

The Great Darkness

The Great Darkness takes place on the afternoon of April 12, as Private Thompson, stationed at Fort Sumter, observes the arrival of a third steamship joining the two that had been anchored off the coast since the early hours of the morning. This sight initially raises the spirits of the fort's garrison, as they are hopeful that the ships are part of a much-needed relief expedition. However, as time passes and the ships remain unmoving, their initial hopes begin to wane, leading Thompson to believe that the vessels will likely wait until nightfall to make any significant moves. The tension in the fort is palpable, with the men anxiously watching the ships, unsure of whether they bring salvation or the foreboding presence of an incoming attack. The atmosphere grows heavy as the waiting game continues, and the soldiers find themselves stuck in a moment of uncertainty, unsure how to react to the looming threat in the distance.

Confederate scouts quickly identify the ships, revealing that two of them are warships—the *Pawnee* and the *Harriet Lane*—while the third vessel, the *Baltic*, appears to be carrying rowboats for the landing of troops. Meanwhile, Confederate officer Edmund Ruffin takes note of the damage to Fort Sumter, observing that, while the fort had taken some hits from artillery fire, the damage was not as severe as expected. The fort's walls had only minor breaches, indicating that, despite the bombardment, the fort had held up well under pressure. On the Union side, however, the return fire from the fort is largely ineffective, with most of the cannonballs either missing their target or being deflected by the Confederate Iron Battery. This highlights the frustrating impotence of the federal forces, who are unable to gain any real advantage despite their best efforts, leaving them at a disadvantage and contributing to the growing tension on both sides of the conflict.

As night begins to settle over the area, anxiety mounts on both sides, with the Union and Confederate forces awaiting the other's next move. The Confederate soldiers

begin to mock the inaction of the federal fleet, watching as the ships remain stationary on the horizon, while the sporadic sounds of shelling continue to echo in the background. Ruffin, unable to sleep due to the mounting tension, steps outside into the darkness to observe the activity unfolding. At approximately 12:30 a.m., he is startled by the sudden sound of gunfire, which causes him to fear that the federal forces may attempt a landing operation. However, the lack of clarity in the night and the confusion of the moment leave Ruffin uncertain about the true nature of the threat, adding to the sense of disorientation and fear that pervades the scene.

In the early hours of the morning, chaos erupts when a small boat with two passengers makes its way to the beach, only to be met with Confederate artillery fire. The occupants of the boat claim to be “friends” from the Southern Confederacy, but it quickly becomes clear that the men are disoriented and intoxicated. They had intended to transport guardsmen, but in their state, they had become lost in the midst of the confusion and danger surrounding them. The situation grows more confusing as the two men are apprehended, and the true nature of their mission becomes clear. This event adds yet another layer of chaos to an already tense situation, with both sides still uncertain about what to expect next. Meanwhile, the guns of Fort Sumter remain silent, and the sporadic Confederate artillery fire continues to reverberate in the distance, keeping both the Union and Confederate forces on edge.

The juxtaposition of the weary soldiers inside Fort Sumter and the federal ships, shrouded in the mystery of darkness, creates an air of intense uncertainty. The chapter masterfully portrays the tension and anticipation that gripped both sides as they waited for some form of resolution or action. As the soldiers inside the fort continue to hold their positions, unsure of when or if relief will arrive, the uncertainty only grows. The emotional and physical strain on the soldiers is evident, and the looming threat of warfare grows ever closer. The Great Darkness, as described in the chapter, becomes a powerful metaphor for the confusion, fear, and overwhelming uncertainty that engulfed both the soldiers on the front lines and those observing the conflict from afar. The chapter ends with both sides still trapped in a state of waiting, with the outcome of the conflict hanging in the balance. The great darkness of war

envelops them, offering no answers, only the promise of impending violence and chaos.