

# *Rampart*

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**W**hen Charles Rampart looked up from his book and squinted through glasses as thick as slices of bread, he swore the vase in the far corner of his study had moved. It had been knocked askew—not tipped or broken but had shifted slightly when the walls jostled forward.

His noble castle creaked and moaned. A fire flickered lazily in the fireplace to his right, next to the intimidating seven-foot-tall Colorado blue spruce Christmas tree adorned with bright, red teardrop ornaments and glistening, white lights, created strange, swaying shadows. Charles cowered in the formidable, wavering light, dreading the inevitable. He shut his book and set it down quickly on the end table before he rose from his comfortable, red leather chair and shuffled over to the delicate, white vase resting on the middle of the polished cherry table near the entranceway. After considerable effort, he managed to lift it for a closer look. Nothing out of the ordinary explained the shift. He returned the vase to its proper place, then sobbed.

He became aware of these subtle shifts gradually, obvious only to a keen observer. Charles watched and waited, hoping his overactive imagination simply played tricks on him. As days turned into weeks, the bizarre phenomenon became impossible to deny. He wanted to tell his beloved wife but dreaded the confrontation—he knew she would reason her way out of what she considered his delusional paranoia.

Susan tiptoed into his study and stopped short at the sight of his open weeping. “Charles, what’s got you so upset?”

Charles shook his head vigorously. “Do you see that vase over there?”

“Of course, I do.” She laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “What about it?”

He balled his unsteady hands into fists. “It just moved. I saw.” Charles desperately scoured the study for an explanation but came up empty-handed.

Susan rolled her eyes. “Don’t be foolish! It’s impossible to see anything in this dim light, let alone the vase on the other side of the room.” She extinguished the fire. “You look exhausted. Your eyes must be playing tricks. That happens sometimes when you’re tired. And tomorrow is Christmas.”

“I *know* what I saw,” He declared, clearly agitated.

“Come to bed. Everything will look better in the morning. I promise. Christmas makes even the most die-hard skeptics believe in miracles.” Susan coaxed him

upstairs. All the while, he stared at the floor, unable to bear the dreadful sight of the walls closing in.

His wife frowned. "What's the matter?" She took his hand and held it tight.

Charles worked up the nerve to take a quick look around. "I have reason to believe my castle is trying to destroy me, little by little." His voice mirrored his shaky movements.

"Prove it." Susan raised her eyebrows.

He pointed to the vase. "Look, that vase isn't even with the door. It was this afternoon. Explain that!"

"There's nothing *to* explain. That vase hasn't moved in years." Her eyes lit up. "You probably kicked the table by mistake and that's why it doesn't look right. Accidents happen to the best of us."

She kissed him, tucked him in, and slid into her side of the bed.

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The next morning, Charles woke early and inspired by the magic of Christmas, ventured downstairs alone to the kitchen. Not wanting to wake Geoff, the butler, he prepared a feast for Susan and himself of scrambled eggs, bacon, French toast, orange juice, and coffee. He carefully placed everything on an enormous tray and set it down on the dining room table, trying hard not to look at the walls along the way.

Much to his dismay, they had shifted a bit. He detected a negligible difference; early in the morning, the picture of Susan at the far end of the room was even with the China cabinet, but now it seemed much closer to the dining room table. Too close. He shook his head and shut his eyes. A minute later Charles opened them, alarmed to find the picture closer still.

Terrified, he rushed upstairs to get his wife. She finished dressing and met him in the hallway.

“What’s wrong now?” Susan took him by the hand and led him downstairs, afraid he might trip and tumble down headfirst in such an agitated state.

“The walls moved right in front of me.” Like a frightened child, Charles cringed, wide-eyed. “Come see for yourself!”

She sighed, tired of these grueling episodes. “Show me where.”

“In the dining room.” He led her to the scene. “Your picture doesn’t line up with the China cabinet anymore.”

Susan examined the cabinet. “Well, that *is* odd. Are you sure Geoff didn’t move it?”

“Let’s ask him.” Charles yanked the golden rope, summoning the butler.

Moments later, Geoff appeared, distinguished as ever in his morning suit. “How can I help you, sir?”

“Geoff, did you clean the dining room yesterday?” Charles cocked his head, anxious for tangible evidence.

“Yes, as I do every day. Did I do an unsatisfactory job?”

Susan patted Charles’s arm. “Not at all. But I do have one question: Did you forget to put the China cabinet back where it belonged?”

“No, I didn’t move the cabinet. It’s much too heavy for one man to move single-handedly. I call in part-time movers every six weeks to help me clean behind such bulky furniture.” Geoff scratched his head, quite puzzled. “If you ask me, it looks perfectly fine where it is.”

Charles straightened up, his face growing red. “I’m telling you that cabinet moved. I *watched* it happen.”

“Calm down, Charles. There’s no need to panic. There *must* be a logical explanation.” She went over to the offending wall and leaned, willing it to move; nothing happened. “See, this wall is as solid as the stones it was built with.”

Charles scanned the room frantically in desperation. He shuffled over to the troublesome wall and caressed the cold, rough stone with callused fingers. Then he looked at his wife with a furrowed brow. “I’ll have you know something awful went into the building of this castle.”

His wife peered at him. “Charles, I think you should *sit* down before you *fall* down.”

Geoff helped Charles over to the table. Susan sat next to her distraught husband and held his trembling hand, in a concerted effort to steady it.

Charles took a long drink of orange juice. “I want you to understand what I’ve done, to help put things into perspective. I want you to know why my castle is trying to kill me.”

She gave his hand a little squeeze. “Go on, tell me. I’d give anything to know what’s going on here.”

“I had this castle built during the Depression, stone by stone.” Charles gripped his juice glass so hard his knuckles turned white.

His wife nodded. “Yes, dear, that was over sixty years ago. What’s your point?”

Geoff nodded curtly. “Perhaps I should take my leave.”

“No, stay. I insist,” Charles said and then cleared his throat. “I took great pains to create an authentic atmosphere worthy of royalty. I had these stones imported from England, where our ancestors lived. Little did I know that most of them, especially the ones on the second floor, were headstones filched from local graveyards, stolen from their rightful owners, the dearly departed. I was not there to oversee the unearthing. I found out after the fact. By then, this castle had already been built, and irreparable damage done.” He shook his head. “Some people have no respect for the dead.”

A palpable silence filled the room.

Charles continued, “I have a hunch the walls are being painstakingly moved by the headstones’ former owners. Bit by bit.” Geoff stared at the cold, flagstone beneath him.

Susan scoffed. “Ghosts? That’s ridiculous!” She shook her head for a long time. “Even if, oh, even if! Why would they wait so long to seek revenge?”

Geoff shrugged. “Everyone’s patience has its limits, even the dearly departed.”

She glared at the butler. “Don’t encourage his delusions!” Exerting considerable effort, she helped Charles to his feet.

Charles made his way over to the other end of the room and pointed to a stone that had been hidden behind the China cabinet. “And the dead know who I am. I didn’t notice the etchings until much later. Come over here and I’ll show you.”

Susan and Geoff followed close behind.

He paused in front of a flat stone with these words etched upon it, scarcely legible but unmistakably there: **HERE LIES RICHARD RAMPART 1856 – 1916.**

Susan gasped. “Your grandfather?”

“They’re coming for me. The hour is nigh.” Charles clutched his chest and collapsed.

Susan screamed.

The butler called an ambulance.

The paramedics let Susan ride in the back with her husband. When they arrived at the hospital, the prognosis was encouraging. Dr. Heartwell told Susan that Charles had suffered a mild heart attack and would have to be kept overnight for observation. Sedated, he slept soundly.

She stayed by his side until the doctor discharged him the following morning.

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“Are you feeling better, sir?” Geoff greeted them at the front door as the silver Rolls Royce pulled up.

“Quite.” Charles winked.

Susan pulled Geoff aside to whisper in his ear. “Dr. Heartwell said he needs plenty of bed rest and no more nasty surprises.”

“Understood.” The butler nodded. “Silence is golden.”

She tried to take her husband’s hand while Geoff prepared lunch, but Charles shook her off and wandered the hallway, checking the stones for inscriptions. Finding one that was illegible but slightly visible, he flinched.

“The walls have moved again! I just saw it happen with my own eyes!”

Susan and the butler hurried to his panicky voice.

Charles looked at them, eyes wide with shock and awe.

“I felt the tremors.” With trembling fingers, Charles touched the stone and permanence of the letters.

Geoff cleared his throat. “Mr. Rampart, frightening though they are, I’m sure we’ve experienced an earthquake, and nothing more. This is California, after all. Just a mild quake, at that. Nothing to worry over.”

Susan shook her head. “Not now, Geoff! Can’t you see I’ve got my hands full?!”



The butler frowned. “Sorry, madame. Merely putting things into perspective.” The butler frowned and left.

Susan tightened her grip on Charles’s arm. “You’re still delirious, Charles. Come with me, you need your rest. Doctor’s orders.”

She led her husband into the bedroom, took off his shoes, and helped him into bed.

He struggled to sit up. “I won’t rest until I’m certain the walls have stopped moving.”

She laughed. “I don’t think you anything to worry about.”

Charles pulled the covers up to his chin. “Don’t be too sure.”

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Alone, Charles sat in the study with the walls advancing on him and no idea how to make them stop.

They rushed at him from all sides. He couldn’t get out of his chair fast enough to avoid being sandwiched between them.

He awoke with a start. All four walls actually *had* closed in silently while he slept. Frantic, he struggled to get up, but with the bed crushed between them, he couldn’t budge.

Charles strained to yank the golden rope dangling next to the bed until he heard Geoff and Susan rush upstairs to his aid. He clutched the bedcovers in quivering hands.

“Charles, honey, what’s wrong?”

The doorknob jiggled.

He shrieked, “I’m trapped between the walls.”

“What? Open the door!”

“Try to hang on, sir,” Geoff shouted, “Susan and I will try our best to rescue you!”

“Help me,” Charles’s voice cracked. “I don’t have much time.”

They threw their weight against the door, in a futile attempt to break it down. The wood didn't even splinter.

Charles heard Geoff’s voice. "I’ll fetch a crowbar!"

He lay helplessly pinned by the walls for an eternity, desperately hoping nothing would move. The butler returned and pried at the door. The scrape of metal against wood provided Charles with a twinge of hope.

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A loud rumble overhead sounded like thunder. The butler dropped the crowbar; it clattered and slipped between the cracks of a rapidly growing fissure in the cold, flagstone floor beneath him.

Charles screeched.

“Are you still with us, honey?”

The rumbling ceased; the lights flickered.

“It sounds like Charles was right after all,” the butler muttered.

Susan opened her mouth but was cut short, crushed by a falling headstone.

Charles staggered backward as the castle crumbled around him in row after row of flagstone dominoes; far too many to count. A hailstorm of headstones landed this way and that. The final blow knocked Charles to the ground.

His death delivered swiftly by a headstone, which read:  
HERE LIES RICHARD RAMPART 1856 – 1916.