

The Black Box

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The BLACK BOX

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "The Meeting Place," "The Prince of St. James," "The Adventures," 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 world, finds that in bringing to justice Macdougall, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has not 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 ape skeleton and a living creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms have appeared black boxes containing notes, signed by a pair of armless hands. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig, the professor's servant, of a double murder. The black boxes continue to appear in uncanny fashion. Craig escapes to Port Fashion. Quest and his party follow, and beyond the desert they are captured by Mongars, escape with Craig as their captive, and turn him over to Inspector French in San Francisco. He escapes in a train wreck, outcrawls his pursuers, and goes back to New York, where he dies while Quest, attempting to hypnotize him into confession.

FIFTEENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XXXV.

The first shock was over. Craig's body had been removed, and the girls had taken Mary, half stunned with grief, to their room. French and Quest were left alone. "That is some disappointment," the former remarked, gloomily. "It is a disappointment," Quest said slowly, "which may clear the way to bigger things."

"What's in your mind now?" French inquired. Quest shook his head. "A turmoil. First of all, where is the professor?" "Must have scouted right away home," French suggested. "He was looking pretty sick all the time. Guess it must have been a powerful shock for him, and he isn't so young as he used to be."

"Give me that paper of Craig's again," Quest asked. The inspector produced the document from his inner pocket, and Quest, stretching it out upon his knee, read it word for word. "Never to communicate or to have anything to do with anyone of the name of Ashleigh, eh?" he remarked, as he handed it back again. "Rather a queer provision, that, French."

"I've been thinking that myself," the inspector admitted. Quest glanced at the clock. "Well," he said, "if you're ready, inspector, we'll be getting along."

The two men drove to the outskirts of the city almost in silence. The professor's house seemed more than ever deserted as they drew up at the front door. They entered without ringing and crossed the hall towards the library. On the threshold Quest paused and held up his finger. "Someone is in there," he whispered, stepping quickly forward. "Come!"

thoughts were framing themselves in the brains of both of them. Then there came a startling and in its way a dramatic interlude. Through the empty house came the ringing of the electric bell from the front door, shrill and insistent. Without a moment's hesitation, Quest hurried out, and French followed him. On the doorstep was another surprise. Lenora and Laura were there, the former carrying a small, black-bound volume. "Don't be cross," she begged, quickly. "We just had to come. Look! We picked this up underneath the chair where Craig was sitting. It must have slipped from his pocket. You see what is written on it?—Diary of John Craig."

Quest took it in his hand. "Say, this ought to be interesting," he remarked. "Come along." They passed into the library. French lingered behind for a moment and caught them up just as they were opening the book underneath the electric lamp. "See here what I've found!" he exclaimed. "It was just by the side of the wall there. Where's that magazine?"

He spread out the piece of paper—it fitted exactly into the empty space. They all read together. Professor Ashleigh, after being bitten by the anthropoid, rapidly developed hydrophobia of a serious nature. After treatment with a new serum the patient was relieved of the hydrophobic symptoms, but to my horror this mild-mannered, humane man seems possessed at times of all the characteristics of the brutal anthropoid—cunning, thievish, brutality. I do not know what may come of this. I hesitate to put even these words on to paper. I am doubtful as to what course, in the interests of humanity, I ought to take.

(Signed) JAMES MERRILL, M. D. Editor's Note.—Just as we go to press, a cable announces the terrible death of Doctor Merrill, the writer of the above notes. He was attacked by wild animals whilst alone in a South American jungle, and torn to pieces. There was a queer little silence among the company. No one seemed inclined for speech. They looked at one another in dumb, wondering horror. Then Quest drew a penknife from his pocket and with a turn of his wrist forced the lock of the diary. They all watched him with fascinated eyes. It was something to escape from their thoughts. They leaned over as he spread the book out before him. Those first two sentences were almost in the nature of a dedication.

For ten years I have protected my master, Prof. Edgar Ashleigh, at the cost of my peace of mind, my happiness, my reputation. This book, even though it be too late to help me, shall clear my reputation. Quest closed the volume. "French," he decided, "we must find the professor. Will you have your men search the house and grounds immediately?"

The inspector left the room like a dazed man. They could hear him giving orders outside. "The next page," Lenora begged. "Just one page more!" Quest hesitated for a moment. Then he turned it over. All three read again: Ten years of horror, struggling all the while to keep him from that other self, that thing of bestiality, to keep his horrible secret from the world, to cover up his crimes, even though their shadow should rest upon me. Now Sanford Quest has come. Will this mean discovery? "Another page," Quest said. "Don't you see where it is leading us? We have his truth here. Wait!"

wards. There's no sign of the professor." Quest pocketed the diary. "You're perfectly certain that he is not in this house or anywhere upon the premises?"

"Certain sure!" French replied. Quest shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we'd better get back," he said.

They were on the point of starting, the chauffeur with his hand upon the starting handle, French with the steering wheel of the police car already in his hand. And then the little party seemed suddenly turned to stone. For a few breathless seconds not one of them moved. Out into the clammy night air came the echoes of a hideous, inhuman, blood-curdling scream. Quest was the first to recover himself. He leaped from his seat and rushed back across the empty hall into the study, followed a little way behind by French and the others. An unsuspected panel door which led into the garden stood slightly ajar. The professor, with his hand on the back of a chair, was staring at the fireplace, shaking as though with some horrible ague, his face distorted, his body curiously hunched up. He seemed suddenly to have dropped his humanity, to have fallen back into the world of some strange creature. He heard their footsteps, but he did not turn his head. His hands were stretched out in front of him as though to keep away from his sight some hateful object.

"Stop him!" he cried. "Take him away! It's Craig—his spirit! He came to me in the garage, he followed me through the grounds, he mocked at me when I hid in the tree. He's there now, kneeling before the fireplace. Why can't I kill him! He is coming! Stop him, someone!" No one spoke or moved; no one, indeed, had the power. Then, at last Quest found words. "There is no one in the room, professor," he said, "except us."

The sound of a human voice seemed to produce a strange effect. The professor straightened himself, shook his head, his hands dropped to his side, ghastly pale, but his smile was once more the smile of the amiable naturalist. "My friends," he said, "forgive me. I am very old, and the events of these last few hours have unnerved me. Forgive me."

He groped for a moment and sank into a chair. Quest fetched a decanter and a glass from the sideboard, poured out some wine and held it to his lips. The professor drank it eagerly. "My dear friend," he exclaimed, "you have saved me. I have something to tell you, something I must tell you at once, but not here. I loathe this place. Let me come with you to your rooms."

"As you please," Quest answered, calmly. He gripped Quest's arm. In silence they passed from the room, in silence they took their places once more in the automobiles, in silence they drove without a pause to Quest's rooms. The professor made his way at once to his favorite easy chair, threw off his overcoat and leaned back. "Quest," he pronounced, "you are the best friend I have in my life! It is you who have rid me of my great burden. Tell me—help me a little with my story—have you read that page from the Medical Journal which I have enclosed?"

Quest followed him, pleading, expostulating. They saw the conservatory for a minute, and then blackness. The professor was leaning against a marble basin. There was nothing to be seen of him but his eyes and hands. They saw him listen for a moment or two in cold, unresponsive silence, then stretch out his hand and push Craig away. The picture glowed and faded and glowed again. Then they saw through the gloom the figure of a woman approach, a diamond necklace around her neck. They saw the hands steal out and circle her throat—and then more darkness, silence, obscurity. The mirror was empty once more.

"Mrs. Rheinhold's jewels!" Lenora cried. "What next? Oh! my God, what next?" Their eyes ached with the strain, but there was not one of them who could even glance away from the mirror. It was Quest's study which slowly appeared then. The Salvation Army girl was there, talking to the professor. They saw him leave her, they saw him look back from the door, a strange, evil glance. Then they saw the secretary enter and speak to her. Once more the door opened. The hands were there, stretching and reaching, a paperweight gripped in the right-hand fingers. They saw it raised above the secretary's head, they saw the other hand take the girl by the throat and push her towards the table. A wild scream broke from Lenora's lips. Quest wavered for a



He is Dead!

its coils and levers. The professor watched her. Slowly his face changed. The benevolence faded away, his teeth for a moment showed in something which was almost a snarl. "You believe me?" he cried, turning to Quest. "You are not going to try that horrible thing on me—Professor Lord Ashleigh? I am all broken up. I am not fit for it. Look at my hands, how they shake."

"Professor," Quest said, sternly, "we are surrounded by the shadow of some terrible deeds for which as yet there is no explanation. I do not say that we mistrust you, but I ask you to submit to this test." "I refuse!" the professor replied, harshly. "And I insist," Quest muttered. The professor drew a little breath. He sat back in his chair. His face became still, his lips were drawn closely together. Lenora wheeled up the machine and with deft fingers adjusted the fittings on one side. Quest himself connected it up on the other. The professor sat there like a figure of stone. The silence in the room was so intense that the ticking of the small clock upon the mantel piece was clearly audible. The very atmosphere seemed charged with the thrill and wonder of it. Never before had Quest met with resistance so complete and immovable. Sternly he concentrated the whole of his will power upon his task. Almost at once there was a change. The professor fell back in the chair. The tense self-control had passed from his features, his lips twitched. Simultaneously, the mirror for a moment was clouded—then slowly a picture upon it gathered outline and substance. There was a jungle, strange, tall trees, and brushwood so thick that it reached to the waists of the two men who were slowly making their way through it. One was the professor, clearly recognizable under his white sun helmet; the other a stranger to all of them. Suddenly they stopped. The latter had crept a yard or so ahead, his gun raised to his shoulder, his eyes fixed upon some possible object of pursuit. There was a sudden change in the professor. They saw him seize his gun by the barrel and whirl it above his head. He seemed suddenly to lose his whole identity. He crouched on his haunches, almost like an animal, and sprang at the other's throat. They could almost hear the snarl from his lips as the two men went down together into the undergrowth. The picture faded away.

"Doctor Merrill!" Lenora faltered. "Then it was not wild beasts which killed him?" Almost immediately figures again appeared in the mirror. There was a small passage which seemed to lead from the back entrance of a house; the professor, with a black mantle, Craig followed him, pleading, expostulating. They saw the conservatory for a minute, and then blackness. The professor was leaning against a marble basin. There was nothing to be seen of him but his eyes and hands. They saw him listen for a moment or two in cold, unresponsive silence, then stretch out his hand and push Craig away. The picture glowed and faded and glowed again. Then they saw through the gloom the figure of a woman approach, a diamond necklace around her neck. They saw the hands steal out and circle her throat—and then more darkness, silence, obscurity. The mirror was empty once more.

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moment. The picture faded out. "Oh, stop it!" Lenora begged. "Haven't we seen enough? We know the truth now. Stop it or I shall die!" The criminologist made no reply. His eyes were still fixed upon the professor, who showed some signs of returning consciousness. He was gripping at his collar. He seemed to have difficulty with his breathing. Quest suddenly braced himself. He pushed Lenora back. "One more," he muttered. "There's something growing in my mind. I can feel it. Wait!"

Quest held up the paper. They all read. The professor's letters were carefully formed, his handwriting perfectly legible. "You have been a clever opponent, Sanford Quest, but even now you are to be cheated. The wisdom of the ages outreaches your outreaches it and triumphs."

Quest looked up quickly. "What the devil does he mean?" he muttered. The professor's arms shot suddenly above his head. Again that strange animal look convulsed his features. He burst into a loud, unnatural laugh. "Mean, you fool!" he cried, holding out his wrist, which was slyly turning black. "Poisoned! That is what it means!"

They all stared at him. Quest seized the ink bottle, revealed the false top and hid it down again with a little exclamation. Then, before they could realize it the end came. The professor lay, a crumpled-up heap, upon the floor. Quest swung round in his chair as French entered the room and held out his left hand. "Glad to see you, French. Help yourself to a cigar."

"I don't know as I want to smoke this morning just at present, thank you," French replied. "Nothing wrong, eh?" "The fact of it is," French explained, "I should like a few words with Miss Laura."

Quest laughed shortly. "Why on earth couldn't you say so?" he observed. "Never knew you bashful before, inspector. She's up in the laboratory. I'll ring for someone to show you the way."

Quest touched the bell and his new secretary entered almost at once. "Take Inspector French up into the laboratory," Quest directed. See you later, French. "Yes—perhaps—I hope so," the inspector replied nervously. Quest watched him disappear with a puzzled smile. Then he sat down at his desk, drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write: My Dear Inspector: I am taking this opportunity of letting you know that out of deference to the wishes of the woman I hope soon to marry, I am abandoning the hazardous and nerve-racking profession of criminology for a safer and happier career. You will have, therefore, to find help elsewhere in the future. With best wishes, Yours, SANFORD QUEST.

He left the sheet of paper upon the desk and, ringing the bell, sent for Lenora. She appeared in a few moments and came over to his side. "What is it, Mr. Quest?" she asked. He gave her the letter without remark. She read it through and, turning slowly around, looked at him expectantly. "How's that seem to you?" he asked, reaching out his hand for a cigar. "Very sensible, indeed," she replied. "It's no sort of life, this, for a married man," Quest declared. "You agree with me there, don't you, Lenora?"

"Yes," she admitted, a little faintly. The secretary entered the room, helped Quest on with his coat and handed him his hat. "If you are quite ready, Lenora," "Ready!" she exclaimed. "Where are we going?" Quest sighed. "Fancy having to explain all these things!" he said, taking her arm. "I just want you to understand, Lenora, that I've waited—quite long enough, Parkins," he added, turning to his secretary, "if anyone calls, just say that my wife and I will be back early in the afternoon. And you'd better step upstairs to the laboratory and give my compliments to Inspector French, and say that I hope he and Miss Laura will join us at Delmonico's for luncheon at one o'clock."

"Very good, sir," the man replied. Lenora's face was suddenly transformed. She passed her arm through Quest's. She stooped and kissed him as he led her towards the door. "You understand now, don't you?" he whispered, smiling down at her. "I think so," she admitted, with a little sigh of content. THE END.

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