

Theater of Cruelty
A Discworld short story
By Terry Pratchett
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It was a fine summer morning, the kind to make a man happy to be alive. And probably the man would have been happier to be alive. He was, in fact, dead. It would be hard to be deader without special training.

"Well, now," said Sergeant Colon (Ankh-Morpork City Guard, Night Watch), consulting his notebook, "so far we have cause of death as a) being beaten with at least one blunt instrument b) being strangled with a string of sausages and c) being savaged by at least two animals with big sharp teeth. What do we do now, Nobby?"

"Arrest the suspect, Sarge," said Corporal Nobbs, saluting smartly.

"Suspect, Nobby?"

"Him," said Nobby, prodding the corpse with his boot. "I call it highly suspicious, being dead like that. He's been drinking, too. We could do him for being dead and disorderly."

Colon scratched his head. Arresting the corpse offered, of course, certain advantages. But...

"I reckon," he said slowly, "that Captain Vimes'll want this one sorted out. You'd better bring it back to the Watch House, Nobby."

"And then can we eat the sausages, sarge?" said Corporal Nobbs.

It wasn't easy, being the senior policeman in Ankh-Morpork, greatest of cities of the Discworld [*].

There were probably worlds, captain Vimes mused in his gloomier moments, where there weren't wizards (who made locked room mysteries commonplace) or zombies (murder cases were really strange when the victim could be the chief witness) and where dogs could be relied on to do nothing in the night time and not go around chatting to people. Captain Vimes believed in logic, in much the same way as a man in a desert believed in ice -- i.e., it was something he really needed, but this just wasn't the world for it. Just once, he thought, it'd be nice to solve something.

He looked at the blue-faced body on the slab, and felt a tiny flicker of excitement. There were clues. He'd never seen proper clues before.

"Couldn't have been a robber, Captain," said Sergeant Colon. "The reason being, his pockets were full of money. Eleven dollars."

"I wouldn't call that full," said Captain Vimes.

"It was all in pennies and ha'pennies, sir. I'm amazed his trousers stood the strain. And I have cunningly detected the fact that he was a showman, sir. He had some cards in his pocket, sir. 'Chas Slumber, Children's Entertainer'."

"I suppose no one saw anything?" said Vimes.

"Well, sir," said Sergeant Colon helpfully, "I told young Constable Carrot to find some witnesses."

"You asked Corporal Carrot to investigate a murder? All by himself?" said Vimes.

The sergeant scratched his head.

"And he said to me, did I know anyone very old and seriously ill?"

And on the magical Discworld, there is always one guaranteed witness to any homicide. It's his job.

Constable Carrot, the Watch's youngest member, often struck people as simple. And he was. He was incredibly simple, but in the same way that a sword is simple, or an ambush is simple. He was also possibly the most linear thinker in the history of the universe.

He'd been waiting by the bedside of an old man, who'd quite enjoyed the company. And now it was time to take out his notebook.

"Now I know you saw something, sir," he said. "You were there."

WELL, YES, said Death. I HAVE TO BE, YOU KNOW. BUT THIS IS VERY IRREGULAR.

"You see, sir," said Corporal Carrot, "as I understand the law, you are an Accessory After The Fact. Or possibly Before The Fact."

YOUNG MAN, I AM THE FACT.

"And I am an officer of the Law," said Corporal Carrot. "There's got to be a law, you know."

YOU WANT ME TO... ER... GRASS SOMEONE UP? DROP A DIME ON SOMEONE? SING LIKE A PIGEON? NO. NO-ONE KILLED MR. SLUMBER. I CAN'T HELP YOU THERE.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," said Carrot, "I think you have."

DAMN.

Death watched Carrot leave, ducking his head as he went down the narrow stairs of the hovel.

NOW THEN, WHERE WAS I...

"Excuse me," said the wizened old man in the bed. "I happen to be 107, you know. I haven't got all day."

AH, YES, CORRECT.

Death sharpened his scythe. It was the first time he'd ever helped the police with their enquiries. Still, everyone had a job to do.

Corporal Carrot strolled easily around the town. He had a Theory. He'd read a book about Theories. You added up all the clues, and you got a Theory. Everything had to fit.

There were sausages. Someone had to buy sausages. And then there were pennies. Normally only one subsection of the human race paid for things in pennies.

He called in at a sausage maker. He found a group of children, and chatted to them for a while.

Then he ambled back to the alley, where Corporal Nobbs had chalked the outline of the corpse on the ground (colouring it in, and adding a pipe and a walking stick and some trees and bushes

in the background -- people had already dropped 7p in his helmet). He paid some attention to the heap of rubbish at the far end, and then sat down on a busted barrel.

"All right... you can come out now," he said, to the world at large. "I didn't know there were any gnomes left in the world."

The rubbish rustled. They trooped out -- the little man with the red hat, the hunched back and the hooked nose, the little woman in the mob cap carrying the even smaller baby, the little policeman, the dog with the ruff around its neck, and the very small alligator.

Corporal Carrot sat and listened.

"He made us do it," said the little man. He had a surprisingly deep voice. "He used to beat us. Even the alligator. That was all he understood, hitting things with sticks. And he used to take all the money the dog Toby collected and get drunk. And then we ran away and he caught us in the alley and started on Judy and the baby and he fell over and --"

"Who hit him first?" said Carrot.

"All of us!"

"But not very hard," said Carrot. "You're all too small. You didn't kill him. I have a very convincing statement about that. So I went and had another look at him. He'd choked to death. What's this?"

He held up a little leather disc.

"It's a swozzle," said the little policeman. "He used it for the voices. He said ours weren't funny enough."

"That's the way to do it!" said the one called Judy.

It was stuck in his throat," said Carrot. "I suggest you run away. Just as far as you can."

"We thought we could start a people's co-operative," said the leading gnome.

"You know... experimental drama, street theatre, that sort of thing. Not hitting each other with sticks..."

"You did that for children?" said Carrot.

"He said it was a new sort of entertainment. He said it'd catch on."

Carrot stood up, and flicked the swozzle into the rubbish.

"People'll never stand for it," he said. "That's not the way to do it."

The End

[*] Which is flat and goes through space on the back of an enormous turtle, and why not...

"Theatre of Cruelty" was originally written for the W. H. Smith "Bookcase" magazine. The

expanded version reproduced above was later published in the program book for the OryCon 15 convention.

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