

DAY BY DAY

By LOUIS ZRAEL

LYNCH LAND

I HAVE BEEN down in the lynching country; down in Salisbury. I started as soon as Baltimore received the news of what had happened, and I drove furiously through most of the night; through the roads which wind their lovely ways around the Eastern Shore; through the peaceful beauty of a starlit night. There was a crescent moon rising, orange-colored, above the faintly waving tree tops. There was the clean, fresh odor from fertile fields. And there was, in my mind, the picture of a Negro's body hanging from a tree; of a body dragged through the mob-filled streets; of a fire which fed on human flesh.

And it all symbolized, in exaggerated fashion, the Eastern Shore. Nature has done so much there and men have done so little. Nature reaches such heights there; men such depths, occasionally.



A Symbol of What

NO NEED, NOW, to repeat the details of the crime. The papers have told how the crowd gathered, how it took the wounded, bandaged, strait-jacketed Matthew Handy from the hospital; how it shoved him three block to the Courthouse square and there, ten steps from the Temple of Justice, it hanged him to a tree. And from the 2,000 men, women and children who watched, no voice was raised in protest.

You have—or should have—read how, twenty minutes later the mob cut down the body and dragged it, at the head of a gruesome parade, through Main Street to a vacant lot, and how it poured gasoline upon it and set the body ablaze. And, with blood-lust still unquenched, the mob then dragged the body back; back through Main Street for a full half-mile, into the section in which the colored folk live, and there they hanged it up again, as a lifeless symbol to the colored folk. A symbol, the white folk told me later, of the fact that the Negro must keep his place, but a symbol, more truly, of the fact that there can be no beast like the beast that lurks in the human mind; lurks deep down in those who are civilized; lurks near the surface of the less civilized.

There Was No Regret

ALL THESE details you doubtless know. But there was another thing which amazed me. It came hours after the lynching. It came in the peace of a sunlit Saturday afternoon in a small town, where townsmen gather on the corners and talk of the events which interest them. It came, in this case, on Saturday and Sunday on the street corners and in the homes of Salisbury, where I talked to the countians and found no vestige of horror at the deed they had done; found no shame and no sorrow, but rather a complacency at what they believed to be a good deed well done. From the highest to the lowest, with but a few exceptions, I found no regret for the lynching, but only regret because their town was being presented to the public in an unfavorable light. I heard some say, "It was an awful thing. It should never have happened." But I found no deep regret in any eye or voice, and the words they uttered were born of convention, not of candor.

Standing on the corners, and on the Courthouse square where the lynching had occurred, I heard other things, too. There was one man who is now on the grand jury which is supposed to help punish the culprits. "We've got nothing to be ashamed of," he said. "The people of the Eastern Shore are more intelligent and better educated, on the whole, than the people of Baltimore. The Baltimore papers do a lot of yelling whenever anything happens on the Eastern Shore," he complained, "but they don't say anything when things happen in Baltimore. There they just throw people into the river and everything is quiet."

'We Are Americans'

I HEARD another man—a reputable member of the community—I say, "This lynching wasn't any mob action. It was an orderly group of people. Why, there were women and children in it. This was no bunch of hoodlums."

In a hopeless sort of way, I tried to argue. I tried to describe their deeds, as these deeds appeared to an outsider. Finally one of them was generous enough to grant that something I'd said was partially justified. "Well," he said, "I guess they shouldn't have dragged the body around the streets and tried to burn it and all that. But why think about that? That was a minor matter."

And another said, "Well, if you don't like the way we do things in Salisbury, why don't you go back where you came from?"

And still another said, "Sure, you Baltimore people don't like the way we do. That's because you let a bunch of foreigners run you, and we're Americans. We're Americans straight through."

A Few Were Sorry

SOME FEW there were who were a bit less brazen. They sensed, though they could not agree with, the shame of what they'd done and they argued that it should be minimized. "Sure, it was bad," they said, "but why write about it? Why stress it? It's over. The sooner it's forgotten, the better."

And Levin Bailey, the state's attorney, before he had interviewed one witness, went to great pains to explain to me that evidence against the lynchers couldn't be obtained because the witnesses wouldn't talk. And the Chief of Police said he had recognized none of the mobsters. And the general attitude was that a good job had been done and that the people who did it were to be protected.

And that, it seems to me, is even more tragic than the lynching. No lynching is excusable, but some are understandable. Passions may rise to terrible heights and make folks do what they later recall with grief or shame. But that these people of Salisbury should, in cold blood, when passions have had time to subside, glory in their ghoulishness and seek to justify it—that is a more deep-rooted, grievous thing. It shows how low human beings can be.