



The Princess and the Goblin
Abridged

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CHAPTER 1

Why the Princess Has a Story About Her

There was once a little princess whose father was king over a great country full of mountains and valleys. His palace was very grand and beautiful.

The princess, whose name was Irene, was born in the palace; but soon after her birth, because her mother was not very well, she was sent to be brought up by country people in a large house. It was half castle, half farmhouse, and was half way up the side of a mountain.

The princess was a sweet little creature, and at the time of my story was about eight years old. Her face was pretty, with eyes like two bits of night sky, each with a star dissolved in the blue. She often looked upwards at her nursery ceiling, which was painted blue, with stars on it. But she never saw the real night sky full of stars: and this is why.

The mountains were full of hollow places underneath – huge caverns, and winding tunnels, some with water running through them, and some shining with all colours of the rainbow when a lamp was carried in. There had once been mines there, great deep pits, with long galleries and passages running off them. Miners had dug them to get the ore which was in the mountains; and while they were digging, they found many of these natural caverns. Some of them had far-off openings on the side of the mountain.

Now in these subterranean caverns lived a strange race of beings, called by some gnomes, by some kobolds, and by some goblins. It was said that at one time they had lived above ground, and were very like other people. But for some reason or other – maybe because of new laws or taxes imposed on them by the king – they had all disappeared from the surface of the earth.

However, instead of going to some other country, they had all taken refuge in the underground caverns. They never came out except at night, and even then they were not often seen.

Those who had caught sight of them said that they had greatly altered over the centuries; and no wonder, seeing as they lived away from the sun, in cold, wet, dark places. They were now hideous, grotesque beings, people said: you could not draw any creature uglier.

In fact the goblins themselves were not so different from the humans as all that. But as they had grown misshapen in body, they had also grown in knowledge and cleverness, and now were able to do things no ordinary person could.

Unfortunately they grew in mischief too. Their great delight was to annoy the people who lived in the open-air world above them. The goblins cared for each other; but they held such a grudge against those living up above, and especially against the descendants of the king, that they sought every way of tormenting them that they could. The goblins had a king and a government of their own, whose chief business was to devise trouble for their neighbours.

It will now be clear why the little princess had never seen the sky at night. People were much too afraid of the goblins to let her out of the house at night, even with many attendants; and they had good reason, as we shall see.

CHAPTER 2

The Princess Loses Herself

One very wet day, the mountain was covered with mist. It was constantly gathering itself into raindrops, and pouring down on the roofs of the great old house, from where it fell in a fringe of water all round the eaves. So of course Princess Irene could not go out.

She got very fed up, so that even her countless toys could no longer amuse her. Imagine the princess sitting in the nursery with the sky ceiling over her head, at a great table covered with her toys; her head hanging down, and her hands in her lap, feeling very miserable. She did not know what she wanted, except to go out and get thoroughly wet, and catch a particularly nice cold, and have to go to bed and eat gruel.

When she sat up and looked around, her nurse had gone out of the room. The princess tumbled off her chair and ran out of the door; not the same door that the nurse went out of, but one which led to a curious old staircase of ancient oak, which looked as if no-one had ever set foot upon it before. The princess had once been up six steps of it, and today she decided to find out what was at the top.

Up and up she ran – such a long way it seemed to her! – until she came to the top of the third flight of stairs. There she found the landing was at the end of a long passage, so she ran along it.

The passage was full of doors on either side. Irene did not open any, but ran on to the end, where she turned into another passage, also full of doors. When she had turned twice more, and still saw doors and only doors around her, she began to get frightened. It was so silent! And all those doors must hide rooms with nobody in them! That was dreadful. Also the rain made a great trampling noise on the roof.

Irene turned and set off at full speed, her little footsteps echoing through the sounds of the rain, back to the stairs and her safe nursery. So she thought, but she had lost herself long ago.

She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then began to be afraid. Very soon she was sure that she had lost the way back. Rooms everywhere, and no stair! Her little heart beat as fast as her little feet ran, and a lump of tears was growing in her throat. But she did not cry, until at last her hope failed her. Nothing but passages and doors everywhere! She threw herself on the floor, and burst into wailing sobs.

She did not cry long, however, for she was as brave as could be expected of an eight year princess. After a good cry, she got up, and brushed the dust from her frock, and wiped her eyes with her hands, since she had no handkerchiefs in her pocket.

Next, like a true princess, she resolved on going wisely to work to find her way back: she would walk through the passages, and look in every direction for the stair. So she did this, although she went over the same ground again and again without knowing it.

At last, in a corner, through a half-open door, she did see a stair. But alas! it went the wrong way: instead of going down, it went up. Still, frightened as she was, she could not help wishing to see where the stair might lead. It was very narrow, and so steep that she went up like a four-legged creature on her hands and feet.

CHAPTER 3

The Princess and – We Shall See Who

When Irene came to the top, she found herself in a little square landing, with three doors: one on either side, and one opposite her. She stood for a moment, wondering what to do next. But as she stood, she began to hear a curious humming sound.

Could it be the rain? No. It was much more gentle. The low sweet humming sound went on, sometimes stopping for a little while and then beginning again. It was like the hum of a very happy bee that had found a rich well of honey in some flower. Where could it come from? She put her ear to each of the doors to check. When she put her ear against the third door, there could be no doubt that it was coming from something in that room.

What could it be? She was rather afraid, but her curiosity was stronger than her fear, and she opened the door very gently and peeped in; and there she saw a very old lady who sat spinning.

Perhaps you will wonder how Princess Irene could tell that the lady was an old lady, when her face was smooth and white and beautiful. Her hair was combed back from her face, and hung loose all over her back. That is not much like an old lady, is it?

Ah! but her hair was white as snow. And although her face was so smooth, her eyes looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing that she must be old. The princess thought she must be very old indeed – at least fifty, she said to herself. But she was rather older than that, as you shall hear.

While the princess stared bewildered, with her head around the door, the old lady said, in a sweet, but old and rather shaky voice, which mingled very pleasantly with the hum of her spinning wheel:

“Come in, my dear; come in. I am glad to see you.”

So the princess stepped inside the door, and shut it gently behind her.

“Come to me, my dear,” said the old lady.

And again the princess did as she was told. She slowly approached the old lady until she stood by her side, and looked up in her face with her blue eyes and the two melted stars in them.

“Why, what have you been doing with your eyes, child?” asked the old lady.

“Crying,” answered the princess.

“Why, child?”

“Because I couldn’t find my way down again.”

“But you could find your way up.”

“Not at first – not for a long time.”

“But your face is streaked like the back of a zebra. Hadn’t you a handkerchief to wipe your eyes with?”

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you come to me to wipe them for you?”

“Please, I didn’t know you were here. I will next time.”

“There’s a good child!” said the old lady.

Then she stopped her wheel, and rose, and, going out of the room, returned with a little silver basin and a soft white towel, with which she washed and wiped the princess’s little face. Her hands felt so smooth and nice!

When she carried away the basin and towel, the little princess was surprised to see how straight and tall she was, for, although she was so old, she didn’t stoop a bit. She was dressed in black velvet with thick white lace; and her hair shone like silver. There was hardly any furniture in the room: no carpet on the floor – no table – nothing but the spinning-wheel and the chair beside it. When the lady came back, she sat down and without a word began her spinning once more, while Irene, who had never seen a spinning-wheel, stood by her side and watched.

When the old lady had got her thread going again, she said to the princess:

“Do you know my name, child?”

“No, I don’t,” answered the princess.

“My name is Irene.”

“That’s my name!” cried the princess.

“I know that. I let you have my name. I haven’t got your name. You’ve got mine.”

“How can that be?” asked the princess, bewildered. “I’ve always had my name.”

“Your papa, the king, asked me if I minded your having it; and, of course, I let you have it with pleasure.”

“It was very kind of you to give me your name,” said the princess.

“Oh, not so very kind!” said the old lady. “A name is something one can give away and keep at the same time. I have a good many things like that. Wouldn’t you like to know who I am, child?”

“Yes, I should, very much.”

“I’m your great-great-grandmother,” said the lady.

“What’s that?” asked the princess.

“I’m your father’s mother’s father’s mother.”

“Oh, dear! I can’t understand that,” said the princess.

“I will explain it to you when you are older,” the lady said. “But you will be able to understand this much now: I came here to take care of you.”

“When did you come? Was it yesterday?”

“I’ve been here ever since you came yourself.”

“But I never saw you before,” said the princess.

“No. But you shall see me again.”

“Do you live in this room always?” asked Irene.

“I don’t sleep in it. I sleep on the opposite side of the landing. I sit here most of the day.”

“I wouldn’t like it. My nursery is much prettier. You must be a queen too.”

“Yes, I am a queen.”

“Where is your crown, then?”

“In my bedroom,” said the lady.

“I should like to see it.”

“You shall some day, not today.”

“I wonder why nursie never told me,” mused the princess.

“Nursie doesn’t know. She never saw me. Nobody knows that I am in the house,” the lady said.

“How do you get your dinner, then?”

“I keep chickens – of a sort.”

“Where do you keep them?”

“I will show you.”

“And who cooks the chicken for you?” asked the princess.

“I never kill any of my chickens. I eat their eggs.”

“Is that what makes your hair so white?”

“No, my dear. It’s old age. I am very old.”

“I thought so. Are you fifty?”

“More than that.”

“Are you a hundred?”

“More than that,” the lady said. “I am too old for you to guess. Come and see my chickens.”

She stopped her spinning and stood up. Taking the princess by the hand, she led her out of the room and opened the door opposite the stair.

The princess expected to see a lot of hens and chickens, but instead, she saw the blue sky, and then the roofs of the big house, with a crowd of the loveliest pigeons walking about, bowing to each other, and talking a language she could not understand. She clapped her hands with delight, and caused such a flapping of wings that she was startled.

“You’ve frightened my birds,” said the old lady, smiling.

“And they’ve frightened me,” said the princess, smiling too. “Are the eggs nice?”

“Yes, very nice.”

“They must be very small! Wouldn’t it be better to keep hens, and get bigger eggs?”

“How should I feed them, though?”

“Oh, I see,” said the princess. “The pigeons feed themselves. But where are their nests?”

The lady pulled a little loop of string in the wall beside the door. It lifted a shutter and showed a great many pigeon-holes with nests, some with young chicks and some with eggs in them. The birds came in at the other side, and she took out the eggs on this side. Then she closed it again quickly, lest the young ones should be frightened.

“Oh, how nice!” cried the princess. “Will you give me an egg to eat? I’m rather hungry.”

“I will some day, but now you must go back, or nursie will be miserable. I dare say she’s looking for you everywhere.”

“Except here,” answered the princess. “Oh, how surprised she will be when I tell her about my great big grand-grand-mother!”

“Yes, she will!” said the old lady with a curious smile. “Mind you tell her all about it exactly.”

“I will. Please will you take me back to her?”

“I can’t go all the way, but I will take you to the top of the stair, and then you must run down fast into your own room.”

The little princess put her hand in the old lady’s, who, looking this way and that, brought her to the top of the first stair, and watched her go down. When she heard the cry of her nurse’s pleasure at finding the princess, she turned and sat down to her spinning again, with another strange smile on her sweet old face.

Guess what she was spinning? I will tell you more another time.

CHAPTER 4

What the Nurse Thought of It

“Where have you been, princess?” asked the nurse, taking her in her arms. “It’s very unkind of you to hide away so long. I began to be afraid—” She stopped.

“What were you afraid of, nursie?” asked Princess Irene.

“Never mind,” she answered. “Now tell me where you’ve been.”

“I’ve been up a long way to see my very great, huge, old grandmother,” said the princess.

“What do you mean?” asked the nurse, who thought she was making a joke.

“I mean that I’ve been a long way up and up to see my great grandmother. Ah, nursie, you don’t know what a beautiful mother of grandmothers I’ve got upstairs. She is such an old lady, with such lovely white hair – in fact, I think her hair is silver.”

“What nonsense you are talking, princess!” said the nurse.

“I’m not talking nonsense,” replied Irene, rather offended. “I’ll tell you all about her. She’s much taller than you, and prettier.”

“I dare say!” remarked the nurse.

“And she lives on pigeons’ eggs.”

“Most likely,” said the nurse.

“And she sits in an empty room, spinning all day long.”

“No doubt,” said the nurse.

“And she keeps her crown in her bedroom.”

“Of course she does. I expect she wears it in bed.”

“She didn’t say that. And I don’t think she does. That wouldn’t be comfortable, would it? I don’t think my papa wears his crown in bed. Does he, nursie?”

“I never asked him.”

“And she’s been there for years, ever since I came here.”

“Anybody could have told you that,” said the nurse, who did not believe a word Irene was saying.

“Why didn’t you tell me, then?”

“There was no need. You could make it all up by yourself.”

“You don’t believe me, then!” exclaimed the princess, astonished and angry.

“Did you expect me to believe you, princess?” asked the nurse coldly.

The princess burst into tears.

“Well, I must say,” remarked the nurse, “it is not at all becoming in a princess to tell stories and expect to be believed, just because she is a princess.”

“But it’s quite true!”

“You’ve dreamt it, child.”

“No, I didn’t dream it,” Irene said. “I went upstairs, and I lost myself, and if I hadn’t found the beautiful lady, I should never have found myself. Come up with me, and you’ll see that I’m telling the truth.”

“I have other work to do.” said the nurse. “It’s your dinnertime, and I won’t have any more such nonsense.”

The princess wiped her eyes, and sat down to her dinner, but she ate next to nothing. Not to be believed does not at all agree with princesses: for a real princess cannot tell a lie. So all the afternoon she did not speak a word, except to answer the nurse when she spoke to her, for a real princess is never rude.

Of course the nurse was not comfortable in her mind. She did not think Irene was telling the truth, but she loved her dearly, and was vexed with herself for having been cross to her. She thought her crossness was the cause of the princess’s unhappiness, and had no idea that she was really hurt at not being believed.

But it became more and more plain during the evening that, although she tried to amuse herself with her toys, Irene’s heart was too troubled to enjoy them. Her nurse’s discomfort grew. When bedtime came, she undressed Irene and laid her down, but the child, instead of holding up her little mouth to be kissed, turned away from her and lay still.

Then nursie’s heart gave way altogether, and she began to cry. At the sound of her first sob the princess turned again, and held her face to kiss her as usual. But the nurse had her handkerchief to her eyes, and did not see.

“Nursie,” said the princess, “why won’t you believe me?”

“Because I can’t believe you,” said the nurse.

“Ah! then you can’t help it,” said Irene, “and I will not be annoyed with you any more. I’ll give you a kiss and go to sleep.”

“You little angel!” cried the nurse, and she lifted her out of bed, and walked about the room with her in her arms, hugging her.

“You will let me take you to see my dear old great big grandmother, won’t you?” said the princess, as she laid her down again.

“And you won’t say I’m ugly, any more, will you, princess?”

“Nursie, I never said you were ugly.”

“Well, if you didn’t say it, you meant it.”

“I never did.”

“You said I wasn’t so pretty as—”

“As my beautiful grandmother – yes, I did say that, because it’s true.”

“I do think you are unkind!” said the nurse, and put her handkerchief to her eyes again.

“Nursie, dear, everybody can’t be beautiful, you know. You are very nice-looking, but if you had been as beautiful as my grandmother—”

“Bother your grandmother!” said the nurse.

“Nurse, that’s very rude. You are not fit to be spoken to till you can behave better.”

The princess turned away once more, and again the nurse was ashamed of herself.

“I beg your pardon, princess,” she said stiffly.

“You won’t say it again, I am sure,” Irene answered. “I was only going to say that if you had been twice as nice-looking as you are, some king or other would have married you, and then what would have become of me? You will come and see my grandmother, won’t you?”

“I will go anywhere you like, my cherub,” the nurse answered; and in two minutes the weary little princess was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 5

The Princess Lets Well Alone

When Irene woke the next morning, the first thing she heard was the rain still falling. At once she thought of the lady in the tower; and wondered whether she should ask the nurse to go with her to find her grandmother as soon as she had had her breakfast.

But she decided that perhaps the lady would not be pleased if she took anyone to see her without asking permission; especially as it was clear that she did not want the household to know she was there. So the princess resolved to take the first chance of running up alone and asking whether she might bring her nurse.

The princess and her nurse were the best of friends that morning, and the princess ate an enormous breakfast.

“I wonder, Lootie” – that was her pet name for her nurse – “what pigeons’ eggs taste like?” she said, as she was eating her egg.

“We’ll get you a pigeon’s egg, and you can judge for yourself,” said the nurse.

“Oh, no, no!” said Irene, suddenly reflecting they might disturb the old lady in getting it.

“What a strange creature you are,” said the nurse; but she did not say it crossly, and the princess did not mind.

Now the nurse, as she said herself afterwards, could not be in the room at every moment; and as the princess had never given her the smallest reason for anxiety until yesterday, she did not think to watch her more closely. So she went out of the room: and at once Irene was off and up the stairs again.

This day’s adventure, however, did not turn out like yesterday’s. Indeed, today is very seldom like yesterday. The princess ran through passage after passage, and could not find the stair to the tower. Possibly she had not gone up high enough, and was searching on the second floor instead of the third. When she turned to go back, she failed equally in her search for the stair. She was lost once more.

Something made it even worse to bear this time, and it was no wonder that she cried again. Suddenly it occurred to her that yesterday, it was after having cried that she had found her grandmother’s stair. She got up at once, wiped her eyes, and started upon a fresh quest.

This time, although she did not find what she hoped, she found what was next best. She did not come to a stair that went up, but she found one that went down. It was better than no stair at all, so down she went, and was singing merrily before she reached the bottom.

There, to her surprise, she found herself in the kitchen. Although she was not allowed to go there alone, her nurse had often taken her, and she was a great favourite with the servants. So they all rushed over the moment she appeared. Soon the nurse heard about it, and came to fetch her; but she never suspected how she had got there, and the princess kept quiet.

Her failure to find the old lady not only disappointed Princess Irene, but made her very thoughtful. Sometimes she almost thought she really had dreamed her; but that fancy never lasted long. She wondered whether she would ever see her again, and thought it very sad not to have been able to find her when she particularly wanted to. But she resolved to say nothing more to her nurse about it.

CHAPTER 6

The Little Miner

The next day the great cloud still hung over the mountain, and the rain poured like water from a full sponge. The princess was very fond of being out of doors, and she nearly cried when she saw that the weather was no better. But the mist was lighter, and as the hours went on it grew brighter still. Late in the afternoon the sun broke out so gloriously that Irene clapped her hands, crying:

“Look, Lootie! The sun has had his face washed. Look how bright he is! Let’s go out for a walk. How happy I am!”

Lootie was very glad to please the princess. She got her hat and cloak, and they set out together for a walk up the mountain; for the road was so hard and steep that the water did not settle on it, and it was dry enough for walking a few minutes after the rain stopped.

The clouds were rolling away in broken pieces, like great, overwoolly sheep. Between them the sky shone with a deeper and purer blue, because of the rain. The trees on the roadside were hung all over with drops, which sparkled in the sun like jewels.

The only things that were no brighter for the rain were the brooks that ran down the mountain; they had changed from the clearness of crystal to a muddy brown, and had become much noisier. Irene was delighted with the great brown streams tumbling down everywhere.

At length the nurse observed that the sun was getting low, and said it was time to be going back. She made the remark again and again, but, every time, the princess begged her to go on just a little further, reminding her that it was much easier to go back downhill, so that they would be at home in a moment. So on they went, pausing to look at a group of ferns, or pick a shining stone from the wayside, or watch the flight of some bird.

Suddenly the shadow of a great mountain peak came up from behind, and shot in front of them. When the nurse saw it, she jumped and shook, and catching hold of the princess’s hand she turned and began to run down the hill.

“What’s the hurry, nursie?” asked Irene, running alongside her.

“We must not be out a moment longer.” But the nurse almost cried, because they were much too far from home. It was against her orders to be out with the princess one moment after the sun was down; and they were nearly a mile up the mountain! If the King, Irene’s papa, were to hear of it, Lootie would certainly be dismissed; and to leave the princess would break her heart. It was no wonder she ran.

But Irene was not in the least frightened, not knowing anything to be frightened at. She kept on chattering as she ran, saying: “Look, look, Lootie!” but Lootie paid no heed to anything she said, only ran on.

“Look, look, Lootie! Don’t you see that funny man peeping over the rock?”

Lootie only ran faster. They had to pass the rock, and when they came nearer, the princess saw it was only a lump of the rock itself that she had taken for a man.

“Look, look, Lootie! There’s such a curious creature at the foot of that old tree. Look at it, Lootie! It’s making faces at us!”

Lootie gave a stifled cry, and ran faster still – so fast that Irene’s little legs could not keep up with her, and she fell down with a crash. It was a hard road, and she had been running very fast – so it was no wonder she began to cry. The nurse was nearly beside herself; but she got the princess on her feet, and they ran on again.

“Who’s that laughing at me?” said the princess, trying to keep in her sobs, and running too fast for her grazed knees.

“Nobody, child,” said the nurse, almost angrily.

But at that instant there came a burst of coarse laughter from somewhere near, and a hoarse indistinct voice that seemed to say: “Lies! lies! lies!”

“Oh!” cried the nurse, almost in a scream, and she ran on faster than ever.

“Nursie! Lootie! I can’t run any more. Let’s walk a bit.”

“What am I to do?” said the nurse. “Here, I will carry you.”

She lifted Irene up; but found her much too heavy to run with, and had to set her down again. Then she looked wildly about her, gave a great cry, and said:

“We’ve taken the wrong turning somewhere. I don’t know where we are. We’re lost!”

It was true: they had lost the way. They had been running down into a little valley in which there was no house to be seen.

Now Irene did not know the reason for her nurse’s terror, for the servants had all strict orders never to mention the goblins to her; but it was very alarming to see her nurse in such a fright.

However, a moment later, she heard the sound of whistling. She saw a boy coming up the road from the valley to meet them, and whistling; but before they met, his whistling changed to singing. And this is something like what he sang:

“Ring! dod! bang!
Go the hammers’ clang!
Hit and turn and bore!
Whizz and puff and roar!
Thus we rive the rocks,
Force the goblin locks.
See the shining ore!
One, two, three—
Bright as gold can be!
Four, five, six—
Shovels, mattocks, picks!
Seven, eight, nine—
Light your lamp at mine.
Ten, eleven, twelve—
Loosely hold the helve.
We’re the merry miner-boys,
Make the goblins hold their noise.”

“I wish *you* would hold your noise,” said the nurse rudely, for the very word ‘goblin’ made her tremble. It would surely bring the goblins upon them, she thought, to defy them in that way.

But the boy did not stop his singing.

“Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—
This is worth the siftin’;
Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—
There’s the match, and lay’t in.
Nineteen, twenty—
Goblins in a plenty.”

“Do be quiet,” cried the nurse, in a whispered shriek. But the boy, who was now close, still went on.

“Hush! scush! scurry!
There you go in a hurry!
Gobble! gobble! goblin!
There you go a wobblin’;
Hobble, hobble, hobblin’—
Cobble! cobble! cobblin’!
Hob-bob-goblin!—
Huuuuuh!

“There!” said the boy, as he stood still opposite them. “There! that’ll do. They can’t bear singing, and they can’t stand that song. They can’t sing themselves, for they have no more voice than a crow; and they don’t like other people to sing.”

The boy was dressed in a miner’s dress, with a curious cap on his head. He was a very nice-looking boy, with eyes as dark as the mines in which he worked and as sparkling as the crystals in their rocks. He was about twelve years old. His face was pale, because he had been so little in the open air and the sunlight; but he looked happy – perhaps at the thought of having driven away the goblins.

“I saw them as I came up,” he went on, “and I’m very glad I did. I knew they were after somebody, but I couldn’t see who it was. They won’t touch you so long as I’m with you.”

“Why, who are you?” asked the nurse, offended at the freedom with which he spoke to them.

“I’m the son of Peter the miner.”

“I don’t know him. And why should the goblins mind you, pray?”

“Because I don’t mind them,” he said. “I’m used to them. If you’re not afraid of them, they’re afraid of you. I’m not afraid of them. That’s all you need – up here. It’s a different thing down there. They won’t even care about that song, down there. If anyone sings it, they stand grinning at him awfully; and if he gets frightened, and misses a word, or says a wrong one – oh! don’t they give it him!”

“What do they do to him?” asked Irene, with a trembling voice.

“Don’t go frightening the princess,” said the nurse.

“The princess!” said the little miner, taking off his curious cap. “I beg your pardon; but you oughtn’t to be out so late. Everybody knows that’s against the law.”

“Yes, indeed it is!” said the nurse, beginning to cry again.

“I hope they didn’t hear you call her the princess. If they did, they’re sure to know her again: they’re awfully sharp.”

“Lootie! Lootie!” cried the princess. “Take me home.”

“Don’t go on like that,” said the nurse to the boy, almost fiercely. “How could I help it? I lost my way.”

“You shouldn’t have been out so late. You wouldn’t have lost your way if you hadn’t been frightened,” said the boy. “Come along. I’ll soon set you right again. Shall I carry your little Highness?”

“No, thank you,” said Irene. “I can walk very well, though I can’t run so fast as nursie. If you will give me one hand, Lootie will give me another.”

They each took a hand.

“Now let’s run,” said the nurse.

“No, no!” said the little miner. “That’s the worst thing you can do. If you hadn’t run before, you would not have lost your way. And if you run now, they’ll be after you in a moment.”

“I don’t want to run,” said Irene.

“But if they know at the house that I’ve kept you out so late, I shall be turned away and lose my job,” said the nurse, “and that would break my heart.”

“Turned away, Lootie! Who would turn you away?”

“Your papa, child.”

“But I’ll tell him it was all my fault. And you know it was, Lootie. I’ll go down on my knees and beg him not to take away my own dear Lootie.”

The nurse was comforted by this, and said no more; and they went on, walking pretty fast, but taking care not to run.

“I want to talk to you,” said Irene to the little miner; “but I don’t know your name.”

“My name’s Curdie, little princess. Curdie Peterson. What’s your name, please?”

“Irene.”

“Irene what?”

“I don’t know. What is the rest of my name, Lootie?”

“Princesses haven’t got more than one name,” said the nurse. “They don’t need it.”

“Oh, then, Curdie, you must call me just Irene.”

“He shall do no such thing,” said the nurse indignantly. “He should call you Your Royal Highness.”

“My Royal Highness! What’s that? No, no, Lootie. I won’t be called names. Curdie, my name’s Irene.”

“Well, Irene,” said Curdie, with a glance at the nurse; “it is very kind of you to let me call you anything. I like your name very much.”

He expected the nurse to interfere again; but he saw that she was too frightened to speak. She was staring at something like a lump of earth in the

middle of the path, where it narrowed between rocks so that only one could pass at a time.

“It is very kind of you to go out of your way to take us home,” said Irene.

“I’m not out of my way yet,” said Curdie. “It’s on the other side of those rocks that the path turns off to my father’s.”

“You wouldn’t think of leaving us till we’re safe home, I’m sure,” gasped the nurse.

“Of course not,” said Curdie.

“You dear, kind Curdie! I’ll give you a kiss when we get home,” said the princess.

The nurse pulled her by the hand.

But at that instant, the something in the middle of the way, which had looked like a great lump of earth, began to move. One after another it shot out four long limbs, like two arms and two legs, but it was too dark to tell what they were.

The nurse began to tremble. Irene clasped Curdie’s hand tighter, and Curdie began to sing again:

“One, two—
Hit and hew!
Three, four—
Blast and bore!
Five, six—
There’s a fix!
Seven, eight—
Hold it straight!
Nine, ten—
Hit again!
Hurry! scurry!
Bother! smother!
There’s a toad
In the road!
Smash it!
Squash it!
Fry it!
Dry it!
You’re another!
Up and off!
There’s enough!—
Huuuuuh!”

As he sang the last words, Curdie let go of Irene’s hand, and rushed at the thing in the road as if he would trample it under his feet. It gave a great spring, and ran straight up one of the rocks like a huge spider. Curdie turned back laughing, and took Irene’s hand again. She grasped his hand very tight, but said nothing till they had passed the rocks. A few yards further on she found herself on a part of the road she knew, and was able to speak again.

“Do you know, Curdie, your song sounds rather rude,” she said.

“Well, perhaps it is,” answered Curdie. “We sing it because the goblins don’t like it.”

“Don’t!” said the nurse. “Please don’t.”

“Oh! Then I won’t; though I don’t understand why,” he said. “Look! There are the lights of your great house down below. You’ll be at home in five minutes.”

They reached home in safety. Nobody had missed them, or even realised they had gone out; and they arrived at the door without anyone seeing them. The nurse was rushing in with a hurried good night to Curdie; but the princess pulled her hand away from hers, and was just throwing her arms round Curdie’s neck, when the nurse caught her again and dragged her away.

“Lootie! I promised him a kiss,” cried Irene.

“A princess mustn’t give kisses. It’s not proper,” said Lootie. “And he’s only a miner-boy.”

“He’s a brave boy, and he has been very kind to us. Lootie! Lootie! I promised.”

“Your Royal Highness,” said Lootie, suddenly grown very formal, “you must come in at once.”

“Nurse, a princess must not break her word,” said Irene, drawing herself up.

Lootie did not know which the king might think was worst – to let the princess be out after sunset, or to let her kiss a miner-boy. She did not know that, being a gentleman, he would not have wanted her to break her word. So she was in a great difficulty. But Curdie came to the rescue.

“Never mind, Princess Irene,” he said. “You mustn’t kiss me tonight. But you shan’t break your word. I will come another time.”

“Oh, thank you, Curdie!” said the princess.

“Good night, Irene; good night, Lootie,” said Curdie, and turned and was out of sight in a moment.

“I should like to see him try!” muttered the nurse, as she carried the princess to the nursery.

“You will see him,” said Irene. “You may be sure Curdie will keep his word. He’s sure to come again.”

“I should like to see him try!” repeated the nurse, and said no more, because she did not want to quarrel with the princess. She resolved to watch Irene far better in future. Her carelessness had already doubled the danger she was in.

Formerly the goblins were her only fear; now she had to protect the princess from Curdie too.

CHAPTER 7

The Mines

Curdie went home whistling. He resolved to say nothing about the princess for fear of getting the nurse into trouble, for while he enjoyed teasing her, he did not wish to do her any harm. He saw no more of the goblins, and was soon fast asleep in his bed.

He woke in the middle of the night, thinking he heard strange noises outside. He sat up to listen; then got up, and, opening the door very quietly, went out.

When he peeped round the corner, he saw beneath his window a group of stumpy creatures, whom he at once recognized by their shape. As soon as he began his "One, two, three!" they scurried away out of sight. He went inside laughing, got into bed again, and was fast asleep in a moment.

In the morning he thought about it. Nothing like this had ever happened before, so he decided that the goblins must be annoyed with him for interfering to protect the princess. By the time he was dressed, however, he was thinking of something quite different, for he did not care about the goblins in the least. As soon as they had had breakfast, he set off with his father for the mine.

They entered the hill by a natural opening under a huge rock, where a little stream rushed out. They followed the stream for a few yards, until the passage took a turn, and sloped steeply into the heart of the hill. With many angles and windings and branchings-off, and sometimes with steps, it led them deep into the hill before they arrived at the place where they were digging out the precious ore. The mountain was very rich in several metals.

With flint and steel and tinder-box, they lit their lamps, then fixed them on their heads, and were soon hard at work with their pickaxes and shovels and hammers. Father and son were working near each other, but not in the same gang – which meant a passage out of which the ore was dug; because when the vein of ore was small, one miner would have to dig away alone in a small gang, a passage just big enough to work in.

If they stopped for a moment they could hear, everywhere around them, some near, some far, the sounds of their companions burrowing away in the inside of the great mountain. Some were drilling holes in the rock to fill with with gunpowder, others were shovelling broken ore into baskets to be carried back up, others were hitting away with their pickaxes. Sometimes, if the miner was in a very lonely part, he would hear only a tap-tapping, no louder than a woodpecker, for the sound would come from a great distance through the solid mountain rock.

The work was hard, but it was not unpleasant, and some of the miners, when they wanted to earn a little more money, would stay behind and work all night. You could not tell night from day down there, except from feeling sleepy; for no sunlight ever came into those gloomy regions. Some who had remained behind alone during the night would declare the next morning that every time they halted for a moment, they had heard a tap-tapping all about them, as if the mountain were more full of miners than ever it was during the day.

Because of this, some people would never stay overnight, for everyone knew those were the sounds of the goblins, who only worked at night. Night was their day. Indeed, most of the miners were afraid of the goblins; but the braver ones, including Peter Peterson and his son Curdie, had stayed in the mine all night many times. Although they had sometimes met a few stray goblins, they had never yet failed in driving them away. Their chief defence against them was verse, for the goblins hated verse of every kind. I suspect they could not make any themselves, and that was why they disliked it so much.

At all events, those people who were most afraid of them were those who could neither make up verses themselves nor remember other people's verses; while those who were never afraid were those who could make up verses for themselves. For although certain old rhymes were very effective, a new rhyme of the right sort was even more hateful to the goblins, and would put them to flight.

Perhaps you may be wondering why the goblins were working all night long, seeing they never sold the ore; but you will soon understand.

Curdie had determined to remain there alone this night – for two reasons: first, he wanted to get extra wages so that he might buy a warm red petticoat for his mother, who was feeling cold in the mountain air this autumn; and second, he had just a faint hope of finding out what the goblins were doing under his window the night before.

He told his father, who made no objection, for he had great confidence in his boy's courage and resourcefulness.

"You'll be sure to take care of yourself, won't you?" said his father.

"Yes, father; I will. I'll keep a sharp look-out, I promise you."

Curdie was the only one who remained in the mine. About six o'clock the rest went home, bidding him good night, and telling him to take care of himself; for he was a great favourite with them all.

"Don't forget your rhymes," said one.

"No, no," answered Curdie.

"It's no matter if he does," said another, "for he can make a new rhyme."

"Yes: but he mightn't be able to make it fast enough," said a third; "and while it was cooking in his head, they might set upon him."

"I'll do my best," said Curdie. "I'm not afraid."

"We know that," they replied, and left him.

CHAPTER 8

The Goblins

For some time Curdie worked briskly, throwing all the ore he had dug to one side, ready for carrying out in the morning. He heard a good deal of goblin-tapping, but it all sounded far away in the hill, and he paid it little heed.

Towards midnight he began to feel rather hungry; so he dropped his pickaxe, got out a lump of bread which he had put in a damp hole in the rock, sat down on a heap of ore, and ate his supper. Then he leaned back for five minutes' rest, and laid his head against the rock.

He had been there only a minute when he heard something which made him sharpen his ears. It sounded like a voice inside the rock. After a while he heard it again. It was a goblin voice – and he could make out the words.

“Hadn't we better be moving?” it said.

A rougher and deeper voice replied:

“There's no hurry. That wretched little mole won't dig through tonight, no matter how hard he works. He's not at the thinnest place.”

“But you still think the lode of ore comes through into our house?” said the first voice.

“Yes, but a good bit further on than he has got to. If he had struck more to the side just here, he would be through;” and the goblin tapped the very stone, it seemed to Curdie, against which his head lay. “But he's a couple of yards past it now, and if he follows the lode it will be a week before it leads him in. Still, perhaps it would be just as well to get out of here. Helfer, you can carry the great chest.”

“Yes, dad,” said a third voice. “But you must help me to get it on my back. It's awfully heavy.”

“Well, it isn't just a bag of smoke, I admit. But you're as strong as a mountain, Helfer.”

“I think I'm quite strong, dad. But I could carry ten times as much if it wasn't for my feet.”

“That is your weak point, my boy.”

“Ain't it yours too, father?”

“Well, to be honest, it's a goblin weakness. I don't know why our feet are so soft.”

“Specially when your head's so hard, dad.”

“Yes, my boy. The goblin's glory is his head. To think how the fellows up above there have to put on helmets when they go fighting! Ha! ha!”

“But why don't we wear shoes like them, father?”

“Well, it's not the fashion. The king never wears shoes.”

“The queen does.”

“Yes, but that's because the first queen – I mean the king's first wife – wore shoes because she came from upstairs; and so, when she died, the next queen decided she should wear shoes too. It was all pride. She forbade the rest of the women to wear them.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t wear them!” said the first voice, which was evidently that of the mother of the family. “I can’t think why the first queen did.”

“Didn’t I tell you she was from upstairs?” said the other. “That was the only silly thing His Majesty ever did. Why should he marry an outlandish woman like that – one of our natural enemies too?”

“I suppose he fell in love with her.”

“Pooh! He’s just as happy now with one of his own people,” said the goblin father.

“Did she die very soon? They didn’t tease her to death, did they?”

“Oh, dear, no! She died when the young prince was born.”

“How silly of her! It must have been because she wore shoes. Why do they wear shoes up there?”

“Ah, I can tell you that. But first I must tell you a secret. I once saw the first queen’s feet – without her shoes.”

“No! Did you? How come?”

“Never you mind,” said the goblin father. “She didn’t know I saw them. And what do you think! They had toes!”

“Toes! What’s that?”

“You may well ask! I should never have known if I hadn’t seen the queen’s feet. Just imagine! The ends of her feet were split up into five or six thin pieces!”

“Oh, horrid! How could the king have fallen in love with her?”

“You forget that she wore shoes. That is why she wore them. That is why all the men and women upstairs wear shoes. They can’t bear the sight of their own feet.”

“Ah! now I understand. If ever you wish for shoes again, Helfer, I’ll hit your feet.”

“But, mother, I—”

A horrid scream followed, which Curdie interpreted as meaning that the mother had hit the feet of her eldest goblin.

“Well, I never knew that!” remarked a fourth voice.

“You don’t know everything,” said the father. “You were only fifty last month. As soon as we’ve finished our supper, we’ll be up and going. Ha! ha!”

“What are you laughing at, husband?”

“I’m laughing to think what a mess the miners will find themselves in some day.”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. Everyone is at our palace consulting about it; and as soon as we’ve got away from this place I’m going there to hear what night they decide on. I should like to see that young ruffian there on the other side, struggling in—”

Here he dropped his voice so low that Curdie could hear only a growl for quite a long time. It was not until his wife spoke again that his voice rose to its former pitch.

“But what shall we do while you’re at the palace?” she asked.

“I’ll see you safe to the new house I’ve been digging for the last two months. Podge, you mind the table and chairs. The table has seven legs – each chair has three. You carry them.”

After this there was a confused conversation about transporting various household goods; and Curdie heard nothing more of any importance.

He now knew at least one reason for the constant sound of the goblin hammers and pickaxes at night. They were making new houses for themselves, in case the miners should break into their dwellings.

But he had also learned two things of far greater importance. The first was, that some awful calamity was ready to fall upon the heads of the miners; the second was the one weak point of a goblin's body. He had not known that their feet were so soft and tender. He had heard it said that they had no toes, but had never been able to see for himself because the goblins only appeared at dusk.

But the fact about the softness of the goblin feet might, Curdie foresaw, be useful. What he had to do in the meantime, was to discover the special evil plan the goblins had in their heads.

Although he knew all the gangs and galleries which the goblins used, he had no idea where the palace of the king of the goblins was; otherwise he would have set out at once in the hopes of discovering the plan. He thought that the palace must lie in a far part of the mountain, with no path between it and the mine.

But he now knew that only a thin wall of rock now separated them. If only he could get through in time to follow the goblins as they retreated! A few blows might be enough – but if he struck with his pickaxe, he would put the family on their guard. So he began to feel the wall with his hands, and soon found that some of the stones were loose enough to be pulled out with only a little noise.

Taking hold of a large stone with both his hands, he drew it gently out, and let it down softly.

“What was that noise?” said the goblin father.

Curdie blew out his light, lest it should shine through.

“It must be that miner that stayed behind,” said the mother.

“No; he's been gone a good while. I haven't heard a blow for an hour.”

“Then I suppose it must have been a stone carried down the brook inside.”

“Perhaps.”

Curdie kept quite still. After a little while, hearing nothing but the occasional sound, he put his hand in the gap to feel. It went in a good way, and then came in contact with something soft. He quickly pulled his hand out. He had felt one of the toeless goblin feet: its owner gave a cry of fright.

“What's the matter, Helfer?” asked his mother.

“A beast came out of the wall and licked my foot!”

“Nonsense! There are no wild beasts here underground,” said his father.

“But I felt it, father.”

“Nonsense. Hold your tongue.”

Curdie suppressed his laughter, and lay still as a mouse, although he kept nibbling away with his fingers at the edges of the hole, slowly making it bigger.

Through it, he could hear a mass of confused talk, but it was not easy to make out what the rasping voices said. At length he heard the father goblin speak.

“Now, then,” he said, “get your bundles on your backs. Helfer, I'll help you up with your chest. I must go to the meeting at the palace tonight. When that's over, we can come back and clear out the last of the things before the morning. Now light your torches, and come along.”

CHAPTER 9

The Hall of the Goblin Palace

There was a sound of many soft feet, which died away. Then Curdie flew at the hole like a tiger, and tore and pulled. The sides gave way, and it was soon large enough for him to crawl through.

He would not risk rekindling his lamp, but the torches of the goblins retreating down a long passage threw back enough light to let him glance round their deserted home. To his surprise, it looked just the same as an ordinary natural cave, like many which he had come across during the miners' excavations. The goblins had talked of returning for the rest of their household gear: yet he saw nothing there.

The floor was rough and stony; the walls uneven; the roof in one place was twenty feet high, in another almost touched his forehead; while on one side a stream, no thicker than a needle, but still sufficient to spread a wide dampness over the wall, flowed down the face of the rock.

But the troop departing down the tunnel was toiling under heavy burdens. He could distinguish Helfer now and then, in the flickering light, with his heavy chest on his bending shoulders; while the second brother was almost buried in what looked like a great feather mattress.

"Where do they get the feathers?" thought Curdie; but in a moment the troop disappeared round a bend, and he had to follow them or lose them altogether. He darted after them like a greyhound.

When he reached the corner and looked round cautiously, he saw them again at some distance down another long passage. None of the galleries he saw bore signs of the work of man. Stalactites, far older than the mines, hung from their roofs; and their floors were rough with boulders.

He waited again at this corner till they had disappeared round the next, and so followed them a long way through one passage after another. The passages grew more and more lofty, and their roofs were covered with shining stalactites.

It was a strange procession which he followed. But the strangest part of it was the household animals which crowded amongst the feet of the goblins. It was true they had no wild animals down there; but they had a wonderful number of tame ones. I can tell you more about these later.

At length, turning a corner too abruptly, Curdie almost rushed into the middle of the goblin family; for they had already set down all their burdens on the floor of a large cave, too breathless to speak. He jumped back before anyone saw him, and retreating a good way, stood watching.

Before very long, the goblin father and his son Helfer set off in the same direction as before, while Curdie followed them again with renewed caution. For a long time he heard no sound except something like the rush of a river inside the rock; but at length what seemed the far-off noise of a great shouting reached his ears, and then stopped.

After advancing some way farther, he thought he heard a single voice. It sounded clearer and clearer as he went on, until at last he could almost distinguish the words. In a moment, following the goblins round another corner, he once more started back – this time in amazement.

He was at the entrance of a magnificent oval cavern. It had probably once been full of water, but was now the great palace hall of the goblins. It rose to a tremendous height; but the roof was made of such shining rocks, and the multitude of torches carried by the crowd of goblins lit up the place so brilliantly, that Curdie could see right up to the top.

The rough projections on the walls, and the shadows thrown upwards from them by the torches below, made the sides of the chamber look as if they were crowded with statues, reaching in irregular tiers from floor to roof. The walls themselves were shining, and gorgeously coloured in some places.

Curdie could not help wondering whether his rhymes would be of any use against such a multitude of goblins. They filled the floor of the hall. He felt tempted to begin his shout of “One, two, three!” Instead he kept perfectly quiet, and peering round the edge of the doorway, listened hard.

At the other end of the hall, high above the heads of the crowd, was a high terrace-like ledge set into the cavern-wall. Upon this sat the king and his court: the king on a throne hollowed out of a huge block of green copper ore, and his court upon lower seats around it. The king had been making a speech, and the applause following it was what Curdie had heard.

One of the court was now addressing the crowd.

“Two plans have been for some time working in the strong head of His Majesty. We were the first possessors of the upper regions they now inhabit; and we abandoned that region from the loftiest motives. We excel them far in mental ability, if not in stature, and yet they look upon us as a degraded race. But the time has almost arrived when – thanks to His Majesty’s inventive genius – we will be able to take revenge upon them once and for all, in return for their unfriendly behaviour.”

“May it please Your Majesty,” cried a voice close by the door, which Curdie recognized as that of the goblin father.

“Who interrupts the Chancellor?” cried another from near the throne.

“Glump,” answered several voices.

“He is our trusty subject,” said the king himself, in a slow and stately voice: “let him come forward and speak.”

A lane was parted through the crowd, and Glump, having ascended the platform and bowed to the king, spoke as follows:

“Sire, I would have held my peace, had I not known that in all probability, before another day is past, the enemy will have broken through into my house. The partition between is now no more than a foot in thickness.”

“Not quite that much,” thought Curdie.

“This very evening I have had to remove my household goods; therefore the sooner we are ready to carry out His Majesty’s magnificent plan, the better. I may just add, that within the last few days I have perceived a small outbreak in my dining-room, which has convinced me that close to that spot must be a deep gulf

in the river channel. This discovery will, I trust, add to the already immense forces at His Majesty's disposal."

Glump ceased, and after bowing, slid down amongst the rest of the goblins. Then the Chancellor rose and resumed.

"The information which the worthy Glump has given us," he said, "might have been of importance at present, but for that other plan, which naturally takes precedence. Should His Majesty be successful – and who doubts it? – then a peace, all to the advantage of the goblin kingdom, will be established for a generation at least, made absolutely secure by the pledge which His Royal Highness the prince will have for the good behaviour of her relatives. Should His Majesty fail – and who can dare to imagine that? – then will be the time for carrying out the plan to which Glump referred, and for which our preparations are almost complete. The failure of the first plan will make the second essential."

Curdie, seeing that the meeting was drawing to a close and that there was little chance of either plan being more fully disclosed, now thought it prudent to make his escape before the goblins began to disperse. So he slipped quietly away.

There was not much danger of meeting any goblins, for all the men were behind him in the palace; but there was considerable danger of taking a wrong turning, for he had now no light, and had to depend upon his memory and his hands.

He was most anxious to get back through the hole before the goblins should return to fetch the remains of their furniture. It was not that he was afraid of them, but it was of the utmost importance that he should discover what they were plotting – and they must not suspect that they were watched by a miner.

He hurried on, feeling his way along the walls of rock. Had he not been very courageous, he would have been very anxious, because he knew that if he lost his way it would be the most difficult thing in the world to find it again. Morning would bring no light into these regions; and no goblin could be expected to be friendly to him. How he wished that he had brought his lamp and tinder-box with him!

He wished it all the more when, after a while, he found his way blocked up, and could get no further.

It was of no use to turn back, for he had not the least idea where he had begun to go wrong. Mechanically, however, he kept feeling about the walls that hemmed him in. His hand came upon a place where a tiny stream of water was running down the face of the rock.

"How stupid I am!" he said to himself. "I am actually at the end of my journey! And there are the goblins coming back to fetch their things!" he added, as the red glimmer of their torches appeared at the end of the long avenue that led up to the cave.

In a moment he had thrown himself on the floor, and wriggled backwards through the hole. The floor on the other side was several feet lower, which made it easier to get back. It was all he could do to lift the largest stone he had taken out of the hole, but he did manage to shove it in again. Then he sat down on the ore-heap and thought.

He was pretty sure that the second plan of the goblins was to flood the mine by breaking through outlets for the water that ran through the mountain and

accumulated in natural reservoirs. Now that a passage was broken through to the goblins' side, it was clear to Curdie that the mine could be destroyed by flooding in an hour. Water was always the chief danger to which the miners were exposed; so they were careful as soon as they saw any appearance of water.

As Curdie thought about this, it seemed to him that it would be best to build up the whole of this passage, filling it with stone and clay, so that there should be no channel for the water to get into. There was not, however, any immediate danger of that happening, for the second plan would only happen if the first, unknown plan failed; and he was most anxious to keep the passage open, so that he might if possible discover what that first plan was. He knew that the goblins could not cause a flood without his knowing, and if that happened the passage could be blocked up in time.

As soon as he found that the goblins had again retired, Curdie lit his lamp, and filled the hole he had made with stones that could be easily removed. Then he thought he had better go home and have some sleep.

How pleasant the night air felt upon the outside of the mountain! He hurried up the hill without meeting a single goblin on the way, and tapped at the window until he woke his father, who rose and let him in. Curdie told him the whole story. Just as he had expected, his father thought it best to work that lode no farther, but at the same time to pretend occasionally to be at work there, in order that the goblins might have no suspicions.

Both father and son then went to bed and slept soundly till the morning.

CHAPTER 10

The Princess's King-Papa

The weather continued to be fine for weeks, and the little princess went out every day. Such a long period of fine weather had never been known upon that mountain. The only problem was that her nurse was so nervous and particular about being inside before the sun was down, that often she would take to her heels when nothing worse than a fleecy cloud threw a shadow on the hillside. Many an evening they were home a full hour before the sunlight had gone.

If it had not been for such odd behaviour, Irene would by this time have almost forgotten the goblins. She never forgot Curdie, but she remembered him for his own sake, and indeed would have remembered him if only because a princess never forgets her debts.

One splendid sunshiny day, Irene, who was playing in the garden, heard the distant blast of a bugle. She jumped up with a cry of joy, for she knew that particular blast meant that her father was on his way to see her. This part of the garden lay on the hill-slope and allowed a full view of the country below.

So she shaded her eyes with her hand and looked out to catch the first glimpse of shining armour.

In a few moments a little troop came glittering round the shoulder of a hill. Spears and helmets were sparkling and gleaming, banners were flying, horses prancing, and again came the bugle-blast which was to her like the voice of her father calling across the distance: "Irene, I'm coming."

On they came until she could clearly see the king. He rode a white horse and was taller than any of the men with him. Around his helmet he wore a narrow circle of gold set with jewels, which flashed in the sun.

It was a long time since he had been to see her, and her little heart beat faster and faster as the shining troop approached, for she loved her king-papa very dearly and was nowhere so happy as in his arms. When she could see them no more from the garden, she ran to the gate, and stood there till up they came, clanging and stamping, with one more bright bugle-blast.

By this time the people of the house were all gathered at the gate, but Irene stood alone in front of them. When the horsemen pulled up she ran to the side of the white horse and held up her arms. The king took her hands. In an instant she was on the saddle and clasped in his great strong arms.

The king had gentle, blue eyes, but a nose that made him look like an eagle. A long dark beard, streaked with silver, flowed almost to his waist, and as Irene sat on the saddle and hid her glad face upon his bosom it mingled with the golden hair which her mother had given her, and the two together were like a cloud with streaks of the sun woven through it. After he had held her to his heart for a minute he spoke to his white horse, and the great beautiful creature walked as gently as a lady through the gate and up to the door of the house.

Then the king set Irene on the ground. Dismounting, he took her hand and walked with her into the great hall, which was hardly ever entered except when he came to see his little princess. There he sat down, with two of his counsellors, to have some refreshment, and Irene sat on his right hand and drank her milk out of a carved wooden bowl.

After the king had eaten and drunk he turned to the princess and said, stroking her hair:

"Now, my child, what shall we do next?"

This was the question he almost always asked her after their meal together; and Irene had been waiting for it with some impatience; for now, she thought, she should be able to settle a question which constantly perplexed her.

"I should like you to take me to see my great old grandmother."

The king looked grave. He said, "What does my little daughter mean?"

"I mean the Queen Irene that lives up in the tower – the very old lady, you know, with the long silver hair."

The king only gazed at his little princess with a look which she could not understand.

"She's got her crown in her bedroom," she went on; "but I've not been in there yet. You know she's there, don't you?"

"No," said the king, very quietly.

“Then it must all be a dream,” said Irene. “I half thought it was; but I couldn’t be sure. Now I am sure of it. Besides, I couldn’t find her the next time I went up.”

At that moment a snow-white pigeon flew in at an open window and settled upon Irene’s head. She broke into a merry laugh, and put up her hands to her head, saying:

“Dear dovey, don’t peck me. You’ll pull my hair with your claws if you don’t take care.”

The king stretched out his hand to take the pigeon, but it spread its wings and flew away through the open window. The king laid his hand on his princess’s head, gazed in her face, smiled half a smile, and sighed half a sigh.

“Come, my child; we’ll have a walk in the garden together,” he said.

“You won’t come up and see my great, beautiful grandmother, then, king-papa?” said the princess.

“Not this time,” said the king very gently. “She has not invited me, you know, and great old ladies like her do not choose to be visited without permission being asked.”

The garden was a very lovely place. Being upon a mountainside, there were parts where the rocks came through in great masses, and wild flowers and tufts of heather grew around them: while nearby grew roses and lilies. This mingling of the wild mountain with the civilized garden was very pleasant.

Against one of these rocks was a garden seat, shadowed from the afternoon sun by an overhanging rock. They sat there because the sun was hot; and talked together of many things. At length the king said:

“You were out late one evening, Irene.”

“Yes, papa. It was my fault; and Lootie was very sorry.”

“I must talk to Lootie about it,” said the king.

“Don’t scold her, please, papa,” said Irene. “She’s been so afraid of being late ever since! It was only a mistake for once.”

“Once might be too often,” murmured the king to himself, as he stroked his child’s head.

He sat for a good while thinking. There was no sound except that of a little stream which ran merrily out of an opening in the rock, and sped away down the hill. Then he rose, and leaving Irene, went into the house and sent for Lootie, with whom he had a talk that made her cry.

When in the evening he rode away upon his great white horse, he left six of his attendants behind him, with orders that three of them should watch outside the house every night, walking round and round it from sunset until sunrise.

CHAPTER 11

The Old Lady's Bedroom

Nothing happened for some time. The autumn came and went. There were no more flowers in the garden; the wind blew strong, and howled among the rocks. The rain fell – again and again there would be a glorious morning followed by a pouring afternoon, and sometimes there would be nothing but rain all day, and then the most lovely cloudless night, with not a single star missing.

But the princess could not see much of them, for she went to bed early. As winter drew on, she found things growing dreary. When it was too stormy to go out, and she had got tired of her toys, Lottie would take her about the house – sometimes to the housekeeper's room, where the kind old housekeeper made a fuss of her – and sometimes to the servants' hall or the kitchen, where she was treated as an absolute queen, and ran a great risk of being spoiled.

Sometimes she would run off to the room where sat the men-at-arms whom the king had left, and they did what they could to amuse her. Still at times she found it very dreary, and often wished that her huge great grandmother had not been a dream.

One morning the nurse left Irene with the housekeeper, who, to amuse her, emptied the contents of an old cabinet upon the table. The little princess found these queer ancient ornaments far more interesting than her own toys, and sat playing with them for two hours. But then, while she was handling a curious old-fashioned brooch, she ran the pin of it into her thumb, and gave a little scream with the sharp pain.

The pain increased and her thumb begun to swell. This alarmed the housekeeper greatly. The nurse was fetched; the doctor was sent for; her hand was poulticed, and long before her usual time she was put to bed. Although she fell asleep and dreamed many dreams, there was the pain in every dream. At last it woke her up.

The moon was shining brightly into the room. The poultice had fallen off her hand, which felt burning hot. Irene fancied if she could hold her hand in the moonlight, that would cool it.

So she got out of bed, without waking the nurse who slept at the other end of the room, and went to the window. When she looked out she saw one of the men-at-arms walking in the garden with the moonlight glinting on his armour. She was going to tap on the window and call him, but then thought that might wake Lottie.

So she decided to go to the window of another room, and call him from there. It was so much nicer to have somebody to talk to than to lie awake in bed with the burning pain in her hand. She opened the door very gently and went through the nursery to find another window. But when she came to the foot of the old staircase, there was the moon shining down from some high window, and making the ancient oak look very strange and delicate and lovely.

In a moment she was stepping on the silvery path up the stair, looking behind her as she went, to see the shadows she made in the silver. Some little girls would

have been afraid to find themselves thus alone in the middle of the night, but Irene was a princess.

As she went slowly up the stair, not quite sure whether she was dreaming, suddenly a great longing woke in her heart to see whether she could find the old lady with the silvery hair.

“If she was a dream,” she said to herself, “then I am more likely to find her, if I am dreaming.”

So up and up she went, on stair after stair, until she came to the many rooms – all just as she had seen them before. Through passage after passage she softly sped, comforting herself that if she should lose her way it would not matter much, because when she woke she would find herself in her own bed. But, as if she had known every step of the way, she walked straight to the narrow stair that led to the tower.

“What if I should really find my beautiful old grandmother up there!” she said to herself as she crept up the steep steps.

When she reached the top she stood a moment listening in the dark, for there was no moon there. Yes! It was the hum of the spinning-wheel! She tapped gently at the door.

“Come in, Irene,” said the sweet voice.

The princess opened the door and entered. There was the moonlight streaming in at the window, and in the middle of the moonlight sat the old lady in her black dress with the white lace, and her silvery hair mingling with the moonlight.

“Come in, Irene,” she said again. “Can you tell me what I am spinning?”

“She speaks,” thought Irene, “just as if she had seen me five minutes ago, or yesterday at the most.... No,” she answered; “I don’t know what you are spinning. Please, I thought you were a dream. Why couldn’t I find you before, great-great-grandmother?”

“You would have found me sooner if you hadn’t decided I was a dream. Also, I didn’t want you to find me.”

“Why, please?”

“Because I did not want Lottie to know I was here.”

“But you told me to tell Lottie.”

“Yes. But I knew Lottie would not believe you. If she were to see me sitting spinning here, she wouldn’t believe me, either. She would rub her eyes, and go away and forget half of it, and say it had been all a dream.”

“Just like me,” said Irene, feeling very much ashamed of herself.

“Not just like you; for you’ve come again; and Lottie wouldn’t have come again. I’m not cross with you, my child – nor with Lottie either. But I don’t want you to say anything more to Lottie about me. If she should ask you, just be silent. But I don’t think she will ask you.”

All this time the old lady kept on spinning. It was very pretty stuff that she was spinning. In the moonlight it shone almost like silver, but grey rather than white, and it glittered only a little. And the thread the old lady drew out from it was so fine that Irene could hardly see it.

“I am spinning this for you, my child,” the old lady said.

“For me! What am I to do with it, please?”

“I will tell you by and by. But first I will tell you what it is. It is spider-web – of a particular kind. My pigeons bring it me from over the great sea. There is only one forest where the spiders live who make this kind, the finest and strongest of any.”

“Do you work all day and all night, too, great-great-great-great-grandmother?” said the princess, thinking to be very polite with so many greats.

“I am not quite so great as all that,” she answered, smiling merrily. “If you call me grandmother, that will do. No, I don’t work every night – only moonlit nights, and only while the moon shines upon my wheel. I shan’t work much longer tonight.”

“And what will you do next, grandmother?”

“Go to bed. Would you like to see my bedroom?”

“Yes, I should.”

“Then I think I won’t work any longer tonight.”

The old lady rose, and leaving her wheel, took Irene by the hand. It was her bad hand and Irene gave a little cry of pain.

“My child!” said her grandmother, “what is the matter?”

Irene held her hand into the moonlight, and told her all about it, at which her grandmother looked grave.

But she only said, “Give me your other hand.” Leading her out upon the dark landing, she opened the door on the opposite side of it.

What was Irene’s surprise to see the loveliest room she had ever seen in her life! It was large and lofty, and dome-shaped. From the centre hung a round lamp, shining as if with moonlight, which made everything visible in the room, though not very clearly. A large oval bed stood in the middle, with a coverlet of a rose colour, and velvet curtains all round it of a lovely pale blue. The walls were also blue with stars of silver.

The old lady went to a strange-looking cabinet, opened it and took out a silver casket. Then she sat down on a low chair and made Irene kneel before her while she looked at her hand. She took some ointment from the casket. The sweetest odour filled the room – like that of roses and lilies – as she rubbed the ointment gently all over the hot swollen hand. Her touch was so pleasant and cool that it seemed to drive away the pain and heat.

“Oh, grandmother! It is so nice!” said Irene. “Thank you.”

Then the old lady went to a chest of drawers, and took out a large handkerchief of gossamer-like fabric which she tied round Irene’s hand.

“I don’t think I can let you go away tonight,” she said. “Would you like to sleep with me?”

“Oh, yes, yes, dear grandmother,” said Irene.

“You won’t be afraid to share a bed with such an old woman?”

“And you won’t mind sharing with such a very young woman, grandmother?”

The old lady kissed her. Then she got a large silver basin, and having poured some water into it made Irene sit on the chair, and washed her bare feet. This done, she was ready for bed. And oh, what a delicious bed it was into which her grandmother laid her! She hardly could have told she was lying upon anything: she felt nothing but the softness.

The old lady lay down beside her.

“Why don’t you put out your moon?” asked the princess.

“That never goes out, night or day,” she answered. “In the darkest night, if any of my pigeons are out on an errand, they always see my moon and know where to fly to.”

“But somebody in the house might see it.”

“That has hardly ever happened,” said the old lady. “But most of those who see it take it for a meteor, and forget it again. Besides, nobody could find the room unless I wished it. And I will tell you a secret – if that light were to go out, you would fancy yourself lying in a bare garret, on a heap of old straw, and would not see any of the pleasant things around you.”

“I hope it will never go out,” said the princess.

“I hope not. But it is time we both went to sleep.”

The little princess nestled close up to the old lady, who took her in her arms and held her close.

“Oh, this is so nice!” said the princess. “I didn’t know anything in the world could be so comfortable. I should like to lie here for ever.”

“You may if you wish,” said the old lady. “But I must put you to one trial. Not a very hard one, I hope. This night in exactly one week you must come back to me. If you don’t, I do not know when you may find me again, and you will soon need me very much.”

“Oh! please, don’t let me forget.”

“You won’t forget. The only question is whether you will believe I am anything but a dream. I will do all I can to help you to come; but it will be up to you. On the night of next Friday, you must come to me. Mind now.”

“I will try,” said the princess.

“Then good night,” said the old lady, and kissed her forehead.

In a moment more the little princess was dreaming the loveliest dreams – of summer seas and moonlight and mossy springs and great murmuring trees, and sweet-smelling wild flowers.

In the morning she found herself in her own bed. There was no handkerchief or anything else on her hand. The swelling had all gone down; her hand was perfectly well.

CHAPTER 12

A Short Chapter About Curdie

Curdie spent many nights in the mine. He had let his mother into the secret, for he knew she could hold her tongue.

Mrs. Peterson was such a nice good mother! All mothers are nice and good, more or less, but Mrs. Peterson was nice and good all more and no less. She made a little heaven in that poor cottage on the high hillside for her husband and son to go home to after their dreary job. True, her hands were hard and chapped, but it was with working for them; and therefore, in the sight of the angels, her hands were beautiful. And if Curdie worked hard to buy her a petticoat, she worked hard every day to get him comforts too. Not that she and Curdie ever thought of how much they worked for each other.

When he was left alone in the mine Curdie always worked on for an hour or two, following the lode which, according to Glump, would lead at last into the deserted house. After that, he would set out to explore. In order to find his way back better than the first time, he had bought a huge ball of fine string. He tied the end of his string to his pickaxe, which he left behind as an anchor, and then, with the ball in his hand, unrolling it as he went, he set out in the dark through the naturally formed passages of the goblins' territory.

The first night or two he came upon nothing important; he saw a little of the home-life of the goblins in the caves they called houses, but he failed to find any information about their first plan.

But on the next night, when he followed the noise of their tools, he found a company of goblin miners hard at work. What were they doing? It could not be anything to do with the flood in the second plan, because that had been postponed for now. Then what was it?

He lurked and watched, but without learning more. To avoid detection, he had again and again to retreat in haste, which was made difficult because he had to gather up his string as he returned. It wasn't that he was afraid of the goblins, but he was afraid of their finding out that they were being watched. Sometimes he left in such a hurry that his string ended up hopelessly entangled by the time he got home; but after a good sleep, he always found his mother had got it right again. There it was, wound in a most respectable ball, ready for use!

"I can't think how you do it, mother," he would say.

"I follow the thread," she would answer, "just as you do in the mine." She was clever with her hands.

But still Curdie had made no discovery as to what the goblin miners were doing.

CHAPTER 13

The Goblins' Creatures

About this time, the gentlemen whom the king had left to watch over the princess saw some strange things – more than strange. They were creatures, but so grotesque and misshapen as to be more like a child's drawings than anything real. The men-at-arms saw them only at night, while they were on guard around the house.

The first man to see one reported that, as he was walking slowly round the house in the shadow, he caught sight of a creature standing on its hind legs in the moonlight, with its forefeet upon a window-ledge, staring in at the window. Its body might have been that of a dog or wolf, he thought, but he declared that its head was twice the size it ought to have been, and as round as a ball; while the creature's face was like one carved by a boy upon a turnip into which he is going to put a candle.

The creature rushed into the garden. He sent an arrow after it, and thought he must have struck it; for it gave an unearthly howl, and he could not find either his arrow or the beast, although he searched all over the place. The other men laughed at him, and said he must have drunk too much ale.

But before two nights were over, a second man saw something strange, only quite different to the first. The description the second man gave of the creature he had seen was yet more grotesque and unlikely. They were both laughed at by the rest; but night after night another saw something too, and came over to their side, until at last there was only one man left to laugh at all his companions.

He saw nothing for two nights, but on the third he came rushing from the garden to find the pair of men on guard. When they ran with him into the garden, they saw a score of creatures, no two of them alike, hideous and ludicrous at the same time, gambolling on the lawn in the moonlight. The ugliness of their faces, the length of the legs and necks of some, the absence of either in others, made the men doubt their own eyes – and their ears as well. For the noises the creatures made, although not loud, were not exactly grunts nor squeaks nor roars nor howls nor barks nor yells nor screams nor croaks nor hisses nor mews nor shrieks, but something like all of them mingled in one horrible dissonance.

Hidden in the shade, the watchers looked on for a few moments; but all at once the creatures scampered off in the direction of a great rock, and vanished before the men had time to follow them.

These creatures were, of course, household animals belonging to the goblins, whose ancestors had taken their ancestors many centuries before from the upper regions of light into the lower regions of darkness. Their ancestors were very much the same as the animals now seen about farms, with the exception of a few wild creatures, such as foxes, and indeed wolves and small bears, which the goblins had caught when cubs and tamed.

But in the course of time all had undergone even greater changes than their owners. Their descendants had altered with the most abnormal developments. Indeed, so bewildering were the results, that you could only have guessed at any

known animal as the original. But what increased the gruesomeness tenfold was that, from constant association with the goblins, their faces had grown to resemble human faces. This did not improve them.

I shall now explain how it was that these animals began to show themselves about the king's country house.

The goblins, as Curdie had discovered, were mining both day and night, following the plan which he was trying to discover. In the course of their tunnelling they had broken into the channel above a small stream. Some of the creatures had found the hole, and had explored the channel. The stream was the one which ran out next to the seat on which Irene and her king-papa had sat. The goblin creatures found it jolly fun to get out for a romp on a smooth lawn, such as they had never seen in all their poor miserable lives.

For several nights afterwards, the men-at-arms watched that part of the garden where they had last seen the creatures. Perhaps they paid too little attention to the house. But the creatures were too cunning to be easily caught. Nor were the watchers observant enough to notice the keen eyes watching from the opening where the stream came out – eyes which were watching them in turn, waiting for the moment they should leave the lawn, and ready to report the place clear.

CHAPTER 14 That Night Week

All week Irene had been thinking of her promise to the old lady, although even now she could not feel quite sure that she had not been dreaming. Could it really be that an old lady lived up in the top of the house, with pigeons and a spinning-wheel, and a lamp that never went out?

None the less, she was determined, on the coming Friday, to ascend the three staircases, walk through the passages with many doors, and try to find the tower in which she had either seen or dreamed her grandmother.

Her nurse could not help wondering what had come over the child – she would sit so thoughtfully silent, and even in the midst of a game would suddenly fall into a dreamy mood. But the princess took care to say nothing about it to Lootie.

At length the longed-for Friday arrived. Irene tried to keep herself as quiet and ordinary as possible. In the afternoon she asked for her doll's house, and arranged the rooms and their inhabitants for a whole hour. Then she gave a sigh and threw herself back in her chair. One of the dolls would not sit, and another would not stand, and they were all very tiresome. But it was now getting dark, and the darker it got the more excited Irene became, and the more she felt it necessary to be composed.

“I’ll go and get you tea, princess,” said the nurse. “The room feels stuffy: I will open the window a little. The evening is mild.”

Lootie took longer in returning than she had intended; for when Irene, who had been lost in thought, looked up, she saw that it was nearly dark. At the same moment she caught sight of a pair of eyes, bright with a green light, glowering at her through the open window.

The next instant, something leaped into the room. It was like a cat, but with thin legs as long as a horse’s, although its body was no bigger than a cat’s. Irene was too frightened to cry out – but not too frightened to jump from her chair and run from the room.

She thought of running up the stairs; but when she came to the foot of the old stair, just outside the nursery door, she imagined the creature running up those long ascents after her, and pursuing her through the dark passages – which, after all, might lead to no tower! That thought was too much.

Her heart failed her, and, turning away from the stair, she rushed to the hall. She saw the front door open, so she darted into the courtyard pursued – so she assumed – by the creature. No one saw her as she ran on, unable to think for fear, and ready to run anywhere to elude the awful creature with the stilt-legs. Not daring to look behind her, she rushed straight out of the gate and up the mountain. It was foolish indeed, to run farther and farther from all who could help her; but that is what fear does.

The princess was soon out of breath with running uphill; but she ran on, for she fancied the horrible creature was just behind her, forgetting that with its long legs it should have overtaken her long ago. At last she could run no longer, and fell down by the roadside, where she lay half dead with terror.

But finding nothing attacked her, and with her breath beginning to come back, she stood up and peered anxiously around. It was now so dark that she could see nothing. Not a single star was out. She could not even tell in what direction the house lay, and between her and home she imagined the dreadful creature was lying ready to pounce upon her.

She saw now that she ought to have run up the stairs at once. She sat down upon a stone, and nobody could have been more miserable. She had quite forgotten her promise to visit her grandmother.

Then a raindrop fell on her face. Irene looked up, and for a moment her terror was lost in astonishment. At first she thought the rising moon had left its place, and drawn close to see the little girl, sitting alone, without hat or cloak, on the dark bare mountain; but she soon saw she was mistaken. Instead, a great silver globe was hanging in the air; and as she gazed at the lovely thing, her courage revived. If she were only indoors again, she would fear nothing, not even the terrible creature with the long legs!

But how was she to find her way back? Could that light be her great-great-grandmother’s lamp?

Irene jumped up: if she could keep that light in view, she must find the house. Her heart grew strong.

Quickly, yet softly, she walked down the hill, hoping to pass the watching creature unseen. Strangely, the light that filled her eyes from the lamp, instead of blinding her when she looked away, instead enabled her for a moment to see

despite the darkness. By looking at the lamp and then dropping her eyes, she could see the road for a yard or two in front of her. This saved her from several falls, for the road was very rough.

But all at once, to her dismay, the light vanished, and the terror of the beast again laid hold of her heart. That instant, however, she saw the light of the windows, and knew exactly where she was. She hurried on, and reached the gate in safety. She found the house door still open, ran through the hall, and, without even looking into the nursery, bounded straight up the stair, and the next, and the next; then ran through the long avenue of silent rooms, and found her way at once to the door at the foot of the tower stair.

When first the nurse had missed her, she fancied Irene was playing her a trick, and for some time did not worry about her; but at last, getting frightened, she had begun to search. By the time the princess entered, the whole household was all over the house, hunting for her. But Irene was knocking at the old lady's door.

CHAPTER 15 Woven and Then Spun

"Come in, Irene," said the silvery voice of her grandmother.

The princess opened the door and peeped in. The room was quite dark; there was no sound of the spinning-wheel. She grew frightened once more, thinking that, although the room was here, the old lady might be a dream after all.

Then she remembered that at night she spun only in the moonlight. That must be why there was no sweet, bee-like humming: the old lady might be somewhere in the darkness. Before she had time to think another thought, she heard her voice again, saying, "Come in, Irene."

She realised that her grandmother was not in the room beside her. Perhaps she was in her bedroom. She turned across the passage, feeling her way to the bedroom door. When her hand fell on the lock, again the old lady spoke:

"Shut the other door behind you, Irene. I always close the door of my workroom when I go to my chamber."

Irene wondered to hear her voice so plainly through the door: having shut the other door, she opened this one and went in.

Oh, what a lovely haven to reach from the darkness and fear! The soft light made her feel as if she were going into the heart of a pearl.

"I've lit a fire for you, Irene: you're cold and wet," said her grandmother.

Then Irene looked, and saw that what she had taken for a huge bouquet against the wall was in fact a fire which burned in the shapes of the loveliest and reddest roses, glowing gorgeously between two cherubs of shining silver.

And when she came nearer, she found that the smell of roses with which the room was filled came from the fire-roses on the hearth.

Her grandmother was dressed in pale blue velvet, over which her hair, no longer white, but of a rich golden colour, streamed like a waterfall. As Irene looked, the hair seemed to be pouring down from her head and vanishing in a golden mist before it reached the floor. It flowed from under the edge of a circlet of shining silver, set with pearls and opals. Her dress had no decoration, and she wore no ring or necklace; but her slippers glimmered with the light of the Milky Way, for they were covered with seed-pearls and opals. Her face was that of a young woman.

The princess was so bewildered with astonishment and admiration that she could hardly thank her. She drew close timidly, feeling dirty and uncomfortable. The lady was seated on a low chair beside the fire, with hands outstretched to her, but the princess hung back with a troubled smile.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked her grandmother. “You haven’t been doing anything wrong – I know that by your face, though it is rather miserable. What’s the matter, my dear?”

“Dear grandmother,” said Irene, “I’m not so sure that I haven’t done something wrong. I ought to have run up to you at once when the long-legged cat came in at the window, instead of running out onto the mountain.”

“You were taken by surprise, my child, and you are not likely to do it again. Come.” And still she held out her arms.

“But, grandmother, you’re so beautiful and grand with your crown on; and I am so dirty with mud and rain! I should spoil your beautiful blue dress.”

With a merry little laugh the lady sprung lightly from her chair, caught the child to her bosom, and kissing the tear-stained face, sat down with her in her lap.

“Oh, grandmother! You’ll make yourself such a mess!” cried Irene, clinging to her.

“You darling! do you think I care more for my dress than for my little girl? Besides, look here.”

As she spoke she set her down, and Irene saw to her dismay that the lovely dress was covered with mud. But the lady stooped to the fire, and picking up one of the burning roses by the stalk, passed it three times over the front of her dress. When Irene looked, not a single stain was to be seen.

Irene hung back, eyeing the flaming rose which the lady held in her hand.

“You’re not afraid of the rose, are you?” said the lady, about to throw it on the hearth again.

“Oh! don’t, please!” cried Irene. “Won’t you hold it to my frock and my hands and face?”

“No,” answered her grandmother, smiling a little sadly, as she threw the rose from her; “it is too hot for you still. It would set your frock in a flame. Besides, I don’t want to make you clean tonight.

You will have to tell your nurse and other people how you ran away for fear of the long-legged cat, and if I wash you clean, they would not believe you. Do you see that bath behind you?”

The princess looked, and saw a large oval tub of silver.

“Go and look into it,” said the lady. “What do you see?”

“The sky, and the moon and the stars,” she answered.

The lady smiled a pleased smile. Then she said: “Any time you want a bath, come to me. I know you have a bath every morning, but sometimes you want one at night, too.”

“Thank you, grandmother; I will,” answered Irene. Then after thinking for a moment she said: “How was it, grandmother, that I saw your beautiful round lamp hanging alone in the open air, high up? It was your lamp I saw, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, my child, it was.”

“How? I don’t see a window anywhere.”

“When I please, I can make the lamp shine through the walls. But it is not everybody that can see it. It is a gift born with you. And one day I hope everyone will have it.”

“But how do you make it shine through the walls?”

“Ah! that you would not understand – not yet. But,” added the lady, rising, “you must sit in my chair while I get you the present I have been preparing. I told you my spinning was for you. It is finished now, and I’m going to fetch it. I have been keeping it warm under one of my brooding pigeons.”

Irene sat down in the low chair, and her grandmother left her, shutting the door. The child sat gazing at the rose fire, and the starry walls, and the silver light; and a great quietness grew in her heart. If all the long-legged cats in the world had come rushing at her then, she would not have been afraid of them. Why this was she could not tell – she only knew that everything was right and safe, and fear could not get in.

After gazing at the lovely lamp for some minutes, she looked round, and found the wall had vanished, for she was looking out on the dark cloudy night. But though she heard the wind blowing, none of it blew upon her. In another moment the clouds parted, or rather vanished like the wall, and she looked straight into the stars.

It was only for a moment. The clouds gathered again and shut out the stars; the wall gathered again and shut out the clouds; and there stood the lady beside her with the loveliest smile on her face, and a shimmering ball in her hand, about the size of a pigeon’s egg.

“There, Irene; there is my work for you!” she said, holding out the ball to the princess.

Irene took it in her hand, and looked at it. It sparkled and shone faintly. It was a grey-white colour, like cloudy glass.

“Is this all your spinning, grandmother?” she asked.

“All since you came to the house. There is more there than you think.”

“How pretty it is! What am I to do with it, please?”

“It will explain that to you,” answered the lady. She went over to her cabinet and came back with a small ring in her hand. Then she took the ball from Irene, and did something with the ring – Irene could not tell what.

“Give me your hand,” she said. Irene held up her right hand, and the lady put the ring on her forefinger.

“What a beautiful ring!” said Irene. “What is the stone called?”

“It is a fire-opal.”

“Please, am I to keep it?”

“Always.”

“Oh, thank you, grandmother! It’s prettier than anything I ever saw, except for the colours in that – please, is that your crown?”

“Yes, it is. The stone in your ring is of the same sort.”

“I will take such care of the ring! But what am I to say when Lottie asks me where I got it?”

“You will ask *her* where you got it,” answered the lady smiling.

“I don’t see how I can do that.”

“You will, though. Don’t worry about it. You will see when the time comes.” So saying, the lady turned, and threw the little ball into the rose fire.

“Oh, grandmother!” exclaimed Irene. “I thought you had spun it for me.”

“So I did, my child. And you’ve got it.”

“No; it’s burnt in the fire!”

The lady put her hand in the fire, brought out the ball, glimmering as before, and held it towards her. Irene stretched out her hand to take it, but the lady turned and, going to her cabinet, opened a drawer, and laid the ball in it.

“Have I done anything to vex you, grandmother?” said Irene pitifully.

“No, my darling. That ball is yours.”

“Oh! I’m not to take it with me? You are going to keep it for me!”

“You are to take it with you. I’ve fastened the end of it to the ring on your finger.”

Irene looked at the ring. “I can’t see it there, grandmother,” she said.

“Feel a little way from the ring towards the cabinet,” said the lady.

“Oh! I do feel it!” exclaimed the princess. “But I can’t see it.”

“No. The thread is too fine for you to see. You can only feel it. Now you can fancy how much spinning that took, although it does seem such a little ball.”

“But what use can I make of it, if it lies in your cabinet?”

“It would be of no use to you if it did not lie in my cabinet. Now listen. If ever you find yourself in any danger – for example, as you were this evening – you must take off your ring and put it under your pillow. Then you must lay your finger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you.”

“Oh, how delightful! It will lead me to you, grandmother, I know!”

“Yes. But, remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, yet you must not doubt the thread. One thing you may be sure of, that while you hold it, I hold it too.”

“It is very wonderful!” said Irene thoughtfully, but still a little puzzled. “Won’t the thread get in somebody’s way and be broken, if one end is tied to my ring, and the other is in your cabinet?”

“All that will arrange itself. Now it’s time for you to go.”

“Mayn’t I stay and sleep with you tonight, grandmother?”

“Not tonight. Everybody in the house is miserable about you, and it would be cruel to keep them so all night. You must go downstairs.”

“I’m so glad, grandmother, you didn’t say *Go home*, for this is my home. May I call this my home?”

“You may, my child. And I trust you will always think it your home. Now come. I must take you back without anyone seeing you.”

“Please, I want to ask you one question more,” said Irene. “Is it because you have your crown on that you look so young?”

“No, child,” answered her grandmother; “it is because I felt so young this evening that I put on my crown. And I thought you would like to see your old grandmother at her best.”

“You’re not old, grandmother,” said Irene.

“I am very old indeed. It is so silly of some people to fancy that old age means feebleness and sticks and spectacles and rheumatism and forgetfulness! Old age has nothing whatever to do with all that. The right old age means strength and beauty and mirth and courage and clear eyes and strong painless limbs. I am older than you think, and—”

“And look at you, grandmother!” cried Irene, jumping up and flinging her arms about her neck. “I wish I were as old as you, grandmother. I don’t think you are afraid of anything.”

“Not for long, at least, my child. But I confess I have sometimes been afraid about my children – sometimes about you, Irene.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, grandmother! Tonight, I suppose, you mean.”

“Yes – a little tonight; but a good deal when you had almost made your mind up that I was a dream, and not a real great-great-grandmother. I don’t blame you for that. I dare say you could not help it.”

“I don’t know, grandmother,” said the princess, beginning to cry. “I can’t always do as I should like. And I don’t always try. I’m very sorry anyhow.”

The lady stooped, lifted her in her arms, and sat down with her in her chair, holding her close. In a few minutes the princess had sobbed herself to sleep. When she woke up she was sitting in her own high chair at the nursery table, with her doll’s house before her.

CHAPTER 16

The Ring

At that moment her nurse came into the room, sobbing. When she saw Irene sitting there she started back with a loud cry of amazement and joy. Then running to her, she caught her in her arms and covered her with kisses.

“My precious darling princess! Where have you been? We’ve all been crying our eyes out, and searching the house from top to bottom for you.”

“Not quite from the top,” thought Irene to herself; but she did not say it.

“Oh, Lootie! I’ve had such a dreadful adventure!” she replied, and told her all about the cat with the long legs, and how she ran out upon the mountain, and came back again. But she said nothing about her grandmother or her lamp.

“And we’ve been searching for you all over the house for more than an hour and a half!” exclaimed the nurse. “But that’s no matter, now we’ve got you! Only, princess, I must say,” she added, her mood changing, “you should have called for your own Lootie to come and help you, instead of running out of the house, and up the mountain, in that wild and foolish fashion.”

“Well, Lootie,” said Irene quietly, “perhaps if you had a big cat that was all legs, running at you, you might not exactly know what was the wisest thing to do just then.”

“I wouldn’t run up the mountain, anyhow,” returned Lootie.

“Not if you had time to think about it. But when those creatures came at you that night on the mountain, you were so frightened that you lost your way home.”

This put a stop to Lootie’s reproaches. She had been on the point of saying that the long-legged cat must have been a twilight fancy of the princess’s, but the memory of the horrors of that night, and of the talking-to which the king had given her in consequence, prevented her. And she had a strong suspicion that the cat was a goblin; for she knew nothing of the difference between the goblins and their creatures: she counted them all just goblins.

Without another word she went and got some fresh tea and bread and butter for the princess. Before she returned, the whole household, headed by the housekeeper, burst into the nursery to exult over their darling. The gentlemen-at-arms followed, and were ready enough to believe all she told them about the long-legged cat; for they had seen just such a creature on the lawn.

In their own hearts they blamed themselves for not keeping better watch. And their captain gave orders that from this night the front door and all the windows on the ground floor should be locked as soon as the sun set.

When the princess woke the next morning, her nurse was bending over her. “How your ring does glow this morning, princess! Just like a fiery rose!” she said.

“Does it, Lootie?” returned Irene. “Who gave me the ring, Lootie? I know I’ve had it a long time, but where did I get it? I don’t remember.”

“I think it must have been your mother gave it you, princess; but I don’t think I ever heard,” answered her nurse.

“I will ask my king-papa next time he comes,” said Irene.

CHAPTER 17

Springtime

The spring came at last, and the king rode through its budding valleys to see his little daughter. He had been in a distant part of his kingdom all the winter, for he moved from place to place, so that all his people might know him. Wherever he journeyed, he kept a constant look-out for the ablest and best men to put into office; and wherever he found himself mistaken, and that those he had appointed turned out to be incapable or unjust, he removed them at once.

So you see it was his care of the people that kept him from seeing his princess so often as he would have liked. But now once more Irene heard the bugle-blast, and once more she was at the gate to meet her father as he rode up on his great white horse.

After they had been alone for a little while, she asked him:

“Please, king-papa. Will you tell me where I got this pretty ring? I can’t remember.”

The king looked at it. A strange beautiful smile spread like sunshine over his face; and an answering smile, but a questioning one, spread like moonlight over Irene’s.

“It was your queen-mamma’s once,” he said.

“And why isn’t it hers now?” asked Irene.

“She does not want it now,” said the king, looking grave.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s gone where all those rings are made.”

“And when shall I see her?” asked the princess.

“Not for some time yet,” answered the king, and the tears came into his eyes.

Irene did not remember her mother and did not know why her father looked so sad; but she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and asked no more questions.

The king was very disturbed on hearing from the gentlemen-at-arms about the creatures they had seen; and he might have taken Irene away with him that very day, if it were not for the presence of the ring on her finger. About an hour before he left, Irene saw him go up the old stair; and he did not come down again till they were just ready to set off. She thought that he had been up to see the old lady. When he went away he left another six gentlemen behind him, so that there could be six of them always on guard.

And now, in the lovely spring weather, Irene was out on the mountain most of the day. In the warmer hollows there were lovely primroses, and whenever she saw a new one opening, she would clap her hands with gladness, and instead of pulling it up, would touch it as tenderly as if it had been a new baby, and leave it as happy as she found it. She would pay visits to all the flowers she knew: she would go down on her hands and knees beside one and say: “Good morning! Are you smelling very sweet this morning? Good-bye!” There were many flowers up and down, and she loved them all, but the primroses were her favourites.

There were goats too, on the mountain, and when their little kids were born she was as pleased with them as with the flowers. The goats belonged mostly to the miners; but there were a good many wild ones that belonged to nobody. These the goblins counted theirs: they set snares and dug pits for them; but they did not try to steal them, because they were afraid of the dogs the hill-people kept to watch them. But the goblins had some sheep of their own – very odd creatures, which they drove out to feed at night.

CHAPTER 18 Curdie's Clue

Curdie was as watchful as ever, but was getting nowhere. Every other night he followed the goblins, as they went on digging and tunnelling: he got as near to them as he could, hiding behind rocks; but he could not find out what their plan was. He always kept hold of the end of his string, while his pickaxe, left just outside the hole in the mine by which he entered the goblins' country, continued to serve as an anchor and held the other end. The goblins, hearing nothing, kept no watch.

One night, after listening till he was nearly falling asleep with weariness, he began to roll up his ball of string and follow it back to the mine, so that he could go home to bed. It was not long, however, before he began to feel bewildered as he walked. One after another he passed goblin houses – or caves, rather, occupied by goblin families, and he was sure there were many more than he had passed as he came in. He had to be very careful, because they lay so close together.

Could his string have led him wrong? He still followed it, winding it up, and it led him into yet more thickly populated areas, until he became quite uneasy; for although he was not afraid of the goblins, he was afraid of not finding his way out.

But what could he do? It was of no use to sit down and wait for morning, for it was always dark down here; and if his string failed him he was helpless. He might arrive within a yard of the mine and never know it.

He decided that he would at least find where the end of his string was. He knew by the size of the ball that he was getting near the end of it – when he began to feel a tugging and pulling at it. What could it mean?

Turning a sharp corner, he heard strange sounds. As he went on, these grew into a scuffling and growling and squeaking; until, turning a second corner, he found himself in the midst of a wallowing mass of the goblins' creatures. Curdie tumbled over them; and before he could get to his feet, he had some great scratches on his face and several severe bites on his legs and arms.

But when he scrambled to get up, his hand fell upon his pickaxe, and began laying about with it right and left in the dark. Hideous cries followed; and scampering sounds and howls as the beasts retreated. Curdie stood for a little while, holding his battle-axe as if it had been the most precious lump of metal – indeed it was more precious than gold to him at that moment – and then untied the end of the string from it, and put the ball in his pocket.

He stood thinking. It was clear that the creatures had found his pickaxe and carried it off to he knew not where. But for all his thinking he could not tell what he ought to do, until suddenly he became aware of a glimmer of light in the distance. Without a moment's hesitation he set out for it along the rugged path.

Led by the dim light, he turned another corner, and spied something he had never seen underground before: a small irregular shape of something shining. Going up to it, he found it was a piece of mica, or Muscovy glass, in the rock; and the light flickered from a fire behind it. After trying in vain to discover an entrance to the place where it was burning, he found a small chamber where an opening high in the wall revealed a glow beyond.

He managed to scramble up to this opening, and saw a strange sight.

Below him sat a little group of goblins around a smoking fire. The sides of the cave were full of shining minerals; and the company was evidently of high rank, for everyone wore coloured gems around head, or arms, or waist. Curdie recognized the king himself, and found that he had made his way into the inner apartment of the royal family.

He had never had such a good chance of hearing something important. He crept through the hole as softly as he could, scrambled some way towards them without attracting attention, and then sat down and listened.

The king, the queen, and probably the crown prince and the Prime Minister were talking together. He was sure of the queen by her shoes, which he saw as she warmed her feet at the fire.

“That will be fun!” said the one he took for the crown prince.

“I don't see why you should think so!” said his stepmother, tossing her head.

“You must remember, my wife,” interposed His Majesty, “he has got the same blood in him. His mother–”

“Don't talk to me of his mother! You encourage his unnatural fancies. Whatever belongs to that mother ought to be cut out of him.”

“You forget yourself, my dear!” said the king.

“I don't,” said the queen. “If you expect me to approve of such coarse tastes, you are mistaken. I don't wear shoes for nothing.”

“You must admit, however,” the king said, with a little groan, “that this is no whim of Harelip's, but State policy. Harelip is merely pleased at the idea of sacrificing himself for the public good. Are you not, Harelip?”

“Yes, of course, father. Only it will be nice to make her cry. I'll have the skin taken off between her toes, and tie them up till they grow together. Then her feet will be like other people's, and there will be no need for her to wear shoes.”

“Do you mean to insinuate I've got toes, you unnatural wretch?” cried the queen angrily. The councillor, who was between her and Harelip, leaned forward and addressed the prince.

“Your Royal Highness,” he said, “should be reminded that you have got three toes yourself – one on one foot, two on the other.”

“Ha!” shouted the queen triumphantly.

The councillor, encouraged by this mark of favour, went on.

“It seems to me, Your Royal Highness, it would greatly endear you to your future people, and prove that you are one of them despite having the misfortune to be born of a sun-mother, if you yourself were to undergo the slight operation which you so wisely consider for your future princess.”

“Ha! Ha!” laughed the queen, louder than before, and the king and the minister joined in, while Harelip growled.

The queen was the only one Curdie could see clearly. She sat sideways to him, and the light of the fire shone upon her face. She was not handsome. Her eyes, instead of being horizontal, were set up like two vertical eggs, one standing on the broad end, the other on the small end. Her mouth was no bigger than a small buttonhole, until she laughed, when it stretched from ear to ear – only, to be sure, her ears were very nearly in the middle of her cheeks.

Anxious to hear everything they might say, Curdie ventured to slide down a smooth part of the rock, to get closer. But he was not careful enough, or the rock gave way – and down he came with a rush to the floor of the cavern, in a great rumbling shower of stones.

The goblins jumped from their seats in anger. When they saw Curdie with his pickaxe in his hand, their rage was mingled with fear, for they took him for the first of an invasion of miners.

The king drew himself up to his full height of four feet, spread himself to his full breadth of three and a half feet – for he was the handsomest and squarest of all the goblins – and strutting up to Curdie, planted himself with outspread feet before him. He said with dignity:

“Pray, what right have you in my palace?”

“The right of necessity, Your Majesty,” answered Curdie. “I lost my way and did not know where I was.”

“How did you get in?”

“Through a hole in the mountain.”

“But you are a miner! Look at your pickaxe!”

Curdie answered, “I came upon this lying on the ground a little way from here. I tumbled over some wild beasts who were playing with it. Look, Your Majesty.” And Curdie showed him how he was scratched and bitten.

The king was pleased to find him behaving more politely than he had expected from a miner, but he did not feel friendly to the intruder.

“You will oblige me by walking out of my dominions at once!” he said.

“With pleasure, if Your Majesty will give me a guide,” said Curdie.

But the king uttered a strange shout, half halloo, half roar, and in rushed a swarm of goblins. He said something to them which Curdie could not hear, and they began to gather about him in a way he did not relish. He retreated towards the wall.

“Stand back,” he said, grasping his pickaxe tighter.

They only grinned and pressed closer. So Curdie began to rhyme.

“Ten, twenty, thirty—
You’re all so very dirty!
Twenty, thirty, forty—
You’re all so thick and snorty!
Thirty, forty, fifty—
You’re all so puff-and-snifty!
Forty, fifty, sixty—
Beast and man so mixty!

“Fifty, sixty, seventy—
Mixty, maxty, leaventy!
Sixty, seventy, eighty—
All your cheeks so slaty!

“Seventy, eighty, ninety,
All your hands so flinty!
Eighty, ninety, hundred,
Altogether dundred!”

The goblins fell back a little when he began, and pulled horrible faces all through the rhyme, as if eating something disagreeable; but whether the rhyme was less effective than usual – for Curdie had made it up on the spur of the moment – or whether the presence of the king and queen gave them courage, I cannot tell; but the moment the rhyme was over they crowded on him again. Out shot a hundred long arms, with thick nailless fingers, to lay hold upon him.

Then Curdie heaved up his axe. But being as gentle as he was courageous and not wishing to kill any of them, he turned the end which was square and blunt like a hammer, and with that hit a great blow on the head of the nearest goblin. Hard as the heads of all goblins are, he thought he must feel that.

And so he did; but he only gave a horrible cry, and sprung at Curdie’s throat. Curdie drew back in time, and remembered the vulnerable part of the goblin body. He made a sudden rush at the king and stamped with all his might on His Majesty’s feet. The king gave a most unkingly howl and almost fell into the fire.

Curdie then rushed into the crowd, stamping right and left. The goblins drew back, howling on every side as he approached, but they were so crowded that few of those he attacked could escape. Their shrieking and roaring filled the cave – and filled him with hope.

The goblins were tumbling over each other in heaps in their eagerness to rush from the cave, when a new assailant suddenly faced him. It was the queen. With flaming eyes, her hair standing up from her head, she rushed at him. She trusted in her shoes, for they were made of granite, hollowed out like stone clogs.

Curdie made a great stamp on one of her feet. But she instantly returned it, causing him frightful pain, and almost disabling him. A second later she had caught him up in her arms and was rushing with him across the cave. She dashed him into a hole in the wall, with a force that almost stunned him.

But although he could not move, he could hear her loud cry, and the stamp of multitudes of soft feet, followed by the sounds of something heaved up against

the rock; after which came a patter of many stones falling near him. And then he grew very faint, and passed out for a while.

When he came to himself there was perfect silence around him, and utter darkness, except for the merest glimmer in one tiny spot. He crawled to it, and found that the goblins had heaved a slab against the mouth of the hole; only a tiny gleam of the firelight came past it. He could not move the slab a hairbreadth, for they had piled a great heap of stones against it.

He crawled back to where he had been lying, in the faint hope of finding his pickaxe. But after a vain search he had to admit to himself that he was in an evil plight. He sat down and tried to think, but soon fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER 19

Goblin Counsels

Curdie must have slept a long time, for when he awoke he felt wonderfully restored, and very hungry. There were voices in the outer cave.

It must be night, then; for the goblins slept during the day and went about their affairs during the night. In the constant darkness of their home they had no reason to prefer night to day, but because of their dislike of the sun-people, they chose to be busy when there was the least chance of their meeting either the miners below, or the people of the mountain above.

And indeed it was only when the sun was down that the outside of the mountain was sufficiently dark for their eyes to bear it, for they had become unaccustomed to any light brighter than their own fires and torches.

Curdie listened, and soon realised that they were talking about him.

“How long will it take?” asked Harelip.

“Not many days, I should think,” answered the king. “They are poor feeble creatures, those sun-people, and want to be always eating. We can go a week at a time without food; but I’ve been told they eat two or three times every day! Can you believe it? They must be quite hollow inside. Yes, I judge a week of starvation will do for him.”

“If I may be allowed a word,” interposed the queen, “and I think I ought to have some say—”

“The wretch is entirely at your disposal, my dear,” said the king. “He is your property. You caught him.”

“I was about to say,” she went on, “that it does seem a pity to waste so much fresh meat. By the time he is starved there will hardly be a picking upon his bones.”

The king gave a great laugh. “Well, my wife, you may eat him when you like,” he said. “I don’t fancy it. I am pretty sure he is tough eating.”

“I would not do him so much honour,” returned the queen. “But why should our poor creatures be deprived of such nourishment? Our little dogs and cats and pigs and small bears would enjoy him very much.”

“You are the best of housekeepers, my lovely queen!” said her husband. “Let it be so by all means. Let our people get him out and kill him at once. He deserves it. Or rather let us tie him hand and foot, and have the pleasure of seeing him torn to pieces by torchlight in the great hall.”

“Better and better!” cried the queen and the prince together, clapping their hands.

“But,” added the queen, “he is so troublesome. Although they are poor creatures, there is something about those sun-people that is very troublesome. I cannot imagine why, with our superior strength and skill and understanding, we permit them to exist at all. Why don’t we destroy them entirely, and use their cattle and grazing lands? Of course we don’t want to live in their horrid country! But we might use it as a sort of outhouse, you know. Our creatures’ eyes might get used to it. We might even keep their great cows and other creatures, and then we should have a few more luxuries, such as cream and cheese, which at present we only taste occasionally, when our brave men have succeeded in carrying some off from their farms.”

“It is worth thinking about,” said the king; “although, as you say, they are very troublesome. It would be better to starve him for a day or two first, so that he may be a little less frisky when we take him out.”

“Once there was a goblin
Living in a hole;
Busy he was cobblin’
A shoe without a sole.

“By came a birdie:
‘Goblin, what do you do?’
‘Cobble at a sturdie
Upper leather shoe.’

“‘What’s the good o’ that, Sir?’
Said the little bird.
‘Why it’s very Pat, Sir—
Plain without a word.

“‘Where ’tis all a hole, Sir,
Never can be holes:
Why should their shoes have soles, Sir,
When they’ve got no souls?’”

“What’s that horrible noise?” cried the queen, shuddering from her head to her granite shoes.

“I declare,” said the king with solemn indignation, “it’s the sun-creature in the hole!”

“Stop that disgusting noise!” cried the crown prince valiantly, getting up and standing in front of the heap of stones next to Curdie’s prison. “Stop now, or I’ll break your head.”

“Break away,” shouted Curdie, and began singing again:

“Once there was a goblin,
Living in a hole—”

“I really cannot bear it,” said the queen.

“I think we had better go to bed,” said the king.

“It’s not time to go to bed,” said the queen.

“I would if I was you,” said Curdie.

“Impertinent wretch!” said the queen, scornfully.

“Quite,” returned Curdie, and began singing again:

“Go to bed,
Goblin, do.
Help the queen
Take off her shoe.

“If you do,
It will disclose
A horrid set
Of sprouting toes.”

“What a lie!” roared the queen in a rage.

“By the way, that reminds me,” said the king, “that for as long as we have been married, I have never seen your feet, queen. I think you might take off your shoes when you go to bed! They positively hurt me sometimes.”

“I will do as I like,” retorted the queen sulkily.

“You ought to do as your hubby wishes,” said the king.

“I will not,” said the queen.

“Then I insist upon it,” said the king.

And then Curdie heard a scuffle, and a great roar from the king.

“Will you be quiet?” said the queen wickedly.

“Yes, yes, queen.”

“Hands off!” cried the queen triumphantly. “I’m going to bed. You may come when you like. But as long as I am queen I will sleep in my shoes. It is my royal privilege. Harelip, go to bed.”

“I’m going,” said Harelip.

“So am I,” said the king.

“Come along, then. And mind you are good,” said the queen, “or I’ll—”

“Oh, no, no!” screamed the king.

And then the cave was quite still.

They had left the fire burning, and the light came through brightly. Curdie thought it was time to try to escape. But he could not get even a finger through

the chink between the slab and the rock. He pushed with his shoulder against the slab, but it did not yield. All he could do was to sit down and think again.

By and by he decided to pretend to be dying, in the hope they might take him out. Then, if he could only find his axe again, he would have no fear of the goblins' creatures; and if it were not for the queen's horrid shoes, he would have no fear at all.

Meantime, there was nothing for him to do but forge new rhymes, now his only weapons. He had no intention of using them at present; but it was as well to have a stock, for he might need them, and the making of them would help to pass the time.

CHAPTER 20

Irene's Clue

Early that same morning, the princess woke in a terrible fright. There was a hideous noise in her room: creatures were snarling and hissing and rocketing about as if they were fighting.

Then she remembered what her grandmother had told her to do when she was frightened. She immediately took off her ring and put it under her pillow. As she did so she fancied she felt a finger and thumb take it gently from under her palm.

"It must be my grandmother!" she said to herself, and the thought gave her courage. She jumped up and stopped to put on her slippers before running from the room; and while doing this she caught sight of a long sky-blue cloak, thrown over the back of a chair. She had never seen it before but it was evidently waiting for her.

Irene put it on. Then, feeling with her forefinger, she soon found her grandmother's thread, and began to follow it. She expected it would lead her straight up the old stair. But when she reached the door she found it went down to the floor, so that she almost had to crawl in order to keep hold of it.

Then, to her surprise and dismay, she found that instead of leading her towards the stair it turned in quite the opposite direction. It led her through narrow passages towards the kitchen, turning aside before she reached it, and guiding her to a door which opened on to a small back yard. Across the yard the thread still ran along the ground, until it brought her to a door in the wall which opened upon the Mountainside. When she had passed through, the thread rose to about half her height, and she could hold it with ease as she walked. It led her straight up the mountain.

The cause of her alarm was actually less frightful than she had thought. The cook's great black cat, pursued by the housekeeper's terrier, had bounced against her bedroom door, and the two had burst into the room together and begun to fight. How the nurse could sleep through it was a mystery, but the old lady may have had something to do with it.

It was a clear warm morning, and the wind blew deliciously over the Mountainside. Here and there Irene saw a late primrose. The sun was not yet up, but the fluffy edges of the clouds had caught his light, and were fringed with gold and orange. The dew lay in round drops upon the leaves, and hung like tiny diamond ear-rings from the blades of grass along her path.

"How lovely that bit of gossamer is!" thought the princess, looking at a long undulating line that shone at some distance from her up the hill. She soon discovered that it was her own thread she saw, shining in the light of the morning. It was leading her she knew not where; but she had never in her life been out before sunrise, and everything was so fresh and cool and lively that she felt too happy to be afraid.

After leading her uphill a good distance, the thread turned to the left, and down the path upon which she and Lootie had met Curdie. But now, in the morning light, no path could have been more airy and cheerful. She could see the road along which she had so often watched her king-papa and his troop come shining; it stretched almost to the horizon.

Down and down the path went, then up, and then down and then up again, getting more rugged as it went; and still along the path went the silvery thread, and still along the thread went Irene's little forefinger.

By and by she came to a stream that prattled down the hill, and up the side of the stream went both path and thread. And still the path grew rougher and steeper, and the mountain grew wilder, till Irene began to think she was a very long way from home. When she turned to look back she saw that the level country had vanished and the rough bare mountain had closed in about her.

But still on went the thread, and on went the princess. Everything around her was getting brighter and brighter as the sun came up; till his first rays alighted on the top of a rock in front of her, like some golden creature fresh from the sky.

Then she saw that the little stream ran out of a hole in that rock, that the path ended at the rock, and that the thread was leading her straight up to it. The thread was actually taking her into the hole out of which the stream ran. It ran out babbling joyously, but she had to go in.

Irene gave a little shudder, but she did not hesitate. She went right into the hole, which was high enough to let her walk without stooping. For a little way there was a brown glimmer, but at the first corner it ceased, and soon she was in total darkness.

Then she began to be frightened indeed. Every moment she kept feeling the thread, and as she went farther and farther into the darkness of the great hollow mountain, she kept thinking more and more about her grandmother, and all that she had said to her, and how kind she had been, and how beautiful she was, and all about her lovely room, and the fire of roses, and the great lamp that sent its light through stone walls. And she became more and more sure that the thread could not have gone here by itself, and that her grandmother must have sent it.

But the path went downhill very steeply, and in places she had to go down rough stairs, and even sometimes a ladder. Through one narrow passage after another, over lumps of rock and sand and clay, the thread guided her, until she came to a small hole through which she had to creep.

On the other side, there was no change.

“Shall I ever get back?” she thought, wondering at herself that she was not ten times more frightened, and feeling as if she were walking through a dream. Sometimes she heard the noise of water, a dull gurgling inside the rock. By and by she heard the sounds of blows; but again they grew duller, and almost died away. In a hundred directions she turned, following the guiding thread.

At last she spied a dull red shine, and came up to a mica window, and from there walked right into a cavern, where there glowed the red embers of a fire. Here the thread began to rise. It rose as high as her head and higher still. What should she do if she lost her hold? She was pulling it down: she might break it! She could see it far up, glowing red in the light of the embers.

But then she came to a huge heap of stones, piled in a slope against the wall of the cavern. She climbed these, only to find that the thread vanished through the heap of stones, and left her standing with her face to the rock.

For one terrible moment she felt as if her grandmother had forsaken her. The thread which the spiders had spun far over the seas, which her grandmother had sat in the moonlight and spun again for her, had gone where she could no longer follow it – had brought her into a horrible cavern, and there left her! She was forsaken indeed!

“When shall I wake?” she said to herself in an agony, but she knew it was no dream. She threw herself upon the heap of stones, and began to cry.

It was as well she did not know what creatures, one of them with stone shoes on her feet, were lying in the next cave. But neither did she know who was on the other side of the slab.

At length the thought struck her that she could follow the thread backwards, and thus get out of the mountain, and home. She rose at once, and found the thread. But the instant she tried to feel it backwards, it vanished from her touch. Forwards, it led her hand up to the heap of stones – backwards, it led nowhere. She burst into a wailing cry, and again threw herself down on the stones.

CHAPTER 21

The Escape

As the princess lay and sobbed she kept feeling the thread mechanically, following it with her finger many times up to the stones in which it disappeared. By and by she began, still mechanically, to poke her finger in after it between the stones as far as she could.

All at once it came into her head that she might remove some of the stones and see where the thread went next. Almost laughing for not having thought of this before, she jumped to her feet. Her fear vanished; once more she was certain her grandmother's thread could not have brought her here just to abandon her.

She began to throw away the stones from the top of the pile as fast as she could, sometimes two or three at a handful, sometimes taking both hands to lift one. After clearing some away, she found that the thread went straight downwards, so that she had to throw away many more stones to follow it.

But this was not all, for she soon found that the thread, after going straight down for a little way, turned first sideways in one direction, then sideways in another, this way and that inside the heap, so that she began to be afraid that to clear the thread she must remove the whole huge pile. She was dismayed at the idea, but, losing no time, set to work with a will; and with an aching back, and bleeding fingers and hands, she worked on, helped by the pleasure of seeing the heap slowly diminish. Another thing which helped to keep up her courage was that the thread kept tightening up as she worked; this made her sure that her grandmother was at the end of it somewhere.

She had got about half-way down when she nearly fell over with fright. Close by, a voice broke out singing:

“Jabber, bother, smash!
You'll have it all in a crash.
Jabber, smash, bother!
You'll have the worst of the pother.
Smash, bother, jabber!—”

Here Curdie stopped. But he had uttered enough to let Irene know who he was.

“It's Curdie!” she cried joyfully.

“Hush! hush!” came Curdie's voice again from somewhere. “Speak softly.”

“Why, you were singing loudly!” said Irene.

“Yes. But they know I am here, and they don't know you are. Who are you?”

“I'm Irene,” answered the princess.

“Why, how ever did you come here, Irene?”

“My great-great-grandmother sent me; and I think I've found out why. You can't get out, I suppose?”

“No, I can't. What are you doing?”

“Clearing away a huge heap of stones.”

“There’s a princess!” exclaimed Curdie in delight, but still speaking in a whisper. “I can’t think how you got here, though.”

“My grandmother sent me after her thread.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Curdie; “but you can tell me all about it when we get out. There’s no time to lose now.”

Irene went to work again. “There’s such a lot of stones!” she said. “It will take me a long time to move them all away.”

“How far have you got?” asked Curdie.

“I’ve moved about half away, but the other half is ever so much bigger.”

“I don’t think you will have to move the lower half. Do you see a slab up against the wall?”

Irene looked, and felt about with her hands, and found the slab.

“Yes,” she answered, “I do.”

“I think,” said Curdie, “when you have cleared the slab about half-way down, I shall be able to push it over.”

“I must follow my thread,” replied Irene, “whatever I do.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Curdie.

“You will see when you get out,” answered the princess, and she worked on harder than ever.

But she soon saw that Curdie and the thread both wanted the same thing. For, by following the turns of the thread, she had been clearing the face of the slab; and half-way down, the thread went through the chink between the slab and the wall into the place where Curdie was confined, so that she could not follow it any farther until the slab was out of her way. As soon as she found this, she said in a joyful whisper:

“Now, Curdie, I think if you were to give a great push, the slab would tumble over.”

“Stand quite clear of it, then,” said Curdie, “and let me know when you are ready.”

Irene got off the heap, and stood on one side of it. “Now, Curdie!” she cried.

Curdie gave a great rush with his shoulder against it. Out tumbled the slab on the heap, and out crept Curdie over the top of it.

“You’ve saved my life, Irene!” he whispered.

“Oh, Curdie! I’m so glad! Let’s get out of this horrid place as fast as we can.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Oh, no, it’s quite easy,” said Irene. “We have only to follow my thread. I am sure that it’s going to take us out now.”

She had already begun to follow it over the fallen slab into the hole, while Curdie was searching the floor of the cavern for his pickaxe.

“Here it is!” he cried. “No, it’s not – it’s a torch. That’s good! It’s almost better than my pickaxe.”

He lit the torch at the embers of the expiring fire. When he looked up, with the torch lighting the great darkness of the huge cavern, he caught sight of Irene disappearing into the hole out of which he had just come.

“Where are you going?” he cried. “That’s not the way out.”

“This is the way my thread goes,” whispered Irene, “and I must follow it.”

“What nonsense the child talks!” said Curdie to himself. “I must follow her, though, and see that she comes to no harm. When she finds she can’t get out that way, she will come with me.”

So he crept over the slab once more into the hole, with his torch in his hand. But when he looked around, he could see her nowhere.

And now he discovered that the hole was much longer than he had supposed; for in one direction the roof came down very low, and the hole went off in a narrow passage, of which he could not see the end. The princess must have crept in there.

He got on his knees and crept after her. The hole twisted about, in some parts so low that he could hardly get through, in others so high that he could not see the roof, but everywhere it was narrow – far too narrow for a goblin to get through, and so they would never have thought that Curdie might. He was beginning to worry that something had happened to the princess, when he heard her voice whispering:

“Aren’t you coming, Curdie?”

And when he turned the next corner there she stood waiting for him.

“Now you must keep by me, for here is a great wide place,” she said.

“I can’t understand it,” said Curdie, half to himself, half to Irene.

“Never mind,” she replied. “Wait till we get out.”

Curdie, astonished that she had already got so far, and by a path he had known nothing of, thought it better to let her do as she pleased. “At all events,” he thought, “she seems to think she knows her way, though I don’t understand how. She’s just as likely to find her way out as I am, and as she insists on leading, I must follow.”

So he followed her for a few steps, until they came out in another great cavern – across which Irene walked in a straight line, as confidently as if she knew every step of the way. Curdie went after her, flashing his torch about, and trying to see something of what lay around them.

Suddenly he started back a pace. The light fell upon a platform of rock raised a few feet from the floor and covered with sheepskins. On it lay two horrible figures, asleep – the king and queen of the goblins.

He lowered his torch instantly lest the light should awake them. As he did so, it flashed upon his pickaxe, lying by the side of the queen, whose hand lay close to its handle.

“Stop one moment,” he whispered. “Hold my torch, and don’t let the light on their faces.”

Irene shuddered when she saw the frightful creatures, but she did as he requested. Curdie drew his pickaxe carefully away, and as he did so spied one of the queen’s feet, projecting from under the sheepskins. The great clumsy granite shoe was a temptation he could not resist. He laid hold of it, and very cautiously, took it off.

He saw to his astonishment that what he had sung in ignorance, to annoy the queen, was actually true: she had six horrible toes. Overjoyed at his success, and seeing by the huge bump in the sheepskins where the other foot was, he began to lift them gently, hoping to carry away the other shoe as well.

But as he pulled at the second shoe the queen gave a growl and sat up in bed. At the same instant the king awoke also and sat up beside her.

“Run, Irene!” cried Curdie, for though he was not in the least afraid for himself, he was afraid for the princess.

Irene looked round, saw the fearful creatures awake, and like the wise princess she was, dashed the torch on the ground and extinguished it, crying out: “Here, Curdie, take my hand.”

He caught hold of her hand, as she sped fearlessly on where her thread guided her. They heard the queen give a great bellow; but they had a good start, for it would be some time before the goblins could get torches lit to pursue them. Just as they thought they saw a gleam behind them, the thread brought them to a very narrow opening, through which Irene crept easily, and Curdie with difficulty.

“Now,” said Curdie, “I think we shall be safe.”

“Of course we shall,” said Irene. “My grandmother is taking care of us.”

“That’s nonsense! I don’t know what you mean.”

“If you don’t know what I mean, what right have you to call it nonsense?” asked the princess, a little offended.

“I beg your pardon, Irene,” Curdie said. “I did not mean to annoy you.”

“Of course not,” she answered. “But why do you think we shall be safe now?”

“Because the king and queen are far too stout to get through that hole.”

“What king and queen?” asked the princess.

So Curdie, as they walked along, gave her a full account of the characters and habits of the goblins, and also of his own adventures with them. When he had finished, he begged Irene to tell him how it was that she had come to his rescue.

So Irene too had to tell a long story, which she did in rather a roundabout manner, interrupted by many questions. But her tale left Curdie nearly as perplexed as before. He did not know what to think of the princess. He could not believe that she was deliberately telling stories, and he decided that Lootie had been playing the child tricks, and inventing lies to frighten her.

“Why did Lootie let you go into the mountains alone?” he asked.

“Lootie knows nothing about it. I left her fast asleep. I hope my grandmother won’t let her get into trouble, for it wasn’t her fault at all.”

“But how did you find your way to me?” persisted Curdie.

“I told you already,” answered Irene; “by keeping my finger upon my grandmother’s thread, as I am doing now.”

“You don’t mean you’ve got the thread there?”

“Of course I do. I’ve told you so ten times already. There!” she added, guiding Curdie’s hand to the thread, “you feel it yourself – don’t you?”

“I feel nothing at all,” replied Curdie.

“Then what can be the matter with your finger? I feel it perfectly. To be sure it is very thin, and in the sunlight looks just like the thread of a spider – but I can’t think why you shouldn’t feel it as well as I do.”

Curdie was too polite to say he did not believe there was any thread there at all. What he did say was, “Well, I can make nothing of it.”

“I can, though.”

“We’re not out yet,” said Curdie.

“We soon shall be,” answered Irene confidently. And now the thread went downwards to a hole in the floor of the cavern, from where there came a sound of running water which they had been hearing for some time.

“It goes into the ground now, Curdie,” said Irene, stopping.

He had been listening to another sound, which also had been growing louder. It was the noise the goblin-miners made at their work, and they seemed to be quite close. Irene heard it too, the moment she stopped.

“What is that noise?” she asked.

“It is the goblins digging,” he answered.

“And you don’t know what they do it for?”

“No; I haven’t the least idea. Would you like to see them?” he asked.

“If my thread took me there, I shouldn’t much mind; but I don’t want to see them, and I can’t leave my thread. It leads down into the hole, and we had better go at once.”

“Very well. Shall I go in first?” said Curdie.

“No; better not. You can’t feel the thread,” she answered, stepping down through a narrow break in the floor of the cavern. “Oh!” she cried, “I’m in the water. It’s strong – but it isn’t deep. Hurry, Curdie.”

He tried to go in, but the hole was too small for him.

“Go on a little bit,” he said, shouldering his pickaxe. In a few moments he had made a larger opening and followed her. They went on, down and down with the running water, Curdie getting more and more afraid it was leading them to some terrible gulf in the heart of the mountain. In one or two places he had to break away the rock to make room before even Irene could get through.

But at length they spied a glimmer of light, and in a minute more they were almost blinded by the full sunlight, into which they emerged. The princess discovered that they stood in her own garden, close to the seat on which she and her king-papa had sat that afternoon. They had come out by the channel of the little stream. She danced and clapped her hands with delight.

“Now, Curdie!” she cried, “won’t you believe what I told you about my grandmother and her thread? There! – don’t you see it shining on before us?”

“I don’t see anything,” persisted Curdie.

“Then you must believe without seeing,” said the princess; “for you can’t deny it has brought us out of the mountain.”

“I should be very ungrateful to deny that.”

“Well, come along, and Lootie will get you something to eat. I am sure you must be hungry.”

“I am. But my father and mother will be so anxious about me, I must hurry – first up the mountain to tell my mother, and then down into the mine again to let my father know.”

“Very well, Curdie. I’ll take you through the house, for that is quickest.”

They met no one on the way, for as before, the people were here and there and everywhere searching for the princess. When they got inside Irene found that the thread, as she had half expected, went up the old staircase, and a new thought struck her. She turned to Curdie and said:

“My grandmother wants me. Do come up with me and see her. Then you will know that I have been telling you the truth. Do, please, Curdie. I can’t bear you to think what I say is not true.”

The little miner could not withstand this appeal, and though he felt shy in what seemed to him a huge grand house, he yielded, and followed her up the stair.

CHAPTER 22

The Old Lady and Curdie

Up the stairs they went, and through the long rows of empty rooms, and up the little tower stair, Irene growing happier and happier as she ascended. There was no answer when she knocked at the door of the workroom, nor could she hear any sound of the spinning-wheel, and once more her heart sank, but only for a moment. She turned and knocked at the other door.

“Come in,” answered the sweet voice of her grandmother, and Irene entered, followed by Curdie.

“You darling!” cried the lady. She was dressed in white, looking lovelier than ever, and was seated by a fire of red roses mingled with white. “I’ve been waiting for you, and getting a little anxious. I was beginning to think I had better go and fetch you myself.” As she spoke she took the little princess in her arms and placed her on her lap.

“I’ve brought Curdie, grandmother, because he wouldn’t believe what I told him.”

“Yes, I see him. He is a good boy, and a brave boy. Aren’t you glad you got him out?”

“Yes, grandmother. But it wasn’t very good of him not to believe me.”

“I doubt if you would have believed it all yourself, if you hadn’t seen some of it,” her grandmother replied.

“Ah! yes, grandmother, I’m sure you are right. But he’ll believe me now.”

“I don’t know that,” replied her grandmother.

“Won’t you, Curdie?” said Irene, looking round at him. He was standing in the middle of the floor, staring, and looking strangely bewildered. She thought he was astonished at the beauty of the lady.

“Make a bow to my grandmother, Curdie,” she said.

“I don’t see any grandmother,” answered Curdie rather gruffly.

“You don’t see my grandmother, when I’m sitting in her lap?” exclaimed the princess.

“No, I don’t.” Curdie sounded offended.

“Don’t you see the lovely fire of roses?” asked Irene, as bewildered as he was.

“No, I don’t,” answered Curdie, almost sulkily.

“Nor the blue bed? Nor the rose-coloured counterpane? Nor the beautiful light, like the moon, hanging from the roof?”

“You’re making fun of me, Your Royal Highness; and after what we have come through together, I don’t think it is kind of you,” said Curdie, feeling very much hurt.

“Then what do you see?” asked Irene, who perceived at once that for her not to believe him was as bad as for him not to believe her.

“I see a big, bare, garret-room – like the one in mother’s cottage, only much bigger,” answered Curdie.

“And what more do you see?”

“I see a tub, and a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple, and a ray of sunlight coming through a hole in the middle of the roof and shining on your head, and making all the place look a curious dusky brown. I think you had better drop it, princess, and go down to the nursery, like a good girl.”

“But don’t you hear my grandmother talking to me?” asked Irene, almost crying.

“No. I hear the cooing of a lot of pigeons. If you won’t come down, I will go without you. I think that will be better anyhow, for I’m sure nobody who met us would believe a word we said to them about the goblins and the mine. They would think we made it all up. I don’t expect anybody but my own father and mother to believe me. They know I wouldn’t tell a story.”

“And yet you won’t believe me, Curdie?” asked the princess, now fairly crying with vexation and sorrow.

“No. I can’t, and I can’t help it,” said Curdie, turning to leave the room.

“What shall I do, grandmother?” sobbed the princess, turning to the lady.

“You must give him time,” said her grandmother; “and you must be content not to be believed for a while. It is very hard to bear; but I have had to bear it. I will take care of what Curdie thinks of you in the end. You must let him go now.”

“You’re not coming, are you?” asked Curdie.

“No, Curdie; my grandmother says I must let you go. Turn to the right when you get to the bottom of the stairs, and that will take you to the hall where the great door is.”

“Oh! I can find my way without you, princess, or your old grannie’s thread either,” said Curdie quite rudely.

“Oh, Curdie! Curdie!”

“I wish I had gone home at once. I’m very much obliged to you, Irene, for getting me out of that hole, but I wish you hadn’t made a fool of me afterwards.”

He said this as he opened the door, and went down the stairs. Irene listened with dismay to his departing footsteps.

Then turning again to the lady, she sobbed, “What does it mean, grandmother?” and burst into fresh tears.

“It means, my love, that I did not mean to show myself. Curdie is not yet able to believe some things. Seeing is not believing – it is only seeing. You remember

I told you that if Lootie were to see me, she would rub her eyes, forget half of what she saw, and call the other half nonsense.”

“Yes; but I should have thought Curdie—”

“You are right. Curdie is much farther on than Lootie. But in the meantime you must be content to be misunderstood for a while. We are all very anxious to be understood, and it is very hard not to be. But there is one thing much more necessary.”

“What is that, grandmother?”

“To understand other people.”

“Yes, grandmother. I must be fair. I see. So as Curdie can’t help it, I will not be angry with him, but just wait.”

“There’s my own dear child,” said her grandmother, and hugged her.

“Why weren’t you in your workroom when we came up, grandmother?” asked Irene, after a few moments. “I thought you would be spinning.”

“I’ve nobody to spin for just at present. I never spin without knowing for whom I am spinning.”

“That reminds me,” said the princess: “how are you to get the thread out of the mountain again? Surely you won’t have to make another for me? That would be such a trouble!”

The lady set Irene down and went to the fire. Putting in her hand, she drew it out again, and held up a shining ball between her finger and thumb.

“I’ve got it now, you see,” she said, “all ready for you when you want it.”

Going to her cabinet, she laid it in the same drawer as before. “And here is your ring,” she added, taking it from her little finger and putting it on the forefinger of Irene’s right hand.

“Oh, thank you, grandmother! I feel so safe now!”

“You are very tired, my child,” the lady went on. “Your hands are hurt with the stones, and you have bruises. Just look at yourself.”

She held up a little mirror which she had brought from the cabinet. The princess burst out laughing at the sight – she was so bedraggled with the stream, and dirty with creeping through narrow places. The lady laughed too, and lifting her again upon her knee, took off her cloak and night-gown.

Then she carried her to the side of the room. Irene saw that she found that she was going to lay her in the large silver bath; but as she looked into it, she started, for she saw no bottom, but the stars shining miles away, as it seemed, in a great blue gulf. Her hands closed involuntarily on the beautiful arms that held her.

“Do not be afraid, my child,” the lady said.

“No, grandmother,” answered the princess, with a little gasp; and the next instant she sank in the clear cool water.

When she opened her eyes, she saw nothing but a strange lovely blue all around her. The lady, and the beautiful room, had vanished from her sight, and she seemed utterly alone. But instead of being afraid, she felt perfectly blissful. And from somewhere came the voice of the lady, singing a strange sweet song, although she could not remember a single line of it after it was gone. It vanished, like the poetry in a dream. In after years, however, she would sometimes fancy that snatches of melody suddenly rising in her brain must be little fragments of that song; and the very fancy would make her happier.

How long she lay in the water she did not know. It seemed a long time, not from weariness but from pleasure. But at last she felt the beautiful hands lay hold of her, and she was lifted out into the lovely room. The lady carried her to the fire, and dried her tenderly with the softest towel. It was so different from Lootie's drying. When the lady had finished, she stooped to the fire, and drew from it her night-gown, as white as snow.

"How delicious!" exclaimed the princess. "It smells of all the roses in the world, I think."

When she stood up she felt as if she had been made over again. Every bruise and all weariness were gone.

"Now I am going to put you to bed for a good sleep," said her grandmother.

"But what will Lootie be thinking? And what am I to say when she asks me where I have been?"

"Don't worry. You will find it will be all right," said her grandmother, and she laid her in the blue bed, under the rosy counterpane.

"There is just one thing more," said Irene. "I am a little anxious about Curdie. I ought to have seen him safely home."

"I took care of all that," answered the lady. "I told you to let him go, and therefore I was bound to look after him. Nobody saw him, and he is now eating a good dinner in his mother's cottage up in the mountain."

"Then I will go to sleep," said Irene, and in a few minutes she had done just that.

CHAPTER 23

Curdie and His Mother

Curdie went up the mountain neither whistling nor singing, for he was vexed with Irene for taking him in, as he called it; and he was vexed with himself for having spoken to her so angrily.

His mother gave a cry of joy when she saw him, and at once set about getting him something to eat, asking him questions all the time, which he did not answer so cheerfully as usual.

When his meal was ready, she left him to eat it, and hurried to the mine to let his father know he was safe. When she came back, she found Curdie fast asleep upon her bed; and he did not wake up until his father came home in the evening.

"Now, Curdie," his mother said, as they sat at supper, "tell us the whole story from beginning to end."

So Curdie told them everything to the point where they came out upon the lawn in the garden of the king's house.

“And what happened after that?” asked his mother. “You ought to be very happy at having got away from those demons, and instead I never saw you so gloomy. There must be something more. Besides, you do not speak of that lovely child as I should like. She saved your life at the risk of her own, and yet somehow you don’t seem to think much of it.”

“She talked such nonsense,” answered Curdie, “and told me a pack of things that weren’t a bit true; and I can’t get over it.”

“What were they?” asked his father.

Then Curdie told them everything. They all sat silent for some time, pondering the strange tale. At last Curdie’s mother spoke.

“You confess, my boy,” she said, “there is something about the whole affair you do not understand?”

“Yes, of course, mother,” he answered. “I cannot understand how a child knowing nothing about the mountain, or even that I was shut up in it, should come all that way alone, straight to where I was; and then, after getting me out of the hole, lead me out of the mountain, where I should not have known a step of the way.”

“Then you have no right to say that what she told you was not true. She did take you out, and she must have had something to guide her: why not a thread as well as a rope? Her explanation may be the right one.”

“It’s no explanation at all, mother; and I can’t believe it.”

“That may be only because you don’t understand it. If you did, you would probably believe it thoroughly. I don’t blame you for not being able to believe it, but I do blame you for thinking such a child would try to deceive you. Why should she? Depend upon it, she told you all she knew. You might at least have been less angry with her.”

“That is what something inside me has been saying,” said Curdie, hanging his head. “But what do you make of the grandmother? That is what I can’t get over. To take me up to an old garret, and try to persuade me that it was a beautiful room, with blue walls and silver stars, and no end of things, when there was nothing there but an old tub and a withered apple and a heap of straw and a sunbeam! It was too bad!”

“Didn’t she speak as if she saw those things herself, Curdie?”

“Yes. That’s what bothers me. You would have thought she really meant that she saw every one of the things she talked about. And not one of them was there!”

“Perhaps some people can see things other people can’t, Curdie,” said his mother very gravely. “I think I will tell you something I saw myself once – only perhaps you won’t believe me either!”

“Oh, mother, mother!” cried Curdie, bursting into tears; “don’t say that!”

“But what I am going to tell you is very strange,” went on his mother; “and if you were to say I must have dreamt it, I don’t think that I should have any right to be upset with you, though I know that I was not asleep.”

“Do tell me, mother. Perhaps it will help me to think better of the princess.”

“That’s why I am tempted to tell you,” replied his mother. “But first, I should mention that there were strange stories told about the old king and queen – all good stories – but strange, very strange. What they were I do not know, for I only

remember the faces of my grandmother and my mother as they talked together about them. There was wonder and awe in their eyes, and they whispered.

“But what I saw myself was this. Your father was going to work in the mine one night, and I had been down there with his supper. It was soon after we were married, and before you were born. He came with me to the mouth of the mine, and left me to go home alone, for I knew the way very well. It was pretty dark, but I got along perfectly well, never thinking of being afraid, until I reached a spot you know well, Curdie, where the path has to make a sharp turn out of the way of a great rock on the left-hand side. When I got there, I was suddenly surrounded by about half a dozen goblins, the first I had ever seen, although I had heard tell of them often enough. One of them blocked the path, and they all began tormenting and teasing me in a way it makes me shudder to think of even now.”

“If I had only been with you!” cried father and son together.

Curdie’s mother gave a funny little smile, and went on.

“They had some of their horrible creatures with them too, and I was dreadfully frightened. They had torn my clothes, and I was afraid they were going to tear me to pieces, when suddenly a great white soft light shone upon me. I looked up. A broad ray, like a shining road, came down from a large globe of silvery light, not very high up, so it could not have been a star or moon or anything of that sort. The goblins stopped persecuting me, and looked dazed, and I thought they were going to run away; but soon they began again.

“At the same moment, however, down the path from the globe of light came a bird, shining like silver in the sun. It looked to me just like a white pigeon. But whatever it was, when the goblins caught sight of it coming straight down at them, they took to their heels and scampered away, leaving me safe – only very frightened. As soon as it had sent them off, the bird went gliding up the light again, and the moment it reached the globe the light disappeared, just as if a shutter had been closed over a window. I saw it no more. But I had no more trouble with the goblins that night or ever after.”

“How strange!” exclaimed Curdie.

“Yes, it was strange; but I can’t help believing it, whether you do or not,” said his mother.

“You don’t think I’m doubting my own mother?” cried Curdie.

“I don’t know that your mother is more to be believed than other people, Mr. Curdie. There are mothers far more likely to tell lies than that little princess.”

“But princesses have told lies too,” said Curdie.

“Yes, but not princesses like that child. She’s a good girl, I am certain, and that’s more important than being a princess. You ought to be sorry for behaving so to her, Curdie.”

“I am sorry now,” answered Curdie.

“You ought to go and tell her so, then.”

“I don’t see how I could. They wouldn’t let a miner boy like me have a word with her alone; and I couldn’t tell her in front of that nurse of hers, Lootie. She’d be asking ever so many questions, and the princess told me that Lootie didn’t know anything about her coming to get me out of the mountain. But I may have a

chance before long, and meantime I must try to do something for her. I think, father, I have got on the track of the goblins' plans at last."

"Have you, indeed, my boy?" said Peter. "I am sure you deserve some success; you have worked very hard for it. What have you found out?"

"It's difficult, you know, father, inside the mountain, to tell where things are outside. But I think I have nearly discovered in what direction the goblins are mining. If I am right, I know something else that I can add to it, and then one and one will make three."

"Tell us what you have found out."

"I don't see what this has to do with the princess," put in Curdie's mother.

"You'll soon see, mother. Just as we came to the channel by which we got out, I heard the miners at work somewhere near – I think below us. Now since I began to watch them, they have mined a good half-mile, in a straight line; and so far as I am aware, they are working in no other part of the mountain. But I never could tell in what direction they were going. When we came out in the king's garden, however, I thought at once that they might be tunnelling towards the king's house; and tonight I want to find out whether they are or not. I will take a light with me—"

"Oh, Curdie," cried his mother, "then they'll see you!"

"I'm no more afraid of them now than I was before," replied Curdie, "now that I've got this precious shoe. They can't make another stone shoe in a hurry, and one bare foot will do for my purpose. But I shall be careful with my light, for I don't want them to see me."

"Tell us what you mean to do."

"I mean to take a bit of paper and a pencil, and go in at the mouth of the stream by which we came out. I shall mark on the paper as near as I can the angle of every turning I take until I find the goblins at work, and so get a good idea in what direction they are going. If it is parallel with the stream, I shall know they are tunnelling towards the king's house."

"And what if they are?"

"Wait a minute, mother dear. I told you that when I came upon the royal family in the cave, they were talking of their prince, Harelip, marrying a sun-woman – that means one of us – with toes on her feet. Now I heard one of them say that peace would be secured for a generation by the pledge the prince would hold for the good behaviour of her relatives. He must have meant the sun-woman the prince was to marry. I am quite sure the king is much too proud to wish his son to marry any girl but a princess, and a peasant wife would be of no advantage to them."

"I see what you are driving at now," said his mother.

"But," said his father, "our king would never let his princess be a goblin's wife."

"I fancy if they once got her," Curdie said, "they would tell the king that they would kill her unless he consented to the marriage."

"They might say so," said his father, "but they wouldn't kill her; they would keep her alive for the sake of the hold it gave them over our king."

"And they are bad enough to torment her just for their own amusement – I know that," said his mother.

“Anyhow, I will keep a watch on them, and see what they are up to,” said Curdie. “It’s too horrible to think of. But they shan’t have her, if I can help it. So, mother dear, if you will get me a bit of paper and a pencil and a lump of pease pudding, and a ball of thread, I will set out at once. I saw a place where I can climb over the garden wall quite easily.”

His mother got him what he had asked for, and Curdie set out. Close beside the door by which the princess left the garden for the mountain there stood a great rock, and by climbing it Curdie got over the wall. He tied his thread to a stone just inside the channel of the stream, and took his pickaxe into the tunnel with him.

He had not gone far before he met a horrid creature, and had a severe struggle with it. Not being able to use his pickaxe, it was only after receiving many bites that he succeeded in killing it with his pocket-knife. After dragging the creature out, he made haste to get in again before another should arrive.

I need not follow him further in this night’s adventures. He returned to his breakfast, sure that the goblins were mining in the direction of the palace. He thought they meant to burrow under the walls of the king’s house, and come up inside it, in order to lay hands on the little princess – and carry her off as a wife for their horrid Harelip.

CHAPTER 24

Irene Behaves Like a Princess

When the princess awoke from the sweetest of sleeps, she found her nurse bending over her, the housekeeper looking over the nurse’s shoulder, and the laundry-maid looking over the housekeeper’s. The room was full of women-servants; and the gentlemen-at-arms, with a long column of servants behind them, were trying to peep in at the door of the nursery.

“Are those horrid creatures gone?” asked the princess, remembering what had terrified her in the morning.

“You naughty, naughty little princess!” cried Lootie. Her face was very pale, and she looked as if she were going to shake her. “How could you get under the bedclothes like that, and make us all think you were lost! And keep it up all day too! You are the most obstinate child! It’s anything but fun to us, I can tell you!” It was the only way the nurse could account for her disappearance.

“I didn’t do that, Lootie,” said Irene, very quietly.

“Don’t tell stories!” cried her nurse, quite rudely.

“I shall tell you nothing at all,” said Irene.

“That’s just as bad,” said the nurse.

“To say nothing is just as bad as to tell stories?” exclaimed the princess. “I will ask my papa about that. I don’t think he will like you to say so.”

“Tell me at once what you mean by it!” screamed the nurse, half wild with anger at the princess and fright for herself.

“When I tell you the truth, Lootie,” said the princess, who somehow did not feel at all angry, “you say to me ‘Don’t tell stories.’ It seems I must tell stories before you will believe me.”

“You are very rude, princess,” said the nurse.

“You are so rude, Lootie, that I will not speak to you again till you are sorry. Why should I, when I know you will not believe me?” returned the princess. For she knew perfectly well that if she were to tell Lootie what she had been doing, Lootie would not believe her.

“You are the most provoking child!” cried her nurse. “You deserve to be well punished for your wicked behaviour.”

“Please, Mrs Housekeeper,” said the princess, “will you take me to your room, and keep me till my king-papa comes? I will ask him to come as soon as he can.”

Every one stared at these words. Up to this moment they had all regarded her as little more than a baby.

But the housekeeper was afraid of the nurse, and said, “I am sure, princess, nursie did not mean to be rude to you.”

“I do not think my papa would wish me to have a nurse who spoke to me as Lootie does. If she thinks I tell lies, she had better either say so to my papa, or go away. Sir Walter, will you take charge of me?”

“With the greatest of pleasure, princess,” answered the captain of the gentlemen-at-arms, striding into the room. The crowd of servants made way for him, and he bowed low before the little princess’s bed. “I shall send my servant at once, on the fastest horse in the stable, to tell your king-papa that Your Royal Highness desires his presence. When you have chosen one of these under-servants to wait upon you, I shall order the room to be cleared.”

“Thank you very much, Sir Walter,” said the princess, and she looked towards a rosy-cheeked girl who had lately come to the house as a scullery-maid.

But when Lootie saw the eyes of her dear princess going in search of another, she fell upon her knees by the bedside, and burst into a great cry of distress.

“I think, Sir Walter,” said the princess, “I will keep Lootie. But I put myself under your care; and you need not trouble my king-papa until I speak to you again. Will you all please go away? I am quite safe and well, and I did not hide to either amuse myself, or trouble my people. Lootie, will you please dress me.”

CHAPTER 25

Curdie Comes to Grief

Everything was quiet for some time above ground. The king was still away in a distant part of his dominions. The men-at-arms kept watch about the house. They had been astonished at finding in the garden the hideous body of the goblin creature killed by Curdie; but they came to the conclusion that it had been slain in the mines, and had crept out to die; and they saw nothing else to cause alarm.

Curdie kept watching in the mountain, and the goblins kept burrowing deeper into the earth. As long as they went deeper, there was, Curdie judged, no immediate danger.

To Irene the summer was full of pleasure. For a long time, although she often thought of her grandmother during the day, and dreamed about her at night, she did not see her. She played on the mountain and made friends with the miners' children as much as Lottie would permit; but Lottie had very foolish ideas about the dignity of a princess.

However, the nurse was considerably altered for the better in her behaviour to Irene. She could not help seeing that she was no longer a mere child. She kept foolishly whispering to the servants, however – sometimes that the princess was not right in her mind, sometimes that she was too good to live, and other nonsense.

All this time Curdie was sorry that he had behaved so unkindly to the princess, but had no chance to apologise. This perhaps made him more diligent in his endeavours to serve her. When his mother and he talked on the subject, she comforted him, and told him she was sure he would some day have the opportunity.

At last, he began to see signs of a change in the goblin excavations: they were going no deeper, but had were staying on a level; so he watched them more closely than ever. One night, coming to a slope of very hard rock, they began to ascend along its surface. Having reached its top, they went again on a level for a night or two, and then began to ascend once more, going up at a pretty steep angle.

Curdie judged it time to transfer his observation to another place, and the next night he did not go to the mine at all. Leaving his pickaxe and ball of string at home, and taking only his usual lumps of bread and pease pudding, he went down the mountain to the king's house.

He climbed over the wall, and remained in the garden the whole night, creeping on hands and knees from one spot to the other, and lying at full length with his ear to the ground, listening. But he heard nothing except the tread of the men-at-arms as they marched about. As the night was cloudy and there was no moon, he had little difficulty in avoiding being seen. For several nights he continued to haunt the garden and listen, but with no success.

Whether he had got careless of his own safety, or the growing moon had become strong enough to expose him, his watching came to a sudden end.

He had been listening all round the rock where the stream ran out, and had just crept out into the moonlight on the lawn, when a whizz in his ear and a blow upon his leg startled him.

He heard the sound of running feet, and jumped up to flee. But then he fell, with a keen shoot of pain, for the bolt of a crossbow had wounded his leg, and the blood was streaming from it. He was instantly seized by two or three of the men-at-arms. It was useless to struggle, and he submitted in silence.

“It’s a boy!” cried one of them in amazement. “I thought it was one of those demons. What are you doing here? You have no business here in the king’s grounds, and if you don’t give a true account of yourself, you’ll be treated as a thief.”

“Why, what else could he be?” said one.

“He might have been after a lost animal, you know,” suggested another.

“But he has no business here.”

“Let me go away, then, please,” said Curdie.

“Not unless you tell us what you’re doing here.”

“I don’t feel quite sure whether I can trust you,” Curdie said.

“We are the king’s own men-at-arms,” said the captain courteously, for he admired Curdie’s courage.

“Well, I’ll tell you all about it – if you will promise to listen to me and not do anything rash.”

“I call that cool!” said one of the party, laughing.

But Curdie could say no more. He turned faint, and fell senseless on the grass. Then the men discovered his wound; and realised that, taking him for one of the goblin creatures, they had shot him.

They carried him into the house and laid him down in the hall. The report spread that they had caught a robber, and the servants crowded in to see the villain. Amongst them was the nurse. The moment she saw Curdie she exclaimed with indignation:

“I declare it’s the same young rascal of a miner that was rude to me and the princess on the mountain. He actually wanted to kiss the princess, the wretch! And he was prowling about, was he? Just like his impudence!” Because the princess was fast asleep, Lottie could say what she liked.

When he heard this, the captain, although he had doubts of Lottie’s truthfulness, resolved to keep Curdie a prisoner until they could find out more. So they attended to his wound, which was rather a bad one, and laid him, conscious but exhausted from the loss of blood, upon a mattress in a disused room. They locked the door, and left him.

Curdie passed a troubled night, and in the morning they found him talking wildly. In the evening he came to himself, but felt very weak, and his leg was exceedingly painful. Wondering where he was, and seeing one of the men-at-arms in the room, he began to question him and soon recalled the events of the preceding night.

Then he told the soldier all he knew about the goblins, and begged him to tell his companions, and to ask them to watch with tenfold vigilance; but perhaps he did not talk quite coherently, or perhaps the whole thing appeared incredible, for the man thought that Curdie was only raving, and tried to coax him into holding

his tongue. This, of course, annoyed Curdie dreadfully. He now felt what it was not to be believed, and the consequence was that his fever returned, so that by the time the captain was called, he was feverish and truly raving. They did for him what they could, and promised everything he wanted, without any intention of doing it.

At last he went to sleep, and they left him, locked the door again, and withdrew, intending to revisit him early in the morning.

CHAPTER 26 The Goblin-Miners

That same night several of the servants were chatting together before going to bed.

“What can that noise be?” said one of the housemaids, after listening for a moment or two.

“I’ve heard it the last two nights,” said the cook. “I would have taken it for rats, but my cat Tom keeps them far away.”

“It might be an army of rats,” said the scullery-maid. “I’ve heard those noises yesterday and today too.”

“It seems to me,” said the nurse, “that the noises are much too loud for rats. I have heard them all day, and my princess has asked me several times what they could be. Sometimes they sound like distant thunder, and sometimes like the noises you hear in the mountain from those horrid miners underneath.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said the cook, “if it was the miners after all. They may have found some hole in the mountain. They are always blasting and breaking, you know.”

As he spoke, there came a great rolling rumble beneath them, and the house quivered. They all jumped up in fright, and rushing to the hall found the gentlemen-at-arms in consternation also. They went to wake their captain, who said that it must have been an earthquake. Then he went back to bed again, and fell fast asleep without once thinking of Curdie. He had not believed Curdie’s story, or he would have taken precautions.

In fact, as they discovered afterwards, the goblins had arrived at a huge block which lay under the cellars of the house. After hard work, they had succeeded in dislodging it; but then it rolled thundering down the slope, shaking the foundations of the house. The goblins were dismayed at the noise, for they knew that they must now be very near, if not actually under, the king’s house, and they feared giving an alarm.

So they remained quiet for a while. When they began to tunnel again, they thought themselves very fortunate in finding a vein of sand which filled a fissure in the rock under the house. By scooping this away, they came out in the king's wine cellar.

No sooner did they find out where they were, than they scurried back again, like rats into their holes; and running at full speed to the goblin palace, announced their success to the king and queen with shouts of triumph.

In a moment the goblin royal family and the whole goblin people were on their way to the king's house, each eager to have a share in the glory of carrying off the Princess Irene. The queen went stumping along in one shoe made of stone and one of leather.

They soon arrived in the king's wine cellar. At once, as quietly as they could, they forced the door that led upwards.

CHAPTER 27

The Goblins in the King's House

When Curdie fell asleep he began to dream. He thought he was ascending the mountainside from the mouth of the mine, whistling and singing "Ring, dod, bang!" when he came upon a woman and child who had lost their way; and from that point he went on dreaming everything that had happened to him since he met the princess and Lootie – how he had watched the goblins, how he had been captured by them, how he had been rescued by the princess; everything, indeed, until he was wounded and imprisoned by the men-at-arms.

And now he thought he was lying wide awake where they had lain him, when suddenly he heard a great thundering sound.

"The goblins are coming!" he said. "They didn't believe a word I told them! The goblins'll be carrying off the princess from under their stupid noses! But they shan't!"

He jumped up, as he thought, and began to dress, but, to his dismay, found that he was still lying in bed.

"Now then, I will!" he said. "Here goes! I am up now!"

But yet again he found himself snug in bed. Twenty times he tried, and he failed; for in fact he was not awake, only dreaming that he was. At length in an agony of despair, fancying he heard the goblins all over the house, he gave a great cry.

Then there came, as he thought, a hand upon the lock of his door. It opened, and, looking up, he saw a lady with white hair enter the room, carrying a silver box in her hand. He thought she stroked his head with cool, soft hands, took the dressing from his leg, rubbed it with something that smelt like roses, and waved her hands over him three times.

Then everything vanished. He felt himself sinking into the deepest slumber, and remembered nothing more until he awoke properly.

The setting moon was throwing a feeble light through the window, and the house was full of uproar. There was heavy stamping, a clashing and clanging of weapons, the voices of men and the cries of women, mixed with a hideous bellowing – which sounded victorious.

The goblins were in the house! He sprang from his bed, pulled on his clothes, not forgetting his shoes, which were armed with nails; then spying an old hunting-knife, or short sword, hanging on the wall, he grasped it, and rushed down the stairs towards the sounds of fighting, which grew louder and louder.

When he reached the ground floor he found the whole place swarming. All the goblins of the mountain seemed gathered there. Curdie rushed amongst them, shouting.

“One, two,
Hit and hew!
Three, four,
Blast and bore!”

With every rhyme he came down with a great stamp upon a foot, and cut at their faces in a sort of wild sword dance. Away scattered the goblins in every direction, into closets, up stairs, into chimneys, and down to the cellars. Curdie went on stamping and slashing and singing, but saw none of the people of the house until he came to the great hall.

The moment he entered it, a loud goblin shout arose. The last of the men-at-arms, the captain himself, was on the floor, buried beneath a wallowing crowd of goblins. For, while each knight was busy defending himself as well as he could, the queen had attacked their legs and feet with her horrible granite shoe, and they were soon down; but the captain had got his back to the wall and stood out longer. The goblins would have torn them all to pieces – but the goblin king had given orders to carry the men away alive, and goblins crowded around each of them or were sitting on their prostrate bodies.

Curdie burst in dancing and stamping and singing like a whirlwind.

“Where ’tis all a hole, sir,
Never can be holes:
Why should their shoes have soles, sir,
When they’ve got no souls?”

“But she upon her foot, sir,
Has a granite shoe:
The strongest leather boot, sir,
Six would soon be through.”

The queen gave a howl of rage and dismay; and before she recovered her presence of mind, Curdie already had eleven of the knights on their legs again.

“Stamp on their feet!” he cried as each man rose – and in a few minutes the hall was nearly empty, the goblins running from it as fast as they could, howling and shrieking and limping, and cowering every now and then as they tried to cuddle their wounded feet in their hands, or to protect them from the frightful stamp-stamp of the armed men.

And now Curdie approached the group which kept guard over the prostrate captain. The king sat on the captain’s head, but the queen stood in front, like an infuriated cat, with her eyes gleaming green, and her hair standing up from her horrid head. Her heart was quaking, however, and she kept moving her leather-shod foot with nervous apprehension.

When Curdie was within a few paces, she rushed at him, made one tremendous stamp at his foot, which happily he withdrew in time, and caught him round the waist, to dash him on the marble floor. But just as she caught him, he came down with all the weight of his iron-shod shoe upon her leather-shod foot. With a hideous howl she dropped him, and took her foot in both her hands.

Meanwhile the men-at-arms rushed on the goblin king and the bodyguard, sent them flying, and lifted up their captain, who was almost squashed to death. It was some moments before he recovered breath and consciousness.

“Where’s the princess?” cried Curdie, again and again.

No-one knew, and off they all rushed in search of her.

Through every room in the house they went, but nowhere was she to be found. Nor could any of the servants be seen. Curdie kept to the lower part of the house, which was now quiet; and he began to hear a confused sound like a distant hubbub, and set out to find where it came from.

The noise grew as his sharp ears guided him to a staircase, and down to the wine cellar. It was full of goblins, whom the butler was supplying with wine as fast as he could.

While the queen and her party had been fighting the men-at-arms, Harelip with another company of goblins had gone to search the house. They captured everyone they met, and hurried away to move them to the caverns below.

But when the butler, who was amongst the captives, found that their path lay through the wine cellar, he thought of persuading them to taste the wine. As he had hoped, they no sooner tasted it than they wanted more. The other goblins, on their way down, joined them, and when Curdie entered, they were all holding out vessels of every description, from saucepan to silver cup, pressing around the butler, who sat at the tap of a huge cask, filling and filling.

Curdie cast one glance around the place, and saw in the farthest corner a terrified group of the servants cowering. Amongst them was the terror-stricken Lootie; but nowhere could he see the princess. Seized with the horrible conviction that Harelip had already carried her off, he rushed amongst the goblins, unable to sing in his anger, but stamping and cutting with greater fury than ever.

“Stamp on their feet; stamp on their feet!” he shouted. In a moment the goblins were disappearing through the hole in the floor like rats and mice.

Soon the goblin king and his group came running down to join them, with the fearful queen at their head. Finding Curdie again busy amongst her unfortunate

subjects, she rushed at him once more in rage and despair, and this time gave him a bad bruise on the foot.

Then a regular stamping fight began between them. Curdie, with the point of his hunting-knife, stopped her from claspng her mighty arms around him, and watched for an opportunity of getting a good stamp at her foot. But the queen was more wary than before.

The rest of the goblins, meantime, seeing Curdie busy for the moment, paused in their headlong hurry, and turned to the shivering group of women in the corner. As if determined to have a sun-woman of some sort to share his future throne, Harelip rushed at them, caught up Lootie, and sped with her to the hole.

She gave a great shriek. Curdie heard her, and saw the plight she was in. Gathering all his strength, he gave the queen a sudden cut across the face with his weapon, stamped with all his weight on her foot, and sprung to Lootie's rescue. The prince had two defenceless feet, and on both of them Curdie stamped just as he reached the hole.

Harelip dropped his burden and rolled shrieking into the earth. Curdie made one stab at him as he disappeared. Then he caught hold of Lootie, and having dragged her back to the corner, mounted guard over her, preparing once more to meet the queen.

Her face streaming with blood, and her eyes flashing green lightning, she came at him grinning like a tiger, followed by the king and a bodyguard of the thickest goblins. But at the same moment in rushed the captain and his men, and ran at them stamping furiously.

Away the goblins scurried, the queen foremost. Of course, the right thing would have been to take the king and queen prisoners, and hold them as hostages for Princess Irene, but no one thought of that until it was too late.

Having rescued the servants, they set about searching the house for the princess once more. None of them had any idea where she was. Lootie was almost silly with terror, and would not leave Curdie's side for a single moment. So he allowed the others to search the rest of the house, while he asked Lootie to take him to the princess's room. She was as submissive and obedient as if he had been the king.

He found the bedclothes tossed about, with most of them on the floor, while the princess's clothes were scattered all over the room. It was only too evident that the goblins had been there; and Curdie had no longer any doubt that she had been carried off at the very start.

With a pang of despair he saw how wrong they had been in not keeping the goblin king and queen and prince as prisoners. But he determined to find and rescue the princess, just as she had found and rescued him – or else meet the worst fate to which the goblins could doom him.

CHAPTER 28

Curdie's Guide

Just as Curdie had decided this, and was turning away to follow the goblins down into their hole, something touched his hand. It was the slightest touch, and when he looked he could see nothing. Feeling about in the grey of the dawn, his fingers came upon a tight thread. He looked again, more closely, but still could see nothing. It flashed upon him that this must be the princess's thread.

He knew no one would believe him any more than he had believed the princess, however. So without saying a word, he followed the thread with his finger. He managed to give Lootie the slip, and was soon out of the house and on the mountainside.

But when he reached the place where the path turned off for the mine, he found that the thread did not turn with it, but went straight up the mountain. Could it be that the thread was leading him home to his mother's cottage? Could the princess be there? He bounded up the mountain like a goat, and before the sun was up the thread had indeed brought him to his mother's door. There it vanished from his fingers.

The door was on the latch, and he entered. There sat his mother by the fire – and in her arms lay the princess, fast asleep.

“Hush, Curdie!” said his mother. “Don't wake her. I'm so glad you've come! I thought the goblins must have got you again!”

With a heart full of delight, Curdie sat down at a corner of the hearth, opposite his mother's chair, and gazed at the princess, who slept as peacefully as if she had been in her own bed. All at once she opened her eyes and fixed them on him.

“Oh, Curdie! you've come!” she said, “I thought you would!”

Curdie rose and stood before her with downcast eyes.

“Irene,” he said, “I am very sorry I did not believe you.”

“Oh, never mind, Curdie!” answered the princess. “You couldn't, you know. You do believe me now, don't you?”

“I do. Because just as I was going into the mountain to look for you, I got hold of your thread, and it brought me here.”

“Then you've come from my house?” she asked.

“Yes. I've been there two or three days, I believe.”

“And I never knew it! Then perhaps you can tell me why my grandmother has brought me here? I can't think. Something woke me – I didn't know what, but I was frightened, and I felt for the thread, and there it was! I was more frightened still when it brought me out on the mountain, for I thought it was going to take me into it again. I supposed you were in trouble again, and I would have to get you out. But it brought me here instead; and, oh, Curdie! your mother has been so kind to me – just like my own grandmother!”

Here Curdie's mother gave the princess a hug, and the princess turned and gave her a sweet smile, and kissed her.

“Then you didn't see the goblins?” asked Curdie.

“No.”

“But they have been into your house – all over it – and into your bedroom, making such a row!”

“What did they want there? It was very rude of them.”

“They wanted to carry you off into the mountain, as a wife for their prince Harelip.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” cried the princess, shuddering. “But how did you come to be in my house, without my knowing it?”

Then Curdie had to explain everything – how he had watched for her sake, how he had been wounded and shut up by the soldiers, how he heard the noises and could not rise from his bed, and how the beautiful old lady had come to him, and all that followed.

“Poor Curdie! to lie there hurt and ill, and me never to know it!” exclaimed the princess, stroking his rough hand. “I would have come and nursed you, if they had told me.”

“And you’re lame,” said his mother. “Let me see the wound.”

He pulled down his stocking; and apart from a great scar, his leg was perfectly sound!

Curdie and his mother gazed in each other’s eyes, full of wonder, but Irene called out:

“I thought so, Curdie! I was sure it wasn’t a dream. I was sure my grandmother had been to see you. Don’t you smell the roses? It was my grandmother who healed your leg, and sent you to help me.”

“No, Princess Irene,” said Curdie; “I wasn’t good enough to be allowed to help you. Your grandmother took care of you without me.”

“She sent you to help my people, anyhow. I wish my king-papa would come. I do want so to tell him how good you’ve been!”

“But,” said the mother, “we are forgetting how frightened your people must be. You must take the princess home, Curdie.”

“Yes, mother. Only I’m dreadfully hungry. Do let me have some breakfast first. They ought to have listened to me, and then they wouldn’t have been taken by surprise.”

“That is true, Curdie; but it is not for you to blame them. You remember?”

“Yes, mother, I do. Only I must really have something to eat.”

“You shall, my boy – as fast as I can get it,” said his mother.

But before his breakfast was ready, Curdie jumped up suddenly, startling his companions.

“Mother, mother!” he cried, “I was forgetting. You must take the princess home yourself. I must go and wake my father.”

Without a word of explanation, he rushed to where his father was sleeping. Having thoroughly awoken him with his news, he darted out of the cottage.

CHAPTER 29

Masonwork

Curdie had just remembered that the goblins had a second plan, to flood the mine, which they would carry out if the first plan failed. No doubt they were already busy, and the mine was therefore in the greatest danger of being flooded and made useless – not to speak of the lives of the miners.

When he reached the mouth of the mine, he found his father and a good many more miners just entering. They all hurried to the passage along which Curdie had found a way into the goblin country.

There, thanks to his father's foresight, they had already collected a great many blocks of stone, with cement, ready for building up the weak place. Although there was only room for two men to build there at the same time, they set all the rest to work in preparing the cement and passing the stones. So by the end of the day a huge buttress filled the whole passage, supported by the surrounding rock.

They had heard goblin hammers and pickaxes busy all the time, and at length fancied they heard sounds of water they had never heard before. But that was accounted for when they left the mine, for they stepped out into a tremendous storm which was raging all over the mountain.

The thunder was bellowing, and the lightning flashed out of a huge black cloud which lay above the mountain and hung thick mist over its sides. From the state of the brooks, now swollen into raging torrents, it was evident that the storm had been storming all day.

The wind was blowing as if it would blow him off the mountain, but, anxious about his mother and the princess, Curdie ran up through the thick of the tempest. In such a storm, their poor little house was in danger.

Indeed he soon found that, if it had not been built against a huge rock which protected it, it must have been swept or blown away; for a torrent rushed down the mountain towards it, was parted by this rock, and then the rushing waters joined again in front of the cottage – two roaring and dangerous streams, which his mother and the princess could not possibly have crossed. With great difficulty Curdie forced his way through one of the streams, and up to the door.

The moment his hand fell on the latch, he heard the joyous cry of the princess.

“There's Curdie! Curdie!”

She was sitting wrapped in blankets on the bed, while his mother was trying for the hundredth time to light the fire which had been drowned by the rain that came down the chimney. The clay floor was a mass of mud, and the whole place looked wretched. But the faces of his mother and the princess shone as if their troubles only made them the merrier. Curdie burst out laughing at the sight of them.

“I never had such fun!” said the princess, her eyes twinkling. “How nice it must be to live in a cottage on the mountain!”

By the time Curdie's father Peter returned, the storm was nearly over, but the streams were so fierce and swollen that it was out of the question for the princess to go down the mountain. It would be dangerous even for Peter or Curdie to try, in the gathering darkness.

"They will be dreadfully frightened about you," said Peter to the princess, "but we can't help it. We must wait till morning."

With Curdie's help, the fire was lighted at last, and the mother made their supper; and after supper they all told the princess stories till she grew sleepy. Then Curdie's mother laid her in Curdie's bed, which was in a tiny garret-room. When she was in bed, through a little window low down in the roof she caught sight of her grandmother's lamp shining far away down the mountain; and she gazed at the beautiful silvery globe until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 30

The King and the Kiss

The next morning the sun rose so bright that Irene said the rain had washed his face and let the light come out clean. The torrents were still roaring down the mountainside, but they were so much smaller that they were not dangerous in the daylight. After an early breakfast, Peter went to his work, and Curdie and his mother set out to take the princess home.

They had difficulty in getting her dry across the streams, and Curdie had to carry her, but at last they were safe on the road, and walked down towards the king's house. And what should they see as they turned the corner but the last of the king's troop riding through the gate!

"Oh, Curdie!" cried Irene, clapping her hands joyfully, "my king-papa is come."

The moment Curdie heard that, he caught her up in his arms, and set off at full speed, crying,

"Come on, mother dear! The king may break his heart before he knows that she is safe." Irene clung round his neck and he ran with her like a deer.

When he entered the court, there sat the king on his horse, with all the people of the house around him, weeping and hanging their heads. The king was not weeping, but his face was white, and he looked as if the life had gone out of him. The men-at-arms he had brought with him sat horror-stricken, their eyes flashing with rage, waiting only for the word of the king to do something – although they did not know what.

The day before, the men-at-arms belonging to the house, believing the princess had been carried away, rushed after the goblins into the hole. But they found that the goblins had already so skilfully blockaded the narrowest part below the cellar, that without the miners and their tools they could do nothing.

Not one of them knew where the mouth of the mine lay. Poor Sir Walter was especially filled with shame, and almost hoped the king would order his head to be cut off; for to think of that sweet little face down amongst the goblins was unendurable.

When Curdie ran in at the gate with the princess in his arms, they were all so absorbed in their own misery and awed by the king's presence and grief, that no one noticed him. He went straight up to the king, where he sat on his horse.

"Papa! papa!" the princess cried, stretching out her arms to him; "here I am!"

The king started. The colour rushed to his face, and he let out a cry. Curdie held up the princess, and the king bent down and took her from his arms. As he clasped her to his bosom, the big tears went dropping down his cheeks and his beard.

And such a shout arose from the bystanders that the startled horses pranced and capered. Irene greeted them all as she nestled in her father's bosom, and the king did not set her down until she had told them the whole story. But she had more to tell about Curdie than about herself, and what she did tell about herself none of them could understand – except the king and Curdie, who stood stroking the neck of the great white horse.

And as she told what Curdie had done, Sir Walter and others added to what she told, even Lootie joining in the praises of his courage and energy.

Curdie said nothing, looking quietly up in the king's face. His mother stood on the outskirts of the crowd listening with delight, until the princess caught sight of her.

"And there is his mother, king-papa!" she said. "She is such a nice mother, and has been so kind to me!"

The crowd parted as the king made a sign to Curdie's mother to come forward. She obeyed, and he gave her his hand, but could not speak.

"And now, king-papa," the princess went on, "I must tell you another thing. One night long ago Curdie drove the goblins away and brought Lootie and me safe from the mountain. And I promised him a kiss when we got home, but Lootie wouldn't let me give it him. I don't want you to scold Lootie, but I want you to tell her that a princess must do as she promises."

"Indeed she must, my child, unless it's wrong," said the king. "There, give Curdie a kiss."

The princess reached down, threw her arms round Curdie's neck, and kissed him, saying: "There, Curdie! There's the kiss I promised you!"

Then they all went into the house, and the cook rushed to the kitchen and the servants to their work. Lootie dressed Irene in her finest clothes, and the king took off his armour, and put on purple and gold; and a messenger was sent for Peter and all the miners, and there was a grand feast, which continued long after the princess went to bed.

CHAPTER 31
The Subterranean Waters

The king's harper was playing and chanting a ballad which he had made up about the princess and the goblins, and Curdie's feats: when all at once he ceased, looking at the door of the hall. The king and his guests looked that way too. The next moment, through the open doorway came the princess Irene.

She went straight up to her father, with her right hand stretched out a little sideways, and her forefinger, as her father and Curdie both understood, feeling its way along the invisible thread. The king took her on his knee, and she said in his ear:

"King-papa, do you hear that noise?"

"I hear nothing," said the king.

"Listen," she said, holding up her forefinger.

The king listened. Each man fell still and listened also, and the harper sat with his fingers silent on the strings.

"I do hear a noise," said the king at last, "like distant thunder. It is coming nearer and nearer. What can it be?"

They all heard the noise now, coming rapidly closer.

"I think it must be another storm coming over the mountain," said Sir Walter.

Then Curdie, who had laid his ear to the ground, rose up quickly, and approaching the king said, speaking very fast:

"Please, Your Majesty, I think I know what it is. I have no time to explain, but will Your Majesty give orders that everybody leave the house as quickly as possible and get up the mountain?"

The king, who was the wisest man in the kingdom, knew well there was a time when things must be done and questions left till afterwards. He had faith in Curdie, and rose instantly, with Irene in his arms.

"Every man and woman follow me," he said, and strode out into the darkness.

Before he had reached the gate, the noise had grown to a great thundering roar. The ground trembled beneath their feet. As the last of the servants crossed the courtyard, out after them from the great hall door came a huge furious rush of water, which almost swept them away.

But all the people got safely out of the gate and up the mountain, while the torrent went roaring down the road into the valley beneath. Curdie had left the princess in order to look after his mother; he and his father made sure that she was safe and dry.

When the king had got a little further up the mountain, he stood with the princess in his arms, looking back with amazement on the torrent of water, which glimmered fierce and foamy through the night. There Curdie rejoined them.

"Now, Curdie," said the king, "what does it mean?"

Curdie told him about the second scheme of the goblins, who had resolved, if they should fail in carrying off the king's daughter, to flood the mine and drown the miners.

Then he explained what the miners had done to prevent it. The goblins had let loose all the underground reservoirs and streams, expecting the water to run into the mine. But they did not know of the solid wall built by the miners. So instead the water found its way to the tunnel they had made to the king's house – a possibility which had not occurred to the young miner until he had laid his ear to the floor of the hall.

What was to be done? The house appeared in danger of falling, and at every moment the torrent was increasing.

“We must set out at once,” said the king. “But how can we get the horses?”

“Shall I see if we can manage that?” said Curdie.

“Do,” said the king.

Curdie gathered the men-at-arms, and took them over the garden wall to the stables. They found the horses terrified; the water was rising fast around them. But there was no way to get them out, except by riding them through the stream, which was now pouring in from the lower windows as well as the door. Curdie got on the king's white charger and led the way, bringing them all in safety to the rising ground.

“Look, look, Curdie!” cried Irene, as he dismounted and led the horse up to the king.

Curdie looked, and saw, high in the air, near the top of the king's house, a great globe of light shining like pure silver.

“Oh!” he cried in alarm, “that is your grandmother's lamp! We must get her out. I'll go and find her. The house may collapse, you know.”

“My grandmother is in no danger,” said Irene, smiling.

“Here, Curdie, take the princess while I get on my horse,” said the king.

Curdie took the princess again, and both turned their eyes to the globe of light. Then they saw a white bird shoot out from it. Gliding down on outstretched wings, it circled round the king and Curdie and the princess, and then glided up again, and vanished – along with the light.

“You see, Curdie!” said the princess, as he lifted her up to her father's arms, “my grandmother knows all about it, and isn't frightened. I believe she could walk through that water and it wouldn't wet her at all.”

“But, my child,” said the king, “you will get cold. Run, Curdie, my boy, and fetch anything you can find, to keep the princess warm. We have a long ride before us.”

Curdie was gone in a moment, and soon returned with a rich fur, and the news that dead goblins were drifting about in the current through the house. They had been caught in their own snare; instead of the mine, they had flooded their own country, and were now being swept up drowned.

Irene shuddered, but the king held her close. Then he turned to Sir Walter, and said, “Bring Curdie's father and mother here.”

When they stood before him, the king said, “I wish to take your son with me. He shall enter my bodyguard and in time be promoted.”

Peter and his wife, overcome, murmured almost inaudible thanks. But Curdie spoke aloud.

“Please, Your Majesty,” he said, “I cannot leave my father and mother.”

“That's right, Curdie!” cried the princess. “I wouldn't if I was you.”

The king looked at the princess and then at Curdie with a satisfied expression.

“I think you are right, Curdie,” he said, “and I will not ask you again. But I shall do something for you some time.”

“Your Majesty has already allowed me to serve you,” said Curdie.

“But, Curdie,” said his mother, “why shouldn’t you go with the king? We can get on very well without you.”

“But I can’t get on very well without you,” said Curdie. “Please, Your Majesty, if you wouldn’t mind giving my mother a red petticoat! I should have got her one long ago, but for the goblins.”

“As soon as we get home,” said the king, “Irene and I will search out the warmest one to be found, and send it here.”

“Yes, we will, Curdie!” said the princess. “And next summer we’ll come back and see your mother wear it. Shan’t we, king-papa?”

“Yes, my love,” said the king. Then turning to the miners, he said, “Will you look after my servants tonight? I hope they will be able to return to the house tomorrow.”

The miners all promised their hospitality. Then the king commanded his servants to obey Curdie, and after shaking hands with him and his father and mother, the king and the princess and all their company rode away into the starry night.

CHAPTER 32

The Last Chapter

All the rest went up the mountain, to the homes of the miners. Curdie and his father and mother took Lootie with them. And the whole way a light shone upon their path. But when they looked round they could see nothing of the silvery globe.

For days and days the water continued to rush from the doors and windows of the king’s house, and goblin bodies were swept out into the road.

Curdie saw that something must be done. He spoke to his father and the rest of the miners, and they began to make another outlet for the waters. By busily tunnelling here and building there, they soon succeeded; and having made a tunnel to drain the water away from under the king’s house, they were able to get into the wine cellar, where they found a multitude of dead goblins, including the queen. The flood had greatly widened the passage. So they built it up securely, and then went back to their labours in the mine.

A good many of the goblins with their creatures escaped from the flood on to the mountain. But most of them soon left that part of the country, and those who remained grew milder in character, and indeed became very much like the Scotch brownies. Their hearts grew softer and their feet grew harder, and gradually they became friendly with the inhabitants of the mountain, and even with the miners.

But the miners were merciless to any of the goblins' creatures that came in their way, until at length they all but disappeared.

The rest of the story of The Princess and Curdie must be kept for another book....

* * *

The End

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