

On Sale Third Wednesday of Each Month

VOLUME XIII
NUMBER 2

ASTOUNDING STORIES

APRIL
1934

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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Title: The God Box

Date of first publication: 1934

Author: Howard Von Drey

Date first posted: February 26, 2015

Date last updated: February 26, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150257

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The God Box

By

Howard Von Drey

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“But I am not a locksmith,” said Thorn impatiently. “I have never made a key in my life. Why don’t you take this Chinese cabinet, or whatever it is, to one of these fellows in the street who does that sort of thing for his business?”

“It’s too heavy to carry.” Pence smiled.

“A box no larger than a camera?” said Thorn.

“I told you,” said Pence, “that it was extremely heavy, though I didn’t say *how* heavy. The exact dimensions are four and three quarters by five and one half by seven inches. It weighs, I should judge, somewhat more than a ton.”

Graham Thorn, who was a pretty good engineer and no fool, stared at the young man incredulously.

“What I am getting at is this,” said Pence: “This job has me stopped. I can’t make head or tail of it, and I ought to know a great deal about such things. The box is heavily carved, but has no movable parts. Nothing like a lid, no keyholes. It reacts like gold, except for hardness, and sounds hollow. I can’t imagine why such a container should weigh so much unless there is something remarkable inside. I heard about you as an engineer with an unusual imagination, and thought I could afford to pay you for opening it by some means of your own.”

“What do you think this container is?” the engineer asked.

“A battery.”

“A battery!” Thorn’s feet came off the desk and banged on the floor. He pulled his chin thoughtfully, weighing possibilities more remote than a dream. Suddenly he rose.

“Come,” he said, taking his coat and hat, and the two men left the laboratory.

Like many wonderful curiosities of the goldsmith’s art, Pence’s box had no history. No one could say anything more about it than Pence himself, and that was little. The earliest Egyptians certainly did not discover America, nor did they live in an ugly old residence on 30th Street. Nevertheless, a locksmith plied his trade there in what was little more than a hole in the wall, and there Pence had discovered the box. What attracted him were the fine, carved figures; figures of an Egyptian character.

Finding a thing so precious in this rubbish was odd enough, but there was something besides. The place was infested with cats; huge cats like small panthers. He watched the beasts while his key was being filed. One of them sniffed in the corner at this box, a lovely thing without a counterpart. All that the locksmith could say of it was that it was there, crated to the floor, when he moved in a dozen years ago. He seemed to be a little afraid of it. He had never succeeded in opening it and thought it was welded shut.

Such an object, so richly carved, could not be a mere arbitrary form. Somewhere, in whatever crypt or antique vale, it must have been worked for one particular purpose; which was probably contained in the book of Thoth.

“I know considerable about such things,” said Pence, “on the side of archæology. Beyond any doubt, aside from its arbitrary form, this work is earliest Egyptian. There’s no trace of conflict.

“These knobs on top are royal heads, each different in one small particular which would probably not be apparent to you. These two on the side represent the head of Thoth—one is an ibis and the other a dog. There is no good reason for their being placed where they are—you can see they aren’t part of the design. I got to thinking of terminals—a battery.”

Young Pence cocked his head in an odd way he had. “Listen!” he said sharply. “Do you hear anything?”

Thorn squinted around the room, puzzled. “That humming?” he asked. “What is it?”

“The cats are coming,” said Pence. “I heard it in that shop. I think the sound comes from the box.”

He walked to the window. “Look,” he said.

Thorn joined him, and looked into the courtyard. A number of uncommonly large cats were prowling about down there and glancing up at the window with yellow eyes. More were coming, one by one, over the wall. Thorn looked up. It was a gray day in spring, with clouds overcasting the sky like a sheet of slate.

He turned into the room again and without a word picked up a few tools Pence had been working with—knife, pliers, file. The gold box was tempered enormously, and the file dulled.

Thorn looked inquiringly at young Pence, then cut a lamp cord. He looked closely at the two heads of Thoth and saw that the pupil of the right eye of each head was in reality a small hole. He inserted a bare wire in each hole and plugged the cord into the wall. There was a flash.

He bent over the box. "There's a connection here," he said.

Pence nodded. This thing was operated by electrical force. A thing out of olden times, engraved with forgotten characters, and it was controlled by the most powerful tool of modern science! A cat screamed outside.

It was Pence who discovered the next step. He had been trying the heads on top of the box, and one of them gave, turning to the left. There was a smart click. Both looked, and saw that a square, carved plate had been withdrawn from the front of the box. They peered in through the aperture, at what was apparently a flat crystal. In this crystal were imprisoned myriads of phosphorescent particles which seemed to have a motion of their own, endless and slow.

Beyond the crystal was an impression of wheels and queerly shaped ratchets; miniature drums mounted eccentrically on their axles. The entire mechanism, what they could see of it, was foreign to their knowledge, but beautifully machined for some odd purpose.

The knob Pence had turned unlocked all the others. The royal Egyptian heads that incrustated the top of the box were engraved with perplexing symbols, but though Pence could not hope to decipher them in their connection here, he guessed there was a definite purpose in the pattern of the heads, at least. A second knob yielded.

Suddenly Thorn flapped his arms grotesquely and cried out, "My boy!" as though Pence had struck him.

Darkness descended on them like a blow, and was so oppressive that Thorn groaned. The humming sound increased in volume till the room seemed to be spinning around them. Pence staggered to the window and opened it. At once, the darkness which filled the room spilled through the window and fell into the courtyard in a well of shadow. The host of cats were drowned in it, and their fighting and crying ceased.

There was light behind him. He turned and saw the engineer regarding a cube of light, some ten or twelve feet in dimensions, in the middle of the room. Thorn seemed to have recovered.

"Mr. Pence! Mr. Pence!" he called. "I cannot believe this!"

"What is it?" Pence asked.

A chair and table had been there where the light was, but now even the rug on the floor ended where the cube of light touched it.

"It is solid!" shouted Thorn. "You can feel it with your hands!"

Pence was frightened. Solid darkness and solid light! This cube of light stopped Thorn's hands as though it were made of glass. In it was nothing but its own thin brilliance. It was an abyss, and he backed away from it.

It came from the box, though there was no visible connection between the two. If that were its source, it could be controlled. He had a crazy memory of having read somewhere that in the book of Thoth were powers that controlled light. Was it so, indeed? He warned the engineer of what he was going to do.

"There are seventeen heads," he said recklessly, "and we have tried only two."

Graham Thorn smiled. "I believe I can account for the weight of that box," he said. "Did you observe the row of cylinders in the bottom of the box? Each connected in some way to the crystal or to the gears? I don't know whether they are hollow or not, but I believe they contain power in some form, and a great deal of it. That light is a manifestation, and it is certainly not the kind of energy we are familiar with. What do you suppose might happen if that force were released all at once?"

"I think we'd be blown to smithereens." Pence grinned.

"Very likely I'm an imaginative old jackass," said the engineer, "but I think it would be something worse."

Thorn did not specify what he meant. But the two men soon discovered they were tinkering blindly with a force of a peculiarly awful nature. At the same time there was a prankishness in their experimenting, as in the encounter that followed with Swane, an archæologist, or "digger," as he fondly called himself.

Russel Swane, who could speak several languages fluently and had seen practically everything on earth worth seeing, was crossing the African desert by motor. The sand in this section had a fair crust, but he had been traveling slowly, as itinerant diggers do. The right rear wheel broke through.

"I *will* be a dirty so and so," he said, by way of beginning.

It would be a long, nervous job getting out, and a worse one getting up enough momentum to travel again. Whereupon he commenced swearing easily and rapidly, which he considered the best thing to do in such cases, and got out of the car.

About fifty paces ahead, a twelve-foot cube of sand rose in the air, drifted sidewise, and dropped with a thump that fissured the entire stretch of crust he intended to travel across.

“I say!” he shouted. “Damn it!”

He dropped his shovel and board and strode angrily toward the pile of sand. Another perfect cube issued from the ground at his feet, and he scrambled away from it. It rose high in the air without dropping a single grain, and moved directly over his head. He heard a droning sound like a single monstrous bee, and knew this was some damned new kind of machinery, American-made, for excavating.

“Ahoy!” he yelled, shaking his fist at the block of sand. “Ahoy! Ahoy! Heads up!”

The cake of sand moved about uncertainly in the air, approached the hole it had occupied, and sank back deliberately into the ground.

“Ahoy!” said a clear voice. “Where are you?”

Swane whirled about. A solid block of intense light stood on the ground near by.

“Here!” he said sharply. “What is this?”

“Sorry, old man,” said the voice apologetically, “didn’t know you were about. Can we help you?”

“You can,” said Swane belligerently, as the light enveloped him. “You busted my crust, and you can tell me how I’m going to get my car out of here.”

“Where is the car?”

“Down there.”

Even as Swane pointed he felt himself lifted in the air and deposited easily by the side of the car. He heard the voice say:

“Does it fit?”

“Just,” a new voice added.

The car shifted in the sand.

“Get in,” Swane was commanded. “Where do you want to go?”

“Cape Town. I forgot my watch.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Really?” the voice asked.

“No!” said Swane angrily. “My digging is thirty kilometers ahead, and now I’m not going to make it.”

The car left the ground and was rapidly carried forward.

“When you see the digging, let us know,” said the voice.

As the rippled dunes passed below him, Swane heard several incomprehensible remarks. One of the voices said:

“Gift horses, and all that, but this thing ought to have a bigger focus.”

The other voice agreed. Then:

“What puzzles me, now that we have tried all heads, is the fact that we have no finder. Why, a kodak has a finder, of a sort! Do you suppose two heads work together—say nine and eleven?”

“Possibly.”

“So, they do! In that case, thirteen and eleven would give this digger a look at us?”

“It may be. That must be his destination, by the way.”

“Is that your digging?” asked the younger voice.

“Yes,” gasped Swane, and was unceremoniously dumped on the desert with an experience he never fully believed himself.

“When I think of what we have in this god box!” said Pence. “Why, there is no privacy on earth any more!”

“Never do that which needs to be concealed,” said Thorn, smiling.

“We’ve looked into the bowels of the earth, and seen the ruined fanes off the dolphin ridge. Here we are in New York, and yet we can step into that cube of light—hard at first, wasn’t it?—and find ourselves in Yucatan, if we’re focused there. What’s to prevent us from looking around the Moon?”

“Nothing,” said Thorn.

“Mars, Jupiter, the Milky Way?”

“Nothing.”

“Beyond that? The stars we can’t see? The worlds out there in the black?”

“Nothing.”

“What,” said Pence, “do you suppose we’d find, in the end, if we went far enough?”

“I don’t think you would find anything out there,” said Thorn quickly. “You would not find God.”

That was the trouble with Thorn. He was forever expressing some thought like that when life was at its highest. Anyhow, what was the good of Graham Thorn now? He had served his purpose, accidental as it was. Pence could have had the machine entirely to himself. Thorn knew too much, and he might possibly speak of the machine to strangers. Graham Thorn was a menace.

In the early days of experimenting, it was Pence who discovered the various powers of the machine, which he affectionately called his “long-legged camera” or “the Eye of Thoth.” He found what heads served a simple three-dimensional function or controlled motion. “King 17” was a deadly weapon of vengeance. When there was a self-reciprocal action between two or more heads, both Pence and the subject he was shooting were visible to each other as solid, living objects. He could enter the cube of focus himself, and the subject could leave it and enter the room from, say, the streets of Bombay.

But when “King 17” was turned, that subject—camel, deep-sea fish, or man—was “crushed with darkness.” Pence had thus “blacked out” a giant squid and part of the whale it was fighting with. When he released this blackness the squid and the snout of the whale exploded in a smother of foam. This was after he found how to increase the focus two and three times over.

Outside the original cube, however, no object had any reality nor substance beyond visibility. He could follow an eagle in the sky, and throw a stone through the eagle. But as soon as the bird passed through the twelve-foot cube, it became a solid object.

Murder by proxy, wholesale theft, every crime on the calendar was within the reach of the long arm of Thoth, and divine justice as well. Pence became a little arrogant with his increasing mastery of the camera, as was only natural. But Thorn frowned a little when Pence met him at the door dressed in the robes of Egyptian priesthood and holding the tau; and he frowned more at the stink of some antique temple incense filched from deep in the African sand.

Worst of all, Pence had saved a huge “European black” from the hands of tribal enemies in the north African jungle, and this oily colossus, of royal black lineage, was Pence’s slave.

The prankishness increased. A liquor ship in the north Atlantic was nearing the American coast. The skipper was standing at the rail of his vessel, smoking. This man’s name was Ganning, and he was a hard-headed, blond-whiskered individual who was not himself given to drinking. The sea was so quiet that his own vessel seemed to be sliding through dirty green glass. A small, chunky sailing vessel stood off side without a ripple, and two men in ducks sat in her stern, yawning or coiling a small rope.

Ganning swore vehemently that he had seen a man dressed in a long white skirt appear in mid-air above the bow of this vessel, and holding a funny kind of gold-headed cane. Pence in his robes, with the tau. The next thing he knew, the sailboat creaked from stem to stern, and leaped straight up into the air as though a whale had boosted it from underneath. The two men in ducks sprawled on their small deck, and one of them yelled, rather pointlessly:

“Man overboard!”

This boat disappeared. An instant later, before Ganning realized he had lost a good pipe in the water, another boat appeared in mid-air and floated down to the water like a big feather. It was a freaky little hull, not like the first in any particular, and full of gibbering little men talking something like Italian.

Ganning was quite right. The harbor authorities wanted to know how a fishing boat from the bay of Naples could have arrived at the port of New York without being seen in transit, let alone weathering the ocean. Ganning never read a paper himself, or he would have found point in a simultaneous report of two Americans, both apparently insane, who had showed up in their sailboat, on a perfectly calm day, in the bay of Naples.

This “wingless angel in a white skirt,” with or without the long cane, appeared in three reports. A certain actress, foreign born and thus subject to the folk-tale beliefs of her people, was awakened one night in a suburb of Los Angeles by a brilliant light all around her. Into this light stepped a very handsome incubus clad in a white dress ornamented with gold thread and jewels.

Her mother—whose English vocabulary consisted of “Yes,” “No,” and “How much?”—slept in an adjoining room and awakened also. She was a very agile old woman, and immediately skipped through the hall in her nightdress when she heard a rumpus in her daughter’s bed. A cloud of black stuff was rolling out of the bedroom, and billowed around her naked ankles, imprisoning her. She heard a calm, arrogant voice say these mysterious English words:

“Pride goeth before a fall. What’s more, all is vanity.”

Then she was released; she found the room empty of Americans when she turned on the lights. Her daughter, almost unrecognizable, was sitting up in bed with an expression of surprise and disappointment on her face. Her head, which one could now see was shaped something like a cue ball, was cropped to the scalp, and her extravagant platinum tresses were strewn all over the room.

Shortly after this, an unpublished and profane account of James Grogan Torres, a soldier of fortune, described this angel in greater detail. Torres, who had found that the most profitable insurrections were those under already satisfactory governments, was leading his expedition for gain down on a certain South American city when he saw a solid block of what he thought was white-hot metal leave the city and advance along the road toward him. He concealed himself at once. His army of three hundred, deployed along the hills, stopped their advance and commenced chattering with excitement at this phenomenon.

There came into view, behind this cube, a white angel with a wand, who pointed at the army from a point not ten feet from Torres, said “Death!” and disappeared. This shining cube then began to plow the men into the earth amid agonized screams. Three besides Torres escaped death or mangling. The hill was very fertile that year.

Pence never fully understood the working of the camera. Thorn could have given a great deal of information if we were asked for it, but Pence was increasingly independent. Even Thorn had no knowledge of the nature of the force which some time-forgotten wizard had harnessed; but it showed a singularity of nature which was referred to in at least three ancient literatures as “god,” and the learned deities of fable, and others, most certainly had traffic with it.

In its various forms it explained, if it did not excuse, certain well-known miracles. Barring accidents, there was no reason why Pence, a mere archæologist interested in the origins of Egyptian culture, could not have acquired considerable power, and, in fact, come near making himself a god, if he had any such purpose in mind.

But he was as much interested in what people contrived the camera as in using it, and his attention, by his training, was diverted to that end. He dimly guessed at a people long vanished, ingenious beyond belief, but found it difficult to account for their unrecorded passing, and, indeed, for the existence of the camera itself.

There were more cats than ever. M’Gwallah, the African servant, closed every hole in the old house that might admit a rat, but as fast as Pence got rid of them he would appear, spread his black arms with imperial magnificence, and say apologetically:

“Cats.”

There was something in the droning, snoring sound of the camera that attracted them, and that was puzzling. It seemed ridiculous to suppose that the cat family had a generic memory of that sound. The cat once held the distinction of being a venerated beast, but so had other animals.

Pence took the simplest method of disposing of them. M’Gwallah would throw chicken, freshly roasted, into the cube, and Pence would transport them abroad when the cube was full; load after load.

The captain of a transatlantic liner was considerably disconcerted when several dozen nondescript cats suddenly appeared in his cabin in mid-ocean, eating chicken. Pence estimated that he had transported more than five thousand of the beasts altogether.

Nevertheless, they found ways of entering, and removing them was a daily nuisance. When the machine droned they would appear, and the worst of it was, it would occasionally sound when the camera was not in use. It was affected by mild electrical disturbances of the atmosphere.

One night Pence decided that Thorn must be done away with. He approached Thorn’s room with the dark focus and found him asleep. This room was fitted up like a power plant, and the man lay sound asleep on a studio couch in the midst of apparatus. To Pence’s surprise, for he thought the engineer might have appreciated dying in his sleep, Thorn

said:

“I have been waiting for you.”

Pence brightened the focus at once. “You knew I was coming?” he asked.

“Not at all,” said Thom, sitting up. “It was a trick. I have trained myself to say that in my sleep, for at least a month. I thought we were getting pretty close to the end. Are you—going to kill me?”

Pence felt disconcerted and very much ashamed. Hesitating a moment, he turned a head on the god box and stepped into the focus himself. As he did so, both he and Thom were aware again of the mysterious attraction they felt toward the camera. A subtle pull existed between the shining cube they were in and the box.

“I’m sorry,” Pence said, holding out his hand.

“That’s quite all right,” said Thom. “You see, I don’t think your camera will work in this room, and I want to live out my normal span of years, anyhow.”

“It won’t work? Why not?” Pence’s flesh tingled, as did Thom’s. There was an unusual tension in the air. Ghostly fires chased over their bodies in phosphorescent ripples, and the hair of their arms and heads bristled.

“I’ve had the idea,” Thom explained, “that whatever force is imprisoned in that box is only related to electricity as we know it. That’s obvious. But a common house current sets the camera working. I repeat, I am just an old fool, but I have a few ideas. Do you see all this apparatus? Well, this bed is in the middle of a field of resistance that ought to prove very troublesome for your god box. I have a supply of current here large enough to create a sizable lightning bolt, and the more force you used the more current it would meet. The camera mechanism would weld.

“By the by, haven’t you found any way of keeping those monsters of yours outdoors?”

It was true; the cats appeared in ever-increasing numbers. Pence watched the animals filing through the open door of his room, which they could see beyond the camera from Thom’s laboratory. The beasts slunk around the camera stand as though they were in search of prey.

Momentarily the two men heard the rumble of M’Gwallah’s bass, and the great black appeared in the doorway. He glowered at the cats, which now numbered more than a dozen, and began to stalk them. One of the animals leaped up on the table, glared into the crystal, and leisurely assumed a position on top of the royal Egyptian heads.

“M’Gwallah!” Pence shouted.

The surprised black looked up.

“For the love of God, Pence!” Thom said. “Don’t move!”

Thom was sitting where he looked into the camera’s eye, and he could see something Pence could not. It was the first time either man had looked into the lens from the cube. The crystal, curiously, seemed to be increasing in size, and behind it was not the mere jumble of wheels there should have been.

The cat had leaped off the camera meanwhile, which was what Thom had hoped to prevent. It was too late now. For the cat had disturbed the position of the heads.

“Pence! Pence!” whispered Thom. “Come down here and look!”

The sound of the camera increased to a great booming drone. The camera, on its stand, approached the cube of light which was its focus, met the cube with a shivering sound of metal, and vanished. They could still see M’Gwallah off in the shadows, a cat screaming under each arm—great fighting cats that were raking his glistening black hide with their steel claws.

The cube of light was so charged with cross currents of force that their flesh stung. Pence and Thom looked around the room, amazed. Graham Thom gasped with realization, then screamed:

“God help us! Pence! We are inside the camera!”

Their surroundings changed. They were on a sandy beach, and saw to the left a mighty building fronted by countless steps in terraces. It was of red stone, and of unrecognizable architecture. They saw a scintillating blue sea, and at perhaps a thousand yards distance a towering, brightly painted galley at anchor. Red-skinned men and women, clad in a kind of shimmering, easily draping cotton when they were clad at all, stood about them, and eyed them incuriously, smiling. Large cats, or beasts of that family, wandered about freely and seemed to be held in high esteem.

“Egypt?” whispered Thom.

Pence shook his head. "Don't you see?" he said. "There are two suns in that sky. That's a western ocean."

Meanwhile a small boat was nearing shore, in which stood erect a Negro holding a plate covered with a red cloth. On it was a golden box having the general appearance of the camera Pence had found at the locksmith's. And behind them, behind Pence and Thorn, a black shadow had been moving up across that plane of the cube of focus. It was the shutter.

Pence stood up, terribly afraid and glaring sightlessly. The camera was nowhere to be seen.

"M'Gwallah!" he screamed.

He could still see the Negro. The red people frowned at him and uttered blurred, musical words of protest in their own language. "M'Gwallah! M'Gwallah!" He made twisting motions with his hands, as though he were turning the royal Egyptian heads.

The African giant, totally dumfounded, stood there like a black shadow. The cats shrieked and fought against his fixed arms, unheeded. He muttered anxious sounds, shifted his bare feet uncertainly.

The small boat they had seen touched shore, and the Negro carrying the box stepped pompously on the sand. Pence pointed violently at the spot where his camera should have been and made gestures as though he were pushing the camera over. M'Gwallah still did not understand. Pence hurled himself forward, and his body met the shining wall of the cube with a thud.

M'Gwallah strode forward and seemed to be busy with some invisible object. His mighty back arched and cracked as he strode to move a ton or more of metal, the camera they could no longer see. Suddenly he sprawled into the cube of light himself. The black shadow crossed the cube behind them with a crash like cataclysm.

At the same instant, the walls of the Manhattan residence of an archæologist named Paul Pence collapsed inward as the result of a vertical explosion of unknown nature. This man Pence could not be found, nor could his friend Graham Thorn who disappeared at the same time, and who had been well liked in local scientific circles. Another phenomenon occurred at about this time also, no one having heard the explosion.

Quite a number of persons, considering the average New Yorker as a rather unobservant individual, saw the rocket go off. This rocket was of a singular shape, being that of a box kite, or cube of about twelve feet in dimensions. It was reported by several loose-witted persons, too, that though this rocket was blinding in its brilliance, there still could be seen in it the figures of three men, one of them a Negro. A statement wholly untenable, since authorities had no knowledge of any persons working on passenger rockets at this time, and particularly not of this shape.

Nevertheless, the cube had a meteoric course, brilliant, instant, and free; and if any astronomer were observing it, he would have said it was pursuing a mathematically direct line for a point a fraction of a degree off the north star Vega. Toward that certain planet, in fact, which the imaginative tribe of astronomers count as one able to support life as on earth.

[The end of *The God Box* by Howard Von Drey]