

The Goblin King

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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When I was small, my father would read me bedtime stories, and my mother would say from another room, "You aren't reading him that poem, are you?" "It's his favorite before bed!" my father would answer with a wink to me. I wasn't sure why my father thought the poem about the Goblin King was my favorite. Every night after he read it I would lie awake for a long time, listening to the darkness. Later, I often woke up crying, and my mother would come and hold me. Nevertheless, every night after my last story, my father opened the book of children's poems and quietly read the lines about the Goblin King's spies:

* * *

The Moon is an eye for the Goblin King
And watches all you do.
When you pout or cry or shout or whine,
The spiders tell on you.

* * *

Most of the poem was devoted to children who misbehaved and what happened to them when the Goblin King found out. One little boy disappeared up a chimney, snatched by a nameless black thing. A little girl was dragged into a well. And then there was Annie.

* * *

Little Annie was a noisy child,
dinner she banged her plate.
Her parents sent her to her bed.
Alas! They sealed her fate.
The Goblin King has feet of sand
And never makes a sound.
When Mother pulled the covers back,
Here is all she found:
A shriveled, blackened ball of hair,
A tooth, a nail, a bone.
Nothing more of Ann was left
Except, perhaps, a moan.

* * *

There was a picture of the Goblin King in the book. He sat on his forest throne, grinning. Except for

his yellow teeth and eyes, he was made of forest things-- branches, grass, sand, mud, and dried leaves. It was hard to see where the forest ended and the Goblin King began.

One night, the electricity went out in our neighborhood just before my bedtime. I was already in my pajamas, and my father carried me into my bedroom. There was no light for a story, but my father recited from memory:

* * *

The Moon is an eye for the Goblin King
And watches all you do.
When you pout or cry or shout or whine,
The spiders tell on you.

* * *

The moon had risen outside my window. In the dim light, all I could see were the whites of my father's eyes and the flashing of his teeth.

Mother pulled the covers back,
Here is all she found:

As he recited, my father grinned a wider and wider grin. His teeth took on a light of their own, and his eyes grew huge. The rest of his body faded away until I couldn't tell where the darkness ended and my father began.

He finished reciting, then tousled my hair and said what he always said before he left me alone with the poem's words still hanging in the black air.

"Be good", he told me. "Be very, very good."

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