

The BLACK BOX

by E. Phillips Oppenheim

Novelized from the Photo Play of the Same Name. Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company

(Continued)

The professor rose to his feet, knocked the ash from his cigar, struggled into his coat and took up his hat. Then he waited until Quest had completed his conversation. The latter's face had grown grave and puzzled. It was obvious that he was receiving information of some importance. He put down the instrument at last with a curt word of farewell.

The professor moved towards the door. "If only this may prove to be the end," he sighed. Quest spent the next hour or so in restless deliberations. There were still many things which puzzled him. At about a quarter past nine Lenora and Laura arrived, dressed for their expedition. "I'm afraid I am in for a bad thunderstorm, girls," Quest remarked. Laura laughed.

"Who cares? The automobile's there, Mr. Quest." "Let's go, then," he replied. They descended into the street and drove to the professor's house in silence. Even Laura was feeling the strain of these last hours of anxiety. On the way they picked up French and a plain-clothes man and the whole party arrived at their destination just as the storm broke. The professor met them in the hall. He, too, seemed to have lost to some extent his customary equanimity.

"Come this way, my friends," he invited. "If Craig keeps his nose from here now within a few minutes, this way." They followed him into the library. Chairs were arranged around the table in the middle of the room and they all sat down. The professor took out his watch. It was five minutes to ten.

"In a few minutes," he continued solemnly, "this weight is to be lifted from the minds of all of us. I have come to the conclusion that on this occasion Craig will keep his word. I am not sure, mind, but I believe that he is in the house at this present moment. I have heard movements in the room which belonged to him. I have not interfered. I have been content to wait."

"He has at least not tried escape," Quest remarked. "French here brought news of him. He has been living with his niece very quietly, but without any particular attempt at concealment or any signs of wishing to leave the city."

"I had that girl brought to my office," French remarked, "barely an hour ago, but she slipped away while we were talking. Say, what's that?" They all rose quickly to their feet. In a momentary lull of the storm they could hear distinctly a gasp from outside, followed by the clamor of angry voices.

"Gee! I bet that's the girl," French exclaimed. "She'd been looking up the professor's address in a directory." They all hurried into the hall. The plain-clothes man who had been standing there with his hand upon Craig's collar. The girl, sobbing bitterly, was clinging to his arm. Craig was making desperate efforts to escape. Directly he saw the little party issue from the library, however, the strength seemed to leave his limbs. He remained in the clutches of his captor, limp and helpless.

"I caught the girl trying to make her way into the house," the latter explained. "She called out and this man came running downstairs, right into my arms."

"It is quite all right," the professor said, in a dignified tone. "You may release them both. Craig was on his way to keep an appointment here at ten o'clock. Quest, will you and the inspector bring him in? Let us resume our places at the table." The little procession made its way down the hall. The girl was still clinging to her uncle.

"What are they going to do to you, these people?" she sobbed. "You shan't hurt you. They shan't!" Lenora passed her arm around the girl.

"Of course not, dear," she said, soothingly. "Your uncle has come of his own free will to answer a few questions, only I think it would be better if you would let me—"

Lenora never finished her sentence. They had reached the entrance now to the library. The professor was standing in the doorway with extended hand, motioning them to take their places at the table. Then, with no form of warning, the room seemed suddenly filled with a blaze of blue light. It came at first in a thin flash from the window to the table, became immediately multiplied a thousand times, played round the table in sparks, which suddenly expanded to sheets of leaping, curling flame. The roar of thunder shook the very foundations of the house—and then silence. For several seconds not one of them seemed to have the power of speech. An amazing thing had happened. The oak table in the middle of the room was a charred fragment, the chairs were every one blackened remnants.

"A thunderbolt!" French gasped at last. Quest was the first to cross the room. From the table to the outside window was one sharp, black line which had burnt its way through the carpet. He threw open the window. The wire whose course he had followed ended here with a little lump of queer substance. He broke it off from the end of the wire, which was a splintered bit of wood, and brought it into the room.

"What is it?" Lenora faltered.

"Say, what have you got there?" French echoed. Quest examined the strange-looking lump of metal steadily. The most curious thing about it seemed to be that it was absolutely sound and showed no signs of damage. He turned to the professor.

"I think you are the only one who will be able to appreciate this, professor," he remarked. "Look! It is a fragment of opotam—a distinct and wonderful specimen of opotam." Everyone looked puzzled.

"But what," Lenora inquired, "is opotam?" "It is a new metal," Quest explained, gravely, "towards which scientists have been directing a great deal of attention lately. It has the power of collecting all the electricity from the air around us. There are a dozen people at the present moment, conducting experiments with it for the purpose of cheapening electric lights. If we had been in the room ten seconds sooner—"

He paused significantly. Then he swung round on his heel. Craig, a now pitiful object, his hands nervously twitching, his face ghastly, was covering in the background.

"Your last little effort, Craig?" he demanded, sternly. Craig made no reply. The professor, who had disappeared for a moment, came back to them.

"There is a smaller room across the hall," he said, "which will do for our purpose." Craig suddenly turned and faced them.

"I have changed my mind," he said. "I have nothing to tell you. Do what you will with me. Take me to the Tombs, deal with me any way you choose, but I have nothing to say."

Quest pointed a threatening finger at him. "Your last voluntary word, perhaps," he said, "but science is still your master, Craig. Science has brought many criminals to their doom. It shall take its turn with you. Bring him along, French, to my study. There is a way of dealing with him."

Quest felt his forehead and found it damp. There were dark rims under his eyes. Before him was Craig, with a little hand around his forehead and the mirror where they could all see it. The professor stood a little in the background. Laura and French were side by side, gazing with distended eyes at the blank mirror, and Lenora was doing her best to soothe the terrified girl. Twice Quest's teeth came together and once he almost reeled.

"It's the light of his life," he muttered at last, "but I've got him." Almost as he spoke they could see Craig's resistance begin to weaken. The tenseness of his form relaxed. Quest's will was triumphing. Slowly in the mirror they saw a little picture creeping from the outline into definite form, a picture of the professor's library. Craig himself was there with mortar and trowel, and a black box in his hand.

"It's coming!" Lenora moaned. Quest stood perfectly tense. The picture suddenly flashed into brilliant clarity. They saw Craig's features with almost lifelike detail. From the corner of that room where the professor was standing, came a smothered groan. It was a terrifying, a paralyzing moment. Even the silence seemed charged with awful things. Then suddenly, without any warning, the picture faded completely away. A cry, which was almost a howl of anger, broke from Quest's lips. Craig had fallen sideways from his chair. There was an ominous change in his face. Something seemed to have passed from the atmosphere of the room, some tense and nameless quality. Quest moved forward and laid his hand on Craig's heart. The girl was on her knees, screaming.

"Take her away!" Quest whispered to Lenora.

"What about him?" French demanded, as Lenora led the girl from the room.

"I caught the girl trying to make her way into the house," the latter explained. "She called out and this man came running downstairs, right into my arms."

"It is quite all right," the professor said, in a dignified tone. "You may release them both. Craig was on his way to keep an appointment here at ten o'clock. Quest, will you and the inspector bring him in? Let us resume our places at the table." The little procession made its way down the hall. The girl was still clinging to her uncle.

"What are they going to do to you, these people?" she sobbed. "You shan't hurt you. They shan't!" Lenora passed her arm around the girl.

"Of course not, dear," she said, soothingly. "Your uncle has come of his own free will to answer a few questions, only I think it would be better if you would let me—"

Lenora never finished her sentence. They had reached the entrance now to the library. The professor was standing in the doorway with extended hand, motioning them to take their places at the table. Then, with no form of warning, the room seemed suddenly filled with a blaze of blue light. It came at first in a thin flash from the window to the table, became immediately multiplied a thousand times, played round the table in sparks, which suddenly expanded to sheets of leaping, curling flame. The roar of thunder shook the very foundations of the house—and then silence. For several seconds not one of them seemed to have the power of speech. An amazing thing had happened. The oak table in the middle of the room was a charred fragment, the chairs were every one blackened remnants.

"A thunderbolt!" French gasped at last. Quest was the first to cross the room. From the table to the outside window was one sharp, black line which had burnt its way through the carpet. He threw open the window. The wire whose course he had followed ended here with a little lump of queer substance. He broke it off from the end of the wire, which was a splintered bit of wood, and brought it into the room.

"What is it?" Lenora faltered.

"Say, what have you got there?" French echoed. Quest examined the strange-looking lump of metal steadily. The most curious thing about it seemed to be that it was absolutely sound and showed no signs of damage. He turned to the professor.

"I think you are the only one who will be able to appreciate this, professor," he remarked. "Look! It is a fragment of opotam—a distinct and wonderful specimen of opotam." Everyone looked puzzled.

"But what," Lenora inquired, "is opotam?" "It is a new metal," Quest explained, gravely, "towards which scientists have been directing a great deal of attention lately. It has the power of collecting all the electricity from the air around us. There are a dozen people at the present moment, conducting experiments with it for the purpose of cheapening electric lights. If we had been in the room ten seconds sooner—"

"He fought too hard," Quest said, gravely. "He is dead. Professor—" They all looked around. The spot where he had been standing was empty. The professor had gone.

CHAPTER XXXV

The first shock was over. Craig's body had been removed, and the girls had taken Mary half stunned with grief, to their room. French and Quest were left alone.

"That is some disappointment," the former remarked gloomily. "It is a disappointment," Quest said slowly, "which may clear the way to bigger things."

"What's in your mind now?" French inquired. Quest shook his head. "A turmoil. First of all, where is the professor?"

"Must have scouted right away home," French suggested. "He was looking pretty sick all the time. Guess it must have been a powerful shock for him, and he isn't so young as he used to be."

"Give me that paper of Craig's again," Quest asked. The inspector produced the document from his inner pocket, and Quest, stretching it out upon his knee, read it word for word.

"Never to communicate or to do anything to do with anyone of the name of Ashleigh, eh?" he remarked, as he handed it back again. "Rather a queer provision, that, French."

"I've been thinking that myself," the inspector admitted. Quest glanced at the clock. "Well," he said, "if you're ready, inspector, we'll be getting along."

The two men drove to the outskirts of the city almost in silence. The professor's house seemed more than ever deserted as they drew up at the front door. They entered without ringing and crossed the hall towards the library. On the threshold Quest paused and held up his finger.

"Someone is in there," he whispered, stopping quickly forward. "Come!" He threw open the door. The room was empty, yet both Quest and French were conscious of a curious conviction that it had been occupied within the last few seconds.

"Queer but it seemed to me I heard someone," French muttered. "I was sure of it," Quest replied. They stood still for a moment and listened. The silence in the empty house was almost unnatural. Quest turned away with a shrug of the shoulders.

"At any rate," he said, "Craig's dying thoughts must have been truthful. Come." He led the way to the fireplace, went down on his knees and passed his hands over the bricks. The third time he touched, shook. He tapped it—without a doubt it was hollow. With his penknife he loosened the mortar a little and drew it out easily. The back was open. Inside was the black box.

"Craig's secret at last!" French muttered, hoarsely. "Bring it to the light, quick!" They were unemotional men, but the moment was supreme. The key to the mystery of these tragical weeks was there in their hands! Their eyes almost devoured those few hastily scrawled words buried with so much care.

See Page 62, January Number, American Medical Journal, 1905. They looked at one another. They repeated vaguely this most commonplace of messages. As the final result of their strenuous enterprise, these cryptic words seemed pitifully inadequate. Quest's fingers dragged out recently into the middle of the room. It was covered with bound volumes. Quest glanced at one and exclaimed softly:

"American Medical Journal, 1905! French, there's something in this message, after all." He turned over the pages rapidly. Then he came to a stop. Page 61 was there; page 62 had been neatly removed with a pair of scissors.

"The professor!" he cried. "The professor's been at work here!" The two men stood looking at one another across the table. Strange thoughts were framing themselves in the brains of both of them. Then there came a startling and in its way a dramatic interlude. Through the empty house came the ringing of the electric bell from the front door, shrill and insistent. Without a moment's hesitation, Quest hurried out and French followed him. On the doorstep was another surprise. Lenora and Laura were there, the former carrying a small, black-bound volume.

"Don't be cross," she begged, quickly. "We just had to come. Look! We picked this up underneath the chair where Craig was sitting. It must have slipped from his pocket. You see what is written on it?"

Diary of John Craig. Quest took it in his hand. "Say, this ought to be interesting," he remarked. "Come along." They passed into the library. French lingered behind for a moment and caught them up just as they were opening the book underneath the electric lamp.

"See here what I've found!" he exclaimed. "It was just by the side of the wall there. Where's that magazine?"

He spread out the piece of paper—it fitted exactly into the empty space. They all read together.

Professor Ashleigh, after being bitten by the antrophoid, rapidly developed hydrophobia of a serious nature. After treatment with a new serum the patient was relieved of the hydrophobic symptoms, but to my horror this mid-mannered, humane man seems possessed at times of all the characteristics of the brutal antrophoid—cunning, thievery, brutality. I do not know what may come of this. I hesitate to put even these words on to paper. I am doubtful as to what

course, in the interests of humanity, I ought to take. (Signed) JAMES MERRILL, M. D. Editor's Note—Just as we go to press, a cable announces the terrible death of Doctor Merrill, the writer of the above notes. He was attacked by wild animals whilst alone in a South American jungle, and torn to pieces.

There was a queer little silence among the company. No one seemed inclined to speak. They looked at one another in dumb, wondering horror when Quest drew a penknife from his pocket and with a turn of his wrist forced the lock of the diary. They all watched him with fascinated eyes. It was something to escape over as he spread the book out before him. Those first two sentences were almost in the nature of a dedication:

For ten years I have protected my master, Prof. Edgar Ashleigh at the cost of my peace of mind, my happiness, my reputation. This book, even though it be too late to help me, shall clear my reputation.

Quest closed the volume. "French," he decided, "we must find the professor. Will you have your men search the house and grounds immediately?"

The inspector left the room like a dazed man. They could hear him giving orders outside. "The next page," Lenora begged. "Just one page more!"

Quest hesitated for a moment. Then he turned it over. All three read again: Ten years of horror, struggling all the while to keep him from that other self, that thing of bestiality, to keep his horrible secret from the world, to cover up his crimes, even though their shadow should rest upon me. Now Sanford Quest has come. Will this mean discovery?

"Another page," Quest said. "Don't you see where it is leading us? We bury the truth here. Wait!" He strode hastily to the door. French and one of the plain-clothes men were descending the stairs.

"Well?" Quest asked, breathlessly. "The professor is not in the house," French reported. "We are going to search the grounds."

Quest returned to the library. Lenora clung to his arm. The diary lay still upon the table. Quest opened the volume slowly. Again they all read together:

The evil nature is growing stronger every day. He is developing a sort of ferocious cunning to help him in his crimes. He wanders about in the dark, wearing a black velvet suit with holes for his eyes, and leaving only his hands exposed. I have watched him come into a half-darkened room and one can see nothing but the hands and the eyes; some times if he closes his eyes, only the hands.

"Mrs. Rheinholt!" Quest muttered. The door was suddenly opened and French entered.

"What?" he exclaimed, tersely. "You haven't found him?" Quest asked. French shook his head.

"We've searched every room, every cupboard, every scrap of the cellar in the place," he announced. "We've been into every corner of the grounds, but the hands and the eyes; some times if he closes his eyes, only the hands."

"You're perfectly certain that he is not in this house or anywhere upon the premises?" French replied. Quest shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, we'd better get back," he said. They were on the point of starting, the chauffeur with his hand upon the starting handle, French with the dropped key in the pocket of his coat already in his hand. And then the little party seemed suddenly turned to stone. For a few breathless seconds not one of them moved. Out into the clammy night air came the echoes of a hideous, inhuman, blood-curdling scream. Quest was the first to recover himself. He leaped from his seat and rushed back across the empty hall into the study, followed a little way behind by French and the other two. An unsuspected panel door which led into the garden stood slightly ajar. The professor, with his hand on the back of a chair, was staring at the fireplace, shaking as though with some horrible ague, his face distorted, his body curiously hunched over. He seemed suddenly to have dropped his humanity, to have fallen back into the world of some strange creature. He heard their footsteps, but he did not turn his head. His hands were stretched out in front of him as though to keep away from his sight some hateful object.

"Stop him!" he cried. "Take him away! It's Craig—his spirit! He came to me in the garage, he followed me through the grounds, he mocked at me when I hid in the tree. He's there now, kneeling before the fireplace. Why can't I kill him! He is coming! Stop him, someone!"

No one spoke or moved; no one, indeed, had the power. Then at last Quest found words. "There is no one in the room, professor," he said, "except us."

The sound of a human voice seemed to produce a strange effect. The professor straightened himself, shook his head, his hands dropped to his side, ghastly pale, but his smile was once more the smile of the amiable naturalist.

"My friends," he said, "forgive me. I am very old, and the events of these last few hours have unnerved me. Forgive me."

He groped for a moment and sank into a chair. Quest fetched a decanter, poured out some wine and held it to his lips. The professor drank it eagerly.

"My dear friend," he exclaimed, "you have saved me. I have something to tell you, something I must tell you at once, but not here. I loathe this place. Let me come with you to your rooms."

"As you please," Quest answered, calmly. He gripped Quest's arm. In silence they passed from the room, in silence

they took their places once more in the automobiles, in silence they drove without a pause to Quest's rooms. The professor made his way at once to his favorite easy chair, threw off his overcoat and leaned back.

"Quest," he pronounced, "you are the best friend I have in my life! It is you who have rid me of my great burden. Tell me—help me a little with my story—have you read that page from the Medical Journal which

cried. "What next? Oh! my God, what next?" Their eyes ached with the strain, but there was not one of them who could even glance away from the mirror. It was Quest's study which slowly appeared then. The Salvation Army girl was there, talking to the professor. They saw him leave her, they saw him look back from the door, a strange, evil glance. Then the secretary entered and spoke to her. Once more the door opened. The hands were there, stretching and reaching, a paper-weight gripped in the right-hand fingers. They saw it raised above the secretary's head, they saw the other hand take the girl by the throat and push her towards the table. A wild scream broke from Lenora's lips. Quest wavered for a moment. The picture faded out.

"Oh, stop it!" Lenora begged. "Haven't we seen enough? We know the truth now. Stop it or I shall die!" The criminologist made no reply. His eyes were still fixed upon the professor, who showed some signs of returning consciousness. He was gripping at his collar. He seemed to have difficulty with his breathing. Quest suddenly braced himself. He pushed Lenora back.

"One more," he muttered. "There's something growing in his mind. I can feel it. Wait!" Again they all turned towards the mirror. They saw the hallway of Ashleigh house, the pictures upon the walls, they could almost feel the quiet silence of night. They saw the professor come stealing down the stairs. He was wearing the black velvet suit with the cowl in his hand. They watched him pause before a certain door, draw on the cowl and disappear. Through the opening they could see Lord Ashleigh asleep in bed, the moonlight streaming through the open window across the counterpane. They saw the professor turn with a strange, horrible look in his face and close the door. Lenora burst into sobs.

"No more!" she shrieked. "No more, or I shall go mad!" Quest leaned forward and released their victim. The whole atmosphere of the place seemed immediately to change. Lenora drew a long, convulsive breath and sank into a chair. The professor sat up and gazed at them all with the air of a man who has just awakened from a dream.

"Have I, by any chance, slept?" he asked. "Or—"

He never finished his sentence. His eyes fell upon the mirror, the metal band lying by his side. He read the truth in the faces still turned towards him. He rose to his feet. There was another and equally sudden change in his demeanor and tone. He carried himself with the calm dignity of the scientist.

"The end of our struggle, I presume?" he said to Quest, pointing to the metal band. "You will at least admit that I have shown you the sport?" No one answered him. Even Quest had barely yet recovered himself. The professor shrugged his shoulders.

"I recognize, of course," he said, gravely, "that this is the end. A person in extremis has privileges. Will you allow me to write just a matter of twenty lines at your desk?"

Silently Quest assented. The professor seated himself in the swing chair, drew a sheet of paper towards him, dipped the pen in the ink and began to write. Then he turned around and reached for his own amazing sport, which lay upon the table. Quest caught him by the wrist.

"What do you want out of that, professor?" he inquired. "Merely my own pen and ink," the professor expostulated. "If I detect anything I detect in the world, it is violet ink. And your pen, too, is exorable. As they are to be the last words I shall leave to a sorrowing world, I should like to write them in my own fashion. Open the bag for yourself, if you will. You can pass me the things out."

Quest opened the bag, took out a pen and a small glass bottle of ink. He handed them to the professor, who started at once more to write. Quest watched him for a moment and then turned away to French. The professor looked over his shoulder and suddenly bared his wrist. Lenora seized her employer by the arm.

"Look!" she cried. "What is he going to do?" Quest swung around, but he was too late. The professor had dug the pen into his arm. He sat in his chair and laughed as they all hurried towards him. Then suddenly he sprang to his feet. Again the change came into his face which they had seen in the mirror. French dashed forward towards him. The professor snarled, seemed about to spring, then suddenly once more stretched out his hands to show that he was helpless and handed to Quest the paper upon which he had been writing.

"You have nothing to fear from me," he exclaimed. "Here is my last message to you, Sanford Quest. Read it—it was not your triumph, but mine."

Quest held up the paper. They all read. The professor's letters were carefully formed, his handwriting perfectly legible.

You have been a clever opponent, Sanford Quest, but even now you are to be cheated. The widow of my open outreaches yours, outreaches it and triumphs.

Quest looked up quickly. "What the devil does he mean?" he muttered.

The professor's arms shot suddenly above his head. Again that strange animal look convulsed his features. He burst into a loud, unnatural laugh. "Mean, you fool?" he cried, holding out his wrist, which was slowly turning black. "Poisoned! That is what it means!"

They all stared at him. Quest seized the ink bottle, revealed the false top and laid it down again with a little exclamation. Then, before they could realize it the end came. The professor lay, a crumpled-up heap, upon the floor.

Quest swung round in his chair as French entered the room and held out his left hand. "Glad to see you, French. Help yourself to a cigar."

"Mrs. Rheinholt's jewels!" Lenora

"Mrs. Rheinholt's jewels!" Lenora



The Professor Sat There Like a Figure of Stone.

I don't know as I want to smoke this morning just at present, thank you," French replied.

"Nothing wrong, eh?" "The fact of it is," French explained, "I should like a few words with Miss Laura."

Quest laughed shortly. "Why on earth couldn't you say so?" he observed. "Never knew you so bashful before, inspector. She's up in the laboratory. I'll ring for someone to show you the way."

Quest touched the bell and his new secretary entered almost at once. "Take Inspector French up into the laboratory," Quest directed. See you later, French.

"Yes—perhaps—I hope so," the inspector replied nervously. Quest watched him disappear with a puzzled smile. Then he sat down at his desk, drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write:

My Dear Inspector: I am taking this opportunity of letting you know that out of deference to the wishes of the woman I hope soon to marry, I am abandoning the hazardous and nerve-racking profession of criminology for a safer and happier career. You will have, therefore, to find help elsewhere in the future. With best wishes, Yours,

SANFORD QUEST. He left the sheet of paper upon the desk and, ringing the bell, sent for Lenora. She appeared in a few moments and came over to his side.

"What is it, Mr. Quest?" she asked. He gave her the letter without remark. She read it through and, turning slowly around, looked at him expectantly.

"How's that seem to you?" he asked, reaching out his hand for a cigar. "Very sensible, indeed," she replied. "No sort of life, this, for a married man," Quest declared. "You

agree with me there, don't you, Lenora?" "Yes!" she admitted, a little faintly. The secretary entered the room, helped Quest on with his coat and handed him his hat.

"If you are quite ready, Lenora," "Ready!" she exclaimed. "Where are we going?" Quest sighed.

"Fancy having to explain all these things," he said, taking her arm. "I just want you to understand, Lenora, that I've waited—quite long enough, Parkins," he added, turning to his secretary, "if anyone calls, just say that my wife and I will be back early in the afternoon. And you'd better step upstairs to the laboratory and give my compliments to Inspector French, and say that I hope he and Miss Laura will join us at Delmonico's for luncheon at one o'clock."

"Very good, sir," the man replied. Lenora's face was suddenly transformed. She passed her arm through Quest's. He stooped and kissed her as he led her towards the door.

"You understand now, don't you?" he whispered, smiling down at her. "I think so," she admitted, with a little sigh of content.

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END



The Sound of a Human Voice Seemed to Produce a Strange Effect.

WATCH FOR THE
ADVOCATE'S
NEW SERIAL
'EXCUSE
ME'
ON THIS PAGE
NEXT WEEK