

THE MAN THEY COULD NOT HANG

John Lee Tells His Personal Story of the Heart-Rending Scene on the Scaffold—Executioner Moved to Tears—Terrible Fliasco Foretold in Dream.

John Lee, sentenced to death twenty-three years ago for the murder of Miss Keyse at Babacombe, gives an authentic account of the terrible scenes which accompanied the execution, which, as he repeated, to carry his sentence into execution.

That morning Lee's lips have been sealed by prison routine, but his memory of every detail of that terrible ordeal is undimmed, and his emotions reproduce themselves with a vivid realism that time has not abated.

To many men it is given to face the prospect of death, sudden and violent, but to stand three times in the presence of destruction, as inevitable and irresistible as the mind of man can devise, is a living penance which Lee, alone of living men, is able to describe.

(Continued from last Friday.)

VII.

Recollections of My Trial.

When the curtain fell at the end of the first part of my history I told how I had just been arrested for the murder of my dear mistress, Miss Keyse.

I now draw aside the curtain again in order that you may follow the second part of the drama. It seems to me as if I were in a strange story that I have been all my life in the grip of fate. For good or for ill, for success or failure, I have been under the influence of a tragic part to play in the drama of life. Perhaps some day when the place is over and the curtain down for ever I shall see the meaning and purpose of it all.

The two scenes which I shall describe to you this week are my trial and my attempted execution. But first there are certain things I must say in order to put myself right with my fellow men, in order to ensure myself that share of justice which is the common heritage of us all. Two charges are being made against me: First, that I killed a woman; second, that I made a direct claim to Divine Intervention on my behalf when I stood on the scaffold in 1885.

There seem to be certain people in this world who derive pleasure from oppressing the outcast. There is no suffering possible to the human heart but they multiply it by all sorts of unkind means. They are, perhaps, come to these people a moment when they too will stand on the brink of destruction. In that time they will remember how they pursued an unhappy man who has suffered during twenty years agony unattainable. May they obtain more mercy than they have shown me. May they at last be finally forgiven.

I do not question the verdict of the jury. On the evidence that was placed before them they could have come to no other conclusion than that I was guilty. Whatever I may think about some of the witnesses, I do not complain about any of them. My fellow men are beyond suspicion. No jury would wickedly send a man to his death. What I do complain about is that even before I was tried, and even while I was being tried, the malice that was shown by certain writers and other individuals was disgraceful. And to these people I again say: May more mercy be shown to you than you showed to me.

As for my wonderful escape from death for they tried three times to execute me and failed, I have only one thing to say. If it be true that the Divine will is manifest in everything that happens, that it is true I may even a cat can fall or a sparrow perch without God's knowledge, then I say that Heaven, and Heaven alone, spared me on that terrible morning. God does not always send an angel with a sword. The planks of the scaffold may have swollen with rain. The carpenter may have bungled his task. My deliverance could have been effected in any way you may choose. I have seen through that carpenter, through that executioner.

I do not propose to say very much about the trial or the execution, which immediately preceded it. They interested me but little. I knew that I was innocent. Besides, I was just a poor fellow, and I was not a lawyer. I knew about it all. What did I know about trials? What do I know about them now?

A trial is a thing so bewildering that it seems to be nothing but one long jumble of words till suddenly the jury says "Guilty," and the judge passes sentence. I often think that the law ought to recognize this. But unfortunately the law only knows crime and the punishment. It takes no count of the man.

Let me put you in the dock for a moment just as I was put in the dock. You are weary and worn after many weeks of confinement, of hurrying to and fro between police stations, jails, police courts, and coroners' inquests. You look tired, pale, and thin. "Ah!" says the law, "Your guilty conscience is making you out!" You tremble with nervous exhaustion. You are full of suspense. You hand shakes. Your voice quivers as you speak. "Ah!" says the public, watching you every move. "Wretch, you are afraid!" Your mind is overwhelmed. You say: "If by some wonderful chance you are able to preserve your fortitude: if the knowledge that you are innocent comes to you, rescue and braces you up; if you betray no emotion, if you smile, what then? 'Wretch! wretch!' is the cry. 'Only the author of so diabolical a murder as this could show such weakness and indifference!'

This is what happened in my case. Since my release I have turned up many of the accounts of my trial, and they all note my unflinching bearing. In some cases the accounts of my conduct are exaggerated.

er's brother. He told me that Mr. Templer was too ill to look after my trial, but that he, the brother, would be present in court.

"Shall I have anything to say, sir?" I asked him. "No," he replied. "Don't you say a word. I'll get you off all right."

VIII.

I Am Sentenced to Death.

When the hour appointed for the trial drew near, I was taken to the court, which was a short distance from the prison. The governor came into my cell and told me to follow him. We went into the prison yard where a carriage was waiting. Into this we got, and we were driven out of the prison.

I have heard that this is the most terrible of all moments. It is, of course, a moment of awful suspense. The jury are all about the box. Every body is watching them to detect if possible some sign of the secret they hold in their hearts. Is it to be "Guilty" and death, or "Not Guilty" and freedom? For my part I was as calm as ever. "Courage, John," I said to myself. "You are in heaven's hands."

I was standing at the dock rail waiting for the judge to speak. At my back were several warders. You could have heard a pin drop. "Guilty!"

Someone asked me if I had anything to say. Yes I had. I remember the words to this hour. Holding myself erect I replied manfully, "I am ready to die, sir!"

Then the judge put on the black cap. How strange he looked—how severe! I felt the warders come closer to me. I forgot what the judge said. There was something about the way he executed his duty, the way he spoke, that I shall never forget saying good-bye to my parents for what I thought was the last time. We talked of the old days, of the days when I was in the navy. I told them not to be afraid; that their John was innocent.

Several clergymen also came to the prison on the Saturday before the execution to see me; but on the advice of the governor they only saw one of them, the then vicar of Abbotsewell, Mr. Hind.

The governor told me I could see them all if I liked, but he suggested that I should only see one vicar of my own parish of Abbotsewell.

I had an idea that the authorities had sent these gentlemen to me in the hope of getting a confession. If one failed the other could try. But I was committed no crime. How could I make a confession?

I did not ask for any reprieve. I sent a statement to the Home Secretary, informing him that I was innocent, and I understood that another petition was going to be sent to the Home Secretary. I was resigned to my fate. I was not afraid.

There was another petition sent round to collect money to pay for my trial. My father told me that my defence cost £50. This petition, I believe, was fairly successful.

I took as much exercise every day as I could in the prison yard. I never saw any of the other prisoners. Indeed I never saw anybody in the yard besides the warders, except on the last Sunday, when there was a little man walking up and down.

The warders looked at me rather curiously, and one of them answered carelessly: "Oh, that's a visitor."

A visitor! I may have been a bumpkin, but I was not a fool. I guessed who the "visitor" was. "That's the executioner," said I to myself, "looking at me to see how much drop I shall want."

This yard was, of course, not the one in which I was to be executed. Of that I had as yet seen nothing.

And now I come to the eve of the execution, Sunday, February 22nd, 1885. I had written my letters. I had done all with worldly ties. Late at night I took a true sacrament, and composed myself for my last sleep on earth, the last before the long, peaceful sleep of death.

And whilst I slept I had a dream. I thought I was on the scaffold. I heard the bolt drawn, but the scaffold would not work. Three times the bolt was drawn, and three times it failed to act. The warden said to me: "You are on the scaffold beside me in my dream. I seemed to be alone in space."

Three Times They Fail to Hang Me. Half-past six!

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The chaplain was indeed there. He had come to pray with me, but when he saw that I was not dressed he went out of the cell and waited up and down the corridor outside till I was ready.

As I was putting on my socks I told the warders about my dream. They did not say a word, but gave me a side look. After a while they left the cell, and the chaplain came in again.

Solemn as that time of prayer was, it might have been still more solemn and precious if I had not been so conscious of my fate. I felt that I was about to die, but I was not afraid. I had done my duty, and I was ready to die.

"Confess!" I replied. "I have nothing to confess. I have finished with this world. I want to think of the things of the next."

I was quite calm. After a while Mr. Pitkin went, and the wardens came back to the cell. The minutes passed. They seemed to be hours. Hark! What was that? The deep boom of the prison bell.

"Doom! Doom! Doom!" it seemed to be saying. Doom! Doom! Doom! It was eight o'clock! For a moment I felt Death's cold fingers about my throat. But only for a moment. Now was the time to show how an innocent man could die.

As the clock struck, the door of my cell opened and in came the governor and Berry, the executioner. With them was the chaplain, robed. Berry stepped forward to shake hands with me, but the governor pushed him

how the people gazed at me. They were watching, I suppose, for some sign of fear or guilt. They were disappointed.

As I sat alone beneath the court I could hear the people talking over. Then as before came the sudden hush. Once more a key turned in a lock. Once more I was taken back to the dock. The jury had been absent about half an hour. At last I was to hear my fate.

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Now that is probably where the story about the threats has come from. What I said may have been reported to the chaplain—and I suppose the words were altered a little on the way.

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on one side, saying: "I will shake hands with Lee first."

Then Berry shook hands with me. As he did so he said: "Poor fellow. I must carry out my duty."

I now saw that he was holding a large belt with straps on it. Very quickly—so quickly that it was all done before I knew where I was—he slipped the belt round my waist, buckled it, and strapped my arms to it. My wrists were also strapped together just near the buckle.

When all was ready the warders and officials who were standing in the cell around me, formed up in procession and we started on our way to the scaffold. This was the order of the procession:

Chief Warder.

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heard the clang of the bell. I heard a wrench as of a bolt drawn, and—

My heart beat! "Was this Death? Or was it only a dream? A nightmare? What was this stamping going on? Good Heavens! I was still on the trap! It would not move!"

"This is terrible," I heard someone say. The trap had given just about two inches. It would go no further. A second passed. It was like a lifetime. The trap could now be moved.

My dream had come true for a moment, and every time the warders stamped the trap shook.

Again and again the bolt was drawn, but it was quite evident that the mechanism would not work.

Such an ordeal was enough to kill most men, I suppose. But I remained perfectly quiet, and at last I was led off the trap.

The cap, rope, and leg straps were removed, and I was taken into a little store-room about six yards away from the shed.

Whilst I was there I believe an officer hung on to the rope and was allowed to drop through the trap, which now worked all right.

I believe I waited in that room for something like four minutes. It was not very far from the scaffold, and I could hear all that was going on in the shed quite distinctly. I could hear them pulling the bolt backwards and forwards. This bolt, I should explain, was fixed upright in the door of the shed on the left of the trap. It was not like a railway lever. It was more like a piece of an iron railing with a handle on it, which could be turned up and backwards and forwards, and each time there was a thud as the trap was released and fell inwards. The scaffold was apparently working all right. You may imagine that these things were not pleasant to listen to. Nevertheless, they did not break my courage. They simply made me more anxious to get it all over.

After time Berry came in. He seemed to be very much distressed. Clapping his hands, he said: "My poor fellow, I don't know what I'm doing!"

Then he took me back to the shed. The second attempt was about to be made to execute me. I remember all that took place. I see the scaffold before me as I write. All the details are clear.

When I got back to the shed the officials were waiting for me. Some of them turned away as if they could not bear to witness the scene. I saw a scene similar to that which had taken place. Mr. Pitkin, the chaplain, was so distressed that he looked as if he would collapse. The warders were as white as hosts.

Once more my legs were strapped, and once more the cap and rope were adjusted. Again the chaplain, who was standing in front of the shed, began to beg, and again the bolt was drawn.

This time I made sure that I was gone. I could not see through the cap, but I could see the shed. I felt a terrible fall into space had begun.

The shock took away my breath. I wanted to put out my hands and grasp something. It seemed as if my heart was leaping out of my body.

But death had not come yet. I sank two inches just as before, and there I remained.

The horrible stampings and hammerings were repeated, but all to no purpose.

I heard them saying: "Stamp on it! Now see if it will move!"

But the trap refused to move. "Take him off," commanded someone, and I was made to step back