

The Black Box

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SHOW IN THE LEADING THEATRES OF GREATER NEW YORK

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS. Stanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in Belgium, in Justice Macdonald, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has just seen a life and death struggle with a man whose name is Quest. In a hidden box in Prof. Ash's study he finds a diary of a man named Quest, a living creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed in the black box containing notes, signed by a pair of anonymous hands. The black box contains a diary of a man named Quest, who is captured by Macdonald, and who is taken to the Black Box. The black box contains a diary of a man named Quest, who is captured by Macdonald, and who is taken to the Black Box.

CHAPTER XXXV. (Continued.)

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 adequate. Quest's face darkened. He crumpled the paper in his fingers. There must be some meaning in this," he muttered. "It can't be altogether a fool's game we're on."

He moved toward a table which usually stood against the wall, but which had obviously been 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, 1901. 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 heads 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 been 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 magnifying glass?"

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 hydrophobic, 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 mild-mannered, humane man seems possessed at times of all the characteristics of the brutal anthropoid—ruthless, thievish, brutal. 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 Dr. 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. Then Quest drew a penknife from his pocket and with a turn of his wrist turned the lock of the diary. They all watched him with fascinated eyes. It was something to escape from their thoughts. They leaned over as he spread the book out before him. Those first two sentences were almost in the light 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 is 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 your shadow should rest upon me. Now Stanford Quest has come. Will this mean discovery?"

"Another page," Lenora faltered. "No more," Quest said. "Don't you see where it is leading us? We have the truth here. Wait!"

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's hands were shaking. 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; sometimes if he closes his eyes, only the hands."

"Rheinholdt!" Quest muttered. "Wait. I know where that suit is."

He hastened to a cupboard at the farther end of the room, snatched some garments from it and vanished into the hall.

"Now moment, girls," he said. "I see now how he did it. Wait. I'll show you."

They stood quite still, a little terrified.

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