

# THE OLD OXFORD CHARM

By Christopher Johnstone



I have never been afraid of walking alone in the dark. The sun had gone from the world, but not the light. The air was dusky and beneath the trees, darkly glowing. Off in the distance, steam from one of the Wickham Line trains mopped up the last of the evening's gold, and above the quiet earth a watercolour sky held a pale moon, flat and chalky.

Night was seeping beneath the trees and hedgerows. But I have never been afraid of walking alone in the dark. We all have our foolish little quirks.

I was not really paying much attention to anything other than keeping my dress from the muddy road, and thinking about - oh - I don't know what, just gazing everywhere and nowhere and dwelling on airy daydreams. I was so distracted that when my nose wrinkled up at a strange smell, all musty and rank like rotting moss, I didn't know what to make of it.

And then I looked up.

At the heart of the smell was a creature - a great hairy thing just standing there, taking up the road, stooped and gangly, pot bellied and googly eyed. It

was very close, so close that I stumbled backwards.

It was a stupid thing to say now that I think back, because it was rather obvious, but I said it anyway. "My word. A troll."

The troll sneered and grinned, making an effort, I think, to show off all his yellow teeth.

"Oh," I remember saying, and then, "Oh," again. I have, after all, been well brought up and never can quite lower myself to vulgar interjections.

The troll lumbered closer, and clenched and unclenched its long and hairy fingers.

"Tasty, tasty, tasty," said the troll and I blinked, quite amazed.

"You can speak?" That seemed to catch the poor beast off guard, and its big ugly face looked for a moment like that of a scatty and puzzled dog.

"Yes. Talk. Dunna you?"

That made me think. Why shouldn't a troll have a capacity for speech? It was a little judgemental of me to have supposed otherwise. "Yes. Well. I should apologise. It's just that you don't look very...

conversational. Your jaws don't look very good for much other than chewing."

And he smiled. "Big jaws good fur chewingery."

"Oh." I breathed out a worried little sound.

I looked carefully at the troll, then at the road and back to the troll again. He had very long legs and I have never been a good athlete; besides which, I was wearing my third-best dress, which has a very long hem. I didn't see any way to escape.

But life, I have found, is a strange thing. Why does the criminal who knows that he is for the noose give himself up to the constabulary? Why does the man before the firing squad bother with a last cigarette? We hold onto life, every breath of it, right to the end, even if the end is bitter and might be only a few moments away. So, condemned as I was, I thought to keep my fast-beating heart beating a little longer. "So..." I tried to think of what to say. "Why is it I've never seen you about before?"

The troll twitched its nose and an expression of agitation rolled about its face.

"I be only comin' out at night."

"Oh," and then feeling very stupid I said, "Why is that?"

The troll snarled and licked his teeth before answering.

"Bad sun. Nasty sun. Filthy sun. Sun hating tur troll. Turn troll to stone. Happen'd to my nuncle. He's dead as a rock up on tur hill."

Now I suppose that a troll doesn't usually have the advantage of a modern education, so I felt obliged to say, "That's very odd. What I mean to say is that sunlight doesn't turn a lot of things to stone, does it?"

The troll shrugged its hairy shoulders. "Wuddna know. I n'ar ogled the sun. N'ar seen wutta it does. But I do know I'm a-hungry." And he moved a step closer. His face was only inches from mine now. The smell was as thick as tar.

"Wait!" I said. Well, if I'm to be honest, I rather squeaked it. After all, I find large hairy dogs quite frightening, let alone trolls. I think we were both a little surprised when the troll did stop.

"Harrumph." The word came out as a snort, shaking the flesh around his nostrils. "Wutta now?"

"Well," I said "the moon is out, isn't it?"

The troll looked up and scratched his nose, which to this day I suspect might be where his brain was

kept.

"Wutta of it?"

"It doesn't make sense does it? You can stand moonlight, but not sunlight? But there's no such thing as moonlight. Not really. The moon is only lit up because it reflects light from the sun. Its just a very big mirror."

"Really?" said the troll, and he looked up at the sky again.

"Certainly, yes. My history tutor told me, and he attended Oxford, and lectured there too, for twenty years. He knows a great deal."

"Oh." said the troll, and without doing anything more than letting out a hoarse grunt, a little like that of a frightened badger, he turned into a big lump of stone.

And although I'm still not really afraid of walking alone in the dark, I must confess that I do find myself paying more attention during my lessons than I used to.

Just in case.

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