

The BLACK BOX

by E. Phillips Oppenheim

FIRST INSTALLMENT

"SANFORD QUEST, CRIMINOLOGIST."

The young man from the West had arrived in New York only that afternoon, and his cousin, town born and bred, had already embarked upon the task of showing him the great city. They occupied a table in a somewhat insignificant corner of one of New York's most famous roof garden restaurants. The place was crowded with diners. There were many no-bodies to be pointed out. The town young man was very busy.

"Tell me," the country cousin inquired, "who is the man at a table by himself? The waiters speak to him as though he were a little god. Is he a millionaire, a judge, or what?"

"You're in luck, Alfred," the New Yorker declared. "That's the most interesting man in New York—one of the most interesting in the world. That's Sanford Quest."

"Who's he?"

"Sanford Quest is the greatest master in criminology the world has ever known. He is a magician, a scientist, the Pierpont Morgan of his profession."

"Say, do you mean that he is a detective?"

"Yes," he said simply, "you can call him that—just in the same way that you could call Napoleon a soldier or Lincoln a statesman. He is a detective, if you like to call him that, the master detective in the world."

When Sanford Quest entered his house an hour later he glanced into two of the rooms on the ground floor in which telegraph and telephone operators sat at their instruments.

Then, by means of a small lift, he ascended to the top story and entered a large apartment wrapped in gloom until, as he crossed the threshold, he touched the switches of the electric lights. One realized then that this was a man of taste. Quest drew up an easy chair to the wide-fung window, touching a bell as he crossed the room. In a few moments the door was opened and closed noiselessly.

A young woman entered with a bundle of papers.

The criminologist glanced through the papers quickly. "No further inquiries, Laura."

She left the room almost noiselessly.

"THE TENEMENT HOUSE MYSTERY."

CHAPTER I.

"This habit of becoming late for breakfast," Lady Ashleigh remarked, as she sat down the coffee pot, "is growing upon your father. Any news, dear?"

Ella glanced up from a pile of correspondence through which she had been looking a little negligently.

"None at all, mother. My correspondence is just the usual sort of rubbish—invitations and gossip. Such a lot of invitations, by the way."

"At your age," Lady Ashleigh declared, "that is the sort of correspondence which you should find interesting."

"You know I am not like that, mother," she protested. "My music is really the only part of life which absolutely appeals to me. Oh, why doesn't Darcy make up his mind and let father know, as he promised? . . . Here comes daddy."

Lord Ashleigh loitered for a moment to raise the covers from the dishes upon a side table. Afterwards he seated himself at the table.

"I heard this morning," he said, "from your friend Delaney, Ella. He went into the matter very fully. The substance of it is that for the first year of your musical training he advises New York."

"I have not finished yet. This cablegram," he went on, drawing a little slip of blue paper from his pocket, "was brought to me this morning."

He smoothed it out before him and read:

To Lord Ashleigh, Hamble House, Dorset, England: I find a magnificent program arranged for at Metropolitan Opera house this year. Have taken box for your daughter, engaged the best professor in the world, and secured an apartment at the Leland, our most select and comfortable residential hotel. Understand your brother is still in South America, returning early spring, but will do our best to make your daughter's year of study as pleasant as possible. Advise her sail on Saturday by Muretania.

"On Saturday?" Ella almost screamed.

"I shall now," Lord Ashleigh said, "leave you to talk over and discuss this matter for the rest of the day. At dinner time tonight you can tell me your decision, or rather we will discuss it together."

CHAPTER II.

"I am to take it, I believe," Lord Ashleigh began after dinner that evening. "That you have finally decided, Ella, to embrace our friend Delaney's suggestion and to leave us Saturday?"

"If you please," Ella murmured, with glowing eyes.

"You will take your own maid with you, of course," Lord Ashleigh continued. "Lenora is a good girl and I am sure she will look after you quite well, but I have decided to supplement Lenora's surveillance over your comfort by sending you, also, a sort of courier and general attendant—whom do you think? Well, Macdougall. He has lived in New York for some years, and you will doubtless find this a great advantage, Ella."

Ella glanced over her shoulder at the two servants who were standing discreetly in the background. Her

eyes rested upon the pale, expressionless face of the man who during the last few years had enjoyed her father's confidence.

For a moment a queer sense of apprehension troubled her. Was it true, she wondered, that she did not like the man? She banished the thought almost as soon as it was conceived.

"You are spoiling me, daddy," Ella sighed.

"If you think so now," he remarked, "I do not know what you will say to me presently."

He laid upon the table a very familiar morocco case, stamped with a coronet.

"Our diamonds!" Ella exclaimed. "The Ashleigh diamonds?"

The necklace lay exposed to view, the wonderful stones flashing in the subdued light.

"In New York," Lord Ashleigh continued, "it is the custom to wear jewelry in public more, even, than in this country. Allow me!"

He leaned forward. With long, capable fingers he fastened the necklace around his daughter's neck.

"It is our farewell present to you," Lord Ashleigh declared.

Ella, impelled by some curious impulse which she could not quite understand, glanced quickly around to where the manservant was standing. For once she saw something besides

the perfect automaton. His eyes, instead of being fixed at the back of his master's chair, were simply riveted upon the stones. A queer little feeling of uneasiness distressed Ella for the moment.

It passed, however, as his glance away her attention was once more attracted by the sparkle of the jewels upon her bosom.

"Our Diamonds!" She exclaimed. "The Ashleigh Diamonds?"

The streets of New York were covered with a thin, powdery snow as the very luxurious car of Mrs. Delaney drew up outside the front of the Leland hotel, a little after midnight. Ella leaned over and kissed her hostess.

"Thank you, dear, ever so much, for your delightful dinner," she exclaimed, "and for bringing me home. As for the music, well, I can't talk about it. I am just going upstairs into my room to sit and think."

The car rolled off. Ella, a large umbrella held over her head by the doorman, stepped up the little strip of driveway which led from the hotel to the Leland. Behind her came her maid, Lenora, and Macdougall, who had been riding on the box with the chauffeur. He paused for a moment to wipe the snow from his coat as Ella crossed the hall to the left. Lenora turned toward him. He whispered something in her ear. For a moment she shook. Then she turned away and followed her mistress upstairs.

Arrived in her apartment, Ella threw herself with a little sigh of content into a big easy-chair before the fire and gave herself up for a few moments to reverie.

A log stirred upon the fire. She leaned forward lazily to replace it and then stopped short. Exactly opposite to her was a door which opened on to a back hall. It was used only by the servants. Just as she was in the act of leaning forward Ella became conscious of a curious hallucination.

"Lenora, come here at once," the maid hurried in from the next room. Ella pointed to the door.

"Lenora, look outside. See if anyone is on that landing. I fancied that the door opened."

Lenora crossed the room and tried the handle. Then she turned towards her mistress in triumph.

"It is locked, my lady," she reported.

"Go down and ask Macdougall to come up. I am going to have this thing explained."

Something of her mistress' agitation seemed to have become communicated to Lenora.

She walked quickly to the back part of the hotel and ascended to the wing in which the servants' quarters were situated. Here she made her way along a corridor until she reached Macdougall's room. She knocked, and knocked again. There was no answer.

She tried the door and found it was locked. Then she returned to the lift and descended once more to the floor upon which her mistress' apartments were situated. She opened the door of the suite without knocking. She turned at once to the sitting room. "I am sorry, my lady."

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men and a boy. The boy, who had had a little trouble with his starting apparatus and had not as yet descended, heard the scream which broke from her lips, and a fireman in an adjacent corridor came running up almost at the same moment. Lenora was on her knees by her mistress' side. Ella was still lying in the easy-chair in which she had been seated, but her head was thrown back in an unnatural fashion. There was a red mark just across her throat.

Lenora shrieked. "She's fainted!" And the diamonds—the diamonds have gone!

A doctor, hurriedly summoned, had just completed a hasty examination when a police inspector, followed by a detective, entered the room.

"This is your affair, gentlemen, not mine," the doctor said gravely. "The young lady is dead. She has been cruelly strangled within the last five or ten minutes."

The inspector made a careful examination of the room.

"Tell me," he inquired, "is this the young lady who owned the wonderful Ashleigh diamonds?"

"They've gone!" Lenora shrieked. "They've been stolen! She was wearing them when I left the room!"

The inspector turned to the telephone.

"Mr. Marshall," he said, "I am afraid this will be a difficult affair. I am going to take the liberty of calling in an expert at once, you know? I want number one, New York city—Mr. Sanford Quest."

CHAPTER IV.

There seemed to be nothing at all original in the method pursued by the great criminologist when confronted with this tableau of death and robbery. His remarks to the inspector were few and perfunctory. He asked only a few languid questions of Macdougall and Lenora, who were summoned to his presence now.

Macdougall then turned to leave the room. Lenora was about to follow, but Quest signed to her to remain.

"I should like to have a little conversation with you about your mistress," he said to her pleasantly. "If you don't mind, I will ask you to accompany me in my car. I will send the man back with you."

They descended in the lift together and Quest handed the girl into his car. They drove quickly through the silent streets.

In a few minutes Lenora was installed in an easy chair in Quest's sitting-room.

"Lean back and make yourself comfortable," Quest invited, as he took a chair opposite to her. "I must just look through the papers."

The girl did as she was told. She opened her coat. The room was delightfully warm, almost overheated. A sense of rest crept over her. She was conscious that Quest had laid down the letters which he had been pretending to read. His eyes were fixed upon her. There was a queer new feeling creeping through her veins.

Quest's voice broke an unnatural silence.

"You are anxious to telephone someone," he said. "You looked at both the booths as we came through the hotel. Then you remembered, I think, that he would not be there yet. Telephone now. The telephone is at your right hand. You are going to him."

She obeyed almost at once.

"Number 700, New York city."

"You will ask," Quest continued, "whether he is all right whether the jewels are safe."

There was a brief silence then the girl's voice.

"Are you there, James? . . . Yes, I am Lenora. Are you safe? Have you the jewels? . . . Where? . . . You are sure that you are safe? . . . No, nothing fresh has happened."

"You are at the hotel," Quest said softly. "You are going to him."

"I cannot sleep," she continued. "I am coming to you."

She set down the receiver. Quest leaned a little more closely over her. "You know where the jewels are hidden," he said. "Tell me where."

Her lips quivered. She made no answer.

"Very good," Quest concluded. "You need not tell me. Only remember this: At nine o'clock tomorrow morning you will bring those jewels to this apartment. Rest quietly now. I want you to go to sleep."

She obeyed without hesitation. Quest watched, for a moment, her regular breathing. Then he touched a bell by his side. Laura entered almost at once.

Together they carried the sleeping girl out of the room into a larger apartment. A single electric light was burning on the top of a square mirror fixed upon an easel. Towards the right they carried the girl and laid her in an easy chair almost opposite to it.

"The battery is just on the left," Laura whispered.

Quest nodded.

"Give me the band."

She turned away for a moment and disappeared in the shadows. When she returned, she carried a curved band of flexible steel. Quest took it from her, attached it by means of a coil of wire to the battery, and with firm, soft fingers slipped it on to Lenora's forehead. Then he stepped back.

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alone out. He crept nearer to the girl—his eyes fixed upon the diamonds, a thin, silken cord twisted round his wrist. Suddenly she saw him—too late! His hand was upon her lips, his face seemed to start almost from the mirror—then blackness!

Lenora opened her eyes. She was still in the easy-chair before the fire.

"Mr. Quest!" she faltered.

He looked up from some letters which he had been studying.

"I am so sorry," he said politely. "I really have forgotten that you were here. But you know—that you have been to sleep?"

"Can I go now?" she asked.

"Certainly," Quest replied. "To tell you the truth, I find that I shall not need to ask you those questions, after all. A messenger from the police station has been here. He says they have come to the conclusion that your very well-known gang of New York criminals are in this thing. We know how to track them down all right."

"I may go now, then?" she repeated.

Quest escorted the girl downstairs, opened the front door, blew his whistle and his car pulled up at the door.

"Take this young lady," he ordered, "wherever she wishes. Good-night!"

The car disappeared around the corner. Then he turned slowly and made preparations for his adventure.

"Number 700, New York," he muttered, half an hour later, as he left his house. "Beyond Fourteenth street—a tough neighborhood."

He hesitated for a moment, feeling the articles in his overcoat pocket—a revolver in one, a small piece of hard substance in the other. Then he stepped into his car, which had just returned.

"Where did you leave the young lady?" he asked the chauffeur.

"In Broadway, sir. She left me and boarded a cross-town car."

Quest nodded approvingly.

"No finesse," he sighed.

CHAPTER V.

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"My fault!" he exclaimed. "We are slow. Good-morning, Miss Lenora!" She came straight to the table. She

had a little packet upon the table. Quest opened it coolly. The Ashleigh diamonds flashed up at him. He led Lenora to a chair and rang a bell.

"Prepare a bedroom upstairs," he ordered. "Ask Miss Roche to come here. . . . Laura," he added, as his secretary entered, "will you look after this young lady?"

A few minutes later Inspector French was announced. Quest nodded in a friendly manner.

"Some coffee, Inspector?"

"I'd rather have those diamonds!" Quest threw them lightly across the table.

The inspector whistled.

"And now, French, will you be here, please, at midnight, with three men, armed."

"Here!" the inspector repeated. Quest nodded.

"Our friend," he said, "is going to be mad enough to walk into hell, even when he finds out what he thinks has happened."

"It wasn't any of Jimmy's lot?"

Sanford Quest shook his head.

"French," he said, "keep mum, but it was the elderly family retainer, Macdougall. I felt restless about him. He has lost the girl—he was married to her, by the by—and the jewels. No fear of his slipping away. I shall

have him here at the time I told you."

"You've a way of your own of doing these things, Mr. Quest," the inspector admitted grudgingly.

"Mostly lucky," Quest replied. "Take a cigar, and so long, Inspector. They want me to talk to Chicago on another little piece of business."

It was a few minutes before midnight when Quest parted the curtains of a room on the ground floor of his house in Georgia square and looked out into the snow-white street. Then he turned around and addressed the figure lying as though asleep upon the sofa by the fire.

"Lenora," he said, "I am going out. Stay here, if you please, until I return."

He left the room. For a few moments there was a profound silence. Then a white face was pressed against the window. There was a crash of glass. A man covered with snow sprang into the apartment. He moved swiftly to the sofa, and something black and ugly lay in his hand.

"So you've deceived me, have you?" he panted. "Handed over the jewels, didn't you, and given me the double cross! Anything to say?"

Macdougall leaned forward, his white face distorted with passion. The life-preserver belt and quivered behind him, cut the air with a swish and crashed full upon the head.

The man staggered back. The weapon fell from his fingers. For a moment he was paralyzed. There was no blood upon his hand, no cry—silence inhuman, unnatural! He looked again. Then the lights flashed out all around him. There were two detectives in the doorway, their revolvers covering him—Sanford Quest, with Lenora in the background. In the sudden illumination Macdougall's horror turned almost to hysterical rage. He had wasted his fury upon a dummy!

"Take him, men," Quest ordered. "Hands up, Macdougall. Your number's up."

The handcuffs were upon him before he could move.

"What about the young woman?" the inspector asked.

Lenora stood in an attitude of despair, her head downcast. She had turned a little away from Macdougall. Her hands were outstretched. It was as though she were expecting the handcuffs.

"You can let her alone," Sanford Quest said quietly. "A wife cannot give evidence against her husband, and besides, I need her. She is going to work for me."

Macdougall was already at the door between the two detectives. He swung around. His voice was calm, almost clear-calm with concentration of hatred.

"You are a wonderful man, Mr. Sanford Quest," he said. "Make the most of your triumph. Your time is nearly up, there is one coming whose wit and cunning, science and skill are all-conquering. He will brush you away, Sanford Quest, like a fly. Wait a few weeks."

"You interest me," Quest murmured. "Tell me some more about this great master."

"I shall tell you nothing," Macdougall replied. "You will!"

The door was suddenly opened. Lenora walked in. Quest glanced in surprise at the clock.

"I am sorry, my lady," she repeated.

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and who know nothing I suddenly you will find yourself a dead. You will struggle—and then . . . end. It is certain."

They led him away. Only Lenora remained, sobbing. Quest went up to her.

"You've had a rough time, Lenora," he said, with strange gentleness. "Perhaps the brighter days are coming."

CHAPTER VI.

Sanford Quest and Lenora stood side by side upon the steps of the courthouse, waiting for the automobile, which had become momentarily entangled in a string of vehicles. A little crowd of people were elbowing their way out on to the sidewalk. The faces of most of them were still shadowed by the three hours of tense drama from which they had just emerged. Quest, who had lit a cigar, watched them curiously.

"No need to go into court," he remarked. "I could have told you, from the look of these people, that Macdougall had escaped the death sentence. They have paid their money—or rather their time, and they have been cheated of the one supreme thrill."

"Imprisonment for life seems terrible enough," Lenora whispered, shuddering towards him.

"Can't see the sense of keeping such a man alive myself," Quest declared, with purposeful brutality. "It was a cruel murder, fiendishly committed."

They were on the point of crossing the pavement toward the automobile when Quest felt a touch upon his shoulder. He turned and found Lord Ashleigh standing by his side. Quest