

# A DARK TRADE



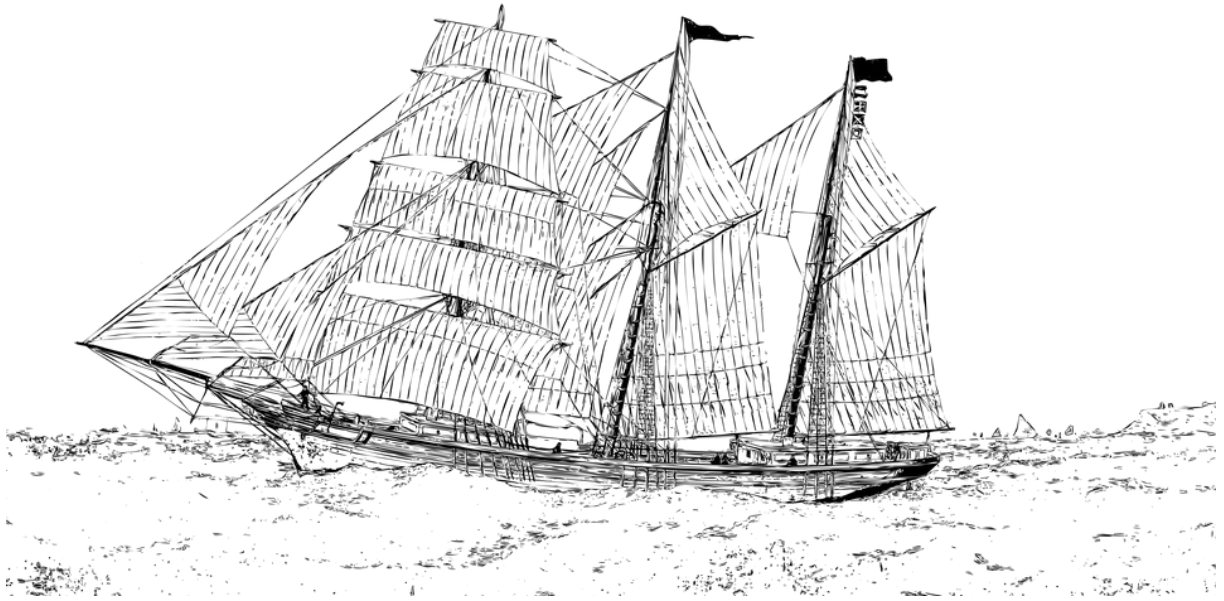
by **John Linwood Grant**

A TALE OF THOMAS CARNACKI

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“I've been in Somerset,” said Carnacki as we settled down after dinner. “Not far from Bristol, in fact.”

Taylor and I had been invited to Cheyne Walk at short notice, and had cancelled our theatre engagement at once. Such invitations invariably meant that Carnacki was back from a case – and his cases were always the strangest affairs.

That night I saw that he was in an oddly contemplative mood. He took his usual armchair by the drawing room fire, but as I tipped the brandy decanter his way, he shook his head.

“Not for me, Dodgson. I want to get this one off my chest first.”

His gaze was on the watercolour of an old three-master which hung above the fireplace. It had been there as long as I had known him, but Carnacki looked at it as if he had never seen it before.

“Bristol, yes,” he said suddenly. “I was invited down by an old friend, Arthur Tranter. A painter with talent but not a fingernail's worth of commercial sense. You'll have heard of him.”

We murmured agreement, not wanting to break his flow.

“He'd taken a place near the coast, and he wanted me to visit. I might

have thought it a social occasion until I saw the post-script to his letter of invitation. 'Come equipped,' it stated.

“He met me at the station, and to be frank, I didn't think that he looked well. A carriage ride along the coast brought us to what he called his 'country studio', a large farmhouse with an extension on the side which faced the sea.

“ 'That end gets the light something splendid,' he said as we eased down my baggage, but his expression belied his attempt to sound cheerful. 'An old dear from the village does for me twice a week, and the rest of the time I'm left alone.'

“He laughed, a shrill sound without humour. Tranter had always been a nervous chap, even when we were at school together, and there was clearly something up. Come equipped, indeed!

“We entered a sizeable main hall. On our left was a huge wooden door, quite out of place, which must open on his painting room, the one facing the sea. A furthest, much smaller door took us though to the kitchen, and he was soon pouring tea into chipped enamel mugs, his hands shaking slightly.

“ 'You'd better tell me what's up, Tranter. ' I took a mug from him. 'I'm hardly here to see paintings, am I?'

“I saw a tremor in his left cheek. He looked around him, as if listening.

“ 'I can't paint any more, Carnacki. It's this place...'

“Sitting at the kitchen table, he explained. It had started not long after he took the house. The place hadn't been lived in for some months, and he immediately noticed the damp. He put this down to the sea air. He had work to do. On the third day of his tenancy, however, the sounds had begun.

“ 'I started to hear it at dusk, quite faint. A drumming, a rhythm which... well, I can't really describe it. Each night it grows a little more insistent, rising and falling until the small hours.'

“ 'And then I... I dream. Faces, dark faces, as if seen through water, rushing water. I can't breath, I'm choking...' He dropped his mug, spilling tea across the table. 'I wake up, heart fluttering, soaked in sweat.'

“He dabbed at the spilled tea, then absently wiped his brow with the same cloth.

“ 'Water, and the faces, every night. The galleries are demanding

something new, I can hardly put brush to canvas, yet I can't afford to take a new place... Carnacki, those faces, they want something from me!

“He gave me an anxious glance. 'Do you think me mad?'

“I placed one hand on his shoulder.

“ 'I doubt it, old chap. But don't tell me any more yet. I want to form my own impressions at this stage.'

“You can imagine what ran through my mind. An anxious artist, overwrought, worried about his work, money, whatever. Such nerve attacks are common enough these days. But one can never be sure. I needed to have a look around this 'country studio' of his. We all know how many supposed hauntings are tracked down to faulty chimney cowl, leaking gas pipes or good old human mischief.

“As I said, the west end of the house had been rebuilt to provide a single well-lit room. This was reached by the peculiar door I mentioned, its lintel almost flush with the hall ceiling. I pushed it open, and was struck that although the morning was warm and dry, there were droplets of moisture on the worn timbers.

“On impulse I lifted one finger to my lips, and could have sworn I tasted salt-water. Curious, I examined both sides of the door. The thick timbers were of oak, and the surfaces so smooth that they might have been holy-stoned that morning.

“In the room beyond, four windows gave an almost uninterrupted view down to the waters of the Severn Estuary. There were few furnishings, just a clutter of canvasses, paint tubes and other artist's paraphernalia.

“My eye was drawn to a large oil colour on the right hand wall. Clearly not one of Tranter's, the painting was in an old-fashioned frame. It showed a ship, a fast and handy Baltimore-style clipper, in a heavy sea – waves breaking on the deck, and the copper of the ship's bottom visible as it tacked to meet the swell. There was no signature, and the plaque had peeled to leave only 'Mar...e. S..tt.' readable.

“Such paintings are common enough, yet this one was...disquieting. I would be the first to appreciate the sight of a sleek clipper under sail. Instead, I felt unease, as if there were something wrong about this ship.

“I shrugged and moved on. There was nothing of note in the other

rooms, and I returned to Tranter, who was tapping his fingers on the kitchen table. He looked up.

“ 'Nothing, as yet,' I said. 'We'll see what can be detected this evening.'

“That afternoon I employed the usual tools of my trade, setting hairs across the outside doors and windows, making certain signs on thresholds with wax and garlic, and so forth. I also laid lines and traps outside the place, should this be the work of locals somehow baiting the 'city gent'.

“As the light was fading by then, Tranter agreed to retire to his room with a book.

“ 'I think... think that I might sleep more soundly now.'

“I myself settled down on a bench in the hall. I am no stranger to night-time vigils, as you know. Bad dreams and a damp old house might mean nothing. And I had my revolver and a stout stick. I lit a large storm lantern and placed it in the centre of the stone-flagged room. And I waited.

“My attention was focussed on Tranter, naturally. He began to snore about ten o'clock. Perhaps an hour had passed when I heard him whimper. I looked in. He was twisting in his sleep, the counterpane kicked half off...

“Then I heard it myself. A thrum on the air, and another. Four, five more, like a hand upon a taut drumskin, until a constant beat sounded around me. There was no obvious change in the hall, so I went to Tranter. In the light of a candle, his sleeping body twitched with each drum beat, and he muttered to himself.

“That was when I felt something, almost a presence. I spun round, my stick ready, but there was no-one there. I strode to the front door. The seals were intact, and it was quiet outside. None of the alarms on the wires around the house had sounded.

“The drumming deepened, and with it came a smell which took me back to my days at sea. Bilgewater and the sweat of a long voyage, the press of men in darkness below the deck...

“Wood creaked behind me. I instinctively looked to the great west door, perhaps expecting something to emanate from the studio. To my astonishment the door was... moving. No, not exactly moving. It was still in place, but the oak planks were flexing, rippling as if they were alive.

To my right I could see Tranter in bed, his head jerking rhythmically.

To my left the door was nodding, yes, nodding, bending its upper timbers in time to the unseen drums. The storm lantern picked out every unnatural detail, far more clearly than I think I wanted at that moment. Water dripped down the door's worn surface, and my spine went cold as Tranter cried out in a deep voice.

“ 'Watch they mainstays, damn 'ee! An' quiet they yowlin' basdurds below!'

“I thought I must rouse him, but even as I moved, the sounds began to fade, and the door sank into silent stillness. The whole episode had last less than twenty minutes.

“I sat down again with my back to a wall, ready, glancing time and again at the door. The rest of the night brought nothing but a lingering smell of bilgewater and the fitful snoring of the artist.



“The next morning Tranter had no knowledge of any physical disturbance. He looked more drawn than ever, and said that his dreams had been 'queer' again.

“You can guess how I felt. I am a sceptical man, but what had occurred could not have been achieved by trick wires and bellows, I can tell you. I said nothing about the door to Tranter, who spent the day down by the sea, trying again to sketch.

“The next night I kept watch once more. This time, when the drumming began I slipped outside and peered in through the studio windows. Moonlight shone off the painting of the clipper, lending it even more menace than before, but most compelling was the sight of the door as it began to shift within its frame, movements echoing the drums.

“I returned quickly to the hall via the front entrance, to find Tranter half out of bed, asleep but swearing crudely in what seemed both English and Arabic. I pressed him back onto the bed, and waited between him and the hall. This time the drums and the queer shifting of the door lasting almost two hours, during which time Tranter twitched and moaned under the thin counterpane. All I could determine was that the drumming, although it resonated around the hall and fooled the ears at first, seemed to originate within the door itself!



“Breakfast was subdued on both our parts, until, after pushing his half-eaten bacon away, he looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

“ 'They want me, Carnacki. Oh God, I saw those faces closer, white eyes bloodshot and huge. They want me...'

“I gave him a draught in his tea, and sat with him. When he was more calm, I wrote a short note to old friends of mine in Bath, and packed Tranter off, note in one hand, hastily-stuffed valise in the other, to get some proper rest over the weekend.

“Without having to worry about him, I worked at a pace. A letter to the house agent produced an uninformative reply. The place had belonged to the Rowsell family until their extinction in the 1840s. The last occupants, eighteen months ago, had made no complaint of damp or anything else.

“Exhaustive tapping of the walls and floors showed no hollow spaces, hidden passages or the like. I performed chemical tests on the wood of the door, but found nothing apart from the strong saline nature of the moisture which gathered there.

“I also made the acquaintance of the lady who 'did' for Tranter, a Mrs Pascoe. She must have been fifty or sixty, with a pleasant, no-nonsense attitude.

“ 'Tell me, Mrs Pascoe,' I asked her as she swept the hall, 'Have you ever noticed anything, well, odd about this house.'

“ 'Odd, sir? Can't say as I have. Apart from Mr Tranter's clutter, begging your pardon, in the sea-room.'

“ 'I don't suppose you know who had that room made?'

“ 'Why, Cap'n Rowsell, sir. Long dead he is, and well rid, they used to say. Lost at sea not long after he had that work done, my granda' did believe.'

“ 'Is that his ship, the painting in the sea-room?'

“ 'It is, sir. The *Margaret Scott*, I was telled, though it were before my time.'

“She knew no more, and had washing to do, if I pleased.

“The place remained quiet. I read some of the reference papers I had brought with me, to no avail, and spent too long staring at the painting. With each viewing I felt more and more that the ship was a thing of ill purpose. What was she carrying, and where was she bound?

“I slept well enough, however, and the great door was quiet. I began to

suspect that something within was waiting, waiting for Tranter's return.

“He arrived back on the third day, with obvious apprehension. I explained over lunch that we might have to conduct an experiment if we wished to understand what was happening. He agreed only after I told him that I had used this particular approach many times before. That afternoon I unpacked the electric pentacle and batteries from my baggage.

“As I could hardly isolate the west door itself, I planned to have Tranter within the pentacle whilst I observed, carrying such personal protections as I could. I was sure that the device would insulate Tranter from whatever influence imbued the door; if there was risk, it was only to me.

“Dusk brought a blustery wind from the sea. I made the final adjustments to the electric pentacle and the chalked equivalent around it, with wards and Saaamaaa signs on the stone floor. Once Tranter was seated inside both pentacles, I sealed them and attached the battery leads. The pale blue glow of the vacuum tubes seemed to reassure him, and I took my seat on the bench where I could see the door and Tranter with equal clarity.

“The drumming came within a half hour, not loud but in a way which seemed to get inside one. It seemed more familiar this time, as if I had heard it long ago some place else.

“ 'Remember, stay where you are,' I murmured. 'Don't touch or leave the pentacles.'

“Tranter sat silent, his gaze fixed not on me but on the door. Slowly, but without doubt, the heavy oak timbers were flexing. Candles and the light of the vacuum tubes were more than enough to show the upper part moving, a rhythmic movement which brought it almost from the frame, while flakes of plaster fell from the walls around.

“I held my breath as I saw the flagstones between Tranter and the door begin to tremble, the flags grinding edge on edge...

“It was then that my foolishness struck me, Dodgson. Though rarely encountered, there are those psychic forces which can use existing form, which can control matter. I had just seen a solid wooden door twisting before me. What were the protections I had so vainly constructed but base matter? What use a tube which gave off a defensive light if the tube itself could be attacked!

“The hall echoed to the drum-beats; the door shifted and nodded like a

living being. The house creaked around us, drowning the wind outside, and the stench which filled the hallway was the unmistakable smell of below-decks, only stronger, fouler than I had ever known it at sea...

“I was terrified that Tranter would bolt, but in fact he was on his feet, his body rocking, his own head nodding more violently with every moment. His mouth opened wide.

“ 'Overr wi' 'em,' he cried out in that deep Bristolian voice. 'Drown they basdurds, by God, afore 'e do run leeward an' take uz!'

“The wooden battery box split with a loud crack, brass screws working from their positions, and the electric pentacle flickered as one glass section buckled out of shape. A vase of blessed water toppled, spilling its contents across the chalk pentacle – none of my protections were going to hold.

“Door and man were moving in unison, nodding and bowing as if in the grip of a fever. And it was then that I remembered. In my one voyage to West Africa, I had been laid up in British Gambia with a broken collar-bone. Whilst recuperating I had seen a native dance, and it was all there – the peculiar sound of the goat-skin drums, the rhythmic, almost hypnotic nodding heads.

“ 'Ave they overr, orr uz'll never see Brissl!' Tranter screamed.

“His legs jerked uncontrollably, hitting the vacuum tubes and shattering two of them. With his arms held loose above his head, like a man caught in a great current, I realised that he was being drawn towards the door, inch by inch. They want me, he had said...

“I could observe no longer. I threw myself across the hall and propelled both of us crashing against the front door. Holding the struggling man with one hand, I flung us heedless into the night...”

Carnacki paused, reaching for the decanter. Taylor and I held out our glasses for a much-needed refill, and after his first mouthful of brandy, he lit his pipe, drawing until the bowl glowed.

“Tranter was unconscious. I hauled him awkwardly down the track in the dark and we spent an uncomfortable night at the local inn. I told the landlady that the wind had caused damage up at the house, and she found us a room.

“He was somewhat recovered the next day, although when I described what had happened, he was for abandoning Hilltop altogether. I was chastened, but anxious to redeem myself.

“ ‘Rather than throw it all in, leave me here. Give me a bit more time.’

“We agreed that my friends in Bath would have him to stay for a fortnight. If I could not solve the case in that time, I would go with him to the house agent. Despatching him in a carriage, I quit the inn and headed for Bristol. There, with fresh clothes and a clearer head, I set about some genuine detective work. I won't bore you with the details. Admiralty papers, records from the Port of Bristol and so on. More particularly, I sent telegrams to a friend I had made on my last trip to the Americas, Willard Canevin..

“I soon had what I needed. Captain Jack Rowsell, it appeared, had been a slave-trader of the most ruthless type, and he had indeed been owner and captain of the *Margaret Scott*.

“Canevin, for his part, wired me that he had uncovered records of at least five trips to the island of St Croix, all after the Atlantic trade in humanity had been declared illegal. There was no doubt locally what her cargo had been.

“According to the Admiralty, the clipper had finally been intercepted by HMS *Sureswift* en route from Africa in '42. No charges could be made because there were no slaves found on the ship, even though the hold stank of unwashed, untended bodies.

“Rowsell then turned north for home. Apparently she sprung her hull and barely made it around Land's End. Records showed that she was beached on the coast below.

“I had no doubt now that the great west door had been fashioned from the timbers of the beached *Margaret Scott*. And I suspected what had actually happened to the clipper's human cargo as soon as Rowsell sighted the *Sureswift*...

“And so it was that on the twelfth day I went back to Hilltop, just as dusk was falling. I stepped warily into the hall. There were the broken remains of the vacuum tubes, the smudged and broken lines of the chalk pentacle beneath. The battery was dead, discharged, and there was salt-water in the shattered tubes. So much for my fine devices!

“As I stared at the door once more, I was convinced that those timbers were somehow imbued with the last vestiges, if not the very souls, of those poor blacks taken as slaves on the *Margaret Scott*. Slaves who had been flung, still shackled, into the Atlantic to drown as the Royal Navy bore down on the clipper

with intent to free them.

“I knew little of African beliefs. I was aware of the supposed use of fetishes and likenesses in West African *vodun* – aware in theory only, mind you!

“It was instinct rather than experience, therefore, that made me go to the sea-room and rip the painting from the wall. Holding it tight in my right hand, I went down before the door on one knee. I am not a true sensitive, but there are times when I have some small gift. This close to the door, I felt a tense, waiting silence before me.

“ 'I know what evil was done to you on this ship,' I said, pressing my left hand to the oak. Seawater welled around my fingers, and a bilge-stench filled the hall. The door creaked, shifted, as if uncertain.

“In my mind I saw faces, dozens of terrified black faces, from grizzled oldsters to small, weeping children. Some – God help us – were already dead, rotting in the clipper's hold. There was a horror in that sight which went far beyond those hauntings and monstrosities which I have mentioned to you before...”

Carnacki paused. His pipe had gone out; our glasses were empty.

“I held the painting of the *Margaret Scott* in my free hand, and broke it across my knee.

“ 'Rowsell is dead, and the truth will be told. You need not remain.' ”

“I told them that I would send them home. I tore the canvas of that foul ship into pieces, as I wished I could have torn Jack Rowsell apart, and I told them I would send them home.

“A single drum-beat shook the room, then nothing.



“I wrote to Tranter the next morning. When I explained what I had uncovered, he was shocked, yet relieved that his sanity was not in question.

“We hired one of Mrs Pascoe's sons to strip out the west door, frame and any other oak of similar appearance in the house.

“A week later, Tranter and I watched two crates being loaded onto a trusted Bristol merchantman bound for the Gold Coast. We had no conceivable way of knowing what peoples had been enslaved by Rowsell, and so I paid the

merchantman's captain to unload the crates on African soil, far from any port or interference. I prayed that this would give them rest at last.

“As I shook his hand before departure, I held the captain's grip for a moment and said, quite clearly, that I would know if he failed his commission.”

A light shower pattered outside Cheyne Walk. The three of us sat in silence for a moment.

“Filthy trade.” said Taylor. “Poor, poor devils.”

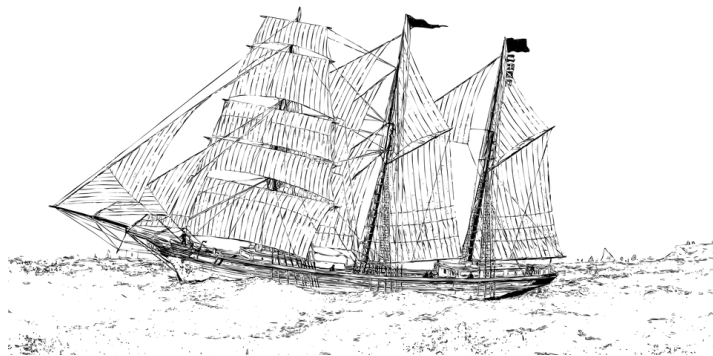
“But tell me, Carnacki.” I asked. “Why Tranter? If there had been no previous reports of such goings-on...”

Carnacki sighed. “Tranter was from an old Bristol family himself, Dodgson. It took only a few hours with parish records to find a distant maternal connection. You see, Arthur Tranter was in fact the first Rowsell to set foot in that house for seventy years!”

“Next year he anticipates a new exhibition, not in London as planned but in his home city. He has some major philanthropic societies interested. It will be titled... Freedom.”

He stood up, eyes on the re-assuring English rain that ran down the window-panes.

“Off you go, you fellows. I need my sleep!”



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

'A Dark Trade' was written for the anthology CARNACKI: THE LOST CASES (Ulthar Press, 2016) where each tale had to spring from one of Carnacki the Ghost Finder's unrecorded cases, as mentioned in the original Carnacki canon. As with Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, Hope Hodgson threw a number of case names, without further explanation, into the stories. This modest effort of mine was prompted by Hope Hodgson's aside on the 'Nodding Door' case:

*"I dashed out, slamming the door and locking it. I leant a little against the opposite wall of the corridor, feeling rather funny; for it had been a narrow squeak.... 'Theyr be noe sayfetic to be gained bye gayrds of holieness when the monyster hath pow'r to speak throe woode and stoene.' So runs the passage in the Sigsand MS., and I proved it in that 'Nodding Door' business."*

*'The Whistling Room', William Hope Hodgson*

How a door could nod at all vexed me for a few hours, until I came up with a dark explanation, based on the abomination that was the Atlantic slave trade. Appallingly, there really were instances when slaves were thrown overboard if an anti-slavery patrol ship was sighted at sea, if water ran low, or simply for the insurance on them. The Zong massacre of 1781 is a particularly well-known incident, but the Royal Navy was still running anti-slavery patrols in the mid-nineteenth century. And the City of Bristol's wealth in those days was based in no small way upon profits from slavery.

It's not an easy subject, but I hope I wrote with respect for those many souls lost during that period.

**JOHN LINWOOD GRANT** is a professional writer/editor from Yorkshire, UK, who lives with a pack of lurchers and a beard. Widely published in anthologies and magazines, he writes contemporary weird fiction, and also dark period stories of murder, madness and the supernatural – such as his ‘Tales of the Last Edwardian’ series, including stories of the 1920s hoodoo-woman Mamma Lucy. His latest novel is **The Assassin’s Coin**, from IFD, featuring Mr Edwin Dry, the Deptford Assassin, who also features in his new collection **A Persistence of Geraniums**. He is editor of *Occult Detective Quarterly*, plus anthologies such as **ODQ Presents** and **Hell’s Empire**. He can be found on Facebook, and at his popular website [greydogtales.com](http://greydogtales.com), which explores weird and speculative fiction, plus weird art. And lurchers.