

Sickened

Sickened by the unfolding events in Charleston, Edmund Ruffin read Lincoln's inaugural address, which had been telegraphed to the *Mercury* on March 4. As the public gathered to listen to Lincoln's address, Ruffin found his belief in the inevitability of war becoming even stronger. The speech, he believed, only confirmed what he had long suspected—that a direct confrontation was imminent. The possibility that Confederate General Beauregard might move to strike Fort Sumter soon felt like an unavoidable reality. Ruffin also predicted that the president's decision to attempt a reinforcement of the fort would certainly provoke a military response. The excitement and fervor within the crowd reflected an underlying certainty that the conflict was no longer avoidable. Everyone around him was ready for the coming confrontation, not out of fear, but with an anticipatory energy that things would soon come to a head.

Meanwhile, in Montgomery, Mary Chesnut carried on with her social obligations, moving between events and meetings. Despite fulfilling her role within society, she wrote about her disdain for the people she encountered, calling some of them "fat and stupid" and expressing discontent about the quality of social gatherings. This underlying sense of dissatisfaction ran through her interactions, reflecting a deeper sense of frustration with her environment. However, amid this discontent, she also found herself the subject of attention from former Governor John Manning, whose admiration for her did not go unnoticed. Mary seemed puzzled by this attention, even expressing confusion at it, given that she did not consider herself a striking beauty, remarking, "I never was handsome." Nevertheless, her attractiveness to those around her seemed an inescapable part of her social life, something that she did not fully grasp but quietly accepted.

Mary's visit to Varina Davis provided a contrast to the otherwise tense atmosphere. As the wife of the Confederate president, Varina welcomed Mary warmly, and the

conversation shifted to lighter topics, such as the Prince of Wales's recent visit to the United States. This conversation brought a momentary respite from the political unrest, offering a distraction from the increasingly volatile situation. However, later that day, as Mary observed a slave auction on Inauguration Day, the tranquility of her social circle was shattered. Witnessing the sale of a mulatto woman, Mary was left deeply disturbed by the scene and could not shake the parallels it drew between the treatment of women in marriage and that of enslaved individuals. Despite being a slaveholder herself, the harsh reality of the auction scene left her feeling physically ill, as the dehumanizing objectification struck at the very core of her moral compass. It was an experience that left an indelible mark on her, shaking her belief system and forcing her to confront the ugly realities of her world.

The next morning, after reading President Lincoln's inaugural address, Mary's unease about the unfolding political situation deepened. She was skeptical of the president's true intentions and worried that Lincoln might aim to divide the Confederacy by creating tensions within the Southern states and the border states. Reflecting on the speech, she feared Lincoln was trying to weaken the Southern cause, possibly using the Union's political strategies to make the Confederacy crumble from within. To articulate her concerns, she turned to a ballad from 1808, using the character Lochinvar, known for his bold and daring actions, as a metaphor for how Lincoln might deal with the secession crisis. This comparison between a legendary hero and Lincoln was a way for Mary to express her anxieties about the president's actions, which she believed could lead to war. As the men in her social circle became increasingly vocal in their calls for war, Mary remained doubtful, even as tensions grew. Despite the mounting pressure, she could not bring herself to believe the situation would escalate into full-scale conflict, writing, "Still I do not believe it," a statement that captured her reluctance to accept the looming certainty of war.

This period of reflection marked a pivotal point for Mary as she wrestled with the duality of her role in a world on the brink of conflict. Though she could see the inevitable movement toward war, the social dynamics around her offered an escape from the growing tension, where flirtation and social events allowed her to temporarily

avoid the deeper issues surrounding her. Still, the dark cloud of war loomed ever larger, and Mary's thoughts on Lincoln's speech only further deepened her unease about what was coming next.