

## CHAPTER IX

### PROVENCE

#### *Maniace*

New Year's Day found us at Palermo where my husband was enchanted at being presented with a little pottle of freshly gathered wild strawberries; a week later we traversed the island to Taormina, whence he wrote to Mrs. Janvier:

MONTE VENERE, TAORMINA,  
25th Jan., 1901.

“ . . . To-day is was too warm to work contentedly indoors even upon our little terrace with its superb views over Etna and the Ionian Sea — so at 9 a. m. Elizabeth and I, with a young painter-friend, came up here to a divine spot on the slopes of the steep and grand-shouldered Hill of Venus, bringing with us our writing and sketching materials and also fruit and wine and light luncheon. It is now about 3 p. m. and we have lain here for hours in the glorious warmth and cloudless sunglow — undisturbed by any

*William Sharp*

sounds save the soft sighing of the sea far below, the fluting of a young goatherd with his black flock on a steep across a near ravine, and the occasional passing of a muleteer or of a mountaineer with his winepanier'd donkeys. A vast sweep of sea is before us and beneath. To the left, under the almond boughs, are the broad straits which divide Sicily from Calabria — in front, the limitless reach of the Greek sea — to the right, below, the craggy heights and Monte Acropoli of Taormina — and, beyond, the vast slope of snow-clad Etna. . . .

“I have just been reading (for the hundredth time) in Theocritus. How doubly lovely he is, read on the spot. That young shepherd fluting away to his goats at this moment might be Daphnis himself. Three books are never far from me: Theocritus, the Greek Anthology, and the Homeric Hymns. I loved them before: now they are in my blood.

“Legend has it that near this very spot Pythagoras used to come and dream. How strange to think that one can thus come in touch with two of the greatest men of antiquity — for within reach from here (a pilgrimage to be made from Syracuse) is the grave of Æschylus. Perhaps it was here that

## *Provence*

Pythagoras learned the secret of that music (for here both the sea-wind and the hill-wind can be heard in magic meeting) by which one day—as told in Iamblicus—he cured a young man of Taormina (Tauromenion) who had become mad as a wild beast, with love. Pythagoras, it is said, played an antique air upon his flute, and the madness went from the youth. . . .

“I shall never forget the journey across Sicily. I forget if I told you in my letter that it had been one of my dreams since youth to read the Homeric Hymns and Theocritus in Sicily—and it has been fulfilled: even to the unlikeliest, which was to read the great Hymn to Demeter at Enna itself. And that I did—in that wild and remote mountain-land. Enna is now called Castrogiovanni—but all else is unchanged—though the great temples to Demeter and Persephone are laid low. It was a wonderful mental experience to read that Hymn on the very spot where Demeter went seeking—torch in hand, and wind-blown blue peplos about her—her ravished daughter, the beautiful Pherephata or Persephone. However, I have already told you all about that—and the strange coincidence of the two white doves, (which Elizabeth witnessed at the moment I exclaimed)

*William Sharp*

and about our wonderful sunset-arrival in Greek Tauromenion. . . .”

To the same friend he described our visit to Syracuse:

CASA POLITI, STRADA DIONYSIO,

7th Feb., :01.

“ . . . I must send you at least a brief line from Syracuse — that marvellous ‘Glory of Hellas’ where ancient Athens fell in ruin, alas, when Nicias lost here the whole army and navy and Demosthenes surrendered by the banks of the Anapus — the Syracuse of Theocritus you love so well — the Syracuse where Pindar heard some of his noblest odes sung, where Plato discoursed with his disciples of New Hellas, where (long before) the Argonauts had passed after hearing the Sirens singing by this fatal shore, and near where Ulysses derided Polyphemus — and where Æschylus lived so long and died.

“It seems almost incredible when one is in the beautiful little Greek Theatre up on the rising ground behind modern Syracuse to believe that so many of the greatest plays of the greatest Greek tragedians (many unknown to us even by name) were given here under the direction of Æschylus himself. And now I must tell you of a piece of extraordinary good fortune. Yesterday turned out

## Provence

the superbest of this year — a real late Spring day, with the fields full of purple irises and asphodels and innumerable flowers, and the swallows swooping beneath the multitudes of flowering almonds. We spent an unforgettable day — first going to the Castle of ancient Euryalos — perhaps the most wonderful I have ever known. Then, in the evening, I heard that to-day a special choral performance was to be given in the beautiful hillside Greek Theatre in honour of the visit of Prince Tommaso (Duke of Genoa, the late King's brother, and Admiral of the Fleet). Imagine our delight! And *what* a day it has been — the ancient Æschylean theatre crammed once more on all its tiers with thousands of Syracusans, so that not a spare seat was left — while three hundred young voices sang a version of one of the choral sections of 'The Suppliants' of Æschylus — with it il Principe on a scarlet dais where once the tyrant Dionysius sat! Over head the deep blue sky, and beyond, the deep blue Ionian sea. It was all too wonderful. . . ."

While we were at Taormina the news came of the death of Queen Victoria. An impressive memorial service was arranged by Mr. Albert Stopford, an English resident

*William Sharp*

there, and held in the English Chapel of Sta. Caterina.

To attend it the Hon. Alexander Nelson Hood came from the "Nelson property" of Bronte where he was wintering with his father, Viscount Bridport, Duke of Bronte, who for forty years had been personal Lord in Waiting to the Queen. To the son we were introduced by Mr. Stopford; and a day or two later we started on our first visit to that strange beautiful Duchy on Ætna, that was to mean so much to us.

Greatly we enjoyed the experience—the journey in the little Circum-Ætnean train along the great shoulder of Ætna, with its picturesque little towns and its great stretches of devastating lava; the first sight of the Castle of Maniace—in its shallow tree-clad valley of the Simeto flanked by great solemn hills—as we turned down the winding hill-road from the great lava plateau where the station of Maletto stands; the time-worn quadrangular convent-castle with its Norman chapel, and its great Iona cross carved in lava erected in the court-yard to the memory of Nelson; the many interesting relics of Nelson within the castle, such as his Will signed Nelson and Bronte on each page, medals, many fine line engravings of the battles in which

## *Provence*

he, and also Admiral Hood, took part; the beautiful Italian garden, and wild glen gardens beyond. No less charming was the kindly welcome given to us by the fine, hale old Courtier who — when his son one afternoon had taken my husband for a drive to see the hill-town of Bronte, and the magnificent views of and from Ætna, with its crowning cover of snow — told me, as we sat in the comfortable central hall before a blazing log fire, many reminiscences of the beloved Queen he had served so long.

In the spring we returned to England, through Italy; and from Florence where we took rooms for a month, F. M. wrote to an unknown correspondent:

18th March, 1901.

MY DEAR UNKNOWN FRIEND,

You must forgive a tardy reply to your welcome letter, but I have been ill, and am not yet strong. Your writing to me has made me happy. One gets many letters: some leave one indifferent; some interest; a few are like dear and familiar voices speaking in a new way, or as from an obscure shore. Yours is of the last. I am glad to know that something in what I have written has coloured anew your own thought, or deepened the subtle music that you yourself hear —

William Sharp

for no one finds the colour of life and the music of the spirit unless he or she already perceive the one and love the other. Somewhere in one of my books—I think in the latest, *The Divine Adventure*, but at the moment cannot remember—I say that I no longer ask of a book, is it clever, or striking, or is it well done, or even is it beautiful, but—out of how deep a life does it come. That is the most searching test. And that is why I am grateful when one like yourself writes to tell me that intimate thought and emotion deeply felt have reached some other and kindred spirit. . . .

I am writing to you from Florence. You know it, perhaps? The pale green Arno, the cream-white, irregular, green-blinded, time-stained houses opposite, the tall cypresses of the Palatine garden beyond, the dove-grey sky, all seem to breathe one sigh . . . *La Pace! L'Oblio!*

But then—life has made those words “Peace,” “Forgetfulness,” very sweet for me. Perhaps for you this vague breath of another Florence than that which Baedeker described might have some more joyous interpretation. I hope so. . . .

You are right in what you say, about the gulf between kindred natures being less wide

*Provence*

than it seems. But do not speak of the spiritual life as "another life": there is no "other" life; what we mean by that is with us now. The great misconception of Death is that it is the only door to another world.

Your friend,

FIONA MACLEOD.

The October number of *The Fortnightly Review* contained a series of poems by F. M. entitled "The Ivory Gate," and at the same time an American edition of *From the Hills of Dream* — altered from the original issue — was published by Mr. T. Mosher, to whom the poet wrote concerning the last section of the English Edition:

12th Nov., 1901.

DEAR MR. MOSHER:

What a lovely book *Mimes* is! It is a pleasure to look at it, to handle it. The simple beauty of the cover-design charms me. And the contents . . . yes, these are beautiful, too.

I think the translation has been finely made, but there are a few slips in interpretative translation, and (as perhaps is inevitable) a lapse ever and again from the subtle harmony, the peculiar musical undulant rhythm of the original. In a *creative* translation, the

William Sharp

faintest jar can destroy the illusion: and more than once I was rudely reminded that a foreigner mixt this far-carried honey and myrrh. Yet this is only "a counsel of perfection," by one who perhaps dwells overmuch upon the ideal of a flawless raiment for beautiful thought or dream. Nor would I seem ungracious to a translator who has so finely achieved a task almost as difficult as that set to Liban by Oisín in the Land of the Ever-Living, when he bade her take a wave from the shore and a green blade from the grass and a leaf from a tree and the breath of the wind and a man's sigh and a woman's thought, and out of them all make an air that would be like the single song of a bird. Do you wish to tempt me? Tempt me then with a proposal as to *The Silence of Amor*, to be brought out as *Mimes* is!

The short prose-poems would have to be materially added to, of course: and the additions would for the most part individually be longer than the short pieces you know. . . .

Sincerely yours,

FIONA MACLEOD.

In sending a copy of the American edition of *From the Hills of Dream* to Mr. Yeats, the author explained that, though it contained new material:

## Provence

. . . there will be much in it familiar to you. But even here there are changes which are recreative—as, for example, in the instance of “The Moon-Child,” where one or two touches and an added quatrain have made a poem of what was merely poetic.

The first 10 poems are those which are in the current October *Fortnightly Review*. But when these are reprinted in a forthcoming volume of new verse . . . it will also contain some of the 40 “new” poems now included in this American edition, and the chief contents will be the re-modelled and re-written poetic drama *The Immortal Hour*, and with it many of the notes to which I alluded when I wrote last to you. In the present little volume it was not found possible to include the lengthy, intimate, and somewhat esoteric notes: among which I account of most interest for you those pertinent to the occult myths embodied in *The Immortal Hour*.

You will see, however, that one or two dedicatory pages—intended for the later English new book—have here found a sectional place: and will, I hope, please you.

Believe me, Your friend truly,

F. M.

Mr. Yeats replied:

*William Sharp*

18 WOBURN BUILDINGS,  
LONDON, Saturday.

MY DEAR MISS MACLEOD,

I have been a long while about thanking you for your book of poems, but I have been shifting from Dublin to London and very busy about various things — too busy for any quiet reading. I have been running hither and thither seeing people about one thing and another. But now I am back in my rooms and have got things straight enough to settle down at last to my usual routine. Yesterday I began arranging under their various heads some hitherto unsorted folk-stories on which I am about to work, and to-day I have been busy over your book. I never like your poetry as well as your prose, but here and always you are a wonderful writer of myths. They seem your natural method of expression. They are to you what mere words are to others. I think this is partly why I like you better in your prose, though now and then a bit of verse comes well, rising up out of the prose, in your simplest prose the most, the myths stand out clearly, as something objective, as something well born and independent. In your more elaborate prose they seem subjective, an inner way of looking at things assumed by a single mind.

## *Provence*

They have little independent life and seem unique; your words bind them to you. If Balzac had written with a very personal, very highly coloured style, he would have always drowned his inventions with himself. You seem to feel this, for when you use elaborate words you invent with less conviction, with less precision, with less delicacy than when you forget everything but the myth. I will take as example, a prose tale.

That beautiful story in which the child finds the Twelve Apostles eating porridge in a cottage, is quite perfect in all the first part, for then you think of nothing but the myth, but it seems to me to fade to nothing in the latter part. For in the latter part the words rise up between you and the myth. You yourself begin to speak and we forget the apostles, and the child and the plate and the porridge. Or rather the more mortal part of you begins to speak, the mere person, not the god. You, as I think, should seek the delights of style in utter simplicity, in a self-effacing rhythm and language; in an expression that is like a tumbler of water rather than like a cup of wine. I think that the power of your work in the future will depend on your choosing this destiny. Certainly I am looking forward to "The Laughter of

*William Sharp*

the Queen." I thought your last prose, that pilgrimage of the soul and mind and body to the Hills of Dream promised this simple style. It had it indeed more than anything you have done.

To some extent I have an advantage over you in having a very fierce nation to write for. I have to make everything very hard and clear, as it were. It is like riding a wild horse. If one's hands fumble or one's knees loosen one is thrown. You have in the proper sense far more imagination than I have and that makes your work correspondingly more difficult. It is fairly easy for me, who do so much of my work by the critical, rather than the imaginative faculty, to be precise and simple, but it is hard for you in whose mind images form themselves without ceasing and are gone as quickly perhaps.

But I am sure that I am right. When you speak with the obviously personal voice in your verse, or in your essays you are not that Fiona who has invented a new thing, a new literary method. You are that Fiona when the great myths speak through you. . . .

Yours,

W. B. YEATS.

I like your verses on Murias and like them the better perhaps because of the curious co-

## *Provence*

incidence that I did in summer verses about lovers wandering "in long forgotten Murias."

During the spring William Sharp had prepared a volume of selections from the poems of Swinburne, with an Introduction by himself, for publication in the Tauchnitz Collection of British Authors. Mr. Swinburne consented that the selection should be made in accordance with the critical taste of the Editor, with which however he was not in complete agreement. He expressed his views in a letter dated from The Pines, Putney Hill:

Oct. 6th.

DEAR MR. SHARP,

Many thanks for the early copy you have had the kindness to send on to me. I am pleased to find the *Nympholept* in a leading place, as I think it one of the best and most representative things I ever did. I should have preferred on all accounts that *In the Bay* had filled the place you have allotted to *Ave atque Vale*, a poem to which you are altogether too kind, in my opinion, as others have been before you. I never had really much in common with Baudelaire, tho' I retain all my early admiration for his genius at its best. I wish there were fewer of such

*William Sharp*

very juvenile crudities as you have selected from my first volume of poems: it is trying to find such boyish attempts as *The Sundew*, *Aholibah*, *Madonna Mia*, etc., offered as examples of the work of a man who has written so many volumes since in which there is nothing that is not at least better and riper than they. I wish too that *Mater Triumphalis* had not been separated from its fellow poem — a much fitter piece of work to stand by itself. On the other hand, I am very cordially obliged to you for giving the detached extract from *Anactoria*. I should greatly have preferred that extracts only should have been given from *Atalanta in Calydon*, which sorely needs compression in the earlier parts. *Erectheus*, which would have taken up so much less space, would also, I venture to think, have been a better and a fairer example of the author's work. Mr. Watts Dunton's objections to the book is the omission of *Super Flumina Babylonis*. I too am much surprised to find it excluded from a selection which includes so much that might well be spared — nay, would be better away. I would like to have seen one of what I call my topographical poems in full. The tiny scrap from *Loch Torridon* was hardly worth giving by itself. I do not understand what

## *Provence*

you find obscure or melancholy in *The Garden of Cymodoce*. It was written simply to express my constant delight in the recollection of Sark. I hope you will not think anything in this note captious or ungracious. Candour always seems to be the best expression possible of gratitude or goodwill.

Ever sincerely yours,

A. SWINBURNE.

In December of 1901 F. M. wrote, ostensibly from Argyll, to Dr. Goodchild: "I had hoped by this time to have had some definite knowledge of what I am to do, where to go this winter. But circumstances keep me here. . . . Our friend, too (meaning himself as W. S.), is kept to England by the illness of others. My plans though turning upon different issues are to a great extent dependent, later, on his. . . .

"I have much to do, and still more to think of, and it may be bring to life through the mysterious resurrection of the imagination.

"What long months of preparation have to go to any writing that contains life within it.—Even the slightest, the most significant, as it seems! We, all of us who live this dual life of the imagination and the spirit, do in-

*William Sharp.*

deed mysteriously conceive, and fare thereafter in weariness and heaviness and long travail, only for one small uncertain birth. It is the common law of the spirit — as the obverse is the common law of womanhood.”

And again:

“Life becomes more and more strange, complex, interwrought, and *intentional*. But it is the *end* that matters — not individuals.”

Owing to my Mother's serious illness I could not leave England early in November, as we had intended. London was impossible for my husband for he, too, was ill. At first he went to Hastings, whence he wrote to Mrs. Philpot — author of *The Sacred Tree*:

HASTINGS, Dec. 20, 1901.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

You would have enjoyed “being me” yesterday. I had a most delightful day at Rye with Henry James who now lives there for many months in the year. I went over early, lunched, and then we went all over that wonderfully picturesque old Cinque Port. A lovely walk in a frost-bound still country, and then back by the sombre old Land Gate, over the misty marshes down below, and the

## Provence

flame red Cypres Tower against a plum coloured sunset, to Henry James' quaint and picturesque old house to tea. It was in every way a memorable and delightful day, and not least the great pleasure of intercourse with that vivid brilliant and alive mind. He is as of course, *you* realise, an artist to the finger tips. *Et ils sont rares ces diables d'esprit.* I wish it were spring! I long to hear the missel thrush in the blossoming pear tree: and the tingling of the sap, and the laughter in the blood. I suppose we are all, all of us ever dreaming of resurrections. . . .

The English climate proved equally impossible, so W. S. went to Bordighera to be near Dr. Goodchild. But he was too restless to remain long anywhere, and moved on to Rome and finally to Sicily. He wrote to Mr. Ernest Rhys after the New Year from Il Castello di Maniace:

MY DEAR ERNEST,

As I think I wrote to you, I fell ill with a form of fever,—and had a brief if severe recurrence of it at Rome: and so was glad some time ago to get on to my beloved “Greek” Taormina, where I rapidly “convalesced.” A few days ago I came on here, to the wild inlands of the Sicilian Highlands,

*William Sharp*

to spend a month with my dear friend here, in this wonderful old "Castle-Fortress-Monastery-Mansion — the Castel" Maniace itself being over 2,000 feet in the highlands beyond Etna, and Maletto, the nearest station, about 3,000.

How you and Grace would rejoice in this region. Within a day's easy ride is Enna, sacred to Demeter, and about a mile or so from Castel' Maniace, in a wild desolate region of a lava wilderness, is the lonely heron-haunted moorland-lake wherein tradition has it Persephone disappeared. . . .

W. S.

I joined him early in February at Maniace and we remained with Mr. Hood for a month of sunshine and flowers. Among other guests came Miss Maud Valerie White. She was wishful that the pleasant days spent there together should be commemorated, and proposed that W. S. should write a short poem for her to set to Sicilian airs, and that the song should be dedicated to our host. To that end Mr. Hood summoned to the Castello one of the peasant bagpipe players, who one evening walked round and round the hall, playing the airs that are played each Christmas by the pipers before the shrines to the

*Provence*

Madonna in the various churches. The result of that evening was a song, "Buon' Riposo," written by William Sharp, set to music by Miss Valerie White, and published by Messrs. Chappell:

BUON' RIPOSO

When, like a sleeping child  
Or a bird in the nest,  
The day is gathered  
To the earth's breast . . .  
Hush! . . . 'tis the dream-wind  
Breathing peace,  
Breathing rest  
Out of the gardens of Sleep in the West.

O come to me . . . wandering  
Wind of the West!  
Gray Doves of slumber  
Come hither to nest. . .  
Ah, sweet now the fragrance  
Below the dim trees  
Of the White Rose of Rest  
That blooms in the gardens of Sleep in the West.

On leaving Maniace W. S. wrote to Dr. Goodchild:

Friday, 7th March, 1902.

To-morrow we leave here for Taormina. . . . And, not without many regrets, I am glad to leave — as, in turn, I shall be glad (tho' for other reasons) when the time comes

*William Sharp*

to leave Taormina. My wife says I am never satisfied, and that Paradise itself would be intolerable for me if I could not get out of it when I wanted. And there is some truth in what she says, though it is a partial truth, only. I think external change as essential to some natures as passivity is to others: but this may simply mean that the inward life in one person may best be hypnotised by "a still image," that of another may best be hypnotised by a wavering image or series of wavering images. It is not change of scene one needs so much as change in these wavering images. For myself, I should, now, in many ways be content to spend the most of my life in some quiet place in the country, with a garden, a line of poplars and tall elms, and a great sweep of sky. . . .

Your friend affectionately,

WILLIAM SHARP.

To Mrs. Philpot:

TAORMINA,  
April 3, 1902.

DEAR FRIEND,

. . . It would take pages to describe all the flowers and other near and far objects which delight one continually. Persephone has scattered every treasure in this her birth-

## *Provence*

island. From my room here in the Castello-a-Mare — this long terraced hotel is built on the extreme edge of a precipitous height outside the Messina Gate of Taormina — I look down first on a maze of vividly green almond trees sloping swiftly down to the deep blue sea, and over them the snowy vastness of Etna, phantom-white against the intense blue, with its hitherside 11,000 feet of gulfs of violet morning shadow. About midway this is broken to the right first by some ancient cactus-covered fragments of antiquity at the corner of a winding path, and then by the bend of Santa Caterina garden wall with fine tall plume-like cypresses filled with a living green darkness, silhouetted against the foam-white cone.

My French windows open on the terrace, it is lovely to go out early in the morning to watch sunrise (gold to rose-flame) coming over Calabria, and the purple-blue emerald straits of Messina and down by the wildly picturesque shores of these island coasts and across the Ionian sea, and lying like a bloom on the incredible vastness of Etna and its rise from distant Syracuse and Mt. Hybla to its cone far beyond the morning clouds when clouds there are — or to go out at sunrise and see a miracle of beauty being woven

*William Sharp*

anew — or at night when there is no moon, but only the flashing of the starry torches, the serpentine glitter of lights, the soft cry of the aziola, and the drowsy rhythmic cadence of the sea in the caves and crags far below. Just now the hum of bees is almost as loud as the drowsy sighing of the sea: among the almonds a boy is singing a long drowsy Greek-like chant, and on the mass of wild rock near the cypresses a goatherd is playing intermittently on a reed pipe. A few yards to the right is a long crescent-shaped terrace garden filled with roses, great shrub-like clumps of white and yellow marguerite, myrtle, lilies, narcissus, sweet-scented blossom-covered geranium, oranges hanging in yellow flame, pale-gold lemons. Below the branches a "Purple Emperor" and a snow-white "May Queen" are hovering in butterfly wooing. On an oleander above a wilderness of pink and scarlet geraniums two blue tits are singing and building, building and singing.

. . . . .  
Since I wrote the above Easter has intervened. The strange half pagan, half Christian ceremonies interested me greatly, and in one of the ceremonials of one processional part I recognized a striking survival of the

## Provence

more ancient Greek rites of the Demeter and the Persephonæ-Kôrê cult.

To Mrs. Janvier:

TAORMINA.

“. . . It is difficult to do anything here. I should like to come sometime without anything to do — without even a book to read, simply to come and dream, to re-live many of the scenes of this inexhaustible region of romance: to see in vision the coming and going of that innumerable company — from Ulysses and his wanderers, from Pythagoras and St. Peter, from that Pancrazio who had seen Christ in the flesh, from Æschylus, and Dionysius and Hiero and Gelon, from Pindar and Simonides and Theocritus, to Richard Cœur-de-Lion and Garibaldi and Lord Nelson — what a strange company! . . .

“As for my own work, it is mostly (what there is of it!) dealing with the literature, etc., of the south. I do not know whether my long article on Contemporary Italian Poetry is to be in the April-June issue of *The Quarterly*, or the summer issue. I am more interested in a strange Greek drama I am writing — *The Kôrê of Enna* — than in anything I have taken up for a long time. My reading just now is mostly Greek history and

*William Sharp*

Italian literature. . . . Looking on this deep blue, often violet sea, with the foam washing below that perhaps laved the opposite shores of Greece, and hearing the bees on the warm wind, it is difficult to realise the wet and cold you have apparently had recently in New York — or the fogs and cold in London. I wish you could bask in and sun yourself on this sea-terrace, and read me the last you have written of ‘Captain Dionysius’ while I give *you* tea!”

During our first visit to Sicily, though my husband realised the beauty of the island, he could not feel its charm or get in touch with the spirit of the place because he was overborne by the sense of battle and bloodshed that he felt pervaded it. When I described how much the fascination of the beautiful island had seized hold of me he would say: “No, I cannot feel it, for the ground is sodden and every leaf drips with blood.” To his great relief, on his return there he found, as he said, that he had got beyond the surface of things, had pierced down to the great essentials of the ancient land, and had become one of her devoted lovers.