

THE ASSASSINS' CLUB

Astro the Seer Breaks up an Extraordinary Association.

The third of a series of five Mystery Stories in which Astro, The Seer, and Valeska, his assistant, use their crystal-gazing and their common-sense to their own and the general good. Astro is supposed to have great occult power, and many people who have private troubles come to him for aid. The Seer has a keen appreciation of all modern foolishness.

By ALAN BRAGHAMPTON*



“V ALESKA, do you understand gargoyles?” Astro looked up from a book of Viollet-le-Duc's architectural drawings and glanced across to the pretty blond head. His assistant, busy with her card catalogue where she kept memoranda of the seer's famous cases, made a delightful picture against the dull crimson hangings of the wall.

She came over to him and looked down across his shoulder at the pictures of the grotesque stone monsters. “Why,” she said, “I've seen those wonderful old ones on Notre Dame in Paris, that gaze down on the city roofs. I've always wondered why they placed them on beautiful churches.”

“It's a deep question,” said Astro, his eyes still on the engraving. “But to my mind they symbolise the ancient cult of Wonder. In the Middle Ages men really wondered; they didn't anticipate flying machines years before they were invented, as we moderns do. They took nothing for granted. Everything in life was a miracle.”

Valeska dropped quietly into a seat to listen. Astro had many moods. Sometimes he was the dreamy, occult seer, cryptic, mysterious; again he was the alert man of affairs, keen, logical, worldly. She had seen him too in society, affable, bland, jocose. But in this introspective, whimsical, analytical mood she got nearest him and learned something of the true import of his life.

He went on, his eyes half-closed, his red silken robe enveloping him like a shroud, the diamond in his turban glittering as he moved his head. His olive skinned, picturesque face with its dark eyes was serene and quiet now. A little blue-tailed lizard, one of Astro's many exotic fancies, frisked across the table. He caught it and held it as he talked.

“In the thirteenth century, clergy and laity alike believed that the forces of good and evil were almost equally balanced. They worshipped the Almighty; but propitiated Satan as well; so these horrible beasts leered down from the cornices of the house of God, and watched the holy office of priests. The devil had his own litany, his own science. They were forbidden practices; but they flourished then among the most intellectual people as they flourish now among the most ignorant. Magic was then a science; now it is a fake. Still, man's chief desire is to get something for nothing—to find a short cut to wisdom. The gargoyle is replaced by the dollar mark. So be it. One must earn one's living. Selah! I have spoken.”

He looked up with a smile and a boyish twinkle in his eyes. Then his businesslike, cynical self returned. He jumped up, tall and handsome, a picturesque oriental figure informed with the stirring life of the West.

“Valeska, I've been reading about the devil worshippers of Paris—the black mass, infant sacrifices, and all that. That's an anachronistic cult. I'd like to know if there really is any genuine survival of the worship of Evil?”

Valeska shuddered. “Oh, that would be horrible!”

“But interesting.” He clasped his hands behind him and gazed up at the silver starred ceiling. “I don't mean degeneracy or insanity, but a man that does evil for the love of it, as they did in the old days.”

“I hate to have you talk like that!” Valeska put a hand on his arm.

“Very well, I won't.” He snapped his fingers as if to rid himself of the thought, and walked into the reception room adjoining the great studio.

Valeska went back to her work. For some minutes she arranged her cards in their tin box; then, hearing voices outside, she looked up and listened. Then she walked softly across the heavy rugs and touching a button in the mahogany wainscoting, passed through a secret door.

Scarcely had she disappeared when Astro returned, ushering in a young woman stylishly dressed in brown. When she put aside her veil her face shone out like a portrait, vivid, instinct with grace

and a delicate, rare, high bred beauty, full of character and force. Astro showed her a seat under the electric lamp.

“I thought you would help me if anyone could,” she was saying, in continuation of her conversation in the reception room. “If it was anything less vague, I'd speak to mother about it; but it's too strange and elusive. I'm sure he has not been drinking; I would notice that in other ways. And yet he is different, he is not himself. It frightens me.”

“Have you spoken to him about it?” Astro asked. “Yes; but he won't say anything. He evades it, and says he's all right. But I don't dare to marry him till I know what it is that has changed him. I know it seems disloyal to suspect him; but how can I help it?”

“What is Mr. Cameron's business?” “He's a naval lieutenant, in the construction department at the Brooklyn navy yard. And that is another reason why I'm worried. He has charge of work that is important and secret. If this thing—whatever it is—should affect his work, he'd be disgraced; he might even be dishonourably discharged.”

“When have you noticed this peculiarity of his? At any particular time?”

“Usually on Sundays, when he generally comes to call; but sometimes in the middle of the week. At times he talks queerly, almost as if in his sleep, of colours and queer landscapes that have nothing to do with what we are discussing. Sometimes he doesn't even finish his sentences and goes off into a sort of daze for a minute; and then he'll ask my pardon and go on as if nothing had happened.”

“And when will you see him next?” Astro inquired.

“He will probably come Saturday afternoon. Usually he stays to dinner; but of late he has been having engagements that prevent.”

“All right,” said the seer; “I'll see what I can do. Knowing that he is at your house, I shall be able to orient myself and thereby be more receptive to his astral influence. I shall then be able to ascertain the cause of any psychic disturbance.”

The young woman, rising to go, looked at him plaintively. “Oh, I hope I haven't done wrong in telling you about it! But I do love him so I can't bear to see him so changed!”

“My dear Miss Mannerling,” said Astro kindly, “you need have no fear, I assure you. Your business shall be kept absolutely confidential. With the exception of my assistant, no one shall ever know that you came here.”

“Your assistant?” She looked at him doubtfully. “Miss Wynne.”

She seemed surprised. “A lady?” she asked; then, timidly, “Might I see her?”

“Certainly.” Astro touched a bell. In a moment Valeska appeared between the velvet portieres, and waited there, her pretty, sensitive face questioning his wish, her golden hair brightly illuminated from behind.

Miss Mannerling walked to her impulsively and took her hand. “Might I speak to you for a moment?” she asked.

Valeska, giving Astro a glance, led the visitor into the reception room.

“I had no idea that Astro had a lady assistant,” she said. “I feel much better about having told him, now.”

Valeska smiled at her and held the hand in both hers. “Oh, I only do some of his routine work,” she said; “but he often discusses his important cases with me. I'm sure that he can help you. He is wonderful. I never knew him to fail.”

“Miss Wynne,” said the visitor, “no one but a woman can understand how distressed I am. I'm sure I can trust you; I can read that in your face. I am always sure of my intuitions. And, now that I've seen you, I'm going to tell you something I didn't quite dare to tell Astro. I know my fiancé is in some trouble. But what I'm afraid of is too dreadful: it terrifies me! Here! look at this! It dropped out of Mr. Cameron's pocket the last time he called, and I found it after he had gone.”

She handed an envelope to Valeska, who looked at it carefully and drew out a single sheet of paper. On this was written in green ink:

“Be at the Assassins' Saturday at 7. Haskell's turn.”

“What can that mean?” Miss Mannerling whispered. “I didn't dare to show it for fear of getting Bob into trouble in some way. That word ‘Assassins’—oh, it's awful!”

“May I take this letter?” Valeska asked.

“No, I daren't leave it. Mr. Cameron may miss it and ask for it. But you may tell Astro, if you think best.”

Valeska gave another glance at the letter and handed it back. “My dear Miss Mannerling, don't worry about it,” she said, pressing her hand. “It may not be so bad as you fear. Whatever it is, Astro will find it out, you may be sure.”

When the visitor had departed, Valeska walked into the studio with the news. Astro listened in silence till she had finished; then he smiled, nodded, and took up his water pipe lazily.

“The solution of this thing is so simple that I'm surprised it hasn't occurred to you, my dear. But that's because of your lack of experience and the fact that you haven't read so much as I have. But, all the same, there may be something deeper in it than appears now. At any rate the girl is to be helped, and the Lieutenant as well; and that we will do.”

“But what about the ‘Assassins’?” Valeska inquired anxiously.

“Oh, that's the whole thing, of course. But I think I'll let you study that out yourself. It will be good practice for your reasoning powers. First, let's see if your powers of observation have improved. Tell me all about the letter.” He blew out a series of smoke rings and regarded her quizzically.

“Well,” Valeska puckered up her lips; “it was written on buff laid linen paper of about ninety pounds weight—very heavy stock, anyway—in an envelope of the same, postmarked Madison Square Station, April 19th, 4 p.m. The handwriting was that of a stout, middle-aged man who had just had some serious illness—a foreigner, hard working, unscrupulous, dishonest, with no artistic sensibility.”

“Bravo! Is that all?”

“No, the stationery came from Perkins & Shaw's. I saw the stamping on the flap.”

“Very good. Unfortunately we can't ask there about the Assassins. But perhaps we'll find my ideal criminal after all. The easiest plan will be to follow Cameron to-morrow night. Meanwhile, you had better do some thinking yourself.”

Valeska sat down and gazed long into the great open fire, her forehead frowning, her hands working mechanically, absorbed in thought. Astro took a small folding chessboard and gracefully amused himself with an intricate problem in the logistics of the game. When at last he had queened his white pawn according to his theory, he looked over at his assistant and smiled to see her seriousness. In that look something seemed to pass from him to her.

“Oh!” she cried, jumping up, “does it begin with an H?”

“More properly with a C,” he replied.

She shook her head and went at the problem again, and kept at it until it was time to close the studio.

The next afternoon Astro and Valeska waited for two hours across 78th Street from Miss Mannerling's house before they saw the Lieutenant emerge. They had already a good description of him, and had no trouble in recognising the tall, good looking fellow who at half-past six o'clock walked briskly up the street, ran down the stairs to the subway, and took a seat in a down town local train. Astro and Valeska separated and took seats on the opposite side of the car, watching their man guardedly. At 23rd Street he got out, went up to the sidewalk, and walked eastward.

Beyond Fourth Avenue was a row of three-storey, old-fashioned brick houses, back from the street. The Lieutenant entered the small iron gate to one of the yards and, taking a key from his pocket, went in the front doorway of a house. It slammed behind him.

“The headquarters of the Assassins,” said Astro