

DAVID KERR CAMERON

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A KIST  
OF SORROWS

Eva Figes

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## A KIST OF SORROWS

David Kerr Cameron is a writer and national newspaper journalist. He was born in his grandfather's croft house in the farming flatlands of Aberdeenshire, and spent much of his childhood trailing at his grandfather's heels, imbibing the old man's love of the land and its seasons. His parents were cottars, living in tied farming cottages, and his young life was spent, gipsy-like, 'moving on' from one farm to the next. He did his National Service in the RAF and has spent over thirty-five years on Scottish and Fleet Street papers. Living and working in London, he is still deeply drawn to the landscape of his childhood with its dour characters, its old values and its peasant dignity, and through them, to explore his roots and make sense of an increasingly frenetic world.

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DAVID KERR CAMERON

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# A KIST OF SORROWS



**Flamingo**

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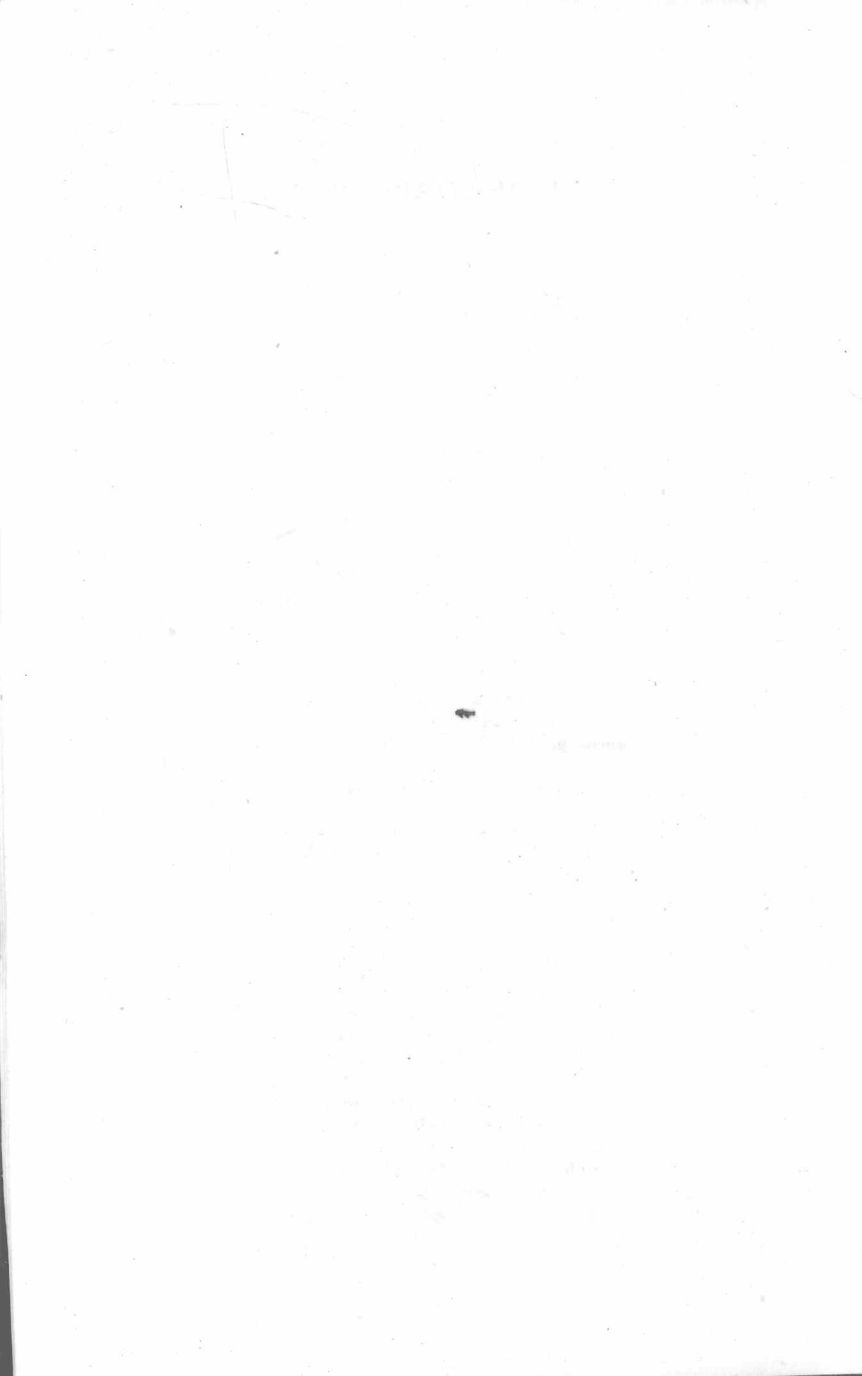
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## LIST OF SORROWS



LAST NIGHT I took the old roads and heard the old speak. I listened again to the still voices and felt the sting of the wind on my cheek. And it was good, like a home-coming. The old track is grass-grown, almost obliterated by the years, and I am a stranger now where the old wind wanders, where it reeshles the dry broom and tugs at the tufted grass. The hill is quiet, shorn of voices. There is neither a whimper nor the snarl of a dog borne on the wind, only the silent throb of the centuries and the distant grey growl of the sea. The small echoes of history linger where the tumbled, moss-green stones mark the site of a dwelling, the line of an old hill dyke that once margined a poor man's kingdom, and in the stunted tree that guards the lonely gable. Unroofed, the hearth looks at the northern sky, lone and forlorn.

Time has mellowed the stones, as it has sutured the hurts of the heart; hallowed them as the last reminder of the folk who once had their life and their being here. They rest, stilled forever in their coffin'd sleep, and now on the hill nature has reclaimed her own. Below, in the broad haughlands of the farmtouns, the fields are bleak and spare but orderly still under the plough in an unbroken continuity with the past as they run for the plain and the sea. As the cold autumn light fails it is a land, suddenly, that chills the soul. Once its bare parks and its damp, poor-lit bothies bound a proud folk prisoner, sapping their will to leave it, slowly taking the heart out of them; circumscribed in it they lived out their sorrows and their chance encounters and endured the rote of their days, fulfilling bleak destinies till the kirkyard claimed them.

They were not, those folk of the old hill crofts and the mud-girt farmtouns, railers against the terrible futility of their lives; nor were they sad lamenters. Their time was not heavy with regretting, though their guarded despair slipped out, like rabbit-guts from a rotten bag, in the worn rough poetry of their guttural speak and now and then in the words of a plaintive song that caught their sadness. Even the land itself begrudged

them, endlessly denying them, for their hairsts were late and haggard and rarely abundant. In its poor yield the soil quietly mocked them . . .

The wind teases the memory, restoring to it the fragments from another life; the images of another eye. Here in the crofting uplands where the heather has encroached it conjures into the mind the interlacing fall of the small croft fields, the fall of the track, now overgrown and bereft of footsteps, into the farmlands below. It was never a hospitable place. It broke men in body and will and with a strange kind of bankruptcy that haunted their gaunt faces. Theirs was a slow dance to the music of eternity, a minuet to the movement of the seasons. Few escaped unscathed. I cannot tell you now how it was with all of them, only a few. In my blood runs their blood. Once, slow down that stony track tumbling its way through the patterns of the past stumbled a lass with a winsome smile, and an impish sense of mischief that shone still in the eyes of the old woman I knew by the chimney corner. Strange and intangible the thing that bound us then, that continuity of race and creed that united the tenuous thread of her yesterdays with my own tomorrows. It is from the old woman that I have the memory of it and how it was.

Slow through the still of the fields she had come as night folded down and slipped blue-hazed into the hollows of the land. It thickened the hedgerows and crouched like a thief by the dykesides and already it had begun to take the Croft Hill by stealth, creeping upward in a mounting gloaming tide that blurred the patchwork of its small and pitiful fields. From his study window under the eaves of the manse, Patrick Pringle watched the solitary figure descend the track and take the road that led round the skirt of the hill, a speck that moved slow-motioned in the empty evening landscape. Dusk did not conceal the errand or the identity from the man who had long held God's embassy in the parish, for he was already aware of them. He watched until the thickening mirk of the November night took the figure from his sight, merging it with its own darkness, before sitting down at the desk behind him. There he lit the lamp and waiting, watched as its yellow light spilled slowly over the open bare page of his day-book. Brooding

over its blankness a sadness gathered in him. Strange to him still the ways of men, and of God.

'So be it.'

His sigh was neither rebuke nor acceptance, only a recognition of the imponderables of life, of the tortured destinies that blew folk through it like windlestraws. That weighed heavily; there were times when Patrick Pringle wondered about God. Then, dipping his quill, he began to write quickly, as though the hand were already impatient with the tale it would unfold.

November 28, 1878:

This night, as the light failed, saw James MacCaskill's lass go home on the moss road to her new place, the Campbell town of Moss-gair. God pity the poor bairn that it must be so for I misdoubt that she will find much of the milk of charity or human kindliness there. It is a sore heart that awaits her and I would it were not so—that the Hill folk did not have to sell their children into slavery for the avoidance of another mouth to feed. But such is their penury, the grind of their want, they must have recourse to it. May God protect the bairn who yet must be a woman ere she has left her childhood behind her.

Pringle rose from his desk. A restlessness gripped him, as now it so often did. What was it, this desolation of the soul that so possessed him? Beyond the cold panes he looked out on the night, on the pale cluster of lights in the village below him. Dark had come suddenly as he wrote so that now only the black mound of the Hill loomed against the lighter shading of the sky. He pulled the curtains. Folk, he knew, would wonder at MacCaskill, seeing his lass to the likes of the Campbells.

'So be it,' he murmured again and the pity moved in his bowels as he stepped again to the desk to shut the diary page from his sight, the past from his heart, closing the large leather-bound volume that was his only confidant, in a way his only friend. It was long years now since Hannah had died; so long that he was no longer sure of the sound of her voice in his inner ear or that the image of the face conjured by remembrance on the membranes of the mind was really hers. He felt a deep

sense of loss that it had become so. There were nights when Pringle grieved for the wasteland his life had become, for the emotional desert of his days and for the lonely bed that was now his living tomb. That desolation had deeply lined the strong, heavy features of a face that might have been handsome once. The thick wiry grey of his crisply cropped hair ran down to side-whiskers and the thrust of a cropped, steely grey beard. His garb was the evangelical uniform of his calling worn without grace or distinction, as though it sat on a ploughman, and without the need to excuse it for the hands that held the quill might as capably have handled the stilts and would not have deigned to do so. It was Pringle's strength that he had never found it difficult to equate the things of the earth and the fields with the will of Heaven.

Now in the quiet room of Kilbirnie's Free Kirk manse, its silences broken only by the spit and crackle of the larch log in the grate, he minded the start of him there, the cloth but new to him yet, and his first coming among them. The Free Kirk folk of Kilbirnie had been ill to please with their ministers. When their new-biggit kirk's pulpit had fallen suddenly vacant—when old MacBain, their hero of the Disruption, had finally started to haver and speak stite and had been pressed into an unwanted retirement—it had taken them an unconscionable time to vote in his successor. The first they had tried had been a begeck to them all, a sickly, simpering laddie from the refined streets of west Aberdeen who would not have kenned one end of a black stirk from the other: he had fair scunnered them with his fine, English-like accent and his pained reasonableness and his hash was soon enough settled when he was bidden to come to his denner by Tait of Littleshin who was an elder and elder statesman of the parish and held great sway with the session. He had gone home the laddie, after the sermon, and almost at once had put Littleshin fair out of humour with his dainty-like steppies and the unctuous way he wiled a path through the glaur of the Littlins close—'just like a lassie near,' old Tait had said later, 'as though he had niver in's life seen coo's skitter afore!' And forbye, he had been tactless enough to kicher and hoast once or twice on Mistress Tait's Sunday boiled beef (she was terribly put-out), so it wasn't that long before Littlins was convoying him from the

place, good riddance to him, and that was the last and hinderend the Kilbirnie folk saw of him.

The next nominee promised better, coming from somewhere round Echt: he was a fine and decent old man who once had written long-headed books till the years began to overtake him and he spoke right civilly to them in a quiet, fatherly way. But they were feared of him all the same, old like he was, in case he gaed the way of MacBain.

So syne Pringle was sent for and came from his kirk away down in Dundee. Young he had been then, his old father a crofter man still in the upcountry of Rhynie. He had pleased them fine.

'Fine and standyont,' they said, one to the other. 'He will have nae truck wi' thae Moderates.'

He had great muckle hands on him they saw like a ploughman's and that had reassured them, and the way he had taken hold of the edge of the pulpit had garred the timmer crack and they had kenned for sure he was the very man they were looking for. And right enough he had girmed and glowered at them and indicted and damned them and they had likit that fine (not a blink of a nod could they take, his eye aye upon them) and when it had come time to go home with Littleshin to his Sunday bite of denner he had taken through the sharn of the toun without breaking his stride or giving a care to the shine of his patent leather boots and that had so pleased old Tait that he had taken the liberty as well of offering a dram and had it willingly, no-nonsense accepted. And when he had pushed the soup plate from him to make way for the second course at Mistress Tait's table he had gobbled the great unsavoury dollops of her boiled beef a damned sight faster than any fee'd laddie they had ever had about the place. Forbye that, the thick black hair of him wagging above vigorously masticating jaws, he had speired knowledgeably between mouthfuls about Littlin's beasts and his seed corn and the upshot of it was that Tait and him were real chief afore it came time for him to take his leave. And instead of that, he had been bidden to stay to his supper and syne to his bed and when he had left in the morning he had known he had the pulpit. But before then he'd had time to take a keek under his brows at Tait's youngest daughter—the fine oval of her sun-kissed face

and the wild tumble of her deep brown hair—and her at him, the look between them something strange and questioning like she had known him always. Queer she thought it, brooding long after.

'Fegs,' she told her sister, drawing the blankets up over them after the bedtime prayer, 'he doesnae look nane like a minister should look!'

'Wheesht!' her sister had said.

'He'd be a fair terror in yer bed.'

'Anna!'

But fine it would be—she had thought it all the same—to have his hands on your dowp.

So that had been the coming of Pringle, the young widower with his motherless bairn, guilty still in his grief. He had taken his god among them not knowing what the years would bring, a god in his own image: dour, straight and resolute.

Pringle cupped a hand over the glass to douse the lamp's flame and came slow down the stair to the room that was kitchen and dining room both. There Miss Pringle was already boiling their supper eggs in the kettle slung low from the swey over the fire.

Night and silence brooded round the Campbell steading as Morag MacCaskill stepped into its shadows. There was no lantern alight as yet in the stable that housed the toun's Clydesdale pairs nor, that Term-night of the year, was there the ring of a tacketed boot on the cobbles of its close as a horseman took across it on some stable errand: to get a windling of straw for bedding to his beasts or a bag of bruised corn from the loft. On any other night of the year there would have been movement about the toun as it went about its tasks, the bob and sway of lanterns about it as men came home, lowsed from the plough, their shouts and banter as they threw hames and collars noisily on to the brackets on the lime-washed stable wall. Tonight, though, silence locked the toun: that Term-day of Martinmas, like that of Whitsunday, was a landmark in the farmtoun year when the folk of that countryside shed their past and began their lives anew as they moved on from one toun to the next, engaging themselves for a new six-month fee. The day before the loft bothy of Moss-gair had released the toun's



second horseman to a new stable and another Clydesdale pair and, its door dark by the stable gable, awaited its next incumbent who would look remarkably like the last. It was a place of habitation that would give little of life's comforts and make sure he moved on when he had completed his engagement.

The stillness settled on Morag, emphasizing her own footfalls as they echoed behind her. She came finally to the back door of the farm dwelling and, waiting, fought down her racing heartbeats. Her knock went through the house to gather its own echo and fade it slowly back to her, a lone cry in an endless cavern. Somewhere in the nightfall, maybe on the Croft Hill, a dog barked, ruffling the calm of the countryside. Hesitatingly, quelling again the urge to flee the place and its threatening silences, she pounded the door and almost at once heard shuffling feet behind it. Inside a hand fumbled the latch and the door was flung open on a face vignettied in the glow of a guttering candle. From its deep sockets the eyes surveyed her, almost without interest.

'An' who micht ye be, quean?' The old man's voice was gruff, querulous.

'Gin it please ye, sir, I'm Mistress Campbell's new servant maid.'

The gaze was pitiless. 'Ye dinna tell me . . .' The head nodded, lolling sideways in the candlelight, taking in the small stature of the figure before it, and Morag realized now that the old Campbell had been drinking. The head nodded again, uncertain of its own equilibrium.

'Lord save us then . . .'

'If ye wid tell Mistress Campbell that I'm here——'

'Tell her yersel, lass. She's in the byre!' The door was swung shut in her face without ceremony and turning now in the way his nod had directed her she saw for the first time, a feeble glimmer—the only light about the farmtoun—that marked the cow byre. In a moment she had stooped under its low lintel into the fetid warmth of housed beasts and the commingling smells of sharn and urine. A mutched face lifted itself from the slow rise and fall of a cow's side as her step approached and she broke into the circle of lantern light. Its expression was one of obvious relief.

'Ye'll be Morag MacCaskill, bairn?'