
The Terror

by James Oneal

[event of June 1908]

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Organizations for the protection of Negroes against injustice have been particularly busy of late in behalf of their race. The following story is based upon an incident that came under the writer's observation ten years ago. The story appeared in a Socialist publication in 1909, and is re-printed here because of the interest aroused in the subject with which it deals.

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“Your theories would send hell surging through the streets and erect the guillotine in the public square.”

I looked at my friend in surprise. I was not prepared for such a passionate protest for while our views of life and its problems were at variance, his rejoinders were usually mildly satirical. Now it was evident that he was aroused. His eyes glowed with honest antagonism and indignation. The rise of educated and disciplined proletarians evidently conjured visions of a French Terror in his mind.

“What,” he continued, “could you expect should these vandals crawl from their holes some fine morning like this and, possessed with your ideas that the 20th Century is theirs, should proceed to impress their beliefs on all the institutions of today? What would be the result? Pillage and massacres such as the world has never seen,” he concluded, with a gesture that indicated a conviction which no argument of mine could shake.

We reached the bank of a river and the bright June sun reflected from the water almost blinded us as we gazed at the green willows and shrubbery that lined the opposite bank. The silent flow of water, reflecting the foliage and the old wooden bridge, was so suggestive of peace that I felt it was almost a sacrilege to discuss violence even for

the purpose of defending my comrades against the charge. Surely, these waters had never known the turbulence of civil strife; they had never been discolored by mixing with the blood of a human heart.

And yet I knew that my faith in the world of labor was well placed and that, with the experience of history, the culture of modern science, philosophy, and the discipline of our ideals, there is less possibility of social disaster in our rise than in the rise of any other class in history. Still, I felt at a disadvantage on the banks of this peaceful river. The warmth of the sun, the sparkle of the stream, and the sponge-like softness of the moss beneath my feet produced such a profound feeling of ease and comfort that I sank into one of those half-conscious noonday reveries which come to the indolent at times.



Presently, a fisherman left the shore and pulled slowly upstream, the clumsy bark taking all his strength as he struggled with the swift current. This seemed to be my answer. The boatman was a symbol of the unorganized, ignorant struggle of the poor; they were looking backward, pulling blindly against the stream and drawing the hulk of dying institutions after them. The boatman would find his adjustment in the stone age, but not in our time, unless he was equipped with modern methods of navigation. So the proletarians, too, required the intellectual equipment of our movement to guard against a fruitless and misdirected struggle which might end in the disaster my friend predicted. And we of the movement had that equipment and were giving it to increasing numbers of the disinherited. I thanked the primitive boatman. I had my answer. I turned to my friend.

“Your conception of us who think and have acquired some of the culture of modern times is beastly,” I said. “We are not executioners, but liberators, who hold life the most sacred thing on this planet. This fellow in the boat—”

A faint roar from many voices in the distance interrupted me. Looking back up the street which we traversed we saw a great mass of frenzied human beings rushing like an avalanche toward us. The central column in its onward sweep gathered up others from the side streets. Here and there along the walks a stray pedestrian was sucked into the living vortex and became a part of it. Terrible curses ascended from a thousand throats like filth flowing from the mouth of a foul sewer. Tense drawn faces, distorted and made hideous with cruel

snarls, were visible through the dust that enveloped the mob in one great cloud. Reason had fled. Primitive, cruel passions, shed centuries ago, swayed the mob. Blood lust shone in the eyes of the lynchers. Frightened mothers appeared at windows clutching their offspring, fearful that this sea of passion would overflow and carry destruction to their doors. In the mob the dainty bank clerk mingled with the laborer. A miner, black with the grime of toil and a smutty torch still in his cap, jostled a small merchant. The habitués of the “red light” district fraternized with the well-to-do. Rags and purple met on common ground, bent on the same mission — the destruction of human life.



We had passed the county prison 100 yards away. The street was now glutted with the mass which pressed the first section on. A telephone pole was seized by hundreds who mounted the steps to the steel door. The long black weapon carried between the two rows of enraged men looked like a monster centipede. The prison shook from the impact of the first blow. A shot from behind the steel door only inflamed the besiegers. With roars and curses they retreated a few paces and with one great lunge caved in the door.

The mob choked up the entrance in the struggle to enter. A half hundred rushed inside and soon appeared with a rope coiled around the neck of a Negro. He stood for a moment in the sun, his thick lips curling like those of a famished wolf at bay, but his struggles were soon quieted with a blow from a hammer.

Willing hands grasped the rope and dragged the half-conscious victim through the dust, most of them looking back and hooting at their human freight. Their frightful leers were accentuated by the glare of the noonday sun on their sweaty and dust-covered faces. On they swept and disappeared in the mouth of the covered bridge that spanned the peaceful stream. Their prey struck the corner of the bridge, rebounded, and, raised clear of the ground, plunged with a jerk into the shadows and disappeared.

In a few minutes the lynchers appeared at an open span at the other end. The quivering Negro hung from a girder but was soon cut down only to fall into the arms of the advance guard below. The hills echoed the rage of the mob as their victim shot downward. Faggots were gathered. A well-dressed madman circled the crowd with his

derby in his hand, which was soon filled with coins. Two messengers were dispatched and soon returned with new pails filled with kerosene. The derby was again passed and other messengers volunteered. The fisherman pulled the primitive craft up the bank and danced and howled like one stark mad.

Meanwhile, the brush was being piled, and the well-dressed struggled with the ragged urchins to cut a souvenir from their unconscious prey. A few days later charred parts of a human skull were exhibited by many of that mob, and learned discussions divided them, for many held that the thickness was evidence that a Negro was not human. All but a few having supplied themselves, these were content to wait for the ash heap for their mementoes.

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Suddenly the flames shot upward and the crackling of dry wood mingled with the roars of the mob. The tongues of flame were reflected in the ripples of the stream, while at the open span above a black mass yelled itself hoarse as the heat ascended to their nostrils. The fisherman howled and circled the pyre till he was nearly exhausted; then he returned to his “dug-out” and began his laborious task of sending it against the stream.

I turned to my friend. He was sick and pale with emotion. We walked in silence past the prison and up the street through which the lynchers had come. Suddenly I remembered our controversy.

“There wasn’t a red card in that crowd,” I said.

He looked at me, grasped my hand, attempted to speak, but could not, and we passed on.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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