

AN ANTI-LYNCHING LAW

On the night of December 4 a mob in Salisbury lynched and burned a Negro who had murdered a business man a few hours earlier. The Negro was taken through the streets from a hospital to the courthouse green. The procession was observed by many persons. And the lynching on the courthouse green was in the presence of a large crowd. Indeed, it was stated immediately afterward that policemen found it necessary to regulate traffic on the outskirts of the crowd.

On Friday, three months and a half later, the grand jury of Wicomico county, after examination of more than 100 witnesses, reported that it found "absolutely no evidence that can remotely connect anyone with the instigation or perpetration of the murder." Thus the town in which occurred one of the most bestial outbreaks of mob violence on record stands powerless after this invasion of its law and of its civilization. More than that, the State of Maryland stands helpless with the disgrace written across its name. For, under existing law, it could act only in conjunction with the local authorities, and really at their sufferance, and apparently it can take no further steps.

The State should be freed of this disability. Governor Ritchie should take the lead in framing a State-wide anti-lynching law, under which the State authorities could move swiftly and surely to investigate and to punish such outbreaks, regardless of the action of county officials. In our neighbor State to the south, Virginia, there is such a law, enacted during the Byrd administration in 1928, which might be taken as a working model. It places the burden of detection and punishment of lynchers on the State and it authorizes the use of ample funds; also, it subjects lynchers to civil liability to the personal representatives of the man lynched.

No law can be so effective, of course, as a civilized public opinion in stamping out these disgraces, but a stern State-wide anti-lynching law, in the hands of a stern Governor, would provide the means of making lynching too dangerous to be engaged in by the low and cowardly breed of men which forms mobs.