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An Encounter By The River

Written by Matias Travieso-Diaz | 👁 Hits: 7



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Trolls are slow in the uptake, and mighty suspicious about anything new to them.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

The afternoon was overcast, the air thick with dew and mist. The horses' hooves plodded through the mushy forest floor. Everything was hazy, wet, and unseasonably warm. Devin's unease at being in an unfamiliar forest was made worse by the uncomfortable weather. It was never this humid at the shore where he used to live. It would get worse too, hotter and more oppressive as they moved further north and reached the Gatpach Basin and the swamps.

****Take a look ahead**** came a suggestion inside his head from his master, the wizard. Devin squinted, trying to see as far ahead as the narrow path between the trees would allow. For the first time, the corridor did not extend to the horizon: there was an opening in the forest, a clearing that was slowly getting wider.

They were on a wide strip of grassland that ended on the bank of a river. On the opposite side, there were more woods, only not as dense as those they had gone through. A wooden arching bridge connected the banks. Although roughly built, the bridge seemed sturdy and wide enough for two horses to cross side by side. The wizard motioned Devin towards the bridge.

They had advanced less than ten yards when there was a churning of the river waters, followed by a deep gurgling sound. Devin's horse reared, and he had his hands full keeping the steed under control. The animal began shivering.

A gigantic form shot up from the river bottom. It had a roughly human outline in that it had four limbs, a trunk, and a head, but any resemblance ended there. It crouched, and even so it was over eight feet tall. Its body was covered with greenish-gray skin, slick and splattered with mud and silt. From its head, which sat on the trunk without the benefit of a neck, hung an open sack. An assortment of parts of dead bodies showed through the sack opening as the creature moved. Even from where Devin stood, the stench from the beast and the contents of the sack was overpowering.

The monster had huge webbed limbs ending in claws. Its right hand brandished a massive chunk of driftwood, which it swung like a club. Its left hand was free, and it struck the side of its body with an open palm in a threatening gesture.

The menace was emphasized by the creature's nightmare of a face. Its vast jaws swelled under the skull, enclosing a lipless mouth that, when open, revealed double rows of yellow teeth, some broken or chipped, others razor sharp. It had no ears, and only parallel slits where a nose would have been expected. Its eyes were black and dull, without irises, and were set deeply under bony ridges above which a flattened cranium sloped away with no forehead. There was little room for expression in that face, but it clearly belonged to a ferocious and violent being.

The creature lumbered onto the river bank and stationed itself at the far end of the bridge, blocking passage.

****It's a troll**** observed the wizard, his thoughts projecting apprehension into Devin's mind. ****They live under bridges and stay close to them. It probably won't attack us unless we try to go across.****

&I thought trolls died if they came out during the day,& challenged Devin.

****Not true. There is an energy field generated by the iron in a bridge that keeps trolls alive. However, if they stray away from that field during the day, they turn to stone.****

&You said iron. That's a lousy *wooden* bridge.&

****It must have iron bolts and reinforcement bars. In any event, we're stuck unless we can get rid of him.****

&Is there any other way across?&

****Not for many leagues. And it would be foolish to try to wade the river with that creature waiting for us.****

Devin studied the troll for a while. "I can do it" he stated aloud with conviction.

****Do what?***

&I can kill him.&

****Have you lost your mind? You wouldn't last a minute against a troll.****

Devin paid no attention. He drew a halberd strapped to the pack horse, and waved it above his head in challenge. "You are talking to the son of one of the greatest warriors in the kingdom" he said proudly.

As Devin started off towards the troll, the man's voice rang in his head. ****If you're bent on trying to throw your life away, at least give yourself a chance. Use a long spear. You will die for sure if you get within grasping distance of a troll.****

Devin realized that the wizard had a point. He transferred the halberd to his saddle bag and unfastened a great spear from his horse's left flank. The spear was thick, with a blade of black steel ending in razor-sharp edges. It was bound with leather thongs that provided an excellent grip.

Devin positioned his horse in a charging stance and lowered the spear so that it rested parallel to the mount's body. The troll also readied itself for combat, placing its legs firmly on the ground, wide apart.

****Let's try non-violence first. Please empty your mind.****

Devin had his adrenaline flowing and was eager to engage the brute, but obeyed the command out of respect.

****We come in peace, troll. Please let us pass!***

Devin felt the wizard's thoughts resonate inside his head and then, amplified, being projected towards the beast's brain.

The message commanded the troll's attention. It looked over its left shoulder towards the wizard, who sat motionless in his horse, a little behind Devin. The message went on: ****We have no offerings to add to your bag, but we'll sing your praises far and wide as the undisputed Lord of Pain and Agony. Please step aside and let us through!***

Before the wizard had finished his speech, the troll began to swing the club wildly and uttered a blood-curdling growl.

The wizard sighed. ****I didn't think a parlay would work.****

&Now what?&

****I need to think for a minute**** mumbled the wizard as he withdrew from Devin's mind.

"You think about it!" shouted Devin, and urged his horse ahead. As they charged towards the bridge, Devin tilted the spear down, only inches from the ground, and fixed his eyes on the troll's stomach. At the last second, he would raise the spear just enough to pierce the beast's belly.

The troll stood firm as its attacker drew nearer. Devin put all his attention on timing his approach, trying to recall everything he had learned about grand melees and hand to hand combat. He crouched and twisted the spear so that the blade was horizontal. This would ensure that the spine was severed as the tip went into the body. Devin then turned the horse ever so slightly to the left, aiming to have the spear zeroed on the belly's exact midpoint.

The monster cooperated by making no move, except to raise the club above its chest. It also held its left hand out before it, claws spread, ready to snatch man or horse if they came within reach.

When Devin was only a few yards away from a crash, he pulled the spear upwards slightly, and just as he did so the tip of the weapon slammed into the troll's belly, splitting it open. The spear lifted inside its target and Devin let it go when he heard the sound of steel ripping flesh and muscle.

The troll's snout twitched in agony. Devin veered the horse sharply to the right, but could not avoid crashing against the troll's left arm, which was trying to pry the spear loose. Horse and rider ricocheted onto the bridge, while the troll fell to the ground with the weapon sticking out of its body like a flagpole.

The collision's momentum carried Devin halfway back across the bridge. He brought the horse forward, ready to finish the job. The troll, meanwhile, was getting back on its feet. It was still grappling with the spear, shaking it and trying to pull it out of its body.

Devin spurred the horse again and took out the halberd. The troll finally drew out the spear, threw it furiously over the bridge, and held the wound closed with its free hand to keep the entrails from falling out. Devin slammed the side of his horse against the monster, pushing it against the bridge railing, and brought the halberd up while eyeing his opponent's chest, looking for the rib openings. He would hack right into the heart, ending the fight for sure. He seized the weapon's handle with both hands and brought it as hard as he could against the spot where the ribs separated.

****NO!*** resounded in his mind, but it was too late.

The blade hit bone and slid harmlessly along the inside of the troll's chest.

Devin was stunned by the unexpected recoil from his blow. The troll swung the club around onto the horse's neck, snapping it and sending the animal and rider down on the floor of the bridge. As the youth landed, the head and neck of the horse fell on top of him, preventing him from getting up. The halberd lay a few feet away, out of reach.

The troll shuffled slowly towards Devin, one hand still holding the club and the other keeping the belly closed. It stopped near its fallen enemy, rested the club against the bridge wall, and bent over gingerly to pick up the halberd.

Devin saw his whole life flash before him, so short and empty of accomplishment. Regret filled him as he prepared to die. However, rather than chopping off his head, the troll brought the pointed tip of the halberd into the skin of his belly, pinning the flaps of the wound with the weapon. As its hand let go of the wound, the halberd was left dangling from the belly. Blood trickled out of the opening, but the crude stitch held.

The troll then picked the club with both claws, its intentions clear. Devin tried desperately to free himself, but the troll brought one foot down on the horse's head and held Devin securely against the ground. Devin yelled mentally for help. ****I'm on my way**** was the immediate response.

Devin looked up and saw the club above him, about to come crashing down. Out of the corner of his eye, he also saw the wizard's horse approaching the bridge at a steady pace.

The wizard stopped at the foot of the bridge and rapped on the railing once with his staff while uttering a sharp command. Both sounds reverberated the entire length of the structure, and as the echoes died a new sound took over, that of cracking wood. The troll stopped in mid swing and staggered as the floor of the bridge gave way under its feet.

Devin felt himself in midair and plunged into the river. He had enough time to wonder whether the river was deep enough to dampen his fall, and to see a dead horse and a surprised troll follow him in short order.

He hit the water hard with the back of his body and an instant later struck the river bed, which luckily was muddy and cushioned the impact. As he bounced upwards, he was met by wood pieces, iron clamps, bolts and other objects. His head broke water and, as he gasped for air he looked around to survey the situation.

The horse's corpse was almost out of sight, carried away by the current. Poor animal, he thought. The troll, on the other hand, was only a few feet from him and was already getting up. Its wound had torn open, and it was making a futile attempt to close it again with its hand.

Devin stumbled as fast as he could towards the nearest shore, which was opposite the one from whence they had come. His feet slid on the mud and he fell. Water came up to his chest as he got up again.

The troll raised its club and chased after Devin, while the last remnants of the bridge crumbled away. As planks, rivets and reinforcing bars tumbled into the water, the monster turned very pale, then grey, and finally stopped dead on its tracks. Like an eight-foot statue it stood in the middle of the river, arm and club raised, even more frightening in death than it had in the heat of the battle.

The wizard forded the river, leading the pack horse as well as his own. He plodded through the fast waters and came up to where Devin stood. "Granite, I think," he observed, tapping the troll with its cane. "The meaner they are, the harder the stone. Most remarkable. A monument to the downfall of evil, wouldn't you say?"

The fight was over and Devin was in shock. The wizard nudged him gently and, getting no response, went into his mind. ****Are you all right? You took quite a beating.****

Devin managed to shape an answer. &I'll live, I guess.&

As they advanced towards the shore, Devin shook his head in disbelief. "I thought I had him. There is no way my blow could have missed the ribcage. Still, it seemed to have gone off to the side somehow."

The wizard grasped his shoulder. "Your aim was good. What made you fail was your ignorance of subhuman anatomy. These things don't have ribcages; they have *ribcases*" he said, tapping the troll's chest. It's all solid bone in there. Never poke a troll chest, unless you use a battering ram."

"No matter," he continued. "It was a magnificent display of courage and fighting skill." The wizard paused, as he propped himself up the slope and out of the water. "The best I've seen in a long time."

He guided the horses out of the river, and offered a hand to Devin. "I knew there was talent in you."

Devin took the wizard's hand and let himself be pulled onto the grass, where he lay for a long time. Finally, he got up, shook the water off his drenched clothes, and took a last look at the river. The troll stood where they left it, and would remain there for a very long time.

"Come along now" summoned the blind man, gentleness gone from his voice. "We have a long way still to go."

Devin mounted the pack horse, pulled the reins, and patted the horse on the neck, urging it on. They paced along the shallow river bank, with Devin a few steps behind the wizard.

"Actually, that wasn't such a bad fight" he proclaimed, to no one in particular.

THE END

The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Cornelius G. Swart to the writing of this story.

Bio:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his novels, an autobiography entitled "Cuban Transplant," and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.



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