

PHEBE G. AND JAMES H. SHERMAN

"One week ago today you went away. Last night I shortened the four years by calculation like this—2 years, 8 months only for active life if in bed by 10 and up at 6. When asleep I shall not realize your absence."

"Went in a sleigh for flowers. Was married to James H. Sherman at Cousin Lizzie's near 7 o'clock eve. 52 persons present. By M. Batchelor."

It was New Year's Day, 1873, when Phebe A. Gifford of Westport and James Henry Sherman entered into the union that was to last forty years, involve two whaling voyages to the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans for her—one with their two small sons—the usual stretches of separation and loneliness, exemplifying, even for the 19th Century's comparatively stable time, the solidity of the wedding contract.

"I knew Phebe Sherman," a Descendants' member recalled as recently as 1977. "She was blind by that time. (The sudden unexplained blindness which lasted until her death in 1913 began in 1896.) A very sweet gentle woman and her husband was quite fiery and outspoken . . . She went whaling with him and took the two boys Wilbur and Elijah."

Luckily enough, substantial excerpts exist from the journal which Mrs. Sherman, then thirty-one, kept during the first twelve months of her marriage. A succinct stylist, with a gift for undertone, she records in the early pages that "JHS proves to be a Christian, kind, gentle, affectionate husband. He has been blessed with perfect peace." Inevitably the entries which follow cover a range both broad and spotty for they were intended, especially after James left for the sea in October, to serve as a mirror of her life for him.

On February 5, for example, she tells of a meeting with "James' father for the first time" (an ellipsis not otherwise explained) and on February 9, "A dog bit my arm from my patting his head. Went to eve meeting. . . I spoke. God helped me."

On October 8 of that year the whaler Milton cleared New Bedford with James Sherman aboard and Phebe's journal became, as planned, a day-to-day letter to him.

"Today the Milton sailed," she wrote a few hours after he left. "My dear James Henry has gone. I brought his large picture home from Fred Andrews' gallery. After J.H. went I prayed and the thought 'trust' came to my mind . . .

Paid \$7 1/4 for pictures and frames." The next day she added, "I felt I wanted to draw near to your mother after you left . . . I want to be a comfort to my parents and yours. Mother is kind. One hour today piano exercise."

And on October 10,

"I threw leaves into a brook to see them sail down stream. I take more notice now of things pertaining to the sea. I picked a bunch of leaves for their beauty—thought I might send them to you but had to throw it away. They thought it was dogwood. I love you J.H. My love for you makes me desire to do as you wish to have me do though you are absent."

The following morning "mother brought in a black kitten. She says it is a sign of good luck to have a black cat come to us. Mother has slept with me since you left 3 nights . . . I hope you will like this my way of writing daily. It gives you an idea of my everyday life. One hour at piano."

An extraordinarily devout woman, she nonetheless had a keen eye and ear for the human scene. The next Sunday, for instance, on the way to church, she remarks that "Mrs. Landers and her little boy rode over to New Bedford with us. She eats parched oatmeal dry and thinks it gives her strength. She thinks, too, it benefits the mind . . . We met Ellen going to Charlie Soule's funeral. Thank God that we are not parted by death. May God help us to live as to be *sure* to meet again.

"I shall carry down our Marriage Certificate, Marriage Maxims and a picture to have framed tomorrow. Father sits in the great chair nodding, the clock has just struck ten. I must go to bed without thee, so good night."

In mid-October Phebe "received a letter from Father Sherman today. He addressed me Respected Daughter and said 'May you always be happy.' William Gifford rode with Father and I from the drinking fountain corner County and Smith down street. He says they battle him about your going to sea. He says he tells them that you acted your faith . . . I have your collar boxes on my bureau and father Sherman's letters to you so placed that I can read your name.

"One week ago today you went away. Last night I shortened the four years by calculation like this--2 years, 8 months only for active life if in bed by 10 and up at 6. When asleep I shall not realize your absence."

Exactly two weeks after the Milton sailed Phebe put together all the journal entries to date and "sent my first letter to you . . . The wife of the mate who is with James Stanton writes to her husband and sends a letter every fortnight. When they went for letters he, the mate, got 4 letters and no one else got any. I want to do as well by my husband as anyone else does by hers.

"I have heard so much of suffering and sickness lately it is almost enough to frighten me. I am almost afraid to eat butter or grease lest I might have a cancer. Thank our Heavenly Father that your health and mine is as good as it is.