

VAN ASTEN'S VISITOR

Astro Looks Into the Queer Case of a Doctored Will

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Drawing by George Brehm



I THINK I'll not go to Boston to-night, after all," said young Van Asten, of Hipp & Van Asten's law firm. He stood looking out a thirteenth story window, late one December afternoon, watching the big snowstorm which had increased steadily in violence since one o'clock. His hat was hanging on the back of his head and his overcoat collar was turned up about his ears. Keen, quick, and clear cut, his features showed handsomely in profile. He was the popular member of the firm among his affluent clientele.

"Looks like a blizzard," said the clerk, rummaging in a pasteboard letter holder.

"Sure. The midnight train is sure to be either stalled or delayed, and I can go Saturday just as well. I don't care to sit up for hours in a snowbank. Then he turned suddenly to the clerk. "Say, has anybody from Selvig's been in to-day?" he asked.

"You mean about the Dreilmont will case?"

"Yes. By the way young Dreilmont spoke yesterday I rather expect he's getting ready to compromise. He's a fool if he doesn't; and a bigger fool to expect me to show him the will, too!"

"Nobody's been in," said the clerk laconically.

Van Asten went out and plowed his way through rising drifts to the subway station. By six o'clock he was at the Gavel Club, and by eight had finished his dinner. Several games of pool, a long talk with a visiting Englishman, perusal of the French comic papers, and convivial gossip with late comers from the theaters full of tales of the storm, kept him warm and cheerful till midnight. Then, as the clock struck, he put on his things and went out.

There were few abroad at this hour, and not a carriage or an automobile in sight. The street car lines had given up trying to keep the tracks clear, and he came across one darkened car abandoned in the snow. He had to fight his way home, struggling through drifts waist high. It was deathly quiet except for the sound of the wind.

HE reached his apartment house at last, and, stamping and shaking himself, climbed four flights of stairs, the elevator being out of order. At his door he stopped, surprised. Under the door there was a thin streak of light.

Van Asten's firm was still too young to enable him to live in the style he had been used to before going into business. His apartment consisted of only four rooms—a large L-shaped studio, a bedroom, and, off the entrance hall, on one side a bathroom, and on the other a kitchenette. A woman came in every morning to clean up the place; except for that, he was alone.

He distinctly remembered that no light had been left burning, as he had left the place at ten o'clock that morning. What, then, could the light mean? No one save the janitor had a key to the place. His thought went naturally to burglars. He hesitated for some moments, wondering what to do. It was late to summon the janitor for assistance, and he would appear foolish if nothing serious had happened. He determined to investigate alone and, prepared for an immediate struggle, he put his key quietly into the door and turned the latch. The door opened without noise, and he could see through the one opposite into the long studio.

There, a woman in chinchilla furs stood, with her back to him, beside the great table. She was bending over, as if taking something from a bag.

The tension of suspense that had knotted Van Asten's muscles and nerves gave way to a little laugh. The romance of the encounter amused him vaguely, though his curiosity was doubly alert. He took a step forward.

At the sound of his footsteps, the woman looked round quickly, and for a minute stood staring at him with an expression of alarm. Her hand went to her heart. She was a beautiful woman of twenty-three, dressed with elegance. She was a vivid blonde, with masses of heavy yellow hair, blue eyes, and slender hands. For a single moment she stood there, immobile; then, to Van Asten's amazement, she ran forward and threw her arms about his neck and pressed her lips to his cheek.

"Oh, Paul! I'm so glad you've come! I didn't know what to do! I was afraid

I'd have to stay here all night alone! Where in the world have you been?"

Van Asten calmly disentangled himself from her embrace and took another look at her face. She was blushing violently. "Will you kindly tell me, first of all, who you are?"

"Why, Paul! What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, and naturally I have a little curiosity about a visitor at this hour."

For a second or two she gazed at him steadily, her lips parted. "Are you drunk, Paul?" she demanded finally.

"I'm not drunk. I simply don't know you. Why should I?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she exclaimed in a vibrant, intense tone. Then she took a backward step, as if she feared him.

"My sister is in Boston." He stared at her with a frown and folded his arms. "What is your little game, anyway?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she repeated helplessly. Then she staggered back and sunk into a chair, hiding her face in her hands, and began to weep.

"You are not my sister, and you know it as well as I do! What do you want here, anyway?" he demanded, still standing, staring at her.

"Why, I want to stay here, of course! I've just come from Boston to visit you!" She suddenly sprang up. "The idea! It's a stupid practical joke you're playing on me, of course. Come, Paul, drop it, please! I'm tired, and want to go to bed. Where are you going to put me?"

"I'm going to put you outdoors!" he retorted.

"In this awful blizzard?" she demanded. She smiled sadly through her tears. The effect was really dazzling; but Van Asten kept his head.

He stopped and reflected for a few moments. Then, without tak-

ing his eyes from her, he took off his hat and overcoat, tossed them aside, and sat down.

"Now," he continued, "I insist that you drop this masquerade and tell me immediately who you are and how you came here. You're either crazy, or it's some sort of blackmailing game. If you know anything about my sister, you know you don't in the least resemble her, and if you know anything about me, you know I haven't any money. So, out with it, quick!"

"I've told you!" she said, and loosed another pathetic smile at him.

He frowned impatiently. "Then you are crazy!"

"No, I'm afraid you are!"

The deadlock continued for some minutes before either spoke again. Then he began more quietly. "I don't know what's the matter with you. It's too much for me. But of course I can't let you stay here. Neither can I put you out into this storm. The only thing I can think of is to telephone to some one to come here. But no woman could get here to-night, even if she should be willing to. I confess I don't know what to do with you."

"It's perfectly all right," she answered sweetly.

"I'm your sister, and surely you should be willing to let me have your room for to-night. You can sleep on that big couch round the corner of the studio, and you'll be sober in the morning. When you wake up, you'll probably recognize me. I won't be hard on you, my dear. Only really you ought to be careful what you drink." She rose, walked over to him, and patted his head.

He jumped up abruptly and walked away, opened his bedroom door, and stood there for a moment. "Come in here!" he commanded.

"All right, Paul!" she answered with extravagant humility, and casting down her eyes, walked into the room. Just before she closed the door she came near him again.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodnight, Paul dear?" she asked.

Without answering her, he pulled the door to, and heard her swiftly lock it on the inside. Then, still frowning, he walked up and down the long studio for ten minutes. Once or twice he stopped outside the door to listen; but heard nothing. Later, she called out "Goodnight, Paul!" to him, in blithe accents. He bit his lip and resumed his promenade, more worried than ever. The thing was uncanny. He no longer accepted the situation as romantic; he felt decidedly uncomfortable and embarrassed. Some one was making a fool of him, or worse.

SUDDENLY, a thought came to him, and he went to the telephone and spoke as low as possible, "Madison, 5555."

For fully three minutes he waited without receiving a reply.

"Madison 5555 doesn't answer," came the word at last.

"Ring 'em up again!" He spoke a bit more loudly.

In two minutes more he heard, "Hello!"

"Is this Astro?"

"Yes. What the deuce—?"

"Wait a minute and I'll explain."

"Well, hurry up! You've got me up out of bed."

"I'm Paul Van Asten, and am in my apartment at the Elton, 444 West 21st-st. I've just come home and found a strange woman in my place. She says she's my sister. Pretty and all that, well dressed, and not otherwise obviously mad. But she worries me. I can't put her out; and she won't go, anyway. What'll I do? Can't you come over here? It's mighty embarrassing."

There was a pause, then



She Stood Staring at Him with an Expression of Alarm.