

CHAPTER II

THE cross-Channel steamer was nearing the cliffs of Dover. The sun was shining but there was a shrewdness in the breeze. It was late spring. Camilla Wylde turned up the collar of her coat and drew the rug about her knees. She wished Robert were there to do it for her. But he never seemed to be on hand at the moment when he was needed. Now he had not been near her for a long while. She might be in desperate need of him but he'd go right on being preoccupied by his own doings. What *was* he doing? she wondered. Talking over the European situation, she guessed, with some chance acquaintance. She was a little tired of the European situation. It was always boiling up to something and then subsiding into bickerings. Robert seemed inclined to take this crisis seriously, to be glad they were on their way back to America. She wanted a cigarette but knew she could not light it in the strong breeze. It was

annoying. She kept imagining what it would be like to light a cigarette, to draw from it those first satisfying puffs.

She wondered where Palmer was. She wished he would come and get his warm sweater. After that nasty cold he'd had in Paris he needed special care. She took up her book and tried to read. But she was uneasy. She was certain that the Customs would charge a ridiculous duty on the things she had bought in Paris. If only Robert weren't so terribly honest about declaring their purchases! She remembered the time she and Janet had come over by themselves and how she hadn't declared anything and had got away with it.

Palmer came up. "Hey, Mom," he said, "did you see all those planes?"

"No, darling, I was reading. But you're just the boy I want. I want you to put on your sweater. Here it is." She drew it from behind her and handed it to him with a tender yet half-annoyed look. "You'd stay out till you froze and never notice it."

He drew back from her as though she were offering him poison.

"Why, Mom," he exclaimed, "you don't want to roast me alive, do you? Gee whizz, just feel me!

I'm hot as an oven already." He held out a rather grimy hand and round brown wrist.

"No. I don't want to feel you. I want you to put your sweater on." She pushed it against him.

"The boy I was with up in the bow has nothing but a cotton shirt on!"

"Palmer, will you *please* believe that mother knows best, and do what she tells you?"

When Camilla began to talk of herself in the third person, Palmer began to feel bored. He'd rather do what she said than go on listening to her. He took the thick striped sweater and began to struggle into it, as though there were not an instant to be lost.

"Palmer, do it more quietly. Goodness' sakes, you'll have it torn in another minute."

"O.K., Mom." There was defiant acquiescence in his voice. Then suddenly he gave her his sweet smile and escaped. The sweater wrinkled across his shoulders but, somehow, Palmer always wore his clothes well. He had a good figure and a good walk.

She was tired of fresh air. She yawned and thought of the moment when she would have a hot bath and a cigarette in her bedroom in the hotel. Now she saw Robert coming toward her down the deck. He had a boy Palmer's age with him. It must be the boy

Palmer had spoken of, for he wore a soft white shirt open at the throat. He was tanned a deep brown. Contrasted with his skin, his fair hair and eyebrows looked almost silvery. Robert and the boy stopped quite near her and leant against the rail staring at some planes circling overhead. She watched them, feeling rather amused by the similarity of their attitudes. Each had his elbows bent above the rail, his legs stiff, his face upturned and jaw dropped; one large figure; one small; it was ridiculous.

When the planes had passed she caught Robert's eye and beckoned to him. He came, smiling.

“What is it, Camilla?”

“I've been dying for a smoke for agès but I can't get a light in this wind. I feel stiff all over. Who is that boy?”

He gave her a cigarette, lighted it from his lighter, and said, — “You might feel better if you walked around. I don't know who the youngster is but he's mighty intelligent. He's with his parents — they're English.”

She closed her eyes and took a few delicious puffs at the cigarette. When she opened them the boy had drawn a little closer. He was looking at her with polite interest. She smiled.

He returned the smile, flushed a little and was turning away, when she asked :

“ Have you been on your vacation too ? ”

He nodded. “ Yes. We’ve been to Italy.”

“ Is this your first trip there ? ”

“ Oh, no. Some of us always go in the summer holidays.”

“ It’s pretty hot there in the summer, isn’t it ? ”

“ Rather.”

“ I should think you’d go to Norway or Sweden.”

“ Well, you see, my grandmother — that is, one of my grandmothers — lives in Bordighera.”

Robert interrupted, — “ There’s that queer-looking plane again ! I’ve never seen one just like it.”

He and the boy stared upward; and Camilla was struck by their resemblance. This time, however, it was more than mere attitude. If the boy had been Robert’s son people would have said he was the image of his father. What a strange thing resemblance was ! There was Palmer, not really looking like any of the family. And here this strange boy with a profile so extraordinarily like Robert’s. He had even the same odd little nick in the edge of the nostril and the cleft in the chin. She wished they would not keep moving their heads about. She

would like to have them right in front of her and compare them. She began to talk to the boy to keep him from going away.

"Aren't you chilly in that thin shirt?" she asked. "I should think after being in Italy you'd feel this wind raw. I certainly do."

"I'm quite warm," he answered a little distantly, as though he were afraid she was going to be interfering.

"I think you've met my son," she added quickly. "He was speaking of you. He's like you, he never feels the cold."

"Yes," he agreed. "I see him now up in the bow. I think I'll find out what he's up to!", He ran off.

Camilla drew a deep breath. She turned to Robert who had sat down beside her.

"I'll be damned," she said, "if I've ever seen anything like it! It's enough to frighten you."

He looked at her blankly. "What's enough to frighten you?"

"The resemblance between you and that boy. He's a hundred times more like you than Palmer is."

"So what?"

She laughed. "So what yourself? Perhaps your

interest in him has some foundation."

But, though she laughed, she stared hard at Robert. He bore her scrutiny with the calm of the deeply innocent.

"I've got to find out his name," she said. "I guess Palmer will know it."

Robert grunted. "Boys never know names," he said.

As they spoke, Palmer came running toward them dishevelled and excited.

"We'll land in half an hour!" he exclaimed. "Hadn't we better collect our baggage, Boss?"

"Keep your hair on," said his father. "What's the name of the boy you were with?"

"Boy! What boy?" Palmer looked up and down the deck.

"Well, you were with a boy a minute ago, weren't you?"

"Oh, him! I dunno." He made as if to go. Camilla caught him and held him. "Palmer, listen to me: you're to go and find that boy and ask him his name."

"Gosh, Mom, I don't want to know his name." He moved his arm under her fingers as though she were hurting him.

She felt like hurting him. But she controlled herself and said, — “ I want to know his name, Palmer. It doesn’t matter why. Just go back to him and, in a moment or so, say, just casually, that you’d like to know his name. Then, as soon as you can, come back and tell me.”

He gave her a look of mingled pity and reproach.

“ I do wish he wasn’t so heedless ! ” she said to Robert.

“ They’re all alike at that age.”

Palmer made the effort and made it successfully. But, back with his mother, he quite forgot the errand he had been on and talked excitedly of a ship they were passing.

“ I want the binoculars,” he said, rummaging behind Camilla to find them.

“ I haven’t got them,” she said impatiently. “ Your father has them. Palmer, what is the boy’s name ? ”

Palmer looked up and down the deck. “ What boy ? ” he asked.

“ Good heavens ! The English boy you’ve been with all the way across.”

“ I haven’t been with him all the way across. I’ve been with you most of the time.” He wrinkled his smooth brow. “ His name is Mark — Mark Rendel.

Say, Boss, can I have the binoculars ? ”

Robert gave them him and he hurried off.

Camilla sat lost in thought. Her mind moved through the mists of memory trying to form some solid shape to which she might attach the name. “ Mark Rendel,” she repeated softly. “ I’m sure I’ve heard it before.”

Robert had an extraordinarily good memory for names. He thought a moment, then said, — “ Rendel was the name of the people whose baby was born in the nursing home the same day as Palmer. Captain Rendel, the man’s name was.”

“ And they named the baby Mark ! Why, Robert, what an astounding coincidence ! That boy is the baby ! If his parents are with him, then we six are meeting again on this boat. Did you ever hear of anything so strange ? ”

“ It certainly is a coincidence,” he agreed.

Both sat silent for a space, absorbed by the singularity of what had happened. He noticed the way she had clenched her hands and was looking at them out of narrowing eyes, as though they held some secret which she was afraid would escape her.

“ Yes,” she repeated. “ This Mark Rendel is the Mark Rendel who was born just across the corridor

from Palmer — on the same day — the same day.”

“Huh-huh,” he agreed, listening to the pound of the waves against the side of the ship. In an odd way he was trying to protect himself against what she might say next. They sat silent a space.

She unclenched her hands. She looked strange.

“Robert, it couldn’t have happened, could it? Do you know what I mean? . . . Oh, Robert, that place was so carelessly run! Wouldn’t it be terrible if——” Her voice broke. “Oh, Robert!”

He looked at her almost pleadingly. “Camilla, I want you to put any sensational idea right out of your head.”

“But, Robert — the boy — why, he’s the image of you! Everybody’s always saying how much like me Janet is. But she’s not half as much like me as that boy is like you. Oh, Robert, he’s so like you.”

“It’s just a chance resemblance. It couldn’t be anything else. Don’t get excited.”

“But I’ve got to know; I’ve got to find those people!” She struggled up from her chair and pushed the rug away from her.

He gathered it up and folded it.

“Come,” she said impatiently. “We haven’t any time to spare. I must talk to them.”

He laid the neatly folded rug on her chair.

"You saw the man," she said, as they went along the deck. "What did he look like?"

"I forget. I think he was tall and thin. He'd a small dark moustache."

"Do you see that couple in the corner reading? He's reading the *Sketch*. Is that the man?"

Robert looked at him carefully. "Yes. That's h'im. I'd know him anywhere. He hasn't changed."

"Don't move for a minute. Stand right here and look out at the water. Be talking to me. I want to have a look at them before I speak."

He obediently stared at the broken, foam-flecked waves of the *Chaniel*. He said, in a hurried undertone:

"Take my advice, Camilla. Don't speak to these people. You've an impossible idea in your head. They'll think you're crazy. Take my advice, just for once. Just take my advice, Camilla."

"I'm always taking your advice," she retorted. "But I'd never have another moment's peace if I didn't probe this thing. Robert — Palmer looks like that woman! God, she smiled then and it was Palmer's smile! I'm going to speak to her."

She went straight over to the two people absorbed

in their illustrated weeklies. She said, in her clear, emphatic voice, her body tense :

“ Pardon me, but aren't you Mrs. Rendel ? ”

The Englishwoman raised her eyes to Camilla's face in a look that was curious but not unfriendly.

“ Yes,” she answered, “ I am ! ”

Captain Rendel had got to his feet. His expression was polite but slightly irritated. Then, as he noticed how attractive Camilla was, his irritation faded:

Camilla looked straight into Mrs. Rendel's eyes. “ We've never met,” she said, “ but we went through the same experience in rooms opposite one another in Miss Holt's nursing home in London, thirteen years ago last November. Do you remember ? ”

Mrs. Rendel looked puzzled, then smiled. She said, — “ Yes, I remember. There was an American baby born the same day as my boy. Are you his mother ? ”

“ Yes. I'm Camilla Wylde. This is my husband,”

Robert's face was heavy with reluctance as he came forward and shook hands. He said to Captain Rendel :

“ You saved me from falling when I was getting into the elevator in the nursing home. Do you remember ? ”

It was plain that Captain Rendel did not remember. But he said, — “Yes, yes, — of course.”

“I guess I’ve changed a lot since then. I’ve got a corporation and grey hair. But I’d have known you anywhere.” He looked anxiously at Camilla, waiting to see what she would do next.

Captain Rendel dragged forward two empty chairs and the four sat down somewhat uneasily.

“I’m afraid we’re just going to dock,” said Mrs. Rendel. “I must find Mark.”

Camilla twisted her fingers together in her lap. She was very pale. “I’ve got something terribly important to say,” she began breathlessly. “It’s about our two boys. You must listen to me.”

“For my part,” interrupted Robert, “I’m against saying anything. I think it’s a mistake.”

Camilla’s fine grey eyes looked searchingly into Captain Rendel’s face. “You wouldn’t want to live under a delusion, would you? If you found something mysterious in your life I think you’d want to clear it up.”

Now he looked defensive but he said, — “Yes. I’d want to clear it up.”

“Oh, you must think I’m crazy! But I’m not. It’s only that a terrible suspicion is tormenting me.

That is, ever since I saw your boy and my husband together. Your boy is the image of my husband." She saw the blood mount to their faces. Their look of wanting to escape from a demented person. "Please don't think I'm crazy," she said, tears filling her eyes. "This is as terrible for me as it is for you. What I think has happened is that the nurse got our babies mixed and that you have our boy and that we have yours."

The colour receded from Mrs. Rendel's face. It looked pale and set. She rose. She was a fine-looking woman in a careless blond way, as though she lived a country life and had never had anything in it to conceal. She said coldly, addressing Robert :

"I think you will understand that my husband and I can't listen to this. I'm afraid your wife is not well."

He was miserably embarrassed, still he couldn't have Camilla spoken of that way. He said :

"My wife's well enough, but she's worried to death over this thing. And it does seem queer when you think about it."

He looked so sane, his blunt features so steady, yet so troubled, they had to give him their attention, their respect. Mrs. Rendel addressed him :

“Do you yourself think there is anything in this?”

“Well, I don’t know what to think.” He hesitated, then added, as with an effort, — “We’ve often wondered about Palmer’s looks. He doesn’t resemble either of our families.”

Camilla interrupted — “But he does look like you, Mrs. Rendel. Before I spoke to you I saw you smile and — it was Palmer’s smile. He has hazel eyes, so have you.” Her eyes devoured Mrs. Rendel. “And there’s so much more! The set of the head — the curve of the chin — the bend of the eyebrows — it’s amazing.”

Mrs. Rendel replied curtly, — “It’s impossible.”

Captain Kendel looked about him. “People are staring at us,” he said. “We can’t talk about it here. Anyhow, we’re landing.”

The two boys came running up. They looked surprised, almost shocked, to find their parents talking familiarly together. Then Palmer exclaimed:

“Say, there’s the funniest-looking gull up there! It’s different than any of the others. Come and look! Golly, it’s the grandfather of them all.”

He talked on but no one heard what he said. The four stood transfixed, their eyes scrutinizing the two candid boy faces, while fearful suspicion linked them

together in a chain from which they could not tear themselves.

Phyllis Rendel tried to. "There is nothing in this," she said, "and I refuse to listen to it."

"We must listen," objected her husband. "We can't shirk it. We shall have to meet again. Where are you staying?"

"At the Dorchester," answered Robert. "Can you come there tomorrow morning? Then we'll be able to talk in peace."

"Yes. We'll be there," answered Captain Rendel at once.

"It's been terrible to me to speak of this," said Camilla. "But I had to. I couldn't go on in such appalling uncertainty, could I?"

"I think it would have been much better," answered Phyllis Rendel. She began to gather up her belongings in a confused way, as though she scarcely knew what she was doing.

All about them the other passengers were surging toward the companion-way. The two boys had not waited to hear what was being said, nor had they been conscious of the scrutiny they were under. Now they appeared carrying their private belongings. Palmer was laden with things he had picked up abroad.

“When you’ve been about more,” said Mark Rendel, “you won’t want everything you see.”

Palmer bumped against him, almost throwing him off his balance.

“You look just like a tripper back from Blackpool,” laughed Mark.

“Oh, yeah,” said Palmer.

The six were swallowed up in the crowd, down the stairs, across the gangway, on to the pier. There the spring sunshine beat down hotly. Gulls circled and whimpered above them. Porters shouted. In the Customs sheds it was cool and draughty. The Wyldes, under the letter W, the Rendels, under R, were quite separated. Yet a shadowy but powerful bond linked them together. None was so conscious of this as Camilla Wyldes. She felt feverishly excited. She had a feeling of exaltation, as though she held the threads of their destinies in her hands. She had one more glimpse of the Rendels. She saw Captain Rendel’s head above the crowd, then glimpsed all three as they got into the car sent to meet them by Phyllis Rendel’s mother. Robert was engaging a taxi. Their luggage was in a neat pile.