

"I Think I Caught a Killer"

BY RALPH KINNEY BENNETT

A Reader's Digest reader leads police to one of the "World's Most Wanted"

WHEN POLICE found Aileen O'Brien-Beaucage slumped on the front seat of a car in a Burlington, Ont., shopping mall, they were struck by the bloody ferocity of her murder. The divorced mother of two had been stabbed at least 20 times in the back. Police eventually charged the woman's ex-husband, Grant Warren Beaucage, with the murder.

But on January 22, 1997, shortly before his trial, the 43-year-old disappeared. More than two years passed, and the trail ran cold -- until Reader's Digest ran his photo and description in editions around the world.

IT WAS Jenny Schueneman's day off from her job as a restaurant cashier at the Stardust Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, and she wasn't excited about spending it at an auto-repair shop. But she picked up the October issue of Reader's Digest and was soon oblivious to the noise of the garage. Glancing at the article "World's Most Wanted," she scanned the thumbnail sketches of criminals being sought all over the globe. Looking at one, Schueneman froze.

I know that man! she thought. *He doesn't have that mustache anymore, but I'd know those eyes anywhere.*

She was struck by the description of Grant Warren Beaucage as "a slick, gregarious talker" who "spent most of his time gambling." She knew him as a regular in the sports-betting room where she worked.

Born in Durban, South Africa, and transplanted to Las Vegas, Schueneman, 36, had seen so many faces pass through the Stardust during the nearly five years she had worked there. Could she be wrong?

Scanning one of the thumbnail sketches of criminals being sought, Schueneman froze. "I know that man," she thought.

No. I know it's him.

By the time her husband got home from work that night, Schueneman was already in bed. "Honey, how was your day?" he asked.

"I had to get the brakes fixed on my car," she mumbled sleepily, "and I think I caught a killer."

The next morning Schueneman tore Beaucage's picture from the magazine and took it to work. Hailing one of the Stardust's uniformed security officers, she showed him the photo and said, "This guy comes in here almost every day."

Dave Thompson was skeptical. "Well, if he shows up, you call me."

Around noon a thickset man walked in wearing a white T-shirt and dark shorts. "Hi, Jen!" he called out cheerily. Most of the regulars knew her by name. She waved back from behind the snack-bar counter, her heart pumping. The man bantered with other regulars before he settled into a seat and began browsing through a newspaper.

A Closer Look

Schueneman waited almost a half hour, then punched in the number for casino security. Within minutes Thompson and Sgt. Don Carlton arrived, and she pointed out the man. "That's him," she said.

Sizing up the man in the T-shirt, their skepticism began to disappear. They telephoned William Cage, a former California policeman who is chief investigator for Stardust.

Someone read a story about an axe murderer and is having nightmares, Cage thought. But his practice was to follow up on everything. Surveillance cameras zoomed in for close-ups and clicked off hard-copy images for Cage to compare with the picture in *The Digest*. He called the number listed in the article for the Halton Regional Police, Major Crime Bureau, in Ontario.

Some 4,800 kilometres away at the regional headquarters, Detective Sgt. Al Frost answered. He had inherited the Beaucage case, and after so many dead-end leads, it was like a wound that wouldn't heal.

"We might have your guy down here," Cage said. Stunned, Frost alerted him to the regional police web site, where there was a larger photo of Beaucage and a thumb-print. Cage compared the photo with the casino camera shots. He concentrated on the distance between the eyes and the bridge of the nose, a characteristic often used by police to make an identification. It was a match. A scar on Beaucage's chin and a small mole on his forehead also seemed to match. It was time for a closer look.

Sergeant Carlton had assembled an unobtrusive fence of armed security officers around the area. Now Cage, dressed in a sport shirt and slacks, sat down next to the suspect at a 25-cent slot machine. When the man started to walk away, Cage followed, tapped him on the shoulder and showed his badge. "Good afternoon. Casino investigations. Can I see some ID?" The suspect said he didn't have any. He started, however, to reach into his pocket. "Don't do that," Cage said quietly. Then he clapped handcuffs onto the man's wrists. The digital clock on the casino surveillance monitors read 1:59 p.m., September 15, 1999, as the camera captured a look of stunned resignation in the man's eyes.

No More Alibis

In a small interview room nearby, the suspect maintained he was Philip Hansen, a U.S. citizen born in Duluth, Minn. Pressed for identification, he rattled off a social security number. But he gave it in a sequence of threes -- the style for Canadian social insurance numbers -- rather than the three-two-four sequence of American numbers.

Cage checked it out. The number belonged to a 75-year-old woman in St. Louis. When he told "Hansen" this, the man hung his head and grimly joked, "Maybe I shoulda been in drag." Cage telephoned the Las Vegas Criminal Apprehension Team, a fugitive task force made up of federal and local law enforcement.

Las Vegas Metro Detective George Headley and FBI Special Agent James Patrick arrived 25 minutes later. Patrick had noticed a small scar in Grant Beaucage's right thumbprint. He asked the man to hold up his hand. There was the same diagonal scar. "Sir, we are placing you under arrest," Patrick said. They put the man in the front seat of an unmarked Toyota Camry. Headley was at the wheel as they drove towards the Clark County Detention Centre.

"If you lie to a federal agent, you get five years in federal prison," Patrick told the prisoner. Trying to break the tension, Headley added, "If you lie to a Metro officer, it's a misdemeanour and you get a traffic ticket." All three men chuckled, and then Grant Warren Beaucage sighed. "Okay," he said. "I'm the man you're looking for."

Grant Warren Beaucage was returned to Canada on October 22 and will soon stand trial for the murder of Aileen O'Brien-Beaucage.

Update: On December 14, 2000, in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, Grant Warren Beaucage was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment (eligible for parole after serving 25 years, in Canada).