Secret Rose


This is a #Yeats2015 project in celebration of WB Yeats’s 150-year anniversary.

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Introduction

THIS PDF CONTAINS EXTRACTS FROM both Secret Rose books. From The Secret Rose, I have chosen the tale “The Wisdom of the King” in which a prince is born with the feathers of a hawk in his hair. Like the Grimm Brothers, WB Yeats collected folklore and fairy tales, except from the Irish, Celtic tradition which sits, perhaps, less easily in the English language.

And unlike the Grimm brothers who took their tales from literary sources and the middle classes, Yeats (together with his friend Lady Gregory) walked the countryside, seeking out peasants in their fields and cottages and taking down their stories word by word, thus saving stories that were millennia old.

And also unlike the Grimm brothers, Yeats went on to write his own stories in which he tried to capture the ancient sensibility that gave rise to the folklore of Ireland. A mindset in which time collides uneasily with eternity, where the questing adventurer clashes with the settled, imperfect world of legality and custom, where the wise soul of poetry must compromise with the quotidian body of law, and a hero can find no place.

The stories need to be read slowly, and aloud, to savour their unfamiliar language and meaning.

In the story below, the Prince’s blemish bars him from the throne of Ireland but because his courtiers conspire to persuade his whole kingdom to keep the secret of his flaw from him, so that they may keep him as their prince, for all know that he is wise and true. Through falling in love with a princess who rejects the gift of his wisdom, he learns his predicament and has to leave the earth for the fairy realms where he belongs. He chides his courtiers for having made him betray his own hawklike nature: “Men of law and men of verse, live according to your kind, and call Eocha of the Plain of Towers to reign over you, for I set out to find my kindred.”

From my novel, Her Secret Rose, I’ve chosen the opening passage, the day Maud Gonne came calling on the poet and started a love affair that would rock the history of two nations.

I hope these extracts help to whet your appetite for the book.

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THE SECRET ROSE

The Wisdom of the King

THE HIGH-QUEEN OF THE ISLAND of Woods had died in childbirth, and her child was put to nurse with a woman who lived in a hut of mud and wicker, within the border of the wood.

One night the woman sat rocking the cradle, and pondering over the beauty of the child, and praying that the gods might grant him wisdom equal to his beauty. There came a knock at the door, and she got up, not a little wondering, for the nearest neighbours were in the dun of the High-King a mile away; and the night was now late. 'Who is knocking?' she cried, and a thin voice answered, 'Open! for I am a crone of the grey hawk, and I come from the darkness of the great wood.'

In terror she drew back the bolt, and a grey-clad woman, of a great age, and of a height more than human, came in and stood by the head of the cradle. The nurse shrank back against the wall, unable to take her eyes from the woman, for she saw by the gleaming of the firelight that the feathers of the grey hawk were upon her head instead of hair.

But the child slept, and the fire danced, for the one was too ignorant and the other too full of gaiety to know what a dreadful being stood there. 'Open!' cried another voice, 'for I am a crone of the grey hawk, and I watch over his nest in the darkness of the great wood.' The nurse opened the door again, though her fingers could scarce hold the bolts for trembling, and another grey woman, not less old than the other, and with like feathers instead of hair, came in and stood by the first.

In a little, came a third grey woman, and after her a fourth, and then another and another and another, until the hut was full of their immense bodies. They stood a long time in perfect silence and stillness, for they were of those whom the dropping of the sand has never troubled, but at last one muttered in a low thin voice: 'Sisters, I knew him far away by the redness of his heart under his silver skin'; and then another spoke: 'Sisters, I knew him because his heart fluttered like a bird under a net of silver cords'; and then another took up the word: 'Sisters, I knew him because his heart sang like a bird that is happy in a silver cage.'
And after that they sang together, those who were nearest rocking the cradle with long wrinkled fingers; and their voices were now tender and caressing, now like the wind blowing in the great wood, and this was their song:

Out of sight is out of mind:
Long have man and woman-kind,
Heavy of will and light of mood,
Taken away our wheaten food,
Taken away our Altar stone;
Hail and rain and thunder alone,
And red hearts we turn to grey,
Are true till Time gutter away.

When the song had died out, the crone who had first spoken, said: ‘We have nothing more to do but to mix a drop of our blood into his blood.’ And she scratched her arm with the sharp point of a spindle, which she had made the nurse bring to her, and let a drop of blood, grey as the mist, fall upon the lips of the child; and passed out into the darkness.

Then the others passed out in silence one by one; and all the while the child had not opened his pink eyelids or the fire ceased to dance, for the one was too ignorant and the other too full of gaiety to know what great beings had bent over the cradle.

When the crones were gone, the nurse came to her courage again, and hurried to the dun of the High-King, and cried out in the midst of the assembly hall that the Sidhe, whether for good or evil she knew not, had bent over the child that night; and the king and his poets and men of law, and his huntsmen, and his cooks, and his chief warriors went with her to the hut and gathered about the cradle, and were as noisy as magpies, and the child sat up and looked at them.

Two years passed over, and the king died fighting against the Fer Bolg; and the poets and the men of law ruled in the name of the child, but looked to see him become the master himself before long, for no one had seen so wise a child, and tales of his endless questions about the household of the gods and the making of the world went hither and thither among the wicker houses of the poor. Everything had been well but for a miracle that began to trouble all men; and all women, who, indeed, talked of it without ceasing. The feathers of the grey hawk had begun to grow in the child's hair, and though, his nurse cut them continually, in but a little while they would be more numerous than ever.

This had not been a matter of great moment, for miracles were a little thing in those days, but for an ancient law of Eri that none who had any blemish of body could sit upon the throne; and as a grey hawk was a wild thing of the air
which had never sat at the board, or listened to the songs of the poets in the light of the fire, it was not possible to think of one in whose hair its feathers grew as other than marred and blasted; nor could the people separate from their admiration of the wisdom that grew in him a horror as at one of unhuman blood. Yet all were resolved that he should reign, for they had suffered much from foolish kings and their own disorders, and moreover they desired to watch out the spectacle of his days; and no one had any other fear but that his great wisdom might bid him obey the law, and call some other, who had but a common mind, to reign in his stead.

When the child was seven years old the poets and the men of law were called together by the chief poet, and all these matters weighed and considered. The child had already seen that those about him had hair only, and, though they had told him that they too had had feathers but had lost them because of a sin committed by their forefathers, they knew that he would learn the truth when he began to wander into the country round about. After much consideration they decreed a new law commanding every one upon pain of death to mingle artificially the feathers of the grey hawk into his hair; and they sent men with nets and slings and bows into the countries round about to gather a sufficiency of feathers. They decreed also that any who told the truth to the child should be flung from a cliff into the sea.

The years passed, and the child grew from childhood into boyhood and from boyhood into manhood, and from being curious about all things he became busy with strange and subtle thoughts which came to him in dreams, and with distinctions between things long held the same and with the resemblance of things long held different. Multitudes came from other lands to see him and to ask his counsel, but there were guards set at the frontiers, who compelled all that came to wear the feathers of the grey hawk in their hair. While they listened to him his words seemed to make all darkness light and filled their hearts like music; but, alas, when they returned to their own lands his words seemed far off, and what they could remember too strange and subtle to help them to live out their hasty days.

A number indeed did live differently afterwards, but their new life was less excellent than the old: some among them had long served a good cause, but when they heard him praise it and their labour, they returned to their own lands to find what they had loved less lovable and their arm lighter in the battle, for he had taught them how little a hair divides the false and true; others, again, who had served no cause, but wrought in peace the welfare of their own households, when he had expounded the meaning of their purpose, found their bones softer.
and their will less ready for toil, for he had shown them greater purposes; and numbers of the young, when they had heard him upon all these things, remembered certain words that became like a fire in their hearts, and made all kindly joys and traffic between man and man as nothing, and went different ways, but all into vague regret.

When any asked him concerning the common things of life; disputes about the mear of a territory, or about the straying of cattle, or about the penalty of blood; he would turn to those nearest him for advice; but this was held to be from courtesy, for none knew that these matters were hidden from him by thoughts and dreams that filled his mind like the marching and counter-marching of armies. Far less could any know that his heart wandered lost amid throngs of overcoming thoughts and dreams, shuddering at its own consuming solitude.

Among those who came to look at him and to listen to him was the daughter of a little king who lived a great way off; and when he saw her he loved, for she was beautiful, with a strange and pale beauty unlike the women of his land; but Dana, the great mother, had decreed her a heart that was but as the heart of others, and when she considered the mystery of the hawk feathers she was troubled with a great horror. He called her to him when the assembly was over and told her of her beauty, and praised her simply and frankly as though she were a fable of the bards; and he asked her humbly to give him her love, for he was only subtle in his dreams.

Overwhelmed with his greatness, she half consented, and yet half refused, for she longed to marry some warrior who could carry her over a mountain in his arms. Day by day the king gave her gifts; cups with ears of gold and findrinny wrought by the craftsmen of distant lands; cloth from over sea, which, though woven with curious figures, seemed to her less beautiful than the bright cloth of her own country; and still she was ever between a smile and a frown; between yielding and withholding. He laid down his wisdom at her feet, and told how the heroes when they die return to the world and begin their labour anew; how the kind and mirthful Men of Dea drove out the huge and gloomy and misshapen People from Under the Sea; and a multitude of things that even the Sidhe have forgotten, either because they happened so long ago or because they have not time to think of them; and still she half refused, and still he hoped, because he could not believe that a beauty so much like wisdom could hide a common heart.

There was a tall young man in the dun who had yellow hair, and was skilled in wrestling and in the training of horses; and one day when the king
walked in the orchard, which was between the foss and the forest, he heard his voice among the salley bushes which hid the waters of the foss.

'My blossom,' it said, 'I hate them for making you weave these dingy feathers into your beautiful hair, and all that the bird of prey upon the throne may sleep easy o' nights'; and then the low, musical voice he loved answered: 'My hair is not beautiful like yours; and now that I have plucked the feathers out of your hair I will put my hands through it, thus, and thus, and thus; for it casts no shadow of terror and darkness upon my heart.'

Then the king remembered many things that he had forgotten without understanding them, doubtful words of his poets and his men of law, doubts that he had reasoned away, his own continual solitude; and he called to the lovers in a trembling voice. They came from among the salley bushes and threw themselves at his feet and prayed for pardon, and he stooped down and plucked the feathers out of the hair of the woman and then turned away towards the dun without a word.

He strode into the hall of assembly, and having gathered his poets and his men of law about him, stood upon the dais and spoke in a loud, clear voice: 'Men of law, why did you make me sin against the laws of Eri? Men of verse, why did you make me sin against the secrecy of wisdom, for law was made by man for the welfare of man, but wisdom the gods have made, and no man shall live by its light, for it and the hail and the rain and the thunder follow a way that is deadly to mortal things? Men of law and men of verse, live according to your kind, and call Eocha of the Hasty Mind to reign over you, for I set out to find my kindred.'

He then came down among them, and drew out of the hair of first one and then another the feathers of the grey hawk, and, having scattered them over the rushes upon the floor, passed out, and none dared to follow him, for his eyes gleamed like the eyes of the birds of prey; and no man saw him again or heard his voice.

Some believed that he found his eternal abode among the demons, and some that he dwelt henceforth with the dark and dreadful goddesses, who sit all night about the pools in the forest watching the constellations rising and setting in those desolate mirrors.
WHAT YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND is that they were like Gods to us. Their height, for starters. This was a time when most of Ireland and England went half-hungry and a person was lucky to reach 5’ 4” in his manhood. If you didn’t see your ribs when you looked down at yourself naked, if you had a few decent rags to pull about your person, you were well got; if you’d two good meals a day and a winter coat, you were pure fortunate. Then along those two would come in their finery, striding the full length of their legs down Grafton Street or Piccadilly.

You’d have to stop and stare at them, even those who claimed to disdain them would be brought to stopping and staring.

Maud Gonne would have a hat on, atop her Parisien finery, one of those concoctions they loved back then adding to her height, already lording high. A nest, maybe, trimmed with feathers and a stuffed bird or two. Or a basket of nuts and pine cones, spilling over the rim.

Oftentimes too, she’d have her dog stepping out in front of them. A great slavering beast of a thing, tall as a donkey and as imperious as themselves, head held high like an Egyptian statue. Madame Gonne’s travels between Dublin and London and Paris were always accompanied by cages full of birds: canaries and finches, her dog and her parrot, and once I saw her with a full-grown hawk from Donegal….

Everything you’ve heard about her beauty was true. Never listen to those who say otherwise, they’re being pure political. The photographs don’t do her justice, you had to be in her presence to feel it. When she came into a room every man, whether he was for the cause of Ireland or against, would start fidgeting his tie.

WB wasn’t rich like her but he’d be costumed too. Every stitch, from the flowing tie to the black clerical cloak, from the eyeglass on a ribbon to the pointy black boots, was chosen to announce that you were in the presence of a POET.

He was always delighted to be seen with her, that was the other thing you’d notice. Though he’d be stuck into whatever he was talking about, head bent, all intense, two hands fluttering like captured birds in front of his chest, still you could see that awareness sitting upon him: Look at me, walking down the highway with Maud Gonne.

So yes, they were a queer pair, Mr WB Yeats and Madame Gonne, Master Willie and Miss Maud, and like the rest of us, no better than they could be. You may have heard much about them already. Don’t believe one tenth of it,
especially if it comes from the scholars, who are too intellectual to understand what went on between those two wild souls.

I saw them many a time, in Dublin. And in London and Paris too, for I lived in all them places in the last years of the old century, as did so many of the Irish in exile. I knew everyone who knew them but now there’s near none of us else left. So I’d better be telling it as it was, before I’m gone m’self.

For, bedazzled by fame and distracted by opinion, the world has again forgotten what it most needs to know.

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We’ll begin with the day WB immortalized in his memoirs, when she came calling to his father’s house, where he still lived. Maud always insisted she’d met him long before that day, in Dublin at the house of their mutual mentor, the old Fenian, John O’Leary. They’d become acquainted, she said, one afternoon when he carried her books home, from Mr O’Leary’s house to her hotel.

Which reminds me to tell you something you have to hold in your head. There were two Maud Gonnes and two WB Yeats. One was the living, breathing woman and man, what he called "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast" and the other the creations they made between them, to feed the newspapers and stalk the history books.

His version of their meeting, like most everything that passed between them, has become the accepted account but in this book, we'll be weighing male and female, outer and inner, public and private, in equal measure. When looked at from the woman’s side of the bed-sheet, most tales take a turning. This one’s no different.

On their first meeting, we’ll give him the word, as he wrote it all up so prettily: how she came spinning into the Yeats abode and knocked them all, but especially him, sideways with her great stature, and her strong, Valkyrie-like features, and her luminous complexion and bronze hair and, most of all, her passionate energy laced with a soupçon of tragic vulnerability. It was a combination guaranteed to lance its way straight to the heart (and nether regions) of a fin de siècle romantic male.

And WB was as romantic as they come. He’d been paving the way in his poetry for just such a woman for years and had just published a long poem, full of mists and caverns and castles, with a hero compelled by “the ancient sadness of man” to gallop after the temptations of an exotic seductress.
A maid, on a swift brown steed
Whose hooves the top of the surges grazed,
Hurried away, and over her raised
An apple of gold in her tossing hand;
And following her at a headlong speed
Was a beautiful youth from an unknown land.

So: to London in the year of 1889, on the early afternoon of Wednesday, 30th of January. Here, buttoned and bonneted, comes Miss Maud Gonne, banging the hall door of her uncle’s Belgravia home behind her, half-running for a cab, on her way to the famous visit.

She’s spent the morning chattering with her sister Kathleen and cousin May, who are always delighted when she whirls in from France, surrounded by animals and birds, holding out presents for all, her generosity and devil-may-care attitude giving the English aunts and uncles a shake-up. The three young ladies each have new beaus and a lot to discuss, so now Maud is, as usual, running late, pulling on her gloves as she goes. She needs to be back by five o’clock to be ready for dinner, and it’s already after half-past two and in her hurry, hasn’t realized that she’s neglected to change out of her house slippers.

The cab at the kerb is a hansom, where the driver sits low in front, close to the horse. One of the new speedy ones, so she may yet be on time. “Bedford Park, please,” she says, sitting in.

The driver flicks the reins — “Right away, Mam” — and the horse begins its trot.

She picks up on the short “a”. “You are Irish?”
“Indeed and I am.”
“How very interesting. I have just returned from Ireland.”
“Have you now? And whereabouts did you find yourself while you were there?”

“Co Donegal. Falcarragh. Do you know it?”
“I don’t Mam. But I hear tell it’s beautiful in them parts.”
“It ought to be. Alas, there is much distress.”

Maud Gonne always liked to talk to cabbies or servants or peasants, all those she called “The People”. She thought the likes of us purer of heart than those of her own class and held that thought through all evidence to the contrary, her whole life long.

Now she leans in to share the full drama of what she witnessed in Donegal. A woman who threw herself screaming up on the back of one of the
bailiffs sent to evict her. The children clinging to their parents rags, terrified of starvation or the option, the workhouse that would keep them physically alive but at the cost of all other sustenance.

“You’re a rare one, Mam,” the cabbie said. “A lady like yourself to care a bit about the like.”

“I care a great deal, Mr…?”

“O’Driscoll, Mam. The Tipperary O’Driscolls. If you’re ever in Borrisoleigh, you can enquire after the family. Just tell them Michael sent you and they’ll organize anything for you. Anything you need doing. Anything at all.”

He turns around and screws up his face at her in what she guesses must be a smile.

The conversation lapses and Maud relaxes back. From Ebury Street, the journey takes them through the newly fashionable suburbs of Kensington, and then into the countryside and riverscapes around Hammersmith’s new station. Maud’s mind is on what is ahead. For a time now, since her father died and she met Lucien, she has made Ireland her interest and been collecting Irish connections. Today, she seeks out a young poet who has recently issued not one but two books, both of which Mr O’Leary has said are most important, and one of which affected her profoundly.

The first is a book of folklore, tales of old Ireland she can’t get out of her mind. The second, even more unforgettable, is a volume of poems called The Wanderings of Oisin (a Gaelic name pronounced, she’s been told, as Usheen).

The folklore was fascinating and strange but the poems have lines so hauntingly beautiful and redolent of old Ireland that they have been circumambulating her mind, since she read them, behind all her sleeping and eating and talking.

…[They]… came to the cairn-heaped grassy hill
Where passionate Maeve is stony still;
And found on the dove-grey edge of the sea
A pearl-pale, high-born lady.

A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who… rode… something. How did it go again? She couldn’t quite remember now but there were lines she knew she would never forget.

…Her eyes were soft as dewdrops hanging
Upon the grass-blades’ bending tips
And like a sunset were her lips
A stormy sunset o’er doomed ships…

She thinks he might have genius. Mr O’Leary believes so and his sister, Ellen organized for her a letter of introduction to Mr John B Yeats, the father with whom the poet still lives. A portrait painter and, they say, quite bohemian and full of Irish conviviality. There are four offspring, Willie and Lily and Lolly and Jack, and the poet is the eldest. Everywhere, the Yeats family is spoken of as a slip of old Ireland in the branches of new London suburbs. And a light of artistic dedication among the murk.

Willie and Lily and Lolly and Jack. Such names! She is keen to meet them but, yes, she is nervous. That’s why she’s been talking too much to the cabbie. Intellectuals always make her nervous, more than any other class of people. She does hope the O’Leary recommendation will carry her and they are not anti-female or inclined to think her an English spy.

She could never tell in advance who would be an ally. In Dublin, Mr Oldham, middle-aged and bluff, had seemed unpromising, but how he’d loved taking her to the Contemporary Club and throwing open the door and booming: “Maud Gonne wants to meet John O’Leary. I thought you’d all like to meet Maud Gonne.”

With this Irish family, she would do as she had done that day, when she’d felt so very shy. Mustering her courage, she’d said, “Mr O’Leary, I have heard so much about you. You are a leader of revolutionary Ireland and I want to work for Ireland. Can you show me how?”

He’d liked this direct talk; the frown had vanished from his ancient, cagey eyes and he led her to a sofa, while Mr Oldham busied himself getting them a cup of tea.

“You must read,” he’d told her. “Read the history of our country, I will make you a list and lend you books.”

A citron color gloomed in her hair
But down to her feet white vesture flowed,
And with the glimmering crimson glowed…

Clip-clop, clip-clop of the horse’s hooves beat the rhythm of the beautiful, romance-soaked words.

…And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
That waved like the summer streams,
As her soft bosom rose and fell…

It must be marvelous to be able to express one’s feelings in words like that. These ancient whispers of Ireland showed up the dullness of the grey expanse of London they are passing through. She sits back, closes her eyes.

In 1889, London was no longer the city made famous by Dickens, where rich and poor, healthy and afflicted, co-mingled public and private life on thronged and tiny streets. Now the center and the east side teem with the under-fed and under-clothed poor, while the middle-classes are expanding the city out north and west. New road upon new road of houses are springing up in long strips along the river and the passenger railways. Maud fancies if she were to take flight up out of the carriage and look down, she would actually see London ravenously advancing over the fields, its concrete army of houses felling fields and hedges and trees, curling in around farms and villages and towns.

If she did, from that vantage she’d see among the rows of grey a warm, red-brick cluster of houses up ahead, the brick we now commonly called “London brick” but that was, back then, far more uncommon. Its color offered late Victorian Londoners the same pleasure as the scarlet petticoat of an Irish colleen: all the more pleasurable for being unexpected. This is Bedford Park, where the Yeats family lives.

Uncommon too are the varied details on each of the houses in this enclave. They avoid the regimental look of other middle-class suburbs, for Bedford Park is not inhabited by bowler-hatted Mr Pooters, swinging their brollies towards the 8.15, content to be one of many. It is home, in the main, to artists, writers and academics who prize individuality. Now Maud’s hansom cab pulls up in front of No 3 Bleinham Road, the Yeats abode.

She lingers a moment to take a good look. The road is quiet and tree lined; the house appears roomy, with Dutch gables, white casement windows and a porch with decorative tiles. “You can wait,” she says to O’Driscoll. “I shouldn’t be too long.”

She knows she shall be at least an hour but she would keep the fare running for his sake, so Mrs O’Driscoll and the little O’Driscolls, of whom there are doubtless a surfeit, might have a good week of it.

His “Thank you a million times over, Mam” and his “Aren’t you awful good, awful good” follow her out of the carriage, through the little gate, and up the pathway but she has forgotten him, as she consciously pulls herself up, and steps with what she hopes is calm dignity towards the front door. For a time
Maud Gonne had thought she might be an actress, had taken some training to annoy her Uncle William, and talked through many bedroom nights to her sister Kathleen about becoming a famous courtesan, consorting with the monarchs of Europe.

She was young then, and half-crazed in those days after her dear father, Tommy had departed. It was her Parisian friend, Lucien Millevoye, who had disabused her of this ambition. “An actrice!” he’d snorted, in his French manner. “Pshaw! You underestimate your own power, my dear. An actrice, even one as great as Sarah Bernhardt, who is truly the greatest, even she only portrays the life of another. Where is the glory in that?”

She had agreed with him that day that instead, she should make Ireland her stage and now, on Ireland’s behalf, she draws on her acting training to make her entrance. Suppressing a shiver, though it is not cold, not for January, she rings the doorbell with a sense of significance.

It is as if her inner ear is already attuned to the sound of the bell tintinnabulating through the future, striking up the poetry that is to come. And the spiritual and political work she and the poet will do together, it too a kind of poetry. What she and Willie Yeats are about to create together will alter the history of two nations and make them both famous, down through time.

Something in Maud already knows this; it is in hope of just such an outcome that she has come here today. So when the serving girl answers the door, she speaks to her slowly, with a sense of import. “I am Miss Gonne,” she says, proffering her calling-card and her letter of introduction from Ellen O’Leary. “Miss Maud Gonne, lately come from Ireland.”
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