

To Climb The Mountain

By Elsie Locke

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Jocelyn had a longing to climb the mountain. It rose into the air behind the pine trees, smooth and grassy. But there was no one to take her. Mother said that she was too small and would be tired before she was half-way up. Father said it was better to go for a drive on Sundays with Billy and Graeme, who were smaller than she was, and always wanted to play on the sand.

From the beach, she could see the rocky top of the mountain. It made her all the more eager to stand on those rocks in the sky, and see what the beach looked like from there. Father laughed and said, "Can't you tell that the mountain is much too high for you?"

"I know I could get to the top," said Jocelyn. "The mountain wants me to come."

Grandad was the only one who was different. In the summer he came to stay. He had grown up in their house, and he had planted the big pear tree and built the old chicken house.

One morning, at breakfast, he said, "Today I feel like climbing the mountain. Will any one come with me?"

"Oh! Mum, can I go with Grandad?" Jocelyn was so excited that she knocked over her glass of milk. She had to clean up the mess before her mother would answer.

"Yes, if you promise to tell Grandad when you get tired. And you, Grandad, promise not to walk the legs off her. She won't get right to the top. She's never walked so far."

"When I see her legs coming loose, I'll bring her back," said Grandad, hiding his smile. "Are they screwed in tight, Jocelyn?"

"I think so," she said. She pretended to turn them like a corkscrew.

Grandad put the lunch into his pack and made Jocelyn wear her strong shoes with woollen socks. Away they went between the pines, across the grassy paddocks, up and up and up. There was tussock, and lonely cabbage trees, and sheep that ran away, and red cattle with white faces that stood and stared.

They stopped often to look at the world down below. They could see the beach, and white sails and a ship coming up the harbour. The cars looked like match-box models creeping along the roads.

Jocelyn quite forgot about getting tired. Larks darted ahead, and one went straight up, singing, till they couldn't tell where he had gone to. The mountain was really made of one hill after another. At the very end were the rocks piled up higgledy-piggledy.

"It's quite a pull, this last bit," said Grandad.

He puffed and blew and made Jocelyn laugh. Still, he helped her over the big rocks and the prickly bushes that grew among them. She saw brown skinks that dashed into the cracks as they came near, and yellow daisies, and little plants and rosy-pink flowers. All of a sudden, it was smooth and grassy again, and there was nothing left to climb.

"I got to the top! I got to the top!" shouted Jocelyn, waving her arms to the wind. "Can you, see me, you people down there on the beach?"

"Of course they can't," said Grandad. "We're much too far up in the sky. Are you very tired? Have your legs come loose yet?"

"No, but I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

Grandad took out their lunch and looked at it. "Sorry, no horse," he said. "Could you manage with pig? We have ham sandwiches, and raisin cake, and oranges and a bottle of drink."

The other side of the mountain was quite, quite different. In the gullies were patches of bush. In the distance was a new row of mountains. In between was a valley with a road, and Jocelyn counted seven houses.

She was thinking how much she wanted to explore the valley when Grandad pointed to it and said, "How about going down that way?"

"Oh, Grandad! Did you know I was wishing? But how could we get home? Would we have to climb the mountain twice?" She didn't feel very sure of her well-screwed legs, after all.

"I don't think so," said Grandad in his most mysterious way. "The day isn't half over yet."

It was very steep on the valley side. Sometimes they had to hold on to a fence, and once Jocelyn had to slide over a huge rock while Grandad held up his arms to catch her. In place of the larks were beilbirds, and fantails, and tomtits. They came to a farm track, and every time it crossed over the stream they had to jump from stone to stone.

The track led to a farm-house. Grandad walked straight up and knocked at the back door. An old lady opened it and said:

"Jumping tomcats! It's Dick! Andrew!" she called. "Come and see who's blown in." Her husband came hurrying with a newspaper in his hand.

"Dick!" he said. "This is a surprise. Don't tell me you came up over the mountain?"

"Oh, yes, I did. My grand-daughter brought me. Jocelyn, this is Mrs Grigg and Mr Grigg."

Mrs Grigg gave her a drink with ice in it, and a piece of cake with real cream on top. She told Jocelyn how, when Grandad was a boy, he discovered the valley for himself. In those days, she and Andrew played together, and Grandad joined them in their games.

"And now you have come to stay, in your turn," said Mrs Grigg. "You will sleep in the room I keep for my own grand-daughter."

So that was what Grandad had meant when he said they wouldn't have to climb the mountain twice! He rang up, and Jocelyn could hear her mother answer in a voice full of surprise. Next day, Mother would come in the car and take them home, down the valley road and round the foot of the mountain.

There were no children on the farm, but there were bantams, and pet lambs, and puppies, and a mother cat with kittens. In the granddaughter's room were toys and books and a pair of gumboots for wet days, and a bed with roses on the quilt, and a nightdress in the drawer. After dinner and a warm bath, Jocelyn climbed into that bed and listened to the beilbirds singing goodnight to each other.

She felt clean, and cosy, and very tired. But she had climbed the mountain, and even more! She had gone right over the mountain.