

CHAPTER VIII

What I feel sure I know by this time is that all the things we think happen by chance and accident are only part of the weaving of the scheme of life. When you begin to suspect this and to watch closely you also begin to see how trifles connect themselves with one another, and seem in the end to have led to a reason and a meaning, though we may not be clever enough to see it clearly. Nothing is an accident. We make everything happen ourselves: the wrong things because we do not know or care whether we are wrong or right, the right ones because we unconsciously or consciously choose the right even in the midst of our ignorance.

I dare say it sounds audacious for an ordinary girl to say such things in an ordinary way; but perhaps I have said them in spite of myself, because it is not a bad thing that they should be said by an every-day sort of person in simple words which other every-day people can understand. I am only expressing what has gradually grown into belief in my mind through reading with Angus ancient books and modern ones-- books about faiths and religions, books about philosophies and magics, books about what the world calls marvels, but which are not marvels at all, but only workings of the Law most people have not yet reasoned about or even accepted.

Angus had read and studied them all his life before he began to read

them with me, and we talked them over together sitting by the fire in the library, fascinated and staring at each other, I in one high-backed chair and he in another on the opposite side of the hearth. Angus is wonderful--wonderful! He KNOWS there is no such thing as chance. He KNOWS that we ourselves are the working of the Law--and that we ourselves could work what now are stupidly called "miracles" if we could only remember always what the Law is.

What I intended to say at first was merely that it was not by chance that I climbed to the shelf in the library that afternoon and pushed aside the books hiding the old manuscript which told the real story of Dark Malcolm of the Glen and Wee Brown Elspeth. It seemed like chance when it happened, but it was really the first step toward my finding out the strange, beautiful thing I knew soon afterward.

From the beginning of my friendship with the MacNairns I had hoped they would come and stay with me at Muircarrie. When they both seemed to feel such interest in all I told them of it, and not to mind its wild remoteness, I took courage and asked them if they would come to me. Most people are bored by the prospect of life in a feudal castle, howsoever picturesquely it is set in a place where there are no neighbors to count on. Its ancient stateliness is too dull. But the MacNairns were more allured by what Muircarrie offered than they were by other and more brilliant invitations. So when I went back to the castle I was only to be alone a week before they followed me.

Jean and Angus were quite happy in their quiet way when I told them who I was expecting. They knew how glad I was myself. Jean was full of silent pleasure as she arranged the rooms I had chosen for my guests, rooms which had the most sweeping view of the moor. Angus knew that Mr. MacNairn would love the library, and he hovered about consulting his catalogues and looking over his shelves, taking down volumes here and there, holding them tenderly in his long, bony old hand as he dipped into them. He made notes of the manuscripts and books he thought Mr. MacNairn would feel the deepest interest in. He loved his library with all his being, and I knew he looked forward to talking to a man who would care for it in the same way.

He had been going over one of the highest shelves one day and had left his step-ladder leaning against it when he went elsewhere. It was when I mounted the steps, as I often did when he left them, that I came upon the manuscript which related the old story of Dark Malcolm and his child. It had been pushed behind some volumes, and I took it out because it looked so old and yellow. And I opened at once at the page where the tale began.

At first I stood reading, and then I sat down on the broad top of the ladder and forgot everything. It was a savage history of ferocious hate and barbarous reprisals. It had been a feud waged between two clans for three generations. The story of Dark Malcolm and Ian Red Hand was only part of it, but it was a gruesome thing. Pages told of the bloody deeds they wrought on each other's houses. The one human passion of Dark

Malcolm's life was his love for his little daughter. She had brown eyes and brown hair, and those who most loved her called her Wee Brown Elspeth. Ian Red Hand was richer and more powerful than Malcolm of the Glen, and therefore could more easily work his cruel will. He knew well of Malcolm's worship of his child, and laid his plans to torture him through her. Dark Malcolm, coming back to his rude, small castle one night after a raid in which he had lost followers and weapons and strength, found that Wee Brown Elspeth had been carried away, and unspeakable taunts and threats left behind by Ian and his men. With unbound wounds, broken dirks and hacked swords, Dark Malcolm and the remnant of his troop of fighting clansmen rushed forth into the night.

"Neither men nor weapons have we to win her back," screamed Dark Malcolm, raving mad, "but we may die fighting to get near enough to her to drive dirk into her little breast and save her from worse."

They were a band of madmen in their black despair. How they tore through the black night; what unguarded weak spot they found in Ian's castle walls; how they fought their way through it, leaving their dead bodies in the path, none really ever knew. By what strange chance Dark Malcolm came upon Wee Brown Elspeth, craftily set to playing hide-and-seek with a child of Ian's so that she might not cry out and betray her presence; how, already wounded to his death, he caught at and drove his dirk into her child heart, the story only offers guesses at. But kill and save her he did, falling dead with her body held against his breast, her brown hair streaming over it. Not one living man went back to the small, rude

castle on the Glen--not one.

I sat and read and read until the room grew dark. When I stopped I found that Angus Macayre was standing in the dimness at the foot of the ladder. He looked up at me and I down at him. For a few moments we were both quite still.

"It is the tale of Ian Red Hand and Dark Malcolm you are reading?" he said, at last.

"And Wee Brown Elspeth, who was fought for and killed," I added, slowly.

Angus nodded his head with a sad face. "It was the only way for a father," he said. "A hound of hell was Ian. Such men were savage beasts in those days, not human."

I touched the manuscript with my hand questioningly. "Did this fall at the back there by accident," I asked, "or did you hide it?"

"I did," he answered. "It was no tale for a young thing to read. I have hidden many from you. You were always poking about in corners, Ysobel."

Then I sat and thought over past memories for a while and the shadows in the room deepened.

"Why," I said, laggingly, after the silence--"why did I call the child

who used to play with me 'Wee Brown Elspeth'?"

"It was your own fancy," was his reply. "I used to wonder myself; but I made up my mind that you had heard some of the maids talking and the name had caught your ear. That would be a child's way."

I put my forehead in my hands and thought again. So many years had passed! I had been little more than a baby; the whole thing seemed like a half-forgotten dream when I tried to recall it--but I seemed to dimly remember strange things.

"Who were the wild men who brought her to me first--that day on the moor?" I said. "I do remember they had pale, savage, exultant faces. And torn, stained clothes. And broken dirks and swords. But they were glad of something. Who were they?"

"I did not see them. The mist was too thick," he answered. "They were some wild hunters, perhaps."

"It gives me such a strange feeling to try to remember, Angus," I said, lifting my forehead from my hands.

"Don't try," he said. "Give me the manuscript and get down from the step-ladder. Come and look at the list of books I have made for Mr. MacNairn."

I did as he told me, but I felt as if I were walking in a dream. My mind seemed to have left my body and gone back to the day when I sat a little child on the moor and heard the dull sound of horses' feet and the jingling metal and the creak of leather coming nearer in the thick mist.

I felt as if Angus were in a queer, half-awake mood, too--as if two sets of thoughts were working at the same time in his mind: one his thoughts about Hector MacNairn and the books, the other some queer thoughts which went on in spite of him.

When I was going to leave the library and go up-stairs to dress for dinner he said a strange thing to me, and he said it slowly and in a heavy voice.

"There is a thing Jean and I have often talked of telling you," he said.

"We have not known what it was best to do. Times we have been troubled because we could not make up our minds. This Mr. Hector MacNairn is no common man. He is one who is great and wise enough to decide things plain people could not be sure of. Jean and I are glad indeed that he and his mother are coming. Jean can talk to her and I can talk to him, being a man body. They will tell us whether we have been right or wrong and what we must do."

"They are wise enough to tell you anything," I answered. "It sounds as if you and Jean had known some big secret all my life. But I am not

frightened. You two would go to your graves hiding it if it would hurt me."

"Eh, bairn!" he said, suddenly, in a queer, moved way. "Eh, bairn!" And he took hold of both my hands and kissed them, pressing them quite long and emotionally to his lips. But he said nothing else, and when he dropped them I went out of the room.