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**THE CORACLE BOY**

by

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## Synopsis

A long time ago, in a land not too far away, there was a fabled and mysterious place known as 'Farland - the land of the great swamp'. At its heart lay the town of Westtown, the home of Harry, the 'Coracle Boy'.

Time and time again pirates and robbers from all over this land came to plunder the good folk of Westtown, rampaging and taking anything they could. The people of Westtown dare not venture into the forests and even the river that had supplied food and goods from far away were now deemed unsafe to travel.

But Harry knew the river like the back of his hand and no-one knew how to use a coracle more than he. And now, more than ever, Harry's skill and determination were desperately needed. For it was only Harry who could navigate this dangerous, swollen river and get a message to General Smith that the notorious King Axel was about to mount his most vicious assault. . . Will Harry be able to save the day?

The future of Westtown depends upon the 'Coracle Boy'.

## Chapter One

The river is swollen; heavy rain up in the mountains to the north had raised the water level to three times the height of a man above normal, an unexpected high for this time of year. The muddy waters were out over the flood meadows to the north and south of the town which was cut in half by the river. Easttown was built on land just above the flood level; Westtown sat high above the river on a heavily wooded limestone ridge that ran for almost as far as the eye could see to the north and south of the town. The two communities were joined by a bridge, a wooden structure that had replaced a stone bridge destroyed in a great storm long before living memory. The wooden bridge was supported on three timber trestles, one in the centre and one at each bank protruding out into the river, at every flood men were ordered onto the trestles, using long poles they would guide floating debris past, and thus minimise the pressure on the ageing supports.

Those who knew the river said that the water had reached its peak and the houses on the Wharfage would not be flooded this time. It had stopped raining but the men still

grumbled that if the Merchants and the rich men who lived up in Westown would pay for a proper masonry bridge, similar to the one destroyed all those years ago, there would be no need for men to risk their lives every time there was a flood.

A long way to the north a coracle moved slowly upstream following the eddies that occur where the water spreads out into the floodplain, the pollarded willows and tall alders marking the eastern banks of the river. In the tiny craft a barefoot boy of about thirteen years of age piloted his flimsy boat with a single paddle held in his left hand; in his right hand he held a coil of rope. He watched intently the oncoming flood as it brought down a harvest of firewood, but it was not kindling that the boy waited for, there was a giant oak that had toppled into the river and if allowed to reach the town would wreck the bridge and isolate the two towns. Without the bridge the people of Eastown were defenceless against the marauding tribes scattered about the great forest to the east. The 'Raiders', as they were called, attacked from time to time, but that was not expected yet, the attacks usually come in the autumn when the barns are full and the animals' fat and ready for slaughter, but because the garrison was located in Westown, military protection would be denied the residents of Eastown if the bridge was destroyed.

The boy peered into the afternoon sun, now low on the treetops that covered the high ground across the river, which met the water at a near vertical cliff. The boy shaded his eyes and looked upstream, waiting for the great tree to appear like a floating island forest, moving, turning and bobbing in the fast midstream current.

Earlier the boy had ridden his father's horse to the blacksmith, Abe Tull; to deliver a quantity of wooden handles for a variety of tools and collect an adze and two axe heads the forester had ordered. He was on his way back to their cottage in the woods when, he first heard and then saw, the mighty oak slide from the steep slope of the west bank and crash into the river. At first something held the tree fast but gradually the current got the better of the tree that yawed back and forth until it broke away and swung out into the fast moving current. The boy saw the danger and turned the mare's head for home, a fairly direct route, whereas the river followed a meandering course across the floodplain.

At the forester's cottage the boy discovered that his father had been ordered to the bridge to pole the debris past the trestles. The boy's sister, a year older than him, was responsible for running the household since the death of their mother two years earlier.

"You are to join father at the bridge if you returned before nightfall, Harry."

The boy told his sister of the massive tree that threatened the bridge.

"I must get a line tied to it, Meg; remember father is on that bridge."

"But Harry, you can't, not on your own."

"I can, I have done it many times, I can lasso it from a safe distance."

"This is not a piece of driftwood, you can't..."

"I can and I must." The boy cut in. "I can do it. You look after the young 'uns and feed the pigs for me, I have to go. Oh, and put the mare in the stable, thanks Meg."

The boy raced into the barn and lifted his coracle onto his shoulder, reached for the coil of rope and his paddle and ran down the path to the tributary of the main river that flowed past the forester's cottage. He launched the little craft and soon came into the flood meadows, he peeled off away from the pull of the small tributary, which would have taken him into the swift flow of the main river, and headed north.

Now the boy waited and hoped that the floating monolith, that would surely take away the whole bridge, had been caught on some underwater obstacle or marooned in shallow water. Suddenly he saw it, a moving island of new foliage, twisting and turning in the fast flowing current of the main river. The boy felt both fear and excitement as he waited for the giant to come within range for what he had planned, he had done this many times but never during a flood or with such a huge obstacle, he looked at the rope and questioned if it would hold

such huge tree. The boy had deliberately positioned his small craft at the head of a length of river that was fairly straight and the tree would be easier to manoeuvre into the shallower flood meadow.

The boy paddled the coracle out into the fast flowing current as soon as his target was opposite him. At first he thought he had misjudged it as the floating battering ram seemed to be getting away from him, but soon skilful paddle work got him close enough for him to consider his best course of action. The boy would prefer to fasten his rope to the roots of the tree, but at the moment the great oak was moving root first. Keeping a safe distance the boy followed the tree until its roots caught in an underwater obstacle and began to swing around. He saw the great, flat slab that was the base of the tree, he saw torn and twisted roots intertwined like a basket full of snakes, large lumps of stone held in their grip, not a job for a lasso he would have to tie the rope to a root

The boy moved forward cautiously, he knew that if he was too close and the tree rolled his fragile craft could be holed, he was a strong swimmer but in this current he would stand little chance of survival. He followed his prey like a hunter waiting for the moment when he could be confident of a steady target, but he knew that such a moment was not predictable, no; he had to take the risk. But first he must pray as Brother Anselm had taught him; he said a short prayer to his mother, who, Brother Anselm had assured him, was his guardian Angel. He dug the paddle into the water and sent the tiny craft forward and closed with the tangled mass until the boy could reach a trailing root and tie his rope to it, all the time hoping that the tree would not roll. His prayers were answered as the boy piloted his coracle away from the fast moving current; he paid out the rope until he was a safe distance from the tree. Now he had to select his landing place and there it was, a clump of trees that lined the river bank and then a clear area of low lying floodplain that was normally pasture land that ran right down to the river's edge. The boy paddled furiously and raced for the last tree in the group and passed the rope around it, as the rope tightened he paid a little out so as not to break the rope, the great tree appeared not to respond to this puny effort and then, slowly, it began to swing towards the east bank. Still the boy let more rope pass around the tree, stripping the bark from the sturdy ash, but he was running out of rope he had to secure his catch. He passed the rope around the once more and fashioned a clove hitch and allowed the great tree to tighten the knot for him. Now he had to pray that the rope was strong enough.

The boy paddled the flimsy craft into the floodwater and got as close as he dare to the great tree, he was sure that the branches were caught on the bottom and were probably digging into the soil of the flood meadow, but if the rope broke and the root swung out into the mainstream then all his efforts would have been in vain. He must get something stronger. He would fetch the heavy rope his father used to haul timber from the forest. The boy paddled the coracle to the shore and hid the craft in the undergrowth and ran back to the cottage.

"I've done it, Meg; I've got the tree to the shore, upstream of Beech Wood. I'm going to take the big rope and make it secure and then I'll go to the bridge."

"Wait, Harry." His sister called anxiously. "The huntsman's wife came to warn us that there are Raiders on this side of the bridge, they have not been seen this far north before."

"Thanks for the warning, Meg; I'll come right back if I can't get to the bridge."

With the heavy rope across his shoulder the boy went off at a trot back towards the captive tree, he was more than halfway there when he heard someone laugh and then there was another voice and more laughter. The boy took to the cover of the undergrowth. He waited for the party to come up the path but they had stopped, their conversation was a much lower key now, he moved back to a tall pine tree and began to climb, eager to see these men, they may not be Raiders. He was looking down on a group of four men who

appeared to be resting. Suddenly there was the call of a hunting horn, not a signal that the boy recognised, it came from the south and was not far away. The men got up hurriedly and left, going back in the direction of the hunting horn.

The boy left his perch and hurried after the noisy group who appeared not to care that they were in enemy territory.

“They must know that all the men are at the bridge.” The boy guessed. He became aware of the growing drone of many voices, there was a large party up ahead and they were very close to the tethered oak. He climbed an ivy covered oak tree and was able to both see and hear from this vantage point. A fire had been lit and a meal was being prepared, he saw four thoroughbred horses tethered in the trees, this was unusual, the forest Raiders had few horses other than mules to carry away their spoils. The boy was in a quandary now, his path to the bridge was blocked, his coracle was hidden in the undergrowth on the other side of the encampment and it would be dark soon.

There was a commotion in the camp, a big man with a black beard had arrived told everyone to be quiet and listen, he was wearing an odd sort of helmet and a polished breastplate; he carried a heavy sword in an elaborately decorated scabbard at his waist.

“You don’t have to build a fire raft, we have found the tree, tied up and waiting for us, a great oak that would take that bridge out without the need for fire, but we will light it, just to make sure.”

“We have time enough to make a massive blaze by tomorrow night.” Someone said.

“No!” The big man roared. “We go tonight, if we were discovered they might persuade the soldiers to come looking for us.”

“I thought they were on our side.” Someone laughed.

“Not all of them.” The big man replied. Opinions and advice came thick and fast as the excitement grew. The boy listened, horrified, they had found the tree and were going to launch it, ablaze, at the bridge and the men on it. He must get to the bridge and warn his father and the other men there, but how? The next command solved the problem for him.

“Put that fire out and set up camp by the tree, come on, move yourselves, we don’t often get a chance like this.”

The boy listened to the big man issuing orders and making threats as the camp was broken and the clearing became deserted.

Moving quickly and silently through the bracken and bushes as soon as the coast was clear, he found the coracle and moved down to the water’s edge. The light was fading now and it would be even more dangerous out on the river if he couldn’t see the obstacles, he must stay in the flood meadows even if it meant getting dangerously close to the great tree. And then an idea came to the boy, he would disguise the coracle, he gathered an armful of bracken and birch twigs, put it in the small boat and paddled out until there was enough current to carry him downstream. As he approached the great tree he knelt on the floor of his craft instead of sitting on the thwart and pulled the camouflage over him. Steering was difficult but in the fading light he only needed to be about fifty paces clear of the encampment and then he would pull for the shore and run to the town. He was almost opposite the great oak now; he saw the fires of the enemy camp and the huge black shape of the tethered weapon with men climbing in its branches. The boy was tempted to move away but resisted, knowing that if he got caught in the fast flowing water he would be swept away.

As the coracle slid silently over the water, draped in its disguise, the boy got the smell of tar and guessed that brushwood was being tied to the branches and soaked with tar to make a fearful blaze to send against the bridge.

Once clear the boy sat up and gained full control of the boat, he needed to scour the shore line for a safe place to land. Each time he ventured near he saw movement or fires in

the woods that could only be raiders; there would be very few local people abroad at this hour. Time was getting short; he must land soon before the current becomes too strong where the river is forced through its narrowest point at the bridge. The coracle would be smashed by debris or pulled into one of a number of whirlpools created by the flood.

The mill! The boy remembered Hermit's Mill and the channel that fed the mill-race, he would look out for the foot bridge that crossed the channel, that was never submerged and then he would go to warn the miller of the Raiders presence. It was quite dark now, there was a moon but it was overcast; only appearing when the scudding clouds parted. These were waters the boy had only navigated once before.

The little foot bridge appeared quite suddenly and it took a supreme effort for the boy to pull the coracle out of the grip of the fast moving current and into the shadow of the bridge. The water in the channel was almost still and suggested to the boy that the miller had closed the sluice gates. He climbed onto the bank, pulled the coracle from the water and into the bushes, crossed over the channel by the footbridge and hurried down to the sluice gates, which were shut and the big water wheel was motionless. There were no lights in the mill but there was a light in the miller's cottage set on higher ground.

A door opened at the cottage and a man carrying a lantern came out followed by two other men. The boy was about to go to them when he saw the second man pushed to the ground, there was shouting and the fallen man was hauled to his feet. The boy drew back into the shadow of the roof over the big undershot water wheel. The men stopped at the entrance to the mill, the boy saw that the miller had his hands tied behind his back, his captors both carried swords. The party went into the mill and the door was closed.

The boy turned and ran down the path at the rear of the mill and past the cart shed, hoping that the miller's dogs would not hear him and start barking. He need not have worried, he found both dogs dead, each killed with an arrow, an archer sent ahead to deal with the dogs, he thought. A sudden chill hit the boy, just how close to the town were the Raiders, was he too late, and were they already in the town? He would have to be so very careful; he would keep close to the water's edge and go through the withy beds. He could see torches on the bridge now, and soon he was at the back of the weavers shed, there was no one about. The boy took a chance and raced out onto the cobbled lane and ran past the sheds and gardens, past the houses and up to where he could see people up on the main road that crossed the bridge.

Men were gathered at the end of the bridge waiting their turn to go down onto the trestle to pole away any hazard to the bridge. The breathless boy asked urgently after his father, Tom the forester. He discovered that he was down on the centre trestle, but he was advised to speak to Mark Alkmund the River Master, the tall man by the ladder. The boy raced up to the big man and blurted out his story and asked to speak to his father.

"Hold on, son, you say your father is Tom the forester and that there are Raiders in the woods to the north?"

"Yes, sir, please sir, you have to stop them they are cutting a huge tree loose, sir."

"You, Jacob, go down and take Tom's place, send him up tell him his lad is here. Perhaps he can make sense of the boy."

It seemed to take an age for the boy's father to come up from the trestle.

"Harry my son, what ails you, is it your sister, what's wrong?"

It took a while to get the gist of the boy's story through to Tom and the River Master. A man was dispatched to the Garrison to alert the soldiers.

"You know what the Raiders are planning, Mark?" Tom said. "They are sending a massive tree down onto us, with brushwood soaked with tar, blazing fit to shame the fires of Hell, and there's no way to stop it."

"I know that Tom, our only answer is to get a cable across the river and hope we can hold it or better still guide it to one side or the other.

"But all the barges are downstream of the bridge; we would never get one through the bridge in this flood."

"You are right Tom; we must get an archer to fire a line across and hope that we can haul a cable through the water. Seth, how much cable have you got at the ropewalk?"

"Enough to cross the river twice, leave it to me, River Master. I'll send some twine up for the archer, it's best if he fires from the west bank, say from St. Mary's rock and aims into the withy beds and we can fasten off at the old forge."

"That will give us a diagonal line across the river we can guide the tree into the withy beds, it can burn itself out there."

The boy stood back and listened, he knew that Mark Alkmund was the man in charge of the barges and the quay side, an important man respected by all. He knew some of the other men, mostly shopkeepers and tradesmen, but only by sight.

The sound of hooves, clattering on the cobbled street and then pounding on the boards of the bridge, brought heads round to see a horseman approaching with the messenger running at his stirrup. The rider was a red faced man, resplendent in gold braid on a red and blue uniform; a plumed helmet adorned his head.

"What's going on here, who's in charge?"

"Colonel, sir, I am Mark Alkmund, River Master, sir. We have reports of Raiders in the forest to the north of here, sir.

"Raiders to the north, nonsense, they never come down from the north."

"Sir, we have a witness who has seen them preparing a fire raft just beyond the beech wood, that fire raft could be here within the hour, and we are sure that they have captured Hermit's Mill, sir."

"Rubbish, who is this witness?"

"Tom the forester's son, Harry, sir. Tell the Colonel what you have seen Harry."

"Sir, Colonel sir, it's true I have seen them, sir, they shot the millers dog..."

"Enough, are you taking the word of a child, do you expect me to send soldiers out every time a child comes to you with a fairy story?" The Colonel blustered.

"Sir, the boy is trustworthy." The River Master said firmly. "I believe him, if they do send a fire raft down we shall need all the help we can get. We are putting into place plans to stop or divert the fire..."

"And if you can't stop this fire raft do you expect me to send soldiers across the bridge and have it burned behind them? They would be trapped with no way back. No, River Master, I will not send soldiers, I do not believe your story of bogey men in the woods, or tales of fire rafts on a flooding river, you need calm water to pilot a fire raft. It is not possible to control such a craft in those wild waters."

"There would be no need to control the fire raft, sir; this strong current would bring it down on us, sir."

"Don't argue with me, River Master, you are trying my patience and risking arrest if you persist, now continue with your proper duty and pole the floating debris past the trestles." The Colonel reined his horse around savagely and cantered back up the hill.

"The man's a fool, Mark, why don't you go and see the Mayor?" Tom asked

"There would be no point, the Colonel was appointed by the King, I saw the letter. The Mayor and the Elders are not happy they don't like the Colonel's high handed methods, but they are powerless against a Royal Appointment. No, Tom we are on our own, will you take charge of the evacuation of everyone out of Eastown. Mathew go with Tom, women, children and the sick and elderly first, we will house them in the empty warehouse in Church

Street. Samuel, go and form a defence line across the main road, from the turnpike to the corner of Weavers Lane, arm them with anything you can find.”

The next hours saw a stream of people moving across the bridge carrying all they could up to the empty warehouse at the lower end of Westtown. The barricade at the eastern end of the bridge was complete, the cable was across the river, it had taken fourteen men to haul the great rope through the floodwater. A man came up from the barricade and reported that Easttown was completely evacuated.

The boy had fallen asleep for a short while in a passing place on the bridge, wrapped in his father’s coat; he awoke feeling cold and hungry. He stood up and pulled on the oversized coat, he looked east to where the dawn had begun to streak the sky, but the heavy cloud made for a dark morning. Men argued that the raiders would not send the fire raft down now, it was too late and they would lose the element of surprise.

It was just after midnight when the boy became aware of a commotion at the barricade and then a man was running up to the River Master.

“Sir, the Raiders are in the woods at the edge of town, there are a great many of them, Brother Anselm sent me to warn you, he says there are more than a hundred of them, sir.”

“Seth, take this man to the Colonel at the Garrison and then tell the Mayor what is happening.” The two men hurried away.

“Look sir, fire arrows.” the boy called out. Heads turned as two arrows soared up and then curved down to hit the river and extinguish. A second pair started heavenwards.

“What are they shooting at?” A man asked.

“They’ve let the fire raft loose and now they are trying to ignite it. Mathew, take some men to defend the men at the withy beds, stay with them as long as you can but don’t get cut off. Tom, you take charge at the barricade hold it until Mathew has got his men back safely.” The River Master bellowed out his orders in a voice that left no one in doubt that he was in full command here. He turned and saw the second flight of arrows down in the river, but a third flight was in the air and hit the target and set two of the bundles of brushwood alight. Instantly a shower of arrows followed and the true horror and size of the conflagration that was bearing down on them was outlined against blackness of the northern sky, the size alone was enough to sweep away the bridge.

“The boy was right.” The River Master said, grimly. “Those fire arrows were sent up from the mill, the Raiders are too damn close. Abraham, go and tell the lads at the withy beds to answer to the huntsman’s horn and then stay with Tom at the barricade.”

People were still hurrying across the bridge with their possessions heaped on wheelbarrows and handcarts or in bundles on their backs. The River Master spoke softly.

“Son, Harry isn’t it? Go and find a safe place across the bridge.”

“Sir, can’t I stay and help? I could take messages and fetch things, please, sir”

“Stay in that niche then and be ready to take my orders. Can you get a note out of a huntsman’s horn?”

“Yes sir, we use the hunting horn to call my father, sir, I know all the calls, sir.”

“Here, take this and be ready to take my orders.”

The boy took the horn and hung it around his neck. A woman came back across the bridge with a basket of bread and cheese and apples, she doled out the food to anyone who wanted it. Harry was glad of the bread and cheese, the woman smiled as she chose a particularly rosy apple for him. She turned away to look at the inferno that was coming.

“Get back to safety, Martha; this is no place for you.” The River Master ordered.

“What about the men at the barricade?” Martha asked.

“The boy will run down with the basket, now get back I say. Son, take the food and leave it with Seth and get back here as quick as you can.”

The boy ran with the basket of food and gave it to Seth and told him to listen out for the hunting horn calls. He looked about for his father.

“Your father is guarding the lads on the cable, son, I’ll keep some food for him.”

The boy got back to his post just as a loud cheer went up, the great fireball had met the cable and was turning towards the withy beds, but would the cable hold? The huge tree rolled to the east extinguishing some of the burning branches and then it stopped. It was too far away to tell, but the opinion was that the cable was submerged and safe from the fire. The River Master sent a man to tell the men at the withy beds to drop back to the barricade.

“Ask Tom the forester to report to me as soon as he can.” He ordered.

The boy waited anxiously for his father to appear and then he saw him crossing the barricade and hurrying up to report to the River Master.

“What’s the position with the cable, Tom?”

“We have it secure around the base of the old furnace, sir, it’s below the water so the Raiders won’t see it. I think that they are in the field behind the weavers shed, sir, about a dozen of them, one of the lad’s reckons.”

“Thank you Tom, your boy is my messenger so listen out for the calls. Now go and get some food if there’s any left.”

“Seth is saving some for me, sir.” And then to the boy, “What about Meg and the young ‘uns, Harry, how close were the Raiders?”

“They turned back at St, Peters Well, father, and went to where I had tied the great oak, they set up camp there.”

“Ah, well short of our cottage, but I can’t help worry about Meg and the young ‘uns.”

“Meg knows what to do, father, I’m sure she will be alright.”

The boy watched his father hurry back to the barricade and his bread and cheese. He turned to look upstream to where the great tree still burned, the huge obstacle was blocking a large section of the river and floating rubbish was building up behind it. The River Master asked if there was any sign of the soldiers, he said that if they hurried they could drive the Raiders back and allow men to get ropes onto the tree and hold it and let it burn itself out.

Suddenly something caused the tree to swing around and release a raft of forest wreckage, from whole trees to masses of leaves, from chicken coops to empty barrels, all bearing down on the trestles. The men down at water level were hard pressed to get the conglomeration through the bridge.

“If that tree breaks loose, Mark, we will have no time to clear the bridge. We will all be drowned.” Someone shouted.

“Boy, sound the re-call.” The River Master ordered. “Get the men up off the trestles.”

Harry moistened his lips and sent out the notes to signal that everyone must fall back to the River Master. He saw men at the barricade turn and run towards the centre of the bridge, the River Master then ordered them to continue across and set up a barricade.



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