

Excerpts from *Sherman's Mistress in Savannah*, by Lawrence Martin

To this point the book has provided background on Sherman's march from Atlanta to Savannah, his occupation of the Charles Green mansion in Savannah, and the settling in of Union soldiers. The following excerpt describes Belle's first meeting with General Sherman.

...Finally, after waiting over hour and a half, it was Belle's turn. There were only a few others left in the foyer as she ascended the staircase. Her first impression on entering his office was that Sherman looked tired, and that he was taller than she expected, about 6 feet. He had deep red hair and a short rusty beard. His face was marked with what she called worry lines but other people might call wrinkles. She inferred his thinking at that moment: 'Oh, no, not another wife asking for protection'.

"Your name, M'am?" asked the aide.

"Mrs. Belle Anderson."

"Address?"

"106 Jones St., Savannah."

"And your business with the general?"

Speaking to the aide, she began: "My mother, who has recently..."

"I'm sorry, M'am, you may address the General directly."

Belle turned toward Sherman, who was still standing, and she started over. "My mother, who has recently deceased, begged me – asked me – to bring you this letter, General. It is sealed and I have not read it. As horrible as this war has been, and as much as you have made it so, I must honor my mother's dying wish." This was clearly a rehearsed line, and said with aplomb. The aide stiffened a bit but Sherman just smiled. She went on.

"My mother had a premonition you would show up here."

"I'm sorry about her passing. Premonition? When did she die, and from what cause?"

"She died a few weeks after the fall of Atlanta, in late September, from cancer. She was 46. She said: "Belle, Sherman has taken Atlanta. He will come here next, I feel it. If he does come, you will please deliver to him this note. In person, I beg you. Do not trust it to any of his lieutenants. And please don't ask me what is in it.""

"Again, accept my condolences, Mrs. Anderson. Please understand that I want this war to end as much as you do. Should I read it now?"

"If you wish." Belle hadn't thought of that question. Would he read it now or later? It was really up to him. He could pocket the thing and send her away. She was of course curious and did not move, but quickly added, "Yes, please."

Sherman did remember a woman named Anderson from long ago, but in the flush of meeting Belle the details didn't register immediately, or he might have pocketed the note for a later time. Instead, out of simple curiosity and to get this visit over, he opened the sealed envelope and removed a single slip of paper. As he read Belle could see her mother's handwriting but not make out any words. His smirk turned to a frown. He read the letter again, cleared his throat slightly and looked at the young woman. Then to the aide and sentry:

"I wish to have a private discussion with Mrs. Anderson. Could you please leave us alone for a few minutes? You can wait in the hallway," and he motioned them to the door.

"But sir," protested the aide, concerned to leave their Uncle Billy alone with this unknown woman in a Confederate's house.

"It's OK. It'll be OK. That's an order." They did as told, closing the door behind them. Sherman walked to the window overlooking Macon St. and motioned Belle to follow.

He held the letter in his hand and looked hard at Belle, then turned away to face the window for a full half minute. Belle thought this was certainly one of the more awkward moments of her young life. She saw him bite his lip just before he turned around. The letter jarred every bit of his memory, down to the last minute detail of their encounter so long ago.

“So, you have not read this, really?”

“No, you saw it was sealed. You knew her?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask in what capacity?”

“Good friend. Dear friend. I was in Savannah years ago, actually 20 years ago, and we met at the Pulaski House. She was working as a receptionist.”

“And?”

“I shan’t discuss it further.”

“May I infer, dear sir?”

“You may infer all you wish. I am a happily married man, and I do not wish to bring up a bygone era that can do no one any good. This was 20 years ago. You were how old then?”

“Four. My father’s cousin owed the hotel when I was a child, I do remember that. And my father... was he away at sea?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“So it was more than a passing ‘How do you do, Lieutenant Sherman’? I suppose it was Lieutenant Sherman then.”

“Yes.”

“Good friends?”

“Yes.” All Sherman had to do was leave it at that. He had no obligation to show her the letter or discuss its contents, but something propelled him forward – to share this private history and see where it might lead.

“You want to read it?”

“Yes.”

He handed over the slip of paper. She read it quickly, half afraid he might snatch it back.

September 15, 1864

Dear William

*You have made it back to Savannah. I somehow knew you would. As I write this, I know I won’t be around to ‘welcome’ you. I hope the citizens of our city have not suffered too greatly. You are a Union soldier through and through, and I respect that. My husband and son-in-law died fighting for the Confederacy, and now I am dying of natural cause – a cancer, my doctors tell me. My only comfort – now and in the life hereafter – is Belle, a child whom you never met when you were here, and her son. Belle is a beautiful young woman now, alas a war widow. I would ask only one favor from the grave. Please, to the fullest extent within your power, please make sure no harm comes to them. I do fear for their future when – as now seems inevitable – the South will fall and Savannah will be at the will and mercy of your army. With affection from the beyond,
Maryjane (“Marcie”) Wickham.*

Belle fought back tears. "Had I known the contents, sir, I would not have honored my mother's wish. We do not need your protection, at least I sincerely hope not."

"She doesn't mention the boy's father. Where is he?"

"Edward was killed at Second Manassas. A bullet through the heart, I am told. He died a hero, sir."

"And your father?"

"Chancellorsville. He also died the hero's death." Then, almost inaudibly, "A hero is a man who is afraid to run away."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just that the word is sometimes overused, I think, and does not really soothe the widow or the child."

"I see." Sherman had witnessed thousands of battlefield deaths and was hardened to this sort of personal history. Husbands, sons, brothers -- a multitude killed since the summer of 1861. On a personal level it was always tragic. As a commanding general it was the cost of doing business.

"So there's just you and your son?"

"We live with my aunt, my father's older sister, who I'm afraid has a touch of senility. She's forgetful, and rarely leaves the house unless someone goes along."

"Slaves?"

"We had two but my father freed them when he entered the army. He too had a premonition that this day might come. He didn't want our servants to feel hostility toward us, to abandon us if we lost the war, which is what most slaves surely will do now that they are liberated. So in 1861 they became freed Negroes, and we pay them and they understand they are free to leave if they wish. And that was long before Mr. Lincoln's Proclamation. Savannah had almost 1000 free blacks before you arrived."

"So I've learned. Now you have thousands more."

"Ours stayed with us. You won't find two more devoted and loyal people anywhere in this city. Mabel, also a widow, I've known her since childhood and she lives with us and helps raise my son. She's with him now. And Hoshiah Jackson has been with us for years. He helps maintain the house, the horse and carriage. He goes home to his own family at night."

"And your means of support, if I may ask?"

"An inheritance I have is sufficient to pay them and support us. And I do some private teaching in my home, that helps."

"In your own home?"

"Just three children. I used to teach in the Mayberry School here in town, but now I just do it privately. We are in recess for the holidays. Our home is quite nice, so I have no personal needs. Unlike a lot of people in Savannah right now."

"So I have learned in my short stay here. Half the people I met today begged me to get more food for the city. It's a problem. And you know what the other half asked?"

"If I may surmise from the two women before me, protection for their persons and property. But *I* didn't ask General, my mother did."

"Would you believe," and here Sherman gave out a loud chuckle, "General Hardee even had the temerity to ask me to protect his brother! I'm supposed to be a monster, a devourer of flesh, a burner of homes, and yet three Confederate generals have asked me to protect their families! Shows you the hypocrisy of all those newspaper articles about me. The generals surely know I am an honorable soldier, or they wouldn't trust me with such requests."

"I should think there is a lot of puffoonery on both sides, General. What you read about southerners in northern papers is just as outlandish, I'm sure. You'll find more tolerance and decency here than you would ever expect from northern propaganda."

"Well, yes, you have a point Mrs. Anderson. I've said that myself. You do have a point."

"And your family sir?"

"I have not seen my wife Ellen in 9 months. A son died last year, at age 9. I have 5 children, including a son just 6 months old. I've never seen him. They are all in Indiana now. Separation is

painful. Nothing good about this war. I want it to be over and will do everything I can to make that happen. War affects everyone. We did not start this war, Mrs. Anderson, but we will finish it.”

“I don’t doubt that, General. Well, I better be going.”

“Won’t you come again? The sentries don’t bite.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think we really have anything more to discuss, General. But you have been most kind.”

Belle did not want to go but her head told her she must. They felt a mutual, physical attraction, a longing really, but it was so repressed that a casual observer would miss it. Belle wondered: Is Mama reaching out through me? And for the first time in months Sherman felt a strong desire to hold and caress a woman.

“Our troops are putting on a grand parade at noon tomorrow, on Bay Street. We’ll have bands, color guards, it’ll be a spectacle. The Mayor and aldermen will be there. I think your boy may like it. You should come. The soldiers are to pass our stands at noon, corner of Bull and Bay. Then they have me scheduled to greet visitors after the parade. I should like to meet your son.”

“Thank you, General. I’ll look into it. Good day.”

“Mr. Campbell,” he yelled. “You and the Corporal may enter now. Mrs. Anderson is leaving. Please escort her out.”

Then in low voice to Belle, “Thank you for coming. I really mean that.”

They shook hands and Belle left the room.

The following excerpt describes Belle’s 2nd encounter with General Sherman. The morning before this encounter Belle’s home has been invaded by two Union officers, who state their intention of occupying the home while in Savannah.

Shortly after 11 am Belle approached the Green mansion’s Macon Street sentries. Thankfully, they were not the same soldiers she had met on Friday, lest she be too familiar. She asked to see General Sherman.

“I’m sorry, M’am but the General is not seeing visitors at this time.”

“I’m not a visitor, I’m here on official business.”

“And what would that be, M’am?”

“It’s personal.”

“I’m sorry, M’am, but visitation starts at 2 pm today, you may return then.”

“Listen to me, and please listen hard.” Her inflection was not pleading but intimidating. “I know the General, and he specifically asked me to report to him on this vital matter. If you don’t let me in I will see that he learns of your rebuff, and you will not be a happy soldier. You will be responsible for preventing him from learning vital war information.”

The poor sentry was new to Sherman’s headquarters and not sure what to do. What if she’s right? After a few agonizing seconds he said “wait here” and disappeared inside. Belle eyed the other sentry, who looked briefly at her, then away; he did not wish to become embroiled in this situation. The first sentry returned a few minutes later. “Major Hitchcock will speak to you.”

Belle was led inside to the large library on the first floor, where Henry Hitchcock presided. Hitchcock had been a prominent attorney in St. Louis when, in late 1864, he became tired of sitting out the war. Through a powerful family connection – his uncle was Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, advisor to War Secretary Edwin Stanton – he secured position as Sherman’s personal secretary. It helped that Sherman knew him in St. Louis, and that Stanton made the proposal. Hitchcock joined Sherman in October 1864 and marched with the army to Savannah. Hitchcock loved the position and was fiercely loyal to his boss, meeting with him virtually every day and interceding in the minutest of matters. In Missouri he practiced contract and real estate law, but knew the gruff and bluff of litigators. He could be

charming or acerbic, as the situation required, but his most important qualities were intellect and good judgment.

He had the largest desk she had ever seen, easily 8 feet wide and 4 feet deep, and made of solid oak. On either side stood a flag bearing stars and stripes, which Belle looked at as if a curiosity. Until Sherman arrived the U.S. flag was nowhere to be found.

“Good afternoon Miss, you are...?”

“Mrs. Belle Anderson, a friend of the General Sherman’s. I met him three days ago, during visitation, and he was most kind. He said to come back if I had any problems, and I have a major problem, right now.”

“The General is in a meeting, but if you’ll tell me the problem, I’ll see that it gets the proper attention.”

Now was no time to insist on meeting only with the general, which might never happen. She would not press her luck; for this crisis she would accept help from any quarter. She told Hitchcock of the morning’s events and names of the intruders. She explained “I felt threatened physically,” and how her son was so frightened.

“Did they, um, manhandle you or your family in any way?”

“No, but their manner and speech were most ungentlemanly and menacing. I don’t know for certain, but I suspect the lieutenant had been imbibing some liquor for breakfast.”

Hitchcock was attentive, for he must be able to recount events to Sherman should it be warranted. He did not know the officers in question. But he did know the general’s view on such matters, and that an order was being drafted that very day about interactions with civilians. He decided the matter should be relayed.

“If you will wait a few minutes, I’ll let him know as soon as his meeting is over” and with that he disappeared into another room. Belle was alone in the library. She knew the foyer and Sherman’s upstairs office, but had not seen much else of the house. She marveled at the woodwork: American black walnut, beautifully carved, with elaborate crown moldings. The doorknobs, hinges, even the keyholes were silver plated. In walking through the living room into the library she noted that both rooms had marble mantles, clearly imported. They also had identical chandeliers, easily 5 feet across, and the mirrors had gold leaf frames. She supposed such ornate furnishings were typical of upper class London or New York, but in Savannah it was extraordinary. As for the books, they were mostly English, with a focus on history and geography. She found a volume of Dickens, with which she was familiar from her schooling, and began reading. A few minutes later the door opened and Major Hitchcock announced:

“The general will see you now,” Mrs. Anderson

She was ushered into a small office off the library. Hitchcock left and closed the door. Now it was just the two of them, no aide and no sentry.

Sherman went right to the issue. “Major Hitchcock gave me an outline, Mrs. Anderson, but I wanted to hear from you in directly.”

“Once again, General, thank you for seeing me. I know this is highly irregular. But my mother’s note is becoming all too prescient, I’m afraid.” She recounted events of the morning, embellishing even more her feeling of violation and threat to personal safety. “I have a mother’s fear for my child. I don’t know these men, and I know this is war, but it is an affront. I didn’t think you would allow such a thing. Am I mistaken? Please tell me I am not mistaken.”

“Belle, you are not mistaken. These men will not sleep in your house tonight – or ever. You have my word.”

Just like that? So easy! She began crying. She had wanted not to like this man, who had brought so much misery on Georgians. But every encounter with him was exceptional: his understanding and kindness, the way he handled Benjamin’s comment at the parade, and his commanding authority. ‘These men will not sleep in your house tonight – or ever’. He was her savior! Could this really be the same man responsible for burning homes and ripping up railroads and killing soldiers like her own husband and father?

To Sherman, the issue at hand was a trivial matter, but he understood its effect on Belle. She seemed so vulnerable, standing there and crying over his simple promise. Wishing nothing more than to give comfort, he put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her toward him. Her head lay on his bosom and she sobbed, softly.

“Belle, it’s OK, I’m glad you came and very sorry this has happened. Go home to your son, everything will be OK.”

She did not want to leave. Why was she so attracted to him? Why, Mother – why? She looked into his eyes. He could see that she wanted – expected – to be kissed. And it happened. They kissed lightly and Sherman felt tears on his cheeks. Then Sherman gently pushed her away, fearing perhaps a sudden intrusion.

“Belle, you mustn’t. You don’t owe me anything. You should leave now, you won’t be bothered.”

She took out a handkerchief from her purse and wiped away the tears. “I am so...embarrassed. I’m sorry.”

“You needn’t be. It’s been a stressful morning, I understand.”

Rather spontaneously, for it was not in her thoughts on arrival: “There is so much I want to talk to you about, General. So many questions. Could I return later?”

“I am busy later. And you know when I receive visitors in the afternoon, that’s not the place for personal discussion.”

“This evening?”

“Belle, what are you talking about?”

Her crying had stopped and she felt more assertive. “After all your meetings, all your visitations, after dinner, after everyone has gone to bed. Just to talk.”

“Belle, you don’t owe me anything. I don’t want to be in any position to take advantage of you.”

“It is I who will be taking advantage, General.”

This was a most unexpected turn of events. Belle was beautiful, prettier even than her mother. He had felt her ample bosom against his chest and physical attraction was undeniable. She had a spunk and intelligence that just added to her physical attractiveness. But he had a war to run. And the last thing he needed was to become entangled with another woman, a southerner at that and 20 years his junior. That he even contemplated the idea for a second bothered him. But he had undeniable urges, and she was being the aggressor, not him.

Sherman so longed for his wife Ellen, for female companionship. His men could frequent any of a dozen bordellos in town, some of them ‘high end’, and relax in the company of the opposite sex. That was impossible for the very married major-general. But, being major-general, he could also do what he wanted. The only people he had to answer to were hundreds of miles away. Back and forth he struggled. Opportunity? Disaster? He couldn’t decide. But generals must make decisions, and he did.

“Just to talk?”

“Just to talk.”

“You will have to be in disguise to come here at that hour.”

“Of course.”

He thought a minute. “I will have a soldier pick you up tonight and walk you over. He will have an army coat and hat for you to wear. You have a rear alley?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I don’t want neighbors or any of our patrols seeing a soldier approaching your front steps at night. Can you be in the alley at 10 pm?”

“Yes.”

“Best hem your dress and put your hair in a bun, so they don’t show under the coat and hat. There are back stairs through the kitchen. He can bring you up those. And your son, who will stay with him?”

“Mabel lives with us and she is very loyal. Benjamin will be fast asleep. And my aunt will be oblivious, she hardly knows what day it is anymore.”

“What will you tell Mabel?”

“That I am with the Southern Resistance, and have a nighttime clandestine meeting to discuss plans.”

Sherman laughed. "Good idea. Is there such a thing, a Southern Resistance movement now that Hardee's gone and the mayor is in my pocket?"

"Oh yes! And I am the leader! Oh, how did you find me out?"

He laughed again. "Belle, you are something else!"

"I think this is a good plan, General," said Belle.

"Call me William. See you tonight."