In a way, the HPLHS owes its very existence to “The Rats in the Walls.” Sean Branney’s first acquaintance with the Lovecraftian horror tale came through this story roughly 35 years ago. His very weird friend (and current DRAFT illustrator) Darrell Tutchton handed him an anthology of horror stories with this one bookmarked and said, “You’ve got to read this story — it’s really weird.” That fateful literary encounter, lo these many years ago, set Sean on a course of a lifelong love for Lovecraft, which he later shared with Andrew Leman through the role-playing game Call of Cthulhu.

“The Rats” is among HPL’s earlier works — one of the first as he transitioned from publishing stories through the amateur press to selling stories to pulp magazines. He wrote it late in the summer of 1923 and infused the tale with many motifs which would reappear throughout the remainder of his career: a protagonist suffering an ancestral curse; dangerous cults worshiping even more dangerous gods; ancient legends of unspeakable acts and an underground world that hides sanity-wrenching horrors. There’s also a nod to Poe and his dread House of Usher — a house whose destruction is tied to the fate of the family dwelling in it. “Rats” gives us a team of brave investigators, risking their health and sanity in a manner that will surely be familiar to those who have played Chaosium’s role-playing game. It gives us an unreliable narrator whose testimony is tormented by otherworldly phenomena which may or may never be real. And it gives us a finale untypical for Lovecraft — a moment of surprising and genuinely shocking horror.

In adapting the story for radio, as usual, we had to make a few changes. We wanted to open up the perspective of the story which was written in the first person. We also wanted to add it to the programme without duplication. The story makes references to a number of real historical and fictional characters. In alluding to the Roman poet Catullus, Lovecraft used a technique that he would continue to develop, salting his fiction with genuine scholarship to make it seem more authentic. When Lovecraft wrote. (The idea of human evolution has always been controversial, but that controversy was especially heated in the early 1920s, leading up to the infamous “Scopes Monkey Trial” of 1925.) And the unexpected 1923 death of Warren Harding also gets a mention in Lovecraft’s story.

The HPLHS isn’t the only august affiliation that got its start from this tale. In the climactic moments, Delapore insanely babbles a genuine Gaelic curse which Lovecraft quoted from The Sin Eater by Fiona Macleod. Lovecraft knew it was a bit of a cheat to use Gaelic and that it really should have been Welsh, but he believed no reader would notice. But first, a few words from our sponsor.

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