

CHAPTER SIX

It was decided. Thea would accompany her mother to Minnesota. Astrid wrote to her cousin, Lena Anderson, who lived in a town named Northfield. The cousin, who had lived in America some fifteen years now, wrote back how pleased she was they were coming. "I am so often alone," she wrote. Her husband, the bishop, was seldom at home for lengthy periods and there were no children.

Thea was both exhilarated and fearful. Her thoughts were more of Georgia than Minnesota. By now Oliver had become almost a letter in her mind, hundreds of letters, beautiful letters. But his true image was clouded. She tried to recall his features. They were a blur. How small were his eyes? His brown hair was always tousled, she remembered. His mouth she would never forget. It was his mouth that identified him, the thin upper lip and the fuller lower one forming a feature that could be both stern and kind, interacting. He was as tall as Halvor, but his walk was more purposeful, as if a

thousand duties lay ahead of him. Still, the whole of him was blurred. It had been half a year since she had seen him and she herself had changed, too. Her heartbeat accelerated at the thought of first seeing him. Would her feelings for him change? And, if so, what would she do in Minnesota for a whole spring and summer? What would he think of her?

She heard nothing from Lucille. Mrs. Houghton wrote a condolence letter, but Lucille was silent. Oliver wrote that she was seeing something of a young man from Atlanta. That was all. Also what frightened her was his description of threats to the Whitfield family, especially Oliver, because of his editorials supporting the Negro in Georgia. Thea read that part of his letter to her mother and Astrid listened with her long fingers at her heart.

"Vigilantism?" her mother asked.

"Only the police," Thea said. "Klansmen wear sheets, and hang black people. They come in great hordes to frighten the people."

Her mother stared at Thea. "Did you see such things?"

"No," she said Oliver and the Senator told her about the Ku Klux Klan. She had not seen them herself.

Oliver also wrote of politics. Warren Gamaliel Harding and Calvin Coolidge overwhelmingly had defeated James Cox and Franklin Roosevelt. Oliver was fearful for the South. Though Harding was a newspaperman, he wrote, "the man stands for everything I (and President Wilson) abhor." He added in a postscript that the mint julep probably was gone from the South forever since the Volstead Prohibition Act was likely

to be enacted, even though President Wilson had vetoed the act during his Presidency.

"Are you sure you want to live in such a place?" her mother asked. "It doesn't sound civil."

Thea smiled and nodded her head. "It's exciting," she said, but inside there were so many questions. Did she really know Oliver Whitfield? Does anyone ever know anyone else? Truly?

The time arrived and Thea stood on shipboard until the last dot of Norway's soil disappeared. "Farvel," she said softly. She was leaving herself on that piece of land, all of her youth, her days with her parents, with Martha, with Halvor, her friends — all of it gone, disappeared like a dream. Tears fell to her cheeks. Would she ever return?

The crossing was rough and both she and her mother were ill. The Atlantic was worse than the North Sea. Great waves rose and crashed against the ship. Their cabin rose and fell and their belongings continuously fell to the cabin floor.

Finally, the ship's doctor was called for Astrid. She had not tasted food in six days and she was badly dehydrated. He doctored her with medicines and orders that she drink tea and eat wafers every two hours. Thea had looked forward to the voyage with her mother. She wanted to discuss all the details of her new life, if it was to be. Her cousin with the Norwegian embassy in Washington wrote that all the information he could gather about Oliver Whitfield was favorable except for the fact he had liberal leanings "in the extreme." Her cousin spoke with the Episcopal rector, he wrote, and the banks. He even queried people in Atlanta. One man wrote: "The Whitfield family has

long been one of the leading families in Georgia intellectually, socially and industrially

.....”

Thea wanted to laugh at the quote from the bankers since Oliver’s father had long been connected with the leading bank in Ashton. She half-believed Oliver himself had written the letter including his “extreme liberalism.” The thought brought him closer to her. His wit and charm seemed to disappear in her cloudy vision of him. His letters were so serious.

But Astrid took the news from her cousin with relief. Thea regarded her, saying in almost anger that she would never marry someone who was completely void of any principles.

“I’m no fool, believe it or not,” she said hotly.

“Of course not. But you are so young, Thea — and a foreigner — one never knows.” She added that she could not bear harm to come to her youngest daughter.

Gradually as the sea calmed she and Astrid sat on deck chairs admiring the blue, blue sky and the vast water about them. It was then Thea spoke of her fears.

“What if I don’t like him?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been so long. And you dream so. Maybe he can’t live up to my dreams.”

Astrid was silent and continued knitting. She knitted endless scarves. Thea wondered what she would do with them. Ulla had received twenty scarves at least. The knitting was something new — and disturbing. Shortly after her father died, the knitting

needles appeared and were used inexhaustibly as if in a kind of hunger.

"Do you know what I mean?" Thea asked. "People can never match dreams."

"No. Even now. I can't remember one fault of Christian's. It was as if he were perfect."

"He was." Thea said, believing it, knowing it.

"Wouldn't he laugh!" The needles rested on the blanket. "Our thinking he was perfect?"

"No, he probably thought so himself."

And they both laughed. It was good, the laughter. They had reached the point in their grief where they could remember the little things, the charming idiosyncrasies.

"Is he good looking, your Oliver?"

"I like his looks. He's not good looking in the way Father was — or even Halvor. He's very tall and has a slightly awkward walk, the way he walks. He sort of lopes, bent forward. But his face has character, ruddiness. He's very slender. But you would like him. He's more your type. Intellectual. And a wonderful writer."

"Yes," was all Astrid said.

Thea looked at her. Her lovely face was returning. The sea air brought color to her cheeks and her grey eyes fairly glowed with the beauty about. Thea had taken note that other passengers apparently admired both their looks — she fair and her mother dark. A passenger at their table asked if they were sisters, which astonished Thea as well as her mother. There was a resemblance, Thea guessed. They were both tall and had the same slender figure. Another passenger whispered that they were "haughty."

And Thea, hearing, laughed, covering her mouth with her hands. Haughty, they were not. Timid, yes. Neither liked conversing with strangers. It was difficult. And they were alike in that. As well they had the same cheekbones, tilt to the nose and the firm chin. Her mother's square jaw was also Thea's. So it was not impossible they could be taken for sisters, one older and one younger. Astrid was rather pleased by the passenger's statement, though she said nothing to Thea. Thea's delight in Astrid's healing was a healing to her as well. Good days, she said to herself. These are good days. Would they last? She lifted her face to the sea wind and sun.

Minnesota. She wondered if she would like it there. It was flat land, all the books told her. It had great farming land, black soil and many Norwegians lived there, poor ones who left Norway during the depressions of the mid and late eighteen hundreds. What would she do there? And what would she do if Oliver failed her in some important way? "Oh," she said aloud.

Astrid looked up from her knitting. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking."

"Not very pleasantly, I presume. Don't frown so. It might become permanent."

"I was thinking---what if I really don't love Oliver. What if---"

"Well, you will meet someone else." Astrid smiled. "You are a charming young lady, you know."

"Am I?" She stared at her mother, the stitches, each stitch.

Astrid nodded. They were a family given to few compliments. Thea lifted her eyes from the knitting to her mother's face, her profile, the lilt of her nose, the chin, her

long fingers, body. "I wish I were dark like you. Your hair shines so."

"Come now. Your fairness suits you, the quietness, the part you show to the world."

Thea continued staring, unbelieving. "You know me so well. No one knows me better."

The knitting needles began clicking again, fairly shouting nerves. Selfish, Thea thought in an instant of recognition. Her mother was fearful for her own life. That was what they should be talking about, not Oliver and her own selfish fears. Her mother had fears too, great ones. How to face a life alone? The greatest fear of all, loneliness.

They took a taxi in New York and with all their luggage made their way to Pennsylvania Station. Then at last they were traveling the distances of the Midwestern prairies. New York lingered in Thea's mind as only a great sound. But here on the prairies there seemed to be no sound at all, only wide silent spaces, farms, red barns, miles and miles of tilled ground.

Lena Anderson, whom they were to meet in Minneapolis, wrote at length of the loneliness of Minnesota. "There is little joy here," she wrote, "at least among the Norwegians. The work is long and hard for most."

The college, she wrote, St. Olaf College in small Northfield, was the center for many urban lives offering, as it did, lectures, band and choir concerts. The professors, mostly of Norse stock, were interesting and had their moments of high humor. It was the countryside that offered the sterner life.

Thea glanced at the homely little cities as they traveled and stopped and traveled again. She could not possibly live here, she said to herself. Astrid, though, appeared to view it all with more interest. She had visited America before, but only in New York and California. The Midwest was as new to her as it was to Thea.

"There is something rather moving about all this," Astrid said, her gloved hand to her neck as she viewed the rolling land, still covered with snow, though it was April. "It is all so large and mysterious. There is a grandeur about it."

Thea was thinking of Oliver. He hated cold weather. He would never live in a place like this. The Southland was his blood and love. His editorials were full of "The South," which was not so of any other region, Thea had observed. It was "the South" this and "the South" that. It was the conversation at every dinner table. When will the South recover? Unfair freight rates. The price of cotton, the Negro race — "the white man's burden." It was all as if the entire section had been infected by a dire disease, a war, the War Between the States, as Thea had learned to call it — the haunted time in all Southerner's minds.

But this — this rolling black soil — was rich land. No wonder the Scandinavians found it, were lulled by it. Thea learned from relatives at home that the Scandinavians were not accepted by the more wealthy English stock. The northern Europeans were newcomers to the state whereas the English had long been established.

"They are thought of as servants only," her aunt in Kristiania told Thea, speaking of the Scandinavians in Minnesota.

"But not our cousins," Astrid interrupted firmly. Lena Anderson had kinship with

the royal family of Sweden and her husband had given his life and soul to the church. These were not yeomen or farmers. "Besides, the farmers of Minnesota are scientists," her mother read from a book she held, adding that those of English stock should be pleased to have their northern brethren among their midst.

All this Thea barely listened to. It had nothing to do with her own life, not even her Mother's. Astrid would visit for a month or two then return to Kristiania. Thea very much wanted Astrid to visit the Whitfield family.

She mentioned it to her.

"That would not be appropriate. I do not know them."

"That doesn't matter in America."

"It matters in Norway and to me."

End of conversation.

At last they reached Minneapolis, a bustling cold city with tall modern buildings. Lena Anderson was at the railway depot to meet them. A striking woman with white hair dressed into a pompadour, she stood by yards the most stunning woman about. A streak of red lipstick emphasized dark lashes and blue eyes. Even clothed as she was in long furs, her body and bone structure appeared delicate. Thea was immediately taken by this woman.

She was the first woman Thea had ever seen who drove her own automobile. "I'm so alone most of the time that I had to learn to drive." She added that otherwise she would never venture from Northfield.

They made their way to the smaller city with Thea seated in the back of the open car on top of and centered by all their luggage. Obviously Lena Anderson and her mother had been close friends. She had never seen her mother in such high spirits, at least not since her father died. She laughed and talked in girlish Norwegian of their younger days — the mischief and delight of those days.

Once Lena called to Thea as she steadfastly held onto the wheel of the car. "You have a dozen letters or so from Georgia waiting for you."

"Oh?" Thea tried to sound nonchalant, but Astrid interrupted:

"Thea has a young man in Georgia. They may marry."

"N-o-o-o-o," said Lena Anderson in Norwegian.

"Yes," said her mother with a decided change of mood. "He may visit us while we are here."

"N-o-o-o-o," responded Lena again in Norse.

Finally they drove up to a one-story white house surrounded by pine trees and hidden from the road by an enormous stone wall. Dogs barked wildly prancing about on the snow-covered ground. The house was large and from the front door Thea looked up to a hill on which stood a tall Victorian building with a dark grey steeple, giving a ghostly appearance in its stance.

"Old Main," said Lena. "The college. St. Olaf."

And, Thea thought, it was St. Olaf, his ghost looking down on them, visitors from Norway, while he, the patron saint, reigned on his lonely height.

"Tomorrow we will go up to the college," Lena said, opening the door to the

house, which inside was even larger than the outside made it seem.

"Lovely," said her mother. They entered a room off the hallway which was filled with sunlight, books and busts of various relatives and friends. Rugs from Norway rested on the highly polished floor. There were paintings, one a large canvas depicting Lillehammer.

A young woman with fair hair and rosy cheeks curtsied to Astrid.

"This is Anna. Anna is a college student and she is my right arm. Are you not, Anna?" Lena removed her furs and Anna took them.

Thea and her mother removed their own coats and followed Anna to a closet in the hallway.

"Do you live here?" her mother asked in English.

"Yes! I stay with Mrs. Anderson. My work helps pay my way through college."

"How nice for both of you."

The girl nodded vigorously, smiling.

I will like it here, Thea was thinking. The atmosphere was so different from the South. How vast America was, each section different. Here, the little town of Northfield was much like Norway. In atmosphere at least. It was more like western Norway. Quiet, with young people everywhere. It was not like the South, lazy pedestrians making their way through the streets downtown, unkempt most of them, all that remained of a tired war. But there was a beauty there, too, a lush darkness that was lacking here in this white cheer.

Lena Anderson was, for a woman, active in the Republican party. Almost

immediately she told how pleased she was with President Harding. Thea said nothing, wondering how Lena and Oliver would take to each other. Oliver had even gone so far as to call the Republican party "evil." Whether he was teasing or not, Thea had not known. How long would it take to learn the history of this confused country, she wondered.

All of Oliver's letters, twelve by count, rested in a box Lena had placed them in, carefully tied with a white satin ribbon — like a marriage gift. In the room Lena had designated as her own, Thea read and reread the letters:

"I will give you one week in that cold place and then you must come South. The dogwoods are blooming everywhere. The whole of Georgia is a garden. Come. Mother has written you."

And, indeed, she had. Thea showed the letter to her mother and Lena.

"How lovely," Astrid said. "Will you go?"

Thea did not look up at the women, who were both staring at her, as if she were to make a life or death decision.

She merely nodded. "Next week, I think."

"And when will he come here?" asked her mother.

Thea looked at Lena. "I'll have to see," she said, almost asking permission. In her mind she was trying to see Oliver in this house with its feminine decor and silent chords of the holy — the missing bishop whom Thea had yet to meet. In her imagination Oliver seemed too big for the house, even with all its roominess. He did not belong here.

Indeed the very next week she found herself on her way to Atlanta. She changed trains in Chicago and then began the long journey south. Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee---. In contrast to the rich farms of the Midwest, the poverty of the South showed itself boldly: broken, unpainted fences, little shacks on stilts, black children playing on grassless fronts; mules, patches of sown cotton, stray dogs, little towns with home-owned shops and the slow stride of the overalled citizenry. Occasionally she would see fields with only a chimney showing — a memory of The War — and plantation houses in need of paint, also a reminder. But always there was the glory of dogwoods in full bloom with redbuds and azaleas surrounding even the meanest houses. The South was in full bloom. Traveling through it was like entering a shop filled with every color flower imaginable. It was almost difficult to believe, so used had she become to snow and ice, both in Norway and in Minnesota. May was the month for those countries. Here one began to be free as early as February when the first blades of daffodils pricked through the ground.

She sat alone in her seat and wondered if she could live in this alien environment forever. Her heart was racing so and the pit of her stomach felt queasy. Her nerves were torn. How would the Whitfield family like her? How would Oliver like her? Had she changed? Grown old with grief? What would he think? The old questions came and went. Would she feel shy with this man whose very soul had been emptied to her in letters? She thought she knew him better than she had ever known anyone. Still, his physical being was blurred. She remembered her mother's warning:

"It seems too sudden," she said, "this love of yours."

And until that moment she had not realized the shortness of their face-to-face time together. Then it seemed forever. But in actuality it had been a little short of a month---. She had been away from him longer than she had been with him. Could one fall so deeply in love with letters? In her mind she went back to that day by the waterfall when he told her about the girl in Charleston and first mentioned his attraction to her, Thea. Remembering she felt dizzy with happiness.

The train rounded on its tracks into Georgia. Thea went to the ladies room and combed her hair, combed it again, the comb trembling in her hand. She studied her face. Strange to see it here. It did not look different, the same slanted eyes, the tilted nose, high cheekbones and determined jaw line. She twisted the fair hair into a bun at the back of her neck and little wisps of hair fell about her face. She stood and examined her dark blue suit, turning to see its fit in the back. When she returned to her seat, the black porter announced they were coming into Atlanta, that he would take her luggage forward.

“You need brushin?” he asked.

Thea understood nothing. But it was a question and he held a small brush in his hand. “No,” she said. “No, thank you.” She could scarcely speak — her nerves were so high.