

GEORGE  
MacDONALD

AT THE  
BACK  
OF THE  
NORTH WIND

*Illustrated*



Illustration by Dr. Alan C. Thomas      Complete and unabridged

AT THE  
BACK  
OF THE  
NORTH WIND

\* \* \* \*

GEORGE MACDONALD

---

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.  
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

**An Airmont Classic**

*specially selected for the Airmont Library  
from the immortal literature of the world*

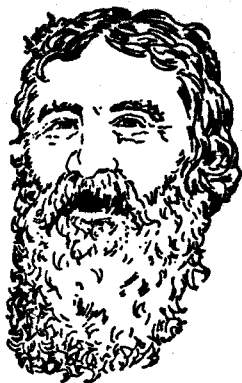
THE SPECIAL CONTENTS OF THIS EDITION

© Copyright, 1966, by  
Airmont Publishing Company, Inc.

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
1. The Hay-Loft . . . . .	11
2. The Lawn . . . . .	20
3. Old Diamond . . . . .	26
4. North Wind . . . . .	36
5. The Summer-House . . . . .	45
6. Out in the Storm . . . . .	54
7. The Cathedral . . . . .	61
8. The East Window . . . . .	68
9. How Diamond Got to the Back of the North Wind . . . . .	72
10. At the Back of the North Wind . . . . .	87
11. How Diamond Got Home Again . . . . .	91
12. Who Met Diamond at Sandwich . . . . .	98
13. The Seaside . . . . .	102
14. Old Diamond . . . . .	113
15. The Mews . . . . .	116
16. Diamond Makes a Beginning . . . . .	119
17. Diamond Goes On . . . . .	129
18. The Drunken Cabman . . . . .	136
19. Diamond's Friends . . . . .	141
20. Diamond Learns to Read . . . . .	147
21. Sal's Nanny . . . . .	153
22. Mr. Raymond's Riddle . . . . .	160
23. The Early Bird . . . . .	163
24. Another Early Bird . . . . .	166
25. Diamond's Dream . . . . .	176
26. Diamond Takes a Fare the Wrong Way Right	185
27. The Children's Hospital . . . . .	191

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
28. Little Daylight . . . . .	195
29. Ruby . . . . .	213
30. Nanny's Dream . . . . .	220
31. The North Wind Doth Blow . . . . .	235
32. Diamond and Ruby . . . . .	238
33. The Prospect Brightens . . . . .	245
34. In the Country . . . . .	254
35. I Make Diamond's Acquaintance . . . . .	259
36. Diamond Questions North Wind . . . . .	270
37. Once More . . . . .	280
38. At the Back of the North Wind . . . . .	286

# AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND



GEORGE MACDONALD

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n all the imaginary places of storytelling, there cannot surely be a more curious one than the one that exists at the back of the north wind. Though it has many of the physical characteristics of heaven, paradise, or other idyllic places like the famous Shangri-la, it is not a completely satisfactory place to be. As reported by Diamond, the hero of this story, and others, "he could not say he was very happy there, for he had neither his father nor mother with him, he felt so still and quiet and patient and contented, that as far as mere feeling went it was something better than mere happiness. Nothing went wrong at the back of the north wind. Neither anything quite right, he thought. Only everything was going to be right some day."

When we discover later that Diamond had been, or at least seemed to his parents and relatives to have been very ill, it becomes clearer that this is less a place than a state of being, a condition that a few people achieve, that that is so real and so important to them and those around them that it takes on the quality of a place. Inventing a place with which to contrast the everyday world was a common literary form, particularly in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it was more possible and more likely when

the world remained unexplored and a great deal of geographical and cultural exploration was taking place. It has declined in this century, though some aspects remain in novels and stories that compare times, that is, invent imaginary pasts or futures, rather than places. The most terrifying of these recent attempts is George Orwell's *1984*.

George Macdonald's purpose was quite different from Orwell's, for the place he invents is a happy one, and Diamond's experience with it brings only good and happiness to those around him. Macdonald was born one-quarter of the way through the nineteenth century, and just barely outlasted it. This novel was written in 1871, and was followed by two others, both popular stories for children. Macdonald was ordained a minister in 1851, resigned his ministry later, though he continued as a lay preacher, a fact clear enough in his books. And yet there is only a faint reflection of the harsh, appalling conditions of industrial England, and more especially London, of the late nineteenth century. It is hard to realize that he was writing at the same time as Charles Dickens, and this is the city of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Even Diamond's life and experience in London as a cab-driver, even the life of Sal, the crossing sweeper, seems part of an earlier London than the time during which Macdonald lived. In a way, the book in its concern for truth, kindness, love, and the unity of self, all portrayed with difficulty by Diamond even with the help of the beautiful North Wind with whom he was in love, seems to anticipate the problems of the industrial technical age to come. More than a hundred years later, we in our complicated technical society struggle with the very things that Macdonald was preoccupied with: divided selves, complex and painful relations between parents and children, friends and friends, sisters and brothers. Macdonald, like his hero Diamond, had had a disturbing vision, which he found difficult to understand, and more difficult to explain.

The book is a disturbing fairy tale, like a number of the shorter ones it contains, and which the author obvi-

ously so dearly loves to tell. It contains the ingredients of simple fairy tales such as talking animals, angels, dreams, stars, and moons; but it also has those of the great and more complex fairy tales, those told by philosophers and great mystics, such as a mysterious place which so deeply affects those who visit it that they can never quite make themselves understood upon their return; a percipient child whose wisdom both enlarges and frightens his parents, and who is known both as a "God's-baby" or as having a "loose tile" in his head; a traveling job, in this case a cabdriver, related both to Ulysses of Greek times and the modern urban "folk-hero taxi driver, a job that allows chance acquaintance and wide experience without straining too much the bounds of credibility; and finally a beautiful woman, who is both loving and stern, kind and ruthless, and—everywhere.

The basis of the book is of course Christian in the way in which Macdonald is concerned with right and wrong, kindness and brutality, good and bad. His wish to understand them in ordinary life, not unlike the same concern to be found in his contemporaries Browning and Tennyson, is clear in Diamond's puzzling over the acts of the North Wind. In some of them there is to be found only simple if terrifying justice to correct a wrongdoer, but how does she explain the sinking of the ship? She can't; she just does it because it is right for her to do it. The attempt later on to link the ship with the punishment of Diamond's father's employer, Mr. Coleman, and the return of the long-lost lover, does resemble some of the more simple views of Victorian morality. But it is difficult to explain why all the other people on that ship had to die in order to teach Mr. Coleman and his daughter a good lesson.

Despite the Christian setting, almost taken for granted, there is a great affection in Macdonald for the more natural gods of the elements. One senses in him a taste for the varieties of Greek gods, or perhaps those more clearly part of Northern mythology. Certainly the North Wind herself is reminiscent of the very human seeming and changeable creatures of those older mythologies. One



would have expected much more readily to encounter the land at the back of the North Wind in the Finnish *Kalevala*, or perhaps in *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.

The form of the book itself is much more like the series of anecdotes or individual adventures that one finds in earlier forms of literature than those of the period in which Macdonald was writing. It seems much more like a ballad or folk tale in form, with one adventure following another as a means of illustrating something about the hero, or just enjoying the impact of his personality, rather than the closely developed novels taking shape in the nineteenth century. This fact is born out by Macdonald's skill in writing conversation. Perhaps that is why we can accept without much difficulty the insertions of Mr. Randall's fairy stories of Sal's dreams, and of the lovely songs that Diamond comforts the very little children with. It is to be hoped that as many readers as possible will read those songs aloud; they are not meant only to be seen.

Is it too tediously moralizing? Is Diamond too good and too wise to be tolerated. For some perhaps he is. But we should remember that Macdonald was perhaps trying to deal with goodness. What or who is a good person? What would a good person do? How do we deal with an inscrutable universe, in which right and wrong, good and bad seem to alter from one day to the next, from one situation to another. One feels that to a large degree Diamond's small and personal kindnesses, his genuine insight into himself and thereby into others is a constant contrast to the larger, more violent concerns of his beloved North Wind. Occasionally one wishes that Macdonald would leave Diamond and the readers alone, and allow us to follow out the quite credible and often gripping series of events. But perhaps that's not the kind of story he was telling. However, the problem remains with us, as it did with Macdonald. We have lots of ways of describing, or rather judging other people, but though the idea of a genuinely good person stays with us, we don't often attempt to use it.

Historically, we can find a recurring theory that it is

possible for some individuals to find and understand those universals of human life and experience that both ennoble men and make life comprehensible. Such an idea is to be found in the Bible, in Plato's *Republic*, and in the contemporary psychiatric theories of Jung. It is perhaps also to be found in dramatic portrayals of such figures as are often called "fools" or who seem slightly mad, and often comic. This surely is what Diamond was, and whether he gained his wisdom from a series of illnesses or from visiting the back of the north wind doesn't much matter. What does matter is that the story is both charming and credible enough to make us think a little about the grasp of truth it contains. It's sad that Diamond died, perhaps, but it was a time when the gifted, whether poets or novelists or musicians, died young, and Diamond's gift was perhaps too powerful to be borne for very long.

Alan M. Thomas, M.A., Ph.D.



## *Chapter I* THE HAY-LOFT

I have been asked to tell you about the back of the North Wind. An old Greek writer mentions a people who lived there, and were so comfortable that they could not bear it any longer, and drowned themselves. My story is not the same as his. I do not think Herodotus had got the right account of the place. I am going to tell you how it fared with a boy who went there.

He lived in a low room over a coach-house; and that was not by any means at the back of the North Wind, as his mother very well knew. For one side of the room was built only of boards, and the boards were so old that you might run a penknife through into the north wind. And then let them settle between them which was the sharper! I know that when you pulled it out again the wind would be after it like a cat after a mouse, and you would know soon enough you were *not* at the back of the North Wind. Still, this room was not very cold, except when the north wind blew stronger than usual: the room I have to do with now was always cold, except in summer, when the sun took the matter into his own hands. Indeed, I am not sure whether I ought to call it a room at all; for it was just a loft where they kept hay and straw and oats for the horses. And when little Diamond—— But stop: I must tell you that his father, who was a coachman, had named him after a favourite horse, and his mother had had no objection: when little Diamond then lay there in bed, he could hear the horses under him munching away in the dark, or moving sleepily in their dreams. For Diamond's father had built him a bed in the loft with boards all round it, because they had so

little room in their own end over the coach-house; and Diamond's father put old Diamond in the stall under the bed, because he was a quiet horse, and did not go to sleep standing, but lay down like a reasonable creature. But although he was a surprisingly reasonable creature, yet, when young Diamond woke in the middle of the night and felt the bed shaking in the blasts of the north wind, he could not help wondering whether, if the wind should blow the house down and he were to fall through into the manger, old Diamond mightn't eat him up before he knew him in his night-gown. And although old Diamond was very quiet all night long yet when he woke he got up like an earthquake, and then young Diamond knew what o'clock it was, or at least what was to be done next, which was—to go to sleep again as fast as he could.

There was hay at his feet and hay at his head, piled up in great trusses to the very roof. Indeed it was sometimes only through a little lane with several turnings, which looked as if it had been sawn out for him, that he could reach his bed at all. For the stock of hay was, of course, always in a state either of slow ebb or of sudden flow. Sometimes the whole space of the loft, with the little panes in the roof for the stars to look in, would lie open before his open eyes as he lay in bed; sometimes a yellow wall of sweet-smelling fibres closed up his view at the distance of half a yard. Sometimes, when his mother had undressed him in her room and told him to trot away to bed by himself, he would creep into the heart of the hay, and lie there thinking how cold it was outside in the wind, and how warm it was inside there in his bed, and how he could go to it when he pleased, only he wouldn't just yet; he would get a little colder first. And ever as he grew colder his bed would grow warmer, till at last he would scramble out of the hay, shoot like an arrow into his bed, cover himself up, and snuggle down, thinking what a happy boy he was. He had not the least idea that the wind got in at a chink in the wall, and blew about him all night. For the back of his bed was only of boards an inch thick, and on the other side of them was the north wind.

Now, as I have already said, these boards were soft and crumbly. To be sure, they were tarred on the outside, yet in many places they were more like tinder than timber. Hence it happened that the soft part having worn away from about it, little Diamond found one night, after he lay down, that a knot had come out of one of them, and that the wind was blowing in upon him in a cold and rather imperious fashion. Now he had no fancy for leaving things wrong that might be set right, so he jumped out of bed again, got a little strike of hay, twisted it up, folded it in the middle, and, having thus made it into a cork, stuck it into the hole in the wall. But the wind began to blow loud and angrily, and, as Diamond was falling asleep, out blew his cork and hit him on the nose, just hard enough to wake him up quite, and let him hear the wind whistling shrill in the hole. He searched for his hay-cork, found it, stuck it in harder, and was just dropping off once more, when, pop! with an angry whistle behind it, the cork struck him again, this time on the cheek. Up he rose once more, made a fresh stopple of hay, and corked the hole severely. But he was hardly down again before—pop! it came on his forehead. He gave it up, drew the clothes above his head, and was soon fast asleep.

Although the next day was very stormy, Diamond forgot all about the hole, for he was busy making a cave by the side of his mother's fire, with a broken chair, a three-legged stool, and a blanket, and then sitting in it. His mother, however, discovered it, and pasted a bit of brown paper over it, so that, when Diamond had snuggled down the next night, he had no occasion to think of it.

Presently, however, he lifted his head and listened. Who could that be talking to him? The wind was rising again, and getting very loud, and full of rushes and whistles. He was sure someone was talking—and very near him too it was. But he was not frightened, for he had not yet learned how to be; so he sat up and hearkened. At last the voice, which, though quite gentle, sounded a little angry, appeared to come from the back

of the bed. He crept nearer to it, and laid his ear against the wall. Then he heard nothing but the wind, which sounded very loud indeed. The moment, however, that he moved his head from the wall he heard the voice again, close to his ear. He felt about with his hand and came upon the piece of paper his mother had pasted over the hole. Against this he laid his ear and then he heard the voice quite distinctly. There was, in fact, a little corner of the paper loose, and through that, as from a mouth in the wall, the voice came.

'What do you mean, little boy—closing up my window?'

'What window?' asked Diamond.

'You stuffed hay into it three times last night. I had to blow it out again three times.'

'You can't mean this little hole! It isn't a window, it's a hole in my bed.'

'I did not say it was *a* window: I said it was *my* window.'

'But it can't be a window, because windows are holes to see out of.'

'Well, that's just what I made this window for.'

'But you are outside: you can't want a window.'

'You are quite mistaken. Windows are to see out of, you say. Well, I'm in my house, and I want windows to see out of it.'

'But you've made a window into my bed.'

'Well, your mother has got three windows into my dancing room, and you have three into my garret.'

'But I heard Father say, when my mother wanted him to make a window through the wall, that it was against the law, for it would look into Mr Dyves's garden.'

The voice laughed.

'The law would have some trouble to catch me!' it said.

'But if it's not right, you know,' said Diamond, 'that's no matter. You shouldn't do it.'

'I am so tall I am above *that* law,' said the voice.

'You must have a tall house, then,' said Diamond.

'Yes; a tall house: the clouds are inside it.'

'Dear me!' said Diamond, and thought a minute. 'I think, then, you can hardly expect me to keep a window in my bed for you. Why don't you make a window into Mr Dyves's bed?'

'Nobody makes a window into an ash-pit,' said the voice rather sadly. 'I like to see nice things out of my windows.'

'But he must have a nicer bed than I have, though mine is *very* nice—so nice that I couldn't wish a better.'

'Its not the bed I care about: it's what is in it. But you just open that window.'

'Well, Mother says I shouldn't be disobliging; but it's rather hard. You see the north wind will blow right in my face if I do.'

'I am the North Wind.'

'O-o-oh!' said Diamond thoughtfully. 'Then will you promise not to blow on my face if I open your window?'

'I can't promise that.'

'But you'll give me the toothache. Mother's got it already.'

'But what's to become of me without a window?'

'I'm sure I don't know. All I say is, it will be worse for me than for you.'

'No; it will not. You shall not be the worse for it, I promise you that. You will be much the better for it. Just you believe what I say, and do as I tell you.'

'Well, I *can* pull the clothes over my head,' said Diamond, and feeling with his little sharp nails, he got hold of the open edge of the paper and tore it off at once.

In came a long whistling spear of cold, and struck his little naked chest. He scrambled and tumbled in under the bedclothes, and covered himself up: there was no paper now between him and the voice, and he felt a little—not frightened exactly—I told you he had not learned that yet—but rather queer; for what a strange person this North Wind must be that lived in the great house—'called Out-of-Doors, I suppose,' thought Diamond—and made windows into people's beds! But the voice began again; and he could hear it quite plainly, even with his head under the bedclothes. It was a still



more gentle voice now, although six times as large and loud as it had been, and he thought it sounded a little like his mother's.

'What is your name, little boy?' it asked.

'Diamond,' answered Diamond, under the bedclothes.

'What a funny name!'

'It's a very nice name,' returned its owner.

'I don't know that,' said the voice.

'Well, I do,' retorted Diamond a little rudely.

'Do you know to whom you are speaking?'

'No,' said Diamond.

And indeed he did not. For to know a person's name is not always to know the person's self.

'Then I must not be angry with you. You had better look and see, though.'

'Diamond is a very pretty name,' persisted the boy, vexed that it should not give satisfaction.

'Diamond is a useless thing rather,' said the voice.

'That's not true. Diamond is very nice—as big as two—and so quiet all night! And doesn't he make a jolly row in the morning, getting up on his four great legs! It's like thunder.'

'You don't seem to know what a diamond is.'

'Oh, don't I just! Diamond is a great and good horse; and he sleeps right under me. He is Old Diamond, and I am Young Diamond; or if you like it better, for you're very particular, Mr North Wind, he's Big Diamond, and I'm Little Diamond; and I don't know which of us my father likes best.'

A beautiful laugh, large but very soft and musical, sounded somewhere beside him, but Diamond kept his head under the clothes.

'I'm not Mr North Wind,' said the voice.

'You told me that you were the North Wind,' insisted Diamond.

'I did not say *Mister* North Wind,' said the voice.

'Well then, I do; for Mother tells me I ought to be polite.'

'Then let me tell you I don't think it at all polite of you to say *Mister* to me.'