Sympathy

by gypsymuse

Summary

In the aftermath of tragedy, sometimes people grow closer...and sometimes, they merely fall apart.

Notes

Timeline: Fall, 1873
Chapter 1

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Part One

Summer slipped away almost imperceptibly that year, blending into a golden September so fine that for years afterward people remarked upon its beauty. Life bustled on apace as the stifling heat gradually relaxed its grip on the city and the humid days gave way at last to softer, cooling nights. As the month wore on, gentle rains became a feature of the afternoons, settling the dusty streets and nourishing the last of the late-blooming flowers still rioting bravely in sidewalk gardens. Atlanta had never looked more lovely.

Although a few of the damask roses still lifted defiant heads in the front garden of the Butler mansion, the bushes were nearly devoid of blooms now, having been denuded earlier in the summer to provide much of the floral display for little Bonnie's funeral. Pruned back too far, the bushes struggled to maintain the life they still held. And although the gardeners continued their diligent efforts, they went unnoticed by the ones to whom those efforts had once meant the most, for the small laughing girl who had delighted in the showy fragrant blossoms would never again dart between the bushes playing tag with her elder siblings; and her mother, who had cultivated those bushes especially for her youngest child's delight, had been the one to strip them of their bounty in the first frenzy of her grief.

Behind the forbidding walls of the great mansion, its mistress drifted through her days and nights alike in the grip of a bewildering apathy utterly at variance with her usual vigor. Nameless fears assailed her; and Scarlett, always the most pragmatic of people, suddenly found herself overwhelmed with an almost superstitious dread of the future. Disaster seemed to lurk just ahead, and a huge and horrible certainty that something else was about to befall her became her constant dark companion. The passage of ordinary time was scarcely noticeable to her, sequestered within the enormous dark house with its thick velvet portieres drawn against the incursion of light and life; in true deep mourning for the first time in her life, she felt no desire for society, no interest in leaving the house even if it had been acceptable for her to do so. The mills, sold months before, were no longer her concern; and the store muddled along without her oversight, Hugh Elsing struggling diligently to manage the entire enterprise in her absence. At least during Scarlett's convalescence two years before, Captain Butler had taken it upon himself to see to his wife's business affairs; but at present he was no more capable of doing so than was she, so Hugh was left to his own devices. The store struggled, but soldiered on, unremarked.

Once she had loved her elegant house and now it oppressed her. Where it had stood as a symbol of her accomplishments, now it seemed more a catalogue of her failures, of missed chances and abortive dreams. Scarlett wandered its halls by day and by night, looking very nearly as pinched and drawn as she had during the war; and though the servants went in silent fear of provoking her, in truth she scarcely noticed them or much of anything. Having bundled her two surviving children off to Tara just days after Bonnie's funeral, there was little that required her attention. She spent much of her time in her office, occasionally looking over the ledgers that were dropped off regularly for her perusal, but in truth she did little more than flip the pages idly as the figures swam before her burning eyes. She refused all callers, save Melanie, and after awhile the callers simply stopped coming by. Mammy, who feared for both her mistress and Cap'n Butler, took the extreme liberty of soliciting Dr. Meade's advice; he pronounced acute melancholia on Scarlett's part, and advised her that her husband was likely to drink himself to death without intervention on her part. Deeply skeptical, she merely nodded, wishing she knew a way to intervene with the swarthy
stranger who occasionally appeared at the opposite end of her shining dinner table.

Unconfined by the demands of convention or the desires of an aching heart, Rhett was rarely in attendance; he disappeared for hours, sometimes days at a stretch, only occasionally arriving in time to take a strained and silent dinner with the pale apparition of his wife. If possible, he looked even worse than did Scarlett, and invoked even more fear in the baffled staff. His drinking was nearly constant now, to the point that he was rarely seen to be sober, and where once he had held his liquor well and became ever more sharp-tongued and sardonic with drink, he had deteriorated into a sullen, sodden drunk. Much of his time was spent in the rooms above the Girl of the Period Saloon, seeking liquid oblivion rather than the purchased affections of Belle's girls. When he bothered to return to his garish, cheerless house, it was invariably in the depth of the night when there was little chance of encountering anyone but his long-suffering valet. Pork had long grown accustomed to handling men incapacitated by drink, though Rhett was nearly double the size of Gerald O'Hara, and he attended the needs of the master of the house with quiet efficiency. Rhett had developed an aversion to his second-floor suite, the room in which Bonnie had lain in state after the accident, so Pork would make up a pallet in the butler's pantry at the rear of the house in the servants' wing and bear his employer to bed therein. None of the other servants remarked upon this, and it went unnoticed by Scarlett, who rarely ventured beyond her office when she even bothered to come downstairs.

In the aftermath of the furious words exchanged in the first extremity of their grief, Mr. And Mrs. Butler behaved as virtual strangers, interacting with the indifference of people passing in the halls of a hotel. Scarlett bitterly regretted the accusations she had flung at Rhett immediately following the accident, and desperately wished she knew a way to breach the chasm that had opened up between them. Had she been able to, she would have told him she held him blameless, that she too had been loathe to restrain or restrict their beautiful and high-spirited daughter, that she had been proud of Bonnie's horsemanship and touched by Rhett's devotion to the child. But apologies had never come easily to her, and apologizing to Rhett was nearly impossible even at the best of times; and words left unspoken became harder and harder to imagine, until at last it seemed almost unthinkable that she should ever be able to speak to her husband of anything deeper than her desire that he might pass her a utensil at the dining table. The blank black eyes he turned upon her so infrequently did not invite confidences, the arms held stiffly at his sides forbade the thought of comforting embraces; and the broad chest (now running to softness as muscle was occluded by the effects of drink) where once she had laid her head was surely off-limits to her now.
At first the tearing, desperate sense of loss of her child, wed to a dark loathing of that child's living father, had been almost too much to be borne. Her memories of the events immediately following the accident were already dimmed, though she still relived them in dreams, on those occasions when sleep could be found. In dreams she again came swimming up from the murk of unconsciousness, ripped herself free of Mammy's restraining embrace, hurled herself at Rhett as he staggered stricken from the room where their beloved child lay dead, screaming accusations at him before even the illusion of life and warmth had left the small body. She was in that moment quite literally insane, driven mad by a loss deeper than any she'd yet faced, and in her madness the only ease for the searing pain that drove her seemed to lie in finding a target and destroying it. What she saw, stumbling forward in a state even worse than her own, was not her husband or her friend or the father of her darling little girl, but a symbol of everything that had ever gone wrong in her world, the source of every moment of unhappiness, the cause of the almost unbearable hurt that tore her from the inside out. The monstrous unfairness of this was beyond her ability to comprehend at the time; and like any wounded animal, her only sense was the self-protective urge to strike. She struck not only with her small fists and scratching nails but, even more damagingly, with words more violent than any physical blow. She was left now with only the gist of those words (though she recalled them all quite vividly, in dreams) and the wistful desire to recall them, destroy them, rewind her life back to the moment before they were spoken. She wished she had remained unconscious. Sometimes she wished she had never awoken.

That first shredding grief had been followed by an equally disturbing sensation, that quiet loathing of Rhett. His reaction to her attack, while surely understandable and far from unprovoked, had fanned the spark of her anger into a small flame of hatred she had nourished to herself in the days that followed. He'd flung her away from him, the grief and sorrow he'd moments before wished only to share with her transformed into a consuming anger and loathing of his own, for the woman he saw no longer as his wife or the mother of their beloved daughter but some monster of selfishness and cruelty bent upon his destruction. He shoved her away and her back hit the wall across from the door to his sitting room, her hip banging into the edge of a mahogany whatnot with bruising force; and when she moved as if to raise her hands against him again, he lunged forward, face red and contorted, bellowing like an enraged bull. Fear of him cut momentarily through her fury and she too screamed, in fright and rage and a thousand other emotions impossibly entwined; and just as she would consciously forget the words she'd hurled at him, so would she forget the exact content of his words to her. The utter hatred and contempt in his face and manner, though; that she remembered.

On the third day after the accident she'd refused the laudanum-laced cup pressed into her hands and sent Mammy from her room, trying valiantly to pull herself together sufficiently to consider the situation and what needed to be done. The first thing that came to her mind, quite unbidden and shocking in its simplicity, was the thought: I wish Rhett was dead. Had any observer been present, the look on her face as this concept dawned would have seemed almost comical: the pale green eyes widening, the colour fading from formerly flushed cheeks, lips parting on a soundless O. Shaking her head slightly, she tried to clear the thought away, but there it was, right in the forefront of her consciousness, unwilling to budge: I wish Rhett was dead. I hate him. I wish he was dead, and Bonnie was still alive.

Horrified, she crossed herself, actually looking fearfully round the room as if afraid that God Himself might be somewhere nearby, listening. Over the years Rhett had inspired any number of reactions in her, some of which she would have identified as hatred at the time, but those white-
hot sensations had been as nothing compared with the quiet intensity of this new feeling. It was accompanied by a bone-deep lethargy that crept over her, sapping her strength and stealing her vitality, a lethargy that had nothing at all to do with Dr. Meade's well-intentioned prescription and everything to do with the natural progression of grieving, though of course she did not know it. All she knew for certain was that her favourite child was dead, she hated her husband, and her life was taking on the dimensions of a nightmare from which she was desperate to awaken. In this situation as in every other she had ever faced, the only way out of it that she could envision was to shove blindly through it and go forward, and though she had barely the volition to rise from her bed she knew she must, so she rang again for Mammy and put her feet firmly on the floor.

Later that morning, she squared her shoulders, forced open Rhett's door, and informed him that she had made arrangements for Bonnie's funeral.
Rhett was sober, though just barely, on the morning of the funeral; he had loved his child, and would not disgrace her memory. Atlantan tongues would always find reasons to wag where the Butlers were concerned, but he could at least deny them that one. He stood stiff and remote beneath the leaden sky, his immaculately tailored black suit hanging untidily on a body whose contours had changed since the suit's purchase in happier days, and reddish clay from the damp and churned ground stained his shining black shoes. Nearby, but not touching, unacknowledged and unacknowledging, stood Scarlett, all white skin and black crepe and wide stricken eyes. Melanie, who looked as though she ought to be in bed rather than outdoors in the rain, stood at her side, a steadying arm around her waist.

Life, it seemed, could be unbearably cruel. Surely only a twist of capricious fate could raise two people to such heights and then dash them so fiercely to the ground; surely a just and merciful God would have no hand in it! Melanie could scarce conceive such a thought (which surely bordered on blasphemy), but Scarlett, her mind awash in darkness, had no similar difficulties. Faith had never gone much more than skin deep with her, but the events of the past few weeks had obliterated it entirely. The somber droning words of the hired minister fell upon her ears and meant nothing; the man had not known Bonnie, and all his pious assurances that the child had gone to eternal bliss with the Lord meant less than nothing to Scarlett, who wanted her here with her family. The Lord could have His own children or do without. A world governed by a loving Creator would be a world in which Bonnie lived a long and happy life; that she was being lowered into the ground on an ugly rainy morning before her fifth birthday was proof to Scarlett that no such Creator existed.

At the close of the service, Rhett wordlessly handed Scarlett and Melanie back into the elegant Butler carriage, closing the door gently and instructing the driver to take both women home. It would be nearly another week before Scarlett saw her husband again, and a goodly while thereafter before she next saw him sober.

By the time Rhett reappeared at the Peachtree Street mansion, worry had replaced the icy hatred that had gripped Scarlett's heart for so long. During the week of his absence she did not seek him openly; despite the extremity of their circumstances, she still could not bear to let it be known to the outside world that she, Scarlett Butler, had no inkling of her spouse's whereabouts. She found herself unable to do much of anything beyond waiting and worrying, hoping that wherever he was, he was safe, hoping that the black thoughts she'd harbored hadn't in some arcane way hastened his demise.

After he returned, she never asked him where he'd been, nor did he ever volunteer that information. Truth be told he scarcely remembered a moment of his extended lost weekend, days spent in an alcoholic stupor at times so profound as to border on coma; at one time face-down in an alley behind a rough anonymous saloon from which he'd been unceremoniously ejected; at another, collapsed in a filthy cell upstairs in a vile and nameless brothel; still others, mere blurs, jumbles of half-recalled sounds and colours and faces, meaning nothing. He never knew how he got back home, only that he roused to semi-consciousness to find himself draped over the steps outside one of the rear entrance doors. When he pounded on it, scarcely able to hold himself upright, the door was opened by a horrified-looking kitchen maid, the one who dozed by the bell-pull at night lest the lady of the house need something in the wee hours. Leaving him sprawled
there, half in and half out, she scrambled up the back stairs and rapped frantically upon the door of
the room shared by Rhett's valet, Pork, and his wife.

The manservant was well-schooled in such matters and hastened down to assist his employer. A
pallet was made up in the butler's pantry and Rhett placed thereon; and Pork remained by his side
for the remainder of that night, and many nights to come, reminded of similar nights spent keeping
vigil over Mist' Gerald. In the days to come Pork would find himself struck, for the first time, by
how much Miss Scarlett had come to remind him of her mother—though not in any way that
Scarlett might ever have hoped to resemble her. The shuttered eyes, the stiff posture, the utter
absence of vitality in a face far too youthful to be so empty; these were Ellen O'Hara's traits now
reflected in her eldest daughter. Pork mourned the change in his Miss Scarlett as fiercely as he
mourned the ruin of Mist' Rhett, as deeply as he mourned the loss of little Miss Bonnie. He
wondered what was to become of them all.

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