

CHAPTER SEVEN

The warm sun of Georgia embraced her as she descended from the train. It was in marked contrast to the depot in Minneapolis, where dark shadows played on the cold concrete. But the warmth now was instantly recognizable. She was in another country, the American South with its separate rhythms and air.

All of this was reflected only in an instant. She discovered her luggage and almost in a panic looked about. She saw no one recognizable. Only Atlanta people, in mist, seeking their own luggage, and dark "red caps" pushing large carts to the station itself. Thea's heart began to quicken. Where was Oliver? Could he have forgotten, confused the dates? What then would she do?

She chose the last "red cap" and followed him. In the distance, behind tall wrought iron gates, was a gathering of people looking anxiously toward the passengers. There was no one--- Then--- There! Oliver's face! The familiar but

forgotten half smile played about his lips. She remembered now. Oliver never actually smiled, never a broad smile, only the suggestion lessening the sterner mouth. Yes, she had forgotten. But now, seeing, all the lost feelings returned. The confusion of the last months vanished and she quickened her steps, almost running to him. He looked so American with his hat tilted on the back of his head and his tie askew. But then in his embrace a sudden awkwardness seized her again. She drew back, smiling all the time. She was forced to act a role. The easiness they once had known was gone. She looked about and asked for her luggage.

The question obviously confused Oliver. He looked from her to the waiting train and back again. "Where?" he mumbled. And all the while Thea studied his face. In the harsh depot he looked older. These last days when she thought of him, he appeared younger, always in the log cabin, flushed with emotion, even stern. None of that was with him now.

He cocked his head and touched his ear. "I need some help here."

Thea looked about. "There! The grey ones. They're mine." She opened her purse to pay the porter, but Oliver was quicker.

"We have a car," he said to the porter. "Can you follow us?"

Thea sighed. How nice it was to have somebody help with the amenities of traveling. She realized how alone she had been, even with her mother. Oliver put his arm about her waist and the two followed the whistling porter through the station, Oliver smiling down at her often and she meeting the smile with her own. It was pleasant being two instead of one. But, as he started the car, moving away from the depot, the

feeling of constraint came again, a tension. In one way it was as if he were a stranger and she, new to the stranger, must play this part. She began to chat.

She had followed the dogwoods all the way down from Tennessee, she was saying. "Can you imagine? I left snow in Norway and also in Minnesota. Snow all the time." It was uncharacteristic of her to chat in this way and once when he glimpsed her she thought she saw a hint of irritation. If not irritation, curiosity.

"It's so lovely here. The sun." She began to remove her suit jacket. "Hot even in April." She lifted her head to the sun.

"You're still beautiful," Oliver said, narrowing his eyes as the car made its way onto the red dirt road leading to Ashton.

Thea sat up. The compliment pleased her. But she was still uneasy, her muscles taut. "I'm still me," she said. "It's only been eleven months."

"Eleven years." He glanced at her. "By the way, we're having a house party. Allison's fiancé is visiting."

"Allison?"

Oliver nodded. "Sarah Carr. From Charleston. That ill-fated city."

Thea said nothing for a while. Then she asked:

"What is she like?"

"I like her. You will, too. She just graduated from Sweetbriar. My brother did extremely well." He narrowed his eyes. "But not as well as I." He looked at her then. "You're more beautiful than you were last summer."

"How is Lucille?" Somehow she compared all Southern women to Lucille.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Wouldn't know."

"I never heard from her. Isn't that strange?"

"Damn!" Suddenly Oliver was turning the wheel of the car and Thea looked back as she saw the back rear of the car slowly grind into a red ditch whereon the car stopped, the nose of the car pointed upward like an arrow and the back stuck dumb into red mud.

Oliver raised his hands in a gesture of futility. Thea watched him and the comedy of the scene — the two of them reared back like buffoons — struck her and she began to laugh. It was as if she were releasing something and she could not stop laughing. Until she felt Oliver's lips on her own. "I love you. I love you. Nothing has changed." And she kissed him back, noting his eyelashes in the sun. Long straight lashes she had never noticed before. She sat back.

"Well, this is the best place I know to give you this. I was waiting for something more romantic."

"This is pretty romantic," Thea said and laughed into the sun.

She watched, her laughter slowing to a smile, then silence, as Oliver took from his jacket pocket a small box wrapped in a silver paper with white ribbon. Thea felt her heart beat as he handed her the package. She stared at it, coupled in her hands. "What is this?" It was like a miniature casket.

"Open it."

She sat staring down at it.

"Open it."

She slowly began to untie the ribbon. Inside was a black velvet box. She lifted the lid as if she were lifting the lid of a coffin. Inside was the largest diamond she had ever seen. The gem itself was set downward into a platinum setting. But the diamond was so large it sparkled like the evening star.

She must have stared ~~at~~ at length because she heard Oliver's voice:

"Do you like it?"

She glanced at him and then back at the ring. It was larger than her mother's ring or Martha's or Mrs. Houghton's or any she had ever seen before.

"It was my grandmother's. Of the three boys she left her engagement ring to me. I loved her."

The confession was so touching Thea smiled at him, gazing at his excited face. But her own feelings were confusion, even rebellion. Oliver was so sure, and she was not. Not now.

"So?" Oliver was staring at her.

She threw her arms about him.

"Nigger lover! Nigger lover!"

Thea immediately drew back. In front of them were two men on mule back, grinning in the sun. Their damp faces glistened like raw fat. The toothless one, the dark-haired one who had spoken, spat onto the tilted end of the car. "Messin round with a gull in a ditch. If that ain't somethin. And she white, too."

Oliver's face turned red in a flash. He had his hand on the handle of the car. Thea took hold of his arm. "No."

"Is that all you have to do?" he asked the men.

"You gone try to get smart, Mis-tuh White-field?"

The other, the younger with a nose so small it was practically non-existent, giggled like a child.

"You ain't in no position to ask nothin, seems to me. Ain't that rat, Tap?"

"Thas rat!"

Thea stared at the men, their unshaven faces. What were they going to do? The mule's dumb, tragic eyes gazed hollowly at Oliver.

But Oliver was pointing a gun. "And I'm not afraid to shoot this, either! Get going. GO!" He was yelling.

"That ain't no way for no editor feller to act. Is it? But we gone. Gotta stay live so we can read all that what you write about niggers and such."

Both Oliver and Thea watched as the two made their way down the muddy road.

Oliver looked at Thea. "Are you all right?"

Thea had her hand to her heart, trying to quiet its wild beating. "Would you have shot them?"

"Probably. I was mad enough."

"Has this happened before? Do you always have a gun?"

"But on to more important things." He was actually smiling. "Some engagement!"

"But---"

He placed the gun in his inside coat pocket. "You are going to marry me, aren't you?"

The ring. Thea looked down at her hand and at the diamond so startlingly new on her finger. "I had almost forgotten — Those men."

Oliver put his arm around her shoulder. "Forget about them. This is us! Engaged in a ditch."

Thea joined his laughter. "It's so lovely, Oliver." She looked into his eyes. Somehow the men, the terror they brought, renewed the old feelings. Harm to Oliver was the last thing on earth she could bear. "I do love you, Oliver." And she was believing what she said.

He pressed her hand so hard it almost hurt. "I was afraid you didn't."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Let's marry this weekend. At home."

Thea straightened. "You're crazy! My mother would never forgive me. You have to come to Minnesota."

"Minnesota?"

Thea nodded.

"I'll freeze to death."

"In May. It's warm in May. I think."

Oliver sat straighter. "You mean we have to wait until May. That's years from now."

Thea looked at the ring again. She traced its outline with her right finger.

Oliver rested his hands on the wheel of the car. "Well, there's one thing for sure. We can't sit here for the rest of our lives." He opened the car door and got out, half-

climbing his way up the red ditch. Thea watched him. He stood in the middle of the muddy road, his right hand to his forehead almost like a salute. "Come, citizens," he said, "we need help here."

And, as if he had willed it, a wagon drawn by two mules soon rounded the bend. A man and his wife were sitting in front of the wagon and in back were at least ten white-haired children. Oliver kept beckoning and as the wagon approached, Oliver bowed low, hat in hand, to the family, the mother and oldest girls arrayed in colorful dresses made from cotton sacks.

The man and woman stared at Oliver, and Thea wanted to laugh. They think he's crazy, she was musing. But the man tipped the bill of his cap. "You in trouble, brother?"

"I surely am," said Oliver. "Do you think you can give me a hand?"

"Negative," said the man.

"Just a push," said Oliver.

"Negative."

"Could the children help?"

The children were surveying the scene with sober fish eyes, as if they were viewing a miracle.

"Negative."

Oliver glanced at Thea with the familiar small smile.

"Then can you give us a ride into town?"

"Yessir, the Lord don't know no stranger."

Oliver helped Thea out of the car and up the ditch, then he took her luggage and placed them beside the children.

"What that er?" asked the oldest of the blond children.

"Clothes," said Oliver and, lifting Thea to the back of the wagon, he said, "And this is my wife."

The children said nothing, observing the smiling Thea. She sat on one suitcase and Oliver on the other.

"You in?" called the driver.

"Yes," called Oliver. "Onward, Christian soldier."

"He ain't no soldier," said the boy. The other children were content to stare at Thea. She tried smiling at them but the smiles were not met. It was as if she were some Being sent amongst their midst.

Oliver began to laugh. "A bit different from Norway, eh?"

"Negative," she said and laughed, steadying herself by putting both palms flat down on the sides of the suitcase. If only she had a picture of all this — Oliver in his dark suit and tie and she in her smart dark blue suit and diamond surrounded by ^{wire} ~~none~~ — she counted them — children.

Oliver asked one of the smaller girls:

"Do you pick cotton?"

The child nodded.

"Aren't you too little?"

The child shook and lowered her head.

"We all picks," said one of the boys. "Cept'n Humman, he's home with grandmaw. He got the rickets and can't walk."

"Naw he don't," objected the tallest girl. "Humman, he just a baby."

"Do you like picking cotton?" Oliver asked.

The young girl nodded. "Sometimes."

"Why sometimes?"

The girl blinked and looked away. "When its dew on the ground--- I doesn't like that."

Oliver studied the statement.

"Dew is when it's wet," the girl explained further.

"Early in the morning?"

The girl nodded.

Thea listened to all this with marked interest. Oliver was good with children and yet she had the feeling he was trying to pry something from the innocent minds — some fact of the South, some lack that he was always writing about. Cotton, he had once said, would be the doom of the South. The economy of the South now was still war economy. And the rest of the world had discovered cotton while the Boll Weevil had discovered the South. His editorials fairly rang with warnings and these happy children would be the hopeless victims.

"If only they could see you now!" Oliver said, laughing as Thea nearly fell from her suitcase as the wagon hit an especially large rock.

"Who?" Thea asked, steadying herself further.

"The Norwegians. Your mother. I guess she wouldn't think you were marrying very well."

Thea laughed.

The beginnings of the town of Ashton were showing — little frame buildings marked "Feed" and "General." Old wagons were dumped along the edges of a cotton field. In the distance a few cars were slowly making their way up an unpaved business district.

Thea glanced at her ring and back at the scene ahead. What was waiting for her beyond that street? She had seen Oliver's mother once, from a distance. What if the woman didn't approve of her? Her son, her most intelligent son, marrying a foreigner? Certainly she would be more pleased with Allison's intended, the girl from Charleston.

And what of the girl from Charleston? What of all of them? The thought brought on a sudden fatigue. She had not got on particularly with these Southern young women. The men rather liked her, she thought. But she always felt distant from the women. And now she even considered Lucille a stranger, perhaps even a foe. As close as they had been during the past year or so she thought certainly Lucille would have written — even if it were just a note about her father.

Thea looked down at the ring again, so incongruous amongst these children, all of whom, Thea observed, could do with a lengthy washing. Their very thinness was disturbing. She tried to avoid their haunting stares.

"What's that thang?" a girl of about eight asked Thea.

"What?"

"On your fanger?"

"Oh!" Thea smiled at the child. "It's a ring."

"I never saw nothin like that er before."

"It's an engagement ring," Oliver said.

"Is?"

"That means this pretty lady is going to marry me."

The oldest boy frowned. "She ain't gone marry yew?"

Oliver crossed his arms. "Something wrong with that?"

"Yeah, " said the boy and all the children joined in hearty laughter.

Oliver feigned anger and sat with his arms folded viewing the sky as he rocked along over the deeply rutted road.

Thea laughed. Even in his dismay he looked perfectly oriented, taking the bumps in the road as if he had been sitting in wagons all the days of his life.

"What are you laughing at?" Oliver asked her.

"You," she said. "You look as if you're being dragged to the executioner. With such dignity."

He said nothing and continued looking about at the tin-roofed broken shanties.

Suddenly the wagon stopped and the face of the driver leaned down. "Where you goin, brother?"

"To my house. Can you drive us there?"

"Negative."

"It's not too far. Just a short distance from town."

"Negative."

Thea smothered her smile with her hand. "We can walk," she muttered.

"With these big bags?"

"We can manage."

"All right." Oliver stood. "We'll get off here. We're much obliged."

The man said nothing.

Oliver jumped down and helped Thea.

"We need a hand with the luggage," he instructed the children.

Two small boys struggled with the luggage and finally handed it down to Oliver's outstretched hands. The man and wife stared down at Oliver and Thea, as if the very sight of them tired them beyond recognition.

Oliver saluted. "Much obliged, comrades!"

"Uh huh," the woman muttered and began laconically moving her head left to right. The caravan proceeded into town.

Oliver and Thea watched them go as if it were a last chance, the very final one. Then they both burst into laughter.

"What do we do now?" Thea asked.

"I don't know, but I'll be damned if I'll parade down main street with you and these two huge bags. There's not a soul in this town I don't know."

Thea, seeing the ridiculousness of the situation, leaned down to pick up one of the bags.

"No, let me," Oliver said. "I know a way and nobody will see us."

"Couldn't you tell them I'm your fiancée." She stuck out her hand. "See, the ring. All official."

Oliver's look then was softer than Thea had ever seen it. "You're a wonderful sport. What other woman would put up with such an unromantic beginning?"

"I thought it was very romantic."

Oliver cocked his head. "Let's go."

The first thing Thea saw when they approached the house was the black wrought iron fence surrounding the house. It reminded her of gates and fences she had seen in England with their slender details shining in the sun like warring spears. The large house was brick, plain without adornment save for the windows exhibiting narrow panes. It stood back from the street with a winding graveled drive making its way through myriads of dogwood, pine and redbud. The door to the house was massive with black-green shutters and white trim which curved to a point at the door's top. No shrubbery or ornaments ruined the perfect lines of the building. Thea stopped as she looked at it. It was, indeed, formidable — even in contrast to the Houghton's house with its formal gardens, columns and other pediments.

Oliver also stopped and rested the luggage. "What in the world do you have in here?" He was actually breathless.

"It's so perfect," Thea said.

"What?"

"Your house."

Oliver looked at her and then at the house. "Oh, that!"

"Is that all you have to say about it?"

"Do you think it's big enough for just my mother?"

"Alone? She lives there alone?"

Oliver nodded. "Let's go. Get this over with."

Curiously Thea wanted to cry. She couldn't explain why exactly. Fear? The apprehension of meeting Oliver's mother for the first time. The house. It actually looked as if it were frowning, frowning its disapproval of a stranger, a foreigner entering its halls.

"Oh, Oliver," she said aloud.

He looked back at her and then began to frown. "What is it?"

"She's not going to like me."

"Who?"

"Your mother."

Oliver put the luggage down again and came to her. "She doesn't bite, you know. She's going to love you."

Thea shook her head. "Women don't like me. American women."

Oliver gently hugged her. "They're jealous of your accent."

Thea instantly drew away from him. "She may be looking." She stared at the frowning windows. Surely the woman was looking out, seeing, wondering what her eldest son was bringing to the house of Whitfield.

"Come," Oliver beckoned with his hand. Then he picked up the luggage. "Open the gate for me, please."

Thea felt as if she could not move. Oliver beckoned again, standing before the mighty gate, suitcases still in hand.

Thea slowly walked to him.

"Just open the latch."

The familiar tenseness was again affecting her arms and shoulders. Her arms were tight against her body and her back felt stretched. But she managed to open the latch. All at once she thought of her mother, her lovely mother laughing with her friend in the snow. "Remember, Thea, you are a Viking. The Vikings are afraid of nothing." She heard her words distinctly, and her body began to soften, relax. Her mother had told her that as long as Thea could remember and it always helped. She could face anything, even the formidable Viola Whitfield "who has all the connections in Charleston." She could hear Mrs. Houghton's voice — low and awesome.

Oliver opened the door to the house. "Anybody here?" he called and Thea half expected an echo.

Thea stood with Oliver in the large hallway. To the right was a Drawing Room, whose walls reflected shades of soft rose. A harp was placed at one side of the room. Above, an enormous chandelier with shining prisms centered the high ceiling. Lighted portraits and landscapes were mellow above the tall mantel and walls. Beside a small rocking chair was a basket holding knitting needles and yarn. Instead of morning, the room had a sense of dusk.

"Well, were you trying to hide?" Oliver asked.

Thea instantly turned her gaze to the stairway. Viola Whitfield, in a dark blue knit

dress with a small white collar was descending the stairs. Oliver had not got his mother's eyes. The eyes dominated her face — dark, rounded eyes, knowing in their outlook and emphasized by her greying hair. She was most decidedly a handsome woman, Thea noted, albeit commanding. Not overly tall, she gave the appearance of being so. She was accustomed to managing. It was the eyes that commanded, not the stature. Yet Thea saw something — a kindness in the face.

She gave a low laugh. "I was trying to arrange flowers for our newest guest." She went to Thea and shook her hand, her eyes examining, not smiling, though her lips held the hint of a smile.

She turned to Oliver and Thea watched as Oliver leaned down to kiss his mother. The gesture appeared to please her. She repeated the same low laugh. Thea immediately saw the love between the two. His mother had a pretty mouth — a short upper lip and a more generous lower one. Once, Thea thought, this woman was a great beauty — part of which had not left her yet. She had seen the world and something, something was lacking.

"Where's Sarah?" Oliver asked.

"She's playing tennis." She glanced at Thea as she spoke of her future daughter-in-law. "At the club." Thea was well aware of the pleasure the name Sarah gave the woman. Her face took on a glow. And seeing, Thea felt diminished. She knew her clothes were wrinkled from the ride from Atlanta. She touched her hair and felt the small dark hat she was wearing was askew.

"Tell your mother, Oliver." Thea forced a smile.

“What?”

“How we got here.”

Oliver snapped his fingers. “Which reminds me. I’ve got to get somebody to get my car.”

“What happened?”

Thea studied Viola Whitfield’s face as Oliver told in exaggerated detail about their travail. The woman beamed at Thea. Thea tried to read disappointment behind the beaming face. Certainly she would have wanted this beloved son to marry someone more like herself, a Southerner, one with “connections.” But her face was a mystery except for the adoration.

Thea caught glimpses of the rooms about her. The dining room was to the left of the hallway. The table and chairs were Queen Anne and across the wall a large frontispiece exhibited plates and platters of all colors and sizes from China. It was a dazzling sight, the greens of the Caledon, the reds of South China, blues and white, a large grey crackled platter and centered was an imperial yellow plate with blue markings.

The sun shone onto a silver teapot whose patina exhibited its long age and wear. Chinese rugs were everywhere in the house — in the hall, Dining Room and Drawing Room. Beyond the Drawing Room Thea caught a glimpse of books — an antique desk and books, books from floor to ceiling.

How could she manage to fit in with all this, she wondered? And at this moment she wasn’t sure if she wanted to. All at once, she felt very tired. But she continued to

smile even though her face fairly ached.

“Come, Thea,” said Viola. “We need light in these rooms. Could you help me draw the curtains?”

She gave her low laugh again. “I’ve been in your country, Norway. It’s so different from all this.” She indicated the rooms with a gesture of her hand.

“Yes, it is. But your house is so interesting.” And Thea meant what she said. In its way it was beautiful, too.

They drew the blinds and Thea saw the arrangements of azaleas and dogwood throughout the house. Flowers meant a happy house, she was taught. And she observed even in the library there were tall sprays of pink and white dogwood cheering the sober intellect of the room.

“I like dogwoods,” said Thea. “We have lilacs in Norway, sometimes as tall as buildings — little buildings.”

Viola came to her and put her arm about Thea’s waist. “You and I are going to be good friends. I can see that now.” She looked into Thea’s eyes. “And a beautiful young friend.”

Thea felt the blush come to her face. She would never accustom herself to such open flattery. Thea thought of the ring.

“I must show you,” she said quietly, showing her slender finger.

“Yes, that was Maa-maa’s.” Her dark eyes inspected the ring with saddened eyes as if the very saying of her mother-in-law’s affectionate name brought sorrow, not love.

"I never thought I would have such a thing!"

"Maa-maa loved Oliver," She patted Thea's hand as if the ring and the past were to be dismissed.

Thea followed her into the dining room.

"So many Chinese things. Were you in China?"

"No, no. The Whitfield's have always had a love affair with China. One was actually a missionary there. He was a doctor, I guess, and spent most of his life there. His wife died in China." She was examining the plates with her eyes but the statement was accusing as if the missionary, a doctor, had caused his wife's death.

"But I like most of the Whitfield's. They're interesting."

Thea told her about Martha, her sister living in Shanghai and that Martha had met Cuthbert.

Viola's face fairly beamed.

"Oh, Bert!" she said. "He is my dreamer. So handsome."

"Martha said he was, that everyone liked him. How brilliant he is."

"Too brilliant I sometimes think. He is good at everything. I fear he'll never settle on one thing — like Oliver."

"Isn't he in the newspaper business?"

"For the Associated press. He writes for the Associated Press." She turned her gaze from the plates to Thea. "He's coming soon, you know."

"Here?"

Viola nodded. "You will like him, I'm sure."

Somehow there seemed to be a warning in her deep voice. But the fatigue had returned to Thea and she paid little attention. She wanted to be with Oliver alone. She was tired, trying to please. And she wondered if she could ever accustom herself to Viola Whitfield. Or her house. Or this place, this Georgia. Or even Oliver himself. She didn't think she had ever been so tired.