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Gone with the Wind

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Margaret Mitchell



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Part Four

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Chapter 31

Part Four

On a cold January afternoon in 1860, Scudder sat in the office writing a letter to Ann Fitz, explaining in detail for the first time why neither she, Melinda nor Ashley could come back to Atlanta to live with her. She wrote eagerly because she knew Ann Fitz would read no farther than the opening lines and then write her again, waiting for her to say to live by herself. Her hands were numb as she typed together notes and her deepening despair over the state of her affairs. The piles of her papers were practically gone and were scattered with pieces of paper. The paper kept her out of the door but she tried to keep her feet warm. That morning Will had taken her home to Henderson to get her shoes. Several things were by the things were spiked at a pretty pace when people's feet were as bare as wild dogs. She picked up her pen to resume her writing but did not know when she heard Will coming in at the back door. She heard the things being of in wooden leg as she sat outside the office and that he supposed she wanted for a moment for him to see and when he made no move she called to him. It was in his ear and from his side, he said in a low voice, "I'm looking down at you, a young woman's smile on her lips." "Miss Scudder," he questioned, "what are you doing here?" "I'm going to try to hurry me for the winter," she said, "I've asked permission to go." "No, Miss Scudder, I'm not to return."

Chapter 31

On a cold January afternoon in 1866, Scarlett sat in the office writing a letter to Aunt Pitty, explaining in detail for the tenth time why neither she, Melanie nor Ashley could come back to Atlanta to live with her. She wrote impatiently because she knew Aunt Pitty would read no farther than the opening lines and then write her again, wailing: "But I'm afraid to live by myself!"

Her hands were chilled and she paused to rub them together and to scuff her feet deeper into the strip of old quilting wrapped about them. The soles of her slippers were practically gone and were reinforced with pieces of carpet. The carpet kept her feet off the floor but did little to keep them warm. That morning Will had taken the horse to Jonesboro to get him shod. Scarlett thought grimly that things were indeed at a pretty pass when horses had shoes and people's feet were as bare as yard dogs'.

She picked up her quill to resume her writing but laid it down when she heard Will coming in at the back door. She heard the thump-thump of his wooden leg in the hall outside the office and then he stopped. She waited for a moment for him to enter and when he made no move she called to him. He came in, his ears red from the cold, his pinkish hair awry, and stood looking down at her, a faintly humorous smile on his lips.

"Miss Scarlett," he questioned, "just how much cash money have you got?"

"Are you going to try to marry me for my money, Will?" she asked somewhat crossly.

"No, Ma'm. But I just wanted to know."

She stared at him inquiringly. Will didn't look serious, but then he never looked serious. However, she felt that something was wrong.

"I've got ten dollars in gold," she said. "The last of that Yankee's money."

"Well, Ma'm, that won't be enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Enough for the taxes," he answered and, stumping over to the fireplace, he leaned down and held his red hands to the blaze.

"Taxes?" she repeated. "Name of God, Will! We've already paid the taxes."

"Yes'm. But they say you didn't pay enough. I heard about it today over to Jonesboro."

"But, Will, I can't understand. What do you mean?"

"Miss Scarlett, I sure hate to bother you with more trouble when you've had your share but I've got to tell you. They say you ought to paid lots more taxes than you did. They're runnin' the assessment upon Tara sky high—higher than any in the County, I'll be bound."

"But they can't make us pay more taxes when we've already paid them once."

"Miss Scarlett, you don't never go to Jonesboro often and I'm glad you don't. It ain't no place for a lady these days. But if you'd been there much, you'd know there's a mighty rough bunch of Scallawags and Republicans and Carpetbaggers been runnin' things recently. They'd make you mad enough to pop. And then, too, niggers pushin' white folks off the sidewalks and—"

"But what's that got to do with our taxes?"

"I'm gettin' to it, Miss Scarlett. For some reason the rascals have histed the taxes on Tara till you'd think it was a thousand-bale place. After I heard about it, I sorter oozed around the barrooms pickin' up gossip and I found out that somebody wants to buy in Tara cheap at the

sheriff's sale, if you can't pay the extra taxes. And everybody knows pretty well that you can't pay them. I don't know yet who it is wants this place. I couldn't find out. But I think that pusillanimous feller, Hilton, that married Miss Cathleen knows, because he laughed kind of nasty when I tried to sound him out."

Will sat down on the sofa and rubbed the stump of his leg. It ached in cold weather and the wooden peg was neither well padded nor comfortable. Scarlett looked at him wildly. His manner was so casual when he was sounding the death knell of Tara. Sold out at the sheriff's sale? Where would they all go? And Tara belonging to some one else! No, that was unthinkable!

She had been so engrossed with the job of making Tara produce she had paid little heed to what was going on in the world outside. Now that she had Will and Ashley to attend to whatever business she might have in Jonesboro and Fayetteville, she seldom left the plantation. And even as she had listened with deaf ears to her father's war talk in the days before the war came, so she had paid little heed to Will and Ashley's discussions around the table after supper about the beginnings of Reconstruction.

Oh, of course, she knew about the Scallawags—Southerners who had turned Republican very profitably—and the Carpetbaggers, those Yankees who came South like buzzards after the surrender with all their worldly possessions in one carpetbag. And she had had a few unpleasant experiences with the Freedmen's Bureau. She had gathered, also, that some of the free negroes were getting quite insolent. This last she could hardly believe, for she had never seen an insolent negro in her life.

But there were many things which Will and Ashley had conspired to keep from her. The scourge of war had been followed by the worse scourge of Reconstruction, but the two men had agreed not to mention the more alarming de-

tails when they discussed the situation at home. And when Scarlett took the trouble to listen to them at all, most of what they said went in one ear and out the other.

She had heard Ashley say that the South was being treated as a conquered province and that vindictiveness was the dominant policy of the conquerors. But that was the kind of statement which meant less than nothing at all to Scarlett. Politics was men's business. She had heard Will say it looked to him like the North just wasn't aiming to let the South get on its feet again. Well, thought Scarlett, men always had to have something foolish to worry about. As far as she was concerned, the Yankees hadn't whipped her once and they wouldn't do it this time. The thing to do was to work like the devil and stop worrying about the Yankee government. After all, the war was over.

Scarlett did not realize that all the rules of the game had been changed and that honest labor could no longer earn its just reward. Georgia was virtually under martial law now. The Yankee soldiers garrisoned throughout the section and the Freedmen's Bureau were in complete command of everything and they were fixing the rules to suit themselves.

This Bureau, organized by the Federal government to take care of the idle and excited ex-slaves, was drawing them from the plantations into the villages and cities by the thousands. The Bureau fed them while they loafed and poisoned their minds against their former owners. Gerald's old overseer, Jonas Wilkerson, was in charge of the local Bureau, and his assistant was Hilton, Cathleen Calvert's husband. These two industriously spread the rumor that the Southerners and Democrats were just waiting for a good chance to put the negroes back into slavery and that the negroes' only hope of escaping this fate was the protection given them by the Bureau and the Republican

party.

Wilkerson and Hilton furthermore told the negroes they were as good as the whites in every way and soon white and negro marriages would be permitted, soon the estates of their former owners would be divided and every negro would be given forty acres and a mule for his own. They kept the negroes stirred up with tales of cruelty perpetrated by the whites and, in a section long famed for the affectionate relations between slaves and slave owners, hate and suspicion began to grow.

The Bureau was backed up by the soldiers and the military had issued many and conflicting orders governing the conduct of the conquered. It was easy to get arrested, even for snubbing the officials of the Bureau. Military orders had been promulgated concerning the schools, sanitation, the kind of buttons one wore on one's suit, the sale of commodities and nearly everything else. Wilkerson and Hilton had the power to interfere in any trade Scarlett might make and to fix their own prices on anything she sold or swapped.

Fortunately Scarlett had come into contact with the two men very little, for Will had persuaded her to let him handle the trading while she managed the plantation. In his mild-tempered way, Will had straightened out several difficulties of this kind and said nothing to her about them. Will could get along with Carpetbaggers and Yankees—if he had to. But now a problem had arisen which was too big for him to handle. The extra tax assessment and the danger of losing Tara were matters Scarlett had to know about—and right away.

She looked at him with flashing eyes.

“Oh, damn the Yankees!” she cried. “Isn't it enough that they've licked us and beggared us without turning loose scoundrels on us?”

The war was over, peace had been declared, but the

Yankees could still rob her, they could still starve her, they could still drive her from her house. And fool that she was, she had thought through weary months that if she could just hold out until spring, everything would be all right. This crushing news brought by Will, coming on top of a year of back-breaking work and hope deferred, was the last straw.

“Oh, Will, and I thought our troubles were all over when the war ended!”

“No’m.” Will raised his lantern-jawed, country-looking face and gave her a long steady look. “Our troubles are just gettin’ started.”

“How much extra taxes do they want us to pay?”

“Three hundred dollars.”

She was struck dumb for a moment. Three hundred dollars! It might just as well be three million dollars.

“Why,” she floundered, “why—why, then we’ve got to raise three hundred, somehow.”

“Yes’m—and a rainbow and a moon or two.”

“Oh, but Will! They couldn’t sell out Tara. Why—”

His mild pale eyes showed more hate and bitterness than she thought possible.

“Oh, couldn’t they? Well, they could and they will and they’ll like doin’ it! Miss Scarlett, the country’s gone plumb to hell, if you’ll pardon me. Those Carpetbaggers and Scallawags can vote and most of us Democrats can’t. Can’t no Democrat in this state vote if he was on the tax books for more than two thousand dollars in ’sixty-five. That lets out folks like your pa and Mr. Tarleton and the McRaes and the Fontaine boys. Can’t nobody vote who was a colonel and over in the war and, Miss Scarlett, I bet this state’s got more colonels than any state in the Confederacy. And can’t nobody vote who held office under the Confederate government and that lets out everybody from the notaries to the judges, and the woods are

full of folks like that. Fact is, the way the Yankees have framed up that amnesty oath, can't nobody who was somebody before the war vote at all. Not the smart folks nor the quality folks nor the rich folks.

“Huh! I could vote if I took their damned oath. I didn't have any money in 'sixty-five and I certainly warn't a colonel or nuthin' remarkable. But I ain't goin' to take their oath. Not by a dinged sight! If the Yankees had acted right, I'd have taken their oath of allegiance but I ain't now. I can be restored to the Union but I can't be reconstructed into it. I ain't goin' to take their oath even if I don't ever vote again— But scum like that Hilton feller, he can vote, and scoundrels like Jonas Wilkerson and pore whites like the Slatterys and no-counts like the MacIntoshes, they can vote. And they're runnin' things now. And if they want to come down on you for extra taxes a dozen times, they can do it. Just like a nigger can kill a white man and not get hung or—” He paused, embarrassed, and the memory of what had happened to a lone white woman on an isolated farm near Lovejoy was in both their minds.... “Those niggers can do anything against us and the Freedmen's Bureau and the soldiers will back them up with guns and we can't vote or do nothin' about it.”

“Vote!” she cried. “Vote! What on earth has voting got to do with all this, Will? It's taxes we're talking about.... Will, everybody knows what a good plantation Tara is. We could mortgage it for enough to pay the taxes, if we had to.”

“Miss Scarlett, you ain't any fool but sometimes you talk like one. Who's got any money to lend you on this property? Who except the Carpetbaggers who are tryin' to take Tara away from you? Why, everybody's got land. Everybody's land pore. You can't give away land.”

“I've got those diamond carbobs I got off that Yankee.

We could sell them."

"Miss Scarlett, who 'round here has got money for ear-bobs? Folks ain't got money to buy side meat, let alone gewgaws. If you've got ten dollars in gold, I take oath that's more than most folks have got."

They were silent again and Scarlett felt as if she were butting her head against a stone wall. There had been so many stone walls to butt against this last year.

"What are we goin' to do, Miss Scarlett?"

"I don't know," she said dully and felt that she didn't care. This was one stone wall too many and she suddenly felt so tired that her bones ached. Why should she work and struggle and wear herself out? At the end of every struggle it seemed that defeat was waiting to mock her.

"I don't know," she said. "But don't let Pa know. It might worry him."

"I won't."

"Have you told anyone?"

"No, I came right to you."

Yes, she thought, everyone always came right to her with bad news and she was tired of it.

"Where is Mr. Wilkes? Perhaps he'll have some suggestions."

Will turned his mild gaze on her and she felt, as from the first day when Ashley came home, that he knew everything.

"He's down in the orchard splittin' rails. I heard his axe when I was puttin' up the horse. But he ain't got any money any more than we have."

"If I want to talk to him about it, I can, can't I?" she snapped, rising to her feet and kicking the fragment of quilting from her ankles.

Will did not take offense but continued rubbing his hands before the flame. "Better get your shawl, Miss Scarlett. It's raw outside."

But she went without the shawl, for it was upstairs and her need to see Ashley and lay her troubles before him was too urgent to wait.

How lucky for her if she could find him alone! Never once since his return had she had a private word with him. Always the family clustered about him, always Melanie was by his side, touching his sleeve now and again to reassure herself he was really there. The sight of that happy possessive gesture had aroused in Scarlett all the jealous animosity which had slumbered during the months when she had thought Ashley probably dead. Now she was determined to see him alone. This time no one was going to prevent her from talking with him alone.

She went through the orchard under the bare boughs and the damp weeds beneath them wet her feet. She could hear the sound of the axe ringing as Ashley split into rails the logs hauled from the swamp. Replacing the fences the Yankees had so blithely burned was a long hard task. Everything was a long hard task, she thought wearily, and she was tired of it, tired and mad and sick of it all. If only Ashley were her husband, instead of Melanie's, how sweet it would be to go to him and lay her head upon his shoulder and cry and shove her burdens onto him to work out as best he might.

She rounded a thicket of pomegranate trees which were shaking bare limbs in the cold wind and saw him leaning on his axe, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. He was wearing the remains of his butternut trousers and one of Gerald's shirts, a shirt which in better times went only to Court days and barbecues, a ruffled shirt which was far too short for its present owner. He had hung his coat on a tree limb, for the work was hot, and he stood resting as she came up to him.

At the sight of Ashley in rags, with an axe in his hand, her heart went out in a surge of love and of fury at fate.

She could not bear to see him in tatters, working, her debonair immaculate Ashley. His hands were not made for work or his body for anything but broadcloth and fine linen. God intended him to sit in a great house, talking with pleasant people, playing the piano and writing things which sounded beautiful and made no sense whatsoever.

She could endure the sight of her own child in aprons made of sacking and the girls in dingy old gingham, could bear it that Will worked harder than any field hand, but not Ashley. He was too fine for all this, too infinitely dear to her. She would rather split logs herself than suffer while he did it.

“They say Abe Lincoln got his start splitting rails,” he said as she came up to him. “Just think to what heights I may climb!”

She frowned. He was always saying light things like this about their hardships. They were deadly serious matters to her and sometimes she was almost irritated at his remarks.

Abruptly she told him Will’s news, tersely and in short words, feeling a sense of relief as she spoke. Surely, he’d have something helpful to offer. He said nothing but, seeing her shiver, he took his coat and placed it about her shoulders.

“Well,” she said finally, “doesn’t it occur to you that we’ll have to get the money somewhere?”

“Yes,” he said, “but where?”

“I’m asking you,” she replied, annoyed. The sense of relief at unburdening herself had disappeared. Even if he couldn’t help, why didn’t he say something comforting, even if it was only: “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

He smiled.

“In all these months since I’ve been home I’ve only heard of one person, Rhett Butler, who actually has money,” he said.

Aunt Pittypat had written Melanie the week before that Rhett was back in Atlanta with a carriage and two fine horses and pocketfuls of greenbacks. She had intimated, however, that he didn't come by them honestly. Aunt Pitty had a theory, largely shared by Atlanta, that Rhett had managed to get away with the mythical millions of the Confederate treasury.

"Don't let's talk about him," said Scarlett shortly. "He's a skunk if ever there was one. What's to become of us all?"

Ashley put down the axe and looked away and his eyes seemed to be journeying to some far-off country where she could not follow.

"I wonder," he said. "I wonder not only what will become of us at Tara but what will become of everybody in the South."

She felt like snapping out abruptly: "To hell with everybody in the South! What about us?" but she remained silent because the tired feeling was back on her more strongly than ever. Ashley wasn't being any help at all.

"In the end what will happen will be what has happened whenever a civilization breaks up. The people who have brains and courage come through and the ones who haven't are winnowed out. At least, it has been interesting, if not comfortable, to witness a Götterdämmerung."

"A what?"

"A dusk of the gods. Unfortunately, we Southerners did think we were gods."

"For Heaven's sake, Ashley Wilkes! Don't stand there and talk nonsense at me when it's us who are going to be winnowed out!"

Something of her exasperated weariness seemed to penetrate his mind, called it back from its wanderings, for he raised her hands with tenderness and, turning them palm up, looked at the calluses.

“These are the most beautiful hands I know,” he said and he kissed each palm lightly. “They are beautiful because they are strong and every callus is a medal, Scarlett, every blister an award for bravery and unselfishness. They’ve been roughened for all of us, your father, the girls, Melanie, the baby, the negroes and for me. My dear, I know what you are thinking. You’re thinking, ‘Here stands an impractical fool talking tommyrot about dead gods when living people are in danger.’ Isn’t that true?”

She nodded, wishing he would keep on holding her hands forever, but he dropped them.

“And you came to me, hoping I could help you. Well, I can’t.”

His eyes were bitter as he looked toward the axe and the pile of logs.

“My home is gone and all the money that I so took for granted I never realized I had it. And I am fitted for nothing in this world, for the world I belonged in has gone. I can’t help you, Scarlett, except by learning with as good grace as possible to be a clumsy farmer. And that won’t keep Tara for you. Don’t you think I realize the bitterness of our situation, living here on your charity— Oh, yes, Scarlett, your charity. I can never repay you for what you’ve done for me and for mine out of the kindness of your heart. I realize it more acutely every day. And every day I see more clearly how helpless I am to cope with what has come on us all— Every day my accursed shrinking from realities makes it harder for me to face the new realities. Do you know what I mean?”

She nodded. She had no very clear idea what he meant but she clung breathlessly on his words. This was the first time he had ever spoken to her of the things he was thinking when he seemed so remote from her. It excited her as if she were on the brink of a discovery.

“It’s a curse—this not wanting to look on naked realities. Until the war, life was never more real to me than a shadow show on a curtain. And I preferred it so. I do not like the outlines of things to be too sharp. I like them gently blurred, a little hazy.”

He stopped and smiled faintly, shivering a little as the cold wind went through his shirt.

“In other words, Scarlett, I am a coward.”

His talk of shadow shows and hazy outlines conveyed no meaning to her but his last words were in language she could understand. She knew they were untrue. Cowardice was not in him. Every line of his slender body spoke of generations of brave and gallant men and Scarlett knew his war record by heart.

“Why, that’s not so! Would a coward have climbed on the cannon at Gettysburg and rallied the men? Would the General himself have written Melanie a letter about a coward? And—”

“That’s not courage,” he said tiredly. “Fighting is like champagne. It goes to the heads of cowards as quickly as of heroes. Any fool can be brave on a battle field when it’s be brave or else be killed. I’m talking of something else. And my kind of cowardice is infinitely worse than if I had run the first time I heard a cannon fired.”

His words came slowly and with difficulty as if it hurt to speak them and he seemed to stand off and look with a sad heart at what he had said. Had any other man spoken so, Scarlett would have dismissed such protestations contemptuously as mock modesty and a bid for praise. But Ashley seemed to mean them and there was a look in his eyes which eluded her—not fear, not apology, but the bracing to a strain which was inevitable and overwhelming. The wintry wind swept her damp ankles and she shivered again but her shiver was less from the wind than from the dread his words evoked in her heart.