

Advanced Cantraps for the Wayfaring Adventurer

Supplemental Small Magics for the 'Dying Earth Role-Playing Game'.

By Ian Thomson

Artwork: Carrie Walters (pp 1,3,7,9); & the 'Commode Minstrels in Bullface' collective (p6)
www.pelgrane.com/violetcusps.htm



Introduction

This is not the first article to appear on cantraps. The first selection was published in 'Cugel's Compendium of Indispensable Advantages' (Pelgrane Press, 2001). The cantraps described there typify lesser examples available to peons and lackeys - folk of no great worth and no significant understanding of the magical arts. The game mechanics of those first cantraps are different to those covered here, which are more creditable¹ specimens of this class of magic. Those first cantraps granted a boon of 1 for the whole contest or a bonus of 1 to the first roll of a related ability attempt, or provided a discrete effect. Those that follow here are largely of the 'discrete effect' variety.

The second selection of cantraps printed was as an appendix in 'Demons of the Dying Earth' (Pelgrane Press, 2003). As one reviewer surmised, they were included when we suddenly realized that two blank pages remained once layout was complete. This does not mean that they were sub-standard, or flung together hurriedly. Rather, they were taken from this article, which was already in development at that time – with the idea that this article would follow shortly in a copy of the XPS magazine. Since such has not been possible, this article has been chosen as one of the first to grace the author's page 'Through Violet Cusps' - on the Pelgrane Press website.

¹ In the most part.

At the time of writing, a selection of this new style of cantrap has also been included in the first draft of the forthcoming Dying Earth Bestiary. In this case, this is not because we have again discovered pages to fill, but because we value diversity and believe that a bestiary unadorned by additional items of interest than just the beasts themselves would be a less than optimal product. Though inferior in effect to full spells, remember that cantraps may well come into their own² when all true spells have been cast and no resort is left but attempting to use one of these minor magics to solve a problem of some magnitude.

What Exactly is a Cantrap?

As noted in the *Cugel's Compendium* article, the term 'cantrap' can be used to cover widely divergent magical effects. Such effects include those petty magics that remove dust from one's hat brim, and rise through those that call a minor invisible imp to perform some simple deed - to those that bring down a curse of potentially fatal consequence. What better way to illustrate this divergence of scale than simply to equate it to the different levels of gameplay available through DERPG: Dabblers, Magicians, Arch-Magicians. The word 'cantrap' describes a different type of magic for each class. Practitioners of higher ranking still consider the cantraps used by those of lower ranking to be 'cantraps', just of a lesser sort. However, dabblers considering the cantraps of true magicians and arch-magicians are likely to regard such things to be minor spells. Definition of what is a cantrap over what is a spell, is purely a matter of perspective. The cantraps here are presented as those available in low-level Turjan Campaigns, or more advanced Cugel-Level campaigns. Individual GMs might decide that cantraps are common in their version of the Dying Earth (since they appeared or were mentioned in several stories, whilst true spells were known to relatively few).

Author Note: The truly innovatory amongst you will notice that the cantraps in Cugel's Compendium can be adapted wholesale to function under these new rules - should you prefer it.

Cantrap Mechanics

The cantraps in this article adhere to the following principles (unless otherwise noted in their text):

- Roll one dice (Magicians [Magic rating 8-18] at a bonus of 1; and Arch-Magicians [19+] at bonus of 2);
- On an IS the cantrap takes effect with superior success (GM judges any additional benefits);
- On a true DF³, some amusing and/or inconvenient result takes place (again GM decides – usually something akin to the reverse of what was intended), and the cantrap may not be attempted again for an entire hour;
- On an adjusted DF (that is to say when a Magician rolls a 6) a point is lost from the caster's Magic pool, but they suffer no further ill-effect, and may retry the cantrap as if it were a regular failure;
- On any regular failure, one's Magic pool is not affected, but the cantrap cannot be attempted again for a number of minutes equal to 20 minus one's Magic rating (min. of 1 minute).

Optional Adjustment: Should the caster be under no significant pressure, and able to concentrate fully on the cantrap, an additional bonus of 1 to any casting roll may be granted. (This brings these cantraps into line with those evidenced in the Dying Earth story 'Liane the Wayfarer'.)

Cost: If the spell is a success (or a DF – see above) a point is expended from the caster's Magic pool. (This illustrates that these petty magics are unwieldy and ill-designed compared to true spells.) Should the caster have no points remaining in their Magic pool, cantraps may no longer be cast. (Optional Rule: Magic pool points used casting cantraps refresh automatically - at the rate of one per hour.)

Duration: Standard duration is for a feat, but occasionally this extends to a contest. (The article in Cugel's Compendium erroneously states that the standard duration for most cantraps is an hour; in fact an hour's duration only occurs with exceptional cantraps, or perhaps on an IS roll.)

² No doubt to the merriment of all.

³ A natural '6' by someone with no bonus – IE a result that only dabblers can experience.

Finding or Learning Cantraps

Each worthy cantrap results from significant magical research and experimentation – refined into simple incantations and magical gestures. Despite the waning of magical wisdom in this final age, a wide tradition of folk magic still prevails – though in no universally coherent form. Rather, isolated cantraps are passed down through families, or within small communities, or as trade secrets amongst professionals. Any particular cantrap may be well known in one area, yet utterly unheard of further afield. That there are still so many cantraps extant indicates the prevalence they once possessed.

No 'College of Cantraps' awaits your adventurers with open doors. Only within Kaiin's Scholasticarium - or some similar ancient institution - are cantraps taught with any frequency, and even then these petty magics are not popular. (Being widely regarded as mere curios in most cases worthy only of the lowest magicians.) Rather, they are likely to be learned during a game in exchange for favors, as reward for assistance, or from ancient parchments. (GMs of highly magic-based games may wish to introduce cantraps as common, especially if PCs are Scholasticarium students, or rogues of sufficient ingenuity and Magical capacity to wish to arm themselves with helpful enchantments of this type.)

To learn a cantrap on your own, you must have access to a tome that explains how to retain its enchantment within your psyche. This is not the same as encompassment, as the cantrap cannot cast itself with a mere thought, but is very similar. (The activation gestures and incantations are then required to bring forth the magical energies from the caster's mind.) After several hours of study {represented by a figure equalling 12-MR – where MR is your Magic rating, and with a minimum of 1 hour}, you may check to see if the cantrap is learned. Mechanically this involves rolling an IS with your Magic rating, at a maximum number of re-rolls equal to half of your pool.

To learn with the help of a magician (Magic rating 10+) who already knows the cantrap, halves the time required, and the cantrap is also successfully learned on a PS. To learn with the help of a non-magician – or a magician of low potency (Magic-rating 9 or less) who knows the cantrap also halves the time required but does not increase the chance of success.

Note that we do not include here many of the more common professional cantraps, such as those for increasing the temperature of the forge fire, polishing silverware, or finely-finishing a piece of carpentry. Should such things be necessary within the game, they are easy to invent, and in any case are more likely to be observed taking effect⁴ than to be required/desired by PCs.



⁴ As a means to add atmosphere to a standard scenario.

The Cantraps Themselves

Artman's Mundane Concealment

Function: The caster can disguise themselves, automatically assuming the semblance of some local furnishing or accoutrement that has every right to be where it is.

Gestures Required: Caster merely stands still and shakes their hands alongside their upper torso. The elementals involved in the cantrap itself decide upon the best 'disguise', so the caster may feel the need to squat down or raise their arms, or some other action that more closely resembles the general attitude of the assumed object. (No position is required that is physically difficult to hold for a minute.)

Variations in Effect: Those who know the area intimately will, if they pause to examine in any detail, notice an unusual item. (Though this may sometimes not in itself draw attention, since people change their furnishings from time to time.) This cantrap does not work in any natural setting such as forest, moor, or field. The caster can easily hold an unusual position for about a minute, after which they will surely twitch and the cantrap effect ends. Even the easiest positions, that could technically be held for much longer, will not assist, as concentration can at longest be extended to about 4 minutes (IS).

Artman's False Semblance

Function: Makes some small object (no larger in mass than a hammer) appear to be something totally ordinary.

Gestures Required: Twist and turn the object as if it were the item you want it to be; then say 'I see a ##' – with '##' being the name of the object the target will come to resemble.

Variations in Effect: This is most useful if one is about to be searched for some missing object. Through concentration one can for several minutes make the object appear to be an innocent object such as a walking stick or hat. On a DF the cantrap appears to work, but then fails as soon as someone begins to search you. On an IS no concentration is required, and the item remains changed for up to an hour.

Artman's Vocal Replicant

Function: The caster can exactly imitate the voice of another person, presuming they know that person reasonably well, or have listened to them speak more than a phrase or two in the last few hours.

Gestures Required: Plucking swiftly at one's throat.

Variations in Effect: Normally this can only be a short continuous burst of three short phrases, or two long ones; however on an IS the caster may engage in a short dialogue, or utter several sentences. On a DF, the voice emerges as a squeaky and pathetic parody of the one intended. (Something that is almost guaranteed to raise instant suspicions.)

Aura of Petty Nobility

Function: Enhances one's pretension to be of noble stock.

Gestures Required: Draw oneself upright and make a haughty claim/demand of some kind.

Variations in Effect: This cantrap increases the chances of success with Imposture or Persuasion (not Glib or Obfuscatory), when posing as a person of fine pedigree. The user gains a boon of 1 for a contest, or a bonus of 1 for a discrete attempt. On a DF, the act of Imposture is immediately evident, and often results in the charlatan being bodily ejected from the premises. (Note that even with a success, persons taken in will not maintain their conviction if they view the person acting, or appearing, out of character thereafter.)

Boton's Unlikely Contortion

Function: The user can wriggle through small spaces or around corners, as if they were an accomplished contortionist.

Gestures Required: Undulate one's body energetically, then push forward in the desired direction.

Variations in Effect: Standard use allows the PC to use 'Athletics' for feats that the GM would normally disallow for any non-contortionist character. On an IS the Athletics ability does not require rolling for. (Automatic success)

Codwill's Minor Excavation

Function: The caster may dig a hole the size of a small grave, or remove debris from a similar area.

Gestures Required: Motioning with one's hands, as if digging in sand.

Variations in Effect: On a DF, an amount of the debris showers the caster and nearby comrades (though the cantrap still partially works).

Dartwiler's Integral Review

Function: Assists one in examining antiquities and magical curios – to detect forgeries.

Gestures Required: One must physically examine the object, pausing frequently to make sub-vocal noises and raise one's eyebrows in a suspicious manner.

Variations in Effect: On a regular success a bonus of 1 is granted to an Appraisal (or appropriate Pedantry specialism) roll. On a DF either the object slips from one's fingers (if it is fragile), or a penalty of 1 is applied.

Effulgent Vitality

Function: Despite all manner of physical inconveniences that might be applied to the person of a roving vagabond, this cantrap summons internal vitalities that boost one's constitution.

Gestures Required: Its activation requires only a tensing of the thorax, accompanied by the recitation of a single arcane syllable. (However, such acts are impossible whilst in active combat, and therefore the cantrap doesn't help against mundane wounding.)

Variations in Effect: On a regular success a bonus of 1 is applied (the first roll only if a contest) when resisting poison or in other situations where one's Health is compromised. On a DF, a levy of 1 is instead acquired for a contest (or a penalty of 1 for a single roll situation). On an IS, the bonus lasts for an entire contest, or the bonus is 2 for a single roll situation.

Gerb's Emplacer

Function: An invisible imp will carry any small object to the point specified and leave it there. (During transit the item is also invisible.)

Gestures Required: One merely places the object in one's sleeve or pocket and sights the desired location.

Variations in Effect: The location may not be a locked container unless the caster scores an IS. The imp cannot pass any magical barriers.

Hoolart's Self-Analysis

Function: Allows the caster to determine if they are under the influence of some clandestine magical effect (whether through spell or potion, or any other means).

Gestures Required: Pat oneself down as if searching for one's pipe and tobacco.

Variations in Effect: On an IS the caster actually knows generally what the magical influence is. On a DF an inaccurate reading is recovered.



Inconvenience Lock

Function: There are numerous occasions when one might wish a secured portal to open with all promptness.

Gestures Required: The user must press their fingertips to the lock and twist them as if using a key.

Variations in Effect: This grants a bonus of 1 to Quick Fingers, when attempting to pick a lock. On a DF, the lock becomes jammed. On an IS, the lock opens noiselessly without need to make the Quick Fingers roll.

Lommer's Delayed Distraction

Function: An electric charge is placed in an object and startles the first person to touch it (single Health roll to avoid losing 1 point from Health pool). A Wherewithal success (made at a penalty of 1 if you do not expect the charge) is also required - to avoid yelping loudly in pain.

Gestures Required: You tap the target object with a series of ritual beats.

Variations in Effect: On a DF the charge instantly affects the caster. On an IS the charge's effect is doubled.

Lorgan's Instant Flame

Function: Creates a long tongue of flame (equal to a very strong candle flame) from the palm of your hand.

Gestures Required: Rub one's hands together vigorously.

Variations in Effect: On an IS this flame lasts for half an hour (and can be turned on and off at will during this time). On a DF the flame bursts forth with unexpected virility, and may well set light to one's clothes or surroundings.

Momentary Obscurative

Function: This cantrap will render a small object invisible for one minute.

Gestures Required: Place the object in your hand and blow on it softly.

Variations in Effect: On an IS the object remains invisible for as many minutes as you have points in your Magic pool. On a DF the object becomes brightly fluorescent for a number of minutes equal to half your current Magic pool.

Quort's Leaping Rapier

Function: Carries your rapier instantly to your hand.

Gestures Required: One merely reaches out, whilst snapping fingers, and cries "To Me!"

Variations in Effect: On a DF the rapier bounds away in a random direction for several yards. On an IS the caster also receives a bonus of 1 on any Attack roll immediately following.

The Rope Enhancer

Function: The caster casts this on any length of rope (up to about 50ft long). The rope will thereafter (for the next hour) tie itself to some protrusion - whenever one end is thrown and the caster retains hold of the other. It will also untie itself when the caster tugs on it and calls out a code word.

Gestures Required: Hold the rope loosely in one's hands, and wave it slowly about in the air.

Variations in Effect: If no protrusion exists, the rope cannot tie itself; but will guide itself several feet from the actual direction thrown if a convenient tying-point is within reach. On an IS the duration extends to three hours. On a DF the rope immediately ties itself about the caster. (Typically it takes one person of reasonable dexterity 10 minutes to untie them; and the caster themselves cannot get free without aid for an hour.)

Ropewalking

Function: Allows the caster to walk across a reasonably tight rope, as if solid unwavering ground.

Gestures Required: Tap one's foot repeatedly against the end of the rope in question, then step lively along its length.

Variations in Effect: Outsiders see the person walk nimbly along the rope as if they were a masterful rope-walker. On an IS the effect lasts for another few minutes, so other ropes can also be passed over during this time. On a regular fail, the caster must lunge back to safety (failing to do so only on a DF). On a DF, the caster must also lunge back, but fails to do so on any Failure – though an EF leaves them dangling rather than plummeting.)

Rotan's Swift Comprehension

Function: Allows one to read a very small section of writing in a foreign tongue.

Gestures Required: Place a finger near both the beginning and end of the short section of inscription one wishes to read; then clap one's palms together.

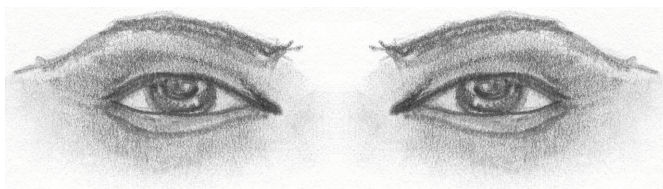
Variations in Effect: On an IS, rather than just one phrase, caster can read a sentence or two (if the inscription is that long). On a DF, the caster gains a wildly inaccurate reading – possibly based on what they expected to read (rather than what is actually indicated).

See Cards

Function: The advantage of knowing what cards fellow players hold needs no explanation.

Gestures Required: Surreptitious stroking of one's eye whilst holding at least three cards from the pack in question in your hands.

Variations in Effect – On a regular success, one's Gambling ability operates at a boon of 1 for the contest. (Or a bonus of 1 if the GM extrapolates the whole game to contesting single rolls.) On a DF, the cantrap gives false readings when called, resulting in a levy (or penalty). On an IS, the boon is increased to a bonus.



Sense Gems

Function: The caster senses any gems within a radius of one yard per point in their Magic rating.

Gestures Required: Slowly spin around with extended arms, and the fingers of one hand stroking the palm of the other.

Variations in Effect: On an IS the radius is increased to two yards per point. On a DF the caster senses any false gems in the area (but doesn't know the cantrap has failed).

Sense Magic

Function: User can see strong concentrations of magic within 10 yards.

Gestures Required: Spreading one's fingers with outstretched arms, whilst turning oneself in a circle.

Variations in Effect: This works on people with spells encompassed, or magical items, or even things that have changed form within the last day. On an IS, one has some general idea of the type of magic one is sensing. On a DF, readings are wildly inaccurate.

Sense Precious Metals

Function: The caster can sense the presence of all precious metals (such as silver and gold) within a radius of one yard per point in their Magic rating.

Gestures Required: Slowly spin around with extended arms, and chinking a coinpurse in one hand.

Variations in Effect: If no coins are available, the caster may fill the purse with pebbles or something similar. On an IS range is doubled; on a DF the spell instead detects buttons.

Smoke Walking

Function: The caster can climb up, and ride on, drifting smoke as if it were a near-solid surface.

Gestures Required: Make huffing noises through puffed cheeks, then step up in a lively fashion.

Variations in Effect: The GM must decide how long the smoke lasts before it drifts into a consistency insufficient to be used for such things. The cantrap comes into its own when ascending locally; however, should the plume dissipate, the caster floats to earth on a small cushion of smoke (providing they are no more than half a mile up).

Spontaneous Mirth

Function: Target laughs uproariously for a moment.

Gestures Required: A sly snigger behind an obscuring hand, and wiggling one's little finger in the direction of the target.

Variations in Effect: On a DF the caster laughs instead. On an IS the target resists at a penalty of 1.

Stealthy Hands

Function: Enhances the caster's capacity to undetectably remove objects from about the person of their target.

Gestures Required: Caster slowly rubs their hands together, then flexes fingertips against one another.

Variations in Effect: On a regular success, the cantrap grants a bonus of 1 to a single-roll situation, or a boon of 1 to a contest. On an IS the boon is increased to a bonus of 1. On a DF one's hands leap clumsily for the target of their own volition (and some sort of convincing excuse must immediately be made).

Stekkler's Silver Terce

Function: Creates a single silver coin which remains in existence for a number of minutes equal to the caster's Magic rating. Useful for tipping folk of no great consequence; especially in situations where you or they are imminently mobile⁵.

Gestures Required: Rolling one's index and forefinger, and clucking with a rolled tongue.

Variations in Effect: On a DF the cantrap appears to work but the coin vanishes (with a loud 'pop' and unpleasant odor) after only a number of seconds equal to the caster's Magic rating.

⁵ Using this coin to pay/coerce a person who is clearly poor and hungry, or otherwise in genuine and palpable financial distress, attracts at least one negative Sympathy Point - see DERPG p143. (Unless that person is also clearly a conniving rascal that deserves every ill-fortune that falls upon them.)

Todman's Temporary Replicant

Function: Creates a short-lived illusory simulacrum of the caster. This is not very mobile, but can gesticulate, shrug, smile, that sort of thing. (The caster must specify its actions immediately after casting the cantrap.) It evaporates when touched, or after one minute. It can be created anywhere within 100 yards of the caster, and does not require concentration.

Gestures Required: One must trace one's own outline in the air, then point to where the simulacrum will appear.

Variations in Effect: On an IS, the simulacrum lasts for three minutes and can be instructed to respond in a certain way to specific possible events during its existence. On a DF the replicant appears beside the caster and copies their every move for the next three minutes – after which it dispels itself with a loud bang and an acrid smell.

Vgnet's Exemplary Ascent

Function: The palms and soles of the caster or recipient become covered in sturdy spines that grip onto any surface (save quality glass, polished marble, or those magically polished).

Gestures Required: One must divest oneself of shoes and gloves, then stamp one's feet and clap one's hands three times.

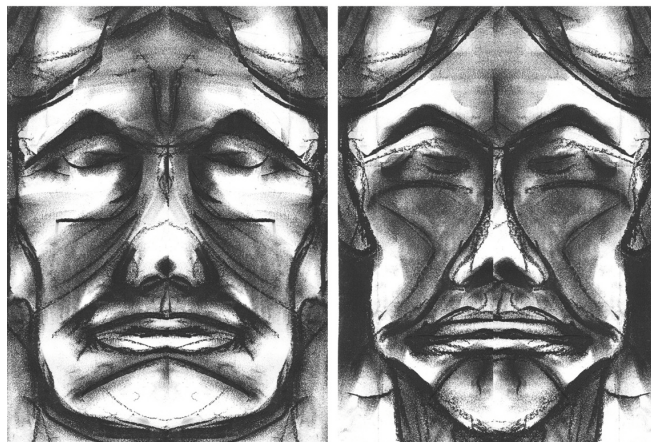
Variations in Effect: Standard effect gives a bonus of 1 to a feat involving a single Athletics roll to climb, or a boon of 1 to a climbing contest, or annuls any GM penalty or levy to Athletics in a climbing situation. On a DF the spines are painful and make climbing and walking impossible for several minutes. On an IS duration increases to half an hour, and the spines can be retracted at will.

Voodle's Bogus Physiognomy

Function: The caster alters their face, to appear to be someone else.

Gestures Required: Caster pulls and moulds their own face for a moment.

Variations in Effect: Normally lasts for one feat (a short conversation). The caster's body and voice do not change; thus whispering sounds the most convincing. On an IS the illusion lasts several minutes.



Voodle's Distant Voice

Function: Allows the caster to project their voice so that its origin appears to be some distance away from their actual person.

Gestures Required: Point the fingers of one hand directly against one's lips and then pull the hand away and replace it five times.

Variations in Effect: On a regular success the maximum distance from the caster is two yards per point of Magic rating. On an IS it is three yards per point. On a DF, the caster shouts out a phrase uncontrollably at the top of their voice. (Probably the phrase they already had in mind, but if nothing was decided then some random abusive slander.)