

The BLACK BOX

by E. Phillips Oppenheim

(Continued)
THIRD INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS.

In her apartment at the Leland Hotel, the daughter of Lord Ashleigh, is murdered and the Ashleigh diamond necklace is 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 hypnotism 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 by his death in a tough tenement house while engaged in the work, Lenora becomes one of the assistants. The detective is called in to investigate the theft of the skeleton of an ape of Lord Ashleigh. Macdougall escapes on his way to prison. A string of diamonds is mysteriously stolen from Mrs. Rheinholdt during a reception.

They found their way to a room, which seemed to be the only habitable room. Lenora glanced around at its strange contents with an expression almost of awe.

A small motor car passed the window, driven by Craig. The professor descended. A moment or two later he entered the room. He gazed from Quest to Lenora at first in blank surprise. Then he held out his hands.

"You have good news for me, my friends!" he exclaimed. "I am sure of it. How unfortunate that I was not at home to receive you! Tell me—don't keep me in suspense, if you please—have you discovered my skeleton?"

"We have found the skeleton," Quest answered. "For a single moment the newcomer stood as though turned to stone."

"My skeleton!" he murmured. "Mr. Quest, I knew it. You are the greatest man alive. Now tell me quickly—I want to know everything, but this first of all. Where did you find the skeleton? Who was the thief?"

"We found the skeleton, professor," Quest replied, "within a hundred yards of this house."

The professor's mouth was wide open. He looked like a bewildered child. It was several seconds before he spoke.

"Within a hundred yards of this house? Then it wasn't stolen by one of my rivals?"

"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 Ramsay, 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 amuses me 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 rock ages. Now you tell me that in the person of Hartoo, the last of the Inyamo race of South America, you have found their corollary. You have supplied the missing link. You are in a position to give the world a definite and logical explanation of the evolution of man. Let me give you one word of warning, professor, before you write up at greater length on the matter. Anthropologists are afflicted more, even than other races of scientific men, with jealousy. Guard your secret well, lest the hope of this discovery should be stolen from you.

WILLIAM RAMSAY.

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 page 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 non-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. The 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 sawed at his feet as though trying to show him the way through the forest. Then for a single moment they saw the form of the ape-man as he struggled to follow the others. His strength failed him, how-

ever, 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?"

"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. Thursday evenings most likely time. Shall wait here on chance of seeing him.

"Good girl, that," Quest remarked. "She's a rare stickler, 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, rested an-

other 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.

SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing to Justice Macdougall, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just entered a life-and-death contest with a mysterious master criminal. Engaged by Professor Ashleigh, Lord Ashleigh's brother, to recover the stolen skeleton of an anthropoid ape, hurried to Mrs. Rheinholdt's reception, where her diamonds have been torn from her throat by a pair of hands without arms or body, a black box later appears from nowhere in his room and a note contained in it, signed by the armless hands, sarcastically suggests that he may be hidden together. While Laura, Quest's secretary, shadows Craig, the professor's valet, and discover there an inhuman creature, half monkey and half man. As the professor explains, the hut is set afire and the monkey-man and skeleton are destroyed in the flames. In Quest's room the Rheinholdt diamonds suddenly reappear, enclosed in a second black box with a note signed by the threatening hands.

FOURTH INSTALLMENT

AN OLD GRUDGE.

CHAPTER X.

Sanford Quest was smoking his after-breakfast cigar with a relish somewhat affected by the measure of his perplexities. Early though it was, Lenora was already in her place, bending over her desk, and Laura, who had

just arrived, was busy dressing herself of her coat and hat. Quest watched the latter impatiently.

"Well," he asked.

Laura came forward, straightening her hair with her hands.

"No go," she answered. "I spent the evening in the club, and I talked with two men who knew Craig, but I couldn't get on to anything. From all I could hear of the man, respectability is his middle name."

"That's the professor's own idea," Quest remarked grimly.

"We're fairly up against it, boss," Laura sighed. "The best thing we can do is to get on to another job. The Rheinholdt woman has got her jewels back, or will have at noon to-day. I bet she won't worry about the thief. Then the professor's moldy old skeleton was returned to him, even if it was burned up afterwards. I should take on something fresh."

"Can't be done," Quest replied shortly. "Look here, girls, your average intellects are often apt to hit upon the truth, when a man who sees too far ahead goes wrong. Rule Craig out. Any other possible person occur to you? Speak out, Lenora. You've something on your mind, I can see."

"I'm afraid you'll laugh at me," she began tentatively.

"Won't hurt you if I do," Quest replied.

"I can't help thinking of Macdougall," Lenora continued falteringly. "He has never been recaptured. I don't know whether he's dead or alive. He had a perfect passion for Jew. If he is alive, he would be desperate and would attempt anything."

Quest smoked in silence for a moment.

"I guess the return of the jewels awakened the Macdougall theory," he remarked. "He wouldn't be likely to part with the stuff when he'd once got his hands on it. However, I always meant, when we had a moment's spare time, to look into that fellow's whereabouts. We'll take it on straight away. Can't do any harm."

"I know the section boss on the railway," Laura announced.

"Then just take the train down to Mountways—that's the nearest spot—and get busy with him," Quest directed.

"Try and persuade him to loan us the section boss's car to go down the line. Lenora and I will come on in the automobile."

"Take you longer," Lenora remarked as she moved off to put on her jacket. "The cars do it in a quarter of an hour."

"Can't help that," Quest replied. "Mrs. Rheinholdt coming here to identify her jewels at twelve o'clock, and I can't run any risk of there being no train back. You'd better be making good with the section boss. Take plenty of bills with you."

"Sure! That's easy enough," Laura promised him. "I'll be waiting for you."

She hurried off and Quest commenced his own preparations. From his safe he took one of the small black lumps of explosive to which he had once before owed his life, and fitted it carefully in a small case with a coil of wire and an electric lighter. He looked at his revolver and recharged it. Finally he rang the bell for his confidential valet.

"Ross," he asked, "who else is there here today besides you?"

"No one today, sir."

"Just as well, perhaps," Quest observed. "Listen, Ross, I am going out now for an hour or two, but I shall be back at midday. Remember that. Mrs. Rheinholdt and Inspector French are to be here at twelve o'clock. If by any chance I should be a few minutes late, ask them to wait. And, Ross, a young woman from the Salvation

Army will call too. You can give her this check."

Ross Brown, who was Quest's secretary and general factotum, accepted the slip of paper and placed it in an envelope.

"There are no other instructions, sir?" he inquired.

"None," Quest replied. "You'll look out for the wireless, and you had better switch the through cable and telegraph communication on to headquarters. Come on, Lenora."

They left the house, entered the waiting automobile, and drove rapidly towards the confines of the city.

By Quest's directions the automobile was brought to a standstill at a point where it skirted the main railway line, and close to the section house which he had appointed for his rendezvous with Laura. She had apparently seen their approach, and she came out to meet them at once, accompanied by a short, thick-set man whom she introduced as Mr. Horan.

"This is Mr. Horan, the section boss," she explained.

"Mr. Horan shook hands."

"Say, I've heard of you, Mr. Quest," he announced. "The young lady tells me you are some interested in that prisoner they lost off the cars near here."

"That's so," Quest admitted. "We'd

like to go to the spot if we could."

"That's dead easy," the boss replied. "I'll take you along on the handcar."

The section boss turned round and whistled. From a little side track two men jumped on to a handcar, and brought it around to where they were standing. A few yards away the man who was propelling it—a great, red-headed Irishman—suddenly ceased his efforts. Leaning over his pole, he gazed at Quest. A sudden ferocity darkened his coarse face. He gripped his mate by the arm.

"See that bloke there?" he asked, pointing at Quest.

"The guy with the linen collar?" the other answered. "I see him."

"That's Quest, the detective," the Irishman went on hoarsely. "That's the man who got me five years in the pen, the beast! That's the man I've been looking for. You're my mate, Jim, eh?"

"I guess so," the other grunted.

"Are you going to try and do him in?"

"Now then, you fellows," Horan shouted. "What are you hanging about there for, Red Gallagher? Bring the carriage up. You fellows can have a smoke for an hour. I'm going to take her down the line for a bit."

The two men obeyed and disappeared in the direction of the section house. Quest looked after them curiously.

"That's a big fellow," he remarked. "What did you think of him?"

"I seem to have seen him before," Quest answered.

"He was the most troublesome fellow on the line once, although he was the biggest worker," the boss replied. "He got five years in the penitentiary and that seems to have taken the spirit out of him."

"I believe I was in the case," Quest observed carelessly.

"That's so! Now then, young ladies," Mr. Horan advised, "hold tight, and here goes!"

They ambled down the line for about half a mile. Then Horan brought them to a standstill.

"This is the spot," he declared. "Now, if you want my impressions you are welcome to them. All the search has been made on the right-hand side here and in New York. I've had my eye on that hill for a long time. My impression is that he hid there."

"Take your advice," Quest decided. "We'll spread out and take a little exercise in hill climbing."

"Good luck to you!" the boss exclaimed.

They searched carefully and deliberately for more than half an hour. Then Laura suddenly called out. They looked around to find only her head visible. She scrambled up, muddy and with wet leaves clinging to her skirt.

"Say, that guy of a section boss told me to look out for caves. I've been in one, sure enough! Only just saved myself!"

They hurried to where she was. Quest peered into the declivity down which she had slipped. Suddenly he gave vent to a little exclamation. At the same time Laura called out. An inch or two of weed was clearly visible through the strewn leaves. Quest, flat on his stomach, crawled a little way down, took out his electric torch from his pocket and brushed the stuff away. Then he clambered to his feet.

"Our search is over," he declared gravely, "and your troubles, Lenora. That is Macdougall's body."

Lenora's face sank into her hands for a moment. Quest stood on one side while Laura passed her arm around the other girl's waist.

Quest glanced at his watch.

"I'll have to get," he said, "but I'll send someone along. Cheer up, Lenora," he added kindly. "Look after her, Laura."

Quest hastened along the road to

you a nana."

He stooped down to unfasten the straps which fastened the spare wheel. It was one of his rare lapses, realized a moment too late. Almost in his ears came the hoarse cry:

"Hands up, gunner! Hands up this second or I'll blow you to hell!"

Quest glanced over his shoulder and looked into the face of Red Gallagher, raised a little above the level of the road. A very ugly little revolver was pointed directly at Quest's heart.

"My mate's got you covered on the other side of the road, too. Hands up, both of you, or we'll make a quick job of it."

Quest shrugged his shoulders, threw his revolver into the road and obeyed. As he did so, the other man stole out from behind a bush and sprang for the chauffeur, who under cover of the car was stealing off. There was a brief struggle, then the dull thud of the railway man's rifle falling on the chauffeur's head. He rolled over and lay in the road.

"Pitch him off amongst the bushes," Red Gallagher ordered. "You don't want anyone who comes by to see. Now lend me a hand with this chap."

"What do you propose to do with me?" Quest asked.

"You'll know soon enough," Red Gallagher answered. "A matter of five minutes' talk to start with. You see that handcar house?"

"Perfectly well," Quest assented.

"My sight is quite normal," Quest said. "Get there then. I'm a yard behind you and my revolver's pointing for the middle of your back."

Quest sprang lightly down from the road, crossed the few intervening yards and stepped into the handcar house.

Gallagher and his mate followed close behind. Quest paused on the threshold.

"It's a filthy dirty hole," he remarked. "Can't we have our little chat out here? Is it money you want?"

Gallagher glanced around. Then with an ugly push of the shoulder he sent Quest reeling into the shed. His great form blocked up the doorway.

"No," he cried fiercely. "It's not money I want this time. Quest, you brute, you dirty bloodhound! You sent me to the pen for five years—you

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lagger's mate from penma shouted out a warning just a second too late. With a sudden kick, Quest sent the revolver flying across the room and before the Irishman could recover he struck him full in the face. Notwithstanding his huge size and strength, Gallagher reeled. The operator who had just begun to realize what was happening flung himself bodily against the two thugs. A shot from the tangled mass of struggling limbs whistled past Quest's head as he sprang to the window which overlooked the track. The freight had already almost passed. Quest steadied himself for a supreme effort, crawled out on the little steel bridge and poised himself for a moment. The last car was just beneath. The gap between it and the previous one was slipping by. He set his teeth and jumped on the smooth top.

Back behind the tower Red Gallagher and his mate bent with horrified faces over the body of the signalman.

"What the hell did you want to plug him for?" the latter muttered. "He ain't in the show at all. You've done us, Red, he's cooked!"

Red Gallagher staggered to his feet. Already the horror of the murderer was in his face as he glanced furtively around.

"I never meant to drop him," he muttered. "I got mad at seeing Quest get off. That man's a devil!"

"What are we going to do?" the other demanded hoarsely.

"There's the old man," Gallagher shouted. "Come on, old man! I can fix the wheel. If we've got to swing for this job, we'll have something of our own back first."

They crawled to the side of the road. Gallagher's rough, hairy fingers were still trembling, but they knew their job. In a few minutes the wheel was fixed. Clumsily but successfully, the great Irishman turned the car around away from the city.

"She's a hummer," he muttered. "I'll make her go when we get the hang of it. Sit tight!"

They drove clumsily off, gathering speed at every yard. Behind, in the shadow of the tower, the signalman lay dead. Quest, half way to New York, stretched flat on his stomach, was struggling for life with knees and hands and feet.

CHAPTER XI.

Mrs. Rheinholdt welcomed the inspector with a beaming smile as he stepped out of his office and approached her automobile.

"How nice of you to be so punctual, Mr. French," she exclaimed, making room for him by her side. "Will you tell the man to drive to Mr. Quest's house in Georgia square?"

The inspector obeyed and took his place in the luxurious limousine.

"How beautifully punctual we are!" she continued, glancing at the clock.

"Inspector, I am so excited at the idea of getting my jewels back. Isn't Mr. Quest a wonderful man?"

"He's a clever chap, all right," the inspector admitted. "All the same, I'm rather sorry he wasn't able to lay hands on the thief."

"That's your point of view, of course," Mrs. Rheinholdt remarked. "I can think of nothing but having my diamonds back. I feel I ought to go and thank the professor for recommending Mr. Quest."

The inspector made no reply. Mrs. Rheinholdt was suddenly aware that she was becoming a little tactless.

"Of course," she sighed, "it is disappointing not to be able to lay your hands upon the thief. That is where I suppose you must find the interference of an amateur like Mr. Quest. A little troublesome sometimes. He gets back the property, which is what the private individual wants, but he doesn't secure the thief, which is, of course, the real end of the case from your point of view."

"It's a queer affair about these jewels," the inspector remarked. "Quest hasn't told me the whole story yet. Here we are on the stroke of time!"

The car drew up outside Quest's house. The inspector assisted his companion to alight and rang the bell at the front door. There was a pause. Then a servant came. He rang again.

"Never knew this to happen before," he remarked. "That sort of secretary-valet of Mr. Quest—Ross Brown—I think he calls him—is always on the spot." They waited for some time. There was still no answer to their summons. The inspector placed his ear to the keyhole. There was not a sound to be heard. He drew back, a little puzzled. At that moment his attention was caught by the fluttering of a little piece of white material caught in the door. He pulled it out. It was a fragment of white embroidery, and on it were several small stains. The inspector looked at them and looked at his fingers. His face grew suddenly grave.

"Seems to me," he muttered, "that there has been some trouble here. I shall have to take a liberty. If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Rheinholdt, I think it would be better if you waited in the car until I send out for you."

"You don't think the jewels have

been stolen again?" she gasped.

The inspector made no reply. He had drawn from his