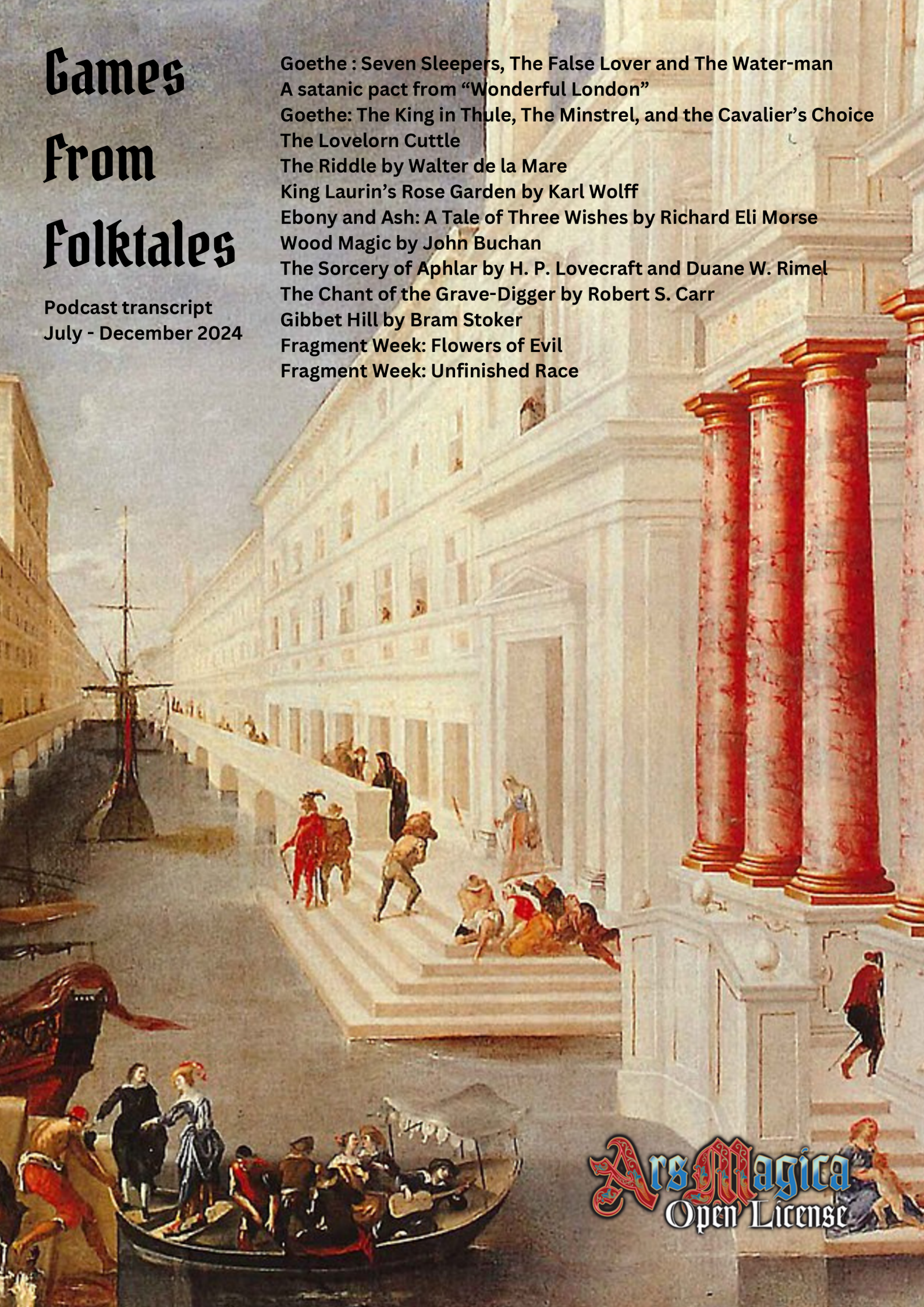


Games From Folktales

Podcast transcript
July - December 2024

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A satanic pact from “Wonderful London”

“Wonderful London” was published in 1878 and has a little fragment which is useful in roleplaying games. The anonymous narrator is talking with a late-night coffee seller about his most unusual customers, and there’s an odd little Satanic pact mentioned. Over to Peter Yearsley, from Librivox, with thanks to him and his team.

Why, there’s dozens of these unaccountable customers I could call to mind if it was worth while,’ he continued, after a short pause. ^ Just about the end of last year there used to drop in here every Friday night, as regularly as clockwork between twelve and one, an old woman — precious old to be sure she seemed— with an old-fashioned coalscuttle bonnet and a crutched stick just like that Mother Shipton has in the picture of her. I never saw a more ugly old woman, and she looked all the uglier from always coming in company with as sweet a little creature of a child, a girl of five or six years old say, as ever you set eyes on; a delicate blue-eyed little thing, with hair like yellow-floss silk, nearly all tucked away into the dark-cloth hood she wore, and with a complexion that, compared with the old woman’s, was the whitest marble against Spanish mahogany. She didn’t seem unkind to the child, but let it eat and drink what it wished for ; but the old woman herself never on any occasion ate or drank a morsel, though on every occasion of her Friday night’s visit she seemed and the child too as though they had tramped a very long way, being wet with the rain or dusty with the dust, as the weather might be. There was no fear of them taking cold, however, for they were both, and especially the little girl, well shod and as warmly clad as need be. But the puzzle to me was what two such strange companions wanted out of a night together.

At last — that was after they had paid me ten or a dozen visits — there came in a man while they were there, and as soon as he saw the old woman he looked towards me and winked in a way I didn’t understand. The old woman must have seen him wink, for all in a moment she took the little girl by her hand, and hobbled off with her as quick as her legs would move her bent old body.

“You know who that is?” the man asked me.

“No, I don’t,” said I.

“Well,” says he, ” that’s old Mother Mutch of Stepney. She’s sold herself to the devil ; but the bargain was, that when the old un wanted her he was to fetch her out of her bed at midnight, and that time to be put off as long as she could get a child who had not yet

shed its milk-teeth to be her companion. She could roll in money if she liked; and she is under a promise to leave it all to that little girl when her time comes. It is to stave off that time that she never sleeps in her bed of nights, but wanders about London from dark till daylight with the little child with her.”

Now what do you think of that?’ asked the coffee-stall keeper.

What did Mother Mutch say the next time she came ?’ I asked.

^She never came after that time when she saw the man wink, which / think looks black against her.”

Goethe: The King in Thule, The Minstrel, and the Cavalier's Choice.

Our last episode of ballads from Goethe.
Thanks again to the Librivox recorders.
Shall we start with a potential candidate
for cursed treasure?

THE KING IN THULE

A King there was in Thule,
Kept troth unto the grave
The maid he loved so truly
A goblet to him gave.
And ever set before him
At banquet was the cup
And saddening thoughts came o'er him,
Whene'er he took it up.
When Death with him had spoken,
His treasures rang'd he there,
And all, save one dear token,
He gifted to his heir.
Once more to royal wassail
His peers he summon'd all
Around were knight and vassal
Throng'd in his father's hall.
Then rose the grand old Rover,
Again the cup drain'd he,
And bravely flung it over
Into the welt'ring sea.
He saw it flashing, falling,
And settling in the main.
Heard Death unto him calling

He never drank again

THE MINSTREL

"What sounds are those I hear, along
The drawbridge sweetly stealmg ?
"Within our hall I'd have that song,
That minstrel measure, pealing."
Then forth the little foot-page hied
When he came back, the king he cried,
"Bring in the aged minstrel ! "

"Good-even to you, lordlings all
Fair ladies all, good-even.
Lo, star on star ! Within this hall
I see a radiant heaven.
In hall so bright with noble light,
'Tis not for thee to feast thy sight.
Old man, look not around thee ! "
He closed his eyne, he struck his lyre
In tones with passion laden.
Till every gallant's eye shot fire,
And down look'd every maiden.
The king, enraptured with his strain,
Held out to him a golden chain,
In guerdon of his harping.
"The golden chain give not to me.
For noble's breast its glance is,
Who meets and beats thy enemy.
Amid the shock of lances.
Or give it to thy chancellere
Let him its golden burden bear,
Among his other burdens.
"I sing as sings the bird, whose note
The leafy bough is heard on.
The song that falters from my throat
For me is ample guerdon.
Yet I'd ask one thing, an I might,
A draught of brave wine, sparkling bright
Within a golden beaker ! "

The cup was brought. He drain'd its lees,
"O draught that warms me cheerly !
Blest is the house, where gifts like these
Are counted trifles merely.
Lo, when you prosper, think on me,
And thank your God as heartily,
As for this draught I thank you ! "

THE CAVALIER'S CHOICE

A note from the translators: “This lively little ballad occurs in one of Goethe’s Operas, very charming compositions, which probably are less read than they deserve. It is not altogether original, being evidently founded on a popular Scottish ditty, called indiscriminately “Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship,” or “The Laird of Roslin’s Daughter,” in which precisely the same questions are propounded and answered. Truth compels us to say that, in point of merit, the superiority lies with the Scottish ballad. This being a case of disputed property, or rather commonty, the translator has allowed himself more license in rendering than has been used in any other instance in the present collection.”

It was a gallant cavalier
Of honour and renown,
And all to seek a lady-love
He rode from town to town.
Till at a widow-woman’s door
He drew the rein so free

For at her side the knight espied
Her comely daughters three.
Well might he gaze upon them,
For they were fair and tall
Ye never have seen fairer maids,
In bower nor yet in hall.
Small marvel if the gallant’s heart
Beat quicker in his breast
‘Twas hard to choose, and hard to lose-
How might he wale the best ?

” Now, maidens, pretty maidens mine,
Who’ll rede me riddles three ?
And she who answers best of all
Shall be mine own ladye ! “
I ween they blush’d as maidens do,
When such rare words they hear
” Now speak thy riddles, if thou wilt,
Thou gay young cavalier ! “

What’s longer than the longest path ?
First tell ye that to me
And tell me what is deeper yet.
Than is the deepest sea ?
And tell me what is louder far,
Than is the loudest horn ?
And tell me what hath sharper point,
Than e’en the sharpest thorn 1
” And tell me what is greener yet,
Than greenest grass on hill ?
And tell me what is crueller
Than a wicked woman’s will “?

The eldest and the second maid,
They mus’d and thought awhile
But the youngest she looked upward.
And spoke with merry smile
” O, love is surely longer far,
Than the longest paths that be
And hell, they say, is deeper yet.
Than is the deepest sea
The roll of thunder is more loud.
Than is the loudest horn ;
And hunger it is worse to bear
Than sharpest wound of thorn
” The copper sweat is greener yet,
Than is the grass on hill
And the foul fiend he is cruellei
Than any woman’s will ! “

He leapt so lightly from his steed,
He took her by the hand ;
” Sweet maid, my riddles thou hast read,
Be lady of my land ! “
The eldest and the second maid,
They pondered and were dumb,
And there, perchance, are waiting yet
Till another wooer come.
Then, maidens, take this warning word.
Be neither slow nor shy.
But always, when a lover speaks,
Look kindly, and reply.

A note here from my own reading. In the Scottish variants, it is the woman who asks the riddles and the man who answers them. This might make her the same type of faerie I made up out of whole cloth for one of the earliest of my Ars Magica submissions, based on the riddle rhyme “Scarborough Fair”

I’d also like to know where “copper sweat” came from in this translation. The Scots versions I’ve seen use the word “verdigris” and that seems a better translation. Copper sweating is, I believe, the process Australians would call soldering. Copper pipes oxidize to a deep green at the joins due to a reaction with the flux and air. Verdigris was made historically, mostly by women as a dye. The usual method was to hang a piece of copper, in a sealed container, over vinegar, so that crystals of verdigris, which is a copper salt, formed on the surface.

The Lovelorn Cuttle

This week an odd little familiar that turned up while I was looking at some Venetian material.

I've been reading "Venice is a fish" and there's a section in it which, to me, seems to be a perfect origin story for a familiar

Here's the quote:

"Apart from the inevitable mess left by man's best friend it is only in Zetterra ins springtime that you need to watch where you put your feet. Some Venetians go there to fish at night using lamps and torches to attract enamoured cuttlefish and catch them in a sort of big butterfly net From the bottom of their buckets the captured cuttlefish catch you unawares by spurting ink into the stones of the shore, staining socks and trousers."

My idea is a poetic Jerbiton magus is walking along the Lido and sees a cuttlefish. It has been destroyed by love and responds by sending out huge amounts of ink. He thinks "I've been there comrade!" and saves it from someone's dinner.

He eventually binds it as a familiar this leads to some questions as to the practicalities. With a bond quality you could make a cuttlefish able to breathe air. Alternatively you could have a series of halfpipes through the areas where the magus lives filled with fresh water magically, allowing his familiar to follow him around and make itself useful in the laboratory. I'd prefer one that can fly just because I like the idea of him jetting about.

Cuttlefish can taste through their suckers which means in an avian cuttle you'd have a sense of smell. Cuttles are likely interesting to illusionists because they don't see the way that humans do. They can't see colour which isn't all that odd for a familiar but they don't focus their eyes by reshaping their lenses. In a cuttle the lens actually moves forward and back like the slide on a telescope to create a point on one of two Focus areas on the back of the eye. Cuttles don't have blind spots because their optic nerve doesn't come through the surface of the retina and then splay out nerve fibers on the inner surface of the eye. In what is clearly a better design the optic nerve comes to the back of the eye and the optic nerves come through the back of the retina directly to the sensors.

I'm not sure if I want him to be able to speak. I quite like the idea that he communicates with people not his master by flashing written words on his skin using chromatophores. In real life cuttles communicate with each other by chromatophore, but also by changing their texture, posture, and movement. This cuttle might not be limited to letters. It might be able to draw diagrams and hieroglyphs on itself. They produce sepia which can be used as a writing ink and can be altered in the lab to produce a surprisingly wide range of colours.

Their blood is based on hemocyanin which means that it's bluish-green and it needs to be pumped about faster than red blood. It carries less oxygen. To allow this the cuttle has three hearts one by each gill and one is a general system pump. Magi tend to develop the physical characteristics of their familiars, so does this mean that the Jerbiton magus develops extra hearts?

Some cuttles, in real life, seem to sleep.. That is they enter a dormant state from which they can rapidly emerge. During this they have rapid eye movement, twitching tentacles and chromatophore changes. In short: they seem to dream. I think I'll call him Ardent. In Latin his name would be ardens and that means he who burns which is a good name for a Flambeau magus.

The Riddle by Walter de la Mare

Do you ever read a piece of media and say “I want to use that in a game, but don’t know how?” That was how I’ve felt about “The Riddle” by Walter de la Mare. I’ve used his material on this podcast before, but this eerie little story, written for small children, deliberately doesn’t tell you what it is about. I’ll hand you over to Ben Tucker from Librivox, then come back at the end with some plot hooks.

(from his Collected Stories for Children [1947])

So these seven children, Ann and Matilda, James, William and Henry, Harriet and Dorothea, came to live with their grandmother. The house in which their grandmother had lived since her childhood was built in the time of the Georges. It was not a pretty house, but roomy, substantial, and square; and a great cedar tree outstretched its branches almost to the windows.

When the children were come out of the cab (five sitting inside and two beside the driver), they were shown into their grandmother’s presence. They stood in a little black group before the old lady, seated in her bow-window. And she asked them each their names, and repeated each name in her kind, quavering voice. Then to one she gave a work-box, to William a jack-knife, to Dorothea a painted ball; to each a present according to age. And she kissed all her grandchildren to the youngest.

‘My dears,’ she said, ‘I wish to see all of you bright and gay in my house. I am an old woman, so that I cannot romp with you; but Ann must look to you, and Mrs. Fenn too. And every morning and every evening you must all come in to see your granny; and bring me smiling faces, that call back to my mind my own son Harry. But all the rest of the day, when school is done, you shall do just as you please, my dears. And there is only one thing, just one, I would have you remember. In the large spare bedroom that looks out on the slate roof there stands in the corner an old oak chest; aye, older than I, my dears, a great deal older; older than my grandmother. Play anywhere else in the house, but not there.’ She spoke kindly to them all, smiling at them; but she was very old, and her eyes seemed to see nothing of this world.

And the seven children, though at first they were gloomy and strange, soon began to be happy and at home in the great house. There was much to interest and to amuse them there; all was new to them. Twice every day, morning and evening, they came in to see their grandmother, who every day seemed more feeble; and she spoke pleasantly to them of her mother, and her childhood, but never forgetting to visit her store of sugar-plums. And so the weeks passed by....

It was evening twilight when Henry went upstairs from the nursery by himself to look at the oak chest. He pressed his fingers into the carved fruit and flowers, and spoke to the dark-smiling heads at the corners; and then, with a glance over his shoulder, he opened the lid and looked in. But the chest concealed no treasure, neither gold nor baubles, nor was there anything to alarm the eye. The chest was empty, except that it was lined with silk of old-rose, seeming darker in the dusk, and smelling sweet of pot-pourri. And while Henry was looking in, he heard the softened laughter and the clinking of the cups downstairs in the nursery; and out at the window he saw the day darkening. These things brought strangely to his memory his mother who in her glimmering white dress used to read to him in the dusk; and he climbed into the chest; and the lid closed gently down over him.

When the other six children were tired with their playing, they filed into their grandmother’s room for her good-night and her sugar-plums. She looked out between the candles at them as if she were uncertain of something in her thoughts. The next day Ann told her grandmother that Henry was not anywhere to be found.

‘Dearie me, child. Then he must be gone away for a time,’ said the old lady. She paused. ‘But remember, all of you, do not meddle with the oak chest.’

But Matilda could not forget her brother Henry, finding no pleasure in playing without him. So she would loiter in the house thinking where he might be. And she carried her wooden doll in her bare arms, singing under her breath all she could make up about it. And when one bright morning she peeped in on the chest, so sweet-scented and secret it

seemed that she took her doll with her into it—just as Henry himself had done.

So Ann, and James, and William, Harriet and Dorothea were left at home to play together. ‘Some day maybe they will come back to you, my dears,’ said their grandmother, ‘or maybe you will go to them. Heed my warning as best you may.’

Now Harriet and William were friends together, pretending to be sweethearts; while James and Dorothea liked wild games of hunting, and fishing, and battles.

On a silent afternoon in October, Harriet and William were talking softly together, looking out over the slate roof at the green fields, and they heard the squeak and frisking of a mouse behind them in the room. They went together and searched for the small, dark hole from whence it had come out. But finding no hole, they began to finger the carving of the chest, and to give names to the dark-smiling heads, just as Henry had done. ‘I know! let’s pretend you are Sleeping Beauty, Harriet,’ said William, ‘and I’ll be the Prince that squeezes through the thorns and comes in.’ Harriet looked gently and strangely at her brother but she got into the box and lay down, pretending to be fast asleep, and on tiptoe William leaned over, and seeing how big was the chest, he stepped in to kiss the Sleeping Beauty and to wake her from her quiet sleep. Slowly the carved lid turned on its noiseless hinges. And only the clatter of James and Dorothea came in sometimes to recall Ann from her book.

But their old grandmother was very feeble, and her sight dim, and her hearing extremely difficult.

Snow was falling through the still air upon the roof; and Dorothea was a fish in the oak chest, and James stood over the hole in the ice, brandishing a walking-stick for a harpoon, pretending to be an Esquimau. Dorothea’s face was red, and her wild eyes sparkled through her tousled hair. And James had a crooked scratch upon his cheek. ‘You must struggle, Dorothea, and then I shall swim back and drag you out. Be quick now!’ He shouted with laughter as he was drawn into the open chest. And the lid closed softly and gently down as before.

Ann, left to herself, was too old to care overmuch for sugar-plums, but she would go solitary to bid her grandmother good-night; and the old lady looked wistfully at her over her spectacles. ‘Well, my dear,’ she

said with trembling head; and she squeezed Ann's fingers between her own knuckled finger and thumb. 'What lonely old people, we two are, to be sure!' Ann kissed her grandmother's soft, loose cheek. She left the old lady sitting in her easy chair, her hands upon her knees, and her head turned sidelong towards her.

When Ann was gone to bed she used to sit reading her book by candlelight. She drew up her knees under the sheets, resting her book upon them. Her story was about fairies and gnomes, and the gently-flowing moonlight of the narrative seemed to illumine the white pages, and she could hear in fancy fairy voices, so silent was the great many-roomed house, and so mellifluous were the words of the story. Presently she put out her candle, and, with a confused babel of voices close to her ear, and faint swift pictures before her eyes, she fell asleep.

And in the dead of night she rose out of her bed in dream, and with eyes wide open yet seeing nothing of reality, moved silently through the vacant house. Past the room where her grandmother was snoring in brief, heavy slumber, she stepped lightly and surely, and down the wide staircase. And Vega the far-shining stood over against the window above the slate roof. Ann walked into the strange room beneath as if she were being guided by the hand towards the oak chest. There, just as if she were dreaming it was her bed, she laid herself down in the old rose silk, in the fragrant place. But it was so dark in the room that the movement of the lid was indistinguishable.

Through the long day, the grandmother sat in her bow-window. Her lips were pursed, and she looked with dim, inquisitive scrutiny upon the street where people passed to and fro, and vehicles rolled by. At evening she climbed the stair and stood in the doorway of the large spare bedroom. The ascent had shortened her breath. Her magnifying spectacles rested upon her nose. Leaning her hand on the doorpost she peered in towards the glimmering square of window in the quiet gloom. But she could not see far, because her sight was dim and the light of day feeble. Nor could she detect the faint fragrance as of autumnal leaves. But in her mind was a tangled skein of memories—laughter and tears, and children long ago become old-fashioned, and the advent of friends, and last farewells. And gossiping fitfully, inarticulately, with herself, the old lady went down again to her window-seat.

De la Mare was once asked if the children died and if the grandmother was meant to be sinister, and his answer was that, yes, the children did die and that the grandmother was no more sinister than she appeared. That's all the clues we have for his riddle, and even that I'm willing to ignore. We can map out story ideas for either truth value.

So, assuming the grandmother isn't feeding them to the box, what could be going on.

Most gently, they are just getting transferred to a different world, perhaps the world they came from following the death of their parents. For a time they dwell in this halfway place, and when they are ready they rejoin the world they go out via the box. The grandmother, who is left behind, is unable to complete her mourning for her son, so she stays where she is. At the end she cannot even see the box.

An alternative, the box could be sending them somewhere else. This is the basic Narnia type of story, where the children are whisked away when they are storytelling or dreaming, so they land in a different world. The grandmother is a gateway guardian, but not much of one, serving to effectively constrain only the eldest, Anne, until her conscious mind is dulled by sleep.

The coffin-like box could be inevitable: the grandmother knows that that the children will die, but cannot change the time or nature of their death. The children entering the box could be symbolic of their loss from other causes in the real world. That loss might not even be death: it could be that the children go off on adventures and leave the grandmother. They could be like Susan in Narnia, cursed to survive in the world without. Actually that's an interesting link: if the grandmother is Susan her children are dying but not in a terrible way, what with visiting Narnia being afterlife tourism of sorts.

A lot of people when this story was published assumed that the grandmother is feeding the children to the box. What does she get out of the process? She lives on? So the box grants her extended life? She is given new and colourful memories from the children, so she's a consuming gestalt. It repairs her lost memory of her own life? I'm not sure on this – I can't solve the riddle because my answer, that they are dying and it is a coffin, is just so banal. Please send in alternative interpretations.

King Laurin's Rose Garden

The first book I wrote for Ars Magica was Sanctuary of Ice which was based heavily on Karl Felix Wolff's The Pale Mountains. As a matter of personal joy, that book entered the public domain in 2024 and KirksVoice at Librivox recorded a small excerpt. Thanks to the reader and production team.

To the east of Bozen rises a strange uneven mass of mountains, called the Rosengarten because on clear evenings the Alpine glow is reflected there so vividly that you might think a rose-red flood had poured down over the barren rocks. But the people who live within sight of the Rosengarten tell the following legend.-

In ancient times there grew on the high mountains east of Bozen a real rose garden, so filled with flowers that in the sunlight it seemed a soft rose-colored mass. This garden kingdom belonged to the dwarf king, Laurin, who lived there with his people.

Deep within the mountains Laurin had many secret rooms and storehouses full of glittering jewels and gold, and to protect his kingdom and this treasure he had, instead of a wall or a moat, a silken thread. This was drawn around the rose garden. And whoever crossed it must fight the king. He was only a dwarf, but he was skilful in the use of magic arms.

Laurin, returning one day from a distant country, brought back with him to the rose garden the lovely Princess Similde. He wished to make her his queen, but Similde, who had come against her will, would listen neither to entreaties nor threats, and in a short time her brother, discovering where she was, came to set her free, bringing with him Dietrich of Bern and several other warriors.

When they suddenly beheld the Rosengarten, they halted, overcome by its beauty. All but one, the ferocious Witege, who rushed forward and, cutting the silken barrier, opened the battle. The warriors had counted on an easy victory, but Laurin exerted all the power of his magic weapons and combined with it the aid of five giants. Nevertheless, the warriors conquered. Laurin was taken captive and carried to Bozen, where they planned to make him court buffoon.

Laurin was silent and uncomplaining. At last a day came when he was left

unguarded. He fled from the court, quickly reached the outskirts of Bozen, and began the perilous journey back to his mountains. As his eyes clung to the vivid light of the distant Rosengarten, he suddenly realized that the glow was a curse to him, for its light could be seen from the depths of the lowest valleys; everyone marvelled at it, and everyone sought, and often found, the source .

The dwarf king determined to make his kingdom invisible . It should no longer be observed from the valleys . When people could not see it, they would lose their desire to visit it. So he laid a magic spell on the Rosengarten , a spell making it invisible in daytime and at night . But Laurin had forgotten the twilight, which is neither day nor night .

And in the twilight of every clear evening , the flowers of the Rosengarten spread their soft rosy curtain over the mysterious high spires of rock, and their warm radiance dominates the mountains and valleys , as it did in the old days before dwarfs and men were enemies . Today we call this light the Alpine glow, and when it spreads over the peaks of the Rosengarten, the people in the valley come out to gaze in wonder . But they know nothing of that older time when men were kinder and the world more beautiful .

Wood Magic by John Buchan

John Buchan was a Scottish novelist and poet who died in 1940. He was Governor-General of Canada for a while, which was no so odd as you'd imagine back in the days of Empire. This is Buchan attempting to be a 9th Century peasant. A grog or companion in Ars Magica could repeat this.

(9th Century)

I WILL walk warily in the wise woods on the fringes of eventide,
For the covert is full of noises and the stir of nameless things.
I have seen in the dusk of the beeches the shapes of the lords that ride,
And down in the marish hollow I have heard the lady who sings.
And once in an April gloaming I met a maid on the sward,
All marble- white and gleaming and tender and wild of eye;—
I, Jehan the hunter, who speak am a grown man, middling hard.
But I dreamt a month of the maid, and wept I knew not why.

Down by the edge of the firs, in a coppice of heath and vine.
Is an old moss-grown altar, shaded by briar and bloom.
Denys, the priest, Hath told me 'twas the lord Apollo's shrine
In the days ere Christ came down from God to the Virgin's womb.
I never go past but I doff my cap and avert my eyes —
(Were Denys to catch me I trow I'd do penance for half a year.) —
For once I saw a flame there and the smoke of a sacrifice,
And a voice spake out of the thicket that froze my soul with fear.

Wherefore to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
Mary the Blessed Mother, and the kindly Saints as well,
I will give glory and praise, and them I cherish the most.
For they have the keys of Heaven, and save the soul from Hell.
But likewise I will spare for the lord Apollo a grace.
And a bow for the lady Venus — as a friend but not as a thrall.
'Tis true they are out of Heaven, but some day they may win the place ;
For gods are kittle cattle, and a wise man honours them all.

The Sorcery of Aphlar by H. P. Lovecraft and Duane W. Rimel

Another little story from Fantasy Fan magazine read by Ben Tucker through Librivox.. Thanks to Ben and his team.

The council of twelve seated on the jeweled celestial dais ordered that Aphlar be cast from the gates of Bel-haz-en. He sat too much alone, they decreed, and brooded when toil should have been his lot. And in his obscure and hidden delvings he read all too frequently those papyri of Elder æons which reposed in the Gothic shrine and were to be consulted only for rare and special purposes.

The twilight city of Bel-haz-en had climbed backward in its knowledge. No longer did philosophers sit upon street corners speaking wise words to the populace, for stupid ignorance ruled within the crumbling and immemorially ancient walls. Where once the wisdom of the stars abounded, only feebleness and desolation now lay upon the place; spreading like a monstrous blight and sucking foul nurture from the stupid dwellers. And out of the waters of the Oll that meandered from the mountains of Azlakka to pass by the aged city, there rose often great clouds of pestilence that racked the people sorely, leaving them pale and near to dying. All this their loss of wisdom brought. And now the council had sent their last and greatest wise man from them.

Aphlar wandered to the mountains far above the city and built a cavern for protection from the summer heat and winter chill. There he read his scrolls in silence and his mighty wisdom to the wind about the crags and to the swallows on the wing. All day he sat and watched below or drew queer drawings on small bits of stone and chanted to them, for he knew that some day men would seek the cave and slay him. The cunning of the twelve did not mislead him. Had not the last exiled wiseman's screams rent the night two moon-rounds before when people thought him safely gone?

Had not his own eyes seen the priest's sword-slashed form floating by in the poison waters? He knew no lion had killed old Azik, let the council say what they might. Does a lion slash with a sword and leave his prey uneaten?

Through many seasons Aphlar sat upon the mountain, gazing at the muddy Oll as it wound into the misty distance to the land where none ever ventured. He spoke his words of wisdom to the snails that worked in the ground by his feet. They seemed to understand, and waved their slimy feelers before they sank beneath the sand again. On moonlight nights he climbed the hill above his cave and made strange offerings to the moon-God Alo; and when the night-birds heard the sound they drew close and listened to the whispering. And when queer winged things flapped across the darkened sky and loomed up dimly against the moon Aphlar was content. Those which he had addressed had heeded his beckoning. His thoughts were always far away, and his prayers were offered to the pale fancies of dusk.

Then one day past noontide Aphlar rose from his earthen chair and strode down the rock mountain-side. His eyes, heeding not the rotten, stone-walled city, held steadfastly to the river. When he drew near its muddy brink he paused and looked up the bosom of the stream. A small object floated near the rushes, and this Aphlar rescued with tender and curious care. Then, wrapping the thing in the folds of his robe, he climbed up again to his cave in the hills. All day he sat and gazed upon the object; rummaging now and then in his musty chronicles, and muttering awful syllables as he drew faint figures on a piece of parchment.

That night the gibbous moon rose high, but Aphlar did not climb above his dwelling. Queer night-birds flew past the cavern's mouth, chirped eerily, and fled away into the shadows.

Many days passed before the council sent their messengers of murder; but at last the time was thought ripe, and seven dark-browed men stole away to the hills. Yet when that grim seven ventured within the cave they saw not the wise man Aphlar. Instead, small blades of grass were sprouting in his natural chair of earth. All about lay papyri dim and musty, with faint figures drawn upon them. The seven shuddered and left forthwith when they beheld these things, but as the last man tremblingly withdrew he saw a round and unknown thing lying on the ground. He picked it up, and his fellows drew close in curiosity; but they saw upon it

only alien symbols which they could not read, yet which made them shrink and quaver without knowing why. Then he who had found it cast it quickly over the steep precipice beside him, but no sound came from the slope below whereon it should have fallen. And the thrower trembled, fearing many things that are not known but only whispered about. Then, when he told how the sphere he had held was without the weight a thing of stone should have; how it was like to have floated on air as the thistledown floats; he and the six with him slunk as one from the spot and swore it was a place accursed.

But after they had gone a snail crawled slowly from a sandy crevice and slid intently over to where the blades of grass were growing. And when it reached the spot, two slimy feelers stretched forth and bent oddly downward, as if eager to watch forever the winding river.

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I'd note that you could stat the magician Aphlar as a Bjornaer Great Beast using the enormous snails in Transforming Mythic Europe as a guideline

The Chant of The Grave-Digger by Robert S. Carr

A little poem for Hallowe'en.

I'm the one who gets you all,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Lean ones, fat ones, short or tall,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Rich and poor I lay you deep
Where the grave-worms writhe and creep
In the cold earth's oozy seep,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Coffin-lids are bright and new,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Mausoleums mighty few,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Hear the wet clods tumble down,
Preacher, thief or circus clown,
Tattered rags or ermine gown,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Far away from mortal woes,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Maggots nibble at your toes,
Ho! I swing my shovel!
Born to die—a monstrous jest!—
Sordid four-score years at best,
Then you're rotting with the rest.
Ho! I swing my shovel!

Gibbet Hill by Bram Stoker

A lost short story by Bram Stoker was recently rediscovered in an archive. Its from before he wrote Dracula, so his style is there but the story doesn't conclude in the way his usually do: you're left at the Jamesian wallop.

Ben Tucker has recorded a version into the public domain vis Librivox. Thanks to Ben and his production team.

BLINDWORM OF GIBBET HILL

Some statistics for the Blindworm of Gibbet Hill. The physical statistics were based on the Green Snakes of Malebolge in *Thrice Told Tales* (page 29).

Order: False God

Infernal Might: 10 (Animal)

Characteristics: Int +1, Per +1, Pre -6, Com +2, Str -6, Sta +2, Dex +4, Qik +3

Size: -3

Virtues and Flaws: Infamous

Personality Traits: Proud +3, Hostile +3, Merciful -4

Reputations: None

Hierarchy: 4

Combat:

Bite (fangs): Init +3, Attack +10, Defense +9, Damage -5*

*see Powers: Venomous Bite

Soak: +2

Fatigue Levels: OK, 0, -1, -3, -5, Unconscious

Wound Penalties: -1 (1), -3 (2), -5 (3), Incapacitated (4), Dead (5)

Abilities: Awareness 4 (prey), Brawl 2 (fangs), Hunt 4 (rodents), Latin 5 (curses), Stealth 4 (stalking prey), Survival 3 (grasslands)

Powers:

Envisioning 1 or 5 points, Init +5, Mentem.

This power allows one of two dreamlike powers. At a cost of 1 point, the demon appears in a target's dream. The dream itself is gradually imposed upon and twisted to take a darker and more frightening tone. The demon speaks through figures in the dream. At a cost of 5 points, the demon forces the target into a waking dream. The waking dream is a powerful hallucination of whatever the demon desires. The shocking aspects stun the victim for a round, requiring a Brave Personality roll (Ease Factor 9) to avoid an extreme reaction (retching, convulsions, abject terror). Demons use this power to manipulate the dream states of their victims. It also serves as a method to provide visions to a victim, with the end goal of leading them into corruption through a desire to obsess and hoard some object.

Obsession (Needing to know the future), 1-3 points, Init 0, Vim: This power is used only when there is a chink in the armor of virtue, through the indulgence in a venial sin. This allows the demon to impose its particular sin upon the target. Magic Resistance must be Penetrated, as normal. The victim is assaulted with sinful thoughts and acquires a Personality Trait to represent this. This Personality Trait has a score equal to the number of points used by the demon to activate the power. This becomes the target's Obsession Trait. (Realms of Power: the Infernal, page 32)

Possession : 1 or more points, Init. +2, Mentem: If this power penetrates, the victim is under the direct control of the Blindworm. It burrows into the victim's chest, sitting coldly like a rock where the heart should be. If the Blindworm forces the host to act against its true nature, the Blindworm must spend 1 Might point and win a contested roll (Cruel vs whatever trait the host has which opposes the action). The Blindworm does not have the Might to trigger supernatural powers. It can, however, pass through magical wards while possessing a human, so long as this is not forced by the possession power. If the Blindworm is removed, or chooses to leave, the host dies after about three minutes.

The Serpent Oracle: 2 points, Init. +2, Mentem:

May cast any Intelligo spell for 2 Might, and automatically knows the context and likely outcome of actions made in response to the information gained. Note that the serpent answers questions by pointing toward the speaker it agrees with, so it may be necessary for its supplicants to ask a series of binary questions. This rapidly drains the serpent's Might pool if it chooses to use its power, but it often agrees with the most dangerous or harmful thing suggested without bothering to consult its supernatural senses.

Venomous Bite, 2 points, Init +8, Animal

This is a paralysis toxin causing 2 levels of Fatigue, resisted by a Stamina roll against an Ease Factor of 9.

Weakness: The blindworm cannot touch or act against people with True Faith at all, nor against anyone touching them.

Vis: 2 pawns of Intellego vis, eyes

Appearance: Blindworms are snakelike lizards with brown to gold scales. They are called "blindworms" because their eyes are small compared to snakes, but they have sight. Similarly although they are called "deaf adders" they can sense vibrations. One odd behavior is they don't bask like other reptiles, preferring to burrow under warm object like rocks. A standard blind worm grows to about two feet long, but this demonic creature is far longer. It remains thin enough that when it is rolled into a ball it can fit inside a chest cavity.

Fragment week: The Flowers of Evil

Fragment weeks are where I use up ideas that I know have value in Ars but can't quite land. Sometime others in the community find excellent ways to use them. Here I'm presenting some of the poems from *The Flowers of Evil* by Baudelaire. As I think about them I keep circling back to the Lady of Pain and the Ladies of Sorrow. This is because Baudelaire and Swinburne are both decadent poets. There is one inverted Ghostly Warder which would give the Plagued by Supernatural Entity Flaw, and another which might be useful as a necromancer wanting to leave the flesh. Thanks to the Librivox readers and their production team.

BEAUTY

I am lovely, O mortals, like a dream of stone,
And my bosom, where each one gets bruised in turn,
To inspire the love of a poet is prone,
Like matter eternally silent and stern.

As an unfathomed sphinx, enthroned by the Nile,
My heart a swan's whiteness with granite combines,
And I hate every movement, displacing the lines,
And never I weep and never I smile.

The poets in front of mine attitudes fine
(Which the proudest of monuments seem to implant),
To studies profound all their moments assign,

For I have all these docile swains to enchant—
Two mirrors, which Beauty in all things ignite:
Mine eyes, my large eyes, of eternal Light!

SONNET XXVIII

With pearly robes that wave within the wind,
Even when she walks, she seems to dance,
Like swaying serpents round those wands entwined
Which fakirs ware in rhythmic elegance.

So like the desert's Blue, and the sands remote,
Both, deaf to mortal suffering and to strife,
Or like the sea-weeds 'neath the waves that float,
Indifferently she moulds her budding life.

Her polished eyes are made of minerals bright,
And in her mien, symbolical and cold,
Wherein an angel mingles with a sphinx of old,

Where all is gold, and steel, and gems, and light,
There shines, just like a useless star eternally,
The sterile woman's frigid majesty.

HYMN TO BEAUTY

O Beauty! dost thou generate from Heaven or from Hell?
Within thy glance, so diabolic and divine,
Confusedly both wickedness and goodness dwell,
And hence one might compare thee unto sparkling wine.
Thy look containeth both the dawn and sunset stars,
Thy perfumes, as upon a sultry night exhale,
Thy kiss a philter, and thy mouth a Grecian vase,
That renders heroes cowardly and infants hale.
Yea, art thou from the planets, or the fiery womb?
The demon follows in thy train, with magic fraught,
Thou scatter'st seeds haphazardly of joy and doom,
Thou govern'st everything, but answer'st unto nought.
O Loveliness! thou spurnest corpses with delight,
Among thy jewels, Horror hath such charms for thee,
And Murder 'mid thy mostly cherished tinklets bright,
Upon thy massive bosom dances amorously.
The blinded, fluttering moth towards the candle flies,
Then frizzles, falls, and falters—"Blessings unto thee"—
The panting swain that o'er his beauteous mistress sighs,
Seems like the Sick, that stroke their gravestones lovingly.
What matter, if thou comest from the Heavens or Hell,
O Beauty, frightful ghoul, ingenuous and obscure!
So long thine eyes, thy smile, to me the way can tell
Towards that Infinite I love, but never saw.
From God or Satan? Angel, Mermaid, Proserpine?
What matter if thou makest—blithe, voluptuous sprite—
With rhythms, perfumes, visions—O mine only queen!—
The universe less hideous and the hours less trite.

THE GHOST

Just like an angel with evil eye,
I shall return to thee silently,
Upon thy bower I'll alight,
With falling shadows of the night.

With thee, my brownie, I'll commune,
And give thee kisses cold as the moon,
And with a serpent's moist embrace,
I'll crawl around thy resting-place.

And when the livid morning falls,
Thou'lt find alone the empty walls,
And till the evening, cold 'twill be.

As others with their tenderness,
Upon thy life and youthfulness,
I'll reign alone with dread o'er thee.

OVERCAST SKY

Meseemeth thy glance, soft enshrouded with dew,
Thy mysterious eyes (are they grey, green or blue?),
Alternately cruel, and tender, and shy,
Reflect both the languor and calm of the sky.

Thou recallest those white days—with shadows caressed,
Engendering tears from th' enraptured breast,
When racked by an anguish unfathomed that weeps,
The nerves, too awake, jibe the spirit that sleeps.

At times—thou art like those horizons divine,
Where the suns of the nebulous seasons decline;
How resplendent art thou—O pasturage vast,
Illumed by the beams of a sky overcast!

O! dangerous dame—oh seductive clime!
As well, will I love both thy snow and thy rime,
And shall I know how from the frosts to entice
Delights that are keener than iron and ice?

“CAUSERIE”

You are a roseate autumn-sky, that glows!
Yet sadness rises in me like the flood,
And leaves in ebbing on my lips morose,
The poignant memory of its bitter mind.

In vain your hands my swooning breast embrace,
Oh, friend! alone remains the plundered spot,
Where woman's biting grip has left its trace:
My heart, the beasts devoured—seek it not!

My heart is a palace pillaged by the herd;
They kill and take each other by the throat!
A perfume glides around your bosom bared—

O loveliness, thou scourge of souls—devote
Thine eyes of fire—luminous-like feasts,
To burn these rags—rejected by the beasts!

THE JOYOUS DEFUNCT

Where snails abound—in a juicy soil,
I will dig for myself a fathomless grave,
Where at leisure mine ancient bones I can coil,
And sleep—quite forgotten—like a shark 'neath the wave.

I hate every tomb—I abominate wills,
And rather than tears from the world to implore,
I would ask of the crows with their vampire bills
To devour every bit of my carcass impure.

Oh worms, without eyes, without ears, black friends!
To you a defunct-one, rejoicing, descends,
Enlivened Philosophers—offspring of Dung!

Without any qualms, o'er my wreckage spread,
And tell if some torment there still can be wrung
For this soul-less old frame that is dead 'midst the dead!

ILLUSIONARY LOVE

When I behold thee wander by, my languorous love,
To songs of viols which throughout the dome resound,
Harmonious and stately as thy footsteps move,
Bestowing forth the languor of thy glance profound.

When I regard thee, glowing in the gaslight rays,
Thy pallid brow embellished by a charm obscure,
Here where the evening torches light the twilight haze,
Thine eyes attracting me like those of a portraiture,

I say—How beautiful she is! how strangely rich!
A mighty memory, royal and commanding tower,
A garland: and her heart, bruised like a ruddy peach,
Is ripe—like her body for Love's sapient power.

Art thou, that spicy Autumn-fruit with taste supreme?
Art thou a funeral vase inviting tears of grief?
Aroma—causing one of Eastern wastes to dream;
A downy cushion, bunch of flowers or golden sheaf?

I know that there are eyes, most melancholy ones,
Wherein no precious secret deeply hidden lies,
Resplendent shrines, devoid of relics, sacred stones,
More empty, more profound than ye yourselves, O skies?

Yea, does thy semblance, not alone for me suffice,
To kindle senses which the cruel truth abhor?
All one to me! thy folly or thy heart of ice,
Decoy or mask, all hail! thy beauty I adore!

Fragment Week: Unfinished Race

A note from Ambrose Bierce that seems to have a person falling into regio Thanks to the Librivox recorder and their production team.

James Burne Worson was a shoemaker who lived in Leamington, Warwickshire, England. He had a little shop in one of the by-ways leading off the road to Warwick. In his humble sphere he was esteemed an honest man, although like many of his class in English towns he was somewhat addicted to drink. When in liquor he would make foolish wagers. On one of these too frequent occasions he was boasting of his prowess as a pedestrian and athlete, and the outcome was a match against nature. For a stake of one sovereign he undertook to run all the way to Coventry and back, a distance of something more than forty miles. This was on the 3d day of September in 1873. He set out at once, the man with whom he had made the bet—whose name is not remembered—accompanied by Barham Wise, a linen draper, and Hamerson Burns, a photographer, I think, following in a light cart or wagon.

After remaining at and about the spot for some time, with aimless irresolution, the three men returned to Leamington, told their astonishing story and were afterward taken into custody. But they were of good standing, had always been considered truthful, were sober at the time of the occurrence, and nothing ever transpired to discredit their sworn account of their extraordinary adventure, concerning the truth of which, nevertheless, public opinion was divided, throughout the United Kingdom. If they had something to conceal, their choice of means is certainly one of the most amazing ever made by sane human beings.