POEMS

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Poems by George MacDonald

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BY

GEORGE MACDONALD, LL.D.

SELECTED BY V. D. S. AND C. F.

The lightning and thunder
  They go and they come;
But the stars and the stillness
  Are always at home.

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1893.

INTRODUCTION.

GEORGE MACDONALD was born at Huntly, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1824. After taking his degree at the University of Aberdeen, he studied theology, and preached for a short time as an Independent minister in Surrey and Sussex. He left the ministry, however, and became a lay member of the Church of England, settling in London and devoting himself to literature. In 1872–73 he lectured in the United States.

Mr. MacDonald is best known as the writer of a number of novels strongly religious in tone. The name of the author of *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood*, and *Robert Falconer* is familiar to a wide circle of readers. At intervals between 1855 and 1868 four volumes of his poetry were published in England; but American readers have had scant opportu-

nity of becoming acquainted with his verse. It was thought, therefore, that a volume which should include his best work and collect for the first time the charming poems scattered through the novels, would be welcome to many. Most of the poems chosen for this collection are given entire. In a few cases, however, extracts have been taken from a long poem, or omissions made from a shorter one. When this has been done, the poem is marked in the Table of Contents by a star (*). The novel, *Robert Falconer*, contains a number of sonnets or snatches of verse, the authorship of which Mr. MacDonald expressly disclaims. These poems are closely associated with his name; and several of them are of so great intrinsic value that they have been retained in the present volume. The names of such poems are marked by a dagger (†).

It is perhaps unfair to seek in the verse of an author whose chief work is in prose, an adequate or symmetrical record of his message to the world. The verse of such a man is usually incidental; it is often the product

of youth, when the author has not found the true channel for his energies. Many of Mr. MacDonald's poems are youthful, and the later ones are seldom elaborated with the care given to work to which the author attaches much importance. Technically these verses are often slipshod, diffuse, or abrupt; and they always represent the occasional overflow of personal emotion rather than the sustained effort to impart truth, characteristic of his prose. Why, then, it may be asked, collect these juvenile or fugitive pieces? The answer will readily be given by any one who is familiar with the novels of Mr. MacDonald; for he will perceive the poetic temperament shining out at every turn through the art of the story-teller. The keen and delicate interpretative faculty that renders with loving insight the beauty alike of the commonplace and of the remote; control of a searching and vivid style and a singular power of suggestion:—these gifts are the gifts of a poet, and they belong emphatically to the prose of Mr. MacDonald.

If we look for them in his poetry we are

not disappointed. We find in it also the same attitude towards life which has proved in Mr. MacDonald's novels helpful to so many. The reader of his novels is first impressed by his intensely religious nature, his habitual reference of all thoughts and acts to a divine source and object. This quality, as might be predicted, is equally marked in his poems. Not that we are to expect from him volumes of religious poetry in the strict sense of the words; but the Scottish bias towards religious contemplation and the profound moral earnestness of the man always lie back of the more superficial gracefulness and fancy which first attract us.

Looking further into his work we find that the prevailing note of Mr. MacDonald's religious thought is its strong hopefulness. He has freed himself from the Scottish gloom and grimness, not by cheerfully ignoring hard facts, but by sternly facing the sternest realities. He is not a shallow optimist; he looks unflinchingly at sin and suffering, at weakness and distortion; he is, indeed, peculiarly sensitive to all forms of evil, as is

shown in such a poem as *Contrast;* but he looks beyond these with a manly trust to the deeper, more permanent realities of strength and purity. Poems like *The Lost Soul*, and *What Man is there of You?* release their author from any charge of superficiality in his philosophy of life.

In their treatment of the spiritual life these poems possess a quality even more noticeable and unique than their courageous honesty of vision; it is the subtle power with which they delineate certain less obvious phases of nature and experience. Of the morbid analysis into which this subtlety sometimes leads —or sometimes misleads—the poems show no trace. From this he is saved by his wholesomeness of vision on the one hand, and on the other by the fact that with him religious emotion always finds its basis in clear intellectual perception. Such sonnets as those in *A Sonnet Sequence*, or *If Thou Art Tempted by a Thought of Ill*, do not merely reflect and enhance in melodious numbers a pleasing sentiment, but afford real guidance and helpfulness in some of those unrecognized per-

plexities that press upon the bewildered soul in its efforts to enter into communion with the unseen. These perplexities, underlying as they do our keenest spiritual sorrow and joy, are seldom touched by religious verse except in their most obvious aspects; they are rendered by Mr. MacDonald with sympathetic and accurate penetration; and therefore is it that they possess an enduring value. He is one of those authors, more rare than men of greater genius, who make less solitary the inmost recesses of the spiritual life.

From this remoteness and subtlety of subject, it follows that these poems may sometimes seem at first sight a little mystical; but a straightforward reading will usually destroy all difficulty. Curiously enough, mysticism is often in common use only another word for a certain simplicity of vision. In the most symbolic utterances of the so-called mystics, a return to childlike directness of thought will quickly effect the correspondence between the spiritual truth and its verbal form. The long poem, *Somnium Mystici*,