

The Bridge Troll

Once upon a bridge, a gnome named Minnette rode across with Molly, her trusty goat. Minnette clung tightly to her friend as the goat's hooves echoed trip-trapping over the planks, for goats are sure-footed, and this bridge had such spaced apart planks already when they weren't busted through, like someone had taken a step and suddenly plummeted into the grey mist that rolled through the gaps like liquid mortar. The mist was so thick, neither could see when long knotted fingers reached up between the planks and seized Molly by her front hooves.

"Got you," the gravelly voice of a troll bellowed with glee and the cliffs on either side of the bridge trembled, sending scree skittering down the valley. "What's this tripping over my bridge?"

Minnette gasped as Molly bleated and tried to shake free of the monstrous strength, but it was no use.

"Aha, a goat! Delicious." The wood creaked as the troll began to pull, ready to yank them down like every other traveler that had left nothing behind but a broken plank.

"Wait!" Minnette shouted. "You wouldn't want to eat us."

The wood under them was bowed, but the creaking stopped. "Oh really? I'll have you know I like every kind of meat, and I bet a gnome would taste like candy."

"You're right, I'm very sweet," Minnette thought quickly. "I'd rot all the teeth out of your head, and then you'd never chew meat again."

"Fair. I'll just take the goat then." The boards began to groan.

"Waitwaitwait," the gnome squeaked. "Molly's a lot of fur for not a lot of meat, and you're clearly very big. If you wait a little bit, there is...a meat pie cart heading this way," she made up on the spot.

The boards stopped groaning. "How do you know?"

"We-we passed them."

"How?"

"What?" Minnette was frantic and amazed the wood was still holding.

“How did you pass them?” the troll sounded annoyed trying to explain the logic. “You’re on a goat and they’re driving a cart. How was your goat faster than them?”

“It was being pulled by a giant turtle,” she mumbled as she let words come to her rather than think up a believable lie.

“A giant turtle?!”

“Yes. You know, they’re slow but steady. Much better than a fast horse that can roll an ankle and have to be put down. And great for crossing rivers too.” Minnette let the word associations tumble from her mouth, lest she sound too slow thinking something up.

The troll hummed in thought, again vibrating the bridge with its gruff voice before releasing them. “Alright, I’ve never known a gnome to lie.”

The boards sprung back into shape with a horrible crack, and Molly raced off across the bridge, ready to be rid of the place. Just as soon as they had reached solid ground, Minnette and Molly heard a strange sound behind them. Instead of the trip-trapping of hooves, a low and lumbering stomp of broad turtle feet sounded over the bridge, and the smell of meat pies wafted their way.

Minnette’s jaw dropped at her made-up story coming true, and waved her little arms at the driver in a panic. “Go back! Troll!”

Her high-pitched voice couldn’t carry. The driver waved back in confused politeness before fingers as long and thin as saplings wrapped around the turtle’s legs. The creature hissed in surprise and tried to retreat into its shell as the troll dragged them all through the breaking slot of boards, first turtle, then cart, as it tumbled down with a laugh from the troll and a scream from the driver.

Minnette sat frozen in horror at the swiftness of the attack, stuck hearing the fading scream and patter of falling cargo, waiting for a crash that never came. The troll must have carried them down, rather than let the pies or the living splatter on the ground. If that was the case, they could still be alive.

“We have to help them, Molly.” Minnette ushered her goat to the edge of the cliff, feeling responsible for the plight of the giant turtle and pie driver she’d somehow conjured up. Perhaps gnomes really couldn’t lie; she’d never tried before, anyway.

After a moment's hesitation, Molly bounded down the rocky ledge. Sure-footed as goats are, she scaled down the cliff face, neither able to see more than a few yards around them from the shrouding mist that turned the ledges damp and black. For the troll to have reached up to the bridge, it had to be enormous. Soon the roar of a river filled their ears, as well as the sloppy gorging of the troll.

The view of just the troll's head first came into view, as large and craggy as a boulder with hair like rotten straw, as he threw handfuls of pies into his mouth like popcorn. He crouched with too long legs over the upended cart, where the poor giant turtle struggled half in the river on his back. At the base of the ravine, the pie driver whimpered from the gnarled tree he hung in. Blood ran from deep scrapes along his arms and back where the branches had nearly impaled him. Trembling, he clutched the branches, too scared to move.

Molly jumped from the rocky ledge to a thick branch, and Minnette scooted along the boughs like hand railings to the man. "I'm glad you're alive," Minnette whispered, the roar of the river drowning her out from the troll while his back was turned.

"H-he said he'll eat me if I move," the driver cowered.

"He'll eat you if you don't move too," Minnette reminded him and pointed to his turtle. "If we can flip him into the river, we can get away. He can't follow us into daylight."

"B-but the troll is right in front of him."

Minnette glanced again at the troll looming over the turtle and cart, his back to them, and drummed her fingers on her cheek in thought. "I have an idea."

As the man followed Minnette's instructions, the gnome bounded across river rocks to stand in front of the troll.

"Get out of here, Toothache," the troll curled his spindly fingers, threatening to flick Minnette away with the strength of a treefall.

"I just wanted to warn you," Minnette pointed past the troll to the empty tree. "The driver is getting away."

The troll growled as he abandoned the wagon and rolled to his hands and knees. “I’ll pop his head off,” he said as he crawled away, assuming the human would run the opposite direction of him.

Minnette nodded to Molly at the edge of the river and hauled the man out of the water with his grip on her horns. They scrambled over the slippery rocks to the toppled turtle while Minnette cut him loose from the cart.

“Hurry, before he comes back!” Minnette whispered urgently as the three worked together to right the giant turtle. With much effort from Molly and Minnette, and actual effectiveness from the man, the turtle turned over with a splash that alerted the troll.

“You Toothache!” the troll thundered and came scrambling back. “You lied to me!”

“No I didn’t,” Minnette said victoriously as they piled onto the turtle, “I said the driver is getting away!”

The troll snarled as he tore after them, but the turtle sped off with the flow of the rushing river. As they broke through the misty valley into sunlight, the troll leapt and swiped for them, lunging into daylight where he turned to stone.

And that was the end of the bridge troll.