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Available at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol10/iss1/4
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With thanks to Dr. Leslie Cowan

In chapter XLII of *The Seaboard Parish* (entitled “The Studio”) George MacDonald features a picture supposedly by the fictional artist Percivale, but actually, as he adds in a footnote, by his friend Arthur Hughes. He is describing from memory *The Knight of the Sun*, an oil painting done by Hughes in 1868.

A dark hill rose against the evening sky which shone through a few thin pines on its top. Along a road on the hill-side, four squires bore a dying knight—a man past the middle age. One behind him carried his helm, and another led his horse, whose fine head only appeared in the picture. The head and countenance of the knight were very noble, telling of many a battle, and ever for the right. The last had doubtless been gained, for one might read victory as well as peace in the dying look. The party had just reached the edge of a steep descent, from which you saw the valley below, with the last of the harvest just being reaped, while the shocks stood all about in the fields, under the peace of the sunset. The sun had been down for some little time. There was no gold left in the sky, only a little saffron; but plenty of that lovely liquid green of the autumn sky, divided with a few streaks of pale rose. The depth of the sky overhead, which you could not see from the arrangement of the picture, was mirrored lovelily in a piece of water that lay in the centre of the valley. “My dear fellow!” I cried, “why did you not show me this first, and save me from saying so many unkind things? Look here Wynnie,” I went on, “you see it is evening. The sun’s work is done, and he has set in glory, leaving his good name behind him in a lovely harmony of colour. The old knight’s work is done too; his day has set in the storm of battle, and he is lying lapt
in the coming peace. They are bearing him home to his couch and his grave. Look at their faces in the dusky light. They are all mourning for and honouring the life that is ebbing away. but he is gathered to his fathers like a shock of corn fully ripe; and so the harvest stands, golden in the valley beneath. The picture would not be complete, however, if it did not tell us of the deep heaven overhead, the symbol of that heaven whither he who has done his work is bound: what a lovely idea to represent it by means of the water, the heaven embodying itself in the earth, as it were, that we may see it! And observe how that dusky hillside, and those tall, slender, mournful-looking pines, with that sorrowful sky between, lead the eye and point the heart upward towards that heaven. It is indeed a grand picture—full of feeling—a picture and a parable.

The original painting is now, I understand, in Switzerland; but I have copied a black and white photograph of it, so that readers can get some idea of the composition of the picture, and may take particular note of the Knight’s face. It is very similar to MacDonald’s appearance in the late 1850s, as we know from photographs and from the Munro medallion of 1858. Arthur Hughes and MacDonald first met in 1857. We do not know that MacDonald actually “sat” as a model for the Knight; Hughes was probably influenced by MacDonald’s features, whether consciously or unconsciously. He used many of his friends and acquaintances like this in other works.

A quotation inscribed on the frame is from MacDonald’s poem “Better Things” published in 1857: “Better a death when work is done / Than earth’s most favoured birth.” The MacDonald influence is certainly strong, though the circumstances are not known which led Hughes to use these particular lines. Nineteenth-century artists frequently added such quotations as an afterthought, when the work was complete. The story of the picture is not MacDonald’s; it probably came about by a process of amalgamation of romantic stories Hughes had read.

It is likely that in giving The Knight such high praise in The Seaboard Parish (1868), MacDonald was returning the compliment paid to him by Hughes. They were seeing a great deal of each other around that time; in 1867 Hughes was busy on illustrations for Dealings With the Fairies. But we cannot be absolutely sure: there are no written documents, nor is there any oral tradition among Arthur Hughes’s descendants.
(N.B. Another Arthur Hughes painting, acquired by the MacDonald family, was bequeathed to the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool by Joshua Sing, Louisa MacDonald’s brother-in-law.) [21]