

## Chapter 17

Felicia was never quite sure exactly what it was that caused her appointment to the board of Student Council. But after a sober reappraisal she rather suspected it was a kind of "lesser of the evils" sort of thing, the winner by default. Chesney Hall's ninth grade was not exactly abounding in talent, she knew, and competition couldn't have been very strenuous. Nevertheless, whatever it was, she didn't feel inclined to pursue the reasons too carefully.

Nothing like it had ever happened to her before. All her life she had lived with the fact that she didn't have what her principal at home, Mr. Mason, called "leadership qualities". Mr. Mason had expressed it another way to her mother: "No, Felicia will never be a leader, Mrs. Whitfield, but maybe she'll be the power behind the throne."

That from Mr. Mason had pleased her enormously—then. She was just as satisfied with the idea of being near greatness as being great herself. But now here she was, suddenly sky-rocketed into power and glory. And she

loved it, every minute of it. Greatness, she discovered, carried all kinds of gifts with it. For instance, at snack time or in church it didn't matter at all if you sat alone. It didn't mean that no one wanted to sit with you, it merely meant you preferred to sit alone. And that carried over into other things as well. No longer did you have to have your own private list of rooms to avoid nor did you have to keep a mental check as to just how you were supposed to greet one girl as opposed to another. You were free even to be kind. And how soothing it all was.

START Also, she found herself developing a kind of worshipful attitude toward Chesney Hall itself. Everything about it was the best, the best teachers, the choicest students and Miss Eubanks was the finest headmistress in all America. Felicia promised herself she would never forget Chesney Hall, and as the obscure Mrs. Harvey T. Mathew before her, she knew perfectly well that when she died she would leave every penny of her money to this great institution where she had first tasted the elixir of success. It was the least she could do.

But while she was here she would give her utmost to her new position. After all, it was not out of the realm of possibility that some day she might even become president of the Board, a "Southern Mary Olmquist", as Cannon had said. It wasn't impossible at all. But that was years away and now was now.

One afternoon Felicia went back to her room to find Patsy in high, gay spirits (for Patsy.) She was on her way to the shower, wearing her blue-checked robe, wooden shower shoes (rule nine in the Common Book of Rules), and her hair rolled up underneath a fragile blue net turban. The thought went through Felicia's mind that Patsy was even glamorous going to the shower, in spite of the decided hippiness she had developed lately (a complaint that had begun to be aired almost as much as the one-time



headaches.)

Felicia waved at her, a Cannon salute.

"Hi," Patsy said. "Oh, hey, had a memo from Mummy today."

"You did?"

"Uh." Patsy stepped behind the shower curtain and then stuck her head out like an impish little girl. "She's all chirpy about your coming up this Summer."

Felicia blushed. "She is?" Patsy had only mentioned the visit once and she had been embarrassed to tell her about the enthusiastic letter from her own Mother: "...How perfectly lovely of young Patsy. Please give me her mother's address so that I can write her. Your father and I both agree that it would be such a fine opportunity for you to see and know that part of the country, and what you tell me of Patsy she sounds like a charming...."

The letter had come a month ago and Felicia had never sent Mrs. Dedham's address because Patsy had never mentioned the invitation again.

"Do you really think she wants me?" she asked now.

"Cute. Of course she wants you." Patsy disappeared behind the shower, tossing her robe over the top of the shower rail. "Besides, she says she's going to hide me at the farm until I lose some weight. She ought to see me now."

Felicia laughed. "You'd better go on that diet soon then."

"Oh, I don't care. I love the farm. You will, too. Have you heard from your parents?"

"No, not yet. I'm going to write them again tonight."

"My cousin, the one from Choate I told you about ~~---~~ You know? He'll be there, too. You'll be mad for him, just the right age."

Felicia didn't say anything. Patsy had turned the shower on anyway

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and couldn't have heard her. Felicia wasn't exactly sure she liked this rather motherly tone from Patsy. "Just the right age." Even so, she wished the cousin weren't coming. Patsy had shown her a picture of him, a tall, slender, sandy-haired boy with his sleeves rolled up and wearing chinos. He was very good-looking in a kind of bleached-eyebrowed way. To Felicia he was terrifying. He wouldn't like her; he wouldn't like her at all. He would be bored to death, this blond righ god.

But the idea of being on a <sup>e</sup>Pennsylvania farm where there were cocktail parties, famous people dropping in for the weekend, and everyone was rich and bored and glamorous was so exciting she had even drawn a calander in the back of her Algebra book and marked off the days. She hoped they would like her, <sup>up there;</sup> ~~these people,~~ especially Patsy's mother and Gigi. She thought perhaps they would because Patsy herself did. Felicia had often tried to figure this out. "Dedham's little slave," Cannon had called her. And maybe that was true, but she really had tried to help Patsy, listening to her, for hours, trying to think up ways to get her mind off Peter. Only inwardly did she admit to herself she was more intrigued with Patsy's troubles than genuinely sorry. She sometimes wished she had had some tragic love affair herself. Once, she thought of inventing one, just as she had the hang<sup>o</sup>ver story.

Patsy had told about being in Hobe Sound once and how she and some boy stayed out until three in the morning with some "terribly cute married people" and the next day she had had to stay in bed all day. Felicia had invented a similar tale about Christmas vacation in Ashton, and she could see how enormously impressed Patsy was. It kind of put them on a par somehow; no one else in school had ever experienced the agonies of hang<sup>o</sup>overs. Nevertheless, she hoped the cousin from Choate didn't drink. If he did, she didn't know what she would do: <sup>f</sup>Revealed as a complete fake



in front of all those glamorous <sup>people.</sup> ~~northerners.~~ There were so many things to worry about from now until May.

Patsy came back into the room. "Today. This very day," she said, her lips pinched together. "I'm really going on a diet. Today! God, how I hate pudgy people."

"But you don't really look bad," Felicia said. "Sometimes I think you even look better."

"Better? Look!" Patsy brushed her fingers underneath her chin. I'm even getting another chin. And my clothes! The only thing I can wear are those baggy skirts and sweaters. And this girdle! It's like a corset!"

Felicia laughed. "You and Cannon. D'you think I've gained any?"

"Not much." Patsy glanced up and down at her. "You have a divine figure, really. ~~No hips and those long legs.~~"

"Really?! Do you really think so?" Felicia had never thought of such a thing before. She had always considered her long legs a handicap, a blight that had ruined her life.

"You've really got a model's figure," Patsy said.

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. She looked away. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"It's these farmers' meals they give you around here," Patsy said. "Great globs of starch."

"Miss Abernathy says everybody gains at school. She says it's the regular schedule and all that."

Patsy sat down on the other side of her cot and brought a slip over her head. "God, I'll be glad when I get out of here. Nobody<sup>h</sup>-----absolutely <sup>M</sup> nobody' ever going to get me in a school again."

"What about college? ~~Are~~'t you going to college?"

"God, no. Mother and I are going back to France, live over there for

a year or two. I don't want any more of this little community life business, silly girls and their silly faces."

"What about your father? Will he live there, too?" Felicia had never quite understood the living arrangement of Patsy's parents.

"He'll be back and forth."

Felicia considered this. "What's he like, Patsy?"

Patsy drew her robe together and lying down sideways on the cot, rested her head on her arm. The line marking her cheekbone was still very pronounced. "All business. One of those men. Business. Actually, I don't think I know him. I've really never known my father."

"You don't even know your own father?" Felicia was thinking of her own father. Maybe she didn't really know him either. She had never thought about it before.

"No, I really don't. Mummy's divine, though." Her eyes brightened. "She loves art. Really loves it. I think she could have been a very great artist." Gall. 78

"Are they at all alike? I mean---" dm

"You mean why do they stay married?"

Felicia hesitated. "I guess so."

"Sometimes I wonder. Daddy's the typical self-made ~~man~~ dm You know? Pinches pennies, terribly moral, talks about 'when I was your age' business. All that. The Talleys <sup>2</sup> ~~Mother's~~ family, have had money for years. It was one of those things. Rich girl marries poor man; poor man makes a success."

Felicia didn't say anything.

Patsy stood up and began unwinding the net on her hair; her hair fell thick and blond from the turban. "He has all sorts of middle-class ideas. He loathes Europe and he's suspicious of everybody, literally. He's always



calling everybody a Communist, especially people in the arts." Patsy began to giggle. "He's really a little bit impossible, terribly strict with Gigi and me. That's why Mummy packed us off to Switzerland, to get some of the Babbitt out of us."

Felicia turned her head and then looked back at Patsy. "Will uh---  
will he be at the farm this ~~Summer~~?"

"Probably. Some of the time anyway. But, actually, you might like him. Some people do." She brought the comb through her hair. Her hair had grown considerably since the ~~Fall~~; it fell straight along her face, almost to her shoulders now. "He'll probably play the organ for you." She glanced round. "That's his little hobby, playing the organ. Funeral home every weekend."

For a moment Felicia envisioned the scene. Some great giant of a man sitting before an organ in some vast, marble room, herself standing in a corner, listening.

Patsy put her hands behind her neck. "He plays for hours. Badly." She gave a little laugh. "Gigi says that's what gave her mononeucleosis, that organ." She sat down on the cot again. "Oh, welllll. That's what he's like." She looked at Felicia as if she expected some reaction to this painful admission.

Felicia looked down. "I don't think he sounds so bad. Really." Never in her life had she heard anyone talk about their own father that way. In a way it was embarrassing.

"Maybe, not," Patsy sighed. "I think they'll probably divorce when Gigi gets older."

"Your mother and father?" Felicia stared at her wide-eyed.

"I mean it's ridiculous. Why stay together when you've got a situation like that? Two complete strangers."

Felicia frowned. "Why d'you guess they ever got married? I mean why did your mother marry him?"

"God knows. He was very good-looking, I guess, and Mummy had just gotten out of Vassar with a lot of Trotsky ideas about a classless society. She was sort of a bore about it, I guess." She smiled. "Mummy laughs about it now, but do you know where they went on their wedding trip?"

Felicia shook her head.

"Niagara Falls." Patsy giggled. "Mummy said it was absolutely hideous, all those sort of little nasty creatures darting around."

"How simply terrible," Felicia said. She immediately took on a sober expression and hung her head. "But that's too bad, honestly."

"What?"

"For you and Gigi, a divorce and all that."

"No, not at all. Not at all. It'll help things enormously. Poor Mummy. Do you know Daddy doesn't even know who Modigliani is?" She looked at Felicia as if she had just pronounced illiteracy upon her father.

"He doesn't?" Felicia said. "Honestly?" She was trying to think who he was, too. He was something in Italy, she was sure, a pope or something.

"No, really. Don't you see how impossible it is? I mean just impossible for Mummy." Patsy began tracing her finger up and down her arm. "She's so divine. I mean really sacrificing herself for Gigi and me. She's so brilliant, too. It's just foul." She looked at Felicia. "I could never hurt her. I'd rather die first. I<sup>h</sup><sub>M</sub>" She stood up abruptly and turned her back. Felicia saw her quickly brush her eyes, leaving her hand partially covering her face. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I get so weepy and tristey all the time."

"Maybe it's your thyroid," Felicia said quietly.



~~Patsy didn't say anything.~~

"Cannon had a bad thyroid, and she said she cried all the time, for a whole year."

Patsy sighed heavily and stood up straighter. "Ohhh, I don't know. I don't know anything."

That night after final light bell Felicia lay in bed and watched Cannon's nightly rite of brushing her hair. She had just washed it and the sparks were really flying.

"42. Forty-two, forty-three, forty 43." mumbled Cannon.

"Must we?" came Patsy's whispered voice from the corner.

"Forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight 48."

"Must we count out loud every night?"

"Yes, we must! Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two..."

It was open hostility between Patsy and Cannon now. Just the other day Patsy had said she didn't see any sense in Cannon's going on a diet because she was the type that would always be "sort of short and pudgy anyway." She said Cannon had "big bones" and Cannon went into a rage.

"My bones aren't any bigger than yours, Dedham!" She went over and grabbed Patsy's wrist, comparing her arm bone to Patsy's. "Yours is just all fat!" she shouted. "Pure, polyunsaturated fat!"

Patsy didn't say anything. She just went out the door and slammed it, muttering something about "spooky little children."

They hadn't spoken to each other since, and Felicia suddenly found herself a kind of rose between two thorns; both of them were abnormally nice to her, actually courting her vote. She sided with neither, however, though privately the scales were slightly tipped in favor of Patsy.

After Cannon had banged her brush down on the side table and at last

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adjusted herself in the squeaky cot, Felicia, also, turned over. Truly, life had never been more blooming. She was the most important girl in the ninth grade and even though no one could exactly say she was a "force" on the Student Council Board (she rarely said anything at the meetings) at least she was on it. Also, her grades were getting better. Miss Munford didn't think she needed any more tutoring, and Madame de Crèvecoeur, who never complimented anybody, two days ago had said: "You have a nize accent, Wheetfield." And on top of all that was the visit after school to Pennsylvania! Things had come to such a glorious pass that now in the warm comfort of herself she decided to say her prayers in French tonight instead of the regular "Now I lay me down to sleep, Thank you, God" prayer she usually said. It was a kind of silent salute to Madame de Crèvecoeur, she decided.

"Notre père qui êtes aux cieus..." Half-way through it she was asleep. In the morning she remembered saying the prayer, but she couldn't remember just when it was or how far she had gone. What she did remember was suddenly being awakened. The room was black-dark and the door to the room beside her was open. All at once she became aware of bare feet running along the hall corridor.

She sat up and looked first at Cannon's cot. Cannon turned over, fast asleep. Patsy. It was Patsy. Even in the dark she saw that the bed covers were tossed back and the white sheets gleamed like a peeled apple. "She must be sick," was her first thought, and she got out of bed and stealthily tip-toed to the door. At the end of the long corridor the night-light was on. She started to wake up Cannon, but if it wasn't an emergency Cannon would never forgive her, especially if it were on Patsy's account. She tip-toed down the corridor. Half-way there she heard someone retching.



"Patsy?" she whispered as she stood outside the little swinging door.

There was silence and then more retching. The sound of the labored gagging and then the foul splashing into the commode made her own stomach turn, but rather than give way to it, she forced herself to blank the sickness of the sound.

"Patsy? Are you all right?" she whispered again. There were no rooms near, so no one could hear them, but the emptiness of the corridor and the eerie night light seemed to call for whispering.

She heard Patsy moan.

"I'm here, Patsy. Can I help you?" She wasn't sure what she could do. But she remembered whenever she got sick at home her mother put a cold wash cloth on her forehead. She supposed this was normal procedure for everyone. She tiptoed back to her room and got a wash cloth, careful to close the bureau drawer as silently as she could.

She dampened the cloth and then went back to stand before the door again. When the silence had lasted for a while, Felicia nudged open the door. Patsy was huddled on the floor, her head leaning against the wall, her face sick-white and streaked with tears. "All night," she tried to say. "I've been here all <sup>h</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub>"

Felicia placed the damp cloth to her head and Patsy, breathing heavily, took the cloth with her own hand. "I've <sup>h</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub>"

"Do you want me to get the nurse?" Felicia asked.

Patsy turned to her abruptly. "No! No! For ~~/~~Godsakes!"

The bite of the protest jolted Felicia and she instinctively stood up straighter. "But you're really sick. What do you guess it is?"

Patsy turned her head slowly this time and looked at Felicia in a way she never had before, a kind of pleading look and yet there was resignation and defeat in it, too. She seemed to be studying Felicia

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somehow, testing her. And then she turned away. "I'm pregnant," she said. "I have been since September. I'm going to have a baby and I'm <sup>a</sup> alone."

For the first time in her life Felicia thought she was actually going to faint. Her mind began to whirl and her legs became weak. She sank to her knees beside Patsy, and only then did the face before her become focused again, a sick face in a sick light. "You're ~~WHAT!~~" she said.

Patsy cradled her face in her arms and began to sob.

Felicia took hold of her arm. "Patsy! Now? Are you going to have it now?" There was sobbing in her own voice.

Patsy shook her head, her face still in her arms. "I don't think so."

"But<sup>hm</sup>---" Felicia kept nervously blowing her hair back from her face.

"I don't know why I'm sick now." Patsy raised her head. "Just a stomach upset, I think. I haven't eaten all day." She leaned her head against the wall again. "I haven't eaten since January, not really."

Felicia sat on the floor opposite her. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I haven't been sick this way, throwing up sick, for months now."

"How<sup>hm</sup>---" Felicia tried to form the words. "How long?"

"Six months. I'm six months."

Felicia's breath came in jerks. "Does anybody know? Anybody?"

Patsy shook her head, and then began to cry again.

"Hey, try to be quiet. Somebody'll hear us." In a minute, Felicia was thinking, somebody was going to open the door and discover them. Miss Abernathy's room was on the same floor.

Patsy raised her head again, her eyes red and puffy. "You've got to help me," she said.

"Huh?"



"You've got to help me have this baby." Her voice was guttural.

"You've got to!"

Felicia just stared at her.

"I mean it," Patsy said. She took hold of Felicia's arm and the fingernails dug into her skin.

Felicia jerked her arm away. "No, I'm not!" She stood up. "I'm going to tell somebody, right now. You can't have a baby here. You'll die! You're ~~h~~" She was half crying.

Patsy jerked hold of the bottom of Felicia's pajamas. "I thought you were my friend! I thought you were the only friend I ever had."

Felicia shook her head. "I am," ~~l~~ she dampened her lips ~~l~~ "But ~~l~~"

The two looked at each other. It was the first time Felicia had ever looked down on Patsy. "She's begging me," she thought. "Patsy Dedham is begging me."

Patsy's face suddenly softened. "There's nothing to it, honestly. You don't have to do anything, just stay with me."

"But where? Patsy, you just can't!"

"On our way home, this May. We'll stop off in some small town some-  
where. Nobody'll ever find out."

"But what if it's too late?"

Patsy looked away. "No, I've figured it almost to the day. We can go to a hotel or something."

Felicia's heart was pounding. She pictured them in some small dirty hotel room, like gangsters, and Patsy in the agonies of labor and herself, standing by, terrified, like Scarlet O'Hara when Melanie was having her baby. Her throat tightened. "But you don't ~~l~~ I wouldn't even know what to do. And what if you died or something?" Felicia put her hands over her face. She was gulping air, not crying, just trying to swallow. "Oh,

Pat-sy," she whimpered.

"I've got a book," Patsy said. "It's simple. It tells just what you're supposed to do." She looked up at Felicia again. "I'm counting on you, Felicia. You know<sup>ch</sup>---" She looked straight at her, her eyes un<sup>+</sup>blinking. "You mean as much to me as Gigi does, my own sister. You're the best friend I have in the world. I need you now. I need your help, Felicia."

"Yes, but<sup>ch</sup>---" Felicia shook her head. Yet she had made a vow once, that day in church. She had forgotten the vow many times over, but now<sup>it came back to her</sup>---  
Blessed are the merciful. She looked back at Patsy. How pathetic she looked. O God, help me now.... Her body went limp.

A slow smile came across Patsy's lips. "I knew you would," she said. "And then when it's all over we can have such a glorious time at the farm."

"I don't know whether I can go to the farm or not."

"Of course you can!" said Patsy.

"I don't know."

"For a few days anyway, after it's all over."

"But what are you going to do with<sup>ch</sup>---" Felicia couldn't bring her<sup>+</sup>self to say baby. She said "it."

"Leave it in the hotel room, of course."

"Just leave it there?" A chill went over Felicia's body.

"Somebody'll find it, take care of it. We'll register under different names, naturally."

Felicia's head began to ache. She had only been in a hotel room once. That was last Fall when they first came to Chesney, she and her parents.

Patsy drew her robe closer together. "Thank goodness I don't show

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too much. I really have been practically starving myself to death."

Felicia nodded automatically.

"Mummy was the same way. When she had Gigi, my aunt said you'd hardly have even known she was going to have a baby<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub> even up to the last. The girdle I have helps, too."

"No, you just look like you've gained some weight, that's all." Felicia sat down on the floor again. She sighed heavily. "I'd never have known. That's the last thing on earth I'd ever've thought of anyway."

Patsy brought her hand to her face. "God, you don't know what hell I've been going through<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub> a nightmare<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub>, trying to cover up, dodging that damn nurse."

"But, gosh, don't you think you oughtta see a doctor or something? Why didn't you go to one while you were home, just sneak off to one?"

"I couldn't!" Patsy raised both her hands, "Mummy dragged us off to New Hampshire and there's only one doctor in the little town and you know how that is. I couldn't."

"You didn't dare tell your mother?"

Patsy shook her head. "I couldn't. I can't hurt Mummy<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub> I<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub> I even thought of killing myself."

Felicia just sat there, frowning, and slowly shaking her head.

Patsy sat up straighter. "Now, look, we've got to get all this planned, what to do, exactly how we're going to go about it. We're going to have to memorize the book I've got."

Felicia moaned. "Patsy, I just don't think<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub>"

"Now, don't start panicking. I mean, really. You're not a child any longer, you know."

"I know it, but<sup>cl</sup>~~---~~<sub>m</sub>"

A door down the corridor squeaked. Felicia stood up and put her

finger to her lips.

They waited, scarcely breathing. There was no other sound.

Felicia looked out into the hall. It was empty; no one was there.

"It must've been the door to our room. I forgot to close it."

"It wasn't Cannon, was it?" Patsy whispered. "Cannon can never know."

"No, she's asleep. It was just the door."

Patsy took hold of Felicia's arm. "You hear me? Don't you ever dare tell Cannon."

Felicia glanced back at her. "I'm not, but let's go back before somebody does come."

Patsy didn't let go of Felicia's arm. "Look, though, first: Do you think anybody suspects? Cannon or anybody?"

Felicia shook her head. "Not now, but I don't know about later, when you really do start getting, you know, tremendous."

"Yes, well, we're going to keep on with this gaining weight bit. Besides, I'm not going to get tremendous. I'm just like Mummy."

Felicia opened the door. "We'd better get back. Are you all right now? Are you still sick?"

"No, I'm all right now."

They crept back to the room, Felicia leading the way. But it was early day before Felicia finally slept. Patsy, she noticed, fell asleep easily.