

# The Ku Klux Klan—"Soul of Chivalry"

By ALBERT DE SILVER

THE modern Ku Klux Klan, according to its descriptive folder entitled "The Ku Klux Klan—Who—Why—What," has been in the making for the past twenty years. Its Imperial Wizard, Mr. William Joseph Simmons (who has copyrighted the folder), "for fourteen years thought, studied, and worked to prepare himself for its launching." Dedicating his life to the cause, "he kept his own counsel during these years, and in the silent recesses of his soul he thought out the great plan." In the fall of 1915 he was ready and on Thanksgiving night of that year he took thirty-four intrepid spirits to the top of a mountain near Atlanta, Georgia, and there "on the mountain top that night at the midnight hour while men braved the surging blasts of wild wintry mountain winds and endured a temperature far below freezing, bathed in the sacred glow of the fiery cross, the Invisible Empire was called from its slumber of half a century."

One might have expected that such a portentous event would have been attended by some extraordinary disturbance of the celestial spheres or at least by some strange and mysterious currents in the affairs of men. And indeed, on July 4 next, there did appear from the Aulic of His Majesty, the Imperial Wizard (Mr. William Joseph Simmons) an "Imperial Proclamation" directed "to the whole world," in which the aims of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc., were set forth. This impressive document, done in a literary style which should perhaps be described as neo-African, stated simply that the Order, *inter alia*, was "dedicated to the sublime and pleasant duty of providing generous aid, tender sympathy, and fraternal assistance in the effulgence of the light of life and amid the sable shadows of death." All men who could qualify were invited "to approach the portal of our beneficent domain and join . . . the sacred duty of protecting womanhood . . . to maintain forever white supremacy in all things . . . to bless mankind, and to keep eternally ablaze the sacred fire of a fervent devotion to a pure Americanism." In conclusion the Order was stated to be "the soul of chivalry and virtue's impenetrable shield."

The Imperial Wizard made this verbal magnificence somewhat more specific in an interview later vouchsafed a Chicago representative of the Universal Service. The reporter, after passing the "ghoul," "the goblin," and the "cyclops" who guarded approach to the Grand Wizard, was told:

We exclude Jews because they do not believe in the Christian religion. We exclude Catholics because they owe allegiance to an institution that is foreign to the Government of the United States. Any native-born American who is a member of the English church or any other foreign church is barred. To assure the supremacy of the white race we believe in the exclusion of the yellow race and in the disfranchisement of the Negro. It was God's act to make the white race superior to all others. By some scheme of Providence the Negro was created as a serf. . . . We harbor no race prejudices. The Negro never had and has not today a better friend than the Ku Klux Klan. The law-abiding Negro who knows his place has nothing to fear from us. . . . We do not act until called upon but if needed we have a great invisible and mysterious force that will strike terror into the hearts of lawbreakers.

Which, after all, gave more hint of the sober reality

of the Klan than did the Imperial Proclamation of 1915.

For some years after the proclamation indeed little was heard of the Klan. The fiery cross appears to have remained hidden under a bushel. In the fall of 1920, however, the name began to appear in the newspapers in a disquieting manner. On October 21 the New York *Tribune* reports that a certain Peter McMahon of Yonkers, while traveling South to assist a lady in a dispute about her share in the estate of a deceased relative, was "taken from a train at Trenton, South Carolina, by a gang of men dressed as Ku Klux Klansmen, who had attempted to lynch him and then had beaten him." The men, it seems, had tried to force him to sign a declaration adverse to the claims of his client. And ten evenings later, and just before election day, five hundred members of the Ku Klux Klan marched in costume through the streets of Jacksonville, Florida, following the fiery cross, "supposedly," according to the New York *Times*, "as a warning to Negroes to attempt no lawlessness at the polls on Tuesday." It is of record that few colored people voted in Jacksonville on Tuesday. "White supremacy" was maintained.

With the spring of 1921 there came, principally in the State of Texas, a remarkable crop of mob outrages, all perpetrated by masked bands of men and so similar in technique as to suggest a common origin. Among the persons attacked were both blacks and whites, men and women, and there was such a variety of apparent causes as to defy analysis. Responsibility for two, at least, of the mobbings was publicly avowed by the Beaumont, Texas, branch of the Klan and it was widely assumed, in the absence of local disavowal, that such responsibility was general. Southern as well as Northern newspapers became loud in their denunciation of the violence of the Ku Kluxers. The Imperial Wizard apparently became alarmed, and issued statements (inserted in many papers as full-page paid advertisements) denying that the lawlessness was due to the Klan. He even revoked the charter of the Beaumont branch, which had indiscreetly written to the papers, with the Klan's official seal, glorying in its crimes. He also suspended the charters of the Mobile, Alabama, and Pensacola, Florida, chapters, which also were caught in rather too flagrant and public violence. But the cases of threats, tar-and-featherings, and general rowdiness by mysterious masked and white-capped men calling themselves Klansmen continued. The Galveston, Texas, *Daily News* for July 19 lists nineteen such incidents in Texas alone, beginning on April 1, when a band of masked men took a Negro bellboy from a Dallas hotel, carried him into the country near by, whipped him, and branded the letters K.K.K. with acid on his forehead. The last was on July 16, at Tenaha, when a young white woman was seized on a hotel porch by masked men wearing white uniforms, taken several miles into the country, undressed, tarred and feathered, and returned to town. "The sacred duty of protecting womanhood," no doubt! Proclamations and warnings signed "Ku Klux Klan" and directed against grafters, idlers, bootleggers, and agitators appeared in a number of places, including the State Capitol. In as far separated places as Houston, Beaumont, Dallas, Waco, Belton, Goose Creek, Fort Worth, Glidden, Deweyville, and

Timpson men were seized by masked bands and roughly handled. In some cases they were merely beaten. In others they were tarred and feathered in addition. Their abductors on some occasions acted anonymously. On others they acted in the name of the Ku Klux Klan and now and then they placarded their exploit upon the person of their victim. The victims themselves were sometimes bad characters and sometimes of good repute. One was a former Marine who served at Château Thierry. Another, Sherwood Vinson, was the son of a life-long resident of Lufkin, Texas, who writes to the American Civil Liberties Union thus:

My 19-year-old boy, Sherwood Vinson, received a letter through our mail ordering him to leave and advise his bootlegger friends to go with him. I took the letter to the grand jury and ask the jury to tell my boy if he was violating the law but they done nothing so far as I could tell. Later they caught the boy on the streets of Lufkin with a pistol in the hand of one of them, put him in a car, went to the woods, tarred and feathered him, brought him back to the streets of Lufkin, set him out, and our Sheriff paid no attention, so far as I could tell, to the pistol or crime. The boy says he knows the men that done the work. I have lived here sixty-four years, not educated, but want right, want the laws executed, and tried to get the grand jury to do so. We can get the bunch if we can get the law handed out honest. . . .

Although the State of Texas has been more favored than any other by these manifestations of a desire to "bless mankind," they have appeared elsewhere throughout the South. At Miami, Florida, on July 17, the British rector of a church in the Negro quarter was tarred and feathered by masked men. The day before, an elderly farmer was similarly seized and whipped at Warrensburg, Missouri. On July 23, a man and a woman at Birmingham, Alabama, received like treatment. And so it has gone. Of course much is charged to the Klan that cannot be traced directly to Mr. William Joseph Simmons's dues-paying organization. The game was too inviting; naturally it had imitators. Some call themselves Ku Klux Klansmen without paying dues; others indignantly oppose the Klan but copy its methods. An anti-Ku Klux Klan organization in southern Texas adopted the slogan, "Kill 'em on sight like you would a mad dog." The "Black Band" of Joaquin, Shelby County, Texas, threatened to burn the whole town if Klansmen committed more violence. And in Charlotte, North Carolina, a 19-year-old genius elected himself "Exalted Dragon" of a Junior Ku Klux, and collected twenty-five cents dues each from a large number of his young friends. There is occasional confusion of purpose: in Florida the Klan declares that it is against blue laws, but in Texas it threatens bootleggers. In one Florida town a group of alleged Klansmen even threatened a judge guilty of enforcing the speed laws.

Of late there have come serious charges of a financial nature against the Klan. Major Craven, the Grand Dragon of the Invisible Empire for the Realm of North Carolina, recently issued an order disbanding the Klan in that State, saying that as conducted in North Carolina "it is an organization engaged exclusively in collecting initiation fees under false pretenses, without any legal standing in the State, and is, in my opinion, a failure and a fraud." He added that "the most notorious criminal in the county got in by paying for it . . . and the organizers kept him in because he was bringing in others of the same kind at so much per head." Major Craven's charges are disputed by the King Kleagle of the Realm, Mr. W. V. Guerard, but they should perhaps serve to make other public officials follow the exam-

ple of the Mayor of Philadelphia who has directed that inquiry be made as to the disposition of the fees for which membership in the Order is bestowed. These fees are large. It costs \$10 to be initiated into the Klan, plus \$6.50 for a white robe—and it is obvious that these robes can be produced at a cost of about one dollar. These fees appear to go to the Grand Aulic of the Imperial Wizard at Atlanta. Local branches charge further dues, usually \$5 or \$10 annually. What becomes of all this money is not known. The Imperial Wizard says he pays himself only \$100 per week, but an Atlanta paper recently announced the purchase by the Ku Klux Klan of an entire block on Peachtree Road which was to be made National Headquarters "at a cost of about one million dollars." "Landscape improvements," including an artificial lake and "about \$30,000 worth of marble and plaster statuary," were to be made. "Lanier University," Atlanta (a school which does not figure in the rather complete list of academic institutions in the World Almanac), has also been taken over by the Klan, and the Imperial Wizard himself, it is announced, will be the new president. It may be said that William Allen White was probably not unjustified in exulting that it was "to the everlasting credit of Emporia that the organizer of this cheap clan found no suckers here with \$10 each to squander."

It is, of course, unlikely that the remarkable series of mob outbreaks were foreseen by the Imperial Wizard in 1915. Such a program would have been too hazardous to have been deliberate. But what should have been foreseen was that such a consequence was well-nigh inevitable. The Klan springs from the memory of post-civil war lawlessness, when the Negro was disfranchised by terror. It proclaims its purpose to maintain white supremacy and to protect womanhood, the two customary cloaks for lynching. Its leader asserts its purpose to protect the security of the people "in the absence or inadequacy of the forces of law and order." Its membership form discloses an unmistakable anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic bias. Its organizers in the North admit at private meetings that there it is to be mainly an instrument of anti-Semitism. Its protestations of 100 per cent Americanism and its warnings to agitators suggest the familiar tactics of the conventional opponents of organized labor. Indeed the group of rowdies at first described as American Legion men who tore Mrs. Ida Crouch Hazlett from a Socialist platform in Mason City, Iowa, last month, and drove her out of town, were quoted by the United Press correspondent as saying that "they preferred to be known as the Ku Klux Klan"; and the *Kansas City Post* frankly describes the Klan in that part of the world as an anti-Non-partisan League organization. Over the whole has been thrown an amazing haze of mumbo jumbo with its Imperial Wizards, its King Kleagles, its Grand Dragons, Ghouls, Goblins, and Cyclopes, its fiery crosses and the rest. It was inevitable that all this should have attracted those most easily stirred to mob action and that the range of prejudice to which the Order appeals should have led to repeated outbreaks. The Imperial Wizard (Mr. William Joseph Simmons) should have foreseen all this. He cannot now absolve himself by proclaiming lawful and beneficent purposes for his Empire. He had much better "destroy the child of his own handiwork," as he threatened to do not long ago. It is a child conceived in the tradition of a lawless past and brought forth in the extravagant obscurantism of present-day prejudice. Its life cannot and should not be a happy one. The modern Ku Klux Klan does not deserve to live and it had much better die.

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, L. P. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.