

Carnacki, the Ghost Finder and a Poem.

BY

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON.



COPYRIGHT 1910

BY

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

Carnacki, the Ghost Finder; And, a Poem (New York: Paul R Reynolds, 1910)
[coll: chap: four abridged stories later published in full in the 1913 collection
below, plus poem: for copyright protection

Source *The Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*

Photographed and transcribed from the British Library's copy. American spelling
and examples of rather unusual English have not been altered, obvious errors
(such as agruptly for abruptly) have been corrected. – MLR

Carnacki, the Ghost Finder and a Poem

“Now,” said Carnacki reminiscently, “I’ll tell you some of my experiences. In that case of the ‘House Among the Laurels,’ which was supposed to be haunted, and had a ‘blood-drip’ that warned you, I spent a night there with some Irish constabulary. Wentworth, who owned the place, was with me, and I drew a pentacle around the lot of us in the big hall and put portions of bread and jars of water and candles round it. Then I fixed up the electric pentacle and put a tent over us, and we waited with our weapons. I had two dogs out in the hall with us, and I had sealed all the doors except the main entrance, which I had hooked open. Suddenly I saw the hook of the door slowly raised by some invisible thing, and I immediately took a flashlight photograph. Then the door was slowly closed. Perhaps an hour and a half of absolute silence passed, except when once in a while the dogs would whine distressfully. Then I saw that the candle before one of the sealed doors had been put out, and then, one after another, every candle in the great hall was extinguished except those round the pentacle.

“Another hour passed, and in all that time no sound broke the stillness. I was conscious of a sense of awful strain and oppression, as though I were a little spirit in the company of some invisible brooding monster of the unseen world, who, as yet, was scarcely conscious of us. I could not get rid of this sense of a presence, and I leaned across to Wentworth and asked him in a whisper whether he had a feeling as if something was in the room. He looked very pale and his eyes kept always on the move. He glanced just once at me and nodded, then stared away round the hall again. And, when I came to think, I was doing the same thing. Abruptly, as though a hundred unseen hands had snuffed them out every candle in the barrier went out, and we were left in a darkness that seemed, for a little, absolute, for the fire had sunk into a low, dull mound of red, and the light from the pentacle was too weak and pale to penetrate far across the great hall. I tell you, for a moment, I just sat there as though I had been frozen solid. I felt the ‘creep’ go all over me, and it seemed to stop in my brain. I felt all at once to be given a power of hearing that was far beyond the normal. I could hear my own heart thudding most extraordinarily loud. I began to feel better after a little, but I simply had not the pluck to move. Presently I began to get my courage back. I gripped at my camera and flashlight and waited. My hands were simply soaked with sweat. I glanced once at Wentworth, I could see him only dimly. His shoulders were hunched a little, his head forward, but, though it was motionless, I knew that his eyes were not. The other men were just as silent. And thus a while passed.

“A sudden sound broke across the silence. From three sides of the room there came faint noises. I recognised them at once – the breaking of sealing wax. The sealed doors were opening. I raised the camera and flashlight, and it was a peculiar mixture of ear and courage that helped me to press the button. As the great flare of light lit up the hall I felt the men all about me jump. It was

thoughtless of me perhaps to have fired it without warning them, but there was no time even if I had remembered. The darkness fell again, but seemingly tenfold. Yet in the moment of brightness, I had seen that all the sealed doors were wide open.

“Suddenly, upon the top of the tent, there sounded a drip, drip, drip, falling on the canvas. I thrilled with a queer, realizing emotion and a sense of very real and present danger – immanent. The ‘blood-drip’ had commenced. And the grave question was, Would the pentacles and the circles save us?

“Through some awful minutes the ‘blood-drip’ continued to fall in an ever increasing rain. Beyond this noise there was no other sound. And then, abruptly, from the boarhound farthest from the entrance there came a terrible yelling howl of agony followed, instantly, by a sickening, snicking, breaking noise and an abrupt silence. If you have ever, when out shooting, broken a rabbit’s neck, you’ll know the sound – in miniature. Like lightning the thought sprang into my brain: it has crossed the pentacle. For, you will remember, that I had made one about each of the dogs. I thought instantly, with sickening apprehension, of our own barrier. There was something in the hall with us that had passed the barrier of the pentacle about one of the dogs. In the awful succeeding silence I positively quivered. And suddenly one of the men behind me gave out a scream, like any woman, and bolted for the door. He fumbled and had it open in a moment. I yelled to the others not to move, but they followed like sheep. I heard them kick the water jars in their panic, and one of them stepped on the electric pentacle and smashed it. In a moment I realized that I was defenseless against the powers of the unknown world, and with one leap I followed, and we raced down the drive like frightened boys.

“Well, we cooled down in a bit and I went to the inn where I was staying and developed my photos. Then, in one of them, I saw that a wire was juggling with the hook of the entrance door, so I went back to the house and got in quietly through a back window and found a whole lot of chaps who had just come out of a secret doorway. They proved to be members of a secret society. They all escaped, but I guess I laid the ghost. You see, they were trying to keep the house empty for their own uses.

“Then, in that business of ‘The Gateway of the Monster’ I spent a night in the haunted bedroom alone in the electric pentacle, and very nearly got snuffed out, as you’ll see. I had a cat die in the room. This is what happened: I had been in the pentacle some time, just like the last business, only quite alone, when, suddenly, I was aware of a cold wind sweeping over me. It seemed to come from the corner of the room to the left of the bed – the place where both times I had found the bedclothes tossed in a heap. Yet I could see nothing unusual – no opening – nothing. And then, abruptly, I was aware that the candles were all a-flicker in the unnatural wind. I believe I just squatted there and stared in a sort of horribly frightened wooden way for some minutes. And then flick! flick! flick! all the candles round the outer barrier went out, and there I was locked and sealed in that room and with no light beyond the queer weakish blue glare of the electric pentacle. Still that wind blew upon me and then, suddenly, I knew that

something stirred in the corner next to the bed. I was made conscious of it rather by some inward, unused sense than by the sight or sound, for the pale, short-radius glare of the pentacle gave but a very poor light to see by. Yet I stared and stared, and abruptly it began to grow upon my sight – a moving something, a little darker than the surrounding shadows. I lost the vague sight I had of it, and for a moment or two I glanced swiftly from side to side with a fresh new sense of impending danger. Then my attention was directed to the bed. All the coverings were being drawn steadily off with a hateful, stealthy sort of motion. I heard the slow dragging slither of the clothes, but I could see nothing of the thing that pulled.

“The faint noises from the bed ceased once, and there was a most intense silence. The slurring sound of the bedclothes being dragged off recommenced. And then, you know, all in a moment, the whole of the bed coverings were torn off with extraordinary violence, and I heard the flump they made as they were hurled into the corner.

“There was a time of absolute quietness then for perhaps a couple of minutes, and none can imagine how horribly I felt. Then, over by the door, I heard a faint noise – a sort of crickling sound, and then a patter or two upon the floor. A great nervous thrill swept over me, for the seal that secured the door had just been broken. Something was there. And then it seemed to me that something dark and indistinct moved and wavered there among the shadows. Abruptly, I was aware that the door was opening. I reached out for my camera, but before I could aim it the door was slammed with a terrific crash that filled the whole room with a sort of hollow thunder. There seemed such a power behind the noise, as though a vast, wanton force were ‘out.’ The door was not touched again, but directly afterwards I heard the basket in which the cat lay creak. I tell you I fearfully pringed. Now, at last, I should learn definitely whether what was abroad was dangerous to life. From the cat there rose suddenly a hideous catterwaul that ceased abruptly and then – too late – I snapped off the flashlight. In the great glare I saw that the basket had been overturned and the lid was wrenched open, with the cat lying half in and half out upon the floor. I saw nothing else. But I was full of the knowledge that I was in the presence of some being or thing that had power to destroy.

“I was half blinded because of the flashlight. Abruptly I saw the thing I was looking for close to the ‘water-circle.’ It was big and indistinct and wavered curiously, as though the shadow of a vast spider hung suspended in the air just beyond the barrier. It passed swiftly round the circle and seemed to probe ever towards me, but only to draw back with extraordinarily jerky movements, as might a living person if he touched the hot bar of a grate. Round and round it moved and round and round I turned. Then, just opposite to one of the ‘vales’ in the pentacles, it seemed to pause, as though preliminary to a tremendous effort. It retired almost beyond the circle of the pentacle’s glow and then came straight toward me, appearing to gather form and solidity as it came. I got a most terrible feeling of horror, for these seemed such a vast malign determination behind the movement that it must succeed. I was on my knees,

and I fell over onto my left hand and hip in a wild endeavor to get back from the advancing thing. With my right hand I was grabbing madly for my revolver, though, as you can imagine, my look never left the horrible thing. The brutal thing came with one great sweep straight over the garlic and the 'water-circle' right almost to the pentacle. I believe I yelled. Then, just as suddenly as it had swept over, it seemed to be hurled back by some mighty invisible force. I'd learnt something. I knew now that the grey room was haunted by a monstrous hand!

"Suddenly I saw what had so nearly given the monster an opening through the barrier. In my movements within the pentacle I must have touched one of the jars of water, for, just where the thing had made its attack, the jar that guarded the 'deep' of the 'vale' had been moved to one side, and this had left one of the five 'doorways' unguarded. I put it back quickly and felt almost safe again. The 'defense' was still good and I began to hope again I should see the morning come in.

"For a long time I could not see the hand, but presently I thought I saw, once or twice, an odd wavering over among the shadows near the door. Then, as though in a sudden fit of malignant rage, the dead body of the wretched cat was picked up and beaten with dull, sickening blows against the solid floor. A minute afterwards the door was opened and slammed twice with tremendous force. The next instant the thing made one swift, vicious dart straight at me from out of the shadows. Instinctively I started sideways from it, and so plucked my hand from upon the electric pentacle, where, for a wickedly careless moment, I had placed it. The monster was hurled off from the neighborhood of the pentacles, though, owing to my inconceivably foolish act, it had been enabled for a second time to pass the outer barriers. I can tell you that I shook for a time with sheer funk. Then I moved right to the center of the pentacles and knelt there, making myself as small and compact as possible.

"I spent the rest of that night in a haze of sick fright. At times the ghastly thing would go round and round the outer ring, grabbing in the air at me, and twice the dead cat was molested. Then the dawn came and the unnatural wind ceased. I jumped over the pentacles, and in ten seconds I was out of the room and safe. That day I found a queer ring in the corner from which the wind had come, and I knew it had something to do with the haunting, so that night I stayed in the pentacle again, having the ring with me. About eleven o'clock a queer knowledge came that something was near to me, and then an hour later I felt the wind blow up from the floor within the pentacle and I looked down.

"I continued to stare down. The ring was there, and suddenly I was aware that there was something queer about it – funny shadowy movements and convolutions. I stared stupidly, though alert enough to fear, and then abruptly I knew that the wind was blowing up at me from the ring. A queer, indistinct smoke became visible, seeming to pour upward through the ring. Suddenly I realized that I was in more than mortal danger, for the convoluting shadows about the ring were taking shape and the death hand was forming within the pentacle. It was coming through, pouring through into the material world, even

as a gas might pour out from the mouth of a pipe. With a mad, awkward movement, I snatched the ring, intending to hurl it out of the pentacle, yet it eluded me as though some invisible, living thing jerked it hither and thither. At last I gripped it, yet in the same instant it was torn from my grasp with incredible and brutal force. A great black shadow covered it and rose into the air and came at me. I saw that it was the hand, vast and nearly perfect in form. I gave one crazy yell and jumped over the pentacle and the ring of burning candles, and ran despairingly for the door. I fumbled idiotically and ineffectually with the key, and all the time I stared with a fear that was like insanity toward the barriers. The hand was plunging toward me; yet, even as it had been unable to pass into the pentacle when the ring was without, so, now that the ring was within, it had no power to pass out. The monster was chained, as surely as any beast would be were chains riveted upon it. I got the door open at last and locked it behind me and went to my bedroom. Next day I melted that ring and the ghost has never been heard of since. Not bad, eh?

“Another case of mine – ‘The horse of the Invisible’ – was very queer. It was supposed, according to tradition, to haunt the daughter of a certain house during courtship. This began happening with the present generation, so they sent for me. After a lot of queer hauntings and attacks, I had decided to guard the girl closely and get the marriage performed quickly. On the last night, as I, with a Mr. Beaumont, was sitting outside of her door keeping guard, my companion motioned suddenly to me for absolute quiet. Directly afterward I heard the thing for which he listened – the sound of a horse galloping out in the night. I tell you I fairly shivered. It died away and left a horrible, desolate eerie feeling in the air, you know. I put my hand on the cord that rung the butler’s bell and waited, glancing before and behind. Some five minutes passed, full of what seemed like an almost unearthly quiet. And then suddenly, down the corridor, there sounded the clumping of a great hoof, and instantly the lamp was thrown down with a tremendous flash and we were in the dark. I tugged hard on the cord and blew the whistle, then I raised my snapshot and fired the flashlight. The corridor blazed into brilliant light, but there was nothing, and then the darkness fell like thunder. From up the corridor there came abruptly the horrible gobbling neighing that we had heard in the park and in the cellar. I blew the whistle again and groped blindly for the cord, shouting in a queer breathless voice to Beaumont to strike a match before that incredible unseen monster was upon us. The match scraped on the box and flared up dully, and in the same instant I heard a faint sound behind me. I whipped round, wet tense with terror, and saw something in the faint light of the match – a monstrous horse head – close to Beaumont.

“‘Look out, Beaumont!’ I shouted in a sort of scream. ‘It’s behind you!’”

“The match went out abruptly, and instantly there came the huge bang of a double-barrelled gun – both barrels at once – fired close to my ear. I caught a momentary glimpse of the great head in the flash, and of an enormous hoof amid the belch of smoke, seeming to be descending upon Beaumont. Then there was the sound of a dull blow, and then that horrible, gobbling neigh broke out

close to me. Something struck me and I was knocked backward. I got on to my knees and shouted for help at the top of my voice. I heard the women screaming behind the locked door, and directly afterward I knew that Beaumont was struggling with some hideous thing, near to me. I squatted there half an instant, paralyzed with fear, and then I went blindly to help him, shouting his name. There came a little choking scream out of the darkness, and at that I jumped plunk into the dark. I gripped a vast furry ear. Then something struck me another great blow, knocking me sick. I hit back, weak and blind, and gripped with my other hand at the incredible thing. Abruptly I was aware that there were lights in the passage and a noise of feet and shouting. My hand grips were torn from the thing they held. I shut my eyes stupidly and heard a loud yell above me, then a heavy blow, like a butcher chopping meat, and something fell upon me.

“I was helped to my feet by the Captain and the butler. On the floor lay an enormous horse head, out of which protruded a man’s trunk and legs. On the wrists were fixed two great hoofs. It was the monster. The Captain cut something with the sword that he held in his hand and stooped and lifted off the mask – for that is what it was. I saw the face of the man then who had worn it. It was Parsket. He had a bad wound across the forehead where the Captain’s sword had bit through the mask. I looked stupidly from him to Beaumont, who was sitting up, leaning against the wall of the corridor.

“That’s all there is to the yarn itself. Parsket was the girl’s would-be lover, and it was he who had been doing the haunting all the time, trying to frighten off the other man by acting the ghost, dressed in a horse’s mask and hoofs. So I cleared that up all right.

“‘The Whistling Room,’ one of my later cases, was a disagreeable business and nearly finished me. Tassoc, the chap who owned the place, sent for me. He thought it was some of the wild Irish playing a trick on him, for it was generally known that one of the rooms gave out a queer whistling. I searched a lot, but found nothing, and I’d begun to think it must be the Irishmen after all, only the whistling wouldn’t stop. So one night, when it was whistling quietly, I got a ladder and climbed up gently to the window. Presently I had my face above the sill and was looking in alone with the moonlight.

“Of course the queer whistling sounded louder up there but it still conveyed that peculiar sense of something whistling quietly to itself. Can you understand? Though, for all the meditative lowness of the note, the horrible gargantuan quality was distinct – a mighty parody of the human, as if I stood there and listened to the whistling from the lips of a monster with a man’s soul.

“And then, you know, I saw something. The floor in the middle of the huge empty room was puckered up in the centre in to a strange, soft-looking mount that parted at the top into an ever-changing hole that pulsed ever to that great, gentle hooning. At times, as I watched, I saw it gape across with a queer inward suction, as with the drawing of an enormous breath, then the thing would dilate and pout once more to that incredible melody. And suddenly, as I was

started dumb, it came to me that the thing was living. I was looking at two enormous blackened lips, blistered and brutal, there in the pale moonlight

“Suddenly they bulged out to a vast pouting mound of force and sound, stiffened and swollen, and hugely clean cut, in the moonbeams, and a great sweat lay heavy on the vast upper lip. In the same moment of time the whistling had burst into a mad, screaming note that seemed to stun me even where I stood, outside of the window, and then the following moment I was staring blankly at the solid undisturbed floor of the room, smooth, polished oak flooring from wall to wall, and there was an absolute silence. Can’t you picture me staring into the quiet room and knowing what I know? I felt like a sick, frightened kid, and wanted to slide quietly down the ladder and run away. In that very instant I heard Tassoc’s voice calling me from within the room for help! help! My god, but I got such an awful dazed feeling and such a vague bewildered notion that, after all, it was the Irishmen who had got him in there and were taking it out of him! And then the call came again, and I burst the window and jumped in to help him. I had an idea that the call had come from within the shadow of the great fireplace, and I raced across to it, but there was no one there.

“‘Tassoc!’ I shouted, and my voice went empty, sounding round the room; and then in a flash, I knew that Tassoc had never called. I whirled round, sick with fear, toward the window, and, as I did so, a frightful exultant whistling scream burst through the room. On my left the end wall had bellied in towards me in a pair of gargantuan lips black and utterly monstrous to within a yard of my face. I fumbled for a mad instant for my revolver – not for it, but for myself, for the danger was a thousand times worse than death; and then suddenly the unknown last line of the Saaamaaa Ritual was whispered quite audibly in the room. Instantly the thing happened that I had known once before – there came a sense as of dust falling continually and monotonously, and I knew that my life hung uncertain and suspended for a flash, in a brief, reeling vertigo of unseeable things. Then that ended and I knew that I might live. My soul and body blended again and life and power came to me. I dashed furiously at the window and hurled myself out head first. I crashed down onto the ladder and slithered, grabbing and grabbing, and so came one way or another alive to the bottom. And there I set in the soft, wet grass, with the moonlight all about me, and far above, through the broken window of the room, there was a low whistling.

“That’s the chief of it. I was not hurt. So, you see, the room was really haunted after all and we had to pull it down and burn it. That’s another business I managed to clear up.”

Lost

And, aye, I set to search the grey, lone plains
For my love out in the gloaming—
For my maiden, whence sad strains
Came o'er the waters moaning—
Moaning, moaning, moaning—
O'er the sea-hills wildly roaming.

And I swam through spume, grey with the touch of death,
To a far faint wail of singing,
As one who sang with moaning breath,
Kissed by sad surges, swinging—
Swinging, swinging, swinging—
The sea-bells weirdly ringing.

And I came upon her, clothed about with foam,
And in her eyes the silence of the sea,
And I made to bear her home,
But her eyes looked not on me.
All mystery, all mystery.
Hung round about, and wild and free
Rung out the sea-bells of the grey, grey sea.

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON