

The Dizzy Dryad

by Paul Watson and Ms Tiger to You

A shaft of moonlight filters through the leaves, shining brightly on the curved bole of the great birch tree standing in the clearing, a ring of pale mushrooms circling it at a respectful distance, seeming to glow under the half-moon's gaze. A light breeze caresses the branches, the leaves whispering their secrets to each other. If one were to examine the bole closely, gleams of light shining through the cracks in the birch's white bark might be discerned. A much closer examination, were anyone so inclined, would reveal the outline of a door within the bark. And if one were curious enough to look up into the whispering branches, they might just glimpse a sign swaying in the breeze. And, if they were foolhardy enough to disregard what happens to curious cats, they might see on the sign a slender figure, seated unsteadily, her hands supporting her, her legs stretched out ahead, glimmering stars circling her head somehow avoiding the leaves sprouting through her chestnut hair, her modesty defended, mostly, by an Eve-like placement of leaves. And beneath her, in curling, elegant script are three words: 'The Dizzy Dryad'. And if one was still curious enough to ignore the very sensible voice in the back of one's brain telling one just how bad an idea this was, one could open the door. And that's when things would get interesting.

A fire crackles in the hearth, a black cauldron, regardless of original colour, suspended over it, occasionally emitting an assortment of flavourful aromas. A collection of wooden tables and benches meander about the main floor, all occupied, or over-occupied. The rambunctious sounds of many voices speaking many tongues in many states of inebriation and with many degrees of volume rattle the dark wood rafters. Sitting just inside the door, his forepaws pushing his body up, his tail lying flat on the wooden floor, is a hound with eyes as big as cartwheels, glowing with emerald fire. His coat is a glossy midnight black, his muzzle twitching as he nasally inspects the incoming patrons, occasionally growling just a little, or, in extreme cases, baring fangs like swords. Curled up in his expansive shadow lie two smaller hounds, one with eyes as large as saucers and the other with eyes the size of dinner plates.

The bar stretches along one wall from here all the way to there, the shelves behind it dominated by an assortment of mismatched bottles in a rainbow of colours. Behind the bar, stands the bartender. The ginger tide of his hair has begun to ebb from his brow, but the bushy eyebrows and thick muttonchop sideburns are endeavouring to compensate. A forest green apron covers his plain white shirt, whose collar appears permanently undone, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, a long, curled stem pipe casually resting out the side of his mouth, surrounding the bar in a faint haze of pipeweed smoke. Along the bar, from here all the way to there, stand a collection of patrons unlikely to be seen in any other establishment. A satyr leers over the shoulder of a comely nymph, only to retreat and regroup as she delivers a stinging rebuff to his advances and his cheek. A salamander quaffs a flame-filled tankard, his arms leaving little fires dancing on the bar before the barkeep's towel slaps them back into oblivion. A troupe of brownies animatedly discuss the rescue of one of their own, following an unfortunate slip into their ponykeg of foamy dark ale, the brownie in question vehemently opposing said rescue.

Sitting at one of the tables close to the fire, a group of dwarves bang their tankards enthusiastically on the wood, almost in time with the boisterous ballad they are busily slurring. A nearby table of elves looks on with polite, well-cultivated disdain as they sip golden ambrosia from their fluted glasses. At a third table sits a trio of oddly disparate companions: a diminutive fairy sipping from her flowercup sits between a spindly goblin, his spidery fingers clutching a mug of foul-smelling brew, and a badger in his homespun smock, draining his glass of ale. At yet a fourth table, as far from the firelight as is inhumanly possible to be, a troll sprawls across his table, a wide zone of empty benches around him, his trencher of ale sloshing over the edge of the table and onto the floor. He raises his warty face from the trencher, ale dripping from the tip of his pointed nose. His face grimaces, his mouth gapes open, revealing a cavern of chipped and broken teeth, and he emits a thunderous belch. Everyone and everything in the tavern dives for cover. A hand emerges from behind the bar to snatch the black crock containing the night's proceeds to safety.

At a theatre many realms, and yet more leagues, hence, the Professor's assistant poses by the last prop of the evening show, her leaf-green bikini barely rating its title as a costume (not that the half-filled theatre's cut-rate patrons would notice the difference), a crown of plastic leaves scratching her scalp through her chestnut hair, her professional smile fixed in place. The Professor prattles on in front of her, spinning the same yarn from the old country (or New York) about a young maiden fleeing a brutish husband (as if there was any other kind in these stories) and beseeching the gods to save her. At this point, the Professor arches a meaningful eyebrow, and the assistant raises her arms to the rafters, staring beseechingly heavenwards. The Professor yanks the front curtain from the front of the cabinet (which shakes rather more than it ought to). The Assistant flees inside, remembering to wiggle her leaves as she enters. She pulls the rear curtain open to prove that there is no trickery involved (as if). The Professor continues to relate his tale, emphasising how the gods took pity on the poor maiden, and, as is the way with the gods in these tales (who never seem to do anything straightforwardly), transformed her into a tree to hide her from her husband. The curtains are pulled closed from inside, and the Professor pauses for the required few seconds, turning the cabinet around and around. He triumphantly yanks aside one curtain, revealing a tree that deserves a sales label from Acme Mail Order to be hanging from one of its plastic branches. Someone claps, but quickly ceases. The Professor, completely ignoring the audience, gestures theatrically. After the required few seconds, during which no one claps, he closes the curtain back up, explaining to the dumbstruck patrons how the husband gave up his search and restored the poor maiden, who lived happily ever after (the divorce, that is). He turns the cabinet around and around, and flings the curtain open. There is a faint '-uck' from inside the cabinet, but when he turns, not sure he heard what he thought he heard, her professional smile is in its proper place.

Many realms and yet more leagues hither, the tavern recovers, drinkers slowly raising themselves, and more importantly their drinks, off the floor. The table of dwarves glowers across the common room at the renewly oblivious troll, the elves' faces crinkling as they place perfumed silk handkerchiefs to their noses. The fairy resumes her former place at the table, sipping from her flower, as the goblin's spindly fingers grab onto the table, pulling him back onto his seat. "Hey, Brocc, are you hibernating down there?" his weedy, reedy voice calls. A black, furry hand takes hold of the edge of the table, thick claws scraping the varnish as the badger pulls himself upright.

"Some of us, Fiddlewit, don't have your taste for horrible smells."

"Fiddlestick, Brocc, Fiddlestick. Surely even a creature of your limited prowess with language can pronounce my name correctly."

"And if your name wasn't so puffed up it wouldn't be a problem for us decent folk, Fiddlewit."

"Now, now, Brocc, I do believe you are trying to provoke me into an altercation." he raises his mug with both hands, guzzling the foul brew down.

A black fist slaps onto the table, "Does that mean you fancy a decent scrap at last, Fiddlewit?"

"No, he doesn't." the fairy interrupts, flitting on her swirling butterfly wings between them, "Some of us, dear Brocc, do not like 'a decent scrap' as much as you do."

"Bah. And how would you know, Merridimple? Even Fiddlewit here could out wrestle you."

Merridimple drifts back to her raised seat, takes a sip from her flower, and glares daggers at him, "At least I..."

And then the air above the table shimmers, and with a soft pop, is occupied. For a breath, the new arrival hangs there, a crown of leaves askew in her chestnut hair, more leaves wrapped around her modesty. And then, she falls to the table, her flailing feet catching Fiddlestick's mug, sending it hurtling to the floor, whilst one hand delivers an equally telling blow to Brocc's ale. She looks about her from her unsteady seat, her hands supporting her body on the table, her mouth open wide. Once more the tavern falls into silence, every eye turned to the table, and it's surprise occupant. "What the fu-" and with a slightly louder pop, the table is

empty. Merridimple looks down at her flower, and then at the stunned bartender.

“What did you put in my nectar, Seamus?!”

“She spilled my ale.”

“You are hardly alone in that regard. Whoever she may have been, she certainly makes a dramatic entrance.”

“She looked familiar. Do we know anyone who drops in and drops out again so quickly?”

“That was the Dryad.” Merridimple gasps.

Fiddlestick sniffs, his long nose twitching, “No dryad she, nor any other decent fey maiden, my discerning nose detects the scent of...” he pauses, basking in their attention.

“The scent of what??”

“A mortal, Brocc, surely even your nose can smell that.”

“I'm surprised you can smell anything over the troll.” Brocc mutters.

“A mortal?? Here?? Don't say such things, Fiddlestick, it's bad luck.”

“Merridimple, my dear, this discerning olfactory device never tells a lie and I say she was a mortal.”

“A mortal?” the collective gasps resounds around the tavern, dissolving into a hubbub of noise.

“Now see what you've done. I told you it was bad luck to mention mortals.”

“It is not my fault, Merridimple, the mortal has soured our luck with her contaminating...mortalness.”

“Mortalness isn't a proper word.”

“Be that as it may, not only has she cursed us with mortal luck, but...”

“She spilled our ale.”

“Well, I was going to say she has the temerity to pass herself off as a superior individual, namely the illustrious personage for whom our charming establishment is named, but, yes, Brocc, she did, indeed, spill our drinks. That makes a third serious crime this brazen mortal...”

“What crimes? She fell. There's no way she intended to do this. Didn't you see her face?”

“A lack of intent is no defence in offences of such a serious nature. She has still committed three grave insults to us. To wit, she has insulted the patroness of this establishment by assuming her appearance such that even you were taken in, temporarily I am sure; she has insulted our persons by cursing us with mortal luck, and...”

“She spilled our ale.”

“Quite so. And she should be taught to properly respect her betters.”

“And not spill their ale.”

Meridimple spares a withering glance at Brocc, before turning on Fiddlestick, “And just what do you intend to do about it? Or have you forgotten that your Queen Mab and my Queen Titania have both decreed that mortals are not to be harmed without express, written, and formal consent from either of the Courts. Which

we don't have. And which we are not going to get.”

Fiddlewick licks his thin lips slowly at that, “That...is a valid impediment, I grant you. However, such impediments were created to be circumvented and we do not have to actually harm the mortal. A simple demonstration of her place in the greater scheme of things should be sufficient to chasten her adequately.”

“And get her to leave our ale in the glass.”

“Quite so, Brocc, my compatriot in arms.”

“And how do you intend to find this mortal who has done you such a grave injury? Perhaps you have a crystal eye hidden somewhere in those vermin-infested rags you wear that you haven't told us about?”

“Rags? Rags??? Merridimple, these are the height of fashion in fashionable circles in the Undercommons, which, if you were a little more cultured, you would be aware of.”

Merridimple opens her mouth to reply and...

“We could use a bowl.” Both turn to look at Brocc.

“What did you say?”

“To find her. Merri can use them, can't you?”

Merridimple looks nonplussed, “And why would I want to be involved in this harebrained idea in the first place? And in the second, we don't have a bowl to use anyway.”

“Well, I do believe we could be persuaded to cover the not inconsiderable account you have accrued with Seamus. Nectar, I do believe, is an uppershell item, and, as such, is surely a strain on your finances.”

Merridimple licks her lips at that, “And how will you afford it, Fiddlestick? Or have got you a bottomless purse next to your crystal eye?”

“I'll get a bowl of brew for us to use.” he leaves them discussing the details of the arrangement and ambles over to the bar, “Seamus, we need a bowl of brew.”

He looks Brocc up and down, mostly down, “Certainly, for you, the best in the house.” he reaches under the bar, pouring it out, “A bowlful of Adam's Ale for you.”

A grumbling Brocc takes the water-filled bowl and wanders back to the table, muttering about wanting proper ale, and plops the bowl onto the table.

Many realms and yet more leagues away, an argument has ensued, “I've changed nothing! Why would I ruin a perfectly good trick with changes?”

“What do you mean 'changed nothing'? It didn't do that in rehearsal!”

“Do what?”

“I ended up, it sent me, it, I, what in hell did you do?”

“What do you mean? You are not making no sense. Perhaps too much dust in the cabinet is making you see things. Aha, perhaps too much wine in the assistant.”

“Hold it! Just what are you trying to imply by that, you incompetent bastard? You don't even know when you've changed a trick!”

"You insult my competence! You insult my parents! And you still won't tell me what it is that is wrong with the trick!! What do you want me to say?"

"It dropped me into a bar with Tinkerbell, a badger in a dress and some skinny smelly thing!"

"It did what? Ah, it is wine in the assistant."

She throws up her hands, the door slamming hard on her way out of the dressing room.

Many realms and yet more leagues away, and several drinks further in time, Merridimple stares into the bowl full of clear, fresh water. "Have you found 'er yet, Merridimple?"

The tavern falls silent, all eyes craning towards the table, even the troll opens one bleary, bloodshot eye.

"Keep yer hair on, Seamus. What there is of it. This isn't as easy as it looks!"

And the eyes return to their normal pursuits.

"Brocc, will you please quit bashing the table? This does require a still pool of water. Be a good badger, have some more ale, and quit bashing the table!" Fiddlestick raises a slender finger, and opens his wide mouth. Merridimple whirls to face. "Did you have something to add, Fiddlewit? Like you have the last fifteen times!" Being a wise, albeit somewhat inebriated, goblin Fiddlestick withdraws the finger, closes his mouth and stares intently into his mug of brew. Satisfied, Merridimple returns to staring into the bowl. The last of the ripples fades away and the bowl glows with a pale inner light. A look of satisfaction, mixed with a fairly large dose of pride, crosses Merridimple's face as every eye in the tavern once more converges on her. "Got her!!"

"You got her?" Brocc leans forward, peering into the bowl.

In the still water, surrounded by a flickering halo of light, he sees a cramped theatre dressing room where the lady in question mutters to herself as she pulls on the drawer handle, "...and if he pulls another stunt like yesterday I'll show him a trick of my own. Making me disappear back to a decent job!" She gives the drawer a sharp tug, only to have it leap from the dresser and crash to the ground, missing her bare toes by scant inches as she leaps back.

"Brocc!!" Merridimple shouts, "Which part of no harm is giving you problems, you besotted badger?!"

"She wasn't hurt. It missed her."

"Only because she was smarter than you and jumped back. Do you think Her Majesty..."

"Their Majesties." Fiddlestick amends quietly.

"...will care if you broke her edict by accident? She'll still flay your hairy skin off and wear it as a belt!"

"I believe it is now my opportunity to intervene?" he extends his long finger, a drop of shadow rolling down the nail and into the water.

The Assistant stares at the drawer, "What the.." she snarls out a few curses, "I do not have time for this!" she reaches into the drawer, pulling out a pair of stockings. As she shakes them out, a baker's dozen of spiders scuttle out of the threads, and across the floor. She jumps, "I knew this place was bad, but..." she shivers and very carefully inspects the stockings in case any more of the arachnids are reluctant to leave their home.

"Subtlety, finesse, and style, you see, my dear Brocc, are everything." Fiddlestick licks his broken fingernail and smirks across the table.

Brocc merely belches, staring into the bowl, studiously ignoring the goblin's jibes. "What are those mad mortals doing, now?" he asks as the Professor and his Assistant begin their act.

Fiddlestick presses his fingertips together in thought, peering into the bowl as the Professor extracts cards from thin air. He thoughtfully takes a pull from his mug, "Clearly, Brocc, this is some form of primitive mortal entertainment. They appear to be performing some minor magics to impress their fellows. Wouldn't it be a shame if someone were to interfere?"

"A crying shame." he smiles a toothy grin, and stares into the bowl.

A bunch of brilliantly coloured artificial flowers appears in the Professor's hand, brandished triumphantly for the expected applause, which is long in coming. Unperturbed, he drops them into the thin-necked vase in his assistant's decorous hands and watches with some surprise as they fall to the floor in a cascade of water, the base of the vase rattling on the boards. His assistant scoops the flowers up, trying to ignore the water soaking into her feet, her professional smile uncracked.

"Hey, no crowding!" Merridimple shouts, as the first of the patrons drifts over to the table, trying to get a good view into the bowl, "Come on, back, back, I can't concentrate if you keep shoving!"

"Still, if the good people here would like an appropriate show..." Fiddlestick leans in, fingers hovering over the water.

On the stage the Professor pulls a faded red silk handkerchief from his hand, draping it over his assistant's outstretched arm, followed by a rainbow of others, the blue fraying a little around the corners, hiding the stain that still won't come out of the lime green. The silks twitch, squirming and slithering over the assistant's forearm, tangling themselves around her. She yanks the silks off as they writhe around her arm, dashing them onto the stage. There is a brief pause in which the Professor looks at her askance and she looks back as if to bore a hole through to the box office, her professional smile still in place. The audience, such as it is, laughs.

"I said, quit shoving!" Merridimple shouts back, her tiny hands gripping the edge of the bowl, as yet more patrons cluster around the table.

"Now what are they doing?" a dwarf asks from the throng, mug of foaming ale still in hand, "They're bringing some kind of box on."

"Indeed. What are these mad mortals up to now?" Fiddlestick asks as the Assistant shimmies her way into the Mismade Cabinet.

"This is fun?"

"Brocc, my dear badger, they are mortals. Who can fathom what their primitive minds consider...my, those look sharp! Does anyone know how mortals react usually to having steel thrust through them?"

"Usually a lot of screaming, bleeding and then dying. The stains take an awful lot of cleaning to get rid of them."

A dwarf snorts at the very idea of wasting time washing. "Prissy elves." he mutters and his companions cheer, raising their mugs. The elves sniff disdainfully and return their attention to the bowl.

"And there is no screaming this time. How odd. Mortal magic must be...oh, oh." he smiles widely, "This isn't magic. It's just mortal trickery. She's curled herself up in there and is merely letting them all think she's being harmed. Well, this is interesting."

"So, they think she's in pieces but she's not in pieces? That's a damned dirty trick to play on people." he scratches his furry chin, "We should show them she's not in pieces."

"Or, my dear, dear, Brocc, we could accomodate their desire to slice the mortal up."

"No harm! Remember, no harm!" Merridimple screams.

"We could? We could. Oh, we *could*!"

"Yes, Brocc. We could." Both lean over the bowl.

On stage, the Professor reaches up to remove the first box, but jumps back as it screams in panic. It is a fortuitous decision as the cabinet flies apart, the boxes hurtling across the stage in all directions, the scream rising in pitch and volume into an impressive shriek. The boxes land heavily, the flimsy sides shaking, the doors flying open on impact. The audience gasps.

At the Dryad, the spectators applaud as the Assistant's severed head screams from its box on one side of the stage, her arms and legs flailing in their boxes separated by several feet from both each other and the screaming head. A voice rises above the clamour. "What in the name of blue moonlight did you two just do? Were two simple words too much for your booze-addled brains to cope with??? 'NO HARM'!!!!!!!"

"Merridimple..." Fiddlestick's calm voice begins, and falters as she turns to him directly.

"There'd better be an 'of course she isn't harmed' right after that word, Fiddlewit! Or I will be extremely perturbed!!!"

Fiddlestick quails, "Of course she isn't harmed." he murmurs. "If they just put their sham box back together, she'll be fine. If they don't, well, it's hardly my responsibility if mortals are lacking in elementary deduction, is it?"

"She'd better be."

The Professor reassembles the cabinet with unseemly haste, not even bothering to mix his Assistant up in the process. The Assistant steps out, her legs trembling, her face pale, but her professional smile only slightly dimmed. She exits, stage-right, at speed with the cabinet, as the Professor mops at his forehead, and begins to tell the tale of a young maiden fleeing from her brutish husband, as, backstage, the Assistant slips into her leafy bikini, trying to stop her hands from shaking. She pushes the last prop of the evening onto the stage...

...and the patrons of the Dryad erupt. Tankards bash on the tables. The elves let out a string of curses that would make an orcish dockworker blush. One voice rises above the din. "QUIET!!!!!" the din quietens, dark mutterings heard from the patrons.

In the bowl, the curtains are pulled closed from the inside of the cabinet.

"Let's see what they're up to before you all decide to get yourselves executed, and me along with you, with some of those hare-brained ideas!" The patrons cluster around the bowl, crowding in, filling the space with a confused jabbing of arms and legs and eyes. A dog with eyes as big as dinner plates pads over, looming above the throng. The troll raises his head and slowly pushes himself up to his feet. He takes a step towards the bowl and topples forward, thunderous, ale-flavoured snores rumbling from his mouth. Seamus pushes his way through the crowd. After all, it is his bar, as he loudly reminds those who don't move aside quickly enough, and he did provide the bowl, so he deserves to see what's going on without this wall of people in his way.

The Professor pauses for the required few seconds, turning the cabinet around and around.

And then the air above the table shimmers, and with a soft pop, is occupied. The table shudders as she lands, retaining her balance, dozens of eyes staring at her. "What the fuck?! Not again!" she looks around, and catches a glimpse of the Professor in the waters of the bowl, still running through his spiel. She glares around the table. "This is all your fault!" she kicks the bowl over, sending Adam's Ale raining down on the table and

the nearest rows of the Dryad's patrons. And with a slightly louder pop, the table is empty.

A voice emerges from under the upturned bowl. "Will someone please get this thing off of me?! This wasn't even my lackwitted idea in the first place! And there'd better be a flower of nectar waiting for me or the Queens won't need to skin and mount you two!"

On stage, the Professor turns the cabinet around and around, and flings the curtain open. The Assistant stands in her proper place, her genuine smile beaming out at the audience. She takes a moment to adjust her leafy bikini before stepping out for her bow.

A shaft of moonlight filters through the leaves, shining brightly on the curved bole of the great birch tree standing in the clearing, a ring of pale mushrooms circling it at a respectful distance, seeming to glow under the half-moon's gaze. A light breeze caresses the branches, the leaves whispering their secrets to each other. If one were to examine the bole closely, gleams of light shining through the cracks in the birch's white bark might be discerned. A much closer examination, were anyone so inclined, would reveal the outline of a door within the bark. And if one were curious enough to look up into the whispering branches, they might just glimpse a sign swaying in the breeze. And, if they were foolhardy enough to disregard what happens to curious cats, they might see on the sign a slender figure, seated unsteadily, her hands supporting her, her legs stretched out ahead, glimmering stars circling her head somehow avoiding the leaves sprouting through her chestnut hair, her modesty defended, mostly, by an Eve-like placement of leaves. And one would then see the Dryad laughing her dizzy head off.



This work by Paul Watson is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <mailto:magicbookshelf@blueyonder.co.uk>.