

Part II



*airline rule x 1 1/2*

Chapter 11

*24 Caslow  
05 Ital #3371*

*1 1/2 / 14  
Caslow  
OF  
XB*

"Ash-ton! Ash-ton, Gawjaaa!" called the porter. The wheels of the train clicked along the tracks as the hazy morning fields of pine, scrub and red earth sped past the window. Felicia kept looking out the window, and her nervous excitement was so acute she felt almost sick. The land was so familiar and with the train whistle intermittently heralding their entrance, the porter calling out the name of the town and the wheels turning along the tracks, she positively could sit no longer.

She clutched her pocketbook and gloves and made her way to the platform where the conductor and porter were standing, seemingly bored by the fact that in a matter of only two minutes this great iron of a train would make its entrance into Ashton, Georgia. Population: fifteen thousand.

"Theeze is your bags, aint they?" asked the porter, his dark face scowling at Felicia. Porters used to smile, she thought. When she was a very young girl they always smiled.

"Yes, yes they are!" Felicia answered.

The train whistle grew louder as the porter opened the top half of the door on the platform. Wind rushed in and the wheels along the tracks grew louder. Felicia stood back, but then as the train slackened she glanced out the door and, there, ~~in~~ one flashing second, she got a glimpse of her mother, father, Velvet, ~~the colored cook~~ and Isaiah, Velvet's son. They were standing near the little yellow wooden station, smiling and looking eagerly up as the train sped by. Suddenly, in just that instant, Felicia's throat tightened. This was her home. These were the people who loved her. What would the day be like if ever she should come home and they would not be standing there?

The first thing that struck <sup>Felicia</sup> her as she got off the train was the idleness of the station. After all the excitement of packing, waving people good-bye, the chatter about snow in New York and the wild anticipation of coming home, this small station, so meandering in quality, seemed almost unreal. A colored boy in a light tan shirt, with his sleeves rolled up, whistled lazily as he pushed a cart of holiday boxes. No one was hurrying to board the train; the ticket agent with his startlingly even false teeth leaned against the coach of the train talking to a conductor. Where was the excitement of Christmas? The day, just another Wednesday morning, was almost Spring-like, a rarity even for a Georgia winter.

Ahead she saw her mother and father coming toward her, her mother waving. She immediately thought of Patsy Dedham's command for poise and started to walk toward them. Her mother had on a tweed suit and walking shoes. Her father was coatless and his hat was characteristically slanting backward on his head. She ran to them, laughing and giggling at nothing in particular.

Behind them she saw Velvet, a coat over her blue uniform and her same black hat, plain and stretched, placed squarely on top of her smoothly-dressed hair. She was grinning widely with her two gold "open-faced crowns" on her front teeth gleaming in the winter sun. Isaiah, Velvet's "baby son" (though he was forty-seven) had on his short dark serving coat buttoned up to the neck. He was smiling, too, but Felicia was instantly taken aback by something strained in his face, something forced, as if the skin of his face was stretched by some unknown pull. She looked back at Velvet and then a queer sensation came to her, an uneasiness. ~~Velvet and Isaiah were Negroes.~~ She immediately thought of Dr. Gardner and her chapel talk: "Go back to yourrr homes, speak with your Neeegro friends, inform, uplift.... The situation in ~~the~~ <sup>our</sup> South today is desperate!"

Now, looking at Velvet, she felt almost timid. She wondered if, unknown to her, Velvet and Isaiah had actually hated her, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> hated her whole family, silently and for years. ("...and, of course, we cawn't blame them. Can we?")

Velvet's arms were outstretched, and without the slightest hesitancy she threw her arms around Felicia, drawing her to her.

"Lawd, she done growed up!" said Velvet. She was almost shouting. "She's Miss Felicia now."

Felicia drew back and looked into the dark face. "Aw, Velvet," she said. She didn't want Velvet to call her Miss. She never had before. It was as if something wonderful had passed, their easy ways, their talks on the same terms, their catastrophic fusses when she was a child. She didn't want anything to change, not here, not at home.

"I'm not ancient yet, Velvet."

Velvet laughed.

Felicia turned to Isaiah and shook hands with him. "Isaiah, how are

you? Still a member of the Elks Club?"

"No'm, I resigned."

Felicia stepped back. "You did? Why?"

"It got raided."

"Raided? Why?"

"We aint talkin' 'bout that no more," Velvet said.

Isaiah went to pick up Felicia's bags. His face was drawn, Felicia noted, and the hollows under his eyes were deep. Isaiah was usually so gay. He was always laughing. Things had changed in the months she had been away, not on the surface, not actually, perhaps, but there was some+ thing. She smiled at her parents. Don't change, she thought. Don't die. Don't ever change.....<sup>2</sup>

For the first time in her life Felicia saw ~~her~~ own house as a stranger might see it, the gravel driveway, lined with boxwoods, dogwood, and camellias (in full bloom now), and the two holly trees in the front of the house making an arch over the Georgian doorway. The house had been built by her great/great-grandfather and Whitfields had lived in it ever since. Some day it would be Arthur's and then Arthur's sons. Felicia herself would never live in it, unless, as she used to think, painfully, she would grow old, still a Miss Whitfield, living in the house like another piece of furniture, the maiden sister of Arthur LaGare Whitfield.

"Well, how do things seem to you?" asked her mother as they entered the hallway.

The two pier mirrors were already decorated with holly, and the rounded stairway had green smilax <sup>e</sup> intertwined through the banister rail. Felicia remembered how her mother always decorated the house before Arthur

arrived when he was in school in Connecticut.

"It's wonderful! Really wonderful!" To the right the living room and library beyond gleamed with old woods and faded fabrics. In the dining room the chandelier also held sprays of holly and the epergne on the table was filled with bright red camellias. "It's so Christmasy and ~~---~~" Her eye immediately saw the invitation. It was resting there on the card tray near the front door. She went over and picked it up ~~---~~ a small pink and blue card with the words "You're Invited" written in white horse-shoe lettering across the top:

SE7  
headline  
loop  
19 x 15 pi

14/18  
Caslow  
65 ital #3371  
w/ swash initials  
Sm caps

TO A DANCE ~~---~~ Dec. 23  
TIME: nine o'clock  
PLACE: Legion Hall  
Marilyn Summers  
R.S.V.P. <sup>1/2</sup> <sub>1/2</sub>  
Date: Horace Jenkins

11/18  
Caslow OF

"Date, Horace Jenkins." Her heart sank. Horace Jenkins was a half a grade ahead of her in school, an over-grown, sombre-faced boy Felicia scarcely knew. The one fact Felicia remembered about Horace Jenkins was that he had reached a kind of notoriety in the second grade of grammar school by wetting his pants during the singing of "America, The Beautiful." Since those days he had become a quiet, sullen boy, brooding on his humiliation, his height and big bones somehow belying his baby face. But he was sixteen now and no doubt had eased over the second grade mishap.

Felicia thought of Patsy Dedham and all her talk of Europe and "men." How different one's dreams and the reality of things. This was her life ~~---~~ Ashton, Horace Jenkins; Patsy Dedham's life was some far place, a magic and a wonder Felicia would never know. She read the card again. "Place: Legion Hall." She pictured the low frame white building with its blazing red and blue "American Legion" marker at the top of the door. She wondered what Cannon was doing in St. Louis, Cannon with all of her friends and

invitations and ~~new~~ step-mother.

"Yes, Marilyn is giving a little dance," her mother said. There was an unmistakable sigh.

"Uh huh," was all Felicia said. She placed the card back on the tray, and they all went in for lunch.

Lunch was all talk of school, with Felicia going into minute detail about Patsy, Cannon, Madame de Crèvecoeur:

"Her name means 'broken heart', and she won't even let you speak in English. Whatever you say you have to say it in French, even at meals. See, they've got this French table and every month you have to sit at it. It's just horrible."

"Goodness, do you know that much French?" her mother asked.

Felicia nodded her head. All her life she had been given to flights of exaggeration. Sometimes she even got so she believed what she was saying *herself*.

Even so, she gave an accurate account of the cheating episode, ~~dis-~~ covering in herself almost Christian overtones of forgiveness now for Elaine.

"Why, how simply horrid," said her mother. "Don't you think so, Allison?"

"Yes," her father agreed.

"I should think Miss Eubanks would have said something to you about it."

"No, they've got this honor system, see. But I don't think Elaine ever reported herself. I think they just kicked her out anyway." She looked tragically down at her plate. "I could have gotten kicked out, too, you know."

"Heavens, just don't mention such a thing," her mother said.

"Wouldn't that have been terrible? Me? Kicked out for cheating? What would you have done?" It was a good feeling discussing the improbable this way, like reviewing a nightmare from which you had awakened safe and

*gal 50*

secure again.

"I don't know," her mother said quietly. "I just don't know." She smiled wistfully at Felicia. "I think we would be quite hurt."

"To say the least," her father said. He got up from the table. "Just see you don't get kicked out for anything!"

Felicia laughed. "I don't think I will," she said. But all at once a kind of fear gripped her. She saw herself leaving Chesney Hall, alone, disgraced. Her mother was weeping. She sat up straighter. "I don't think I will," she said again.

"I should hope not," her father said and turned to her mother. "I'll be out at the farm, Sarah. If you need me."

Felicia watched him leave the room, but the feeling of a second ago was still with her. How queer, she thought. How very odd. She had never had a feeling like this before, as if vague whisperings were telling her things, like a warning. The room was very still. She shuddered slightly.

Soon, however, she was on the subject of Cannon again, and she was so excited with all her talk she almost resented it when her mother said she was a little tired, that she believed she would "rest for a while." It was unthinkable her mother couldn't listen for the rest of the afternoon.

"We'll hear more tonight," said Sarah Whitfield a little wearily.

Still keyed-up, Felicia ~~then~~ wandered aimlessly about the dark afternoon of the house. She thought of calling some of her friends, Marilyn or Melissa Stewart, but for some reason she felt oddly shy about them now. Maybe they wouldn't want her to call them. They hadn't written her once that Fall and she didn't know what had transpired in their lives during the time. Last Summer both Marilyn and Melissa had suddenly risen to glorious heights of popularity with the ~~male~~ <sup>male</sup> half of Ashton Junior High School's eighth grade, and as September approached (and also high school) even older boys began calling them. Somehow all this had ~~seemed to draw~~

Marilyn and Melissa closer, a kind of divine rapport, excluding Felicia who was still in good standing with the female half of the eighth grade, but pointedly insignificant as far as the letter-wearing contingent went. This had been the object of many a brooding silence last ~~summer~~. Sometimes it had seemed as if this were their town, Marilyn and Melissa's, everybody else's town, not hers. She was like some dark shadow in the corner who watches the lights of the carnival. She was always watching. And listening. Yes, she would wait before she plunged too quickly into the beat of the village.

Tired of the ticking clock on the library shelf, she wandered into the kitchen. Velvet, with a pan in her lap, was snapping green beans and talking to herself:

"...So I just sez to mahself---Velvet I sez---you aint no count---  
gawn and got the high bluuud, feets aches awl the time, aint got no money---  
just plain woeout!"

"Velvet!" Felicia said, giggling. Thank goodness she was still in the kitchen. "Are you still talking to yourself?"

"Lawd, Feeeeelicia!" ~~(She didn't call her Miss.)~~ "I thought you was upstairs restin'."

Felicia sat on top of the small ~~little~~ step-ladder near the pantry. "You know when you start talking to yourself that's the first sign you're going crazy."

"I aint goin' crazy, I already is."

"What's the matter with you?"

She snapped a bean. "High bluuud, feets no count. I'm just gettin' old. 'Fore you know it I'll be huggin' a dyin' pillow."

"Whataya mean, a dyin' pillow?"

"You aint never heard that spression?"

gal  
51



Felicia shook her head.

She stopped snapping the beans. "Les see heah." She looked up at the ceiling. There were small threads of red veins in her eyes.

← "When I comes to press a dyin' pillow  
O Lawd, I wanta be ready.  
Let me in sweetly, and lay me down gently;  
The fields been long, and the ways been hard  
So, Lawd, I'ze comin' home.

} set line  
for line -  
text

← "They's more, but I can't gather it all up right now."

"That's beautiful, Velvet."

"Yes, Jesus, many's the time I said that little pome." She <sup>went on with</sup> started snapping the beans <sup>n</sup> quicker. "When my father died, everybody there---  
eeevrybody, and Lawd there was a heep o'folks round that casket---all of  
'em commenced to sayin' that. "When I comes to press a dyin' pillow...!"

"You're not thinking about pressing it soon now, are you?"

Velvet glanced at Felicia and then began to giggle. "I show hopes not. Lawdy, I hopes not!"

Felicia giggled, too. She had really missed Velvet. All her life Velvet had been the only person she could really talk to. Once, long ago, she had heard her mother tell some dinner guests: "Our daughter Felicia stays in the kitchen all the time. She had much rather be with the colored help than with us."

It was true, in part. But it was merely because she could tell Velvet things, all her problems. She didn't want to tell her mother and father because then they would worry; <sup>and</sup> her friends would just be bored. It embarrassed her to talk about herself to most people. Velvet was the only one. She never thought of her as "colored help."

"Hey, Velvet, let me ask you something?"

"Uh hah?"

"Do colored ~~p~~ people hate white people?" ~~She was thinking of Dr.~~

~~Gardner at school again.~~

Velvet didn't say anything for a moment. She just kept right on snapping ~~the~~ beans. "Not all of 'em."

"Do they really?"

"Some does."

"Do you?"

"None of 'em aint nevah crossed me up." She bent down and ~~took~~ up some more beans from the crumpled brown sack. "Longs I remember white folks always thought good of Velvet. Thought a heep of my father, too."

"Well, what's all this stuff in Mississippi and Alabama about then, I mean all that mess?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I wouldn't wanta go nowhere somebody didn't want me. No ma'm. If somebody doesn't want Velvet, she ain goin'. You heah me?"

"I know, but everybody at school says colored people in the South are just miserable."

"Some of 'em is. Just wantin' folks to feel sorry for 'em. Don't half do nothin', don't work. They had all that fuss over in Birmingham ~~---~~ Martin Luther Kang just keepin' up a heep of fuss." ~~---~~

"I know it. This minister at school prayed for him in chapel."

"Wasn't nevah no fuss 'till he commenced to preachin' and carrin' on."

"Martin Luther King, you mean?"

"Thas right. Man in the taxicab last week ~~---~~ old Willie Beeezely ~~---~~ knowed him awl mah life ~~---~~ say; 'Velvet, ~~say,~~ 'you gone set-in when Martin Luther Kang come to Ashton?' I say, 'Set-in for whut?' He say, 'set-in for yo rights, gal!' I say, 'Maaan, I aint studyin' you. Velvet got on heah now for sixty-two years without no settin' stuff and I aint

settin' nowheres now for nobody! ' "

"What did he say then?"

"He just commenced to laughin'."

Felicia laughed. "You don't wanta be put in jail? Just think, every-  
body'll think you're a saint or something."

"I aint never been in nobody's jail and I aint aimin' on enterin' one  
now."

"Everybody in the North thinks Martin Luther King's a kind of saint."

Velvet looked up. "Who think he is?"

"People up north."

"Let 'em thank it. He aint no saint." She began giggling again.

"Martin Luther Kang aint no saint. You heah me? No ma'm! "

"Wonder what Isaiah feels about all that?"

"About what?"

"You know, about everybody hating everybody else."

"Isaiah aint studyin' nobody."

"You don't know. He might and just not tell you. Hey, how do you  
think he looks, Velvet? Isaiah?" Velvet had just finished with the beans,  
and Felicia wanted her to keep talking.

"Aint lookin' good-a-tall. I don't know what's come over Isaiah---  
moons round, ~~awl the time~~, just sets hunched up in front of the fire awl  
the time." She began smoothing her apron with the wide slat of her hand.  
"Doctor say they aint nothin' wrong with him. Yo mama sent him down to  
see Doctor Mathey. Isaiah's just been livin' too high, that's awl."

"Did the doctor give him any pills to take or anything?"

"He give him somethin'. But he aint no worse off than I is." She  
began shaking her head. "Lawd, you know nobody ought never to forgit their  
mama---all that pain you had to go through to git 'em heah and they just

goes off lack they mama aint even in this world."

gal 51A "Aw, Velvet you know Isaiah loves you."

"Sometime he do."

"He's always looking out for you, doing things and giving you things on Mother's day." Felicia was looking at the little gold heart around Velvet's neck. She remembered when Isaiah had given her that ~~one~~<sup>one</sup> on Mother's day years ago. Velvet had come into the house and she was wearing a white rose in memory of her dead mother, and the little locket for the first time was around her neck.

"He aint give me nothin' lately. Not since he come on that woman."

"What woman?"

"Sorry thang. Got fi<sup>re</sup> chirrun of her own. Husband's sorry, too."

"Is she married?"

"Husband done lef her, gawn up to Deetroit. She just got Isaiah in a spell, thas all." Velvet shook her head and then looked at Felicia out of the corner of her eye. "Youze gotten right fat up theah in Ginger, aintcha?"

"Fat?" Felicia almost shouted. That was the last thing on earth she could ever be accused of.

Velvet smiled at her. She had a pretty smile. "You ain lookin' as poely as you did 'fore you left. Got yoeself a little shape to you theah now." She began to giggle again.

"They say everybody gains weight at school." She was thinking of Patsy Dedham. Even she had gained weight, and Cannon was always hollering around about how much she had gained. "Do I look better, Velvet?"

Velvet looked at her again. "You'ze gettin' to be a reglar little lady."

Felicia thought of the dance coming up. "Have you seen Marilyn or Melissa this winter?" She yawned, but she was really interested.

"I sees 'em sometimes. Downtown, sassin' down the street."

"Have they changed or anything. I mean ~~it~~"

"Melissa she gotten right pretty. I never did thank nothin' o' Marilyn. She got ugly ways." She stood up and began shaking her apron. "Pretty ways is what counts. If you got pretty ways aint nothin' better'n that."

"Boys don't think so."

"Why, honey, yes they dooze. Boys aint no different from the rest o' the folks."

"I know, but ~~it~~" Felicia started thinking about the dance again. She hoped she wouldn't have just a horrible time. It was different thinking about dances at school and actually going to them. It was humiliating with everybody watching, especially people like Marilyn and Melissa.

"You takes somebody like yo mama, now she got pretty ways."

"But she's pretty, too. Mother was very popular."

"Yes, chile, yo mama's a pretty woman."

"Ohhhh me," groaned Felicia.

"But you got pretty ways, and you aint no right down ugly child neither. I don't lack nobody with ugly ways." She took off her apron and put on her hat.

"Where you going?" Felicia didn't want her to go.

"Out heah to the house for a spell." She pointed to the servant's house in back. "Got to git me a smoke."

"A smoke?" Felicia leaned forward. "Velvet! Do you smoke?"

Velvet laughed. "I just calls it that."

"Oh, snuff, you mean. Red Devil?"

"Aw huh. I just gits to studyin' 'bout it and aint nothin' do but I git some."

Felicia smiled at her. "You know ~~what~~, Velvet?"

"Hawh?" Velvet ran her hand over her full face and wrinkled her nose.

"Isn't it too bad Arthur isn't here for Christmas?"

Velvet raised her hands. "Lawd, don't say nothin'! I misses that boy sooo! Now you tawk 'bout somebody sweet---<sup>m</sup> Arthur's the sweetest boy I evah did see! How ~~zome~~ you guess he went and did what he done?"

"Join the Navy?"

"Aw huh. Navy aint no place for that child."

"School, I guess. He just wasn't trying."

Velvet shook her head. "Arthur aint no dumb boy. He just aint con-  
secratin'."

"That's what the Headmistress at school told me, that I don't con-  
centrate."

"Thas right," Velvet said. "You and Arthur just alike. Always thankin' 'bout somethin' you aint got no business thankin' 'bout." She opened the door. "Well, I'm gone. See you after awhile."

"Okay," Felicia said. "Have a good smoke."

Velvet giggled and went out the door.

*gal 52* Felicia leaned back on the step-ladder. Now what could she do? She looked at her watch---<sup>m</sup>only three-thirty. She thought of the dance again. She had to find something to wear, something not too---<sup>m</sup> She got down off the step ladder. A new dress! She would have to buy one, something that Patsy Dedham would wear. Could she find it in Ashton, though? Better go tell her mother.

But half-way up the stairs she heard shouting outside:

"Feeeee-licia! Feeee-licia! Call your mama! Come heah!"

She ran back down the stairs and opened the back door in the hall.

"Come heah! Fee-licia! Come heah!"

It was Velvet.

