


## Chapter 16

Later, months later, after the ~~drag ends~~ of hurt and humiliation had finally run its course, Felicia often went back to one particular Sunday at Chesney Hall, and she always remembered it, though wistfully and with some amusement, as "the happiest day of my life."

~~Queerly~~, it had been a day, ~~too~~, that had sustained her through the many ~~months~~ <sup>days or</sup> to come. ~~But~~ mostly, it was the only time she could remember that she had prayed for something and the prayer had been answered. There were no other times like that. And if perhaps she had found a God in ~~some~~ <sup>a</sup> small rural Negro church when a faithful servant died, then in a small Episcopal Church in Virginia she had found an answering God, once. And she never quite forgot it.

The ~~gray~~ <sup>a</sup> clapboard church with its studied simplicity inside was the one link Chesney Hall had with the village of Chesney.

It was set back from the brick sidewalk, surrounded by thick  
boxwoods and holly trees, and 

each Sunday the seventy boarding residents of the school were herded into the church by tight-lipped faculty members.

Once Chesney Hall had had a chapel of its own, but it had burned one ~~summer~~ night in 1957. Ever since, the drives for funds to build a new one were monthly, if not sometimes weekly. Letters to parents and alumni<sup>ae</sup> were filled with carefully worded requests for contributions. Finally, an obscure Mrs. Harvey T. Mathew of New York died, leaving the school a large endowment with special emphasis on a new chapel. The chapel would be finished in 1966. Meanwhile, students went to St. Luke's. They clomped down the aisles, sitting together in groups of sixes, sometimes giggling but more often dreamily eyeing the older choir boys, who each Sunday sang with uncertain voices the hymns and chants of the age-old service.

The rector, the Reverend Samuel R. Carrington, was a stocky, middle-aged man with a <sup>a</sup>graying crew cut who had once boxed at Princeton. He was called "Chip" in his college days and some of the fathers of girls at Chesney still referred to him as that. "Sure, I know old Chip Carrington. Is he down here?" He was indeed. Sixth in line of generations of Virginia Carringtons, three of the former Carringtons had at one time or another been rector of St. Luke's. Now<sup>u</sup>, it was Samuel R.'s time.

He was a familiar face to most of the students, taking part in many of the school's chapel services, and he was often in the dining room for lunches or dinners, the purpose of his being there never quite fully explained. But whenever he was there Miss Eubanks honored the dining room with her own presence, laughing a studied laugh and in general being much more cordial than was her custom. The Reverend Mr. Carrington called her "Margaret." And no doubt there was a mutual respect of long standing. Of course, they both led flocks.

Felicia never thought too much about the Reverend Mr. Carrington.

Some of the students he seemed to know better than others and with them he was on a first-name basis, ~~also~~, jovially questioning them about their activities: "And how did the play come out, Callie?" Or: "Will I see you again at Northfield this Summer, Madelaine?" He didn't even know Felicia's name, but after each service he shook her hand and matter-of-factly wished her good morning. It was a kind of feather in the cap to be one of the Reverend Mr. Carrington's chosen ones.

Actually, church itself meant nothing more than routine to Felicia. It was merely a part of the week like gym or choral practise or Miss Munford's terrible tutoring. As a matter of fact, had it been possible, five Sundays out of ten she would have skipped (now that she was free from parental rule.) Church just seemed to come too early, that was all, and, besides, she resented the herd-like way in which they were brought into the place.

Yet ever since Isaiah's funeral there was something in the reading of the scriptures and even in the Morning Prayer itself that had begun to reach her. It came to her much in the same way Miss Peacock's poetry had come. But the Biblical words were purer, more haunting, and seemed to ring out with a sturdiness that made one glad rather than pitying.

"....Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for His sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy Holy name. Amen."

Felicia, squeezed into a pew between Patsy and four others, listened intently to the words of the General Confession. The minister's voice was strong and deep over those of the congregation, coming in highs and lows and resonant rhythms, and suddenly, as she had in the past, Felicia

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was touched by a kind of <sup>inner</sup> heaviness ~~inside~~. More and more often now (she had even noticed it while she was home) she was given to these strange cycles of feeling. They would come to her like warm winds across a wheat field, coming from nowhere, only suddenly there, and always the desire to cry was so heavy within she instinctively put her hand to her throat, as if by so doing she could somehow fight the hurt of tears.

What caused it, she was never sure. Sometimes she could be alone and for no reason at all the feeling would come. But more often now ~~it was~~ in church the feeling came and she wondered if perhaps somewhere in the far reaches of her mind it was the sensation of death that touched her here. Or was it life itself? She wanted to be a better person, "a more godly, righteous, and sober" person. ~~Somehow~~ it all seemed prophetic and she vowed ~~with double fists~~ that she would be a better person. Yes, she would always think of others, never of herself; she would actually put herself in the mind of others and suffer with them and be glad with them and if she could, with all her power, help them.

Yet, in the beginning of the service, she had prayed for something. She wanted God to give her something, and with all her heart and mind she wanted it. "Please God," she had said. "I have never asked for much, but this time, please." Once her rector at home had said it was selfish to ask God for things you wanted. She had never quite understood that because the prayer of St. Chrysostom at the end of Morning Prayer stated as clearly as possible that He would answer. Felicia had always been impressed by the prayer: "...and dost promise that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life ever lasting."

She supposed that meant if God thought it was right for you He would answer. So she had added: "If it is thy will." Then for a moment she wondered if perhaps there were some vast face above the church roof listening and weighing the requests of all these people. How could He possibly hear everyone? She had often wondered this, but she had been too ashamed to ask. It seemed too childlike. But there were so many riddles in the land of God.

The Reverend Mr. Carrington based his sermon on the Sermon on the Mount which he had already read as the lesson for the day. He asked the congregation to "think on these things" and as he repeated the familiar words Felicia took them into herself, *trying to understand them, and wondering if she herself met the ancient rules;*

"...Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

*2* ...Now what constitutes a good spirit, Marion Cannon? Miss Gates had asked that first night. Miss Gates had said they had "poor spirits," but it wasn't the same thing Christ was talking about. She would have to ask someone what He meant. She might ask the Reverend Carrington after the service, but she wasn't sure whether she dared to or not.

"Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted."

Yes, she had mourned and time had comforted her.

"Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth."

She was sort of meek, she guessed, but sometimes with people she knew pretty well she wasn't meek at all.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; For they shall be filled."

*2* "...Blessed are...."

And as the minister continued to read, so did Felicia judge herself, weighing the rules, weighing herself against the rules. "Please, God,

just this once, give me what I want. I will be a better person. I..."

Beside her, Patsy was fingering her gloves. They were black kid and every now and then she would slap them lightly against her knee, an impatient gesture, as if she wanted the hour done. Every so often she would sigh heavily and then shift nervously in the pew. But sighing and impatience had become a fact with Patsy lately. She complained about everything and then she would sigh and say she didn't really care. Also lately her eyes had a queer glaze to them, the whites of her eyes almost startlingly white, and the rims slightly red as if she had just emerged from a bout of crying. Felicia wondered if Patsy had ever thought about God. She had never discussed such a thing with her. And she never would, of course. Once Cannon had been talking about her step-mother, how at the dinner table she liked to say the blessing standing up and holding hands. And Patsy had said: "People like that give me a pain; it's so awfully tacky." And for once Cannon had agreed. But both Patsy and Cannon were from other worlds. They had never heard the wind whispering in a pine tree by a poor grave, and perhaps they never would. Why did I hear it, God?

Outside the church, the sun was high and whatever hopes and dreams were begged in the dark were now lain aside for the workaday world.

It had always interested Felicia, the expressions on people's faces as they left church—a kind of humble, self-congratulatory look that never lasted for long but was with them while they made the slow progress up to the minister's hand. Then outside everyone was so nice to each other, shaking hands and talking in little groups, much nicer than they were at any other time. No, there were no enemies at the mouth of the

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at 7:15

on the church steps @

~~Church.~~

"Well, old Chip was really wound up this good day, wasn't he?" Cannon said as they walked out onto the sidewalk.

"I thought he was sweet," Patsy said.

Cannon glanced at Patsy and then looked up at the sky, wagging her head as she walked. "Genetic good luck," she said.

Patsy looked at her questioningly.

"Old Chip! Born a Carrington of Virginia!" She stretched out her arms. "Let's all make a joyful noise unto the Lord!"

Pedie, on the other side of Patsy, giggled as Cannon, her head still wagging, walked ahead of them, swaggering, to the bus.

"I mean reeee-ally," Patsy said, and sighed.

On the bus Felicia had to sit by Hook. ("Old Hook, the spook; thou miserable Kook!") There was no other choice. Cannon and Patsy got the front seat by the driver and the only remaining seat was across the aisle. Felicia looked about to see if there was one somewhere else, but every thing was taken, even the long seat in the back.

Hook had on a black coat and a matching hat with a small brim that came down almost to her eyebrows. It was a kind of feat that Hook had found a hat that would actually fit over her "great bushels" of kinky hair and for a moment Felicia was intrigued with the accomplishment.

"Yes, I guess you'll have to sit by me," Hook said, and grinned at Felicia, her teeth more yellow than usual.

"Uh huh," Felicia said with a non-committal chipperness in her voice. But inside she was furious. Every opportunity Hook got she tried to sit by her, in chapel and at mid-morning snacks, and she always used a kind of familiar chiding with Felicia she never used with anybody else, as if the firm bond of friendship afforded her the luxury.



Hook was the most repulsive girl Felicia had ever known. She even had a suspicion Hook was dirty. She was always wearing white blouses with the rim of the neck dirty, and her roommate, poor Alice Oxley, said she never changed her underwear. "She even sleeps in them! I swear she does!" Yet her clothes, usually wrinkled or spotted, bore the labels of all the best Boston and New York stores---tailored and simple and designed to last. Hook's ~~trial~~ <sup>The problems posed</sup> to her mother must have been ~~a~~ <sup>enormous,</sup> catastrophic, Felicia often thought, and she pictured some harrassed Boston woman winding through stores buying things for old Hook.

"You know what Dinky did?" Hook asked in her nasal voice, her lips curled into a half smile. She touched Felicia's arm. Hook was always touching people.

Felicia shook her head and moved her arm.

"She put bus tokens in the collection plate." She grinned into Felicia's face. "I saw her."

"Uh," was all Felicia said.

"Don't you think that's a howl?"

"Not very," Felicia said, looking straight ahead.

"What's the matter with you?" whined Hook.

"Nothing!"

"O-kay then, suit yourself," Hook said and turned to look out the window.

Felicia herself turned in the opposite direction, irritation mounting, but as she did the church bulletin with its order of service and announcements for the coming week fell to the floor. The picture of the church was on the cover with the words, "Remember Now Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth," printed in small italics at the top. She stared at the words and then tenderly picked up the bulletin. Already she had forgotten

the vows she had made earlier, especially the vow to be a better person, a "more righteous" person. She was being snobbish and selfish. Poor Hook. She couldn't help the way she was, she guessed.

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"Hey, Hook," she said then. "I surely do like your hat, Hook. You have awfully nice clothes."

Hook glanced at her. "What's the matter? You want something?" Hook would never have dared to rebuff anyone else like that. And the fact she felt free to say anything she pleased to Felicia just showed again what Felicia's status really was. And though your enemies revile you and.....

"No," Felicia said, giving a little supercilious laugh. "I just said I liked your hat, that's all."

"Well, it's not for sale," Hook said and turned away again.

Anger sprung to Felicia. She hated Hook! She really did. The hat was ugly as sin anyway. All she was doing was being charitable. Looks like Hook would have known that. Well, you just couldn't even try with someone like that. They sat in silence for the remainder of the bus ride.

It was during mid-day dinner, however, that the day reached its pinnacle. Felicia was sitting at Miss Munford's table and gradually as they made their way through the heavy Sunday meal Felicia noticed that Miss Munford was being nicer to her than she ever had before. She had thought it was because she had at long last discovered the mystery of percentages. Even yesterday during tutoring Miss Munford had said, "I do believe you're going to make it after all, Whitfield." And for the first time, then, there had been a few moments of shared warmth between the two.

But now Miss Munford seemed to be almost straining herself with cordiality <sup>FM</sup> at least for her. She even asked Felicia if she had any brothers or sisters, and, for Miss Munford, that was almost like cherished

friendship. She never asked anybody anything. She just strode through the halls <sup>in</sup> with her low heeled oxfords and tweed suits unmindful of ~~every-~~ thing and everybody except Room <sup>20</sup> ~~twenty~~ where ~~there~~ upon the blackboard <sup>shone</sup> sat one great, fat square root.

Actually, Felicia was finding it a bit of a strain, this new relation- ship with Miss Munford. For one nice gesture from her called for six from Felicia; certainly she didn't want to show she didn't appreciate this smile from on high. Tomorrow, she was thinking, I'll sit down at the end of the table, let someone else struggle for recognition. It was too diffi- cult keeping it up through a whole dinner.

But just as she was thinking that, Mary Olmquist rose from the chair in the middle of the dining room and struck her fork against a glass.

"What now?" Hallie Humphries next to Felicia said. Mary Olmquist was always interrupting desserts with her little "do's and don't" announce- ments.

"I have an announcement to make, pu-less," said Mary Olmquist in her familiar high, S-filled voice. "I want to saaay, it is my distinct privilege today to announce the new member of the Student Council Boarrrrrt. The faculty met last night with Miss Eubanks and theirrr decision was unanimous also."

Felicia's face bolted red. Her heart was pouding and she couldn't swallow.

"I want to say ourrr ninth grade representative for the remainderrr of the school year is FELICIA CARR WHITFIELD!"

A terrible silence fell on the room, and Felicia didn't know how long it lasted because all at once there was a burst of applause and Hallie Humphries next to her squealed and hugged her, knocking over a water glass. In the blur of confusion the next thing Felicia knew a colored

maid and Miss Munford were wiping up the water off the table, and Miss Munford was muttering something, but she was actually smiling, too. And looking up into the British woman's face, Felicia, in just that instant, was miraculously changed. She was a taller, safer, even beloved human being. She was queen of the school! She was queen of the world! Oh dear, good, kind Miss Munford.

She made her way out of the dining room. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." she said to everybody congratulating her. And then she ran up the backstairs and at the top, where no one could see her, she leaned against the wall and said, "Thank you, God! Thank you! You answered me, and I shall never forget it! Never!" How great the world!

It was <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ one day she would remember throughout her life.