

The RAVENSCROFT HORROR

By C. Ranger-Gull

There was the click of a key in the lock, and Sir Philip stood before them.

"Ah, it is you, gentlemen," he said, "come in, come in."

As they entered they saw that Muriel Vincent was still sitting by the fire, covered with a great fur rug which had been taken from a settee. Jane Gregory sat upon a footstool at her side. Sir Philip looked at the door, and then caught Wag Ashton by the hand.

"Sir," he said, "you have probably saved my daughter's life. Knowing what we knew, it was criminal of me to take no precautions, but I thought I should be safe here in my own house for tonight."

With tears in his eyes the distinguished old man dropped the other's hand and placed his own upon Wag's shoulder.

Wag was obviously very much embarrassed. "It was nothing, Sir Philip," he said, "only it occurred to me that Miss Muriel ought to be protected in some way, and so I arranged to sleep in the passage outside her room. But don't let us talk about that, Sir Philip, the point is that Miss Muriel must be guarded absolutely for the rest of the night. How are we to do it?"

During the whole of the evening Charlie Penrose had felt how inadequate he was compared to his clever and effective friend. Yet his intellect was more acute and far more imaginative than that of his friend. Lost in surmise as to the mysteries surrounding the Vincent family—mysteries which were already half revealed to him by Sir Philip—he had neglected immediate precautions. But he became practical now.

"How would this do, Sir Philip?" he said hurriedly. "Wag and I have been put into a suite of three rooms. There is a sitting room in the middle and a bedroom on each side. Surely they will be safe?"

"God knows," the baronet answered, "what room in my house is safe tonight, or at any other time."

"I think those rooms will be all right," Charlie replied in a brisk and business-like voice. "Miss Muriel must be protected, you have more to tell me also. What I propose is this: Let Miss Vincent and Jane sleep in one of the rooms of our suite. The door leading into the sitting-room shall be open. You and I and Mr. Ashton will remain in the centre room, the lights shall be turned on—yes, the electric lights shall be on, but we will also provide ourselves with lamps and candles, for it is obvious the electric can be cut, and has been tampered with, both in Miss Muriel's room and in the sitting-room."

It was extraordinary how quickly the little pugilist took it all in. He nodded and nodded, with the fire-light playing upon his hard capable face. "I have told Ashton everything," Charlie said, turning to Sir Philip. "Everything except about what happened in the smoking room, only a minute before he brought Miss Vincent in."

Wag pricked up his ears. "Ah," he said, "then you too have had some experiences tonight?"

"We have indeed, Mr. Ashton," Sir Philip replied, and in a few trenchant sentences he explained what had occurred.

"And the letter, Sir Philip?" Sir Philip drew the letter from the pocket of his velvet smoking suit and held it out before him with trembling hands. "Allow me," Charlie broke in. He rose from his chair, took the letter, quietly pulled out his pocket knife, opened the blade and slit the envelope. He withdrew the contents, a single sheet, and read it without a sign of perturbation.

"It is typewritten," he said. "These are the words: 'Your son has died. Your daughter has seen how your son died. Your daughter has seen how she will also die. Tonight she has witnessed a rehearsal of her own death. You fled from London yesterday. In your own house none of you are safe. You have, by a coincidence, enlisted two young men as guards. Yet nothing, no one, can save you from those who are determined to blot out your family and race from England. Power greater than you know of surrounds you and yours. You are people in a net. Death is hovering over your house. Still, there is one way by which you can save yourself and those you love. Give up THOSE THINGS and you may yet preserve your life and your daughter's.'"

Charlie handed the letter back to Sir Philip. It was typewritten in

capital letters upon a sheet of white paper.

"Even now," Charlie said, "I do not know what this means, Sir Philip."

"I was just about to tell you, Penrose," Sir Philip answered, "when the light went out in the smoking room, and this hideous letter was flung upon our table by some unknown hand. Briefly and plainly, for six months I must guard and keep in my possession something so precious that the welfare of England depends upon it."

Both Charlie and Wag Ashton stirred in their chairs. Charlie spoke first.

"Sir Philip, you have tonight offered me a very large sum to help in protecting you. I am beginning to realize now that, mingled with your own private feud with the house of Helston, the interests of this country are concerned. That is what you mean to tell us, isn't it?"

"Just that," the other answered. "I have served my country for many years and though I have retired from any official position, I can serve it still. I will do so!" he went on in a low, passionate voice, clenching one brown hand on his knee. "I will not be conquered. I will sacrifice my life gladly to save my country. My son died in the same cause. That may very likely be my fate. But somehow I feel I shall win. I feel that I shall win to safety, for myself, my dear daughter, and for this country. I have a conviction that it will be so, now that at my right hand I have two such helpers as you, gentlemen."

The old man made a courtly bow. "You came to me by chance," he said, "you came to me out of the unknown. But already you have proved your metal, already I look upon you as my friends. And now," his voice became lower than ever, and he glanced quickly round the room—"and now, I will put you both in full possession of the facts, under the seal of utter secrecy which you have already promised me, and which is ratified without any further oath by the fact of us all being Brethren in the Craft."

At that Sir Philip rose and began to pace quietly up and down the room, the thick carpet deadening his footsteps, and letting no sound penetrate to the bedroom where his daughter and Jane Gregory were asleep. His face was wrinkled with thought.

At last he stopped, leant an arm upon the mantelpiece and prepared to speak.

"He had hardly opened his mouth when Wag Ashton, who was close to the door which led to the corridor, suddenly raised his head.

"I think the occurrences of this night are not yet over," he said quickly, his head bent in an attitude of intent listening.

Charlie and Sir Philip went noiselessly up to him. For a moment no sound at all was heard, and then all three men became conscious of a curious dragging noise in the passage beyond.

They waited, an alert group, tense with expectation. After an interval of thirty seconds they heard the noise again. It seemed as if something was being pulled along the corridor, and the shuffling noise was accompanied by a slight hissing or whistling sound, like the escape of a thin jet of steam.

Charlie raised his hand in warning. He turned the handle of the door without the slightest noise, and then, with a sudden movement, followed by Wag and Sir Philip within a couple of feet, he glided out into the corridor.

Five yards away, directly under the shaded radiance of an electric pendant, a man in an eastern robe lay upon the carpet. He was gasping for breath, struggling vainly to crawl onwards. In one ivory yellow hand was a rope, attached to an oblong box behind him. The box was the size of an ordinary suitcase. It was of dark teak, bound with brass, and obviously of considerable weight.

"Umatare!" Sir Philip cried in a loud voice. He rushed towards the struggling, crawling figure. He bent over it, and as he did so, the face of the Japanese turned towards him with a look which none of the three ever forgot. It was the faithful, pleased expression of a dying dog. Dying indeed, for a dark, scarlet stain spread out upon the man's grey kimono, and his eyes were already glazing in the last agony.

"I save it, I save it, master!" Umatare gasped. "They kill me, but they not get it. When they go I take it from secret place and bring it to master, good-night."

The man rolled over upon his back. His hands opened and shut. He lay motionless with the full light falling upon his yellow face, which now was strangely placid, and wore an expression of quiet triumph.

Charlie and his friend leant against the wall of the passage, sick and terrified. But Sir Philip rounded them. "Quick," he said, and his voice

was sharp and authoritative—he seemed quite unmoved by the terrible spectacle of his dead servant.

"Quick, lift that box with me, and bring it into the sitting room."

They did as they were told. The box, which was very heavy, was carried into the middle room of the suite, and placed upon the table.

"Wait here and be upon your guard," Sir Philip said, and hurried from the room.

Within five minutes the two young men heard the voices of Brice, the butler, and Sir Philip speaking in low tones. There was the sound of a body being moved, the unlocking of a door, and shortly afterwards its closing.

Sir Philip came back to the sitting room.

"That man, gentlemen," he said with tears in his eyes, "was one of the most faithful, loving creatures that ever lived. He shall mourn him all my life. But tonight there is no time to mourn. Here"—he placed his hand upon the teak, brass-bound box on the table—"here is the crux of the whole matter. My poor Umatare died rather than our enemies should capture this. This box," he continued, "preserved in my care for six months will save England from the greatest catastrophe in the whole of her history. Its removal from my care will plunge the country into a frightful disaster. I was about to explain it all to you when this final horror has occurred."

"If you can, sir," Charlie said, after a long silence in the room, "explain it to me and Mr. Ashton now. As I understand already all the danger comes from that castle a mile away upon the moor, which you have shown me under the moonlight an hour ago."

"All from there, all from there," the baronet answered.

"I knew it," Charlie continued, "even though I have not yet heard the last part of the story, I have felt that everything centres in that powerful personality which is a mystery to all the world and which is known by the name of Lord Helston. Is it not so?"

"Yes," came the reply—the word tolling out into the room like the single stroke of some great bell.

"Then tomorrow," Penrose said quietly, "I am going to discover who or what really exists in Helston Castle. Cunning shall be met by cunning, and if I lose my life it will be well lost. I have no fear at all."

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CHAPTER V.

The Plan to Save Muriel.

It was early morning at Ravenscroft.

The air was crisp and keen, the rising sun a round ball like a crimson shield. The mist was floating upwards like ghostly wreaths of smoke, the wild Northern moors were absolutely silent, save now and then for the startled calling and whirring of an old black cock or grouse, which had escaped the August massacre.

Ravenscroft Hall, a quarter of a mile away from where Charlie Penrose was walking with Sir Philip Vincent upon the moor, showed as a huge pile of weathered stone from which terrace after terrace upon all sides descended to a deep sunken fence. The old moat, fed by a moorland spring, still ran round the ancient house. Charlie had not known anything of it the night before, but he noticed now that the motor-cars which brought the party there had rolled into the central quadrangle over a granite bridge, which spanned the encircling water. That water now was turned to the colour of blood by the onrushing sun, while the windows of the west wing shone like diamonds. Smoke rose from the tall Tudor chimneys, and the great house had an air of massive security and peace.

The night before, the three men, watching in the central room, had spoken but little after the horror of Umatare's murder, and the bringing in of the steel-bound box. Sir Philip had more to tell Charlie and Ashton, but he had been seized with an attack of nerves, so painful to witness, and so obviously necessary to dispel, that Charlie had forbore to press him.

It was not cowardice—both the young men knew this—but the result of the "hideous strain upon every faculty, which had been continuing for a long period, and of which they themselves had seen the horror during the last thirty-six hours.

The man's eldest son had been foully murdered under the most tragic and mysterious circumstances. Two nights before his daughter had been openly kidnapped in the West of London and had been forced to witness what seemed very probably the destruction of the great house of her brother.

And what was the result? "Quick," he said, and his voice

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with Japan, which not only will preserve the balance of power in the far East, but will be of the very greatest help to us in case of war.

But, as I said before, the Mikado is a sick man."

"That means?"

"It means this, Mr. Penrose—I will not confuse your mind with historical details—but, at any rate, I know from private information, that the Mikado is dying, and that his death will take place within six months. The prince that will succeed him is absolutely anti-British. This young man's policy—his declared policy—is, to bring Britannia to her knees."

"Still I do not see," Charlie said.

"You will in a moment. Mr. Mikado of Japan can legally become ruler of his country unless he pays a special visit to a certain monastery, some thirty miles away from his capital. In this monastery, which is the sort of Westminster Abbey, of the Japanese, three objects have been carefully preserved for many centuries. They are a Sword, a Crystal Globe, and a Sacred Mirror. In Japan there is no coronation as we understand it in our country. The real coronation, the real sacrament, is the initiation of the Emperor to the rites and observations of which these objects are the symbols."

Charlie rose from the granite rock upon which he had been sitting. "Ah, Sir Philip," he said quietly, "now I understand what are the contents of the steel-bound box."

The elder man nodded. "It is just that," he said. "My son, through a series of adventures which would hardly be believed if they were written, removed the Sword, the Mirror and the Crystal from the monastery. While I have these in my possession no Mikado can be crowned. But what do you wish to prevent, Sir Philip?"

"I wish to prevent the succession to the throne of a Prince of the Samurai, who will certainly secure the popular acclamation, and who will embroil the whole of Europe."

"And how exactly do you mean to bring about this thing?"

"It is quite simple," Sir Philip answered. "When the Mikado dies Prince Hirotsaki cannot possibly become Mikado without the sacred symbols. If he is not crowned within two or three months, the undriving away of the people will elect another, and far more promising, candidate to the throne. There are secret European agents already at work in Japan. They will make it known that the sacred symbols will at once be returned if Prince Hirotsaki is passed over and his cousin, Prince Satsumi, who is especially favourable towards England, is chosen."

"Now you have the whole thing in a nutshell," the Ambassador concluded. "My son has already been sacrificed. I am prepared, if necessary, to die myself in this cause and how near death I am is no secret to you."

"Sir Philip," Charlie said, and the tone of his voice was both brisk and earnest, "you and yours are going to be saved. The whole horrible conspiracy directed against you is going to be discovered and squashed. You have enlisted me and my friend. Rely upon us."

"I do, my dear boy," the elder man answered. "Indeed I shall deliver men in my dreadful position could keep their nerve unshaken. I am not a cowardly man—he concluded, unconsciously bracing himself up and looking round the landscape with a clear eye—"but what has happened to me of late is enough to fill me with a dreadful fear of the future."

"The great thing," Charlie said, taking a briar pipe from his pocket and quietly filling it, "is to be practical. You have done me the honour to put the control of your affairs in my hands. We must get to action at once."

"Ah, I was waiting to hear you say that," Sir Philip answered. "I saw when you asked me to come for a walk upon the moor that you had some definite plan. What is it?"

"I understand Sir Philip, that your brother-in-law, the General Sir Thomas Yeoland, is in command of the garrison at York?"

"Certainly he is," Sir Philip answered, "and he is one of the finest chivalrous spirits of the present intellectual, but a first-class soldier whose record in South Africa, you probably know. He is married to my sister, Maria. She is younger than her husband, and Muriel and she get on together very well."

"I have heard so," Sir Philip Ashton told me so."

"Of course, I remember."

"I have thought everything out, Sir Philip, and I can see what must be done at once—without a moment's delay. Miss Vincent must flee from Ravenscroft. She must go to York and stay with her aunt for a time. Within an hour she must leave the house as unobtrusively as possible. We don't know, of course, what spies there are upon our doings here. But, without any delay, your daughter must motor to York. Once in the house of the General commanding the Division, she will be secure from the mysterious and horrible visitations in Ravenscroft. And if Lord Helston, the man who should be got ready at once, and that Ashton and I should accompany Miss Vincent, to York. You will write a letter which I shall deliver to General Yeoland. As he knows nothing of the truth, it will only be necessary for you to ask him to have Miss Vincent most carefully guarded. And if Lord Helston, the thing called the Raven, or any of the infernal and diabolical influences

which surround you now, for reasons of family hate and the enmity of Japan, can get anywhere near a girl surrounded by well-trained English soldiers—well, I am a fool, Sir Philip."

The elder man brought one hand to another with a resounding clap. The blue eyes under white brows, grew keen and brave again. "You've hit it," he said, "you've hit it. Muriel, at any rate, will be out of the way."

"Yes, she will be out of the way of the campaign, which we are now waging against the most subtle and deadly enemies of which in my wildest moments I have never dreamed. But more than that, Sir Philip, you have with you that steel-bound box through which, last night, poor Umatare lost his life; for gaining which your son and my late school friend, died. Do you think for a single moment that it is safe in Ravenscroft?"

The other shook his head. "If I did not know," he replied, "that Mr. Ashton was sitting by the fire with two loaded pistols upon the table, even in this beautiful light of dawn, and in the most secluded room of Ravenscroft, I should not think it safe."

"It was safe in London, was it not?"

"Yes, in London they could not touch it. The box was deposited in the vaults of Coutts's bank, and even the ingenuity of my enemies could not reach it there. But certain developments have occurred—as I am constantly advised from Japan—which seem to make it necessary for me to have the mysterious objects of the coronation close at hand. Foolishly, rashly, I admit now, I have brought them with me to this remote part of England. And," Sir Philip continued, with a catch in his breath, "by doing so, I have sacrificed the best servant and the oldest friend I have ever had."

"I have thought this matter out also," Charlie replied quickly. "The box must go with Miss Vincent and York. But it must be taken into the motor secretly, wrapped up in a pile of furs. Within an hour of our leaving for York another car must start, and a box made to look like the real one must be somewhat ostentatiously put into it and driven off towards London."

"I do not exactly see your meaning, Penrose," Sir Philip answered.

"No? Yet it is quite simple. The danger comes from Helston Castle. It is idle to suppose that the agents of Lord Helston or whoever may be the controlling power in these horrible affairs are not watching Ravenscroft with the keenest attention. The fact is, that the undriving away will not matter to these people for a short time. Personal vengeance may be gratified later—that is how I deduced their thought. They are after the sacred regalia, and when some spy upon the moor sees, through his field glasses, what he imagines to be the real box put into a car and driven away, there will be a swift and organised pursuit."

"You have it, you have it! Your plan is excellent."

"Then we must put it into execution at once, Sir Philip. Remember that our enemies are people of such cunning and resource, so absolute secrecy is imperative. They will stick at nothing whatever. Give instructions to the chauffeur of the second car. Let the false box be stolen. That will give us time to work, time to penetrate the mystery to confound our enemies, and to sweep them out of the path forever."

"You inspire me with new hopes, Mr. Penrose. I bless the fortunate chance which brought you and Mr. Ashton to my help. But can it ever be? Can we fight against the unknown and be triumphant?"

Charlie laughed. His blithe, youthful voice echoed upon the sunlit purple moor with such gaiety and confidence that the other took new courage from it.

"Didn't we tell you, Sir Philip," Charlie said, "that I and Wag are going this very night to make a first attempt upon the stronghold of the enemy?"—as he spoke he turned and Sir Philip turned with him. A mile away, stark and black against the painted morning sky, stood grim, castellated keep of Helston Castle.

Even as they looked, a little ball ran up the flag staff of the central tower, and broke at the top the great red flag, with the Helston crest, shook out to the breeze. It showed that the mysterious holder of the title was in residence, but the two men who watched it knew that it was both a menace and challenge in one.

Charlie took off his tweed cap. "So it shall be," he called in a loud voice. "I take your challenge, Lord Helston, whoever or whatever you are!"

"And I will have the Vincent flag up, by Jove!" the old gentleman said, "directly we get back to Ravenscroft. The peerage of Helston was created in the time of George II., but the first Vincent was made a baronet in the days of James I., and I am the fourteenth of the line. We will see if honest love for England can't combat against kidnapping, murder, and the terror that walks by night."

As they walked home Charlie and Sir Philip never spoke a word. But their faces were bright and cheerful. They strode over the heather, the noble house with a swing of resolution.

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