

## Chapter 7

October<sup>1</sup><sub>M</sub>---blue, blue sky, and the yellow leaves like high girl chatter  
 swirled to the Virginia earth. <sup>At</sup> Ten forty-five <sup>and</sup> Felicia joined the  
 throng of girls as they made their way across the east garden into chapel.  
 She walked with her head down, <sup>and</sup> but snatches of conversation struck her ears,  
 ears still unaccustomed to the special kind of jargon she felt surely she  
 must try to acquire:

"...How di-vine!" "Well, you know, they're awfully so sort of, you  
 know." "How absuud!" "My brother goes to St. Marks and he said..."  
 "It was such a fun party! I mean they actually, literally destroyed the  
 place." "I caaan't believe it, no, I jost cawn't." "I think I'm going  
 mad." "Just too divine for wueds." "Grosse Point." "A bore." "At  
 Erearley we used to---" "Nifty!" "I thought I'd dieee!" "The ancients  
 are coming next weekend, God!" "Pity, awwww..." "I've got to go on a  
 diet." "The assemblys and Mummy said..." "Damn the industrial revolution!"

~~2~~ "She was this Southern ~~gehl~~ and she sounded like a combination of a colored mammy and a high wailing ghost. Chee-zus<sup>1</sup>"

At the last remark Felicia glanced around. Chessie Comstock and Nonie Baker, roommates (their absolute togetherness firmly established), were laughing at Chessie's quaint apostrophe. Clearly, though, Felicia saw they weren't talking about her, because when she turned Nonie Baker actually smiled at her and immediately they began talking to one another again. Still, it was an indicative remark. Southerners, Felicia had gradually discovered were "just the bottom" as Pedie might have expressed it in one of her less studied remarks.

"You know what that crowd at Harvard calls Southerners? They call them coons!"

(But that's what Southerners call Negroes.)

"Hah, hah, hah!"

All this had come as quite a shock to Felicia, who for years had been nurtured on the idea that Southerners could boast the only true "aristocracy" America could claim. Her Aunt Pett in Charleston believed there was nothing beyond Virginia or South Carolina. Of course people had moved to other Southern states, but the ones you knew naturally had connections in Charleston or Virginia. "Northerners", as Aunt Pett called anyone born above "that line", were impossible, vulgar people who dedicated their lives to money, fashion, outlandish display, and allowed their pictures to be put in newspapers. Clearly, they were "trash."

Here, however, the situation was reversed. Southerners were people who obviously (the men especially) took some kind of pride in bad grammar, impossible drawls, were overly-polite, country, foolish, tackily dressed, and ridiculously boasted of "mah family". Their humor was monotonously "so this Niggah say, he say, Mistah Joe ah's jes<sup>1</sup>" On and on. A bore.



Occasionally, of course, one ran across an "intelligent Southerner", but then as might be expected, he or she had had a good bit of contact with the East.

It was a shock, But Felicia was learning.

The speaker at chapel that day was Dr. Alice B. Gardner, "eminent historian, lecturer, and author". She sat on the stage next to Miss Eubanks, a woman of fifty or so dressed in a thick tweed suit that seemed stretched across the middle; ~~as she sat with her feet,~~ <sup>were</sup> enclosed in brown oxfords, crossed one over the other. Her <sup>a</sup>grey-brown hair was straight, cut short, and pulled behind one ear on one side so as to give to her round face <sup>with the</sup> and slightly protruding teeth a kind of carefreeness, a devil-may-care look that unhappily did not go with the rest of her. Oddly, she was smiling as she watched the girls come into chapel and take their seats. She seemed to be wanting to advertise herself, ~~this woman,~~ to be liked, even before she began to speak <sup>of</sup> ~~as if it were a happy joke she and Miss Eubanks had planned,~~ a kind of surprise that would definitely please "you young people out there."

Dr. Gardner, as it was explained by Miss Eubanks, was a native of the state of Maine, "that lovely state where many of us here at Chesney Hall have summered and learned to love and appreciate the special beauties of" "~~she~~ <sup>she</sup> turned to Dr. Gardner with a smile ~~she~~ <sup>she</sup> "your state, Dr. Gardner." Dr. Gardner was a graduate of Wellesley College, and had received her higher degrees at Grenoble and Columbia Universities. She was the author of many books, including the well-known, "definitive" biography of Millard Fillmore. As a journalist, she had travelled through most of the countries of Europe as well as Asia and the Middle East.

"Just recently," explained Miss Eubanks, "Dr. Gardner has completed a six-months' journey through the deep South, observing, listening,

studying, and recording those tragic states, and it is about this, that journey, that Dr. Gardner has consented to come to speak to us this morning. Dr. Gardner?"

Dr. Gardner rose from her chair and came to stand before the lectern. She was a rather short, well-fed woman with speckled hands and oddly thin-muscular legs, the muscles almost knotted at the calf which, one thought, must have sustained her through her "laborious" journey in the deep South. She was still smiling as she rested her hands on the lectern. But when the smile vanished, it never came back again.

"As I look at you out therrre," her voice, high and harsh, rang through the rafters, "so young, so fresh, so yet reallly untouched by life, I am reminded of what a dearrrr little Neeegro girl said to me recently one morning in a little town in <sup>Alabama</sup> ~~Alabama~~. Therre she was, this adorrable child, sitting there on her broken-down front porch amongst rubbles, hardly enough to eat, one of eleven children—yet smiling eagerly, happy because she had, just that morning, found a new toy to play with, an abandoned old automobile tiyerr.

"I see you'rre enjoying yourr tiyerr," I said to herr. Herr eyes lit up. She was indeed enjoying it. 'But don't you like to play with dollies?' I awsked herr. I saw immediately I had awsked the wrong thing. 'Iye have no dolllie,' she said." Dr. Gardner's round face suddenly be+ came simple in her attempt to convey what must have been the Negro child's pathos.

"No dollie?' I awsked.

"She shook herr little head. And then her face fairrly beamed at me. 'But Iye can make one,' she said. 'Iye can make one out of piece goods. My motherr has lots of piece goods,' she added. <sup>8'</sup>My motherr finds them

Coll. 30



in the white folks garrbage cans."

"Awwww", moaned a girl behind Felicia.

Dr. Gardner put her hand to her ample bosom. "But laterr I was to think many times about that young colored girrl. Why, really, what ingenuity, I thought. The child couldn't have been morre than fourr-years-old and yet she had the where-with-all to make her dollie if she couldn't have one!" Dr. Gardner emphasized the last three words with a wagging of the head as if to say "by golly!"

"That, my young friends, that very spirit, is what has made ourr country what it is today. That is the spirit of ourr founding fathers. And as I journeyed through the saddened South, the thought struck me many times that it is the Neeegro, beaten, lynched, bombed, starrved--and perhaps only the Neeegro--who still retains that pioneering spirit, the daring, the courage, that was the gift and the strength of ourr forefathers."

Dr. Gardner paused in her remarks. "I was therrrre," her voice pierced the room. "I was therre, in Birmingham. I walked through the ashes of that torn city." Her eyes searched her audience. "Young girrls, you who will become motherrrs, wives, career women, you--we must--dedicate ourr hearrts and minds to the determination therre will neverr be another Birmingham! We are in the midst of revolution. For revolution is iss! And therre can never be another Birmingham. No, neverr again!"

Dr. Gardner's darting eyes made sure this point had been established and then she continued in a milder voice; "Yearrs ago in Germany, I inter-viewed many of the ordinary folk of that country. I awsked them; 'Didn't you know?' I awsked 'Didn't you know these terrible atrocities were being committed?' Not one of them, not one single person, man or woman, ever answered me positivly. They said; 'Iye did not know.'

"Now, that same situation exists herre in ourr South today. Here in America, girrls! Responsible, educated people say they do not know. I sat in many a gracious home in the South, in many a city, large and small, awsking, imploring:<sup>g</sup> 'Why do you allow these things to happen---merely because of the color of someone's skin?' Oh, they gave many answers, these responsible, educated moderates. They speak of theories and blame. They speak of crime. They cry Socialism, Communism, but nevrerr once was Iye to hear one person say:<sup>g</sup> 'Dr. Gardner, we arre to blame. We have sewn and now we reap. We have been---<sup>h</sup>~~m~~yes, eee-vil.' No, Iye nevrerr heard one person say that to me.

"What is happening in the South, indeed all over the world, is a glorrrrrris thing! I talked to many fine Neeegro leaders in the South, grand people, proud people, full of energy and hope and courage. 'Dr. Gardner'<sup>g</sup>, they said to me, 'We arrre winning this fight! We are winning because we arre on the side of right!' 'Grand, I say!'" She waved her hand as if there might have been a flag there.

"I went to that marrch in Washington, that magnificent sight, when thousands of darrk faces lifted theirr voices in the sound of freedom, and I thought of my young colored friend and I thought of Birmingham and I thought of the white people with whom I had spoken in the South---<sup>h</sup>~~m~~their complacency, their cruelty---<sup>h</sup>~~m~~and I thought, 'Oh, if only you were here to be thrilled by this outpouring of hope and pride---<sup>h</sup>~~m~~ringing through the halls and streets of our capital.'"

Dr. Gardner put her hand on her hip, and in a voice almost hushed she said:<sup>g</sup> "The situation in ourr South today is desperate. Iye am not here to give you an answer to it. Some of the rare liberals with whom I spoke down there think education is theirr answer. It is. It is. But therre is something else that transcends all of this." She paused



theatrically. "Hearrrrt," she said. "Mind and hearrrrt!" She dared her audience; there was complete silence.

"I don't know how many Southerners you have herre at Chesney Hall," she said, as if to say she didn't care. "But Iye would say to you, go back to yourrr homes, talk with your Neegro friends, worrk, inform, uplift, educate, aid yourr torn homes! Today, more than ever before, we need responsible young women in this country. For it is my belief that it is we women who can bring our country....."

Felicia <sup>had stopped</sup> wasn't listening any more. She had heard others speak as Dr. Cardner had since she had been at Chesney Hall. And all these people, teachers and girls, seemed to know more about her section of the country than she did <sup>all</sup> the girls from Boston, New York, Illinois. If she said anything she was dismissed, not in so many words but by a look, with the scornful meaning ~~scorn~~ of "prejudiced". Yet, how strange it was that they knew more. Could so many people be wrong? An entire section? <sup>of the United States?</sup> Wasn't there ~~then~~ perhaps <sup>always</sup> something that the people of the South might possibly know that they didn't know? Was the Negro always right, truthful? And the white man <sup>always</sup> wrong?

She was thinking of her own home. Were they really evil, her mother, her father, her friends, their friends? She knew they were not. But the races were divided now more than ever before. And it seemed to her much of the division had come from places in the North where the continuous cries and moaning had emphasized the difference. "just because the color of someone's skin". Actually, Felicia didn't believe she had <sup>never</sup> ever thought, consciously at any rate, about the "color of someone's skin". Not until recently anyway. There were ignorant people, and there were wise people. There were people she felt easier with, liked more than others; there were good people and there were bad people. But she didn't think she had <sup>never</sup> ever

thought very much about the color of, say, Velvet's skin. Velvet had worked for her family long before Felicia was born and she loved her, deeply and sincerely. But now something seemed to be <sup>breaking down</sup> dividing that love <sup>by making</sup> ~~because~~ ~~her feel she would be~~ with all the talk she felt self-conscious with Velvet, or rather she thought ~~she might~~. Velvet was a "Neeegro", someone who had to have rights and privileges, someone who was different when she was with white people than <sup>when</sup> she was with her own, someone to be pitied---<sup>rl</sup><sub>m</sub> or so they said. Oddly, she had never "pitied" any colored person. She had only loved---<sup>rl</sup><sub>m</sub> at least those she knew well.

"...Now Miss Eubanks tells me that you herre at Chesney Hall do a great deal for the Neegro families in nearby Chesney." Dr. Gardners' voice had softened which apparently was meant to take the ~~place~~ of a smile. "This pleases me, that right herre in Virginia you girrrls are making an effort. And yet, girrrrls? Do you want to be accused of paternalism, show in even the tiniest---<sup>rl</sup><sub>m</sub>" she lifted her hand and put her thumb to her little finger---<sup>rl</sup><sub>m</sub> "that we are more privileged than they, superior?"

Dr. Gardner said she wanted "you girrrls" to think about that. "Of courrrse we do not!" she said. "It has seemed to me that it is with this, paternalism, at least the spirit of paternalism, that the average <sup>d</sup> Southernerrr excuses himself. He hides his eee-vil behind his few acts of benevolence. They say: 'Why, Iy've fed and clothed Neeegros, gotten <sup>them</sup> him out of jail, paid for <sup>their</sup> his horspital bills!' Dr. Gardner shook her head. "The Neeegro doesn't want that, my young friends. He wants to pay his own bills. He wants to sit down and have dialogue with a white man. The Neeegro is a proud man, children. I know, for they have told me so. Overrr and overrr---<sup>rl</sup><sub>m</sub>"

Felicia looked away. She wasn't sure what "paternalism" meant.



But she knew her own family was always "helping" Negroes. They had done just what Dr. Gardner was saying was so terrible, yet never once did the Negroes seem to mind, or at least it seemed that way to her. It was just the opposite. Was it wrong then to help someone if he was in trouble? She didn't understand. There was so much she didn't understand. Every thing was so different here, everyone was so different. Sometimes now she believed she would never learn what was right and what was wrong. How confusing it all was. She vowed to herself that when she went home she would ask Velvet about all this. Velvet would tell her. She always had. But would she tell the truth?

"...Think!" came Dr. Gardner's voice. "Think on these things, young friends."

She was finished. The applause was thundering and she went back to her straight chair, flushed and smiling, obviously pleased with the response. Miss Eubanks, too, joined in the chorus of applause. She stood before the lectern, looking back at Dr. Gardner, still applauding, and Felicia suddenly was reminded of what Miss Gates had said. Miss Gates said it was barbaric to applaud too much. You should clap your hands three times as if to say "That is good" and then be done with it. "Ladies don't pound their hands together like men at a boxing bout." But there was Miss Eubanks standing up there, pounding away.

Dr. Gardner joined the girls in the garden for lemonade and crackers. She was surrounded by the faculty and Felicia could hear her as she was introduced to each one: "How lovely, yes, yessss. How do you do?..." And the beaming faculty responded in kind. They were fine; indeed, they were fine. Dr. Gardner was "fine." For, "it was passing great to be a king and ride in triumph through Persepolis."

"Hey, Felicia, wha don't you all down theah quit bein' so mean to all them Niggahs? Why not, huh?"

Felicia turned. It was Cannon, grinning. "Why, I bet you all whups'em in the fields when you're pickin' cotton. Ah jus Bet!"

"That isn't funny, McNulty now!"

Mary Olmquist, the president of Student Government, was standing behind Cannon in the lemonade line. Her lips, with the slightest suggestion of a mustache over them, were pinched together. "It's nothing to joke about!"

coll. 32

Cannon cocked her head at Mary. "Aw, for godsakes, Olmquist," she said.

"Well, you shouldn't joke about such a serious thing. I thought everything Dr. Gardner said was simply magnificent. It isn't funny. It isn't funny at all."

Cannon wrinkled her nose. "Okay, Aimee Semple McPherson."

"Whaaat?"

"Some day, Olmquist, maybe you, too, can stand up there on that stage."

Mary frowned. "I hope I can!" she said. "I just hope I can."

"So do I," said Cannon and turned round again. She punched Felicia in the back.

Felicia didn't look at Cannon. She was afraid Mary Olmquist might see her and nobody, literally nobody, wanted to cross Mary Olmquist and all her power.

But the talk continued. Felicia listened to it as she chewed the soft waxy top of her paper cup.

"...Why cawn't the Neeegro have his rights?" "Dr. Gardner's di-vine! I jost cawn't see those people down theah. Actually, they're so--sort of hideously bahbaric. You know?" "My brother roomed with a Neeegro his



fust yeah at Hahvad. He was di-vine, the poor soul, wrote these simply dreamy stories and things."-----"Paul Askew was down in Mississippi, lawst Summer---ya know?---and he got arrested. He said everybody down theah was sick. Ya know?"

Felicia felt her throat choking up. How lonely it was sometimes, How terribly lonely.... There was no place to go, no place to sit. But then she saw Patsy. She was sitting alone on the steps to the annex. Felicia went over to her. At least Patsy wouldn't talk about Dr. Gardner. Patsy wasn't interested in such things.

"Oh, hello theah," said Patsy. The circles beneath her eyes were deep.