

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

A sequel to
THE COLOUR OF MAGIC
TERRY PRATCHETT



The Light Fantastic

by Terry Pratchett

The sun rose slowly, as if it wasn't sure it was worth all the effort.

Another Disc day dawned, but very gradually, and this is why.

When light encounters a strong magical field it loses all sense of urgency. It slows right down. And on the Discworld the magic was embarrassingly strong, which meant that the soft yellow light of dawn flowed over the sleeping landscape like the caress of a gentle lover or, as some would have it, like golden syrup. It paused to fill up valleys. It piled up against mountain ranges. When it reached Cori Celesti, the ten mile spire of grey stone and green ice that marked the hub of the Disc and was the home of its gods, it built up in heaps until it finally crashed in great lazy tsunami as silent as velvet, across the dark landscape beyond.

It was a sight to be seen on no other world.

Of course, no other world was carried through the starry infinity on the backs of four giant elephants, who A'ere themselves perched on the shell of a giant turtle. His name – or Her name, according to another school of thought – was Great A'Tuin; he – or, as it might be, she – will not take a central role in what follows but it is vital to an understanding of the Disc that he – or she – is there, down below the mines and sea ooze and fake fossil bones put there by a Creator with nothing better to do than upset archeologists and give them silly ideas.

Great A'Tuin the star turtle, shell frosted with frozen methane, pitted with meteor craters, and scoured with asteroidal dust. Great A'Tuin, with eyes like ancient seas and a brain the size of a continent through which thoughts moved like little glittering glaciers. Great A'Tuin of the great slow sad flippers and star-polished carapace, labouring through the galactic night under the weight of the Disc. As large as worlds. As old as Time. As patient as a brick.

Actually, the philosophers have got it all wrong. Great A'Tuin is in fact having a great time.

Great A'Tuin is the only creature in the entire universe that knows exactly where it is going.

Of course, philosophers have debated for years about where Great A'Tuin might be going, and have often said how worried they are that they might never find out.

They're due to find out in about two months. And then they're really going to worry . . .

Something else that has long worried the more imaginative philosophers on the Disc is the question of Great A'Tuin's sex, and quite a lot of time and trouble has been spent in trying to establish it once and for all.

In fact, as the great dark shape drifts past like an endless tortoiseshell hairbrush, the results of the latest effort are just coming into view.

Tumbling past, totally out of control, is the bronze shell of the Potent Voyager, a sort of neolithic spaceship built and pushed over the edge by the astronomer-priests of Krull, which is conveniently situated on the very rim of the world and proves, whatever people say, that there is such a thing as a free launch.

Inside the ship is Twoflower, the Disc's first tourist. He had recently spent some months exploring it and is now rapidly leaving it for reasons that are rather complicated but have to do with an attempt to escape from Krull.

This attempt has been one thousand per cent successful.

But despite all the evidence that he may be the Disc's last tourist as well, he is enjoying the view.

Plunging along some two miles above him is Rincewind the wizard, in what on the Disc passes for a spacesuit. Picture it as a diving suit designed by men who have never seen the sea. Six months ago he was a perfectly ordinary failed wizard. Then he met Twoflower, was employed at an outrageous salary as his guide, and has spent most of the intervening time being shot at, terrorised, chased and hanging from high places with no hope of salvation or, as is now the case, dropping from high places.

He isn't looking at the view because his past life keeps flashing in front of his eyes and getting in the way. He is learning why it is that when you put on a spacesuit it is vitally important not to forget the helmet.

A lot more could be included now to explain why these two are dropping out of the world, and why Twoflower's Luggage, last seen desperately trying to follow him on hundreds of little legs, is no ordinary suitcase, but such questions take time and could be more trouble than they are worth. For example, it is said that someone at a party once asked the famous philosopher Ly Tin Weedle 'Why are you here?' and the reply took three years.

What is far more important is an event happening way overhead, far above A'Tuin, the elephants and the rapidly-expiring wizard. The very fabric of time and space is about to be put through the wringer.

The air was greasy with the distinctive feel of magic, and acrid with the smoke of candles made of a black wax whose precise origin a wise man wouldn't inquire about.

There was something very strange about this room deep in the cellars of Unseen University, the Disc's premier college of magic. For one thing it seemed to have too many dimensions, not exactly visible, just hovering out of eyeshot. The walls were covered with occult symbols, and most of the floor was taken up by the Eightfold Seal of Stasis, generally agreed in magical circles to have all the stopping power of a well-aimed half brick.

The only furnishing in the room was a lectern dark wood, carved into the shape of a bird – well, to be frank, into the shape of a winged thing it is probably best not to examine too closely – and on the lectern, fastened to it by a heavy chain covered in padlocks, was a book.

A large, but not particularly impressive, book. Other books in the University's libraries had covers inlaid with rare jewels and fascinating wood, or bound with dragon skin. This one was just a rather tatty leather. It looked the sort of book described in library catalogues as 'slightly foxed', although it would be more honest to admit that it looked as though it had been badgered, wolved and possibly beared as well.

Metal clasps held it shut. They weren't decorated, they were just very heavy – like the chain, which didn't so much attach the book to the lectern as tether it.

They looked like the work of someone who had a pretty definite aim in mind, and who had spent most of his life making training harness for elephants.

The air thickened and swirled. The pages of the book began to crinkle in a quite horrible, deliberate way, and blue light spilled out from between them. The silence of the room crowded in like a fist, slowly being clenched.

Half a dozen wizards in their nightshirts were taking turns to peer in through the little grille in the door. No wizard could sleep with this sort of thing going on – the build-up of raw magic was rising through the university like a tide.

'Right,' said a voice. What's going on? And why wasn't I summoned?'

Galder Weatherwax, Supreme Grand Conjuror of the Order of the Silver Star, Lord Imperial of the Sacred Staff, Eighth Level Ipsissimus and 304th Chancellor of Unseen University, wasn't simply an impressive sight even in his red nightshirt with the hand-embroidered mystic runes, even in his long cap with the bobble on, even with the Wee Willie Winkie candlestick in his hand. He even managed to very nearly pull it off in fluffy pompom slippers as well.

Six frightened faces turned towards him.

'Um, you were summoned, lord,' said one of the under-wizards.

'That's why you're here,' he added helpfully.

'I mean why wasn't I summoned before?' snapped Galder, pushing his way to the grille.

'Um, before who, lord?' said the wizard.

Galder glared at him, and ventured a quick glance through the grille.

The air in the room was now sparkling with tiny flashes as dust motes incinerated in the flow of raw magic. The Seal of Stasis was beginning to blister and curl up at the edges.

The book in question was called the Octavo and, quite obviously, it was no ordinary book.

There are of course many famous books of magic. Some may talk of the Necrotelicomnicon, with its pages made of ancient lizard skin; some may point to the Book of Going Forth Around Elevenish, written by a mysterious and rather lazy Llamaic sect; some may recall that the Bumper Fun Grimoire reputedly contains the one original joke left in the universe. But they are all mere pamphlets when compared with the Octavo, which the Creator of the Universe reputedly left behind – with characteristic absent-mindedness – shortly after completing his major work.

The eight spells imprisoned in its pages led a secret and complex life of their own, and it was generally believed that —

Galder's brow furrowed as he stared into the troubled room. Of course, there were only seven spells now. Some young idiot of a student wizard had stolen a look at the book one day and one of the spells had escaped and lodged in his mind. No-one had ever managed to get to the bottom of how it had happened. What was his name, now? Winswand?

Octarine and purple sparks glittered on the spine of the book. A thin curl of smoke was beginning to rise from the lectern, and the heavy metal clasps that held the book shut were definitely

beginning to look strained.

'Why are the spells so restless?' said one of the younger wizards.

Galder shrugged. He couldn't show it, of course, but he was beginning to be really worried. As a skilled eighth-level wizard he could see the half-imaginary shapes that appeared momentarily in the vibrating air, wheedling arid beckoning. In much the same way that gnats appear before a thunderstorm, really heavy build-ups of magic always attracted things from the chaotic Dungeon Dimensions – nasty Things, all misplaced organs and spittle, forever searching for any gap through which they might sidle into the world of men. [1]

This had to be stopped.

'I shall need a volunteer,' he said firmly.

There was a sudden silence. The only sound came from behind the door. It was the nasty little noise of metal parting under stress.

'Very well, then,' he said. 'In that case I shall need some silver tweezers, about two pints of cat's blood, a small whip and a chair —'

It is said that the opposite of noise is silence. This isn't true. Silence is only the absence of noise. Silence would have been a terrible din compared to the sudden soft implosion of noiselessness that hit the wizards with the force of an exploding dandelion clock.

A thick column of spitting light sprang up from the book, hit the ceiling in a splash of flame, and disappeared.

Galder stared up at the hole, ignoring the smouldering patches in his beard. He pointed dramatically.

'To the upper cellars!' he cried, and bounded up the stone stairs. Slippers flapping and nightshirts billowing he other wizards followed him, falling over one another in their eagerness to be last.

Nevertheless, they were all in time to see the fireball of occult potentiality disappear into the ceiling of the room above.

'Urgh,' said the youngest wizard, and pointed to the floor.

The room had been part of the library until the magic had drifted through, violently reassembling the possibility particles of everything in its path. So it was reasonable to assume that the small purple newts had been part of the floor and the pineapple custard may once have been some books. And several of the wizards later swore that the small sad orang outang sitting in the middle of it all looked very much like the head librarian.

Galder stared upwards. 'To the kitchen!' he bellowed, wading through the custard to the next flight of stairs.

No-one ever found out what the great cast-iron cooking range had been turned into, because it had broken down a wall and made good its escape before the dishevelled party of wild-eyed mages burst into the room. The vegetable chef was found much later hiding in the soup cauldron, gibbering unhelpful things like The knuckles! The horrible knuckles!

The last wisps of magic, now somewhat slowed, were disappearing into the ceiling.

'To the Great Hall!'

The stairs were much wider here, and better lit. Panting and pineapple-flavoured, the fitter wizards got to the top by the time the fireball had reached the middle of the huge draughty chamber that was the University's main hall. It hung motionless, except for the occasional small prominence that arched and spluttered across its surface.

Wizards smoke, as everyone knows. That probably explained the chorus of coffin coughs and sawtooth wheezes that erupted behind Galder as he stood appraising the situation and wondering if he dare look for somewhere to hide. He grabbed a frightened student.

'Get me seers, farseers, scryers and withinlookmen!' he barked. 'I want this studied!'

Something was taking shape inside the fireball. Galder shielded his eyes and peered at the shape forming in front of him. There was no mistaking it. It was the universe.

He was quite sure of this, because he had a model of it in his study and it was generally agreed to be far more impressive than the real thing. Faced with the possibilities offered by seed pearls and silver filigree, the Creator had been at a complete loss.

But the tiny universe inside the fireball was uncannily – well, real. The only thing missing was colour. It was all in translucent misty white.

There was Great A'Tuin, and the four elephants, and the Disc itself. From this angle Galder couldn't see the surface very well, but he knew with cold certainty that it would be absolutely accurately modelled. He could, though, just make out a miniature replica of Cori Celesti, upon whose utter peak the world's quarrelsome and somewhat bourgeois gods lived in a palace of marble, alabaster and uncut moquette three-piece suites they had chosen to call Dunmanifestin. It was always a considerable annoyance to any Disc citizen with pretensions to culture that they were ruled by gods whose idea of an uplifting artistic experience was a musical doorbell.

The little embryo universe began to move slowly, tilting . . .

Galder tried to shout, but his voice refused to come out.

Gently, but with the unstoppable force of an explosion, the shape expanded.

He watched in horror, and then in astonishment, as it passed through him as lightly as a thought. He held out a hand and watched the pale ghosts of rock strata stream through his fingers in busy silence.

Great A'Tuin had already sunk peacefully below floor level, larger than a house.

The wizards behind Galder were waist deep in seas. A boat smaller than a thimble caught Galder's eye for a oment before the rush carried it through the walls and away.

To the roof!' he managed, pointing a shaking finger skywards.

Those wizards with enough marbles left to think with and enough breath to run followed him, running through continents that sleeted smoothly through the solid stone.

It was a still night, tinted with the promise of dawn. A crescent moon was just setting. Ankh-Morpork, largest city in the lands around the Circle Sea, slept.

That statement is not really true.

On the one hand, those parts of the city which normally concerned themselves with, for example, selling vegetables, shoeing horses, carving exquisite small jade ornaments, changing money and making tables, on the whole, slept. Unless they had insomnia. Or had got up in the night, as it might be, to go to the lavatory. On the other hand, many of the less law-abiding citizens were wide awake and, for instance, climbing through windows that didn't, t belong to them, slitting throats, mugging one another, listening to loud music in smoky cellars and gener,erally having a lot more fun. But most of the animals were asleep, except for the rats. And the bats, too, of course. As far as the insects were concerned . . .

The point is that descriptive writing is very rarely entirely accurate and during the reign of Olaf Quimby II is Patrician of Ankh some legislation was passed in a determined attempt to put a stop to this sort of thing and introduce some honesty into reporting. Thus, if a legend said of a notable hero that 'all men spoke of his prowess' any bard who valued his life would add hastily 'except for a couple of people in his home village who thought he was a liar, and quite a lot of other people who had never really heard of him.' Poetic simile was strictly limited to statements like 'his mighty steed was as fleet as the wind n a fairly calm day, say about Force Three,' and any loose talk about a beloved having a face that launched a thousand ships would have to be backed by evidence that the object of desire did indeed look like a bottle of champagne.

Quimby was eventually killed by a disgruntled poet during an experiment conducted in the palace grounds to prove the disputed accuracy of the proverb 'The pen is mightier than the sword,' and in his memory it was amended to include the phrase 'only if the sword is very small and the pen is very sharp.'

So. Approximately sixty-seven, maybe sixty-eight per cent, of the city slept. Not that the other citizens creeping about on their generally unlawful occasions noticed the pale tide streaming through the streets. Only the wizards, used to seeing the invisible, watched it foam across the distant fields.

The Disc, being flat, has no real horizon. Any adventurous sailors who got funny ideas from staring at eggs and oranges for too long and set out for the antipodes soon learned that the reason why distant ships sometimes looked as though they were disappearing over the edge of the world was that they were disappearing over the edge of the world.

But there was still a limit even to Galder's vision in the mist-swirled, dust-filled air. He looked up. Looming high over the University was the grim and ancient Tower of Art, said to be the oldest building on the Disc, with its famous spiral staircase of eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eight steps. From its crenelated roof, the haunt of ravens and disconcertingly alert gargoyles, a wizard might see to the very edge of the Disc. After spending ten minutes or so coughing horribly, of course.

'Sod that,' he muttered. 'What's the good of being a wizard, after all? Avyento, thessaloul I would fly! To me, spirits of air and darkness!'

He spread a gnarled hand and pointed to a piece of crumbling parapet. Octarine fire sprouted from under his nicotine-stained nails and burst against the otting stone far above.

It fell. By a finely calculated exchange of velocities Ga.cer rose, nightshirt flapping around his bony legs. Higher and higher he soared, hurtling through the pale night like a, like a – all right, like an elderly but powerful wizard being propelled upwards by an expertly judged thumb on the scales of the universe.

He landed in a litter of old nests, caught his balance, and stared down at the vertiginous view of a Disc dawn.

At this time of the long year the Circle Sea was almost on the sunset side of Cori Celesti, and as the daylight sloshed down into the lands around Ankh-Morpork the shadow of the mountain scythed across the landscape like the gnomon of God's sundial. But nightwards, racing the slow light towards the edge of the world, a line of white mist surged on. There was a crackling of dry twigs behind him. He turned to see Ymper Trymon, second in command of the Order, who had been the only other wizard able to keep up.

Galder ignored him for the moment, taking care only to keep a firm grip on the stonework and strengthen his personal spells of protection. Promotion was slow in a profession that traditionally bestowed long life, and it was accepted that younger wizards would frequently seek advancement via dead men's curly shoes, having previously emptied them of their occupants. Besides, there was something disquieting about young Trymon. He didn't smoke, only drank boiled water, and Galder had the nasty suspicion that he was clever. He didn't smile often enough, and he liked figures and the sort of organisation charts that show lots of squares with arrows pointing to other squares. In short, he was the sort of man who could use the word 'personnel' and mean it.

The whole of the visible Disc was now covered with a shimmering white skin that fitted it perfectly.

Galder looked down at his own hands and saw them covered with a pale network of shining threads that allowed every movement.

He recognised this kind of spell. He'd used them himself. But his had been smaller – much smaller.

'It's a Change spell,' said Trymon. The whole world is being changed.'

Some people, thought Galder grimly, would have had the decency to put an exclamation mark on the end of a statement like that.

There was the faintest of pure sounds, high and sharp, like the breaking of a mouse's heart.

'What was that?' he said.

Trymon cocked his head.

'C sharp, I think,' he said.

Galder said nothing. The white shimmer had vanished, and the first sounds of the waking city began to filter up to the two wizards. Everything seemed exactly the same as it had before. All that, just to make things stay the same?

He patted his nightshirt pockets distractedly and finally found what he was looking for lodged behind his ear. He put the soggy dogend in his mouth, called up mystical fire from between his

fingers, and dragged hard on the wretched rollup until little blue lights flashed in front of his eyes. He coughed once or twice.

He was thinking very hard indeed.

He was trying to remember if any gods owed him any favours.

In fact the Gods were as puzzled by all this as the wizards were, but they were powerless to do anything and in any case were engaged in an eons-old battle with the Ice Giants, who had refused to return the lawnmower.

But some clue as to what actually had happened might be found in the fact that Rincewind, whose past life had just got up to a quite interesting bit when he was fifteen, suddenly found himself not dying after all but hanging upside down in a pine tree.

He got down easily by dropping uncontrollably from branch to branch until he landed on his head in a pile of pine needles, where he lay gasping for breath and wishing he'd been a better person.

Somewhere, he knew, there had to be a perfectly logical connection. One minute one happens to be dying, having dropped off the rim of the world, and the next one is upside down in a tree.

As always happened at times like this, the Spell rose up in his mind.

Rincewind had been generally reckoned by his tutors to be a natural wizard in the same way that fish are natural mountaineers. He probably would have been thrown out of Unseen University anyway – he couldn't remember spells and smoking made him feel ill – but what had really caused trouble was all that stupid business about sneaking into the room where the Octavo was chained and opening it.

And what made the trouble even worse was that no-one could figure out why all the locks had temporarily become unlocked.

The spell wasn't a demanding lodger. It just sat there like an old toad at the bottom of a pond. But whenever Rincewind was feeling really tired or very afraid it tried to get itself said. No-one knew what would happen if one of the Eight Great Spells was said by itself, but the general Agreement was that the best place from which to watch the effects would be the next universe.

It was a weird thought to have, lying on a heap of pine needles after just falling off the edge of the world, but Rincewind had a feeling that the spell wanted to keep him alive.

'Suits me,' he thought.

He sat up and looked at the trees. Rincewind was a city wizard and, although he was aware that there were various differences among types of tree by which their nearest and dearest could tell them apart, the only thing he knew for certain was that the end without the leaves on fitted into the ground. There were far too many of them, arranged with absolutely no sense of order. The place hadn't been swept for ages.

He remembered something about being able to tell where you were by looking at which side of a tree the moss grew on. These trees had moss everywhere, and wooden warts, and scrabbly old branches; if trees were people, these trees would be sitting in rocking chairs.

Rincewind gave the nearest one a kick. With unerring aim it dropped an acorn on him. He said 'Ow.' The tree, in a voice like a very old door swinging open, said, 'Serves you right.'

There was a long silence.

Then Rincewind said, 'Did you say that?'

'Yes.'

'And that too?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.' He thought for a bit. Then he tried, 'I suppose you wouldn't happen to know the way out of the forest, possibly, by any chance?'

'No. I don't get about much,' said the tree.

'Fairly boring life, I imagine,' said Rincewind.

'I wouldn't know. I've never been anything else,' said the tree.

Rincewind looked at it closely. It seemed pretty much like every other tree he'd seen.

'Are you magical?' he said.

'No-one's ever said,' said the tree, 'I suppose so.'

Rincewind thought: I can't be talking to a tree. If I was talking to a tree I'd be mad, and I'm not mad, so trees can't talk.

'Goodbye,' he said firmly.

'Hey, don't go,' the tree began, and then realised the hopelessness of it all. It watched him stagger off through the bushes, and settled down to feeling the sun on its leaves, the slurp and gurgle of the water in its roots, and the very ebb and flow of its sap in response to the natural tug of the sun and moon. Boring, it thought. What a strange thing to say. Trees can be bored, of course, beetles do it all the time, but I don't think that was what he was trying to mean. And: can you actually be anything else? In fact Rincewind never spoke to this particular tree again, but from that brief conversation it spun the basis of the first tree religion which, in time, swept the forests of the world. Its tenet of faith was this: a tree that was a good tree, and led a clean, decent and upstanding life, could be assured of a future life after death. If it was very good indeed it would eventually be reincarnated as five thousand rolls of lavatory paper.

A few miles away Twoflower was also getting over his surprise at finding himself back on the Disc. He was sitting on the hull of the Potent Voyager as it gurgled gradually under the dark waters of a large lake, surrounded by trees.

Strangely enough, he was not particularly worried. Twoflower was a tourist, the first of the species to evolve on the Disc, and fundamental to his very existence was the rock-hard belief that nothing bad could really happen to him because he was not involved; he also believed that