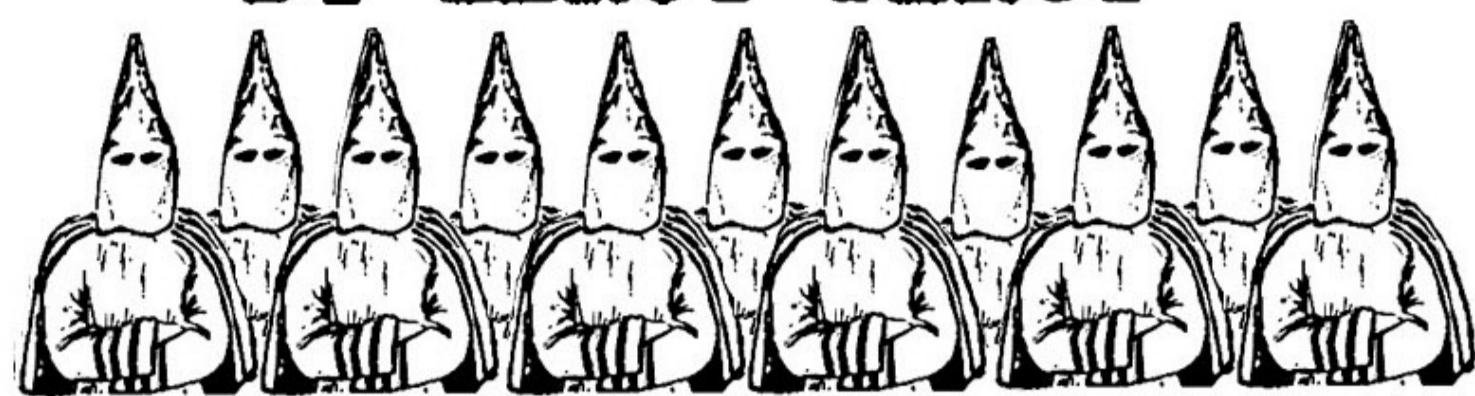


ATLANTIC MONTHLY

July, 1922: p.130

THE MODERN KU KLUX KLAN

BY LEROY PERCY



ONE of the strangest aberrations in American life since the war is the growth of the Ku Klux Klan. In the North that organization, when considered at all, has been thought of as a colossal buffoonery, a matter unworthy of the time or thought of intelligent folk; and, indeed, for the average American, with his common sense and his appreciation of the ridiculous, any other attitude would seem unlikely. But because in certain sections of the country, notably the South and Southwest, the attitude of numbers of people has been quite the reverse, and the consequences of that attitude evil and seriously dangerous, a consideration of the purposes of the Klan and of its effect, intentional or otherwise, is worthy of the attention of the country's best citizens.

The present Ku Klux Klan should not be confused with the secret order of that name, which a disorganized system of justice in the South during Reconstruction days in a measure justified. The original Klan disbanded when its purpose had been served. The new order has appropriated, without leave or license, the name, the disguises, the mummary of the old, — intended as childish but effective means of terrifying the imaginative and newly emancipated negro, — without appropriating either its aims or its ideals. This theft was designed to advertise the upstart organization; in this it has been successful. Among Southerners a romantic tradition of patriotism and terrible

justice hallows the memory of the old Klan. Thoughtless enthusiasts have joined the new because of that tradition. Among the negroes the very name is still a thing of nightmare terror, and such an attitude of mind perfectly suited the plans of the founder of the new order.

And what were those plans? What reason could there be at this time to drag from its grave this old Southern bogey, with its secrecy, disguises, mask, Kleagles, Wizards, and fee-fi-fo-fun clap-trap? Why was the new Klan formed? The easy and half-true answer is: 'For profit.' The initiation fee is ten dollars for each Klansman. Without that high incentive, certainly no clanish brotherhood would have been attempted. But it may be that the professed ideals of the founder were sincere, and undoubtedly many good men have joined because of them. Therefore, a brief examination of those ideals is necessary.

The Klan excludes from membership negroes, Jews, Catholics, and foreign-born, whether citizens or not. In its own phrase, it is the only Gentile White Protestant American-born Organization in the world. It is secret. Its membership is secret, in that respect differing probably from every other secret society in America, though like enough to many in Russia. When asked if he is a member, the custom is for a good Klansman to evade, more rarely to reply in the negative, but in any event not to avow his membership.

The *Congressional Record* prints in full the Klan's ritual, and the exceedingly verbose, emotional, and silly explanation and defense of it by its founder, styled the 'Grand Wizard.' The principles there set forth — support of the Constitution, allegiance to the government, preservation of the public-school system, protection of the chastity of women, and the rest — are neither new nor open to condemnation, with two important exceptions.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Section One of the Oath of Allegiance (testimony of Grand Wizard Simmons, in the Ku Klux Klan hearings before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives, Sixty-seventh Congress, First Session, reads: —

Section 1. *Obedience.* — You will say, ‘I,’ — pronounce your full name, and repeat after me, — ‘In the presence of God and man, most solemnly pledge, promise, and swear, unconditionally, that I will faithfully obey the constitution and laws, and will willingly conform to all regulations, usages, and requirements of the ——— which do now exist or which may be hereafter enacted, and will render at all times loyal respect and steadfast support to the imperial authority of same, and will heartily heed all official mandates, decrees, edicts, rulings, and instructions of the I—— W—— thereof. I will yield prompt response to all summonses, I having knowledge of same, Providence alone preventing.’

This oath makes obedience to the orders of the Invisible Empire obligatory, with no guaranty that those orders will not be unwise or un-American or even criminal.

Section Four of the same oath reads: —

‘I swear that I will keep secure to myself a secret of a ———sman when same is committed to me in the sacred bond of ———smanship, the crime of violating this solemn oath, treason against the United States of America, rape, and malicious murder alone excepted.’

And its viciousness becomes glaring on considering the fact that this Klan makes a special effort to enroll in its membership county and city officials, and even the members of the judiciary.

But not from its ritual will the true purposes and methods of the organization be learned. That information is given by its itinerant paid speakers, who are now touring the South and West, soliciting membership. The individual assigned to Mississippi for this work is Joseph G. Camp, formerly a lyceum lecturer, now dubbed ‘Colonel.’ His

speech, wrung dry of its oratory and its indefinite but ardent praise of 'one-hundred-per-cent Americanism,' may be accurately summarized in two paragraphs.

First. The Jews, the Catholics, the negroes, the alien-born are organized; they are a menace to American institutions; it is necessary to combat their pernicious influences; the sole weapon to hand is the Ku Klux Klan; therefore, if you are a true American, join the Klan.

Second. The morals of the country are in a parlous condition; sexual vice, bootlegging, gambling flourish; the Klan loveth righteousness; if you are on the side of the angels, join the Klan.

The first part of the programme is effected by moulding public sentiment, by watching wayward politicians, by combating the sinister propaganda of the press, which is under the control of Jews or Catholics or negroes or foreigners. The second part of the programme is the real work of the separate local Klans. It is accomplished in this wise: each Klansman is a 'detective'; he goes about his community 'with eyes and ears open,' spying on the morals of his fellow citizens, the objects of his scrutiny being serenely unconscious of it, as only Klansmen know who are members of the Klan; then, at the next meeting of the Klan, the various members report the bits of information they have collected; the assembled body passes on the guilt or innocence of the accused (naturally, in his absence), and takes such course as seems necessary and proper.

That course is not direct action, — an order to leave town, or a coat of tar-and-feathers, or a whipping, or worse, — as the hired press reports; but selected members remonstrate with the delinquent on the evil of his ways, even warn him; then, should he remain forward and unregenerate, they report him and his sins to the officers of the law, volunteering to those officials, usually spineless, the Klan's aid and comfort;

and if they then fail to act, the Klan's duty is to see that they are retired from office and their places more worthily filled, preferably by Klansmen.

The Klan speakers seem always to stress that part of their address outlining the regulation of private morals, and that part is very much the same wherever delivered. But the remainder of the address appears to vary widely from one section of the country to the other, to suit the outstanding prejudice or antipathy of the particular audience being exhorted.

It is said that in California the anti-Japanese feeling is the basis of appeal; in some localities the Jew is referred to in a manner to rejoice the heart of Henry Ford; less frequently, white supremacy as an anti-negro appeal is eloquently defended. But it appears the Church of Rome is never scanted. Always she is represented as the deadly enemy of American institutions, to be crushed not so much for her religious tenets as for her dark and unexplained political machinations. Colonel Camp regaled Mississippi audiences with references to 'that old dago on the Tiber,' and 'that slick and slimy cardinal who had more power in America during the war than the President of the United States.'

II

Such are the principles and methods of this amazing society which, calling itself Protestant Christian, preaches an aggressive bigotry, a venomous intolerance, abhorrent alike to Luther and to Christ, and, appointing itself the watchdog of private morals, dares assume that rôle only in anonymity, its members masked like clowns, sheeted like servants of the Inquisition. What then is its effect? Granting that its every principle is high, and the every object of its hate deserving of that hate, what happens for better or for worse in the town or countryside where the Klan

has gained a following? That, after all, is the only question of importance. Jewry and Rome need no defense, at least from this writer.

A word may not, however, be amiss as to the effect of the Klan's activities upon the negro population in the agricultural sections of the South. The struggle in these sections is to retain the negro population. The industrial system of the South is built upon this population. The loss of it means that the lumber-mills will lie idle and the cotton fields, cornfields, and sugar fields will revert to the wilderness. The steady trend of the negro population is away from the South to the industrial centres, because of better wages and better economic conditions than agriculture can compete with. This trend cannot be arrested. It can easily, however, be so expedited as to afford no opportunity for readjustment to changed conditions, resulting in industrial paralysis and ruin. This is one of the terrifying potentialities of the Klan's work in these sections. True it is that their orators avow, in their public utterances, that the Klan is the friend of the negro; that they will not hurt him, 'if he does what is right.' The answer to this is twofold: first, that the negro can never be assured that he is doing what is right according to the Klan's conception of right; and second, the original Ku Klux Klan was created solely for the purpose of terrorizing the negro; he has never heard of it being associated with any other purpose, and it is impossible to reassure him on this point. It would be as easy to go through a sedge field populated with rabbits with a bunch of hounds, and to satisfy the rabbits that they were in no danger, but that you were intent upon fox-hunting alone. The reply would possibly be: 'I never heard about your doing much except hunting rabbits. You look like you are fixed for hunting rabbits. What you say may be so; but even if it is, I see

OldMagazineArticles.com

seven or eight young hounds in that bunch that might break away and start to running rabbits anyway. The best thing for this rabbit to do is to start to running now.' Anyone who knows the blacks of the South, and the strange indefinable terror which surrounds the name of the Ku Klux Klan in their minds, knows that, following one of the sheeted parades of the Klan, it would be almost impossible to get close enough to a negro to reassure him. This grave menace to industrial conditions is without compensating advantages of any kind.

There is another respect in which the Klan has, perhaps unwittingly, inflicted a wrong upon the negro. The negro, especially in the rural sections of the South, derives great pleasure from an extravagant nomenclature. The more meaningless, the better. Often I have seen the solemnity of a court-room ripple into mirth as a case for or against 'The Sons and Daughters of Isaac and Jacob of North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia' was called; and yet how flavorless is this language compared to the ordinary efforts of the Klan. I quote the beginning and end of an official document issued by the Imperial Wizard, William Joseph Simmons, notifying the Klan of the selection of Mary Elizabeth Tyler as his Grand Chief-of-Staff: —

To all Genii, Grand Dragons and Hydras of Realms, Grand Goblins and Kleagles of Domains, Grand Titans and Furies of Provinces, Giants, Exalted Cyclops and Terrors of Klantons, and to all Citizens of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan — in the name of our valiant, venerated Dead, I affectionately greet you. . . .

Done in the Aulic of his Majesty, Imperial Wizard, Emperor of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, in the Imperial City of Atlanta, Commonwealth of Georgia, United States of America, on this, the ninth day of the ninth month of the year of our Lord, 1921, and on the Dreadful Day of the Weeping Week of the Mourn-

ful Month of the Year of the Klan LV.

Duly signed and sealed by his Majesty.

(Signed) WILLIAM JOSEPH SIMMONS
Imperial Wizard.

They have wronged the negro by getting 'a corner' on the gibberish of the English language, and they exclude him from the organization, when he would derive peculiar delight from, would fairly revel in, its official language.

But aside from its effect upon the negro population, which cannot be overestimated, the fruits of the Ku Klux Klan are a heavy harvest and evil, all of them. It is a lawless organization, judged alike by its ritual and its activities. As will be noted from the oath, a Klansman swears to keep the secrets of a fellow Klansman with the exception of four crimes, namely, violating his Klansman's oath, treason against the United States of America, rape, and malicious murder. For everyday purposes the first two exceptions may be disregarded. There is no crime which is to be or has been committed by a Klansman, and which is revealed to a fellow Klansman, which he will not keep sacred, except rape and malicious murder. He pledges himself to be willing to be an accessory, before or after the fact, for every crime that can be committed by a Klansman, and this whether he be an ordinary American citizen, whose duty it is to uphold the law, a sheriff, whose sworn duty it is to enforce it, or a judge, whose duty it is to administer it.

In what way have the activities of the Klan evinced themselves? Wherever they have gone, there has been a trail of lawless deeds and violence done by them or by those masked in the garb which they have rendered possible. An organization which breeds violence, either by deeds done or by the opportunity for lawlessness which it offers to the criminal element of a country, is an evil thing. Innumerable instances can be given, taken from the daily press,

where men, without the ceremony of a trial, have been taken out by masked men, tarred and feathered and otherwise maltreated, and usually ordered to leave the community. I will simply give two typical illustrations, one of the Klan at its best and one of the Klan at its worst.

The daily press carried a telegram of February 27, 1922, from Helena, Arkansas, reading as follows:—

HELENA, ARKANSAS, *February 27, 1922.*

Silently and without looking to right or left, four robed and hooded figures stalked into at least four of the down-town churches last night, stopped at the chancel, and handed the minister a slip of paper containing a typewritten message.

If the minister was startled by the sudden appearance of the silent figures, he betrayed it only by a look of surprise at the interruption. He asked if they desired to have the printed message read to the congregation; the robed figures bowed and stood mute as the minister read as follows:—

‘We who stand thus silently before you are more than a million strong; we are friends of this minister, this church, and this congregation; we stand for the Christian religion, for the protection of womanhood and for the everlasting supremacy of the white race. As such we most earnestly ask your friendship and your prayers.

‘*(Signed)* KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN.’

Similar dispatches were published from a number of places. These men walked into a place of worship. They stopped the services of the church. They stalked down the aisle and handed a message to the preacher. Would four citizens have done it who were not masked? Hidden behind masks, they interfered with the solemn worship in the House of God and asked to be prayed for because they were a million strong. That was the message they were carrying; and they say that ‘we stand for Christianity, for the protection of womanhood and white supremacy.’ Did they have to be masked for that kind of declaration? Since

when has Southern womanhood needed to be defended by men in masks? Must the men of the South clothe themselves in sheets and cover their faces with masks in order to defend their homes?

Another illustration of the activities of the Klan: on February 22, 1922, at Texarkana, Texas, Judge D. A. Turner, in a special charge to the Bowie County grand jury, directed that an investigation be made of the activities of masked men in the county, with special attention to the case of a party which on the night of February 11, obtained P. Norman, a negro, from the custody of Deputy Sheriff W. T. Jordan, and lynched him. In his charge to the jury Judge Turner declared that there was now more lawlessness in Bowie County than ever before during the fifty years he had sat on the bench; and he denounced the Ku Klux Klan as an enemy of constituted government. He did not charge that the Ku Klux Klan had any connection with the activities of the masked men, but declared that the very nature of the organization opens the way for any lawless element to operate, seemingly with very little molestation.

It is proper to say that the Klan has denied its responsibility for this crime. It usually denies responsibility for all acts of violence committed by men in the Klan's garb. But whether such denial be true or not, there is no escape from the moral responsibility for the acts so committed; and I have heard of no criminal in the garb of the Klan who has been brought to justice by the Klan, who alone can know whether he is a member of the Klan or not.

The Grand Wizard is profuse in assurances that the Klan will assist officers of the law. When officers of the law in any community become so helpless and impotent that they have to be backed up by sheeted Klansmen at night, that community is in a bad way. The garb of the Klan does not lend

itself to uphold the law; it never was devised for that purpose. The men who first devised it devised it to conceal their identity when doing the lawless deeds that they felt justified in doing. Men who are aiding officers of the law in doing a right thing do not disguise themselves and go about after nightfall. This organization tries a man on hearsay evidence, without giving him an opportunity of being confronted by his accusers, and without lawful authority proceeds to enforce its judgments. The foundation-stone of government and constitutional liberty in our land is the right of a man to be confronted by his accusers and to hear the evidence brought against him.

III

This organization poses as the representative and sole defender of Protestant Americanism. Its methods bear no semblance to those of any government except Bolshevist Russia. A decree of the Ku Klux Klan, handed down by Simmons of Atlanta, is as abhorrent to democracy and Americanism as a decree of the Soviet government handed out by Lenin. One is as much a menace to orderly government as the other. One is as undemocratic and un-American as the other. Either is a menace to law, order, and freedom.

What is the lure that draws men to membership in such an organization? Why do they fall such easy victims to the cheap oratory of hired itinerant speakers? Partly because of the 'jinning' proclivities of the American people. Partly because of the desire of exercising power in secrecy and without responsibility. They wish to 'get even' with some man or class of men. But in this section and in others the chief appeal has been to religious intolerance. Good men, Christian men, pastors of churches, have enrolled themselves as members, feeling that in some way

through this mysterious order they would be able to combat the forces of evil, and especially the political activities of the Roman Catholic Church, portrayed in such lurid colors by these new evangelists. There has been a recrudescence of that puritanical meddlingness which seeks to regulate the habits, lives, and consciences of other people. The secret methods of the Inquisition all but destroyed the Church of Rome, and for hundreds of years, Protestants, whatever might be their denomination, have gloried in freedom of discussion and publicity; prayer and Christian suasion have been recognized as the means of reaching the erring sinner; yet, to-day, Christian ministers are found endorsing the idea that men can be made more righteous by a tar treatment applied at night by masked inquisitors.

Assuredly no word of the Man of Galilee can be quoted in extenuation of the unutterable cruelty and cowardice of such treatment. The incident in the Bible which more nearly parallels midnight operations of the Klan than any other is the one in which they came at night to take Jesus, and He said: 'Are ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and with staves to take me? I was daily with you in the Temple, teaching, and ye took me not.' Since when, among Christian peoples, taking men at night has not been in good repute. They have been told by their chief instructors,—Wizards, Kleagles, Genii— that the Knights of Columbus, as a representative of the Great Catholic hierarchy, is on the eve of catholicizing America and destroying our educational institutions; and instead of fighting this hobgoblin, created by their leaders for profit, in the open, according to the manner of their forefathers, they seek to overcome the powers of evil by donning a clown's garb, swearing to conceal their identity, and marching behind an Imperial Wiz-

ard, whom they are sworn to obey. They fail to realize that our government has been established by free American people, who will handle it without interference by, or dictation from, church or clan; that it is to be governed by neither priest nor wizard, knights nor klansmen.

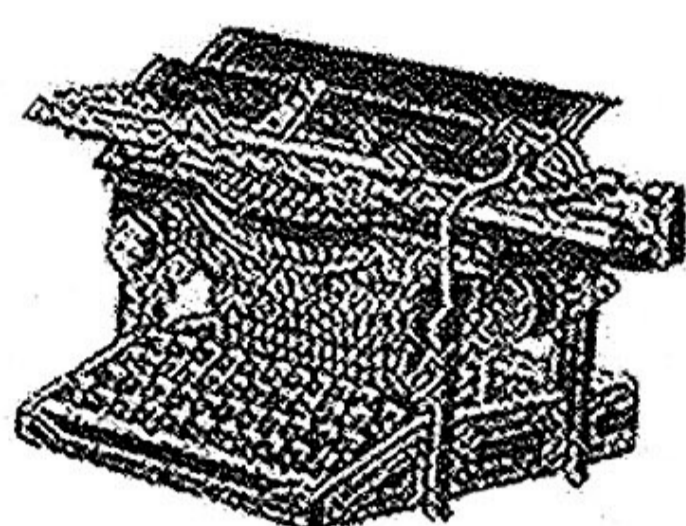
The most malign effect of the organization is the destruction of the spirit of helpfulness, coöperation, and love in the community where it intrudes itself. In a community composed of Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, white and black, where the life and progress of the community has been marked by helpfulness and coöperation, friendship and harmony, this organization comes to plant discord, racial hatred, religious dissension, and intolerance. Whatever may be its aspirations, it can breed only suspicion and distrust among the members of a community. It paralyzes all spirit of coöperation. It is violative of every principle of Christianity, repugnant to every sense of right, justice, and fair dealing between man and man. Good citizenship should actively and openly oppose its entry into any community.

The evils of the organization should be pointed out, so that good men will not join it, and active war should be made upon those who do join it.

Because of failure to pursue this course, thousands have become members of the organization in Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia, and the great state of Texas is rent asunder over a Klan fight. It will be a dominant issue in the next political campaign there. A candidate for lieutenant-governor has a daily paper openly espousing the cause of the Klan; and it is said that ten thousand Klansmen recently assembled at a meeting in that state. When this organization seeks to find lodgment in a community, the common sense and patriotism of the people should be ap-

THE MODERN KU KLUX KLAN

pealed to. The shams, sophistry, un-Americanism, and evil of the organization should be exposed. The light of publicity should be turned upon the trappings, tomfoolery, and gibberish of the Imperial Wizard.



OldMagazineArticles.com