

## CHAPTER VII

SCHOOLS in America close at the middle of June but in England the holidays do not begin till the end of July. July seemed very long. The sun beat down hotly on the streets of Malvern, though to Palmer, inured to Boston's climate, it threw only a mild warmth. Still it was sometimes a relief when the hills rose in their grandeur and drew their curtain across its brightness.

July had much thunder weather. The air was close and full of rumours of war. Sometimes Mr. Cutler forgot the cramming of his pupils and gave them his opinion on international affairs. Every late afternoon the boys went into the streets which had become so familiar. Every day they had ice-cream, for both had plenty of pocket-money. They bought fresh fruit and ate it in the public gardens, or in the graveyard in the shadow of the Abbey. Sometimes, in the gardens, Palmer would hear American voices and strain his

ears to catch what they were saying. Once he heard an old lady say she was from Boston and, before he could stop himself, he broke out with :

“H’ya, Ma’am, I’m from Boston too !”

They had a long conversation. She was staying on for the Drama Festival. She knew members of his family in Massachusetts. She invited the boys to the Abbey Hotel to tea with her.

The time had come for leaving. Palmer strained toward it but Corbold looked miserable. Good spirits and appetite had left him. He kept on saying how he wished he might spend the holidays with Palmer. He made Palmer feel old and responsible.

At last Dick Rendel came with his car to fetch Palmer. He looked sharply at him as they shook hands.

“You look a bit pale,” he said. “Have you been well?”

“Yes, I’m O.K. Do you remember David Corbold? I guess we’ll have to say good-bye now, David.”

Mr. Cutler had already told of Palmer’s fair progress so there was no need for delay. Dick Rendel found the atmosphere of the house depressing. He wanted to get away. Before leaving he turned to Corbold and said :

“ I went to Sandhurst with a chap named Corbold. I was with him afterward in Mesopotamia. I wonder if he'd be related to you.”

“ My father's name is Roger,” said Corbold. “ And he was in Mesopotamia.”

“ By George, it's the same man ! He's stationed in India now, isn't he ? Where are you spending your holidays ? ”

“ He's spending them here,” said Palmer quickly. “ He's nowhere else to go.”

Dick Rendel looked down into their two faces.

“ Like to spend a fortnight with us in Cornwall ? ” he asked.

So lightly was despair changed to joy for Corbold.

His things took up little room. The boys squeezed themselves into the two-seater beside Dick Rendel. He asked them many questions about their work and how they had enjoyed themselves. At first they were cautious, then they gave their unvarnished opinion of Mrs. Cutler's catering, and, with some embellishment, told of the affair of Ames.

“ But why did he come into your room at night and lick you ? ” asked Dick.

“ He just got that way,” answered Palmer. “ He'd some sort of complex.”

“He was a swine,” said Corbold. “But we got even with him. You should have seen his face, all covered with blood and egg.”

Dick Rendel laughed delightedly.

Palmer admired the way Mrs. Rendel took the news of an unexpected boy's going to Cornwall with them. She even seemed glad to have little Corbold. But Palmer had a queer feeling that himself she didn't like. There was a look in her eyes when they rested on him, as though she tried not to see him. Yet she sometimes looked at him so intently that it made him uncomfortable. He was glad his own mother wasn't queer like Mrs. Rendel. There was clearness in his mother's eyes and you knew what she was thinking.

It was fine to be back at Oakley Manor. He had a feeling of pride, of knowing all about it, as he and Corbold dashed about the grounds and followed the curves of the stream, now winding its way among the rich herbage of summer. There had been a week of rain and storm but now calm had come and a tranquil blue sky. Every flower and blade of grass was bowed with its weight of moisture. Fields of corn stood golden-red waiting to be cut, but not so bright as the gay poppies that massed among it. Ox-eye daisies, swinging harebells, blue crane's-bill grew beside the

hedges where wild clematis and pink roses found support for their climbing.

The food was so good. The tender meat, the rich milk, the home-made bread, the big, ripe, golden gooseberries, the honey in the comb, all were exhilarating to boyish stomachs. Then there was the comfort of the good beds, the fine sheets, the downy pillows. Mrs. Maltby made much of them in the two days that passed before the return of Clive and Humphrey. She too made Palmer a little uncomfortable by her way of looking at him. Once she put her hands on either side of his face and held it still. She smiled but then she shook her head and drew a deep breath. "There sure is something funny about me," thought Palmer.

"Is there something funny about my face?" he asked Corbold.

Corbold looked at him judicially. "Well," he agreed, "it is rather funny."

"Am I hard to look at?" asked Palmer anxiously.

"Not to me. But then I'm used to you."

Corbold and Humphrey took to each other at first sight. Indeed Palmer felt a little chagrin when the two of them tore off together to inspect some treasure of Humphrey's.

In a few days they all were packed into two cars and set forth for Cornwall. The Rendels' house was on a bay on the north coast. It was stone, plastered and whitewashed. The windows looked right out across the sea. It was very different from the Atlantic of the New England coast to which Palmer was used, for it stretched in streaks of sapphire blue, jade green, apple green and rose. He shared a room with the two younger boys. He suddenly found himself grown beyond them. He found himself full of strange and mysterious thoughts. He wanted to wander among the rock-pools, staring down into the miniature forests that grew there, or lie stretched on his back listening to the pounding of the breakers or the steady inward-pressing tide. Or he would wander on the cliffs, high above the sea, where the grass was cropped short by sheep and their little black droppings lay like dark berries. He had never before heard a skylark. Now he would stare skyward while a winging speck mounted up and up, while song dripped down like silver rain.

One day Dick Rendel said to him, — "I think you like England pretty well, don't you, Palmer?"

"It's swell," answered Palmer promptly. Dick looked intently at the end of the cigarette he was

smoking, and then asked, — “ How would you like to live in England? I mean — how would you like to be an Englishman? ”

“ I'd like it fine if I'd been born one. But I'm an American and I'd go nuts if I thought I had to be anything else.”

Dick gave a sudden bark of laughter. “ You're a character, Palmer,” he said.

One day an odd thing happened. The three boys had gone to a sandy cove to bathe. They splashed and wrestled in the incoming waves, then lay on the sand for a while. Palmer was very cold, for he was used to the tepid water of a New Hampshire lake. He had never liked sea bathing. His pleasure was to stay in the water for an hour. Now he drew a damp towel about him and burrowed into the sand. Humphrey and David were talking sheer nonsense. He lay listening to them, thinking what kids they were. A flock of gulls came walking toward them across the glistening sand. There was the sweet sucking sound of the incoming wavelets. The boys crept higher up on the sand to avoid getting wet again. It was time to go home but they could not make up their minds to leave. At last Humphrey sat up and looked about him. He exclaimed :

“ I say, we'd better cut for home.”

The two rocky points that embraced the cove were already touched by the tide. The boys jumped up and began to run but their feet sank in the soft sand. When they reached the point of rock, rough waves were tumbling against it, slithering back to disclose the jagged surface beneath, then surging forward with renewed strength. They knew they dare not attempt to round the point. Yet above, the cliff rose steeply.

“ Gee — are we in a spot ? ” said Palmer.

“ We can get up,” answered Humphrey. He began climbing nimbly.

But they could not do it. They were forced to remain on a ledge over which, in another half-hour, the waves would curl. They stood, a forlorn little group, waving their towels and shouting. They were not yet really frightened.

But, as the tide grew ever closer, the first chill of panic crept over them.

“ Now,” said Palmer, “ all together ! Yell till you bust ! ” They shouted with all their strength.

A faint cry rose above the sound of the waves, reaching Phyllis Rendel and Clive walking on the cliff. They ran to the edge and peered over.

“ Here we are ! ” shouted Humphrey. “ Come

and save us ! We're drowning !”

Clive gripped a wind-twisted tree at the edge of the cliff with one hand and, with the other, clung to his mother's hand who let herself over the edge. First she drew up David, then Humphrey, then, almost exhausted, Palmer. He was much the heaviest.

She sank down on the grass with him in her arms. The tide had reached his knees. She had saved him just in time. A strange melting sweetness ran through his veins. He relaxed in the shelter of her arms. For a moment she held him close. His face was against her breast. A strange happiness surged through her. For that moment he was hers.

Then Clive lifted her to her feet. “Poor old dear,” he said, supporting her. To the boys he said, — “You kids deserve a damned good hiding !”

After that the days sped quickly. David's visit was extended through the holidays. He grew hardier and happier every day. Cablegrams were exchanged between Dick Rendel and Major Corbold. The result of these was that David was to go to the preparatory school which the Rendel boys had attended. It hurt Phyllis to see how happy the boys were without Mark. “Upon my word,” she said to Humphrey, “you are so taken up with Palmer and David, you

seem never to give a thought to Mark."

"But I do, Mummie, I often think of him. But these boys are here and Mark isn't."

"I suppose, if he never came back, it would be all the same to you," she said bitterly.

"But he is coming back, isn't he?"

"Of course. It's all right, dear. Still, I do like to know you think of him sometimes."

"Indeed I do," said Humphrey, throwing great earnestness into his voice.

Dick had overheard. He said afterward to Phyllis, — "It's scarcely fair to Humphrey to accuse him of forgetting Mark. After all, he's only a child. You can't expect him to keep the absent one in his mind."

"I don't," she returned passionately. "I don't. I expect everyone to be quite resigned to parting with him. I can see how you, for one, are letting that boy take Mark's place with you."

"Phil, do you realize that 'that boy' is your own son?"

"Yes." She spoke stubbornly.

"Well, it makes you seem very harsh."

"I don't care." She turned away.

"Phil, can't you work up an atom of natural feeling for Palmer?"

“ No.”

“ Well, a third of his time here is gone. The rest will soon pass.”

She asked abruptly, — “ What are you going to do if war is declared ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Well, I think if that happens, he ought to be sent home.”

Rendel flushed. “ Sent home, eh ? ”

“ Then you want to keep him and let Mark stay over there ? ”

“ My God, you wilfully misunderstand me ! ”

“ I must say I find you difficult to understand.”

“ All I want is that you should not speak so harshly of Palmer.”

“ I don't speak harshly.”

He got up and strode about the room. The mantel-piece was covered with shells the children had brought from the shore. He picked up one and held it to his ear. The faint purring sound calmed him. After a little he said :

“ What I should like to achieve is some sort of common footing where all six of us could meet and somehow bridge over — what happened in the nursing home.”

“ It can't be bridged over ! ” she cried. “ The only thing to do is to accept it. If we tell the boys nothing and keep on shuttlecocking them back and forth across the Atlantic they will be utterly spoilt. If eventually we tell them the truth, how can it do anything but confuse them and weaken their characters ? They'll feel that they have no real country — no real parents. Oh, I'm sick at heart over the situation ! I wish that woman had died before she brought it about.”

“ Well, well,” he said soothingly, “ we must just try to make the best of it.”

“ There is no best ! ”

He returned somewhat grimly, — “ I expect we shall shortly have things to cope with which will overshadow even this.”

“ You mean war ! ”

“ Yes. I believe it's coming.”

And, within a fortnight, it did.