

Tea and Angst

In Charleston on Saturday, April 13, anxiety hung heavy in the air, rendering even routine tasks impossible. The morning's relentless rain yielded to brilliant sunlight, illuminating the Mills House hotel while shadows danced along Meeting Street. Amidst this, cannon fire from across the bay intensified, signaling the commencement of a new battle. The Union fleet remained inactive, perceived as cowards by spectators, especially as Fort Sumter burned.

The previous night had brought relief when news broke that no Confederate troops had been harmed. Mary excitedly noted, "Nobody hurt after all," reporting an upbeat atmosphere at Mrs. Gidiere's boarding house. However, Saturday brought renewed tension as heavy firing resumed. Though enslaved Black servants served breakfast, the sounds of artillery made it impossible for the women to enjoy regular meals. "None of us go to table. But tea trays pervade the corridors," Mary observed, highlighting their nervous approach to sustenance during such instability.

Different women responded to the stress in varied ways; some retreated into solitude, while Mary and Mrs. Wigfall found solace in each other's company over tea. Many prayed fervently, articulating faith in divine favor, yet doubt lingered in private discussions comparing their plight with rural myths about divine retribution against the Yankees.

Louisa Hamilton visited and spiritedly discussed her husband's recent design of the floating battery, but Mary diverted her attention by inquiring about her new son. Louisa proudly shared that her child could imitate the booming cannon, calling it "Boom boom." Meanwhile, the demeanor of the Black servants remained strikingly unchanged despite the tumult—"sleepy and as respectful," as Mary noted. Their indifference raised queries in Mary's mind about their understanding of the chaos surrounding them.

Just then, Colonel Manning, with a red sash and sword, made his entrance, eager to share his experiences under fire with Mary. His boastful remarks about bravery embodied a sense of pride, contrasting sharply with the palpable anxiety among the women, who were nonetheless drawn into his flirtation and tales of valor. The clashing emotions of hope, anxiety, and the stark reality of war painted a vivid picture of life in Charleston during this tumultuous time.