

CHAPTER IV

“RUNES OF THE SORROW OF WOMEN”

Green Fire

During the most active years of the Fiona Macleod writings, the author was usually in a highly wrought condition of mental and emotional tension, which produced great restlessness, so that he could not long remain contentedly anywhere. We spent the summer of 1896 moving about from one place to another that had special interest for him. First we went to Bamborough, for sea-bathing (he was a fine swimmer), and to visit the little Holy Isle of the Eastern Shores, Lindisfarne, Iona's daughter. Thence to the Clyde to be near his mother and sisters. From Inverness we went to the Falls of Lora, in Ossian's country, and later we moved to one of William's favourite haunts, Loch Tarbert, off Loch Fyne, where our friends Mr. and Mrs. Frank Rinder had taken a house for the summer. There I left him with his secretary-sister, Mary, and returned to London to recommence my work on *The Glasgow*

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

Herald. The two following letters to me told of the progress of his work:

September 23d.

“I am now well in writing trim I am glad to say. Two days ago I wrote the long-awaited ‘Rune of the Passion of Woman,’ the companion piece in a sense to the ‘Chant of Woman’ in *Pharais* — and have also done the *Savoy* story, ‘The Archer’ (about 4,500 words) and all but done ‘Ahez the Pale.’ To-day I hope to get on with the ‘Lily Leven.’ . . .

“I must make the most of this day of storm for writing. I had a splendid long sleep last night, and feel ‘spiff.’ . . . I am not built for mixed companies, and like them less and less in proportion as the imperative need of F. M. and W. S. for greater isolation grows. I realise more and more the literal truth of what George Meredith told me — that renunciation of ordinary social pleasures (namely of the ordinary kind in the ordinary way) is a necessity to any worker on the high levels: and unless I work that way I shall not work at all.”

26th Sept.

“ . . . Yesterday turned out a splendid breezy day, despite its bad opening: one of the

William Sharp

most beautiful we have had, altho' too cold for bathing, and too rough for boating. I went off by myself for a long sail — and got back about 4. Later I went alone for an hour or so to revise what had stirred me so unspeakably, namely the third and concluding 'Rune of the Sorrow of Women.' This last Rune tired me in preliminary excitement and in the strange semi-conscious fever of composition more than anything of the kind since I wrote the first of the three in *Pharais* one night of storm when I was alone in Phe-nice Croft.

“I have given it to Mary to copy, so that I can send it to you at once. Tell me what you think and feel about it. In a vague way not only you, Mona, Edith and others swam into my brain, but I have never so absolutely felt the woman-soul within me: it was as though in some subtle way the soul of Woman breathed into my brain — and I feel vaguely as if I had given partial expression at least to the inarticulate voice of a myriad woman who suffer in one or other of the triple ways of sorrow. For work, and rebuilding energy, I am thankful I came here. You were right: I was not really fit to go off to the Hebrides alone, at the present juncture, and might well have defeated my

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

own end. To-morrow morning I shall be writing — probably at From the Hills of Dream.”

From Tighnabruaich Hotel, a lovely little village in the Kyles of Bute, he wrote to me:

“I am glad to be here, for though the weather has changed for the worse I am so fond of the place and neighbourhood. But what I care for most is I am in a strong Fiona mood, though more of dream and reverie — creatively — than of actual writing: indeed it is likely all my work here, or nearly all, shall be done through dream and mental-cartooning. I have written ‘The Snow Sleep of Angus Ogue’ for the winter *Evergreen*, and am glad to know it is one of F. M.’s deepest and best utterances.”

The Evergreen was a Quarterly started by Prof. Geddes, of which W. S. was Editor. Five numbers only were issued. During the autumn William had prepared for publication by P. Geddes & Coll. a re-issue of the Tales contained in *The Sin-Eater* and *The Washer of the Ford*, in the form of a paper covered edition in three volumes, *Barbaric Tales*, *Spiritual Tales*, *Tragic Romances*. Each volume contained a new tale. Mr. W.

William Sharp

B. Yeats considered that "of the group of new voices none is more typical than the curious mysterious voice that is revealed in these stories of Miss Fiona Macleod. . . . She has become the voice (of these primitive peoples and elemental things) not from mere observation of their ways, but out of an absolute identity of nature. . . . Her art belongs in kind, whatever be its excellence in its kind, to a greater art, which is of revelation, and deals with invisible and impalpable things. Its mission is to bring us near to those powers and principalities, which we divine in mortal hopes and passions."

Mr. W. E. Henley had shown considerable interest in the "F. M." Tales, and had written an appreciative letter to the author, who immediately acknowledged it:

I:4:97.

DEAR MR. HENLEY,

I thank you for your kind letter. Any word of recognition from you means much to me. Your advice is wise and sane, I am sure—and you may be certain that I shall bear in mind. It will be difficult to follow—for absolute simplicity is the most difficult of all styles, being, as it must be, the expression of a mind at once so imaginative in itself, so lucid in its outlook, and so controlled

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

in its expression, that only a very few rarely gifted individuals can hope to achieve the isolating ideal you indicate.

The three latest things I have written are the long short-story "Morag of the Glen," "The Melancholy of Ulad," and "The Archer." I would particularly like to know what you think of the style and method of "The Archer" (I mean, apart from the arbitrary fantasy of the short supplementary part — which affords the clue to the title) — as there I have written, or tried to write, with the accent of that life as I know it.

F. M.

The central story of "The Archer" was one of the Tales which the author valued most, and rewrote many times. In its final form — "Silis," in the Tauchnitz volume of F. M. Tales — it stands without the opening and closing episodes. Concerning the "fantasy of the short supplementary part" a curious coincidence happened. That arbitrary fantasy is the record of a dream, or vision, which the author had at Tarbert. In a letter from Mr. Yeats received shortly after, the Irish poet related a similar experience which he had had — a vision of a woman shooting arrows among the stars — a vision that appeared

William Sharp

also the same night to Mr. Arthur Symons. I remember the exchange of letters that passed between the three writers; unfortunately Fiona's letter to Mr. Symons, and the latter's answer, are not available. But I have two of the letters on the subject which, through the courtesy of Mr. Yeats, I am able to quote; both, unfortunately are undated. F. M. describes a second vision which, however, had no connection with the coincidence.

Mr. Yeats wrote:

TILLYRA CASTLE,
CO. GALWAY.

MY DEAR SHARP,

Many thanks for your letter. You must have written it the very morning I was writing to Miss Macleod. I have just returned from the Arran Islands where I had gone on a fishing boat, and where I go again at the end of this week. I am studying on the islands for the opening chapter of a story I am about to set out upon. I met two days ago an old man who hears the fairies he says every night and complains much that their singing keeps him awake. He showed me a flute which he had got thinking that if he played it they might be pleased and so cease teasing him. I have met much curious lore here and in Arran.

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

I have had some singular experiences myself. I invoked one night the spirits of the moon and saw between sleep and waking a beautiful woman firing an arrow among the stars. That night she appeared to Symons who is staying here, and so impressed him that he wrote a poem on her, the only one he ever wrote to a dream, calling her the fountain of all song or some such phrase. She was the symbolic Diana. I invoked a different spirit another night and it appeared in dreams to an old French Count, who was staying here, and was like Symons ignorant of my invocations. He locked his door to try to keep it out. Please give my greetings to Miss Macleod.

Yours Sincerely,
W. B. YEATS.

F. M. wrote in acknowledgment of a long critical letter from Mr. Yeats, to whom "she" had sent *The Washer of the Ford*:

TARBERT ON LOCH FYNE.

DEAR MR. YEATS,

Unforeseen circumstances have prevented my writing to you before this, and even now I must perforce be more brief than I would fain be in response to your long and deeply

William Sharp

interesting as well as generous letter. Alas, a long pencilled note (partly apropos of your vision of the woman shooting arrows, and of the strange coincidence of something of the same kind on my own part) has long since been devoured by a too voracious or too trustful gull — for a sudden gust of wind blew the quarto-sheet from off the deck of the small yacht wherein I and my dear friend and confrère of whom you know were sailing off Skye. . . . How good of you to write to me as you did. Believe me, I am grateful. There is no other writer whose good opinion could please me more — for I love your work, and take an endless delight in your poetry, and look to you as not only one of the rare few on whose lips is the honey of Magh Mell, but as one the dark zone of whose mind is lit with the strange stars and constellations of the spiritual life. Most cordially I thank you for your critical remarks. Even where I do not unreservedly agree, or where I venture to differ (as for example, in the matter of the repetition of the titular words in “The Washer of the Ford” poem) I have carefully pondered all you say. I am particularly glad you feel about the “Annr Choille” as you do. Some people whom I would like to please do not care for it: yet I am sure you are

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

right in considering it one of the most vital things I have been able to do.

With what delight I have read your lovely poem, "O'Sullivan Rue to the Secret Rose!" I have read it over and over with ever deepening delight. It is one of your finest poems, I think: though perhaps it can only be truly appreciated by those who are familiar with legendary Celtic history. We read it to each other, my friend and I, on a wonderful sundown "when evening fed the wave with quiet light," off one of the Inner Hebrides (Colonsay, to the South of Oban). . . . I cannot quite make up my mind, as you ask, about your two styles. Personally, I incline not exactly to a return to the earlier but to a marriage of the two: that is, a little less remoteness, or subtlety, with a little more of rippling clarity. After reading your Blake paper (and with vivid interest and delight) I turned to an early work of yours which I value highly, *Dhoya*: and I admit that my heart moved to *it*. Between them lies, I think, your surest and finest line of work — with the light deft craft of *The Celtic Twilight*.

I hope you are soon going to issue the promised volume of poems. When my own book of verse is ready — it is to be called

William Sharp

From the Hills of Dream — it will give me such sincere pleasure to send you a copy. By the bye, I must not forget to thank you for introducing my work to Mr. Arthur Symons. He wrote to me a pleasant letter, and asked me to contribute to the *Savoy*, which I have done. I dare say my friend (who sends you comradely greetings, and says he will write in a day or two) will tell you more from me when he and you meet.

I had a strange vision the other day, wherein I saw the figure of a gigantic woman sleeping on the green hills of Ireland. As I watched, the sun waned and the dark came and the stars began to fall. They fell one by one, and each fell into the woman — and lo, of a sudden, all was bare running water, and the drowned stars and the transmuted woman passed from my seeing. This was a waking dream, an open vision: but I do not know what it means, though it was so wonderfully vivid. In a vague way I realise that something of tremendous moment is being matured just now. We are on the verge of vitally important developments. And all the heart, all the brain, of the Celtic races shall be stirred. There is a shadow of mighty changes. Myself, I believe that new spirits have been embodied among us. And some

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

of the old have come back. We shall perish, you and I and all who fight under the "Lifting of the Súnbeam"—but we shall pioneer a wonderful marvellous new life for humanity. The other day I asked an old islesman where her son was buried. "He was not buried," she said, "for all they buried his body. For a week ago I saw him lying on the heather, and talking swift an' wild with a Shadow." *The Shadows are here.*

I must not write more just now.

My cordial greetings to you, sincerely,

FIONA MACLEOD.

No sooner had W. S. returned to London than he fell ill with nervous prostration, and rheumatism. It was soon obvious that he could not remain in town, and that for a short time at any rate he must cease from pen-work. It therefore seemed an opportune moment for him to go to New York, and attend to his publishing interests there, especially as Messrs. Stone & Kimball had recently failed.

Before starting he had read and reviewed with much interest a volume of poems by the American poet, Mrs. Elizabeth Stoddard, and had received a pleased acknowledgment from her husband Richard H. Stoddard:

William Sharp

NEW YORK, Oct. 30, 1896.

MY DEAR SHARP,

I am greatly obliged to you for what you have written about my wife's poetry, any recognition of which touches me more nearly than anything that could be said about my own verse. . . . My wife has told you, I presume, how much I enjoyed your wife's *Women's Voices*, just before I went into the Hospital, and how I composed a bit of verse in my head when I couldn't see to feed myself. Do you ever compose in that silent way? I have taught myself to do without pens, ink, and paper, in verse; but I can't do so in prose, which would print itself in the thing I call my mind. Give my kindest regards and warmest good wishes to your Elizabeth, whose charming book is a favourite with *my* Elizabeth as well, as with

Yours sincerely,

R. H. STODDARD.

Later, Mr. Stedman wrote an account of a dinner given to Mr. Stoddard to which W. S. was invited:

BRONXVILLE, N. Y.

Feb. 17, 1897.

MY DEAR SHARP,

I have received your long letter of the 25th Jany, and also a shorter one of the 30th

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

written at Mr. George Cotterell's house. I will say at the outset that I feel guilty at seeing the name of that lovable man and true poet; for although a year has passed since the completion of my (Victorian) Anthology I have been positively unable to write the letter which I have in my heart for him.

. . . The most important social matter here this winter relating to our Guild will be a large important dinner to be given on March 25th by the Author's Club and his other friends, to Richard Henry Stoddard. We are going to try to make an exception to the rule that New York is not good to her own, and to render a tribute somewhat commensurate with Stoddard's life long services, and his quality as poet and man. A few invitations are going to be sent to literary men abroad, and I have been able to write about them to Besant, Dobson, Garnett and yourself. Of course I do not expect that you will come over here, and I am quite sure you will write a letter which can be read at the dinner, for I have in mind your personal friendship with Stoddard and affectionate comprehension of his genius and career. . . .

On the 13th of April Mr. Stedman wrote again to report on the proceedings:

William Sharp

“Your letter to the Stoddard Banquet was by far the best and most inclusive of the various ones received, and it was read out to the 150 diners and met with high favour. I mailed you the full report of the affair, but believe I have not written you since it came off. It proved to be the most notable literary occasion yet known in this city — was brilliant, magnetic, enthusiastic throughout. I felt a pride in my office as Chairman. The hall was one of the handsomest in America, the speaking of the most eloquent type, and full of laughter and tears. The Stoddards were deeply gratified by your letter.

“E. C. S.”

My husband arrived in New York on All Hallow E'en and went direct to the hospitable house of Mr. Alden whence he wrote to me:

METUCHEN, N. J.,

1st Nov., 1896.

“. . . Of course nothing can be done till Wednesday. All America is aflame with excitement — and New York itself is at fever-heat. I have never seen such a sight as yesterday. The whole enormous city was a mass of flags and innumerable Republican and Democratic insignia — with the streets thronged with over two million people. The

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

whole business quarter made a gigantic parade that took 7 hours in its passage—and the business men alone amounted to over 100,000. Everyone—as indeed not only America, but Great Britain and all Europe—is now looking eagerly for the final word on Tuesday night. The larger issues are now clearer: not merely that the Bryanite 50-cent dollar (instead of the standard 100 cent) would have far reaching disastrous effects, but that the whole struggle is one of the anarchic and destructive against the organic and constructive forces. However, this tremendous crisis will come to an end—pro tem. at any rate—on Tuesday night. . . .”

During his absence, F. M.'s romance, *Green Fire*, was published. The title was taken from a line in “Cathal of the Woods,” “O green fire of life, pulse of the world, O Love!” And the deeper meaning of the expression “Green Life”—so familiar to all who knew “Fiona Macleod”—is suggested in a sentence at the close of the book: “Alan knew that strange nostalgia of the mind for impossible things. Then, wrought for a while from his vision of green life, and flamed by another green fire than that born of earth, he dreamed his dream.”

William Sharp

To me, the author wrote from New York :

“ . . . I am indeed glad you like *Green Fire* so well. And you are right in your insight: Annaik *is* the real human magnet. Ynys is an idealised type, what I mean by Ideala or Esclarmoundo, but she did not take hold of me like Annaik. Alan, too, is a variation of the Ian type. But Annaik has for me a strange and deep attraction: and I am sure the abiding personal interest must be in *her*. You are the only one who seems to have understood and perceived this— certainly the only one who has noticed it. Some day I want to tell Annaik’s story in full. . . . ”

The author had read much Breton lore during his study of French Literature, and as his interest had for a time been centred on the land of the kindred Celt, he determined to make it the setting of a new Romance. He had never been there, so drew on his imagination for the depiction of the places he knew of by hearsay only. The result, when later he judged the book in cool criticism, he considered to be unsatisfactory as to structure and balance. He realised, that although the *Fiona impetus* produced the first

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

chapter and the latter part, the plot and melodramatic character of the Breton story are due to W. S.; that the descriptions of nature are written by F. M. and W. S. in fusion, are in character akin to the descriptions in *The Children of To-morrow*, written by W. S. in his transition stage. Consequently, when in 1905, he discussed with me what he wished preserved of his writings, he asked my promise that I would never republish the book in its entirety.

In order to preserve what he himself cared for, he rewrote the Highland portion of the book, named it "The Herdsman" and included it in *The Dominion of Dreams*. (In the Uniform Edition, it is placed, together with a series of detached Thought-Fragments from *Green Fire*, in *The Divine Adventure*, Vol. IV.) He never carried out his intention of writing Annaik's story in full. Had he done so it would have been incorporated in a story, partly reminiscent of his early sojourn among the gipsies, and have been called *The Gipsy Trail*.

Some months later Mr. W. B. Yeats wrote to W. S.:

"I have read 'Green Fire' since I saw you. I do not think it is one of your well-built

William Sharp

stories, and I am certain that the writing is constantly too self-consciously picturesque; but the atmosphere, the romance of much of it, of 'The Herdsman' part in particular haunts me ever since I laid it down.

“‘Fiona Macleod’ has certainly discovered the romance of the remote Gaelic places as no one else has ever done. She has made the earth by so much the more beautiful.”

And Mr. George Russell (A. E.) wrote to F. M. from Dublin:

DEAR FIONA MACLEOD,

My friend, Willie Yeats, has just come by me wrapt in a faery whirlwind, his mouth speaking great things. He talked much of reviving the Druidic mysteries and vaguely spoke of Scotland and you. These stirring ideas of his are in such a blaze of light that, but for the inspiration of a presence always full of enthusiasm, I would get no ideas at all from him. But when he mentioned your name and spoke of the brotherhood of the Celts and what ties ought to unite them, I remembered a very kindly letter which I had put on one side waiting for an excuse to write again. So I gladly take Yeats' theory of what ought to be and write. . . .

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

Thoughts inspired by what is written or said are aimed at the original thinker and from every quarter converge on his inner nature. Perhaps you have felt this. It means that these people are putting fetters on you, binding you to think in a certain way (what they expect from you); and there is a danger of the soul getting bent so that after its first battle it fights no more but repeats dream upon dream its first words in answer to their demand and it grows more voice and less soul every day. I read *Green Fire* a few weeks ago and have fallen in love with your haunted seas. Your nature spirit is a little tragic. You love the Mother as I do, but you seem for ever to expect some revelation of awe from her lips where I would hide my head in her bosom. But the breathless awe is true also—to “meet on the Hills of Dream,” that would not be so difficult. I think you know that? Some time when the power falls on me I’ll send a shadow of myself over seas just to get the feeling of the Highlands. I have an intuition that the “fires” are awakening somewhere in the North West. I may have met you indeed and not known you. We are so different behind the veil. Some who are mighty of the mighty there are nothing below,

William Sharp

and then waking life keeps no memory of their victorious deeds in sleep. And if I saw you your inner being might assume some old Druidic garb of the soul, taking that form because you are thinking the Druidic thought. The inner being is protean and has a thousand changes of apparel. I sat beside a friend and while he was meditating, the inner being started up in Egyptian splendour robed in purple and gold. He had chanced upon some mood of an ancient life. I write to you of these things judging that you know of them to some extent here: that your inner nature preserves the memory of old initiations, so I talk to you as a comrade on the same quest. You know too I think that these alluring visions and thoughts are of little import unless they link themselves unto our humanity. It means only madness in the end. I know people whose lamps are lit and they see wonderful things but they themselves will not pass from vision into action. They follow beauty only like the dwellers in Tyre whom Ezekiel denounced, "They have corrupted their wisdom by reason of their brightness." Leaving these mystic things aside what you say about art is quite true except that I cannot regard art as the "quintessential life" unless art comes to mean the art of liv-

Runes of the Sorrow of Women

ing more than the art of the artists. . . . Sometime, perhaps, if it is in the decrees of the gods (our true selves) we may meet and speak of these things. But don't get enslaved by your great power of expression. It ties the mind a little. There was an old Hermetist who said "The knowledge of It is a divine silence and the rest of all the senses. . . ."

You ask me to give my best. Sometimes I think silence is the best. I can feel the sadness of truth here, but not the joy, and there must always be as exquisite a joy as there is pain in any state of consciousness. . . .

A. E.