

HOW TILL HOOLETGLESS LEARNT TAE FLY

by Thomas Clark

Tae tell ye the truth, Till Hooletgless had mair nor less had enough o his auld life by the time he left Arbroath for guid.

For mony years he'd been ridin aw around the toons and clachans o Scotland, playin pranks on the lairds and giein hauners tae the puir fowk. Sae when he troddled intae Cadzow on his wee dun mare that Monday morn, he'd awready made his mind up tae caw canny wi the cairry-on and settle doon - get himsel a job, mebbe, and a wee roof ower his heid.

“Ach, I’ve had a guid run,” Till said tae himsel, “But I cannae spend the rest o ma life gettin a chasin aff the Laird o This, or the High-Heid-Yin o That. Chitterin awa aw nicht in a stable, wi a paved stane for a pillae and ma ain breith for a bedsheet... Nah, that’s no the gemme for me.”

Till shook his heid and laughed tae himsel, thinkin o aw the fantoosh fowk he'd gied the rin-around ower the years, and his wee dun mare let oot a dulesome whinny.

“Och, I ken, pal! I’ll miss it tae. Richtin wrangs is a fine profession, but there’s nae money in it. It’s time tae find oorsels a job wi a wee bit mair tae it, eh. Somethin we can really get oor teeth intae.”

Sae when Till cam intae Cadzow and fund oot he wis awready weel-kent tae the burghers there, he wis fair oorie aboot it. But it soon turnt oot he needna hae fashed. The fowk that bided in Cadzow were happy as onythin tae see the famous Till Hooletgless ride intae their wee toon. In fact, as he trotted on doon the high street, there wis that mony punters pointin at him and smilin that Till couldnae help feelin like he wis tapster o the entire heap.

“Hoi! Is that wha I think it is?”

“Thon’s Till Hooletgless! He’s the fella that stole the brig o Kirkcudbright!”

“How’re ye daein, lads?” Till winked at them as he passed, “Keepin busy?”

“Would ye credit that?” anither voice cried oot, “Till Hooletgless! Here in Cadzow! Hiv ye heard he’d hauf o Hamilton thinkin he’d turnt watter intae wine?”

Till smiled doon at the new speaker.

“Weel, there’s a wee bit mair tae it than that, but...”

“Thon’s the bampot that spent twa weeks tryin tae learn a cuddie how tae talk! He’s aff his heid!”

“Eh,” Till said, frownin, “I’m no shuir ye’ve heard that yin richt... See, whit happened wis...”

“Haw Till!” somebody else shoutit, “Hiv ye got ony o yer baw-heided stunts lined up for us in Cadzow?”

“Weel, I widnae exactly caw thaim baw-heided,” Till said, “But I’ve mebbe got a couple o wee ideas I’m minded tae...”

But naebody wis listenin. It was as if the hale toon had gathert there, laughin and jokin about Till and aw his exploits. And for the next few days, it wis like that everywhaur Till went. Whether he wis seekin oot some lodgins, or tryin tae pick up a wee bit wirk, aw onybody wantit tae blether about wis the merry cantrips he’d been at in the past, and the wans they howped he wis plannin for the future.

“Oor provost’s a richt scunner, eh?” they’d say tae him, “Think ye might sort him oot the wey ye did yon merchant in Musselburgh?”

“Weel, I dinnae ken the man,” Till would answer, “I mean, thon merchant wis naethin but a pauchler and a radge. Itherwise, I’d hae left him alane.”

“Bigger fish tae fry, is that whit ye’re sayin? Ha ha! I bet! Heidbanger like yersel, there’s nae tellin whit ye’ll get up tae!”

And Till would scart his neb and stare faur intae the distance.

Efter twa or three days o that, Till stapped gawin oot in Cadzow awthegither, and disappeared frae sicht. The toonsfowk were frantic wi guessin at whaur he had went and whit he wis up tae. They were certain he wis schemin up some unco ploy, and when he rode back intae toon a fortnicht later, the mercat square was rammied wi fowk waitin tae hear his news.

“Whaur’ve ye been, man?” they yollert at him, “Whit’ve ye been up tae?”

Till looked oot intae the crood. His face was awfy thochtfu.

“Ach, I wisnae shuir if I wis gaun tae tell ye, tae be honest. But noo that ye’re aw here, I doot I nicht as weel. Ye see,” Till said, strokin his horse’s mane, “I’ve been awa teachin masel how tae fly.”

There were quiet giggles fae oot the crood, and the toonsfowk pinched each ither’s airms wi glee.

“Ye... Ye *whit?!!*” they shoutit.

“Aye, I think I’ve aboot got the hing o it noo,” Till went on, rubbin the back o his heid wi a wince, “It’s wan o thae things ye’ve kind o got tae learn jist by daein it.”

By noo the crood wis a low rummle o smirtles and smothered laughin. The hale thing wis mair nor onybody in Cadzow could ever hiv howped for.

“Weel, c’mon show us then!” somebody shoutit.

Till looked intae the sky wi doot.

“It’s... It’s no that I *cannae*. It’s jist that I’m no sae guid fae a staunin stairt. But I’ll tell ye whit, though,” Till went on, as the toonsfowk mummelt and

grummelt, “If ye aw come doon tae the toon haw balcony the morra morn, I’ll be gled tae gie ye a wee demonstration then.”

And the hale clamjamfrie o them gied up a muckle cheer, and filled Till’s hauns wi drink fae then until the sun went doon.

The follaein mornin, when Till clambert oot on tae the toon haw balcony, aw the toonsfowk ablo could see he wis the warse for wear. He had his bunnet doon-sclentit ower wan o his een, and he mounted the cantle wan leg at a time, as if it wis a camsteirious mare.

“Watch oot! He’s for takkin a heider richt ower it!” the toonsfowk shoutit, and they aw took a few steps awa.

But at lang and last Till got up ontae the ledge, and for a meenit he hunkered doon there wi his airms flung oot, sweein aboot in the wund. Tae the crood o thaim aw starin up, he wis the absolute spit o wan o thae glaikit-lookin gargoyles on the kirk across the road. Somebody startit shoutin.

“Dae it, Till! Dae it!”

“C’mon, mun! Show us ye can fly!”

“Aye! Jump! Jump! Jump!”

And afore lang, the hale bunch o them were yollerin up at Hooletgless, darin him tae jump. He looked doon at them for a meenit wia muckle grin on his face, then he lifted up his haun for silence.

“Are yese aw ready for me tae jump then, aye? See if auld Till the heidbanger’s *really* able tae fly?”

“Aye, we’re aw ready! Stap yer haverin and jist *dae* it!”

Till listened tae aw the fowk tellin him tae jump. He nodded a few times, and took wan deep braith. Then he straichtened up, pit his bunnet back on, and stepped doon ontae the balcony.

For a meenit naebody said onythin. Then, there wis bedlam. Awbody stairtit screamin and shoutin up at Till, cawin him aw the names that are unner the sun, and some o the wans that arenae.

“Fearty! Ye’re naethin but a big fearty!”

“Aye! Imagine gawin aboot tellin awbody ye can fly when ye cannae! Whit a haufwit!”

Till leaned oot ower the balcony, and looked doon at them. He wisnae smilin ony mair.

“Aw, *I’m* the haufwit, aye? Weel, if ye’re here because ye *actually* think I can fly, ye’re mair o a haufwit than I am,” he said tae the thrang, “And if ye’re here tae watch cause ye think I *canna*e fly...Man! I dinnae ken whit that maks ye, except that heidbanger disnae even run it close.”

And wi that Till Hooletgless left the silent crood, and wis niver seen in Cadzow toon again.