

The Shambles of South Carolina

By WALTER WHITE

FOUR men went down the darkened corridor of the Aiken, S. C., jail towards the cell where slept a colored woman. Through the brick and steel structure, there had grown all night a sense of impending terror. Here and there, prisoners unable to sleep with the shadow over them, moved restlessly about their cells, sensing vaguely the form of Tragedy standing nearby.

Before the woman's cell the four men paused. One of them unlocked the door and two others went in and shook the sleeping figure. Bertha Lowman awoke. "What do you want now?" she demanded. The answer was a gruff demand that she get on her clothes and go downstairs. She knew instinctively that something was wrong and refused to go. In nearby cells, other prisoners saw her seized by two of the men and dragged from the iron-barred room.

Downstairs, Bertha Lowman, her brother, Demon, twenty-two years of age and her fifteen-year-old cousin, Clarence, were taken by the mob numbering between thirty and forty out York Street on the Dixie Highway, past darkened houses and luxuriant flower beds yet untouched by the frost. The cars hurried. On the way, Clarence, knowing what the end of the journey would be, jumped from the car. A shot brought him to the ground, blood pouring from his wound. No tell-tale blood marks must get on the car. A rope was taken from under the rear seat, one end of it was tied to the rear axle of the automobile, the other circled Clarence's body. The pilgrimage was resumed, the body of the boy bumping ludicrously along the road behind the car.

A mile and a half from town near an old tourist camp were gathered a thousand people and the two hundred cars which had brought them there. The three Negroes were lined up. The man to whom had been assigned the "honor" of executioner stood sickened by the task before him. He quailed and shook his head. Angrily he was brushed aside and three men took his place with two others aiding.

The Negroes were told to run. Off they started. Shots rang out and they fell, the

bullets having gone into their backs. The two boys were dead; the woman was not. She thrashed about on the ground begging piteously for life. "She's bleating like a goat." One of the mob members laughed derisively as he said it. The sight was too much for some of the mob and they turned their heads away. Others, less tender hearted, fired shot after shot at the squirming figure. At last one bullet found a vital spot. A spasmodic quiver and the body was still. . . .

This was the end on October 8th, 1926, of a story which began early in 1925. Sam Lowman and his wife, Annie, were hard working, industrious, law-abiding Christian people. All their lives they had lived in Saluda County with their children, where no member of the family had ever been involved in trouble of any sort. In an effort to better their lot, as the family was miserably poor, Sam Lowman and his wife decided to move to Aiken in 1924. They entered there into negotiations with a white man by the name of William Hartley who had bought the old Stevens place thirteen miles from Aiken. The Lowmans agreed to farm this place on shares. Hartley was a man of considerable wealth measured by the standards of rural South Carolina. He was not a very popular man for, being independently rich, he could and did speak his mind freely. Often these opinions were acrimonious for most of his life Hartley had suffered from nervous indigestion.

Hartley, as was said, had enemies. These sought in many ways to avenge themselves upon him. Early in April, 1925, a crowd of robed and hooded klansmen went to the home of Hartley's tenants, the Lowmans, called Demon Lowman outside and whipped him severely. Two weeks later, Sheriff H. H. Howard of Aiken received an anonymous letter—at least he said he did. The letter declared that Sam Lowman was selling whiskey. Out to the Lowmans' house Howard started, taking with him his deputies, Nollie Robinson, A. D. Sheppard and Robert L. McElheney. They did not know where the Lowmans lived except in a general way. Nearing the house, they saw two boys plowing in a field who, when asked, said that the Lowmans lived across

the road in the house that could be seen from where the four sheriffs stood. The four white men, clad in civilian clothes, started towards the house. In the back yard, fifty-five-year-old Annie Lowman, the mother, and Bertha were working. Mrs. Annie Lowman was making soap in an iron pot; Bertha was sweeping the yard with a home-made brush broom. Bertha looked up and saw the four men approaching. Through her mind flashed the terror of the Sunday night two weeks before when other white men had come to their home. Softly she spoke to her mother who agreed with her that it was wisest to go inside the house until the white men had gone by.

The white men saw them. They drew their revolvers and started running towards the house to surround it. Sheriff Howard and Bertha Lowman reached the back steps at the same time. Pistol in right hand, the sheriff struck Bertha Lowman in the mouth with the back of his left and ordered her to "stand back!". Mrs. Lowman saw her daughter being struck and heard her scream. Older and slower, she had not had time to escape into the house. She picked up an axe and started to her daughter's assistance. Deputy Sheriff Nollie Robinson emptied his gun into her body and she crumpled into an inert and lifeless heap.

Demon and Clarence Lowman heard their sister's cry of pain and fright and ran towards the house. Demon got a revolver and Clarence a shot gun. The two deputies at the front of the house started firing at Demon and he returned the fire. No one ever knew exactly what Clarence did. In a few seconds, however, the sheriff was dead, Bertha was shot twice through the left breast just above the heart and once through the left abdomen, Clarence was gravely wounded, and Demon was shot in a less vital spot.

Five of the Lowmans were arrested and placed in the Aiken jail. Sam Lowman, away at the mill having meal ground when the shooting took place, came home later in the day to find himself a widower and four of his children and a nephew in jail. Three days later, three-fourths of a quart of liquor was found buried in the yard of the Lowman home. Sam Lowman was sentenced to two years on the chain gang. Rumors spread around the town that the Klan was going to lynch the Lowman chil-

dren. Bertha and Clarence were near death from their wounds, but all five of them were rushed away to the penitentiary at Columbia to escape the impending lynching.

The shooting took place on April 25, 1925. Howard's funeral on April 26th was a huge affair at which some two hundred members of the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia participated. An inquest was held on the 27th. Court convened and the Lowmans were indicted on May 4th. Arraignment took place on May 9th. The trial began on May 12th. Judge H. F. Rice, presiding, assigned attorneys to defend the prisoners. The courtroom atmosphere was tense. The crowd was in an ugly mood. Defense attorneys went through the motions of a trial. Not a soul but knew what the verdict would be. The farcical trial nearly over, Judge Rice arose to charge the jury. First he entered into a long eulogy of the deceased sheriff. Then he apologized for the defense attorneys to the jury: Don't hold it against them because they defended these Negroes, he said in effect. They were ordered by the Court to take the case; the ethics of their profession force them to defend a man when the courts assign them such a task. "None of them wanted to do it," was the final plea.

Only one verdict could have been expected after such a trial and such a charge to the jury. Demon and Clarence Lowman were found guilty of murder and sentenced to die on June 12th. Bertha was found guilty of murder with the recommendation of mercy. Life imprisonment was her penance.

In Columbia there lives a brave, intelligent and well prepared Negro lawyer, N. J. Frederick by name. He had read of the case in the newspapers and his every sensibility was shocked by the travesty of such a trial. Mr. Frederick looked into the record and was further amazed. He could not rest until he had filed with the Supreme Court of the State of South Carolina a bill of exceptions. The execution of the two Lowmans was held up. In November, Mr. Frederick argued the case before the Supreme Court.

Month after month went by with no word from the Court. On April 25, 1926, the anniversary of the death of the sheriff, the Ku Klux Klan held a great celebration in the little Graniteville cemetery. The Col-

umbia State said there were 1500 people present. Others who were there estimated the crowd between four and five thousand. Free lemonade and lunches were served, eulogies to the late sheriff were uttered and a Klan cross of flowers placed on his grave. All this while the Supreme Court of the State was passing upon the legality of the trial of those accused of conspiring to cause the death of the late sheriff.

Two days later the decision was handed down. The conviction was set aside and new trials ordered. Mildly the Supreme Court rebuked Judge Rice for his unethical hostility to the prisoners before him in the first trial.

October came and a new term of court. Mr. Frederick was there and with him L. G. Southard, a white lawyer from Spartanburg whose father and grandfather were Confederate veterans and one of them a general in the Confederate Army.

Alert, intelligent, courageous were the two of them. They hammered away at the case which the State had prepared against the prisoners. Time and again the State tried to re-inject into the trial that there had been a conspiracy to murder the sheriff even though the Supreme Court's decision had said definitely that there was no evidence whatever establishing the fact that the three had conspired together to do murder. Every time the State attempted to re-inject this issue which had been settled, Frederick and Southard blocked their attempts. The testimony of witness after witness showed that the sheriff and his deputies had never notified the Lowmans in any manner that they were officers of the law. The balance swung the other way until Mr. Southard argued that the criminals in the case were the sheriffs; that they were trespassers upon the property of a peaceable, law-abiding family; that, "a man's home being his castle", the Lowmans had every legal and human right to repel invaders of that home.

On the afternoon of October 7th, a motion was made to Judge Lanham, presiding, for a directed verdict of "not guilty" for the three defendants since the State had clearly failed to make out a case of conspiracy to commit murder against them. Judge Lanham took the matter under advisement. At five o'clock, he announced his decision. The motion for a directed verdict

for Demon Lowman was granted. The motion for such a ruling in Bertha and Clarence Lowman's cases was denied. Demon Lowman was immediately re-arrested on a charge of assault and battery with intent to kill; a little knot of men sitting in the back of the dingy court, who had eagerly followed the trial, got up and hastily left the court house.

All arrangements had been made to remove the prisoners hastily if they were convicted. The murder charge against one dismissed and the other two certain to be freed if there was the slightest atom of decency and fair play in the minds of the twelve jurors, the plans were abandoned for some unexplained reason. They were taken back to jail and one man left there to guard them.

Out of the courtroom streamed the crowd. Here and there men detached themselves from the clusters of talkers and went to the office of a lawyer who a month before had been elected to the South Carolina State Legislature. And every man who met in that office was a member of the Ku Klux Klan! In this office, plans were hastily made. Telephone calls went out to Columbia, to Warrentonville, to Graniteville, to Bath and other towns all over the State.

An hour after Judge Lanham delivered his decision, a white man in Columbia was talking to his lawyer, also white.

"I am sorry," the client said, rising, "but I will have to finish talking this over with you some other time."

"What's your hurry?" the lawyer asked.

"Got to go over to Aiken right away."

"What's going to happen there and why are you in such a hurry?"

"They are going to lynch three niggers over there tonight. Don't you want to come along?"

It was a few days later that I reached South Carolina. In some of the towns where I went tracing information, gathering clues, they said to me, "Don't go to Aiken! If you do go, I wouldn't insure your life for a nickel."

But Aiken is not all bad. I talked with men of character, of distinction, who bitterly, *though privately*, denounced the lynching and the lynchers.

One afternoon when the sun had almost set, I drove along a lonely road with one of these men. We went to the house of a man whom we knew could give us valuable

information. I was introduced as the representative of a New York daily newspaper.

"What does your paper want, Mr. White? The story of this lynching or of the Ku Klux Klan, or both?"

"Both," I answered, "but particularly the Klan's connection with the lynching."

"Wait a minute," he told me and he left me in the room. Two minutes later, the door through which he had gone opened again. I was reading a document he had given me and from that paper I looked up. There stood a man in the full regalia of the Ku Klux Klan!

"I show you this," he said to me, "so that you may know what I tell you about the Klan is authentic."

Back and forth through the mill towns owned by the Graniteville Manufacturing Company whose mills are large and prosperous through the use of under-nourished, play-deprived white boys and girls and their parents, we rode. A bit of information here and there and corroborative evidence poured in confirming details which at first seemed too horrible for belief. Tales of desperate gangs of moonshiners; tales of floggings and of murders of white men and women as well as of Negroes; the tale of William Hartley, (on whose land the Lowmans lived), wealthy, influential, but driven away from his home and forced to take refuge with a son-in-law when he dared condemn the way the Lowmans had been treated; the tales of postmasters who are members of the Klan and who open the mails of persons known to oppose the Klan; pitiful tales of exploitation of child labor; tales so horrible that the faint voices of the few who oppose the lawless regime make the picture seem all the blacker.

All these stories were woven together and the story of the murder of the Lowmans corroborated in every detail. Back in New York, I sent a seven-page letter to Governor Thomas G. McLeod of South Carolina. Sheriffs, deputy sheriffs, policemen, lawyers, members of the South Carolina Legislature, relatives of the Governor—all these together with their names, addresses, occupations, were furnished the Governor as being members of the mob. The names and addresses, too, of responsible white citi-

zens, as well as colored, who knew these facts to be true, were offered to the Governor if he would guarantee them protection from the vengeance of the mob. The Governor was told how in his own State after the lynching, an attempt was made to manufacture a race riot to cover the guilt of the murderers. Agents of the Klan went around Aiken and the neighboring towns saying, "The niggers are armed; they are going to rise in the night and kill all the white people." The Governor was told how the mob even planned to castrate Lawyer Southard and to tar and feather Lawyer Frederick for daring to defend the Lowmans and to do it well. All these things were told him. Not yet do we know whether any action will come of it. The Grand Jury which investigated the lynching and *one of whose members is known to have been a member of the mob* and another strongly suspected of having been in it, has reported, strangely enough, that no evidence whatever could be found against any of the lynchers. Governor McLeod, as many citizens of his State told me, is a very weak man. He is a "pussy-footer" they say, who is always quoting the scriptures. He will do nothing.

The Governor has the authority under the law to offer a reward for the apprehension of the lynchers. The Lowmans were lynched on October 8th. When I left South Carolina on October 25th, he had offered no reward even though, conditions being what they are, there there would be little likelihood of the State ever being forced to pay this sum.

But three more names have been added to the black roll of victims of mob murder. White people in South Carolina have learned that they have sown the dragon's teeth. Man after man of them, respectable, respected, law-abiding, are today living in fear of their lives. The seeds of lawlessness have been sown when black men were lynched and nothing done about it. Today white men are suffering and white women too. And I heard in South Carolina a new note. "We have been opposed to the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill but we realize now that the only hope lies in Federal action. For a time the states would not end lynching. Now the states of the South cannot."

(All of the documents obtained by Mr. White were turned over to the New York World and formed the basis of its exposé of the lynching situation in South Carolina.)