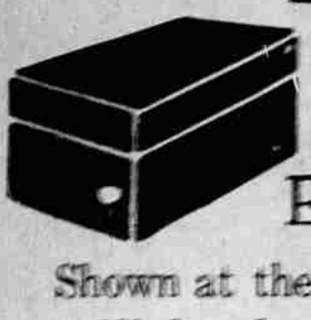
The BLACK BOX



by E. Phillips Oppenheim

Shown at the Arcade theatre on Wednesdays and Thursdays

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 anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms have appeared from nowhere black boxes containing diamonds that had been torn from the owner's throat by a pair of armless, threatening hands, and sarcastic, threatening notes signed by the mysterious Hands. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig, the professor's valet, of the double murder of Ross Brown, Quest's valet, and a Miss Quigg. Quest traps Craig, but he escapes to England on a tramp steamer. The black boxes continue to appear in uncanny fashion. Notified of Craig's recapture by Scotland Yard men Quest and the professor go to Hamblin house, Lord Ashleigh's home in England, only to find that Craig has again escaped.

NINTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XX.

LOST IN LONDON.

Quest, notwithstanding the unusual nature of his surroundings, slept that night as only a tired and healthy man can. He was awakened the next morning by the quiet movements of a manservant who had brought back his clothes carefully brushed and pressed.

"Breakfast is served at nine o'clock, sir. It is now half-past eight."

"I'll be right there."

The man withdrew and Quest made a brisk toilet. The nameless fears of the previous night had altogether disappeared. At the last moment he stretched out his hand to take a handkerchief from his satchel. A sudden exclamation broke from his lips. He stood for a moment as though turned to stone. Before him, on the top of the little pile of white cambric, was a small black box! With a movement of the fingers which was almost mechanical, he removed the lid and drew out the customary little scrap of paper. He smoothed it out before him on the dressing case and read the message:

"You will fail here as you have failed before. Better go back. There is more danger for you in this country than you dream of."

His teeth came fiercely together and his hands were clenched. His thoughts had gone like a flash to Lenora. Was it possible that harm was intended for her? He put the idea away from him almost as soon as conceived. The thing was unimaginable. Craig was here, must be here, in the close vicinity of the house.

The atmosphere of the pleasant breakfast room to which in due course he descended, was cheerful enough. Lady Ashleigh had already taken her place at the head of the table.

She touched an electric bell under her foot and a moment or two later the butler appeared.

"Go up and see how long your master will be?" Lady Ashleigh directed.

"Very good, your ladyship."

The man was backing through the doorway in his usual dignified manner when he was suddenly pushed on one side. The valet who had waited upon Quest, and who was Lord Ashleigh's own servant, rushed into the room. He almost shouted to Lady Ashleigh:

"Your ladyship—the master! Something has happened! He won't move! He—he—"

They all trooped out of the room and up the stairs, the professor leading the way. They pushed open the door of Lord Ashleigh's bedchamber. In the far corner of the large room was the four-poster, and underneath the clothes a silent figure. The professor turned down the sheets. Then he held out his hand. His face, too, was blanched.

"Julia, don't come," he begged.

"I must know," she almost shrieked. I must know!"

"George is dead," the professor said slowly.

There was a moment's awful silence, broken by a piercing scream from Lady Ashleigh. She sank down upon the sofa, and the professor leaned over her. Quest turned to the little group of frightened servants who were gathered round the doorway.

"Telephone for a doctor," he ordered; "also to the local police station.

"He, too, approached the bed and reverently lifted the covering. Lord Ashleigh was lying there, his body a little doubled up, his arms wide outstretched. On his throat were two black marks.

They had led Lady Ashleigh from the room. The professor and Quest stood face to face. The former's expression, however, had lost all his amiable serenity. His face was white and pinched.

"Quest! Quest!" he almost sobbed. "My brother!—George, whom I loved like nobody else on earth! Is he really dead?"

"Absolutely!"

The professor gripped the oak pillar of the bedstead. He seemed on the point of collapse.

"The mark of the Hands is upon his throat," Quest pointed out.

"The Hands! Oh, my God!" the professor groaned.

"We must not eat or drink or sleep," Quest declared, fiercely, "until we have brought this matter to an end. Craig must be found. This is the supreme horror of all."

The butler made an apologetic appearance. He spoke in a hushed whisper.

"You are wanted downstairs, gentlemen. Middleton, the head keeper, is there."

As though inspired with a common idea, both Quest and the professor hurried out of the room and down the broad stairs. Their inspiration was a true one. The gamekeeper welcomed them with a smile of triumph. By his side, the picture of abject misery, his clothes torn and muddy, was Craig!

"I've imagined this little job, sir," Middleton announced, with a smile of slow triumph.

"How did you get him?" Quest demanded.

"Little idea of my own," the gamekeeper continued. "I guessed pretty well what he'd be up to. He'd tumbled to it that the usual way off the moor was pretty well guarded, and he'd doubled back through the thin line of woods close to the house. I dug one of my poachers' pits, sir, and covered it over with a lot of loose stuff. That got him all right. When I went to look this morning I saw where he'd fallen through, and there he was, walking round and round at the bottom like a caged animal. Your servants have telephoned for the police, Mr. Ashleigh."

Quest suddenly whispered to the professor. Then he turned to the keeper.

"Bring him upstairs, Middleton, for a moment," he directed. "Follow us, please."

They passed into the bedchamber. Quest signed to the keeper to bring Craig to the side of the four-poster. Then he drew down the sheet.

"Is that your work?" he asked, sternly.

Craig, up till then, had spoken no word. He had shambled to the bedside, a broken, yet, in a sense, a stolid figure. The sight of the dead man, however, seemed to galvanize him into sudden and awful vitality. He threw up his arms. His eyes were horrible as they glared at those small black marks. His lips moved backwards and forwards, helplessly at first. Then at last he spoke.

"Strangled!" he cried. "One more!"

"That is your work," the criminologist said, firmly.

Craig collapsed. He would have fallen bodily to the ground if Middleton's grip had not kept him up. Quest bent over him. It was clear that he had fainted. They led him from the room.

"We'd better lock him up until the police arrive," Quest suggested. "I suppose there is a safe place somewhere?"

The professor awoke from his stupor.

"Let me show you," he begged. "I know the way. We've a subterranean hiding place which no criminal on this earth could escape from."

They led him down to the back part of the house into a dry cellar which had the appearance of a prison cell.

"This place has been used before now, in the old days, for malefactors," the professor remarked. "He'll be safe there, Craig," he added, his voice trembling. "Craig—I—I can't speak to you. How could you!"

There was no answer. Craig's face was buried in his hands. They left him there and turned the key.

CHAPTER XXI.

Quest stood, frowning, upon the pavement, gazing at the obviously empty house. He looked once more at the slip of paper which Lenora had given him. There was no possibility of any mistake:

Mrs. Willet,
157 Elsmere Road,
Hampstead.

This was 157 and the house was empty. After a moment's hesitation he rang the bell at the adjoining door. A woman, who had been watching him from the front room, answered the summons at once.

"Can you tell me," he inquired, "what has become of the lady who used to live at 157—Mrs. Willet?"

"She's moved," was the uncompromising reply.

"Do you know where to?" Quest asked, eagerly.

"West Kensington—No. 17 Princess Court road. There was a young lady here yesterday afternoon inquiring for her."

Quest raised his hat. It was a relief, at any rate, to have news of Lenora.

"I am very much obliged to you, madam."

"You're welcome!" was the terse reply.

Quest gave a new address to the taxi driver and was scarcely able to restrain his impatience during the long drive. They pulled up at last before a somewhat dingy-looking house. He rang the bell, which was answered by a trim-looking little maidservant.

"Is Mrs. Willet in?" he inquired.

The maidservant stood on one side to let him pass. Almost at the same moment the door of the front room opened and a pleasant-looking elderly lady appeared.

"I am Mrs. Willet," she announced.

"I am Mr. Quest," the criminologist told her quickly. "You may have heard your niece, Lenora, speak of me."

"Then perhaps you can tell me what has become of her?" Mrs. Willet observed.

"Isn't she here?"

Mrs. Willet shook her head.

"I had a telegram from her from Plymouth to say that she was coming, but I've seen nothing of her as yet."

"You've changed your address, you know," Quest reminded her, after a moment's reflection.

"I wrote and told her," Mrs. Willet began. "After all, though," she went on thoughtfully, "I am not sure whether she could have had the letter. But if she went up to Hampstead, anyone would tell her where I had moved to. There's no secret about me."

"Lenora did go up to 157 Elsmere road yesterday," Quest told her. "They gave her your address here, as they have just given it to me."

"Then what's become of the child?" Mrs. Willet demanded.

Quest, whose brain was working quickly, scribbled upon one of his cards the address of the hotel where he had taken rooms and passed it over.

"Why Lenora didn't come on to you here I can't imagine," he said. "However, I'll go back to the hotel wh[illegible] she was to spend the night [illegible] arrived. She may hav[illegible] there. That's my add[illegible] If you hear anyth[illegible] me know. Leno[illegible] friend of min[illegible] ious."

Quest h[illegible] door for [illegible] sprang [illegible] kept w[illegible]

"Cli[illegible] he tol[illegible]

He [illegible] all d[illegible] men[illegible] vans [illegible] on [illegible] being [illegible] alone [illegible]

"Ca[illegible] Macdo[illegible] at the d[illegible]

The wo[illegible]

"Miss M[illegible] night before [illegible] luggage is wait[illegible] here yesterday a[illegible] aunt's, and promis[illegible] things later on during [illegible] they stand, all ready for se[illegible]

"What time did she go?"

"Directly after an early lunch. It must have been about two o'clock."

Quest hurried away. So after all there was some foundation for this queer sense of depression which had been hovering about him for the last few days!

"Scotland Yard," he told the taxi driver.

He thrust another cigar between his teeth, but forgot to light it. He was amazed at his own sensations, conscious of fears and emotions of which he would never have believed himself capable. He gave in his card, and after a few moments' delay he was shown into the presence of one of the chiefs of the detective department, who greeted him warmly.

Craig Escapes From the Cellar.

"My name is Hardaway," the latter announced.

"My assistant, a young lady, Miss Lenora Macdougal, has disappeared! She and I and Professor Ashleigh left the steamer at Plymouth and traveled up in the boat train. It was stopped at Hamblin road for the professor and myself, and Miss Macdougal came on to London. She was staying at Clifford's hotel in Payne street for the night, and then going on to the aunt. Well, I've found that aunt. She was expecting the girl, but the girl never appeared."

"Where did this aunt live?" Hardaway inquired.

"No. 17, Princess Court road, West Kensington," Quest replied. "She had just moved there from Elsmere road, Hampstead. I went first to Hampstead. Lenora had been there and learned her aunt's correct address in West Kensington. I followed on to West Kensington and found that the aunt was still awaiting her."

A new interest seemed suddenly to have crept into Hardaway's manner.

"Let me see," he said. "If she left Clifford's hotel about two, she would have been at Hampstead about half-past two. She would waste a few minutes in making inquiries, then she probably left Hampstead for West Kensington, say, at a quarter to three. Give me at once a description of the young lady," he demanded.

Quest drew a photograph from his pocket and passed it silently over.

"Mr. Quest," he said, "it is just possible that your visit here has been an exceedingly opportune one."

"Come along with me," he continued. "We'll talk as we go."

They entered a taxi and drove off westwards.

"Mr. Quest," he went on, "for two months we have been on the track of a man and a woman whom we strongly suspect of having decoyed half a dozen perfectly respectable young women, and shipped them out to South America."

"The white slave traffic!" Quest gasped.

"Something of the sort," Hardaway admitted. "Well, we've been closing the net around this interesting couple, and last night I had information brought to me upon which we are acting this afternoon. We've had them watched and it seems that they were sitting in a tea place about three o'clock yesterday afternoon when a [illegible] who was ob[illegible] London. You [illegible] if your as[illegible] way to [illegible] She [illegible]

[illegible] a mo[illegible] [illegible]ested, "they [illegible] and they'll [illegible] until they're forced [illegible] a stranger. Let me go. I'll get in all right."

"All right," he assented. "We shall follow you up pretty closely, though."

Quest stepped back into the taxi and gave the driver a direction. When he emerged in front of the handsome gray stone house he seemed to have become completely transformed. There was a fatuous smile upon his lips. He crossed the pavement with difficulty, stumbling up the steps, and held on the knocker with one hand while he consulted a slip of paper. He had scarcely rung the bell before a slightly parted curtain in the front room fell together and a moment later the door was opened by a man in the livery of

(Continued on Page 3.)

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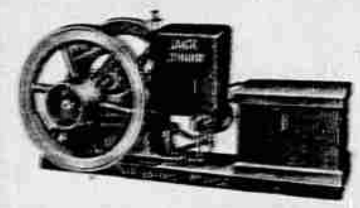

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