

# Herndon is Back in Atlanta

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ATLANTA.

**T**HE TRAIN carrying Angelo Herndon back to a Georgia chain-gang had four golden bars running all around the stream-lined locomotive and the first pullman car was named Rotary Club. It was one of the fastest trains in the world and it tore down the Atlantic Coast as though demons were pursuing it; the siren kept sounding every few minutes in a low, mournful wail through Delaware, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia.

"That damn whistle," Herndon said to me at three-thirty in the morning somewhere in North Carolina: "Sounds like somebody crying for his lost soul."

The Supreme Court of these United States decreed two weeks ago that Angelo Herndon had to go back to Georgia and serve eighteen to twenty years on the chain-gang. The jury had recommended mercy. The Supreme Court didn't say so in its review of the case, but the crime Herndon had committed was to have a dark skin and to ask bread for Georgia's starving people. And I have seen these people. They are wild-eyed with hunger.

Atlanta, Georgia, is the only city where I ever saw cats and human beings roam the main streets searching for food. On Marietta and Forsyth Streets in the heart of town I saw lean cats slink down the gutter and I saw white farmers (oh, we have no peasants in America) carrying their children, naked save for diapers, begging for a nickel for something to eat. They beg on streets handsome with skyscrapers and Atlanta has a proud skyline you see in long pictures in cigar stores and it is called the "Convention City of the South."

Indeed while I write the American prison Association is holding its Sixty-fifth Annual Convention here at the Biltmore and warden Lawes of Sing Sing has just delivered a stirring address called "Humanizing Our Prisons" at the very time Herndon was delivering himself up to the chain-gang.

I saw a chain-gang and the clink of the chains sound musical from a distance like ice bumping against the thin glass holding a Georgia planter's mint julep. I saw prisoners in stripes chained to each other working from "can to can't" *i. e.*, from daybreak when you can see to nightfall when you can't.

Herndon came a thousand miles to hand himself over to the authorities. He is charged with inciting to insurrection. I wrote the account for *THE NEW MASSES* when Herndon was freed on \$15,000 cash bail about a year and a half ago. I repeat: This lad stands up with John Brown and Nat Turner, a twentieth-century Abolitionist—the dream of John Brown and Nat Turner with the wisdom of George Dimitrov.

Listen: He caught the train in New York,

of his own, free, twenty-one-year-old will to ride a thousand miles to the chain gangs of Georgia. Life, I need not tell you, is sweet at twenty-one and many persons said he would jump bail. George Schuyler, columnist of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, said he was a damn fool if he didn't. But eighteen more are charged with insurrection in Georgia. And Herndon, son of the Negro people and of the proletariat, went back to see to it the people of Georgia could stand up and fight for the right to live like men. He came back to fight this nineteenth-century charge.

**W**E SAT up 1,000 miles and talked. (Black passengers can't get sleepers anyway South of the Mason-Dixon Line.) Herndon is a citizen of the future and those who live in the future can hang their hats anywhere in the present and be at home. We sat in the Jim-Crow car and talked at our ease about everything in life. Herndon's nose was glued to the pane and we sat there watching America fly by.

There was Jersey and the Crempa-Jersey Power case and the spot where Dutch Schultz was rubbed out; there was Delaware where duPont makes dynamite and owns every inch of the state; Virginia was dark but the lights of Richmond flickered and here Lee surrendered and the Civil War ended freeing the slaves. And now the train was roaring through Dixie seventy miles an hour carrying twenty-one-year-old Angelo to twenty years on a chain gang. It was coming dawn in North Carolina and at four-forty the train stopped at Gastonia, right in front of *The Gastonia Gazette* which called for the lynching of the textile organizers in the famous 1929 strike. The sun came up hot and red when we hit South Carolina and Angelo pointed out two bloodhounds about a quarter of a mile off loping through the meadows, their long ears flopping. It was scarcely dawn when we saw the Southern textile mills aglow and I looked through the window of a shack in a mill village and saw a young woman "operative," as *The New York Times* calls her, combing her long hair before ten—twelve speed-up hours at the loom. The soil began to turn red-rusty and we both got a little excited when we saw the first cotton fields and the cotton pickers out in the fields gleaning the final few bolls, packing them in burlap sacks slung at their sides. We saw the rickety shacks with the bales of cotton piled high. "Waiting for a good price," Herndon said. "I've laid in those cabins in the Black Belt," he said, "and looked up in the middle of the night and seen the moon and stars through the cracks in the roof."

We talked about life and we talked about his dreams. He remembered Lenin's statement that revolutionaries need not be afraid to dream.

"Would you like to go to the U.S.S.R. for a spell if you were freed now?"

"Oh, I would, of course, but Jesus, Joe, there ain't time. There's too much to do in the U.S.A."

"What work would you prefer when you get out of prison here?"

He grinned. "I like to count chickens when they're hatched. But I do know what. I'd want to work among my own people. They have special problems with which I'm best acquainted." We got to talking of the things he had done since he came out of jail some sixteen months ago. First of all, he had spoken all over America to more than a million people.

"And how does America look to you?"

"Once you go round and see it, Joe, you love it. It is a magnificent country. I love its factories and mills and I love the lay of the land. I loved Oregon most of all because the mountains are higher there and make you feel grand—make you feel like a man ought to. It's a wonderful country but it belongs to the wrong people. Everywhere I went I saw it was the America of the capitalists. I want to see it the America of the people who built it."

It was after we saw the bloodhounds with long ears flopping, somewhere past Gastonia, that he got to talking about how he had discovered Communism. I reported that in my first article on Herndon over a year ago. But today he said, "It was like all of a sudden turning a corner on a dirty old street and finding yourself on a broad, shining highway."

Georgia, red-brown soil, the people bony, underfed, driving consumptive mules with long jittery ears along rusty-dusty highways. The shacks rickety and humanity barefooted. This is the state with the motto, "Wisdom, Justice, Moderation." This is the state which passed the following law after the Nat Turner Slave Rebellion in 1933 and now holds Herndon with it in 1935:

Any person convicted of the defense of insurrection of slaves or of an attempt to incite insurrection of slaves shall be punished with death, or if the jury recommend to mercy confined in the penitentiary for term of not less than five years or more than twenty years.

**A**TLANTA: We went to the Negro neighborhood. Talk about the hovels and the mudstreets of Adowa and Adigrat. We needn't be uppitty about Yankee progress. Where we stood, here in the second biggest city of the South, the homes leaned on rickety brick piles, the night stars shone through the cracks in the frame-structures. And the people hungered.

But what people: "Angelo Herndon: Well, I'll be blessed! Angelo, Angelo Herndon!" They kissed him and they took him in. I

dare not mention the name of the family which took us in, for the Reverend Hudson, Atlanta's official Torquemada and Assistant Prosecutor, would hunt them down. Anyway, they lived in one of these shacks in "Darktown" and they offered us their hospitality and though they were half-starved they went out and rustled up food and they fell all over themselves making things good for Angelo.

They knew the next morning he was to give himself up to 18 or 20 years on the chain gang and he was theirs and he spelled liberation. They wanted to do everything they could do to make him happy these few hours before he went back to Fulton Tower—"the big rock."

They went out and brought back fish which they fried but there was no money for wine. We ate garfish at midnight and then after we were through talking and nobody wanted to sleep they played the little victrola. It was dark inside, no gas, nothing but lamplight and that only in the kitchen, and our shadows danced all over the walls. They looked for something cheerful to play among the twenty-year old records but all the records were blues. There was The Back Water Blues and The Deadcat Blues, The Birmingham Gambling Man Blues and The Mean Woman Blues which sang:

Blues got me drinkin'  
Trouble got me thinkin'  
And it's gonna carry me to my grave....  
It's mean for a woman to be drinkin'  
When she ain't got a dollar  
To meet the rent man.

It was a week-end night and the police squad was patrolling these Adowa-like streets of Atlanta and we had to laugh in whispers. Workingmen can extract the gold of laughter out of the meanest ore; and Herndon laughed with all the rest.

They finally got Herndon to sing and he sang a song he had learned in Fulton Tower.

Look a-yonder—yonder  
Hard-boiled sun is turnin' over  
It's comin' down, O Lawd  
It's comin' down.

Give me, give me a cool drink a' water  
Before I die, O Lawd  
Before I die.  
I don't want no  
Corn bread, peas and molasses  
At supper time  
No—at supper time.

Every mail day—mail day  
I get a letter  
Son, come home, O son, son, come home.

How can I go  
Shot guns and pistols  
All around me  
To blow me down  
O Lawd, to blow me down.

The next morning before our hostess left for work (on relief) about 6:30 a. m. she fried us chicken and fish, and God only knows where she got the half pint of wine and we ate chicken and fish and grits and

hot corn muffins as the sun was coming up. She and her husband Tom wanted to do more for Angelo but what was there to do? What can you do for somebody when you're broke, flat broke? Wasn't there something Angelo wanted, anything they could do? Standing there desperately, at dawn, eager to do something for a man on the chain gang for twenty years—for them.

He saw a family picture on the mantel. "I'd like to have that picture," he said, "autographed."

"Auto-what?" they asked.

"Autographed. That means, sign it," he said. They took the photograph down (the mother and child on their chair and the father in high celluloid collar standing stiffly behind them) and they painfully wrote their names down.

Angelo took their picture and looked at it intently. His people, his fellow-workingmen. "I'll carry that along to Fulton Tower," Angelo said, smiling. We all shook hands and they kissed Angelo Herndon and they went away to work on relief.

Angelo and I played a few more records and then Angelo said we ought to wash the breakfast dishes before we left and we did it and about noon Angelo went down to the Atlanta courthouse where he had brought the crowd of 1,000 in 1933 asking for bread and he turned himself over to the authorities who had sentenced him to twenty years.

"You know," he said to me a block or so away from the courthouse, "the nearer I get to the court, the nearer I feel freedom. I'm dead sure the united front'll get me out soon. Funny, isn't it? The nearer I get to Fulton Tower, this time, the nearer I feel to freedom." He was silent a moment and then grinned. "That's dialectics, I guess, isn't it?"

THEY had been waiting for him, for the mandate had come down from the Supreme Court in Washington that morning. The Georgia authorities bound him over to Fulton Tower to await hearing on November 12. Before he gave himself up he handed me a slip of paper:

If what I've done and what I do, if all I have suffered, and will still suffer, helps build the united front, then I have been successful. My fight has not been in vain. I will have been as successful as any human being, any worker, could be, in such a short span of life, I am now twenty-one years old. If life is spared me and I am sure the people of America will see to that, if I am snatched from this slow death of a Georgia chain-gang, then I will devote the rest of life to the same work that caused my arrest. I searched for a unity of all the working men in America, white and black, in mine and office, to end the slavery I find my beautiful country in. I want to see shining workers' homes of marble where today these grimy shacks stand.

This is the second chapter of Angelo Herndon's story. I hope to be granted the privilege soon to write the third.

*Attorneys for Herndon have secured an order setting November 12 as the date for a hearing on a writ of habeas corpus sought on the ground that the constitutionality of the statute under which he was convicted has never been determined. There is a United States Supreme Court decision holding that where a prisoner has been denied a review of his case on technical grounds he may test the constitutionality of the law through habeas corpus. This is the same procedure that is being used in the Mooney case. The effect of the order will be to keep Herndon in Fulton County until November 12 and prevent authorities from sending him to one of the worst chain gangs in Georgia.—THE EDITORS.*

## Poem

Here where head lights pour torrents  
Of white fire into the dark: here where  
These careful citizens curse and mock him,  
Being black, lift him screaming  
into the horror of a Negro's death—there is  
No loveliness of Southern night—see well:  
With naked cold eye weigh well each nerve.  
Like liquid-fire; each toss of battered head:  
This sheltered warm blood dripping  
Down the tarred rope; this human agony,  
There is the reality.

Above, the stars rock on through Space.  
Below, these figures move through Time,  
Unlike the frozen place of stars,  
Toward a sterner scene.  
Where hate is a smile to cover Southern hells  
With deadly flags and history  
Of song from black throats, joined  
Carefully with mountain-voice  
Within the beautiful comrade ranks.  
Advancing as the singing blood  
To roll great stones away from doors  
That lead on light, that lead on light.

KENNETH PATCHEN.