

The Mystery of Agatha Webb.

By Anna Katharine Green.

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Mr. Sutherland made an indefinable gesture, and Sweetwater again disappeared, this time not to return. As for Mr. Sutherland, he remained standing before Mr. Halliday's door. What had the young man meant by this emphatic repetition of his former suggestion? That he would be quiet also and not speak of what he had that night seen? Why, then—But to the hope thus given this honest hearted gentleman would yield no quarter, and, seeing a duty before him, a duty he dare not shrink, he brought his emotions, violent as they were, into complete and absolute subjection and, opening Mr. Halliday's door, entered the house. They were old neighbors, and ceremony was ignored between them.

Finding the hall empty and the parlor door open, he walked immediately into the latter room. The sight that met his eyes never left his memory. Agnes, his little Agnes, whom he had always loved and whom he had vainly longed to call by the endearing name of daughter, sat with her face toward him, looking up at Frederick. That young gentleman had just spoken to her, or she had just received something from his hand, for her own was held out, and her expression was one of gratitude and acceptance. She was not a beautiful girl, but she had a beautiful look, and at this moment it was exalted by a feeling the old gentleman had once longed, but now dreaded, to see there. What could it mean? Why did she show interest, devotion, passion almost, at this especial moment of her life, when in all the years that had gone by, and when it was the dearest wish of his heart to see these two united, she had never betrayed in all their intercourse anything but distrust, if not an uneasy dislike? It was one of the contradictions of our mysterious human nature, and at this crisis and in this moment of secret heartbreak and miserable doubt it made the old gentleman shrink, with his first feeling of actual despair.

The next moment Agnes had risen, and they were both facing him.

"Good evening, Agnes."

Mr. Sutherland forced himself to speak lightly.

"Ah, Frederick, do I find you here?" The latter question had more of constraint in it.

Frederick, with a slight flush suffusing his cheek, which had been only too pale until now, acknowledged his father's greeting with a smile in which that father was surprised to see a faint shade of relief if not of joy. Then he backed toward the door.

"I was just leaving," said he. "I was the bearer of a message to Miss Halliday. He had always called her Agnes before."

Mr. Sutherland, who had found his faculties confused by the expression he had surprised on the young girl's face, answered with a divided attention:

"And I have a message to give you. Wait outside on the porch for me, Frederick, till I exchange a word with our little friend here."

Agnes, who had thrust something she held into a box that lay beside her on a table, turned, with a confused blush, to listen.

Mr. Sutherland waited till Frederick had stepped into the hall. Then he drew Agnes to one side and remorselessly, persistently, raised her face toward him till she was forced to meet his benevolent but searching regard.

"Do you know," he whispered in what he endeavored to make a bantering tone, "how very few days it is since that unhappy boy yonder confessed his love for a young lady whose name I cannot bring myself to utter in your presence?"

The intent was kind, but the effect was unexpectedly cruel. With a droop of her head and a hurried gasp which conveyed a mixture of entreaty and reproach Agnes drew back in a vague endeavor to hide her sudden uneasiness. He saw his mistake and let his hands drop.

"Don't, my dear," he whispered. "I had no idea it would hurt you to hear this. You have always seemed indifferent, hard even, toward my scapegrace son. And this was right, for—" What could he say, how express one-tenth of that with which his breast was laboring? He could not, he dared not, so ended, as we have intimated, by a confused stammering.

Agnes, who had never before seen this object of her lifelong admiration under any serious emotion, felt an impulse of remorse, as if she herself had been guilty of occasioning him embarrassment. Plucking up her courage, she wistfully eyed him.

"Did you imagine," she murmured, "that I needed any warning against Frederick, who has never honored me with his regard, as he has the young lady you cannot mention? I'm afraid you don't know me, Mr. Sutherland, notwithstanding I have sat on your knee and sometimes plucked at your beard in my infantile insistence upon attention."

"I am afraid I don't know you," he answered. "I feel that I know nobody now, not even my son."

He had hoped she would look up at this, but she did not.

"Will my little girl think me very curious and very impertinent if I ask her

what my son Frederick was saying to her when I came into the room?" She looked up now and with visible candor answered him immediately and to the point.

"Frederick is in trouble, Mr. Sutherland. He has felt the need of a friend who could appreciate this, and he has asked me to be that friend. Besides, he brought me a packet of letters which he entreated me to keep for him. I took them, Mr. Sutherland, and I will keep them, as he asked me to do, safe from everybody's inspection, even my own."

Oh, why had he questioned her? He did not want to know of these letters; he did want to know that Frederick possessed anything which he was afraid to retain in his own possession.

"My son did wrong," said he, "to confide anything to your care which he did not desire to retain in his own home. I feel that I ought to see these letters, for if my son is in trouble, as you say, I, his father, ought to know it."

"I am not sure about that," she smiled. "His trouble may be of a different nature from what you imagine. Frederick has led a life that he regrets. I think his chief source of suffering lies in the fact that it is so hard for him to make others believe that he means to do differently in the future."

"Does he mean to do differently?" She flushed. "He says so, Mr. Sutherland. And I, for one, cannot help believing him. Don't you see that he begins to look like another man?"

Mr. Sutherland was taken aback. He had noticed this fact and had found it a hard one to understand. To ascertain what her explanation of it might be he replied at once:

"There is a change in him—a change that more than one has noticed. What is the occasion of it? To what do you ascribe it, Agnes?"

How breathlessly he waited for her answer! Had she any suspicion of the awful doubts which were so deeply agitating himself that night? She did not appear to have.

"I hesitate," she faltered, "but not from any doubt of Frederick, to tell you just what I think lies at the bottom of the sudden change observable in him. Miss Page (you see, I can name her, if you cannot) has proved herself so unworthy of his regard that the shock he has received has opened his eyes to certain feelings of his own which made his weakness in her regard possible. I do not know of anything else. Do you?"

At this direct question, which pierced to the very quick of his trouble, breathed though it was by tender lips and launched in ignorance of the barb which carried it to his heart, Mr. Sutherland recoiled and cast an anxious look upon the door; then, with forced composure, he quietly said, "If you do not, who are so much nearer her age, and let me hope, his sympathy, how should I, who am his father, but have never been his confidant?"

"Oh," she cried, holding out her hands, "such a good father! Some day he will appreciate that fact as well as others. Believe it, Mr. Sutherland, believe it." And then, ashamed of her glowing interest, which was a little more pronounced than fitted her simple attitude of friend toward a man professedly in love with another woman, she faltered a little and cast the shyest of looks upward at the grand but troubled face she had never seen turned toward her with anything but kindness.

"I have confidence in his good heart," she added, with something like dignity.

"Would God that I could share it!" was the only answer she received. Before she could recover from the shock of these words Mr. Sutherland was gone.

Agnes was a little troubled by this interview, for after she had heard the gate click behind these two friends and had carried that precious something away with her up stairs there was a lingering in the step with which she trod the little white embowered chamber, sacred to her girlish dreams, that bespoke an overcharged heart, a heart that, before she slept, found relief in these few words that she whispered into the night air, laden with the sweetness of honeysuckles:

"Can it be that he is right? Did I need such a warning—I who have hated this man and who thought that it was my hatred which made it impossible for me to think of anything or anybody else since we parted from each other last night? Oh, me, if it is so!"

CHAPTER XX.
AGATHA'S HEIR.
Meanwhile Mr. Sutherland and Frederick stood facing each other in the former's library. Nothing had been said during their walk down the hill, and nothing seemed likely to proceed from Frederick now, though his father waited with great and growing agitation for some explanation that would relieve the immense strain on his heart. At last he himself spoke dryly, as we all speak when the heart is fullest and we fear to reveal the depth of our emotions.

"What papers were those you gave into Agnes Halliday's keeping? Any-

thing which we could not have more safely, not to say discreetly, harbored in our own house?"

Frederick, taken aback, for he had not realized that his father had seen these papers, hesitated for a moment; then he boldly said:

"They were letters—old letters—which I felt to be better out of this house than in it. I could not destroy them,



"When were these letters written?" so I gave them into the guardianship of the most conscientious person I know. I hope you won't demand to see those letters. Indeed, sir, I hope you won't demand to see them. They were not written for your eye, and I would rather rest under your displeasure than have them in any way made public."

Frederick showed such earnestness rather than fear that Mr. Sutherland was astonished.

"When were these letters written?" he asked. "Lately or before—You say they are old. How old?"

Frederick's breath came easier.

"Some of them were written years ago—most of them, in fact. It is a personal matter. Every man has such. I wish I could have destroyed them. You will leave them with Agnes, sir?"

"You astonish me," said Mr. Sutherland, relieved that he could at least hope that these letters were in nowise connected with the subject of his own frightful suspicions. "A young girl to whom you certainly were most indifferent a week ago is a curious guardian of letters you decline to show your father?"

"I know it," was Frederick's sole reply.

Somehow the humility with which this was uttered touched Mr. Sutherland and roused hopes he had supposed dead. He looked his son for the first time directly in the eye and with a beating heart said:

"Your secrets, if you have such, might better be entrusted to your father. You have no better friend." And there he stopped with a horrified, despairing feeling of inward weakness. If Frederick had committed a crime, anything would be better than knowing it. Turning partially aside, he fingered the papers on the desk before which he was standing. A large envelope, containing some legal document, lay before him. Taking it up mechanically, he opened it. Frederick as mechanically watched him.

"I know," said the latter, "that I have no better friend. You have been too good, too indulgent. What is it, father? You change color, look ill. What is there in that paper?"

Mr. Sutherland straightened himself; there was a great reserve of strength in this broken down man yet. Fixing Frederick with a gaze more penetrating than any he had yet bestowed upon him, he folded his hands behind him, with the document held tightly between them, and remarked:

"When you borrowed that money from me, you did it like a man who expected to repay it. Why? Whence did you expect to receive the money with which to repay me? Answer, Frederick; this is your hour for confession."

Frederick turned so pale his father dropped his eyes in mercy.

"Confess?" he repeated. "What should I confess? My sins? They are too many. As for that money, I hoped to pay it as any son might hope to pay his father for money advanced to pay a gambler's debt. I said I meant to work. My first money earned shall be offered to you."

"Well? Well?" His father was holding the document he had just read opened out before his eyes.

"Didn't you expect this?" he asked. "Didn't you know that that poor woman, that wretchedly murdered, most unhappy woman, whose death the whole town mourns, had made you her heir? That by the terms of this document seen by me here and now for the first time, I am made executor and you the inheritor of the \$100,000 or more left by Agatha Webb?"

"No!" cried Frederick, his eyes glued to the paper, his whole face and form expressing something more akin to terror than surprise. "Has she done this? Why should she? I hardly knew her." "No, you hardly knew her. And she? She hardly knew you; if she had, she would have abhorred rather than enriched you. Frederick, I had rather you were dead than stand before me the inheritor of Philemon and Agatha Webb's hard earned savings."

"You are right; it would be better," murmured Frederick, hardly heeding

what he said. Then, as he encountered his father's eye resting upon him with implacable scrutiny, he added in weak repetition: "But why give her money to me? What was I to her that she should will me her fortune?"

The father's finger trembled to a certain line in the document, which seemed to offer some explanation of this, but Frederick did not follow it. He had seen that his father was expecting a reply to the question he had previously put, and he was casting about in his mind how to answer it.

"When did you know of this will?" Mr. Sutherland now repeated. "For know of it you did before you came to me for money."

Frederick summoned up his full courage and confronted his father resolutely.

"No," said he, "I did not know of it. It is as much of a surprise to me as it is to you."

He lied. Mr. Sutherland knew that he did and Frederick knew that he knew it. A shadow fell between them, which the older, with that unspeakable fear upon him roused by Sweetwater's whispered suspicion, dared no longer to attempt to lift.

After a few minutes, in which Frederick seemed to see his father age before his eyes, Mr. Sutherland coldly remarked:

"Dr. Halbot must know of this will. It has been sent here to me from Boston by a lawyer who drew it up two years ago. The coroner may not as yet have heard of it. Will you accompany me to his office tomorrow? I should like to have him see that we wish to be open with him in an affair of such importance."

"I will accompany you gladly," said Frederick, and, seeing that his father neither wished nor was able to say anything further, he bowed with distant ceremony as to a stranger and quietly withdrew. But when the door had closed between them and only the memory of his father's changed countenance remained to trouble him, he paused and laid his hand again on the knob, as if tempted to return. But he left without doing so, only to turn again at the end of the hall and gaze wistfully back. Yet he went on.

As he opened his own door and disappeared within he said half audibly: "Easy to destroy me now, Amabel. One word and I am lost!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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