

The White People

By

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TO LIONEL

"The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high
Can keep my own away from me."

THE WHITE PEOPLE

CHAPTER I

Perhaps the things which happened could only have happened to me. I do not know. I never heard of things like them happening to any one else. But I am not sorry they did happen. I am in secret deeply and strangely glad. I have heard other people say things--and they were not always sad people, either--which made me feel that if they knew what I know it would seem to them as though some awesome, heavy load they had always dragged about with them had fallen from their shoulders. To most people everything is so uncertain that if they could only see or hear and know something clear they would drop upon their knees and give thanks. That was what I felt myself before I found out so strangely, and I was only a girl. That is why I intend to write this down as well as I can. It will not be very well done, because I never was clever at all, and always found it difficult to talk.

I say that perhaps these things could only have happened to me, because, as I look back over my life, I realize that it has always been a rather curious one. Even when those who took care of me did not know I was thinking at all, I had begun to wonder if I were not different from other children. That was, of course, largely because Muircarrie Castle was in such a wild and remote part of Scotland that when my few

relations felt they must pay me a visit as a mere matter of duty, their journey from London, or their pleasant places in the south of England, seemed to them like a pilgrimage to a sort of savage land; and when a conscientious one brought a child to play with me, the little civilized creature was as frightened of me as I was of it. My shyness and fear of its strangeness made us both dumb. No doubt I seemed like a new breed of inoffensive little barbarian, knowing no tongue but its own.

A certain clannish etiquette made it seem necessary that a relation should pay me a visit sometimes, because I was in a way important. The huge, frowning feudal castle standing upon its battlemented rock was mine; I was a great heiress, and I was, so to speak, the chieftainess of the clan. But I was a plain, undersized little child, and had no attraction for any one but Jean Braidfute, a distant cousin, who took care of me, and Angus Macayre, who took care of the library, and who was a distant relative also. They were both like me in the fact that they were not given to speech; but sometimes we talked to one another, and I knew they were fond of me, as I was fond of them. They were really all I had.

When I was a little girl I did not, of course, understand that I was an important person, and I could not have realized the significance of being an heiress. I had always lived in the castle, and was used to its hugeness, of which I only knew corners. Until I was seven years old, I think, I imagined all but very poor people lived in castles and were saluted by every one they passed. It seemed probable that all little

girls had a piper who strode up and down the terrace and played on the bagpipes when guests were served in the dining-hall.

My piper's name was Feargus, and in time I found out that the guests from London could not endure the noise he made when he marched to and fro, proudly swinging his kilts and treading like a stag on a hillside. It was an insult to tell him to stop playing, because it was his religion to believe that The Muircarrie must be piped proudly to; and his ancestors had been pipers to the head of the clan for five generations. It was his duty to march round the dining-hall and play while the guests feasted, but I was obliged in the end to make him believe that he could be heard better from the terrace--because when he was outside his music was not spoiled by the sound of talking. It was very difficult, at first. But because I was his chieftainess, and had learned how to give orders in a rather proud, stern little voice, he knew he must obey.

Even this kind of thing may show that my life was a peculiar one; but the strangest part of it was that, while I was at the head of so many people, I did not really belong to any one, and I did not know that this was unusual. One of my early memories is that I heard an under-nursemaid say to another this curious thing: "Both her father and mother were dead when she was born." I did not even know that was a remarkable thing to say until I was several years older and Jean Braidfute told me what had been meant.

My father and mother had both been very young and beautiful and wonderful. It was said that my father was the handsomest chieftain in Scotland, and that his wife was as beautiful as he was. They came to Muircarrie as soon as they were married and lived a splendid year there together. Sometimes they were quite alone, and spent their days fishing or riding or wandering on the moor together, or reading by the fire in the library the ancient books Angus Macayre found for them. The library was a marvelous place, and Macayre knew every volume in it. They used to sit and read like children among fairy stories, and then they would persuade Macayre to tell them the ancient tales he knew--of the days when Agricola forced his way in among the Men of the Woods, who would die any savage death rather than be conquered. Macayre was a sort of heirloom himself, and he knew and believed them all.

I don't know how it was that I myself seemed to see my young father and mother so clearly and to know how radiant and wildly in love they were. Surely Jean Braidfute had not words to tell me. But I knew. So I understood, in a way of my own, what happened to my mother one brilliant late October afternoon when my father was brought home dead--followed by the guests who had gone out shooting with him. His foot had caught in a tuft of heather, and his gun in going off had killed him. One moment he had been the handsomest young chieftain in Scotland, and when he was brought home they could not have let my mother see his face.

But she never asked to see it. She was on the terrace which juts over the rock the castle is built on, and which looks out over the purple

world of climbing moor. She saw from there the returning party of shooters and gillies winding its way slowly through the heather, following a burden carried on a stretcher of fir boughs. Some of her women guests were with her, and one of them said afterward that when she first caught sight of the moving figures she got up slowly and crept to the stone balustrade with a crouching movement almost like a young leopardess preparing to spring. But she only watched, making neither sound nor movement until the cortege was near enough for her to see that every man's head was bowed upon his breast, and not one was covered.

Then she said, quite slowly, "They--have--taken off--their bonnets," and fell upon the terrace like a dropped stone.

It was because of this that the girl said that she was dead when I was born. It must have seemed almost as if she were not a living thing. She did not open her eyes or make a sound; she lay white and cold. The celebrated physicians who came from London talked of catalepsy and afterward wrote scientific articles which tried to explain her condition. She did not know when I was born. She died a few minutes after I uttered my first cry.

I know only one thing more, and that Jean Braidfute told me after I grew up. Jean had been my father's nursery governess when he wore his first kilts, and she loved my mother fondly.

"I knelt by her bed and held her hand and watched her face for three

hours after they first laid her down," she said. "And my eyes were so near her every moment that I saw a thing the others did not know her well enough, or love her well enough, to see.

"The first hour she was like a dead thing--aye, like a dead thing that had never lived. But when the hand of the clock passed the last second, and the new hour began, I bent closer to her because I saw a change stealing over her. It was not color--it was not even a shadow of a motion. It was something else. If I had spoken what I felt, they would have said I was light-headed with grief and have sent me away. I have never told man or woman. It was my secret and hers. I can tell you, Ysobel. The change I saw was as if she was beginning to listen to something--to listen.

"It was as if to a sound--far, far away at first. But cold and white as stone she lay content, and listened. In the next hour the far-off sound had drawn nearer, and it had become something else--something she saw--something which saw her. First her young marble face had peace in it; then it had joy. She waited in her young stone body until you were born and she could break forth. She waited no longer then.

"Ysobel, my bairn, what I knew was that he had not gone far from the body that had held him when he fell. Perhaps he had felt lost for a bit when he found himself out of it. But soon he had begun to call to her that was like his own heart to him. And she had heard. And then, being half away from earth herself, she had seen him and known he was waiting,

and that he would not leave for any far place without her. She was so still that the big doctors thought more than once she had passed. But I knew better."

It was long before I was old enough to be told anything like this that I began to feel that the moor was in secret my companion and friend, that it was not only the moor to me, but something else. It was like a thing alive--a huge giant lying spread out in the sun warming itself, or covering itself with thick, white mist which sometimes writhed and twisted itself into wraiths. First I noticed and liked it some day, perhaps, when it was purple and yellow with gorse and heather and broom, and the honey scents drew bees and butterflies and birds. But soon I saw and was drawn by another thing.

How young was I that afternoon when I sat in the deep window and watched the low, soft whiteness creeping out and hovering over the heather as if the moor had breathed it? I do not remember. It was such a low little mist at first; and it crept and crept until its creeping grew into something heavier and whiter, and it began to hide the heather and the gorse and broom, and then the low young fir-trees. It mounted and mounted, and sometimes a breath of wind twisted it into weird shapes, almost like human creatures. It opened and closed again, and then it dragged and crept and grew thicker. And as I pressed my face against the window-pane, it mounted still higher and got hold of the moor and hid it, hanging heavy and white and waiting. That was what came into my child mind: that it had done what the moor had told it to do; had hidden

things which wanted to be hidden, and then it waited.

Strangers say that Muircarrie moor is the most beautiful and the most desolate place in the world, but it never seemed desolate to me. From my first memory of it I had a vague, half-comforted feeling that there was some strange life on it one could not exactly see, but was always conscious of. I know now why I felt this, but I did not know then.

If I had been older when I first began to see what I did see there, I should no doubt have read things in books which would have given rise in my mind to doubts and wonders; but I was only a little child who had lived a life quite apart from the rest of the world. I was too silent by nature to talk and ask questions, even if I had had others to talk to. I had only Jean and Angus, and, as I found out years later, they knew what I did not, and would have put me off with adroit explanations if I had been curious. But I was not curious. I accepted everything as it came and went.