

***WILLIAM
SHARP***



***TRAGIC
ROMANCES***

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William Sharp

Tragic Romances

**Re-issue of the Shorter Stories of Fiona Macleod;
Rearranged, with Additional Tales**

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I

It was a black hour for Archibald Campbell of Gorromalt in Strathglas, and for his wife and for Morag their second daughter, when the word came that Muireall had the sorrow of sorrows. What is pain, and is death a thing to fear? But there is a sorrow that no man can have and yet go free for evermore of a shadow upon his brow: and there is a sorrow that no woman can have and keep the moonshine in her eyes. And when a woman has this sorrow, it saves or mars her: though, for sure, none of us may discern just what that saving may be, or from whom or what, or what may be that bitter or sweet ruin. We are shaped as clay in the potter's hand: ancient wisdom, that we seldom learn till the hand is mercifully still, and the vessel, finished for good or evil, is broken.

It is a true saying that memory is like the sea-weed when the tide is in—but the tide ebbs. Each frond, each thick spray, each fillicaun or pulpy globe, lives lightly in the wave: the green water is full of strange rumour, of sea-magic and sea-music: the hither flow and thither surge give continuity and connection to what is fluid and dissolute. But when the ebb is far gone, and the wrack and the weed lie sickly in the light, there is only one confused intertangled mass. For most of us, memory is this tide-left strand: though for each there are pools, or shallows which even the ebb does not lick up in its thirsty way depthward,—narrow overshadowed channels

to which we have the intangible clues. But for me there will never be any ebb-tide of memory, of one black hour, and one black day.

A wild lone place it was where we lived: among the wet hills, in a country capped by slate-black mountains. To the stranger the whole scene must have appeared grimly desolate. We, dwellers there, and those of our clan, and the hill folk about and beyond, knew that there were three fertile straths hidden among the wilderness of rock and bracken: Strathmòr, Strathgorm, and Strathglas. It was in the last we lived. All Strathglas was farmed by Archibald Campbell, and he had Strathgorm to where the Gorromalt Water cuts it off from the head of Glen Annet. The house we lived in was a long two-storeyed whitewashed building with projecting flanks. There was no garden, but only a tangled potato-acre, and a large unkempt space where the kail and the bracken flourished side by side, with the kail perishing day by day under the spreading strangling roots of the usurper. The rain in Strathglas fell when most other spots were fair. It was because of the lie of the land, I have heard. The grey or black cloud would slip over Ben-Bhreac or Melbèinn, and would become blue-black while one was wondering if the wind would lift it on to Maol-Dunn, whose gloomy ridge had two thin lines of pine-trees which, from Strathglas, stood out like bristling eyebrows. But, more likely than not, it would lean slowly earthward, then lurch like a water-logged vessel, and spill, spill, through a rising misty vapour, a dreary downfall. Oh! the rain—the rain—the rain! how weary I grew of it, there; and of the melancholy

méh'ing of the sheep, that used to fill the hills with a lamentation, terrible, at times, to endure.

And yet, I know, and that well, too, that I am thinking this vision of Teenabrae, as the house was called, and of its dismal vicinage, in the light of tragic memory. For there were seasons when the rains suspended, or came and went like fugitive moist shadows: days when the sunlight and the wind made the mountains wonderful, and wrought the wild barren hills to take on a softness and a dear familiar beauty: hours, even, when, in the hawthorn-time, the cuckoo called joyously across the pine-girt scaurs and corries on Melbèinn, or, in summer, the swallows filled the straths as with the thridding of a myriad shuttles.

Sure enough, I was too young to be there: though, indeed, Morag was no more than a year older, being twenty; but when my mother died, and my father went upon the seas upon one of his long whaling voyages, I was glad to leave my lonely home in the Carse o' Gowrie and go to Teenabrae in Strathglas, and to be with my aunt, that was wife to Archibald mac Alasdair Ruadh—Archibald Campbell, as he would be called in the lowland way—or Gorromalt as he was named by courtesy, that being the name of his sheep-farm that ran into the two straths where the Gorromalt Water surged turbulently through a narrow wilderness of wave-scooped, eddy-hollowed stones and ledges.

I suppose no place could be called lifeless which had always that sound of Gorromalt Water, that ceaseless lamentation of the sheep crying among the hills, that hoarse croaking of the corbies who swam black in the air betwixt us

and Maol-Dunn, that mournful plaining of the lapwings as they wheeled querulously for ever and ever and ever. But, to a young girl, the whole of this was an unspeakable weariness.

Beside the servant-folk—not one of whom was to me anything, save a girl called Maisie, who had had a child and believed it had become a “pee-wit” since its death, and that all the lapwings were the offspring of the sorrow of joy—there were only Archibald Campbell, his wife, who was my aunt, Muireall the elder daughter, and Morag. These were my folk: but Morag I loved. In appearance she and I differed wholly. My cousin Muireall and I were like each other; both tall, dark-haired, dark-browed, with dusky dark eyes, though mine with no flame in them; and my face too, though not uncomely, without that touch of wildness which made Muireall’s so strangely attractive, and at times so beautiful. Morag, however, was scarce over medium height. Her thick wavy hair always retained the captive gold that the sunshine had spilled there; her soft, white, delicate, wild-rose face was like none other that I have ever seen: her eyes, of that heart-lifting blue which spring mornings have, held a living light that was fair to see, and gave pain too, perhaps, because of their plaintive hillside wildness. Ah, she was a fawn, Morag!... soft and sweet, swift and dainty and exquisite as a fawn in the green fern.

Gorromalt himself was a gaunt stern man. He was two inches or more over six feet, but looked less, because of a stoop. It always seemed to me as if his eyes pulled him forward: brooding, sombre, obscure eyes, of a murky gloom. His hair was iron-grey and matted; blacker, but matted and

tangled, his thick beard; and his face was furrowed like Ben Scorain of the Corries. I never saw him in any other garb than a grey shepherd tweed with a plaid, though no Campbell in Argyll was prouder than he, and he allowed no plaid or *tunag* anywhere on his land or in his house that was not of the tartan of MacCailin Mòr. He was what, there, they called a black protestant; for the people in that part held to the ancient faith. True enough, for sure, all the same: for his pity was black, and the milk of kindness in him must have been like Gorromalt Water in spate. Poor Aunt Elspeth! my heart often bled for her. I do not think Archibald Campbell was unkind to his wife, but he was harsh, and his sex was like a blank wall to her, against which her shallow waters surged or crawled alike vainly. There was to her something at once terrible and Biblical in this wall of cruel strength, this steadfast independence of love or the soft ways or the faltering speech of love. There are women who hate men with an unknowing hatred, who lie by their husband night after night, year after year; who fear and serve him; who tend him in life and minister to him in death; who die, before or after, with a slaying thirst, a consuming hunger. Of these unhappy housemates, of desolate hearts and unfrequented lips, my aunt Elspeth was one.

It was on a dull Sunday afternoon that the dark hour came of which I have spoken. The rain fell among the hills. There was none on the north side of Strathglas, where Teenabrae stood solitary. The remembrance is on me keen just now: how I sat there, on the bench in front of the house, side by side with Morag, in the hot August damp, with the gnats pinging overhead, and not a sound else save the loud

raucous surge of Gorrromalt Water, thirty yards away. In a chair near us sat my aunt Elspeth. Beyond her, on a milking-stool, with his chin in his hands, and his elbows on his knees, was her husband.

There was a gloom upon all of us. The day before, as soon as Gorrromalt had returned from Castle Avale, high up in Strathmòr, we had seen the black east wind in his eyes. But he had said nothing. We guessed that his visit to the Englishman at Castle Avale, who had bought the Three Straths from Sir Ewan Campbell of Drumdoon, had proved fruitless, or at least unsatisfactory. It was at the porridge on the Sabbath morning that he told us.

“And ... and ... must we go, Archibald?” asked his wife, her lips white and the deep withered creases on her neck ashy grey.

He did not answer, but the tumbler cracked in his grip, and the splintered glass fell into his plate. The spilt milk trickled off the table on to the end of his plaid, and so to the floor. Luath, the collie, slipped forward, with her tongue lolling greedily: but her eye caught the stare of the silent man, and with a whine, and a sudden sweep of her tail, she slunk back.

It must have been nigh an hour later, that he spoke.

“No, Elspeth,” he said. “There will be no going away from here, for you and me, till we go feet foremost.”

Before the afternoon we had heard all: how he had gone to see this English lord who had “usurped” Drumdoon: how he had not gained an interview, and had seen no other than Mr Laing, the East Lothian factor. He had had to accept bitter hard terms. Sir Ewan Campbell was in Madras, with his

regiment, a ruined man: he would never be home again, and, if he were, would be a stranger in the Three Straths, where he and his had lived, and where his kindred had been born and had died during six centuries back. There was no hope. This Lord Greycourt wanted more rent, and he also wanted Strathgorm for a deer-run.

We were sitting, brooding on these things: in our ears the fierce words that Gorromalt had said, with bitter curses, upon the selling of the ancient land and the betrayal of the people.

Morag was in one of her strange moods. I saw her, with her shining eyes, looking at the birch that overhung the small foaming linn beyond us, just as though she saw the soul of it, and the soul with strange speech to it.

“Where is Muireall?” she said to me suddenly, in a low voice.

“Muireall?” I repeated, “Muireall? I am not for knowing, Morag. Why do you ask? Do you want her?”

She did not answer, but went on:

“Have you seen him again?”

“Him?... Whom?”

“Jasper Morgan, this English lord’s son.”

“No.”

A long silence followed. Suddenly Aunt Elspeth started. Pointing to a figure coming from the peat-moss at the hither end of Strathmòr, she asked who it was, as she could not see without her spectacles. Her husband rose, staring eagerly. He gave a grunt of disappointment when he recognised Mr Allan Stewart, the minister of Strathmòr parish.

As the old man drew near we watched him steadfastly. I have the thought that each one of us knew he was coming to tell us evil news; though none guessed why or what, unless Morag mayhap.

When he had shaken hands, and blessed the house and those within it, Mr Stewart sat down on the bench beside Morag and me. I am thinking he wanted not to see the eyes of Gorromalt, nor to see the white face of Aunt Elspeth.

I heard him whisper to my dear that he wanted her to go into the house for a little. But she would not. The birdeen knew that sorrow was upon us all. He saw "no" in her eyes, and forbore.

"And what is the thing that is on your lips to tell, Mr Stewart?" said Gorromalt at last, half-mockingly, half-sullenly.

"And how are you for knowing that I have anything to tell, Gorromalt?"

"Sure, man, if a kite can see the shadow of a mouse a mile away, it can see a black cloud on a hill near by!"

"It's a black cloud I bring, Archibald Campbell: alas, even so. Ay, sure, it is a black cloud it is. God melt the pain of it!"

"Speak, man!"

"There is no good in wading in heather. Gorromalt, and you, Mrs Campbell, and you, my poor Morag, and you too, my dear, must just be brave. It is God's will."

"Speak, man, and don't be winding the shroud all the time! Let us be hearing and seeing the thing you have brought to tell us."

It was at this moment that Aunt Elspeth half rose, and abruptly reseated herself, raising the while a deprecatory

feeble hand.

“Is it about Muireall?” she asked quaveringly. “She went away, to the church at Kilbrennan, at sunrise: and the water’s in spate all down Strathgorm. Has she been drowned? Is it death upon Muireall? Is it Muireall? Is it Muireall?”

“She is not drowned, Mrs Campbell.”

At that she sat back, the staring dread subsiding from her eyes. But at the minister’s words, Gorromalt slowly moved his face and body so that he fronted the speaker. Looking at Morag, I saw her face white as the canna. Her eyes swam in wet shadow.

“It is not death, Mrs Campbell,” the old man repeated, with a strange, uneasy, furtive look, as he put his right hand to his stiff white necktie and flutteringly fingered it.

“In the name o’ God, man, speak out!”

“Ay, ay, Campbell: ay, ay, I am speaking ... I am for the telling ... but ... but, see you, Gorromalt, be pitiful ... be ...”

Gorromalt rose. I never realised before how tall he was. There was height to him, like unto that of a son of Anak.

“Well, well, well, it is just for telling you I’ll be. Sit down, Gorromalt, sit down, Mr Campbell, sit down, man, sit down!... Ah, sure now, that is better. Well, well, God save us all from the sin that is in us: but ... ah, mothering heart, it is saving you I would be if I could, but ... but ...”

“But *what!*” thundered Gorromalt, with a voice that brought Maisie and Kirsteen out of the byre, where they were milking the kye.

“He has the mercy: He only! And it is this, poor people: it is this. Muireall has come to sorrow.”

“What sorrow is the sorrow that is on her?”

“The sorrow of woman.”

A terrible oath leapt from Gorromalt’s lips. His wife sat in a stony silence, her staring eyes filming like those of a stricken bird. Morag put her left hand to her heart.

Suddenly Archibald Campbell turned to his daughter.

“Morag, what is the name of that man whom Muireall came to know, when she and you went to that Sodom, that Gomorrha, which men call London?”

“His name was Jasper Morgan.”

“Has she ever seen him since?”

“I think so.”

“You *think*? What will you be *thinking* for, girl! *Think!* There will be time enough to think while the lichen grows grey on a new-fall’n rock! Out with it! Out with it! Have they met?... Has he been here?... is *he* the man?”

There was silence then. A plover wheeled by, plaining aimlessly. Maisie the milk-lass ran forward, laughing.

“Ah, ’tis my wee Seorsa,” she cried. “Seorsa! Seorsa! Seorsa!”

Gorromalt took a stride forward, his face shadowy with anger, his eyes ablaze.

“Get back to the kye, you wanton wench!” he shouted savagely. “Get back, or it is having my gun I’ll be and shooting that pee-wit of yours, that lennavan-Seorsa!”

Then, shaking still, he turned to Morag.

“Out with it, girl! What do you know?”

“I know nothing.”

“It is a lie, and it is knowing it I am!”

“It is no lie. I *know* nothing. I *fear* much.”

“And what do *you* know, old man?” And, with that, Archibald Campbell turned like a baited bull upon Mr Stewart.

“She was misled, Gorromalt, she was misled, poor lass! The trouble began last May, when she went away to the south, to that evil place. And then he came after her. And it was here he came ... and ... and...”

“And who will that man be?”

“Morag has said it: Jasper Morgan.”

“And who will Jasper Morgan be?”

“Are you not for knowing *that*, Archibald Campbell, and you *Gorromalt*?”

“Why, what meaning are you at?” cried the man, bewildered.

“Who will Jasper Morgan be but the son of Stanley Morgan!”

“Stanley Morgan!... Stanley Morgan! I am no wiser. Do you wish to send me mad, man! Speak out!... out with it!”

“Why, Gorromalt, what is Drumdoon’s name?”

“Drumdoon... Why, Sir Ewan... Ah no, for sure ’tis now that English bread-taker, that southern land-snatcher, who calls himself Lord Greycourt. And what then?... will it be for...”

“Aren’t you for knowing his name?... No?... Campbell, man, it is *Morgan ... Morgan*.”

All this time Aunt Elspeth had sat silent. She now gave a low cry. Her husband turned and looked at her. “Go into the house,” he said harshly; “this will not be the time for whimpering; no, by God! it is not the time for whimpering, woman.”

She rose, and walked feebly over to Mr Stewart.

“Tell me all,” she said. Ah, grief to see the pain in her old, old eyes—and no tears there at all, at all.

“When this man Jasper Morgan, that is son to Lord Greycourt, came here, it was to track a stricken doe. And now all is over. There is this note only. It is for Morag.”

Gorromalt leaned forward to take it. But I had seen the wild look in Morag’s eyes, and I snatched it from Mr Stewart, and gave it to my dear, who slipped it beneath her kerchief.

Sullenly her father drew up, scowled, but said nothing.

“What else?” he asked, turning to the minister.

“She is dying.”

“Dying!”

“Ay, alas, alas—the mist is on the hill—the mist is on the hill—and she so young, too, and so fair, ay, and so sweet and——”

“That will do, Allan Stewart! That will do!... It is dying she is, you are for telling us! Well, well, now, and she the plaything o’ Jasper Morgan, the son of the man there at Drumdoon, the man who wants to drive me away from here ... this *new* man ... this, this lord ... he ... to drive *me* away, who have the years and years to go upon, ay, for more than six hundred weary long years——”

“Muireall is dying, Archibald Campbell. Will you be coming to see her, who is your very own?”

“And for why is she dying?”

“She could not wait.”

“Wait! Wait! She could wait to shame me and mine! No, no, no, Allan Stewart, you go back to Lord Greycourt’s son and his *leannan*, and say that neither Gorromalt nor any o’