

A TWINKL ORIGINAL

The Man Who Bought a

MOUNTAIN



One

“Everyone: stick together, look out for each other and stay on the trail, please. The path is really rocky and steep. It’s mostly uphill from here – but I suppose you’d all guessed that! As the elders say, the longest journey begins with a single step.”

Yash finished his speech and smiled at the weather-beaten faces looking back at him. He had spoken loudly and clearly to the group of nine men and women, most of whom shuffled from foot to foot, adjusting huge rucksacks as they listened.

“Jeez! How old is this kid, eleven?” muttered one man towards the back.

“Actually, I’m twelve.” Yash gritted his teeth.

Twelve years living at the base of this mountain, he thought to himself, compared with the twelve hours since you got off the plane.

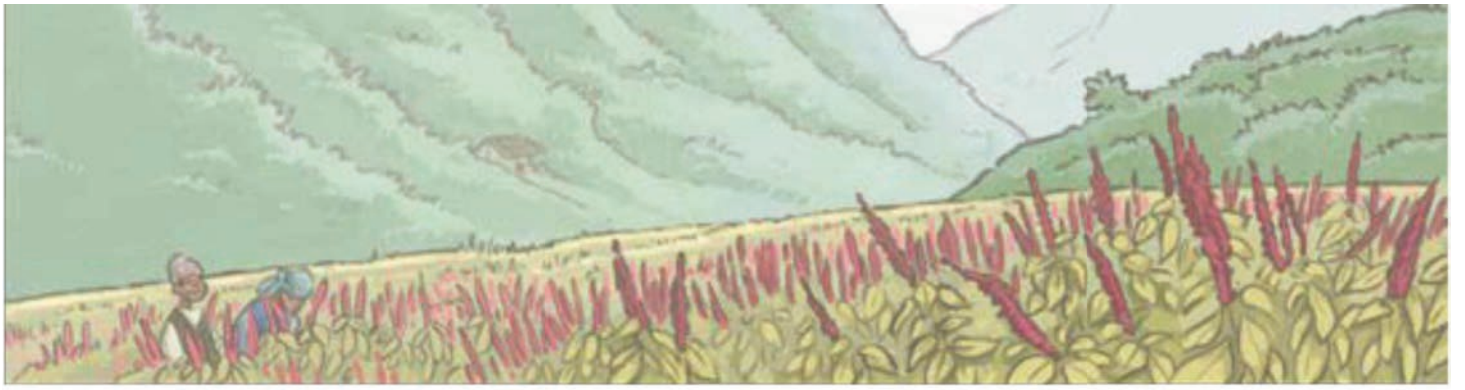
A wise voice then echoed in his head.

Always be welcoming to friends but be even more welcoming to visitors.

He forced another smile and then fastened his rarely brushed brown hair into a messy knot with a plain elasticated band which he took from his wrist. “Right, follow me. It’s a few hours to the base camp. The Jagurdwa mountain is home to thousands of different species of animals and plants...”

Yash began his ritual of information and storytelling as he led the trek. He weaved his familiar route through the fields of amaranth crops, up a steep slope and past the Spring of Hope, where clear, cool ground water pooled gently before tumbling down the mountain rocks.

The area around the Spring of Hope always reminded him how much new life came from even the tiniest nooks and crannies on the vast



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Jagurdwa mountain. Cracks and crevices along the side of the steep path were home to beetles and spiders and, behind the waterfall, a damp, shallow cave served as a perfect hiding place for other small creatures who preferred the darkness. The river that cascaded from here with its streams and pools provided homes for fish and other creatures, and food for people.

Some visitors squealed or jumped in fright at the sight of the many animal species living on the mountain slopes, but Yash loved to see them and took pleasure in trying to identify one set of distinguishing features from another. He knew that some animals lived only in this mountain region and nowhere else.

The group wound their way along the rocky track which led to the path of yaks. Yash's scratched and faded boots glided deftly over each section of the rough ground. With his right hand, he gripped a finely crafted stick made by his grandfather. The tip of it reached shoulder height and he planted it into the ground with every alternate footstep. Yash knew this – and every – path up the mountain like the back of his hand, and he adored every inch of the familiar landscape.

Behind him trudged the group, each kitted out with walking boots and hats and weighed down with their heavy bags. Sometimes, the groups were chatty and asked lots of questions; sometimes, they marched silently as though they had been sent as a punishment. Thankfully, this lot seemed like a fairly interesting bunch.

Several hours and two short stops later, he had delivered most of his repertoire.

“Some people believe that the mountains were created by the gods. They point to the skies, see?” Yash extended an arm up towards the nearby peaks that were visible around them as they climbed. “Lots of our people believe that they are sacred and a way for us to get closer to the gods.”

With that, he showed a final flourish of energy, dashing to greet his uncle, Ranj, as they arrived at their destination. At eye level, the sight

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was little more than a colourful array of dome-shaped tents pitched on some flat, rocky ground. It looked like alien pods had landed on a moonscape. Above was the most breathtaking view – the one which always drew gasps from the visitors when they first rounded the corner approaching base camp. All around, jagged mountain peaks pointed skyward, stretching their cold fingers towards the clouds. Straight ahead, the highest tip of the Jagurdwa rose above them all.

“They’re all yours,” Yash said to his uncle.

“A good group?” he asked, out of earshot.

“Pretty good, Uncle,” Yash replied. “Not too fit – but we’ve seen worse!”

They shared a laugh between them before the first of the group caught up and was slowly followed by the rest, who were sweating and breathing heavily.

“Here we are,” Yash announced. “Your base camp for the evening. My uncle, Ranj, will lead you on the next part of your trek up the Jagurdwa first thing in the morning. Have a safe trip! I’ll see you again in a couple of days.”

With that, Yash began to wander back down the beaten track towards the village. On the way, he detoured, as he often did, to visit the wise sage who lived in a remote spot on the mountainside. He had lived in the small wooden hut for as long as Yash could remember (and, he supposed, much longer than that).

Everyone knew the sage. Children were taught about his sayings; adults sought his advice for help on anything important. When the drought had withered all the villagers’ crops, the sage had been there; when the river had burst its banks and destroyed many homes, the sage had been there. Each time the village needed guidance, to the sage was where the elders turned. Yash wondered if there was anything that the sage didn’t know. He knew and kept even more of the mountain’s secrets than Yash did, and his words always brought inspiration.

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Yash found Guru Oluko sitting silently in his rickety home, well hidden from the tourist trekking route. His wrinkly eyes were closed.

Yash studied him silently for a moment. A few wisps of grey hair on his mostly smooth, bald head fluttered slightly in the breeze that billowed through the tiny cabin. Yash had no idea how old the sage was, and had never been brave enough to ask him.

“Hello, Yashaswin.” The voice startled Yash.

“Hey, G. How did you know it was me?”

“No one else tiptoes in at this time. And no one else calls me ‘G’.”

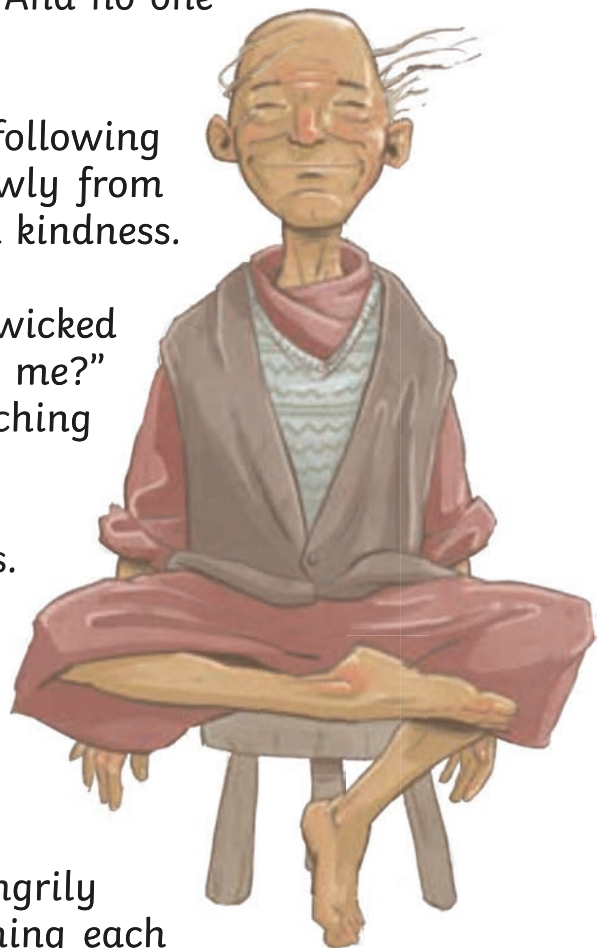
The sage opened one eye at a time, following this with a smile which spread slowly from cheek to cheek. His face glowed with kindness.

Then, suddenly, his smile became a wicked grin. “Now, what have you brought me?” he asked, scouring Yash with searching eyes.

Yash sighed and turned out his pockets. “Not much,” he admitted. “A couple of boiled sweets and something called ‘mint cake’.” He pulled out a handful of sweet treats, donated to him by the past week’s tourists.

Unblinking, the sage reached out hungrily and took the meagre offerings. Turning each sweet over in his hands, he investigated them all with the innocent bliss of a child inspecting his marble collection.

As Guru Oluko began to unwrap a mint humbug, Yash cleared his throat. “So, what’s new, G?”



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As usual, there wasn't anything new but Yash was sure that there would still be a story to hear. He helped himself to a steaming mug of tea as a few lively flames licked at the bottom of a well-worn saucepan, precariously balanced over the fire near the entrance to the hut.

The sound of the trickling stream nearby reminded Yash that almost everything the sage had, including this tea, came from the mountain. It was no wonder, thought Yash, that he was so fascinated by the sugary delicacies brought up the mountain by travellers; his was an uncomplicated lifestyle that many in the huge cities dreamed of, away from the noise and confusion of modern life. He tucked his legs underneath himself on a rough blanket as he sipped the warm drink. The wise sage spoke softly, sucking all the while on his boiled sweet, and they talked for a time.

"Can you remember how old the mountain is?" Guru Oluko asked.

"Millions of years. You've told me that before, you know."

"It is true, Yashaswin. Millions of years of history lie beneath your feet."

"But how did the mountain get here, G? Does anyone really know that?"

"It is a good question to ask, Yashaswin. Ask a man of science and he will tell you about the plates in the Earth's crust colliding fiercely together, causing the land to buckle and rise..."

Yash complemented the sage's description by motioning with his outstretched hands, bringing his fingertips together and then pushing them upwards, adding sound effects for good measure. "Boosh!"

"...but ask a man of spirituality and he'll tell you of the gods fashioning a higher sacred place for the ancient people to become closer to their creators – a pathway to the heavens."

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“So, which one is true?”

“Many people believe different things, Yashaswin... but some things are certain. The mountain has both beauty and power. It is greater and older than us all, and it has an aura of majesty. It will take from you but it will also give great rewards. Do not concern yourself with moving mountains, for the mountains will move you.”

Silently, Yash thought for a moment on the sage’s words.

Do not concern yourself with moving mountains, for the mountains will move you.

It didn’t seem to make any sense and Yash gazed out across the drifting cloud shapes as his mind wandered, distracted by the views. In the distance, snowy peaks were attempting to edge higher than each other into the sky. The overlapping mountain sides sloped away and, even further below, the tops of the great trees looked tiny.

“Oh no, look how low the sun is!” he blurted, jumping to his feet. “I have to go, otherwise I’ll have a miserable herd of chauries wondering where their evening feed is.”

Smiling, Guru Oluko reached out one bony hand, as he always did. He deposited a small parcel, wrapped in leaves and tied with string, into Yash’s palm. “Take this to our friend on your way home, if you would, Yashaswin.”

Yash waved as he skipped away along the rocky path.

Two

There were no more scheduled groups for the following few days, which was rare for the Jagurdwa during the summer trekking season. Usually, people would arrive from cities and countries all over the world, wanting to explore somewhere new. Mostly, they would say how surprised they were at the calm and peaceful surroundings and compare them with all their cars and buildings and crowds of people.

Yash was always kept busy between treks, tending the crops, looking after the cattle and helping out his mother in many other ways. Yash's mother was a tremendous cook and he took every opportunity to assist her while she mixed up steaming pots of lentil soup and juicy, meat-filled dumplings. His favourite chore was making cheese from yak's milk, as he often came away with a small chunk of the smoky, nutty cheese to suck on during his hours labouring in the fields.

While he worked, he often pondered over the strange phrase that the sage had left him with during his last visit.

Do not concern yourself with moving mountains, for the mountains will move you.

Days later, Yash was no closer to understanding the sage's meaning.

The villagers were spread across miles of Jagurdwa mountain foothills and the lower slopes, connected by long, dusty paths and uneven roads. Passing one expanse of farmland and fields led to another small collection of homes, then wide open spaces linking to the next gathering. Even spread so far apart, most of the villagers knew each other by name. It was a community like one enormous family. Jagurdwa mountain farmers could trade crops with each other and everyone made their living, in one way or another, from the mountain; they felt its presence looking over them as it towered up into the sky.

Spread around over many hectares, each part of the villagers' farmland seemed to have different conditions and therefore suited to a different

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purpose. Land in the foothills was usually hotter and drier. Higher up, there was more rainfall and moisture. A patchwork of habitats boasted a variety of plants and animals in different locations. Higher still was the treeline where it became colder and nothing more would grow.

On a particularly blustery day, Yash was feeding his family's cattle. The grazing land, which stretched up a gentle incline from Yash's home, lay in the shadow of the bamboo forest. The trails of the forest had a mysterious, magical feeling and were shrouded by a canopy of green. At the edge, the path opened out and led to the wide open pasture spaces where their home nestled among surrounding peaks and slopes.

"Ah, there you are, Yash," called a voice across the dry land of the field. "We have a late booking for a group arriving this afternoon."

Yash stood up from the water trough and looked at Bhubakta, one of the village elders, who had brought the announcement.

Always show respect for your elders, Yashaswin.

"This afternoon?" he replied, as calmly as he could. "Will there be enough time to reach the camp before dusk?"

"You'll get them there, I'm sure," smiled Bhubakta. "They are important men and women. Show them your kindness."

Yash dusted off his dirty hands on the sides of his shirt and sighed. In less than ten minutes, he had topped up the water and food and was striding off to the meeting point where most of the trekking groups were dropped off. Dancing over rocks of every size, Yash skirted across the bamboo bridge and joined the mountain path as it zigzagged its way to his destination.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen!" he announced breathlessly, with a beaming smile. Right on time, too.

The seven-strong group consisted of four men and three women, all with shiny sunglasses and almost-as-shiny boots. All were busily

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strapping on matching packs, which all looked brand new. Every man and woman was wearing a thin, black earpiece in one ear which, Yash thought, made them look a little like robots. One or two carried small devices with large screens and were tapping away furiously upon them.

The battered local mountain truck which had transported them sped noisily away, belching smoke into the distance.

“Welcome to the Jagurdwa Mountain! I hope that you’ve had a good trip so far. There’s some important information to tell you before we start our trek.”

There was a bellow. “Excuse me, young man! Where’s our actual guide?”

The gravelly voice grated on Yash’s last nerve as he resisted the instinct to roll his eyes. “Well, sir, I’ll be guiding you to the base camp. I’ve guided many groups before. I know this area really well.”

“D’you hear that, fellas?” the man laughed, his pink cheeks jiggling up and down. “This little boy is taking us up that huge mountain!”

Like infant chimps gathered around a troop leader, the men and women all joined in with the laughter. The pink-faced man took off his hat and pushed some straggling, greasy hairs away from his forehead. He took out a slim, silver mobile phone and shaded his eyes to peer into the screen.

“Well, I won’t be taking you all the way up the mountain,” Yash corrected him. “As I said, I’ll lead you to the base camp, where you’ll spend tonight. My uncle, Ranj, will prepare you for the next part of your trek. We must get moving, though. It gets dark pretty quickly.”

Grumbling murmurs were exchanged between a couple of members of the group. Unhurriedly, they began to move off behind Yash in the direction of the amaranth fields. They had trudged little more than a few hundred metres before the same man spoke up again.

“Is this the quickest route?” his voice boomed.

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“Yes, sir.”

Around the narrow winding path and up the steep slope, they approached the Spring of Hope. Yash loved the view from here, even though they still had a long way to go. The air tasted cleaner and you could sense the clouds beginning to shroud the mountainside. Smaller peaks in the mountain range were poking through the mist. It was such a delight to look down on tall trees from above. His eyes followed the edge of the forest to where it met the fields and farmland. A few tiny wooden buildings on the edge of the village were dotted around like toy houses. He paused for a moment and breathed deeply, before his peaceful moment was cut short by a loud voice.

“...and I don't care what the mayor's man says! Offer him three million and no more.”

Yash wheeled around, confused. The pink-faced man was dawdling behind the rest of the group, conversing loudly into his mobile phone. The group of men and women reached the small outcrop on which Yash stood, and paused to admire the view. Many of them removed their earpieces to listen to the running water which burred near their feet. Yash smiled briefly at the looks on their faces.

“...if he doesn't like it, tell him I'll put that money into running against him in the next election. See how he likes that! Hah!” The large man stabbed at the screen with his thumb and pushed himself up the last few feet towards the group. Rather than take in the view, he fixed his gaze on Yash. “Boy, is there not another truck or something to drive us to this base camp?”

Yash paused and cast his eyes along the narrow, rocky path – it was barely wide enough to fit a wheelbarrow, let alone a truck.

“No, sir. You can't get there by road.”

The mountain goats always frequented the next section. As steadily as the trees seemed to grow sideways from the rocky edge, the goats clung to the stones like they had magnetic feet. A wall of rock on the

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left-hand side of the path contrasted with a sheer unprotected drop on the right. The sound of rushing water signalled that they were almost at the waterfall ahead.

Some of the group sped up, keen to see more wonders of the mountain. Many of the earpieces, portable screens and blinking gadgets had been stowed away, now. Yash marvelled, as usual, at the power that the mountain had to amaze people and take them out of their small worlds for a short while.

“...I’m not interested in *how* you do it, just make it happen! I don’t want to hear the word ‘can’t’, do you understand me?”



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The loud voice ripped through the natural sounds of the mountainside once more, and Yash glanced back to see the large man's mobile phone clamped to the side of his face yet again. He was struggling to keep up with the group and maintain his conversation, especially in places where the walkers needed to use both hands to navigate parts of the path.

A rickety wooden bridge came into view, which crossed the rushing waters below. It was only wide enough to move in single file while holding the worn, rope handrail on each side. Yash stood aside politely to let the group go first, ready to bring up the rear, and the first walkers stepped forwards tentatively. When most of the group had crossed, he stepped onto the planks himself.

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" came a shout from behind him.

Yash recognised the voice. He spun round to address the man, who stood at the edge of the path and whose wide face and bulbous nose had both now turned from pink to more of a beetroot red.

"Hold," the man barked at the person on the other end of the phone. He stuffed his mobile phone into his pocket and stepped onto the bridge unsteadily.

Yash sighed. "It's not ridiculous, sir. It's a mountain. It's steep. It's narrow."

"It's a joke! You expect us to clamber over this wretched thing like cattle? Disgraceful!"

Watching the rest of the group climbing off the bridge ahead of them, Yash seethed, "You don't climb the Jagurdwa mountain because it is easy, *sir*, you climb it because it is *hard*. If you can't manage this part, how d'you think you're going to reach the summit section?"

Someone gasped. The rest of the group stood and stared, silently. The large man, joining Yash in the centre of the swaying bridge, lifted his shoulders so that his chest puffed out like a bullfrog's. He breathed



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towards Yash.

“Now listen here, young man. Don’t you know who I am?” His voice was a dangerous rumble.

Inside, Yash felt a quiver of fear but he wouldn’t let it show. Looking up into the man’s eyes, he stood his ground. “No, I don’t know you who you are, actually. I just know that you’re holding up the whole group by complaining.”

The man scrunched up his face and held Yash’s gaze, unblinking. The bridge creaked and water continued to charge past underneath their feet.

“I’ll have you know,” he began, his huge face wobbling with suppressed fury, “that my name is Theodore J. Goldlaw.” He stuck out his chin with pride at the sound of his own name. “I am one of the richest men you’re ever likely to meet, lad. *No one* speaks to me like that.”

People may not arrive with kind thoughts, Yashaswin, but consider it your mission to make sure that they depart with them.

Yash inhaled through his nose and counted slowly as he breathed out. As he reached five, he opened his mouth to speak, deliberately softening his tone.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to sound rude. Where I come from, we are taught to respect the mountain. It gives us food and shelter and it is home to thousands of living species. It affects our whole climate and, in turn, what we can grow on the land. It is really special to our people.”

His knuckles white on the rope handrail and blotches of red spreading to his ears and neck, Theodore J. Goldlaw looked disapprovingly at Yash for a moment. Perhaps he was deciding how to react, or perhaps he was just taking a couple more rasping breaths before attempting to continue.

“Well... apology accepted. We’ve all come a long way, so let’s give this

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one more try, shall we?”

The pair walked in silence to the end of the bridge. On solid ground, the man marched past Yash and pulled out his mobile phone once more, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. The smell of his sweat lingered behind slightly longer than the rest of him. Off they traipsed, following the path towards base camp.

*

“What – an – *idiot!*” Yash announced as he flung himself onto the layers of blankets draped on the corner chair.

He had deposited most of Mr Goldlaw’s group at the base camp but, due to the late arrival, had been forced to stay with Uncle Ranj for the night before returning home the following morning.

“Yash! Please say nothing at all, unless you have something nice to say,” his mother scolded.

“You know what he did? That ‘Goldlaw’ guy?” Yash continued. “*First*, he complained about absolutely everything. *Then*, he turned around before he even got to base camp because there was no signal for his mobile phone. He made the truck come back and pick him up from the meeting point! And – you won’t believe it – *and*, he said that he’s here because he wants to buy the mountain so he can make it more ‘tourist-friendly’! Can you believe it? *Buy* the mountain!”

“Yash...” began his father, who was reading in a chair by the fire.

“Who does he think he is? He thinks he can come here and *buy* the mountain? All the land around here has been owned by our ancestors for generations. He doesn’t understand the beauty or the power of our land or how important or sacred it is. How *dare* he?”

“Well, he is a very rich man...” his father said softly.

“Rich? Who cares if he’s rich? He’s rubbish at trekking and he’s lazy –”

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“Yash!” His mother’s mouth pursed.

“– and it doesn’t matter if you’re rich or not. You can’t just buy a mountain if it’s not for sale.”

“As I was saying,” continued his father, “money can make a difference. It’s well known that many of the villagers have been struggling. Maybe it would be for the best if Mr Goldaw paid the locals for their land. The Council of Elders would have to consider things very carefully.”

Yash stared at his father for an age. When he managed to speak, his voice was a hoarse whisper. “You can’t be serious? What about the farm? The mountain is our life. It can’t be sold!”