

CHAPTER II

THE MOUNTAIN LOVERS

The Sin-Eater

It was soon evident that the noise and confused magnetism of the great City weighed disastrously on William Sharp. At the New Year, 1895, he wrote to a friend:

“London I do not like, though I feel its magnetic charm, or sorcery. I suffer here. The gloom, the streets, the obtrusion and intrusion of people, all conspire against thought, dream, true living. It is a vast reservoir of all the evils of civilised life with a climate which makes me inclined to believe that Dante came here instead of to Hades.”

The strain of the two kinds of work he was attempting to do, the immediate pressure of the imaginative work became unbearable, “the call of the sea,” imperative.

As he has related in “Earth, Fire and Water”: “It was all important for me not to leave in January, and in one way I was not ill-pleased for it was a wild winter. But one night I awoke hearing a rushing sound in the

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street, the sound of water. I would have thought no more of it had I not recognised the troubled sound of the tide, and the sucking and lapsing of the flow in muddy hollows. I rose and looked out. It was moonlight, and there was no water. When after sleepless hours I rose in the grey morning I heard the splash of waves, I could not write or read and at last I could not rest. On the afternoon of that day the waves dashed up against the house."

An incident showed me that his malaise was curable by one method only. A telegram had come for him that morning, and I took it to his study. I could get no answer. I knocked, louder, then louder,—at last he opened the door with a curiously dazed look in his face. I explained. He answered "Ah, I could not hear you for the sound of the waves!" It was the first indication to me, in words, of what troubled him.

That evening he started for Glasgow *en route* for Arran, where I knew he would find peace. To quote his own words:

"The following morning we (for a kinswoman was with me) stood on the Greenock pier waiting for the Hebridean steamer and before long were landed on an island, almost the nearest we could reach that I loved so

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well. . . . That night, with the sea breaking less than a score of yards from where I lay, I slept, though for three nights I had not been able to sleep. When I woke the trouble was gone.”

There is a curious point in his telling of this episode. Although the essay is written over the signature of “Fiona Macleod” and belongs to that particular phase of work, nevertheless it is obviously “William Sharp” who *tells* the story, for the “we” who stood on the pier at Greenock is himself in his dual capacity; “his kinswoman” is his other self.

He wrote to me on reaching his destination:

CORRIE, ISLE OF ARRAN,
20:2:1895.

“You will have had my telegram of my safe arrival here. There was no snow to speak of along the road from Brodick (for no steamer comes here) — so I had neither to ride nor sail as threatened: indeed, owing to the keen frost (which has made the snow like powder) there is none on the mountains except in the hollows, though the summits and flanks are crystal white with a thin veil of frozen snow.

“It was a most glorious sail from Ardrissan. The sea was a sheet of blue and purple

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washed with gold. Arran rose above all like a dream of beauty. I was the sole passenger in the steamer, for the whole island! What made the drive of six miles more beautiful than ever was the extraordinary fantastic beauty of the frozen waterfalls and burns caught as it were in the leap. Sometimes these immense icicles hung straight and long, like a Druid's beard: sometimes in wrought sheets of gold, or magic columns and spaces of crystal.

"Sweet it was to smell the pine and the heather and bracken, and the salt weed upon the shore. The touch of dream was upon everything, from the silent hills to the brooding herons by the shore.

"After a cup of tea, I wandered up the heights behind. In these vast solitudes peace and joy came hand in hand to meet me. The extreme loneliness, especially when I was out of sight of the sea at last, and could hear no more the calling of the tide, and only the sough of the wind, was like balm. Ah, those eloquent silences: the deep pain-joy of utter isolation: the shadowy glooms and darkness and mystery of night-fall among the mountains.

"In that exquisite solitude I felt a deep exaltation grow. The flowing of the air of

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the hills laved the parched shores of my heart. . . .

“There is something of a strange excitement in the knowledge that two people are here: so intimate and yet so far-off. For it is with me as though Fiona were asleep in another room. I catch myself listening for her step sometimes, for the sudden opening of a door. It is unawaredly that she whispers to me. I am eager to see what she will do — particularly in *The Mountain Lovers*. It seems passing strange to be here with her alone at last. . . .”

The Mountain Lovers was published in the summer of 1895 by Mr. John Lane. A copy of it was sent to George Meredith with the following letter:

9 UPPER COLTBRIDGE TERRACE,
MURRAYFIELD.

DEAR SIR,

Will you gratify one of your most loyal readers by the acceptance of the accompanying book? Nothing helped me so much, or gave me so much enduring pleasure, as your generous message to me about my first book, *Pharais*, which you sent through my cousin, Mr. William Sharp.

· Naturally, I was eager it should appeal to

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you — not only because I have long taken keener delight in your writings than in those of any living author, but also because you are Prince of Celtland. . . .

I hope you will be able to read, and perhaps care for, *The Mountain Lovers*. It is not a story of the Isles, like *Pharais*, but of the remote hill-country in the far northwest. I know how busy you are: so do not consider it necessary to acknowledge either the book or this letter. Still, if some happy spirit move you, I need not say that even the briefest line from you would be a deep pleasure to

Yours, with gratitude and homage,

FIONA MACLEOD.

Acknowledgment came swiftly:

Box Hill, July 13, 1895.

DEAR MADAM,

If I could have written on any matter out of my press of work when I received your *Pharais*, there would have been no delay with me to thank you for such a gift to our literature. This book on the "Mountains" promises as richly. Whether it touches equally deep, I cannot yet say. I find the same thrill in it, as of the bard on the three-stringed harp, and the wild western colour over sea

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and isles; true spirit of the mountains. How rare this is! I do not know it elsewhere. Be sure that, I am among those readers of yours whom you kindle. I could write more, but I have not recovered from the malady of the *degoût de la plume*, consequent on excess — and I pray that it may never fall on you. For though it is wisdom at my age to cease to write, it is not well to be taught to cease by distaste. That is a giving of oneself to the enemy. I have to be what I am, and I disclose it to win your pardon for my inexpressiveness when I am warmly sensible of a generous compliment.

I am, Yours most faithful

GEORGE MEREDITH.

It was in 1895 that the Omar Khayyam Club under the Presidentship of Mr. Edward Clodd, who was an old personal friend of Mr. Meredith, elected to hold its summer dinner at the Burford Bridge Hotel. Mr. Thomas Hardy, Mr. Watts-Dunton, Mr. George Gissing and William Sharp were among the guests. Mr. Clodd knew that it would be difficult to persuade Mr. Meredith to be present at the dinner. Nevertheless he lured him to the Hotel, and when coffee was served (I quote from a contemporary ac-

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count), "the beautiful face of the great novelist appeared within the doorway, and he was welcomed with enthusiasm by all present. The president extended to Mr. Meredith the right hand of fellowship on behalf of the Club, in a charming and eloquent speech not devoid of pathos. Mr. Meredith in his reply declared that Mr. Clodd was the most amiable of Chairmen but the most dastardly of deceivers. Never before, he added, had he been on his legs to make a speech in public, now before he knew it he was hustled over the first fence, and found himself overrunning the hounds. 'I have my hands on the fellow at this moment,' he continued laughingly, 'and I could turn on him and rend him, but I spare him.' After a few graceful and characteristic sentences concerning the Club and its object, and Omar, and expressing his appreciation of his reception, Mr. Meredith said in conclusion: 'I thank you from my heart, everyone of you.'"

Much to William Sharp's satisfaction he was elected member of the Omar Khayyam Club in the autumn of the same year. On receipt of the announcement of the fact the new member wrote to the President:

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RUTLAND HOUSE,
2d Nov., 1895.

DEAR BROTHER-IN-OMAR,

On my return from Scotland the other day I found a note informing me that I had been elected an Omarian on the nomination of your distinguished self.

My thanks, cher confrère. "A drop of my special grape to you," as Omar might say, if he were now among us with a Hibernian accent! Herewith I post to you another babe, born into this ungrateful world so recently as yesterday. . . . Such as it is, I hope you may like it. "Ecce Puella" itself was written at white heat — and ran in ripples off the brain: and so is probably readable.

"Fragments from The Lost Journals of Piero di Cosimo" when they appeared (some few years ago) won the high praise of Pater — but perhaps their best distinction is that they took in the cocksure and levelled the omniscient. One critical wight complained that I was not literal (probably from the lack of knowledge of medieval Italian), which he clinched by the remark that he had compared my version with the original! I see that Silas Hocking has just published a book called "All men are liars." I would fain send a copy to that critic, even now. By the way,

William Sharp,

my cousin, Miss Fiona Macleod, wrote to me the other day for your address. I understand she wanted to send you a copy of her new book. If you get it, you should, as a folk-lorist, read the titular story, *The Sin-Eater*.

My wife joins with me in cordial regards, and I am

Sincerely yours,

WILLIAM SHARP.

The President replied:

19 CARLETON ROAD,
TUFNELL PARK,
5th Nov.

MY DEAR SHARP,

It is an addition to the pleasant memories of my year of office to know that you are of the elect. You come in with Lang and Gissing. By the way, the next dinner is fixed for the sixth proximo. And it is an addition to a burden of obligation willingly borne which your kind gift imposes. For work such as yours has unending charm for me, because while Science was my first love and is still my dear mistress, I love her more for what she suggests than what she reveals. Facts, unrelated, bore me: only in their significance does one get abiding interest. That

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is why your *Vistas* and such like delicate, throbbing things attract me. Some of these were especially welcome on a recent dull Sunday by our "cold restless sea," on which in bright days you promise to come with Allen to look at it from my window. Your delicious story of the critic sent me straight to the *Journal of di Cosimo*. How well you produce the archaic flavour: the style has a Celtic ring about it. As for *Ecce Puella* I await the hearing of it from the voice of a "puella" who likes your work. I was at Meredith's on Sunday week: he keeps wonderfully well for him: his talk is bright as his face is beautiful. He has his fling at me over the Burford Bridge deception, and says that my duplicity cost you all a fine speech. I tell him that the speech we had was good enough for "the likes of us." So Fiona Macleod is your cousin! She is of the "elect." I take it as most kind of her to send me her new book, which I have as yet but partly read, and am about to acknowledge. She holds a weird, strong pen, and will help the Celt to make further conquest of the dullard Saxons. Meredith and I talked about her *Mountain Lovers* when I was with him in August.

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Kindest regards to Mrs. Sharp and yourself.

Yours sincerely,

EDWARD CLODD.

In the Autumn of 1894 we had come in touch with Professor and Mrs. Patrick Geddes of Edinburgh, and a friendship with far reaching results for "Fiona Macleod" arose between the two men. Both were idealists, keen students of life and nature; cosmopolitan in outlook and interest, they were also ardent Celts who believed in the necessity of preserving the finer subtle qualities and the spiritual heritage of their race against the encroaching predominance of materialistic ideas and aims of the day.

It was the desire and dream of such idealists and thinkers as Professor Geddes, and those associated with him, to preserve and nurture what is of value and of spiritual beauty in the race, so that it should fuse into and work with, or become part of, the great acquisitions and marvellous discoveries of modern thought. To hold to the essential beauty and thought of the past, while going forward eagerly to meet the new and ever increasing knowledge, was the desire of both men. In their aims they were in sympathy with one another; their manner of approach

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and methods of work were different. Patrick Geddes — biologist — was concerned primarily with the practical and scientific expression of his ideals; William Sharp was concerned primarily with expression through the art of words. Mutually sympathetic, they were eager to find some way of collaboration.

It was the dream of Professor Geddes to restore to Scotland something of its older pre-eminence in the world of thought, to recreate in Edinburgh an active centre and so to arrest the tremendous centralising power of the metropolis of London; to replace the stereotyped methods of education by a more vital and synthetic form; and to encourage national art and literature. Towards the carrying out of these aims he had built a University Hall and Settlement for students, artists, etc. Perhaps the most important of his schemes, certainly the most important from the modern scientific point of view, was the planning of the Outlook Tower — once an observatory — now an educational museum on the Castle Rock commanding a magnificent view of the city, of the surrounding country, of sea and sky; “an institution that is designed to be a method of viewing the problems of the science of life.” According

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to Professor Geddes "Our little scholastic colony in the heart of Edinburgh symbolises a movement which while national to the core, is really cosmopolitan in its intellectual reach."

Grouped with this scientific effort, was the aim to revive the Celtic influence in art and literature; and the little colony contained a number of men and women who were working to that end; notably among the painters were James Cadenhead, Charles Mackie, Robert Burns, John Duncan, also Pittendrigh MacGillivray the sculptor; and among the writers Professor Arthur Thomson, Dr. Douglas Hyde, Nora Hopper, Rosa Mulholland, A. Percival Graves, S. R. Crockett, Elisée Réclus, Alexander Carmichael, Victor Branford, Professor Patrick Geddes, F. M. and W. S.

Into that eager and sympathetic atmosphere of linked thought and aim my husband and I were speedily drawn; and before long a Publishing Firm was established for the issuing of Celtic Literature and Works on Science. To Mr. and Mrs. Geddes was confided the important secret relating to the personality of "Fiona Macleod," to the thoughts and ideals that underlay "her" projected work. It was arranged that William Sharp

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should be the Manager in the Firm of Patrick Geddes & Colleagues (which post he very soon relinquished for that of Literary Adviser); an arrangement which made it possible for that particular Colleague to publish three of his "F. M." books under his immediate supervision and from what was then one of the centres of the Celtic movement. This post, naturally, necessitated frequent visits to Edinburgh. For the month of August, 1895, we took a flat in the neighbourhood of the University Settlement so that we might share actively in the Summer Session.

It was an interesting experience. The students came from England, Scotland, France, Italy, and Germany; among the lecturers, in addition to Professors Geddes and Arthur Thomson, were Elisée Réclus, the geographer, and his brother Elie Réclus, Edmond Demolins and Abbé Klein.

W. S. prepared his lectures in rough outline. His inexperience in such work led him to plan them as though he were drafting out twelve books, with far more material than he could possibly use in the time at his disposal. His subject was "Art and Life" divided into ten lectures:

I. Life & Art: Art & Nature: Nature.

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- II. Disintegration: Degeneration: Regeneration.
- III. The Return to Nature: In Art, in Literature. The Literary Outlook in England & America.
- IV. The Celtic Renaissance, Ossian, Matthew Arnold, The Ancient Celtic Writers.
- V. The Celtic Renaissance. Contemporary. The School of Celtic Ornament.
- VI. The Science of Criticism: What it is, what it is not. The Critical Ideal.
- VII. Ernest Hello.
- VIII. The Drama of Life, and Dramatists.
- IX. The Ideals of Art — pagan, Mediæval, modern.
- X. The Literary Ideal — Pagan, Mediæval. The Modern Ideal.

One lecture only was delivered; for during it he was seized with a severe heart attack and all his notes fell to the ground. It was with the greatest effort that he was able to bring the lecture to a close: and he realised that he must not attempt to continue the Course; the risk was too great. Therefore, while I remained in Edinburgh to keep open

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house for the entertainment of the students, he went to the little Pettycur Inn at Kinghorn, on the north side of The Firth of Forth, till I was able to join him at Tighnabruaich in the Kyles of Bute where we had taken a cottage with his mother and sisters for September.

Two volumes of short stories were published in the late Autumn. It was the writer's great desire that work should be issued by W. S. and by F. M. about the same time; in part to sustain what reputation belonged to his older literary self, and in part to help to preserve the younger literary self's incognito. *Ecce Puella*, published by Mr. Elkin Matthew for W. S., was a collection of stories, etc., that had been written at different times and issued in various magazines, and prefaced by a revised and shortened version of the Monograph on "Fair Women in Painting and Poetry." It contained among other short stories one entitled "The Sister of Compassion," dedicated "to that Sister of compassion for all suffering animals, Mrs. Mona Caird," our dear friend. The other volume contained the first series of barbaric tales and myths of old Celtic days, "recaptured in dreams," that followed in quick succession from the pen of Fiona Macleod. *The Sin-*

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Eater was the first of the three "F. M." books published by the new Scoto-Celtic publishers. The Author was gratified by favourable reviews from important journals, and by letters, from which I select two:

The first is from Mr. Hamilton W. Mabie:

THE OUTLOOK,
13 ASTOR PLACE,
May 23d, 1897.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

The Sin-Eater came in holiday week and was one of my most welcome remembrances. I have read it with deep pleasure, almost with envy; so full is it of the stuff which makes literature. It has the vitality and beauty of a rich and living imagination. The secrets of the spirit are in it, and that fellowship with the profounder experiences which gets at the heart of a race. I have not forgotten your kind words about my own work; words which gave me new heart and hope. For you are the very type of man to whose mind I should like to appeal. The judgment of Mrs. Sharp, which you quote, gave me sincere pleasure. To get the attention of the few for whose opinion one cares most is a piece of great good fortune; to really find one's way to their hearts is best of all. I am looking

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forward to a good long talk with you. I wish you were here to-day. This is a divine May; balmy, fragrant, fresh; as if it had never been here before. There is enough *soul* in Miss Macleod's stories to set up a generation of average novelists. The work of the real writer seems to me a miracle; something from the sources of our life. I have found, however, so few among all my good literary friends who feel about literature as I do that I have felt at times as if I had no power of putting into words what lies in my heart. This does not mean that I have missed appreciation; on the contrary, I have had more than I deserve. But most of the younger men here regard literature so exclusively as a craft and so little as a revelation that I have often missed the kind of fellowship which you gave me. The deeper feeling is, however, coming back to us in the work of some of the newest men — Bliss Carman for instance. There is below such a book as *Vistas* a depth and richness of imagination which have rarely been disclosed here. I hope you will find time to send me an occasional letter. You will do me a real service. I am now at work on a book which I hope will be deeper and stronger than anything I have done yet. There is the stir of a new life here, although

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it may be long in getting itself adequately expressed.

Yours fraternally,

HAMILTON W. MABIE.

The second is from Sir George Douglas, poet, scholar, and keen critic:

SPRINGWOOD PARK, KELSO,
23:12:95.

MY DEAR SHARP,

Many thanks for your interesting letter and enclosures. I am very glad to find that you think I have understood Miss Macleod's work, and I think it very good of her to have taken my out-spoken criticisms in such good part. Certainly if she thinks I can be of any use to her in reading over the proofs of *The Washer of the Ford*, it will be a great pleasure to me. I shall probably be in Italy by the time she names — the end of Feb., but in these days of swift posts I hope that need not matter. What you tell me of Fiona's admirer is very interesting, and from my recollection of the way in which books and the fancied personality of their authors possessed my mind when I was a youth, I can well enter into his infatuation. Fortunately there were no women among my "influences," or I might have been in as bad a case as he! Would

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not this be a case for telling the secret, under pledges of course, if it were only to prevent mischief? By the way the whole incident seems to me to afford excellent material for literary treatment — not by you perhaps, nor yet by me (for the literary element in the material puts it outside your province, and makes it not quite the theme I like for my own use either) but say, for W.

Yours ever sincerely,

GEORGE DOUGLAS.

I do not quite agree with you as to the inception of *Miss Macleod*, and possibly this is a matter in which you are not the best possible judge. At any rate, without going into the matter, I fancy that I could establish the existence in works earlier than the *Poems of Phantasy* of a certain mystical tendency (German perhaps rather than Celtic in its colouring at that time), but none the less akin to the mysticisms of F. M.

But I may be mistaken. . . .

Our friend, Sir George Douglas, had followed the literary career of William Sharp with careful interest, and gave the same heed to the writings of "Fiona Macleod." After perusal of *The Sin-Eater* he made a careful

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study of the two methods of work, and wrote to the author to tell him he was finally convinced from internal evidence that William Sharp was the author of these books under discussion. He did not ask for confirmation but wished the author to know his conclusions. The latter, who valued not only the friendship but the critical appreciation of his correspondent, made no denial, but begged that the secret might be guarded. In Sir George Douglas' answer there is a reference to a curious incident which had happened while we were at Rudgwick. A letter came from an unknown correspondent containing a proposal of marriage to Fiona Macleod. Whether it was intended as a "draw" or not we could not decide. The proposal was apparently written in all seriousness. Similarities of taste, details of position, profession, etc., were carefully given. Acceptance was urged with all appearance of seriousness; therefore the refusal was worded with gravity befitting the occasion.