CHAPTER IV

My guardian was a man whose custom it was to give large and dignified parties. Among his grand and fashionable guests there was nearly always a sprinkling of the more important members of the literary world. The night after I arrived there was to be a particularly notable dinner. I had come prepared to appear at it. Jean had brought fine array for me and a case of jewels. I knew I must be "dressed up" and look as important as I could. When I went up-stairs after tea, Jean was in my room laying things out on the bed.

"The man you like so much is to dine here to-night, Ysobel," she said. "Mr. Hector MacNairn."

I believe I even put my hand suddenly to my heart as I stood and looked at her, I was so startled and so glad.

"You must tell him how much you love his books," she said. She had a quiet, motherly way.

"There will be so many other people who will want to talk to him," I answered, and I felt a little breathless with excitement as I said it.

"And I should be too shy to know how to say such things properly."

"Don't be afraid of him," was her advice. "The man will be like his

books, and they're the joy of your life."

She made me look as nice as she could in the new dress she had brought; she made me wear the Muircarrie diamonds and sent me downstairs. It does not matter who the guests were; I scarcely remember. I was taken in to dinner by a stately elderly man who tried to make me talk, and at last was absorbed by the clever woman on his other side.

I found myself looking between the flowers for a man's face I could imagine was Hector MacNairn's. I looked up and down and saw none I could believe belonged to him. There were handsome faces and individual ones, but at first I saw no Hector MacNairn. Then, on bending forward a little to glance behind an epergne, I found a face which it surprised and pleased me to see. It was the face of the traveler who had helped the woman in mourning out of the railway carriage, baring his head before her grief. I could not help turning and speaking to my stately elderly partner.

"Do you know who that is--the man at the other side of the table?" I asked.

Old Lord Armour looked across and answered with an amiable smile. "It is the author the world is talking of most in these days, and the talking is no new thing. It's Mr. Hector MacNairn."

No one but myself could tell how glad I was. It seemed so right that

he should be the man who had understood the deeps of a poor, passing stranger woman's woe. I had so loved that quiet baring of his head! All at once I knew I should not be afraid of him. He would understand that I could not help being shy, that it was only my nature, and that if I said things awkwardly my meanings were better than my words. Perhaps I should be able to tell him something of what his books had been to me. I glanced through the flowers again--and he was looking at me! I could scarcely believe it for a second. But he was. His eyes--his wonderful eyes--met mine. I could not explain why they were wonderful. I think it was the clearness and understanding in them, and a sort of great interestedness. People sometimes look at me from curiosity, but they do not look because they are really interested.

I could scarcely look away, though I knew I must not be guilty of staring. A footman was presenting a dish at my side. I took something from it without knowing what it was. Lord Armour began to talk kindly. He was saying beautiful, admiring things of Mr. MacNairn and his work. I listened gratefully, and said a few words myself now and then. I was only too glad to be told of the great people and the small ones who were moved and uplifted by his thoughts.

"You admire him very much, I can see," the amiable elderly voice said.

I could not help turning and looking up. "It is as if a great, great genius were one's friend--as if he talked and one listened," I said. "He is like a splendid dream which has come true."

Old Lord Armour looked at me quite thoughtfully, as if he saw something new in me.

"That is a good way of putting it, Miss Muircarrie," he answered. "MacNairn would like that. You must tell him about it yourself."

I did not mean to glance through the flowers again, but I did it involuntarily. And I met the other eyes--the wonderful, interested ones just as I had met them before. It almost seemed as if he had been watching me. It might be, I thought, because he only vaguely remembered seeing me before and was trying to recall where we had met.

When my guardian brought his men guests to the drawing-room after dinner, I was looking over some old prints at a quiet, small table. There were a few minutes of smiling talk, and then Sir Ian crossed the room toward me, bringing some one with him. It was Hector MacNairn he brought.

"Mr. MacNairn tells me you traveled together this afternoon without knowing each other," he said. "He has heard something of Muircarrie and would like to hear more, Ysobel. She lives like a little ghost all alone in her feudal castle, Mr. MacNairn. We can't persuade her to like London."

I think he left us alone together because he realized that we should get

on better without a companion.

Mr. MacNairn sat down near me and began to talk about Muircarrie. There were very few places like it, and he knew about each one of them. He knew the kind of things Angus Macayre knew--the things most people had either never heard of or had only thought of as legends. He talked as he wrote, and I scarcely knew when he led me into talking also. Afterward I realized that he had asked me questions I could not help answering because his eyes were drawing me on with that quiet, deep interest. It seemed as if he saw something in my face which made him curious.

I think I saw this expression first when we began to speak of our meeting in the railway carriage, and I mentioned the poor little fair child my heart had ached so for.

"It was such a little thing and it did so want to comfort her! Its white little clinging hands were so pathetic when they stroked and patted her," I said. "And she did not even look at it."

He did not start, but he hesitated in a way which almost produced the effect of a start. Long afterward I remembered it.

"The child!" he said. "Yes. But I was sitting on the other side. And I was so absorbed in the poor mother that I am afraid I scarcely saw it. Tell me about it."

"It was not six years old, poor mite," I answered. "It was one of those very fair children one sees now and then. It was not like its mother. She was not one of the White People."

"The White People?" he repeated quite slowly after me. "You don't mean that she was not a Caucasian? Perhaps I don't understand."

That made me feel a trifle shy again. Of course he could not know what I meant. How silly of me to take it for granted that he would!

"I beg pardon. I forgot," I even stammered a little. "It is only my way of thinking of those fair people one sees, those very fair ones, you know--the ones whose fairness looks almost transparent. There are not many of them, of course; but one can't help noticing them when they pass in the street or come into a room. You must have noticed them, too. I always call them, to myself, the White People, because they are different from the rest of us. The poor mother wasn't one, but the child was. Perhaps that was why I looked at it, at first. It was such a lovely little thing; and the whiteness made it look delicate, and I could not help thinking--" I hesitated, because it seemed almost unkind to finish.

"You thought that if she had just lost one child she ought to take more care of the other," he ended for me. There was a deep thoughtfulness in his look, as if he were watching me. I wondered why.

"I wish I had paid more attention to the little creature," he said, very

gently. "Did it cry?"

"No," I answered. "It only clung to her and patted her black sleeve and kissed it, as if it wanted to comfort her. I kept expecting it to cry, but it didn't. It made me cry because it seemed so sure that it could comfort her if she would only remember that it was alive and loved her. I wish, I wish death did not make people feel as if it filled all the world--as if, when it happens, there is no life left anywhere. The child who was alive by her side did not seem a living thing to her. It didn't matter."

I had never said as much to any one before, but his watching eyes made me forget my shy worldlessness.

"What do you feel about it--death?" he asked.

The low gentleness of his voice seemed something I had known always.

"I never saw it," I answered. "I have never even seen any one dangerously ill. I--It is as if I can't believe it."

"You can't believe it? That is a wonderful thing," he said, even more quietly than before.

"If none of us believed, how wonderful that would be! Beautiful, too."

"How that poor mother believed it!" I said, remembering her swollen, distorted, sobbing face. "She believed nothing else; everything else was gone."

"I wonder what would have happened if you had spoken to her about the child?" he said, slowly, as if he were trying to imagine it.

"I'm a very shy person. I should never have courage to speak to a stranger," I answered.

"I'm afraid I'm a coward, too. She might have thought me interfering."

"She might not have understood," he murmured.

"It was clinging to her dress when she walked away down the platform," I went on. "I dare say you noticed it then?"

"Not as you did. I wish I had noticed it more," was his answer. "Poor little White One!"

That led us into our talk about the White People. He said he did not think he was exactly an observant person in some respects. Remembering his books, which seemed to me the work of a man who saw and understood everything in the world, I could not comprehend his thinking that, and I told him so. But he replied that what I had said about my White People made him feel that he must be abstracted sometimes and miss things. He

did not remember having noticed the rare fairness I had seen. He smiled as he said it, because, of course, it was only a little thing--that he had not seen that some people were so much fairer than others.

"But it has not been a little thing to you, evidently. That is why I am even rather curious about it," he explained. "It is a difference definite enough to make you speak almost as if they were of a different race from ours."

I sat silent a few seconds, thinking it over. Suddenly I realized what I had never realized before.

"Do you know," I said, as slowly as he himself had spoken, "I did not know that was true until you put it into words. I am so used to thinking of them as different, somehow, that I suppose I do feel as if they were almost like another race, in a way. Perhaps one would feel like that with a native Indian, or a Japanese."

"I dare say that is a good simile," he reflected. "Are they different when you know them well?"

"I have never known one but Wee Brown Elspeth," I answered, thinking it over.

He did start then, in the strangest way.

"What!" he exclaimed. "What did you say?"

I was quite startled myself. Suddenly he looked pale, and his breath caught itself.

"I said Wee Elspeth, Wee Brown Elspeth. She was only a child who played with me," I stammered, "when I was little."

He pulled himself together almost instantly, though the color did not come back to his face at once and his voice was not steady for a few seconds. But he laughed outright at himself.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized. "I have been ill and am rather nervous. I thought you said something you could not possibly have said. I almost frightened you. And you were only speaking of a little playmate. Please go on."

"I was only going to say that she was fair like that, fairer than any one I had ever seen; but when we played together she seemed like any other child. She was the first I ever knew."

I told him about the misty day on the moor, and about the pale troopers and the big, lean leader who carried Elspeth before him on his saddle. I had never talked to any one about it before, not even to Jean Braidfute. But he seemed to be so interested, as if the little story quite fascinated him. It was only an episode, but it brought in the weirdness

of the moor and my childish fancies about the things hiding in the white mist, and the castle frowning on its rock, and my baby face pressed against the nursery window in the tower, and Angus and the library, and Jean and her goodness and wise ways. It was dreadful to talk so much about oneself. But he listened so. His eyes never left my face--they watched and held me as if he were enthralled. Sometimes he asked a question.

"I wonder who they were--the horsemen?" he pondered. "Did you ever ask Wee Elspeth?"

"We were both too little to care. We only played," I answered him. "And they came and went so quickly that they were only a sort of dream."

"They seem to have been a strange lot. Wasn't Angus curious about them?" he suggested.

"Angus never was curious about anything," I said. "Perhaps he knew something about them and would not tell me. When I was a little thing I always knew he and Jean had secrets I was too young to hear. They hid sad and ugly things from me, or things that might frighten a child. They were very good."

"Yes, they were good," he said, thoughtfully.

I think any one would have been pleased to find herself talking quietly

to a great genius--as quietly as if he were quite an ordinary person; but to me the experience was wonderful. I had thought about him so much and with such adoring reverence. And he looked at me as if he truly liked me, even as if I were something new--a sort of discovery which interested him. I dare say that he had never before seen a girl who had lived so much alone and in such a remote and wild place.

I believe Sir Ian and his wife were pleased, too, to see that I was talking. They were glad that their guests should see that I was intelligent enough to hold the attention even of a clever man. If Hector MacNairn was interested in me I could not be as silly and dull as I looked. But on my part I was only full of wonder and happiness. I was a girl, and he had been my only hero; and it seemed even as if he liked me and cared about my queer life.

He was not a man who had the air of making confidences or talking about himself, but before we parted I seemed to know him and his surroundings as if he had described them. A mere phrase of his would make a picture. Such a few words made his mother quite clear to me. They loved each other in an exquisite, intimate way. She was a beautiful person. Artists had always painted her. He and she were completely happy when they were together. They lived in a house in the country, and I could not at all tell how I discovered that it was an old house with beautiful chimneys and a very big garden with curious high walls with corner towers round it. He only spoke of it briefly, but I saw it as a picture; and always afterward, when I thought of his mother, I thought of her as sitting

under a great and ancient apple-tree with the long, late-afternoon shadows stretching on the thick, green grass. I suppose I saw that just because he said:

"Will you come to tea under the big apple-tree some afternoon when the late shadows are like velvet on the grass? That is perhaps the loveliest time."

When we rose to go and join the rest of the party, he stood a moment and glanced round the room at our fellow-guests.

"Are there any of your White People here to-night?" he said, smiling. "I shall begin to look for them everywhere."

I glanced over the faces carelessly. "There are none here to-night," I answered, and then I flushed because he had smiled. "It was only a childish name I gave them," I hesitated. "I forgot you wouldn't understand. I dare say it sounds silly."

He looked at me so quickly.

"No! no! no!" he exclaimed. "You mustn't think that! Certainly not silly."

I do not think he knew that he put out his hand and gently touched my arm, as one might touch a child to make it feel one wanted it to listen.

"You don't know," he said in his low, slow voice, "how glad I am that you have talked to me. Sir Ian said you were not fond of talking to people, and I wanted to know you."

"You care about places like Muircarrie. That is why," I answered, feeling at once how much he understood. "I care for Muircarrie more than for all the rest of the world. And I suppose you saw it in my face. I dare say that the people who love that kind of life cannot help seeing it there."

"Yes," he said, "it is in your eyes. It was what I saw and found myself wondering about when I watched you in the train. It was really the moor and the mist and the things you think are hidden in it."

"Did you watch me?" I asked. "I could not help watching you a little, when you were so kind to the poor woman. I was afraid you would see me and think me rude."

"It was the far look in your face I watched," he said. "If you will come to tea under the big apple-tree I will tell you more about it."

"Indeed I will come," I answered. "Now we must go and sit among the other people--those who don't care about Muircarrie at all."