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# **There & Back**

George MacDonald

# Imprint

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## CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

- I. FATHER, CHILD, AND NURSE
- II. STEPMOTHER AND NURSE
- III. THE FLIGHT
- IV. THE BOOKBINDER AND HIS PUPIL
- V. THE MANSONS
- VI. SIMON ARMOUR
- VII. COMPARISONS
- VIII. A LOST SHOE
- IX. A HOLIDAY
- X. THE LIBRARY
- XI. ALICE
- XII. MORTGRANGE
- XIII. THE BEECH-TREE
- XIV. AGAIN THE LIBRARY

- XV. BARBARA WYLDER
- XVI. BARBARA AND RICHARD
- XVII. BARBARA AND OTHERS
- XVIII. MRS. WYLDER
- XIX. MRS. WYLDER AND BARBARA
- XX. BARBARA AND HER CRITICS
- XXI. THE PARSON'S PARABLE
- XXII. THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER
- XXIII. A HUMAN GADFLY
- XXIV. RICHARD AND WINGFOLD
- XXV. WINGFOLD AND HIS WIFE
- XXVI. RICHARD AND ALICE
- XXVII. A SISTER
- XXVIII. BARBARA AND LADY ANN
- XXIX. ALICE AND BARBARA
- XXX. BARBARA THINKS
- XXXI. WINGFOLD AND BARBARA
- XXXII. THE SHOEING OF MISS BROWN
- XXXIII. RICHARD AND VIXEN
- XXXIV. BARBARA'S DUTY

- XXXV. THE PARSON'S COUNSEL
- XXXVI. LADY ANN MEDITATES
- XXXVII. LADY ANN AND RICHARD
- XXXVIII. RICHARD AND ARTHUR
- XXXIX. MR., MRS., AND MISS WYLDER
- XL. IN LONDON
- XLI. NATURE AND SUPERNATURE
- XLII. YET A LOWER DEEP
- XLIII. TO BE REDEEMED, ONE MUST REDEEM
- XLIV. A DOOR OPENED IN HEAVEN
- XLV. THE CARRIAGE
- XLVI. RICHARD'S DILEMMA
- XLVII. THE DOORS OF HARMONY AND DEATH
- XLVIII. DEATH THE DELIVERER
- XLIX. THE CAVE IN THE FIRE
- L. DUCK-FISTS
- LI. BARONET AND BLACKSMITH
- LII. UNCLE-FATHER AND AUNT-MOTHER
- LIII. MORNING
- LIV. BARBARA AT HOME

- LIV. MISS BROWN
- LVI. WINGFOLD AND BARBARA
- LVII. THE BARONET'S WILL
- LVIII. THE HEIR
- LIX. WINGFOLD AND ARTHUR MANSON
- LX. RICHARD AND HIS FAMILY
- LXI. HEART TO HEART
- LXII. THE QUARREL
- LXIII. BARONET AND BLACKSMITH
- LXIV. THE BARONET'S FUNERAL
- LXV. THE PACKET
- LXVI. BARBARA'S DREAM

## NOTE.

Some of the readers of this tale will be glad to know that the passage with which it ends is a real dream; and that, with but three or four changes almost too slight to require acknowledging, I have given it word for word as the friend to whom it came set it down for me.\_



## CHAPTER I.

### *FATHER, CHILD, AND NURSE.*

It would be but stirring a muddy pool to inquire—not what motives induced, but what forces compelled sir Wilton Lestrange to marry a woman nobody knew. It is enough to say that these forces were mainly ignoble, as manifested by their intermittent character and final cessation. The *mésalliance* occasioned not a little surprise, and quite as much annoyance, among the county families,—failing, however, to remind any that certain of their own grandmothers had been no better known to the small world than lady Lestrange. It caused yet more surprise, though less annoyance, in the clubs to which sir Wilton had hitherto been indebted for help to forget his duties: they set him down as a greater idiot than his friends had hitherto imagined him. For had he not been dragged to the altar by a woman whose manners and breeding were hardly on the level of a villa in St. John's Wood? Did any one know whence she sprang, or even the name which sir Wilton had displaced with his own? But sir Wilton himself was not proud of his lady; and if the thing had been any business of theirs, it would have made no difference to him; he would none the less have let them pine in their ignorance. Did not his mother, a lady less dignified than eccentric, out of pure curiosity beg enlightenment concerning her origin, and receive for answer from the high-minded baronet, "Madam, the woman is my wife!"—after which the prudent dowager asked no more questions, but treated her daughter-in-law with neither better nor worse than civility. Sir Wilton, in fact, soon came to owe his wife a grudge that he had married her, and none the less that at the time he felt himself of a generosity more than human in bestowing upon her his name. Creation itself, had he ever thought of it, would have seemed to him a small thing beside such a gift!

That Robina Armour, after experience of his first advances, should have at last consented to marry sir Wilton Lestrange, was in no sense in her favour, although after a fashion she was in love with

him—in love, that is, with the gentleman of her own imagining whom she saw in the baronet; while the baronet, on his part, was what he called in love with what he called *the woman*. As he was overcome by her beauty, so was she by his rank—an idol at whose clay feet is cast many a spiritual birthright—and as mean a deity as any of man's device. But the blacksmith's daughter was in many respects, notwithstanding, a woman of good sense, with much real refinement, and a genuine regard for rectitude. Although sir Wilton had never loved her with what was best in him, it was not in spite of what was best in him that he fell in love with her. Had his better nature been awake, it would have justified the bond, and been strengthened by it.

Lady Lestrangle's father was a good blacksmith, occasionally drunk in his youth, but persistently sober now in his middle age; a long-headed fellow, with reach and quality in the prudence which had long ceased to appear to him the highest of virtues. At one period he had accounted it the prime duty of existence to take care of oneself; and so much of this belief had he communicated to his younger daughter, that she deputed herself so that sir Wilton married her—with the result that, when Death knocked at her door, she welcomed him to her heart. The first cry of her child, it is true, made her recall the welcome, but she had to go with him, notwithstanding, when the child was but an hour old.

Not one of her husband's family was in the house when she died. Sir Wilton himself was in town, and had been for the last six months, preferring London and his club to Mortgrange and his wife. When a telegram informed him that she was in danger, he did go home, but when he arrived, she had been an hour gone, and he congratulated himself that he had taken the second train.

There had been betwixt them no approach to union. When what sir Wilton called love had evaporated, he returned to his mire, with a resentful feeling that the handsome woman—his superior in everything that belongs to humanity—had bewitched him to his undoing. The truth was, she had ceased to charm him. The fault was not in her; it lay in the dulled eye of the swiftly deteriorating man, which grew less and less capable of seeing things as they were, and transmitted falser and falser impressions of them. The light that was

in him was darkness. The woman that might have made a man of him, had there been the stuff, passed from him an unprized gift, a thing to which he made Hades welcome.

It was decent, however, not to parade his relief. He retired to the library, lit a cigar, and sat down to wish the unpleasant fuss of the funeral over, and the house rid of a disagreeable presence. Had the woman died of a disease to which he might himself one day have to succumb, her death might, as he sat there, have chanced to raise for an instant the watery ghost of an emotion; but, coming as it did, he had no sympathetic interest in her death any more than in herself. Lolling in the easiest of chairs, he revolved the turns of last night's play, until it occurred to him that he might soon by a second marriage take amends of his neighbours for their disapprobation of his first. So pleasant was the thought that, brooding upon it, he fell asleep.

He woke, looked, rubbed his eyes, stared, rubbed them again, and stared. A woman stood in front of him—one he had surely seen!—no, he had never seen her anywhere! What an odd, inquiring, searching expression in her two hideous black eyes! And what was that in her arms—something wrapt in a blanket?

The message in the telegram recurred to him: there must have been a child! The bundle must be the child! Confound the creature! What did it want?

"Go away," he said; "this is not the nursery!"

"I thought you might like to look at the baby, sir!" the woman replied.

Sir Wilton stared at the blanket.

"It might comfort you, I thought!" she went on, with a look he felt to be strange. Her eyes were hard and dry, red with recent tears, and glowing with suppressed fire.

Sir Wilton was courteous to most women, especially such as had no claim upon him, but cherished respect for none. It was odd therefore that he should now feel embarrassed. From some cause the machinery of his self-content had possibly got out of gear; anyhow no answer came ready. He had not the smallest wish to see the

child, but was yet, perhaps, unwilling to appear brutal. In the meantime, the woman, with gentle, moth-like touch, was parting and turning back the folds of the blanket, until from behind it dawned a tiny human face, whose angel was suppliant, it may be, for the baptism of a father's first gaze.

The woman held out the child to sir Wilton, as if expecting him to take it. He started to his feet, driving the chair a yard behind him, stuck his hands in his pockets, and, with a face of disgust, cried—

"Great God! take the creature away."

But he could not lift his eyes from the face nested in the blanket. It seemed to fascinate him. The woman's eyes flared, but she did not speak.

"Uglier than sin!" he half hissed, half growled. "—I suppose the animal is mine, but you needn't bring it so close to me! Take it away—and keep it away. I will send for it when I want it—which won't be in a hurry! My God! How hideous a thing may be, and yet human!"

"He is as God made him!" remarked the nurse, quietly for very wrath.

"Or the devil!" suggested his father.

Then the woman looked like a tigress. She opened her mouth, but closed it again with a snap.

"I may say what I like of my own!" said the father. "Tell me the goblin is none of mine, and I will be as respectful to him as you please. Prove it, and I will give you fifty pounds. He's hideous! He's damnably ugly! Deny it if you can."

The woman held her peace. She could not, even to herself, call him a child pleasant to look at. She gazed on him for a moment with pitiful, protective eyes, then covered his face as if he were dead, but she did not move.

"Why don't you go?" said the baronet.

Instead of replying, she began, as by a suddenly confirmed resolve, to remove the coverings at the other end of the bundle, and presently disclosed the baby's feet. The baronet gazed wondering.

To what might not assurance be about to subject him? She took one of the little feet in a hard but gentle hand, and spreading out "the pink, five-beaded baby-toes," displayed what even the inexperience of the baronet could not but recognize as remarkable: between every pair of toes was stretched a thin delicate membrane. She laid the foot down, took up the other, and showed the same peculiarity. The child was web-footed, as distinctly as any properly constituted duckling! Then she lifted, one after the other, the tiny hands, beautiful to any eye that understood, and showed between the middle and third finger of each, the same sort of membrane rising half-way to the points of them.

"I see!" said the baronet, with a laugh that was not nice, having in it no merriment, "the creature is a monster!—Well, if you think I am to blame, I can only protest you are mistaken. *I* am not web-footed! The duckness must come from the other side."

"I hope you will remember, sir Wilton!"

"Remember? What do you mean? Take the monster away."

The woman rearranged the coverings of the little crooked legs.

"Won't you look at your lady before they put her in her coffin?" she said when she had done.

"What good would that do her? She's past caring!—No, I won't: why should I? Such sights are not pleasant."

"The coffin's a lonely chamber, sir Wilton; lonely to lie all day and all night in!"

"No lonelier for one than for another!" he replied, with an involuntary recoil from his own words. For the one thing a man must believe—yet hardly believes—is, that he shall one day die. "She'll be better without me, anyhow!"

"You are heartless, sir Wilton!"

"Mind your own business. If I choose to be heartless, I may have my reasons. Take the child away."

Still she did not move. The baby, young as he was, had thrown the blanket from his face, and the father's eyes were fixed on it: while he gazed the nurse would not stir. He seemed fascinated by its ugliness. Without absolute deformity, the child was indeed as unsightly as infant well could be.

"My God!" he said again—for he had a trick of crying out as if he had a God— "the little brute hates me! Take it away, woman. Take it away before I strangle it! I can't answer for myself if it keeps on looking at me!"

With a glance whose mingled anger and scorn the father did not see, the nurse turned and went.

He kept staring after her till the door shut, then fell back into his chair, exclaiming once more, "My God!"—What or whom he meant by the word, it were hard to say.

"Is it possible," he said to himself, "that the fine woman I married—for she *was* a fine woman, a deuced fine woman!—should have died to present the world with such a travesty! It's like nothing human! It's an affront to the family! Ah! the strain *will* show! They say your sins will find you out! It was a sin to marry the woman! Damned fool I was! But she bewitched me! I *was* bewitched!—Curse the little monster! I shan't breathe again till I'm out of the house! Where was the doctor? He ought to have seen to it! Hang it all, I'll go abroad!"

Ugly as the child was, however, to many an eye the first thing evident in him would have been his strong likeness to his father—whose features were perfect, though at the moment, and at many a moment, their expression was other than attractive. Sir Wilton disliked children, and the dislike was mutual. Never did child run to him; never was child unwilling to leave him. Escaping from his grasp, he would turn and look back, like Christian emerging from the Valley of the Shadow, as if to weigh the peril he had been in.

As tenderly as if he had been the loveliest of God's children, the woman bore her charge up staircases, and through corridors and passages, to the remote nursery, where, in a cradle whose gay furni-

ture contrasted sadly with the countenance of the child and the fierceness of her own eyes, she gently laid him down. But long after he was asleep, she continued to bend over him, as if with difficulty restraining herself from clasping him again to her bosom.

Jane Tuke had been married four or five years, but had no children, and the lack seemed to have intensified her maternity. Elder sister to lady Lestrangle, she had gone gladly to receive her child in her arms, and had watched and waited for it with an expectation far stronger than that of the mother; for so thorough was lady Lestrangle's disappointment in her husband, that she regarded the advent of his child almost with indifference. Jane had an absolute passion for children. She had married a quarter for faith, a quarter for love, and a whole half for hope. This divinely inexplicable child-passion is as unintelligible to those devoid of it, as its absence is marvellous to those possessed by it. Its presence is its justification, its being its sole explanation, itself its highest reason. Surely on those who cherish it, the shadow of the love-creative God must rest more than on some other women! Unpleasing as was the infant, to know him her own would have made the world a paradise to Jane. Her heart burned with divine indignation at the wrongs already heaped upon him. Hardly born, he was persecuted! Ugly! he was *not* ugly! Was he not come straight from the fountain of life, from the Father of children? That such a father as she had left in the library should repudiate him was well! She loved to think of his rejection. She brooded with delight, in the midst of her wrath, on every word of disgust that had fallen from his unfatherly lips. The more her baby was rejected, the more he was hers! He belonged to her, and her only, for she only loved him! She could say with *France in King Lear*, "Be it lawful I take up what's cast away!" To her the despised one was the essence of all riches. The joy of a miser is less than the joy of a mother, as gold is less than a live soul, as greed is less than love. No vision of jewels ever gave such a longing as this woman longed with after the child of her dead sister.

The body that bore was laid in the earth, the thing born was left upon it. The mother had but come, exposed her infant on the rough shore of time, and forsaken him in his nakedness. There he lay, not knowing whence he came, or whither he was going, urged to live by a hunger and thirst he had not invented, and did not understand.

His mother had helplessly forsaken him, but the God in another woman had taken him up: there was a soul to love him, two arms to carry him, and a strong heart to shelter him.

Sir Wilton returned to London, and there enjoyed himself—not much, but a little the more that no woman sat at Mortgrange with a right to complain that he took his pleasure without her. He lived the life of the human animals frequenting the society of their kind from a gregarious instinct, and for common yet opposing self-ends. He had begun to assume the staidness, if not dullness, of the animal whose first youth has departed, but he was only less frolicsome, not more human. He was settling down to what he had made himself; no virtue could claim a share in the diminished rampancy of his vices. What a society is that which will regard as reformed the man whom assuaging fires have left an exhausted slag—a thing for which as yet no use is known, who suggests no promise of change or growth, gives no poorest hint of hope concerning his fate!

With the first unrecognized sense of approaching age, a certain habit of his race began to affect him, and the idea of a quieter life, with a woman whose possession would make him envied, grew mildly attractive. A brilliant marriage in another county would, besides, avenge him on the narrow-minded of his own, who had despised his first choice! With judicial family-eye he surveyed the eligible women of his acquaintance. It was, no doubt, to his disadvantage that already an heir lay "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;" for a woman who might willingly be mother to the inheritor of such a property as his, might not find attractive the notion of her first being her husband's second son. But slips between cups and lips were not always on the wrong side! Such a moon-calf as Robina's son could not with justice represent the handsomest man and one of the handsomest women of their time. The heir that fate had palmed upon him might very well be doomed to go the way so many infants went!

He spread the report that the boy was sickly. A notion that he was not likely to live prevailed about Mortgrange, which, however originated, was nourished doubtless by the fact that he was so seldom seen. In reality, however, there was not a healthier child in all England than Richard Lestrangle.

Sir Wilton's relations took as little interest in the heir as himself, and there was no inducement for any of them to visit Mortgrange; the aunt-mother, therefore, had her own way with him. She was not liked in the house. The servants said she cared only for the little toad of a baronet, and would do nothing for her comfort. They had, however, just a shadow of respect for her: if she encouraged no familiarity, she did not meddle, and was independent of their aid. Even the milking of the cow which had been, through her persistence, set apart for the child, she did herself. She sought no influence in the house, and was nothing loved and little heeded.

Sir Wilton had not again seen his heir, who was now almost a year old, when the rumour reached Mortgrange that the baronet was about to be married.

Naturally, the news was disquieting to Jane. The hope, however, was left her, that the stepmother might care as little for the child as did the father, and that so, for some years at least, he might be left to her. It was a terrible thought to the loving woman that they might be parted; a more terrible thought that her baby might become a man like his father. Of all horrors to a decent woman, a bad man must be the worst! If by her death she could have left the child her hatred of evil, Jane would have willingly died: she loved her husband, but her sister's boy was in danger!

