



**Ruth Snyder:
Press Access to a Murderess and “The Most Remarkable
Exclusive Picture in the History of Criminology”**

Part B—Decisions

Unfortunately for Hazelton, the press refused to play along with the Ruth Snyder he desperately wanted to depict. At the first interview and subsequently, Snyder was rather roughly treated by both the tabloid and broadsheet papers. Damon Runyon, literary personality and pressman for the United Press publicly referred to the case as “the Dumbbell Murder,” because of the perpetrators’ stunning haplessness.¹ It did not help that Hazelton first allowed the *Daily News* an exclusive photo opportunity with Snyder, while the other reporters were simultaneously told that she was resting after a sleepless night. They had already agreed to Hazelton’s exasperating stipulations that only three reporters be allowed to conduct the interview, all of them women. When they realized the photo shoot was happening, the reporters demanded that the interview begin, already starting out with a less than stellar opinion of Hazelton and his client.

During the interview Snyder read from a prepared script. Even the photo-op itself represented the difficulty and awkwardness Hazelton had with portraying Snyder in a positive light: “When [the cameraman] suggested that she put her handkerchief to her eyes in a show of grief, Mrs. Snyder grinned broadly, cautioning the cameraman not to take any photographs while she was laughing.”²

The press played up the image of Snyder as a demonic temptress who had seduced Judd Gray into committing his heinous crime. They were prompted to this by each of the defendants’ attempts, in their statements and early in the trial process, to place the ultimate guilt on the other, but their moralizing reportage also clearly influenced the tactics of the defendants’ respective attorneys. In his closing statements William Millard, Gray’s attorney, echoed the tone of the press, saying:

That woman, that peculiar creature, like a poisonous snake, like a poisonous serpent, drew Judd Gray into her glistening coils, and there was no escape. That

¹ MacKellar, Landis. *The "Double Indemnity" Murder: Ruth Snyder, Judd Gray, and New York's Crime of the Century*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006, p. 337.

² *Id.* at 66.

woman. Why, gentlemen, it was a peculiar, alluring seduction. I want to say here that this woman was abnormal. Just as a piece of steel jumps and clings to the powerful magnet, so Judd Gray came within the powerful compelling force of that woman, and she held him fast. She knew her man and she held him fast. I must speak plainly, gentlemen. This woman, this peculiar venomous species of humanity was abnormal; possessed of an all-consuming, all-absorbing sexual passion, animal lust, which seemingly was never satisfied.³

Dana Wallace, an attorney for Snyder alongside Hazelton, summed up the enormous pressure this situation put on his client, saying: “This is a case of Henry Judd Gray and the people of the state of New York against Ruth Snyder, and nothing else. She is sandwiched in between two prosecutors, and you [the jurors] know it.”⁴

Wallace painted Gray as a drunkard, who planned and carried out the murder himself, dragging his hopeless housewife lover along for the crime. Mr. Snyder had repeatedly brandished a loaded revolver at his wife during arguments, Ruth’s defense argued. Placed in between two such violent and irascible men, where could she turn? Judd Gray, the counterargument went, held the true guilt. All this, bear in mind, came from the *defense* attorneys. Ironically, neither Gray nor Snyder would be saved by this blame circus.

Even after the trial was concluded, there were many bizarre and macabre moments in the case that lent themselves to the media firestorm. Snyder made a show of converting to Catholicism (from Lutheranism) a few weeks before her execution. All was not over, even after both Snyder and Judd were dead. Apparently, Ruth Snyder’s mother had tried to arrange for her body to be claimed immediately after execution, in the vain hope that Ruth might be able to be resuscitated. As comical as the idea seemed, the request was rejected in light of a case in Illinois, wherein a hanged criminal was immediately whisked away by a private ambulance and given resuscitative treatment. Whether this plan would have worked or not is unknown, as the police foiled the plan, but the judge in that case argued that “technically a [legally] dead man is a non-person—and thus immune from the law.”⁵ It was moments like this that gave the Snyder-Gray case its unusualness, and thus helped fuel its popularity in the press for nearly a full year.

By far the most macabre episode in the case, however, was the publication of Howard’s photograph on the front page of the *Daily News*, two days in a row (**image 1**). The image was a huge success. Sales for those two days skyrocketed. What had been a gamble when Patterson first began planning it now led to a jackpot when the photo was released. The image would go down in *Daily News* history as one of its greatest triumphs. In fact, the *Daily News* is still fond of drawing on the memory of the Ruth Snyder execution photo as one of the paper’s greatest triumphs.

³ Kobler, John, ed. *The Trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray: Edited with a History of the Case*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1938, p. 302.

⁴ Id. at 316.

⁵ Gillespie, L. Kay. *Executed Women of the 20th and 21st Centuries*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009, p. 26.

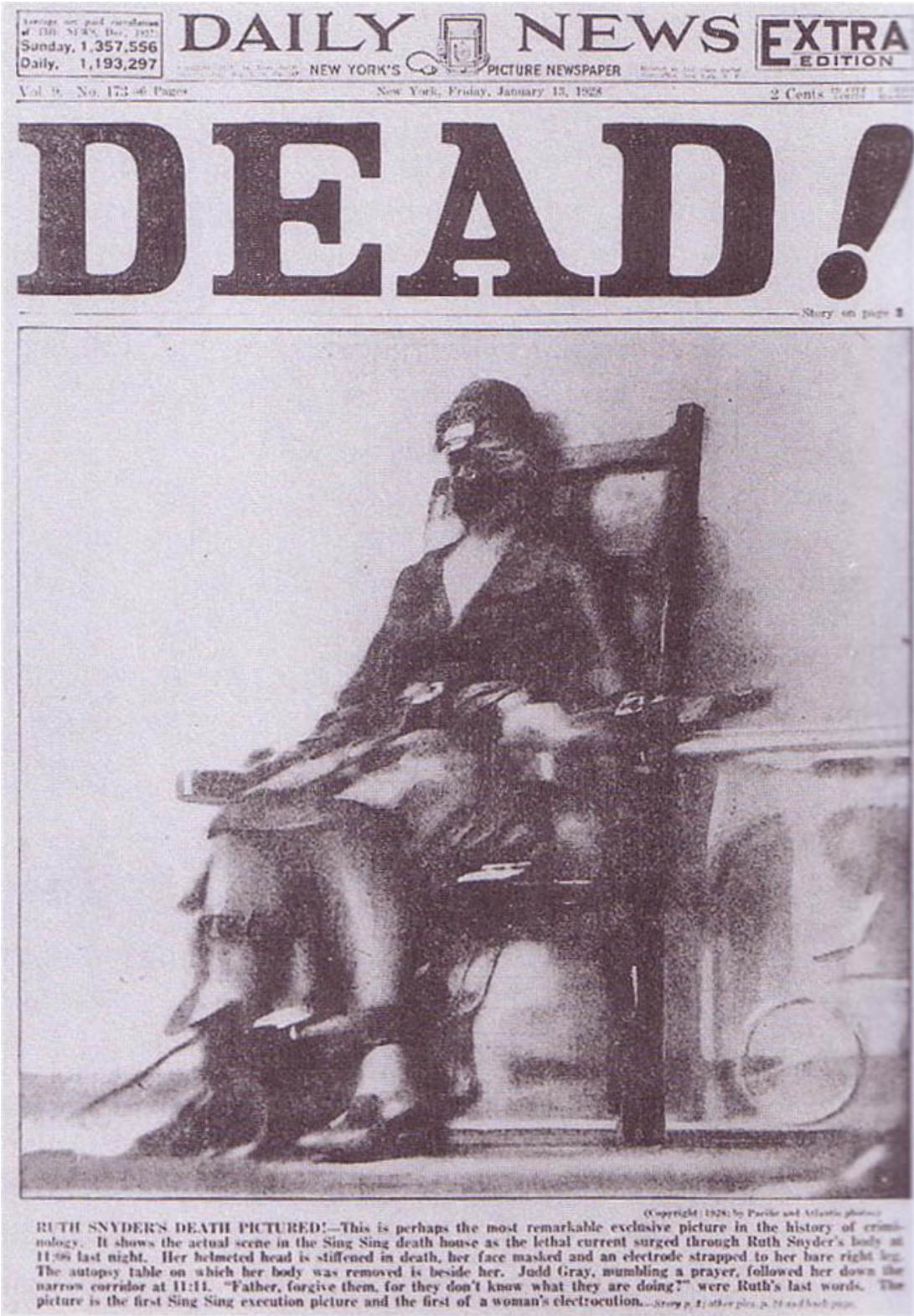


Image 3 The Daily News's front page featuring Snyder's execution (Daily News, January 13, 1928).

Even a perfunctory search of the paper's archives in the first decade of the 21st century is enough to evince this fact. The paper republished the photo in June of 2004 and again in June of 2009.⁶ In an October, 2005 piece Bill Gallo wrote that "*The Daily News* is noted for great front pages, ones easily recognized whenever they're reprinted," and gave the Ruth Snyder photograph as his *primary* example. The picture was so "dramatic," he writes, because it was taken just as Snyder "was given the juice."⁷ Clearly neither time nor the decline of capital punishment in much of the country has tempered the newspaper's unabashed zeal for the "drama" of such a shocking photograph. Even so long removed from the event, the *Daily News* uses the same euphemistic language to try to normalize the fact that it published a photograph of a human being *in the very moment of death* on its front page.

The articles themselves tell the story: they are articles in which the *Daily News* looks back on its existence and congratulates itself for its most clever achievements. The image remains the only press photograph ever circulated of an execution within a US prison, and will remain so due to the strict regulation of the press at executions instated after Howard's photograph came to light.

The incredible publicity of the Snyder-Gray trial ensured its survival in the American public consciousness even decades after the close of the trial. The 1944 film noir *Double Indemnity* (**image 4**) was based on a popular novelization of the case. In it Ruth Snyder was styled as Phyllis Dietrichson, who was later ranked by the American Film Institute the #8 villain in American cinema's first 100 years.

⁶ Maeder, Jay. "85 Years New York's Hometown Newspaper." *New York Daily News*, June 27, 2004.

⁷ Gallo, Bill. "When 'Dem Bums' Were Kings. 50 Years Ago, Dodgers Ended Their Own Curse." *New York Daily News*, October 04, 2005.

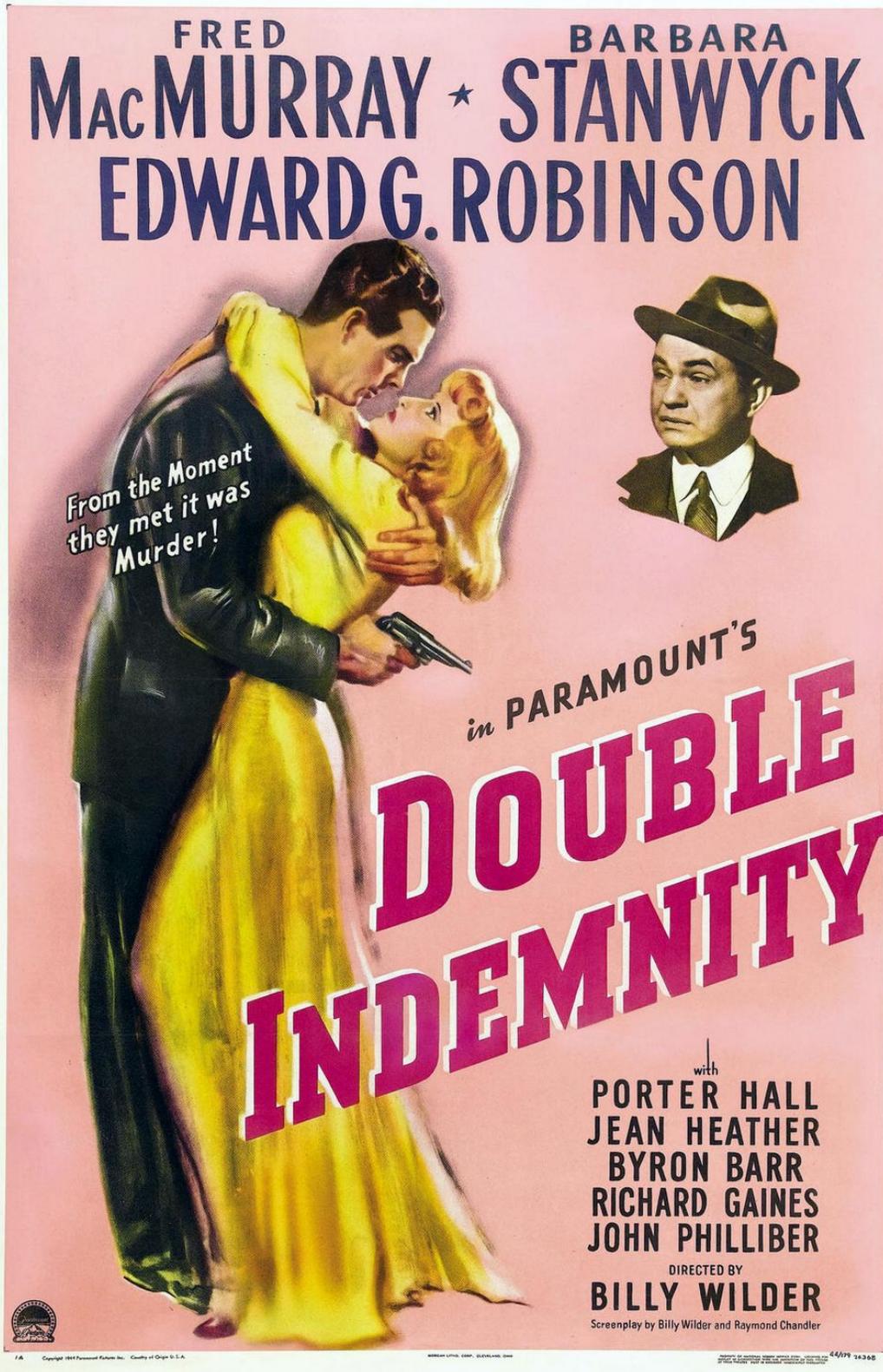


Image 4 Original movie poster for *Double Indemnity* (Paramount Pictures, 1944).