

The Eastern Shore Kultur

By H. L. MENCKEN

[Copyright, 1931, by The Evening Sun. Republication without permission prohibited]

I

NOT man, observant Marylanders, I take it, were surprised by the news of last Friday's extraordinarily savage and revolting lynching at Salisbury. Something of the sort had been plainly hatching down in that forlorn corner of the State for a long while. There was a time, years ago, when it was the seat of an urbane and charming culture, dominated by an enlightened and public-spirited gentry, but of late it has succumbed to its poor white trash, who now determine its ideas and run its affairs. The Ku Klux Klan, which was laughed at in all the more civilized parts of Maryland, got a firm lodgment in the lower counties of the Shore, and the brutish imbecilities that it propagated are still accepted gravely by large numbers of the people, including not a few who should know better. The whole area is a lush stamping-ground for knavish politicians, prehensile professional patriots, and whooping soul-savers. It is, quite naturally, a stronghold of Prohibition (and of the rot-gut liquors that go therewith), and within its bounds tin-pot revivalism is making its last stand in Maryland.

There could be no better indication of the depths to which public opinion has sunk in Wicomico and Dorchester counties than the comments of the two local papers, the *Salisbury Times* and the *Cambridge Daily Banner*, upon the lynching. The latter, to be sure, deplored it formally, but only formally: the rest of its comment was devoted to hysterical railings against Baltimore, and disingenuous attempts to distort and conceal the facts. The former went to the almost incredible length of dismissing the atrocity as a "demonstration." Well, the word somehow fits. It was indeed a demonstration of what civilization can come to in a region wherein there are no competent police. Little save a simian self-seeking in public office, no apparent intelligence on the bench, and no courage and no decency in the local press.

Certainly it would be silly to think of the lynching as if it were an isolated incident. It was, in fact, nothing of the sort. It was the natural culmination of a degenerating process that has been in progress for years. At least since the World War the lower Shore has been going downhill, mentally and morally. It has been sliding out of Maryland and into the orbit of Arkansas and Tennessee, Mississippi and the more flea-bitten half of Virginia. Time and again the whole State has been menaced by the peculiar svinishness of its boozing-dry politics, and now it holds us all up to the contempt of the nation and the world by staging a public obscenity worthy of cannibals.

II

IN the immediate premises, unfortunately, not much can be done. The gallant Wicomiconians, having butchered a wounded and helpless black man, seem very likely to get away with it. Governor Ritchie says that he has confidence in the Hon. Levi C. Bailey, the county State's attorney, and no doubt it is justified, but Mr. Bailey can accomplish little if anything in the face of the prevailing public opinion, which supports the lynchers almost unanimously. If anyone had really wanted to arrest them, they might have been taken on the spot. They made no effort to disguise themselves, and every child in Salisbury knows who they are, and duly admires them. After suitable delays, I suppose, the county grand jury will indict a couple of highly improbable scapegoats, and after more delays it will be found that there is no evidence against them. And that will be that.

Governor Ritchie himself is almost helpless. He can't go into the county and take over the jurisdiction of the local courts. To be sure, he can offer Mr. Bailey the aid of Attorney General Lane, or the State police and of the city detectives, but the final disposition of the business will be in the hands of the court at Salisbury, with a jury in the box made up partly, if not wholly, of men who witnessed the lynching without protest, and maybe gave a hearty hand to it. There is no way under the constitution of Maryland to transfer the case to another county, or to displace the local law officers.

All this reveals one of the lamentable defects of local self-government. In a State with a centralized government the lynchers would be in jail by now, the very dubious Salisbury police would be in adjacent cells, and all hands would be sure of severe punishment. But the evils of centralized government, taking one with another, are so much worse than

those of the Maryland system that we must bear the occasional failures of the latter with philosophical calm. If the people of Wicomico want to condone and ratify such cowardly outrages, then they have an inalienable right to do so. The rest of the State may protest, but it cannot take that right away from them. All it can do is to let them know plainly what it thinks of them.

III

THE remedy lies in another direction.

What is needed down in the Bible Belt of the Shore is simply a revival of enlightenment, a liberation of decent public opinion. There are plenty of people in Wicomico who view Friday's lynching precisely as any other self-respecting man must view it. The difficulty is that the running of things in that whole unhappy region has passed into the hands of ninth-rate men. It is cut off from easy contact with the rest of the world, and its poverty has caused most of its best sons to move out. So it has become an Alsatia of morons, which is to say, of lynchers.

What it cries for without knowing it is more attention from the rest of the State. We have let it sweat in its own juices without paying anything more than casual attention to it. We have even allowed it to arrogate to itself a political power and importance altogether out of line with its state of civilization. Baltimore City sends one delegate to Annapolis for each 22,300 of its population, but Wicomico county sends one for every 7,800. Baltimore, with 805,000 population, has six State senators; Wicomico, with but 31,600, has one. In other words, the vote of the president of the Johns Hopkins University or of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, when it comes to electing the lower House of the Legislature, is worth but one-third as much as the vote of one of the Salisbury witch-burners, and when it comes to electing the upper House, but one-fourth as much.

Such grotesque disparities stand in plain contempt of all fairness and reason. They not only deprive Baltimore of its plain rights; they also give a false and evil influence to the low-grade political hacks who flourish in such swamps, preying upon the ignorant and ignoble hinds. They are to blame for the prevailing yearning, so noticeable in all the backwaters of the State, to spit into the city's eye whenever possible, to oppress it with stupid and costly legislation, to loot the money of its taxpayers, and, in general, to bid it be damned.

IV

THE Salisbury lynching, at least in some part, was a gesture to that end. It was the local morons' answer to the effort of city men to make them behave with common decency. They wanted to do things in their own barbaric way, and what is more, they wanted to prove to the city slickers that they could. The *Cambridge Daily Banner*, foaming in bad English, seeks to put all the blame for the sorry business on the *Sunpaper*, and hints broadly that it has turned Communist! My own suspicion is that Judge Ulman really had more hand in it, though he acted quite innocently. When he intervened in the Yuel Lee case against the Snow Hill Dogberry he set the whole lower Shore afire. The lynching of poor Williams, dragged to death blind and in bandages, was no more than a melodramatic demonstration that the brave fellows of the region were not to be intimidated. They proved it as such poltroons always do—at odds of 1000 to 1.

The remedy is not to bellow, but to educate. The majority of people, even in Wicomico, are probably teachable. The trouble is that no one bothers to teach them. They are resigned to the Devil, and left in their dismal isolation—miles from a lemon and more miles from a book. I long ago suggested that a missionary crusade be organized to save Maryland irredenta from its Methodist preachers, its porcine politicians, its professional patriots and visionaries, its whole pack of blind leaders of the blind. Its people are stupid enough, God knows, but they are probably less stupid than merely misinformed. There are no agencies of civilized opinion among them. They must depend for their ideas upon clowns in the pulpit, clowns on the stump, and clowns in the editorial chair. Certainly it would be irrational to ask for enlightenment in communities whose ideas are supplied by such pathetic sheets as the *Cambridge Daily Banner* and the *Salisbury Times*. Even the burning Baptists of rural Georgia are better off than that.

So I call for volunteers. The first should come from the lower Shore itself. Let its small minority of educated and civilized young men bestir themselves, lest their people be lost altogether.