Summary

After the war, Melanie considers the patterns of her life on a cold autumn evening in Atlanta.

Notes

Written as a Yuletide NYR 2006 fic for Maidenjedi.

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The stitches in Melanie’s needlepoint were growing uneven as the light faded in the parlor. She rubbed her eyes, trying to will them to see more clearly by the light of the kerosene lamp and the dying embers of the fireplace, but it was no use. She would have to stop for the evening and begin her work afresh in the morning. Quietly, careful not to disturb the sleep of her husband in the next room or little Beau upstairs, she tucked the unfinished tea cozy that was to be a birthday present for Aunt Pittypat into her workbasket and stood, stretching her limbs in front of the fire with a freedom she would never have dared by daylight.

Her arms and legs seemed to take in the evening cold and hold it into her bones throughout the day, and a small voice in the back of her mind whispered to her that the chill she felt might be something far more than the aches of daily life. Melanie knew she wasn’t well. For everyone’s assumptions that she was a simple, sweet, utterly innocent girl and not expected to understand the darker parts of life, she knew far more than she let on, but she chose not to disabuse her friends...
and family of their error. They’d all suffered far more than enough, and if it pleased Ashley to think that one little corner of his dream-world still remained untouched from the horrors of war and a fallen civilization, then it was worth it.

Sleep never came easily to her anymore, and she preferred to stay awake until she felt truly exhausted. Then she had a chance of sleeping without dreams. She never knew which were worse: the nightmares of burning death on every side as she existed in a whirlwind of pain while Atlanta fell to pieces around her, the old fears of Ashley’s shattered body on the battlefield that had never abated even after he came home, Twelve Oaks ripped to shreds and left to decay like a corpse in the noonday sun, the Yankee soldier coming for Scarlett when Melanie couldn’t even lift Charles’s sword to protect her sister, or the dreams that could fool her into believing that the life she had once known still existed which, on waking, would show themselves to be lies.

The mantelpiece clock softly struck the hour in hushed tones: two o’clock. The time had slipped away from her, as it often did these days. Still, tired as she was, she didn’t quite feel ready for sleep yet. She went to the front door and opened it, standing on the porch and taking in the quiet night of an Atlanta autumn. The starlight shone down on the streets, bathing everything in a soft silver. Not a candle was to be seen in any window save one, and that was in the Butler house.

She could just barely see the outline of the mammoth mansion, ostentatious beyond belief, standing at the end of the block of homes. The neighbors talked about it incessantly, the chatter about how gauche it was, how common and vile and utterly without gentility droning on and on like flies circling around particularly sweet jam on a hot July afternoon. It was enough to make her scream sometimes, but she managed to remember to smile, say a kind word for Scarlett and Captain Butler, and deftly change the topic of conversation. It made the others frown, particularly India, whose vitriol on the subject of Scarlett was becoming so rampant that the other ladies were starting to find it in bad taste despite their own rapacious glee over any possible bit of gossip about her. Mrs. Meade had even “accidentally” forgotten to invite India to tea last Wednesday with the rest of the small group that remained from the old days, and the oversight had been welcomed with unintentional sighs of relief by many, Melanie herself included. Granted, she had felt guilty for it later and had made a point of inviting India to dinner later that night. She was, after all, her sister-in-law, and the way India’s life had turned out was far from a happy story.

As Melanie watched, the candle at the Butler house went out, leaving her quite alone. She supposed she should feel nervous, alone at night without a friend in sight to protect her and the streets of Atlanta being none so safe as they once had been, but all she could feel was a quiet gladness that she could be alone and unoccupied for a moment, free from any calls of duty or need to pretend to be perfectly happy in spite of ill health and the knowledge that her husband loved another woman.

She had always known about Scarlett and Ashley, but it hadn’t changed a thing for her. She still loved them both because she couldn’t feel anything except love for them. Ashley had never ceased being kind to her and devoted to their son, and she knew that he loved her in a way far different from the passion he felt for Scarlett. Ashley needed his wife in order to exist, and she would always have a part of him that no one else could touch. As for Scarlett, Melanie had always been fond of her, and over the years that fondness had turned into a fierce love tinged with a streak of protectiveness. She couldn’t blame Scarlett for being what she was, though at times she had wished she could. It would be much easier to simply hate the two of them, with their stolen glances that they assumed she somehow never saw, but the uncomfortable jealousy she sometimes felt was always tempered by the knowledge that somehow they both belonged to her. She loved them, and if they loved each other, well, that was how things were.

It was Captain Butler she worried about most. A wilder and more volatile man than her Ashley, yet somehow he seemed hurt in ways much deeper than any of the rest of them. He had no family
except Scarlett, none that would speak to him anyway, and his friends seemed little more than hangers-on, untrustworthy. His whole heart was set only on Scarlett, though sometimes she seemed too blind to see it. The real jealousy that sometimes leapt up and burned at Melanie’s heart wasn’t over Scarlett and Ashley, but more at the all-encompassing, reckless, sometimes foolish but always total love Rhett felt for Scarlett that she had never felt from Ashley, but she did her best to remember that a love like that had consequences far worse than average.

Still, she felt sorry for Captain Butler more than anything else, and though she would not have admitted it for the wide world, she was secretly glad that Miss Watling took care of him from time to time. Though they had never spoken privately again after that night in the carriage when she had thanked her for saving Ashley’s life, if Melanie passed her on the street, she smiled and said good morning. It stirred a sadness in her heart that the other woman always looked a little terrified by this, glancing this way and that like a frightened animal to be sure no one of quality had heard her greeting before daring to return a smile and a nod. Melanie liked her. She was honest, had more than her share of gumption, and, if she were to tell the truth, Melanie probably would have preferred her conversation to that of the incessantly tattling, nit-picking, back-biting sewing circle of ladies of good breeding. But, it couldn’t be helped.

The moon was shining through the half-empty branches of the chestnut tree in the front yard, looking both beautiful and a little spectral, and a cold breeze had begun to stir the leaves that remained. Melanie pulled her faded wrap around her shoulders a bit more tightly before taking a final deep breath of the evening air and turning back to the house. It wouldn’t be long before Beau would crash through their bedroom door in the morning, demanding his father give him a piggyback ride to the breakfast table. There would be a thousand little things to be done all day, distractions from life that made up her life. Yet, for all the poorly hidden secrets and shrewish gossiping and small indignities of reduced circumstances, she would rather have her own life than anyone else’s. Even if, as she knew while that cold whisper took hold of her heart once more, it wasn’t to be a long one.

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