

THE BLACK BOX

PHILLIPS • OPPENHEIM

THIRD INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS.

In her apartment at the Leland Ella, daughter of Lord Ashleigh, is murdered and the Ashleigh diamond necklace stolen. The New York police place the case in the hands of Sanford Quest, known and feared as the master criminologist of the world. He takes Lenora, Ella's maid, to his own apartment and through hypnosis and the use of electro-telepathic appliances discovers her connection with the crime, recovers the diamonds and arrests the murderer. Macdougall, Lenora's husband, though nearly trapped in his death in a tough tenement house while engaged in the work. Lenora becomes one of Quest's assistants. The detective is called in to investigate the theft of the skeleton of an ape, presented to the museum by Professor Ashleigh, brother of Lord Ashleigh. Macdougall escapes while on his way to prison. A string of diamonds is mysteriously stolen from Mrs. Rheinholdt during a reception.

THE POCKET WIRELESS

CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Sanford Quest sat in his favorite easy chair, his cigar inclined toward the left-hand corner of his mouth, his attention riveted upon a small instrument which he was supporting upon his knee. He glanced across the room to where Lenora was bending over her desk.

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

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! Where's 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? Cunning? The necklace 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.

"What hands?" Lenora asked.

"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 here," 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 declared.

"Quite right, professor," Quest assured him. "They know well enough downstairs that I am always at liberty 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."

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 here 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.

"Yes, that will do very nicely," he decided. "Put me down—'Black Box,' five hundred dollars."

The girl took out her book and began to write. The professor, with a little farewell bow, crossed the room toward Quest. Lenora moved toward the door.

"Let me see you out," she said to the girl pleasantly.

Lenora opened the door. Both girls started. Only a few feet away Craig was standing, his head a little thrust forward. For a moment the quiet self-respect of his manner seemed to have deserted him. He seemed at a loss for words.

"What do you want?" Lenora demanded.

"I was waiting for my master," Craig explained.

"Why not downstairs?" Lenora asked suspiciously. "You did not come up with him."

"I am driving the professor in his automobile," Craig explained. "It occurred to me that if he were going to be long here I should have time to go and

now. Say, French, where did you say that was found?"

"Just outside the professor's back gate," French grunted. "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.

"Get right ahead with it."

"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 bone 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 bone so near the professor's house," he decided, "cannot be coincidence

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.

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.

"Well 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 his words was instantaneous. Almost as he spoke, the creature crouched for a

"Where? 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 Raymore, 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 Inyan 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 this matter. Anthropologists are afflicted more, even than any other race of scientific men, with jealousy. Guard your secret well, lest the honor of this discovery should be stolen from you.

WILLIAM RAYMORE.

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 paper 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 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 somewhere and get you a glass of wine."

She tried to smile but her strength was almost gone. They drove to a restaurant and sat there for some little time. Lenora soon recovered her color. She even had courage to speak of the events of the afternoon when they re-entered the automobile.

"Mr. Quest," Lenora murmured, "who do you suppose burned the hut down?"

"If I don't say Craig, I suppose you will," he remarked. "I wonder whether Laura's had any luck."

They were greeted, as they entered Quest's room, by a familiar little ticking. Quest smiled with pleasure.

"It's the pocket wireless," he declared. "Let me take down the message."

He spelled it out to Lenora, who stood by his side.

Have joined Servants' club disguised as your butler. Craig frequent visitor here ten years ago, comes now occasionally. Thursday evenings most likely time. Shall wait here on chance of seeing him.

"Good girl, that," Quest remarked. "She's a rare sticker, too."

He turned away from the instrument and was crossing the room toward his cigar cabinet. Suddenly he stopped. He looked intently towards the sideboard.

"What is it?" Lenora asked.

He did not answer. She followed the direction of his gaze. Exactly in the same spot as before reposed another but somewhat larger black box of the same shape and material as the previous one.

"Say, who put that there?" he demanded. Lenora shook her head.

"I locked the door when we went out," she assured him.

Quest took the box into his hands and removed the lid. It seemed half full of cotton-wool. On the top were a few lines of writing and beneath them the signature of the parted hands. He read the form out slowly:

Drop all investigation. The hands that return these jewels command it.

Quest raised the cotton-wool. Beneath lay Mrs. Rheinholdt's necklace!

(To Be Continued.)



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

2—Human Yet Inhuman, a Monkey and Yet a Man.

3—It Was Mrs. Rheinholdt's Necklace.

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 wandered 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 little 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. Sound to me uncommonly like a human effort."

They made their way up as 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 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

order another fire. It is of no consequence, though. I will go down and wait in the car."

Lenora stood at the top of the stairs and watched him disappear. Then she went thoughtfully back to her work. The professor and Quest were talking at the further 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 the 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," quietly remarked Quest. "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 tack on the phototelesma," 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