

The Salisbury Affair

By THE REV. ASBURY SMITH

The author of these meditations on the Salisbury lynching and the "Negro question" was born near Salisbury and is a graduate of the Salisbury High School. He is now pastor of the McKendree Methodist Episcopal Church, Baltimore.

GRANT that the Eastern Shore has slid into "the orbit of the more flea-bitten half of Virginia," that it is populated by "poor white trash" and "morons," that it is ruled over by "low grade political hacks" and "whooping soul savers." Grant that Mr. Mencken's soul came from "a hyena, a rattlesnake, or a skunk" and that his body was smeared with "poisoned entrails, fillet of a fenny snake, eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, tongue of dog, adder's fork, blind worm's sting, lizard's leg, scale of dragon . . . and all cooled with baboon's blood." After both of these questionable definitions are granted the humiliating fact remains that the atrocity that happened at Salisbury could just as easily have happened in any part of Maryland or in any one of the States in the United States.

The race hatred that has smoldered on the Eastern Shore for the past two months and flared up in the lynching of Matthew Williams is woven into the fabric of our entire national life. When we realize that in the past forty-eight years there have been 4,761 lynchings involving forty of our forty-eight States and that during this period Maryland has produced thirty of these atrocities, we begin to see that more than the Eastern Shore is involved. The admirable cartoon of Mr. Duffy in *The Sun* could with devastating accuracy have been titled "My Country 'Tis of Thee" or "America, the Beautiful."

In all the world there is no parallel to the lynching custom of the United States. It has become a national characteristic that any section of the world which wishes to humiliate us holds up to the scorn of civilized people. The lynching of Matthew Williams reflects not alone on the good name of Salisbury, the Eastern Shore, or Maryland, it reflects on the good name of the nation. The constant recurring of lynching in the United States does more than call into question our respect for the law and the effectiveness of the Christian religion, it calls into question our right to be called a civilized people.

IN one of our churches in Baltimore a group composed of high school and college young people after a discussion of the lynching in Salisbury decided by a narrow margin that "It was never justifiable to lynch." On the way home from the meeting one of the young girls of superior intelligence and high personal ideals said, "They did right to lynch that nigger. They should lynch a whole lot more of them. We need to lynch some right here in Baltimore." If someone says this shows the absolute failure of the Christian gospel, I am the first to admit the accusation. But I am not willing to allow all the blame to be laid upon the church. It is equally a blot upon our public schools, one of whose primary duties is to teach good citizenship. It is a blot on our press, which proudly claims to be the mold of public opinion. It is a blot on our homes, where hate instead of understanding has been taught.

Mob lynching is race hatred in action. No one can begin to understand the 4,761 lynchings in the United States until he knows the prevailing attitude of the white man toward the one whose skin is black. After a bloody Civil War this nation passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, freeing Negro slaves and giving them the rights of American citizens. But in spite of the fact that the Negro was given citizenship over sixty years ago there is no place in this country where he can receive his full rights as a citizen.

From New York to New Orleans, from San Francisco to Savannah, the universal demand of the white man is that the "nigger be kept in his place." The "nigger's" place is the most menial of labor, the lowest wages, the most undesirable houses, the poorest education, and the half-worn clothes of the white people. The only unquestioned contact the Negroes have with white people comes when they wash, clean or cook for them. In no part of our nation do Negroes dare to frequent good hotels, attend first-class theaters, or accept entertainment by white men of the same cultural level.

THE women of Baltimore have enough confidence in the cleanliness of Negro women to intrust to them the care of their children and the preparation of food for themselves and their families.

made more healthy by another man's sickness. On the other hand, it is true that the ignorance of one man vitiates the knowledge of another and the sickness of a black man scourges his white neighbor. Whether we like it or not we are bound to the Negro in the common interest of culture and health. The South recognizes this and many Southern States spend as much money for education and health among Negroes as among whites.

AT this point Maryland lags behind, spending in 1929 only \$28 per pupil for the education of its Negroes in elementary schools, while it spends \$47 per pupil for the education of its white elementary pupils; and spending \$57 per pupil for Negro high school education, as against \$98 per pupil for white high school education. To add to this evident unfairness the State by law forbids Negroes to attend any institution of professional grade that receives State aid, and thus denies Negroes access to all higher education in Maryland. This to me seems a more serious infringement of the rights of citizens of the State of Maryland than the much condemned disfranchisement of the Negro in the South.

The best economists today are telling us that it is erroneous to think that one man's riches can be successfully founded on other men's poverty. With the coming of the machine and the demand for large buying power, it is economic folly to try to keep the Negroes, who comprise one-fifth of our population, in economic servility. When we try to keep the Negro poor we really make ourselves poorer. You can't keep a man down in the ditch unless you stay in the ditch with him.

No doubt someone will rail at my suggestions as being an attempt to make the "nigger equal" to the white man. That is far from my mind. I do not want to make the Negro equal to anybody, white, yellow or brown. What I am pleading for is the emancipation of the Negro from his economic, political and educational slavery. I plead for equal wages for equal work, for education of as high grade as given the white citizen, for equal opportunity in civil service competitive appointments, for free use of all public places, for housing conditions that will make for health and morality, and for equal justice before the law. In short, I plead for the extension of all the privileges of American citizenship to the Negro.

"BUT you would not want your daughter to marry a Negro." Certainly not! Neither would I want her to marry Henry L. Mencken (if he were not already in that blissful state). But that does not mean that I want Mr. Mencken to wash my clothes, cook my food, live in a miserable hole, wear the last year's suit I cast off, or get off the street car when I get on. I have the greatest disrespect for Mr. Mencken, but I ask no privilege for myself that I do not fully grant to him. He is born an American citizen, and I want him to have his full American privileges—even to the privilege of cussing me if it does his soul any good.

The truth is that it is not those who want racial justice who have brought about the intermingling of the races. The "nigger" haters who at short notice lynch any Negro who dares so much as to touch a white woman are the ones who freely intermingle the races by their illicit contact with Negro women. If there were a few lynchings of white men for being fathers of mulatto babies I would then begin to feel that those who believe in race purity were in earnest.

The thing that deeply impresses me about this whole race question is the fact that the hate and violence are all on one side. The white man has plenty of hate, but it is unusual to find any hate among the Negroes. I do not believe that history affords an example of any race of people who have suffered so much at the hand of another race with so little expression of violence and hate. Among the younger educated Negroes we sometimes see a flare of indignation, but even with them it soon cools in the stream of racial good nature. This characteristic of the Negro to suffer wrong without malice is well expressed by the statement of Booker T. Washington, engraved on his statue at Tuskegee, "I will not allow any man to drag me down so low as to make me hate him."