

The Mystery of Agatha Webb.

By Anna Katharine Green.

Author of "The Leavenworth Case," "Lost Man's Lane," "Hand and Ring," Etc., Etc.

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Again the detective opened his lips and might have spoken, but Sweetwater gave him no chance.

"Where is the letter he was writing?" he demanded. "Have any of you seen any paper lying about here?"

"He was not writing," objected Knapp; "he was reading—reading in that old Bible you see there."

Sweetwater caught up the book, looked it over and laid it down, with that same serious twinkle of his eye they had noted in him before.

"He was writing," he insisted. "See, here is his pencil." And he showed them the battered end of a small lead pencil lying on the edge of his chair.

"Writing at some time," admitted Knapp.

"Writing just before the deed," insisted Sweetwater. "Look at the fingers of his right hand. They have not moved since the pencil fell out of them."

"The letter, or whatever it was, shall be looked for," declared the constable. Sweetwater bowed, his eyes roving restlessly into every nook and corner of the room.

"The brother, James, was the stronger," he remarked; "yet there is no evidence that he made any attempt at suicide."

"How do you know that it was suicide John attempted?" asked some one. "Why might not the dagger have fallen from James' hand in an effort to kill his brother?"

"Because the dent in the floor would have been to the right of the chair instead of to the left," he returned. "Besides, James' hand would not have fallen so utterly, since he had strength to pick up the weapon afterward and lay it where you found it."

"True, we found it lying on the table," observed Abel, scratching his head in forced admiration of his old schoolmate.

"All easy, very easy," Sweetwater remarked, seeing the wonder in every eye. "Matters like those are for a child's reading, but what is difficult and what I find it hard to come by, is how the \$20 bill got into the old man's hand. He found it here, but how?"

"Found it here? How do you know that?"

"Gentlemen, that is a point I will make clear to you later, when I have laid my hand on a certain clew I am anxiously seeking. You know this is new work for me, and I have to advance warily. Did any of you gentlemen, when you came into this room, detect the faintest odor of any kind of perfume?"

"Perfume?" echoed Abel, with a glance about the musty apartment. "Rats, rather."

Sweetwater shook his head with a discouraged air, but suddenly brightened, and, stepping quickly across the floor, paused at one of the windows—it was that one in which the shade had been drawn down.

"Peering at this shade he gave a grunt."

"You must excuse me for a minute," said he. "I have not found what I wanted in this room and now must look outside for it. Will some one bring the lantern?"

"I will," volunteered Knapp, with grim good humor. Indeed, the situation was almost ludicrous to him.

"Bring it round the house, then, to the ground under this window," ordered Sweetwater without giving any sign that he noticed or even recognized the other's air of condescension. "And, gentlemen, please don't follow. It's footsteps I am after, and the fewer we make about the house ourselves the easier it will be for me to establish the clew I am after."

Mr. Fenton stared. What had got into the fellow?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MONEY FOUND.

The lantern zone the room resumed its former appearance.

Abel, who had been much struck by Sweetwater's mysterious maneuvers, drew near Dr. Talbot and whispered in his ear: "We might have done without that fellow from Boston."

To which the coroner replied:

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. Sweetwater has not yet proved his case; let us wait till he explains himself." Then turning to the constable he showed him an old fashioned miniature which he had found lying on James' breast when he made his first examination. It was set with pearls and backed with gold and was worth many meals, for the lack of which its devoted owner had perished.

"Agatha Webb's portrait," exclaimed Talbot, "or rather Agatha Gilchrist's! For I presume this was painted when she and James were lovers."

"She was certainly a beauty," commented Fenton, as he bent over the miniature in the moonlight. "I do not wonder she queened it over the whole county."

"He must have worn it where I found it for the last 40 years," mused the doctor. "And yet men say that love is a fleeting passion. Well, after coming upon this proof of devotion, I find it impossible to believe James Zabel accountable for her death. Sweetwater's instinct was truer than Knapp's."

"Of ours," muttered Fenton.

"Gentlemen," interposed Abel, pointing

to a bright spot that just then made its appearance in the dark outline of the shade before alluded to, "do you see that hole? It was the sight of that prick in the shade which sent Sweetwater outside looking for footprints. See! Now his eye is to it" (as the bright spot became suddenly eclipsed). "We are under examination, sirs, and the next thing we will hear is that he's not the only person who's been peering into this room through that hole."

He was so far right that the first words of Sweetwater on his re-entrance were: "It's all O. K., sirs. I have found my missing clew. James Zabel was not the only person who came up here from the Webb cottage last night." And turning to Knapp, who was losing some of his supercilious manner, he asked, with significant emphasis: "If, of the full amount stolen from Agatha Webb, you found \$20 in the possession of one man and \$980 in the possession of another, upon which of the two would you fix as the probable murderer of this good woman?"

"Upon him who held the lion's share, of course."

"Very good. Then it is not in this cottage you will find the person most wanted. You must look—But there, first let me give you a glimpse of the money. Is there any one here ready to accompany me in search of it? I shall have to take him a quarter of a mile farther up hill."

"You have seen the money? You know where it is?" asked Dr. Talbot and Mr. Fenton in one breath.

"Gentlemen, I can put my hand on it in ten minutes."

At this unexpected and somewhat startling statement Knapp looked at Dr. Talbot and Dr. Talbot looked at the constable, but only the latter spoke. "That is saying a good deal. But no matter. I am willing to credit the assertion. Lead on, Sweetwater. I'll go with you."

Sweetwater seemed to grow an inch at least. "And Dr. Talbot?" he suggested.

But the coroner's duty held him to this house of death, and he decided not to accompany them. Knapp and Abel, however, yielded to the curiosity which had been aroused by these extraordinary promises, and soon these four started on their small expedition up the hill.

Sweetwater headed the procession. He had admonished silence, and his wish in this regard was so well carried out that they looked more like a group of specters moving up the moon lighted road than a party of eager and impatient men. Not till they turned into the main thoroughfare did any one speak.

Then Abel could no longer restrain himself, and he cried out: "We are going to Mr. Sutherland's."

But Sweetwater quickly undeceived him.

"No," said he, "only into the woods opposite his house."

But at this Mr. Fenton drew him back.

"Are you sure of yourself?" he said.

"Have you really seen this money, and is it concealed in this forest?"

"I have seen the money," Sweetwater solemnly declared, "and it is hidden in these woods."

Mr. Fenton dropped his arm, and they moved on till their way was blocked by the huge trunk of a fallen tree.

"It is here we are to look," cried Sweetwater pausing and motioning Knapp to turn his lantern on the spot where the shadows lay thickest. "Now, what do you see?" he asked.

"The upturned roots of a great tree," said Mr. Fenton.

"And under them?"

"A hole or, rather, the entrance to one."

"Very good. The money is in that hole. Pull it out, Mr. Fenton."

The assurance with which Sweetwater spoke was such that Mr. Fenton at once stopped and plunged his hand into the hole; but when, after a hurried search, he drew it out again, there was nothing in it; his hand was empty. Sweetwater stared at that hand amazed.

"Don't you find anything?" he asked.

"Isn't there a roll of bills in that hole?"

"No," was the gloomy answer, after a renewed attempt and a second disappointment. "There is nothing to be found here. You are laboring under some misapprehension, Sweetwater."

"But I can't be. I saw the money; saw it in the hand of the person who hid it there. Let me look for it, constable. I will not give up the search till I have turned the place topsy turvy."

Knocking down in Mr. Fenton's place, he thrust his hand into the hole. On either side of him peered the faces of Mr. Fenton and Knapp. (Abel had slipped away at a whisper from Sweetwater.) They were lit with a similar expression of anxious interest and growing doubt. His own countenance was a study of conflicting and by no means cheerful emotions. Suddenly his aspect changed. With a quick twist of his lithe, if awkward, body, he threw himself lengthwise on the ground, and began tearing at the earth inside the hole, like a burrowing animal.

"I cannot be mistaken. Nothing will make me believe it is not here. It has simply been buried deeper than I

thought. Ah! What did I tell you? See here! And see here!"

Bringing his hands into the full blaze of the light, he showed two rolls of new crisp bills.

"They were lying under half a foot of earth," said he, "but if they had been buried as deep as Grannie Fuller's well, I'd have unearthed them."



He showed two rolls of new crisp bills.

Meantime Mr. Fenton was rapidly counting one roll and Knapp the other. The result was an aggregate sum of \$980, just the amount Sweetwater had promised to show them.

"A good stroke of business," cried Mr. Fenton. "And now, Sweetwater, whose is the hand that buried this treasure? Nothing is to be gained by preserved silence on this point any longer."

Instantly the young man became very grave. With a quick glance around which seemed to embrace the secret recesses of the forest rather than the eager faces bending toward him, he lowered his voice and quietly said:

"The hand that buried this money under the roots of this old tree is the same which you saw pointing downward at the spot of blood in Agatha Webb's front yard."

"You do not mean Amabel Page," cried Mr. Fenton, with natural surprise.

"Yes, I do. I am glad it is you who have named her."

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS PAGE SUSPECTED.

A half hour later these men were all closeted with Dr. Talbot in the Zabel kitchen. Abel had rejoined them, and Sweetwater was telling his story with great earnestness and no little show of pride.

"Gentlemen, when I charge a young woman of respectable appearance and connections with such a revolting crime as murder, I do so with good reason, as I hope presently to make plain to you."

"Gentlemen, on the night and at the hour Agatha Webb was killed, I was playing with four other musicians in Mr. Sutherland's hallway. From the place where I sat I could see what went on in the parlor and also have a clear view of the passageway leading down to the garden door."

As the dancing was going on in the parlor I naturally looked that way most, and this is how I came to note the eagerness with which during the first part of the evening Frederick Sutherland and Amabel Page came together in the quadrilles and country dances. Sometimes she spoke as she passed him and sometimes he answered, but not always, although he never failed to show he was pleased with her or would have been if something—perhaps it was his lack of confidence in her, sirs—had not stood in the way of a perfect understanding. She seemed to notice he did not always respond and after awhile showed less inclination to speak herself, though she did not fail to watch him and that intently. But she didn't watch him any more closely than I did her, though I little thought at the time what would come of my observation. She wore a white dress and white shoes and was as coquettish and seductive as the evil one makes them. Suddenly I missed her. She was in the middle of the dance one minute and entirely out of it the next.

"Naturally I expected that she had slipped aside with Frederick Sutherland, but no, he was still in sight, but looking so pale and so abstracted I was sure of mischief. But what mischief? Watching and waiting, but no longer confining my attention to the parlor, I presently espied her stealing along the passageway. I have mentioned carrying a long cloak which she rolled up and hid behind the open door. Then she came back, humming a gay little song which didn't deceive me for a moment. 'Good!' thought I, 'she and that cloak will soon join company.' And they did. As we were playing the Harebell mazurka I again caught sight of her stealthy white figure in that distant doorway. Seizing the cloak, she wrapped it round her, and with just one furtive look backward, seen, I warrant, by no one but myself, she vanished in the outside dark. 'Now to note who follows her?' thought I. But no body followed her. This struck me as strange, and having a natural love for detective work, in spite of my devotion to the arts, I consulted the clock at the foot of the stairs, and noting that

it was half past 11, scribbled the hour on the margin of my music, with the intention of seeing how long my lady would linger outside alone. Gentlemen, it was two hours before I saw her face again. How she got back into the house I do not know. It was not by the garden door, for my eye seldom left it; yet at or near half past 1 I heard her voice on the stair above me and saw her descend and melt into the crowd as if she had not been absent from it for more than five minutes. A half hour later I saw her with Frederick again. They were dancing, but not with the same spirit as before, and even while I watched them they separated. Now where was Miss Page during those two long hours? I think I know, and it is time I unburdened myself to the police.

"But first I must inform you of a small discovery I made while the dance was still in progress. Miss Page had come down stairs, as I have said, from what I now know to have been her own room. Her dress was, in all respects, the same as before, with one exception—her white slippers had been exchanged for blue ones. This seemed to show that they had been rendered unserviceable, or at least unsightly, by the walk she had taken. This in itself was not remarkable, nor would her peculiar escapade have made more than a temporary impression upon my curiosity if she had not afterward shown an unaccountable and extraordinary interest in the murder which had taken place in the town below during the very hours of her absence from Mr. Sutherland's ball. This, in consideration of her sex and her being a stranger to the person attacked, was remarkable, and, though perhaps I had no business to do what I did, I no sooner saw the house emptied of master and servants than I stole softly back, and climbed the stairs to her room. Had no good followed this intrusion, which, I am quite ready to acknowledge, was a trifle presumptuous, I should have held my peace in regard to it; but as I did make a discovery there which has, as I believe, an important bearing on this affair, I have forced myself to mention it. The lights in the house having been left burning, I had no difficulty in finding her apartment. I knew it by the fold-downs scattered about. But I did not stop to look at them. I was on a search for her slippers, and presently I came upon them, thrust behind an old picture in the dimmest corner of the room. Taking them down, I examined them closely. They were not only soiled, gentlemen, but dreadfully cut and rubbed. In short, they were ruined; and, thinking that the young lady herself would be glad to be rid of them, I quietly put them into my pocket, and carried them to my own home. Abel has just been for them, so you can see them for yourselves, and, if your judgment coincides with mine, you will discover something more on them than mud."

Dr. Talbot, though he stared a little at the young man's confessed theft, took the slippers Abel was holding out and carefully turned them over. They were, as Sweetwater had said, grievously torn and soiled and showed, besides several deep earth stains, a mark or two of a bright red color quite unmistakable in character.

"Blood," declared the coroner. "There is no doubt about it. Miss Page was where blood was spilled last night."

"I have another proof against her," Sweetwater went on. "In full enjoyment of his prominence among these men who, up till now, had barely recognized his existence. 'When full of the suspicion that Miss Page had had a hand in the theft, if not the murder of Mrs. Webb, I hastened down to the scene of the tragedy, I met this young woman issuing from the front gate. She had just been making herself conspicuous by pointing out a trail of blood on the grass plot. Dr. Talbot, who was there, will remember how she looked on that occasion, but I doubt if he noticed how Abel here looked, or so much as remarked the faded flower the silly boy had stuck in his button-hole."

"I did not," ejaculated the coroner. "Yet that flower has a very important bearing on this case. He had found it, as he will tell you, on the floor near Batsy's skirts, and as soon as I saw it in his coat, I bade him take it out and keep it, for, gentlemen, it was a very uncommon flower, the like of which can only be found in this town in Mr. Sutherland's conservatory. I remember seeing such a one in Miss Page's hair, early in the evening. Have you that flower about you, Abel?"

Abel had, and being filled with importance, too, showed it to the doctor and to Mr. Fenton. It was withered and faded in hue, but it was unmistakably an orchid of the rarest description.

"It was lying near Batsy," explained Abel. "I drew Mr. Fenton's attention to it at the time, but he scarcely noticed it."

"I will make up for my indifference now," said that gentleman.

"I should have been shown that flower," put in Knapp.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Wherein They Were Alike. A country minister who, though a poor man, was notoriously defective and hesitating in his style of delivery in the pulpit, was sitting having a cup of tea with one of the old spinsters connected with his congregation when he observed that the spout of the teapot was either choked or too narrow.

"Your teapot, Miss Kennedy," he remarked, "disna—disna rin weel."

"Ay, jist like yourself, Mr. Broom," retorted the nettled lady. "It has an unco pair delivery."

The only proper place for the practical joker is the "dangerous" ward of an insane asylum.—Philadelphia Gazette.

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