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**S**tanding in the rear of the large spacious church, Sexton Granville Miller nervously scanned the rows of worshippers sitting inside St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. While the mood inside was quiet and somber, outside the bustle of war-torn Richmond, Virginia, filtered in through the opened stained glass windows. Like their fellow Richmonders attending services in other nearby churches, those present had recently become acutely aware of how badly the war was progressing less than twenty-five miles away.

Having served the church for over thirty years as the person responsible for the care and upkeep of the grounds, and for responding to the occasional needs of those attending Sunday Mass, Miller knew almost every churchgoer by not only their first and last names, but by where their family pews were located. Many were some of the city’s most influential citizens. Among them were members of the Confederate cabinet, local and state politicians, a variety of wealthy businessmen, and a number of high-ranking officers from the Confederate Army. Located directly across 9th Street from the Virginia state capital, the large stone structure, with its ornate steeple and massive exterior columns, was designed to replicate several churches built across Western Europe. It was every bit the Greek Revival building its architects had envisioned.

Approached moments earlier by Major Patrick Brophy, one of several military advisers serving the Confederate cabinet, Miller stood fidgeting as he waited for the right moment to honor Brophy’s request. Having delivered a variety of messages in the past to politicians and others present during church services, from the panic clearly visible in Brophy’s face Miller knew the message he was about to deliver was likely the most important, and most depressing, he would ever carry down the main aisle of the church he had grown to love. A widower for several years, Miller had often found solace sitting alone inside the large cathedral when it was not being used.

Slowly making his way towards the front of the church, Miller could not help noticing the concerned look displayed on the face of Reverend Charles Minnigerode as he finished his sermon. Born in Germany, Minnigerode, the rector at St. Paul’s since 1856, was well respected across the city, and the entire Confederacy. Three years earlier, in 1862, he had baptized Jefferson Davis, the president of the rebellious states who were now struggling to keep their fight against the federal government alive. A year ago, Minnigerode had participated in General J.E.B. Stuart’s funeral, one of the South’s most-beloved figures.

Staring up at the pulpit as he passed row after row of some of Richmond’s most respected citizens, Miller sensed their stares as he stopped next to the person he had been sent to find. Bending down, he softly whispered in the distinguished church goer’s left ear. As he fumbled for the right words, the person he was speaking to never flinched at the unexpected sound of Miller’s voice. Instead, he remained focused on the sermon’s last few words. Like Miller, this churchgoer had taken notice of the reverend’s concerned look.

*“Mr. President, I was told this is important. Your presence is needed immediately in the rear of the church.”*

As Miller finished speaking, the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, turned slightly in his seat to see who was waiting to escort him from his pew. Seeing two of his aides standing a few feet away, Davis sensed the bad news he was about to be told. Days of disappointing news had already served to warn him that this crisis would likely result in consequences too powerful for his government to overcome.

Patting his wife’s hands as he stared into her eyes, Davis spoke to her in a hushed tone. As he spoke, the president tried his best to allay her concern. “I’m sure it’s nothing, so don’t worry. I’ll meet you in the foyer when the service is over.” Exiting his pew, the president, aware of the many faces staring in his direction, thanked Miller for his tact. Slowly striding towards the rear of the large ornate church, Davis, doing his best to present a poised and confident appearance, smiled at the many faces he recognized. Several feet away, two members of the Confederate cabinet followed the president to the rear of the church.

“How bad is it?” Davis asked, staring at the telegram he was being handed by one of his aides, Captain Isiah Avery. Born and raised in Mississippi, Avery, like many others across the South, had served in the Union Army prior to the hostilities the nation was currently engaged in. A few feet away, Captain Samuel Herndon, a native Virginian serving in several capacities on the president’s staff, cautiously eyed Davis as he began to read the message he had been handed. As expected, despite the gravity of the situation confronting them both officers had saluted the president of the Confederacy. As the telegram was being read, Brophy updated the two cabinet members on its distressing news.

“Mr. President,” Herndon replied, “I’m afraid it’s very bad. This telegram confirms the news we suspected earlier this morning. I’m sorry to be the one who has to tell you this, but General Pickett has been driven from the field at Five Forks. By all accounts, he did everything possible to change the outcome, but Union troops under the command of General Sheridan overwhelmed our forces on nearly every front. Sir, the reports we’re receiving indicate that we may have lost close to three thousand men.”

Nodding his head over the news he was being told, Davis glanced at Herndon as he raised the telegram he was holding in his right hand. “Is this what this little meeting is all about or is there more bad news you need to tell me?”

With little choice, and with a great deal of sadness, Herndon answered Davis’ question. “No, sir, there’s more. All of it is just as bad; even worse, I suppose. We just received . . .”

Raising his left hand as a means of cutting Herndon off, Davis, hoping he had missed a morsel of good news, anxiously read the telegram a second time; slowly digesting every word. While overly confident in the fighting spirit possessed by the Army of Northern Virginia, over the past several weeks Davis had become too optimistic in its ability to turn back the advancing Union Army. The words he was reading for a second time were ones he and others had feared would soon come. *“I think it is absolutely necessary that we should abandon our position tonight.”* With little food, dwindling amounts of ammunition, and the ranks of his army thinning out with each passing day due to desertions and deaths, in order to save his remaining resources one of Davis’ most competent generals knew it was time to march west.

The disappointing words General Robert E. Lee had sent told Davis the two-hundred and ninety-two day siege of Petersburg was now a lost cause. While believing Lee had done everything possible to protect one of the Confederacy’s vital supply lines and evacuation routes, Davis knew Petersburg and, most likely, the South Side Railroad had fallen. After months of arduous and bitter fighting in which his army was constantly being shelled and attacked by superior forces, Davis realized General Ulysses S. Grant and his men had won a strategic battle by sheer attrition. In less than twenty-four hours, the battles at Petersburg and Five Forks had been lost. By nightfall, with less than twenty-five miles separating the once vital railroad hub and the Confederate capitol, Davis feared Richmond would also fall to the relentless Union Army.

Watching as Davis seemed to age right in front of them, Avery updated the president with a few additional details. “Sir, the attack on Petersburg continued in earnest this morning; the reports we’ve received confirm the shelling intensified around seven a.m. The city’s outer perimeter collapsed shortly afterwards . . . our boys did their best, but the news we’re learning was there were just too many blue-bellies for them to stop.” Outmanned and outmatched for the past several months, Lee’s soldiers had done their best to defend Petersburg despite the squalid conditions inside their exposed trenches. With little support from Richmond and the army’s Quartermaster Corps, Lee’s soldiers had bravely persevered for longer than many had expected.

Turning to look back at where his wife was seated, Davis briefly listened to what his two advisors were telling him. Both were adamant that Richmond needed to be evacuated. Ignoring their comments, Davis’ thoughts turned back to Petersburg. “What about the inner perimeter? Is it still in place or has General Lee already started withdrawing our troops?” Looking down at the telegram he was holding, Davis wished he had been sent more information.

Serving the president for as long as he had, Avery knew what Davis was thinking. “Mr. President, as far as we know some sections of Petersburg are still in our control. Sir, with your permission, I’d like to send General Lee a telegram suggesting he maintain the inner perimeter at all costs. This will buy us some time so we can start evacuating the capital. If he can hold out for a few more hours, it will allow us time to move the trains in position so we can transfer your office to another location.”

With several thoughts running through his mind, and with a long history of being unable to get along with those he often disagreed with, Davis did his best at staying calm. “Isiah, do you expect me to send General Lee a telegraph telling him to hold the line at all costs? If that’s what you expect me to do, then what I’m really asking is for General Lee to make the ultimate sacrifice so we can save our own lives. No matter how bleak the situation appears that’s not an order I’ll ever be prepared to issue.”

Realizing he had misspoken, Avery clarified his position. “Sir, while that’s what all good soldiers do for the cause their fighting for, I didn’t mean to imply that General Lee should make such a sacrifice. I was simply suggesting that you might take this opportunity to express your concern about needing time to relocate your office, and those of your cabinet members. If we’re to keep functioning . . . to keep supporting our armies, we can’t do it with the Union Army on Richmond’s doorsteps. If General Lee can hold the line for a few hours we should . . .”

“Isiah,” Davis said, interrupting his aide’s final thoughts, “send the telegram, but stress to General Lee that I want him to remove himself from the field as soon as possible. The news hasn’t been good this morning, so let’s not make it worse by losing our best general. I need General Lee to keep us in the fight over the coming weeks. If we lose him, surrender is inevitable.” As he spoke, Davis recalled a prior discussion in which Lee had estimated it would take the better part of a week to remove the Army of Northern Virginia from Petersburg in the event of an emergency. Now he shuddered at the thought of Lee having to do so in less than a day.

“Thank you, Mr. President. Is there anything else you would like Captain Herndon and me to address this morning?”

Briefly conferring with his two cabinet members before sending them off to find their families, Davis then assigned his aides a set of tasks to complete. Much to his disappointment, each task was related to relocating the government of the Confederacy to another location.

Doing his best to appear as if he was undisturbed by the morning’s unsettling news, Davis instructed Avery to locate the other members of the Confederate cabinet. Like Davis, most were attending morning services at two nearby churches, St. Peter’s and the Baptist Church two streets over. “When you locate Secretary Breckinridge, tell him to have his family start packing, but I want him to meet me at my office in thirty minutes. Do the same when you locate Secretary Trenholm. Please advise him that we need our assets packed up and ready to be loaded on one of the trains later this afternoon. See to it that he has the assistance he needs. Tell him I also expect his staff to start packing up our records. That’s to include any archives he feels are necessary so our government can continue to function, and any others pertinent to the creation of our cause. Anything he deems as useless is to be burned immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” Avery replied, acknowledging the order he had been given.

Looking at Brophy, Davis wasted little time before issuing his next order. “Major, make sure you assign one of our military aides to supervise that task as we can’t afford anything being left behind for the Yankees to use to their advantage. Use as many soldiers as you need, but make sure they set fire to whatever we’re not taking with us. Any cabinet members the three of you manage to locate are to report to my office in less than thirty minutes.” In his comments, Davis had anxiously referred to two of his cabinet members; Major-General John C. Breckinridge, his Secretary of War, and George Trenholm, the Secretary of the Treasury.

“Yes, sir.” As this small group of soldiers saluted their commanding officer, Avery asked, “Anything else, Mr. President?”

“Tell the cabinet members my train is leaving Richmond at eight p.m. There will be six seats reserved for each of their families. If there’s anyone else at home beyond those six, well, I’m sorry, but they’ll have to arrange their own transportation. And, Captain Avery, tell them to pack light. Now’s not the time to be bringing along the family heirlooms. We’ve got a major crisis on our hands.”

After sending Sexton Miller off to advise Reverend Minnigerode of his interest in addressing the congregation, Davis noticed the worried look on Herndon’s face. Patting the young officer on the shoulder, he said, “Samuel, I’m just as worried as you are, but we’re going to see this through. It’s going to be difficult, but I need your help. Are you okay?”

Regaining his composure after realizing he had added to Davis’ concerns, Herndon apologized. “I was just thinking about all of the hard work you’ve done to keep our cause on course. I . . . I just can’t help thinking with Petersburg soon to be in the hands of the Yankees, all of your efforts may have been for naught.” Looking at Davis as he prepared to move off, the young captain added, “Just as you are, Mr. President, I’m still holding out hope.”

After smiling at Herndon’s comments, Davis gave the young officer his final set of instructions. “Captain, you’re in charge of the logistics concerning our move. I don’t care how you do it, but I want two trains in place by four p.m. The first one is for the cabinet secretaries, their families, and for me and my family. See to it our bags are placed onboard, and make sure you save enough space in one of the baggage cars for our servants. You also need to save enough space for yourself and Captain Avery, and a small detachment of soldiers. Major Brophy will be in charge of the second train, so make sure you save seats for him and his family. If there’s anyone else I’ve forgotten, find seats for them, as well. Make sure everyone knows the trains are leaving at eight p.m. If anyone is late, they can explain to the Yankees why they weren’t there in time.”

Davis’ last comment caused Herndon a brief chuckle as he stared at the anxious faces staring his way from the pews in front of him. In several pews, a group of widows and orphaned children, all dressed in black, stared at the sudden frenzy taking place around the Confederate president. As Brophy and Avery moved off, Herndon asked, “Sir, what are your plans for the second train?”

“After I finish addressing the congregation, I’m going to have a private conversation with a few of the local bankers I see here. They’ll be told to pack up their vaults, and to have their assets ready to be picked up by a military escort at three p.m. These bankers, their families, and the assets of each of their banks are to be assigned space on the second train. Those assets we have in our treasury will also be placed on this same train. Have a guard assigned to that train, as well. We can’t afford for any of that money to fall into the hands of General Grant or any of his men.”

With his instructions completed, President Jefferson Davis walked away to deliver the news that Petersburg would soon be in the hands of the Union Army. It was news many already suspected. What he would tell the congregation would cause them to lose any remaining hope of a Confederate victory.