CHAPTER V

I went to tea under the big apple-tree. It was very big and old and wonderful. No wonder Mr. MacNairn and his mother loved it. Its great branches spread out farther than I had ever seen the branches of an apple-tree spread before. They were gnarled and knotted and beautiful with age. Their shadows upon the grass were velvet, deep and soft. Such a tree could only have lived its life in such a garden. At least it seemed so to me. The high, dim-colored walls, with their curious, low corner towers and the leafage of the wall fruits spread against their brick, inclosed it embracingly, as if they were there to take care of it and its beauty. But the tree itself seemed to have grown there in all its dignified loveliness of shadow to take care of Mrs. MacNairn, who sat under it. I felt as if it loved and was proud of her.

I have heard clever literary people speak of Mrs. MacNairn as a "survival of type." Sometimes clever people bewilder me by the terms they use, but I thought I understood what they meant in her case. She was quite unlike the modern elderly woman, and yet she was not in the least old-fashioned or demodee. She was only exquisitely distinct.

When she rose from her chair under the apple-tree boughs and came forward to meet me that afternoon, the first things which struck me were her height and slenderness and her light step. Then I saw that her clear profile seemed cut out of ivory and that her head was a beautiful shape

and was beautifully set. Its every turn and movement was exquisite. The mere fact that both her long, ivory hands enfolded mine thrilled me. I wondered if it were possible that she could be unaware of her loveliness. Beautiful people are thrilling to me, and Mrs. MacNairn has always seemed more so than any one else. This is what her son once said of her:

"She is not merely beautiful; she is Beauty--Beauty's very spirit moving about among us mortals; pure Beauty."

She drew me to a chair under her tree, and we sat down together. I felt as if she were glad that I had come. The watching look I had seen in her son's eyes was in hers also. They watched me as we talked, and I found myself telling her about my home as I had found myself telling him. He had evidently talked to her about it himself. I had never met any one who thought of Muircarrie as I did, but it seemed as if they who were strangers were drawn by its wild, beautiful loneliness as I was.

I was happy. In my secret heart I began to ask myself if it could be true that they made me feel a little as if I somehow belonged to some one. I had always seemed so detached from every one. I had not been miserable about it, and I had not complained to myself; I only accepted the detachment as part of my kind of life.

Mr. MacNairn came into the garden later and several other people came in to tea. It was apparently a sort of daily custom--that people who

evidently adored Mrs. MacNairn dropped in to see and talk to her every afternoon. She talked wonderfully, and her friends' joy in her was wonderful, too. It evidently made people happy to be near her. All she said and did was like her light step and the movements of her delicate, fine head--gracious and soft and arrestingly lovely. She did not let me drift away and sit in a corner looking on, as I usually did among strangers. She kept me near her, and in some subtle, gentle way made me a part of all that was happening--the talk, the charming circle under the spreading boughs of the apple-tree, the charm of everything. Sometimes she would put out her exquisite, long-fingered hand and touch me very lightly, and each time she did it I felt as if she had given me new life.

There was an interesting elderly man who came among the rest of the guests. I was interested in him even before she spoke to me of him. He had a handsome, aquiline face which looked very clever. His talk was brilliantly witty. When he spoke people paused as if they could not bear to lose a phrase or even a word. But in the midst of the trills of laughter surrounding him his eyes were unchangingly sad. His face laughed or smiled, but his eyes never.

"He is the greatest artist in England and the most brilliant man," Mrs. MacNairn said to me, quietly. "But he is the saddest, too. He had a lovely daughter who was killed instantly, in his presence, by a fall. They had been inseparable companions and she was the delight of his life. That strange, fixed look has been in his eyes ever since. I know

you have noticed it."

We were walking about among the flower-beds after tea, and Mr. MacNairn was showing me a cloud of blue larkspurs in a corner when I saw something which made me turn toward him rather quickly.

"There is one!" I said. "Do look at her! Now you see what I mean! The girl standing with her hand on Mr. Le Breton's arm."

Mr. Le Breton was the brilliant man with the sad eyes. He was standing looking at a mass of white-and-purple iris at the other side of the garden. There were two or three people with him, but it seemed as if for a moment he had forgotten them--had forgotten where he was. I wondered suddenly if his daughter had been fond of irises. He was looking at them with such a tender, lost expression. The girl, who was a lovely, fair thing, was standing quite close to him with her hand in his arm, and she was smiling, too--such a smile!

"Mr. Le Breton!" Mr. MacNairn said in a rather startled tone. "The girl with her hand in his arm?"

"Yes. You see how fair she is," I answered.

"And she has that transparent look. It is so lovely. Don't you think so? SHE is one of the White People."

He stood very still, looking across the flowers at the group. There was a singular interest and intensity in his expression. He watched the pair silently for a whole minute, I think.

"Ye-es," he said, slowly, at last, "I do see what you mean--and it IS lovely. I don't seem to know her well. She must be a new friend of my mother's. So she is one of the White People?"

"She looks like a white iris herself, doesn't she?" I said. "Now you know."

"Yes; now I know," he answered.

I asked Mrs. MacNairn later who the girl was, but she didn't seem to recognize my description of her. Mr. Le Breton had gone away by that time, and so had the girl herself.

"The tall, very fair one in the misty, pale-gray dress," I said. "She was near Mr. Le Breton when he was looking at the iris-bed. You were cutting some roses only a few yards away from her. That VERY fair girl?"

Mrs. MacNairn paused a moment and looked puzzled.

"Mildred Keith is fair," she reflected, "but she was not there then. I don't recall seeing a girl. I was cutting some buds for Mrs. Anstruther. I--" She paused again and turned toward her son, who was standing

watching us. I saw their eyes meet in a rather arrested way.

"It was not Mildred Keith," he said. "Miss Muircarrie is inquiring because this girl was one of those she calls the White People. She was not any one I had seen here before."

There was a second's silence before Mrs. MacNairn smilingly gave me one of her light, thrilling touches on my arm.

"Ah! I remember," she said. "Hector told me about the White People. He rather fancied I might be one."

I am afraid I rather stared at her as I slowly shook my head. You see she was almost one, but not quite.

"I was so busy with my roses that I did not notice who was standing near Mr. Le Breton," she said. "Perhaps it was Anabel Mere. She is a more transparent sort of girl than Mildred, and she is more blond. And you don't know her, Hector? I dare say it was she."