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What is a Lynching?

A Study of Mob Justice, South and North

II—Lynching in the North

HAVING looked, last month, into two Southern lynching towns, let us now see what a Northern lynching is like. The comparison is highly interesting and illuminating.

Springfield, Ohio, is one of the most prosperous of the smaller cities of the state. It is a beautiful town of about 41,000 people, fine streets, fine buildings, busy factories, churches, an imposing library. Some of the older families have resided here for nearly a century. It is the seat of government of one of the most fertile and attractive counties in the state: an altogether progressive, enlightened city. Of its population, over 6,000 are negroes (about one-seventh), a considerable proportion of whom are recent settlers. It is a highly significant and noteworthy fact that within the last few years large numbers of negroes have been migrating from the South, and crowding into Northern towns located along the Ohio or in those portions of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kansas, and other states, which border on the Old South. Many of the negroes in Springfield have come from Kentucky. We soon discover in these Northern towns, exactly as in the South, the two classes of negroes: the steady, resident class, more or less known to the whites, and a restless, unstable, ignorant class, coming to one neighborhood today to help build a bridge, and going elsewhere tomorrow to dig a canal. For years no such thing as race prejudice existed in Springfield; there is not much today, although, with the growth of negro population, it is rapidly increasing. For instance, a druggist in Springfield refuses to sell soda-water to a negro college professor, the typesetters in a publishing house compel the discharge of negro workmen, a negro physician visits the high-school, finds the half-dozen negro pupils sitting by themselves and, angrily charging discrimination, orders his child to sit among the white children. This feeling of race repulsion is especially noticeable between the working class of white men and the negroes who come more or less into industrial competition with them. The use of negroes for breaking strikes in the coal-fields and elsewhere has been a fertile source of discord, kindling the fire of race prejudice in places where it never before existed. The nearer the white man comes to the social level of the negro, the more he hates him.

How the Negroes Sold Their Votes In Springfield

In Springfield there are about 1,500 negro voters, practically every one of whom is bought at every election. The Democrats and the Republicans are so evenly divided that the city administration is Democratic and the county administration Republican. The venal negro vote goes to the highest bidder, carries the elections, and, with the whisky influence, governs the

town. This is the vote—both negro vote and saloon vote—which the South is rapidly eliminating. Springfield, enlightened, educated, progressive, highly American, has 145 saloons—or one to every 285 people. Before the lynching, nine of these were negro saloons—some of them indescribably vile. A row of houses along the railroad tracks, not three blocks from the heart of the city, was known as the Levee. It was a negro row composed of saloons and disorderly houses, where the lowest of the low, negro men and both negro and white women, made a general rendezvous. Just back of it was one of the foremost Catholic churches in town; hardly a block away were the post-office, the public library, and the foremost club of the city, and within three or four hundred yards were the back doors of some of the city's most aristocratic residences. For years, the ineffective good citizen has protested against these abominable resorts, but when the Republicans wanted to win they needed the votes from these places, and when the Democrats wanted to win they needed them. Burnett, the Democratic boss, said in a tone of real injury to a gentleman—a Democrat—who protested against the protection of the Levee: "Don't you want the party to win? We've got to have those 60 or 80 votes from Hurley"—Hurley being the notorious negro proprietor of a dive called the Honky Tonk.

Corrupt Politics and the Negro Question

So these vile places remained open, protected by the police, breeding crime, and encouraging arrogance, idleness, and vice among the negroes.

And yet one will hear good citizens of Springfield complaining that the negroes make themselves conspicuous and obnoxious at primaries and elections, standing around, waiting, and refusing to vote until they receive money in hand.

"To my mind," one of these citizens said to me, "the conspicuousness of the negro at elections is one of the chief causes of race prejudice."

But who is to blame? The negro who accepts the bribe, or the white politician who is eager to give it, or the white business man who, desiring special privileges, stands behind the white politician, or the ordinary citizen who doesn't care? Talk with these politicians on the one hand, and the impractical reformers on the other, and they will tell you in all seriousness of the sins of the South in disfranchising the negro. Such talk makes fine ammunition for the politician, and the impractical reformer, knowing more of books than of life, supports the politician.

"Every negro in Springfield," I was told, "exercises his right to vote."

If you were to tell these men that the negroes of Springfield are disfranchised as absolutely as they are anywhere in the South, they would stare at you in amazement. But a purchased voter is a disfranchised voter. The negroes have no more real voice in the government of Springfield than they have in the government of Savannah or New Orleans. In the South the negro has been disfranchised by law or by intimidation: in the North by cash. Which is worse?

Story of the Crime that Led to the Lynching

Last winter a negro named Dixon arrived in Springfield from Kentucky. He was one of the illiterate, idle, floating sort. He could not get "political equality" in Kentucky, so he was seeking it in the North. He had with him a woman not his wife, with whom he quarreled. He was arrested and brought into court.

I am profoundly conscious of the seriousness of any charge which touches upon our courts, the last resort of justice, and yet it was a matter of common report that "justice was easy"

in Clark County, that laws were not enforced, that criminals were allowed to escape on suspended sentence. I heard this talk everywhere, often coupled with personal accusations against the judges, but I could not discover that the judges were more remiss than other officials. They were afflicted with no other disease.

Even in a serious recent sociological study of Clark County by Prof. E. S. Todd, I find this statement:

“In Springfield, one of the chief faults of the municipal system has been and is the laxity and discrimination in the enforcement of the law. Many of the Municipal Ordinances have been shelved for years. The saloon closing ordinances are enforced intermittently, as are those concerning gambling.”

When the negro Dixon was brought into court he was convicted and let out on suspended sentence. He got drunk immediately and was again arrested, this time serving several weeks in jail. The moment he was free he began quarreling with his “wife,” in a house directly across the street from police headquarters. An officer named Collis tried to make peace and Dixon deliberately shot him through the stomach, also wounding the woman.

This was on Sunday. Dixon was immediately placed in the county jail. Collis died the next morning.

Human Life Cheap in Clark County

I have called attention to the fact that the lynching town nearly always has a previous bad record of homicide. Disregard for the sacredness of human life seems to be in the air of these places. Springfield was no exception. Between January 1, 1902, and March 7, 1904, the day of the lynching, a little more than two years, no fewer than ten homicides were committed in the city of Springfield—and there have been two since then. White men committed five of these crimes and negroes five. Three of the cases were decided within a short time before the lynching and the punishment administered was widely criticized. Bishop, a colored man who had killed a colored man, was fined \$200 and sentenced to six months in the workhouse. This was for *killing a man!* O’Brien, a white man, who killed a white man, got one year in the penitentiary. And only a week before the lynching, Schocknessy, a white man who killed a white man, but who had influential political friends, went scot-free!

On the morning after the Collis murder, the *Daily Sun* published a list of the recent homicides in Springfield in big type on its first page and asked editorially:

“What are you going to do about it?”

It then answered its own question:

“Nothing.”

The following morning, after the lynching, the same paper printed in its headlines:

AWFUL REBUKE TO THE COURTS

They Have Temporized With the Criminal Classes Until Patience Was Exhausted

I cite these facts to show the underlying conditions in Springfield; a soil richly prepared for an outbreak of mob law—with corrupt politics, vile saloons, the law paralyzed by non-enforcement against vice, a large venal negro vote, lax courts of justice.

Gathering of the Lynching Mob

Well, on Monday afternoon the mob began to gather. At first it was an absurd, ineffectual crowd, made up largely of lawless boys of sixteen to twenty—a pronounced feature of every mob—with a wide fringe of more respectable citizens, their hands in their pockets and no convictions in their souls, looking on curiously, helplessly. They gathered hooting around the jail, cowardly at first, as all mobs are, but growing bolder as darkness came on and no move was made to check them. The murder of Collis was not a horrible, soul-rending crime like that at Statesboro, Georgia; these men in the mob were not personal friends of the murdered man; it was a mob from the back rooms of the swarming saloons of Springfield; and it included also the sort of idle boys “who hang around cigar stores,” as one observer told me. The newspaper reports are fond of describing lynching mobs as “made up of the foremost citizens of the town.” In no case that I know of, either South or North, has a mob been made up of the best citizens; but the best citizens have often stood afar off “decrying the mob”—as a Springfield man told me piously—and letting it go on. A mob is the method by which good citizens turn over the law and the government to the criminal or irresponsible classes.

And no official in direct authority in Springfield that evening, apparently, had so much as an ounce of grit within him. The sheriff came out and made a weak speech in which he said he “didn’t want to hurt anybody.” They threw stones at him and broke his windows. The chief of police sent eighteen men to the jail but did not go near himself. All of these policemen undoubtedly sympathized with the mob in its efforts to get at the slayer of their brother officer; at least, they did nothing effective to prevent the lynching. An appeal was made to the Mayor to order out the engine companies that water might be turned on the mob. He said he didn’t like to; the hose might be cut! The local militia company was called to its barracks, but the officer in charge hesitated, vacillated, doubted his authority, and objected finally because he had no ammunition except Krag-Jorgensen cartridges, which, if fired into a mob, would kill too many people! The soldiers did not stir that night from the safe and comfortable precincts of their armory.

A sort of dry rot, a moral paralysis, seems to strike the administrators of law in a town like Springfield. What can be expected of officers who are not accustomed to enforce the law, or of a people not accustomed to obey it—or who make reservations and exceptions when they do enforce it or obey it?

Threats to Lynch the Judges

When the sheriff made his speech to the mob, urging them to let the law take its course they jeered him. The law! When, in the past, had the law taken its proper course in Clark County? Someone shouted, referring to Dixon:

“He’ll only get fined for shooting in the city limits.”

“He’ll get ten days in jail and suspended sentence.”

Then there were voices:

“Let’s go hang Mower and Miller”—the two judges.

This threat, indeed, was frequently repeated both on the night of the lynching and on the day following.

So the mob came finally, and cracked the door of the jail with a railroad rail. This jail is said to be the strongest in Ohio, and having seen it, I can well believe that the report is true. But

steel bars have never yet kept out a mob; it takes something a good deal stronger: human courage backed up by the consciousness of being right.

They murdered the negro in cold blood in the jail doorway; then they dragged him to the principal business street and hung him to a telegraph-pole, afterwards riddling his lifeless body with revolver shots.

Lesson of a Hanging Negro

That was the end of that! Mob justice administered! And there the negro hung until daylight the next morning—an unspeakably grisly, dangling horror, advertising the shame of the town. His head was shockingly crooked to one side, his ragged clothing, cut for souvenirs, exposed in places his bare body: he dripped blood. And, with the crowds of men both here and at the morgue where the body was publicly exhibited, came young boys in knickerbockers, and little girls and women by scores, horrified but curious. They came even with baby carriages! Men made jokes: “A dead nigger is a good nigger.” And the purblind, dollars-and-cents man, most despicable of all, was congratulating the public:

“It’ll save the county a lot of money!”

Significant lessons, these, for the young!

But the mob wasn’t through with its work. Easy people imagine that, having hanged a negro, the mob goes quietly about its business; but that is never the way of the mob. Once released, the spirit of anarchy spreads and spreads, not subsiding until it has accomplished its full measure of evil.

Mob Burning of Negro Saloons

All the following day a rumbling, angry crowd filled the streets of Springfield, threatening to burn out the notorious Levee, threatening Judges Mower and Miller, threatening the “niggers.” The local troops—to say nothing of the police force—which might easily have broken up the mob, remained sedulously in their armories, vacillating, doubtful of authority, knowing that there were threats to burn and destroy, and making not one move toward the protection of the public. One of the captains was even permitted to go to a neighboring city to a dance! At the very same time the panic-stricken officials were summoning troops from other towns. So night came on, the mob gathered around the notorious dives, someone touched a match, and the places of crime suddenly disgorged their foul inhabitants. Black and white, they came pouring out and vanished into the darkness where they belonged—and whence they have not yet returned. Eight buildings went up in smoke, the fire department deliberating—intentionally, it is said—until the flames could not be controlled. The troops, almost driven out by the county prosecutor, McGrew, appeared after the mob had completed its work.

Good work, badly done, a living demonstration of the inevitability of law—if not orderly, decent law, then of mob-law.

For days following the troops filled Springfield, costing the state large sums of money, costing the county large sums of money. They chiefly guarded the public fountain; the mob had gone home—until next time.

Efforts to Punish the Mob

What happened after that? A perfunctory court-martial that did absolutely nothing. A grand jury of really good citizens that sat for weeks, off and on; and like the mountain that was in travail and brought forth a mouse, they indicted two boys and two men out of all that mob, not for murder, but for “breaking into jail.” And, curiously enough, it developed—how do such things develop?—that every man on the grand jury was a Republican, chosen by Republican county officers, and in their report they severely censured the police force (Democratic), and the mayor (Democratic), and had not one word of disapproval for the sheriff (Republican). Curiously enough, also, the public did not become enthusiastic over the report of that grand jury. Everyone knows, of course, that the boys and men indicted are perfectly safe: they will never be punished.

But the worst feature of all in this Springfield lynching was the apathy of the public. No one really seemed to care. A “nigger” had been hanged: what of it? But the law itself had been lynched. What of that? I had just come from the South, where I had found the people of several lynching towns in a state of deep excitement—moral excitement if you like, thinking about this problem, quarreling about it, expelling men from the church, impeaching sheriffs, dishonorably discharging whole militia companies. Here in Springfield, I found cold apathy, except for a few fine citizens, one of whom, City Solicitor Stewart L. Tatum, promptly offered his services to the sheriff and assisted in a vain effort to remove the negro in a closed carriage and afterwards at the risk of personal assault earnestly attempted to defeat the purposes of the mob. Another of these citizens, the Rev. Father Cogan, pleaded with the mob on the second night of the rioting at risk to himself; another withdrew from the militia company because it had not done its duty. And afterwards the city officials were stirred by the faintest of faint spasms of righteousness: some of the negro saloons were closed up, but within a month, the most notorious of all the dive-keepers, Hurley, the negro political boss, was permitted to open an establishment—through the medium of a brother-in-law!

Good Citizenship Flat on Its Back

If there was ever an example of good citizenship lying flat on its back with political corruption squatting on its neck, that example may be found in Springfield, Ohio. And the worst feature of all is that good citizenship there is apparently well satisfied and comfortable where it lies.

I turn with pleasure from the story of this lynching to another Northern town, where I found as satisfying an example of how to deal with a mob as this country has known.

In Springfield we had an exhibition of nearly complete supineness and apathy before the mob; in Statesboro, Georgia, we discovered a decided law-and-order element, not strong enough, however, to do much; in Huntsville, Alabama, we had a tremendous moral awakening. In Danville, Illinois, we find an example of law vindicated, magnificently and completely, through the heroism of a single man, backed up later by wholesome public opinion.

Character of Danville, Illinois

Danville presents many of the characteristics of Springfield, Ohio. It has had a growing negro population and there has been an awakening race prejudice between the white workingmen and the negroes, especially in the neighboring coal mines. Indeed, there are everywhere evidences that the negro problem is creeping Northward, not slowly, and that as the proportion of

colored population increases, the Northern states will be compelled to meet exactly the questions with which the South is now struggling—disfranchisement of the negro, lynching, and “social equality” in all its various forms. And the Northerner, with little understanding of the negro character, is not likely to be as patient as the Southerner has been.

As in other places where lynchings have occurred, we find that Vermilion County, of which Danville is the seat, has also a heavy record of homicide and other crime. They count there on a homicide every sixty days; at the term of court preceding the lynching seven murder trials were on the docket; and in all its history the county never had a legal hanging, though it has had two lynchings. The criminal record of Vermilion County is exceeded only by Cook County (Chicago), and St. Clair County (East St. Louis), where the horrible lynching of a negro schoolmaster took place (at Belleville) last summer.

Story of a Starved Negro

The crime which caused the rioting was committed by the familiar vagrant negro from the South—in this case a Kentucky negro named Wilson—a miserable, illiterate, half-starved creature who had been following a circus. He had begged along the road in Indiana and no one would feed him. He came across the line into Illinois, found a farmhouse door open, saw food on the table, and darted in to steal it. As he was leaving, the woman of the house appeared. In an animal-like panic, the negro darted for the door, knocking the woman down as he escaped. Immediately the cry went up that there had been an attempted criminal assault, but the sheriff told me that the woman never made any such charge and the negro bore all the evidence of the truthfulness of the assertion that he was starving; he was so emaciated with hunger that even after his arrest the sheriff dared not allow him a full meal.

Hot Weather and Mobs

But it was enough to stir up the mob spirit. It was Saturday night, July 25th, and the usual crowd from all over the county had gathered in the town. Among the crowd were many coal miners, who had just been paid off and were drinking. As in Springfield, the town had a very large number of saloons, ninety-one within a radius of five miles, to a population of some 25,000. Most Northern towns are far worse in this respect than the average Southern town. It was a hot night; mobs work best in hot weather. Statistics, indeed, show that the great majority of lynchings take place in the summer, particularly in July and August.

It was known that the sheriff had brought his negro prisoner to the jail, and the crime was widely discussed. The whole city was a sort of human tinder-box, ready to flare up at a spark of violence.

Well, the spark came—in a saloon. Metcalf, a negro, had words with a well-known white butcher named Henry Gatterman. Both had been drinking. The negro drew a revolver and shot Gatterman dead. Instantly the city was in a furor of excitement. The police appeared and arrested Metcalf, and got him finally with great difficulty to the police station, where he was locked up. A mob formed instantly. It was led, at first, by a crowd of lawless boys from sixteen to eighteen years old. Rapidly gathering strength, it rushed into the city hall, and although the mayor, the chief of police, and nearly the entire police force were present, they got the negro out and hanged him to a telegraph-pole in the main street of the town, afterwards shooting his body full of holes. Intoxicated by their swift success and, mob-like, growing in recklessness and bloodthirstiness,

they now turned upon the jail determined to lynch the negro Wilson. It was a much uglier mob than any I have hitherto described; it was a drunken mob, and it had already tasted blood. It swarmed around the jail, yelling, shooting, and breaking the windows with stones.

A "Strict" Sheriff

Sheriff Hardy H. Whitlock of Vermilion County had never been looked upon as an especially remarkable man—except, as I was told everywhere, he had a record as a strict sheriff, as a man who did his best to enforce the law in times of peace. He and the state's attorney were so industrious that they caught and punished four times as many criminals in proportion to population as were convicted in Chicago. The sheriff is a big, solid, deliberate man with gray eyes. He was born in Tennessee. His father was an itinerant Presbyterian preacher, always poor, doing good for everybody but himself, and stern in his conceptions of right and wrong. His mother, as the sheriff relates, made him obey the law with peach-tree switches. His history has been the commonest of the common; not much education, had to make his living, worked in a livery stable. He was faithful at that, temperate, friendly. They elected him constable, an office that he held for seven years. He was faithful at that. They elected him sheriff of the county. He went at the new task as he had at all his other work, with no especial brilliancy, but steadily, doing his duty, catching criminals. He found a great deal to learn and he learned. The extradition laws of the states troubled him when he wanted to bring prisoners home. There was no compilation of the laws on the subject. Here was work to be done. Although no lawyer, he went at it laboriously and compiled a book of 500 pages, containing all the extradition laws of the country, and had it published at his own expense.

Defending a Jail With a Riot-Gun

And when the crisis came that night with the mob howling around his jail, Hardy Whitlock had become so accustomed to doing his duty that he didn't know how to do anything else. Here was the jail to be protected; he intended to protect it. He sent for no troops—there was no time anyhow—nor for the police. He had a couple of deputies and his wife. Though the mob was breaking the windows of the house and the children were there, his wife said:

"Give me a gun. Hardy, and I'll stay by you."

The sheriff went out on the porch unarmed, in his shirt-sleeves, and made them a little speech. They yelled at him, threw stones, fired revolvers. They brought a railroad rail to break in the door. He went out among them, called them Bill, and Jim, and Dick, and persuaded them to put it down; but others took it up willingly.

"Are you going to open the door?" they yelled.

"No!" said the sheriff.

Then he went in and got his riot-gun, well loaded with duck-shot. He was one man against two thousand. They began battering on the iron door, yelling and shooting. It was not an especially strong door, and it began to give at the bottom, and finally bent inward enough to admit a man's body. The crucial moment had come: and the sheriff was there to meet it. He stuck his riot-gun out of the opening and began firing. The mob fell back but came charging forward again, wild with passion. The sheriff fired again, seven times in all, and one of his deputies opened with a revolver. For a time pandemonium reigned; they attempted the house entrance of the jail; the sheriff was there also with his riot-gun; they threatened dynamite and fire. They cut

down the negro, Metcalf, brought him in front of the jail, piled straw on the body and attempted to burn it. Part of the time they were incited to greater violence by a woman who stood in a wagon-box across the street.

So they raged all night, firing at the jail, but not daring to come too near the man with the riot-gun. "On Sunday," the sheriff told me, "I realized I was up against it. I knew the tough element in town had it in for me."

How a Real Sheriff Punished a Mob

They even threatened him on the street. A large number of men had been wounded by the firing, some dangerously, though no one, fortunately, was killed. The sheriff stood alone in the town. A lesser man might still have failed ignominiously. But Whitlock went about the nearest duty: punishing the rioters. He had warrants issued and arrested every man he could find who was streaked or speckled with shot—indubitable evidence of his presence in the mob at the jail door. Many fled the city, but he got twenty or thirty.

Vermilion County also had a prosecuting attorney who knew his duty—J. W. Keeslar. Judge Thompson called a grand jury, Attorney Keeslar pushed the cases with great vigor, and this was the result: thirteen men and one woman (the disorderly woman of the wagon-box) were sent to the penitentiary, eight others were heavily fined. At the same time the negro, Wilson, came up for trial, pleaded guilty, and was legally punished by a term in the penitentiary.

There will never be another mob in Vermilion County, at least while Whitlock is sheriff.

And the people came strongly to the support of their officers. Hardy Whitlock today is one of the most popular men in the county. Keeslar, coming up for reelection the following fall, with mob-law for the essential issue, was returned to his office with an overwhelming majority. The sheriff told me that, in his opinion, the success of the officers in convicting the lynchers was due largely to a thoroughly awakened public opinion, the strong attitude of the newspapers, especially those of Chicago, the help of the governor, and the feeling, somehow, that the best sentiment of the county was behind them.

Conclusions Regarding Lynching in This Country

And finally, we may, perhaps, form a few general conclusions.

Lynching in this country is peculiarly the white man's burden. The white man has taken all the responsibility of government; he really governs in the North as well as in the South, in the North disfranchising the negro with cash, in the South by law or by intimidation. All the machinery of justice is in his hands, and will continue to be; the negro, indeed, brought here originally against his will, is even yet the all but helpless charge of the white man. How keen is the need, then, of calmness and strict justice in dealing with him! The idea of equality is hateful to many white men, but nothing more surely tends to bring the white man down to the lowest level of the criminal negro than yielding to those blind instincts of savagery which find expression in the mob. The man who joins a mob, by his very acts, puts himself on a level with the negro criminal: both have given way wholly to brute passion. For, if civilization means anything, it means self-restraint; casting away self-restraint the white man becomes as savage as the negro.

If the white man sets an example of non-obedience to law, of non-enforcement of law, and of unequal justice, what can be expected of the negro? A criminal father is a poor preacher

of homilies to a wayward son. The negro does not reason. He sees a man, white or black, commit murder and go free, over and over again in all these lynching counties. Why should he fear to murder? Every passion of the white man is reflected and emphasized in the imitative negro.

Lynching a Symptom

Lynching is not so much a disease in itself as it is the symptom of a disease. It is a symptom of lawlessness, of the failure of justice, of political corruption. It is an attempt of nature to throw off disease—as she sometimes throws off the humors of the blood in the human body—by violent eruptions.

And this disease—the failure of law—is not essentially a Southern disease, though it is complicated and emphasized there by an ignorant, inferior, defenseless, often crimina negro population. No Southern manifestation of mob-law has equaled in downright anarchy the conditions in Colorado last year. In the North, as our negro population increases—and it is increasing rapidly—we shall lynch negroes with the same utter brutality that we find in the South: we have done it already, and repeatedly, in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kansas, Delaware, and in other Northern states. No Southern lynching was ever more barbarous than that of Wilmington, Delaware.

We would think it the height of absurdity, in this day of science, to doctor the outward symptom of a physical ill. We treat the disease itself. Yet several states, notably Ohio, have passed laws to prevent lynching—which have not stopped mob violence, and never will stop it.

The only remedy is a strict enforcement of all the laws, all along the line, all the time, so that no man, rich or poor, white or black, can escape. That is the remedy, and the only remedy; and, like most real remedies, not patent nostrums, it is simplicity itself—if lived up to. It gets back, after all, like every one of these great questions, to us, personally. We, the people, are the government, we execute the law, and if we are too bad or too lazy to do our work properly, let us in all honesty take the blame—and not shoulder it on the irresponsible negro.

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