

CHAPTER V

FROM THE HILLS OF DREAM

The Laughter of Peterkin

On the wanderer's return to England his volume of poems *From the Hills of Dream* was published by P. Geddes & Coll. The first edition was dedicated to our godson Arthur Allhallow, younger son of Prof. and Mrs. Patrick Geddes, who was born on that Hallow E'en the anniversary of our Wedding-day. The volume consists of poems, runes and lyrics, written by F. M. between 1893 and 1896; and a series of "prose rhythms" entitled "The Silence of Amor."

A sympathetic letter from Mr. Ernest Rhys, drew a quick response:

MURRAYFIELD, MIDLOTHIAN,
23:11:96.

DEAR MR. RHYS,

On my coming from the West to Edinburgh, for a few days, I found your very welcome and charming letter, among others forwarded to me from the Outlook Tower.

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It gratifies me very much that you whose work I so much admire and with whose aims and spirit I am in so keen sympathy, care so well for the "Hills of Dream." These are hills where few inhabit, but comrade always knows comrade there—and so we are sure to meet one another, whether one carry a "London Rose" or a sheaf of half-barbaric Hill-Runes. It may interest you to know that the name which seems to puzzle so many people is (though it does exist as the name "Fiona," not only in Ossian but at the present day, though rarely) the Gaelic diminutive of "Fionaghal" (i. e. Flora). For the rest—I was born more than a thousand years ago, in the remote region of Gaeldom known as the Hills of Dream. There I have lived the better part of my life, my father's name was Romance, and that of my mother was Dream. I have no photograph of their abode, which is just under the quicken-arch immediately west of the sunset-rainbow. You will easily find it. Nor can I send you a photograph of myself. My last fell among the dew-wet heather, and is now doubtless lining the cells of the wild bees.

All this authentic information I gladly send you!

Sincerely yours,

FIONA MACLEOD.

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Early in 1897 Mr. Yeats wrote from Paris to F. M. concerning aims and ideals he was endeavouring to shape into expression for the re-vivifying of Celtic Ireland, and out of which has evolved the Irish National Theatre:

MY DEAR MISS MACLEOD,

I owe you a letter for a long time, and can only promise to amend and be more prompt in future. I have had a busy autumn, always trying to make myself do more work than my disposition will permit, and at such times I am the worst of correspondents. I have just finished a certain speech in *The Shadowy Waters*, my new poem, and have gone to *The Café du Musée de Cluny* to smoke and read the Irish news in the *Times*. I should say I wrote about your book of poems as you will have seen in the *Bookman*. I have just now a plan I want to ask you about? Our Irish Literary and Political literary organisations are pretty complete (I am trying to start a Young Ireland Society, among the Irish here in Paris at the moment) and I think it would be very possible to get up Celtic plays through these Societies. They would be far more effective than lectures and might do more than anything else we can do to make the Irish, Scotch and other Celts

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recognise their solidarity. My own plays are too elaborate, I think, for a start, and have also the disadvantage that I cannot urge my own work in committee. If we have one or two short direct prose plays, of (say) a mythological and folklore kind, by you and by some writer (I may be able to move O'Grady, I have already spoken to him about it urgently) I feel sure we could get the *Irish Literary Society* to make a start. They have indeed for some time talked of doing my *Land of Heart's Desire*.

My own theory of poetical or legendary drama is that it should have no realistic, or elaborate, but only a symbolic and decorative setting. A forest, for instance, should be represented by a forest pattern and not by a forest painting. One should design a scene, which would be an accompaniment, not a reflection of the text. This method would have the further advantage of being fairly cheap, and altogether novel. The acting should have an equivalent distance to that of the play from common realities. The plays might be almost, in some cases, modern mystery plays. Your "Last Supper," for instance, would make such a play; while your story in the *Savoy* would arrange as a strong play of merely human tragedy. I shall try my own hand

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possibly at some short prose plays also, but not yet. I merely suggest these things because they are a good deal on my mind, and not that I wish to burden your already full hands. My "Shadowy Waters" is magical and mystical beyond anything I have done. It goes but slowly, however, and I have had to recast all I did in Ireland some years ago. Mr. Sharp heard some of it in London in its first very monotonous form. I wish to make it a kind of grave ecstasy.

I am also at the start of a novel which moves between the Islands of Aran and Paris, and shall have to go again to Aran about it. After these books I start a long cherished project — a poetical version of the great Celtic epic tale, Deirdre, Cuchullin at the Ford, and Cuchullin's death, and Dermot and Grainne. I have some hopes that Mr. Sharp will come to Paris on his way back to England. I have much to talk over with him, I am feeling more and more every day that our Celtic movement is approaching a new phase. Our instrument is sufficiently prepared as far as Ireland is concerned, but the people are less so, and they can only be stirred by the imagination of a very few acting on all.

My book *The Secret Rose* was to have

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been out in December but it has been postponed till February. If I have any earlier copies you shall have one. I am specially curious to know what you think of a story called "The Adoration of the Magi" which is a half prophecy of a very veiled kind.

Yours truly,
W. B. YEATS.

The prolonged strain of the heavy dual work added to by an eager experimentation with certain psychic phenomena — with which he had long been familiar but wished further to investigate, efforts in which at times he and Mr. W. B. Yeats collaborated — began to tell heavily on him, and to produce very disquieting symptoms of nervous collapse. We decided therefore that he should pass the dead months of the year, as he called December and January, in the South of France. From St. Remy while on a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Janvier he wrote to me:

"I am not going to lament that even the desire to think-out anything has left me — much less the wish to write — for I am sure that is all in the order of the day towards betterness. But I do now fully realise that I must give up everything to getting back

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my old buoyancy and nervous strength — and that prolonged rest and open air are the paramount needs. . . .

“ However, enough of this, henceforth I hope to have to think of and report on the up-wave only.

“ I am seated in a little room close to the window — and as I look out I first see the boughs of a gigantic sycamore through which the mistral is roaring with a noise like a gale at sea. Beyond this is a line of cypresses, and apparently within a stone’s throw are the extraordinary wildly fantastic mountain-peaks of St. Remy. I have never seen anything like them. No wonder they are called the Dolomites of France. They are, too, in aspect unspeakably ancient and remote.

“ We are practically in the country, and in every way, with its hill-air and beauty, the change from Tarascon is most welcome. . . . There is a strange but singularly fascinating blend of north and south here just now. The roar of the mistral has a wild wintry sound, and the hissing of the wood fire is also suggestive of the north: and then outside there are the unmistakable signs of the south and those fantastic unreal like hills. I never so fully recognise how intensely northern I am than when I am in the south. . . . ”

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The following fragment of a diary — all there is for 1897 — gives a record of the work he had in progress: also shows his way of noting (or not noting!) his outgoing expenses:

January 1st, 1897.—A day of extreme beauty at Sainte-Maxime (Var). In the morning wrote letters, etc., and then walked into Sainte-Maxime and posted them, and sent a telegram to Elizabeth, to be delivered at dinner time, with New Year greetings and Fair Wishes.

Worked at "Ahez the Pale," and, having finished the revision of it from first to last, did it up with "The Archer," and then sent (with long letter of general instructions about the re-issue of F. M.'s tales in 3 vols., *Spiritual Tales*, *Barbaric Tales*, and *Tragic Romances*) to Lilian Rea, at the Outlook Tower.

After dinner went a long walk by the sea. Noticed a peculiarity by which tho' the sea was dead calm, and on the eastern side of the littoral of Ste. Maxime made hardly a ripple, the noise on the further side was like that of a rushing train or of a wind among pinewoods. I walked round, and found oily waves beating heavily on the shore. Tidal, possibly. Expenses to-day, :Letters, fr. 3.90.

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Telegrams 5.90, Poor Man 30. Board &c.,
at hotel,

Total " " .

After his return to London he wrote to
Mrs. Janvier:

GROSVENOR CLUB,
March 10, 1897.

" . . . Although I have had an unpleasant mental and physical set-back the last three days, I am steadily (at least I hope so) gaining ground — but I have never yet regained the health or spirits I was in at St. Remy, tho' even there far more worn in mind and body than even *you* guessed. But with the spring I shall get well.

" I am heart and soul with Greece in this war of race and freedom — and consider the so-called 'Concert' a mockery and a sham. It is a huge Capitalist and Reactionary Bogus Company. Fortunately the tide of indignation is daily rising here — and even the Conservative papers are at one with the Liberal on the central points. Were I a younger man — or rather were I free — I would now be in Greece or on my way to join the Hellenes. As you will see by enclosed, I am one of the authors who have sent a special message to the Athenian President of the Chamber. It is a stirring time, and in many ways. . . ."

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March 22d.

“ . . . What a whirl of excitement life is, just now. I am all on fire about the iniquities of this Turkish-Finance triumph over honour, chivalry, and the old-time sense that the world *can* be well lost. There are many other matters, too, for deep excitement — international, national, literary, artistic, personal. It is the season of sap, of the young life, of green fire. Heart-pulses are throbbing to the full: brains are effervescing under the strong ferment of the wine of life: the spiral flames of the spirit and the red flower of the flesh are fanned and consumed and recreated and fanned anew every hour of every day. . . .

“ This is going to be a strange year in many ways: a year of spiritual flames moving to and fro, of wild vicissitudes for many souls and for the forces that move through the minds of men. The West will redden in a new light — the ‘ west ’ of the forlorn peoples who congregate among our isles in Ireland — ‘ the West ’ of the dispeopled mind.

“ The common Soul is open — one can see certain shadows and lights as though in a mirror. . . .” [The letter ends abruptly.]

Towards the end of April I went to Paris to write upon the two “ Salons,” and my hus-

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band, still very unwell, went to St. Margaret's Bay, whence he wrote to me :

“*Sunday* (on the shore by the sea, and in the sunshine). I wonder what you are doing to-day? I feel very near you in spirit as I always do when I have been reading, hearing, or seeing any beautiful thing — and this forenoon I have done all three, for I am looking upon the beauty of sunlit wind-swept sea, all pale green and white, and upon the deep blue sky above the white cliffs, upon the jackdaws and gulls dense black or snowy against the azure, upon the green life along and up the cliff-face, upon the yellow-green cistus bushes below — and am listening to the sough of the wind, soft and balmy, and the rush and break of the sunlit waves among the pebbly reaches just beyond me — and have been reading Maeterlinck's two essays, ‘The Deeper Life’ and ‘The Inner Beauty.’

“I am longing to be regularly at work again — and now feel as if at last I can do so. . . .

“More and more absolutely, in one sense, are W. S. and F. M. becoming two persons — often married in mind and one nature, but often absolutely distinct. I am filled with a passion of dream and work. . . .

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“Friendship, deepening into serene and beautiful flame, is one of the most ennobling and lovely influences the world has. . . .

“WILFION.

“P. S. Again some more good tidings. Constables have accepted my giving up *The Lily Leven* indefinitely—and instead have agreed to my proposal to write a child’s book (dealing with the Celtic Wonderworld) to be called *The Laughter of Peterkin*. . . .”

From Paris I went to St. Remy for a short visit to our friends the Janviers, and my birthday found me still there. My husband had been considerably perplexed how he was to celebrate the day for me from a distance. On the early morning of the 17th of May the waiter brought me my coffee and my letters to my room as usual, and told me gravely that a large packet had arrived for me during the night, with orders that it should not be delivered to me till the morning. Should it be brought up stairs? The next moment the door was pushed open and in came the radiant smiling unexpected apparition of my Poet! In a little town an event of this sort is soon known to everyone, and that evening when he and I went for a walk, and sauntered through the little

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boulevards, we found we were watched for and greeted by everyone, and heads were popped out of windows just to see "les amants."

After his equally rapid return to town he wrote to me:

"It seems very strange to be here and at work again—or rather it is the interlude that seems so strange and dreamlike. This time last week it was not quite certain if I could get away, as it depended partly upon finishing the Maeterlinck Essay and partly upon the postponement of due date for the monograph on Orchardson. Then Richard Whiteing came in. Then at last I said that since fortune wouldn't hurry up it could go to the devil—and I would just go to my dear wife: and so I went. And all is well. Only a week ago to-day since I left! How dramatic it all is—that hurried journey, the long afternoon and night journey from Paris, the long afternoon and night journey to Tarascon—the drive at dawn and sunrise through beautiful Provence—the meeting you—the seeing our dear friends there again. And then that restful Sunday, that lovely birthday!"

And again a few days later:

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“ Herewith my typed copy of your Wilfion’s last writing. Called ‘The Wayfarer’ though possibly, afterwards, ‘Where God is, there is Light,’ it is one of the three Spiritual Moralities of which you know two already, ‘The Fisher of Men’ and ‘The Last Supper.’ In another way, the same profound truth is emphasised as in the other two — that Love is the basic law of spiritual life. ‘The Redeemer liveth’ in these three: Compassion, Beauty, Love — the three chords on which these three harmonies of Fiona’s inner life have been born. . . . ”

“The Wayfarer” was published in *Cosmopolis*, and afterwards included in *The Winged Destiny*.

On the 10th of June the author went for a night to Burford Bridge, in order to have some talks with George Meredith. While there he began to write “The Glory of the King,” (“Ulad of the Dreams”), and two days later he finished it on reaching home.

In the summer of 1897 he visited Ireland for the first time. In Dublin he met Mr. George Russell — whose beautiful verse was first published over the initials A. E. — Mr. Standish O’Grady and other writers with whom he had been in correspondence; and he

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greatly enjoyed a visit to Mr. Edward Martin at Tillyra Castle in Galway. Among several enthusiastic letters I received the following:

“. . . I find it almost impossible to attempt to tell you the varied and beautiful delights of this lovely place. . . . The country is strange and fascinating — at once so austere, so remote, so unusual, and so characteristic. . . .

“Lord Morris, and Martin and I go off to-day ‘to show me the beauties of the wild coast of Clare.’ It is glorious autumnal weather, with unclouded sky, and I am looking forward to the trip immensely. We leave at 11, and drive to Ardahan, and there get a train southward into County Clare, and at Ennis catch a little loopline to the coast. Then for two hours we drive to the famous Cliffs of Moher, gigantic precipices facing the Atlantic — and then for two hours move round the wild headlands of Blackhead — and so, in the afternoon, to the beautiful Clare ‘spa’ of Lisdoonvarna, where we dine late and sleep. Next day we return by some famous Round Tower of antiquity, whose name I have forgotten. Another day soon we are to go into Galway, and to the Aran Isles.

“On Thursday Yeats arrives, also Dr.

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Douglas Hyde, and possibly Standish O'Grady — and Lady Gregory, one of the moving spirits in this projected new Celtic Drama. She is my host's nearest neighbour, and has a lovely place (Coole Park) about five miles southwest from here, near Gort. I drove there, with Sir N. G. yesterday, in a car, through a strange, fascinating, austere country.

“The people here are distinct from any I have seen — and the women in particular are very striking with their great dark eyes, and lovely complexions and their picturesque ‘snoods.’

“The accent is not very marked, and the voices are low and pleasant, and the people courteous to a high degree.

“In the evening we had music — and so ended delightfully my first delightful day in the west. . . .

“I forgot to tell you that I arrived late — and of course at Athenry only — some 14 miles from here. I had to wait some time till a car could be got — and what a drive I had! The man said that ‘Plaze God, he would have me at Tull-lyra before the gintry had given me up entoirely’ — and he was as good as his word! The night was dark, and the roads near Athenry awful after the recent gale and rains — and it was no joke to hold

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on to the car. Whenever we came to a particularly bad bit (and I declared afterwards that he took some of the stone dykes at a leap) he cried — ‘Now thin yer honour, whin I cry *Whiroo!* you hould on an’ trust to God’ — and then came his wild *Whiroo!* and the horse seemed to spring from the car, and the jarvey and I to be flying alongside, and my rope-bound luggage to be kicking against the stars — and then we came down with a thud, and when I had a gasp of re-found breath I asked if the road was as smooth and easy all the way, whereat my friend laughed genially and said, ‘Be aisy at that now — shure we’re coming to the bad bit soon!’ . . .

“Not far from here is a fairy-doctor, I am going to see him some day. It is strange that when one day Lady Gregory took one of Russell’s mystical drawings (I think of the *Mōr Reega*) and showed it to an old woman, she at once exclaimed that that was the ‘photograph’ of the fairy queen she had often seen, only that the strange girdle of fan-flame was round her waist and not on her head as in the drawing. An old man here also has often met ‘the secret people,’ and when asked to describe one strange ‘fairy lord’ he has encountered more than once, it

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was so like G. R.'s drawing that that was shown him among several others, and he at once picked it out!

“ It is a haunted land.

“ In haste (and hunger),

“ WILF.

“ P. S. I have been thinking much over my long-projected consecutive work (i. e. as W. S.) — in five sequel books — on the drama of life as seen in the evolution of the dreams of youth — begun, indeed, over ten years ago in Paris — but presciently foregone till ten maturing years should pass.

“ But now the time has come when I may, and should, and indeed, now, *must*, write this *Epic of Youth*. That will be its general collective name — and it will interest you to know the now definitely fixt names of these five (and all very long) books; each to be distant and complete in itself, yet all sequentially connected: and organic and in the true sense dramatic evolution of some seven central types of men and women from youth to maturity and climax, along the high and low levels.

“ Name: *The Epic of Youth*.

- I. The Hunters of Wisdom.
- II. The Tyranny of Dreams.

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- III. The Star of Fortune.
- IV. The Daughters of Vengeance.
- V. The Iron Gates.

“This will take five years to do — so it is a big task to set, before the end of 1902! — especially as I have other work to do, and F. M.’s, herself as ambitious. But method, and maturer power and thought, can accomplish with far less nervous output, what otherwise was impossible, and only at a killing or at least perilous strain.

“So wish me well!”

But the pressure of health, of the needs of daily livelihood, and of the more dominating ambitions of F. M. prevented the fulfilment of this scheme.

Many times he talked of it, drafted out portions of it — but it remained unaccomplished, and all that exists of it is the beginning chapters of the first book written in Paris ten years before, and then called *Cæsar of France*.

London proved to be impossible to him owing to the excitable condition of his brain. Therefore he took rooms in Hastings whence he wrote to me:

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Nov. 21, 1897.

“I am so glad to be here, in this sunlight by the sea. Light and motion — what a joy these are. The eyes become devitalised in the pall of London gloom. . . .

“There is a glorious amplitude of light. The mind bathes in these illimitable vistas. Wind and Wave and Sun: how regenerative these elder brothers are.

“Solomon says there is no delight like wisdom, and that wisdom is the heritage of age: but there is a divine unwisdom which is the heritage of youth — and I would rather be young for a year than wise for a cycle. There are some who live without the pulse of youth in the mind: on the day, in the hour, I no longer feel that quick pulse, I will go out like a blown flame. To be young; to keep young: that is the story and despair of life. . . .”

Among the Christmas publications of 1897 appeared *The Laughter of Peterkin* by Fiona Macleod. This book, issued by Messrs. Archibald Constable and illustrated by Mr. Sunderland Rollinson, was a new departure for the author, an interlude in the midst of more strenuous original work; for it was the re-telling of three old tales of Celtic Wonder-

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land: "The Four White Swans," or "The Children of Lir," "The Fate of the Sons of Turenn," and "Darthool and the Sons of Usna."

Some years later, after the publication of Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men*, Mr. Alfred Nutt wrote to F. M. and suggested that she should again turn her attention to the re-telling of some of the beautiful old Celtic tales and legends. My husband, however, realised that he had far more dreams haunting the chambers of his mind than he could have time to give expression to. Therefore, very regretfully, he felt constrained to forego what otherwise would have been a work of love.