

The BLACK BOX

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Mr. Gray 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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CHAPTER IX.

The exact spot where the bones of the missing skeleton was discovered, was easily located. It was about twenty yards from a gate which led into the back part of the professor's grounds. Quest wasted very little time before arriving at a decision.

"The discovery of the bones so near the professor's home," he decided, "cannot be coincidence only. We will waste no time out here, Lenora. We will search the grounds. Come on."

It was hard to know which way to turn. Every path was choked with tangled weeds and bushes. They wan-

far as the hedge, which they skirted for a few yards until they found an opening. Then Quest gave vent to a little exclamation. Immediately in front of them was a small hut, built apparently of sticks and bamboos, with a stronger framework behind. The sloping roof was grass-grown and entwined with rushes. The only apology for a window was a queer little hole set quite close to the roof.

There was a rude-looking door, but Quest, on trying it, found it locked. They walked around the place, but found no other opening. All the time from inside they could hear queer scuffling sounds. Lenora's cheeks grew paler.

"Must we stay?" she murmured. "I don't think I want to see what's inside. Mr. Quest! Mr. Quest!"

She clung to his arm. They were opposite the little aperture which served as a window, and at that moment it suddenly framed the face of a creature, human in features, diabolical in expression.

"Say, that's some face!" he remarked. "I'd hate to spoil it."

Even as he spoke it disappeared.

"We've got to get inside there, Lenora," he announced, stepping forward.

She followed him silently. A few turns of the wrist and the door yielded. Keeping Lenora a little behind him, Quest gazed around eagerly. Exactly in front of him, clad only in a loin cloth, with hunched-up shoulders, a necklace around its neck, with blazing eyes and ugly, gleaming teeth, crouched some unrecognizable creature, human, yet inhuman, a monkey, and yet a man. There were a couple of monkeys swinging by their tails from a bar, and a leopard chained to a staple in the ground, walking round and round in the far corner, snapping and snarling every time he glanced towards the newcomers.

The creature in front of him stretched out a hairy hand towards a club, and gripped it. Quest drew a long breath. His eyes were set hard.

"Drop that club," he ordered.

The creature suddenly sprang up. The club was waved around his head.

"Drop it," Quest repeated firmly. "You will sit down in your corner. You will sleep."

The club slipped from the hairy fingers. The tense frame, which had been already crouched for the spring, was suddenly relaxed. The knees trembled.

"Back to that corner," Quest ordered, pointing.

Slowly and dejectedly, the ape-man crept to where he had been ordered and sat there with dull, non-comprehending stare. It was a new force, this, a note of which he had felt—

superman raising the voice of authority. Quest touched his forehead and found it damp. The strain of those few seconds had been intolerable.

"I don't think these other animals will hurt," he said. "Let's have a look around the place."

The search took only a few moments. The monkeys ran and jumped around them, gibbering as though with pleasure. The leopard watched them always with a snarl and an evil light in his eye.

They found nothing unusual until they came to the distant corner, where a huge piano box lay on its side with the opening turned to the wall.

"This is where the brute sleeps, I suppose," Quest remarked. "We'll turn it around, anyway."

They dragged it a few feet away from the wall, so that the opening faced them. Then Lenora gave a little cry and Quest stood suddenly still.

"The skeleton!" Lenora shrieked. "It's the skeleton!"

It was a skeleton so old that the bones had turned a dull gray. Quest glanced towards the hands.

"Little fingers both missing," he muttered.

"Remember the message?" she exclaimed. "Where the skeleton is, the necklace may be also."

Quest nodded shortly.

"We'll search."

They turned over everything in the place fruitlessly. There was no sign of the necklace.

"You get outside, Lenora," Quest directed. "I'll just bring this beast round again and then we'll tackle the professor."

Quest turned towards the creature, which crouched still huddled up in its corner.

"Look at me," he ordered.

The creature obeyed. Once more its frame seemed to grow more virile and natural.

"You need sleep no longer," Quest said. "Wake up and be yourself."

The effect of these words was instantaneous. Almost as he spoke, the creature crouched for a spring. There was wild hatred in its close-set eyes, the snarl of something fendlike in its contorted mouth. Quest slipped quickly through the door.

"Anyone may have that for a pet!" he remarked grimly. "Come, Lenora, there's a word or two to be said to the professor. There's something here will need a little explanation."

He lit a cigar as they struggled back along the path. Presently they reached the untidy-looking avenue, and a few minutes later arrived at the house.

Quest searched in vain for a bell. They walked round the piazza. There were no signs of any human life. They came back to the front door. Quest tried the handle and found it open. They passed into the hall.

"Hospitable sort of place, anyway," he remarked. "We'll go in and wait, Lenora."

They found their way to the study, which seemed to be the only habitable room. Lenora glanced around at its strange contents with an expression almost of awe.

A small motor car passed the window, driven by Craig. The professor descended. A moment or two later he entered the room. He gazed from Quest to Lenora at first in blank surprise. Then he held out his hands.

"You have good news for me, my friends!" he exclaimed. "I am sure of it. How unfortunate that I was not at home to receive you! Tell me—don't keep me in suspense, if you please—

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In Front of Them Crouched an Unrecognizable Creature.

dered about almost aimlessly for nearly half an hour. Then Quest came to a sudden standstill. Lenora gripped his arm. They had both heard the same sound—a queer, crooning cry, half plaintive, half angry.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

Lenora still clung to his arm.

"I hate this place," she whispered. "It terrifies me. What are we looking for, Mr. Quest?"

"Can't say that I know exactly," the latter answered, "but I guess we'll find out where that cry came from. Sounded to me uncommonly like a human effort."

They had made their way up as

you have discovered my skeleton?"

"We have found the skeleton," Quest announced.

For a single moment the newcomer stood as though turned to stone.

"My skeleton!" he murmured. "Mr. Quest, I knew it. You are the greatest man alive. Now tell me quickly—I want to know everything, but this first of all. Where did you find the skeleton? Who was the thief?"

"We found the skeleton, professor," Quest replied, "within a hundred yards of this house."

The professor's mouth was wide open. He looked like a bewildered child. It was several seconds before he spoke.

"Within a hundred yards of this house? Then it wasn't stolen by one of my rivals?"

"I should say not," Quest admitted. "Where? exactly did you find it?" the professor insisted.

"I found it in a hut," Quest said, "hidden in a piano box. I found there, also, a creature—a human being, I must call him—in a state of captivity."

"Hidden in a piano box?" the professor repeated wonderingly. "Why, you mean in Hartoo's sleeping box, then?"

"If Mr. Hartoo is the gentleman who tried to club me, you are right," Quest admitted. "Mr. Ashleigh, before we go any further I must ask you for an explanation as to the presence of that person in your grounds?"

The professor hesitated for a moment. Then he slowly crossed the room, opened the drawer of a small escritoire, and drew out a letter.

"You have heard of Sir William Raysmore, the president of the Royal Society?" he asked.

Quest nodded.

"This letter is from him," the professor continued. "You had better read it."

The criminologist read it aloud. Lenora looked over his shoulder:

To Prof. Edgar Ashleigh, New York.

My Dear Professor: Your communication gratifies and amazes me. I can say no more. It fell to your lot to discover the skeleton of the anthropoid, a marvelous thing, in its way, and needing only its corollary to form the greatest discovery since the dark ages. Now you tell me that in the person of Hartoo, the last of the Inyamo race of South America, you have found that corollary. You have supplied the missing link. You are in a position to give to the world a definite and logical explanation of the evolution of man. Let me give you one word of warning, professor, before I write you at greater length on the matter. Anthropologists are afflicted more, even than any other race of scientific men, with jealousy. Guard your secret well. Let the honor of this discovery should be stolen from you.

WILLIAM RAYSMORE.

The professor nodded deliberately as Quest finished the letter.

"Now, perhaps you can understand," he said, "why it was necessary to keep Hartoo absolutely hidden. In a month's time my papers will be ready. Then I shall electrify the world. I shall write not a new page but a new volume across the history of science. I shall—"

The door was suddenly thrown open. Craig sprang in, no longer the self-contained, perfect man-servant, but with the face of some wild creature. His shout was one almost of agony.

"The hut, professor! The hut is on fire!" he cried.

His appearance on the threshold was like a flash. They heard his flying feet down the hall, and without a moment's hesitation they all followed. The professor led the way down a narrow and concealed path, but when they reached the little clearing in which the hut was situated, they were unable to approach any

nearer. The place was a whirlwind of flame. The smell of kerosene was almost overpowering. The wild yell of the leopard rose above the strange, half-human gibbering of the monkeys and the hoarse, bass calling of another voice, at the sound of which Lenora and even Quest shuddered. Then, as they came, breathless, to a standstill, they saw a strange-thing. One side of the hut fell in, and almost immediately the leopard with a mighty spring, leaped from the place and ran howling into the undergrowth. The monkeys followed but they came straight for the professor, wringing their hands. They fawned at his feet as though trying to show him their scorched bodies. Then for a single moment they saw the form of the ape-man as he struggled to follow the others. His strength failed him, however. He fell backwards into the burning chasm.

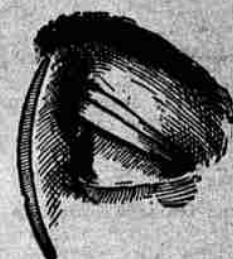
The professor bade them farewell, an hour later, on the steps of the house. He seemed suddenly to have aged.

"You have done your best, Mr. Quest," he said, "but fate has been too strong. Remember this, though, it is quite true that the cunning of Hartoo may have made it possible for him to have stolen the skeleton and to have brought it back to its hiding-place, but it was jealousy—cruel, brutal, foul jealousy which smeared the walls of that hut with kerosene and set light to it. The work of a lifetime, my dreams of scientific immortality, have vanished in those flames."

He turned slowly away from them and re-entered the house. Quest and Lenora made their way down the avenue and entered the automobile which was waiting for them, almost in silence. The latter glanced toward his companion, as they drove off.

"Say, this has been a bit tough for you," he remarked. "I'll have to call

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(Continued on Page 7.)

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