

MAGNUS THE MAGNIFICENT

By Tamaso Lonsdale

Magnus was a truly magnificent magpie with shiny black and white feathers. He owned a large house and garden, with a huge gumtree in it, at the very top of the hill. Also he had two human servants, an old man and an old woman. When he was hungry he called to his servants and they brought him juicy pieces of meat, scraps of bread, chunks of cheese and slices of fruit. They put out fresh water each day for him to drink. On hot days they turned on the garden sprinkler so that he could bathe in its spray.

The old people worked very hard for Magnus and their only wages were his glorious songs that he sang to them whenever he wanted something. He also allowed them to live in his house and they had the whole beautiful garden to enjoy.

Magnus allowed them a few visitors, too, but he would never let strangers through the gate. He swooped on them, screeching and pecking at them with his sharp pointed beak.

Magnus really hated cats and dogs. He would never let one anywhere near his house or garden. They could walk by on the other side of the road but if they came any closer Magnus would zoom in, squawking at them until they ran off in terror. All the cats and dogs in the neighbourhood stayed well away from Magnus' place. Sometimes stray animals came by but Magnus soon got rid of them.

Magnus had owned his house and garden for most of his life. He had fallen from his nest when he was a small bird and the old man had brought him to the house and began working for him.

At first, Magnus was frightened of the old people but he quickly found out how to handle them and soon taught them to do what he wanted. He only had to open his beak and squawk and one of them would rush up with some food.

The old people seemed to love feeding him. They popped food in every time he opened his beak. He grew quickly and was soon flying from one room to another.

One day the old woman opened the door and Magnus flew into the garden and straight to the top of the gumtree. From there he could see the whole town. He glided to a lower branch and, as he landed, a piece of bark came loose. Underneath, Magnus saw a fat juicy grub. He pecked at it. It was most delicious! He found a couple more and then flew to the ground. He walked all around the garden and back to the kitchen door.

Inside, the old people were watching him so he hopped back in to tell them about the grubs. They seemed very pleased that he had come inside again.

After that, they left the door open every day so that Magnus could go in and out as he liked. If it was ever shut, he would just stand there and warble a few notes and one of them would come running to open it for him. They were absolutely the best servants any magpie could possibly have.

The old man spent many hours amusing Magnus by whistling strange little songs to him. After a while, Magnus began copying the notes and whistling them back. The old man was delighted.

‘This is truly a magnificent magpie,’ he said to his wife. ‘He is Magnus the Magnificent!’

‘Maybe you could teach him to talk,’ said the old woman.

So the old man started saying the same words over and over again to Magnus. It was terribly boring so Magnus just pretended not to hear. It was much more fun to sit at the top of his tree guarding it from strange birds who might want to nest in it.

One day he chased away a pair of crows, some red wattlebirds and a couple of noisy miners. Another day a crimson rosella came to examine a hole in a broken branch but she soon took off when she saw Magnus flying at her. However, Magnus quite liked the willie wagtails. They were black-and-white like him, although much smaller. He liked their bravery. He had seen them chasing a cat one day. So he had allowed them to live in the garden all winter. In spring, he let them build a nest on one of the lower branches of his tree.

Magnus would have liked to eat their eggs when he saw them but the wagtails got very annoyed. They flew at him making angry chattering sounds nothing like their usual sweet little song. Funny little birds, thought Magnus.

He could easily have chased them away and eaten the eggs but the situation was rather amusing so he didn't bother. In any case, just at that time, the old woman suddenly began giving him so much extra food that he didn't really want the eggs anyway.

Magnus sometimes felt lonely and wished there were some other magpies nearby. He had heard some once, in the trees at the bottom of the hill. He had flown down to meet them but they had not been very friendly to him. In fact, they had attacked him. Magnus had raced back home and hidden inside his house with the old woman.

However, there was another magpie in one of the rooms of his house. A strange bird, though. It looked exactly like Magnus. It copied all his actions. But it never answered him no matter how long he sat in front of it whistling. Over and over again he invited it to fly outside to the top of his tree. But it never went with him. Magnus sometimes got annoyed and pecked at this stupid bird but there seemed to be a wall between them and his beak just hit against it. This poor bird must be locked up, he thought. So he tried ordering the old people to let it out but they just laughed.

'Look at Magnus!', the old woman said to her husband. 'He just loves seeing how magnificent he looks in the mirror.'

Magnus loved to play. His house was full of wonderful toys. He had a great time going around the house poking and pecking at things; picking them up; turning them over; flying across the room and dropping them; running across the floor chasing them; and pulling them to pieces.

There were long shiny spoons that made a ringing sound when he dropped them, and little round balls that rolled across the floor and disappeared under the furniture if he hit them with his beak. There were tall jars that turned over easily and spilled hundreds of little seeds across the bench and down onto the floor.

Sometimes Magnus took things outside to the top of his tree to see what happened when he dropped them. He never understood how a big thing like a cup could change into a lot of bits and pieces when he did this. But it was lots of fun.

One day, Magnus had a bad accident. It happened when a strange dog tried to walk past his house. Magnus swooped down, screeching angrily, and the dog raced across the street. Magnus chased after it. He didn't see the car coming. There was a squeal of brakes. But, too late! Magnus fell to the road. The driver jumped out and picked him up. Next thing, Magnus was inside the car wrapped up in some strange woollen thing. Then he was carried into a house. Some warm liquid was dribbled into his beak and he spluttered as it ran down his throat.

Someone put him in a dark box, still wrapped up. He was feeling all warm and drowsy, so he went to sleep.

When Magnus woke up there was a man peering down at him.

'Hello, old fellow,' said the man loosening the woollen thing. 'Let's have a look at you.' Magnus stood up and ruffled his feathers. He flapped his wings. One of them hurt. He tried to fly but it hurt more. The man picked him up and looked closely at the sore wing.

'Looks like a little break there,' he said. 'I'll put a splint on it and you'll be right as rain in no time.'

Magnus struggled and pecked at the man. Someone else came and held him while the man put an awkward wooden thing on his wing. This felt strange and he still could not fly. He walked around the floor pecking at whatever he could find. However, this house was very different from his own place. There was nothing much to play with here. As soon as Magnus found something, the man took it away from him. The food here was not so nice, either.

One day, Magnus hopped onto the seat of a chair, then onto the arm, and from there up onto the kitchen bench. This was much more interesting. Some of the things here looked just the same as in his own house. The man had gone outside now so there was nobody to stop him from having fun. Magnus walked along the bench pecking at things and turning them over. He knocked over a jar of salt and tasted it.

It wasn't nice. The sugar tasted better and he ate quite a lot before the bowl tipped over and the sugar got mixed up with the salt.

He found a dish of freshly-shelled green peas, all ready to be cooked. Magnus ate one. He liked it very much so he hopped onto the edge of the dish for some more. His weight was too much and the dish toppled over and crashed to the floor breaking into lots of pieces and sending the peas rolling all over the place.

The man came running inside. He yelled at Magnus and chased him. Magnus ran out the door and the man slammed it shut.

Outside in the fresh air now, Magnus decided to explore the yard. It was not very big and there were no trees but there was a vegetable patch. Magnus scratched around in there and dug up a few worms. Some little plants got knocked about and broken. Magnus pecked at these and pulled out a few more. Then he saw a dish of water. It was not very fresh but he was thirsty so he drank some. Nearby, there was a dirty old bone with a bit of meat still on it. Magnus started pecking at it. Suddenly, he heard an angry growl. A big dog was snarling at him from the end of a chain. Magnus screeched at the dog, puffing out his feathers to make himself look as big as possible. The dog snapped at him. Magnus hopped out of his reach just in time. He screeched some more and the dog began barking loudly.

The man came outside, yelled at the dog, scooped Magnus up and carried him back inside. He shut him in the bathroom.

Magnus walked all around the tiny room. There was a wet place in the corner and, as he paddled about in it, drops of water kept falling on him. He liked that. It was something like his own garden sprinkler at home. He ruffled up his feathers and shook himself.

Then he hopped onto the edge of the bath and sat preening himself. The splint on his wing got in the way and he pecked at it but could not shift it. From the bath he hopped onto the wash-basin. Here he got a great surprise! His old friend from his own house, the bird like himself, was there in front of him!

Magnus got very excited. He chattered and called and whistled at his friend. But, just as before, the other bird would not answer him. Magnus tried for a long

time. In the end, he decided to just ignore the other bird and hope that it would want to be friends later.

Magnus pecked at the soap. It was terrible and he shook his head to get rid of the awful taste. The soap slid on to the floor and skidded across the room hitting the door with a thud. The man came running in to investigate the noise. He slipped on the soap. As he fell, he grabbed the towel rail. It broke away from the wall with a loud crack and hit him on the head. The man howled in pain and Magnus jumped off the wash-basin and scurried out the door. He hid under the table. The man came and sat in a chair holding his head and groaning.

After a while, the man got up and went to the fridge. Magnus knew all about fridges. He had a big one at his house and the old people kept lovely food in there for him.

However, the man did not bring out any food. He just got a can of beer, popped the top of it and had a long drink. Then he put the can down on the floor and switched on the TV.

Magnus did not like TV. The bright flickering light hurt his eyes. He looked at the can sitting on the floor. He knew all about cans, too. At home, the old man often let him drink from one. Magnus still had the awful taste of soap in his mouth. He thought a drink might help. Very quietly, he went over to the can. He probed inside with his beak but could not reach the beer. Then the can tipped over and the beer spilled all over the floor. The man was very angry. Magnus didn't know why. Magnus didn't like it at this house. Everything he did was wrong. No matter what he did for fun inside the house, the man got angry with him. He could not go outside because of the dog. He felt very unhappy.

Magnus kept trying to tell the bird in the mirror about it but the bird never answered him. At last, one day, the man picked up Magnus and took the splint off his wing. It felt wonderful! Magnus flapped his wings and flew across the room.

The man opened the door and Magnus looked out. The dog growled. Since he had not been able to fly, Magnus had become very frightened of the dog. He was not brave enough now to go outside the door.

The man chased him but he flew into the bathroom. The man ran in, opened the window, and went back through the door, shutting it quickly.

‘He’ll fly out the window soon,’ thought the man. ‘Then he’ll be gone, thank goodness! What a pest!’

Magnus perched on the wash-basin and showed the other bird his healed wing. He looked out of the window. He couldn’t see the dog anywhere but he still felt scared. He decided to wait a while.

He looked at the things on the bathroom shelf. He picked up a toothbrush and dropped it into the wash-basin. It did not make much of a noise. Then Magnus saw a glass of water with a pink-and-white thing in it. He had seen this before. He had even picked it up once but the man had come and snatched it away from him. The man had put it in his mouth and yelled at him.

‘You sneaky bird! Leave my teeth alone!’

The man was not here to stop him now. He picked up the teeth and hopped onto the window ledge. He couldn’t see the dog so he flapped his wings and soared off over the house-tops carrying the teeth in his beak.

Magnus flew around for a while looking for a landmark. Then he saw his own tree on top of the hill! He flew to it and landed on the top branch. It felt so good to be home! He was just going to start a beautiful song when he saw the old people come into the garden. Magnus flew down to them, still holding the teeth.

‘Look, dear!’ gasped the old woman. ‘It’s Magnus the Magnificent! He’s come back to us!’

‘Yes,’ said the old man gazing delightedly at Magnus. ‘But what have you got there, old fellow?’ He took the teeth from Magnus. ‘The rascal!’ he said. ‘He’s stolen these from someone. We’ll have to advertise in the paper. Somebody will claim them.’

The old people were very excited to see Magnus again. They took him inside and fed him some meat and cheese. The old man whistled his song and Magnus sang it back to him.

Then Magnus went on a big tour of his house and garden to see that everything was the same. And it was.

All his toys were still in the same places. His water bowl was full of fresh water. The garden sprinkler was going. The willie wagtails were still flitting around catching insects.

But one thing puzzled Magnus. His old friend was still locked up behind the glass wall. Magnus didn't understand how he could possibly have got back there from the other house. It was a mystery. But Magnus was very pleased to see him again and sat in front of him for a long time telling him all about his adventures.

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children's section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations' children's programs.

She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book Skye's the Limit, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest.

She has recently completed the third novel in trilogy form. The first book, Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt! was published in 2002. The second book The Missus was published in 2010 and the third Beyond Darkness in 2012.

Also in 2012, a book of short stories Out of My Mind was published.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine Beyond the Rainbow.