THE FAIRY FAITH AND PICTURED MUSIC OF PAMELA COLMAN SMITH: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

O sane, well-balanced and cultured people believe in fairies? Hardly anyone would admit it in so many words, but does not a large part of our modern literature, painting and music prove that, whether it is acknowledged or not, the majority of mankind has a keen and imperishable interest in the invisible world that lies beyond the ken of objective consciousness?

In the days when life was less involved in the network of material things, men accepted the reality of the subjective world as simply as they did that of the things apprehended by the senses, because their perception was unclayed by inherited skepticism. Wise men and seers who had mastered the secrets of Nature by penetrating into her hidden places knew that the realm which alone is evident to our bodily senses lies like a landlocked bay at the edge of a boundless ocean teeming with conscious and intelligent life. Unlettered peasants who lived in the fields and woods and were much alone knew there were fairies, sprites and goblins because they felt them all around and now and again they saw them. Poets knew it as children do, because they lived

PEN AND INK SKETCH OF HENRY IRVING BY PAMELA COLMAN SMITH.
so close to the heart of things that the veil was very thin. We all know the faith of the past. We know, also, how the clouds gathered and the gulf widened when mankind grew so busy with its own affairs and so wise in its own conceit of them that everything pertaining to the unseen kingdoms of Nature was dismissed contemptuously as folk-lore or superstition.

The question now is: are we once more bridging the gulf? We seem to be doing so, and in many ways. We are forever hovering about the borderland, only we call it psychical research, occultism, experimental psychology, and such high-sounding names. When we venture over the edge, we adopt Kipling's device in the matter of the sea-serpent and call it fiction. But the fact remains the same. We are becoming less academic in our attitude toward folk-lore, and are beginning to realize that a belief which is rooted in the life of every nation belongs to the collective experience of humanity and cannot die out.

Thinkers like Schelling, Villanis, Edward Carpenter and William James have prepared the way and shown the possibility of reconciling the visions of seers and transcendentalists, and the beliefs of the folk in all ages, with the materialistic knowledge of average mankind. And now William Butler Yeats and his colleagues in the Celtic Revival
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are translating mysticism into plain language by openly avowing their belief in fairies and their knowledge that such beings exist. This avowal is something quite different from the literature of fantasy or the speculations of philosophers, because it states what purports to be a simple fact that may be proven by anyone who cares to go about it in the right way. Another step has been taken by Mr. W. Y. Evans Wentz, who has just published in England a book which deals exhaustively with the fairy faith as a living thing today, and this book is vouched for by authorities in the Universities of Oxford and Rennes. But the most direct evidence of a belief in the actuality and occasional visibility of subjective beings is given by Pamela Colman Smith, who not only asserts that she sees such beings and the countries in which they dwell, but makes pictures of what she sees.

These pictures are strangely convincing. Perhaps that is why such crowds of people went to see a collection of them that was exhibited in a New York gallery last spring. Although well done, they were not specially remarkable for technique. There were hundreds of as good or better pictures shown in other galleries at the same time. But there was something about them that appealed irresistibly to the mysticism that, consciously or unconsciously, occupies so large a place in human nature. The note of simplicity and sincerity was unmistakable. A few were paintings, boldly decorative in design and blazing with color, but by far the greater part were drawings in pencil or India ink. Of these, some were mere hasty sketches, evidently dashed upon paper within the space of a few minutes and left to stand as the record of strong but fleeting impressions; others showed a more careful working out of similar impressions. But without exception the subjects were fantastic and unearthly, baffling the understanding while quickening the imagination into flame. They were glimpses into an unknown world,—that land of fantasy where color takes the place of our clumsier modes of expression, and forms are as elusive as mist and as fanciful as a dream; in other words, fairyland.

The key that unlocks this world to Pamela Colman Smith is music. She is not a musician herself, nor does she care greatly for music for its own sake. But the rhythm of it, and the changing harmonies, stir certain subconscious depths in her and so enable her to enter the realm which lies beyond ordinary consciousness and to bring to the light visions and sensations which might otherwise struggle in vain for utterance. She sees music, rather than hears it, and she expresses,—as perfectly as she can and with the literal directness of a child,—exactly what she sees.
"PETER PAN" : FROM A DRAWING BY PAMELA COLMAN SMITH.
Reproduced from the Collection of Frederick Allen King.

From a drawing by Pamela Colman Smith, inspired by Beethoven’s Symphony Number Five in C.
"RECESS": FROM A DRAWING BY PAMELA COLMAN SMITH.

Reproduced from the Collection of Frederick Allen King.
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There is nothing supernatural about this effect of rhythmic, harmonious sound. Many of us have actually experienced it, for all people whose senses are profoundly stirred by music see vague visions and feel the color of the tones. But we are so used to ignoring our subconscious impressions that for the most part they remain vague and formless as clouds and are forgotten as soon as the stimulus has passed. Our minds are not ordinarily attuned to the reception and comprehension of such impressions, far less to giving them forth again in objective form. Herein lies all the difference. We all share the hidden life, but only the few have the power to express it or make it visible. Great poets, artists and musicians have it, and children are so close to it that they try sometimes to make the grown folk see and understand what is so real to them. But they have not the power. Their visions are laughed at as fancies or punished as falsehoods, and so imagination—the priceless image-making power of the mind—takes flight and the land of fantasy fades into nothingness.

But, given the open mind and vivid perception of the child, and the power of expression that comes from long training in the coördination and control of both conscious and subconscious faculties, as well as in the technique of art, and pictures like these cease to be inexplicable. It is simply another application of the powers held in the old time by the master weavers of Kashmir. The story goes that an English traveler in India once went to see the weaving of the royal shawls. As the weavers worked, they sang,—one of the endless crooning chants that swing like a pendulum to the strange syncopated rhythm of the East. Going close to the looms, he saw that the brilliant, intricate web was being woven without chart or pattern of any kind. He asked the master weaver how such a thing could be. The old man answered: "Sahib, we see the colors and patterns as we sing, and so we weave the shawl." Pamela Colman Smith sees the thronging images as she listens, and so she makes her pictures.

THESE visions are not in any sense the obvious pictures of operatic or programme music. When the composer explains his own emotions or spells out his ideas, her mental canvas remains a blank. Abstract music alone comes to her in pictures, and the more remote and elusive is the expression of the thought or feeling of the composer, the more clearly defined is its symbolic presentation to her inner vision. Grieg, for example, brings to her nothing but the everyday pleasure of listening to pleasant, obvious melodies in which his message is clearly spoken and the colors are brightly and thickly laid on. Wagner, with his colossal images of gods and heroes, and the profoundly sensuous appeal of his stupendous orchestration, brings a
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strong response from her, it is true,—but it is passionate revolt from all that the music means. There are no pictures in it to her, only a confused blur of violent antagonism.

But when the music is in harmony with her own innermost being, the gates to the Otherworld are thrown wide, and for the time she is one with the beings that in Celtic lands are called “The Silent Ones” or “The People of Peace.” Not always the same people or the same land; the regions that are revealed to her differ as widely as did those seen by Swedenborg in his subconscious journeyings, and vary according to the inspiration of the composer, but always she sees what the music endeavors to express. It was said of Schumann that he saw thoughts and emotions symbolized in pictures, and then told in tones what the eyes beheld. For this woman the tones are resolved again into pictures, and every line reveals the emotional content of the music.

The pictures are wholly symbolic, not in the conventional sense, but as the natural expression of one who puts thought and feeling into symbolic forms rather than into tones or words. One feels that there is no effort to interpret what the music may mean, but rather the spontaneous portrayal of the same vision or emotion that inspired the composer. That both spring from the same source is revealed by the pictures themselves, for each one shows the peculiar individual quality of the music of which it is the visible form. Not only do the subjects differ widely in character as the inspiration changes, but the very method of handling differs. Even the quality of line in the original sketches, which is broad, powerful and sweeping when it represents Beethoven’s titanic emotions, becomes dainty and precise under the influence of Mozart, sensual and freakish in the portrayal of certain moods of Richard Strauss, and vague, delicate and at times austere when it endeavors to define and fix the well-nigh formless musical fancies of Debussy.

Yet, by a strange contradiction, it is the music of Debussy that reveals the most glowing, vivid pictures in the collection. The pencil drawings made at the time may outline the merest suggestion of wan, unearthly forms, but when the imagination of the artist is aroused and begins to build consciously upon the memory of the vision, the result is a painting that
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glows with jeweled color. Debussy himself says that both drawings and paintings are his dreams made visible, and always keeps a portfolio of them at hand.

They come in strange forms, the fancies of this dreamer who strives always to express in his music the inexpressible,—to make his hearers feel as he does the glamour of color, perfume, lights in a murky sky, the rush of the wind, the bodiless might of the sea,—this tone-poet whose never-ending search is for some way to bring back to humanity its lost sense of the invisible. That is why the pictures of his music belong wholly to the land of faerie. The like of “L’Isle Joyeuse” never was seen on earth, but those who look long at the picture know that in the Country of the Young,—the Land of the Living Heart, as it used to be called,—there must be just such a happy isle, bathed in burning sapphire light and towering high out of a peacock hued sea. Maeldun saw the fair, strange isle as he voyaged in the Western Sea, and they told him it was the Island of Joy. The Greeks, too, dreamed of islands like this, far out in the unknown ocean that rimmed their world, and called them the Islands of the Blest.

AND in this fairy world the elements are dimly personified, just as men who were simple and closely akin to Nature personified them ages ago. Not in allegorical figures, solid and fleshly, such as we see in so-called imaginative and symbolical paintings, but in mist-wreaths and falling rain, sunbeams, clouds and snow that contain hardly more than the suggestion of a hidden personality. This is what Debussy is always hinting at, and this is what is mirrored forth in the pictures of his fugitive fancies. One is of a garden in the rain, where the drenched brilliance of the flowers gleams dimly through the gray shadows of the rain. It is a passing shower, such as might fall from any summer cloud, and yet it gathers into tall shadowy forms that trail draperies of mist over the blossoms which they seem to bless with outstretched arms. These rain-forms appear in many pictures, moving singly or in groups through lush green meadows, and they are
always the same. Clouds, too, come as dancing figures, fleecy and dazzling-white against the blue sky, and the airy forms are what every child sees, for they are only clouds. The snowflakes whirl into huge diaphanous forms that dance madly against the black night sky, and the west wind sweeps through the heavens with the rush of a hurricane, a colossal goddess veiled in the flaming purple and gold of a tropic sunset.

Sometimes the visions are wholly of the borderland, where it shines momentarily through the cloud of the material world. A shepherd boy, pixy-led over the heather-covered hills in the luminous twilight, plays his pipe for the circle of pixies that frolic at his knee. Or the “seven towers of faerie” appear for a moment amid tossing sunset clouds, that part far enough to allow just a glimpse of the Land of Heart’s Desire. Again, a ship comes sailing out of the darkness over the curling purple-blue waves of a fairy sea,—a ship that embodies all the dreams of child-humanity as to what the golden treasure-ship of pure romance might be. It is a gorgeous myth of sea-adventure, a towering galleon with flame-colored sails swelling in the strong wind that impels it onward, and sides overlaid with plates of beaten gold.

But when the curtain rolls up on the world of Beethoven there is an end of fairy fancies. This is a titanic world that saw the beginning of time,—a world of tossing seas, trackless deserts and mountains that pierce the skies. It is peopled with kingly forms that move with slow stateliness or remain motionless, lost in brooding thought. They never dance. There is always the suggestion of storm; of the possible war of elemental forces, yet as a whole the visions are sternly reposeful. The feeling is that of overwhelming strength, either held in leash by some unseen force, or quiescent after a storm of emotion. The action is expressed in great swinging curves that image forth the rhythmic surge of the music. The lighter moods of Beethoven, the occasional buffoonery, seldom appear. It is the grave splendor of his spirit that dominates the forms in which the varying melodies are made manifest. Perhaps the most purely symbolic of all these springs from a movement in the Sonata Appassionata. In this, a stormy sea beats heavily against the shore, threatening to engulf the towers and spires of a distant city. But for the moment their force is gathered together in one gigantic billow that rears itself like a serpent, and the crest of this billow curls over into the semblance of a woman’s face,—dreaming, wistful, with great eyes set wide apart and the delicate pointed chin of utter femininity.

Deeply symbolic also is the presentation of Cesar Franck’s emotional, passionately religious preludes, fugues and chorales, with their rich, somber coloring and their sense of spiritual unrest. The
most significant of these is the “Call to Earth,” which images the imperious urge toward objective existence. Three godlike figures have heard the call and yielded to their destiny. One, clad in gleaming robes and with crowned head still touching the clouds, stands on the earth erect and stately, but in the drooping, dreaming face is seen the numbing influence that slowly lulls the spirit into the stupor of physical existence. Another towering form in the far background is stumbling forward, drawn down as with invisible cords to the waiting earth, but with arms flung up to heaven as if imploring succor. The third has fallen prone and already is blending with the earth so that it is hardly distinguishable from the swale in which it lies. Only the jewels of its robes and the white unconscious face catch the gleams of celestial light from its former home.

Exactly the opposite chord is struck by Richard Strauss, and the pictures here are merry, elvish, richly sensuous. But they are imaginative rather than visionary,—Don Quixote tilting at maliciously frolicking windmills, or Tïll Eulenspiegel dancing recklessly in the wake of a bounding nymph, both mad with the intoxication of the music, which seems to roll around them in the form of billowing, jocund clouds. It is all of the earth, well spiced with genial deviltry. Russian and Slav music also appears in pictures that are sensuous and imaginative. They are either freakishly fantastic or luxuriously melancholy. The very lines of the pictures which delineate Tchaikovsky’s chronic despair droop even as his themes droop, in the enthrancement of soul-satisfying woe. Dvórák, though, hearty-humored and close to Nature, gives to the world music that appears as dancing, blossomed-crowned creatures that are not so much dryads as trees endowed with conscious life and the power of movement.

Some of Schumann’s music takes forms that are wholly human. A movement of the Second Symphony, for instance, brings to light a
vigorously young, tall and strong, pulsating with the sheer joy of life as he springs upward to the effort of casting into the air the falcon that perches on his outstretched arm. But for the most part the element of fantasy is dominant. A phrase from the First Symphony takes the shape of a gaunt old tree, with bare branches blown by the wind; yet the tree is a woman, helpless in the grip of mortal anguish, rooted fast to an abhorred spot and bending before the strong wind of destiny. A Nachtstück (No. 4) shadows forth a towering peak against the primrose sky of dawn. Up the mountainside toil weary, shadowy forms,—the dreams of humanity returning home.

Pamela Colman Smith is so naturally a mystic that she has but little intellectual interest in mysticism. From childhood she has had the gift of the "second sight" which is common among the Celtic peasants of Ireland, Scotland and Brittany, and she believes in what she sees as simply and implicitly as they do. She never thinks of this power as clairvoyance, or exploits it as such, but uses it precisely as she does the senses and faculties which are common to all. In temperament and personality she is as much of an anachronism as was William Morris, for like him she belongs to an earlier age, but the only outward evidence of this is a childlike and utterly unconventional sincerity which finds expression with fearless freedom. She does not dabble in psychology, as is the fashion now, and she knows next to nothing of philosophical theories, transcendental or otherwise. Her understanding and knowledge are wholly intuitional. Perhaps this is why she sees so much that is hidden from the ordinary sight.

ENVIRONMENT and early training had much to do with the development of her strange and vivid individuality. Her interest in folk-lore, which has so vitally affected her achievements in the realm of the subconscious, began in Jamaica, where she passed her girlhood. Even then, music came to her in pictures, and she drew little dancing figures and elfin landscapes as she heard the melodies, but she visualized nothing in that place of romantic and horrible memories, although she felt intensely the oppression and excitement of its psychic atmosphere. She listened to many tales and legends of the unseen world, told by witch-like old women in the firelight,—because in Jamaica no one dares to speak of such things in the broad light of day,—and she made a collection of them which she published as a book of Jamaican folk-lore, but she saw nothing of it at that time.

After the years in Jamaica, the family went to England. There her fancy, as expressed in pictures, turned mainly to the quaint and whimsical. The preternaturally good little children of the early Victorian period appealed so keenly to her sense of humor that we
have hundreds of tiny pen sketches of these small, smug beings in hoopskirts and sandals,—or in roundabouts and skeleton trousers as the case may be,—romping most decorously or listening with extreme propriety to the moral and improving tales recounted by a mother, aunt or governess, who beamed with virtue and delicate sensibility. Or, we have a bold, bad pirate struggling in the too-loving grasp of a group of roguish, sea-green mermaids, while a tubby, broad-beamed galleon scuttles away like an indignant hen, looking back with an expression of horror and righteous wrath in every porthole.

It was at this period that the young artist followed Walter Crane, founded herself upon him and luxuriated in decorative conceptions and gorgeous color. The influence of the famous illustrator is still glimpsed in her work, but it is now so overlaid by her own individuality that one finds little more than an occasional reminder of the way Walter Crane used to see things. He never saw them half so humorously, though, as did his young disciple. It was not intentional or obvious humor. She seldom caricatured things for sake of caricaturing; apparently made no effort to draw funny pictures; but she looked at life with such a mirthful quirk in her own vision that every line of these quaint daring sketches fairly rippled with laughter.

It was when she went to Ireland that the power of her early childhood returned to her. Again environment played its part, for she was the friend and close associate of the group of poets and playwrights who are restoring Celtic literature and tradition to the world. On the Continent, her friends were Maeterlinck, Debussy and others who were endeavoring, each in his own way, to pierce the veil that hid the subjective world. Pamela Colman Smith had not the great creative power of these men, but it soon became evident that she had something quite as rare,—the power to see clearly the invisible realm of which they all dreamed. She entered it or shut it out at will, but when music opened the gates everything became clear to her inner vision. She learned to distinguish the elementals of the earth, air, fire and water,—the gnomes, goblins, wraiths, leprechauns, pixies, salamanders and people of the sea. But most often in Ireland she saw the Sidhe, the invisible children of Dana who were conquered, but not driven out, by the sons of Miled. It is this towering and godlike race which, in Ireland, is closest to the objective world and has most to do with the affairs of men. The peasants,—and the poets,—call them the People of Peace, the Gentry or the Silent Ones, and without them there would not be much left of Celtic legendary lore. Most of the invisible races seem to be as unconscious of their human neighbors
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as men are of them, but the *Sidhe* play a part more like that of the ancient gods of Greece. They figure prominently in the pictures of Pamela Colman Smith. If one asks her why she paints them all radiant and glowing, and apparently twenty or thirty feet high, she answers simply that it is the way they look. And if her impression is a hallucination produced by the effect of traditional belief and repeated description sinking into the subconscious mind, the hallucination is fairly widespread. Mr. Wentz gives in his book, “The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries,” incident after incident of actual encounters with the *Sidhe*, vouched for by such sober and substantial men as college professors, lawyers, physicians, clergymen and civil engineers, to say nothing of farmers and country people.

If the pictures of Pamela Colman Smith are mere figments of an unusually lively imagination, she is a genius, for they are handled with a simplicity and conviction that neither Watts nor Rossetti, Böcklin nor Arthur Davies, have attained in all their sumptuous imaginings or abstruse symbolism. If they are the result of actual visions that come to her because of her gift of the “second sight,” they are still more interesting as an evidence that the folk traditions which have lived stubbornly through centuries of scornful disbelief may, after all, be founded on truths which we are on the verge of discovering anew. As to the fairy faith itself, most of us are willing to echo the wish of Andrew Lang, that:

"Folk to come, ayont the sea,
May hear the yowl of the Banshie,
And frae the water-kelpie flee,
Ere a’ things cease,
And island bairns may stolen be
By the Folk o’ Peace.

Faith, they might steal *me*, wi’ ma will,
And, ken’d I ony Fairy hill,
I’d lay me down there, snod and still,
Their land to win,
For, man, I’ve maistly had my fill
O’ this world’s din."

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