

The Denton Boudoir Murder

Astro the Seer Takes a Turn in Heavy Tragedy

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"See Here!
You've Got to
Take This Case!"

BENEATH a shaded, swinging bronze lamp in his favorite corner of the studio, Astro the Master of Mysteries sat with half-closed eyes, seeming to drowse over a huge vellum bound folio whose leaves bore lines of Arabic characters. But, though his dreamy eyes appeared heavy and dull, his index finger sped with such rapidity from line to line as to reveal that the palmist was eagerly absorbed in the message of those antique parchment pages. Behind him loomed the damasks and embroidered hangings with which the room was adorned; in a corner hung a gilded censer breathing its delicate aromatic perfume; an astrolabe occupied a small table at one hand, and near it lay a strange assortment of queer instruments picked up by the seer in his vagabond travels,—the dread "spider" of the Inquisition, the Angoise "pear," a set of fearsome thumbscrews, strips of human hide, and other such horrors.

"So," he murmured contemplatively, "Ptolemy was a Torquemada himself, in a good many ways. That's interesting; and it confirms an old theory of mine. To think that many persons don't believe in metempsychosis—and do believe in the signs of the zodiac!" His thin lips parted in a smile.

He had turned to his book again, and had read for a few minutes, when his whole attitude changed. He sat upright; his eyes gleamed with interest. Voices were heard outside in the office, where Valeska, his assistant, was still working. He listened intently; then with a quick movement of his right hand touched a button, and the room was flooded with light. It was the first sight of a new client that often told Astro more than an hour's interview.

"Wait a moment till I announce you!" Valeska was exclaiming. "The Master cannot be interrupted in his work. It is impossible. I could not do it for the President himself!"

"I must see him immediately! I tell you I must see him!" a man's voice replied. "By Heaven! I'll break in by main force!"

Another moment, and the black velvet portières leading to the waiting room were violently flung aside, and a flushed and excited young man of about thirty years strode into the apartment. Behind him the small dark face of Valeska Wynne appeared in the doorway, with an alarmed expression.

ASTRO the Seer sat, in turban and silken robe, reading, apparently unmoved by this interruption. When the young man stopped in the center of the room, the palmist slowly raised his olive hued face to the visitor, and a smoldering glance shot from his dark eyes, in a mute question. The young man took a few steps nearer, and broke out again.

"See here! You've got to take this case!" he exclaimed appealingly. "I'm at my wits' ends. I'll go mad if you don't help me; no one else can solve it. You're the only man in New-York that can explain this mystery. For God's sake, sir, tell me you'll do it!" He dropped in exhaustion into an arm chair, gazing anxiously at the crystal gazer. The fingers of one hand twitched nervously, while

his other fist was clenched. His forehead was lined with vertical wrinkles.

Astro, still unperturbed, looked at him gravely, his quick eye darting from point to point of the young man's clothing. Finally he said languidly, with an almost imperceptible foreign accent, "My dear sir, the Turks have a proverb, 'He who is in a hurry is already half mad.' If you were in such haste to see me, you should have taken a cab to come here, and a street car to go to the central police office, instead of having done the exact opposite."

The young man pulled himself together, sat up, and stared hard at the seer. Then his face relaxed, as he said, with a tone of great relief, nodding his head, "That's wonderful! It's exactly what I did. Oh, I know you can do it, if you only will! The police are all stupid,—there isn't a man with a brain on the whole force, I believe. You're the man to help me!"

Astro made a graceful gesture with his long, slender hand. "It is not a question of brains, my dear sir. It is a question of the right comprehension of the forces of the occult, of undeveloped senses and powers. Men need signboards to show them the way from town to town. The birds wing their straight paths by instinct. It is my fortune to be sensitive to vibrations that most minds do not register. Where you see a body, I see a spirit, a life, an invisible color. All these esoteric laws have been known by the priestcraft of the occult for ages. Nothing is hidden from the Inner Eye."

"I don't know how you get it," the young man interrupted. "I believe that there are many things we don't understand yet, and that some men are developed beyond their fellows. I've studied mysticism myself, and that's why I came directly to you. I want the mystery of my sweetheart's death cleared up, and the hellish scoundrel that killed her executed. Until that is accomplished, my life will stop, or I'll go insane. The police can prove nothing, even on their own suspect. What motive there could have been for such a crime I can't imagine; it seems so unnecessary, so monstrous!" He had worked himself again into a fever of excitement.

Astro rose and walked over to his visitor. Placing his two thumbs on a muscle in the young man's back, near the spinal column, he manipulated the flesh for a few moments. His client's hysteria gradually subsided, and he became calmer.

"Now," said Astro, sinking back into his chair and taking up the amber mouthpiece of his water pipe, "give me the details of your story, beginning at the beginning. You need not mind my assistant; she is quite in my confidence and may be trusted implicitly."

Valeska had entered, and sat at a table prepared to take notes of the conversation. Astro's eyes turned indulgently on the pretty blond head as it bent seriously over the writing pad.

THE young man spoke now as if he had the history already clearly mapped out in his mind. He used occasional impulsive gestures, displaying an ardent and intense temperament.

"My name is Edward Masson. For three months I have been engaged to marry Miss Elizabeth Den-

ton of Hamhurst, Long Island. That is, I was, until three days ago, when we had a quarrel,—nothing to speak of, really, you know, but the match was temporarily broken off. It would have come out all right, I'm sure. I intended to make it up with her. I was prepared to make any compromise whatever; for I was crazy about her. She was my whole life." He paused and put his hands across his eyes.

Valeska looked across to the Master, her own eyes already swimming with tears of sympathy. Astro, however, showed no sign, and puffed tranquilly at his narghile, waiting for Masson to become more calm. In the anteroom the great clock broke the silence with a ringing, melodious chime and struck the hour of six in booming notes.

Masson looked up with a tense face. "That next day she was murdered!" he said brokenly. "She was found dead in her boudoir on the second floor of her house, just before dinner time, at about dusk. Both doors were locked; but the double windows were open. The police say she was strangled. Think of it! Gods! she was beautiful! How could anyone have done it? It seems impossible, even now, that she is dead. There were slight marks on her throat that looked like finger prints. I didn't see them,—there was lace round her neck when I saw her, in her casket. Oh, God!" He rose and paced up and down the room restlessly, his eyes cast down.

"What have the police done?" Astro inquired gently.

"They've arrested Miss Denton's maid. She had a key to Elizabeth's room, it seems, and some of the servants thought they heard her talking in the room. I think that's the strongest point against her. But I doubt if she did it. It was too brutal. I must run down the real murderer and have it proved beyond the possibility of a doubt. I can't rest till that's done." He turned almost savagely to the quiet figure of the palmist. "Can't you do it? You can see things in crystals; you know the secret laws of nature; you lead a life of study and research with the old adepts. Can't you do this for me?"

Astro smiled subtly. "My dear Mr. Masson," he said, "I do not ordinarily concern myself with such affairs. Those who wish come to me, and I, of my knowledge of the Laws of Being, can reveal what is hidden. Such agonizing experiences as yours are distracting to the student of the Higher Way."

"I'm rich!" Masson broke in. "I'll pay you anything you wish! Make your price,—one thousand, two, anything! Only help me! My God, man! you were a part of the world once. Can't you remember what it means to love a beautiful woman and want to marry her?"

"I remember—only too well. It was partly on that account that I hesitated. But I'll forget myself and consent to assist you."

The young man sank into a chair again, with gratitude in his voice. "You'll want to go down to Hamhurst?" he asked.

"Certainly. I must get the vibrations of the scene itself before I seek the murderer. He has left behind him emanations that will rapidly evaporate. I shall go down to-morrow, if you will accompany me. To-night I shall go to the Tombs and see Miss Denton's maid. She too must be studied by one who is sensitive to aura. My friend McGraw will be able to get permission for that, no doubt."

He shot a glance at Valeska as he mentioned the inspector's name. She replied with a fluttering smile, and was serious again.

Young Masson buttoned up his overcoat, and with an embarrassed, hesitating manner did his best to express his thanks. Astro cut short his stammering sentences, laid his own hand with a friendly gesture on Masson's shoulder, and guided him out of the room. At parting it was agreed that they should meet on the nine-twelve train for Hamhurst.

THE palmist walked back to the studio, shut off all lights but that in his favorite corner, and sat down in silence. Valeska waited for him to speak.

"Not bad for two days' work," he said finally, smiling.

"Are you sure you can do it?" she asked, raising her golden brows.

"My dear," he replied, taking up his water pipe again, "am I not a Mahatma of the Fourth Sphere, and were not the divine laws of cosmic life revealed to me while I was a cheela on the heights of the Himalayas?"

Valeska broke into a silvery laugh. "Do you know," she said, "that patter of yours is almost as becoming as that turban and robe. But, to be serious, have you any clue as yet?"

Astro did not answer for a moment; then he said