

Portrait of a Killer

No. 16: Vernon Oldaker

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Its an old story—theft & murder for a few dollars to place a bet on the ponies...

There is no law against being fond of playing the horses; and even if a man is unemployed and on relief and has a wife and four kids to support, there's not too much you can do to him if he still retains his fondness for betting a few bucks on the ponies. But Vernon Oldaker's list of „credits“ went far beyond this. He was a former bookie, a bigamist, a man who had deserted two wives, a convicted thief—and, finally, a murderer.

The ironic part of it all is that he not only killed the one woman who had gotten him on relief and who had added to this by continually giving him money out of her own pocket, but he also left enough obvious clues to point to himself as the killer and ended up by virtually inviting the police to come and get him.

Vernon, his wife, and his four children all lived in what was little better than a shack on the outskirts of town, and it was only through the kindness of Anne McKee, an elderly and very wealthy philanthropist, that none of the Oldaker family starved. Miss McKee saw to it that Vernon was placed on relief, that he got his check regularly, and that he didn't lack for a few extra dollars, which she gave to him herself. But, even so, the family came close to starvation many times because Vernon liked to play the horses.

It was an old story—he'd bet and lose and then bet some more trying to make back his losses. The only result was that the relief money seldom went for feeding and clothing his family. Instead, it was spent on Vernon's efforts to prove that he was a first-class handicapper—which he certainly wasn't.

One March morning, Vernon woke up to the fact that all his relief check had been spent. He was broke, but he was sure that this was only temporary. Miss McKee would take care of him again, and Vernon was positive he could pick a real winner this time.

He wasted no time in going to her house, and he found the old woman alone in the big house—alone and not exactly anxious to give him any money this time.

She refused flatly, even though Vernon tried to play on her sympathy by pointing out that his family would starve unless he got some money to feed them. It didn't work. Miss McKee knew from bitter experience in the past with Vernon that any money she'd give him would go to the nearest bookie and not to the neighborhood grocer.

Vernon kept on begging, then he started to argue, but Miss McKee was adamant—she wouldn't give him a cent. Finally, when Vernon became even more persistent, Miss McKee told him to follow her and she'd show him that, even if she wanted to help him, she didn't have any money in the house that day.

She led him out into the hallway to where her purse was lying on the table. Vernon noticed a hammer there also, but didn't bother to think about who had been using it or how it had gotten on the table.

Miss McKee picked up her purse, her back to Vernon—and that's when Vernon lost control of himself.

He grabbed the hammer and swung it at Miss McKee's head. He missed, and the hammer went over her head and thudded into the wall. Vernon drew back his arm and swung again before Miss McKee could get away from him. He hit her this time, and then he kept on swinging, the hammer missing and striking the wall almost as many times as it hit the woman.

When it was all over, and Miss McKee had fallen to the floor, Vernon had hit her four times in the head.

She looked dead. There was enough blood all over her head, but Vernon had to make sure. He went out to the kitchen, picked up the sharpest knife he could find, and came back to the hallway. He made certain by using the knife.

He was sure she was dead now. He dropped the knife and dragged the body back into the living room. Then, remembering that he had come there for money, he searched her desk, found a checkbook, and tore out a handful of blank checks. He went back to the hallway, got her purse and the hammer, and left the house.

There was only nine dollars in cash in the purse, and Vernon tossed it and the hammer into the river before clearing out of town. He had left the knife

behind, and while this might not have been an important clue, it didn't really matter because Vernon proceeded to put the finger on himself as the killer.

He forged Miss McKee's signature to five of the blank checks during his travels—and he was foolish enough to make out three of the checks to himself.

Naturally, the bank reported the matter to the police when the checks came through, and the police now knew for certain who the killer was. The usual bulletins went out, and the usual routine search was started for a wanted man.

Vernon eluded the police for a while, but then he apparently decided that it was time he wrote home to find out how his wife and family were making out—since he had left town without even letting them know about it. He wrote to his wife from another city, being careful not to include a return address. It was never made clear just what he hoped to accomplish by writing to his wife and not giving a return address, but the police now had a definite lead as to his whereabouts.

They checked the postmark, informed the local authorities in that city, sent along a description of Vernon, and the rest was just a matter of time. Vernon was picked up on the street just a few days after he had mailed the letter.

He broke down easily under police questioning, and confessed to the crime. At his trial, he tried to plead insanity. Even though he certainly had behaved in a peculiar manner—not trying to cover his trail after the killing—the plea wasn't allowed. It may have helped, though, because Vernon did manage to cheat the chair.

He was found guilty of murder in the second degree and sentenced to life in prison—where going on relief and playing the ponies are not a part of everyday life.
