

PART I

INNOCENCE

CHAPTER ONE

It began as a distant hum. Joshua Mattingly, his black face and body marked by rivulets of sweat from the noon sun, straightened slowly, listening. He had never heard such a noise. It was unearthly, not like the swarms of bees which sometimes arrived this time of year, hitting at him, his hoe in attack. Even the cotton plants arched as if they were human, cowering. He was in mid-field with flatness all about. There was not a tree in sight, no place to hide. He was alone and as exposed as nakedness.

And then he saw it, a winged creature above his head. It had a tail and a body with straight wings that stretched out like arms on a cross. He threw down the hoe and ran through the red-dirt fields, his breath caught in his chest. His heart beat even in his neck. He ran until he reached the cabin exhausted.

Bell, his wife, stood in the doorway, gazing upward with her white apron lifted in her dark hands as if to escape something.

"What er?" she inquired, her eyes wide.

“Jesus,” Joshua managed and fell face down on the swayed cot. “He back here. He done come back. Like He say.”

The year was nineteen hundred and twenty, the year Jesus Christ descended to earth. Or so it was told about, sometimes in mockery, other times in knowing fear. Thus it was that the first airplane flew over Ashton County, Georgia. And Joshua Mattingly, who could neither read nor write but knew scripture, memorized from his father's father, had never heard of such a machine. Nor had the others in this wasted land. The Lord had, indeed, come to take the earth and him, Joshua Zeberdee Mattingly.

In high humor they were recalling all this at the gathering that afternoon. Perhaps twenty friends or so were invited to Bonheur, the Adams-style house belonging to the Houghton family. Lucille Houghton was entertaining in honor of Thea Aaker, who was visiting from Norway. Lucille had met the blond young woman when both attended the Aisley School near London and Lucille invited her to visit here in Georgia.

Thea listened to the laughter. She was not amused. There was something about these people, the richness of their tales, their dark laughter, their very foreignness that both beguiled and puzzled her. To hide her thoughts she busied herself with serving tea. As honor guest she had been asked to serve. An actress of sorts, only known to herself, she aimed to please Lucille's assortment of friends. She knew the picture she presented. She had planned well.

“You look absolutely beautiful,” Lucille said before the guests arrived.

Thea saw herself now as Lucille had seen her, as others were seeing her: a blond Scandinavian young woman dressed for the occasion in brown silk and amber beads, her hair caught in a braid at the back of her head, different from the other women in the room who had begun to follow the new way with bobbed hair and shorter skirts. She was seated behind the lace-covered tea table and her long slender fingers busily filled the cups with lump sugar and tea.

“Beauty.” The word fairly whispered into Thea’s ears. She overheard some of the remarks but mainly she saw it in the faces of the women—a timidity, fear, a sudden haughtiness. The men appeared pleased. Thea was accustomed to the stare of strangers, but there was no particular pleasure in it. Since she was five, she knew she had inherited her father Christian’s looks, the blue eyes that slanted upward, his slender tallness, his fairness and full mouth which, in him, also carried sternness. As a child she was delighted with the similarity, but the delight soon began to wane. Her comeliness was merely she, Thea, as a part of nature as the air and sky, a mere picture she presented to the world. Inwardly, there were the doubts and fears, wants, strangeness and heaviness of mood, which the world never saw. She was unable to explain any of this. Especially now when the days and months lay before her twenty years as long as the waters from Norway to the American South. Strange, she thought, the turns and twists of life: meeting Lucille, coming here to this strange, hot, beautiful place.

Across the room a man, perhaps in this late twenties, caught her attention, mainly because he too found nothing humorous in the black man’s fear. The man was

looking down into the silver cup he held in his right hand, frowning. In the days Thea had been entertained here, practically every moment, it seemed, she had not seen the man before. He was tall, taller than most men in the room and his face was almost homely, craggy. Yet there was something appealing in the face, perhaps its thinness, or the narrowed grey eyes. The eyes were intelligent, alert. He was Lincolnesque in the way his mouth was set, determined yet somehow kind. Thea wondered who he was, this man who also saw no buffoonery in the actions of a confused Negro man.

Thea thought of the black man running. Before this visit she had never seen a black person. At first she was frightened of them, even the women who appeared at times arrogant, belying the charming smiles and courtesies. She would catch their faces as they departed a room, their mouths turned down, scorn in the way they lifted their shoulders. All this after: "Yes'm. no'm. Is you journey proud?"

Journey proud, Lucille explained, was a southern expression, used mainly by black people. "Darkies," as she referred to the servants. The expression, Lucille said, meant a feeling of out of sorts when traveling, nervous in anticipation of a new place. Thea liked the expression. She began to like the women. Oddly, they appeared to have more depth, more insight than Lucille's friends, who chattered on and on, often tiresomely.

Still, she saw charm in them as well, Lucille's women friends . . . They had the same enchanting accent as Lucille's, which gave them an innocence and vulnerability she had not seen in New York or London women, for instance. These young women were more feminine, not unlike Scandinavian women, most of them.

As she observed all this, she also sensed a shared community among the people who moved about the spacious Drawing Room. And observing, her own sense of loneliness became heightened. She had never felt more alone. An entire summer. Her parents had given permission for the long visit. An only child, Lucille and her family, particularly the latter, appeared delighted with the arrangement. Lucille had always wanted brothers and sisters, Mrs. Houghton explained to Thea. Throughout the years there had been a succession of visits by other young people.

But summer in Norway was always special. The few months of sun were fine until the darkness came again. Thea missed it all—the trips to the fjords, their place in the country, the blue sails, the light air, the flowers, the sea. All at once in this elegant Drawing Room she felt such a longing that she put her hand to her throat. For all the world she felt she might spill over into tears.

“Are you all right?” Lucille asked as she approached the tea table. The color wine in Lucille’s dress was flattering, bringing out the folly in her large brown eyes. “Everyone is just cray-zee about you.”

Thea smiled. The exaggerations also were new to her. In Norway no one spoke that way about anyone, not even the king. Whatever, the words had their affect. The sense of aloneness instantly disappeared. And she smiled up into Lucille’s pleasant face. Then she glanced down and set aside one of the gold-rimmed cups. “Who is the man over there?” She nodded toward the corner of the room, where a Celadon vase shimmered alone on a Chinese table. The man she had observed earlier was now joined by two other young men, each holding silver julep cups.

"Who?" Lucille turned her head, glancing about the room.

"The tall one?"

"Oh him!" Lucille brightened and examined Thea's face. "Why?"

Thea shrugged. "I don't know. He's new."

"He's a Whitfield."

Lucille's rather reverent tone of voice amused Thea. Family in these southern towns, she had discovered, meant mighty things: called for hushed tones, admiration, deadly seriousness. She supposed it was the same in Norway, but there the respect seemed more appropriate somehow. Families in Scandinavia traced their ancestry to the tenth and eleventh centuries, even further back to pagan days. The families were truly old and their deeds and accomplishments throughout time were read in the yellowed pages of history. But no one dwelled on the facts particularly.

The families here were so new compared to Europe. Here, she had observed, especially in the South, blood ran the bluest in direct relation to the Civil War and possibly a generation or so of money. The Houghtons had portraits everywhere of men in uniform and young women with camellias at their breasts. "Nobility" fairly whispered from the walls.

Thea had never considered herself a cynical person. But her image of America had always been one of wildness, violence, untamed newness. She had been surprised to drive up to the Houghton's driveway and discover what would pass anywhere as civilized elegance.

"He's Oliver Whitfield," said Lucille. She explained further: He had been away

and only recently returned. Thea had met his brother, Allison Whitfield. Oliver was his older brother, almost thirty. He was a newspaperman and had followed the war in Europe and traveled extensively throughout the Orient. Presently he had returned to Ashton to start his own newspaper.

"He's sort of peculiar," Lucille finished.

"Eh?" Thea examined Lucille's face and then watched as her hand indicated the kitchen of the house. Thea had learned the gesture. It referred to the Negroes. One spoke of them only in gestures, fingers to the mouth, pointings, especially when the talk was unfavorable or opinionated and might be overheard. Thea had never experienced such secrecies in a house before.

"Why?" Thea instantly felt the heat rise to her face. Oliver Whitfield was standing beside Lucille, smiling. He had a nice smile, an almost timid smile, yet an amused one as if he were planning some future ruse. His grey eyes fairly twinkled. His complexion was heightened and ruddy and the lines between the brows appeared to say his smile was not usual.

Lucille introduced them. And Thea looked down at the cups before her.

"Thea means goddess," she heard him say and quickly looked up into his face. He had the same amused smile.

"How do you know this?" Thea heard her own voice, low, and the accent she had tried with such difficulty in England to overcome.

"From Ibsen, I think." His voice was deep and almost without accent, different than the other men in the room.

"Tea?" she asked. "Would you like tea?"

He indicated the julep cup. "This is better. Do they have juleps in Norway?"

Thea smiled then. "It is too cold." She saw Lucille's quiet departure as if to say her presence obviously was no longer needed.

"I can't believe any of this," he said.

"Eh?"

"All these fluttering southerners and suddenly a goddess—like a rainbow—pouring tea. How did this happen? Why are you here? Who are you?"

Thea began to stammer. Never would she get used to such flattery. In Norway no one, except a few silly boys, ever referred to her looks. She felt the warmth in her face and to cover it she tried to explain that she had met Lucille at school. "The war was finished and my parents sent me to England."

"How long?"

"How long?"

"How long will you be here?"

For the first time she noted there were red lights in his dark hair, which was worn long in the back, from neglect, she thought, not design.

"All summer." And she looked away.

"All summer?"

Thea nodded.

"I see." He sipped his drink, seemingly draining the last from the frosted cup.

Thea looked up at him questioningly.

"All summer," he repeated.

Thea felt the heat rise from her neck again. The intensity of the man was unnerving. And the fact he had seen the world, seen war, seen so much of living and dying, perhaps, intimidated her in a way she had never experienced before. At home, in Kristiania, she always felt at ease. She was able to converse with everyone, even her father's friends in shipping who had sailed the world and returned with such stories Thea had never dreamed of. But those men were always formal and aloof in her presence, except when they were with her father, sailing or hunting with complete abandon. Oliver Whitfield was unlike anyone she had ever encountered. Intellect seemed to speak from his brow and yet he smiled, even teased. It was the latter that finally angered her. He was making fun of her, perhaps her accent, her regionalism, coming from so small a country.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, and frowned in front of her at a petite young woman in a fringed skirt who appeared to pout at the world, knowing her charm, flaunting it. Still, Thea was very aware the man did not move.

"I like your country very much," he said.

She then looked up at him, startled. "You've been in Norway?"

"Most of it."

"Why?"

He was there for a rest, he said, from the war, from Europe, from everything. A friend and he traveled throughout the fjord country and spent sometime in Kristiania.

"But we never saw you."

Despite the archness, this slight touch of home brought comfort to Thea. She said nothing, merely smiled up at him. He was suddenly like an oasis in the desert, a relative, a friend who knew something about her. The only one.

And then he was gone. He deposited the julep cup on the tea table and left, saying nothing. Thea watched him go, his steps almost loping. Had she said something wrong? She had fully expected to continue the conversation. She wanted to talk about home, about the fjords, ask him if he liked Kristiania, did he like Norway. He said that he did, but why the sudden departure.

At breakfast the next morning she learned more about him. Before he left for Europe, he had become engaged to a young woman from Charleston, South Carolina. He had given her a ring. They were to be married when he returned. There was another brother, also a newspaperman, who currently was in China. The mid-brother was the most handsome, said Mrs. Houghton. She had no idea how Oliver came by his looks. "He's really quite homely. Wouldn't you say?"

"Not really," Thea said, touching the napkin to her lips. "He has character in his face, I think."

"They're lovely people," said Mrs. Houghton, gazing out at the June garden now filled with gardenias and boxwoods and magnolias in their last bloom of the year. She was a handsome woman with greying hair and the same intense dark eyes as her daughter's. But the mother's eyes spoke of lost loves, a hint of sadness.

"Is he going to marry the girl?" Thea asked.

"He broke the engagement. His mother was heartbroken. She liked the girl so

much and Viola — his mother — has connections in Charleston.”

But as the days grew hotter and the newness of her summer residence became more routine, Thea mostly forgot Oliver Whitfield. No one mentioned him and she heard nothing from him. Yet when the name Whitfield was spoken she found her curiosity was still alive. When she thought back on their meeting, she was fairly certain he had liked her. But obviously he had not. Perhaps he had renewed his relationship with the girl in Charleston.

It didn't matter. By now Thea began to put her mind to other things. All the talk at table in the evenings was of the “tragedy” of President Wilson. The four of them, Thea, Lucille and her parents, sat in the candle-lighted room, the Confederate portraits looking down on them and the black help serving from worn silver dishes as Senator Houghton, a gold watch chain gleaming beneath his breast, expounded on the tragedy of the President.

The Senator was a large man, which somehow went with his calling in life: banking, real estate and one-time United States Senator. Everything about him was large, even his appetite. He was always the last to finish meals and the three women sat each night, their hands in their laps, while the Senator extolled his opinions for hours until, at last, he finished his fare. “Hours” was Thea's thought. It seemed that way to her.

Perhaps handsome in his youth, there was nothing to admire in his current looks, Thea observed. All of his features appeared to have spread with the years: wide red nose, heavy lidded eyes and a mouth that viewed the world sourly. His eyes were

large and light blue, sometimes appearing startled. He was a man of little patience except for his own rambling talk.

Thea was half interested in the talk — mainly because his thinking was the same as Oliver Whitfield's. Thea followed her vanished friend's thinking through the news columns of The Ashton Herald. She especially read the editorials where Oliver Whitfield's name was prominently displayed: Oliver Hartwell Whitfield, editor and publisher.

Thea read trying to understand the man's vision. Knowing little of American history, she read of President Wilson's stroke in Colorado and the defeat of his League of Nations at the hands of Republicans Henry Cabot Lodge, William E. Borah and Hiram Johnson — all of which she would have noted with only passing interest had it not been for her curiosity about the writer.

"Murderers, thieves, liars, filled with nothing but avarice and greed," extolled Senator Houghton in reference to Republicans whom Thea quickly learned resided mainly in the northern sections of America.

"What they did to the South was unspeakable," Mrs. Houghton explained to Thea. "Mr. Wilson has been the only civilized President we've had since the war."

"Po," shouted the Senator. "Damn Yankees left us all po." He added that now all the South had to look forward to was Warren Gamaliel Harding. "An idiot and a renegade!"

Thea listened. Norway had only a greatly beloved king. There was never such talk at her family's table. The heat of the talk here echoed what she had originally

thought of America — a fearful, violent, rebellious, multiracial giant. Odd that such heated energy should ~~pour~~^{pour} forth in such a gentle land, the South.

Oliver Whitfield remained in her mind through his writing only. He attended none of the parties Thea and Lucille were invited to, and Thea never saw him at the country club, playing golf or tennis. It had been a month since the day she first caught sight of him. She wanted to ask Lucille about him. But Lucille never brought up his name. "Peculiar" was all she had said about him. Perhaps that was true, Thea decided, determined not to look for him again.

Besides, her attentions were fairly occupied. Thea and Lucille were besieged with suitors, none of whom particularly interested Thea. Some were amusing but their jokes were mainly at the expense of the Negro race which offended something deep inside her, a sense of decency, the way she was brought up to believe. But she never said this, fearing to offend these otherwise jovial friends of Lucille.

How could people be so happy? She often wondered. Nothing appeared to trouble these young people, not even politics. At the country club dances she was surrounded by smiling young men, all asking her for "dates," a word she had never heard before and considered juvenile. She danced with one man after another. Actually, she felt pleased at the attention she was receiving. But later when she was alone in bed, the wilderness of her inner self filled her to tears. Why wasn't she as other young women: What was this darkness? She asked herself over and over, her own silent secret.

Homesickness was her ready answer. But it was a created one. Foremost in her

mind was her Aunt Magda, her mother's sister who lived alone in a little house on the outskirts of Kristiania and was hospitalized for "frailty," Thea was told. Later, she learned that Aunt Magda, an older sister of her mother's, suffered melancholia. She drank wine and frightened young people whose curiosity about her was almost insatiable.

Thea grew up with this frightening sense of her heritage. Would she, too, be so afflicted? Once she asked her mother if this would be so and her mother said no, that Magda was brought low by a drunken husband, who, though of royal blood, hounded Magda into the crazed darkness. Her mother was loathe to speak of this and when Thea brought it up the subject was changed — to the weather, the beauty of the world, friends, anything. It was through her father's relatives Thea learned that the gene of madness was in her mother's line. But the ones who spoke thus were known to be jealous of Thea's mother. Astrid Aaker was known everywhere to be one of the great beauties of Norway. The relatives said that her mother thought she was superior and had little to do with her husband's kin.

Thea had not got her mother's dark beauty, but she had got her seeming aloofness. It was not that she thought herself superior in any way. It was shyness of nature and a liking for solitude. Her father, whose looks she had received, was a man of high spirits, popular with both men and women. Thea's older sister, Martha, had inherited her father's personality, which Thea envied and, try as she might to imitate, always failed.

So after the parties and dances with Lucille's friends, Thea retired to her room,

happy to be there, alone. Was it this way in this country, she wondered, never to feel the sadness of life? Or the wonderment? Here, in this torrid heat and sweetness, dark clouds seemed to hang heavy with the world's sorrows. And yet there was laughter and jokes and dancing whirls. All so confusing and contradictory.

But in the latter days of June, in spite of the oppressive heat, Thea's spirits rose. Oliver Whitfield attended a Saturday dance at the country club and the whole night became a whirl of lights and laughter, and she knew afterward that her life's course would be changed forever. The high spirits of her father had reached her at last.