

# The Riddle of Ragstaff

By Sax Rohmer

## I

“Well, Harry, my boy, and what’s the latest news from Venice?”

Harry Lorian stretched his long legs and lay back in his chair.

“I had a letter from the governor this morning, Colonel. He appears to be filling his portfolio with studies of windows and doorways and stair-rails and the other domestic necessities dear to his architectural soul!”

Colonel Reynor laughed in his short, gruff way, as my friend, Lorian, gazing sleepily about the quaint old hall in which we sat, but always bringing his gaze to one point—a certain door—blew rings of smoke straightly upward.

“I suppose,” said our host, the Colonel, “most of the material will be used for the forthcoming book?”

“I suppose so,” drawled Lorian, glancing for the twentieth time at the yet vacant doorway by the stair-foot. “The idea of architects and artists and other constitutionally languid people, having to write books, fills my soul with black horror.”

“He had a glorious time with our old panelling, Harry,” laughed the Colonel, waving his cigar vaguely toward the panelled walls and nooks which gradually were receding into the twilight.

“Yes,” said my friend. “He was here quite an unconscionable time—even for an old school chum of the proprietor. I hope you counted the spoons when he left!”

Lorian’s disrespectful references to Sir Julius, his father, were characteristic; for he reverences that famous artist with the double love of a son and a pupil.

Of course we did,” chuckled Reynor. Nothing missing, my boy!”

“That’s funny,” drawled Lorian. “Because if he didn’t steal it from here I can’t imagine from where he stole it!

“Stole what, Harry?”

“Whatever some chap broke into his studio for last night!”

“Eh!” cried the Colonel, sitting suddenly very upright. “Into your father’s studio? Burglars?”

“Suppose so,” was the reply. “They took nothing that I was aware to be in his possession, though the place was ransacked. I naturally concluded that they had taken something that I was *unaware to be* in his—Ah!”

Sybil Reynor entered by the door which, for the past twenty minutes, had been the focus of Lorian’s gaze. The gathering dusk precluded the possibility of my seeing with certainty, but I think her face flushed as her dark eyes rested upon my friend. Her beauty is not of the kind which needs deceptive half-lights to perfect it, but there in the dimness, as she came towards us, she looked very lovely and divinely graceful. I did not envy Lorian his good fortune; but I suppressed a sigh when I saw how my existence had escaped the girl’s notice and how the world, in her eyes, contained only a Henry Lorian, RI.

Her mother entered shortly afterwards and a general conversation arose, which continued until the arrival of Ralph Edie and his sister. They were accompanied by Felix Hulme; and their advent completed the small party expected at Ragstaff Park.

“You late arrivals,” said Lorian, “have only just time to dress, unless you want to miss everything but the nuts!”

“Oh, Harry!” said Mrs. Reynor, “you are as bad as your father!”

“Worse,” said Lorian promptly. “I am altogether more rude and have a bigger appetite!”

With such seeming trivialities, then, opened the drama of Ragstaff, the drama in which Fate had cast four of us for leading roles.

## II

Following dinner, the men—or, as my friend has it, “the gunners”—drifted into the hall. The hall at Ragstaff Park is fitted as a smoking lounge. It dates back to Tudor days and affords some magnificent examples of mediæval panelling. At every point the eye meets the device of a man with a ragged staff—from which the place derives its name, and which is the crest of the Reynors.

A conversation took place to which, at the time, I attached small importance, but which, later, assumed a certain significance.

“Extraordinary business,” said Felix Hulme—“that attempted burglary at Sir Julius’s studio last night.”

“Yes,” replied Lorian. “Who told you?”

Hulme appeared to be confused by the abrupt question.

“Oh,” he replied, “I heard of it from Baxter, who has the next studio, you know.”

“When did you see Baxter?” asked Lorian casually.

“This morning.”

“I suppose,” said Colonel Reynor to my friend, “a number of your father’s drawings are there?”

“Yes,” answered Lorian slowly; “but the more valuable ones I have at my own studio, including those intended for use in his book.”

Something in his tone caused me to glance hard at him.

“You don’t think they were the burglar’s objective?” I suggested.

“Hardly,” was the reply. “They would be worthless to a thief.”

“First I’ve heard of this attempt, Lorian,” said Edie. “Anything missing?”

“No. The thing is an utter mystery. There were some odds and ends lying about which no ordinary burglar could very well have overlooked.”

“If any loss had been sustained,” said the Colonel, half jestingly, “I should have put it down to the Riddle!”

“Don’t quite follow you, Colonel,” remarked Edie. “What riddle?”

“The family Riddle of the Ragstaffs,” explained Lorian. “You’ve seen it—over there by the staircase.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the other, “you mean that inscription on the panel—which means nothing in particular? Yes, I have examined it several times. But why should it affect the fortunes of Sir Julius?”

“You see,” was the Colonel’s reply, “we have a tradition in the family, Edie, that the Riddle brings us luck, but brings misfortune to anyone else who has it in his possession. It’s never been copied before; but I let Lorian—Sir Julius—make a drawing of it for his forthcoming book on Decorative Wood-carving. I don’t know,” he added smilingly, “if the mysterious influence follows the copy or only appertains to the original.”

“Let us have another look at it,” said Edie. “It has acquired a new interest!

The whole party of us passed idly across the hall to the foot of the great staircase. From the direction of the drawing-room proceeded the softly played strains of the *Duetto* from *Cavalleria*. I knew Sybil Reynor was the player, and I saw Lorian glance impatiently in the direction of the door. Hulme detected the glance, too, and an expression rested momentarily upon his handsome face which I found myself at a loss to define.

“You see,” said the Colonel, holding a candle close to the time-blackened panel, “it is a meaningless piece of mediæval doggerel roughly carved in the wood. The oak-leaf border is very fine, so your father tells me, Harry”—to Lorian—“but it is probably the work of another hand, as is the man and ragged staff which form the shield at the top.”

“Has it ever occurred to you,” asked Hulme, “that the writing might be of a very much later date—late Stuart, for instance?”

“No,” replied the Colonel abruptly, and turned away. “I am sure it is earlier than that.”

I was not the only member of the party who the curt tone of his reply; and when we had all retired for the night I lingered in Lorian’s room and reverted to the matter.

“Is the late Stuart period a sore point with the Colonel?” I asked.

Lorian, who was in an unusually thoughtful mood, lighted his pipe and nodded.

“It is said,” he explained, “that a Reynor at about that time turned buccaneer and became the terror of the two Atlantics! I don’t know what possessed Hulme to say such a thing. Probably he doesn’t know about the piratical page in the family records, however. He’s a strange chap.”

“He is,” I agreed. “Everybody seems to know him, yet nobody knows anything *about* him. I first met him at the Travellers’ Club. I was unaware, until I came down here this time, that the Colonel was one of his friends.”

“Edie brought him down first,” replied Lorian. “But I think Hulme had met Sybil—Miss Reynor—in London, before. I may be a silly ass, but somehow I distrust the chap—always have. He seems to know altogether too much about other people’s affairs.”

I mentally added that he also took too great an interest in a certain young lady to suit Lorian’s taste. We chatted upon various matters— principally upon the manners, customs, and manifold beauties of Sybil Reynor—until my friend’s pipe went out. Then I bade him good night and went to my own room.

### III

With that abruptness characteristic of the coast and season, a high wind had sprung up since the party had separated. Now a continuous booming filled the night, telling how the wrath of the North Atlantic spent itself upon the western rocks.

To a town-dweller, more used to the vaguely soothing hum of the metropolis, this grander music of the elements was a poor sedative. Sleep evaded me, tired though I was, and I presently found myself drifting into that uncomfortable frame of mind between dreaming and waking, wherein one’s brain becomes a torturing parrot-house, filled with some meaningless reiteration.

“The riddle of the ragged staff—the riddle of the ragged staff,” was the phrase that danced maddeningly through my brain. It got to that pass with me, familiar enough to victims of insomnia, when the words began to go to a sort of monotonous melody.

Thereupon, I determined to light a candle and read for a while, in the hope of inducing slumber.

The old clock down in the hall proclaimed the half-hour. I glanced at my watch. It was half-past one. The moaning of the wind and the wild song of the sea continued unceasingly.

Then I dropped my paper—and listened.

Amid the mighty sounds which raged about Ragstaff Park it was one slight enough which had attracted my attention. But in the elemental music there was a sameness which rendered it, after a time, negligible. Indeed, I think sleep was not far off when this new sound detached itself from the old—like the solo from its accompaniment.

Something had fallen, crashingly, within the house.

It might be some object insecurely fastened which had been detached in the breeze from an open window. And, realising this, I waited and listened.

For some minutes the wind and the waves alone represented sound. Then my ears, attuned to this stormy conflict, and sensitive to anything apart from it, detected a faint scratching and tapping.

My room was the first along the corridor leading to the west wing, and therefore the nearest to the landing immediately above the hall. I determined that this mysterious disturbance proceeded from downstairs. At another time, perhaps, I might have neglected it, but to-night, and so recently following upon Lorian's story of the attempt upon his father's studio, I found myself keenly alive to the burglarious possibilities of Ragstaff.

I got out of bed, put on my slippers, and, having extinguished the candle, was about to open the door when I observed a singular thing.

A strong light—which could not be that of the moon, for ordinarily the corridor beyond was dark—shone under the door!

Even as I looked in amazement it was gone.

Very softly I turned the knob.

Careful as I was, it slipped from my grasp with a faint *click*. To this, I think, I owed my failure to see more than I did see. But what I saw was sufficiently remarkable.

Cloud-banks raced across the sky tempestuously, and, as I peered over the oaken balustrade down into the hall, one of these impinged upon the moon's disc and, within the space of two seconds or less, had wholly obscured it. Upon where a long, rectangular patch of light, splashed with lozenge-shaped shadows spread from a mullioned window across the polished floor, crept a band of blackness—widened—claimed half—claimed the whole—and left the hall in darkness.

Yet, in the half-second before the coming of the cloud, and as I first looked down, I had seen something—something indefinable. All but immediately it was lost in the quick gliding shadow—yet I could be sure that I had seen—what?

A gleaming, metallic streak—almost I had said a sword—which leapt from my view into the bank of gloom!

Passing the cloud, and the moon anew cutting a line of light through the darkness of the hall, nothing, no one, remained to be seen. I might have imagined the presence of the shining blade, rod, or whatever had seemed to glitter in the moon-rays; and I should have felt assured that such was the case but for the suspicion (and it was nearly a certainty) that a part of the shadow which had enwrapped the mysterious appearance had been of greater depth than the rest—more tangible; in short, had been no shadow, but a substance—the form of one who lurked there.

Doubtful how to act, and unwilling to disturb the house without good reason, I stood hesitating at the head of the stairs.

A grating sound, like that of a rusty lock, and clearly distinguishable above the noise occasioned by the wind, came to my ears. I began slowly and silently to descend the stairs.

At the foot I paused, looking warily about me. There was no one in the hall.

A new cloud swept across the face of the moon, and utter darkness surrounded me again. I listened intently, but nothing stirred.

Briefly I searched all those odd nooks and corners in which the rambling place abounded, but without discovering anything to account for the phenomena which had brought me there at that hour of the night. The big doors were securely bolted, as were all the windows. Extremely puzzled, I returned to my room and to bed.

In the morning I said nothing to our host respecting the mysterious traffic of the night, since nothing appeared to be disturbed in any way.

“Did you hear it blowing?” asked Colonel Reynor during breakfast. “The booming of the waves sounded slap under the house. Good job the wind has dropped this morning.”

It was, indeed, a warm and still morning, when on the moorland strip beyond the long cornfield, where the thick fir-tufts marked the warren honeycomb, partridges might be met with in many coveys, basking in the sandy patches.

There were tunnels through the dense bushes to the west, too, which led one with alarming suddenness to the very brink of the cliff. And here went scurrying many a hare before the armed intruder.

Lorian and I worked around by lunch-time to the spinneys east of the cornfield, and, nothing loath to partake of the substantial hospitalities of Ragstaff, made our way up to the house. There is a kind of rock-garden from which you must approach from that side. It affords an uninterrupted view of the lower part of the grounds from the lawn up to the terrace.

Only two figures were in sight; and they must have been invisible from any other point, as we, undoubtedly, were invisible to them.

They were those of a man and a girl. They stood upon the steps leading down from the lawn to the rose-garden. It was impossible to misunderstand the nature of the words which the man was speaking. But I saw the girl turn aside and shake her head. The man sought to take her hand and received a further and more decided rebuff.

We hurried on. Lorian, though I avoided looking directly at him, was biting his lip. He was very pale, too. And I knew that he had recognized, as I had recognized, Sybil Reynor and Felix Hulme.

#### IV

During lunch, a Mr. Findon, who had driven over with one of the Colonel's neighbours, asked Sybil Reynor whether the peculiar and far from beautiful ring which she invariably wore was Oriental. From his conversation I gathered that he was something of an expert.

“It is generally supposed to be Phœnician, Mr. Findon,” she answered; and slipping it from her finger she passed it to him. “It is my lot in life to wear it always, hideous though is!”

“Indeed! An heirloom, I suppose?”

“Yes,” replied the girl; “and an ugly one.”

In point of fact, the history of the ring was as curious as that of the Riddle. For generations it had been worn by the heir of Ragstaff from the day of his majority to that of his eldest son's. Colonel Reynor had no son. Hence, following the tradition as closely as circumstances allowed, he had invested Sybil with the ring upon the day that she came of age—some three months prior to the time of which I write.

As Mr. Findon was about to return the ring, Lorian said:

“Excuse me. May I examine it for a moment?”

“Of course,” replied Sybil.

He took it in his hand and bent over it curiously. I cannot pretend to explain what impelled me to glance towards Hulme at that moment; but I did do so. And the expression which rested upon his dark and usually handsome face positively alarmed me.

I concluded that, beneath the cool surface, he was a man of hot passions, and I would have ascribed the fixed glare to the jealousy of a rejected suitor in presence of a more favoured rival, had it centred upon Lorian. But it appeared to be focused, particularly, upon the ring.

The incident impressed me very unfavourably. A sense of mystery was growing up around me— pervading the atmosphere of Ragstaff Park.

After lunch Lorian and I again set out in company, but my friend appeared to be in anything but sporting humour. We bore off at a sharp angle from the Colonel and some others who were set upon the rough shooting on the western rim of the moors and made for the honeycombed ground which led one upward to the cliff edge.

Abruptly, we found ourselves upon the sheer brink, with the floor of the ocean at our feet and all the great Atlantic before us.

“Let us relent of our murderous purpose,” said Lorian, dropping comfortably on to a patch of velvety turf and producing his pipe. “I have dragged you up here with the malicious intention of talking to you.”

I was not sorry to hear it. There was much that I wished to discuss with him.

“I should have stayed to say something to some one,” he added, carefully stuffing his briar, “but first I wanted to say something to you.” He paused, fumbling for matches. “What,” he continued, finding some and striking one, “is Felix Hulme’s little game?”

“He wants to marry Miss Reynor.”

“I know; but he needn’t get so infernally savage because she won’t accept him. He looked at me in a positively murderous way at lunch to-day.”

“So you noticed that?”

“Yes—and I saw that you noticed it, too.”

“Listen,” I said. “Leaving Hulme out of the question, there is an altogether more mysterious business afoot.” And I told him of the episode of the previous night.

He smoked stolidly whilst I spoke, frowning the while; then:

“Old chap,” he said, “I begin to have a sort of glimmering of intelligence. I believe I am threatened with an idea! But it’s such an utterly fantastic hybrid that I dare not name it— yet.”

He asked me several questions respecting what I had seen, and my replies appeared to confirm whatever suspicion was gathering in his mind. We saw little enough sport, but came in later than anyone.

During dinner there was an odd incident. Lorian said:

“Colonel, d’you mind my taking a picture of the Riddle?”

“Eh!” said the Colonel. “What for? Your father made a drawing of it.”

“Yes, I know,” replied Lorian. “I mean a photograph.”

“Well,” mused the Colonel, “I don’t know that there can be much objection, since it has been copied once. But have you got a camera here?”

“Ah—no,” said my friend thoughtfully, “I haven’t. Can anybody lend me one?”

Apparently no one could.

“If you care to drive over to Dr. Mason’s after dinner,” said our host, “he will lend you one. He has several.”

Lorian said he would, and I volunteered to accompany him. Accordingly the Colonel's high dogcart was prepared; and beneath a perfect moon, swimming in a fleckless sky which gave no hint of the storm to come, we set off for the doctor's.

My friend's manoeuvres were a constant source of surprise to me. However, I allowed him to know his own business best, and employed my mind with speculations respecting this mystery, what time the Colonel's spirited grey whisked us along the dusty roads.

We had just wheeled around Dr. Mason's drive, when the fact broke in upon my musings that a Stygian darkness had descended upon the night, as though the moon had been snuffed, candle-wise.

"Devil of a storm brewing," said Lorian. "Funny how the weather changes at night."

Two minutes after entering the doctor's cosy study, down came the rain.

"Now we're in for it!" said Mason. "I'll send Wilkins to run the dogcart into the stable until it blows over."

The storm proved to be a severe one; and long past midnight, despite the doctor's hospitable attempts to detain us, we set off for Ragstaff Park.

"We can put up the grey ourselves," said Lorian. "I love grooming horses! And by going around into the yard and throwing gravel up at his window, we can awaken Peters without arousing the house. This plan almost startles me by its daring originality. I fear that I detect within myself the symptoms of genius."

So, with one of Dr. Mason's cameras under the seat, we started back through the sweet-smelling lanes; and, at about twenty minutes past one, swung past the gate lodge and up the long avenue, the wheels grinding crisply upon the newly wetted gravel. There was but little moon, now, and the house stood up, an irregular black mass, before us.

Then, from three of the windows, there suddenly leapt out a dazzling white light!

Lorian pulled up the grey with a jerk.

"Good God!" he said. "What's that! An explosion!"

But no sound reached us. Only, for some seconds, the hard, white glare streamed out upon the steps and down on to the drive. Suddenly as it had come—it was gone, and the whole of Ragstaff was in darkness as before!

The horse started nervously, but my friend held him with a firm hand, turning and looking at me queerly.

"That's what shone under your door last night I " he said. "That light was in the hall!"

## V

Peters was awakened, the horse stabled and ourselves admitted without arousing another soul. As we came around from the back of the house (we had not entered by the main door), and, candles in hand, passed through the hall, nothing showed as having been disturbed.

"Don't breathe a word of our suspicions to anyone," counselled Lorian.

"What *are* our suspicions?" said I.

"At present," he replied, "indefinable."

To-night the distant murmur of the sea proved very soothing, and I slept soundly. I was early afoot, however, but not so early as Lorian. As I passed around the gallery above the hall, on my way to the bathroom, I saw him folding up the tripod of the camera which he had borrowed from Dr. Mason. The morning sun was streaming through the windows.

“Hub!” Lorian called to me. “I’ve got a splendid negative, I think. Peters is rigging up a dark-room in the wine-cellar—delightful site for the purpose! Will you join me in developing?”

Although I was unable to conjecture what my friend hoped to gain by his photographic experiments, I agreed, prompted as much by curiosity as anything else. So, after my tub, I descended to the cellar and splashed about in Hypo., until Lorian declared himself satisfied.

“The second is the best,” he pronounced critically, holding the negative up to the red lamp. “I made three exposures in all; but the reflection from the polished wood has rather spoiled the first and also the third.”

“Whatever do you want with this photograph, anyway,” I said, “when the original is available?”

“My dear chap,” he replied, “one cannot squat in the hall fixedly regarding a section of panel like some fakir staring at a palm leaf!”

“Then you intend to study it?”

“Closely!”

As a matter of fact, he did not join us during the whole of the day; but since he spent the greater part of the time in his own room, I did not proffer my aid. From a remark dropped by the Colonel, I gathered that Sybil had volunteered to assist, during the afternoon, in preparing prints.

I was one of the first in to tea, and Lorian came racing out to meet me.

“Not a word yet,” he said, “but if the Colonel is agreeable, I shall tell them all at dinner!”

“Tell them what?” I began—

Then I saw Sybil Reynor standing in the shadow of the porch, and, even from that distance, saw her rosy blushes.

I understood.

“Lucky man!” I cried, and wrung his hand warmly. “The very best of good wishes, old chap. I am delighted!”

“So am I!” replied Lorian. “But come and see the print.”

We went into the house together; and Sybil blushed more furiously than ever when I told her how I envied Lorian—and added that he deserved the most beautiful girl in England, and had won her.

Lorian had a very clear print of the photograph pinned up to dry on the side of his window.

“We shall be busy to-night!” he said mysteriously.

He had planned to preserve his great secret until dinner-time; but, of course, it came out whilst we sat over tea on the balcony. The Colonel was unfeignedly delighted, and there is nothing secretive about Colonel Reynor. Consequently, five minutes after he had been informed how matters were between his daughter and Lorian, all the house knew.

I studied the face of Hulme, to see how he would take the news. But he retained a perfect mastery of himself, though his large dark eyes gleamed at discord with the smile which he wore.

Our photographic experiments were forgotten; and throughout dinner, whereat Sybil looked exquisitely lovely and very shy, and Lorian preserved an unruffled countenance, other topics ruled.

It was late before we found ourselves alone in Lorian’s room, with the print spread upon the table beneath the light of the shaded lamp.

We bent over it.

“Now,” said Lorian, “I assume that this is some kind of cipher!”

I stared at him surprisedly.

“And,” he continued, “you and I are going solve it if we sit up all night!”

“How do you propose to begin?”

“Well, as it appears to mean nothing in particular, as it stands, I thought of beginning by assuming that the letters have other values altogether. Therefore, upon the basis that *e* is the letter which most frequently occurs in English, with *a, o, i, d, h, n, r*, afterwards, I had thought of resolving it into its component letters.”

“But would that rule apply to medieval English?”

“Ah,” said Lorian thoughtfully, “most sage counsellor! A wise and timely thought! I’m afraid it wouldn’t.”

“What now?”

Lorian scratched his head in perplexity.

“Suppose,” he suggested, “we write down the words plainly, and see if, treating each one separately, we can find other meanings to them.”

Accordingly, upon a sheet of paper, I wrote:

Wherso eer thee doome bee  
Looke untoe ye strypped tree  
Offe ragged staffe. Upon itte ley  
Golde toe greene ande kay toe kay.

Our efforts in the proposed direction were rewarded with poor success. Some gibberish even less intelligible than the original was the only result of our labour.

Lorian threw down his pencil and began to reload his pipe.

“Let us consider possible meanings to the original words,” he said. “Do you know of anything in the neighbourhood which might answer to the description of a ‘strypped tree’?”

I shook my head.

“What has occasioned your sudden interest in the thing?” I asked wearily

“It is a long story,” he replied; “and I have an idea that there’s no time to be lost in solving the Riddle!”

However, even Lorian’s enthusiasm flagged at last. We were forced to admit ourselves hopelessly beaten by the Riddle. I went to my own room feeling thoroughly tired. But I was not destined to sleep long. A few minutes after closing my eyes (or so it seemed), came a clamouring at the door.

I stumbled sleepily out of bed, and, slipping on my dressing-gown, admitted Lorian. Colonel Reynor stood immediately behind him.

“Most extraordinary business!” began the latter breathlessly. “Sybil had—you tell him, Harry!”

“Well,” said Lorian, “it is not unexpected! Listen: Sybil woke up a while ago, with the idea that she had forgotten something or lost something—you know the frame of mind! She went to her dressing-table and found the family ring missing!”

“The ring!” burst in the Colonel excitedly. “Amazing!”

“She remembered having taken it off, during the evening, to—er—to put another one on! But she was unable to recall having replaced it. She determined to run down and see if she had left it upon the seat in the corner of the library.

Well, she went downstairs in her dressing-gown, and, carrying a candle, very quietly, in order to wake no one, crossed to the library and searched unavailingly. She heard a faint noise outside in the hall.”

Lorian paused. Felix Hulme had joined the party.

“What’s the disturbance?” he asked.

“Oh,” said Lorian, turning to him, “it’s about Sybil She was down in the library a while ago to look for something, and heard a sort of grating sound out in the hall. She came out, and almost fell over an iron-bound chest, about a foot and a half long, which stood near the bottom of the staircase!”

“Good heavens, Lorian!” I cried, “how had it come there?”

“Sybil says,” he resumed, “that she could not believe her eyes. She stooped to examine the thing . . . and with a thrill of horror saw it to be roughly marked *with a skull and crossbones!*”

“My dear Lorian,” said Hulme, “are you certain that Miss Reynor was awake?”

“She woke us quickly enough!” interrupted the Colonel “Poor girl, she was shaking dreadfully. Thought it was a supernatural appearance. She’s with her mother now.”

“But the box!” I cried. “Where is the box?”

“That’s the mystery,” answered Colonel Reynor. “I was downstairs two minutes later, and there was nothing of the kind to be seen! Has our Ragstaff ghost started walking again, I wonder? You ought to know, Hulme; you’re in the Turret Room—that is the authentic haunted chamber!

“I was aroused by the bell ringing,” replied Hulme. “I am a very light sleeper. But I heard or saw nothing supernatural.”

“By the way, Hulme,” said my friend, “the Room is directly above the hall. I have a theory. Might I come up with you for a moment?”

“Certainly,” replied Hulme.

We all went up to the Turret Room. Having climbed the stairs to this apartment, you enter it by descending three steps. It is octagonal and panelled all around. My friend tapped the panels and sounded all the oaken floor-boards. Then, professing himself satisfied, he bade Hulme good night, and accompanied me to my room.

## VI

Ragstaff Park slumbered once more. But Lorian sat upon the edge of my bed, smoking and thinking hard. He had been to his own room for the print of the Riddle, and it lay upon a chair before him.

“Listen to this,” he said suddenly: “(a) Some one breaks into the governor’s studio, and takes nothing. His drawings of the Ragstaff Riddle happen to be at my studio. (b) You hear a noise in the night, and see (1) a bright light; (2) a gleaming rod. (c) You and I see a bright light on the following night, and presumably proceeding from the same place; i.e., the hail. (d) Something I have not mentioned before—Hulme has a camera in his kit! And he doesn’t want the fact known!”

“What do you mean?”

“I tested him the other night, by inquiring if anyone could lend me a camera. He did not volunteer! The morning following the mysterious business in the hall, observed by you, I saw a photographic printing frame in his window! He must have one of those portable developers with him.”

“And to what does all this point?”

“To the fact that he has made at least three attempts to obtain a copy of the Riddle, and has at last succeeded!”

“Three!”

“I really think so. The evidence points to him as the person who broke into the studio. He made a bad slip. He referred to the matter, and cited Horace Baxter as his informant. Baxter is away!”

“But this is serious!”

“I should say so! He couldn’t attempt to photograph the panel in daylight, so he employed magnesium ribbon at night! First time his tripod slipped. It is evidently one of the light, telescopic kind. His negative proved useless. It was one of the metal legs of the tripod which you saw shining! The second time he was more successful. That was the light of his magnesium ribbon you and I saw from the drive!”

“But, Lorian, I went down and searched the hall!”

“Now we come on to the, at present, conjectural part,” explained Lorian. “My theory is that Hulme, somewhere or other, has come across some old documents which give the clue to those secret passages said to exist in Ragstaff, but which the Colonel has never been able to locate. I feel assured that there is some means of secret communication between the Turret Room and the hail. I further believe that Hulme has in some way got upon the track of another secret—that of the Riddle.”

“But what is the secret of the Riddle?”

“In my opinion the Riddle is a clue to another hiding-place, evidently not connected with the maze of passages; possibly what is known as a Priest’s Hole. As you know, Hulme asked Sybil to marry him. I believe the man to be in financial straits; so that we must further assume the Riddle to conceal the whereabouts of a treasure, since the Reynors are far from wealthy.”

“The *chest!* Lorian! The chest!” I cried.

“Quite so. But what immediately preceded its appearance? The loss of the family ring! If I am not greatly in error, Hulme found that ring! And the ring is the key to the riddle! Do you recall the shape of the bezel? Simply a *square peg of gold!* Look at the photograph!”

He was excited, for once.

“What does it say?” he continued: “‘Ye strypped tree!’ That means the device of leaves, twigs, and acorns stripped *from* a tree—see? Here, at the bottom of the panel, is such a group, and (this is where we have been so blind!) intertwined with the design is the word *CAEG*—Ancient Saxon for *key!* Look! ‘Golde toe Greene and kay toe kay’! Amongst the *green* leaves is a square hole. The *gold* knob on the ring fits it!”

For a moment I was too greatly surprised for speech. Then:

“You think Hulme discovered this?”

“I do. And I think Sybil’s mislaying her ring gave him his big chance. He had got the chest out whilst she was in the library. He must have been inside somewhere looking for it when she passed through the hall. Then, hearing her approach from the library, he was forced to abandon his heavy ‘find’ and hide in the secret passage which communicates with his room. Directly she ran upstairs he returned for the chest!

I looked him hard in the face.

“We don’t want a scene, Lorian,” I began. “Besides, it’s just possible you may be wrong.”

“I agree,” said Lorian. “Come up to his room, now.”

Passing quietly upstairs, we paused before the door of the Turret Room. A faint light showed under it. Lorian glanced at me—then knocked.

“Who’s there?” came sharply.

“Lorian,” answered my friend. “I want a chat with you about the secret passage and the old treasure chest—*before speaking to the Colonel!*”

There was a long silence, then:

“Just a moment,” came hoarsely. “Don’t come in until I call.”

We looked at one another doubtfully. A long minute passed. I could hear a faint sound within. At last came Hulme’s voice:

“All right. Come in.”

As Lorian threw the door open, a faint *click* sounded from somewhere.

The Turret Room was empty!

“By heaven I he’s given us the slip!” cried my friend.

We glanced around the room. A candle burnt upon the table. And upon the bed stood an iron-barred chest, with a sheet of notepaper lying on its lid!

Lorian pounced upon the note. We read it together.

“Mr. Henry Lorian” (it went), “I realize that you have found me out. I will confess that I had no time to open the chest. But as matters stand I only ask you not to pursue me. I have taken nothing not my own. The ring, and an interesting document which I picked up some years ago, are on the table. Offer what explanation of my disappearance you please. I am in your hands.”

We turned again to the table. Upon a piece of worn parchment lay the missing ring. Lorian spread out the parchment and bent over it.

“Why,” I cried, “it is a plan of Ragstaff Park!”

With a perfect network of secret passages!” added my friend, “and some instructions, apparently, as to how to enter them. It bears the initials ‘R. R.’ and, in brackets, ‘Capt. S.’ I begin to understand.”

He raised the candle and stepped across to the ancient chest. It bore a roughly designed skull and cross-bones, and, in nearly defaced red characters, the words:

**“CAPTAIN SATAN.”**

“Captain Satan!”, I said. “He was one of the most bloodthirsty pirates who ever harried the Spanish Main!”

“He was,” agreed Lorian; “and his real name was Roderick Reynor. He evidently solved the riddle some generations earlier than Hulme—and stored his bloodstained hoard in the ancient hiding-place. Also, you see, he knew about the passages.”

“What shall we do?”

“Hulme has surrendered. You can see that the chest has not been opened. Therefore there is only one thing that we *can* do. We must keep what we know to ourselves, return the chest to its hiding-place, and proclaim that we have found the missing ring!”

Down to the hall we bore the heavy chest. The square knob on the ring fitted, as Lorian had predicted, into the hole half hidden among the oak leaves of the design. Without much difficulty we forced back the fastening (it proved to be of a very simple pattern), and slid the whole panel aside. A small, square chamber was revealed by the light of the candle—quite empty.

“As I had surmised,” said my friend; “a Priest’s Hole.”

We carried the chest within, and reclosed the panel, which came to with a sharp *click*.

\* \* \*

The story which we invented to account for Hulme’s sudden departure passed muster; for one topic usurped the interests of all—the ghostly box, with its piratical emblem.

“My boy,” Colonel Reynor said to Lonan, “I cannot pretend to explain what Sybil saw. But it bears curiously upon a certain black page in the family history. If the chest had been tangible, and had contained a fortune, I would not have opened it. Let all pertaining to that part of our records remain buried, say I.”

“Which determines our course,” explained Lorian to me. “The chest is not ours, and the Colonel evidently would rather not know about it. I regret that I lack the morals of a burglar.”