



Games from Folktales

Transcripts for January 2018

Stories I have tried to write

The Last Mile Problem

**Dunsany:
The City on Mallington Moor**

**Srendi Vashtar:
faerie god or demon?**

An experiment in podcasting for the Ars Magica roleplaying game

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A note on the Cornwall stories

During November 2017 I made all of the Cornish material public on the blog, and I am reworking it as a single piece, a sort of Cornish gazetteer.

The pieces of raw research won't be included in these monthly transcripts, in expectation of a finished piece later this year.

Patreons

Dan Casar

Daniel Jensen

Jarkman DeVries

Jason Italiano

Jason Newquist

Jason Tondro

Pantelis Polakis

and Anonymous

Thanks for 100 episodes!

A note on Patreon

Patreon has been reworking their business model, much to the anger of people who backed smaller creators with \$1 subscriptions.

I've previously said Games From Folktales would only continue if it paid its way in hosting charges, but I'll pause that assessment until the Patreon model is clearer.

Dunsany's work here describes a regio. It might be Faerie in origin, but could also be a covenant which has encircled itself with a spell like The Shrouded Glen. In this post, Dunsany's words are in black, my interjections in green.

Besides the old shepherd at Lingwold whose habits render him unreliable I am probably the only person that has ever seen the city on Mallington Moor. These place names are fictitious. "Ling" is a name for heather, and in some of Dunsany's other stories he refers to "ling flowers", so the name may just mean "heathery moor". Similarly, there's no Mallington, but Millington is found in Yorkshire, and has suitable surrounds.

I had decided one year to do no London season; partly because of the ugliness of the things in the shops, partly because of the unresisted invasions of German bands, partly perhaps because some pet parrots in the oblong where I lived had learned to imitate cab-whistles; Cabs first appear after the game period, in the reign of Elizabeth I. but chiefly because of late there had seized me in London a quite unreasonable longing for large woods and waste spaces, while the very thought of little valleys underneath copses full of bracken and foxgloves was a torment to me and every summer in London the longing grew worse till the thing was becoming intolerable. So I took a stick and a knapsack and began walking northwards, starting at Tetherington and sleeping at inns, where one could get real salt, and the waiter spoke English and where one had a name instead of a number; and though the tablecloth might be dirty the windows opened so that the air was clean, where one had the excellent company of farmers and men of the wold, who could not be thoroughly vulgar, because they had not the money to be so even if they had wished it.

So, to unpack that: the place name is fictitious, but there is a Tytherington in Cheshire, southeast of Manchester. Foxgloves are a poison, but are pretty. Bracken is a type of fern found on moorlands. Real salt is, in this case, probably unadulterated salt rather than unprocessed salt, as the name is used today.

At first the novelty was delightful, and then one day in a queer old inn up Uthering way, beyond Lingwold, I heard for the first time the rumour of the city said to be on Mallington Moor. They spoke of it quite casually over their glasses of beer, two farmers at the inn. "They say the queer folk be at Mallington with their city," one farmer said. "Travelling they seem to be," said the other. And more came in then and the rumour spread. And then, such are the contradictions of our little likes and dislikes and all the whims that drive us, that I, who had come so far to avoid cities, had a great longing all of a sudden for throngs again and the great hives of Man, and then and there determined on that bright Sunday morning to come to Mallington and there search for the city that rumour spoke of so strangely.

There is no Uthering in the UK, but if we are to suggest that it's in the north of England, near Millington, then perhaps this is a play on names. Might this be near Wuthering? Where the inspiration for Wuthering Heights was is unclear. Some people suggest various places near Halifax in West Yorkshire. There's another alternative, though, -ing is used in Saxon place names to mark the home of the eldest descendant of a named person, so "Tytherthington" above is the tun (settlement) of the oldest descendant (-ing) of a person called something like Tyther. Uthering, therefore should be

Dunsany: The City on Mallington Moor

Again, thanks to Sarah for the audio used in the podcast episode.



should be the dwelling place of the descendant of Uther, and that's the name of King Arthur's father.

Mallington Moor, from all that they said of it, was hardly a likely place to find a thing by searching. It was a huge high moor, very bleak and desolate and altogether trackless. It seemed a lonely place from what they said. The Normans when they came had called it Mal Lieu and afterwards Mallintown and so it changed to Mallington. Though what a town can ever have had to do with a place so utterly desolate I do not know. And before that some say that the Saxons called it Baplas, which I believe to be a corruption of Bad Place. Lieu is French for "place". It's the same word as the Latin locus, which we have used for various things in game.

And beyond the mere rumour of a beautiful city all of white marble and with a foreign look up on Mallington Moor, beyond this I could not get. None of them had seen it himself, "only heard of it like," and my questions, rather than stimulating conversation, would always stop it abruptly. I was no more fortunate on the road to Mallington until the Tuesday, when I was quite near it; I had been walking two days from the inn where I had heard the rumour and could see the great hill steep as a headland on which Mallington lay, standing up on the skyline: the hill was covered with grass, where anything grew at all, but Mallington Moor is all heather; it is just marked Moor on the map; nobody goes there and they do not trouble to name it. It was there where the gaunt hill first came into sight, by the roadside as I enquired for the marble city of some labourers by the way, that I was directed, partly I think in derision, to the old shepherd of Lingwold. It appeared that he, following sometimes sheep that had strayed, and wandering far from Lingwold, came sometimes up to the edge of Mallington Moor, and that he would come back from these excursions and shout through the villages, raving of a city of white marble and gold-tipped minarets. And hearing me asking questions of this city they had laughed and directed me to the shepherd of Lingwold. One well-meant warning they gave me as I went—the old man was not reliable.

In Ars Magica beasts, and people chasing them, can get through the Shrouded Glen, because they are not affected by the Mentem form.

And late that evening I saw the thatches of Lingwold sheltering under the edge of that huge hill that Atlas-like held up those miles of moor to the great winds and heaven.

They knew less of the city in Lingwold than elsewhere but they knew the whereabouts of the man I wanted, though they seemed a little ashamed of him. There was an inn in Lingwold that gave me shelter, whence in the morning, equipped with purchases, I set out to find their shepherd. And there he was on the edge of Mallington Moor standing motionless, gazing stupidly at his sheep; his hands trembled continually and his eyes had a blear look, but he was quite sober, wherein all Lingwold had wronged him. Blear is one of those words which only survives as its adjective "bleary", meaning dim, or filmed over.

And then and there I asked him of the city and he said he had never heard tell of any such place. And I said, "Come, come, you must pull yourself together." And he looked angrily at me; but when he saw me draw from amongst my purchases a full bottle of whiskey and a big glass he became more friendly. As I poured out the whiskey I asked him again about the marble city on

Mallington Moor but he seemed quite honestly to know nothing about it. The amount of whiskey he drank was quite incredible, but I seldom express surprise and once more I asked him the way to the wonderful city. His hand was steadier now and his eyes more intelligent and he said that he had heard something of some such city, but his memory was evidently blurred and he was still unable to give me useful directions. I consequently gave him another tumbler, which he drank off like the first without any water, and almost at once he was a different man. The trembling in his hands stopped altogether, his eye became as quick as a younger man's, he answered my questions readily and frankly, and, what was more important to me still, his old memory became alert and clear for even minutest details. His gratitude to myself I need not mention, for I make no pretence that I bought the bottle of whiskey that the old shepherd enjoyed so much without at least some thought of my own advantage. Yet it was pleasant to reflect that it was due to me that he had pulled himself together and steadied his shaking hand and cleared his mind, recovered his memory and his self-respect.

So, is the shepherd a human, who has been elf-struck so that he can only pull himself together under the influence of the vitality of alcohol, or is he a portal guardian faerie accepting a tribute to allow passage? If we accept that he's just alcohol dependant, or elf-struck, then why has he not drunk the rum which we are soon to find out he has with him? That the man is offered whisky may indicate we are in the north of England, or southern Scotland. The first textual reference to whisky comes after the game period and is in Latin as aquavita, which is a direct translation of the Gaelic uisge beatha "water of life". The first part of this, uisge, eventually transliterates into the English "whisky".

He spoke to me quite clearly, no longer slurring his words; he had seen the city first one moonlight night when he was lost in the mist on the big moor, he had wandered far in the mist, and when it lifted he saw the city by moonlight. He had no food, but luckily had his flask. There never was such a city, not even in books. Travellers talked sometimes of Venice seen from the sea, there might be such a place or there might not, but, whether or no, it was nothing to the city on Mallington Moor. Men who read books had talked to him in his time, hundreds of books, but they never could tell of any city like this. Why, the place was all of marble, roads, walls and palaces, all pure white marble, and the tops of the tall thin spires were entirely of gold. And they were queer folk in the city even for foreigners. And there were camels, but I cut him short for I thought I could judge for myself, if there was such a place, and, if not, I was wasting my time as well as a pint of good whiskey. So I got him to speak of the way, and after more circumlocution than I needed and more talk of the city he pointed to a tiny track on the black earth just beside us, a little twisty way you could hardly see.

I said the moor was trackless; untrodden of man or dog it certainly was and seemed to have less to do with the ways of man than any waste I have seen, but the track the old shepherd showed me, if track it was, was no more than the track of a hare—an elf-path the old man called it,

So, this is a faerie trod.

Heaven knows what he meant. And then before I left him he insisted on giving me his flask with the queer strong rum it contained.





Rum won't be known in Europe for about 600 years after the game period. Technically sugar cane is known, but we don't see it being used as a fermentation base. This may be because sugar is ridiculously expensive in 1220. It's literally treated like a spice. Note the metal flask? Why don't all potions come in metal flasks? In Latin you'd call that an ampule.

Whiskey brings out in some men melancholy, in some rejoicing, with him it was clearly generosity and he insisted until I took his rum, though I did not mean to drink it. It was lonely up there, he said, and bitter cold and the city hard to find, being set in a hollow, and I should need the rum, and he had never seen the marble city except on days when he had had his flask: he seemed to regard that rusted iron flask as a sort of mascot, and in the end I took it.

Is the iron flask a key to allow entrance, or do you need to have drunk the concoction within it? Why has the man not drunk it all himself, given the state he was in, if he is a human?

I followed that odd, faint track on the black earth under the heather till I came to the big grey stone beyond the horizon, where the track divides into two, and I took the one to the left as the old man told me. I knew by another stone that I saw far off that I had not lost my way, nor the old man lied.

And just as I hoped to see the city's ramparts before the gloaming fell on that desolate place, I suddenly saw a long high wall of whiteness with pinnacles here and there thrown up above it, floating towards me silent and grim as a secret, and knew it for that evil thing the mist. The sun, though low, was shining on every sprig of heather, the green and scarlet mosses were shining with it too, it seemed incredible that in three minutes' time all those colours would be gone and nothing left all round but a grey darkness. I gave up hope of finding the city that day, a broader path than mine could have been quite easily lost. I hastily chose for my bed a thick patch of heather, wrapped myself in a waterproof cloak, and lay down and made myself comfortable. And then the mist came. It came like the careful pulling of lace curtains, then like the drawing of grey blinds; it shut out the horizon to the north, then to the east and west; it turned the whole sky white and hid the moor; it came down on it like a metropolis, only utterly silent, silent and white as tombstones.

Almost literally a shroud for the city.

And then I was glad of that strange strong rum, or whatever it was in the flask that the shepherd gave me, for I did not think that the mist would clear till night, and I feared the night would be cold. So I nearly emptied the flask; and, sooner than I expected, I fell asleep, for the first night out as a rule one does not sleep at once but is kept awake some while by the little winds and the unfamiliar sound of the things that wander at night, and that cry to one another far-off with their queer, faint voices; one misses them afterwards when one gets to houses again. But I heard none of these sounds in the mist that evening.

And then I woke and found that the mist was gone and the sun was just disappearing under the moor, and I knew that I had not slept for as long as I thought. And I decided to go on while I could, for I thought that I was not very far from the city.

I went on and on along the twisty track, bits of the mist came down and filled the hollows but lifted again at once so that I saw my way. The twilight faded as I went, a star appeared, and I was able to see the track no longer. I could go no further that night, yet before I lay down to sleep I decided to go and look over the edge of a wide depression in the moor that I saw a little way off. So I left the track and walked a few hundred yards, and when I got to the edge the hollow was full of mist all white underneath me. Another star appeared and a cold wind arose, and with the wind the mist flapped away like a curtain. And there was the city.

Nothing the shepherd had said was the least untrue or even exaggerated. The poor old man had told the simple truth, there is not a city like it in the world. What he had called thin spires were minarets, but the little domes on the top were clearly pure gold as he said. There were the marble terraces he described and the pure white palaces covered with carving and hundreds of minarets. The city was obviously of the East and yet where there should have been crescents on the domes of the minarets there were golden suns with rays, and wherever one looked one saw things that obscured its origin. I walked down to it, and, passing through a wicket gate of gold in a low wall of white marble, I entered the city. The heather went right up to the city's edge and beat against the marble wall whenever the wind blew it. Lights began to twinkle from high windows of blue glass as I walked up the white street, beautiful copper lanterns were lit up and let down from balconies by silver chains, from doors ajar came the sound of voices singing, and then I saw the men. Their faces were rather grey than black, and they wore beautiful robes of coloured silk with hems embroidered with gold and some with copper, and sometimes pacing down the marble ways with golden baskets hung on each side of them I saw the camels of which the old shepherd spoke.

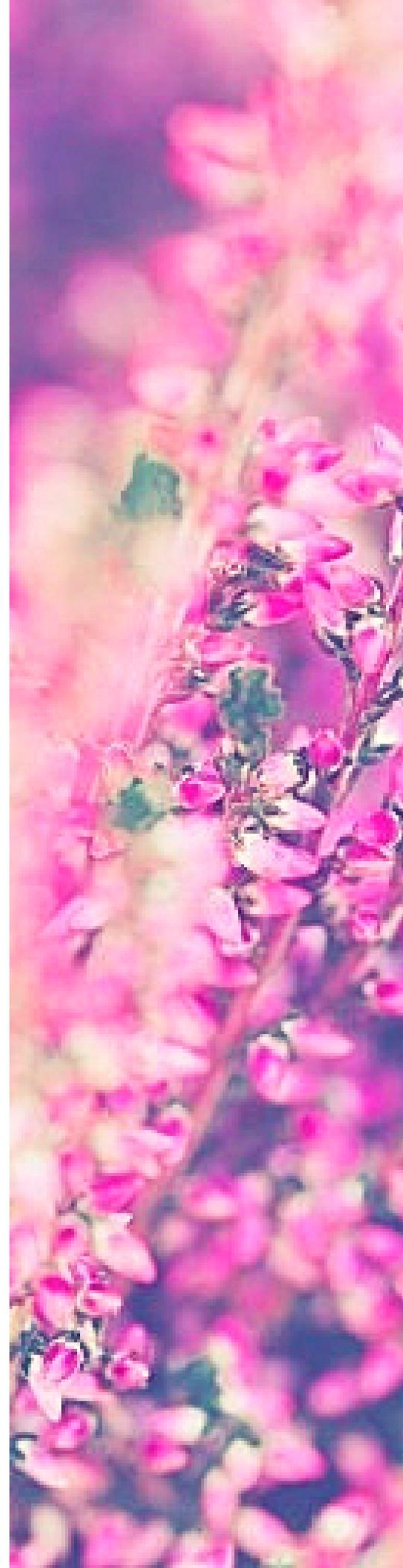
The people had kindly faces, but, though they were evidently friendly to strangers, I could not speak with them being ignorant of their language, nor were the sounds of the syllables they used like any language I had ever heard: they sounded more like grouse.

There are audio recordings of grouse available on the internet, but their calls are clipped and repetitious, unless he means the drumming displays from the males of certain species. If that's the case, then the people speak with taps and clicks. This isn't unknown in the real world. There are some African languages that use clicks as consonant sounds.

When I tried to ask them by signs whence they had come with their city they would only point to the moon, which was bright and full and was shining fiercely on those marble ways till the city danced in light.

They came from the moon, and yet have the sun as their symbol? Could we tie these people inot the soldiers of sun and moon mentioned by Lucian in True Story?

And now there began appearing one by one, slipping softly out through windows, men with stringed instruments in the balconies. They were strange instruments with huge bulbs of wood, and they played softly on them and very beautifully, and their queer voices softly sang to the music weird dirges of the griefs of their native land wherever that may be. And far off in the heart of the city others were singing too, the sound of it came to me wherever I roamed, not loud enough to disturb my thoughts, but gently turning the mind to pleasant





things. Slender carved arches of marble, as delicate almost as lace, crossed and re-crossed the ways wherever I went. There was none of that hurry of which foolish cities boast, nothing ugly or sordid so far as I could see. I saw that it was a city of beauty and song. I wondered how they had travelled with all that marble, how they had laid it down on Mallington Moor, whence they had come and what their resources were, and determined to investigate closely next morning, for the old shepherd had not troubled his head to think how the city came, he had only noted that the city was there (and of course no one believed him, though that is partly his fault for his dissolute ways). But at night one can see little and I had walked all day, so I determined to find a place to rest in. And just as I was wondering whether to ask for shelter of those silk-robed men by signs or whether to sleep outside the walls and enter again in the morning, I came to a great archway in one of the marble houses with two black curtains, embroidered below with gold, hanging across it. Over the archway were carved apparently in many tongues the words: "Here strangers rest." In Greek, Latin and Spanish the sentence was repeated and there was writing also in the language that you see on the walls of the great temples of Egypt, and Arabic and what I took to be early Assyrian and one or two languages I had never seen.

So, they have been doing this for a long time. Is the Moor the only entrance to their regio? What are the camels carrying if the industry of the city is self-contained? Most faeries are able to speak human languages as required. Given that the narrator is so interested in the causes of things, they may have decided to play mute, to avoid having to answer questions about haulage on marble and similar pedantries. Sometimes specifics ruin a story.

If they are magicians, no-one wants to, or is able to, talk to this man.

I entered through the curtains and found a tessellated marble court with golden braziers burning sleepy incense swinging by chains from the roof, all round the walls were comfortable mattresses lying upon the floor covered with cloths and silks. It must have been ten o'clock and I was tired. Outside the music still softly filled the streets, a man had set a lantern down on the marble way, five or six sat down round him, and he was sonorously telling them a story. Inside there were some already asleep on the beds, in the middle of the wide court under the braziers a woman dressed in blue was singing very gently, she did not move, but sung on and on, I never heard a song that was so soothing. I lay down on one of the mattresses by the wall, which was all inlaid with mosaics, and pulled over me some of the cloths with their beautiful alien work, and almost immediately my thoughts seemed part of the song that the woman was singing in the midst of the court under the golden braziers that hung from the high roof, and the song turned them to dreams, and so I fell asleep.

A small wind having arisen, I was awakened by a sprig of heather that beat continually against my face. It was morning on Mallington Moor, and the city was quite gone.

So the man may have entered the city using dream magic, or once the man fell asleep, they may have kept him that way with various arts, then just dumped him outside and let the sun make the regio boundary impermeable. Are these people faeries, the refugees of a distant civilisation, or actually far away, but linked to the moor by a faerie trod?

This year, once the podcast is done with the works of Lord Dunsany, we'll be heading off into the works of MR James. One of his stories is an apology where he gives the brief details of stories he has tried to write, but failed to conclude. I suppose every *Ars Magica* author has some of these. It often works out: my desire to write about Antilla took ten years to finally make it to the page. Still, for the podcast there are some items which keep floating from notebook to notebook, and it's time to send them out onto the web, where people can find a use for them, or not

Thumbelina Drone

The problem with creating magic items which are steered by an occupant is that the rules penalise them for being large. If you have a person who is like Tomb Thumb or Thumbelina, though, you could make a perfectly functional combat drone relatively cheaply. You might also have a magic item which shrinks down a person of average size, to allow them to act as pilot. Ghosts are even easier: the skull is the place of the grave, so you could put a poltergeist in one of these things, like the haunted bowling ball in "Mystery Men".

Vampiric ape

The quality control on the translations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* wasn't great. The Icelandic serialisation by Valdimar Ásmundsson has a half-vampiric ape in it. That sounds like a lot of fun, frankly. It's been back-translated as "Powers of Darkness". In a related idea, there's a valley in Norway that never gets direct sunlight. I think necromancers should live there.

Stories I have tried to write

Bunyips

When the white people came to Australia, they would sometimes hear a woman screaming in the wilderness. They'd also find animals dead, but with their heads bitten off. They blamed this on the bunyip, but we now know it was barking owls. I was working on a Bjornaer angle, but the owl appears to be an Australian native. I often use Australian animals in Faerie, though, and it seems like an interesting idea to have a Bjornaer necromancer who can become a sort of owl/banshee thing.

Smooth criminal

In the film clip for *Smooth Criminal*, Michael Jackson punches an enemy into the Twilight Void, leaving a cutout in the wall that looks like a silhouette. I'd like to know if any Criamon can do that. Are there creatures like the Scissormen in *Doom Patrol* that can do that, and is it a good or a bad thing? For a player, it loses their character, but for the character, that's ascension, isn't it?

Teleporting is impossible

I recall reading in an ancient copy of Fortean Times that medieval people believed people were never miraculously moved from one place to another instantly: instead, they were carried unharmed from place to place at vastly rapid speeds. This means that you can't teleport through a wall unless there's a mundane path around the wall. The idea is all tangled up in the belief that your personal matter mattered.

Our idea that provided your soul was still attached to whatever comes out of the transporter is you did not carry any weight with medieval theologians. Such a thing was a duplicate, not you, even if it housed your soul.

Augustine discussed this a lot in reference to the bodily Resurrection before judgement.

If you are to be given your old body back, glorified, what happens to the body of a cannibal? Does he get the material of your body back that he has absorbed into his body?

The theology takes a long time, and doesn't lead anywhere useful here, because Ars has chosen to allow teleportation, but I do rather like the idea that Leap of Homecoming is kind of like an actual Seven League Stride: you do go through the intervening space.

Chess variants

Lord Dunsany had an odd chess variant named after him, where a swarm of pawns attack a standard chess army. I also have a note here to explain bughouse chess. This is a sort of paired chess where each piece you take becomes a piece your partner can use against his rival. I think this suits necromancers. Charles Martel invented human chess. What does it do to you in a world full of faeries to take on the role of a knight, or a queen or a castle?

Personality traits from books

I note my diction changes when I read certain books. Can you develop personality traits by reading books? Do this occur at the same time as other learning? Is it required for the learning? It clearly is in certain mystagogic settings.

Saint Honore

The patron saint of bakers and pastries gets his first chapel in Paris in 1202. I blame House Jerbiton for this. See also the people who eat books made of phyllo pastry.

Sleep breaks

Medieval people didn't sleep through the night like us. That's a modern, industrialised, sleep pattern. Magi, further, need to be awake at dawn and dusk to keep their parmae up, so their sleep cycle is weirdly nyctophobic.



The eye that blunts the sword

I've been listening to Saga Thing, a podcast about Icelandic sagas, recently and there are some ongoing tropes. One is this fun little power: if the character sees a sword, the sword becomes blunt.

Let's model this.

MuTe 25 (R:Sight, D:Sun, T:Ind.) The sword becomes blunt, having a -3 Damage modifier.

It's basically "Edge of the Razor" in reverse. If a player argued for a Perdo Terram alternative, I'd allow it. (Base 3, +1 Touch, +2 Sun, +2 metal)

This sounds like a really useful power, although oddly in the sagas it never seems to make any difference to the outcome of battles. One hero is surprised by the power, and is unable to hurt his enemy for a few strikes. Then he adjusts his strategy and then hits the man hard enough to break the bone in his rival's arm. After that he works over the rest of the guy's skeleton. A hero knows his foe has this power, so he so brings two swords to a duel, letting the power fall on one before using the other to cut his enemy's head off.

I often feel the second look at a subject is the stronger, and my second take on this is that rather than altering the damage rating of the sword, it should just make it so that the sword cannot inflict Light or Medium wounds. This matches what's described above better: the first hero gets around the power by causing a Heavy wound, and then using the combat advantage given him by his opponent's injury to keep inflicting them.

Let's model this.

MuTe 30 (R:Sight, D:Sun, T:Ind.) The sword becomes blunt, having a -3 Damage modifier.

(Base 4 (highly unnatural), +2 Sight, +2 Sun, +2 metal)

A character without Might can spend a Fatigue level to spark a mystical power. Arguably both powers could be vested in one person, but there's something, to me, that seems a little odd about double dipping. There's something cosmological going on: you shouldn't have two bites at this particular cherry.

No hero seems to have this power: only villains, and no-one who uses it seems to prosper. Might it be a minor gift of the Infernal? If that's the case, you might trigger it with a Confidence point gained by sin.

House Mercere and the Last Mile Problem

The last mile problem was first discussed in communications but it also has applications in logistics. The redcaps in the early versions of the game were basically a postal service, but they are now essentially a logistical service: they spend a lot of time buying stuff for magi. They own merchant ships, for example, and have a network of factories (a term which means something like “warehouses” in the period). The Last Mile is a problem for them either way. Let’s define terms.

The Last Mile Problem is that when you ship something from one place to another, half the total shipping cost is paid in the final little part of the trip. The Mile is a metaphorical measurement. In Australia we call it the Last Kilometre problem, because we have no Webster spelling and base ten measurements. It happens because most of your economies of scale are stripped out in the final mile.

Say I want to move a box of scrolls from a covenant in Normandy to a covenant in Scotland. The item gets picked up by a guy who comes on a schedule and grabs all of the stuff to go from all of the magi, not just at your covenant but on his route. He drops it at a certain point (Confluensis, in this case). Sailing is the fastest, cheapest way to get around the Britain, so all the stuff from Normandy gets shipped to a Mercer House, presumably near a large port like Leith. Then a redcap has to deliver it. They need to go to a port and walk, or ride. If you are riding, you need to maintain horses.

Notice that, from House Mercere’s perspective, the cheap bit, on a per message basis, is in the middle? Having a postie on a route is less expensive than a courier making individual deliveries, but both are a lot more expensive than if they could just get magi to have a post box and turn up to collect from it. I’m guessing that this makes Venice, which has chapter houses from all over the place, a mail node. Similarly, House Tremere has a Tribunal every year: that makes it a seasonal mail node, I presume: it must be given the quantity of stuff exported. While that’s not on, they have a house covenant with the Quaesitores at a decent port.

So, messages travel faster, and more cheaply, between these high volume nodes. I’m kind of surprised we have not tried to map this, since it is obvious that there’s high volume traffic of valuable items and information between these sites. One problem is they seem to exist only erratically.

Let’s assume Magvillius is a node. I’m not sure why it should be: it’s so close to Venice there are good reasons for it not to be. Assume it has worn a strong historical groove into Hermetic society, and so it has inertia?

Does each Tribunal have at least one node? There are good reasons to assume each is near a port. It doesn’t need to be the largest city: Paris, as an example, is less good as a distribution node than Confluensis is, because sea travel is just better than land travel. This means that, for example, there’s some question as to if Icy North in The Greater Alps is a node, or if the whole thing is run from Magvillius. The Alps are crossed by only two paths, and getting ships through Gibraltar is annoying enough that the network might need a logistical station in the mountains here.

We know there are some obvious points for nodes: Shrouded Glen in Transylvania, Alexandria in Thebes, London Mercer House in Stonehenge. There’s an obvious lack of a central house in other places. Three Lakes, in Novgorod doesn’t seem to have this infrastructure. Is it Fengheld or Durenmar in the Rhine? In Iberia, it might be Barcelona? It’s the best fit of the four described, although it’s still not great. I’m tempted to suggest that it is unlikely, because trans-shipping between the Provencal and Iberian nodes are one of the ways to avoid the whole Alps business.

The other is to put a canal between the Rhine and Danube. Charlemagne wanted one, but if you made one, how would you keep it secret? Could you make a tunnel?

When a system is obviously imperfect, that leads to story ideas. We can see, if we look at the Order using the Last Mile Problem as a key concern of House Mercere, that there is a need for several new nodes. That’s a great reason to have a spring covenant that is constantly forced to maintain the network, travel to the other covenants, and source rare materials.

Saki is one of my favourite humorous authors. His life was cut short by the First World War, so his output wasn't vast, which has made him slip from consciousness. In this story, I'd like you to focus on something: is the boy using Free Expression to craft his desires onto a faerie, or is this the weakest demons from the Order of False Gods that we have ever seen? The plot hook is that a child, particularly an apprentice, could do much the same thing, to create a faerie or demonic ally.

The recording quoted in the podcast was released into the public domain through Librivox by Peter Yearsley. Get used to his voice: he'll be your guide to the world of MR James in 2018. Thanks, Peter Why.

**Sredni Vashtar :
faerie ally or
tiny false god?**

Conradin was ten years old, and the doctor had pronounced his professional opinion that the boy would not live another five years. The doctor was silky and effete, and counted for little, but his opinion was endorsed by Mrs. de Ropp, who counted for nearly everything. Mrs. De Ropp was Conradin's cousin and guardian, and in his eyes she represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real; the other two-fifths, in perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination. One of these days Conradin supposed he would succumb to the mastering pressure of wearisome necessary things—such as illnesses and coddling restrictions and drawn-out dullness. Without his imagination, which was rampant under the spur of loneliness, he would have succumbed long ago.

Mrs. de Ropp would never, in her honestest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him "for his good" was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome. Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian, and from the realm of his imagination she was locked out—an unclean thing, which should find no entrance.

In the dull, cheerless garden, overlooked by so many windows that were ready to open with a message not to do this or that, or a reminder that medicines were due, he found little attraction. The few fruit-trees that it contained were set jealously apart from his plucking, as though they were rare specimens of their kind blooming in an arid waste; it would probably have been difficult to find a market-gardener who would have offered ten shillings for their entire yearly produce. In a forgotten corner, however, almost hidden behind a dismal shrubbery, was a disused tool-shed of respectable proportions, and within its walls Conradin found a haven, something that took on the varying aspects of a playroom and a cathedral. He had peopled it with a legion of familiar phantoms, evoked partly from fragments of history and partly from his own brain, but it also boasted two inmates of flesh and blood. In one corner lived a ragged-plumaged Houdan hen, on which the boy lavished an affection that had scarcely another outlet. Further back in the gloom stood a large hutch, divided into two compartments, one of which was fronted with close iron bars. This was the abode of a large polecat-ferret, which a friendly butcher-boy had once smuggled, cage and all, into its present quarters, in exchange for a long-secreted hoard of small silver. Conradin was dreadfully afraid of the lithe, sharp-fanged beast, but it was his most treasured possession. Its very presence in the tool-shed was a secret and fearful joy, to be kept scrupulously from the knowledge of the Woman, as he privately dubbed his cousin. And one day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the beast a wonderful name, and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion. The Woman indulged in religion once a week at a church near by, and took Conradin with her, but to him the church service was an alien rite in the House of Rimmon. Every Thursday, in the dim and musty silence of the tool-shed, he worshipped with mystic and elaborate ceremonial before the wooden hutch where dwelt Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret. Red flowers in their season and scarlet berries in the winter-time were offered at his shrine, for he was a god who laid some special stress on the fierce impatient side of things, as opposed to the Woman's religion, which, as far as Conradin could observe, went to great lengths in the contrary direction. And on great festivals powdered nutmeg was strewn in front of his hutch, an important feature of the offering being that the nutmeg had to be stolen. These festivals were of irregular occurrence, and were chiefly appointed to celebrate some passing event. On one occasion, when Mrs. de Ropp suffered from acute toothache for three days, Conradin kept up the festival during the entire three days, and almost succeeded in persuading himself that Sredni Vashtar was personally responsible for the toothache. If the malady had lasted for another day the supply of nutmeg would have given out.

The Houdan hen was never drawn into the cult of Sredni Vashtar. Conradin had long ago settled that she was an Anabaptist. He did not pretend to have the remotest knowledge as to what an Anabaptist was, but he privately hoped that it was dashing and not very respectable. Mrs. de Ropp was the ground plan on which he based and detested all respectability.

After a while Conradin's absorption in the tool-shed began to attract the notice of his guardian. "It is not good for him to be pottering down there in all weathers," she promptly decided, and at breakfast one morning she announced that the Houdan hen had been sold and taken away overnight. With her short-sighted eyes she peered at Conradin, waiting for an outbreak of rage and sorrow, which she was ready to rebuke with a flow of excellent precepts and reasoning. But Conradin said nothing: there was nothing to be said. Something perhaps in his white set face gave her a momentary qualm, for at tea that afternoon there was toast on the table, a delicacy which she usually banned on the ground that it was bad for him; also because the making of it "gave trouble," a deadly offence in the middle-class feminine eye.

"I thought you liked toast," she exclaimed, with an injured air, observing that he did not touch it.

"Sometimes," said Conradin.

In the shed that evening there was an innovation in the worship of the hutch-god. Conradin had been wont to chant his praises, to-night he asked a boon.

"Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar."

The thing was not specified. As Sredni Vashtar was a god he must be supposed to know. And choking back a sob as he looked at that other empty corner, Conradin went back to the world he so hated.

And every night, in the welcome darkness of his bedroom, and every evening in the dusk of the tool-shed, Conradin's bitter litany went up: "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar."

Mrs. de Ropp noticed that the visits to the shed did not cease, and one day she made a further journey of inspection.

"What are you keeping in that locked hutch?" she asked. "I believe it's guinea-pigs. I'll have them all cleared away."

Conradin shut his lips tight, but the Woman ransacked his bedroom till she found the carefully hidden key, and forthwith marched down to the shed to complete her discovery. It was a cold afternoon, and Conradin had been bidden to keep to the house. From the furthest window of the dining-room the door of the shed could just be seen beyond the corner of the shrubbery, and there Conradin stationed himself. He saw the Woman enter, and then he imagined her opening the door of the sacred hutch and peering down with her short-sighted eyes into the thick straw bed where his god lay hidden. Perhaps she would prod at the straw in her clumsy impatience. And Conradin fervently breathed his prayer for the last time. But he knew as he prayed that he did not believe. He knew that the Woman would come out presently with that pursed smile he loathed so well on her face, and that in an hour or two the gardener would carry away his wonderful god, a god no longer, but a simple brown ferret in a hutch. And he knew that the Woman would triumph always as she triumphed now, and that he would grow ever more sickly under her pestering and domineering and

superior wisdom, till one day nothing would matter much more with him, and the doctor would be proved right. And in the sting and misery of his defeat, he began to chant loudly and defiantly the hymn of his threatened idol:

Sredni Vashtar went forth,
His thoughts were red thoughts
and his teeth were white.
His enemies called for peace,
but he brought them death.
Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful.

And then of a sudden he stopped his chanting and drew closer to the window-pane. The door of the shed still stood ajar as it had been left, and the minutes were slipping by. They were long minutes, but they slipped by nevertheless. He watched the starlings running and flying in little parties across the lawn; he counted them over and over again, with one eye always on that swinging door. A sour-faced maid came in to lay the table for tea, and still Conradin stood and waited and watched. Hope had crept by inches into his heart, and now a look of triumph began to blaze in his eyes that had only known the wistful patience of defeat. Under his breath, with a furtive exultation, he began once again the paean of victory and devastation. And presently his eyes were rewarded: out through that doorway came a long, low, yellow-and-brown beast, with eyes a-blink at the waning daylight, and dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat. Conradin dropped on his knees. The great polecat-ferret made its way down to a small brook at the foot of the garden, drank for a moment, then crossed a little plank bridge and was lost to sight in the bushes. Such was the passing of Sredni Vashtar.

"Tea is ready," said the sour-faced maid; "where is the mistress?"

"She went down to the shed some time ago," said Conradin.

And while the maid went to summon her mistress to tea, Conradin fished a toasting-fork out of the sideboard drawer and proceeded to toast himself a piece of bread. And during the toasting of it and the buttering of it with much butter and the slow enjoyment of eating it, Conradin listened to the noises and silences which fell in quick spasms beyond the dining-room door. The loud foolish screaming of the maid, the answering chorus of wondering ejaculations from the kitchen region, the scuttering footsteps and hurried embassies for outside help, and then, after a lull, the scared sobbings and the shuffling tread of those who bore a heavy burden into the house.

"Whoever will break it to the poor child? I couldn't for the life of me!" exclaimed a shrill voice. And while they debated the matter among themselves, Conradin made himself another piece of toast.