

THE LAST TROLL OF LONDON BRIDGE

by Jean Hearst
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In 1968 a man named Robert Paxton McCulloch bought old London Bridge, packed it up and shipped it across the ocean to its new home in Lake Havasu Arizona. The Last Troll of London Bridge is the story of what might have happened if a troll hitched a ride with his bridge and arrived in the middle of the Arizona desert, where he met and changed the life of one young boy.

Chapter 1. A Meeting by a Lake

Splash, SPLASH!

Alex dropped the tarantula he was trying to coax into an empty peanut butter jar. It was the loudest splash he had ever heard coming from his lake. "Bet it's that monster fish that that everyone's been trying to catch," he muttered. He scrambled to the top of the steep sandy slope behind him. Once again, he was too late. The surface of the lake was calm and quiet. Only the reflection of the full moon gleamed on the black water. Next time, he promised himself, I'll move faster.

Alex lay down on his back. A shooting star fell behind the dark bulk of the far off mountains. He looked at the cratered face of the moon. Alex imagined he could see the footprints the astronauts had left behind two years ago. He liked to

think of the American flag waiting patiently for creatures from some other planet to find it. "I'd give anything to see the expressions on their faces," he said to the moon. "If they have faces. Maybe they'll be a pile of slithery slimy, green arms with lots of eyes. I'd give anything just to see a real live alien."

The moon climbed higher in the sky and Alex sighed, "It's getting late. I better get back before Mom notices I've climbed out the window again." He knew she thought it was too dangerous for him to be out in the desert at night all alone. Alex thought being in the same trailer with her boyfriend, Dave, was a lot scarier than any rattlesnake he might meet in the dark. Dave was always pinching and shoving Alex "to toughen him up." The only time Dave got clean was if he went for a swim and that wasn't very often. Sometimes Alex felt the walls of the trailer closing in making it hard for him to breathe. Then he had to get away into the desert.

SPLASH SPLAT SPLASH!

Alex sat up fast. This time he was in the right place at the right time. Crouched half in and half out of the water was a pale green thing. It was tearing at a fish with its pointed teeth. The creature sucked each bone carefully before throwing it back into the lake. It licked its fingers and burped loudly. It stood up. It was wearing a pair of red shorts with yellow pineapples on them. "Hey, those are my shorts," yelled Alex.

The creature leaped back into deeper water.

"Oh, don't go. Please, Mr. Critter. I never did like those old shorts. Honest."

A bald head popped out of the water. Green eyes glared from under black bushy eyebrows. "And just what's a critter when it's at home?"

"Huh?" The boy dug a finger in his ear. "You sure talk funny."

"Pot calling the kettle black, I'd say. It's hard enough understanding you Yanks, and you're rude besides. Critter indeed!"

"Well, what are you then? I know. You're an alien from outer space. From another planet!"

"AARGGH!" it cried. Its teeth looked very sharp. "Don't you know a Troll when you see one?"

"No, I don't! We don't have trolls in America. We have tolls though."

Alex liked his joke so much he began to laugh. He laughed so hard that his feet slipped out from under him and he rolled down to the edge of the lake.

The troll walked out of the water and sat down beside him. He was not really green at all, but white like the underside of a fish. Alex sniffed. The troll smelled like fish, too. Alex put a few more inches between them. This was the most exciting thing he had ever found in the desert, but he had learned to be careful of strange plants and animals when he found them. "All I know," he answered, "is that trolls live under bridges and are mean and grumpy."

"True, true. I can't say no. But not my branch of the family. We keep ourselves to ourselves, minding our bridges and our own business."

"Then what are you doing in Arizona?"

"It's a long story, toe-rag." The troll peered at Alex seeing a ten-year-old boy whose straight brown hair fell over his forehead hiding his brown eyes. His

legs and arms were thin and covered with scratches and scabs. What have we here? wondered the troll. Most lads would have taken one look at me and run off screaming. Still, it's early days yet. "Got a name have you?"

"Alexander Rennie," Alex answered. "But everybody calls me Alex."

The green eyes glowed brighter and got larger. "Well, well now, isn't that interesting." He rubbed his hands together. "We're practically related. The man who built my bridge was named Rennie, too. It must be fate our meeting like this." He gave a laugh that sounded like a creaking door.

"What's so funny?" Alex hated being laughed at. The kids at school were always making fun of him. They called him "Bug Boy" because he spent recess with his eyes on the ground, looking for ants and beetles to put in the matchboxes he carried in his pockets. His collection of pet lizards and tarantulas needed lots of snacks. The troll said nothing, just smiled his ugly smile.

Alex glared at the troll. "Okay. Where's your bridge if you're really a troll?"

The troll stopped smiling and his eyes got paler and paler. He snarled, "Stacked up in piles behind that bloody great fence back there."

"That's your bridge? London Bridge is your bridge! It really fell down this time," Alex giggled. "Didn't it?"

The troll stalked back to the lake and vanished into the dark water without another word.

"I'm always messing things up," Alex thought sadly. "I shouldn't have teased the troll about not having a bridge. I hurt his feelings and now I have no one to talk to. Even if he wasn't a real alien, I bet he could have told me all kinds

of interesting things.” Alex sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “ Maybe he’ll come back,” he hoped.

But the troll never did. Not that night.