

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

Natalla Nabibulla – Executed 16 November 1906

A Dreadful Murder; An Indian Accused; His White Wife Killed; Body Thrown in the Torrens; Only a Part Recovered; An Arrest Made.

On August 14th 1906, the Register newspaper gave its readers a dramatic coverage of a murder that had been committed the day before.

The story would end several months later with the execution of the killer.

A bolting horse started a chain of events that led to the discovery of a gruesome killing.

On the previous night, Sunday, a horse and cart were careering madly down Pennington Terrace at North Adelaide, only stopping when the cart hit an electric light pole. Two youths who were there took hold of the horse and one of the youths recognized the cart as belonging to Natalla Habibulla, an Afghan camel driver.

They drove the cart to Tynte Street to the home of Natalla's mother-in-law.

On inspecting the cart, William Manson, Natalla's brother-in-law, saw blood stains on the floor of the cart. There was also a shirt with blood on it. He then drove the cart to the City.

Driving down Waymouth Street they saw Constable Kennedy on patrol and showed him the blood stains. The constable then accompanied them to Natalla's house in Bristol Street, a small lane which ran off Cardwell Street and just one street back from Wakefield Street. (Bristol Street has since been renamed.)

As they approached the door to the house it opened and a young girl named May let them in. The girl was Mrs Habibulla's companion and maid. The policeman looked through the house but did not find anything unusual or suspicious until, on going to the back door, he found it locked. The key was found on a ledge above the door.

The policeman entered the back yard, where a pool of blood was found on the ground. By now it was 11.00pm. The cart had been found at 10.15pm.

The policeman and Mr Manson then left the house and went to the main police station.

At 11.40pm Natalla entered the police station where he was met by his wife's sister and brother and by Detective O'Sullivan. The detective showed Natalla a blood stained shirt and asked him if it was his.

He replied "Yes, my nose had been bleeding."

He was then asked about the blood stains in the horse cart. Natalla replied that earlier he had bought meat in Gouger Street and the stains were from the meat. Natalla told the detective that earlier he had taken his trap and pony to a stable in Waymouth Street where it was kept and that he had got out of the trap to call the stable boy when a passing motor car had frightened the pony

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

and it had bolted towards Light Square and then towards North Adelaide.

Natalla went on to say that on the way towards North Adelaide he met several youths who told him about the runaway horse and that two youths had driven away in it.

He had then gone to the North Adelaide police station to report the missing cart. From the police station he had gone to the Waymouth Street stable to see if the horse had returned and, as it had not, he had come to the station to see if it was here.

Natalla was closely questioned by the detective and as a result of the questioning was taken to his house by Detective O'Connor and Constable Goldsworthy junior.

The house was more closely examined and in the pool of blood in the yard, material was found that resembled human brains.

Underneath the bed a woman's clothes, hat and shoes were found. The maid, May McNamara, identified the clothes as the ones that Mrs Habibulla had been wearing the previous day.

Natalla was taken back to the police station for further questioning.

Detective Kitson instructed three detectives and two constables to meet with the Water Police at 7.30am for a search of the river and its surrounds as this was a suspected place where Natalla was last seen and a possible hiding place for a body.

That morning a black Tracker was taken to Natalla's house and from there to the Torrens River.

Meanwhile, Constables Mattin and Nettle found wheel tracks from Frome Road near the Victoria Bridge leading to the waters edge.

The water police then began dragging the river and at 8.00am recovered a sugar bag containing part of a corpse. The police then proceeded to drag the river towards the weir and near the Morphett Street bridge found another bag containing remains which were then taken to the City Morgue. Here it was found that the body was incomplete.

The police resumed dragging the river for the missing upper part of the body.

An inquest was to be held at the Elephant Castle hotel (opposite the morgue) on recovery of the missing parts.

Natalla was arrested and placed in custody.

On the Wednesday the authorities had permission to partly drain the lake and, when the water level dropped, the final bag containing the remains were found.

Natalla's trial opened on the 16th of October 1906.

Natalla was represented by Sir Josiah Symon, K.C. and Mr A.J. Foster. The Crown Solicitor, Mr C. Dashwopd, K.C., prosecuted and on the bench Mr

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

Justice Gordon.

The Crown Solicitor's opening address took one and a half hours, after which the Jury were taken to Natalla's house and then to the river and shown where parts of the body were found.

The evidence:

Mrs Manson said she identified the body at the morgue as being that of her daughter, Edith Ellen Mary, who had married the accused in April that year. After the wedding they went to Broken Hill for 2 to 3 weeks and on returning to Adelaide had stayed with her for 2 weeks.

Whilst staying with her, the accused left his wife there and went North. On his return he came to the house and asked where his wife was.

He was told by Mrs Manson she did not know.

Natalla said "She has gone to Port Augusta."

Mrs Manson replied "I don't think so."

The accused said "I will go and get her and shoot her, and then cut my throat."

Mrs Manson said "Don't do that."

Natalla stayed at the house for another week and in that time got a young lady to send several telegrams to his wife whom he believed was in Port Augusta.

A telegram in reply was delivered to Natalla from his wife telling him that she did not want to see him any more, and that he could try and bring her back.

Natalla then went away on business and whilst away his wife returned to her mother's house.

On his return, Natalla and his wife, after a rowdy scene, went together to Broken Hill. They returned after several days and went to live in the Bristol Street house.

During cross examination of Mrs Manson by Sir Josiah Symon, Mrs Manson stated that her daughter had boarded near Shere Mahomed's place at Broken Hill and had only met and known Natalla for a week before marrying him, and that Shere had paid for Nellie's fare to Port Augusta without Natalla's knowledge.

At this stage the Crown Solicitor put in a letter written by Nellie to the accused. The letter was from Port Augusta. Nellie asked the accused to be forgiven and expressed her sorrow for what she had done.

Nellie's sister, Maud, took the stand and related that a few days after the marriage she accompanied them both to Broken Hill.

Whilst there, Nellie and her were going to go for a walk. Natalla wanted to go with them. Nellie said she did not want him to go with them. Half way through the walk, Natalla approached them and asked them to go over to the mine for a walk. In his hand he had a large, thick stick.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

They told him no.

Later that day they went to Argent Street and, whilst in a shop, Natalla asked his wife to accompany him up the street. She declined and said she was going home. He replied that she did not like going out with him, and he looked very angry.

Natalla left the house to buy some boots and on his return told his wife he had seen Shere Mahomed.

"I suppose you went to meet him before?"

She replied "No."

Natalla and his wife returned to Adelaide and stayed with Mrs Manson.

After several weeks, Natalla went of to Hergott Springs.

Several days later Mrs Manson and Nellie met Shere Mahomed at the Adelaide Rail Station.

A few days later Nellie and her sister left for Port Augusta.

A week later Shere Mahomed joined them. During Nellie's stay she underwent a small operation and a week later they returned to Adelaide.

Mrs Manson pointed out that Nellie did not stay with Shere Mahomed but stayed next door, that he did not pay for the fares, and that whilst in Broken Hill they had met Dost and Shere Mahomed in the street, and that Nellie had left Port Augusta after a quarrel with Shere.

Natalla and Nellie moved into the Bristol Street house 3 weeks before she died.

Mrs Manson went on to relate other domestic matters about the accused and Nellie.

Other witnesses were bought forward for the Crown.

Myrtle Anderson, a child, gave evidence that she accompanied Mr and Mrs Habibulla to the Central Market on the Friday and whilst there she (Myrtle) had walked over to a man near a cheap-jack stall. Mrs Habibulla had then come over and taken her away, saying that the man was Shere Mahomed.

The next morning Natalla would not get out of bed for his breakfast or dinner.

Finally he did. His wife asked him to chop some wood. This he did and, when putting it next to the fireplace, said to his wife. "You do not love me."

She replied, "That is the truest words."

Natalla picked up a pointed stick and said "I will stab you!"

Mrs Habibulla laughed.

The next day, Sunday Mrs Habibulla and her sister said they would go to Henley Beach for a drive and meet Natalla at her mother's for tea.

Natalla collected the horse and cart that morning at 10.00am.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

Natalla turned up at Mrs Manson's at 5.30pm. When Nellie had not arrived after several hours, he returned home to find her there.

Later that night a next-door neighbour, Mrs Priaux, told the court that about 8.45pm she heard a scream coming from Natalla's house. She was certain it was a woman's scream.

Another witness, Charles Hastie, said that he was in Bristol Street at 9.00-9.45pm and saw Natalla in the street going east leading the horse and cart. He had since seen it in the police yard.

Sir Josiah Symon asked him if he could swear that it was the same pony and he replied yes as he had seen Natalla driving it on other occasions.

"Will you positively swear that it was the same pony?"

"Yes it is a nice pony."

"Come," said Sir Josiah, "there are plenty of nice ponies in Adelaide."

"Yes but I can recognise that one."

"Well what colour was it?"

"It was a" greyish color."

"Was it white?"

"No, it was light grey."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, I think so."

Would you be surprised to know that it is a dark brown pony?"

"I don't think it was."

"The pony in the yard is dark brown with a white foreleg."

"Would you say that was the same pony?"

"I think it was lightish."

In answer to further questions, the witness said it was a dark night.

The man he saw with the cart was an Afghan, but he could not say if he wore a hat or turban. He could not identify any more than that. It could have been any Afghan.

Walter Manson, a brother of Nellie's said he was on a tram at 10.00pm on the Sunday night and, as the tram went over the City Bridge over the Torrens River, he saw Natalla driving the cart near the river.

The cart passed an electric light and he saw it was an Afghan he knew - Shere and Dost Mahomed - and that it was clearly Natalla driving it.

Other witnesses gave evidence, including, the youths who found the runaway horse and cart, the police, and a doctor who had examined the house and blood stains in the yard, including the axe and a large knife found there.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

The doctor gave evidence that the deceased had been partly strangled before being undressed and taken out into the yard where she was then chopped in half and the legs chopped off.

The arresting officer gave evidence that when Natalla had come into the Station on the Sunday night, he asked him if his name was Natalla and Natalla replied yes. The officer then asked him if he had been to North Adelaide earlier in the day, and what time did he go back home.

Natalla said he had been to North Adelaide earlier and had returned home at 8.30pm. Shortly after he had gone to the stables in Waymouth Street where the horse had bolted, and then to North Adelaide police station to see if his horse had been taken there. At the police station he was told to go to the City office.

The officer told Natalla "I will detain you on suspicion of having wilfully murdered your wife. There is a pool of blood in the yard, and I believe that she may have been murdered."

Natalla replied "Me kill my wife? If I kill her, why not you find her?"

The Prosecution closed its case, and the Defence intimated that it did not propose to call any witnesses for the defence.

The Crown Solicitor then began his address to the jury. He told them that the moral character of the deceased was not to be taken into consideration by them, that was a matter that had nothing to do with the case. He reviewed the evidence and told the jury that, if they believed the evidence with all its chain of circumstances, then they would have no difficulty in arriving at a verdict.

If they did not believe the evidence, they would give the accused the benefit of their doubt.

The theory of the Crown was that the deceased was in good health and strength at 8.30pm on August 21 and that a few minutes past 10.00pm her remains were in the Torrens River and that the accused placed them there.

The jury were told that it was a revolting crime.

The defence, in their address to the Jury, said they, the Jury, would have to take in to consideration the whole of the evidence and satisfy themselves whether or not the accused's hand was the one that did the deed. If so, they would consider whether there had been premeditation and malice-aforethought.

In considering whether there was malice, they should ask themselves if the deed was committed at the dictate of a wicked, depraved and malignant heart.

Before they could bring in a verdict of wilful murder they would have to be satisfied that the death had resulted from some act, the intention of which was to kill or do some grievous bodily harm. He believed that the jury would come to the conclusion that there was no intention to kill, even if it was the hand of the accused that did the deed.

The defence reviewed the evidence and submitted to the jury that there was

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

nothing to indicate that the accused had anything but love and kindness towards his wife. He loved her to the end, even though she taunted him with statements of her infidelity. With no thoughts of premeditation or malice aforethought, they would bring in a verdict of manslaughter. He could picture it in his own mind; the accused, after a heated argument, had grabbed the deceased by the throat; she fell and hit her head; the accused, horrified, believing his wife dead, took her body out to the yard to dispose of it.

This was his theory and he asked the jury to accept it on these grounds and to acquit the prisoner.

The Judge then summed up the case.

In summing up, his Honour said that in alleging the guilt of the accused, the Crown relied entirely on circumstantial evidence. That kind of evidence was all that was available in the great majority of cases of murder and it was indispensable to the very existence of society and that Judges and Juries should act upon it.

There was always, of course, the danger of a possible mistake, whether the evidence was circumstantial or direct.

The Judge then related to the Jury several previous cases of established law between manslaughter and murder, confessions of adultery, that the husband had no previous idea of such a thing by his wife, that it caused sudden mental distress and in a frenzy, a killing.

There was evidence that the deceased had not confessed to adultery, but there was evidence to say that she had fanned her husband's jealousy by various remarks over a period of time.

The judge then went on to further explain to the jury the difference between manslaughter and murder.

The Jury retired to consider their verdict. It was out for 55 minutes before returning with a verdict of guilty of murder with a strong recommendation to mercy.

His Honour said he would forward the recommendation to the authorities and that if the executive consulted him he would support the recommendation.

Natalla was then sentenced to death by hanging.

The jury was thanked then discharged, but not before one juror had complained to his Honour that the jury seats were uncomfortable and hard. His Honour said he would pass the complaint along.

Natalla was transported to Adelaide Gaol where he would spend the next 28 days pending any appeals.

During the next four weeks, there were many more letters from the public to the newspapers about the penalty, than in previous trials.

Numerous letters to the editor of the daily papers were published - half wanted the execution to go ahead and half were against it.

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

Several jurors wrote to the papers stating that had they known the outcome was to be an execution, they might have voted the other way.

Petitions were signed and delivered to the authorities. Some letters sent to the papers were very racist.

Two previous cases - Bonfield and Horton - were cited for comparison, pointing out that, if they were mad and still executed, then the same should happen to Habibulla.

The papers went on to explain to the readers that the Judges usually told the juries that the penalty had nothing to do with them and that for trials of murder, higher authorities must decide whether the dread sentence is carried out.

Natalla's appeal for commutation of the death sentence failed.

During his stay in the condemned cell he was constantly watched over by the authorities. Natalla, being Mohammedan, would not eat meat during his stay as it was not prepared according to his religion. During this time he ate and drank only bread, milk, and eggs.

Two priests of his faith, one from Port Augusta and one from Broken Hill, came to the Gaol to minister to his spiritual needs.

On the morning of his execution the Sheriff, Mr Schomburgk, read the warrant in the front office then, accompanied by the official witnesses, they proceeded to the south wing of the 'New Building' which housed the gallows on the first floor.

The bell began to toll and at one minute to 8.00 am, the cell door was opened.

Natalla, barefooted and dressed in Hindu costume and wearing a turban on his head, emerged with arms pinioned in front of his body.

The executioner placed Natalla over the trapdoor, put a strap around his ankles to secure his legs. He then removed Natalla's turban from his head and placed the rope around his neck before placing the 'hood' over his head to cover his face.

The priests were chanting their prayers.

The executioner moved to his appointed position and, on the command from the Sheriff, pulled the lever.

Natalla's body disappeared from view.

The official party adjourned to the Gaol office for one hour then the Inquest was heard by the Coroner.

The body was then taken to the north-west laneway and buried 'North and South' according to the prisoner's faith. The priests were allowed to say prayers at the grave site.

Several of Natalla's countrymen waited outside the Gaol during the execution.

The newspapers said Habibulla showed no nervousness and walked calmly

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

onto the trap. Natalla was 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighed 10 stone 5 pound and was given a drop of 6 feet.

Natalla's execution was to be the last that newspaper reporters would be allowed to witness.

In 1908 the Government excluded newspaper reporters from James Coleman's execution, and made it official in 1909 by letter from the Government to the newspapers.

Natalla was executed at 8.00am on 16th of November 1906, the third and last person of his faith to be executed in South Australia.

Note: Natalla's name was spelled several different ways, eg. Notale, Natalie, etc.

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