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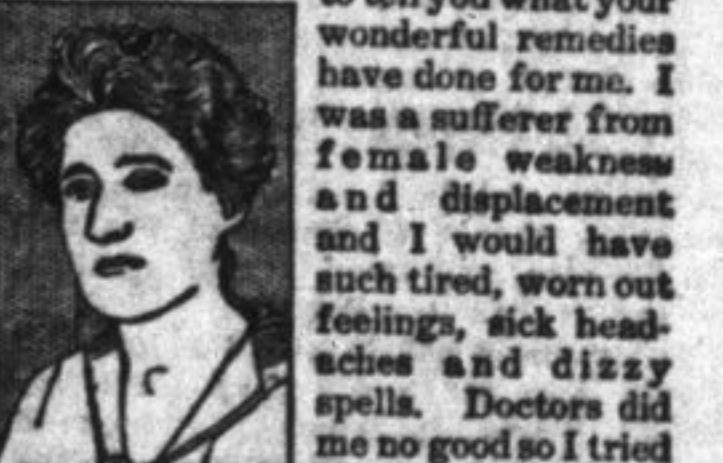
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The BLACK BOX

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM
Author of "Mr. Grev 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.

SYNOPSIS.
Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing to justice MacDougal, 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 and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms have appeared from nowhere black boxes containing sarcasms, notes, signed by a pair of aridous hands. Laura and Lenora, the professor's servant, of a double murder. The black boxes continue to appear in mysterious fashion. Craig is trapped by Quest, but escapes to England, where Quest, Lenora and the professor follow him. Lord Ashleigh is murdered by the Hands. Lenora is abducted in London and rescued. Craig is captured and escapes to Port Said, where Quest and his party also go, and beyond into the desert.

ELEVENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XXIII. IN THE DESERT.

Quest was the first the next morning to open his eyes, to grope his way through the tent opening and stand for a moment alone, watching the slabaster skies. He turned lazily around, meaning to summon the Arab who had volunteered to take Hassan's place. His arms—he had been in the act of stretching—fell to his sides. He stared at the spot where the camels had been tethered. Incredulously. There were no camels, no drivers, no Arabs. There was not a soul nor an object in sight except the stark body of Hassan, which they had dragged half out of sight behind a slight knoll. High up in the sky above were two little black specks, wheeling lower and lower. Quest shivered as he suddenly realized that for the first time in his life he was looking upon the winged ghoul of the desert. Lower and lower they came. He turned away with a shiver.

The professor was still sleeping when Quest re-entered the tent. He woke him up and beckoned him to come outside.

Quest pointed to the little sandy knoll with its sparse covering of grass, deserted—with scarcely a sign, even, that it had been the resting place of the little caravan. The professor gave vent to a little exclamation.

The professor hurried off towards the spot where the encampment had been made. Suddenly he stood still and pointed with his finger. In the clearer, almost crystalline light of the coming day, they saw the track of the camels in one long, unbroken line stretching away northwards.

He glanced around a little helplessly. Quest took a cigar from his case and lit it.

"No good worrying," Quest sighed. "The question is how best to get out of the mess. What's the next move, anyway?"

The professor glanced towards the son and took a small compass from his pocket. He pointed across the desert.

"That's exactly our route," he said, "but I reckon we still must be two days from the Mongars, and how we are going to get there ourselves, much more so get the women there, without camels, I don't know. There are no wells, and I don't believe those fellows have left us a single tin of water."

Laura put her head out of the tent in which the two women had slept.

"Say, where's breakfast?" she exclaimed. "I can't smell the coffee."

They turned and approached her silently. The two girls, fully dressed, came out of the tent as they approached.

clock; the chief by his side—a fine, upright man with long, gray beard; behind, three Mongars, their rifles already to their shoulders. The chief wheeled up his horse as he came within twenty paces of the little party.

"White! English!" he shouted. "Why do you seek death here?"

He waited for no reply, but turned to his men. Three of them dashed forward, their rifles, which were fitted with an odd sort of bayonet, drawn back for the charge. Suddenly Craig, who had been a little in the rear, galloped, shouting, into the line of fire.

"Stop!" he ordered. "Chief, these people are my friends. Chief, the word!"

The chief raised his arm promptly. The men lowered their rifles. Craig galloped back to his host's side. The chief listened to him and nodded gravely. Presently he rode up to the little party. He saluted the professor gravely and talked to him in his own language. The professor turned to the others.

"The chief apologizes for not recognizing me," he announced. "It seems that Craig had told him that he had come to the desert for shelter, and he imagined at once, when he gave the order for the attack upon us, that we were his enemies. He says that we are welcome to go with him to his encampment."

Craig turned slowly towards them. It was a strange meeting.

"It is necessary," he told them, "that you should pretend to be my friends. The chief has ordered two of his men to dismount. Their ponies are for the young ladies. There will be horses for you among the captured ones from the caravan yonder."

They all turned towards the chief, who remained a little on the outside of the circle. The professor raised his hat and spoke a few words in the Mongar language, then he turned to the others.



Captured by the Mongars.

absolutely refused my request. Feerda has overheard some of your conversation, and the chief believes that you will betray us. You will have to come, too."

They all rose at once to their feet, and a few moments later horses were brought.

The little procession was already being formed in line. Craig approached them once more.

"You will mount now and ride in the middle of our caravan," he directed. "The chief does not trust you. If you value your lives, you will do as you are bidden."

"You can call this fairly, if you want," Laura remarked, gazing around her; "I call it a nasty, damp, oozy spot."

Quest motioned them to sit a little nearer.

"I had a moment's talk with Craig this morning, and from what he says I fancy they mean to make a move a little farther in before long. It'll be all the more difficult to escape them."

"Drop your knife," she ordered Craig.

He obeyed without hesitation.

"Now, tie the sash around the girl."

He obeyed mechanically. Quest took Craig by the collar and led him to the spot where the others were waiting. They hoisted him on to a horse. Already behind them they could see the flare of the torches from the returning Mongars.

"You know the way to Port Said," Quest whispered. "See that you lead us there. There will be trouble, mind, if you don't."

Craig made no reply. He rode off in front of the little troop, covered all the time by Quest's revolver. Very soon they were out of the jungle and in the open desert. Quest looked behind him uneasily.

"To judge by the row those fellows are making," he remarked, "I should think that they've found Feerda already."

"In that case," the professor said gravely, "let me recommend you to push on as fast as possible. We have had one escape from those fellows, but nothing in the world can save us now that you have laid hands upon Feerda. The chief would never forgive that."

They galloped steadily on. The moon rose higher and higher until it became as light as day.

Quest fell a little behind the professor's side, although he never left off watching Craig.

"Look behind you, professor," he whispered.

In the far distance were a number of little black specks, growing every moment larger. Even at that moment they heard the low, long call of the Mongars.

"They are gaining on us," Quest muttered.

They raced on for another mile or more. A bullet whistled over their heads. Quest tightened his reins.

"No good," he sighed. "We'd better stay and fight it out, professor. Stick close to me, Lenora."

They drew up and hastily dismounted. The Mongars closed in around them. A cloud had drifted in front of the moon, and in the darkness it was almost impossible to see their whereabouts. They heard the chief's voice.

"Shoot first that dog of a Craig!" There was a shriek. Suddenly Feerda, breaking loose from the others, raced across the little division. She flung herself from her horse.

"Tell my father that you were not faithless," she pleaded. "They shall not kill you!"

She clung to Craig's neck. The bullets were beginning to whistle around

"Be Careful, Lenora."

them now. All of a sudden she threw up her arms. Craig, in a fury, turned around and fired into the darkness. Then suddenly, as though on the bidding of some unspoken word, there was a queer silence. Everyone was distinctly conscious of an alien sound—the soft thud of many horses' feet galloping from the right; then a sharp, English voice of command.

"Hold your fire, men. Close in to the left there. Steady!"

The cloud suddenly rolled away from the moon. A long line of horsemen were immediately visible. The officer in front rode forward.

"Drop your arms and surrender," he ordered, sternly.

The Mongars, who were outnumbered by twenty to one, obeyed without hesitation. Their chief seemed unconscious, even, of what had happened. He was on his knees, supporting the body of Feerda, half supported in Craig's arms. The officer turned to Quest.

"Are you the party who left Port Said for the Mongar camp?" he asked. Quest nodded.

"They took us into the jungle—just escaped. They'd caught us here, though, and I'm afraid we were about finished if you hadn't come along. We are not English—we're American."

"Same thing," the officer replied, as he held out his hand.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)