ANNALS OF A QUIET NEIGHBOURHOOD. IN TWO VOLUMES. VOL. I

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GEORGE MACDONALD

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ANNALS

OF A

QUIET NEIGHBOURHOOD.

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1867.

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OF VOLUME I.

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CHAPTER I.

Despondency and Consolation.

Before I begin to tell you some of the things I have seen and heard, in both of which I have had to take a share, now from the compulsion of my office, now from the leading of my own heart, and now from that destiny which, including both, so often throws the man who supposed himself a mere on-looker, into the very vortex of events — that destiny which took form to the old pagans as a gray mist high beyond the heads of their gods, but to us is known as an infinite love, revealed in the mystery of man — I say before I begin, it is fitting that, in the absence of a common friend to do that office for me, I should introduce myself to your acquaintance, and I hope coming friendship. Nor can there be any impropriety in my telling you about myself, seeing I remain concealed behind my own words. You can never look me in the eyes, though you

may look me in the soul. You may find me out, find my faults, my vanities, my sins, but you will not *see* me, at least in this world. To you I am but a voice of revealing, not a form of vision; therefore I am bold behind the mask, to speak to you heart to heart; bold, I say, just so much the more that I do not speak to you face to face. And when we meet in heaven — well, there I know there is no hiding; there, there is no reason for hiding anything; there, the whole desire will be alternate revelation and vision.

I am now getting old — faster and faster. I cannot help my gray hairs, nor the wrinkles that gather so slowly yet ruthlessly; no, nor the quaver that will come in my voice, nor the sense of being feeble in the knees, even when I walk only across the floor of my study. But I have not got used to age yet. I do not *feel* one atom older than I did at three-and-twenty. Nay, to tell all the truth, I feel a good deal younger. — For then I only felt that a man had to take up his cross; whereas now I feel that a man has to follow Him; and that makes an unspeakable difference. — When my voice quavers, I feel that it is mine and not mine; that it just belongs to me like my watch, which does not go well now, though it went well thirty years ago — not more than a minute out in a month. And when I feel my knees shake, I think of them with a kind of pity, as I used to think of an old mare of my father's of which I was very fond when I was a lad, and which bore me across many a field and over many a fence, but which at last came to have the

same weakness in her knees that I have in mine; and she knew it too, and took care of them, and so of herself, in a wise equine fashion. These things are not me — or *I*, if the grammarians like it better, (I always feel a strife between doing as the scholar does and doing as other people do;) they are not me, I say; I *have* them — and, please God, shall soon have better. For it is not a pleasant thing for a young man, or a young woman either, I venture to say, to have an old voice, and a wrinkled face, and weak knees, and gray hair, or no hair at all. And if any moral Philistine, as our queer German brothers over the Northern fish-pond would call him, say that this is all rubbish, for that we *are* old, I would answer: "Of all children how can the children of God be old?"

So little do I give in to calling this outside of me, *me*, that I should not mind presenting a minute description of my own person such as would at once clear me from any suspicion of vanity in so introducing myself. Not that my honesty would result in the least from indifference to the external — but from comparative indifference to the transitional; not to the transitional in itself, which is of eternal significance and result, but to the particular form of imperfection which it may have reached at any individual moment of its infinite progression towards the complete. For no sooner have I spoken the word *now*, than that *now* is dead and another is dying; nay, in such a regard, there is no *now* — only a past of which we know a little, and a future of which we know far less and far more. But I will not speak

at all of this body of my earthly tabernacle, for it is on the whole more pleasant to forget all about it. And besides, I do not want to set any of my readers to whom I would have the pleasure of speaking far more openly and cordially than if they were seated on the other side of my writing-table — I do not want to set them wondering whether the vicar be this vicar or that vicar; or indeed to run the risk of giving the offence I might give, if I were anything else than "a wandering voice."

I did not feel as I feel now when first I came to this parish. For, as I have said, I am now getting old very fast. True, I was thirty when I was made a vicar, an age at which a man might be expected to be beginning to grow wise; but even then I had much yet to learn.

I well remember the first evening on which I wandered out from the vicarage to take a look about me — to find out, in short, where I was, and what aspect the sky and earth here presented. Strangely enough, I had never been here before; for the presentation had been made me while I was abroad. — I was depressed. It was depressing weather. Grave doubts as to whether I was in my place in the Church, would keep rising and floating about, like rain-clouds within me. Not that I doubted about the Church; I only doubted about myself. "Were my motives pure?" "What were my motives?" And, to tell the truth, I did not know what my motives were, and therefore I could not answer about the purity of them. Perhaps seeing we are in this world in order to become pure, it would be expecting too