

THE AXTON LETTERS

By EDWIN BALMER and WILLIAM MCHARG

"AMAZING!" Trant leaped to his feet, and took two or three rapid turns up and down the office. "If I am to believe the obvious inference from these letters, Miss Waldron—coupled with what you have told me—I have not yet come across a case, an attempt at crime more careful, more cold-blooded, and withal more surprising!"

"A crime—an attempt at crime, Mr. Trant?" cried the startled girl. "So there was cause for my belief that something serious underlay these mysterious appearances?"

"Cause?" Trant swung to face her. "Yes, Miss Waldron—criminal cause, a crime so skilfully carried on, so assisted by unexpected circumstance that you—that the very people against whom it is aimed have not so much as suspected its existence."

"Then you think Howard honestly believes the man still means nothing?"

"The man never meant 'nothing,' Miss Waldron. It was only at first the plot was aimed against Howard Axton," Trant replied. "Now it is aimed solely at you!"

The girl grew paler.

"How can you say that so surely, Mr. Trant?" Caryl demanded, "without investigation?"

"These letters are quite enough evidence for what I say, Mr. Caryl," Trant returned. "Would you have come to me unless you had known that my training in the methods of psychology enable me to see causes and motives in such a case as this which others, untrained, cannot see? You have nothing more to tell me which might be of assistance?" He faced the girl again, but turned back at once to Caryl.

"Let me tell you, then, Mr. Caryl, that I am about to make a very thorough investigation of this for you. Meanwhile, I repeat: a definite, daring crime was planned first, I believe, against Howard Axton and Miss Waldron; but now—I am practically certain—it is aimed against Miss Waldron alone. There cannot be in it the slightest danger of intentional personal hurt to her. So neither of you need be uneasy while I am taking time to obtain full proof."

"But, Mr. Trant," the girl interrupted, "are you not going to tell me—you must tell me—what the criminal secret is that these letters have revealed to you?"

"You must wait, Miss Waldron," the psychologist answered kindly, with his hand on the door knob, as though anxious now for the interview to end. "What I could tell you now would only terrify you and leave you perplexed as to how to act while you were waiting to hear from me. No; leave the letters, if you will—and the page from the Illustrated London News," he added, suddenly, as the girl began gathering up her papers. "There is only one thing more. You said you expected an interruption here from Howard Axton, Mr. Caryl. Is there still a good chance of his coming here or—must I go to see him?"

"Miss Waldron telephoned to me, in his presence, to take her to see you. Afterwards she left the house without his knowledge. As soon as he finds she has gone, he will look up your address, and I think you may expect him!"

"Very good. Then I must set to work at once." He shook hands with both of them hurriedly and almost forced them out his door, closed it behind them, and strode back to his desk. He picked up immediately the second of the four letters which the girl had given him, read it through again and made a careful copy, which he put in a drawer of the desk. Apparently the four originals were lying before him when he heard a knock and, opening his door, found that his visitor was again young Caryl.

"Miss Waldron did not wish to return home at once; she has gone to see a friend. So I came back," he explained, "thinking you might make a fuller statement of your suspicions to me alone than you would in Miss Waldron's presence."

"Fuller in what respect, Mr. Caryl?"

The young man reddened.

"I must tell you—though you already may have guessed—that, before Miss Waldron inherited the estate and came to believe it her duty to do as she has done, there had been an—understanding between us, Mr. Trant. She still has no friend to look to as she looks to me. So if you mean that you have discovered through those letters—though God knows how you could have done it—anything in Axton which shows him unfit to marry her, you must tell me!"

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"As far as Axton's past goes," Trant replied, "his letters show him a man of high type—moral, if I may make a guess, above the average. There is a most pleasing frankness about him. As to making any further explanation than I have done—but Good Lord? what's that?"

The door of the office had been banged open, and its still trembling frame was filled by a tall, very angry young man in automobile costume, whose highly coloured, aristocratic-looking features Trant recognized immediately from the print in the page of the Illustrated London News.

"Ah, Mr. Caryl, you are here, too, like the village busybody!" the newcomer sneered, with a slight accent which showed his English education. "You are insufferable, meddling in my affairs," he continued, as Caryl, with an effort, controlled himself and made no answer. "Keep out of them! That is my advice—take it! Does a woman have to order you off the premises before you can understand that you are not wanted? As for you," he turned toward Trant, "you are Trant, I suppose!"

"Yes, that is my name, Mr. Axton," replied the psychologist, leaning against his desk.

THE other advanced and raised a threatening finger. "Then that advice is meant for you, too. I want no police, no detectives, no outsider of any sort interfering in this matter. Make no mistake; it will be the worse for anyone who pushes himself in! I came at once to take the case out of your hands, as soon as I found Miss Waldron had come here. This is strictly my affair—keep out of it!"

"You mean, Mr. Axton, that you prefer to investigate it personally?" the psychologist inquired.

"Exactly. Investigate and punish."

"But you cannot blame Miss Waldron for feeling great anxiety on your account, as your personal risk in making such an investigation will be so immensely greater than anyone else's would be."

"My risk?"

"Certainly; you may be simply playing into the hand of your strange visitor, by pursuing him unaided. Any other's risk—if I were to take up the matter, mine, for instance—would be comparatively slight. Besides, such risks are a part of my business."

Axton halted. "I had not thought of it in that light," he said, reflectively.

"You are too courageous—foolishly courageous, Mr. Axton. Let me conduct it, beginning perhaps by questioning the night watchman and stable boys in the neighbourhood with a view to learning what became of the man after he left the house."

"Do you mind if I sit down? Thank you. You think, Mr. Trant, that an investigation such as you suggest, would satisfy Miss Waldron—make her easier in her mind, I mean?"

"I think so, certainly."

"And it would not necessarily entail calling in the police? You must appreciate how I shrink from publicity—another story concerning the Axton family exploited in the daily papers!"

"I had no intention of consulting the police, or of calling them in, at least until I was ready to make the arrest."

"I must confess, Mr. Trant," said Axton, easily, "that I find you a very different man from what I had expected. I imagined an uneducated, somewhat brutal, perhaps talkative fellow; but I find you, if I may say so, a gentleman. Yes, I am tempted to let you continue your investigation on the lines you have suggested."

"I shall ask your help."

"I will help you as much as is in my power."

"Then let me begin, Mr. Axton, with a question—pardon me if I open a window, for the room is rather warm—I want to know whether you can supplement these letters, which so far are our only real evidence against the man, by any further description of him," and Trant, who had thrown open the window beside him, undisturbed by the roar that filled the office from the traffic-laden street below, took the letters

and clumsily opened them, spreading them upon the desk.

"I am afraid I cannot add anything to them, Mr. Trant."

"We must get on then with what we have here." The psychologist hitched his chair near to the window to get a better light on the paper in his hand, and his cuff knocked one of the other letters off the desk onto the window sill. He turned, hastily but clumsily, and touched, but could not grasp it before it slipped from the sill out into the air. He sprang to his feet with an exclamation of dismay, and dashed from the room. Axton and Caryl, rushing to the window, watched the paper, driven by a strong breeze, flutter down the street until lost to sight among waggons; and a minute later saw Trant appear below them, bareheaded and excited, darting in and out among vehicles at the spot where the paper had disappeared. But it had been carried away upon some muddy waggon wheel or reduced to tatters, for he returned after fifteen minutes' search disheartened, vexed, and empty-handed.

"It was the letter describing the second visit," he exclaimed, disgustedly, as he opened the door. "It was most essential. I do not see how I can manage well, now, without it."

"Why should you?" Caryl said in surprise at the evident stupidity of the psychologist. "Surely Mr. Axton—if he cannot add any other details—can at least repeat those he had already given."

"Of course!" Trant recollected. "If you would be so good, Mr. Axton, I will have a stenographer take down the statement. I want to give you the least trouble."

"I will gladly do that," Axton agreed; and when the psychologist had summoned the stenographer, he dictated without hesitation, the following letter:

The second time that I saw the man was at Calcutta, in the Great Eastern Hotel. He was the same man I had seen at Cairo—shoeless and turbaned; at least I believed then that it was a turban, but I saw later at Cape Town, that it was his short brown coat wrapped round his head and tied by the sleeves under his chin. We had, at the Great Eastern, two whitewashed communicating rooms opening off a narrow dirty corridor, along whose whitewashed walls at a height of some two feet from the floor ran a greasy smudge gathered from the heads and shoulders of the dark-skinned, white-robed native servants who spent the nights sleeping or sitting in front of their masters' doors.

Though Lawler and I each had a servant also outside his door, I dragged a trunk against mine after closing it—a useless precaution, as it proved, as Lawler put no trunk against his—and though I see now that I must have been moved by some foresight of danger, I went to sleep afterwards quite peacefully. I awakened somewhat later in a cold and shuddering fright, oppressed by the sense of some presence in my room, started up in bed and looked about. My trunk was still against the door as I had left it; and besides this, I saw at first only the furniture of the room. But presently I saw more. He was there! A dark shadow against the whitewashed wall beside the window marked his position as he crouched beside my writing desk and held the papers in a bar of white moonlight to look at them.

For an instant, the sight held me motionless. Then, suddenly becoming aware that he was seen, he leaped to his feet—a short, broad-shouldered, bulky man—sped across the straw matting into Lawler's room and drove the door to behind him. I followed, forcing the door open with my shoulder, saw Lawler just leaping out of bed in his pajamas, and tore open Lawler's corridor door through which the man had vanished. He was not in the corridor, though I inspected it carefully, and Lawler, though he had been awakened by the man's passage, had not seen him. Lawler's servant, pretty well dazed with sleep, told me in blank and open-mouthed amazement at my question, that he had not seen him pass; and the other white-draped Hindoos, gathering about me from the doors in front of which they had been asleep, made the same statement.

When I struck a light in my room, I found nothing had been touched except the writing desk, and even from that nothing had been taken, although the papers had been disturbed. The whole affair was as mysterious and inexplicable as the man's first appearance had been, or as his subsequent appearance proved; for though I carefully questioned the hotel employees in the morning I could not learn that any such man had entered or gone out from the hotel.

"That is very satisfactory indeed," Trant's gratification was evident in his tone, as Axton finished. "Now there is only one thing more. Besides your friend Lawler, who was drowned in the wreck of the Gladstone, and the man Beasley—who, Miss Waldron tells me, is in a London hospital—there were only

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