

CHAPTER X

MARK liked the school to which he returned at the beginning of the term. The boys were friendly, the masters interested in him. He threw himself into his studies and games. He was good at football. He watched the mails eagerly for an answer to the letter he had written to Captain Rendel. He had written :

“DEAR FATHER,

I am writing, to say that I think I should go home now instead of waiting till spring. I think you will agree that I ought to go now there is war. You know I am not just a child now. I shall be fourteen in a few weeks. I think my place is at home. It has been a great experience for me to live in America, but I do want to go home now. I hope you will agree that I ought to go home.

Lots of love to Mummie and Nanny,

Your loving son,

MARK.”

About the time this arrived in England the Wyldes had a letter from Palmer. He wrote :

“DEAR MOM AND DAD,

I guess you've heard there's a war on. Anything you don't know about it over there I'll tell you. I guess it's going to be a big one. Captain Rendel thinks I'll be perfectly safe here till my time is up. Then I'll come home with bells on, you can bet. You can depend on me. I'll send you the right news. Don't believe everything the papers say.

Love to all the folks at home,

PALMER.

P.S.—I guess you'd die laughing if you could see me in my Eton pants and coat and high hat. I'd make a dog laugh.”

Captain Rendel's reply to Mark's letter was disappointing. There was no reason, he wrote, why the period of Mark's stay in America should be shortened. He appreciated Mark's feelings but he thought it would be foolish to disarrange the plans which had been so carefully made. He had enough on his mind without the addition of any new arrangements.

The letter was disappointing but not so much so as it would have been a few weeks earlier. Mark was swept along by the activities of the school. He resigned himself to wait cheerfully for the time when he could return to England. He was growing fast. The clothes he had brought with him were becoming short in the leg and arm. Fortunately, the tailor had made them with deep hems. As his body developed his mind became subject to moods of depression that sometimes reached the border of fear. These were mostly at night, when he would wake from troubling dreams. These dreams were not of war but they were full of vague and tormenting shapes. They were chaotic. He could have found no words for describing them.

In October the *Royal Oak* was sunk at Scapa Flow. An uncle of Mark's, his mother's brother, was among the officers lost. He was a young man of thirty and Mark's favourite uncle. Camilla thought the boy showed more sorrow in this loss than was natural for one so young. And, after it, his dreams became even more troubling. He would get up in the night and sit by the open window of his cubicle, till the cold air chilled and calmed him.

He shrank from the week-end in Boston because

Gideon Greene was almost always there. He would escape by taking Honey-Lou to the cinema. But at the dinner-table he had to listen to Greene's talk and he was always talking. He had written an article for a magazine on the attitude of the Harvard Undergraduate to the war, and the praise or blame he had had for that was the subject of many monologues on his part. Camilla and Janet were proud of Gideon's leap into public notice. Robert bore with him patiently, but Mark felt for him a helpless hatred.

He suffered from what, to him, was the overheating of school and home. He would run down the steep slippery streets of Beacon Hill to the river and stand, facing the raw November wind and the icy water, till he was refreshed. After one of these Sundays he developed a severe cold and was kept in bed for a fortnight. The doctor discovered that he had enlarged tonsils.

Camilla nursed him herself. She even welcomed the illness because it gave her the opportunity to draw nearer to him. His coughing kept her awake and she was in and out of his room several times each night. The weather had turned bitterly cold. Robert was worried about her but she insisted on caring for Mark without help.

She was rewarded by the look Mark gave her when she came into the room. She was touched, too, by his solicitude for her. Palmer had accepted her ministrations with the unquestioning egoism of childhood, never noticing whether or not she looked tired, but Mark often said, — “ You shouldn’t be waiting on me like this. Perhaps you’ll take the cold from me.”

She laughed at the idea. She did take the cold, but she was able to keep up. She would sit by his bed and play games with him and they would cough in turn.

When he was convalescent she said to him :

“ Now, Mark, I’ve something nice to propose. How would you like to go to Palm Beach for a couple of weeks? We’d go together and get back the strength we’ve lost. We’d lie on the sand in the sun and watch the waves and have a perfectly lovely time.”

His eyes lighted. “ That would be splendid. When can we go ? ”

“ Next week. I have a particular reason for taking you. The doctor says your tonsils must come out and we think you ought to get built up first.”

His expression changed to one of defence.

“ I’m sorry,” he said, “ but I won’t have my

tonsils out. My mother wouldn't want that done to me."

That pulse in Camilla's throat began to throb. She demanded sharply :

"Will you tell me why?"

"She doesn't believe in the operation. She says they grow again. One of her brothers — the one who went down in the *Royal Oak* — had his tonsils out. And they grew again and were worse than ever. She says she'll never let that be done to one of her children."

"What perfect nonsense!"

"That's what she thinks," he returned stubbornly. "You can write and ask her."

Camilla spoke in a reasoning tone, — "That's an isolated case, Mark. There is not one chance in a thousand it would happen to you."

"My mother's tonsils," he went on, "used to bother her when she was a girl but they quite got over it. She gargled every day with salt and water and cured them. It will be the same with me, if I can remember to gargle with salt and water. I'm very like my mother."

"Like *her*!" exclaimed Camilla. "Why, Mark, you're not a scrap like her!"

“ Oh, I know I don't look like her. But my nature is like hers. The same things make us ill and the same things cure us. She often says so. It's different with Humphrey. He looks like her but his nature is like one of her brothers — the one who is an officer in the *Hood*.”

“ You're such a sensible boy, Mark,” said Camilla gently, “ I just can't bear to hear you being plain silly. And it's terribly silly to say that salt and water will cure your tonsils when the best doctor in Boston says they've *got* to come out. He says you'll never have a perfectly well day till they do.”

“ Does he ? ” Mark looked interested.

“ So do be sensible ! Just think — there's no reason for us to go to Palm Beach, if you won't have the operation ! It would be a pity not to go to Palm Beach, wouldn't it ? ”

“ I shan't mind.”

She fixed her eyes on his. “ Do you know what I think ? I think you're *afraid* ! Afraid of a little operation like that ! ”

He was unperturbed. He said, — “ Yes, I am. And so is my mother. She hates fussing of all sorts. She says there is nothing as good for children as a little wholesome neglect.”

He sat looking at Camilla, his head resting on the back of the chair, his lips parted. She could see the two teeth that needed straightening. She had a feeling of angry impotence. He was her child, yet always Phyllis Rendel stood between them.

"You talk," she said, "of fighting for England. You'd make a poor sort of soldier or sailor if those tonsils aren't removed."

She rose. "I think you are behaving very badly, Mark. I'm disappointed in you." She left the room.

She went downstairs and found Robert taking off his overcoat in the hall. He kissed her and they went into the living-room.

"How's Mark?" he asked.

"I'm in despair with him!" she broke out. "He's as stubborn as a mule. He refuses to have his tonsils out because his *mother* doesn't approve of the operation. It's maddening to have that woman's opinion continually thrown in my teeth. Oh, why didn't I get hold of him before he was so set in his ways! How could fate have played such a horrible trick on me! Do you know, Robert, there are moments when I positively hate Mark. Isn't it horrible? But I just can't help it. And I believe he hates me too. After all I've done to win his love!"

Robert's quiet voice was steady to her.

"Nonsense, Camilla. Neither of you hates the other. It's just that you're not accustomed to open opposition, and Mark resents orders from any but his parents."

"His parents!"

"Yes. Custom is stronger than nature any time. Palmer is more my boy than Mark is. He's more your boy than Mark is. I never wanted this experiment. In my opinion it's a failure and the sooner we put an end to it the better pleased I'll be. I like Mark. I admire him. But I don't feel near to him."

"You haven't the time to study him."

"Has your study of him helped you?"

She broke out, — "Oh, I wish I could have them both! That would be the perfect solution."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. Now about those tonsils. I think I'd better cable Captain Rendel."

Camilla agreed and the cable was sent off. It was a fortnight before they received a reply. It was :

"Think operation had better be postponed till Mark's return to England. RENDEL."

"Just what I expected!" exclaimed Camilla.
"And to think he might have had it done here, under

the most perfect conditions ! It's nothing short of criminal."

"He seems perfectly well now."

"You ought to hear him breathe at night. He sounds all choked up."

"Well, we can't do anything about it. Have you decided if you're going to take him to Florida?"

"I am certainly not. He'll find my will is as strong as his."

Mark regained his usual health but did not return to school till after the Christmas holidays. He felt much happier but, when Camilla came into the room, he had a way of slipping out. Christmas in Boston was good fun, he thought. He and Honey-Lou followed the carol-singers through the snowy streets of Beacon Hill, where lighted candles were in all the windows and doors stood open, inviting them to enter and have cake and coffee.

Back at school in January he thought, — "Just a few months more and I shall be leaving for home." He crossed off each day on a calendar. He read and re-read the letters from England till he knew them almost by heart.