

## The RAVENSCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

"Clever," he said to himself. "Here is a door that nothing but dynamite would have blown up, and they secure it by a four-and-sixpenny Birmingham padlock. It is always so in life. Over-confidence has been the ruin of many a better man than Lord Helston. There is a weak point in the armour of everyone, and in this case I seem to have found it."

The light of the torch showed him that he was in a bare room of small size. The walls were covered with rotting, wooden panelling. There was an old table and three or four chairs pushed into a corner. The door in front of him was now the more modern part of the castle. The door in front of him was locked, from the other side. It was an easy matter to push back the door, but he took the precaution of the rusty mechanism before he did so, to switch off the flash light and to open the door with the greatest possible caution.

There was no sound. Before him, in a lamp of bronze, round which dragons curled, was a wide corridor. The walls were hung with priceless Japanese colour prints in frames of thin gold. His feet trod upon a soft carpet of tawny red and faded blue. Large doors of polished wood were on each side of this corridor which was as wide as a room. In the middle of it was a carved table of ebony upon which stood a huge bowl of satsuma enamel. The light from the bronze lamp fell upon the jewelled glories of its sides, and it was filled with sulphur-coloured winter roses from some hothouse.

Charlie was, at last, in the very stronghold of the Unknown. His teeth clenched, his eyes watchful, his ears greedy for the slightest noise, he crept onwards. In his left hand he held the electric torch, in his right was the modern automatic pistol which could fire eight shots in two seconds.

His progress was as noiseless as that of a jaguar stalking its prey. He passed door after door of polished wood. A warm scented atmosphere surrounded him. He was in the secret home of great mystery. He had passed from the raffish, owl-haunted chamber of the turret, down the passage and into a place where the last word of modern comfort had been spoken.

"They are real then, these people," he thought to himself. "I am in the house of mystery, possibly the house of horrors, and the enemies with whom I have to deal are flesh and blood."

He stopped, stiffened suddenly and crouched against the left hand wall of the corridor. The light of the bronzed lamp was now a considerable way behind him, he had come to where its rays but hardly penetrated, and where the heavy aromatic odours seemed to wrap him round like curtains. And, not three yards before him, a band of orange light cut like a wedge into the darkness.

The light came from a door upon his left, door that was ajar. He heard the murmur of voices. Glimpsing his pistol more firmly in his hand he crept onwards. He heard a voice that he knew, that he knew very well indeed.

"It was nearly done. The young ruffians tied me up—with telephone wire, if you please!" There was a soft chuckling. "It was a pure coincidence of course that this young Penrose and his friend, who I have ascertained, is a professional boxer and who even knows Jujitsu! I am afraid when I instructed the chauffeur to drive Miss Vincent round London after her little experience in Park Lane, I didn't allow for every possibility."

Charlie's breath was almost strangled in his throat. He knew who was talking. The voice was the voice of the Japanese gentleman who had accented him outside the cinema theatre in Oxford Street.

There was a deep musical reply. Again the listener was thrilled to the foundations of his being. The voice that spoke was the voice that had so lately rung in musical agony into the quiet night. It was different now, it was toned down to the pitch of ordinary speech, but it was still incredibly rich—commanding.

"I am sorry, Yoshida."

"You need not be. I bear no malice. I work for the Cause, and as you know now, these two misguided young men have fled for London tonight. They got, rather more than they bargained for yesterday, according to your own account!"

"They did, and Ravenscroft is now waiting for—"

"For what, Prince?"

"I will tell you to-morrow," the beautiful voice concluded. "Ravenscroft shall have a respite tonight, and as for its owner—look!"

"We will go to bed," came the voice that Charlie knew.

There was a sound of laughter, musically blended, the hissing noise of feet moving over some smooth surface—perhaps the noise of Oriental slippers upon some carpet woven of grass. Then a final word.

"The lights? Shall I turn them out, Prince?"

"Why?" the organ voice replied.

"What does it matter? My electricians know well that they must always have reserve of power. No, while we sleep the lights shall shine down upon—"

Charlie heard no more, save the crisp closing and locking of a door far away, at the other end of the room.

His moment had come.

He rose from his stooping posture, took three silent steps and pushed open the heavy mahogany door from which the yellow lights had cut into the blackness.

He stood aghast. He found himself in a huge room, so brilliantly lit, so wonderful in its splendour, colours and marvellous decoration, that it struck upon the eye like a blow from a hand of gold. The Arabian Nights?—Here were suddenly seen glories which the brain could hardly realize.

And then, and then, Charlie sank to the ground with a low cry of horror.

Three yards away, bound tightly with ropes, seated in a chair, his face a mask of tortured horror and with gout of blood upon it, was Sir Philip Vincent!

CHAPTER IX.  
Sinister Lady Yeoland.

"Well, I think your brother is a fool," General Yeoland said to his wife, as he rose from the breakfast table. "All this, confounded nonsense and imagination about persecution and intrigues and all that."

"Philip is not generally thought to be a fool," the General's wife answered.

"You know what I mean," was the irritable reply. "Of course he was a successful Ambassador to Japan, he is a distinguished man in the public eye, and so forth, but all this present nonsense simply annoys me. It is my private opinion that Philip Vincent got a touch of the sun a good many years ago when he was out East, and that his son's mysterious murder—though I always thought it looked like a suicide, by Jove!—has simply turned him into a nervous old woman."

General Sir Thomas Yeoland, V.C., D.S.O. etc., etc., was already in uniform, for there was a big parade and the Commander in Chief of the Eastern Army Corps must inspect the various units.

The tall, elderly man, with the grey waxed moustache was in an ill temper. He grumbled as he gulped down the cup of coffee, caught up his sword and sabre-fascia and stamped out into the hall, where two slim, young aides-de-camp were waiting.

He gave them a few curt directions and then put his head once more into the breakfast room.

"Well, good-bye, Maria," he said. "Goodness knows when I shall be back. What are you going to do?"

"This morning I shall be shopping," said Lady Yeoland, "and in the afternoon Muriel and I are going for a walk."

"Very well, but do try and knock all this nonsense out of the girl's head. I am dashed fond of Muriel as you know, but she seems all off wires. Your silly brother has been infecting her with his own superstitions. I am damned if I believe that Ravenscroft is haunted or anything of the sort—your brother's an ass, Maria!"

The door banged, there was a clinking and clattering of swords and spears beyond, and shortly afterwards Lady Yeoland heard the pawing of horses' feet upon the gravel sweep outside the house, as the orderlies brought up the charges and the officers mounted and trotted away to the Barracks Square.

It was eight o'clock in the morning. Dawn had only just begun, the long, luxurious breakfast room was lit by lamps, and only a faint grey winter's light came in from the long French windows. A huge fire burned upon the hearth. A young footman entered and began to remove silver breakfast dishes.

"Breakfast at nine, my lady?" he asked in a deferential voice.

"Yes, Charles, at nine. Miss Muriel will be down then. Has the post arrived yet?"

"Not yet, my lady."

"Oh, I am going upstairs. When it does arrive tell Jenkins to bring the bag to me at once."

"Thank you, my lady. It should be here in twenty minutes now, if the London train has not been delayed by the fog."

Lady Yeoland, who was wearing a turbaned morning wrapper, rose from the breakfast table and went to her boudoir upon the first floor. She always made a point of coming down to see that her husband had his breakfast in comfort upon days when big military evolutions were in force. Now, she gave a sigh of relief as she entered the cosy little sitting-room which adjoined her bedroom.

Lady Yeoland was not a popular woman. Together with the wife of the Archbishop of York and two or three other great ladies, she was at the head of official society in the largest county in England. Of irreproachable descent—a sister of our late Ambassador to Japan, a wife of one of the best liked soldiers of the day, who had distinguished himself in the Boer War by his brilliant cavalry tactics, a woman of handsome and commanding presence, one would have thought that the Fates had given her almost everything.

Yet she was not popular. Every-where acknowledged that she was a devoted wife to her husband, every-where admitted that her social tact and her leadership of society were both beyond criticism. Nevertheless, no one seemed—to use a homely phrase—"to get any nearer to her." She baffled people. She seemed to be a woman with reserves which no one had ever been allowed to penetrate. With a hundred friends, she had no intimates, and even Muriel, her nearest feminine relation by blood—the Yeolands had no children—felt that she could never really love her aunt, though the two were the greatest friends, and there was at least a show of extreme intimacy between them.

Lady Yeoland's maid came out of the bedroom and assisted her mistress to complete her toilet.

"Be sure, Briggs, that the post bag is brought up to me directly it arrives."

"Thank you, my lady. It should be here now. I will go and see."

Briggs left the boudoir and went into the corridor. An adjacent door opened and a pretty girl in a dress of dark grey came out, closing the door softly behind her.

It was Jane Gregory, Muriel Vincent's maid.

"Hello, Jane."

"Hello, Plo, what are you doing?"

"Going down to see if the post has come."

"Lady Yeoland's maid answered, "she seems anxious about it this morning, wants to have the letters up at once."

"Well, I'm on the same job, dear. If you ask me, Miss Muriel wants her letters, too. She's just as restless as she can be, and I don't believe she slept at all last night."

"Something up, you may depend upon that," Briggs remarked philosophically.

Jane Gregory looked at her new friend, and seemed half inclined to speak, but thought better of it, and shut her mouth. And, as the two girls descended the stairs into the hall, Jane thought that she could tell a story that would considerably surprise and interest the demure Florence, Jane, also, expected a letter from a certain agile little professor of pugilism, physical culture and jujitsu, but she had been warned to tell nothing of the strange occurrences at Ravenscroft to anyone in the house of General Sir Thomas Yeoland.

The post bag arrived as the two went down into the hall.

"What about Miss Muriel?" Jane said.

"My lady has the key, dear."

Briggs answered, "so you must wait a minute or two until the bag is unlocked."

"Very well," the other answered and in a moment more Briggs was in Lady Yeoland's boudoir.

"You can go now, Briggs."

"Yes, my lady. If you please, my lady, Miss Muriel is expecting a letter. I have just seen her maid."

"I shall be down in the breakfast room in five minutes—tell Miss Muriel."

Briggs left the room.

Lady Yeoland unlocked the private post bag which an orderly brought three times a day from the general post office in the city. With her firm, white hands—they were extraordinarily capable and prehensile—she sorted the letters as if she were dealing a hand of cards. A little pile for Sir Thomas showed up upon the table. There were one or two for various members of the household—the residential aide-de-camp; one or two for the servants—and one thick, large envelope for

Lady Yeoland, and another, in handwriting resembling her own letter, for Muriel Vincent.

The strong white hands all open the large envelope with a tiny silver paper knife. Lady Yeoland withdrew a letter written in firm, clear, but rather angular script. It bore the heading, embossed in black, "Ravenscroft House, Hammoor, York."

She glanced through the letter, nodded her head two or three times as if with inward satisfaction. Then she did a curious thing. She went to a little ebony writing table in the corner of the boudoir, and took a large reading glass from one of its drawers. Coming back to the table she scrutinized the signature of the letter under the magnifying glass. Then she nodded once more.

She put back the letter in the envelope and withdrew from it another enclosure. This was a half sheet of newspaper, thin and crackling—it seemed like foreign paper. Upon it was a series of odd little squares and angles, interspersed here and there with a series of numbers.

She unhooked a little gold pencil from the chateleine at her belt, frowned, bent over the table with great concentration and began to write letter after letter above the symbols upon the page.

Obviously Lady Yeoland was a woman of business-like habits and quick decision. She knew the cypher from memory, not waiting to gather its full meaning, until she had got it in plain English. Then, when this was finished, she sat back in her chair, and read the communication with the greatest care. She read it once, she read it twice, and then she walked to the fire and carefully burnt it.

Upon a trivet by the fire was a little copper kettle from which the steam was pouring in a thin, feathery jet—the night before Lady Yeoland had told her maid that she had been suffering from indigestion lately, and that the doctor had ordered her a glass of hot water before taking the first meal. Hence the little kettle.

Lady Yeoland passed into her bedroom, and returned in a moment or two with a tumbler of cut glass. She nearly filled the glass with hot water from the kettle. Hot water in the early morning is a well-known cure for digestive troubles, perhaps Lady Yeoland's indigestion had now departed, for she certainly did not drink the boiling fluid. Instead of doing so, she took up the letter addressed to Miss Muriel Vincent—which bore the same handwriting as the one she had just opened—and deliberately proceeded to steam the flap of the envelope.

In two minutes the flap curled up. In three seconds the strong white hands had withdrawn the enclosed letter.

Lady Yeoland read it carefully. When she had done so, her face, which had been slightly contracted and anxious, smoothed itself again into its usual expression of some-what stony calm. Lady Yeoland seemed relieved. But as she replaced the letter in its envelope and deftly stuck it down with a little brush of rum from the writing table, Lady Yeoland's finely arched brows went up, her firm, smooth brow contracted, and she gave a nervous whistle of surprise.

A towel pressed upon the letter for a few seconds restored it to its original appearance. It was replaced in the post bag with the other letters. Lady Yeoland left her boudoir and descended to the breakfast room carrying the bag in her hand.

It was now a full winter's morning—a grey day without any appeal whatever, but still, morning. The lamps which had been put upon the table for the General's early meal had been removed. Flowers from the conservatory had been cut by the gardener and placed upon the table. The fire was remade, the place was comfortable and cosy, and bore no trace of its recent occupation by the irritable warrior, who was even now clanking over the moor with his staff, and who would much rather have been sitting down to cutlets and devilled kidneys at a little after nine.

"Here are the letters, Charlie," Lady Yeoland said, giving them to the footman. "There are four for the office, three for Captain Osborne, and one for Major Dobbin. Here are the servants' letters, and let me see"—she dealt the letters musically—"oh, yes, one for me, and six, seven for Sir Thomas; and, ah, yes, one for Miss Vincent."

The footman bowed, put the letters upon a tray and hurried from the room.

He had not been gone a moment when the door opened and Muriel came in.

Muriel wore a skirt of Harris tweed check and a flannel blouse of dark red. She looked perfectly tailored, absolutely charming and self-possessed as she came in and kissed her aunt. An acute observer,

however, might have discerned a certain anxiety in the grey eyes which flitted over the flowers, glass and stirrer of the breakfast table.

"Had a good night, Muriel?" Lady Yeoland said in her brisk, bright voice, a voice in which people said there was always something a little metallic. "Had a good night?"

"And then not waiting for a reply, "Letter for you from Ravenscroft."

It is not too much to say that Muriel darted to the other side of the table. She sat down, tore open the envelope, and then put it quietly by the side of her plate, as Charles entered and began to serve breakfast.

"Devilled kidneys, migs?"

"No."

"Scrambled eggs and mushrooms, miss?"

"No—I mean yes, anything, Charles."

"Very good, miss." The young man did his duties and went away.

Lady Yeoland was occupied in reading a letter of her own. Muriel read also. The lady at the head of the table, with a quick, oblique glance, noticed that the hands of her niece were trembling.

"This was what Muriel read."

"My darling."

"Charlie Penrose has told me everything that happened yesterday, when you were driving with him to York. I have waited the day before writing you, I am not going to send you any long letter now, but I send you my love and my blessing, for I know that you will have been waiting to hear from me. Muriel, he is a splendid fellow! Since poor Anthony's death I have never taken to any one in the same way as I have done to Charlie. I say Charlie, because I know now that you love him and he loves you. I could not wish a better husband for my daughter, and I give your engagement my sanction. He had told me all about his people. I am no stickler for social proprieties—I have lived too long in the world not to know how hollow such distinctions are. Still I am glad that the man of your choice is of our own rank. Of the strange way in which he has come into our lives, I can say nothing more than that I believe the guiding hand of Providence has been at work."

"And now, my dearest girl, I will tell you that the chivalrous and splendid devotion of the man whom I hope will one day be your husband has resulted in the definite carrying out of the plan that was hinted to you before. Charlie has gone. He went to Helston Castle, fully equipped for a dangerous undertaking by his quaint little friend, Mr. Ashton, tonight. He has done it for you, dear, and yet I believe he has done it for England also. I feel the greatest confidence for him. I am a more hopeful and determined man than I have ever been. Charles Penrose will discover the precise nature of the controlling mind which has persecuted us for so long."

"All my love, my dearest daughter—all my love."

"Your father."

"Philip Vincent."

"Interesting letter, Muriel?"

Muriel started. Her aunt's sharp cold voice cut into her joy and anxiety. The girl's mind was in a whirl of sensation. To know that her father approved of her strangely sudden engagement to an almost stranger made her whole being tremble. To know that Charlie had disappeared into the unknown, bravely fighting hideous phantoms—indeed they were phantoms—for her sake, stabbed the girl's heart with icy apprehension, even in the moment of her joy.

"Yes, Aunt."

"Interesting letter, I said, Muriel? You seem dreamy, didn't you sleep well?"

Muriel made a great effort and recovered her composure.

"Not very well, Aunt. I suppose it was the new place, don't you know?"

"Well, it may be. I have noticed the same thing myself when I have been changing houses, but you will sleep better tonight."

"I hope so," Muriel replied—was it some trick of the grey morning light, or did she see a curious gleam flash and fade in Lady Yeoland's eye?

"Well, what are you going to do this morning? Your uncle has gone off on a big review, and there will be manoeuvres afterwards. He won't be home until dinner time this evening. I want to do a good deal of shopping in York—like to come?"

Muriel noticed that her aunt's invitation was only perfunctory. She was glad of it. She wanted to be alone to think everything over.

"Well, if you don't mind, Aunt, I think I'll just potter about by myself this morning."

She did not notice that there was a note of relief in her aunt's voice as she replied, "Very well then, we will meet at lunch. There is an organ recital in the Minster if you like to go. A couple of tickets

came last night. It is not a general public affair, but still you might like to pass an hour away hearing Dr. Pasche trying out his fugues."

"Just what I should like, Auntie," Muriel responded eagerly. The idea appealed to her at once. Wrapped in furs, hidden behind some great column of the Minster, while the massive harmonies of the great organ pealed out under the vaulted roofs, she knew that she would find peace of mind and time for deep consideration.

"Very well then, lunch at half-past one. But this afternoon, Muriel, you must go for a good brisk walk with me. I shall be driving about the city all the morning, and I must get some exercise before your uncle returns."

"I shall be very glad, Auntie, after lunch."

The two ladies rose from the breakfast table and went their several ways in the big, luxurious house.

About half-past eleven Lady Yeoland's brougham stopped outside the Capital and Yorkshire Bank in High Street. Charles, the footman, was jumped down from the box, opened the door, and the Commanding Officer's wife, in her heavy sable coat and muff entered the bank. The pale clerk at the counter bowed deferentially.

"I want to see Mr. Tracey," said Lady Yeoland, mentioning the name of the manager.

"Certainly, my lady, certainly," the clerk said, "one moment." He hastened to an inner room, was only gone a second or two, and then bowed politely, lifted up the counter flap, opened a door and ushered Lady Yeoland down a short passage into the manager's room.

Mr. Tracey, the manager, was a slim, middle-aged man, with a pointed beard turning grey. He was standing to receive his distinguished visitor. Sir Thomas Yeoland was a very wealthy man. The garrison accounts were all kept at the C.Y.B. Sir Philip Vincent had a large local account—Lady Yeoland was a client to be received like a princess.

The tall handsome woman with the firm white hands and curious enigmatic expression was singularly gracious this morning. She shook the manager's hand with great cordiality. It was an extraordinary condescension.

"Well, Mr. Tracey," she said, fumbling in her muff and withdrawing a letter, "the little precautions that my husband asked you to make two days ago are no longer necessary."

"You mean about the chest that was deposited in the vaults, Lady Yeoland?"

"Exactly, you can dismiss the special policemen, and the sentry will be taken away this afternoon. The matter was purely a temporary one."

"Quite so, Lady Yeoland, you have of course."

"Here is my brother's authorization," she said holding out a letter stamped with the Ravenscroft heading and the Vincent crest.

The manager took it and read as follows:

"Dear Maria."

"The necessity for specially guarding the box which my agent deposited at the C.Y.B. is now over, and I should be glad to have it again. Thank Thomas very much for helping me in the matter. I can't explain why, but you may take it from me that the precautions were really necessary, though they are now no longer so. Please take this to Mr. Tracey, and instruct him to deliver the box to my Japanese servant, Umataro, who will call for it, during the afternoon and give a receipt."

Mr. Tracey looked up. "Certainly," he beamed. "Sir Philip's man will come for the box sometime during the day. I see, I see. I hope your ladyship and Sir Thomas are very well?"

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Tracey. Oh, by the way, you know that in a fortnight's time the Hussars and the Carbiniers are giving a fancy dress ball, might I send you and Mrs. Tracey a card?"

"Delighted, delighted," the bank manager replied—he would gladly have paid fifty pounds for the invitation which was so freely proffered. "It is very kind of your ladyship, I am sure."

"Not at all, not at all. Good morning, Mr. Tracey."

"Good morning."

The manager himself came out of his private office, and saw Lady Yeoland into her brougham. The footman banged the door and jumped up on the box. "Home Bill," he said to the coachman. It seemed that Lady Yeoland had not very much shopping to do in the city after all!

Lunch had been over for nearly two hours. Muriel had spent the latter part of the morning in the Minster. It had been cold in the great building, but she was wrapped

in furs and felt nothing of it. She had listened to the organ harmonies with ears that heard but the inward meaning, the personal appeal of the stately fugues that rolled and pealed like thunder through the aisles and transepts. The supreme melodies of Bach formed but a complement to her thoughts. Her mind so shaken and agitated in the immediate past by her terrible experiences, had seemed numbed—or smoothed rather—to a profound peace. She was no longer drifting helplessly upon the sea of her father's ambition. Out of the night, out of the dark, out of the unknown a knight in armour had risen to protect her. Her simple girlish mind had received a new strength and impulse.

She loved, she was beloved—the man she loved with all her heart and soul was fighting for her, for her father, for all that she had been taught to care for and revere.

Certainly as she sat in the great cathedral, and heard the thundering harmonies vibrate in that forest of stone, certainly a deep anxiety and fear formed part of her sensations. She knew that her lover was engaged in a most perilous mission. She did not underestimate the cunning, the perfect organisation, which had kidnapped her by a trick in London and forced her to witness pictured horrors. Nor had she any illusions about the sinister power of her father's enemies—those enemies who, upon the very night of her arrival at Ravenscroft, could terrify to the extremity of terror, and could murder a trustful servant and friend. But she could believe utterly in one man, one force; one determination—that of her lover.

Lady Yeoland and her niece had walked some way beyond the confines of the city. Lady Yeoland talked but superficially, and Muriel herself was in no mood for conversation. They chatted to each other in an abstracted fashion, and their feet rang upon the hard road between the weathered hedges.

They had left York by the northern gate, and were now pushing onwards towards Ravenscroft.

Suddenly Muriel realised this, and the realisation gave her a quick pang of joy. They were only two miles from the city, but the girl's heart leaped up to think that her face was turned towards where all the hope of her life was waiting.

Suddenly her aunt said something that chilled and cut short the flow of her thought. Muriel looked round, dusk was already falling, though it was not much after four o'clock. There was something in Lady Yeoland's voice which struck a curious and a sinister note.

"Don't you think we have gone too far Auntie?" she asked suddenly turning and seeing the lights of the city below—for they were mounting now towards the moorlands.

"Perhaps we have," came the reply, sharp staccato and unusual in the keen air of late afternoon. "Let's turn then, Muriel. Possibly we have walked a little too much."

They turned, and the city faded below. Suddenly, Lady Yeoland caught Muriel to her. Her arms were very strong. She held the girl and kissed her passionately.

"Auntie!" Muriel cried, in wild surprise, "what do you mean, what is this?"

In answer to her question Lady Yeoland released her, and the girl went staggering back to the other side of the road. Then, all that Muriel knew was that Lady Yeoland leaped at her like a panther. She felt the blow of a clenched fist upon her temple. She felt back fainting and as she did so she heard the growling hum of an approaching motor-car.

She was not quite unconscious as a great black car stopped and people seemed to swarm from it and carry her inside. Long after she remembered that a tiny cart came up the winding road, and that something oblong and heavy was taken from it and placed upon the seat opposite her.

The last thing she consciously knew was that the car which held her began to move with great rapidity, and that she heard a voice which brought back memories of terror.

It was one of the voices which had peeped in her ear in London when she had seen the pictured story of her brother's murder.

Then Muriel fell into darkest, blackest sleep.

CHAPTER X.  
What Lived on the Castle on the Moor.