

The Black Box

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The BLACK BOX

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Mr. Gres of Monte Carlo," "The Vanished Messenger," "The Lighted Way," etc.

Novelized from the motion picture drama of the same name produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated with photographs from the motion picture production.

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SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the Macdonald, finds that in bringing to justice the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just begun a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden hut in Professor Ashleigh's garden he has seen an anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his room have appeared from nowhere black boxes, one containing diamonds torn from a lovely throat by a pair of armless, threatening hands, both with sarcastic, threatening notes signed by the inscrutable hands. On his return from finding the body of Macdonald, who had escaped on his way to prison, he is arrested for the murder of his valet, Ross Brown, and a Miss Quest, in his rooms. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig the professor's valet, trap Craig and rescue Quest from the Tombs to hypnotize Craig into confession, but when Quest arrives he finds that Craig and Lenora have both disappeared. He dodges Police Inspector French, who has discovered his escape.

SIXTH INSTALLMENT

THE UNSEEN TERROR.

CHAPTER XIV.

With a little gesture of despair Quest turned away from the instrument which seemed suddenly to have become so terribly unresponsive, and looked across the vista of square roofs and tangled masses of telephone wires to where the lights of larger New York flared up against the sky. From his attic chamber the roar of the city a few blocks away was always in his ears. He had forgotten in those hours of frenzied solitude to fear for his own safety. He thought only of Lenora. He paused once more before the little instrument.



"Mount Those Stairs, Craig."

"I don't know where I am. I am terrified. I was outside the garage when I was seized from behind. The 'Hands' held me. I was unconscious until I found myself here. I am now in an attic room with no window except the skylight, which I cannot reach. I can see nothing—hear nothing. No one has hurt me, no one comes near me. Food is pushed through a door, which is locked again immediately. The house seems empty, yet I fancy that I am being watched all the time. I am terrified!"

hundred willing hands to release him. Quest drew up the rope quickly, wanted by a roar of anxious voices. Then he commenced to descend, letting himself down hand over hand, always with one eye upon that length of rope that swung below. Suddenly, as he reached the second floor a little cry from the crowd warned him of what had happened. Tongues of flame curling out from the blazing building had caught the rope, which was being burned through not a dozen feet away from him. He descended a little farther and paused in mid-air.

A shout from the crowd reached him. "The cables! Try the cables!" He glanced round. Seven or eight feet away, and almost level with him, was a double row of telegraph wires. Almost as he saw them the rope below him burned through and fell to the ground. He swung a little towards the side of the house, pushed himself vigorously away from it with his feet, and at the farthest point of the outward swing jumped. His hands grasped the telegraph wires safely. Even in that tense moment he heard a little sob of relief from the people below.

Hand over hand he made his way to the nearest pole and slipped easily to the ground. The crowd immediately surged around him. "Where is the man who came down before me?" he asked a bystander. "Talking to the police in the car over yonder," was the hoarse reply. "Say, gov'nor, you only just made that!"

CHAPTER XV.

The professor swung round in his chair and greeted Quest with some surprise, but also a little disappointment. "No news of Craig?" he asked. "I got Craig, all right," he replied. "He came to the Servants' club, where I was waiting for him. My luck's out, though. The place was burned to the ground last night. I saved his life and then the brute gave me away to the police. I had to make my escape as best I could."

"This is insufferable," he declared. "I have had no shaving water; my coffee was undrinkable; I can find nothing. I have a most important lecture to prepare and I cannot find any of the notes I made upon the subject." Quest smoked in silence for a moment. "Any mail for me, professor?" he asked abruptly. The professor opened a drawer and handed him a telegram. "Only this!" Quest opened it and read it through. It was from the sheriff of a small town in Connecticut.

"The men you inquired for are both here. They have sold an automobile and seem to be spending the proceeds. Shall I arrest?" Quest studied the message for a moment. "Say, this is rather interesting, professor," he remarked. "These are the two thugs who set upon me at the section house. They killed the signal man who could have been my alibi, and swiped my car, in which, as it cannot be found, French supposes that I returned to New York. With their arrest the case against me collapses. I tell you frankly, professor, Quest continued frowning. "I hate to leave the city without having found that girl; but I am not sure that the quickest way to set things right would not be to go down, arrest these men and bring them back here, clear myself, and then go tooth and nail for Craig."



"Put it Away; You Know You Daren't Use It."

In the road. It's for you to say whether it can be identified." Quest drew a sigh of relief. "That's mine, right enough," he declared. "Now for the men." "Say, I want to tell you something," the sheriff began dubiously. "These two are real thugs. They ain't going to take it lying down." "Where are they?" Quest demanded. "In the worst saloon here," the sheriff replied. "They've been there pretty well all night, drinking, and they're there again this morning, hard at it. They've got firearms, and though I ain't exactly a nervous man, Mr. Quest—" "You leave it to me," Quest interrupted. "This is my job and I want to take the men myself." "You'll never do it," the sheriff declared.

"Look here," Quest explained, "I let you and your men go in, there will be a free fight, and as likely as not you will kill one, if not both of the men. I want them alive." "Well, it's your show," the sheriff admitted, stopping before a disreputable looking building. "This is the saloon." "Well," Quest decided, "I'm going in, and I'm going in unarmed. You can bring your men in later, if I call for help or if you hear any shooting." "You're asking for trouble," the sheriff warned him. "I've got to do this my own way," Quest insisted. "Stand by now."

He pushed open the door of the saloon. There were a dozen men drinking around the bar and in the center of them Red Gallagher and his mate. Quest walked right up to the two men. "Gallagher," he said, "you're my prisoner. Are you coming quietly?" Gallagher's mate, who was half drunk, swung round and fired a wild shot in Quest's direction. The result was a general stampede. Red Gallagher alone remained motionless. Grim and dangerously silent, he held a pistol within a few inches of Quest's forehead.

"If my number's up," he exclaimed ferociously, "it won't be you to take me." "I think it will," Quest answered. "But that's away." Gallagher hesitated. Quest's influence over him was indomitable. "Put it away," Quest repeated firmly. "You know you daren't use it. Your account's pretty full up, as it is." Gallagher's hand wavered. From outside came the shouts of the sheriff and his men, struggling to fight their way in through the little crowd who were rushing for safety. Suddenly Quest backed, jerked the pistol up with his right elbow, and with almost the same movement struck Red Gallagher under the jaw. The man went over with a crash. His mate, who had been staggering about, cursing viciously, fired another wild shot at Quest, who swayed and fell forward. "I've done him!" the man shouted. "Get up, Red! I've done him, all right! Finish your drink. We'll get out of this!"

unconscious, since that scrap. He can tell you what time he saw me last. Bring the girls along, French—and hurry!" Quest hung up the receiver. Inspector French was as good, even better than his word. In a surprisingly short time he entered the room, followed by Laura and Lenora. Quest gave them a hand each, but it was into Lenora's eyes that he looked. "I mustn't stop to hear your story, Lenora," Quest said. "You're safe—that's the great thing."

"Found her in an empty house," French reported, "out Grayson avenue way. Now, Mr. Quest, I don't want to come the official over you too much, but if you'll kindly remember you're an escaped prisoner—" There was a knock at the door. A young man entered in chauffeur's livery, with his head still bandaged. Quest motioned him to come in. "I'll just repeat my story of that morning, Mr. French," Quest said. "We went out to find Macdonald, and succeeded, as you know. Just as I was starting for home those two thugs set upon me. You know how I made my escape. They went off in my automobile and sold it in Bethel. I arrested them there myself this morning. Here's the sheriff who will bear out what I say, also that they arrived at the place in my automobile."

Inspector French held out his hand. "Mr. Quest," he said, "I reckon we'll have to withdraw the case against you. No hard feelings, I hope?" "None at all," Quest replied promptly, taking his hand. Quest stood upon the threshold watching the sheriff and his prisoners leave the house. The former turned round to wave his adieu. "There's an elderly guy out here," he shouted, "seems to want to come in."

Quest leaned forward and saw the professor. "My dear Quest," he exclaimed, as he wrung his hand, "my heartiest congratulations! As you know, I always believed your innocence. I am delighted that it has been proved." The professor sank wearily into an easy chair. "I will take a little whisky and one of your excellent cigars, Quest," he said. "I must ask you to bear with me if I seem upset. After more than twenty years' service from one whom I have always treated as a friend this sudden separation, to a man of my age, is somewhat trying. I do not at allude, as you perceive, Mr. Quest, to the horrible suspicion you seem to have formed of Craig."

"All the same," the inspector remarked thoughtfully, "someone who is still at large committed those murders and stole those jewels. What is your theory about the jewels, Mr. Quest?" "I haven't had time to frame one yet," the criminologist replied. "You've been keeping me too busy looking after myself. However," he added, "it's time something was done."

He took a magnifying glass from his pocket and examined very closely the whole of the front of the safe. "No sign of finger prints," he muttered. "The person who opened it probably wore gloves." He fitted the combination and swung open the door. He stood there for a moment speechless. Something in his attitude attracted the inspector's attention. "What is it, Mr. Quest?" he asked eagerly. Quest drew a little breath. Exactly facing him, in the spot where the jewels had been, was a small black box. He brought it to the table and removed the lid. Inside was a sheet of paper, which he quickly unfolded. They all three read the few lines together: "Pitted against the inherited cunning of the ages, you have no chance. I will take compassion upon you. Look in the right-hand drawer of your desk."

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