

THE BLACKE PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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FIFTH INSTALLMENT

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 entered a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a sealed box, a strange, ghastly body was found—an anthropoid, a skeleton, and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms at intervals have appeared from nowhere two black-clad assassins, and several times right with a pair of arms threatening hands, representing those which have already figured in a diamond robbery. With his secretary, Laura, and his assistant, Lenora, he follows the trail of Macdougal, who escapes on his way to New York and finds Macdougal's body in a cave on a lonely hillside. After a thrilling escape from two thugs who try to kill him, he returns to his rooms to find his valet, Brown, and a Miss Quig, murderer and Police Inspector French investigating. French, puzzled, half-suspects Quest of the crime.

ON THE RACK

CHAPTER XII.

For the moment a new element had been introduced into the horror of the little tableau. All eyes were fixed upon Quest, who had listened to the inspector's dubious words with a supercilious smile upon his lips.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you would like to ask me a few questions?"

"Perhaps I may feel it my duty to do so," the inspector replied gravely. "In the first place, then, Mr. Quest, will you kindly explain the condition of your clothes?"

Quest shrugged his shoulders.

"Here you are, then," he replied. "This morning I decided to make an attempt to clear up the mystery of Macdougal's disappearance. I sent on my secretary, Miss Laura, to make friends with the section boss, and Lenora and I went out by automobile a little later. We instituted a search on a new principle, and before very long we found Macdougal's body. That's one up against you, I think, inspector."

"Very likely," the inspector observed. "Go on, please."

"I left the two young ladies, at Miss Lenora's wish, to superintend the removal of the body. I myself had an engagement to deliver over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinhildt here at midday. I returned to where my automobile was waiting, started for the city and was attacked by two thugs near the section house. I got away from them, ran to the tower house to try and stop the freight, was followed by the thugs, and jumped out on to the last car from the signal arm."

"Where is your automobile?"

"No idea," Quest replied. "I left it in the road. When I jumped from the freight car I took a taxi cab to the professor's and called for him, as arranged."

The inspector nodded.

"I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a moment," he said, "while I ring up number ten signal tower. If Mr. Quest's story receives corroboration the matter is at an end."

The inspector left the room almost immediately. When he returned he was looking graver than ever.

"Quest," he announced, "your alibi is useless—in fact, a little worse than useless. The operator at number ten has been found murdered at the back of the tower!"

Quest started.

"I ought not to have left him to those thugs," he murmured regretfully.

"There is no automobile of yours in the vicinity," the inspector continued, "nor any news of it. I think it will be as well now, Quest, for this matter to take its obvious course. Will you, first of all, hand over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinhildt?"

Quest drew the keys of the safe from his pocket, crossed the room and swung open the safe door. For a moment afterwards he stood transfixed. His arm, half outstretched, remained motionless. Then he turned slowly around.

"The jewels have been stolen," he announced with unnatural calm.

The inspector laid his hand heavily upon Quest's shoulder.

"You will kindly consider yourself under arrest, Quest. Ladies and gentlemen, will you clear the room now, if you please. The ambulance I telephoned for is outside."

The professor, who had been looking as though dazed, suddenly intervened.

"Mr. French," he said earnestly, "I am convinced that you are making a great mistake. In arresting and taking away Mr. Quest you are removing from us the one man who is likely to be able to clear up this mystery."

The inspector pushed him gently to one side.

"You will excuse me, professor," he said, "but this is no matter for argument. If Mr. Quest can clear himself, no one will be more glad than I."

Quest shrugged his shoulders.

"The inspector will have his little joke," he observed dryly. "It's all right, girls. Keep cool," he went on, as he saw the tears in Lenora's eyes. "Come round and see me in the Tombs, one of you."

The ambulance men came and departed with their grim burden, the room on the ground floor was locked and sealed, and the house was soon empty, except for the two girls. Toward three o'clock Lenora went out and returned with a newspaper. She opened it out upon the table and they both pored over it.

"Justice Thorpe has refused to consider bail!" It's a guy, that Justice Thorpe, and so's the idiot who wrote this stuff!" Laura exclaimed, thrusting the paper away from her. "I guess the professor was dead right when he told French he was locking up the one man who could clear up the whole show."

Lenora nodded thoughtfully.

"The professor spoke up like a man," she agreed, "but Laura, I want to ask you something. Did you notice his servant—that man Craig?"

"Can't say I did particularly," Laura admitted.

"Twice," Lenora continued, "I thought he was going to faint. I tell you he was scared the whole of the time."

"What are you getting at, kid?" Laura demanded.

"At Craig, if I can," Lenora replied, moving toward the telephone. "Please give me the photo-telescop. I am going to talk to the professor."

Lenora adjusted the mirror to the instrument and Lenora rang up. The professor himself answered the call.

"Have you seen the three o'clock edition, professor?" Lenora asked.

"I never read newspapers, young lady," the professor replied.

"Let me tell you what they say about Mr. Quest!"

Lenora commenced a rambling account of what she had read in the newspaper. All the time the eyes of the two girls were fixed upon the mirror. They could see the professor seated in his chair with two huge volumes by his side, a pile of manuscript, and a pen in his hand. They could even catch the look of sympathy on his face as he listened attentively. Suddenly Lenora almost broke off. She gripped Laura by the arm. The door of the study had been opened slowly, and Craig, carrying a bundle, paused for a moment on the threshold.

Lenora smiled pleasantly. "I came to this door," she said, "because I wanted a little talk with you."

Craig's attitude was perfect. He was mystified but he remained respectful.

"Will you come inside?" he invited.

She shook her head.

"I am afraid," she confided, "of what I am going to say being overheard. Come with me down to the garage for a moment."

He opened the door of the garage, leaving the keys in the lock, and they both passed inside.

"You can say what you please here without the slightest fear of being overheard, miss," Craig remarked.

Lenora nodded, and breathed a prayer to herself.

She was nearer the door than Craig by about half a dozen paces. Her hand groped in the little bag she was carrying and gripped something hard. She clenched her teeth for a moment. Then the automatic pistol flashed out through the gloom.

"Craig," she threatened, "if you move I shall shoot you."

It seemed as though the man were a coward. He began to tremble, his lips twitched, his eyes grew larger and rounder.

"What is it?" he faltered. "What do you want?"

"Just this," Lenora said firmly. "I suspect you to be guilty of the crime for which Sanford Quest is in prison. I am going to have you questioned. If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. If you are guilty there will be someone here before long who will extract the truth from you."

The man's face was an epitome of terror. Even

CHAPTER XIII.

Craig's surprise was real enough as he opened the back door of the professor's house on the following morning and found Lenora standing on the threshold.

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"That's all right," Quest replied, "but how am I to get hold of him?"

Lenora glanced once more carelessly around to where the guard stood.

"Lenora's gone up to the professor's again this afternoon. She is going to try and get hold of Craig and lock him in the garage. If she succeeds, she will send a message by wireless at three o'clock. It is half-past two now."

"Well?" Quest exclaimed. "Well?"

"You can work this guard, if you want to," Lenora went on. "I have seen you tackle worse cases. He seems dead easy. Then let me in the cell, take my clothes and leave me here."

Quest followed the scheme in his mind quickly.

"It is all right," he decided, "but I am not at all sure that they can really hold me on the evi-

The professor swung round in his chair and eyed his visitor in blank astonishment.

"Quest?" he exclaimed. "God bless my soul! Have they let you out already, then?"

"I came out," Quest replied grimly. "Sit tight and listen to me for a moment, will you?"

"You came out?" the professor repeated, looking a little dazed. "You mean that you escaped?"

Quest nodded.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," he admitted, "but here I am. Now listen, professor." And he told the story of the last few hours.

The professor's face was almost pitiful in its blank amazement. His mouth was wide open like a child's, words seemed absolutely denied to him. He rose to his feet, obviously a tremendous effort to adjust his ideas.

"Craig locked up in my garage?" he murmured. "Craig guilty of those murders? Why, my dear Mr. Quest, a more harmless, a more inoffensive, peace-loving and devoted servant than John Craig never trod this earth!"

"Maybe," Quest replied, "but where is he?"

The professor could do nothing but look around him a little vaguely.

"I am going back," Quest announced. "My only chance is the wireless. If Lenora is alive or at liberty, she will communicate with me."

"May I come, too?" the professor asked timidly.

"Come, by all means," Quest assented. "I will drive you down in your car, if you like."

The professor hurried away to get his coat and hat, and a few minutes later they started off. In Broadway they left the car at a garage and made their way up a back street which enabled them to enter the house at the side entrance. They passed upstairs into the sitting-room. Quest fished the pocket wireless and laid it down on the table. The professor examined it with interest.

"You are marvelous, my friend," he declared. "With all these resources of science at your command it seems incredible that you should be in the position you are."

Quest nodded coolly.

"Just one moment, professor, while I send off a message," he said, opening the little instrument. "Where are you, Lenora?" he signaled.

"Send me word and I will fetch you. I am in my own house for the present. Let me know that you are safe."

The professor leaned back, smoking one of Quest's excellent cigars. He was beginning to show signs of the liveliest interest.

"Quest," he said, "I wish I could induce you to dismiss this extraordinary suspicion of yours concerning my servant Craig. The man has been with me for the best part of twenty years. He saved my life in South America; we have traveled in all parts of the world. He has proved himself to be exemplary, a faithful and devoted servant."

"Then perhaps you will tell me," Quest suggested, "where he is now, and why he has gone away? That does not look like complete innocence, does it?"

The professor sighed.

"I cannot stay here much longer, unless I mean to go back to the Tombs," Quest declared.

"Surely," the professor suggested, "your innocence will very soon be established."

"There is one thing which will happen, without a doubt," Quest replied. "My auto and the chauffeur will be discovered. I have insisted upon inquiries being sent out throughout the state of Connecticut. They tell me, too, that the police are hard on the scent of Red Gallagher and the other man. Unless they get wind of this and sell me purposely, their arrest will be the end of my troubles. To tell you the truth, professor," Quest concluded, "it is not of myself I am thinking at all just now. It is Lenora."

The professor nodded sympathetically.

Quest, for the third or fourth time, moved cautiously toward the window. His expression suddenly changed. He glanced downwards, frowning slightly. An alert light flashed into his eyes.

"They're after me!" he exclaimed. "Sit still, professor."

He darted into his room and reappeared again almost immediately. The professor gave a gasp of astonishment at his altered appearance. His tweed suit seemed to have been turned inside out. There were no lapels now and it was buttoned up to his neck. He wore a long white apron; a peaked cap and a chinpiece of astonishing naturalness had transformed him into the semblance of a Dutch grocer's boy.

"Half an hour or so," Quest answered. "Don't bother about him. I shall drop the key back through the window."

Quest reached Georgia square at five minutes to three. A glance up and down assured him that the house was unwatched. He let himself in with his own key, threw Laura's clothes off, and, after a few moments' hesitation, selected from the wardrobe a rough tweed suit with a thick lining and lapels. Just as he was tying his tie, the little wireless which he had laid on the table at his side began to record a message. He glanced at the clock. It was exactly three.

Quest's eyes shone for a moment with satisfaction. Then he sent off his answering message, put on a duster and slouch hat, and left the house by the side entrance. In a few moments he was in Broadway, and a quarter of an hour later a taxi cab deposited him at the entrance to the professor's house. He walked swiftly up the drive and turned toward the garage, hoping every moment to see something of Lenora. The door of the place stood open. He entered and walked around. It was empty. There was no sign of either Craig or Lenora.

Quest, recovered from his first disappointment, stole carefully out and made a minute examination of the place. Close to the corner from which Lenora had sent her wireless message to him, he stooped and picked up a handkerchief, which from the marking he recognized at once. A few feet away the gravel was disturbed as though by the trampling of several feet. He set his teeth.

"I've got to find that girl," he muttered. "Craig can go to hell!"

He turned away and approached the house. The front door stood open and he made his way at once to the library. The professor, who was sitting at his desk surrounded by a pile of books and papers, addressed him, as he entered, without looking up.

"Where on earth have you been, Craig?" he inquired petulantly. "I have rung for you six times. Have I not told you never to leave the place without orders?"

French turned impatiently away. Suddenly a light broke in upon him; he rushed toward the door.

"That d—d Dutchie!" he exclaimed.