

# The Black Box

(Continued from page 4)



"Stolen!" Mrs. Rheinholdt shrieked.

had admitted Craig, "take Professor Ashleigh's servant into the kitchen and see that he has something before he leaves for home. Now, professor, if you will come this way."

They reached a little room in the far corner of the house. Mrs. Rheinholdt apologized as she switched on the electric lights.

"It is a queer little place to bring you to," she said, "but my husband used to spend many hours here, and he would never allow anything to be moved. You see, the specimens are in these cases."

The professor nodded. His general attitude toward the forthcoming exhibition was merely one of politeness. As the first case opened, however, his manner completely changed. Without taking the slightest further notice of his hostess, he adjusted a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and commenced to mumble eagerly to himself. Mrs. Rheinholdt, who did not understand a word, strolled around the apartment, yawning and finally interrupted a little stream of eulogies, not a word of which she understood, concerning a green beetle with yellow spots.

"I am so glad you are interested, professor," she said. "If you don't mind, I will join my guests. You will find a shorter way back if you keep along the passage straight ahead and come through the conservatory."

"Certainly! With pleasure!" the professor agreed, without glancing up. Mrs. Rheinholdt's reception, notwithstanding the temporary absence of its presiding spirit, was without doubt an unqualified success. In one of the distant rooms the younger people were dancing. Philip Rheinholdt, with a pretty young debutante upon his arm, came out from the dancing room and looked around amongst the little knots of people.

"I wonder where mother is?" he remarked. "She told me—"

The young man broke off in the middle of his sentence. He, too, like many others in the room, felt a sudden thrill almost of horror at the sound which rang without warning upon their ears—a woman's cry, a cry of fear and horror. Mrs. Rheinholdt, her hands clasping her neck, her splendid composure a thing of the past, a panic-stricken, terrified woman, stumbled into the room. She seemed on the point of collapse. Somehow or other, they got her into an easy chair.

"My jewels!" she cried. "My diamonds!"

"What do you mean, mother?" Philip Rheinholdt asked quickly. "Have you lost them?"

"Stolen!" Mrs. Rheinholdt shrieked. "Stolen there in the conservatory!"

They gazed at her open-mouthed, incredulous. Then a still, quiet voice from the outside of the little circle intervened.

"Instruct your servants, Mr. Rheinholdt, to lock and bar all the doors of the house," the professor suggested. "No one must leave it until we have heard your mother's story."

"I had just taken the professor into the little room my husband used to call the museum," Mrs. Rheinholdt explained, her voice still shaking with agitation. "I left him there to examine some specimens of beetles. I thought that I would come back through the conservatory, which is the quickest way. I was about half way across it when suddenly I heard the switch go behind me and all the electric lights were turned out. I couldn't imagine what had happened. While I hesitated I saw—"

She broke down again. There was no doubt about the genuineness of her terror.

"I saw a pair of hands—just hands—no arms—nothing but hands—come out of the darkness! They gripped me by the throat, I suppose it was just for a second. I think—I lost consciousness for a moment, although I was still standing up. The next thing I remember is that I found myself shrieking and running here—and the jewels are gone!"

"You saw no one?" her son asked incredulously. "You heard nothing?"

"I heard no footsteps, I saw no one," Mrs. Rheinholdt repeated. The professor turned away.

"If you will allow me," he begged, "I am going to telephone to my friend, Mr. Sanford Quest, the criminologist. An affair so unusual as this might attract him. You will excuse me."

The professor met the great criminologist and his assistant in the hall upon their arrival. He took the former at once by the arm.

"Mr. Quest," he began, "in a sense I must apologize for my peremptory message. I am well aware that an ordinary jewel robbery does not interest you, but in this case the circumstances are extraordinary. I ventured, therefore, to summon your aid."

"Stolen There in the Conservatory!" Sanford Quest nodded shortly.

"As a rule," he said, "I do not care to take up one affair until I have a clean slate. There's your skeleton still bothering me, professor. However, where's the lady who was robbed?"

"I will take you to her," the professor replied.

Mrs. Rheinholdt's story, by frequent repetition, had become a little more coherent, a trifle more circumstantial, the perfection of simplicity and utterly incomprehensible. Quest listened to it without remark and finally made his way to the conservatory. He requested Mrs. Rheinholdt to walk with him through the door by which she had entered and stop at the precise spot where the assault had been made upon her. There were one or two plants knocked down from the tiers on the right-hand side, and some disturbance in the mold where some large palms were growing. Quest and Lenora together made a close investigation of the spot. Afterwards, Quest walked several times to each of the doors leading into the gardens.

"There are four entrances altogether," he remarked, as he lit a cigar and glanced around the place. "Two lead into the gardens—one is locked and the other isn't—one connects with the back of the house—the one through which you came, Mrs. Rheinholdt, and the other leads into your reception room. Into which you passed after the assault. I shall now be glad if you will permit me to examine the gardens outside for a few minutes, alone with my assistant, if you please."

For almost a quarter of an hour Quest and Lenora disappeared. They all looked eagerly at the criminologist on his return.

"It seems to me," he remarked, "that from the back part of the house the quickest way to reach Mayton avenue would be through this conservatory and out of that door. This is a path leading from just outside straight to a gate in the wall. Does anyone that you know of use this means of exit?"

Mrs. Rheinholdt shook her head. "The servants might occasionally," she remarked doubtfully, "but not on nights when I am receiving."

The butler stepped forward. He was looking a little grave.

"I ought, perhaps, to inform you, madam, and Mr. Quest," he said, "that I did, only a short time ago, suggest to the professor's servant—the man who brought your mackintosh, sir," he added, turning to the professor—"that he could, if he chose, make use of this means of leaving the house. Mr. Craig is a personal friend of mine, and a member of a very select little club we have for social purposes."

"Did he follow your suggestion?" Sanford Quest asked.

"Of that I am not aware, sir," the butler replied. "I left Mr. Craig with some refreshment, expecting that he would remain until my return, but a few minutes later I discovered that he had left. I will inquire in the kitchen if anything is known as to his movements."

He hurried off. Quest turned to the professor.

"Has he been with you long, this man Craig, professor?" he asked.

The professor's smile was illuminating, his manner simple but convincing. "Craig," he asserted, "is the best servant, the most honest moral who ever breathed. He would go any distance out of his way to avoid harming a fly. I cannot even trust him to procure for me the simplest specimen of insect life. Apart from this, he is a man of some property, which he has no idea what to do with. He is, I think I may say, too devoted to me to dream of ever leaving my service."

"You think it would be out of the question, then," Quest asked, "to associate him with the crime?"

The professor's confidence was sublime.

"I could more readily associate you, myself or young Mr. Rheinholdt here with the affair," he declared.

His words carried weight. The little breath of suspicion against the professor's servant faded away. In a moment or two the butler returned.

"It appears, madam," he announced, "that Mr. Craig left when there was only one person in the kitchen. He said good-night and closed the door behind him. It is impossible to say, therefore, by which exit he left the house, but personally I am convinced that, knowing of the reception here tonight, he would not think of using the conservatory."

"Most unlikely, I should say," the professor murmured. "Craig is a very shrewd man. He is at all times at my disposal. Mr. Quest, if you should desire to question him."

Quest nodded absently.

"My assistant and I," he announced,

"would be glad to make a further examination of the conservatory, if you will kindly leave us alone."

They obeyed without demur. Quest took a seat and smoked calmly, with his eyes fixed upon the roof. Lenora went back to her examination of the overturned plants, the mold and the whole ground within the immediate environs of the assault. She abandoned the search at last, however, and came back to Quest's side. He threw away his cigar and rose.

"Nothing there?" he asked laconically.

"Not a thing," Lenora admitted.

Quest led the way toward the door.

"Lenora," he decided, "we're up against something big. There's a new hand at work somewhere."

"No theories yet, Mr. Quest?" she asked, smiling.

"Not the ghost of one," he admitted gloomily.

Along the rain-swept caseway of Mayton avenue, keeping close to the shelter of the house, his mackintosh turned up to his ears, his hands buried in his pockets, a man walked swiftly along. At every block he hesitated and looked around him. His manner was cautious, almost furtive. Once the glare of an electric light fell upon his face, a fawn pallid with fear, almost hopeless with despair. He walked quickly, yet he seemed to have no idea as to direction. Suddenly he paused. He was passing a great building, brilliantly lit. For a moment he thought that it was some place of entertainment. The thought of entering seemed to occur to him. Then he felt a firm touch upon his arm, a man in uniform spoke to him.

"Step inside, brother," he invited earnestly, almost eagerly, notwithstanding his monotonous nasal twang. "Step inside and find peace. Step inside and the Lord will help you. Throw your burden away on the threshold."

The man's first impulse at being addressed had seemed to be one of terror. Then he recognized the uniform and hesitated. The man took him by the arm and led him in. There were the best part of a hundred people taking their places after the singing of the hymn. A girl was standing up before them on a platform. She was commencing to speak, but suddenly broke off. She held out her arms to where the professor's confidential servant stood hesitating.

"Come and tell us your sins," she called out. "Come and have them forgiven. Come and start a new life in a new world. There is no one here who thinks of the past. Come and seek forgiveness."

For a moment the waif from the rain-swept world hesitated. The light

there is any news—of my skeleton?"

"Not yet, professor, I am sorry to say," Quest replied. "Come in and shut the door."

"There is a young lady here," he said, "who caught me up upon the landing. She, too, I believe, wishes to see you."

He threw open the door and stood on one side. A young woman came a little hesitatingly into the room. Her hair was plainly brushed back, and she wore the severe dress of the Salvation Army.

"Want to see me, young lady?" Quest asked.

She held out a book.

"My name is Miss Quigg," she said. "I want to ask you for a subscription to our funds."

Quest frowned a little.

"Very well, Miss Quigg, you shall have a donation. I am busy today, but call at the same hour tomorrow and my secretary shall have a check ready for you."

The girl smiled her gratitude. The professor laid his hand upon her arm as she passed.

"Young lady," he observed, "you seem very much in earnest about your work."

"It is only the people in earnest, sir," she answered, "who can do any good in the world. My work is worth being in earnest about."

"You compel my admiration. My most respectful admiration. May I, too, be permitted?"

He drew out a pocketbook and passed over toward her a little wad of notes.

"It is so kind of you," she murmured. "We never have any hesitation in accepting money. May I know your name?"

"It is not necessary," the professor answered. "You can enter me," he added, as he held open the door for her, "as a friend—or would you prefer a pseudonym?"

"A pseudonym, if you please," she begged. "We have so many who send us sums of money as friends. Anything will do."

The professor glanced around the room.

"What pseudonym shall I adopt?" he ruminated. "Shall I say that an oak sideboard gives you five hundred dollars Or a Chippendale sofa? Or," he added, his eyes resting for a moment upon the little box, "a black box?"

The two girls from the other side of the table started. Even Quest swung suddenly around. The professor, as though pleased with his fancy, nodded as his fingers played with the lid.

"We've done it this time, young woman," he declared triumphantly. "It's all O. K., working like a little peash."

Lenora rose and came toward him.

"Is that the pocket wireless?" he nodded.

"I've had Morrison out at Harlem all the morning to test it," he told her. "I've sent him at least half a dozen messages from this easy chair, and got the replies. How are you getting on with the code?"

"Not so badly for a stupid person," Lenora replied.

Laura, who had been busy with some papers at the farther end of the room, came over and joined them.

"Say, it's a dandy little affair, that, Mr. Quest," she exclaimed. "I had a try with it a day or so ago. Jim spoke to me from Fifth avenue."

"We've got it tuned to a shade now," Quest declared. "Equipped with this simple little device, you can speak to me from anywhere up to ten or a dozen miles."

Quest rose to his feet and moved restlessly about the room.

"Say, girls," he confessed, "this is the first time in my life I have been in a fix like this. Two cases on hand and nothing doing with either of them,

Criminologist, indeed! Whose box is this?"

Quest had paused suddenly in front of an oak sideboard which stood against the wall. Occupying a position upon it of some prominence was a small black box, whose presence there seemed to him unfamiliar. Laura came over to his side and looked at it also in puzzled fashion.

"Never saw it before in my life," she answered.

Quest grunted.

"H'm! No one else has been in the room, and it hasn't been empty for more than ten minutes," he remarked. "Well, let's see what's inside, anyway."

He lifted off the lid. There was nothing in the interior but a sheet of paper folded up. Quest smoothed it out with his hand. They all leaned over and read the following words, written in an obviously disguised hand:

You have embarked on a new study—anthropology. What characteristic strikes you most forcibly in connection with it? Counting! The monkeys might be where the skeleton is. Why not begin at the beginning?"

The note was unsigned, but in the spot where a signature might have been there was a rough pen drawing of two hands, with fingers extended, talon fashion, menacingly, as though poised to strike at some unseen enemy. Quest, after their first moment of stupefaction, whistled softly.

"The hands!" he muttered.

"The hands that gripped Mrs. Rheinholdt by the throat," he reminded them. "Don't you remember? Hands without arms?"

There was another brief, almost stupefied silence. Then Laura broke into speech.

"What I want to know is," she demanded, "who brought the thing here?"

"A most daring exploit, anyway," Quest declared. "If we could answer your question, Laura, we could solve the whole riddle. We are up against something, and no mistake."

"The hand which placed that box there," Quest continued slowly, "is capable of even more wonderful things. We must be cautious. Hello!"

The door had opened. The professor stood upon the threshold.

"I trust that I have done right in coming up," he inquired.

"Quite right, professor," Quest assured him. "They know well enough downstairs that I am always at home to you. Come in."

"I am so anxious to learn," the professor continued eagerly, "whether there is any news—of my skeleton?"

"Not yet, professor, I am sorry to say," Quest replied. "Come in and shut the door."

"There is a young lady here," he said, "who caught me up upon the landing. She, too, I believe, wishes to see you."

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and watched him disappear. Then she went thoughtfully back to her work. The professor and Quest were talking at the farther end of the room.

"I was in hopes, in great hopes," the professor admitted, "that you might have heard something. I promised to call at Mrs. Rheinholdt's this afternoon."

Quest shook his head.

"There is nothing to report at present, Mr. Ashleigh," he announced.

"Dear me," the professor murmured, "this is very disappointing. Is there no clue, Mr. Quest—no clue at all?"

"Not a ghost of one," Quest acknowledged. "I am as far off solving the mystery of the disappearance of your skeleton and Mrs. Rheinholdt's necklace as I have ever been."

The professor took a courteous leave of them all and departed. Lenora crossed the room to where Quest was seated.

"Mr. Quest," she asked, "do you believe in inspiration?"

"I attribute a large amount of my success," Quest replied, "to my profound belief in it."

"Then let me tell you," Lenora continued, "that I have one, and a very strong one. Do you know that when I went to the door a few minutes ago the professor's servant, Craig, was there, listening?"

"Inspector French has had his men watching Craig ever since the night of the robbery," Quest quietly remarked. "What's that? Answer the telephone, Lenora."

Lenora obeyed.

"It's Inspector French," she announced. "He wants to speak to you."

Quest nodded and held out his hand for the receiver.

"Hello, French!" he exclaimed. "Anything fresh?"

"Nothing much," was the answer. "One of my men, though, who has been up Mayton avenue way, brought in something I found rather interesting this morning. I want you to come round and see it."

"Go right ahead and tell me about it," Quest invited.

"You know we've been shadowing Craig," the inspector continued. "Not much luck up till now. Fellow seems never to leave his master's side. We have had a couple of men up there, though, and one of them brought in a curious-looking object he picked up just outside the back of the professor's grounds."

"What is the thing?" Quest asked.

"Well, I want you to see whether you agree with me," French went on. "If you can't come round, I'll come to you."

"No necessity," Quest replied. "We've got over little difficulties of that sort. Laura, just tuck on the photoleimase," he added, holding the receiver away for a moment. "One moment, French. There that's right," he added, as Laura, with deft fingers arranged what seemed to be a sensitized mirror to the instrument.

"Now, French, hold up the article just in front of the receiver. There, that's right. Hold it steady. I've got the focus of it now. Say, French, where did you say that was found?"

"Just outside the professor's back gate," French granted. "But you're not kidding me—"

"It's a finger from the professor's skeleton you've got there," Quest interrupted.

Quest hung up the receiver. Then he turned toward his two assistants.

"Another finger from the professor's skeleton," he announced, "has been found just outside his grounds. What do you suppose that means?"

"Craig," Lenora declared confidently.

"Craig on your life," Laura echoed. "Say, Mr. Quest, I've got an idea."

Quest nodded.

"Go right-ahead with it," he said. "Didn't the butler at Mrs. Rheinholdt's say that Craig belonged to a servant's club up town? I know the place well. Let me go and see if I can't join and pick up a little information about the man. He must have a night out sometimes. Let's find out what he does? How's that?"

"Capital!" Quest agreed. "Get along, Laura. And you, Lenora," he added, "put on your hat. We'll take a ride towards Mayton avenue."

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-

ded about almost aimlessly for nearly half an hour. Then Quest came to a sudden standstill. Lenora gripped

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 bamboo, with a stronger framework behind. The sloping roof was grass-green and entwined with rushes. The only opening 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 pale.

"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 loincloth, with hunched-up shoulders, a necklace around his 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—the 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 monkey 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. "Well! 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 frames seemed to grow more virile and natural.

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

The effect of those 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 feral 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 bill.



"The Hut, Professor! The Hut is on Fire!"