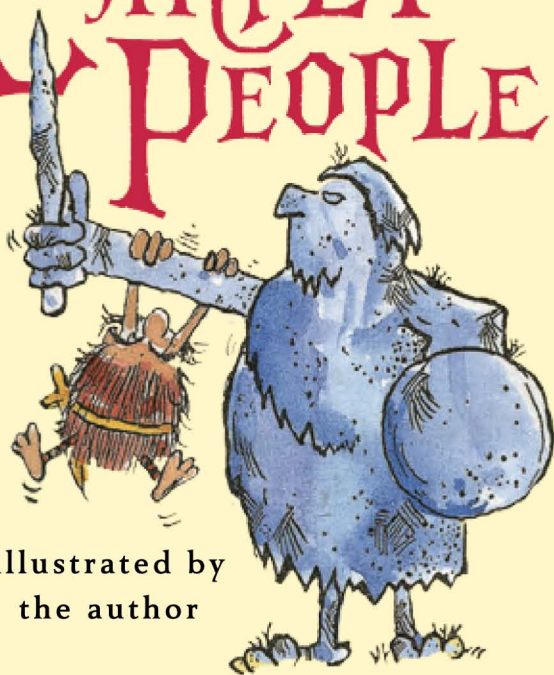


New York Times Bestselling Author

TERRY PRATCHETT

THE CARPET PEOPLE



illustrated by
the author

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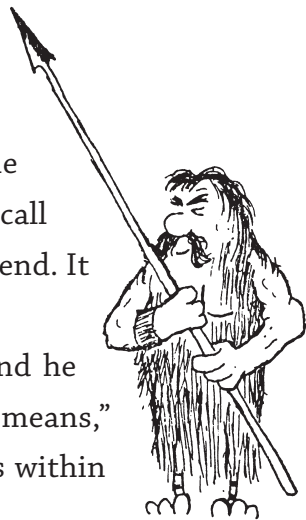
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Old Grimm Orkson, chieftain of the Munrungs, had two sons. The eldest, Glurk, succeeded his father as chieftain when old Orkson died.

To the Munrung way of thinking, which was a slow and deliberate way, there couldn't have been a better choice. Glurk looked just like a second edition of his father, from his broad shoulders to his great, thick neck, the battering center of his strength. Glurk could throw a spear farther than anyone. He could wrestle with a snarg, and wore a necklace of their long yellow teeth to prove it. He could lift a horse with one hand, run all day without tiring, and creep up so close to a grazing animal that sometimes it would die of shock before he had time to raise his spear. Admittedly he moved his lips when he was thinking, and the thoughts could be seen bumping against one another like dumplings in a stew, but he was not stupid. Not what you'd call stupid. His brain got there in the end. It just went the long way round.

"He's a man of few words, and he doesn't know what either of them means," people said, but not when he was within hearing.



One day, toward evening, he was tramping homeward through the dusty glades, carrying a bone-tipped hunting spear under one arm. The other arm steadied the long pole that rested on his shoulder.

In the middle of the pole, its legs tied together, dangled a snarg. At the other end of the pole was Snibril, Glurk's younger brother.

Old Orkson had married early and lived long, so a wide gap filled by a string of daughters, who the chieftain had carefully married off to upright and respected and above all *well-off* Munrungs, separated the brothers.

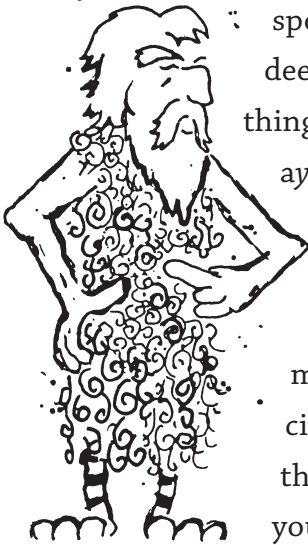
Snibril was slight, especially compared with his brother. Grimm had sent him off to the strict Dumii school in Tregon Marus to become a clerk. "He can't hardly hold a spear," he said. "Maybe a pen'd be better. Get some learning in the family."

When Snibril had run away for the third time, Pismire came to see Grimm.

Pismire was the shaman, a kind of odd-job priest.

Most tribes had one, although Pismire was different. For one thing, at least once every month he washed all the bits that showed. This was unusual. Other shamans tended to encourage dirt, taking the view that the grubbier, the more magical.

And he didn't wear lots of feathers and bones, and he didn't talk like the other shamans in neighboring tribes.



Other shamans ate the yellow-spotted mushrooms that were found deep in the hair thickets and said things like 'Hiiiiyahyahheya! Heyahey-ayahyah! Hngh! Hngh!' which certainly *sounded* magical.

Pismire said things like 'Correct observation followed by meticulous deduction and the precise visualization of goals is vital to the success of any enterprise. Have you noticed the way the wild tromps always move around two days ahead of the sorath herds? Incidentally, don't eat the yellow-spotted mushrooms.'

Which didn't sound magical at all, but worked a lot better and conjured up good hunting. Privately some Munrungs thought good hunting was due more to their own skill than to his advice. Pismire encouraged this view. "Positive thinking," he would say, "is also very important."

He was also the official medicine man. He was a lot

better, they agreed (but reluctantly, because the Munrungs respected tradition), than the last one they had had, whose idea of medicine was to throw some bones in the air and cry 'Hyahyahyah! Hgn! Hgnh!' Pismire just mixed various kinds of rare dust in a bowl, made it into pills, and said things like "Take one of these when you go to bed at night and another one if you wake up in the morning."

And occasionally he offered advice on other matters.

Grimm was chopping sticks outside his hut. "It'll never work," said Pismire, appearing behind him in that silent way of his. "You can't send Snibril off to Tregon again. He's a Munrung. No wonder he keeps running away. He'll never be a clerk. It's not in the blood, man. Let him stay. I'll see he learns to read."

"If you can learn him, you're welcome," said Grimm, shaking his head. "He's a mystery to me. Spends all his time moping around. His mother used to be like that. Of course, she got a bit of sense once she got married."

Grimm had never learned to read, but he had always been impressed by the clerks at Tregon Marus. They could make marks on bits of parchment that could *remember* things. That was power, of a sort. He was quite keen to see that an Orkson got some of it.

So Snibril went to Pismire's village school with the other children, and learned numbers, letters, and the Dumii laws. He enjoyed it, sucking in knowledge as though his life depended on it. It often did, Pismire said.

And, strangely, he also grew up to be a hunter almost as good as his brother. But in different ways. Glurk chased. Snibril *watched*. You don't have to chase around after creatures, Pismire had said. You watch them for long enough, and then you'll find the place to wait and they'll come to *you*. There's nearly always a better way of doing something.

When old Grimm died, he was laid in a barrow dug out of the dust of the Carpet, with his hunting spear by his side. Munrungs had no idea where you went when you died, but there was no reason to go hungry once you got there.

Glurk became chieftain, and would have to take the tribe to the next Counting. But the messenger to summon them to Tregon Marus was long overdue, and that worried Glurk. Not that he was in a hurry to pay taxes, and actually going to *see* why the messenger was late seemed a bit too, you know, *keen*, but usually the Dumii were very reliable, especially over tax gathering.

But as he and his brother wandered homeward

that evening, he kept his thoughts to himself. Snibril grunted as he heaved the pole onto his other shoulder. He was shorter than his brother, and he was going to get shorter still, he thought, if he couldn't shed the load for a minute or two.

"I feel as though my feet have worn right off and my legs have turned up at the ends," he said. "Can't we stop for a rest? Five minutes won't hurt. And . . . my head aches . . ."

"Five minutes, then," said Glurk. "No more. It's getting dark."

They had reached the Dumii road, and not far north of it lay the Woodwall, home, and supper. They sat down.

Glurk, who never wasted his time, started to sharpen the point of his spear on a piece of grit, but both brothers gazed down the road, which was shining in the dim evening air. The road stretched west, a glowing line in the darkness. The hairs around it were full of growing shadows. It had fascinated Snibril ever since his father had told him that all roads led to Ware. So it was only the road that lay between the doorway of his hut and the threshold of the Emperor's palace, he thought. And if you counted all the streets and passages that led off the road . . . Once you set foot on it,

you might end up anywhere, and if you just sat by the road and waited, who might pass you by? Everywhere was connected to everywhere else, Pismire had said.

He put his head in his hands. The ache was worse. It felt as though he was being squeezed.

The Carpet had felt wrong, too, today. The hunting had been hard. Most of the animals had vanished, and the dust between the hairs did not stir in the breathless air.

Glurk said, "I don't like this. There hasn't been anyone on the road for days."

He stood up and reached out for the pole.

Snibril groaned. He'd have to ask Pismire for a pill . . .

A shadow flickered high up in the hairs, and flashed away toward the south.

There was a sound so loud as to be felt by the whole body, hitting the Carpet with horrible suddenness. The brothers sprawled in the dust as the hairs around them groaned and screamed in the gale.

Glurk gripped the rough bark of a hair and hauled himself upright, straining against the storm that whipped round him. Far overhead the tip of the hair creaked and rattled, and, all round, the hairs waved like a gray sea. Smashing through them came grit, man-

sized boulders half rolling and half flying before the wind.

Holding on tightly with one hand, Glurk reached out with the other and hauled his brother to safety. Then they crouched, too shaken to speak, while the storm banged about them.

As quickly as it had come, it veered south, and the darkness followed it.

The silence clanged like gongs.

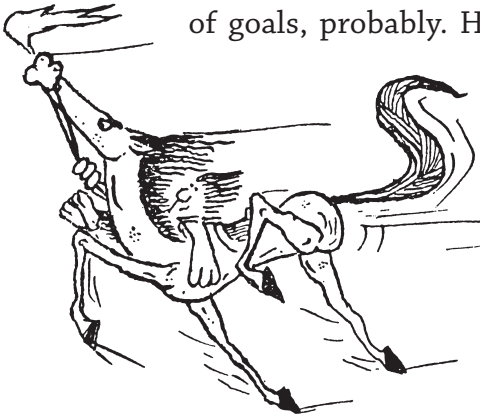
Snibril blinked. Whatever it was it had taken the headache with it. His ears popped.

Then he heard the sound of hooves on the road as the wind died away.

The hoofbeats got louder very quickly and sounded wild and frightened, as though the horse was running free.

When it appeared, it was riderless. Its ears lay back flat on its head and its eyes flashed green with terror. The white coat glistened with sweat; reins cracked across the saddle with the fury of the gallop.

Snibril leaped in its path. Then, as the creature hurtled by him, he snatched at the reins, raced for a second alongside the pounding hooves, and flung himself up into the saddle. Why he dared that he never knew. Careful observation and precise determination



of goals, probably. He just couldn't imagine *not* doing it.

The brothers rode into the village, the quieted horse carrying them and dragging the snarg behind it.

The village stockade had broken in several places, and grit boulders had smashed some huts. Glurk looked toward the Orkson hut and Snibril heard the moan that escaped from him. The chieftain climbed down from the horse's back and walked slowly toward his home.

Or what had *been* his home.

The rest of the tribe stopped talking and drew back, awed, to let him pass. A hair had fallen, a big one. It had crushed the stockade. And the tip of it lay across what was left of the Orkson hut, the arch of the doorway still standing bravely amid a litter of beams and thatch. Bertha Orkson came running forward with her children round her and flung herself into his arms.

"Pismire got us out before the hair fell," she cried. "Whatever shall we do?"

He patted her absently but went on staring at the ruined hut. Then he climbed up the mound of wreckage and prodded about.

So silent was the crowd that every sound he made echoed. There was a clink as he picked up the pot that had miraculously escaped destruction, and looked at it as though he had never seen its design before, turning it this way and that in the firelight. He raised it above his head and smashed it on the ground.

Then he raised his fist above him and swore. He cursed by the hairs, by the dark caverns of Underlay, by the demons of the Floor, by the Weft and by the Warp. He bellowed the Unutterable Words and swore the oath of Retwatshud the Frugal, which cracked bone, or so it was said, although Pismire claimed that this was superstition.

Curses circled up in the evening hairs and the night creatures of the Carpet listened. Oath was laid upon oath in a towering pillar vibrating terror.

When he had finished, the air trembled. He flopped down on the wreckage and sat with his head in his hands, and no one dared approach. There were side-long glances, and one or two people shook themselves and hurried away.

Snibril dismounted and wandered over to where Pismire was standing gloomily, wrapped in his goat-skin cloak.

“He shouldn’t have said the Unutterable Words,” said Pismire, more or less to himself. “It’s all superstition, of course, but that’s not to say it isn’t *real*. Oh, hello. I see you survived.”

“What did this?”

“It used to be called Fray,” said Pismire.

“I thought that was just an old story.”

“Doesn’t mean it was untrue. I’m sure it was Fray. The changes in air pressure to begin with . . . the animals sensed it . . . just like it said in the . . .” He stopped. “Just like I read somewhere,” he said awkwardly.

He glanced past Snibril and brightened up.

“You’ve got a horse, I see.”

“I think it’s been hurt.”

Pismire walked to the horse and examined it carefully. “It’s Dumii, of course,” he said. “Someone fetch my herb box. Something’s attacked him, see, here. Not deep, but it should be dressed. A magnificent beast. Magnificent. No rider?”

“We rode up the road a way but we didn’t see anyone.”

Pismire stroked the sleek coat. "If you sold all the village and its people into slavery, you might just be able to buy a horse like this. Whoever he belonged to, he ran away some time ago. He's been living wild for days."

"The Dumii don't let anyone keep slaves anymore," said Snibril.

"It's worth a lot, is what I was trying to say," said Pismire.

He hummed distractedly to himself as he examined the hooves.

"Wherever he came from, someone must have been riding him."

He let one leg go and paused to stare up at the hairs. "Something scared him. Not Fray. Something days ago. It wasn't bandits, because they would have taken the horse, too. And they don't leave claw marks. A snarg could have made that if it was three times its normal size. Oh dear. And there are such," he said.

The cry came.

To Snibril it seemed as though the night had grown a mouth and a voice. It came from the hairs just beyond the broken stockade — a mocking screech that split the darkness. The horse reared.

A fire had already been lit at the break in the wall, and some hunters ran toward it, spears ready.

They stopped.

On the farther side there was a mounted shape in the darkness, and two pairs of eyes. One was a sullen red, one pair shimmered green. They stared unblinking over the flames at the villagers.

Glurk snatched a spear from one of the gaping men and pushed his way forward.

“Nothing but a snarg,” he growled, and threw. The spear struck something, but the green eyes only grew brighter. There was a deep, menacing rumble from an unseen throat.

“Be off! Go back to your lair!”

Pismire ran forward with a blazing stick in his hand and hurled it at the eyes.

They blinked and were gone. With them went the spell. Cries went up and, ashamed of their fear, the hunters surged forward. “Stop!” shouted Pismire. “Idiots! You’ll chase out into the dark after that, with your bone spears? That was a black snarg. Not like the brown ones you get around here! You know the stories? They’re from the farthest Corners! From the Unswept Regions!”

From the north, from the white cliff of the Wood-wall itself, came again the cry of a snarg. This time it did not die away, but stopped abruptly.

Pismire stared north for a second, then turned to Glurk and Snibril. "You have been found," he said. "That was what brought this horse here, fear of the snargs. And fear of the snargs is nothing to be ashamed of. Fear of snargs like that is common sense. Now they have discovered the village, you can't stay. They'll come every night until one night you won't fight back hard enough. Leave tomorrow. Even that may be too late."

"We can't just —" Glurk began.

"You can. You must. Fray is back, and all the things that come after. Do you understand?"

"No," said Glurk.

"Then trust me," said Pismire. "And hope that you never *do* have to understand. Have you ever known me to be wrong?"

Glurk considered. "Well, there was that time when you said —"

"About *important* things?"

"No. I suppose not." Glurk looked worried. "But we've never been frightened of snargs. We can deal with snargs. What's special about these?"

“The things that ride on them,” said Pismire.

“There was another pair of eyes,” said Glurk uncertainly.

“Worse than snargs,” said Pismire. “Got much worse weapons than teeth and claws. They’ve got brains.”