

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thea's concern was now little Chris. He was old enough to enter kindergarten. Thea watched his excitement over this with amusement. He ran all over the house shouting to everyone — Velvet, Oliver — whomever was present: "I'm goin to school!" came his shouts in a richly drawled Southern accent. It was so odd to Thea that she had a child who spoke this way.

She drove him to Miss Powell's grey house where the children were to gather for kindergarten. Chris was holding a leather bag filled with pencils and erasers and a tablet, all carefully placed the night before. Thea could almost feel the child's heart beating in anticipation.

But when they neared the little house in back of Mrs. Powell's, Chris stopped. Through his thick glasses he observed the melee of small girls and boys, shouting and running here and there, and he stood back still holding onto Thea's hand. Then after

giving the scene a decided summation, he grabbed his glasses and threw them on the ground.

"Chris, you can't do that now. You won't be able to see," Thea tried to explain.

"I don't care," he whined, almost turning back to the car.

"I thought you wanted to go to school," Thea said, her own hurt as sensitive as the child's.

Mrs. Powell, an older woman with pink hair, dark kind eyes, and a drawling accent that almost turned to sugar, came to greet them.

"Chris, I think, doesn't want to wear his glasses," Thea said.

"Why Chriyus," said Mrs. Powell and she reached into her pocket bringing out her own pair of glasses. She put them on. "See, I wear glasses," she said.

Chris stared at the woman. She reached down to fetch the small thick spectacles lying on the grass. "Now, let's put these back on. You and I will be together."

Thea watched as the woman carefully put the glasses on Chris. And then Mrs. Powell indicated with a thrust of her hand that it would be better if Thea left now.

Reluctantly Thea left. She wanted to stay, protect her son.

But autumn gave way to December with sun-filled days and cold nights. Then two days into the new year Oliver handed Thea a note from Bert:

...and so I have taken the job with The Times. How long I will be assigned here I do not know. The country is in constant uproar. I do have excellent friends, though. They call me "Chink" because of my rantings, which never cease, for the red mud of China. I want to go back and I will go back, The Times willing or not.

I hope all is well in Ashton and that the painful years we live in are not too harsh for you. Don't worry, Oliver. There are always good times that follow bad ones.

Can little Chris actually be four? It seems like only yesterday that he was born. . .and. . .

Thea finished reading. Time was the healer here. When Bert first left she thought of him constantly, and she missed him — the non-romantic Bert she had come to love. But as the months passed she ceased to think of him at all except as someone lost. They did receive ~~Christmas~~^{the} cards addressed from Panama to both Oliver and her. But on the whole, Cuthbert Whitfield was a distant in her life, a small darkness in her garden.

All of Thea's energy and thoughts now were focused on little Chris. She was thinking this as she drove to the kindergarten to fetch him. Mrs. Powell was standing outside the little house, holding Chris's hand. Thea glanced at her watch. She was late. She parked the car and hurried to the house. As she approached she saw Chris's face was red as if he had been crying.

"Here she comes, Chris. Here's your mother," Mrs. Powell said to the child. He did not run to Thea as he usually did when she parked the car. "I'm so glad you're here." Mrs. Powell said, frowning at Thea as if she had done something wrong. "Chris is sick, I believe."

Thea knelt down and felt the child's forehead. "He has fever." She glanced up at Mrs. Powell.

"I tried to call but no one answered."

"We'll go to the doctor." Thea stood and took Chris' small hand.

"I don't want no shot," Chris drawled.

"A shot, Chris. I don't want a shot." Thea was always correcting the child. He had taken up the bad grammar from the gardener's son, whom Chris almost worshipped and liked to imitate. He said "ain't" and "fie-it" for "fight."

"Just like anybody's little red neck child," Oliver said the other night.

Thea thanked Mrs. Powell and she and Chris drove to the pediatrician's office, which was a house really, and reminded Thea ^{again} of the doctor's office in Minnesota where her pregnancy was confirmed. It all seemed so long ago, but this office was a constant reminder and she believed she disliked going there as much as Chris did.

"This child has to go to the hospital immediately," said Dr. Jeffers. He was examining Chris's small bare chest and still held the examining instrument in his hand. "He's a mighty sick boy." The doctor was frowning.

"What is it?" Thea asked, her hand to her throat. She could hear the alarm in her own voice.

"Pneumonia," said the doctor still frowning.

Thea rose. "I have to phone Oliver."

Together then Thea and Oliver drove Chris to the hospital. Thea could not trust her own driving. She was patting Chris's fair head. "You'll be just fine," she kept repeating. She could hear his labored breathing and then he collapsed in Thea's lap.

"Hurry, Oliver. He's---"

At the hospital Oliver carried the child into the foyer while Thea, in panic, followed. A nurse, who had been forewarned by Dr. Jeffers, took the child from Oliver and placed him on a wheeled table, his small body looking so vulnerable on the gurney.

Dr. Jeffers met them at the hospital and a Dr. Hall whom Thea had seen but did not know joined the group.

"Wait outside," Dr. Jeffers motioned to Thea and Oliver. They hurried the small body behind closed doors.

"Oh, Oliver," Thea said as she collapsed into one of the waiting room chairs.

"He'll be all right," Oliver said. "Children get these things. I was always getting something. Even pneumonia."

Thea took a lace handkerchief from her purse and held it to her nose. I'm going to lose my child, she thought. It's God's way. His retribution.

"I love it when there's wind and it blows in my face," Chris told Thea once. It was the Norse in him, his natural place. She had promised him to make a visit to Norway and he drew a picture of a tall mountain with water below, just as Thea had described the fjords to him. Thea's mind was so concentrated.

"He's such a trusting child," she said to Oliver, the handkerchief still at her nose.

Oliver only nodded. He was sitting slumped over, his large hands folded in front of him. Not since birth had he once mentioned Chris's looks, the red-rimmed eyes and the white skin and hair. Once when they were shopping another small boy said to his mother: "Looka that, Mama. Ain't he funny?"

Chris merely stared at the boy. Until kindergarten he had not known of his difference. At kindergarten, Mrs. Powell informed Thea, the children tried to make fun of Chris, but he won them over with his winning ways. He was a born leader, she said, but never led. He was breathless when he ran only a short distance, but never complained. Mrs. Powell admitted that Christian Whitfield was her favorite child.

All of which pleased Thea and Oliver immensely.

In time a nurse came from the emergency room. She was a rather pretty young woman with auburn hair and brown eyes.

"The crisis," she said. "They are waiting ^{for} ~~for~~ the crisis."

The nurse's gaze was concentrated everywhere except at Thea and Oliver.

"Will he be all right?"

The nurse said the doctor would have to tell her these things.

"May we see him?"

"We want him to be quiet. He's making a tremendous fight."

"Oh, no," Thea said into the handkerchief.

Oliver looked at her.

"He's too young to struggle so."

Oliver took her hand with the handkerchief wadded up in it. He said nothing.

They both looked toward the door where their son lay struggling for his breath.

They looked as if they were seeing something other than the closed steel doors. There was no sound anywhere.

Later that morning Dr. Jeffers left a note with the nurse that he wanted to see Thea and Oliver in his office. Thea read the note with alarm. Why both of us. It was always she and she alone who took Chris to Dr. Jeffers'. And why hadn't he talked to them here in the hospital? Surely he knew they were there waiting. Oliver asked the nurse the same question.

"Dr. Jeffers he's so over-run."

"What do you mean?" Oliver asked and Thea heard the testiness in his voice.

"So many patients. You know? Dr. Jeffers has the most patients of anybody. In here and down in his office, too. He's always running."

"I see," Oliver said and stood. "Thank you."

In time Thea and Oliver sat facing the busy doctor as the man read through papers on his desk. Finally, he shoved the papers to one side, folded his hands and looked over his glasses at both of them. He explained, almost nonchalantly, that Chris had a failing heart.

The little boy's face seemed to appear before Thea and she saw him fully, his enthusiasm for everything, for life, all that was his world. Her own heart was beating so fast she could say nothing.

She heard Oliver ask. He was staring at the doctor, his long lashes prominent in the frowning face. "How serious?"

"Serious enough to be watched. We would like to see him at least twice a month

..."

"Will he---" and Thea finally said the word: "---die?"

“Not today, not tomorrow. He might even reach his teens. There’s no definite time. The doctor seemed to study the two faces before him and then he looked away. “I’m sorry.”

The fright Thea was experiencing was equal to what she felt when the Klansmen surrounded the house that night.

“He’s such a likeable young fellow,” said Dr. Jeffers.

“Yes, yes he is,” said Oliver as if he were talking to himself.

“Just watch him. Don’t let him get overly tired.”

“How can you do that with a young boy?” Thea asked.

“You’ll have to talk to him, tell him that after pneumonia all young children must curtail their activities.”

Oliver scraped back his chair. “Well, thank you, Bill. You’ve been very kind. It couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“It never is.”

Oliver stood. Thea thought, but she was not sure, she saw tears in his eyes. It was a man’s world, struggling, a world men understood, admired, as they did honor, bravery, achievement and courage — all were words men knew and felt.

“Oh, Oliver,” Thea said as they departed.

But he only glanced at her, his face pale and rigid. Thea said nothing further. Outside they parted in silence — Oliver back to his office and Thea back to the hospital to see her ailing child. Life went on. The world was unaware of the fear they carried. No one. No one really cared. Not truly.