Gumboot Charley Along Salt Creek

Michael Kocik
"Ste-a-mer's comin'!"

"Ain't been no steamer down that river in a hunnerd years, at least," came the reply.

"Sure?"

"Yup -- why, ain't been nothin' come down that a-way in more time than grandpa can remember. Got to be at least centuries since any boat's headed down there. Nebbe even ten years, I reckon."

"Why -- fer sure, Trotty. I know all that, and more. Din't the one who showed you all about barges and things -- when to lookit, and when and where, and lots of other things -- teach you 'bout that too?"

The absence of a response turned the tone neatly from reproach to conciliation.

"All I meant were that it curter been a boat. It's as long as smoke. And it didn't look like no boat, not unlike one, too," the first boy added, standing on tiptoe so he could look over the iron spans of the trestle into the muddy water below.

For early June the dragonflies seemed more abundant than many a blossom wisp. The amber warmth of the morning sun enveloped the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the bridge and creek -- sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes bathing it all in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; sometimes casting the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the creek with prismatic sparkle; 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indifferent flow. Before he could utter a word of protest as to what he saw, Gumboot was already in the water — alternately running and swimming, as the depths demanded, until he had reached the wreckage and released the branch in question. In another moment he was back at Trotty's side, brandishing the mock sword over his head with all due exhilaration.

"Blame, but if this ain't a proper sword," he yelled, flailing it madly about him — thrusting and parrying it at some unseen enemy, while Trotty did his best to stay out of the way.

"What luck, Gumboot," Trotty said, as he dodged another jab of the branch. "Now we can get that treasure for certain.

"And luck," Gumboot cried scornfully.

"Why, luck had nary a thing to do with it, Trotty -- it's fate, pure and simple. The Lady of the Lake gave it up, just like she did with Arthur."

"Mebbe so. But how you figure she's here, instead of some for'nin lake?"

At this, Gumboot scratched his head with the branch, as if sorely perplexed. Then, latching on to an idea, he made a slashing movement with the sword.

"Why, consider. Ain't no knights over there, any more, and none as likely to be -- they've plumb forgot how. Now, a body can hardly 'spect a sword to be wasted, just 'spect a power like hers to waitin' for someone who ain't likely to show. So, it stands to reason she got fed up with that vas the outlet for bia which could be his."

"Lemme think," he replied, sitting down on the bank and scratching his ankle abstractedly with the branch. After a few moments of expressionless thought, his face brightened somewhat derisively, practicing a few more thrusts with the branch.

"Now. No dragon as stands a chance 'gainst a magic sword, Trotty -- no way.

"What should we do, then, Gumboot -- attack it right out?"

"Naw. Best way is to be nice and circumspect."

"Why, what fer? Knights ain't 'posed to hide like they was afraid, Gumboot."

"Afeard! Who's afraid?" he demanded, pointing the branch at Trotty's face with a "Look. Knights had to plan things, or they wouldn't have stood a chance 'gainst ogres, or evil wizards, who were always lyin' in wait for them. 'Sides, it's cleaner; distains in distress secretly has a better hold on people, though they know they have to look all bright and happy about it, to keep up pearances. Frightens 'em to death -- or so's I hear tell."

"Mebbe you're right. What do you think we should do, then -- circumspectly, that is?"

"Lemme think," he replied, sitting down on the bank and scratching his ankle abstractedly with the branch. After a few moments of expressionless thought, his face brightened again.

"Right. I figure that if he's any respect'le dragon, his cave ought to have plenty of passageways and secret tunnels. If we can find the main outlet, up northers, I spect we can sneak in there, and catch him by surprise."

"How'n we to do that, Gumboot? There must be a hunnerd holes all along the river, any of which could be his."

"Why, why, why -- why, sure. Smoke -- smoke has to come out, somewhere. Up ahead, what we saw on the left bank, though its outlet for his smoke, or else he'd explode all innards. All we got to do is foller that, and we've found the hole."

Triumphant, both boys yelled their excitement aloud, and hurried off north to where the wisp of smoke was still gently curling upwards in the breeze. As their bare feet navigated the shoreline, cautiously treading past tangled vines, over piles of rotting branches, and around massive logs blanketet with moss — the sun reached its highest arc in the midday sky. Corresponding to this momentous occasion, the two of them entered a dense wood and region of grottoes, so black, but the water's reddish-brown. It's his blood, Trotty exclaimed, raising his voice for emphasis.

"Why --

"His blood, Gumboot. And once a year, same time, you can see his ghost a-hangin' on that same tree. Grandpa says that those who see it never live more'n a year, 'cuz o' the curse."

"Why, blame it, Trotty," Gumboot said angrily, "nobody's seen Potter's ghost -- here.
"Kush now," Gumboot said, as he tried to pick up the book with the blackened cover, only to have it crumble into dust in his hands. "Almost over."

As the fire began to smolder, the two boys crouched motionlessly around the stone rim, and wretched the stray cinders dissolve the remaining pages of yellow manuscript. Then, while the last few sheets scattered into ash, two new wisps of smoke floated up from the rim, joined the central column, and evaporated into the June night -- leaving the sun to set upon an empty clearing.

"No, no," Gumboot said, looking carefully in both directions: "it's off to the left, by the summit where the creek bends."

So saying, the two boys headed slowly up the twisting path, tearing their pants on the brambles as they did so. After a determined ascent, they cleared the top, and glanced about for a trace of the smoke.

"There it is!" Gumboot cried excitedly, pointing to a spot about five hundred yards distant. "But blame if it don't be as far away as afore we started."

As they gazed on in silent appreciation, they saw that the wisps of smoke was losing its intensity in the dying light, and starting to fade into a strand no wider than a hair. Quickly brushing themselves off, the two of them ran furiously through the undergrowth in the direction of the smoke. The odor of blackberries and muddy water played about their nostrils as they followed the meandering path of the creek out of the thickets, and into a grassy clearing. Dodging the lairs of moles and water rats that broke across their path, even as they ran, they soon discovered the origin of the smoke: a campfire, made of brush and driftwood dragged from the creek, and then deposited carelessly in an area cleared for the purpose. And there -- clinging to the fringes -- they saw what remained of a stack of books, all charred beyond identification: a blackened cover, a bit of scorched paper, and a pile of gray ash.

"Gumboot --"

"Hush now," Gumboot said, as he tried to pick up the book with the blackened cover, only to have it crumble into dust in his hands. "Almost over."

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"No, no," Trotty squealed, turning pale at the thought.

"What about in broad daylight; can they harm you then?"

Trotty scratched his head a good while before answering. "Don't see how, Gumboot. Ghosts get used to doin' things reg'lar, I s'pose, so they're only up and about at night. Still, Grandpa says they can bewitch trav'lers -- make 'em lose their way until night, and then they're done for."

"Let's a-goin', then. Even knights don't have to take chances, if they could help it. Now, where's that smoke -- to the left?"

"No, it's off to the right, I think -- oh, let's see, now. Oh, Gumboot -- what if we's bewitched? I ain't got no garlic, or nothin', or elsewheres. Never."

"And that's 'cuz no one wants to, if he can help it."

"Well, if I happen to see that ghost, I'll whack him to bits," he said unconvincingly, while thumping his shin with the branch.

"Hush! You want his ghost to hear you? Sword or not, there ain't nothin' to help you 'gainst a spell -- unless it's another, just as pow'ful," Trotty whispered, continuing to glance warily about him.

"And what would that be?" Gumboot asked, beginning to feel a little frightened.

"Whenever you enter a bewitched place, you can't have anything on you but garlic and salt. You tie both in a tiny sack, afore you go in, then you face south, turn around quickly three times, and toss the bag over your left shoulder. The salt drags the ghost to the ground, and the garlic keeps it a-there until after you've gone. Oh, I forgot the most important thing: afore you toss the bag, you got to say twice:

'Salt, salt, dead cat's stare
Garlic follo' and keep it there.'"

When that's a-done, ain't nothin' can harm you as long as you don't look back, and keep a- headin' to where you're goin'. If you stop once, the spell's broken, and the ghost can work his will. That's why you got to follo' things in the right order."

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"No, it's off to the right, I think -- oh, let's see, now. Oh, Gumboot -- what if we's bewitched? I ain't got no garlic, or nothin', on me!" Trotty squealed, turning pale at the thought.