

Nina Van Zandt Spies to Marry

The Romance of the Trial of the Chicago Anarchists Retold.—The Authentic Story of a Woman's Unwavering Devotion.

Lizzie M. Holmes

1891

ON ENTERING a certain museum in Chicago the first objects that attract the eye of the visitor are two excellent oil paintings, under one of which are the words, "Handsome August Spies," and beneath the other, "Beautiful Nina Van Zandt." The crowds invariably pause to gaze upon the pictures as they have done for more than four years. Time has not lessened the interest taken in these two characters and their romantic history, and that interest has been deepened since the announcement is made public that the proxy wife and widow is soon to wed S. S. Malato, a young Italian newspaper man of New York.

Time is sweeping aside the clouds of prejudice that made of August Spies a mere designing, cowardly criminal, and of Nina Van Zandt but a silly, deluded girl. It has also dispelled the sentimental adoration of admirers, and the real story, stripped of the stormy environments of those days, may now be told and appreciated in a clearer atmosphere.

Nina Stuart Clark Van Zandt is a descendant of the royal Stuarts on her mother's side, and through her father is a member of one of the oldest families of New York. All that many generations of culture, ease and luxury can bequeath to a human being have been given to her, and she does credit to the blood that flows in her veins and the thorough training she has personally received. She was a Vassar student, and a fair specimen of that noted, intelligent and independent class of womankind.

In the summer of 1886, she, her mother and two other ladies were invited to seats one day beside Judge Gary during the trial of the anarchists. These are her own words concerning her experience:

"Having received what information I had through the newspapers, I was expecting to see a rare collection of stupid, vicious, criminal-looking men. I was greatly surprised to find that so far from corresponding with this description, they had intelligent, kindly and good faces. I became interested. I soon found that the officers of the court and the entire police and detective force were bent upon their conviction, not because of any crime of theirs, but because of their connection with the labor movement. Desirous of proffering my sympathy, I, with my mother, visited the close, dark prison, and there made the acquaintance of August Spies."

Upon conversing with Spies it soon flashed upon Miss Van Zandt's mind that she had met him before. Two years previous she had visited The Arbeiter Zeitung office to insert an advertisement

for a lost pet. Even then, strangely attracted, she had tarried in conversation with the handsome editor. Some memory of the interview haunted her for weeks, but finally faded away in the crowding of other events and scenes into her life.

The acquaintance continued, and Nina's visits were repeated at frequent intervals. A correspondence ensued between the visits, which seemed to have the effect of thoroughly converting Miss Van Zandt to Spies' views, as well as gaining her affections.

August Spies was accused at the time of duping the girl by working upon her impulsive nature, hoping to gain favor by her Influence, thus interposing her between himself and the gallows. There was nothing in the facts to call out the comments they did. Miss Van Zandt was neither "crazy," "deluded," "morbidly sentimental," nor anxious for notoriety, even though the object of her regard was the inmate of a jail under sentence of death. Apart from his surroundings Spies was good looking, intellectual, possessed of winning manners, and frequent interviews and letters revealed to each strong similarities of tastes and opinions. The one peculiarity of Miss Van Zandt was her strength and independence of character. She believed she was right in her love, and all the world could not frighten her from it.

Early in the winter the two became engaged, the engagement to be fulfilled in case of his release. On the 12th of January, 1887, Nina went to the sheriff and asked permission to call on Spies out of the regular visiting hours that their intercourse might not be disturbed by the curious public. The families of the other prisoners were sometimes allowed to sit outside the doors of their relatives' cells, and hoping to gain some of these privileges she informed Sheriff Matson of their betrothal.

After studying over her request for some minutes Mr. Matson said it was impossible for him to grant it. Had she been his wife, he said, he could have allowed her to visit Spies as the others' wives did.

"Then," she said, with her dark, pray eyes flashing, "then I will marry him at once, that I may secure the privilege of visiting and the right to work for him as a wife," and she went out of the jail with a determined air. It is quite certain that this was the moment in which the decision was made from which no difficulty, ridicule or remonstrance ever afterward moved her.

She sought Captain Black, the attorney for the prisoners, and asked his aid. Seeing that she was thoroughly in earnest, this gentleman gave her his hearty sympathy and assistance. The proposition for an immediate marriage came from Miss Van Zandt herself, as Captain Black testified. August Spies told him "he would not think of asking the lady to make such a sacrifice, but if it was her desire, he would consent, and show to the world their mutual love and trust "

Mr. Van Zandt sympathized with the feelings of his daughter, and, while regretting the peculiar chain of circumstances which had brought her to this step, would not interfere. Mrs. Van Zandt was deeply grieved, but did not try or had no power to control her child. On the 18th of January Captain Black and Nina Van Zandt went to the county courthouse and procured a marriage license. It was arranged that the ceremony should take place in the jailor's office on Thursday, the 20th. Sheriff Matson had given his full consent and both he and the jailor promised the occupancy of the room for some time. Judge Pendergrast consented to perform the ceremony. City papers of the 19th spoke of the affair as settled, giving various opinions. But on the morning of the 20th The Staats Zeitung and Tribune opened up on the subject and criticized the officials for allowing such a farce to be played, and declared it was making a disreputable place of the county buildings, paid for by citizens for entirely different purposes.

At the same time Matson received a telegram from Mrs. Arthur, of Philadelphia, Nina's aunt, forbidding the marriage. The pressure was too much for that official, judge forbade any further proceedings. To keep the young lady out he gave orders that no one but relatives should be admitted to visit the prisoners. For a time all parties interested were dismayed. Mr. George Schilling, a friend of both, entered the jail on the evening of the 20th, and was met by a reporter, who said to him: "Ah, you won't have a wedding after all. The sheriff won't let Miss Van Zandt come in." Mr. Schilling retorted on the impulse of the moment:

"What difference do you suppose that makes? They can be married just the same. It isn't necessary they should stand side by side. Did you ever hear of a marriage by proxy?"

"Is that what you mean to do?"

"That can be done, and very likely will be," briefly answered Mr. Schilling, so coolly that the reporter believed it a prearranged matter, whereas Mr. S. had answered with the first words that came into his mind. The next morning the news was telegraphed to the world that Miss Van Zandt and Spies would be married by proxy. It was news to them, but they were immediately struck with the feasibility of the scheme. Nina hastened to find some one who would consent to unite them in this unusual manner. Judge Pendergrast was out of the question. But in the northwestern part of the city lived a justice of the peace who had already evinced his sympathy by the strong stand he had taken among the Turners against the verdict of the court. Nina, with Gretchen Spies, called on him and stated their errand.

Judge Englehardt promised to look up the law, and if it could be done legally he would marry them. He consulted a competent attorney, whose name cannot be given, and together they searched the laws on marriage. They found no statute demanding the presence of both parties before an authorized agent; that mutual consent constitutes a legal marriage, and that a lady living in Massachusetts had been married to a soldier in Canada who could not obtain leave of absence, the two merely declaring their intention and wish. He was afterward killed, and in court it was decided she was his lawful wife and entitled to the property left by him. Justice Englehardt fully believed the marriage could be legally performed by proxy, but took every possible means to make it binding. He wrote out two contracts, the one below being that which Nina signed; the one signed by August Spies was nearly the same, except as to the difference in person.

I, Nina Stuart Clark Van Zandt, being of sound mind and body and twenty years of age, do by these presents hereby take August Theodore Vincent Spies to be my lawful husband from this time forth until death shall part us, and I publish and declare my accepting the said August Theodore Vincent Spies as my husband in the presence of Henry Kraft and Amelia Englehardt, the two witnesses who are by me requested to sign this document. I waive the right and custom to have August Spies present in person, fully agreeing to the action of Henry Spies by August Spies appointed to represent him; In furtherance of his appointment bind myself to all the obligations and duties the relation of husband and wife imposes.

Oscar Neebe, Ida Spies and Gretchen Spies signed as witnesses to August Spies' signature; Henry Kraft and Amelia Englehardt as witnesses to Nina's. On the 29th of January Henry Spies stood up to represent his brother, and Justice Englehardt pronounced the marriage ceremony. The justice made the usual returns, and the license and certificate were kept by the county officers for one week and then the papers were sent back for "correction," as the clerk wrote. "It was

found that A. Spies was detained at the jail and could not have been in Jefferson at the time the ceremony was said to have been performed.”

But the devoted lady derived no benefit, from the ceremony She was persistently denied entrance to the jail, and never, until the morning of the 11th of November, did she look upon the face of her lover again. Then she was granted the keenly cruel pleasure of one brief interview, a last and only embrace, and an agonized farewell.

Those who believed in the sincerity of her love and the merit of its object wondered how she endured those terrible days. Even her enemies were silent when they looked upon her pale, worn but still beautiful face.

Now that her marriage to the Italian Signor Malato is announced, some say that this early ending of her widowhood proves that the charge of notoriety seeking was true, especially if she takes out a license under the name of Van Zandt, as she may be forced to do to obtain one at all. But even this does not prove that Nina’s love was ephemeral or partaking of an emotional, excitement craving nature. She is young and has many years before her, she is no more bound to live them all alone than are other bereaved young women.

Robert Emmet’s broken hearted wife married again, though she finally died of grief for her first love. The fact that Nina declined only a year and a half ago the offer of her aunt to take her back as her heiress on condition of repudiating her marriage, discarding the name and the ideas of her radical lover, would prove her sincerity and independence of character. “No,” she said to the writer. “I scorned such a thought. She repudiated us at a time when her influence would have been priceless She might have saved my husband; instead she added to the sorrows we had to bear. I sent her letter back with one decisive, indignant sentence written across it.”

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