Julia Dent Grant and the Attempt on Grant’s Life

DOCUMENT

Introduction

Many volumes have been written about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, but few carry the poignancy of Julia Grant’s first-hand recollection in her memoirs. She notes that afterward, she paid condolence calls on Mary Lincoln, who remained sequestered upstairs in the White House. Mary Lincoln had considered Julia Grant to be a “rival” as a Washington hostess. It is not known if Mrs. Grant ever heard Mary Lincoln refer to General Grant as “that bucher.”

Julia Grant records the precognition that may have saved her husband’s life as well as the resulting Grant presidency if they had joined the Lincolns at Ford’s Theatre that night as planned. In the ensuing investigation, it was confirmed that Grant had also been a target. Julia recalls that on April 14, 1865, General Grant was meeting with Lincoln and his cabinet. Around mid-day a rough-looking man came to her hotel room. He said he had a verbal message from Mrs. Lincoln for the Grants to be ready for the theater at exactly 8:00 p.m.

Julia Grant did not like the looks of the man or the fact there was no written message. When she said that she and her husband were leaving town that afternoon and would not be going to the play, the man argued that the newspaper already said the Grants would be attending. Julia promptly dismissed him and sent a note to her husband urging him to take her to see their children in Burlington, New Jersey, that very day. While waiting, she had lunch in a restaurant with a friend. There, Mrs. Grant thought she saw the man from the hotel again as well as a “pale, dark man.” Referring to John Singleton Mosby, a Confederate raider, Mrs. Grant recorded that she said the following.

The above is from America’s First Ladies, a Historical Encyclopedia and Primary Document Collection, by Nancy D. Hendricks. ABC-Clio, September, 2015.

Here is Julia’s description of the attempt on Grant’s life at the time of the Lincoln assassination.
Primary Source

“I believe they are a part of Mosby’s guerillas and they have been listening to every
word we have said. Do you know, I believe there will be an outbreak tonight or
soon, I just feel it, and am glad I am going away tonight.’ Afterwards, as General
Grant and I rode to the depot, this same dark, pale man rode past us at a sweeping
gallop on a dark horse – black, I think. He rode twenty yards ahead of us, wheeled
and returned, and as he passed us both going and returning, he thrust his face quite
near the General’s and glared in a disagreeable manner. Mrs. General [Daniel H.]
Rucker, in whose carriage we were, remarked, ‘General, everyone wants to see
you.’ ‘Yes,’ the General replied, ‘but I do not care for such glances. These are not
friendly at [the] least.’ I noticed the General draw back as the man returned and
came so close.

“We arrived without incident at Philadelphia. We went through the city and
stopped at a large restaurant, situated near where we had to take the ferryboat to
reach the cars for Burlington, N. J. The General ordered some oysters, as he had
had nothing to eat since nine o’clock in the morning. Before they were ready for
him, a telegram was handed to him, and almost before he could open this, another
was handed to him, and a third.

“The General looked very pale. ‘Is there anything the matter?’ I inquired: ‘You
look startled.’ ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘something very serious has happened. Do not
exclaim. Be quiet and I will tell you. The president has been assassinated at the the-
atre, and I must go back at once. I will take you to Burlington (an hour away), see the
children, order a special train, and return as soon as it is ready.’

“On the way to Burlington, the General was silent and in deep thought. When I
questioned him as to who could have done it, and the object, he replied: ‘Oh, I don’t
know. But this fills me with the gloomiest apprehension. The president was inclined
to be kind and magnanimous, and his death at this time is an irreparable loss to the
South, which now needs so much his tenderness and magnanimity.’ I asked, ‘This
will make Andy Johnson President, does it not?’ ‘Yes,’ the General said, ‘and for
some reason, I dread the change.’

“We none of us retired for the night. Crowds of people came thronging into our
cottage to learn if the terrible news were true. The General left for Washington while
it was yet starlight. The first mail that morning brought a letter to General Grant. He
having directed me to open all telegrams and letters, I read the following letter;
‘General Grant, thank God, as I do, that you still live. It was your life that fell to
my lot, and I followed you on the [railroad] cars. Your car door was locked, and
thus you escaped me, thank God.’

“The whole land, now filled with lamentation and woe, had so recently been all
joy at the restoration of the Union and peace. Our beloved and martyred President
was dead, lay in state at the Capitol, and was at length carried in great sorrow and
funereal pomp through all the principal cities from Washington to his old home at
Springfield, Illinois. His bereaved widow, almost frenzied with grief, still lingered
at the Executive Mansion, alone with her little son Tad. With my heart full of sor-
row, I went many times to call on dear, heart-broken Mrs. Lincoln, but she could not see me.”