



House of Knaves

by Mike Dukas

for the Leagues of Gothic Horror setting by Triple Ace Games



Murder. It is spoken of in hushed, furtive tones by some and loudly railed against by others. It is a thing of nightmares, yet it captivates the whole of the civilized world. For those living in London, the horrible deeds of Jack the Ripper are fresh in their memories. With every new murder reported, there are always a few who whisper that Jack has returned. If only the whisperers knew just how close to the truth they actually are.

LETHAL AWAKENING

The English public's fascination with murder and the birth of what would eventually become the House of Knaves both largely began with the Ratcliffe Highway murders. On December 7th, 1811, Timothy Marr, his wife, their infant son and Timothy's 14 year old apprentice were found brutally murdered in the Marr home. Their demise, and the question of who the culprit(s) might be, covered every handbill and newspaper. The public was hungry for any and all news or "official" theories related to the murders. The Marrs' bodies, instead of being cleaned up and moved, were lain on the beds in the house, allowing the public to enter the Marr home at will to view the bodies for further spectacle. Then, two weeks later, a second set of murders occurred.

The method of killing was nearly identical. This time a tavern owner, his wife and their servant were the victims. Once again, handbills and newspapers covered nothing else. A suspect, John Williams, was arrested, but hung himself in his cell, much to the chagrin of those hoping to witness a public execution. Not wanting it to appear that Williams had escaped justice, his body was paraded down Ratcliffe Highway and taken to the site of each of the murders. Shops closed and people lined the streets to see the dead killer on parade. Feelings of anger, fear, horror, and disgust were prevalent during those few weeks. But for one man, a flame of passion and excitement had been ignited that could not easily be extinguished.

Earl Brison was an artist of some skill who thought to take advantage of the spectacle of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. When the bodies of the Marrs were placed on the beds in their house and the house left for the public to peruse, he was quick to take advantage, sketching



each body and paying particular attention to their grisly wounds. The sketches sold immediately, so he made more, and then even more after that. By the time the second set of murders occurred, Earl had become known as the "Death Artist" and "Murder Sketcher". His presence was accepted at the murder scene by public and police alike. He found he enjoyed the work far more than he expected and his glass was never empty thanks to a fawning and grimly curious public.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

As years passed and the murder rate rose, Earl Brison found that he was no longer alone in his ghastly work. The number of "Death Artists" and lovers of death and murder slowly grew. Like macabre hobbyists, they watched the papers and waited for the next killing to sate their loathsome desires. With so many more artists pursuing the death trade, Earl found his glass was no longer always full and his stomach was often empty. His anger at these "pretenders" as he called them caused more than a few shouting matches that led to fisticuffs. In one such tirade, Earl vehemently spoke of how the others cared only for the fame and coin death would get them. They did not see the beauty of death as he did. How could they?

Unbeknownst to Earl, there were those who shared his passion and they heard his words that night at the tavern. They approached him afterwards, revealing there were indeed others who found beauty in death and murder. They were artists, all, and used their grotesque interests to fuel their creativity. Thinking they were mocking him, he demanded to see this art they spoke of. What he was shown proved these were not men creating art for coin, but out of passion for the subject matter and the art itself. They welcomed him with open arms.

A club in all but name, Earl spoke of the need to legitimize themselves by giving a title to their group. Many names were offered but in the end, they chose the Quietus Guild. As with most clubs,

it began casually enough but soon found its membership growing. Unlike other clubs this one's membership found their tastes becoming more violent as time wore on.

In 1864, a wealthy member of the Guild proposed a party to celebrate their muse by honoring Caine, the first murderer. He beseeched all members to create works of art to be displayed at the event and promised the ultimate thrill awaited them. Unbeknownst to the rest of the Guild, he took it upon himself to "procure" a number of London's homeless and destitute, promising them food and coin for but a night's work. The reality was quite different. They were going to die.

The Celebration of Caine, as they later came to call it, was the catalyst for the exodus of much of the membership at the time. That night was filled with violence and hedonistic pleasures, culminating in a hunt in the nearby forest. The prey were those lured into coming for a bit of food and fortune. There is little record of what transpired once the hunt began, save that the mansion was burnt to the ground, at least seven people were killed by various means and what was once the Quietus Guild was left in shambles

After that night in 1864, the gatherings became few and the remaining membership was close to the original number when the Guild was originally formed. Earl Brison, a survivor of the Celebration of Caine, joined his fellows less and less, claiming he had found a new muse to occupy his mind. He eventually stopped coming altogether. Those who remained would still gather discreetly and talk of the latest happenings in the city and, individually, they still pursued their art. Death and murder were still their muses and many a work of art was inspired by the Celebration of Caine. Many of today's members refer to these years as the "cocoon stage" before the butterfly that is the House of Knaves tore free.

THE RIPPER MURDERS

It was in 1888 that those who once called themselves the Quietus Guild found cause to rejoice once more in ghoulish delight and come together again. The murders committed by the killer dubbed "Jack the Ripper" grabbed the attention of not only the nation, but the world. It was a different age now and the remaining old guard of the Quietus Guild found themselves suddenly surrounded by those who not only shared their love of death and murder, but longed for a stage for which to share their ideas and works. By the time of Catherine Eddowes death on September 30th, 1888, membership had gone from four to at least two dozen people. With so many new voices and no real leader, the Guild threatened to tear itself apart. Salvation came on the evening of Friday, November 10th, 1888... the night after Jack the Ripper took Mary Kelly's life.

Some time after dinner, when multiple arguments were being waged amongst the membership, an unknown

man emerged from the shadows of the room, to the shock of all present. Of everyone in the room, only the four oldest members recognized him, and they just barely. Standing before them, and looking just as he did when the Quietus Guild was first formed, was Earl Brison. The spiritual father of the Guild had returned.

After greeting his old friends and introducing himself to the newer members, chaos ensued as many declared him a charlatan. The real Earl Brison, they said, would be an old man by now if not already in the grave! With a simple gesture of his hand, he somehow forced a preternatural calm upon them all. Try as they might, they could do nothing but look upon him and listen.

THE POWER OF DEATH

His first words, had they not already been supernaturally silenced, would have left them speechless. Jack the Ripper would not kill again, he said. His time was over. Now it was their turn. While the Ripper had shown them the path, it was up to them to see it to its end. He spoke to them of how Jack the Ripper's killings were different from those that came before. These were not only more visceral; Jack's killings had *meaning*. They all knew it, they all had sensed it, he urged.

One by one, they felt the invisible hold upon them release. When one and all were freed, he gave them a choice: join him in following the path that Jack the Ripper began, or die. The four older members refused him immediately. They demanded to know how it was that he was young, how he knew that Jack the Ripper would kill no more. Was he the Ripper? What was this power that he had used upon them all?

He gave them a final smile and then, looking to the other members, he gestured to the elder four. They fell upon their elders like a pack of jackals. It was over in moments. The four pillars of the Quietus Guild perished not with dignity, but like caged animals. The realization for those that remained came quickly: Why had they done it? They had murdered their friends and colleagues. Each had, to a man, participated in that act which had formerly only roused their art and discussions in the Guild. Now they were murderers.

Earl Brison gathered them and explained that, with the killing of their elders, they had taken the first step to true understanding and walking the path of Jack the Ripper. Jack, he explained, killed not out of anger or rage. He did so as ritual. For him, the deaths served an altogether greater purpose. There was power in death. Earl would teach them that power. They would continue the work that Jack the Ripper began. One among them asked Earl if he was the Ripper. His only answer was a smile.

THE HOUSE OF KNAVES

Earl Brison was quick to cull those he deemed too weak or unfit. Not wanting any of his protégé's clinging to the past, he declared their group was in want of a new name. Someone suggested they name themselves after Jack the Ripper since it was supposedly his works they pursued. Brison liked the idea, saying they were indeed a house of jacks... a House of Knaves.

Once he had culled the herd, he set about creating protocols to ensure secrecy, security and a sense of order among the flock. Each member was given a stylized playing card— a knave. The suit of the card signifying the person's rank within the group; clubs being the lowest, followed by diamonds, hearts and spades. This card not only gives each member a sense of identity within the House of Knaves, but also acts as a signal card that can be shown to doormen to gain access to certain places in the city where others are not welcome.

Each member is tested on their knowledge of death, anatomy, spiritualism and the occult, as well as artistic skill. Those with connections to the upper class are given special attention and often act as recruiters. Those in the lower rungs of society are no less important and act as the eyes and ears of the House. No matter their rank, all must kill.

Those who carry spade cards are Brison's personal circle, his Spades, whom he has personally instructed in the rudimentary use of dark magics. It is they who sometimes aid Brison in difficult rituals or who are sent outside of the city to retrieve any tomes or artifacts deemed necessary by Brison. All members, regardless of rank, are made to see the power inherent in murder and the miraculous things one can achieve if properly schooled and motivated.

In the two years since it's inception, the House of Knaves has made its power felt from the streets of Whitechapel to the halls of Parliament. It owns properties across London but is especially prevalent in art houses and museums, where members can show off the more tame pieces of their art. Of course, to the card-carrying members of the House of Knaves, the city is their canvas and the blood of their victims is their paint.

While the House wields tremendous power thanks to some of its Upper Class members as well as occasional threats and blackmail, to the general public it does not exist. Only those with an interest in macabre art or the occult might have heard of them, and even then it is just "insane rumors". Whispers of shadowy killers stalking the night and killing for unholy power is the stuff of penny dreadfuls, not something to be taken seriously. Newspapers report on their dark works and both the London Police and Scotland Yard do their best to investigate them, but none would guess the gruesome murders happening throughout the

city were anything but the work of lone madmen.

Of the various Leagues throughout London, The Ghost Club is the only one with (in)tangible proof of the House's existence. A year ago, a member of the Club had the misfortune of discovering one of the House's victims. A medium of some strength, she was immediately assaulted by the victim's weeping spirit. From that encounter, the Ghost Club learned of these individuals who murdered for mystical power. Uncovering and stopping the House of Knaves has become a priority for the Club.

EARL BRISON

Patron 4

Archtype: *Occultist*; **Motivation:** *Power*; **Style:** 4

Primary Attributes: Body 3, Dexterity 3, Strength 3, Charisma 4, Intelligence 4, Willpower 7

Secondary Attributes: Size: 0, Move 6, Perception 11, Initiative 7, Defense 6, Stun 3, Health 10

Skills: Academics: Occult 10, Art: Sketching 6 (*Murders* 7), Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Con 4, Connoisseur 6, Intimidation 6, Investigation 6, Linguistics 6 (*Deciphering* 7), Stealth 5, Streetwise 5, Magic: Black 15

Talents: Fearsome, Fearsome Attack, Magical Aptitude, Psychic Resistance, Quick Healer

Resources: Status 1 (Leader of House of Knaves), Artifact 1 (Ley Line map of London)

Rituals: Arcane Shield, Augury, Empower, Fear, Harm, Hex (Lesser), Hex (Greater), Summon Horror

Flaw: Sadism

Weapons: Punch 6

Adventure Seed

Brison regained his youth by making a deal with the devil. Creating the House of Knaves was the first step in paying back that debt. He has in his possession a map of the major Ley Lines in London which he is using to plot out a city-wide summoning circle. The second part of paying off his debt is far more insidious. Once his Knaves are ready, he is going to have them go forth and recreate the Ripper murders at the sites of the most powerful lines, all during the tolling of the midnight bell. This will fuel a ritual to open a gate to hell in the middle of Whitechapel. Where Jack the Ripper failed, Earl Brison plans to succeed. It will be a living work of art, much as it was when Jacques Callot painted it the last time the ritual was performed.