

CHAPTER III

THE WASHER OF THE FORD

Owing to the publication of *The Sin-Eater* by a firm identified with the Scoto-Celtic movement the book attracted immediate attention. Dr. Douglas Hyde voiced the Irish feeling when he wrote to my husband: "I think Fiona Macleod's books the most interesting thing in the new Scoto-Celtic movement, which I hope will march side by side with our own." This movement was according to William Sharp "fundamentally the outcome of Ossian, and immediately of the rising of the sap in the Irish nation." Following on the incentive given by such scholars as Windische, Whitley Stokes, Kuno Meyer, and the various Folklore societies, a Gaelic League had been formed by enthusiasts in Ireland, and in Scotland, for the preservation and teaching of the old Celtic tongue; for the study of the old literatures of which priceless treasures lay untouched in both countries, and for the encouragement of natural racial talent. Wales had succeeded in

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recovering the use of her Cymric tongue; and the expression in music of racial sentiment had become widespread throughout that country. Ireland and the Highlands looked forward to attaining a similar result; and efforts to that end were set agoing in schools, in classes, by means of such organisations as the Irish Feis Ceoil Committee, the Irish Literary Society and the Irish National Theatre. Their aim was to preserve some utterance of the national life, to mould some new kind of romance, some new element of thought, out of Irish life and traditions. Among the most eager workers were Dr. Douglas Hyde, Mr. W. B. Yeats, Mr. Standish O'Grady, Mr. George Russell (A.E.), Dr. George Sigerson, and Lady Gregory.

In Scotland much valuable work had been done by such men as Campbell of Islay, Cameron of Brodick, Mr. Alexander Carmichel; by the Gaelic League and the Highland Mod and its yearly gatherings. There were writers and poets also who used the old language and were consequently known within only a small area. No conspicuous modern Celtic work had hitherto been written in the English tongue until the appearance of the writings of Fiona Macleod, and later of Mr. Neil Munro. *The Sin-Eater* was therefore warmly

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welcomed on both sides of the Irish Channel. and Fiona Macleod, acclaimed as the leading representative of the Highland Gael, "our one and only Highland novelist." *The Irish Independent* pronounced her to be "the poet born," "her work is pure romance — and she strikes a strange note in modern literature, but it has the spirit of the Celt, and is another triumph for the Celtic genius."

In consequence of this reception, and of a special article in *The Bookman*, speculations began to be made concerning the unknown and unseen authoress. *The Highland News* in pursuance of its desire to awake in the Highlands of Scotland an active sympathy with the growing Scoto-Celtic movement, was anxious to give some details concerning the new writer. To that end Mr. John Macleay wrote to William Sharp to ask if "considering your relation towards Miss Macleod, you might be able to tell me where I could obtain any personal information about her." In reply, a few sparse notes were sent; the author in question was said to have passed her girlhood in the West Highlands; her tastes, her dislike of towns and her love of seclusion, were among the characteristics described.

When, early in 1896, *The Highland News* wrote to several authors to ask their views on

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the subject of Literature in the Highlands, Mr. Grant Allen, Mrs. Katherine Tynan Hinkson, Fiona Macleod and William Sharp were among those writers whose letters, expressive of interest and sympathy, were published.

The two letters contributed by my husband were written necessarily, each from a slightly different standpoint. He welcomed the opportunity of appearing in print in the two characters for he believed that it would help to shield the secret concerning Fiona Macleod.

The publication by P. Geddes & Coll. of *The Washer of the Ford* — a collection of Tales and Legendary Moralities — aroused a fresh outbreak of curiosity. For instance, a sensational article appeared in *The Highland News* on the vexed question of the identity of the Highland writer, headed: "Mystery! Mystery! All in a Celtic Haze."

According to it: "Highland Celts in Glasgow are, I hear, hot on the scent of what they imagine to be a female James Macpherson. This, of course, is Miss Fiona Macleod. The way which Miss Macleod has led our Glasgow countrymen is strange indeed, and the literary detective has been busy. In the first place, it is asserted that Miss Fiona Mac-

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leod does not exist. No one seems to have seen her. One gentleman called twice at her residence in Edinburgh, and Miss Macleod was out. She has written about Iona, but again in that well watched place her name is unknown. The natural inference, you will admit, is that there is something here to be 'fahnd aht,' as the Englishman says. Seeing that the non-existence of Miss Fiona Macleod has been thus established, the next point is who wrote those books to which that name is attached. Now, Mr. William Sharp has declared himself to be Miss Fiona Macleod's uncle; he has, too, interested himself in Celtic things. Isn't it the second natural inference that he has written the books? But Mr. Sharp has specifically denied the authorship. Then, of course, it must be Mr. and Mrs. Sharp in collaboration. But again comes denial. Mr. Sharp has addressed the following note to the *Glasgow Evening News*, which has been somewhat persistent in casting doubt on the existence of Miss Macleod — 'Miss Fiona Macleod is not Mr. William Sharp, Miss Fiona Macleod is not Mrs. William Sharp, Miss Fiona Macleod is — Miss Fiona Macleod.' "

The persecuted author was much disturbed by this effort to draw Fiona Macleod into

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a controversy, to force her to declare herself. Not only was he indignant at what to him was an unwarrantable interference with the privacy of the individual, and resented the traps that were laid to catch the author should "she" be "unwary," it was instrumental also in making him much more determined to guard his secret at all costs. During the months of controversy the subject of it accomplished a considerable amount of work.

He collaborated with me in the preparation of an Anthology of Celtic Poetry; prepared an edition of *Ossian* (P. Geddes & Coll.) for which he wrote a long introduction; and began to work upon a humorous novel, not, however, finished until 1898.

As F. M. he published *The Washer of the Ford* in April, wrote *Green Fire*, and also a number of Poems, which were subsequently included in *From the Hills of Dream*. His Diary for the New Year has this entry:

Jany 7th, 1896. The British Weekly has a paragraph given under all reserve that Fiona Macleod is Mrs. William Sharp. Have written — as W. S. — to Dr. R. Nicoll and to Mrs. Macdonnell of *The Bookman* to deny this authoritatively.

From the first we decided that it would

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be advisable to admit that F. M. was my cousin, also, that my husband acted as her adviser and "right hand" in the matter of publishing.

The arrangements for the two first books were made by W. S. in person. No such precautions were necessary for the books brought out by P. Geddes & Coll., as the head of the firm was in the secret. But, as it was well known in Edinburgh and elsewhere that William Sharp was keenly interested in the "Celtic Movement," he thought it well to collaborate with me on an Anthology of Celtic Poetry entitled *Lyra Celtica* (and published by the firm), for which he prepared an Introduction and Notes.

On the 6th January, in a letter to Mrs. William Rossetti he wrote: "Just back from France where I went so far with my wife on her way to Central Italy. Her health has given way, alas, and she has been sent out from this killing climate for 3 to 4 months at any rate."

At the end of January he wrote to me:

"Only a brief line to thank you for your letter about *me* and *Fiona*. Every word you say is true and urgent, and even if I did not know it to be so I would pay the most search-

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ing heed to any advice from you, in whose insight and judgment mentally as well as spiritually I have such deep confidence. Although in the main I had come to exactly the same standpoint I was wavering before certain alluring avenues of thought. . . . If I live to be an elderly man, time enough for one or more of my big philosophical and critical works. Meanwhile—the flame!

“The only thing of the kind I will now do—and that not this year—will be the ‘Introduction to the Study of Celtic Literature’: but for that I have the material to hand, and shall largely use in magazines first. . . . Well, we shall begin at once! February will be wholly given over to finishing *Wives in Exile* and *The Washer of the Ford*.”

On the 1st February he left town and settled down to work on the Pettycur Inn, Kinghorn, Fife. His Diary (1896) gives the following record of work:

Feb. 3rd. Wrote the Preface to *The Washer of the Ford*.

Feb. 7th. Dictated (1750 words) article on Modern Romantic Art, for the *Glasgow Herald*—Also *World* article.

Feb. 9th. Wrote “The Festival of the Birds.”

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Feb. 10th. *Glasgow Herald* Article (1500 words) on The Art of the Goldsmith, and wrote "The Blessing of the Fishes."

In the middle of February William had written to Mr. R. Murray Gilchrist, one of the few friends who then knew the secret of the pseudonym:

MY DEAR GILCHRIST,

Fiona Macleod has suddenly begun to attract a great deal of attention. There have been leaders as well as long and important reviews: and now the chief North of Scotland paper, *The Highland News*, is printing two long articles devoted in a most eulogistic way to F. M. and her influence "already so marked and so vital, so that we accept her as the leader of the Celtic Renaissance in Scotland." There is, also, I hear, to be a Magazine article on her. This last week there have been long and favourable reviews in the *Academy* and *The New Age*.

I am glad you like my other book, I mean W. S.'s! [*Ecce Puella*] There are things in it which are as absolutely out of my real self as it is possible to be: and I am glad that you recognise this. I have not yet seen my book of short stories published in America under the title *The Gypsy Christ*, though it

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has been out some weeks: and I have heard from one or two people about it. America is more indulgent to me just now than I deserve. For a leading American critic writes of *The Gypsy Christ* that, "though it will offend some people and displease others, it is one of the most remarkable volumes I have read for long. The titular story has an extraordinary, even a dreadful impressiveness: 'Madge o' the Pool' is more realistic than 'realism': and alike in the scathing society love-episode, 'The Lady in Hosea,' and in that brilliant Algerian *conte*, 'The Coward,' the author suggests the method and power of Guy de Maupassant."

I hope to get the book soon, and to send you a copy. As I think I told you, the setting of the G/C is entirely that which I knew through you. I have made use of one or two features — exaggerated facts and half facts — which I trust will not displease you. Do you remember my feeling about those gaunt mine-chimneys: I always think of them now when I think of the G/C. Fundamentally, however, the story goes back to my own early experiences — not as to the *facts* of the story, of course. . . . Then again, Arthur Sherburne Hardy, who is by many considered the St. Beuve of American criti-

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cism — in surety and insight — has given his opinion of a book i. e. of all he has seen of it (a comedy of the higher kind) for which Stone and Kimball have given me good terms — *Wives in Exile* — that it is “quite unlike anything else — at once the most brilliant, romantic and witty thing I have read for long — to judge from the opening chapters and the scheme. It will stand by itself, I think.”

Personally, I think it shows the best handicraft of anything W. S. has done in fiction. It is, of course, wholly distinct in manner and method from F. M.'s work. It *ought* to be out by May. Sunshine and blithe laughter guided my pen in this book. Well, I have given you my gossip about myself: and now I would much rather hear about *you*. I wish you were here to tell me all about what you have been doing, thinking, and dreaming.

Yours,
W. S.

IN ROME I received the following letter from him:

LONDON, 21st Feb.

“I am sure *The Highland News* must have delighted you. Let me know what you think of Fiona's and W. S.'s letters. . . . I am

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so sorry you are leaving Siena. . . . I follow every step of your movements with keenest interest. But oh the light and the colour, how I envy you!

“I am hoping you are pleased with *Lyra Celtica*. It is published to-day only — so of course I have heard nothing yet from outsiders. Yesterday I finished my Matthew Arnold essay¹ — and in the evening wrote the first part of my F. M. story, ‘Morag of the Glen’ — a strong piece of work I hope and believe though not finished yet. I hope to finish it by to-night. I am so glad you and Mona liked the first of ‘The Three Marvels of Hy’ (pronounced *Ee* or *Hee*) so well. Pieces like ‘The Festival of the Birds’ seem to be born out of my brain almost in an inspirational way. I hardly understand it. Yes, you were in the right place to read it — St. Francis’ country. That beautiful strange Umbria! After all, Iona and Assisi are not nearly so remote from each other as from London or Paris. I send you the second of the series, ‘The Blessing of the Flies.’ It, too, was written at Pettycur — as was ‘The Prologue.’ . . . There is a strange half glad, half morose note in this Prologue which I

¹ The essay prefaces a selection of M. A.’s poems published in the Canterbury Series (Walter Scott).

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myself hardly apprehend in full significance. In it is interpolated one of the loveliest of the 'legendary moralities' which I had meant to insert in Section I—that of 'The King of the Earth.' I will send it to you before long. . . ."

To a correspondent he wrote about the "Three Marvels of Hy": "They are studies in old Religious Celtic sentiment so far as that can be recreated in a modern heart that feels the same beauty and simplicity of the Early Christian faith."

And to me again: ". . . I know you will rejoice to hear that there can be no question that F. M.'s deepest and finest work is in this *Washer of the Ford* volume. As for the spiritual lesson that nature has taught me, and that has grown within me otherwise, I have given the finest utterance to it that I can. In a sense my inner life of the spirit is concentrated in the three pieces, 'The Moon-Child,' 'The Fisher of Men,' and 'The Last Supper.' Than the last I shall never do anything better. Apart from this intense inner flame that has been burning within me so strangely and deeply of late—I think my most imaginative work will be found in the titular piece, 'The Washer of the Ford,' which still, tho' written and revised some time

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ago, haunts me! and in that and the pagan and animistic 'Annir Choille.' We shall read those things in a gondola in Venice?"

He joined me in Venice on the 16th May — glad of sunshine and rest. We journeyed back to England by way of the Lakes, in a time of early roses, and returned to London to find the first copies of *The Washer of the Ford* awaiting us. Two out of many letters concerning the book that came to him from friends who were in the secret and watched the development of the "F. M." work, were a strong incentive to further effort.

The first is from Mr. Frank Rinder:

MY DEAR WILL,

From my heart I thank you for the gift of this book. It adds to the sum of the precious, heaven-sent things in life. It will kindle the fire of hope, of aspiration and of high resolve in a thousand hearts. As one of those into whose life you have brought a more poignant craving for what is beautiful in word and action, I thank you for writing it.

Your friend,

FRANK.

The second was from Thomas A. Janvier:

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SAINT REMY DE PROVENCE,
June 22, 1896.

MY DEAR WILL,

If *The Washer of the Ford* were the first of Fiona's books I am confident that the sex of its author would not pass unchallenged. A great part of it is essentially masculine — all the "Seanachas," and "The Annir Choille," and the opening of "The Washer": not impossible for a woman to write, but unlikely. Nor would a woman have written "The Annir Choille," I think, as it is written here. Fiona has shown her double sex in this story more completely, it seems to me, than in any other. It is written with a man's sense of decency and a woman's sense of delicacy — and the love of both man and woman is in it to a very extraordinary degree. The fighting stories seem to me to be pure man — though I suppose that there are Highland women (like Scott's "Highland Widow") capable of their stern savagery. But on these alone, Fiona's sex scarcely could have been accepted unchallenged. But what seems to me to show plainest, in all the stories together, is not the trifle that they are by a man or by a woman but that they have come out of your inspired soul. They seem to be the result of some outside force constrain-

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ing you to write them. And with their freshness they have a curious primordial flavour — that comes, I suppose, from the deep roots and full essences of life which are their substance of soul. Being basic, elementary, they are independent of time; or even race. In a literary — technically literary — way they seem to me to be quite your most perfect work. I am sensitive to word arrangement, and some of your work has made me rather disposed to swear at you for carelessness. You have not always taken the trouble to hunt for the word that you needed. But these stories are as nearly perfect in finish, I think, as literary endeavour can make them. And they have that effect of flow and ease that can only come — at least, I can imagine it only as arriving — from the most persistent and laborious care. In the detail of make-up, I am especially impressed by the insertion of the Shadow Seers just where the key is changed radically. They are at once your justifying pieces for what has gone before, and an orchestral interlude before the wholly different Seanachas begin. Of all in the book, my strongest affection is for “The Last Supper.” It seems to me to be the most purely beautiful, and the profoundest thing that you have done.

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I feel that some strong new current must have come into your life; or that the normal current has been in some way obstructed or diverted — for the animating spirit of these new books reflects a radical change in your own soul. The Pagan element is entirely subordinated to and controlled by the inner passions of the soul. In a word you have lifted your work from the flesh-level to the soul-level. . . .

What you say in your letter of worry and ill-health saddens me. It is unjust that your rare power of creation should be hampered in any way. But it seems to me that there must be great consolation in your certain knowledge that you have greatly created, in spite of all.

Always affectionately yours,

T. A. J.