

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bert was buried next to his mother among angels and harps and praying hands. Thea watched the coffin as it was carried through the throng of celestial granite. The minister, the rector who visited her when she was so ill with Chris, took on an appropriate mourning air: "From dust to dust . . . in sure and certain knowledge of the resurrection . . . "

Thea watched the casket, so slow in its journey toward its final destination. Never, never, in her wildest dreams did she think she would witness this scene. She remembered the hickory tree, in all its bursting yellow when the autumn season shone on it and Bert's telling her of his leaving. She could hear his voice, deep and confident and reassuring. He would never die.

When the service was finished, and the rector closed the Prayer Book, it

seemed to Thea a great silence had come upon things. It was as if she had suddenly become deafened and there would never be a sound again. She took little Chris's hand and together the two followed Oliver to the waiting car.

"Uncle Bert aint in no heaven," Chris said, breaking the enormous silence. They were seated in the car.

"Why do you say that?" Oliver asked from the front seat.

"He's in the ground."

"His spirit. . . .," Thea started to say, but she burst into tears.

"His spirit is in heaven," Oliver finished.

But Chris was more interested in Thea's tears. "Don't cry. Don't cry."

Thea hugged him to her. "We'll miss him so," she muttered.

"Uh huh," Chris agreed.

And they moved away from the silent place. Workmen who had stood in silence, their feet resting on shovels in respect, could now finish their job, cover Bert's casket and remove the artificial grass and tent.

It was all so different from her own father's funeral, Thea was thinking. She remembered his casket covered with wild flowers of Norway. The casket there was never opened. There was no need. But somehow the burial among the fir and birch trees and the dark rich soil was so sane, simple, reasoned.

But Bert, against every will he had, was surrounded with florist's flowers whose scent was almost overwhelming. The trees were bare and the sky was overcast. Thea noted the angel who pointed toward the sky had lost two fingers, broken off. And next

to the angel was a child's grave with a small sleeping lamb atop the granite. The lamb had hollow eyes.

Oliver drove through the winding cemetery. He said nothing. It was then, riding in the car, that Thea felt the first moving of the baby inside. "Oh," she said. And both Oliver and Chris glanced at her. She had not told Chris he was to have a little brother or sister. Soon she would tell him.

Once home Thea left Chris and Oliver to take a walk by the creek bed. She did not believe she could bear the confines of the house. Her emotions were so in conflict. There was guilt and there was joy. Guilt for Bert and joy for her unknown baby. Perhaps Bert would have been with her now, walking along the creek bed, watching the darting fish, the tadpoles and the ancient pebbles smoothed now by time. He would be alive. But because of her he was dead. Dead was the word. People here said "passed away," which was completely unintelligible to Thea.

She was remembering how Bert had said he planned to stay only a year with her and Oliver. And he had stayed three, almost four years. Why hadn't she realized then what his true reasons were? She should have known that someone like Bert would never busy himself in a town like Ashton, Georgia, no matter how much he liked the place. He needed action, more exotic cultures.

The thought came to her as she walked, keeping as near to the creekbed path as possible, that probably she should tell Oliver of Bert's declaration.

But she knew she never would. It was a secret buried with Bert, and with only her and Sarah and Allison. Allison looked drawn at the service, sadder even than

Oliver. All different. How could that be? It was nature's work. Orderly which made her think of the child she was carrying. Would she---and she was convinced she was carrying a girl---be unlike Chris? In looks? Actions? She thought of the years to come. Her children would never know their grandparents. Or their uncle. Tonight, she thought, she would write this to Astrid, that she should know her grandchild. Strange, Martha was childless. But she was seeing an American doctor now, she wrote, one who was in the mission field who agreed to see her. All her life Thea had envisioned their children playing together, finishing life together---Martha's now with their Chinese culture and Thea's with the mores of the American South.

All these thoughts were suddenly broken by the sound of Chris' voice. She turned and saw him running to her. She put her hand to her throat. "No Chris," she half shouted. His heart. "Don't run so," she said as he approached, his breathing labored and his eyes shining.

"They wants you."

"Who?"

"Uncle Allison and Aunt Sarah."

"Oh." They looked toward the house.

"Another man in there, too."

"Who?" Thea asked impatiently.

"I never seen him."

"Oh dear. Now's not the time." And she meant it. Who would have the audacity to call at this time? She wanted these hours alone, to think, remember, plan.

"Looka there," Chris fairly shouted, bending over staring at the creek.

"We must get back," Thea said, but she glanced down at the water. Beside the stones, lounging in the sun, black and shiny, was the largest snake she had ever seen. It moved cunningly and slowly and---- She was screaming. Stricken. Terrified. Never had she seen such a creature, only in pictures, only in Africa, pictures of Africa.

Chris started shouting, too, imitating Thea. In the distance she saw Allison and Oliver and another man. They were running toward her and Chris. The screaming ceased and Chris was pulling at her hand. "Come on. Let's run!"

Thea stood with her hand to her breast. Shame was filling her. She had always been taught to keep emotions to herself and here she was yelling like an animal. Who was the other man? Chris was back at the creek staring at the snake, sudden courage coming with the advent of the grown men.

"What is it?" Oliver asked. He was breathless.

"Looka here," Chris said.

The man went to the creek. "Rattler," they almost said in unison. And then the strange man, a revolver in his hand, shot the creature. Thea watched as it opened its mouth — white — while its pink tongue darted in the air, then slowly uncoiled and was still. Dead. Thea covered her face with her hands and Oliver held her. Would she ever get used to this land? The hard violence.

"That's one dead snake," said Allison. "And one dead eye." He looked at the man, the gun still in his hand.

"Jackson," Oliver said, "at least you've got one admirer."

He smiled at Chris, who was staring at the man with eyes only slightly short of worship. The child's eyes were as blue as the sky and his lashes as white as the serpent's mouth. The man picked him up. "See," he said. "That snake won't hurt you--- ever again."

Chris stared at the creature from the height of the man's shoulder. "My uncle's dead, too," he said quietly.

Oliver released Thea. "Now, Chris," he said. "Thank Mr. Eubanks for shooting the snake."

Chris said nothing.

Thea forced a smile. "Well, I thank you. I'm Thea Whitfield."

She liked the man's looks. He was not as tall as Oliver or Allison. But he was compact, a doer, a man of masculine grace, quick, good with his hands. His hair was dark brown, and his eyes equally as dark were now filled with mischief, almost Irish. The eyes contrasted pleasingly with the otherwise stern, Anglo-Saxon features — nose, mouth.

He shook hands with Thea. Thea noted earlier he had placed the gun in his pocket when he picked up Chris. "Eubanks," he said with only a trace of a Southern accent. "Jackson Eubanks."

Thea knew the Eubanks family. They owned the largest textile mill in the county. But the older Eubanks were frail and ageing. "Are you?" Thea started to say.

"Yes." Obviously he was accustomed to the question. "The son. Returned."

Thea smiled. He couldn't have been much older than Oliver . . . Possibly even

younger. Bert's age.

"Bert and I grew up together." He looked away, then back at the creek where his prey lay twisted in death.

"Can I go to the pitcher show?" Chris asked.

Everyone laughed as if it were a release from something. Even Thea smiled. The movies had come to Ashton with a vengeance, ruining, as Oliver said, young minds and the older ones, too. Chris, allowed to go to the theater only once a month, was enthralled with the silver screen. Afterward he would entertain Oliver and Thea with the plots of each viewing, not forgetting the smallest detail. He would recite the plots with dramatic affects which both bored and amused Oliver and Thea. Thea saw something of an actor in the young child.

"No," said Oliver. "Now is no time to go anywhere."

"Oh, let him go," said Jackson Eubanks, replacing the tweed hat on his head. For reasons only he understood he had removed the hat when he shot the snake. He was a study in grey tweed, his feet firmly planted as if he could out-run, out-shoot anyone about. "What's playing, son?"

"I dunno."

Thea smiled. "It really doesn't matter. Chris likes them all."

She turned and all at once she realized she and Jackson Eubanks were walking alone back to the house. Chris, Allison and Oliver were still examining the snake. Chris wanted the creature's rattlers. Thea was listening to the child as well as to Jackson's remarks. He was sorry, he said, to know of Bert's death. He heard of this as soon as he

came into town.

"How long have you been here?"

"Just now. I missed the funeral."

Thea wanted to ask where he had been. She knew nothing of this man. Later she would ask Oliver about him. He was different than most about the town. He spoke so distinctly and had an almost New England accent, even British, though she was aware of Southern overtones.

"You're Norwegian, aren't you?"

Thea looked up at him with mild surprise. "Why, yes?"

"My mother wrote me."

"Was this such news?"

They stopped walking.

Jackson nodded. "There hasn't been a Norwegian around here since---I guess Leif Erickson, if he got this far."

"I must say I doubt that he did." Thea looked backward. The three, Oliver, Allison and Chris, were following. All three heads were bowed as they walked.

"It has been so sad here." Thea said, turning to Jackson whose eyes were sparkling. There was orange in the eyes, Thea noted. Was he married, she wondered. He wore no ring but then neither did Oliver or Allison.

"Mother never wrote how beautiful you are," he said. His eyes were dark now, mischievous.

Was he flirting? Thea said nothing.

"I've never been to northern Europe," he said, looking down now as he walked.

"You must go one day, especially Norway, the fjord country."

He glanced at her. "You miss it. Don't you?"

She nodded.

"I don't know how in the world you can stand all this."

Her curiosity must have shown on their face.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh no. I'm just surprised, that's all. This, Georgia, is interesting, too. For me. So different."

"Not very," he said, "interesting. And you know it."

Who was this man, being so familiar? Or was he rude? Thea began to walk faster.

"I like what you've done with Oliver's hutch." He was smiling, viewing the distant house. "God, the times we've had in that place. Bachelors. I miss those days."

Thea looked at the house, too, trying to see it as if she were a stranger. The place did have its charm now, the worn logs, the added porch, the windows with the small panes she had placed instead of the older plainer ones. She had worked in the garden, too, trying to keep as many pine trees as she could in order to plant the boxwoods and arborvitae here and there. She wanted to keep the grounds simple, disregarding the richness that so many Southern gardens displayed---magnolias, crepe myrtle, lilies, all of it. She was striving to have a white and green garden, summer and winter. It all seemed more in keeping with the simplicity of the house.

"Oliver wants to build a new house one day. Here on this property."

"What for?"

"In case we have more children."

He said nothing but turned, ceased walking, waiting for Allison and Oliver. It was a dismissal of a sort.

The pause was welcomed by Thea. She felt the child moving inside her again. And she wanted to be alone. Besides, she wasn't sure she cared for this stranger. Yet she had the instinctual feeling that he was to become a frequent presence in their lives, a situation she neither liked nor disliked.

"I must leave you now," she said to his back. "Do come in . Have a drink with Oliver and Allison. They've had such a hard time."

"Yes," was all he said and left her to join the others, as if the latter were a more preferred choice.

Jackson Eubanks did not join Allison and Oliver for a drink. In fact he left as soon as they reached the house. That night Thea asked Oliver about him.

"He seems a bit forward," Thea said.

"In what way?" Oliver was re-reading the editorial comments about Bert, and Thea felt she did not want to interrupt him.

"In what way?" he asked again.

"I don't know. He seemed a bit forward."

"I hope he's better," Oliver said and resumed reading.

"Better? Is he ill?"

“Uh.”

Thea resisted interrupting him again. She went to see about Chris. It was late and he, too, had had a hard day, learning about death and life. Thea wondered if she had paid enough attention to this. Prepared him. The child was so imaginative.

She opened the door to his room slowly. A bedlight was on but no Chris. The emptiness of the bed hit her like a slap in the face. “Chris,” she said softly. And then she turned.

“Oliver!” she half-shouted. But she looked back in panic and saw the tousled white hair and elfin face peeking out from beneath the bed.

“Chris!” She placed her hand against her chest. “Why are you hiding like that? Why? You frightened me.”

Chris crawled out slowly. He was sulking, a gesture completely foreign to him. He had never shown such a demeanor. The movies, Thea thought. He’s trying to imitate movie stars. They would have to make a rule. No more movies. Life itself offered more. He must learn this.

“What is the matter?” she asked as she saw him crawl into the bed, his striped green and white pajamas too close a fit. He was growing so fast. It seemed almost daily she went shopping for more clothes.

“The window,” he said.

“What about it?”

“I seen something out there, peeping at me. Mahma.”

He was crying, his fists gnarled at his eyes.

Thea ran to him, held him. "There's nothing there, Chris. Nothing at all. You're just imagining."

"It was Uncle Bert and he was holding that dead snake."

Thea could say nothing. She was staring at the window and then back at her sobbing child. "No. No. Uncle Bert is dead."

"He aint either. He got out of the ground and he's hauntin me. The snake, too. I seen him. I did!" He was pointing to the window.

Suddenly Oliver was in the room. He went to the window, cranked it open. "What you saw was a tree branch. It's raining."

"You see, " said Thea, relieved with the presence of Oliver. "It's just the pine tree."

Chris stared at it for a long time, his pale eyes pinker than usual. He was still such a child, Thea was thinking. He seemed so adult sometimes, trying to learn to read, sometimes playing with Oliver's golf clubs. Then again he would turn around and be a child, climbing trees, playing Indians and cowboys. And now this. The Eubanks man should never have shot the snake in the child's presence. It was too grisly.

"When people die," Oliver was saying. "They never, never return. They are in heaven or hell. In Bert's case, he is in heaven. Even if he weren't, he would never try to frighten a young boy. Do you understand, Chris? Tell me."

"I seen him," Chris said softly. "He'd go away and come back, holdin up that er snake."

"THAT snake, Chris," Oliver was almost abrupt.

The only time Oliver was harsh with Chris was when the child used bad grammar. Thea admonished Oliver for this, saying he would learn in time.

"No, he won't. A child has to learn at home. We can't let him get by with such carelessness."

Oliver went to him, sat on the side of the bed. "You've learned a great lesson about life today, Chris. Men die. All of us. Everything dies. Trees and leaves. Grass. It's as normal as breathing, a part of our time on this earth. You've learned a truth."

Chris said nothing. And Thea was wondering when she herself first learned of death. Her grandmother. She remembered the funeral and lilacs, people dressed in black. Takk for alt, her grandmother had written by way of farewell. Thea remembered that. "Thank you for everything."

At last Thea closed the child's door. She partially believed he had listened to them. There would be no more imaginings. To make sure, she went to his room later, and he was sleeping soundly. It wasn't easy being a child. One forgets so soon. But the vision remained with Thea. Bert and the snake, a horror she was determined to erase from her own mind.

It wasn't until sometime later that Thea thought to ask Oliver from what illness Jackson Eubanks suffered. She had seen the man downtown earlier that day, striding toward the library. He had not seen her, but Thea noted his assurance as he walked and how well-dressed he was in comparison with others who came and went. For sure he did not seem to belong to Depression Ashton, Georgia. True: The Eubanks Mills,

like all textile mills, were also depressed with hard times. But they never closed.

"Melancholia," Oliver said.

They were at dinner and Velvet was serving after-dinner coffee.

Thea placed her cup down on the saucer. It was an unexpected answer and she immediately thought of Astrid, her mother, and much of her own family. "Really?"

"It comes and goes," Oliver said. "As does Jackson."

"I would never have thought such a thing."

"He was at Yale during the war, I remember. I think that was where they recognized something was wrong. He never finished college. Just had one year."

"That's sad. Isn't it?"

Oliver said he had always considered Jackson a close friend. They went on trips together when they were younger. One especially memorable trip was to Canada with Jackson and some other Virginia friends. They all wore white suits and the Canadians asked them what they were.

"'Baptists,' Jackson said, '. . . which appeared to answer the curiosity of the Canadians.'

"White suits," Thea mused. One would never see such a thing in Norway either. But she had seen them in England and it also seemed correct attire for the South, with such heat.

But melancholia. Thea never spoke to Oliver what she feared for her mother. She was afraid of his disapproval, believing that the illness might be inherited. Strange, they were so close in almost every other way and he accepted the illness in Jackson.

Surely, he would accept it in Astrid. But she could not bring herself to say that her mother was mad. If, in truth, she was. Such a thought never crossed her mind. To think her husband had never met her mother or her uncle or any of her relatives. He never said as much either. Everything in their marriage seemed to be on his side. She was living in his town, his country, his house. She spoke his language. Even the weather was his. And so were his brothers, even the dead. They were his, though she had taken one love, only one. Somehow in all this was her truth: she was merely a visitor. But she carried her child. And Chris was hers. My children. My son. My daughter. It if was to be a daughter. But for certain she knew it to be a girl. It moved inside her differently than Chris. The movements were slower somehow, feminine movements. Was there such a thing? Occurrences of gender?

She longed for Spring, something to lift the dark spirits that had come upon her during the year. In this she felt a oneness with her mother now. There seemed such a sameness to her days. Oliver going and coming to work. And always, always complaints about the Depression. She was sure it was this, the Depression, that weighed so heavily on her own life as well. There was so much suffering. Daily Velvet would regale her with friends, especially children, who had nothing to eat, and Thea would prepare packages of food for Velvet to take home.

Oliver was generous in this as well. Still, there was the guilt. Bert left his share of his mother's inheritance to Allison and Oliver. Therefore, they never wanted for the essentials of life. But there was another want. Oliver was hungry for success, a deeper hunger, Thea often thought. He wanted a successful business and a newspaper of

quality. He had the latter. He was often mentioned in national magazines as one of the "leading Southern editors." Thea never understood this. Why identify someone always as being "Southern"? When she read the journals, the writers never mentioned Midwestern editors or Northwestern editors anywhere, only the South, as if it were another country. Which, indeed, Oliver believed the South to be---a foreign country struggling to come back to life---with only remnants of an elegant past. A sad time. A sad country.

The Negro question was always au courant in their lives. Thea felt she knew little of the subject. Velvet was her principal source here. Velvet and her family. Still, she knew little of someone she saw so often. Velvet disappeared at night and what her life was after that, Thea could not imagine. She knew Velvet's conversation on the phone was different from the way she spoke to Thea and even Chris. There was a privacy Thea did not feel she could penetrate. And, often, when there was extra help in the house, she felt these very people mistrusted her. The relationships were strained as if she should treat these people separately from her own friends, her Caucasian friends. She felt she was being honest and they, even Velvet, were crafty, playing an act. Perhaps the latter was a necessity. She would never understand. She saw none of this in the friends she made here, even Sarah, who took Negroes as they appeared in her environs and saw nothing deeper, only their charm. And there was much of that. Sometimes Thea thought she had never met a more charming race of people, amusing, sad, an appreciator of all life had to offer, mainly its intense beauty as it showed itself in these Southern states. Still, she did not know the race. But they knew her.

On a Sunday, after church services, Mrs. Eubanks, Jackson Eubanks' elderly mother, asked Thea if she and Oliver would come to Sunday night dinner. She explained that Jackson had "enjoyed" meeting her and there were so few about that he did "enjoy." Thea accepted and Oliver appeared pleased by the invitation.

Thea had been to the Eubanks' house only once in all the time she had been in Ashton. The Eubanks were friendly with Viola Whitfield and all the Whitfields. "Close friends," as Oliver explained it. Thea discovered along the way that it was an honor to be asked to dinner at the Eubanks. Even Senator and Mrs. Houghton or Lucille rarely received invitations. The Eubanks enjoyed a kind of lonely splendor in the town, which gave the appearance that they did not actually live here, but were merely visiting. They were too grand for most.

And so that night Thea rather dressed for the occasion wearing her aunt's small circle pin and earrings, which went well, she thought, with the plain gray dress she chose.

Actually she was rather tired that afternoon. Chris and a friend were playing croquet or rather playing at it. They used the mallets as swords and pretended to stab each other. Chris accidentally hit the other child on the head, leaving a gash and blood on the child's forehead. Such crying and yelling Thea had rarely heard and she telephoned the boy's mother, who on sight rushed to her child, hardly speaking to Thea. With some in the town Thea was still suspect because of her accent. There were no foreign accents in Ashton. And Thea was always referred to as the "German," a reminder of war and death.

"Whut happened?" the woman asked.

"I fear Chris--- They were playing," Thea was slightly stricken by the woman's obvious fury. She was pressing a handkerchief to the yelling child's forehead. And she looked at Chris as if he were the devil incarnate.

"I'm so sorry," Thea offered. "Can I get anything? Mercurochrome?" A red medicine Thea discovered only in America. She had never heard of it before.

The woman finally left with the muttering that her son could never come to this house again. Chris was a monster.

And so she was tired, worn out with the thought that once again Chris had lost a friend. Most mothers, she noted, remained with their children, watching every movement. Thea was determined not to do that. Children needed freedom, she believed, freedom from authority. Occasionally. Boys, especially, did not need a mother hanging over them constantly.

She was saying all this to Oliver as they entered the driveway to the Eubanks' house. The drive was lovely, lined with magnolias and pink crepe myrtles. Now there were early signs of Spring, a mistiness to the hills which surrounded the town and the faintest color of new green on shrubbery and trees. It was early March. Thea had planted more than a thousand daffodils, having copied her mother-in-law, and it was a scene that always lifted her as it had when she first glimpsed the yellow flowers in Viola's garden.

The house came in view, a large brick house with black-green shutters and white trim about the doors and windows. Thea had seen such houses in England but never in

Norway. Denmark had a few, though plainer in design and more age. To the right of the immediate house was a large swimming pool and brick bath houses. Beyond this was a grape arbor, where Thea now saw just the beginning of green. In the summer Mrs. Eubanks gave picnics under the arbor after a swim.

Oliver parked beneath the porte-cochere and Thea noted the hanging basket by the door, a fey touch placed to collect the delivered mail.

One had the sense of vines and boxwoods and roses here. To the right was a formal garden with trellises and clipped boxes and benches, formally placed so one could sit and watch the roses bud and bloom as they circled the green. Thea had learned much about Southern gardening since she first arrived. She studied books about the subject and liked to experiment with wild flowers native to the land. She discovered which ones would return and those that would not. In this they were like friends.

Jackson met them at the door, eyes teasing, greeting them almost charmingly, a slight bow. Behind him was his mother, Mrs. Eubanks. No one ever called her by her first name. She was always Mrs. Eubanks, nothing else. She was wearing a long beige dress and her dark eyes flashed as she greeted Thea. Her upswept white hair was formal against her dark eyes and brows. Thea noted the twinkling diamonds in her ears. Behind her, shorter, was Mr. Eubanks. Bob. He was called that by everyone. A comfortable man, he usually had cigar ashes on his vest and sweaters. But one knew that it was he who inherited the money and he who had worked to afford these elaborate surroundings. "Evening, Oliver," he said now. "Evening, Thea."

The first thing Thea noticed when they entered the drawing room was a roaring fire in the fireplace and Mrs. Eubanks' portrait hanging above the high mantle. The artist had seen highlights in the woman's hair and eyes. Younger in the portrait, she was indeed a striking woman. The artist had seen haughtiness.

When they were seated Mrs. Eubanks sat in the small rocking chair. Jackson sat in the tall antique chair, one leg crossed over the other at the knee. He leaned back in utter ease as if he had experienced strenuous exercise earlier but was now accepting this comfort as routine and due him.

"Bourbon for you, Oliver?" Bob asked.

"Fine."

"Thea?"

"A little wine would be lovely," said Thea. She had never accustomed herself to drinking hard whiskey. Bourbon, especially.

Bob merely glanced at Mrs. Eubanks as if there was no need to ask. The years had taught him well.

"Damnest thing," Jackson was saying, a smile playing about his lips. "Thought I heard something a while ago---was upstairs. Went out on the balcony and I know I saw at least five darkies I'd never seen about the place before. I called out to them.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Jackson. It's just Zebedee. Me."

All this was said in an exaggerated accent but accurate in its words, Thea thought. She smiled.

"I knew who it was. Zebedee's a caddy. Used to caddy for me." His eyes were

twinkling. "I had my hand in my pocket. No pistol."

"That you, Zeb?," I called. "Saw him hiding behind a bush."

"Sho is."

It was like a play, Thea thought, listening in fascination as he worked the plots and sub-plots of his afternoon. Apparently, the Eubanks' driver lived in the servants quarters in back of the Eubanks' house. And just as apparently it was also a rendezvous for gambling as well.

"We're going to have to do something about that," said Bob, leaning back in the arm chair, a table by his side on which he dropped his cigar ashes. "Can't be having those folks hanging 'round like that."

Oliver was sitting forward, drink in hand, saying nothing.

"Isn't Zebedee related to Velvet?" Thea asked. "The name is familiar."

"Yes," said Jackson. "I'm surprised you know that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I thought only Southerners knew these circuitous relationships."

"They're not all that difficult," Oliver said. "And the name isn't forgettable."

Zebedee. Who was he anyhow?"

"Zebedee's the father of James and John," said Bob. "Bible."

His small triangular eyes twinkled like his son's

Thea liked these people. She felt at home here, more so than she did in most houses in Ashton. These were people who knew Europe, were traveled, were accustomed to other cultures, accepted other cultures with ease. So many in the town

were tightly focused, she reasoned. It was difficult trying to meet this stringent reasoning. But now she was relaxed, listening.

"Another glass of wine?" Jackson asked Thea.

"You're never supposed to ask someone to have 'another'," Mrs. Eubanks said, actually smiling. "It sounds as if you're accusing someone."

"Of what?" Jackson turned to her.

"Of drinking too much."

"Well, no," said Thea. "Thank you."

"Don't let maa-mah worry you."

Thea merely smiled at Mrs. Eubanks, who said nothing. Actually, Thea was thinking of the unborn baby. One glass of wine would do no harm. But she dared not have another.

"Roosevelt," said Bob, "he's a damn communist."

"Now, Bob," said Oliver. He had just written an editorial strongly endorsing Roosevelt's candidacy. Obviously Bob was referring to the editorial.

"Excuse me," said Jackson and, picking up the silver tray with several glasses on it, left the room.

Thea watched the flames in the fireplace. She was not up to listening to a political fight, though there were not many these days. Most people in the community were strongly in support of Roosevelt. All except the Eubanks who were outspoken in their Republican conservatism. Thea learned that to disagree with one's politics was like attacking someone's religion, the very core of one's being. Besides, there was a

certain rudeness Thea could never accustom herself to. In Norway there would never be such outbursts as she saw here. But Oliver said the exchanges were merely "sport" and, besides, no one ever changed anyone's mind.

"Roosevelt isn't going to change anything. But Hitler is," said Bob.

"For once you're correct about something," Oliver said. "About the latter, I mean. Dangerous man. Hitler."

Thea looked at Oliver. He was sipping from the drink Jackson had just served him. Never once had she heard him mention the name "Hitler." And he had never written on the subject either. Their talk, between the two of them, now was always the Depression and Chris and the coming baby. Their table conversation had completely changed since Bert left for Panama. Thea often wondered if she bored her husband. His talk had always been so lively when Bert was present.

Dinner was formal with Mrs. Eubanks' black-clad maid and butler serving dinner. These two elderly Negroes appeared to Thea to have caught some of Mrs. Eubanks' arrogance. Indeed, they had the appearance of royalty with their straight bearing and lifted brows. Thea heard there was royal blood in many of the dark people living in the South.

But what was making her truly uncomfortable was Jackson. He sat across from her and in the candlelight his gaze teasingly seemed to rest on Thea's every gesture. He had inherited his mother's dark eyes and the tilt toward secret amusement. He was annoying with his gaze; yet, still, she was pleased that he was present for the dinner.

The Ewings alone would have been a bit of a burden.

Before they came to this dinner she asked Lucille about Jackson. Actually, she was thinking he might be a possible suitor for Lucille. Hers and Lucille's relationship, no longer the girlish friendship that it once was, was now a half-pleasant friendship. Thea could never completely erase the past as far as Lucille was concerned. Yet, if she wanted to know something about someone in the town, Lucille was more than willing to deliver. She could easily have been a reporter for Oliver's newspaper.

Jackson Ewing, said Lucille, had just broken off his engagement with a girl in Savannah, Georgia. Thea laughed when Lucille told her this. It was the same old story, except the players were different: Oliver and Charleston. But this was different: Lucille knew the girl slightly. She was pretty, very blond, but her family did not approve of their daughter marrying someone with Jackson's illness.

To get over his "hurt" Jackson went to Europe where he had been for the past year or so. Lucille added that she herself would not relish the thought of marrying "someone like that" either. And Thea argued that melancholia didn't mean "madness." It means only a viewpoint, a sad sense of things and occasionally even a joyous sense. "Like all of us, excerpt more exaggerated."

But Lucille merely stared at Thea. Accusingly, Thea somehow thought. All of which brought Astrid to mind.

Martha wrote of Astrid's strange letters. She seemed unusually centered on religion. Her letters were filled with church and the pastor and her hope that Martha would not fill her days with nonsense but rather pray every morning and evening.

Martha did not mention any reference to Thea in the letters.

"Well, I think it would be a good idea to quit talking politics. At least while we're dining." Mrs. Eubanks had a commanding voice. Thea had not been paying attention to the talk. But the voices about her were suddenly lowered. She looked across the table at Jackson and he was smiling to himself. He was enjoying the rowdy talk and his mother's admonition. Obviously, he was not treated to such discussions often, at least not in Ashton.

"Has the Depression hit Norway?" asked Jackson, addressing the remark to Thea.

Thea placed her fork on her plate. The question was not meant to be rude, but she had no idea how to answer it. Which went to show just how isolated from her country and kin she was. "I don't know," said Thea. And there was laughter. Embarrassing laughter. What was amusing? That she was so ignorant? Was that amusing?

"It's everywhere." said Oliver.

Thea was then struck by the very scene they presented. Here sat Mrs. Ewing and her husband and son. Not a care as far as material want was concerned. Their wine was special; their meals were perfect. Here they were — served by arrogant servants, a fire blazing in the room they were about to enter — silver everywhere, perfectly polished. And yet there was melancholia. She saw no room for laughter as she was now hearing.

Back in the drawing room Thea sat on the settee nearest the fireplace. Across

the room Oliver and the Ewings were continuing talk of the Depression. Jackson, a coffee cup in hand, sat next to Thea. She regarded the cup he held.

"Isaiah's on his way," he said, speaking of the butler. "I stole this from his tray."

"I see," said Thea, smoothing her silk skirt.

They would have to leave early, she decided. She was concerned about Chris, and Velvet wanted to leave before it got too late.

"I'm sorry I didn't see Norway when I was in Europe," said Jackson.

"Oh?"

He had nice eyebrows like his mother's in the portrait. "I thought of Scandinavia once or twice, but I didn't know you or anyone there."

Thea wondered fleetingly if she had written Astrid that this young man would be visiting if she, in truth, would have invited him to the house. "I think you would have enjoyed Norway--- But it is very different from here."

"Then I certainly would have enjoyed it. Enjoy. Is that the correct word?"

"Perhaps. But this is your home. Don't you like Ashton? The people?"

"A few." He looked up at Isaiah, who held a tray-full of blue and white demi-tasse cups.

Thea took her cup and placed one cube of sugar into it. She shook her head.

"No cream."

They sat in silence then, Thea sipping her coffee, which was bitter. Jackson stared across the room, not looking at his parents or Oliver but beyond somewhere. Thea was loathe to break his thoughts, if thoughts they were. But she felt

uncomfortable with the silence.

"How long?" she asked.

He looked at her then, smiling as if in appreciation. His gaze was above her eyes as if he were appreciating her brow and hair.

"How long?" she asked again.

"How long what?"

"Will you be visiting?"

He looked away. "I'm here to stay. Robert Jackson Eubanks IV is here to stay. The return of the Prodigal. Back where he belongs."

And Thea listened as he explained that his father wanted to retire. He, Jackson, would take over the running of the mills. His sister, Eugenia, was married and living in Boston. He was the only one to take over. He wasn't overjoyed at the thought. He had always wanted to be an architect---one of the reasons he stayed in London so long. "I'm an appreciator only. I like to look at beautiful buildings and houses---" Then he smiled--- " . . . and women."

Thea wanted to ask him about his engagement. She was trying to see him as a younger, unmarried woman might see him. Certainly he was attractive in his way. A bit odd, yes. But all in all she could see why any woman might be attracted to him even with the air of authority he commanded.

Across the room Oliver was rising from his chair. He looked at her. "I think we had better be going."

"Yes." She looked at Jackson and smiled. Then she stood, almost reluctantly.

She was interested in this man who apparently had suffered so. Through him she might learn more about Astrid, analyze this disease which if, in truth, Astrid did have. Then she might free herself of the shadows she carried with her.

They left the Eubanks' grounds and Thea said: "You would hardly know there was a Depression, so much suffering."

"No," Oliver said as he turned out onto the mud highway. "I wonder if anybody there would like to buy a dying newspaper?"

"Oh, Oliver." The old worries were returning. Would they ever be safe again?

"You certainly caught the fancy of my old friend, Jackson."

Thea looked at his profile, such an about change from dying newspapers and the Depression.

"What do you mean?"

"He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"Why, Oliver Whitfield, you're jealous."

"I certainly am." His lips were pinched.

Thea laughed and Oliver put his arm about her, drawing her closer to him as they drove.