The Mystery of Agatha Webb.

By Anna Katharine Green.

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"You are right," acquiesced the coroner, and, turning to Knapp, he suggested that Miss Page was such an important witness in this matter that perhaps it would be better to have her down in the town where she could be more easily under his eye.

Nothing could have pleased Mr. Sutherland better. Glancing at Frederick and seeing that he was rather pleased than disturbed by this suggestion, he gave his unqualified approval, and Miss Page was notified of the coroner's wishes.

She made no objection. On the contrary, her cheeks dimpled, and she turned away with alacrity to prepare herself for departure. But before going she approached the coroner and said persuasively:

"I have told you all that came to my mind this moment. But after thinking it over I may remember some little details that have escaped me today."

"Call her back," cried Mr. Courtney. "She has kept back something; let us hear it all."

But Mr. Sutherland, with a side look at Frederick, whispered: "Wait! She is a subtle creature and under the excitement of the moment will contrive to elude you. Catch her alone, Mr. Courtney; catch her alone, and if she has a secret, you of all men will succeed in surprising it."

He had noted that the rest were too preoccupied to observe that Frederick had reached the limit of his strength and could not be trusted to preserve his composure any longer under this searching examination into the conduct of a woman from whom he had so lately detached himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SYMPATHETIC FRIEND.

The next day was the day of Agatha's funeral.

She was to be buried in Porchester, by the side of her six children, and, as the day was fine, the whole town, as by common consent, assembled in the road along which the humble cortege was to make its way to the spot indicated.

From the windows of farmhouses, from between the trees of the few scattered thickets along the way, saddened and curious faces looked forth, till Sweetwater, who walked as near as he dared to the immediate friends of the deceased, felt the impossibility of remembering them all and gave up the task in despair.

Before one house, about a mile out of town, the procession paused, and at a gesture from the minister every one within sight took off their hats, amid a hush which made almost painfully apparent the twittering of birds and the other sounds of animate and inanimate nature which are inseparable from a country road. They had reached Widow Jones' cottage, in which Philemon was then staying.

The front door was closed and so were the lower windows, but in one of the upper casements a movement was perceptible, and in another instant there came into view a woman and a man, supporting between them the impassible form of Agatha's husband. Holding him up in plain sight of the almost breathless throng below, the woman pointed to where his darling lay and appeared to say something to him.

Then there was to be seen a strange sight. The old man, with his thin white locks fluttering in the breeze, leaned forward, with a smile, and, holding out his arms, cried in a faint but joyful tone, "Agatha!" Then, as if realizing for the first time that it was death he looked upon and that the crowd below was a funeral procession, his face altered, and he fell back, with a low, heartbroken moan, into the arms of those who supported him.

As his white head disappeared from sight the procession moved on, and from only one pair of lips went up that groan of sorrow with which every heart seemed surcharged—one groan. From whose lips did it come? Sweetwater endeavored to find out, but was not able, nor could any one inform him unless it was Mr. Sutherland, whom he dared not approach.

This gentleman was on foot like the rest, with his arm fast linked in that of his son Frederick. He had meant to ride, for the distance was long for men past 60; but, finding the latter resolved to walk, he had consented to do the same rather than be separated from his son.

He had fears for Frederick—he could hardly have told why—and as the ceremony proceeded and Agatha was solemnly laid away in the place prepared for her his sympathies grew upon him to such an extent that he found it difficult to quit the young man for a moment or even to turn his eyes away from the face he had never seemed to know till now. But as a friend and stranger were now rapidly leaving the yard he controlled himself and, assuming a more natural demeanor, asked his son if he were now ready to ride back. But, to his astonishment, Frederick replied that he did not intend to return to Sutherlandtown at present, that he had business in Porchester and that he was doubtful as to when he would be ready to go home. As the old gentleman did not wish to raise a controversy, he said nothing, but as soon as he saw Frederick disappear up the road he sent back the carriage he had ordered, saying that he would return in a Porchester gig as soon as he had settled some affairs of his own, which might and might not detain him there till evening.

Then he proceeded to a little inn, where he hired a room with windows that looked out on the highroad. In one of these windows he sat all day, watching for Frederick, who had gone further up the road.

But no Frederick appeared, and with vague misgivings, for which as yet he had no name, he left the window and set out on foot for home.

It was now dark, but a silvery gleam on the horizon gave promise of the speedy rising of a full moon. Otherwise he would not have attempted to walk over a road proverbially dark and dismal.

The churchyard, in which they had just laid away Agatha, lay in his course. As he approached he felt his heart fail, and stopping a moment at the stone wall that separated it from the highroad, he leaned against the trunk of a huge elm that guarded the gate of entrance. As he did so he heard a sound of repressed sobbing from some spot not very far away, and moved by some undefinable impulse stronger than his will, he pushed open the gate and entered the sacred precincts.

Instantly the wierdness and desolation of the spot struck him. He wished, yet dreaded, to advance. Something in the grief of the mourner whose sobs he had heard had seized upon his heartstrings, and yet as he hesitated, the sounds came again, and, forgetting that his intrusion might not prove altogether welcome, he pressed forward till he came within a few feet from the spot from which the sobs issued.

He had moved quietly, feeling the awe of the place, and when he paused it was with a sensation of dread not to be entirely explained by the sad and dismal surroundings. Dark as it was, he discerned the outline of a form lying stretched in speechless misery across a grave, but when impelled by an almost irresistible compassion he strove to speak, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth and he only drew back further into the shadow.

He had recognized the mourner and the grave. The mourner was Frederick and the grave that of Agatha Webb.

A few minutes later Mr. Sutherland reappeared at the door of the inn and asked for a gig and driver to take him

A moment's conversation proved the driver's supposition to be correct.

back to Sutherlandtown. He said in excuse for his indecision that he had undertaken to walk, but had found his strength inadequate to the exertion. He was looking very pale and trembled so that the landlord, who took his order, asked him if he were ill. But Mr. Sutherland insisted that he was quite well, only in a hurry, and showed the greatest impatience till he was again started upon the road.

For the first half mile he sat perfectly silent. The moon was now up and the road stretched before them flooded with light. As long as no one was to be seen on this road or on the path running beside it Mr. Sutherland held himself erect, his eyes fixed before him in an attitude of anxious inquiry, but as soon as any sound came to break the silence or there appeared in the distance ahead of them the least appearance of a plodding wayfarer he drew back and hid himself in the recesses of the vehicle. This happened several times. Then his whole manner changed. They had just passed Frederick, walking, with bowed head, toward Sutherlandtown.

But he was not the only person on the road at this time. A few minutes previously they had passed another man walking in the same direction. As Mr. Sutherland mused over this he found himself peering through the small window at the back of the buggy, striving to catch another glimpse of the two men plodding behind him. He could see them both, his son's form throwing its long shadow over the moonlit road, followed only too closely by that other, whose ungainly step he feared to acknowledge to himself was growing only too familiar in his eyes.

Falling into a troubled reverie, he beheld the well known houses and the great trees under whose shadow he had grown from youth to manhood flit by him like phantoms in a dream. But suddenly one house and one place drew his attention with a force that started him again into an erect attitude, and, seizing with one hand the arm of the driver, he pointed with the other at the door of the cottage they were passing, saying in choked tones:

"See, see! Something dreadful has happened since we passed by here this morning. That is crape, Samuel, crape, hanging from the doorpost yonder!"

"Yes, it is crape," answered the driver, jumping out and running up the path to look. "Philemon must be dead, the good Philemon."

Here was a fresh blow. Mr. Sutherland bowed before it for a moment. Then he rose hurriedly and stepped down into the road beside the driver.

"Get in again," said he, "and drive on. Ride a half mile, then come back for me. I must see the Widow Jones."

The driver, awed both by the occasion and the feeling it had called up in Mr. Sutherland, did as he was bid and drove away. Mr. Sutherland, with a glance back at the road he had just traversed, walked painfully up the path to Mrs. Jones' door.

A moment's conversation with the woman who answered his summons proved the driver's supposition to be correct. Philemon had passed away. He had never rallied from the shock he had received. He had joined his beloved Agatha on the day of her burial, and the long tragedy of their mutual life was over.

"It is a mercy that no inheritor of their misfortune remains," quoth the good woman as she saw the affliction her tidings caused in this much revered friend.

The assent Mr. Sutherland gave was mechanical. He was anxiously studying the road leading toward Porchester.

Suddenly he stepped hastily in.

"Will you be so good as to let me sit down in your parlor for a few minutes?" he asked. "I would like to rest there for an instant alone. This final blow has upset me."

The good woman bowed. Mr. Sutherland's word was law in that town. She did not even dare to protest against the "alone" which he had so pointedly emphasized, but left him after making him, as she said, comfortable, and went back to her duties in the room above.

It was fortunate she was so amenable to his wishes, for no sooner had her steps ceased to be heard than Mr. Sutherland rose from the easy chair in which he had been seated and, putting out the lamp Widow Jones had insisted on lighting, passed directly to the window, through which he began to peer with looks of the deepest anxiety.

A man was coming up the road, a young man—Frederick. As Mr. Sutherland recognized him he leaned forward with increased anxiety till at the appearance of his son in front his scrutiny grew so strained and penetrating that it seemed to exercise a magnetic influence upon the passerby, for when directly opposite the window Frederick involuntarily roused from his abstraction and looked up. The glance he gave the house was but momentary, but in that glance the father saw all that he had secretly dreaded. As his son's eye fell on that fluttering bit of crape, testifying to another death in this already much bereaved community, he staggered wildly, then in a pause of doubt drew nearer and nearer till his fingers grasped this symbol of mourning and clung there. Next moment he was far down the road, plunging toward home in a state of great mental disorder.

With sinking heart Mr. Sutherland let his eyes drop from this flying figure to search for the man whom a little while before he had seen following immediately behind his son. He was following him still and hastened by the house just as Mr. Sutherland's glance fell on him, so that whatever was strange or pitiful in the foregoing scene must have had this man for a witness.

A half hour afterward Mr. Sutherland reached home. He had not overtaken Frederick again or even his accompanying shadow. Ascertaining at his own door that his son had not yet come in, but had been seen going farther up the hill, he turned back again into the road and proceeded after him on foot.

The next place to his own was occupied by Mr. Halliday. As he approached it he caught sight of a man standing half in and half out of the honeysuckle porch, whom he at first thought to be Frederick. But he soon saw that it was the fellow who had been following his son all the way from Porchester, and, controlling his first movement of dislike, he stepped up to him and quietly said:

"Sweetwater, is this you?"

The young man fell back and showed a most extraordinary agitation, quickly suppressed, however.

"Yes, sir; it is no one else. Do you know what I am doing here?"

"I fear I do. You have been to Porchester. You have seen my son"—

Sweetwater made a hurried, almost an entreating, gesture.

"Never mind that, Mr. Sutherland. I had rather you wouldn't say anything about that. I am as much broken up by what I have seen as you are. I never suspected him, sir; only the girl to whom he has so unfortunately attached himself. But after seeing him abandoned to grief in that place, over that grave, what am I to think? What am I to do? I honor you; I would not grieve you, but—but—oh, sir, perhaps you can help me out of the maze into which I have stumbled! Perhaps you can assure me that Mr. Frederick did not leave the hall at the time she did. I missed him from among the dancers. I did not see him between 12 and 3, but perhaps you did, and—and"—

His voice broke. He was almost as profoundly agitated as Mr. Sutherland. As for the latter, who found himself unable to reassure the other on this very vital point, having no remembrance himself of having seen Frederick among his guests during those fatal hours, he stood speechless, lost in abysses, the depth and horror of which only a father can appreciate. Sweetwater respected his anguish and for a moment was silent himself. Then he burst out:

"I had rather never have lived to see this day than be the cause of shame or suffering to you. Tell me what to do. Shall I be deaf, dumb"—

Here Mr. Sutherland found voice.

"You make too much of what you saw," said he. "My boy has faults and

"You have a right to command me."

has lived anything but a satisfactory life, but he is not as bad as your fears would show. He could never have taken life. That would be incredible, monstrous, in one brought up as he has been. Besides, if he were so far gone in evil as to be willing to attempt crime, he had no motive to do so; Sweetwater, he had no motive. A few hundred dollars! But these he could have got from me, and did, but"—

Why did the wretched father stop? Did he recall the circumstances under which Frederick had obtained these last hundreds from him? They were not ordinary circumstances, and Frederick had been in no ordinary strait. Mr. Sutherland could not but acknowledge to himself that there was something in that whole matter which contradicted the very plea he was making, and not being able to establish the conviction of his son's innocence in his own mind he was too honorable to try to establish it in another. His next words showed the struggle he was laboring under.

"It is that girl who has ruined him, Sweetwater. He loves her, but he doubts her, as who could help doing after the story she told us day before yesterday. Indeed he has doubted her ever since that fatal night, and it is this which has broken his heart and not—not"— Again the old gentleman paused; again he recovered himself, this time with a touch of his usual dignity and self command. "Leave me!" he cried. "Leave us! Nothing that you have seen has escaped me, but our interpretations of it may differ. I will watch over my son from this hour, and you may trust to my vigilance."

Sweetwater bowed.

"You have a right to command me," said he. "You may have forgotten, but I have not, that I owe my life to you. Years ago—perhaps you can recall it; it was at the Black pond—I was going down for the third time, and my mother was screaming in terror on the bank, when you—you plunged in and— Well, sir, such things are never forgotten, and, as I said before, you have only to command me." He turned to go, but suddenly came back. There were signs of mental conflict in his face and voice also. "Mr. Sutherland, I am not a talkative man. If I trust your vigilance, you may trust my discretion. Only I must have your word that you will convey no warning to your son; that you will not even let him see he lies under any suspicion, least of all your own."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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