

# **THE MOUNTAIN LOVERS**

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The mountain lovers by Fiona Macleod

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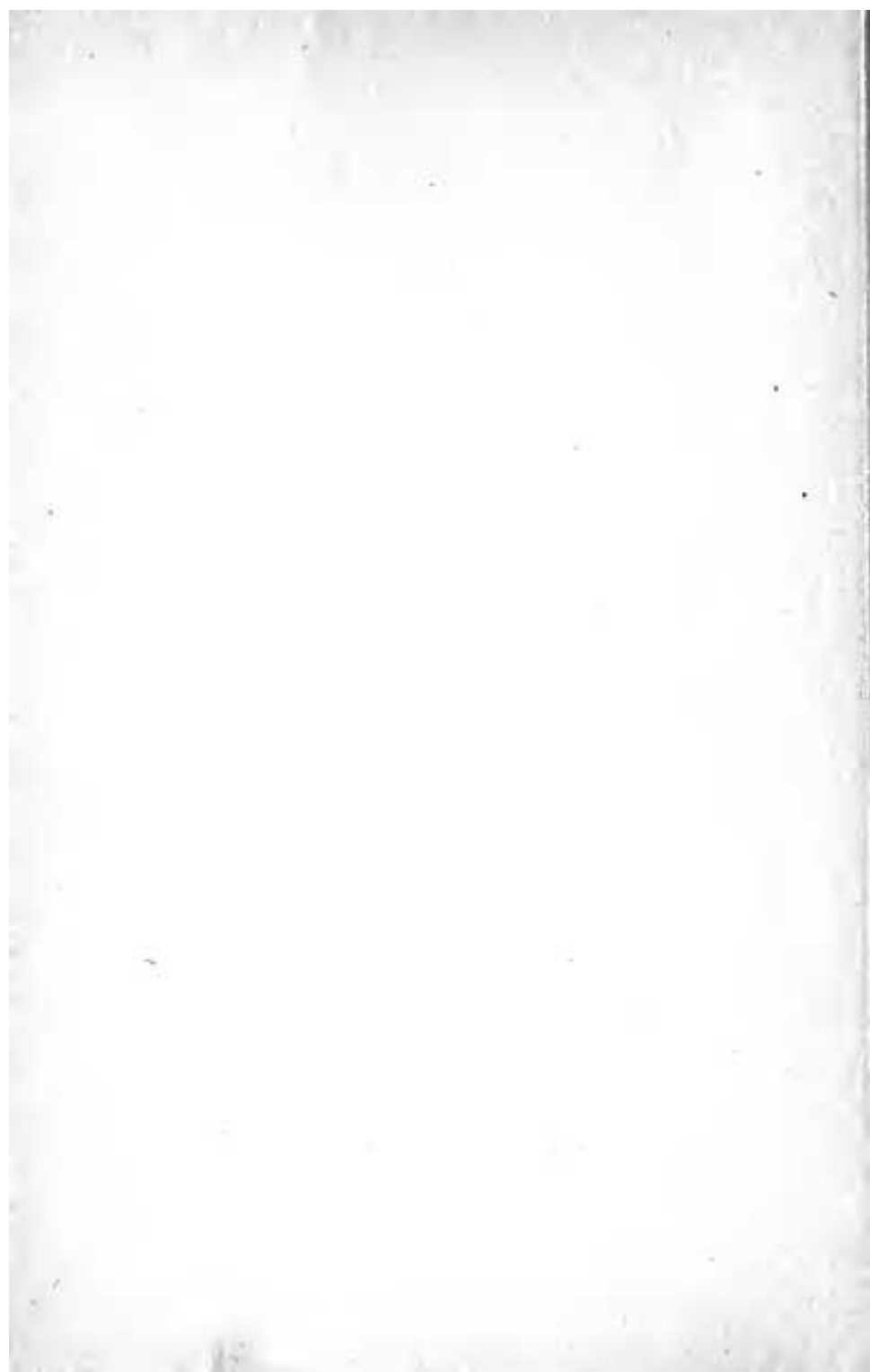
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TO

. . . . .  
*Dum juga montis aper, fluvios dum piscis amabit,  
Dumque thymo pascentur apes, dum rorae cicadae ;  
Semper honos, nomenque tuum, laudesque manebunt.*



## THE MOUNTAIN LOVERS.



### I.

THE wind sighed through the aisles of the hill-forest. Among the lower-set pines there was an accompanying sound as of multitudinous baffled wings. This travelling voice was upon the mountain in a myriad utterance. Round the forehead of Ben Iolair it moved as an eagle moves, sweeping in vast circles: the rhythm of its flight reiterated variously against walls of granite, gigantic boulders, and rain-scooped, tempest-worn crags and pinnacles. Lower were corries, furrows that seemed to have been raked into the breast of the hill in some olden time when the solitudes were not barren. Therein the wind slid with a hollow, flute-like call. This deepened into an organ-note of melancholy, when glens, filled with birchen undergrowth and running water, were aloud with the rumor of its passage. Upon the heights, upon the flanks, upon all the sun-swept mass of Iolair, the rushing noise of



its pinions was as the prolonged suspiration of the sea. Beyond the forest of pines it swooped adown the strath, and raced up the narrow neck of the Pass of the Eagles, and leapt onward again athwart and over the slopes of Tornideon that, gigantic in swarthy gloom, stood over against Ben Iolair.

In the heart of the pine-woods it was meshed as in a net. The sighing of it through the green-gloom avenues, warm with the diffused ruddiness of the pine-bark, was as the sound of distant water falling from infrequent ledge to ledge in a mountain gorge. Intent by the fringe of the forest, or even upon the under-slopes still flooded with afternoon sunlight, one might have heard its rising and falling sough as it bore downward beneath the weight of the branches, or slipt from bole to bole and round ancient girths.

Here and there a hollow was still as deep water. Not a sigh breathed upon the mossy ground, thickly covered in parts with cones and the myriad-shed needles of the pines. Not a murmur came from the spell-bound trees. The vast boughs hung motionless in the silent air. Sometimes the upper branches stirred, but while the shadow-haunted plumes ruffled as with a passing breath it was with a slow, solemn, soundless rhythm.

In one of those sanctuaries of peace, where the forest was thinner and everywhere luminous with the flowing gold of the setting sun, a child danced blithely to and fro, often clapping her hands, but without word or sound, and with her wild-fawn eyes ceaselessly alert, yet unquestioning and unsmiling.

In that solitary place she was doubly alone. No eyes were there to espy her, save those of the cushats and a thrush whose heart beat wildly against her callow brood. She was like the spirit of woodland loneliness: a lovely thing of fantasy that might recreate its beauty the next moment in a medley of sun-rays, or as a floating golden light about the green boles, or as a wind-flower swaying among the tree-roots, with its own exquisite vibration of life. So elemental was she, then and there, that if she herself had passed into the rhythm of her rapt dance and so merged into the cadence of the wind among leaves and branches, or into the remoter murmuring of the mountain burns and of the white cataracts even then leaping into the sun-dazzle and seeming never to fall though forever falling — if this change had been wrought, as the swift change from shadow-gloom to sun-gloom, nothing of it would have seemed unnatural. She was as absolutely one with nature as though she were

a dancing sunbeam, or the brief embodiment of the joy of the wind.

As the child danced, a human mote in that vast area of sun-splashed woodland, the light flooded in upon her scanty and ragged dress of brown homespun, from which her arms and legs emerged as the white chestnut-buds from their sheaths of amber. Her skin was of the hue and smoothness of crudded cream, where not sunburnt to the brown of the wallflower. Dark as were her heavily lashed eyes, her hair, a mass of short curls creeping and twisting and leaping throughout a wild and tangled waviness, was of a wonderful white-like yellow, as of the sheen of wheat on a windy August noon or the strange amber-gold of the harvest-moon when rising through a sigh of mist. She was beautiful, but rather with the promise of beauty than beauty itself, — as the bud of the moss-rose is lovely but has a fairer loveliness in fee. Though her face was pale, its honey-suckle-pallor was so wrought by the sun and wind that her cheeks had the glow of sunlit hill-water. In every line, in every contour of her body, in every movement, every pose, a beautiful untutored grace displayed itself. A glimpse of the secret of all this winsomeness opened at times in the eyes. These were full of a changing light. The "breath" was upon