Sisters

by Leni

Summary

Set in pre-Sherman Atlanta. A quiet afternoon at the Peachtree Street house.

Melanie pulled the needle back towards her, frowning when she realized the knot she'd wanted as the center of a yellow rose was so taut that it scrunched the rest of the stitches. Just like the ones she'd worked on for the last hour. This was hopeless, she thought as she put her work on her lap, unable to even draw a sigh because her corset suddenly felt too tight. Fingering the border of what should have been a beautiful flower arrangement, Melanie tried to summon the enthusiasm she'd had for the work as a young girl. An unmarried girl, a girl who hadn't watched her loved ones march into war…. Oh Ashley!

Embroidering seemed so useless these days, so utterly pointless. If Dr. Meade would but allow it, she would be at the hospital at this very moment. But the good man had taken a look at Scarlett's pale face yesterday, and declared that both sisters-in-law needed a day of rest. Poor Scarlett had looked relieved, and Melanie understood her. Her poor sister had barely had a moment with little Wade since the wounded had started pouring into the Atlanta station. If she had a son at home, Melanie was afraid a mother's selfishness would also drive her out of the hospital. If she had a son…. If….

"Are you tired, Melly?"

Melanie looked up at the concerned eyes of her aunt. Pittypat hadn't seen the inside of the hospital since before the war, and then it had always been quick visits to a clean ward where a friend was interned. The older lady couldn't imagine the horrors in every room and hallways, the sounds of pain and sorrow drifting through the windows and into every corner - and both Melanie and Scarlett worked for Pittypat's ignorance to stay.

"I'm fine, aunt."
As married women who were loyal to the Confederacy, Melanie and Scarlett had no choice but to help Dr. Meade in his efforts to save as many soldiers as their supplies allowed them to save. But Pittypat, so innocent and always so sheltered - not to mention so nervous and easily shaken - was better at their Peachtree home, as protected as her great-grand-nephew.

Pittypat's only concerns regarding the hospital was to collect their old clothes to make bandages, and to declare every once in a while that she'd be a nurse if Mrs. Meade and Mrs. Merriweather thought it'd be proper. Melanie was glad her aunt's friends thought otherwise - in fact, if she could get Scarlett out of the list, she would. At least she knew that Ashley was alive, and he'd come for Christmas, no less! But Scarlett…. Every time Melanie saw a young soldier with dark hair and hazel eyes who was prostrated with fever in a lonely corner, her mind pictured dear Charles. What it must be like for poor Scarlett!

"You looked pale, child," Aunt Pittypat insisted.

"You don't think you've caught something at the hospital, do you?" Scarlett's green eyes widened with worry, probably thinking about her little boy being prey of an infectious disease. "You do look pale."

Melanie shook her head. "I was just…." She couldn't mention Charles! Not when Scarlett had been trying so hard to move on! True, Melanie had been surprised by the speedy abandonment of her widow's clothes, but then she'd realized that Charles had fallen in love with a lively girl; making something less out of Scarlett would be against her brother's wishes. She wasn't as positive that Charles would have approved of Captain Butler's visits, but would her sweet brother have denied Scarlett any happiness? In that, he and Captain Butler had more in common that either man would have believed the one time they met. "I was thinking of Ashley," Melanie said at last, relieved that she needn't lie.

Pittypat made a distressed sound. Scarlett wordlessly reached for their aunt's salts and put it into the older lady's lap. "Ashley is doing well," her sister said, her eyes flaming with determination, "He must be!"

Melanie nodded and refused to cry. What right did she have when Scarlett kept her mourning private and still had the energy to rouse her spirits? "Thank you, dear," she murmured, moving to sit next to her sister so she could take the smaller hand between hers.

"Don't be silly, Melly," Scarlett sighed with a little impatience, tugging her hand back to complete her needle point. Melanie let her, aware that Scarlett was often uncomfortable with physical signs of affection. "Ashley wouldn't jump into needless danger by playing war games." A little hurt that Scarlett would refer so to Charles' boyish enthusiasm, Melanie fidgeted in her seat. Her sister, though, didn't notice her reaction. "Skimming along the Yankees' waters indeed! Daring them to aim better, I say! Ashley won't be as foolish as to risk life and shipment for the sake of bravery, now would he?"

Melanie hid a smile. "No, Scarlett. Ashley wouldn't."

Scarlett gave a curt nod. "It'd serve him well if he drowned," she muttered as she stabbed her needle through a half-finished wildflower.

Melanie let the girl be. It seemed that this morning, without their usual rush through their toilet and into their nursing dresses, Scarlett had found the time to peruse the newspaper. Melanie herself had glanced through Uncle Peter's copy in the kitchen, her curiosity drawn by the familiar name inked onto the page. Today's edition had included a few rumors about Captain Butler's current whereabouts, laced with the inevitable hints about the man's past.
Melanie hadn't been able to read past those insidious sentences about Charleston gossip. She had never understood the need to dig out old faults, especially if the man in question had behaved so honorably since the war had started. Besides, Melanie knew Charlestonians, and though she hated to admit it, they tended to make mountains out of molehills. It was impossible that the incurable rascal that was purported to have been thrown out of society was the same man who always offered to help her untangle skeins when he came for dinner. To tell the truth, Melanie didn't believe a word that'd been printed. It pained her to think it, but given the situation, she had the feeling that Atlanta reporters were as hungry for news as the citizens themselves.

"We should remind Cook not to kill a chicken this Sunday," Melanie told the other women. Pittypat blinked, but quickly nodded in agreement. Scarlett, though, had knitted her brow as she turned towards her, "Why?"

Because Captain Butler never let three months pass without paying a visit, and the next week marked the end of August. Unwilling to give false hopes, though, Melanie smiled at her sister and patted her arm. "We want to make it last, don't we?"

Reluctant, Scarlett did agree to that. "Maybe it'll get fatter with an extra week," she said after a minute, a smile starting to appear on her face.

Melanie held back the urge to hug the younger girl. Such optimism, such courage! Instead she collected her needlework and tried her best to copy Scarlett's single-mindedness as she worked through her own embroidery. *Thank you,* she thought, adding a silent prayer for her brother's soul. For as much as she missed her Charles, Melanie would always thank him for giving her such an amazing sister.

The End
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