

CHAPTER II

I only six when Wee Brown Elspeth was brought to me. Jean and Angus were as fond of each other in their silent way as they were of me, and they often went together with me when I was taken out for my walks. I was kept in the open air a great deal, and Angus would walk by the side of my small, shaggy Shetland pony and lead him over rough or steep places. Sheltie, the pony, was meant for use when we wished to fare farther than a child could walk; but I was trained to sturdy marching and climbing even from my babyhood. Because I so loved the moor, we nearly always rambled there. Often we set out early in the morning, and some simple food was carried, so that we need not return to the castle until we chose. I would ride Sheltie and walk by turns until we found a place I liked; then Jean and Angus would sit down among the heather, Sheltie would be secured, and I would wander about and play in my own way. I do not think it was in a strange way. I think I must have played as almost any lonely little girl might have played. I used to find a corner among the bushes and pretend it was my house and that I had little friends who came to play with me. I only remember one thing which was not like the ordinary playing of children. It was a habit I had of sitting quite still a long time and listening. That was what I called it--"listening." I was listening to hear if the life on the moor made any sound I could understand. I felt as if it might, if I were very still and listened long enough.

Angus and Jean and I were not afraid of rain and mist and change of weather. If we had been we could have had little outdoor life. We always carried plaids enough to keep us warm and dry. So on this day I speak of we did not turn back when we found ourselves in the midst of a sudden mist. We sat down in a sheltered place and waited, knowing it would lift in time. The sun had been shining when we set out.

Angus and Jean were content to sit and guard me while I amused myself. They knew I would keep near them and run into no danger. I was not an adventurous child. I was, in fact, in a more than usually quiet mood that morning. The quiet had come upon me when the mist had begun to creep about and inclose us. I liked it. I liked the sense of being shut in by the soft whiteness I had so often watched from my nursery window in the castle.

"People might be walking about," I said to Angus when he lifted me from Sheltie's back.

"We couldn't see them. They might be walking."

"Nothing that would hurt ye, bairnie," he answered.

"No, they wouldn't hurt me," I said. I had never been afraid that anything on the moor would hurt me.

I played very little that day. The quiet and the mist held me still.

Soon I sat down and began to "listen." After a while I knew that Jean and Angus were watching me, but it did not disturb me. They often watched me when they thought I did not know they were doing it.

I had sat listening for nearly half an hour when I heard the first muffled, slow trampling of horses' hoofs. I knew what it was even before it drew near enough for me to be conscious of the other sounds--the jingling of arms and chains and the creaking of leather one notices as troopers pass by. Armed and mounted men were coming toward me. That was what the sounds meant; but they seemed faint and distant, though I knew they were really quite near. Jean and Angus did not appear to hear them. I knew that I only heard them because I had been listening.

Out of the mist they rode a company of wild-looking men wearing garments such as I had never seen before. Most of them were savage and uncouth, and their clothes were disordered and stained as if with hard travel and fight. I did not know--or even ask myself--why they did not frighten me, but they did not. Suddenly I seemed to know that they were brave men and had been doing some brave, hard thing. Here and there among them I caught sight of a broken and stained sword, or a dirk with only a hilt left. They were all pale, but their wild faces were joyous and triumphant. I saw it as they drew near.

The man who seemed their chieftain was a lean giant who was darker but, under his darkness, paler than the rest. On his forehead was a queer,

star-shaped scar. He rode a black horse, and before him he held close with his left arm a pretty little girl dressed in strange, rich clothes. The big man's hand was pressed against her breast as he held her; but though it was a large hand, it did not quite cover a dark-red stain on the embroideries of her dress. Her dress was brown, and she had brown hair and soft brown eyes like a little doe's. The moment I saw her I loved her.

The black horse stopped before me. The wild troop drew up and waited behind. The great, lean rider looked at me a moment, and then, lifting the little girl in his long arms, bent down and set her gently on her feet on the mossy earth in the mist beside me. I got up to greet her, and we stood smiling at each other. And in that moment as we stood the black horse moved forward, the muffled trampling began again, the wild company swept on its way, and the white mist closed behind it as if it had never passed.

Of course I know how strange this will seem to people who read it, but that cannot be helped and does not really matter. It was in that way the thing happened, and it did not even seem strange to me. Anything might happen on the moor--anything. And there was the fair little girl with the eyes like a doe's.

I knew she had come to play with me, and we went together to my house among the bushes of broom and gorse and played happily. But before we began I saw her stand and look wonderingly at the dark-red stain on

the embroideries on her childish breast. It was as if she were asking herself how it came there and could not understand. Then she picked a fern and a bunch of the thick-growing bluebells and put them in her girdle in such a way that they hid its ugliness.

I did not really know how long she stayed. I only knew that we were happy, and that, though her way of playing was in some ways different from mine, I loved it and her. Presently the mist lifted and the sun shone, and we were deep in a wonderful game of being hidden in a room in a castle because something strange was going to happen which we were not told about. She ran behind a big gorse bush and did not come back. When I ran to look for her she was nowhere. I could not find her, and I went back to Jean and Angus, feeling puzzled.

"Where did she go?" I asked them, turning my head from side to side.

They were looking at me strangely, and both of them were pale. Jean was trembling a little.

"Who was she, Ysobel?" she said.

"The little girl the men brought to play with me," I answered, still looking about me.

"The big one on the black horse put her down--the big one with the star here." I touched my forehead where the queer scar had been.

For a minute Angus forgot himself. Years later he told me.

"Dark Malcolm of the Glen," he broke out. "Wee Brown Elspeth."

"But she is white--quite white!" I said.

"Where did she go?"

Jean swept me in her warm, shaking arms and hugged me close to her breast.

"She's one of the fair ones," she said, kissing and patting me. "She will come again. She'll come often, I dare say. But she's gone now and we must go, too. Get up, Angus, man. We're for the castle."

If we three had been different--if we had ever had the habit of talking and asking questions--we might surely have asked one another questions as I rode on Sheltie's back, with Angus leading us. But they asked me nothing, and I said very little except that I once spoke of the wild-looking horsemen and their pale, joyous faces.

"They were glad," was all I said.

There was also one brief query from Angus.

"Did she talk to you, bairnie?" he said.

I hesitated and stared at him quite a long time. Then I shook my head and answered, slowly, "N-no."

Because I realized then, for the first time, that we had said no words at all. But I had known what she wanted me to understand, and she had known what I might have said to her if I had spoken--and no words were needed. And it was better.

They took me home to the castle, and I was given my supper and put to bed. Jean sat by me until I fell asleep; she was obliged to sit rather a long time, because I was so happy with my memories of Wee Brown Elspeth and the certainty that she would come again. It was not Jean's words which had made me sure. I knew.

She came many times. Through all my childish years I knew that she would come and play with me every few days--though I never saw the wild troopers again or the big, lean man with the scar. Children who play together are not very curious about one another, and I simply accepted her with delight. Somehow I knew that she lived happily in a place not far away. She could come and go, it seemed, without trouble. Sometimes I found her--or she found me upon the moor; and often she appeared in my nursery in the castle. When we were together Jean Braidfute seemed to prefer that we should be alone, and was inclined to keep the under-nurse occupied in other parts of the wing I lived in. I never asked her to do

this, but I was glad that it was done. Wee Elspeth was glad, too. After our first meeting she was dressed in soft blue or white, and the red stain was gone; but she was always Wee Brown Elspeth with the doelike eyes and the fair, transparent face, the very fair little face. As I had noticed the strange, clear pallor of the rough troopers, so I noticed that she was curiously fair. And as I occasionally saw other persons with the same sort of fairness, I thought it was a purity of complexion special to some, but not to all. I was not fair like that, and neither was any one else I knew.