

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 sarcastic, threatening 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 is trapped by Quest, but escapes to England, where Quest, Lenora and the professor follow him. Lord Ashleigh is murdered by the hands. Lenora is abducted in London and rescued. Craig is captured and escapes to Port Said.

TENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SHIP OF HORROR.

Quest leaned a little forward and gazed down the line of steamer chairs. The professor, in a borrowed overcoat and cap, was reclining at full length, studying a book on seagulls which he had found in the library. Laura and Lenora were both dozing tranquilly. Mr. Harris of Scotland Yard was deep in a volume of detective stories.

"As a pleasure cruise," Quest remarked grimly, "this little excursion seems to be a complete success."

Laura opened her eyes at once.

"Trying to get my goat again, eh?" she retorted. "I suppose that's what you're after. Going to tell me, I suppose, that it wasn't Craig I saw aboard this steamer?"

"We are all liable to make mistakes," Quest observed, "and I am inclined to believe that this is one of yours."

Laura's expression was a little dogged.

"If he's too clever for you and Mr. Harris," she said, "I can't help that. I only know that he came on board. My eyes are the one thing in life I do believe."

"If you'll excuse me saying so, Miss Laura," Harris ventured, leaning deferentially towards her, "there isn't a passenger on board this ship, or a servant, or one of the crew, whom we haven't seen. We've been into every stateroom, and we've even searched the hold. We've been over the ship, backwards and forwards. The captain's own steward has been our guide, and we've conducted an extra search on our own account. Personally, I must say I have come to the same conclusion as Mr. Quest. At the present moment there is no such person as the man we are looking for on board this steamer."

"Then he either changed into another one," Laura declared obstinately, "or else he jumped overboard."

"Come on, Harris, you and I promised to report to the captain this morning. I don't suppose he'll be any too pleased with us. Let's get through with it."

The two men walked down the deck together. They found the captain alone in his room, with a chart spread out in front of him and a pair of compasses in his hand. He turned round and greeted them.

"Well?"

"No luck, sir," Quest announced.

"Your steward has given us every assistance possible and we have searched the ship thoroughly. Unless he has found a hiding place unknown to your steward, and not apparent to us, the man is not on board."

The captain frowned slightly.

"You are not suggesting that this is possible, I suppose?"

"Quest did not at once reply. He was thinking of Laura's obstinacy.

"Personally," he admitted, "I should not have believed it possible. The young lady of our party, however, who declares that she saw Craig aboard the steamer, is quite immovable."

"Brown," said the captain, turning to the steward, "I understand that you say that you have taken these gentlemen into every corner of the ship, that you have ransacked every possible hiding place, that you have given them every possible opportunity of searching for themselves?"

"That is quite true, sir," the man acknowledged.

"You agree with me that it is impossible for anyone to remain hidden in this ship?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"You hear, gentlemen?" the captain continued. "I really can do no more. What the mischief are you hanging about for, Brown?" he asked, turning to the steward, who was standing by with a carpet-sweeper in his hand.

"Room wants cleaning out badly, sir."

The captain glanced distastefully at the carpet-sweeper.

"Do it when I am at dinner, then," he ordered, "and take that damned thing away."

The steward obeyed promptly. Quest

and Harris followed him down the deck.

"Queer-looking fellow, that," the latter remarked. "Doesn't seem quite at his ease, does he?"

"Seemed a trifle overanxious, I thought, when he was showing us round the ship," Quest agreed.

"Mem," Harris murmured, softly, "as the gentleman who wrote the volume of detective stories I am reading puts it, to keep our eye on Brown."

The captain, who was down to dinner unusually early, rose to welcome Quest's little party, and himself arranged the seats.

They settled down into the places arranged for them.

An elderly lady, dressed in somewhat oppressive black, with a big cameo brooch at her throat and a black satin bag in her hand, was being shown by the steward to a seat by Quest's side. She acknowledged the captain's greeting acidly.

"Good evening, captain," she said. "I understood from the second steward that the seat on your right hand would be reserved for me. I am Mrs. Foston Rowe."

The captain received the announcement calmly.

"Very pleased to have you at the table, madam," he replied. "As to the seating, I leave that entirely to the steward. I never interfere myself."

Laura pinched his arm, and Lenora glanced away to hide a smile. Mrs. Foston Rowe studied the menu disapprovingly.

"Hors d'oeuvres," she declared, "I never touch. No one knows how long they've been opened. Bouillon—I will have some bouillon, steward."

"In one moment, madam."

The professor came ambling along towards the table.

"I fear that I am a few moments late," he remarked, as he took the chair next to Mrs. Foston Rowe. I offer you my apologies, captain. I congratulate you upon your library. I have discovered a most interesting book upon the habits of seagulls. It kept me engrossed until the very last moment, and I am hungry."

"Well, you'll have to stay hungry a long time at this table then," Mrs. Foston Rowe snapped. "Seems to me that the service is going to be abominable."

The steward, who had just arrived, presented a cup of bouillon to Quest. The others had all been served. Quest stirred it thoughtfully.

"And as to the custom," Mrs. Foston Rowe continued, "of serving gentlemen before ladies, it is, I suppose, peculiar to this steamer."

Quest hastily laid down his spoon, raised the cup of bouillon and presented it with a little bow to his neighbor.

"Pray allow me, madam," he begged. "The steward was to blame."

Mrs. Foston Rowe did not hesitate for a moment. She broke up some toast in the bouillon and commenced to sip it.

The spoon suddenly went clattering from her fingers. She caught at the sides of the table, there was a strange



"A Message From the Hands! Look!" look in her face. With scarcely a murmur she fell back in her seat. Quest leaned hurriedly forward.

There was a slight commotion. The doctor came hurrying up from the other side of the saloon. He bent over her and his face grew grave.

"What is it?" the captain demanded.

The doctor glanced at him meaningly.

"She had better be carried out," he whispered.

"Was it a faint?" Lenora asked.

"We shall know directly," the captain replied. "Better keep your places

I think. Steward, serve the dinner as usual."

The man held out his hand to withdraw the cup of bouillon, but Quest drew it towards him.

"Let it wait for a moment," he ordered.

He glanced at the captain, who nodded back. In a few moments the doctor reappeared. He leaned down and whispered to the captain.

"Dead!"

Quest turned around.

"Doctor," he said, "I happen to have my chemical chest with me, and some special testing tubes. If you'll allow me, I'd like to examine this cup of bouillon. You might come round, too, if you will."

The captain nodded.

"I'd better stay here for a time," he decided. "I'll follow you presently."

The service of dinner was resumed. Laura, however, sent plate after plate away. The captain watched her anxiously.

"I can't help it," she explained. "I don't know whether you've had any talk with Mr. Quest, but we've been through some queer times lately. I guess this death business is getting on my nerves."

The captain was startled.

"You don't for a moment connect Mrs. Foston Rowe's death with the criminal you are in search of?" he exclaimed.

Laura sat quite still for a moment.

"The bouillon was offered first to Mr. Quest," she murmured.

The captain called his steward.

"Where did you get the bouillon from you served—that last cup, especially?" he asked.

"From the pantry just as usual, sir," the man answered. "It was all served out from the same caldron."

"Any chance of anyone getting at it?"

"Quite impossible, sir."

In Quest's stateroom the doctor, the professor, Quest and Lenora were all gathered around two little tubes, which the criminologist was examining with an electric torch.

"No reaction at all," the latter muttered. "This isn't an ordinary poison, anyway."

The professor, who had been standing on one side, suddenly gave vent to a soft exclamation.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Wait! I have an idea."

He hurried off to his stateroom. The doctor was poring over a volume of tabulated poisons. Quest was still watching his tubes. Lenora sat upon the couch. Suddenly the professor reappeared. He was carrying a small notebook in his hand, his manner betrayed some excitement. He closed the door carefully behind him.

"I want you all," he begged, "to listen very carefully to me. You will discover the application of what I am going to read when I am finished. Now, if you please."

"This," he began, "is the diary of a tour made by Craig and myself in northern Egypt some fourteen years ago. Here is the first entry of import:

MONDAY—Twenty-nine miles southeast of Port Said. We have stayed for two days at a little Mongar village. I have today come to the definite conclusion that anthropoid apes were at one time denizens of this country.

TUESDAY—Both Craig and I have been a little uneasy today. These Mongars into whose encampment we have found our way are one of the strangest and fiercest of the nomad tribes. They are descended, without a doubt, from the ancient Mongolians, who invaded this country some seven hundred years before Christ, but have preserved in a marvelous way their individuality as a race. They have the narrow eyes and the thick nose base of the pure Oriental; also much of his cunning. One of their special weaknesses seems to be the invention of the most hideous forms of torture, which they apply remorselessly to their enemies.

WEDNESDAY—This has been a wonderful day for us, chiefly owing to what I must place on record as an act of great bravery by Craig, my servant. Early this morning, a man-eating lion found his way into the encampment. The Mongars behaved like arrant cowards. They fled right and left, leaving the chief's little daughter, Florida, at the brute's mercy. Craig, who is by no means an adept in the use of firearms, chased the animal as he was making off with the child, and, more by good luck than anything else, managed to wound it mortally. He brought the child back to the encampment just as the chief and the warriors of the tribe returned from a hunting expedition. Our position here is now absolutely secure. We are treated like gods, and, appreciating my weakness for all matters of science, the chief has today explained to me many of the secret mysteries of the tribe. Amongst other things, he has shown me a wonderful secret poison, known only to this tribe, which they call Veedemzo. It brings about instant death, and is exceedingly difficult to trace. The addition of sugar causes a curious condensation and resolves it almost to a white paste. The only antidote is a substance which they use here freely, and which is exactly equivalent to our camphor.

The professor closed his book. Quest promptly rang the bell.

"Some sugar," he ordered, turning to the steward.

They waited in absolute silence. The suggestion which the professor's disclosure had brought to them was stupefying, even Quest's fingers, as a moment or two later he rubbed two knobs of sugar together so that the contents should fall into the tubes of bouillon, shook. The result was magical. The bouillon turned to a strange shade of gray and began slowly to thicken.

"It is Mongar poison!" the professor cried, with breaking voice.

They all looked at one another.

"Craig must be here amongst us," Quest muttered.

"And the bouillon," Laura cried, clasping Quest's arm, "the bouillon was meant for you!"

There seemed to be, somehow,

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