

***GEORGE  
MACDONALD***



***THE PRINCESS  
AND THE GOBLIN***

**George MacDonald**

# **The Princess and the Goblin**

**Enriched edition. Including "The Princess and Curdie"**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Cara Whitlock*

EAN 8596547391739

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022



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# Introduction

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This collection presents George MacDonald's two linked fantasy novels, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), in a single authorial gathering whose purpose is to offer the complete narrative arc of one of his best-known tales for young readers. Composed in Victorian Britain by a Scottish novelist and former minister, these works helped shape modern children's fantasy. Read together, they trace a developing vision of courage, conscience, and imagination set against mountain towns, royal halls, and shadowed caverns. The volume is designed for general readers, students, and lifelong admirers seeking a coherent encounter with MacDonald's enduring storytelling.

The contents are novels—sustained works of narrative fiction—rather than a miscellany of poems, essays, or tales. They belong to the fairy-tale and fantasy tradition, written with a domestic immediacy that situates marvels in recognizable households, mines, and roads. MacDonald's narrator addresses readers with humane clarity and keeps the marvelous within reach of everyday experience. Folkloric creatures and the ordinary labors of miners, servants, and children share the same imaginative space. The books exemplify nineteenth-century children's literature in their moral seriousness and play, yet they appeal beyond childhood through supple prose, understated humor, and images whose suggestiveness invites multiple levels of reading.

The Princess and the Goblin introduces Princess Irene, a child of a mountain kingdom, and Curdie, a miner's son whose work keeps him close to the underground world of goblins. When disturbances beneath the hills begin to threaten peace on the surface, the children's paths converge. The story unfolds as an adventure of discovery, marked by secret stairways, night journeys, and the testing of trust. MacDonald balances household scenes with subterranean menace, allowing bravery, patience, and discernment to emerge as practical virtues. The opening novel establishes the tale's luminous imagery and its quiet conviction that steadfast goodness can outlast cunning.

The Princess and Curdie returns to the same world some years later, following Curdie as new dangers gather about the kingdom and its rulers. The tone is more austere, the challenges more public, and the questions more pointed about how a realm may be preserved. Without abandoning wonder, the narrative broadens from a child's vantage toward civic responsibility, loyalty under pressure, and the costs of moral choice. Familiar figures reappear, and elements seeded earlier take on fresh significance, yet the novel stands on its own as a journey tale. Together, the pair forms a duology that moves from awakening to testing.

Across both novels, MacDonald's signatures are unmistakable. He crafts a mythic landscape from simple materials—stone, light, song, hearth, and handwork—so that the tangible world suggests deeper realities without lecturing. His characters are drawn with affectionate exactness: a princess learning patience, a working boy learning wisdom, adults capable of folly or fidelity. Humor softens peril; wonder is treated as a discipline rather than an escape. The prose often slows for homely observation before quickening into danger, a rhythm that invites readers to inhabit the scenes. Thematically, the books explore

integrity, courage, compassion, and the formation of a trustworthy imagination.

The continuing significance of these novels is evident in their influence on later fantasy. Writers such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and G. K. Chesterton acknowledged MacDonald's importance to the imaginative tradition they advanced. The books remain frequently reprinted and read for pleasure, study, and inspiration. Their blend of realism and wonder helped establish a model in which enchantment illuminates ordinary duty rather than replacing it. They also demonstrate how children's literature can carry substantial ideas without ceasing to delight. In an era crowded with spectacle, MacDonald's restraint and moral clarity offer another way to think about magic.

Readers may approach this collection in publication order to experience the growth of themes and the maturation in tone from the first to the second novel. Each book is complete and accessible on its own, yet together they yield a fuller portrait of a kingdom and of courage shaped over time. As a single-author gathering, it presents essential long-form fiction by George MacDonald in a coherent whole, with emphasis on narrative craft, recurring imagery, and ethical imagination. The arrangement invites both first-time and returning readers to notice echoes, contrasts, and continuities that keep these Victorian fantasies vivid for contemporary audiences.

# Historical Context

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George MacDonald (1824–1905), a Scottish novelist and former Congregational minister, wrote *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) during high Victorian Britain, amid accelerating industrialization and social reform. Born in Aberdeenshire and later active in London's literary circles, he brought a northern landscape of mountains and mines into tales where royalty meets working families. The collection emerged while Britain balanced faith in progress with anxieties about urban poverty and class division. MacDonald's concern for moral imagination, courage, and humane authority reflects debates over what kind of virtues could guide a rapidly changing nation.

Religious controversy framed MacDonald's development. Ordained at Trinity Congregational Church in Arundel in 1850, he resigned in 1853 after objections to his generous theology, later articulated in *Unspoken Sermons* (first series 1867). In an era of Evangelical rigor, Broad Church reforms, and debates over eternal punishment, he turned to fairy tales as a hospitable vehicle for doctrine centered on childlike trust and moral growth. This strategy shaped both books' emphasis on obedience freely chosen rather than imposed. Orthodox critics sometimes mistrusted his universalist leanings, yet many Victorian families welcomed the tales as spiritually serious without sectarian sharpness.

Industrial Britain provided both setting and pressure. Mid-century coal production soared in Scotland and northern England, and mining communities lived with danger despite

reforms such as the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842, which barred women and very young children from underground work. Disasters like the Hartley Colliery calamity of January 1862, killing over two hundred men and boys in Northumberland, haunted the public mind. Against this backdrop, MacDonald's sympathetic miners and subterranean threats engage anxieties about labor, safety, and dehumanization. The stories imagine courage and conscience as counters to mechanized hardness, inviting readers to dignify work while distrusting cruelty.

The books also rode a transformation in children's literature. English translations of the Grimms and of Hans Christian Andersen had popularized the modern fairy tale by mid-century, while Charles Dodgson's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) confirmed a market for imaginative nonsense. MacDonald, who encouraged Dodgson to publish, defended fantasy in his 1867 lecture *The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture*, arguing it nurtured ethical perception. After the Elementary Education Act of 1870 expanded literacy, family magazines and illustrated gift-books multiplied. *The Princess and the Goblin*, adorned by Pre-Raphaelite associate Arthur Hughes, reached a broad middle-class readership comfortable with wonder.

Folklore studies and Romanticism enriched this climate. William Thoms coined the term "folklore" in 1846, and the Folklore Society formed in London in 1878 amid collecting drives from the Highlands to Eastern Europe. MacDonald drew on Scottish balladry, mountain lore, and German Romantic spirituality—admiring writers such as Novalis—while resisting mere antiquarianism. His tales weave domestic intimacy with the sublime, a balance prized since Sir Walter Scott yet redirected toward children. Later, Andrew Lang's *Fairy Books* (from 1889) institutionalized the genre that authors like MacDonald had legitimated. The

collection thus participates in a wider nineteenth-century recovery of mythic speech.

Scientific upheavals sharpened the stakes. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and continuing debates over geology, deep time, and human origins unsettled inherited certainties even as they fascinated readers accustomed to Charles Lyell's earth sciences. Victorian culture also reveled in new ways of seeing—gaslight, optical entertainments, and the spread of photography since 1839, a craft practiced by Dodgson in the 1850s. MacDonald's imagery of light, thread, and true sight answers these preoccupations by associating vision with moral discernment. Rather than resisting science, his fairy tales offer a complementary claim: imagination trains perception to recognize the good.

Print networks and artistic collaboration amplified the books' reach. London publishers such as Alexander Strahan marketed illustrated narratives to a growing railway and Christmas gift market, while Pre-Raphaelite-inflected art lent spiritual intensity without solemnity. MacDonald's position within metropolitan circles enabled cross-promotion with periodicals and lectures. A transatlantic component mattered as well: his American reading tour of 1872–73 created audiences that sustained reprints and schoolroom use. In an era shaped by the Great Exhibition of 1851 and subsequent consumer culture, the collection circulated as both moral instruction and stylish commodity for the Victorian home.

The later 1870s and 1880s supplied a political undertone to the sequel's concerns. After the Second Reform Act of 1867 and the broader household franchise extended by the Third Reform Act of 1884, Britons debated the character of authority across classes and institutions, amid anxieties about corruption, urban vice, and imperial strain. Irish Home

Rule crises and municipal scandals fostered doubts about stewardship. Within this atmosphere, MacDonald's recurring themes—testing rulers, exposing flattery, and renewing civic trust—carried pointed resonance. Readers could receive the collection as parables urging purification of power not by revolution, but by conscience, humility, and neighborly duty.

# Synopsis (Selection)

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## **The Princess and the Goblin & The Princess and Curdie**

A sheltered princess and a forthright miner boy contend with goblins and subterranean dangers, marrying homely detail to luminous wonder to evoke courage, trust, and the world just beyond sight.

The sequel grows broader and darker as the boy undertakes a morally testing quest to heal a corrupted court, deepening themes of discernment and compassion while recurring motifs—hidden guidance, light versus depth, and song as ward—reappear in MacDonald’s clear, parable-like prose.

# The Princess and the Goblin

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THE PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN  
THE PRINCESS AND CURDIE

# THE PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then  
began to be afraid

She clapped her hands with delight, and up rose such a  
flapping of wings

"Never mind, Princess Irene," he said. "You mustn't kiss me  
to-night. But you shan't break your word. I will come  
another time"

In an instant she was on the saddle, and clasped in his  
great strong arms

"Come," and she still held out her arms

The goblins fell back a little when he began, and made  
horrible grimaces all through the rhyme

Curdie went on after her, flashing his torch about

There sat his mother by the fire, and in her arms lay the  
princess fast asleep

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# CHAPTER I

## WHY THE PRINCESS HAS A STORY ABOUT HER

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THERE was once a little princess who—

*"But, Mr. Author, why do you always write about princesses?"*

*"Because every little girl is a princess."*

*"You will make them vain if you tell them that."*

*"Not if they understand what I mean."*

*"Then what do you mean?"*

*"What do you mean by a princess?"*

*"The daughter of a king."*

*"Very well, then every little girl is a princess, and there would be no need to say anything about it, except that she is always in danger of forgetting her rank, and behaving as if she had grown out of the mud. I have seen little princesses behave like the children of thieves and lying beggars, and that is why they need, to be told they are princesses. And that is why, when I tell a story of this kind, I like to tell it about a princess. Then I can say better what I mean, because I can then give her every beautiful thing I want her to have."*

*"Please go on."*

There was once a little princess whose father was king over a great country full of mountains and valleys. His palace was built upon one of the mountains, and was very grand and beautiful. The princess, whose name was Irene, was born there, but she was sent soon after her birth, because her mother was not very strong, to be brought up by country people in a large house, half castle, half farm-

house, on the side of another mountain, about halfway between its base and its peak.

The princess was a sweet little creature, and at the time my story begins was about eight years old. I think, but she got older very fast. Her face was fair and pretty, with eyes like two bits of night-sky, each with a star dissolved in the blue. Those eyes you would have thought must have known they came from there, so often were they turned up in that direction. The ceiling of her nursery was blue, with stars in it, as like the sky as they could make it. But I doubt if ever she saw the real sky with the stars in it, for a reason which I had better mention at once.

These mountains were full of hollow places underneath; huge caverns, and winding ways, some with water running through them, and some shining with all colors of the rainbow when a light was taken in. There would not have been much known about them, had there not been mines there, great deep pits, with long galleries and passages running off from them, which had been dug to get at the ore of which the mountains were full. In the course of digging, the miners came upon many of these natural caverns. A few of them had far-off openings out on the side of a mountain, or into a ravine.

Now in these subterranean caverns lived a strange race of beings, called by some gnomes, by some kobolds, by some goblins. There was a legend current in the country that at one time they lived above ground, and were very like other people. But for some reason or other, concerning which there were different legendary theories, the king had laid what they thought too severe taxes upon them, or had required observances of them they did not like, or had begun to treat them with more severity in some way or other, and impose stricter laws; and the consequence was that they had all disappeared from the face of the country. According to the legend, however, instead of going to some other country, they had all taken refuge in the subterranean

caverns, whence they never came out but at night, and then seldom showed themselves in any numbers, and never to many people at once. It was only in the least frequented and most difficult parts of the mountains that they were said to gather even at night in the open air. Those who had caught sight of any of them said that they had greatly altered in the course of generations; and no wonder, seeing they lived away from the sun, in cold and wet and dark places. They were now, not ordinarily ugly, but either absolutely hideous, or ludicrously grotesque both in face and form. There was no invention, they said, of the most lawless imagination expressed by pen or pencil, that could surpass the extravagance of their appearance. And as they grew mis-shapen in body, they had grown in knowledge and cleverness, and now were able to do things no mortal could see the possibility of. But as they grew in cunning, they grew in mischief, and their great delight was in every way they could think of to annoy the people who lived in the open-air-story above them. They had enough of affection left for each other, to preserve them from being absolutely cruel for cruelty's sake to those that came in their way; but still they so heartily cherished the ancestral grudge against those who occupied their former possession, and especially against the descendants of the king who had caused their expulsion, that they sought every opportunity of tormenting them in ways that were as odd as their inventors; and although dwarfed and mis-shapen, they had strength equal to their cunning. In the process of time they had got a king, and a government of their own, whose chief business, beyond their own simple affairs, was to devise trouble for their neighbors. It will now be pretty evident why the little princess had never seen the sky at night. They were much too afraid of the goblins to let her out of the house then, even in company with ever so many attendants; and they had good reason, as we shall see by-and-by.

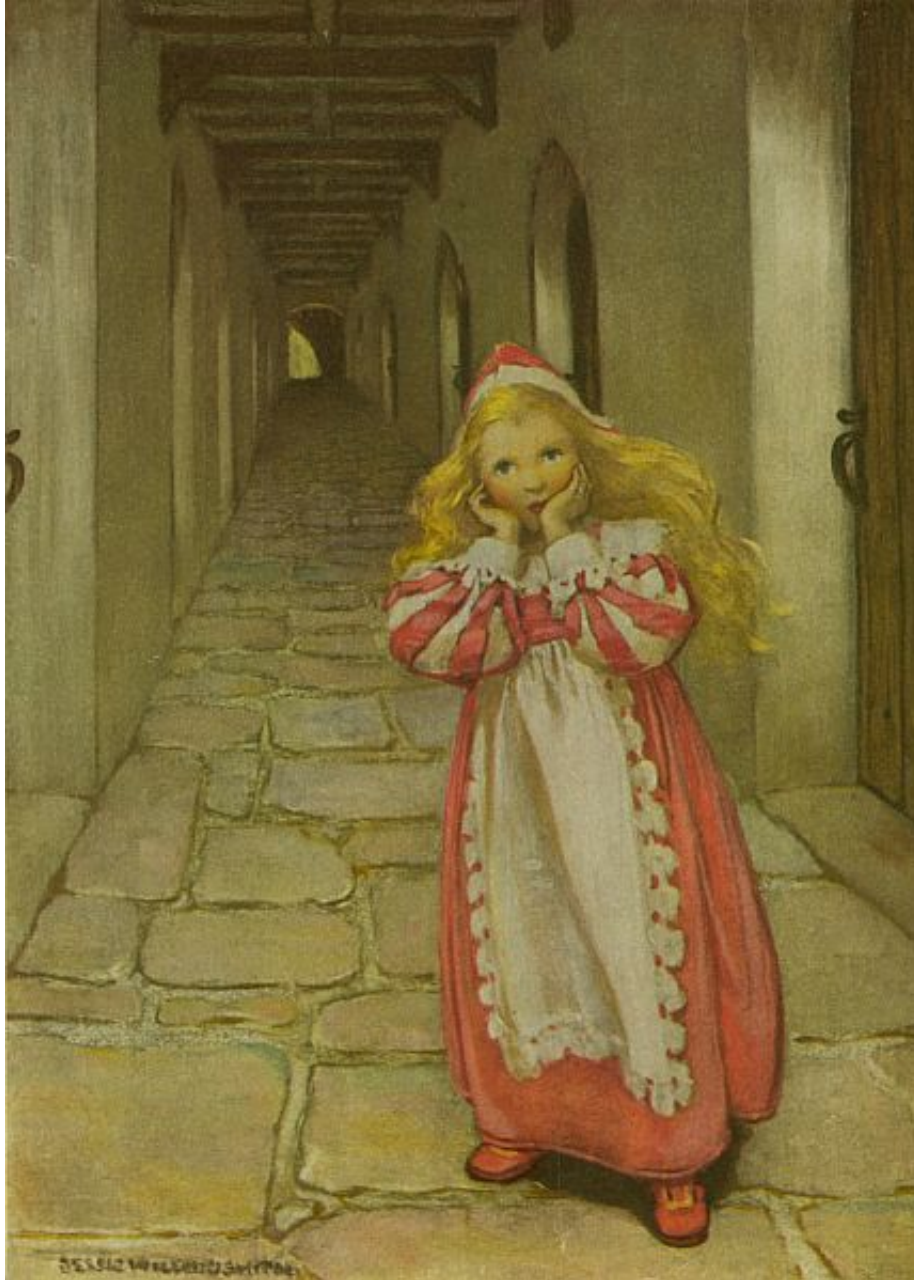
## **CHAPTER II**

# **THE PRINCESS LOSES HERSELF**

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I HAVE said the Princess Irene was about eight years old when my story begins. And this is how it begins.

One very wet day, when the mountain was covered with mist which was constantly gathering itself together into rain-drops, and pouring down on the roofs of the great old house, whence it fell in a fringe of water from the eaves all round about it, the princess could not of course go out. She got very tired, so tired that even her toys could no longer amuse her. You would wonder at that if I had time to describe to you one half of the toys she had. But then you wouldn't have the toys themselves, and that makes all the difference: you can't get tired of a thing before you have it. It was a picture, though, worth seeing—the princess sitting in the nursery with the sky-ceiling over her head, at a great table covered with her toys. If the artist would like to draw this, I should advise him not to meddle with the toys. I am afraid of attempting to describe them, and I think he had better not try to draw them. He had better not. He can do a thousand things I can't, but I don't think he could draw those toys. No man could better make the princess herself than he could, though—leaning with her back bowed into the back of the chair, her head hanging down, and her hands in her lap, very miserable as she would say herself, not even knowing what she would like, except to go out and get very wet, catch a particularly nice cold, and have to go to bed and take gruel. The next moment after you see her sitting there, her nurse goes out of the room.



**She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then began to be afraid.**

Even that is a change, and the princess wakes up a little, and looks about her. Then she tumbles off her chair, and runs out of the door, not the same door the nurse went out of, but one which opened at the foot of a curious old stair of worm-eaten oak, which looked as if never any one had set

foot upon it. She had once before been up six steps, and that was sufficient reason, in such a day, for trying to find out what was at the top of it.

Up and up she ran—such a long way it seemed to her! until she came to the top of the third flight. There she found the landing was the end of a long passage. Into this she ran. It was full of doors on each side. There were so many that she did not care to 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 about 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. She turned and started at full speed, her little footsteps echoing through the sounds of the rain—back for the stairs and her safe nursery. So she thought, but she had lost herself long ago. It doesn't follow that she *was* lost, because she had lost herself though.

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 was too eager and perhaps too frightened to cry for some time. At last her hope failed her. Nothing but passages and doors everywhere! She threw herself on the floor, and began to wail and cry.

She did not cry long, however, for she was as brave as could be expected of a princess of her age. After a good cry, she got up, and brushed the dust from her frock. Oh what old dust it was! Then she wiped her eyes with her hands, for princesses don't always have their handkerchiefs in their pockets any more than some other little girls I know of. 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. This she

did, but without success. She went over the same ground again and again without knowing it, for the passages and doors were all alike. 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. Frightened as she was, however, she could not help wishing to see where yet further the stair could lead. It was very narrow, and so steep that she went up like a four-legged creature on her hands and feet.

# CHAPTER III

## THE PRINCESS AND—WE SHALL SEE WHO

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WHEN she came to the top, she found herself in a little square place, with three doors, two opposite each other, and one opposite the top of the stair. She stood for a moment, without an idea in her little head 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, and even monotonous than the sound of the rain, which now she scarcely heard. The low sweet humming sound went on, sometimes stopping for a little while and then beginning again. It was more like the hum of a very happy bee that had found a rich well of honey in some globular flower, than anything else I can think of at this moment. Where could it come from? She laid her ear first to one of the doors to hearken if it was there—then to another. When she laid her ear against the third door, there could be no doubt where it came from: it must be 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. What do you think she saw? A very old lady who sat spinning[19].

*"Oh, Mr. Editor! I know the story you are going to tell: it's The Sleeping Beauty; only you're spinning too, and making it longer."*

*"No, indeed, it is not that story. Why should I tell one that every properly educated child knows already? More old ladies than one have sat spinning in a garret. Besides, the old lady in that story was only spinning with a spindle, and*

*this one was spinning with a spinning wheel, else how could the princess have heard the sweet noise through the door? Do you know the difference? Did you ever see a spindle or a spinning wheel? I daresay you never did. Well, ask your mamma to explain to you the difference. Between ourselves, however, I shouldn't wonder if she didn't know much better than you. Another thing is, that this is not a fairy story; but a goblin story. And one thing more, this old lady spinning was not an old nurse—but—you shall see who. I think I have now made it quite plain that this is not that lovely story of The Sleeping Beauty. It is quite a new one, I assure you, and I will try to tell it as prettily as I can."*

Perhaps you will wonder how the princess could tell that the old lady was an old lady, when I inform you that not only was she beautiful, but her skin was smooth and white. I will tell you more. Her hair was combed back from her forehead and face, and hung loose far down and all over her back. That is not much like an old lady—is it? Ah! but it was white almost as snow. And although her face was so smooth, her eyes looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old. The princess, though she could not have told you why, did think her very old indeed—quite fifty—she said to herself. But she was rather older than that, as you shall hear.

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

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

That the princess was a real princess, you might see now quite plainly; for she didn't hang on to the handle of the door, and stare without moving, as I have known some do who ought to have been princesses, but were only rather vulgar little girls. She did as she was told, stepped inside the door at once, and shut it gently behind her.

"Come to me, my dear," said the old lady.

with Victorian extraction economies, portraying danger and discipline while imagining community as cooperation forged in labor and clarified by light.

The Princess and Curdie relocates contestation to the palace and city, where power circulates through offices, ceremonies, and rumor. Corridors widen into antechambers and streets, and the antagonists operate by decorum, procurement, and controlled access rather than ambush. The court's fragility emerges in dependence on appearances and compliant speech. Into this environment enter companions marked by roughness and loyal service, importing the ethic of the workshop into administrative life. Community coalesces less around kinship or craft and more around tested trust, as allegiance is sifted in dining halls, guardrooms, and council chambers.

The spatial transition reframes political imagination. External threats in the first novel are tangible and geographically other; the sequel locates peril within institutions ostensibly dedicated to order. Power is reconsidered as stewardship rather than dominance, achieved through attending to the vulnerable and resisting procedural cynicism. Community unfolds as a fellowship of character more than status, uniting miners, servants, and rulers in mutual accountability. The pairing thus traces a movement from defending boundaries to renewing centers, suggesting that the health of the polity depends on virtues learned underground and transferred, tested, and tempered in public rooms.

## **Question 4**

**What roles do voice, song, and silence play in moral action across both books?**

In *The Princess and the Goblin*, voice operates as a practical safeguard and a shaping presence. Songs rally courage and disrupt hostile designs, while spoken trust knits unlikely friendships. Silence, too, matters, sheltering secrets and honoring presences that do not announce themselves. The narrator's measured talk fosters calm, even as miners' ballads and children's chatter enliven scenes. Dishonest speech is marked as brittle and self-defeating, yet the tale lingers on the restorative effects of simple, shared words. Language carries warmth and rhythm, aligning moral action with cadence, memory, and communal breath.

In *The Princess and Curdie*, language turns political. Flattery, euphemism, and official proclamation shape perception, and refusal to speak on cue functions as resistance. Truth becomes costly, often needing the reinforcement of steadfast action when words alone fail. Curdie's companions, many lacking persuasive polish, enact fidelity through work and presence rather than eloquence. Irene's speech aims to steady wavering loyalties, but listening becomes equally significant, discerning what scripted talk conceals. Silence thus expands from secrecy to strategy, protecting fragile initiatives in an atmosphere where talk is currency and sincerity is tested.

Across the two, voice matures from counter-magic into ethical speech for public life. Musicality persists, but rhetoric gains weight as audiences change and stakes widen. MacDonald links truthful words to embodied credibility, treating promises, greetings, and commands as acts that require alignment with character. Meanwhile, chosen silences conserve attention to inner prompting and the welfare of others, resisting clamor. The trajectory clarifies continuity: language serves the good when it shelters, steadies, and summons, and fails when divorced from

service. The novels thus explore how speaking and withholding jointly participate in moral action.

# Memorable Quotes

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[1q](#) "A very old lady who sat spinning."

[2q](#) "If you're not afraid of them, they're afraid of you."

[3q](#) "It sounded like a voice inside the rock."

[4q](#) "He would not betray himself by rekindling his lamp"

[5q](#) "The moon was shining brightly into the room."

[6q](#) "It is a gift born with you."

[7q](#) "CURDIE was as watchful as ever, but was almost getting tired of his ill-success."

[8q](#) "Then you must believe without seeing,"

[9q](#) "People must believe what they can, and those who believe more must not be hard upon those who believe less."

[10q](#) "Perhaps some people can see things other people can't see, Curdie,"

[11q](#) "WHEN Curdie fell asleep he began at once to dream."

[12q](#) "A mountain is a strange and awful thing."

[13q](#) "The child is not meant to die, but to be for ever fresh-born."