

CHAPTER XI

WINTER IN ATHENS

Greek Backgrounds

During the following summer William Sharp saw George Meredith for the last time. Concerning that visit to Box Hill he wrote to a friend:

Monday, June 22, 1903.

“ . . . I am so glad I went down to see George Meredith to-day. It was good-bye, I fear, though the end may not be for some time yet: not immediate, for he has recovered from his recent severe illness and painful accident, though still very weak, but able to be up, and to move about a little.

“ At first I was told he could see no one, but when he heard who the caller was I was bidden enter, he gave me a sweet cordial welcome, but was frail and weak and fallen into the blind alleys that so often await the most strenuous and vivid lives. But, in himself, in his mind, there is no change. I felt it was good-bye, and when I went, I think he felt it so also. When he goes it will be

the passing of the last of the great Victorians. I could have (selfishly) wished that he had known a certain secret: but it is better not, and now is in every way as undesirable as indeed impossible. If there is in truth, as I believe, and as he believes, a life for us after this, he will know that his long-loving and admiring younger comrade has also striven towards the hard way that few can reach. What I *did* tell him before has absolutely passed from his mind: had, indeed, never taken root, and perhaps I had nurtured rather than denied what *had* taken root. If in some ways a little sad, I am glad otherwise. And I had one great reward, for at the end he spoke in a way he might not otherwise have done, and in words I shall never forget. I had risen, and was about to lean forward and take his hands in farewell, to prevent his half-rising, when suddenly he exclaimed, "Tell me something of *her* — of Fiona. I call her so always, and think of her so, to myself. Is she well? Is she at work? Is she true to her work and her ideal? No, *that* I know!"

"It was then he said the following words, which two minutes later, in the garden, I jotted down in pencil at once lest I should forget even a single word, or a single change in the sequence of words. 'She is a woman

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of genius. That is rare . . . so rare anywhere, anytime, in women or, in men. Some few women "have genius," but she is more than that. Yes, she is a woman of genius: the genius too, that is rarest, that drives deep thoughts before it. Tell her I think often of her, and of the deep thought in all she has written of late. Tell her I hope great things of her yet. And now . . . we'll go, since it must be so. Good-bye, my dear fellow, and God bless you.'

"Outside, the great green slope of Box Hill rose against a cloudless sky, filled with a flowing south wind. The swifts and swallows were flying high. In the beech courts thrush and blackbird called continually, along the hedge-rows the wild-roses hung. But an infinite sadness was in it all. A prince among men had fallen into the lonely and dark way."

Good-bye it was in truth; but it was the older poet who recovered hold on life and outlived the younger by four years.'

A wet spring, and a still damper autumn affected my husband seriously; and while we were visiting Mrs. Glassford Bell in Perthshire he became so ill that we went to Llandrindod Wells for him to be under special treatment. As he explained to Mr. Ernest Rhys:

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LLANDRINDOD WELLS,
Sept., 1903.

MY DEAR ERNEST,

. . . I know that you will be sorry to learn that things have not gone well with me. All this summer I have been feeling vaguely unwell and, latterly, losing strength steadily. . . . However, the rigorous treatment, the potent Saline and Sulphur waters and baths, the not less potent and marvellously pure and regenerative Llandrindod air — and my own exceptional vitality and recuperative powers — have combined to work a wonderful change for the better; which may prove to be more than “a splendid rally,” tho’ I know I must not be too sanguine. Fortunately, the eventuality does not much trouble me, either way: I have lived, and am content, and it is only for what I don’t want to leave undone that the sound of “Farewell” has anything deeply perturbing.

W. S.

And later to Mrs. Janvier:

LONDON, Sept. 30, 1903.

“Thanks for your loving note. But you are not to worry yourself about me. I’m all right, and as cheerful as a lark — let us say as a lark with a rheumatic wheeze in its little song-box, or gout in its little off-claw. . . .

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Anyway, I'll laugh and be glad and take life as I find it, till the end. The best prayer for me is that I may live vividly till 'Finis,' and work up to the last hour. . . .

"My love to you both, and know me ever your irrepressible,

"BILLY."

In a letter to Mr. Alden (Aug. 25th, 1903) he describes the work he had on hand at the moment, and the book he had projected and hoped to write:

". . . in the *Pall Mall Magazine* you may have noticed a series of topographical papers (with as much or more of anecdotal and reminiscent and critical) contributed, under the title of *Literary Geography*, by myself. The first three were commissioned by the editor to see how they 'took.' They were so widely liked, and those that followed, that this summer he commissioned me to write a fresh series, one each month till next March. Of these none has been more appreciated than the double article on the *Literary Geography of the Lake of Geneva*. Forthcoming issues are *The English Lake Country*, *Meredith*, *Thackeray*, *The Thames*, etc. In the current issue I deal with *Stevenson*.

". . . About my projected Greek book, to

comprise Magna Grecia as well, i. e. Hellenic Calabria and Sicily, etc. . . . I want to make a book out of the material gathered, old and new, and to go freshly all over the ground. . . . I intend to call it *Greek Backgrounds* and to deal with the ancient (recreated) and modern backgrounds of some of the greatest of the Greeks — as they were and are — as, for example, of Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Empedocles, Theocritus, etc.—and of famous ancient cities, Sybaris, Corinth, etc.; and deal with the home or chief habitat or famous association. For instance:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------|------------------------|
| (1) Calabria (Crotan and Metapontum) | with | Pythagoras. |
| (2) Eleusis in Greece, | } | Æschylus. |
| Syracuse and Gela in Sicily | | with life and death of |
| (3) Colonos | | Sophocles. |
| (4) Athens etc. | | with Euripides. |
| (5) Syracuse | | with Pindar etc. etc." |
| and Acragas (Girgente) | } | |

The two following letters were acknowledgments of birthday greetings. In the first to Mr. Stedman our plans for that winter are described:

THE GROSVENOR CLUB,
Oct. 2, 1903.

MY DEAR E. C. S.,

Two days ago, on Wednesday's mail, I posted a letter to reach you, I hope, on the

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morning of your birthday — and to-day, to my very real joy, I safely received your long and delightful letter. It has been a true medicine — for, as I told you, I've been gravely ill. And it came just at the right moment, and warmed my heart with its true affection.

. . . I know you'll be truly glad to hear that the tidings about myself can be more and more modified by good news from my physician,—a man in whom I have the utmost confidence and who knows every weakness as well as every resource and reserve of strength in me, and understands my temperament and nature as few doctors do understand complex personalities.

He said to me to-day, "You look as if you were well contented with the world." I answered, "Yes, of course I am. In the first place I'm every day feeling stronger, and in the next, and for this particular day, I've just had a letter of eight written pages from a friend whom I have ever dearly loved and whom I admire not less than I love." He knew you as a poet as well as the subtlest and finest interpreter of modern poetry — and indeed (tho' I had forgotten) I had given him a favourite volume and also lent your Baltimore addresses.

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When I'm once more in the land of Theocritus (and oh how entrancing it is) I'll be quite strong and well again, he says. Indeed I'm already "a live miracle"! We sail by the Orient liner "Orizaba" on the 23rd; reach Naples (via Gibraltar and Marseilles) 9 to 10 days later; and leave by the local mail-boat same evening for Messina — arrive there about 8 on Monday morning — catch the Syracuse mail about 10, change at 12 at Giarre, and ascend Mt. Etna by the little circular line to Maletto about 3,000 ft. high, and thence drive to the wonderful old Castle of Maniace to stay with our dear friend there, the Duke of Bronte — our third or fourth visit now. We'll be there about a fortnight: then a week with friends at lovely and unique Taormina: and then sail once more, either from Messina or Naples direct to the Piræus, for Athens, where we hope to spend the winter and spring.

How I wish you were to companion us. In Sicily, I often thought of you, far off Brother of Theocritus. You would so delight in it all, the Present that mirrors the magical Past; the Past that penetrates like stars the purple veils of the Present.

Yes, I know well how sincere is all you say as to the loving friend awaiting me —

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awaiting *us* — if ever we cross the Atlantic: but it is gladsome to hear it all the same.

All affectionate greetings to dear Mrs. Stedman, a true and dear friend,

Ever, dear Stedman,

Your loving friend,

WILLIAM SHARP.

13th Sept., 1903.

DEAR MRS. GILCHRIST,

It is at all times a great pleasure to hear from you, and that pleasure is enhanced by hearing from you on my birthday and by your kind remembrance of the occasion. . . .

We look forward to Athens greatly, though it is not (as in Elizabeth's case) my first visit to that land of entrancing associations and still ever-present beauty. But as one grows older, one the more recognises that "climate" and "country" belong to the geography of the soul rather than to that secondary physical geography of which we hear so much. The winds of heaven, the dreary blast of the wilderness, the airs of hope and peace, the tragic storms and cold inclemencies — these are not the property of our North or South or East, but are of the climes self-made or inherited or in some strange way become our "atmosphere." And the country

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we dream of, that we long for, is not yet reached by Cook nor even charted by Bae-deker. You and yours are often in our thought. In true friendship, distance means no more than that the sweet low music is far off: but it is there. Your friend,

WILLIAM SHARP.

We journeyed by sea to Naples. Our hopes of a chat with our friends the Janviers at Marseilles were frustrated by a violent gale we encountered. As my husband wrote to Mrs. Janvier while at sea:

R.M.S. ORIZABA,

Oct. 31, 1903.

“It seems strange to write you on the Festival of Samhain—the Celtic Summer-end, our Scottish Hallowe’en—here on these stormy waters between Sardinia and Italy. It is so strong a gale, and the air so inclement and damp that it is a little difficult to realise we are approaching the shores of Italy. But wild as the night is I want to send you a line on it, on this end of the old year, this night of powers and thoughts and spiritual dominion.

“It was a disappointment not to get ashore at Marseilles—but the fierce gale (a wild mistral) made it impossible. Indeed the

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steamer couldn't approach: we lay-to for 3 or 4 hours behind a great headland some 4 or 5 miles to S. W. of the city, and passengers and mails had to be driven along the shore and embarked from a small quarry pier. . . . We had a very stormy and disagreeable passage all the way from Plymouth and through the Bay. . . . The first part of the voyage I was very unwell, partly from an annoying heart attack. You may be sure I am better again, or I could not have withstood the wild gale which met us far south in the Gulf of Lyons and became almost a hurricane near Marseilles. But I gloried in the superb magnificence of the lashed and tossed sport of the mistral, as we went before it like an arrow before a gigantic bow.

“It is now near sunset and I am writing under the shelter of a windsail on the upper deck, blowing ‘great guns,’ though I don't think we are in for more than a passing gale. But for every reason I shall be glad to get ashore, not that I want to be in Naples, which I like least of any place in Italy, but to get on to Maniace . . . where I so much love to be, and where I can work and dream so well. . . .”

But the gale increased and became one of

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the wildest we had ever known, as William reminded me later when he showed me an unrhymed poem he had composed — exactly as it stands — in the middle of the night, and the next day, in Naples, recalled it and wrote it down. It was his way of mental escape from a physical condition which induced great nervous strain or fatigue to create imaginatively a contrary condition and environment, and so to identify himself with it, that he could become oblivious to surrounding actualities. This is the poem:

INVOCATION

Play me a lulling tune, O Flute-Player of Sleep,
Across the twilight bloom of thy purple havens.
Far off a phantom stag on the moon-yellow high-
lands
Ceases; and as a shadow, wavers; and passes:
So let Silence seal me and Darkness gather, Piper
of Sleep.

Play me a lulling chant, O Anthem-maker,
Out of the fall of lonely seas, and the wind's sorrow:
Behind are the burning glens of the sunset-sky
Where like blown ghosts the sea-mews wail their
desolate sea-dirges:
Make me of these a lulling chant, O Anthem-maker.

No — no — from nets of silence weave me, O Sigher
of Sleep,
A dusky veil ash-gray as the moon-pale moth's grey
wing;

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Of thicket-stillness woven, and sleep of grass, and
thin evanishing air
Where the tall feed spires breathless—for I am
tired, O Sigher of Sleep,
And long for thy muffled song as of bells on the
wind, and the wind's cry
Falling, and the dim wastes that lie
Beyond the last, low, dim, oblivious sigh.

During a short visit to Maniace W. S.
wrote to Mrs. Philpot:

11th Nov., 1903.

“. . . At this season of the year, beautiful
and unique in its appeal and singular wild
fascination as it is, this place does not suit
me climatically, being for one thing too high,
between 2,000 and 3,000 ft., and also too
much under the domination of Etna, who
swings vast electric current, and tosses thun-
der charged cloud-masses to and fro like a
Titan acolyte swinging mighty censers at the
feet of the Sun. We drive to Taormina on
Tuesday and the divine beauty and not less
divinely balmy and regenerative climate—
sitting as she does like the beautiful goddess
Falcone worshipped there of old, perched on
her orange and olive-clad plateau, hundreds
of feet above the peacock-hued Ionian Sea,
with one hand as it were reaching back to
Italy (Calabria ever like opal or amethyst to
the North-east), with the other embracing all

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the lands of Etna to Syracuse and the Hyblæan Mount, the lands of Empedocles and Theocritus, of Æschylus and Pindar, of Stesichorus and Simonides, and so many other great names — and with her face ever turned across the Ionian Sea to that ancient Motherland of Hellas, where once your soul and mine surely sojourned.

“We shall have a delightful ‘going’ and one you would enjoy to the full. . . . Tomorrow if fine and radiant we start for that absolutely unsurpassable expedition to the great orange gardens a thousand feet lower at the S. W. end of the Duchy. We first drive some eight miles or so through wild mountain land till we come to the gorges of the Simeto and there we mount our horses and mules and with ample escort before and behind ride in single file for about an hour and a half. Suddenly we come upon one of the greatest orange groves in Europe — 26,000 trees in full fruit, an estimated crop of 3,000,000! stretching between the rushing Simeto and great cliffs. Then once more to the saddle and back a different way to barbaric Bronte and thence a ten mile drive back along the ancient Greek highway from Naxos to sacred Enna. And so, for the moment, *à revedèr!a!*”

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After a delightful week at Corfù we settled in Athens (at Maison Merlin) for four months, and found pleasant companionship with members of the English and American Schools of Archeology — of which Mr. Carl Bosenquet and Prof. Henry Fowler were respectively the heads — with Dr. Wilhelm head of the Austrian School, — with Mr. Bikelas the Greek poet, at whose house we met several of the rising Greek men of letters, and other residents and wanderers.

The winter was very cold and at first my husband was very ill — the double strain of his life seemed to consume him like a flame. At the New Year he wrote again to Mrs. Philpot:

MAISON MERLIN,
ATHENS.

DEAR FRIEND,

This is mainly to tell you that I've come out of my severe feverish attack with erect (if draggled) colours and hope to march "cock-a-hoopishly" into 1904 and even further if the smiling enigmatical gods permit! . . . To-day I heard a sound as of Pan piping, among the glens on Hymettos, whereon my eyes rest so often and often so long dream. To-morrow I'll take Gilbert Murray's fine new version of Hippolytus or Bacchæ as my pocket

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companion to the Theatre of Dionysius on the hither side of the Acropolis; possibly my favourite Œdipus at Kolonos and read sitting on Kolonos itself and imagine I hear on the wind the rise and fall of the lonely ancient lives, serene thought-tranced in deathless music. And in the going of the old and the coming of the new year, a friend's thoughts shall fare to you from far away Athens. . . . As far as practicable I am keeping myself to the closer study of the literature and philosophy and ethical concepts and ideals of ancient Hellas and of mythology in relation thereto, but you know how fascinating and perturbing much else is, from sculpture to vase paintings, from Doric and Ionic architecture to the beauty and complex interest of the almost inexhaustible field of ancient Greek coins, and those of Græcia Magna,— And then (both Eheu and Evœ!) I have so much else to do — besides "Life" the supreme and most exciting of the arts!

A letter of New Year wishes to Dr. Garnett from W. S.; and a copy of *The House of Usna* to Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Rhys brought the following acknowledgments:

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27 TANZA ROAD, HAMPSTEAD,
Jan. 8, 1904.

MY DEAR SHARP,

Your letter has given me infinite pleasure. . . .

Athens must be a delightful residence at this time of year, especially if there are no "cold snaps," against which I fear that the modern Athenians are no better provided than their ancestors were. There is a very amusing letter in Alciphron's epistles, describing the sufferings of a poor parasite in a hard winter. You seem to have very charming society. The name of Bikelas is well known to me, but I am not much versed in Roman literature. The history of Paparrhegopoulos has been a good deal noticed of late. It seems to be a really classical work. By producing such the Greeks will indicate their claim to a high position in the European family, until the time has come for action, which apparently has not come yet.

I quite agree in the conclusion at which they seem to have arrived that it is better to have the Turks in Constantinople than the Bulgarians, much more the Russians. If either of their victims once occupy it, the rightful possessors will be forever excluded.

I have not wanted for literary occupations

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—one a little work of fancy which I am about finishing, and of which you will hear more. Then I have a story to translate from the Portuguese, published in the *Venture*; an edition of Browning's preface to Shelley's forged letters, with an introduction by me, and the second volume of English literature in conjunction with Gosse, which has been these six weeks ready for issue but delayed from time to time to suit the Americans. It is now positively announced for the 31st.

With kindest regards to Mrs. Sharp, who I hope finds Attica entirely to her taste,

I am, dear Sharp,
Very sincerely yours,

R. GARNETT.

DERWEN,

HERMITAGE LANE, N. W.,

Jan. 28, 1904.

DEAR MISS FIONA MACLEOD,

Most delightful of all New Year's gifts is a really beautiful book; and we thank you, — both of us, — for sending us your most characteristic heroic-lyric tragedy, *The House of Usna*. We were fortunate in being allowed to see it performed — how long ago can it have been? — at the Stage Society's instance. . . . The "Psychic Drama," as you conceive it, opens the door to a lost world

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of Nature and the emotions of Nature in the imagination. No doubt it is a frightfully difficult thing to attire these emotions in fair and credible human dress, one that seemed impossible even, but *The House of Usna* may serve as a test of how far those who have the key to these emotions can hope to fit it to old or new-old dramatic forms. Your "Foreword" is suggestive enough to be treated separately; but we write from a sick house, and in such states, it is harder to think of critical things than of pure imaginative ones. For these last, as they rise out of your magic "House," and haunt the ear, we owe you very whole and ample thanks.

With many wishes for health and spirit in this year of 1904,

We are, yours most truly,

G. AND E. RHYS.

With spring sunshine and warmth my husband regained a degree of strength, and it was his chief pleasure to take long rambles on the neighbouring hills alone, or with a young American friend, Mrs. Roselle L. Shields, a tireless walker. We made some interesting expeditions to Tyryns, Mycenæ, Corinth, Delphi, etc., and from "Olympia in Elis" he wrote to a friend:

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“How you would love this radiant heat, this vast solitude of ruins, the millions of flowers and dense daisied grass. This fragment of vast Olympia is the most ancient Greek temple extant. It lies at the base of the Hill of Kronos, of which the lowest pines are seen to the right and overlooks the whole valley of the Alpheios. . . .

“And the millions of flowers. They are almost incredible in number and density. The ground is often white with thick snow of daisies. Wild plums, pears, cherries, etc. The radiant and glowing heat is a joy. I am sad to think that this day week beautiful Greece will be out of sight.”

Later he wrote to Mr. Ernest Rhys:

MAISON MERLIN, ATHENS,
Friday, 26th Feb., 1904.

MY DEAR ERNEST,

. . . Yesterday I had a lovely break from work, high up on the beautiful bracing dwarf-pine clad slopes of Pentelicos, above Kephisia, the ancient deme of Menander — and then across the country behind Hymettos, the country of Demosthenes, and so back by the High Convent of St. John the Hunter, on the north spur of the Hymettian range, and

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the site of ancient Gargettos, the place of Epicurus' birth and boyhood. At sundown I was at Heracleion, some three or four miles from Athens — and the city was like pale gold out of which peaked Lycabettos rose like a purple sapphire. The sky beyond, above Salamis, was all grass-green and mauve. A thunder-cloud lay on extreme Hymettos, rising from Marathon: and three rainbows lay along the violet dusk of the great hill-range. . . .

We intend to spend April in France, mostly in Southern Provence, which we love so well, and where we have dear French friends.

I am apparently well and strong again, hard at work, hard at pleasure, hard at life, as before, and generally once more full of hope and energy.

Love to you both, dear friends, and a sunbeam to little Stella.

Ever yours,

WILL.

On leaving Greece we loitered at Hyères in the month of cherry-blossoms, and moved slowly northwards through Nîmes to the fantastic neighbourhood of Le Puy, with its curious hill-set town and churches perched on pinnacles of conical rock.

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From Le Puy W. S. wrote to Mrs. Janvier :

“ 18th April, 1904. . . . What has most impressed my imagination in this region is what I saw to-day outside of fantastic Le Puy — namely at the magnificent old feudal rock-Chateau fortress of Polignac, erected on the site of the famous Temple of Apollo (raised here by the Romans on the still earlier site of a Druidic Temple to the Celtic Sun God). I looked down the mysterious hollow of the ancient oracle of Apollo, and realised how deep a hold even in the France of to-day is maintained by the Ancient Pagan faith. . . .”