

Chapter 9

"My god," Cannon said, "as if things weren't bad enough around here, you had to go get your hand caught in the cookie jar!"

"But I didn't," Felicia said. "I told you! I told you exactly what happened."

Cannon was rocking furiously in the rocking chair, enthralled with this first bit of excitement Felicia had brought to the room. "Well, what's done is done now," she said flatly.

"Elaine'll never admit she cheated," Felicia said. "You should of heard her down there with Miss Peacock."

Cannon stopped rocking. "Of course, if you want to be right down technical about the thing, you could report her yourself."

"I couldn't do that! Uh uh, I just couldn't!" Felicia fell back on the cot. "Why did this have to happen?"

"Well, don't go moping around like you did do it. Right now you look

like you'd just pulled a job at Fort Knox."

Felicia sighed. Cannon was right, she guessed. But, actually, she was more angry than she was hurt. At Elaine. Miss Peacock. Miss Peacock had been so deadly serious and ~~so~~ Suddenly, a thought jolted her. "Cannon!" She stood up. "What can they do to you if you don't report someone else? I mean really?"

"Then the ship comes in, I guess."

"Whatdoya mean?"

"Just that. If somebody did something bad enough and you were just sitting there watching it like a clod and didn't do anything about it, then---" She turned both her thumbs down.

"But it could have been some tremendous coincidence or something, I mean about Elaine."

Cannon didn't say anything. She just sat there looking disgustedly into space and shaking her head. Then getting up, she said: "We-ull, I'd just forget it. For now anyway. Let's get dressed before the bell rings."

"But---"

"Forget it! Pretend it never happened."

~~That~~ was impossible, however. Before study hall that night there was a meeting of the ninth graders. The vice-president, Jane Masterson, had been taken West with her family because of increasing attacks of asthma and the office of vice-president had to be filled. "VERY IMPORTANT! BE ON TIME!" said the notice on the bulletin board.

Felicia had missed the original meeting when officers were elected in September. Miss Munford's algebra tutoring took precedence, and Felicia had regretted this because class officers, even the ninth grade, enjoyed a kind of splendid power, second only to being on the Board of

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Student Council. That became evident after only the second week of school. Class officers and board members ushered at chapel and at concerts and sometimes monitored at study hall. No doubt about it. They were the chosen ones.

The meeting was held in Miss Cothran's history room. There were no desks in the room, only one large round table with maps hanging from the top of the blackboard. The ninth grade always held their meetings in Miss Cothran's room because the room was small and the ninth grade was the smallest grade in the school, only sixteen girls.

When Felicia came into the room just about everyone was there, seated around the table, and laughing. Dinky Downing was marching up and down before the blackboard, giving an imitation of Miss Cothran, the way she paced up and down as she lectured, sometimes getting so excited she practically spit out her words. (Miss Cothran was rather renowned for sprinkling her listeners anyway.)

But when Felicia sat down at the table, the room became suddenly quiet.

"What's the matter?" she asked. She looked at the circle of faces.

No one said anything.

"Why's everybody so quiet?" She asked Dinky who had suddenly quit her act and was coming over to the table.

Dinky crossed her arms. "I just would not know," she said dramatically, and glanced at Elaine Karr.

Elaine Karr looked once at Felicia, her eyes dull and her lower lip protruding slightly, then looked away.

Felicia immediately knew. Elaine had told everyone in the class what had happened. That was like Elaine; she told everybody everything ^{1/2} another reason for her stunning popularity. An element of excitement always seemed to hover around Elaine. She could even tell you ("so help me God, it's

the truth") in detail the most guarded secrets of most of celebrated America—to say nothing of the student body and faculty of Chesney Hall. For this ability, plus her quaint dumbness in most things scholarly, Elaine was not only liked; she was revered. "She's so fu-nneeee, too— like when she says...." Elaine Karr was a sort of modern-day, female Paul Revere, galloping along the halls, spreading her little messages of dire and doom.

Felicia, immediately sensing the poison of her own presence, opened her notebook and with her pencil pressed hard to the theme paper began drawing her initials, F.C.W., tracing them over and over. She didn't dare look up from the paper. Her hands were moist and she kept pressing the corners of her mouth inward.

The business of elections was over in fifteen minutes. Neither Felicia nor Elaine was elected. Elaine, however, was nominated amidst giggles, and went with three other girls to stand outside the room while the voting, a show of hands, was being conducted. Felicia didn't even look up from her paper when she raised her hand. She voted for Helen Barbour, a studious non-entity whom she had scarcely spoken to. Helen Barbour was not elected either. Margaret Langsdatter, a rather sunny-dispositioned blond who ~~no one~~ neither liked nor disliked, was elected. The choice was welcomed with only mild acclaim.

On the way to study hall Felicia held back so she could talk to Dinky.

"Whaaat !?" Dinky said after Felicia had called her name for the third time. Oddly, Felicia noticed the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of Dinky's nose. She had never noticed them before.

"What's everybody so mad about?" Felicia tried to smile.

Dinky pinched her mouth together and looked up at Felicia with un-

characteristically somber eyes. "You should know," she said. "Felicia Whitfield, I don't see how anybody could do what you did!"

"Do what?"

"You know her father's practically dying. You know that, don't you?"

"Whose father?"

"Elaine's. And you could have gotten her kicked out of school!" Dinky's eyes were flashing, and even with her ~~S~~outhern accent she was speaking faster than Felicia had ever heard her. "I just don't see how anybody could do a thing like that to somebody else. It's the nastiest thing I ever heard of ~~of~~^M—and with somebody's father dying with an incurable disease, too!"

Felicia stepped back. She was almost dizzy with anger. ~~"What~~

~~"What's Dinky?"~~

"That's all I have to say!" Dinky said, and hastily walked away to join two other girls. She said something to them, and one of the girl's looked lazily back at Felicia.

gal 40 Not for a minute did Felicia believe Elaine Karr's father was dying. Elaine had never mentioned such a thing, and if it were true, it would have been spread around the school in five minutes.

"They're jealous," she thought. "They're jealous because of Patsy Dedham, because I don't go around with them all the time! They want to believe Elaine!"

But to have no one in her class even speak to her. Ever! It was a nightmare. Maybe she didn't actually go around with Dinky and ~~them~~^{that group} all the time, but she had every class with them, even gym, and she saw more of them really than she ever did Cannon and Patsy. It would mean that all day she would have to go without anyone saying anything to her.

"For-~~get~~ a voice behind her said.

She turned quickly. It was Cannon.

"You look like a brooding mare!" Cannon laughed and hit Felicia lightly on the head with a pencil. "On to study hall," she said.

Felicia followed her, dazed. She was the last one to be seated at her desk.

Friday afternoon Patsy and Felicia stood on the little balcony outside their room and looked down as Cannon got into the car with Miss Gates. Cannon was on her way to her father's wedding and Miss Gates was to take her to the airport. Cannon was wearing a dark blue beret and matching coat with brass buttons down the front. Pedie and a group of others were standing at the entrance, watching mournfully as Cannon, stumbling and bow-legged in high heels, made her gleeful way to the car. Her gloves were immaculately white.

"That lucky girl," Patsy said. "I'd give anything to be getting out of here---just about right now."

"Me, too," Felicia said, and she meant it now with all her heart.

Before Cannon got in the car she glanced up at the balcony and thumbed her nose at Felicia and Patsy.

They both waved back and Cannon got in the car and slammed the door. The tires raced on the driveway, the car jerked forward, jerked again, and then moved away.

"Miss Gates needs her third driving lesson," said Patsy.

Felicia kept looking at the moving car. "Gates and Cannon," she said wistfully, and watched as the car went out the gates. Then, sighing heavily, she turned and went back in the room.

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 With Cannon gone and only the remainders of her left---tissue paper, an empty shoe box, a ruffled bed---the room seemed oddly silent and bleak.

Patsy began taking her newly washed handkerchiefs down from her bureau mirror---a practical way of ironing that Patsy in her endless striving ~~so~~ neatness practised weekly.

Felicia sat down on the foot of Cannon's cot. "I wish there was a movie or something tonight, don't you? I mean just something to do."

Patsy shook her head. "I loathe movies." She glanced up from the handkerchiefs she was folding. "Oh, incidentally, did you happen to check my mail this afternoon?"

"Uh, there wasn't anything."

"Nothing?"

"Just a postcard for Dinky Downing."

Patsy put her hands to the back of her neck. Her eyes seemed to slant upward more than usual. "I just don't understand. I just---" She sighed. "God, I feel awful."

Felicia ~~wasn't~~ listening. She was thinking of Miss Peacock and English class that morning. In no way did Miss Peacock seem to show any thing had happened. She called on both Elaine and Felicia as usual, and after class she didn't ask them to stay as Felicia had thought she would. "What am I going to do, Patsy?" she asked aloud.

Patsy cocked her head to the side. "Do about what?" she sounded almost irritable.

"About Elaine Karr?"

"Are you still worrying about that?" She sighed and sat down on the edge of the cot.

~~Felicia nodded.~~

Patsy smoothed her skirt with both her hands and then slowly regarded Felicia with bored eyes. "It's so completely insane, Felicia. Why don't you just go and have a talk with Miss Peacock? I mean, actually, it's so childish."

"You mean go ^{to her} ~~the~~ room?"

~~"Of course, why not?"~~

Only once had Felicia seen inside Miss Peacock's room. She had been hurrying through the lower annex to get to gym and, not looking, had practically run into Miss Peacock coming out of her room. The door was wide open and ~~in the moment~~ Felicia had looked in. On the wall, above a bookcase, was a large white figure of Christ, ² his arms stretched out across the wall and his eyes looking heavenward in death agony. ~~She had quickly looked away.~~ Oddly, it had embarrassed her, the figure, as if she had seen something she shouldn't, something private and too revealing. There wasn't ^{little} much else in the room, a small bed, one chair, and the bookcase. The thought of sitting in that bare room with just Miss Peacock was a chilling thought.

".... You've just got to have poise," Patsy was saying. "I mean this sort of hideous little image America has of the teen-ager is absurd." She crossed her legs and sat up straighter, lifting her hand slightly, her right thumb and third finger making a graceful little circle (a characteristic pose Felicia had often tried to imitate.) "The typical little giggling Indiana high-school girl. God, what a bore!"

"I know it," Felicia said. She wasn't exactly sure what a giggling Indiana high-school girl was like. But whatever it was she was certain Patsy Dedham was not it, and she would strive not to be it herself.

"Miss Peacock's just a sweet old maid, that's all," Patsy said. "Actually, this school is so sort of ridiculous that way. That's one

thing I loved about Europe."

"What?"

"I mean there wasn't all this faculty-student sort of business. We were treated like adults, not like little children. It's so inane, actually."

~~Felicia didn't say anything.~~

Patsy put her hands to the back of her neck again. "Of course, they had their dignity." Her eyes suddenly brightened. "We used to have the most divine afternoons, going to art galleries and then finding some charming little inn for tea. I learned much more french that way than having that peasant Madame de Crévecoeur sitting up there shouting at everybody."

Patsy had a distinct dislike for Madame de Crévecoeur. Madame had shouted at her one day in class and said she was "stupeeed and vain!" The former was not so. Patsy never made lower than a B minus on any of her tests.

"I mean everything was so sort of freer. You know? I loved those afternoons."

Felicia was fascinated. She could almost picture Patsy with her straight blond hair, polo coat, and pigskin gloves walking along some foreign avenue with an older woman, in black, talking of art and tea. How different it was from Ashton, where most of the girls Patsy's age overdressed, rode around in ~~fast~~ cars, smoking and waving at everyone.

Patsy leaned her elbow on her knee. "As a matter of fact, that's where I first saw Peter." Her lips curled upward.

"At school?" Felicia asked quietly.

"No, at a gallery in Geneva." She almost laughed. "He had on this ridiculously crazy little hat."

"What did he do? I mean did he just come up and start talking to you?"

"He didn't say anything, just kept trailing us around the museum!"

She put the tips of her fingers to her lips as if to hide the smile that wanted to play there. "I met him later^{1/2}---at Gstaad^{1/2}---skiing."

"Did you like him? I mean right away?"

Patsy laughed and it was a decided giggle. "It was so sort of silly, really. Hack and Aileen were giving this monstrously dull party for some of their silly friends. And Peter just kind of popped up there. Actually I don't think he was even invited."

Felicia began biting a fingernail off her second finger.

"Hack and Aileen really have the most ridiculous friends. I adore them both, of course. Hack is really divine. But his friends! I mean they do things like taking peoples' stoves apart and all that sort of thing."

"Gosh," Felicia said. She tried to smile.

"Peter was hideously bored with the whole thing." She giggled again. "He's really so funny. We went back to the library and read WINNIE, THE POO^h out loud²---we really did^{1/2}---practically the whole night. I kept calling him Eeyore because he has^{1/2}---" her voice broke^{1/2}---"these sad, sort of droopy-drop eyes."

With a start Felicia saw Patsy's eyes were filled with tears. She looked away and then back again. She tried to think of something to say.

"I²---loved him so. I still²---do^{1/2}---more than^{1/2}---" She put a handkerchief to her nose and her eyes looked suddenly frightened, like a young animal's. "What am I going to do? What can I possibly do?"

"Oh, Patsy. Gosh. You've just got to think about^{1/2}--- Just think he was married"^{1/2} (Just saying this aloud was still jolting^{1/2}) "all that time. And he didn't even tell you. I think that was^{1/2}---"

"I know! God knows, I know! But he was in love with me. I know he was." She looked straight at Felicia. Her face was flushed and one

blue vein was streaked across the corner of her forehead. "What am I going to do?"

Felicia didn't say anything. There was something frightening in the high pitch of the girl's voice.

Patsy kept looking at Felicia, her eyes darting and queerly bright. "You just don't understand. You just don't understand at all. I'm ~~---~~"

She didn't finish. The door was thrust open. It was Pedie. "Hey, Whitfield! Miss Eubanks wants you! Downstairs, in her of-fice!"

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Felicia bolted up from the cot, glanced once at Patsy, and then hurried over to her bureau. "It's about Miss Peacock. I know it! I know it!" She ran a comb through her hair.

Patsy didn't say anything. She just sat on the edge of the cot, her feet placed neatly together, her hands resting in her lap and her face flushed.

Felicia hurried down the circular stairway. She wondered if Elaine or even Miss Peacock would be there.

Out in the hall she paused before Miss Eubank's ominously closed ~~the~~ door. She was out of breath and her throat was so dry she wondered if she would even be able to speak.

The door was panelled and painted white. Felicia knocked softly, ~~---~~ three short raps. (Chesney Hall gulls rap only three times. Don't they, gulls? Chesney Hall gulls never pound on doors, do they, gulls?)

Miss Abernathy, the music teacher, opened the door. "Oh, hello, Felicia," she said, and then to the hidden presence in the room added, "Did you want to see, Felicia Whitfield, Miss Eubanks?"

"Yes, tell her to come in, please," said the voice.

"Well, I'll get busy on that right away," said Miss Abernathy, still standing in the doorway and blocking Felicia's entrance.

"Thank you, Julia," said the voice.

Felicia tried to enter and Miss Abernathy tried to exit. They both went the same way, nonsensically going back and forth as if they were playing some irritating little game. Miss Abernathy laughed and so did Felicia. The small by-play, however, seemed to relax some of the panic Felicia felt. She entered the room.

Miss Eubanks, as usual, was sitting behind her desk, but she wasn't writing or fingering the paper-weight as she had done the last and only time Felicia had been in her office. She was looking into space with both her arms resting on the arms of her chair. She seemed to be reviewing some decision, one she had no doubt ^{with} made to Miss Abernathy. There were orange flecks in Miss Eubanks' eyes; Felicia had never noticed them before. And the etching of Thomas Jefferson above her head seemed to have grown larger somehow.

"Yes, come in, Felicia," said Miss Eubanks. Her deep voice sounded almost cordial and she twitched her smile—a favor she extended all too infrequently. "You may sit down." She indicated the chair in front of the desk.

Felicia sat down. "Whewwwh!" she sighed and immediately regretted it. Miss Eubanks might think such a sound ordinary. She dampened her lips and felt her heart begin to beat faster again.

Miss Eubanks moved her chair ^a further away from the desk as if by so doing she could somehow dismiss the desk, perhaps have a little social time.

Suddenly Felicia remembered what Patsy had said about having poise.

Miss Eubanks liked poise. Felicia immediately sat up straighter, folded her hands in her lap, crossed her ankles, and strove for the simple half-smile that also seemed to go with the posture.

Miss Eubanks turned her profile to Felicia. It was not a good profile because of the slight jowls. "How are you getting along here, Felicia?" she asked in an almost sweet voice. It was not the voice she used in chapel nor her "good evening" voice at dinner. It was a voice she ^{perhaps} ~~no doubt~~ used when encountering her own equals. Felicia had often wondered how Miss Eubanks was with people she knew well.

"Fine! I'm getting along just fine!" Felicia closely watched the woman's face to see if ~~by~~ ^{would tell her} the slightest change of expression or ~~bat~~ of the eye-lid she had heard anything from Miss Peacock or Elaine Karr;

"Good!" said Miss Eubanks with emphasis. She turned full-face. "And do we like our roommates?" She tilted her head slightly. "Are we getting along all right with them?"

"Oh, yes!" (She started to say 'yes'm.') "They're both very nice."

"Yes, they are interesting gulls, I think." Her eyes were suddenly serious. "It is a bit unusual, of course, placing a senior with two younger gulls. But we are so pressed for space these years. All the schools are."

"I know it," Felicia said. "But I like Patsy Dedham so much. ^{I'm}" It occurred to her then that Patsy Dedham was why Miss Eubanks wanted to see her; she had probably heard something.

"And how are we coming along with our algebra?"

With a kind of relief Felicia sighed. "I don't know. I guess I'm just not very good at it." She leaned her elbow on the arm of the chair and put her hand to her cheek. "Miss Munford's a very good teacher."

"Yes, yes she is. Miss Munford's a very fine woman, too."

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"She certainly is." Felicia wondered if Miss Eubanks had ever heard Miss Munford calling people "you stupid awse." She did that, but only in the heat of battle.

Miss Eubanks drew her chair closer to her desk. "Now, Felicia," she said, and by her tone of voice it was definite the little social time was over. "That is what I want to talk to you about. Miss Munford seems to think you are not concentrating. She believes, however, that you are perfectly capable of grasping algebra but that you just haven't been concentrating. Is anything worrying you—or bothering you?" Miss Eubanks turned her head, but stealthily shot a glance back at Felicia.

Felicia's elbow slipped off the arm of the chair and she sat up straighter. For a moment, but only for a moment, she wondered if she could tell Miss Eubanks about the English test. But then maybe Miss Peacock hadn't told her. Best to let her bring it up.

"I'm not worrying about anything much," she said. "I just can't get problems. I couldn't even get them in Ashton—I mean at the school I went to at home."

Start Miss Eubanks picked up a pencil. "Don't you think if you thought about it, made an extreme effort to concentrate you might be able to think through the problems better?"

"Oh, I'm sure I would!" She dampened her lips again.

"Now Miss Munford says she doesn't want to have to put you back a grade, though she feels your fundamental training has lacked something that you really need a course in just the fundamentals of mathematics."

Felicia felt her face grow hot. They were going to put her back a grade! That's why Miss Eubanks wanted to see her. She thought of home

and the disgrace of it.

"However, Miss Munford and I talked it over and we feel this might put an additional load on you that you don't need---^{to}_M just now, that is." Miss Eubanks seemed to be searching Felicia's face.

Felicia looked away.

"I don't want you to have to repeat the course. And I'm sure you wouldn't choose that either."

Felicia looked back at her. "No, I wouldn't," she said softly.

"So we must make a special effort to concentrate, musn't we?"

"Yes, we must." ^{Felicia} ~~She~~ hadn't meant to say "we." She quickly cleared her throat.

Miss Eubanks leaned back in her chair. "Sometimes concentrating can be difficult. I used to have a grand old professor---^{oh}_M long ago---Dr. Peterson---^{and}_M Dr. Peterson told me years ago that scholarship is nothing in the world but just the ability to concentrate."

"He did?"

"Yes. I've never forgotten it. And he said every time you feel your mind wandering a bit---^{you}₂ must speak to your mind. You must say: "All right now, mind; you're not concentrating. Now, come back, mind!" Miss Eubanks smiled, happy with her little story. "It's a little game you can play with yourself."

Felicia smiled, too. "That's a good idea," she said, but she was thinking that if she played that game she would be concentrating so hard on the game she would forget all about X's and Y's.

"Now we will make an effort with our algebra, won't we?"

"I certainly will!" Felicia said. And she meant it. Actually, though, she had tried.

"Miss Munford is a very patient teacher, one of Englands finest con^t

tributions to us."

"She certainly is patient, I mean to put up with me." Felicia laughed.

Miss Eubanks moved her chair back slightly and seemed to relax. "Well, how do you like us here at Chesney Hall, Felicia?"

"Oh, fine! I just love it! I really do."

"And do you feel as if you're getting as much ^{out} of school as you would like?"

Felicia looked down at her hands. She wanted to give the right answer. She looked back at Miss Eubanks. "I'd like to be better in my subjects."

Miss Eubanks nodded. "Well, it's always a bit difficult in the be^ginning, I think. However, the rest of your teachers don't seem to have any out-of-the-way complaints."

"They don't!" She said a little too loudly. Miss Peacock hasn't told her, she thought. Nobody's told her.

"None of them, of course, feel as if you're fulfilling your potential. But that is understandable, I should think."

Felicia looked back at the older woman. "Chesney Hall sure is different from the school I went to." gal
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"Surely, Felicia," said Miss Eubanks. "Not sure."

"Oh! I mean ~~sure~~" She put her hand to her face. She knew that. Her father was always correcting her about sure and surely.

Miss Eubanks placed her hand lightly on the desk as if she were about to arise. "Well, I think that will be all," she said. She nodded to Felicia.

Felicia sat there for a moment and when Miss Eubanks nodded again she stood up.

"I have enjoyed our little visit," said Miss Eubanks. "I had a very

lovely letter from your mother yesterday."

"From Mother?" Felicia blushed. What was her mother writing Miss Eubanks for?

"Yes, and we were discussing you at the faculty meeting last night. I wanted to know you better."

Felicia didn't say anything. She waited for Miss Eubanks to continue.

"Now I feel as if I do know you better." She twitched her smile and nodded again. "Thank you for coming in."

Felicia hesitated for a moment. But why did you want to see me?
What did they say at the faculty meeting? You're testing me. That's what
you're ~~doing~~ ^{doing}

"Good evening, Felicia."

"Oh! Good-bye, Miss Eubanks." Felicia went to the door. Her mind was spinning. She closed the door slowly, stood there for a moment and then in deep thought climbed the stairs again.