Pain and Suffering

Lay by your dog and snare to you I do speak plain,
If you knew the hardship we endure you ne’er would
posh again

"Van Diemen’s Land"

Hanged Three Times

Joseph Samuels was one of a gang of Sydney housebreakers
who stole a desk containing money and other valuables from
the home of Mary Breeze in August 1803. The constable who
caught up with the thieves the next day was beaten to death.
Who actually struck the fatal blows was unclear but Samuels
was blamed, tried and sentenced to hang for the crime together
with another member of the gang named Hardwicke.

The men were brought to the place of execution around 9.30
on the morning of September 26 where they were comforted
by their respective ministers, Hardwicke a Christian and
Samuels a Jew. According to the Sydney Gazette, ‘Both pris-
oners conducted themselves with becoming decency’. Samuels
made a statement in which he threw the blame for the murder
on another gang member, Isaac Simmonds. Samuels deliv-
ered his accusation ‘with mildness and composure’ though it
was loudly contradicted by Simmonds who was in the crowd,
having been brought there to witness the execution of his
accomplices. Samuels gained the sympathy of the spectators,
most of whom had already decided that Simmonds was the real
murderer—‘He had escaped condemnation at the Trial, yet he
had been arraigned in the Court of Public Opinion.’

At that time hangings were performed from a wooden cart.
Samuels and Hardwicke stepped up to suffer their final punish-
ments. All was ready when the provost marshall in charge of
the proceedings unexpectedly announced a reprieve for Hard-
wicke. ‘Samuels devoted the last awful minute allowed him to
the most earnest and fervent prayer.’ A signal was given and
the cart was driven away from under him. As the condemned
man’s body dropped through the air, the rope parted and he
was flattened face down onto the ground.

Another rope was fetched. The cart was driven back under
the gallows, men lifted Samuels up while the new rope was
placed around his neck. ‘He was again launched off’ but this
time the rope simply unwound, leaving Samuels only half
suspended between life and death.

Some in the shocked crowd declared that ‘the invisible hand
of Providence’ was at work after hearing the story Samuels told
earlier. But the sentence had to proceed. Samuels was uncon-
scious by now so some men lifted him up on their shoulders while
the hangman fitted a third noose. Then they gently lowered the
body. But as soon as the weight of the body pulled on the rope,
it snapped, dropping Samuels immobile to the earth.

This was too much even for the provost marshall. He hastened
to the governor and rushed back with a reprieve ‘which diffused
gladness throughout every heart’. Samuels was still insensible:
‘By what he had endured his reasonable faculties were totally
impaired’ and when he recovered consciousness, ‘he uttered
many incoherences, and was alone ignorant of what had passed’.

A belated examination was now made of the rope used in the
execution. One end was fastened to a wooden beam and seven
weights of 56 pounds each were hung from it. One strand gave
way, then a second. But the third strand held the full weight placed upon it and should have been easily adequate to hang a man.

As usual with newspaper reports of the time, miscreants were admonished to learn the lessons of their deeds and, in this case, of a remarkable reprieve. But perhaps Samuels' experience addled his mind. He returned to a life of crime and was then sent to Newcastle. Here, he joined a group of prisoners attempting to escape by boat on April Fool's Day 1806. He was never seen again.