My Graceless Heart

by Kinderby

Summary

After the miscarriage, Melanie hears Scarlett call for Rhett.

Notes

There are so many places throughout the book that I think "if only." (Don't we all?) So much pride, so much pretense, so many missed opportunities. I just want these crazy kids to work things out!

The pain was like nothing she’d known before. So much worse than childbirth. Worse even than the months of starvation and backbreaking work at Tara, this was a great blackness that yawned and threatened to swallow her whole. Hot pincers seemed to stab everywhere. The dark invited her, and she knew the pain would stop if she fell into it. When it was worst, she wished she could fall. Yet somehow she knew that void lured her with false promises. The agony, unbearable as it was, was preferable to the nothing. It was excruciating, though, and she didn’t know if she could cling to the pain for much longer. Emptiness could be so inviting. And so she was caught, between a fire living under her very skin, and the velvet abyss. She could not make either retreat, and like walls closing in, there would soon be no space for her between. The fire would push her into the dark.

Only Melly’s cool hand on the side of her face made the panic recede. Rhett would, too, only he wasn’t here. Why wasn’t he here? He would slay the dragon. He needed to, because she could not do it on her own.

“Rhett—”
Melanie was at the threshold of the door when she heard the soft sound. Barely a whisper, Scarlett’s call still carried in the eerie, silent room. The whimper was just a sound, not quite a name, but she knew. She had called for her husband! Melanie could not understand why Rhett hadn’t been in the room the whole time, but then, women were often stronger than men about illness. She could see the anguish etched in his features every time she updated him on Scarlett’s health. He seemed almost broken, and poor Scarlett, who had withstood devastation with such fortitude, was in so much pain. Melanie did not know what she could do for either of them. But surely being together would ease both their hearts! And if Scarlett was asking for her husband, she would see to it that he was there.

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Melanie was not there, and she needed Rhett. A particularly sharp pain below her heart caused her to cry out. It was soon followed by another pain near her hip. Tears ran from her eyes and over the bridge of her nose, falling noiselessly onto the pillow, as the memory hit her. Rhett did not need her. Was he home? Was Bonnie? She missed them so. She recalled his hoarse cry, the unearthly pale of fear on his face as he gathered her from the stairs. No, he did not need her. The darkness beckoned.

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“Captain Butler?”

Rhett’s unfocused eyes swiveled from the square of carpet to the door. He had been staring for so long he could not immediately make sense of a person standing there. Miss Melly’s face slowly came together out of pinpricks and flashes of color, and he knew what she was here to say.

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

God had no more joined them than he had ordered the sun to rise. Oh yes, Ashley and Scarlett had helped to damage their marriage. But what they had done was nothing compared to his share of the blame. His love, having been thwarted, had turned bitter, angry, and desperate. What he’d said to her, things he’d done in foolish attempts to soothe his wounded pride… He could barely live with himself, and now Scarlett did not live at all. His gaze returned to the plush carpet.

“She is dead then?” His voice sounded strange to his ears.

“Oh no, Captain Butler. She— she called for you.”

He jerked his head up at her words, and he felt tears filling his eyes. Had she really? Could she? Having waited for some sign through these dreadful days, a sign that his presence would bring her some comfort rather than inflicting more pain, he almost couldn’t believe. But Miss Melanie would not lie. He got to his feet.

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Captain Butler hadn’t eaten in days, and when he stood and made his way toward her, Melanie could see that it was on unsteady legs. He had not seemed reassured by her words, so she set a hand on his arm as he came toward her. “Scarlett will be well again, Captain Butler. She will.” She smiled up at him.

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Rhett’s legs seemed unwilling to support him. He had taken Mrs. Wilkes’ arm and rather shamefully leaned on her for support as they crossed the hall. He took a deep breath as they
reached the doorway. Scarlett’s small frame lay on one side of the large bed. Numerous fluffy pillows propped her up and slightly to one side, the effect being that she was angled toward the window, away from them.

He drew himself up and let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the room. Before his fear could paralyze him further, he found himself moving around to her side, and sitting in the chair that Mrs. Wilkes had so recently left. Had barely left, as she tended to Scarlett, while he waited in his room, cowering and totally without grace. Well. He was here now.

She was asleep. Tears had left shiny paths down her face. A large purple mark bloomed across one cheek, and two smaller bruises shadowed her jawline. His heart clenched at the manifestation of her pain. He had done this to her. Rhett reached a shaking hand forward to trace those silvery tracks. Her skin was warm—so warm—yes, of course, Dr. Meade had mentioned the fever.

His eyes swung blindly around the room. “Is there something—a cool cloth, does that soothe her?” he asked, hating himself even more for not knowing the answer.

“That does calm her sometimes, but they’re being laundered right now.”

Rhett hastily reached into a pocket and retrieved a handkerchief. A pitcher and bowl of water stood on the nightstand, and he dipped the cloth in and wrung it out. Gently, he laid the silk against Scarlett’s bruised cheek and forehead.

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She felt something soft and cool covering part of her face, and her left arm was heavy, as though weighed down. She slowly opened her eyes, and saw a head of thick, dark hair. It was resting near her wrist, and her hand was held in a firm, gentle clasp. Tears of relief sprang to her eyes. As she turned her head to more fully look at him, lightning flashed across her middle, twisting her body with it. She squeezed the hand holding hers, the only solid thing anchoring her amidst this sea of pain. “Rhett. Hurts.” The words cracked, and she had to push them through a dry throat that distorted the sound.

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After watching her breathe for some minutes, his relief at finally seeing her had blended into exhaustion. He took her hand in his and leaned forward, resting his cheek where they touched. The twilit room and the sound of Scarlett breathing somehow lulled him into the first sleep he’d known in days.

He felt a pressure on his hand, and a voice woke him. “Rhett. Hurts.” He lifted his head and looked straight into green eyes. Tears shimmered in them, and he felt a mirroring reaction in his own.

He lifted one hand and smoothed it along the unbruised side of her face. “I know, my brave darling. I know.” Tears clogged his throat and thickened his words. “I’m here.”

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“I know, my brave darling, I know.” His words, usually so cool and assured, sounded different. Were there tears in his eyes? “I’m here.”

“You weren’t before.” One corner of his mouth turned down, and he swore softly as he looked down.

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“You weren’t before.” It was matter-of-fact—not curious, not accusatory. So unlike her, somehow hurting him even more. He frowned and swore at the shame of his cowardice.

Returning his gaze to her face, he tucked some hair behind her ear and spoke. “I know. Oh my dear, I’m sorry. I thought—” He stopped. What had he thought? Did it even matter? He could not excuse his behavior; he could only try, now, to atone for it. His thumb feathered along one eyebrow. He sighed heavily. “I’m sorry.”

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She had wanted him here, and he was uttering words she’d never before heard him say, to anybody. His hand was tender and warm—not the frightening heat of a fever, but something solid and real. His soothing touch on her face held her awake. The panic could not get to her while he was here, and neither could the darkness. As long as he was here. Fear tingled back into her veins. She pressed her fingers into his hand.

“Don’t leave me.”

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He had watched the emotions play across her face. Her extraordinary eyes showed relief, pain, and then fear. “Don’t leave me.”

Leaving. Of course. Because he always left. Too proud, too scared, he always ran away, leaving her to be buffeted by the winds of fate. He had never given her a reason to think he would stay, until now. He brought her hand to his cheek and held it there as he looked into her eyes. "Never."

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