

PART III

“ . . . An Ever Flowing Stream . . . ”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The announcement in the newspaper was simple. Oliver wrote it and Thea approved, after rejecting that "Mrs. Christian Aaker announces the marriage of her daughter...."

Instead Oliver wrote:

The marriage of Miss Thea Astrid Aaker to Mr. Oliver Maitland Whitfield III took place on Friday, May three, 1921, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Miss Aaker, formerly of Kristiania, Norway, attended schools in her native Norway and in England, having attended the Aisley School and Oxford University there.

Mr. Whitfield, son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Maitland Oliver Whitfield II, is a native of Ashton. He attended Episcopal High School in Virginia and received his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and William and Mary.

Mr. Whitfield is publisher of The Ashton Observer.

Thea read and re-read the announcement, over and over, staring at Oliver's

handwriting as if she were reading about strangers. All the while a peculiar silence took over the house. There was no celebration, no telephone calls or letters. Only silence. They had returned alone to the empty house. Oliver told no one of their plans, not even Allison or Leuvonía. So on Saturday when Oliver left to go to the newspaper, Thea remained alone to think out everything, her enormous step into the world of adults.

Mainly she thought of Astrid. Never to see her again? How could this be? She decided to write to her. And also Martha. She would tell Martha everything. "Never put anything in writing," she remembered the woman's advice on the train. But Martha was different. She would tell about Astrid, ask: Could a mother actually give up her daughter? Never see her again?

Also on her mind, very much so, was her appearance. She was showing. Not a great deal. But she herself was acutely conscious of how she looked. Oliver had said last night that they would attend church on Sunday: "Our first foray into the world as a married couple!"

"What will people say?" Thea asked. "What will we say?"

"We'll tell the truth."

"What?"

"That we decided to marry and we didn't want ^{any} fuss. That is the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose."

She wrote her mother five pages on both sides of the paper: she wanted to see her soon, she wrote. She must see in her heart to forgive this transgression. Toward the end, she was half begging.... And then she wrote Martha an even longer letter.

When Oliver returned she gave him the letters to mail.

"Don't you want to see your wedding present?" he asked, mischief in his eyes.

"A present?" Thea had half-forgotten. Ceremony called for presents.

"Come."

They went outside arm-in-arm. And before them was a shiny grey automobile.

"You've bought a new car?"

"It's yours."

"Mine. I can't..."

"Yes. I'll teach you."

Thea stood, saying nothing. She would never be able to drive such a thing. She said so.

"Of course, you will." Oliver was almost like a young boy, excited. "Don't you like it?" The grey is almost the color of your eyes." He beckoned for her to come.

Oliver sat in the driver's seat and Thea beside him. They drove out the driveway. "You'll need a car to drive from this house to our house — to oversee the workmen, tell them what you want done."

"Oh, Oliver." She felt the wind in her hair. For the first time since the dreadful courthouse in Atlanta, she felt alive. Astrid and all of it had burdened her with all the heaviness of the world. But now seated beside Oliver, in the golden late afternoon, she felt a measure of what their future together could be. Free and golden.

"I'll never learn to drive this."

"Oh yes. Yes, you will."

But it was only a moment, one golden moment. There was so much to be done. And there was the matter of a doctor. True, the nausea had lessened, but she badly needed care, and from one who had discretion. Her secret had to be kept. If not, there was only ruin ahead. She and Oliver would have to move to another city, a prospect Thea did not see now as totally bad.

Oliver suggested she go to a doctor in a neighboring town, not too far from Ashton. The town of Yonanoka was a college town, smaller than Ashton, but whose history was more illustrious, since monument after monument displayed fallen Confederate heroes. There was also a church where General Lee had worshipped. Thea was gradually learning the great importance of all this. Families named their children after these heroes, borrowing heredity whether the inheritance was actually theirs or not. At first this yearning for "nobility" amused Thea but gradually she found herself taking it with more sobriety. In no way could she claim such "nobility," whether true or false. "In Rome, do as the Romans do" was not altogether just a saying. There was wisdom as well. Therefore, she must learn the ways of this tight little city and admire them, adopt them for her own. So small a world.

And regular church attendance was very much a custom of the place. On Sunday morning, Thea glimpsed the wedding announcement in the newspaper, and dread such as she had never known clothed her. She stared at herself in the mirror, turning sideways back and forth. She was definitely showing. The image before her was not the young woman who first visited here. There was a maturity about her now that she devoutly wished would vanish. But it was here and she could not enter church

looking this way. A suit jacket was the answer, she decided---even in the heat. She owned one silk suit that had a shorter skirt and long jacket. Astrid had given her the golden amber beads she could wear. But the thought of Astrid again weighed heavily. The distance tween them seemed wider than ever. As a girl Thea never imagined that Astrid would not be present at her wedding. In the past sometimes Thea and Martha spoke of their weddings. They were children and only Martha now had had a true wedding with flowers and dresses to match on the green summer grounds.

Thea sighed.

"Is it all that bad?" Oliver asked as he placed the newspaper back on the breakfast table.

"I can't go, Oliver."

He looked at her over his spectacles. Thea could never quite get used to him in spectacles, which he used only for reading. They made him look almost stern, older.

"Everyone will see," she said.

"That's the last thing on their minds. They'll be thinking about what to say to you. They'll be thinking about themselves. It's always that way."

By ten-thirty that morning Thea was dressed in the tan suit with the long amber beads shining about her neck. Another thing she had to get accustomed to was the way the women got all dressed up for church. It was almost as if they were going to a party. But this, indeed, was no party.

"How do I look?"

"Beautiful, as always." He came to hug her.

She drew away. "No, you know what I mean."

"Triplets, at least."

Thea began to cry. She would never get used to Oliver's sometimes insensitivity, even if it were in jest.

"Just a little joke," he said, encircling his arm about her.

"But I'll disgrace you. All of the Whitfields. People here don't know me. They know nothing."

"And they don't have to know you. You know yourself."

Thea said nothing. Did she know herself? She had never thought of such a thing. Americans had the oddest thoughts. Who in the world would sit and try to know one's own self? One acted in one way and another. Or reacted. Creatures were taught.

"You look fine. Let's go." Oliver was rattling the keys to the car.

In silence Thea followed him to the car. She had convinced herself that she did not care what anyone thought. She would live here with Oliver, live out the days, and there would be an end one day. All of it would be finished.

But even Thea was surprised at the reaction from the congregation. After the service she and Oliver were literally surrounded by people, all congratulating Oliver and hugging her ever so gently. They seemed to be genuinely pleased, these worshippers. But on the outside, standing alone by a dogwood tree, was Lucille, soon to be a bride herself. Thea gave a little wave to her former friend, but Lucille turned with a shrug of her shoulders and disappeared into the waiting automobiles. Thea knew

then, that instant, that she had, indeed, acquired a true enemy and there was no telling just where or when the wrath would descend.

Allison gave a reception at the country club for his brother and bride. Thea tried to talk him out of it, but there was no way. Sarah came from Charleston.

"You little devil," Sarah said in her Charleston accent, "marrying and not letting one person know." She had burst into Thea's room.

"It was so sudden," Thea said.

"To say the least."

"I don't think my mother will ever forgive me."

"And she shouldn't"

"No, Sarah, she actually said she would never see me again."

Sarah studied Thea's face, trying to see something there, a truth perhaps.

"Really?"

Thea nodded.

"She couldn't have meant it."

"Yes."

Sarah went to her. "I'm so sorry, Thea. But she'll get over it. Won't she?"

Thea could not keep the tears back. Kindness always brought the tears.

Meanness she could stand. It occurred to her there were too many tears. They would have to cease.

Sarah hugged her. "Families make such problems for themselves."

It was true. Each family member was supposed to act as a unit, never as an individual. Thea said as much.

Sarah went to the door of Thea's room. "Well, you must look your Nordic best for tonight. All eyes will be upon your gorgeous self." Sarah ran back to Thea, gave her a little hug. "Old married lady." Except she pronounced the word "ledy".

Thea smiled at her. "And when will you become one yourself? Have you and Allison decided?"

"September, I think now. And---you are going to be my matron-of-honor."

Thea stood there, her mouth wide.

"Well?"

"Oh, yes," she said, her mind a melee of words and lies. "I can't wait for you to move here. There's so much I---"

"Good! Then that's settled. I'll tell my good mother, who, unlike yours, will be extremely visible at this wedding. She was a born manager."

Thea only smiled at the girl's excitement, her face glowing, this sane, innocent young woman who was born with Spring in her very being. Always happy. Always. Thea was thinking of Viola Whitfield. She must have had great affection for this daughter-in-law, so full of the world's goodness and from a world the Whitfield's thoroughly understood, the "romantic" South. For that was what Thea had begun to think of her husband's South, the South he was born to. There were so many Souths, the South of the poor white man, the black man, the clerks and the doers and the politicians and those who strove. For what? Thea had never quite reasoned. All she knew was that for

Oliver's sake she had to be a part of it all, learn to know it, learn, in fact, to love it.

Allison's "reception" went well. At least Thea said so. It was held in the house and all of Ashton and surrounding parts came. Thea managed to stand in the receiving line all night without once leaving. She had dreaded this above everything else. But her bouts of nausea were lessening and instead she noted her energy level had accelerated.

Still, in the back of her mind was the fact she had to see a doctor. But she didn't know when. After the reception there were invitations almost daily, all in her honor. Luncheons, dinners, teas---outings in the country houses. Food. Rich and bountiful.

And through it all was her nagging worry about her own health. And there was also Lucille. The Houghtons were conspicuous by their silence. Everyone knew that Thea had met Oliver through the Houghtons. They expected an invitation to the historic Adams-style house. There was nothing.

And, also, there was something in all the young women that Thea detected. They were polite enough, but that was all. Time and time again she found herself standing alone at gatherings. She felt all eyes were upon her. Did they know? Did Lucille know?

She spoke to Oliver about it.

"Envy," said Oliver.

"Why?"

"Because you're so beautiful."

"How silly."

"Women are silly. Some of them. Not you."

"No, Oliver. They actually dislike me. Lucille is so strange."

"You're imagining again."

"No! No, I'm not." She told him she had to see a doctor. "Will you go with me?"

"Of course." He was reading The New York Times, a habit that took place every night after dinner. He would sit in the red leather chair in the library and read dozens of newspapers. And Thea would sit in silence sewing or knitting. She had taken up her mother's habit. Also she liked to tat. But the evenings were lengthy. She longed for female companionship. When she thought of it she had never been without friends. At school, or at home. It was all right during the day. She spent time overseeing the work done on their house. Oliver had given her complete freedom to do whatever she wished. That took up time. She also planned meals with Leuvonias and she found herself spending more and more time with the genial black woman, who knew her secret and with whom she could discuss symptoms and fears.

Just the other day she asked about doctors here.

"They talks," Leuvonias said. "Ain't supposed to but that's what they does."

She told her Oliver had suggested going to Yonanoka, the neighboring city.

"You know somebody over there?"

"No, but he thought it would be better---because of the situation." Thea never liked to say aloud what her situation was.

"Everybody talks."

Thea watched the woman's solemn face as she snapped beans. Her concern

was real. Thea saw this through her reddened eyes and downcast mouth. All the world was sorrowful, as far as Leuvonía was concerned. And Thea's "situation" was just one more thing.

"Can you go to the doctor with me?"

"I can, but it won't do no good."

"What do you mean?"

"I knows somebody what don't say nothin."

Thea leaned forward in the kitchen chair. "Who?"

"She brangs babies. Never say nothin, brung on hundreds of babies."

Thea thought she understood the woman. Babies in Norway were occasionally delivered at home. Currently, though, most were delivered in hospitals. "A mid-wife. Are you talking about a mid-wife?"

Leuvonía nodded, smiling. "That's right. She see after you, too. And nobody ain't never gone know."

Oliver set aside the newspaper.

"Do you think they are reliable?"

Oliver said nothing.

"Do you?"

"Probably as reliable as the doctors around here. You could try a mid-wife and if you like her maybe that's the way to go."

Thea sighed. "Oh, Oliver. What are we going to do?"

He came and sat beside her. "We're going to have this baby and be happy ever

after. Believe me. It's all right."

Thea felt the warmth of him, the safety of his words.

"But you have to see a doctor first. You won't have to give your name. We'll go over to Yonanoka."

Thea asked if people there didn't know him. "They take the paper and you're a famous editor."

"We can wear wigs and false mustaches."

"Be serious."

Therefore on a rainy Friday afternoon Oliver and Thea made their way to the so-called historic town of Yonanoka, named for a Cherokee Indian chief. But there were statues everywhere for the famous white men who had won in wars. Indian wars, Revolutionary, and The War.

Dr. Maximillian Leonard was encased in a small building that announced his name in gold. Thea regarded the lustrous sign and entered the building. Oliver waited outside.

Thea signed a name as instructed and sat in the crowded waiting room where mothers and babies and small children sat patiently waiting.

A nurse called her name from a small partition, which separated the nurse from the patients.

"Miz'z Ole Olaf?" drawled the nurse.

Thea rose.

"That the way you pronounce your name?"

Thea nodded.

"You from over yonder?"

She nodded again.

"Well, how come you are here? What's your trouble?"

The patients behind her were silent. Indeed, silence had fallen on the room as soon as Thea entered. All eyes, small and large, inspected this presence in the room.

"I have a complaint I would like to see the doctor about."

"What nature?" asked the nurse taking in Thea's eyes, mouth, hair.

"I'm not sure. That is why I am here." She heard the testiness in her own voice.

The woman irritated her with her frizzed brown hair and overly made-up face.

The nurse left the partition, hugging a folder to her breast. No doubt she would announce to the doctor that there was a foreigner outside who could not speak English.

Thea sat again amidst the silence. All eyes appeared to be inspecting Thea's shoes. They were black and white boots laced to the ankle. She had got them in Copenhagen some years ago. She crossed her ankles as if the gesture would dismiss the eyes.

"Looka thar," said the white-haired young girl who was sitting in her mother's lap. She began to point to Thea's shoes.

"Hush up thet, Hor-tense," said the mother.

Magazines. Thea spied McClure's magazine and began to turn the pages, ignoring the audience.

At last she was asked to enter the inner sanctum of the doctor's office. "Miz'z O-lie," said the nurse.

Thea rose and followed the haughty nurse into the doctor's office. She sat fronting a large desk. In glass cabinets were various medical instruments: a porcelain bed pan, a twisted piece of steel seemingly invented for torture and various utensils for the ill.

The balding doctor arrived and hastily sat behind his desk. Thea was reminded of the doctor in Minnesota. But there the similarity ended. This man was entirely different. He was completely bald except for spurts of hair which grew on top of his head together with a black fringe in back. His glasses were black rimmed and enlarged as if a magnifying glass had worked its wonderment. The eyes were light blue and dominated his otherwise ordinary face.

"I'm visiting here," Thea began. "And my doctor in Minnesota suggested I see a doctor here about medicines and such I should be taking."

"You pregnant?" he drawled---a speech slower than most Thea had heard.

"Yes."

"Whatcha takin'?"

"Nothing. I--- I thought maybe vitamins. They are giving those now for pregnant women---in Norway. I'm from Norway."

"Coulda told that first off."

"Oh?"

"Blond like you are." He looked away as if he had said something obscene. She

saw the color slowly come to his bald head.

“I can give you vitamins, but they won't do any good. Lose all the good they do in yo urine. Eat the right kinda diet. That's really all you need.”

“My doctor in Minnesota thought additional vitamins were needed.”

“Who gone deliver yo child?”

“My doctor. My doctor in Minnesota.” She stared at him almost in defiance.

There was something she loathed about the man. She rose to leave.

“Haven't been having any pains or anything.”

“No. Nausea, in the beginning.”

He rose also. “Just watch your diet and see me if you need me.” He smiled an almost pleasant smile, a most unpleasant gesture, Thea thought.

And that was that.

She told Oliver she never wanted to see the man again. “I don't even think he's a doctor.”

Oliver said he just wasn't used to seeing women “like you,” that the “poor man” was a country doctor and probably exhausted from traveling the countryside. “They are very fine people, the doctors that answer calls all hours of the day and night.”

Oliver was usually correct in his summation of country men and women. Actually, he seemed to prefer their company to the men and women he had been brought up with. He was more at ease with these people and they liked him as a rule. Around his peers he was quiet, rarely said very much. He was the exact opposite of Allison, who

seemingly charmed everyone.

Still, the fact remained that none of Thea's fears had been put to rest by the visit to the doctor. She felt healthy enough. That was true. But the constant round of parties and the fear that someone would notice her ever-thickening waistline made her tense and ill-at-ease. The weather was becoming hot again, every day in the nineties, and she had to discard her jackets. Also the clothes she owned were too hot for Georgia. They were all right for Norwegian^{at} and Minnesota springs. But not here. She was afraid to buy clothes because of the clerks. Everyone was curious about her anyway. And the clerks were no exception. She did not want them to see her figure. The whole town was a network of gossip. Everyone talked, from the lowest clerk to the most prominent planter.

Oliver suggested they go to Atlanta. "At least you can hide there. From store clerks."

"I'm so sorry," Thea said.

"Sorry?"

"To take you away from your work." Before, she was thinking, he always had a book in hand or one by his chair ready to pick up and make notes as he read. She had taken him away from his solitude that was so necessary to his work. She said as much.

"You are a distraction," he said.

"Why, Oliver!"

He smiled his half-smile. "But that's why I married you. Didn't I? A marvelous distraction." He came to her and ran his hand through her hair. "Don't worry. Everything

will be all right.”

They did go to Atlanta and Thea, with the help of a friendly saleswoman, found a few dresses that flattered her figure without revealing too much. She told the saleswoman that she did not want to “show” just now because her mother was coming to visit and she hadn’t told her of her pregnancy.

It occurred to Thea that she had learned to lie, something she had never done in her life except for kindness sometimes. Her whole life was a lie and she was aware of it. True, her love for Oliver grew daily---the only truth in her now.

She said as much to Oliver.

“In time, people forget,” he said, “like old legends which in time people never know were true or not.”

“I don’t want to be a legend,” Thea said half in humor.

“An old, old legend. That’s what you’ll be.”

“Or an ancient ruin.”

And they went to bed, two young married people filled with worry and want, Thea thought as she undressed. She had come to believe her mother to be correct. She had betrayed everyone and in so doing betrayed herself and the young child she carried so fretfully. What would become of them?