

Tragic Landscapes

By Fiona Macleod

I.

THE TEMPEST.

The forest undulated across the land in vast black-green billows. Their sombre solitudes held no light. The sky was of a uniform grey, a dull metallic hue such as the sea takes when a rainy wind comes out of the east. There was not a break in the appalling monotony.

To the north rose a chain of mountains. Connecting one to another, were serrated scaurs, or cleft, tortured, and precipitous ridges. The wild-stag had his sanctuary here; here were reared the young of the osprey, the raven, the kestrel, and the corbie. On the extreme heights the eagles called from their eyries at sunrise; at sundown they might be seen whirling like minute discs around the flaming peaks.

An absolute silence prevailed. At long intervals there was the restless mewing of a wind-eddy, baffled among the remote carries. Sometimes, far beneath and beyond, in the midmost depths of the forest, a sound, as of the flowing tide at an immeasurable distance, rose, sighed through the grey silences, and sank into their drowning depths.

At noon, a slight stir was visible here and there. Two crows drifted inky-black against the slate-grey firmament. A kestrel, hovering over a rocky wilderness, screamed, and with a sudden slant cut the heavy air, skimmed the ground, breasted the extreme summits of the pines, and sailed slowly westward, silent, apparently motionless, till absorbed into the gloom. A slight mist rose from a stagnant place. On a black moorland tract, miles away from where the forest began, two small, gaunt creatures, human males, stooped continually, tearing at the peaty soil.

By the fourth hour from noon, there was nothing audible; not a thing visible, save the black-gloom overhead, the green-gloom of the vast pine-forest, the grey sterility of the hills, to the north.

Towards the fifth hour, a sickly white flame darted forkedly out of the slate-hued sky to the northwest. There was no wind, no stir of any kind, following. The same breathless silence brooded everywhere.

Close upon the sixth hour a strange shivering went through a portion of the forest. It was as though the flank of a monster quivered. A confused rustling arose, ebbed, died away. Thrice at long intervals, the narrow, jagged flame lunged and thrust, as a needle thridding the two horizons. At a vast distance a wail, a murmur, a faint vanishing cry, might be heard, like the humming of a gnat. It was the wind, tearing and lashing the extreme frontiers, and screaming in its blind fury.

A raven came flying rapidly out of the west. Again and again in its undeviating flight its hoarse croak re-echoed as though it fell clanging from ledge to brazen ledge. At an immense height, three eagles, no larger than three pinpoints, winging their way at terrific speed, seemed to crawl like ants along the blank slope of a summitless and endless wall.

In the southwest the greyness became involved. Dark masses bulged forward. A gigantic hand appeared to mould them from behind. The ponderous avalanches of rain were suspended, lifted,

whirled this way and that, fused, divided, and swung low over the earth like horrible balloons of death.

Furtive eddies of wind moved stealthily among the forest-trees. The pines were motionless, though a thin song ascended spirally the columnar boles; but the near beeches were flooded with innumerable green wavelets of unquiet light. A constant tremor lived suspensive in ever birk, in every rowan. On the hither frontier of the pines a few scattered oaks lifted their upper boughs, lifted and lapsed, slowly lifted again and slowly lapsed. These were silent, though a confused murmur as of bewildered bees came from the foliage midway and beneath. Wan green tongues of air licked the fronds of the myriad bracken. Swift arrows of wind, narrow as reeds, darted through the fern and over the patches of grass, leaving for a moment a wake of white light. By a pool the bulrushes seemed to strain their tufty heads one way, listening; the tall, slim fairy-lances beside them continually trembled.

Suddenly there was an obscure noise upon the hills. Far off, a linn roared hoarsely, whose voice had been muffled before. Many streams and hill-torrents called. Then the mountain-wind came rushing down the strath, with incoherent shouts and a confused tumult of tidings. Every green thing moved one way, or stood back upon itself as a javelin-thrower. In the tragic silence of the forest and the moorland the pulse of the earth beat slowly, heavily. A suffocating grip was at the brown heart.

But the moment the hill-wind dashed through the swaying rowans and beeches, and leaped into the forest, a hurricane of cries arose. Every tree called to its neighbour; each pine shouted, screamed, moaned, or chanted a wild song; the more ancient lifted a deep voice, mocking and defiant. For now they knew what was coming.

The sea-tempest was climbing up over the back of the sun, and had already, with rolling thunders and frightful sulphurous blasts, with flame of many lightnings and vast volumes of cloud holding seas of rain and gravelly avalanches of hail, attacked, prostrated, trampled upon, mutilated, slain and twice slain, the far-off battalions of the forest! This was what the herald of the hills proclaimed, as with panic haste he leaped through the woods screaming wild warnings as he went.

For leagues and leagues he swept onward, then, suddenly swerving, raced up a rock-bastioned height that rose in the forest. For a while he swung suspensive, then, swaying blindly, fell back stumbling, and, as one delirious, staggered to the forest again, and once more flew like a flying deer, though no longer forward but by the way he had come.

“The Tempest! The Tempest!” he screamed: “The Tempest comes!”

Soon all the forest knew what he had seen. Distant lines of great trees were being mowed down as by a scythe; gigantic pines were being torn from the ground and hurled hither and thither; the Black Loch had become a flood; the river had swollen into a frightful spate, and raged and ravaged like a beast of prey. He had seen cattle fall, slain by lightning; a stag had crashed downwards as he leapt from boulder to boulder; the huts of some humans had been laid low, and the sprawling creatures beneath been killed or mutilated; sheep had been dashed up against stone-dykes and left lifeless. The air in places was thick and dark with whirling grouse, snipe, wild-doves, lapwings, crows, and a dust of small birds.

A moan went up from the forest,—a new sound, horrible, full of awe, of terror, of despair. In the blank grey hollows of the mountains to the north the echo of this was as though the Grave were opened, and the Dead moaned.

Young and old moved near to each other, with clinging boughs, and tremulous sprays and branches. The fluttering leaves made a confused babble of tongues. The males swirled their

upper boughs continuously, inclining their bodies now this way and now that. The ancient pines spread their boles as far as they could reach, murmuring low to their green offspring, and to the tender offspring of these. Sighs and sobs, swift admonitions, and sudden, passionate heart-break cries resounded. Death would be among them in a few moments; all could not survive, many must perish, patriarch and sapling, proud bridegroom and swaying bride, the withered and the strong.

From the extreme edge there was a constant emigration of living things. The birds sank among the bracken.

Some deer, three human males and a female, some foxes and stoats came out into the open, hesitated, and slowly retreated.

The first thunder-chariot now hurtled overhead. The charioteer leaned low, and thrust hither and thither with his frightful lance. A deer was killed, also the human female and one of the males. A scorching smell came from a spruce-fir; the next moment it hung in tongues of flame.

Then—silence: awful, appalling. Suddenly, the heaven opened in fire; the earth became a hollow globe of brass wherein an excruciating tumult whirled ruin against ruin. The howl of desolation seemed to belch at once from the entrails of the mountains and from the bowels of the bursting sky.

The Tempest was come!

II.

MIST.

A dense white mist lay upon the hills, clothing them from summit to base in a dripping shroud. The damp spongy peat everywhere sweated forth its overwelling ooze. Not a living thing seemed to haunt the desolation, though once or twice a faint cry from a bewildered curlew came stumblingly through the sodden atmosphere.

There was neither day nor night, but only the lifeless gloom of the endless, weary rain, thin, soaking, full of the chill and silence of the grave.

Hour lapsed into hour, till at last the gradual deepening of the mists betokened the dreary end of the dreary day. Soaked, boggy, treacherous as were the drenched and pool-haunted moors, no living thing, not even the restless hill-sheep, fared across them. But towards the late afternoon a stooping figure passed from gloom to gloom,—wan, silent, making the awfulness of the hour and the place take on a new desolation.

As the shadow stole slowly across the moor, it stopped ever and anon. It was a man. The heavy moisture on his brow from the rain passing through his matted hair mixed with the great drops of sweat that gathered there continually. For as often as he stopped he heard footsteps anigh, footsteps in that lonely deserted place,—sometimes following, sometimes beyond him, sometimes almost at his side. Yet it was not for the sound of those following feet that he stopped, but because on the rain-matted cranberry-bushes or upon the glistening thyme or on the sodden grass, he saw now bloody foot-marks, now marks of bloody fingers. When he looked, there was nothing below or beyond him but the dull sheen of the rain-soaked herbage; when he looked again, a bloody footstep, a bloody finger-mark.

But at last the following feet were heard no more, the bloody imprints were no more seen. The man stood beside a deep tarn, and was looking into it, as the damned in hell look into their souls.

At times a faint, almost inaudible sigh breathed behind the mist in one direction. It was the hill-wind stirring among the scaurs and corries at a great height on a mountain to the north. Here and there, a slight drifting of the vapour disclosed a shadowy boulder: then the veils would lapse and interweave, and the old impermeable obscurity prevail.

It was in one of these fugitive intervals that a stag, standing upon an overhanging rock, beheld another, a rival with whom it had fought almost to the death the day before. This second stag stood among the wet bracken, his ears now laid back, now extended quiveringly, his nostrils vibrating, as he strove to smell the something that moved through the dense mist by the tarn.

The upper stag tautened his haunches. His lips and nostrils curled, and left his yellow teeth agleam. The next moment he had launched himself upon his enemy. There was a crash, a sound as of a wind-lashed sea, sharp cries and panting breaths, groans. Then a long silence. Later, a single faint, perishing bleat came through the mist from the fern far up upon the hill.

The restless wind that was amid the summits died. Night crept up from glen and strath; the veils of mist grew more and more obscure, more dark. At last, from the extreme peaks to where the torrent crawled into hollows in the sterile valley, there was a uniform pall of blackness.

In the chill, soaking silence not a thing stirred, not a sound was audible.

III.

SUMMER-SLEEP.

The high-road sinuated like a white snake, along the steeper slope of the valley. The vast expanse of the lowland lay basking in the July sunlight. In all directions woodlands, mostly of planes and oaks, swelled or lapsed in green billows.

The cuckoo had gone; the thrush was silent; blackbird and shilfa and linnet were now songless. But every here and there a lark still filled the summer air, as with the cool spray of aerial music; in the grain the corncrakes called; and, in shadowy places, in the twilight, the churring of a belated fern-owl was still a midsummer sweetness upon the ear.

The gloom of July was upon the trees. The oaks dreamed of green water. The limes were already displaying fugitive yellow banners. A red flush dusked the green-gloom of the sycamores. But by far the greater mass of the woodlands consisted of planes; and these were now of a black green darker than that of north-wind waves on a day of storm. The meadows, too, lay in the shadow, as it were, even when the sun-flood poured upon them.

From the low ranges to the south a faint wind drifted leisurely northward. The sky was of a vivid blue, up whose invisible azure ledges a few rounded clouds, dazzling white or grey as swan's-down, climbed imperceptibly.

In the air was a pleasant murmur of the green world. The wild-bee and the wasp, the dragon-fly and the gnat, wrought everywhere a humming undertone. From copse and garth and water-meadow suspired an audible breath.

The lowing of kine from many steadings blended with the continuous murmur of a weir, where the river curved under ancient alders and slipped into a dense green shaw of birches beyond an old water-mill, whose vast black wheel, jagged and broken, swung slowly, fanning the hot air so that it made a haze as of faint-falling rain.

Peace was upon the land, and beauty. The languor of dream gave the late summer a loveliness that was all its own,—as of a fair woman, asleep, dreaming of the lover who has not long left her, and the touch of whose lips is still warm upon her mouth and hair.

Along the high-road, where it made a sweep southwestward, and led to a small hamlet of thatched, white-walled cottages, three men walked. The long fantastic shadows which they cast were pale blue upon the chalky dust of the road, and leaped and contracted and slid stealthily forward with wearisome, monotonous energy. Two of the men were tall and fair; one dark, loosely built, and of a smaller and slighter build.

"There is my home," said the tallest wayfarer suddenly, after what had been a long silence; and as he spoke he pointed to a small square house set among orchard-trees, a stone's throw from the hamlet.

"It is a beautiful place," replied his comrade, slowly, "and I envy you."

"Yes, indeed," added the other.

"I am glad you think so," the owner of the house answered quietly.

But the three shadows leapt to one side, moved with fantastic steps, and seemed convulsed with laughter.

Perhaps the tall shiver-grass that rose by the wayside out of the garth of champions and purple scabious could catch the attenuated sounds and understand the speech of the shadows. If so, it would know that the taller of the two strangers said in his heart:—

"There is something of awe, of terror about that house; nay, the whole land here is under a tragic gloom. I should die here, stifled. I am glad I go on the morrow."

It would know that the smaller and darker of the two strangers said in his heart:—

"It may all be beautiful and peaceful, but something tragic hides behind this flooding sunlight, behind these dark woodlands, down by the water-course there, past the water-mill, up by that house among the orchard-trees."

It would know that the tallest of the three men, he who lived in that square cottage by the pleasant hamlet, said in his heart:—

"It may be that the gate of hell is hidden there among the grass, or beneath the foundations of my house. Would God I were free! O my God, madness and death!"

Then, after another long silence, as the three wayfarers drew near, the dark man murmured his pleasure at the comely hamlet, at the quiet land lying warm in the afternoon glow. And his companion said that rest and coolness would be welcome, and doubly so in so fair and peaceful a home. And the tallest of the three, he who owned the house in the orchard, laughed blithely. And all three moved onward, with quickened steps, through the hot, sweet, dusty afternoon, golden now with the waning sun-glow.