

# 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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"Just so," she answered, with another quick look at Frederick, the last she gave him for some time. "As soon, then, as I dared I ran out of the house into the yard. The moon, which had been under a cloud, was now shining brightly, and by its light I saw that the space before me was empty and that I might venture to enter the street. But before doing so I looked about for the dagger I had thrown from me before going in. But I could not find it. It had been picked up by the fugitive and carried away. Annoyed at the cowardice which had led me to lose such a valuable piece of evidence through a purely womanish emotion, I was about to leave the yard when my eyes fell on the little bundle of sandwiches which I had brought down from the hill and which I had let fall under the pear tree at the first scream I had heard from the house. It had burst open, and two or three of the sandwiches lay broken on the ground. But those that were intact I picked up, and, being more than ever anxious to cover up by some ostensible errand my absence from the party, I rushed away toward the lonely road where these brothers lived, meaning to leave such fragments as remained on the old doorstep, beyond which I had been told such suffering existed.

"It was now late, very late, for a girl like myself to be out, but under the excitement of what I had just seen and heard I became oblivious to fear and rushed into those dismal shadows as into transparent daylight. Perhaps the shouts and stray sounds of laughter that came up from the wharfs where a ship was getting under way gave me a certain sense of companionship. Perhaps—but it is folly for me to dilate upon my feelings; it is my errand you are interested in and what happened when I came up to the Zabels' dreary dwelling."

The look with which she paused, ostensibly to take breath, but in reality to weigh and criticize the looks of those about her, was one of those wholly indescribable ones with which she was accustomed to control the judgment of men who allowed themselves to watch too closely the ever changing expression of her weird yet charming face. But it fell upon men steeled against her fascinations, and, realizing her inability to move them, she proceeded with her story before even the most anxious of her hearers could request her to do so.

"I had come," said she, "very quietly along the road, for my feet were lightly shod, and the moonlight was too bright for me to make a misstep. But as I cleared the trees and came into the open place where the house stands I stumbled with surprise at seeing a figure crouching on the doorstep I had anticipated finding as empty as the road. It was an old man's figure, and as I paused in my embarrassment he slowly and with great feebleness rose to his feet and began to grope about for the door. As he did so I heard a sharp, tinkling sound, as of something metallic falling on the doorstone, and, taking a quick step forward, I looked over his shoulder and saw in the moonlight at his feet a dagger so like the one I had lately handled in Mrs. Webb's yard that I was overwhelmed with astonishment and surveyed the aged and feeble form of the man who had dropped it with a sensation difficult to describe. The next moment he was stooping for the weapon with a startled air that has impressed itself distinctly upon my memory, and when, after many feeble attempts, he succeeded in grasping it he vanished into the house so suddenly that I could not be sure whether he had seen me standing there or not.

"All this was more than surprising to me, for I had never thought of associating an old man with this crime. Indeed I was so astonished to find him in possession of this weapon that I forgot all about my errand and only wondered how I could see and know more. Fearing to be observed where I was, I slid in among the bushes and soon found myself under one of the windows. The shade was down, and I was about to push it aside when I heard some one moving about inside and stopped. But I could not restrain my curiosity, so, pulling a hairpin from my hair, I worked a little hole in the shade and through this I looked into a room brightly illuminated by the moon which shone in through an adjoining window. And what did I see there?" Her eye turned on Frederick. His right hand had stolen toward his left, but it paused under her look and remained motionless. "Only an old man sitting at a table and"—

"Why did she pause, and why did she cover up that pause with a wholly inconsequential sentence? Perhaps Frederick could have told, Frederick, whose hand had now fallen at his side. But Frederick volunteered nothing, and no one, not even Sweetwater, guessed all that lay beyond that and which was left hovering in the air to be finished—when? Alas, had she not set the day and the hour?"

What she did say was in seeming explanation of her previous sentence. "It was not the same old man I had seen on the doorstep, and while I was looking at him I became aware of some one leaving the house and passing me on the road up hill. Of course this ended my interest in what went on within,

and, turning as quickly as I could, I hurried into the road and followed the shadow I could just perceive disappearing in the woods above me. I was bound, gentlemen, as you see, to follow out my adventure to the end. But my task now became very difficult, for the moon was high and shone down upon the road so distinctly that I could not follow the person before me as closely as I wished without running the risk of being discovered. I therefore trusted more to my ear than to my eye, and as long as I could hear his steps in front of me I was satisfied. But presently, as we turned up this very hill, I ceased to hear those steps and so became confident that he had taken to the woods. I was so sure of this that I did not hesitate to enter them myself, and, knowing the paths well, as I have every opportunity of doing, living as we do, directly opposite this forest, I easily found my way to the little clearing that I have reason-



"I rushed away toward the lonely road," to think you gentlemen have since become acquainted with. But, though, from the sounds I heard I was assured that the person I was following was not far in advance of me, I did not dare to enter this brilliantly illuminated space, especially as there was every indication of this person having completed whatever task he had set for himself. Indeed I was sure that I heard his steps coming back. So, for the second time, I crouched down in the darkest place I could find and let this mysterious person pass me. When he had quite disappeared, I made my own retreat, for it was late, and I was afraid of being missed at the ball. But later, or rather, the next day, I returned and began a search for the money which I was confident, had been left in these woods by the person I had been following. I found it, and when the man here present, who, though a mere fiddler, has presumed to take a leading part in this interview, came upon me with the bills in my hand, I was but burying deeper the ill gotten gains I had come upon."

"Ah, and so making them your own," quoth Sweetwater, stung by the sarcasm in that word fiddler.

But with a suavity against which every attack fell powerless she met his significant look with one fully as significant and quickly said:

"If I had wanted the money for myself, I would not have risked leaving it where the murderer could find it by a bunch of sodden leaves. No, I had another motive for my action, a motive with which few, if any, of you will be willing to credit me. I wished to save the murderer, whom I had some reason, as you see, for thinking I knew, from the consequences of his own action."

Mr. Courtney, Dr. Talbot and even Mr. Sutherland, who naturally believed she referred to Zabel and who, one and all, had a lingering tenderness for this unfortunate old man which not even this seeming act of madness on his part could quite destroy, felt a species of reaction at this and surveyed the singular being before them with perhaps the slightest shade of reënting in their severity. Sweetwater alone betrayed restlessness. Knapp showed no feeling at all, while Frederick looked like one petrified and moved neither hand nor foot.

"Crime that is the outcome of forethought is despicable," she went on, with a deliberateness so hard that the more susceptible of her auditors shuddered. "But crime that springs from some imperative and overpowering necessity of the mind or body might well awaken sympathy, and I am not ashamed of having been sorry for this frenzied and suffering man. Weak and impulsive as you may consider me, I did not want him to suffer on account of a moment's madness, as he undoubtedly would if he were ever found with this money in his possession, so I plunged it deeper into the soil and trusted to the confusion which crime always awakens even in the strongest mind for him not to discover my sub-

terfuge."

"Ha! Wonderful! Devilish subtle, eh? Clever, too clever!" were some of the whispered exclamations which this curious explanation on her part brought out. Yet only Sweetwater showed his open and entire disbelief of the story, the others possibly remembering that for such natures as hers there is no governing law and no commonplace interpretation.

To Sweetwater, however, this was but so much display of feminine resource and subtlety. Though he felt he should keep still in the presence of men so greatly his superiors, he could not resist saying:

"Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. I should never have attributed any such motive as you mention to the young girl I saw leaving this spot with many a backward look at the hole from which we afterward extracted the large sum of money in question. But say that this burying of stolen funds was out of consideration for the feeble old man you describe as having carried them there, do you not see that by this act you can be held as an accessory after the fact?"

Her eyebrows went up, and the delicate curve of her lips was not without meaning as she said:

"You hate me, Mr. Sweetwater. Do you wish me to tell these gentlemen why?"

The flush which, notwithstanding this peculiar young man's nerve, instantly crimsoned his features was a surprise to Frederick. So was it to the others, who saw in it a possible hint as to the real cause of his persistent pursuit of this young girl, which they had hitherto ascribed entirely to his love of justice. Slighted love makes some hearts venomous. Could this ungainly fellow have once loved this bewitching piece of unreliability and suffered from her disdain?

It was a very possible assumption, though Sweetwater's blush was the only answer he gave to her question, which nevertheless had amply served its turn.

To fill the gap made by his silence Mr. Sutherland made an effort and addressed her himself.

"Your conduct," said he, "has not been that of a strictly honorable person. Why did you fail to give the alarm when you re-entered my house after being witness to this double tragedy?"

Her serenity was not to be disturbed. "I have just explained," she reminded him, "that I had sympathy for the criminal."

"We all have sympathy for James Zabel, but—"

"I do not believe one word of this story," interposed Sweetwater, in reckless disregard of the proprieties. "A hungry, feeble old man, like Zabel, on the verge of death, could not have found his way up into this woods, as you say. You carried that money there yourself, miss; you are the—"

"Hush!" interposed the coroner authoritatively. "Do not let us go too fast—get. Miss Page has an air of speaking the truth, strange and unaccountable as it may seem. Zabel was an admirable man once, and if he was led into theft and murder it was not until his faculties had been weakened by his own suffering and that of his much loved brother."

"Thank you," was her simple reply, and for the first time every man there thrilled at her tone. Seeing it, all the dangerous fascination of her look and manner returned upon her with double force. "I have been unwise," said she, "and let my sympathy run away with my judgment. Women have impulses of this kind sometimes, and men blame them for it till they themselves come to the point of feeling the need of just such blind devotion. I am sure I regret my shortsightedness now, for I have lost esteem by it, while he"—

With a wave of the hand she dismissed the subject, and Dr. Talbot, watching her, felt a shade of his distrust leave him and in its place a species of admiration for the lithe, graceful, bewitching personality before them, with her childish impulses and womanly wit which half mystified and half imposed upon them.

Mr. Sutherland, on the contrary, was neither charmed from his antagonism nor convinced of her honesty. There was something in this matter that could not be explained away by her argument, and his suspicion of that something he felt perfectly sure was shared by his son, toward whose cold, set, face he had frequently cast the most uneasy glances. He was not ready, however, to probe into the subject more nearly, nor could he for the sake of Frederick urge on to any further confession a young woman whom his unhappy son professed to love and in whose discretion he had so little confidence. As for Sweetwater, he had now fully recovered himself and bore him fully with great discretion when Dr. Talbot finally said:

"Well, gentlemen, we have got more than we expected when we came here this morning. There remains, however, a point regarding which we have received no explanation. Miss Page, how came that orchid, which, I am told, you wore in your hair at the dance, to be found lying near the beam of Batsy's skirts? You distinctly told us that you did not go up stairs when you were in Mrs. Webb's house."

"Ah, that's so!" accused the Boston detective dryly. "How came that flower on the scene of the murder?"

She smiled and seemed equal to the emergency.

"That is a mystery for us all to solve," she said quietly, looking into the eyes of her questioner.

"A mystery it is your business to solve," corrected the district attorney. "Nothing that you have told us in support of your innocence would in the eyes of the law weigh for one instant against the complicity shown by that one piece of circumstantial evidence against you."

Her smile carried a certain high handed denial of this to one heart there at least. But her words were humble enough.

"I am aware of that," said she. Then, turning like lightning to where Sweetwater stood lowering upon her from out his half closed eyes, she impetuously cried: "You, sir, you who without call to do so have presumed to arrogate the office of detective from those whose right it was to act in this matter, prove yourself equal to your presumption by finding out the explanation of this mystery yourself. It can be found out, for, mark, I did not carry that flower into the room where it was found. This I am ready to swear to before God and before man!"

Her hand was raised, her whole attitude spoke defiance and—hard as it was for Sweetwater to acknowledge it—truth. He felt that he had received a challenge, and, with a quick glance at Knapp, who barely responded by a shrug, he shifted over to the side of Dr. Talbot.

Amabel at once dropped her hand. "May I go?" she now cried appealingly to Mr. Courtney. "I really have no more to say, and I am tired."

"Did you see the figure of the man who brushed by you in the wood? Was it that of the old man you saw on the doorstep?"

At this direct question Frederick quivered in spite of his dogged self control. But she, with her face upturned to meet the scrutiny of the speaker, showed only a childish kind of wonder. "Why do you ask that?"



"This I am ready to swear to before God and before man!"

Is there any doubt about its being the same?"

What an actress! Frederick stood appalled. He had been amazed at the skill with which she had manipulated her story so as to keep her promise to him and yet leave the way open for that further confession which would alter the whole into a denunciation of himself which he would find it difficult if not impossible to meet. But this extreme dissimulation made him lose heart. It showed her to be an antagonist of almost illimitable resource and secret determination.

"I did not suppose there could be any doubt," she added, in such a natural tone of surprise that Mr. Courtney dropped the subject and Dr. Talbot turned to Sweetwater, who for the moment seemed to have robbed Knapp of his rightful place as the coroner's confidant.

"Shall we let her go for the present?" he whispered. "She does look tired, poor girl!"

The public challenge which Sweetwater had received made him wary, and his reply was a guarded one.

"I do not trust her, yet there is much to confirm her story. Those sandwiches, now! She says she dropped them in Mrs. Webb's yard under the pear tree and that the bag that held them burst open. Gentlemen, the birds were so busy there on the morning after the murder that I could not but notice them, notwithstanding my absorption in greater matters. I remember wondering what they were all pecking at so eagerly. Then the length of time that elapsed between the moment Zabel was seen rushing from Mrs. Webb's gate and the hour in which he bought the bread has never been quite accounted for. Though I doubt that so old a man would find strength for that journey to the woods, I can but acknowledge that it would account for those very minutes we have had some difficulty in filling up. But the flower whose presence on the scene of guilt she challenges me to explain! How about that, sirs? And then the money so deftly reburied by her—can any explanation make her other than accessory to a crime on whose fruits she lays her hand in a way tending solely to concealment? No, sirs, and so I shall not relax my vigilance over her actions even if, in order to be faithful to it, I have to suggest that a warrant be made out for her imprisonment."

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