CHAPTER IX

It was wonderful when Mr. MacNairn and his mother came. It was even more beautiful than I had thought it would be. They arrived late in the afternoon, and when I took them out upon the terrace the sun was reddening the moor, and even the rough, gray towers of the castle were stained rose-color. There was that lovely evening sound of birds twittering before they went to sleep in the ivy. The glimpses of gardens below seemed like glimpses of rich tapestries set with jewels. And there was such stillness! When we drew our three chairs in a little group together and looked out on it all, I felt as if we were almost in heaven.

"Yes! yes!" Hector said, looking slowly--round; "it is all here."

"Yes," his mother added, in her lovely, lovely voice. "It is what made you Ysobel."

It was so angelic of them to feel it all in that deep, quiet way, and to think that it was part of me and I a part of it. The climbing moon was trembling with beauty. Tender evening airs quivered in the heather and fern, and the late birds called like spirits.

Ever since the night when Mrs. MacNairn had held me in her arms under the apple-tree while the nightingale sang I had felt toward her son as if he were an archangel walking on the earth. Perhaps my thoughts were

exaggerated, but it seemed so marvelous that he should be moving among us, doing his work, seeing and talking to his friends, and yet that he should know that at any moment the great change might come and he might awaken somewhere else, in quite another place. If he had been like other men and I had been like other girls, I suppose that after that night when I heard the truth I should have been plunged into the darkest woe and have almost sobbed myself to death. Why did I not? I do not know except--except that I felt that no darkness could come between us because no darkness could touch him. He could never be anything but alive alive. If I could not see him it would only be because my eyes were not clear and strong enough. I seemed to be waiting for something. I wanted to keep near him.

I was full of this feeling as we sat together on the terrace and watched the moon. I could scarcely look away from him. He was rather pale that evening, but there seemed to be a light behind his pallor, and his eyes seemed to see so much more than the purple and yellow of the heather and gorse as they rested on them.

After I had watched him silently for a little while I leaned forward and pointed to a part of the moor where there was an unbroken blaze of gorse in full bloom like a big patch of gold.

"That is where I was sitting when Wee Brown Elspeth was first brought to me," I said.

He sat upright and looked. "Is it?" he answered. "Will you take me there to-morrow? I have always wanted to see the place."

"Would you like to go early in the morning? The mist is more likely to be there then, as it was that day. It is so mysterious and beautiful. Would you like to do that?" I asked him.

"Better than anything else!" he said. "Yes, let us go in the morning."

"Wee Brown Elspeth seems very near me this evening," I said. "I feel as if--" I broke off and began again. "I have a puzzled feeling about her. This afternoon I found some manuscript pushed behind a book on a high shelf in the library. Angus said he had hidden it there because it was a savage story he did not wish me to read. It was the history of the feud between Ian Red Hand and Dark Malcolm of the Glen. Dark Malcolm's child was called Wee Brown Elspeth hundreds of years ago--five hundred, I think. It makes me feel so bewildered when I remember the one I played with."

"It was a bloody story," he said. "I heard it only a few days before we met at Sir Ian's house in London."

That made me recall something.

"Was that why you started when I told you about Elspeth?" I asked.

"Yes. Perhaps the one you played with was a little descendant who had inherited her name," he answered, a trifle hurriedly. "I confess I was startled for a moment."

I put my hand up to my forehead and rubbed it unconsciously. I could not help seeing a woesome picture.

"Poor little soul, with the blood pouring from her heart and her brown hair spread over her dead father's breast!" I stopped, because a faint memory came back to me. "Mine," I stammered--"mine--how strange!--had a great stain on the embroideries of her dress. She looked at it--and looked. She looked as if she didn't like it--as if she didn't understand how it came there. She covered it with ferns and bluebells."

I felt as if I were being drawn away into a dream. I made a sudden effort to come back. I ceased rubbing my forehead and dropped my hand, sitting upright.

"I must ask Angus and Jean to tell me about her," I said. "Of course, they must have known. I wonder why I never thought of asking questions before."

It was a strange look I met when I involuntarily turned toward him--such an absorbed, strange, tender look!

I knew he sat quite late in the library that night, talking to Angus

after his mother and I went to our rooms. Just as I was falling asleep I remember there floated through my mind a vague recollection of what Angus had said to me of asking his advice about something; and I wondered if he would reach the subject in their talk, or if they would spend all their time in poring over manuscripts and books together.

The moor wore its most mysterious look when I got up in the early morning. It had hidden itself in its softest snows of white, swathing mist. Only here and there dark fir-trees showed themselves above it, and now and then the whiteness thinned or broke and drifted. It was as I had wanted him to see it--just as I had wanted to walk through it with him.

We had met in the hall as we had planned, and, wrapped in our plaids because the early morning air was cold, we tramped away together. No one but myself could ever realize what it was like. I had never known that there could be such a feeling of companionship in the world. It would not have been necessary for us to talk at all if we had felt silent. We should have been saying things to each other without words. But we did talk as we walked--in quiet voices which seemed made quieter by the mist, and of quiet things which such voices seemed to belong to.

We crossed the park to a stile in a hedge where a path led at once on to the moor. Part of the park itself had once been moorland, and was dark with slender firs and thick grown with heather and broom. On the moor the mist grew thicker, and if I had not so well known the path we might have lost ourselves in it. Also I knew by heart certain little streams

that rushed and made guiding sounds which were sometimes loud whispers and sometimes singing babbles. The damp, sweet scent of fern and heather was in our nostrils; as we climbed we breathed its freshness.

"There is a sort of unearthly loveliness in it all," Hector MacNairn said to me. His voice was rather like his mother's. It always seemed to say so much more than his words.

"We might be ghosts," I answered. "We might be some of those the mist hides because they like to be hidden."

"You would not be afraid if you met one of them?" he said.

"No. I think I am sure of that. I should feel that it was only like myself, and, if I could hear, might tell me things I want to know."

"What do you want to know?" he asked me, very low. "You!"

"Only what everybody wants to know--that it is really AWAKENING free, ready for wonderful new things, finding oneself in the midst of wonders. I don't mean angels with harps and crowns, but beauty such as we see now; only seeing it without burdens of fears before and behind us. And knowing there is no reason to be afraid. We have all been so afraid. We don't know how afraid we have been--of everything."

I stopped among the heather and threw my arms out wide. I drew in a

great, joyous morning breath.

"Free like that! It is the freeness, the light, splendid freeness, I think of most."

"The freeness!" he repeated. "Yes, the freeness!"

"As for beauty," I almost whispered, in a sort of reverence for visions I remembered, "I have stood on this moor a thousand times and seen loveliness which made me tremble. One's soul could want no more in any life. But 'Out on the Hillside' I KNEW I was part of it, and it was ecstasy. That was the freeness."

"Yes--it was the freeness," he answered.

We brushed through the heather and the bracken, and flower-bells shook showers of radiant drops upon us. The mist wavered and sometimes lifted before us, and opened up mystic vistas to veil them again a few minutes later. The sun tried to break through, and sometimes we walked in a golden haze.

We fell into silence. Now and then I glanced sidewise at my companion as we made our soundless way over the thick moss. He looked so strong and beautiful. His tall body was so fine, his shoulders so broad and splendid! How could it be! How could it be! As he tramped beside me he was thinking deeply, and he knew he need not talk to me. That made me

glad--that he should know me so well and feel me so near. That was what he felt when he was with his mother, that she understood and that at times neither of them needed words.

Until we had reached the patch of gorse where we intended to end our walk we did not speak at all. He was thinking of things which led him far. I knew that, though I did not know what they were. When we reached the golden blaze we had seen the evening before it was a flame of gold again, because--it was only for a few moments--the mist had blown apart and the sun was shining on it.

As we stood in the midst of it together--Oh! how strange and beautiful it was!--Mr. MacNairn came back. That was what it seemed to me--that he came back. He stood quite still a moment and looked about him, and then he stretched out his arms as I had stretched out mine. But he did it slowly, and a light came into his face.

"If, after it was over, a man awakened as you said and found himself--the self he knew, but light, free, splendid--remembering all the ages of dark, unknowing dread, of horror of some black, aimless plunge, and suddenly seeing all the childish uselessness of it--how he would stand and smile! How he would stand and SMILE!"

Never had I understood anything more clearly than I understood then. Yes, yes! That would be it. Remembering all the waste of fear, how he would stand and SMILE!

He was smiling himself, the golden gorse about him already losing its flame in the light returning mist-wraiths closing again over it, when I heard a sound far away and high up the moor. It sounded like the playing of a piper. He did not seem to notice it.

"We shall be shut in again," he said. "How mysterious it is, this opening and closing! I like it more than anything else. Let us sit down, Ysobel."

He spread the plaid we had brought to sit on, and laid on it the little strapped basket Jean had made ready for us. He shook the mist drops from our own plaids, and as I was about to sit down I stopped a moment to listen.

"That is a tune I never heard on the pipes before," I said. "What is a piper doing out on the moor so early?"

He listened also. "It must be far away. I don't hear it," he said. "Perhaps it is a bird whistling."

"It is far away," I answered, "but it is not a bird. It's the pipes, and playing such a strange tune. There! It has stopped!"

But it was not silent long; I heard the tune begin again much nearer, and the piper was plainly coming toward us. I turned my head.

The mist was clearing, and floated about like a thin veil through which one could see objects. At a short distance above us on the moor I saw something moving. It was a man who was playing the pipes. It was the piper, and almost at once I knew him, because it was actually my own Feargus, stepping proudly through the heather with his step like a stag on the hills. His head was held high, and his face had a sort of elated delight in it as if he were enjoying himself and the morning and the music in a new way. I was so surprised that I rose to my feet and called to him.

"Feargus!" I cried. "What--"

I knew he heard me, because he turned and looked at me with the most extraordinary smile. He was usually a rather grave-faced man, but this smile had a kind of startling triumph in it. He certainly heard me, for he whipped off his bonnet in a salute which was as triumphant as the smile. But he did not answer, and actually passed in and out of sight in the mist.

When I rose Mr. MacNairn had risen, too. When I turned to speak in my surprise, he had fixed on me his watchful look.

"Imagine its being Feargus at this hour!" I exclaimed. "And why did he pass by in such a hurry without answering? He must have been to a wedding and have been up all night. He looked--" I stopped a second and

laughed.

"How did he look?" Mr. MacNairn asked.

"Pale! That won't do--though he certainly didn't look ill." I laughed again. "I'm laughing because he looked almost like one of the White People."

"Are you sure it was Feargus?" he said.

"Quite sure. No one else is the least like Feargus. Didn't you see him yourself?"

"I don't know him as well as you do; and there was the mist," was his answer. "But he certainly was not one of the White People when I saw him last night."

I wondered why he looked as he did when he took my hand and drew me down
to my place on the plaid again. He did not let it go when he sat down by my side. He held it in his own large, handsome one, looking down on it a moment or so; and then he bent his head and kissed it long and slowly two or three times.

"Dear little Ysobel!" he said. "Beloved, strange little Ysobel."

"Am I strange!" I said, softly.

"Yes, thank God!" he answered.

I had known that some day when we were at Muircarrie together he would tell me what his mother had told me--about what we three might have been to one another. I trembled with happiness at the thought of hearing him say it himself. I knew he was going to say it now.

He held my hand and stroked it. "My mother told you, Ysobel--what I am waiting for?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do you know I love you?" he said, very low.

"Yes. I love you, too. My whole life would have been heaven if we could always have been together," was my answer.

He drew me up into his arms so that my cheek lay against his breast as I went on, holding fast to the rough tweed of his jacket and whispering: "I should have belonged to you two, heart and body and soul. I should never have been lonely again. I should have known nothing, whatsoever happened, but tender joy."

"Whatsoever happened?" he murmured.

"Whatsoever happens now, Ysobel, know nothing but tender joy. I think you CAN. 'Out on the Hillside!' Let us remember."

"Yes, yes," I said; "'Out on the Hillside.'" And our two faces, damp with the sweet mist, were pressed together.