

The Black Box

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E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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Novelized from the Photo Play of the Same Name, Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company

SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, 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 but 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 sarastic, threatening notes signed by the inscrutable hands. He is arrested for the murder of his valet, Ross Brown, and a Miss Quig. In his room, Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig, the professor's valet. Lenora is abducted by the threatening hands, but is rescued. Quest clears himself of the murder charge, but fails to trap Craig. In his room another black box appears in the rifled safe and returning the diamonds a second time, the accompanying note tells him he has no chance against the inherited cunning of ages.

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

CHAPTER XVI.

Something in the nature of a conference was proceeding in Quest's study. The professor was there, seated in the most comfortable easy-chair, smoking without relish one of his host's best cigars, watching with nervous impatience the closed door. Laura and Lenora were seated at the table, dressed for the street. They had the air of being prepared for some excursion. Quest, realizing the professor's highly strung state, had left him alone for a few moments and was studying a map of New York. The latter, however, was too ill at ease to keep silent for long.

"Our friend French," he remarked, "gave you no clue, I suppose, as to the direction in which his investigations are leading him?"

Quest glanced up from the map. "None at all. I know, however, that the house in which Lenora here was confined is being watched closely."

"The professor glanced across toward the table before which Lenora was seated.

"It seems strange," he continued, "that the young lady should have so little to tell us about her incarceration."

Lenora shivered for a moment. "What could there be to tell, she asked, "except that it was all horrible, and that I felt things—felt dangers—which I couldn't describe."

The professor gave vent to an impatient little exclamation. "I am not speaking for fancies," he persisted. "You had food brought to you, for instance. Could you never see the hand which placed it inside your room? Could you hear nothing of the footsteps of the person who brought it? Could you not even surmise whether it were a man or a woman?"

Lenora answered him with an evident effort. She had barely, as yet, recovered from the shock of those awful hours.

"The person who brought me the food," she said, "came at night—never in the daytime. I never heard anything. The most I ever saw was once—I happened to be looking toward the door and I saw a pair of hands—nothing more—setting down a tray. I shrieked and called out. I think that I almost fainted. When I found courage enough to look, there was nothing there but the tray upon the floor."

The professor sighed as he turned away. "It is evident, I am afraid," he said, "that Miss Lenora's evidence will help no one. As an expert in these affairs, Mr. Quest, does it not seem to you that her imprisonment was just a little purposeless? There seems to have been no attempt to harm her in any way."

"Whoever took the risk of abducting her," Quest pointed out grimly, "did it for a purpose. That purpose would probably have been developed in course of time. However we look at it, Mr. Ashleigh, there was only one man who must have been anxious to get her out of the way, and that man was Craig. Here comes our friend French. I have an idea that he has something to tell us."

They glanced expectantly towards the door as French entered. The inspector, who was looking very spruce and well brushed, wished them a general good-morning. His eyes rested last and longest upon Laura, who seemed, however, unconscious of his presence.

"Now, then, French," Quest began, as he returned his greeting, "take a cigar, make yourself comfortable in that chair and let us have your news. As you see, we have obeyed orders. We are all ready to follow you anywhere."

"It won't be to the end of the world, anyway," the inspector remarked, as he lit his cigar. "I am going to propose a little excursion down Gayson avenue way."

"Back to that house?" Lenora exclaimed with a grimace. The inspector nodded. "We have had those boys at the



The Whole Staircase Suddenly Began to Revolve.

replied promptly. "You've stretched your ten minutes out some, Mr. French."

The inspector maneuvered to let the others pass on, and descended the stairs by Laura's side.

pora, "the inspector here's setting up as a judge of millinery!"

Lenora turned and looked at them both with an air of blank astonishment. The inspector was a little embarrassed.

"No need to give me away like that," he muttered, as they reached the hall. "Now then, ladies and gentlemen, if you are ready."

They took their places in the automobile and drove off. As they neared the vicinity of Gayson avenue the professor began to show signs of renewed uneasiness. When they drew up at last outside the house he gave a little exclamation. His face was grave, almost haggard.

"Mr. Quest," he said, "inspector French, I deeply regret that I have a statement to make."

They both turned quickly toward him. The inspector smiled in a confidential manner at Laura. "It was obvious that he knew what was coming."

"Some years ago," the professor continued, "I bought this house and made a present of it to—"

"To whom?" Quest asked quickly. "To my servant Craig," the professor admitted with a groan.

Lenora gave a little cry. She turned triumphantly towards the inspector. "All recollection as to its locality had escaped me," the professor continued sorrowfully. "I remember that it was on the anniversary of his having been with me for some fifteen years that I decided to show him some substantial mark of my appreciation. I knew that he was looking for a domicile for his father and mother, who are since both dead, and I requested a house agent to send me in a list of suitable residences. This, alas! was the one I purchased."

Quest glanced around the place. "I think," he said, "that the professor's statement now removes any doubt as to Craig's guilt. You are sure the house has been closely watched, inspector?"

"Since I received certain information," French replied, "I have had half a dozen of my best men in the vicinity. I can assure you that no one has entered or left it during the last twenty-four hours."

They made their way to the piazza steps and entered by the front door. The house was an ordinary framework of moderate size, in poor repair, and showing signs of great neglect. The rooms were barely furnished and their first cursory search revealed no traces of habitation.

There was still the broken skylight in the room which Lenora had occupied, and the bed upon which she had slept was still crumpled. French, who had been tapping the walls down stairs, called to them. They trooped down into the hall. The inspector was standing before what appeared to be an ordinary panel.

"Look here," he said, glancing out of the corner of his eye to be sure that Laura was there, "let me show you what I have just discovered."

He felt with his thumb for a spring. In a moment or two a portion of the wall, about two feet in extent, slowly revolved, disclosing a small cupboard fitted with a telephone instrument.

"A telephone," the inspector remarked, pointing to it, "in an unoccupied house and a concealed cupboard. What do you think of that?"

The professor shook his head. "Don't ask me," he groaned. French took the receiver from its rest and called up the exchange.

"Inspector French speaking," he announced. "Kindly tell me what is the number of the telephone from which I am speaking, and who is the subscriber?"

He listened to the reply and asked another question. "Can you tell me when this instrument was last used? . . . When?"

"Thank you!" The inspector hung up the receiver. "The subscriber's name," he told them dryly, "is Brown. The number is not entered in the book, by request. The telephone was used an hour ago from a call office and connection was established. That is to say, that someone spoke from this telephone."

"Then if your men have maintained their search properly, that someone," Quest said slowly, "must be in the house at the present moment."

"Without a doubt," the inspector agreed. "I am going to search the front room on the first floor before we do anything else," said Quest. "I think that if you wait here I may be able to show you something directly."

Quest ascended the stairs and entered a wholly unfurnished room on the left-hand side. He looked for a minute contemplatively at a large but rather shallow cupboard, the door of which stood open, and tapped lightly with his forefinger upon the back part of it. Then he withdrew a few feet and, drawing out his revolver, deliberately fired into the foot a few inches inside. There was a half-stifled cry. The false back suddenly swung open and a man rushed out. Quest's revolver covered him, but there was no necessity for its use. Craig, smothered with dust, his face white as a piece of marble, even his jaw shaking with fear, was wholly unarmed. He seemed, in fact, incapable of any form of resistance.



He Was Wearing Craig's Clothes.

French waited in the hall below, also armed. Laura gripped Lenora's arm in excitement. "They've got him now!" she exclaimed. "Got him, sure!"

On the fourth or fifth stair, Craig hesitated. He suddenly saw the professor standing below. He gripped the banisters with one hand. The other he flung out in a threatening gesture.

"You've given me away to these bloodhounds!" he cried—"you, for whom I have toiled and slaved, whom I have followed all over the world, whom I have served faithfully with the last breath of my body and the last drop of blood in my veins! You have brought them here—tracked me down! You!"

The professor shook his head sorrowfully. "Craig," he said, "you have been the best servant man ever had. If you are innocent of these crimes you can clear yourself. If you are guilty your death is none too good for you."

Craig seemed to say for a moment upon his feet. Only Lenora, from the hall, saw that he was fitting his right foot into what seemed to be a leather loop hanging from the banisters. Then a wild shout of surprise broke from the lips of all of them, followed by a moment of stupefied wonder. The whole staircase suddenly began to revolve. Craig, clinging to the banisters, disappeared. In a moment or two there was a fresh click. Another set of stairs, identical to the first, had taken their place.

"The ceiling!" Quest shouted, as he rushed down the stairs. "Quick!" They watched open the wooden door and hurried down the dark steps into the gloomy, silent cellar. The place was crowded with packing cases and two huge wire barrels stood in the corner. At the farther end was a door. Quest rushed for it and stood guard. A moment later, however, he recalled to Laura and pressed his revolver into her hand.

"Stand here," he ordered. "Shoot him if he tries to run out. I'll search in the packing cases. He might be dangerous."

The professor, out of breath, was leaning against one of the pillars. His arm passed around it for support. Lenora, with Quest and French, searched hastily amongst the packing cases. Suddenly there was a loud crack, the sound of falling masonry, followed by a scream from Laura. French, with a roar of anger, rushed toward her. She was lying on her side, already half covered by falling bricks and masonry. He dragged her away, just in time.

"My God, she's faint!" he exclaimed. "I haven't," Laura faltered, trying to open her eyes, "and I'm not going to, but I think my arm's broken, and my side hurts."

The fellow's not down here, anywhere," Quest declared. "Let's helper upstairs, and get her out of this devil's house."

The professor led her up the steps and found a chair for her in the hall. The inspector swung open the telephone cupboard and called for an ambulance. Then Quest, who had been examining the staircase, suddenly gave a little exclamation.

"He's done us!" he cried. "Look here, French, this is the original staircase. There's the leather loop. I know it because there was a crack on the fourth stair. When we rushed down the cellar again, he swung the thing round again and simply walked out of the front door. Damn it, man, it's open!"

They hurried outside. French blew his whistle. One of the plain-clothes men came running up from the avenue. He was looking a little sheepish.

"What's wrong?" French demanded. "He's gone off," was the unwilling reply. "I guess that chap's given us the slip."

"Speak up," French insisted. "The only place," the man went on, "we hadn't our eyes glued on was the front door. He must have come out through that. There's been a motor-truck with one or two queer-looking chaps in it at the corner of the avenue there for the last ten minutes. I'd just made up my mind to search round and see what it was up to when you, who was on the other side, showed out. A man jumped up into it and they made off at once."

The inspector's ruminated countenance was white with fury. His head kept turning in the direction of Laura, to whom the professor was busy rendering first aid.

"If I never take another job on as a

"Then we've got to make trucks," he declared, "and pretty quick, too. She'll be starting from somewhere about number twenty-eight dock, a long way down. Come along, gentlemen."

They hurried out to the automobile and started off for the docks. The latter part of their journey was accomplished under difficulties, for the street was packed with drays and heavy vehicles. They reached dock number twenty-eight at last, however, and hurried through the shed on to the wharf. There were no signs of a steamer there.

"Where's the Durham?" Quest asked one of the carters, who was just getting his team together. The man pointed out to the middle of the river, where a small steamer was lying.

"There she is," he replied. "She'll be off in a few minutes. You'll hear the sirens directly when they begin to move down."

Quest led the way quickly to the edge of the wharf. There was a small tug there, the crew of which were just making her fast for the night.

"Fifty dollars if you'll take us out to the Durham and catch her before she sails," Quest shouted to the man who seemed to be the captain. They clambered down the iron ladder and jumped on to the deck of the tug. The captain seized the wheel. The two men who formed the crew took off their coats and waistcoats.

"Give it to her, Jim," the former ordered. "Now then, here goes! We'll just miss the ferry."

They swung around and commenced their journey. Quest stood with his watch in his hand. They were getting up the anchor of the Durham and from higher up the river came the screech of steamers beginning to move on their outward way.

"We'll make it all right," the captain assured them. They were within a hundred yards of the Durham when Quest gave a little exclamation. From the other side of the steamer another tug shot out away, turning back towards New York. Huddled up in the stern, half concealed in a tarpaulin, was a man in a plain black suit. Quest, with a little shout, recognized the man at the helm from his long, brown beard.

"That's one of those fellows who was in the truck," he declared, "and that's Craig in the stern! We've got him this time. Say, captain, it's that tug I want. Never mind about the steamer. Catch it and I'll make it a hundred dollars!"

"We've got her!" he captain exclaimed. There's the ferry and the first of the steamers coming down in the middle. They'll have to chuck it."

Right ahead of them, blazing with lights, a huge ferry came churning the river up and sending waves in their direction. On the other side,

Quest crossed the room towards his cigar cabinet, and opened it. His little start was apparent to both of them. Lenora laid down the bag which she had just lifted up. The professor leaned forward in his chair.

"What is it, Quest?" he demanded. Quest stretched out his hand and picked up from the top of the cigars a small black box! He laid it on the table.

"Unless I am very much mistaken," he said, "it is another communication from our mysterious friend."

"Impossible!" the professor exclaimed hoarsely. "How can he have been here?" Lenora cried.

Quest removed the lid from the box and drew out a circular card. Around the outside edge was a very clever pen and ink sketch of a life-sized man. Inside the margin were several sentences of clear handwriting. In the middle was the signature—the clenched hands! Quest read the message aloud:

In the great scheme of things, the Supreme Ruler of the universe divided an inheritance amongst his children. To one he gave power, to another strength, to another beauty, but to his favorite he gave cunning. They all looked at one another. "What does it mean?" Lenora gasped.

"A lifebuoy!" the professor murmured. They both stared at Quest, who remained silent, chewing hard at the end of his cigar.

"Every message," he said, speaking half to himself, "has had some significance. What does this mean—a lifebuoy?"

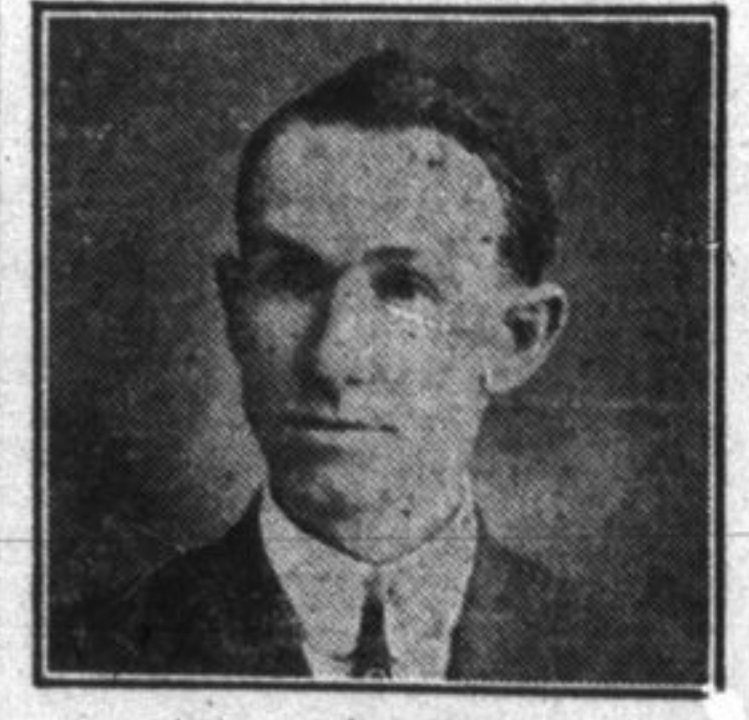
He was silent for a moment. Then he turned suddenly to the professor. "What did you call those men in the motor-truck, professor—river pirates? And a lifebuoy! Wait."

He crossed the room towards his desk and returned with a list in his hand. He ran his finger down it, stopped and glanced at the date. "The Durham," he muttered, "cargo cotton, destination Southampton, sails at high tide on the 16th. Lenora, is that calendar right?"

"It's the 16th, Mr. Quest," she answered.

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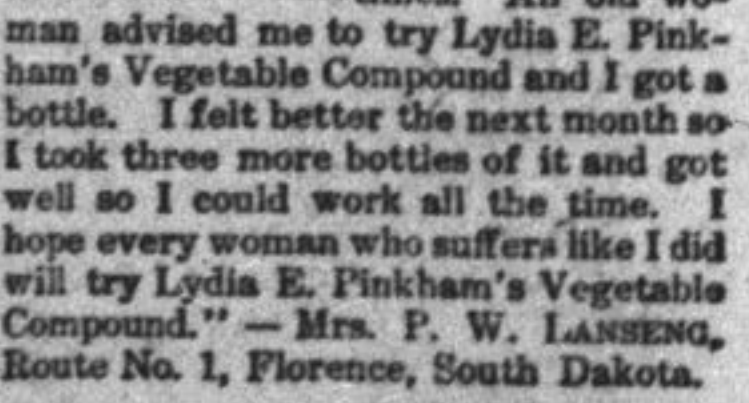
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