CHAPTER XI

PALMER was standing in front of a pier-glass in a room conveniently across the passage from his own. He had on his Eton suit and had now adjusted the stiff snow-white collar and neat tie. His black boots were glossy but they were dull as compared with the gloss on his top-hat. He placed it on his smooth fair head at half a dozen angles and at last found one that achieved the very zenith of jauntiness and *savoir faire*. He stared at his reflection in a curious mixture of pride and derision.

He stood immobile for a space, taking in every detail of his outfit. Then he backed away from the pier-glass and returned, as though to greet his own reflection. He raised his hand to the brim of his hat and saluted. He repeated this ceremony, only varying it this time by touching his hat in an off-hand manner. Next time he ceremoniously raised the hat. Next he gave the Nazi salute. Then he bowed deeply with one hand on his stomach.

"Polly voo Francie?" he asked of his reflection.

Finally he tilted the hat over his eyes and thrust his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. He stuck out his jaw.

He adjured his reflection, — "Come on, sling out the dough! You sure look as though you had lots of it."

Mrs. Maltby came into the room. She began to gather up the many sheets of tissue paper in which his clothes had been wrapped. She said:

"You're to go downstairs and show yourself. My word, you do look smart! Mind you don't get a spot on that suit and, when you get to school, don't go hanging that hat on the floor the way Mr. Clive does." The look of wonder with which she sometimes regarded him came over her face. "Well, well," she muttered, "it passes everything."

Palmer entered the sitting-room with composure, though his colour was a little heightened. He could not believe that he would not be laughed at. But he was given a look of approval by Dick Rendel, who exclaimed at once:

"A jolly good fit! You'll do, Palmer. But a junior mustn t wear his hat at that angle. Show him, Clive."

Clive sprang up and set the hat properly on Palmer's head. He gave his tie a tweak.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"O.K. Will I be seeing you sometimes at Eton?"

Clive looked dubious. "Not very often. But I'll put you on to the ropes. Don't worry."

"Gee, I never worry," said Palmer.

Humphrey came jauntily into the room. He had left his preparatory school and was that day entering Dartmouth College. In his naval uniform he was the pride of Mrs. Maltby's heart. But Phyllis saw him with a stab at her heart, remembering her brother at Humphrey's age. She sat, her long legs extended, smoking a cigarette. There was a remote look in her eyes.

"Look at Palmer!" exclaimed Humphrey jocularly.

"What's the matter with me?" asked Palmer truculently.

"Everything. Who'd want to go to Eton?"

"Don't be a little ass," said Clive. Dick regarded the three tolerantly. Turning to Phyllis he said,—"A pretty good-looking trio, eh?"

Through the smoke of her cigarette she gave him a glance that had something faintly hostile in it. During

the past months he had been conscious of her withdrawing from him. He knew the reason for it. But what else could he have done? he often asked himself. He could scarcely have refused to take his part in the experiment. It had been right and just that Mark and Palmer should see something of the parents who had given them birth, that those parents should establish some sort of bond with them. Phyllis certainly had not done her share in making Palmer one of the family. On the contrary, she had somehow withdrawn from Clive and Humphrey. She was less affectionate in her manner, as though she felt resentment toward them all for Palmer's intrusion into their midst. When Mark's letters came she would read them without comment, fold them up and put them away. She never showed Dick the letters she wrote to Mark. Always she had wanted a life without complications. She came of a family of loyal but tempered affections and a tradition of duty. Now she faced undreamed-of complications and could not tell where her duty lay. The loyal strain in her clung stubbornly to Mark.

Palmer was infinitely happier at Eton than he had been at Mr. Cutler's For one thing, he was not nearly so hard-worked. He felt no gratitude to Mr.

Cutler for the way he had slaved over him, just a bounding relief to be away from that house, away from the sight of Ames.

He liked his little room beneath the sloping roof that almost touched the floor, the great beam that cut it in half. He was fortunate in being in the house of a master of good private means so that the boys were well fed. But Palmer found the hours of meals trying. Sometimes he got indigestion. The distance between breakfast and the two o'clock lunch was too great, the buns offered at eleven not to his taste. He would fill up on the various things that attracted him in the shops. He could be seen trotting into Baldwin's End carrying paper bags and up to his room where the feast was laid. Camilla never wrote to him without enclosing an order for a small sum of money. Other boys discovered his affluence and he found himself popular. His vocabulary too was an asset. Even Ellis-Carter, the boy he fagged for, was interested in it and began a dictionary of Americanisms which he hoped to find useful later on when he went into the Diplomatic Service.

But the only real friend Palmer made was a boy named Tramenter. He was a thin, high-spirited boy who was constantly in trouble. But punishment had

no effect on him. He was heir to a title but not much else, yet somehow he always got on. He and Palmer would sit in the refreshment-room of The Cockpit or Tull's, eating Banana Mess in large quantities and making plans for illicit activities. Tramenter had a passion for dormice and white rats, which he kept hidden in his room in nests varying from an old top-hat to a corner in his chest of drawers. He and Palmer took them for walks, in their pockets. They burnt incense and sprinkled cologne in Tramenter's room to kill their odour.

Camilla had striven to make Palmer fastidious in his habits but now he threw his belongings about as he chose. It would have been hard to say which room, his or Tramenter's, was untidiest. Their drawers stood half open, vomiting out their underwear. Their trousers lay on the floor just where they had slipped out of them. Their top-hats were flung into a corner.

Camilla wrote careful letters to Palmer about the history of Eton. She directed him to see certain places in the ancient buildings and to write his impressions of them. This was a great fag for Palmer but he obediently did what he could about it. He even found where Shelley's name was carved and reported to her

that he had been much impressed by it. He wandered, a small slim figure, among the pillared antiquities of the past. He stared up, in wonder, at the youthful figure of Henry the Sixth, Eton's founder, who, sceptre in hand, showed his fine robes and aquiline profile against the autumn sky. On Sunday morning he would crowd with other small boys into the Chapel and, when the service was over, select his hat from the hundreds piled in the ante-chapel and hasten with Tramenter past its buttresses across the dim street that smelt of fallen leaves, to their tea.

Palmer saw little of Clive after the first fortnight, when Clive did his best to warn him of the things he must and must not do. So much freedom, combined with so many incomprehensible rules and customs! Sometimes Palmer was confused but he doggedly did his best to understand. Many of the rules Clive could not explain the reason for. They had been made so long ago that no one remembered their origin.

He learned that on only one side of the street was it permissible for him to walk, that he must not turn down the collar of his greatcoat or roll his umbrella, or be seen eating the smallest sweet in the street. He never tired of exploring the old streets. He was

glad when Ellis-Carter sent him on an errand to Windsor. He liked the great bulk of the Castle, rising on its hill, sentries guarding its gates.

Tramenter was frequently caned, for various good reasons. Though he groaned a good deal when he got back to his room, he did not really much mind. In truth, he despised the Upper boy who gave him a light caning.

"The beating Pierce gave me," he explained, "was so absolutely piffling that he himself was ashamed and came to me afterward and apologized for it."

Palmer had several narrow escapes, then a day came when he was discovered to be ringleader in a minor but noisy disturbance.

"You'll get tanned, as sure as your name is Wylde!" said Tramenter, in sympathy mingled with pleasure that Palmer's turn had come.

Palmer was no coward but the formality of the Eton system intimidated him. All day he felt a sinking in the stomach. What he dreaded happened. The Library fag — a plump, smug little fellow — tapped on the door. Palmer opened it tremblingly. Yes, he was summoned! His hour had struck.

"Better put on something extra," said Tramenter.

But Palmer was too excited to take the time.

Better hurry and have it over with. On the way downstairs he kept muttering, — " Oh, Mom, I wish I was out of here ! " And, outside the door of the Library, he added, — " Hey, Boss, send me a magic carpet or something ! I wanta go home." He stood with his heart thumping, but no magic came to his aid. He went in.

Erskine, the Captain of the House, was waiting. He put a few pointed questions which Palmer answered in a small husky voice. Out of the corner of his eye he saw other members of the Library sitting about reading. Clive was among them but no one took any notice of Palmer. No one looked up when he was condemned and told to go outside and wait.

A draught swept down the passage. A window was open and he could hear the hoarse whistle of a boat on the river. He could hear, too, furniture being moved inside the Library and the swish of a cane as the Captain tested its suppleness. The readers were no longer engrossed but were helping Erskine in the selection. But, when Palmer again entered, their eyes were fixed on their books.

" Shut the door," ordered Erskine.

Palmer closed it.

" Now bend over. Touch your toes."

Palmer tried to bend but he suddenly felt old and stiff.

" Lower," said Erskine.

He managed to touch his toes. Now all eyes were on him. Whew, how it hurt ! The cane cut the air. His legs felt rigid as pokers. His buttocks on fire. Now everyone in the room was giving him rapt attention.

" Enough," said Erskine.

Palmer straightened himself. Again the readers were buried in their books, as though they had seen nothing.

" Good night," said Erskine politely.

" Good night," added all the others, looking rather surprised to find Palmer there.

" Good night," he got out huskily. He ran up the stairs.

Along the passage the doors opened and boys' heads were stuck out. "How many?" they demanded.

Palmer added three to the number of strokes. Tramenter was waiting for him in his room. He had brought all his dormice and his best white rat to comfort him. Palmer cast his troubles behind him.

The term slipped past in hazy autumn sunshine, in early winter fogs. The boys filled sandbags and piled

them against the richest of the carvings, heaped them about the statue of Henry the Sixth. The thought that bombs might be dropped on them filled them with a strange hilarity. Palmer hoped that a bomb or two would drop before he left in the spring. His letters home were filled with war news, for he had the feeling that the news they got in America was not accurate. English idioms began to crop up in his letters.

"Why, he's getting to be a thorough little Englishman!" Robert exclaimed ruefully. "He doesn't think we know anything over here."

Mid-December came with red sunrises and hoar frost on the ancient walls. The river flowed brown between dank russet banks. Sometimes all was hidden in fog. The Carol Service came, with the choir in their crimson cassocks marching into the Chapel. Palmer liked best "The Holly and the Ivy" and "In Dulci Jubilo." Something stirred in him — he did not know what — making him both sad and joyful. What troubled him was, though he could not have put it into words, that he felt a part of all this — yet for ever an outsider.

The Rendels spent the Christmas holidays with Phyllis' mother in London. Mrs. Stuart-Grattan had

seen little of Palmer and she made up her mind to get better acquainted. She said to her daughter :

" I don't think you are taking a proper interest in the child. I think he is a very nice boy, and, when all's said and done, he's yours."

Phyllis interrupted passionately, — " He is not mine, Mother ! And never can be. If strangers — foreigners — have had your child till he is thirteen, can he ever be really yours ? No, I can't do any better than I'm doing. What has happened has horribly complicated my life " — she hesitated, then added, in a shaking voice — " and my emotions."

Her mother took her hand. Their fingers twined together. Each knew the heart-break the other had suffered in the loss of that brave officer who had gone down in the *Royal Oak*.

" Well, well," said Mrs. Stuart-Grattan, " we must just do the best we can. "

She did her part by having some intimate hours with Palmer. She drew him on to talk. She told him a great deal of the family history and puzzled him more than once by the way she tried to make him feel a share in it. But he liked her. He liked her best of all the family and would seek her out in her own sitting-room, where the tables were covered with

silver-framed photographs of children and men in naval uniform. Palmer would put his arm about her shoulder and press his cheek to hers.

Once she said, — "When you go back to America I suppose you'll forget all this."

"No," he answered at once. "I'll always remember it."

"I am glad of that. What I'm hoping is that something of England will have got into your bones and that you'll take it back with you and always keep it."

"Yes. And I'll always want to come back and visit."

"How would you like to stay here for another year?" He gave a little embarrassed laugh, for he was anxious not to hurt her feelings.

"I couldn't do that," he said. "It's a whole-time job being an American these days."

Dick Rendel took Palmer and Humphrey to pantomimes and children's plays, still running in spite of the war. But everyone knew that things were going to get much worse. Children were being evacuated from the congested areas of London to the country. In January the rationing of bacon and ham, butter and sugar, came into force. Three submarines were sunk

by enemy action. People began to talk of sending their children out to Canada and America for the duration of the war.

The Rendels had a letter from Camilla offering to take Humphrey for that period. He could go out with Palmer. And, of course, Mark would stay on.

At first Phyllis refused, but by spring events were more and more threatening. Dick was absorbed in war work. Clive was leaving Eton to take a course in flying. Both urged her to accept the generous invitation. It would be a relief to all, they said, if the children were safely established in America, where their nerves would be under no strain and where they would certainly have the abundant food needed for growing boys.

"But," Phyllis exclaimed desperately, "Mark wants so badly to come home. In every letter he begs us to let him come as soon as possible."

"Does a kid that age know what is good for him?" asked Clive. "Don't you remember how nervy he used to get in a thunder-storm? And how he hated the sight of blood? I should think you'd be thankful for such an offer."

Dick added,—"You must remember, too, the danger in his crossing the ocean."

"You don't object to exposing Humphrey to that danger," she retorted.

"Humphrey will be going toward safety," said Clive. "Mark would be risking his life to come into what is going to be the front line." He put his arm about her. "Come now, Mummie, it isn't like you to be so unreasonable."

After a time they overcame her, but she never really believed they were right. She wrote to Camilla, trying hard to make her letter seem grateful, but she only achieved what, to Camilla, seemed a tone of cold acquiescence.

"Just think," Camilla said to Robert, "we have offered to take two lively youngsters into our home for goodness knows how many years and this is the best she can do in the way of thanks."

"I have a feeling she has never liked us," said Robert.

"It is not a matter of like or dislike. It's a matter of utter selfishness. She just takes it for granted that we should turn our house into a boarding-school."

"Well, after all," said Robert, "one of the boys is Palmer and you were wishing, not long ago, you could have both Mark and Palmer. You said it would solve the whole problem."

"Do you know, Robert, I often see traits of yours in Mark. And not the pleasantest ones, either. He has your very way of reminding me of what I said ages ago and trying to make me seem selfish and unreasonable."

Robert reddened. Then, after a pause, he said:

"I sort of think we ought to let Mark go back to England. He badly wants to go. I don't think he seems very well or happy."

"He'd be well if he'd have his tonsils out!" she cried. "As for being happy — do you think he'd be happy in a country that's likely to be bombed to pieces at any moment? You seem to forget that Mark is your very own son."

"Yes, I do, sometimes," he admitted.

The arrangements moved forward. A new invitation was added to that already sent. The Greenes, Camilla's neighbours in New Hampshire, were eager to do their part to help English children. So Camilla suggested that they should take in little Corbold, of whom Palmer had so often written in his letters.

The Rendels held the three boys in readiness. But it was no easy matter to book their sailings. One disappointment followed another. The boys ran wild over Oakley Manor. May came and Dick Rendel hastened to Italy to bring his mother to England.

She was well past seventy. She was nervously exhausted and heart-broken at leaving the villa where she had, for so many years, made her home. The wildness of the boys was a trial to her. They were brimming over with a kind of crazy excitement. Little Corbold was growing used to uprootings and now cared little where he went so long as he was treated well. Humphrey was naturally high-spirited and boisterous. Palmer's year of visiting was over — he was going home ! All the rules, the traditions he had absorbed at Eton, fell away from him. He was Palmer Wylde, an American, quite finished with the Old World, buoyant with the thought of return to the New.

It was mid-June before they sailed. Dick and Phyllis motored them to the ship. Clive had suffered an accident in his training and Phyllis' thoughts were with him as she had seen him in hospital the day before. They crowded on to the pier with other parents who were giving up their children for they knew not how long. Perhaps they might never see them again. But the children were too excited to feel sorrow. When it was Phyllis' turn to say good-bye to Palmer, she suddenly drew him close and held him for a short space.

"Good-bye, Palmer," she said. "You'll come again sometime and perhaps then we'll get better acquainted."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Rendel," he answered, "and thanks a lot for all you've done for me."

"You must look after Humphrey and David," put in Dick, "and you two younger ones must do as Palmer says."

There was a jostling, an outward surge, the ringing of a bell. The children moved forward on their pilgrimage.

In those days Camilla worried herself almost ill. She pictured the bombing of the ship, the frantic children struggling in the sea, Palmer's little body sinking down into the deep. She could not sleep and there were dark shadows under her eyes. Robert too was anxious.

But then the joyful news came that the ship would dock in New York that day. The family, with the exception of Robert, were already settled for the summer at Lake Osonaga. It was Robert who was to meet the boys.

He stood watching the approach of the ship bearing its bright burden. Somehow its coming seemed to bring the war extraordinarily close to him. He felt

that he might stretch out his hand and touch the bowed shoulders of the oppressed, look into the eyes of the wounded. Tears filled his own eyes. As he heard the children singing the tears ran down his cheeks. His heart was wrung by a gratitude that was pain, to see the ship safe, majestic, after her peril.

How many children there were — all being marshalled into order by those in charge! He would have a time of it to find Palmer.

Then suddenly he saw the three boys together, Palmer the tallest; how he had grown!

"Hey, Palmer! Hello!" he shouted. He took off his hat and waved it.

Palmer saw him. He pointed out Robert to the other two, but he moved forward in orderly fashion.

"They've tamed him," thought Robert. "A year ago nothing would have held him back."

Then the curtain of a year ago was swept back and he hugged Palmer to him.

"Hey, Boss——" said Palmer, and clutched Robert in an iron grip.

Robert took the boys back to Boston. The four spent the night in the house on Beacon Hill.

Palmer dogged Robert's footsteps. Wherever Robert went, there was Palmer! He had little to

say. He just stared at Robert in a kind of ecstasy. Then suddenly he would grip him about the middle and all but squeeze the breath out of him.

That night Palmer said, — "Hey, Boss, I'm going to sleep with you!"

"Oh, no, Palmer. I don't think you'd better do that. You'd rest better in your own bed."

"Don't you *want* me to sleep with you?"

"Sure, I want you. But I think you'd sleep better in your own bed."

"I don't want to sleep. I want to be with you."

Robert gave in. Though he had a poor night's rest he was glad he had done so, for Palmer poured out the intimate story of his life in England. It seemed that he never would want to settle down and sleep.

"Are you glad you did it?" asked Robert.

"You bet. Now it's over and I'm home again. But, honest, Boss, at the first I thought I was going to die."

Never had he talked so freely to Robert.

Next day they motored to New Hampshire. Robert took a week's holiday. The house was full of boys' voices. Palmer hugged Camilla, Janet and Honey-Lou in turn, then all together. The Greenes came over to claim little Corbold.

"Say!" cried the Greene girls. "Just listen to Palmer's English accent! It's so thick you could cut it with a knife!"

"Shucks," said Palmer, but not ill-pleased, "I don't sound English at all compared to these guys."

Camilla looked from him to Mark, her eyes shining. She had a sense of strength and fine purpose. During these years of war she would mould the characters of the two, devote her days to developing them into splendid manhood.

She stretched out her hand and took a hand of each. Their young fingers closed about hers.