

CHAPTER NINE

Oliver was explaining:

“Five years. It will take five years.” It would take five years before the newspaper would show a decent profit. He was almost there, he was saying. But he wanted everything on a sound basis. He had to have “firm footing.” The country, he believed, was headed toward calamity and he had to be ready for it.

They were driving out into the country. He wanted to get Thea away — away from his mother “and brother.” Sarah Carr had returned to Charleston that morning and Thea herself would be leaving soon for Minnesota with Oliver to follow.

The heat, which had been bearable up to now, was heavy as they drove. A haze hung over the cotton fields as Thea watched the green fields. She was wearing a light dress but it might as well have been fur. She had forgotten the heat and how long the days were until darkness gave some relief.

"Besides," he was saying, "we want to start on the house."

They had talked a great deal about the house in the past few days, half-smiling, half-laughing, half-believing. It would be made of cypress, Oliver declared, and on hearing the advantages of this, Thea concurred. She knew little of the woods and trees of this country.

"And we'll have pillars so that you can be a proper Southern lady."

"But I want light," Thea objected. "Happiness and light — all over the house — and a garden, flowers and boxwood — I do love your boxwood — everywhere."

Oliver turned to her. "It takes money." He smiled at her. "Do you still blame me for leaving dinner, which was pretty dull at that?"

"Yes." Thea said and turned her face upward toward the sun. She liked the way Southern girls were tan in the summer. She, too, wanted that. But her skin was so fair. No one in Norway stayed in the sun, lying in it, as the young women at the country club swimming pool did almost daily.

"Oliver, do you think I'll ever be as sophisticated as the girls here?"

"Ho ho." Oliver turned into the driveway. "I hope not."

"I mean worldly."

He laughed, then.

They were approaching his house. She hadn't seen it since she was here before. There hadn't been time to do anything — just the two of them. Luncheons and dinners kept them going constantly. Even Mrs. Houghton had a little luncheon for six at her house. Lucille was not present. She was in Atlanta. Thea considered talking to Mrs.

Houghton about Lucille but thought better of it. She was too preoccupied by winning the friendship of the other young women, who appeared to be pleased she would soon be moving among them.

Oliver parked the car in front of the log house. The place was more charming than Thea remembered. The front door was double and wide with heavy eaves above it. Geraniums, large and deep red, bloomed on the small front porch. Oliver had added wooden rails to the entrance since Thea had last seen it.

"It makes such a difference," she said.

"I made them myself," said Oliver.

Thea noted the decided pride in his voice. "I never knew you were a builder."

"A master builder," he said mockingly, "echoing Ibsen."

"So many talents. So many talents."

Oliver said she should remember to tell her mother about that — that she was not only getting a brilliant newspaperman, she was also marrying a master carpenter.

"She will be delighted. Mother likes to write, too."

"Oh?"

"Poems. They are really quite good. I think several have been published."

Oliver said nothing as he came round to help Thea out of the car.

Thea stood while Oliver opened the door. On impulse she thrust both arms outward. "How beautiful it is. The day, the world. I'm happy. I'm happy, Oliver."

Oliver came back to her then, fastening her open arms about his waist. "This has been a nightmare," he said into her hair.

She glanced up at him. "Nightmare?"

"You always there but miles away."

He led her to the door of the cabin and still holding her managed to open the door.

Thea felt the blood flow to her face. At last they would be truly alone. She wanted to be alone in this charming corner of the world. But to her dismay, even irritation, she glimpsed the slight figure of Velvet, the young black woman who sometimes cooked for Oliver. She was hurrying to the kitchen as if she had been caught at something.

Both Oliver and Thea looked at each other. Their unspoken words spoke of the ruined moment.

"Velvet," called Oliver. "Are you still here?"

"You told me to get things cleaned. You say---"

"Well, everything's all right now. Miss Thea and I have to go over plans." He strode into the kitchen. "Did I tell you Miss Thea and I are to be married?"

"Is?" Velvet's high voice was practically a squeal.

Then she let out a high trill of joy, covering her face with flat hands as if the news was so great she must hide her feelings.

Oliver laughed and Thea came to Velvet. "You are happy, Velvet?"

"I sho am. He be's all to hisself." Velvet was smiling to herself now. "Yall's gone need a cook, aintcha?"

"Yes," said Oliver. "And you're it."

For a moment Thea considered that she had not been consulted but she quickly dismissed the thought. Nothing could ruin this time.

"We'll have wonderful times together," Thea said to Velvet. "You can teach me how to cook---the Southern way."

"I can cook anything," bragged Velvet.

"True," said Oliver.

"Yessir. I'll be going along now."

Both Oliver and Thea smiled as they watched Velvet, almost skipping, make her way through the pine woods on her way to wherever it was she lived.

Still smiling, but standing her distance, Thea came back to the nagging question that had puzzled her in the car. "What calamity, Oliver? What are you talking about? A coming calamity?"

"Let's not talk about that now." He went over to the leather sofa and patted the space next to him. "Come."

Thea felt a sudden dizziness but held back. Questions were turning in her mind.

Oliver rose and came to her. "Are you afraid?" he asked softly.

Thea only shook her head and felt his lips on hers, his hands bringing her closer to him. He led her, then, into his bedroom. Thea hesitated. "It's all right," he said. "It is."

All of it was darkness, their passion. A mindless whirl of want. Thea gave in to his every stroke, her body searching for closeness. Closer. "I love you." Far, far away, in the dim distance, was her true self, all she had ever known, abandoned in a northern shore. She was here. And that was everything.

At last there was an ebbing and the Oliver she knew was saying over and over.

"I love you. I love . . ."

Then reasoning came and she saw her clothes scattered about the floor in disarray and then only did it come to her what she had done. She covered her naked body with the white bedspread. All she wanted to do was straighten the clothes on the floor, bring order again.

She felt Oliver's arms about her but she remained motionless, seated on the side of the narrow bed, clinging to the bedspread.

"You're not sorry?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

His hands tightened on her arms and she relaxed beside him.

"Thea!"

She said nothing.

"We can't wait until Minnesota. We have to marry now. Tomorrow---before you leave."

She shook her head.

"You do love me?"

"Oh yes." She put her mouth to his cheek. "More than anything but--"

He buried his face in her hair.

What have I done, she was thinking? Now. From this moment on she was a different person. She had changed completely. Now she knew what others knew, what married women knew. All innocence was gone. It would never return. Men never knew

such things, she was thinking, such feelings. These were moments she would remember the rest of her life with a sense of both joy and sorrow.

Oliver was dressing. She looked down at her clothes on the floor again. The dress was bought in Kristiania---before she left. Her mother was with her, saying how strange it was to be buying summer clothes, and the clerk said many were buying for trips to Spain. She wanted to reach for the dress, rescue it somehow.

"Champagne," Oliver was saying. He was dressed and standing at the door of the bedroom.

"Would you like?"

Thea smiled at him.

"Great!" And he vanished.

Slowly Thea assembled her clothes, picking up each article as if each were an injured child. Once dressed she went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror there. She looked the same except for her hair. Her face was the same face. Somehow she expected to look older, wiser--perhaps tired and old. She smoothed her hair with her hands.

"Come," called Oliver.

Thea went to him. He was holding the dripping bottle of champagne which instantly reminded Thea of her uncle in Oslo as he held another bottle of champagne in honor of her return---A lovely scene where she was so unknowing, a young girl at home. Only that.

"Champagne at eleven-thirty in the morning," Oliver said, as he poured the

bubbling liquid into Thea's glass. "You've made a complete wastrel out of me."

"Not completely," Thea said, now smiling at him.

"Good!"

"What?"

"To see you smile." He went to her and put his arms about her shoulders. "But now, sit. Let's think this out."

Thea sat beside him on the small sofa. He was talking about marrying, that she could stay over the week end and they would have a small wedding. "Your mother can come here."

Thea told him that Astrid would never come here, that her family lived on ceremony, old customs. "It would be very bad for her." She nodded her head. "Uh huh, it would."

"Well, then let's get you to Minnesota as soon as possible. Next week we can be married."

"Will we live here?" Thea asked. She was looking at all the books, hundreds of them.

"If you would like."

"Yes, yes I would. I love the woods."

"One thing, for sure, we'll have to get a new bed."

And for the first time Thea laughed.

Oliver sat watching her, his face unsmiling. "I would do anything for you. Anything."

They stayed into the late afternoon, finding solace again in Oliver's narrow bed, which now cushioned their bodies in a pleasurable and now familiar blur of the senses.

It was only when she saw Mrs. Whitfield that the guilt began. They had been riding over the countryside, they lied to the woman. She was already dressed for dinner in a long dress of black cotton and around her neck was a necklace of white jade. Her eyes fairly sparked when she kissed Oliver on the cheek. "And one for you, too, Thea dear," she said. And Thea bent to receive the tender kiss on her cheek.

"I'll be down in a minute." Thea said. "I must change. How wrinkled I must be." She fled the room.

Upstairs she sat in the small rocking chair. What have I done? She asked herself over and over. There was such an innocence about Mrs. Whitfield---a purity that fairly shouted from the woman. And I am me, she said to herself. She thought of all her friends at home. Not one of them, no one she knew, had slept with a man. None of her friends had married yet and she knew from their talk of their innocence. There was one wild girl in Kristiania, a little older than Thea's own group, who, it was rumored, had slept with classmates and Thea always looked at her in wonderment---half admiring the girl's courage yet dismissing her as wanton. And now here she was---exactly like that girl. What would her mother say? What would Martha say? What would everyone say? It was true, she had not enjoyed the first experience this morning. She was too aware of Oliver's every action. As well, it did not seem such a momentous experience. She had thought or believed the act of love would be so enormous that her entire being would

be transfixed. But here she was, still Thea.

Later, that afternoon, however, there was actual pleasure and she began to know the misty pleasure of love. Now. Right now. She wished for Oliver. How wonderful it will be, she thought, when we can be together every day in complete freedom. Until we die. Until---. She bent over. But the guilt. The church.

She had no idea how long she sat. Oliver was knocking on her door. "What are you doing in there? Sewing your dress?"

"Oh! I'll be there." She immediately hurried to the bureau and took out the most innocent dress she had. It was white with lace tatting about the neckline. She hurried down the stairs.

Oliver held out a glass of champagne. An almost wicked smile moved about his lips, as if he were re-enacting this morning, his salute to their first encounter.

She refused the glass. In no way did she want to take part in his little drama. It was almost as if he were mocking something, teasing her silently in front of his innocent mother. Besides, she still felt a little giddy from the glass they had before they left the cabin. As giddy as she felt hugging his arm while he drove to the house, not wanting to depart from him, not even for the short ride.

Viola Whitfield was speaking of Baltimore, saying how sad it was when their house there was sold. Everyone was suddenly dead, she said. "Imagine---that large family and everyone was dead."

"I would like to see that part of the country. Washington. All of it," Thea said.

Mrs. Whitfield said they would visit it one day. "The house. Our house is still there. I hope the grounds are as beautiful as they once were."

Thea could see by the woman's eyes and voice that there, Maryland, was her true love, not here. She understood. Norway would never leave her. Ever.

"We will miss you," Viola said to Thea. "How empty the house will seem." She sipped from her glass. "Do you two have any idea when the wedding will be?"

"Soon," Oliver said.

Both Thea and Viola smiled at him.

"I don't know. It will be strange---my mother putting on a wedding in another country." She pulled a piece of loose thread from her dress. "It will be small."

"Sarah wants to come," said Viola and there was almost a question in her voice.

Thea thought of the small town of Northfield, so different from exotic Charleston.

"Oh, I hope so," she said, feeling the blush come to her face. What would her mother do with these people? Where would they stay? She heard herself saying that there was a college there, a beautiful college.

But then dinner was announced by the ageing black Leuvonias and they slowly made their way to the dining room, just the three of them with Oliver seated at the head of the table, far far away it seemed to Thea, and she, alone, in the middle still remembering the morning and afternoon. She would be no bride, she thought. Ever.

Each day, after the presses had run, she and Oliver went to the cabin, explaining to Viola that Thea was making plans for redecorating.

At first Viola had protested. "But I thought you would live here. The house is so large---and empty." She emphasized the T in the word empty. Thea said nothing, but Oliver said they had plans to build, but for now Thea wanted some changes in the cabin.

"And who will live here---after I'm dead?" She seemed to pronounce a T again.

"Allison and Sarah, of course," said Oliver.

Her eyes brightened. "Do they want to live here? I'm so pleased."

"Yes," said Thea. "Sarah loves the house and so does Allison."

And so it was planned, which caused Thea to feel even closer to Oliver. The idea of their own house, the sharing, the joy of it all, affected Thea viscerally and she felt a well-being she had never experienced before. Her whole body felt stretched with health.

"I'm so happy," she said to Oliver. "I had no idea being engaged, planning a marriage, would do this to one."

Oliver said nothing, merely smiled. He, too, had changed, in his way. His eyes had a clarity and his skin a high color that was absent when she first met him. He was almost a brooder then, weighed down.

"We've got to get you married," he said one afternoon. "I need some sleep. All I think of is you, not tomorrow's editorial. My reading is nil. Can't concentrate."

"After I'm an old married lady, you'll start leaving me at dinners again."

"Old married lady," Oliver said. "Never."

"One day."

"And you will never be old."

Odd. Thea had never thought of being old. She would grow old in America, a broken ailing old lady. But she did not believe it. Time stretched before her like an endless forest, mornings and nights, seasons and moons. All with the one man in the world she could never be without.

They arrived at the Atlanta station in the afternoon. Oliver had said earlier that he wanted to go with her, but they both decided it would look "unseemly." Thea's mother would not approve. Therefore, Oliver would arrive in Minnesota the following week.

"Is it still snowing?" he asked incredibly as the hot sun beamed down on them in front of the Atlanta depot.

"No, the lilacs should be blooming."

There were no lilacs in Georgia. At least Thea had not seen them. In Norway the lilacs were like tall trees and the scent of them permeated the land. Minnesota was like that, too. Hedges and hedges of lilacs. She hoped they would be blooming when Oliver arrived.

Wedding plans would be decided then, Thea explained.

"You mean there's going to be a second trip?"

Thea nodded.

"Allison has already decided he'll be my best man. He wants to know if everyone speaks Norwegian there."

Thea laughed. "Yes," she said. "You'll have to learn."

They walked arm in arm through the station. It was all so different than when she arrived. ~~Thea thought~~. There was not the slightest constraint---so easy did she feel now. But leaving---even for so short a time---was like a breaking away, like a snapped thread.

The great hissing train seemed to speak to her of far away places. Even danger. This giant of a locomotive would take her three and a half days through state after state. Planning. That was what she would do. She would plan their wedding, make changes for the cabin, for their lives together. The time would go quickly. They both needed this separation. It was practical. But practicality was a lost manner now. She had tossed it to the wiles of wherever.

Oliver stayed with her so long at her berth that he almost was caught by the moving train. Thea strained out the window to see if he had fallen. He was all right. Tall and ruddy and waving. They were both laughing.

All the way through Georgia Thea stared at her ring, once holding up her hand in front of the mirror to examine it. What would her mother think? What was her life to be? She, Thea Aaker, would become someone else. Who? All of it--the ring, marriage, the South--was like something that did not belong to her.