

CHAPTER VI

I remained in London several weeks. I stayed because the MacNairns were so good to me. I could not have told any one how I loved Mrs. MacNairn, and how different everything seemed when I was with her. I was never shy when we were together. There seemed to be no such thing as shyness in the world. I was not shy with Mr. MacNairn, either. After I had sat under the big apple-tree boughs in the walled garden a few times I realized that I had begun to belong to somebody. Those two marvelous people cared for me in that way--in a way that made me feel as if I were a real girl, not merely a queer little awkward ghost in a far-away castle which nobody wanted to visit because it was so dull and desolate and far from London. They were so clever, and knew all the interesting things in the world, but their cleverness and experience never bewildered or overwhelmed me.

"You were born a wonderful little creature, and Angus Macayre has filled your mind with strange, rich furnishings and marvelous color and form," Mrs. MacNairn actually said to me one day when we were sitting together and she was holding my hand and softly, slowly patting it. She had a way of doing that, and she had also a way of keeping me very near her whenever she could. She said once that she liked to touch me now and then to make sure that I was quite real and would not melt away. I did not know then why she said it, but I understood afterward.

Sometimes we sat under the apple-tree until the long twilight deepened

into shadow, which closed round us, and a nightingale that lived in the garden began to sing. We all three loved the nightingale, and felt as though it knew that we were listening to it. It is a wonderful thing to sit quite still listening to a bird singing in the dark, and to dare to feel that while it sings it knows how your soul adores it. It is like a kind of worship.

We had been sitting listening for quite a long time, and the nightingale had just ceased and left the darkness an exquisite silence which fell suddenly but softly as the last note dropped, when Mrs. MacNairn began to talk for the first time of what she called The Fear.

I don't remember just how she began, and for a few minutes I did not quite understand what she meant. But as she went on, and Mr. MacNairn joined in the talk, their meaning became a clear thing to me, and I knew that they were only talking quite simply of something they had often talked of before. They were not as afraid of The Fear as most people are, because they had thought of and reasoned about it so much, and always calmly and with clear and open minds.

By The Fear they meant that mysterious horror most people feel at the thought of passing out of the world they know into the one they don't know at all.

How quiet, how still it was inside the walls of the old garden, as we three sat under the boughs and talked about it! And what sweet night

scents of leaves and sleeping flowers were in every breath we drew! And how one's heart moved and lifted when the nightingale broke out again!

"If one had seen or heard one little thing, if one's mortal being could catch one glimpse of light in the dark," Mrs. MacNairn's low voice said out of the shadow near me, "The Fear would be gone forever."

"Perhaps the whole mystery is as simple as this," said her son's voice "as simple as this: that as there are tones of music too fine to be registered by the human ear, so there may be vibrations of light not to be seen by the human eye; form and color as well as sounds; just beyond earthly perception, and yet as real as ourselves, as formed as ourselves, only existing in that other dimension."

There was an intenseness which was almost a note of anguish in Mrs. MacNairn's answer, even though her voice was very low. I involuntarily turned my head to look at her, though of course it was too dark to see her face. I felt somehow as if her hands were wrung together in her lap.

"Oh!" she said, "if one only had some shadow of a proof that the mystery is only that WE cannot see, that WE cannot hear, though they are really quite near us, with us--the ones who seem to have gone away and whom we feel we cannot live without. If once we could be sure! There would be no Fear--there would be none!"

"Dearest"--he often called her "Dearest," and his voice had a wonderful

sound in the darkness; it was caress and strength, and it seemed to speak to her of things they knew which I did not--"we have vowed to each other that we WILL believe there is no reason for The Fear. It was a vow between us."

"Yes! Yes!" she cried, breathlessly, "but sometimes, Hector--sometimes--"

"Miss Muircarrie does not feel it--"

"Please say 'Ysobel!'" I broke in. "Please do."

He went on as quietly as if he had not even paused:

"Ysobel told me the first night we met that it seemed as if she could not believe in it."

"It never seems real to me at all," I said. "Perhaps that is because I can never forget what Jean told me about my mother lying still upon her bed, and listening to some one calling her." (I had told them Jean's story a few days before.) "I knew it was my father; Jean knew, too."

"How did you know?" Mrs. MacNairn's voice was almost a whisper.

"I could not tell you that. I never asked myself HOW it was. But I KNEW. We both KNEW. Perhaps"--I hesitated--"it was because in the Highlands

people often believe things like that. One hears so many stories all one's life that in the end they don't seem strange. I have always heard them. Those things you know about people who have the second sight. And about the seals who change themselves into men and come on shore and fall in love with girls and marry them. They say they go away now and then, and no one really knows where but it is believed that they go back to their own people and change into seals again, because they must plunge and riot about in the sea. Sometimes they come home, but sometimes they do not.

"A beautiful young stranger, with soft, dark eyes, appeared once not far from Muircarrie, and he married a boatman's daughter. He was very restless one night, and got up and left her, and she never saw him again; but a few days later a splendid dead seal covered with wounds was washed up near his cottage. The fishers say that his people had wanted to keep him from his land wife, and they had fought with him and killed him. His wife had a son with strange, velvet eyes like his father's, and she couldn't keep him away from the water. When he was old enough to swim he swam out one day, because he thought he saw some seals and wanted to get near them. He swam out too far, perhaps. He never came back, and the fishermen said his father's people had taken him. When one has heard stories like that all one's life nothing seems very strange."

"Nothing really IS strange," said Hector MacNairn. "Again and again through all the ages we have been told the secrets of the gods and the wonders of the Law, and we have revered and echoed but never believed.

When we believe and know all is simple we shall not be afraid. You are not afraid, Ysobel. Tell my mother you are not."

I turned my face toward her again in the darkness. I felt as if something was going on between them which he somehow knew I could help them in. It was as though he were calling on something in my nature which I did not myself comprehend, but which his profound mind saw and knew was stronger than I was.

Suddenly I felt as if I might trust to him and to It, and that, without being troubled or anxious, I would just say the first thing which came into my mind, because it would be put there for me by some power which could dictate to me. I never felt younger or less clever than I did at that moment; I was only Ysobel Muircarrie, who knew almost nothing. But that did not seem to matter. It was such a simple, almost childish thing I told her. It was only about The Dream.