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The Château of Laughing Phantoms

By

GEORGE
A. SCOTT



When the old Frenchman swore that uncanny creatures lurked in the ruined castle, the two Americans scoffed at the idea. But one of them lived to learn the awful truth

ALL hope is gone! The last plea has failed! Tomorrow, at the first dim light of dawn, I must ascend the scaffold of that inhuman relic of barbarism, the Guillotine, and there meet my doom in punishment for a crime of which, I swear by all that I hold sacred and holy, I am innocent.

Yes, I am innocent, despite the blackness of the evidence against me. And before I go to my death, I must leave a record of the events of that night of horror—a record that may be read by my friends at home, and that may, perhaps, convince them. Still—I wonder! My story, no doubt garbled and reduced to banality by the court interpreters, brought nothing but incredulous smiles from the jury. Will it meet with greater credence from my friends? I do not know—I can only try.

Here, then, is a true recital of the things that occurred in the north chamber of the Château des Verboises on the night of August 9th, and of the incidents which led to the death of my friend, Paul Granger, and my own trial, conviction and sentence on the charge of having murdered him.

It was on the fifth of August that I chanced to meet my old friend and college chum, Paul Granger, in the famous Café Maxim in Paris. I was surprised and delighted to see him, for at least five years had passed since our last meeting. He seemed quite as happy to see me, and in his usual frank and outspoken way he told me, during the first few minutes of our conversation, of the change in his fortunes which permitted him the luxury of European travel. It seemed that a distant relative had recently died, leaving to Paul his entire fortune—a sum very closely approaching a million dollars.

"Just now," said Paul with a smile, "I am considering

some investments in French real estate. I used to have a small real-estate office in New York, you know, and I can't get the old business out of my blood."

"I'm afraid this is poor territory for real-estate booms," I replied. "The French nation is much too old to be stampeded even by American advertising methods."

"I was only joking about going into the business," he said. But the fact is that I am thinking of buying one of these old castles, fixing it up with all the modern conveniences, and using it as a kind of country home. It may seem idiotic, but you know, I always have been a born romanticist. Ever since I first read *Ivanhoe*, when I was twelve years old, I've wanted a castle of my own. I began looking around when I came to France, and I find that there are several castles on the market at ridiculously low prices. A good many of the old moneyed class here have lost their fortunes, you know, through the fluctuations of the franc, and have to sell their estates. Hard luck for them, of course, but it gives me a chance to get hold of one of these old châteaux at a reasonable figure."

"**H**AVE you anything particular in mind?" I asked.

"Well, there's a place down in Brittany, the Château des Verboises, that I'd like to look over. It seems to be in pretty good repair, considering that it was built sometime in the Eleventh Century. I have talked to the agent here in Paris who is handling the sale, and he has shown me photographs taken from every angle. But I want to run down for a day or two and examine it thoroughly, inside and out. By the way, why couldn't you come along with me? You're interested in these old places, aren't you? Besides, you're an architect and you could probably tell me

just about what would have to be done to put the place in condition. What do you say, old man?"

I agreed at once. As an architect, I am always glad of an opportunity to examine the architecture of other centuries, and particularly those amazing structures built by unknown architects of the Middle Ages. But my chief reason was that I wished to renew my friendship with Paul. It was decided that we should start four days hence—on the morning of August 9th.

"I'll take a couple of canvas cots along," said Paul, "and we can sleep in the château. The agent tells me that there is an inn in a little hamlet near the castle, but I'm not sure that I would care to sleep there. You know what most of these country inns are. I don't suppose you would be nervous about sleeping in an empty castle that hasn't had a tenant for a good many years?"

"Not at all," I answered with a smile. "Of course the place is probably haunted, and there will be ghosts tramping about all night, but I prefer ghosts to bedbugs."

To be brief, we started early on the morning of the 9th and, after driving all day in Paul's car, arrived late in the afternoon at the little hamlet near the château. After a glance into the doorway of the filthy inn and the still filthier café, we promptly decided to prepare our own dinner with provisions we had brought from Paris, and to sleep at the château.

"We won't need a big meal tonight," said Paul. "We have some sausage and bread, and we can make coffee on that little sterno outfit. Now I'll have to look up the caretaker of the castle and get the key. I have a note to him from the agent."

The caretaker's house was pointed out by one of the inhabitants of the hamlet, most of whom were by this time grouped about our car. Paul crossed the single street of the village, knocked upon the door and in a few moments returned bearing a huge iron key, at least eight inches in length.

"Here it is!" he cried, holding it up as he approached the car. "This, I'd have you know, is the key to the small gate in the wall—what do you call it?—the postern gate. If we wanted to go in by the front door, we'd probably have to get another car to carry the key."

When Paul started to climb into the machine, I noticed that some of the people in the crowd around the car exchanged startled glances. As he started the motor, an old man on the outskirts of the group pushed his way forward and said in a low voice: "Do you go to the château?"

I cannot speak French well, though I understand it perfectly, so I left the reply to Paul.

"Yes, monsieur," he said, "we are going to look at the place."

"But not at night!" exclaimed the old man with agitation. "It will be moonlight before you can reach there. Wait until the morning."

"But why should we wait?" asked Paul. "We intend to sleep there."

"No, no—do not go!" cried the old man excitedly. "The hand of evil is upon the place. A curse rests upon all those on whom the shadow of the château falls by moonlight."

"Ho! So it is haunted!" said Paul, turning to me. "You were right." Then, speaking to the old man again, he asked: "What is this evil? What happens to those who fall under the curse?"

"They die!" said the old man. "All—all! They die!"

"Wait a minute!" Paul exclaimed, looking more serious. "There might be something to this. Some of these old places may have pockets of poisonous gas, or something of the sort. These people who died—they were all found dead in the château in the morning?" he asked, again addressing

the old man, who stared at us with horror in his eyes.

"No, no! One, perhaps, or two. But mostly they die in a day, a week, a month—even a year. The curse is upon them! They cannot escape! They die—all die!"

"Oh," said Paul with a laugh, "they die afterward, eh? Well, that's all right. As long as they're not found dead in the château, I'm not afraid." He let out the clutch.

"Funny thing how these superstitions get started," he said, as the car moved forward. "I suppose some fellow happened to die after having been near the château at night, or perhaps even slept there—and the news went around that the place was haunted. And after that, of course, whenever anybody in the village happened to die, it was because he had been in or near the château. That's a rummy idea, though, about the moonlight shadow."

"If you're going to buy a castle in France," I said, "you must expect to get at least one ghost along with it. They're part of the equipment."

We were driving slowly, for the road was rough and muddy—we had left the high road some ten kilometers back. As the old man had predicted, the night fell swiftly. Before we had hardly left the hamlet behind, it was quite dark. With the darkness came fog—not a heavy, blinding fog, but a thin, drizzling gray mist, through which we could dimly discern the stark, barren landscape of this most dismal section of the damp and windswept coast of Brittany.

PRESENTLY, looming obscurely through the mists before us, we saw the shadowy outlines of the huge castle. As we approached slowly, the car sliding from one side of the road to the other in the mud, it seemed to bend its bleak, gray bulk above us, lowering upon us with a sullen and menacing frown. It was then that I felt the first touch of a cold and incomprehensible fear—a sense of terror that constricted my throat and pressed upon my chest like a heavy weight.

I think Paul felt something of it, too, for he shivered and turned up the collar of his coat, with some remark about the dampness.

"We'll have to follow the road around to the other side," he added. "The postern gate is in the rear."

Driving slowly, he piloted the car over the narrow wagon road that led to the rear of the vast building, and stopped before a narrow door set deep in the masonry of the towering wall.

As we stepped from the car, a light breeze rose and quickly scattered the mist, and the ghostly landscape was flooded with pale, sickly moonlight. I glanced at the sky, but the moon itself was hidden behind the huge towers that rose above us. Involuntarily, I thought of the old villager.

"Come on, let's get this stuff out of the car," said Paul. I thought his voice sounded a little strained and high-pitched. "Here's a flash-light." Then, after a pause: "Humph—it doesn't work. Batteries used up. Well, never mind—I've got some candles and plenty of matches." He picked up half

of the bundles and started for the gate, while I followed with the rest.

I lit one of the candles, while Paul, after a few moments of effort, succeeded in turning the key in the rusted lock. The door swung back with a creak of hinges, and we found ourselves in a small tunnel, scarcely three feet wide and just high enough to permit us to stand erect. A damp, sickening odor pervaded the place, and the stones underfoot were slippery with a slime that showed green in the candle light. The walls were of solid masonry, pierced by horizontal slits an inch or two in width, about four feet from the floor. These, I knew, were for the purpose of permitting bowmen in the interior of the castle to discharge arrows upon any



enemy that might succeed in battering down the postern gate and gaining entrance to the passage. I could not help wondering how many brave fighters of a former age might have given up their lives in this dank and musty corridor.

Paul took the candle and went ahead. After proceeding for about fifty feet, we came to another heavy door. This was not locked, but the hinges were so rusty that our combined efforts were required to open it. It led into another and more spacious passage, and this, after devious twists and turns, brought us to the great hall of the castle.

It was an immense room, fully three hundred feet in length and half as wide. Paul held the candle as high above his head as he could reach, but its rays could pierce the darkness only dimly. High overhead we could sense, rather than see, the network of vast rafters that supported the roof. Thick dust on the floor beneath our feet deadened our footsteps, but as we crossed that silent space it seemed to me that somebody, or something, was looking at us, watching us, following each step that we took. Several times I caught myself glancing quickly over my shoulder.

PAUL must have felt it, too, for he turned to me, his face white in the circle of candle light, and said, with an attempt at a grin: "Nice place for a murder."

The grin froze on his face, and I felt my own scalp itch as the hair stood up—for a hollow, sepulchral voice from the other side of the hall replied: "Murder!"

For a second we stood staring at each other in horror. Then we both laughed.

"An echo!" said Paul.

"Ho, ho!" said the voice.

Even though the source of the voice was thus easily explained, such was the weight of the feeling that lay upon us that neither of us spoke again until we had reached the broad stone steps that led to the upper stories of the castle.

Then Paul said, "Let's go upstairs."

"Upstairs!" repeated the voice.

I was glad enough to leave that vast hall, where the feeling of abysmal space had given me a sense of helplessness—such a sensation, I believe, as might be felt by a swimmer alone in the middle of the ocean at night. But before climbing the stairs, I struck a match and lit another candle.

At the head of the stairway we found another passage, or corridor, this one of such huge dimensions that it might have been taken for a room except for its length and the fact that other rooms opened into it from each side. Paul turned toward the north end of the building, and when he reached the first door, opened it and looked in.

"This won't do," he said. "No shutters on those windows. These foggy nights are pretty cold, even in August."

We glanced into each room as we came to it, but in all of them the windows were unshuttered and the draught which swept across the room upon the opening of the door, making our candles flicker and flutter, warned us away.

"I'd rather sleep out here in the hallway," said Paul, "than have a gale like that blowing over me all night. Think what colds we would have in the morning."

At last, at the end of the passage, we came to a room in which the heavy oak shutters were still in the window openings. Unlike the other rooms into which we had glanced, this one still contained some of the furnishings which had graced it in the days when knights were bold and feudal barons ruled the countryside. A bed of vast size stood in one corner of the room, and a canopy of silk, now shredded and tattered and filthy with the grime of centuries, hung drunkenly above it. It was a larger room than the others, measuring fully fifty feet on each side. The walls, which towered above us to a vaulted ceiling that seemed almost lost in the distance, were hung with heavy draperies of a somber and funereal color. Dust lay thick upon everything. It rose in clouds as we walked across the floor. A touch of the elbow upon a fold of the hangings brought down a stifling, choking cloud. At the corner opposite the door by which we had entered, was another door, probably leading to an adjacent chamber.

As the door was barred on the inside with a stout oaken bar, we did not investigate further.

"This will do," said Paul, dropping his bundles upon the floor. "We can camp here for the night."

At that moment the door by which we had entered the room swung shut with a crash that echoed and re-echoed. I turned with a gasp, instinctively drawing the pistol that I carried. We looked at each other for a moment. Paul's lips were blanched, but he laughed in a strained way.

"Seems to be a bit draughty in here, too, in spite of the shutters, doesn't it?"

"Paul," I asked, "wasn't that door standing open when we came up here? I don't remember that you opened it."

"Yes. No. I don't know. I think it must have been shut. It wouldn't have blown shut like that after standing open all these years. It must be years since anybody was in this room. See, the dust is at least an inch deep and ours are the only footprints here."

I WENT over to the door and looked closely at the marks in the dust.

"Look!" I exclaimed. "The dust is nearly an inch deep—except in one place. See, where the door has been standing open—all these years. Paul, someone, or something, shut that door behind us."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Paul. "You've been reading too many ghost stories. Here, let's see if it will open. If somebody closed it behind us, it must have been to lock us in." With that he caught the huge iron latch-handle and swung the door open. The hinges creaked, but turned easily enough.

I was almost convinced until the light of my candle fell upon the thumbpiece of the latch on the outside of the door.

"Look here, Paul," I said. "If you had opened the door, you would naturally have to raise the latch, wouldn't you. But you see that the dust on the thumbpiece is undisturbed."

He stared at the latch for a moment uneasily. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Say, are you trying to make me believe in ghosts?" he asked. "I suppose the door was almost closed when we came, and I pushed it open. Then, when it was all the way open, the draught caught it and (Continued on page 90)

"Not One Escapes!"

"The hand of evil is upon the place," the old peasant said. "A curse rests upon all those on whom the shadow of the château falls by moonlight."

"What happens to them?" Paul asked.

"They die!" he answered. "All—all They die!"

Wouldn't you think that any sane man would stay away from a place with a reputation like that? But Paul and I were young and headstrong—so we entered the castle—and faced a monstrous doom!

The Château of Laughing Phantoms

(Continued from page 15)

blew it shut. Isn't that logical enough?

"Anyhow," he went on, "if somebody followed us down the passage and shut the door, we can easily fix things so he'll stay out where he is." He shut the door and dropped the ponderous oaken bar into place. "There! That door is solid oak and three inches thick, and nothing less than dynamite would make any impression on it. The other door is already barred and the window shutter is fastened. No danger of anybody getting in here now. We may have a headache in the morning for lack of fresh air, but certainly nothing else can happen to us."

He began to unpack the sterno outfit and the provisions. He measured coffee into a small pot, poured in some water from a canteen and placed the pot on the sterno stove. Then he cut thick slices of bread from a loaf and placed slices of sausage between them.

"Here," he said, holding one of the sandwiches out to me, "start the banquet. Nothing like a little food to cure the blue funk. And as a further cheer to your spirits, I have a bottle of wine here."

I UNSTRAPPED the cots and set them up, one on each side of the little sterno stove. I seated myself on one of the cots, my back to the door by which we had entered, and Paul took his place on the other, facing me. The candles, set on the floor in hardened pools of their own wax, threw a dim light about the room, wavering with every breath and making our shadows dance like gruesome specters on the gloomy hangings of the wall.

The room was soon filled with the pleasant aroma of boiling coffee. Paul lifted the pot from the stove, and was in the act of filling our cups when both candles flickered and went out, leaving the room in darkness save for the ghostly pool of blue light about the sterno stove. We sat for a moment in startled silence; then Paul said in a voice from which he tried in vain to keep a note of uneasiness: "It is a bit draughty in here, isn't it?"

I found my match box, struck a match and leaned over to light the candles. As I straightened up again, I saw Paul staring over my shoulder at something behind me, his face bloodless and his eyes glassy. I leaped to my feet and whirled to face the door.

It was standing wide open!

For what seemed an age we stood there staring—staring at that open, empty door.

At last Paul gave a weak chuckle, more like a gasp. "Oh," he said, "it gave me a little start at first—seeing that door standing open. I had forgotten that I opened it. You see—you see—I thought I had left the canteen of water down in the car, and I—I was going down to get it—and I opened the door—and then I saw the canteen and—

and I guess I forgot to—to close the door."

I knew that he was lying—lying hopelessly and bravely to calm my fears, but in the extremity of my horror I was willing to accept any explanation—as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Without comment, I closed and barred the door and resumed my seat. We finished our meal in silence. Even the bottle of excellent champagne failed to revive our spirits.

After a little while, Paul said, "Well, I suppose it's time to go to bed."

I agreed, though I was fully determined that I should not sleep a wink that night.

"I'll tell you how we'll arrange this," Paul went on. "Just to make sure that nobody can operate those bars from the outside, you put your cot across that door over there, and I'll put mine across this one. If you feel anybody pushing the door open, call out. I'll do the same. We'll put out one of these candles. If we let both of them burn together, we'll be without light before morning."

I assented, and we both lay down at our appointed stations. I do not know how long I lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening tensely to the wind, which moaned about the deserted towers and empty turrets as though it were wailing the anguish of all those long-forgotten beings who had lived, suffered and died within these moldering walls. Paul's irregular breathing, and an occasional creak of the cot as he shifted his position, told me that he, too, was wide awake.

And then—the candle went out.

THERE was no preliminary flicker or wavering of the flame. The light was cut off as swiftly and completely as that of an electric bulb when the current is switched off. And at the same moment, out of the darkness, lean, powerful hands closed upon my throat.

I had no impression of a rush—of a body leaping upon me from some place of concealment. It was as though those hands had been there waiting—waiting. I tried to call out, but could make no sound. I tore at those relentless hands in an ecstasy of terror, but could not loosen them. At last, with the strength of despair, I struggled to a sitting posture, drew my pistol, pressed it against the body before me and pulled the trigger three times. The roar of the shots started a thousand reverberations which echoed hollowly through the room, and as they died away the grip upon my throat relaxed—the hands dropped. I waited for the thud of a falling body, but heard nothing.

"Paul!" I screamed. "Paul, where are you?"

There was no answer.

I found my match box, and with trembling fingers struck a light and ran toward Paul's cot. He was lying quietly—I thought at first that he had fallen asleep and had slept through my

struggle with the unknown Thing that had attacked me in the darkness. I glanced swiftly about the room—there was no sign of a body. Then I looked again at Paul. Blood was oozing from his temple. There were three bullet holes, all within a space an inch in diameter.

Was it Paul, then, who had attacked me? Impossible! The hands had closed upon my throat at the very instant that the light went out. And in any case, he could never have regained his cot, which was fully sixty feet distant from mine. He could not have walked a step after the first of those three bullets had struck.

As I stood there, too horrified to cry out—too horrified even to move—the match in my fingers burned out. And then, in the pitch darkness, at my very elbow, I heard a sardonic chuckle.

How I found my way out of that castle, I do not know. I can remember, as through a mist, dashing frenziedly through the endless, echoing corridors, falling down flights of stone steps, beating upon the bare stone walls with my naked fists when I could find no door, stumbling through the murk that seemed to close upon me like a foul ooze that clung, holding me back. And always, until at last I fell through the postern gate into the blessed moonlight, I heard that chuckle behind me, beside me, before me, growing ever louder and shriller, until it rang through those empty corridors like the wild laughter of demons.

I remember leaping into the car and driving, driving, driving. Across ditches and fields I drove until I came out on the high road—then on, on—with no thought but to leave that accursed castle farther and farther behind me.

The rest of the story everybody knows. When we failed to appear in the village the following morning, a group of the villagers, emboldened by the daylight, went to the castle and there found Paul's body lying on the cot. To all appearances, he had been shot in his sleep. The news, with a description of myself, was swiftly flashed all over France and I was arrested at the outskirts of Nantes—exhausted, bleeding and bruised from my contacts with the stone walls of the castle, but still running on—on. The car was found ten miles back along the road, where I had left it when the fuel gave out.

I pleaded not guilty to the charge of murdering Paul Granger, and employed the best legal talent that France could produce. But even from the first I knew that it was useless. For I could hear the voice of the old villager: "*They die! A curse follows those upon whom the shadow of the château falls by moonlight. All—all! They die!*"

I have spent the night in writing this record.

The candle which my pitying jailor allowed me as a last favor in life is flickering and about to die. And I, too! Already it grows light in the east. They are coming for me—