

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 6

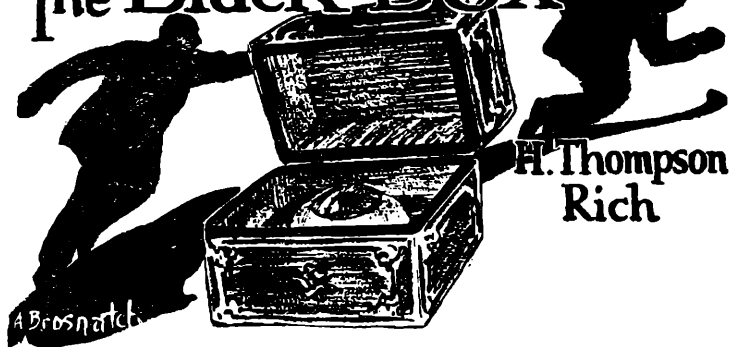
Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 405 Holiday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. T. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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The Black Box



H. Thompson
Rich

WHEN they told me Ainsworth had been committed to an asylum for the insane—Ainsworth, the comrade of years—at first I could hardly believe it. He had always seemed so sensible, so strong of mind.

But when a scribbled note from him finally reached me, I could no longer doubt. Insane he certainly was, and apparently in a condition bordering on the maudlin.

I give you the note as he penned it—though nothing less than the original scrawl could possibly serve to convey anything like a correct impression of his mental state.

My dear Conway:

In the first place I am not insane. I am as rational as you are. Surely, old fellow, you must know me well enough to know better than that my mind could be unbalanced. Why they have put me in this terrible place I can not imagine—unless it is more of Herrington's diabolic revenge.

He has murdered my wife and now he wants to murder me. Yes, murdered her! That is what he has done. Oh God, but it is harrowing!

I have a story, Conway—but only you shall ever hear it. If you care to, come; if not, then silence. I haven't long to live.

In great agitation,

AINSWORTH.

These are the words, but the scrawl and blur of the writing were so great as to make it almost unintelligible. Lines were written over lines and there were almost incessant scratches and erasures. I was three days puzzling out the contents before I was able to read the letter in the form above. Then I went, for I knew that somewhere in his crazed mind there was a powerful reason for his desire to see me.

I found him in a worse condition than I had imagined. In fact, on my arrival at the asylum, it was only with the greatest difficulty that I was admitted to his cell.

"He is mad—positively mad," they told me. "He raves continually. In his frenzy he is likely to do you harm."

"Nonsense," I said. "He asked me to come, and I must see him. He knows me too well to harm me, even in his present agitation."

So they admitted me to his cell at last.

As I entered, taking cognizance of the pitiful surroundings, his eyes met mine with a sad, unsteady look. At first he failed to recognize me,

then deep within those phantom pools some remembrance seemed to flame.

"Conway!" he exclaimed, half inaudibly. "So you have come. I rather thought you would. You see, I am not insane."

"Yes, I see," I managed to say.

"Well," he broke in, "I suppose they have told you a lot of lies. They've got me down for a murderer—but I swear, as there is a God in heaven, my hands are clean. At any rate, it was not my wife. Herrington I might have murdered—and even so, I could take oath he lives. But that is the story. Do you care to hear it?"

"Yes," I answered. "And yet, Ainsworth, if the telling is to cause you pain, I'd rather not."

"Nothing of the sort," he hastened in reply, with some show of his old brusqueness. "If you really are willing, I'll tell you. But I must be brief, for those guards will come presently and take you away. I am seldom allowed the luxury of a visitor any more, and then only for a few minutes."

With that he seated himself and entered into the most amazing account that it has ever been my fortune, good or ill, to hear.

"**Y**ou remember reading in the papers of my engagement, and subsequently of my marriage? The woman, as you recall, was a Southern lady of rare beauty. I met her after my last hunting trip together with you, and you have never seen her except for the pictures in the papers, which quite failed to do her justice. Fred, old fellow, she was handsome—and you know that my eye was never an easy one to please. Need I tell you more?"

"It was while on a visit to my uncle's plantation in Alabama that I met her, at one of the big week-end affairs where all the beauty of the

South seemed gathered together. And yet even in such a coterie of charm she stood out easily from the rest.

"I was attracted to her at once, and, in spite of the dark-complexioned gentleman who seemed to be her most ardent admirer, I lost no time in meeting her and getting acquainted.

"He eyed me with suspicion and ill-concealed jealousy. But I was never a man to fear a fellow man, especially in the matter of a woman. I laughed at him and took her away. We danced and talked, and I managed to be with her the greater part of the evening. Her name, I learned, was Aline—and I called her that.

"When the time came to go home it was I who escorted her, and the last I saw of her dark admirer was an open look of hate he flung at me from the veranda as I helped her into the waiting coach. Then we drove off, leaving him standing there in a burning rage.

"Acquaintance rapidly deepened to friendship, and friendship to love. I asked for her hand and she accepted me. The engagement was announced. We were to be married in the fall.

"Then it was, one night in mid-summer—how well I recall the odor of jasmine that hung in the air!—I was awakened from sleep by the stealthy opening of a window, and rising suddenly from my bed I saw silhouetted against the moonlight a dark figure. Even as I looked I caught a flash of gleaming steel in its left hand.

"'Herrington!' I cried, leaping from my bed. 'What are you doing here?'"

"'Damn you!' he spat out through clenched teeth, and I rather fancied I detected the tremor of intoxication in his voice. 'I have come here to kill you! You shall never have her! She is mine!'"

"With that he sprang upon me, and I had barely time to guard myself before I was in his clutches.

"Being a strong man, I would not have feared him in the daytime, but in the night, with that deadly dagger in his hand, I realized that the chances favored him.

"Even as the thought of death flashed through my mind there came a sudden chill in my back, near the shoulder.

" 'You have stabbed me!' I cried, and my mind went faint.

"But only for a moment, for suddenly I saw that he had drawn the dagger out and held it ready to strike again. Straight over my heart I saw it poise, saw it descend—when summoning all my strength, I grappled him about the waist, flinging him heavily to the floor. Then I leapt upon him, seized the wrist that held the deadly knife and fairly crushed it in the grip of my hand. He uttered a cry of pain, his fingers relaxed, and the weapon fell to the floor.

"Seizing it, I flung it out of the window, where I saw it sway glitteringly through the moonlight, and vanish. Then I hurled myself upon him with all the frenzy of madness.

" 'So you would take my life!' I muttered in a low voice, fearful lest someone in one of the adjoining rooms should hear. 'So you came here seeking to kill me!'

"Of a sudden my mind seemed to leave me. Scarcely knowing what I did, I reached for his throat. With all the strength I could summon, I sank my fingers into his fleshy neck. I felt them press against his windpipe and I heard him gasp. Then, as the frenzy grew, I relaxed my hold on his throat and my tense fingers crept over his face. I came upon his eyes, and with a fury that had never before been aroused in me, I sank my thumb into his left eye-socket and in an instant had gouged

the eye bodily from its fixture and had flung it away, leaving him there, half frantic with pain, in a horrible pool of blood.

"Then I came to. My mind cleared and I realized what a fearful thing it was that I had just perpetrated against a fellow being, and my heart sickened with horror and remorse.

"What was I going to do? Morning would come and they would find him there. Perhaps he would die before morning and I would be judged his murderer.

" 'He must not be found!' I exclaimed in a low voice, thinking of my love for Aline and the marriage that was near at hand. 'For her sake, for the sake of our happiness, which we have a right to, he shall not be found!'

"Suddenly I turned again to him in the darkness. He was half-conscious, and moaning feebly.

" 'Herrington,' I whispered, 'you came here to murder me. You inflamed my mind, and but for the grace of God you would now be dead. Your life is in my hands. You have willed it so. Therefore I offer you one chance. Either leave this room and this house and this state forever, or I will kill you as you lie here and carry you to the marsh. There I will sink your body among the reeds, where it will never be found. And Aline and I will be happy. Choose! Either get up at once and go, or you die!'

"He groaned, and his single remaining eye opened and looked wildly at me there in the moonlight. I shall never forget its stare.

" 'I—I will go,' he gasped, and sank once more into unconsciousness.

" 'What a pitiable beast he is!' I thought. 'How dimly the spark of life smolders within his breast! A little more punishment and—the end.'

" 'But he shall live!' I cried, and I bent over him again.

Taking his scarf, I bandaged it around his bleeding and empty eye-socket, and tied it in a firm knot at the back of his head. Then I got out a bottle of brandy, and putting the neck to his mouth, poured half a glass of its fiery contents forcibly down his throat.

"As the fumes of the strong liquor rose to his nostrils and the burning spirits rushed against his palate, impelling him to swallow, he gave a violent shiver and sat up.

"'There,' I said, helping him to his feet, 'that is what you needed. And now, come with me. Here!' I put the bottle in his pocket. 'Take this along with you. You may have to use it before morning.'

"Stealthily I led him from my room and down the stairs to the hall below.

"We walked together across the veranda and descended the short flight of steps, then out over the road, keeping on until we were a good half-mile from my uncle's house. Then I paused.

"'Now,' I said, 'out of my sight forever! If you ever cross my path again, I'll kill you as I would a dog. Good-bye—and remember!'

"'Good-bye,' he muttered, as he staggered away. 'And oh, I will be revenged for this!'

"That is the last I ever saw of him, and whether he lived to reach some adjacent town and receive the medical attention he so sorely needed, or whether he wandered off into the lonely swamp and was drowned, I know not. From his condition it would seem almost impossible that he could have walked the five or ten miles that would have meant life to him. And yet from what subsequently occurred, I would say that he must indeed have reached help and must still be alive.

"At any rate, by the living God, he has had his revenge! That Aline is dead, that I am here today, is the

work of Herrington. Of that I am convinced—yet of the living man or of the spirit that lives after death, I know not. But the time is brief. Presently the guards will come and you will have to leave. Let me relate the rest and you shall judge for yourself.

"I RETURNED to the house that night and removed from my room every trace of the fearful crime I had perpetrated. Carefully I rubbed the blood stains from the floor. Carefully I rearranged everything so that no sign of the struggle could ever be visible. Carefully I bandaged my wounded shoulder and disposed of my bloody garments. I even went to the garden below my window and found the knife I had flung there, carrying it to the river and hurling it forever out of sight. Then I tiptoed back to the house once more, locking every door just as I had found it, and returned to my own chamber.

"Had it not been for one odd though apparently trivial circumstance, I would have slept more or less peacefully the remainder of the night. But, due to a single curious fact, I lay awake, tossing for hours, unable to quiet my nerves to slumber. The thing seemed incredible, but nevertheless it was so—the eye I had gouged from Herrington's head was not to be found anywhere in the room. Though I searched the chamber minutely, I could discover no trace of it. So, agitated and ill at ease, I at last gave up the search and got into bed, where I lay wakeful all the long hours till dawn.

"When the morning came, however, my nerves seemed to steady themselves somewhat. I got up, and after I had shaved and dressed, I felt almost myself again. In fact, at breakfast I even remarked that I had been troubled with insomnia the night before, thus allaying the sus-

precious of anyone who might possibly have heard the struggles that had issued from my room. But apparently no one had, for the remark did not engender any reply and the conversation rapidly turned to other things.

"That morning the whole party went for a tramp over the plantation, visiting the various negroes' cabins and overseers' quarters. I walked with Aline and, as I gazed upon her, I thought she had never seemed lovelier. An unusually rosy color suffused her cheeks and a spontaneous and girlish vivacity manifested itself in her every action. Her eyes looked up frankly and innocently into mine, and as I looked back at her with half-lowered lids, my soul almost shrank within me. In that moment I realized that with my deed of the night before I had sacrificed forever the joy of frank and happy companionship which would otherwise have been hers and mine, for nevermore would I be able to meet that clear, wondrous gaze, and always there would now be between us an invisible, blood-red barrier—and the memory of a ghastly human eye and a hideous empty socket.

"But somehow the days passed, and gradually I gained back my old composure. By a heroic struggle of mind I was freeing myself of the morbidity that had at first hovered about me like a fog. Herrington had been as the dead and I was beginning to think that the episode was over, except that every now and then some memory of that hideous night would flash phantomlike across my brain, to be wiped out almost immediately by a snatch of melody or a burst of merriment from gracious and charming Aline.

"WITH the first days of fall came our marriage. Never will I forget the festivities of that day. I was happier than I had ever hoped to be in this life. All memory of

Herrington and my crime were now forgotten, and I entered into the spirit of my wedding with a glad and open heart.

"Many and beautiful were the gifts that were showered upon us. Aline was like a diamond in a setting of emeralds and rubies and opals, and every manner of precious stones.

"One gift, however, stood out from all the rest. That was a black box, small and antique, fantastically carved on every side with ancient Chinese or Japanese figures. But the curious thing about this box was not the carving, but the fact that it came to us by post on the day of the wedding, with no hint as to the identity of the sender. Even this, curious as it seemed, was not the most peculiar thing about the box. The thing that struck me as strangest, and that gave me a feeling of foreboding such as I can not describe—an odd, peculiar sensation of fear and suspicion—was that I was unable, after the minutest examination, to find any method of opening the box. In fact it seemed not to be a box at all, but a solid cube of ebony or some other dark, heavy substance.

"But why should anyone wish to send us a mere specimen of some antique Oriental carving? Surely it must be a box, and being a box, must have an opening somewhere. Must in truth contain something. But as I have said, in spite of the fact that I went over it carefully, I found no opening, nor did I discover any hidden spring about it upon whose touch the lid might fly open, as in certain similar boxes I had seen while in various parts of the world.

"And I would to heaven I had never learned it was in reality a box! I would it and its awful secret had forever remained unknown! But such was not to be. Prompted by a desire to learn the nature of this mysterious gift, I took it with me to

the banquet in my uncle's house the night of our wedding, and in the course of the merriment that followed, laying it on the table, I arose and lifting my glass, offered a toast: 'Here's to the Black Box. Fortune attend whoever shall open it!'

"They all raised their glasses and the toast was drunk. Immediately afterward, my uncle, who was seated at my right, took the box and started it around the table. As it came into the hands of each guest, he or she would turn it over, shake it, examine it, press it and in every way try to discover its hidden secret.

"It had perhaps passed half-way around and I had quite forgotten it and was talking and laughing with Aline, my wife, when suddenly there came a scream of horror, and everyone immediately looked in the direction whence it had issued.

"There sat Mrs. FitzHerron, the box open in her shaking hand, lying across the table in a half faint.

"'My God!' I remember hearing Uncle Henry exclaim; and, leaping to his feet, he rushed to her. Bending over her, he took the box from her hand and peered inside, when with a low cry he dropped it and stood there trembling, pale as death. I leapt to my feet and asked him what the matter was.

"He turned, and with eyes that seemed dazed he looked at me and his lips moved.

"'That box!' he said. 'For God's sake, Ainsworth—Herrington!—'

"Then he stopped, his lips compressed.

"'Where is it?' he suddenly demanded.

"And then I looked. It had fallen to the floor and snapped shut. Stooping, I picked it up and attempted to hand it to him.

"'Take it!' he said, drawing back, and an unaccountable expression crept across his face. 'Take it, and for God's sake, keep it shut!'

"So I took it, wonderingly, and set it down on the table beside me.

"Aline picked it up and began regarding it with increased curiosity.

"Meanwhile some of the men had succeeded in reviving Mrs. FitzHerron, and she sat there listening, positively pallid. Uncle Henry bent over to her.

"'Did you see it?' I thought I heard him whisper.

"'Yes,' she replied slowly, hardly able to speak. 'Herrington's—'

"'Later!' said Uncle Henry, checking her. 'No more, here.'

"Then he turned and addressed the table.

"'Mrs. FitzHerron is not feeling well. If you will excuse me, I will escort her home.'

"With that the two of them left together.

"What passed between them I shall never know, but when my uncle returned, he took me aside.

"'Frank,' he said, 'I am not going to question you about that box. Whatever it is, it is your affair, and not mine. But I am going to insist that if you and Aline wish to remain under this roof you must get rid of it. I refuse to have it in this house over night.'

"'Why?' I replied. 'I do not understand.'

"'I am not so sure you do not understand,' he said slowly. 'That is between you and your conscience. But I insist that you get rid of the box—at once.'

"'Very well,' I said dully, and left to carry out his wish.

"THE whole affair had thrown a damper on the party, and they were now breaking up and leaving for their rooms, those who were staying with my uncle; and the rest were taking their carriages and driving off. In half an hour everyone had either retired or left.

"But the box—where was it? For the moment I could not think where I had left it. Then I remembered last seeing it on the banquet table where I had laid it after Uncle Henry refused to touch it. Hastily I ran to the banquet room. It was gone.

"Then I noted the absence of Aline.

"She has doubtless gone to her room," I thought.

"And swift as a flash the realization came that the dread box had last been in her hands. She had been exceptionally curious about it. What if she were even now attempting to open it?

"In an agony of apprehension and dread I rushed upstairs. I must get it away from her! She, most of all, must never see its contents!

"Dashing into her room, I turned on the light.

"Aline," I called.

"There was no answer.

"Aline, where are you?" I repeated the call.

"Still there was no answer.

"Suddenly a wave of terror engulfed me. Had she opened the box? Had its dread contents exerted some horrible spell on her? Oh, my fair young wife! I turned from the library and ran into our bedroom.

"Aline!" I called once more.

"There came no sound but my voice, which echoed strangely in the still room. Striking a match, I lit one of the tall candles on the dresser, and by its first feeble ray I saw her. There she lay, in a little crumpled heap on the bed, in her hand the black box—*shut*. Bending over her, I took it gently from her hand and laid it aside.

"Aline," I whispered, "answer me. What is it? Are you ill?"

"She didn't move. In a frenzy of fear, I laid my hand over her heart.

There came no answering beat, and as I looked at her eyes a sudden icy chill struck me to the heart. They were glazed and on her lips was the frost of death.

"With a moan, I flung myself upon her.

"Aline! Aline!"

"Again and again I called her name, but the only answer was the echo of my voice, which reverberated out of the room and down the dark, still corridors of the old mansion.

"In a frenzy of anguish, I seized her, I held her close to me and implored her to speak. I stroked her soft, dark hair, and kissed those pale, cold lips. But she made no move. She was dead.

"I think it was then that the madness came upon me, if I *am* mad. I seized the box and struggled to open it. Madly I worked over it. I stamped on it, bit it, flung it against the wall. I prayed, screamed, cursed over it, but it would not open. Finally, in a fit of insane, hopeless rage, I seized an enormous andiron from the grate and with all my strength brought the heavy metal piece crushing down upon that dark, mysterious box. The impact was sufficient. The lid flew off, shattered, and there it lay—with the mystery all revealed.

"TAKING the candle from the dresser, I brought it over and peered down into the recess of the box. As I looked, a wild cry escaped me. I looked again. I could not believe my eyes at the dread horror that lay therein. Seizing the box in both hands, I held it close to the candle and gazed straight into it and beheld—and beheld (Oh God! I know not how I can ever tell it without being utterly engulfed in madness!)—beheld there in that dark recess, rolling and gleaming as if set in a

socket, staring straight at me, the hideous, bloody eye I had torn from Herrington's head on that tragic, never-to-be-forgotten or expiated night!

"As I looked into that awful orb and as it looked back at me, I felt my reason go. Fascinated, I gazed on and on; and the more I looked, the more hideous became the stare that met my stare. How long I sat there, spellbound, hypnotized, I do not know. Finally, it seems hours afterward, I rose, and with a wild, hysterical laugh, lifted the eye out of its socket in that awful box and, putting it between my teeth, *crunched it*, spitting it out upon the floor a mangled pulp.

"Then, laughing deliriously, I took the box itself and hurled it through the window—into the night. I heard the glass tinkle, I heard the box strike on the ground below. Then I flung myself into a chair and laughed loud and long. It seemed as if I should never stop laughing.

"And there they found me. Ha, ha! Even yet, when I think of it, I must laugh. Ha, ha! Ha, ha!"

I DREW back, sickened, as Ainsworth's maudlin laughter rang through the steel corridors of the madhouse.

That is all. Shortly afterward I left him. Three months later he died—died laughing, laughing insanely.
