

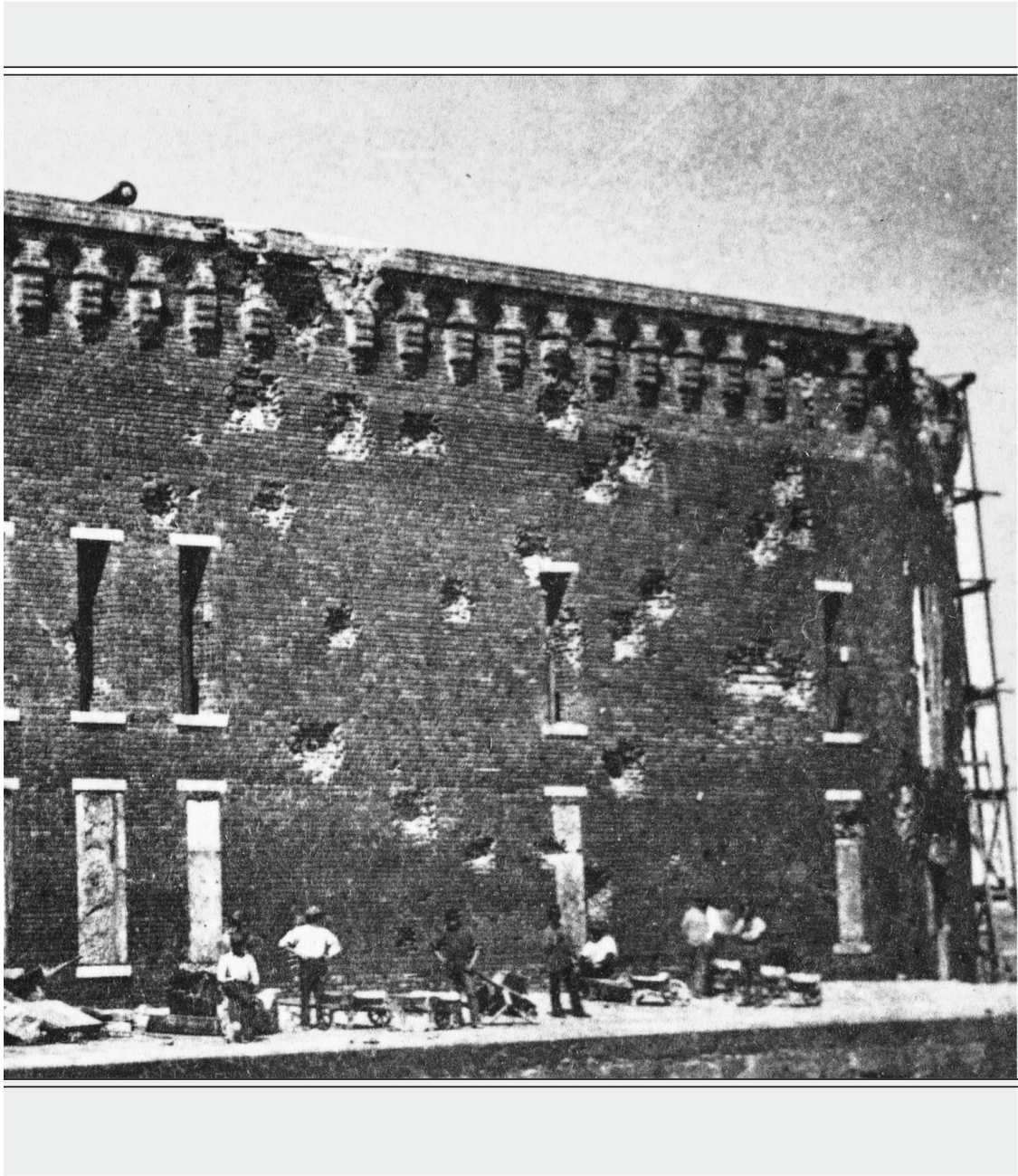
**A SAGA OF HUBRIS, HEARTBREAK, AND
HEROISM AT THE DAWN OF THE CIVIL WAR**

THE
DEMON
OF
UNREST



**ERIK
LARSON**

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY AND **THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE**



THE DEMON OF UNREST

A SAGA OF HUBRIS,
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CROWN
NEW YORK

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Hardback ISBN 9780385348744
Ebook ISBN 9780385348751

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Title-page image by Osborn's Gallery and Edward Anthony. Metropolitan Museum: Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005.

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Anna Kochman
Cover illustration: Tim O'Brien

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For C.A.G.

Slavery with us is no abstraction—but a *great and vital fact*. Without it our every comfort would be taken from us. Our wives, our children, made unhappy—education, the light of knowledge—all *all lost and our people ruined for ever. Nothing short of separation from the Union can save us.*

—ARTHUR PERONNEAU HAYNE TO PRESIDENT JAMES BUCHANAN, DECEMBER 22, 1860

We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, REMARK TO PRIVATE SECRETARY JOHN HAY, MAY 1861

Is any thing worth it? This fearful sacrifice—this awful penalty we pay for war?

—MARY BOYKIN CHESNUT, JOURNAL, JULY 26, 1864

Dark Magic

(A NOTE TO READERS)

I WAS WELL INTO MY RESEARCH on the saga of Fort Sumter and the advent of the American Civil War when the events of January 6, 2021, took place. As I watched the Capitol assault unfold on camera, I had the eerie feeling that present and past had merged. It is unsettling that in 1861 two of the greatest moments of national dread centered on the certification of the Electoral College vote and the presidential inauguration.

I was appalled by the attack, but also riveted. I realized that the anxiety, anger, and astonishment that I felt would certainly have been experienced in 1860–1861 by vast numbers of Americans. With this in mind, I set out to try to capture the real suspense of those long-ago months when the country lurched toward catastrophe, propelled by hubris, duplicity, false honor, and an unsatisfiable craving on the part of certain key actors for personal attention and affirmation. Many voices at the time of Sumter warned of civil war, but few had an inkling of what that might truly mean, and certainly none would have believed that any such war could take the lives of 750,000 Americans.

At the heart of the story is a mystery that still confounds: How on earth did South Carolina, a primitive, scantily populated state in economic decline, become the fulcrum for America's greatest tragedy? And even more bewildering, what malignant magic brought

Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line to the point where they could actually imagine the wholesale killing of one another?

This is a work of nonfiction. As always, anything between quotation marks comes from some form of historical document; likewise, any reference to a gesture, smile, or other physical action comes from an account by one who made it or witnessed it. In places I have corrected anachronistic spelling, capitalization, and punctuation to conform with modern usage. For example, I turned “&” into “and,” but only where that meaning was obvious. Lincoln’s charming misspellings remain unaltered.

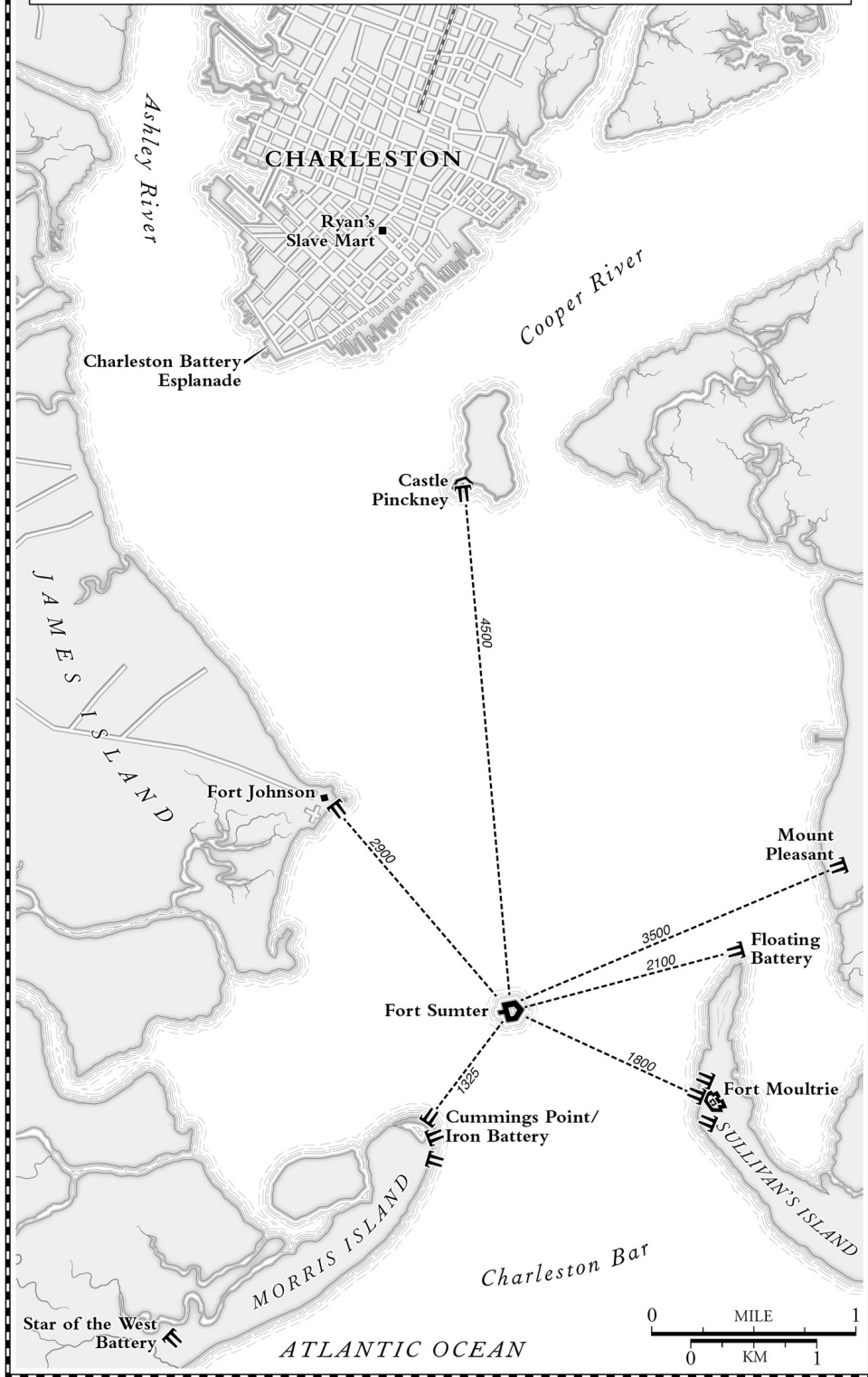
I invite you now to step into the past, to that time of fear and dissension, and experience the passion, heroism, and heartbreak—even humor—as if you were living in that day and did not know how the story would end. I suspect your sense of dread will be all the more pronounced in light of today’s political discord, which, incredibly, has led some benighted Americans to whisper once again of secession and civil war.

—*Erik Larson*

NEW YORK, 2023

CHARLESTON HARBOR • April 1861

▬ Confederate batteries; -----⁰⁰⁰⁰----- Distances, in yards, from Fort Sumter



A Boat in the Dark

THE OARS WERE AUDIBLE BEFORE the boat came into view, this despite a noisy wind that coarsened the waters of the bay. It was very late on a black night. The rain, according to one account, “fell in torrents, and the wind howled weird-like and drearily.” In recent weeks the weather had been erratic: seductively vernal one day, bone-rackingly cold the next. One morning there was snow. For a week a strong gale had scoured the coast. The four enslaved men rowing the boat made steady progress despite the wind and chop, and hauled their cargo—three white Confederate officers—with seeming ease. They covered the distance from Charleston to the fortress in about forty-five minutes. Until recently, a big lantern incorporating the latest in Fresnel lenses had capped the fort’s lighthouse, but in preparing for war, Army engineers had moved it. Now the lantern stood elevated on trestles at the center of the enclosed grounds, the “parade,” where it lit the interior faces of the surrounding fifty-foot walls and the rumps of giant cannon facing out through ground-level casemates. From afar, at night, in the mist, the light transformed the fortress into an immense cauldron steaming with pale smoke. The boat reached its wharf at twelve forty-five A.M., Friday, April 12, 1861, destined to be the single-most consequential day in American history.

Over the last 113 days, the fort’s commander, Maj. Robert Anderson, and his garrison of U.S. Army regulars, along with a cadre of men under Capt. John G. Foster of the Army Corps of Engineers,

had transformed it from a cluttered relic into an edifice of death and destruction. It was still drastically undermanned. Designed to be staffed by 650 soldiers, it now had only seventy-five, including officers, enlisted men, engineers, and members of the regimental band. But its guns were ready, nested within and atop its walls. Also, five large cannon had been mounted on makeshift platforms in the parade and pointed skyward to serve as mortars, these capable of throwing explosive shells into Charleston itself.

In those 113 days, this fortress, named for Thomas Sumter, a Revolutionary War hero, had become a profoundly dangerous place to invade and could have resisted attack quite possibly forever, but for one fatal flaw: It was staffed by men, and men had to eat. The food supply, cut off by Confederate authorities, had dwindled to nearly nothing.

—

ANDERSON WAS FIFTY-FIVE YEARS old, with a wife, Eliza (known universally as Eba), three daughters, and a one-year-old son, also named Robert. Anderson was clean-shaven, rare for the time, and this helped impart to his face a pleasant openness very unlike the hollow, axe-handle aspect of his Confederate opponent across the bay, his friend and former pupil Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard, who had taken command of all South Carolina military activities. Their relationship was courteous and cordial, almost warm, despite Beauregard's obvious willingness to kill Anderson and all his men if it meant furthering the cause of Southern independence.

Anderson adored his family and mourned the separation from them that was so often required by the Army. Thanks to income from Eba's family, they lived a life they could not have afforded on his salary alone. They owned a house on West Ninth Street in New York, but with Anderson's rising notoriety, Eba and the children moved into the nearby Brevoort House hotel, a luxurious five-story

structure on Fifth Avenue. Their daughters went to boarding school in New Jersey, a measure meant, apparently, to ease the burden of child-rearing for Eba, who suffered from an indeterminate chronic illness, which Anderson in one letter described as her "long continued indisposition."

Eba's condition made Anderson all the more attentive to her. "What would I not give to *know* that you passed a comfortable night, and that you feel much better this morning," he wrote on one occasion. He was prone to loving endearments. "I do not know what I should do without you, my precious pet," or simply "my precious," or "my own dear little wife." To save her the physical strain of writing letters, he proposed a pact: He would continue to write to her every day in multipage, diary-like accounts, but she would be obligated to write to him only once a week.

Anderson was a deeply religious man. To Eba: "I pray that Our Heavenly Father may, ere long, rejoice my old heart by restoring you to health, such that we may be together as long as we live." He summoned the beneficence of God even in formal reports to the War Department. One of his officers wrote, "I never met a man who trusts more quietly and at the same time more contentedly upon the efficacy of prayer." Lately a consistent element of his prayers was a plea that war would not come.

On the stillest nights, at nine o'clock, Major Anderson could hear the great bells in the distant witch-cap spire of St. Michael's Church, bastion of Charleston society where planters displayed rank by purchasing pews. It stood adjacent to Ryan's Slave Mart, and each night rang the "negro curfew" to alert the city's enslaved and free Blacks that they had thirty minutes to return to their quarters, lest the nightly "slave patrol" find them and lock them in the guard house until morning.

Charleston was a central hub in the domestic slave trade, which in the wake of a fifty-year-old federal ban on international trading now thrived and accounted for much of the city's wealth. The "Slave

Schedule" of the 1860 U.S. Census listed 440 South Carolina planters who each held one hundred or more enslaved Blacks within a single district, this when the average number owned per slaveholding household nationwide was 10.2. In 1860, the South as a whole had 3.95 million slaves. One South Carolina family, the descendants of Nathaniel Heyward, owned over three thousand, of whom 2,590 resided within the state.

Together these planters constituted a kind of aristocracy and saw themselves as such. They called themselves "the chivalry." As the prominent South Carolina planter James Henry Hammond put it, they were "the nearest to noblemen of any possible in America." This idea was affirmed on a daily basis by the fact of their possession of, and dominion over, a subservient population of enslaved Blacks. But with this also came a deep fear that this population over which they exercised such stern rule might one day rise in rebellion. The 1860 census found that the state had 111,000 more enslaved people than it did whites; it was, moreover, one of only two states where this kind of imbalance existed, the other being Mississippi. Free and enslaved Blacks together accounted for over 40 percent of the population of South Carolina's chief city, Charleston, and this caused uneasiness among its white citizens. Planters built what were in effect backyard plantations with two or more out-structures housing kitchens, stables, and slave quarters and surrounded by high walls to limit the dangers of insurrection and midnight murder. Any enslaved person who worked outside these walls had to wear a special badge, a metal medallion—square, round, octagonal—stamped "Charleston," with the year, type of job, and an identification number pinned to clothing or hung around the neck. The effect of this overwhelming slave presence was immediately evident to travelers from the North. "How strange the aspect of this city!" one such visitor observed. "Every street corner, and door-sill filled with blacks; blacks driving the drays & carriages, blacks

carrying burdens, blacks tending children & vending articles on the sidewalks; blacks doing all."

Not only did the state's planters call themselves "the chivalry"; they devoured chivalric novels, like Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. They held jousting competitions, called "heads and rings," where a rider bearing the name of one of Scott's or Tennyson's knights, wearing knightly garb and holding a long lance, would ride at full gallop and attempt to spear a series of dangling metal rings as small as half an inch in diameter, then draw his saber to take an exuberant swipe at the head of an inanimate figure at the end of the course. The chivalry gave themselves military titles and favored elaborate uniforms. Their South Carolina standard-bearer, novelist William Gilmore Simms, wrote eighty-two novels in which chivalry and honor were central themes. Chivalry, to him, meant "gallantry, stimulated by courage, warmed by enthusiasm, and refined by courtesy." The chivalry valued honor above all human traits and would happily kill to sustain it, but only in accord with the rules set out in the *Code Duello*, which specified exactly how a man suffering an abrasion of honor could challenge and, if he wished, murder another.

The chivalry, male and female, dressed in the highest fashion and rode magnificent horses over clean, well-tended streets, and promenaded nightly, starting at four o'clock, along the city's Battery—"their Hyde Park, their Prater, and their Champs Elysées," as one visitor put it. But time and steam had begun to upset this world. To outsiders, South Carolina seemed to have fallen out of step with the nation's great march into what many called the Railroad Age. One marker: The Census Bureau's tally of occupations counted 364 "railroad men" in the state as of 1860; in New York, by contrast, there were 6,272. In 1800, Charleston was the fifth-largest city in the United States; by 1860, the twenty-second. In the last decade the city had actually lost 6 percent of its population, mainly due to a

decline in the number of enslaved inhabitants as planters sought better land elsewhere—in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi.

There was a growing fear that maybe South Carolina's best days were behind her. Planters had once constituted the richest class in America, wrote Dennis Hart Mahan, a New York-born, Virginia-raised professor at West Point in a November 1860 letter to a friend. "But when commerce, manufacturers, the mechanic arts disturbed this condition of things, and amassed wealth that could pretend to more lavish luxury than planting, then came in, I fear, this demon of unrest which has been the utmost sole disturber of the land for years past." Mahan, whose son Alfred would grow up to become a prominent naval historian, argued that rather than join the rush to modernity, South Carolina—"this arrogant little state"—had grown ever more insular. "That fine old, careless hospitality, the necessary accompaniment of a sparse and wealthy population, and all its concomitants of high courtesy and geniality, is no longer in keeping with this railroad age," he wrote. "Men have no longer time to waste in mere talk and dawdling through the livelong day, and even into the small hours of the morning."

If anyone cared to look, there was an analogy to be found in a new novel by Charles Dickens, called *Great Expectations*, just then being published in installments in an English literary weekly. The first installment appeared in December 1860. One of the book's key characters, Miss Havisham, seemed the perfect embodiment of South Carolina. Having been stood up at the altar, she retired from the world, stopped her clocks, wore her wedding dress forever, and even left her nuptial feast in place, rotting on the table. Jilted at the altar of the Railroad Age, South Carolina had retreated into its own world of indolence and myth.

THE THREE CAROLINA OFFICERS stepped onto Sumter's wharf, and did so gingerly, as their boat rocked below them. This was their second visit to the fort in twenty-four hours. On the first, they learned from Major Anderson that he and his men would soon run out of food and be starved into capitulation; the officers passed this on to the Confederacy's new secretary of war, Leroy Pope Walker, in Montgomery, Alabama, provisional capital of the Confederate States of America. Anderson's statement suggested a new path that might allow the state to gain control of the fort without violence. Walker authorized the officers to pursue it, and so, on this second visit, they told Anderson that if he would declare a date and time when he planned to evacuate the fort, the Confederate batteries arrayed around Charleston Harbor would stay silent and allow him and his men to leave safely. Over the prior three months, Confederate forces had installed new batteries of heavy artillery on opposing shores capable of firing on Fort Sumter from all directions.

While the emissaries waited, Anderson gathered his officers together and polled them as to how long they thought they could maintain possession of the fort without new supplies. Five days, they agreed, with almost no rations on the last three. All of Anderson's officers voted to stay put and not surrender the fort before then.

Anderson wrote out his reply. He gave it to the Carolina officers at three-fifteen A.M., assuring them that he would indeed evacuate the fort but, rather than subject his men to needless suffering, would do so in three days, at precisely twelve noon on April 15. He added an important caveat: His pledge would hold provided that in the interim he did not receive "controlling instructions from my Government or additional supplies." Though vastly outnumbered and outgunned, Anderson pluckily added, "I will not in the meantime open my fires [*sic*] upon your forces unless compelled to do so by some hostile act against this fort or the flag of my Government."

This did not please the emissaries. They knew that a Union naval expedition had been dispatched to Charleston. They knew it because

Lincoln had told them. On April 6, a courier had set out from Washington for Charleston to deliver to the state's governor, Francis W. Pickens, a succinct message: An expedition was on its way to supply the fort with provisions only and would make no attempt to transfer arms, ammunition, or troops unless the fort or the ships were attacked.

It was, on Lincoln's part, a clever gambit: He was sending food to starving men. Who could object? If the ships were allowed to deliver it unimpeded, peace would reign and Anderson and his men would have all the supplies they needed to continue holding the fort. If Confederate forces fired on the ships, however, they would in the world's eyes be the offenders, engaging in an act of dishonor, the very thing the chivalry were schooled from childhood to avoid. The Northern fleet was prepared: It carried two hundred soldiers, guns, and ammunition and included several of the U.S. Navy's most powerful warships.

To the Carolina officers, Anderson seemed to be stalling; they feared that the fleet might actually be an expedition of war and that Anderson knew it. As General Beauregard noted later in a formal report, it was "an imperative necessity to reduce the fort as speedily as possible, and not to wait until the ships and the fort should unite in a combined attack upon us."

"Reduce" was a polite military way of saying "destroy."

The weather contributed to the Carolinians' fears. The rain and deep darkness and the noise of wind and surf made ideal conditions for a covert passage through the harbor.

The officers read Anderson's response on the spot. Yes, he had given what they'd asked for, a precise evacuation date, but his qualification rendered it moot. One officer, Col. James Chesnut, Jr., among the chivalry's most-favored sons, resplendent now in a brilliant red sash and sword, wrote out a reply.

"Sir," it read, "By authority of Brigadier-General Beauregard, commanding the provisional forces of the Confederate States, we

have the honor to notify you that he will open the fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time." It was three-twenty A.M.

Anderson accepted this without comment. There was no anger, just civility and courtesy. This was, after all, an affair of honor, and there was no more important thing to Anderson and to the Confederate officers than honor. Anderson walked them to the dock and shook hands with each. "If we never meet in this world again," he told them, "God grant that we may in the next."

The officers departed. Their boat moved out over the black waters, the enslaved oarsmen again hard at work, but they did not steer toward Charleston. Instead, they rowed due west, toward James Island, twenty-three hundred yards away, where a battery of heavy mortars had been established in a colonial-era redoubt named Fort Johnson, once abandoned but now again ready for battle. The landscape around it lay newly barbed with cannon, mortars, and bombproof shelters, these installed by hundreds of captive workers whose labor was donated by their Charleston owners.

The officers made their way to a mortar battery and ordered its commander to prepare to fire one round at precisely four-twenty A.M., this to signal that the bombardment of Sumter was to begin. In the liturgy of honor, such precision was important: A gentleman was punctual.

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AT SUMTER, ANDERSON ORDERED the garrison's distinctive American flag raised over the fort, its thirty-three stars arrayed in a loose diamond pattern in the blue field at its top-left corner. The flag was immense: twenty feet high by thirty-six long. He dispatched his own officers to awaken their men and give them the news. Just the day before he had directed them all to move their bedding into the protective

shelter of the casemates, the virtually bombproof first level of the fort.

—

IN CHARLESTON THAT THURSDAY there was a wild dinner party, “the merriest, maddest dinner we have had yet,” wrote Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife of the colonel then delivering the Confederate ultimatum. Dinner was an afternoon meal, generally around two or three o’clock; supper was in the evening.

Mary described the party in a red leather-bound book laced with gold leaf and defended with a brass lock that housed her daily journal. She kept it very private now and locked the book nightly, but in time it would become one of the most famous diaries of American history. In its pages she called her husband “JC” or “Mr. C.”

“Men were more audaciously wise and witty,” she wrote. “We had an unspoken foreboding it was to be our last pleasant evening.”

The city had a festive yet anxious air. For Mary there had been teas and dinners all week. She dined with two former governors, a former U.S. senator (who flamboyantly quoted Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*), a former U.S. assistant secretary of state, a former judge, and myriad other scions of the best families at the pinnacle of society, including even a Pinckney—Harriott Pinckney, holder of 343 enslaved Blacks and “one of the last of the 18th century Pinckneys,” Mary wrote. At one supper the fare was “pâté de foie gras, salad, biscuit glacé, and champagne frappé.”

The usual society quadrille of house visits and return visits, with calling cards passed inward by Black house servants in white gloves, took on a relentless Rome-afire intensity. Carriages moved from house to house driven by enslaved men in scarlet livery, with enslaved boys on the fenders to open gates. Planters who had been wearing ordinary clothing one day turned up the next in elaborate uniforms, red sashes glaring—their “soldier’s toggery,” as Mary put it.

With so much tension in the city, she wrote, the atmosphere was “phosphorescent.” The streets were full of soldiers in uniform marching and singing; at night she heard the heavy rumble of ammunition wagons moving over cobbled streets—no one could sleep. “The plot thickens,” she wrote, using a phrase then in common usage but first deployed in a play two centuries earlier. “The air is red-hot with rumors,” she wrote. “The mystery is to find out where these utterly groundless tales originate.”

After one especially buoyant dinner where talk centered on the latest report that half a dozen U.S. Navy warships had massed in the Atlantic outside the harbor, Mary retreated to her room. “In any stir or confusion, my heart is apt to beat so painfully,” she wrote in her diary. “Now the agony was so stifling—I could hardly see or hear. The men went off almost immediately. And I crept silently to my room, where I sat down to a good cry.”

On that Thursday, April 11, while Mr. C and his two fellow officers shuttled to and from Sumter with their ultimatums, as rain fell, windows rattled, and men clattered about with their swords and red sashes, and ammunition wagons trundled toward the wharf and nightriders hunted stray Blacks, the fever of anxiety and war lust grew unbearable.

“Patience oh my soul—” Mary wrote, “if Anderson will not surrender, tonight the bombardment begins.

“Have mercy upon us, Oh Lord!”

Later: “I do not pretend to go to sleep. How can I? If Anderson does not accept terms—at four—the orders are—he shall be fired upon.”

She lay awake. A church bell boomed four times. Silence followed. “I begin to hope,” Mary wrote. At four-twenty, the actual time designated for the first shot, there was again only quiet.

AT SUMTER, CLOCKS TICKED, chronometer hands whirled, as one slow minute passed, then another.