The Correspondent

On Thursday, April 11, William Russell of the London Times dined at the modest residence of General Winfield Scott, the commander of military forces in Washington. Upon arrival, he was greeted by soldiers on horseback patrolling the street. Inside, he joined a gathering that included notable figures like William Seward and Attorney General Bates, as well as Major George W. Cullum, a stern Army engineer known for his past construction of fortifications, including Fort Sumter.

The dinner was remarkable, described as "a most excellent dinner" with fine wines from various regions. Just as the meal progressed, an orderly delivered a dispatch from President Lincoln. Scott read it but had to apologize for his rudeness, handing it over to Seward, whose reaction indicated its significance. An air of agitation surrounded Seward as he read it, then passed it to Bates, who also demonstrated surprise.

To allow them to discuss the contents privately, Russell stepped outside into the garden with Major Cullum, where he noted the unusual security measures around General Scott. After some time, they returned inside to learn the dispatch's critical message: the South Carolina batteries were ordered to fire on Fort Sumter if Major Anderson did not surrender.

Dinner concluded, and Seward escorted Russell back to the Willard Hotel, driving through the unexpectedly empty streets of Pennsylvania Avenue. The threat of a potential attack from Virginia loomed large, as rumors hinted about a force gathering for a daring mission that included the potential kidnapping of Lincoln and his cabinet. Seward admitted that Washington was "almost defenseless," but claimed both the North and South were unprepared for aggressive military action.

Russell planned to leave for Charleston the following day, heading first to Baltimore. Setting out amidst a heavy rainstorm, he arrived two hours later to find the streets flooded. At Eutaw House, his hotel, an employee confirmed that the bombardment of Fort Sumter had begun. However, Russell remained skeptical of such claims, as he had encountered many false reports in recent days. When he visited the hotel bar, it buzzed with speculation about Sumter, placing Russell in an unfamiliar position—he was just as uninformed as the patrons asking him for his opinions.