

IN BIRMINGHAM JAIL

Negro and White Workers Defy Caste System and Police Terror

By GILBERT LEWIS

Write me a letter, send it by mail;
Send it in care of Birmingham jail.
Birmingham jail, Birmingham jail,
Send it in care of Birmingham jail.

The above lines are taken from a folk song of the south. The first time and place I heard it was two o'clock one morning as several of us drove along the highway to Chattanooga, Tenn. from Atlanta, Ga. where we held a fine mass meeting. The comrade driving the car, himself a southerner, broke into the refrain to keep awake. Someone joined him. Soon all were wailing away, fascinated by the calm, easy rhythm of the thing. Someone spoke of how the Gastonia strikers, facing electrocution for militantly struggling for the right to live, had changed "Birmingham" to "Gastonia" and had sung the number with rousing gusto.

This was the way with the workers, ever changing the name to suit their own locality, ever seeing in the words of the composer a reflection of their own misery. It was this that had made it one of the most popular numbers below the Mason and Dixon line.

The next time I heard the song was in Birmingham jail. A fellow prisoner, sitting on his bunk playing solitaire, hummed it softly to himself.

Capitol Park in Birmingham is Woodrow Wilson and white supremacy. Negroes passing through this park find it necessary to keep moving. Under no circumstances may they stand around or sit beneath the shady trees, no matter how hot the day or how tired they may be.

A short time ago a joint meeting called by the Communist Party and Trade Union Unity League to protest lynching assembled in this park some two hundred white and four hundred Negro workers, the latter already sufficiently rallying to the program of the Communist Party to hurl a certain defiance at their age-old oppressors. Also among the audience was no small amount of plain-clothed "dicks," harness bulls, high officials of the Klan and high city and state officials.

They did not like the presence of Negroes in the park but said nothing. The white speaker for the Communist Party spoke for one hour, an hour in which the system of race and class oppression was picked to pieces with minute care and laid bare for all workers to behold.

Then suddenly a Negro speaker

what he is; a hoarder of sorely needed grain in the earlier years, a saboteur of the Soviet power, an assassin of Soviet officials and the base for a recrudescence of capitalism. We understand sharply the great historical necessity for the complete liquidation of the kulak class as a prerequisite and guarantee for the building of socialism.

Bruski is an invaluable picture in arriving at a fuller understanding of the import of the stupendous achievements of collectivization under the Five-Year Plan, its background, etc.

Bruski rounds out the portraits of different phases of the Russian Revolution and socialist construction contained in "Cement," a novel depicting the workers' new life and the building up of industry shattered during the war period; "The Nineteen," a gripping story of the Civil War days, and "Azure Cities," a collection of short stories which deal with various phases of life in the Soviet Union.

Don't miss reading this important novel of Soviet life.

FRED VIGMAN.

was introduced. Not merely a Negro speaker, but one who incidentally could speak. Straightway he began to attack the premise of white superiority and the Ku Klux Klan, the latter having only a few nights before paraded through the Negro sections of the town terrorizing the workers. Pandemonium reigned. The bourgeois bastards couldn't sit still. It was not enough that Negroes had come into the park, it was not enough for a Negro to speak in the park, it was not enough for him to attack the Klan . . . he had dared talk about social equality!

The bourgeois mind at work: White supremacy was being threatened. It was alright for a white man to talk about social equality . . . if he wanted to sleep with a "nigger wench" that was his business. But a Negro . . . demanding the right to sleep with a white woman! And with four hundred Negroes listening to him. Something had to be done. It took them ten minutes, however, to make up their minds as to what, for after all the four hundred Negroes looked formidable indeed!

Finally, he police on a signal from the head of the Klan, smashed the meeting. Two white organizers, the Negro organizer and two Negro workers were arrested!

"523-C. Dangerous and suspicious! Held for investigation!" This was the charge on which we were held. It mattered not that we had committed no crime; it mattered not that we had no connection with thugs and criminals; we were Reds,



Gilbert Lewis on Chain Gang

organizers, advocates of racial equality, advocates of the abolition of wage slavery, advocates of a new system of government. We were therefore dangerous and suspicious. Key-boys, trustees, etc., were not allowed near us, to talk to us. Others could have books, magazines, papers, but we could have nothing, for we were dangerous and suspicious. This is always the charge they place against you when they have no definite charge to make—"Held for investigation!"

There were seven of us in 523-C, an unusually small amount for this cell, with a capacity for about twenty-five. Three of the prisoners had been there for nearly two weeks. There were no charges against them. None would be placed against them. They would simply hold them long enough to make them realize that Birmingham was a bad place for Negroes, especially militant Negroes. Jails, Klan, police terror, swords of Damocles over the heads of the Negro workers. But . . .

One of the three was a coal miner from West Virginia. He had come to Birmingham in search of work in the mines, and had been arrested almost the moment he stepped off the freight. He was a real class-

conscious baby, with such a virile, healthy hate for cops, and especially coal and iron police. I sat on the bunk listening to him and thought of what a fine revolutionist he would make!

They were talking about the South and what a helluva place it is to live in. The thing that pleased me most was that none of them wanted to run away, to go north; they wanted to change the south. Most of them had been north and had lost their illusions.

Arrested with us was a preacher, a small, heavy set fellow, with a crooked ear. He had been caught with a Daily Worker in his hand. He passed to and fro in the cell and gave us, in a soft, mellow voice, a splendid repertoire of Negro spirituals.

But Negro spirituals are no longer new in the south, no longer have the awe-inspiring appeal as in the North, and soon some of the boys began teasing him about his flock. "What are they going to do tomorrow, Rev.?" he was asked. "You won't get any chicken this Sunday!" (This was a Saturday), someone else declared.

Across the way was the cell of the women prisoners. From the window in our lavatory we could look into it. There were about sixty girls, arrested for diverse things, but mostly for prostitution, forced upon them, in many cases, by the merciless onslaught of the economic crisis. Under pretense of using the lavatory, the reverend watched them for nearly two hours.

Being in jail was no great punishment for him under these circumstances, but were he removed to another cell from which he could not see the girls undress for the night, I am sure he would have renounced his god! I was unpleasantly reminded of Somerset Maugham's story "Miss Thompson." In it a reverend, subject to years of repression, of failure to fulfill the natural functions of mankind, had set himself the task of bringing about the regeneration of a prostitute only to rape her when she had come under his influence. Souvenirs of capitalism: Somerset Maugham's reverend, our crooked-ear minister.

Mistakes are sometimes made by the Birmingham police. A guiltless Negro legally or extra-legally lynched for an alleged rape only to have the woman confess she lied after his death; a Negro shot to death on a dark and deserted street because of his "striking resemblance" to a cop's memory-picture of a police album character. . . mistake, dire, beastly, frequent. . .

Smaller mistakes are also some-



Birmingham's Rock Pile

times made. My being brought from the city jail to the police station on Monday to be finger-printed after having been photographed and finger-printed on Saturday was also a "mistake."

"What you bring that nigger back here for? We got him Saturday."

"His name wuz on the list."

"Hey, Cole, here's that nigger 'Red' out here."

"Send that black son of a bitch in here."

"Sit down in that chair! 'Round here telling the niggers they is as good as the white peepul."

Employing a rubber hose, after throwing a lighted cigarette in my face, they attempted to impress me with the logic of white supremacy. They failed miserably. With every blow that was placed upon my bare-head I became more convinced that here was a group of men who did not themselves accept the premise of white superiority, but on the contrary, did recognize the potential equality of races and were resorting to such barbarous methods to maintain a position which they recognized as having no base in actual fact.

Later in the day a charge of vagrancy was placed against me and I was taken to the county jail, the real Birmingham jail. They call it the "big rock." They didn't misname it. It is close, hot and stuffy and between you and freedom there are nine locks. Escape seems impossible, though it is said that a condemned man once got as far as the outer wall. I confess frankly I don't believe it. But even so escape was a long way off as the wall is about twelve feet high and the top covered with bottle glass.

Prayer Meetings And Prison Riots.

Holidays (not Sundays) are exceptions. On the Fourth of July we had roast pork, applesauce and pie, plus vegetables. An unfortunate incident, however, nearly spoiled the day for most of us. A preacher (not the one arrested with me) came down to bless the dinner. He started like this: "Lord, bless this state, bless this city, bless the state officials, bless the city officials, etc.," and ended up with a demand that god bless the jail. This remark resulted in a small riot. It was fifteen minutes before the prisoners could be quitted again, and the preacher who had planned to eat with the boys thought better of the matter.

The beds are about what you would expect in any jail. They are not lousy, or at least I did not see any lice, but there is a standing army of cockroaches with numbers and discipline surpassed only by that of the Red Army itself. Their command seems to be to crawl over you at night and keep you from sleeping.

The jail is filled with young workers ranging from the age of 18 to 32. They are charged, with but few exceptions, with very small crimes, petty crimes committed in the act of striving to survive. There is a sort of revolt, a revolt that needs guidance, that needs direction, that needs to be marshalled into the channels of revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Talk with them in their cells and you are irresistibly drawn to this conclusion.

They take you out of the "bull pen" where you are all together and lock you into your small cells every day at four o'clock. The boys then begin singing spirituals, blues, playing cards and occasionally hold church services. The last night I was there they had a prayer meeting—a fine prayer meeting, conducted by a burglar doing a ten year stretch for grand larceny!