

**A letter by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw  
to his wife Annie about**

**The Raid at Darien, Georgia**

St. Simons Island, Ga. [RGS]  
Tuesday, June 9, 1863

My Dearest Annie,

We arrived at the southern point of this island at six this morning. I went ashore to report to Colonel [James] Montgomery, and was ordered to proceed with my regiment to a place called "Pike's Bluff," on the inner coast of the island, and encamp. We came up here in another steamer, the "Sentinel," as the "De Molay" is too large for the inner waters,—and took possession to-day of a plantation formerly owned by Mr. Gould. We have a very nice camping-ground for the regiment, and I have my quarters in "*the house*"; very pleasantly situated, and surrounded by fine large trees. The island is beautiful, as far as I have seen it. You would be enchanted with the scenery here; the foliage is wonderfully thick, and the trees covered with hanging moss, making beautiful avenues wherever there is a road or path; it is more like the tropics than anything I have seen. Mr. Butler King's plantation, where I first went ashore, must have been a beautiful place, and well kept. It is entirely neglected now, of course; and as the growth is very rapid, two years' neglect almost covers all traces of former care.

June 12th—If I could have gone on describing to you the beauties of this region, who knows but I might have made a fine addition to the literature of our age? But since I wrote the above, I have been looking at something very different.

On Wednesday, a steamboat appeared off our wharf, and Colonel Montgomery hailed me from the deck with, "How soon can you get ready to start on an expedition?" I said, "In half an hour," and it was not long before we were on board with eight companies, leaving two for camp-guard.

We steamed down by his camp, where two other steamers with five companies from his regiment, and two sections of Rhode Island artillery, joined us. A little below there we ran aground, and had to wait until midnight for flood-tide, when we got away once more.

At 8 A.M., we were at the mouth of the Altamaha River, and immediately made for Darien. We wound in and out through the creeks, twisting and turning continually, often heading in directly the opposite direction from that which we intended to go, and often running aground, thereby losing much time. Besides our three vessels, we were followed by the gunboat "Paul Jones."

On the way up, Montgomery threw several shells among the plantation buildings, in what seemed to me a very brutal way; for he didn't know how many women and children there might be.

About noon we came in sight of Darien, a beautiful little town. Our artillery peppered it a little, as we came up, and then our three boats made fast to the wharves, and we landed the troops. The town was deserted, with the exception of two white women and two negroes.

Montgomery ordered all the furniture and movable property to be taken on board the boats. This occupied some time; and after the town was pretty thoroughly disembowelled, he said to me, "I shall burn this town." He speaks always in a very low tone, and has quite a sweet smile when addressing you. I told him, "I did not want the responsibility of it," and he was only too happy to take it all on his shoulders; so the pretty little place was burnt to the ground, and not a shed remains standing; Montgomery firing the last buildings with

his own hand. One of my companies assisted in it, because he ordered them out, and I had to obey. You must bear in mind, that not a shot had been fired at us from this place, and that there were evidently very few men left in it. All the inhabitants (principally women and children) had fled on our approach, and were no doubt watching the scene from a distance. Some of our grape-shot tore the skirt of one of the women whom I saw. Montgomery told her that her house and property should be spared; but it went down with the rest.

The reasons he gave me for destroying Darien were, that the Southerners must be made to feel that this was a real war, and that they were to be swept away by the hand of God, like the Jews of old. In theory it may seem all right to some, but when it comes to being made the instrument of the Lord's vengeance, I myself don't like it. Then he says, "We are outlawed, and therefore not bound by the rules of regular warfare" but that makes it none the less revolting to wreak our vengeance on the innocent and defenceless.

By the time we had finished this dirty piece of business, it was too dark to go far down the narrow river, where our boat sometimes touched both banks at once; so we lay at anchor until daylight, occasionally dropping a shell at a stray house. The "Paul Jones" fired a few guns as well as we.

I reached camp at about 2 P.M. to-day, after as abominable a job as I ever had a share in.

We found a mail waiting for us, and I received your dear letter, and several from Father, Mother, Effie, and some business correspondence. This is the first news we have had since our departure, and I rather regained my good spirits.

Now, dear Annie, remember not to breathe a word of what I have written about this raid, to any one out of our two families, for I have not yet made up my mind what I ought to do. Besides my own distaste for this barbarous sort of warfare, I am not sure that it will not harm very much the reputation of black troops and of those connected with them. For myself, I have gone through the war so far without dishonour, and I do not like to degenerate into a plunderer and robber,—and the same applies to every officer in my regiment. There was not a deed performed, from beginning to end, which required any pluck or courage. If we had fought for possession of the place, and it had been found necessary to hold or destroy it, or if the inhabitants had done anything which deserved such punishment, or if it were a place of refuge for the enemy, there might have been some reason for Montgomery's acting as he did; but as the case stands, I can't see any justification. If it were the order of our government to overrun the South with fire and sword, I might look at it in a different light; for then we should be carrying out what had been decided upon as a necessary policy. As the case stands, we are no better than "Semmes," who attacks and destroys defenceless vessels, and haven't even the poor excuse of gaining anything by it; for the property is of no use to us, excepting that we can now sit on chairs instead of camp-stools.

But all I complain of; is wanton destruction. After going through the hard campaigning and hard fighting in Virginia, this makes me very much ashamed of myself.

Montgomery, from what I have seen of him, is a conscientious man, and really believes what he says,—"that he is doing his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability."

...There are two courses only for me to pursue: to obey orders and say nothing; or to refuse to go on any more such expeditions, and be put under arrest, probably court-martialled, which is a serious thing.

June 13th.—This letter I am afraid will be behindhand, for a boat went to Hilton Head this morning from the lower end of the island, and I knew nothing about it. Colonel Montgomery has gone up himself; and will not be back until Tuesday probably.

...To-day I rode over to Pierce Butler's plantation. It is an immense place, and parts of it very beautiful. The

house is small, and badly built, like almost all I have seen here. There are about ten of his slaves left there, all of them sixty or seventy years old. He sold three hundred slaves about three years ago.

I talked with some, whose children and grandchildren were sold then, and though they said that was a "weeping day," they maintained that "Massa Butler was a good massa," and they would give anything to see him again. When I told them I had known Miss Fanny, they looked very much pleased, and one named John wanted me to tell her I had seen him. They said all the house-servants had been taken inland by the overseer at the beginning of the war; and they asked if we couldn't get their children back to the island again. These were all born and bred on the place, and even selling away their families could not entirely efface their love for their master. Isn't it horrible to think of a man being able to treat such faithful creatures in such a manner?

The island is traversed from end to end by what they call a shell-road; which is hard and flat, excellent for driving. On each side there are either very large and overhanging trees, with thick underbrush, or open country covered with sago-palm, the sharp-pointed leaves making the country impassable. Occasionally we meet with a few fields of very poor grass; when there is no swamp, the soil is very sandy.

There are a good many of these oyster-shell roads, for in many places there are great beds of them, deposited nobody knows when, I suppose. The walls of many of the buildings are built of cement mixed with oyster-shells, which make it very durable.

I forgot to tell you that the negroes at Mr. Butler's remembered Mrs. Kemble very well, and said she was a very fine lady. They hadn't seen her since the young ladies were very small, they said. My visit there was very interesting and touching.

A deserted homestead is always a sad sight, but here in the South we must look a little deeper than the surface, and then we see that every such overgrown plantation, and empty house, is a harbinger of freedom to the slaves, and every lover of his country, even if he have no feeling for the slaves themselves, should rejoice.

Next to Mr. Butler's is the house of Mr. James E. Cooper. It must have been a lovely spot; the garden is well laid out, and the perfume of the flowers is delicious. The house is the finest on the island. The men from our gunboats have been there, and all the floors are strewn with books and magazines of every kind. There is no furniture in any of these houses.

Please send this to Father, for I want him and Mother to read it, and I don't care about writing it over.

Colonel Montgomery's original plan, on this last expedition, was to land about fifteen miles above Darien, and march down on two different roads to the town, taking all the negroes to be found, and burning every planter's house on the passage. I should have commanded our detachment, in that case. The above are the orders he gave me.

Good bye for to-day, dearest Annie.

Your loving Rob