

ACT I

SETTING: *Various locations along the Virginia route General Lee followed on his retreat from Petersburg to Appomattox Courthouse in April, 1865. The set should be minimal –a field desk and chair represent Lee’s various headquarters along the way. The play is set both in the Present and in the first nine days of April in 1865.*

AT RISE: *The stage is black. Lee’s frock coat is draped over his chair. On his desk lies a battlefield map. In the darkness we hear the muffled roar of cannon. Lights come up to the dim glow of predawn light. We hear a knock on the door then LT. COL. WALTER TAYLOR enters hurriedly. It is just before dawn, April 2, 1865.*

TAYLOR

(Calling off)
General Lee!

(He lights a lamp on the desk as GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE enters, pulling on his vest. He has been sleeping.)

LEE

Good morning, Walter. You’re up early.

(TAYLOR snaps a salute.)

TAYLOR

General Lee, Captain Russell is here to see you. With an urgent message from General Pickett.

LEE

Send him in.

(TAYLOR turns and gestures. RUSSELL enters and salutes.)

RUSSELL

General Lee.

LEE

You have a message, Captain.

RUSSELL

From General Pickett, sir, at Five Forks. He has encountered the enemy.

LEE

Tell General Pickett to stand his ground. Five Forks *must* be held at all costs.

RUSSELL

Yes, sir, but...

LEE

If we lose Five Forks, we lose the Southside railroad and if we lose the Southside railroad, we lose Richmond and I will not abandon the Capital – do you understand?

RUSSELL

Yes, sir, but...

LEE

But *what*, Captain?

RUSSELL

It's too late, sir. General Pickett can no longer hold Five Forks.

LEE

What?!

RUSSELL

The enemy has smashed through his left flank and has attacked the rear. More than three thousand men have been lost already.

LEE

How did this happen?

RUSSELL

General Pickett assumed the Yankees were through attacking for the day, so he retired to the rear to share a meal with General Rosser... Baked shad.

LEE

What?

RUSSELL

Baked shad... Shad is a type of fish, sir.

LEE

I know what *shad* is, Captain!

TAYLOR

Who did General Pickett leave in charge?

RUSSELL

No one, Colonel.

LEE

No one? *No one?! By God, I'll wring his...*

(He takes a deep breath and calms himself.)

Find General Anderson. Apprise him of the situation. Tell him to send reinforcements immediately.

RUSSELL

Yes sir!

((RUSSELL salutes and exits.))

LEE

Baked shad. I should have Pickett court-martialed. That meal just cost us the Capital.

TAYLOR

Must we abandon Richmond, sir?

LEE

Yes - and Petersburg. Our lines are stretched too thin as it is. Without the Southside railroad to supply us... *Dammit!*

(He turns to the map on his desk.)

We have to leave Virginia.

TAYLOR

Leave Virginia...?

LEE

We'll march to North Carolina. Join up with Joe Johnston's army.

TAYLOR

But, General...

LEE

Virginia is my home as well, Walter.

TAYLOR

Yes, sir, but to leave it altogether, to *retreat*...

LEE

We are not *retreating*. We are *regrouping*. And we *will* return victorious and reclaim our home. But for now, we march to North Carolina.

TAYLOR

The Yankees have us blocked to the south and east.

LEE

Then we'll head west.

TAYLOR

The men and horses are near starving, sir.

LEE

There are three-hundred and fifty thousand rations stored in Richmond.

(He points to the map and studies it for a moment.)

Marching west, we should meet the Danville railroad...

(He puts a finger on the railroad and traces its path.)

Here!

(He jabs a finger at the map.)

Amelia Court House. I shall order the rations shipped there. Once the men and horses have eaten, we'll turn south.

TAYLOR

Amelia Court House looks to be forty miles away, sir.

LEE

Have a little faith, Walter.

TAYLOR

Yes, sir...

(LEE *grabs his coat. TAYLOR hastens to help him put it on.*)

TAYLOR (cont.)

What about your wife, General? Mrs. Lee is in Richmond. Will she evacuate when our troops abandon the city?

LEE

I doubt it. After being forced from Arlington, she told me she'd rather face Abe Lincoln himself than ever move again.

TAYLOR

Perhaps we should dispatch someone to see to her safety.

LEE

Mrs. Lee is a civilian, Walter. She is not entitled to military escort.

TAYLOR

But, sir, she is confined to a wheelchair. When the Yankees take the city...

LEE

Do not presume to speak to me *about my wife!*

(*Beat.*)

I am well aware of her limitations. I am well aware of what may befall her when...

(*Beat.*)

I can not help her, Walter. I must leave her in the hands of Providence.

TAYLOR

Yes, sir.

(LEE *puts a hand on Taylor's shoulder.*)

LEE

God help the Yankees should they lay hold of my Mary.

(*Another boom of cannon.*)

Take a letter, Colonel.

(TAYLOR *sits at the desk, and starts taking dictation.*)

LEE (cont)

To John C. Breckinridge, Secretary of War, Confederate States of America, Richmond, Virginia. April 2nd, 1865.

Dear Sir. That moment we have feared has finally arrived. The Army of Northern Virginia can no longer withstand the enemy and must withdraw its protection from both Richmond and Petersburg. I advise the government to remove its records and personnel from the capital immediately. I apologize for any inconvenience this action might incur...

(TAYLOR *looks up at him, surprised.*)

TAYLOR

“Inconvenience,” sir?

LEE

Politicians.

(TAYLOR *nods knowingly. LEE continues dictating.*)

I apologize for any inconvenience this action might incur; however, I feel it vital to the survival of this Army and its Cause. Your Obedient Servant, R.E. Lee, Commander, The Army of Northern Virginia, Headquarters, Edge Hill, Petersburg, Virginia.

(TAYLOR *finishes with a flourish.*)

Who owns this house, Walter?

TAYLOR

William Turnbull, sir.

LEE

Is he still alive?

TAYLOR

Yes, sir. He’s with the government in Richmond.

LEE

Not for long.

TAYLOR

No, sir.

LEE

It is a nice house. I pray he gets it back in one piece... Post that at once, Colonel.

TAYLOR

Yes, sir.

(TAYLOR salutes and exits.)

LEE

(To the heavens)

Baked shad...?

(Another boom of cannon, much closer. TAYLOR reenters hurriedly.)

TAYLOR

General Lee! The enemy is within sight!

(LEE starts buttoning up his coat calmly.)

We have to move out, sir! There's no time to waste!

(LEE puts on his gloves.)

General Lee!

LEE

All right, Colonel. Let's go.

(LEE follows TAYLOR off. The scene shifts to an April morning in the Present. The field desk and chair are gone. The sound of birds chirping, then a car approaching and coming to a halt. One car door opens and shuts, then another. BEAU WEEKS enters from the road, excited. He wears an authentic Confederate Civil War cap and is carrying an old haversack.)

BEAU

This is it! Jenny! We found it!

(He stops center and looks front, reading an unseen roadside Historical Marker as his wife JENNY enters and looks around, confused.)

JENNY

Are you sure this is the right place?

BEAU

Sure I'm sure. Look. Read it.

(He points off to the Historical Marker then digs in his haversack for a Civil War Trails Retreat Map as she reads aloud)

JENNY

“To the north stood William Turnbull’s house, Edge Hill, headquarters of Robert E. Lee during the siege of Petersburg...”

(She looks around.)

Which way’s north?

(BEAU looks around, getting his bearings, then points off.)

BEAU

That way.

(BEAU returns to his map. JEMMY gazes north.)

JENNY

Where’s the house?

(He’s too engrossed to hear her.)

Honey?

BEAU

What?

JENNY

Where’s the house? I see an empty field next to a Walgreen’s, but no house.

BEAU

The house is gone. The Yankees blew it up.

(She looks confused. He points to the Marker.)

Keep reading.

JENNY

(Reading aloud)

“Here, after dawn on April 2nd, Lee learned of the Union attack... “Lee moved his headquarters...” “Union artillery destroyed the Turnbull house.” Oh, no. Honey – I’m so sorry.

Why? BEAU

I know how much you wanted to see Edge Hill. JENNY

Right. And we found it. BEAU

But there's no house. JENNY

I know. BEAU

So... what is it we've found, exactly? JENNY

This! BEAU

(He points to the Historical Marker.)

The historical marker? JENNY

Yeah. BEAU

Oh. We're looking for historical markers? JENNY

Yeah! Every important spot on Lee's Retreat Trail has at least one. See...? BEAU

(He shows her the map.)

They're marked on this map with stars.

Yes, I can see that, but... JENNY

But what? BEAU

JENNY

I guess I just thought there would be a house.

BEAU

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mislead you.

JENNY

I never said you...

BEAU

I thought I told you.

JENNY

Maybe you did. It's still early. I haven't had any coffee yet. But that's not the point.

BEAU

What's the point?

JENNY

The point is – well, I just can't help but wonder why we're making such a big fuss over a little sign.

BEAU

Are you kidding?

JENNY

I never kid at seven-thirty in the morning.

BEAU

Okay, well, first of all, it's on the *note*. The name – Edge Hill – is written on the *note*.

JENNY

I know, but...

BEAU

Here. I'll show you....

(He digs through the haversack and pulls out an old, fragile folded piece of paper.)

JENNY

That's okay. I've seen the note....