

The Last Siege of London

In all honesty, there should be little surprise at encountering a troll in England. With London's long history and many bridges perhaps I'm fortunate I just encountered the one.

We were on Tower Bridge taking photos when a slight shift in wind direction turned a suspicious scent into a certainty. I kept my composure, knowing if we stayed on top of the bridge and around other people in daylight, we had very little to worry about. When I came back tonight, it would be a different matter.

Later that evening, my daughter Imogen and her friend Dorsa turned in earlier than normal due to the long day of backpacking we had had. Most nights I didn't take my daypack on my walk, but with the evening I had planned, the sack with its contents were easier than explaining the handful of odd devices I carried.

France and Germany were already behind us and noneventful and this scent was the first real sign of possible danger I had encountered while in Europe. Many would argue that I had no business looking for trouble as I was, but with predispositions such as mine it comes with the territory.

I hailed a black cab to get me nearer my return to Tower Bridge, then walked the last two blocks to approach on my own terms. I walked along the dimly lit brick waterfront as much as I could. Jack the Ripper worked his night shift here, and knights on horses their dayshift, along these very cobblestones so many years before. I watched the cars from a distance with their lights as they quietly moved back and forth on the bridges that spanned the Thames up and down stream.

London remains restless at all hours but does slow some at night, as the day folk transition to night folk. I wondered if they went so far as to use the same cars, exchanging a crisp nod or curtsy as they asked each other if they had refueled. The night folk would judge less, I thought. Even though they see less, they see more. I checked over my shoulder before going over the rail towards the bottom of Tower Bridge's south side.

The change in barometric pressure that comes with the night made the stench of the beast even stronger. Despite this I couldn't tell exactly where or even which side of the bridge I should be on. Despite their size and odor, trolls prove themselves to be quite elusive when they chose to be. I stood just under Tower Bridge, at the edge of the shadows, and cranked my flashlight. Certainly not the most modern of technology, but it came with my other weapons that avoided scrutiny at security.

The light offered a dull yellow spot wherever I pointed, making some shadows disappear as I scanned it around, while others seemed to get darker.

I walked around, side stepping litter and the odd urine stain as best as I could. My larger concern was inadvertently stepping in a snare, a trap trolls are famous for, which would likely not end well for me. Needles and used condoms were strewn about, and empty liquor bottles and newspapers added to the carpeting of the concrete. There were no people there, and by the mess of the place, no troll. I shined my light across the Thames to the north side of the bridge, the side the Tower of London is on. The light faded long before it reached its destination, lost over the Thames.

The brackish water of the river chopped the slightest of ripples, its salt smell intermixed with the odor of the beast.

Deciding there was nothing for me under my current side, I made my way back to the walkway and up to the top of the bridge itself. I kept my flashlight in my hand but turned it off as I walked across to the north side. The columns and bridge itself were well lit as I walked and cars, now closer, loudly scuttled by on unknown missions in their own little worlds leaving only their trace amount of exhaust before that too drifted away. I stopped halfway along, leaning over the rail enjoying the view of cars moving along the bridges further upstream, the closest one being London Bridge itself. Most things are more beautiful as they are further away. They get too close, and we see their imperfections.

I was saddened by the fact that Imogen couldn't be here with me to take the view in, and had the thought if I survived the night, I would like to return with her to show her this. Better yet, we would go to London Bridge and look downstream at Tower Bridge with its proudly lit columns.

I reached the end of the bridge and waited for a quell in traffic to make my way over the second railing of the night to descend into shadows. I walked to the bottom and cranked my light back on.

The landscape of refuse continued to this side, as I turned direction and walked around. The smell I sought wasn't any stronger on this side than the last, which confused me. Yet I smelled someone or something. Behind a few pillars the orange glow of an unseen fire danced against the surrounding concrete.

"Who's here?" I asked.

"You a cop?" a gruff man's voice asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Then this side is taken! Scram!” A man in his senior years shuffled over to me. His grey hair was tattered and hands and stubbled face unwashed. He smelled such of wine and filth I temporarily lost all trace of what I was searching for.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know this side was taken. Are you the only one here? And for how long?” I asked.

“I said shove off!” The man pressed. “This side is taken! You need to go to the other side of the bridge or West. Downstream.”

I was about to ask him my questions again, but he added something which shut me up.

“Just not London Bridge. You’ll go but won’t come back. Or will. But nobody does. I don’t really care. Now, be off!” He flailed his arms as if shooing a fly. He was missing three teeth.

I apologized again, and promised to leave, then asked again what he meant by going missing at the bridge further upstream. London Bridge.

“What? What are you talking about?” he asked as if he had no idea what I was referring to.

I left Tower Bridge, mindful the vagrant didn’t attack me from behind as I vacated.

I worked my way along the Thames towards the bridge I was just cautioned about visiting. Often confused with the more grandiose Tower Bridge, London Bridge wasn’t all that old. Not by bridge standards. The old London Bridge, replaced by the one I was

walking to, was sold in a swindle to an American confusing the London Bridge of nursery rhymes with the more picturesque Tower Bridge. Or so the cab driver in the black cab had told me earlier in the day. I had resolved to confirm this if I ever had a chance. It was like most of the other bridges of London, which is to say unlike Tower Bridge because it lacked the massive columns mid span.

The smell of the troll got stronger, its damp musk hanging over the air like a wet sponge. I gripped my backpack tighter as I drew nearer the void under London Bridge. There were less cars overhead, which made more sense the troll would be here. In my experience trolls weren't fans of thunder at the best of times and completely terrified of it at the worst. Which is exactly what a car driving over a smaller bridge would sound like. Before stepping out of the dim lighting of the streetlamp, I cranked my light back on. I scanned the sides of the bridge seeing only graffiti and then looked below to the near distance my light would illuminate. Observing nothing more, I continued.

As I walked under the bridge, I noticed an orange glow like the fire the vagrant under Tower Bridge had had going. Aside from the enhanced stench the general cleanliness of the area told me this wasn't a regular hideout for the homeless and down-on-their-lucks of society. The sounds and lights under the bridge came off as distorted, bending along a plain I could sense but not fully understand. It was not uncommon for Trolls to distort their immediate reality. I was getting close.

"Hello?" I called out. "I know you're here. Come out."

Nothing.

“You can’t hide from me. I smell your kind, and the hell you bring. We should get this over with,” I added as I walked around, scanning with my light in every direction.

I saw a hump on the ground several feet over and walked towards it. As I got nearer, I saw it was clothing, with most of a man still in it. The headless remains lay in a sizeable pool of blood beside a shopping cart with what I presumed would have been his meager holdings in life. His right arm was missing but the cloth of his green jacket was torn nearer the elbow so that it folded flatly on the ground. I lifted my left foot and nudged the torso. Yup. Dead.

“Perhaps I ‘ll just use the bathroom here and mark my own territory,” I added, looking for a place to relieve myself and unzipping my fly then back up to prolong the sound. I knew that would do it. Trolls don’t do well with others sullyng their turf.

“Come out, come out, wherever you may be,” mocked a voice deep enough to come from the heart of a mountain with a heavy accent I took for French. It warbled, as if there were marbles in his mouth. “Who are YOU to bother me now, here, or anytime or anywhere?” I think its voice slurred, as if its tongue were asleep and cheeks were numb.

“I am not of much, not much different than you, to be fair.” I shone my light and walked to from where the voice came, stepping in a small dark pool of liquid that was likely blood as I did so. It was dark and felt sticky to my shoe.

From behind a wide concrete column stepped the largest troll I had ever seen. He was over seven feet tall with long greasy hair on a tall head the size of a wheelbarrow. His mouth and clean-shaven face were smeared with the still wet blood of owner of the shopping cart. He had very large eyes, a massive nose, and large puffy lips that only

partially covered his giant teeth. His shoulders, six feet wide, sloped into long arms that reached down to his knees. One of his hands were clenched around the semi charred arm of the same individual from the ground (I presumed). In the other hand was a burning piece of wood just pulled from the fire. In this same arm he cradled a bucket of something which smelled like home brew.

His bare stomach stretched out to an enormous bubble, and beneath that a scant loin cloth failed to cover enough to my liking. His legs, with thighs the size of a horse's neck, ended in large powerful feet with just three toes on each.

"I smelled you today on the other bridge. You and the girl and your stench. I wondered when you would come. You humans that know, never learn." He rocked back and forth.

"You're drunk," I told him, surprised. It was very bad form for a troll to be caught drunk.

"No. I am not," he insisted, lifting his chin while clutching his bucket a bit tighter and semi turning it to hide it behind him.

"Jesus, look at you. You're soaked." Never in my days had I seen a drunk troll before.

He changed the subject. "I know your scent. I quartered a forebearer of yours in Bedlam. I took my time and he squealed like a little pig," and at that the troll imitated his best impression of a pig squealing with his drunken baritone voice he could and smiled. As he moved, he slopped a bit from his bucket. Off in the distance of London's nearest

burrows dogs had heard his squealing. They howled along and scratched frantically to get inside their houses.

I tried my best to look nonchalant. “That makes us even, for a relative of yours I finished. Cuba, seventy years ago. Matanzas, deep inside Saturno Cave. She never squealed, for I sliced her in her sleep. Her only sounds were of air gurgling in and out of her grotesque neck as she tried in vain to stop the blood with her hands. Her eyes were big as man-hole covers as she tried to save herself. She was strong, too.” I did not know for sure about her strength but wanted to add to her value to compound his loss.

His smug look gave way to anger. He roared and threw the arm at me. Blood droplets spattered me as the arm barely missed and went bouncing into the darkness of the Thames with a plop then sank.

“Tell me. How did you find me, before I chew you apart an inch at a time?” he asked as he took a step nearer. He was quick and deceptively light on his feet for being so large and drunk.

I took a pre-emptive step back. “Pure chance,” I assured him. “I’m backpacking through Europe with company and stumbled upon you. So here I am.”

“So here you are. When I’m done with you, I shall seek your younger self out this very evening and explain to her how very foolish you were. And tasty.” With this he stopped for a moment and smelled the air. “Unless she saves me the trip and comes here as well. Then I shall gnaw off her limbs and burn the wounds with my fyre so she doesn’t bleed out. Then I shall poke out her eyes with my fingernail (he flashed a long thick finger

at me) and rip out her tongue. I shall keep her as my mute toy and feed her rotten fish to keep her alive. She'll pray for death and rue being born to you."

"If you succeed as you say, I'll have you know she's allergic to seafood," I advised him.

"Oh. I didn't know," he sounded almost remorseful. "Shell or finned?"

"Anything from the sea, lake or river." This was in part a fib, for the truth was too long a story given the situation. It's too long even now to explain, as I recount this. "Before I kill you, what is your name and what's with the bucket of home brew?"

"It is I that will kill YOU. But my children will call me Low Thunder. As for the bucket, it helps pass time of this dreary siege until my help is to come."

"You are carrying out a siege? Here on the city? By yourself?" I wondered if I had stumbled upon something bigger than this Low Thunder.

"It is a soft siege, if I am to be honest. Most recently of this bridge. A small squeeze of my fist in places where it counts." With this Low Thunder squeezed his free hand to show me his strength. "Soon, Long Stick and his brothers three will arrive from the Black Forest of Deutschland. Together we shall crush the entry and exit of supplies then tear London apart along with the rodent humans that inhabit it. If King Edward the Elder still reigns I shall enjoy the soup I make of him. If he has already passed his offspring shall do," with this Low Thunder licked his lips. His tongue was large and covered most of his nose as it moved along his face.

“Edward the Elder?” I asked, wondering just how long this “siege” had been taking place. Perhaps there was nothing I was stumbling upon after all.

Low Thunder nodded.

“Was the former London Bridge, the one before this one, sold to an American who thought it was actually the Tower Bridge?” I asked. There would be nobody in all of London better suited to answer a question about a bridge than a troll.

“McCulloch knew what he was buying, full and well,” Low Thunder answered. “Cab men like to spin yarns to have sport with tourists.” Low Thunder thought for a moment then added, “And before you ask, Roman centurions burned the London Bridge original, not the Iceni. Holding back their Denari cost Londini dearly. But THAT is not in their history bindings.”

I thanked him for his candor.

“We don’t have to fight, you and I,” I lied as I scanned the area for an upper hand on the situation. I had already placed my knife and its sheath in my pocket. It was obsidian, and a chosen tool of the Order I belonged to, smithed by Tubal-Cain himself. “You could just promise to go away and never eat any little boys and girls again. Nor anyone else for that matter.” I pretended to half look away at an imaginary distraction as I quietly slipped my knife out of its sheath and hid it up my forearm. I never fully took my eyes off Low Thunder, and noticed while I was pretending to look away he slid four feet closer to me as quick as one could blink.

He laughed. "Humans cannot be trusted since many years ago. We once lived in harmony together as your bindings may tell you. We taught them how to make bridges only asking for a toll. Fair is fair. How quickly a people forget their debts."

Low Thunder paused and scratched his scrotum at length before continuing. I thought he may be done talking but he continued.

"Sure, over time we had to eat the odd human or goat or throw them over our bridge if humans failed to pay the tolls. For without showing them the first bridge, none more would have followed." Low Thunder swept his hand and gestured to the bridge above us. "You would still be floating on rafts of weeds and straw fearing sharks and eels."

The troll paused for a moment then farted a massive wave lasting twenty seconds. I tasted bile in my mouth as I held back my vomit.

"Are you alright?" I asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"I am now." Then he continued. "You preached harmony all while your churches made a plan. They lured Oldsam, one of my Forers, to Roma to a chamber where they drugged him and drained and mixed his blood with disciples of the Long Table. Those that lived gained our powers, passing it on to some of theirs to follow, who in turn would be watched and brought to your Order if they gained the gift of Oldsam." Low Thunder's face contorted and I had to remind myself it was just his surrounding reality and not real.

"Like me," I cut in.

“Your kind seek us out needlessly with your arrogances only to find we are tougher to kill than appears.”

I look at the remains of the vagrant before speaking. “When you are done preaching, I’ll have you know I don’t think that’s how the story goes.”

The troll shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what I heard.” I noticed at this point while I had glanced down at the vagrant, Low Thunder had slipped closer yet. One more shuffle and he would be close enough to grab me. I showed my knife.

Low Thunder stepped back. “Obsidian. By the forger of Enoch. Where did you get that?” For the first time in our encounter Low Thunder swallowed.

I didn’t answer as I stepped to the side, and in doing so into a thin snare, likely of spider silk. Which as I said earlier Trolls are known for. Before I could register what was going on I was upside down with Low Thunder walking towards me, a large Wolfish grin on his upside-down face.

I couldn’t reach up and cut myself down, as easy as that would be. It would leave me open to being grabbed by the Troll and ripped apart.

“That’s it, little dove. Hang and wait until all of your blood drains to your head and you pass out.” Low Thunder licked his lips again. It looked even more grotesque upside down.

Keeping my knife and an eye pointed at the troll, I glanced around looking for anything to help.

Low Thunder smiled. "I may merely dismember some of you so you can see what I do to your daughter."

I could feel the pressure in my head build, and the already distorted reality of the troll made it quite hard to focus.

Low Thunder continued talking about what he would do to us but was cut short as he suddenly put his hands around his neck and reached over his shoulders. He staggered around as I could feel myself slowly passing out. He eventually dropped to one knee, then another. His labored breathing continued as his arms flailed slower and weaker over his shoulders and at his neck at something I still couldn't see.

I lost consciousness just as he fell flat to the floor and then there was nothing for a while.

I woke up to Imogen's face looking down at me and my first instinct was that we were late for catching a train. She had blood smeared on her face, and as I recognized the concrete around me, I remembered where I was.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"Me? What are YOU doing here, mom?! Are you hurt? Can you move?"

I sat up, perfectly fine aside from being a bit disoriented and having a sore leg from the snare. I looked at Low Thunder, unconscious and laying on the ground.

"You- do this too?" I asked. "For how long?"

"A while now. I smelled that wretched creature when we were taking photos on Tower Bridge earlier but of course couldn't tell anyone. You know how it is. Then tried to

get us all to sleep early so that I could come back out. I hated the thought of you being out and about with this thing in the shadows. I didn't know you did this too. That's awesome." In her hand she held the rope she had used to strangle Low Thunder. This also was made of spider silk, with small wooden knobs fastened to each end like assassins in movies use.

A car rumbled faintly overhead then was gone. I glanced again over at the troll. He was still undoubtedly alive. "How do you want to do this?" I asked Imogen.

She looked at Low Thunder also. "Well, I know I'm not waiting till sunrise for him. Let's drown him."

"He's got to be a thousand pounds," I pointed out.

"Yeah, maybe so, but his head is only seventy," she countered as she picked up my knife from the ground and walked over to him. She knelt, facing me. After a few minutes of squishy and grinded sawing, my daughter, who up till this moment I had viewed as a frail vegetarian artist, had cut the head off a seven-foot tall troll and rolled it into the River Thames.

It plopped in not unlike the arm of the poor soul beside the shopping cart and I saw the silhouette of the head bob along slowly downstream.

"Hopefully nobody finds it," I ventured.

Imogen looked at her watch. She now had a substantial amount of blood on her. "In six hours, the sun will be out and that head and this will be stone, then dust. In nine hours, we'll be out of this country."

She had a point.

We walked away from Low Thunder and his siege of London, out from the bottom of the bridge. “It’s quicker if we just climb here,” Imogen suggested.

“Yes, and there is a view from up top of Tower Bridge I want to see with you,” I suggested, and she agreed.

We made our way along London Bridge and shared a cigarette as we looked at Tower Bridge. It was a beautiful view and a beautiful moment. We then walked the entire way back to the Airbnb instead of hailing a cab. We found a café and shared a hot chocolate with whipped topping and caramel sprinkles along the way. The night shift workers didn’t question the blood on Imogen. Being night workers, they see more so ask less.

By the time we made it to the airbnb we only had three hours to sleep before we were due to get up. Imogen had already cleaned up, changed and threw out her entire outfit including footwear prior to going to sleep. Fortunately, I didn’t snore this time. In the morning we packed and were on our way to St Pancras station. We stopped along the way for blueberry scones and more hot chocolate. Dorsa pointed at my feet and told me my shoes looked like I had blood on them.

I passed it off as a nosebleed from the night before, and quickly switched to sandals as I threw my sneakers and any traces of the nameless vagabond’s DNA from the night before in a trashcan. I had to wear long socks on my sandals as the bruising from the spider silk snare had left quite a mark on my ankle and shin.

Our train was on schedule, but all rails to France were delayed due to a developing large-scale emergency. Imogen and I slept during our ride and by later that day we were eating in Edinburgh.

At the same time we were trying Haggis for the first time (but not Imogen for she didn't eat meat, as I have previously stated) a flock of crows were cawing and fluttering away from a cluster of trees near Le Havre, France. It is a town near the coast overlooking the English Channel. Or was, before it was sacked and destroyed during the end of this story I tell you now.

The winds cannot keep a secret. And didn't take long to find Long Stick, one of the pokiest of trolls you will ever find and whisper the fate of Low Thunder. Long Stick, one of the pokiest trolls you'll ever meet, was now in a haste. And he was angry. He pulled out his map and confirmed he was still heading north- destination London. Behind him were his three brothers-Chaos, Death, and Fyre.

