

THE INFERNAL MACHINE

by Malcolm Craig

'The Infernal Machine' is an extended adventure nugget for the upcoming a/state RPG (and the free a/stateLite preview) but can also be used with a variety of horror, steampunk or urban games.

GM Synopsis

The tenement blocks that make up the north side of Woebegone Crescent, Folly Hills have recently been served with a Condemnation Order by the Department of Public Health (DoPH), part of the Three Canals Metropolitan Area Authority (TCMAA). The characters will be begged to intervene on behalf of the residents. After some investigations, intimidation, bribery and possibly some corruption, they will eventually find some dirt on a local politician responsible for the decision. This dirt will be enough to persuade him to reverse the decision. All's well that ends well. *Or maybe not...*

The PCs are feted as heroes, but things go from bad to worse. Some of the tenants start acting strangely, committing various crimes that they can remember nothing of. These tenants have been "eyehacked" by the Ancient & Honourable Guild of Fulgurators (an arcane organisation concerned with the production of electricity and the running of the railways). The Fulgurators want the buildings demolished so that they can excavate beneath them. The eyehack implants suggestions in the subject's mind, forcing them to carry out certain tasks. All the eyehacked tenants remember figures swathed in black and blinding lights. Clues point to the attacks taking place nearby, where the Fulgurators are using a suite of rented rooms, one of which contains the eyehack machine. Notes and plans found here point to something hidden beneath the tenements and that the Fulgurators are desperate to get people out of the area so that they can begin excavating.

Far beneath Woebegone Crescent lies a relic of times past: an ancient tunnelling machine used centuries ago to create sewers and railway tunnels. This arcane device is still functional and rumours of it reached the Fulgurators. They have struck upon the notion that the tunnelling machine will allow them to repair and expand their railway network. Once the characters have this information in their hands, it is up to them what to do with it...

Introductions & Involvement

Below are three suggestions for getting character groups involved in the adventure.

Friendly Provosts

Not all Provosts are crooked, shiftless thugs with a badge. Some are honourable, decent people who hold the law in high regard and have high moral principles. Such a group could be approached, off duty of course, and politely asked by a delegation from Woebegone Crescent if they could see their way clear to helping them resolve their little problem. Unlike other groups, Provosts are likely to have access to information a bit more readily and be able to take some form of action if they suspect wrongdoing.

Family Connections

Blood is, as they say, thicker than water and when family calls, you'd better listen. This is an easy way to have a fairly disparate group of characters get involved in the situation. Either they are a pre-existing group who are contacted by one of the character's family who lives in

Woebegone Crescent or they are a totally new group, brought together by various calls for help from a variety of relations. Family loyalty and a desire to help provide the cohesiveness for this particular kind of group.

Local Do-gooders

Some people just can't help helping others. If there's a cause going, then they'll be there to help, regardless of the consequences. From a group centred around a local lostfinder (or lostfinders) to a more religiously motivated group (perhaps the local Third Church parish priest has taken the cause to heart), such a group will undoubtedly (in their minds) have right on their side in this struggle against the faceless bureaucrats!

Fighting The Good Fight

However they get involved, the characters will quickly learn that the DoPH, one of the many arms of the bureaucratic creature that is the TCMAA, has condemned Woebegone Crescent. The residents have been given ten days to vacate their homes before demolition



work begins. Most people living in the Crescent are good, honest, hard-working men, women, and children who have done nothing to offend the TCMAA. One of the first things the characters will be shown is the eviction notice tacked to every door. In amongst the bureaucratic humbug, they come across the following line:

"...and the heretofore mentioned properties shall be vacated in good order within 10 (ten) days, due to the imminent public health risk posed by under-surface corruption in the immediate area."

Under-surface corruption? Public health risk? What?

Asking Around

The local people are only too willing to give vent to their complaints about the TCMAA, the Provosts, the DoPH and so on. If the characters diligently question the locals, the following rumours will come to light (the part of the rumour in italics is for the gamesmaster only):

1) Woebegone Crescent is built on top of an ancient death-pit from the time of The Shift. Thousands of bodies were thrown into the pit in an attempt to prevent the spread of plague. *False: This rumour is baseless.*

2) A century ago, a band of men went deep under Woebegone Crescent in search of a legendary Fury. No one ever returned. Their ghosts are said to haunt the sewers under the crescent. *True: Men did go underground a century ago, although the Fury was non-existent; they perished in a rock fall.*

3) The TCMAA wants to sell-off Woebegone Crescent because there are rich deposits of iron deep below the ground. *False: This is complete hogwash.*

4) The local burgess (Leeland Thoroughgood) is on the take. Various businesses in the burgh are giving him substantial amounts of money to make sure decisions go their way. *True in every respect.*

Some of these rumours may lead in the wrong direction. If the characters head up the proverbial garden path, then so be it.

Investigate at the TCMAA

One rather obvious route is to pop down to the DoPH and find out what the hell is going on. This will, obviously, be a bureaucratic nightmare, as the characters are forced to sit for hours in draughty waiting rooms to possibly meet with a dry, dusty clerk of little importance.

Eventually, after an interminable time, the characters will get to meet Gertrude Hofflinger, a senior clerk within the DoPH. A stern, emaciated, humourless woman who affects a monocle and gentleman's necktie, Gertrude is wide open to a bit of bribery and corruption. Skills such as Persuasion, Fast-talk, Bribery and so forth should be brought to the fore here. For a few pounds, Madam Hofflinger will 'accidentally' leave a 'confidential note' in plain view on her desk while she goes for a cup of tea. Alert characters will pounce on this. Hopefully,

The piece of paper is a hand-written note from Leeland Thoroughgood to the DoPH. In this note, Thoroughgood threatens, cajoles, and generally browbeats the DoPH about the condemnation of Woebegone Crescent. The note states that he is very, very much in favour of the demolition and he would look upon it very favourably if the notice were passed without any problems. This note was never meant to be kept on file, but Madam Hofflinger, being the neat and tidy person she is, kept everything.

Questioning Thoroughgood

Thoroughgood holds regular surgeries for his constituents, where they can air their grievances and he can cheerfully ignore them. The next surgery is in one day's time and presents the ideal opportunity to confront the Burgess. Thoroughgood also runs a small canal haulage business from a dilapidated, cramped warehouse at Old Wharf, Littlegate Canal, Folly Hills. When not on political business, he's generally to be found here, barking at his employees and grumbling over unpaid bills.

However they get to meet Thoroughgood, they will find him a thoroughly uncooperative man. He refuses to discuss anything to do with Woebegone Crescent, becoming increasingly agitated about the entire affair. Eventually, he will eject the characters from either his burgh office, or his office at the warehouse, depending on where they found him.

Digging The Dirt

Thoroughgood is quite obviously bent and the best way to get to the bottom of things would be to dig up some dirt and confront him with the ugly truth. If the characters don't think of this, they can be approached by an employee of Thoroughgood or his burgh office secretary and informed, in no uncertain terms, that Thoroughgood is basically a bastard and if they look hard enough, they could find evidence to bring him down with a thump.

Asking around will reveal the following rumours:

1) Local worthy Frolian Mosse is engaged in the illegal sale of young children to various militant groups for training as mikefighter pilots. Thoroughgood gets a percentage of the money. *False: But Mosse is very religious and has actively been helping local street children get housing in hostels and orphanages.*

2) Thoroughgood has recently come into a fair chunk of money from unexplained sources. He claims this is an inheritance from a wealthy uncle. *True: However, the inheritance part is false. He's been paid off by the Fulgurators to get the condemnation order for Woebegone Crescent passed by the DoPH.*

3) Thoroughgood's burgh office secretary has lithoprints of his boss in a compromising position with what is demonstrably a young prostitute. He'd be willing to sell them for the right price. *True: His secretary does have such photos and would be willing to sell them cheaply.*

4) Thoroughgood is using his haulage business to run narcotics and weapons for the 3rd Syndicate, making a healthy profit in the process. *True: He's doing exactly that. If this information were to be made public, Thoroughgood would be a dead man.*

Rumours 3 and 4 are the ones that will get Thoroughgood really hot under the collar. Confronting him with either evidence of his 3rd



Syndicate dealings or the photos will cause him to panic and plead with the characters not to ruin his business or political career. In reality, he's a very weak man. He'll promise to get the condemnation order cancelled as soon as possible, if only the characters will keep their mouths shut and not take their knowledge to the press.

Happy Ever After?

A short while after their dealings with Thoroughgood, the characters will doubtless be delighted to find out that the condemnation order has been rescinded. The characters will be hailed as heroes, bought many rounds of drinks, and generally be the men/women of the hour. However, a few days later, things start going wrong....

The characters will have settled back into their regular routine and are basking in glory. Then...one of the character's doors is hammered upon by a tear-stained, dirt-streaked little girl. The character should recognise her as one of the kids from Woebegone Crescent, little Emiline Hockley, daughter of Mr & Mrs Lucian Hockley. She tearfully explains that her daddy has hit her mummy, stolen things from other people, and is being beaten by a gang of men, and will the characters please, please come and help! What heartless cad could refuse the pleas of a small child in distress?

Upon arrival (with Emiline clinging to the sturdiest of the characters), they find Woebegone Crescent in a state of uproar. Clusters of people are standing in the street gossiping, arguing, remonstrating with Provosts and making the angry sounds of a group on the verge of turning into a mob. Emiline will drag the characters through the crowds (they will greet the characters in a friendly fashion) to the tenement containing numbers 74 - 82. In the dingy, slightly damp lobby of the building, a group of swarthy men and women are having a heated discussion. One pale, slender woman is lying, apparently unconscious, on the floor being tended by a young boy and an old man. In the far corner of the lobby, in a dim little alcove, the characters can barely make out the shape of a man trussed up with rough ropes and gagged with a strip of dirty cloth. If they move closer, they can see that he has been badly beaten.

The characters are duly recognised, and the self-appointed spokesman of the group, Mr Jonas Throck, relates the events that have transpired.

"Well, you see, young Hockley there has been acting mighty strange these past couple of days. Then, stuff starts going missing, you know, jewellery, bits and pieces. Then, just this past hour, we hear this almighty screaming from Hockley's place. Me and the boy run up and find Hockley beating seven shades out of his missus. Well, there was a right to do. He had this look in his eyes, like



he wasn't really there. Anyhow, had to give him a right going over to get him to stop. Tied him up now, he was screaming fit to burst he was. Then we found a sack with all our stuff in it, the stolen things, right? So, we puts two and two together and, well...."

Questioning Mr & Mrs Hockley

Poor Mrs Hockley is in a state of severe shock and must be treated very gently. The most that anyone can get out of her is that Lucian never acted like this before, that he was the perfect husband and father, and had absolutely no reason to steal from his friends and neighbours.

Lucian has been badly beaten by Throck and his sons. He has several broken bones and is covered in bruises. His recollection of events is hazy at best, but he swears blind that he never hit his wife and would certainly not steal. If he is allowed to see his wife and the bruises on her face, he will begin to cry inconsolably. Even Throck and the rest of the residents begin to feel some pity for the poor man, but only young Emiline tries to do anything to comfort him.

The thefts: All the stuff that Hockley (allegedly) stole was inconsequential, commonplace stuff. There are a few items of jewellery, some clothing, some household goods and so on.

Other happenings: If the characters ask around, they'll quickly find out that there have been other mysterious goings on and people acting out of character. The following strange happenings have taken place over the last two or three days:

- Elton Sprague (of #48) attacked his neighbour and friend of many years, Mr Farland House, with a pry bar. House is in hospital, and the Provosts are holding Sprague on a charge of attempted murder. If questioned, Sprague

remembers nothing of the attack and resolutely refuses to believe that he attacked one of his closest friends.

- Harriet Unsworth (of #32) was caught attempting to break into a shop on the Crescent owned by Mr. George Hesketh. She reacted violently when accosted, needing to be subdued by Mr. Hesketh and several men. This was not reported to the Provosts, and Mr. Hesketh is being very understanding about the event. If questioned, Ms. Unsworth only remembers 'waking up' and being sat on by several large, angry men. If pressed, however, she does mention, 'black clad figures' and 'blinding lights' but can offer little more than this.

- Tiermont Hollow (of #60) was found in the basement of his tenement with a shovel, attempting to dig through the floor. When confronted, he began ranting, raving, and acting violently. Since then, he has been his usual calm self and, like the others, remembers nothing of his 'episode'. If questioned further, he too recalls 'men in black' and 'a stabbing light'.

Rampant Rumours

The events of the past couple of days have given substantial amounts of grist to the local rumour mill. During their investigations, the characters will be confronted with the following speculation.

1) Some locals talk of seeing a black train silently pulling in to the local station (Folly Hills West) and mysterious figures unloading dark crates from the train in utter silence. *As weird as it sounds, this is actually true. Black clad figures have been unloading stuff in the middle of the night. This happened three days ago, shortly after the characters managed to get the condemnation order rescinded.*



2) Black-clad figures in long, floor-sweeping garments have been seen moving silently about the streets in recent weeks. Hager are abroad, and no good can come of this. *True in parts. There have been black-clad figures in the form of Fulgurators, but the Hager part of it is total balderdash.*

3) Sinister rumblings and creakings can sometimes be heard in the northern half of Woebegone Crescent. This is the result of unquiet spirits related to the 'Death Pit' rumour from earlier in the adventure. *True: there are mysterious rumblings and creakings, but these are due to the digging engine shifting the foundations of the buildings.*

4) Strange, actinic light has been seen coming from behind shuttered windows in a tenement on Falls Lane, just around the corner from Woebegone Crescent. Shift worshippers are thought to meet there and carry out dark rites. *True, in that a strange light has been seen coming from the building, but False, in that these are the rooms that the Fulgurators have obtained to set up their eyehack machine, and implant suggestions in the minds of their unfortunate victims. Shift worshippers have nothing to do with it.*

Avenues Of Investigation

Several ways of probing further into the problem present themselves.

Move Towards The Light

Some characters may make the connection between the 'blinding light' mentioned by some of those involved in the random acts and the 'actinic' light mentioned in Rumour 4 above. Staking out Falls Lane (a dank, evil smelling, claustrophobic little alleyway between teetering tenement blocks) will be a long and boring process. However, late at night, when very few

people are abroad, a group of figures can be seen coming up the alley carrying a long bundle. All clad in long, high-collared, matte black coats that seem to repel rain (the coats of all Fulgurators are rubberised), they come slowly up the alley and knock quietly at a decrepit door. Let the characters decide how they will deal with the situation. The Fulgurators are not well armed, but carry a variety of coshes, knives and the occasional sparklock.

The interior of the building is foetid and dark, and a low buzzing sound can be heard coming from the upper levels. The second floor room where the light was seen contains the Fulgurators and their eyehack machine. The other rooms on this level have been used to live in, cots and small stoves are scattered about. All five of the Fulgurators will be in the eyehack room to watch the proceedings, wearing their heavy goggles and thick, black coats.

Strapped into the machine is a young man, the 'viewer' of the machine clamped across his face. Occasional bursts of light spill out around the edges of the viewer, illuminating the room in a stark fashion (the gas lamp has been turned off and the room is otherwise dark at this point). One Fulgurator manipulates a *dingin* on the floor by the light of a small lamp, the body in the machine jerking at each burst of light. The Fulgurators are intent on their business, so the characters will have the element of surprise in anything they attempt to do. Whatever way they play it, they can gather enough evidence to show what the Guild has been up to. Plans, maps, shreds of paper, scribbled notes and perhaps most importantly, the eyehack machine itself, will indicate the existence of the digging machine and the plans that the Guild had for it, for Woebegone Crescent, and the poor unfortunates they hacked.

The Set-up

Something is being done to the people of Woebegone Crescent that is making them act very strangely. In order to find out what is going on, the players may wish to set themselves up as targets for whoever is carrying out these dastardly deeds. If they allow themselves to be captured, they will be mugged from behind as they stroll around the area. They will then be carried to Falls Lane, as mentioned above in 'Move Towards The Light'. The situation will broadly be the same as described, but one of the characters will be at the mercy of the Fulgurators, rather than some inoffensive citizen.

Deeper Underground

Going under Woebegone Crescent will be an adventure in itself (and will be covered in a free pdf, available soon*). Like most places in The City, there is a labyrinth of tunnels, vaults, old cellars, whole rooms, sewers, canals and suchlike forming a veritable maze, a death trap for the unwary. Mounting an expedition to actually find the digging machine will be a serious proposition, but one which could lead to some very valuable rewards, should the characters choose to go down that route.

Conclusions

Regardless of how they have managed it, the characters should now be in full possession of the facts. These facts are:

- 1) There is an ancient tunnelling machine buried under Woebegone Crescent.
- 2) The Fulgurators wanted it badly, and were prepared to bribe Burgess Thoroughgood and demolish much of the area to get it.
- 3) They were using the eyehack machine to cause panic and confusion in Woebegone Crescent in an effort to make the people more eager to leave.
- 4) As a follow up to this, those who were manipulated by the eyehack machine will start to have seizures, fits and, in some cases, will die of massive brain haemorrhages.

The accumulated evidence is enough to take to the Provosts or, possibly intimidate the Fulgurators into backing down. Whatever path they choose, the characters will have gained friends in the area, but will also have made some powerful, vengeful enemies.

Eyehacking

Developed by the Fulgurators to assist in their devious machinations, eyehacking involves projecting rapid pulses of coherent light into the eyes of an individual, implanting suggestions in their brain. Even within the recesses of the Guild, no one is entirely sure how this works and all are aware of the dangerous side effects of the technique (seizures, fits and potential brain damage).

* at www.contestedground.co.uk