

# **DARK SOUNDINGS**

By Greg Oliver Bodine

Adapted from  
*The Screaming Skull and The Upper Berth*  
by F. Marion Crawford

# DARK SOUNDINGS

© 2008 by Greg Oliver Bodine

CAUTION: Professionals and Amateurs are hereby warned that performance of **DARK SOUNDINGS** is subject to payment of a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of The United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth) and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including without limitation professional/amateur stage rights, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all other forms of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction, transmission and distribution, such as CD, DVD, the Internet, private and file-sharing networks, information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is placed upon the matter of readings, permission of which must be obtained from the Author in writing.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for **DARK SOUNDINGS** are controlled exclusively by Next Stage Press. No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance written permission and paying the requisite fee. Inquiries concerning production rights should be addressed to [www.nextstagepress.com](http://www.nextstagepress.com)

## SPECIAL NOTE

Anyone receiving permission to produce **DARK SOUNDINGS** is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. The name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately beneath the title and in size of type equal to 50% of the size of the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the Play. No person, firm, or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent than that accorded the Author.

# DARK SOUNDINGS

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*Special thanks to my dad, Oliver H. Bodine, Jr.*

## DARK SOUNDINGS

*Dark Soundings* was first presented at Ketewomoke Yacht Club in Halesite, NY on November 8, 2008, and went on to tour metro-area libraries and colleges with the following cast and crew: Cast: Greg Oliver Bodine; Director: DeLisa M. White; Stage Manager: Charles Jeffreys.

*Dark Soundings* was remounted in October 2009 and presented aboard the historic steamship, USCG *LILAC*, at Pier 40 in New York City, Paranormal Books & Curiosities in Asbury Park, NJ, and at Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club and Matinecock Masonic Historical Society in Oyster Bay, NY with the following cast and crew: Cast: Greg Oliver Bodine; Director: DeLisa M. White; Stage Managers: Charles Jeffreys / Ien DeNio.

## DARK SOUNDINGS



(Greg Oliver Bodine as Capt. Braddock in the 2008 production of *Dark Soundings*. Photo by Charles Jeffreys.)

"*Dark Soundings* is something reminiscent of Masterpiece Theatre -- very turn of the century, very warm, but somehow unsettling, because in its richness hides something sinister."

--*Oyster Bay Guardian*

*Dark Soundings* is a double-bill of one-man plays that should ideally be performed by one actor without an intermission. Only a brief musical interlude is necessary to allow enough time for set and costume changes between *The Screaming Skull* and *The Upper Berth*.

## DARK SOUNDINGS

### **THE SCREAMING SKULL**

#### TIME

Evening, late October, 1906.

#### PLACE

The living room of a small, seaside cottage in the hamlet of Montauk, at the easternmost tip of Long Island.

#### CHARACTERS

CAPT. BRADDOCK, a retired sea captain.

### **THE UPPER BERTH**

#### TIME

Late evening in June, 1901.

#### PLACE

Mariners' Lounge of the New York Nautical Society, New York City.

#### CHARACTERS

BRISBANE, an experienced yachtsman and business traveler.

# THE SCREAMING SKULL

*The stage is dressed simply to suggest the humble living room of a salt-box style, seaside cottage. There is a large, braided hearth rug downstage center, with a captain's chair facing out from the upstage right corner of the rug. The chair is flanked by a small, square side table on which rest: a framed black & white photo of a large steamship, an ashtray, a bag of pipe tobacco, a candle in a holder, matches, a flask, an enamel mug, a pocket watch, key and fob. At the opposite, upstage left corner of the rug stands a wooden coat rack. On it hang: a black, full-length rain slicker, a pea coat and a black, oilskin Sou'wester hat. Against the upstage wall at center stands a wooden bookcase displaying on various shelves: a tall ship model, a braided rope basket, a bo'sun's whistle, a spyglass, a few worn books, a pipe tobacco box, a ship's anchor lamp and the odd trinket or memento from past ports-of-call. A discolored, crudely framed map of Long Island hangs above the bookcase. Next to the bookcase there is a small ship's wheel leaning against a sea chest, which sits catty-cornered, upstage left. The front of the chest bears a worn, hand-painted shipping 'house' flag under the inscription: "Capt. Charles Braddock, S.S. Noordland, Red Star Line". House lights fade to black. The stage is dark. There is a flash of lightning and clap of thunder along with sounds of wind and rain, surf and seagulls in the darkness, followed by a ship horn and a bell buoy in the distance. A sudden, shrill, disembodied, bloodcurdling scream is heard in the darkness. At rise, lights bump up quickly to reveal CAPT. BRADDOCK in his black, winter uniform cap, a dark turtleneck sweater, worn trousers and boots. He is seated stiffly on the edge of his chair, clutching his pipe as he addresses the audience.*

**CAPT. BRADDOCK.** Did you hear that?! Did you? *(looking around nervously)* I've heard it often. Whatever it is, it hates me almost as much

## DARK SOUNDINGS

as it hated Luke Pratt, and it *screams* at me! Take my advice: never -- *never* tell ugly stories about ingenious ways of killing people -- you never can tell if someone at the table may be tired of his or her nearest and dearest. I've always blamed myself for Mrs. Pratt's death, and I suppose I was responsible for it in a way, though heaven knows, I never wished her anything but long life and happiness. If I hadn't told that story, she might be alive yet. That is why the thing screams at me, I fancy. She was a good little woman, with a sweet temper, all things considered, and a nice gentle voice; but I remember hearing her shriek once when she thought her little boy was killed by a pistol that went off, though everyone was sure that it wasn't loaded. It was the same scream; exactly the same, with a sort of rising quaver at the end; do you know what I mean? Unmistakable. The truth is, I hadn't realized that Luke and his wife were not on good terms. Oh, they used to bicker a bit now and then when I was here, and I often noticed that Mrs. Pratt got very red and bit her lip hard to keep her temper, while Luke grew pale and said the most offensive things. He was that sort when he was a boy, I remember, and afterwards when he grew older. Luke Pratt was my cousin -- that's how I came by this house; after he died, and his boy Charley was killed in South America, there were no relations left. *(looking around the room)* It's a pretty little property, just the sort of thing for a retired sailor like me who's taken to gardening. One always remembers one's mistakes much more vividly than one's cleverest things, doesn't one? I've often noticed it. I was dining with the Pratts one night when I told them the story that afterwards made so much difference. It was a wet night in November or late October, and the sea was moaning. Hush! If you don't speak you'll hear it now... do you hear the tide? Gloomy sound, isn't it? Sometimes about this time of year-- *(Another scream, only less audible, is heard under the sound of the wind and gentle rain outside.)* Shh! There it is! *(getting out of his chair)* Don't be frightened, it won't eat you -- it's only a noise, after all! But I'm glad you've heard it, because there are always people who think it's the wind, or my imagination, or something. You won't hear it again tonight, I fancy -- it doesn't often come more than once. *(He picks up the enamel cup from the side table, then takes a sip.)* Yes, it was on a night just like this, when I was home for a spell, waiting to take the *Noordland* out on her first trip -- it was on the



## DARK SOUNDINGS

next voyage that she broke the record, but that dates it. Let's see... '92 was the year, early in November. The weather was dirty, Pratt was out of temper, and the dinner was bad, very bad indeed, which didn't improve matters -- and *cold*, which made it worse! *Mrs. Pratt* was very unhappy about it, and insisted on making a Welsh rarebit to counteract the raw turnips and the half-boiled mutton. Luke must have had a hard day. Perhaps he had lost a patient. (*sitting in his chair again*) At all events, he was in a nasty temper. "You see, Charles? My wife is trying to poison me!" he said. "She'll succeed someday." I saw that she was hurt, and I made believe to laugh, and said that *Mrs. Pratt* was much too clever to get rid of her husband in such a simple way; and then I began to tell them about Japanese tricks with spun glass and chopped horsehair and the like. Luke Pratt was a doctor, and knew a lot more than I did about such things, but that only put me on my mettle, and I told a story about a woman in Ireland who did for three husbands before anyone suspected foul play. Know how she did it? She *drugged* them and poured melted lead into their ears through a little horn funnel when they were asleep! The fourth husband managed to keep awake and caught her. The police dug up the three skulls, you know, and there was a small lump of lead rattling about in each one. *That* was what hanged the woman. (*A brief sound of wind buffeting the house is heard.*) Shh! Listen to that. (*getting up*) No, never mind -- that's the wind whistling. It's backing up to the South'ard again. I can tell by the sound. Besides, the *other* thing doesn't often come more than once in an evening even at this time of year since it happened. Yes, poor *Mrs. Pratt* died suddenly in her bed not long after I dined here. (*He grabs the flask from the side table and pours some of it into his cup.*) I take a little with my tea from time to time. Luke must have been lonely here after his wife was dead, I should think; I came to see him now and then, and he looked worn and nervous, and told me that his practice was growing too heavy for him, though he wouldn't take an assistant on any account. Years went on, and his son was killed in South America, and after that he began to act strangely. There was something about him not like other people. I believe he kept his senses in his profession to the end; there was no complaint of his having made mistakes in cases or anything of that sort, but he had a look about him. (*He sits in the chair to make himself*

## DARK SOUNDINGS

*more comfortable.*) Luke was a red-headed man with a pale face when he was young, and he was never stout; in middle age his hair turned a sandy grey, and after his son died he grew thinner and thinner, till his head looked like a skull with parchment stretched over it very tight, and his eyes had a sort of glare in them that was very disagreeable to look at. He had an old dog that poor Mrs. Pratt had been fond of, and that used to follow her everywhere. He was a bulldog, and the sweetest tempered beast you ever saw, though he had a way of hitching his upper lip behind one of his fangs that frightened strangers a good deal. Sometimes, in the evening, Pratt and Bumble -- that was the dog's name -- used to sit and look at each other, thinking about old times, I suppose, when Luke's wife used to sit in that chair you've got. That was always *her* place, and this was the doctor's, where I'm sitting. Bumble used to climb up by the footstool -- he was old and fat by that time, and couldn't jump much, and his teeth were getting shaky. He would look steadily at Luke, and Luke looked steadily at the dog, his face growing more and more like a skull with two little coals for eyes; and after about five minutes or so, old Bumble would suddenly begin to shake all over, and set up an awful howl, as if he had been shot, and tumble out of the easy chair and trot away, and hide himself under the sideboard, and lie there making odd noises. Considering Pratt's looks in those last months, it's not a surprising thing, you know -- his head looked so much like a skull in parchment. At last, I came out one day before Christmas when my ship was in dock and I had three weeks off. Bumble wasn't about, and I said casually that I supposed the old dog had died. "Yes," Pratt answered, "I killed him. I could stand it no longer." (*taken aback*) I asked what it was that Luke couldn't stand, though I guessed well enough. "He had a way of sitting in her chair and glaring at me, and then howling. He didn't suffer at all, poor old Bumble. I put dionine into his water to make him sleep soundly, and then I chloroformed him gradually, so that he couldn't have felt suffocated even if he was dreaming. It's been quieter since then." I wondered what he meant, for the words slipped out as if he couldn't help saying them. I've understood since. He meant that he didn't hear that *noise* so often after the dog was out of the way. Perhaps he thought at first that it was old Bumble in the yard howling at the moon, though it's not that kind of noise, is it? Besides, I know what it is, if Luke

## DARK SOUNDINGS

didn't. It's only a noise after all, and a noise never hurt anybody yet. But he was much more imaginative than I am. No doubt there really is something about this place that I don't understand; but when I don't understand a thing, I call it a 'phenomenon' and I don't take it for granted that it's going to kill me, as he did. Besides, what is there to *prove* that Luke killed his wife? I wouldn't even suggest such a thing to anyone but you. After all, there was nothing but the coincidence that poor Mrs. Pratt died suddenly in her bed a few days after I told that story at dinner. She wasn't the *only* woman who ever died like that. Luke got another doctor over from the next parish, and they agreed that she had died of something the matter with her heart. Why not? It's common enough. *(after an awkward pause)* Of course, there was the *ladle*. I never told anybody about that, and it gave me a start when I found it in the cupboard in the bedroom. It was new too -- a little tinned iron ladle that hadn't been in the fire more than once or twice, and there was some lead in it that had been melted, and stuck to the bottom of the bowl, all grey, with hardened dross on it. But that proves nothing. A country doctor is generally a handy man, who does everything for himself, and Luke could have had a dozen reasons for melting a little lead in a ladle. Well, Luke Pratt is gone now. He lies buried beside his wife with an honest man's tombstone at his head, so I shouldn't care to stir up anything that could hurt his memory. There was trouble enough about *his* passing, as it was. He was found dead on the beach one morning, and there was an official inquest. Here -- I saved a clipping from the newspaper. *(Capt. Braddock rises and crosses upstage to retrieve an old, yellowed newspaper clipping from out of the rope basket sitting on the bookshelf. He unfolds the clipping and reads it aloud):* "The coroner's report has returned the somewhat singular verdict that Dr. Pratt came to his demise by the hands or teeth of some person 'unknown'. A closer examination of the body has revealed that the deceased had been bitten in the throat by a human assailant with such amazing force as to crush the windpipe and cause death. The local surgeon is said to have expressed privately the opinion that the murderer is a woman, a view he deduces from the small size of the upper jaw, as shown by the marks of the eye teeth. The whole affair is shrouded in mystery and the authorities are pursuing every lead." *(He carefully refolds the clipping and puts it back in the rope basket.)* No one

## DARK SOUNDINGS

knew at what time Luke had gone out, nor where he'd been. He was discovered lying on his back above the high-water mark covered in fiddler crabs. An old cardboard hatbox that had belonged to his wife lay under his hand, open. The lid had fallen off. He seemed to have been carrying home a *skull* in the box. It had rolled out and lay near his head, and it was a remarkably fine skull, rather small, beautifully shaped and very white, with perfect teeth. That is to say, the upper jaw was perfect, but there was no lower one at all, at least when *I* first saw it. Yes, I found it here when I came into the property. It was very white and polished, like a thing meant to be kept under a glass case, and people didn't know where it came from, nor what to do with it; so they put it back into the hatbox and set it on the shelf of the cupboard in the bedroom, and of course they showed it to me when I took possession. I was taken down to the beach, too, to be shown the place where Luke was found, and an old fisherman explained just how he was lying, with the skull beside him. The only point he couldn't explain was why the skull had rolled *up* the sloping sand towards Luke's head instead of rolling *downhill* to his feet. It didn't seem odd to me at the time, but I have often thought of it since, for the place is rather steep. When he fell down, or was thrown down -- whichever happened -- the hatbox struck the sand, and the lid came off, and the thing came out and ought to have rolled down. But it didn't. It was close to his head almost touching it, and turned with the face towards it. I couldn't help thinking about it afterwards, again and again. (*scratching his head*) I began to ask myself why the plaguey thing had rolled up instead of down, and why it had stopped near Luke's head instead of anywhere else, a yard away, for instance. And I got something else into my head that made me feel uncomfortable. Oh, I don't mean as to anything supernatural! There may be ghosts, or there may not be. If there are, I'm not inclined to believe that they can hurt living people except by frightening them, and, for my part, I would rather face any shape of ghost than a fog in Long Island Sound when it's crowded. No. What bothered me was that the skull might possibly be *hers*. Now, you'll tell me there's no sense in it -- that Mrs. Pratt was buried like a Christian and is lying in the churchyard where they put her, and that it's perfectly monstrous to suppose her husband kept her skull in her old hatbox in the bedroom. All the same, in the face of reason and

## DARK SOUNDINGS

common sense, I'm convinced that he did! Doctors are fond of collecting such things -- they do all sorts of strange things that would make you and me feel downright creepy. If it really *was* her skull, poor woman, the only way of accounting for his having it is that he really did kill her, and did it in that way I told you about, as the woman in Ireland killed her husbands -- *and* that Luke was afraid there might be an examination of the grave someday which would *betray* him. He remembered that, I'm sure. I suppose he took it the night before she was buried, after the coffin had been shut and when the servant girl was asleep. You may laugh at me, but you don't live here alone, where it was done, and you didn't tell Luke the story about the melted lead. I'm not nervous, but sometimes I begin to feel that I understand why some people are. I dwell on all this when I'm alone, and I dream of it, and when that thing screams-- (*with a shudder*) Oh, I don't like the noise any more than you do, though I should be used to it by this time. I've tried to get rid of the thing, but it doesn't *like* that. It wants to be (*pointing off upstage right*) in there in its place, in Mrs. Pratt's hatbox in the cupboard in the bedroom. It's not happy anywhere else. As long as it's there, it only screams now and then, generally at this time of year. But if I put it outside or in another room in the house, it goes on all night! But it's only a noise after all. I may be all wrong about the skull. It may be just a fine specimen which Luke got somewhere long ago. And what rattles about inside when you shake it may be nothing but a pebble, or a bit of hard clay, or *anything*. I've never tried to get it out, whatever it is; I'm afraid it might be lead, don't you see? And I don't want to know the fact, for I'd much rather not be sure. (*morosely*) If it really *is* lead, then I killed her quite as much as if I had done the deed myself, and I believe I should have to leave this house. As long as I don't know for certain, I have the consolation of saying that it's all utterly ridiculous nonsense, that Mrs. Pratt died a natural death and that the skull belonged to Luke when he was a medical student in Boston. I should probably just throw the confounded-- (*catching himself*) the... "blasted thing" into the pond and be done with it, yes! (*under his breath*) But I dare not call it a "confounded bugbear" -- it doesn't like being called names. (*There is another horrific scream*) AH! There! Lord, what a shriek! I told you so! (*addressing an audience member*) You're quite pale -- are you alright? Draw your chair a little

## DARK SOUNDINGS

closer and take some drink. "Old Hollands" never hurt anybody yet. I've seen a Dutchman in Java drink half a jug of Hulstkamp in a morning without turning a hair. (*with a long pour from the flask into his cup*) I don't take much myself. (*He takes a large swig, and grimaces.*) It doesn't agree with my constitution. But it *is* a very damp night outside. (*Another long pour into his cup as the wind picks up outside.*) The wind is howling again, it'll soon be in the Southwest. We should not have heard the thing again tonight if I'd held my tongue, I'm sorry. (*looking around*) Whatever it is, it's not a ghost -- you don't call anything a ghost that you can take in your hands and look at in broad daylight, and that rattles when you shake it, do you, now? But it's something that hears and understands -- there's no doubt about that. If you choose to describe it as a coincidence, you are quite welcome. I tried sleeping in the bedroom when I first inherited this house just because it was the best and most comfortable, but I had to give it up. It was *her* room, and then there's the big bed she died in, and the cupboard is in the thickness of the wall, near the head on the left. That's where it likes to be kept, in its hatbox. I only used the room for a fortnight after I came, and then I turned out and took the little room in there (*pointing off downstage left*) next to the surgery where Luke used to sleep when he expected to be called to a patient during the night. I was always a good sleeper ashore; eight hours is my dose, eleven to seven. But I couldn't sleep a wink after three o'clock in the morning in that room. (*He takes out his pocket watch.*) I timed it with this old pocket watch, which still keeps good time, and it was always at exactly seventeen minutes past three. I wonder whether that was the hour when she died? The noise wasn't like what we heard tonight. If it had been that -- oh, I couldn't have stood it two nights. At first, it was just a *start* and a moan and hard breathing for a few seconds in the cupboard. Of course, you can't exactly "hear" a person "start"; at the most, you might hear the quick drawing of the breath between the parted lips and closed teeth. (*He re-creates the sound.*) The noise in the cupboard was no louder than that, but it woke me instantly. I just supposed that the cupboard had some communication with the outside air, and that the wind had got in and was moaning through it with a sort of very faint screech. I struck a light and looked at my pocket watch -- it was seventeen minutes past three. That was the first night, and the same thing

## DARK SOUNDINGS

happened again and several times afterwards, not regularly, though it was always at the same time, to a second. I overhauled the cupboard and there was no way by which the wind could get in, or anything else, for the door makes a good fit. After about a fortnight, I had had enough of the "noises." So far I had said to myself that it would be silly to yield to it and take the skull out of the room. But the voice grew louder -- I suppose one may call it a voice -- and it got inside my head one night and made me lose my temper! (*re-enacting in pantomime*) I struck a light and got up, and I opened the cupboard, grabbed the hatbox and threw it out of the window as far as I could! (*incredulously*): The thing *screamed* in the air, like a shell from a twelve-inch gun! (*pointing off right*) It wasn't more than half an hour later when I heard a shriek outside -- like what we've had tonight, but worse. It may have been my imagination, but I could have sworn that the screams came nearer and nearer each time. I lit a pipe, and walked up and down for a bit, and then took a book and sat up reading. But I'll be hanged if I can remember what I read nor even what the book was, for every now and then a shriek came up that would have made a dead man turn in his coffin. A little before dawn someone knocked at the front door. There was no mistaking that for anything else, for I guessed that someone wanted a doctor, supposing that the new man had taken Luke's house. It was rather a relief to hear a human knock after that awful noise. The knocking came again, and I called out (*off stage right*) "Who's there?" But nobody answered. (*off stage right again*) "The doctor doesn't live here any longer." Again, there was no answer, but it occurred to me that it might be some old gentleman or lady who was stone deaf. (*He stands and crosses a few steps stage right to re-enact the incident.*) So I took my candle and went to open the door, convinced that I should find somebody outside on the doorstep with a message. As I opened the door inward, the skull *rolled* in across the threshold and stopped against my foot, lying a little on its side and turning one hollow eye up at my face, as if it meant to accuse me! It seemed impossible! I'm quite sure that I had thrown it across the road. I shut and bolted the front door, picked the skull up carefully (*crossing back to his chair*) and put it on the table. The light and shadow from the candle played in the hollows of the eyes so that they seemed to open and shut at me. Then the candle went out quite unexpectedly, though the door was

## DARK SOUNDINGS

closed, and there wasn't the least draught; and I used up at least half a dozen matches before it would burn again. (*sitting slowly*) The thing had come home, and it wanted to go back to its cupboard. I sat still and stared at it for a bit till I began to feel very cold; then I took it and carried it into the bedroom and set it in its place, and I remember that I spoke to it, and promised that it should have its hatbox again in the morning. I kept a light burning, and sat up smoking and reading, most likely out of fright -- plain, undeniable fear -- I couldn't have stayed alone with that thing in the bedroom, no -- I should have been scared to death. (*rising*) When the dawn came, I put on my boots and went out to find the hatbox. I had to go a good way round, by the gate near the road, and I found the box open and hanging on the other side of the hedge. It had caught on the twigs, and the lid had fallen off and was lying on the ground below it. I picked it up and returned to the house. I placed the skull back in the hatbox and locked it up, putting it back on its shelf in the cupboard. I moved out of the bedroom that *day*, and I have never slept in it since. (*cryptically*) I suppose you'd like to see the skull, wouldn't you? (*with a shrug*) I've no objection.

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—  
ORDER A COPY AT [WWW.NEXTSTAGEPRESS.COM](http://WWW.NEXTSTAGEPRESS.COM)***