

CHAPTER III

It was when I was ten years old that Wee Elspeth ceased coming to me, and though I missed her at first, it was not with a sense of grief or final loss. She had only gone somewhere.

It was then that Angus Macayre began to be my tutor. He had been a profound student and had lived among books all his life. He had helped Jean in her training of me, and I had learned more than is usually taught to children in their early years. When a grand governess was sent to Muircarrie by my guardian, she was amazed at the things I was familiar with, but she abhorred the dark, frowning castle and the loneliness of the place and would not stay. In fact, no governess would stay, and so Angus became my tutor and taught me old Gaelic and Latin and Greek, and we read together and studied the ancient books in the library. It was a strange education for a girl, and no doubt made me more than ever unlike others. But my life was the life I loved.

When my guardian decided that I must live with him in London and be educated as modern girls were, I tried to be obedient and went to him; but before two months had passed my wretchedness had made me so ill that the doctor said I should go into a decline and die if I were not sent back to Muircarrie.

"It's not only the London air that seems to poison her," he said when Jean talked to him about me; "it is something else. She will not live,

that's all. Sir Ian must send her home."

As I have said before, I had been an unattractive child and I was a plain, uninteresting sort of girl. I was shy and could not talk to people, so of course I bored them. I knew I did not look well when I wore beautiful clothes. I was little and unimportant and like a reed for thinness. Because I was rich and a sort of chieftainess I ought to have been tall and rather stately, or at least I ought to have had a bearing which would have made it impossible for people to quite overlook me. But; any one could overlook me--an insignificant, thin girl who slipped in and out of places and sat and stared and listened to other people instead of saying things herself; I liked to look on and be forgotten. It interested me to watch people if they did not notice me.

Of course, my relatives did not really like me. How could they? They were busy in their big world and did not know what to do with a girl who ought to have been important and was not. I am sure that in secret they were relieved when I was sent back to Muircarrie.

After that the life I loved went on quietly. I studied with Angus, and made the book-walled library my own room. I walked and rode on the moor, and I knew the people who lived in the cottages and farms on the estate. I think they liked me, but I am not sure, because I was too shy to seem very friendly. I was more at home with Feargus, the piper, and with some of the gardeners than I was with any one else. I think I was lonely

without knowing; but I was never unhappy. Jean and Angus were my nearest

and dearest. Jean was of good blood and a stanch gentlewoman, quite sufficiently educated to be my companion as she had been my early governess.

It was Jean who told Angus that I was giving myself too entirely to the study of ancient books and the history of centuries gone by.

"She is living to-day, and she must not pass through this life without gathering anything from it."

"This life," she put it, as if I had passed through others before, and might pass through others again. That was always her way of speaking, and she seemed quite unconscious of any unusualness in it.

"You are a wise woman, Jean," Angus said, looking long at her grave face. "A wise woman."

He wrote to the London book-shops for the best modern books, and I began to read them. I felt at first as if they plunged me into a world I did not understand, and many of them I could not endure. But I persevered, and studied them as I had studied the old ones, and in time I began to feel as if perhaps they were true. My chief weariness with them came from the way they had of referring to the things I was so intimate with as though they were only the unauthenticated history of a life so

long passed by that it could no longer matter to any one. So often the greatest hours of great lives were treated as possible legends. I knew why men had died or were killed or had borne black horror. I knew because I had read old books and manuscripts and had heard the stories which had come down through centuries by word of mouth, passed from father to son.

But there was one man who did not write as if he believed the world had begun and would end with him. He knew he was only one, and part of all the rest. The name I shall give him is Hector MacNairn. He was a Scotchman, but he had lived in many a land. The first time I read a book he had written I caught my breath with joy, again and again. I knew I had found a friend, even though there was no likelihood that I should ever see his face. He was a great and famous writer, and all the world honored him; while I, hidden away in my castle on a rock on the edge of Muircarrie, was so far from being interesting or clever that even in my grandest evening dress and tiara of jewels I was as insignificant as a mouse. In fact, I always felt rather silly when I was obliged to wear my diamonds on state occasions as custom sometimes demanded.

Mr. MacNairn wrote essays and poems, and marvelous stories which were always real though they were called fiction. Wheresoever his story was placed--howsoever remote and unknown the scene--it was a real place, and the people who lived in it were real, as if he had some magic power to call up human things to breathe and live and set one's heart beating. I read everything he wrote. I read every word of his again and again. I

always kept some book of his near enough to be able to touch it with my hand; and often I sat by the fire in the library holding one open on my lap for an hour or more, only because it meant a warm, close companionship. It seemed at those times as if he sat near me in the dim glow and we understood each other's thoughts without using words, as Wee Brown Elspeth and I had understood--only this was a deeper thing.

I had felt near him in this way for several years, and every year he had grown more famous, when it happened that one June my guardian, Sir Ian, required me to go to London to see my lawyers and sign some important documents connected with the management of the estate. I was to go to his house to spend a week or more, attend a Drawing-Room, and show myself at a few great parties in a proper manner, this being considered my duty toward my relatives. These, I believe, were secretly afraid that if I were never seen their world would condemn my guardian for neglect of his charge, or would decide that I was of unsound mind and intentionally kept hidden away at Muircarrie. He was an honorable man, and his wife was a well-meaning woman. I did not wish to do them an injustice, so I paid them yearly visits and tried to behave as they wished, much as I disliked to be dressed in fine frocks and to wear diamonds on my little head and round my thin neck.

It was an odd thing that this time I found I did not dread the visit to London as much as I usually did. For some unknown reason I became conscious that I was not really reluctant to go. Usually the thought of the days before me made me restless and low-spirited. London always

seemed so confused and crowded, and made me feel as if I were being pushed and jostled by a mob always making a tiresome noise. But this time I felt as if I should somehow find a clear place to stand in, where I could look on and listen without being bewildered. It was a curious feeling; I could not help noticing and wondering about it.

I knew afterward that it came to me because a change was drawing near. I wish so much that I could tell about it in a better way. But I have only my own way, which I am afraid seems very like a school-girl's.

Jean Braidfute made the journey with me, as she always did, and it was like every other journey. Only one incident made it different, and when it occurred there seemed nothing unusual in it. It was only a bit of sad, everyday life which touched me. There is nothing new in seeing a poor woman in deep mourning.

Jean and I had been alone in our railway carriage for a great part of the journey; but an hour or two before we reached London a man got in and took a seat in a corner. The train had stopped at a place where there is a beautiful and well-known cemetery. People bring their friends from long distances to lay them there. When one passes the station, one nearly always sees sad faces and people in mourning on the platform.

There was more than one group there that day, and the man who sat in the corner looked out at them with gentle eyes. He had fine, deep eyes and a handsome mouth. When the poor woman in mourning almost stumbled into

the carriage, followed by her child, he put out his hand to help her and gave her his seat. She had stumbled because her eyes were dim with dreadful crying, and she could scarcely see. It made one's heart stand still to see the wild grief of her, and her unconsciousness of the world about her. The world did not matter. There was no world. I think there was nothing left anywhere but the grave she had just staggered blindly away from. I felt as if she had been lying sobbing and writhing and beating the new turf on it with her poor hands, and I somehow knew that it had been a child's grave she had been to visit and had felt she left to utter loneliness when she turned away.

It was because I thought this that I wished she had not seemed so unconscious of and indifferent to the child who was with her and clung to her black dress as if it could not bear to let her go. This one was alive at least, even if she had lost the other one, and its little face was so wistful! It did not seem fair to forget and ignore it, as if it were not there. I felt as if she might have left it behind on the platform if it had not so clung to her skirt that it was almost dragged into the railway carriage with her. When she sank into her seat she did not even lift the poor little thing into the place beside her, but left it to scramble up as best it could. She buried her swollen face in her handkerchief and sobbed in a smothered way as if she neither saw, heard, nor felt any living thing near her.

How I wished she would remember the poor child and let it comfort her! It really was trying to do it in its innocent way. It pressed close to

her side, it looked up imploringly, it kissed her arm and her crape veil over and over again, and tried to attract her attention. It was a little, lily-fair creature not more than five or six years old and perhaps too young to express what it wanted to say. It could only cling to her and kiss her black dress, and seem to beg her to remember that it, at least, was a living thing. But she was too absorbed in her anguish to know that it was in the world. She neither looked at nor touched it, and at last it sat with its cheek against her sleeve, softly stroking her arm, and now and then kissing it longingly. I was obliged to turn my face away and look out of the window, because I knew the man with the kind face saw the tears well up into my eyes.

The poor woman did not travel far with us. She left the train after a few stations were passed. Our fellow-traveler got out before her to help her on to the platform. He stood with bared head while he assisted her, but she scarcely saw him. And even then she seemed to forget the child. The poor thing was dragged out by her dress as it had been dragged in. I put out my hand involuntarily as it went through the door, because I was afraid it might fall. But it did not. It turned its fair little face and smiled at me. When the kind traveler returned to his place in the carriage again, and the train left the station, the black-draped woman was walking slowly down the platform and the child was still clinging to her skirt.