The Capture and Occupation of Richmond

April 3rd, 1865

By

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My answer to this was simple enough. General Ewell deliberately chose to instruct his officers to execute this order though it endangered the lives of thousands of helpless women and children and his sick and wounded comrades of Lee's army, who crowded the city, rather than risk that more or less cotton and tobacco should fall into the hands of the hated Yankees when the value of it was not of any importance to the North as a war measure. He invited a holocaust of his own friends to keep us out of a million or two dollars' worth of cotton and tobacco.

Every officer in command must exercise at times his own judgment as to the possibility or desirability of executing even very stringent orders.

VALUABLE RECORDS SAVED.

Among the acts of vandalism we were happily able to arrest, before irreparable damage was done, was the sacking of the Virginia State Library. An officer entering it found the floor covered with the colonial and other records in which it was so rich. They had been wantonly taken from their cases and thrown around. A guard was at once posted over it with imperative orders to let no person pass without written permission from headquarters, and when, several days later, I tried to enter it, it was with difficulty I could persuade my own guard to let me pass. The floor was yet covered with an interesting mass of time-worn papers. I believe little real damage was done to these valuable archives.

The Confederate archives, such as were left in the hurried retreat, were the most interesting and important spoils of our capture, and the first things sought for and guarded, together with the contents of the telegraph offices. These I some days later, on the arrival of Chas. A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, turned over to him. One half of the large accumulation of copies of the Confederate telegraph dispatches were found, the other half have never been found. They were said to have been carried off by a woman on the day of our entry.

A report having come to me that Mrs. Robert E. Lee, who had left the city hurriedly, was very ill and wished to return to her home, I sent an ambulance to assist her; and after Appomattox and General Lee's home-coming I arranged to protect him as much as possible from the annoyance of the curious public which had begun to throng from the North to this famous stronghold of the Confederacy.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S VISIT.

As fast as possible the Confederate prisoners were paroled and urged to lay aside their gray uniforms, take to citizen's dress, and aid in the maintenance of order, which they very generally and in good spirit did. They were mostly men who on the abandonment of their capital saw that further fighting was useless and upon the retreat of Ewell's corps quietly stayed behind. One of these came to my quarters on the day of Mr. Lincoln's arrival on Admiral Porter's flag-ship, *Malvern*, April 4th, and begged an interview. The streets were crowded during the daytime with excited throngs of negroes and whites, and we were very uneasy at Mr. Lincoln's insistence upon visiting all interesting points. We tried to make him consent to an escort, but he would not allow it, and strolled through the city like a private citizen, followed by crowds of people, white and black. It was a very dangerous thing to do, and we were obliged, unknown to him, to surround him with a crowd of detectives in citizen's dress, heavily armed. His reception by the emancipated negroes was dramatic in the extreme. The War and Navy Departments were particularly anxious as to Mr. Lincoln's personal safety, as the following dispatches illustrate:

MR. LINCOLN CAUTIONED.

I.

CITY POINT, April 3, 8:30 A.M.

EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War:

General Grant reports Petersburg evacuated and he is confi-

dent Richmond is taken. He is pushing forward to cut off the retreating army. I start to join him in a few minutes.

A. LINCOLN.

II.

WAR DEPARTMENT, April 3, 10:30 A.M.

TO THE PRESIDENT:

I congratulate you and the nation on the glorious news in your telegram just received. Allow me respectfully to ask you to consider whether you ought to expose the nation to the consequences of any disaster to yourself in the pursuit of a treacherous and dangerous enemy like the rebel army. If it was a question concerning yourself only I should not presume to say a word. Commanding generals are in the line of their duty in running such risks; but is the political head of a nation in the same condition?

EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War.

III.

CITY POINT, April 3, 5:00 P.M.

EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War:

Thanks for your caution, but I have already been to Petersburg, staid with General Grant an hour and a half, and returned here. It is certain that Richmond is in our hands and I think I will go there to-morrow. I will take care of myself.

A. LINCOLN.

"I will take care of myself." In those six words lay the fate of the great Emancipator.

Admiral Porter in his book writes:

The President was received by General Weitzel, whose headquarters were in the house of the fugitive President of the Confederacy. He took us to the state-house, the Libby prison, and the public offices which had escaped the terrible conflagration of the day before. Late in the afternoon we were greatly relieved to get the President safely back on board the *Malvern*. On Wednesday and Thursday of the following week I was completing my final dispositions for my departure from City Point for Washington, which was hastened by a feeling of nervous apprehension for the President, the result of reflecting upon the risks he ran.

The Confederate soldier alluded to above, who came to my headquarters and begged to have an interview with me on a very important subject, was a more than usually intelligent and fine-appearing man in uniform, by the name of Snyder.

He began by saying that he was an enlisted man in Raine's torpedo bureau, an organization of the Confederate secret service, which had among its duties such services as the blowing up of our magazines and our river steamers, raids on our rear like the St. Albans raid, firing of Northern cities, like the simultaneous attempts on the Fifth Avenue and many other New York hotels, the blowing up of the powder boats at City Point, the distribution of small-pox clothes, etc., etc., in fact all kinds of deviltry and irregular warfare, calculated to create panic or discontent in the rear of the Union armies. Their method was to plan an expedition and detail certain men who never knew what they were to do until they arrived at a designated rendezvous and received their orders.

A CONSPIRACY TO TAKE LINCOLN'S LIFE.

With the capture of Richmond and the abandonment of the Petersburg lines, he believed the war was hopeless and not another gun should be fired. Indeed his conscience told him every life taken now was in a way a wanton murder, and every right-minded man should strive to avert the shedding of another drop of blood. He had seen with the greatest anxiety President Lincoln expose himself to a fearful risk in walking so carelessly unattended and unprotected through the streets filled with people whose hearts in their defeat were bitter, and it would be but human nature for some one to take the opportunity to revenge the lost cause on the person of the man who represented the triumphant cause of the Union.

He then said that what he was particularly anxious to tell me was this:

He knew that a party had just been dispatched from Raine's torpedo bureau on a secret mission, which vaguely he understood

was aimed at the head of the Yankee government, and he wished to put Mr. Lincoln on his guard and have impressed upon him that just at this moment he believed him to be in great danger of violence and he should take the greater care of himself. He could not give names or facts, as the work of his department was secret, and no man knew what his comrade was sent to do, but of this he was convinced, that the President of the United States was in great danger.

Upon expressing willingness to make a statement and swear to it, I called in Captain Staniels, acting assistant adjutant-general, who took down his statement under oath. I then told him I should feel obliged to keep him in custody until I could arrange an interview with President Lincoln. I wrote the President a note and sent it at once aboard the *Malvern*, asking an interview at his earliest leisure on an important matter. It was then about 10 o'clock in the evening. In reply he wrote me a personal note, saying he would see me at 9 o'clock the next morning. I was promptly on hand, taking Snyder and his statement with me.

A MEMORABLE STATEMENT.

Admiral Porter's boat was waiting at the dock. The President received me most cordially in the Admiral's cabin, and then sat down on the long cushioned seat running along the side of the ship behind the dining table, I taking my seat opposite him. Little Tad, who was then a small and very restless boy, amused himself by running up and down the length of the sofa behind his father and jumping over his back in passing. As I progressed in the explanation of my errand, Mr. Lincoln let his head droop upon his hands as his elbows rested on the table, his hands supporting his chin and clasping either cheek in an expression of the most heart-breaking weariness, his great, melancholy eyes filling the cabin with the mournful light they emitted. I read the paper; I urged upon him the reasonableness of the warning, the good faith and apparent integrity of the man, and to make the impression deeper, if possible, I begged him to let me bring him in

and talk with him, but it was all to no purpose. Finally he lifted his head, and, casting upon me that face above all human faces that of a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," he said: "No, General Ripley, it is impossible for me to adopt and follow your suggestions. I deeply appreciate the feeling which has led you to urge them on me,—*but I must go on as I have begun in the course marked out for me, for I cannot bring myself to believe that any human being lives who would do me any harm.*" The interview then ended. He was so worn, emaciated, and pallid that he looked more like a disembodied spirit than the successful leader of a great nation in its hour of supreme triumph. I never saw him again; he left Richmond that afternoon, and City Point for Washington in a few days. My warning to him was on the morning of the 5th of April; on the night of the 15th—a short ten days after—he lay in his blood at Washington, a victim of the wolfish desire for revenge against which Snyder so honestly and prophetically warned him. I have so often thought of the web of fate I held in my impotent hands that morning, and what would have happened to the destinies of this great, new nation which has sprung up out of the blood and agony of that desperate conflict if I had been able to persuade the great President to let his friends protect him until the first rage of the enemy over defeat had expended itself and the realization had come in time to them that he, and his great and generous General Grant were the best and wisest friends they had. Would the miseries and crimes of the reconstruction period have been escaped under his patient, loving leadership, or would it have proved too great a task to bring the sections together and weld them into a sound, healthy body, and the great war President have lived to have been robbed of the lofty prestige in which he died?

No man can answer that question, but I have never had any doubt of his holding a higher place in the Pantheon of immortals because I failed, nor any doubt of the lengthened period of the healing of the wounds of the nation because he yielded to his conviction that he was following a path

marked out for him by a higher power. Still I would like to feel that I had been able to persuade and save him from his tragic fate.

By Wednesday much interest began to be felt in the opening of the churches on Sunday, and the question asked, "How will the ministers conduct service under the new order of things?" I therefore sent an invitation to all these gentlemen to meet me at my headquarters that afternoon to express their views. They all came, to the number of twenty or more, representing every creed. It was not difficult to come to an understanding with the pastors who had no established form of prayer, but the rectors of the Episcopal churches, Messrs. Minnigerode, Peterkin, and others, took the ground that as their form of prayer, established by the church of the South, required prayer for President Davis, no power could change it except that which created it. The controversy was warm and amusing to the onlooker, as I sat in the middle of the parlor of Mrs. Allen's house, a mere boy, with twenty or more reverend gentlemen laying down the ecclesiastical law to me. I cut it short by saying to Rev. Dr. Minnigerode, who did the most of the talking: "You forget, sir, that Richmond is again a part of the United States, and under martial law civil and ecclesiastical law is superseded. The churches will all be open on Sunday, will, no doubt, be thronged with an unusually large attendance, and the services will be conducted with regard to loyalty to the United States. Such of you as recognize this reasonable necessity will not be interfered with, but I have an abundant supply of clergymen to assign to such pulpits as may be needed to conduct loyal services." They then retired, and I crossed the hall to the opposite parlor, where the theatrical managers were assembled, to arrange for the opening of the theatres.

CONTROVERSY WITH THE RICHMOND MINISTERS.

In the morning I received from Dr. Minnigerode a long and warm protest against any interference by the state

with the church, vehemently denying my right to place any minister in his pulpit. This paper is in the *War Records*, where it is published to complete the history of the heated controversy between Secretary Stanton, Assistant Secretary Dana, General Weitzel, and myself, on the subject of the services to be held.

April 9th Dana telegraphed Stanton:

> The churches have all been well filled to-day. The ladies, especially, have attended in great numbers. The regular clergy have prayed, almost without exception. The sermons were devout and not political. The city is perfectly quiet, and there is more security for persons and property than has existed here for many months.

This was Secretary Dana's tribute to the splendid work of the First Brigade.

On April 10th Dana telegraphed to Stanton:

> Permission was given to open all churches yesterday on the general condition that no disloyal sentiments should be uttered. No especial authority was given to omit the prayer for the President, but it was distinctly understood that that prayer would not be said in Episcopal churches. As I have already reported, Weitzel is of the opinion that this prayer should be required of all those denominations of whose service it forms a regular part, but on the urgent advice of Shepley, military governor, and Brevet Brigadier-General Ripley, he did not give a positive order enforcing it.

This was a deliberate untruth. The reverse was the fact, as will be seen by Dr. Minnigerode's protest to me. The *War Records* contain long despatches on the subject, too long to copy here.

Secretary Stanton approved my position, but Weitzel, who had first revoked my order, when he found Stanton was angry with him, deliberately threw the responsibility and blame on me. Dana, detecting it, telegraphed Stanton, "I report the fact, confessing that it shakes a good deal my confidence in Weitzel."