

Chapter 10

"God, bless us all, both great and small, and bring us Christmas cheer!" sang the room full of girls as they marched out of chapel. The holiday mood was at fever-pitch and the voices, tremulous and high, fairly rang through the room. "God, bless us ALLLLL" came the voices and then running feet along the hall corridors. In only one hour the New York train would leave.

Two buses, loaded with suitcases, hat boxes, and extra coats, were already parked outside the gates waiting. Most of Tuesday night had been spent in preparation for this day. Punky Allen, Pedie's roommate, and Ann Huffinger had engaged in a pillow fight outside their room on the third floor and Ann's feather pillow had ripped, dropping feathers over the floor and down the circular stairway right in front of Miss Gate's office. Penalty: two weeks restriction when they returned. No one cared. Returning was some far day not to be thought of now. Meanwhile, there was

snow in New York. The great hissing train was waiting. Cotillions, dinners, and boys were ahead. All would be loved, admired, and they would never grow old.

"God, bless us ALLLLLLL", sang Cannon with outstretched arms as she stood in the doorway to the room.

Even Patsy seemed caught up in the spirit. She smiled at Cannon and continued stretching her gloves down over her fingers.

"Wheeeeeee," shouted Cannon, and hit Felicia on the shoulder. "Three solid weeks of freedom!"

Only Felicia hadn't caught the spirit yet. Her train going South didn't leave until nine o'clock that night. There was all afternoon to go through yet.

"Whatta they do down in Gawwwwwja for Christmas?" Cannon asked. "D'you sing Jingle Bells?" Cannon laughed. "Can't you just hear it, though: 'Jangle Be-yelles. Jangle Be-yelles. Jangle awwwwl the wayyyuh! Is that the way you do? That the way they do, huh Whitfield?" She was leaning toward Felicia and giggling.

"Not exactly," Felicia said.

Cannon thought that was hilariously funny. She fell on her bed, rolled over, stood up on the other side and picked up her pillow. "Good-bye, dear little Gates," she said to the pillow. "Farewell, you sweet gorgeous lovely creature!"

Both Patsy and Felicia laughed.

Cannon suddenly dropped the pillow. "The only damn thing that cruds me is my dear, loving step-mother. I got another letter from her today, literally dripping with sentiments."

"And how many have you answered?" Patsy asked, smiling her Mona Lisa smile. "One. And that nearly killed me. Just listen to this one!"

Cannon picked up an envelope on her bureau and opened it. "I so look forward to Christmas with my darling new family. There are so many invitations for you, Cannon dear, that I am almost tempted to tear them up for fear your friends will take too much time away from us...." Cannon tossed the letter back on the bureau. "She'd better not tear up any mail of mine." gal 45

"I think she sounds sweet," Patsy said.

"Cheeee-zus, she's so sweet she practically makes you throw up. She sent me this slurpy poem last week, all about maidens and Spring and stuff. You oughtta see her! Literally. Even her damn face looks like a valentine box and she walks like this!" Cannon started walking on tip-toes, her hips swaying exaggeratedly. She began pursing her lips. "Cannon, sweet heart. Cannon, angel. Cheee-zus! My poor, unsuspecting father. He musta had it bad." She sat in the rocking chair and folded her arms in front of her.

Patsy shook her head again and then glanced at her watch. "I wish they'd let us fly instead of going flock-like on the train." She touched her forehead lightly, her new way, developed recently, of informing she had another headache.

"Bad weather," Cannon said. "They wouldn't want you to crash, you know, Dedham dear."

"I sometimes think I'd rather do that than spend all that time with a bunch of giggling little girls."

Cannon poked out her lower lip. "Yep," she said. "I guess you would."

Patsy glanced at her watch again. "Well, I guess it's about that time." She put her scarf around her neck.

"D'you want me to carry your suitcase for you?" Felicia asked. It was just an over-night bag.

"Oh, would you mind, Felicia? I do have a hideous little headache."

"My god," groaned Cannon, and put both hands to the top of her head.
 "And who's little slave are you?"

Felicia pretended she didn't hear Cannon. "Have you got everything?" she asked Patsy.

"I think so."

"Aren't you coming?" Felicia asked Cannon.

"No, I hate farewells so. They tear me to ^{pieces} ~~pieces~~." She leaned back in the chair. "Aw, hell, I might as well." She stood up. "Might as well see if Pedie and the rest of the jerks made it."

Patsy and Cannon strode out to the bus and Felicia followed under the weight of the overnight bag. She hadn't bargained on its being so heavy.

"Hurry up, slave," Cannon called back to her and giggled. Then when Felicia put the suitcase down for a minute Cannon came back to help her with it. "My god, Dedham! What have you got in here? The whole No-dew Deodorant Company?"

Patsy looked back at them and ran her fingers down the side of her hair. "Just a few things. Why? Is it heavy?"

Cannon muttered something under her breath and took a firmer hold on the handle.

Miss Gates was marching up and down before the buses "like a fretted hen", as Cannon described her, and most of the girls were already inside seated. The first person Felicia saw on the bus was Hook. What ^{Gate} ~~she~~ Boston held for her, no one knew. Meanwhile, she had on a black hat and looked as miserable as ever.

"You're late!" Miss Gates pointed her finger at Patsy.

Patsy put the tips of her gloved fingers to her face. "Why, I thought

you said we should be ~~here~~ ^{here} at 11 o'clock, Miss Gates." She didn't seem in the least ruffled by the woman's ^a frowning face.

"And what's that?" Miss Gates pointed to the suitcase being hauled by Felicia and Cannon. "Throw it away! There's no room for it! I told you to have all luggage here by eight o'clock! There's just no room for it!"

"My other bags are here," said Patsy. "This is just a ~~---~~"

"Well, you ~~---~~" She rapped on the window of the bus. "Driver! Driver!"

The driver opened the door on the other side of the bus and Miss Gates hurried over to it. "We have another bag, driver! This child cannot hear instructions! A senior, and she still can't carry out instructions!"

The driver ~~didn't say anything. He just~~ glanced at Patsy, took the suitcase from Felicia and Cannon and then helped Patsy on to the bus. Patsy never once looked back.

The buses drove away without further ado, and Felicia and Cannon stood just outside the gates watching until they disappeared down the curving highway.

"You know what?" Cannon said. "I'll betcha that's the last time we'll ever see that girl."

"Why?"

"Just feel it, that's all."

"No, she's coming back. All her clothes are here. She said she was coming back."

"Maybe so, but ~~---~~"

"All right! All right!" said Miss Gates, ~~seemingly~~ appearing from nowhere. "A week's restriction for both of you when you return!"

"What for?" Cannon asked.

"You're outside the gates without permission. You know that. Both of you!"

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Cannon didn't say anything to Miss Gates. She just punched Felicia.
 "Come on," she said wearily.

Cannon left right after lunch, and by late afternoon Felicia had every thing packed. There were only two girls left in the school—Felicia and, far on the other side of the building, Dinky Downing. That night they were to have an early dinner, ^{which} and Felicia dreaded it, not so much because of Dinky, though that was bad enough (she still was not speaking), but the table was to be all faculty—Madame de Crèvecoeur, Miss Munford, Miss Gates, and Miss Abernathy, who were to stay at the school over the holidays. Miss Eubanks would remain at school, too, but she never had her meals in the school dining room. She just welcomed everyone and then ate in lonely splendor in her office. Nevertheless, the idea of having such an intimate time in such exalted company was unnerving, especially since Felicia knew she had been the topic of conversation at one, and possibly more, faculty meeting. She was positive the subject of cheating had been discussed. ~~Every~~ now and then she felt curious glances coming her way from various teachers, some ^{or} whom she didn't even have classes under. At any rate, she felt she was having dinner in the enemy camp.

It was strange walking down to the dining room alone. Felicia was already dressed for traveling. She had on her green wool suit, and the small little heels on her shoes clicked hollowly as she walked across the empty assembly room and down the stairs to the brick floor of the dining room. Miss Eubanks was not there to say "good evening", so Felicia sort of peeked inside first to see if anyone was there.

They were, Madame de Crèvecoeur was reigning at the head of the table, with Miss Munford and Miss Abernathy on either side. Next to Miss Munford

was Miss Gates, and across from Miss Gates was Dinky Downing with her ordinarily short straight dark hair incongruously curled in small ringlets all over her head^h—her one grand effort toward a glamorous home^ccoming to High Point, North Carolina. They were all standing, and Dinky stood there looking so very proper with her thin face that, even with everything, Felicia suddenly wanted to laugh.

"Come in, Felicia. Come in!" said Miss Gates nervously. "What time does your train leave?"

"Nine o'clock," said Felicia.

"Then you're the last one," Miss Gates said. "We'll leave at 8 o'clock. You be ready at eight o'clock!"

"Oh, I will," Felicia said, and merely glanced at Dinky. She took the place opposite her.

The dining room seemed almost spooky with just the two lights on in the front of the room. Further^a back the rows and rows of tables were dark and queerly covered. Felicia wondered what sort of Christmas these four ageing teachers could have in such dark cheerlessness. Suddenly^s she pictured them on Christmas eve, the four of them, and Miss Eubanks, decorating a Christmas tree, their wrinkled fingers reaching for a piece of gay tinsel.

"Eh, Mademoiselle Munford," said Madame de Crèvecoeur, her brown eyes sparkling. "Another Chreeee^smus, eh?"

Miss Munford, her ruddy English face suddenly relaxing into a half=
smile, kept looking down at her plate. "And this year, Odette, it will be English!"

Madame leaned back in her chair and, for no reason that Felicia could possibly see, suddenly^s went into gales of laughter, her face and neck grow^ting red and her wide eyes narrowing into two small slits.

still looking down,
 Miss Munford didn't glance up at the laughing woman, but there was a decided smile on her lips. Obviously it was a joke she, too, enjoyed *the joke* enormously.

Madame leaned forward, placing her hands gently on the table. "Last Chreeesmus," she tried to ^{spea} say but began laughing again, wheezing, and finally was reduced to bringing her napkin to her eyes. "Last Cheeesmus we have Franch Chreeesmus. I--^mme---" she pointed to her bosom---"Madame de Crèvecoeur, the bestest coo^gcke in all mid^m---I cook thee bestest deeeener for theeze Anglish ledy and she gets seeeeek." Madame began to laugh again, wheezing as she pointed her finger at Miss Munford's long face. "Alll Chreeesmus she is seeeeek!"

"Yes," said Miss Munford. "And this Christmas will jolly well be English!"

Madame de Crèvecoeur suddenly began to pout. "Anglish! Bah! Dull! Bor-ing!" She looked at Miss Abernathy. "Regardez! Anglish ^{ees}Christmas!" She ~~suddenly~~ made a very long face and closed her eyes as if she were sleeping.

Everyone laughed, even Miss Gates. Miss Gates turned to Felicia. "Miss Munford and Madame de Crèvecoeur have spent their Christmas~~s~~ together for fifteen years."

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"Perhaps," said Miss Munford and continued eating her spinach.

Madame half closed her eyes and folded her arms in front of her. Then, bursting them wide again, exclaimed: "Ahhhh hahhh, regardez!" She pointed to the kitchen door. "Loook what Ahnnie bring Madame!"

A large colored woman, beaming broadly, was coming toward the table, tremulously carrying a tray. On the tray was one ~~large~~^{perfect} artichoke.

"Oh deah," said Miss Munford. "Do we have to watch this performance, too?" She shook her head. "Pity."

The colored woman placed the artichoke beside Madame's dinner plate.

"Mah Ahninnie. You theenk of Madame de Crèvecoeur alway. Eh?"

"Yes ma'm," said the colored woman. "And Minnie fixed you yo holi-
days sauce, too!"

"Oh, deah," ~~meant~~^{meaned} Miss Munford.

Madame de Crèvecoeur thought this, too, was funny. She thought every-
thing Miss Munford said was funny.

Felicia was entranced. She could scarcely eat. Never had she seen anyone eat an artichoke with such extraordinary relish. Delicately, delicately Madame plucked each leaf, then with artistically held fingers dipped the leaf into the sauce and amidst "ohhhhs and ahhs" brought the tip to her mouth, savoring each delicious moment of the rare flavor. It was a performance so contagious that Felicia could almost taste the arti-
choke herself. When Madame finally got to the heart and her plate was piled with the dark leaves, the climax was ecstatic.

"Rahhhhly, Odette, cawn't you learn to eat the vegetable as others do?" asked Miss Munford.

"Mais, la coeur! La coeur!" She took up her knife and fork and with extended elbows gracefully cut the remaining heart into small bits. "Delicieux!" she said quietly, her hands almost praying over the small plate.

She finished the heart with a flourish, touching the corners of her lips with her napkin. And then having finished, she promptly leaned back

in her chair and began to sulk. No one said anything, no one asked why she seemed suddenly unhappy. It was merely part of the performance: that having finished the artichoke she now was finished with everything. Her moods were like the tides, ebbing and flowing, and just as acceptable.

"Will you have ^a good holiday, Dinky?" asked Miss Abernathy, turning to Dinky, and still smiling as she had at Madame de Crèvecoeur.

Dinky glanced at Miss Abernathy, her frizzed hair making her nose seem more snub than ever. "Oh, I'm sure." She kind of humped her shoulders forward.

"Which reminds me," said Miss Gates, shaking her head. "The room next to you. That room will have to be thoroughly cleaned."

Dinky looked at her. "Pam's and Elaine's, you mean?"

"Yes," said Miss Gates. "Elaine Karr will not be returning in January."

Felicia put down her water glass and turned to Miss Gates.

"Why not?" Dinky asked. ~~Her mouth was one round O.~~

"She just will not be with us next term," said Miss Gates.

Miss Munford cleared her throat.

"Did her father die or something?" asked Dinky.

"No," said Miss Gates, looking down at her plate.

Felicia looked at Dinky. Their eyes met, and Dinky's face burst into a smile. The table was terribly silent, but Felicia, her whole body suddenly seeming to quicken, met the smile with a radiant one of her own. Elaine Karr had been asked not to come back, and Dinky knew it! Felicia took up the napkin in her lap and twisted it. She had never been so happy. Never in her entire life!

No more was said at the table about Elaine. But after dinner Dinky

followed Felicia up to the assembly hall.

"Have you ever seen anybody like Madame de Crèvecoeur ^{rh}~~the~~ way she _m ate that thing?"

"Never!" said Felicia.

"Are you all packed and everything?"

"Yeah. I've been packed for three months."

Dinky laughed. "Well, I'd better go finish. Have a great time at home, hear?" She waved back at Felicia.

"I will! You do, too!"

"See you!"

"Okay," Felicia called and ran up to her room. In her ^{gal}mirror her ₄₈ face beamed back at her. "Thank you, God." she muttered. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She thought of Madame de Crèvecoeur and Miss Munford. She loved them! She loved everybody! And she adored Chesney Hall. All her life she would adore it.

The train sped through the night. Outside in the dark the tiny lights of the small South Carolina towns flickered, shone, and faded away. South. South. South. Georgia. She was young. She was sad. She was gay. She was Felicia Patsy Whitfield Dedham and she was going home. The glory of it all!