



Emma Florence LeConte

THE TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD

A Young Girl's Account of the
Invasion of South Carolina
and the Burning of Columbia

by
Emma Florence LeConte

Written in Her Seventeenth Year,
From Dec. 31, 1864 to Aug. 6, 1865

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CHAPTER ONE

New Year's Eve, 1864 – January, 1865



Columbia South Carolina,
Dec. 31st, 1864.

The last day of the year – always a gloomy day – doubly so today. Dark leaden clouds cover the sky, and ceaseless pattering rain that has been falling all day. The air is chill and damp, and the morning wind fills one with melancholy. A fit conclusion for such a year – 'tis meet old year that thou should'st weep for the misfortunes thou hast brought our country! And what hope is there to brighten the new year that is coming up? Alas, I cannot look forward to the new year – “My thoughts still cling to the mouldering past.” Yes, the year that is dying has brought us more trouble than any of the other three long dreary years of this fearful struggle. Georgia has been desolated. The resistless flood has swept through that State, leaving but a desert to mark its track. And now our hateful foes hold Savannah. Noble old Charleston is at last to be given up. They are preparing to hurl destruction upon the State they hate most of all, and Sherman the brute avows his intention of converting South Carolina

into a wilderness. Not one house, he says, shall be left standing, and his licentious troops – whites and negroes – shall be turned loose to ravage and violate. All that is between us and our miserable fate is a handful of raw militia assembled near Branchville. And yet they may say there is a Providence who fights for those who are struggling for freedom – who are defending their homes, and all that is held dear! Yet these vandals – these fiends incarnate, are allowed to overrun our land! Oh my country! Will I live to see thee subjugated and enslaved by these Yankees – surely every man and woman will die first. On every side they threaten – Lee’s noble army alone stands firm. Foreign nations look on our sufferings and will not help us. Our men are being killed off – boys of sixteen are conscripted. Speculators and extortioners are starving us. But is this a time to talk of submission? Now when the Yankees have deepened and widened the breach by a thousand new atrocities? A sea rolls between them and us – a sea of blood. Smoking houses, outraged women, murdered fathers, brothers and husbands forbid such a union. Reunion! Great Heavens! How we hate them with the whole strength and depth of our souls!

I wonder if the new year is to bring us new miseries and sufferings. I am afraid so. We used to have bright anticipations of peace and happiness for the new year, but now I dare not look forward. Hope has fled, and in its place remains only a spirit of dogged sullen resistance.



Jan. 1st, 1865

What a bright new year! If only the sunshine be a presage of happier days! Cold but clear and sunny – such

a contrast to yesterday's tears. With this bright sun shining on me I can't feel as mournful as I did yesterday. I will try to throw off the sad memories I was brooding over and hope for better things. I will try to forget my struggles and failures and disappointments and begin again with new resolutions. Oh, me! I haven't much confidence in my ability to keep them!

Yesterday we had a letter from my darling father. He was at Thomasville. He has been gone two weeks, and I suppose by this time he is at the Altamaha. The Gulf Road only runs thus far, and there he will have to stop and get word if possible to Aunt Jane, with Sallie, Cousin Ada and Cousin Annie to meet him. If that is impossible he will try to make his way through the lines to them. Though I never say anything about it, I feel uneasy in regard to Father. The Yankees have been through Liberty County, burning and destroying, and I hear they have passed right through our plantations. Father says however that he has heard of no outrages committed. But how dreadfully they must have been frightened. And what is worse, if the provisions have been destroyed, they may be suffering.

The uncertainty is very horrible. But how accustomed we have grown to what is horrible!

We had a letter from Grandma too. She had left us to be with Aunt Sallie in her confinement. She gives a long account of her journey, performed mostly in Government wagons with Lee's men. Poor Aunt Sallie suffered dreadfully, and her babe was born dead – the result of the fright she experienced when the enemy passed through Milledgeville.

The old year did not die without bringing us one more piece of bad news. We heard yesterday that Gen.

Price – old “Dad Price” – was dead. Misfortunes assail us on every side. The President however is quite well again. What a sinking of despair I had when I heard that he was dead.



Jan 2nd.

(This day’s entry being filled with speculations on and arguments for and against the immortality of the soul, etc., I therefore extract only a short entry made before going to bed).

Have just returned from Aunt Josie’s, where we spent the evening in company with Capt. and Mrs. Green. We had a very pleasant evening and were regaled in honour of the new year, which yesterday being Sunday was celebrated today, with egg-nog, Confederate cake and pop-corn. Capt. Green of the Nitre Bureau is an odd sort of man, and his wife is awfully ugly. No more news today except that I heard that Jeff Davis said that he would defend Carolina at all hazards. I hope it is true, but I do not believe it.



Jan. 4th.

What a budget of bad news this morning! Four letters. One from Father who writes from camp at Doctortown only fifteen miles from Halifax, but he cannot get there. He had sent word to Aunt Jane by some scouts to try to reach him with the girls, but how can they when every mule and horse has been taken? They could

only walk, and that of course would be impracticable. Father said the Yanks made a clean sweep of everything, and we have lost all our worldly possessions except the few negroes here. Perhaps Aunt Jane's family and Sallie are almost starving! Oh it is too dreadful to think of! A second letter from Aunt Ann in Baker County says that Will and Joe Henry (Quartermen) seeing the outrageous conduct of the Yankees in one of the upper counties, mounted and rode night and day to reach Liberty in time to beseech their mother and sisters to run anywhere rather than encounter such fiends. The house was surrounded – (so says report) – Willy was killed, Joe Henry mortally wounded, and Gus taken prisoner. Cousin Corinne's husband was found in the swamp. How I hope it is not true! Poor Aunt Harriet! She has so recently buried her husband and daughter. And oh, what are my feelings when I think of Aunt Jane, Annie and Ada and poor little Sallie! What fate may not have overtaken them, alone as they are upon the plantation! And Father – I cannot bear to think of him. Every day I tremble with the fear that I may hear he is a prisoner or killed. Killed – Oh, no – God would not be so cruel as that – I could not think of that – my darling precious father, if you were only safe at home again! Grandma writes more dreadful accounts of outrages and horrors that happened in Milledgeville. Walter writes from the hospital in Charleston that he has been laid up with chills and fever as a consequence of the terrible march after the evacuation of Savannah. He has got transferred to our College hospital, and we expect to see him this evening. I am constantly thinking of the time when Columbia will be given up to the enemy. The horrible picture is constantly before my mind. They have promised to show no mercy in this State. Mother wants

to send me off, but of course I would not leave her. I can only hope their conduct in a city will not be so shocking as it has been through the country. Yet no doubt the College buildings will be burned, with other public buildings, and we will at least lose our home.



Jan. 6th.

A horrid day. Rain, rain, rain. I have been sitting over the fire knitting and reading. Mother sitting opposite with her knitting asked me such endless questions in regard to her stocking that I put down my book impatiently and am trying to write. I feel awfully cross and out of sorts, and can't at all understand how so simple an affair as knitting a stocking should appear an insoluble problem. Mother can't conquer the mystery of "turning the heel" – there it is again – "Emma, how many times did you say I must knit plain?" I think I shall put my pen down and run away – * * * * It was brighter this afternoon in spite of the angry clouds. The sun was setting as we finished dinner and I brought my book out on the piazza where the rosy clouds divided my attention with the pages, when mother came and asked me to take Carrie. I fear I did so ill-naturedly, but the little darling's laughing face and merry blue eyes soon put me in a better humor, and I raced up and down with her till Jane came, when I ran upstairs, brushed my hair and coming down again found the moonlight struggling through the clouds.



Jan. 10th.

What a day! The rain is sweeping down in torrents and the earth is flooded – not a living creature to be seen – not even a benighted soldier in the campus usually so alive with them. Nothing but the driving rain and rushing water. It is perfectly splendid! * * * *



Jan. 12th.

Last night Cousin Lula and Johnnie came over and we all – Mother, Mr. Memminger – son of Father's old friend Col. Memminger, and who had been with us for quite a while before Father left, and still seems like a member of the family – Walter, Cousin Lula and myself, gathered round the table and made "kiss verses" all the evening for our grand bazaar. As might be supposed there was lots of nonsense and laughing over our work – if I except Walter, who was as silent as usual. I do not know what is the matter with him; he used to be so very talkative and now he is so gloomy – perhaps it is his health.

Troops have been passing through Columbia for some days and I feel a little safer, though if Joe Johnston is put in command we had as well pack up and prepare to run. He will certainly execute one of his "masterly retreats" from the coast back to Virginia, and leave us at Sherman's mercy. I hear that Sherman has drawn his troops back from South Carolina to Savannah. Some think this bodes ill for Gen. Hood, who is in Alabama or Mississippi or somewhere else, and may be caught in a trap between Sherman and Thomas. I hope not. Cousin

Lula says they had a letter from Julian yesterday. He, who used to be such an ardent Georgian, is down on the State for behaving so shamefully. He says all his Company have abjured their State, and made a vow never to live in it, especially in Savannah. As for me, I am a South Carolinian. I have lived here almost since I can remember, and only wish I had been born here instead of in Georgia! That whole State is utterly demoralized, and ready to go back into the Union. Savannah has gone down on her knees, and humbly begged pardon of Father Abraham, gratefully acknowledging Sherman's clemency in burning and laying waste their State! Oh it is a crying shame, such poltroonery! * * * *

Father writes that he will try to get them all out of Liberty County under a flag-of-truce. I wish he would make haste and come home – who can tell how soon communication may be cut off. * * * *



Jan – (Between the 13th and 17th)

We have no more news from Father this morning – indeed there are no mails. The late freshet has carried away the bridges over the Edisto. The Greenville road is so injured that it cannot be repaired under three weeks, and worse still the Danville road upon which Lee depends for his supplies cannot be used for ten days and he is short of provisions. The very elements conspire against us! Madame DeOvilliere is going to make us repeat our comedy that came off with so much eclat in the Fall. We rehearse this afternoon.



Jan. 18th.

Well, our great bazaar opened last night, and such a jam! I was at the State House helping to arrange the tables until four o'clock so I was thoroughly tired. There are seven booths in the House (of Representatives) – South Carolina, at the Speaker's desk, is the largest, and on either side are Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Missouri. In the Senate are North Carolina, at the Desk, Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama and Florida. The tables or booths are tastefully draped with damask and lace curtains, and elaborately decorated with evergreens. To go in there one would scarce believe it was war times. The tables are loaded with fancy articles – brought through the blockade, or manufactured by the ladies. Everything to eat can be had if one can pay the price – cakes, jellies, creams, candies – every kind of sweets abound. A small slice of cake is two dollars – a spoonful of Charlotte Russe five dollars, and other things in proportion. Some beautiful imported wax dolls, not more than twelve inches high, raffled for five hundred dollars, and one very large doll I heard was to raffle for two thousand. "Why" as Uncle John says, "one could buy a live negro baby for that." How can people afford to buy toys at such a time as this! However I suppose speculators can. A small sized cake at the Tennessee table sold for seventy-five dollars.

The bazaar will continue until Saturday. They had intended holding it for two weeks, but Sherman's proximity forces them to hurry up. I heard, but it is only one of Mr. Johnston's stories, that the aforesaid individual had an-

nounced his intention of attending the Ladies' Bazaar in person before it closes. The railroads are so broken up that we can hear nothing definite, but report says that Sherman is marching one column on Augusta and one on Branchville. One piece of bad news is certain, namely that Fort Fisher has fallen at last. I had expected to take great interest in the Soldier's Bazaar, but I cannot. It seems like the dance of Death, and who can tell that Sherman may not get the money that was made instead of our sick soldiers.

How long before our beautiful little city may be sacked and laid in ashes. Dear Columbia, with its lovely trees and gardens. It is heart-sickening to think of it. Grandpa wants to leave for Georgia as soon as the trains run through, which will be on Friday, and he wants to take me with him, but I think mother and I had better stay or run together. We are going to pack up Father's books and as many things as we can and get those of our friends who remain to take care of them as almost any house in the town will be safer than these buildings, then perhaps we may run with Uncle John's family to whatever point he moves the Nitre Bureau works. Oh it is so dreadful, and yet how callous our hearts have grown. Two years ago with what despairing agony I would have looked upon the prospect before us, and now I only feel a dull heart pain. If we were anywhere but in this State it would not be so horrible, but who can tell what will be our fate. Oh, if Father were only at home to advise us what to do. Sometimes I wonder I can be so calm. We have not heard from him in two weeks. He may be in Augusta or Branchville waiting to get through, but if Sherman should reach those places before him and cut him off from us! Oh this fearful uncertainty is heartrending!



Jan. 21st, Sunday.

News from Father and Sallie at last. They are safe, and I am *so* happy. Now doubly happy now that I know all that he has endured and escaped. He was a week in the County surrounded by Yankees. He walked 72 miles in three days. Sallie and Cousin Annie and Ada he sent out by a flag-of-truce. Poor Sallie gives a dreadful account of her adventures. She walked half the distance of Doctortown, camping out in the woods at night with no shelter, crossing burnt trestles and swollen streams on logs. Poor child! If you were only safe at home again. The nearer the time approaches the longer and more weary it seems. Father's letter was dated the 9th; Sallie's from Thomasville the 12th, while they awaited a conveyance to take them to Albany. So as soon as the road is repaired, which will be on Tuesday or Wednesday, I shall begin to hope for them. Sallie has been gone nearly three months, and Father five or six weeks.

A new trouble – Walter is down with the measles, and we fear if little Carrie should get them it will kill her in her delicate state of health. Mother is trying very hard to keep her from the infection. * * * Things are looking very gloomy. I heard Gov. Magrath had received orders to hold Charleston, but Mr. Memminger who was here yesterday says it is being evacuated. They say Richmond and Petersburg are to be given up, and Lee's army will fall back to South Carolina. That would be safer for us, but who could endure the idea of giving up Richmond! Glorious old Richmond, that we have been defending so long. – to fall after all those battles – that would be the darkest, darkest day of all.

Everyone seems to feel that Columbia is doomed. Aunt Josie thinks we had all better run off with the Nitre Bureau and camp in the woods of North Carolina till danger is over. They say Sherman is massing his forces at Branchville. Oh, what times to live in! Who knows what may become of us in ten days! Columbia is thought in so much danger that the ladies closed the Bazaar on Friday. Yet all this does not rouse us. We seem sunk in an apathy. Nothing could surprise me now, unless some wonderful help should break in upon our trouble and give us the independence we have been longing and fighting for all these sad years. Even my books fail to keep my attention.



Jan. 22

Mr. Pond has arrived in Columbia with his command. He says Butler's cavalry – five thousand strong – will be stationed here for the present, so we will have some security at least from raids. We can hear no news from the army, except that Hood has been relieved of the command at his own desire. Taylor is in command *pro tem*. No one seems to know the whereabouts of either Hood or Thomas. There is talk in Congress of making a Commander-in-Chief, and some recommend Joe Johnston. Gen. Lee is the only man for that office.



Jan. 23rd

No more news from Father. I begin to think he had

stayed to get the negroes out. We hear so many rumors of the movements of the Yankees and of our own troops, but they are not worth noting. * * * *

Mother has packed up the clothing and bed-linen that we may save those at least. All the books are packed too. I have not been in the library since they were taken down. It would make me too sad to look at the empty shelves. * * * *

It may be of interest some day to recall the poor style in which we lived during the war, so I shall make a few notes. My underclothing is of coarse unbleached homespun, such as we gave the negroes formerly only much coarser. My stockings I knit myself, and my shoes are of heavy calfskin. My dresses are two calicoes, (the last one bought cost sixteen dollars a yard) a homespun of black and white plaid, and an old delaine of pre-war times that hangs on in a dilapidated condition, a reminiscence of better days. We have a couple of old silks, carefully preserved for great occasions and which do not look shabby for the simple reason that all the other old silks that still survive the war are in the same state of decay. The homespun cost about eight or ten dollars a yard, – calico is 20 to 30 dollars a yard now, and going higher from week to week. My shoes are 150 dollars a pair. In two or three months these prices will be doubled. We live tolerably poorly. Two meals a day. Two plates of bread for breakfast, one of wheat flour as five bags of flour were recently made a present to us else we would only have corn bread. Corn itself is forty dollars a bushel. Dinner consists of a very small piece of meat, generally beef, a few potatoes and a dish of hominy and a pone of corn bread. We have no reason to complain, so many families are so much worse off. Many have not tasted meat for months, and we too having a cow are able

to have butter. Wood is hard to get at one hundred dollars a load. We keep but one fire in the dining room where we sit. We have been fortunate in having gas thus far, (at eighty dollars a thousand,) but since the freshet the supply of rosin has been deficient and now and then it is cut off and we burn tallow candles at two dollars apiece. We never have sweet things now, and even molasses candy is a rarity seldom to be thought of.



Jan. 25th.

Last night while I was lying on the sofa feeling very blue and full of gloomy thoughts in regard to the war and the dreadful possibility of the South having to yield, Uncle H. John came in the library and said – “Well! have you heard the last report? It is said that England and France conjointly will certainly recognize us by the fourth of March.” I jumped up with the first thrill of real joy I have felt for a long time. A bright vista of peace and happiness seemed to open up before my mind’s eye. Of course a moment’s reflection sobered me and brought me back to common sense. I recollected with a sigh how often we had been disappointed and lured on to false hopes by that will-o-the-wisp “Recognition” and “Intervention,” yet there are some circumstances that lend a slight colouring of possible truth to this rumor. Although at the height of their success, the Yankees are making fair proposals through their Commissioner Blair, if the South will only yield slavery. Dispatches say that much excitement prevails in Richmond, gold has fallen, and the people are selling out. I think I would rather the South were conquered than that she should make peace

with them! Father has not come home yet, and we hear nothing. How tired we are of waiting – how I long to see them. Today is Johnny's birthday. He is fifteen. Mother sent him one of our cobwebbed bottles of champagne – a few still lurk in the pantry. I tell Mother she must keep some for *peace* if we ever live to see it.



Jan. 27th.

Another day and the long-looked for have not returned. * * * * later, we have just received a letter from Sallie. She and Cousins Annie and Ada are in Macon with our relatives (the Clifford Andersons), while Father has returned to attempt to save Aunt Jane by flag-of-truce. Sallie entreats us to run if there is the slightest danger from Yankees – “Oh Mother,” she says, “I never want to see them again!” Cousin Ada in a letter to Aunt Josie gives a sad account of all they suffered and the brutal rudeness of the soldiers. I am so sorry for her. She and Aunt Jane are turned adrift, homeless and destitute.



Jan. 28th.

Grandpa leaves for Macon the day after tomorrow – Monday. Mother wanted to send me with him but we came to the conclusion we had best not leave home or separate till Father comes. * * * *

Mr. Memminger was here this evening to bid us goodbye. He places no confidence in rumors of foreign aid. He left early and a few minutes after Dr. Nat Pratt

dropped in and talked more cheerfully. He seems quite confident we will hear tomorrow that an armistice of 60 days has been declared, having learned that Gen. Hampton has received a telegram to that effect. Gen. Lee has been made Generalissimo, and Hood has taken leave of his army. His farewell address is very manly. He shoulders the whole responsibility of his campaign. Says he did his best and failed.

The weather is intensely, fearfully cold. Walter is getting on very well but is breaking out in boils now. * *
* *

How dreadfully sick I am of this war. Truly we girls whose lot it is to grow up in these times are unfortunate! It commenced when I was thirteen, and I am now seventeen and no prospect yet of its ending. No pleasure, no enjoyment – nothing but rigid economy and hard work – nothing but the stern realities of life. Those which should come later are made familiar to us at an age when only gladness should surround us. We have only the saddest anticipations and the dread of hardships and cares when bright dreams of the future ought to shine on us. I have seen little of the light-heartedness and exuberant joy that people talk about as the natural heritage of youth. It is a hard school to be bred up in and I often wonder if I will ever have my share of fun and happiness. If it had not been for my books it would indeed have been hard to bear. But in them I have lived and found my chief source of pleasure. I would take refuge in them from the sadness all around if it were not for other work to be done. I do all my own sewing now besides helping Mother some. Now that everything is lost perhaps we will all have to work for a living before long. I would far rather do that and bear much more than submit to the Yankees.