

**Thud!**

**Terry Pratchett**

Thud . . .

That was the sound the heavy club made as it connected with the head. The body jerked, and slumped back.

And it was done, unheard, unseen: the perfect end, a perfect solution, a perfect story.

But, as the dwarfs say, where there is trouble you will always find a troll.

The troll saw.

It started out as a perfect day. It would soon enough be an imperfect one, he knew, but just for these few minutes it was possible to pretend that it wouldn't.

Sam Vimes shaved himself. It was his daily act of defiance, a confirmation that he was . . . well, plain Sam Vimes.

Admittedly he shaved himself in a mansion, and while he did so his butler read out bits from the Times, but they were just . . . circumstances. It was still Sam Vimes looking back at him from the mirror. The day he saw the Duke of Ankh in there would be a bad day. 'Duke' was just a job description, that's all.

'Most of the news is about the current . . . dwarfish situation, sir,' said Willikins as Vimes negotiated the tricky area under the nose. He still used his grandad's cut-throat razor. It was another anchor to reality. Besides, the steel was a lot better than the steel you got today. Sybil, who had a strange enthusiasm for modern gadgetry, kept on suggesting he get one of those new shavers, with a little magic imp inside that had its own scissors and did all the cutting very quickly, but Vimes had held out. If anyone was going to be using a blade near his face, it was going to be him.

'Koom Valley, Koom Valley,' he muttered to his reflection. 'Anything new?'

'Not as such, sir,' said Willikins, turning back to the front page. 'There is a report of that speech by Grag Hamcrusher. There was a disturbance afterwards, it says. Several dwarfs and trolls were wounded. Community leaders have appealed for calm.'

Vimes shook some lather off the blade. 'Hah! I bet they have. Tell me, Willikins, did you fight much when you were a kid? Were you in a gang or anything?'

'I was privileged to belong to the Shamlegger Street Rude Boys, sir,' said the butler.

'Really?' said Vimes, genuinely impressed. 'They were pretty tough nuts, as I recall.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Willikins smoothly. 'I pride myself I used to give somewhat more than I got if we needed to discuss the vexed area of turf issues with the young men from Rope Street. Stevedore's hooks were their weapon of choice, as I recall.'

'And yours . . .?' said Vimes, agog.

'A cap-brim sewn with sharpened pennies, sir. An ever-present help in times of trouble.'

'Ye gods, man! You could put someone's eye out with something like that.'

'With care, sir, yes,' said Willikins, meticulously folding a towel.

And here you stand now, in your pinstripe trousers and butlering coat, shiny as schmaltz and fat as butter, Vimes thought, while he tidied up under the ears. And I'm a Duke. How the world turns.

'And have you ever heard someone say "Let's have a disturbance"?' he said.

'Never, sir,' said Willikins, picking up the paper again.

'Me neither. It only happens in newspapers.' Vimes glanced at the bandage on his arm. It had been quite disturbing, even so.

'Did it mention I took personal charge?' he said.

'No, sir. But it does say here that rival factions in the street outside were kept apart by the valiant efforts of the Watch, sir.'

'They actually used the word "valiant"?' said Vimes.

'Indeed they did, sir.'

'Well, good,' Vimes conceded grumpily. 'Do they record that two officers had to be taken to the Free Hospital, one of them quite badly hurt?'

'Unaccountably not, sir,' said the butler.

'Huh. Typical. Oh, well . . . carry on.'

Willikins coughed a butlery cough. 'You might wish to lower the razor for the next one, sir. I got into trouble with her ladyship about last week's little nick.'

Vimes watched his image sigh, and lowered the razor. 'All right, Willikins. Tell me the worst.'

Behind him, the paper was professionally rustled. 'The headline on page three is: "Vampire Officer For The Watch?", sir,' said the butler, and took a careful step backwards.

'Damn! Who told them?'

'I really couldn't say, sir. It says you are not in favour of vampires in the Watch but will be interviewing a recruit today. It says there is a lively controversy over the issue.'

'Turn to page eight, will you?' said Vimes. Behind him, the paper rustled again.

'Well?' he said. 'That's where they usually put their silly political cartoon, isn't it?'

'You did put the razor down, did you, sir?' said Willikins.

'Yes!'

'Perhaps it would also be just as well if you stepped away from the washbasin, too, sir.'

'There's one of me, isn't there . . . ' said Vimes grimly.

'Indeed there is, sir. It portrays a small nervous vampire and, if I may say so, a rather larger-than-life drawing of yourself leaning over your desk, holding a wooden stake in your right hand. The caption is: "Any good on a stake-out, eh?", sir, this being a humorous wordplay referring, on the one hand, to the standard police procedure-'

'Yes, I think I can just about spot it,' said Vimes wearily. 'Any chance you could nip down and buy the original before Sybil does? Every time they run a cartoon of me she gets hold of it and hangs it up in the library!'

'Mr, er, Fizz does capture a very good likeness, sir,' the butler conceded. 'And I regret to say that her ladyship has already instructed me to go down to the Times office on her behalf.'

Vimes groaned.

'Moreover, sir,' Willikins went on, 'her ladyship desired me to remind you that she and Young Sam will meet you at the studio of Sir Joshua at eleven sharp, sir. The painting is at an important stage, I gather.'

'But I-'

'She was very specific, sir. She said if a commander of police cannot take time off, who can?'

On this day in 1802, the painter Methodia Rascal woke up in the night because the sounds of warfare were coming from a drawer in his bedside table.

Again.