

Margaret Mitchell

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ATLANTA, Ga.—Reporting for chapel on Guadalcanal one Sunday morning early in 1943, an Army chaplain was elated to find a full house, the biggest GI congregation he had faced in nearly two years' service. "I am deeply moved to note," he said, "that the heavenly light of true religion has at long last found this outfit."

Unhappily, as the disillusioned chaplain discovered in the near-stampede to the bamboo altar which took place immediately after his final prayer, "heavenly light" had nothing to do with it. It was chewin' tobacco. It seems some zealous civilian back in the States, worried over what was happening to quid-loving GIs who couldn't get anything stronger than Juicy Fruit in Red Cross packages, had dispatched a big box of scrap and assorted plug to the chaplain's assistant. This T-5, knowing which side his duty-bread was buttered on, had explained to the boys that all they had to do to get an honest chew was to sweat out a few hymns and prayers and then file piously to the altar.

The zealous civilian who authored the idea of sending GIs honest chewing tobacco is a half-pint-sized, blue-eyed female from Dixie named Margaret Mitchell. Miss Mitchell also authored, a few years back, that Civil War novel called "Gone With the Wind" and more familiarly known as GWTW, a long, rambling book about a dame named Scarlett O'Hara and a gent named Clark Gable—or maybe it was Rhett Butler.

According to Miss Mitchell, the novel's ending, which leaves the fate of the hero and heroine somewhat unsettled, may have been a happy inspiration in the literary sense, but its results in real life, especially her own, have been anything but happy. She has received millions of letters—many thousands from GIs, she says—and in almost every one of them there is either an earnest plea or a downright demand that she disclose what finally happened to Rhett and Scarlett. These demands haven't been confined to letters. One day not long ago when she was window-shopping on Atlanta's famous Peachtree Street, a somewhat wild-looking matron, recognizing her, rushed up and gave Miss Mitchell a kind of half-Nelson treatment, threatening her with bodily damage if she didn't reveal the ultimate fate of the star-crossed lovers. Regrettably, Miss Mitchell is unable to satisfy either her restrained correspondents or her would-be public assailants on this issue simply because she herself doesn't exactly know what finally happened to her on-again, off-again pair.

"For all I know," she says, her Irish eyes sparkling slyly as she mouths the words in an accent that combines the best features of cotton fields, magnolias in bloom and the last four bars of "Swanee River," "Rhett may have found someone else who was less—difficult. Why, honey, just think of it, out of this hypothetical union may have come a strapping fellow who grew up to be a dashing second lieutenant."

Another thing that GIs and other GWTW fans are always writing Miss Mitchell about is her next book. When is it coming out and what will the story be like? Miss Mitchell can't answer that one, either.

"I am writing every chance I get," she says, "but for the last four years or so I am afraid that hasn't been very often. We've been too busy with the Red Cross and Home Defense."

Margaret, who is known as Peggy to practically everybody in Atlanta's super-swank Piedmont Riding Club, has no illusions about the importance of her contribution to the late war effort.

"Actually, my efforts have consisted only of sewing thousands of hospital gowns, putting suitable patches on the behinds of GI trousers

and, alas, playing dummy for the Home Defense fire - and - rescue department. In this last job I seemed invariably to be chosen for the practice sessions because of my four-foot-eleven height. I was tossed unceremoniously out of two-story windows, grabbed in the most monstrous places and thrown about as if I had been an acrobat's stooge. It was positively frightful."

Peggy is a little concerned over the accumulative effect of that striking phenomenon of the second World War, the pin-up. "Why, my goodness, honey," she says, "after looking at all those pictures of seraphic and perspirationless babes for so long in the privacy of a foxhole, what is a poor doughfoot going to do when he comes home and discovers that American women are, after all, biological and given, under stress, to shiny noses?"

The bulk of Peggy's GI mail in the past four years has been along the same lines as the mail she got in the late 1930s, except that soldiers, she finds, are, if anything, more curious than civilians about her personal life.

"Are you really like Scarlett?" one moon-struck Infantryman in Italy wrote, adding provocatively, "If you are, I think I know how you could be tamed. Please answer by return mail."

Peggy, as a matter of fact, is a lot like Scarlett in that she is extraordinarily energetic, intelligent, witty, attractive and—practical. But there the similarity ends. Peggy, unlike her mercurial and green-eyed heroine, is a home-loving, kind-hearted person and not by anybody's standards can she be tagged a fickle adventuress, or as "changeable," as one critic described Scarlett, "as a baby's underwear."

MISS MITCHELL, it turns out, is strictly an enlisted-man's girl, having married a sergeant from the last war. Her husband is the man, incidentally, who is most responsible for *The Book*, which, when last heard from, was well over the 3,500,000 mark in sales. Some years ago Miss Mitchell was laid up with an auto-crash injury that refused to heal. Day in and day out, her husband, ex-Sgt. John R. Marsh, had to traipse to the public library, gather up an armful of books ("I have always been an omnivorous reader," Miss Mitchell says) and carry them home. After a couple of years of this routine, John got sick of the whole thing and, in a moment of desperation, said, "For God's sake, Peggy, can't you write a book instead of reading thousands of them?" Something clicked, and the result was "Gone With the Wind."

Peggy's present-day, GI fans, she says, are just as susceptible to the old rumors about her as were the readers of the first edition. One rumor has it that Peggy was married at the scarcely nubile age of 6. This, she says emphatically, is not true. "When I sidled to the altar," she continues, "I was in all respects a woman—and I sidled." Another persistent rumor that won't be laid is that she is going blind. Recently, she got a telegram from a solicitous GI who said, "Hear you're going blind stop wire me at once



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if there is anything I can do." Peggy answered, "Nothing you can do stop read your wire without a struggle." There is one fairly well-known story about her, however, that is true. She was 10 years old before she knew that Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Grant. Up to that time she had always believed that the Confederacy had won the war. "It was a crushing blow," she says.

On the question of sectional differences, Peggy is liberal, reasonably impartial and optimistic. She feels that the collection of so many men from so many parts of the country into the Army and Navy has rubbed out a lot of the old vexatious, Rebel-Yankee stuff. She also feels that, due in part to an unfortunate Northern press, the South of today is not properly understood by many Northerners. "The spirit of liberalism has taken deep root down here," she says. "One symptom is our newspapers. Where can you find two more fair and forward-looking newspapers than the *Atlanta Constitution and Journal*?"

The climax of Peggy's career probably occurred when GWTW copped the Pulitzer Prize for the best novel of 1936. But the climax of her popularity was certainly reached during the run of the motion picture, which, incidentally, is still playing, or was until recently, in London.

Despite nearly 10 years of almost suffocating publicity, enough to wreck most public figures, Peggy is still the modest, dynamic lady she was before *The Book*. In fact, she insists that she never really achieved fame until last summer when Bill Mauldin drew a cartoon in which a dirty soldier is shown holding a copy of GWTW with a neat shrapnel-hole through its center. The soldier is writing a letter addressed to "Dear Miss Mitchell."

"All the kids know me now," she says.

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