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Belles And the Beast

WHEN THE DEVIL CAME DOWN TO DIXIE
Ben Butler in New Orleans
By Chester G. Hearn
Louisiana State University Press
260 pp. $26.95

FROM "WHEN THE DEVIL CAME DOWN TO DIXIE"
Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler

OF ALL the scoundrels who have strutted their way through American history, few have been so perversely fascinating as Benjamin F. Butler, the "Beast" of New Orleans. For nine months in 1862, Butler served as head of Union troops occupying that city, and he managed to win the adoration of its poor and the loathing of its rich. He "fed the poor, cleaned the streets, flushed the sewers, stabilized currency, created employment and organized elections"; he also insulted fair Southern womanhood, traded with the enemy, and stole everything he could lay his hands on.

Small wonder that history has never known what to do with Ben Butler. By some measures his performance as Abraham Lincoln's agent was magnanimous and farsighted; by others it was dictatorial and criminal. In all these respects it was in character. Someone who knew him well said that Butler could "change in an instant from a well-mannered, affectionate gentleman to an insolent, brazen bully," and added: "Butler was at once passionately loved and passionately hated. He was a man who left few people indifferent." Or, as Chester Hearn puts it in this lucid, balanced account of Butler's New Orleans days, "Butler—no matter where he was or what he did—attracted trouble."

He was as peculiar in looks as in behavior and character. Born into modest circumstances in New Hampshire in 1818, he was "disfigured by a drooping eyelid and a severe case of strabism." Four and a half decades later, as he arrived in New Orleans, he had the figure of a tennis ball walking on a pair of toothpicks; to one person who saw him, the best that could be said was that he did not look so bad as his portraits suggested. Yet he had charm and what we now call, however mistakenly, charisma. These, along with his "wit and constant devotion," won him a beautiful, gifted wife and a considerable contingent of friends and allies, many of whom were delighted to follow him wherever he cared to go.

He practiced law in Massachusetts and did handsomely at it, but vainglory was his real stock in trade. Barely in his thirties, he "wore many hats, and it is amazing that he wore them all so well—a state senator, a gubernatorial candidate, a brigadier general of militia and a busy trial lawyer all at the same time." He was a Democrat who sometimes displayed an unseemly sympathy for the slaveholding states, but as the tide changed Butler moved with it, eventually managing to get himself appointed brigadier general in charge of 6,000 militiamen. Quite unbidden by higher authority, he marched into Baltimore with 1,000 men and took control of that border city, which in 1861 was deeply divided in its loyalties; this "horrified" Lincoln, who "had been tiptoeing around the delicate issue of Maryland's status," but made Butler a popular favorite, if not an outright hero, in the North.

From the day Butler entered Lincoln's

life until the day of Lincoln's death, this ersatz "general"—Ulysses S. Grant had a "lack of confidence in his military ability" and regarded him as "an unsafe commander for a large army"—was a burr in the great man's saddle. It was to extirpate the burr that Lincoln finally allowed Butler to take command of the New Orleans mission. One gentleman highly placed in Union circles put it bluntly: "I guess we have found a hole to bury this Yankee elephant in."

But self-entombment was scarcely Butler's style. He invaded New Orleans much as Sherman later invaded Georgia: He gave no quarter and he took no prisoners. Unlike Sherman, an honest man, he did not hesitate to appropriate his full share of booty, of which at that time New Orleans had plenty. Though war and a Union blockade "had destroyed trade and brought hunger in its stead," the Crescent City was "the greatest and wealthiest city in the Confederacy," rich in banks, themselves rich in deposits of gold and silver. Together with his rapacious brother Andrew, Butler systematically bled the city dry even as he went about the more respectable business of imposing order and discipline on a populace that had only nominal acquaintance with either.

BUTLER "held absolute reign over the city." As he himself said, with characteristic modesty: "I was supreme. Having supreme power, I used it." At first he was restrained in methods and temper; he tried to work with the elected city government and to prevent occupying troops from abusing their position. But resistance was everywhere, especially in the upper classes, and most especially among privileged women, who "had become galvanizing influences, using the inviolability of their gender to agitate resistance." They spat on Union men, shrank from them on the sidewalks, hissed insults at them. Finally Butler had enough; "the constant insults from the fairer sex demanded drastic steps." So on May 15 Butler issued General Orders No. 28, "the infamous Woman Order." It read:

"As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subjected to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by word, gesture or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation."

That was that: "The edict was as astounding as it was effective, and the anger it stimulated in the South elevated Butler's image to new levels of hatred." He had been "Picayune Butler" when he arrived, but now he was "Beast Butler." The flower of white Southern womanhood had been insulted beyond imagination; even unto this day, in certain refined precincts of New Orleans the words "Ben Butler" can cast a pall over a room.

At the same time that he was insulting the "ladies," Butler was getting himself into hot water with the consuls, actual or self-represented, of the many foreign governments doing business in New Orleans. He properly suspected that many were trading with the enemy and went after them accordingly, to the irritation of Lincoln, who was trying to keep Europe from moving into the Rebel camp. Yet it wasn't long before Butler himself, through Andrew's good offices, was trading with the enemy. So, at least, there is ample reason to believe. "Whether Ben Butler would risk the disgrace of treason to acquire wealth is still questionable, but Andrew had no restraints beyond those imposed by his brother," and there seem to have been few if any of those. Suffice it to say that when he reached New Orleans, Ben Butler had capital of about $150,000. By 1868 this had multiplied to $3 million, with "but one source to account for the swiftly amassed fortune—New Orleans."

For well over a century the story of Ben Butler has been read in New Orleans and much of the South as a horror tale. Read today it comes far closer to comedy. It is hard to imagine a more devastatingly witty wartime document than the "Woman Order," and the spectacle of the giddily venal Butler sacking the arrogant banks and corrupt civic coffers of New Orleans is genuinely delicious. The story falls somewhere between Restoration comedy and the Marx Brothers, and is best read as such. Though Chester Hearn is no comedian, he provides the raw material, and the reader can do the rest. ■

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