

The Axton Letters

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....

Line Drawings by A. M. WICKSON, after
Originals by WM. OBERHARDT

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Luther Trant, the Psychological Detective, Determines Identity by Sound

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THE sounds in her dressing room had waked Ethel Waldron just before six o'clock. She could still see, when she closed her eyes, every single, sharp detail of her room as it was that instant she sprang up in bed, with the cry that had given the alarm, and switched on the electric light.

Instantly the man had shut the door; but as she sat staring at it, the hands and dial of her clock on the mantel beside the door had fixed themselves upon her retina like the painted dial of a jeweler's dummy.

It could have been barely six o'clock, therefore, when Howard Axton, after his first swift rush in her defence, had found the window which had been forced open; had picked up the Turkish dagger which he found broken on the sill, and, crying to the girl not to call the police as it was surely "the same man"—the same man, he meant, who had so inexplicably followed him around the world—had rushed to his room for extra cartridges for his revolver and run out into the cold sleet of the March morning.

It was now an hour or more since Howard had run after the man, revolver in hand; and he had not reappeared or telephoned or sent any word at all as to his safety. However much Howard's life in wild lands had accustomed him to seek redress outside the law, she still held the city-bred impulse to appeal to the police. She turned from her nervous pacing at the window and seized the telephone receiver from its hook; but at the sound of the operator's voice, she remembered again Howard's injunction that the man, whenever he appeared, was to be left solely to him. She dropped the receiver without answering. But she resented fiercely the advantage he held over her which must oblige her, she knew, to obey him.

She drew herself up and threw the dressing gown from her shoulders with a proud, defiant gesture. She was a straight, almost tall girl, with the figure of a more youthful Diana, with features as fair and flawless as any younger Hero, and in addition a great depth of blue in very direct eyes and a crowning glory of thick, golden hair. She was barely

twenty-two. And she was not used to having any man show a sense of advantage over her, much less threaten her, as Howard had done. So, in that impulse of defiance, she was reaching again for the telephone she had just dropped, when she saw through the fog outside the window the man she was waiting for—a tall, alert figure hastening toward the house.

She ran downstairs rapidly and opened the door herself. Whether her sense of almost resentment was because this man, whom she did not love but must marry, could so appear the assured and perfect gentleman without collar or scarf and with his clothes and boots spattered with mud and rain, or whether it was merely the confident, insolent smile of his full lips behind his small, close-clipped moustache, she could not tell. She motioned him into the library without speaking. But when they were alone and she had closed the door, she burst out breathlessly.

"Well, Howard? Well? Well, Howard?"

"You have not sent any word to the police, Ethel?"

"I was about to, the moment you came! But—I have not—yet!" she had to confess.

"Or to that—" he checked the epithet that was on his lips—"your friend Caryl?"

She flushed scarlet, and shook her head.

HE drew his revolver, "broke" it, ejecting the cartridges carelessly upon the table, and threw himself wearily into a chair. "I'm glad you understand that this has not been the sort-of affair for anyone else to—interfere in!"

"Has been! You mean," the girl's face grew white, "you—you caught him this time and—and killed him, Howard?"

"Killed him, Ethel?" the man laughed, but observed her more carefully. "Of course I haven't killed him, or even caught him. But I've made myself sure, at least, that he's the same fellow that's been trying to make a fool of me all this year, that's been after me, as I wrote you. And if you remember my letters, even you—I mean, even a girl brought up in a city, ought to see how it's a matter of honour with me now to settle with him alone!"

"If he is merely trying to 'make a fool of you,' as you say, yes, Howard," the girl returned, hotly. "But from what you yourself have told me of him, you know he must be keeping after you for some serious reason! Yes; you know it. I can see it! You can't deny it!"

"Ethel, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if you do not think that the man who has been following you from Calcutta to Cape Town and from Cape Town to Chicago means more than a joke for you to settle for yourself, I know that the man who has now twice gone through my letters in my room is something for me to go to the police about!"

"And have the papers flaring the family scandal again? I admit, Ethel," he conceded, carefully calculating the sharpness of his second sting before he delivered it, "that if you or I could call in the police without setting the whole pack of papers upon us again, I'd be glad to do it—if only to please you. But I told you, before I came back, that if there was to be any more airing of the family affairs at all, I could not come. If you want to press the point now, of course I can leave you," he gave the very slightest but most suggestive glance about the rich, luxurious furnishings of the great room, "in possession."

"You know I can't let you do that!" The girl flushed. "But neither can you prevent me from making my private inquiry."

She went to the side of the room and, in his hearing, took down the telephone receiver and called a number without consulting the directory.

"Mr. Caryl, please," she said. "Oh, Henry, is it you? You can take me to your—Mr. Trant, wasn't that the name—as soon as you care to. . . . Yes; I want you to come here. I will have my brougham ready. Immediately!"

And without another word or even a glance at Axton, she brushed by him and ran upstairs to her room.

In the same impetus of reckless anger, she swept up the scattered letters and papers on her writing desk, and put on her things to go out. But on her way downstairs she stopped suddenly. The curl of his cigarette smoke through the open library door showed that he was waiting just inside it. Suddenly his tobacco's sharp, distinctive odour sickened her. She turned about, ran upstairs again and fled, almost headlong, down the rear stairs and out the servant's door to the alley.

At the end of the alley, she shrank instinctively from the glance of the men passing until she made out a hurrying form taller even than Axton, and much broader. She sprang toward it with a shiver of relief as she saw Henry Caryl's light hair and recognized his even, open features.