

CHAPTER VI

WIVES IN EXILE

Silence Farm

The production of the Fiona Macleod work was accomplished at a heavy cost to the author as that side of his nature deepened and became dominant. The strain upon his energies was excessive: not only from the necessity of giving expression to the two sides of his nature; but because of his desire, that, while under the cloak of secrecy F. M. should develop and grow, the reputation of William Sharp should at the same time be maintained. Moreover each of the two natures had its own needs and desires, interests and friends. The needs of each were not always harmonious one with the other, but created a complex condition that led to a severe nervous collapse. The immediate result of the illness was to cause an acute depression and restlessness that necessitated a continual change of environment. In the early part of 1898 he went in turn to Dover, to Bournemouth, Brighton, and St. Margaret's Bay. He was much alone, except for the occasional visit of an intimate

William Sharp

friend; for I could go to him at the week-ends only, as I had the work in London to attend to. The sea, and solitude, however, proved his best allies.

To Mrs. Janvier he wrote:

“. . . I am skirting the wood of shadows. I am filled with vague fears — and yet a clear triumphant laughter goes through it, though whether of life or death no one knows. I am also in a duel with other forces than those of human wills — and I need all my courage and strength. At the moment I have recovered my psychic control over certain media. It cannot last more than a few days, at most a few weeks at a time: but in that time *I am myself*. . . .

“Let there be peace in your heart: peace and hope transmuted into joy: in your mind, the dusking of no shadow, the menace of no gloom, but light, energy, full life: and to you in your whole being, the pulse of youth, the flame of green fire. . . .”

At the end of April he wrote to R. Murray Gilchrist from St. Margaret's Bay:

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I know you will have been sorry to hear that I have been ill — and had to leave work,

Wives in Exile

and home. The immediate cause was a severe and sudden attack of influenza which went to membranes of the head and brain, and all but resulted in brain fever. This evil was averted—but it and the possible collapse of your friend Will were at one time, and for some days, an imminent probability.

I have now been a fortnight in this quiet sea-haven, and am practically myself again. Part of my work is now too hopelessly in arrears ever to catch up. Fortunately, our friend Miss F. M. practically finished her book just before *she* got ill too—and there is a likelihood that *There is But One Love* [published in the following year under the title of *The Dominion of Dreams*] will come out this Spring. A few days will decide. . . .

Your friend and Sunlover,
(in the deep sense you know I mean—
for I have suffered much, but am now
again fronting life gravely and with
laughing eyes),

WILL.

and again after his return to London:

RUTLAND HOUSE.

MY DEAR ROBERT,

. . . After months of sickness, at one time at the gates of death, I am whirled back from

William Sharp

the Iron Gates and am in the maelstrom again — fighting with mind and soul and body for that inevitable losing game which we call victory. Well, the hour waits: and for good or ill I put forth that which is in me. The Utmost for the Highest. There is that motto for all faithful failures. . . .

I am busy of course. And so, too, our friend F. M.—with an elixir of too potent life. The flame is best: and the keener, the less obscured of smoke. So I believe: upon this I build. *Cosmopolis* will ere long have “The Wayfarer” of hers — *Good Words* “The Wells of Peace”—*Harpers*, something — *Literature* a spiritual ballad — and so forth. But her life thought is in another and stranger thing than she has done yet.¹ . . . Your friend W. S. is busy too, with new and deeper and stronger work. The fugitive powers impel. I look eagerly to new work of yours: above all to what you colour with yourself. I care little for anything that is not quick with that volatile part of one which is the effluence of the spirit within. Write to me soon: by return best of all. You can help me — as I, I hope, can help you.

It is only the fullest and richest lives that know what the *heart* of loneliness is.

¹ The Divine Adventure.

Wives in Exile

You are my comrade, and have my love,

WILL.

Two, among the many letters he wrote to me during that Spring — so full of suffering for him and anxiety for me — are, I think, very indicative of the two phases of his nature. The first relates to views we held in common; the second gives an insight into the primitive elemental soul that so often swayed him, and his work:

March 29, 1898.

“ . . . Yes, in essentials, we are all at one. We have both learned and unlearned so much, and we have come to see that we are wrought mysteriously by forces beyond ourselves, but in so seeing we know that there is a great and deep love that conquers even disillusion and disappointment. . . .

“ Not all the wishing, not all the dreaming, not all the will and hope and prayer we summon can alter that within us which is stronger than ourselves. This is a hard lesson to learn for all of us, and most for a woman. We are brought up within such an atmosphere of conventional untruth to life that most people never even perceive the hopeless futility in the arbitrary ideals which are

William Sharp

imposed upon us — and the result for the deeper natures, endless tragic miscarriage of love, peace, and hope. But, fortunately, those of us who to our own suffering *do* see only too clearly, can still strike out a nobler ideal — one that does not shrink from the deepest responsibilities and yet can so widen and deepen the heart and spirit with love that what else would be irremediable pain can be transmuted into hope, into peace, and even into joy.

“ People talk much of this and that frailty or this or that circumstance as being among the commonest disintegrants of happiness. But far more fatal for many of us is that supreme disintegrant, the Tyranny of Love — the love which is forever demanding *as its due* that which is wholly independent of bonds, which is as the wind which bloweth where it listeth or where it is impelled, by the Spirit. We are taught such hopeless lies. And so men and women start life with ideals which seem fair, but are radically consumptive: ideals that are not only bound to perish, but that could not survive. The man of fifty who could be the same as he was at twenty is simply a man whose mental and spiritual life stopped short while he was yet a youth. The woman of forty who could have the same

Wives in Exile

outlook on life as the girl of 19 or 20 would never have been other than one ignominiously deceived or hopelessly self-sophisticated. This ought not to be — but it must be as long as young men and women are fed mentally and spiritually upon the foolish and cowardly lies of a false and corrupt conventionalism.

“No wonder that so many fine natures, men and women, are wrought to lifelong suffering. They are started with impossible ideals: and while some can never learn that their unhappiness is the result, not of the falling short of others, but of the falsity of those ideals which they had so cherished — and while others learn first strength to endure the transmutations, and then power to weld these to far nobler and finer uses and ends — for both there is suffering. Yet, even of that we make too much. We have all a tendency to nurse grief. The brooding spirit craves for the sunlight, but it will not leave the shadows. Often, *Sorrow* is our best ally.

“The other night, tired, I fell asleep on my sofa. I dreamed that a beautiful spirit was standing beside me. He said: ‘My Brother, I have come to give you the supreme gift that will heal you and save you.’ I answered eagerly: ‘Give it me — what is it?’

William Sharp

And the fair radiant spirit smiled with beautiful solemn eyes, and blew a breath into the tangled garden of my heart — and when I looked there I saw the tall white Flower of Sorrow growing in the Sunlight.”

ST. MARGARET'S BAY,
May, 1898.

(To E. A. S.)

“I have had a very happy and peaceful afternoon. The isolation, with sun and wind, were together like soft cream upon my nerves: and I suppose that within twenty minutes after I left the station I was not only serenely at peace with the world in general, but had not a perturbing thought. To be alone, alone ‘in the open’ above all, is not merely healing to me but an imperative necessity of my life — and the chief counter agent to the sap that almost every person exercises on me, unless obviated by frequent and radical interruption.

“By the time I had passed through the village I was already ‘remote’ in dreams and thoughts and poignant outer enjoyment of the lovely actualities of sun and wind and the green life: and when I came to my favourite coign where, sheltered from the bite of the wind, I could overlook the sea (a mass of lovely, radiant, amethyst-shadowed, foam-

Wives in Exile

swept water), I lay down for two restful happy hours *in which not once a thought of London or of any one in it, or of any one living*, came to me. This power of living absolutely in the moment is worth not only a crown and all that a crown could give, but is the secret of youth, the secret of life.

“O how weary I am of the endless recurrence of the ordinary in the lives of most people—the beloved routine, the cherished monotonies, the treasured certainties. I grudge them to none: they seem incidental to the common weal: indeed they seem even made for happiness. But I know one wild heart at least to whom life must come otherwise, or not at all.

“To-day I took a little green leaf o’ thorn. I looked at the sun through it, and a dazzle came into my brain—and I wished, ah I wished I were a youth once more, and was ‘sun-brother’ and ‘star-brother’ again—to lie down at night, smelling the earth, and rise at dawn, smelling the new air out of the East, and know enough of men and cities to avoid both, and to consider little any gods ancient or modern, knowing well that there is only ‘The Red God’ to think of, he who lives and laughs in the red blood. . . .

“There is a fever of the ‘green life’ in

William Sharp

my veins — below all the ordinary littlenesses of conventional life and all the commonplace of exterior: a fever that makes me ill at ease with people, even those I care for, that fills me with a weariness beyond words and a nostalgia for sweet impossible things.

“This can be met in several ways — chiefly and best by the practical yoking of the imagination to the active mind — in a word, to work. If I can do this, well and good, either by forced absorption in contrary work (e. g. Cæsar of France), or by letting that go for the time and let the more creative instinct have free play: or by some radical change of environment: or again by some irresponsible and incalculable variation of work and brief day-absences.

“At the moment, I am like a man of the hills held in fee: I am willing to keep my bond, to earn my wage, to hold to the foreseen: and yet any moment a kestrel may fly overhead, mocking me with a rock-echo, where only sun and wind and bracken live — or an eddy of wind may have the sough of a pine in it — and then, in a flash — there’s my swift brain-dazzle in answer, and all the rapid falling away of these stupid half-realities, and only a wild instinct to go to my own. . . .”

Wives in Exile

It was in this mood that he wrote to a friend:

“. . . but then, life is just like that. It is glad only ‘in the open,’ and beautiful only because of its dreams. I wish I could live all my hours out of doors: I envy no one in the world so much as the red deer, the eagle, the seamew. I am sure no kings have so royal a life as the plovers and curlews have. All these have freedom, rejoice continually on the wind’s wing, exalt alike in sun and shade: to them day is day, and night is night, and there is nothing else.”

His sense of recovery was greatly heightened by a delightful little wander in Holland in May with Thomas A. Janvier, a jovial, breezy companion. Of all he saw the chief fascination proved to be Eiland Marken, as he wrote to me:

“We are now in the south Zuyder Zee, with marvellous sky effects, and low lines of land in the distance. Looking back at Eiland Marken one sees six clusters of houses, at wide intervals, dropped casually into the sea.

“We had a delightful time in that quaintest of old world places, where the women are grotesque, the men grotesquer, and the children grotesquest — as for the tubby, capped, gorgeous-garbed, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, im-

William Sharp

perturbable babies, they alone are worth coming to see. . . .”

The following is a letter from his other self:

23d July, 1898.

MY DEAR MR. RHYS,

On my coming to Edinburgh for a few days I find the book you have so kindly sent to me. It is none the less welcome because it comes as no new acquaintance: for on its appearance a friend we have in common sent it to me. Alas, that copy lies among the sea-weed in a remote Highland loch; for the book, while still reading in part, slipped overboard the small yacht in which I was sailing, and with it the MS. of a short story of mine appropriately named “Beneath the Shadow of the Wave”! The two may have comforted each other in that solitude: or the tides may have carried them southward, and tossed them now to the Pembroke Stacks, now to the cliffs of Howth. Perhaps a Welsh crab may now be squeaking (they do say that crabs make a whistling squeak!) with a Gaelic accent, or the deep-sea congers be reciting Welsh ballads to the young-lady-eels of the Hebrides. Believe me, your book has given me singular pleasure. I find in it the indescribable: and to me that is one of the tests, perhaps the

Wives in Exile

supreme test (for it involves so much) of imaginative literature. A nimble air of the hills is there: the rustle of remote woods; the morning cry, that is so ancient, and that still so thrills us.

I most eagerly hope that you will recreate in beauty the all but lost beauty of the old Cymric singers. There is a true originality in this, as in anything else. The green leaf, the grey wave, the mountain wind—after all, are they not murmurous in the old Celtic poets, whether Alban or Irish or Welsh: and to translate, and recreate anew, from these, is but to bring back into the world again a lost wandering beauty of hill-wind or green leaf or grey wave. There is, I take it, no one living who could interpret Davyth ap Gwilym and other old Welsh singers as you could. I long to have the Green Book of “the Poet of the Leaves” in English verse, and in English verse such as that into which you could transform it. . . .

The Welsh poet replied:

NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE,
27th Dec., 1898.

DEAR “FIONA MACLEOD,”

I believe I never wrote to thank you for your story in the *Dome*, which I read even-

William Sharp

tually in an old Welsh tower. It was the right place to read such a fantasy of the dark and bright blindness of the Celt: and I found it, if not of your very best, yet full of imaginative stimulus.

Not many weeks ago, in very different surroundings, Mr. Sharp read me a poem — two poems — of yours. So I feel that I have the sense, at least, of your continued journeys thro' the divine and earthly regions of the Gael, and how life looks to you, and what colours it wears. What should we do were it not for that sense of the little group of simple and faithful souls, who love the clay of earth because heaven is wrapt in it, and stand by and support their lonely fellows in the struggle against the forces upon forces the world sends against them? I trust at some time it may be my great good fortune to see you and talk of these things, and hear more of your doings. ERNEST RHYIS.

From the little rock-perched, sea-girt Pettycur Inn, my husband wrote to Mrs. Janvier:

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS,
20th Dec., 1898.

“ . . . It has been a memorable time here. I have written some of my best work — including two or three of the new things for

Wives in Exile

The Dominion of Dreams — viz. 'The Rose of Flame,' 'Honey of the Wild Bees,' and 'The Secrets of the Night.'

"What a glorious day it has been. The most beautiful I have ever seen at Pettycur I think. Cloudless blue sky, clear exquisite air tho' cold, with a marvellous golden light in the afternoon. Arthur's Seat, the Craggs and the Castle and the 14 ranges of the Pentlands all clear-cut as steel, and the city itself visible in fluent golden light. The whole coast-line purple blue, down to Berwick Law and the Bass Rock, and the Isle of May 16 miles out in the north sea.

"And now I listen to the gathering of the tidal waters under the stars. There is an infinite solemnity — a hush, something sacred and wonderful. A benediction lies upon the world. Far off I hear the roaming wind. Thoughts and memories crowd in on me. Here I have lived and suffered — here I have touched the heights — here I have done my best. And now, here, I am going through a new birth.

"*'Sic itur ad astral!'*"

During the years that F. M. developed so rapidly her creator felt the necessity pressing hard on him to sustain, as far as he could,

William Sharp

the reputation of W. S. He valued such reputation as he had, and was anxious not to let it die away; yet there was a great difference in the method of production of the two kinds of work. The F. M. writing was the result of an inner impulsion, he wrote because he had to give expression to himself whether the impulse grew out of pain or out of pleasure. But W. S., divorced as much as could be from his twin self, wrote because he cared to, because the necessities of life demanded it. He was always deeply interested in his critical work, for he was a constant student of Literature in all its forms, and of the Literature of different countries—in particular of France, America and Italy. This form of study, this keen interest, was a necessity to W. S.; but fiction was to him a question of choice. He deliberately set himself to write the two novels, *Wives in Exile* and *Silence Farm*, because he felt W. S. ought to produce some such work as a normal procedure and development; and also he felt it imperative to show some result of the seclusion he was known to seek for purposes of work. He was deeply interested in both books. *Wives in Exile* was the easier to write, as it gave an outlet to the vein of whimsicality in him, to his love of fun. He

Wives in Exile

delighted in the weaving of any plot, or in any extravaganza. The book was a great relief and rest to him and was a real tonic to his mind.

A little later, when he realised that something more was expected of him and was too ill to attempt anything in the shape of comedy, he therefore set himself to write a tragic tale of the Lowlands, founded on a true incident. Into this he put serious interested work, but there was one consideration that throughout had a restraining effect on him — he never forgot that the book should not have obvious kinship to the work of F. M., that he should keep a considerable amount of himself in check. For there was a midway method, that was a blending of the two, a swaying from the one to the other, which he desired to avoid, since he knew that many of the critics were on the watch. Therefore, he strained the realistic treatment beyond what he otherwise would have done, in order to preserve a special method of presentment. Nevertheless, that book was the one he liked best of all the W. S. efforts, and he considered that it contained some of his most satisfactory work. *Wives in Exile* was published in June of 1896 by Mr. Grant Richards, and *Silence Farm* in 1897.

William Sharp

The following letter from Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton was a great pleasure. It is, I believe, the only written expression of what the author has termed the "inwardness of *Aylwin*":

THE PINES, PUTNEY HILL,
Oct. 19, 1898.

MY DEAR SHARP,

I had no idea that you were in England, and had no means of finding your address.

You read only a portion of *Aylwin* — as far, I think, as the discovery that Winifred had been the model of Wilderspin. I always intended to send you other portions, but procrastination ruined my good intentions. You and my dear friend Mrs. Sharp were very kind to it, I remember, and this encourages me to hope that when you come to read it in its entirety, you will like it better than ever. Although it is of course primarily a love-story, and, as such, will be read by the majority of readers, it is intended to be the pronouncement of something like a new gospel — the gospel of love as the great power which stands up and confronts a materialistic cosmogony and challenges it and conquers it. This gospel of course is more fully expressed in "The Coming of Love" of which I send you a copy. "The Coming of

Wives in Exile

Love" is of course a sequel to *Aylwin*, although, for certain reasons, it preceded in publication the novel. *Aylwin* appears in the last year of the present century, and I had a certain object in delaying it for a little while longer because I believe that should it have more than an ephemeral existence, as to which I am of course very doubtful, it will appeal fifty years hence to fifty people where it now only appeals to one. I cannot think that, when a man has felt the love-passion as deeply as Aylwin feels it, he will find it possible, whatever physical science may prove, to accept a materialistic theory of the universe. He must either commit suicide or become a maniac. . . . Henry Aylwin and Percy Aylwin, the Tarno Rye of "The Coming of Love," spring from the same Romany ancestors and they inherited therefore the most passionate blood in the Western World. Each of them is driven to a peculiar spiritualistic cosmogony by the love of a girl — Winifred Wynne and Rhona Boswell, though the two girls are the exact opposite of each other in temperament.

But you really must let me get a glimpse of you somehow before you leave England again.

Your affectionate

"AYLWIN."