

Afterword

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At a very much younger age I came to *The Princess and the Goblin* by the back door, as one might say. Its sequel (*The Princess and Curdie*) was given to me as a birthday present when I was about ten or so, before I knew that there was another book about the mountain-haunting goblins, Princess Irene, and the sturdy, dependable Curdie. My birthday book was devoured in one gulp and then I searched library shelves for more books by the same author. Having so discovered *The Princess and the Goblin*, I was entranced to see how the story really began. For some time the thought of the goblin queen's fearsome stone shoes remained with me—certainly a new and unusual weapon to be used against dark forces, perfect to wear clumping about in the night of underground.

Some of MacDonald's work seems by our standards today to be turgid and oversentimental, lacking any spell for readers who have had dealings with Tolkien's orcs and the like. His style is consciously that of a storyteller instead of a writer, and his moralizing becomes heavy-handed.

But once he forgets he is writing for "dear little children" lapped about by the snug safety of a Victorian nursery or schoolroom, he spins an exciting tale. He explores some points that are of prime importance today—namely, the wrong in dismissing as nonexistent that which cannot be understood. The frustration of those telling the truth after encountering some wonder and not being believed, or being declared a liar, can still strike a spark from a reader.

One who has read of the mores of the Victorian period can agree that such frustration must have been common to children. By custom they lived so far apart from most adults in even middle-class families that they did indeed have little common ground with those of an older generation. One was taught then to accept all that was said by an adult without asking any questions. Quick punishment for "naughtiness" was the result of asking why.

Our modern robust fantasy does not contain this gulf between generations. But MacDonald's picture of a grandmother (fairy, of course) who is visible only when she is believed in was a telling argument for faith in his day and age.

Belief without physical proof, openness of mind to the wonders of life about one, is the center theme of his books. And that is as important now as when they first appeared, in spite of what we would consider today quaint, "old-fashioned" style.

Though the goblins and their unfortunate animals will cause few shivers for those knowing orcs and the modern evil servants of the Dark, they still carry the taint of ugly wrongness. Only the goblin queen is given true menace. One is led to suspect that she may, consciously or unconsciously, be based on some overaggressive female (for that age) known to MacDonald. She is always represented in a temper, pushing the reluctant male

members of her family into action. Of all the underground crew she is the most noxious.

As for the others, hunted out of their homes by the increasing demands of the miners, well, one wonders whether they did not indeed have rights worth fighting for. We must agree that their end of the tale is more fitting than a ruthless suppression of all their kind.

Just as the goblin queen is all-powerful underground, so is the elusive grandmother her balance above. A powerful god-mother or grandmother is so usual a character in many fairy tales that it takes MacDonald's skill to make a notable success of Irene's great-great-relative. Her character is a major one (she shows even greater powers in *The Princess and Curdie*). One can close one's eyes and see her spinning magic, just as one can hear the far-off hum of her wheel.

George MacDonald wrote a number of fantasies—for both children and adults. *The Golden Key*, for example, is a small masterpiece, keeping within the limits of a novelette a complete allegory of life and death. Just as the Princess Irene, on a similar quest, must follow the invisible thread of faith through a dark she dreads in order to fulfill what she conceives to be her duty.

The power evoked in giving one's word is the second theme MacDonald stresses. We have gotten well away (we are smugly told) from stories that are occupied with openly stressed moral lessons. But old-fashioned values do carry weight. They certainly do with Princess Irene and Curdie, they even do with the goblins. A visible scale of justice waits to swing to the proper balance.

This book is exactly what developed when an adult with imagination, talent, and purpose said—"I'll tell you a story." The

author meant to provide more than entertainment, he wished to underline right and wrong. That the story rises above the stressed conscientious moral purposes demanded in his day is due to MacDonald's own native genius. He is more than just offering a book to while away such a rainy day as sent Princess Irene exploring up a crooked hidden stair.

We live in a different age and by other standards, yet there is something strongly appealing in these firmly stated older codes of conduct. Sometimes black and white with no grays can be refreshingly secure.