Casting The Runes

Occult Investigation in the World of M.R. James

By Paul StJohn Mackintosh

Kickstarter Special Preview

The Design Mechanism

This special preview gives you a glimpse inside Casting the Runes, the new GUMSHOE-powered game of occult investigation, set in the world of M. R James' celebrated ghost stories and tales of the supernatural.

Written by Paul StJohn Mackintosh, and published by The Design Mechanism (creators of Mythras), we are launching our Kickstarter Campaign on January 2ND 2020. As you can see from this preview, the book is essentially finished: writing is done, editing complete, and even layout is finalised. The Kickstarter campaign is therefore aimed at funding the book's physical production in standard and prestige formats, and commissioning new art to replace the Public Domain pieces we've used in this pre-production edition.

What this means is that as soon as the campaign closes, Backers will have immediate access to the pre-production PDF and can start playing Casting the Runes immediately. No waiting months for a finished product; we have it ready to go.

Stretch goals for the project aim to increase the production values incrementally: adding a leatherette cover, dustjacket, book marks, and other embellishments to create a prestige version that wouldn't look out of place on the shelves of Kings College library at Cambridge University, where M. R. James was Provost. There are a couple of other stretch goals too, and these will be revealed during the campaign.

We hope you enjoy browsing these preview pages; we'll be offering more previews as the Kickstarter progresses. For news on the Kickstarter launch, keep an eye on the following sites, where we'll be making more announcements in due course.

https://www.facebook.com/designmechanism

https://www.facebook.com/pg/M-R-James-54831232321

https://thedesignmechanism.com

https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/designmechanism/

https://www.yog-sothoth.com/

Introduction

"Here you have a story written with the sole object of inspiring a pleasing terror in the reader; and as I think, that is the true aim of the ghost story." - M.R. James

Casting the Runes is a roleplaying game (RPG) based on the GUMSHOE system for investigative RPGs, which was created by Robin Laws under the auspices of Pelgrane Press to model "stories where investigators uncover a series of clues, and interpret them to solve a mystery" - an apt description of much of the classic horror fiction of Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936). The unique character of James's stories, and his own personality, which fed into his creation of the sub-genre of the "antiquarian ghost story," are what inspired us to create this game.

Here, player-characters, dubbed "Investigators" for game purposes, proceed step by step to unearth the unearthly, under the guidance of Game Masters, or GMs for short. (Some James fans may prefer to designate their GMs as Masters in keeping with many Edwardian schools and colleges.)

The classic ghost story, replete with "malevolence and terror, the glare of evil faces, 'the stony grin of unearthly malice,' pursuing forms in darkness, and 'long-drawn, distant screams'," in James's words, is the mood we're aiming at. And for the occult detection element, read on...

Why this Game?

Kenneth Hite, at the start of his introduction to *Trail of Cthulhu* , wrote: "This game exists to adapt the greatest RPG of all time, *Call of Cthulhu*, to a different rules set, the GUMSHOE engine. Why on Earth would we do a thing like that?" Only, this game has gone one step further, and effectively adapted, not one pre-eminent RPG, but two. Why? Well, it's primarily the Cthulhu component of those titles. I love Lovecraftian horror, write it regularly, and revere both *Call of Cthulhu* and *Trail of Cthulhu*. But the success and popularity of the Cthulhu Mythos has tended to bring other styles of horror under its sway, and in the RPG space especially. I wince when I see a *Call of Cthulhu* or *Trail of Cthulhu* GM or scenario writer go through contortions to rationalize how some traditional spook or monster or legend is actually a Great Old One or one of Lovecraft's alien species.

Applied carelessly, this diminishes the whole rich global corpus of supernatural traditions and folklore to a one-stop-shop where everything is Yog-Sothothery, the true sources of terror get lost in the scramble to evoke the Capital-Letter-Entity-of-the-Week, and there is only one explanation for the inexplicable. Games run on that basis may faithfully reflect H.P. Lovecraft's own rationalistic materialism, but there's no need for gamers to be confined within those limits. And Pelgrane Press has helped broaden the scope of horror gaming in exactly this way, with RPGs like *Night's Black Agents*, *The Esoterrorists* and *Fear Itself*, and resources like The *Book of Unremitting Horror*.

Also, the Cthulhu Mythos tends to impose a particular style of play, even within *Trail of Cthulhu*. The Sanity mechanic is an inspired, perennially fun, game device, but it reflects the whole slide-towards-doom lemming rush of many Lovecraftian RPG adventures, where the players know their characters are doomed anyway, and part of the enjoyment is the creative and stylish ways in which they meet their final Nemesis. In my opinion, this predisposes things towards the pulp end of the spectrum, with widescreen effects, big events, roller-coaster thrills. So much Lovecraftian fiction,

and Cthulhu Mythos gaming, in my view, plays out less as existential or psychological horror than as a disaster movie, with Cthulhu as just another MEE asteroid. Nothing wrong with that, except that two classic games already exist to do it. And their mechanisms, resources, and systemic biases tend to push things away from another flavour of horror. "You must have horror and also malevolence," James remarked in *Ghosts - Treat Them Gently!*, his essay on ghost story writing. "Not less necessary, however, is reticence." And in 1929 in *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*, he added: "Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories." Reticence is the last quality you'd expect from a Cthulhu Mythos game. M.R. James wrote some of the most powerful, enduring, horror stories in the English language, so he probably had a point.

So far, that reads like a list of negatives: What about the positives? Well, one is the chance to realize some of the most enduring, evocative ghost stories and horror tales ever written, unequalled in their field. Another is to tap back into the vast heritage of traditional folk tales, legends, occult practices and beliefs, and play them out on their own merits, to enjoy the archetypes and fears they embody. A third, as I've hinted, is the opportunity to recreate the kind of horror that M.R. James excelled at, the chill, atmospheric, measured, often quiet escalation towards something genuinely horrifying. Sandy Petersen, the master himself, has paid tribute to M.R. James's three rules of ghost story writing (malign entity, familiar setting, no jargon) as the basis of good horror RPG scenarios.

I don't think it's just relative popularity that dictates that no one has yet tried to turn any of James's creations into soft toys like Cthulhu plushies. There's a lot of built-in bathos in the Cthulhu Mythos, with its pulpy apocalyptic hysteria, which Lovecraft himself may or may not have been conscious of. M.R. James may have indulged in many a dry donnish chuckle in

MONTAGU RHODES JAMES (1862–1936, SCHOLAR AND MASTER OF THE GHOST STORY, IS THE INSPIRATION FOR CASTING THE RUNES

his stories, but his climactic horrors are pure terror. The supernatural never seems unbelievable in M.R. James, whereas Lovecraft's painstakingly, scientifically rationalised horrors too often end up seeming simply ludicrous. I think it's no coincidence that the current revival of folk horror has burgeoned almost entirely outside the Lovecraftian orbit.

All this explains why *Casting the Runes* has no Sanity mechanic. For game masters who want to reintroduce one, it's all there in *Trail of Cthulhu*. In our view, the GUMSHOE Stability mechanic is more than enough to model the frights and shocks of Jamesian ghostly encounters, as well as the fact that few to none of James's protagonists end up

gibbering in a padded cell. They may die horribly, or recover uncertainly from terrifying encounters, but those encounters tend to reinforce a more traditional world-view, rather than blast human minds with their cosmic insignificance. Unhappily for the characters, it's a world-view teeming with genuine evil and occult menaces, but those menaces at least have a universal eschatological significance, and all the more dark and frightful for that.

Why the Period?

Casting the Runes focuses on a very tight historical band, roughly between when M.R. James published *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* in 1904, and when he published *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* in 1925. In practice, it's biased towards the earlier part of that period, roughly the Edwardian and immediately post-Edwardian gilded age from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to August 1914 - even though James's own stories embrace settings and protagonists from the Twenties, via the High and Early Victorian periods, right back to the Georgian and even Restoration eras. Why? There are two reasons, one narrowly related to the current RPG market, the other to broader issues of style and period.

Firstly, there are already plenty of sourcebooks, supplements, and core materials in *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Call of Cthulhu*, as well as other dedicated RPGs, to allow GMs to set their campaigns and scenarios in other epochs. The Victorian age, even the late Victorian period of early Wells and Conan Doyle, is already well covered by *Cthulhu by Gaslight* and other sources, including legion steampunk games. The later 1920s and the 1930s have deep, deep coverage courtesy of *Call of Cthulhu*, and the reams of spinoffs supporting British and European settings, as well as ToC itself. GMs and players who want to relocate their Jamesian horror to the realms of Agatha Christie's Poirot and the earliest Alfred Hitchcock movies are warmly recommended to pick up a copy of Kenneth Hite's superb *Trail of Cthulhu* supplement *Bookhounds of London,* and its supporting companion *Book of the Smoke.* Those with a hankering for a (much) earlier period can delve into Kenneth's Tudor necromancy supplement *The School*

of Night, or his equally exhaustive exploration of *Alchemy.* You couldn't do better, and we won't even try.

Secondly, then, there's the question of M.R. James's own style, and that of his contemporaries, many of them pioneers of tales of occult detection. Ramsey Campbell has called M.R. James "the most influential stylist in British supernatural fiction," and his dry, laconic, urbane stance is hard to imagine in an earlier era, even the 1890s. It's far closer to the style of Saki's short stories, Kipling's tales and poetry, or G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday,* all from writers who'd internalized the influence of the Nineties, and moved on beyond both Victorian moral earnestness and equally effusive, breathy Aestheticism. To some extent, that may reflect James's own struggles with belief in his youth, the son of an Evangelical Anglican minister who became conspicuously less doctrinaire. It definitely mirrors the spirit of an age. It certainly reflects cultural and social changes in full swing as the 20th century began. If we expanded the game to embrace all the periods James wrote about, we'd lose that unique flavour, as well as producing a hopelessly unwieldy book.

M.R. James's Edwardian contemporaries also included the pioneers of occult detection, especially Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, E.F. and R.H. Benson, and the authors of the Flaxman Low series of adventures. Some wrote self-consciously in the shadow of Sherlock Holmes; all helped make the Edwardian era a heyday in the development of this distinctive sub-genre. *The Great God Pan* first appeared in 1890, *The Experiences of Flaxman Low* appeared in 1899, contemporary with many of Machen's other horror tales, *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* in 1908, and *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* in 1913. Even Saki produced a few breathtakingly brief horror tales that could inspire superb scenarios. The chronological and thematic parallels with James's own ghost stories are too close to ignore: only a couple of James's protagonists are tagged as investigators, but many of them do investigate, unearth clues, and follow mysteries to their dark conclusion. This game is designed to serve up the period details, spectres and sorcery, to allow GMs and players to evoke a Jamesian world of contemplative, often passive inquiry, or
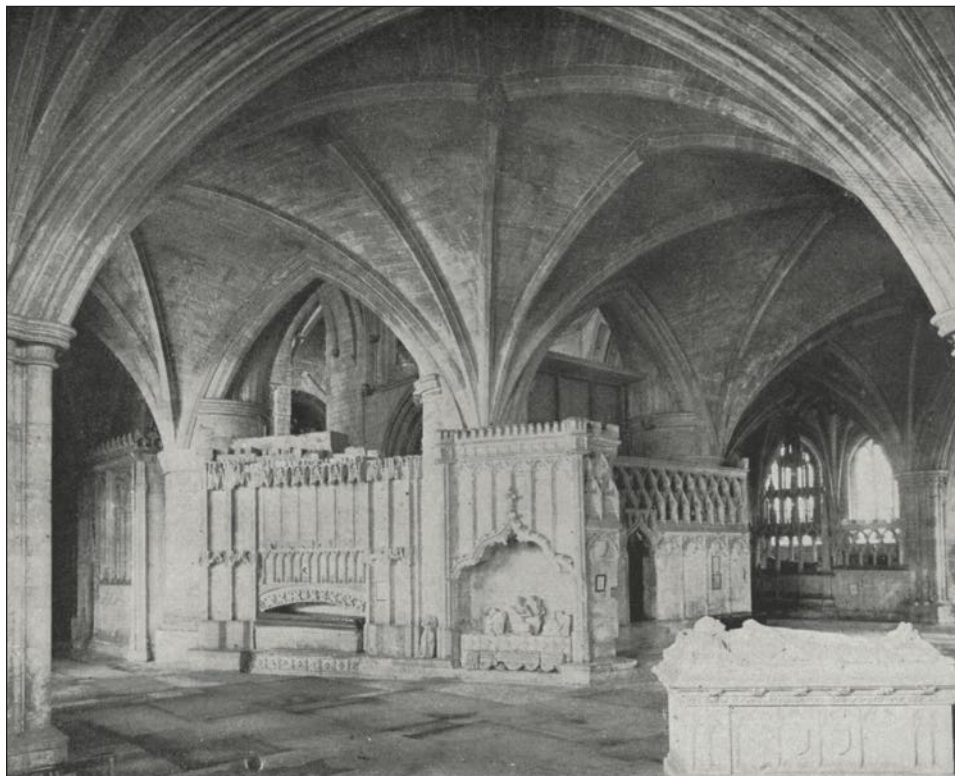
Investigators

In *Casting the Runes*, player characters are called Investigators. M.R. James only referred to two of his fictional protagonists as investigators - Mr Somerton the antiquary in *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, and Mr Lake in *An Episode of Cathedral History*. But investigating is what most of them do, and the term absolutely fits people like Thomas Carnacki, Flaxman Low, John Silence, and the other fictional occult investigators of that period. It's up to the player whether his or her Investigator also takes up the occult and ghost hunting as an occupation.

As well as an Occupation, all Investigators will have a social role or Class, and a Drive that motivates them.

Their social class is usually, but not always, dictated by their occupation and social role. Their Drive is a personal impulse, character trait or defining flaw that motivates them and pushes them through all the twists and turns of investigations, sometimes literally driving them to their doom.

As a starting player, you get to choose your Occupation and your Drive. Your GM will usually decide how many Build Points you get to build your set of Abilities - normally a function of the number of players.

Unlike some other roleplaying games, there are no characteristic rolls and skill percentages - almost every aspect of your character is a function of your Abilities, and Health and Stability are especially important. You also get to define your Sources of Stability, the pillars of your existence that fortify you when facing the eldritch and arcane. The rest - hair colour, dress style, sporting affiliations, manner, etc. - is up to you.

SOMETHING HAS BEEN DISTURBED DURING RESTORATION WORK TO THE CHOIR AT EASTMINSTER CATHEDRAL AND THE INVESTIGATORS HAVE BEEN CALLED IN.

Build Points and Abilities

When an Investigator is created, the GM gives their player a set number of Build Points, usually determined by the size of the group of Investigators (i.e. the number of regular players in the campaign). These are assigned to the Investigative Abilities, the core skills and capabilities of each character - see the Gameplay chapter for more detail. Some of these abilities, the

Occupational Abilities characteristic of the Investigator's chosen Occupation, are available at a 2-for-1 ratio.

Players start with 1 point each in Stability and Health. Players start with a Class equal to the lowest limit for their Occupation, but any further allocation of initial Class is from their Build Points, on a 1-for-1 basis, not the 2-for-1 ratio for an Occupational speciality.

Ability Caps

Casting the Runes imposes Ability caps on certain Abilities for normal human characters. This is to avoid unrealistically tough and rock-steady characters with unshakeable psyches and rhino-like physiques.

As a general capping rule, the second highest rating in any Ability must be at least half that of the highest rating. Specifically for Stability and Health, the cap on these essential General Abilities is 12. Would-be magicians should also note the effect of Occult on Stability. Class is capped at the top of the range for the particular Occupation. Any increase will come later in the course of play.

Investigative Abilities

Investigative Abilities are central to any GUM-SHOE character; they enable you to gather information and drive the plot forward. The number of Build Points each player spends on Investigative Abilities varies according to the number of regularly attending players, according to the following formula.

Number of players	Investigative Build Points
2	80% of x
3	60% of x
4	55% of x
5+	50% of x

Where x is the total number of Investigative Abilities the GM includes in the campaign (round up). The basic Casting the Runes rules give 36 Investigative Abilities, so a party of 5 Investigators would receive 18 Investigative built points each, while a party of 3 would receive 22 each.

The GM leads the group through the list of Investigative Abilities. Parties of players should aim at broad coverage, but, through Connections, non-player characters can provide certain much-needed Investigative Abilities.

Players who can only attend every now and then get the same Investigative build points as everyone else, but are not counted toward the total when deciding how many points to allocate.

What Good Are Investigative Ratings?

Players used to the bumbling half-competence of their characters in other investigative game systems may be surprised to learn how effective even a single rating point is.

Any rating in an Investigative Ability indicates a high degree of professional accomplishment or impressive natural talent. If you have an ability relevant to the task at hand, you automatically succeed in discovering any information or overcoming any obstacles necessary to propel you from the current scene further into the story.

You may ask to spend points to gain special benefits. Sometimes the GM will offer you the chance to spend points. In other circumstances she may accept your suggestions of ways to gain special benefits. Use them wisely; spent points do not return until the next investigation begins.

Once all of your preferred Investigative Abilities are covered, you are permitted, if you desire, to reserve any remaining build points to spend as situations arise during play.

You may assign yourself additional Abilities, or increase your Ratings in the ones you've chosen, as seems appropriate to your character and the situations

she finds herself in. When you choose to do this, you are not suddenly acquiring Abilities on the spot, but simply revealing for the first time what the character has been able to do all along.

If you want, you can save build points from character creation to spend later. If your GM is running an ongoing series, you will accumulate additional build points during play.

INVESTIGATIVE BENCHMARKS

When choosing Investigative Abilities it is better to get a large number of Abilities with fairly low Ratings. Even a 1-point Rating is worth having. You'll rarely want to spend more than 3 or 4 points on any one Investigative Ability. You must have an Investigative Ability at a Rating of at least 1 to get useful information from it.

General Abilities

Each player gets 60 points to spend on General Abilities, regardless of group size.

General Abilities use different rules than Investigative Abilities. When choosing General Abilities, you'll want to concentrate your points among a few abilities, giving you comparatively higher Ratings than you want in Investigative Abilities.

You start the game with 1 point each in Health and Stability.

Although there is no set cap on the other General Abilities beyond Health and Stability, the second highest rating must be at least half that of the highest rating.

MERTON COLLEGE, OXFORD. MANY INVESTIGATORS WILL HAVE ACADEMIC BACKGROUNDS AT THE UNIVERSITIES AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

Occupations and Social Roles

It's somewhat ironic to have a list of Occupations for the golden age of the gentleman or gentlewoman of private means. When the Olympic Games were held in London in 1908, the British Olympic organising committee made sure that the regulations for the Games explicitly included definitions of of amateur. That indicates how much resistance there still was at the highest levels of Edwardian Britain to the very idea of a
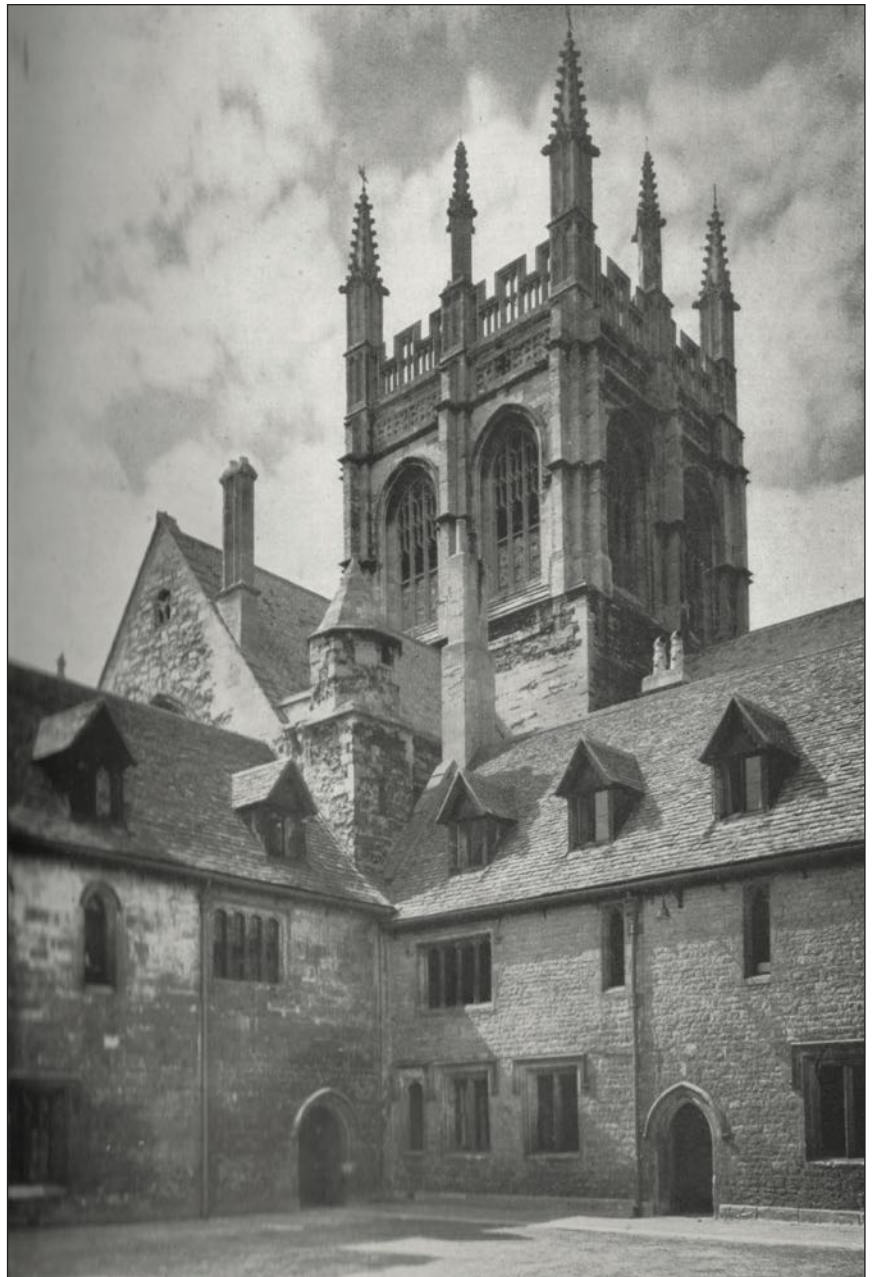
depend on your branch of the Services, but duty and sacrifice are common to them all. You may be on active duty, on the reserve list, or a retired or invalided veteran. If you had the rank of captain or above, you carry it into civilian life.

Occupational Abilities: Athletics, Fieldcraft, Firearms, Intimidation, Scuffling, Weapons.

Army: add Conceal, Driving, Stealth.

Navy: add Astronomy, Navigation, Sailing.

Officer: add Bureaucracy, Reassurance, Riding.

Royal Army Medical Corps: add First Aid, Medicine, Reassurance.

Class: 2-5 (officers), 1-3 (lower ranks)

Special: Thanks to your time in the service, you can steady the nerves of your comrades. You can use 2 points from your Reassurance pool to buck up panicking or erratic characters, so long as your own Stability is above 0.

Serving or retired, you can use any Interpersonal skill to work your way into a military facility of your own branch of service, or Connections to enlist the help of former comrades-in-arms.

MISCREANT

"She removed her neighbour's landmark: leastways she took in a fair piece of the best pasture in Betton parish what belonged by rights to two children as hadn't no one to speak for them, and they say years after she went from bad to worse, and made out false papers to gain thousands of pounds up in London." - M.R. James, *A Neighbour's Landmark*

You are the apple that has fallen very far from the tree, cad or adventuress, the scapegrace child of good family gone bad. You still bear the signs of good breeding, but you have adopted ways of life and done things that would get you disinherited, if it hasn't happened already.

You may disdain the common criminal, but you share far more than you would ever admit with them. You can charm your way into drawing rooms and exclusive soirees, but your hosts may regret it when they find their valuables missing and their closest secrets plundered.

Occupational Abilities: Bargain, Charm, Conceal, Disguise, Filch, Charm, Locksmith, Scuffle, Sense Trouble, Stealth, Streetwise.

Class: 2-4

Special: You may replenish your purse by spending Charm Pool Points, to an extent determined by the GM. This reflects cheating at cards, confidence tricks and other nefarious income.
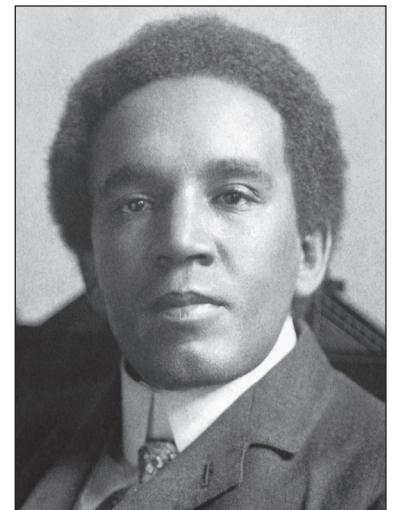
MUSICIAN

"It was that music. Oh, don't play it any more! I liked it at first, and then all at once it seemed to terrify me!" - E. and H. Heron, *The Story of Saddler's Croft*

You are a distinguished soloist or the concertmaster in a major orchestra such as the Hallé or the Queen's Hall Orchestra. Or you could be a struggling piano teacher in a provincial town, or a half-crazed viola-player in an urban garret. In any case, your repertoire may hold charms to soothe the savage beast - or lay unquiet souls to rest.

THE MUSICIAN: SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR, VIOLINIST AND COMPOSER

Occupational Abilities: Art, Craft, Charm, Languages, Library Use, Reassurance.

Class: 2-5

Special: You can play rousing tunes to stir the spirits of your friends. You can use 2 points from your Art pool to buck up panicking or erratic characters, or add 1 to their Stability test against a threat or a fright, so long as your own Stability is above 0.

Naturalist

"Across a broad level plain they looked upon ranges of great hills, whose uplands - some green, some furred with woods - caught the light of a sun, westering but not yet low. And all the plain was fertile, though the river which traversed it was nowhere seen. There were copses, green wheat, hedges and pasture-land: the little compact white moving cloud marked the evening train." - M.R. James, *A View from a Hill*

You are the scientific world's equivalent of an Antiquary, a dedicated amateur and magpie intellect. You revere and celebrate the wonders of Nature, and study them enthusiastically, if unsystematically. You are found in the Great Outdoors, identifying and collecting every kind of plant, animal and insect.

Occupational Abilities: Athletics, Biology, Fieldcraft, First Aid, Folklore, Geology, Library Use, Photography, Shadowing, Stealth.

Class: 2-5

Special: Once per adventure, if you are in open country, you can find some plant or mineral that will help further the current adventure, such as wolfsbane to ward off that werewolf, or natural rock salt for a Circle of Protection.

Nurse

"The doctor intimated to the nurses that the patient was not out of the wood yet" - M.R. James, *Mr. Humphreys and His Inheritance*

You are a Florence Nightingale or a medical orderly, dispenser of comfort and relief. As the District Nurse in a rural community or an urban slum, you may the only form of healthcare that the poor locals have access to, and a ready source of local lore and gossip. You are liable to be far closer to the social level of your patients than the distant, aloof doctor, and more tolerant of folk remedies and old ways than his scientific mindset.

Occupational Abilities: Assess Honesty, Bookkeeping, First Aid, Folklore, Medicine, Pharmacy, Reassurance.

Class: 2-4

Special: You can use Medicine, Connections or Reassurance to access the private areas of hospitals or obtain drugs from pharmacists. You can also use these to secure lore and gossip from locals (Granny Macdonald in the Gorbals, grateful for your dose of laudanum, tells you an old tradition of her clan...). When you use First Aid, each point spent heals 3 Health points, rather than 2. (You gain 2 Health points rather than 1 for each First Aid point you spend to heal yourself.) You can stabilize the condition of a seriously wounded victim by spending only 1 First Aid point, rather than 2.

Occultist

"Although Flaxman Low has devoted his life to the study of psychical phenomena, he has always been most earnest in warning persons who feel inclined to dabble in spiritualism, without any serious motive for doing so, of the mischief and danger accruing to the rash experimenter. Extremely few persons are sufficiently masters of themselves to permit of their calling in the vast unknown forces outside ordinary human knowledge for mere purposes of amusement." - E. and H. Heron, *The Story of Saddler's Croft*

THE OCCULTIST: PLAYBOY SORCEROR, CULT-LEADER, SATANIST, THE SCANDALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NAME OF ALEISTER CROWLEY ARE TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT. MANY OF THE RUMOURS ARE SPREAD BY CROWLEY HIMSELF

You are a wary walker on the boundaries of the Unseen, probably not a full believer, but definitely exposed to the supernatural. You may be a Theosophist or a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, or a reluctant medium called by the spirits to

Abilities

Abilities define the characters in terms of what they can do, but are more than just skills - Health or Stability above all. Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of their use in an investigation. Creative players should be able to propose additional uses as unexpected situations confront their characters. Certain specific actions may overlap between several Abilities. For example, a poison may be detectable with Forensics, Medicine or Pharmacy.

GMs should still feel free to modify or to create their own Abilities, though, as well as to tweak and expand on the various example benefits and bonuses. Game balance and the number of Investigative Abilities and General Abilities versus build points and pool points are the main elements to keep in mind.

Many of these Abilities are taken directly from the GUMSHOE System Reference Document. As per the terms of that document, though, Ability descriptions and example bullet points have been rewritten to add more of the right Edwardian period flavour, and some have been renamed accordingly.

Investigative Abilities

Investigative Abilities are the bread and butter of GUMSHOE characters, and enjoy special rules for their allocation and use.

Investigative abilities are divided into the following sub-groups: Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical. The purpose of the sub-groups, aside from realism, is to allow players to quickly find the best ability for the task during play, by scanning the most likely portion of the overall list.

The GUMSHOE system, as it has evolved, has progressively increased the importance of Investigative Ability pool point spends to obtain in-game benefits. Without infringing on the basic principle that Investigative Abilities always secure core clues and information for free, *Casting the Runes* provides examples of recommended benefits for in-adventure Investigative Ability Pool Point spends. These are not binding, and GMs should feel free to expand on them or develop their own - or scale back the whole principle if they find it too cumbersome. One pointer: Investigative Abilities are free for information-gathering and analysis, but active use of them is more suited to point spends.

One type of benefit common to all Investigative Abilities is that a spend from the Ability can yield dedicated Pool Points to boost General Abilities in a particular situation or scene. For instance, a spend of 1 point in Architecture prior to a confrontation in a church yields 3-4 Pool Points per Investigator to boost Firearms or Stealth, because the party's Architecture

Anthropology (Academic)

You are an expert in the study of human cultures, from the Stone Age to the Steam Age. You can:

Identify artifacts and rituals of living cultures

Describe the customs of a foreign group or local sub-culture

Extrapolate the practices of an unknown culture from similar examples

Example Benefit: Draw analogies from common social rituals to enlist, or intimidate, a group; a 2-point spend transforms the local villagers from wary sceptics to enthusiastic followers.

Archaeology (Academic)

You excavate and study the structures and artifacts of historical cultures and civilizations. You can:

- Tell how long something has been buried
- Identify artifacts by culture and usage
- Distinguish real artifacts from fakes
- Navigate inside ruins and catacombs
- Describe the customs of ancient or historical cultures Spot hidden underground features

Example Benefit: spot exit, trick, trap, etc. in an archaeological context; a 1-point spend reveals a side alcove in a half-excavated passage grave, allowing Surprise against any adversary.

Architecture (Academic)

You know how buildings are planned and constructed. You can:

- Guess what lies around the corner while exploring an unknown structure
- Spot discontinuities and voids that indicate a secret room or passage
- Identify a building's age, architectural style, original purpose, and history of modifications
- Construct stable makeshift structures
- Identify elements vital to a building's structural integrity

Example Benefit: spot weak points, secret doors or peculiarities of a structure; a 1-point spend gives the party 3 Pool Points each of Shadowing to trail the suspected diabolist through Victoria Station.

Art (Technical)

You are a practitioner of an artistic discipline, from painting to literature. You must specify what art you are proficient in. You can allocate build points to one discipline, or spread them across several, but your Rating does not transfer between different artistic disciplines.

Example Benefit: create work or perform to gain money, impress and win trust, or barter for other
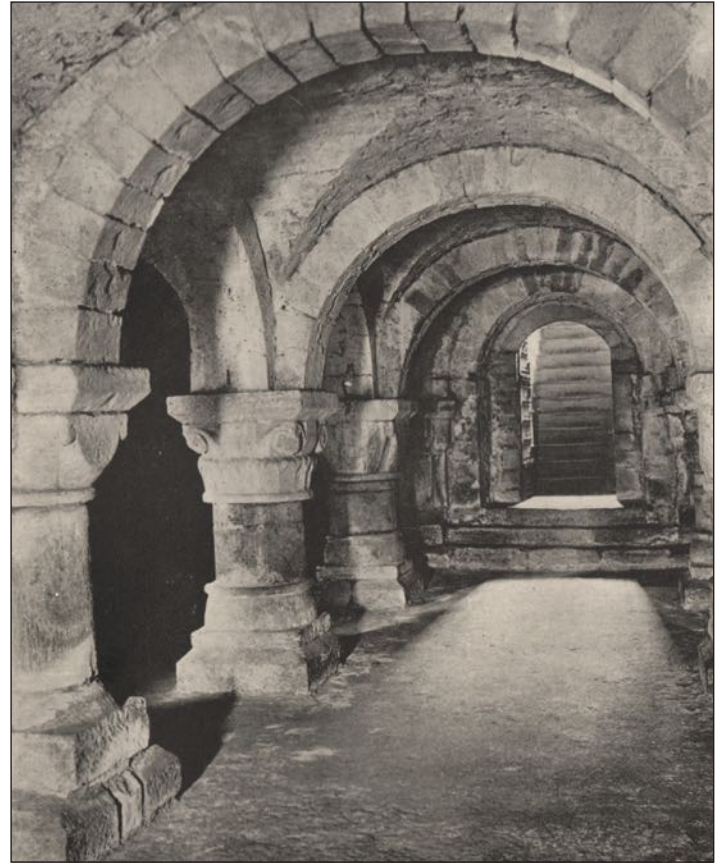
Archaeology, Art History or Architecture reveal that the crypt beneath the Priory has odd, and highly suspicious, features

favours or benefits; a 1-point spend means your work or performance impresses the Duchess so much that she grants you access to her family archive.

Art History (Academic)

You are an expert on works of art from an aesthetic and technical point of view. You can:

- Distinguish real works from fakes
- Tell when something has been retouched or altered
- Identify the age of an object by style and materials
- Call to mind historical details on artists and those around them

Example Benefit: Quickly scan catalogues or exhibitions to find key/most valuable works; a 1-point spend allows the party to target the most lucrative items in

the auction.

Assess Honesty (Interpersonal)

You can tell when some people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance. Sometimes you can infer motives, but an additional point spend may be needed to deduce more information. This sense doesn't tell you what they're lying about, specifically, or see through their lies to the truth. Not all lies are verbal. You can tell when a person is attempting to project a false impression through body language.

Example Benefit: identify motive or driver for dishonesty, e.g. fear, pride, venality, etc. (1 point); perceive or intuit some details of true situation behind liar's deception (2 point).

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your sixth sense. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you. You can normally distinguish charlatans, but a sincere believer in nonsense such as astrology will appear genuine to you.

Astronomy (Technical)

You study celestial objects, including the stars, planets. You can:

- Decipher astrological texts
- Plot the movement of constellations
- Interpret astronomical information in old books and manuscripts
- Find directions on a clear night

Example Benefit: use astronomical knowledge for astro-navigation, finding your way or plotting a course under the open sky; a 1-point spend impresses the curator of the Observatory so much that he grants you access to the telescope, enabling you to observe the strange forms flitting around the surrounding peaks.

Bargain (Interpersonal)

You are adept at haggling or negotiating to get a better deal. You can:

- Get lower prices or more favourable terms
- Gain the upper hand in negotiations
- Trade information and secrets

Example Benefit: secure a specific (or greater) reduction in cost, or greater reward for use; a 1-point spend reveals that the owner of a country estate has been selling off heirlooms at ruinously low prices, and is likely desperate for money.

Biology (Academic)

You are fully acquainted with the biological science of the time. You can:

- Identify an animal or plant species
- Spot unusual animal behaviour or plant growth
- Analyse and interpret scales, furs, hides, leaves, and other biological specimens

Example Benefit: use knowledge to identify characteristics, habits and weaknesses of animals, especially potentially threatening wild beasts; a 1-point spend reveals the right herb to use to distract the estate's guard dogs.

Bookkeeping (Technical)

You can keep accounts, and understand them. You can examine financial records, ledgers and company balance sheets. You can:

- Tell legitimate businesses from criminal enterprises
- Spot the telltale signs of embezzlement
- Track payments to their source

Example Benefit: find well hidden money trails; a 1-point spend earns the Dean's undying gratitude, when he learns how the Treasurer has been cooking the Cathedral's books to loot diocesan funds.

Gameplay

Casting the Runes uses the bare bones (no pun intended) of the GUMSHOE system for investigative roleplaying games, generally available under the Open Gaming License and the Creative Commons 3.0 Attribution Unported License. This is a tried and tested system, and one of the best for modelling the unique character of Jamesian occult investigation. This is also a great deal simpler than many RPG systems, but there are a few basics that need to be understood before getting into the game mechanics. GMs and players who want to delve further, or tweak the system, can dig into the voluminous GUMSHOE games and resources available in print and online.

Abilities

All characters and entities in the system are defined by Abilities, not characteristics. In the case of Health and Stability, these Abilities directly reflect physical and mental qualities, not skills. You can see them as capabilities and attributes, innate or learned.

When a player creates a character, the GM allots them a predetermined number of Build Points - not to be confused with the Pool Points that crop up later. (The capital letters are there to help understand the system.) The player divides these Build Points among different Abilities.

Ability Ratings and Pools

The starting value for each Ability is called a Rating. Although it may improve gradually through time and experience, your Rating in a particular Ability is your current upper limit in that Ability. Think of it like your reservoir, or fuel tank, of power or capacity in that particular Ability. Generally, unless something very drastic and nasty happens, it will not change in the course of a game session or adventure.

Your Rating in a particular Ability also defines the number of points you have as a pool for that Ability at the beginning of each investigation or adventure. You don't need those points to do something, but you do need them to do it spectacularly or assuredly. Think of your Pool Points as the turbocharger or booster to give you extra power in that particular Ability, fully charged at the start of the journey, up to the level of your current Rating.

You may use up some Pool Points in the prelude to the investigation itself, if the GM gives you a good reason and opportunity. You may have to spend some Pool Points - drain your power - in the course of the investigation, as you seek to excel in your Ability, or get a sure win. You can recharge your Pool Points during an investigation, representing rest and recovery periods, but cannot usually refuel to greater than your current Rating. Almost always, though, you will be able to use an Ability without Pool Points - they just add that special something extra that makes your character larger-than-life or heroic.

The distinction between Ratings and pools is a crucial one; keep it in mind as you read and interpret the rules.

Investigative and General Abilities

Like most GUMSHOE games, *Casting the Runes* operates a distinction between Investigative Abilities and General Abilities. This is not just a matter of labels: the distinction directly affects the mechanics of the game.

GUMSHOE refines and streamlines the time-honoured form of the investigative roleplaying game. Other types of game may focus on the play-

ers defeating their adversaries. The central question an investigative RPG asks is: Will the heroes get the information they need? The focus is not on victory, but discovery. The players need those clues to get through the adventure. Assuming that they look in the right place and apply appropriate Abilities to the task, GUMSHOE ensures that the heroes get the basic clues they need, so the investigation doesn't grind to a halt. Investigative scenarios are not about finding clues, they're about interpreting the clues you do find. GUMSHOE, therefore, makes the finding of clues all but automatic, as long as you get to the right place in the story and have the right Ability. What this means in game terms is that, if you have the right Investigative Ability, get to the right point or scene in the story, and say that you are using that Ability (except for immediately obvious passive clues), you will automatically get the corresponding clue. For those used to some simulation mechanics, it's as though you

By charming the locals at the inn, the Investigators learn that the pool in the woods has a sinister reputation and many people have gone missing nearby. Folklore and History rolls provide more information, indicating St George's Eve (22nd April) is the most dangerous time

had 100% rating in the relevant skill, with no chance of failure or fumble. Obviously, no Pool Point spend or dice role is required for that to happen; the clue is found, regardless of how many or few Pool Points the Investigator has left.

Does this detract from the game? Not for investigative horror. It avoids the ludicrous situation where a whole investigation grinds to a halt because of a fumbled dice roll. It also avoids the equally ludicrous situation of an expert Investigator failing to spot or interpret a blindingly obvious clue because of a critical fail. It has many other ancillary benefits in driving players to use their heads instead of their dice-rolling wrists. There are better uses for RPG players' imaginations than coming up with justifications for a roll of the dice.

This is also intended to make sure that the players spend less time and energy on dice rolls, and more on actually figuring out or imagining what the significance of a particular clue might be - because the interest and enjoyment lies, not in uncovering the clues with a roll of the dice, but in figuring out what they mean. (This is not just an issue in gaming or fiction either: "It is interpretation, not collection, that presents the real intelligence challenge," testifies former intelligence officer John Hughes-Wilson, in his history of spycraft, *The Puppet Masters: Spies, Traitors and the Real Forces Behind World Events*.)

For instance, an Investigator with an Archaeology or Art History Investigative Ability sees a gold coin, and immediately recognises it as Byzantine. That fact doesn't explain what it was doing on a corpse sunk at the bottom of a well in Ireland, with another corpse wrapped round it in a death grip. Or, another Investigator with the Evidence Collection Investigative Ability declares that he's searching some beachside ruins in East Anglia - probably the site of a Templar preceptory - using his Investigative Ability, and automatically uncovers a small metal whistle. Does he know what its significance is? No - but if he blows it he'll find out...

Putting the pieces together is what makes an investigation interesting and exciting. If every adventure ends up unsolved, as "one of London's mysteries," because of some failed dice rolls, then both GMs and Investigators are liable to be frustrated and disappointed. This approach also happens to fit the style of M.R. James, who liked to hint and signpost all the way along his narrative, while leaving the final explanation of all the clues until well on in the story.

Investigative Abilities comprise the crucial academic, technical, and other specialisations needed to define the Investigators and progress the story. They are the Abilities immediately called on to unearth clues during an investigation. General Abilities are the other, ancillary capabilities that are fun, flavourful, and above all, introduce an element of risk and failure to enrich the narrative. You can use Investigative Abilities to follow a trail of clues into mortal danger - then you may have to use General Abilities to fight or dodge your way out of it.

Regaining Pool Points

Spent points from various pools are restored at different rates, depending on their narrative purpose. Investigative Ability pools are restored only at the end of each case, without regard to the amount of time that passes in the game world. Players seeking to marshal their resources may ask how long cases typically run, in real time. Most groups finish scenarios over 2-3 sessions.

Players may revise their management of Pool Point spends as they see how quickly their group typically concludes its investigations. The Contemplation Ability also adds some potential for recovery of Investigative Ability Pool Points during an adventure, but this is very much a special case.

GMs running extremely long, multi-part investigations may designate certain story events as breakpoints where all Investigative Ability pools are also refreshed. For example, a campaign that ranges from a castle in provincial Sweden to a ruined city in the Holy Land may require periodic rest stops for refreshment and recuperation.

What Do Pool Points Represent?

Pool Points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets his or her own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little of your time in the limelight. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine. However, all Pool Points should allow the character to show their mettle in a distinct and personal way.

Remember, all characters are remarkably competent. Pool Points measure your opportunities to exercise this ultra-competence during any given scenario. Even when pools are empty, you still have the baseline chance to succeed at a test or contest at the given Difficulty, and use of an Investigative Ability, whether its Pool Points are all gone or not, will always net you the information you need to move forward in the case.

Pool Points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. At best, they have some idea of Health and Stability levels, or how mentally exhausted they are by a particularly difficult cipher, but that is all.

GUMSHOE represents this most purely in the case of Investigative Abilities, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, refreshment can be handled in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.

An Example of Combat:
The Colonel and the Demon

Colonel Anstruther is fighting off the Lesser Demon that his friend the Professor has inadvertently called up from an old illuminated missal obtained on approval from a London dealer. The Professor has succumbed to the shock of seeing the creature, and lies insensible in his library chair. A strong-minded veteran, the Colonel has made his Stability test, grabbed a poker from the library fireplace, and stands ready to defend his friend.

The doughty Colonel has Athletics of 10, Health 10, Scuffling 12, and Weapons 14. The Lesser Demon has the conventional statistics for its vile kind: Athletics 12, Health 15, Scuffling 16. Normally the Lesser Demon would have the Initiative, but the indulgent GM rules that the Colonel has the longer weapon, and was able to seize the Initiative while the monster was still materializing, and awards him the first blow.

The Colonel's player rolls the first attack against the Lesser Demon's Hit Threshold of 4, and comes up with a 5. The Colonel has landed a blow on the creature. His player rolls damage of 4. The poker counts as a full weapon for damage purposes, but the blow is dulled by the creature's coarse hide, inflicting 2 points of damage. The Lesser Demon's Health pool is now down to 13.

The Lesser Demon now makes the first of its two attacks with its ferocious talons. The GM rolls a 2 for the first attack, against the Colonel's Hit Threshold of 4, and the Demon misses its swing. Its second swing, however, connects with a 6. Fortunately for the Colonel, the GM only rolls 1, and with the Demon's damage modifier, the old warhorse only sustains 2 points of damage, reducing his Health to 8.

The Colonel takes aim for his next swing. This time, the Colonel's player elects to take advantage of the Colonel's veteran status, and calls for an aimed shot at the Lesser Demon's sallow head, committing 4 pool points from the Colonel's Weapons pool. The Colonel's player rolls a 3, and with the 4 additional pool points, scores a 7, enough to overcome the Lesser Demon's basic Hit Threshold of 4, and the +2 for an aimed shot to the head. The Colonel's player then rolls a 5 for damage. At -2 for the Demon's horny hide, and +2 for the head shot, the Demon suffers the full value of the roll: its Health is now down to 8.

With the combatants now on an equal footing for Health, the Demon takes its first swing of the round. The GM rolls a 4: the Demon has equalled the Colonel's Hit Threshold and connected with its talon. The blow does 5 points of damage, reducing the Colonel to 3 points of Health. Luckily, its second swing misses, with a 2.

Realizing what a deadly adversary he faces, the Colonel's player digs into his Weapons pool points again, and adds 5 for a strike at the Demon's left claw, aiming to cripple the creature. The Colonel now only has 5 Weapons pool points left. The Colonel's player rolls 4, with 5 added, which comfortably exceeds the Demon's Hit Threshold of 6 for an aimed shot targeting a limb. The Colonel's player rolls 4 damage, with a +2 bonus for a strike on a limb; even with -2 for its armoured skin, the Demon has lost a further 4 points of Health, and has lost the use of one claw. Still, it manages to connect with its next blow, and does 1 point of damage to the Colonel, with a further 1 point modifier.

The Colonel now faces the horrible prospect of death in the jaws of a Demon. His health is 1, just enough to avoid a roll for losing consciousness. Realizing his dire straits, the Colonel's player commits all his Weapons pool points to one final swing at the Demon's head. He rolls a 5, and the blow connects, even at the higher Hit Threshold. The damage roll is also a 5: with the damage bonus for the head shot and the Demon's armour rating cancelling each other out, the final damage value stands at 5, enough to reduce the Demon to below 0 Health. For a supernatural creature, this means dissolution rather than unconsciousness, and the Lesser Demon dissipates in a puff of smoke, leaving the Colonel to tend his wounds and wake his insensible friend.

Astute players will note that a seasoned and unusually tough veteran was only just able to defeat a Lesser Demon. The obvious lesson is that crucifixes work better than cudgels against the supernatural.

If you struck an ordinary person in the head, throat, or chest with a weapon, add +2 to the damage; hitting the heart adds +3 to the damage. Neither can be combined with a point-blank gunshot, which is already assumed to hit a vital location.

If you struck an ordinary person in a joint (wrist, knee, etc.) or throat with an aimed hand-to-hand blow, lock, or kick, add +2 to the damage; hitting an eye adds +3 to the damage. This assumes a trained, targeted strike intended to disable or cripple.

Explosives

Grenades had fallen out of favour by the dawn of the Edwardian era, but Russian experience in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 once again demonstrated their value, although the British Empire had to wait until 1915 for the Mills Bomb to arrive.

However, "infernal machines" were commonplaces of terrorism (especially in Russia where they were often used for attacks on officials), and of Edwardian fiction from Conrad to Saki. Investigators with an engineering or mining background might well resort to blasting charges and dynamite to deal with such monstrous incursions as an eruption of Swine-Things.

A detonation deals damage automatically at point-blank range, but anyone in the blast radius at close range has an automatic Hit Threshold of 3 to avoid damage, 4 at medium range, and 5 at long range.

To set and fuse a bomb, mining charge, etc., a character makes a test of their Demolition ability against a basic Difficulty of 4. (At the GM's sadistic discretion, failure could mean premature detonation.)

For historical accuracy, thrown explosives are assumed to be dynamite sticks with a minimal fragmentation radius. Throwing these is an Athletics test, with Difficulty 3 at close range, and 5 at medium range. (Investigators should not be throwing explosives at point-blank range.)

Running Away

Fleeing from an ongoing fight requires an Athletics or Fleeing test. The Difficulty is 3 plus the number of foes you're fleeing from: to flee one enemy is Difficulty 4, fleeing two enemies is Difficulty 5, fleeing four enemies is Difficulty 7.

On a success, melee ends and you flee; if they intend to chase you, your foes must roll first in the ensuing full contest of Athletics vs Athletics or Fleeing. If you fail, the opponent with the highest damage value automatically deals one instance of damage to you. Melee still ends, but you must roll first in the ensuing chase.

In situations where it seems appropriate to make flight more difficult, on a failure, any directly engaged opponent might spend 3 Athletics to block you from fleeing - interposing himself between you and the exit, tackling you, slamming the church doors, or whatever the narrative description warrants. In this case, your enemies forgo the damage they would otherwise deal.

Other Hazards

Combat is not the only hazard that *Casting the Runes* characters are liable to face; in many campaigns, it may be the least likely. However there are many other dangers that Investigators may encounter.

Black Powders

Damage/range chart X = no damage

Explosive	Point Blank	Medium	Long
Small bomb	+2	X	X
Dynamite stick	+3	-2	X
Medium bomb	+7	-1	X
Gas explosion	+6	+1	X
Artillery shell	+8	-1	X

Fire

Damage from exposure to fire varies according to the surface area of your body exposed to the flame, and repeats for each round (or, outside of combat, every few seconds) you remain exposed to it.

Minor exposure, most often to an extremity like a hand or foot, carries a damage modifier of -2.

Partial exposure, to up to half of your surface area, carries a damage modifier of +0.

Extensive exposure, to half or more of your surface area, imposes a damage modifier of +2. The GM should always give you a chance to avoid being set on fire. The difficulty of extinguishing a flame is usually 4, but might be higher for petrol spills or Fire Elementals. Optionally, the GM can also require a Stability test for being set on fire, costing 2 Stability on failure.

Suffocation and Drowning

When deprived of air, you get two minutes before the nastiness kicks in. After that point, you lose 1 Athletics every ten seconds, as you struggle to hold your breath. Once that pool depletes, you start losing Health, at a rate of 1 point every five seconds.

This also applies to drowning, but a successful Athletics roll will get characters out of many situations where they might otherwise drown.

Acid

An acid or other corrosive (e.g. quicklime) does damage each round until a successful Chemistry, First Aid or Medicine test removes or counteracts it. (Chemistry or Medicine require a 1-point spend, First Aid requires a successful test against Difficulty 4.) The GM can set a damage point strength for the acid, or roll a damage dice which gives the damage inflicted each round, with weaker or stronger acids modifying the damage roll.

Poisons

Toxins are either inhaled, ingested or injected directly into the bloodstream. They vary widely in lethality. A dose of Lysol or some other standard cleaning reagant may impose a damage modifier of -2, where an experimental mustard gas or the sting of a Spider Familiar might range from +6 to +16.

Inhaled toxins tend to take effect right away. Injected and ingested toxins take delayed effect, anywhere from minutes to hours after exposure. Their damage might be parceled out in increments, and may prevent you from refreshing Health points until somehow neutralised.

The Mandrake (Mandragora) one of the many poisonous plants used by witches and sorcerers
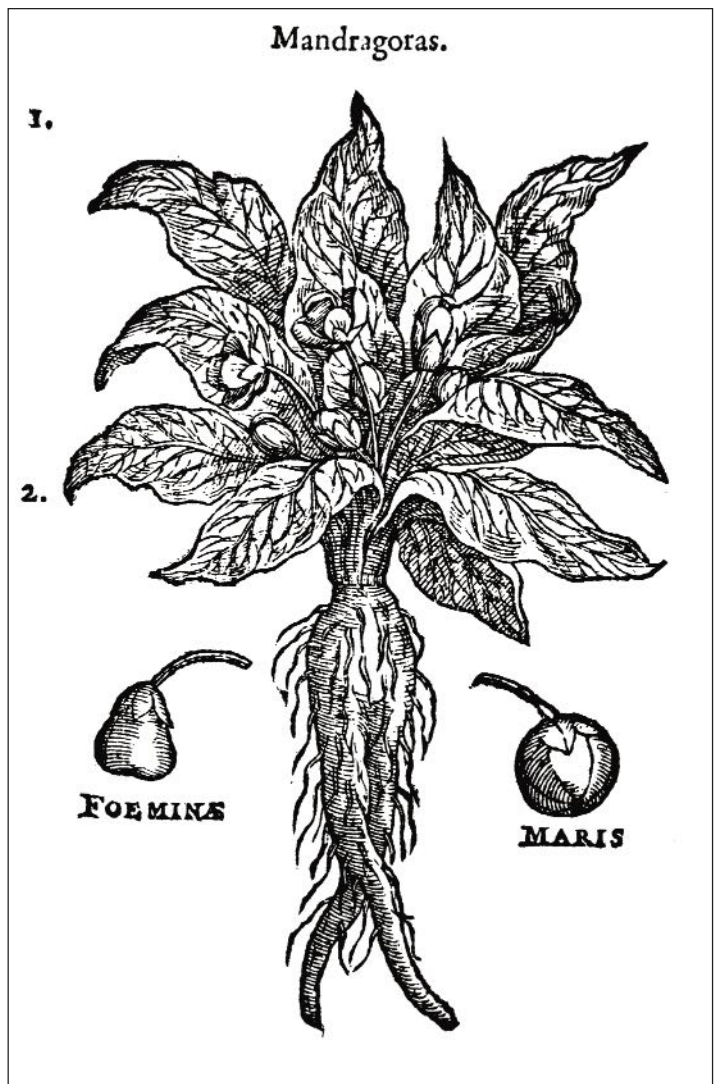
Creatures

M.R James sought to create a pleasing terror rather than a fanciful bestiary. Yet in the process, he did produce a series of well-delineated and frightful creatures and manifestations, well beyond the plain and ordinary sheeted ghost. Add in the equally ghastly creations from his contemporaries, and you have more than enough entities to satisfy any adventure gamer.

All the same, and in deference to his spirit, this selection of horrors is not supposed to be exclusive, or rigid. Sinister entities and apparitions are there to provide atmosphere and colour and thrills, but not to flesh out a pseudo-taxonomy of Monsters-of-the-Week. GMs should feel free to create their own menaces which are nothing like these - or even to have no monsters at all, and leave all the horror to tales of dark possession, malign curses, animated doll's houses and so on. By all means, let your imagination run free, ransack folklore traditions and don't let it be fettered by stats, or by some narrow category of canonical monsters.

Entity facts and figures

Each description of an entity that follows gives some idea of its general description, pedigree, and motivations, followed by enough Ability figures to play them in the game setting. Following a common convention in RPGs, the fantastic and supernatural entities are listed first, followed by the mundane - but potentially still dangerous - terrestrial beasts. Perennial horror favourites are also included, for those who may wish to have them.

Each entity has a list of Abilities - usually the basics for play and combat - followed by Hit Thresholds, Stealth Modifiers, and Armour figures that work as they do for player characters. The Stability Loss modifier gives the plus-or-minus influence that the creature's other-worldly appearance or nature has on

every interaction with it that would usually require a Stability roll - over and above the usual penalty for that type of manifestation. This won't apply to mundane creatures like tigers, but fighting the latter might still lead to situations that trigger Stability rolls - only without a modifier. The Attack listing comes last to give space to whatever unique attack the entity has.

The Ability statistics given for each creature type are averages - sadistic GMs can craft far stronger ones. GMs should also add on more Abilities as appropriate - intelligent creatures such as Little People or vampires may have all kinds of Abilities that don't show up in their bare-bones descriptions.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SUPERNATURAL ARE AS VARIED AS THEY ARE DANGEROUS

no obvious connection to the ghost. Many adventures will focus on the Investigators struggling to piece together the clues leading to the talisman or remnant, before the ghost catches up with them.

GMs and players should remember that by the time Investigators encounter a ghost, their Stability pools will usually have been drained by various suitably atmospheric and terrifying phenomena: clanking chains, unearthly keening on the wind, levitating objects, blood drips, etc. This will make the final confrontation all the more tense and fateful.

That said, not all ghosts by any means are aggressive or hostile. Many simply manifest and disappear. Some may talk (or gibber) or act intelligently; most are just apparitions, without apparent consciousness or intelligence. They may be frightening, and dangerous to Stability, but they will not seek to inflict harm - unless some Investigator provokes them.

Statistics given are for a typical newly deceased ghost. GMs may wish to make older ghosts more powerful and menacing, adding another 2 Health points per century the spirit has been dead.

GMs are especially invited to ring the changes on ghosts, and make them as diverse and as individual and interesting as possible.

A 17TH CENTURY GHOST, THAT OF THE EARL OF STRAFFORD. MANY OF JAMES' SPECTRES HAD THEIR ORIGINS IN THIS PERIOD

Stability costs of ghostly manifestations

The Stability costs here are for the effects experienced alone, without the ghost itself being present. All Stability tests are against the standard value of 4. The dice total column allows GMs to generate random ghostly manifestations in a haunted locale by rolling two six sided dice.

Manifestation/effect	Stability Cost	Dice Total
Distant sighing, moaning	2	2
Phantom footsteps	2	3
Breath of cold wind	2	4
Door, window opening and closing	2	5
Drifting cloud, mist	2	6
Inexplicable odour	2	7
Blood drip	3	8
Sudden unearthly scream	3	9
Icy cold	3	10
Floating spectral knife	4	11
Suffocation, strangulation	4	12

Random Ghosts

GMs are strongly recommended to use their imaginations as much as possible around ghosts, and make each phantom unique. For occasional chance encounters, though, and since ghosts are so ubiquitous in the work of M.R. James and other classic ghost stories, here is a table for generating random ghosts. These follow the GUMSHOE norm of six-sided dice only, and are written for two rolls of a dice, with the results added. Of course, GMs can simply choose from the tables rather than rolling for results.

Ghost appearance	Dice Total
Grey or white lady	2
Monk (black, white, brown habit)	3
Young child	4
Soldier, warrior, knight	5
Mounted rider	6
Sorrowing maiden	7
Old man/woman	8
Headless figure	9
Spectral animal, dog, cat	10
Skull, skeleton	11
Contemporary figure, apparently normal	12

ABILITIES: Athletics 14, Health 10, Scuffling 6

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

STABILITY LOSS: +0 (more for especially frightful ghosts)

ARMOUR: 0 (but immaterial and invulnerable to most physical weapons)

ATTACK: +1 (ghostly touch). The chill of phantom fingers adds an extra effect besides cold damage. Regardless of the actual damage sustained, any Investigator is treated as hurt until the end of the encounter, and suffers the corresponding penalties.

The most terrifying ghosts also have an unique Stability-based attack. If an Investigator's Stability pool is reduced to 0 or below by these ghosts, the character falls dead on the spot from pure fright, their face contorted in a rictus of terror.

GHOUL

Ghouls are included in these rules for their imaginative potential. "Old ghoul," the Squire's remark in *A View from a Hill*, need not be read as a sign that M.R. James seriously intended to write about ghouls. Nonetheless, there is a lot of fun to be had from ghouls.

Ghouls dine off dead flesh, not the flesh of the living - but there is nothing to stop them hunting and stalking their prey. The ghoul has the unique ability to assume the identity of those it has killed and/or eaten, to hunt for more prey or to fulfil other dark purposes. It does this by donning their skin and eating their brains.

The ghoul can put on the skin of the slain or recently deceased. For one day, the skin still appears fresh and lifelike. The ghoul can also draw on the memories taken from the brain it has just eaten, again for about a day. After this, the skin will start to decay, and the chemicals carrying the memories to degrade. Although usually a master of Disguise, the ghoul will start to show rents in its flesh and patches of greenish decaying skin. Friends of the deceased make a passive Sense Trouble test in close proximity to the impersonating ghoul from the second day (administered by the GM of course), starting with a Difficulty level of 5 and decreasing by 1 point per day. As each day passes, more and more skin will slough off to reveal the ghoul's true form beneath: a revolting greenish carcass with sharp claws.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 15, Scuffling 16, Disguise 16

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

STABILITY LOSS: +1

ARMOUR: -1 (undead flesh)

ATTACK: +1 (claws)

GREATER DEMON

The Greater Demons are the worst horrors by far that any Investigator is likely to encounter. The Princes and Kings of Hell are the adversaries of angels and archangels; mere mortals are at best amusing insects to them. Any interaction with them that degenerates

Magic

Magic in the ghostly tales of M.R. James is almost always the purview of villains, sorcerers, witches, and other menaces to the sane and settled order of things. On the rare occasions that protagonists actually perform magic themselves, as in *Casting the Runes* or *An Evening's Entertainment*, they either acquire it reluctantly from their antagonists, or regret their occult studies very soon after. Other Edwardian classics of occult detection, especially Hodgson's Carnacki series, do have a more actively sorcerous protagonist, but even there, magic is usually defensive, and concerns mostly warding off or dispelling supernatural threats, rather than conjuring them up or performing great feats of sorcery.

This is the approach to magic we've adopted for this game. The magic system and spells are here not to give Investigators whole grimoires to learn, but more to give them some idea of what magicians are capable of, and motivated by. Other GUMSHOE games may have a more active and powerful magic system, and players and GMs are invited to refer to them, or to adapt the system here as they see fit. The Aberrancy Ability in *Fear Itself*, or Magic Ability in *Rough Magics*, or Hypergeometry in *The Fall of DELTA GREEN*, could all be recast for this setting.

Here are a few of the limitations on magic implemented in the following outline spells and rituals. Almost all of them require considerable time, resources, and prior study. Very few can be performed in the course of an investigation - barring some warding or defensive charms. Almost all of them are also the jealously guarded property of cults or lineages of wizards, whose survival usually depended on absolute secrecy. Most of the more powerful ones have grievous Health and Stability costs that require either a brush with mental collapse, or blood sacrifice on a more or less massive scale. Many require other elaborate preconditions, or initiations, or supporting minor spells. Some can only be learned at all from entities conjured by other spells. Almost none are available for casual learning or study from commonly available texts. There is no menu of spells for the Investigators to set out to learn, and even those with Occult knowledge will only have the vaguest idea that they exist at all.

Want to acquire a Hooded Spirit servitor? First you need to go into the ruined city of Chorazin, and there salute the Prince of the Air. Want to raise a witch from the dead to learn a new spell or find a trove of gold? Be prepared to pass a Stability Test of Difficulty 5, as well as all the other attendant difficulties including finding the witch's corpse in the first place. Yearn to set Spider Familiars loose on your enemies? You already need to have called up a Greater Demon, survived the encounter, signed your name in the *Black Book of Death*, and evaded investigation and execution for the blood sacrifices required by those rituals. Want to learn Telekinesis? The only known copy of the rite is locked away in Scotland Yard's Black Museum, after its previous owner was caught abducting street urchins to cut out their hearts. Obviously, many of these limitations are up to the GM, but to keep the true flavour of a *Casting the Runes* game, we recommend using them and more.

All of this is intended to capture and define magic within the mechanics of the game, and give GMs a few useful and fun tips on how to use these to create more interesting ways to play supernatural occurrences, but they shouldn't be seen as binding (sic). Magic is by definition beyond the rational and natural, and James, unlike Hodgson, never codified or reiterated any system. We prefer the Jamesian approach.

Ever wonder why so many powerful sorcerers are megalomaniacs or murderous sociopaths? Consid-

er the effect of casting just a few powerful spells. Any player-character who somehow gets on the Left Hand Path may fairly soon find their Stability permanently blasted by magic, at which point they become an NPC, either institutionalised as a source of insane but occasionally rewarding insights, or perhaps a new and terrible antagonist. The canonical GUMSHOE table of Mental Illnesses provides plenty of ideas for sorcerers' motivations.

Magic Costs and Difficulties

This magic system is modelled closely on the system developed for *Trail of Cthulhu*, with the help of Tony Williams. It is designed to be simple and consistent with the basic GUMSHOE rules, but still flavourful. GMs should be aware, though, that other magic systems have been developed under the GUMSHOE rules, and can adapt their own.

Almost all magic requires to some extent a wrenching of reality, and a transgression of natural laws. Three Abilities are used to model this: Occult, Stability and Health. Occult represents the knowledge of the caster; Stability and Health represent the strength of will and life force needed to power the spell. ("Health" in a magical context, of course, is a less material concept than elsewhere in the game, but we stick with it to avoid introducing yet another metric to keep track of.)

Occult is still applied to other uses as a regular Investigative Ability, but it governs the learning of magic. Stability and Health power its casting. Other Abilities can contribute modifiers to a spell, but these are usually very limited. The tripos of fundamental Abilities is the basis of magic.

Casting a Spell

All spells require a test which represents a struggle against the resistance of the Cosmos to human efforts to effect changes to the substance of reality - or the potency of the target entity. Overcoming this is mind-wracking, and requires great strength of will.

Spells require both a fixed cost to be paid in pool points - usually Stability - and a Stability test, of a given Difficulty level. Both figures are given in the spell description. The Cost figure should always be assumed to be Stability, unless otherwise stated. With all spells, unless otherwise stated, the Cost of a spell can be paid in Health instead of Stability, on a 2-for-1 basis. For certain offensive or defensive spells, the basic Cost is increased by the number of points that the caster wants to put into the attack (or defence). The standard minimum Stability loss from a failed test in casting a spell is 2, equivalent to "a strong unnatural sensation such as intense *déjà vu*" in the basic Stability rules.

In most cases, a targeted entity will not get an active chance to resist the spell; the target's current Health or Stability determines its natural resistance, and a casting will inevitably succeed if it has the right number of points behind it, and if the caster makes their Stability roll. (Kindly GMs may wish to modify this by allowing the target its usual roll to resist attack, but this will tend to give powerful supernatural entities an even greater advantage over mortals.) For more powerful entities, this may mean that the caster has to pile up quite a stack of pool points.

The caster's Stability pool points can be drawn on to improve the success chances in the Stability test as usual - though the caster should remember the spell's basic point cost as well. Some other Abilities can reinforce the Stability test associated with a related spell - for instance, a countryman with Fieldcraft or a musician with a musical Art would be able to draw on their Ability to lessen the destabilizing effect of a Contact Faunus spell. Usually this effect is capped at a 1 point benefit, and does not require an active spend from the pool points for the associated Ability. The effect cap is not increased if the caster has more than one appropriate Ability.

Certain rituals allow other characters to voluntarily contribute their Stability (or Health) pool points to pay the Cost, whether or not they know the spell, contributing 3 points for every 1 point transferred to the caster. Only the caster need make the Stability test for the spell, but the points cannot be add-

ed to the Stability test, only to defray the Cost. The contributors must be *compos mentis* to do this: characters already unhinged by seeing a Greater Demon would be unable to join in the ritual.

If the spell casting fails, with a blown Stability test, the caster and any other contributors lose only half of the spell's points Cost. However, any of the caster's pool points used to buttress the Stability test will be lost in full.

Furthermore, a failed Stability test in spell casting inflicts damage on the caster's Stability just like any other failed Stability test, usually with some direct relation to the intended effect of the spell. Some spells automatically cost Health as well as Stability. In some spells, this is a reflection of the strain and lacerating effort required to effect changes in reality; in others, it is a measure of the expenditure of life force (frequently something or someone else's) needed to draw or satiate the entity evoked.

Some spells can be repeatedly cast as many times as the caster's Stability and Health resources and the duration of the scene allow: for instance, Banish. Others only have a single chance of success per scene: for example, Summon spells.

The deep-dyed damned sorcerers whose magical researches have long since reduced their Stability to 0 do not have to take the Stability test for spells. But they still need to pay the relevant Cost - usually in Health from sacrificial victims - and have already sacrificed their own souls to the forces of darkness in exchange for their powers.

The GM should feel free to devise other spells on the same basis as detailed here. Magic is supernatural by definition, and spells are not codified formulae that can be standardised and read off to achieve the same results.

Learning Magic

The unwary and reckless Investigator who wants to learn a magic spell in *Casting the Runes* can do

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Offensive and Defensive Spell Costs

The most powerful supernatural entities will obviously require big pool point accumulations and spends if any Banish or Warding spell is ever to succeed against them. That'll be a problem for magicians who do not know the Health of their target. How many points to put into a Banish spell, or into a Circle of Protection?

The offensive and defensive spells listed below assume that a caster has some idea of the average strength and potency of their opponents, but not an exact figure. Naturally, most casters are going to err on the side of caution and overcharge their spells. Sensibly, most GMs should match adversaries to the Investigators' powers. Of course, all this adds more to the fun and doubt factor of magic, but it also adds considerably to the risk.

Determining the strength required for spells is an obvious benefit for Occult Ability pool point spends. A 1-point Occult spend will give the generic Health/strength for that particular type of entity. A 2-point spend will give the exact Health/strength of the target.

Some magic grimoires can help out by giving exact strengths for the various monsters and demons. For instance, the *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* (The False Kingdom of the Demons) gives the exact strengths of 69 Greater Demons, even though it contains no useful magic to actually summon a demon. This is one area where classic but totally harmless real-world occult tomes may help the Investigator. GMs should play this carefully as a specific benefit from studying such a book.

Certain magic artifacts or aids may give casters the exact strength of a target entity. Enchanted fanes or places of power may have this effect too, as well as their other benefits.

Regardless of the spell cost, the Stability test in a casting remains a limiting factor on the caster's chances of success.

The Period

This introduction to the Edwardian era is designed partly to let GMs design a convincing game world, partly to help players navigate that world, and partly to give background and inspire campaigns and adventures. Despite misconceptions of the period as some sort of golden slumber right up to 1914, the Edwardian era had plenty of room for those.

Imperial Currency

"Well, I think I should buy it if the price was five shillings," said Williams; "but for some unearthly reason he wants two guineas for it." - M.R. James, *The Mezzotint*

GUMSHOE games customarily adopt a freeform approach to income and money, to avoid campaigns degenerating into bookkeeping exercises. However, full price and currency details are provided here for those who do want a more detailed approach to finances, as well as for the important and flavourful matter of Imperial currency.

Edwardian Britain still operated on the Imperial system of units and currency, otherwise known as pounds, shillings and pence. Under this system, 12 pence equalled 1 shilling, and 20 shillings (240 pence) equalled 1 pound. The guinea, though no longer a real gold coin, was still used as a sales and accounting term to add cachet, and signified 21 shillings.

Shilling amounts were often written with the solidus symbol (/), hence: 2/10 = 2 shillings and 10 pence. A whole shilling amount was sometimes written with a dash after the solidus, hence: 11/- = 11 shillings.

The actual coins of the Edwardian era were:

Farthing (bronze, ¼ penny)
Halfpenny (bronze)
Penny (bronze)
Twopence, or tuppence (silver, not in regular circulation, only issued as Maundy Money)
Threepence (silver)
Fourpence (silver, not in regular circulation, only

men were now enfranchised, but with a population of 30.5 million in 1901, this obviously left many - over 40% of adult males - without the vote, especially in Ireland. The United Kingdom was still very much an oligarchy right up until 1918.

The oligarchic system found many defenders, who were to prove vigorous, aggressive political opponents to the forces of change. In 1897, in his book on "A great agricultural estate, being the story of the origin and administration of Woburn and Thorney," the Duke of Bedford declared "that the system of land tenure which allows a great estate to descend unimpaired from one generation to another, secures to those dwelling on the soil material and moral advantages greater than any that are promised under any alternative system, tried or untried."

Those beliefs were still ardently held by many during the Edwardian era. Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal leader, opposed the 1909 People's Budget as "pure socialism... and the end of all, the negation of faith, of family, of property, of Monarchy, of Empire." The Primrose League, with membership numbering over 2 million by 1910, was the Conservative riposte to the mass appeal of the trade union movement and the Labour Party.

The Liberal Party, Britain's main progressive force for most of the Victorian era, was now weakened by fissures, despite its landslide victory in 1906, that would lead to its collapse during and after World War I. Gladstone's support for Irish Home Rule had cost the party many of its aristocratic and patrician supporters, as well as some middle-class radicals who objected to its bailouts for Ascendancy landowners, and created the schismatic Liberal Unionist Party, which commonly allied with the Conservatives. The Liberal success in the 1906 elections, and its passage of a raft of reforms typified by the People's Budget of 1909, masked an uneasy coalition of differing interests, from free trade economic liberals to socialists and statists. All were mostly united against the Conservatives and propertied interests, who felt correspondingly persecuted by new wealth taxes and the strident rhetoric of David Lloyd George, with his talk of "implacable warfare". The Liberal passage of the Parliament Act

of 1911, to curb the powers of "Mr Balfour's Poodle," as Lloyd George had dubbed the House of Lords, gave constitutional form to this opposition to the aristocracy's traditional supremacy.

Meanwhile, the Independent Labour Party, formed in 1893 under Kier Hardie, initially failed to get candidates into parliament, though Hardie himself stood independently in 1892 and entered parliament wearing his famous cloth cap (actually a deerstalker.) The ILP supported the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, which eventually became the Labour Party for the 1906 elections, when 29 candidates, including future PM Ramsay MacDonald, were

WELSH LIBERAL POLITICIAN DAVID LLOYD GEORGE WAS DETERMINED TO BREAK THE POWER OF THE OLIGARCHY. AS CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER (FINANCE MINISTER) HE HAMMERED THE UPPER CLASSES WITH NEW TAXES ON THEIR ESTATES AND INVESTMENTS, WHILE INTRODUCING NEW BENEFITS FOR THE POOR.
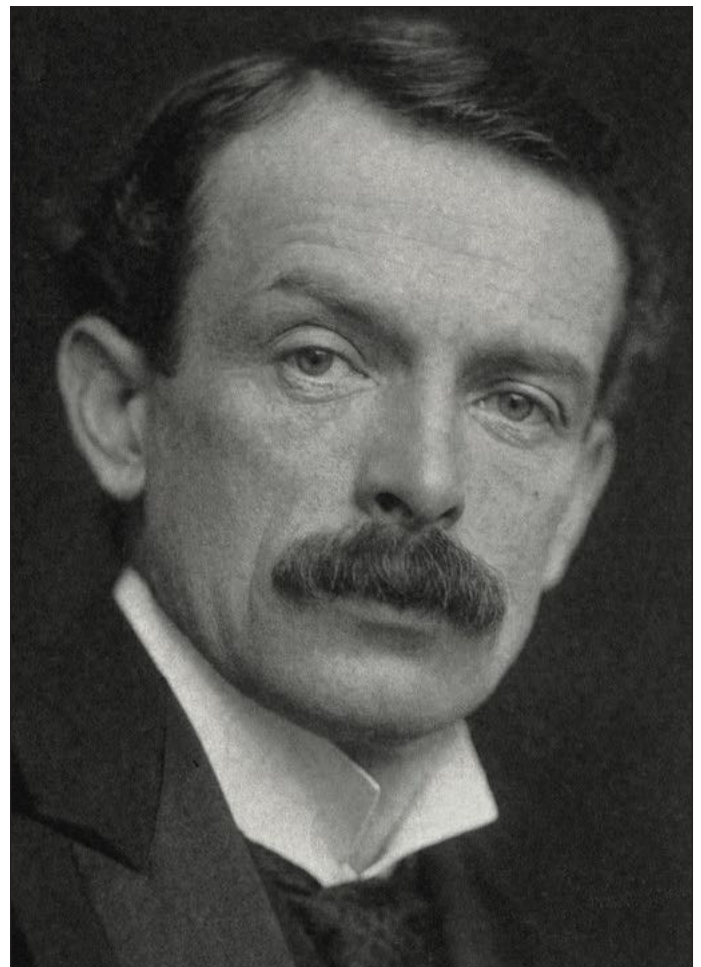
chooses the Investigator with the highest current pool in that ability (if applicable) or the Investigator who has had the least recent spotlight time or most requires a positive reversal of fortune. Alternatively, the GM may allow applicable background considerations to determine the possessor of the restricted clue: for example, an Investigator with an aristocratic family background might be the one to recognize the unusual heraldry on a funerary urn for what it is.

Timed Results

The following structural technique applies to any GUMSHOE game where the characters have access to the services of an outside laboratory, and rely on tests or researches performed by others. This is separate to the issue of timing for use of Investigative Abilities, covered elsewhere.

You can shape the pacing of a case with a timed result. This occurs when believability requires a suitable interval between the submission of evidence to experts and the results they produced. In police procedurals, it is common for the direction of an investigation to be suddenly changed when the lab results come in. The new evidence may open up a totally different line of inquiry, or put already gathered evidence into a whole new perspective.

A timed result can serve as a delayed-reaction core clue, directing the Investigators to a new scene. These are useful devices in cases where the scenes can be connected in any order. If the Investigators get bored or bogged down in one scene, they can receive a telegram summoning them to a consultation to receive some much-needed exposition, which sends them in a new direction.

CASTING THE RUNES COMBINES M. R. JAMES' GOTHIC AESTHETIC WITH THE TOOLS AND MECHANICS OF DETECTIVE FICTION

The arrival of a timed result can also change the Investigators' interpretation of their current case notes without moving them to a new scene. They might dismiss a suspect's alibi, alter their timeline of events, or reject information provided them by a witness whose perceptions are revealed as unreliable.

News of expert findings requiring the team's attention can also be used to cut short a scene that the players

won't abandon, even though they've already collected all available clues.

Scene Types

Classic GUMSHOE scenario design involves constructing a series of scenes. Each of these takes place in a different location or involves an interaction with a different supporting character - usually both. Good scenario design tradecraft is to write the title of the scene, followed by the scene type, and the scene or scenes which lead to the current scene, and those which lead out from it.

INTRODUCTORY

This is the first scene of the episode. It establishes the premise of the mystery. If it's the Investigators' first meeting, have them come together under appropriate auspices. They may then move to another location where they receive their introductory briefing, or receive it there and then. Obviously if a patron or elderly academic has summoned them all together, it makes sense for the mentor-figure to brief them on the reasons for the summons at once.

CORE

Core scenes present at least one piece of information necessary to complete the investigation and get to the climactic scene. Each core scene requires at least a single core clue. A core clue typically points the group to another scene, often a further core scene.

GMs should ideally avoid hard-sequenced core clues, which can only lead to one another in a single order. This is where the floating core clue and spine/skeleton approach can deliver the most value and variety. GMs may improvise another scene inspired by the Investigators' actions. The scene structure guarantees that there's at least one way to navigate the story, but should not preclude other scene sequences.

By following the structure, the GM is also more certain to create a branching narrative driven by player choices. This avoids the syndrome of the story being driven by the actions of supporting characters, which the players observe more or less passively. It also al-

lows players' Investigative Ability pool point spends to have a more meaningful impact on the progression of the narrative, and determine exactly which path is followed.

A core scene should typically be rich and plentiful, with many pieces of information in addition to its core clue. Facts may provide understanding and context - or obscure the mystery, by focusing attention on irrelevant details. Creating a scene is about anticipating the questions the players will ask and figuring out which answers ought to be available to the investigative experts their characters happen to be.

If a spend doesn't make the Investigator giving up pool points seem more impressive, or confer some other benefit, it shouldn't be a spend.

ALTERNATE

Alternate scenes provide information which may be of some use in understanding and solving the central mystery, but aren't strictly necessary to reach the conclusion. They often provide context and detail. Or they might provide the same information as core scenes, but in another way. As a third option, they might allow the group to eliminate a red herring possibility. These facts are valuable; they let the Investigators narrow their search to the real answer, even though they don't strictly speaking, lead to another core clue.

ANTAGONIST REACTION

This is a scene of danger or trouble in which supporting characters opposed to the group's success take action to stop them or set them back. This might be a fight scene, but could just as easily be a legal entanglement, act of sabotage, or other less direct challenge. Antagonist reactions can be floating, to be dropped in wherever they suit the narrative best, or when they can help the pace.

HAZARD

A hazard scene presents the crew with an impersonal obstacle to their safety or ability to continue the investigation. It must typically be over-

come through tests or contests.

Sub-Plot

A sub-plot scene gives the characters an opportunity to look around, explore and interact without directly altering the course of the investigation. These may arise from personal arcs, side bets, cover stories, or simply the curiosity of one or more Investigators. Where the central mystery provides structure and forward momentum, the sub-plot adds flavour and character. Sequences arising from it may be what the group remembers long after the mystery has been put to bed. Sub-plots are more suited to long-running campaign play.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings the group to the end of its investigation and often confronts it with a moral dilemma, physical obstacle, final revelation, etc. Often it can be a final hazard or antagonist reaction scene, albeit initiated by the Investigators. The classic conclusion of many an RPG mystery is a big fight, but that is exactly what Casting the Runes is seeking to at least provide some alternatives to. There is clearly no sense fighting something that cannot be defeated, or that exists only to be solved rather than subdued.

Hybrid Scenes

Some scenes serve a double purpose, most often when a general challenge leads to an information opportunity. GMs should remember that a core clue should come as a reward for overcoming an obstacle only if that core clue is also available by other means. Otherwise this risks a situation where a core clue becomes unavailable, violating the central tenet of the GUMSHOE system and potentially bringing the investigation to a grinding halt.

Scene Diagrams

To check that player choice matters in a scenario, GMs may be wise to diagram its scenes, like a typical process flow chart. Connect the scenes with arrows, checking to make sure that they can be unravelled in any order. If necessary, put the core clues on one side and move them around from one scene to the next once the overall flow is clear. It's acceptable to add unpredictability and variance with non-investigative scenes (antagonist reactions, hazards, and sub-plots), but better form when the players can connect the core and alternate scenes in more than one way.

Sandy Petersen's Three Rules of Horror

Game design doyen Sandy Petersen has publicly shared his three rules for running a confrontation and climactic scene: hint, evidence, and monster. Players should get a suitably subtle hint before they encounter the final nemesis (a foul miasma, a whisper on the wind, etc.) If they insist on pressing on, they should be presented with solid evidence of the imminent danger (gnawed bones, an eerie glow from behind a closed door, etc.) If they continue, they will finally be confronted with the monster.

This structure exists partly so that players won't blame the GM if their characters die. They had fair warning, and if they persisted, whatever happened was their own fault. Of course, the GM may structure the adventure so that there is no other way to vanquish the monster, but at least the players keep their character agency.

More often, the hints and evidence should give the players a chance to hang back and prepare an alternative plan of attack. Ideally, this should still give them some dramatic encounter with the monster, but one that makes it clear that their cunning has saved the day - and themselves. For instance, they had time to get within a very solid Circle of Protection, or detonate the pre-laid demolition charges just in time to collapse the tunnel before the horde of Swine-Things engulfs them. A clever, fully invested group of Investigators will almost always be able to come up with a Plan B, and any player who insists on a head-on confrontation in the teeth of alternatives deserves whatever's coming to them.

Scenarios

The following adventures are given as starter/taster scenarios for *Casting the Runes*. Investigators are advised to read no further, and leave the rest to their trusty GM. To make these into more difficult scenarios for more experienced Investigators, a few tweaks should suffice.

The Coptic Lamp

This adventure revolves around the antiquarian community of London, and one very curious - and dangerous - artefact that comes to light (to coin a phrase...) It is intended as an initial introduction to the game, and an opportunity for Investigators to meet and get to know each other, if needed.

The story opens at the offices of Eve & Porter, a well-respected dealer in Near Eastern antiquities, in Crown Passage SW1, located in the very grand St James's district of central London. Crown Passage is a narrow, dark street lined with 17th and 18th century shop buildings. The offices of Eve & Porter are in an early 18th century building dating from the reign of Queen Anne.

The Investigators have been called there after the firm's usual opening hours by Adrian Sowerby, a junior member of staff at the establishment. Sowerby may be known to one of them at university, or through antiquarian contacts; or he may simply have heard of one or more of them as experienced people in the fields of the bizarre and supernatural. Alternatively, he may have contacted any of the organisations suggested in the Campaigns chapter as suitable patrons and entry points to the Jamesian world for player characters.

Adrian Sowerby's statistics are given below, though they will probably not have much bearing on the investigation. He is physically unimposing, neatly dressed, with a low forehead, red hair, and a swept-back look to his face that recalls a rodent, but his fixed determination endows him with an almost bullet-like air of purpose.

Sowerby will introduce the case as follows:

"Gentlemen, I've called you here to help in a situation that could threaten the life of at least one of our clients, but where I am professionally and personally unable to proceed. The fact is, I'm at my wits' end in knowing what to do, and badly need help."

"As I'm sure you know, we frequently despatch items 'on approval' to our most established clients, for their assessment and evaluation, before they offer to buy. In this case, one of our longest established and most valued customers, Percival Wallas of Mayfair, retired partner in the banking firm of Robarts, Lubbock & Co., died suddenly just over a year ago. You may remember the case: it attracted attention because the cause of death was determined to be spontaneous human combustion. Comparisons were made with the death of Krook in Bleak House."

"Now, at the time of his death, Mr Wallas had in his possession one of our items, on approval. As this did not constitute part of his effects, it was not held up in probate, and was returned to us. The object is a Coptic lamp, of Egyptian origin, dating from approximately the 13th century AD, and fairly unique of its kind."

"Since the circumstances of Mr Wallas's death were so strange, I became interested in the provenance of the lamp, and looked it up in our records. It first came into our possession in the 1880s, apparently from an Army officer who had served in Egypt and fought at the Battle of Tel El Kebir. It featured regularly in our catalogues thenceforth, but had never been sold. However, I did find that it had been sent out on approval once before: to The Hon. Gervais Strang of

Holmbush Park in East Sussex, who died in a sudden fire at his house in 1895."

"This seemed too much of a coincidence to be merely accidental, and I brought it to the attention of Mr Porter. He proved extremely sceptical, and brushed off my concerns as boyish fancy. He went so far as to threaten me with dismissal for besmirching the good name of the firm if I continued."

"So, I held my peace, especially as no other customer had shown an interest in the lamp. Mr Porter has continued to advertise it in our catalogues without attracting any interest - until now. A retired Indian Civil Service officer, Mr Reginald Dewhurst of The Oaks,

The Coptic lamp, from a sketch in the archives of the Society of Antiquaries. The whereabouts of the item are currently unknown

Cranleigh, Surrey, has asked for the lamp to be sent to him, on approval. I can delay it at most two days longer, without losing my position. I'm at a loss what to do. But I thought that gentlefolk with your abilities might be able to solve the mystery of this lamp, and see if it really has any malediction attached to it."

Assess Honesty will indicate that Sowerby is sincere, and a further 1-point spend will indicate that he is motivated by a burning, frustrated desire to do the right thing and save a life.

The Lamp

The Investigators will realise of course that the lamp is still in the dealer's strong rooms. If asked, Sowerby will disappear downstairs to the vaults and reappear with a locked wooden case. Opening the case with a key, he will reach into the box with a polishing cloth, and take out the Coptic lamp.

"After what I've told you, I won't invite you to touch it." Sowerby says as he holds the lamp up to the light...

The Coptic lamp itself is a brass orb, obviously made to hang by chains, exquisitely chased with perforations and inscriptions that create a mosaic effect strongly reminiscent of a mosque lamp. Even unlit, it is serene and beautiful, imposing rather than threatening. Investigators with Art History or Archaeology will recognize it as Middle Eastern work of the 13th century.

Sowerby calls the Investigators' attention to the inscription on the lamp. "The inscription is Coptic, but has not yet been translated," he says.

The lamp bears an inscription around its widest circumference in Coptic. Although using Greek script, this language is entirely different, and is the most modern survival of the ancient Egyptian tongue, used to this day as a liturgical language in the Coptic Churches of Egypt and elsewhere. Investigators who already know Greek will recognize the script, but will also find the inscription incomprehensible. Only a specialist in Coptic will be able to decipher the inscription.