

## CHAPTER V

PALMER and Mark, who had been born under the same roof in London, now again woke under the same roof. They had lain side by side in their two cots in the nursing home ; now they woke side by side in a big four-poster with the April sun already shining through the small diamond-paned casement. The curtains of the bed were faded to a strange dun colour, so was the quilt that lay on them. Their combined clothing lay strewn over chairs and floor. The bleating of lambs came in at the open casement, and the sound of a mower.

“ Hello,” said Mark. “ Sleep well ? ”

“ You bet.”

“ Feel ready for anything ? ”

“ Sure ! ”

“ Do you like fishing ? ”

“ Yeh.”

“ Good. We’ll have some. I hope they don’t

make us go to church.”

“Gosh, I hope not.”

They stared into each other's eyes. Mark's had a speculative look in them. He was finding it hard to keep his father's injunction to say nothing to Palmer of the proposed visits. He could not resist asking :

“Would you like to stay here for a bit ?”

“You bet I would.”

“You could have a pretty good time.”

“We've got to go tomorrow. My father's got to attend to his business.”

“What does he do ?”

“He's head of an insurance company. What does yours do ?”

“That's pretty obvious, isn't it ?”

“What ?”

“Army, of course. He got the V.C. in the Great War.”

“Gosh, did he ? If there is another war will he fight ?”

“He was badly wounded in the last. Both his brothers were killed.”

“Say, that was too bad ! Are you going into the Army ?”

“I think so. I'm not quite sure.” He hesitated

and then added, — “ I wish I could visit America.”

“ C’mon over and see us. We’d give you a whale of a time.”

“ Perhaps I shall.”

They stared into each other’s eyes. They grinned. Then Palmer’s hand stole across the sheet. His fingers found a tender spot between Mark’s ribs. Mark doubled up. Then he pushed a knee into Palmer’s middle. They rolled and twisted, choking with laughter. The four-poster creaked beneath them. Their noise attracted Humphrey and he came bounding in from the next room. There was a pillow-fight. In the midst of it Mrs. Maltby, the nurse, bustled in. She was short, stout, with rosy cheeks and round light eyes. She wore a grey cotton dress and large white apron. She scolded them energetically, but plainly was exhilarated by such scenes.

“ Such carryings-on ! ” she exclaimed, “ making rags and tatters of the pillow-cases ! You’ll come straight to your breakfast or you’ll get none. Look at your clothes ! Pick your jacket up at once, Mark ! Humphrey, let me look at your ears ! ” She took Humphrey off to his own room.

“ He’s her darling,” observed Mark: “ You’ll soon discover that. If you want to have Nanny in

your hair, just hurt Humphrey."

"It seems kinda funny," said Palmer, getting into his shirt, "for fellows of your age to have a nurse around."

Mark was unembarrassed. "I expect we shall always have Nanny about," he said. "She was Clive's nurse. Now she looks after the linen in term time and after us in the hols."

The boys had breakfast with her in what was once the nursery. A large rocking-horse stood in one corner and there were cupboards full of toys. There were kippers and toast for breakfast. Palmer did not care much for either but he was in holiday mood and ready to accept what came his way. The meal was a series of under-the-table scuffings among the boys, and reprimands from Mrs. Maltby. They drank tea instead of milk and Palmer noticed how Humphrey was waited upon by the nurse, who even spread the marmalade on his toast.

After breakfast they went to the stables. Palmer had inspected the four hunters the evening before. Now they went from stall to stall, feeding them sugar, Mark and Humphrey pointing out their various characteristics.

"Do you hunt?" asked Mark.

“ No. But I learned to ride last summer at camp.”

“ What camp ? ” asked Humphrey.

“ Camp Kagamakoon.”

Mark gave a shout of laughter. “ Lord, what a name ! ”

Palmer answered rather huffily, — “ It’s Indian. We’ve lots of Indian names.”

“ Was the camp good fun ? ”

“ Pretty good.”

“ Tell me about it.”

Mark listened eagerly while Palmer described, with fair exaggeration, the doings at the summer camp. Mark drew a deep breath.

“ I wonder if I shall go there,” he said.

Palmer stared. “ You ? ”

“ Well, I might one day, you know.” He reddened at what he had almost said. To take Palmer’s mind off it he exclaimed :

“ What about fishing ? Cut into the house, Humphrey, and ask Dad if we may go.”

Humphrey ran off obediently. In a short space he was back. He said, — “ Daddy says we may go. But your mother wants to see you first, Palmer. She’s up in her room. Daddy told me to send you there before we go fishing.”

“Great gosh, what does she want now!” exclaimed Palmer. He had been for so many weeks deprived of the companionship of other boys that he did not want to waste a moment. He entered Camilla’s room with a pucker on his fair forehead and a look that warned her to be brief and to the point. She came to meet him, kissed him, then closed the door.

“Say, Mom,” he began, “I’m in an awful hurry. I——”

“Palmer”—she could not control the tremor in her voice—“you will just have to wait a little while. I’ve something terribly important to say to you.” Then she laughed and pressed him against her side. “Well, I needn’t be so solemn about it. It’s going to be just heaps of fun for you. I guess you can’t imagine what these nice Rendels have suggested.”

“The only Rendels I care about have suggested goin’ fishin’,” he said.

She drew him on to a settee beside her. He saw that intense look come over her face which meant that, on his part, the struggle was lost before it was begun. He did not yet know what it was about but he sensed something he was not going to like, and he stiffened himself against her hand that was stroking the back of his neck.

“Listen, Palmer. You know how often I have said that it’s my ambition you should play an important part in the life of your country. Now nothing will help you to do this so much as knowing other countries. I mean, the way people live in other countries, especially England, which speaks the same language as we do and has the same ideals.”

“You’ve always said,” he objected, “that nothing would help me as much as studying hard at school.”

“Yes, I did say that, when you were younger. But now you’re old enough to benefit by travel. That’s why your father and I brought you on this expensive trip.”

“I thought us kids were just taking turns and that it was my turn,” he said argumentatively. “Honey-Lou says she’s coming over and she ain’t going to help govern America, is she?”

“She may. Who knows?”

“Well, if she does, I don’t want to be there.”

“That is not what we are discussing, Palmer.”

“Well, it’s important to me.”

She forced herself to be patient. “I know it is, darling. But what I am going to tell you about is something that’s got to be settled immediately.”

He wriggled. “Mark’s waiting for me to go fishing.”

“ Now listen, Palmer. When you hear what I am going to tell you, you’ll agree it means more to you than the best fishing in the world.”

He was interested in spite of himself.

“ Captain Rendel has invited you,” she went on a little breathlessly, “ to have a real good visit here. Isn’t that kind ? You’ll live just like an English boy. You’ll learn all about English life. Your mind will be broadened. You’ll come back to America with all sorts of new ideas. You’ll have a grand time.”

“ How can Poppa take the time off from business ? ”

She gave him a deep look that somehow brought him a feeling of apprehension.

“ Your father and I can’t stay,” she said gently. “ I only wish we could. But we have our responsibilities at home. You understand that, don’t you, darling ? ”

He drew back from her.

“ You’re not talking about leaving me here all alone, are you ? ” he said.

“ Alone ! Now, Palmer, that’s not like you. You went off to camp last year and just loved it.” She hurried on. “ The idea is that you’ll stay here and study English life and Mark will go back with us and study American life. Mark thinks it’s a grand idea.”

“Mark never said a word about it to me.”

“He was told not to, not till you and I had had a talk. But he’s just delighted at the opportunity to see America.”

“Then let him come back with us,” said Palmer loudly. “I’d like to have him. I’d sure like to have him. I’m not going to stay here!” His mouth quivered.

“Now listen, Palmer. Your father and Captain and Mrs. Rendel and I have gone to a lot of trouble to arrange this for you two boys. You’re not going to spoil everything, are you, by making a fuss? You’re not going to make me feel ashamed of you because you’re not as manly as Mark, are you? Why, the time will pass so quickly you’ll hardly realize it. It won’t be very different to going to boarding-school, will it?”

“I was home every week-end from school. I—I knew you and Poppa were there.” Tears were almost choking him. “I had friends at school. Here I’d be alone. I’d have no one. Besides—there’s the ocean.”

“The ocean?”

He answered fiercely, — “Well, it’s pretty wide, isn’t it?”

“ You said yourself what a little while it took us to come over ! ”

“ Glory, Mom, can't you see the difference between crossing the ocean with your family and staying behind with it between you and them ? ”

Camilla gave a tender little laugh. She took him in her arms. “ Of course I see. And I'll feel just as badly as you. But I'm not letting myself think of my present suffering. Only of your future good. And I *know* what a lovely time you'll have here. I *know* what kind of people you'll be with.”

“ How can you tell ? They may be just on their best behaviour. You hardly know them.”

“ Darling, I met them years and years ago when you were just a baby.”

“ If Mark was staying it wouldn't be so bad.”

She felt that he was weakening. She was shocked then when he dropped to his knees on the floor, covered his face with his hands and began to cry. “ I don't want to be left,” he sobbed. “ I don't want to be left.”

The door opened and Robert came in. With his face full of concern he bent over Palmer.

“ What's the matter, old man ? ” he asked. Palmer did not reply. He just stretched out his arms and

wrapped them about Robert's legs. "Oh, Boss," he sobbed, "don't make me stay here! I want to go home!"

Robert took him under his arms and heaved him to his feet. He sat down with him on his knee. Palmer cast himself on Robert's breast.

Camilla sprang up and walked about the room.

"I never dreamed," she said, "that we'd have to go through a scene like this. I thought Palmer had more intelligence and self-control."

"Well, you can't expect him not to be sort of upset, Camilla." Robert's face was heavy with concern.

"I did expect it! And I expected you to help me instead of hindering me."

Palmer raised his head and glared at her.

"Then it was all your idea!" he said.

She came and knelt before him, raising her fine grey eyes to his. She took his hands in hers.

"We four parents have all agreed that the exchange will be a wonderful experience for you and Mark. But — perhaps because I have more imagination than the others — I see more clearly what it may mean to your future."

Robert's arms about him had calmed him. He

said, — “ Do you mean it might help me to grow up to be President or something ? ”

“ I do indeed. Difficult times are ahead of us and we need leaders of international outlook.”

Robert heaved a sigh.

“ I’ll tell you what, Palmer,” he said, “ if you’ll do this, without any more fuss, I’ll buy you that rifle we saw in the store window in Boston. It’s really far too expensive a one for a boy, but I’ll buy it for you as soon as you come home.”

“ When could I come back home ? ”

Robert looked enquiringly at Camilla.

She answered quickly, — “ We’ll not set any exact time. We’ll see how you get on.”

“ But I wanta know.”

“ Well . . . you’ll have the summer in Cornwall. Then in the fall we’ll find out how you are getting on, and, if you’re getting on all right, we’ll make it a little longer.”

“ And if I’m not getting on all right — what then ? ”

“ Palmer, we must not think of that. We must feel that you’ll get along gloriously. I *know* you will. I feel it in the very depths of me.”

He looked unconvinced but he had lost the battle.

Camilla held up Mark's example to him, emphasized the pleasures in store. Robert talked of the rifle. They persuaded him.

Half an hour later Camilla led him into the bathroom and, wetting her own face-cloth under the cold-water tap, pressed it to his hot eyes. He raised his eyes to her in gratitude. He felt a tiny boy again, yet strangely lonely.

Camilla said, — "Always remember, Palmer, that no one loves you as I do. That is why I am so ambitious for you. That is why I want you always to see the light of reason and truth. Nothing else will do."

He had a queer, emptied-out feeling as he ran across the tender green grass of the lawn to meet the other boys, who were to wait for him by a door in the wall that led to the meadow. Perhaps it was because he had cried, his eyes been wetted by salty water, that colours looked deeper, more intense to him. There was an odd unreality about the lovely springtime scene.

The other boys were waiting, fishing-rods in hand. They confronted him accusingly.

"We thought you'd gone back to bed," said Mark. "What the dickens were you doing?"

“ I had to have a talk with my father and mother.”

“ Oh, what a good little boy ! ” exclaimed Humphrey. “ He had to have a nice Sunday-morning talk with his dear parents ! ”

“ Shut up,” said Mark. “ Well, there’s no time to spare if we’re going to get any fishing before lunch. Come along.” He led the way through the ivy-hung door.

“ Bags to choose my fly first,” said Humphrey.

“ You’re to take what’s given you,” returned Mark.

“ Bags to use the rod that was Uncle Harry’s.”

“ Palmer is going to use that.”

The wind was in their faces. The meadow sloped down and down. Below, the stream showed itself bright among the willows. A thrush was singing the sweetest notes he knew. Playful twin lambs left the flock and ran alongside the boys.

When they reached the stream Mark, in a business-like way, opened the book of bright-coloured flies and scanned them. From them he cast a contemplative look at the stream. It was fed at this spot by a glassy, transparent spring and was the colour of whey. A little lower down, large stones had been placed in the stream to make homes for the fish. Now the

stones were moss-covered and the water rippled and curled itself about them.

“What sort of fly shall I give you?” mused Mark. “A Blue Dun? An Alder? Why, I’ll tell you! I’ll give you a Palmer! That’s the ticket? Eh, Humphrey?”

“Sure,” said Palmer. “I’d like a Palmer. I didn’t know there was a Palmer. I didn’t know flies had names. At home I fish with a hook and worm.”

“That’s good fun too.” He gave a slanting look at Palmer, then turned to Humphrey. “Look here,” he said. “You go a bit farther down. Two of us are enough here. Besides, you can’t stop talking.”

“But I want to stay here.”

Mark turned on him sharply. “Will you do what you’re told!”

Humphrey grumbled a little but he moved down the stream. A cock pheasant rose with a startled cry. A cuckoo gave his deep, muffled note. Mark and Palmer exchanged a long look. Then Mark said:

“So you know all about it.”

“Yeh.” Palmer bit his lip.

“How do you like the idea?”

“I guess it’s all right. But I wish we were going to be together.”

“ So do I. I wish you could stay here for six months and then I could go to America for six months. We could do everything together.”

“ That would be swell.”

“ Of course you’ll have Humphrey, but he’s an awful little ass in some ways. See that you keep him in order. You have to take a firm stand with him.”

“ That’ll be O.K. . . . Say, Mark, do you s’pose it’s going to do us a lot of good ? ”

“ Do you mean exchanging homes for a while ? ”

“ Yeh. I mean, do you think it would help me to get on in the world later on ? • Not to be President, of course, but something or other ? ”

Mark laughed. “ I don’t expect it will help us much, but it will be a lark. And I expect my father is right when he says it will be an experience we’ll never lose. We’ll never be just the same sort of boys again.” His contemplative eyes rested on Palmer’s troubled face.

“ I think you’ll like it,” he said. “ My father is a good sort, and my mother is never fussy. Humphrey’s a pest sometimes, but, if you keep him down, he’s all right. Clive will give you advice when you want it and lots of times when you don’t. We’ll write to each other often and compare notes, shall we ? You

give me the low-down on my country and I'll do the same for yours."

Talking with Mark, Palmer felt immensely cheered. The future seemed somehow bearable. If only Mark were going to stay with him he felt that he could better bear being left behind in England. There was something comforting in Mark. It was rather like having his father beside him.

Mark was soon absorbed in giving him lessons in casting his line. He instructed him with great earnestness, as though Palmer's future hung on his ability to cast the olive-coloured fly as a living thing on the surface of the brook. They caught half-pounders where, later in the season, four-pounders would be killed.

When they turned homeward, Humphrey ran up to them. He was jubilant at having caught as many trout as they two together. He was jealous of the quick intimacy between Mark and Palmer. To show off, he ran up behind a sheep which was drinking by a pool and suddenly pushed it in. There was wild commotion in the pool as the poor sheep floundered and finally got herself out. She stood shaking her woolly body while consternation looked out of her pale-lashed eyes.

Across the fields came the striking of the clock in the stable tower. The boys began to run, laughing and jostling each other, the trout bouncing about in their fishing-baskets. Palmer thought he could be happy here if only Mark might stay with him.