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Chapter 3

"Cheee-zus god," Cannon said when she came back in the room, "they've got everything fouled up this year!"

Felicia, who had locked herself in the bathroom and cried for one solid hour, was feeling better now. Nevertheless, she didn't want Cannon to know she had been crying, so she bent further over her suitcase pretending to be unpacking in earnest.

"Do you know who's going to room with us?" Cannon asked, waving her arms about.

"Uh uh, who?" Felicia looked up then.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" Cannon said, peering around at her.

"Me?" Felicia ~~said and~~ quickly looked away. "Nothing!" She tried to sound gay.

"I know. You've got the home-sick bug!"

Felicia shook her head. "Uh uh, I--" ^M

Cannon sat down on the opposite bed. "Hell, that's all right if you have. This place is something to cry about. I practically had hysterics for the whole first five months I was here. They thought they were going to have to put me in chains and drag me to the insane asylum."

Felicia tried to laugh, but this rather kind revelation from Cannon made her want to cry again, and her eyes, filled with tears, belied her smile.

"Just don't think about it," Cannon said. "For the first week you've got to go around like you've had a prefrontal lobotomy or something; just don't think about anything."

July 9

Felicia was trying to fold her ^agrey sweater, but she sighed heavily and let the sweater drop back in the suitcase. "I just don't think I'll ever get used to it here."

"Yes, you will! They hypnotize you into it. Really."

Felicia went over and sat down in the rocker. "I guess so."

"Hell, everybody's miserable the first week. I think old Eubanks plans it that way. It's worse than St. Tim's."

"St. Tim's?"

"Uh, St. Timothy's. But at least we don't have to wear uniforms. This batty cousin of mine from Baaaaston went to St. Tim's---ya know---and she said they went around like they were in prison---literally."

Felicia sighed and her breath came in small jerks again.

Cannon rested her back against the pillow on the cot and drew her legs up to her. "Any-way, do you know who they've got coming in here with us?"

"No, who?"

"A senior! She oughtta be over there by Senior Hall or some place."

"How do you know?"

"Polly Osterhaupt told me. She was practically panting with delight. Name's Patsy Dedham and Polly and all this Pittsburgh crew were up in Canada with her this ~~Summer~~^{1_M} in Huntsville. She wasn't sure whether she was coming or something, so Gates put her in here with us."

Felicia looked at the empty cot. "Is she an old girl or ~~1_M~~"

"Never laid eyes on her. Polly says she's divine, though. Literally swirling in plotchers of cash. Her father invented underarm deodorant or something." Cannon plumped the pillow on top of her legs. "Osterhaupt's the biggest snob in nine continents and if she says anything decent about somebody, there's gotta be something there."

"Gosh," Felicia said. ~~She~~ was thinking how easy it was for some people. All some people had to do was just say their name and everybody started swooning around, even before they arrived.

"Hey, how old are you?" Cannon asked. She was frowning.

"Fourteen." Felicia dampened her lips. ~~"I'm only fourteen."~~

"Is that all?"

"I'll be fifteen soon, though."

"Then you're only in the ninth grade!"

Felicia jerked her shoulders up. "I guess so."

Cannon kept frowning. "God, I'd of thought you were older. You just look older."

"I know," Felicia said, pleased with the obvious compliment. "People're always saying I'm older. All my friends are." It was a lie. "You're six⁷ teen, aren't you?"

"Fifteen. I'll be sixteen next December." Cannon started pulling a thread out of the spread on the bed. Suddenly she looked up at Felicia almost suspiciously. "What does your father do?" she asked quietly.

"He's a banker," Felicia said. She wondered if this sounded impressive

enough. Certainly it wasn't like inventing deodorant. "And he farms, too."

"On a plantation?"

"No, just a farm. It used to be a plantation, my great grandfather's, but it got burned down."

"Yankees?"

Felicia wasn't sure whether people from St. Louis were Yankees or not. They talked like Yankees, she knew that. "No," she said. "It just burned."

"Cheee-zus god!" Cannon said and rested her head dramatically on the bare wall.

Felicia looked at her sharply.

"What if I go home with a Southern drawl?! God, I'll bet after rooming with you for a year, ah'll get awf the trayan drawwwlin' lack thiyis." She started giggling. "Ah thank ah wiyill. Everybodi'll just diah. They wiyill."

The accent was so obviously exaggerated that Felicia laughed.

"You see! You see!" Cannon said. "You're laughing! You'fe got to laugh around here or you'll go stir crazy with cabin fever."

"But we don't---Southerners don't sound like that," Felicia said, giggling.

"Yes, you do, too. God, a deodorant manufacturer, a Southern Belle and a midwestern Hoosier---all in one room." Cannon suddenly hung her head down off the bed. "They say this is good for you. Good for your skin. Aaaaaach," she put her hands to her throat---"Ah'm stranglin' to deyeth. Awl the little ole blood's goin' to mah little old crayzy heyed and ah'm---aaaaach! Heyelp! Heyelp!"

Felicia laughed again. "You're---" she started to say but a bell rang---three sharp rings.

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Cannon immediately sat up. "God, first bell for dinner! Hurry, we've only got five minutes to get dressed."

Felicia stood up. "Do we have to dress for dinner? I mean¹²---"

"Holy cow, yes! Hurry!"

They raced for the closets out in the hall. Felicia snatched a rose wool dress from off the hanger and in a panic of almost seconds was dressed and buttoning the buttons down the front.

"Damn stockings," Cannon said, still in her slip and looking backwards at the beginning of a run. "Nail polish! Where is it?"

She dabbed a bright red splotch of polish on the stocking and half limping to the center of the room put on a dark blue dress with brass buttons across the front. "Come on!" she said. "If we're late they'll chain us to the bed for a month!"

Felicia and Cannon, breathless from the spurt of activity, were the last two going into the dining room. Miss Eubanks, dressed in a long-sleeved purple dress, stood at the entrance. She looked better than she had earlier. Her hair was more smoothly dressed and she was wearing small pearl earrings and a necklace. She had probably already made her trip to the kitchen with tonight's supply of saltpeter, Felicia thought. But now here she was, a powdered hostess, graciously nodding to her guests as they went into dinner.

"Good evening, Miss Eubanks. Good evening, Miss Eubanks," said each girl as she passed by.

"Good evening, Cannon," said Miss Eubanks somberly as Cannon hurried in front of Felicia.

"Oh, evening, Miss Eubanks," Cannon said, almost saluting the older

woman.

Miss Eubanks didn't call Felicia by name. She only said "good evening." It seemed a deliberate omission. Nevertheless, Felicia called her by name and trailed after Cannon as they went down the aisle of some twenty-five tables placed on both sides of the white-washed brick basement room. There were ~~eight~~ ^{cover} girls at each table and a teacher stood at the head, grim-faced and bored like some caretaker at a dull rite.

"Ssssst, hey Cannon!" came a voice from one side. "Sit here!"

It was Pedie, dressed in a long-sleeved white blouse and black velvet skirt. She was grinning at Cannon, and with a start Felicia saw there was only one empty chair left.

Cannon looked at the chair for a moment and then pointed to another table ^a further back where only five girls were sitting.

Pedie made a face at Cannon, and Felicia, feeling a warm glow of gratitude toward Cannon, half-way smiled at Pedie and followed Cannon to the last table in the room.

Everyone stood until Miss Eubanks, standing just inside the dining room now, quietly bowed her head and the entire dining room began: "Notre Père, qui êtes aux ^{ciel} ~~ciels~~ ^M..."

"Lord's Prayer in French," Cannon mumbled as they sat down. "Eubanks thinks it's quaint. Big deal. You'll learn it soon. Everybody has to."

Suddenly two high doors from the far corner of the room flung open and about twenty-five colored girls entered bearing heavy trays. "Here it comes," Cannon whispered to Felicia. "If it's broccoli or spinach, watch out!"

It was neither; cream chipped-beef on toast, asparagus, beets, and a pear salad. It reminded Felicia of the dinners she had when she was in the

hospital, the time she had her tonsils out. But she didn't care. She wasn't hungry. Across the table from her a girl with wide braces and short kinky brown hair kept making sniffing noises in her nose. It was a noise broken only by the chatter at the head of the table. There a dark-haired girl with a prominently rounded forehead, and obviously comfortable in her status at Chesney Hall, was chatting gaily with the teacher.

"Shall we?" the girl was saying. "All right." She smiled at the rest of the table and her teeth protruded slightly. "Miss Lee says for everrrryone to say theirrrr names and wherrre you'rrre from." She glanced at Miss Lee. "You mean just go arrround the table?"

"I think so," said Miss Lee, smiling almost benignly. Miss Lee was one of the younger teachers, a well-groomed, rather pretty woman of thirty or so.

"Corn," said Cannon out of the side of her mouth. "Pure corn."

"I'm Marrrrry Olmquist," said the dark-haired girl, making sure each syllable of this important fact came through. "From Minne-apolissss, Minnesota."

The rest of the table followed with embarrassed grins.

"Chessie Adams; Winnetka, Illinois."

"Mary Fairbanks; Newport, Rhode Island."

"Ann Paget; Rye, New York."

"Jane Hook; Boston," said the sniffing girl across from Felicia.

"Felicia Whitfield; Ashton, Georgia."

"Cannon McNulty from St. Louis, M.O."

"Ann Rice; Chelsea Farms, Pennsylvania."

"And I am Miss Lee," said the teacher grandly and for some reason everyone smiled appreciatively as if she were a good scout, Miss Lee,

Jall.!!

entering the game like everyone else.

"Where is that you're from?" the girl with the sniffling nose whined at Felicia.

"Ashton. Ashton, Georgia," Felicia said and immediately looked down at her plate.

"You rooming with her?"

Felicia glanced at Cannon, and then nodded once to the girl.

"Gooo-ud night," the girl said and plunged her fork into the middle of the pear.

"What's so startling about that, Hook?" Cannon said.

The girl just smiled knowingly down at her pear and shook her head.

"Hey, Hook," Cannon said. "Betcha haven't been dieting any more. I'll betcha won't try that again?"

"That just doesn't happen to be funny, McNulty," the girl whined.

Cannon punched Felicia. "Old Hook went on a diet last year and then got so she couldn't eat at all. You should have ~~---~~^{sh}_M"

"Ve-ry amusing," the girl said and sniffled pointedly. "It was psychological."

"Psyholgical, my eye," Cannon said.

"Well, it was. This doctor from Boston who just happens to know more about medicine than you do said it was."

"Okay," Cannon said. "O~~---~~^{sh}_Mkay."

There was a hush around the table during this exchange. It was inter-
rupted quite obviously by Miss Lee.

"Did you have a nice summer, Cannon?" she asked with a complete change of voice.

"Too bad she didn't drown," mumbled Hook from across the table.

Cannon only glanced at Hook. "Kind of cheery," she said. "Spent most of it in Michigan."

"Why, Michigan?" the dark-haired girl from Minneapolis asked.

"Because I was forced to," Cannon said. "Half of St. Louis migrates to Michigan in the summer, just like birds or locusts."

Miss Lee laughed. "I forgot you were from St. Louis. I roomed with a girl at Vassar from St. Louis. She was a [#] _{MH} What is the ball you have out there every year?"

"Veiled Prophet."

"Yes. She was the Veiled Prophet Queen. Hazzard ¹² _M Jane Hazzard."

"Uh, she's still charging around St. Louis. They all do. My cousin was queen one year and she never got over it." Cannon sliced her finger across her neck. "She's bad news, my cousin. Bad news."

Everyone was smiling at Cannon.

"Your roommate is the school wit," the sniffling girl, Hook, said to Felicia. "I guess you've discovered that fact."

Felicia only smiled at the girl.

"St. Louis is a charming city," said Miss Lee. "A charming city."

"It does the job, I guess," Cannon said.

Felicia listened to all this and wished she were able to join in. She was thinking how good it would be to be from a place everyone knew. She had often wondered what it would be like to be from a place like Atlanta or even Savannah. She wondered if people were different in those places, big cities. Certainly everyone here was different; they talked differently and knew about things and places she had never heard of. She wondered if she could ever be like them.

"Well, I tell you this is one se-well dinner," Cannon said. "Just

se-wellll."

"I see Michigan didn't improve your vocabulary very much, Cannon," said Miss Lee almost haughtily.

Cannon shrugged. "I guess not." She continued eating her salad.

Miss Lee kept looking at her as if she were trying to discover some-
thing and then she quickly turned to the girl from Minneapolis. "Did you
share an announcement to make?"

"Yes. Should I make it now?"

Miss Lee looked about the dining room. "I think so." She glanced at
her watch and then rose from her chair, striking her fork on her glass.
The dining room immediately became silent.

"Mary Olmquist, our president of Student Council this year, would like
to make an announcement please." She then smiled down at Mary, a smile of
shared importance. "Mary?" Jill. 12

Mary stood up and immediately her former crisp joviality vanished.
She was now her public self, someone with a mission. "Miss Eubanks asked
that I announce there will be an important assembly meeting right
after dinner in the assembly hall. Name tags will be given out at the door
and every new girl must be accompanied by an old girl. Miss Eubanks asks
that you please be prompt! Thank you." She sat down with a smile of
thorough satisfaction.

"Ohh god," Cannon groaned. "They just try to bore the pants off you
around here. They sit up nights, just thinking up ways to bore you."

Across the table Hook grinned, revealing her remarkably yellowed
braced teeth. "McNulty, I predict you're going to last just about one-half
of a year here. Remember I predicted that when the shipping day comes."

Cannon just folded her arms and sat there staring at Hook. "You're

gorgeous, Hook. Ya know? You're the most gorgeous individual I've ever known."

Hook looked at Felicia and giggled.

"Why don't you go on another diet, Hook," Cannon said, still staring at her. "I wish you would. I crave that you would."

"Because it just so^{ok}---"
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Miss Lee leaned forward. "Have we all finished? I believe we have." She stood up and the rest of the table rose in unison.

On the way out of the dining room Cannon said: "If they put me at the table with that drip Hook again I'm going to shoot myself. I'd like to meet her mother some day. I'd like to know just what kind of a human being brought her into the world."

"What do you guess is wrong with her?" Felicia asked.

"She was born, that's all. That's what's wrong with her; she was just born."

Felicia laughed.

"I told you, this place is literally floating with queens. And Marrrry Olmquist!" She wrinkled her nose. "Ourrrr president of Student Council this year." She pursed her lips in imitation of Miss Lee.

"I guess she's pretty smart or something," Felicia said.

"She thinks so. You oughtta see her on the hockey field. She's got these huge legs and goes bounding around knocking everybody down. She ran into me last year and nearly put me in the infirmary."

"Gosh."

Cannon turned to her. "She's gonna be one of those women, ya know? The type that goes around running everything. St. Louis is full of them. Always trying to run some damn thing."

START

"I know," Felicia said, but she didn't.

The assembly hall was on the second floor between the old and new annex. It was part of the old Comstock house and in better days had probably been used as a ball room for succeeding generations of Comstocks. Chairs were placed around the walls now and an upright piano, obviously much used, was in the corner.

"Felicia Carr Whitfield," said Cannon grandly to the girl who was passing out the name tags.

Cannon took the tag with a slight flourish. "Well, I see you're a Blue."

"A what?"

"It's your tribe," Cannon said. "Sort of like the Congo. The whole school is divided up into tribes, the Blues and the Whites. I'm a White."

"What for?" Felicia asked, examining her name tag with the small blue ribbon on it.

"Athletics, hockey, all that. We have these two amazons for captains and there's a lot of rah rah junk connected with it—almost like the Yale-Princeton game, literally."

"Gosh, I've never played hockey," Felicia said.

"You will. Oh, you will."

Suddenly three chords were struck on the piano. "All right, girls, let's be seated, please," said the dark-haired woman at the piano.

"That's Miss Abernathy, Glee Club," said Cannon. "Little Miss Sunshine. She goes round chirping at everybody."

Felicia and Cannon sat in two chairs nearest the entrance. A rather striking girl with long straight brown hair sat beside them.

"Where's your new girl, Terry?" Cannon asked her.

"Couldn't find one," the girl said in a clipped accent. "Looked all over. Couldn't find one."

"Guess we didn't get much new blood this year. Huh? Pity."

The girl laughed and glanced at Felicia.

"Here," Cannon said, taking a sheet of paper from the girl's hand and handing it to Felicia. "That's the song."

"The school song?"

"Uh, ^{the} hardly ever sing it. But at the beginning of every year we sit up here and sing it for one million hours. You're supposed to die of grief over it."

Felicia read the words on the paper:

I-in a boxwood planted gar-a-den
By a cit-ee 'mongst the hills
There stands old Chesney Hall, so proud,
I long to be there still.

#

For years have passed too swiftly now
And thoughts do long for thee.
Our gladdest days and laughter were
Amongst the far blue hills.

#

Oh, Ches-ney Hall, dear Ches-ney Hall...^o

"Some girl that died wrote that," said Cannon.

"Now, you mean?" Felicia asked. "Just recently?"

"No, about one million years ago."

Felicia read the words again. She wondered about the dead girl who had written such a thing. She wondered if she really meant the words and if in time she would ever sit in a room somewhere and long to be back here. She didn't think so.

"Now, girls," said Miss Abernathy from the piano, "for the benefit of the new girls I'm going to play this over ~~just~~ just once, and then we'll

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(E)
st line for
line

all join in with the words."

Even to Felicia's untrained ears the music to this rather poignant elegy of longing was amateurish, strained⁵ It rippled from treble to bass, bass to treble, almost a scale, difficult to sing at best. However, Miss Eubanks, sitting in the far end of the room, listened with her head lifted. She looked almost exalted, like a bishop in a bishop's chair.

"Now let us all join in," said Miss Abernathy.

Soft soprano voices filled the room, but Felicia only pretended to sing, moving her lips to the words. For some reason she was afraid to actually sing. It seemed almost impertinent somehow, for a new girl.

"Oh, Ches-ney HELL! Dear Ches-ney HELL!" sang Cannon loudly enough for Felicia and Terry to hear. At the second group of "hells" Terry, on the other side of Cannon, began to shake, trying to stifle giggles.

"Very good," said Miss Abernathy from the piano. "Very, very good! Now try again!"

"...There stands old Chesney Hell, so proud¹²..." sang Cannon.

Both Felicia and Terry began to giggle.

All at once a hand clutched Cannon's shoulder. Felicia glanced in back of her. It was Miss Gates, her face scarlet and one wisp of hair curled outward from her head as if it had suddenly been frizzed by electrical current.

"After assembly¹³---I want to see you after assembly." She glanced at Felicia and Terry. "The three of you!"

Felicia and Terry both looked at Cannon. "Yes, Miss Gates," Cannon half sighed, then rolled her eyes upward.

Felicia's heart began to beat faster. She looked over at Terry. Her face was tragically drawn as she sang the fatal words, "Oh Ches-ney Hall,

dear Ches-ney Hall."

"It's a week's restriction if you just step on the floor without your bedroom slippers," Cannon had said.

During the remainder of the assembly Felicia tried to listen as Mary Olmquist, rolling her R's and hissing her S's, explained the workings of the Student Council and "most imporrrrrtant of all, to each of you, is ourrr honorrr system."

Felicia had never heard of a system in which it was called honorable to tell on the other person. It was all right that one reported oneself but to report somebody else seemed the very opposite of everything she had always thought was right. Here, though, as Mary Olmquist explained interminably, it was considered a very serious offense to have knowledge of someone else's wrong-doing and let it go unreported. "You'rrrrre as guilty as if you yourrrself had committed the offense!"

"Why doesn't she shut up," whispered Cannon, but Felicia, more than mindful of Miss Gates behind them, didn't even glance at Cannon. She stared straight ahead as Mary Olmquist continued to explain the differences between right and wrong.

Each class, it seemed, had a representative on the Board of Student Council. Mary Olmquist, reading from a slip of paper in her hand, called out the name of each representative and in turn the girl rose from her chair, smiling broadly at the semi-circle of girls and teachers. From the ninth grade was a slender brunette with horn-rimmed glasses. She didn't look as if she were any older than Felicia, but it was obvious each of these girls was highly revered by the rest of the school. Felicia wondered if ever she might become one of these chosen few. But it was an impossible thought. She looked down at her open palms. They were clammy and she felt

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the quick beating of her heart. What would Miss Gates do to them?

After Mary Olmquist finished her list of some fifteen "Chesney Hall girls do nots," Miss Eubanks rose to say; "That will be all, gulls. You may remain here if you like until the first light bell."

"Downstairs," said Miss Gates clutching Cannon's shoulder again. She looked at Felicia and Terry. "I will meet you in my office."

Felicia looked into the woman's eyes and tried to read something there. There seemed ^{to be} only anger.

"Well, here goes nothing," Cannon said as the three began their descent down the circular stairway. "Marie Antoinette going to the guillotine!"

"Good god, Cannon, why did you have to shout out those hells," Terry said. "Didn't you see her in back of us?"

"Don't know," Cannon said. "I just don't know."

"What'll she do?" Felicia asked. "What'll she do to us?" Her mouth was dry and she could scarcely speak.

"Nothing probable," Cannon said. "Not to you all anyway. She'll probably just scream like a maniac for one thousand hours."

Miss Gates was sitting behind her desk when the three entered. She was holding a long yellow pencil in her hand, and turning it over and over.

"I want to ask you a question," she said, and her eyes bulged wide. "I want to ask you, just what do you think constitutes a good spirit?" She examined the three of them for a minute and then leaned back in her chair, waiting.

"School spirit, you mean, Miss Gates?" Terry asked with a touch of inappropriate coyness in her voice.

"I mean a good spirit about anything," said Miss Gates, ignoring any attempt to placate the sombreness of the moment.

"Gosh, I don't know, Miss Gates," Terry said and frowned studiously.

"Marion Cannon?"

"Just doing the right thing all the time, I guess," Cannon said, staring straight back at Miss Gates.

"I was fairly confident you wouldn't know," said Miss Gates. "Do you know, Felicia Carr?"

Felicia kept her eyes on a spot on the wall just above Miss Gates's head. A dozen answers came to her, none of which gave her confidence enough to answer. "I don't know ~~either~~, I guess," she said.

"Exactly as I thought," said Miss Gates. She leaned forward and started turning the pencil over again. The frizzed wisp of hair tremored. "Laughing at a school song is a very crude thing to do. You may be relieved I didn't report you to Miss Eubanks." She kept looking at Cannon. "Miss Eubanks would be very distressed to know Chesney Hall has three girls with such poor spirits. We're not illbred girls here, you know. We don't lose control and giggle as the shop girls do." Her head shook from side to side.

"Yes, Miss Gates," mumbled Terry humbly from the other side of Cannon.

"To have a good spirit is a rare thing in this world today. As you grow older you will realize just how rare. Smart cynicism is not only vulgar, it is dull." She looked away from them. "Loyalty, sensitivity, and yes---dignity are what we ask. There is no room for depressing mediocrity here." She leaned back again. "I am very disappointed in you. Ve-ry. You were not amusing, Marion Cannon. You were merely silly."

Cannon slowly filled her cheeks with air and then like a deflating balloon blew it out.

"And I might add quite ordinary," said Miss Gates, her eyes taking

in Felicia and Terry.

Suddenly Felicia's throat was strictured with aching. Miss Gates had called her ordinary. She had never been lectured to like this by anyone before, anyone but her own mother and father, and certainly not by a stranger, not for so simple a thing as merely giggling. If only she were home. She was tired, exhausted, tired of fighting tears, tired of the struggle and, most of all, tired of the hard glare in Miss Gates' bulging eyes.

"Of course you will report yourselves for creating this disturbance." She was looking at Cannon. "Though I shouldn't have to remind you."

"Yes, Miss Gates," said Cannon and turned to go.

"And one more thing." She looked at Felicia, up and down, and then back to Cannon. "Your roommate has arrived. She seems to be a very lovely girl. Try not to be poor examples."

Cannon merely nodded her head.

"That is all," said Miss Gates.

The three turned to go and when they were out in the hall Cannon said: "Old Maids! Looks like God could have thought up another way."

"What'll we get for that?" Terry asked.

"For what?"

"Creating a disturbance at assembly?"

"A crude thing like that oughtta bring about two weeks imprisonment."

"Two weeks!" Both Felicia and Terry looked at her.

"Aw, nothing probably. Gates just loves to hear herself talk. She's madly in love with the sound of her own nasal voice."

Felicia didn't say anything. She followed Terry and Cannon up the stairway. She was so exhausted she could scarcely make the climb. Some-thing, it seemed, had been taken from her this day. Exactly what she

wasn't sure. She was too tired to think.

Cannon turned to her. "Hurry up, Feeee-licia. Let's go see Miss Underarm Deodorant of 1963!"

