

2200 words approx

JAMIE'S CASTLE

As soon as the School-bus drew up outside the castle, Jamie felt sure that he'd been there before.

He frowned, trying to remember. He was certain that once you got inside the old gate-house there was a wide passage with a curved roof and then fourteen stone steps leading up to the door that no-one was supposed to open.

So while the others ran excitedly across the draw-bridge shouting to one another Jamie hung back, staring up at the high stone walls and the two half-ruined towers.

"Don't drag behind, Jamie," shouted Mr Twemlow, bringing him back to earth with a bump.

"Judy!" he called in a loud whisper, and Judy stopped and looked back.

"Whatyawant?"

"Lend us your torch."

"Why?"

"I'll give you my Mars Bar."

"A whole one?"

Jamie nodded.

"Hurry up, Judith," shouted Mr Twemlow, a long way ahead by now.

"There you are." Judy thrust the torch into Jamie's hand, took the Mars Bar and ran after the others.

Jamie didn't put on Judy's torch at once, but felt his way

up the stone steps by keeping in touch with the wall, and when he reached the wooden door, now crumbling with age, he was surprised to find how heavy it was when he pushed it open.

Once inside, he shut it carefully behind him in case someone came back to look for him, and then switched on Judy's torch.

'PRIVATE. DANGEROUS STONEMWORK' was printed on the blackboard across the stone spiral staircase. It led downwards into darkness and the steps were more worn than he remembered them, in places completely broken away. He trod carefully, keeping close to the wall.

When he'd counted to a hundred-and-twenty-three he thought he should be near the bottom because fixed in his mind was the number 'hundred-and-fifty-one'. The air was cold and damp and the walls and the underside of the spiral steps above his head were dripping with moisture.

'Of course', he thought, remembering the underground river.

On the wall, someone had carved a dagger in the stonework and underneath it the date '1698'. Had that been there before? He thought not.

He had been right about the hundred-and-fifty-one though, for that was when the steps stopped and led out onto a long stone platform with iron rings along its edge. The wooden rowing-boat was still there as well, hanging by a chain from one of the rings because there was no longer any water for it to float in, only an empty stone channel stained green with dried slime.

The old man was nowhere to be seen.

Jamie flashed Judy's torch round the tunnels at each end of the platform and thought how like an underground railway it was -

an underground railway with no rails. Then he climbed down into the stone channel and began walking up it to the right. He felt sure that was the way they'd gone before.

At the beginning of the tunnel, he stopped. What had happened when they'd gone inside? He couldn't have been walking because of the river, so they must have been in the boat. Had something dreadful happened or was that just his imagination? He flashed Judy's torch up it, but it lit such a small area that he wasn't at all sure that he wanted to explore further. Certainly not at that moment - he had no idea what might be up there in the darkness waiting for him.

He peered anxiously up it for several minutes and then told himself that he mustn't miss the coach home and had better get going. So he climbed back onto the platform and ran as fast as he dared up the spiral staircase and shut the wooden door behind him. Then he went to find the others.

Mr Twemlow had already sent someone back to look for him and now gave him a good talking-to about the dangers of going off on his own in strange places.

But Jamie's mind was elsewhere. He knew he should have gone at least a little way up the tunnel and he was cross with himself that he'd been too frightened. Why was that? Was it just because it was dark, or was there another reason? And why couldn't he remember what had happened in the tunnel, when he could remember everything else so clearly?

He gave Judy back her torch and climbed into the coach with the others, his mind full of muddled thoughts chasing each other round

and round inside his head.

That night, when he went up to bed, he took a notebook and pencil with him and put them next to his pillow.

"What are they for?" his mother asked when she came up to turn off the light.

"In case I want to write something", he said, and turned over and shut his eyes.

For eight nights nothing happened - no dreams, either waking or sleeping - and he began thinking that perhaps the whole castle business was just one of those odd times when you think you've seen something before but you haven't really.

Then, in the middle of one night - it was a Sunday - he awoke with a cry of pain, wet with sweat and with his legs and arms stretched out at strange angles. Not only that, but when he switched on the light to reach for his notebook he found that his hands were trembling so much that he could only just write.

'The steps are not old or worn but white and shining, and although the door is heavy it opens quite easily. There are a hundred-and-fifty-one steps. At the bottom, the old man is waiting. He bows to me and takes my cloak. He is short and has a beard and a brown face, and he is wearing a leather jacket and leather trousers with long boots reaching up to his thighs. So am I. The river is running from right to left, and he helps me into the boat and takes the oars himself, rowing up-stream.

After a little while the tunnel begins to get lower and narrower so that the oars almost scrape the sides, but I'm not nervous even though the roof is only just above my head. The tunnel

is lit by flares burning in iron brackets on the wall. It is hot and the flares smell of tar.

We seem to be going somewhere important, and the old man keeps looking at me in a certain way while he rows as if to say, 'This time it's up to you.'

After maybe half-a-mile the tunnel ends, and in front of us are four stone steps leading up to a long room with thick stone columns holding up a curved roof. The river disappears underground beneath the steps. The old man stares hard at me again and then gives me a heavy dagger with a leather handle and a iron key which he puts in my belt.

It is understood that I have to walk up the steps and enter the room alone. I do this, and when I look back I see the old man already rowing away.

The room is lit by flares, just like the tunnel, but they move about because there is a wind. Where is it from? It becomes difficult to see clearly because a fog is rolling along the floor towards me from the far end of the room. When it reaches me I try to cut through it with my dagger as if that would clear it, and then I walk straight into the middle of it and come out the other side.

That is when I see the iron bars in the right-hand wall, and everything is suddenly clear - why I've come and what I have to do.

Behind the bars is a stone cell about ten feet deep, carved out of the rock, and along one side of it is a stone bench with an iron ring in it. A girl is tied to the ring by a chain. Her hair has been cut short like a boy's and she wears a long dress

made of grey wool. When she sees me, she doesn't look surprised but holds up her arm so that I can see where the chain is locked onto her wrist.

Some of the iron bars form a door and it has a square lock set into it. I try the key from my belt, but although it seems to fit, the lock won't move. I look up at the girl to explain this and I see that she is looking at something over my shoulder.

I turn, and it is a man, but a bigger man than any I have ever seen, and he carries a rope net in one hand and a sword in the other. He throws the net at me and it goes over my head and pins me down so that I can hardly move. Then he begins hacking at me with the sword. I hold up my dagger to keep it away, but the man is too strong and the dagger is knocked out of my hand. The sword hits my shoulder and my leather jacket is ripped and bloody.

Now that he sees I am helpless, he grins. I try to pick up the dagger but he kicks it away and it skids across the floor towards the cell. I see the girl straining at her chain, trying to reach it with her foot. She gets it, picks it up and then hurls it at the man. It hits him in the face and he gives a dreadful cry.

I am struggling to get out of the net. The man has dropped his sword and is staggering about because he cannot see. His face is bloody. I climb underneath the net and pick up the man's sword although it is almost too heavy for me. I run at him with it and when it goes into him he falls to the ground.

I go back to the iron door and try to turn the key with my left hand - my right arm is too painful to move - but the lock still won't turn so I go back and get the dagger. The man is still not

moving.

I take out the key from the lock and try the point of the dagger, turning it this way and that until I feel the lock snap. I open the door. The girl holds up her wrist for me to unlock her chain and this time the key fits perfectly and the chain falls to the ground. She is free.

We go out of the cell together, but then we hear men's voices coming from the direction of the river. They are very faint but they sound rough and threatening and they are getting louder. Although we can't hear the words, it is clear that they are after us.

The girl seizes my left arm and takes me back to the far end of the long room, where the wind came from. Three feet above the floor is a cave, dark inside and sloping upwards. I have to be helped into it because of my arm, and the girl half drags me up it, pulling me round the bends and shielding my head from the low roof.

The wind is stronger the higher up the cave we go, and the men's voices become faint once more. It takes a long while for us to get to the top of the cave because I am so slow, but at last we are out of it and lying in the long grass on the edge of the moat.

There is a full moon. The water in the moat is cold and I can only swim with one arm so the girl supports me across it and then we climb up the far bank and run away from the castle. When I look back I see the high walls and the towers, and they are not ruined and old, but new and shining.'

Jamie got back into bed when he had finished and lay for a long while looking up at the ceiling and thinking.

The next morning, at breakfast, he asked if he could go to the

castle again - the one they'd been to for the School Outing.

"I'll ask Dad if he can take you Saturday."

"Can't I go on my own? There's a bus goes nearly all the way."

"We'll see."

"Please."

"Oh, alright - I suppose there's no harm."

He took his own torch this time, and because he wasn't part of a Group he had to pay £1.50 to get in. The man wanted him to wait for the Guided Tour as well, but Jamie slid off quietly while he wasn't looking and disappeared behind the wooden door.

He counted the steps again, out of habit by now, and at the platform he tried to remember everything as it had been when the river was flowing and the old man had helped him into the boat. Then he climbed down into the dried-up channel and began walking to the right as if he was going upstream.

At the beginning of the tunnel he wanted again to turn back, but this time he forced himself to go on. He had to walk a long way to get to the four steps, the air getting stale and thick, but when he reached them and walked into the long room, it became colder and clearer and he could feel the wind coming from higher up.

There was no fog this time and his torch shone clearly on the iron-barred cell with its door still half-open and on the stone bench with its iron ring and chain.

He sat down on it and tried to imagine the girl sitting there as well and then he shone his torch outside the cell where he and the man had fought.

He stayed there for a long while, letting his mind drift

and listening to the silence, until he thought he could almost hear the river lapping against the steps.

Then, very faintly as before, he heard the men's voices. They were rough and threatening and although he couldn't hear the words, it was clear that they were coming for him.

He jumped up and at once his right arm began hurting. He looked down at where the girl had once sat and saw that the stone bench was now white and newly-carved and that the chain was not old and rusted but smooth and shining.

The voices sounded as if they were very near now, and without thinking Jamie held out his left hand and felt it taken.

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