

**PART IV**

**. . . LIKE THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD  
BUT THE WIND PASSETH O'ER AND IT IS GONE**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

January and February were Thea's favorite months in Georgia. Rarely was there snow, but there was a certain beauty in the bare branches of the old oak trees and the lights twinkling among the hills. The cold suited Thea and on moonlight nights the pine trees with their long needles swayed in the wind and there was a glory there.

"You're the only person in the whole state of Georgia who sees wintertime." Oliver said to her once. "Most people just feel it, except an artist here and there."

"Maybe so," Thea always answered. Indeed, maybe so became an expression she found she employed over and over now. It didn't definitely put her in opposition nor did it speak approval. That, too, she had come to believe, was her life here — or everywhere. Ambiguity rested on her lightly. This or that. On good days it was "that." "This," her separate being, was another matter.

Her current pregnancy was always with her, never forgotten, no matter what occurred. As always her main concern was Oliver. He had become almost overwhelmed by the town's economy, as well as his own. The latest blow was the closing of the military base, Fort Ames, which was located just outside Ashton and had become almost a savior for the town. But the Army and Washington declared it permanently closed. There were no wars, no "disturbances" that warranted such expense, it was declared. "Hoover days" was the town's byword.

Thea wondered. The letters she received from aunts and uncles in Norway always spoke of Germany and the deep Depression there. They wrote of the burning of the Reichstag building believed set afire by "Nazis." And always they wrote of "Adolf Hitler." Thea read all this, but gave it little thought. It was so far away, and her aunts, especially, were a particular breed of alarmists. To them dire tragedy was just around the corner always. Thea and Martha used to laugh at their aunts' satiating gloom.

No. Fort Ames was not needed. The soldiers and personnel who walked the downtown streets of Ashton on weekends were to be shipped to Missouri and to another, more vibrant community where they would spend their time and money. Ashton would gradually wither away.

Thea also regretted the move. She enjoyed the polo matches played at the fort and the dances she and Oliver attended. Oliver attended the dances begrudgingly. Thea was greatly sought after at these affairs, and she was able to dance only a few steps before another soldier "cut in on her," a rite she had become accustomed to. Games. Silly games. And Oliver, she noted, cared little to watch the scene where Thea

had such popularity. Thea herself was amused by it all, especially Oliver's reaction.

But now that was all over and she was again carrying Oliver's child. This time, surprisingly, there was none of the sickness and desperation she experienced last time. She actually had a sense of well-being and energy she did not have when she was carrying little Chris. Indeed as the weeks and months went by and her body began to swell she believed her dreams were becoming reality. This child, boy or girl, would be born to success. It was as if she saw the future ahead and it was golden. The baby would be brilliant of mind and body. She would never have to compensate. The child's perfections would never demand such concern.

Knowing this, the secret she did not reveal to anyone, even Oliver, caused her to develop an odd smile. She caught this in the mirror, an unbecoming smile, almost smug, and she was determined not to show this. It was unattractive, at best. But to counteract this she concentrated on all the suffering about her.

Beggars, women mostly, were always at the door. The bell would ring and Thea would open the door to miserable lined faces and hands, the hands lifting empty brown sacks. "Food. Can you spare food? My baby she ain't got no food." And Thea would hurry to the kitchen and fill bags with milk and canned foods, returning to the front door, delivering them, listening to the stories of jobs lost, farms that failed, houses with no heat.

How could anyone be pleased with oneself in light of such suffering? Their suffering was basic. Oliver's was of the mind. They had enough to eat and a warm house. How did God provide for them and not the others? Such conditions would never

happen in Norway. But then there were not many with great wealth in Norway as there were here. Still, the question persisted.

There was hope, some said, in the political climate. All Georgians were hoping for the election of Franklin Roosevelt. Even Bert wrote of Roosevelt. Bert also wrote Oliver to take his inheritance from their parents and use it for the newspaper, which Oliver hesitated to do. He wrote Bert that if he must borrow the money he would pay it back with interest.

"We'll see," was all Bert wrote back.

So Thea felt some relief from Oliver's painful worries. She now concentrated on Chris. He was growing so. Sometimes, watching him, Thea believed she loved this child more than life itself. "It is a sin to love too much," her mother often told Martha and her. She was a sinner then. In Thea's eyes the child could do no wrong.

If only it were that way with others. Chris entered the first grade of school and returned stoically with his glasses smashed and his clothes torn. He said nothing to Thea and when she asked what happened he just shrugged his shoulders, not even glancing at Thea.

At school Thea learned that some of the other boys, more developed than Chris, were tormenting the child, calling him "four eyes" and "white trash," but Chris did not fight back. He just took what came. "He's a very brave youngster," his teacher, a lovely brunette young woman, told Thea. She said she had intervened with the disturbances and sent the other boys to the Principal's office for discipline. But the deed had worked its wrong, Thea noted.

School seemed to sap Chris' energy. He had lost his curiosity, the furnace of his energy. The laughing, running kindergarten child that he was became the slow-gaited, seated, staring child that he now was. Thea took him to the doctor for fear his heart had been damaged further. But the doctor said he could not detect further deterioration. Then why, she asked the doctor, was there so great a change? She mentioned the boys teasing.

"Happens to almost everybody," was the doctor's only answer. But that very day Thea overheard one of the children's remarks and her furor was even physical.

"Yo mother talks funny. She aint from this country. She from over yonder somewheres. My daddy he kilt folks that talk like your Mama. In the wah! Old four-eyes. Hey, four-eyes."

Thea immediately left her car, slamming the door, and walked up to the boy, taking hold of his sweater, practically ripping it. "Who are you?" she asked the red-faced child. His nose was running, which angered Thea all the more. She tugged at the dirty sweater.

"Lemme go. You aint my mother."

"No, thank God," said Thea.

"I'll tell my daddy." The boy tried to jerk away.

"No, no," Chris protested.

"Get in the car, Chris," Thea almost shouted.

She pointed her finger at the sneering child. "If I hear you have so much as touched Christian Whitfield I'll sue you and your parents. I'll call the police, tell them to

imprison you.”

The boy said nothing but wandered away, his hands in his pants pocket.

When they returned to the house Thea announced very formally that she and Chris were going to have “a little talk.”

“Come into the library,” she said.

In truth she had no idea what she was going to say. Her anger had subsided somewhat. But the situation was impossible. The atmosphere at the school and the town was all wrong for someone as sensitive and frail as young Chris. He was too young to have his will tested so. Why, Thea wondered, did he take up for the boy?

She watched him as he sat in the Hepplewhite chair, his legs dangling and both small hands resting on the chair arms as if he had been sitting in such chairs all his life when, in truth, he rarely sat in the house — sometimes in the child’s rocker put away now in the corner of the library.

“What are we going to do with that boy, Chris?” Thea was speaking her thoughts aloud. She could hear the desperation in her voice and also the accent, which she had suddenly become very aware of again. Her tones were lilting and she could hear the broad A of England.

Chris just frowned at her and began tapping the arms of the chair.

“What are we going to do?”

“They aint going to kill me,” Chris said, still frowning as if the possibility were there.

“Don’t say ‘aint’ again. It’s not proper English.”

"They think you talk funny."

"Do you think so?"

Chris hung his head. "No." The voice deepened as he looked at Thea. "But none of their mothers talk like you. Not even the teacher."

"I was taught proper English. In England — and I might add, in Norway."

Chris began swinging his legs, up and down, up and down. The gesture was making her nervous.

"Why don't you fight the boys?" she asked. But, of course, she knew the answer to that. He was too small. Just yesterday he picked up a wounded bird and he and Amos, the yard man, fixed his leg with a splinter and bandage. Chris stayed all afternoon and into the night with the creature, patting the frightened bird that sometimes spread his wings as if to take flight. "No, no," Chris told it, "you're not ready yet."

"Answer me. Why don't you fight those mean boys?"

"I dunno." He was looking everywhere except at Thea.

"We'll have to tell your father about all this. Maybe he has an idea."

Chris slumped his shoulder. "You gotta tell him?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"I don't want you to."

"Very well." Thea began twisting her wedding ring. "But you can't be very happy."

"I am. I am." His legs stopped swinging. "You finished now?"

"Yes."



Chris slid out of the chair and ran for the garage in back of the house. Thea followed him to the back porch.

"Hey, little bird. You feeling better? We gone play?" He talked to the wounded bird just as the nurses had talked to him in the hospital.

She told none of this to Oliver. Suddenly, it seemed, her husband had aged before her eyes. There were permanent frown marks and his shoulders had begun to slump. Or was she imagining? His confessions were almost nightly: he had used up all his inheritance buying the paper and trying to meet expenses. The opposition newspaper appeared to grow daily.

"Bert left me his bonds before he left," he announced one night. "I still have that." But he was reluctant to spend it, he said. Bert would marry one day and need the money.

"I can get a job," Thea said, answering his statement of unaware accusation that she was a burden, that all wives were burdens.

"No," he protested. "I'm thinking about taking out a second mortgage on the house."

"What about Velvet? Her salary?"

Velvet's salary was a mere pittance, he said. Besides he didn't want Velvet to suffer because of his ill timing.

"What about Roosevelt?" Thea asked. She was trying to lift his spirits. He always seemed to lighten at the mention of the name.

"We'll see if he's elected. But he can't do everything in a day — or a month — or even a year."

As if it were ordained, they received another letter from Bert. He again urged Oliver to use any money he wanted, that he was corresponding almost daily now for The New York Times. "Mother's inheritance (mine) is all yours.

"They still call me 'Chink' down here, since everyone knows my plan — to return to China as soon as possible. I yearn to go back to my adoptive home. The heat here is without mercy as is this uprising. There's no other word for it. But in the end, Panama will be Panama still."

But the greater words came from Atlanta, as all bad news continuously did, from the Southern headquarters of the Associated Press. They called late in the night. Oliver answered the call. And Thea, fearing the worst (what now?) joined Oliver in his room. He was saying nothing, just staring at the phone as if it were a bandit come to take him and everything that was his.

"I see," he said finally. "Thank you." And when he placed the phone down Thea saw the tears in his eyes. She had never seen his tears before and she was startled. She went to him. "What? What is it?"

"Bert," was all he said. "He was shot. He died just now. That was a friend calling." He looked at the ceiling and shook his head.

Thea went to him and embraced him as gently as she could. "Bert," she said aloud. "Bert. Gone."

"I'd better call Allison," Oliver said.

"Shall I?"

He shook his head. "No, I will." He gave Central the number 472. "Allison. I must speak to Allison, Sarah." His voice was hoarse. "Allison. Bert's been assassinated. He's dead."

Silence. The weight of it. Heavy. The emotion of silence and loss and fear.

Little Chris came sleepily into the room.

"Who's dead?" He asked. "Did my bird die?"

"No," Thea said and realized she was speaking in Norwegian. "Run back to your room, Chris. It's very late. School tomorrow."

Chris regarded Oliver with blue-pink eyes. Then he cocked his head as intelligence appeared to come. He went to him. "I'm sorry, Paw-paw. Did your best friend die?"

Oliver said nothing, but picked up the child and buried his head into the young one's white hair.

It was a gesture Thea would never forget. She watched as Oliver carried the child to his room. "Sleep now," she heard Oliver's hoarse voice. But her own body was rigid with shock. It's my fault, she said to herself. If it weren't for me, Bert would still be with the paper here. Alive. Oliver had even offered him half ownership if he stayed. But he was determined to leave, eventually to return to China, never seeing Thea again. And now it was all over. Belief defied her. The wire service had got everything wrong. An error.

"I had better go to the paper," Oliver said when he returned to the room. "If they

call again — give them the number there.” He seemed dazed, not seeing Thea.

“Allison's coming over. Allison and Sarah.” He looked at her then as if she were a wall, a familiar piece of furniture. Nothing else really mattered.

Gradually further news came from Bert's friends and admirers in Panama and from wire services:

**Cuthbert Foster Whitfield Loses Valiant  
Fight, Succumbing  
Early Today**

... headlined in one newspaper. Then followed brokenly:

Thea read: *“...neck and the other being a far more serious wound in the abdomen. The bullet evidently was from the large calibre rifle, and entered the stomach, perforated the intestines, punctured the bladder and shattered the pelvis bone.*

*“By this time the attack had begun in earnest and bullets were raining along the street. No one came to his rescue and he lay in the street for almost three hours before Sergeant Crosscup, a policeman from the Canal Zone, in company with four others, happened to pass and find him. They rushed him to Gorgas Hospital where Dr. Troy Earhart, one of the best surgeons in America, performed an operation.*

A letter: *“... I'm afraid it was to no avail. I did not learn of this until nearly 10 o'clock and I went directly to the hospital, but others already had informed you as to what had occurred, and I wanted to write and tell you in more detail just what happened. I guess you knew of mine and Bert's associations, both here and when we were in Atlanta. And I certainly can say that the Revolution was not worth the cost in this respect.*

*“I talked with Bert yesterday and again this morning, for I wanted to let him tell me what really occurred. He was bright and cheerful and I've never seen such an exhibition of nerve and vitality as he exhibited. That is most certainly true when*

*he was lying in the street, helpless. Anyone less strong certainly would never have been able to go to a hospital."*

Newspaper  
Again:

*". . . The death of Whitfield lay down the brilliant journalistic pen that had produced thrilling stories of Central American life; the survey and exploration for the first Latin-American air mail route; tales of deep sea fishing, of tiger hunting, or new and seldom, if ever, visited recesses in the Isthmian country.*

*. . . Lived most of his adult life in the Orient and grew to love it with an absorbing passion that he hoped would carry him back there as a correspondent to give the world correct, intelligent information on the politics and economics of that vast country.*

Funeral  
Tributes:

*Cuthbert Foster Whitfield followed the course of the sun: He rose in the East and sank in the West. His career rose in China at the time when the guns of the Boxer Rebellion had exploded but recently ceased to echo. He died in Panama, the result of a shot not intended for him, and the death stroke came as a new government was blasting out that standing order of all good newspaper men — GET THE NEWS! His death is regretted by the Panamanians no less than by the Americans in this Isthmus, for "Chink" Whitfield was beloved to all who knew him.*

*"One of the supreme tests in the ethics of newspaper men is the ability to keep a confidence where the confidence is reposed. In the time I knew Whitfield I never had the slightest hesitation in talking freely with him. He frequently called at the office in his rounds and as we talked he might interject: 'Care if I use that?' If the reply was 'I'd rather you'd not' — I knew the confidence would be respected. Those of us who knew the difficulty of securing 'stories' in this news-restricted locality, and the pressure from the 'desk' for more copy can appreciate the temptation to abuse a confidence. Yet so punctilious was Whitfield in this respect that I verily believe had he sat in the meetings of Acclaim Communal with the seal of confidence imposed upon him, he would have remained silent as to their deliberations — as silent as*

*he is today. But he might have taken the precaution of providing himself with a ringside seat on the night of January 2, which would be no infraction of our rule.*

*"There is an old adage that he who gets printer's ink on the fingers will never get it off. Hence, as an erstwhile newspaper man I feel privileged in saying 'WE'.*

*"We, the newspapermen of Panama and the Canal Zone, regard the death of Cuthbert Foster Whitfield as a sacrifice laid upon the 'imposin' stone of high class journalism. We, the slaves of the printer's galley, whose task it is to give our best strength to the emancipation and enlightenment of the world, shall miss the strong arm of our brother.*

*"We ascribe blame to no one. It was simply an unfortunate occurrence and we extend to the family of Mr. Whitfield our heartfelt condolences."*

Thea placed the cuttings aside. How little they know, she thought. The blame is squarely here. The room before her blurred as the tears came. Such a gift was Bert---- the gift of friendship as well as pen. Barely could she make out the print she picked up again:

*Cuthbert Whitfield personified all that was best in the qualities which go to make up the really great newspaperman. Words are poor things indeed to portray the character of the man so tragically taken away this early in his career. To him as a newspaperman his duty was to be on the ground where history was being made. Danger only added zest to the task. Grim fate whose ways are always beyond human understanding, had other plans for him and the whining bullets were the periods which ended his story. And still, though, the end was always almost within sight. He continued to fight it out in a magnificent encounter with death itself. Yes, it was a glorious thing, the most glorious because the last battle was already hopelessly lost.*

*Though his voice is stilled and his eyes are forever closed, Cuthbert Whitfield lives on in the memory of life and*

*death we can not comprehend. This chaos called world has never been explained. But he said, Character survives; goodness lives; love is immortal.*

*What is this mystery that men call death?  
My friend before me lies; in all save breath  
He seems the same as yesterday. His face  
So like to life, so calm, bears not a trace  
Of that great chance which all of us must take.  
I gaze on him and say: He is not dead.  
But sleeps; and soon will arise and take  
Me by the hand I know he will awake  
And smile on me as he did yesterday;  
And he will have some gentle word to say.  
Some kindly deed to do; for loving the thought  
Was warp and woof of which his life was wrought.  
He is not dead. Such souls forever live  
In boundless measure of the love they give.*

Again Thea placed the newspaper in her lap, then took it up again. She wanted to know where the poem appeared. It read Panama Star and Herald. It added that Cuthbert Whitfield was also correspondent for The New York Sun and at his death was a correspondent for The New York Times.

Thea leaned back in her chair. How admired Bert was. His sweetness and kindness were received universally as she, Thea, and Martha knew also. "And now I've killed him." She rose from the chair and for the moment her life seemed without direction. For the time she almost forgot the child she was carrying.

Yesterday Oliver said Bert's body would be arriving in New Orleans this week and there would be a funeral and burial in Ashton. He added that the body would be on display at the Whitfield house for one day. Thea said nothing. She believed she could not look at Bert dead — after so much pain, so much anguish. He had lived more in

thirty-one years than most do in a lifetime.

Sarah! Thea thought. Again, she would have to talk to Sarah, confess her anguish.

Without further ado, she found the keys to her car and drove toward the Whitfield house. Early March had brought the daffodils. Thea observed the slight hill on the side of the house. Viola had planted hundreds of the old-fashioned variety of daffodils. Now they covered practically the entire hillside — pale yellow blossoms blowing in the wind.

*. . . And bladed jonquils pricking through  
Can split my very soul in two.*

Thea had read the lines of the poet Sara Henderson Hay and never forgot them. The beauty of the blossoms appearing as they did almost suddenly to announce Winter's past and Spring's arrival was a sight in this far Southern town Thea had written to Astrid about. "A sight more beautiful than any I've ever seen before."

Astrid. Should she write the vanished face about Bert? Writing Astrid was almost like writing in a diary or to a face struck dumb with silence.

Sarah, dressed in black, met Thea at the front door. In an instant Thea knew what was happening. The house, the hallway, rooms, had the same aura Thea felt the first time she stood in these rooms waiting for the arrival of Viola Whitfield. Sarah had two fingers to her lips announcing "quiet." There was no sunlight and all the draperies were unaccustomly drawn.



In the library a soft light shone from the desk lamp. Thea looked at Sarah:

"The casket is open. He looks so old," Sarah said, not looking at Thea but beyond where the light shone.

"Already? When did---- Does Oliver know?"

"I think Allison told him. Allison's in there now."

Thea held back, her hand on the hall table. She had never seen a dead person before, a younger person. She had seen very old people and it seemed proper somehow that their days were ended. But Bert---so happy walking back from the tennis court, listening to his phonograph records, teasing, playing with little Chris---so alive with the day.

"You might as well," Sarah said.

And Thea followed her through the drawing room and into the library. Allison, seated with the straight chair tipped backward against the wall, had his arms crossed. As soon as he saw Thea he righted the chair and stood. Thea saw the signs of grief, the unaccustomed blackened circles beneath the eyes, the bluish cast to his skin and lips. He hugged Thea gently. "He's been through some kind of hell," he whispered to her and Thea turned, her eyes transfixed on the body lying there in the gray casket--- The "artists" at the funeral home had fixed his sunken cheeks with rouge and his powdered face was an unnatural white. There were shadows on his eyelids, bluish shadows. But what struck Thea first was his hair. When he left for Panama there were gray strands in his dark hair, but now the hair was completely gray.

"He looks old, doesn't he?" Allison said. "But it's Bert all right. I'd know those

hands anywhere.”

Thea looked at the hands, the fingers crossed as if in prayer. He had the Whitfield's little finger, only one joint. It was a failing he had always been proud of: “Oliver's got one finger like that. But I have two, so did our father. Freaks,” he explained to Thea. He was especially proud that little Chris had inherited both jointless little fingers, also.

Thea wondered why she was thinking such stupid thoughts, except for Allison's remark. Somehow her overwhelming emotion was repulsion, not one of grief.

“Can't we close this?” Thea asked. “Just put some lovely flowers on the casket?”

Allison explained that open caskets in the house was a tradition in the town. “At church it will be closed.”

Thea nodded as if to say: “I see.” But with all her heart she knew Bert would not want this. He was so vulnerable with the town's eyes inspecting every inch of his face and the ridiculous pin-striped suit and tie. Thea turned from the scene in respect. All of my life, she was thinking, all of it, I will always remember this final sight---Bert grown old with pain and the face of a clown.

Sarah was saying that in Charleston they didn't have pallbearers. The Negro friends of the family held that duty. Though she said “honor.” It was they who carried the coffins to their final place. Not white friends. Only black friends. Thea wondered if she would ever accustom herself to the ways in this country. Or was it a Southern custom?

The doorbell rang and all at once, it seemed, the house was filled with visitors.

Oliver had arrived and was quietly talking to the owner of the Ashton Times, the competitive newspaper. Oliver was frowning but the other, George Postlethwaite, looked as if he had never had a worry in his life. His face, feature handsome, was without wrinkle or disturbance as he listened to Oliver. Thea overheard one remark and was completely taken aback:

“You can combine the two papers and if the town grows eventually have a monopoly.” He was keeping his house here but his main interests would be in New York.

What he was saying was almost unbelievable. He would sell the newspaper to Oliver and that would end the competition.

“So sayad. So sayad,” said Mrs. Ellingham, an older friend of Viola’s. Thea regarded her rouged, wrinkled face and thought of Bert’s own face---colorful in death.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” said Thea.

“I know Oliver can hardly stand this. I’ve known the Whitfield boys all my life. Never did I think I’d outlive any of them. Didn’t think I’d outlive their mother. Dear Viola. It’s all so say-ad. Everything’s dying and all.”

“Yes, it is,” was all Thea said. She wanted to leave the house, run---she wanted to run in an open field, forget all this---the morbidity of it. Bert was so alive watching sunrises and sunsets. It was all over.

She decided to leave on her own, say nothing to anyone. She wanted to be with little Chris, whose ways more and more imitated Bert’s ways and gestures. She had to be alone, to remember, beautiful things.