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The Princess and the Goblin—Chapter 9: The Hall of the Goblin Palace

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For the Easter season, I am posting some rather different things on this channel, in addition to my regular output, as a little gift to my followers and supporters. This is the second book I am reading through: 'The Princess and the Goblin', by George MacDonald. I hope that you all enjoy!

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<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Chapter 9. The Hall of the Goblin Palace. A sound of many soft feet followed, but soon ceased. Then Curdie flew at the hall like a tiger, and tore and pulled.

The sides gave way, and it was soon large enough for him to crawl through. He would not betray himself by rekindling his lamp, but the torches of the retreating company, which he found departing in a straight line up a long avenue from the door of their cave, threw back light enough to afford him a glance round the deserted home of the goblins. To his surprise, he could discover nothing to distinguish it from an ordinary natural cave in the rock, upon many of which he had come with the rest of the miners in the progress of their excavations.

The goblins had talked of coming back for the rest of their household gear. He saw nothing that would have made him suspect a family had taken shelter there for a single night. The floor was rough and stony, the walls full of projecting corners, the roof in one place twenty feet high, in another endangering his forehead, while on one side a stream,

no thicker than a needle it is true, but still sufficient to spread a wide dampness over the wall, flowed down the face of the rock.

But the troop in front of him was toiling under heavy burdens. He could distinguish hell for now and then, in the flickering light and shade, with his heavy chest on his bending shoulders, while the second brother was almost buried in what looked like a great feather bed. Where did they get the feathers? thought Curdie.

But in a moment the troop disappeared at a turn of the way, and it was now both safe and necessary for Curdie to follow them, lest they should be round the next turning before he saw them again, for so he might lose them altogether. He darted after them like a greyhound. When he reached the corner and looked cautiously round, he saw them again at some distance down another long passage.

None of the galleries he saw that night bore signs of the work of man, or of goblin either. Stalactites, far older than the mines, hung from their roofs, and their floors were rough with boulders and large round stones, showing that their water must have once run. He waited again at this corner till they had disappeared round the next, and so followed them a long way through one passage after another.

The passages grew more and more lofty, and were more and more covered in the roof with shining stalactites. It was a strange enough procession which he followed, but the strangest part of it was the household animals which crowded amongst the feet of the goblins. It was true they had no wild animals down there, at least they did not know of any, but they had a wonderful number of tame ones.

I must, however, reserve any contributions towards the natural history of these for a later position in my story. At length, turning a corner too abruptly, he had almost rushed into the middle of the goblin family, for there they had already set down all their burdens on the floor of a cave considerably larger than that which they had left. They were as yet too breathless to speak, else he would have had warning of their arrest.

He started back, however, before anyone saw him, and retreating a good way, stood watching till the father should come out to go to the palace. Before very long both he and his son Helther appeared, and kept on in the same direction as before, while Curdie followed them again with renewed precaution. For a long time he heard no sound except something like the rush of a river inside the rock, but at length what seemed the far-off noise of a great shouting reached his ears, which however presently ceased.

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

He was at the entrance of a magnificent cavern, of an oval shape, once probably a huge natural reservoir of water, now the great palace hall of the goblins. It rose to a tremendous height, but the roof was composed of such shining materials, and the multitude of torches carried by the goblins who crowded the floor, lighted up the place so brilliantly that Curdie could see to the top quite well, but he had no idea how immense the place was until his eyes had got accustomed to it, which was not for a good many minutes. The rough projections on the walls, and the shadows thrown upwards from them by the torches, made the sides of the chamber look as if they were crowded with statues upon brackets and pedestals, reaching in irregular tiers from floor to roof.

The walls themselves were, in many parts, of gloriously shining substances, some of them gorgeously coloured besides, which powerfully contrasted with the shadows. Curdie could not help wondering whether his rhymes would be of any use against such a multitude of goblins as filled the floor of the hall, and indeed felt considerably tempted to begin his shout of, One, two, three, but as there was no reason for routing them, and much for endeavouring to discover their designs, he kept himself perfectly quiet, and peering round the edge of the doorway, listened with both his sharp ears. At the other end of the hall, high above the heads of the multitude, was a terrace-like ledge of considerable height, caused by the receding of the upper part of the cavern wall.

Upon this sat the king and his court, the king on a throne hollowed out of a huge block of green copper ore, and his court upon lower seats around it. The king had been making them a speech, and the applause which followed it was what Curdie had heard. One of the court was now addressing the multitude.

What he heard him say was to the following effect, Hence it appears that two plans have been for some time together working in the strong head of his majesty for the deliverance of his people, regardless of the fact that we were the first possessors of the regions they now inhabit, regardless equally of fact that we abandoned that region from the loftiest motives, regardless also of the self-evident fact that we excel them so far in mental ability as they excel us in stature, they look upon us as a degraded race, and make a mockery of all our finer feelings. But the time has almost arrived when, thanks to his majesty's inventive genius, it will be in our power to take a thorough revenge upon them once and for all in respect of their unfriendly behavior. May it please your majesty, cried a voice close by the door, which Curdie recognized as that of the goblin he had followed.

Who is he who interrupts the chancellor? cried another from near the throne. Glump, answered several voices. He is our trusty subject, said the king himself in a slow and stately voice.

Let him come forward and speak. A lane was parted through the crowd, and Glump, having ascended the platform and bowed to the king, spoke as follows. Sire, I would

have held my peace had I not known that I only knew how near was the moment to which the chancellor had just referred.

In all probability, before another day is passed, the enemy will have broken through into my house, the partition between being even now not more than a foot in thickness. Not quite so much, thought Curdie to himself. This very evening I have had to remove my household effects.

Therefore, the sooner we are ready to carry out the plan, for the execution of which his majesty has been making such magnificent preparations, the better. I may just add that within the last few days I have perceived a small outbreak in my dining room, which combined with observations upon the course of the river escaping where the evil men enter, has convinced me that close to the spot must be a deep gulf in its channel. This discovery will, I trust, add considerably to the otherwise immense forces at his majesty's disposal.

He ceased, and the king graciously acknowledged his speech with a bend of his head, whereupon Glump, after a bow to his majesty, slid down amongst the rest of the undistinguished multitude. Then the chancellor rose and resumed. The information which the worthy Glump has given us, he said, might have been of considerable import at the present moment, but for that other design already referred to, which naturally takes precedence, his majesty, unwilling to proceed to extremities, and well aware that such measures sooner or later result in violent reactions, has excogitated a more fundamental and comprehensive measure, of which I need say no more.

Should his majesty be successful, as who dares to doubt, then a peace, all to the advantage of the goblin kingdom, will be established for a generation at least, rendered absolutely secure by the pledge which his royal highness, the prince, will have and hold for the good behaviour of her relatives. Should his majesty fail, which who shall dare even to imagine in his most secret thoughts, then will be the time for carrying out with rigour the design to which Glump referred, and for which our preparations are even now all but completed. The failure of the former will render the latter imperative.

Curdie, perceiving that the assembly was drawing to a close, and that there was little chance of either plan being more fully discovered, now thought it prudent to make his escape before the goblins began to disperse, and slipped quietly away. There was not much danger of meeting any goblins, for all the men at least were left behind him in the palace, but there was considerable danger of his taking a wrong turning, for he had now no light, and had therefore to depend upon his memory and his hands. After he had left behind him the glow that issued from the door of Glump's new abode, he was utterly without guide, so far as his eyes were concerned.

He was most anxious to get back through the hole before the goblins should return to fetch the remains of their furniture. It was not that he was in the least afraid of them, but

as it was of the utmost importance that he should thoroughly discover what the plans they were cherishing were, he must not occasion the slightest suspicion that they were watched by a minor. He hurried on, feeling his way along the walls of rock.

Had he not been very courageous, he must have been very anxious, for he could not but know that if he lost his way, it would be the most difficult thing in the world to find it again. Morning would bring no light into these regions, and towards him least of all, who was known as a special reimester and persecutor, could goblins be expected to exercise courtesy. Well might he wish that he had brought his lamp and tinderbox with him, of which he had not thought when he crept so eagerly after the goblins.

He wished it all the more when, after a while, he found his way blocked up, and could get no farther. It was of no use to turn back, for he had not the least idea where he had begun to go wrong. Mechanically, however, he kept feeling about the walls that hemmed him in.

His hand came upon a place where a tiny stream of water was running down the face of the rock. What a stupid I am, he said to himself. I am actually at the end of my journey.

And there are the goblins coming back to fetch their things, he added, as the red glimmer of their torches appeared at the end of the long avenue that led up to the cave. In a moment he had thrown himself on the floor, and wriggled backwards through the hole. The floor on the other side was several feet lower, which made it easier to get back.

It was all he could do to lift the larger stone he had taken out of the hole, but he did manage to shove it in again. He sat down on the oar-heap and thought. He was pretty sure that the latter plan of the goblins was to inundate the mine by breaking outlets for the water accumulated in the natural reservoirs of the mountain, as well as running through portions of it.

While the part hollowed by the miners remained shut off from that inhabited by the goblins, they had had no opportunity of injuring them thus. But now that a passage was broken through, and the goblins' part proved the higher in the mountain, it was clear to Curdie that the mine could be destroyed in an hour. Water was always the chief danger to which the miners were exposed.

They met with a little choke-damp sometimes, but never with the explosive fire-damp so common in coal mines. Hence they were careful as soon as they saw any appearance of water. As the result of his reflections, while the goblins were busy in their old home, it seemed to Curdie that it would be best to build up the whole of this gang, filling it with stone and clay or lye, so that there should be no smallest channel for the water to get into.

There was not, however, any immediate danger, for the execution of the goblins' plan was contingent upon the failure of that unknown design which was to take precedence of it, and he was most anxious to keep the door of communication open, that he might if possible discover what the former plan was. At the same time they could not resume their intermitted labours for the inundation without his finding it out, when by putting all hands to the work the one existing outlet might in a single night be rendered impenetrable to any weight of water, for by filling the gang entirely up, their embankment would be buttressed by the sides of the mountain itself. As soon as he found that the goblins had again retired, he lighted his lamp, and proceeded to fill the hole he had made with such stones as he could withdraw when he pleased.

He then thought it better, as he might have occasion to be up a good many nights after this, to go home and have some sleep. How pleasant the night air felt upon the outside of the mountain after what he had gone through in the inside of it! He hurried up the hill without meeting a single goblin on the way, and called and tapped at the window until he woke his father, who soon rose and let him in. He told him the whole story, and just as he had expected, his father thought it best to work that load no farther, but at the same time to pretend occasionally to be at work there still, in order that the goblins might have no suspicions.

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