

# ATLANTIC MONTHLY

November, 1923

## KLAN

&

## CHURCH

BY LOWELL MELLETT

*The moonlight's fair [no doubt] to-night along the Wabash. From the fields [perhaps] there comes the scent of new-mown hay. Through the sycamores the candle-lights are gleaming —*

No land could be lovelier than Indiana under moonlight. No air could be blessed with sweeter fragrance than that of new-mown hay. The home land of the Hoosiers keeps its hold on our hearts, even though many changes have come since Theodore Dreiser wrote the simple ballad to describe it, and his brother, Paul Dresser, composed the music which we all sang or hummed or whistled a generation ago. The moonlight remains undimmed by the years, but the scent from the fields is of scorching rubber and gasoline. Through the sycamores the blast-furnaces are gleaming.

Indiana is part of the modern world. All that any other state has, Indiana has — all the wonders. The chambers of commerce are quite explicit about this. They point to the dozen or more automobile factories in Indianapolis, to say nothing of those in South Bend, Connersville, Kokomo, Elkhart, and elsewhere. Of course, the state never has stopped producing politics and literature, and it now talks pridefully of its Brown-County art colony, 'the largest this side of the Alleghanies.'

And yet — can it be that through the sycamores of our Hoosier minds the candle-light is still gleaming? Even the cabins among the cornfields have electric lights, but what is our mental illumination?

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## KLAN &amp; CHURCH

So long ago that 'On the Banks of the Wabash' had not yet been written, I was a boy in Indiana. One happy hot afternoon I trailed along the streets of our little town, following a parade of the Knights of St. John. Perhaps this juvenile order no longer exists; I have never seen another of its parades, in any event. The Knights of St. John appeared to be small brothers of the Knights of Columbus. Their uniforms were blue and their little rifles were wooden. They were a bit awkward about the business of parading. Many of them were too small and their legs in unaccustomed long trousers, had to stretch to keep the step.

Catholics were still something of a novelty to us natives. We had profound knowledge of the Protestants churches. We knew the Methodist, the Christians, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Campbellites, the Protestant Episcopalians; knew which had the least irksome services; which Sunday School had the shortest sessions. But the Catholics happened to be newcomers. They came in on the boom that followed the discovery of natural gas and the building of many glass factories and steel and iron mills. They were strangers to us and consequently feared. It was some time before we realized that one of us were about as good, pound for pound, in battle as one of the funny-talking lad from Pittsburgh. That having been established, in due course the barriers went down. The newcomers were absorbed into the community and soon was as if they always had been there.

Most everybody ceased to feel any strangeness, but a few held out. The few most sensitive to fear continued in a state of alarm. There was Pood Wamsley, for example. Pood, a little older than the rest of us, was our self-ordained oracle. We listened to his opinions concerning affairs. Most of these opinions he obtained in the back room of his father's undertaking establishment where, of an evening, when there was no undertaking afoot, leading citizens often congregated to discuss matters of moment.

The day following the parade of the Knights of St. John, Pood rounded us up and, glancing over his shoulder

## KLAN & CHURCH

every now and then to make sure no Roman spies were lurking about, he gave us a whispered harangue to this effect: —

‘Didja see them Cath’lic kids p’radin’ yestiddy? Lissen! ‘Ja know what they’re doin’? Lissen! Ever’ one of them is bein’ trained to be soldiers when they grows up. That’s what them Cath’lics is doin’. Soon’s they git ‘em all trained and they’re growed up, they’re goin’ to seize the whole country and take charge of it an’ ever’thing!’

‘Howja know?’ one of his aghast hearers inquired.

‘I know,’ returned Pood, mysteriously. ‘There’s certain people watchin’ ever’thing they do, and when the time comes —’

He broke off with a far-away, portentous look.

‘How kin they do it?’ someone asked.

‘How kin they do it? Don’t ja know that ever’ time a boy baby is born in a Cath’lic fam’ly they take and bury a gun under the church for him to use when he grows up? And they bury enough am’nition fer him to kill fifty people with!’

‘Well, why’s the marshal let ‘em, then?’

‘Huh! The marshal! Bob Mounts don’t know nothin’ that’s goin’ on!’

‘Why n’t somebody tell him?’

‘The time ain’t come yet. It’s a-comin’ though! Trouble is — the govinment. Can’t expect to do nothin’ while’s Cleveland’s president. They say that, sekurtly, he’s mebbe a Cath’lic himself!’

Up to that point I think Pood had us almost convinced. We were forgetting how funny some of the little fellows had looked the day before, trying to keep a march step that was too long for their legs. What had seemed a delightful show was beginning to take on a sinister aspect. It was occurring to us that we ought to have a smarter town marshal than Bob Mounts. But when Pood brought out that about President Cleveland, some of us rebelled. We were Democrats! We argued the matter lucidly with Pood. ‘Aw, he is not!’ — ‘Howja know he ain’t?’ — ‘Well, he ain’t. I know it. You’re crazy!’ —

And then we broke up his alarm

## KLAN & CHURCH

feast in favor of scrub baseball.

Thirty years ago this was. And now I've been back home again in Indiana, among the folks I used to know. And two of them have told me — in this enlightened summer of 1923 — that every time a Catholic boy baby is born, a rifle is buried beneath the church against the day when the Church proposes to turn these United States over to the Pope!

Hoosiers surely have not been believing this ever since the days when that serious little circle met in the back room of Wamsley's undertaking shop and Pood repeated to us the weighty opinions there expressed. Worry about the Catholics apparently had disappeared under the pressure of more imminent and real problems. To-day it has been revived. It is part of the state of mind that accounts for the amazing growth of the Ku Klux Klan in the old Hoosier commonwealth; that enables Indiana to compete with Ohio for the distinction of having a larger Klan membership than any other State. It helped make possible the remarkable election results of last fall, when practically every candidate opposed by the Klan went down in defeat.

In Indiana, as in other states, the Klan has the usual trilogy of fears. It fears the Jews, the Negroes, and the Catholics. But I heard little concerning the Jews and the Negroes. I heard much concerning the Catholics.

This is true of the Negroes, notwithstanding the immense Negro population of Indianapolis, and notwithstanding the fact that this city was the home of the notorious Bungaloos, a hoodlum organization that amused itself with anti-Negro riots in the earlier years of the present century.

It is true as to the Jews, especially in Indianapolis, although there the Jews appear to dominate big retail business as completely as they do in most cities. One intelligent member of the race, who has been studying the situation in a detached sort of way, pointed out to me that in Indianapolis the Jews do not engage in small trade to any extent, and suggested that this accounts for the apathy toward them on the part of the Klan. In the smaller cities, he said, I should find the Jews competing with the

## KLAN & CHURCH

smaller business concerns, and should find the Klan actively antagonistic.

This upon investigation seemed to be the case. Here the anti-Jewish sentiment appeared to be the natural antipathy of small tradesmen toward a race that somehow always manages to do well in trade.

Very clearly the crux of the Klan problem in Indiana is the Catholic Church. The Klan is feeding on a revival of anti-Catholic feeling and renewed circulation of Catholic goblin stories. Men actually join the Klan because they believe that a magnificent home (a million-dollar palace, is the term usually used) is being built in Washington, D. C., to house the Pope, and that the Vatican is soon to be moved to the American capital!

This will sound strange to those of you who do not share the Klan's panic on the subject of the Catholic Church. It has been your observation, no doubt, that a good Catholic is just about as devout a church member as a good Protestant — and no more so. But it is customary for many Protestants to assume that the Catholic priest has some strange and complete control over the actions of the men and women of his parish; that he is a great deal more than their spiritual adviser; that all members of the Church walk about with bated breath in fear of incurring the priest's wrath. They forget that the older parishioners probably knew the priest when he was a small and irreverent boy.

Many have believed it is a fixed policy of the Church to keep its members down to a definite level of ignorance. Ku Klux Klan organs now assiduously spread this idea. The truth seems more nearly to be that the effort to spread education — general education, not merely sectarian education — is as great among Catholics as among Protestants.

Indeed, one of the most serious charges against the Church that you hear in Indiana is that they are endeavoring to obtain control of the public schools. Why? To wreck the public-school system, to be sure! The Catholics have had control of the School Board in Indianapolis for years, several excited informants told me, and,

## KLAN &amp; CHURCH

they would say, look how the schools have deteriorated!

Investigation revealed that the Catholics had been represented on the School Board by one member. The superintendent of schools in a certain city, I was told in a confidential whisper, is a Catholic. But I had known this man intimately for half a life-time and knew the contrary to be true. Running down other such allegations was like running down atrocity stories in the German-occupied districts of France; the stories nearly always evaporated as one got near their source.

It would be unwise to assert that no case whatever can be made against the Catholics in some corners of Indiana. There are instances in plenty when, forming a majority of the voting population, they have voted themselves into power. There are instances in which shortsighted leadership has led them to abuse their power. There are communities where, while in a minority, they have been as clannish as the Klan, and have made themselves a solid and obstructive political *bloc*. But, recalling Catholic candidates who have failed to get the Church vote and recalling Protestant candidates who have succeeded, the conclusion is that, as individuals and as a group, no case of undesirable citizenship can be maintained against them.

However, unreasonable as are the allegations on which the Klan's growth is largely based, this growth is the most important fact in Indiana to-day.

One finds a friend who is neither Klan nor anti-Klan, fighting hard to preserve his neutrality. One finds a politician seeking to make each side think he hates the other. One finds a business man engaged in the same precarious undertaking, for now the business boycott has come in to harass further the middle-of-the-road folks.

'If,' said a man to me, 'you were widely reputed to be a member of the Klan and were not a member, what would you do about it? Would you publicly deny it? Or would you keep quiet? Well, no matter what you would do, I'd just keep quiet.'

He is a judge on the bench, a scholar, a man of high standing in the law, an honest, scrupulous jurist. But he is baffled by the religious war he finds raging about him, baffled into complete

## KLAN & CHURCH

silence on a subject that touches real principle with him.

When certain Klan leaders had told me all the wild stories about Catholics they could think of, and certain Catholic laymen had told me all the wild stories about the Klan they could think of, I started out to find some of the rank and file, some of the plain Klansmen.

I found a great many, and who do you suppose they were? They were old friends of mine; folks I'd known all my life; just some of the best citizens of Indiana, that was all. The best citizens — save for this one weakness. Not the stuff of which cowardly mobs are supposed to be made, not the sort which drags women out at night to tar-and-feather and lash, naked, against trees. Clean, decent family men. Not even religious fanatics; their average church attendance probably not very high; men who have done more thinking, even if misguided thinking, about religion and churches during the present fever than in any ten years of their lives.

How true the stories of Klan outrages in other states may be, they were not committed by such men as I found in the Klan in Indiana. That is, they were not committed by men in the state of mind of the Indiana Klansmen to-day. What state of mind they may get into presently cannot be foretold. They cannot vision themselves running amuck and they do not believe the tales concerning Klansmen who have run amuck in other states.

This feeling concerning themselves is shared by whole communities. Good people who could not conceivably join the Klan themselves have only good-natured curiosity regarding the organization. They amuse themselves by trying to identify the members when the latter turn out for public parade in their hoods and gowns. The shape under the sheet or the familiar shoes of a sturdy marcher often tells a wife for the first time that her husband is a member; but when she allows this information to spread about the block, it seldom excites real surprise — certainly not horror. It is not thought that this respectable neighbor has suddenly become a terrorist, a doer of evil deeds in the dark.

## KLAN & CHURCH

Much effort has been spent in Indiana, as in other states, to convince possible Klansmen that they became victims of a gigantic money-making scheme when they wrote their names in blood on the dotted line. But this has proved only a slight deterrent. That it has been a money-making enterprise for certain men is admitted. But so was — for example — the Loyal Order of the Moose.

The present U. S. Secretary of Labor, James J. Davis (a Hoosier, by the way), might be called the Simmons of the Moose, in that respect. Yet the rapid growth of the Moose could not be attributed simply to the fact that Davis had an excellent profit-taking idea. Tens of thousands did not join the Moose just because they wished to make Jim the Puddler a millionaire. No, he had a conception of enjoyable human fellowship that appealed to them.

So it was with the men who originated the Ku Klux Klan. They have made money, no doubt, an immense amount of it, but they did have something that appealed to thousands of other men. Unfortunately, the thing they had was not so wholesome a thing as that which Davis had. The thing they had was fear — fear, based on error, as most fears are; fear, based on a superstitious ignorance of the Catholic Church.

This fear is not to be dissolved by the voice of one fellow Hoosier asserting that there is no basis for it. All this assertion is likely to do is to convince some of his friends that he is a paid propagandist for the Catholic Church and to convince other friends that he is a paid propagandist for the Ku Klux Klan.

But here is a suggestion which, if acted upon, may help prevent the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana going the way it has gone in many other states, and may help destroy the notion that there is any proper place in Indiana society for such an organization.

The suggestion is: Publicity.

You may assume that I mean legislation to compel the publication of every secret order's membership list, such as New York's recent enactment. My anti-Klan friends will applaud, crying: 'That's the ticket! Drag them



## KLAN & CHURCH

into the daylight!' My pro-Klan friends will begin digging in their heels and preparing to resist.

But I mean publicity concerning the Catholic Church. And I do not mean the usual sort of newspaper publicity. The newspapers have pretty well indicated the course they may be expected to pursue in the face of this truly grave menace. When the Klan was a far-off matter, not an intimate problem, they printed all the stories of brutal outrages that came over the wires. When it came closer home, they lapsed into silence. Now that they have reason for suspecting that every other reader may be a Klan member or sympathizer, many of the newspapers content themselves with careful avoidance of the issue.

It might have been possible for a newspaper of wide influence in Indiana to head off the Klan's growth at one stage by printing the facts, but no newspaper has influence sufficient to accomplish that now.

By printing what facts? The facts concerning the Catholic Church, to be sure. There is the essence of the whole question. Are the firmly fixed beliefs of tens of thousands of Hoosier Protestants concerning the Catholic Church true or untrue? Find out. And print what is found.

No newspaper, of course, ever has thought of doing this, because the newspapers have feared the Catholic Church. There is one article of the Klan faith that has a real basis. Klansmen will tell you that newspapers fear to print anything they think may offend the Church. And Klansmen are not altogether mistaken on this point. The tradition has grown up in newspaper offices that such news is unsafe to handle, that the Church has some mysterious power to punish those who offend.

There is nothing mysterious about it, of course; it is simply that many readers are Catholics and might cancel their subscriptions. Many editors and sub-editors, however, seem to feel that the authority of the Church would be exercised to compel its members to do this. There is good reason for doubting the existence of any such shortsighted policy.

In my experience, the newspaper

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## KLAN &amp; CHURCH

men who have seemed most free and unworried in their handling of news concerning the Catholic clergy, including sometimes unpleasant news, have been Catholic newspaper men. They have less fear of their own Church than Protestant newspaper men have.

One result of this news-suppression has been the growth of belief in all sorts of weird tales about the Church, mouth-to-mouth stories of pagan immoralities, involving all ranks in the Church organization. It is not conceivable that Catholic churchmen prefer general circulation of malicious or ignorant inventions to a condition in which they would receive from the press exactly the same treatment as the Protestant clergy receive.

But the remedy for the Klan problem. The suggestion toward which I have tried to pave the way is a state-wide survey of the Church activities in Indiana. It should be possible to organize a commission of intelligent men and women to collect the facts concerning the churches and what the churches do. It can be shown what proportion of the state offices are and have been held by Catholics, and how this corresponds to the number of Catholics themselves. It can be shown how much the Catholics contribute to the support of the public schools, how many are serving on public-school boards, how many are teaching in the public schools.

Catholic churches could be forced open, if necessary, — which it would not be, of course, — to prove or disprove the tales of buried rifles and ammunition. This suggestion may draw a smile, but I am not certain that it is not the most important I have to make. The tales are preposterous, to be sure, but I would take the only possible course to eradicate them from the minds of those who do not consider them preposterous.

Further, a commission of inquiry might call publicly for the presentation of every charge against the Catholic Church that any responsible person or responsible group of persons might have to make, and then investigate the truth of these charges. They could bring the whole truth out of the darkness of rumor into the daylight of established fact.

## KLAN &amp; CHURCH

What do the people of Indiana receive in the place of the truth, now? Two or three days of each week the down-town streets of the larger Indiana cities resound with the voices of boys selling *The Fiery Cross*, a Ku Klux Klan weekly. These are bought eagerly and in great numbers by persons determined to hear and believe the worst concerning the Catholic Church.

On the same days, on the same corners, other boys are crying just as loudly the sale of *Tolerance*, an anti-Klan weekly, containing every intolerant idea concerning the Klan that the latter's enemies have to offer. These are bought eagerly and in great numbers by persons determined to hear and believe the worst concerning the Klan.

As for the neutral publications, they appear to be waiting warily for the storm to blow over. It may blow over and it may not. It has not blown over in many another state without having first been responsible for shameful incidents which those states will spend years deploring. Witnessing the trend it has taken there, it is hard to believe that Indiana will escape her share of bitter regrets unless some means is found to clear the air before the storm descends.