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The killing of Florida physician Clifford LeRoy Adams Jr. by his African-American mistress Ruby McCollum was one of the signal crimes of the late Jim Crow era. McCollum, a well-off housewife whose husband ran a federally licensed numbers game known as "bolita," had already given birth to one child by Dr. Adams, and was pregnant with another when she confronted him in his office on the morning of August 3, 1952. Their ensuing altercation ended when McCollum shot him four times in the back. Despite widespread rumors of scandal, Adams—a powerful figure in the community who had just been elected to the state senate—was eulogized in the local press as a virtual saint, while McCollum was denounced as a vicious "Negress" who had murdered him in a dispute over an unpaid bill for six dollars. The other African-American citizens of Suwannee County, a Ku Klux Klan stronghold, found it prudent to adhere, in public at least, to the official line.

At McCollum's trial in October 1952 the judge disallowed all mitigating testimony that might expose the racist status quo—a system in which, among other holdovers from the days of slavery, powerful white men continued to exert a *droit de seigneur* over black women. Covering the trial for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a nationally distributed African-American newspaper, was the novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), who wrote 20 stories on the case between October 11, 1952, and May 3, 1953. Refused permission to interview McCollum, Hurston enlisted the help of Southern journalist William Bradford Huie, who later incorporated an edited version of her typewritten account of the trial into his 1956 book *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail*.

Found guilty by an all-white, all-male jury, McCollum was sentenced to die in the electric chair, but her conviction was overturned by the Florida Supreme Court. In a subsequent trial, she was declared mentally incompetent and committed to a state mental hospital, where she spent the next 20 years. She was released in 1974 and died 18 years later at the age of 82.

The Trial of Ruby McCollum

My comprehensive impression of the trial was one of a smothering blanket of silence. I gained other vivid impacts, but they were subsidiary and grew out of the first. It was as if one listened to a debate in which everything which might lead to and justify the resolution had been waived. Some of the actors attained silence by a murmur of evasions; others by a bald statement that this was something which it would not be decent to allow the outside world to know about.

It amounted to mass delusion by unanimous agreement. The motive for the slaying had been agreed upon—he dunned her, she got mad, and she killed him; and however bizarre and unlikely this motive might appear either at home or abroad, it was going to be maintained and fought for. Anything which might tend to destroy the illusion must be pushed or wished away.

I found myself groping in this foggy atmosphere even before the sanity hearing. To avoid the suspicion of having told anything to an "outsider," most of the Negroes in Live Oak fled my presence. Others loudly denounced Ruby to make certain that "if the white folks heard anything that they said about the case at all," it would be pleasing to them.

"Ruby," they said (before the murder they would not have spoken of her by her first name), "she done killed the good-heartedest and the best white man in Suwannee County, if not in the whole State of Florida. They won't be doing her right unless they gives her the chair."

"Ruby McCollum knowed better than to go messing around with that white man in the first place. She knowed so well that she was a nigger. How come she couldn't stay among her own race?"

"I hope and pray that there ain't no salvation for Ruby at all. Killing up that nice Dr. Adams. You could always go to him when you was in a tight for change and he sure would help you out. And if you couldn't pay when he waited on you, he'd scold at you and say, 'Did I ask you

for money? I'm a-tryin' to get you well.' And Ruby had to go and kill a nice man like that."

"Naw, Doc Adams *never* dunned nobody for money at all. You could pay him when you was able. Never heard of him bearing down on nobody."

"But Sam and Ruby wasn't no bad pay neither. That's how come I can't see to my rest how they got to fussin' over her doctor's bill and ended up in this killing scrape. Everybody knows that them McColums paid what they owed on the dot. They had it to pay with and they paid. Everybody in the county will give 'em that. They never owed nobody."

It was words like that which gave away the code—let you understand that they were play-acting in their savage denunciation of Ruby. The sprig of hyssop was in their hands, and they were sprinkling the blood of the paschal lamb around their doorways so that the Angel of Death would pass over them. This, never you forget, was West Florida.

Inside the courthouse on the December day of the trial, a couple came up the stairs to the galleries reserved for Negro spectators, and took seats next to me. The woman murmured for my benefit, "Don't be surprised what might come off here." They looked down the row of seats and the man said, "I hope no fool don't go and block up that aisle."

"But you wouldn't run off and leave me, honey, if something was to take place, would you?"

"Not if you can keep up, baby."

The whites felt no such timidity about violence. But they were afraid. They were afraid of "outsiders"—what the outside world might learn and say. So the white judge refused to let any reporter talk with Ruby.

"She has killed a white man—the most prominent white man in the county. She ought to die for that, and she's gonna die. We don't want these newspapermen coming in here and printing lies about us. She was just full o' meanness, shooting the doctor rather than pay her honest bill."

"We don't have to believe no word that a nigger woman says who will murder a good man just because he sent her a bill for waiting on her. That baby of hers is not the doctor's. It may be bright-colored, but it's just a throwback."

"Sure, we know the doc stepped around among the ladies, like the girl in Lake City. He was separated from his wife until he put in to run for the senate. But he never had nothing to do with a nigger. She's lying. She just hated to pay him that money she owed him. That's the nigger for you."

It was like chant. The Doctor Bill; the Mad, Mean Nigger Woman. It was dogma. It was a posture, but a posture posed in granite. There was no other circumstance in the case, let alone an extenuating one. This was the story; and the Community was sticking to it. The press was requested to take the Community's story, not to dig up any "confusing" material. And the press took it.

There was no digging. Only the chant of the dogma: The Murder That Grew Out of an Argument over a Doctor Bill.

That the Negroes were using protective coloration was evidenced too by the fact that the closer their association had been with the McCollums the more violent was their denunciation of Ruby. An example was Charles Hall, the undertaker numbers writer. McCollum money had set Hall up in business; and Hall had functioned as a sort of numbers ambassador to Dr. Adams: he often drove the doctor at night to rendezvous. Hall knew that he would be suspected of sympathy for Ruby, so his voice was the loudest raised against her. He was giving himself a cat-bath—washing himself off with his tongue.

Then there was the janitor at the courthouse. He had been the McCollum yardman for twelve years, had enjoyed numerous favors from them. But he recounted loudly how he prayed for Ruby's execution. He waited on the judge every morning, to carry his briefcase. He was so obsequious, so diligent in his efforts to "show the judge how the Colored community felt," that the judge publicly thanked him at the end of the trial.

I bear no resentment for this humble man. Human nature cannot

be ignored. The McCollums were wealthy; they lived in a big house and drove big cars. These local Colored people were, for the most part, little people, the kind of people, irrespective of race, who have only the earth as their memorial. They must always resent success. The story in which the poor triumph over the fortunate must be eternal; and Heaven must ever be where the earth's humble become superior to the earth's powerful. So to see Ruby brought low was satisfying to Suwannee County Coloreds.

And there was human satisfaction on the part of Negro men in that Ruby had gotten into "bad trouble" by giving herself to a white man. This is from slavery days, the advantage with women that white men have over Negro men. In a Negro café, with the jukebox playing at the top of its voice, a tall man was pleasuring himself with breaded pork chops and side dishes of collard greens and fried sweet potatoes.

"I ain't got no sympathy for Ruby," he said. "She wouldn't even wipe her feet on nobody like us. If she had to have herself an outside man, she could'a got any kind she wanted right inside her own race. That's one thing about our race, we're just like a flower garden, you can get any color from coal-scuttle blond to pink-toed white." (This is a common boast when Negroes rail against miscegenation. They don't seem to realize that by it they are endorsing the very action which is being denounced, for obviously if there had been no miscegenation, there could be nothing but dark individuals among us.) "Naw, she had to go and have that white man, and when she knows so well how these white men don't allow us no chance at all with *their* women. Colored women ought to be proud to stick to their own men and leave these white men alone.

"And more specially when they ought to know that white men ain't no trouble at all. They can't do nothing in bed but praise the Lord. Nothing to 'em at all."

There was a guffaw of gloating laughter from all the men at this. The thought sort of evened things up.

"We gets all we wants for nothing, but they got to pay for it, and

they had better, 'cause they sho' ain't got what it takes to bring sinners to repentance!"

There was even louder laughter. But one drunken woman dared to disagree.

"Talk that you know and testify to that you done seen," she shouted. "Some of these here white men got lightning in their pants. They're in the 'Be' class: be there when you start and be there a long time after you done fell out."

But in the enraged silence the slattern took backwater fast. "That is, it could be," she added. "I wouldn't know my own self."

"You better say 'Joe' 'cause you don't know," a man growled. "Tain't a thing to the bear but his curly hair. Don't you stand there and tell that lie that a white man can do with a woman what a Colored man can do. Sho', some of these trashy nigger women who is after money will lay up under 'em, like Ruby done, and moan and squall and cry and make 'em think they're done comin' to Jesus, but that's only because of the spendin' change the white man puts out. But everybody knows that a white man ain't no trouble, not a damn bit, and any old nappy head that tells me they is in my hearing is gonna get a righteous head-stomping."

No female accepted the challenge, so the men beat their breasts in a vimful "reading." They poured out all the resentment of the centuries since 1619, when the first batch of Negro slaves were landed in the English colonies. This old hobbyhorse was flogged from Ginny-Gall to Diddy-Wah-Diddy. (Mythical places of Negro folklore reputedly a long way off. Like Zar, which is on the other side of Far.)

In a way, but in a limited way, these men had a point. But by the measuring stick of history their contention has no standing for the reason that force is lacking to back it up. From the cave man to the instant minute, to the victor has gone the spoils, and the primeest spoils are women. We will know that the blessed millennium has arrived when this is no longer so.

No Negro man even hinted that the passage of money between Dr.

Adams and Ruby had been in her favor. But the scab of the old sore was scraped off, and it oozed blood afresh.

I talked several times with Judge Adams. He is a man possessed of many substances marketable in the human bazaar. I found no fault with the broad, black Stetson, the black string tie of the past century, the chewing tobacco, the efforts at wit, or yet the mouthful of Southern idioms. To me these are externals and need not indicate a turn of mind. How he conducted the trial was my yardstick.

I was disappointed when he denied me permission to interview Ruby. But he was not curt or harsh. He said that the nature of the case made it advisable to deny the press access to the defendant. He didn't want the case tried in the newspapers.

I concluded that Judge Adams was contributing the power of his position toward the establishment of the local dogma as to motive. But I pondered this question: Was such action on his part native to the judge's spirit, or was he a captive of geographical emotion and tradition?

All of us who love the South know that there is precedent for this query: the case of Robert E. Lee. The great-souled general hated slavery, had freed his slaves, and revered the Union. Yet when struggle came, he had to stand with his "folks." Many latter-day Southerners are caught in this same old web.

Because of this question, Judge Adams, to me, was the most interesting figure at the trial. The slaying had been admitted by the defendant; only the degree of her guilt was left to be decided. So the real drama was in Judge Adams, in how far he would allow Ruby to go in explaining extenuating circumstance. We have a Southern saying: "A man ain't got no business pulling on britches until he's got guts enough to hold 'em up." The judge had on the britches; did he have guts enough to let the truth come out?

From my seat in the balcony on the east side of the building, I had a good view of the courtroom. It was clean and comfortable enough as

courtrooms go. Provision had been made for custom and comfort. Tobacco-chewing and snuff-dipping are common enough in the area not to be apologized for, so spittoons were handy, particularly to the judge and jury.

The substantial building had been constructed before drinking fountains became common in such places, so the janitor presently came up the center aisle toting a bucket of ice water which he balanced on the corner of the railing enclosing the court officers. A glance told me that a man had bought the bucket and dipper: the bucket was white enamel with a red rim, while the dipper was white enamel with a blue handle. A woman would have seen that they matched. The janitor passed the bucket and the dipper around to the jury, and also to court officers, but white spectators could go up and get a drink. Under the separate-but-equal doctrine there was a similar bucket for the Negro galleries.

The room filled up rapidly, and it was plain that no one doubted the conclusion of the trial. The uprising would be put down. Emotion rose like a fume from the lower floor.

As the hour drew near, Judge Adams passed down the aisle, exchanging pleasantries with friends in the audience and behind the rail. Visiting lawyers, including an ex-governor, occupied seats inside the railing on the right of the bench.

There was State Attorney Keith Black and his assistant, O. O. Edwards. Black is a short, plump man in a rumpled blue suit, with a bald spot on top of his head so perfectly round that it might be the tonsure of a monk. He is not impressive in appearance, but a Negro behind me murmured: "Don't let that sleepy look fool you. He's just playing possum. He's gonna burn Ruby. That Black is a 'getting fool.' I done seen him at it." Edwards did little mixing around. He appeared to be preoccupied, perhaps dedicated; his look was grim.

Frank Cannon made his entrance like a star. He was the homebred boy who had made good in the big city. He is possessed of a challenging head of thick, wavy white hair; he has a handsome profile, a becoming suntan; and tall, graceful, he wears clothes of good quality. Smiling voices

called out to Cannon. Hands were extended. He was a one-man procession down the aisle.

Court sat at last, and when Ruby was led in by a state trooper, the place really came alive. She had been given the opportunity to groom herself with some care. Her hair was pressed and hung in a long bob to her shoulders, confined loosely by a net. It was parted neatly on the left side, and since it was December, she wore a coat, a bright green camel's hair over a pale yellow wool dress. Her small feet were in low-heeled black pumps. She is little, and she looked almost childish in her seat.

She walked in briskly with an expressionless face and took her seat beside Cannon. In the course of the sanity hearings, the balked first trial, and the real trial, I have striven to enclose my impression of Ruby McCollum in a sentence, but I have failed. She is attractive but not beautiful. Sort of chestnut-brown in color, with the breadth of face I think of as feline, though I could discern nothing sly or calculating. Even under her terrible strain she appeared to be possessed of dignity. She seemed to set herself in a resolved position. Her right elbow rested on the arm of the chair, her head on her hand lightly inclined to the right. I had the impression that every muscle in her body was consciously set and locked in place lest she betray her inner turmoil. The only sign of nervous strain was an occasional swinging of her crossed feet; she was too small for her feet to reach the floor. She would extend her right hand at full length and examine it in detail, flex and extend the fingers and regard them studiously, turn the hand and regard it palm and back as if it were something new and interesting to her. Since it was the hand that had wielded the gun, I thought she might be regarding it as having a separate existence, a life and will of its own, and having acted without her knowledge or consent.

There was one poignant moment while Ruby was on the stand. She maintained her shut-in, expressionless mask through the questioning by State and her own counsel until one felt that she was a woman without nerves. Then came the moment, as Cannon led her through the story of the actual slaying. Ruby did not break down and weep; she did not scream out in an agony of memory; but there was an abrupt

halt in her testimony as emotion gushed up from the deeps of her soul and inhabited her face. I saw it: the quintessence of human agony. I saw the anguish of the hours, perhaps the days and weeks which preceded the slaying. I saw the awful emotions of the resolve to slay, to blot out from the world that which she had come to know. I saw the emotions which tightened the hand upon the gun. And I saw memories of it all, which lived down deep in barred cavities in the cellar of her soul.

What I saw in the eyes of Ruby McCollum in that instant when she balked into silence, when the agony of her memories robbed her of the power of speech, may God never permit me to behold again. In that instant I beheld the infinity of the human mind, mother of monsters and angels, and I comprehended the ineffable glory and horror of its creations.

That illuminated moment was the life of the trial for me. Now I could see that what was transpiring in the courtroom was nothing more than a mask; that the real action existed on the other side of silence. The defendant had admitted the slaying; she was in the hands of the law; thus there was no reason for the legal machinery of the State of Florida to be operating except to fix the degree of guilt. This could be done, in justice, only by hearing and weighing the defendant's own explanation of her motives.

Ruby was allowed to describe how, about 1948, during an extended absence of her husband, she had, in her home, submitted to the doctor. She was allowed to state that her youngest child was his. Yet thirty-eight times Frank Cannon attempted to proceed from this point; thirty-eight times he attempted to create the opportunity for Ruby to tell her whole story and thus explain what to her were her motives; thirty-eight times the State objected; and thirty-eight times Judge Adams sustained these objections.

"In your long sexual relationship with Dr. Adams, Ruby, was he cruel to you?" "Did he ever strike you?" "Did you have any reason to fear for your life?" "Did you love him?" "Did he love you?" "Did he acknowledge his child?" "Was he proud of it?" "How much of the

bolita money was he extracting from you and Sam, Ruby?" "Why did you decide to kill him?" These were questions which Ruby could have answered. But there were the objections of the State, recited, as if by rote, by Black or Edwards:

"We object to that because it is shown that the question was asked for the purpose of obtaining testimony as to a preposterous act and matter which can constitute no defense to this charge. It is seeking testimony which is entirely irrelevant and immaterial, and it is seeking testimony back at an uncertain time which could have bearing on the issue of the case. It is shown that the question is propounded for the purpose of obtaining testimony to confuse the issue that is now being tried in this case, and it is clearly shown that such a question is seeking testimony that is improper and inadmissible in this trial."

"Objection sustained!"

I had begun the trial with some faith in Judge Adams, and I kept looking at him confidently and saying, almost audibly, "No, Judge Adams will never allow this. He will never send a human being to her death without permitting the jury to hear her side of the story. He won't!" But then I watched the judge grow angry and threaten Cannon with contempt of court if he persisted with his questions, and I wilted, first in my soul and then in my chair. My disillusionment was complete. I heard Cannon's words, uttered with resignation: "May God forgive you, Judge Adams, for robbing a human being of life in such a fashion. I would not want it on my conscience."

Race had nothing to do with my disillusionment. Had Judge Adams been as black as Marcus Garvey and Ruby McCollum as fair as the Maid of Astolat, I would have felt the same. My discomfort increased when I recalled that Black and Dr. Adams had been on the most intimate terms, so it seemed hardly possible that he did not know all that Ruby had to tell. Yet Black, for the State of Florida, even denied at the top of his voice that a sexual relationship existed between Ruby and the doctor. "It is preposterous! It is unthinkable!" he shouted.

One tiny incident let the whole cat out of the State's bag. A colored nurse for Dr. Adams, Thelma Curry, was called by the State. She de-

scribed the office procedure for sending out bills—as she had obviously been called and coached to do. But she ventured further: she tried to tell about a quarrel she had overheard between the doctor and Ruby a few days before the murder. Summarily, she was jerked from the stand by the State, and Judge Adams growled at her: “Get down and go back where you came from!”

I was tired and embittered by the time Ruby was asked if she had anything to say. She replied simply: “I do not know whether I did right or not when I killed Dr. Adams.”

And it was as if I walked in a dream as I listened to Judge Adams intone: “A jury having found you, Ruby McCollum, guilty of murder in the first degree . . . and that at the time so designated the said superintendent of State prison or one of his authorized deputies shall cause to pass through your body a current of electricity of sufficient intensity to cause your immediate death and shall continue application of such current until you are dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul!”

The trial was ended. A Negro woman had become infuriated over a doctor bill, and she had killed the good doctor . . . the friend of the poor . . . a man whose only rule had been the Golden Rule. And now the poor men would have their justice: their eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.

The Community will had been done.

William Bradford Huie, *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail*, 1956