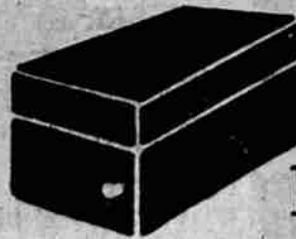


The BLACK BOX

by E. Phillips Oppenheim



Shown at the Arcade theatre on Wednesdays and Thursdays

CHAPTER XV.

The professor swung round in his chair and greeted Quest with some surprise, but also a little disappointment.

"No news of Craig?" he asked. "I got Craig, all right," he replied. "He came to the Servants' club, where I was waiting for him. My luck's out, though. The place was burned to the ground last night. I saved his life and then the brute gave me away to the police. I had to make my escape as best I could."

The professor tapped the table peevishly.

"This is insufferable," he declared. "I have had no shaving water; my coffee was undrinkable; I can find nothing. I have a most important lecture to prepare and I cannot find any of the notes I made upon the subject."

Quest smoked in silence for a moment.

"Any mail for me, professor?" he asked abruptly.

The professor opened a drawer and handed him a telegram.

"Only this!"

Quest opened it and read it through. It was from the sheriff of a small town in Connecticut:

"The men you inquired for are both here. They have sold an automobile and seem to be spending the proceeds. Shall I arrest?"

Quest studied the message for a moment.

"Say, this is rather interesting, professor," he remarked. "These are the two thugs who set upon me at the section house. They killed the signa man, who could have been my ally, and swiped my car, in which, as it cannot be found, French supposes that I returned to New York. With their arrest the case against me collapses. I tell you frankly, professor, Quest continued indignantly. "I hate to leave the city without having found that girl; but I am not sure that the quickest way to set things right would not be to go down, arrest these men and bring them back here, clear myself, and then go tooth and nail for Craig."

"I agree with you most heartily," the professor declared. "I recommend any course which will insure the return of my man Craig!"

"I cannot promise you that you will ever have Craig here again," Quest observed grimly. "I rather fancy Sing Sling will be his next home."

Quest stepped off the cars at Bethel a little before noon that morning. The sheriff met him at the depot and greeted him cordially but with obvious surprise.

"Say, Mr. Quest," he exclaimed, as they turned away, "I know these men are wanted on your charge, but I thought—you'll excuse me for saying so—that you were in some trouble yourself."

Quest nodded.

"I'm out of that—came out yesterday. The moment my car is identified and Red Gallagher and his mate arrested every scrap of evidence against me goes."

"Well, here's the garage and the man who bought the car," the sheriff remarked, "and there's the car itself in the road. It's for you to say whether it can be identified."

Quest drew a sigh of relief.

"That's mine, right enough," he declared. "Now for the men."

"Say, I want to tell you something," the sheriff began dubiously. "These two are real thugs. They ain't going to take it lying down."

"Where are they?" Quest demanded.

"In the worst saloon here," the sheriff replied. "They've been there pretty well all night, drinking, and they're there again this morning, hard at it. They've got firearms, and though I ain't exactly a nervous man, Mr. Quest—"

"You leave it to me," Quest interrupted. "This is my job and I want to take the men myself."

"You'll never do it," the sheriff declared.

"Look here," Quest explained. "If I let you and your men go in, there will be a free fight, and as likely as not you will kill one, if not both of the men. I want them alive."

"Well, it's your show," the sheriff admitted, stopping before a disreputable looking building. "This is the saloon."

"Well," Quest decided, "I'm going in, and I'm going in unarmed. You can bring your men in later, if I call for help or if you hear any shooting."

"You're asking for trouble," the sheriff warned him.

"I've got to do this my own way," Quest insisted. "Stand by now."

He pushed open the door of the saloon. There were a dozen men drinking around the bar and in the center of them Red Gallagher and his mate. Quest walked right up to the two men.

"Gallagher," he said, "you're my prisoner. Are you coming quietly?"

Gallagher's mate, who was half drunk, swung round and fired a wild shot in Quest's direction. The result was a general stampede. Red Gallagher alone remained motionless. Grim and dangerously silent, he held a pistol within a few inches of Quest's forehead.

"If my number's up," he exclaimed ferociously, "it won't be you to take me."

"I think it will," Quest answered. "Put that away."

Gallagher hesitated. Quest's influence over him was indomitable.

"Put it away," Quest repeated firmly. "You know you aren't use it. Your account's pretty full up, as it is."

Gallagher's hand wavered. From outside came the shouts of the sheriff and his men, struggling to fight their way in through the little crowd who were rushing for safety. Suddenly Quest backed, jerked the pistol up with his right elbow, and with almost the same movement struck Red Gallagher under the jaw. The man went over with a crash. His mate, who had been staggering about, cursing viciously, fired another wild shot at Quest, who swayed and fell forward.

"I've done him!" the man shouted. "Get up, Red! I've done him, all right! Finish your drink. We'll get out of this!"

He bent unsteadily over Quest. Suddenly the latter sprang up, seized him by the leg and sent him sprawling. The gun fell from his hand. Quest plucked it up and held it firmly out, covering both men. Gallagher was on his knees, groping for his own weapon.

"Get the handcuffs on them," Quest directed the sheriff, who with his men had at last succeeded in forcing his way into the saloon.

Crouching in her chair, her pale, terror-stricken face supported between her hands, Lenora, her eyes filled with hopeless misery, gazed at the dumb instrument upon the table. Her last gleam of hope seemed to be passing. Her little friend was silent. Once more her weary fingers spelled out a final, despairing message.

"What has happened to you? I am waiting to hear all the time. Has Craig told you where I am? I am afraid!"

There was still no reply. Her head sank a little lower on her folded arms. Even the luxury of tears seemed denied her. Fear, the fear which dwelt with her day and night, had her in its grip. Suddenly she leaped, screaming, from her place. Splinters of glass fell all around her. Her first wild thought was of release; she gazed upwards at the broken pane. Then very faintly from the street below she heard the shout of a boy's angry voice:

"You've done it now, Jimmy! You're a fine pitcher, ain't you? Lost it, that's what you've gone and done!"

The thoughts formed themselves mechanically in her mind. Her eyes sought the ball which had come crashing into the room. There was life once more in her pulses. She found a scrap of paper and a pencil in her pocket. With trembling fingers she wrote a few words:

"Police headquarters. I am Sanford Quest's assistant, abducted and imprisoned here in the room where the ball has fallen. Help! I am going mad!"

She twisted the paper, looked around the room vainly for string, and finally tore a thin piece of ribbon from her bosom. She tied the message round the ball, set her teeth and threw it at the empty skylight. The first time she was not successful and the ball came back. The second time it passed through the center of the opening. She heard it strike the sound portion of the glass outside, heard it rattle down the roof. A few seconds of breathless silence! Her heart almost stopped beating. Had it rested in some ledge or fallen into the street below? Then she heard the boy's voice:

"Geel! Here's the ball come back again!"

A new light shone into the room. She seemed to be breathing a different atmosphere—the atmosphere of hope. She listened no longer with horror for a creaking upon the stairs. She walked backwards and forwards until she was exhausted. . . . Curiously enough, when the end came she was

asleep, crouched upon the bed and dreaming wildly. She sprang up to find Inspector French, with a policeman behind him, standing upon the threshold.

"Inspector!" she cried, rushing towards him. "Mr. French! Oh, thank God!"

Her feelings carried her away. She threw herself at his feet. She was laughing and crying and talking incoherently, all at the same time. The inspector assisted her to a chair.

"Say, what's all this mean?" he demanded.

She told him her story, incoherently, in broken phrases. French listened with puzzled frown.

Then he realized that she was on the point of a nervous breakdown and in no condition for interrogations. "That'll do," he said. "I'll take care of you for a time, young lady, and I'll ask you a few questions later on. My men are searching the house. You and I will be getting on, if you can tear yourself away."

The plain-clothes man, who was lounging in Quest's most comfortable easy chair and smoking one of his best cigars, suddenly laid down his paper. He moved to the window. A large, empty automobile stood in the street outside, from which the occupants had presumably just descended. He hastened towards the door, which was opened, however, before he was halfway across the room. The cigar slipped from his fingers. It was Sanford Quest, who stood there, followed by the sheriff of Bethel, two country policemen and Red Gallagher and his mate, heavily handcuffed.

"Say, aren't you wanted down yonder, Mr. Quest?" the man inquired.

"That's all right now," Quest told him. "I'm ringing up Inspector French myself. You'd better stand by the other fellows there and keep your eye on Red Gallagher and his mate."

"I guess Mr. Quest is all right," the sheriff intervened. "We're ringing up headquarters ourselves, anyway."

The plain-clothes man did as he was told. Quest took up the receiver from his telephone instrument and arranged the phototeleam.

"Police station No. 1, central," he said—"through to Mr. French's office, if you please. Mr. Quest wants to speak to him. Yes, Sanford Quest. No need to get excited! All right I'm through, am I?"

Hello, Inspector?"

A rare expression of joy suddenly transfigured Quest's face. He was gazing downward into the little mirror.

"You've found Lenora, then, Inspector?" he exclaimed. "Bully for you! . . . What do I mean? What I say! You forget that I am a scientific man, French. No end of appliances here you haven't had time to look at. I can see you sitting there, and Lenora and Laura looking as though you had them on the rack. You can drop that, French. I've got Red Gallagher and his mate, got them here with the sheriff of Bethel. They went off with my auto and sold it. We've got that. Also, in less than five minutes my chauffeur will be here. He's been lying in a farmhouse

unconscious, since that scrap. He can tell you what time he saw me last. Bring the girls along, French—and hurry!"

Quest hung up the receiver. Inspector French was as good, even better than his word. In a surprisingly short time he entered the room, followed by Laura and Lenora. Quest gave them a hand each, but it was into Lenora's eyes that he looked.

"I mustn't stop to hear your story, Lenora," Quest said. "You're safe—that's the great thing."

"Found her in an empty house," French reported, "out Grayson avenue way. Now, Mr. Quest, I don't want to come the official over you too much, but if you'll kindly remember you're an escaped prisoner—"

There was a knock at the door. A young man entered in chauffeur's livery, with his head still bandaged. Quest motioned him to come in.

"I'll just repeat my story of that morning, Mr. French," Quest said. "We went out to find Macdougall, and succeeded, as you know. Just as I was starting for home those two thugs set upon me. You know how I made my escape. They went off in my automobile and sold it in Bethel. I arrested them there myself this morning. Here's the sheriff who will bear out what I say, also that they arrived at the place in my automobile."

Inspector French held out his hand. "Mr. Quest," he said, "I reckon we'll have to withdraw the case against you. No hard feelings, I hope?"

"None at all," Quest replied promptly, taking his hand.

Quest stood upon the threshold watching the sheriff and his prisoners leave the house. The former turned round to wave his adieux.

"There's an elderly guy out here," he shouted, "seems to want to come in."

Quest leaned forward and saw the professor.

"My dear Quest," he exclaimed, as he wrung his hand, "my heartiest congratulations! As you know, I always believed your innocence. I am delighted that it has been proved."

The professor sank wearily into an easy chair.

"I will take a little whisky and one of your excellent cigars, Quest," he said. "I must ask you to bear with me if I seem upset. After more than twenty years' service from one whom I have always treated as a friend this sudden separation, to a man of my



"Inspector!" She Cried, Rushing Towards Him.

age, is somewhat trying. I do not allude, as you perceive, Mr. Quest, to the horrible suspicion you seem to have formed of Craig."

"All the same," the inspector remarked thoughtfully, "someone who is still at large committed those murders and stole those jewels. What is your theory about the jewels, Mr. Quest?"

"I haven't had time to frame one yet," the criminologist replied. "You've been keeping me too busy looking after myself. However," he added, "it's time something was done."

He took a magnifying glass from his pocket and examined very closely the whole of the front of the safe.

"No sign of finger prints," he muttered. "The person who opened it probably wore gloves."

He fitted the combination and swung open the door. He stood there for a moment speechless. Something in his attitude attracted the inspector's attention.

"What is it, Mr. Quest?" he asked eagerly.

Quest drew a little breath. Exactly facing him, in the spot where the jewels had been, was a small black box. He brought it to the table and removed the lid. Inside was a sheet of paper, which he quickly unfolded. They all three read the few lines together:

"Pitted against the inherited cunning of the ages, you have no chance. I will take compassion upon you. Look in the right-hand drawer of your desk."

Underneath appeared the signature of the "Hands." Quest moved like one in a dream to his cabinet and pulled open the right-hand drawer. He turned around and faced the other two men. In his hand was Mrs. Rheinholdt's necklace!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

And now J. Johnson has sailed for Spain. If everybody who gets licked is expected to go to Spain who will be left for the chautauqua circuit after the next campaign.



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