

## CHAPTER XII

MARK was oddly detached from the scene about him. He was absent-minded and, when he was half-finished doing something, would forget what he was about. Physically he was at Lake Osonaga but his spirit was in England. The evacuation of Dunkirk had swept his young being like a torrent. Relentlessly, giving him no rest, his imagination pictured the terror and grandeur of the scene. At night he dreamed of England beleaguered, vast hordes of enemy soldiers scaling, with dreadful ease, the smoking cliffs. But sometimes he pictured the Cotswolds, peaceful in summer-time. He would see the brook moving secretly between its lush banks; the tiny islands of forget-me-nots that cast the reflection of their blueness on the ripples; the bending willows, their oval leaves fluttered by the breeze so that the white undersides were upturned, making the woods silvery.

He would take Humphrey out in the canoe with him where they could talk, in solitude, of home. When Humphrey had been a week in America, Mark said to him :

“ Look here, Humphrey, I want you to write to Daddy and say you think I ought to go home. Tell him how tall I’ve grown and how I don’t feel happy over here.”

“ But these people are awfully kind, aren’t they ? David says he never was a spoilt boy in his life before. The Greenes give him whatever he wants.”

“ That has nothing to do with me,” Mark answered impatiently. His voice rose. “ I tell you I’ve got to go home ! I think you can help me, if you write just what I say. I’ll dictate the letter to you.”

“ Why don’t you write yourself ? ” asked Humphrey argumentatively.

“ I have written — and they tell me how much better off and safer I am here ! I don’t want to be safe. I want to go home.”

“ If they won’t listen to you they’ll never listen to me. If I were you and wanted to go back I’d make Mrs. Wylde tired of having me. I’d make her glad to be rid of me. I’d tell her I wanted to leave and ask her to write. There’d be some punch to that.”

There was sense, Mark thought, in what Humphrey said, but he could not bring himself to the point of being troublesome. Too much kindness had been shown him for that. It would be better, he thought, to tell Camilla frankly that go he must, and persuade her to write to his parents. In the meantime he himself would write once more, try his utmost to bring them to his way of thinking. He wrote :

“ DEAR FATHER,

I can't tell you how hard it is for me to remain in America when things are going so badly at home. Everyone here says England is bound to be defeated. Of course I don't believe that, but I think we are going to have a terrible struggle for victory. I do want to go home and do something to help. When you see me you will be surprised by how tall and strong I have grown. I could do almost any kind of work. Mummie will know that Humphrey is safe, so that ought to be a comfort to her. I will be no trouble to anyone and I will strain every bit of me to help. *Please* cable me to come. I am very restless and unhappy. *Please* don't refuse.

Your loving son,

MARK.”

The summer wore on while he waited for an answer. However, he felt more tranquil. Even when time passed and no cable came he still was hopeful. His father would write rather than cable, because there would be so much to say, so many directions about his leaving, the booking of his passage. He began to go over his belongings, the things he had collected since coming to America, to sort them over and decide what he would take back with him. He gave what he thought he could not take to the other boys. This generosity made him very popular.

“Just look,” exclaimed Palmer to Camilla, “what Mark has given me! His microscope! Isn’t it a dandy?”

“Why, I gave him that at Christmas! How could he give it away?”

“He doesn’t want it any more. And he’s given his kodak and his books to Humph. Gosh, he’s generous!”

Camilla went straight to Mark.

“I feel hurt,” she said, “that you should give away my Christmas present. It was a strange thing to do. You seemed delighted with it at the time.”

He flushed deeply. “I was. And I still like it — just as much. But — I think I may be going home

and I can't take a lot of things with me, you know."

"Oh, Mark," she said, "how can you be so foolish! You know perfectly well there's no chance of you going back. It would be a crazy thing to do. You have little idea of what an air raid is like or you would thank God you are safe with us." She put her arm about him. "Come, do be reasonable! You make me feel I've been a complete failure when you behave like this. And I've tried — I can't tell you how I've tried — to make you happy."

"I know. You've been very kind. All of you. But my place is in England and — I want to go. I've written home to say so."

She felt that she might break down, lose her self-control. He was her own child and he was standing there telling her that his place was in a foreign country that was to be devastated by war. It was unbearable. She was afraid of what she might say if she remained with him. A dreadful jealousy of his love for Phyllis Rendel made her ill. She turned abruptly away, crossed the meadow and went into the woods.

The day was to be fiercely hot but beneath the pines and hemlocks it was still cool. Tall ferns brushed her knees. Birds fluttered among the branches. It

was strange, she reflected, how when Mark made her angry he always brought to mind certain unhappy times she had had with Robert. Such times never occurred now, but she still remembered that antagonistic something in him which, in Mark, was still more pronounced. It was something detached and stubborn as if there were part of him one could not get near. But Robert had mellowed, become gentler with the years. Often she was proud of how well they got on together as compared with other couples of their acquaintance. She took a part of the credit to herself for she knew that she had learned more self-control and had gained in good humour and tolerance.

She passed through the open space where the hurricane had blown down some of the noblest of the pines. There they lay prone, their jagged stumps already wreathed in ferns and wild climbing plants. A resinous scent filled the air. She never could get used to the sight of the fallen trees. The feeling of hurt was too personal. She felt that she suffered with the pines.

She could hear the creak of rowlocks and, when she reached the shore, she saw Mark in the row-boat pulling steadily in the blazing sun. Of course he was going to the post-office to see if there was a letter for

him. She hoped he would get one that would settle things definitely, make him realize how hopeless any idea of returning to England was. She sat down on a moss-covered rock and waited for his return.

He was not gone long. Once more the creak of rowlocks sounded above the lapping of the little waves. She saw him rounding the point. He turned the boat into the shade quite near her and, shipping the oars, took a letter from his pocket. His back was to her so she could not see his face, but he was still for a space, as motionless as the shadow of a tree on the glassy little bay.

She saw him take his penknife from his pocket and slit open the envelope. She thought how Palmer would have torn it open. As Mark read the letter the current gently moved the boat, turning it so that he faced her. She saw that his face was transfigured by happiness. It was as though a light had flamed within him. That must mean only one thing — that Captain Rendel had written telling him that he might return to England !

Camilla's heart began to beat rapidly. She trembled with anger. How dare he give his permission for Mark to return ? Mark was hers and she would not part with him. She would refuse ! She would not

let him go. She felt a fierce anger against the boy that his face should so light up at the thought of going.

“Mark,” she called out sharply, “Mark !”

His face was bright from that inner glow as he raised it to hers.

“I’ve had a letter from my father,” he called out. “Shall I come and read it to you ?”

“Yes.”

As the boat glided toward her, her feeling of possession in him became almost painful. She would fight the forces that were striving to take him away from her. The time had come, she thought, her eyes fixed on his bright face, to tell him everything. She had known the time would come. She had felt that she was prepared for it. She had a feeling of exaltation. The strain of all this secrecy had been so great. A shoal of tiny minnows were circling at the shore’s brink. They darted away as the bow of the boat loomed above them. Mark sprang to the beach and, with a strong deft movement, drew the boat on to the sand. How he had developed in the past year ! She watched him, turning over in her mind the words which she was about to disclose, trying to choose the perfect, the most poignant ones.

Mark’s teeth were gleaming in his tanned face. He

caught her impulsively by the arm and drew her toward the shade of the pines.

“Isn't it splendid?” he said. “I can't tell you how happy I am. It isn't that I don't like this place or —” again he gave a swift pressure on her arm — “or being with you and all the rest of the family. But I'm growing up. I feel that I can be of some use over there and I've been able to make my father feel that too. He says if you and Mr. Wylde are willing——” He broke off with a little laugh, then added, — “But I'll bet you will be glad to be rid of me! I know I have been a young beast sometimes this summer! Shall I read you my father's letter?”

*But, Mark, he isn't your father!* She kept turning the words over in her mind, trying to choose the right ones. She discarded these. They were too abrupt. She mustn't shock him. She must tell him the whole truth, quite simply, very tenderly, holding his hand in hers, so that the glowing love of her motherhood might pass from her body into his. *Mark, I have something to say to you. It all began years ago, on the day you and Palmer were born.* She thought that would be the simple, the perfect beginning of the story. She would throw open her heart to him. Make him understand, as well as she could, what she had been

through. She drew him to the fallen silver birch whose trunk stretched, gleaming white, above the pine needles. A red squirrel had darted along its length, leaping, a bright arc of fright, into the undergrowth.

They sat down on the fallen tree and Mærk began to stroke its smoothness with his brown hand. A new vitality was surging in him. He could not keep his body still. He swung his legs and she again noticed the shabby canvas shoes, the glimpse of a bare toe. Now was the time to begin. She stretched out her hand and took his.

He gave it a quick, responsive grip. "Isn't it splendid?" he said.

"It hurts one," she returned, in a low voice, "to know you are so happy to leave us."

"Oh, it's not the leaving you!" he exclaimed. "It's the going home that makes one glad! I've loved all this" — he looked about him as though he would imprint the picture of the woods on his memory — "but I want terribly to be where I belong, don't you see?"

Now was the time to tell him. But words that usually came so fluently to Camilla failed her. She could only say:

"I'm glad to think you loved the place . . . the

trees . . . but I wish you'd loved me." It wasn't a good beginning. She must not embarrass him. She must tell the story simply, in words that would go straight to his heart. Sometimes she thought that his defensive attitude toward her was the result of the bewilderment at the unknown forces within him, drawing him to her.

He looked at her questioningly. "Have you something to tell me?" he said.

She thought she had never seen a face so transfigured. His face had often looked old for his years in the past months. He had worn the expression of a man, experienced and even bitter. Now he looked just a child, tender and transfigured by gladness. His face was like the face of a flower that had been drooping but was now raised toward the sun and the breeze. A feeling of tenderness for him welled in her heart. In truth she had never before felt quite such a sense of tenderness toward any human being as she now felt toward Mark. He seemed suddenly fragile and terribly vulnerable. She thought of him setting out to face the dangers of the sea and later the dangers of the land, and so eager to face them! But nothing that could befall him, on sea or on land, would wound him so cruelly as what she had in her mind to tell him.

She saw that, suddenly, and with terrible clarity. He would find himself torn up by the roots — belonging nowhere ! She had hoped he would put out new roots here but he had not. He was staunch in his loyalties, as indeed Palmer was in his. She pictured the shock in Palmer's face if the truth were revealed to him. For the first time in her life she considered a problem with no thought of herself. She seemed absolutely selfless. Yet at that moment both boys seemed a part of her, as though she actually had borne them both. All she wanted was their happiness — to preserve that at any cost to herself. It was what Robert wanted. It was what the Kendels wanted. Only she had had wrong, dark thoughts. Now the way lay clear and bright before her. Neither boy must ever be told the truth. There had been suffering enough because of it. She put a hand on each of his cheeks and kissed him.

“ I only want to tell you,” she said, “ how happy I am for you.”

Robert saw them coming. Lunch was waiting and he had come out to ring the bell that hung in a small cupola at the back of the house. In former times this bell had been rung to call the farm-hands to their meals. He dropped the rope and the clang of the bell

died on the air. The startled barn-swallows that had darted away began to return.

Robert opened the white wicket gate.

"You're late," he said, smiling at the two.

"No wonder," said Camilla. "We have such news!"

Mark looked anxiously up into Robert's face. "I've had a letter from my father," he said.

"Well, I was wondering. I could see you had good news. What is it?"

"He says I may go home. I had told him, you see, how I feel about it. Do you mind?"

Robert looked at Camilla.

"It's made Mark very happy," she said.

Mark said to Robert, "There's a letter for you, too. I imagine it will explain just what I am to do. He has a friend on a mission to Washington and I think I am to go back with him."

Again the look of gladness transfigured his face. He looked no more than a child. Robert put an arm about Lim.

"I'm glad for your sake, Mark," he said.

The other boys came running out of the house. Mark ran to meet them. "I'm going home!" he called out.

“ Back to England ? ” cried Palmer.

“ Yes. Back to England.”

“ That’s fine ! ” said Palmer, and with a sudden manly gesture he gripped Mark’s hand. “ I know just how you feel. As though you could turn hand-springs ! I felt the same way when my time was up and I was on my way home. Not that I didn’t like it there. Just as you’ve liked it here. But, oh, boy, it’s grand to be home ! ” He turned suddenly and flung both arms about Camilla. “ We’re all happy now. You’ve got me back and pretty soon Mark’s mother will have him ! ”

“ What do you feel about it, Humphrey ? ” asked Robert.

Humphrey had looked a little subdued at the news but now his face brightened. “ It’s all right for Mark to go,” he said, “ but I want to stay here for a while. I haven’t seen and done half the things I want to. I’m having a jolly good time.”

Palmer turned again to Mark. “ You tell them over there,” he said, “ that America will be in it before long. We’ll be fighting side by side. We can lick the world that way.”

Mark stood looking from one face to another, not able to find words — his gladness shining out of his

eyes. Then the three boys dashed across the lawn together.

“Don’t go away!” shouted Robert. “Lunch is waiting. Here come the girls!”

Janet and Honey-Lou were coming up the path from the lake. They had been picking blackberries. The boys ran to tell them the news.

Camilla took Robert’s hand. “Were you surprised at me?” she asked. “I mean — taking this the way I have?”

“Yes — I was very surprised. I thought——” He hesitated.

“I know. You thought I’d be terribly upset and would oppose Mark’s going and make everyone miserable.”

He flushed and gave a little laugh. “Well——”

“And so I was going to. But something happened to me, Robert, when I was alone in the woods with Mark. I saw quite clearly that he belonged to the Rendels — not to us. To England — not to America. They have made him what he is. It would be terribly cruel to uproot him — just as it would be terribly cruel to uproot Palmer. I saw, too, that parenthood can’t be shared. Children are either yours or they aren’t. Sharing them would kill something in them that is

their right. It's their certainty, their confidence in us. Both Mark and Palmer fit absolutely into their places and we mustn't ever change that. . . . I know you've seen it this way all along, Robert. I've been slower than you . . . and selfish. I've had to feel my way through a lot of things that hurt, but — I've done it ! ”

He felt her hand within his tremble. He saw tears in her eyes. He put his arm about her and drew her to him.

“ Camilla,” he said, “ I can't tell you how relieved — how happy I am about this. You're being splendid——”

“ No, I'm not ! ” she interrupted. “ I'm just now accepting the truth. And I am not so unhappy as you may think I am. Not so disappointed, I mean. Well, I couldn't have both boys, could I? And I have Palmer as my very own. Did you see the look he gave me? Mark could never look at me like that. There's another thing, Robert. I've often felt proud of the way you and I get on together. But lately, deep inside me, there's been a feeling that I was losing you. Through my own fault ! This morning that feeling is gone. I can't tell why, but it's gone ! ”

“ I hadn't any such feeling,” he protested stoutly. “ But I was conscious of something between us. I

thought I'd just got dull and uninteresting to you. . . . Camilla, I do love you. Everything's going to be all right, isn't it ?”

“ Everything *is* all right ! Look at those boys !”

Palmer and Mark had scrambled to the top of a fern-crowned rock that jutted up from the lawn. They stood there, clasped in a rough embrace, their slender figures silhouetted against the sunny sky. Their faces were lively with the purpose of youth. To Robert and Camilla they suddenly seemed, not two unimportant young boys, but as symbols of the future. Robert said :

“ Their sort — the American and the Englishman — will have to build a new world when this war is over. And I must say, they look well fitted for the job.”

Janet, Honey-Lou and Humphrey called to them from the verandah :

“ We're going to begin lunch ! We just can't wait any longer. Do come !”

Robert and Camilla, linked together, went into the house.

“ Gosh, I'm starving !” exclaimed Palmer.  
“ Come along, Mark.”

But Mark was suddenly grave. He looked out

across the fair land and the lake. There welled up in him a love for the place — a feeling of kinship for those who lived there. He would not forget. He would come back when he was a man. Palmer and he would always be friends. He turned his head and his eyes looked into Palmer's. Palmer became grave too. They exchanged a look of affectionate understanding.

THE END