

The Magical Mountain

Chapter One

It was in the year of the great fall, when hoar frosts abounded, pine trees dusted with sugar icing. There was a sadness that fell like dusk.

In the land that noone knew lived two, Quaestari and her husband Quaestor. They were greatly in love, but there was something not quite right. One day Quaestari said to her husband: “Husband, you will have to go to the mountain”. They both had big soulful eyes. He looked at her with his. The mountain on the other side of the valley, he thought. Noone goes there. “It is on the other side of the valley. I will draw you a map and tell you about all the dangers”, “and wonders” she added, about the Avalanche Terrain, the Fallen Rocks, the Forest of Fairies, the Valley of Treasure, which you must not enter for fear of being lured...there is much treasure there, buried and lying about like flowers on the mountainside, like gold just waiting to be picked...but you mustn’t...”, the River of Dreams—and then, the Secret Door at the foot of the mountain. This leads to a secret cave, wherein you will find the answer.

He knew he had to do this, but it filled him with dread. He did not know anything more than the land that noone knew; he was afraid; what was the answer, what was the question. He could not say.

He packed up his green backpack that he got free once. He couldn’t remember where. It just came. He could not believe how nice it was, brand new, with pockets, even secret pockets for all the things that you would want on a great expedition; his favourite breakfast mug, strapped to a special lapel, socks, pullovers, tee-shirts for the desert, thick wooly shirts for the cold, toothbrush, a special tool with trowel, screwdriver, saw, knife, fork, spoon—everything he could possibly need for...the journey into...the unknown...of course, chocolate covered Kendal Mintcake. This would be a lifesaver!

He looked at Quaestari with his big soulful eyes, turned and bowed his head as if into a big headwind, and set off.

Chapter Two

Without looking back he placed one foot in front of the other and let his feet take him as if they knew the way. On and on he went, all on the first morning. He passed rivers and trees and birds and all sorts of wild animals who looked at him as if to say “don’t you know?”; this is the terrain that noone passes through, not even we wild animals if we can help it. Even the air changed; from silver to shivering cold, back through to rainbows and hanging something, dull and breathless, then clear again like a mountain stream. He felt he had passed through railway stations that he had heard about that took him to another country, to other countries.

There was noone, not anybody to say Good Morning to or What’s the Weather going to be today. He started to Goodday with the animals that he caught sight of, behind a tree, peeping from under a stone, looking with eyes popping out of the water. Good Morning and how are you today. At first they thought him very strange, but after a while they said things like: “he’s very polite; he must have a good mother; he must have been brought up properly”, yet they didn’t reply; they just watched, like a network of spies, observing and passing on information down the chain of command along the dirt track, to the valley and beyond.

Trudge, trudge, trudge, down the stony path, along grassy verges, through echoey ravines, through copses, even full-blown woods, clearings where the air changed again and you could hear your own voice talking to you as crisp as a chocolate bar. Chocolate bar, that gave him an idea, so he found a comfy looking grassy knoll, swung off his backpack and sat down for the first time. He breathed, leaned back, took in the scene with his great big soulful eyes. What am I doing here? But wait, it's really rather nice. I haven't seen anything like this...ever...in my whole life! It's...beautiful and the birds are singing music that I have never heard before.

He must have fallen asleep because when he woke it was getting dark, the woods were getting closer and the birds were singing the song he knew: it's time for bed. Bed, he thought, then he looked down to his left, something out of the corner of his eye, a neat as you like pile of acorns, and there chestnuts, and there raspberries and strawberries. This is where I'll sleep tonight, and this is my supper. Thank you he whispered to the night and settled down right there.

In the morning he found a blanket over him keeping him nice and warm, made of autumnal leaves all sewn together with spider's web. He had to marvel. He looked around. There were eyes everywhere. He got up took off his felt hat and bowed. There was a great rustling.

Having tied everything in its place and neatly folded the leafen blanket and put everything away prim and proper, he swung his backpack up as if he had been doing this for a long time, placed it in a nice comfy position and off he trudged, past the clearing, into the woods again, gradually going down all the time. Down, down, down, he went, through changing atmospheres and woody scenery, until he came to what Quaestari had told him about, his first obstacle, Avalanche Terrain, and fallen rocks. He knew it, because when he looked left and right, the mountain just seemed to go on for ever, up, up, up, steep as you like—and there in front of him, were the rocks, jagged, sharp, of all angles and all sizes, dangerous, just waiting saying come and try us. There was no way around this, so he tried. Forward he went, placing a foot on a sort of ledge on one big boulder, then another on whatever he could find by way of foot placement holding, scramble, scramble, stumble, stumble, cut, cut, bleed, bleed, but he did not give up. On he went. He stopped and surveyed as far as he could see fallen rock, sharp, jagged, dangerous—but, there, off to his left: look a bit of a path, like the one he first started off on. I'm going there he said to himself. He must have said it just a little bit loudly, because he was sure that he heard a lot of Yes Yeses!

Chapter three

Little did he know. If only he had listened to everything that Quaestari had said, had warned him about. First, he smelt the smacking tang of resin like the after-shave he remembered from his youth, his daddy, then he realised he was gradually entering deeper and deeper into a pine forest. This is the Forest of Fairies. Brown of bough and green of pine mantle was all he could see. Deeper the green, viridian, burnt sienna bark. The scent intoxicating. Little scamperings and mutterings like rustling leaves all around. He forged on, intrepid. Suddenly he stopped. What am I doing? What am I doing, he repeated, aloud. A little bell sounded: You are wandering lost in the Forest of Fairies, he thought he could make out through the sighing of the trees. Fairies? He said, a bit louder. Yes, came the reply. For a second he was flummoxed, then he collected himself, for he *was* well brought up, then he said in his best politest voice Good Morning, or is it Night, because it is so dark in here, in fact I can hardly see

anything. Then as an afterthought, which was a stroke of genius, he said: and, um, would it be possible for you to help me, please? For him this was a stroke of luck because it is one of the main rules of fairies that they must help someone who asks, especially if it is done ever so politely. Suddenly, all sorts of little lights came on throughout the woods, on branches, twigs, from behind trunks, until the whole forest was alight with lights like at Christmas time. It was magical, all sorts of colours, twinkling and saying without saying follow me. There was a sort of music halfway between the sap, the resin, the earthen spongy forest floor and around all the trees, in the trees, from the trees. He knew that he was safe, he smiled and raised his felt cap to say thank you, and followed he knew not where, he just followed.

When he got to the other side, he saw light, daylight, grey, wiped across the whole sky, getting bigger and bigger as he approached the edge. You'd better sleep here, have a rest, because you have a long journey ahead of you said a little choir of tinkly voices. So he did, he unfurled his leafen blanket, lay down on the moss at the edge of the forest and marvelled at the sight ahead of him: a sheer cliff face drop, to a sprawling valley teeming with verdure, twinkling in the evening light shifting as the sun went to bed behind the big hill, or rather mountain. Mountain! Could this be the mountain?

Chapter four

Sometimes one takes a right turn and sometimes one takes a left turn, sometime a right turn and sometimes a wrong turn, but there is never a wrong turn Quaestari said, it is just your attitude. It felt like a wrong turn because he turned left into what turned out to be the Land of Others. How did he know this. Quaestari had told him about this, warned him about it. Try to avoid it at all costs. He was in it. He knew. The land was flat, arid, like a desert (the only thing he was glad of at this time was that he had brought his tee-shirts), it was hot, the sun burned down like through a magnifying glass. He only had three packs of orange juice left, the sort with a straw. He would keep it to one pack a day. The sun was so hot it was all he could think of, sun, sun, sun. Suddenly, a beautiful maiden appeared swathed in a silken sari. Would you like some water? She said invitingly, her voice suffused with a watery bubbly music. He tried to think hard. Why would he suddenly be offered water in the middle of the desert? What should I say? Of course his upbringing got the better of him and he replied in his politest of, courtestest, manners: "I would be delighted to have some water, if you have any to spare". She smiled like a sunbeam and moonbeam all in one. Follow me. Now what? Shall I follow he thought silently. Of course! Besides, where else are you to go? And where are you going? Well, he thought quickly and again he had always been brought up to be honest, so he simply said: "To the mountain, to the secret door, to find the answer". "Ah!" she said, smilingly, but of course she already knew. He followed as her bare feet left neat imprints on the perfect yellow sand. She turned as if to see if he was following, but she already knew, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" she said. "Of course!". "I mean, of course I don't mind. Please, go ahead, ask". "Why were you not frightened when I appeared to you suddenly as I did and what do you think of me?" "Well," he started, and believing as always that honesty was the best policy, he simply blurted out "taking the second part of your question first, which relates to the first part, how can I be frightened of such a beautiful person as yourself? And, instinctively I knew you were nice and noone to be afraid of...", "especially since you were inviting me to have some water" he joked. "There are some that are afraid of us because we are different and live apart here in

the desert and...”, “That does not bother me. I was brought up to always believe in everyone, that everyone is beautiful and especially inside where you cannot see. Everyone just needs to be given a chance...”. Just as suddenly as she appeared, she was gone, there was a beautiful amphora of sparkling water beside him, and what’s more he was on the edge of the desert, overlooking the gorgeous valley and the mountain shimmering beyond. What a journey I’m having he thought. Not too long ago I was in the Land that Noone Knew and now I am glad that I’ve been to the Land of Others. I feel...I feel...*I feel!*

This was time for his third night’s sleep, so on the edge of the desert of the Land of Others, overlooking the valley and the mountain as clear as a razor silhouetted against the brilliant indigo night sky simply bristling with sharp twinkling stars, he settled down under his leafen blanket and fell fast asleep.

Chapter five

In the morning he stretched a nice stretchy stretch reaching up to the sky and waggled his toes in the soft sandy earth. Time to get going again. But, he knew. He knew there was no way but to return to the Avalanche Terrain, to the treacherous fallen rocks. It was the only way through. So off he went.

The feelings of dread returned to him as he rounded a corner at the edge of the woods to see the impenetrable pass of rocks below. Before that, lay a lake of the most beautiful flowers, of blues and gold, faded pink and other subtle hues. It was a real meadow to gladden the heart before the ardour that lay ahead. Like a seasoned climber, he instinctively zig-zagged choosing just the right path for his traverses down the scree filled mountain side, stopping occasionally only to admire and wish Good Morning to the odd brave pretty flower that stubbornly insisted on growing out of nothing. This was easy. Now came the rocks. He took a deep breath and having a brainwave reached into his backpack and pulled out the blue and white and silvery paper covered Kendal Mintcake, the lifesaver. He snapped off one big chunk, then for good measure another, let them melt in his mouth then with the instant fructose hit he jumped up on the highest part of the rocks he could reach and started to climb and inch forward. Slip, slip, cut, cut, again as before, yet this time he did not give up. There were gashes all over him, blood staining his tee-shirt and shorts, even his socks. Somehow his hat stayed as if glued to his head. At least he had proper climbing boots which protected his ankles and gave him some sort of grip. This went on, it seemed, for days. It may have been hours, or months, or...time passed, interminably. The sun wheeled, the night came and on he went. He could not camp for any rest. There was nowhere flat with grass or sand, just rocks shaped deliberately into the most fantastical shapes with knife edges.

When he came to the plain, he hardly knew what he had achieved. His mind had been robotic, computer-like calculating in micro seconds what decision to make to place his foot, jump, dance, play hop-scotch, just pressing forward all the time, no stopping. He was there though. He stopped, placed both hands on his shins, like an athlete after a race, got his breath back, and realising his achievement stretched back to wave to the crowd. Could he hear clapping and cheers. He must be dazed. It was all that sun. But, look! What was that directly in front of him lying on the ground. It was unmistakable, a gold ingot the size of his mother’s muffins. Just lying there. Then as he stretched out his gaze before him down the valley alongside the stream, or rather river, down in the gorge, he saw what reminded him of history, literally The Field of Cloth of Gold.

Chapter six

He couldn't help himself, or rather he did help himself, to as much gold as he could handle. It seemed as if he could not pick up gold ingots fast enough to stuff into all his pockets and hiding places in his backpack. His mind was immediately changed from thinking rocks and sharp edges to gold and more gold, how much was all of this worth, what would it get. He was happy, deliriously. Delirious was the word. He was dizzy and kept stuffing yet more and more gold into whatever crevice he found about his person, in his socks, under his shirt, cramming yet more into his backpack. With each increased load he did not realise that it was getting heavier and heavier. He could hardly move and he was sinking, sinking into the field of treasure. He was soon going to be buried there and become another treasure himself below the soil, hidden. Something clicked in his brain and he realised that (a) Quaestari had warned him about this and (b) he had been brought up not to chase treasures upon this earth; he had no time for materialistic possessions—what was he doing!?! As quickly as he could, in a frenzy, he started throwing out the gold lumps from his backpack, from everywhere. With a mixture of delirium, frenzy and a cocktail of other emotions he lost his balance, fell over the side of the ravine, tumbling down, down, down, hitting tree roots growing out of the rock side, clumps of grasses, rocky outcrops, twisting turning, at times flying...until he landed on what seemed like a raft. Logs tied together with lianas. He did not have time to wonder who had made this craft. The river close up was rushing steeply as a veritable torrent. He had to be careful of overhanging branches and rocks jutting out into the water, yet there was nothing he could do. He was powerless, the speed was faster than anything he could imagine. The roaring of the waters, the rapids and what was happening to his mind. All he could do was to lie down prone on the raft's surface and be buffeted about from rock outpost to rock outpost, accelerating at an increasingly steeper incline. It was like being on speed, heroin, cocaine and LSD all at the same time. It was literally ecstasy times ten or more, colours and shapes like the kaleidoscope that he was given when he was little. The whole world was turning. It was night the darkness of outer space at the same time; stars revolved; he could see into the heart of matter, atoms, stars, all the same. Involuntarily he flung out an arm. This was the River of Dreams. He felt it tug, or rather, it seemed, being tugged. This was all sensation. Gradually it seemed that he was pulled, twisted, manoeuvred onto the far shore, the river bank on the other side of the ravine. He was lifted aloft by a thousand hands and with many more feet he was gently carried up the mountainside. It was rabbits, hares, voles, mice, rats, badgers, birds of all sorts, weasels, stoats, frogs (the one with big eyes popping out of the water) and many others too. All he could do was moan "brothers and sisters". A vague notion of giving them his last bar of Kendal Mintcake monopolised his thinking, such as it was, but he did not have the strength. They, as he had done, pressed onwards and upwards, inching their way up the lower skirts of the great mountain.

Chapter seven

Eventually, they got there and placed him down. In front of him was the amphora filled with delicious pure water. He drank from it and poured the remainder all over himself, washing away all the blood stains. He was awake. He could see, clearly.

There was the door, built into the side of the mountain, of dark oak with wrought iron black studs, a huge frame around and a massive key in an equally massive lock. The door was slightly open. With both hands he heaved and just managed to slip inside. He was in. The door clanged. It was dark, completely black. He could see nothing. Again, as before, fear started to nibble at his toes. He went forward, stumbling, feeling what he could with each foot proffered out as an advance guard before each step. On and on he went, deeper and deeper into the mountain, on a downward arc. In the end he simply felt he could go no more. Rather losing faith, he slumped to the ground and found what he thought was rock to lean against with his back, feet stretched out before him like a little boy lost. He had no one. All he had was his backpack which he clutched as if it were a teddy bear or other childhood friend, tightly! What was that!? He felt a lump. No! It was one of those large chunks of gold, he thought he had got rid of. He started to feel despondent, in fact depressed. A large black hole appeared before him into which he was gradually disappearing. For some reason a true story his mother told him came to him at that moment. A person had simply asked her for money for the fare to get home overseas. She gave the money and when he had said how can I pay you back, she said don't, just hand it on. He instantly, knew what he had to do: to use the gold to help others less fortunate than him and his kin, to help animals such as had helped him, creatures of all kinds, even trees like in the forest, flowers like on the mountainside, all plants—and he knew he would not have a single part of it for himself. The black hole dissolved and he felt as light as air, lighter than air. He felt as if he levitated slightly and that a glow like light shone from within.

Then the darkness came again, for it *was* dark. And as he looked into the nothingness all around him, it seemed as if shadows formed within shadows, were moving and even coming towards him. He seemed to recognise something. “Quaestari, is that you?”. It was.

Short epilogue

Quaestari led him back to the light. He lived up to his promises and the gold seemed to multiply, so that he did wondrous things. He became a legend in his time, although that mattered to him not one jot. He found the small word that is really a very big word: love.

THE END

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