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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"So you should," acknowledged Sweetwater, "but when the detective instinct is aroused it is hard for a man to be just to his rivals. Besides, I was otherwise occupied. I had Miss Page to watch. Happily for me, it had been decided that she should not be allowed to leave town till after the inquest, and so my task became easy. This whole day I have spent in sight of Mr. Sutherland's house, and at nightfall I was rewarded by detecting her end a prolonged walk in the garden by a hurried dash into the woods opposite. I followed her and noted carefully all that she did. As she had just seen Frederick Sutherland and Miss Holliday disappear up the road together, she probably felt free to do as she liked, for she walked very directly to the old tree we have just come from and, kneeling down beside it, pulled from the hole underneath something which rattled in her hand with that peculiar sound we associate with fresh bank notes. I had approached her as near as I dared and was peering around a tree trunk when she stooped down again and plunged both hands into the hole. She remained in this position so long that I did not know what to make of it. But she rose at last and turned toward home, laughing to herself in a wicked but pleased way that did not tend to make me think any more of her. The moon was shining very brightly by this time, and I could readily perceive every detail of her person. She held her hands out before her and shook them more than once as she trod by me, so I was sure there was nothing in them, and this is why I was so confident we should find the money still in the hole.

"When I saw her enter the house, I set out to find you, but the courthouse room was empty, and it was a long time before I learned where to look for you. But at last a fellow at Brighton's corner said he saw four men go by on their way to Zabel's cottage, and on the chance of finding you among them I turned down here. The shock you gave me in announcing that you had discovered the murderer of Agatha Webb knocked me over for the moment, but now I hope you realize, as I do, that he could never have had an active hand in her death notwithstanding the fact that one of the stolen bills has been found to have been in that wretched man's possession, for—and here is my great point—the proof is not wanting that Miss Page visited this house as well as Mrs. Webb's during her famous escapade, or at least stood under the window beneath which I have just been searching. A footprint can be seen there, sirs, a very plain footprint, and if Dr. Talbot will take the trouble to compare it with the slipper he holds in his hand he will find it to have been made by the foot that wore that slipper."

The coroner, with a quick glance from the slipper in his hand up to Sweetwater's eager face, showed a decided disposition to make the experiment thus suggested, but Mr. Fenton, whose mind was full of the Zabel tragedy, interrupted them with the question:

"But how do you explain by this hypothesis the fact of James Zabel trying to pass one of the $20 bills stolen from Mrs. Webb's cupboard? Do you consider Miss Page generous enough to give him that money?"

"You ask me that, Mr. Fenton? Do you wish to know what I think of the connection between these two great tragedies?"

"Yes; you have earned a voice in this matter. Speak, Sweetwater."

"Well, then, I think Miss Page has made an effort to throw the blame of

"A footprint can be seen there—compare it with the slipper."

her own misdoing on one or both of these unfortunate old men. She is sufficiently cold blooded and calculating to do so, and circumstances certainly favored her. Shall I show how?"

Mr. Fenton consulted Knapp, who nodded his head. The Boston detective was not without curiosity as to how Sweetwater would prove his case.

"Old James Zabel had seen his brother sinking rapidly from inanition. This their condition amply shows. He was weak himself, but John was weaker, and in a moment of desperation he rushed out to ask a crumb of bread from Agatha Webb or possibly—for I have heard some whispers of an old custom of theirs—to join Philemon at his yearly merrymaking and so obtain in a natural way the bite for himself and brother he perhaps had not the courage to ask for outright. But death had been in the Webb cottage before him, which awful circumstance, acting on his already weakened nerves, drove him half insane from the house and sent him wandering blindly about the streets for a good half hour before he reappeared in his own house. How do I know this? From a very simple fact. Abel here has been to inquire, among other things, if Mr. Crane remembers the tune we were playing at the great house when he came down the main street from visiting old Widow Walker. Fortunately he does, for the trip, trip, trip in it struck his fancy, and he has found himself humming it over more than once since. Well, that waltz was played by us at a quarter after midnight, which fixes the time of the encounter at Mrs. Webb's gateway pretty accurately. But, as you will soon see, it was 12:50 before James Zabel knocked at Loton's door. How do I know this? By the same method of reasoning by which I determined the time of Mr. Crane's encounter. Mrs. Loton was greatly pleased with the music played that night and had all her windows open in order to hear it, and she says we were playing 'Money Musk' when that knocking came to disturb her. Now, gentlemen, we played 'Money Musk' just before we were called out to supper, and as we went to supper promptly at 1:45 you can see just how my calculation was made.

"Thirty-five minutes then passed between the moment James Zabel was seen rushing from Mrs. Webb's gateway and that in which he appeared at Loton's bakery, demanding a loaf of bread and offering in exchange one of the bills which had been stolen from the murdered woman's drawer. Thirty-five minutes! And he and his brother were starving. Does it look, then, as if that money was in his possession when he left Mrs. Webb's house? Would any man who felt the pangs of hunger as he did or who saw a brother perishing for food before his eyes, allow 35 minutes to elapse before he made use of the money that rightfully or wrongfully had come into his hand? No, and so I say that he did not have it when Mr. Crane met him. That, instead of committing crime to obtain it, he found it in his own home, lying on his own table, when, after his frenzied absence, he returned to tell his dreadful news to the brother he had left behind him. But how did it come there? you ask. Gentlemen, remember the footprints under the window. Amabel Page brought it. Having seen or perhaps met this old man roaming in or near the Webb cottage during the time she was there herself, she conceived the plan of throwing upon him the onus of the crime she had herself committed and with a slyness to be expected from her stole up to his home, made a hole in the shade hanging over an open window, looked into the room where John sat, saw that he was there alone and asleep, and, creeping in by the front door, laid on the table beside him the $20 bill and the bloody dagger with which she had just slain Agatha Webb. Then she stole out again and in 20 minutes more was leading the dance again in Mr. Sutherland's parlor."

"Well reasoned!" murmured Abel, expecting the others to echo him. But, though Mr. Fenton and Dr. Talbot looked almost convinced, they said nothing, while Knapp, of course, was quiet as an oyster.

Sweetwater, with a quiet smile calculated to hide his disappointment, went on as if perfectly satisfied.

"Meanwhile John awakes, sees the dagger and thinks to end his misery with it, but finds himself too feeble. The cut in his vest, the dent in the floor, prove this, but if you call for further proof, a little fact, which some if not all of you seem to have overlooked, will amply satisfy you that this one at least of my conclusions is correct. Open the Bible, Abel; open it not to shake it for what will never fall out from between its leaves, but to find in the Bible itself the lines I have declared to you he wrote as a dying legacy with that tightly clutched pencil. Have you found them?"

"No," was Abel's perplexed retort. "I cannot see any sign of writing on fly leaf or margin."

"Are those the only blank places in the sacred book? Search the leaves devoted to the family record. Now, what do you find there?"

Knapp, who was losing some of his indifference, drew nearer and read for himself the scrawl which now appeared to every eye on the discolored page which Abel here turned uppermost.

"Almost illegible," he said. "One can just make out these words: 'Forgive me, James—tried to use dagger—found lying—but hand wouldn't—dying without—don't grieve—true men—haven't disgraced ourselves—God bless'— That is all."

"The effort must have overcome him," resumed Sweetwater in a voice from which he carefully excluded all signs of secret triumph, "and when James returned, as he did a few minutes later, he was evidently unable to answer questions even if James was in a condition to ask them. But the fallen dagger told its own story, for James picked it up and put it back on the table, and it was at this minute he saw, what John had not, the $20 bill lying there with its promise of life and comfort. Hope revives. He catches up this bill, flies down to Loton's, procures a loaf of bread and comes frantically back, gnawing it as he runs, for his own hunger is more than he can endure. Reentering his brother's presence, he rushes forward with the bread. But the relief has come too late. John has died in his absence, and James, dizzy with the shock, reels back and succumbs to his own misery. Gentlemen, have you anything to say in contradiction of these various suppositions?"

For a moment Dr. Talbot, Mr. Fenton and even Knapp stood silent; then the latter said, with pardonable dryness:

"All this is ingenious; but, unfortunately, it is upset by a little fact which you yourself have overlooked. Have you examined attentively the dagger of which you have so often spoken, Mr. Sweetwater?"

"Not as I would like to, but I noticed it had blood on its edge and was of the shape and size necessary to inflict the wound from which Mrs. Webb died."

"Very good, but there is something else of interest to be observed on it. Fetch it, Abel."

Abel, hurrying from the room, soon brought back the weapon in question. Sweetwater, with a vague sense of disappointment disturbing him, took it eagerly and studied it very closely. But he only shook his head.

"Bring it nearer to the light," suggested Knapp, "and examine the little scroll near the top of the handle."

Sweetwater did so and at once changed color. In the midst of the scroll were two very small but yet perfectly distinct letters. They were "J. Z."

"How did Amabel Page come by a dagger marked with the Zabel initials?" questioned Knapp. "Do you think her foresight went so far as to provide herself with a dagger ostensibly belonging to one of these brothers? And then have you forgotten that when Mr. Crane met the old man at Mrs. Webb's gateway he saw in his hand something that glistened? Now, what was that if not this dagger?"

Sweetwater was more disturbed than he cared to acknowledge.

"That just shows my lack of experience," he grumbled. "I thought I had turned this subject so thoroughly over in my mind that no one could bring an objection against it."

Knapp shook his head and smiled. "Young enthusiasts like yourself are great at forming theories which well seasoned men like myself must regard as fantastical. However," he went on, "there is no doubt that Miss Page was a witness to, even if she has not profited by, the murder we have been considering. But with this palpable proof of the Zabels' direct connection with the affair I would not recommend her arrest as yet."

"She should be under surveillance, though," intimated the coroner.

"Most certainly," acquiesced Knapp.

As for Sweetwater, he remained silent till the opportunity came for him to whisper apart to Dr. Talbot, when he said:

"For all the palpable proof of which Mr. Knapp speaks—the 'J. Z.' on the dagger and the possibility of this being the object he was seen carrying out of Philemon Webb's gate—I maintain that this old man in his moribund condition never struck the blow that killed Agatha Webb. He hadn't strength enough even if his lifelong love for her had not been sufficient to prevent him."

The coroner looked thoughtful.

"You are right," said he. "He hadn't strength enough. But don't expend too much energy in talk. Wait and see what a few direct questions will elicit from Miss Page."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WILY WITNESS.

Frederick rose early. He had slept but little. The words he had overheard at the end of the lot the night before were still ringing in his ears. Going down the back stairs in his anxiety to avoid Amabel, he came upon one of the stablemen.

"Been to the village this morning?" he asked.

"No, sir, but Lem has. There's great news there. I wonder if any one has told Mr. Sutherland?"

"What news, Jake? I don't think my father is up yet."

"Why, sir, there were two more deaths in town last night—the brothers Zabel—and folks do say (Lem heard it a dozen times between the grocery and the fish market) that it was one of these old men who killed Mrs. Webb. The dagger has been found in their house and most of the money. Why, sir, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

Frederick made an effort and stood upright. He had nearly fallen.

"No—that is, I am not quite myself. So many horrors, Jake."

"What did they die of? You say they are both dead—both?"

"Yes, sir, and it's dreadful to think of, but it was hunger, sir. Bread came too late. Both men are mere skeletons to look at. They have kept themselves close for weeks now, and nobody knew how bad off they were. I don't wonder it upset you, sir. We all feel it a bit, and I just dread to tell Mr. Sutherland."

Frederick staggered away. He had never in his life been so near mental and physical collapse. At the threshold of the sitting room door he met his father. Mr. Sutherland was looking both troubled and anxious—more so, Frederick thought, than when he signed the check for him on the previous night. As their eyes met both showed embarrassment, but Frederick, whose nerves had been highly strung up by what he had just heard, soon controlled himself and, surveying his father with forced calmness, began:

"This is dreadful news, sir."

But his father, intent on his own thought, hurriedly interrupted him.

"You told me yesterday that everything was broken off between you and Miss Page, yet I saw you re-enter the house together last night a little while after I gave you the money you asked for."

"I know, and it must have had a bad appearance. I entreat you, however, to

"The dagger has been found in their house and most of the money."

believe that this meeting between Miss Page and myself was against my wish and that the relations between us have not been affected by anything that passed between us."

"I am glad to hear it, my son. You could not do worse by yourself than to return to your old devotion."

"I agree with you, sir." And then, because he could not help it, Frederick inquired if he had heard the news.

Mr. Sutherland, evidently startled, asked what news, to which Frederick replied:

"The news about the Zabels. They are both dead, sir—dead from hunger. Can you imagine it?"

This was something so different from what his father had expected to hear that he did not take it in at first. When he did, his surprise and grief were even greater than Frederick had anticipated. Seeing him so affected, Frederick, who thought that the whole truth would be no harder to bear than the half, added the suspicion which had been attached to the younger one's name and then stood back, scarcely daring to be a witness to the outraged feelings which such a communication could not fail to awaken in one of his father's temperament.

But, though he thus escaped the shocked look which crossed his father's countenance, he could not fail to hear the indignant exclamation which burst from his lips or help perceiving that it would take more than the most complete circumstantial evidence to convince his father of the guilt of men he had known and respected for so many years.

For some reason Frederick experienced great relief at this and was bracing himself to meet the fire of questions which his statement must necessarily call forth when the sound of approaching steps drew the attention of both toward a party of men coming up the hillside.

Among them was Mr. Courtney, prosecuting attorney for this district, and as Mr. Sutherland recognized him he sprang forward, saying, "There's Courtney; he will explain this."

Frederick followed, anxious and bewildered, and soon had the doubtful pleasure of seeing his father enter his study in company with the four men considered to be most interested in the elucidation of the Webb mystery.

As he was lingering in an undecided mood in the small passageway leading up stairs he felt the pressure of a finger on his shoulder. Looking up, he met the eyes of Amabel, who was leaning toward him over the banisters. She was smiling, and, though her face was not without evidences of physical languor, there was a charm about her person which would have been sufficiently enthralling to him 24 hours before, but which now caused him such a physical repulsion that he started back in the effort to rid his shoulder from her disturbing touch.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Train Blown Off the Track.

Columbus, Ga., March 26.—A mixed train was blown off the Central of Georgia railroad tracks one mile east of Buena Vista, by a tornado. The train consisted of an engine, baggage car, two coaches and 12 freight cars, and was going 15 miles an hour when struck by the wind. The engine was lifted from the track, the tender was turned over, the baggage car and two coaches and three freight cars were thrown on their sides. The rest of the train remained on the track. No one was seriously injured.

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New Dervish Movement.

London, March 19.—A special from Cairo, Egypt, says a new dervish movement is said to have occurred in the southern part of the Soudan.

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