

Deil's Leap

'Lemme go! Lemme go!'

The child was screaming, struggling to get free.

A moment later her cry had changed to 'Dinnie let go! Dinnie let go!' as the big man lifted her up and swung her out over the low parapet, dangling her above the precipice.

He was laughing.

'Weel, whit is't ye want? Am ah tae let go or no?'

By now the child was too terrified to do anything but scream, as the man swung her from side to side over the abyss.

'Sae ye want tae flee, Lintie? Lintie wants tae flee! Up ye go, Lintie, high, high up! Fleein, fleein! Wee Lintie's fleein!'

At last he put the little girl down on the ground. She ran off, sobbing hysterically all the way to the village a hundred yards down the road.

Jamie continued his walk, slightly puzzled by her reaction. She had said she wanted to fly, after all.

Jamie and Lintie had gone up the hill road together,

as they often did. They were buddies, and had been ever since the tiny Lintie was old enough to wander the village streets on her own. Lintie's endless curiosity about the natural world had delighted Jamie, who had been happy to share with her the secrets of where the siskins were nesting, how to approach old Mrs Baird's bad-tempered dog without being snapped at, how you could tell where the fox had been prowling, and how the russet-coloured beech hedge managed to turn green all over in a matter of hours.

'Look! See a' they wee pointed spears? They're the new leaves, rolled up like an umbrella, waitin for a nice warm day tae uncurl. They're rust-coloured on the ootside, which is the back o' the leaf, and that's a' ye can see till they open up. And they're bricht, bricht green inside. Sae, whan they a' open up, the hale hedge turns green.'

Lintie, who had been astonished at the sudden change from rust to fresh young green, was enchanted at this explanation. It confirmed her belief that Jamie was the cleverest man in the village; for she'd asked several other people for an explanation, and had got nothing but indifference. Nobody knew and nobody cared.

Jamie, at twenty-two, had perhaps the intelligence of a normal seven-year-old, so he was the perfect companion for the endlessly inquiring little girl. He was good-natured and harmless, though not always perfectly sensible. He was accepted in the village, for he was always willing to use his great strength for the benefit of anyone who needed a hand with shovelling snow, carrying bricks or clearing out an old shed. But his concentration was so poor that he could never be left to get on with a job on his own, so fixed employment was out of the question. And

his limited understanding meant that he had no friends of his own age. Only a few of the children would let him join in their games. He would have been a lonely figure, had it not been for the intrepid Lintie, who shared none of the fears which his bulk and his reputation as feeble-minded inspired in the others.

On the surface Jamie was accepted; but deep down many of the villagers felt some repugnance towards this huge, dim-witted creature whom they sensed as something alien and unpredictable.

They were buddies, Jamie and Lintie, but they had their ups and downs, for both of them enjoyed what they thought of as a good joke. This meant that Lintie sometimes teased Jamie, and Jamie sometimes teased Lintie. As a result they had the odd quarrel, which was usually made up by the offer of some new-found treasure – a spray of hawthorn from Jamie, with the thorns carefully removed, or half a Mars bar from Lintie.

On this occasion the two friends were sauntering up the hill road, and Lintie had been admiring the flight of a seagull, as it dived and rose and swooped above the great gulf of the Deil's Leap, where the land dropped away sharply from the side of the road.

'Oh, ah wish ah could flee! Ah wish ah could flee!' Lintie had exclaimed passionately.

'Aye, ah ken. Ah've aye wantit tae flee.' And all the longing Jamie had always felt to be rid of his great, heavy body, and to fly and float and soar and swoop through the air, gliding effortlessly and at random, like a wisp of thistledown; all this longing was suddenly transformed, as he realized he could get his little friend to do the flying for him.

Without warning he pounced on Lintie, seizing both her arms in his great fists. And Lintie had screamed and struggled to get free.

Lintie's mother, at first, did not believe her story of being held over the precipice. She knew Lintie to be an intense little creature, given to exaggeration. Certainly, she was very distressed at the moment; but surely Jamie wouldn't be daft enough to swing her out over Deil's Leap? And then she noticed the bruising on the two frail arms where the strong hands had held her.

'Martha!' she called to her neighbour. 'Come and see this!'

'Whit is it, Nell?'

The two women agreed that this time Lintie must be telling the unvarnished truth.

'Jist wait till ah get him!'

'Jist wait till ah get him an a',' chimed Martha.

Martha's four-year-old had come in crying with fright several times because 'the daft man' had spoken to her in the street. And he had recently played one of his pranks on her twelve-year-old, who had been foolish enough to believe Jamie when he said he'd seen a peregrine falcon up the hill, only to be laughed at heartily when he came back disappointed. For some time Martha had felt someone ought to teach Jamie a lesson. His latest exploit was just what she wanted. She set about spreading the news of Jamie's latest offence.

'Terrified the bairn oot o' her wits . . . Near killt the lassie . . . Whit if he'd droppit her . . . ? Jist aboot dislocatit her puir wee arms . . . Covered in bruises, puir wee mite!'

Deil's Leap

* * *

Half an hour later Jamie was on his way back down to the village. He had seen many things he would have enjoyed sharing with Lintie. She would have loved seeing the first bright flowers of the broom, the long, trailing white clouds to the west, the great stone he had found with tiny sparkling bits all through it. She would have asked what it was and he'd have said it was silver, even though he had a suspicion it couldn't possibly be anything so precious. It was a big stone, too big to carry. He'd tried to chip a bit of it off by hitting it with another large stone, and it had broken in two. So he'd picked up one of the pieces and, heavy as it was, he was carrying it back for Lintie. This was to be the peace offering.

As he turned into the village street he was confronted by a row of women standing shoulder to shoulder. Lintie's mother stood in front of them all.

'Pit that muckle rock doon,' she commanded. 'Ye've done enough mischief for ane day.'

'Mischief? Me? Ah havnae done a thing!'

'Ye tried to kill ma wee Lintie.'

At first Jamie couldn't understand what she meant. 'Ah niver! Me kill Lintie? Ye must be mad.'

'Ye swung her oot owre the Deil's Leap.'

'Oh, that! Ah was helpin her tae flee. She said she wantit—'

'Never mind whit she said. She cam hame covered in bruises and frichtened to death. And ah've already telt ye tae pit that rock doon.'

'Ah'm no pittin it doon. It's for Lintie.'

At this point the men began coming in from the fields.

'Whit's gaun on here?

A babble of voices answered:

'He tried tae kill Lintie.'

'He jist about threw her owre the Deil's Leap.'

'He wants tae kill her wi this great rock he's carryin.'

All the suspicion, all the imagined grievances, all their fear of the abnormal, came rushing out. Boys who'd had a disagreement with Jamie over the rules of a game, mothers whose children had been knocked over by him on the football pitch, neighbours who complained that he woke them up in the morning with his raucous singing . . .

For Jamie sang. Loudly and joyfully, he would express his satisfaction with the world in song. His powerful baritone would burst forth, fortissimo, at any moment of the day or night. And first thing in the morning, long before his hard-working neighbours were ready to face the day's toil, thunderous snatches of anything from *Nessun Dorma* to the latest pop tunes would ring out.

'But ah'm happy,' he would say to protesters. 'Ah sing because ah'm happy. Sing wi me! Be happy wi me!'

But today nobody wanted to sing with Jamie. They didn't want his kind of happiness.

And now a strange new elation had seized them. They felt united as never before. They had come together in defence of an innocent child, and so felt justified in giving vent to all their resentment, irritation and hidden fears. The spirit of the mob had taken over.

The men, each assuming the role of vigilante, pushed their way forward, past the women.

Andy Pearson stood out in front of them all. Andy had old scores to settle with Jamie, for Jamie was the only one who could beat him at any of the trials of strength the

men sometimes indulged in. Andy could toss the caber further than any other man in the village – except Jamie. He could control an angry bull better than any man – except Jamie. He could lift more bales of straw than any man – except Jamie.

Andy Pearson was more eager to have a go at Jamie than any man in the village.

'Get back up the hill,' he said. 'We dinnae want ye here. Ye're a danger tae the community.'

'But ah've no done onieething!'

'Ye tried tae kill Lintie!'

'Ye nearly threw her owre the Deil's Leap!'

'If she hadnae managed to struggle free . . . '

The flood of accusations drowned his protestations for a moment. Then he proclaimed:

'She wantit tae flee. Ah was just helpin her. Ah've aye wantit tae flee an' a'.'

'Get back up that road and right oot the village, or we'll help ye dae a bit o fleeing a' richt,' was Andy's retort.

This sally brought forth cries of approval:

'That's richt!'

'A taste o' his ane medicine!'

'Back up tae the Deil's Leap wi' him!'

Andy took a step forward.

'Gie's that rock!' he commanded.

Jamie shook his head.

Andy took another step forward, which brought him within inches of his adversary, and held out his hands for the stone.

Jamie took a step backwards. 'You're no gettin it.'

Again Andy advanced, followed by the crowd, and

Jamie retreated, still clutching his rock.

The crowd was urging Andy on. Again and again he moved one pace forward, and Jamie retreated, one step at a time, up towards where the road overlooked the Deil's Leap.

As the tension increased, as they drew nearer to the precipice, the voices died down. Slowly, and in utter silence, the procession moved on up the hill. One step at a time, the crowd was forcing Jamie back to the precipice.

Nell had put Lintie to bed and sat with her till the child fell asleep, tired out with her fright. Then Nell went out and joined Martha in stirring up public feeling against the insane idiot who was terrorizing their children, as it now appeared.

Lintie woke up feeling refreshed, and perhaps just a little ashamed of the fuss she had made. She was, after all, a big girl now – seven years old! As on many a previous occasion, she knew she could actually have stopped crying earlier. Great as her fright had been while 'flying' above the precipice, by the time she reached the village she was no longer in any danger, and could have controlled her outcry. But her fear had been superseded by anger, and she wanted Jamie punished for what he had done. So she had kept up the crying.

She got up and started going downstairs, not quite sure what line to adopt. Would she complain again of her bruises, to justify her panic and tears, or would she just go and tackle Jamie herself? It would really depend on how her mother was taking the affair.

But the house was empty. She stepped out into the

street, and the street was empty too. Puzzled, she walked along, past Martha's house, past old Mrs Baird's house with the dog tied up by the door, giving the animal a wide berth, just in case. But this time it paid no attention to her, for it was straining at its leash, doing its best to follow the crowd up the hill road. Lintie walked on, past a few more houses, till she came to the cottage where old Mrs Muir sat in her wheelchair.

As soon as she saw Lintie, the old woman cried out:

'Mercy, child, are ye a' richt?'

Lintie wished she hadn't been crying quite so loud or quite so long, as she had passed the cottage on her way home.

'Course ah'm a' richt. Whar's a'body?'

'They're a' up the hill road, chasin Jamie.'

'Whit for? Whit's he done?'

'Done? He tried to kill ye, did he no?'

Lintie didn't wait.

Jamie and his pursuers had got to Deil's Leap.

He stood with his back to the drop, facing his aggressors. Andy was standing a couple of paces away. He was the first to break the long silence:

'Sae ye want tae flee, div ye?'

Jamie said nothing.

'Ye ken,' remarked Andy, 'accidents can happen. Ye nicht jist happen tae fa'owre the edge, here. That's whit a'body would think, if ye was fun deed at the bottom. Especially ainsie they kent you was keen on fleein. They would a' say, "Puir Jamie! Thocht he could flee owre the Deil's Leap! Puir Jamie! But then, he wasnae a' that bricht, was he? No quite a hunner per cent."''

'Is that why ye want tae kill me? Because ah'm no a hunner per cent? Because ye think ah'm daft?'

'No. Because ye tried tae kill Lintie.'

'Ah didnae, ah tell ye. Ah didnae! And if ye dinnae believe me, ask Lintie. She'll tell ye hersel'. Ah wud never hairm her. No Lintie.'

Nell spoke up:

'But ye did an a', Jamie. Whit about a' they bruises on her puir wee arms?'

'Ah didnae mean tae hurt her. Ah never thocht. She kens fine ah never meant tae hurt her. Jist ask her. Let's go and get her.'

'She's owre ill. Lyin in her bed, quite feverish she wis, whan ah left her.'

Andy Pearson, beginning to feel the role of principal was slipping away from him, said:

'Ye neednae think ye're gaun tae get her or onie-yin else. Ye'll jist stey there, wi' yer back to the Deil's Leap, till we've deciddit whit tae dae wi' ye. Ye're a public menace, and we've got tae protect oor bairns frae the likes o' you.' Andy took another step forward, so that he was now only a few inches from his adversary.

Jamie gave a quick glance behind him, saw just how near he was to the low parapet, and tried to edge nearer the middle of the road. But the villagers quickly stepped in to fill the gap. Jamie had no space in front of him, and all the space in the world behind him.

For the first time he realized the gravity of the situation, and a great fear showed in his eyes. Still clutching his stone, he called upon the only power who could save him.

'Lintie!' he cried out, '*Lintie!* Come quick!' His huge

voice echoed down the hill.

And from below came Lintie's shrill little voice:

'Ah'm comin, Jamie. Ah'm comin.'

All the villagers turned round and saw Lintie's small figure running up the hill towards them. She arrived, panting, and they made way for her.

'Jamie! Jamie! Whit's wrang?'

'Look, Lintie, ah've brocht ye a stane. A rare muckle stane, wi' sparkly bits!'

Jamie knelt down and put the stone on the ground in front of Lintie. She knelt too, and began tracing the shiny bits with her forefinger, forgetful of her grudge.

'Oh Jamie, it's lovely. Is it siller?'

'Looks like it. But ah dinnae really ken, like.'

'Come on, let's tak it hame.'

Lintie stood up and signalled to Jamie to pick up the stone. He obeyed, and the pair set off. The crowd, which had closed in round them, opened up to let them through. Then, rather sheepishly, the villagers all followed the two friends, who were chatting away merrily, their differences forgotten along with their fears.

Gradually the men and women began talking too, eager to forget their recent ferocity as well as their sudden volte-face.

'That taucht him a lesson, oniehow.'

'Needed a bit o' a scare, he did.'

'Aye, he really thocht we wis gaun tae push him owre.'

'As if we'd iver hae dune sic a like thing!'

'Course no!'

'There's nae harm in the laddie, really.'

Andy, scowling furiously, pushed his way through the crowd and hurried past the two reunited friends, muttering

MAGDA'S LADY

something about having better things to do than play with children.

And the crowd, seeing him stride off, found their new scapegoat, and murmured that they thought he really did mean to push poor Jamie over the cliff edge.

'Puir Jamie! He means weel enow.'

'No like that yin.'

'Oh, that yin!' with a look at the receding Andy.

'Yon's a thrawn bugger, yon!'

'Ah've aye thocht there was something no canny about him.'

'Richt eneuch, see last week?. . . '

By the time they all got home their world order had been restored.