



All Rights Reserved By HDM For This Digital Publication  
Copyright 2001 Holiness Data Ministry

Duplication of this CD by any means is forbidden, and  
copies of individual files must be made in accordance with  
the restrictions stated in the B4UCopy.txt file on this CD.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Digital Edition 11/23/2001  
By Holiness Data Ministry**

\* \* \* \* \*

# **MIRACLES ON THE GALLOWES**

**By Duane V. Maxey**

\* \* \* \* \*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This compilation is taken directly from the 2700-Plus Sermon Illustrations collection, and involves 3 stories: about the hangings of Will Purvis, John Lee, a youth named Viana, and Il Diavolo Cardinella. Perhaps the story about John Lee is the most extraordinary, although that of Will Purvis is also very remarkable. The story of Viana and Il Diavolo Cardinella illustrates human contriving, whereas the first 2 stories seem to point strikingly to miraculous, Divine intervention.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PART 1 -- WILL PURVIS**

The following true story appears to be a remarkable instance in which God miraculously preserved an innocent man.

The miracle occurred at Columbia, Miss., on February 7, 1894, when Will Purvis, a 21-year-old farmer, was hanged. In Marion County in 1893, a secret band was terrorizing planters and Negroes. The men called themselves White Caps and their latest crime was to horsewhip a Negro who had left a widow's farm to work for Jim and Will Buckley for more money than the widow could afford to pay. The Negro recognized some of his torturers, and the BUCKLEYS announced that they would report the names to the grand jury.

The White Caps threatened the Buckleys with death if they did, but Jim and Will were brave and angry men. Unarmed, they went to town and testified before the grand jury. The White Caps ambushed them on the way home. Will Buckley dropped from his horse, shot to death; Jim escaped. He said that two men had hidden behind a clump of bushes, and that the one who fired the fatal shot was Will Purvis.

Will Purvis was from an old family for whom the nearby town of Purvis was named. Three relatives and two neighbors testified that he was at home when the murder was committed. His shotgun hadn't been fired for months. But the jury doubted the testimony of relatives and friends, and the verdict was "Guilty." Purvis was sentenced to be hanged.

On the day of the hanging, 3000 men, women and children thronged the scene at Court House Square. The Sheriff and his deputies, experienced in their duties, had seen to it that the trap door and the rope were carefully tested with sandbags, and the hangman's knot expertly tied. Everything was ready. Will Purvis was led up the steps. Deputy sheriffs tied his hands behind him, tied his ankles together. One held the black hood ready. The Sheriff, who had arrested Will and believed firmly in his guilt, asked grimly, "Would you like to say anything?" In a clear, cool voice, Will declared, "I didn't do it. There are men out there who could save me if they would."

Near the Court House steps was Rev. W. S. Sibley, pastor of the Columbia Methodist Church. He had visited Purvis in jail and converted him; until then, Will had belonged to no church. The minister believed the condemned man was innocent, and so did scores of others. Throughout the months while Will's futile appeals to higher courts were being heard, Rev. Sibley and church members prayed for him every Wednesday night in the little church. At first only a handful came to the meeting, but the attendance grew until the church was crowded. Their one hope was that God would act. The night before the hanging, Rev. Sibley held a prayer meeting by torchlight in the Court House Square where hundreds knelt. After this meeting Rev. Sibley went to pray again with Will. The condemned man, chained to the floor, was completely calm. "I have no worry," he said, "over the destiny of my soul."

The next day, as the black hood was placed over Will Purvis' head, Rev. Sibley and those who doubted Will's guilt again prayed together aloud: "Almighty God, if it be Thy will, stay the hand of the executioner." The black hood was placed over Will Purvis' head. The Sheriff said, "God help you, Will Purvis," and threw the lever. The crowd cried out as the body shot down through the opened trap door and the rope jerked hard.

Then there were screams and shouts as they saw that Purvis lay on the ground under the gallows, the black hood still over his head, his hands and feet still bound. He was very much alive, and the hangman's noose swung high above the open trap door -- empty. What had happened? No one can put a noose tied with a hangman's knot around a man's neck in such a way that the man's head will slip through as his body drops. If the knot slips, the noose becomes tighter. And the Sheriff

performed no trickery, for he believed Will Purvis was guilty. Yet Purvis had fallen free of the noose.

Later he declared, "I heard the door creak, my body plunged down and all went black. When I regained consciousness I heard somebody say, 'Well, Bill, we've got to do it all over again.'" And the two deputies dragged him like a sack of potatoes back up the steps to be hanged again. As they reached for the rope, Rev. Sibley leaped to the scaffold and cried to the crowd, "People of Marion County, the hand of Providence has slipped the noose. Heaven has heard our prayers. What do you say, friends? Shall Will Purvis be hanged again?" "No! No!" they shouted. The miracle had changed their minds. They began to sing, to shout, to praise the Lord.

Undoubtedly they would have rescued Will Purvis had the executioners tried to go on with their work. So the bewildered and frightened Sheriff took Will Purvis back to jail. The Governor, no believer in miracles, ordered an inquiry. The investigators exonerated the Sheriff; the preparations for the hanging, they reported, had been thorough. They couldn't explain why it wasn't successful. But Will Purvis had been sentenced to hang until dead, and the Governor, believing him guilty, refused to commute the sentence.

Will's attorneys pleaded that he had been hanged once and that he could not be hanged again until he was convicted in another trial. However, three appeals were rejected by the State Supreme Court and Will was sentenced to be hanged again on December 12, 1895, nearly two years after his life had been spared. Most men would have lost their minds under month after month of such torture. Will Purvis, praying constantly, was sure that the Lord would save him again.

No new evidence was discovered, but public opinion turned. The God-fearing citizens of the community were convinced that a sign from Heaven had declared Will Purvis' innocence. And now the hand of man took hold. Will was granted an extraordinary favor by officials of Marion County. He was transferred from the strong Columbia jail to the shabby little prison in his home town of Purvis, "so he could be near his friends for the last weeks of his life." Probably the officials were not surprised when, a few days before Will's sentence was to be carried out, a mob overpowered the guards at midnight and rescued him.

The Governor, furious, offered a reward of \$750 for Will's capture and \$250 for evidence that would convict his rescuers. But the rewards were never claimed, although almost everybody knew who had broken into the jail and almost everybody knew that Will was living with kinfolk in the forests and hills.

Then a new governor was elected. During his campaign he had declared that a miracle had been performed, and he had promised to commute Will's sentence. Will gave himself up, and his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Two years later, in response to a petition signed by thousands of citizens, including the District

Attorney who had prosecuted him, Will was pardoned. He was free not because any new evidence had been found but because the majority of the people of Mississippi believed that God had overruled the jury's verdict.

He moved onto a back-country farm, and a few months later married the daughter of a Baptist minister. They became the parents of 11 children. Every Sunday Will and his wife went to church and gave thanks to God for saving his life. And then when Will was 47, the last chapter in this amazing case was written. An old planter named Joe Beard, dying, confessed that he and another member of the White Caps had committed the Buckley murder. The news was a Mississippi sensation and for weeks those who had believed Purvis was innocent went around saying, "I told you so," to those who hadn't. The State Legislature paid Purvis \$5000 to atone for the State's errors.

Will Purvis died two years ago, a respected citizen of his community. Doubt if you will that his life was saved by a miracle. Call it an accident, an accident that might happen once in the history of the world. But Will Purvis has testified, "God heard our prayers. He saved my life because I was an innocent man." Will Purvis believed. And it was his neck. -- "Miracle On The Gallows," Reader's Digest, January, 1945, by Jerome Beatty (Adapted by Beatty from an article by Charles F. Furey in 1934 and from the "True Life Story of Will Purvis" published by Will Purvis in 1935)

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PART 2 -- JOHN LEE**

Incredible as it sounds, a similar miscarriage of a death sentence occurred in England. John Lee, of the village of Babbacombe, in Devon, was accused of the murder of a Mrs. Keyes, who was found hacked to death in her bed. The evidence against Lee was damning, but the prisoner repeatedly said to his guards, "I did not do it. And they can never hang me for it." When the court sentenced him to be strung up, Lee said: "The Lord knows I am innocent. He will never permit me to be executed. He has told me not to be afraid."

On the day of execution, crowds pressed against the fence that enclosed the gallows. A dummy was hanged to test the rope. Judge Marcus Kavanagh of Chicago, who published his investigation of the case in 1932, says witnesses testified to him that the gallows worked perfectly with the dummy. But when guards put the cap on Lee's head and pulled the lever, the trap failed to fall. A warden took the condemned man's place on the trap door. When the lever was pulled, the warden fell through and broke his leg.

Lee was returned to his cell. They tried the dummy again, and it obediently fell through the trap. Then Lee was brought back for a second attempt to hang him. Again the trap door wouldn't work. Now the frightened sheriff telegraphed the Home

Secretary for instructions. The reply came: "Proceed with the execution." By this time, the mob outside the jail was indignant. They thought the whole thing should be called off. But the Home Secretary's orders must be obeyed.

Four successful trials were made with the dummy. Then Lee was put on the trap once more, and the sheriff himself pulled the lever. He pulled it again and again. Lee fainted and was carried back to his cell -- still unchanged. On the following day, a telegram came from the Home Secretary: "The death sentence of John Lee is commuted."

And Lee? Later, his life sentence was also commuted. He came out of prison, married, and turned evangelist, preaching faith in God for the rest of his days. -- Anthony Abbott, Reader's Digest, December, 1945

\* \* \* \* \*

### **PART 3 -- VIANA & IL DIAVOLO CARDINELLA**

The Following story, taken from the December, 1945 Reader's Digest also tells of a possible escape from the death by hanging. However, this story better illustrates how, through clever inventions, the wicked often attempt to share in a deliverance of which only the innocent are worthy. Yet, in the end the wicked will not be delivered with the righteous:

It is doubtful if the whole truth of the following case will ever be known. Back in 1921, a man known in Chicago as Il Diavolo had a band of young thieves for whom he planned holdups. He divided the loot evenly, then gambled with his dupes and got most of the money away from them. Yet they continued to work for him because they feared him. They even killed for him; and that was what got them into trouble. One of them, a youth named Viana, confessed just before he went to his doom on the gallows; and as a result Il Diavolo himself was brought to trial and condemned to death.

In prison, Il Diavolo, whose real name was Cardinella, went on a hunger strike. He lost nearly 50 pounds. No one suspected that this was a trick until, on the night of his execution, there came an anonymous telephone call to police headquarters. A man's voice grated: "Cardinella's friends are going to grab his body right after the hanging and revive him. They know they can do it, because they did it before with Viana."

Quickly guards were posted, especially in the black alley behind the death house. Three minutes before midnight, when Il Diavolo was to swing, the hearse that was to take away the body drove into the alley. With drawn guns, the police seized the driver and opened the hearse. Inside they found a man wearing a doctor's coat and a woman in a nurse's uniform. On a cot was a rubber mattress filled with boiling hot

water. There were heating pads attached to a portable electric battery, an oxygen tank, a shelf of hypodermic syringes and a large basket filled with hot-water bottles.

So it was true. Il Diavolo had fasted so that he would not weigh too much when he was hanged, lessening the danger of breaking his neck. Today, Chicago's underworld still declares that Viana was actually resurrected to prove that the trick could be done. Then, because he had been a squealer, they blew out his brains and threw him into the lake. -- Anthony Abbott, Reader's Digest, December, 1945

\* \* \* \* \*

**THE END**