

A strange phenomenon helped a killer escape capture for seven years.



Mystery of the Elusive Vagrant

William T. Brannon

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT John A. Meister of Lorain, O., stared silently at the body of Mrs. Mary Wallace on the bedroom floor. Then he strode into the living room. The disorder of the two rooms showed that the attractive young mother had put up a terrific struggle before she was beaten and strangled.

Meister turned to the oldest boy, who was trying manfully to control his tears. He said his mother hadn't gone to work that day because of a severe cold. Her body had been found by the four children after school.

A broken clock, which had stopped at 9, fixed the time of the crime; the killer apparently had entered the house shortly after the children left for school. Contents of drawers scattered about the floors suggested robbery.

The boy explained that his father was in an institution, that his mother had worked hard to keep the family intact. She never had more than a few dollars and he was sure she wouldn't resist a robbery attempt.

Among the scattered papers were several pictures. The boy identified the photograph of a tall, smiling man as that of Frank Naiberg, to whom Mrs.

Wallace had rented a room. But Naiberg had moved to Detroit.

Investigation revealed that at least five men had been interested in Mrs. Wallace, but she declined their romantic overtures. Four of the men were found to be innocent.

The fifth man was Naiberg, the most ardent of all. Mrs. Wallace had finally asked him to move.

Investigation in Lorain turned up two witnesses who had seen a tall man on the Wallace block that day; one recalled that he had stopped at the victim's home. Then a third witness was found; he had seen Frank Naiberg in Lorain that morning.

Sure that he was on the right trail, Meister learned that Naiberg was an itinerant truck driver who worked in many areas. Acquaintances said he hitchhiked or rode freight trains between various cities.

Meister checked with railroads and truck drivers, and inquired at truck-stop restaurants. Naiberg was traced to the Indiana state line, where the trail abruptly vanished.

One thing puzzled Meister: Naiberg knew that Mrs. Wallace had no money;

why had he gone through the drawers? What was he looking for?

He searched the house again and found the answer—a stack of letters addressed to Naiberg. They were from acquaintances in a dozen towns in the East and Midwest. Apparently Naiberg knew he'd had some mail, and after the murder tried to find it so police wouldn't know his whereabouts.

"He'll stay away from those places," Meister predicted. He enlisted the help of the FBI, and "wanted" notices were sent throughout the nation, describing Naiberg as six feet two, weight 270, very powerfully built.

Though the hunt was intensive and Naiberg's description was posted throughout the country, the fugitive seemed to have vanished. Seven years elapsed before he was finally trapped by police in Los Angeles.

He was driving a truck and had to make a delivery to a defense plant. A routine check was made of his fingerprints and he was quickly identified.

Naiberg confessed he had been extremely jealous of Mrs. Wallace, though she spurned his advances. When she resisted him, he strangled her.



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