

CHAPTER VIII

THE weather had been fair for the voyage, which, to Camilla and Mark at least, was full of interest and pleasurable excitement. Her mind was easy about Palmer, for she was sure he was in good hands. She felt that he was at an age when a year in England, part of it spent in an English school, would be splendid experience for him. He would thank her for it later on. And, during that year, here was her other son to become acquainted with, in whom to sow the seeds of a son's love for her. They were equally her sons : one because he had come from her body ; one because she had, for thirteen years, lavished a mother's love on him, and he had known no other mother.

She was proud of Mark on board ship. He seemed older than Palmer and could talk with ease to the people they met. He carried himself with distinction, contrasting to the swaggering walk which Palmer affected and which Robert thought amusing. He

was intelligently interested in everything about him. He was good at games and won a prize for deck tennis. He was full of life and eager for the experiences that lay ahead. Camilla felt that already there was a bond between them.

As for Robert, his business affairs, from which he had been absent longer than he had planned, reached out to clutch at him before he was half-way across the Atlantic. He became preoccupied. His vacation was over and now he must make up for it. He hoped the experiment they were making with the two youngsters would turn out all right. But, when he thought of Palmer, his heart sank. He was going to miss him terribly and he was afraid Palmer would be very homesick. He liked what he saw of Mark but he guessed it would be a long while before he would feel he really knew him. Mark was the product of a very different system.

The day they arrived was unspringlike. The sky was grey and an icy wind swept across the pier. They were delayed in landing because of a fussy Immigration official who had to be convinced that the English boy was being brought into the country with no evil intent. Everyone was delayed, everything held up, while heavy books of rules were produced and searched

for reference. At last Mark was reluctantly granted permission to land and to remain in America for one year.

Their daughters were waiting for Camilla and Robert on the pier. As they hugged their parents the girls poured out their tale of long waiting in the cold. They talked both at once, full of excitement. They had had, just the day before, Robert's letter telling them to expect Mark for a long visit and that Palmer was to remain for a time in England. They greeted Mark with friendly curiosity. Janet, who was eighteen, had her mother's beautiful black hair and clear grey eyes but her features were not so finely cut as Camilla's. There was more softness yet sturdiness about her. Honey-Lou, aged nine, had a turned-up nose, two abrupt pigtales and a piercing voice.

Mark stared out of the window of the taxi to catch every possible glimpse of the city. After London it seemed small and quiet. The girls and Camilla had gone in a taxi together. He was alone with Robert.

Robert pointed out places of interest as they passed. Their two heads were close together. Once Mark gave Robert a swift scrutinizing glance. He decided that he liked Robert very much. It was only a short while till they reached the house in Beacon Street.

The other taxi was already there.

Inside the house Honey-Lou took Mark by the sleeve.

"Come on," she urged, "and I'll show you Palmer's room. You're going to have it while you're here. You're not a scrap like Palmer. Janet says she hopes you behave better."

"I'll try," said Mark gravely.

He suffered himself to be dragged hither and yon by Honey-Lou. He wished Palmer were there! What fun they would have had together! He liked Palmer's room. He noticed what a lot of books, most of them quite new, there were on the bookshelves.

"My brother," said Honey-Lou, "has an English coat and English pants and an English tie. Mommy brought them to him last time she was in London. I'm going next time, but when I go I'll buy my clothes in Paris. Come on downstairs. We're going to eat. Aren't you hungry? I am. I couldn't eat my breakfast. I was too excited."

Camilla greeted them gaily in the living-room.

"Come, children," she cried. "There are sandwiches and coffee waiting!" She put an arm about each. "How do you like our house, Mark?"

"I think it's beautiful," he answered, suddenly shy. Seeing Camilla and Robert with their daughters made him feel an outsider.

Janet offered him sandwiches.

"What sort do you like?" she asked.

"All sorts."

He was hungry. The sandwiches and coffee were delicious.

"Well, it's grand to be home again," said Robert, his arm about Honey-Lou perched on the arm of his chair.

He tried to keep his mind off Palmer, but the youngster's set face, when they had said good-bye, disturbed him. He caressed Honey-Lou's pigtails.

"What are you going to do with Mark?" he asked. "I think you ought to take him out and show him the Common and the Gardens."

"All right. Can we go to the pictures?"

"I think there are other things Mark would rather do."

"It's too cold to do anything else. I want to see *The Wizard of Oz*."

"She's seen it twice already," put in Janet. Honey-Lou glared at her. "I want to see it again."

Robert put his hand in his pocket. "I'll give the

money to Mark." He handed him a dollar.

"Thank you, sir." He turned the money over in his hand. "How much is this? About four shillings?"

"It's a dollar!" Honey-Lou was scornful. "Don't you know a dollar when you see one?"

"If you can't be more polite," said Camilla sternly, "you'll stay at home."

"It's a good thing you're back," said Janet. "She's getting absolutely impossible."

Honey-Lou gripped Mark's hand as they marched along Beacon Street. A pale sunlight brightened the sombre façades of the substantial houses. Mark was exhilarated. He swung Honey-Lou's hand in his.

The little lake in the Gardens was ruffled by the wind. A few children, dressed in heavy dark-coloured snow-suits, played in little groups or walked with their nurses beneath the bare trees. Spring flowers were sending up tentative shoots from the cold earth. Women in fur coats sat on the sunniest benches. The shadows of the bare branches played across the paths. Why, thought Mark, spring has scarcely begun here! He thought of Kensington Gardens and the morning he had run along the paths—it must be three weeks ago—how the trees had been in full leaf, the haw-

thorns in bud, and how the beds of pink and purple hyacinths had blazed against the emerald grass. He remembered the bareheaded, barelegged children, in their fawn or pink or mauve coats, who rode in prams or rolled their hoops alongside.

“ I say, Honey-Lou,” he asked, “ when do you get spring here ? ”

“ Wait and see. It will come good and plenty. You’ll nearly roast.”

They crossed the street and went on to the Common. At the crossing Honey-Lou insisted on buying peanuts to feed the pigeons.

“ But your father didn’t say you could,” said Mark.

“ Who cares ? He gave me the money, didn’t he ? ”

“ No. He gave it to me.”

“ You’re to spend it as I want, he said.”

Mark gave in. They fed the pigeons and he gladly would have stayed on the Common to watch the passers-by, the Italian boys shouting and wrestling, the smartly-dressed negresses ; most interesting of all, the game of baseball progressing in one corner. But there would be time for these things later. He would wander through the streets, find out all about the

State Building with its gilded dome, read the legends on the monuments. He let himself be led by Honey-Lou to *The Wizard of Oz*.

Camilla was submerged in putting her house in order. It was amazing how things got out of order even with a reliable housekeeper left in charge. But it was good to be at home again. She met Robert when he returned from his office, wearing one of her prettiest dinner dresses. Her face was tranquil. She did not look in the least tired.

“How have things gone?” he asked.

“Well, I’m getting some sort of order in the house. But I’ve a lot to do yet. The girls were delighted with their frocks. Janet looks perfectly lovely in that maize one.”

“That’s fine. How’s Mark?”

“Very happy, I think. It’s strange, isn’t it, that he should show no regret at leaving home for a year? There’s something queer about it. Either they are a cold family — I think Mrs. Rendel certainly is — or he just hadn’t a natural affection for them. Of course, he doesn’t show his feelings the way Palmer does.”

“I don’t see how you can possibly think of Mrs. Rendel as cold. She was a good deal more upset at

parting with Mark than you at parting with Palmer." Instantly he wished he had not said that. It would be upsetting to Camilla, just when she was feeling so happy.

Camilla's fine eyes widened. "How could you say such a cruel thing, Robert? You know there were nights when I scarcely slept, before we left England. I felt heart-broken. But what could I do? I was helpless — as we all were!"

"I know, I know. What I meant was that Mrs. Rendel made more fuss at the first."

"She was shocked and she lost her self-control. But later on, when I made the arrangements with her, she was as cold as ice. He's by far the more human of the two."

"Yes, I thought he was quite a nice fellow. How do Mark and Honey-Lou get on together?"

"Oh, she's going to be absolutely devoted to him, as she is to Palmer."

Honey-Lou had come into the room unheard. Now she observed:

"I'm not devoted to Palmer. He's a pest. I'm not devoted to Mark either. He's high-hat. He was bossing me about the whole time we were out, and he says the very name of hot-dog is revolting."

Robert laughed and kissed her. "You're a great girl, Honora-Louise!"

She snuggled against him ecstatically. "My, it's nice to have you back, Daddy! I'm sick and tired of minding that old sour-puss, Janet."

Several friends came in that evening. It was pleasant to Mark to be treated as a grown-up, allowed to stay up as late as he chose. Everyone seemed determined to make him feel happy and at home. As he had for years spent his holidays in Italy they asked him how the Italians felt about the prospect of war. After being one of three boys, always kept in his place by an older brother, it was pleasant to be deferred to.

He was tired but happy when he went upstairs to bed. As he undressed he thought of the long letter home which he would write tomorrow. He pictured his father reading it aloud after breakfast, passing it on to Nanny, sending it to Eton for Clive to read, with the injunction to forward it to Humphrey. He would write a special letter to Palmer. He'd give a good deal to know how Palmer was getting on.

He was sitting up in Palmer's bed reading *Moby Dick* which he had discovered on the bookshelves, when there came a tap on the door. He said, — "Come

in," and Camilla entered. She wore a long glimmering silk dressing-gown and her hair was about her shoulders.

"Do you mind if I come in?" she asked.

He gave her a happy smile and closed the book. She sat down on the side of the bed.

"I'm afraid I've let you stay up terribly late," she said.

"I don't mind. I like it."

"Still, I don't suppose you're used to it."

"I'm not a bit tired."

"What are you reading?"

"A book called *Moby Dick*. It has gorgeous illustrations."

"Yes. That was one of Palmer's presents on his last birthday."

"He has a lot of books. We have too, but they are pretty old and sort of common property."

She took one of his hands in hers. "I want you to be very, very happy, Mark. I want you to look back on this year as one of the happiest in your life. If anything goes wrong, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Yes, I will." But he was suddenly shy, as if he were afraid she was going to infringe on his privacy.

She saw this and gave her light, pretty laugh.

“Nothing will go wrong, I’m sure. . . . Now, if I leave you, will you promise to put out your light in twenty minutes?” She noticed an old-fashioned gold watch, heavily chased, standing in a leather case on the bedside table.

“What an interesting old watch!” she exclaimed, taking it up.

“It was my grandfather’s. He was killed at Majuba Hill. I’m named after him.”

“Oh.” She turned the watch thoughtfully in her hand, then returned it to its place. She rose and bent over him.

“Do you mind being kissed good-night?” she asked.

When she went back to her own room, Robert had just entered it.

“I’m going to have a hot bath,” he said, “and get to bed.”

He noticed then that she was crying.

“Why, what’s the matter, Camilla?”

She leant sobbing against his shoulder.

“I’ve just kissed my son for the first time,” she said, “and he is thirteen years old.”