



Margaret Mitchell

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PART FOUR

CHAPTER XXXI

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 up on 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. However, 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, blacks 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 until 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 someone 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 black people were getting quite insolent. This last she could hardly believe, for she had never seen an insolent black person 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 details 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 black people back into slavery and that the black people's only hope of escaping this fate was the protection given them by the Bureau and the Republican party.

Wilkerson and Hilton furthermore told the black people they were as good as the whites in every way and soon

white and black people marriages would be permitted, soon the estates of their former owners would be divided and every black person would be given forty acres and a mule for his own. They kept the black people 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 backbreaking 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 nothin' 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 never 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 black 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 blacks 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 earbobs I got off that Yankee. We could sell them.”

“Miss Scarlett, who 'round here has got money for earbobs? 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 stonewall. There had been so many stonewalls to butt against this last year.

“What are we goin' to do, Miss Scarlett?”

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