

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sometimes Thea thought there was never enough time in the day for all her activities. There was the house, of course. Daily she arranged flowers and placed them about the rooms, even in little Chris' and Bert's rooms. There was entertaining, both going and coming. Velvet, who appeared so young when Thea first met her, was developing into a very fine cook, learning even Norwegian fare. But what took up most of Thea's time, besides her child, was the Little Theater in town.

In the autumn of that year the Little Theater put on the Ibsen play, Hedda Gabler, and Thea played the part of Hedda, the headstrong young woman who wanted to shape destinies. For the part she had to smoke cigarettes. And even after the run of the play she knew she had found a life-long pleasure — smoking. And as much as Oliver protested, the habit grew stronger. She liked the image of herself: seated and holding the long cigarette holder Bert had given her "as a joke."

But the main point was she found her vocation: acting. It all came so easy for her. She knew, of course, that she had been acting all her life, on stage and off, playing parts she found she had to play, especially since her marriage, trying to "fit in" with the life here. And it had worked. The telephone was constantly ringing and she and Oliver were invited here and there. Even the older women of Ashton seemed to take to her.

Her main and constant worry now was Oliver. He was thinner than Thea had ever seen him, and he was in constant worry. The price of paper was going up almost monthly and every day it seemed Herbert Hoover was manipulating the White House. An Iowan and a Republican, the man represented everything Oliver stood against. Also Bert.

Politics was a subject Thea sought to ignore. But the election was all anybody in the small Georgia town discussed: at table, after tennis, the theater----everywhere. Secretly, Thea was rather interested in Mr. Hoover. She noted in the newspapers that, as Chief Engineer for the imperial mines in China, he directed food relief for victims of the Boxer Rebellion. He was a world figure in relief work, distributing over five billion dollars to the suffering countries.

Thea had seen enough of poverty in Georgia to witness the same need here. Often the people lacked the bare essentials for livelihood — both blacks and whites. The war and Government in Washington, Oliver believed, were the culprits, still punishing and, worse, ignoring the long suffering South.

Al Smith interested Thea not at all. She could not understand why Bert, a China hand, liked the man. He was Roman Catholic, which appeared to puzzle much of

Georgia. Even so, Bert's party affiliation ruled over his spiritual choice. The entire South was Democratic and probably would remain so forever. Hoover had to go.

Only now was Thea beginning to understand the^dfe peoples' obsessive attachment to that bygone "war." There were monuments to it everywhere — in the cemeteries, crumbling plantation houses, broken fences, portraits, diaries, books and even song. How could it be — that she, Thea Aaker from Kristiania, now Oslo, Norway, had become a loyal Southern rebel?

Wouldn't her family marvel at this wonder! But that was only a guess. Martha, her sister, was the only person she wrote to now. Astrid kept her silence, not writing even at Christmastime. Thea spoke of all this to Bert. Indeed, Bert had become more of a brother to her than she had ever expected. In the beginning he spoke of possibly finding an apartment somewhere or maybe living in the garconiere behind the Whitfield house. But he remained, seemingly comfortable with Thea and Oliver's lifestyle...music, reading and table discussions.

He was forever bringing presents to the house, little things, plants for the garden, that he hoped would justify the time spent with Thea and Oliver. Oliver, too, appeared comfortable with the arrangement. Ever since the Klan incident he would not let Thea stay alone in the house. Therefore Bert was the answer to that, too.

One night Thea wept telling Bert about her mother. In no way did she even hint of the circumstance of little Chris' birth. But she did tell him about their wedding and how Astrid had reacted.

"She never wants to see my again," Thea said.

"Give her time, " Bert said. "And keep writing her. Send pictures of Chris. Don't lose contact."

It was good advice, and Thea did just that, sending Kodak pictures of the house, Bert, Oliver, Velvet and little Chris. She heard nothing in return. She wondered if she would ever go back to Norway. There was the matter of money now. So many expenses had occurred: additions to the house, young Chris and just the price for living. But mainly the advertisers were getting more hostile with Oliver's editorials: fairness for Negroes, share croppers, aid to education. The one small hope, it seemed, was Bert. He was very popular in the county. If he wanted he could have invitations every night of the week. He used little Chris as an excuse: he was "child-caring" for Oliver and Thea, he said.

Acting helped Thea relieve some of these concerns. Hedda Gabler was a great success in the town. Even Atlanta asked the cast to put the play on there. And Thea, leaving Chris for the first time in his life, traveled to Atlanta with the rest of the cast and the next day The Atlanta Journal wrote a rave (literally) review. Bert and Oliver attended, also Sarah and Allison. Thea believed she heard them cheering above the other voices.

She was pleased with her success and began to wonder if she had missed her calling in life. But now it made little difference. She was fairly content with matters now. She believed she loved Oliver more now than ever. Yet he was so worried and had little time for her and Chris. And then there was Hoover. Everyone worried from their little

corner of Georgia as Hoover, bare haired, took the oath of office.

"Who knows what will happen to the South now," Oliver said at table after an Associated Press man called him from Atlanta telling of Hoover's election.

"He seems to have a fine spirit," Thea said, trying to encourage Oliver. "Feeding the poor in China and everywhere."

"He'll be the ruin of us all," Oliver said, adding that:

"We need help here — not in China and Russia."

They waited for further ruin. And then sometime in the latter part of October Bert began talking about leaving, possibly finding another job somewhere. He had only planned to stay a year. And now that year had grown into two, and next year it would be three.

Thea was stunned. "I thought you liked it here."

They were walking back from the tennis courts. The world about them was a pageant of reds and yellows and greens. Autumn in the South lasted a long time, and its beauty was unmatched — chilled nights and bracing mornings. This was one of Thea's favorite times of day, late afternoon, after tennis or swimming. It was already dark in Norway. But here the skies were aquamarine, waiting for the evening star and a blaze of color as the sun disappeared.

"I do like it here," Bert was saying. "I'm always thinking that what I do makes me happier than anything I know, ⁾ and I'm paid for it."

Thea smiled, but she was wondering if it were Oliver that caused him to think of leaving. After all, Oliver was publisher and owner, and Bert was the underling — editor

of the editorial page only. It couldn't be all comfort to have your older brother as your superior.

"Is it Oliver?" she asked.

Bert said nothing. He was admiring a hickory nut tree ablaze in golden leaves.

"Is it Oliver?" Thea asked again.

"What about him?"

"Who makes you want to leave?"

"Oh, no. I'm lucky to have an older brother like Oliver. There was never that with us — younger or older. Besides, I admire him too much. I just want to wander again."

He looked at Thea. "Is that so bad?"

Thea said "No." Still, she was slightly astonished at her own feelings. She wanted him here, a permanent fixture. The years had fled so quickly. She was annoyed, maybe even a little angry that he was even thinking of leaving. It was almost as if he were abandoning her. In her mind she half-believed that he might meet someone here, marry, build a house of his own and remain forever.

Lucille had been in attention, but Bert avoided her. He confessed to Thea that he almost married a girl in Shanghai. A Chinese girl. But given the racial climate in this country, he decided he could not expose her to such cruelty. He himself could not stand it.

"How sad," Thea said, imagining the girl, wondering.

They never spoke of it again. Once Thea tried to bring up the subject, but Bert was loathe to talk about her. All that was in the past. The past is over. "Never think

back," he said.

Thea wished she had such reasoning. She was always thinking of the past, of home, the mountains, the fjords and her own family. Occasionally she thought of Halvor, now in Sweden practicing medicine. If she had married Halvor, she would be living in Sweden. But there would never be a little Chris, who grew more entertaining week by week.

The Sunday school teacher, Miss Agee, said that Chris had tendencies of a "loner." He didn't mix with the other children very well. He did not care to color the figure of Jesus. Rather, he wanted to draw his own pictures. Thea, too, had seen this singularity in him. At home he liked playing the part of an Indian, a solitary one. Indeed, Thea watched as Chris with feathers on his white hair ran whooping about the garden, an Albino Indian, filled with energy and caring. He was growing up. And away, Thea reasoned sadly.

"The other children," Thea asked Miss Agee, "do they seem to take to Chris?"

"Yes. He has such a sweet nature."

It was then she saw the resemblance between Bert and Chris. They both had the same kindness and introspection. The look from Chris's red and blue eyes, beneath the white lashes, was Bert's look, a look of appreciation, the joy of living and a kind of wonderment.

At dinner one night Thea brought up Bert's thoughts of leaving. Oliver was

amazed. He placed his fork on his plate. "Why, for godsake?"

"It's time to roam again," was all he said. "I've out-stayed my time here — almost three years."

"You can roam here," Oliver said.

Bert laughed, glanced at Thea and she saw the sudden flush covering his face and neck. He did not like to talk about himself. Nor did Oliver. When Thea thought of it the most she knew about these two brothers came from her own observations, but also from their mother, though Thea sometimes doubted the accuracy of the latter's deductions. Mothers knew little about their sons.

"Well, when did you make this great decision?" Oliver asked again, still studying Bert's flushed face.

"When I was in China, I guess." He added that there he missed the South, Georgia especially.

"I was homesick."

Both Oliver and Thea laughed — the thought of this newspaper man being homesick like a boarding school girl was ludicrous.

"No. I thought I'd spend some time here — if you would have me — then maybe go down to South America. It's interesting down there just now."

Thea felt the slight prickings of anger again. Bert would lead an exciting life in South America while she, Thea, would lead the prosaic life of a Georgia housewife, raising children, playing bridge, going to endless parties and dinners with the same people year in and year out. She knew the anger was jealousy, a thin emotion she

rarely experienced except with her sister Martha — and now this. She, too, wanted to break away, but in the opposite direction. Europe was her ground.

But going anywhere now was out of the question. A second newspaper had started in town. It was backed by Hardy Postlethwaite, the banker and Lucille Houghton's one-time fiancé. The competition worried Oliver no end. Thea watched as evening after evening he paced the Drawing Room floor, walking back and forth, back and forth — worrying. The newspaper, The Ashton Times, was more in thinking with the majority of readers in the county. Whereas Oliver's leanings were appreciated, it seemed, only by most of his out-of-town peers. The new paper was "conservative." The editorials endorsed most of the democratic candidates, however. Indeed there was only one Republican in the entire Southern part of Georgia, and he was a transplanted New Yorker who moved to Georgia mainly because of quail hunting, for which he would invite all his New York friends. Oliver believed he had most of the stock in the new venture.

"You can't leave him now," Thea said to Bert as the two of them sat in the library drinking after-dinner coffee. Oliver was at the paper, which left them free to say whatever they wanted. She would miss these conversations. Indeed, Bert was about the only person around whom she enjoyed conversing with.

"He'll be all right," was all Bert said. "It's an honest newspaper and the other just barely is a newspaper."

Thea sighed. "But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you leaving?" She rose to stoke the coals in the fireplace.

"I wish you could see your hair," Bert said.

Thea turned to him. His eyes were bluer than she had ever seen them. All at once, then, she knew the emotion between them was changed. In a matter of a few minutes she was experiencing a timidity she had never felt with this brother-in-law. She turned back to the fire.

"The lights from the fire are reflected in your hair."

Thea did not turn. But he was standing behind her. She dared not turn. How could this have happened?

"Thea."

She still stared at the fire as it gained momentum. She watched the smoldering lumps of coal.

"I have to go," he said quietly.

She turned to him. He was frowning.

"I can't stay here any longer. You know what has happened.

Thea said nothing.

"My own brother."

She looked at him then.

"I'm in love with my brother's wife. I have to go."

"Oh, Bert," she said and fled the room. She was frightened and she did not know what to do or say. She went to Chris's little room. He was asleep, innocent of the world. She examined his small features, her father's features. Why would Bert say such a

thing? There was madness in this warm climate. What was happening to her? She listened as she heard Bert quietly and finitely close the door to his room.

Had she encouraged this? She thought not. Love, romantic love, between the two of them was the last thing she would ever have imagined. There had been such an easy time between the two of them — like sister and brother. She wondered if Oliver had noted any of this. She hoped not. She decidedly hoped not.

That night as she tried to sleep she sought out her own emotions. There were none except for a kind of sickened feeling. It was all so strange and had elements of incest. Never in a thousand years could she imagine herself in such a situation. And yet?

Everything was changed. She dreaded tomorrow. What would she say at breakfast? She fretted through the long night.

She needn't have worried. Early that morning a note was shoved underneath her door. She and Oliver had taken to using separate bedrooms because of Oliver's coming and going and his late night telephone calls. She quickly read the note:

Thea:

I am leaving now. For Panama. I have a promising job with the Associated Press, and it looks as if a rebellion is on its way down there.

Forgive me for my words last night. They should never have been. I should have left saying nothing.

*Forever,
Bert*

Thea stared at the tight handwriting, so much like Oliver's but different, too. Then she listened for sounds. There was nothing. She ran to his room. All was vacated. He had even made his bed. But the wardrobe doors were opened revealing emptiness. His presence had vanished like a dream — half remembered. She felt hollow inside as if a part of her — an important part had been taken away.

She did not know how long she stood there in the empty room. She tore up the note and placed the particles in the fireplace downstairs. She listened as Velvet hummed away cooking breakfast.

For some reason she wanted to avoid Velvet. She wanted to see no one. And yet the uneasiness in her was so deep she had to talk to someone. Sarah. She would call Sarah, the one person she could trust. But where was Bert now? Driving to Atlanta, never to return.

She had to tell Oliver. She had to tell him Bert had left. She called him. The secretary at the paper said she had seen Oliver earlier. "Wait," she said. "I see him coming now."

"Oh, Oliver! Bert's gone."

"I know," his voice came back.

"What happened?" Thea asked, hearing her voice high with excitement.

"That devil," Oliver said. "He's been planning behind our backs. He got the job."

Thea heard the words "Panama," "Insurrection," "miss him," "need him now." "We'll talk about it tonight."

Thea hung the receiving back, then slowly gave the operator Sarah and Allison's

number.

"Hel-lo." Sarah practically sang the greeting.

Thea told her that she had to talk to her, that it was important.

"What in the world, Thea? Is Chris all right? What's the matter?"

Thea assured her that little Chris was all right. It was something else. "No one's sick."

"Lucille?" Sarah asked knowingly.

"I'll tell you when I see you. I have to talk to somebody."

A long pause. "I'll be waiting."

They sat in the paneled library where Oliver's mother usually received guests. It was strange to see Sarah in her casual sweater and skirt, looking almost like a school girl, in this immense room with the heavy furniture, portraits and books lining the walls. Besides the red nandina berries and the fire in the hearth Sarah herself was the most cheerful aspect in the room with her eager face and lovely green eyes looking so intently at Thea.

Thea told her the entire story, carefully observing Sarah's reactions: doubt, study — sympathy?

"I'm still in shock. How could such a thing happen?"

Sarah looked down at her hands in her lap, then back up at Thea who was leaning forward in the carved chair, waiting for Sarah to speak.

"Didn't you know?"

"What?"

"Allison and I knew. Bert was mad about you. Whenever you were in a room he couldn't take his eyes off you." Sarah too leaned forward. "He was so happy. Allison and I talked about how Bert had changed. He used to be a brooder — moody but fascinating. Always fascinating." She nodded her head as if she expected agreement from Thea.

"I never knew," Thea said as if to herself. "I never thought of him as anything but a friend, a brother even. I liked him so much and---" she was looking into space, seeing nothing but Bert's concerned face--- "If anything happens to him — he's covering some sort of rebellion in Panama. If anything happens it will be my fault."

"No, no." Sarah said. "He left. He knew it was impossible. The Whitfield honor and all that."

Thea said nothing. She was thinking about Sarah's words: *He's mad about you.* "Why didn't you say something?"

"What?"

"About your observations. I had no idea."

"We know that." Sarah took one of the needlepoint pillows on the sofa and hugged it to her. "But, then, Thea, you musn't worry. You love Oliver. I know that. Everyone knows that. And---Bert knows it."

Thea watched as a log in the fire broke in two and smoke rose upward. "Did the town know? Were they talking?"

"Not that I know of. Besides, the Whitfield boys have their reputations."

"Which is?"

"Duty, honesty — all of it. Which doesn't mean they haven't engaged in their own brand of mischief — and often, I might say."

Thea smiled then for the first time in twenty-four hours.

"And now I've got something to tell you." Sarah tossed the pillow.

Thea studied Sarah's teasing face and she knew. "You're pregnant."

Sarah stood. "Oh my god. I can't keep anything from you. Anything!"

Thea went to her and hugged her. "I am so happy. Really. I am. I hope it's a boy. They'll be friends. Chris and---"

"Arthur," Sarah said. "If it's a boy we'll name him Arthur. Arthur Whitfield. My father's name, Arthur."

Two weeks later Thea returned home from the theater and the first thing she saw was the postcard alone on the hall table:

The trip down was fine, mostly smooth sailing. Met a reporter for The Times who is also covering this mess down here. It's hot as blazes. I long for a Georgia autumn. Tell my favorite boy "hello." Will write more later.

*Love,
Bert*

Thea read and re-read the card, then placed it back on the table. Her first instinct was to tear it up. But she knew Oliver would want to see it. And he needed any cheer that could come his way. Everything appeared to be going against him. Night after night he came home, said little about the depression, though Thea knew that the

paper had been reduced to paying employees with script. This was done with the blessings of local banks, which, unlike many of the banks in the country, had not failed. School teachers were suffering also and throughout the state were paid in script. There just was no money. "Anywhere," Oliver said one night.

Thea suggested that they sell their house and let Velvet go, but Oliver said none of that would help really. There was more and more talk of Franklin Roosevelt's probable run for the Presidency. Roosevelt was known in Georgia because of his visits to nearby Warm Springs, where he came for treatment of infantile paralysis, a crippling disease unheard of in Norway. But Roosevelt was in the future. Now was now.

The card from Bert lay on the hall table for days. Oliver read it and placed it back on the table. Thea paused before it each time she entered the hallway, each time thinking she should tear it up. Finally one morning she took the card and placed it in her desk. For safe-keeping, she told herself. One day Bert might want to re-read the notes of his travels. She told herself that but she was aware of her own actions, tenderly placing the card in the bottom drawer and actually patting it as if there lay buried something sacred.

But she heard little Chris's cries in the back garden. He and the gardener's son had discovered the chinaberry tree near the creek bed. The older boy was instructing Chris, who stood alone with his large glasses looking up at the boy with unfeigned admiration.

Thea stood watching them:

"That ain't no house," Chris was saying.

"Watcha here," And the older child climbed the tree as if he were a squirrel, swift of limb.

She would have to watch Chris' grammar, Thea thought. From somewhere he had developed the worst of Southern accents. People were judged by this in the South. Accents told everything, where you came from, the background of parents, all. In this, snobbery reigned.

Thea observed her son, his glasses flashing in the sunlight. Time was hurrying. It seemed only a short while that she had had this child but here he was actually running and laughing, curious about his world.

Arthur Cuthbert Whitfield was born February 24, 1930. Thea marked the date on her calendar. Little Chris would soon be four years older than his cousin. Time was hurrying. Too fast, Thea sometimes thought.

Thea immediately went to the hospital. Sarah's room was like a great holiday, people coming and going, bringing brightly colored flowers and gifts. Aunt Pett was there and Sarah's mother — gracious and charming and chattering away about being a grandmother. It was a scene that always appeared to surround Sarah. There were always flowers and pretty people and cousins and her mother and friends — always friends. Thea spied Lucille on the other side of the bed, trying to open a present for Sarah.

"I know what this is," she was saying. And she held up a silver spoon. "Born with a silver spoon in his. . . ." Chattering away.

"Oh, Thea," Sarah said. "Did you see the baby?"

"Not yet," Thea said. "Where?"

"In the nursery. Go, look."

"Yes," said Sarah's mother.

"Oh, I forgot," Thea said, "a little present — from Oliver and me." She had ordered the silver cup from Tiffany's. Now she would have it engraved. She spent her own money for the gift, money she had received after her father's death. It was not a great inheritance, but it might help one day if Oliver did lose everything.

Thea left the happy room and walked the distance to the nursery. Why was there always light with Sarah and darkness for me, she wondered as she walked. Sarah's talent was that: bringing merriment wherever she went. Occasionally there were glimpses of another side, a serious side that Thea knew, but as a rule there was the light and never irritation as there might have been with another woman not as gifted as Sarah. "She has a small genius for friendship," Aunt Pett told Thea in Charleston. "Sarah's always had that."

Indeed, Thea thought. There seemed to be no notice of a world in deep depression. There was rejoicing, rejoicing that a new Whitfield had entered the world and would carry the name until death, adding to the honor of the name.

Thea looked through the glass partition at the infants as they stretched, cried and made motions with their arms and mouths, examining the world new only hours or a few days. Each was different, Thea marveled. Even in their infancy they had separate

personalities.

Arthur Whitfield lay near the front of the partition. He had dark hair and eyes that slanted upward. The hair, surely, would change. Or maybe he had got Oliver's dark hair. Strange, that looks sometimes reached way into the past to form features and gestures. There were so many blonds in the current Whitfield family and in Sarah's family, too, though auburn hair appeared to reign in the Charleston family.

The nurse picked up the infant and the baby actually smiled at Thea. He would have Sarah's optimistic nature, Thea saw at once. He would be sweet and kind and bear all things. Now the small babe was exhibiting his gifts to the world — already.