

## CHAPTER. IV

**B**UT she did agree to give him up for a year. That first day they could not persuade her and indeed Robert did not try. He just sat miserably listening to the persuasions of the other two. He knew that Camilla was sincere in her conviction that the boys should learn to love their original as well as their adopted parents. He knew that Captain Rendel believed blood to be thicker than water. But it went bitterly against his grain to uproot the two young creatures from all to which they were accustomed, with the prospect ever in view of telling them the disintegrating truth. It hurt him dreadfully to see Phyllis Rendel with that look, as it were, of being at bay while her husband and Camilla argued round and round the subject.

They separated, with her still resisting, but Robert could see that she would finally give in. It was her own mother, Mrs. Stuart-Grattan, who at last per-

suaded her. Phyllis had poured out the story to her, hoping to have her support, but her mother said it would be impossible to let Palmer grow up knowing nothing of his British heritage, knowing nothing of his kin. She saw no reason why the two boys should be injured by having two homes instead of one, and, with the world as it was, it might be of great benefit to them to be familiar with both England and America.

Phyllis felt worn out. She gave in. She would not see the Wyldes again in London but Captain Rendel had a long talk with them. He invited them to spend the following week-end at his house in the Cotswolds.

The first thing Camilla did was to buy Palmer a supply of clothes from one of the best London shops. "He must look like the English boys," she said, "so he'll not feel embarrassed. Boys are so queer."

Palmer was exhilarated by his new wardrobe. Before leaving home Camilla had made it clear to him that, as so much money was being spent on him in this trip abroad, any clothes that were bought should be bought for his sisters. But now all was changed. He was decked in fine raiment. Gifts were poured out on him. It seemed that he had only to ask for a thing and it was handed to him. Not so long ago he had considered clothes as no more than a con-

cession to grown-up decorum. The raggeder and dirtier they were the better he had liked them. But lately a change had come over him. He had begun to cast appraising looks at his reflection in the mirror. He had begun to notice the colour of his tie.

Now, in these smart new suits, he greatly fancied himself. He looked into his parents' eyes in humble affection that they should do so much for him.

At the end of the week they took the train for Stroud on their way to Oakley Manor, the Rendels' place.

It was almost a three hours' journey by train. They had a first-class carriage to themselves. Robert had provided an armful of illustrated weeklies and the latest American newspapers he could find. But they read little. Their eyes were charmed by the loveliest revealing of springtime in all the world: hedges white with may; streams shining blue between the verdant meadows; primrose wreaths growing, as though arranged, in field corners; flocks of rotund sheep, their lambs running from play to press a full udder; hayricks, two-thirds sliced off for winter fodder; shadows of birds flitting across the grass. The time passed quickly. Palmer had never been so restful on a train journey.

He sat opposite Robert and, when their eyes met, they smiled. Robert had felt that he and Palmer, as the boy grew older, were going to be good friends, companions even, though he himself was too busy a man to spend as much time as he would have liked with his children. He felt a little more cheerful at the thought of parting with Palmer than he had when the decision was first reached. After all, a year would soon pass. He had fair hopes that neither boy would make himself the object of great affection in his new home. On his part he would oppose with all his force any revelation of the truth to them before they reached manhood. He had stated this to Camilla very strongly and she had been surprisingly acquiescent. She had seemed satisfied with the knowledge that she was to have Mark with her for a time and that Palmer was to absorb the atmosphere that, by birth, was his heritage.

They left the train at Stroud. A slender dark boy of seventeen came up to them with an easy welcome on his handsome face.

“I’m Clive Rendel,” he said. “I’ve come to meet you.”

They shook hands and he led them to an old-fashioned but well-kept car.

“ We have a car that’s a little less archaic,” he said, as they settled themselves and their luggage, “ but this is roomier.”

The car moved smoothly but he was a reckless driver. Robert felt decidedly on edge but Camilla seemed not to mind, even though in their own car she often irritated him by her nervousness. Now she talked gaily with young Rendel, not seeming to notice how he skimmed corners concealed by hedges or all but grazed the wheels of lorries. Happily they soon left the town and were in the open road among the hills.

The hills rolled, unbelievably green, in every direction. It was as though nature had forgotten everything but humps and hollows. She rounded herself in daisied hills. She sank herself in verdant hollows. She tried new shapes, then cast them aside and returned with love to the rising and sinking. Sometimes a stone house rose on a hill-top or a little farm pressed for room between two hills. Sometimes the eye was held by the golden shine of a newly thatched cottage. Robert had a feeling that he would like to live here, far away from crowds and business. Though he never complained, he often got very tired.

Captain Rendel came out to the car to meet them. He was friendly and seemed determined to make this difficult situation pass off as easily as possible. A maid-servant carried in the travelling-bags. Up here the wind blew strong and very cool. Sometimes it blew in clear, wild gusts between the hills, sometimes whistled steadily above them. This would be a stormy spot !

Oakley Manor had stood against its storms since the days of Queen Elizabeth, and from that time the Rendels had lived there from one generation to another, their characteristics modified by the changes of the centuries but in their essence still the same. The house was of Cotswold stone and many-gabled. The chimneys were tall and severe in outline but the glossy ivy leaves reached upward to embrace them. The steep roof was shingled by Cotswold stone that, through the centuries, had acquired a peculiar golden stain which gave it the effect of being sunlit even on dull days. But, above all, the walls had for so long been the bulwark of human passions and sufferings, against the world outside ; had risen above the darkness of death, guarded the mystery of many births, survived the fall of royal dynasties and the rise of others, remained unchanged in the changefulness of

the ages, so that the house was as true to the hills as they to it and no one could look at it without feeling in it a noble value that, in a sense, was greater than the value of man or nature.

Camilla, Robert and Palmer felt this in their different ways. It gave Camilla a rapt sensation. She wanted to absorb it into her own being, to carry it away with her, as something from which she would never part. It moved her to realize that Palmer, who was her boy and always would be, in spite of everything, had sprung from here. It filled her with wonder that this should be so and he show nothing alien to the New World in his characteristics.

Robert was conscious of the speed at which his own life was passing and of how little leisure he had had for the fulness of living. He had a moment's envy of Dick Rendel standing there with, it seemed, all the time in the world on his hands. He thought of long quiet days among these hills. He thought of the preciousness of life and how hard it was to close one's hand on it.

Palmer had no conscious thought, but, for a moment, he gave himself up to a thorough survey of the house. He drank it in, smiled, then nudged Robert with his elbow.

“Hey, Boss,” he said, “I wish you’d buy one like that. I like it.”

Tea was waiting in the drawing-room. Phyllis Rendel was very different from the woman they had met in London. Now she had control of herself, had made up her mind to go through with the ordeal demanded of her, and showed outward cheerfulness, at least. Camilla watched her as she shook hands with Falmer. It was odd how she kept her eyes averted from him. She looked straight at Robert and Camilla but never gave Palmer more than a swift glance.

“I’m sure you must be hungry,” she said, pouring the tea.

They had seated themselves in the pale room. The walls were panelled in faded damask, pale china figures were grouped in cabinets. An English setter was lying on the white hearth-rug.

“I never want to drive that car again !” exclaimed young Clive. “One might as well drive the Lord Mayor’s coach. You should have seen the faces of our guests when they beheld it.”

Camilla laughed. “On the contrary, we simply loved it. We’ve never had such a perfect drive.”

Clive devoured a tea-cake in one bite. Palmer did not quite know what to do with himself. He was

relieved when Mark appeared in the doorway, followed by a boy about a year younger. Mark came at once and shook hands with the Wylde. There was an electric tension in the room. Phyllis said, as though carefully arranging her words :

“ You younger boys are to have tea in the nursery. Nanny will have it waiting.”

“ Jumping Jerusalem,” thought Palmer, “ tea in the *nursery* ! ”

Phyllis added casually, — “ This is my youngest son. Humphrey, come and speak to Mr. and Mrs. Wylde.”

The boy came forward with a shy assurance.

“ Three boys ! ” exclaimed Camilla. “ I don't think you mentioned this one.”

“ There was so much else to talk about,” said Phyllis Rendel.

Easy to see, thought Camilla, why she had not spoken of her youngest son. There was no such striking resemblance between him and Palmer as between Mark and Robert, but anyone seeing the two boys in the room together might have guessed they were brothers. Humphrey was more fair, his cheeks were pinker, but there were the long-lashed hazel eyes, the same curve to the lips ! The three young

boys went off together. Their feet clattered noisily up the oak stairway.

Captain Rendel spoke little. His thoughts were concentrated on the complicated arrangements that must be made. Robert, too, had little to say. He felt extraordinarily unreal. If the solid stone house had dissolved like a mirage, leaving him on a stark hillside alone, he would have felt no more unreal. But Clive made up for their lack of conversation. He looked admiringly, as he talked and laughed, at Camilla and the clothes she wore. Phyllis encouraged him as though she would postpone the moment when they four would be left alone together.

Captain Rendel moved impatiently in his chair. He said at last :

“ Clive, I wish you'd go and tell Fletcher to be sure to order that hay tonight.”

“ I did tell him,” returned Clive amiably.

“ Then tell him again. You know how forgetful he is.”

Clive was gone. The tea-things had been taken away. Dick Rendel had gone to both doors and closed them carefully. He returned to his chair, sat down and lighted a cigarette. Then he said :

“ Mark's been told.”

Robert started up aghast. "You have told him!" he repeated.

"Well, of course, not everything. Simply that a splendid opportunity has turned up for him to experience something of American life. I asked him how he would like to visit you in Boston for a time. I told him that your boy would spend an equal time with us. He said he thought it would be a good idea. He said he'd love to go to Boston."

"Did he?" said Robert. "Well, you got off easily. I'm afraid it won't be so simple as all that with Palmer. You see, he's an only son, and, I'm afraid, sort of spoilt."

"He may be frightfully homesick," said Phyllis. "The ocean seems very wide to a child. Do you think you had better risk it?"

"He will get over that," said Dick Rendel.

"I'll talk to him. I'll explain to him what a wonderful time he'll have." A tremor of emotion came into Camilla's voice. "Poor little darling — when I think of the callous cruelty of that nurse, I could kill her!"

Phyllis returned hotly, — "Then why should we add cruelty to cruelty?"

"My God, Phyllis," exclaimed Dick Rendel,

“we’ve had all this out before ! We’ve decided that we parents cannot let our boys grow up in a foreign country and have no say in their upbringing.”

“You and Mrs. Wylde decided it,” she answered sullenly. “I think Mr. Wylde feels as I do.”

“It’s certainly hard to part with the youngsters even for a year,” said Robert.

Camilla’s eyes flashed. “Are you willing to live a lie?” she demanded.

“Most of us do, in one way or another,” answered Phyllis.

“I don’t ! I must have truth or I can’t survive.”

Dick Rendel put in wearily, — “We’ve gone over all this before. Anyhow it’s only an experiment. If it doesn’t turn out well we can exchange the boys at any time. They know nothing of what we are going through. Mark is delighted at the thought of a visit to America and I’m pretty sure Palmer will be happy with us. It seems to me unnatural that any parent should have no curiosity about the child they begot or gave birth to.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Camilla, “I’m full of curiosity about Mark. He’s such an interesting boy. Robert took to him the moment he met him, didn’t you, Robert?”

"I certainly did."

"I have no curiosity," said Phyllis. Then she sat silent while the others made arrangements.

"I expect that the schooling will present a difficulty," said Dick Rendel. "English and American methods are pretty different, aren't they? Mark was to enter Eton at the Michaelmas term. The examination is in May. I imagine I can arrange for a special exam. for Palmer, if we find he needs it. I have a few wires I can pull. What about his Latin? You don't go in very strongly for the classics in America, do you?"

"I'm afraid," said Robert, "you'll find him behind in Latin. But he's a real bright boy, with a good memory. He has always stood well in his grades."

"Good. I can't say that Mark is studious. But he is intelligent. He's very fond of reading and he's good at games too. He's going to make a fine cricketer."

"They play baseball in America."

Dick Rendel blew out his cheeks. Then he said, —  
"Of course, I'd forgotten that."

The three talked on and on.