

## **It Could Happen to Any Man Here**

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**November 9, 2009**

**The Literary Club**

**On May 6, 1933 Ernst Kohler died in Cincinnati. Kohler, a 62 year old German immigrant, owned a house at 2950 Colerain Avenue. Kohler lived alone on the third floor and rented two rooms and a kitchen on the second floor to Philip Hahn, his 27 year old German born wife Anna Marie and her young son Oskar.**

**Anna Marie reported that her landlord Ernst Kohler died due to cancer. Despite receiving several anonymous telephone calls that Kohler had been poisoned, the coroner ruled that cancer was the cause of Kohler's death.**

**Kohler's body was cremated and his ashes were given to Anna Marie who kept them on her mantel. Anna's son Oskar enjoyed opening the urn and showing Kohler's ashes to his buddies.**

**By will dated April 22, 1933 (*two weeks* before his death) Kohler left his entire estate "to my friend, Anna Marie Filser Hahn, who has befriended me and taken care of me during my last illness." In addition to the unmortgaged house on Colerain Avenue, the estate included a savings account, a car and antique furnishings, imported dinnerware and five silver services which Anna Marie later told visitors she had collected and owned for years.**

**Kohler's irate relatives in Germany filed suit in Hamilton County contesting the will. An out of court settlement was reached.**

**With regard to the care that Anna Marie gave to Kohler, Captain Patrick Hayes of the Cincinnati Police Department, investigating Anna Marie years later, stated: "Mrs. Hahn administered enough morphine to Kohler to kill a dozen persons."**

**A little over two years later on August 14, 1935 Charles "Karl" Osswalt, a 77 year old retired baker, died at Deaconess Hospital. One week later Anna Marie Hahn received a \$1,000 check as sole beneficiary of Osswalt's National Biscuit Company pension plan.**

**Osswalt had become a widower in 1929 and shortly thereafter 23 year old Anna Marie Filser moved in with 71 year old Osswalt at 304 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street in Over The Rhine. Anna Marie was distantly related to Osswalt's deceased wife Mary so Anna Marie called him "Uncle Charlie".**

**Falsely claiming she had been a nurse in Germany, Anna Marie gave Osswalt care and companionship and he gave her stock. In November, 1929 Anna Marie promised to marry Osswalt and care for him in his old age if he would give her 99 shares of Union Gas and Electric stock valued at several thousand dollars. She also frequently needed cash from Osswalt, which, unbeknownst to him, she wagered with at area race tracks and gambling parlors in Ohio and in Newport and Covington, Kentucky. Shortly after arriving in the United States Anna Marie won \$260 on a \$2 bet at Latonia Race Track in Kentucky. She was immediately hooked on gambling and needed lots of money coming in to support her gambling habit.**

**Anna Marie told Osswalt that she was still indebted for her steamship fare from when she emigrated from Germany to the United States. Osswalt gave her the money to repay the debt but she kept it for herself, probably to use for gambling.**

**In May, 1930, 24 year old Anna Marie married 27 year old Philip Hahn, a Western Union telegrapher whom she met at a German dance at the Hotel Alms. However, she didn't tell Osswalt of the marriage but why should she? She was the prime beneficiary of his estate In July, 1930 Anna Marie received another 27 shares of Union Gas and Electric stock from Osswalt and transferred \$700, being all of Osswalt's money at Eagle Savings and Loan Association, from his account to hers.**

**On February 3, 1931, Osswalt, still unaware of Anna Marie's marriage to Philip, executed a new will leaving \$5 to a stepdaughter in North Bend, Ohio and \$5 to a stepson in Los Angeles and all of the rest, remainder and residue to "my beloved niece, Anna Filser Hahn."**

**However, Osswalt then learned that Anna Marie had married. He filed suit on July 30, 1931 against Anna Marie for breach of promise and asked for the return of the stock and cash plus interest at 6%. The lawsuit stated: "She knew at the time she promised that she was not going to marry plaintiff but, on the contrary, intended to marry someone else and did." For unknown reasons the case was dismissed before the jury made a decision.**

**Osswalt's Last Will and Testament was not probated when he died in 1935 because Anna Marie already had all of his money!**

**On March 26, 1937 Albert J. Palmer, a 72 year old retired railroad watchman, died of an apparent heart attack. Palmer, a Parisian by birth, liked to bet on the horses. At the Blades, a gambling parlor in Elmwood Place, he met Anna Marie in late 1936. In early 1937 Anna Marie visited Palmer in his apartment at 2416 Central Parkway two or three times a week and they dined on her cooking which upset Palmer's stomach.**

Palmer told friends that Anna Marie was “his girl” and that the two of them were going on a trip to Florida that Anna Marie had planned. She cuddled and sweet talked Palmer out of \$2,000 - -a considerable sum in 1937. Anna Marie signed a promissory note but SHE kept possession of it. Anna Marie sent Palmer almost two dozen perfumed love notes, one of which began “My Dear Sweet Daddy” and was signed “with all my love and lots of kisses, Your Ann”. Another note said “Honey, I have to have \$100...”

However, in late February, 1937 Palmer changed his tune and demanded that Anna Marie repay the money he had loaned to her. It is likely that Palmer heard about her involvement with yet another man, George E. Heis (more about Heis later). Palmer suffered bouts with stomach cramps, diarrhea and vomiting after each meal Anna Marie cooked for him.

Finally, Palmer told Anna Marie: become his girl friend on a permanent, exclusive basis or repay the loan. Anna Marie couldn't or wouldn't do either.

Then Palmer died, virtually penniless. After his body was disinterred from the grave several months later, the coroner found 6 grains of arsenic in Palmer's organs.

On June 3, 1937 Jacob Wagner, a German immigrant widower aged 78, died of arsenic poisoning at Good Samaritan Hospital. Very soon after Albert Palmer's March death Anna Marie went to an apartment building at 1805 Race Street and asked “whether any old men lived here alone?” She was told that Jacob Wagner lived down the hall. Anna Marie claimed that she was Wagner's niece and had a letter to him from relatives in Baden-Baden concerning an inheritance. A neighbor told Wagner about Anna Marie's visit and he said: “No, no. There must be some mistake.” Yet soon thereafter Wagner and Anna Marie met and he told a friend “I have a new girl”.

A few weeks after Anna Marie asked whether any old men lived in the building where Wagner resided, Wagner reported to Arthur J. Schmitt, Assistant Vice President of Fifth Third Union Trust Company, that his passbook showing more than \$4,000 on deposit had been stolen after he left his apartment to buy a pail of beer to share with Anna Marie.

After meeting with Schmitt, Wagner stopped at Kirsch's bar on Elder Street and, when Anna Marie entered the bar, Wagner accused her of stealing his bankbook. Anna Marie and Wagner went to his apartment to search for the missing bankbook and Anna Marie “found” it and called Schmitt to tell him.

The next day a neighbor sitting on her porch on Race Street saw Anna Marie in Wagner's apartment serving glasses of orange juice to him. Two days later Wagner was in extreme agony. He was vomiting, passing blood and battling diarrhea.

**Anna Marie claimed (falsely) that she was a nurse and could take care of Wagner but a physician insisted that he go to the hospital. The doctor visited Wagner at Good Sam hospital and stated: “he was semi-conscious, writhing with pain, in a state of shock, dying.”**

**A few minutes past midnight on the morning of June 3, 1937 Wagner died. Hours later when the bank opened, Anna Marie went to Schmitt at Fifth Third Union Trust Company with a note that said “please give Mrs. Hahn a check 1000 dollars bal. in her name”. She had a withdrawal slip for \$1,000 but banker Schmitt refused to honor it because it was incomplete. Schmitt told Anna Marie to get Wagner to sign another withdrawal slip at Deaconess Hospital where Anna Marie stated Wagner was a patient.**

**Two hours later Anna Marie returned to Schmitt’s office with a signed withdrawal slip. Schmitt called Deaconess and they said that they had no patient named Wagner. Anna Marie said she had made a silly mistake and that Wagner was actually at Good Sam. Schmitt called Good Sam and discovered that Wagner had died in the middle of the night.**

**Anna Marie begged Schmitt not to turn her over to the police for forgery, explaining that she was estranged from her husband and her son would have no mother to care for him. Schmitt unfortunately accepted her tearful tale and did not report Anna Marie to the police. Had he done so, lives would have been saved.**

**Anna Marie did not abandon her efforts to get Wagner’s money. No sir! As soon as she left Schmitt’s office she forged a will for Wagner which of course left everything to her. She attempted to trick some non English speaking women to sign the will as witnesses but they refused.**

**Anna Marie took the forged will to the Probate Court anyway but they refused to accept it for probate because it was unwitnessed.**

**Aside regarding Arthur J. Schmitt: When I saw that the name of the Fifth Third bank officer who dealt with Anna Marie was Arthur J. Schmitt, I was shocked! I had a client named Arthur F. Schmitt (who David Reichert knew). I often heard the Art Schmitt I knew mention that in the 1930’s he worked for a bank in Cincinnati. Art’s middle initial was different but I thought it must be a misprint or error. Unfortunately, Art died a few years ago so I couldn’t ask him if he waited on Anna Marie in 1937 but I was able to ask his widow. She told me that the man at the Bank was a different Arthur Schmitt, not her husband. *Sic transit gloria.***

**On July 6, 1937 the body of 67 year old German speaking immigrant George G. Gsellman was found in his apartment at 1717 Elm Street. The police noted that the table where he normally ate his meals alone was set for two. There was a pot of meat and a pot of gravy on the stove. City chemist Dr Otto P Behrer determined that**

together the meat and the gravy contained 18 grains of arsenic, enough to kill two dozen men.

Gsellman told friends that he was going to marry a blond woman and move to California. Anna Marie was the blond woman. Because he appeared prosperous and well dressed, she thought Gsellman had money. Two weeks before Gsellman's death, Anna Marie knocked on his door and introduced herself. Lonely, Gsellman was swept off his feet by Anna Marie. On July 1, five days before his death, Gsellman withdrew \$100 from his bank account. Gsellman's banker could never recall him withdrawing such a large amount on any other occasion.

After Gsellman's body was later disinterred, an autopsy was performed and the coroner ruled that Gsellman "died from an ingestion of arsenic."

George E. Heis was a 63 year old coal dealer, a bachelor, living at 2929 Colerain Avenue. Anna Marie visited Heis in June, 1936, to ask about buying stoker coal. She stayed for beer and Heis fell in love and referred to Anna Marie as "my girl". They drank together and she cooked pfannkuchen or pancakes for him. Anna Marie falsely told Heis that she had divorced her husband and he believed it. She started to borrow money from Heis and she soon owed him more than \$2,000.

Each time Heis ate Anna Marie's cooking in the Fall of 1936 he became sick with diarrhea and terrible stomach pains. He became bedridden. He began to suspect that Anna Marie was poisoning him. After Anna Marie served him a mug of beer, a couple of flies sampled the brew and dropped dead on the spot. She refused to share the drink (wonder why?).

The next time Anna Marie came to his house bringing spinach for him to eat, he told her to leave and never come back. Heis was the only older male victim to survive. Unfortunately, he did not inform the police of his suspicions.

August 1, 1937 was the day Johan George Obendoerfer died in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Obendoerfer was a shoe repairman with German roots. In June of '37 Anna Marie went to Obendoerfer's shop at 2150 Clifton Avenue to have a heel repaired. She immediately charmed the 67 year old cobbler. (Oh, if Anna Marie had been able to patent and bottle that charm, she would have become a multi millionaire instead of a serial killer!). Obendoerfer started talking engagement, marriage, honeymoon. His daughter Louise was amazed at how infatuated her father had become with a woman less than half his age. Anna Marie invited Obendoerfer to take a trip to the Colorado mountains with her and her twelve year old son Oskar.

On July 20, 1937 a healthy Obendoerfer spent the night at Anna Marie's house. She prepared a special dinner for him, so "special" that by the next day Obendoerfer needed assistance to get into the taxi to go to Cincinnati Union Terminal. By the time they arrived in Denver, Obendoerfer was quite ill. A hotel

porter said Obendoerfer “appeared awfully sick and was in agony.” Anna Marie gave Obendoerfer watermelon to eat which at the time was a well known agent for feeding arsenic to rats.

After Louis Straub, the proprietor of the Denver hotel, entered Obendoerfer’s vomit and excrement filled room and saw him in agony, he asked Anna Marie: “Are you travelling with that old gentleman?” She answered: “I met him on the train. I don’t know who he is but he is very sick and I was taking care of him.”

When Straub said that Obendoerfer should go to a hospital, Anna Marie said: “I promised his people in Cincinnati that I would see him to Colorado Springs”, not realizing that she had contradicted her claim that she had just met Obendoerfer on the train.

While Obendoerfer was suffering in Denver, Anna Marie wrote a letter to Clifton Heights Building and Loan in Cincinnati requesting \$1,000 from Obendoerfer’s account be sent by check to Denver because he was “thinking about buying a little chicken farm in Colorado.” However, she left Denver before the check arrived.

Anna Marie put the very weak and sick Obendoerfer on a train for Colorado Springs. She found time to send a postcard to her brother Hans in Germany that she and her husband were on vacation and “all was well by us.”

Anna Marie stole two diamond rings from Mrs. Turner, owner of the Colorado Springs hotel they checked into. This turned out to be a very serious mistake for Anna Marie.

Anna Marie finally took the very sick Obendoerfer to Beth-El Hospital in Colorado Springs after she had taken all of the money he was carrying.

After Obendoerfer died on August 1, the hospital called Anna Marie who said: “Why notify me? I don’t know him. I met him on the train between Denver and Colorado Springs and I got to talking with him because he was Swiss and I am Swiss.”

Anna Marie and Oskar quickly left Colorado Springs (but not before she attempted unsuccessfully to pawn Mrs. Turner’s rings there) and checked into the same hotel in Denver where she told Mr. Straub the proprietor that “Mr. Obendoerfer was getting along very nicely.”

Before departing Denver by train for Cincinnati on the Burlington Zephyr, Anna Marie was able to pawn Mrs. Turner’s rings for \$7.05.

Kohler, Osswalt, Palmer, Wagner, Gsellman, Obendoerfer and Heis - - -these are the older men *that we know of* that Anna Marie poisoned. However, to some degree, Anna Marie was an equal opportunity poisoner; she poisoned several

women- - Olive Louella Koehler (who died) and Julia Kreskay, Mary Arnold (a 95 year old Civil War widow) and Stina Cable, all of whom survived. Anna Marie tried to poison her husband Philip and her mother-in-law Margaret “Maggie” Hahn became very ill after eating candy from a box of chocolate covered cherries given to her by Anna Marie.

Now who was Anna Marie Filser Hahn a/k/a in the newspapers as “Arsenic Annie” or the “Blond Borgia” and what happened to her?

Who was she? Anna Marie Filser was born June 7, 1906, the youngest of a dozen children, in Fuessen, Bavaria. She attended parochial schools and was taught by nuns but never finished high school. At age 18 Anna Marie became an unwed mother, giving birth to a son Oskar in 1925. The father of her baby is unknown although she claimed he was a doctor in Vienna.

Due to the resulting scandal in the small, close knit Bavarian community, her family shipped Anna Marie off to America in 1929. Oskar stayed with Anna Marie’s mother. In the United States Anna Marie kept secret the fact that she had a son although in 1930 she went back to Germany and brought Oskar to Cincinnati.

As I stated earlier, Anna Marie became a gambling addict with an unquenchable thirst for funds with which to bet.

What happened to Anna Marie? On August 10, 1937 Anna Marie was picked up by the Cincinnati Police, at the request of the Colorado Springs Police, for questioning. Mrs. Turner, the hotel owner, had reported to the Colorado Springs Police that she had discovered Anna Marie in Turner’s private quarters at the hotel and told her to leave immediately. After Anna Marie checked out of the hotel, Mrs. Turner discovered that two diamond rings valued at \$305 were missing. The Colorado Springs Police also desired to question Anna Marie about Johan George Obendoerfer because of the mystery of who he was and how he died.

Anna Marie told the police that she “accidentally” met Obendoerfer at the railroad station and that she helped him because he was sick. “I felt sorry for him. I’m kindhearted that way.”

While Anna Marie was being questioned about Obendoerfer, another Cincinnati Homicide Officer heard that her name was Hahn. This rang a bell because the officer had learned she had been friends with Jacob Wagner whose death had been under investigation since early June.

The police found in Anna Marie’s purse a note she claimed that Wagner had written that said: “Feel sorry for Mrs. Hahn. She is not to blame.” Problem was that Jacob Wagner wrote only in German, not in English. When this purse was later analyzed, it was found to be saturated with arsenic.

**Detective Schultz asked Anna Marie how many old men and women she knew who died suddenly? She answered Wagner, Palmer, Kohler, Obendoerfer, her “Uncle” Oswald and Mrs. Koehler.**

**Of course, this broadened the investigation and, when the newspapers started to cover this story, friends, relatives and neighbors of the victims started talking to the police.**

**Anna Marie said: “My conscience is clear. I never did anything wrong.”**

**Nevertheless, on August 14, 1937 Anna Marie was arraigned before Municipal Court Judge Clarence Spraul and two days later on August 16 the Hamilton County Grand Jury indicted Anna Marie for the malicious and premeditated murders of Wagner and Gsellman although she was actually only tried for murdering Wagner.**

**Less than two months later on October 11, 1937, Anna Marie’s murder trial began before a jury of eleven women and one man. One of the prosecutors was Simon Leis, Sr., father of our current Sheriff. Leis Sr. later became a judge and I tried my first case as a new lawyer in his courtroom.**

**In a particularly damaging ruling from the viewpoint of the defense, the Judge ruled that the prosecution would be allowed to introduce evidence of the poisoning of other old men by Anna Marie to show a homicidal pattern.**

**96 witnesses testified for the prosecution and only 3 for the defense: Anna Marie, Oskar and a Chicago toxicologist.**

**The newspaper coverage of Anna Marie’s trial was intense. Many men who patronized race tracks, casinos and bars recalled meeting the beautiful blond German woman. They also considered themselves fortunate that they had not sampled her cooking.**

**The talk then turned to sex. The rumor on the street was that Anna Marie spread arsenic upon her large breasts which her male admirers sucked. They then died happy men. This untrue tale originated after the prosecutor, in pretrial proceedings, stated that the poison was administered orally.**

**After the trial ended on November 4, the jury, after two hours of deliberation, found Anna Marie guilty of murdering Jacob Wagner. There was no recommendation of mercy. Accordingly, on November 10, 1937, Anna Marie was sentenced to death in Ohio’s electric chair.**

**Unsuccessful appeals on Anna Marie’s behalf were filed with the Ohio First District Court of Appeals and the Ohio Supreme Court. The United States Supreme**

**Court refused to accept her appeal and Ohio Governor Martin Davey declined to spare her from the death sentence.**

**In a rambling hand written confession later released by her lawyers after her death, Anna Marie confessed to killing Palmer, Wagner, Gsellman and Obendoerfer:**

**“Only God knows what came over me when I gave Albert Palmer that first one, that poison that caused his death. Up in heaven there is God who will judge me. He will know me and He will tell me how it came about. He will tell me what caused me to do the same things to Mr. Wagner, Gsellman and the last one, Mr. Obendoerfer. ...I couldn’t believe it when, in court, people came to the room and told the jury how these men died. I was sitting there hearing a story like out of a book about another person...God above will tell me what made me do these terrible things...I do not try to excuse myself for my actions. They were not me at all.”**

**She concluded: “I have written this confession with full knowledge that death is near, and I only ask one favor and that is my son should not be judged for the wrongs his mother may have done.”**

**At age 32 Anna Marie Hahn on December 7, 1938 became the first woman to be executed in Ohio’s electric chair. She was the second woman to be executed by the State of Ohio. The first, Hester Foster, a black female jail prisoner, was hung in 1844 for beating a fellow female inmate to death with a shovel. Between 1844 and 1938 no females were put to death in Ohio.**

**After Anna Marie’s execution. Two more women died in Ohio’s electric chair: Dovie Dean from Clermont County and Betty Butler from Cincinnati, both in 1954.**

**Thus, Ohio has executed 4 women but the State also put to death 370 men.**

**Was the death penalty justified in Anna Marie’s case? We learned in law school that one of the purposes of capital punishment is deterrence. While some would be killers might be deterred from murdering because of the death penalty, I doubt that serial killers like Anna Marie would be deterred. She certainly wasn’t.**

**Another purpose of capital punishment is retribution. While retribution does not bring murder victims back to life, society and the families of victims need to feel that the murderer has “paid” for her crimes. Otherwise, if they did not believe the State was going to punish the killer, they might engage in frontier justice - - - -getting guns and shooting the killer, or alleged killer, guilty or not.**

**Generally, I’ve been in favor of capital punishment for premeditated murder. My major qualm is that very, very occasionally mistakes have been made and an innocent person has been executed.**

**In Anna Marie's case, it seems to me that capital punishment was justified. She was an amoral serial killer who was not going to be rehabilitated in prison. Her older male victims could have been *us*.**

**The inspiration for this paper "It Could Happen to Any Man Here" began on January 10, 2005 when Oliver "Muff" Gale read his last paper to the Literary Club titled "Elizabeth, A Dear Little German Maid Was She". At that time Muff was, I believe, the oldest member of the Club in both age and seniority of membership. Muff joined in 1948, before some of you were born!**

**Those of us who are "fairly regular attenders" on Monday evenings listen to a lot of papers, many of them quite good. I know that for me, and perhaps for some of you, only a relatively few of these papers stick in one's memory long term.**

**Muff's paper certainly made an impression on me: Muff, while on an extended business trip to Germany, met Elizabeth, a beautiful young German woman with "golden hair, greenish eyes and a beautiful smile" (just like Anna Marie I might say). Muff, very impressed with Elizabeth's looks, personality and intelligence, agreed to sponsor her to immigrate to America.**

**After Elizabeth arrived in Cincinnati Muff got her a job and stayed in touch. Four or five years later Muff's wife died and after a while Muff started taking Elizabeth to the Symphony, the Opera, the Playhouse and restaurants. In his paper Muff described Elizabeth as charming, vivacious, full of life, excited by the world she was living in, truly a breath of youth and fresh air.**

**I'm certain that many of the older gentlemen who unfortunately met Anna Marie Hahn would have described her in similar terms.**

**Getting back to Muff's story - -Muff was by then retired and travelled a lot all over the world. Elizabeth kindly offered to check his mail while he was away. Over time Muff came to rely heavily upon Elizabeth. He gave her a full power of attorney and let her pay his bills and manage his finances while he travelled, read or attended to his stamp collection.**

**Finally, one day Muff called his broker to talk about putting his stocks in trust. Muff was shocked to learn that, using the power of attorney, Elizabeth had sold all of his stocks and cashed the brokerage firm check! All of Muff's money was gone! He had been captivated by this beautiful, intelligent young German woman and came to trust and rely upon her. When I heard Muff's story (he assured me that it was fiction, not fact), I looked around at the aging members of the Literary Club (myself included) and thought: *It Could Happen to Any Man Here*. Thus, the title of tonight's paper.**