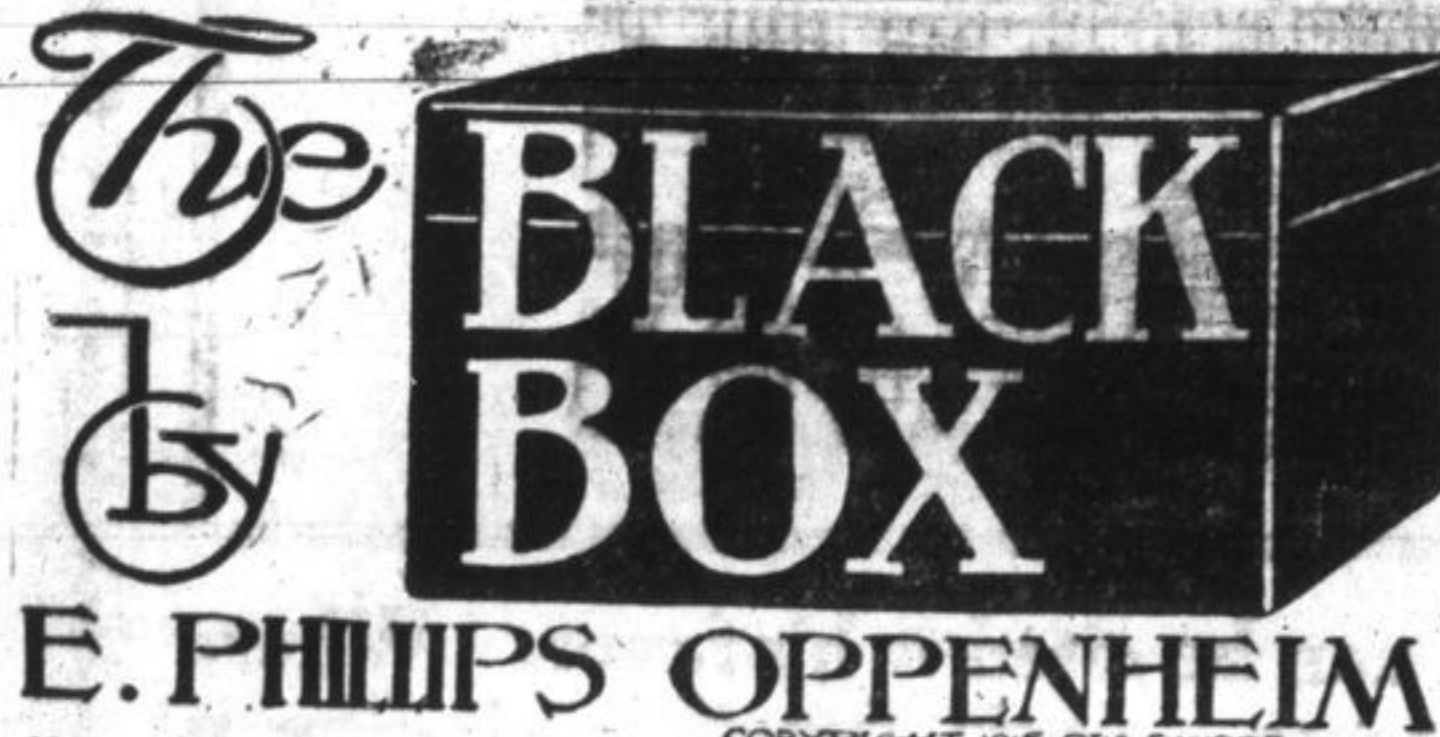


# The Black Box

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HER DREAMS CAME TRUE



E. PHILIPS OPPENHEIM

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 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 hut in Professor Ashleigh's garden he has seen an empty skeleton and a living creature, his hands, half man, destroyed by fire. In his room he has discovered a box containing notes, signed by a pair of armless hands. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, find the box in a mysterious fashion. One is trapped, but escapes to England, where Quest, Lenora and the professor follow. Quest, Lenora and his wife also go, and beyond into the desert. They are captured by Mongars, among whom Craig seems to be in authority, escape with Craig as their captive and are rescued by British troops.

### TWELFTH INSTALLMENT.

#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### NEATH IRON WHEELS.

Side by side they leaped over the rail of the steamer and gazed shorewards at the slowly unfolding scene before them. For some time they had all preserved an almost ecstatic silence.

"Say, but it's good to see home again!" Laura sighed at last.

"I'm with you," Quest agreed emphatically. "It's the wrong side of the continent, perhaps, but I'm aching to set my foot on American soil again."

"This is the wrong side of the continent! I should say not!" Laura exclaimed, pointing to where in the distance the buildings of the exposition gleamed almost white in the dazzling sunshine. "Why, I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

"I guess there's one of us here," Quest observed, "who is none too pleased to see America again."

Lenora shivered a little. They were all grave.

Quest moved slowly down the deck towards Craig's side, and touched him on the arm.

"Give me your left wrist, Craig," he said quietly.

The man slunk away. There was a sudden look of horror in his white face. He started back, but Quest was too quick for him. In a moment there was the click of a handcuff, the mat of which was concealed under the criminologist's cuff.

They stepped along the deck towards the rest of the party. Lenora handed her glasses to Quest.

"Do look, Mr. Quest," she begged. "There is Inspector French standing in the front row on the dock, with two enormous bunches of flowers—carnations for me, I expect, and poinsettias for Laura. They're the larger bunch."

Quest took the glasses and nodded.

Slowly the great steamer drifted nearer and nearer to the docks, hats were waved from the little line of spectators, ropes were drawn taut. The inspector was standing at the bottom of the gangway as they all passed down. He shook hands with everyone vigorously. Then he presented Lenora with her carnations and Laura with the poinsettias. Lenora was enthusiastic. Even Laura murmured a few words of thanks.

"Some flowers, those poinsettias," the inspector agreed.

Quest snipped him, by the arm.

"French," he said, "I tell you I shall make your hair curl when you hear all that we've been through. Do you feel like having me start in right away, on our way to the cars?"

French withdrew his arm.

"Nothing doing," he replied. "I want to talk to Miss Laura. You can stow that criminal stuff. It'll wait all right. You've got the fellow—that's what matters!"

Quest exchanged an amused glance with Lenora. The inspector and Laura fell a little behind. The former took off his hat for a moment and fanned himself.

"Say, Miss Laura," he began, "I'm a plain man, and a poor hand at speeches. I've been saying a few nice things over to myself on the dock here for the last hour, but everything's gone right out of my head. Look here, it sums up like this: How do you feel about quitting this lurch right away and coming with me to New York?"

"What do I want to go to New York for?" Laura demanded.

"Oh, come on, Miss Laura, you know what I mean," French replied. "We'll slip off and get married here and then take this man Craig to New York. Once get him safely in the Tombs and we'll go off on a honeymoon anywhere you say."

Laura was on the point of laughing at him. Then the unwonted seriousness of his expression appealed suddenly to her sympathy. She patted him kindly on the shoulder.

"You're a good sort, inspector, but you've picked the wrong girl. I've run along on my own hook ever since I was born, I guess, and I can't switch my ideas over to this married stuff. You better get a move on and get Craig back to New York before he

He's been unconscious all the time," Quest reminded her. "Might have expected to find us there when he came to, anyway," Laura insisted.

Lenora smiled faintly as she caught a glance from Quest.

"Laura's got a heart somewhere," she muttered, "only it takes an awful lot of getting at!"

They found French, already convalescent, comfortably installed in the private ward of a small hospital in the picturesque New Mexico town. Laura almost at once established herself by his side.

"Can you remember anything about the wreck, French?" Quest inquired. The inspector passed his hand wearily over his forehead.

"It seems more like a dream—or rather a nightmare—than anything," he admitted. "I was sitting opposite Craig when the crash came. I was unconscious for a time. When I came to, I was simply pinned down by the side of the car. I could see a man working hard to release me, tugging and straining with all his might. Every now and then I got a glimpse of his face. It seemed queer, but I could have sworn it was Craig. Then other people passed by. I heard the shriek of a locomotive. I could see a doctor bending over some bodies. Then it all faded away and came back again. The second time I was nearly free. The man who had been working so hard was just smashing the last bit of timber away, and again I saw his face and that time I was sure that it was Craig. Anyway, he finished the job. I suddenly felt I could move my limbs. The man stood up as though exhausted, looked at me, called to the doctor, and then he seemed to fade away. It might have been because I was unconscious myself, for I don't remember anything else until I found myself in bed."

"It would indeed," the professor remarked, "be an interesting circumstance—an interesting psychological circumstance, if I might put it that way—if Craig, the arch-criminal, the man who has seemed to us so utterly devoid of all human feeling, should really have felt in this manner to set free his captor."

"Interesting or not," Quest observed, "I'd like to know whether it was Craig or not. I understand there were about a dozen unrecognizable bodies found."

The nurse, who had left the room for a few minutes, returned with a small package in her hand, which she handed to French. He looked at it in a puzzled manner.

"Say, what can that be?" he muttered, turning it over. "Addressed to me all right, but there isn't a soul knows I'm here except you folks. Will you open it, Miss Laura?"

She took it from him and untied the strings. A little breathless cry escaped from her lips as she tore open the paper. A small black box was disclosed. She opened the lid with trembling fingers and drew out a scrap of paper. They all leaned over and read together.

"You have all lost again. Why not give up? You can never win."

Lenora was perhaps the calmest. She simply nodded with the mechanical air of satisfaction of one who finds her preconceived ideas confirmed.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed softly. "I knew it at the depot. Craig's time has not come yet. He may be somewhere near us, even now."

She glanced uneasily around the ward. Quest, who had been examining the postmarks on the package, threw the paper down.

"The postmark's all blurred out," he remarked. "There's no doubt about it, that fellow Craig has the devil's own luck, but we'll get him—we'll get him yet. I'll just take a stroll up to police headquarters and make a few inquiries. You might come with me, Lenora, and Laura can get busy with her amateur nursing."

"I shall make inquiries," the professor announced briskly, "concerning the local museum. There should be interesting relics hereabouts of the prehistoric Indians."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A man sat on the steps of the range cook wagon, crouching as far back as possible to take advantage of its slight

"We Ain't Powerful Civilized at This Camp, but You Don't Get Our Cook Till You Show a Warrant."



"We Ain't Powerful Civilized at This Camp, but You Don't Get Our Cook Till You Show a Warrant."

There was no one in sight. Softly, almost stealthily, he crept up to the wagon, fetched out from its wooden case a small violin, sat down with his back to the wheel and began to play. Suddenly the bow rested motionless. A look of fear came into his face. He sprang up. The cowboys were all stealing from the other side of the wagon. They had arrived and dismounted without his hearing them. He sprang up, his feet and began to stammer apologies. Long Jim's hand was laid firmly upon his shoulders.

"Say, cookie, you don't need to look so scared. You ain't done nothing wrong. Me and the boys, we like your music. Sing us another tune on that fiddle!"

The cook looked at him for a moment incredulously. Then he realized that the cowboy was in earnest. He picked up the bow and commenced to play again. They sat around him, wondering, absolutely absorbed. No one even made a move towards the food. It was Craig who led them there at last himself, still playing. Long Jim threw his arm almost carelessly around his shoulder.

"Say, cookie," he began, "there ain't never no questions asked concerning the past history of the men who find their way out here, just so long as they don't play the game wrong. Maybe you've fitted up a nice little hell for yourself somewhere, but we ain't none of us hankering to know the address. You're white and you're one of us and any time any guy wants to see us and say time any guy wants to see us, we'll be glad to see him, that's all."

The interruption which came was from outside.

"More of these d-d tourists," Long Jim muttered. "Women, too!"

Craig turned his head slowly. Quest was in the act of dismounting from his horse. By his side was the professor; just behind, Lenora and Laura. Long Jim greeted them with rough cordiality.

"Say, what are you folks looking for?" he demanded.

Quest pointed to Craig.

"This is Inspector French from New York. I am Sanford Quest."

There was a tense silence. Craig covered his face with his hands, then suddenly looked up.

"I won't come," he cried fiercely. "You've bounded me all around the world. I am innocent. I won't come."

Quest shrugged his shoulders. He took a step forward, but Long Jim, as though by accident, sauntered in the way.

"Got a warrant?" he asked tersely. "We don't need it," Quest replied. "He's our man, right enough."

"Right this minute he's our cook," drawled Long Jim, "and we ain't exactly particular about going hungry just to please a bunch of strangers. Cut it short, mister. If you ain't got a warrant, you ain't got this man."

"All right," Quest agreed. "The inspector here and I will soon see to that. We'll ride back to the township. With your permission, the ladies and our elderly friend will remain for a rest."

"You're welcome to anything we've got except our cook," Jim replied, turning away.

Darkness came early and the little company grew closer and closer to the camp fire, where Craig had once more taken up his violin. The professor had wandered off somewhere into the darkness and the girls were seated a little apart. They had been treated hospitably but coldly.

"Don't seem to cotton to us, these boys," Laura remarked.

"They don't like us," Lenora replied, "because they think we are after Craig. I wonder what Long Jim has been whispering to him, and what that paper is he has been showing Craig. Do you know how far we are from the Mexican border?"

"Not more than five or six miles, I believe," Laura replied.

Lenora rose softly to her feet and strolled to the back of the range wagon. In a few moments she reappeared, carrying a piece of paper in her hand. She stopped down.

"Craig's saddling up," she whispered. "Look what he's dropped."

She held out the paper, on which was traced a roughly drawn map.

"That line's the river that marks the Mexican border," she explained. "You see where Long Jim's put the

cross? That's where the bridge is. That other cross is the camp."

She pointed away southwards. "That's the line," she continued. "Laura, where's the professor?"

"I don't know," Laura replied. "He rode off some time ago; and he was going to meet Mr. Quest."

"If only he were here!" Lenora muttered. "I feel sure Craig means to escape. There he goes."

They saw him ride off into the darkness. Lenora ran to where her horse was tethered.

"I'm going after him," she announced. "Listen, Laura. If they arrive soon, send them after me."

She galloped off while Laura was still undecided. Almost at that moment she heard from behind the welcome sound of horses' feet in the opposite direction and Quest galloped up. Laura laid her hand upon his rein.

"Don't get off," Laura continued quickly. "Craig has escaped, riding towards the Mexican frontier. Lenora is following him. He's gone in that direction," she added pointing. "When you come to the river you'll have to hunt for the bridge."

Quest frowned as he gathered up his reins.

"I was afraid they'd try something of the sort," he muttered. "Tell the others where I've gone, Laura."

He galloped off into the darkness. Behind, there were some growls from the little group of cowboys, none of whom, however, attempted to interfere with him. Long Jim stood up and gazed sullenly southwards.

"Cookie'll make the bridge all right," he remarked. "If the girl catches him, she can't do anything. And that guy'll never make it. Whoop! Here comes the rest of them."

The inspector, with the two deputies, rode suddenly into the camp. The inspector eyed to speak to Laura. Long Jim's eyes sparkled as he saw them approach.

"It's old Harris and fat Andy," he whispered. "We'll have some fun with them."

The older of the two deputies approached them, frowning.

"Been at your games again, Long Jim?" he began. "I hear you declined to hand over a criminal who'd been sheltering on your ranch? You'll get into trouble before you've finished."

"Got the warrant?" Jim asked.

The deputy produced it. Long Jim looked at it curiously and handed it back.

"Guess the only thing you want, then, is the man."

"Better produce him quickly," the deputy advised.

Jim turned away.

"Can't do it. He's beat it."

"You mean that you've let him go?"

"Let him go?" Jim repeated. "I ain't got no right to keep him. He took the job on a moment's notice and he left at a moment's notice. There's some of your party after him, all right."

The hunted man turned round with a little gasp. Before him was the rude mountain bridge, and on the other side—freedom. Scarcely a dozen lengths away was Lenora, and close behind her came Quest. He slackened speed as he walked his horse cautiously on to the planked bridge. Suddenly he gave a little cry.

The frail structure, unexpectedly insecure, seemed to sway beneath his weight. Lenora, who was riding fast, was unable to stop at a half cantor. Craig, who had reached the other side in safety, threw up his hands.

"Look out!" he cried. "My God!"

The bridge suddenly collapsed as though it had been made of paper. Lenora, grasping her horse, was thrown into the stream. Quest, galloping up, was only able to check him-

self just in time. He flung himself from his horse and plunged into the stream. It was several moments before he was able to reach Lenora. From the opposite bank Craig watched them, glancing once or twice at the bridge. One of the wooden pillars had been sawn completely through.

"Are you hurt, dear?" Quest gasped, as he drew Lenora to the bank. She shook her head.

"Just my side. Did Craig get away?"

Quest looked gloomily across the stream.

"Craig's in Mexico, right enough," he answered savagely. "but I'm beginning to feel that I could fetch him back out of hell!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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