



*B*lue-Eyed Child  
of *F*ortune

THE CIVIL WAR LETTERS OF

*Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*

EDITED BY RUSSELL DUNCAN

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CHAPTER 10

*“I as a nigger colonel”*

During the early months of 1863, with battlefield casualties rising, desertions increasing, and volunteering decreasing, Lincoln and Congress acted to secure men for the Union armies. On March 3, Congress passed the Enrollment Act, which authorized a draft of all men of ages twenty to forty-five to serve a three-year enlistment. That conscription act caused riots in Northern cities and was nearly as unpopular as the North's other new focus for soldier procurement.

In late January, Lincoln had authorized Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to enlist black men into volunteer regiments. Many people who supported the war for union lashed out at Lincoln for changing the goal of the war to one for freedom of the slaves. The idea of black men in uniforms with guns frightened some Northerners and most Southerners. Many white soldiers loathed the idea of serving with black soldiers. Nevertheless, Lincoln persisted with his plan. The first unit approved and organized in the North was the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. To command this vanguard regiment, Governor John A. Andrew handpicked a veteran soldier and son of a respected abolitionist family—Robert Gould Shaw.

Stafford Court-House, Va.

[RGS]

Feb. 4, 1863

My Dear Annie,

Your two letters, of the 25th and 29th of January, have reached me at last, and I was glad enough to get them. By this time you are on your way to New York, where you will find my last letter. I sent it to Father, thinking that you were going to Susie's.

I did not read General Hitchcock's testimony in McDowell's case.<sup>1</sup> Holt's summing up of the testimony for and against Porter, seemed to me very poor, for a man of his ability; and if I could persuade myself that the court (composed as it was, of officers of honourable standing) could be dishonest, I should think there had been foul play.<sup>2</sup> Several officers have been dismissed for uttering the like sentiments; so I think I had better keep my opinion to myself. I was much surprised to hear, the other day, from a regular officer in Porter's Corps, that, though they considered the latter a fine officer, he was not personally liked. I have hitherto heard just the contrary.

We are tolerably comfortable here now, as our log-huts are going up again, and we have come across a sutler who furnishes the officers with means to keep a very good mess.

Father has just left here. He came down yesterday, and brought me an offer from Governor Andrew of the Colonelcy of his new black regiment.<sup>3</sup> The Governor considers it a most important command; and I could not help feeling, from the tone of his letter, that he did me a great honour in offering it to me. My Father will tell you some of the reasons why I thought I ought not to accept it. If I had taken it, it would only have been from a sense of duty; for it would have been anything but an agreeable task. Please tell me, without reserve, what you think about it; for I am very anxious to know. I should have decided much sooner than I did, if I had known before. I am afraid Mother will think I am shirking my duty; but I had some good practical reasons for it, besides the desire to be at liberty to decide what to do when my three years have expired.<sup>4</sup>

You asked me in one of your letters whether I was a Unitarian. Since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have considered I had better not try to decide about sects. I always like to go to church, and I like to hear a good sermon, whether it is preached in an Episcopal or a Methodist church. The only Sunday school I ever went to, was Episcopal, and I have been to the Unitarian church less than to any other. While I am on this subject, I must remind you of the Bible you are going to send me.

I like the name Robert much better than Bob, and shall be very glad to have

you call me so. Father, Mother, and Effie always call me "Rob," which slight change of a letter makes a great difference in the name.

There does not seem to be much enthusiasm for Hooker. The cry in the army is still for McClellan. I wonder whether he will ever get his old command again! I don't think he is doing himself any good by having public receptions in Boston.

The hills about Lenox would be a very welcome sight to me, whether they were covered with snow, with grass, or with nothing at all; though just now, I had rather be in New York. I want to see you *horribly* (that is the only word I can think of for it), but I have to console myself by looking at the vignette.

Did you manage to have some work done on the place before you left?

Our chaplain is an "Orthodox" clergyman, and is much superior to most in the army, I think, though he does get into very lazy habits.<sup>5</sup> Camp life gives no incentive to activity or energy.

I have about a dozen acquaintances in the South. Most of them classmates of mine, with a few of whom I was on most intimate terms. Two of them were captured in North Carolina by another classmate, a captain in the Forty-fourth Massachusetts. He invited them to dinner, and after having had a jolly time together, they were paroled and sent home. We heard, from some prisoners taken at Antietam, that some of our friends were in a regiment that was opposed to ours in that battle. I don't think I know any one in Richmond.

Being officer of the day, to-day, and having several little affairs to attend to in consequence, I must close. So good-bye, dear Annie, with a great deal of love.

Your affectionate Rob

p.s.—Do you know of a woman in Lenox named McDonald?<sup>6</sup> Whether she is very poor, or anything about her? Her son is in my company, and is always getting punished; but when the men's families are poor we do not like to cut down their pay, which is the most effectual punishment.

1. Gen. Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1798–1870) graduated from West Point in 1817 and resigned from the military to become a writer. In February 1862, Lincoln appointed Hitchcock as a major general and asked him to replace McClellan. Instead, Hitchcock accepted the post as director of prisoner exchange. After the defeat at Second Bull Run, army offi-

cers pointed fingers blaming others for the loss. McClellan accused Pope of poor generalship, and rumors spread that McDowell was a traitor. In the forty-fifth day of inquiry into charges of treason against McDowell, Hitchcock testified on McDowell's behalf. McDowell was innocent of the charges against him, but Lincoln relieved him of command and

had him reassigned to California. Faust, *Encyclopedia*, p. 363; *NYT*, Jan. 20 (2:1), 1863; McPherson, *Battle Cry*, p. 532–33.

2. Joseph Holt (1807–94) was a Kentucky lawyer who became U.S. postmaster general and secretary of war under Buchanan. On Sept. 3, 1862, Lincoln appointed him judge advocate general of the army. His most famous case was the prosecution of Clement Vallandigham, a leading Copperhead. Gen. Fitz John Porter (1822–1901) graduated from West Point in 1845, served in the Mexican War, and became one of McClellan's closest friends and supporters. Porter disliked Pope, and vice versa. When Pope lost at Second Bull Run, he blamed Porter for not following orders and thus, causing the defeat. A court martial, with Holt prosecuting, found Porter guilty and revoked his commission on Jan. 21, 1863. Porter argued that he couldn't obey the order to strike Jackson's flank because Longstreet had moved into position next to Jackson

making no flank available. In 1886, a court of appeals reversed the decision against Porter. Faust, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 366, 594; McPherson, *Battle Cry*, p. 529.

3. John Albion Andrew (1818–67) was born in Maine, attended Bowdoin College, and set up a law practice in Boston. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Andrew agitated until Edwin M. Stanton approved Andrew's requests to recruit a black regiment, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry. The best source on Andrew is still Henry G. Pearson, *The Life of John A. Andrew, Governor of Massachusetts, 1861–1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904).

4. The Second Massachusetts Infantry was composed of three-year men. Those like Shaw who joined in May 1861 would complete their service obligation in May 1864.

5. Chaplain Alonzo H. Quint.

6. McDonald is unidentified.

Stafford C. H., Va.

Feb. 8, 1863

Dear Annie,

You know by this time, perhaps, that I have changed my mind about the black regiment. After Father left, I began to think I had made a mistake in refusing Governor Andrew's offer. Mother has telegraphed to me that you would not disapprove of it, and that makes me feel much more easy about having taken it. Going for another three years is not nearly so bad a thing for a colonel as a captain; as the former can much more easily get a furlough. Then, after I have undertaken this work, I shall feel that what I have to do is to prove that a negro can be made a good soldier, and, that being established, it will not be a point of honour with me to see the war through, unless I really occupied a position of importance in the army. Hundreds of men might leave the army, you know, without injuring the service in the slightest degree.

[RGS]

solve the North's manpower problem proved wrong. Lincoln used the act four times to call for troops—in all, 776,000 men. But with many fleeing to Canada to avoid the call, with others gaining exemptions for physical disabilities or hardship, and with many more paying a commutation fee or hiring a substitute, only six percent of draftees actually went into the army. Still, we do not know how many men enlisted to avoid being drafted. Shaw's appraisal that the draft now made it less important to raise black regiments indicates how far apart he stood from committed egalitarians. Frederick Douglass and others knew that the way to citizenship and freedom lay

Boston  
February 20, 1863  
Dear Mimi,<sup>1</sup>

You will be astonished to hear, I suppose, (unless some one has mentioned it already) that I am engaged to Miss Annie Haggerty. Perhaps you remember that two years ago I told you she would be my "young woman" some time.

Harry and I keep along pretty well together, don't we?<sup>2</sup> And we are both so unfortunate, as to have the prospect of being dragged off again to the tented field, when we want most horribly to stay at home. We are at home now together, he as Lieut. Col. of the 2d Mass. Cavalry, and I as a Nigger Col., for Gov. Andrew has given me the command of his black regiment.

The conscription bill has passed so I advise Theodore not to come home, lest he be drafted.<sup>3</sup> Tell him I will give him a position as chaplain if he would like to go into a good nigger concern.

I hope, dear Mimi, you and he and the baby are well, and are having a pleasant time. It seems as if we were to have continual war in this country. I pray God it may not be so, for there has been enough blood shed to atone for a great many sins.

Since I have been at home the misery and unhappiness caused by this war have struck me more forcibly than ever—for in active service one gets accustomed to think very lightly of such things. Last evening I went to see the

through putting black men in blue uniforms and having them spill red blood for their country. Shaw never seemed to understand that or never cared to.

McPherson, *Battle Cry*, pp. 600–604.

9. Susan and John Parkman.

10. Theodore Parkman.

11. Annie Russell Agassiz and her father-in-law Professor Louis Agassiz.

12. William Henry Homans (1840–93), a clerk from Augusta, Maine, joined the First Massachusetts Infantry as a corporal on May 24, 1861. He transferred to the Fifty-fourth on Feb. 19, 1863. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, pp. 332–33.

[LYM]

Parkmans, and the way in which they bear Theodore's loss is beautiful. You know how devoted they all were to him, and what a terrible blow his death must have been—and there are thousands of such cases on both sides.

Give my love to Theodore. I hope we shall see you safe at home before long—before Harry and I go off again. All are well here.

Always your affectionate Cousin,  
Robert G. Shaw

1. Elizabeth Russell Lyman.

3. Mimi's husband, Theodore Lyman.

2. Mimi's brother, Harry S. Russell.

Boston  
February 21, 1863  
My dear Charley,<sup>1</sup>

[MHS]

Your letter with enclosures reached me yesterday. I am much obliged to you for attending to those matters. Do I owe you anything? Please let me know as soon as possible. I think Johnson's bill was a little more than I supposed.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you know by this time, that my engagement is out. I had a nice time for four days in New York as Miss H. was staying at my sister's.<sup>3</sup>

Harry Russell looks more cheerful & happy than I ever saw him—and Miss Forbes likewise. They are about as devoted a couple as I ever saw.<sup>4</sup>

The darky concern is getting along very well. We are going into camp at Readeville. Sent 25 men out this morning & hope soon to have things entrain. The State House people give us every assistance in their power. The Somerset Club crowd are down on us, but nevertheless I had an invitation to go there whenever I wished.<sup>5</sup> I hear there was a little row about it at first.

Please ask Coughlin, when he goes to Washington to get a package from Adams for me, and send it to 44 Beacon St., Boston.<sup>6</sup> It is something which I should be very sorry to lose.

Henry Higginson has been here for a week.<sup>7</sup> Give my love to Greely & if you see B. Adams tell him that I received his letter and that it gave me a great deal of pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

I suppose Brown & Fox are back by this time.<sup>9</sup> Give my love to Tom Robeson & Grafton.<sup>10</sup> Charley Horton & I dine with Bangs today en famille.<sup>11</sup>

Good-bye my dear Charley. I hope you will enjoy your Provost Martial duties.

Affectionately Yours,  
Robert G. Shaw



Thoron, ed., *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams, 1865-1883* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), pp. xiii, 465. Ida Agassiz, daughter of Professor Louis Agassiz, married Henry Lee Higginson on Dec. 5, 1863. Crawford, *Famous Families*, vol. 1, pp. 219, 225, 254. Miss Heath is unidentified.

3. Josiah Quincy (1772-1864) was a former mayor of Boston (1823-28) and president of Harvard (1829-45). *DAB*, vol. 8, pp. 308-11. Perhaps Shaw is referring to the home of Henry Dwight Sedgwick, a prominent Boston abolitionist. Crawford, *Famous Families*, vol. 2, pp. 288-89.

Readville

[HL]

Feb. 25 1863

Dear Father,

I forgot to mention yesterday that a man is entitled to \$2.00 per head for sound recruits sent to camp.<sup>1</sup>

We have got our barracks all in order here, and can accommodate all the men that come now. I hope you will be able to send us some, before many days.

We have 40 here already and they look remarkably well in their uniforms. They are not of the best class of nigs—and if it weren't for the want of state aid we should be able to get a much better set from the other states.<sup>2</sup>

If you have any difficulty about making the arrangements I spoke of in my yesterday's note, I wish you would let me know. Perhaps you can find a better man than Givens to do the work, and I think it would be well to get some white man who would interest himself in superintending the recruiting & take it off your hands. Doesn't Mr. Gay know some one who would like a commission in the Regt & would be a good man to look after matters in N. Y.<sup>3</sup>

Your loving son

R. G. S.

1. Massachusetts paid recruiting officers two dollars for each recruit mustered into a Massachusetts unit. This incentive caused many recruiters to beat the bushes for volunteers, sometimes going to extremes to sign up any and every available body. While payment depended upon the recruit's passing a physical inspection, recruiters sent along anyone who could walk and

thus caused the state excessive costs in transporting unacceptable individuals to and from camps. R. P. Hallowell to James Bunker Congdon, Mar. 3, 1863, Congdon Scrapbook, NBFPL.

2. In *Letters: RGS* (1864), an editor, probably Shaw's mother, made two important deletions to what Shaw had written. This sentence about the men not being "the best class of nigs" is impor-

tant for understanding Shaw's mindset at the beginning of camp. Two sentences later, where Shaw wrote "get some white man," his 1864 editor left out the words "white man" and inserted the word

"one." Givens's name is also deleted from the printed version. *Letters: RGS* (1864), p. 267.

3. Sydney Howard Gay.

Boston

[RGS]

March 3, 1863

My Dearest Annie,

To-day I received your letter of the 1st of March, from Astoria, and was delighted to hear you were having such a nice, quiet time.

It hardly seems possible that those three weeks are nearly over, which we, or I, looked forward to with dread.<sup>1</sup>

Next Saturday morning I shall find you at Susie's, and I hope with your mind at ease, and all your business wound up; for if you have a hundred people to see, and fifty errands to do, I shall be very much "aggrawated."

Did I tell you that Uncle William Greene had given me silver eagles for my shoulder-straps?<sup>2</sup> He gave them to me, on condition that, when I needed them no longer, I should give you one, and Pauline (Uncle Quin's wife) the other, for shawl-pins.<sup>3</sup> So I shall have your names engraved on them, and I don't think I could carry two better girls on my shoulders.

. . . Good bye until next Saturday—No, I shall write once more.

With love,

Your Rob

1. Annie probably took a three-week trip to prepare for the wedding and to allow Shaw to concentrate on the regiment.

Greene rose to the rank of general during the Civil War. Smith, *Beacon Hill's*, p. 491.

2. Minister William Batchelder

3. Quincy Adams Shaw and Pauline Agassiz Shaw.

Boston

[HL]

March 3 1863

My dear Effie,

Yours of last Sunday, reached me today. Next Sunday you must write something in your own room & send it down to the parlour as I shall be there.

We have some more engagements here—Greely Curtis to Miss Hatty Appleton—Dr. Stone to Miss Hodges of Salem—and as you have, no doubt, heard, Fred. d'Hauteville to Miss Bessie Fish.<sup>1</sup> It has become so entirely the