

Justice in the Foothills

By CLEMENT WHITE

STARR and Collins were apathetic throughout their brief, dramatic trial. Following the jury's verdict of first degree murder, their sullen demeanor became an integral part of their beings.

They did not show emotion when the sheriff and deputies prepared them for the trip to State's prison to await execution.

Heavily manacled, Starr's left wrist chained to Collins' right, they huddled in the automobile ready for the journey to Mills Junction, where the officers planned to take a through train to the penitentiary.

The weather matched the prisoners' mood. A drizzle dampened the car and its occupants, while great fog banks shrouded the hills. As the car nosed its way along the trail, the mist gradually turned to rain. The sheriff was nervous.

"The road's getting slippery; we'd best put on the chains," he told the deputy. "I'd hate to skid over one of these cliffs. It'd be the finish, I reckon."

Inspection of the tool-box showed the chains were missing.

"We must have left them in the garage," apologized the driver. "The trail ahead isn't any worse than the part we have come over; it's as safe to go forward as to return."

"Go slow, then," replied the sheriff. "I don't fancy this trip. I'd forgotten how ornery this road is."

The car swerved from side to side in spite of the driver's efforts. He was slowing up for a steep descent, when the heavy machine left the trail. It spun suddenly, like a thing bewitched, hurling its occupants over the side of a chasm, while it rolled over and over on its way to destruction in the boulder-studded bottom.

The sheriff and deputies followed the car to the canyon bottom, where Starr and Collins would have joined them, only, as they dropped over the canyon wall, they passed on opposite sides of a stunted cedar. The chain which bound them together held securely, and they

were suspended in the air, kicking desperately, almost tearing the tree from its precarious root-hold. Starr hooked a toe over a jutting rock; inch by inch they worked their way to the canyon's rim, and were back on the trail when darkness fell.

Starr was panting; but was not nearly so winded as Collins. He set the pace through the gloom, heading for the foothills to the north. They reasoned that hours would pass before their escape was discovered. Moreover, pursuing posses would be at a disadvantage among the trackless foothills.

The following night they crossed a small stream at a gravel bar and spied a dead fish lying on the bank. Throwing themselves flat on their stomachs, they devoured it in great bites; for with the exception of a rabbit, which a surprised bob cat had dropped, this was their first meal since their escape.

Because of the chain which linked them together, they formed close partnership. Neither could lie down, sit down or arise without the consent of the other. Bitterly they cursed the links of steel which turned their waking hours into a series of mishaps.

So far, posses had not appeared on their trail. This was not strange, considering the wide expanse of sparsely settled country which must be searched. The fugitives were in little dread of men; but, waking or sleeping, they could not rid their minds of the thought of avenging dogs. The anticipation of bloodhounds caused a cold sweat to dampen Starr's clothes, while Collins gritted his teeth and lunged forward with desperate steps. Both men knew of the dogs, half bloodhound, half mastiff, that were owned by a rancher near Mills Junction. It was the boast of the country that these terrible dogs seldom lost a trail, and, when loosed unmuzzled, had been known to rend fugitives limb from limb.

Starr and Collins had one hope. Some years ago Starr had spent several weeks with a renegade hermit, who had a shack in the woods beyond the foothills. If they could reach his shack he would re-

move their manacles. He might be dead, or he might have moved, but the fugitives hoped against hope that he would be ready to aid and hide them.

The nights were cool in the foothills; but the days were hot. Berries were abundant, hanging dead ripe on countless bushes, providing food. When they stopped to rest they worked persistently at their manacles. If they could sever the chain which bound them wrist to wrist, their progress would be easier and safer. This much accomplished, they might devise a way to remove the handcuffs. They dragged the chain back and forth over flint rocks. They worked and strained and pulled; but the stout links refused to yield. After each trial, Starr and Collins arose cursing, and continued their flight toward the north.

EARLY one morning both men paused simultaneously, holding their breath while they listened. From the south floated a faint echo which froze the blood in their veins. Again the sound echoed. It was the baying of a hound. The baying increased in loudness, as the pursuit grew closer.

Starr and Collins crashed through the brush to a small rock pile; gasping and moaning they dragged their wearied bodies on top of the rocks, and saw the hounds lope through the brush into an open space. The great dogs were unmuzzled. As the fugitives cringed before the attack, the triumphant baying of the hounds gave place to a plaintive whimper. The great dogs paused in their tracks; the hair bristled on their backs, while their tails sank between their legs. Their brute instinct had warned them of a peril which tearing fangs would not guard against.

A wolf had emerged from the brush to the north of Starr and Collins, and its bared fangs, the fetid slaver streaming from its jaws, the eyes staring balefully and the dull, upstanding hair showed that the wolf was mad.

The dogs fled from its approach, but the men were in the path of the frenzied animal. They tried to leap away from the dripping jaws which slashed them;

but were bitten in several places before a kick disabled the animal.

Hope fled from the hearts of the fugitives as they examined their wounds. They were haunted with the spectre of approaching madness.

They cursed and fought and strained on the chain until their wrists were torn and bleeding. They rolled on the ground and wept, then arose and continued their efforts with the chain.

The presence of each became decidedly objectionable to the other. Who would be the first victim of rabies? This question drove them to frenzied pulling and straining. The thought uppermost in the mind of each was a consuming desire to become separated from his companion. They fought the chain at intervals throughout the night, then continued their desperate journey.

The morning sun stole over the brooding hills. Wild animals feasted, gambled and basked in the golden sunshine. A fisher emerged from a pool with a fish in its mouth, saw the fugitives, then fled. Grouse went about their affairs undisturbed, and a great eagle sailed in wide circles through the azure air.

Peace rested over wild things; but in the hearts of the two men raged an Inferno. They knew they were to die, and in a measure they comprehended the manner of their death.

As they paused to eat berries they eyed each other sharply, kneeling by the bushes, scratching their faces with brambles as they devoured the watery food. The berries sustained life; but did not strengthen them. Their bodies gradually weakened; but this weakness did not lessen the feverish vigor of their minds.

Each knew what the other was thinking. The one who showed the first symptoms of rabies would be killed, if possible, by his companion.

One afternoon they trudged through a thicket and approached a babbling brook. Hours had elapsed since their last drink, and Starr sank to the ground, eagerly gulping the water.

His thirst quenched, he glanced at Collins, then his body stiffened. Collins was not drinking. His eyes were becoming dull and fixed. A shiver shook his form as they regained their feet. The shaking spells recurred, his spasms becoming more intense.

Suddenly he gave an unearthly shriek and bared his teeth at Starr, who leaped aside in fright, swinging Collins around and around, his fright adding strength to his muscles. Panting and exhausted, they crouched on the ground, glaring and whimpering.

Another spasm shook Collins as they crossed a ridge. He tried to bite and tear Starr's arm. Remembering a fighting trick he had learned in the lumber camps, Starr lunged, with his left knee extended, striking Collins in the stomach. They fell to the ground, Collins made temporarily helpless from the blow. Starr again drove his knee into the mad man's abdomen. Collins raised his head, and Starr dashed his own head against it, the impact driving Collins' head against a sharp stone and rendering him unconscious.

A new difficulty arose; for Starr could not free himself from the helpless body. Its weight hindered his progress as he moved from bush to bush, greedily devouring berries.

When he lay down to rest, the mad man was beside him. He dare not fall asleep while expecting his companion's return to consciousness.

The next day the increasing horror of his predicament caused him to grow hysterical. He called for help, and listened in terror to the lonesome echoes.

Toward evening he saw that Collins was dying. The approaching darkness caused him to stumble and fight through the brush, dragging the burden alongside him.

He came to a rusted spur of track, abandoned since the lumber mill at Rafter had closed. The sight of the rusty rails, and the warmth of the rising sun served to clear his mind; he remembered that the hermit's shack was north of this track.

As he stumbled along, making slow headway, he felt a change creeping over him. He was near a brook and passed a pool of water, and recoiled in fright from its limpid coolness. Spasms shook him and he looked for something to rend and tear. During lucid intervals, between spasms, he struggled grimly through the brush. Each attack was leaving him weaker.

When evening came he looked upon imaginary sights which added to his desperation. His mad brain showed foul vampires flapping through the air about him, throwing water from their wings. And from every side hideous imps called his name, extending vessels of water and inviting him to drink. He sought to slay them; but they recoiled with demoniac grins, only to renew their torments. He thought Collins arose, gazed at him with cadaverous eyes, and asked him to hurry to a pool where they could drink and splash and swim. With bared teeth, Starr showed his displeasure at such an invitation.

He was panting now, and darkness had fallen. His tormentors still offered him water; but between spasms he made slow progress, until a light appeared in the darkness. Gradually the vague outlines of a cabin showed close at hand.

Starr was more normal; he cried with joy at the thought of his relief when the hermit had severed the chains which bound him. Once free, he would smite his tormentors.

He reached the window through which the light streamed, thrust his head through the opening and groaned. The hermit was cleaning a pistol, which he dropped in fright as Starr's grouse reached his ears. He saw the face in the window, the lips spread in an awful grimace, showing blood stained teeth, and the sunken, discolored cheeks and staring, glazed eyes—a grisly spectre.

The hermit screamed. His hand reached behind him and grasped a rifle, which flew to his shoulder as the apparition strove to speak.

The rifle rang and Starr lay down to rest, as though soothed by the echoes reverberating among the hills.

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