Games from Folktales

An experiment in podcasting for the Ars Magica roleplaying game

TRANSCRIPTS FOR JULY 2018

M.R. James : Lost Hearts
Dunsany: Tales of Death
Cornwall: Looe Island
Losing the Tapestry

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M.R. JAMES: LOST HEARTS

One of the earliest of MR James's stories. This is interesting as an apprentice story, or as a plot hook about a Bonisagus who keeps losing apprentices. I'll be spoiling this story on the way through with plot ideas.

It was, as far as I can ascertain, in September of the year 1811 that a postchaise drew up before the door of Aswarby Hall, in the heart of Lincolnshire. The little boy who was the only passenger in the chaise, and who jumped out as soon as it had stopped, looked about him with the keenest curiosity during the short interval that elapsed between the ringing of the bell and the opening of the hall door. He saw a tall, square, red-brick house, built in the reign of Anne; a stone-pillared porch had been added in the purer classical style of 1790; the windows of the house were many, tall and narrow, with small panes and thick white woodwork. A pediment, pierced with a round window, crowned the front. There were wings to right and left, connected by curious glazed galleries, supported by colonnades, with the central block. These wings plainly contained the stables and offices of the house. Each was surmounted by an ornamental cupola with a gilded vane.

An evening light shone on the building, making the window-panes glow like so many fires. Away from the Hall in front stretched a flat park studded with oaks and fringed with firs, which stood out against the sky. The clock in the church-tower, buried in trees on the edge of the park, only its golden weather-cock catching the light, was striking six, and the sound came gently beating down the wind. It was altogether a pleasant impression, though tinged with the sort of melancholy appropriate to an evening in early autumn, that was conveyed to the mind of the boy who was standing in the porch waiting for the door to open to him.

I was tempted to cut off these two paragraphs, but I like the atmosphere. This house really exists: M.R. James had a letter from one of the neighbours to check if this was a true story. "A Podcast to the Curious" suggests this is why he starts making places up in future stories.

The post chaise had bought home from Warwickshire, and some six months ago had been left an orphan. Now, owing to the generous and unexpected offer of his elderly cousin, Mr. Abney, he had come to live at Aswarby. The offer was unexpected, because all who knew anything of Mr, Abney looked upon him as a somewhat austere recluse, into whose steady-going household the advent of a small boy would import a new and, it seemed, incongraous element. The truth is that very little was known of Mr. Abney's pursuits or temper. The Professor of Greek at Cambridge had been heard to say that no one knew more of the religious beliefs of the later pagans than did the owner of Aswarby. Certainly his library contained all the then available books bearing on the Mysteries, the Orphic poems, the worship of Mithras, and the Neo-Platonists. In the marble-paved hall stood a fine group of Mithras slaying a bull, which had been imported from the Levant at great expense by the owner. He had contributed a description of it to the Gentleman's Magazine, and he had written a remarkable series of articles in the Critical Museum on the superstitions of the Romans of the Lower Empire. He was looked upon, in fine, as a man wrapped

up in his books, and it was a matter of great surprise among his neighbours that he should ever have heard of his orphan cousin, Stephen Elliott, much more that he should have volunteered to make him an inmate of Aswarby Hall.

Whatever may have been expected by his neighbours, it is certain that Mr. Abney—the tall, the thin, the austere—seemed inclined to give his young cousin a kindly reception. The moment the front-door was opened he darted out of his study, rubbing his hands with delight.

'How are you, my boy?—how are you? How old are you?' said he—'that is, you are not too much tired, I hope, by your journey to eat your supper?'

'No, thank you, sir,' said Master Elliott; 'I am pretty well.'

'That's a good lad,' said Mr. Abney. 'And how old are you, my boy?'

It seemed a little odd that he should have asked the question twice in the first two minutes of their acquaintance.

'I'm twelve years old next birthday, sir,' said Stephen.

'And when is your birthday, my dear boy? Eleventh of September, eh? That's well—that's very well. Nearly a year hence, isn't it? I like—ha, ha!—I like to get these things down in my book. Sure it's twelve? Certain?'

'Yes, quite sure, sir.'

'Well, well! Take him to Mrs. Bunch's room, Parkes, and let him have his tea—supper—whatever it is.'

'Yes, sir,' answered the staid Mr. Parkes; and conducted Stephen to the lower regions.

Mrs. Bunch was the most comfortable and human person whom Stephen had as yet met in Aswarby. She made him completely at home; they were great friends in a quarter of an hour: and great friends they remained. Mrs. Bunch had been born in the neighbourhood some fifty-five years before the date of Stephen's arrival, and her residence at the Hall was of twenty years' standing. Consequently, if anyone knew the ins and outs of the house and the district, Mrs. Bunch knew them; and she was by no means disinclined to communicate her information.

We know a lot more about Mithras and the Neo-Platonists than James's readers did. Presumably much as Christians have a dark, oppositional force in the Satanists, the Mithranists had a shadow.. Perhaps this is where the Shadow Flambeau in Iberia came from.

What's the deal with the book? Abney seems to have an Evil Bullet Journal or perhaps a Commonplace book. At the end of the story the Evil Bullet Journal is still around and is technically a treasure.

So, she has Gossip and a huge Area Lore score.

Certainly there were plenty of things about the Hall and the Hall gardens which Stephen, who was of an adventurous and inquiring turn, was anxious to have explained to him. 'Who built the temple at the end of the laurel walk? Who was the old man whose picture hung on the staircase, sitting at a table, with a skull under his hand?' These and many similar points were cleared up by the resources of Mrs. Bunch's powerful intellect. There were others, however, of which the explanations furnished were less satisfactory.

The skull thing is probably a momento mori. For Christians these were meant to goad you into thinking about the hereafter, rather than the immediate issues of life. In this case it may act as a sort of external Personality trait a character can draw on. Abney draws on it in a terrible sort of way though.

One November evening Stephen was sitting by the fire in the housekeeper's room reflecting on his surroundings.

'Is Mr. Abney a good man, and will he go to heaven?' he suddenly asked, with the peculiar confidence which children possess in the ability of their elders to settle these questions, the decision of which is believed to be reserved for other tribunals.

'Good?—bless the child!' said Mrs. Bunch. 'Master's as kind a soul as ever I see! Didn't I never tell you of the little boy as he took in out of the street, as you may say, this seven years back? and the little girl, two years after I first come here?'

'No. Do tell me all about them, Mrs. Bunch—now this minute!'

'Well,' said Mrs. Bunch, 'the little girl I don't seem to recollect so much about. I know master brought her back with him from his walk one day, and give orders to Mrs. Ellis, as was housekeeper then, as she should be took every care with. And the pore child hadn't no one belonging to her—she telled me so her own self—and here she lived with us a matter of three weeks it might be; and then, whether she were something of a gipsy in her blood or what not, but one morning she out of her bed afore any of us had opened a eye and neither track nor yet trace of her have I set eyes on since. Master was wonderful put about, and had all the ponds dragged; but it's my belief she was had away by them gipsies, for there was singing round the house for as much as an hour the night she went, and Parkes, he declare as he heard them a-calling in the woods all that afternoon. Dear, dear! a hodd child she was, so silent in her ways and all, but I was wonderful taken up with her, so domesticated she was—surprising.'

So, what's the singing? Is it Abney doing his work? Is it a creature responding to him? Is it the gypsies trying to counter him?

'And what about the little boy?' said Stephen.

'Ah, that pore boy!' sighed Mrs. Bunch. 'He were a foreigner—Jevanny he called hisself—and he come a-

tweaking his 'urdy-gurdy round and about the drive one winter day, and master 'ad him in that minute, and ast all about where he came from, and how old he was, and how he made his way, and where was his relatives, and all as kind as heart could wish. But it went the same way with him. They're a hunruly lot, them foreign nations, I do suppose, and he was off one fine morning just the same as the girl. Why he went and what he done was our question for as much as a year after; for he never took his 'urdy-gurdy, and there it lays on the shelf.'

There were hurdy-gurdies in the Medieval period. The ways the keys worked is a little different, but basically it was still a sort of cranked violin that sounds like a bagpipe. Does touching the hurdy-gurdy call up the creatures that threaten and save Stephen?

The remainder of the evening was spent by Stephen in miscellaneous cross-examination of Mrs. Bunch and in efforts to extract a tune from the hurdy-gurdy.

That night he had a curious dream. At the end of the passage at the top of the house, in which his bedroom was situated, there was an old disused bathroom. It was kept locked, but the upper half of the door was glazed, and, since the muslin curtains which used to hang there had long been gone, you could look in and see the lead-lined bath affixed to the wall on the right hand, with its head towards the window.

On the night of which I am speaking, Stephen Elliott found himself, as he thought, looking through the glazed door. The moon was shining through the window, and he was gazing at a figure which lay in the bath. His description of what he saw reminds me of what I once beheld myself in the famous vaults of St. Michan's Church in Dublin, which possess the horrid property of preserving corpses from decay for centuries. A figure inexpressibly thin and pathetic, of a dusty leaden colour, enveloped in a shroud-like garment, the thin lips crooked into a faint and dreadful smile, the hands pressed tightly over the region of the heart.

As he looked upon it, a distant, almost inaudible moan seemed to issue from its lips, and the arms began to stir. The terror of the sight forced Stephen backwards, and he awoke to the fact that he was indeed standing on the cold boarded floor of the passage in the full light of the moon. With a courage which I do not think can be common among boys of his age, he went to the door of the bathroom to ascertain if the figure of his dream were really there. It was not, and he went back to bed.

Ghosts that cause nightmares are known, but rare. Could this be a minor demon instead, taking the form of the girl?

Mrs. Bunch was much impressed next morning by his story, and went so far as to replace the muslin curtain over the glazed door of the bathroom. Mr. Abney, moreover, to whom he confided his experiences at breakfast, was greatly interested, and made notes of the matter in what he called 'his book.'

The spring equinox was approaching, as Mr. Abney frequently reminded his cousin. adding that this had been always considered by the ancients to be a critical time for the young: that Stephen would do well to take care of himself, and to shut his bedroom window at night; and that Censorinus had some valuable remarks on the subject. Two incidents that occurred about this time made an impression upon Stephen's mind.

The Romans, for example, had the Liberalia, which is the festival where boys are made into men. The Aura that the creatures is tied to may rise on this night.

The first was after an unusually uneasy and oppressed night that he had passed—though he could not recall any particular dream that he had had.

The following evening Mrs. Bunch was occupying herself in mending his nightgown.

'Gracious me, Master Stephen!' she broke forth rather irritably, 'how do you manage to tear your nightdress all to flinders this way? Look here, sir, what trouble you do give to poor servants that have to dam and mend after you!'

There was indeed a most destructive and apparently wanton series of slits or scorings in the garment, which would undoubtedly require a skilful needle to make good. They were confined to the left side of the chest—long, parallel slits, about six inches in length, some of them not quite piercing the texture of the linen. Stephen could only express his entire ignorance of their origin: he was sure they were not there the night before.

'But,' he said, 'Mrs. Bunch, they are just the same as the scratches on the outside of my bedroom door; and I'm sure I never had anything to do with making them.'

Mrs. Bunch gazed at him open-mouthed, then snatched up a candle, departed hastily from the room, and was heard making her way upstairs. In a few minutes she came down.

Is this a threat? It doesn't seem to be an effective attack. Is it a warning?

'Well,' she said, 'Master Stephen, it's a funny thing to me how them marks and scratches can 'a' come there—too high up for any cat or dog to 'ave made 'em, much less a rat: for all the world like a Chinaman's fingernails, as my uncle in the tea-trade used to tell us of when we was girls together. I wouldn't say nothing to master, not if I was you, Master Stephen, my dear; and just turn the key of the door when you go to your bed.'

'I always do, Mrs. Bunch, as soon as I've said my prayers.'

Is Mrs Bunch right here? Are his prayers stopping the creatures from hurting him? That's unusual but its possible and Mrs Bunch seems not to be threatened by the creatures either.

'Ah, that's a good child: always say your prayers, and then no one can't hurt you.'.

Herewith Mrs. Bunch addressed herself to mending the injured nightgown, with intervals of meditation, until bed-time. This was on a Friday night in March, 1812.

On the following evening the usual duet of Stephen and Mrs. Bunch was augmented by the sudden arrival of Mr. Parkes, the butler, who as a rule kept himself rather to himself in his own pantry. He did not see that Stephen was there: he was, moreover, flustered and less slow of speech than was his wont.

'Master may get up his own wine, if he likes, of an evening,' was his first remark. 'Either I do it in the daytime or not at all, Mrs. Bunch. I don't know what it may be: very like it's the rats, or the wind got into the cellars; but I'm not so young as I was, and I can't go through with it as I have done.'

'Well, Mr. Parkes, you know it is a surprising place for the rats, is the Hall.'

'I am not denying that, Mrs. Bunch; and, to be sure, many a time I've heard the tale from the men in the shipyards about the rat that could speak. I never laid no confidence in that before; but to-night, if I'd demeaned myself to lay my ear to the door of the further bin, I could pretty much have heard what they was saying.'

'Oh, there, Mr. Parkes, I've no patience with your fancies! Rats talking in the wine-cellar indeed!'

'Well, Mrs. Bunch, I've no wish to argue with you: all I say is, if you choose to go to the far bin, and lay your ear to the door, you may prove my words this minute.'

What are they saying? Are they asking for help or rest?

'What nonsense you do talk, Mr. Parkes—not fit for children to listen to! Why, you'll be frightening Master Stephen there out of his wits.'

'What! Master Stephen?' said Parkes, awaking to the consciousness of the boy's presence. 'Master Stephen knows well enough when I'm a-playing a joke with you, Mrs. Bunch.'

In fact, Master Stephen knew much too well to suppose that Mr. Parkes had in the first instance intended a joke. He was interested, not altogether pleasantly, in the situation; but all his questions were unsuccessful in inducing the butler to give any more detailed account of his experiences in the wine-cellar.

So, were they talking to each other? If we state that these are not faeries, who can be spooky simply for the sake of it, what are the ghosts communicating to each other?

We have now arrived at March 24, 1812. It was a day of curious experiences for Stephen: a windy, noisy day, which filled the house and the gardens with a restless impression. As Stephen stood by the fence of the grounds, and looked out into the park, he felt as if an endless procession of unseen people were sweeping past him on the wind, borne on resistlessly and aimlessly, vainly striving to stop themselves, to catch at something that might arrest their flight and bring them once again into contact with the living world of which they had formed a part.

This is a sort of Dickensian limbo. The are processions of the dead like this, which certain types of magicians shepherd. They are easier to sense if there is a Magic aura, which may be the case since this is the night of the equinox.

After luncheon that day Mr. Abney said:

'Stephen, my boy, do you think you could manage to come to me to-night as late as eleven o'clock in my study? I shall be busy until that time, and I wish to show you something connected with your future life which it is most important that you should know. You are not to mention this matter to Mrs. Bunch nor to anyone else in the house; and you had better go to your room at the usual time.'

Here was a new excitement added to life: Stephen eagerly grasped at the opportunity of sitting up till eleven o'clock. He looked in at the library door on his way upstairs that evening, and saw a brazier, which he had often noticed in the corner of the room, moved out before the fire; an old silver-gilt cup stood on the table, filled with red wine, and some written sheets of paper lay near it. Mr. Abney was sprinkling some incense on the brazier from a round silver box as Stephen passed, but did not seem to notice his step.

The wind had fallen, and there was a still night and a full moon. At about ten o'clock Stephen was standing at the open window of his bedroom, looking out over the country. Still as the night was, the mysterious population of the distant moonlit woods was not yet lulled to rest. From time to time strange cries as of lost and despairing wanderers sounded from across the mere. They might be the notes of owls or water-birds, yet they did not quite resemble either sound. Were not they coming nearer? Now they sounded from the nearer side of the water, and in a few moments they seemed to be floating about among the shrubberies. Then they ceased; but just as Stephen was thinking of shutting the window and resuming his reading of 'Robinson Crusoe,' he caught sight of two figures standing on the gravelled terrace that ran along the garden side of the Hall—the figures of a boy and girl, as it seemed; they stood side by side, looking up at the windows. Something in the form of the girl recalled irresistibly his dream of the figure in the bath. The boy inspired him with more acute fear.

Whilst the girl stood still, half smiling, with her hands clasped over her heart, the boy, a thin shape, with black hair and ragged clothing, raised his arms in the air with an appearance of menace and of unappeasable hunger and longing. The moon shone upon his almost transparent hands, and Stephen saw that the nails were fearfully long and that the light shone through them. As he stood with his arms thus raised, he disclosed a terrifying spectacle. On the left side of his chest there opened a black and gaping rent; and there fell upon Stephen's brain, rather than upon his ear, the impression of one of those hungry and desolate cries that he had heard resounding over the woods of Aswarby all that evening. In another moment this dreadful pair had moved swiftly and noiselessly over the dry gravel, and he saw them no more.

Ghostly warders in Ars Magica never seem to have useful things like these claws, but I think that would be an excellent design for an apprentice with the Virtue. I particularly like the idea that much as a hamr can step inside an animal phantasticum, so that if you cut the bear you see the man's clothing and armour under the skin, so a child could be surrounded by a ghostly warder, gaining the claws, terrifying visage and soul-wrenching moan.

Inexpressibly frightened as he was, he determined to take his candle and go down to Mr. Abney's study, for the hour appointed for their meeting was near at hand. The study or library opened out of the front-hall on one side, and Stephen, urged on by his terrors, did not take long in getting there. To effect an entrance was not so easy. It was not locked, he felt sure, for the key was on the outside of the door as usual. His repeated knocks produced no answer. Mr. Abney was engaged: he was speaking. What! why did he try to cry out? and why was the cry choked in his throat? Had he, too, seen the mysterious children? But now everything was quiet, and the door yielded to Stephen's terrified and frantic pushing.

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On the table in Mr. Abney's study certain papers were found which explained the situation to Stephen Elliott when he was of an age to understand them. The most important sentences were as follows:

'It was a belief very strongly and generally held by the ancients—of whose wisdom in these matters I have had such experience as induces me to place confidence in their assertions—that by enacting certain processes, which to us moderns have something of a barbaric complexion, a very remarkable enlightenment of the spiritual faculties in man may be attained; that, for example, by absorbing the personalities of a certain number of his fellow-creatures, an individual may gain a complete ascendancy over those orders of spiritual beings which control the elemental forces of our universe.

In Ars Magica, these are perhaps magical spirits. I'm not sure M.R. James would have suggested that. You might also posit that the sacrifices call in a demonic familiar that sits within the magician, performing sorceries, such that the person thinks they have the power themselves.

'It is recorded of Simon Magus that he was able to fly in the air, to become invisible, or to assume any form he pleased, by the agency of the soul of a boy whom, to use the libellous phrase employed by the author of the "Clementine Recognitions," he had "murdered." I find it

set down, moreover, with considerable detail in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, that similar happy results may be produced by the absorption of the hearts of not less than three human beings below the age of twenty-one years. To the testing of the truth of this receipt I have devoted the greater part of the last twenty years, selecting as the corpora vilia of my experiment such persons as could conveniently be removed without occasioning a sensible gap in society.

There's a mathematics here that slow the procedure: maybe there's a digestion time. You can't just adopt three kids and eat them in one night, or surely Abney would have done so, and gained the sort of limitless power that would protect him from reprisal.

The first step I effected by the removal of one Phoebe Stanley, a girl of gipsy extraction, on March 24, 1792. The second, by the removal of a wandering Italian lad, named Giovanni Paoli, on the night of March 28, 1805. The final "victim"—to employ a word repugnant in the highest degree to my feelings—must be my cousin, Stephen Elliott. His day must be this March 24, 1812.

'The best means of effecting the required absorption is to remove the heart from the living subject, to reduce it to ashes, and to mingle them with about a pint of some red wine, preferably port.

I'm presuming here that by "port" it either means fortified wine as a class, or fortified wine from Porto, a city in Iberia (and as the name suggests, modern Portugal). It seems a strange addition: Strabo mentions Iberan wine, but I can't quite work out why it should be superior for this. Fortified Portugese wine isn't known in 1220, so far as I can tell. I'd like to flag the Iberian link to the Shadow Flambeau, who were active in that tribunal, and has the fig-leaf of Mithraic practice.

The remains of the first two subjects, at least, it will be well to conceal: a disused bath-room or wine-cellar will be found convenient for such a purpose. Some annoyance may be experienced from the psychic portion of the subjects, which popular language dignifies with the name of ghosts. But the man of philosophic temperament—to whom alone the experiment is appropriate—will be little prone to attach importance to the feeble efforts of these beings to wreak their vengeance on him.

I contemplate with the liveliest satisfaction the enlarged and emancipated existence which the experiment, if successful, will confer on me; not only placing me beyond the reach of human justice (so-called), but eliminating to a great extent the prospect of death itself.'

What's the mechanism here? Pure deception by demon which has no intention of delivering on the promised immortality? Becoming a dark faerie? Ascension into a shadowy version of the Hall of Heroes?

Mr. Abney was found in his chair, his hair thrown back, his face stamped with an expression of rage, fright, and mortal pain. In his left side was a terrible lacerated wound, exposing the heart. There was no blood on his hands, and a long knife that lay on the table was perfectly clean. A savage wild-cat might have inflicted the injuries. The window of the study was open, and it was the opinion of the coroner that Mr. Abney had met his death by the agency of some wild creature. But Stephen Elliott's study of the papers I have quoted led him to a very different conclusion.

Presumably he didn't learn his wards...odd that you need to keep the bodies around. Spirits are tied to the bodies, so perhaps you need to pin the ghosts to your site so you can absorb or command them on the third sacrifice?

Stephen, to me, seems an excellent apprentice. He can see ghosts, he's brave, and he comes with a country estate.

LOSING THE FIRST COMIC STRIP

The Bayeux Tapestry was a piece of monarchical propaganda produced by the Normans after 1066 to explain to their side of the conflict to illiterates. It was made in England somewhere: although precisely where is not clear. We know this because structurally it is not a tapestry at all: it's an embroidery, and the techniques used, although known outside England, were not practiced at the scale or level of skill.

It was then shipped to Bayeux, to decorate a new chapel in the cathedral of Bishop Odo. Odo was William's brother, and appears in the Tapestry itself. He's wielding a club. The story that this is because he was forbidden from using swords because of his ecclesiastical office led to generations of Clerics in Dungeons and Dragons not being allowed blades.

The Tapestry is about 70 meters long, and about half a meter wide. It contains fifty scenes, and these are described with brief captions. The final caption was probably added in the !9th Century, and it's only the latest rework to edit the contents of the tapestry. At least two sections of tapestry are missing. One of these is the final panel, so it is possible that it's more than a single scene. One scholar estimates the missing section was a meter and a half long.

In 1220, the Tapestry is missing. It was hidden during a siege of the city last century. In the real world, it turns up again in a register of the cathedral's possessions in the 15th Century. Finding treasure is one of the great plot hooks in roleplaying games, but that there's a four century failure in the provenance of the Tapestry gives us additional opportunities.

Plot hooks:

Finding the Tapestry

A Jerbiton magus interested in embroidery wants to examine the Tapestry, and asks the player characters to find it. If it is still within the precinct of the Cathedral, magic may prove unreliable.

The tapestry has been destroyed, so you can make a new one, which contains useful images, and slide it into the cathedral, for a fortunate discovery. What would your characters like to include?

Contents of the Tapestry

There is a panel which shows a fleet of ghost ships. Did the Order cause that, as shown in a missing panel?

There's a comet linked to the ghost ships. Does this simply mean that it was a time of ill omen, or is it a hint that during the time of the comet, the Land of the Dead was closer, and easier to enter? Can necromancers make use of the time of the comet?

Missing panel options

House Tytalus influenced the Norman invasion of Britain. One of them is in the missing coronation panel. Is he kneeling to the king, which is a great shame on his House, or is he giving power to the king, which is illegal, but still useful to the House if demanding concessions from the Crown?

The damnatio memoraie of the Diedne was not complete in 1070. Does one of the magi shown in the panel carry a magic item shaped like the symbol of the proscribed House? It might have been looted during the War.

The coronation panel shows the king making obeisance to a demon, hence the massacre at his coronation and his corpse exploding at burial. The king's oath makes the Church lands he owns accessible to the demon and his servants.

A missing panel shows a faerie aiding the king. The story of the faerie has been expunged so it cannot collect its fee, but if the panel revives the creature, it may claim a large section of the Crown's territories, or aid those opposing the current king. Has a rival of the king set the characters up to rediscover the creature?

DUNSANY :
TWO TALES OF DEATH

Death and Odysseus

In the Olympian courts Love laughed at Death, because he was unsightly, and because She couldn't help it, and because he never did anything worth doing, and because She would.

And Death hated being laughed at, and used to brood apart thinking only of his wrongs and of what he could do to end this intolerable treatment.

But one day Death appeared in the courts with an air and They all noticed it. "What are you up to now?" said Love. And Death with some solemnity said to Her: "I am going to frighten Odysseus"; and drawing about him his grey traveller's cloak went out through the windy door with his jowl turned earthwards.

And he came soon to Ithaca and the hall that Athene knew, and opened the door and saw there famous Odysseus, with his white locks bending close over the fire, trying to warm his hands.

And the wind through the open door blew bitterly on Odysseus.

And Death came up behind him, and suddenly shouted.

And Odysseus went on warming his pale hands.

Then Death came close and began to mouth at him. And after a while Odysseus turned and spoke. And "Well, old servant," he said, "have your masters been kind to you since I made you work for me round Ilion?"

And Death for some while stood mute, for he thought of the laughter of Love.

Then "Come now," said Odysseus, "lend me your shoulder," and he leaning heavily on that bony joint, they went together through the open door.

The Grim Reaper doesn't get much of a look in in Mythic Europe: he's a later artistic contrivance. The Romans had a God of Death, but the god of the process of dying, sadly for the order, was Hermes himself, in his role as psychopomp. I've split off a third story, "Death and the Orange", for a different week, because I want to write the statistics for a piece of homicide-inducing fruit.

Thanks again to Thomas A. Copeland, the Librivox reader who put these into the public domain.

The Guest

A young man came into an ornate restaurant at eight o'clock in London.

He was alone, but two places had been laid at the table which was reserved for him. He had chosen the dinner very carefully, by letter a week before.

A waiter asked him about the other guest.

"You probably won't see him till the coffee comes," the young man told him; so he was served alone.

Those at adjacent tables might have noticed the young man continually addressing the empty chair and carrying on a monologue with it throughout his elaborate dinner.

"I think you knew my father," he said to it over the soup.

"I sent for you this evening," he continued, "because I want you to do me a good turn; in fact I must insist on it."

There was nothing eccentric about the man except for this habit of addressing an empty chair, certainly he was eating as good a dinner as any sane man could wish for.

After the Burgundy had been served he became more voluble in his monologue, not that he spoiled his wine by drinking excessively.

"We have several acquaintances in common," he said. "I met King Seti a year ago in Thebes. I think he has altered very little since you knew him. I thought his forehead a little low for a king's. Cheops has left the house that he built for your reception, he must have prepared for you for years and years. I suppose you have seldom been entertained like that. I ordered this dinner over a week ago. I thought then that a lady might have come with me, but as she wouldn't I've asked you. She may not after all be as lovely as Helen of Troy. Was Helen very lovely? Not when you knew her, perhaps. You were lucky in Cleopatra, you must have known her when she was in her prime.

"You never knew the mermaids nor the fairies nor the lovely goddesses of long ago, that's where we have the best of you."
He was silent when the waiters came to his table, but rambled merrily on as soon as they left, still turned to the empty chair.

"You know I saw you here in London only the other day. You were on a motor bus going down Ludgate Hill. It was going much too fast. London is a good place. But I shall be glad enough to leave it. It was in London that I met the lady I that was speaking about. If it hadn't been for London I probably shouldn't have met her, and if it hadn't been for London she probably wouldn't have had so much besides me to amuse her. It cuts both ways."

He paused once to order coffee, gazing earnestly at the waiter and putting a sovereign in his hand. "Don't let it be chicory," said he.

The waiter brought the coffee, and the young man dropped a tabloid of some sort into his cup.

"I don't suppose you come here very often," he went on. "Well, you probably want to be going. I haven't taken you much out of your way, there is plenty for you to do in London."

Then having drunk his coffee he fell on to the floor by a foot of the empty chair, and a doctor who was dining in the room bent over him and announced to the anxious manager the visible presence of the young man's guest.

Abb. 140. Allegorie auf die Vergänglichkeit. Kpfr. von Cornelis Teunissen. Nagl. M. II, 725, 9. 1537. Wien, Sammlung Jos. Wünsch.

CORNWALL: LOOE ISLAND

Looe Island has a Cornish name meaning “the island of the monks’ enclosure”. In English it is either called St George’s Island, or St Michael’s Island in period, but given how many monastic islands of St Michael we are already struggling with, let’s just go with the name of the nearby town, Looe. Its on the south coast of Cornwall, toward the east, which places it away from Tintagel and Scilly, the other two sites I’m considering developing.

The island is about 22 acres – so it’s large enough to sustain a covenant’s population, particularly given the resources of the sea, and trade with nearby ports. Looe, the nearest modern port, doesn’t seem to exist as a legal entity in 1220, but may be one of the many boroughs that Richard of the Romans sets up. He seems to give them a fair. There’s a village at the site before the Normans turn up, and part of what’s now Looe is made up of three Domesday manors, one owned directly by William himself.

There is a second, smaller islet nearby. It’s now called Trelawny Island, but that’s a recent change. Historically it seems to have been called Little Island. It’s close enough to be connected with a simple footbridge, and large enough that the magi might build a separate domicle there, if they prefered to live physically separated from their community.

The island is identified by some writers with Ictis, the place where the ancient Cornish set up a trading post to sell tin to international traders. There are some features which do not match the description, for example Ictis is meant to be tidal, but for the purposes of the game, the link might be made. It certainly appears in period, because the Cornish people believe that Joseph of Armithea left his nephew, Jesus Christ, on this island for a while, when he came to Cornwall to buy tin along the coast. This has made the island a pilgrimage site from early times, but not a major one inssofar as I can tell. Regardless, Insula Ictis would be a fine Latin name for a covenant here.

The island belongs to Glastonbury Abbey (from 1144 in real Europe). It is administered by two Benedictines at Lammana Priory. In the real world, the Abbey sold the island to a local landowner, so the covenant could make them an offer. The priory was small, and so was converted to a secular chapel, possibly dedicated to St Michael, giving the island its repetitive name. Glastonbury is the abbey that was so fortunate as to discover the tomb of King Arthur about 40 years ago, and its lucky for them that their good fortunate continued, such that they control the only part of the British isles that the Saviour Himself visited in his lifetime.

Looe Island is a potential covenant site that will be added to the material which is gradually being collected for a Cornish gazette for the Ars Magica roleplaying game. Much of this material comes from Alex Langstone’s book “From Granite to Sea” or from the Cornish folklore journal he edits “Lien Gwerin”.

A pair of Victorian antiquarians said that Looe has man-made caves in it, similar to those grottoes built by the Etruscans. I've been trying to work the Etruscans into the game for a while, because they give us a new source for an early, published NPC. In "Sanctuary of Ice" I developed a two line description of Johnathan Tweet's, an archmagus skilled in lightning magic, raised as a Tytalus. They might serve as the ancestors of that tradition.

The last mention of the Etruscan magi I can find is that in 408, when the Visigoths came to sack Rome. The Romans heard that Visigothic forces had been scattered from a town (called Narnia, strangely enough, which is modern Narni) by a magical ritual that called down lightning. The priests of the old religion, Etruscan haruspexes came to the Pope and said they could save the city by performing the same ritual. The Pope said yes, but demanded it be done in secret, or at least in private, so the haruspexes refused and left.

There is some question as to how the story played out, but regardless there were lightning magi actively destroying armies in the 5th Century. Other features of Etruscan (or Rasenna, as they called themselves) culture suit Hermetic magic also. They had comparatively egalitarian sexes, they lived in city states ruled by a small oligarchic caste rather than monarchies. The Etruscans also lived in the area of modern Italy that was the local source of copper and tin, so there's a weak link there. The Etruscans are best known in the modern day from their cavernous, decorated graves, which I could place on the island.

In later periods, smugglers worked from Looe Island, and spread tales of ghosts to frighten off people who might otherwise be attracted to their lights and noise. In Mythic Europe, that's how you attract faeries. There are at least three Looe ghosts There is a dark-skinned man with blood on his face. There is an aristocratic, long-fingered man with grey hair who emerges from a blue light. There is a white hare which warns of storms and is the spirit of a girl who committed suicide when wronged by her suitor. Apparently this happens a lot in Cornwall, so there are several of these hares about as potential familiars.