The Mystery Of The Hansom Cab

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It was in 1905 on May third, my dears, that, for the second and last time, the case of the People of the State of New York (ever a naive litigant) against Nan Randolph Patterson was entrusted to the deliberations of an infatuated jury. After being locked up all night, they tottered from the jury-room to report that they, like the susceptible twelve who had meditated on the same case six months before, were unable to decide whether or not this handsome wench was guilty of having murdered Cesar Young. At that report the exhausted People of the State of New York threw up their hands and, to the cheers of a multitude which choked the streets for blocks, Nan Patterson walked out of the Criminal Courts Building into American legend.

It was in the preceding June that the killing had been done. Cesar Young—that was a nom de guerre, his real name was Frank Thomas Young—was a gay blade of the racetracks, a bookmaker, gambler, and horseman, personable, rich, generous, jovial, English. For some two years he was enchained by the loveliness of this Nan Patterson, a brunette, pompadoured, well-rounded show-girl from the sextette of a Florodora road company. He had picked her up on a train bound for California where, according to testimony which later put all manner of ideas into Eastern heads, they spent several days together in what must have been a singularly liberal-minded Turkish Bath. But by the spring of 1904 he had returned penitent to the bosom of his wife and, for a healing voyage of reconciliation, the Youngs booked passage on the Germanic, due to sail from her pier at the foot of West Fulton Street at 9:30 on the morning of June 4.

On the night before, they had come in from Sheepshead Bay after the fifth race and taken lodging for the night with Mrs. Young's sister in West 140th Street. Indeed that last evening, Young's life was fairly swarming with in-laws, all bent, I suspect, on seeing that this, their Cesar, should not change his mind at the last moment and run back to that dreadful Patterson woman. At seven next morning Young jumped out of bed, dressed, and sallied forth, explaining to his wife that he needed a shave and a new hat and would meet her on the pier not later than nine o'clock. He never kept that appointment and, too late to get her heavy luggage off the boat, poor Mrs. Young decided to let it go on without her.

Young never reached the pier because, at ten minutes before nine, just as the hansom he had picked up in Columbus Circle was rattling along West Broadway near Franklin Street, he was shot through the chest. The cabman, although subsequently disinclined to recall having noticed anything at all that morning, was at the time sufficiently alert to draw up in front of a drug store. Passersby who hurried forward found within the cab a dying man. Oddly enough the pistol which had killed him lay hot in the pocket of his own coat and he had fallen forward across the knees of the fair creature who was sharing the cab with him. Nan, for it was she, was extremely emotional and, clasping her hands

in supplication to the Deity, exclaimed (with admirable presence of mind, the State afterwards contended), "Cesar, Cesar, why did you do this?"

In the following November, the American people settled back to enjoy a real good murder trial, with Nan's face pale in the shade of a vast black picture hat, with her aged father, a patriarch superbly caparisoned with white mutton-chop whiskers, sitting beside her and kissing her in benediction at the end of every session. For the State appeared the late William Rand, who looked rather like Richard Harding Davis in those days. He was a brilliant advocate, although in talking to a jury, the tobacco-chewing members of the bar would tell you, he did rather suggest an English squire addressing the tenantry. For the defense the humbler Abraham Levy had been retained—the mighty Abe Levy who looked like a happy blend of cherub and pawnbroker and who, as the most adroit and zestful practitioner of the criminal law in this country, was called for the defense in more than three hundred homicide cases. The foreman of the first jury was the late Elwood Hendrick, eventually Professor Hendrick of Columbia, if you please, but—marvelous in this restless city— still living in 1930 in the East 40th Street house which he gave as his address on that day when Nan, after looking him sternly in the eye, nodded to her counsel as a sign that he would do as a juror for her.

The aforesaid American people, fairly pop-eyed with excitement, were at first defrauded. On the tenth day of the proceedings, one of the jurors succumbed to apoplexy and the whole verbose, complicated trial had to be started all over again. This form of mishap occurs so often in our courts that there is considerable backing now for a proposed law to provide a thirteenth juror who should hear all the testimony but be called on for a vote only in such an emergency. Roughly the idea is that every jury ought to carry a spare.

In the testimony it was brought out that Nan, aided by her sister and her sister's husband, had in that last spring worked desperately to regain a hold over her once lavish lover, trying every trick from hysterics to a quite fictitious pregnancy. On the night before the murder they had spent some clandestine time together in what was supposed to be a farewell colloquy. It was begun late in the evening at Flannery's saloon in West 125th Street, with one of Mrs. Young's plethora of watchful brothers-in-law sitting carefully within earshot. Nan had reached the morbid stage of predicting darkly that Cesar would never, never sail next day. Profanely, he taunted her with not even knowing on what boat his passage was booked. Indeed he tossed a hundred-dollar bill on the beer-stained table and offered to lay it against fifty cents that she could not name the ship.

"Cesar Young, Cesar Young," she made answer, while abstractedly pocketing the stakes, "Cesar Young, there isn't a boat that sails the seas with a hold big enough or dark enough for you to hide in it from me tomorrow morning."

Between two and three on the morning of the fourth, they parted—unamicably. Indeed there was testimony to the effect that at the end he called her by an accurate but nasty name, slapped her in the mouth, and threatened to knock her damned block off. It was the more difficult for the State to surmise how a few hours later they ever came together in that hurrying and fatal hansom. It was 7:20 when he left his wife in West 140th Street. It was not yet nine when he was shot at the other end of the city. Nor was all of that brief

time at Nan's disposal. For the new hat was on his head when he was killed. And somewhere, somehow he had also paused for that shave.

There were sundry such lacunae in the State's case. The pistol had been sold the day before in a pawnshop on Sixth Avenue but the proof that it had been bought by Nan's sister and her husband was far from water-tight. Anyway the jury must have been left wondering why, if these people had all been battening on Cesar Young, they should have wished so golden a goose slain. Another weakness was Young's general rakishness. But the State's chief weakness, of course, was Nan herself. She was such a pretty thing.

The strength of the State's case lay in the fact that it seemed physically impossible for anyone else to have fired the pistol. The direction of the bullet, the powder marks, the very variety of the trigger-action all pointed only to her. To the ill-concealed rapture of the reporters, a skeleton was trundled into court as a model whereby to convince the jury that Cesar Young would have had to be a contortionist to have pulled the trigger himself, as Nan implied he did. Of course she was not sure of it. It seems she was looking dreamily out of the window at the time and was inexpressibly shocked at his having been driven so desperate by the thought of a parting from her.

It is needless to say that Mr. Levy, who managed to suggest that he was just a shabby neighbor of the jurors, seeking to rescue a fluttering butterfly from the juggernaut of the State, made the most of that "Cesar, Cesar, why did you do this?" At such a time, could this cry from the heart have been studied?

"Is there a possibility," Mr. Levy argued, "that within two seconds after the shot, she could have been so consummate an actress as to have been able deliberately to pretend the horror which showed itself in her face at that moment? Do you believe that this empty—frivolous, if you like—pleasure-loving girl could conceive the plot that would permit her at one second to kill, and in the next second to cover the act by a subtle invention? Why, it passes your understanding as it does mine. My learned and rhetorical and oratorical and brilliant friend will tell you that this was assumed. My God, you are all men of the world. You are men of experience. Why, you would have to pretend that this girl possessed ability such as has never been possessed by any artist that ever trod the boards, not even by the emotional Clara Morris, not even by the great Rachel, not even by Ristori, not even by Mrs. Leslie Carter!"

Reader, if you are faintly surprised to find the name of Mrs. Carter in that climactic spot, consider that it may have been a delicate tribute to her manager, Mr. Belasco, who was attending the trial as a gentleman (pro tem) of the press. Then, as always, the Wizard's interest in the human heart and his warm compassion for people in distress took him often to murder trials, especially those likely to be attended by a good many reporters.

Mr. Levy's "learned and rhetorical friend" was not impressed. Indeed, he could not resist pointing out that Levy himself, while no Edwin Booth precisely, nor any Salvini either, had just read that very line with considerable emotional conviction.

"It does not require the greatness of histrionic talent," Mr. Rand said dryly, "to pretend that something has happened which has not."

Mr. Levy referred a good deal to Nan's dear old dad sitting there in court and, to play perfectly safe, he also read aloud from Holy Writ the episode of the woman taken in adultery. The jury disagreed.

The State tried again in the following April, moving the case for trial this time before Justice Goff, perhaps in the knowledge that, despite his saintly aspect, that robéd terror to evil-doers could be counted on to suggest to the jury, by the very tone of his voice, that hanging was too good for Nan. In his final argument, Colonel Rand was magnificent. In after years at the civil bar he argued in many cases of far greater importance and it was always one of the minor irritations of his distinguished life that laymen everywhere always tagged him as the man who prosecuted Nan Patterson. This gaudy prestige even followed him overseas when he was a high-ranking member of the Judge Advocate's staff stationed at Chaumont for the prosecution of those of us in the A.E.F. who were charged with cowardice, rape, insubordination, and other infractions of the military code.

"Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen," cried Mr. Rand in his peroration, reaching at last his guess at the scene in the hansom cab. "We are near the end, we are near the end now. Going back to revisit his early home and his old friends, a richer, stronger, heartier man than Cesar Young that morning you shall not find. But the harvest of the seed he had sown was still to be reaped and the name of the reaper was Nan Patterson. And his companion, what were her thoughts? What were her reflections as she sat there by his side? One call, you may be sure, was insistent in her thoughts. One call she heard again and again. 'You have lost, Nan, you have lost. The end has come, your rival has triumphed, the wife has won. The mistress has lost, lost her handsome, generous lover. No more riots, no more love with him. He is going back, he is going back. Cesar is going back, Nan. Back, back, to his first love. Back to his true love. Cesar is going back, Nan. Back, back to the woman who had shared his poverty, who had saved his money, who has adorned his wealth. Back. Cesar is going back to the wife he had sworn before God to love, honor and cherish.' Oh, if she had doubts, they vanished then; then she saw red; then the murder in her heart flamed into action, and she shot and killed. A little crack, a puff of smoke, a dead man prostrate on a woman's knee, the wages of sin were paid!"

Thus the District Attorney. But again the jury disagreed and after a few days he moved for a quashing of the indictment. It was immediately announced that Nan would be starred in a musical show called *The Lulu Girls*. It opened a fortnight later in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and got as far as Altoona, where, although billed by that time as *A Romance of Panama*, it quietly expired. Shortly thereafter Nan was remarried, after a lively vacation, to an early husband from whom she had been obscurely divorced. She then vanished from the newspapers, although there occasionally finds its way into print a legend that she is living in Seattle a life given over to good deeds and horticulture.

Ten years ago an elderly and indignant washerwoman living in a shanty in White Plains found herself surrounded one morning by a cordon of reporters and photographers all conjured up by a fanciful and self-sprung rumor that she was Nan Patterson. The White Plains *blanchisseuse* was furious, as it seems she was not Nan Patterson at all. Why, she

had never been in a hansom cab or a Turkish Bath in all her life. She had never even been in Florodora.

Story Notes

"The Mystery of the Hansom Cab" is the third installment of Woollcott's true-crime series "It May Be Human Gore," collected in *While Rome Burns* (1934). Its subject is one of the first great American tabloid murder trials—a case that preceded the modern celebrity trial by two decades and established many of its conventions.

The case. On the morning of June 4, 1904, Francis "Cesar" Young—a prosperous English-born bookmaker and racetrack figure—was shot through the chest in a hansom cab rattling down West Broadway. Young was due to sail for England that morning on the *Germanic* with his wife, finally breaking off a two-year affair with Nan Patterson, a brunette chorus girl from the road company of *Florodora*, the era's most celebrated musical. The gun was found in Young's own coat pocket; Nan was the only other occupant of the cab. Her exclamation —"Cesar, Cesar, why did you do this?"—instantly became the most famous words in America. The case went to three trials between November 1904 and May 1905. The first ended when a juror collapsed with apoplexy on the tenth day, forcing a mistrial; the next two juries deadlocked. The District Attorney at last moved to quash the indictment, and Nan walked free to the cheers of a crowd that had never, really, wanted her convicted.

Florodora deserves a note here because Woollcott assumes his readers know it well. The show's sextette—six beauties paired with six suitors for the song "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden"—had been the sensation of the 1900–02 Broadway run, and its chorus girls were the closest thing the era had to film stars. To be a *Florodora* girl, even in a road company, was to carry a particular glamour, and it colored everything about how the public received Nan Patterson. She was not merely a showgirl; she was a recognizable *type*, and the type was already romantic.

The essay. Woollcott is transparently on Nan's side from his first sentence—"ever a naive litigant," he murmurs of the State—and never pretends otherwise. This partisanship is characteristically self-aware rather than argued: he simply assumes the jury's infatuation was the reasonable response to Nan, and that the People of New York were somehow obtuse to keep trying. Yet the essay isn't merely sentimental. Woollcott is too alert to the theater of it all to reduce the case to a pretty girl wrongly persecuted. He gives Rand's peroration in full, with undisguised admiration for its rhetorical architecture, even as he regards its failure as foreordained.

The theatrical framework runs throughout, and it is more than incidental. *Florodora*, the Turkish Bath testimony, the skeleton trundled into court like a prop, Belasco attending as "a gentleman (pro tem) of the press"—Woollcott sees the trial as a production in which everyone is performing. Levy's defense argument literally becomes an acting critique: could Nan have produced that cry of horror in two seconds? The question, put to twelve men who had just watched her sit pale and bereaved beneath a black picture hat, answered itself. Rand's riposte—"It does not require the greatness of histrionic talent to pretend that something has happened which has not"—is the sharpest line in the essay and one of the few moments where the State's case is allowed to land.

The Belasco aside is classic Woollcott. Mrs. Leslie Carter's name appearing in Levy's climactic list of tragic actresses is mildly absurd—she was a Broadway star, not quite in Rachel's company—and Woollcott's explanation, that it was a "delicate tribute" to her manager

Belasco, who happened to be sitting in the press gallery, is offered with perfectly straight-faced archness. Woollcott knew Belasco; the aside is a form of inside gossip dressed as annotation.

The closing movement—Nan's theatrical career dying quietly in Altoona, her remarriage to an early husband, the rumored retirement to Seattle and horticulture—is handled with the deflating affection Woollcott applies to all legends that shrink to human scale. The coda about the furious White Plains washerwoman is a perfect comic diminuendo: wrongly identified as a famous acquitted murderer and outraged not by the accusation of homicide but by the implied associations with hansom cabs, Turkish baths, and Florodora. "She had never even been in Florodora" is the essay's last word on glamour, celebrity, and the distance between notoriety and ordinary life.

"The Mystery of the Hansom Cab" was first published as part of the "It May Be Human Gore" series in While Rome Burns *(1934). The Nan Patterson case ran November 1904–May 1905 in the Court of General Sessions, New York City. The trials were presided over successively by Justice Fursman and Justice Goff. Defense counsel Abraham Levy appeared in over three hundred homicide cases in his career. Cesar Young is buried in Calvary Cemetery, Queens.*