



## Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Col. Robert Gould Shaw

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### Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Col. Robert Gould Shaw From Avon Books (P)

On the Boston Common stands one of the great Civil War memorials, a magnificent bronze sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. It depicts the black soldiers of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry marching alongside their young white commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. When the philosopher William James dedicated the memorial in May 1897, he stirred the assembled crowd with these words: "There they march, warm-blooded champions of a better day for man. There on horseback among them, in the very habit as he lived, sits the blue-eyed child of fortune." In this book Shaw speaks for himself with equal eloquence through nearly two hundred letters he wrote to his family and friends during the Civil War. The portrait that emerges is of a man more divided and complex, though no less heroic, than the Shaw depicted in the celebrated film *Glory*. The pampered son of wealthy Boston abolitionists, Shaw was no abolitionist himself, but he was among the first patriots to respond to Lincoln's call for troops after the attack on Fort Sumter. After Cedar Mountain and Antietam, Shaw knew the carnage of war firsthand. Describing nightfall on the Antietam battlefield, he wrote, "the crickets chirped, and the frogs croaked, just as if nothing unusual had happened all day long, and presently the stars came out bright, and we lay down among the dead, and slept soundly until daylight. There were twenty dead bodies within a rod of me." When Federal war aims shifted from an emphasis on restoring the Union to the higher goal of emancipation for four million slaves, Shaw's mother pressured her son into accepting the command of the North's vanguard black regiment, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts.

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- Sales Rank: #1205535 in Books
- Published on: 1994-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 5.25" w x 1.25" l,
- Binding: Paperback

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