

THE ATLANTA RIOTS¹

I.—A SOUTHERN WHITE POINT OF VIEW

I HAVE not been a citizen of Atlanta long enough to feel any passion of partisanship in defending the good name of the city. I was out of town during the period of the rioting, from Friday night until Wednesday morning, and so neither shared the universal feeling of the white people on Saturday that something had to be done nor had my sensibilities shocked by the actual spectacle of the murder of innocent and inoffensive negroes by the mob. The *Outlook* was good enough to credit my story of the "Wilmington Revolution," eight years ago, and to take a position on that subject that has added greatly to the influence of the magazine in the South. I crave a word which will be of the nature of a reply to the editorial comment of September 29 entitled "An American Kishinev."

The only parallel that can be drawn between Kishinev and Atlanta is that there was race antagonism in both instances. There was no religious fanaticism, as at Kishinev. There was no sympathy with the mob by civil or military authorities, as *The Outlook* admits. The Jews are a law-abiding and inoffensive people. The negroes are our criminal class. There had been no outrages inflicted by Jewish criminals upon the Russian women or men as the incentive to the Kishinev massacre. But the fact that there was such race antagonism as resulted in an indiscriminate slaughter of negroes by whites because they were negroes is something to be emphasized rather than denied, and its cause or causes patiently and calmly inquired into.

The *Outlook* says that Atlanta is not a typical Southern city. I have found it intensely Southern, and with a most hospitable attitude toward settlers from other sections. Ninety-five per cent. of the people are of Southern birth. It has quite a large population of skilled

¹ See editorial comment elsewhere.—THE EDITORS.

laborers from the North and West, but it should be said that organized labor here is distinctly friendly to the negro laborers, while there may be some of the prejudice, which is still rather foreign to the South, against the negro who has a job that the white man might fill, and this feeling may have found expression in the murder of a telegraph messenger and the two barbers. I am disposed also to question the statement that the race feeling is acuter in Atlanta than in almost any other Southern city. I have thought rather the contrary to be true until the events of the last few weeks occurred.

But the fact remains that for the first time in the history of Southern crime there was an indiscriminate lynching of negroes by a mob. The mob has heretofore been after the negro criminal and anxious to avoid a mistake for the very desire that the criminal should be punished. We have read of such assaults upon negroes in the two Springfields, and there have been anti-negro riots in New York. But Southern cities have been free from this particular form of mob violence, the race wars being in all other cases clashes between armed bodies of whites and negroes.

Nor do I consider plausible The *Outlook's* theory that the political issue of negro disfranchisement has had much to do with the trouble. If it did, its settlement in favor of the negro would have been the more dangerous thing for peace between the races. If it did, it was because of the division of the white people on that question and the apparent "backing" given to the political claims of the negroes. The quality that makes the negro regiment with white officers efficient in war will make the negro dare much with the possession or the fancy of white sympathy and encouragement. But if The *Outlook's* theory is correct, we hark back to race antagonism excited in the breasts of the negroes, for there

was nothing in the campaign or its results to kindle resentment or antipathy in the hearts of the white people.

If there had been no assaults upon white women in and near Atlanta, there would have been no mobs and no riots. That is a truism. A brief history of these assaults within the year, with their cumulative frequency within the last few weeks, will help to determine the cause of this unique experience in a Southern city—the wholesale murder of innocent negroes by the mob.

On October 26, 1905, Mrs. M.,¹ a respectable white woman, fifty-five years of age, was most brutally assaulted by a negro, a railroad hand, who escaped immediately after the crime, was captured in a distant city on November 9, after the arrest of several negroes on suspicion, whom Mrs. M. pronounced not the guilty one, was brought back to Atlanta, fully identified, was protected from the threat of mob violence, confessed his guilt to so many people that his attorneys were powerless, pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to death and hanged, the execution taking place on December 8. The law had acted with certainty and without delay.

In March, 1906, the negro janitor of one of the public schools made an insulting proposal to a white school-girl and laid his hands on her person. He bore a good character to which several white people testified, and while there was no shaking of the testimony of the little girl, it was his word against hers, and he was convicted of a minor crime and sentenced to twelve months on the roads.

On July 31 there was an assault by a negro upon a young girl, Miss P., in one of the suburbs of Atlanta. It should be understood, and will be from these recitals, that every neighbor of an outraged family turns out at once to help in hunting down the criminal, and that, with a city like Atlanta near, he generally escapes. A number of neighbors helped the county police in searching for this negro, found him, with the evidences of his crime, took him before the girl, who unhesitatingly identified him,

¹ Where initials are given, the author mentioned the names, which we suppress out of regard for the feelings of the individuals.—THE EDITORS.

and instantly he was shot by some of the citizens who had caught him, the bullets wounding the two white men who were holding him, and this was done just before the county police arrived. His dead body was brought to Atlanta, and the effort to discover the men who shot him was futile. This is the only lynching of a criminal that has occurred.

On July 20 a negro boy assaulted a negro girl one day, and a white girl, a mere child, the next, in the country, some thirty miles from Atlanta. He confessed to the first crime and was brought to the jail in Atlanta for safe-keeping, "the Tower," as it is called, being impregnable to the attacks of a mob.

On August 15 Mrs. H. was criminally assaulted by a negro, who escaped capture, those arrested on suspicion not having been identified.

On August 20 there was a brutal assault, in another suburb of Atlanta, upon Misses M. and E. L., the former a visitor from England, and the latter a mere child. Both were terribly injured in the struggle. It is believed that, after weeks of search, the right negro has been taken. There were threats of lynching one or two suspects. The negro captured is confined in the Tower and has been indicted by the Grand Jury.

On August 26 the number of county police was trebled, being increased from twelve to thirty-six, and it was agreed to add forty policemen to the city force on the first of October—which was too late.

On August 24 Miss W., a school-teacher, went to a spring on private property and was accosted and pursued by a negro, but escaped his clutches. He also escaped arrest.

On September 20, Thursday afternoon preceding the riot, Mrs. K. was assaulted near Fort McPherson, and, with the rumors of the gathering of a mob, Governor Terrell left the dinner that was given in honor of Mr. Bryan's visit, and called out the military, who conducted the negro arrested for this crime from Fort McPherson to the jail in Atlanta. Mrs. K. failed to identify the one arrested.

The same night a half-clad negro, who was probably intoxicated, but who had hidden his clothing for disguising himself afterward, entered a house in the heart

of the city, attacked a mother and her two daughters, who successfully defended themselves, and was captured by the neighbors and landed in jail.

Friday evening a negro who was delivering ice was shown where to put it by a young white girl, when he seized her by the hand and kissed her. He was caught and lodged in jail.

Saturday, September 22, a negro came to the home of Mrs. C. in another suburb, was ordered away, and then hid in the barn, whence he issued later and pursued Mrs. C. to her house, when she caught up an unloaded gun and drove him off.

The same afternoon Mrs. A., in another suburb, was attacked on the rear porch of her home by a negro, her husband being away. But she had persuaded her brother to stay at the house that evening, and her screams brought him to her aid. A negro suspect was arrested for this crime during Sunday of the riot, and while being brought to town in a buggy managed to pull the reins so that the buggy was overturned by a street-car, and so he escaped.

The same evening, Saturday, Miss A., eighteen years of age, was attacked on the back porch of her home by a negro, who threw her to the floor. Her screams also brought help, but the negro escaped.

At eight o'clock that night Mrs. H. went to the window to close the blinds, and saw a negro at the window, according to her account. But by this time there was a shadow of dread on every home in the city, and it may have been her imagination.

I believe this to be an entirely accurate account of the crimes and attempted crimes that struck terror to the hearts of the white women, and of every man who had to leave his womankind at all unprotected. Men with families to protect went early to their homes Saturday evening, leaving to the negroes and the white hoodlums largely the possession of the streets.

May I suggest here a comparison? The population of Atlanta is, in round numbers, a hundred thousand; of New York, four millions. Multiply everything by forty. Suppose in New York City there had been, say, four hundred and eighty assaults, or attempted assaults,

upon white women of your city, by Chinese brutes—two hundred and forty in three days, one hundred and sixty in one afternoon; that the New York papers, yellow or otherwise, had published extras describing these assaults; that the police, with the best will in the world, had succeeded in arresting only a small number of these criminals, compared with those who escaped; and that the whole white population of the city had come to believe that the different Chinese quarters of the city were hiding and protecting these criminals of their own race, successfully baffling detection of the guilty: what would the New York mob have done under those circumstances? What could have prevented their indiscriminate slaughter of the Chinese?

And this is the heart of the matter of the race antagonism. Individual and sporadic cases of assault would have been, as they always have been heretofore in the South, ascribed to the individual. But the unheard-of frequency of the crimes in two months, with the cumulative aggravation of the last three days, made it a race matter; while the failure to find the guilty, and the absolute indifference of the negroes to the punishment of the criminal, to say the most charitable thing, arrayed white against black, as it was believed that black had already been arrayed against white, and in a matter that has been the distinction of the Saxon race since Tacitus wrote of it—its jealousy of the honor of its women. Certainly there was the appearance of conspiracy, of the many or the few. There was the universal suspicion that the criminals were known to the negroes, and there was never the slightest effort on the part of any negro to bring any of them to justice. The excuse generally given is that the criminals would have been lynched. But why is the negro race so determined for the rule of law and order in this one particular, unless there is racial sympathy with the criminal? In the only trial for assault that I ever witnessed, the criminal was as evidently the hero of the occasion to the negro half of the audience in the court-house as he was the villain to the white spectators.

The story of the riots, whose disgrace

Atlanta keenly feels, has been made even worse than it was by the stories sent out from Atlanta for the papers. The beginnings of the riot were apparently insignificant. Peachtree Street is crossed, in the heart of the city, by another street, called on the east side Decatur and on the west Marietta. Within the open triangular square at this point all the street-cars of the city come for the transfer of passengers. Saturday night it is always full of people passing to and fro, and a crowd can be gathered in five minutes. The news of the four assaults that had been attempted that afternoon and evening, published in night extras by one of the papers, was enough to block the streets and the open space. At the same time the police were conducting a raid upon the negro dives on Decatur Street, two or three blocks away. This attracted a crowd in that direction. A negro girl was shot in a negro row and killed, early in the evening. The negroes had resisted their capture by the police in the raid. There were but fifty-seven police on duty that night. Presently the news was brought that two white boys had been held up and robbed by a gang of negro toughs on the outskirts of the city, and doubtless the rumor grew as it passed from mouth to mouth. Then, with the police occupied in the raid, a crowd of boys and young hoodlums began chasing the negroes on Decatur Street. Finally, on the corner of Peachtree and Decatur Street, a negro snatched a pocketbook from a woman, and a white man sprang upon him. Two negroes came to their comrade's aid, and they were at once attacked by several white people, while a negro telegraph messenger was also set upon. The four negroes got away, but the telegraph messenger presently returned, was recognized by his former assailants, and was brutally killed by the crowd that had now become a mob. The mob started toward Decatur Street, and were held back by the police until the fire department came to the rescue and turned the hose on them, when the mob separated into smaller mobs. Then the street-cars began coming to the crossing, and the mob, having already tasted blood, began dragging the negroes from the cars and

beating them with sticks. Some of these were killed, though the most escaped without serious injury. By this time, say half-past ten, the character of the mob had been changed by the emptying of the bar-rooms, which close at ten o'clock. It is estimated that there were seven thousand in the mob that now crowded Peachtree, Decatur, and Marietta Streets at their crossing. It overflowed into side streets, attacked two negro barbers and killed one of them, and attacked the porters in a Pullman car near by. In all, there were eight negroes killed Saturday night, including the girl who was shot by negroes.

Either the Mayor, the Sheriff, or the Governor could have called out the military. In the face of the provocation given to mischief by a mob, the delay in this matter is inexcusable. All should have been on the alert. Atlanta has recently elected a new Mayor and Georgia a new Governor, from whom better things are expected. But a member of the State militia called up Colonel Clifford Anderson, commander of the regiment, and told him of the mob and asked if he should turn in the riot alarm. Colonel Anderson asked him to find the Mayor at once and get a request from him. The Mayor had tried moral suasion and cold water, but it was a time for the cold steel. After an hour's delay the Mayor communicated with Colonel Anderson, who in the meantime had communicated with the Governor, but it was a quarter to twelve before the request for the military reached Colonel Anderson, and, as he lived two miles from the center of the city, it was a quarter past twelve when he reached the armory. By that time some seventy-five men of the three hundred State militia of Atlanta had reached the armory, and Colonel Anderson put himself at their head and stopped the progress of a mob of two hundred men that came down the streets. The loading with ball cartridges and the fixing of bayonets dispersed this mob, and it never assembled in any large proportions during the three following days while the military, reinforced by companies from other cities, were in possession of the city.

At the breaking out of the riot the

hardware stores sold out their stock of firearms in a few minutes, and the mob broke into the pawn-shops on Decatur Street in the search for pistols and guns. But there was no more killing of negroes after the first attack already described. The negroes had taken the alarm and gone, some to their homes, but thousands to the homes of the white people on whom they had some claim as old servants or friends. The case of the woman who protected a negro man from the mob that was pursuing him was typical. And this is one bright spot in the dark story. Any Southern man would protect an innocent negro who appealed to him for help, with his own life if necessary.

Sunday was a trying day for the military. Little roving bands of hoodlums would appear first in one part and then in another of the city. Sunday night one negro was chased into the Aragon Hotel and was supposed to have been killed by a pistol shot, but he escaped. Another negro was badly wounded and sent to the Grady Hospital. Street-cars carrying negroes were attacked, but no injury was done beyond putting the negroes off the cars in some instances. Street-cars with white passengers, passing through negro settlements, were fired into by the negroes, and windows were broken with stones. But it was hoped that Monday morning would see the last of the rioting.

Atlanta is inclosed by a semicircle of colleges for negroes, but their fall terms had not opened and there were few students in the settlements. Beginning with Atlanta University, co-educational, there come next the Atlanta Baptist College for men, and Spelman Seminary for women. Then come Clark University, Gammon Theological Seminary, and the Morris Brown College. A fruitful subject of consideration would be the real influence for good upon the negro race exerted for a generation by the kind of education that has been given the pupils. But this by the way. Adjoining the grounds of Clark University is the negro settlement called Brownsville. During the year a part of the village was destroyed by fire, and an appeal was made upon the citizens by the Mayor for contributions for rebuilding it,

which I understand was quite liberally answered. On Monday whites and blacks had both been ordered to disarm, so far as parading the streets was concerned. The law against carrying concealed weapons was of course in force. Monday night it was learned that the Brownsville settlement was arming for retaliation. It has always been a center of disturbance. But a very direct and circumstantial telephone message came for protection against a threatening mob of white men from a house in Brownsville, accurately describing the location and appealing for help. A squad of the county police, six or eight men, was sent out in answer to this call. On reaching Brownsville they arrested several armed negroes, and left them guarded by two of their number while the others went to the place where the trouble had appeared. This little squad of men, sent for the protection of the negroes, walked into a trap, carefully laid. They marched down a wide street with houses on both sides. At the end of the street a body of armed negroes was waiting. One of them gave a signal in a loud voice, "Number One," and the squad was fired upon from the front, both sides, and the rear. Officer James Heard was instantly killed, and three of his men were wounded. Yet they returned the fire and killed six negroes and wounded four more who were found by the military next day. The news of this encounter, sent back to town, created excitement anew, and the mob formed again, and, meeting a street-car with two negro prisoners from Brownsville, chased them into the front porch of a white resident and shot them to death. This occasioned the death by fright of a white woman who witnessed the scene. After the attack on the county police a cordon of the military was thrown around Brownsville in order to arrest the guilty parties the next day. Tuesday every house in the town was entered by the soldiers, and some two hundred and fifty negroes temporarily held, while the search was proceeding and inquiries being made. They were all disarmed, and those with concealed weapons, or under suspicion of having been in the party firing on the police, were sent to jail. Two negroes were shot by the soldiers in this encounter

with the Brownsville population. Those wounded the night before were sent to the hospital, and the others, about forty in number, were sent to jail.

This was the end of the disturbance.

On the side of law and order, there might be mentioned the splendid conduct of the State militia, the meeting of citizens calling for the punishment of the rioters, the arrest by the police and the military of twoscore rioters, the action of the City Recorder in giving heavy penalties to those brought before him and requiring heavy bonds on appeal, the charge to the Grand Jury by Judge Pendleton—which was all that could be desired—and the probable verdicts by the petty juries in punishment of the white rioters at Atlanta and the negro rioters at Brownsville.

But while deploring and denouncing the action of the rioters, and feeling the disgrace that has come to the city, suffering also from the loss of business that has come through the interruption of trade, the white people of Atlanta breathe more freely, when thinking of their own homes, than they have done for weeks. It is a universal feeling that the thunder-storm has cleared the atmosphere, and that a long era of peace between the races has begun. The altered demeanor of the negroes has been very noticeable. What a writer in the October Century calls the negro's "bumptiousness" is gone. The thousand appeals for protection have created new sympathy for this child-race among us; and it would be uncandid to deny that the negroes have been taught a needed lesson, even by the indiscriminate violence of the mob. It is this:

For the first time the negroes have been impressed with the truth that the individual criminal who lays his hand upon a white woman is a menace to the mass. The first resolutions denouncing

the crime of assault, of which the sincerity was evident, have been passed by the Atlanta negroes since the riots. The negro criminal will have little sympathy from his own race in Atlanta for some time to come. The negro of slavery days or war times who would have attempted such a crime would have been torn to pieces by his fellow-slaves. If now the law of self-preservation shall lead the negroes sincerely to condemn this crime, to aid in the detection of the criminal and his delivery to justice, the crime itself may at last become sporadic and infrequent.

And if the Northern press were to remember the illogical processes of the negro's mind, how he perverts the denunciation of lynching into an approval of the provocative crime, it would leave the lynching to be attended to by Southern opinion and warn the negroes of their danger in its committal.

And, as a friend of the negro, I would deprecate more than anything else such advice as he has received in certain quarters to make retaliation and thus protect himself. There has been but one white man killed in Atlanta. There was none in Wilmington. In anything like a race war the negro has everything to lose. It means for him, not battle, but extermination.

One other question our people are considering—whether, in accordance with the precedent of prohibiting the sale of liquor to Indians, and, by international agreement, its prohibition in certain isles of the Pacific, a local law preventing the sale of rum to negroes, with exceptions in cases of sickness, or a State law to the same effect, would be a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Does that amendment allow us to protect the negro from what has caused the destruction of the weaker races elsewhere?

Atlanta, Georgia.

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