

The Hanging of Will Purvis

HE KNEW WHY the radio people were bringing him to New York and paying all his expenses. He was a kind of glorified freak — an incredible, living legend from the Mississippi backwoods. At first he didn't want any part of it. For more than twenty years he had been avoiding outsiders. But the family — his four boys and his seven daughters and his good wife, Sarah — had begged and pleaded with him to make the trip.

"Papa, you're the only one in the family who'll ever get this chance to go there. You go and come back and tell us what it's like in New York," they urged.

On his first Pullman ride, this short, stocky, taciturn Missis-

sippi farmer was unhappy and frightened. When the porter closed the lower berth curtains he felt the old, almost forgotten twinge of fear.

In the fast elevators of the Hotel Commodore, he felt the same closed-in fear. He was pretty disappointed when nowhere in the great city could they find his favorite chewing tobacco, "Brown Mule." Still, everything might have been all right if the radio people hadn't arranged that interview with the reporters before the broadcast. They stared at this gnarled, rough-looking farmer whose name had once made the world gasp with disbelief and asked him all kinds of silly questions. Then it happened. A photographer said, "Okay, now what

by Murray Teigh Bloom

we need here for a good shot is this character with a noose around his neck just like . . ."

He never finished the sentence. The man from Mississippi lunged at his throat and started dragging him to an open window. A few reporters grabbed him and held him. And then, suddenly, for the second time in his life, he blacked out.

The one thing you could have predicted on that warm Thursday in June, 1893, was that Will Buckley, a prosperous Mississippi farmer, was as good as dead. That morning Buckley had talked freely to a grand jury in Columbia, the county seat. He told all he knew about the activities of a secret Ku Klux Klan-like outfit called "The White Caps." Everybody, including the Caps, knew Buckley was going to talk. And nearly everybody knew the Caps would kill Buckley.

People were just a little surprised that it happened so quickly. On their way home from Columbia, Buckley and his brother Jim and their Negro farmhand, Sam Waller, were shot at from ambush on a bank of Holliday's Creek. Will Buckley was killed while the other two escaped. That murder set the stage for the most incredible case in the long, bloody roster

of American homicides.

Sheriff I. Otha Magee took charge of the case. He found a lot of footprints at the ambush scene and one print of a particularly large foot attracted his attention for a bit, but he didn't believe in this nonsense they called "scientific detection." Two days after the shooting, he got bloodhounds put on the cold trail. Eventually, after many bad leads, the hounds led to the Purvis farm and Will Purvis' trial for murder.

The neighbors were the first to say that Will was no murderer. He was, they told the sheriff, a decent, hardworking 20-year-old lad who helped his father tenant farm 120 acres of good, rich Pearl River lowlands. The crop was cotton, of course. Will was good at the wrestling matches they used to hold for community recreation and he was a sharp hand at the possum hunts. And there wasn't an abler jaw about for the cane chewing parties.

Like many other young men he joined the White Caps, but when he learned that the Cap chiefs were planning to murder Buckley if he should talk to the Grand Jury, he quit. He wasn't going to have any part of a gang that went in for murder.

The sheriff and his men came for Will Purvis at midnight.

Magee didn't even bother to look at Will's shotgun standing in a corner of the simple farmhouse. If he had he would have seen that the barrel was clogged with dirt dobber nests and hadn't been fired since the previous Spring. Nor did anyone bother to compare Will's shoe prints with the huge print they found at the ambush site. The sheriff wasn't interested in that kind of foolishness. He had an airtight case and he didn't need any additional proof. They made Will walk the twelve miles from the farm to Columbia's jail. The sheriff didn't like riding with murderers.

For the trial they got up a special grand jury — twelve men who understood the real menace of the White Caps and their night-riding activities and were ready to take stern measures against them. Most of the jurors were from well-known county families. Two of them, E. E. Foxworth and W. T. Varnado, came from families which had nearby towns named after them, just as Purvis, Mississippi, was named for an uncle of Will Purvis. The other men on the jury, R. R. Cullenane, J. W. Smith, C. W. Corley, J. I. Cook, G. W. Rankin, W. T. Hand, R. G. Cowan, C. R. Donovan, J. W. Scarborough and J. R. Regan, were local

merchants, surveyors, well-diggers and farmers, a fair cross-section of the county.

On the bench was Judge Sam Terrell who just a few years before had won a small measure of fame as the judge who had sentenced the participants in the last bare-knuckle championship fight in America. The 1889 fight between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain had been held in a natural amphitheater a few miles below Hattiesburg. It ran to seventy-five incredibly punishing rounds before Kilrain's seconds threw in the towel. The State Militia finally caught up with the boxers and the promoters of the illegal bout and brought them before Judge Terrell, who gave them token jail terms and small fines.

At the Purvis trial, which got under way August 4, 1893, it soon became obvious why Sheriff Magee and Prosecutor Jim Neville were so confident that Purvis was the man. They had an eyewitness. Jim Buckley said that he distinctly saw Will Purvis fire the fatal shot. Purvis' attorney, S. E. Travis, couldn't shake his testimony. The rest hardly mattered — the defense witnesses who swore they saw Will Purvis working on his father's farm at the time the killing took place, the admittedly dubious evidence of the blood-

hound tracking, the fact that the prosecution made no effort to locate the murder weapon.

The next day the case went to the jury, and after a few hours they came out with a verdict of "guilty." Sam Terrell, wasting no time, proceeded to sentence the guilty lad.

"I sentence you, Will Purvis, to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead on the sixth day of September, 1893, between the hours of 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. at the jail of Marion County, Mississippi."

The slowly spoken words seemed to paralyze Will Purvis. He stared dumbly at the faces of the jurors for a long minute. Then he blurted out:

"I'll outlive all of you."

Everyone promptly forgot it. Condemned men are always making silly statements.

The case was appealed in vain. Governor J. M. Stone refused to intervene and finally a new date was set for the hanging, February 7, 1894.

Even in his cell, Will Purvis could get the sharp, numbing flavor of death to come. The cell was barely eight feet square, and to make escape impossible, his feet were chained to the floor, leaving enough play for him to walk halfway the width of the cell. He slept on a thin mattress resting on the floor. In that cell,

Will Purvis became convinced for the first time he was really going to hang: all appeals had been exhausted and the governor had again refused to intervene.

One day a Meridian merchant, Link Brown, visited Purvis and questioned him closely about the case. He told Purvis that if he were really innocent his life would be spared somehow. What Link Brown didn't tell Will Purvis was that the night before he and his wife had both had the same curious dream: the day after Will Purvis' hanging they had spoken to him and marveled that he was still alive.

A few nights before the day of execution, Will Purvis also had a dream to which he could attribute no significance. In the dream a young mail carrier he knew, wearing a big cowboy hat, came to the door of his cell and placing his hands against the bars cried:

"Hello, Will. I'm glad you got away." Will Purvis hadn't seen this friend since the trial.

Everyone seemed to be having strange dreams at the time. Purvis' mother told him that two nights in a row she dreamed that she saw their neighbor, Joe Beard, holding a shotgun at the ambush site. Will told her to forget it. Joe Beard wouldn't kill a mouse.

As the appointed day ap-

proached, prayer meetings for Will Purvis were being held all over the state by men and women who believed the boy was innocent.

From Meridian a state militia company took Will Purvis to Lumberton on the way to Columbia, where he was to be hanged the following day. The militia was on the alert for any attempt the White Caps might make to free Purvis.

In Columbia, as he passed through the prison courtyard, Will Purvis saw the scaffold where two others had been hanged the day before. He was taken immediately into the courthouse and upstairs to avoid any possible interference by the crowd. They kept him shackled, and questioned him all night in the hope of getting a confession. That night every road leading into Columbia was heavily guarded and the courthouse yard was dotted with armed sentinels.

THEY DECLARED a holiday in most of southern Mississippi on February 7, 1894. From every part of the state they assembled on the courthouse lawn with their picnic lunches and morbid curiosities. They started coming soon after dawn to get good locations. Most of them felt that a guilty man was about to get

his due and wanted to watch.

There were a few exceptions, of course. None of Will Purvis' immediate family was there, but some cousins and in-laws had assembled near the gallows to claim the body of their doomed kinsman.

Dr. T. B. Ford, a young physician of Columbia, was there against his will. A bitter White Cap foe, he felt that Purvis was being railroaded to hide the crime of someone more important. He had been appointed by the county to make sure that Purvis was really dead after the hanging. Disgusted at the idea of making the execution a public spectacle, he had decided to come to the gibbet only after the hanging was over, but the sheriff's deputies forced him to come along before the execution.

Similarly, the Reverend W. S. Sibley, who firmly believed Purvis innocent, had to be at the execution in spite of himself. He had to be present to console and fortify the prisoner on his way to death.

The gallows and the rope had been thoroughly tested for twenty-four hours. Heavy weights had been suspended to the rope to take out any excessive give. Sheriff Magee had a staff of four deputies to assist in the execution, to make sure nothing went wrong. This was

no time for anything to go wrong — the county had already spent a lot of money on this case and Purvis' hanging was long overdue.

Heavily guarded, a pale Will Purvis stepped out of the little jail and walked slowly up the gallows steps. Dr. Sibley read a short passage of Scripture. Another deputy carefully tied Will Purvis' ankles together and ran a line securely up to his bound hands. The sheriff and a deputy busied themselves adjusting the noose about Purvis' neck. It was a good hangman's knot, skillfully made except for the ungainly eight inches of extra rope sticking out. It didn't look professional. The deputies got paid extra for hangings and they wanted to be invited again. One of them cut off the gangling end with a sharp hunting knife.

"Anything to say, Purvis?" Sheriff Magee asked. The sheriff never had the least doubt about the boy's guilt.

Purvis looked slowly over the huge crowd and shouted:

"I didn't do it. There are men out there among you who could save me if they would."

Some men in the crowd stirred uneasily but no one came forward. Deputy Scott Hathorn placed the traditional black mask over Purvis' face. The sheriff moved deliberately to-

ward the trap door as he said goodbye to Will Purvis.

Dr. Sibley had been praying continuously since he stepped on the gallows platform with Will Purvis. Where was the miracle he had been praying for?

"Oh, God," he shouted to the heavens, "spare this boy . . ."

Sheriff Magee carefully swung the sharp axe at the stay rope holding the trap. Swiftly Purvis plunged through the trap door. Those on the platform heard the trapdoor creak as he passed it. The crowd's sighs and groans commingled.

This was the moment when Will Purvis' body should have been jerking and dangling while his neck was being broken by fracture of the first and third cervical vertebrae. Instead, after the slightest of hesitations the noose gave way and unravelled completely as his body dropped to the ground under the gallows platform. His body hit a stray two-by-four and rested there quiet as death.

The stillest moment in Marion County history was followed by the most stupendous gasp a crowd of five thousand men, women and children ever uttered. Will Purvis' body had visibly stirred on the ground beneath the gallows platform.

"I came around very slowly,"

he later told his family, "and just as I was about to open my eyes I heard someone say, 'Well, Bill, we've got to do it all over again.' The crowd was still tense with emotion. Then two men escorted me back to the scaffold the second time."

Not until Purvis was on the first step leading up to the gallows did the crowd recover its collective consciousness and realize they were going to hang the lad again.

Deputy Ed Wintborne on the gallows platform reached for the dangling rope but couldn't quite make it. He called down to Dr. Ford standing beneath the platform:

"Toss that rope up here, will you, Doctor?"

Still dazed, Dr. Ford started reaching for the rope. He picked it up, looked at it with unseeing eyes and was about to hand it up when, suddenly, he dashed it to the ground.

"I won't do any such damn thing," he shouted. "This boy's been hung once too many times already."

For the first time the gaping crowd broke its silence and spoke with many opposed voices like a body possessed. "Don't let him hang again," and "Hang the murderer" rose from the courtyard square and beyond in hoarse counterpoint.

And now Dr. Sibley made a decision. Having done his share the Lord was certainly entitled to some human cooperation. Climbing onto the scaffold platform he stayed the rising voices in the crowd with an upraised hand:

"People of Marion County, the hand of Providence has slipped the noose. We have seen a miracle from God in the rescue of Will Purvis. Heaven has heard our prayer. Let us rally to our sheriff if he will refuse to carry out the order of the court to hang Will Purvis at this time."

His big, eloquent voice swept up and down the jammed thousands below him.

"All who want to see this boy hanged a second time, hold up their hands." Only a few hands were raised.

"All who are opposed to hanging Will Purvis a second time, hold up *your* hands." Nearly ever hand in the crowd went up.

Only the sheriff and his fumbling deputies weren't ready to go along with the miracle. There was nothing in the executioner's handbook to guide a man in a spot like this. His orders had been to hang this man until he was *dead*.

He nodded to Deputy Ed Wintborne who had gone below

to fetch the rope. Wintborne handed the rope to Henry Banks, another deputy, who while making a knot splice in its ends so that it wouldn't slip a second time, explained to the first few rows of spectators that the rope slipped because it was made of new grass and was too springy. Then he made a noose again. The sight of it jarred Dr. Ford into action.

He looked at the sheriff calmly preparing for a second hanging and asked:

"If I go and ask three hundred men to stand by me and prevent the hanging what are you going to do about it? And I'm ready to do it, too."

The sheriff looked at him steadily, weighing the man and his intentions. After a few still moments he walked deliberately to Will Purvis and slowly started to untie his bonds. The crowd cheered, and as Purvis was led back to the jail, it took all the effort of the sheriff and his deputies to prevent Purvis from being freed completely by the mob.

They took Purvis back to the jail he never expected to see again and in a few minutes his strange dream came true. His mail-carrier friend in the cowboy hat came to his cell, placed his hands on the bars and cried, "Hello, Will, I'm glad you got

away."

In a few weeks they brought him before Judge Terrell again for re-sentencing. Again the judge uttered the grim words required by law but his voice no longer rang with conviction. Will Purvis, he said, had to hang again on September 6, 1895. Purvis' attorneys got a stay of execution while they appealed to the Supreme Court again. In November the high court confirmed Judge Terrell and set the new date for December 12, 1895. If God had a personal interest in this case he'd have to make a return visit before the courts of Mississippi would take notice.

ONCE ALL the appeals had been exhausted and the December hanging date looked definite, Will Purvis' friends and family decided that it would be foolish to expect the good Lord to take time out again from His many chores just to save Will Purvis again. It was time for ordinary mortals to take a hand.

Having been kept in the jail at Purvis — purely accidental ironic touch — for nearly five months, Will Purvis found that jail discipline was considerably relaxed and his friends and family were able to visit him easily. Late on the Sunday afternoon before the hanging was sched-

uled, Bill King, a friend, came to see him and brought him a stalk of cane sugar.

"While I was eating the cane," Purvis later recalled, "Bill King said he would like to look at the combination lock on the cell and for me to have my overcoat on and be ready as they were going to take me out that night. I got ready and by nine o'clock that night the guards came by to make their last inspection. I waited about ten minutes and then looked out of the jail window. In the distance I could hear someone rapping with a paint brush on the end of a log. This was the signal."

The homemade key didn't work so the lock had to be sawed out. A mule took Will Purvis west of the town. The news went to the state capital, Jackson, within a few minutes and not long after the whole world learned that Will Purvis, the man they couldn't hang, had been sprung out of jail by his friends.

He went from friend to friend surreptitiously, spending only a night at each house except for a longer stay he made at his cousin's, O. S. Purvis, who had a special room built for Will under his store.

The hidden, hunted life was made more dangerous when the

Governor authorized a reward of \$750 for Purvis and \$250 for the arrest of members of the party who had assisted him breaking jail.

"I carried a Winchester rifle and a .45 Colt pistol," he later told friends, "but the time spent as a fugitive was the most miserable time of my life. I didn't want to kill anyone so I continued to hide with my friends and relatives. As I blazed a trail hurriedly through the virgin forests and heavy undergrowth, going from one location to another, I realized that my life was in more danger than it had been back in jail and I sometimes wished that my friends hadn't been so hasty in rescuing me from prison."

Will Purvis might have remained a miserable, hunted fugitive the rest of his life if Anselm J. McLaurin hadn't decided to run for the Democratic nomination for governor, which then as now was equivalent to election. McLaurin's only important plank was his promise not to hang Will Purvis. He won easily. In the excitement of the election, almost no one noticed that the first of the jurymen who had found Purvis guilty unexpectedly died that same week.

"Let Purvis surrender himself," McLaurin told Purvis' friends, "and I'll commute his

sentence to life imprisonment." When the news brought no smiles to the faces of the delegation he whispered: "Don't worry. I'll see he's a free man before I go out of office, but he will have to go to jail for a little while."

In February 1897, Will Purvis surrendered. He was sent to a convict camp, the Okley Farm, between Natchez and Jackson, where he was given a job piling logs in a field. Typical meals consisted of black coffee, corn bread and boiled salt meat, turnips and water. He spent twenty-two months as a convict under these conditions and contracted typhoid.

Meanwhile, petitions were being signed all over the state to have Will Purvis pardoned. Hundreds of them poured in on the Governor but the pardon might have been delayed even longer if Jim Buckley, the murdered man's brother, hadn't suddenly come forward in 1898 and said that he was no longer sure it was Will Purvis he saw at the ambush site. This, of course, knocked the bottom out of the state's case and the path was cleared for the governor's pardon.

Late in December 1898, Will Purvis left the prison camp for the state prison at Jackson, where they gave him a suit of

clothes, \$10 in cash and their best wishes. For five and one half years he had been in hiding or in jail. In the general rejoicing that followed the pardon, no one paid much attention to the fact that another of the famous jury died unexpectedly.

Soon after Will returned to his parents' new farm, just above the town of Purvis, the family threw a huge homecoming dinner for all who had been active in the case. Among them were the Reverend J. I. Boone and his pretty daughter, Sarah. Purvis married her a year later, and settled down to serious farming.

As a pardoned convict, Will Purvis still felt the whispers as he and his wife passed through the town, marketing. There were still many people who sincerely believed Purvis had killed Will Buckley and that only a freak accident had saved him from hanging. But in time most people began to forget the case and Purvis became just an ordinary, struggling Mississippi farmer. The years passed and his family grew steadily larger. Eventually he had four boys and seven girls and he made out fairly well. Hardly anyone noticed the jurors Cullenane, Rankin, Scarborough and Cowan had also died.

Then in 1917, at a Holy Roller

revival meeting, the repeated cries, "Come forward and confess your sins" finally brought a tall, aging, heavy-set man to the platform. Everyone knew Joe Beard, an easy-going farmer whose place was near the old Purvis farm. Beard cried aloud that he had long been suffering under a terrible sin. But the words choked up in him and he left.

For months Beard wrestled with his conscience and finally he walked into the office of Toxey Hall, then district attorney of Marion County. He confessed that he and Louis Thornhill, his brother-in-law, had drawn lots at a special White Cap meeting and both had been selected to kill Will and Jim Buckley and their farmhand, Sam Waller. They built a brush blind near the path the Buckley party would have to use on their way home. Thornhill fired the shot that killed Bill Buckley, but as Joe Beard told the district attorney, "his heart failed him and he could not shoot." Beard was supposed to have killed Jim Buckley and Sam Waller. When he failed to pull the trigger, Thornhill looked at his in-law savagely and snarled, "I've a good notion to kill you, too."

District Attorney Hall planned to bring Beard before

the next grand jury, but Beard died of pneumonia before it met. Unfortunately, Beard hadn't signed his informal confession, and with his death it was impossible to prosecute the real killer, Louis Thornhill. As soon as word of the confession got out, Thornhill stopped coming to Columbia and confined himself to his cabin. Even his relatives stopped coming to see him and his cabin was shunned by all. He died a few years later, unconfessed and unrepentant.

Beard's confession made sense to a lot of people who remembered the huge footprints near the ambush and recalled that Joe Beard had unusually large feet. With Beard's confession came final vindication for Will Purvis. But at best vindication would be an empty gesture unless the state could somehow make it up to him, in some small measure, for the attempted hanging, the prison camps and the typhoid. Finally, on March 15, 1920, after several unsuccessful attempts, the Legislature appropriated \$5,000 as "compensation." The most eloquent advocate of the measure in the State Senate was Scott Hathorn, who as a deputy sheriff had placed the black mask over Will Purvis' face just before the trap was sprung. News of the award completely overshadowed the

fact that another of the famous Purvis jury had died suddenly.

With vindication came offers for Will Purvis to appear in vaudeville, to go to Hollywood and help write a movie of his life. Purvis wasn't interested. Instead, he added to his modest farm holdings so that he had 120 acres on which he raised corn, cotton and potatoes. With part of the money he invested in a sawmill which turned out poorly.

Shortly after the award, a bright newspaperman discovered the courtroom promise Will Purvis made after the close of his first trial: "I'll outlive all of you." He discovered that the promise was well on its way to fulfillment. Thereafter local people began keeping score themselves. Actually, Purvis wasn't a very good bet to outlive anyone in particular. All his later life he had recurrences of typhoid, and he suffered from a kidney condition.

In 1932, his family persuaded him to go to New York and appear on Ripley's "Believe It or Not" program. He had an unhappy time, particularly when a photographer wanted him to pose with a noose around his

neck.

As the years passed, Purvis remained alive even as juror after juror went to his death, a few as a result of accidents. Smith, Corley, Hand and Donovan were added to the names of the dead jurors. Finally, in 1938, when Purvis was sixty-six, there was just one jurymen still alive — Johnny Cook, a well-known local well-digger. Even the sheriff, the prosecuting attorney, the judge and all the mistaken witnesses were dead. Cook who came from a line of long-lived Southerners was boasting he would defy the "curse" and outlive Will Purvis. His chances seemed good when Purvis was laid low with Bright's disease, a chronic kidney condition.

On Thursday, October 13, 1938, Will Purvis smiled weakly through the racking pain of his disease and said to a relative at his bedside: "I guess I can die now." He did.

And the last of the jurors, Cook? He was stricken and died on Saturday, October 8th, five days before Will Purvis died. His blurted courtroom promise of 1893 was made good. He had outlived the men who had condemned him to hang.

THE WORLD'S all-time best-seller among books, with the single exception of the Bible, is a solid and solemn tome car-

but as students in all schools of the Soviet-dominated segment of the earth, from the river Elbe in Germany to the brink of the



Stalin's Bible

by Waclaw Solski

rying the unwieldy title, *A Short History of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of the Soviet Union*, commonly referred to in its native habitat as the *Short History*. Its reader appeal to anyone but long-suffering political specialists is practically nil, for it is written in the special gobbledegook of official Bolshevism. But it has been translated into some 200 languages and dialects and its aggregate circulation may be estimated safely at 50,000,000.

Several hundred million people daily are being indoctrinated with the contents of this book, not only as individual readers

Pacific, and in communist cells and schools in the rest of the world. Its study is mandatory for millions in the U.S.S.R. and its satellite empire, where no one can receive a diploma in any branch of education, or obtain an important post in the ruling hierarchy, or get a commission in the armed forces, without thorough knowledge of this fundamental volume.

To the Bolshevik faithful the *Short History* is roughly what *Mein Kampf* was to the followers of Hitler. But whereas the Nazi "bible" was known at least by name and evil repute to the whole world, even the well-