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Night in the Yard

By TOM WICKER

ATTICA, N. Y.—Broken glass underfoot, piled barricaded tables, a faint lingering whiff of tear gas; and in the echoing darkness the still figures of men with heads swathed in towels to resemble Arab headdress: "Right on, Brother!" someone murmurs.

We pass through a door and stumble two-by-two down concrete steps past a burnt-out guard post to a shadowy exercise yard. This is No Man's Land, "controlled" by convicts in revolt but too exposed to guards' rifles and binoculars and too far from the prisoners' hostages to be safe territory.

Fires flicker from oil drums atop low, flat rooftops surrounding the exercise yard, and here and there flash-

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light beams pick out alert faces, many of them framed in football helmets painted white or orange.

Rapidly, convict "security" takes over and with much counting of heads and almost exaggerated courtesy hurries the long line of invited "visitors"—more than twenty of them—past two steel doors and into the midst of the prison rebellion at Attica Correctional Facility, one of the biggest such uprisings on record.

Curving in a long line from the entrance toward the dark rise of D-Block are the inmates—arms locked, shoul-

der to shoulder, each man facing in the opposite direction from the two to which he is linked. Beyond this solid human barrier are the faceless hundreds of others—and somewhere in the darkness, huddled on mattresses within a tight ring of wooden benches, the thirty-odd corrections officers being held hostage.

This is another world—terrifying to the outsider, yet imposing in its strangeness—behind those massive walls, in this murmurous darkness, within the temporary but real power of desperate men. "Nobody gonna be hurt," the helmeted security men are saying soothingly, but it is not reassuring; it only reminds that in this dark world, the powerless have taken power.

A few feet from the D-Block building, a long line of tables has been set up. On the wall side, in the light from reading lamps taped to the wall, and that from a few regular outdoor lamps higher up, what appears to be a leadership committee is waiting. Its members are warily cordial, shaking hands firmly, welcoming the visitors as "brothers," but watching them with hard, suspicious eyes.

Brother Herb, a veteran of revolt in the infamous Tombs, is holding the single small microphone in the glare of a floodlamp; like most of the inmates, he is wearing a prison blanket cut like a poncho. Bull-shouldered and hoarse, with the remarkable eloquence that characterizes most of the inmate speakers, Herb has told the visitors in an earlier, daylight visit: "I am Attica."

Now, laying down the prisoners' demands to loud cheering and shouts of "Right on!" Herb is skillfully heightening his brothers' morale; what the visitors are hearing, he says, is "but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed; when you are the anvil you bend but when you are the hammer you strike."

And Brother Richard, his brown impassive face glistening in the strange light, tells his listeners that it is the guards and the troopers outside who have the bullets and the machine guns, and it is the inmates who are safeguarding the lives of the hostages—"We are the only civilized men here."

See also Francis X. Clines, NYTimes, this date.

But Brother Flip—in fact, he confides to a visitor, his name is Charles Horatio Crowley—is the most eloquent, and the most realistic. "We no longer wish to be treated as statistics, as numbers. We want to be treated as human beings, we will be treated as human beings!"

But Flip knows better, in his prison-wise heart. "If we cannot live as people," he concludes, in a silence so deep his voice rings back from the walls, "we will at least try to die like men."

Suddenly, from the lighted windows of C-Block in the distance, shouts, screams, a strange banging and clashing of metal against metal.

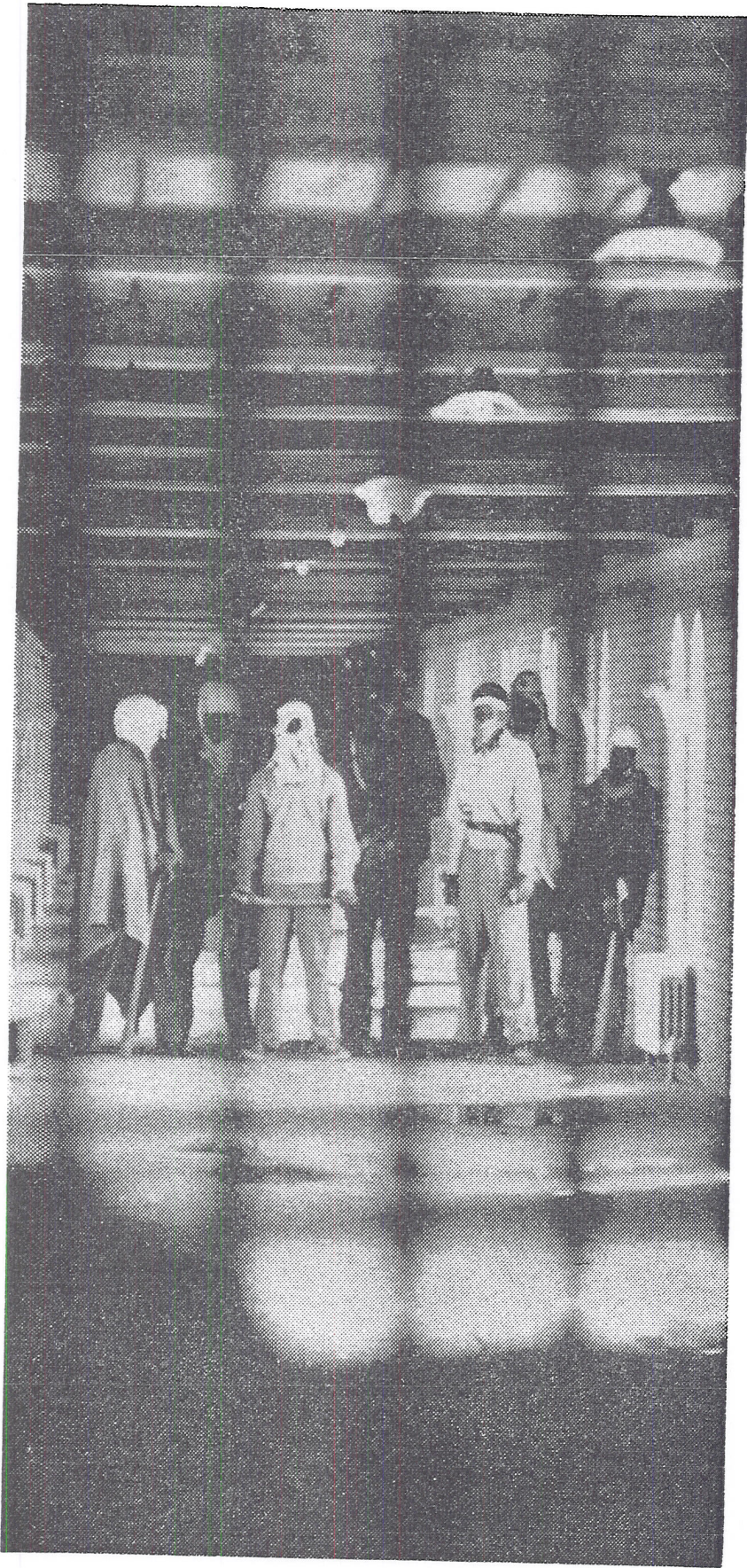
"Our brothers!" someone shouts. "They beatin' up our brothers!"

Voices take up the cry, running feet pound along the top of the low surrounding corridor buildings. The lights go out. On top of the table between the committee and the visitors, men appear as swiftly and silently as cats, and stand with feet braced apart, tense, staring beyond the human chain of "security." One man on the table is holding a tear-gas launcher, with a cannister in place.

"Just step around the table, Brother," a voice murmurs. "Just step around there now. Nobody gonna get hurt."

With the table, too, between the visitors and the unseen yelling masses of men in the yard, long tense minutes pass. Gradually the din from C-Block fades, and beyond the table and the security chain, an eerie quiet returns to the yard. The lights come on, and the visitors scramble back to their side of the table.

"They not coming in," says Brother Flip. "Not yet awhile."



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