

*Nor the Battle to the Strong: A Novel of the American Revolution in the South,*  
by Charles F. Price (Savannah, GA: Frederic C. Beil, Publisher, 2008)

Later, behind the canvas partition that set off his private quarter of the marquee, Greene read and signed the correspondence that Captain Pierce had prepared, then dashed off a brief note to General Pickens asking him to send up the powder needed to explode the works of the Star Fort. Putting that aside, he slumped in his chair and cupped his head in his hands and allowed the tiredness to take him as it had wanted to take him all day today and yesterday too and the day before that and yes, all the days since last December when he first came South to take up the command of the disgraced General Gates. But, maddeningly, along with the tiredness came the swarm of trials that always beset him in the watches of the night, that kept him from surrendering to the tiredness and to the sleep that would have been its remedy.

Not only did he lack troops and provisions, there were feuds between his senior officers of the Continental Line and those of the militia and state lines; there were unbecoming disputes over rank among his subalterns. The soldiers had not been paid for months – Greene himself had not been paid in over three years. Hard money could not be had and no one would take the Continental paper, so most of the forage and supplies must be seized from the country folk, who then rose up outraged by what seemed outright robbery and joined the Tory outliers plaguing his outposts. Half his men were barefoot, yet he could get no shoes. The mails were uncertain; his orders from the Congress and the Minister at War and General Washington, when they came, were weeks out of date and bore no conceivable relation to the reality of events.

And worst of all, he himself was isolated, banished, cast out to the farthest margins of the war. He could be no more distant from the center of power if he served on the moon. It was true that Washington had sent him South because no one else in the high command could have done what was needed to rescue the war in the region. And it was true that he had garnered some laurels Southward by outgeneraling the British in strategy even as he lost the engagements he had fought; and that it even lay within his grasp to chase Cornwallis into Virginia and defeat him there. But it was also true that by sending him South, Washington had gotten him out of the way of a Congress that had come to think of him as self-righteous and opinionated and possibly corrupt, and had grown sick of him. And finally it was true that the Southern Department had always been a graveyard of reputations. Already it had crushed Robert Howe and Benjamin Lincoln and Horatio Gates. Now it threatened to crush Nathanael Greene.

Of course he would not allow that. Nothing had ever crushed him. Bent him, yes. Battered him. Lamed him, as the trip-hammer had lamed him at his father's forge when a boy. But nothing had ever crushed him. Always the iron had been in him to withstand whatever came. It was in him still. Only, these days it seemed harder and harder to call up. Yet he would summon it; he *must* summon it. He stood; he began to pace the confinement of his chamber. He thought of Caty, and as always the thought refreshed him. He brushed his teeth with a frayed sassafrass twig, returned and sat staring for a time at the stained canvas wall before him, seeing the image of her face. Then he took up his pen to write to her.

He did not even know where she was. Their farm at Westerly? Maybe at her girlhood home at New Shoreham. Perhaps with friends in Philadelphia. As always, the not knowing ate strangely at him. It seemed wrong to hold someone so dear yet be unable to say with confidence at any given moment where she might be found. And Caty was a gadfly, always on the move. To predict her situation was an utter impossibility. When he pondered that, he grew annoyed with her, even angry, angry beyond all reason, as if by her frivolity she had willfully obstructed him.

He felt that anger now, sitting at his little folding camp secretary with the nib of his quill poised above the lone sheet of foolscap. Writing a personal letter was no mean undertaking in this headquarters where clean paper was so rare a thing that orders and official communications were sometimes written on scraps of wall-covering. It was a commodity too precious to waste. And he was so very weary. Yet he had the ungenerous feeling that writing to Caty just now was exactly that – a waste. Where was she? Dancing at someone's hop, no doubt. Flirting in a ballroom or a salon with His Excellency, or with Wayne or with Wadsworth, both of whom were madly in love with her – as was all the male world. Breaking hearts on every side, that was Caty. And here he sat, alone in a miserable tent in the midst of the howling waste of South Carolina, dirty, pest-ridden, surrounded by implacable enemies, a dealer in death and maiming, the chance of his soul's redemption drowning in blood sinfully spilled, the sound of gunfire continually in his ears, without reinforcements, without supplies, forgotten by all, forgotten even by Caty in her giddy whirl of self-indulgence.

He laid aside his quill, pinched the bridge of his nose between two finger-ends, rubbed again at his sore eye. Having felt the old resentment, he now submitted to the guilt and regret that always followed in its train. He was thirteen years her senior; he was nearly forty, she, only twenty-six. He was more than half a father to her, she as much a daughter as a wife. He envied the heedless joy she took in a life that had brought him such vexing difficulties; he knew what pain the world held in store, she wished to know only its delights. He was jealous of the longing she inspired in men younger, more handsome and far richer than her lame, portly husband with his flawed eye whose fortune had been blasted by bad investments, the collapse of the currency and the inattention to personal affairs caused by the distractions of war.

He knew himself pretty well. He knew he sometimes had to shape Caty into a kind of villain, to distort her bright and fun-loving nature into one of foolish abandon. Doing that was necessary if he were to keep his sanity and hold himself to his duty. Resenting Caty was his shield against the force of his love for her. For that love was like a great body of deep water pent up behind a dam. He must keep the floodgates shut. If he did not – if it were to breach the dam and the torrents pour forth in all their thunderous volume – the cataract would sweep him away, and with it everything by which the worth of a man was measured in this world – honor, duty, reputation, ambition, prospects. It would break him loose from his moorings, from his solemn mission of saving the Southern states and going on, against all the odds, to win the war and establish the liberty and independency of the nation. It would bear him on the breast of its mighty surge back to Caty. It would ruin him, it would save him, he did not know which. And he would bury himself in her delectable flesh and never leave her again for as long as he lived, and gather to him the young lives they had made together, George and Martha and Cornelia and little Nathanael, and devote himself ever after to their welfare, and watch them grow and wax strong in health and virtue and go on to marry in their turn and flourish and multiply; and together he and Caty would mingle again and again in their passion to make more lives just as precious and full of promise, and bring those up too in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Yes, he would give himself over at last to the domestic bliss he had never stopped craving, and no longer cringe, as he did now, as he must now, under the spur and lash of worldly striving and aspiration.

But that would only come to be if he allowed the dam to break. And he dared not do that. It must stand. Too much - everything, in fact - remained to be done. So once again he had to search out the space in his mind where Caty was neither enemy nor refuge, where she shrank to a smaller, more remote figure in the middle distance of his thought, where the danger she posed to what he meant to be could be kept in check. It was not easy to do – it never was – but after a time he succeeded as he always did. And when it was done, when he had removed her safely to that far plane where her light and warmth had dimmed and cooled, he was able at last to take up his pen and bend to the page and begin to write. *Dear Caty*, he wrote. But even so, even as the point of the quill started its slow crawl across the page, he felt the whelming of the deep waters pressing against the wall, the wall that he had built.