

Terry Pratchett

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER MAKING MONEY



UNSEEN ACADEMICALS



Unseen Academicals

A Novel of Discworld™

Terry Pratchett

 HarperCollins e-books

This book is dedicated to Rob Wilkins, who typed
most of it and had the good sense to laugh occasionally.

And to Colin Smythe for his encouragement.

The chant of the goddess Pedestriana is a parody of
the wonderful poem 'Brahma' by Ralph Waldo Emerson,
but of course you knew that anyway.

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IT WAS MIDNIGHT in Ankh-Morpork's Royal Art Museum.*

It occurred to new employee Rudolph Scattering about once every minute that on the whole it might have been a good idea to tell the Curator about his nyctophobia, his fear of strange noises and, he now knew, his fear of absolutely every thing he could see (and, come to that, not see), hear, smell and feel crawling up his back during the endless hours on guard during the night. It was no use telling himself that everything in here was dead. That didn't help at all. It meant that he stood out.

And then he heard the sob. A scream might have been better. At least you are certain when you've heard a scream. A faint sob is something you have to wait to hear again, because you can't be sure.

He raised his lantern in a shaking hand. There shouldn't be anyone in here. The place was securely locked; no one could get in. Or, now he came to think about it, out. He wished he *hadn't* thought about it.

He was in the basement, which was not among the most scary places on his round. It was mostly just old shelves and drawers, full of the things that were almost, but very definitely not entirely, thrown away. Museums don't like things to be thrown away, in case they turn out to be very important later on.

Another sob, and a sound like the scraping of...pottery?

A rat, then, somewhere on the rear shelves? Rats didn't sob, did they?

'Look, I don't want to have to come in there and get you!' said Scattering with heartfelt accuracy.

And the shelves exploded. It seemed to him to happen in slow motion, bits of pottery and statue spreading out as they drifted towards him. He went over backwards and the expanding cloud passing overhead crashed into the shelves on the other side of the room, which were demolished.

Scattering lay on the floor in the dark, unable to move, expecting at any moment to be torn apart by the phantoms bubbling up from his imagination...

The day staff found him there in the morning, deeply asleep and covered in dust. They listened to his garbled explanation, treated him kindly, and agreed that a different career might suit his temperament. They wondered for a while about what he had been up to, night watchmen being rather puzzling people at the best of times, but put it out of their heads...because of the find.

Mr Scattering then got a job in a pet shop in Pellicool Steps, but left after three days because the way the kittens stared at him gave him nightmares. The world can be very cruel to some people. But he never told anyone about the gloriously glittering lady holding a large ball over her head who smiled at him before she vanished. He did not want people to think he was strange.

But perhaps it is time to talk about beds.

Lectrology, the study of the bed and its associated surroundings, can be extremely useful and tell you a great deal about the owner, even if it's only that they are a very knowing and savvy installation artist.

The bed of Archchancellor Ridcully of Unseen University, for example, is at the very least a bed and a half, being an eight-poster. It encompasses a small library and a bar, and artfully includes a shut-away privy, of mahogany and brass throughout, to save those long cold nocturnal excursions with their concomitant risk of tripping over slippers, empty bottles, shoes and all the other barriers

presented to a man in the dark who is praying that the next thing that stubs his toe will be porcelain, or at least easy to clean.

The bed of Trevor Likely is anywhere: a friend's floor, in the hayloft of any stable that has been left unlocked (which is usually a much more fragrant option), or in a room of an empty house (though there are precious few of those these days); or he sleeps at work (but he is always careful about that, because old man Smeems never seems to sleep *at all* and might catch him at any time). Trev can sleep anywhere, and does.

Glenda sleeps in an ancient iron bed,* whose springs and mattress have gently and kindly shaped themselves around her over the years, leaving a generous depression. The bottom of this catenary couch is held off the floor by a mulch of very cheap, yellowing romantic novels of the kind to which the word 'bodice' comes naturally. She would die if anyone found out, or possibly they will die if she finds out that they have found out. Usually there is, on the pillow, a very elderly teddy bear called Mr. Wobble.

Traditionally, in the lexicon of pathos, such a bear should have only one eye, but as the result of a childhood error in Glenda's sewing, he has three, and is more enlightened than the average bear.

Juliet Stollop's bed was marketed to her mother as fit for a princess, and is more or less like the Archchancellor's bed, although almost all less, since it consists of some gauze curtains surrounding a very narrow, very cheap bed. Her mother is now dead. This can be inferred from the fact that when the bed collapsed under the weight of a growing girl, someone raised it up on beer crates. A mother would have made sure that at least they were, like everything else in the room, painted pink with little crowns on.

Mr Nutt was seven years old before he found out that sleeping, for some people, involved a special piece of furniture.

Now it was two o'clock in the morning. A cloying silence reigned along the ancient corridors and cloisters of Unseen University. There was silence in the Library; there was silence in the halls. There was so much silence you could hear it. Everywhere it went, it stuffed the ears with invisible fluff.

Gloing!

The tiny sound flew past, a moment of liquid gold in the stygian silence.

Silence ruled again above stairs, until it was interrupted by the shuffling of the official thick-soled carpet slippers of Smeems, the Candle Knave, as he made his rounds throughout the long night from one candlestick to another, refilling them from his official basket. He was assisted tonight (although, to judge from his occasional grumbling, not assisted enough) by a dribbler.

He was called the Candle Knave because that was how the post had been described in the university records when it was created, almost two thousand years before. Keeping the candlesticks, sconces and, not least, the candelabra of the university filled was a never-ending job. It was, in fact, the most important job in the place, in the mind of the Candle Knave. Oh, Smeems would admit under pressure that there were men in pointy hats around, but they came and went and mostly just got in the way. Unseen University was not rich in windows, and without the Candle Knave it would be in darkness within a day. That the wizards would simply step outside and from the teeming crowds hire another man capable of climbing ladders with pockets full of candles had never featured in his thoughts. He was irreplaceable, just like every other Candle Knave before him.

And now, behind him, there was a clatter as the official folding stepladder unfolded.

He spun around. 'Hold the damn thing right!' he hissed.

'Sorry, master!' said his temporary apprentice, trying to control the sliding, finger-crushing monster that every stepladder becomes at the first opportunity, and often without any opportunity at

all.

‘And keep the noise down!’ Smeems bellowed. ‘Do you want to be a dribbler for the rest of your life?’

‘Actually, I quite like being a dribbler, sir—’

‘Ha! Want of ambition is the curse of the labouring class! Here, give me that thing!’

The Candle Knave snatched at the ladder just as his luckless assistant closed it.

‘Sorry about that, sir...’

‘There’s always room for one more on the wick-dipping tank, you know,’ said Smeems, blowing on his knuckles.

‘Fair enough, sir.’

The Candle Knave stared at the grey, round, guileless face. There was an unshakeably amiable look about it that was very disconcerting, especially when you knew what it was you were looking at. And he knew what it was, oh yes, but not what it was called.

‘What’s your name again? I can’t remember *everybody*’s name.’

‘Nutt, Mister Smeems. With two t’s.’

‘Do you think the second one helps matters, Nutt?’

‘Not really, sir.’

‘Where is Trev? He should be on tonight.’

‘Been very ill, sir. Asked me to do it.’

The Candle Knave grunted. ‘You have to look smart to work above stairs, Nutts!’

‘Nutt, sir. Sorry, sir. Was born not looking smart, sir.’

‘Well, at least there’s no one to see you now,’ Smeems conceded. ‘All right, follow me, and try to look less...well, just try not to look.’

‘Yes, master, but I think—’

‘You are not paid to think, young...man.’

‘Will try not to do so, master.’

Two minutes later Smeems was standing in front of the Emperor, watched by a suitably amazed Nutt.

A mountain of silvery-grey tallow almost filled the isolated junction of stone corridors. The flame of this candle, which could just be made out to be a mega-candle aggregated from the stubs of many, many thousands of candles that had gone before, all dribbled and runnelled into one great whole, was a glow near the ceiling, too high to illuminate anything very much.

Smeems’s chest swelled. He was in the presence of History.

‘Behold, Nutts!’

‘Yes, sir. Beholding, sir. It’s Nutt, sir.’

‘Two thousand years look down on us from the top of this candle, Nutts. Of course, they look further down on you than on me.’

‘Absolutely, sir. Well done, sir.’

Smeems glared at the round, amiable face, and saw nothing there but a slicked-down keenness that was very nearly frightening.

He grunted, then unfolded his ladder without much more than a pinched thumb, and climbed it carefully until it would take him no further. From this base camp generations of Candle Knaves had carved and maintained steps up the hubward face of the giant.

‘Feast your eyes on this, lad,’ he called down, his ground-state bad temper somewhat moderated by this contact with greatness. ‘One day you might be the...man to climb this hallowed tallow!’

For a moment, Nutt looked like someone trying hard to disguise the expression of a person who seriously hopes that his future holds more than a big candle. Nutt was young and as such did not have

that reverence for age that is had by, mostly, the aged. But the cheerful not-quite-smile came back. It never went away for long.

‘Yessir,’ he said, on the basis that this generally worked.

Some people claimed that the Emperor had been lit on the very night that UU was founded, and had never gone out since. Certainly the Emperor was huge, and was what you got when, every night for maybe two thousand years, you lit a new fat candle from the guttering remains of the last one and pressed it firmly into the warm wax. There was no visible candlestick now, of course. That was somewhere in the vast accumulation of waxy dribbles on the next floor down.

Around a thousand years ago, the university had had a large hole made in the ceiling of the corridor below, and already the Emperor was seventeen feet high up here. There was thirty-eight feet in total of pure, natural, dribbled candle. It made Smeems proud. He was keeper of the candle that never went out. It was an example to everyone, a light that never failed, a flame in the dark, a beacon of tradition. And Unseen University took tradition very seriously, at least when it remembered to.

As now, in fact...

From somewhere in the distance came a sound like a large duck being trodden on, followed by a cry of ‘Ho, the Megapode!’ And then all hell eventuated.

A...creature plunged out of the gloom.

There is a phrase ‘neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring’. This thing was all of them, plus some other bits of beasts unknown to science or nightmare or even kebab. There was certainly some red, and a lot of flapping, and Nutt was sure he caught a glimpse of an enormous sandal, but there were the mad, rolling, bouncing eyes, the huge yellow and red beak and then the thing disappeared down another gloomy corridor, incessantly making that flat honking noise of the sort duck hunters make just before they are shot by other duck hunters.

‘Aho! The Megapode!’ It wasn’t clear where the cry came from. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. ‘There she bumps! Ho, the Megapode!’

The cry was taken up on every side, and from the dark shadows of every corridor, bar the one down which the beast had fled, galloped curious shapes, which turned out to be, by the flickering light of the Emperor, the senior faculty of the university. Each wizard was being carried piggy-back by a stout bowler-hatted university porter, whom he was urging onward by means of a bottle of beer on a string held, as tradition demanded, ahead of the porter’s grasp on a long stick.

The doleful quack rang out again, some distance away, and a wizard waved his staff in the air and yelled: ‘Bird is Flown! Ho, the Megapode!’

The colliding wizardry, who’d already crushed Smeems’s rickety ladder under the hobnailed boots of their steeds, set off at once, butting and barging for position.

For a little while ‘Aho! The Megapode!’ echoed in the distance. When he was certain they had gone, Nutt crept out from his refuge behind the Emperor, picked up what remained of the ladder, and looked around.

‘Master?’ he ventured.

There was a grunt from above. He looked up. ‘Are you all right, master?’

‘I have been better, Nutts. Can you see my feet?’

Nutt raised his lantern. ‘Yes, master. I’m sorry to say the ladder is broken.’

‘Well, do something about it. I’m having to concentrate on my handholds here.’

‘I thought I wasn’t paid to think, master.’

‘Don’t you try to be smart!’

‘Can I try to be smart enough to get you down safely, master?’

No answer was the stern reply. Nutt sighed, and opened up the big canvas tool bag.

Smeems clung to the vertiginous candle as he heard, down below, mysterious scrapings and

clinking noises. Then, with a silence and suddenness that made him gasp, a spiky shape rose up beside him, swaying slightly.

‘I’ve screwed together three of the big snuffer poles, master,’ said Nutt from below. ‘And you’ll see there’s a chandelier hook stuck in the top, yes? And there’s a rope. Can you see it? I think that if you can make a loop around the Emperor it won’t slip much and you ought to be able to let yourself down slowly. Oh, and there’s a box of matches, too.’

‘What for?’ said Smeems, reaching out for the hook.

‘Can’t help noticing that the Emperor has gone out, sir,’ said the voice from below, cheerfully.

‘No it hasn’t!’

‘I think you’ll find it has, sir, because I can’t see the—’

‘There is no room in this university’s most important department for people with bad eyesight, Nutts!’

‘I beg your pardon, master. I don’t know what came over me. Suddenly I can see the flame!’

From above came the sound of a match being struck, and a circle of yellow light expanded on the ceiling as the candle that never went out was lit. Shortly afterwards Smeems very gingerly lowered himself to the floor.

‘Well done, sir,’ said Nutt.

The Candle Knave flicked a length of congealed candle dribble off his equally greasy shirt.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘But you’ll have to come back in the morning to recover the—’ But Nutt was already going up the rope like a spider. There was a clanging on the other side of the great candle as the lengths of snuffer pole were dropped, and then the boy abseiled back down to his master with the hook under his arm. And now he stood there all eagerness and scrubbed (if somewhat badly dressed) efficiency. There was something almost offensive about it. And the Candle Knave wasn’t used to this. He felt obliged to take the lad down a peg, for his own good.

‘All candles in this university must be lit by long taper from a candle that still burns, boy,’ he said sternly. ‘Where did you get those matches?’

‘I wouldn’t like to say, sir.’

‘I dare say you wouldn’t, indeed! Now tell me, boy!’

‘I don’t want to get anyone into trouble, master.’

‘Your reluctance does you credit, but I insist,’ said the Candle Knave.

‘Er, they fell out of your jacket when you were climbing up, master.’

Off in the distance was one last cry: ‘The Megapode is caught!’ But around the Emperor silence listened with its mouth open.

‘You are mistaken, Nutts,’ said Smeems slowly. ‘I think you will find that one of the gentlemen must have dropped them.’

‘Ah, yes, that’s certainly what must have happened, sir. I must learn not to jump to conclusions.’

Once again, the Candle Knave had that off-balance feeling. ‘Well, then, we will say no more about it,’ was all he managed.

‘What was it that happened just then, sir?’ said Nutt.

‘Oh, that? That was all part of one of the gentlemen’s magically essential magical activities, lad. It was vital to the proper running of the world, I’ll be bound, oh yes. Could be they was setting the stars in their courses, even. It’s one of them things we have to do, you know,’ he added, carefully insinuating himself into the company of wizardry.

‘Only it looked like a skinny man with a big wooden duck strapped to his head.’

‘Ah, well, it may have looked like that, come to think of it, but that was because that’s how it looks to people like us, what are not gifted with the ocular sight.’

‘You mean it was some sort of metaphor?’

Smeems handled this quite well in the circumstances, which included being so deeply at sea with that sentence that barnacles would be attracted to his underwear. 'That's right,' he said. 'It could be a meta for something that didn't look so stupid.'

'Exactly, master.'

Smeems looked down at the boy. It's not his fault, he thought, he can't help what he is. An uncharacteristic moment of warmth overtook him.

'You're a bright lad,' he said. 'There's no reason why you shouldn't be head dribbler one day.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Nutt, 'but if you don't mind I was rather hoping for something a bit more in the fresh air, so to speak.'

'Ah,' said Smeems, 'that could be a bit...tricky, as you might say.'

'Yes, sir. I know.'

'It's just that there's a lot of—well, look, it's not me, it's...it's...well, you know. It's people. You know what people are like.'

'Yes. I know what people are like.'

Looks like a scarecrow, talks posh like one of the gentlemen, Smeems thought. Bright as a button, grubby as a turd. He felt moved to pat the little...fellow on his curiously spherical head, but desisted.

'Best if you stay down in the vats,' he said. 'It's nice and warm, you've got your own bedroll, and it's all snug and safe, eh?'

To his relief the boy was silent as they walked down the passages, but then Nutt said, in a thoughtful tone of voice, 'I was just wondering, sir...How often has the candle that never goes out...not gone out?'

Smeems bit back the stinging retort. For some reason he knew it could only build up trouble in the long run.

'The candle that never goes out has failed to go out three times since I've been Candle Knave, lad,' he said. 'It's a record!'

'An enviable achievement, sir.'

'Damn right! And that's even with all the strangeness there's been happening lately.'

'Really, sir?' said Nutt. 'Have stranger than usual things been happening?'

'Young...man, stranger than usual things happen all the time.'

'One of the scullery boys told me that all the toilets on the Tesseractical floor turned into sheep yesterday,' said Nutt. 'I should like to see that.'

'I shouldn't go further than the sculleries, if I was you,' said Smeems, quickly. 'And don't worry about what the gentlemen do. They are the finest minds in the world, let me tell you. If you was to ask 'em...' He paused, trying to think of something really difficult, like, 'What is 864 times 316...?'

'273,024,' said Nutt, not quite under his breath.

'What?' said Smeems, derailed.

'Just thinking aloud, master,' said Nutt.

'Oh. Right. Er...Well that's it, see? They'd have an answer for you in a brace of shakes. Finest minds in the world,' said Smeems, who believed in truth via repetition. 'Finest minds. Engaged in the business of the universe. Finest minds!'

'Well, that was fun,' said Mustrum Ridcully, Archchancellor of the university, throwing himself into a huge armchair in the faculty's Uncommon Room with such force that it nearly threw him out again.

'We must do it again some time.'

'Yes, sir. We will. In one hundred years,' said the new Master of The Traditions smugly, turning

over the pages in his huge book. He reached the crackling leaf headed Hunting the Megapode, wrote down the date and the amount of time it had taken to find the aforesaid Megapode, and signed his name with a flourish: Ponder Stibbons.

‘What is a Megapode, anyway?’ said the Chair of Indefinite Studies, helping himself to the port.

‘A type of bird, I believe,’ said the Archchancellor, waving a hand towards the drinks trolley. ‘After me.’

‘The original Megapode was found in the under-butler’s pantry,’ said the Master of The Traditions. ‘It escaped in the middle of dinner and caused what my predecessor eleven hundred years ago called...’ he referred to the book, “‘a veritable heyhoe-rumbelow as all the Fellows pursued it through the college buildings with much mirth and good spirits”.’

‘Why?’ said the head of the Department of Post-Mortem Communications, deftly snatching the decanter full of good spirits as it went past.

‘Oh, you can’t have a Megapode running around loose, Doctor Hix,’ said Ridcully. ‘Anyone’ll tell you that.’

‘No, I meant why do we do it again every hundred years?’ said the head of the Department of Post-Mortem Communications.*

The Senior Wrangler turned his face away and murmured, ‘Oh, good gods...’

‘It’s a tradition,’ the Chair of Indefinite Studies explained, rolling a cigarette. ‘We have to have traditions.’

‘They’re traditional,’ said Ridcully. He beckoned to one of the servants. ‘And I don’t mind saying that this one has made me somewhat peckish. Can you fetch the cheeseboards one to five, please? And, um, some of that cold roast beef, some ham, a few biscuits and, of course, the pickle carts.’ He looked up. ‘Anyone want to add anything?’

‘I could toy fitfully with a little fruit,’ said the Professor of Recondite Phenomena. ‘How about you, Librarian?’

‘Ook,’ growled the figure hogging the fire.

‘Yes, of course,’ said the Archchancellor. He waved a hand at the hovering waiter. ‘The fruit trolley as well. See to it, please, Downbody. And...perhaps that new girl could bring it up? She ought to get used to the Uncommon Room.’

It was as if he had just spoken a magic spell. The room, its ceiling hazy with blue smoke, was suddenly awash with a sort of heavy, curiously preoccupied silence mostly due to dreamy speculation but in a few rare cases owing to distant memory.

The new girl...At the mere thought, elderly hearts beat dangerously.

Very seldom did beauty intrude into the daily life of UU, which was as masculine as the smell of old socks and pipe smoke and, given the faculty’s general laxness when it came to knocking out their pipes, the smell of smoking socks as well. Mrs Whitlow, the housekeeper, she of the clanking chatelaine and huge creaking corset that caused the Chair of Indefinite Studies to swoon when he heard it, generally took great care to select staff who, while being female, were not excessively so, and tended to be industrious, clean in their habits, rosy cheeked and, in short, the kind of ladies who are never too far from gingham and an apple pie. This suited the wizards, who liked to be not far away from an apple pie themselves, although they could take gingham or leave it alone.

Why, then, had the housekeeper employed Juliet? What could she have been thinking of? The girl had come into the place like a new world in a solar system, and the balance of the heavens was subtly wobbling. And, indeed, as she advanced, so was Juliet.

By custom and practice, wizards were celibate, in theory because women were distracting and bad for the magical organs, but after a week of Juliet’s presence many of the faculty were subject to (mostly) unfamiliar longings and strange dreams, and were finding things rather hard, but you

couldn't really put your finger on it: what she had went beyond beauty. It was a sort of distillation of beauty that travelled around with her, uncoiling itself into the surrounding ether. When she walked past, the wizards felt the urge to write poetry and buy flowers.

'You may be interested to know, gentlemen,' said the new Master of The Traditions, 'that tonight's was the longest chase ever recorded in the history of the tradition. I suggest we owe a vote of thanks to tonight's Megapode...'

He realized the statement had plummeted on to deaf ears. 'Er, gentlemen?' he said.

He looked up. The wizards were staring, in a soulful sort of way, at whatever was going on inside their heads.

'Gentlemen?' he said again, and this time there was a collective sigh as they woke up from their sudden attack of daydreaming.

'What say?' said the Archchancellor.

'I was just remarking that tonight's Megapode was undoubtedly the finest on record, Archchancellor. It was Rincewind. The official Megapode headdress suited him very well, all things considered. I think he's gone for a lie down.'

'What? Oh, that. Well, yes. Indeed. Well done, that man,' said Ridcully, and the wizards commenced that slow handclapping and table-thumping which is the mark of appreciation amongst men of a certain age, class and girth, accompanied by cries of 'Ver', ver' well done, that man!' and 'Jolly good!' But eyes stayed firmly fixed on the doorway, and ears strained for the rattle of the trolley, which would herald the arrival of the new girl and, of course, one hundred and seven types of cheese, and more than seventy different varieties of pickles, chutneys and other tracklements. The new girl might be the very paradigm of beauty, but UU was not the place for a man who could forget his cheeses.

Well, she was a distraction at least, Ponder thought as he snapped the book shut, and the university needed a few of them right now. It had been tricky since the Dean had left, very tricky indeed. Whoever heard of a man resigning from UU? It was something that simply did not happen! Sometimes people left in disgrace, in a box or, in a few cases, in bits, but there was no tradition of resigning at all. Tenure at Unseen University was for life, and often a long way beyond.

The office of Master of The Traditions had fallen inevitably on Ponder Stibbons, who tended to get all the jobs that required someone who thought that things should happen on time and that numbers should add up.

Regrettably, when he'd gone to check on things with the previous Master of The Traditions, who everyone agreed, had not been seen around and about lately, he'd found that the man had been dead for two hundred years. This wasn't a wholly unusual circumstance. Ponder, after years at Unseen, still didn't know the full size of the faculty. How could you keep track of them in a place like this these days, where hundreds of studies all shared one window, but only on the outside, or rooms drifted away from their doorways during the night, travelled intangibly through the slumbering halls and ended up docking quite elsewhere?

A wizard could do what he liked in his own study, and in the old days that had largely meant smoking anything he fancied and farting hugely without apologizing. These days it meant building out into a congruent set of dimensions. Even the Archchancellor was doing it, which made it hard for Ponder to protest: he had half a mile of trout stream in his bathroom, and claimed that messin' about in his study was what kept a wizard out of mischief. And, as everyone knew, it did. It generally got him into trouble instead.

Ponder had let that go, because he now saw it as his mission in life to stoke the fires that kept Mustrum Ridcully bubbling and made the university a happy place. As a dog reflects the mood of its owner, so a university reflects its Archchancellor. All he could do now, as the university's sole self-

confessed entirely sensible person, was to steer things as best he could, keep away from squalls involving the person previously known as the Dean, and find ways of keeping the Archchancellor too occupied to get under Ponder's feet.

Ponder was about to put the Book of Traditions away when the heavy pages flopped over. 'That's odd.'

'Oh, those old book bindings get very stiff,' said Ridcully. 'They have a life of their own, sometimes.'

'Has anyone heard of Professor H. F. Pullunder, or Doctor Erratamus?'

The faculty stopped watching the door and looked at one another.

'Ring a bell, anyone?' said Ridcully.

'Not a tinkle,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes, cheerfully.

The Archchancellor turned to his left. 'What about you, Dean? You know all the old—'

Ponder groaned. The rest of the wizards shut their eyes and braced themselves. This might be bad.

Ridcully stared down at two empty chairs, with the imprint of a buttock in each one. One or two of the faculty pulled their hats down over their faces. It had been two weeks now, and it had not got any better.

He took a deep breath and roared: 'Traitor!'—which was a terrible thing to say to two dimples in leather.

The Chair of Indefinite Studies gave Ponder Stibbons a nudge, indicating that he was the chosen sacrifice for today, again.

Again.

'Just for a handful of silver he left us!' said Ridcully, to the universe in general.

Ponder cleared his throat. He'd really hoped the Megapode hunt would take the Archchancellor's mind off the subject, but Ridcully's mind kept on swinging back to the absent Dean the way a tongue plunges back to the site of a missing tooth.

'Er, in point of fact, I believe his remuneration is at least—' he began, but in Ridcully's current mood no answer would be the right one.

'Remuneration? Since when did a wizard work for wages? We are pure academics, Mister Stibbons! We do not care for mere money!'

Unfortunately, Ponder was a clear logical thinker who, in times of mental confusion, fell back on reason and honesty, which, when dealing with an angry Archchancellor, were, to use the proper academic term, unhelpful. And he neglected to think strategically, always a mistake when talking to fellow academics, and as a result made the mistake of employing, as at this point, common sense.

'That's because we never actually pay for anything very much,' he said, 'and if anyone needs a petty cash they just help themselves from the big jar—'

'We are part of the very fabric of the university, Mister Stibbons! We take only what we require. We do not seek wealth! And most certainly we do not accept a "post of vital importance which includes an attractive package of remuneration", whatever the hells that means, "and other benefits including a generous pension"! A pension, mark you! When ever has a wizard retired?'

'Well. Doctor Earwig—' Ponder began, unable to stop himself.

'He left to get married!' snapped Ridcully. 'That's not retirin', that's the same as dyin'.'

'What about Doctor Housemartin?' Ponder went on.

The Lecturer in Recent Runes kicked him on the ankle, but Ponder merely said, 'Ouch!' and continued. 'He left with a bad case of work-related frogs, sir!'

'If you can't stand the heat, get off the pot,' muttered Ridcully. Things were subsiding a bit now and the pointy hats were tentatively raised. The Archchancellor's little moments only lasted a few

minutes. This would have been more comforting were it not for the fact that at approximately five-minute intervals something suddenly reminded him of what he considered to be the Dean's totally treasonable activity, to wit, applying for and getting a job at another university via a common advertisement in a newspaper. That was not how a prince of magic behaved. He didn't sit in front of a panel of drapers, greengrocers and bootmakers (wonderful people though they may be, salt of the earth, no doubt, but even so...) to be judged and assessed like some champion terrier (had his teeth counted, no doubt!). He'd let down the entire brotherhood of wizardry, that's what he'd done—

There was a squeaking of wheels out in the corridor, and every wizard stiffened in anticipation. The door swung open and the first overloaded trolley was pushed in.

There was a series of sighs as every eye focused on the maid who was pushing it, and then some rather louder sighs when they realized that she was not, as it were, the intended.

She wasn't ugly. She might be called homely, perhaps, but it was quite a nice home, clean and decent and with roses round the door and a welcome on the mat and an apple pie in the oven. But the thoughts of the wizards were, astonishingly, not on food at this point, although some of them were still a bit hazy as to why not.

She was, in fact, quite a pleasant looking girl, even if her bosom had clearly been intended for a girl two feet taller; but she was not Her.*

The faculty was crestfallen, but it brightened up considerably as the caravan of trolleys wound its way into the room. There was nothing like a 3 a.m. snack to raise the spirits, everyone knew that.

Well, Ponder thought, at least we've got through the evening without anything breaking. Better than Tuesday, at least.

It is a well-known fact in any organization that, if you want a job done, you should give it to someone who is already very busy. It has been the cause of a number of homicides, and in one case the death of a senior director from having his head shut repeatedly in quite a small filing cabinet.

In UU, Ponder Stibbons was that busy man. He had come to enjoy it. For one thing, most of the jobs he was asked to do did not need doing, and most of the senior wizards did not care if they were not done, provided they were not not done by themselves. Besides, Ponder was very good at thinking up efficient little systems to save time, and was, in particular, very proud of his system for writing the minutes of meetings, which he had devised with the help of Hex, the university's increasingly useful thinking engine. A detailed analysis of past minutes, coupled with Hex's enormous predictive abilities, meant that for a simple range of easily accessible givens, such as the agenda (which Ponder controlled in any case), the committee members, the time since breakfast, the time to dinner, and so on, in most cases the minutes could be written beforehand.

All in all, he considered that he was doing his bit in maintaining UU in its self-chosen course of amiable, dynamic stagnation. It was always a rewarding effort, knowing the alternative, to keep things that way.

But a page that turns itself was, to Ponder, an anomaly. Now, while the sound of the pre-breakfast supper grew around him, he smoothed out the page and read, carefully.

Glenda would have cheerfully broken a plate over Juliet's sweet, empty head when the girl finally turned up in the Night Kitchen. At least, she would cheerfully have thought about it, in quite a deliberate way, but there was no point in losing her temper, because its target was not really much good at noticing what other people were thinking. There wasn't a nasty bone in Juliet's body, it's just that she had a great deal of trouble homing in on the idea that someone was trying to be unpleasant to her.

So Glenda made do with 'Where have you been? I told Mrs Whitlow you'd gone home ill. Your

dad'll be worried sick! And it looks bad to the other girls.'

~~Juliet slumped into a chair, with a movement so graceful that it seemed to sing.~~

'Went to the football, didn't I. You know, we were playing those buggers in Dimwell.'

'Until three in the morning?'

'That's the rules, innit? Play until full time, first dead man or first score.'

'Who won?'

'Dunno.'

'You don't know?'

'When we left it was being decided on head wounds. Anyway, I went with Rotten Johnny, didn't

I.'

'I thought you'd broken up with him.'

'He bought me supper, didn't 'e.'

'You shouldn't have gone. That's not the sort of thing you should do.'

'Like you know?' said Juliet, who sometimes thought that questions were answers.

'Just do the washing-up, will you?' said Glenda. And I'll have to do it again after you, she thought, as her best friend drifted over to the line of big stone sinks. Juliet didn't exactly wash dishes she gave them a light baptism. Wizards weren't the type of people who noticed yesterday's dried egg on the plate, but Mrs Whitlow could see it from two rooms away.

Glenda liked Juliet, she really did, although sometimes she wondered why. Of course, they'd grown up together, but it had always amazed her that Juliet, who was so beautiful that boys went nervous and occasionally fainted as she passed, could be so, well, dumb about everything. In fact it was Glenda who had grown up. She wasn't sure about Juliet; sometimes it seemed to Glenda that she had done the growing up for both of them.

'Look, you just have to scrub a bit, that's all,' she snapped after a few seconds of listless dipping, and took the brush out of Juliet's perfect hand, and then, as the grease was sent down the drain, she thought: I've done it again. Actually, I've done it again again. How many times is that? I even used to play with her dolls for her!

Plate after plate sparkled under Glenda's hands. Nothing cleans stubborn stains like suppressed anger.

Rotten Johnny, she thought. Ye gods, he smells of cat wee! He's the only boy stupid enough to think he's got a chance. Good grief, she's got a figure like that and all she ever dates are total knobheads! What would she do without me?

After this brief excitement, the Night Kitchen settled into its routine and those who had been referred to as 'the other girls' got on with their familiar tasks. It has to be said that girlhood for most of them had ended a long time previously, but they were good workers and Glenda was proud of them. Mrs Hedges ran the cheeseboards like a champion. Mildred and Rachel, known officially on the payroll as the vegetable women, were good and reliable, and indeed it was Mildred who had come up with the famous recipe for beetroot and cream cheese sandwiches.

Everybody knew their job. Everybody *did* their job. The Night Kitchen was reliable and Glenda liked reliable.

She had a home to go to and made sure she went to it at least once a day, but the Night Kitchen was where she lived. It was her fortress.

Ponder Stibbons stared at the page in front of him. His mind filled up with nasty questions, the biggest and nastiest of which was simply: Is there any way at all in which people can make out that this is my fault? No. Good!

‘Er, there is one tradition here that regrettably we don’t appear to have honoured for some considerable time, Archchancellor,’ he said, managing to keep the concern out of his voice.

‘Well, does that matter?’ said Ridcully, stretching.

‘It is traditional, Archchancellor,’ said Ponder reproachfully. ‘Although I might go so far as to say that not observing it has now, alas, become the tradition.’

‘Well, that’s fine, isn’t it?’ said Ridcully. ‘If we can make a tradition of not observing another tradition, then that’s doubly traditional, eh? What’s the problem?’

‘It’s Archchancellor Preserved Bigger’s Bequest,’ said the Master of The Traditions. ‘The university does very well out of the Bigger estates. They were a very rich family.’

‘Hmm, yes. Name rings a faint bell. Decent of him. So?’

‘Er, I would have been happier had my predecessor paid a little more attention to some of the traditions,’ said Ponder, who believed in drip-feeding bad news.

‘Well, he *was* dead.’

‘Yes, of course. Perhaps, sir, we should, ahem, start a tradition of checking on the health of the Master of The Traditions?’

‘Oh, he was quite healthy,’ said the Archchancellor. ‘Just dead. Quite healthy for a dead man.’

‘He was a pile of dust, Archchancellor!’

‘That’s not the same as being ill, exactly,’ said Ridcully, who believed in never giving in. ‘Broadly speaking, it’s stable.’

Ponder said, ‘There is a condition attached to the bequest. It’s in the small print, sir.’

‘Oh, I never bother with small print, Stibbons!’

‘I do, sir. It says: “...and thys shall follow as long as the University shall enter a team in the game of foot-the-ball or Poore Boys’ Funne”.’

‘Porree boy’s funny?’ said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

‘That’s ridiculous!’ said Ridcully.

‘Ridiculous or not, Archchancellor, that is the condition of the bequest.’

‘But we stopped taking part in that years ago,’ said Ridcully. ‘Mobs in the streets, kicking and punching and yelling...and they were the players! Mark you, the spectators were nearly as bad! There were hundreds of men in a team! A game could go on for days! That’s why it was stopped.’

‘Actually, it has never been stopped as such, Archchancellor,’ said the Senior Wrangler. ‘We stopped, yes, and so did the guilds. It was no longer a game for gentlemen.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said the Master of The Traditions, running a finger down the page, ‘such are the terms. There are all sorts of other conditions. Oh, dear. Oh, calamity. Oh, surely not...’

His lips moved silently as he read on. The room craned as one neck.

‘Well, out with it, man!’ roared Ridcully.

‘I think I’d like to check a few things,’ said the Master of The Traditions. ‘I would not wish to worry you unduly.’ He glanced down. ‘Oh, hells’ bells!’

‘What are you talking about, man?’

‘Well, it looks as though—No, it would be unfair to spoil your evening, Archchancellor,’ Ponder protested. ‘I must be reading this wrongly. He surely can’t mean—Oh, good heavens...’

‘In a nutshell, please, Stibbons,’ growled Ridcully. ‘I believe I am the Archchancellor of this university? I’m sure it says so on my door.’

‘Of course, Archchancellor, but it would be quite wrong of me to—’

‘I appreciate that you do not wish to spoil my evening, sir,’ said Ridcully. ‘But I would not hesitate to spoil your day tomorrow. With that in mind, what the hells are you talking about?’

‘Er, it would appear, Archchancellor, that, er...When was the last game we took part in, do you know?’

‘Anyone?’ said Ridcully to the room in general. A mumbled discussion produced a consensus on the theme of ‘Around twenty years, give or take.’

‘Give or take what, exactly?’ said Ponder, who hated this kind of thing.

‘Oh, you know. Something of that order. In the general vicinity of, so to speak. Round about the You know.’

‘About?’ said Ponder. ‘Can we be more *precise*?’

‘Why?’

‘Because if the university hasn’t played in the Poor Boys’ Fun for a period of twenty years or more, the bequest reverts to any surviving relatives of Archchancellor Bigger.’

‘But it’s banned, man!’ the Archchancellor insisted.

‘Er, not as such. It’s common knowledge that Lord Vetinari doesn’t like it, but I understand that if the games are outside the city centre and confined to the back streets, the Watch turns a blind eye. Since I would imagine that the supporters and players easily outnumber the entire Watch payroll, I suppose it is better than having to turn a broken nose.’

‘That’s quite a neat turn of phrase there, Mister Stibbons,’ said Ridcully. ‘I’m quite surprised at you.’

‘Thank you, Archchancellor,’ said Ponder. He had in fact got it from a leader in the *Times*, which the wizards did not like much because it either did not print what they said or printed what they said with embarrassing accuracy.

Emboldened, he added, ‘I should point out, though, that under UU law, Archchancellor, a ban doesn’t matter. Wizards are not supposed to take notice of such a ban. We are not subject to mundane law.’

‘Of course. But nevertheless it is generally convenient to *acknowledge* the civil power,’ said Ridcully, speaking like a man choosing his words with such care that he was metaphorically taking some of them outside to look at them more closely in daylight.

The wizards nodded. What they had heard was: ‘Vetinari may have his little foibles, but he’s the sanest man we’ve had on the throne in centuries, he leaves us alone, and you never know what he’s got up his sleeve.’ You couldn’t argue with that.

‘All right, Stibbons, what do you suggest?’ said Ridcully. ‘These days you only ever tell me about a problem when you’ve thought up a solution. I respect this, although I find it a bit creepy. Got any way to wriggle us out of this, have you?’

‘I suppose so, sir. I thought we might, well, put up a team. It doesn’t say anything about winning, sir. We just have to play, that’s all.’

It was always beautifully warm in the candle vats. Regrettably, it was also extremely humid and rather noisy in an erratic and unexpected way. This was because the giant pipes of Unseen University’s central heating and hot water system passed overhead, slung from the ceiling on a series of metal straps with a greater or lesser coefficient of linear expansion. That was only the start, however. There were also the huge pipes for balancing the slood differential across the university, the pipe for the anthropic particle flux suppressor, which did not work properly these days, the pipes for the air circulation, which had not worked either since the donkey had been ill, and the very ancient tubes that were all that remained of the ill-fated attempt by a previous archchancellor to operate a university communication system by means of trained marmosets. At certain times of the day all this piping broke into a subterranean symphony of gurgles, twangs, upsetting organic trickling sounds and, occasionally, an inexplicable boinging noise that would reverberate through the cellar levels.

The general ad hoc nature of the system’s construction was enhanced by the fact that, as an

economy measure, the big iron hot water pipes were lagged with old clothing held on by string. Since some of these items had once been wizards' apparel, and however hard you scrubbed you could never get all of the spells out, there were sporadic showers of multicoloured sparks and the occasional ping pong ball.

Despite everything, Nutt felt at home down among the vats. It was worrying; in the high country people in the street had jeered at him that he'd been made in a vat. Although Brother Oats had told him that this was silly, the gently bubbling tallow called to him. He felt at peace here.

He ran the vats now. Smeems didn't know, because he hardly ever troubled to come down here. Trev knew, of course, but since Nutt doing his job for him meant that he could spend more time kicking a tin can around on some bit of wasteground he was happy. The opinion of the other dribblers and dippers didn't really count; if you worked in the vats it meant that, as far as the job market was concerned, you had been still accelerating when you'd hit the bottom of the barrel and had been drilled into the bedrock. It meant that you no longer had enough charisma to be a beggar. It meant that you were on the run from something, possibly the gods themselves, or the demons inside you. It meant that if you dared to look up you would see, high above you, the dregs of society. Best, then, to stay down here in the warm gloom, with enough to eat and no inconvenient encounters and, Nutt added in his head, no beatings.

No, the dippers were no problem. He did his best for them when he could. Life itself had beaten them so hard that they had no strength left to beat up anyone else. That was helpful. When people found out that you were a goblin, all you could expect was trouble.

He remembered what the people in the villages had shouted at him when he was small and the word would be followed by a stone.

Goblin. It was a word with an ox-train-load of baggage. It didn't matter what you said or did, or what you made, the train ran right over you. He'd shown them the things he'd built, and the stones had smashed them while the villagers screamed at him like hunting hawks and shouted more words.

That had stopped on the day Pastor Oats rode gently into town, if a bunch of hovels and one street of stamped mud could be called a town, and he had brought...forgiveness. But on that day, no one had wanted to be forgiven.

In the darkness, Concrete the troll, who was so gooned out on Slab, Slice, Sleek and Slump, and who would even snort iron filings if Nutt didn't stop him, whimpered on his mattress.

Nutt lit a fresh candle and wound up his home-made dribbling aid. It whirred away happily, and made the flame go horizontal. He paid attention to his work. A good dribbler never turned the candle when he dribbled; candles in the wild, as it were, almost never dripped in more than one direction, which was away from the draught. No wonder the wizards liked the ones he made; there was something disconcerting about a candle that appeared to have dribbled in every direction at once. It could put a man off his stroke.*

He worked fast, and was putting the nineteenth well-dribbled candle in the delivery basket when he heard the clank of a tin can being bowled along the stone floor of the passage.

'Good morning, Mister Trev,' he said, without looking up. A moment later an empty tin can landed in front of him, on end, with no more ceremony than a jigsaw piece falling into place.

'How did you know it was me, Gobbo?'

'Your leitmotif, Mister Trev. And I'd prefer Nutt, thank you.'

'What's one o' them motifs?' said the voice behind him.

'It is a repeated theme or chord associated with a particular person or place, Mister Trev,' said Nutt, carefully placing two more warm candles in the basket. 'I was referring to your love of kicking tin can about. You seem in good spirits, sir. How went the day?'

'You what?'

‘Did Fortune favour Dimwell last night?’

‘What are you on about?’

Nutt pulled back further. It could be dangerous not to fit in, not to be helpful, not to be careful.

‘Did you *win*, sir?’

‘Nah. Another no-score draw. Waste of time, really. But it was only a friendly. Nobody died.’

Trev looked at the full baskets of realistically dribbled candles.

‘That’s a shitload you’ve done there, kid,’ he said kindly.

Nutt hesitated again, and then said, very carefully, ‘Despite the scatological reference, you approve of the large but unspecified number of candles that I have dribbled for you?’

‘Blimey, what was that all about, Gobbo?’

Frantically, Nutt sought for an acceptable translation. ‘I done okay?’ he ventured.

Trev slapped him on the back. ‘Yeah! Good job! Respect! But you gotta learn to speak more proper, you know. You wu’nt last five minutes down our way. You’d probably get a half-brick heaven at yer.’

‘That has, I mean *’as* been known to...’appen,’ said Nutt, concentrating.

‘I never seen why people make such a to-do,’ said Trev generously. ‘So there were all those big battles? So what? It was a long time ago and a long way away, right, an’ it’s not like the trolls and dwarfs weren’t as bad as you lot, ain’t I right? I mean, goblins? What was that all about? You lot just cut throats and nicked stuff, right? That’s practically civilized in some streets round here.’

Probably, Nutt thought. No one could have been neutral when the Dark War had engulfed Far Uberwald. Maybe there had been true evil there, but apparently the evil was, oddly enough, always on the other side. Perhaps it was contagious. Somehow, in all the confusing histories that had been sung or written, the goblins were down as nasty cowardly little bastards who collected their own earwax and were always on the other side. Alas, when the time came to write their story down, his people hadn’t even had a pencil.

Smile at people. Like them. Be helpful. Accumulate worth. He liked Trev. He was good at liking people. When you clearly liked people, they were slightly more inclined to like you. Every little helped.

Trev, though, seemed genuinely unfussed about history, and had recognized that having someone in the vats who not only did not try to eat the tallow but also did most of his work for him and, at that, did it better than he could be bothered to do it himself, was an asset worth protecting. Besides, he was congenially lazy, except when it came to foot-the-ball, and bigotry took too much effort. Trev never made too much effort. Trev went through life on primrose paths.

‘Master Smeems came looking for you,’ said Nutt. ‘I sorted it all out.’

‘Ta,’ said Trev, and that was that. No questions. He *liked* Trev.

But the boy was standing there, just staring at him, as if trying to work him out.

‘Tell you what,’ Trev said. ‘Come on up to the Night Kitchen and we’ll scrounge breakfast, okay?’

‘Oh no, Mister Trev,’ said Nutt, almost dropping a candle. ‘I don’t think, sorry, fink, I ought to.’

‘Come on, who’s going to know? And there’s a fat girl up there who cooks great stuff. Best food you ever tasted.’

Nutt hesitated. **Always agree, always be helpful, always be becoming, never frighten anyone.**

‘I fink I will come with you,’ he said.

There’s a lot to be said for scrubbing a frying pan until you can see your face in it, especially if you’ve been entertaining ideas of gently tapping someone on the head with it. Glenda was not in the mood for

Trev when he came up the stone steps, kissed her on the back of the neck and said cheerfully, ‘ ’ullo, darlin’, what’s hot tonight?’

‘Nothing for the likes of you, Trevor Likely,’ she said, batting him away with the pan, ‘and you can keep your hands to yourself, thank you!’

‘Not bin keeping somethin’ warm for your best man?’

Glenda sighed. ‘There’s bubble and squeak in the warming oven and don’t say a word if anyone catches you,’ she said.

‘Just the job for a man who’s bin workin’ like a slave all night!’ said Trev, patting her far too familiarly and heading for the ovens.

‘You’ve been at the football!’ snapped Glenda. ‘You’re always at the football! And what kind of working do you call that?’

The boy laughed, and she glared at his companion, who backed away quickly as though from armour-piercing eyes.

‘And you boys ought to wash before you come up here,’ she went on, glad of a target that didn’t grin and blow kisses at her. ‘This is a food-preparation area!’

Nutt swallowed. This was the longest conversation he’d ever had with a female apart from Ladyship and Miss Healstether and he hadn’t even said anything.

‘I assure you, I bath regularly,’ he protested.

‘But you’re grey!’

‘Well, some people are black and some people are white,’ said Nutt, almost in tears. Oh, why had he, why had he left the vats? It was nice and uncomplicated down there, and quiet, too, when Concret hadn’t been on the ferrous oxide.

‘It doesn’t work like that. You’re not a zombie, are you? I know they do their best, and none of us can help how we die, but I’m not having all that trouble again. Anyone might get their finger in the soup, but rolling around in the bottom of the bowl? That’s not right.’

‘I am alive, miss,’ said Nutt helplessly.

‘Yes, but a live what, that’s what I’d like to know.’

‘I’m a goblin, miss.’ He hesitated as he said it. It sounded like a lie.

‘I thought goblins had horns,’ said Glenda.

‘Only the grown-up ones, miss.’ Well, that was true, for some goblins.

‘You lot don’t do anything nasty, do you?’ said Glenda, glaring at Nutt.

But he recognized it as a kind of residual glare; she’d said her piece, and now it was just a bit of play-acting, to show she was the boss here. And bosses can afford to be generous, especially when you look a little fearful and suitably impressed. It worked.

Glenda said, ‘Trev, fetch Mister...?’

‘Nutt,’ said Nutt.

‘Fetch Mister Nutt some bubble and squeak, will you? He looks half-starved.’

‘I have a very fast metabolism,’ said Nutt.

‘I don’t mind about that,’ said Glenda, ‘so long as you don’t go showing it to people. I have enough—’

There was a crash from behind her.

Trev had dropped the tray of bubble and squeak. He was stock still, staring at Juliet, who was returning the stare with a look of deep disgust. Finally, she said, in a voice like pearls, ‘ ’ad your bleedin’ eyeful? You got a nerve, largin’ it in here wiv that rag round your neck! Everyone knows Dimwell are well pants. Beasly couldn’t carry the ball in a sack.’

‘Oh yeah right? Well, I hear that the Lobbins walked all over you last week. Lobbin Clout! Everyone knows they’re a bunch o’ grannies!’

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