

**GEORGE
MACDONALD**

THE PRINCESS
AND CURDIE

George MacDonald
The Princess and Curdie

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George MacDonald

The Princess and Curdie

CHAPTER 1

The Mountain

Curdie was the son of Peter the miner. He lived with his father and mother in a cottage built on a mountain, and he worked with his father inside the mountain.

A mountain is a strange and awful thing. In old times, without knowing so much of their strangeness and awfulness as we do, people were yet more afraid of mountains. But then somehow they had not come to see how beautiful they are as well as awful, and they hated them—and what people hate they must fear. Now that we have learned to look at them with admiration, perhaps we do not feel quite awe enough of them. To me they are beautiful terrors.

I will try to tell you what they are. They are portions of the heart of the earth that have escaped from the dungeon down below, and rushed up and out. For the heart of the earth is a great wallowing mass, not of blood, as in the hearts of men and animals, but of glowing hot, melted metals and stones. And as our hearts keep us alive, so that great lump of heat keeps the earth alive: it is a huge power of buried sunlight—that is what it is.

Now think: out of that cauldron, where all the bubbles would be as big as the Alps if it could get room for its boiling, certain bubbles have bubbled out and escaped—up and away, and there they stand in the cool, cold sky—mountains. Think of the change, and you will no more wonder that there should be something awful about the very look of a mountain: from the darkness—for where the light has nothing to shine upon, much the same as darkness—from the heat, from the endless tumult of boiling unrest—up, with a sudden heavenward shoot, into the wind, and the cold, and the starshine, and a cloak of snow that lies like ermine above the blue-green mail of the glaciers; and the great sun, their grandfather, up there in the sky; and their little old cold aunt, the moon, that comes wandering about the house at night; and everlasting stillness, except for the wind that turns the rocks and caverns into a roaring organ for the young archangels that are studying how to let out the pent-up praises of their hearts, and the molten music of the streams, rushing ever from the bosoms of the glaciers fresh born.

Think, too, of the change in their own substance—no longer molten and soft, heaving and glowing, but hard and shining and cold. Think of the creatures scampering over and burrowing in it, and the birds building their nests upon it, and the trees growing out of its sides, like hair to clothe it, and the lovely grass in the valleys, and the gracious flowers even at the very edge of its armour of ice, like the rich embroidery of the garment below, and the rivers galloping down the valleys in a tumult of white and green! And along with all these, think of the terrible precipices down which the traveller may fall and be lost, and the frightful gulfs of blue air cracked in the glaciers, and the dark profound lakes, covered like little arctic oceans with floating lumps of ice.

All this outside the mountain! But the inside, who shall tell what lies there? Caverns of awfulest solitude, their walls miles thick, sparkling with ores of gold or silver, copper or iron, tin or mercury, studded perhaps with precious stones—perhaps a brook, with eyeless fish in it, running, running ceaselessly, cold and babbling, through banks crusted with carbuncles and golden topazes, or over a gravel of which some of the stones are rubies and emeralds, perhaps diamonds and sapphires—who can tell?—and whoever can't tell is free to think—all waiting to flash, waiting for millions of ages—ever since the earth flew off from the sun, a great blot of fire, and began to cool.

Then there are caverns full of water, numbingly cold, fiercely hot—hotter than any boiling water. From some of these the water cannot get out, and from others it runs in channels as the blood in the body: little veins bring it down from the ice above into the great caverns of the mountain's heart, whence the arteries let it out again, gushing in pipes and clefts and ducts of all shapes and kinds, through and through its bulk, until it springs newborn to the light, and rushes down the Mountainside in torrents, and down the valleys in rivers—down, down, rejoicing, to the mighty lungs of the world, that is the sea, where it is tossed in storms and cyclones, heaved up in billows, twisted in waterspouts, dashed to mist upon rocks, beaten by millions of tails, and breathed by millions of gills, whence at last, melted into vapour by the sun, it is lifted up pure into the air, and borne by the servant winds back to the mountaintops and the snow, the solid ice, and the molten stream.

Well, when the heart of the earth has thus come rushing up among her children, bringing with it gifts of all that she possesses, then straightway into it rush her children to see what they can find there. With pickaxe and spade and crowbar, with boring chisel and blasting powder, they force their way back: is it to search for what toys they may have left in their long-forgotten nurseries? Hence the mountains that lift their heads into the clear air, and are dotted over with the dwellings of men, are tunnelled and bored in the darkness of their bosoms by the dwellers in the houses which they hold up to the sun and air.

Curdie and his father were of these: their business was to bring to light hidden things; they sought silver in the rock and found it, and carried it out. Of the many other precious things in their mountain they knew little or nothing. Silver ore was what they were sent to find, and in darkness and danger they found it. But oh, how sweet was the air on the mountain face when they came out at sunset to go home to wife and mother! They did breathe deep then!

The mines belonged to the king of the country, and the miners were his servants, working under his overseers and officers. He was a real king—that is, one who ruled for the good of his people and not to please himself, and he wanted the silver not to buy rich things for himself, but to help him to govern the country, and pay the ones that defended it from certain troublesome neighbours, and the judges whom he set to portion out righteousness among the people, that so they might learn it themselves, and come to do without judges at all. Nothing that could be got from the heart of the earth could have been put to better purposes than the silver the king's miners got for him. There were people in the country who, when it came into their hands, degraded it by locking it up in a chest, and then it grew diseased and was called mammon, and bred all sorts of quarrels; but when first it left the king's hands it never made any but friends, and the air of the world kept it clean.

About a year before this story began, a series of very remarkable events had just ended. I will narrate as much of them as will serve to show the tops of the roots of my tree.

Upon the mountain, on one of its many claws, stood a grand old house, half farmhouse, half castle, belonging to the king; and there his only child, the Princess Irene, had been brought up till she was nearly nine years old, and would doubtless have continued much longer, but for the strange events to which I have referred.

At that time the hollow places of the mountain were inhabited by creatures called goblins, who for various reasons and in various ways made themselves troublesome to all, but to the little princess dangerous. Mainly by the watchful devotion and energy of Curdie, however, their designs had been utterly defeated, and made to recoil upon themselves to their own destruction, so that now there were very few of them left alive, and the miners did not believe there was a single goblin remaining in the whole inside of the mountain.

The king had been so pleased with the boy—then approaching thirteen years of age—that when he carried away his daughter he asked him to accompany them; but he was still better pleased with him when he found that he preferred staying with his father and mother. He was a right good king and knew that the love of a boy who would not leave his father and mother to be made a great man was worth ten thousand offers to die for his sake, and would prove so when the right time came. As

for his father and mother, they would have given him up without a grumble, for they were just as good as the king, and he and they understood each other perfectly; but in this matter, not seeing that he could do anything for the king which one of his numerous attendants could not do as well, Curdie felt that it was for him to decide. So the king took a kind farewell of them all and rode away, with his daughter on his horse before him.

A gloom fell upon the mountain and the miners when she was gone, and Curdie did not whistle for a whole week. As for his verses, there was no occasion to make any now. He had made them only to drive away the goblins, and they were all gone—a good riddance—only the princess was gone too! He would rather have had things as they were, except for the princess's sake. But whoever is diligent will soon be cheerful, and though the miners missed the household of the castle, they yet managed to get on without them. Peter and his wife, however, were troubled with the fancy that they had stood in the way of their boy's good fortune. It would have been such a fine thing for him and them, too, they thought, if he had ridden with the good king's train. How beautiful he looked, they said, when he rode the king's own horse through the river that the goblins had sent out of the hill! He might soon have been a captain, they did believe! The good, kind people did not reflect that the road to the next duty is the only straight one, or that, for their fancied good, we should never wish our children or friends to do what we would not do ourselves if we were in their position. We must accept righteous sacrifices as well as make them.

CHAPTER 2

The White Pigeon

When in the winter they had had their supper and sat about the fire, or when in the summer they lay on the border of the rock-margined stream that ran through their little meadow close by the door of their cottage, issuing from the far-up whiteness often folded in clouds, Curdie's mother would not seldom lead the conversation to one peculiar personage said and believed to have been much concerned in the late issue of events.

That personage was the great-great-grandmother of the princess, of whom the princess had often talked, but whom neither Curdie nor his mother had ever seen. Curdie could indeed remember, although already it looked more like a dream than he could account for if it had really taken place, how the princess had once led him up many stairs to what she called a beautiful room in the top of the tower, where she went through all the—what should he call it?—the behaviour of presenting him to her grandmother, talking now to her and now to him, while all the time he saw nothing but a bare garret, a heap of musty straw, a sunbeam, and a withered apple. Lady, he would have declared before the king himself, young or old, there was none, except the princess herself, who was certainly vexed that he could not see what she at least believed she saw.

As for his mother, she had once seen, long before Curdie was born, a certain mysterious light of the same description as one Irene spoke of, calling it her grandmother's moon; and Curdie himself had seen this same light, shining from above the castle, just as the king and princess were taking their leave. Since that time neither had seen or heard anything that could be supposed connected with her. Strangely enough, however, nobody had seen her go away. If she was such an old lady, she could hardly be supposed to have set out alone and on foot when all the house was asleep. Still, away she must have gone, for, of course, if she was so powerful, she would always be about the princess to take care of her.

But as Curdie grew older, he doubted more and more whether Irene had not been talking of some dream she had taken for reality: he had heard it said that children could not always distinguish betwixt dreams and actual events. At the same time there was his mother's testimony: what was he to do with that? His mother, through whom he had learned everything, could hardly be imagined by her own dutiful son to have mistaken a dream for a fact of the waking world.

So he rather shrank from thinking about it, and the less he thought about it, the less he was inclined to believe it when he did think about it, and therefore, of course, the less inclined to talk about it to his father and mother; for although his father was one of those men who for one word they say think twenty thoughts, Curdie was well assured that he would rather doubt his own eyes than his wife's testimony.

There were no others to whom he could have talked about it. The miners were a mingled company—some good, some not so good, some rather bad—none of them so bad or so good as they might have been; Curdie liked most of them, and was a favourite with all; but they knew very little about the upper world, and what might or might not take place there. They knew silver from copper ore; they understood the underground ways of things, and they could look very wise with their lanterns in their hands searching after this or that sign of ore, or for some mark to guide their way in the hollows of the earth; but as to great-great-grandmothers, they would have mocked Curdie all the rest of his life for the absurdity of not being absolutely certain that the solemn belief of his father and mother was nothing but ridiculous nonsense. Why, to them the very word 'great-great-grandmother' would have been a week's laughter! I am not sure that they were able quite to believe there were such persons as great-great-grandmothers; they had never seen one. They were not companions to give the best of help toward progress, and as Curdie grew, he grew at this time faster in body than

in mind—with the usual consequence, that he was getting rather stupid—one of the chief signs of which was that he believed less and less in things he had never seen. At the same time I do not think he was ever so stupid as to imagine that this was a sign of superior faculty and strength of mind. Still, he was becoming more and more a miner, and less and less a man of the upper world where the wind blew. On his way to and from the mine he took less and less notice of bees and butterflies, moths and dragonflies, the flowers and the brooks and the clouds. He was gradually changing into a commonplace man.

There is this difference between the growth of some human beings and that of others: in the one case it is a continuous dying, in the other a continuous resurrection. One of the latter sort comes at length to know at once whether a thing is true the moment it comes before him; one of the former class grows more and more afraid of being taken in, so afraid of it that he takes himself in altogether, and comes at length to believe in nothing but his dinner: to be sure of a thing with him is to have it between his teeth.

Curdie was not in a very good way, then, at that time. His father and mother had, it is true, no fault to find with him and yet—and yet—neither of them was ready to sing when the thought of him came up. There must be something wrong when a mother catches herself sighing over the time when her boy was in petticoats, or a father looks sad when he thinks how he used to carry him on his shoulder. The boy should enclose and keep, as his life, the old child at the heart of him, and never let it go. He must still, to be a right man, be his mother's darling, and more, his father's pride, and more. The child is not meant to die, but to be forever fresh born.

Curdie had made himself a bow and some arrows, and was teaching himself to shoot with them. One evening in the early summer, as he was walking home from the mine with them in his hand, a light flashed across his eyes. He looked, and there was a snow-white pigeon settling on a rock in front of him, in the red light of the level sun. There it fell at once to work with one of its wings, in which a feather or two had got some sprays twisted, causing a certain roughness unpleasant to the fastidious creature of the air.

It was indeed a lovely being, and Curdie thought how happy it must be flitting through the air with a flash—a live bolt of light. For a moment he became so one with the bird that he seemed to feel both its bill and its feathers, as the one adjusted the other to fly again, and his heart swelled with the pleasure of its involuntary sympathy. Another moment and it would have been aloft in the waves of rosy light—it was just bending its little legs to spring: that moment it fell on the path broken-winged and bleeding from Curdie's cruel arrow.

With a gush of pride at his skill, and pleasure at his success, he ran to pick up his prey. I must say for him he picked it up gently—perhaps it was the beginning of his repentance. But when he had the white thing in his hands its whiteness stained with another red than that of the sunset flood in which it had been revelling—ah God! who knows the joy of a bird, the ecstasy of a creature that has neither storehouse nor barn!—when he held it, I say, in his victorious hands, the winged thing looked up in his face—and with such eyes!—asking what was the matter, and where the red sun had gone, and the clouds, and the wind of its flight. Then they closed, but to open again presently, with the same questions in them.

And as they closed and opened, their look was fixed on his. It did not once flutter or try to get away; it only throbbed and bled and looked at him. Curdie's heart began to grow very large in his bosom. What could it mean? It was nothing but a pigeon, and why should he not kill a pigeon? But the fact was that not till this very moment had he ever known what a pigeon was. A good many discoveries of a similar kind have to be made by most of us. Once more it opened its eyes—then closed them again, and its throbbing ceased. Curdie gave a sob: its last look reminded him of the princess—he did not know why. He remembered how hard he had laboured to set her beyond danger, and yet what dangers she had had to encounter for his sake: they had been saviours to each other—and what had he done now? He had stopped saving, and had begun killing! What had he been sent

into the world for? Surely not to be a death to its joy and loveliness. He had done the thing that was contrary to gladness; he was a destroyer! He was not the Curdie he had been meant to be!

Then the underground waters gushed from the boy's heart. And with the tears came the remembrance that a white pigeon, just before the princess went away with her father, came from somewhere—yes, from the grandmother's lamp, and flew round the king and Irene and himself, and then flew away: this might be that very pigeon! Horrible to think! And if it wasn't, yet it was a white pigeon, the same as this. And if she kept a great Many pigeons—and white ones, as Irene had told him, then whose pigeon could he have killed but the grand old princess's?

Suddenly everything round about him seemed against him. The red sunset stung him; the rocks frowned at him; the sweet wind that had been laving his face as he walked up the hill dropped—as if he wasn't fit to be kissed any more. Was the whole world going to cast him out? Would he have to stand there forever, not knowing what to do, with the dead pigeon in his hand? Things looked bad indeed. Was the whole world going to make a work about a pigeon—a white pigeon? The sun went down. Great clouds gathered over the west, and shortened the twilight. The wind gave a howl, and then lay down again. The clouds gathered thicker. Then came a rumbling. He thought it was thunder. It was a rock that fell inside the mountain. A goat ran past him down the hill, followed by a dog sent to fetch him home. He thought they were goblin creatures, and trembled. He used to despise them. And still he held the dead pigeon tenderly in his hand.

It grew darker and darker. An evil something began to move in his heart. 'What a fool I am!' he said to himself. Then he grew angry, and was just going to throw the bird from him and whistle, when a brightness shone all round him. He lifted his eyes, and saw a great globe of light—like silver at the hottest heat: he had once seen silver run from the furnace. It shone from somewhere above the roofs of the castle: it must be the great old princess's moon! How could she be there? Of course she was not there! He had asked the whole household, and nobody knew anything about her or her globe either. It couldn't be! And yet what did that signify, when there was the white globe shining, and here was the dead white bird in his hand? That moment the pigeon gave a little flutter. 'It's not dead!' cried Curdie, almost with a shriek. The same instant he was running full speed toward the castle, never letting his heels down, lest he should shake the poor, wounded bird.

CHAPTER 3

The Mistress of the Silver Moon

When Curdie reached the castle, and ran into the little garden in front of it, there stood the door wide open. This was as he had hoped, for what could he have said if he had had to knock at it? Those whose business it is to open doors, so often mistake and shut them! But the woman now in charge often puzzled herself greatly to account for the strange fact that however often she shut the door, which, like the rest, she took a great deal of unnecessary trouble to do, she was certain, the next time she went to it, to find it open. I speak now of the great front door, of course: the back door she as persistently kept wide: if people could only go in by that, she said, she would then know what sort they were, and what they wanted. But she would neither have known what sort Curdie was, nor what he wanted, and would assuredly have denied him admittance, for she knew nothing of who was in the tower. So the front door was left open for him, and in he walked.

But where to go next he could not tell. It was not quite dark: a dull, shineless twilight filled the place. All he knew was that he must go up, and that proved enough for the present, for there he saw the great staircase rising before him. When he reached the top of it, he knew there must be more stairs yet, for he could not be near the top of the tower. Indeed by the situation of the stairs, he must be a good way from the tower itself. But those who work well in the depths more easily understand the heights, for indeed in their true nature they are one and the same; miners are in mountains; and Curdie, from knowing the ways of the king's mines, and being able to calculate his whereabouts in them, was now able to find his way about the king's house. He knew its outside perfectly, and now his business was to get his notion of the inside right with the outside.

So he shut his eyes and made a picture of the outside of it in his mind. Then he came in at the door of the picture, and yet kept the picture before him all the time—for you can do that kind of thing in your mind—and took every turn of the stair over again, always watching to remember, every time he turned his face, how the tower lay, and then when he came to himself at the top where he stood, he knew exactly where it was, and walked at once in the right direction.

On his way, however, he came to another stair, and up that he went, of course, watching still at every turn how the tower must lie. At the top of this stair was yet another—they were the stairs up which the princess ran when first, without knowing it, she was on her way to find her great-great-grandmother. At the top of the second stair he could go no farther, and must therefore set out again to find the tower, which, as it rose far above the rest of the house, must have the last of its stairs inside itself.

Having watched every turn to the very last, he still knew quite well in what direction he must go to find it, so he left the stair and went down a passage that led, if not exactly toward it, yet nearer it. This passage was rather dark, for it was very long, with only one window at the end, and although there were doors on both sides of it, they were all shut. At the distant window glimmered the chill east, with a few feeble stars in it, and its like was dreary and old, growing brown, and looking as if it were thinking about the day that was just gone. Presently he turned into another passage, which also had a window at the end of it; and in at that window shone all that was left of the sunset, just a few ashes, with here and there a little touch of warmth: it was nearly as sad as the east, only there was one difference—it was very plainly thinking of tomorrow.

But at present Curdie had nothing to do with today or tomorrow; his business was with the bird, and the tower where dwelt the grand old princess to whom it belonged. So he kept on his way, still eastward, and came to yet another passage, which brought him to a door. He was afraid to open it without first knocking. He knocked, but heard no answer. He was answered nevertheless; for the door gently opened, and there was a narrow stair—and so steep that, big lad as he was, he, too, like

the Princess Irene before him, found his hands needful for the climbing. And it was a long climb, but he reached the top at last—a little landing, with a door in front and one on each side. Which should he knock at?

As he hesitated, he heard the noise of a spinning wheel. He knew it at once, because his mother's spinning wheel had been his governess long ago, and still taught him things. It was the spinning wheel that first taught him to make verses, and to sing, and to think whether all was right inside him; or at least it had helped him in all these things. Hence it was no wonder he should know a spinning wheel when he heard it sing—even although as the bird of paradise to other birds was the song of that wheel to the song of his mother's.

He stood listening, so entranced that he forgot to knock, and the wheel went on and on, spinning in his brain songs and tales and rhymes, till he was almost asleep as well as dreaming, for sleep does not always come first. But suddenly came the thought of the poor bird, which had been lying motionless in his hand all the time, and that woke him up, and at once he knocked.

'Come in, Curdie,' said a voice.

Curdie shook. It was getting rather awful. The heart that had never much heeded an army of goblins trembled at the soft word of invitation. But then there was the red-spotted white thing in his hand! He dared not hesitate, though. Gently he opened the door through which the sound came, and what did he see? Nothing at first—except indeed a great sloping shaft of moonlight that came in at a high window, and rested on the floor. He stood and stared at it, forgetting to shut the door.

'Why don't you come in, Curdie?' said the voice. 'Did you never see moonlight before?'

'Never without a moon,' answered Curdie, in a trembling tone, but gathering courage.

'Certainly not,' returned the voice, which was thin and quavering: 'I never saw moonlight without a moon.'

'But there's no moon outside,' said Curdie.

'Ah! but you're inside now,' said the voice.

The answer did not satisfy Curdie; but the voice went on.

'There are more moons than you know of, Curdie. Where there is one sun there are many moons—and of many sorts. Come in and look out of my window, and you will soon satisfy yourself that there is a moon looking in at it.'

The gentleness of the voice made Curdie remember his manners. He shut the door, and drew a step or two nearer to the moonlight.

All the time the sound of the spinning had been going on and on, and Curdie now caught sight of the wheel. Oh, it was such a thin, delicate thing—reminding him of a spider's web in a hedge. It stood in the middle of the moonlight, and it seemed as if the moonlight had nearly melted it away. A step nearer, he saw, with a start, two little hands at work with it. And then at last, in the shadow on the other side of the moonlight which came like silver between, he saw the form to which the hands belonged: a small withered creature, so old that no age would have seemed too great to write under her picture, seated on a stool beyond the spinning wheel, which looked very large beside her, but, as I said, very thin, like a long-legged spider holding up its own web, which was the round wheel itself. She sat crumpled together, a filmy thing that it seemed a puff would blow away, more like the body of a fly the big spider had sucked empty and left hanging in his web, than anything else I can think of.

When Curdie saw her, he stood still again, a good deal in wonder, a very little in reverence, a little in doubt, and, I must add, a little in amusement at the odd look of the old marvel. Her grey hair mixed with the moonlight so that he could not tell where the one began and the other ended. Her crooked back bent forward over her chest, her shoulders nearly swallowed up her head between them, and her two little hands were just like the grey claws of a hen, scratching at the thread, which to Curdie was of course invisible across the moonlight. Indeed Curdie laughed within himself, just a little, at the sight; and when he thought of how the princess used to talk about her huge, great, old

grandmother, he laughed more. But that moment the little lady leaned forward into the moonlight, and Curdie caught a glimpse of her eyes, and all the laugh went out of him.

'What do you come here for, Curdie?' she said, as gently as before.

Then Curdie remembered that he stood there as a culprit, and worst of all, as one who had his confession yet to make. There was no time to hesitate over it.

'Oh, ma'am! See here,' he said, and advanced a step or two, holding out the pigeon.

'What have you got there?' she asked.

Again Curdie advanced a few steps, and held out his hand with the pigeon, that she might see what it was, into the moonlight. The moment the rays fell upon it the pigeon gave a faint flutter. The old lady put out her old hands and took it, and held it to her bosom, and rocked it, murmuring over it as if it were a sick baby.

When Curdie saw how distressed she was he grew sorrier still, and said:

'I didn't mean to do any harm, ma'am. I didn't think of its being yours.'

'Ah, Curdie! If it weren't mine, what would become of it now?' she returned. 'You say you didn't mean any harm: did you mean any good, Curdie?'

'No,' answered Curdie.

'Remember, then, that whoever does not mean good is always in danger of harm. But I try to give everybody fair play; and those that are in the wrong are in far more need of it always than those who are in the right: they can afford to do without it. Therefore I say for you that when you shot that arrow you did not know what a pigeon is. Now that you do know, you are sorry. It is very dangerous to do things you don't know about.'

'But, please, ma'am—I don't mean to be rude or to contradict you,' said Curdie, 'but if a body was never to do anything but what he knew to be good, he would have to live half his time doing nothing.'

'There you are much mistaken,' said the old quavering voice. 'How little you must have thought! Why, you don't seem even to know the good of the things you are constantly doing. Now don't mistake me. I don't mean you are good for doing them. It is a good thing to eat your breakfast, but you don't fancy it's very good of you to do it. The thing is good, not you.'

Curdie laughed.

'There are a great many more good things than bad things to do. Now tell me what bad thing you have done today besides this sore hurt to my little white friend.'

While she talked Curdie had sunk into a sort of reverie, in which he hardly knew whether it was the old lady or his own heart that spoke. And when she asked him that question, he was at first much inclined to consider himself a very good fellow on the whole. 'I really don't think I did anything else that was very bad all day,' he said to himself. But at the same time he could not honestly feel that he was worth standing up for. All at once a light seemed to break in upon his mind, and he woke up and there was the withered little atomy of the old lady on the other side of the moonlight, and there was the spinning wheel singing on and on in the middle of it!

'I know now, ma'am; I understand now,' he said. 'Thank you, ma'am, for spinning it into me with your wheel. I see now that I have been doing wrong the whole day, and such a many days besides! Indeed, I don't know when I ever did right, and yet it seems as if I had done right some time and had forgotten how. When I killed your bird I did not know I was doing wrong, just because I was always doing wrong, and the wrong had soaked all through me.'

'What wrong were you doing all day, Curdie? It is better to come to the point, you know,' said the old lady, and her voice was gentler even than before.

'I was doing the wrong of never wanting or trying to be better. And now I see that I have been letting things go as they would for a long time. Whatever came into my head I did, and whatever didn't come into my head I didn't do. I never sent anything away, and never looked out for anything to come. I haven't been attending to my mother—or my father either. And now I think of it, I know I

have often seen them looking troubled, and I have never asked them what was the matter. And now I see, too, that I did not ask because I suspected it had something to do with me and my behaviour, and didn't want to hear the truth. And I know I have been grumbling at my work, and doing a hundred other things that are wrong.'

'You have got it, Curdie,' said the old lady, in a voice that sounded almost as if she had been crying. 'When people don't care to be better they must be doing everything wrong. I am so glad you shot my bird!'

'Ma'am!' exclaimed Curdie. 'How can you be?'

'Because it has brought you to see what sort you were when you did it, and what sort you will grow to be again, only worse, if you don't mind. Now that you are sorry, my poor bird will be better. Look up, my dovey.'

The pigeon gave a flutter, and spread out one of its red-spotted wings across the old woman's bosom.

'I will mend the little angel,' she said, 'and in a week or two it will be flying again. So you may ease your heart about the pigeon.'

'Oh, thank you! Thank you!' cried Curdie. 'I don't know how to thank you.'

'Then I will tell you. There is only one way I care for. Do better, and grow better, and be better. And never kill anything without a good reason for it.'

'Ma'am, I will go and fetch my bow and arrows, and you shall burn them yourself.'

'I have no fire that would burn your bow and arrows, Curdie.'

'Then I promise you to burn them all under my mother's porridge pot tomorrow morning.'

'No, no, Curdie. Keep them, and practice with them every day, and grow a good shot. There are plenty of bad things that want killing, and a day will come when they will prove useful. But I must see first whether you will do as I tell you.'

'That I will!' said Curdie. 'What is it, ma'am?'

'Only something not to do,' answered the old lady; 'if you should hear anyone speak about me, never to laugh or make fun of me.'

'Oh, ma'am!' exclaimed Curdie, shocked that she should think such a request needful.

'Stop, stop,' she went on. 'People hereabout sometimes tell very odd and in fact ridiculous stories of an old woman who watches what is going on, and occasionally interferes. They mean me, though what they say is often great nonsense. Now what I want of you is not to laugh, or side with them in any way; because they will take that to mean that you don't believe there is any such person a bit more than they do. Now that would not be the case—would it, Curdie?'

'No, indeed, ma'am. I've seen you.'

The old woman smiled very oddly.

'Yes, you've seen me,' she said. 'But mind,' she continued, 'I don't want you to say anything—only to hold your tongue, and not seem to side with them.'

'That will be easy,' said Curdie, 'now that I've seen you with my very own eyes, ma'am.'

'Not so easy as you think, perhaps,' said the old lady, with another curious smile. 'I want to be your friend,' she added after a little pause, 'but I don't quite know yet whether you will let me.'

'Indeed I will, ma'am,' said Curdie.

'That is for me to find out,' she rejoined, with yet another strange smile. 'In the meantime all I can say is, come to me again when you find yourself in any trouble, and I will see what I can do for you—only the canning depends on yourself. I am greatly pleased with you for bringing me my pigeon, doing your best to set right what you had set wrong.'

As she spoke she held out her hand to him, and when he took it she made use of his to help herself up from her stool, and—when or how it came about, Curdie could not tell—the same instant she stood before him a tall, strong woman—plainly very old, but as grand as she was old, and only rather severe-looking. Every trace of the decrepitude and witheredness she showed as she hovered

like a film about her wheel, had vanished. Her hair was very white, but it hung about her head in great plenty, and shone like silver in the moonlight. Straight as a pillar she stood before the astonished boy, and the wounded bird had now spread out both its wings across her bosom, like some great mystical ornament of frosted silver.

'Oh, now I can never forget you!' cried Curdie. 'I see now what you really are!'

'Did I not tell you the truth when I sat at my wheel?' said the old lady.

'Yes, ma'am,' answered Curdie.

'I can do no more than tell you the truth now,' she rejoined. 'It is a bad thing indeed to forget one who has told us the truth. Now go.'

Curdie obeyed, and took a few steps toward the door. 'Please, ma'am—what am I to call you?' he was going to say; but when he turned to speak, he saw nobody. Whether she was there or not he could not tell, however, for the moonlight had vanished, and the room was utterly dark. A great fear, such as he had never before known, came upon him, and almost overwhelmed him. He groped his way to the door, and crawled down the stair—in doubt and anxiety as to how he should find his way out of the house in the dark. And the stair seemed ever so much longer than when he came up. Nor was that any wonder, for down and down he went, until at length his foot struck a door, and when he rose and opened it, he found himself under the starry, moonless sky at the foot of the tower.

He soon discovered the way out of the garden, with which he had some acquaintance already, and in a few minutes was climbing the mountain with a solemn and cheerful heart. It was rather dark, but he knew the way well. As he passed the rock from which the poor pigeon fell wounded with his arrow, a great joy filled his heart at the thought that he was delivered from the blood of the little bird, and he ran the next hundred yards at full speed up the hill. Some dark shadows passed him: he did not even care to think what they were, but let them run. When he reached home, he found his father and mother waiting supper for him.

CHAPTER 4

Curdie's Father and Mother

The eyes of the fathers and mothers are quick to read their children's looks, and when Curdie entered the cottage, his parents saw at once that something unusual had taken place. When he said to his mother, 'I beg your pardon for being so late,' there was something in the tone beyond the politeness that went to her heart, for it seemed to come from the place where all lovely things were born before they began to grow in this world. When he set his father's chair to the table, an attention he had not shown him for a long time, Peter thanked him with more gratitude than the boy had ever yet felt in all his life. It was a small thing to do for the man who had been serving him since ever he was born, but I suspect there is nothing a man can be so grateful for as that to which he has the most right.

There was a change upon Curdie, and father and mother felt there must be something to account for it, and therefore were pretty sure he had something to tell them. For when a child's heart is all right, it is not likely he will want to keep anything from his parents. But the story of the evening was too solemn for Curdie to come out with all at once. He must wait until they had had their porridge, and the affairs of this world were over for the day.

But when they were seated on the grassy bank of the brook that went so sweetly blundering over the great stones of its rocky channel, for the whole meadow lay on the top of a huge rock, then he felt that the right hour had come for sharing with them the wonderful things that had come to him. It was perhaps the loveliest of all hours in the year. The summer was young and soft, and this was the warmest evening they had yet had—dusky, dark even below, while above, the stars were bright and large and sharp in the blackest blue sky. The night came close around them, clasping them in one universal arm of love, and although it neither spoke nor smiled, seemed all eye and ear, seemed to see and hear and know everything they said and did. It is a way the night has sometimes, and there is a reason for it. The only sound was that of the brook, for there was no wind, and no trees for it to make its music upon if there had been, for the cottage was high up on the mountain, on a great shoulder of stone where trees would not grow.

There, to the accompaniment of the water, as it hurried down to the valley and the sea, talking busily of a thousand true things which it could not understand, Curdie told his tale, outside and in, to his father and mother. What a world had slipped in between the mouth of the mine and his mother's cottage! Neither of them said a word until he had ended.

'Now what am I to make of it, Mother? it's so strange!' he said, and stopped.

'It's easy enough to see what Curdie has got to make of it, isn't it, Peter?' said the good woman, turning her face toward all she could see of her husband's.

'It seems so to me,' answered Peter, with a smile which only the night saw, but his wife felt in the tone of his words. They were the happiest couple in that country, because they always understood each other, and that was because they always meant the same thing, and that was because they always loved what was fair and true and right better, not than anything else, but than everything else put together.

'Then will you tell Curdie?' said she.

'You can talk best, Joan,' said he. 'You tell him, and I will listen—and learn how to say what I think,' he added.

'I,' said Curdie, 'don't know what to think.'

'It does not matter so much,' said his mother. 'If only you know what to make of a thing, you'll know soon enough what to think of it. Now I needn't tell you, surely, Curdie, what you've got to do with this?'

'I suppose you mean, Mother,' answered Curdie, 'that I must do as the old lady told me?'

'That is what I mean: what else could it be? Am I not right, Peter?'

'Quite right, Joan,' answered Peter, 'so far as my judgement goes. It is a very strange story, but you see the question is not about believing it, for Curdie knows what came to him.'

'And you remember, Curdie,' said his mother, 'that when the princess took you up that tower once before, and there talked to her great-great-grandmother, you came home quite angry with her, and said there was nothing in the place but an old tub, a heap of straw—oh, I remember your inventory quite well!—an old tub, a heap of straw, a withered apple, and a sunbeam. According to your eyes, that was all there was in the great, old, musty garret. But now you have had a glimpse of the old princess herself!'

'Yes, Mother, I did see her—or if I didn't—' said Curdie very thoughtfully—then began again. 'The hardest thing to believe, though I saw it with my own eyes, was when the thin, filmy creature that seemed almost to float about in the moonlight like a bit of the silver paper they put over pictures, or like a handkerchief made of spider threads, took my hand, and rose up. She was taller and stronger than you, Mother, ever so much!—at least, she looked so.'

'And most certainly was so, Curdie, if she looked so,' said Mrs Peterson.

'Well, I confess,' returned her son, 'that one thing, if there were no other, would make me doubt whether I was not dreaming, after all, wide awake though I fancied myself to be.'

'Of course,' answered his mother, 'it is not for me to say whether you were dreaming or not if you are doubtful of it yourself; but it doesn't make me think I am dreaming when in the summer I hold in my hand the bunch of sweet peas that make my heart glad with their colour and scent, and remember the dry, withered-looking little thing I dabbled into the hole in the same spot in the spring. I only think how wonderful and lovely it all is. It seems just as full of reason as it is of wonder. How it is done I can't tell, only there it is! And there is this in it, too, Curdie—of which you would not be so ready to think—that when you come home to your father and mother, and they find you behaving more like a dear, good son than you have behaved for a long time, they at least are not likely to think you were only dreaming.'

'Still,' said Curdie, looking a little ashamed, 'I might have dreamed my duty.'

'Then dream often, my son; for there must then be more truth in your dreams than in your waking thoughts. But however any of these things may be, this one point remains certain: there can be no harm in doing as she told you. And, indeed, until you are sure there is no such person, you are bound to do it, for you promised.'

'It seems to me,' said his father, 'that if a lady comes to you in a dream, Curdie, and tells you not to talk about her when you wake, the least you can do is to hold your tongue.'

'True, Father! Yes, Mother, I'll do it,' said Curdie.

Then they went to bed, and sleep, which is the night of the soul, next took them in its arms and made them well.

CHAPTER 5

The Miners

It much increased Curdie's feeling of the strangeness of the whole affair, that, the next morning, when they were at work in the mine, the party of which he and his father were two, just as if they had known what had happened to him the night before, began talking about all manner of wonderful tales that were abroad in the country, chiefly, of course, those connected with the mines, and the mountains in which they lay. Their wives and mothers and grandmothers were their chief authorities. For when they sat by their firesides they heard their wives telling their children the selfsame tales, with little differences, and here and there one they had not heard before, which they had heard their mothers and grandmothers tell in one or other of the same cottages.

At length they came to speak of a certain strange being they called Old Mother Wotherwop. Some said their wives had seen her. It appeared as they talked that not one had seen her more than once. Some of their mothers and grandmothers, however, had seen her also, and they all had told them tales about her when they were children. They said she could take any shape she liked, but that in reality she was a withered old woman, so old and so withered that she was as thin as a sieve with a lamp behind it; that she was never seen except at night, and when something terrible had taken place, or was going to take place—such as the falling in of the roof of a mine, or the breaking out of water in it.

She had more than once been seen—it was always at night—beside some well, sitting on the brink of it, and leaning over and stirring it with her forefinger, which was six times as long as any of the rest. And whoever for months after drank of that well was sure to be ill. To this, one of them, however, added that he remembered his mother saying that whoever in bad health drank of the well was sure to get better. But the majority agreed that the former was the right version of the story—for was she not a witch, an old hating witch, whose delight was to do mischief? One said he had heard that she took the shape of a young woman sometimes, as beautiful as an angel, and then was most dangerous of all, for she struck every man who looked upon her stone-blind.

Peter ventured the question whether she might not as likely be an angel that took the form of an old woman, as an old woman that took the form of an angel. But nobody except Curdie, who was holding his peace with all his might, saw any sense in the question. They said an old woman might be very glad to make herself look like a young one, but who ever heard of a young and beautiful one making herself look old and ugly?

Peter asked why they were so much more ready to believe the bad that was said of her than the good. They answered, because she was bad. He asked why they believed her to be bad, and they answered, because she did bad things. When he asked how they knew that, they said, because she was a bad creature. Even if they didn't know it, they said, a woman like that was so much more likely to be bad than good. Why did she go about at night? Why did she appear only now and then, and on such occasions? One went on to tell how one night when his grandfather had been having a jolly time of it with his friends in the market town, she had served him so upon his way home that the poor man never drank a drop of anything stronger than water after it to the day of his death. She dragged him into a bog, and tumbled him up and down in it till he was nearly dead.

'I suppose that was her way of teaching him what a good thing water was,' said Peter; but the man, who liked strong drink, did not see the joke.

'They do say,' said another, 'that she has lived in the old house over there ever since the little princess left it. They say too that the housekeeper knows all about it, and is hand and glove with the old witch. I don't doubt they have many a nice airing together on broomsticks. But I don't doubt either it's all nonsense, and there's no such person at all.'

'When our cow died,' said another, 'she was seen going round and round the cowhouse the same night. To be sure she left a fine calf behind her—I mean the cow did, not the witch. I wonder she didn't kill that, too, for she'll be a far finer cow than ever her mother was.'

'My old woman came upon her one night, not long before the water broke out in the mine, sitting on a stone on the hillside with a whole congregation of cobs about her. When they saw my wife they all scampered off as fast as they could run, and where the witch was sitting there was nothing to be seen but a withered bracken bush. I made no doubt myself she was putting them up to it.'

And so they went on with one foolish tale after another, while Peter put in a word now and then, and Curdie diligently held his peace. But his silence at last drew attention upon it, and one of them said:

'Come, young Curdie, what are you thinking of?'

'How do you know I'm thinking of anything?' asked Curdie.

'Because you're not saying anything.'

'Does it follow then that, as you are saying so much, you're not thinking at all?' said Curdie.

'I know what he's thinking,' said one who had not yet spoken; 'he's thinking what a set of fools you are to talk such rubbish; as if ever there was or could be such an old woman as you say! I'm sure Curdie knows better than all that comes to.'

'I think,' said Curdie, 'it would be better that he who says anything about her should be quite sure it is true, lest she should hear him, and not like to be slandered.'

'But would she like it any better if it were true?' said the same man. 'If she is What they say—I don't know—but I never knew a man that wouldn't go in a rage to be called the very thing he was.'

'If bad things were true of her, and I knew it,' said Curdie, 'I would not hesitate to say them, for I will never give in to being afraid of anything that's bad. I suspect that the things they tell, however, if we knew all about them, would turn out to have nothing but good in them; and I won't say a word more for fear I should say something that mightn't be to her mind.'

They all burst into a loud laugh.

'Hear the parson!' they cried. 'He believes in the witch! Ha! ha!'

'He's afraid of her!'

'And says all she does is good!'

'He wants to make friends with her, that she may help him to find the silver ore.'

'Give me my own eyes and a good divining rod before all the witches in the world! And so I'd advise you too, Master Curdie; that is, when your eyes have grown to be worth anything, and you have learned to cut the hazel fork.'

Thus they all mocked and jeered at him, but he did his best to keep his temper and go quietly on with his work. He got as close to his father as he could, however, for that helped him to bear it. As soon as they were tired of laughing and mocking, Curdie was friendly with them, and long before their midday meal all between them was as it had been.

But when the evening came, Peter and Curdie felt that they would rather walk home together without other company, and therefore lingered behind when the rest of the men left the mine.

CHAPTER 6

The Emerald

Father and son had seated themselves on a projecting piece of rock at a corner where three galleries met—the one they had come along from their work, one to the right leading out of the mountain, and the other to the left leading far into a portion of it which had been long disused. Since the inundation caused by the goblins, it had indeed been rendered impassable by the settlement of a quantity of the water, forming a small but very deep lake, in a part where there was a considerable descent.

They had just risen and were turning to the right, when a gleam caught their eyes, and made them look along the whole gallery. Far up they saw a pale green light, whence issuing they could not tell, about halfway between floor and roof of the passage. They saw nothing but the light, which was like a large star, with a point of darker colour yet brighter radiance in the heart of it, whence the rest of the light shot out in rays that faded toward the ends until they vanished. It shed hardly any light around it, although in itself it was so bright as to sting the eyes that beheld it. Wonderful stories had from ages gone been current in the mines about certain magic gems which gave out light of themselves, and this light looked just like what might be supposed to shoot from the heart of such a gem.

They went up the old gallery to find out what it could be. To their surprise they found, however, that, after going some distance, they were no nearer to it, so far as they could judge, than when they started. It did not seem to move, and yet they moving did not approach it. Still they persevered, for it was far too wonderful a thing to lose sight of, so long as they could keep it. At length they drew near the hollow where the water lay, and still were no nearer the light. Where they expected to be stopped by the water, however, water was none: something had taken place in some part of the mine that had drained it off, and the gallery lay open as in former times.

And now, to their surprise, the light, instead of being in front of them, was shining at the same distance to the right, where they did not know there was any passage at all. Then they discovered, by the light of the lanterns they carried, that there the water had broken through, and made an entrance to a part of the mountain of which Peter knew nothing. But they were hardly well into it, still following the light, before Curdie thought he recognized some of the passages he had so often gone through when he was watching the goblins.

After they had advanced a long way, with many turnings, now to the right, now to the left, all at once their eyes seemed to come suddenly to themselves, and they became aware that the light which they had taken to be a great way from them was in reality almost within reach of their hands.

The same instant it began to grow larger and thinner, the point of light grew dim as it spread, the greenness melted away, and in a moment or two, instead of the star, a dark, dark and yet luminous face was looking at them with living eyes. And Curdie felt a great awe swell up in his heart, for he thought he had seen those eyes before.

'I see you know me, Curdie,' said a voice.

'If your eyes are you, ma'am, then I know you,' said Curdie. 'But I never saw your face before.'

'Yes, you have seen it, Curdie,' said the voice. And with that the darkness of its complexion melted away, and down from the face dawned out the form that belonged to it, until at last Curdie and his father beheld a lady, beautiful exceedingly, dressed in something pale green, like velvet, over which her hair fell in cataracts of a rich golden colour. It looked as if it were pouring down from her head, and, like the water of the Dustbrook, vanishing in a golden vapour ere it reached the floor. It came flowing from under the edge of a coronet of gold, set with alternated pearls and emeralds. In front of the crown was a great emerald, which looked somehow as if out of it had come the light they had followed. There was no ornament else about her, except on her slippers, which were one mass of

gleaming emeralds, of various shades of green, all mingling lovelily like the waving of grass in the wind and sun. She looked about five-and-twenty years old. And for all the difference, Curdie knew somehow or other, he could not have told how, that the face before him was that of the old princess, Irene's great-great-grandmother.

By this time all around them had grown light, and now first they could see where they were. They stood in a great splendid cavern, which Curdie recognized as that in which the goblins held their state assemblies. But, strange to tell, the light by which they saw came streaming, sparkling, and shooting from stones of many colours in the sides and roof and floor of the cavern—stones of all the colours of the rainbow, and many more. It was a glorious sight—the whole rugged place flashing with colours—in one spot a great light of deep carbuncular red, in another of sapphirine blue, in another of topaz yellow; while here and there were groups of stones of all hues and sizes, and again nebulous spaces of thousands of tiniest spots of brilliancy of every conceivable shade. Sometimes the colours ran together, and made a little river or lake of lambent, interfusing, and changing tints, which, by their variegation, seemed to imitate the flowing of water, or waves made by the wind.

Curdie would have gazed entranced, but that all the beauty of the cavern, yes, of all he knew of the whole creation, seemed gathered in one centre of harmony and loveliness in the person of the ancient lady who stood before him in the very summer of beauty and strength. Turning from the first glance at the circujacent splendour, it dwindled into nothing as he looked again at the lady. Nothing flashed or glowed or shone about her, and yet it was with a prevision of the truth that he said,

'I was here once before, ma'am.'

'I know that, Curdie,' she replied.

'The place was full of torches, and the walls gleamed, but nothing as they do now, and there is no light in the place.'

'You want to know where the light comes from?' she said, smiling.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Then see: I will go out of the cavern. Do not be afraid, but watch.'

She went slowly out. The moment she turned her back to go, the light began to pale and fade; the moment she was out of their sight the place was black as night, save that now the smoky yellow-red of their lamps, which they thought had gone out long ago, cast a dusky glimmer around them.

CHAPTER 7

What Is in a Name?

For a time that seemed to them long, the two men stood waiting, while still the Mother of Light did not return. So long was she absent that they began to grow anxious: how were they to find their way from the natural hollows of the mountain crossed by goblin paths, if their lamps should go out? To spend the night there would mean to sit and wait until an earthquake rent the mountain, or the earth herself fell back into the smelting furnace of the sun whence she had issued—for it was all night and no faintest dawn in the bosom of the world.

So long did they wait unrevisited, that, had there not been two of them, either would at length have concluded the vision a home-born product of his own seething brain. And their lamps were going out, for they grew redder and smokier! But they did not lose courage, for there is a kind of capillary attraction in the facing of two souls, that lifts faith quite beyond the level to which either could raise it alone: they knew that they had seen the lady of emeralds, and it was to give them their own desire that she had gone from them, and neither would yield for a moment to the half doubts and half dreads that awoke in his heart.

And still she who with her absence darkened their air did not return. They grew weary, and sat down on the rocky floor, for wait they would—indeed, wait they must. Each set his lamp by his knee, and watched it die. Slowly it sank, dulled, looked lazy and stupid. But ever as it sank and dulled, the image in his mind of the Lady of Light grew stronger and clearer. Together the two lamps panted and shuddered. First one, then the other went out, leaving for a moment a great, red, evil-smelling snuff. Then all was the blackness of darkness up to their very hearts and everywhere around them. Was it? No. Far away—it looked miles away—shone one minute faint point of green light—where, who could tell? They only knew that it shone. It grew larger, and seemed to draw nearer, until at last, as they watched with speechless delight and expectation, it seemed once more within reach of an outstretched hand. Then it spread and melted away as before, and there were eyes—and a face—and a lovely form—and lo! the whole cavern blazing with lights innumerable, and gorgeous, yet soft and interfused—so blended, indeed, that the eye had to search and see in order to separate distinct spots of special colour.

The moment they saw the speck in the vast distance they had risen and stood on their feet. When it came nearer they bowed their heads. Yet now they looked with fearless eyes, for the woman that was old yet young was a joy to see, and filled their hearts with reverent delight. She turned first to Peter.

'I have known you long,' she said. 'I have met you going to and from the mine, and seen you working in it for the last forty years.'

'How should it be, madam, that a grand lady like you should take notice of a poor man like me?' said Peter, humbly, but more foolishly than he could then have understood.

'I am poor as well as rich,' said she. 'I, too, work for my bread, and I show myself no favour when I pay myself my own wages. Last night when you sat by the brook, and Curdie told you about my pigeon, and my spinning, and wondered whether he could believe that he had actually seen me, I heard what you said to each other. I am always about, as the miners said the other night when they talked of me as Old Mother Wotherwop.'

The lovely lady laughed, and her laugh was a lightning of delight in their souls.

'Yes,' she went on, 'you have got to thank me that you are so poor, Peter. I have seen to that, and it has done well for both you and me, my friend. Things come to the poor that can't get in at the door of the rich. Their money somehow blocks it up. It is a great privilege to be poor, Peter—one that no man ever coveted, and but a very few have sought to retain, but one that yet many have learned to prize. You must not mistake, however, and imagine it a virtue; it is but a privilege, and

one also that, like other privileges, may be terribly misused. Had you been rich, my Peter, you would not have been so good as some rich men I know. And now I am going to tell you what no one knows but myself: you, Peter, and your wife both have the blood of the royal family in your veins. I have been trying to cultivate your family tree, every branch of which is known to me, and I expect Curdie to turn out a blossom on it. Therefore I have been training him for a work that must soon be done. I was near losing him, and had to send my pigeon. Had he not shot it, that would have been better; but he repented, and that shall be as good in the end.'

She turned to Curdie and smiled.

'Ma'am,' said Curdie, 'may I ask questions?'

'Why not, Curdie?'

'Because I have been told, ma'am, that nobody must ask the king questions.'

'The king never made that law,' she answered, with some displeasure. 'You may ask me as many as you please—that is, so long as they are sensible. Only I may take a few thousand years to answer some of them. But that's nothing. Of all things time is the cheapest.'

'Then would you mind telling me now, ma'am, for I feel very confused about it—are you the Lady of the Silver Moon?'

'Yes, Curdie; you may call me that if you like. What it means is true.'

'And now I see you dark, and clothed in green, and the mother of all the light that dwells in the stones of the earth! And up there they call you Old Mother Wotherwop! And the Princess Irene told me you were her great-great-grandmother! And you spin the spider threads, and take care of a whole people of pigeons; and you are worn to a pale shadow with old age; and are as young as anybody can be, not to be too young; and as strong, I do believe, as I am.'

The lady stooped toward a large green stone bedded in the rock of the floor, and looking like a well of grassy light in it. She laid hold of it with her fingers, broke it out, and gave it to Peter. 'There!' cried Curdie. 'I told you so. Twenty men could not have done that. And your fingers are white and smooth as any lady's in the land. I don't know what to make of it.'

'I could give you twenty names more to call me, Curdie, and not one of them would be a false one. What does it matter how many names if the person is one?'

'Ah! But it is not names only, ma'am. Look at what you were like last night, and what I see you now!'

'Shapes are only dresses, Curdie, and dresses are only names. That which is inside is the same all the time.'

'But then how can all the shapes speak the truth?'

'It would want thousands more to speak the truth, Curdie; and then they could not. But there is a point I must not let you mistake about. It is one thing the shape I choose to put on, and quite another the shape that foolish talk and nursery tale may please to put upon me. Also, it is one thing what you or your father may think about me, and quite another what a foolish or bad man may see in me. For instance, if a thief were to come in here just now, he would think he saw the demon of the mine, all in green flames, come to protect her treasure, and would run like a hunted wild goat. I should be all the same, but his evil eyes would see me as I was not.'

'I think I understand,' said Curdie.

'Peter,' said the lady, turning then to him, 'you will have to give up Curdie for a little while.'

'So long as he loves us, ma'am, that will not matter—much.'

'Ah! you are right there, my friend,' said the beautiful princess. And as she said it she put out her hand, and took the hard, horny hand of the miner in it, and held it for a moment lovingly.

'I need say no more,' she added, 'for we understand each other—you and I, Peter.'

The tears came into Peter's eyes. He bowed his head in thankfulness, and his heart was much too full to speak.

Then the great old, young, beautiful princess turned to Curdie.

'Now, Curdie, are you ready?' she said.

'Yes, ma'am,' answered Curdie.

'You do not know what for.'

'You do, ma'am. That is enough.'

'You could not have given me a better answer, or done more to prepare yourself, Curdie,' she returned, with one of her radiant smiles. 'Do you think you will know me again?'

'I think so. But how can I tell what you may look like next?'

'Ah, that indeed! How can you tell? Or how could I expect you should? But those who know me well, know me whatever new dress or shape or name I may be in; and by and by you will have learned to do so too.'

'But if you want me to know you again, ma'am, for certain sure,' said Curdie, 'could you not give me some sign, or tell me something about you that never changes—or some other way to know you, or thing to know you by?'

'No, Curdie; that would be to keep you from knowing me. You must know me in quite another way from that. It would not be the least use to you or me either if I were to make you know me in that way. It would be but to know the sign of Me—not to know me myself. It would be no better than if I were to take this emerald out of my crown and give it to you to take home with you, and you were to call it me, and talk to it as if it heard and saw and loved you. Much good that would do you, Curdie! No; you must do what you can to know me, and if you do, you will. You shall see me again in very different circumstances from these, and, I will tell you so much, it may be in a very different shape. But come now, I will lead you out of this cavern; my good Joan will be getting too anxious about you. One word more: you will allow that the men knew little what they were talking about this morning, when they told all those tales of Old Mother Wotherwop; but did it occur to you to think how it was they fell to talking about me at all? It was because I came to them; I was beside them all the time they were talking about me, though they were far enough from knowing it, and had very little besides foolishness to say.'

As she spoke she turned and led the way from the cavern, which, as if a door had been closed, sank into absolute blackness behind them. And now they saw nothing more of the lady except the green star, which again seemed a good distance in front of them, and to which they came no nearer, although following it at a quick pace through the mountain. Such was their confidence in her guidance, however, and so fearless were they in consequence, that they felt their way neither with hand nor foot, but walked straight on through the pitch-dark galleries. When at length the night of the upper world looked in at the mouth of the mine, the green light seemed to lose its way among the stars, and they saw it no more.

Out they came into the cool, blessed night. It was very late, and only starlight. To their surprise, three paces away they saw, seated upon a stone, an old country-woman, in a cloak which they took for black. When they came close up to it, they saw it was red.

'Good evening!' said Peter.

'Good evening!' returned the old woman, in a voice as old as herself.

But Curdie took off his cap and said:

'I am your servant, Princess.'

The old woman replied:

'Come to me in the dove tower tomorrow night, Curdie—alone.'

'I will, ma'am,' said Curdie.

So they parted, and father and son went home to wife and mother—two persons in one rich, happy woman.

CHAPTER 8

Curdie's Mission

The next night Curdie went home from the mine a little earlier than usual, to make himself tidy before going to the dove tower. The princess had not appointed an exact time for him to be there; he would go as near the time he had gone first as he could. On his way to the bottom of the hill, he met his father coming up. The sun was then down, and the warm first of the twilight filled the evening. He came rather wearily up the hill: the road, he thought, must have grown steeper in parts since he was Curdie's age. His back was to the light of the sunset, which closed him all round in a beautiful setting, and Curdie thought what a grand-looking man his father was, even when he was tired. It is greed and laziness and selfishness, not hunger or weariness or cold, that take the dignity out of a man, and make him look mean.

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