

### Vignette 3: Lynch Lie

#### A Monologue

by Ida B. Wells  
Newspaper editor and activist

Miss Wells is a sturdy woman of middle years, hair pulled up in a crown, sadness in her face but fire in her eyes. She speaks in measured, educated, schoolteacher tones, for that is what she was -- a teacher. She occasionally over-enunciates words or phrases, pausing to look sternly into your face, for dramatic effect.

Miss Wells stands facing sideways, looking down, arms crossed, a folded newspaper cradled in her arm. She slowly turns and looks up, unfolds her arms, and makes eye contact with her audience. She continues holding the folded newspaper in one hand, which she uses occasionally to gesture.

Good evening. I am Ida B. Wells, newspaper editress, teacher, friend of the gravely and unjustly wronged.

You ask me to recount the story of what happened 27 May 1892, the day a committee of leading citizens came to my newspaper, the Memphis Free Press, came to my paper and destroyed the type ... (pause) and all the furnishings ... (pause) and ran my business manager out of town (pause) ... saying that anyone trying to publish the paper again would be PUN-ISHED ... with death.

So, I will tell you.

Fate determined that I was traveling in the North that morning.

And so, I remain ... unharmed.

I had fully expected to be home when it happened, and I say WHEN, because I was expecting that something like it, or worse, would take place. I was warned repeatedly by my own people that something -- SOMETHING -- certainly would

happen if I did not stop harping in my editorial pages about three respectable, well-loved Negroes who, on false charges of rape and assault, were lynched.

I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched, because I expected some cowardly reaction to my first editorial.

I thought that it were better to die fighting against injustice than to go like a dog or a rat in a trap.

I also had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked.

I felt if I could take just one lyncher with me, this would even the score a little bit ... an-n-n-d ? (arms out and shaking, as if asking with exasperation) ... What exactly was the offense of my newspaper?

(Holds out the folded newspaper in front of her, as if reading)

Here is what the The Free Speech said:

(as if reading)

"The City of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares protect himself against the white man ... There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and out-armed. There is, therefore, only one thing left to do: -- save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but rather takes us out and murders is on cold blood."

Well, I will tell you, colored people began to save -- To NOT spend their money. To NOT ride on the city railway. To move away, West. And economic life in Memphis bowed under the strain.

For months, they warned me.

But I could not stop myself from writing what was true:

(as if reading from the paper again)

"Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the Free Speech. Three were charged with killing white men and five with raping white women. Nobody in this section believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves ... and a conclusion will be reached ... which will be very damaging ... to the moral reputation ... of THEIR women ... "

The white leaders of Memphis reacted strongly and decisively to that editorial.

They closed us down and wreaked havoc upon our office.

The Free Speech gone, I remained in New York, the telegrams and letters from friends assuring me that my business manager was safe and begging me not to return to Memphis.

My home, the trains into town ... all were being watched by white men who promised to kill me on sight. My friends also told me that colored men were organized to protect me if I should return. My return would only bring more bloodshed, more widows and orphans.

So here, in this great city, I write for the New York Age, telling the world the true and barbarous story of Negro Lynchings in the south, which, since that awful night, have become more numerous, more horrible.

All the vile epithets in the vocabulary nor reckless statements -- NOTHING can change the lynching record of the year 1893. There were lynched in different parts of the State of Tennessee 14 Negroes.

Three were charged with assault on white women. ...

One was lynched on (cocks her head and scratches a half-quote mark in the air) "suspicion." ...

One by (pause, half air quote again) ... "mistake."

Eight for "murder."

Charles Martin, for nothing at all. He was shot dead in his tracks near Memphis for failing to stop for a mob hunting another Negro.

One of the three lynched for assault had committed the awful crime of jumping into a wagon in which white girls were riding and frightening them.

Ten hours before he was lynched, as he sat in jail, the following telegram was sent to the Chicago newspaper, the Inter-Ocean:

(holds out folded newspaper out in front of her as if reading from it)

"Lee Walker colored man accused of raping white woman in jail here STOP

"Will be taken out and burned by whites tonight STOP

"Can you send Miss Ida Wells to write it up STOP"

(Next section delivered in unemotional tones as if she is reading from a shopping list.)

The daily newspapers told in detail how on that day, the mob took this man from jail, kicked him, cut his flesh with knives, hanged his body to a telegraph pole then placed his corpse on a fire and men and women and boys stood by to see it burn; how these half-grown boys dragged the half-charred trunk up the streets and after playing a game of football with it, hanged it again in front of the court house, from whence the coroner cut it down and found the usual verdict.

This is the truth I will tell and tell again, in the press, in the pages of the New York Age, on the pulpit and in speaking tours.

Our British friends and others throughout the European continent find the stories of barbarity in the southern states impossible to believe ... yet they believe ... and they have used the pages of their newspapers to decry this most unspeakable American disgrace.

I leave you with this final thought: The international light of scrutiny focused on the southern states has resulted in the number of Negro lynchings declining.

And so the END of my newspaper, The Free Speech, led to the START of something much larger -- a movement the breadth of which I, to say nothing of my adversaries, never could have imagined.

And so, my work is just begun.

Good night.

(She folds her arms across her chest again turns to walk away.)

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Sources: Crusade for Justice - The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, edited by  
Alfreda M. (Wells) Duster; Crusaders, Scoundrels, Journalists -- the Newseum's  
Most Intriguing Newspeople, Eric Newton, editor.