

Games From Folktales

Episode transcripts for April 2017

**ANZAC
Day
and
House
Tremere**

**Brewing in the
12th Century**

**Dunsany:
Bureau
d'Exchange
de Maux**

**The
Great
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Gold
Sponge**

An experiment in podcasting
for the Ars Magica roleplaying game

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Poppy Mask

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ANZAC Rising Sun Badge

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Australian_Army_Rising_Sun_Badge_1904.png

Hops

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Thank you ever so much

Games From Folktales

March 2017

I continue to be struck by the idea that Lord Dunsany's work seems like the stories of a redcap, long weary of the road.

Let's try another. Be warned, there is a little antisemitism in this one.



Fragments of Dunsany :

Bureau

d'Exchange

de Maux

I often think of the Bureau d'Echange de Maux and the wondrously evil old man that sate therein. It stood in a little street that there is in Paris, its doorway made of three brown beams of wood, the top one overlapping the others like the Greek letter pi, all the rest painted green, a house far lower and narrower than its neighbours and infinitely stranger, a thing to take one's fancy. And over the doorway on the old brown beam in faded yellow letters this legend ran, Bureau Universel d'Echanges de Maux.

I entered at once and accosted the listless man that lolled on a stool by his counter. I demanded the wherefore of his wonderful house, what evil wares he exchanged, with many other things that I wished to know, for curiosity led me; and indeed had it not I had gone at once from that shop, for there was so evil a look in that fattened man, in the hang of his fallen cheeks and his sinful eye, that you would have said he had had dealings with Hell and won the advantage by sheer wickedness.

Such a man was mine host; but above all the evil of him lay in his eyes, which lay so still, so apathetic, that you would have sworn that he was drugged or dead; like lizards motionless on a wall they lay, then suddenly they darted, and all his cunning flamed up and revealed itself in what one moment before seemed no more than a sleepy and ordinary wicked old man. And this was the object and trade of that peculiar shop, the Bureau Universel d'Echange de Maux: you paid twenty francs, which the old man proceeded to take from me, for admission to the bureau and then had the right to exchange any evil or misfortune with anyone on the premises for some evil or misfortune that he "could afford," as the old man put it.

There were four or five men in the dingy ends of that low-ceilinged room who gesticulated and muttered softly in twos as men who make a bargain, and now and then more came in, and the eyes of the

e flabby owner of the house leaped up at them as they entered, seemed to know their errands at once and each one's peculiar need, and fell back again into somnolence, receiving his twenty francs in an almost lifeless hand and biting the coin as though in pure absence of mind.

"Some of my clients," he told me. So amazing to me was the trade of this extraordinary shop that I engaged the old man in conversation, repulsive though he was, and from his garrulity I gathered these facts. He spoke in perfect English though his utterance was somewhat thick and heavy; no language seemed to come amiss to him. He had been in business a great many years, how many he would not say, and was far older than he looked. All kinds of people did business in his shop. What they exchanged with each other he did not care except that it had to be evils, he was not empowered to carry on any other kind of business.

There was no evil, he told me, that was not negotiable there; no evil the old man knew had ever been taken away in despair from his shop. A man might have to wait and come back again next day, and next day and the day after, paying twenty francs each time, but the old man had the addresses of all his clients and shrewdly knew their needs, and soon the right two met and eagerly exchanged their commodities. "Commodities" was the old man's terrible word, said with a gruesome smack of his heavy lips, for he took a pride in his business and evils to him were goods.

I learned from him in ten minutes very much of human nature, more than I have ever learned from any other man; I learned from him that a man's own evil is to him the worst thing there is or ever could be, and that an evil so unbalances all men's minds that they always seek for extremes in that small grim shop. A woman that had no children had exchanged with an impoverished half-maddened creature with twelve. On one occasion a man had exchanged wisdom for folly.

"Why on earth did he do that?" I said.

"None of my business," the old man answered in his heavy indolent way. He merely took his twenty francs from each and ratified the agreement in the little room at the back opening out of the shop where his clients do business. Apparently the man that had parted with wisdom had left the shop upon the tips of his toes with a happy though foolish expression all over his face, but the other went thoughtfully away wearing a troubled and very puzzled look. Almost always it seemed they did business in opposite evils.

But the thing that puzzled me most in all my talks with that unwieldy man, the thing that puzzles me still, is that none that had once done business in that shop ever returned again; a man might come day after day for many weeks, but once do business and he never returned; so much the old man told me, but when I asked him why, he only muttered that he did not know.

It was to discover the wherefore of this strange thing and for no other reason at all that I determined myself to do business sooner or later in the little room at the back of that mysterious shop. I determined to exchange some very trivial evil for some evil equally slight, to seek for myself an advantage so very small as scarcely to give Fate as it were a grip, for I deeply distrusted these bargains, knowing well that man has never yet benefited by the marvellous and that the more miraculous his advantage appears to be the more securely and tightly do the gods or the witches catch him. In a few days more I was going back to England and I was beginning to fear that I should be sea-sick: this fear of sea-sickness, not the actual malady but only the mere fear of it, I decided to exchange for a suitably little evil. I did not know with whom I should be dealing, who in reality was the head of the firm (one never does when shopping) but I decided that neither Jew nor Devil could make very much on so small a bargain as that.

I told the old man my project, and he scoffed at the smallness of my commodity trying to urge me to some darker bargain, but could not move me from my purpose. And then he told me tales with a somewhat boastful air of the big business, the great bargains that had passed through his hands. A man had once run in there to try and exchange death, he had swallowed poison by accident and had only twelve hours to live. That sinister old man had been able to oblige him. A client was willing to exchange the commodity.

"But what did he give in exchange for death?" I said.

"Life," said that grim old man with a furtive chuckle.


"It must have been a horrible life," I said.

"That was not my affair," the proprietor said, lazily rattling together as he spoke a little pocketful of twenty-franc pieces.

Strange business I watched in that shop for the next few days, the exchange of odd commodities, and heard strange mutterings in corners amongst couples who presently rose and went to the back room, the old man following to ratify.

Twice a day for a week I paid my twenty francs, watching life with its great needs and its little needs morning and afternoon spread out before me in all its wonderful variety.

And one day I met a comfortable man with only a little need, he seemed to have the very evil I wanted. He always feared the lift was going to break. I knew too much of hydraulics to fear things as silly as that, but it was not my business to cure his ridiculous fear. Very few words were needed to convince him that mine was the evil for him, he never crossed the sea, and I on the other hand could always walk upstairs, and I also felt at the time, as many must feel in that shop, that so absurd a fear could never trouble me.

A photograph of a dark, ornate wooden door with a 'PRIVATE' sign and a small window. The door is set in a stone wall. A large, light-colored branch or pipe runs diagonally across the top of the frame. The door has a small window with a decorative frame and a handle. The word 'PRIVATE' is written on a plaque above the handle. The door is slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse of the interior.

And yet at times it is almost the curse of my life. When we both had signed the parchment in the spidery back room and the old man had signed and ratified (for which we had to pay him fifty francs each) I went back to my hotel, and there I saw the deadly thing in the basement. They asked me if I would go upstairs in the lift, from force of habit I risked it, and I held my breath all the way and clenched my hands. Nothing will induce me to try such a journey again. I would sooner go up to my room in a balloon. And why? Because if a balloon goes wrong you have a chance, it may spread out into a parachute after it has burst, it may catch in a tree, a hundred and one things may happen, but if the lift falls down its shaft you are done. As for sea-sickness I shall never be sick again, I cannot tell you why except that I know that it is so.

And the shop in which I made this remarkable bargain, the shop to which none return when their business is done: I set out for it next day. Blindfold I could have found my way to the unfashionable quarter out of which a mean street runs, where you take the alley at the end, whence runs the cul de sac where the queer shop stood. A shop with pillars, fluted and painted red, stands on its near side, its other neighbour is a low-class jeweller's with little silver brooches in the window. In such incongruous company stood the shop with beams with its walls painted green.

In half an hour I found the cul de sac to which I had gone twice a day for the last week, I found the shop with the ugly painted pillars and the jeweller that sold brooches, but the green house with the three beams was gone.

Pulled down, you will say, although in a single night. That can never be the answer to the mystery, for the house of the fluted pillars painted on plaster and the low-class jeweller's shop with its silver brooches (all of which I could identify one by one) were standing side by side.

Faerie variant

The Master of the Exchange is a dark faerie, who uses a simple mystoguguic trick to harvest vitality from people. They come to a special place, make a sacrifice of silver, and then they gain a Minor flaw, in exchange for the loss of another Minor flaw which, because of their story circumstances, seems major.

In completing this cosmic sleight of hand, the Exchanger makes his story central to the lives of the people who have traded flaws. One can travel to the new world, and start a career in distant lands. The other can rise in status in his own city. Each is, however, occasionally tormented by their new fears, which lets the creature feed on them.

The Bureau is in a regio, so it can only be found by those who have not previously used its services. How so many people know it is unclear. Lesser faeries may spread word or it, or the money the Master claims may pay people to spread rumors.

Infernal variant

The Master is a minor demon, permitted to trade evils with the consent of the people who participate voluntarily. Although demons cannot plan in any effective sense, they can take advantage of situations like this, where people voluntarily do evil to each other, even though it's a mutual evil. The function of the coins, and the contract, is to make sure that the people are voluntarily performing the evil on each other. On a larger level, making minor contracts with demons makes people over-confident about making greater bargains, or accepting wagers, later.

Human variant

The Master of the Exchange may not, himself, be a supernatural creature, but he is empowered by one. This gets around the demonic inability to plan. If the shop is a regio, his extreme longevity might be explained by a local time dilation or an unnatural law. The player characters might seek to usurp his role, or steal his list of clients and evils. He may age sufficiently that a replacement is required, and the Exchange itself may ask for the aid of the player characters, to find a new keeper. The role is an evil, and the man will want to trade it for another evil he likes.

Other Exchanges

The lengthy name of this exchange seems to indicate a need to differentiate from other exchanges. Are there others? Can they be created? Are they empowered to trade something other than evils?

Maux

Maux is French and means "evils". Maux is the plural of mal (meaning "evil" in several languages). The name is also a place in Central France, and an English dialectal word meaning a slattern. It may come from malkin, which is a diminutive of Maude, and means a cat or a crone. Hence Shakespeare has a witch who calls her familiar Gray-malkin in Macbeth. This provides a useful name for the shop if it requires an animal, or second human, embodiment.

One of the great puzzles of medieval economics is why it works at all. Essentially the European economy, if you are standing at the border of China and looking westward, is an elaborate method of shipping gold and silver to China in exchange for spices. Medieval European understood this. What they did not understand was that the price of gold remained stable over hundreds of years. That, frankly, makes no sense at all.

Gold is not consumable: that is, you do not use it up so that you need more. Therefore, once you have it, you should want it less. Therefore, after the Europeans first send ten tons of gold eastward, the price should drop, so that you need more gold to pay for the same amount of spices. It does not. If anything gold gets slightly more expensive over time. The other possibility, that there is a limitless demand for gold, makes no sense either, because that just means the price should start very high and fall as Europe meets it. Steady prices and insatiable demand, coupled, make very little sense, and so, the European economy makes very little sense.

Now, there are ways of making this make sense, and we discuss them as plot hooks in City and Guild. We don't however, say what was really happening: what the real source of the gold sponge is.

Gold in Europe is used as a commodity: it is consumed to make things, and these things are used by people. In China, in period, however, the link between gold and the idea of a medium for exchange is far weaker than in Europe. Gold is not money. Gold is the stuff you make jewelry and furniture out of.

This means that gold is consumed, in the sense that it is turned into jewelry, rather than staying in circulation. That is, gold sinks into the ruling class of China and vanishes, because its function is to demonstrate capacity for conspicuous consumption.



The Great Chinese Gold Sponge

Unless there is a sudden sacking of a city, to liberate its gold, then there's no reason for this gold to circulate, and the gold does not make you want less gold, or the same gold at a lower price. The ability to get more gold, and give gold as presents, affirm the character's status far beyond gold's actual usefulness. Remember that what is being traded for the gold are spices and silks which are surplus to that which is required by the noble class of China. That is, there's no real opportunity cost to the ruling class of China to get all this gold, and no real opportunity lost to refuse to get it. It's precious, and reserved for certain nobles, but it's not "money" in the western sense.

In both China, and more especially India, having gold is one way of storing your money. Money that is stored goes out of physical circulation. Although it continues to circulate as credit, the gold itself just gets put away in storage. Its function is to wait for disaster, and provided disaster does not strike, it stays out of the economy, in some cases, for hundreds of years. That is, gold flees the economy as a form of insurance.

Now, C&G offers some more mythic reasons for the Asian Gold Sponge, but it is important to recognise that Hermetic magi both know how the European economy operates and, likewise, know that it shouldn't work. There's an incongruity in Asia that should make it crash. If Marco Polo goes to China in Mythic Europe, he will make matters worse.

Polo says there is gold everywhere in China. Given that gold is valuable because it is scarce, it makes even less sense. He also notes that gold is never used as a currency in China. When you turn up, the Khan makes you hand over all of your treasure, and gives you pieces of paper which merchants will treat as money because he says so, and he's willing to kill anyone who refuses his scrip. So, gold is everywhere and actually, there's only one customer. After Polo, the gold price makes even less sense than before.

Plot hooks

Remember there are others in City and Guild.

The Chinese are throwing the gold off the edge of the world. They were right about the cosmology: the world is a disc and its spin needs to be corrected. Sadly, the trajectories they have been using are off, and the gold, having looped under the world erratically, is now crashing down from the sky in Europe as flaming, liquid. What can be done locally to protect from, or take advantage of, this calamity?

Gold, as metaphorical sunlight, is used as ammunition in a war against the shadow beings from the underside of the world. When these creatures break through in the far West, what can the Order do? Are these linked to the Egyptian mut, the shadowy Enemies From the West?

The alchemists of China have found a way to use gold as Corpus vis, and to use it to extend lifespans. An experiment has gone wrong, releasing a gold elemental into the world. Like some other elementals, it can breed by division and expand by contact with more of its substance. When gold becomes beligerent, what can the player characters do to survive, profit, and learn?

One of the advantages that Australian authors have writing for American audiences is that we get to see many of the more popular products of their culture, but the converse is not true. This means that things which are, to us, commonplace, are, to them, surprising. I first noticed this when I wrote a brief piece for Ars Magica, in one of the online forums, about a tree with bark like paper, but pink like human skin, and with dangling, silvered leaves shaped like crescents, from which a small creature looked with inquisitive eyes. Americans wrote to me to ask what drugs I was taking. Australians knew I was literally describing an endemic tree here (*Corymbia maculata*) and that the little creature was a ringtail possum. For Australians, even our endemic things can, for Americans, be exotic.

I wanted to change the Tremere so that they were no longer the default villains for every story. The way they were being used seemed so weak, so unchallenging. They were the evil guys: you could tell because they wore black and did pointless things while ranting about power. I thought that we needed to move to villains with realistic motives.

At the time I was reading a lot of military fiction, and was looking for a way to simulate the genre in Ars Magica. It gave the writing a structure. I liked the idea that since Tremere are never the best at anything, they co-operate more. So, an army then, with roles, and doctrine.

I used the Australian experience of the First World War as my foundation for the attitude to war of the Tremere. The Australian experience of the First World War was that we suffered greater casualties, as a percentage of our population, than any other combatant state. Every little town has a hall for returned soldiers. Every town has a cenotaph for those that didn't come home.

I know that people from other countries often want to say "Oh, we commemorate that too..", but no, not like us. Gathering around cenotaphic stones, in the dark, to wait for dawn, and renew the promise not to forget what happened is the defining ritual of Australian citizenship. We literally call the dead, and hold a ceremonial night vigil for them, as perhaps the single defining action which Australians recognise as the thing that we do to express who we are.

The Australian war experience as a model for Tremere reaction to the Schism War

We do not have flag oaths. We deliberately mumble the second verse of our anthem, and would not have chosen it had the vote been free. A story about sheep thievery was preferred by so many that it was deliberately excluded from the ballot. We had to change our national colours because we didn't know what they were, and so used the wrong ones for decades. Our system of government is not the one we would have chosen, if given a free choice. Australia Day is marked by annual ceremonies of apology and there is a determined effort to change the date. Federation Day is January First, and so is meaningless.

The sacred day for Australians is ANZAC Day. The pilgrimage for young Australians is to ANZAC Cove. This is something we have chosen as the thing which represents the core of us. Our big day as a country is the day we remember.

It is not like the 4th of July. Having had this discussion before I wish to stress it is utterly different. From the way Americans celebrate their war history. Americans win: their national story is about victory, and perhaps, about their destiny.

The ANZAC Cove landings were disastrous and futile. We choose to commemorate this day, rather than say, the victory on the Kokoda Track, precisely because it tore a hole through the middle of our communities that did not heal for generations. We are one of the few countries that chooses not to celebrate its victories. We are one of the few that chooses to celebrate in tandem with neighbouring countries (New Zealand). We are one of the few that lets veterans of the opposing army march in our commemorative parades.

I tried to get across this feeling in the Tremere chapter, much as I try to get across other bits of Australianess in my other work, because it makes my writing different from material foreign readers may have seen before.

I think some of the moral ambivalence turns up in the end work. Should we have landed in Turkey or stayed home? Was it right to go so far away and fight? Were they really killing the Armenians? If we'd let more of our people die, would we have been able to stop the Armenian genocide? What if they really hadn't been killing Armenians? What if our invasion had made them kill Armenians?

The Armenian Genocide is our equivalent of Deidne infernalism. Are they doing it? Why won't they let observers check? If they did do it, did we stop it? Did our attack make them go off the deep end and start it?

Story hooks

If you'd like to more strongly incorporate the ceremonies of ANZAC into your campaign, here are a few pointers. They may be familiar to players from Commonwealth countries, who share some of the traditions. I offer these in a spirit of commemoration and apologise if, by mixing in fantasy elements, I offend. That's not my intent.

Young Australians often travel to the battlefield, particularly to be there on the day for Dawn Service. Player characters may, similarly, travel to commemorate. This is a secular pilgrimage.

Seeds from a pine tree that was used as a point of reference on the battlefield have been cultivated in Australia and are used in some commemorative sites. Similar things may occur in Mythic Europe, and the trees, because they are laden with story and a focal point of emotion, may attract the fae.

The ceremonial night vigil is only a few minutes long, and is marked at each end by military bugle calls. The first is the Last Post, which was originally used to indicate that the camp was secure for the night and the soldiers could rest. That it summons the ghosts of the dead is widely stated by the more poetical. After a delay it is followed by the Rouse, which marks the new day. In the time between silence is meant to be maintained for respect, but speaking during night vigil is one of those intimacies which appears in cohesive units, so there's nothing to stop the ghosts making their presence felt.

Australians spend the afternoon doing what they think the soldiers did in their off time, which basically means watching sport and drinking. An archaic form of gambling is also effectively legal for the day. Magi might develop similar customs.

There are cenotaphs everywhere. I lived in a town of 2 000 people, and it had a cenotaph in the main street. I presume the Tremere, similarly, have cenotaphs all over the place, and that this was, for a while, a major focus of their house aesthetic. Australian cenotaphs in tiny towns, were as good as they could afford. We had a marble obelisk. Human figures of soldiers are popular, but the figure is never of a particular person. Most cities have multiple points for dawn service and so multiple cenotaphs. My current city has 555 000 people and has eleven active cenotaphs. A great deal of effort is made to move cenotaphs if they are going to be damaged, or their sites are going to become disused.

**They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.**

The Ode is an excerpt from a longer poem, and sometimes the verse before is also recited. It's a bit more heroic, and so some people feel it's out of place.

The last line of the Ode to Remembrance, quoted above, is repeated back by the crowd. The vigil then happens, and is concluded by "Lest we forget", which is from a poem by Kipling that has nothing to do with anything else going on in the ceremony. The attendees reply:

"Lest we forget".

There is a biscuit (cookie for our American friends) which originated in a desire to have rations which could be made by Australians at home and shipped to the front line without going stale. This is the informal celebratory food of the holiday. Similar things might be created, shipped and consumed by magi. I like the idea of House Mercere carrying biscuits to deliver to distant covenants, and this being considered a deadly serious business.

After the formal service, people often place poppies near the name of a fallen relative, or on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The poppies are, I believe, an American tradition adopted here in the 1920s, so I don't need to dwell on them for American readers. They are endemic to the battlefield in Flanders. The Order probably has a similar visual shorthand for the War. It might have something to do with Mount Dol in Brittany, where the final major battle is commemorated.



Brewing and the 13th Century

I've been listening to *The London and Country Brewer*, which was an anonymous book completed in the late 19th Century. It's fascinating, in that it describes an industrial process which is still followed today by craft brewers, but to which I'd had no real exposure. Given that brewing, at least to the level of creating small beer, is a task found in all communities above a climatological line in Mythic Europe, it gave me some insights into covenant life.

Magi have the best beer of anyone in Mythic Europe. The process of making beer is that barley is soaked and left to germinate, then dried. The fuel used to dry the malt gives it some of its flavour. The anonymous brewer suggesting coke and coal without sulphur are the best, as they give the cleanest flavour. Coke is technically unknown in Mythic Europe, and "sea coal" as it is called, to differentiate it from charcoal, is rare, if known. The next best choice is dry straw, and that's presumably available because it can be harvested from the fields of barley. It gives the beer a grassy taste, but it's not as bad as either the smoky flavour of wood, or the weird flavour of burned bracken. Magi can produce smokeless heat, and so their beer is like that made in modern electrical kilns: free of undesired flavours.

Mythic Europeans rarely use hops. Hops are flowers of a particular vine, used as a bittering agent. This counteracts the sweet flavour given to the beer by the process of fermenting barley starches into sugars. Hops are used only in Germany at this point, and this use is far from universal, but the Thirteenth Century is when this new technology rolls out across the continent. It is found that hopped beer lasts longer.

Lacking hops, herbal mixtures are used for bittering. This is called gruit, and different areas and brewers had their own gruits. When hops are taxed, people use gruit, and when gruit is taxed, they switch to hops. Later, during the Reformation, gruit use was seen as a Protestant practice, because in many areas, the monopoly on hops was held by monasteries.



Plot hooks

Gruit

There is a subset of Crialmon magi who have been trying to make enlightening beers for generations: some gruits are literally hallucinogenic. What happens when one of these Crialmon gets it right, or right enough, that drunk people gain magical powers?.

Hops

How fortunate for Mythic Europeans that hops appeared at this time. Are they a faerie plant, or do new faeries cluster about them?

Monastic taxes

Hermetic magi can make as many hops as they like as part of magical brewing, its covered by the ingredients exemption in Rego magic. The problem is that, if hops are a monastic monopoly in the local area, being able to make them is depriving the monastery of their income. They may take action against the covnenat's theft of Church money.

Ghost story

A bewster has died without passing on the recipe of her family's prized gruit. Can the player characters call her up, and convince her ghost to part with it?