

CHAPTER III

A FIRE had been lighted in Mrs. Stuart-Grattan's drawing-room but so far it was only a bright-coloured crackling blaze that threw little heat. The room was chilly. But its large windows looked on to Regent's Park in its living springtime brightness, so that the room was cheerful. The trees in the Park seemed to surge with life, billowing one after the other in their bright verdure, with here and there the rosy fountain of a pink hawthorn in flower. Two little girls in pale mauve coats and hats and carrying large brightly-painted hoops were just entering the tall iron gates with their governess. A nurse, in sober grey, was pushing a perambulator and at the same time manœuvring two small dogs on leads.

There were flowers in the room. Gay polyanthus had been planted in large pots and these gave the effect of a tiny garden in the window. Captain Rendel stood looking down at them, avoiding his wife's eyes.

“If you knew,” she said, “how I loathe doing this you wouldn’t ask me to.”

“That’s just being stupid,” he answered tersely. “We must face facts. If we didn’t we’d have no peace in the future. The thing to do is to clear up the mystery, whatever it is. You keep on saying there’s nothing to it. If you’re so sure of that, why are you afraid to go?”

Her low voice broke into harshness, — “Would you be willing to give up Mark?”

“No. No more than you. But I think Mrs. Wylde is absolutely sincere and deserves some consideration from us. God, we had all this out last night, didn’t we?”

She answered brokenly, — “I scarcely slept an hour.”

“We shall all of us feel better when we’ve sifted the thing to the bottom.” He looked at his wrist-watch.

In the taxi they scarcely spoke, he looking through the window at the moist, gleaming spring streets, she straight ahead of her, seeing now the face of Camilla Wylde, now Mark’s face, now, with a stab of apprehension, the face of the strange boy with his long-lashed hazel eyes so like her own.

Camilla and Robert were waiting for them in their sitting-room. Robert, with a forced air of nonchalance, asked them if they would have cocktails. They took sherry instead. The four raised their glasses to their lips and set them down. Robert's hand was trembling. Camilla was the first to speak. Her voice was tense.

"I guess none of us had a very good night," she said, "and I guess we've a pretty hard time ahead of us till this thing is cleared up. I, for one, can't have a minute's peace till it is. It's like a nightmare, isn't it?" Her eyes swept the faces of the other three.

Robert's face was a sallow mask of weariness. Captain Rendel looked cool, almost imperturbable. But in Phyllis Rendel's eyes there was a cold hate, and resentment.

"How do you expect to clear it up?" she asked. "And, if you find that the babies really were exchanged, do you think we shall have peace then?"

Camilla exclaimed, with a dramatic gesture of her small hand, on which an emerald flashed

"I'll throw the whole enquiry up, if you others think we ought to!"

"No," answered Captain Rendel decidedly. "It's too late for that. I wish you'd tell us, Mrs. Wylde, just what grounds you have for suspicion, outside

what may well be a chance resemblance between our son and your husband."

"Very well," she answered. "We'll speak of the resemblance first." She took another sip of her cocktail to steady herself. Then she rose and went to a drawer in an occasional table. She took a box from it and returned to her seat. She moved gracefully. She wore a black suit and a very small black-and-white hat. Her feet were beautifully shod. A silver-fox cape lay on the back of her chair. She was quite calm now, and again she had that look of exaltation.

"I have a daughter of seventeen," she said. "Her name is Janet and she just adores her father. We have a photo of him, taken when he was twelve, and I brought it with me on this trip so I could have a miniature painted from it by a distinguished artist I know in London. It is for Janet's birthday. He has already done one of me from life and one of Janet from a photo. When we arrived at the hotel yesterday this box was waiting for me. It contains the miniature and the photo it was made from. I'll let you see them."

She opened the box and took from it the miniature, which she handed to Phyllis Rendel, and gave the photograph to Captain Rendel. There was dead silence

in the room while husband and wife bent their gaze on the likenesses.

“I want you to notice,” Camilla said, “the shape of the head, the strongly marked eyebrows, the little nick in the side of the nostril. I saw Mark only a very little while but I noticed these things, and of course the colouring which is identical. Now, just look at my husband and you will see those characteristics in the grown-up man.”

Obediently the Rendels raised their eyes from the portraits and looked at Robert. He sat looking heavily back at them, his hands clasped on his stomach.

“Let’s see the miniature.” Captain Rendel stretched out his hand and made the exchange with his wife. There was a prolonged silence in the room. Then he said :

“If it weren’t for the clothes and the haircut, Mark might have sat for the pictures. It’s a strange coincidence that you should have had them with you.”

“It’s beyond coincidence,” exclaimed Camilla. “Surely something completely outside our will brought us four — us six — together ! The whole thing is predestined. We’ve just got to let ourselves be swept along.”

Phyllis laid the photograph on the table.

“There is nothing in all this,” she said. “What can you prove by a chance resemblance? And what do you *want* to prove? Do you want to take my boy from me and ask me to accept yours in return? Have you no love for him?”

Camilla answered fiercely, — “I love him so much that I must know the truth for his sake. Nothing else will do. I have to be perfectly selfless in this, no matter what I suffer. And I can see that Captain Rendel feels the same.”

He returned, — “You spoke of some other proof, Mrs. Wylde. What was that?”

“It was instinct, nothing more. But it was an animal instinct and I guess that’s as true as anything there is. When the baby was two days old — I remember the exact day because it was foggy outside and Robert had sent us glowing crimson roses — the nurse brought baby to me to be nursed. When she put him into my arms and I cuddled him a queer feeling of strangeness came over me, as though he were not my baby at all. It lasted just a moment and then I forgot all about it. But last night when I lay tossing and couldn’t get a wink of sleep, till I took a dose of my sedative, the sensation came over me again. I was back in the hospital with the feeling that

I had a strange baby in my arms." She sank back against her silver-fox cape, looking pale and exhausted.

Captain Rendel said, — "That is very interesting. I think the best thing for us to do is for your husband and me to go to the nursing home and try to find the nurse who was in charge of the infants on that day. She would probably lie. But on the other hand she might give us some help." He turned to Robert Wylde. "What do you say?"

"All right," said Robert heavily. "If the ladies think we'd better. What do you think, Mrs. Rendel?"

"It's out of my hands." She spoke abruptly. "Go if you wish."

"I think," said Camilla, "you're absolutely right. I think you ought to go at once."

Robert got himself out of his chair. "Do you remember the name of the nurse who bathed the youngsters?" he asked.

"Her name was Nurse Jennings. I remember because we had a maid of the same name at the time." She turned to Phyllis Rendel. "Wasn't Jennings her name?"

"I don't remember. Yes — I believe it was." She turned to her husband. "I think I shall go home. You can tell me afterward what happens."

“ Oh, please stay with me ! ” Camilla went impulsively to her and took her hand. “ The time won't seem nearly so long if we are together. Besides, you must be here when they come back. We can't do anything without you. ”

“ Yes, Phyllis, I think you should stay here. If Mr. Wylde and I are to be away too long I shall ring you up. ” He rose quickly and took up his hat and stick.

The two women were alone. Phyllis Rendel sat with her back to the light, her hands clenched in her lap. Anger surged in her because of what had been done to her in these spring days when she should have been happy returning home after a visit to Italy. Left alone with her, Camilla felt shy and wondered what she could find to say to her: Her support and her background seemed to have gone with the two men. She bore the silence as long as she could and then said :

“ Don't let's talk about this awful thing. Let's clear our minds if we can and talk of what's left undisturbed in our lives . . . Will you tell me what other children you have ? ”

“ You're leaving me them, are you ? ” said Phyllis bitterly.

“ Oh, Mrs. Rendel, don't feel like that ! I can't

bear you to think that I'd wilfully harm you. It is just the sense of horrible uncertainty that drives me on. It's the sense of living in a fog. Even a stern wild mountain-top is better than that, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." She put her hands to her temples, then took off her brown felt hat and laid it on the floor beside her chair. "My head aches so," she said.

Camilla looked at her sitting there, in her well-cut tweed coat and skirt, her feet planted side by side. She saw her run her hands through her fair curling hair and, before she could stop herself, she said:

"Palmer's hair curls too. All the rest of us have such straight hair."

The other seemed not to hear. Again she pressed her fingers to her temples. Camilla sprang up.

"I'm going to get you an aspirin," she said.

Left alone, Phyllis Rendel softly beat on the arm of her chair with her clenched hand. Her eyes had a dazed look. When the aspirin tablet was brought she took it meekly.

"Won't you lie down on the chesterfield for a while? Aspirins always work better if you rest." If she could get Phyllis to rest, she herself might relax till the men came back.

The door opened and Palmer put in his head.

“ Hey, Mom, when are we going to eat ? ”

“ Come in, darling, and speak to Mrs. Rendel. You remember meeting her yesterday. ”

“ Yep, ” said Palmer. He came in confidently and smiled at Phyllis. “ Why didn’t you bring Mark with you ? ”

Her eyes searched his face. “ Mark has gone to the Zoo. ”

“ To the Zoo ! Gosh, why can’t I go to the Zoo ! Tell me where it is, Mrs. Rendel, and I’ll start out right now. Give me some money, Mom, so I can start out for the Zoo. ”

“ Palmer, ” said Camilla, “ you cannot go to the Zoo alone. ”

“ What’s to hinder me ? I’m not scared, am I ? How long is it since Mark started for the Zoo, Mrs. Rendel ? ”

“ Oh, some time ago. You see, we’re staying near Regent’s Park, so Mark walks there. ”

“ What bus should I take ? ”

“ Palmer, ” said Camilla, “ go down to the dining-room and get yourself some lunch. Then, when your father comes back, perhaps he’ll take you. ”

“ Oh, yeah ! I know how it will be. He’ll keep me waiting till we’ll just have time to see owls before

the Zoo closes." He thrust his hand in his pocket and drew out a handful of silver. "I guess I've got enough," he said. "But if I had a little more I'd take a taxi. I'd get there quicker and I'd be safer."

Camilla rose, found a ten-shilling note and gave it to him. She straightened his tie and kissed him. "Hadn't you better have lunch before you go?"

"I guess I can get a hot-dog there or a Chelsea bun or a plum pudding, or something. Anyways I'm not hungry, now I know I'm starting for the Zoo."

"You are to take a taxi," said Camilla, "and be back here by five o'clock."

He was gone. Camilla waited for Phyllis to say something. Then, as Phyllis did not speak, she asked :

"Well — did you see?"

"I saw nothing unusual," answered Phyllis coldly.

Camilla gave an impatient sigh. Phyllis stared down at the buses moving slowly along Park Lane, at the rounded tree-tops in Hyde Park and the people sitting in the little green chairs. She saw Palmer waiting on the street corner. Then she saw him mount a bus. Camilla was repeating :

"I do wish you'd lie down on the chesterfield — the aspirin will do you more good."

“It’s very warm here. Could we have a window open?”

“It will let the noise and dust in. But, of course, if you want it open——” She moved slowly toward a window.

“Never mind. I’ll take off my coat.” She took it off, showing the strong supple lines of her body in its silk blouse, and hung it carefully over the back of a chair. Then she lay down, pushing the pillow under her cheek and drawing up her long legs.

Camilla thought, — “And twenty-four hours ago I’d never seen her! And she is Palmer’s mother!”

The time would pass quicker, she thought, if she were by herself. There was nothing about Phyllis she could understand and every moment spent with her was an effort. She went to her bedroom and sat down by a table where she would get the scent of a nosegay of spring flowers Robert had bought her. She lighted a cigarette.

Sinking back in her chair she recaptured that strange moment in the nursing home when the two-days-old Palmer had felt an alien in her arms. If only she had followed up this animal instinct what misery might have been spared them all! But she had denied it — pushed it from her. Now they had to face a possible

agonizing upheaval. Her eager brain sought means of mitigating its pain. No one could say, she thought through sudden tears, that she did not render up herself to life and whatever it brought of change and cruelty. It was a part of her philosophy to give herself and give herself again — not counting the cost. It was strange, she thought, how she had this power of living outside herself, watching her own gestures in the performance of life, as an observer. One thing it did was to make it possible for her to keep her head where others were flustered. Twice she tiptoed into the other room and saw that Phyllis Rendel slept, her back hunched toward the light, one hand covering her face.

She grew hungry and ordered chicken sandwiches and coffee for the two of them, but Phyllis did not wake and Camilla ate her share in her bedroom alone. She drank three cups of coffee, then she put on a little powder and lipstick and tried to read the morning paper. The headlines told of the renewed threat of war but she could not settle down to read, not at such a crisis in her own life. Suddenly she became unbearably anxious. Her heart began to thud. Surely the men would come soon, or telephone !

Soon they came, entering the outer room quietly,

with masculine deliberation. She hurried to meet them. Both were looking at Phyllis, asleep on the divan. She beckoned them and took them into her room.

“It would be cruel to wake her,” she whispered. “She has such a headache.”

She closed the door softly. It was strange having Captain Rendel here, in these intimate surroundings, when a few hours ago he had been a stranger. He sat down on the window-sill and crossed his legs. He looked composed but she could feel that he was shaken. It was Robert who spoke.

“Well,” he said, “we’ve seen Nurse Jennings.”

Camilla breathed, — “Yes? And does she remember anything?”

Robert’s face was inexpressibly weary but he remained standing. “It was all terribly easy, Camilla,” he said. “It seemed like you said — just fate. First we found the elevator man at the nursing home. He was the very same man. He remembered Nurse Jennings and that she’d been there in 1925 and had left two years later to get married. He knew where she lived and we went at once to her house.”

Captain Rendel interrupted, — “She might have lived in Islington or the Midlands, but she lived just

two streets away and, when we rang the door-bell, she opened the door herself. It all fitted in like the bits in a jigsaw puzzle."

Camilla's eyes were bright with excitement. "Did she recognize you?"

"Not at first," answered Robert. "But when we told her who we were, she remembered us. Captain Rendel handled the situation splendidly. He let her see that she wouldn't be in for any trouble, whatever she said. We wanted everything kept secret. At first she pretended that she couldn't remember anything. But she wasn't good at dissembling. You only had to look at her face to see that she remembered doing something wrong. After a little questioning it came out. When the babies were two days old, she said, the Sister — you remember the old lady — came into the nursery when she was bathing the infants. She was in a sort of scolding mood and complained about the way the cribs were made up. She took one baby out — you understand that Nurse Jennings was bathing the other — and laid it on a pillow on the table. She fussed about the cot clothes and got the nurse completely rattled."

"You mustn't forget that Nurse Jennings had a private worry of her own that day," put in Captain

Rendel. "I imagine that had more to do with the mix-up than the Sister's interference."

"Yes," agreed Robert.

"Do hurry," exclaimed Camilla impatiently.

"Well, the Sister left and Nurse Jennings was twice interrupted before she got the babies washed, dressed and back into their cots. By that time, she said, she was scared stiff, for she simply didn't know which was which!"

"My God!" Camilla's voice came between her fingers. "She made that mistake and said nothing! She left us to face this terrible thing thirteen years later! I was right, wasn't I? My instinct told me truly. Oh, if only I'd done something about it then!" She threw herself into her chair and broke into wild crying.

Phylis came to the door and looked in at them.

"What have you found out?" she asked.

"We're pretty certain, Mrs. Rendel," answered Robert, "that what my wife suspected is true. She's very upset."

Camilla's crying had lasted only a few moments. Now she was shaken by silent sobs. She kept twisting a ring on her finger.

"There is no need to do anything about it," said

Phyllis. "We can keep it secret. No one will know but ourselves. It would hurt the boys too terribly."

"I absolutely agree with Mrs. Rendel," said Robert.

"It would turn their world upside-down," she continued, "and just at the age when they need steadying. I don't know anything about Palmer, but Mark is a very sensitive boy."

"It might ruin their lives." Robert spoke as though in fear of interruption. "The Press may be different in England but in America such an occurrence would be front-page news."

"What we must do now," said Phyllis, "is to forget about this meeting and go our separate ways. On my part, I am perfectly satisfied with Mark."

"And I with Palmer," added Robert conclusively.

The other two sat silent, looking into the faces of the speakers, but now Captain Rendel said, — "After all, blood is thicker than water. When you discover that the boy you've looked on as your son hasn't one drop of your blood and that another boy is actually yours — it makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Not to me!" exclaimed his wife. "Not to me!" She came into the room and stood facing him. "Mark and I have been mother and son for thirteen years. Nothing can change that. Our lives are so

woven together that any talk of blood-relationship is just nonsense."

Captain Rendel turned to Camilla. "What do you feel about it, Mrs. Wylde?" he asked.

Her clear grey eyes were wide open now. Her hands were steady. So was her voice. She spoke as though she had concentrated with her whole soul on her answer.

"I feel that we are being moved by forces stronger than ourselves and that we must surrender to them — no matter what our desires are. I love Palmer just as much as Mrs. Rendel loves Mark. At the same time my heart goes out to my other son — I'd feel that I'd failed him if I gave him nothing of myself. Perhaps I'd sound conceited if I talked about a sense of duty. But there's something stern in me that tells me clearly I've got to forget self in this and give Mark what it is in me to give — as I have given to Palmer. And it's the same with you others. You can't escape it. If you let your son grow up without ever having known you, you'll commit a sin against him and against yourselves."

"I quite agree," said Captain Rendel.

"If you know what Mrs. Wylde means," said his wife, "it is more than I do."

“It’s clear enough, isn’t it?” answered Camilla. “To some natures truth is so necessary they can’t exist without it.”

Phyllis pressed her fingers against her temples.

“I’m afraid I’m not one of them. It seems to me, Mrs. Wylde, that you are so self-sufficient you don’t really need anyone but yourself. Therefore you are able to take a cool view of this calamity.”

Camilla answered passionately, — “I’m not cool — I’m in a ferment. I feel as though I were drowning. But I still can see the future, and, if we four are to have any peace in it, we’ve got to do what is right now. Let’s go into the other room and talk.”

She led the way. Phyllis Rendel’s hair clung flat against her head on one side and was tousled on the other, her skirt was wrinkled from lying on it. Camilla mechanically went to the couch and plumped the pillows. Robert asked Captain Rendel what he would have to drink.

The two men ordered whiskey and soda. Phyllis would take nothing. It was three o’clock but no one was hungry.

“Do you mind if I open a window?” asked Captain Rendel. He opened one and a light breeze and the roar of traffic came in. He sat down where

the breeze blew on him and said to Camilla :

“ I think you have some plan in your mind.”

Robert drank half of his whiskey and soda and passed his hand over his face. He looked anxiously at Camilia. But Phyllis stared stubbornly straight ahead of her. Camilla sat poised, ready to speak. She said :

“ We’re changing all the time, aren’t we ? Every crisis turns us into a new person. We just have to make ourselves big enough to meet it or we’re overwhelmed by it. I do believe we can meet this — without hurting ourselves too terribly and without hurting the children at all.” The words came rushing from her lips that were set in tense lines. “ Now why can’t we divide Mark and Palmer between their two homes ? Teach them to love the parents they’ve never known, as well as those they’ve always known. We’d not tell them anything to shock them. We’d see how Palmer got on with you and how Mark got on with us — just as visitors. Then — when they are older and each has adjusted himself to the new life — we’ll tell them everything. We’ll tell them that it will simply mean that they have two homes instead of one — four parents to love them and guide them, instead of two.” As she finished her eyes were bright with tears.

“ I will never give up Mark,” said Phyllis Rendel.