

The RAVENSCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

"You are a public schoolman," he said. "If your guardian hadn't absconded with all your money you'd have been always mixed with people like the Vincents. Now, though you are my best friend, and I know I am yours, I come of good country yeoman stock. I don't admit that that stock is inferior to any other in the world, but class is class, and when things happen like they are happening now, they have got to be preserved."

"I don't quite see what you are driving at, Wag," Charlie had said. "Not well, it is very simple. I am engaged to Miss Vincent's maid, Jane, the daughter of old Tom Gregory, the well-known actor, who has fallen on bad days lately. I love her and we are going to be married. But when we get to Ravenscroft Hall the house-keeper's room will be my place, the dining-room yours. We shall see just as much of each other as ever, and I shall always be at your orders in the dis-entangling of this horrid mystery."

Charlie had protested, but there was no room for argument. Wag's friend spoke words of wisdom. It had been arranged thus, much to Wag's satisfaction.

Wag's cigar was nearly finished. He watched the big shops putting up their shutters. He had enjoyed an excellent meal, he felt happier than he had done for years, while the pleasant sense of risk and adventure tingled in his veins.

He was just determined to go back to the yard and have a chat with McHenry, the head chauffeur, when he heard the loud, long-drawn out toot of an approaching motor.

The noise was insistent, and in a second or two a deep throbbing pulsed through the clear night air, rapidly rising to a humming roar.

Then, a very large closed touring car, of sixty or seventy horse-power at least, dark black in colour, and with the blinds of the interior all drawn, flashed past the hotel at a great speed. The little boxer had time to see that the car was covered with mud and dust. From the pace it was going it was obviously only passing through the city, and indeed the long bellows of the horn was insistent, until it finally died away in the distance. It was like standing in some little way-side station, seeing the North express thunder past.

Wag did not have his little chat with the head chauffeur after all. He became very thoughtful and quiet, and when, half an hour afterwards, the three cars started again upon the last stage of their journey, he leant back in his corner and said very little.

Charlie was in high spirits. He had dined with Sir Philip and his daughter. The ex-Ambassador had consulted him upon various points, had made himself thoroughly friendly, and given the young man to understand that he relied upon him absolutely.

"When we arrive," Charlie said, "I am going to sit up with Sir Philip, and he is going to tell me every thing, so that we can be well prepared. From what he has already said, old chap, I can see that there is a task before us which will call for every possible exercise of our brains—perhaps our muscles also."

"That is when I shall come in," Wag remarked dryly.

"Without any doubt whatever there are the gravest dangers before us, but we'll conquer them, won't we? We'll save Sir Philip and his daughter!"

Wag smiled quietly to himself in the darkness of the car. He recognized certain symptoms in his friend's voice. He hadn't been unkind of the almost reverence with which Charlie treated the beautiful, dark-haired girl. Well! so much the better, the boxer thought to himself. It made the whole affair more interesting than ever.

At last he spoke. "Of course, Charlie," he said slowly, "we have been very clever in tying up that murderous Japanese—I suppose by now the landlord will have your letter and he will be released. Of course he doesn't lay any information against us under the circumstances. It was pretty smart I admit, but when you come to think of it, the other side—wherever they are—were pretty smart, too, in over-hearing part of what went on between Sir Philip and us in Park Lane. If it hadn't been for what Umataro discovered, we should never have suspected for a moment that the house where you were taken, and Miss Vincent decoyed, was only the next door one to her father's."

"I admit all you say," Charlie replied, "but I don't quite see what you are driving at."

"I am coming to that," Wag said. "Now just you listen to me." Wag cut in. And in a few crisp sentences he told him of the enormous black car which had rushed through York half an hour ago.

"It may be so," Charlie said thoughtfully. "We must keep all our wits about us. It is certainly a curious coincidence."

The moon was flooding the vast expanse of the Yorkshire moors with washes of silver light, when the cars mounted a steep winding road to where a huge black mass of buildings stood alone among the heather.

They had come to their destination at last.

As they got out of their car Wag and Charlie surveyed a long, low, battlemented pile, with towers at each corner and a huge entrance door barred with massive, fringed oak.

There was some little delay before the great entrance doors were opened, and as the friends stood together looking at their new home both of them were conscious of a slight chill, a fleeting apprehension at a place so grand and solitary.

The doors opened at length and an elderly caretaker, together with his wife and son of some twenty years of age, stood bowing beneath the archway. Umataro, the Japanese valet, Brice the butler, and Jane Gregory, Muriel's maid—who had all travelled down in the third motor car—came busied with the luggage.

Sir Philip, his daughter, Charlie and Wag crossed a moonlit quadrangle bounded on all sides by tall buildings and entered a postern door at the farther end.

The caretaker and his wife had followed them, and as they entered a wide, carpeted corridor, the walls hung with ancient faded pictures, the whole place leapt up radiance.

The electric light had been installed at Ravenscroft Hall several years before, and the staff of household and outdoor servants were always maintained there, for Sir Philip Vincent was apt to visit his ancestral hall at short notice and required everything to be in readiness when he came.

A couple of fresh-cheeked, smiling housemaids conducted the party to their various rooms. A telegram earlier in the day had prepared the people at Ravenscroft for the influx of visitors. Conducted up more than one staircase, Charlie and Wag Ashton found themselves at length installed in a suite of three rooms.

The middle one of these was a comfortable sitting-room with a pleasant fire burning upon the hearth. A bedroom opened into the sitting room on each side.

Their baggage came up in a minute or two, carried by a groom, and Brice the butler followed him.

"These are your quarters, gentlemen," said the butler. "You are in the north wing, which is the wing inhabited by the family. There are electric lights in both bedrooms, and also one here by the side of the fire."

"I am sure we shall be very comfortable," Charlie replied looking round the large, old-fashioned room with its shuttered windows, over which heavy crimson curtains were drawn, its roomy old chairs and steeple, its general air of hospitality and home.

"I hope so, sir, I am sure," the butler replied. "I am telling of a young fellow to attend to you; it's Jim Waddington, one of the grooms. He is not too clever, Mr. Penrose, but he is as staunch as steel."

Charlie looked keenly at the big, fat man.

Brice nodded. "Yes, sir," he answered. "I know something of it all. Your life here is not going to be any pleasure party. It is a strange, mournful, old house. Only this wing is inhabited. My master trusts me, and though I don't know everything—"

The butler said no more, but shrugged his shoulders.

Charlie took to the faithful old fellow at once. "Well, Mr. Brice," he said, "if you know so much, you must know why I and Mr. Ashton have been asked down here by Sir Philip."

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Philip. "I do," the other answered solemnly. "And I pray God that you two young gentlemen will be able to guard my dear master and our young lady from all that threatens them."

"We shall do our best," Charlie replied in the same earnest voice.

"I am sure you will, sir," said the butler, "and as for Mr. Ashton, here—his face lit up with hope and approval—"We have known each other for several weeks. And what Mr. Ashton can't do in the way of circumventing anything that may be going along, nobody else can do. Of that I am dead certain, Mr. Penrose."

Wag thrust his arm into the butler's, nodding and winking at Charlie as he did so.

"Now I am off," he said, "to take a little supper in the house-keeper's room with Mr. Brice, Miss Gregory, and the rest of them. I shall be up here again at eleven o'clock. I understand that you interview with Sir Philip will be a long one. While I am at supper I may get to get information from Mr. Brice and make a rough plan of this wing of the house. I shall bring that plan up here and leave it on the table. I do not think I shall sleep in one of these bedrooms to-night, but my plan will tell you where I am in case you want me."

The little boxer spoke in a bright and almost jaunty voice, but there was no gaiety in his eyes and he looked meaningfully at his friend.

Charlie did not quite understand what was meant, but nodded, knowing that Wag was speaking with a motive.

As the pugilist and the butler left the room, the latter turned. "I am going at once to Sir Philip, sir," Brice said, "and directly he is ready one of the maids will come for you."

Charlie was left alone in the brilliantly lit suite. He opened both the bedroom doors, and surveyed every nook and cranny of the rooms. They were low ceilinged and obviously ancient apartments. The furniture was solid and comfortable, but about all of them there was a certain atmosphere of being far away from the ordinary world. All the tall pointed windows were heavily barred and shuttered, as he ascertained when he pulled aside the thick hanging curtains. There was not a sound to be heard save the crackling of the great wood fire upon the hearth of the sitting room.

Charlie began to pace up and down the whole suite, from the bedroom through the sitting room, to the end of the other bedroom. They were all brightly lit by hanging pendants, everything was as snug and comfortable upon this cold November night as any traveller could wish. And yet, as he walked, he felt a strong sense of depression falling over his spirits. It was not depression perhaps so much as apprehension. He reviewed the extraordinary and inexplicable occurrences of the immediate past. He could see no light anywhere. He knew, with an inward certainty and intuition which did not in the least depend upon actual occurrences, but which came to him as a sinister and warning message of the night, that his life had now arrived at a crucial, a test point.

Great black walls of horror were closing round him. He was alone, against unknown forces. He had taken up the leadership in a mysterious battle. He had a friend, alert, capable, watchful, to aid him. Wag Ashton was, as it were, a keen sharp dagger at his belt, but in his right hand—what was there? Had he a sword naked and ready for this fight?

In those silent luxurious rooms, as he paced them up and down, there was no immediate answer to his self-questionings.

Yet suddenly he stopped short and threw out his right arm. He knew now. A girl's appealing, tortured face, an agonised cry for help rang in his ears still. Kind glances, wide eyes full of eager hope, flaming protection, came into his mental vision, and struck, as it were, a chord of strong music in his heart.

Yes, this was his sword!—He grasped it now. The Fates had sent him to be the knight and protector of Muriel!

He would do it. Come what might he would save her and her gallant father.

He did not hear the tap at the passage door, and when it opened and he saw a trim housemaid looking with startled eyes, he realised that he was flourishing his right arm with wild gestures.

He dashed deeply as the astonished girl told him that Sir Philip requested his presence below.

He followed the housemaid down one long corridor, a short staircase, another long corridor in the centre of which was a door, opened by a girl, another short staircase, a third, another passage, and then through an open door into a small room.

He found himself in a high, vaulted room, the walls of which were covered with tapestries, and the floor was of dark wood.

Which Sir Philip Vincent was sitting. The haronet wore a velvet smoking suit. He was sitting by an octagonal table upon which there was a silver soup tureen and a couple of small silver bowls.

"Sit down, Penrose," Sir Philip said. "How are you at last in Ravenscroft? Take some soup, and then fill your pipe or have a cigarette. Since you have enlisted yourself in the service of my daughter and myself you must hear everything."

The soup was taken, a cigarette or two smoked, and then the tall, white-haired man rose from his seat and, walking up and down the room, spoke to Charlie as follows:

"First of all, Penrose, you and your clever little friend have come upon my affairs quite by accident. I know who you are. You were at school with my poor dear son. You answer for your friend, and I myself am certain of him. In addition, we are of three brethren—and I need not enlarge upon what Freemasonry means in every degree of life. I found you and Mr. Ashton hard up, at the end of your resources. I have invited you to help me in one of the blackest and most mysterious businesses that exist in Europe at present. Before I go any further I must say something about emolument."

Charlie shook his head and made a deprecating movement.

"No," the other replied, "we must have some understanding. I may tell you that I am one of the richest men of the day. Money is simply nothing at all to me—and yet it is, if I can only use my great wealth for—England. That Mr. Penrose, is what I am trying to do."

He stepped in his walk, threw his cigar into the fire, plunged his hands into his pockets and stared down at Charlie with kindly, trusting and anxious eyes.

"Look here," he said, "the period of danger which threatens us all will be terminated in five or six months. During that time we may all be disgraced and murdered by the most subtle and unexpected means. I put it at six months—that is the outside. If we come through these six months, successful and unharmed, I will give you thirty thousand pounds, and your friend, Mr. Ashton, ten thousand. Will that do?"

Charlie, who was sitting by the fire, lifted the poker, and plunged it into the blaze. "Oh, yes," he said, "that will do very well, Sir Philip."

Sir Philip stepped up to the young man and placed his hand upon his shoulder. "I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I would not have asked you to come and help me in my trouble had I not felt that you were with me heart and soul. We will talk about money afterwards."

Charlie looked up brightly, and clasped his host by the hand. "That is what I wanted, Sir Philip," he said, "and now then—to business. Tell me—"

You know that I was His Majesty's Ambassador to Japan?"

"Yes, Sir Philip."

"In those days I was a bachelor. I had a friend, a very dear friend. It was Lord Helston, Viscount Helston. We had been at Harrow and Oxford together. He was a man of some wealth, extraordinary talent, but of a wild and erratic disposition. He became an explorer, turned up in the wildest parts of the world, writing brilliant accounts of what he had seen, attracting all London by his wild brilliance, and then disappearing once more. When I was appointed Ambassador to Japan, Henry Helston turned up. He presumed upon our friendship. I soon found I could not trust him. He had little or no feeling for the interests of England in that far country."

"Then," Sir Philip continued in a slower voice and with eyes that seemed to be searching the dim past, "then, the lady who afterwards became my wife arrived in Japan. She was a very beautiful and very wealthy girl, Penrose, going with her father upon a tour round the world in a great yacht. Henry Helston fell madly in love with her. I did the same. I was the more fortunate of the two, and Beatrice and I were married. There was a dreadful scene between Lord Helston and myself. After that he disappeared. But I had news of him. He spoke the language like a Japanese. He became attached to the court of Mikado. I always felt his influence against me in all my negotiations on behalf of this country. Eventually he married a Japanese Princess of the Imperial family, and there was one son born, the present Lord Helston."

Charlie started violently. "The present Lord Helston?" he said, "the peer that there is such an astonishing mystery about?—Why, nobody has ever seen him, so the papers say. He has never taken his seat in the House of Lords. The papers are constantly referring to him. I have read all sorts of articles, myself."

Sir Philip nodded. "May I tell you," he replied with a slight but perceptible shudder, "that the empty house next to mine in Park Lane was recently taken by this very Lord Helston, under circumstances of great secrecy. It was in Lord Helston's house that my daughter was abducted last night."

Charlie's eyes blazed with excitement. He rose from his seat trembling.

"Then?" he gasped, "then, Sir Philip?"

"There is an implacable enmity between the houses of Helston and Vincent. After a long period of security, thinking that after the death of the late lord, all accounts between us were over, I have lately been made aware that the present Lord Helston, who ever or whatever that mysterious person may be, is actively engaged against me. Mr. Penrose, and here Sir Philip's voice sank into a hoarse whisper.

"I most firmly believe that my dear son, with whom you were at school, was murdered in some awful, inexplicable way by the hidden, enigmatic person of whom I have been speaking."

"But why, Sir Philip?" Charlie cried. "Why should there be this awful feud between your house and Lord Helston's?"

"I am coming to that," the other answered. "There is, of course the feud handed on by the late Vincent to his son. And in connection with that I have had some most strange and disturbing thoughts. The present Lord Helston, whom nobody has ever seen, must be half Japanese. You must remember his mother was a Princess of the Imperial Court. Perhaps that is why no one knows anything about him in England, or has ever seen him."

"Yet I have heard rumours and whispers, of which I will tell you later, that seem to even augment this family hatred. In addition to that—and here I come to the most secret and important thing of all—there are circumstances connected with the life of my son, Anthony Vincent, and with his cruel death, which may yet shake two great nations to their very foundations."

Sir Philip hesitated.

"What you say to me, sir," Charlie broke in, "is as safe and secret as I lie in the grave."

Sir Philip got up from his chair, and went to one of the long windows of the room. With one hand, upon a finger of which was a curious signet ring of twisted gold, he tore aside a heavy silk curtain. Then, with quick, trembling fingers, he unbarred the shutters, revealing a long, dark, and gloomy vista.

Outside a brilliant moon shone over the city in clearest detail. It washed the heather with floods of silver, it showed a vast expanse of lonely moor. But it showed also, a little to the right, and hardly more than a mile away, the grim keep and walls of a feudal castle etched into the sky in a dead black silhouette.

"You see that house?" Sir Philip murmured. "That is Helston Castle itself. I own half the moor—some twenty thousand acres—the unknown Lord Helston the other half. His house is close to mine as you see."

"What is to come of it all? Helston Castle? Ravenscroft Hall?" the old man continued in a low, vibrating voice. "You must know, Mr. Penrose, that there is a tradition in the Vincent family that whenever disaster is approaching any member of it, the spectre of an enormous raven is seen."

"The pictures!" Charlie gasped.

"Yes, the cinema pictures," Sir Philip replied, "but you yourself have told me how possible it is that such an apparition could be 'faked.' Nevertheless the thing has been done, our old ancestral legend has been revived to terrify us. It may well be that my dear son met his death in some such way as was cruelly shown to my daughter by your unconscious help."

"Then you think?"

"I don't think, I know. It is from the man or thing called Helston that these horrors emanate. It is because of him that you and your friend have joined me to guard my only daughter and myself from some hideous catastrophe and England itself from red war which would end in terrible disaster."

"You're going to explain to me now, aren't you, Sir Philip, the international side of this mystery, in addition to the personal side?"

"Let us shut and bar the window and pull the curtain, then you shall know everything."

They pulled the heavy shutter over the window, and looked it.

Sir Philip had his hand upon the curtain, when, without a sound of warning, the electric light in the room behind went out.

It was like black velvet save only that in one corner there was the red glow of the dying wood fire.

Suddenly Charlie with a loud cry of anger and pursuit, leapt into the middle of the room, dodged round

the table and was brought up with a loud bang against the panelling. He had felt a breath of cool air blowing into the place. He had heard, or thought he had heard, the sound of soft footsteps over the carpet.

Even as he beat with clenched fists against the wall the light leapt up again.

The room was the same as before. Nothing was disturbed or changed, but on the table was a large, square envelope upon which was written "TO SIR PHILIP VINCENT, Bt., C.M.G."

Their faces blanched to a dead whiteness, the two men stared at each other over the table.

"You see," Sir Philip began to stammer and whisper. He was trying to recover some equality, when the door in the other corner of the room, leading into the corridor burst open.

There was the sudden ear-splitting explosion of a pistol, and Wag Ashton, as white as Charlie and Sir Philip, staggered into the room.

He was supporting the white-robed figure of Muriel Vincent upon his left arm, and glaring down the passage, his pistol raised, a thin whip of grey smoke curling up into the air.

CHAPTER IV.

How Umataro Died.

Sir Philip, Vincent and Charlie Penrose stood aghast as the sound of the pistol shot died away.

They rushed up to Wag Ashton and caught the half-fainting Muriel from his arm.

Directly he was free of her the little pugilist bolted back up the passage like a terrier, they heard his feet padding down the corridor, the quick opening of a door, and then silence.

Sir Philip carried his daughter tenderly towards the fire, and placed her in a great leather arm chair. Upon a table at one side of the smoking room, there were, fortunately enough, a tannatus and some glasses. At a nod from Sir Philip, Vincent, and with his cruel death, which may yet shake two great nations to their very foundations."

Sir Philip hesitated.

"What you say to me, sir," Charlie broke in, "is as safe and secret as I lie in the grave."

Sir Philip got up from his chair, and went to one of the long windows of the room. With one hand, upon a finger of which was a curious signet ring of twisted gold, he tore aside a heavy silk curtain. Then, with quick, trembling fingers, he unbarred the shutters, revealing a long, dark, and gloomy vista.

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