

The BLACK BOX

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Novelized from the motion picture drama of the same name produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated with photographs from the motion picture production.

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SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, traces the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, who has just begun a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden hut in Professor Ashleigh's garden he has seen an anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms have appeared from nowhere black boxes containing sarcenic notes, signed by a pair of armless hands. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Quest, the professor's servant, of a double murder. The black boxes continue to appear in uncanny fashion. Craig is trapped by Quest, but escapes to England, where Quest, Lenora and the professor follow him. Lord Ashleigh is murdered by the Hands. Lenora is abducted in London and rescued. Craig is captured and escapes to Port Said, where Quest and his party also go, and beyond into the desert.

ELEVENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE DESERT.

Quest was the first the next morning to open his eyes, to grope his way through the tent opening and stand for a moment at the watching the alabaster skies. He turned lastly around, meaning to summon the Arab who had volunteered to take Hassan's place. His arms—he had been in the act of stretching—fell to his sides. He stared at the spot where the camels had been tethered, incredulously. There were no camels, no drivers, no Arabs. There was not a soul nor an object in sight except the stark body of Hassan, which he had dragged half out of sight behind a slight knoll. High up in the sky above were two little black specks, wisping lower and lower. Quest shivered as he suddenly realized that for the first time in his life he was looking upon the winged ghoul of the desert. Lower and lower they came. He turned away with a shiver.

The professor was still sleeping when Quest entered the tent. He woke him up and beckoned him to come outside. Quest pointed to the little sandy knoll with the sparse covering of grass, deserted with scarcely a sign, even, that it had been the resting place of the little caravan. The professor gave vent to a little exclamation. "The professor hurried off towards the spot where the encampment had been made. Suddenly he stood still and pointed with his finger. In the clearer, most crystalline light of the coming day they saw the track of the camels in one long, unbroken line stretching away northwards. He glanced around a little helplessly. Quest took a cigar from his case and lit it.

"No need worrying," Quest sighed. "The question is how best to get out of the mess. What's the next move, anyway?" The professor glanced towards the son and took a small compass from his pocket. He pointed across the desert. "The exactly our route," he said, "but I reckon we still must be two days on the Mongars, and how we are going to get there ourselves, much more the women there, without camels, I don't know. There are no wells, and I don't believe those fellows will let us a single tin of water."

Laura put her head out of the tent in which the two women had slept. "So where's breakfast?" she exclaimed. "I can't smell the coffee." The professor turned and approached her silently. The two girls, fully dressed, came out of the tent as they approached. "Young ladies," the professor announced, "I regret to say that a misfortune has befallen us, a misfortune which we shall be able, without doubt, to surmount, but which will mean a day of hardship and much inconvenience."

"Here are the camels!" Lenora said breathlessly. "No!" Quest replied. "No, the Arabs?" "One with them—we are left high and dry," Quest explained. "And what is worse," the professor said, with a groan, "they have taken with them all our stores, our rifles and our water."

"How far are we from the Mongar camp?" Lenora asked. "About a day's tramp," Quest replied quickly. "We may reach there by nightfall." "Then let's start walking at once, before it gets any hotter," Lenora suggested. Quest patted her on the back. They made a close search of the tents, but found that the Arabs had taken everything in the way of food and drink, except a single half-filled tin of drinking water. They started bravely enough, but by midday their little stock of water was gone, their feet were sorely blistered. No one complained, however, and the professor did his best to revive their spirits.



"If You Value Your Lives, You Will Do as You Are Bidden."

on their horses, and, turning northwards, galloped away. The professor looked on anxiously. "I am not at all sure," he said in an undertone to Quest, "about our position with the Mongars. Craig has a peculiar hold upon them, but as a rule they hate white men, and their blood will be up. . . . See! The light is all over. Those fellows were no match for the Mongars. Most of them have fled and left the caravan." The fight was indeed over. Four of the Mongars had galloped away in pursuit of the Arabs who had been the temporary escort of Quest and his companions. They passed about a hundred yards away, waving their arms and shouting furiously. One of them even fired a shot, which missed Quest by only a few inches. "They say they are coming back," the professor muttered. "Who this? It's the camels and—"

cloak: the chief by his side—a fine, upright man with long, gray beard; behind, three Mongars, their rifles already to their shoulders. The chief wheeled up his horse as he came within twenty paces of the little party. "White! English!" he shouted. "Why do you seek death here?" He waited for no reply, but turned to his men. Three of them dashed forward, their rifles, which were fitted with an odd sort of bayonet, drawn back for the lunge. Suddenly Craig, who had been a little in the rear, galloped, shouting, into the line of fire. "Stop!" he ordered. "Chief, these people are my friends. Chief, the word!"

The chief raised his arm promptly. The men lowered their rifles. Craig galloped back to his host's side. The chief listened to him and nodded gravely. Presently he rode up to the little party. He saluted the professor gravely and talked to him in his own language. The professor turned to the others. "The chief apologizes for not recognizing me," he announced. "It seems that Craig had told him that he had come to the desert for shelter, and he imagined at once, when he gave the order for the attack upon us, that we were his enemies. He says that we are welcome to go with him to his encampment."

Craig turned slowly towards them. It was a strange meeting. "It is necessary," he told them, "that you should pretend to be my friends. The chief has ordered two of his men to dismount. Their ponies are for the young ladies. There will be horses for you among the captured ones from the caravan yonder." They all turned towards the chief, who remained a little on the outside of the circle. The professor raised his hat and spoke a few words in the Mongar language, then he turned to the others. "I have accepted the invitation of the chief," he announced. "We had better start."

"This may not be Delmonico's," Laura remarked, a few hours later, with a little sigh of contentment, "but believe me that goat-stew and sherbet tasted better than any chicken and champagne I ever tasted." They moved to the opening of the tent and sat looking out across the silent desert. Laura took the flap of the canvas in her hand. "What do all these marks mean?" she asked. "They are calligraphic signs," the professor replied, "part of the language of the tribe. They indicate that this is the guest tent, and there are a few little maxims traced upon it, extolling the virtues of hospitality."

Lenora leaned forward to where a little group of Mongars were talking together. "I wish that beautiful girl would come and let us see her again," she murmured. "She," the professor explained, "is the chief's daughter, Feerda, whose life Craig saved."

"And from the way she looks at him," Laura observed, "I should say she hadn't forgotten it, either." The professor held up a warning finger. The girl herself had glided to their side out of the shadows. She faced the professor. The rest of the party she seemed to ignore. She spoke slowly and in halting English. "My father wishes to know that you are satisfied?" she said. "You have no further wants?"

"None," the professor assured her. "We are very grateful for his hospitality, Feerda." "Won't you talk to us for a little time?" Lenora begged, leaning forward. The girl turned suddenly to the professor and spoke to him in her own language. She pointed to the signs upon the tent, drew her finger along one of the sentences, flashed a fierce glance at them all and disappeared.

"Seems to me that we are not exactly popular with the young lady," Quest remarked. "What was she saying, professor?" "She suspects us," the professor said slowly, "of wishing to bring evil to Craig. She pointed to a sentence upon the tent. Roughly it means 'Gratitude is the debt of hospitality.' I am very much afraid that the young lady must have been listening to our conversation."

The professor suddenly leaned forward. There was a queer change in his face. From somewhere on the other side of that soft bank of violet darkness came what seemed to be the clear, low cry of some animal. "It's the Mongar cry of warning," he said hoarsely. "Something is going to happen." The whole encampment was suddenly in a state of activity. The Mongars ran hither and thither, getting together their horses. The chief, with Craig by his side, was standing on the outskirts of the camp. "Seems to me there's a move on," Quest muttered, as they rose to their feet. "I wonder if we are in it." A moment or two later Craig approached them. "Word has been brought to the chief," he announced, "that the Arab who escaped from the caravan has fallen to with an outpost of British soldiers. They have already started in pursuit of us. The Mongars will take refuge in the jungle, where they have prepared hiding-places. We start at once."



Captured by the Mongars.

absolutely refused my request. Feerda has overheard some of your conversation, and the chief believes that you will betray us. You will have to come, too." They all rose at once to their feet, and a few moments later horses were brought. The little procession was already being formed in line. Craig approached them once more. "You will mount now and ride in the middle of our caravan," he directed. "The chief does not trust you. If you value your lives, you will do as you are bidden."

"You can call this fairyland, if you want," Laura remarked, gazing around her; "I call it a nasty, damp, oozy spot." Quest motioned them to sit a little nearer. "I had a moment's talk with Craig this morning, and from what he says I fancy they mean to make a move a little farther in before long. It'll be all the more difficult to escape them."

"You think we could get away?" Lenora whispered, eagerly. Quest glanced cautiously around. They were surrounded by thick vegetation, but they were only a very short distance from the camp. "Seems to me," he continued, "we shall have to try it some day or other and I'm all for trying it soon. Even if they caught us, I don't believe they'd dare to kill us, with the English soldiers so close behind. I am going to get hold of two or three rifles and some ammunition. That's easy, because they leave them about all the time. And what you girls want to do is to hide some food and get a bottle of water."

"What about Craig?" the professor asked. "We are going to take him along," Quest declared, grimly. "He's had the devil's own luck so far but it can't last forever. I'll see to that part of the business, if you others get ready and wait for me to give the signal." They dispersed in various directions. It was not until late in the evening, when the Mongars had withdrawn a little to indulge in their customary orgy of crooning songs, that they were absolutely alone. Quest looked out of the tent in which they had been sitting and came back again.

"Well?" "Lenora lifted her skirt and showed an unusual projection underneath. "Lenora and I have pinned up our petticoats," she announced. "We've got plenty of food and a bottle of water." Quest threw open the white Arab cloak which he had been wearing. He had three rifles strapped around him. "The professor's got the ammunition," he said, "and we've five horses tethered a hundred paces along the track we came by, just behind the second tree turning to the left. I want you all to go there now at once and take the rifles. There isn't a soul in the camp and you can carry them wrapped in this cloak. I'll join you in ten minutes."

"What about Craig?" the professor inquired. "I am seeing to him," Quest replied. Lenora hesitated. "Isn't it rather a risk?" she whispered fearfully. Quest's face was suddenly stern. "Craig is going back with us," he said. "I'll be careful, Lenora. Don't worry." He stroiled out of the tent and came back again. "The coast's clear," he announced. "Off you go. . . . One moment," he added, "there are some papers in this little box of mine which one of you might take care of."

He bent hastily over the little wallet, which never left him. Suddenly a little exclamation broke from his lips. "What is it?" Quest never said a word. From one of the spaces of the wallet he drew out a small black box, removed the lid and held out the card. They read it together. "Fools, all of you! The cunning of the ages defeats your puny efforts at every turn.—The Hands." Even the professor's lips blanched a little as he read. Quest, however, seemed suddenly furious. He tore the card and the box to pieces, flung them

"Drop your knife," she ordered Craig. He obeyed without hesitation. "Now, tie the sash around the girl." He obeyed mechanically. Quest took Craig by the collar and led him to the spot where the others were waiting. They insisted him on to a horse. Already he found them they could see the flare of the torches from the returning Mongars. "You know the way to Port Said," Quest whispered. "See that you lead us there. There will be trouble, mind, if you don't."

Craig made no reply. He rode off in front of the little troop, covered all the time by Quest's revolver. Very soon they were out of the jungle and in the open desert. Quest looked behind him uneasily. "To judge by the row those fellows are making," he remarked, "I should think that they've found Feerda already."

"In that case," the professor said gravely, "let me recommend you to push on as fast as possible. We have had one escape from those fellows, but nothing in the world can save us now that you have laid hands upon Feerda. The chief would never forgive that." They galloped steadily on. The moon rose higher and higher until it became as light as day. Quest fell a little behind the professor's side, although he never left off watching Craig. "Look behind you, professor," he whispered.

In the far distance were a number of little black specks, growing every moment larger. Even at that moment they heard the low, long call of the Mongars. "They are gaining on us," Quest muttered. They raced on for another mile or more. A bullet whistled over their heads. Quest tightened his reins. "No good," he sighed. "We'd better stay and fight it out, professor. Stick close to me, Lenora."

They drew up and hastily dismounted. The Mongars closed in around them. A cloud had drifted in front of the moon, and in the darkness it was almost impossible to see their whereabouts. They heard the chief's voice. "Shoot first that dog of a Craig!" There was a shriek. Suddenly Feerda, breaking loose from the others, raced across the little division. She flung herself from her horse. "Tell my father that you were not faithless," she pleaded. "They shall not kill you!" She clung to Craig's neck. The bullets were beginning to whistle around

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"I'll be careful, Lenora." He covered Craig with his revolver, but his arm was scarcely extended before Feerda sprang at him like a little wildcat. He gripped her with his left arm and held her away with difficulty. "Craig," he continued, "you're coming with us. You know the way to Port Said and we want you—you know why. Untie that sash from your waist, quickly!" Craig obeyed. "Tie it to the tree," Quest ordered. "Leave room enough."

Craig did as he was told. Then he turned and held the loose ends up. Quest lowered his revolver for a moment as he pushed Feerda towards it. Craig, with a wonderful spring, reached his side and kicked the revolver away. Before Quest could even stoop to recover it he saw the glitter of the other's knife pressed against his chest. "Listen," Craig declared. "I've made up my mind. I won't go back to America. I've had enough of being hunted all over the world. This time I think I'll rid myself of one of you, at any rate."

"Will you?" The interruption was so unexpected that Craig lost his nerve. Through an opening in the trees, only a few feet away, Lenora had suddenly appeared. She, too, held a revolver, her hand was as steady as a rock. "They took us into the jungle—just escaped. They'd caught us here, though, and I'm afraid we were about to be killed if you hadn't come along. We are not English—we're American."

"Same thing," the officer replied, as he held out his hand. (TO BE CONTINUED.)

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"I'll Be Careful, Lenora."