Games From Folktales

A free podcast for the Ars Magica roleplaying game

Pentamerone

- The Face and the Goose
- Seven Pork Rinds and Three Crowns
- Sapia Liccardia
- Three Faeries / Two Brothers

Monsters

- An oddly bibliographic ghost
  - *Bone of his bone*
- Black spirits and White
  - *The succubus*
- "Eyes" by Galen Colin from “Weird Tales” 1924
- The Wondersmith by Fitz-James O’Brien

Poetry

- Cordiphagi
  - *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*
  - *In the desert*
- An example of life-powered spontaneous magic from Edna St Vincent Millay
  - *The harp weaver*
- An Apology for the Bottle Volcanic by Vachel Lindsay
- False, But Beautiful by John Rollin Ridge
- Ines de las Sierras by Theophile Gautier
- The Tavern by Wila Cather
- Two Old Bachelors by Edward Lear

Magonomia

- Are you a Smiley or a Bond?
- Introducing Benvenuto Cellini
- Cellini and the Hailstorm
- Cellini and the Unicorn of Dunsany
- Signals intelligence in Elizabethan England

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Pentamerone

The Face and the Goose

So, this audio went live six months early. The episode that I meant to schedule will come out next week in audio.

The Face

Burton's faux-Jacobean on this story is "Renza is shut in a tower by her father, it having been foretold that she would die through a big bone. She falleth in love with a prince, and with a bone brought to her by a dog, she boreth a hole through the wall, and escapeth. But beholding her lover, who is wedded to another, kissing his bride, she dieth of a broken heart, and the prince, unable to endure his anguish, slayeth himself." I'm not going to do much more with this, because that's basically the story. It is padded out with pages of that thing where people say the same thing in elegant variations, for pages. Let that go.

Essentially we have a tower filled with riches with a hole bored in the side. A girl under a curse has lived there for long enough to create a small Magical aura. Tiny covenant? The lady sneaks into the court of the prince by pretending to be a male bard, which is interesting. After they die they are buried in one grave and their story etched in the archives. As suicides their ghosts are summonable in Ars Magica.

The Goose

The goose that lays golden eggs is obviously a source of vis, and of treasure. Any covenant would want one. Shall we look at the original story of the fabulous bird? I'll skip the faux-Jacobean this time.

There are two poor sisters, Lilla and Lolla, who make their living spinning flax. They save enough to buy a goose, which becomes a sort of pet, that sleeps in their own bed. As luck would have it, the goose begins to shit gold crowns. The author does not say which design are on these crowns. Are they the golden ducat of Florence? The bezant of Constantinople? Which imperial head is coming from the goose? We don't know. I'd be tempted to have them be from an alternate history. In Magonomia, for example, I'd have the head of Henry IX or Queen Jane on them, just to make life interesting. In Ars Magica, each coin could have a mystical secret, so the player characters need to trace every single one.

Sensibly the girls fill a large chest with gold before they do anything, but after that they buy better food, clothes and furniture. The gossips of the town notice, and what they say to each other matters only in as much as show how people thought treasure is expressed in the sumptuous goods people buy (to steal a term from Pendragon).

They have 'become so well-fed and well-dressed that they live in luxury like great ladies? Hast thou seen their windows always ornamented with fowls and barons of beef, which stare thee in the face ? What can it be ? Either they have laid hands on their honour, or they have found an hoard.' "Laid hands on their honour" here is sex work.

The gossips bore a hole in the wall of the girls' house to peek through. By the way, this is where the old English offence of Housebreaking comes from – literally going in through the side of a wattle and daub house with a shovel. Lilla and Lolla put sheets down, and the goose sprays gold coins on them. "The very balls of their eyes stood out" according to Burton.

The gosspis rock up the next morning and say "Hey, I've bought some ducklings and they'd feel a lot better in the house if I could borrow your goose." She goes on, and on, and on, until eventually the girls cave and let her borrow the magical bird. The gossips lay out sheets, which the goose covers in ordure. To be fair, apparently she hadn't been pooping normally for weeks, so…time for it to find some ease and equilibrium. The gossips think "Well, maybe we need to feed her the excellent stuff the girls have been giving her" and os they pack the goose to the throat with treats and lay out a new set of sheets. Alas, the goose has dysentery due to this rich diet, and the gossips become angry. They wring the bird's neck and fling it from a window into a trash-strewn alley.

As it happens, there's a bit of the dysentry going around, and a local prince is caught short while out riding. He dips into the alley and does his business, but find he has no paper in his pocket to clean himself. I need ot check the translation there, for both paper and pockets seem a bit modern. He sees, however, the downy neck of a dead goose and thinks "Ah-ha! Just the thing for the royal buttocks."

The goose is not dead, but merely stunned. It is entirely unwilling to allow itself to be used as bogroll, and so it bites the prince's bottom and latches on. The prince screams and calls his servants, but they can't get the goose off. He gives up, because of the pain, and makes his servants carry him home with the goose still attached. He calls all of the doctors in the realm, and they are utterly unable to remove the goose. Oinments, pincers,

vinegar, none of it works. Why they don’t kill the goose is unclear: some sort of Mentem magic?

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The prince, desperate, sends out an edict “Get this goose off my arse and I’ll give you half the kingdom if you’re a man, or marry you if you’re a woman.” What he’ll do for married women is unclear. A queue forms, because it’s kind of like the lottery. If you happen to be the one with your hand on the goose when it dies of hunger, you get half a kingdom. Why not go hold the goose? Also, you get to see your ruler humiliated.. The more people who try the tighter the goose locks on.

Eventually the younger daughter, Lolla, arrives and calls the goose by name. The goose leaves the prince to give her a kiss, preferring, as the author says, the lips of a country maid to the back parts of a prince. The prince asks her what has caused his discomfort, and he thinks the business with the birdshit on the sheets of the gossips is hilarious. He then marries Lolla and takes the goose that shits treasure as his dowry, because he’s not a fool. He then marries the older sister off to a rich guy, cementing his alliances. The moral is “An impediment is often an assistance”.

Pentamerone

Seven Pork Rinds and Three Crowns

Some simpler stories this time. The creatures from a version of the Seven Pork Rinds were used in *Realms of Power: Faerie*, so no new stats. I like this because its a very early, particularly successful, confidence trick. Let's start with some Burtonish faux-Jacobean.

Seven Pork Rinds

An old woman, a beggar, giveth a good beating to her daughter for her gluttony, she having eaten seven pieces of pork-skin, and maketh a merchant believe that she had clone this, because she had worked too much in filling seven spindles. The merchant taketh her to wife, but she worketh not ; but by gift of three fairies the husband on his return from a journey findeth the piece of cloth finished, and by another ruse of the wife he resolveth not to allow her to work any more, for fear that she should fall ill.

There's a woman who begs for a living, and she has a daughter. She's described in particularly nasty terms, because she's poor, and that means she's basically evil in these stories, which are written for the noble class. She is given seven pieces of pork lard with the skins attached, and asks her daughter to boil them, while she goes off to beg some greens from the gardeners.

The smell of the pork fat is too much for the girl, and so she eats a rind, thinking she can pay for it with blows on her shoulder from her mother. The problem for her is that much like peanuts, you can't eat just one, and so she finishes all seven. She knows she's going to get in trouble, so she cuts seven pieces out of an old shoe and boils those.

The mother returns and adds the greens to the pot, along with a quantity of lard a coachman gave her as alms, after he had finished greasing his axles. She then puts pieces of old bread in a wooden bowl and pours the soup over them. When the mother eats, she knows this is not pigskin. She tells her daughter "You have done me brown!" which I didn't think was a period idiom and demands she confess, threatening to break every bone in her body..

The daughter finally gets a name in this story, Saporita, and she says she was confused by the smoke of the fire and did not put leather in the soup deliberately. The woman will have none of this, and attacks Saporita with a broom handle. The daughter's screams attract a passing merchant, who bursts into the house seeking to prevent whatever calamity is happening. He says "Has she been burgling money boxes or something? This seems ridiculously extreme" and the mother needs to save face. She gets an inspiration.

"You don't know what she's done!", she cries. "I'm a beggar, and she's going to drive us out of house and home, by working so hard that she needs doctors and medicines. I've told her, now that it's summer, that she mustn't work so hard or she will get sick, because we have so little food. She ignored me and still filled seven spindles while I was out. If she gets heart disease and is bedridden for months, then what will I do?"

The merchant thinks "Seven spindles a day, eh? That's some ready cash." and says "Leave off hitting her, because I can see a way to fix all of her medical bills. I'll marry her, and take her out of your household, and then you'll be fine. I'll treat her like a princess. He then describes how this wealth manifests to person from the time.

He says "By the grace of Heaven I raise my own fowls, pigs and pigeons. You can barely move in my house for food. I have casks of corn and pitchers of oil and a cupboard full of flour. I have bladders full of lard and smoked meat hanging from the roofbeams. I have a rack of crocks, and heaps of wood, and mounds of coal. I have safes of linen and a bed fit for a bridegroom" I'll break in here to note that bed was often the most expensive thing a middle class person owned: they turn up a lot in wills. He continues "Best of all, from my rents and interest I live like a lord. I make about ten ducats per fair, and if business goes well, I'll soon be truly rich."

The woman puts Saporita's hand in his and says 'Here she is, live long and prosper" or words to that effect. The text notes the business with the hands is a Neapolitan custom, for its Veneitan audience. Venetians do a sort of Byzantine thing, which we mistake for an Arabic thing, with veiled women and women's only spaces. It outlasts its source in Venice, I believe, much like, say my Cypriot friend in University found when he visited Cyprus that things there had moved on an his family's customs were considered kind of quaint. We don't get Saporita's assent, but if the choices are being beaten with a broom on the regular, or lucky dip with some random dude who seems to object to the broom business, you can see why she might roll the dice.

He gets her home, and then says "Off to buy some flax, dearest". When he comes home he says "Don't be afraid. Unlike your mum, I won't break your bones for spinning. For every ten spindles I'll give you ten kisses, and for

every distaff full I'll give you my heart." Then he says he needs to travel to a fair and will be gone about twenty days. If she's spun a heap of flax by the time he gets back, he'll buy her a ""fine pair of sleeves of Russian cloth, trimmed with green velvet". She tells him to pop off, it's all in hand. It's as easy as milking a black goat. That sounds weird, but he's cool with it and exits stage left.

Saporita is a greedy girl ,according to the story, but I doubt it. I think it's like those marshmallow tests for patience in children. Originally people thought they proved that people were poor because they could not put off immediate gratification, and then later they looked at the data gain and found that poor kids eat the marshmallow they can see, because they don't believe the tester's promise that there will be two later if they leave it alone. Saporita cracks out the flour and oil to makes fritters and cakes, and does precisely nothing but bake and eat for twenty days.

She's worried hubby is going to come back, so she tries something kind of cool: She makes a giant spindle out of an Indian vegetable marrow (basically a zucchini) and tries to drop spindle all of the fabric at once off a balcony. Instead of the usual dish of water, she has a big caldron of macaroni broth, so she has both lubricant and snack. People wandering by think this is marvellously funny, and this attracts some faeries. .The faeries agree, so they bless the house, such that all the flax gets spun, woven and whitened.

Saporita thinks this is great, but she knows she can't depend on whatever magic caused this. When her husband comes home, she makes sure he finds her in bed. She's under the covers, and has some hazelnuts about her. As they talk, she shifts back and forward on them to make cracking noises.

"Are you sick?" he asks.

"Couldn't be worse. I barely have a complete bone in my body" she says. "I'm pretty close to dead, and my mother will starve because you haven't paid her. Still, you got your cloth, so, that's a good thing. Anyhow, I'm not doing this again."

He feels abashed and says "Oh, your mum warned me about this. My bad entirely. You just hang on, I'm going to get you a doctor, and even if it costs me an eye, we'll get you healthy again." Saporita waits for him to leave, then eats the hazelnuts and throws the shells out the window. The doctor comes, and does what's usual in the period. He checks her pulse and looks at her stool and smells her urine. These are in separate containers – the chamber pot and the night vase, and if you've wondered what the guy is holding on the cover of Art and Academe, you now know.

The famous doctor says Saporita needs to be bled, because she's not had any exercise. The husband thinks he's a charlatan, gives him a coin called a carlion, and sends him off with curses. He's about to head off for another doctor, when Saporita says "No, the sight of you has cured me." and leaves bed. He embraces her and promises she wont have to work anymore, because you can't have, and I believe this is what he means, a goddess and a woman who picks cabbages in the same form. So, there's your moral – women of quality will literally be killed by manual work, which is why it is for peasants to do. The Venetian nobles listening ot this lap it up, because they are terrible people.

The Three Crowns

Time for some faux-Jacobean from Burton.

Marchetta is stolen by the wind, and carried to the house of a ghula, whence, after various accidents, receiving a buffet, she goeth forth disguised in man's clothing. She wendeth to the palace of a king, where the queen becometh enamoured of her, and because her love meeteth with no corresponding feelings, accuseth her to her husband of having tempted her to a deed of shame. Thereupon Marchetta is condemned to be hanged, but by the virtue of a charm that had been given to her by the ghula, she is saved, and at last becometh queen.

There's a king without kids, and he's dramatic about it. Rather than just adopting, he goes around sighing and talking about the destruction of his house. He's moaning on in the garden one night when a voice answers him from the bushes "Oh, King", says whatever is in the shrubbery "would you prefer a daughter who will fly away from you, or a son who will destroy you?" The king doesn't know, so he wants to have a word with his advisors.

He goes back to his rooms and rouses out his counsellors. "Discourse on this entirely theoretical question, in the middle of the night!" he commands. Some say to go for a son, because honour before life, as everyone passes away. Honour makes you remembered. Honour is glory, which never fades. Some say to choose a daughter, because honour is just an idea. What makes you remembered is descendants. Life is a prerequisite to love, and to wealth, and these are the practical tools for the construction of a legacy. The also point out that having a patricidal son is not very honourable, and losing a daughter by flight or lewdness isn't much shame on a father. Team XY rallies with the "You have a duty to have a son because we live in a patriarchy and you need a strong heir – think of the welfare of the common people!" Team XX says "So, you think while the son is destroying him the realm is just going to stand around and watch? Sounds like a civil war to us, and in war, it's the peasants who suffer."

The king, having determined that his counsellors are not a cheat code in this game, goes to the garden and calls out again. He's decided on a girl, because who wants to

be murdered and have his kingdom burned down? He answers the voice and goes home. Then we quote the translation “the sun invites’ the hours of the day to take a view of the small ill-made folk of the Antipodes” and we wonder which creatures he means. Moving on…the girl is born in the usual way, and named Marchetta. She is raised with great tutors, good guards, and perfect diligence. He thinks that all of this care can undo the bad influence of her birth.

The father engages his daughter off to King Picrdiscnno, and sends her to that kingdom to marry, but she is swept away by a great wind. It carries her to the house of a ghula, in the dark of a forest. .There’s something here about being struck down by the plague because he has killed Pitone the Infected. Pitone is a version of “Python” so…it might be related to the death of a dragon. There’s an old woman watching the place on behalf of the ghula.

The old woman says “You’re lucky the mistress is not home. She eats nothing but people. I’m not sure why she’s not eaten me. It might be that she needs a servant, or it might be that I have fainting spells, heart disease, urinary tract stones, and flatulence, so she thinks I’ll taste terrible. Tell you what, if you do all of the cleaning, I’ll hide you when she comes and smuggle you food. Who knows what the future might bring if we are wise and patient?”.

Marchetta takes the deal. She makes the floors so clean you could eat macaroni off them. She uses lard to polish the walnut furniture to a mirror finish. Then she makes the bed and hides in a corn cask as she hears the ghula coming.

The ghula says “Who has put the house in order?” The old woman claims it was her. The ghula finds that hard to believe because the woman, who is called Pentatola, has never done this before. She leaves on her ghula business, so Marchetta emerges and removes all of the cobwebs, shines the copperware and soaks the laundry. The ghula returns and priases the old woman, then goes off ghulanating again.

The old woman says “Here’s an idea. Make a dainty thing that’ll suit the ghula’s taste and I’ll try to get a promise out of her. Wait until she swears by the three crowns, or she can still eat you.” Marchetta agrees to this and makes a feast. It’s a goose gibbet stew, with a spit-roast goose stuffed with lard, garlic and onions. She makes some “priest chokers” and lays a table with rose and orange leaves. A priest choker is a sort of gnocchi, eaten with gravy or butter.

The ghula arrives and wants to know who has made this feast. Her personality traits seem to change when she eats. The old woman says “Don’t ask, just be happy”. The ghula says that, by the Three Words of Naples she would give the cook her eyeballs. Then she swears by the Three Bows and Arrows she would enshrine the chef in her heart. Then she swears a long oath which I’ll quote:

“I swear it by the three candles, which are lit when a deed or a will is written by night; by the three witnesses, who cause a man to be hanged; by the three feet of rope that twist the man that is hanged ; by the three things that chase a man from his house, stink, smoke, and a wicked woman ; by the three things which wear out a house, fritters, warm bread, and maccaroni; by the three women and a goose which make up a market ; by the three F’s of fried fish, cold fish, and stewed fish ; by the three first singers of Naples, John de la Carrejola, Gossip Junno, and the king of music; by the three S’s which are needful to a lover, solitude, solicitude, and secrecy ; by the three things which are needful to a merchant credit, spirit, and fair fortune ; by the three sort of folk to whom the whore holds, the boasters, the beauteous youths, and the spiteful; by the three things most important to the thief, eyes to lighten well, claws to grapple well, and feet to disappear well ; by the three things which are the ruin of youths, gambling, women, and taverns; by the three virtues necessary to a bailiff, sight, speed, and success ; by the three things useful to a courtier, deceit, phlegm, and fortune ; by the three things needful to a pimp, large heart, great prattling, and small shame ; by the three tllings which are observed by a doctor, the pulse, the face, and the night-vase.’ Marchetta ignores all of this until the ghula says “By my three crowns, if I ever know the industrious, good housewife who hath done me such good service, I will do her more caresses and kindnesses than she can imagine”.

“I’m here” , says Marchetta, sliding out of her barrel.

The ghula says “Yuo should have kicked me, because you know more than I do. You’ve played me so I won’t eat you. Instead I’ll treat you like a daughter. Here are the keys of the house. Just one thing – don’t use this final key. It opens a room in my chamber which is just for me. Do right by me and, by the three crowns, I’ll make sure you have a great marriage.” Marchetta agrees, but she’s curious, so when the ghula goes out enghulianating, she opens the door.

Inside are three women, asleep, on thrones, arrayed in cloth of gold. This story predates Bluebeard, so they are all alive. They are, the narratorial voice tells us, the daughters of the ghula. She’s put them here because there’s a doom upon them, that they will face a great hardship unless a princess wakes them. Marchetta fails a Sneak roll and wakes them with the sound of her shoes upon the floor. The women ask for food, and she bakes them eggs, which shows she has a practical turn of mind for a princess. This rings them back, fully, to wakeful life, so they go out into the house for some fresh air. The ghula arrives and is angry, so she slaps Marchetta.

The princess responds by begging to be allowed to leave and travel the world to seek her fortune. The ghula knows

that you can't get good housekeepers, so she apologises and says she won't do it again, but the princess is adamant, so she's allowed to leave. The ghula gives her a ring and, at Marchetta's request, a suit of mens clothes. The ring's magical, so that if you twist it a certain way and think of the ghula, in a moment of crisis, aid will come. The men's clothes aren't magical, but they are extremely costly and in Mythic Europe, that's almost like magic. .

Marchetta is heading through the woods, and meets a king. "What ho, handsome youth!" says the king "Who are you" Where are you from? Where are you going?"' Marchetta says she's a merchant's son whose mother has died, and is fleeing her evil stepmother. The king thinks that's an entirely reasonable explanation for hiking through the woods near nightfall in sumptuous clothes, so he offers Marchetta a job as a page. They head back to his palace, and meet the queen.

Things go badly here, because the Queen immediately wants to find out what's in the new page's trousers. She struggles with her feelings for a few days, but the then gives in and calls Marchetta to a private meeting. She then makes a really arduous metaphor the need of her garden to absorb Marchetta's bodily fluids, which sounds like something out of Doctor Strangelove. She then goes through a couple of other metaphors, one of which is pretty straightforward about a ship in a gulf, but the other is about how Neapolitan schoolboys were punished with the "horse" which I don't understand at all. The "horse" is, in this case, a technique of corporal punishment where a boy is held on the shoulders of another, but upside down, so he can be struck on the buttocks by a cane by a third boy, appointed by the teacher. I have no idea how any of that fits in. Then there's a sort of key and lock metaphor, and the Queenb talking about how she needs healing quickly, and a pun about how Marchetta, not being Mercury, has not a caduceus. This is all terrible clever in period, I presume, but I'm skipping it all, with the exception of the way Neapolitan schoolboys are punished, because House Tytalus has roots in Naples, and they have an agogic training regimen. Let's move on: Marchetta says no.

The queen says that when a woman of high degree is slighted, she bathes in the blood of her foe. This is not, Marchetta knows, either true or strictly sane, but she keeps that to herself. The queen puts on the waterworks and goes to the king. "What's the problem?" he asks, being a guy and wanting to fix things. She answers with an extended series of examples of unlikely ingratitude and says unless he fixes it, she'll go back to her father's house. The king can't follow what she's talking about, so he asks her again.

"Oh, your page tried to have sex with me." she lies.

The king takes her word for it, and acts decisively. Marchetta finds herself tied up and at the gibbet before you can get through a paragraph, which in this book is incredibly quick. She thinks that now's the time to open the Matrix of Leadership and twists the ring. A great voice crashes through the air saying "Let her go! She is a woman!". Everyone nearby fails their Brave checks and heads for the hills. Merchant leave their goods. Soldiers flee their posts. Marchetta is left standing alone in the middle of an empty town.

The voice is so powerful it shakes the ground, and is heard at the distant palace. The king, who does not need to make a Brave check because he's out of range, demands Marchetta be bought before him. He says "So, who are you really?" and she gives her story up until this point. Literally, it is repeated in abbreviated form in the text. Were these people paid by the minute? This king is buddies with the king of Valletescosse, and knows his fiancé was whisked off by the wind, so that all sounds entirely plausible to him.

The king, who, as we have noted before, is not one for reflective pauses, has the queen dragged to the shoreline, has weights tied to her feet, and then has her pushed into the briny deeps. Oh, no! However will he father an heir without a wife. Time to marry Marchetta. He sends invitations to her family to attend the wedding. The moral is that "God finds a safe harbour for ships in trouble." which would be less disturbing if the author hadn't used ships as a sexual metaphor earlier. What the King of Valletescosse thinks about the business is notmentioned – he doesn;t even seem to get an invite, which is hard luck. You'd think you'd send him a save the date so he could blow you off and send you whatever the medieval equivalent of a toaster is, but that doesn't happen.

Pentamerone

Sapia Liccardia

Sapia the Glutton, as Burton calls it, has the following faux Jacobean summary

“Sapia with her ability maintaineth herself in all honour, in spite of the bad example of her sisters, their father being away. She laugheth at her lover, and foreseeing the danger which overshadoweth her, she surpasseth it; and at last the king’s son taketh her to wife.” Like most of these stories, it parks the moral up front. Basically it’s that it is better to have good judgement than money, because one comes and goes, but the other will be with you in need.

Long ago there lived a merchant named Marcone, with three daughters: Bella, Canzoll and Sapia the Glutton. He had to go to market, and knowing the eldest were great flirts, he nailed the windows shut. Then he gave each girl a ring with an enchanted gemstone, that would change colour if they were “unseemly”. As soon as he leaves his elder daughters attempt to pry open the windows. His youngest daughter has a crying fit about how this is a house, not an orange seller’s cart, which is an odd sort of thing to say, but ties in surprisingly sharply with early Australian sex work and the Razor Gangs in Sydney, as one of the main players was an Italian grocer who worked a cart. Moving on.

Opposite their house is the king’s palace. The king has three sons. The boys make eyes at the girls, then blow kisses of the hand., then talk, then make promises, then scaled the walls of the house. The two older girls and boys go off, but Sapia slides out of Prince Torre’s grasp, like an eel, and locks herself in her room. He’s forced to “hold the mule while his brothers are filling sacks at the mill.” in Burton’s version. He leaves discontented, and his passion grows over the days which follow, as do the bellies of the older sisters.

They get sick of being chided by Sapia, so they conspire with Torre. The sisters claim that they have the worst cravings for some of the king’s bread. Sapia agrees to collect it, so they lower her out of the window that the king’s sons have smashed in, dressed as a beggar. She begged at the king’s palace, and the Prince, being in on the scheme, leapt out and grabbed her. Fortunately, she had a sharp comb in the back of her hair. She fled, and he was maimed for a few days.

A few days later, the conspiracy tries again. The sisters send Sapia to steal two pears from the king’s garden. Sapia meets the king;’s son in the garden, and gets him to climb up for the pears. After he throws them down she pinches his ladder and heads home, leaving him to be rescued by a gardener. He vows revenge.

The sisters give birth to two beautiful boys, and fearing their father’s imminent return, get Sapia to take the children to the palace. She puts a baby in the bed of each of the older princes, and a large stone in Torre’s. The older princes think their kids are great, and Torre is angry he didn’t get one. He throws himself dramatically on the bed to sulk, and knocks himself out on the stone.

Marcone rolls back into town, and checks the chastity rings. He’s a terrible person, and grabs his sword to torture the girls, but they are saved by the arrival of a couple of princes with wedding proposals. He decides that all’s well that ends well, and agrees. He also throws Sapia into the bargain, which she thinks is unwise. She makes a statue of herself out of sugar and pastry before the wedding, then leaves the celebration early claiming fatigue. She slides the statue into her bed, and hides.

Her husband comes in and says “Now shalt thou pay me, 0 ungrateful bitch, for all the anguish and heartsore thou hast caused me ; now shalt thou perceive what it is for a cricket to compete with an elephant; now shalt thou pay for all, and I will make thee remember the comb in the linen bag, the ladder taken from under the tree, and the other tricks thou hast played me.’ then he stabs the statue in her bed with a poignard. Not satisfied, he then says ‘And I will even drink thy blood.’ While he’s sucking the sugary centre out of the statue he is overcome by the metaphor, and believing he should not have slain such a sweet damsel, he begins to lament and weep and generally carry on, to the point where he decides to kill himself.

Sapia launches herself out of the closet and grabs his wrist saying ‘I’m alive. By the way I was only vexing you to check your constancy. Pardon me for my misdeeds.” And then they have make-up sex and live happily ever after. Remember, this guy’s meant to be the hero, and quite a catch. This sort of oversensitivity is meant to be a sign of nobility, princess and the pea style.

In the version of this I read first, Beautiful Angiola, they don’t make up by having it away: they eat the statue together. That’s even weirder, but I like it more, because it seems like a mystery cult initiation.

Pentamerone

Three Faeries / Two Brothers

Three Faeries

Let us start with Burton's faux-Jacobean summary of this story:

Cecelia. ill-treated by her stepmother, is well entreated by three fairies. Her envious stepmother sendeth her own daughter to them, and she is scorned by them, for which reason she sendeth her stepdaughter to watch pigs. A great lord falleth in love with her, but through the craft and wickedness of the stepmother, they give him the ugly daughter in exchange, and she putteth her stepdaughter in a cask ready to pour boiling water upon her. The lord discovereth the treachery. taketh out Cecelia, and putteth the hideous daughter in her place ; and the mother cometh, and scaldeth her with boiling water, and finding out her error, slayeth herself.

The thing is, this one's so brief that there's not a lot that Burton has missed. He goes one for an entire paragraph about how ugly the stepdaughter is, for example, which is boring as anything if you aren't the sort of person to laugh at mockery of the appearance of others. It was a big seller in medieval Venice, apparently, but now it's about as funny as a Scooby Doo multi-door chase scene. Burton says she's the image of a sea-ghula, which is a tribe I've not heard of before, but presumably it relates to the desert ghouls we have often discussed.

The stepdaughter needs to do all the household chores, and one day, while she's carrying something home, she drops her basket in a ravine. As she's thinking of ways to retrieve it a sorcerer appears behind her. He seems also to be a ghula. I'll include his description, as he might make a useful monster. I presume he's what we'd call an ogre. In the story he seems to be first behind her and then down at the bottom of the ravine, otherwise the dialogue makes little sense.

"…His hair stood up like an hog's bristles, black and stiff, sinking to the very marrow of the bones; The forehead was full of wrinkles, so that it seemed furrowed by the plough. He had shaggy brows, crooked eyes sunk deeply into their orbits, and filled with what do ye call it, and they looked like shops under the eyelashes' heavy gutter. He had a crooked, frothing mouth, out of which protruded a pair of tusks, like a wild boar's. His breast was full of bumps, and covered with hair enough to stuff a mattress. And above all he was hunchbacked, roundbellied, and had thin legs, and crooked feet. His appearance was such, that it would make you twist your mouth with fear."

Cecella, isn't afraid, and asks him to hand up the basket, with the blessing "May you be married to a rich spouse". He answers "Come down, 0 my daughter, and take it up."

Cecella climbs down,. clutching at roots and stones. I note that in doing so she has, in Ars Magica terms, taken the role of "daughter" that was offered. When she arrives at the bottom she is met by three faeries who are, according to Burton's description, blonde and exceedingly lovely. They "kiss and caress" her, and lead her to a house under the rubbish, where a king dwells. Personally I'm hoping for Oscar the Grouch, but I'm sure to be disappointed. She combs and braids the faeries' hair and is asked what she finds after. She answers that there is a mixture of nits, lice, pearls and garnets. They are pleased and give her a tour of the palace.

The luxuries described are weird, to a modern reader, but tell us a little about what impressed nobles at the time, so the materials may suit magic items. There are Turkish carpets, engraved desks, leather covered caskets with brass corners, walnut tables so bright you can see your reflection in them, table covers of green fabric adorned with flowers, and high backed chairs covered in horse leather. In the wardrobe, there are clothes made with sleeves of velvet and cloth of gold, and bed covers made of damask and taffeta. There are also charms shaped like a serpent tongue or a crescent. There are also gems the shape of an ear of wheat, lilies, and feathers to wear, and garnet jewellery.

The faeries tell Cecelia to take what she likes. She's humble, so she just takes an old skirt. They then ask her by which gate she will leave, and she says she chooses the stable door. They bless her with a wand, and curse the circumstances which left her in the woods. She heads home.

On the way home she crosses paths with a young lord called Cuosimo. He offers to marry her and has a word with her stepmother, offering to grant Cecelia one hundred thousand ducats. The stepmother wants to swap him over to her daughter, so she plays for time. She sends him away, saying she needs to call together her relatives to take counsel. He agrees and heads off.

The stepmother then forces Cecelia into a pickling barrel. Her plan is to pour hot water in, to kill her. Cuosimo arrives early, because he's impatient, and finds the stepdaughter in Cecelia's clothes,. He is fooled, despite her being so disgusting the author can list negative characteristics for pages. His lands are far away, so he stops on the way home, and the first night they avoid

each other because he's disgusted. The next morning he takes her back to her stepmother's house, to just call the whole thing off. The stepmother is not home, because she's off gathering wood to boil Cecelia alive.

He declaims emphatically, and a cat answers him :"Your wife's in the cask." He grabs the fire axe and smashes the barrel open. He stands there literally stunned by her beauty for a paragraph. He then asks who put her in the barrel, not once, but six times in different ways,. Elegant variation is beginning to wear me down in the Pentamerone. Cecelia explains what a pig pickling barrel is, and how murder is afoot. He gets her to dress and hide behind the door, then rebuilds the barrel in display of practical coopering which I did not expect from a nobleman. He tricks the stepsister into the cask, saying he's having a charm made, to protect her from the evil eye. He then sneaks off with Cecelia, and they ride to Pascarola, north of Naples, where his lands are.

The stepmother returns home and murders her daughter. We'll not go into detail, save that it says she dies as if she had eaten Sardinian Grass, which we've discussed before.The mother discovers her error, and is so distressed she throws herself into a well, and breaks her neck. The moral is 'Who spitteth to heaven on his face receiveth the spittle.'

Two Brothers

Let's start with Burton's faux-Jacobean *"Marcuccio and Palmiero are brothers, one rich, and corrupt, and vicious, and the other poor, but virtuous. They meet after various vicissitudes, but the poor brother is driven away by the other ; after a time the rich brother falleth into poverty and is driven near the gibbet, but at last, recognised to be innocent, is saved by his brother, who hath become rich and a baron, and who giveth him a share of his good fortune."*

There's a merchant with two sons, and he's dying. He calls them to him and says "Marcuccio and Palmiero, I'm about to die, so I have only a little time to give you my final wisdom. Let me tell you how little time I have for a couple of paragraphs.

So, his advice is kind of basic for a last word. I thought it would be something like "The treasure is in the cave behind the rock that shines on New Year's Day", but no! His advice is

Wisdom's a treasure that can't be stolen. (three ways)

Fear Heaven (two ways)

Don't be lazy (five ways)

Be frugal. He says "By small coins is made the ducat" which seems like an early version of "Take care of the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves".

Spend as much as you can. Eat as much as you want. Drink as much as you like.

People with money are good – people without money are bad (hobgoblins and asses). Suck up to the rich. This is where "Sleep with dogs, arise with fleas" comes from. It's also the source of that ableist saw about not having friends who are lame.

Don't talk much.

Be happy to have little.

Think first and act later (this is where "Don't shut the stable door once the oxen are gone" comes from, and that changes a bit to the modern version about bolting horses.) He says this a second way later.

Chew well, then swallow.

Avoid quarrels. Avoid pride. The gibbet is for fools.

Avoid redheads. This may be an antisemitism thing.

The love of the great is like flask wine: good in the morning and sour in the evening.

"Take care of a rich man become poor, of a peasant become rich, of a beggar in despair, of a petted servant, of an ignorant prince, of a mercenary judge, of a jealous woman, of a man of to-morrow, of a court flint-stone, of a beardless man, of a woman with beard, of a quiet river, of a smoky chimney, of bad neighbours, of a child that always weepeth, and of an envious man. "

The boys split up, and one is good and wise, but poor, and the other is a rake, and becomes rich. Eventually the poor brother asks the rich one for help, and is refused. He decides to kill himself by climbing the tallest available mountain and throwing himself to his death. Just before he manages it, a woman appears and catches him by the arm.

She's gorgeous, dressed in green, and has a laurel wreath in her golden hair. She says "My dude, you've studied so much! Go use the weapons you have tempered. Let me say it again in three different ways! Virtue is a compass! Also, I'm Virtue, and you seem to be blaming me for your problems, so Heaven sent you here so I could tell you to suck it up and stop cursing my name. Shake it off, you big baby. I'm awesome!" She then gives him a packet of powder and sends him to a particular town, Campo-largo. Oddly it says he knows her for Virtue by the "point of her nose". He tries to kiss her feet, but she disappears, because that's not her kink. He slides down the Mountain with the Strong-Willed Virtue.

She can, apparently, grant most of the personal Virtues, but only turns up when Heaven decrees.

In the town, there's a princess on her deathbed. Marcuccio says "I can cure her if you like." The king is happy to let him try. Let's take a quote:

"[He] brought him to the chamber of the princess, where he found that unhappy damsel lying in a perforated bed, so much consumed and grown so thin, that she was only skin and bones : the eyes were so deeply sunken in their orbits, that one would have needed Galileo's glasses to see the eye-balls, the nose was so sharply defined that it might have usurped the office of the supposed form, the cheeks were so thin and drawn that she seemed like the death of Sorrento, the under-lip fell back upon her chin, the breast was flat down like unto the breast of a magpie, the arms were like the shin-bone of a lamb, bared of the flesh ; in brief she was a transformed being, who with the cup of pity drank a toast to compassion."

To explain part of that the Death of Sorrento was a festival until 1799. "A morte 'e Surriento" basically involved a pair of carts, each with a big puppet on the front. At midnight they head for the town gate, where they are slain by Death, and then people party on with the stuff in the carts. I think it was for the end of Lent.

Marcuccio feeds her the powder in a slightly warmed egg. She recovers in a way that makes sense in terms of the theory of humors. Let's take the quote:

"But Night had not yet entered port and set up her tent, when the sick damsel called her handmaidens, and bade them change her bed, which was soaked in sweat, and when they had changed her, she felt refreshed, a thing that in seven years of infirmity had never happened, and she sought somewhat of food ; so that they had fair hopes, and they gave her something to sip. Thus every hour she gained strength, and every day her appetite increased, and not a week went by without she recovered, and her health returned, and she left her bed.

Seeing this, the king thought Marcuccio the god of leechcraft, and he endowed him with lands and fiefs, and made him a baron, and prime minister of his court, and married him to a lady the wealthiest in that country…". Note he doesn't marry the princess.

Meanwhile, the black sheep of the family has fallen on hard times. He's on the run from his problems, but they get progressively worse until he arrives in Campo-largo penniless and ragged. It's raining, so he breaks into an abandoned shack out of town. Palmeiro takes off his stockings, makes a noose and tries to hang himself. The beam is rotten, so he falls and bruises his ribs on the pile of stones he was using as a kickstool.

When the beam breaks, a thief cache is revealed. There are chains, necklaces and rings, as well as a wallet of gold ducats. He is suddenly happy, and he heads for a tavern. In terrible luck, the thieves had stolen these items from this very innkeeper! What are the odds? The tavernkeeper sees the wallet and has the other guys in the inn hold Palmeiro while he calls the watch. He is searched and he's carrying a ton of stolen jewellery, so… it's the gibbet for him. He appeals to a higher judge who happens to be his brother, and then Marcuccio is stuck on a dilemma, because he's caught between the demands of justice and the ties of blood.

As Palmerio is being led to the gibbet, a sprinting doorkeeper arrives and says "You'll never believe this! The two thieves went back to their stash. Since it was missing, they accused each other of treachery, stabbed each other, and then confessed their sins deathbed-style!". Marcuccio explains who he is and says "Hey! If you know what virtue and vice are now, come to my house and I'll share my stuff."

The motto is "Virtue alone makes men blessed."

Cordiphagi

This week, two poems linked by the theme of hearts eaten away. I was going to save this for Halloween, but I'm sure something else will appear. The first was recorded for Librivox by Devorah Allen, and could be reskinned from the Miser's Pot in Realms of Power: Infernal. Stats eventually.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also
by George MacDonald

The miser lay on his lonely bed;
Life's candle was burning dim.
His heart in an iron chest was hid
Under heaps of gold and an iron lid;
And whether it were alive or dead
It never troubled him.
Slowly out of his body he crept.
He said, "I am just the same!
Only I want my heart in my breast;
I will go and fetch it out of my chest!"
Through the dark a darker shadow he leapt,
Saying "Hell is a fabled flame!"
He opened the lid. Oh, Hell's own night!
His ghost-eyes saw no gold!—
Empty and swept! Not a gleam was there!
In goes his hand, but the chest is bare!
Ghost-fingers, aha! have only might
To close, not to clasp and hold!
But his heart he saw, and he made a clutch
At the fungous puff-ball of sin:
Eaten with moths, and fretted with rust,
He grasped a handful of rotten dust,
And shrieked, as ghosts may, at the crumbling touch,
But hid it his breast within.
And some there are who see him sit
Under the church, apart,
Counting out coins and coins of gold
Heap by heap on the dank death-mould:
Alas poor ghost and his sore lack of wit—
They breed in the dust of his heart!
Another miser has now his chest,
And it hoards wealth more and more;
Like ferrets his hands go in and out,
Burrowing, tossing the gold about—
Nor heed the heart that, gone from his breast,
Is the cold heap's bloodless core.
Now wherein differ old ghosts that sit
Counting ghost-coins all day
From the man who clings with spirit prone
To whatever can never be his own?
Who will leave the world with not one whit
But a heart all eaten away?

The second poem contains a ghoul variant, so its core stats are in Realms of Power: Faerie.

It is read by Allan Davis Drake. He was a fantastic reader, and one of the early Voxers. His contributor note says he passed away eleven years ago, so he and I didn't overlap by much. I have not followed his material, but he has 655 sections in the database, so I'll be looking through them for other pieces that are a little spooky.

In the Desert
by Stephen Crane

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;

"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."

An example of life-powered spontaneous magic from Edna St Vincent Millay

In *The Ballad of the Harp Weaver*, we see a magic item which uses, what in Ars Magica terms is, Drudic magic that allows you to spend life energy instead of vis. This sort of blood magic is also sometimes practiced by Cthonic magicians, but here we just see Fatigue and Wounds poured out to make a Creo spell instant.

The recording we're listening to is by Kristen Hughes, and was published through Librivox.

The ballad of the harp weaver
by Edna St Vincent Milay

"Son," said my mother,
When I was knee-high,
"You've need of clothes to cover you,
And not a rag have I.

"There's nothing in the house
To make a boy breeches,
Nor shears to cut a cloth with
Nor thread to take stitches.

"There's nothing in the house
But a loaf-end of rye,
And a harp with a woman's head
Nobody will buy,"
And she began to cry.

That was in the early fall.
When came the late fall,
"Son," she said, "the sight of you
Makes your mother's blood crawl,—

"Little skinny shoulder-blades
Sticking through your clothes!
And where you'll get a jacket from
God above knows.

"It's lucky for me, lad,
Your daddy's in the ground,
And can't see the way I let
His son go around!"
And she made a queer sound.

That was in the late fall.
When the winter came,
I'd not a pair of breeches
Nor a shirt to my name.

I couldn't go to school,
Or out of doors to play.
And all the other little boys
Passed our way.

"Son," said my mother,
"Come, climb into my lap,
And I'll chafe your little bones
While you take a nap."

And, oh, but we were silly
For half an hour or more,
Me with my long legs
Dragging on the floor,

A-rock-rock-rocking
To a mother-goose rhyme!
Oh, but we were happy
For half an hour's time!

But there was I, a great boy,
And what would folks say
To hear my mother singing me
To sleep all day,
In such a daft way?

Men say the winter
Was bad that year;
Fuel was scarce,
And food was dear.

A wind with a wolf's head
Howled about our door,
And we burned up the chairs
And sat on the floor.

All that was left us
Was a chair we couldn't break,
And the harp with a woman's head
Nobody would take,
For song or pity's sake.

The night before Christmas
I cried with the cold,
I cried myself to sleep
Like a two-year-old.

And in the deep night
I felt my mother rise,
And stare down upon me
With love in her eyes.

I saw my mother sitting
On the one good chair,
A light falling on her
From I couldn't tell where,

Looking nineteen,
And not a day older,
And the harp with a woman's head
Leaned against her shoulder.

Her thin fingers, moving
In the thin, tall strings,
Were weav-weav-weaving
Wonderful things.

Many bright threads,
From where I couldn't see,
Were running through the harp-strings
Rapidly,

And gold threads whistling
Through my mother's hand.
I saw the web grow,
And the pattern expand.

She wove a child's jacket,
And when it was done
She laid it on the floor
And wove another one.

She wove a red cloak
So regal to see,
"She's made it for a king's son,"
I said, "and not for me."
But I knew it was for me.

She wove a pair of breeches
Quicker than that!
She wove a pair of boots
And a little cocked hat.

She wove a pair of mittens,
She wove a little blouse,
She wove all night
In the still, cold house.

She sang as she worked,
And the harp-strings spoke;
Her voice never faltered,
And the thread never broke.
And when I awoke,—

There sat my mother
With the harp against her shoulder
Looking nineteen
And not a day older,

A smile about her lips,
And a light about her head,
And her hands in the harp-strings
Frozen dead.

And piled up beside her
And toppling to the skies,
Were the clothes of a king's son,
Just my size.

An Apology For the Bottle Volcanic

by Vachel Lindsay

A quick poem to start festive week in 2021.

Thanks to the Librivox production team.

Sometimes I dip my pen and find the bottle full of fire,
The salamanders flying forth I cannot but admire.
It's Etna, or Vesuvius, if those big things were small,
And then 'tis but itself again, and does not smoke at all.
And so my blood grows cold. I say, "The bottle held but ink,
And, if you thought it otherwise, the worser for your think."
And then, just as I throw my scribbled paper on the floor,
The bottle says, "Fe, fi, fo, fum," and steams and shouts some more.
O sad deceiving ink, as bad as liquor in its way—
All demons of a bottle size have pranced from you to-day,
And seized my pen for hobby-horse as witches ride a broom,
And left a trail of brimstone words and blots and gobs of gloom.
And yet when I am extra good and say my prayers at night,
And mind my ma, and do the chores, and speak to folks polite,
My bottle spreads a rainbow-mist, and from the vapor fine
Ten thousand troops from fairyland come riding in a line.
I've seen them on their chargers race around my study chair,
They opened wide the window and rode forth upon the air.
The army widened as it went, and into myriads grew,
O how the lances shimmered, how the silvery trumpets blew!

False, but Beautiful

by John Rollin Ridge

Another avatar of our old friend the Infernal Saint of Sorrow. Thanks to Winston Tharp for the recording.

Dark as a demon's dream is one I love—
In soul—but oh, how beautiful in form!
She glows like Venus throned in joy above,
Or on the crimson couch of Evening warm
Reposing her sweet limbs, her heaving breast
Unveiled to him who lights the golden west!
Ah, me, to be by that soft hand carest,
To feel the twining of that snowy arm,
To drink that sigh with richest love opprest,
To bathe within that sunny sea of smiles,
To wander in that wilderness of wiles
And blissful blandishments—it is to thrill
With subtle poison, and to feel the will
Grow weak in that which all the veins doth fill.
Fair sorceress! I know she spreads a net
The strong, the just, the brave to snare; and yet
My soul cannot, for its own sake, forget
The fascinating glance which flings its chain
Around my quivering heart and throbbing brain,
And binds me to my painful destiny,
As bird, that soars no more on high,
Hangs trembling on the serpent's doomful eye.

Ines de las Sierras

by Theophile Gautier

A quick little ghost story for this time. This poem mentions “Nodier” and he’s one of the authors we will be dabbling with next year. Charles Nodier’s Infernaliana was one of the earliest French collections of vampire stories. The poem below was released through Librviox. Thanks to Alan Mapstone, and the production team.

In Spain, as Nodier’s pen has told,
Three officers in night’s mid hours
Came on a castle dark and old,
With sunken eaves and mouldering towers,

A true Anne Radcliffe type it was,
With ruined halls and crumbling rooms
And windows graven by the claws
Of Goya’s bats that ranged the glooms.

Now while they feasted, gazed upon
By ancient portraits standing guard
In their ancestral frames, anon
A sudden cry rang thitherward.

Forth from a distant corridor
That many a moonbeam’s pallid hue
Fretted fantastically o’er,
A wondrous phantom sped in view.

With bodice high and hair comb-tipped,
A woman, running, dancing, hied.
Adown the dappled gloom she dipped,—
An iridescent form descried.

A languid, dead, voluptuous mood
Filled every act’s abandon brief,
Till at the door she stopped, and stood
Sinister, lovely past belief.

Her raiment crumpled in the tomb
Showed here and there a spangle’s foil.
At every start a faded bloom
Dropped petals in her hair’s black coil.

A dull scar crossed her bloodless throat,
As of a knife. Like rattle chill
Of teeth, her castanets she smote
Full in their faces awed and still.

Ah, poor bacchante, sad of grace!
So wild the sweetness of her spell,
The curvèd lips in her white face
Had lured a saint from heaven to hell!

Like darkling birds her eyelashes
Upon her cheek lay fluttering light.
Her kirtle’s swinging cadences
Displayed her limbs of lustrous white.

She bowed amid a mist of gyres,
And with her hand, as dancers may,
Like flowers she gathered up desires,
And grouped them in a bright bouquet.

Was it a wraith or woman seen,
A thing of dreams, or blood and flesh,
The flame that burst from out the sheen
Of beauty’s undulating mesh?

It was a phantom of the past,
It was the Spain of olden keep,
Who, at the sound of cheer at last,
Upbounded from her icy sleep,

In one bolero mad, supreme,
Rough-resurrected, powerful,
Showing beneath her kirtle’s gleam
The ribbon wrested from the bull.

About her throat the scar of red
The deathblow was, dealt silently
Unto a generation dead
By every new-born century.

I saw this self-same phantom fleet,
All Paris ringing with her praise,
When soft, diaphanous, mystic, sweet,
La Petra Camara held its gaze,—

Closing her eyes with languor rare,
Impassive, passionate of art,
And, like the murdered Ines fair,
Dancing, a dagger in her heart.

The Tavern by Willa Cather

Taking this poem literally, there's a woman here with a regio inside herself, and the things people do in there affect her personality traits. I love this as an idea for a non-player character, and it seems similar to the Dream Magic rules we have for people who are turned into memories.

Thanks to Andrew Gaunce and Librivox for this recording.

In the tavern of my heart
Many a one has sat before,
Drunk red wine and sung a stave,
And, departing, come no more.
When the night was cold without,
And the ravens croaked of storm,
They have sat them at my hearth,
Telling me my house was warm.
As the lute and cup went round,
They have rhymed me well in lay;—
When the hunt was on at morn,
Each, departing, went his way.
On the walls, in compliment,
Some would scrawl a verse or two,
Some have hung a willow branch,
Or a wreath of corn-flowers blue.
Ah! my friend, when thou dost go,
Leave no wreath of flowers for me;
Not pale daffodils nor rue,
Violets nor rosemary.
Spill the wine upon the lamps,
Tread the fire, and bar the door;
So despoil the wretched place,
None will come forevermore.

Two Old Bachelors by Edward Lear

Thanks to Craig Franklin for the read, and his Librivox production team.

Two old Bachelors were living in one house;
One caught a Muffin, the other caught a Mouse.
Said he who caught the Muffin to him who caught the Mouse,–
‘This happens just in time! For we’ve nothing in the house,
‘Save a tiny slice of lemon nd a teaspoonful of honey,
‘And what to do for dinner — since we haven’t any money?
‘And what can we expect if we haven’t any dinner,
‘But to loose our teeth and eyelashes and keep on growing thinner?’

Said he who caught the Mouse to him who caught the Muffin,–
‘We might cook this little Mouse, if we had only some Stuffin’!
‘If we had but Sage andOnion we could do extremely well,
‘But how to get that Stuffin’ it is difficult to tell’–

Those two old Bachelors ran quickly to the town
And asked for Sage and Onions as they wandered up and down;
They borrowed two large Onions, but no Sage was to be found
In the Shops, or in the Market, or in all the Gardens round.

But some one said, — ‘A hill there is, a little to the north,
‘And to its purpledicular top a narrow way leads forth;–
‘And there among the rugged rocks abides an ancient Sage,–
‘An earnest Man, who reads all day a most perplexing page.
‘Climb up, and seize him by the toes! — all studious as he sits,–
‘And pull him down, — and chop him into endless little bits!
‘Then mix him with your Onion, (cut up likewise into Scraps,)–
‘When your Stuffin’ will be ready — and very good: perhaps.’

Those two old Bachelors without loss of time
The nearly purpledicular crags at once began to climb;
And at the top, among the rocks, all seated in a nook,
They saw that Sage, a reading of a most enormous book.

‘You earnest Sage!’ aloud they cried, ‘your book you’ve read enough in!–
‘We wish to chop you into bits to mix you into Stuffin’!’–

But that old Sage looked calmly up, and with his awful book,
At those two Bachelors’ bald heads a certain aim he took;–
and over crag and precipice they rolled promiscuous down,–
At once they rolled, and never stopped in lane or field or town,–
And when they reached their house, they found (besides their want of Stuffin’,)
The Mouse had fled; — and, previously, had eaten up the Muffin.

They left their home in silence by the once convivial door.
And from that hour those Bachelors were never heard of more.

An oddly bibliophilic ghost from “Bone to His Bone” by E G Swain.

E.G. Swain wrote a series of ghost stories set in a fictional parish called Stoneground, in England. He was a colleague of M.R. James’s, and one of the attendees of the fireside readings which have been collected as his complete works. The following story has a poltergeist in a library, which communicates through its texts. For this to work, the ghost must form and index of the books. It either needs know what is written at the start of all of the pages, or it needs to only have a few phrases of significance, and to have remembered their locations.

Statistics eventually.. Thanks to Colleen McMahon and her production team at LibriVox.

William Whitehead, Fellow of Emmanuel College, in the University of Cambridge, became Vicar of Stoneground in the year 1731. The annals of his incumbency were doubtless short and simple: they have not survived. In his day were no newspapers to collect gossip, no Parish Magazines to record the simple events of parochial life. One event, however, of greater moment then than now, is recorded in two places. Vicar Whitehead failed in health after 23 years of work, and journeyed to Bath in what his monument calls “the vain hope of being restored.” The duration of his visit is unknown; it is reasonable to suppose that he made his journey in the summer, it is certain that by the month of November his physician told him to lay aside all hope of recovery.

Then it was that the thoughts of the patient turned to the comfortable straggling vicarage he had left at Stoneground, in which he had hoped to end his days. He prayed that his successor might be as happy there as he had been himself. Setting his affairs in order, as became one who had but a short time to live, he executed a will, bequeathing to the Vicars of Stoneground, for ever, the close of ground he had recently purchased because it lay next the vicarage garden. And by a codicil, he added to the bequest his library of books. Within a few days, William Whitehead was gathered to his fathers.

A mural tablet in the north aisle of the church, records, in Latin, his services and his bequests, his two marriages, and his fruitless journey to Bath. The house he loved, but never again saw, was taken down 40 years later, and re-built by Vicar James Devie. The garden, with Vicar Whitehead’s “close of ground” and other adjacent lands, was opened out and planted, somewhat before 1850, by Vicar Robert Towerson. The aspect of everything has changed. But in a convenient chamber on the first floor of the present vicarage the library of Vicar Whitehead stands very much as he used it and loved it, and as he bequeathed it to his successors “for ever.”

The books there are arranged as he arranged and ticketed them. Little slips of paper, sometimes bearing interesting fragments of writing, still mark his places. His marginal comments still give life to pages from which all other interest has faded, and he would have but a dull imagination who could sit in the chamber amidst these books without ever being carried back 180 years into the past, to the time when the newest of them left the printer’s hands.

Of those into whose possession the books have come, some have doubtless loved them more, and some less; some, perhaps, have left them severely alone. But neither those who loved them, nor those who loved them not, have lost them, and they passed, some century and a half after William Whitehead’s death, into the hands of Mr. Batchel, who loved them as a father loves his children. He lived alone, and had few domestic cares to distract his mind. He was able, therefore, to enjoy to the full what Vicar Whitehead had enjoyed so long before him. During many a long summer evening would he sit poring over long-forgotten books; and since the chamber, otherwise called the library, faced the south, he could also spend sunny winter mornings there without discomfort. Writing at a small table, or reading as he stood at a tall desk, he would browse amongst the books like an ox in a pleasant pasture.

There were other times also, at which Mr. Batchel would use the books. Not being a sound sleeper (for book-loving men seldom are), he elected to use as a bedroom one of the two chambers which opened at either side into the library. The arrangement enabled him to beguile many a sleepless hour amongst the books, and in view of these nocturnal visits he kept a candle standing in a sconce above the desk, and matches always ready to his hand.

There was one disadvantage in this close proximity of his bed to the library. Owing, apparently, to some defect in the fittings of the room, which, having no mechanical tastes, Mr. Batchel had never investigated, there could be heard, in the stillness of the night, exactly such sounds as might arise from a person moving about amongst the books. Visitors using the other adjacent room would often remark at breakfast, that they had heard their host in the library at one or two o’clock in the morning, when, in fact, he had not left his bed. Invariably Mr. Batchel allowed them to suppose that he had been where they thought him. He disliked idle controversy, and was unwilling to afford an opening for supernatural talk. Knowing well enough the sounds by which his guests had been deceived, he wanted no other explanation of them than

his own, though it was of too vague a character to count as an explanation. He conjectured that the window-sashes, or the doors, or “something,” were defective, and was too phlegmatic and too unpractical to make any investigation. The matter gave him no concern.

Persons whose sleep is uncertain are apt to have their worst nights when they would like their best. The consciousness of a special need for rest seems to bring enough mental disturbance to forbid it. So on Christmas Eve, in the year 1907, Mr. Batchel, who would have liked to sleep well, in view of the labours of Christmas Day, lay hopelessly wide awake. He exhausted all the known devices for courting sleep, and, at the end, found himself wider awake than ever. A brilliant moon shone into his room, for he hated window-blinds. There was a light wind blowing, and the sounds in the library were more than usually suggestive of a person moving about. He almost determined to have the sashes “seen to,” although he could seldom be induced to have anything “seen to.” He disliked changes, even for the better, and would submit to great inconvenience rather than have things altered with which he had become familiar.

As he revolved these matters in his mind, he heard the clocks strike the hour of midnight, and having now lost all hope of falling asleep, he rose from his bed, got into a large dressing gown which hung in readiness for such occasions, and passed into the library, with the intention of reading himself sleepy, if he could.

The moon, by this time, had passed out of the south, and the library seemed all the darker by contrast with the moonlit chamber he had left. He could see nothing but two blue-grey rectangles formed by the windows against the sky, the furniture of the room being altogether invisible. Groping along to where the table stood, Mr. Batchel felt over its surface for the matches which usually lay there; he found, however, that the table was cleared of everything. He raised his right hand, therefore, in order to feel his way to a shelf where the matches were sometimes mislaid, and at that moment, whilst his hand was in mid-air, the matchbox was gently put into it!

Such an incident could hardly fail to disturb even a phlegmatic person, and Mr. Batchel cried “Who’s this?” somewhat nervously. There was no answer. He struck a match, looked hastily round the room, and found it empty, as usual. There was everything, that is to say, that he was accustomed to see, but no other person than himself.

It is not quite accurate, however, to say that everything was in its usual state. Upon the tall desk lay a quarto volume that he had certainly not placed there. It was his quite invariable practice to replace his books upon the shelves after using them, and what we may call his library habits were precise and methodical. A book out of place like this was not only an offence against good order, but a sign that his privacy had been intruded upon. With some surprise, therefore, he lit the candle standing ready in the sconce, and proceeded to examine the book, not sorry, in the disturbed condition in which he was, to have an occupation found for him.

The book proved to be one with which he was unfamiliar, and this made it certain that some other hand than his had removed it from its place. Its title was “The Compleat Gard’ner” of M. de la Quintinye made English by John Evelyn Esquire. It was not a work in which Mr. Batchel felt any great interest. It consisted of divers reflections on various parts of husbandry, doubtless entertaining enough, but too deliberate and discursive for practical purposes. He had certainly never used the book, and growing restless now in mind, said to himself that some boy having the freedom of the house, had taken it down from its place in the hope of finding pictures.

But even whilst he made this explanation he felt its weakness. To begin with, the desk was too high for a boy. The improbability that any boy would place a book there was equalled by the improbability that he would leave it there. To discover its uninviting character would be the work only of a moment, and no boy would have brought it so far from its shelf.

Mr. Batchel had, however, come to read, and habit was too strong with him to be wholly set aside. Leaving “The Compleat Gard’ner” on the desk, he turned round to the shelves to find some more congenial reading.

Hardly had he done this when he was startled by a sharp rap upon the desk behind him, followed by a rustling of paper. He turned quickly about and saw the quarto lying open. In obedience to the instinct of the moment, he at once sought a natural cause for what he saw. Only a wind, and that of the strongest, could have opened the book, and laid back its heavy cover; and though he accepted, for a brief moment, that explanation, he was too candid to retain it longer. The wind out of doors was very light. The window sash was closed and latched, and, to decide the matter finally, the book had its back, and not its edges, turned towards the only quarter from which a wind could strike.

Mr. Batchel approached the desk again and stood over the book. With increasing perturbation of mind (for he still thought of the matchbox) he looked upon the open page. Without much reason beyond that he felt constrained to do something, he read the words of the half completed sentence at the turn of the page—

“at dead of night he left the house and passed into the solitude of the garden.”

But he read no more, nor did he give himself the trouble of discovering whose midnight wandering was being described, although the habit was singularly like one of his own. He was in no condition for reading, and turning his back upon the volume he slowly paced the length of

the chamber, “wondering at that which had come to pass.”

He reached the opposite end of the chamber and was in the act of turning, when again he heard the rustling of paper, and by the time he had faced round, saw the leaves of the book again turning over. In a moment the volume lay at rest, open in another place, and there was no further movement as he approached it. To make sure that he had not been deceived, he read again the words as they entered the page. The author was following a not uncommon practise of the time, and throwing common speech into forms suggested by Holy Writ: “So dig,” it said, “that ye may obtain.”

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The words were, “to the North, an Ilex.” These three passages, in which he saw no meaning and no connection, began to entangle themselves together in Mr. Batchel’s mind. He found himself repeating them in different orders, now beginning with one, and now with another. Any further attempt at reading he felt to be impossible, and he was in no mind for any more experiences of the unaccountable. Sleep was, of course, further from him than ever, if that were conceivable. What he did, therefore, was to blow out the candle, to return to his moonlit bedroom, and put on more clothing, and then to pass downstairs with the object of going out of doors.

It was not unusual with Mr. Batchel to walk about his garden at night-time. This form of exercise had often, after a wakeful hour, sent him back to his bed refreshed and ready for sleep. The convenient access to the garden at such times lay through his study, whose French windows opened on to a short flight of steps, and upon these he now paused for a moment to admire the snow-like appearance of the lawns, bathed as they were in the moonlight. As he paused, he heard the city clocks strike the half-hour after midnight, and he could not forbear repeating aloud

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It was solitary enough. At intervals the screech of an owl, and now and then the noise of a train, seemed to emphasise the solitude by drawing attention to it and then leaving it in possession of the night. Mr. Batchel found himself wondering and conjecturing what Vicar Whitehead, who had acquired the close of land to secure quiet and privacy for garden, would have thought of the railways to the west and north. He turned his face northwards, whence a whistle had just sounded, and saw a tree beautifully outlined against the sky. His breath caught at the sight. Not because the tree was unfamiliar. Mr. Batchel knew all his trees. But what he had seen was “to the north, an Ilex.”

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He did not pass it. A small discovery, as he reached it, annoyed and disturbed him. His gardener, as careful and punctilious as himself, never failed to house all his tools at the end of a day’s work. Yet there, under the Ilex, standing upright in moonlight brilliant enough to cast a shadow of it, was a spade.

Mr. Batchel’s second thought was one of relief. After his extraordinary experiences in the library (he hardly knew now whether they had been real or not) something quite commonplace would act sedatively, and he determined to carry the spade to the tool-house.

The soil was quite dry, and the surface even a little frozen, so Mr. Batchel left the path, walked up to the spade, and would have drawn it towards him. But it was as if he had made the attempt upon the trunk of the Ilex itself. The spade would not be moved. Then, first with one hand, and then with both, he tried to raise it, and still it stood firm. Mr. Batchel, of course, attributed this to the frost, slight as it was. Wondering at the spade’s being there, and annoyed at its being frozen, he was about to leave it and continue his walk, when the remaining words of the “Compleat Gard’ner” seemed rather to utter themselves, than to await his will—

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Four spadefuls of earth he then raised and spread out before him in the moonlight. There was nothing unusual to be seen. Nor did Mr. Batchel decide what he would look for, whether coins, jewels, documents in canisters, or weapons. In point of fact, he dug against what he deemed his better judgment, and expected nothing. He spread before him the fifth and last spadeful of earth, not

quite without result, but with no result that was at all sensational. The earth contained a bone. Mr. Batchel's knowledge of anatomy was sufficient to show him that it was a human bone. He identified it, even by moonlight, as the radius, a bone of the forearm, as he removed the earth from it, with his thumb.

Such a discovery might be thought worthy of more than the very ordinary interest Mr. Batchel showed. As a matter of fact, the presence of a human bone was easily to be accounted for. Recent excavations within the church had caused the upturning of numberless bones, which had been collected and reverently buried. But an earth-stained bone is also easily overlooked, and this radius had obviously found its way into the garden with some of the earth brought out of the church.

Mr. Batchel was glad, rather than regretful at this termination to his adventure. He was once more provided with something to do. The re-interment of such bones as this had been his constant care, and he decided at once to restore the bone to consecrated earth. The time seemed opportune. The eyes of the curious were closed in sleep, he himself was still alert and wakeful. The spade remained by his side and the bone in his hand. So he betook himself, there and then, to the churchyard. By the still generous light of the moon, he found a place where the earth yielded to his spade, and within a few minutes the bone was laid decently to earth, some 18 inches deep.

The city clocks struck one as he finished. The whole world seemed asleep, and Mr. Batchel slowly returned to the garden with his spade. As he hung it in its accustomed place he felt stealing over him the welcome desire to sleep. He walked quietly on to the house and ascended to his room. It was now dark: the moon had passed on and left the room in shadow. He lit a candle, and before undressing passed into the library. He had an irresistible curiosity to see the passages in John Evelyn's book which had so strangely adapted themselves to the events of the past hour.

In the library a last surprise awaited him. The desk upon which the book had lain was empty. "The Compleat Gard'ner" stood in its place on the shelf. And then Mr. Batchel knew that he had handled a bone of William Whitehead, and that in response to his own entreaty.

Black spirits and white - The Succubus

A missed transcript. This is a cutdown of a story from *Black Spirits and White.* Thanks to the Librivox team! Statistics eventually.

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The last room fell to me, and I looked it over carefully.

It seemed innocent enough, a commonplace, square, rather lofty Parisian sleeping-room, finished in wood painted white, with a small marble mantel, a dusty floor of inlaid maple and cherry, walls hung with an ordinary French paper, apparently quite new, and two deeply embrasured windows looking out on the court.

I opened the swinging sash with some trouble, and sat down in the window seat with my lantern beside me trained on the only door, which gave on the corridor.

The wind had gone down, and it was very still without,—still and hot. The masses of luminous vapor were gathering thickly overhead, no longer urged by the gusty wind. The great masses of rank wisteria leaves, with here and there a second blossoming of purple flowers, hung dead over the window in the sluggish air. Across the roofs I could hear the sound of a belated fiacre in the streets below. I filled my pipe again and waited.

For a time the voices of the men in the other rooms were a companionship, and at first I shouted to them now and then, but my voice echoed rather unpleasantly through the long corridors, and had a suggestive way of reverberating around the left wing beside me, and coming out at a broken window at its extremity like the voice of another man. I soon gave up my attempts at conversation, and devoted myself to the task of keeping awake.

It was not easy; why did I eat that lettuce salad at Père Garceau's? I should have known better. It was making me irresistibly sleepy, and wakefulness was absolutely necessary. It was certainly gratifying to know that I could sleep, that my courage was by me to that extent, but in the interests of science I must keep awake. But almost never, it seemed, had sleep looked so desirable. Half a hundred times, nearly, I would doze for an instant, only to awake with a start, and find my pipe gone out. Nor did the exertion of relighting it pull me together. I struck my match mechanically, and with the first puff dropped off again. It was most vexing. I got up and walked around the room. It was most annoying. My cramped position had almost put both my legs to sleep. I could hardly stand. I felt numb, as though with cold. There was no longer any sound from the other rooms, nor from without. I sank down in my window seat. How dark it was growing! I turned up the lantern. That pipe again, how obstinately it kept going out! and my last match was gone. The lantern, too, was that going out? I lifted my hand to turn it up again. It felt like lead, and fell beside me.

Then I awoke,—absolutely. I remembered the story of "The Haunters and the Haunted." This was the Horror. I tried to rise, to cry out. My body was like lead, my tongue was paralyzed. I could hardly move my eyes. And the light was going out. There was no question about that. Darker and darker yet; little by little the pattern of the paper was swallowed up in the advancing night. A prickling numbness gathered in every nerve, my right arm slipped without feeling from my lap to my side, and I could not raise it,—it swung helpless. A thin, keen humming began in my head, like the cicadas on a hillside in September. The darkness was coming fast.

Yes, this was it. Something was subjecting me, body and mind, to slow paralysis. Physically I was already dead. If I could only hold my mind, my consciousness, I might still be safe, but could I? Could I resist the mad horror of this silence, the deepening dark, the creeping numbness? I knew that, like the man in the ghost story, my only safety lay here.

It had come at last. My body was dead, I could no longer move my eyes. They were fixed in that last look on the place where the door had been, now only a deepening of the dark.

Utter night: the last flicker of the lantern was gone. I sat and waited; my mind was still keen, but how long would it last? There was a limit even to the endurance of the utter panic of fear.

Then the end began. In the velvet blackness came two white eyes, milky, opalescent, small, far away,—awful eyes, like a dead dream. More beautiful than I can describe, the flakes of white flame moving from the perimeter inward, disappearing in the centre, like a never ending flow of opal water into a circular tunnel. I could not have moved my eyes had I possessed the power: they devoured the fearful, beautiful things that grew slowly, slowly larger, fixed on me, advancing, growing more beautiful, the white flakes of light sweeping more swiftly into the blazing vortices, the awful fascination deepening in its insane intensity as the white, vibrating eyes grew nearer, larger.

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“Eyes” by Galen Colin

from “Weird Tales” 1924

A ghost story with a cheat at the end, which could still be a great Ars Magica monster.

Statistics eventually. Thanks to Dale Grothman and his team at Librivox.

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“Happy” Bill Ransom of struggling Medical College days is now Dr. William Ransom, world renowned surgeon, and collects thousands in fat fees every year. But to this day the stare of a pair of unblinking, intense blue eyes will make him shudder. No matter what the possible fee, he will always refuse a case of optical surgery. His colleagues call it eccentricity—but I know different, for you see, there is .a story and I got it first hand. It happened near the close of our last year in school.

I didn’t usually study on Sunday evenings. A medical student who spends his days cutting up cadavers and listening to lectures on symptoms and ailments needs at least one day’s relaxation each week. But final examinations began Monday morning, and I was not sure of myself in optical anatomy. That is the reason “Happy” Bill Ransom found me in my room that drizzly and drear June night. There came a clatter at my elbow. Two tiny red lights flashed on. I turned to my door and called, “Come.” The door opened and there stood Bill.

Big handsome, blond, poor as a church mouse but carefree and happy—that was Bill. His hat was gone. His hair was unkempt and uncombed. The usually radiant face was haggard and drawn. Dark circles were beneath his eyes. He staggered like a drunken man. “For God’s sake, Jim, the eyes! Turn off that damn thing!” His voice was hoarse and broken as he begged.

He was looking at my door-knocker, a contrivance of which I was inordinately
proud. It was a perfect snow-white skull with the lower jaw hinged. Tiny electric bulbs of red glass were in the eye sockets. A touch of the button outside my door turned on the red lights and set a toy motor running. The motor in turn started the lower jaw clattering.
“What’s the matter, Bill?” I gasped as I threw off the switch. He sank into my big Morris chair and
covered his face with his hands. His body shook with a violent chill.

“Some jag!” I mumbled, half to myself.

“I’m not drunk,” he said hoarsely. “Jim—Jim—I believe I am going insane. I’ve got to tell someone. You’re the best friend I have in the world. Will you listen to me? Will you help me fight it off ? You’ve got to, Jim!

“Calm down, old son,” I said evenly, although I was beginning to get just a little shaky at Bill’s palpable terror. “Sure I’ll help you—you know that. What is it?”

“We’ve only three weeks more at the old school,” he began. “Then well be full fledged M. D.’s. And Jim, I’ve wanted a skeleton to mount for my study. I have never before wanted anything quite so badly. It has become an obsession with me. I can’t buy one. It is all I can do to earn my expenses. I have tried to trade for one—I have even been tempted to steal. Jim, I had begun
to get desperate. The days were passing and I was still as far as ever from getting my skeleton. It maddened me that the cemeteries guarded thousands of skeletons and I could not even have the smallest and most insignificant of the lot”

“Last Friday I succumbed to temptation. I determined to desecrate the home of the dead. You don’t blame me, do you ? You know what it is to want something so badly that any sacrifice is not too great.”

“Do you remember last Friday night? It was foggy and a chill was in the air. A light mist was falling—just enough to make each branch and twig along the cemetery drive moisture-laden and dripping. You couldn’t see ten feet ahead of your face. I went alone. Under my. arm was a grain bag in which to carry back the bones. A spade was my only tool, and I filched it from the caretaker’s shed. An electric flash gave all the illumination I needed.

“I was not afraid of the dead—then. A medical student seldom is. Yet, as a heritage from our ancestors, a graveyard always holds something of shuddering dread—and this was a gloomy
night. “As I slunk along the drive, the wet branches slapped me in the face. I knew what they were but I could not repress a shudder at each cold touch. I could almost see the spirits of the dead. I could almost hear their protests at this vandalism.

“I searched among the headstones, reading the inscriptions. I wanted a body that had been buried long enough for the flesh to drop from the bones. The skeleton must be that of a man of intelligence, for I wanted the skull to be beautifully moulded. That is why I chose the grave marked. The name sounded solid and dependable —-and he had been buried in 1902. The name doesn’t conjure up the image of a haunting specter, does it? But, God, why did I choose that grave?

“I began digging. Deeper and deeper I went. Every spadeful of earth taken from the grave added to my

dread. But I was desperate. Finally my spade struck something solid, Something it would not penetrate. A few more spadefuls, and I uncovered the box that held the coffin. I threw out the last of the earth—and with it went my terror.

“The wood was so badly decayed that, it would hardly support my weight. It came away easily as I pried with the broad spade. The coffin came into view, an old-fashioned casket, solidly built, but not securely fastened.

“By the radiance of my flashlight I found the catch and threw back the lid. I was standing at the head. As the cover came up I had my first view of the skeleton. All the flesh had returned to dust, but the bones were snow-white and beautifully preserved. I first saw the feet—then the leg bones—then the arched ribs. I gloated—I laughed aloud and the grave threw back the echoes.

Then the laugh froze on my lips as I looked at the skull. “I screamed with terror. Clammy sweat dripped from my brow. The spade fell crashing into the naked ribs. Jim—you’ll never believe it—two cold blue eyes stared up at me from the fleshless skull. They were glassy with hate. Unwinkingly, glaring back the light from my flash, they bored into my very soul.

“Again I screamed. Frantically I tried to climb from the pit. Three times I clawed my way to the top only to fall back among the bones. Still the eyes stared at me. They seemed to leer at my fright. The fourth attempt and I , reached the top. Flashlight, spade, sack —everything was forgotten. I fled for my very life from those eyes. They seemed to follow me. They menaced me from every side. As I sped up the street and into my room they darted venomous glances at me from every street light. I slammed the door, and still those hateful orbs were with me.

“I tried to read. Those eyes came between me and the page. I went to bed but I could not sleep. After hours of tossing I dozed fitfully. I dreamed. The eyes were those of a demon. He tortured me with red-hot irons and glared sardonically at my helplessness. Again the eyes inhabited a corpse and I was bound to it hand and foot. Gradually it decayed and I could not break my bonds. At last it was the skeleton I had dug from the grave. I struggled, bound by that terrible sense of powerlessness which paralyzes us in our dreams. Finally I awoke. Those eyes! Those horrible staring eyes! I could see them everywhere.

“Then came morning—yesterday morning. I was weary and worn, but I could not study. I went to a picture show for distraction. All I could see was the eyes of the players, blue and cold. I tried to forget them in a round of golf. The little white ball stared up at me in a glare of hate—those eyes again!

Last night I tried again to sleep. The same dream haunted me.. Jim, I must sleep, but I cannot. Help me, Jim! Talk to me—reason with me! Jim—Jim—am I going insane? Will those eves haunt
me forever ?”

Bill Avas truly in a pitiable state. It would take but little more to push him across the bridge into insanity. But before he had fairly gotten into his story I knew the sedative to administer. “Have you read the papers within the last two days?” I asked him. “I can’t read, Jim, I can’t even think.
What is news to me when those horrible eyes will not leave me in peace?”

“Listen to this,” I began, as I picked up Saturday morning’s Gazette.

“Some time during last night vandals entered Memorial Lawns and opened the grave of Robert Wiliam Sheldon, who died in 1902. Sheldon was noted during his life time as the only blind attorney in Kansas.

“The motive of the marauders is not known as they were apparently frightened away before they had completed their designs.

“The skeleton was shattered, but the skull containing the two wonderfully constructed glass eyes was strangely untouched.”

“Does that help you any?” I asked as I turned towvard Bill.

But he only gasped once and sank back into the big Morris chair. His expression of terror had given place to a look of astonishment and blessed relief.

The Wondersmith" 1924

by Fitz-James O'Brien

Fitz-James O'Brien monsters are great for Ars Magica, but he was extremely racist. In this story, for example, goes after Jews, Romani and Neopolitans, and that's just in the first four sentences. That means I can't record them for Librivox, because we have a policy of not bowdlerising the text we are recording and I'm not saying the terrible things he's written. So, here, just for GFF listeners, is a story about demonic toy soldiers plotting a robot uprising from 1859, which I've bowdlerised to take out a heap of racism. Stats eventually. The toys are probably a demonically possessed version of the ushabti statues in Realms of the Nile. I'm doing something else with the demonic eye, in a later episode.

Abigor is a demon lord who can predict the future of battles and aid commanders. It's also the name of an Australian black metal band, so when you try to research him, and you're Australian, Google tries to tell you about 90s music. I heard somewhere that the horse he rides is undead, but that its one of the originals from Eden. That's quite an idea for Ars Magica, because you can resurrect animals with Hermetic magic. A fragment of any of the first animals would be all you needed to return them to life, provided they hadn't died of old age.

I've cut out a heap of this story, remember the narrator is a terrible person going in, though.

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Few people knew what Herr Hippe's business or trade really was. That he worked at something was evident; else why the shop? Some people inclined to the belief that he was an inventor, or mechanician. His workshop was in the rear of the store, and into that sanctuary no one but himself had admission. He arrived in Golosh Street eight or ten years ago, and one fine morning, the neighbors, taking down their shutters, observed that No. 13 had got a tenant. A tall, thin, sallow-faced man stood on a ladder outside the shop-entrance, nailing up a large board, on which "Herr Hippe, Wondersmith," was painted in black letters on a yellow ground. The little theatre stood in the window, where it stood ever after, and Herr Hippe was established. But what was a Wondersmith? people asked each other. No one could reply….

A BOTTLEFUL OF SOULS

IT was a dull December evening. There was little trade doing in Golosh Street, and the shutters were up at most of the shops. Hippe's store had been closed at least an hour, and the Mino-birds and Bohemian waxwings at Mr. Pippel's had their heads tucked under their wings in their first sleep.

Herr Hippe sat in his parlor, which was lit by a pleasant wood-fire. There were no candles in the room, and the flickering blaze played fantastic tricks on the pale gray walls….On a table close to where Herr Hippe sat was placed a large square box of some dark wood, while over it was spread a casing of steel, so elaborately wrought in an open arabesque pattern that it seemed like a shining blue lace which was lightly stretched over its surface.

.The profound silence that reigned in the chamber was broken by a peculiar scratching at the panel of the door, like that which at the French court was formerly substituted for the ordinary knock, when it was necessary to demand admission to the royal apartments. Herr Hippe started, raised his head, which vibrated on his long neck like the head of a cobra when about to strike, and after a moment's silence uttered a strange guttural sound. The door unclosed, and a squat, broad-shouldered woman, with large, wild…eyes, entered softly.

"Ah! Filomel, you are come!" said the Wondersmith, sinking back in his chair. "Where are the rest of them?"

"They will be here presently," answered Madame Filomel, seating herself in an arm-chair much too narrow for a person of her proportions, and over the sides of which she bulged like a pudding.

"Have you brought the souls?" asked the Wondersmith.

"They are here," said the fortune-teller, drawing a large pot-bellied black bottle from under her cloak. "Ah! I have had such trouble with them!"

"Are they of the right brand,–wild, tearing, dark, devilish fellows? We want no essence of milk and honey, you know. None but souls bitter as hemlock or scorching as lightning will suit our purpose."

"You will see, you will see…They are ethereal demons, every one of them. They are the pick of a thousand births. Do you think that I, old midwife that I am, don't know the squall of the demon child from that of the angel child, the very moment they are delivered? Ask a musician, how he knows, even in the dark, a note struck by Thalberg from one struck by Listz!"

"I long to test them," cried the Wondersmith, rubbing his hands joyfully. "I long to see how the little devils will

behave when I give them their shapes. Ah! it will be a proud day for us when we let them loose upon the cursed…children! Then we will be once more lords of the earth, as we were in the days when the accursed things called cities did not exist, and men lived in the free woods and hunted the game of the forest. Toys indeed! Ay, ay, we will give the little dears toys! toys that all day will sleep calmly in their boxes, seemingly stiff and wooden and without life,–but at night, when the souls enter them, will arise and surround the cots of the sleeping children, and pierce their hearts with their keen, envenomed blades! Toys indeed! oh, yes! I will sell them toys!"

And the Wondersmith laughed horribly, while the snaky moustache on his upper lip writhed as if it had truly a serpent's power and could sting.

"Have you got your first batch, Herr Hippe?" asked Madame Filomel. "Are they all ready?"

"Oh, ay! they are ready," answered the Wondersmith with gusto,–opening, as he spoke, the box covered with the blue steel lace-work; "they are here."

The box contained a quantity of exquisitely carved wooden manikins of both sexes, painted with great dexterity so as to present a miniature resemblance to Nature. They were, in fact, nothing more than admirable specimens of those toys which children delight in placing in various positions on the table,–in regiments, or sitting at meals, or grouped under the stiff green trees which always accompany them in the boxes in which they are sold at the toy-shops.

The peculiarity, however, about the manikins of Herr Hippe was not alone the artistic truth with which the limbs and the features were gifted; but on the countenance of each little puppet the carver's art had wrought an expression of wickedness that was appalling. Every tiny face had its special stamp of ferocity. The lips were thin and brimful of malice; the small black bead-like eyes glittered with the fire of a universal hate. There was not one of the manikins, male or female, that did not hold in his or her hand some miniature weapon. The little men, scowling like demons, clasped in their wooden fingers swords delicate as a housewife's needle. The women, whose countenances expressed treachery and cruelty, clutched infinitesimal daggers, with which they seemed about to take some terrible vengeance.

"Good!" said Madame Filomel, taking one of the manikins out of the box, and examining it attentively; "you work well…These little ones are of the right stamp; they look as if they had mischief in them. Ah! here come our brothers."

[Other men enter, but I'm cutting this because their dress marks them as of an ethnic group group. The men drink together and there's a long speech about why his people are drunkards.]

"How does your eye get on, Kerplonne?"

"Excellently..It is finished. I have it here." And the little Frenchman put his hand into his breeches-pocket and pulled out a large artificial human eye. Its great size was the only thing in this eye that would lead any one to suspect its artificiality. It was at least twice the size of life; but there was a fearful speculative light in its iris, which seemed to expand and contract like the eye of a living being, that rendered it a horrible staring paradox. It looked like the naked eye of the Cyclops, torn from his forehead, and still burning with wrath and the desire for vengeance.

The little Frenchman laughed pleasantly as he held the eye in his hand, and gazed down on that huge dark pupil, that stared back at him, it seemed, with an air of defiance and mistrust.

"It is a devil of an eye," said the little man, wiping the enamelled surface with an old silk pocket-handkerchief; "it reads like a demon. My niece–the unhappy one–has a wretch of a lover, and I have a long time feared that she would run away with him. I could not read her correspondence, for she kept her writing-desk closely locked. But I asked her yesterday to keep this eye in some very safe place for me. She put it, as I knew she would, into her desk, and by its aid I read every one of her letters. She was to run away next Monday…but she will find herself disappointed."

And the little man laughed heartily at the success of his stratagem, and polished and fondled the great eye until that optic seemed to grow sore with rubbing.

"And you have been at work, too, I see, Herr Hippe. Your manikins are excellent. But where are the souls?"

"In that bottle," answered the Wondersmith, pointing to the pot-bellied black bottle that Madame Filomel had brought with her. "Yes, Monsieur Kerplonne," he continued, "my manikins are well made. I invoked the aid of Abigor, the demon of soldiery, and he inspired me. The little fellows will be famous assassins when they are animated. We will try them to-night."

"Good!" cried Kerplonne, rubbing his hands joyously. "It is close upon New Year's Day. We will fabricate millions of the little murderers by New Year's Even, and sell them in large quantities; and when the households are all asleep, and the…children are waiting for Santa Claus to come, the small ones will troop from their boxes and the..children will die. It is famous! Health to Abigor!"

[I'm cutting out a romantic sub-plot between his daughter and the bookseller, as it offers us nothing but a pair of potential covenfolk. The conspirators are worried they'll be seen.]

“I will take care that we are not disturbed,” said Kerplonne, rising. “I will put my eye outside the door, to watch.”

He went to the door and placed his great eye upon the floor with tender care. As he did so, a dark form, unseen by him or his second vision, glided along the passage noiselessly and was lost in the darkness.

“Now for it!” exclaimed Madam Filomel, taking up her fat black bottle. “Herr Hippe, prepare your manikins!”

The Wondersmith took the little dolls out, one by one, and set them upon the table. Such an array of villanous countenances was never seen. An army of Italian bravos, seen through the wrong end of a telescope, or a band of prisoners at the galleys in Lilliput, will give some faint idea of the appearance they presented. While Madame Filomel uncorked the black bottle, Herr Hippe covered the dolls over with a species of linen tent, which he took also from the box. This done, the fortune-teller held the mouth of the bottle to the door of the tent, gathering the loose cloth closely round the glass neck. Immediately, tiny noises were heard inside the tent. Madame Filomel removed the bottle, and the Wondersmith lifted the covering in which he had enveloped his little people.

A wonderful transformation had taken place. Wooden and inflexible no longer, the crowd of manikins were now in full motion. The beadlike eyes turned, glittering, on all sides; the thin, wicked lips quivered with bad passions; the tiny hands sheathed and unsheathed the little swords and daggers. Episodes, common to life, were taking place in every direction. Here two martial manikins paid court to a pretty sly-faced female, who smiled on each alternately, but gave her hand to be kissed to a third manikin, an ugly little scoundrel, who crouched behind her back. There a pair of friendly dolls walked arm in arm, apparently on the best terms, while, all the time, one was watching his opportunity to stab the other in the back.

“I think they’ll do,” said the Wondersmith, chuckling, as he watched these various incidents. “Treacherous, cruel, bloodthirsty. All goes marvellously well. But stay! I will put the grand test to them.”

So saying, he drew a gold dollar from his pocket, and let it fall on the table in the very midst of the throng of manikins. It had hardly touched the table, when there was a pause on all sides. Every head was turned towards the dollar. Then about twenty of the little creatures rushed towards the glittering coin. One, fleeter than the rest, leaped upon it, and drew his sword. The entire crowd of little people had now gathered round this new centre of attraction. Men and women struggled and shoved to get nearer to the piece of gold. Hardly had the first Liliputian mounted upon the treasure, when a hundred blades flashed back a defiant answer to his, and a dozen men, sword in hand, leaped upon the yellow platform and drove him off at the sword’s point. Then commenced a general battle. The miniature faces were convulsed with rage and avarice. Each furious doll tried to plunge dagger or sword into his or her neighbor, and the women seemed possessed by a thousand devils.

“They will break themselves into atoms,” cried Filomel, as she watched with eagerness this savage melee. “You had better gather them up, Herr Hippe. I will exhaust my bottle and suck all the souls back from them.”

“Oh, they are perfect devils! they are magnificent little demons!” cried the Frenchman, with enthusiasm. “Hippe, you are a wonderful man.

While Oaksmith and Kerplonne were talking, the Wondersmith had placed the linen tent over the struggling dolls, and Madame Filomel, who had been performing some mysterious manipulations with her black bottle, put the mouth once more to the door of the tent. In an instant the confused murmur within ceased. Madame Filomel corked the bottle quickly. The Wondersmith withdrew the tent, and, lo! the furious dolls were once more wooden-jointed and inflexible; and the old sinister look was again frozen on their faces.

“They must have blood, though,” said Herr Hippe, as he gathered them up and put them into their box. “Mr. Pippel, the bird-fancier, is asleep. I have a key that opens his door. We will let them loose among the birds; it will be rare fun.”

“Magnificent!” cried Kerplonne. “Let us go on the instant. But first let me gather up my eye.”

The Frenchman pocketed his eye, after having given it a polish with the silk handkerchief; Herr Hippe extinguished the lamp; Oaksmith took a last bumper of Port; and the four…departed for Mr. Pippel’s, carrying the box of manikins with them.

[Let’s skip to the uprising.]

While Solon [the bookseller] peeped through the keyhole, all in the room was motionless. He had not gazed, however, for many seconds, when the chair of the fortune-teller gave a sudden lurch, and the black bottle, already hanging half out of her wide pocket, slipped entirely from its resting-place, and, falling heavily to the ground, shivered into fragments.

Then took place an astonishing spectacle. The myriads of armed dolls, that lay in piles about the room, became suddenly imbued with motion. They stood up straight, their tiny limbs moved, their black eyes flashed with wicked purposes, their thread-like swords gleamed as they waved them to and fro. The villanous souls imprisoned in the bottle began to work within them. Like the Liliputians, when they found the giant Gulliver asleep, they scaled in swarms the burly sides of the four [sleepers]. At every step they took, they drove their thin

swords and quivering daggers into the flesh of the drunken authors of their being. To stab and kill was their mission, and they stabbed and killed with incredible fury. They clustered on the Wondersmith's sallow cheeks and sinewy throat, piercing every portion with their diminutive poisoned blades. Filomel's fat carcass was alive with them. They blackened the spare body of Monsieur Kerplonne. They covered Oaksmith's huge form like a cluster of insects.

Overcome completely with the fumes of wine, these tiny wounds did not for a few moments awaken the sleeping victims. But the swift and deadly poison…with which the weapons had been so fiendishly anointed, began to work. Herr Hippe, stung into sudden life, leaped to his feet, with a [tiny] army clinging to his clothes and his hands,–always stabbing, stabbing, stabbing. For an instant, a look of stupid bewilderment clouded his face; then the horrible truth burst upon him. He gave a shriek like that which a horse utters when he finds himself fettered and surrounded by fire,–a shriek that curdled the air for miles and miles.

"Oaksmith! Kerplonne! Filomel! Awake! awake! We are lost! The souls have got loose! We are dead! poisoned! Oh, accursed ones! Oh, demons, ye are slaying me! Ah! fiends of Hell!"

Aroused by these frightful howls, the three…sprang also to their feet, to find themselves stung to death by the manikins. They raved, they shrieked, they swore. They staggered round the chamber. Blinded in the eyes by the ever-stabbing weapons,–with the poison already burning in their veins like red-hot lead,–their forms swelling and discoloring visibly every moment,–their howls and attitudes and furious gestures made the scene look like a chamber in Hell.

Maddened beyond endurance, the Wondersmith, half-blind and choking with the venom that had congested all the blood-vessels of his body, seized dozens of the manikins and dashed them into the fire, trampling them down with his feet.

"Ye shall die too, if I die," he cried, with a roar like that of a tiger. "Ye shall burn, if I burn. I gave ye life,–I give ye death. Down!–down!–burn!–flame! Fiends that ye are, to slay us! Help me, brothers! Before we die, let us have our revenge!"

[The author here implies the creatures are destroyed when the house burns down. Given their number, that seems unlikely. This whole thing could have taken place long before the player characters become aware of a race of tiny assassins living in the forgotten spaces of the street.]

Stats eventually.

Magonomia

Are you Smiley or Bond?

Thinking about stories of spycraft in Elizabethan England, there's a question that needs to be discussed at each gaming table. Are your agents more like George Smiley or like James Bond? Either's a fine choice, ands so long as you flag it properly, players can mix these types, but it needs to be discussed. Let me unpack it.

If there were a supervillain that needed assassinating, George Smiley would find a cleaner with a drinking problem, and blackmail or bribe him into slipping sleeping pills into the guy's favourite decanter of whiskey, and then planting a suicide note in a little used book. Smiley wouldn't do it himself, either. He'd have an agent as a cutout. Smiley's deliberately dull, but absolutely meticulous in his craft. The guy's dead, and no-one knows he's been murdered, except for the cleaner. The cleaner has no idea who is responsible, and isn't a credible witness if they go to the police.

Bond would drysuit SCUBA to the man's private island, crash a party, then introduce himself with his real name. After that he'd get slightly drunk, dance the tango with the supervillain's mistress, and humiliate him over a card table. Bond might then shoot the criminal at close range with an underpowdered pistol, like his favourite Walther, or just insult him and leave. Bond's tradecraft is terrible, but he's fun to play.

What are your players expecting to do?

You see both types of spy in the Elizabethan secret services, as seen in the dichotomy between Thomas Phellips and Andrew Parry. Stephen Alford, the author of "The Watchers", makes it clear this is because, in the real world, Parry's spycraft is terrible, but for gamers, it means there's clear real-world precedent to Bond it like a madman if you want.

We don't know a vast amount about Thomas Phellips. He made sure of that. The letters of his we have are from the archives of his patrons. We know his father was a wealthy merchant class, so he had studied mathematics at University but was not loyal to a noble family. He was so skilled a cryptographer that on one occasion at least, intercepted messages were smuggled to him from England to France, where he was on a mission, to let him have a crack at them. We have vague physical descriptions from some of Walsingham's contemporaries. That's about it. A deliberately plain man, sitting at Walsingham's elbow, as they look out over the invisible chessboard. There were others like him in Walsingham's service – men skilled in numbers, listening and silence.

Andrew Parry a different sort of fellow. He claimed to be under Lord Burley's patronage, but how much that was the case is not clear. He used to throw parties among the emigrant English Catholics in Paris and Italy. He claimed this was to recruit agents, but how skilled he was at that, given that Burley was not willing to front him as much cash as he wished, is not clear. Like Bond, he makes himself the centre of the attention, tells everyone who he is, and tries to get by on money and charm. This was a pain for Elizabeth's ambassador in Paris, Lord Cobham, who was trying to run a professional espionage outfit, and had this dilettante keep turning up with reports and requests for money. I suppose Cobham, who had to keep tabs on Parry, might have used him as a distraction.

Magonomia, given its magic, tends to pull you a bit toward Bond, because it's fantastic and magic items are our equivalent of a laser watch. That being said, even Bond, with his boys-own-adventure attitude, isn't all that far from some early Twentieth Century British intelligence services. The SOE loved weird plans and did have a workshop to make spy gadgets, under Charles Fraser-Smith. They really did pay agents to sleep with the wives of foreign ambassadors to get their secrets (the author Roald Dahl, for example). They did have a stage magician on staff, helping to plan the deceptions before the D Day landings. More recently, there really was an assassin who committed murder in public using an alchemical poison on the tip of the Bulgarian umbrella. You can make a historical argument for why people like Parry thought they were doing an absolutely marvellous job.

I'd repeat you can do both with historical sources to back you. In the real world there are people like Cardinal Allen fielding agents into England, who are more in the Smiley mould, but the guy who shot William the Silent in the chest, and the men who tried the same thing with Elizabeth, were more on the Bond end of the spectrum. The key point, is that your group decide if people like Bond and Parry are ridiculous or not. Your opponents need to respond in a way that meets player expectations, so you need to deliberately state what those are.

Magonomia

Introducing Benvenuto Cellini with Alchemical terror and treasure-filled poultry

Cellini was a Florentine goldsmith who lived during Elizabeth's reign. He wrote a lengthy biography in which he confesses to serial murder and necromancy, but its the little boasts which make him particularly charming. If you're an Ars Magica player his petty pride is perfect for a Verditus magus, and if you play Magonomia, his practical alchemy is full of useful effects.

The following plot hooks aren't from his *Autobiography*, which I'm seriously thinking of turning into a column called "The FATE of Celllini" for Magonomia. They are from a little book on goldsmithing he wrote when his patron was annoyed at him, so he had no work to do. The first hook is reminiscent of my earlier episode about Playing the Ghost. The later is a source of vis, in Ars magica, or treasure, in any roleplaying game. This recording is by Rob Marland, released through Librivox. Thanks to the gang. Commentary afterward.

"Piero di Nino was a goldsmith, who worked only in filigree, an art which, while it affords great charm, is not without its difficulties. He, however, knew how to work in it better than anyone else. Inasmuch as there was great riches in those days within the town, so was it likewise in the country, especially among the peasant folk of the plain, who used to get made for their wives a sort of velvet girdle with buckle and pin, about half a cubit long and covered all over with little spangles. These buckles and pins were all wrought in filigree with great delicacy and fashioned in silver of excellent setting. When later on I shall show how these things are made, I am sure the reader will find delight in them.

I knew this Piero de Nino when an old man of near 90 years. He died partly from fear of dying of hunger, and partly from a shock he got one night. As for the dying of hunger it was this way : An edict had been issued in the city that no more belts should be worn either by peasants or others ; and the poor old fellow, who knew no other branch of goldsmithing but this, was always grieving, and cursing from the bottom of his heart all those who had a hand in making this law.

He lived near a draper's shop, where was a young rogue of an urchin, the son of one of them that had made the law. The boy, hearing him thus continually cursing his father, 'Oh, Piero,' said he, 'if you go on swearing like that, some fine day the devil will come and carry you off, bones and all !' Now one Saturday night, when the old chap had worked right up to midnight to finish some job he was engaged on that was to go to Bologna, the urchin took it into his head to play him a practical joke and give him a fright. So he stood on the watch for the old man on his way home.

The latter, as was his wont, locked up his shop, took his lantern in his hand, and, with the lap- pet of his cloak thrown over his head, trudged along ever so slowly, and as lonely as a ghost, home to his house, which stood in the via Mozza. Just as he was turning the corner of the old market the urchin, who was awaiting in ambush for him, and had tricked himself out with rag-tag, sulphur lights, blue fire, and suchlike horrible devilries, suddenly jumped out upon him. The poor old thing was so terrified at the fearful monster thus suddenly coming at him, that he lost his senses ; so much so that the boy, seeing he had played the fool, had to lead the old man home as well as he could, and consign him to the care of his grandsons, among whom was one called Meino, a courier, who afterwards became warden of Arezzo.

Suffice it, the fright had been so great, that soon after the poor old fellow died. This is usually stated as the actual cause of Piero's death, and I have myself oft times heard it narrated.

So, the devices mentioned are blue fire and sulphur lights. Let's explore those. I presume one is a cool fire created using a high proof alcohol. Sulphur lights I'll need to research and report back on.

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In his chapter on white rubies, Cellini says

"I have oft found many such in the bellies of wild fowl, so also the loveliest of turquoises. I used to be very fond of going out shooting, I made my own powder, and became such a fine shot that I should be ready to stand any test you like. I always shot with the simple ball and as for powder…it was quite different rom the powder commonly used. In this wise did I march over the Roman Campagna, at the time when the birds of passage return, and in their bellies I found stones of all sorts, turquoises, white and coloured rubies, also emeralds and every now and again a pearl. But, as I said, these white rubies are of very little use; you only know them for rubies because of their great hardness.

So, to some presumptions:

The stones in the entrails of birds are, I presume, gastroliths. These are abrasives held in the craw to help the birds mechanically process food. I'd note there's

some evidence of dinosaurs having gastroliths, and quite large ones at that, so its possible you could kill a dragon and find huge, tumbled rocks inside. I've used draconic gastroliths in my games as sharpening stones for magic weapons, and magical millstones. We've used every other bit of the dragon for treasure, why not digestive rocks? Sapphires make a lot of sense as gastroliths, because they are about as hard as you are going to find in nature. Presumably the birds have picked them up in fantastic foreign climes.

I presume the thing he's talking about here is what I'd call a white sapphire, and I'm surprised they are useless, because here, in Australia, they are used as a relatively inexpensive diamond simulant. It's not like simulants are rare in European royal jewellery: there are a lot of rubies which are actually spinels, for example.

The odd thing is his mention of the occasional pearl. Cellini knows full well pearls are an excretion of shellfish. It seems an odd inclusion. It touches a theory I'll propound next time we visit Cellini, which is that, in our games, he has the Sight but doesn't know it.

X

Magonomia

Cellni and the hailstorm

In this brief section, Cellini suffers what may be a miracle for his murders, or it may be a spell effect. Note his travelling companion tries the Miserere, which we've discussed in an earlier episode. Thanks to Joyce Martin and her team for the recording.

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We were one day distant from Lyons, and it was close upon the hour of twenty-two, when the heavens began to thunder with sharp rattling claps, although the sky was quite clear at the time. I was riding a cross-bow shot before my comrades. After the thunder the heavens made a noise so great and horrible that I thought the last day had come; so I reined in for a moment, while a shower of hail began to fall without a drop of water. A first hail was somewhat larger than pellets from a popgun, and when these struck me, they hurt considerably. Little by little it increased in size, until the stones might be compared to balls from a crossbow. My horse became restive with fright; so I wheeled round, and returned at a gallop to where I found my comrades taking refuge in a fir-wood. The hail now grew to the size of big lemons. I began to sing a Miserere; and while I was devoutly uttering this psalm to God, there fell a stone so huge that it smashed the thick branches of the pine under which I had retired for safety. Another of the hailstones hit my horse upon the head, and almost stunned him; one struck me also, but not directly, else it would have killed me. In like manner, poor old Lionardo Tedaldi, who like me was kneeling on the ground, received so shrewd a blow that he fell grovelling upon all fours. When I saw that the fir bough offered no protection, and that I ought to act as well as to intone my Misereres, I began at once to wrap my mantle round my head. At the same time I cried to Lionardo, who was shrieking for succour, "Jesus! Jesus!" that Jesus would help him if he helped himself. I had more trouble in looking after this man's safety than my own. The storm raged for some while, but at last it stopped; and we, who were pounded black and blue, scrambled as well as we could upon our horses. Pursuing the way to our lodging for the night, we showed our scratches and bruises to each other; but about a mile farther on we came upon a scene of devastation which surpassed what we had suffered, and defies description. All the trees were stripped of their leaves and shattered; the beasts in the field lay dead; many of the herdsmen had also been killed; we observed large quantities of hailstones which could not have been grasped with two hands. Feeling then that we had come well out of a great peril, we acknowledged that our prayers to God and Misereres had helped us more than we could have helped ourselves. Returning thanks to God, therefore, we entered Lyons in the course of the next day, and tarried there eight days. At the end of this time, being refreshed in strength and spirits, we resumed our journey, and passed the mountains without mishap. On the other side I bought a little pony, because the baggage which I carried had somewhat overtired my horses.

Magonomia

Cellni and the Unicorn of Dunsany

Another little episode for Christmas Week 2021. For the last year or so we've worked through The King of Elfland's Daughter by Lord Dunsany. In an odd coda, we find the unicorn horn from it turn up in the biography of Benevenuto Cellini, which is the replacement for next year. Thanks to David Lazarus and the Librivox team for the recording.

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It happened that Cardinal Salviati, who, as I have related, entertained an old hostility against me, had been appointed Legate to Parma. In that city a certain Milanese goldsmith, named Tobbia, was taken up for false coining, and condemned to the gallows and the stake. Representations in his favour, as being a man of great ability, were made to the Cardinal, who suspended the execution of the sentence, and wrote to the Pope, saying the best goldsmith in the world had come into his hands, sentenced to death for coining false money, but that he was a good simple fellow, who could plead in his excuse that he had taken counsel with his confessor, and had received, as he said, from him permission to do this. Thereto he added: "If you send for this great artist to Rome, your Holiness will bring down the overweening arrogance of your favourite Benvenuto, and I am quite certain that Tobbia's work will please you far more than his." The Pope accordingly sent for him at once; and when the man arrived, he made us both appear before him, and commissioned each of us to furnish a design for mounting an unicorn's horn, the finest which had ever been seen, and which had been sold for 17,000 ducats of the Camera. The Pope meant to give it to King Francis; but first he wished it richly set in gold, and ordered us to make sketches for this purpose. When they were finished, we took them to the Pope. That of Tobbia was in the form of a candlestick, the horn being stuck in it like a candle, and at the base of the piece he had introduced four little unicorns' heads of a very poor design. When I saw the thing, I could not refrain from laughing gently in my sleeve. The Pope noticed this, and cried: "Here, show me your sketch!" It was a single unicorn's head, proportioned in size to the horn. I had designed the finest head imaginable; for I took it partly from the horse and partly from the stag, enriching it with fantastic mane and other ornaments. Accordingly, no sooner was it seen, than every one decided in my favour. There were, however, present at the competition certain Milanese gentlemen of the first consequence, who said: "Most blessed Father, your Holiness is sending this magnificent present into France; please to reflect that the French are people of no culture, and will not understand the excellence of Benvenuto's work; pyxes like this one of Tobbia's will suit their taste well, and these too can be finished quicker. Benvenuto will devote himself to completing your chalice, and you will get two pieces done in the same time; moreover, this poor man, whom you have brought to Rome, will have the chance to be employed." The Pope, who was anxious to obtain his chalice, very willingly adopted the advice of the Milanese gentlefolk.

Magonomia

Signals intelligence in Elizabethan England

You'd be be amazed how bad tradecraft is in Elizabethan England., Seriously, some of the techniques they used are now games for children. Let's think about what they were doing, and what your character can do about it.

The basic technique of sigint that Walsingham uses is interception of mail. There's no postal system as such, instead people have mail passed by trusted couriers. These human elements are easy to suborn. For example, Mary Queen of Scots was fund guilty of treason after her letters were presented to court. Her way of getting letters out, smuggled in barrels, was completely compromised by Walsingham, whose proxies helped set it up. They let it run for ages, until they had what they considered a smoking gun. "Let the great plot commence. Mary" Walsingham also did similar things for the foreign services working in England: a heap of mail was intercepted in the Spanish Netherlands, copied, and then let flow on.

"Why not encode your letters?", you may ask. People did, but they were horrible at it. Thomas Phellepes, Walsingham's codebreaker, did some work with null characters in substitutions, and each of his agents had a separate cypher key. Walsingham has The Book of Keys, the loss of which would be a critical strike against his organisation. He imagines that a similar book exists for all of his rival services, and may dispatch agents to destroy or copy them, but this may not be accurate.

Cardinal William Allen, who is one of the leaders of the Catholic networks, gives one of his agents a key of "Deus". That is, his cypher is a straight substitution where instead of A, B, C, and D the letters are A, B, C and D, then all of the letters just fill out each line. This is childishly simple to crack: frequency analysis has been invented by now, after all. If the plaintext is in English, the DEUS cypher has the basic problem that single letters are likely A or I, and that the likeliest characters are E or T. You crack a couple of words and the whole thing falls apart. Phelleppes notes in one of his letters that the reason he was having trouble cracking a particular message was because the person writing it didn't know as much Latin as they thought they did, and their spelling was terrible. That is, the plaintext was so bad it made the cyphertext hideous.

What if we don't use a cypher? What if we use a code? The best known ones in period are book codes. In that case, the key is a particular edition of a book, and the code is a series of non-repeating locations in the book. The problem here is that the most common books in England are the approved Bible and Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which you don't want an agent in Europe to be lugging about. Similarly the big seller on the continent is the Catholic version of the Bible, and you don't want the English to catch you with one of those. Another problem with Biblical codes is that you can't directly mention many proper nouns, like place names or surnames, because they aren't in the book. You can spell them out, but it makes your message a lot longer. Swapping out the book is hard, but I was thinking the other day that if you were a Cellini fan and someone sent you the tail and claws a scorpion, you'd know it was a signal to switch to his biography.

Some of Walsingham's agents use single signal or idiot code triggers. Basically in the first case, the signal is a context message. You show a red light in a window and that means "Yes" or "Now!" or whatever the agent has been primed with in advance. This is pretty common in ships' actions. An idiot code is an activation phrase that can be hidden in another conversation. So, as an agent, your code might be "Your aunt, Lady Catherine…" and so whenever you see that, you know the next bit is an instruction. "Your aunt, Lady Catherine, has gone to Paris." for example. It has virtually no bandwidth, but I once read a book that used idiot code the whole way through and didn't spot it. At the end there was a flashback where the characters set it up.

In the game period, suddenly the French do get an "unbreakable" cypher. I'm not sure how widely the Vigenere cypher table is known, but here's how it works. You make a 26 row and column grid. The top line is the standard A-Z, the next line is B-A, the next C-B and so on. There's a graphic of it in the episode art on the blog.

You pick a keyword, then extend it to be the length of the message, then chunk the message into 5 letter batches. The first letter in the keyword gives you the row and the plaintext gives you the column, and you work the whole way through. The receiver needs to know your code, of course. This simply works, and isn't broken until the 19th Century, but its a bit finicky for some field agents. This is why even though they have this, Cardinal Richelieu uses a grille instead.

A grille, by the way, is a template that obscures all of the words on a page except the ones to be read. They don't work well in modern writing, because we believe terse sentences are glorious. Back then, language was so flowery, and even simple letters so long, that you could work in messages less obviously. This brings us to

steganography – that is, hiding the message. Tacitus, and early adopter, mentions a couple of ideas in his book on sieges. His preferred idea was to make pinpricks under letters in a book, I believe. More generally, there's so much smuggling to and from the Continent that ships decked out precisely to hide stuff in are found along much of the south coast of England.

Invisible inks do exist. The Arabs invented lemon juice ink a while back. In the Ars Magica period, badly made ink *is* invisible ink. Oak gall ink with too little iron in it is clearish, and over time etches into the parchment, becoming visible. This is why palimpsests exist. That's where parchment that's been scraped clean for reuse sometimes allows its first text to remerge. In the Magonomia period, the recipe for invisible ink that a London alchemist would know is vinegar and alum. That seems like a low-level spell.

As we close out I just want to mention one book, which is so wonderful if I put it in the setting people would think I'd made it up: Steganographia by Johannes Trithemius. It was was written in the 1490s, but was only widely published in the early 1600s. It was banned by the Church as it is, superficially, about how to send messages great distances using conjured spirits. The thing is, though, that this is all just covertext – the book is really about how cryptography, its techniques hidden under a layer of metaphysics. A separate key for the third volume, which for a long while after the first two volumes were keyed was thought to actually be about magical communication, has since been cracked, and it's even more information about cyphers. Robert Hooke, who was eventually the master of experiments for the Royal Society, reckoned he could decode Trithemian codes in John Dee's writing to Queen Elizabeth. It's a stretch, but it suits us.