

Fiction

The two-hour flight seemed more like 20 minutes what with Jane's wool-gathering and Walter's nap. At the field they were met by Carter, a dignified man who looked a trifle odd in the Indian jacket, trousers, and moccasins he wore.

"Wonderful to see you both!" Carter bubbled, relieving Jane of the overnight bag and giving her hand an extra squeeze when he shook it.

When the Campions were seated in the station wagon, Carter nodded to the driver, and they started for camp. Jane could see Walter relaxing as they drove past shadowy pines into beautiful country. But he was quiet, as he had been before on Award Nights. Jane knew how hard it was for him to watch other boys receive cups for athletic distinction when his own son's name would never be called.

WHEN THEY reached camp, Ralph was waiting for them at the director's cottage. "Mmmmm," Jane said, hugging her only child while the slender boy grinned shyly. "Walt, doesn't he look grand?" Ralph's ordinarily pale face was tanned and his teeth shone.

"Hello, sport," Walter said, taking the boy's smallish hand in his mammoth paw and giving it a hearty shake. They smiled at each other with a kind of embarrassed love that contained in it the understanding that Ralph could never give his dad the special pride that the boy knew would have meant so much to him. After chatting with Ralph's counselor, the Campions went off to the guest lodge to clean up while their son rejoined his group.

At six o'clock, all the parents and boys met in the huge, low-ceilinged dining room and listened to Carter recite the pledge of Seminole brotherhood. After shrimp salad, roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and stringbeans, they waited for the customary orange sherbet. But it turned out to be raspberry.

"Well, well," Jane said gayly, "this could be an omen."

"Omen for what, Ma?" Ralph asked.

"Who knows? Maybe you'll be named winner of the marksmanship award or something."

"You know better than that," her son replied, looking at his father, then turning away.

When the dishes were cleared, Carter mounted the dais and announced that the peak of the Summer had been reached tonight. The boys who had been outstanding performers would now be asked to come to the platform and receive silver loving cups with their names and skills engraved on them. Each name had been arrived at by secret vote among the counselors, in the ancient Seminole tradition.

As the first name was read for the best all-around athlete, Walter composed his big face into blankness. The names continued and one by one the chosen made their way to the platform to be congratulated and handed the precious cup. Ralph clapped modestly as each of his more-gifted fellow campers was called.

"And now," Carter was booming, "the cup for the outstanding left-handed tennis player at Seminole this Summer goes to—Ralph Campion!" He didn't mention that there was only one other left-handed tennis player at Seminole, a five-year-old boy in the "midjet group" who could barely hit the ball. Nor in the excitement did anyone remember that a cup for such a unique skill had never been given before.

As the dazed boy mounted the platform and received the secret handshake from Carter—before being presented with the two-foot cup—Jane watched Walter's face. At first unbelieving, dawning recognition had given way to a tremendous smile, then a cheer and a wild clapping of his big hands. As Ralph stumbled down from the platform in a dream, Walter was on his feet leading the applause and going forward to embrace his son.

Jane looked over the heads of the crowd at Carter, and their eyes met. A personal checking account was indeed a lovely invention. It could establish, among other humanitarian benefits, a small fund for strictly impersonal awards to left-handed tennis players at boys' Summer camps.

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