

The Golden Key



GEORGE MACDONALD

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SPARK CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION FOR THE
YOUNG READER



Very few readers have heard of George MacDonald. He is even called “the forgotten father of fantasy” because, while many famous fantasy writers were formed by his stories, he is no longer well known. Dozens of beloved classics draw on MacDonald’s fairy tales, including *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and his influence is still felt today.

So who was this influential but now almost-forgotten man? George MacDonald was born in Scotland in 1824 and his world was full of stories. One of his uncles studied Celtic fairy tales and poetry and another uncle studied Shakespeare. In school, MacDonald learned about Scotland’s great heroes, the classical myths, and Bible stories. He wanted to share the story of God’s love with others and became a minister when he was twenty-six years old. I imagine he also told stories to his children, since he had *eleven* with his wife, Louisa Powell! All in all, he wrote over fifty books, including *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and *The Princess and the Goblin*.

George MacDonald suffered from poor health, and he and Louisa lost four of their children to a lung disease called tuberculosis. While the MacDonalds were often on the brink of poverty, they were always welcoming friends into their home and around their table. Near the end of his life, MacDonald shared a challenging word with a crowd who had gathered to hear him speak: “I’m getting [to be] an old man, and I don’t know how soon I may be away, but I would just like to say to the young men and women present that there’s nothing in all the world worth doing except following Jesus Christ.” MacDonald died on September 18, 1905, after devoting his life to sharing the story of the Gospel as a father, husband, friend, preacher, and writer.

For this collection of his fairy tales, we chose stories that are beautiful and fun to read in hopes that they will help you get to know the wonderful George MacDonald.

In *The Golden Key*, Mossy and Tangle must go on a journey because they are longing to visit a place they have never been, “the place from whence the shadows fall.” Not even knowing what that place may be but guided by fantastical creatures, they begin searching for the keyhole where they can use the Golden Key. Will their wandering lead them to the place calling them home?

The Light Princess is so different from *The Golden Key* that you may be surprised when you read it. It's funny, witty, and even a bit silly. In the kingdom where the story takes place, an evil witch has stolen something very unexpected. She has taken away the princess's gravity (meaning not only that the princess can fly about like a feather on the wind but also that she cannot be serious about anything). In a world where evil holds great power, is there anything that can break the witch's spell?

In *Little Daylight*, the story also begins with a princess who has been cursed. A witch has turned the proper order of things upside down! Poor Daylight must sleep in the day and be awake in the night, and her body will wax and wane with the moon. Evil is always upending the goodness of creation, but how can things be set right?

The wisest people have always known that fairy tales are *important*. We might make the mistake of thinking that such stories aren't true because they're full of make-believe. But as these stories lead us through enchanted worlds, they teach us that we also live in an enchanted world that is full of wonder and mystery if we only have the eyes to see.

As we've prepared these tales for you to read, we've kept the words as close as possible to how George MacDonald

wrote them down, including spellings that may strike you as odd. For example, you may notice that MacDonald spells “colour” with what looks like an extra ‘u’, but this is in fact the way that British people (in MacDonald’s day and in our own) spell the word. MacDonald also uses punctuation in ways that may seem unusual to us today but were popular when he was writing in the 1800s. As you read this old book, you may notice some unfamiliar expressions and word choices as well. To help you out, there is an asterisk (*) designating a note that gives some extra information about the unfamiliar word.

I hope you are delighted by these stories as many children (and grown-ups) before you have been and that after getting to know George MacDonald, the forgotten father of fantasy, you will be eager to read many more beautiful stories that spark your imagination.

Haley Stewart, Editor of *Word on Fire Spark*

THE
GOLDEN KEY



THE GOLDEN KEY



here was a boy who used to sit in the twilight and listen to his great-aunt's stories.

She told him that if he could reach the place where the end of the rainbow stands he would find there a golden key.

"And what is the key for?" the boy would ask. "What is it the key of? What will it open?"

"That nobody knows," his aunt would reply. "He has to find that out."

"I suppose, being gold," the boy once said, thoughtfully, "that I could get a good deal of money for it if I sold it."

"Better never find it than sell it," returned his aunt.

And then the boy went to bed and dreamed about the golden key.

Now all that his great-aunt told the boy about the golden key would have been nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland. For

it is perfectly well known that out of Fairyland nobody ever can find where the rainbow stands. The creature takes such good care of its golden key, always flitting from place to place, lest any one should find it! But in Fairyland it is quite different. Things that look real in this country look very thin indeed in Fairyland, while some of the things that here cannot stand still for a moment, will not move there. So it was not in the least absurd of the old lady to tell her nephew such things about the golden key.

“Did you ever know anybody to find it?” he asked one evening.

“Yes. Your father, I believe, found it.”

“And what did he do with it, can you tell me?”

“He never told me.”

“What was it like?”

“He never showed it to me.”

“How does a new key come there always?”

“I don’t know. There it is.”

“Perhaps it is the rainbow’s egg.”

“Perhaps it is. You will be a happy boy if you find the nest.”

“Perhaps it comes tumbling down the rainbow from the sky.”

“Perhaps it does.”

One evening, in summer, he went into his own room and stood at the lattice window, and gazed into the forest which fringed the outskirts of Fairyland. It came close up to his great-aunt's garden, and, indeed, sent some straggling trees into it. The forest lay to the east, and the sun, which was setting behind the cottage, looked straight into the dark wood with his level red eye. The trees were all old, and had few branches below, so that the sun could see a great way into the forest; and the boy, being keen-sighted, could see almost as far as the sun. The trunks stood like rows of red columns in the shine of the red sun, and he could see down aisle after aisle in the vanishing distance. And as he gazed into the forest he began to feel as if the trees were all waiting for him, and had something they could not go on with till he came to them. But he was hungry, and wanted his supper. So he lingered.

Suddenly, far among the trees, as far as the sun could shine, he saw a glorious thing. It was the end of a rainbow, large and brilliant. He could count all seven colours, and could see shade after shade beyond the violet; while before the red stood a colour more gorgeous and mysterious still. It was a colour he had never seen before. Only the spring of the rainbow-arch was visible. He could see nothing of it above the trees.

“The golden key!” he said to himself, and darted out of the house, and into the wood.

He had not gone far before the sun set. But the rainbow only glowed the brighter. For the rainbow of Fairyland is not dependent upon the sun, as ours is. The trees welcomed him. The bushes made way for him. The rainbow grew larger and brighter; and at length he found himself within two trees of it.

It was a grand sight, burning away there in silence, with its gorgeous, its lovely, its delicate colours, each distinct, all combining. He could now see a great deal more of it. It rose high into the blue heavens, but bent so little that he could not tell how high the crown of the arch must reach. It was still only a small portion of a huge bow.

He stood gazing at it till he forgot himself with delight—even forgot the key which he had come to seek. And as he stood it grew more wonderful still. For in each of the colours, which was as large as the column of a church, he could faintly see beautiful forms slowly ascending as if by the steps of a winding stair. The forms appeared irregularly—now one, now many, now several, now none—men and women and children—all different, all beautiful.

He drew nearer to the rainbow. It vanished. He started back a step in dismay. It was there again, as beautiful as

ever. So he contented himself with standing as near it as he might, and watching the forms that ascended the glorious colours towards the unknown height of the arch, which did not end abruptly, but faded away in the blue air, so gradually that he could not say where it ceased.

When the thought of the golden key returned, the boy very wisely proceeded to mark out in his mind the space covered by the foundation of the rainbow, in order that he might know where to search, should the rainbow disappear. It was based chiefly upon a bed of moss.

Meantime it had grown quite dark in the wood. The rainbow alone was visible by its own light. But the moment the moon rose the rainbow vanished. Nor could any change of place restore the vision to the boy's eyes. So he threw himself down upon the mossy bed, to wait till the sunlight would give him a chance of finding the key. There he fell fast asleep.

When he woke in the morning the sun was looking straight into his eyes. He turned away from it, and the same moment saw a brilliant little thing lying on the moss within a foot of his face. It was the golden key. The pipe of it was of plain gold, as bright as gold could be. The handle was curiously wrought and set with sapphires. In a terror of delight he put out his hand and took it, and had it.



There he fell fast asleep.

He lay for a while, turning it over and over, and feeding his eyes upon its beauty. Then he jumped to his feet, remembering that the pretty thing was of no use to him yet. Where was the lock to which the key belonged? It must be somewhere, for how could anybody be so silly as make a key for which there was no lock? Where should he go to look for it? He gazed about him, up into the air, down to the earth, but saw no keyhole in the clouds, in the grass, or in the trees.

Just as he began to grow disconsolate, however, he saw something glimmering in the wood. It was a mere glimmer that he saw, but he took it for a glimmer of rainbow, and went towards it.—And now I will go back to the borders of the forest.

Not far from the house where the boy had lived, there was another house, the owner of which was a merchant, who was much away from home. He had lost his wife some years before, and had only one child, a little girl, whom he left to the charge of two servants, who were very idle and careless. So she was neglected and left untidy, and was sometimes ill-used besides.

Now it is well known that the little creatures commonly known as fairies, though there are many different kinds of fairies in Fairyland, have an exceeding dislike to untidiness. Indeed, they are quite spiteful to slovenly

people. Being used to all the lovely ways of the trees and flowers, and to the neatness of the birds and all woodland creatures, it makes them feel miserable, even in their deep woods and on their grassy carpets, to think that within the same moonlight lies a dirty, uncomfortable, slovenly house. And this makes them angry with the people that live in it, and they would gladly drive them out of the world if they could. They want the whole earth nice and clean. So they pinch the maids black and blue, and play them all manner of uncomfortable tricks.

But this house was quite a shame, and the fairies in the forest could not endure it. They tried everything on the maids without effect, and at last resolved upon making a clean riddance, beginning with the child. They ought to have known that it was not her fault, but they have little principle and much mischief in them, and they thought that if they got rid of her the maids would be sure to be turned away.

So one evening, the poor little girl having been put to bed early, before the sun was down, the servants went off to the village, locking the door behind them. The child did not know she was alone, and lay contentedly looking out of her window towards the forest, of which, however, she could not see much, because of the ivy and other creeping plants which had straggled across her window.

All at once she saw an ape making faces at her out of the mirror, and the heads carved upon a great old wardrobe grinning fearfully. Then two old spider-legged chairs came forward into the middle of the room, and began to dance a queer, old-fashioned dance. This set her laughing, and she forgot the ape and the grinning heads. So the fairies saw they had made a mistake, and sent the chairs back to their places. But they knew that she had been reading the story of Silverhair* all day. So the next moment she heard the voices of the three bears upon the stair, big voice, middle voice, and little voice, and she heard their soft, heavy tread, as if they had stockings over their boots, coming nearer and nearer to the door of her room, till she could bear it no longer. She did just as Silverhair did, and as the fairies wanted her to do; she darted to the window, pulled it open, got upon the ivy, and so scrambled to the ground. She then fled to the forest as fast as she could run.

Now, although she did not know it, this was the very best way she could have gone; for nothing is ever so mischievous in its own place as it is out of it; and, besides, these mischievous creatures were only the children of Fairyland, as it were, and there are many other beings there as well; and if a wanderer gets in among them, the

*A variation of the story of Goldilocks and The Three Bears.

good ones will always help him more than the evil ones will be able to hurt him.

The sun was now set, and the darkness coming on, but the child thought of no danger but the bears behind her. If she had looked round, however, she would have seen that she was followed by a very different creature from a bear. It was a curious creature, made like a fish, but covered, instead of scales, with feathers of all colours, sparkling like those of a hummingbird. It had fins, not wings, and swam through the air as a fish does through the water. Its head was like the head of a small owl.

After running a long way, and as the last of the light was disappearing, she passed under a tree with drooping branches. It dropped its branches to the ground all about her, and caught her as in a trap. She struggled to get out, but the branches pressed her closer and closer to the trunk. She was in great terror and distress, when the air-fish, swimming into the thicket of branches, began tearing them with its beak. They loosened their hold at once, and the creature went on attacking them, till at length they let the child go. Then the air-fish came from behind her, and swam on in front, glittering and sparkling all lovely colours; and she followed.

It led her gently along till all at once it swam in at a cottage door. The child followed still. There was a bright

fire in the middle of the floor, upon which stood a pot without a lid, full of water that boiled and bubbled furiously. The air-fish swam straight to the pot and into the boiling water, where it lay quiet. A beautiful woman rose from the opposite side of the fire and came to meet the girl. She took her up in her arms, and said,—

“Ah, you are come at last! I have been looking for you a long time.”

She sat down with her on her lap, and there the girl sat staring at her. She had never seen anything so beautiful. She was tall and strong, with white arms and neck, and a delicate flush on her face. The child could not tell what was the colour of her hair, but could not help thinking it had a tinge of dark green. She had not one ornament upon her, but she looked as if she had just put off quantities of diamonds and emeralds. Yet here she was in the simplest, poorest little cottage, where she was evidently at home. She was dressed in shining green.

The girl looked at the lady, and the lady looked at the girl.

“What is your name?” asked the lady.

“The servants always called me Tangle.”

“Ah, that was because your hair was so untidy. But that was their fault, the naughty women! Still it is a pretty name, and I will call you Tangle too. You must not mind

my asking you questions, for you may ask me the same questions, every one of them, and any others that you like. How old are you?"

"Ten," answered Tangle.

"You don't look like it," said the lady.

"How old are you, please?" returned Tangle.

"Thousands of years old," answered the lady.

"You don't look like it," said Tangle.

"Don't I? I think I do. Don't you see how beautiful I am!"

And her great blue eyes looked down on the little Tangle, as if all the stars in the sky were melted in them to make their brightness.

"Ah! but," said Tangle, "when people live long they grow old. At least I always thought so."

"I have no time to grow old," said the lady. "I am too busy for that. It is very idle to grow old.—but I cannot have my little girl so untidy. Do you know I can't find a clean spot on your face to kiss!"

"Perhaps," suggested Tangle, feeling ashamed, but not too much so to say a word for herself,— "perhaps that is because the tree made me cry so."

"My poor darling!" said the lady, looking now as if the moon were melted in her eyes, and kissing her little face,

dirty as it was, “the naughty tree must suffer for making a girl cry.”

“And what is your name, please?” asked Tangle.

“Grandmother,” answered the lady.

“Is it really?”

“Yes, indeed. I never tell stories, even in fun.”

“How good of you!”

“I couldn’t if I tried. It would come true if I said it, and then I should be punished enough.”

And she smiled like the sun through a summer shower.

“But now,” she went on, “I must get you washed and dressed, and then we shall have some supper.”

“Oh! I had supper long ago,” said Tangle.

“Yes, indeed you had,” answered the lady,—“three years ago. You don’t know that it is three years since you ran away from the bears. You are thirteen and more now.”

Tangle could only stare. She felt quite sure it was true.

“You will not be afraid of anything I do with you—will you?” said the lady.

“I will try very hard not to be; but I can’t be certain, you know,” replied Tangle.

“I like your saying so, and I shall be quite satisfied,” answered the lady.

She took off the girl’s nightgown, rose with her in her arms, and going to the wall of the cottage, opened a door.

Then Tangle saw a deep tank, the sides of which were filled with green plants, which had flowers of all colours. There was a roof over it like the roof of the cottage. It was filled with beautiful clear water, in which swam a multitude of such fishes as the one that had led her to the cottage. It was the light their colours gave that showed the place in which they were.

The lady spoke some words Tangle could not understand, and threw her into the tank.

The fishes came crowding about her. Two or three of them got under her head and kept it up. The rest of them rubbed themselves all over her, and with their wet feathers washed her quite clean. Then the lady, who had been looking on all the time, spoke again; whereupon some thirty or forty of the fishes rose out of the water underneath Tangle, and so bore her up to the arms the lady held out to take her. She carried her back to the fire, and having dried her well, opened a chest, and taking out the finest linen garments, smelling of grass and lavender, put them upon her, and over all a green dress, just like her own, shining like hers, and soft like hers, and going into just such lovely folds from the waist, where it was tied with a brown cord, to her bare feet.

“Won’t you give me a pair of shoes too, Grandmother?” said Tangle.



And the lady sat down with her again, and combed her hair...

“No, my dear; no shoes. Look here. I wear no shoes.”

So saying, she lifted her dress a little, and there were the loveliest white feet, but no shoes. Then Tangle was content to go without shoes too. And the lady sat down with her again, and combed her hair, and brushed it, and then left it to dry while she got the supper.

First she got bread out of one hole in the wall; then milk out of another; then several kinds of fruit out of a third; and then she went to the pot on the fire, and took out the fish now nicely cooked, and, as soon as she had pulled off its feathered skin, ready to be eaten.

“But,” exclaimed Tangle. And she stared at the fish, and could say no more.

“I know what you mean,” returned the lady. “You do not like to eat the messenger that brought you home. But it is the kindest return you can make. The creature was afraid to go until it saw me put the pot on, and heard me promise it should be boiled the moment it returned with you. Then it darted out of the door at once. You saw it go into the pot of itself the moment it entered, did you not?”

“I did,” answered Tangle, “and I thought it very strange; but then I saw you, and forgot all about the fish.”

“In Fairyland,” resumed the lady, as they sat down to the table, “the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people; for that is their highest end in that condition.

But they are not therefore destroyed. Out of that pot comes something more than the dead fish, you will see.”

Tangle now remarked that the lid was on the pot. But the lady took no further notice of it till they had eaten the fish, which Tangle found nicer than any fish she had ever tasted before. It was as white as snow, and as delicate as cream. And the moment she had swallowed a mouthful of it, a change she could not describe began to take place in her. She heard a murmuring all about her, which became more and more articulate, and at length, as she went on eating, grew intelligible. By the time she had finished her share, the sounds of all the animals in the forest came crowding through the door to her ears; for the door still stood wide open, though it was pitch-dark outside; and they were no longer sounds only; they were speech, and speech that she could understand. She could tell what the insects in the cottage were saying to each other too. She had even a suspicion that the trees and flowers all about the cottage were holding midnight communications with each other; but what they said she could not hear.

As soon as the fish was eaten, the lady went to the fire and took the lid off the pot. A lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings, rose out of it, and flew round and round the roof of the cottage; then dropped, fluttering, and nestled in the lap of the lady. She

spoke to it some strange words, carried it to the door, and threw it out into the darkness. Tangle heard the flapping of its wings die away in the distance.

“Now have we done the fish any harm?” she said, returning.

“No,” answered Tangle, “I do not think we have. I should not mind eating one every day.”

“They must wait their time, like you and me too, my little Tangle.”

And she smiled a smile which the sadness in it made more lovely.

“But,” she continued, “I think we may have one for supper tomorrow.”

So saying she went to the door of the tank, and spoke; and now Tangle understood her perfectly.

“I want one of you,” she said,—“the wisest.”

Thereupon the fishes got together in the middle of the tank, with their heads forming a circle above the water, and their tails a larger circle beneath it. They were holding a council, in which their relative wisdom should be determined. At length one of them flew up into the lady’s hand, looking lively and ready.

“You know where the rainbow stands?” she asked.

“Yes, mother, quite well,” answered the fish.