



MARGARET MITCHELL & JOHN MARSH

A Biography by
Marianne Walker

THE LOVE STORY BEHIND
Gone With the Wind

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This *new* paperback edition
coincides with the
75th Anniversary
of the publication of
Gone With the Wind

*For the man in my life,
Ulvester Walker*

*And in loving memory of my parents,
Joseph D. and Rose Spatafora Cascio*



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Contents

Preface to the Anniversary Edition v

Preface to the First Edition ix

Notes about the Letters xviii

Acknowledgments xix

CHAPTER 1

A Man Of Character 1

CHAPTER 2

1895-1919 / *Opposites Attract* 17

CHAPTER 3

1912-1921 / *Reasonable Ambitions* 45

CHAPTER 4

1922-1924 / *A Bizarre Courtship* 67

CHAPTER 5

1922-1925 / *Love Regained* 91

CHAPTER 6

1925-1926 / *A Writer In Progress* 127

CHAPTER 7

1927-1935 / *In the Wake of a Masterpiece* 165





MARGARET MITCHELL & JOHN MARSH

CHAPTER 8

1935-1936 / *Midwife to a Novel* 209

CHAPTER 9

1936 / *A Fantastic Dream* 245

CHAPTER 10

July 1936 / *Unbelievable Days* 279

CHAPTER 11

1936-1937 / *Reaping the Whirlwind* 311

CHAPTER 12

1937-1939 / *Publicity, Pirates, and Power* 345

CHAPTER 13

1936-1939 / *Making the Movie* 383

CHAPTER 14

1940-1945 / *Patriotic Volunteer* 429

CHAPTER 15

1945-1952 / *Reality of Dark Dreams* 473

Notes 519

Index 545





PREFACE TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

This edition of MARGARET MITCHELL & JOHN MARSH: THE LOVE STORY BEHIND GONE WITH THE WIND commemorates the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of GONE WITH THE WIND.

In the spring of 1935, when Margaret Mitchell hesitantly turned her manuscript over to Harold Latham of The Macmillan Company, little did she think that her book would be one of the world's best-known and best-loved novels. She would have found it hard to believe that more than seven decades after its initial release, *Gone With the Wind* has been published in nearly forty languages, in countless editions, and it is still capturing the hearts of readers. It also spawned two sequels which she, no doubt, would not have approved but which were necessary to extend copyright protection on *Gone With the Wind*.

As explained in this biography, most of the original manuscript of *Gone With the Wind* was burned by John Marsh following his wife's death in accordance with her wishes. However, the final typescript of the last four chapters was discovered among the papers of George Brett Jr., the president of Macmillan, Mitchell's publisher. A longtime supporter of the Pequot Public Library, in Southport, Connecticut, Brett gave these chapters to the library in the early 1950s and they were twice displayed—in 1979 and 1991. But no one there realized the value of the manuscript, which was returned to storage, until Ellen Brown, who was working on her book with coauthor John Wiley, Jr., asked about Brett's collection, leading the library to rediscover these valuable pages.

Although the popularity of the 1936 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel remains strong, some people seem to have forgotten the critical acclaim it received in the years immediately following its publication. On this anniversary of the publication, the author of *Gone With the Wind* deserves





to be recognized once again for writing what James Michener describes best as “the spiritual history of a region.”

Mitchell grew up surrounded by old people who remembered well Sherman’s march to the sea and the events that followed. An observant child with an eye for detail and a remarkable memory, she listened to their stories, their eyewitness accounts, and as she matured she learned to listen to the silent voices emanating from the old diaries, letters, photographs, daguerreotypes, battlegrounds, and cemeteries of north Georgia. From her listening, her observations, and her research, she produced not only unforgettable characters, but also a reliable, detailed description of day-to-day life in the South of the Civil War era.

Many of her detractors unfairly equate her values with the values of the societies about which she wrote, but Mitchell was no uncritical defender of the Old South. Beneath the surface of her book the careful reader can find a rich vein of social criticism. Mitchell depicted many of the major characters who support the “Lost Cause” as obtuse and fatuous. She created Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara as realists who reject the old views and negate the conventions of the old society while keeping what was best about it. What Rhett loves about the Old South is what most people love. Both carve out new patterns of life for themselves while choosing to remain in the South. Historian Henry Steele Commager once pointed out that “the characters of the book represent, in many ways, the New South versus the Old, and it is not clear that one is better than the other.” He added, “It is one of the virtues of Miss Mitchell’s book that she presents the myth [of the Old South] without being taken in by it or asking us to accept it, and that she makes clear the reasons for both its vitality and its ultimate demise.”

The point demands emphasis because Mitchell’s critics have often accused her of perpetuating attitudes of racism. Since the first edition of this book, additional evidence has emerged to support the contention that Mitchell found ways to transcend the values that still ruled the South in the 1930s and 40s. Her humane attitudes found expression in letters that she and her husband exchanged with Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College. Published in 1996, the correspondence reveals that she provided anonymous financial assistance during the 1940s for more than twenty black students seeking pre-medical and pre-dental degrees. Her concern about the inadequacies of medical care for African-Americans also moved her to contribute generously toward the building of a new wing at Grady





Preface to the Anniversary Edition

Hospital in Atlanta. Although she lived in a society that languished under a regimen of strict racial segregation, she did try to lessen the impact of the harshest features of that social order.

Margaret Mitchell's philanthropy extended beyond the United States. Shortly before she died in 1949, she contributed enough money to rebuild the hospital in Vimoutiers, a small town in France that was inadvertently destroyed by American Armed Forces in World War II. She also secured additional funds from the service organization, Pilot International, to rebuild the rest of the town. The grateful town made her an honorary citizen of Vimoutiers in July 1949 and dedicated the hospital in her honor.

Those who scorn *Gone With the Wind* for “promoting plantation values” have probably never read the book. They are most likely talking about the enormously popular 1939 motion picture made from her novel. And, yes, the motion picture promotes a false notion of the Old South. But Mitchell had nothing to do with making the film. In a letter to Virginius Dabney in 1942, she described her reaction to it:

Some people gave me credit for writing it [the prologue of the film] and thought it was ‘just beautiful’; others, who knew the section about which I wrote, belabored me for dislocating one of the central ideas of the book. It was useless for me to protest that I had nothing to do with the matter. I certainly had no intention of writing about cavaliers. Practically all my characters, except the Virginia Wilkeses, were of sturdy yeoman stock.

With a tone of resignation she added:

Since my novel was published, I have been embarrassed on many occasions by finding myself included among writers who pictured the Old South as a land of white-columned mansions whose wealthy owners had thousands of slaves and drank thousands of juleps. I have been surprised, too, for North Georgia certainly was no such country—if it ever existed anywhere—and I took great pains to describe North Georgia as it was. But people like to believe what they like to believe and the mythical Old South has too strong a hold on their imaginations to be altered by the mere reading of a 1,037-page book. So I have made no effort to defend myself against the accusation.





One sign of continuing public affection for Margaret Mitchell has been the remarkable outpouring of interest in the house in which she wrote much of the novel. For years, *GWTW* fans from all over the world came to Atlanta wanting to see some tangible link to the author and her creation but left disappointed. Many thought it was scandalous that the Midtown apartment building where Mitchell and her husband lived—while she wrote most of *Gone With the Wind*—had been allowed to decay.

After years of fending off developers and their demolition crews, restoration supporters convinced Mayor Andrew Young to veto demolition permits for the building in 1988. A year later the Tudor Revival house, built as a family home in 1899 by Cornelius Sheehan, was awarded historical landmark status. The history of the house was carefully researched and documented, and the building was restored according to the original specifications. After suffering two arson attempts in 1994 and in 1996, neither of which, mysteriously enough, damaged the Marshes' ground-floor apartment, the Margaret Mitchell House & Museum finally opened in May 1997. Thanks to the untiring efforts of Mary Rose Taylor, founding executive director of the house and museum, and the generosity of the German automaker Daimler-Benz, which donated \$5 million to the restoration project, visitors to Atlanta now can see the "Birthplace of *Gone With the Wind*." Since its opening, growing numbers of *GWTW* admirers have traveled to Atlanta to visit the Marshes' tiny apartment. The Mitchell House is now part of the Atlanta History Center.

I take special pride in visiting the Mitchell House, not only because I, like millions of others, like to see the homes of writers to get a vicarious glimpse of their domestic life, but also because many of the letters that I uncovered while researching my book provided information that influenced the furnishing and decorating of the restored apartment. Mitchell wrote some of those letters—published for the first time in my book—to her husband's family during the early years of her marriage, and those letters give detailed accounts of the apartment. In this modest way, my biography helped to bring to public attention some information about Mitchell's everyday life. My larger hope, of course, is that this anniversary edition will contribute to a more realistic assessment of the achievements of this remarkable woman.





PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Although I did not realize it at the time, the genesis of this book occurred in early 1985 when I reluctantly agreed to give a talk about *Gone With the Wind* for a Kentucky Humanities Council program. Like millions of others, I had seen the film made from the novel but had never read the novel itself or anything about its author.

When I got a copy of the book to read, the first thing I noticed was that the dedication page simply says, “To J.R.M.” I remember wondering then, “Who is J.R.M.?” A few days later I learned that Margaret Mitchell dedicated her novel to her husband, John Robert Marsh, who was born and reared in Maysville, Kentucky. Since Maysville is not too far from where I live, I decided to go looking for traces of him and his famous wife.

After needling my husband into going along with me, I set out with him early one chilly Saturday morning in October 1985 on what he called “an authentic wild goose chase.” A sports addict who would have preferred to watch a televised ball game, he told me outright that he thought the expedition would be a waste of time and that I would ultimately be disappointed. And as the day wore on, it looked as if his predictions were correct. Our search first led us to Maysville, then back down to the Blue Grass region around Lexington, and then, finally, with some instructions from a rural postal clerk, to a remote community called Clays Ferry. Much to our surprise, we ended up that afternoon in a three-room log cabin built on a woodsy, steep bank near the Kentucky River. This cabin was the home of Francesca Renick Marsh, the widow of John Marsh’s youngest brother, Ben Gordon Marsh. An avid bird watcher and watercolorist who had been an art teacher at the Sayre School on North Limestone Street in Lexington, Francesca belied her eighty-three years. She drove her red Chevrolet sedan wherever she wanted to go; attended church every Sunday; read several books every week; hiked daily in the woods; and swam in the Kentucky River two miles a day, eight months out of the year, right





up to a few months before her death in 1987. Self-reliant, she lived alone in this charming cabin she and her husband had bought in 1952, only two years before he died.

In looking back, I know now that we were lucky on two accounts that day: first, because I appeared on her doorstep as a teacher preparing to make a talk about her sister-in-law's novel, not as a writer seeking information for a book; and second, because her son, Renny, a geologist from Texas, was visiting her. As I learned later, Francesca had been so disappointed with the manner in which her famous relatives had been characterized in print that she adamantly refused to have anything to do with writers. Then, too, her home had been burglarized earlier that year, and she had adopted a guarded manner toward strangers. Had Renny not been there, I doubt if she would have let us in that day. But apparently she was satisfied with my reasons for presenting myself to her, and she invited us into her parlor filled with lovely old furniture, paintings, family mementos, and books—many of them foreign editions of *Gone With the Wind*. The moment I stepped into that room, I knew I was onto an adventure. And I was right.

It was inevitable that Francesca Marsh and I became friends. Like Margaret Mitchell, I have always enjoyed listening to old people, hearing about the past and the lives of others. Biography is my favorite type of book. So my interest in her and in the author of *Gone With the Wind* did not end a few days later with my lecture at the public library, and I visited her as often as I could.

As I look back now, I realize how favored I have been to have known Francesca, for she, and the others I met through my friendship with her, gave me an authentic, not merely a nostalgic, connection with the past. I learned about John Marsh and Margaret Mitchell, who was called Peggy, just the way one gradually learns about her ancestors—from listening to relatives and friends talk about them. Hearing Francesca and the others talk about people and days long “gone with the wind” intrigued me in a way that nothing else ever had and made me want to know more.

However, the idea of writing this book did not occur to me until the rainy, winter afternoon in 1985 when Francesca dragged out an old cardboard box filled with stuff that she had been saving for over a half-century. I will never forget the excitement I felt when I saw that old box filled with yellowed, fragile newspaper clippings, snapshots, postcards, telegrams, old Atlanta Magazines, and a small, tied bundle of unpublished letters that John and Peggy had written to his family. These letters are a part of





the Round Robins that circulated for nearly twenty-five years among John and Peggy, his two brothers and two sisters, and their spouses. Aside from those letters, the first thing that caught my attention was a picture of John in an Atlanta Sunday Magazine interview dated December 1949, only four months after Peggy's unexpected death. His answer to the question, "How would you describe your wife?" startled me.

"Well," he began, "first of all, she was a lot of fun. . . ." He spread his hands helplessly. "How can you sum up a personality like her in a few words? My starting point is she was a lot of fun. Maybe someday I can succeed in putting the rest into words. But not now."

Because it is so unusual for anyone to describe an individual with whom he has lived for nearly a quarter-century as being "a lot of fun," I immediately thought that their relationship must have been a very special one. But neither of the two Mitchell biographies available at that time had given me that impression.¹

That evening at Francesca's, I sat for hours on the floor near the fireplace going through the materials in that box, reading those letters aloud, and listening to Francesca flesh out accounts of events that were mentioned in the letters. When she began to describe her first visit, as a shy young bride, with the Atlanta Marshes, newlyweds themselves in 1927, I felt as if I had actually been transported to the Marshes' Crescent Avenue apartment. She had a clear memory of events that had occurred over fifty years earlier, and as she spoke John and Peggy came alive for me. The kind of exceptionally personal detail and first-hand knowledge I was getting from the letters and from Francesca indicated that the Marshes had a remarkable and unique relationship. By the time I rose to leave that evening, I had gained a much clearer understanding of this man who, mysteriously enough, has been largely ignored or inaccurately portrayed, and yet played such a vital role in Mitchell's life and work. I knew that the full story of Margaret Mitchell had not yet been told. As my husband and I drove home that night, I was fascinated with what I had discovered and frustrated by what I did not know.

On my next visit, I asked Francesca if there were other family members who had letters and recollections that they would share. With a resounding "Yes," she introduced us, through letters and long-distance calls, to Rollin Zane, the widower of Frances Marsh Zane (John's youngest sister) and



to his son Craig Zane. More important, she also introduced us to Mary Marsh Davis and her husband Edmund, nicknamed Jim.

The Davises, gracious and friendly, opened their home to my husband and me in 1987, and I am eternally grateful to them. Mary Davis is the daughter of Henry Marsh, John's oldest brother. After her parents divorced in 1919 when she was only three years old, her father's mother gave up her position as the principal of a grammar school in Maysville, Kentucky, sold her home, and moved into Henry's home in Wilmington, Delaware, where she looked after Mary until Henry remarried in 1927. Thus, Mary was reared primarily by her grandmother Mary Marsh, after whom she was named. While she was growing up, she and her grandmother visited her uncle John and aunt Peggy in Atlanta, and she also saw them at some family reunions and when they visited her father and grandmother in Wilmington, Delaware.

After Mary and Jim married, in their teens, the two of them continued to exchange visits with the Atlanta Marshes throughout the years. As a result of this close association, the Davises were able to give me information and valuable insight into the Atlanta Marshes' personalities. In his modest but firm manner, Jim quickly shattered many popular misconceptions about the Marshes.² He also gave me a copy of the extensive Marsh genealogy that took him years to research and complete.

Most important of all, Mary Davis gave me access to 184 personal letters. This collection includes 43 letters Peggy wrote to Mary, her grandmother, and her father; and 141 letters John wrote to his mother, Henry, and Jim Davis. Not one of Peggy's 43 letters has been published before, and only portions of two of John's 141 have been published previously. This treasure, which spans over thirty years, had never been shown to anyone else outside the family.³ It was a thrilling experience for me to read these letters for the first time. What I found so compelling was those first-person voices emanating from the letters, voices that give John Marsh and Margaret Mitchell a real presence, a physical reality, a flesh-and-blood humanness.

Because of their mother-daughter-like relationship, her grandmother gave her letters from John and Peggy to Mary. Because of her closeness to John and Peggy, her father also gave Mary some of his letters. Peggy's letters to Mary's father are most revealing because Henry and Peggy were close and, too, she felt she could trust him. These letters were written long before she became famous, and thus long before either she or John had become inhibited in their correspondence. They provide fascinating



Preface to the First Edition

insight into the Marshes' relationship, the times in which they lived, and the passion Mitchell inspired.

The information I gained from all these letters and from members of the Marsh family allowed me to look closer at Margaret Mitchell and John Marsh than any other writer has ever been able to look, and what I saw confirmed my initial impression that the true story of this marriage had not yet been told. By the time we left the Davises, I could clearly see that John Marsh had not only been an exceptionally devoted husband but had also played a vital role in the making of his wife's great novel. The evidence I was accumulating demonstrated that John Marsh had not only nurtured Margaret Mitchell's imagination by providing a constant environment of creative stimulus, but he had also given her precisely the kind of help she needed to do what she had always wanted to do—write a blockbuster of a book. Not just an extraordinarily supportive husband, he was an editor who lovingly provided the kind of editorial expertise Mitchell needed throughout the entire time she worked on the novel. An excellent writer and editor, John offered her ideas and advice, and at night and on weekends he patiently read and edited every line of her manuscript as she produced it. As John himself explained in his December 18, 1949, interview with Medora Field Perkinson for the *Atlanta Magazine*:

I started reading right from the time she started writing and we would talk about it. As you know, talking things over sometimes makes an idea come clearer. In trying to write it out beforehand, the mechanical labor may get between the writer and the idea. I was always more confident than she was that she could write a good book. She didn't have enough confidence in her own ability.

In the ordinary sequence of publishing, an editor comes on board after a manuscript has been completed and helps improve the finished product; editors are not involved in the creative process, are not around when the writer sits staring at that blank page. Thus, Margaret Mitchell enjoyed a unique advantage—she was married to her editor, who also adored her. With this new understanding of the Marshes' relationship, I felt obliged to write this book.

From the Davises' home we went to Washington, D.C., to visit Craig Zane and his father Rollin Zane, the widower of John's youngest sister. Rollin Zane permitted me to use his wife's collection of forty-six letters;





of these, Peggy wrote twenty-nine, and John wrote seventeen.⁴ We then drove from Washington, D.C., to Atlanta, where we met our next major source of information—Joe Kling. An Atlantan, Joe worked as a reporter with Peggy and John at the *Journal* from 1925 to 1926. Although he was a few years younger than they, he socialized with them and their newspaper crowd. After John left journalism and went to work in the public relations department at the Georgia Power Company in 1926, Joe Kling followed him there in 1928. The two men worked side by side from 1928 to 1945, and when John retired in 1945 after having a major heart attack, Joe took his place as the chief of the public relations department.

A few years after the death in 1938 of his first wife, Evelyn Lovett, Joe married Rhoda Williams, who was John's personal secretary for many years, including those critical years before, during, and just after the publication of *Gone With the Wind*. Rhoda helped John prepare the manuscript and proof sheets for Macmillan, and she typed numerous letters that John wrote in the process of managing the book's business. No one—except Peggy, her father, and her brother, Stephens—was closer to John or knew more about his private business than Rhoda Kling. Joe and Rhoda talked to John almost daily for over twenty years, and they associated with him and Peggy on a very personal level as well as on a professional one. They all remained friends until death separated them. A quiet-spoken, learned man, Joe showed infinite patience in answering all of my many questions and in helping me clarify my perceptions. He was an invaluable source of information.

Our next trip took us to the far northeast mountainous corner of Georgia, to Dillard, where we talked with Mary Singleton, the first female editor of Georgia Power's magazine. John appointed her editor at a time when it was unheard of to place women in such executive positions, and she worked with him for many years. Like the Klings, Mary Singleton associated with John and Peggy socially as well as professionally. They were all friends who had much in common. After Peggy's death, John often went out to dinner and to the opera with Mary and Susan Myrick, another old friend who had served as an arbiter of southern manners and speech for the film.

An excellent writer herself, Mary had a remarkable memory for the kinds of details biographers need and love to hear. Fascinating to listen to, she recalled some of her conversations not only with John and Peggy but also with her coworkers Rhoda Kling and Grace Alderman, another



Georgia Power employee who typed almost all of Peggy's manuscript to send to Macmillan. As a result, Mary was able to recreate for me some memorable scenes from those harried *Gone With the Wind* years, and she also gave me first-hand information about the premiere, John's major heart attack, and Peggy's fatal accident and funeral. She contributed significantly to my understanding of the Marshes' relationship as she talked about the intensity of the love John had for Peggy; the sympathetic understanding he had for women's issues; the exactness he as an editor demanded from himself and from others; and the dedication he had to upholding moral principles without ever appearing self-righteous.

On another trip to Atlanta in the late summer of 1987, I talked with Deon Rutledge, a pleasant, attractive woman who worked along with her mother cooking and cleaning for the Marshes. Her mother, Bessie Berry Jordan, started working for the Marshes shortly after their marriage, and because she was their full-time housekeeper and cook for years, her daughter Deon practically grew up in the Marshes' apartment.

As Deon and I sat in the lobby of a downtown Atlanta hotel, I was impressed by her modesty and affection for both Marshes. She showed me the big brown scrapbook on *Gone With the Wind* that her mother had started over fifty years ago and kept adding to until her death. With great pride, she pointed out the Sunday Magazine article that her mother had written as a tribute to Peggy shortly after Peggy's death. As Deon fondly turned the pages of the scrapbook and reminisced, she thrilled me with some glimpses of the past and made me feel as if I were actually back there in the Marshes' apartment. When she came to a picture of John, whom she obviously respected and loved, she laughingly told me how frightened of him she was at first because, she said, "He was so tall and big and had such a deep, low voice." Shaking her head, she exclaimed, "He was so different from Miss Peggy." When we both suddenly realized how late in the afternoon it was, we laughed about how quickly our time together had flown by. Just as she rose to leave and was gathering her things, she looked at me and said matter-of-factly, "Folks don't know it, but he helped her write that book!"

Over the following years, I talked to a number of other people who gave me insight into the Mitchell-Marsh relationship and the times in which the Marshes lived. These included Sam Tupper, the Marshes' neighbor and friend; Richard Harwell, the University of Georgia archivist who was the first to work with the collection of Mitchell-Marsh letters that Stephens

Mitchell donated to the University of Georgia Library in the late 1960s; and Franklin Garrett, Atlanta's foremost historian.

Like Margaret Mitchell, I have a special affection for librarians and a reverence for libraries. Five major archives opened their doors to me and gave me access to letters and information. For three summers, my husband and I made trips to the University of Georgia in Athens, where he and I spent all day every day for weeks examining the Margaret Mitchell Marsh Papers, well over fifty-seven thousand items, as well as numerous papers in the other related files. In addition, we researched all the Mitchell papers and interrelated files in the Atlanta History Center Library Archives. I found information about John's college and journalistic careers in the Margaret I. King Special Collections Library at the University of Kentucky, where John earned his bachelor's degree in 1916, and we visited Maysville, Kentucky, where the Mason County Museum provided information about the town as it was when John grew up there. While in Maysville, we talked to Martha Comer, a local newspaperwoman, who told us about her interview with Peggy at Traxel's Confectionery in November 1940, when John brought his wife to Kentucky for the first time. From the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University, I obtained copies of fourteen letters that Peggy wrote to Harvey Smith from 1927 to 1944. I spent most of one summer reading over twelve thousand frames of microfilm from the *Gone With the Wind*—Margaret Mitchell—Macmillan File at the New York Public Library.

By 1991, I had finished all of my research and completed my manuscript, which I was in the process of revising and editing, when Oxford University Press published Darden Asbury Pyron's *Southern Daughter*. This Mitchell biography contains far more information than its two predecessors do, and I read it with great interest. However, my sources had given me a new and different view of John Marsh and his role in his wife's life and career, a fresh understanding of the Marshes' relationship and of them as individuals. My exclusive access to the Davises' letters and my long talks with the most reliable witnesses—the family, the close friends, and the coworkers who knew the Marshes well throughout their marriage—enable me to provide new and important insight into a marriage that has never before been accurately described.

Thus, in writing this book, my first objective is to focus on Mitchell's private life in order to provide the reader with new information. In doing so, I want to make Margaret Mitchell and John Marsh come alive. Both were complicated, talented, warm-blooded human beings who had



strengths and weaknesses like all of the rest of us, but who experienced a rare relationship full of astonishing success and heart-wrenching tragedy. In a world where ephemeral or traitorous relationships abound, a long union filled with loyalty, love, trust, and humor deserves a comprehensive reexamination.

My second objective is to show that John Marsh's deep attachment to Margaret Mitchell was pivotal to her work and to her life. Without a doubt, she had all the fiery imagination, all the hardy attachment to her environment, and all the raw material that a writer needs to create an epic like hers. But she did not have the technical skills, the self-discipline, or the confidence to transform her ideas into a completed manuscript of the quality of *Gone With the Wind*; her deep-seated insecurities hampered her in many ways. With his intellectual depth, maturity, education, and writing ability, John provided whatever she lacked. Her dedication of *Gone With the Wind* "To J.R.M." is only a hint of the significance of their relationship and the influence it had on the origin and fruition of her great Civil War novel.

I have tried to be as objective as possible, not glossing over her weaknesses or overemphasizing her strengths—or his either, for that matter. The conversations I quote are not fictionalized, but are transcribed as they were related to me by the participants.

Emerging now from my long study, I must confess that I feel conflicting emotions. I am happy to complete my work on this book but am also a little sad to part from my subjects, for I agree with John Marsh: Margaret Mitchell was a lot of fun for me, too. But then, so was he.

NOTES ABOUT THE LETTERS

In typing her letters, Margaret Mitchell, a poor typist, rarely hit the apostrophe key; she generally either omitted the apostrophe or hit the "8" key instead. For the sake of clarity, I have replaced "8's" with apostrophes. I have also added some punctuation. Otherwise, I have not edited any of these original letters. The letters reproduced here are, with the aforementioned exceptions, as they appear in the original sources. In a few instances where quoting an oddity in the original letters appears to be an overlooked printer's mistake, I have used "[sic]" to make clear to the reader that the mistake is in the original material. Some of these letters were typed; others, handwritten. Some had envelopes, others did not.

Before she became famous, Mitchell rarely dated her letters to the family; she usually scribbled only something like "Sunday afternoon" or





“Monday night.” Because she wrote many of her early letters while she was at work at the *Sunday Magazine* from 1922 to 1926, but did not want her editor to know that she was using his time for her personal business, most of these letters do not bear the name of the recipient or the date; they have only “slug heads,” newspaper jargon for instructions temporarily inserted at the top of copy. I have been able to assign dates to these letters, sometimes a day, month, and year, sometimes only a season and a year.

I have gathered a total of 230 personal letters that John and Peggy Marsh wrote to members of the Marsh family. I have quoted major portions of 80 out of the 184 letters from the Davises’ collection, and have used information from the remaining 104. I have also quoted several passages that have never been quoted before from Margaret Mitchell’s 46 letters to Frances Marsh Zane. In addition, I used information from two of John Marsh’s unpublished handwritten letters that Joe Kling gave me.

All other letters quoted here are originals or carbon copies of originals housed in the Margaret Mitchell Papers in the University of Georgia’s Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library; in the New York Public Library’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Division; in the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University; and in the Atlanta History Center Library Archives.

Some information and a few of the quotations are from letters to which I had no access to the original. These are from Finis Farr’s *Margaret Mitchell of Atlanta* (Morrow, 1965), the first Margaret Mitchell biography, which was authorized by Stephens Mitchell; and Jane Bonner Peacock’s *Margaret Mitchell A Dynamo Going to Waste: Letters to Allen Edee 1919-1921* (Peachtree Publishers, 1985), a valuable collection of twenty letters Mitchell wrote to a beau from 1919 to 1921. Mrs. Peacock edited these letters and researched this period of Mitchell’s life. Also extremely useful were Richard Harwell’s *“Gone With the Wind” as Book and Film*; Richard Harwell’s *White Columns in Hollywood: Reports from the GWTW Set* by Susan Myrick; and E.I. (Buddy) Thompson’s *Madame Belle Brezing*.

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C H A P T E R

A MAN OF CHARACTER

All my life I have been beset with Mitchells. My college sweetheart was named Mitchell; my new sweetheart, wife and eventually my widow is named Mitchell; my washerwoman for the past twenty-five years, who regards us as her children and during the period of the war scarcities, gives us presents of kleenex and other rare items, is a Mitchell; the company where I work has at least a dozen Mitchells in prominent positions; the firm of accountants who handle Peggy's bookkeeping is Peat, Marwick, Mitchell and Co., and the man in their organization who works on her books is a Mitchell, but not related to their Peat, Marwick, Mitchell. And now my new boss is a Mitchell who was born in Maine almost on the Canadian line, moved to South America in his young manhood, but was inevitably and unerringly drawn to Atlanta by the destiny which surrounds me with Mitchells. I might add that most of them are pretty fine folks. I'm just curious as to why I should collide with them at every turn of my life.

—John Marsh to his mother, spring 1945







IN ATLANTA'S OLD OAKLAND CEMETERY, after the funeral service for Margaret Mitchell on August 17, 1949, family members urged her husband to go home and rest. But John Marsh, frail from a major heart attack three years earlier, insisted on staying until his wife's body had been lowered into its final resting place. Calm but pale, he sat leaning forward, head bowed, arms outstretched with his elbows resting on his knees. His fingers restlessly reached out and tapped the support of the canopy over the grave as he stared at the freshly dug mound of red Georgia clay. In a low voice full of emotional resonance, he said to a friend: "When you think of all the serious illnesses I have survived, I guess you can say there's a reason I outlived her. So I could do a few things for her."¹

Those last few things John Marsh did for Margaret Mitchell were a measure of his dedication to her. Performing what he knew to be her wishes, he burned nearly all of the original manuscript of *Gone With the Wind* along with its corrected proofs and related papers.² In the backyard of the Marshes' apartment, at the corner of South Prado and Piedmont avenues in Atlanta, he set the priceless pages afire in a tall wire basket, the one the janitor used for burning leaves.³ Except for Bessie Jordan, who had been the Marshes' faithful housekeeper since they were newlyweds, and Eugene Carr, the janitor, who stood back and watched, John was alone.⁴ "I didn't want to see him working at it," said Stephens Mitchell about the destruction of his sister's papers. "The job made John feel sad, and me too. And I was glad he had to do it instead of me."⁵

After watching his employer sit staring for a long time at the contents of three cardboard boxes that he had emptied into the wire basket, Eugene Carr handed him a box of kitchen matches and asked softly, "Mr. Marsh, don't you want me to do this for you?" Without looking up, John sadly shook his head no, rose from his chair, and began his mission. As the papers burned and quickly turned into ashes, he became overwhelmed with sorrow, and he wept. Alarmed at seeing him so distressed, Bessie, watching from the kitchen window, telephoned Margaret Baugh, the





Marshes' secretary, who lived nearby. When Miss Baugh arrived, John asked her to finish destroying the papers. "The janitor offered to do it for me," she recalled, "but John said 'This is a trust,' and I stayed there until every scrap was consumed."⁶

Later, in her notes, Margaret Baugh explained:

You see it was this way: Margaret wanted her papers destroyed, manuscripts, and letters. After her death he [John] took on the job—destroyed the clothes she had on at the time of the accident, the manuscript of *GWTW*, maybe *Ropa*, and maybe the novel of the 1920s. This was such a distressing experience that he turned over to me the destroying of the correspondence. After we had burned a lot of letters, we found some of them would have been useful in carrying on. So the burning stopped. (To my relief, for it was distressing to me too.) Then, after John's death Steve had the responsibility, and he had me burn the remaining manuscripts and some more letters.⁷

Fortunately, Stephens did not have Margaret Baugh destroy all of Peggy's material; thousands of letters and papers were spared. In the late 1960s, after publication of the Margaret Mitchell biography that Stephens had authorized Finis Farr to write, Stephens donated to the University of Georgia Hargrett Library the bulk of his sister's papers—over fifty-seven thousand items—which include not only her and John's letters and papers but also some of Stephens's, along with his extensive family genealogy, portions of his memoir, and many letters written by his parents and grandparents. Margaret Baugh's notes are also in this valuable collection.

It is not difficult to imagine the sadness John Marsh felt as he destroyed the papers that represented his life with Margaret Mitchell. The Marshes' entire domestic life—twenty-four years—centered on *Gone With the Wind*. During the first and happiest decade of their marriage, a lot of their lovemaking went on while they were working on the manuscript.⁸ Perhaps *Gone With the Wind* is not the only novel that resulted from the link between creativity and sexuality, but it is one novel that did. And after the book was published, something that neither of them ever expected, the remainder of their lives was spent in taking care of the complex international business that emerged from its phenomenal success. The book was their only child, and it was one that needed constant supervision. It had consumed their lives just as the fire consumed the papers.

Margaret Mitchell loved her manuscript, which she often spoke of as her "first baby."⁹ She could not destroy it, nor would she sell it or give it away to a library. When the Hollywood producer David O. Selznick





and financier Jock Whitney asked her in 1937 if they could borrow or buy the manuscript for film advertisement purposes, she declined, saying she thought she had destroyed the manuscript, knowing full well she had not. Her feelings about having others see the manuscript are emphatically expressed in a letter she wrote Selznick's assistant Katharine Brown, who also attempted to purchase the manuscript on Selznick's behalf: "The whole truth of the matter is that I do not care where my book, as a book, goes, but I do not want even one sheet of manuscript or one line of notes to survive."¹⁰

In late 1948, she began to put her house in order, and on several occasions she discussed with John and her brother what was to be done if she died before Stephens and if John were unable to carry out her wishes, or if she and John died at the same time. She made it clear then, as she had done many times before, that she wanted her manuscripts, her notes related to them, and her personal papers destroyed; she was also adamant about not wanting sequels, comic strips, and abridgements.¹¹ Then, too, she wanted the Mitchell family home on Peachtree Street torn down if neither she nor Stephens lived in it. In her five-page will, which she wrote in her big, scrawling handwriting on Sunday afternoon, November 21, 1948, only nine months before she died, she left the manuscript, all rights and royalties, all of her papers, letters, childhood writings, and, with a few minor exceptions, all of her possessions to John.¹² But she wrote nothing in her will about wanting anything destroyed because she did not need to do so. John and Stephens not only knew her wishes but also felt as she did about them. Stephens said, "Margaret once told me, 'If John and I die together'—and that almost happened in her accident—"you see that my papers are torn up."¹³

The fact that she felt so strongly about wanting her material destroyed and yet did not destroy it herself but left the job for John to do was characteristic of Peggy; it followed her pattern. She was not subordinate to him, but she was dependent upon him to take care of everything for her. And he did. As one of their journalist-friends put it, John was everything to Peggy—"husband, father, business manager, friend and watchdog."¹⁴

In his own will, written only eleven days after Peggy died, John left portions of the manuscript that he had decided to keep, the copyrights, royalties, and all the other materials related to *Gone With the Wind* to Stephens Mitchell.¹⁵ Then, in July 1951, he wrote a codicil to his will. The first line of the codicil states:

My wife, Margaret Mitchell Marsh, wanted her private papers destroyed. She did not wish them to fall into the hands of strangers. She believed that an author should stand or fall before the





public on the basis of the author's *published* work. She believed that little was ever gained from studying an author's manuscript and private papers, and that, more often than not, this led to false and misleading conclusions. Knowing the uncertainties of life, she placed upon me the duty of destroying the papers if she should die without having done it. She did so die, and I have tried to fulfill the obligation. As a part of the painful job, I have destroyed the original manuscript of her novel *Gone With the Wind* and all related papers, proof sheets, notebooks, notes, et cetera, except as described below.

He then lists what he had saved of the *Gone With the Wind* papers "as a means of authenticating her authorship of the novel." He explained, "If some schemer were to rise up with the claim that her novel was written by another person, it would be tragic if we had no documentary evidence and therefore were unable to beat down the false claim. So I am saving these original *Gone With the Wind* papers for use in proving, if the need arises, that Peggy and no one else was the author of her novel."¹⁶

He included two or three drafts of chapters; several proof sheets that he described as "carrying her handwriting and mine"; samples of other related papers such as chronologies, lists, and notes she made in collecting information; and a few of the large manila envelopes in which she kept the chapters. He concluded: "With this material, I am confident it can be proved not only that my wife Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone With the Wind*, but that she alone could have written it."¹⁷ Without showing the material to anyone, not even Stephens Mitchell or Margaret Baugh, he sealed it in a large manila envelope that he marked in his bold hand, "Do not open."¹⁸ On July 26, 1951, he locked the envelope in his safety deposit box in the vault of the Citizens and Southern National Bank on Marietta Street in Atlanta.¹⁹ He ordered that the papers were to remain sealed "unless a real and actual need for them arises for the purpose stated. If such a need never arises, the envelope and contents are eventually to be destroyed unopened."²⁰ In the early 1960s Stephens wrote in his memoir, "Those things are still sealed in the envelope, the ones John selected and put there. The rest are burned."²¹

Peggy's desire to have the original manuscript destroyed and John's codicil raise many questions. What—if anything—would the contents of that envelope prove? How did he go about deciding which manuscript pages to burn and which to save?²² Why did she want the manuscript destroyed? It is difficult to understand why he—a prudent man with intellectual depth and maturity—did not simply leave all of the material of incalculable literary and monetary value to one of the many universi-



ties or libraries that sought it so that scholars and lay people alike could examine it. Only if he had done so could there be no question of Margaret Mitchell's authorship. So why did he burn the entire proof? Or, did he carefully burn all that which he thought may have suggested something other than proof?

The question of her authorship was just one of the many tales that snaked out soon after *Gone With the Wind* became an unexpected sensation.²³ But of all the many rumors, the "most persistent," Stephens said, "were the stories that Margaret had not written the book at all." Stephens explained, "Many fool people claim that John Marsh wrote the book. . . . John and I decided that we were going to save enough of the notes and the manuscript to prove that Margaret wrote this book."²⁴ A sensitive person who had great pride but little confidence in her own ability, she was devastated by this one rumor that John had written the novel or had helped her write it.²⁵

Ironically, Peggy had unwittingly given rise to this rumor herself. When her popularity was at its height, immediately after *Gone With the Wind* was published in 1936, she allowed the Atlanta Public Library to exhibit two pages of the original manuscript in an enclosed cabinet with a glass top. This exhibition, shown for several weeks in the library, was viewed by thousands. The notes and liberal editing on the pages were in John's handwriting, which was easily recognizable to anybody who had seen it.²⁶ Some of the people who knew the Marshes well had taken for granted that John, an established journalist and an editor, had contributed significantly to his wife's work. And they were convinced after glancing at the pages that he indeed had helped her because the pages appeared in the book exactly as John had edited them in the manuscript.²⁷ When rumors about his collaboration emerged, Peggy realized what a mistake she had made in letting manuscript sheets go. In December 1936, she wrote her friend Herschel Brickell, a reviewer for the *New York Post*: "I want my manuscript and do not want it floating around for I intend to burn it just as soon as I get those leaves back which the MacM co. inveigled out of me when I was too exhausted to argue. . . . The proof sheets are going to be burned, too. . . . I don't want anyone to see them just as I did not want anyone to see the ms pages but couldn't help myself. Don't ask why. I dont know."²⁸

Exquisitely sensitive to criticism, Peggy could never ignore gossip and lies. She spent an inordinate amount of time tracking down misstatements and rumors and writing long responses to them, as well as to questions and to praise. But this questioning of her very authorship seared her soul; she was never able to dismiss it privately or to confront it publicly, as she had done with other rumors. The codicil to John's will proves that



he, too, took it seriously and did not consider it mere local gossip. More important, it underscores his enduring effort to protect her, even in death.

Just three years after her death, the respected southern journalist Ralph McGill wrote an article based on his friendship with Peggy and John and on the knowledge of fellow journalists who knew her in her early years. Although the article compliments Peggy, McGill explains that all her friends were surprised by her achievement.

Not one of the merest handful of persons who knew she had written a book had seen it or had the faintest idea of what it was about. Candor compels one to say that the most loyal friend would not have believed that even by rubbing an Aladdin's lamp she could have written the book. She hid herself completely, inwardly, and in many things, from her best friends.²⁹

Margaret Mitchell did not need an Aladdin's lamp; she had John Marsh. And it is no exaggeration to say that just as she dedicated *Gone With the Wind* to him, so he dedicated his life to her. His burning their beloved manuscript was a fitting end to a relationship marked by his burning devotion to her. Without that devotion, it is unlikely that *Gone With the Wind* would ever have been written. If love is defined as an intrinsic good, full of mutual pleasure—physical and intellectual—friendship, loyalty, trust, humor, and, as Aristotle writes in his *Rhetoric*, “as wishing for someone what you believe to be good things—wishing this not for your own sake but for his—and acting so far as you can to bring them about,” then *Gone With the Wind* is not a love story; it is a novel of failed romances. Ironically, the true love story lies behind *Gone With the Wind*, in the lives of the author and her husband.

2

Their first meeting in late September 1921 was the result, like nearly all things in life, of a circumstance of fate. Ironically, it occurred just a few days after John had written to his mother on September 18, 1921, that he was thinking about making some changes in his life. He assured her: “Don’t feel that I am going to do anything wild and daring. I wish to goodness I had in my past record just one thing wild and daring. I haven’t and I don’t suppose I ever will.” Little did he know then that the most wild and daring person that he would ever know was about to enter his life and change it forever.

John met Peggy one night at the March Hare Tea Shop, better known by its frequenters as “the Rabbit Hole.” A popular downtown Atlanta





gathering place, this “tearoom” was located in the basement of the Haynes Building at 2 1/2 Auburn Avenue, just a block from Peachtree Street but in a shabby neighborhood.³⁰ Just getting over the flu, John had almost not gone there that night. He went only because he was pressed to go by his best friend, O. B. Keeler, a sportswriter at the *Daily Georgian* where John worked as a reporter.³¹

With its bohemian atmosphere, the Rabbit Hole was the favorite gathering place for aspiring, out-of-work writers, a few college students, charming young women known as flappers, and young newspapermen who would drop in between assignments or after deadlines. In the dim candlelight they would dance or sit around the red-checked, oilcloth-covered tables, talking and sipping their drinks (bootleg gin or corn whiskey mixed with Coca-Cola). This was an era when cynicism spread like prairie fire across the country, when many lost their faith in traditional values that had long been taken for granted. Then, too, the Nineteenth Amendment granting women full suffrage had just been passed in 1920 and had brought with it a cascade of changes in the roles of women. Known as “the intelligentsia,” coveys of young people, like the Rabbit Hole crowd, disillusioned with traditional values and materialism, gathered in Greenwich Village-like places across the nation to discuss the problems the older generation had left for them to straighten out. The young people who met at the Rabbit Hole had high ideals and expectations and great books in their heads. In a letter to his mother in the late fall of 1921, John described them as “a sort of almost-intellectual society set, young revolutionaries after a fashion who actually have ideas, though some of them are far from certain as to what those ideas are.”³² He had been to the Rabbit Hole only one time before that fateful night, for it was not the type of place or group that attracted him. Individualistic and disdainful of trivial social pursuits, he was self-made, having earned his present position by hard work and self-denial. Busy making a living, he had no time to sit around being disillusioned and, besides that, he upheld the traditional values scorned by the Rabbit Hole group.

Margaret Mitchell, then twenty-one years old, not only fit right into the Rabbit Hole crowd but was the leader of the pack. More than anything else in the world, she wanted to be a writer. Although nothing she had written had been published, she nevertheless thought of writing as her profession, so on the evenings when she was not dancing with her fraternity boyfriends at such elegant places as the Georgian Terrace, she sought the company of other aspiring writers in the charged atmosphere of the Rabbit Hole. On the night when John walked into the place, Margaret Mitchell was already there, and she captured his attention instantly. She was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.³³





She was sitting, like a fragile centerpiece, on top of one of the tables, her back held straight and her legs daintily crossed at the ankles. She looked strikingly beautiful, young, and small. She was wearing a dark green woolen dress with a cream lace collar that circled high around her slender neck. With its long, straight skirt and tight-fitting bodice, the dress emphasized her tiny waist and shapely little body. Her long, auburn-tinged dark hair, piled high on the back of her head, made her creamy complexion look luminous. Her green eyes sparkled with merriment as the young men, circled about her, listening to her tell an anecdote, burst into laughter.³⁴ In many ways, she was not different in personality or appearance from her heroine Scarlett O'Hara, although she violently objected to such a comparison.³⁵ But her friends said that reading the description of Scarlett on the first page of *Gone With the Wind* is reading a description of Peggy herself.³⁶

Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm. . . . In her face were too sharply blended the delicate features of her mother, a Coast aristocrat of French descent, and the heavy ones of her florid Irish father. But it was an arresting face, pointed of chin, square of jaw. Her eyes were pale green without a touch of hazel, starred with bristly black lashes and slightly tilted at the ends. Above them, her thick black brows slanted upward, cutting a startling oblique line in her magnolia-white skin.

As John was soon to learn, she was a master storyteller, noted for her extraordinary ability to dramatize and embellish ordinary events. When he asked someone who she was, he was told that she was a rich debutante and the most popular girl in town. To get a date with her, he was advised, "Get in line!" He did not reply to that remark, but he was challenged by it.

Although Peggy looked demure during this high-flying period that John later named her "flapperoty era," there was nothing demure about her.³⁷ She even categorized herself as the "Vamp de Luxe."³⁸ In responding to an old beau's remark about her being "a devil and a flirt" and not playing "square with men," she answered saucily, "When a girl knows the male psychology as thoroughly as I do—when she knows the thousand and one small tricks by which a girl can 'innocently' run a man wild or sweep him off his feet—when she knows these things and is small and helpless looking, to boot, and she doesn't use these aforementioned tricks—well, I'd say she played fair!"³⁹ But Peggy did not always play fair.

Before she became aware of his presence, she had already swept John right off his feet. As he stood in the background, watching and listening,



he found her irresistible. His interest in Ruth Gimbel, an Ohio girl whom he had been dating steadily for a year, vanished.⁴⁰ Within a few days of his meeting Peggy, he wrote his sister Frances about what he called “an ardent young revolutionary with a helluva lot of common sense as well. You’ll like her, I’m sure.” Then he added, “If you don’t, I promise to choke you on the spot.”⁴¹

3

At that time Peggy was attracted, much to her father’s regret, to rebels, gamblers, and dashing playboys who flaunted their reckless and arrogant attitudes. John Marsh fit into none of these categories. Twenty-six years old, he was an old young man, conservative and quiet. There was nothing daring about him; his thoughts and behavior were deeply conventional. He was highly principled, but not self-righteous, and he cared nothing for organized religion, a view appreciated by Peggy’s father, Eugene Mitchell, who shared the sentiment. John had supported himself since his early teens, paying for his own college education by writing for the *Herald* and the *Leader*, newspapers in Lexington, Kentucky. And he, along with his oldest brother, was helping to support his mother and his youngest sister, who at that time was in college. Born and reared in a small town in northern Kentucky, he graduated with a degree in English from the University of Kentucky in 1916. While on a fellowship doing graduate studies at the university, he taught two classes of English composition and continued to write for the newspapers until World War I broke out. Then he joined the service. After his two-year stint in the army, he returned to newspaper work in Lexington for a few months and then moved to Atlanta, where he landed a job as a reporter for the *Georgian*. About returning home to Kentucky, he wrote his mother, “I may move back there when I become a famous writer.”⁴² By the time he met Peggy, he had been working in Atlanta on some interesting assignments for over a year. He was an established journalist with an excellent professional reputation.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that he was different from all the other men that she found attractive, Peggy was drawn to John. She found his blond, patrician handsomeness appealing, and his maturity comforting. Because he was more intellectual than any other man she had ever known, she felt reassured by his attention to her. Because she was the prettiest, the friendliest, and the most sought-after girl he had known, he took pride in her interest in him. They became immediate friends. The chemistry between them, from the start, was profoundly reciprocal, but perhaps not identical. Like all those other young men, John was enchanted with her beauty, warmth, and personality. And just like all those others,

he was stimulated by her sexuality. He fell in love with Peggy at first sight and claimed that his falling into such a love was “a soul-shaking, terrifying experience.”⁴³ He wanted physical intimacy but was too shy, too much of a gentleman to act on his desire. He was afraid he would lose her. Just the reverse may have been true of Peggy who, in searching for psychological intimacy, wanted John as an intellectual companion, as a protector and a teacher. At that time, she desperately needed approval from someone she regarded as wise and sensible, someone she trusted. As he began to fulfill all those roles so admirably and generously, she became attracted to him sexually. Soon, each became irreplaceable to the other.

In the beginning of their friendship, she took the initiative by inviting him to escort her to several debutante balls during the Christmas holidays. Having grown up in a small town in a large family dependent upon the limited income of a school-teaching, widowed mother, John had no experience attending such social functions. Also, although he was older than she, more educated and experienced in many ways, he was also conspicuously more naive about romance. His mother and his sisters were models of virtuous womanhood, and all the girls John had dated were more of the conventional type, not like the tantalizing little chameleon Peggy was at that time. John had had no experiences with a woman like her. One of her friends, William Howland, described her best when he wrote, “At times, she looked like a very good little girl—which she was. At other times, she looked like a very bad little girl; which she could be. But never a dull little girl. Or a mean little girl.”⁴⁴

Just a few days after meeting this woman who would dominate the rest of his life, he wrote his sister Frances:

An Atlanta girl is the only girl who interests me. She is one of last season’s debutantes, lives in a beautiful house way out on Peachtree Street, is very small and is named Mitchell. She has a beautiful long name, Margaret, which has been shortened to a pert “Peggy.” To counteract the effect of that word “debutante,” I have been to see her twice and both times have spent the entire evening in conversation, without any stimulation, erotic or otherwise. She is the first girl I have met in Atlanta with whom I have been able to enjoy sensible conversation.⁴⁵

By Thanksgiving, anyone with half an eye could tell at a glance that the tall, quiet newspaperman from Kentucky was deeply in love with the quirky little debutante. At times, she appeared to be in love with him. But no one could be sure because she continued to go out with other men and to play—to the hilt—her role as southern belle.

What soon separated John from her other admirers and made him the object of her serious attention was his recognition of her burning desire to be a writer. He listened to her and validated her intellectually. No one else, except her mother, had ever done that. She had not excelled in her schoolwork or in any other area and had the reputation of being a party girl, one who was lively, unconventional, sexy, and funny. No one appreciated or even saw the serious side of her. Even though her own life thus far had no direction, was unproductive, wasted in social trivia, and dependent upon her father's income, Peggy admired people who were independent, who worked hard and who had, as she put it, "the courage to take it on the chin" as John was doing.⁴⁶ From the time she first met him, she knew intuitively that he was "buckwheat," a term she always used to describe people who had integrity and character. This metaphor came from her childhood when she often heard her grandmother and great-aunts, who were farmers, say that there were just two kinds of people: wheat people and buckwheat people. One day not long after she met him, Peggy nicknamed John "Buckwheat."⁴⁷ She then explained the analogy to him, as she did to many others later: "Take wheat, when it's ripe and a strong wind comes along, it's laid flat on the ground and it never rises again. But buckwheat yields to the wind, is flattened and when the wind passes, it rises up just as straight as ever. Wheat people can't stand a wind. Buckwheat people can."⁴⁸

Because of her sense of adventure—her favorite books were boys' adventure stories and mysteries—she loved John's work. She envied his trek with revenuers into the Georgia mountains on a stormy day to chase bootleggers and the shiny little pistol he had been given to keep as a souvenir of the trip. She was more than impressed with the national attention he received just about the time they met for his controversial interview with the new leader of the Ku Klux Klan. His long interview with Imperial Kleagle Clarke won him praise from the *Georgian* and also from the *New York World*, who called John "one of the most capable and painstaking journalists in Atlanta."⁴⁹

His life was different from that of her fraternity boyfriends. She admired not only his work but also his education. Because of his use of the language and his vocabulary, anyone who listened to him for a few moments knew that he was intelligent and well educated. In contrast to her southern drawl and lapses of grammar, his clear diction made every syllable distinct. Her voice had a lilting, soft but high pitch to it; his was deep and low. Although he had a keen sense of humor, which delighted her, he also had a kind of no-nonsense air. From the beginning of their friendship, she looked upon him as almost an authority figure. She respected and valued his judgment.⁵⁰

Before John met Peggy, his letters to his mother are all about his work. But after November 21, 1921, when he announced that he had just met the “introducingest person” he had ever known, his letters are all about Peggy and their social life. He wrote enthusiastically about the formal balls that he and his “new Sweetie” had been attending at the Georgian Terrace and the fun they had been having. His happiness is evident in this letter to his mother:

I suppose right at the start you want to hear a report on the present condition of my health. It’s great—I’m fat and getting fatter. I am beginning to fear double chins. . . . The day before I went to bed with the flu, my doctor stuck me on the scales and weighed me in at 134 pounds. A couple of days ago I was in his office, got on the same scales and I weighed 145 pounds. I can cheerfully say that I have become much better satisfied with Atlanta and with life in general during the month past. I honestly feel great, physically and mentally.⁵¹

Perhaps the most obvious sign of his involvement with Peggy was the change in his workaholic habits. “I am by a great effort of will power not working so hard at the office that I am too tired to go out in the evenings occasionally,” he told his mother. Also, he said he was trying to cure some of his other bad habits; he had stopped “drinking coffee and coca cola” and had become a “sweet milk fiend.” He added: “I don’t stay up late *every* night, stopped drinking cocktails, using cocaine, heroin and opium, dipping snuff, chewing tobacco, bootlegging whiskey and chewing my fingernails, etc.” A chain smoker since he was sixteen, he wrote: “Of course, I am still smoking cigarettes, *of course*. ‘They never stop,’ . . . but if some one will invent a substitute for that I promise to give it a trial.”⁵²

By mid-December, he and Peggy were seeing each other nightly. Having looked forward to spending all of his Christmas vacation with her, he was furious when, two days before Christmas, the *Georgian* sent him, its star reporter, to cover Eugene Debs’s release from the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta. A colorful Socialist who ran for the presidency five times, Debs was always making national news, first for organizing a union for railroad workers who went on strike the following year, then for making an antiwar speech during World War I. He was convicted under the Espionage Act for his speech and given a ten-year sentence in the Atlanta federal prison, but his sentence was commuted on Christmas Day 1921. Because none of the newspapermen knew exactly when Debs



A Man of Character

would be released, John angrily spent Christmas Eve “sitting in a hard chair in the prison front parlor wishing Debs was in the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.”⁵³ Christmas Day he described as “darn cold . . . and the warden wouldn’t even let us inside the gate, so we marched up and down outside, about 40 of us, including the motion picture men and Socialist delegation” until late Christmas afternoon when Debs was finally released. John got his interview with Debs, hurriedly wrote his story and lined up photographs to go with it, and then tried to reach Peggy. But she had already gone with another date on a round of holiday parties. So he sadly returned to his room in Mrs. Prim’s boarding house on Peachtree Street and sat alone in his rocking chair in front of the fire with nothing more entertaining to do than play with the family’s new kitten. By eight o’clock, he was in bed, exhausted and disappointed, wondering where Peggy was and missing her badly.⁵⁴

In late 1921, the editor of Kentucky’s *Lexington Leader* wrote John asking, for the second time, if he would return to work on its staff and be its highest-paid reporter at thirty-five dollars a week—a high salary in the newspaper world in those days.⁵⁵ Although he was proud of the invitation, he declined. He wanted to stay in Atlanta to be near Peggy, who had changed his life in wonderful ways—at first.

