

The RAVENSCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

He had recognised where he was. He was standing in Oxford Street in the ordinary London world he knew. It must be very late at night, for almost all the traffic had ceased. He staggered across the street and found himself at the top of Park Lane.

To his right were the railings of Hyde Park, to his left the huge houses of the aristocracy towered up into the November night. A late red moon was beginning to illuminate the houses and cast a wan glow over the leafless branches of the trees.

Hardly knowing what he did, striving to collect his thoughts, Charlie walked slowly down Park Lane.

As he approached one of the great houses a small door opened. He caught a glimpse of a brightly lit passage and a fat person in evening dress coming out upon the pavement. He was shaking hands with a much smaller man, who turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. It was Wag Ashton!

As the two stared at each other, and Charlie's face was so white and full of horror that the other was actually trembling, a motor came humming from Piccadilly. It pulled up suddenly, four yards away from where Wag and Charlie were confronting each other.

The door flew open and a girl jumped upon the pavement as if she had been pushed. Her low cry was merged in the furious throbbing of the engine as the car dashed away and was lost to view.

There was no doubt about it! This was the girl whom Charlie had tried to rescue, how long ago he hardly knew. This girl, who stood away upon the pavement with a chalk-white face, was the girl of the mysterious house. Feature for feature she was the same. Her slim hands were opening and shutting, trying to grasp at a support which was not there.

In a second Charlie was at her side holding her from falling. Her great horror-laden eyes stared into his own.

"You, you!" she murmured, "you the man who tried to save me!" Charlie had no time to say a word when the front door of the mansion was flung open.

A footman rushed out, followed by a tall brown-faced man with white hair and a heavy white mustache. A brilliant glow of orange light flooded into Park Lane. The girl tottered to Charlie's support.

"Father!" she cried. "Anthony! I've seen..."

In all his after life Charlie Penrose never forgot that most dramatic moment. There they stood, a group sharply outlined in the great blaze of light which came from the house and even turned to gold the leafless branches of the trees in the park beyond.

Then, as if some common impulse animated them all, they were swept into the house—the girl, her father, Charlie, Wag Ashton and the footman.

The heavy door closed behind them and shut out the dark November night of London.

CHAPTER II The Flight by Motor Car.

In a long, low-ceiling room, paneled in white, Charlie Penrose and his friend, Wag Ashton stood together, while the beautiful dark-haired girl told in a trembling voice of the hideous experience she had just undergone.

"As you know, Father dear, I drove to the Heath's in Bryanstone Square, about nine o'clock for their concert. Emily made me stay and have some supper, and then she did not notice the time, the driver called a taxi and which was going slowly around the square. I got in, and we were moving away when, suddenly, a man from the other side leapt in. I was too astonished for a moment to scream, and then, before I could do anything I found myself firmly seized and something pressed into my mouth. The blinds of the cab seemed to descend immediately, and it started off at a great pace. I must have fainted for the next thing I remember is being led into that awful room I have told you about."

The girl gave a deep sob and shuddered violently.

The tall, white-haired man, who was standing by her side, held a glass of wine to her lips.

"Take a little more of this, darling," he said in a soothing voice. "Be brave and tell me all, Muriel."

The girl made a tremendous effort. Charlie, who was watching her intently, quivered with sympathy as he

saw how she was fighting against an almost overpowering emotion. And when she began to speak again, the young man was lost in admiration at the firmness and courage that had returned to her voice. Here indeed was a queen among girls! A fearless, peerless maiden!

Already the girl had gasped out something of her story; now, her nerves somewhat calmed, she told in detail, her father listening intently, and occasionally asking an abrupt question.

"And you are sure," he said at length, "that the room in which you saw this hideous, inconceivable thing, was really your poor brother's room?"

"Detail for detail, Father," she answered. "I recognised it at once. It was impossible to be mistaken."

Visible perspiration started out upon the lean, brown face of the girl's father. "And the other?" he almost whispered, "the other room, darling?"

"It was my room," she answered firmly, "no less distinct than the other. I was the blue bedroom at Ravenscroft Hall."

There was a dead silence in the room.

"Can you go on, dear?" the elderly man said at length.

"Yes, father. I managed to get the gag out of my mouth. I turned round calling for help, and I saw this gentleman—he looked towards Charlie—the lights had only just been turned up, when he continued, 'I saw this gentleman standing out upon the lean, brown face of the girl's father. "And the other?" he almost whispered, "the other room, darling?"

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God—Charlie reeled as the full realization came to him, "and now, I have been made the tool!"—words failed him. He covered his face with his hands.

Muriel Vincent had risen from her seat. "You knew my dear brother," Charlie heard her say.

"Command yourself, Mr. Penrose," Sir Phillip said kindly, putting his hand upon the young man's shoulder. "And this gentleman?" he turned to the astonished Wag, who was standing impassively a little apart from the others. "How comes he to be here?"

Charlie shook his head. "I can't say at all," he answered, "but just as I came up to the house, I saw him coming out of it by a side door. This is Mr. Ashton. We have lived together for two years and shared each other's fortunes. Mr. Ashton is a professional boxer and professor of physical culture, especially the Japanese Ju-Jitsu. He is the best and most faithful friend I ever had."

Little Wag Ashton flushed and bowed. "My presence in your house, sir," he said, "is very easily explained. My friend here knows that lately I have been—fidgeted with his feet and his flush grew deeper, 'been, er, well, very much attracted by a young lady. That young lady is Miss Vincent's maid, Jane Gregory. This evening she consented to be engaged to me, and when I can get a home for her we hope to be married."

Sir Phillip smiled kindly. He realised the situation at once. "Everything is explained," he said, and then his face changed swiftly.

He stood in the middle of the room, a tall, distinguished figure, and they saw the brown of his face turn ashen grey. Once, twice, he raised his arms shoulder high and let them fall.

"And now," he said with a hollow groan, as if speaking to himself, "they threaten my Muriel." He pressed his hands to his brow as if the thoughts within were insupportable. "The legend," he muttered, "the Legend of the Raven, but it can't be! How can it be woven up with—"

Muriel went up to her father. All the paleness had left her face. Her eyes sparkled, her lips were curved broadly.

"Father," she said in a clear, confident voice, "what all this is I can't guess. It may be that the mysterious and hideous agency which murdered dear Anthony, was indeed the same that snatched me from a lit London street into that horrible room. Perhaps what I saw was indeed the murder of Anthony."

She shuddered deeply. "Perhaps what I saw afterwards," she went on, "is a foreshadowing of the way in which I am to die. But I am not afraid, I am not in the least afraid. I only ask myself this—why, should I have been taken to see these things? There is nothing supernatural in what has occurred tonight."

Charlie Penrose began to speak. "Of course, Sir Phillip," he said quickly, "I am an outsider in all this affair. It is only chance that has brought me into it. At the same time, if you will allow me, perhaps I may make a remark or two. I have been a cinematograph operator for nearly two years. I have shown thousands of films. I understand exactly how they are made. You will remember, too, that I studied the accounts of Mr. Anthony Vincent's murder with great care. It is obviously quite impossible that while Mr. Vincent was actually being murdered, a cinematograph film could have been taken of the dreadful event. Therefore, the film that I have shown tonight must have been a reconstruction of the murder, done, provided the people who took the picture had access to your house in Yorkshire. You have not been there lately?"

"Not for three months," Sir Phillip replied. "My daughter and I have been in the South of France until a week ago."

Charlie nodded. "What must have happened," he said with great decision, "is that a lay figure made to represent your son, was set in the chair by the writing table while the picture was being taken. As for the other—Thing," despite himself a note of horrible disgust and shrinking came into his voice. "That I do not understand. I mean to say, I do not in the least understand what it means or what significance it has in the history of the murder. But, with the resources of the modern film makers, I can assure you, that such an apparition is easily produced. It seems to me, if I may venture to say so, that this cruel and hideous business tonight, is meant to be a threat, a warning or a mental torture."

Sir Phillip started and drew himself up to his full height. "Sir," he said, "I thank you for these words. You have seen me unmaned for a moment. If you knew the dark

mysteries in which I am entangled, you would realise that even a strong man, especially when his very dearest is in danger, may have a momentary weakness, but your words have reanimated me. You have given me courage."

Charlie bowed. He saw that Muriel Vincent was looking at him with grateful eyes. She smiled faintly.

"And so you were," my dear brother's friend, Mr. Penrose," she said softly, and her voice broke the tension.

"Hardly that, Miss Vincent," Charlie answered. "He was far too senior to me at school. He was in the eleven when I was a rag, but I remember once he gave me a severing, and I worshipped him for ever after."

"Muriel," her father said, "you have gone through a great strain. I still want to ask Mr. Penrose a few questions. Don't you think you had better go to bed now?"

The girl went up to her father and kissed him. Then she held out her hand to Charlie. "You would have helped me, Mr. Penrose, if you had not been pulled down," she said sweetly, "at any rate your chance presence tonight has helped my father."

She bowed, smiled, and left the room.

As the door closed behind her, Sir Phillip's manner became brisk and business-like. "Now sit down," he said. "It is nearly two in the morning, but I am sure you won't mind talking this thing over with me."

"Not in the least, Sir Phillip," Charlie answered. And he and Wag sat down and accepted cigarettes from their host's case.

"I will ring for some whisky and soda," Sir Phillip said. "I ought to have thought of it long ago, after the strain that you have undergone. Please forgive me." He pressed an electric button in the wall.

"Now, tell me," he said, beginning to walk up and down the long room, "who was this gentleman you met after you left the cinema theatre? You say he followed you, came into the restaurant after you, and made you a proposal. Can you give me any idea of what he was like?"

Charlie started. "Didn't I tell you, Sir Phillip?" he said. "No, of course, I didn't. He was a Japanese, a Japanese who spoke English perfectly."

Sir Phillip stopped in his walk. "Ah!" he said quietly, "now I know."

He had hardly said it when the door of the white paneled room opened. The plump butler, Wag's friend, entered with a spirit tins and glasses upon a tray. The man was putting them down upon a table when quick footsteps were heard outside the hall.

Sir Phillip raised his head, and in a second more, a short, thick-set, agile man in black lounge suit, passed into the room.

Charlie Penrose and Wag Ashton rose from their seats in a flash.

The man was a full-blooded Japanese.

Now, one Japanese is very like another to the European eye. The newcomer presented many details of likeness to the suave, fair-coated person who had lured Charlie to the unknown house. To Wag Ashton and to Charlie in the strained state of their nerves, he seemed exactly the same.

The little pugilist crouched down and was preparing to run at the man his hands open for the first Ju-Jitsu grip, when Sir Phillip interposed. "No, no!" he cried. "Don't be mistaken. This is Mr. Umataro, my personal servant and friend. I understand your agitation."

The two young men, feeling rather foolish, stared at the Japanese. As they did so they realised that there were many points of difference between him and the sinister stranger of the earlier part of the night.

Sir Phillip and Umataro exchanged a sentence, as the plump, impassive butler withdrew from the room and closed the door. Then the Japanese burst into a quick current of talk. His eyes flashed, his small muscular hands gesticulated, he was obviously in terrible earnest, and what he said made his master grow ashen grey once more, and sent a despairing haunted look into his eyes.

Sir Phillip made a motion of his hand and the Japanese retired to the door, where he remained standing in impassive silence. Sir Phillip turned to Charlie.

"This is the night," he said, "in which surprise succeeds surprise, and horror, horror, Mr. Penrose, never mind how I know it, but let me tell you that everything that has happened to my daughter tonight, and to you also, has taken place within three hours or four yards from where we stand. Incredible as it may seem to you, it occurred only next door."

Charlie gave a shout of amazement.

The tiny hall of the flat was in darkness. Wag flashed on the electric light. The two men shared one fairly large bedroom and they went into it at once, flinging necessities into a couple of kit-bags and making the most hurried preparations for departure.

"We must keep the flat on," Charlie said when their packing was done. "We might want it. We only owe the landlord ten pounds. I'll write a letter and enclose two tickets."

He chuckled. "The enemy's money, my dear boy." And Wag Ashton gave a marionette grin as Charlie took out the notes that had been paid him earlier in the night.

Chuckling, they went down the passage, opened the door of their sitting-room and switched on the light.

From an armchair in the further corner of the room a short, broad gentleman in evening clothes rose, as if to welcome them.

It was the man of the restaurant, the Japanese.

Both young men gave a loud cry of mingled alarm and surprise. The Japanese bowed and smiled. His purplish lips writhed up from his teeth; one hand was outstretched and the electric light shone upon the blue barrel of an automatic pistol.

"So pleased to meet you again," the man said in a mocking, snarling voice. "So you are now friends of Sir Phillip Vincent, the late Ambassador to my country. You have been packing up. You really think, gentlemen, that you are going to Yorkshire?"

Charlie found words first. "You devil," he said, "how do you know what—"

"Well," the other answered, the muzzle of his pistol pointing straight at Charlie's heart, "since you were told that your little experience to-night took place, next door to Sir Phillip Vincent's house in Park Lane surely a young man of your intelligence is able to realise that walls are not very thick, and that means of overhearing conversations between one house and another can be easily arranged—by those with an object in view?"

Charlie grew very white as he leant against the wall.

The muzzle of the pistol shifted an inch.

"In three seconds," the Japanese remarked blandly, "you are further than Yorkshire, Mr. Penrose."

The prolonged and terrible strain of the night's adventures culminated now as if in one swift stroke, Charlie leant against the wall, limp, powerless. All energy and will had left him. He awaited the end of it all.

The Japanese smiled, cruelly and took accurate aim at his adversary's heart.

But he had reckoned without Wag Ashton.

The little pugilist had crouched low without a single movement. He had drawn near to the sneering, yellow fanged with almost imperceptible advance; simultaneously with the flash and explosion of the pistol Wag was on the top of the Japanese.

A frightful silent struggle began, as Charlie—quite unharmed—began to stagger away from the wall. The Japanese was an expert in the wonderful system of self-defence known as Ju-Jitsu, but now he had met his match. Ashton was younger, quicker, and in better training as the two swayed and wrestled upon the floor in deadly silence, only broken by their deep and laboured breathing. Wag remembering every detail of his long apprenticeship to Ju-Jitsu.

A sudden blow upon the small bones of the hand loosened the grip of the Japanese upon the pistol. The man's arm was instantly seized and twisted into a position of almost unendurable pain. Wag's head was pressed against the man's groin with the celebrated "rib" movement. The little pugilist's right hand pulled away his opponent's leg just behind the ankle. In three seconds more, Wag was spread-eagled over his antagonist, and the Japanese was limp, powerless, and groaning in agony.

"Now then, Charlie, be quick," Wag said breathlessly. "Get that coil of wire the telephone people left behind last week."

Charlie got it.

Under Wag's direction he wound the thick wire round the ankles of the Japanese. The man was turned upon his back and his wrists were bound until it was impossible for him to free them.

All this was carried out in dead silence. It was Charlie that broke it. "You gagged Miss Vincent," he said fiercely as he pressed a handkerchief twisted into a ball into the captive's mouth and secured it by a silk scarf bound tightly round his head. "You dared to fill-treat an English lady—to say nothing of the mental torture to which you subjected her. I think, Mr., whatever your name may be—that we are now more than quits."

At Wag's suggestion Charlie

searched the man, tumbling everything that came from his pockets into one of the kit-bags which still remained open.

"You will be here for another twenty-four hours," Charlie said, "and if you are alive at the end of that time you will be released, owing to a letter I am about to post. And if you cross my path again—then, God help you!"

"Same here," said Wag Ashton quietly, as the two went out of the sitting-room and closed the door upon the gagged, wire-bound figure up on the floor.

They locked the door of the flat and carried their bags down to the street. As luck would have it, they found a cab, the driver of which, half asleep, was droning home to the garage. As they got into it and gave the address in Park Lane Wag spoke.

"Do you think he'll die, Charlie?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it," the other replied. "He is as tough as whip-cord. He'll have a bad time, of course, and he deserves it. Don't let's think about him. We have escaped another great danger, and now we take up our new duties. We go to protect Sir Phillip Vincent, and his daughter, from terrible foes."

Wag nodded. As far as he was concerned, there was another pretty girl in the case upon whom his thoughts were fixed.

In less than five minutes the friends arrived at the tall, dark house in Park Lane. As they dismissed their cab and pressed the bell button, both of them looked curiously at the adjoining house upon the right which towered up, black, sinister and lifeless by the side of Sir Phillip Vincent's mansion.

Within an hour two large touring cars, followed by another crowded with luggage, slid noiselessly down Park Lane, just as the November dawn was beginning to break over London.

Hardly anyone was yet abroad, the market carts from distant suburbs were lumbering down Piccadilly towards Convent Garden. Here and there a sleepy policeman stood upon point duty round about Hyde Park Corner.

Two hours afterwards, as the three luxurious cars were rushing swiftly up the Great North Road towards Yorkshire and the Moors, they carried a stranger burden than the village wayfarers who saw them pass ever dreamed of.

The Spirit of Fear accompanied that swift flight through the fresh morning air. And within strong determination, an armed and watchful police, a high spirit of courage and adventure reigned.

And more than all these, tremulous, hesitating, halting, Love was born.

So they whirled up to the North.

CHAPTER III Horror Comes to Ravenscroft

It was just seven o'clock. A full moon was rising over the city of York. The night was cold but windless and clear, as little Wag Ashton strolled out of the big stable yard of the famous old Saracen's Head and Hotel, went under the archway, and with a clear in the corner of his mouth surveyed the quiet street of the old cathedral city.

Nearly two hours ago the three great motor cars had arrived at York. They had stopped twice only, once at Leicester and once at Sheffield. Now the cars were in the great yard at the hotel, Sir Phillip Vincent and his daughter were dining with Charlie Penrose, and Wag, having finished his own meal, had come out for a breath of the night air before the journey was continued. He understood that in two hours after their leaving York they would arrive at Sir Phillip's great house upon the moors.

The little man was happy. The extraordinary occurrences of the last twenty-four hours had interested him enormously. His adventurous disposition was pleased and thrilled. For a time at any rate the days of inactivity and poverty seemed over. His philosophy was quite simple. Where Charlie Penrose led Wag Ashton would follow to the death, for he loved and admired his friend more than any other man in the world. The future, whatever it might bring forth, was sure to be full of excitement. And, more than all else, Wag would be constantly in the society of pretty, graceful Jane Gregory, whom he had lately learned to love and to whom, only the night before, he had become engaged.

All the long rush through England—the flight from unknown perils; he had occupied a car alone with Charlie. The two had talked out the situation very thoroughly and had resolved to stick to Sir Phillip and his daughter whatever might befall. Wag had insisted on one thing.

When people women love you something of a three questions: 1. Unless they wrong about the how can anybody moment that wastes its affective serving members sex? 2. And is it love doubtful me? 3. And am I think women—love had men be as personal friend love them better to observe from? Of course, the a lot of different little stung out that I, for instar yearning toward men. When about saintly about them, or ings, one finds satisfying. Perf with nothing to If you were like Patrick or A feel distinctly a little disgusted, strange country imagined yourself found it full arse on herbs and and grieving over In the same way ing with a dead and suffering, y to a place that a hospital and and sound men same reason, eve sweet women le unnoticed. The men and would pletely, but they attention to the smudges from a upon them. The marry these sha they want to w The sweet w smudges. Oh, crics over them. job for her and she hugs the id could do it. So we women because we real mensey, and the man who the y to come along, a startling against the white, in or kept from slippi may feel that w live for. Beside preach to us. These are the have a weak spe what is called isn't stagnant, all alive from the ends of his. What is more, pluck to take o doing them; an bad, he wakes u order to fight n tricky moves. of our cleverness a world of g from sloth. If t about us, comp stantly on guar come limp-musc So for our ow of us take the h hearts. It's no evil to good t that Even tho fondest of had a fierce hatred fo self. But they about, they cha their wrongdoin active in order them and cure tracing of their out grippingly white background we start scurryi the dirty lines. force, giving us goodness always there wouldn't without them vilians being saints, but we being in the w because it is on villainy that sal And these w look very nice manners, and the picturesou uly lose our ncest bad lots, had and we do. We see them eare. This mak when they beg our scourgings. Even the ras

To be continued.