

The RAVESCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

As they crossed the stone bridge over the moat, and entered the quadrangle, the mansion presented an appearance of perfect tranquility. Upon one side were the open doors of the garage. The three chauffeurs were busily cleaning their cars. Upon the other, and uninvited side—where the red creepers had grown almost over the mullioned windows and the pigeons cooed softly upon the mellow roofs—the morning sun was pouring down.

"When all this trouble is over, Penrose," Sir Philip said briskly, "I must go through the rooms on that side of the quad, and rescue the picture gallery, from which I am afraid, is a rather mildewed condition."

They entered at the little door led to the modernized west wing, mounted the stairs, and went into the dining room.

A bright wood fire burnt upon the hearth. The paneled walls of oak had caught the sunlight, and all the old portraits were tinged and touched to life. The butler and a footman were moving round a long table. In a moment or two Muriel Vincent entered. Behind her came Wag Ashton and another footman—they were carrying a heavy box of dark wood.

"The men were dismissed," "You will breakfast with us, please, Mr. Ashton," Sir Philip said, and as they sat down to the meal the baronet, in a few terse sentences, explained the plan which Charlie had devised upon the moor. Breakfast did not take more than half an hour. Muriel retired to make preparations with her maid. Wag was dispatched to the courtyard to give instructions to the chauffeurs. Charlie and Sir Philip were left alone.

At one side of the room there was an oak table. On it stood the box upon which so much depended.

Suddenly Sir Philip looked at Charlie. "My friend," he said, "I am depending absolutely upon your fidelity. I feel that you ought to have the privilege of looking upon the contents of this box. It is greatly upon you that the preservation of what it contains depends. Few eyes have ever seen these strange and mysterious emblems. At the moment there is no time for you to see them. Only three Europeans have ever seen them: my knowledge, my son myself, and my daughter. You shall be the fourth. I am going to entrust one of the two keys to you. You must give it back to me directly you return from York. My daughter has the only other key, she wears it round her neck. You are travelling in the large car. Mr. Ashton, well armed, will be in front with the chauffeur. Before you get to York, and during your rush through the moors, you may, if you wish, pull down the blinds, and have a glimpse at these royal emblems which you are now sworn to protect."

Half an hour afterwards the Mercedes stood waiting in the centre of the quadrangle. The head chauffeur, a grey-haired, trusted servant, was in the driving seat, his hand upon the wheel. By his side was little Wag Ashton, muffled in a heavy leather coat, a large cap pressed down over his eyes, his hands in the two pockets of his coat, hands nervously fingering two hard, metallic handles.

From the door in the corner, a footman hurried with a dressing bag and a large bundle of rugs. He had but hardly put them in the closed car, and was standing waiting by the door, when a young gentleman and a young lady crossed the court and jumped into the motor. Almost simultaneously it began to move, as the gates of Ravenscroft were thrown open. The car rolled over the granite bridge which spanned the moat, as within it sat a young man and a maid who were looking very steadfastly into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER VI

Love—With Death in Pursuit.

The hour was a supreme one for Charlie Penrose. Every circumstance combined to make it so. The swift change in his life, the terrible responsibilities he had undertaken, the exhilaration of danger—all sent the blood racing through his veins on this bright cold morning of winter, as the great car rolled swiftly down the moor road on its two hours' journey to York. And above all, crowning all, he was alone with Muriel Vincent, whom he loved. He was alone with her, she was looking into his eyes, she was trusting to him, so that he might be her guardian and protector.

For he knew now that he was hopelessly, inevitably, in love. He was as certain as he had ever been of anything in his life that this girl was the only girl in the world for him.

He had never before been even faintly in love. His guardian's failure, which had thrown him upon the world at eighteen without a penny, had made it necessary for him to earn his living in the hardest of schools. The mere question of bread to eat and a shelter for his head, had occupied all his time. And now, despite the peril in which he stood—and he had no illusions upon that point, at all—the world seemed an entirely different place from that of less than three days ago. He had never felt so strong, happy, so proud or glad, as at this moment when the ride to York began.

Muriel was looking into his eyes! A faint fragrance came from the dark masses of her hair, the proudly arched lips were parted, the beautiful face glowed with quiet purpose.

"And you," Charlie thought to himself, "you are the girl who, the night before last, was kidnapped in a London street, and forced to witness pictured horrors, such as you could have never dreamed before. And you are the girl to whom, only last night, the real Horror which the picture forthadowed, actually appeared in the stronghold of your father's house. The hideous mystery of all this has not changed or broken you!"

Some such thoughts as these flashed through Charlie's mind in a single second. He felt a flood of revenge, an almost overpowering rush of admiration, and while his face showed instinctively the emotion that he experienced, Muriel spoke.

"Mr. Penrose," she said, "I feel almost happy."

The words were strange. For a moment Charlie hardly understood them.

"Happy?" he said, "how can that be, Miss Vincent?"

"Everything is relative," she answered calmly, "I mean that I am happier than I have been for many months. And the reason for it is, that you and your friend have come so strangely into the life of myself and my father. I feel assured now that you two will save us—and more than us—with one slim gloved hand she pointed to the long box which was at her feet.

"You care for that?" Charlie said.

"I care for it more than any question of personal safety. I know my father's hopes for England I am an English girl, and I put my country before everything. Father has this great weight upon his shoulders. He cannot co-operate with the Foreign Office. He is working independently and unofficially for his country. He is spending enormous sums to secure his end. I am with him heart and soul."

"Miss Vincent," Charlie replied in a voice as earnest and determined as her own, "Miss Vincent, so am I."

The girl had been looking out of the window of the car, as she spoke, looking at the wild, receding landscapes with dreamy eyes. Now she turned to Charlie with a quick, impulsive movement. The lovely face, that had hitherto been sad and grave, lit up with warmth and friendship.

"Ah," she cried, "I am glad to hear you say so. Not that I doubted it for a single moment. But my dear father's nerves are shattered. He is a brave man—his record, which I will not enter into now, shows it clearly. His great scheme, and all he has endured to further it, prove that fact. But though his resolve is as strong as ever it was, he is losing the capability to carry it out."

"I have come as his lieutenant. I and my friend are here to protect you and him. Be sure that we shall do it."

"Oh, I am sure," the girl answered eagerly, "I am deeply sure. But there is one thing I want to ask you."

"And that is?"

"Why are you enthusiastic and devoted to a cause of which you know nothing three days ago? This morning before we left, my father told me that he had offered you—forgive me if I mention it—very many thousand pounds if all went well. And yet father said you wanted the suggestion of terms, and would not hear of any definite agreement. Why?"

"Can't I love England too, Miss Vincent?"

Yes, but you have taken as gospel every word that my father, who is a perfect stranger, has said. If it was a perfect stranger, you would have no doubt, you would have gone out as a volunteer to fight for your country. But this is quite different. This is a most secret matter, already you have realised that your life and that of your friend, is in great danger."

"Then do you doubt my good faith, Miss Vincent?" Charlie asked in a voice that trembled.

"No! a thousand times no! But I have a mind to think, some knowledge of the way things go in life—that is why I ask you this question."

How sweet she was, how unutterably sweet! Her voice was like the celestine stop upon the organ. Her eyes were charged with a challenge, rather than a curiosity, as upon her flushed lips an eager nation lay.

"Well, you see, Miss Vincent," he replied, making an enormous effort to be prosaic and commonplace, exceeding a self-control that made the voice come harshly and unnatural from his throat. "Well, you see, it was just good luck that I met that horrible Japanese the night before last. I was being dismissed from my wretched post as a cinema operator. The money he offered seemed wealth. Of course, when I realised what was going on I did my best to come to your help. I was prevented. By a further stroke of luck, I met you later on the same night, and was taken into your father's house. Can't you see what an inducement all this is to a penniless young man? I have no prospects whatever. I am about, as careless of my own skin as most fellows of my age and position. Whatever financial benefit I reap from the business on which your father has so kindly engaged me, it will be everything to me."

He said it bravely, but his own ears heard how false and hollow was the voice.

As Muriel answered him, her face became a mask of high contempt. "I see, Mr. Penrose," she said, "one job is as good as another. Your don't much care what happens to you, and of course you stand to win largely if all goes well."

Even now he preserved his self-control.

"Exactly," he replied, "a free lance of fortune, Miss Vincent: I hope a faithful one."

And then, in an instant, the comedy was over. She had tried him and she knew.

She held out both her hands. Her face was quivering with sympathy. Her eyes radiated a soft light.

"And now," she said in a quiet voice, "take my hands and tell me the truth."

He caught the little hands in his own with a swift and eager pressure. The assumed cynicism flashed away—his face was very near indeed to hers.

"But how can I tell you?" he said hoarsely—once his breath would emanate me to make a real start in life."

"Poor boy," she answered tenderly, "but if you could look through that rug and the lid of the box, you would see below you three objects so beautiful, of such incalculable cost, that you would realize that there is nothing else like them in the world. The Sword, the Mirror, and the Crystal Globe are relics handed down to the rulers of Japan from immemorial times. The Sword is a short, curved scimitar of steel, so finely tempered that it is believed to have been wrought by no human hands. It will fall through a thick, quilted cushion he worthy of so peerless and lovely a sob. How can I tell you, even now? I am nobody, I am nothing."

"I have asked you to tell me, the girl answered, and her eyes fell before his passionate gaze, while a blush as faint as the inside of a rare sea shell came out upon her cheeks. It was as though red wine had been poured into a goblet of pure crystal water. It was a confession.

Charlie's whole heart leapt up in one wild ecstasy. "Muriel," he said with hurried, passionate utterance, "I didn't dare, oh, I didn't dare!"

The last moment of hesitation, the last scruple held him. With her hands gripped in his, he began to tremble exceedingly. How was he worthy of so peerless and lovely a maiden? Was it not a breach of all trust, of all honour, to avow a love born of horrors, only a few hours old, and yet a love which he well knew would endure within him—for her only—forever and a day beyond?

A man is a man, and a girl is a girl, and the twin must meet at last. Artificial considerations of wealth or position melt away, sometimes, in the glowing heat of pure first love. The strong male impulse asserts itself. The stronger feminine surrender makes its sweet appeal.

His arms were round her now. Their lips met. Man and maid tasted that moment of supreme ecstasy when heart and soul become one—enter into a oneness, which no Sword of Fate can sever.

They were above the thunders and lightning of Fate. Whatever was to happen, they were each other's. And so, flying from hideous perils, they brought into the world a new thing, a new all-powerful influence—mutual love arrayed against "the arrow that flieth by noon-day, and the terror that walketh by night."

And in the heart of each began that anthem which tells clear souls that love will be triumphant.

At last he released her. The moment of perfect ecstasy was over.

The world came rushing back into his consciousness, he was aware once more of the old disabilities, most poignantly aware of the peril in which they stood.

"Do you mean it, Muriel?" he asked hurriedly. "Socially, no doubt, I am your equal. As I told Sir Philip, my father was Colonel Penrose of the Guards, and my mother a daughter of old Richard Mullen—I come of good Cornish families on both sides. But I am penniless and unknown."

She lifted one little hand, and smiled at him with ineffable sweetness. "Charlie," she said, "you are mine now, and this is the last time I shall ever allow you to say such words as these. You have come out of the unknown to be my love, and to be the champion of the great secret cause, for which my father has endured everything. That is enough."

She paused for a moment, and then her hand stole out and rested on his shoulder. "Charlie," she said, "you will conquer all difficulties, you and your clever little, brown-faced friend—won't you?"

He took her hand from his shoulder, bent over it and kissed it in the most courtly fashion. "Beloved," he replied, "I have not a single doubt in my mind. I know now that whatever happens, I shall be adequate. Something tells me with certainty that I shall help your father to accomplish all he wishes for England."

She sat up straight in her seat. Her lovely face was once more proud and disdainful of all common things. "We shall do it!" she cried. "You, father and myself! Charlie, think of it! We are resting our feet upon the Peace of Europe—no, upon the Peace of the whole world."

For a moment he did not take her meaning, and then he saw that her little bronzed shoes were using the rug, which covered the mysterious box, as a foot-stool. Unconsciously his left foot was also resting on it.

"Yes," she continued, "down below there is the Regalia of Japan, without which Japan, that marvelous country of possibility and tradition, is like a great ship rudderless at sea."

"And it is that," the young man replied with quiet enthusiasm, "that we must guard at all costs, until the sick Mikado passes to his ancestors. Your father, of course, told me everything."

"Have you seen what is in the box?"

He shook his head.

"Soon you must see the contents. Have you ever been to the Tower of London and looked at the Crown Jewels?"

"Yes, I have. I stood there once for nearly half an hour, gazing at the Kohinoor and all the emeralds, rubies and sapphires that stud the Crown. I remember thinking—for I was in very low water at the time—how the very smallest of those innumerable jewels would manage me to make a real start in life."

"Poor boy," she answered tenderly, "but if you could look through that rug and the lid of the box, you would see below you three objects so beautiful, of such incalculable cost, that you would realize that there is nothing else like them in the world. The Sword, the Mirror, and the Crystal Globe are relics handed down to the rulers of Japan from immemorial times. The Sword is a short, curved scimitar of steel, so finely tempered that it is believed to have been wrought by no human hands. It will fall through a thick, quilted cushion he worthy of so peerless and lovely a sob. How can I tell you, even now? I am nobody, I am nothing."

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World, but the most precious treasure of the world too."

"In this car!" Charlie said. She nodded.

"But you are wrong, sweetheart," he said, "these wonders and marvels of which you have told me, and which we are guarding at this moment, are not so splendid nor so supreme as two other things."

She looked at him enquiringly. He took her gently in his arms. "My dear," he said simply, "there are two jewels more precious and more wonderful than all: Muriel is here! and with us is the great Jewel of Love."

He said it beautifully, and every fibre in the girl's being responded to the low, passionate notes of her voice. She laughed, a low, languorous laugh of joy. "We are all safe, Charlie?" she said.

Then, with a quick, characteristic movement, she twisted away from him and became almost business-like. "Charlie," she said, "what do you suppose that Thing I saw in my room last night really was? We have a legend, you know, that the house is haunted by a great raven."

"What is was, sweetheart, I do not know," the young man answered, "but I am certain it was no supernatural appearance. My own theory, and I believe I am absolutely right, is that the enemies of your father are trading on the superstition in order to terrorise him—through you."

His face assumed a grim fixity. "The devil!" he said, "trying to accomplish their objects through the torture of a girl! Of course, Muriel, last night was all part of the same scheme that brought me into your life, when you were forced to watch those hideous cinema pictures."

She nodded wisely. "You are perfectly right, Charlie, and there is one directing mind. All the fantastic and hideous occurrences to which we have been subject are invented and arranged by an intellect very far above the average. If it were not so, these malignity, untrifling resource, a perverted hatred—these are what actuate our enemy."

"Of course, Charlie, for you must have come to the same conclusion that father and I have come to—"

"Lord Helston?"

"Whoever and whatever Lord Helston is," she answered gravely, "I sometimes think there is no real Lord Helston, but that some fiend, concealed from mortal eyes, has assumed his state and name. Of one thing I am sure, when you penetrate this awful mystery—as you will, dear Charlie—you will not only save us, but you will find something so abnormal, and beyond the ordinary experience of life, that you may well go armed, in mind and body, upon your dangerous quest."

For at least a minute there was silence. The brightness of the morning had faded a little. Sunlight no longer fell in golden showers over the moorlands. The beautiful and luxurious car rolled onwards at a level pace. Before them they saw the back of the chauffeur and the back of little Wag Ashton in his heavy coat.

Suddenly, as they lay back in their padded seat, hand in hand, they saw Ashton start in his place. The glass was just a little frosted, but they could see quite clearly that, with a word to the chauffeur, he had risen and was peering round the side of the car.

Ashton was almost immediately back in his seat and fumbling in a little box between the steering wheel and the speedometer. He whipped up a pair of black motor goggles, had them over his eyes in a moment, and once more peered out behind.

Charlie was setting exactly behind Ashton in the big landaulette. He saw his friend leaning backwards close to him, as the car rushed on speeds now with greatly accelerated rapid.

Charlie caught the leather band of the window and shut it down into its place. He put out his hand and shoulders, and his face was now within three inches of Ashton's. "What is it, Wag?" he asked hurriedly.

"Look behind," was the reply. Charlie turned.

There was a white riband of road stretching away for more than a mile. But within seven hundred yards, in the centre of the road, coming towards them at a furious pace, Charlie saw an immense car of dead, lifeless black.

Even then for a moment he did not realize. "What's the trouble, Wag?" he shouted as the wind of their passage shrieked and whistled past.

"That car, the car that went through York last night, the one that got to Helston Castle before we arrived at Ravenscroft!" "Wag gasped.

"Then?" Charlie shouted. "They're after us, Charlie. They have been watching us since we left Ravenscroft. Our plan of the car and the dummy box has failed!"

Charlie felt agitated hands plucking at his sleeve. For a moment he turned back into the closed car. "What is it, what is it, Charlie?" Muriel cried.

He knew it was useless to deceive her. "A great car, much bigger than our own," he said, "and with far greater power, is chasing us. The people from Helston are trying to cut us off or run us down."

For a moment her face turned a dead white. Her eyes fell to the box upon the floor of the car. She clasped her hands as if in an agony of supplication. Then, so quickly that Charlie almost doubted the evidence of his eyes, Muriel sank back and laughed.

"Let them come," she cried, "how can they hurt me, or take away what we are guarding, when you are here?"

Charlie once more thrust his shoulders out of the window.

By now the enormous black car was appreciably nearer. His own chauffeur was bending forward over the wheel, rigid and intent. They were running at least forty miles an hour, and every instant, as the driver manipulated the little levers which controlled the spark, the mixture of air and petrol in the chambers below, the speed was rushing up.

But the car behind was closing upon them, like some great black hawk.

Charlie heard the echo of an excited and exultant laugh, mingled with the furious uproar of their passage. It came from Wag Ashton.

Then Charlie saw an extraordinary thing. The little fellow put his foot upon the door of the driving seat, gripped the engine-rail on the floor top of the landaulette, and leapt upon the roof. He had vanished from Charlie's sight, but as the pursuing car—now not more than a hundred yards away—shot at them like a torpedo Charlie, heard above his head four rapid explosions.

He saw the black car swerve violently, recover itself, press onwards for a second, heel over to one side, totter, and fall at a steep angle against the low, creeper-covered wall of stone which bounded the moorland road upon the right. He saw the chauffeur cutting off his engines and pressing down his brakes in a second or two, his own car turned a corner, and the wreck behind flashed away.

The next thing that Muriel and Charlie saw was a pair of thin, active legs, in cord breeches, descending from above their heads and shooting into the window. The legs were followed by the rest of Mr. Wag Ashton, who stumbled over the box upon the floor, sank into one of the front seats with a bland smile upon his face.

He produced a Colt automatic pistol from his pocket, weighed it in the palm of his hand and looked at it lovingly.

"Jolly good thing I can shoot with one of these," he said with a grin. "I don't you think so? I jumped on the roof and got their two front tires as easy as possible. Now I expect we shall have an uninterrupted drive into York!"

CHAPTER VII

Charlie Arms Against the Unknown Terror.

It was quite dark. The moon had not yet risen; a little wind sighed and moaned round the dark house of Ravenscroft.

Sir Philip Vincent sat alone in one of the rooms of the west wing—not that in which the mysterious letter had been found upon the table. The room was lighted by lamps—there was to be no sudden cutting off the electric light to-night! A fire glowed redly upon the hearth and above upon a distinguished looking, elderly gentleman, sitting in an arm-chair by the side of a low tea-table. The walls were covered with books, save where, here and there, a tarnished family portrait hung between the shelves. No picture could have been more quiet, domestic and serene than the one presented by this comfortable room with its single inmate, at half-past five upon a winter's afternoon.

But Peace was not there. Instead of Peace, there was wild surmise and conjecture, a man's mind shaken to its foundation, not knowing what of horror or disaster the next moment might bring forth.

Sir Philip sipped his tea, his face was pinched and wan. He put down his cup upon the great silver tray, poured out some more tea, and lit a cigarette. Then, leaning forward, he stared steadily into the glowing heart of the fire. He was reviewing the events of the last few days, trying to find a loophole of hope, despairing to see his position clearly and accurately, as a man surveys the pieces upon a board of chess.

He nodded to himself. He had thought out one thing. His own life was not at present in danger. If he were murdered, his enemies could never hope to gain possession of the Regalia of Japan, until it was too late for their purpose. But his son had been mysteriously slain, his daughter threatened, not once, but twice; his faithful servant, Umarov, had been struck down to death without a sign or clue as to the murderers.

"I see," he said quietly, "they are going to terrorise me into giving up the Box. That is their plan. They are meaning now to show me that my daughter's life is at their mercy if I do not come to terms. The letter last night proves that conclusively. They have tried to put me in the position of sacrificing Muriel—Anthony was sacrificed—or preserving her by means of treachery to the ideal for which I have fought so long. I threw the stump of his cigarette into the fire. A little smile came upon his face.

"Well," he muttered, "they have reckoned without the assistance which Fate, or a Higher Power than Fate, has brought me. Those two boys, Penrose and Ashton will save us all if it can be done. Already they have taken Muriel out of harm's way. My letter to Tom Yeoland, and what Penrose will tell him, ensures the dear girl's safety. If they can get at her in the house of the General commanding the garrison, who has been especially warned against any such attempt—"

Sir Philip rose with confidence in his eyes.

He crossed the room, pulled aside the curtain, and gazed out of the big mullioned window. It commanded the moor road which led to York, but he could not see the lights of an approaching car, and he suddenly feared that something had gone wrong. Penrose and Ashton ought to have been back long ago.

But the butler came into the room. There was the yellow envelope of a telegram upon a tray which he carried.

Sir Philip snatched it and tore it open. This was what he read.

"Remaining here tonight in York. Miss Vincent safe with General Yeoland. Fear we must return to London upon pressing private business. Obligated if you will send car tomorrow with luggage and what is arranged as remuneration for services rendered. Ashton and Penrose."

Sir Philip read the telegram and looked up at the butler. "Who brought this?" he said.

"It came in the car, Sir Philip."

"The car? What do you mean?"

"The same which took Miss Muriel and the two young gentlemen this morning," Brice answered. "The chauffeur stopped in the village on his way up, and he gave a lift to the boy."

"Send Rainer to me," Sir Philip answered.

In three minutes the chauffeur of the big car was standing in the little library, his peaked cap in his hand.

"What has happened today, Rainer?" Sir Philip asked.

"The man's face was pale. He was obviously ill at ease, his hands fidgeted with his cap."

"Well, Sir Philip, there was a sort of accident like on our way to York this morning."

"Miss Muriel?"

"Oh, Miss Muriel's all right, Sir Philip. We didn't come to any harm."

"Tell me about it as briefly and clearly as you can."

Rainer gave a graphic account of the pursuit upon the moor. He told in detail how the huge black car had rushed after them, with the obvious intention of wrecking the landaulette. With intense admiration in his voice, he told his master of Wag Ashton's leap upon the roof, and the lucky shot which had enabled them to get away.

"Of course, I knew, Sir Philip," the man continued, "that we were all upon a dangerous affair. I have known it, ever since we left Park Lane, and you gave us a sort of hint like."

"You are frightened, Rainer?" the baronet rapped out sharply, the telegram in his hand trembling as he said it.

"Thank you, Sir Philip, not in the least. Both I and my men are ready to stay and carry out all instructions."

"Thank you for that, Rainer. You have been in my service for a considerable time now. I wish others were as faithful. And now, tell me what happened in York."

"Nothing particular, Sir Philip. We drove to the barracks, and Miss Muriel and the two young gentlemen went in with the luggage. I waited about an hour in the barracks square, and then Mr. Penrose came out and told me to go to Saracen's Head Hotel and wait there for him. Just before four Mr. Penrose and Mr. Ashton turned up. They directed me to come back at once, saying that they had got to London. They said they would communicate with you Sir Philip."

To be continued.

"Baby" Plagued With German

BRITISH SAILORS' ED WELL AGAIN

London, Aug. 6.—(Limited)—Interest regarding the work of the important part in warfare are made by respondent of the Times how British seamen man craft and cunning.

Until this week known nothing about ships, known in the "Q" ships, although notably Captain Gordon was decorated with the Victoria Cross.

How a "woman" counted for a U-boat correspondent. The dered a vessel to save a few shells into it, then left the ship, a woman who ran up deck with a baby in hand.

The U-boat vessel and the "baby" into the "baby" exploded on bottom of the submarine.

Baralong First mention of a U-boat in the case of the ship on August 19, 1915 after the torpedoing liner Arabic. It was, he says, that the ment protested that ing to indicate the like character. The probably not the first use was used, and disguising of armed vessels for