

## *Directions?*

There is a road. A narrow way that circles countryside in twist and hairpin and meander and whirlabout, but difficult to find – not a road that maps are keen to show. Stop and ask a local? ‘Not just anyone can find that road,’ they’d say. ‘And even if you do, you’d never know where it might lead!’

If you are somehow fortunate enough to discover this road, follow it.

There is a wall: high and hemming in swarming forest. Visitors wonder, *Is it behind there?*

On one side, a lake, grey and cool and flat, split by a causeway of stone that stretches from stone shore to a small crannog and a stone tor. The surface of the lake slowly swells and subsides – some say it breathes.

Visitors ask, ‘How do people ever find this House?’

Answer: to be led or allowed is the only way in – to have been invited.

And the road ends. And still only that swarm of forest before you . . . so where now? A blink and heartbeat and suddenly

swarming forest is separated by a new road – shingle and broken shell. And so the visitor can proceed into a delicious dark.

Gentle progress, as though burrowing, as though being slowly swallowed. Forest stays close on either side.

A procession of limestone pillars next, each topped with a silvery limestone lion bearing a limestone shield engraved with a coat of arms; not for nothing is this called the King's Entrance. Holding their breath, guests pass beneath the watch of the lions and some tingle in the spine makes them feel as though they should look back – did that limestone lion open its mouth? Lift a left forepaw to rest on its limestone shield?

But too late to puzzle or ponder more – on and in and on . . . and suddenly out! From shadow into such a sight.

## *Christmas Eve*

'They're here!'

They arrive. From everywhere and from dawn onwards! On motorcycle and horseback and in motorcar and pulled trap!

Up the front steps –

fur-coat,

top hat,

tails going flap-flap!

Boots black,

bags stacked,

heels clack!

Another hysterical cry from one of the Erranders: 'They're here! They're HERE!'

Slap across the back of the head from Clodagh (head housekeeper of Mountfathom) and, 'Compose yourself, you silly clot!'

In come Earl and Duchess, Viscount and Viceroy, Monsieur and Madame, Major and –

'Welcome to Mountfathom!'

Mr Findlater, the manservant, is by the door in his best – shined shoes, maroon velvet suit, hair slicked – there to receive whichever personage with whatever present, and to make careful note of each.

*One scrimshawed narwhal horn (nine feet long)*

*One small malachite statue in the shape of a Griffin*

*One pewter dish large as a cartwheel*

*A pair of Chinese vases, painted, telling the Tale of the Lonely Tailor*

*A trio of crystal vials labelled Happiness, Contentment and Knowledge*

*A pair of orbs (jet and jade)*

*A pair of sewn silver fish-scale gloves*

*A rattle made from bone (possibly human?) that makes no sound when shaken*

*A (badly water-damaged) copy of Peter Pan*

*A (badly fire-damaged) copy of Alice In Wonderland*

*A crate of mangoes*

*A scarlet umbrella (useless – full of holes!)*

*A (possibly half-eaten!) bag of boiled strawberry sherbet sweets*

*One rifle*

*One wicker basket containing a very small kitten the colour of smoke and with turquoise eyes (purring)*

Clodagh: 'A very good evening! Happy to have you at Mountfathom!'

And author and auteur and artisan . . . and some with no title at all – Sullivan from the cattle farm down the Shore Road, and Billy McMaster who delivers the coal on a Monday, and Miss Bellow who runs a boy's boarding-school near Belfast –

Findlater: 'How are you? How's things? Go on ahead in! What did you say your name was? How did you spell that? Say again?'

Good thing Clodagh is there to smooth things.

'Yes, of course – I spoke to you only yesterday. No problem at all. You are on the second floor, fifth door along eastwards – your room is *Berlin*. The boys here will take your bags. And just be cautious when opening the wardrobes in your room – that's all I'll say or else I'll spoil Lord Mountfathom's surprise!'

Such excitement from the staff as they go toing-and-froing –

'Did you see the man with the gold and diamond mask?'

'See that woman with the purple parrot on her shoulder?'

'Men with needles through their noses!'

'Women leading black and white spotted cats!'

'Yes,' says Clodagh (for a change, excitable herself). 'I have seen some sights in this House, but I tell you – this is something else!'

## *Speech*

Meanwhile: upstairs in *The Amazon* –

'*Adventure!*'

Out comes the child's first word.

'Heavens above!' This is the nanny, name of Bogram. 'Hardly six months old and listen to you – already starting with the chat!'

Child sees her reaction so cries aloud again. '*Adventure!*'

Not a normal first word? No normal child . . .

‘Yes, I know,’ says Bogram, her mood (as is usual) somewhere between amusement and dismay. ‘No more talk – we need to be getting you ready for this party.’

She heaves a copper kettle from the range and fills a porcelain basin – bit of soap, bit of a stir to make a skin of suds. And she settles the child in the water. But always he wants to explore and grabble and grab – his face is a crush of concentration as his hand goes out and fingers snatch for the nearest enticing thing: a delicious and innocent-looking flicker . . .

‘Not the bloody candle!’ Nanny Bogram lifts the candlestick clear and scolds, ‘That’s burny, so it is! You do yourself an injury and I’ll be in some trouble, won’t I?’ Would describe herself as ‘no-nonsense’, this woman (if she was the sort of woman to describe herself). She watches the child, and the child watches back. ‘You’re a strange one,’ she says, not for first nor final time. The mouth of the child opens wide with excitable laughter. ‘God, aye,’ Mrs Bogram says, ‘you’re a strange enough little creature. And I tell you this: you’ve no idea the stranger world you’ve been brought into.’

## *Head & Heart & Haven*

When the child was born six months before, the parents wept;  
pair of them prouder than proud! First child of Lord and  
Lady Mountfathom; late gift in life, longed for yet unexpected.  
Precious. *Treasured.*

‘Has your intelligence, I’d say. Your brave heart!’ said the father.

‘Has your curiosity. Your level head!’ said the mother.

Saw so much of themselves in the little bundle of fidgeting limb and bright looks.

‘And he shall sleep in *The Amazon*!’ announced Lord Mountfathom.

‘Oh, indeed,’ says Lady Mountfathom. ‘Perfect choice!’

But some of the staff had doubt –

‘Bit scary for an infant, no?’

‘No end of rooms in this house so why that one?’

‘Bit dark?’

‘Bit odd?’

Odd indeed, yet isn’t that the way of Lord and Lady Mountfathom?

*The Amazon*: like constant dusk despite curtains flung back, like sultry summer even with windows wide. Wallpaper a scene of lush leaf and untamed vine and keen creeper – vast rainforest, full of restless twitch and shiver.

‘Now that’s some crafty foreign Magic!’ supplied Findlater. Stern fella, called ‘Mr Sunshine’ by some of the Errander boys. Swiping a hot iron across the day’s papers he told all staff gathered in the cavernous kitchen, ‘Oh, aye – wallpaper was a gift from a Folkmancer in Kerry. Was given to the fifth Lord of Mountfathom – he helped drive a pair of Copse Gyants out of the county and that was his reward. Must be a hundred year old or more!’

And Mrs Little the cook said, ‘Ach, you’re full of these fancy stories, Reginald Findlater! Always some mad idea you have!’

Well, however long it had hung for, or from wherever it hailed, the walls of *The Amazon* were more alive than they’d been for long years with the arrival of the child. And careful and watchful and

looking as though they're listening in: eyes half-hidden behind branch and bough and tall grass, onyx-bright and baleful to the staff but benevolent to Mother and Father Mountfathom.

'Oh yes,' said the Lord, 'he shall have such fun in here! And know such safety.'

'Of course,' said the Lady. 'Our little boy – he will have such adventures!'

No delay; a crib was conjured quick, composed of bamboo and cord. A hood of muslin that Mrs Bogram embroidered with silver stars; blanket of cream Egyptian silk, pillow packed with goose-feather. Lord Mountfathom found two stuffed toys – capybara and tapir – to set on either side of his son. Lady Mountfathom set a Spell of Accompaniment on an old harp – the strings twitched and quivered and sent soft notes all by themselves.

And the child was settled.

Yet still the staff wondered, was a baby beyond the trusted Lord and Lady? The pair who had ventured so far, seen such extraordinary sights and crossed uncrossable countries? Courted exotic king and imperious queen? Cheered maudlin poets and manic painters? Charmed that stubborn prime minister and those inscrutable priests? Settled disputes, eased ageless grudges, brokered peace with man and beast and creature and cunning Good Folk? Was the care of a child too much?

Meanwhile, the child's mother read him *The Jungle Book*.

Meantime, the child's father read him *Curious Creatures of the Canopy*.

Midnight: the eyes of the child are wakeful, watching the walls. And the eyes of the walls watched over the child, both brimming with a mildly mutual curiosity . . .

## *'Such a one!'*

At night The Traces come, those pale vestiges of past Lords and Ladies of Mountfathom, lingering in the dark places of the House. They curl around the crib – around cornice and ceiling-rose and whisper –

*'Oh such a child! Such a wee marvel!'*

*'Such an oddness though! Such a one!'*

*'Such a good creature to carry on the name of Mountfathom!'*

*'He will see so much. And not all of it good.'*

*'It is a wonder indeed to watch him, is it not?'*

*'Teaches us things! Things we lost along the long way!'*

*'Something so easily forgotten –'*

*'How everything in the world was once so new.'*

## *Who Where When?*

A month before the party: head housekeeper Clodagh stood on the second floor of Mountfathom in the dark of the Gabbling Gallery. Only mirrors adorn the walls here, crowded from skirting board to ceiling. Dark mirrors. Clodagh is stationed with ledger and pencil. Good thing patience is a thing of pride for this housekeeper – needs plenty for this job.

Invitations had been out for a day, so Clodagh waited, knowing it is only a matter of short time before –

One wakes!

In the dark of the mirror are wisps of brightening white . . . eyes appear and a face too and finally a voice full of imperious



enquiry. 'Major Fortflay here! Served in the Land Wars with the late Lord Mountfathom Sixth! Received the invitation – would be happy to attend!'

Now Clodagh – so pre-prepared she can't be perturbed – calmly consulted her ledger list and says simply, 'Very good, Major.'

Face of Major Fortflay dissipated.

Darkness returned, silence restored.

Clodagh made her careful notes.

Scarcely a moment though; another mirror yawned white.

'Lady Anne of Lissadell House here! How's tricks? So this shindig on Christmas Eve – what time shall I land?'

And so. And so on . . .

The arrangements were made.

## *Promises*

'Sir, this was tucked in with the morning post.'

Two weeks before the party, Mr Findlater handed a scrap of paper to Lord Mountfathom over breakfast in the Seasonal Room. It read:

**WE KNOW YOU HAVE A WEE  
CHILD NOW IN THERE.  
YOU THINK YOU CAN BE SAFE BEHIND  
ALL YOUR FANCY SPELLS  
AND THAT HIGH WALL?  
WRONG!**

*WE WILL COME WHEN YOU EXPECT  
IT LEAST AND FROM A PLACE YOU  
WOULDN'T THINK TO LOOK!  
KEEP AN EYE ON THE DARK.  
KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR WEE CHILD.  
THINGS ARE SHIFTING.  
WE PROMISE AND SWEAR – YOU WON'T  
HAVE ALL THE POWERS FOREVER.  
YOU'LL REGRET IT ALL  
BEFORE THE END.*

'Forget we received this,' Lord Mountfathom told his manservant. He Worked his fingers in the air and Magic set the page alight – darkened and curled and disappeared. Lord Mountfathom stood from his breakfast and wandered the Seasonal Room – from Summer to Spring to Winter to Autumn. He stopped, floor around his feet littered with bronze leaves, and said, 'Keep me informed of anything you notice that is more unusual than the usual unusual of Mountfathom. These are odd and dark enough days we live in, Mr Findlater – we must be on our guard.'

### *Preparations . . .*

Every chandelier was lowered and every shard washed! Every brass bit and bob – dish and spoon and snuffbox and doorknob – buffed and polished. Every floor swept and wetted, furniture beeswaxed and portraits touched up. Mr Hooker, the gardener,

got to work pruning and keeping neat the trees in the Upstairs and Downstairs Orchards. Everywhere: elbow-grease and sweat and ache and groan as every maid and Errander boy in his livery got behind the effort of readying the place for the party. And Lady Mountfathom helped too. 'Get me a ladder and wet rag and I'll catch a few of those cobwebs!'

Lord Mountfathom does his bit: sets some Spells to surprise –

In *Berlin*, a Spell on the wardrobe that will play Bach when it is opened.

In *Atlantis*, the sounds of exploding surf when someone turns in the bed.

He wants to fill the House with sound and music and Magic! So in the hallways and passageways and galleries stone faces surmounting doorways sing an aria or recite Byron or Shelley when anyone passes by, and the patterns on the carpet of Ash-Dragons and Kelpies writhe and squirm beneath feet when anyone crosses . . .

### *Five Minutes to Seven*

Now guests are duly gathered inside the House, but the double doors of *The World* are shut. They all ask one another waiting –

'How long till seven?'

'Is it yet?'

'Is it now?'

Agitation and clash of elbows as pocket watches are consulted. Same answer given everywhere.

'Not yet. Not just yet.'



## *Four Minutes to Seven*

A veil of rippling smoke obscures the double doors. The guests wonder –

‘What Spell? Some Weather-Working?’

‘I’d say more like Smoke-Spinning.’

‘Well, perhaps . . . perhaps . . .’

## *Three Minutes to Seven*

Time for some description? Just about.

Such extravagant dress! Such articles! Which to pick out amongst the many? For a start: skirts that shimmer like wind-ruffled water; suits comprised of crimson leaves; patterned kimonos where the patterns move – carp encircling one torso and a pair of cranes picking their way across another and murmur of starlings on one more and –

*‘Two minutes!’*

## *Two Minutes to Seven*

Everything lit with a low light.

A pair of trees on either side of the doors – candelabra, of a kind; foliage of flickering flame. Flame overhead too – chandeliers arranged with pencil-thin tapers.

Somebody cries, *‘One minute!’*





## *One Minute More*

Passes like a blink and breath and a forever. Then –  
‘Welcome!’

All attention to a face they hadn’t noticed, top and centre of the doorway, carved into stone lintel. It says, ‘Welcome, friends! On behalf of the esteemed Lord and Lady, welcome to the House of Mountfathom! And we welcome you most warmly to the myriad wonders of *The World*!’

## *Curtain Up*

Smoky pall peels away; doors ease open and in they go in delighted tide . . .



## *The Room with The World Inside*

What else but round? Above: glow of a gilt ceiling. Below: circular stone floor. And around them the wall curving smooth and begging to be touched! Lay a hand and follow and you’d find no flaw, fingers running over a frieze of green-gold-azure, a sprawling map of ocean and continent which gives way at the farthest end to glass – wall split by tall double doors that lead to . . . no, not just yet. Too much inside to see!

## *Every Poison*

Curving table tight to curving wall, and on it are the fruits of Mrs Little's labour and all anyone's appetite could dream up –

A battalion of boars' heads with mandarins clamped between jaws; palm-sized pies stuffed with game; tarts of pear and raspberry and gooseberry with sugary crusts . . . And to wash it all down – whiskey and ice wine and port and madeira and champagne. Liveried footmen in lilac wigs go about pouring; maids in ivory caps and aprons and silver boots are busy proffering and smiling and topping-up. Mr Findlater and Clodagh keep watch, keep generous and gentle order.

And all the while overhead, some spectacular Smoke-Spinning: masses of writhing grey-white, taking shape for a second – a lion there? Sphinx? Sea snake? Certainly shoals of quick fish – darting down to skim scalps and elicit whoops and gasps. The guests remember the invitation: *Please note – you are warmly encouraged to Conduct.*

So some of the guests add their own delights – the group of ladies in kimonos raise Reeds and with a quick together-twitch they Summon soft notes, Summon an Ash-Dragon that snaps smoky jaws at the other Smoke-Spun shapes and makes them shreds. The men clothed in crimson leaves are not to be outdone – whirl Staffs with small bells that make small sounds, and sound itself brings the sight – a trio of albatross that race the dragon around and around the domed ceiling . . .

The room is soon full of tatters of smoke sifting the air like snowfall. And the eating and drinking and laughter and joy – pure *joy* – rises to such a pitch that it can only be

somehow stilled by the sudden opening once again of *The World's* double doors.

## *The Family*

Enter Lord and Lady and young Master Mountfathom. Lady Mountfathom wrapped in crushed crimson velvet, strings of cultured pearls and earrings shaped like seashells and her one simple wedding band. At her belt she wears a key clustered with crimson stones. Lord Mountfathom is more adorned – scarlet suit and tails, gold on shoe-buckle and cuff, gold thread embroidering his waistcoat in coil and curlicue and golden rings on each finger. And at his waist too a key, though his is composed of polished emeralds.

The child is in a simple blue suit. Proud mother and father each hold a hand, but truth is this child needs no leading. Only six months old, but as though he has been walking for years! Has a look on his face of such concentration: gently knitted brow and pout of mouth saying he would like to be moving faster, but is at the same time happy. Mrs Bogram walks a little behind, unnoticed by most. She sheds a single tear. Tells herself she is being a silly old thing.

And the crowd parts for the Mountfathoms –

‘Aw, look at him! The big smile!’

‘Such a happy child! Such a dear!’

‘He’ll be a force in the world and make no mistake!’

‘And the eyes!’

‘The eyes!’

*'The eyes!'*

What of the eyes? Colour or shape? Maybe size? Whom they take after most – greater resemblance to mother or father Mountfathom? Difficult to say. Simpler just to say this: to be looked at by those eyes is to feel investigated and examined.

The Mountfathom family reach the centre of *The World*.

And then fresh interruption –

All heads turn as the glass doors in the glass wall waft open.

## *Visitors*

The Mountfathoms move towards the door and out into the night. Guests follow as though Enchanted.

In the garden: fullest face of moon, sky sharp with stars and the slow splash of water, fountains streaming into a pair of ponds. And soon collecting on shoulders and settling in hair and sending pleasant shivers: *snow*. But how with such a clear sky and no cloud? Surely some Spell?

The guests descend steps and land on a wide lawn and stand amongst eight towering stone pillars – eight statues of animals sit atop.

The Mountfathom family stand centre.

No one speaks.

Now some gentle movement in the dark.

One guest guesses well in a whisper: *'The Driochta.'*

First a cheetah appears – pads the length of the surrounding wall, yawns wide and then drops soundlessly onto lawn. It sits





there, so shrewd of eye and sharp of claw. Sits patient beside a pillar with a cheetah poised on top.

Mere moments and then the next.

Silent swoop of a long-eared eagle owl that alights on the statue of itself. It watches the crowd, looks to the Mountfathoms.

Now something not so subdued.

Boughs groan and branches clash as some wild darkness swings fast towards the House as though promising violence and then is suddenly so present it makes some of the guests gasp and some others step back. A chimpanzee – glaring at them and rapping tough knuckles on the ground like he’s enjoying the scares caused.

Now something softer.

Three forms in quiet flight – one black, one white, one resplendent. A pair of swans skims one of the ponds and slows to a stop as a peacock settles lightly on the lawn.

All assembled animals regard each other.

Eight statues, six animals: the guests look around seeking the final two, but no time to wonder more as –

‘Our friends!’ says Lord Mountfathom, addressing the animals. He peels away his tailcoat to show a Needle of gleaming but careworn metal bound to his belt – a thing scarcely longer than a pen, but sharp. ‘Our dear friends, thank you for coming.’

‘And now!’ says Lady Mountfathom (notice, too, she has the same kind of short metallic rod at her waist). ‘Now, we request that you show us your truest selves.’



## *Mogrify*

Only some are watching keen or attentively enough to see. Only a few see the moment the Spell is shaken off. One of these, of course, is the child.

‘Changing!’ he cries.

What is reflected in the child’s widening eyes: a quick shiver and wriggle as the animals become a squirm of colour, notional and undecided . . . and now suddenly become someone. Many someones.

Peacock: a tall woman with hair piled high, dressed iridescent and with opals clustered at her throat.

Pair of swans: woman dressed in black with a cascade of white hair, a man dressed in ivory with tresses of dark falling to his shoulders.

Eagle owl: small bald man with wire spectacles and an unassuming look.

Cheetah: fine man in a fine suit (first thing he does to keep himself fine is dust off his shoulders with sharp flicks of the hand).

Chimpanzee: a broad boulder of a man in his Sunday best.

One similarity in all these arrivals – same as the Mountfathoms, at their waists they have fastened short batons of a bright yet battered metal.

They step forward, footsteps a soft crunch on snow, and form a close circle.

Some gap is left, enough for two more to stand – an opening that Lord and Lady Mountfathom let their son wander through. In the centre of the circle the child stands, turning

and turning so he can examine the people standing around.  
He smiles.

Proud parents take their place and close the circle.

All hands go to those sharp points of metal at their belts –  
these things the Driochta call Needles.

‘And now,’ says Lord Mountfathom, ‘the Gifts.’

‘And now,’ says Lady Mountfathom, ‘the Words.’

## *Tradition*

Needles directed night-skyward – to the same point high over  
the child’s head. And around the circle and in turn, Words  
are gifted –

*‘Intleacht!’*

*‘Paisean!’*

*‘Cinneadh!’*

*‘Trua!’*

*‘Cairdeas!’*

*‘Alainn!’*

*‘Eachtra!’*

*‘Gra!’*

And as one the Driochta Conduct – conjure bright trails of  
smoke that take the shape of the same animals that arrived  
moments before and that go whirling around the child, who  
is transfixed and adoring of this Magic. Who smiles to himself  
as the guests smile to themselves also – the sight of these  
Spells and this child sitting below feels like a glimpse of some  
precious peace . . .

## *Attack*

Lord Mountfathom says, 'In sight of the Driochta, and with their blessing, we Name this child –'

Suddenly, a single gasp that multiplies into many –

Crowd parts as two figures sprint out of the dark –

Same swift shiver and distortion: in a blink two of the Driochta Mogrify and retake their animal forms, boulder of a man back to chimpanzee and fine gentleman reforming as a cheetah.

The two sprinting figures, two boys, stop. One has dark hair and the other a head of faded hair.

Mrs Bogram is in fear for the child. Wants to run forward to protect him, but the manservant Findlater holds her back.

The Driochta raise their Needles in readiness.

Lord Mountfathom tells the two boys, 'Do not ruin such a night as this – it will solve nothing.'

'Leave,' says Lady Mountfathom, her tone stronger than her husband. 'Be sensible. Depart while you still have some chance!'

The two figures say nothing.

Lady Mountfathom screams with sudden anger, 'I said go!' And she takes her animal form – a sleek panther, sharp clawed, standing guard by her son.

Lord Mountfathom says, 'I think my wife means business.' And he transforms too – into an Irish elk that towers taller than any being in the garden, regal-eyed, antlers branching broad.

Chimpanzee and cheetah inch nearer to the two boys, closing in.



The boy with faded hair takes another step and says, 'Listen to me now – none of this will last. There is no safe place, not even at Mountfathom. Remember these things!'

'Let's go,' says the boy with black hair, and he takes the other boy's hand.

Only moments more, and the two boys bolt – to the sound of more gasps, both figures run back off into the night.

## *Aftermath*

Shock leaves them stranded. Guests recover their voices, and start to shout –

'Shouldn't someone go after them?'

'We can't let them escape, can we? They could've harmed the child!'

But one voice is loudest.


'Is the child okay? Please tell me he isn't hurt! Let me through!'

Nanny Bogram shoves and elbows everyone aside and when she reaches Lord and Lady Mountfathom and the other Driochta they have relinquished any Spells and retaken their human forms.

Child stands. Difficult to say what his expression is – worried, apprehensive? Or perhaps still curious, unsure of all this fuss? Or perhaps nothing at all – only a small child at the centre of a very strange world.

'Mrs Bogram,' says Lady Mountfathom. 'Take our son to his bedroom. I ask that you stay with him. I know you shall keep him safe.'





Mrs Bogram nods. Holds the child in her arms and turns and the crowd flows back and shifts away to allow her through. But as she goes – sound of a snuffle, small hiccup. And that rare sound, one scarcely made in any month of his life so far at Mountfathom: the child begins to cry.