

# Rock of Wages

by Patrick Welch

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*Mr. Welch says of himself...*

*I published in Riverside Quarterly and Analog while pursuing my MA at Bowling Green State University. Quit writing short fiction to concentrate on writing advertising and articles for local publications until about a year ago. Have had fiction accepted by **Knightmares Magazine**, **Dazzler's Digital Domain** and **Virtual Press**. Plus the mandatory novel or two bouncing around publishers.*

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It was the noise that attracted me. A thunderous rolling sound followed by a crash. A stream of curses and grunts. A scuffle of feet, more grunts, loose falling stone and then the thunderous rolling sound again.

I stopped my wagon at the side of the steep hill. The last few days had been extremely unprofitable, my recent stay in the village of Imogen a complete loss. The townsfolk had expressed no interest in my elixirs, curiosities, mechanisms or other, even more exotic wares. It would seem prudent to avoid the hill and whatever waited on the far side. Instead I dutifully lowered the canopy proclaiming "Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium Of Miscellaneous Marvels" and donned my work clothes: a tall silk hat, patchwork jacket and gold-encrusted trousers. Literally tooting my own horn, I urged my team forward.

I rounded the hill as another crash erupted. The cause: a large, round boulder - at least three times the size of my wagon - which had rolled into a strand of trees lining the main road. I stopped playing my trumpet and watched as an equally huge man, stringing a steady stream of curses, manhandled the boulder out of the grove and back towards the imposing hill. Positioning the stone on a well-worn plot of grass and dirt, he bent down, leaned a great shoulder into the boulder and began to push. He managed to advance it five or six feet up the steep grade before his sandaled feet began to lose traction on the gravel. He continued to struggle thus for another five minutes; then he lost his balance entirely and the boulder bounded inexorably down the hill and into the severely abused woods below.

The man was wiping away dirt and gravel from his hands and tunic as I urged my wagon forward. "What ho, friend?" I greeted him. "So how are we faring this most lovely and propitious day?"

The man/mountain favored me with a glare. "None too well, me thinks," he responded in a surprisingly soft, lilting voice.

"Why, may I ask, do you persist in your labors upon yon boulder?"

He sighed. "The curse of the gods. I must spend my days trying to roll that stone onto the crest of this mighty hill. Only when I have completed my task will they lift the enchantment. It is a burden I fear I shall never discharge."

"My friend, I do believe that this day shall turn out most fortuitous for you. I just might possess, among the many wonders within my coach, an item that will make your onus less onerous."

He frowned and studied me. "I am charged to accept no assistance. And you do not appear to possess the strength necessary to help me."

"Not strength, my mountainous friend." I went to the back of my wagon, opened the door and wrestled a trunk to the ground. "Knowledge is quite another matter." I opened the lid and

made a show of rummaging through its contents. "Here we are." I stood and brandished a pair of wooden clogs. "These should assist you greatly."

"Shoes? I see not..."

"Not just shoes, good sir. These are special shoes. These spikes," I pointed them out, "will enable you to get purchase on this rocky soil. Here, try them."

He accepted them reluctantly. Of course they fit perfectly. He resumed his position behind the boulder and began to push. Almost immediately he noticed the effect; instead of slipping constantly on the loose gravel, the shoes allowed him to dig in and use both his mighty arms and legs to advance the rock. It appeared almost effortless; the boulder began to roll smoothly up the incline. Even though the hill was steep and expansive, I estimated he would achieve his goal before sunset.

"Tell me, my huge friend; what will you do when you get to the top?"

He paused and leaned against the boulder, which moved not a whit. "I know not. I never thought I would succeed before."

I pointed towards the road just beyond. "If you leave it up there, it could eventually dislodge and roll back down this hill. That would pose a danger to any innocent wayfarers. I suggest you let it roll down the other side. There is nothing there." *Nothing save the village of Imogen.*

"Most sound advice, good stranger. I thank you greatly for your assistance and I will do as you suggest!"

As I rode away I saw that my friendly giant was continuing his excellent progress up the hill. I would have stayed to admire his efforts but I had additional business in Imogen.

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The village greeted me no more warmly upon my return than during my first visit. The town constable approached me before I even had time to disembark. "We told you to leave. You and your kind are not welcome here."

"But I have most important and distressing news!" I forced fear and desperation into my voice. "I was leaving, just as you requested. But on my way I met a mountain of a man pushing an equally large boulder up yon precipice," I pointed to the east, where the steep hill was easily seen. "I fear what may happen when he reaches the crest."

The official laughed. "That fool will never succeed! He has been struggling thus for ages. Easier he grasp a handful of sunlight than push that boulder to the top."

"That may not be accurate. When I left, he was making remarkable progress."

The man snorted. A few curious townspeople had gathered nearby to listen. I addressed them. "Dear innocent dwellers of Imogen, I implore you to heed me! I fear greatly that your lovely village may be in danger!"

"And why is that?" several voices asked at once.

"The giant told me that once he reached the top, he would push the boulder down the other side of yon hill. As you can see," I pointed, "this lane leads straight to it. That boulder will roll right into, and destroy, your village."

"Nonsense," the constable snorted. "This man is speaking lies. Good people, we have

nothing to fear."

"Perhaps," I said. "But would it not be prudent to have one of your residents verify my veracity?"

"I'll go," a lad of about nine offered. The constable nodded and we watched as he ran down the street toward the imposing hill beyond. The constable gave me a ferret smile. "If you are lying, we will confiscate your belongings and throw you in the stocks. Our village will greatly enjoy the entertainment."

We waited silently, he confident, myself feigning nervousness. The townspeople started to laugh when we saw the boy approaching. Their amusement died quickly. "It's true, it's true," we could hear the boy yelling well before he reached Imogen. "The giant is halfway up the hill!"

I fought back a smile as I saw their concern and alarm grow. The constable was the first to speak. "This is impossible! Quickly; we must see for ourselves!"

The news spread through the village like fleas. I sat patiently in my wagon while everyone in Imogen made their way towards the hill. Let them observe, let them plan, let them panic. I let nearly an hour pass before I urged my team forward and steered them towards the hill.

When I arrived, the villagers were congregated at the top. I joined them and looked down. The man and his boulder were over half-way up, and while his progress was slowed, he was still moving inexorably onward. I noticed a group of men standing by themselves, conversing rapidly. I assumed they were the town leaders and approached.

"This is most serious," I heard one say. "What are we to do?"

I allowed them to plan ineffectively for a few minutes before speaking. "If you don't mind, I might offer a suggestion."

The constable glared at me. "Now what do you want, thief?"

"Thief? I am no thief. I am your benefactor. Who, after all, alerted you to this looming tragedy?"

"You are at best a charlatan."

Another interrupted our discussion. "Is this man telling the truth?"

"I doubt if it happens very often, but in this case, yes," the constable admitted.

The man, whom I recognized as the tavern owner, appraised me. "I remember you, you tried to sell me some fake philter."

"There is nothing fake about it. However, I doubt we have the time to debate its efficacy. Would you like my assistance or no?"

The innkeeper relented. "We are prepared to listen."

"I suggest you pour boiling oil down the hillside. It will make it impossible for him to go any farther. Indeed it should prevent him from progressing entirely."

I watched the men confer rapidly among themselves. "That might work," the tavern keeper said as spokesman. "But we have none."

"Fortunately I do. And for a most reasonable fee I am prepared to offer it to you."

The constable frowned. "And what would you consider reasonable?"

"50 gold crowns. Paid in advance, of course."

"That is outrageous!" screamed five voices at once. "We can buy an entire vat of oil for only five," the innkeeper added.

"Fine." I turned and looked down the hill. "But you best hurry. Yon giant is rapidly approaching."

They looked, then initiated a heated discussion. Finally the innkeeper approached. "30. We can only offer you 30."

"You have it with you?" The small group looked at each other then nodded reluctantly. "Wait here." Whistling, I entered my wagon. I returned with a cask of heated oil. "Just pour this down the hill," I instructed after they gave me payment. "You should have no more concerns."

The constable did as suggested. We watched as the oil flowed and spread down the hill, quickly intersecting the approaching peril. The boulder began to slip, then spin as it became covered with oil. My laboring friend held out admirably, but the spreading oil soon loosened the soil under his feet. With a groan and a curse, the man fell back as he lost his grip. The boulder rolled merrily down the hill and stopped with a resounding thump against the trees below.

The townspeople let out a cheer and congratulated each other. I quickly returned to my wagon and drove away. I was tired and it was nearing time to set my camp for the evening; I had plenty of work planned for the following day.

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"What ho, friend?" I called out. It was now morning; after a quick breakfast I had made my way back to the giant and his burden.

"I am lost!" he greeted me.

"Why so morose, my colossal comrade?"

"Yonder hill," he pointed. "It has become befouled with some unknown substance. Even with the sandals you graciously provided I can no longer move this rock more than a foot or two without falling. I am lost!"

"Perhaps." I pretended to commiserate and contemplate this unfortunate turn of events. "Tell me," I continued after a suitably long ponder, "what exactly is your obligation?"

"Why, to get this boulder upon the top of that hill. I told you that."

I nodded. "But do you have to push it?"

He frowned, the small gears inside his head struggling to turn. "I understand not."

"Those spiked shoes still provide you sufficient purchase, do they not?"

"Yes, but I cannot push the rock without losing my grip, now that it is covered with that foul substance."

"So much the better. Perhaps you should pull it."

"How?" he asked, trying to grasp the concept.

"Most simple, really. I happen to have a very strong, very long rope in my possession. We merely harness it to the boulder and you...pull it up the hill. Since the ground is now moist, the rock should slide easily."

Finally a smile appeared as the dim light dawned. "You are most correct, friendly stranger. If you have such a rope, that would indeed be possible!"

Of course I had the rope. We tied it thoroughly around the boulder; a few sample tugs convinced him that my suggestion would work. He started pulling his load towards the hill, then stopped. "My friend, your largesse has been great. Yet I have nothing to repay you with. How can I thank you?"

"Just helping a fellow gentleman out of a most trying circumstance is reward enough. May you enjoy success this day and may your burden be finally lifted!" His stream of benedictions faded behind me as I road away. Back to Imogen.

I paused outside the tavern long enough to decompose myself, then burst in. "The giant," I yelled. "He's coming!" The innkeeper looked up from the glass he was cleaning. This early in the morning, the business was otherwise deserted. He was unconcerned and most unfriendly. "It's you. What are you prattling about now?"

"The giant. He's coming back up the hill!"

"And how is that possible? You assured us the oil would prevent him from succeeding."

"He's not pushing the boulder. He's pulling it!"

The innkeeper set down his glass, his attention finally mine. "He cannot." Then he glared at me suspiciously. "Unless he is obtaining assistance from someone."

"It matters not now. Come," I went to the door. "Something must be done to stop him and protect your village."

The innkeeper followed. Soon nearly the entire village trailed behind my wagon as we made our now familiar journey up the hill. The townsfolk formed a crown on the crest as we all gazed below. The giant was making steady progress. As I had promised, his cleated shoes still afforded excellent purchase in the oil-stained soil. The strong rope stretched taut behind him as the boulder slid rather than rolled over gravel, dirt, oil and the occasional patch of grass, making his task much easier. I glanced up at the sky. At this rate he would reach the summit within the hour.

The townspeople recognized their peril as well. The innkeeper approached me. "More oil," he demanded. "We must have more oil!"

"I am afraid you have exhausted my supply. If you had been a bit more conservative in your use of it..." I shrugged.

He grabbed me. "We must do something!"

I pulled his hands away and stepped back, disgusted. "Control yourself. We must think clearly in this situation, not allow our reasoning to be clouded by rampant emotions." I looked anew down the hill. "I should have something..."

"What?" The entire village was gathered around me now.

"Wait here," I ordered and went to my carriage. I returned dragging a small chest.

"What is it? What is in there?" a buzz of conversation rose among the townsfolk.

I ignored them and instead pulled the innkeeper aside. "This is a very valuable chest. In order to accomplish what we must, it will be destroyed. I expect suitable compensation."

"How much?"

"70 gold crowns."

The man gasped. "But, but we have not that much wealth in our entire village!"

I had heard false pleas of poverty before. "I cannot part with it for anything less. Of course, I can leave you to your own devices..."

The man sighed. "And if this fails?"

"Fair enough. I will be out one very old and valuable chest."

"We must discuss this." I remained silent and stoic while the village elders discussed my offer. The innkeeper was ashen when he returned. "We have no choice. If you succeed, 70 gold crowns it is." I nodded. "I need two of your strongest men to assist me." The innkeeper returned with two brawny young lads. Not nearly as brawny, however, as the fast approaching giant. "One of you on either side," I ordered. "I want you to pick up this chest and fling it down the hill as far as you can."

They looked at each other, frowned, then did as instructed. I held my breath as the wooden chest arched out and down the hill, then crashed resoundingly and burst apart. Immediately a black buzzing cloud arose from the wreckage and started down the hill. Towards the man struggling upward.

"Gnats," the innkeeper whispered as he stood next to me, watching.

"Yes. And quite hungry and viscous." Which indeed they were. They descended eagerly upon the man, an army that was too vast and small for him to defeat. He struggled against them valiantly, but in the end he had no recourse but to release the rope while he attempted to drive them off. The boulder careened down the hill; he soon followed, trying to run and discourage the stinging insects at the same time. Part of the horde remained hovering along the hill while the remainder followed him to level ground. The giant would not succeed in climbing the hill this day.

Imogen treated me to a well-deserved hero's welcome. The constable even allowed me to set up my wagon and offer my amazing array of merchandise to the townsfolk. By eventide my coffers were fully replenished.

I was enjoying a glass of the innkeeper's finest wine when one of my earlier customers stormed into his establishment. "There you are!" he exploded. He threw something on my table. "This chronometer does not work!"

I glanced down at the offending mechanism. "That is odd. It functioned properly before. You saw so yourself. What did you do to it?"

"Nothing!" he spat. "I demand repayment. At once!"

"Sire, if there is a problem with my wares, I assure you I will rectify that. I should have another

suitable timepiece in my wagon."

My offer appeased him not. "I don't want your 'wares.' I want my money!"

My response was cut short by angry voices outside. The doors to the inn flew open and no less than a dozen townspeople, led by the constable, burst in. None of them wore pleasant demeanors. "He cheated me." "He's a thief." "He sells fraudulent merchandise."

Those were just a few of the libelous accusations hurled at me.

The constable approached menacingly. "You are no longer welcome in Imogen," he snarled.

I glanced at the half empty bottle of excellent vintage on my table and sighed. "I am sorry you feel that way," I said, rising. "However, I do not wish my customers be dissatisfied. If you will follow me to my wagon, I will repay each of you. Then," I addressed the constable, "I will be on my way."

They cursed me as they followed me out the inn; they cursed me as I repaid them; they cursed me as I drove my team down the street. Imogen denizens were tireless cursers. I made my slow shameful journey out of town, down the lane and around the hill. I soon reached a clearing and found the giant staring forlornly into his fire. I drove up and stopped.

"I see even a giant needs his rest," I greeted him. In the firelight I could see the ugly red welts that covered his body. The gnats had dined well.

"I am lost," he groaned. "Those insects. I can fight a man. I can fight a dragon. I cannot fight them." His voice trailed off into self-pity.

I joined him by his fire and commiserated. We had both been treated harshly by Imogen. Reparations were called for. "My friend, insects need sleep as well," I observed.

He studied me with curiosity. "How does that information assist me?"

"Could you not conclude your labors at night?"

Again the pause was pregnant before the concept was delivered. "Yes. But I have to see the ground beneath me, the hill before me."

"That is a resolvable enigma." I reached into the satchel at my side and handed him a hat. "This is a special helmet," I explained.

"Here," I pointed, "is a small oil lamp and lens. Miners wear these. It will provide sufficient light so you can successfully navigate yon hillside. There is enough oil to keep it lit for several hours, enough time, I wager, to reach the summit." I lit the wick and was rewarded with a piercing beam of light. "Try it."

He complied and beamed as bright as the lamp when he realized how effective it indeed was. "Your benevolence is beyond compensation," he assured me warmly. "I will commence this very instant!" He was as good as his word. He grabbed hold of the ropes and started hauling the boulder smoothly up the hill. As I had predicted, no buzzing insects attacked him as he confidently progressed.

He had traversed a good quarter of the terrain when I called out to him. "Remember," I yelled, "when you reach the summit. Be sure to push the boulder down the other side. We don't want to imperil any innocents traveling this road!"

"I will, kind stranger. And thank you."

I watched for a few more minutes, then returned to my wagon. I would have liked to get some sleep, but I had dallied too long in Imogen. My horses snorted in protest as I urged them out onto the road. I had obligations in Hamelin.

***The End***

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