

# **THE ATLANTA RIOT**

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The Atlanta Riot by Ray Stannard Baker

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**RAY STANNARD BAKER**

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ATLANTA RIOT**



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By  
RAY STANNARD BAKER

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A NEGRO OF THE CRIMINAL TYPE

*The lowest stratum, in all of our American life, is the "worthless negro," as he is called in the South. He is a wanderer, here to-day, there to-morrow; he is densely ignorant and lazy and often with no white man who is his friend. He works only when he is hungry; and he is as much a criminal as he dares to be. It is this class, growing larger every year, though relatively very small compared with the 10,000,000 negroes in the country, that causes most of the trouble in the South. It carouses in the saloons, overflows the jails, fills the chain-gangs: the accounts of its horrible crimes against women flood the newspapers, giving a bad name to the entire negro race*

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# A RACE RIOT, AND AFTER

BY RAY STANNARD BAKER

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY A. B. PHELAN AND OTHERS



UPON the ocean of antagonism between the white and negro races in this country, there arises occasionally a wave, stormy in its appearance, but soon subsiding into quietude. Such a wave was the Atlanta riot. Its ominous size, greater by far than the ordinary race disturbances which express themselves in lynchings, alarmed the entire country and awakened in the South a new sense of the dangers which threatened it. A description of that spectacular though superficial disturbance, the disaster incident to its fury, and the remarkable efforts at reconstruction will lead the way naturally—as human nature is best interpreted in moments of passion—to a clearer understanding, in future articles, of the deep and complex race feeling which exists in this country.

On the twenty-second day of September, 1906, Atlanta had become a veritable tinder-box. For months the relation of the races had been growing more strained. The entire South had been sharply annoyed by a shortage of labor accompanied by high wages and, paradoxically, by an increasing number of idle negroes. In Atlanta the lower class—the "worthless negro"—had been increasing in numbers: it showed itself too evidently among the swarming

saloons, dives, and "clubs" which a complaisant city administration allowed to exist in the very heart of the city. Crime had increased to an alarming extent: an insufficient and ineffective police force seemed unable to cope with it. With a population of 115,000 Atlanta had over 17,000 arrests in 1905; in 1906 the number increased to 21,602. Atlanta had many more arrests than New Orleans with nearly three times the population and twice as many negroes; and almost four times as many as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city nearly three times as large. Race feeling had been sharpened through a long and bitter political campaign, negro disfranchisement being one of the chief issues under discussion. An inflammatory play called "The Clansman," though forbidden by public sentiment in many Southern cities, had been given in Atlanta and other places with the effect of increasing the prejudice of both races. Certain newspapers in Atlanta, taking advantage of popular feeling, kept the race issue constantly agitated, emphasizing negro crimes with startling headlines. One newspaper even recommended the formation of organizations of citizens in imitation of the Ku Klux movement of reconstruction days. In the clamor of this growing agitation, the voice of the right-minded white people and industrious, self-respecting negroes was



*The pawnshops, with windows like arsenals, furnish the low class of negroes and whites with cheap revolvers and knives*

almost unheard. A few ministers of both races saw the impending storm and sounded a warning—to no effect; and within the week before the riot the citizens, the city administration and the courts all waked up together. There were calls for mass-meetings, the police began to investigate the conditions of the low saloons and dives, the county constabulary was increased in numbers, the grand jury was called to meet in special session on Monday the 24th.

But the awakening of moral sentiment in the city, unfortunately, came too late. Crime, made more lurid by agitation, had so kindled the fires of hatred that they could not be extinguished by ordinary methods. The best people of Atlanta were like the citizens of prosperous Northern cities, too busy with money-making to pay attention to public affairs. For Atlanta is growing rapidly. Its bank clearings jumped from ninety millions in 1900 to two hundred and twenty-two millions in 1906, its streets are well paved and well lighted, its street-car service is good, its sky-scrapers are comparable with the best in the North. In other words, it was progressive—few cities I know of more so—but it had forgotten its public duties.

Within a few months before the riot there had been a number of crimes of worthless negroes against white women. Leading negroes, while not one of them with whom I talked wished to protect any negro who was really guilty, asserted that the number of these crimes had been greatly exaggerated and that in special instances the details had

been over-emphasized because the criminal was black; that they had been used to further inflame race hatred. I had a personal investigation made of every crime against a white woman committed in the few months before and after the riot. Three, charged to white men, attracted comparatively little attention in the newspapers, although one, the offense of a white man named Turnadge, was shocking in its details. Of twelve such crimes committed by negroes in the six months preceding the riot two were cases of rape, horrible in their details, three were aggravated attempts at rape, three may have been attempts, three were pure cases of fright on the part of the white woman, and in one the white woman, first asserting that a negro had assaulted her, finally confessed attempted suicide.

The facts of two of these cases I will narrate—and without excuse for the horror of the details. If we are to understand the true conditions in the South, these things *must* be told.

One of the cases was that of Mrs. Knowles Etheleen Kimmel, twenty-five years old, wife of a farmer living near Atlanta. A mile beyond the end of the street-car line stands a small green bungalow-like house in a lonely spot near the edge of the pine woods. The Kimmels who lived there were not Southerners by birth but of Pennsylvania Dutch stock. They had been in the South four or five years, renting their lonesome farm, raising cotton and corn and hopefully getting a little ahead. On the day before the riot a strange rough-looking negro called at the back door of the Kimmel home. He wore a cast-off khaki soldier's uniform. He asked a foolish question and went away. Mrs. Kimmel was worried and told her husband. He, too, was worried—the fear of this crime is everywhere present in the South—and when he went away in the afternoon he asked his nearest neighbor to look out for the strange negro. When he came back a few hours later, he found fifty white men in his yard. He knew what had happened without being told: his wife was under medical attendance in the house. She had been able to give a clear description of the negro: bloodhounds were brought, but the pursuing white men had so obliterated the criminal's tracks that he could not be traced. Through information given by a negro a suspect was arrested



and nearly lynched before he could be brought to Mrs. Kimmel for identification; when she saw him she said: "He is not the man." The criminal is still at large.

One day weeks afterward I found the husband working alone in his field: his wife, to whom the surroundings had become unbearable, had gone away to visit friends. He told me the story hesitatingly. His prospects, he said, were ruined: his neighbors had been sympathetic but he could not continue to live there with the feeling that they all knew. He was preparing to

the negroes as much as I could. But many of them won't work even when the wages are high: they won't come when they agree to and when they get a few dollars ahead they go down to the saloons in Atlanta. Every one is troubled about getting labor and every one is afraid of prowling idle negroes. Now, the thing has come to me, and it's just about ruined my life."

When I came away the poor lonesome fellow followed me half-way up the hill, asking: "Now, what would you do?"

One more case. One of the prominent



TWO NEGROES OF THE CRIMINAL TYPE

*Will Johnson, who is now in the Atlanta jail charged with the Camp assault (see page 578), has already been convicted of another assault*

*Lucius Frazier, who entered a home in the residence district, where a mother, wife and four daughters were alone. A neighbor, called by one of the daughters, saved them*

give up his home and lose himself where people did not know his story. I asked him if he favored lynching, and his answer surprised me.

"I've thought about that," he said. "You see, I'm a Christian man, or I try to be. My wife is a Christian woman. We've talked about it. What good would it do? We should make criminals of ourselves, shouldn't we? No, let the law take its course. When I came here, I tried to help

florists in Atlanta is W. C. Lawrence. He is an Englishman, whose home is in the outskirts of the city. On the morning of August 20th his daughter Mabel, fourteen years old, and his sister Ethel, twenty-five years old, a trained nurse who had recently come from England, went out into the nearby woods to pick ferns. Being in broad daylight and within sight of houses, they had no fear. Returning along an old Confederate breastworks, they were



DECATUR STREET, WHERE THE RIOT ORIGINATED

*It is a street of low saloons, dives, negro "clubs" and pawnshops, frequented by the lowest classes of both races. A few days before the riot an investigating committee counted no fewer than 2455 idle negroes in the 40 saloons of Decatur street*

met by a brutal-looking negro with a club in one hand and a stone in the other. He first knocked the little girl down, then her aunt. When the child "came to" she found herself partially bound with a rope. "Honey," said the negro, "I want you to come with me." With remarkable presence of mind the child said: "I can't, my leg is broken—" and she let it swing limp from the knee. Deceived, the negro went back to bind the aunt. Mabel, instantly untying the rope, jumped up and ran for help. When he saw the child escaping the negro ran off.

"When I got there," said Mr. Lawrence, "my sister was lying against the bank, face down. The back of her head had been beaten bloody. The bridge of her nose was cut open, one eye had been gouged out of its socket. My daughter had three bad cuts on her head—thank God, nothing worse to either. But my sister, who was just beginning her life, will be totally blind in one eye, probably in both. Her life is ruined."

About a month later, through the information of a negro, the criminal was caught, identified by the Misses Lawrence, and sent to the penitentiary for forty years (two cases), the limit of punishment for attempted criminal assault.

In both of these cases arrests were made on the information of negroes.

The effect of a few such crimes as these may be more easily imagined than described: They produced a feeling of alarm which no one who has not lived in such a community can in any wise appreciate. I was astonished in traveling in the South to discover how widely prevalent this dread has become. Many white women in Atlanta dare not leave their homes alone after dark; many white men carry arms to protect themselves and their families. And even these precautions do not always prevent attacks.

But this is not the whole story. Everywhere I went in Atlanta I heard of the fear of the white people, but not much was said of the terror which the negroes also felt. And yet every negro I met voiced in some way that fear. It is difficult here in the North for us to understand what such a condition means: a whole community namelessly afraid!

The better-class negroes have two sources of fear: one of the criminals of their own race—such attacks are rarely given much space in the newspapers—and the other the fear of the white people. My very first impression of what this fear of the negroes might be came, curiously

enough, not from negroes but from a fine white woman on whom I called shortly after going South. She told this story.

"I had a really terrible experience one evening a few days ago. I was walking along ——— street when I saw a rather good-looking young negro come out of a hallway to the sidewalk. He was in a great hurry, and, in turning suddenly, as a person sometimes will do, he accidentally brushed my shoulder with his arm. He had not seen me before. When he turned and found it was a white woman he had touched, such a look of abject terror and fear came into his face as I hope never again to see on a human countenance. He knew what it meant if I was frightened, called for help and accused him of insulting or attacking me. He stood still a moment, then turned and ran down the street, dodging into the first alley he came to. It shows, doesn't it,

how little it might take to bring punishment upon an innocent man!"

The next view I got was through the eyes of one of the able negroes of the South, Bishop Gaines of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He is now an old man, but of imposing presence. Of wide attainments, he has traveled in Europe, he owns much property, and rents houses to white tenants. He told me of services he had held some time before in south Georgia. Approaching the church one day through the trees, he suddenly encountered a white woman carrying water from a spring. She dropped her pail instantly, screamed and ran up the path toward her house.

"If I had been some negroes," said Bishop Gaines, "I should have turned and fled in terror; the alarm would have been given, and it is not unlikely that I should have had a posse of white men with bloodhounds on my trail. If I had been caught



JACKSON ROW

*One of a number of black settlements in Atlanta. Small, dilapidated houses crowded into irregular alleys are filled with negroes, many of them widows with children, who make a living by serving white families. These negroes are all near the edge of poverty, descending sometimes into crime, but living a happy-go-lucky life*