

## The RAVENSCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

How long she was unconscious, neither then nor at any other time, did she know. She came to herself while the old Japanese woman was sponging her face with aromatic vinegar. She sighed, and as she did so her attendants were gone. Once again the heavy curtains were lifted.

This is what she saw: In two massive chairs, side by side, her father and her lover sat tense and bound.

Sir Philip Vincent looked straight out beyond her with the fixed glare of agony. His face was frightful. By his side, Charlie with a white bandage round the lower part of his face, was trembling and struggling in his bonds. His eyes met hers. They seemed to signal some message.

Muriel covered her face with her hands and bowed her head. "Who are you, who are you?" she cried after a full half minute. Her screaming voice echoed in the high roof and fell back upon her in little flakes of sound.

There was a long silence while the girl crouched shuddering among her cushions. Once or twice she glanced before her. The lights had now been lowered. She saw the dusky outline of her father's tortured frame, Charlie's trembling, straining figure; a hideous picture of impotent agony and longing.

The voice spoke once more, slowly, with each syllable peeling like a doom bell.

"Those men you love will die tonight, and this will go back to the land of the Rising Sun."

The voice had hardly ceased, when like ghosts two Japanese came into the screened alcove of her agony, carrying an open box. A light shot down from overhead, a light of shimmering jewels rose up to meet it, and Muriel saw the Sword, the Mirror and the Crystal Globe.

It was as if a vision had passed before her eyes. The light above went out; the jewels of Japan and those who bore them vanished.

"If you swear to marry me, your father, and the young man, Charles Penrose, will be set free. The Regalia of my country will be restored to your father. I will give up all my long hopes for the country of which my mother was a Princess. Choose!"

"Bring me the Book! Bring me the Book!"

"What book?"

"The Book, the Bible on which I will swear to marry you, to save my father, to save my darling, to save Japan. Quick! Bring me the Book."

The curtain before the alcove fell. Immediately there was a great burst of music, triumphant music.

Yoshida crouched low holding out a black book upon a silver of gold. Hardly knowing what she did, Muriel bent and kissed it.

Fingers were at her ankles, the golden shackles were unlocked. She rose from her couch tall, white, and beautiful.

"I have made my sacrifice," she said, "let the bridegroom come!" She threw up her beautiful arms and began to laugh.

Peals of ringing, maddened laughter echoed in the roof. "The bridegroom, my bridegroom! Bring him to me, bring him!"

### CHAPTER XIII

#### The Bridegroom Comes!

Penrose was back in the windowless room.

The electric fan in the roof whispered quietly as if it was telling some secret to itself. The light from the ceiling flooded the place. Charlie was chained by the ankles as before.

It could hardly have been more than three hours ago since the inhuman creature that was called Lord Helston had hung an incredible threat at his prisoner.

Now Charlie knew that it was all perfectly true.

The whole devilish ingenuity, the supreme stage-management—so to speak—the abominable drama in which he had been forced to play a silent part, had accomplished its ends. The fatal secret of Lady Yeoland's life had been the means of capturing Muriel.

Muriel was not only in the power of the monster, she had consented to marry him.

A groan of anguish filled the little room. Lying upon his couch, his hands pressed over his face, Charlie Penrose tasted a bitterness worse than death.

The diabolical cunning of it all! The figure which Muriel had really believed to be her father! He him-

self, Charlie Penrose, tied, bound, unable to speak, and yet given enough freedom to show that he was alive! Oh, it was hideous to turn a man's blood to ice, to change what had been his soul, heart, hope, life to a dead thing of lead.

For himself, Charlie had hardly a thought. He knew that Lord Helston's promise to set him free was merely mockery. He awaited death with supreme indifference. For him the world, all life, had ceased, and the sooner he went into nothingness the better he would be pleased. He lay upon his couch oblivious to everything.

Something touched him on the shoulder. It was a little hesitating tap, the touch of a dog snuffing for recognition.

Charlie turned languidly. The Japanese attendant, who had been sitting in the accustomed seat ever since Charlie had been brought back, strongly guarded from the scene in the great room below, was bending over him.

The young man snarled, "I understand," he said, "this is my end. Well, put the chloroform upon my face, or stick the knife into my heart as quickly as you can, get it over—I suppose you understand English?"

His words met with a curious answer.

The yellow face that bent over him showed no trace of malice or murder. A brown hand pressed upon his head in warning and a voice said, "You friend Wag Asston, mister?"

"At the words Charlie sat up in one movement.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"Your friend Wag Asston, professor boxing?"

"He's the best friend I've got in the world, but what do you mean?"

"Huss. Wag Asston my friend too, one time. I know Ju-jitsu game. I came London one time, teach Englishmen. They not want learn. But I teach Wag Asston. I teach him all my art, all piece same, he teach me how box—how hit. With hands. He tell me that when I go back Japan, I make piogen money, introduce European boxin' was supreme English person."

"Why do you tell me this?"

Charlie answered in a hoarse whisper.

"I know everything, mister! all we Japanese servants know everything. All others afraid of His Highness, but not me."

"Go on, explain what you mean."

"This, mister, all other servants come straight from Tokio and Nippon, all sometime they think master God, also Prince. I been about the world I waiter at English club in Kobe. I know. Specially I love Wag Asston—strongest man in England."

"Why do you tell me this?"—a new hope was springing up into Charlie's mind.

"You friend Wag Asston. You got money one time?"

"As much as you like," Charlie whispered, "if you can get me out of this."

"I get you out of this all safe and very simple," came the reply, and the bland Oriental gazed at Charlie with a face as innocent of emotion as the dial of a clock.

Charlie leapt up and his ankle chains rattled. "You can set me free tonight?" he cried.

"Too damn loud, mister," was the reply.

"We pretty safe here, but wise not make noise. My orders sit here watch you with pistol!"—the creature produced a Browning pistol from his robes with affectionate pride—"my orders watch you six hours, that bring us to morning, one time. I watch you with this pistol, shoot you dead if necessary."

He handed Charlie the blue-steel pistol, loaded with its clutch of six cartridges.

"Now, one time, you shoot me!" remarked the Japanese without a tremor in his voice.

Charlie gripped the stock of the pistol. Six lives lay within it. He felt a man again, but suddenly he laughed, quietly and bitterly. He turned the pistol full upon the head of the Japanese.

"What is to prevent me," he whispered, "from shooting you here and now, and then blowing out my brains to save myself from the death that your master has prepared for me?"

The Japanese was quite impassive. He dismissed the suggestion with a slight wave of one hand, and he put the case in a nutshell.

"My friend beautiful Wag Asston,

He was free now—or nearly free.

Me not like this service. Your little girl kept here. You want to get out one time, and take her away. I want money—that is why you don't shoot me, one piece, and why I give you my pistol."

By this Charlie had recovered from the stunning blow of an hour ago.

"You can have any money you like," he said, "if you will get me out of this frightful house tonight. But I must take Miss Vincent with me."

The Japanese shook his head. "Not to be done," he answered, "not to be done tonight. All other men servants watch round her room. It was mean death you and for missy."

"And Lord Helston, what of him?"

"He now gone to sleep. Yoshida gave him opium—put in his arm with little shinin' machine. Yoshida manage all the Prince's affairs. Whole castle now quiet asleep. Can get you out now."

Charlie's heart was beating rapidly. "Isn't there any way of taking Miss Vincent with us?"

The Asiatic shook his head emphatically. "Not one way," he said. "But you go to Ravenscroft, get Wag Asston, one time. He come in morning with all others and get missy back, and kill the little one with the great head."

"You hate him?"

"He give me fear of death I want to be out of this hell house. What will you pay?"

"A thousand pounds in gold sovereigns," Charlie answered without an instant's delay.

"That will do," was the reply, and Charlie heard a mutter to the effect that "Mr. Wag Asston would pay the money even if this mister would not."

"Now then, let's get to work. I have got one of your pistols. I can kill you at any moment. How are you going to take off these things on my ankles?"

"You can kill me at any moment, mister," the little man said with a smile. "You think I give you pistol unless I sure I making good bargain. No one time!"

He bent down, produced a key from his robe, and unlocked the ankles.

"I take them from Hokkei," he smiled quietly. "I put little something in Hokkei's rice water. Hokkei your head waiter, mister."

Charlie was free! He was free, he had a loaded pistol in his hand. For a moment the impulse to run shouting through this house of horror, and to rescue Muriel surged within his veins. But prudence conquered. He knew that it was impossible at the moment. He followed the little Japanese out of the room.

All Helston Castle was sleeping—or so it appeared.

Still wearing his boots with india-rubber soles, Charlie followed his guide through several corridors, and down one broad flight of stairs.

At last his guide stopped in a brilliantly lit passage. He paused outside a door which Charlie seemed to recognize.

"You go in, one time," the Japanese said with a peasant grin.

Charlie raised his pistol—he had previously ascertained that it was really loaded—and levelled at the head of his guide.

"You are making fun of me," he said, "this is all some trick to torture me once more. But if it is you die in a second."

The Japanese turned the handle and opened the big door without a sign of perturbation.

"Goddam," he said, "you no believe nothing! I friend Wag Asston, I stand to win thousand gold sovereigns. Come in!"

Charlie followed his guide. The huge hall with its incredibly rich and fantastic decoration was entirely empty.

He saw the screen and couch where Muriel had been. He saw the improvised stage upon which he himself had been tied in dreadful mental torture. The wax figure of Sir Philip Vincent was still there, but the chair was turned round and the thing looked like no more than a great doll.

"And now?" he said, "by the way have you got a name?"

"Good name, all one time," said the grinning little creature. "Pashiko, no altogether. Now see, mister, how easy—you can go down a rope what?"

"Indeed I can."

"I can too. I got rope."

The little man darted over the room, opened the lid of a carved settee and brought out a coil of good hemp. He drew it out, and with it a large hook of zinc. "Open window," he said briefly, "go down rope, get on moor. You take me to Ravenscroft. We alarm house and come back rescue missy? Dam easy."

Charlie was trembling with excitement, though not with fear. His one desire was to be out of the hideous house, to rush to Ravenscroft, to return and storm the castle.

He was free now—or nearly free.

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Muriel was still in captivity, but he felt that no harm could happen to her if she was rescued within the next few hours. All was before him; a fierce joy ran through his veins like wine, he could have shouted aloud in his exhilaration, as Pashiko unbarred one of the long windows and tied the rope.

Charlie was testing his means of escape while the sweet, cold night air beat upon his face with a message of welcome, when his little confederate suddenly caught him by the elbow.

"Box belonging to you, one time, no? Box full of shinin' things. Not so good as other things in Castle, but all piece belong you?"

Charlie turned. A deep flush of shame mounted to his forehead. Even at the moment of his own escape, which, as he believed would be only a prelude to the rescue of Muriel, he had forgotten the Crown Jewels of Japan.

He hurried over the great room, and saw the steel-bound box upon the edge of the little stage, where he had been, bound by the side of Sir Philip's waxen image.

The box was open. He crashed the lid upon the glorious jewels, and turned the key in the lock.

He and Pashiko carried the box to the window. It was heavy, but not more so than an ordinary gentleman's suitcase packed for a week-end, yet in the small space, as Charlie knew, the destinies of the far East were held. The intrinsic value of its contents was beyond calculation. Its possibilities for good or evil beyond thought.

They came to the window. Below yawned an abyss, but the wan moon's light still shone faintly low down upon the horizon, and the moor was not altogether dark.

"What shall we do?" Charlie asked in a hurried whisper.

"You go down the rope first, I pull him up and let down box. Then I come down myself one time."

With a prayer in his heart Charlie flung his legs over the window sill, found the rope between his feet and clutched the ledge.

Pashiko held his left hand to steady him, and then he caught at the rope, and after one sickening moment of suspense descended easily until he came to the terrace in front of newer portion of the Castle. He gave a tug at the rope.

It went up like a serpent to the yellow oblong of the window. He waited, the glittering with the sudden cold, until he heard a bumping noise, as the Japanese lowered the heavy box, as now and then it swung against the masonry.

It was done. The box lay upon the gravel. Charlie hastily untied the rope from the handles. Almost before he had finished doing so, the little Asiatic was coming down the filament of rope like a gigantic spider.

The first part of their enterprise had ended with perfect success.

Carrying the box between them the two men hurried over the sunken terraces until they came to the last terrace of all and dropped to the moor. Their feet made no sound. They might have been ghosts as they fled from the Castle of torment and horror.

Charlie jumped six feet down upon the moor. Pashiko was beside him in a moment. The little Japanese, almost immediately that he had touched the ground, put his foot upon a projection in the stone, and caught at the steel-bound box. His strength was enormous. He swung it down with the greatest ease.

"Quick, quick," he said, "we hide this in heather bush, then we run fast to Ravenscroft to save missy."

They stumbled through the heather until they were two hundred yards from the castle which loomed up like a great black cliff with one alt of growing tapers from the open window, which they had escaped.

"We safe now. No one suspect anything. Hide the box in this bush."

They shoved the precious jewels endways into a huge clump of turf.

"Now we run hard to Ravenscroft."

"Come on," Charlie replied. "I am as weak as a kitten from being tied up in that filthy place, but you will have to help me."

"Strong will come to you," was the calm answer. "You run for your life, I help you. Let us go."

The two companions set out over the faint moonlight track. The moon afforded them but little light, constantly they stumbled, and almost fell, but the Japanese seemed made of steel and india-rubber. Charlie in perfect training and as well set up a young man as could be seen anywhere, had suffered a little from his imprisonment. But he was still strong. Yet in that headlong race over the moor, with the word "Muriel" beating to every heart, shrob, he realised how wonderful his side

the training of the most ordinary Japanese must be. He thought of Wag Asston—that little being of whip-cord and tempered steel.

His temples began to drum. "If only I were Wag," he muttered thickly.

He sprawled headlong upon the ground. His feet had caught in a gorse bush. As he rose with a scratched and bleeding face it was to find his companion held firmly in the grip of a half circle of giants who seemed to have suddenly risen up from the moor.

He heard two or three clicking noises and half a dozen electric torches poured their radiance upon Pashiko. A deep voice full of excitement broke upon the silence.

"I have got one, Philip! One of those damned scoundrels, I've got one!"

Then Charlie knew. This was the relief party come to find Muriel.

He staggered into the circle of light, and Wag Asston caught him in his arms.

"Charlie! By all that's wonderful, what's happened? Where's Miss Vincent?"

"Where's Muriel? Where's Muriel?" Sir Philip cried. "My boy, what has happened?"

Charlie could hardly speak. He waved his left arm towards the dark pile of Helston. "She's there," he said, "she's there I have escaped to come and fetch you. She must be rescued tonight. There's no time to lose."

"And this Japanese?" Sir Philip asked.

"He has helped me to escape. He will help us to re-enter the Castle and save Muriel."

"She is safe?"

"Perfectly safe," Sir Philip. She has been subjected to an infamous and hellish torture, so cunning and so diabolical that I cannot tell you of it under the circumstances, but she is safe. She has not been otherwise harmed. We shall save her! We shall save her!"

Sir Philip took Charlie aside into the heather. "Tom," he said, "two minutes and we will go on."

"My brother-in-law has come, Charlie," Sir Philip said in a low voice. "This morning, in my presence, my poor sister committed suicide in my presence. It was another ramification of this dreadful affair. She was terrified from Helston Castle. Helston knew something about her early life and forced her to assist in Muriel's abduction. There is no time to go into details, but poor dear Maria is here with eight or nine officers of the garrison. We called them together, and they are pledged to secrecy. I cling to my original purpose. I will keep those great symbols of Japan, which will place a ruler favourable to England upon the throne of that great country. And I have news, the Mikado is dying!"

"The Regalia are safe, Sir Philip. I brought them with me in my escape. The box is some hundred yards away upon the moor. All we have to do now is to save Muriel."

"I have heard nothing of what has happened to you—you have hinted of dreadful things that have happened to Muriel."

"Dreadful things have happened to us both, but it is impossible to explain them. Time presses. You could not, no man could, take in the extraordinary truth in such a hurried conference as this."

"Let us go back to Helston Castle."

The two men came again into the circle of light. Charlie saw that he was surrounded by clean-limbed men in khaki.

"Tom, gentlemen," Sir Philip said, "this is my friend, Charles Penrose, who was at Harrow with my son. He has escaped from grave peril. My daughter is still there—he threw out his hand. I have not time to tell you everything that has occurred. I do not know it all myself, but I think we should be getting on."

There was a low murmur of acquiescence and then Charlie found himself shaking Sir Thomas Yeoland's hand. "Philip has told me what happened this morning," the General said in an unsteady voice. "She was my dear wife, lead us on to Helston, sir."

The party crept onwards, winding like a snake over the dark moor. Helston was doomed. Charlie knew that very well. Eight or nine trained young men, drawn from two smart cavalry regiments, accompanied by five or six sergeant majors and led by two people like Sir Thomas Yeoland and Sir Philip Vincent—the citadel of horror, the house of dreadful dreams was doomed indeed.

But in its doom would its fairest inmate fall—that was the question Charlie was asking himself every moment of their approach to the great black pile of masonry. He heard a whispered conversation at his side

"Pash, old cock, fancy meeting you?"

"What?"

"It was you that got Mr. Penrose out of that place! You will never suffer for it, Pash, old boy. D'you remember your boxing lessons in the Tottenham Court Road?"

"All one time, Mister Wag, sir. You remember your Ju-jitsu what?"

"I could toss you over my shoulder now by the forearm grip, Pash."

"Me no think you velly could."

"We will see about that to-morrow—yod've got to lead the way now."

The rescue party were standing below the sunk wall which fell to the moor. Charlie explained the situation. He was immensely impressed by the quickness with which these night-walkers understood him.

One khaki-clad figure—a tall, lean sergeant-major saluted.

"I quite understand, sir," he said to Charlie. "This little Jap has got the hang of everything. Up to the present nothing has been disturbed, as far as we know. There is that window open and lit, the rope is hanging down. The Jap can shin up it like a monkey and fix our ladder. Sergeant Macpherson has a silk ladder with cane rungs upon his back. It won't take a minute. Will you lead the way, sir?"

Charlie nodded. The electric torches were put out, and the athletic young men hoisted themselves upon the first terrace, Sir Philip and General Yeoland among them.

In the faint glimmer of the winter moon, in absolute silence, the rescue party crept up to the wall of the great house.

They crouched at the bottom, and over their heads a yellow light shot from the open window of the huge and horrible room above. Then Pashiko was seen mounting upwards.

The little Asiatic was silhouetted upon the window sill, the silken ladder fell softly upon the gravel with hardly a sound.

Charlie was the first to leap up on it and he had hardly sprung up ten rungs when the whole thing groaned and lightened, and he knew that his friends were following him.

Throwing his legs over the window sill he stepped once more into the room of horrors. It was silent and dark. On every side the electric lights glowed in their silver holders. The golden tapestries upon the walls glittered with their jewelled dragons, the horrible black creatures of the roof hung downwards like stalactites of hell.

One by one, with incredible quickness and in perfect silence, the tall, handsome men were helped into the room—the very flower of the Northern Army, clean, trim, in their khaki officers' and non-commissioned officers' all with brown revolver cases strapped to their left sides.

Before they even looked round the room these men pulled out their pistols and examined them. Then they lifted their heads and there was a low murmur of surprise. No single person there had ever seen a place so rich and fantastic as this. Even Sir Philip Vincent, who was accustomed to the private rooms in the palace of the Mikado many years before, realised that here indeed was a sinister and grotesque beauty that struck like a chill upon the heart.

But this was Charlie's moment. He had seen it all before. He was undismayed, he took the lead naturally enough. "Gentlemen," he said in a low voice, "if you will range yourselves round the wall at the far end of the room, by that organ-looking thing."

With perfect obedience the officers did as he asked. In ten seconds they were in place. Then Charlie turned to Sergeant Macpherson.

"You see that door," he said, pointing to the door which led into Helston's more private apartments, "that is the door you have got to watch, Sergeant. Please go to it and stand on one side, having your pistol ready for anything that may happen." The Sergeant saluted automatically and crept to his post.

"Gentlemen," Charlie said, "I am now going to find Miss Vincent with Pashiko."

The little Japanese shook his head violently. "No, no," he said, "you not go. Too dangerous. Three men sleep on stairs leading to missy's room. You make too much noise. I take Mister Wag. He understand Ju-jitsu. We put those three to sleep."

Charlie was entirely in the hands of Pashiko. He sat down in a chair of carved wood, the arms of which were studded with bosses of turquoise and inlaid with platinum and silver. Someone came up to him, a tall, khaki-clad figure was peering something into the silver cup of a flask. "Drink this, sir,"

said a pleasant, modulated voice. "You have gone through a great deal, this will do you good."

Charlie drank. It was brandy that the young Captain of Hussars had given him. It pulled him together and he sat, waiting.

One, two, five minutes, and then the door leading into the corridor opened noiselessly, and the Japanese and Wag entered. Between them they urged an aged Japanese woman with grey hair and a twisted face of torture. Wag was holding a pistol to her head.

"Miss Muriel isn't in the room where she has been since they got here here," Wag said. "This old woman has been in that room there—she flung out his arm towards the door by which Sergeant Macpherson was doing sentry. 'I think we ought to be quick,' Wag concluded."

There was a general movement led by Charlie. The men passed over the floor of woven matting in a solid mass. It opened noiselessly, and they pressed in with hardly a sound.

Then they saw Muriel Vincent. She was standing at the far end of a long panelled room. Her arms were raised above her head. "Ah! The Bridegroom comes!" she cried in a shrill, unnatural voice. "At last the bridegroom comes!"

Sir Philip, Sir Thomas Yeoland and