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Short Stories



A Collegiate Casting-Out of Devilish

Devices

A Discworld short story

By Terry Pratchett

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It was a Thursday afternoon. The college council of the Unseen University, Discworld's oldest and most venerable school of wizardry, liked their Thursday afternoon meetings. The council chamber, with its stained-glass image of 'Archchancellor Sloman Discovering the Special Theory of Slood', was always nice and warm and there was a distant prospect of tea and chocolate biscuits at half-past three. Pointy hats nodded as the agenda was demolished with due mendacity and sleepy prevarication.

As the biscuit hour approached, Archchancellor Mustrum Ridcully drummed his fingers on the battered leather of the table. "Just one item of Any Other Business, gentlemen," he said. "It appears the Lord Vetinari, our gracious ruler, has seen fit to confront us with a little... test. Possibly we have annoyed him in some way, committed some little faux pas -"

"This is about Mayhap Street, isn't it?" said the Dean. "Still not turned up, has it?"

"There is nothin' the matter with Mayhap Street, Dean," said Ridcully sharply. "It is merely temporarily displaced, that's all. I am assured the rest of the continuum will catch up with it no later than Thursday. It was an accident that was waiting to happen."

"Well, only waiting for a thaumic discharge that happened because you said there was no way it could possibly..." the Dean began. He was clearly enjoying himself.

"Dean! We are going to move on and put this behind us!" [1] Ridcully snapped.

"Excuse me, Archchancellor or?" said Ponder Stibbons, who was Head of Inadvisably Applied Magic and also the university's Praelector, a position interpreted at UU as 'the one who gets given the tedious jobs'.

"Yes, Stibbons?"

"It may be a good idea to put it behind us before we move on, sir," said Stibbons. "That way it will be further behind us when we do, in fact, move."

"Good point, that man. See to it," said Ridcully. He turned his attention once again to the ominous Manila folder in front of him.

"Anyway, gentlemen, his lordship has appointed a Mr A E Pessimall, a man of whom I know little, as Inspector of Universities. His job, I suspect, is to drag us kicking and no doubt screamin' into the Century of the Fruitbat."

"That was, in fact, the last century, Archchancellor or," said Stibbons.

"Well, we are hard to drag and very good at kicking," said Ridculy. "He has made a few little, ah, suggestions for improvement..."

"Really? This should be fun," said the Dean.

Ridculy slid the folder to his right. "Over to you, Mr Stibbons," he announced.

"Yes, Archchancellor. Er... thank you. Um. As you know, the city has always waived all taxes on the university..."

"Because they know what would happen if they tried it," said the Dean, with some satisfaction.

"Yes," said Stibbons. "And, then again, no. I fear we are past the time when a little shape-changing or a couple of fireballs would do the trick. That is not the modern spirit. It would be a good idea to at least examine Mr Pessimist's suggestions..."

There was a general shrugging. It would at least pass the time until the tea turned up. The shrugging was particularly marked from the Librarian who, as an orang-utan, had more to shrug.

"Firstly," said Stibbons, "Mr Pessimist wants to know what we do here."

"Do? We are the premier college of magic!" said Ridculy.

"But do we teach? As such?"

"Of course, if no alternative presents itself," said the Dean. "We show 'em where the library is, give 'em a few chats and graduate the survivors. If they run into any problems, my door is always metaphorically open."

"Metaphorically, sir?" said Stibbons.

"Yes," said the Dean. "But technically, of course, it's locked. Good grief, you don't want 'em just turning up."

"Explain to him that we don't do things, Stibbons," said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. "We are academics."

"Interesting idea, though," said Ridculy, winking at Stibbons. "What do you do, Senior Wrangler?"

A hunted look crossed the Senior Wrangler's face. "Well, er," he said, clearing his throat, "The post of Senior Wrangler at Unseen University is, most unusually - "

"Yes, but what do you do? And have you been doing more of it in the past six months than in the previous six?"

"Well, if we're asking that kind of question, Archchancellor, what do you do?" said the Dean, testily.

"I administer, Dean," said Ridculy, calmly.

"Then we must be doing something, otherwise you'd have nothing to administrate."

"That comment strikes at the very heart of the bureaucratic principle, Dean, and I shall ignore it."

"You see, Mr Pessimist wonders why we don't publish the results of, er, whatever it is we do," said Ponder.

"Publish?" said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

"Results?" said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

"Ook?" said the Librarian.

"Braseneck College publishes their Journal of Irreducible Research four times a year now," said Stibbons meekly.

"Yes. Six copies," said Ridcully.

"No wizard worth his salt tells other wizards what he's up to!" snapped the Lecturer in Recent Runes. "Besides, how can you measure thinking? You can count the tables a carpenter makes, but what kind of rule could measure the amount of thought necessary to define the essence of tableosity?"

"Exactly!" said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. "I myself have been working on my Theory of Anything for 15 years! The amount of thought that has gone into it is astonishing! Those 67 pages have been hard won, I can tell you!"

"And I've seen some of those Braseneck papers," said Ridcully. "They've got titles like 'Diothumatic Aspects of Cheese in Mice', or possibly it was mice in cheese. Or maybe chess."

"And what was it about?" said the Dean.

"Oh, I don't think it was for reading. It was for having written," said the Archchancellor. "Anyway, no one knows what diothumics is, except that it's probably magic with the crusts cut off. Braseneck College, indeed! It used to be the Braseneck School of Conjuring!"

"Er... nevertheless, Mr Pessimist does point out that Braseneck is attracting students, to the general benefit of the city," said Stibbons. "In fact he suggests that we ourselves might even consider, er, advertising for students." He paused, because of the sudden frigid quality of the atmosphere, then plunged on: "In order to attract young men, in fact, who would not normally consider wizarding as a profession. He notes that Braseneck gives all new students a free crystal ball and a voucher for a free frog or frog-like creature."

"Make ourselves attractive to students?" said the Archchancellor. "Mr Stibbons, the whole idea of a university is that it should be hard to get into."

Remember Dean Rouster? He used to set traps to stop students attending his lectures! 'I'll tap talent from all backgrounds,' he used to say, 'but a lad who can't spot a tripwire is no good to me!' He reckoned any student who didn't open a door very carefully and look where he was putting his feet would only be a burden to the profession. You see, trying to be nice to students means you end up with

courses like comparative fretwork and graduates who think 'thank you' is one word and can look at a sign sayin'

'Human Resources Department' without detecting a whiff of brimstone."

"I have to tel you, sir, that Mr Pessimall is suggesting that we accept an intake of 40 per cent non-traditional students," said Ponder Stibbons.

"What does that mean?" said the Senior Wrangler.

"Wel , er..." Stibbons began, but the council had already resorted to definition-by-hubbub.

"We take in al sorts as it is," said the Dean.

"Does he mean people who are not traditional y good at magic?" said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

"Ridiculous!" said the Dean. "Forty per cent duffers?"

"Exactly!" said the Archchancel or. "That means we'd have to find enough clever people to make up over half the student intake! We'd never manage it. If they were clever already, they wouldn't need to go to university! No, we'l stick to an intake of 100 per cent young fools, thank you. Bring 'em in stupid, send them away clever, that's the UU way!"

"Some of them arrive thinkin' they're clever, of course," said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

"Yes, but we soon disabuse them of that," said the Dean happily. "What is a university for if it isn't to tel you that everything you think you know is wrong?"

"Wel put, that man!" said Ridcul y. "Ignorance is the key! That's how the Dean got where he is today!"

"Thank you, Archchancel or," said the Dean, in a chil y voice. "I shal take that as a compliment. Careful y directed ignorance is the key to al knowledge."

"I think the inspector actual y means people who by accident of birth, upbringing, background or early education would not meet the usual entrance requirements," said Ponder, quickly.

"Real y? Good idea," said Ridcul y, a gleam in his eye. "And are we to take it that for his part he intends to make a point of hirin' clerks who aren't very good at sums and file everythin' under 'S' for 'stuff'?"

"He doesn't appear to say so - "

"How strange. Oh, I can see what he's getting at, but, you see, we're a university, Mr Stibbons, not a bandage. We can't just wave a magic wand and make everything better!"

"Actual y, sir..." Stibbons began.

Ridcul y waved a hand irritably. "Yes, yes, al right, I know, we can just wave a magic wand and make everything better. Except, of course, that making everything better by magic only makes things much,

much worse. What we do, gentlemen, is dynamical y refrain from using magic. Just imagine what we could do if we turned our... uh, intellects to the political stage. I'm only surprised that he's not asking us to do so."

"Interestingly, he does want to know if we have an ethics committee," said Stibbons.

"Since we don't have any, I don't think we need one," said Ridcul y.

"It appears to be to do with experiments on animals," Stibbons persisted.

"Ook?"

"Quite so," said Ridcul y. "Why would we do that sort of nastiness when we've got students hangin' around? I was turned into something miscellaneous at least once a week in my first year, and it never did me any harm. Anything else?"

"Lots, sir," sighed Stibbons. "Lots and lots."

A pal descended.

"Well, gentlemen, I think I can gauge the sense of the meeting," said the Archchancellor, to break the silence. "I propose that we inform the inspector that we are giving his suggestions our urgent consideration."

They looked up in horror. He winked. They relaxed.

"That's right!" said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. "In depth!"

"Abyssal!" said the Dean.

"We'l form a committee!" said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

"I'm sure Mr Pessimism will be very pleased to hear it," said Ridcul y. "Put it on the agenda for this time next year, Mr Stibbons, will you? No, perhaps the year after next. Yes, that might be better. You can't hurry urgency, I've always said so."

Upon which happy note, as if by magic, the tea and biscuits arrived.

[1] 'Put it behind us and move on' is a political term used meaning, "I've done something I ought to be thoroughly ashamed of, if not actually prosecuted with the full force of the law, so I wish to push the issue away before people start looking too hard."