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## “Pure Americanism”: The Ku Klux Klan, Nativism, and the Moral Crusade in the Jazz Age

The rebirth of the Klan in 1915 could have been easy and smooth, but W. J. Simmons, who established the second Klan, together with many supporters of that idea, had to work hard to bring the Invisible Empire to its unbelievable growth in the 1920s. The old enemy, the African American population of the USA, was not enough to warrant building a strong and sizeable organization. Thus, the Klan had to focus on new enemies and draw attention of as many Americans as possible to the new “threats.” To be successful the organization had to spread beyond the South, the territory of the activity of the original Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan was extraordinarily present and conspicuous, very well advertised, and it often inflated or, alluding to the burning cross, rather inflamed the fears expressed by many Americans. W. J. Simmons employed professionals led by Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler who helped promote the Klan as the defender, protector and fighter for true America. The enemies of America were the enemies of the Klan. America, as promoted by the Klan, had to, traditionally, keep African Americans in their place, and, now also, fight new immigrants, mostly Catholics and Jews, trace Communists, and strongly oppose any manifestation of immoral behavior.

In the light of the last postulate the Klan emerged as a defender and guardian of the conservative, Victorian civilization, of the traditional America in the era of modernity. The activities of the Klan in this field made a significant chapter in the history of the moral revolution fed by the growth of relativity. What had been certain yesterday was not necessarily certain today. As Henry Steele Commager wrote in his classic work: “Marriage came to seem more tentative, virtue more relative, and parental control less authoritative than have been assumed even a generation earlier, and the Seventh Commandment, long the most rigorously enforced, came to be regarded almost as irreverently as the Third and the Fourth” (428). And the Klan fighting this wave of immorality was strongly supported by religion as always organically connected with the sphere of ethical living. The Klan list of the immoral behavior to be fought included, first of all, heavy drinking, bootlegging, visiting nightclubs, scandalous sexual behavior of any sort, wearing obscene clothes and improper interracial relations, especially between people of opposite sex.

To learn about and act against immorality local Klan organizations first examined the community in which they existed and, next, reacted accordingly. The mechanism of that scrutiny and adequate action is well described by Arnold S. Rice:

Every Knight considered himself a detective whose duty it was to do about the community spying on the morals of his fellow residents, the objects of the surveillance being entirely unaware of it, as only Klansmen knew who the members of the order were. When the chapter met, every Knight reported the information he had collected on his neighbors' morals. The assembled body then passed judgment on each case, after which it decided the course of action necessary and proper for the reforming of immorality. (27)

As far as bootlegging, moonshining and drinking were concerned, certain areas and communities proved especially sensitive to that kind of evil. A good example is oil boom places. As one of the papers reported, "[b]ooze has been sold right over the bar, and every known kind of vice has been going full sway.... All night long... women can be seen on the downtown streets with men in a drunken condition."<sup>1</sup> In one of the songs devoted to the actions of the Invisible Empire, entitled "Ku Ku: The Klucking of the Ku Klux Klan," the author of the lyrics alluded to the so-called "tar and feathers" applied as a punishment to those who drank alcohol, breaking the prohibition law. The lyrics published in 1922 contained the following fragment:

They'll dress you like a chicken put feathers on  
your chest,  
Ku, Ku, Ku, Ku  
They will get you if they can,  
So don't drink wine and don't drink home-  
made beer  
if you do you're surely going to hear  
Ku, Ku, Ku,  
That's the klucking of the Ku Klux Klan. (Crew 270)

All sins related to alcohol were condemned by Protestant clergymen who often supported and almost always got the support of the Klan. In Texas, one of the local ministers emphasized the hypocrisy of the citizens who officially supported prohibition but at the same time turned their town into "a wide open gambling city and a wide open saloon.

<sup>1</sup> El Dorado *Daily Tribune* quoted in Alexander 31.

And our daughters are going with young men who are drinking and our sons are fast becoming gamblers” (quoted in Lay 63). El Paso, a city booming in the 1920s, like many others, due to the new oil resources, had to deliver fun to the hard-working men. As a cradle of immorality, it soon became a perfect target for the Klan. Though the local officials, many of whom made big money on alcohol and gambling, tried to suppress the Invisible Empire announcing it illegal, the Klan responded with a recruiting action in the town finding quite satisfactory response from a group of new supporters. After that success the Klan sent some letters to local newspapers announcing itself as a “‘moral correction agency’... whose sole purpose was ‘to make El Paso a better and cleaner city’” (quoted in Lay 75). The Klan was wise enough to examine legal and moral problems of the community, to place them in a letter, and to publish the list in the *El Paso Herald*. Among such vices as prostitution and burglary there was also bootlegging flourishing on the border nearby. The members of the Klan appealed to the local ministers trying to convince them that what they did was nothing but the same what the Klan did: both took care of decency and morality.

The second Klan, backed by many Protestant ministers, was a strong

bulwark against ‘modernism.’ The wearing of short skirts by women and the ‘petting’ in parked automobiles and dancing in smoke-filled rooms by both sexes were indications of an erosion of traditional customs and values. At the root of the problem was ‘Demon Rum.’ The Eighteenth Amendment had supposedly banished liquor from the United States forever; in actual practice the Volstead law lacked adequate enforcement provisions.... The illicit manufacture and sale of intoxicants assumed immense proportions.... The Invisible Empire unhesitatingly affirmed that it stood foursquare for law enforcement and against bootleggers, moonshiners, and ‘wild women.’ (Jackson 17)

“Wild women,” as the author of the above statement called them, were under close inspection of the Klan. Prostitutes, women drinking to excess, white women befriending black men, and those who wore short skirts captured meticulous attention of the Empire. In 1921, “in Tenaha, Texas, a woman believed to have been committing adultery was seized, stripped of her clothing, and tarred and feathered.... A woman from Goose Creek, was kidnapped by hooded and robed men who cut off her hair and tacked the tresses to the post in the center of town” (Rice 28). In fact what the Klan, the Protestant ministers, and many conservative housewives and husbands witnessed in the twenties was what Kathryn Lee Seidel called “[t]he new morality of the Jazz Age” (26), a morality “which presented the flapper and the career woman as radical alternatives to the traditional roles of wife, mother, spinster, and belle” (29). And the Klan publicly de-

fended those traditional roles. “Klan publications condemned ‘women [who] blaspheme God by disobeying their husbands,’ stating that ‘citizenship for our young American women includes the essential duty of motherhood,’ advising ‘5 or 6 children’ per family” (Newton 47).

The Klan’s traditional picture of the woman, the picture it tried to save and defend was the same as one could come across in “The Southern Belle Primer”:

1. Accept the natural distinction between sexes, e. g. women as weak, men as strong. . . .
2. Be virginal until you have targeted the Lord and Master of your choice and then practice chaste, which is to say coy, sexuality.  
...
3. Always remain pious, polite, charming, enthusiastic, forgiving of nature, and sunny of disposition with a soupcon of sentimentality. (Swift 4)

In 1923 a new organization emerged, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). And soon the membership of the ladies’ chapter of the Invisible Empire reached 250,000, being close to 500,000 in its heyday. Many women of the Klan, among them a great number of spinsters and widows, shared their Klan friends’ and husbands’ opinions on tradition and morality but, one should admit, there were also those who supported more independence for America’s fairer sex.

The male Klan members usually showed much reserve towards any participation of women in the organization, or openly opposed such ideas. As Kathleen M. Blee put it, “[i]n the 1920s, the incorporation of women into the Klan, even in gender-segregated Klan groups, was met with derision and hostility by many Klansmen who saw the Klan as a bulwark against all forms of ‘immoral modernism,’ including the expansion of women’s rights” (107). The incorporation of women in the Klan was also criticized by the opponents of the Empire who simply “ridiculed the KKK for bringing women into politics, out of the home where they rightfully belonged” (107). Women of the Klan focused on fighting vice and immorality, at the same time reminding Americans of the significance of family life. In a 1924 song devoted to the women of the Klan, they are “Daughters of America protecting Liberty / Chastity of woman and the white supremacy” (Crew 125). In these lyrics published in 1928 one saw the ladies of the Invisible Empire as true protectors of virtue and morality:

**Chorus**

We are the ladies of the Ku Klux Klan,  
Fighting the immorality of man;

...

All true Americans are knocking at our doors,  
 Soon devils will howl and imps bend the knee,  
 To the Ku Klux ladies and morality.

**Verse 2**

If you love virtue help us increase  
 And then in the future immorals will cease;  
 Virtue will sit on the throne with love,  
 And angels will bless us from heaven above;  
 For upholding virtue and true womanhood... (Crew 220)

The Ku Klux Klan’s fight for a moral America was, as a matter of fact, a fight for an America that was Protestant, Anglo-Saxon and White; in other words, an America that was one hundred percent clean. The idea of cleanliness and true Americanism took on the proportions of an obsession. R. S. Ezekiel, in the introduction to his study of racism, puts into words the following way of thinking of a Klansman and a Nazi:

I am a member of the white race. My people built this civilization, built this country. We have the intelligence and the initiative for the task. Our blood is different and special. Our heritage has been taken from us... The enemy plans the full destruction of my race’s genius – its blood – through racial mixture. (xvii)

The fear of “evil” Germans after America entered the Great War as much as the fear of immigrants, communists and advocates of social liberalism led the Klan to become a devoted propagator of the idea of defining and defending their 100% Americanism. Many, driven by a big thirst to belong to some larger group, bought the idea of “100% pure.” The songs praising the Invisible Empire more and more frequently alluded to “true Americanism”:

Here’s to the Klan,  
 Here’s to the Klan.  
 Loyal Knights of Ku Klux Klan,  
 Loyal Sons of Uncle Sam,  
 One Hundred Percent American... (Crew 41)

In 1924 some song writer supporting the Klan entitled his lyrics simply *100%*. In the final verse the Klan becomes a synonym of all Americans:

Come on ye loyal Klansman,  
 We’ll show them we will stick,  
 And save this land of liberty, in spite of every trick;

The Klans are all Americans, the Klans are here to stay,  
We'll fight to keep our freedom,  
In the good old U.S.A. (Crew 124)

The same year in a song book entitled *A Few 100% Selections*, the Chorus is supposed to sing the following:

It is not our consolation,  
Heart to heart, hand to hand,  
'Till the polls we reach together  
To vote for clean Americans. (Crew 71)

The song persuading the people to vote for “clean Americans” is a part of the political propaganda in which the Klan appears as a significant adviser for whom Americans should vote. Historians often emphasize the unprecedented role the Klan played in various elections; local, state and national. In the 1920s, the heyday of the organization, the influential Klan was able to make the voters choose the candidates it strongly supported, “to put men who are 100 per cent American in charge of the affairs of the nation...” (quoted in Rice 33). The Grand Dragon of the Realm of Kansas advised on the state elections in the following way:

Of course you realize that it is necessary for us to move in solid formation if we [are to] bring about the results we all desire. Therefore, it is considered best for all of us to refrain from pledging our support as an individual to any candidate, until after all information has been assembled, and the Klansmen in the state have expressed a sentiment for certain candidates. After this has happened it will then be very essential that we all support the same candidate, in so far as political party alignment will permit. (quoted in Rice 33)

Even President Coolidge, who was far from racism, was likely beguiled into the idea of true Americanism when he announced: “America must be kept American.”<sup>2</sup> Signed in 1924 by Calvin Coolidge, the Johnson–Reed Act, which significantly limited immigration, was designed not without the influence of the Invisible Empire.

On August 9, 1925, the Klan, convinced of the support of many white Americans managed to organize a big marching parade in the capital of the United States. The Klansmen, many of them carrying American flags, were proud of the great day, in fact,

<sup>2</sup> Miller 148. See also the description of the 1923 Kokomo Klan revival meeting, during which the motto “America for Americans” was accentuated; Coughlan II, 170, 171.

the last such great day in the history of the Empire. The time that followed was marked by the growing crisis and gradual shrinkage of the organization.

One can think about the reasons for the final crisis of the Klan that brought to an end its unbelievable popularity and influence. The success achieved in the first half of the 1920s under the banner of morality and true Americanism became meaningless towards the end of the decade. The reason for the breaking up of this once enormously strong institution comprises both the Klan and the Nation. Many problems of the early twentieth century lost their significance in a more and more prosperous America. Americans finally accepted the offers of modernism as set against the conservatism of the Klan. The Klan also lost its believers due to its own bigotry and cynicism. The reasons for the decay of the Klan corresponded to the general characteristics of the jazz age as described by Henry Steele Commager who saw it as the decade of “prosperity, materialism, and cynicism” (433). Some influential Klan members perverted the ideals they publicly advertised, especially in the sphere of morality. Chester L. Quarles, in his study of the Klan, entitled one of the sections “Klan Immorality,” focusing on the bigotry and hypocrisy of the leading Klansmen. He described the famous or rather infamous case of the Grand Dragon of Indiana, D. C. Stephens, who, being “known for his frequent parties and libertine attitude towards girls and women” (70) was formally accused of kidnapping and raping Madge Oberholzer, a young woman he was strongly attracted to. When two weeks later the woman died, the charge was changed into murder (70). Caleb Ridley, a popular spokesman of prohibition was arrested for driving under influence.<sup>3</sup> “The *World* also reported that King Kleagle and Mrs. Tyler [the people who turned the Klan into a well-operated business institution] had once been arrested in their bedclothes in an Atlanta disorderly house operated by the lady” (Miller 144).

One of the persons who traced the wrongdoing of the Klan was Henry L. Mencken, a literary critic, essayist and editor. *The American Mercury*, an influential and innovative journal run by Mencken, dared publish numerous articles about and by Afro-Americans, though Mencken’s “attitude towards blacks was a mixture of egalitarianism and patronizing superiority (Miller 244), and also denounce the Invisible Empire. In March 1928 the journal published a short story by a W. A. S. Douglas entitled “Ku Klux.” The story focused on and summed up several significant aspects of the Second Klan which are at the core of our interest.

The narrator returns to a small, now deserted, Oklahoma village he used to inhabit for some time during the oil boom. He wants to learn about Adam Kapechik, a Polish man whom he remembers well from his last stay. Lizzie, who runs a place in which it is

<sup>3</sup> See MacLean 98, Sobieraj 87.

possible to buy some beer in spite of the Anti-Saloon League activity, suspects him of belonging to the Klan, but he denies: “‘Not by a damn sight’.... ‘In the first place I am ineligible – born in the Old Country and therefore not a 100% American. Second place, I’m agin ‘em’” (Douglas 272). The woman informs him about the death of Adam, killed by the Ku Klux Klan. The narrator, inquiring about the man, walks to the cemetery where on a granite shaft he notices the following inscription:

Sacred to the Memory of Adam Kapechik,  
Late Private, United States Marine Corps.  
Born in Poland, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1894.  
Died in this City, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1924.  
He fought as a volunteer in the army of his  
adopted country during the World War and was  
severely wounded in the engagement with the  
enemy at Chateau Thierry. He was twice deco-  
rated for individual heroism. (273)

The local Klan that so often punishes people for immoral behavior is led by a man named Faulkner who loves women and booze, and who finally lands in prison for murder. Once ignored and humiliated by a pretty young woman he is attracted to, he takes revenge on the girl who is severely beaten by the Klansmen. The girl is found by the roadside by Adam who carries her to town, thus probably saving her life. Next morning, a day before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade, Adam got “‘completely out of his mind: ‘He had swiped an old machine gun, pretty well shot. And one of the packages was a hundred rounds of ammunition. Also, he took his rifle and bayonet out of the company rack’” (278). The parade was led by the Klansmen and after Adam had shot two of the robed men his machine-gun jammed. That enabled the sheriff to take off “‘his nightie and pillow-case” and run after Adam, finally killing the Polish war hero.

Instead of delivering one more article on the Invisible Empire, this time *The American Mercury* published a short story which probably attracted more readers. The Klan as the protector of 100% Americanism and the savior of morality was ridiculed. The readers could see clearly that what the Klan publicly advertised was a mask. Under the mask one could recognize the faces of bigots and hypocrites greedy for power and influence. The Polish hero, furious about the action of the Klan, was killed by the Sheriff – a Klansman, symbolically, on the Fourth of July, the national holiday, the day celebrating American ideals. The song sung by the participants of the parade, including the Klansmen, now seems bitter, false and blasphemous:



God of Eternity,  
 Guide, guard our great country,  
 Our homes and store.  
 Keep our great state to Thee,  
 Its people right and free,  
 In us Thy glory be  
 Forevermore. (279)

Willa Cather, an outstanding American fiction writer, dramatically noticed: “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (Miller 171), or, one should rather say, the old order based on tradition was gone, the new one fed by prosperity and materialism emerged. The jazz age was a stage on which extremely conservative defendants of the old, with the Klansmen as significant exponents, failed trying to limit the space of the new stars who believed in freedom of all kinds, and among them the stars who also, literally, played their roles in Hollywood, “a colony of... people [who commit] debauchery, riotous living, drunkenness, ribaldry, dissipation [and] free love” (quoted in Miller 242), as one of the U. S. Senators, surely a conservative defendant of the passing world, desperately announced.

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