

ATLANTIC MONTHLY

June, 1865

SCENES IN RICHMOND.

“My line is broken in three places, and Richmond must be evacuated,” was Lee’s despatch to Davis, received by the arch-traitor at eleven and a half o’clock in St. Paul’s Church. He read it with blanched cheeks, and left the church in haste.

Davis had robbed the banks of Virginia a few days before, seizing the bullion in the name of the Confederacy; and his first thought was how to secure the treasure.

He hurried to the executive mansion, passed up the winding stairway to his business apartment, seated himself at a small table, wrote an order for the removal of the coin to Danville, and for the evacuation of the city.

There was no evening service in the churches on that Sunday. Ministers and congregations were otherwise employed. The Reverend Mr. Hoge, ablest of the Presbyterian pastors, fiercest advocate of them all for Slavery as a divine missionary institution, bitterest hater of the North, packed his carpet-bag and took a long Sabbath-day’s journey towards the South. The Reverend Mr. Duncan, of the Methodist Church, did the same work of necessity. Lumpkin, who for many years has kept a slave-trader’s jail, also had a work of necessity on hand, — fifty men, women, and children, who must be saved to the missionary institution for the future enlightenment of Africa. Although it was the Lord’s day, (perhaps he was comforted by the thought, that, the better the day, the better the deed,) the coffle-gang was made up in the jail-yard, within pistol-shot of Davis’s parlor-window, within a stone’s throw of the Monumental Church, and a sad and weeping throng, chained two and two, the last slave-coffle that shall ever tread the streets of Richmond, were hurried to the Danville Depot. Slavery being the corner-stone

RICHMOND

of the Confederacy, it was fitting that this gang, keeping step to the music of their clanking chains, should accompany Jeff Davis's secretaries, Benjamin and Trenholm, and the Reverend Messrs. Hoge and Duncan, in their flight. The whole Rebel Government was on the move, and all Richmond desired to be. No thoughts of taking Washington now, or of the flag of the Confederacy flaunting in the breeze over the old Capitol! Hundreds of officials were at the depot, to get away from the doomed city. Public documents, the archives of the Confederacy, were hastily gathered up, tumbled into boxes and barrels, and taken to the trains, or carried into the streets and set on fire. Coaches, carriages, wagons, carts, wheelbarrows, everything in the shape of a vehicle was brought into use. There was a jumble of boxes, chests, trunks, valises, carpet-bags, — a crowd of excited men sweating as they never sweat before, — women with dishevelled hair, unmindful of their wardrobes, wringing their hands, — children crying in the crowd, — sentinels guarding each entrance to the train, pushing back at the point of the bayonet the panic-stricken multitude, giving precedence to Davis and the high officials, and informing Mr. Lumpkin that his niggers could not be taken. Oh, what a loss was there! It would have been fifty thousand dollars out of somebody's pocket in 1861, but millions now of Confederate promises to pay, which the hurrying multitude and that cuffed gang were treading under foot, — literally trampling the bonds of the Confederate States of America in the mire, as they marched to the station; for the streets were as thickly strown with four per cents, six per cents, eight per cents, as the forest with last year's leaves.

“The faith of the Confederate States is pledged to provide and establish sufficient revenues for the regular payment of the interest, and for the redemption of the principal,” read the bonds; but there was a sudden eclipse of faith,

RICHMOND

and not merely an eclipse, but a collapse, a shrivelling up, like a parched scroll, of the entire Confederacy, which, like its bonds, notes, and certificates of indebtedness, was old rags!

In the Sabbath evening twilight, the trains, with the fugitive Government, its stolen bullion, and its Doctors of Divinity on board, moved out from the city.

At the same hour, the Governor of Virginia, William Smith, and the Assembly, were embarked in a canal-boat, on the James River and Kanawha Canal, moving for Lynchburg. On all the roads were men, women, and children, in carriages of every description, with multitudes on horseback and on foot, fleeing from the Rebel capital. Men who could not get away were secretly at work, during those night-hours, burying plate and money in gardens; ladies secreted their jewels, barred and bolted their doors, and passed a sleepless night, fearful of the morrow, which would bring the hated, despised, Vandal horde of Yankee ruffians: for such were the epithets which they had persistently applied to the soldiers of the Union throughout the war.

But before the entrance of the Union army they had an experience from their friends. Following the example of the Government, which had robbed the banks, the soldiers pillaged the city, breaking open stores, and helping themselves to whatever suited their convenience and taste, of clothing, fancy goods, eatables, and drinkables.

But the Government itself was not quite through with its operations in Richmond. The Secretary of War, John C. Breckinridge, with General Ewell, remained till daylight on Monday morning to clear up things,—not to burn public archives in order to destroy evidence of Confederate villany, but to commit more crime, so deep, damning, that the stanchest friends of the Confederacy recoil with horror from the act.

To prevent the United States from

RICHMOND

obtaining possession of a few thousand hogsheads of tobacco, a thousand houses were destroyed by fire, the heart of the city was eaten out,—all of the business portions, all the banks and insurance-offices, half of the newspapers, mills, depots, bridges, foundries, workshops, dwellings, churches, thirty squares in all, swept clean by the devouring flames. It was the work of the Confederate Government. And not only this, but human life was remorselessly sacrificed.

In the outskirts of the city, on the Mechanicsville road, was the almshouse, filled with the lame, the blind, the halt, the bedridden, the sick, and the poor. Ten rods distant was a magazine containing fifteen or twenty kegs of powder, of little value to a victorious army with full supplies of ammunition. They could have been rolled into the creek near at hand; but the order of Jeff Davis was to blow up the magazines, and the order must be executed.

“We give you fifteen minutes to get out of the way,” was the sole notice to that crowd of helpless creatures lying in their cots, at three o’clock in the morning. Men and women begged for mercy. In vain their cries. The officer in charge of the matter was inexorable. Clotheless and shoeless, the inmates of the almshouse ran in terror from the spot to seek shelter in the ravines. But there were those who could not run, who, while the train was laying, rent the air with shrieks of terror. The train was fired at the expiration of the allotted time. The whole side of the house went in with a crash, as if it were no more than pasteboard. Windows flew into minutest particles. Bricks, stones, timbers, beams, and boards went whirling through the air. Trees were wrenched off as though a giant had twisted them into withes. The city rocked as if upheaved by an earthquake. The dozen poor wretches remaining in the almshouse were torn to pieces. Their bodies were but black-

RICHMOND

ened masses of flesh, when the fugitives who had sought shelter in the fields returned to the shattered ruins.

How stirring the events of that morning! Lee retreating, Grant pursuing; Davis a fugitive; the Governor and Legislature of Virginia seeking safety in a canal-boat; Doctors of Divinity fleeing from the wrath to come; the troops of the Union marching up the streets; the old flag waving over the Capitol; Rebel iron-clads blowing up; Richmond in flames the fiery billows rolling on from house to house, from block to block, from square to square, unopposed in their progress by the panic-stricken, stupefied, bewildered crowd; and the Northern Vandals laying aside their arms, manning the engines, putting out the fire, and saving the city from total destruction! Through the terrible day, all through the succeeding night, the smoke of its torment went up to heaven. Strange, weird, the scenes of that Monday night, — the glimmering flames, the clouds of smoke hanging like a funeral pall above the ruins, the crowd of woe-begone, houseless, homeless creatures wandering through the streets: —

“Such resting found the soles of unblest feet!”