

THE MYSTERY OF AGATHA WEBB.

By Anna Katherine Greene.

But here Mr. Gilchrist rose, weak, tottering, quivering with something more than anger. He approached his daughter and laid his finger on her lips. "Be quiet!" he said. "Philemon is not to blame. A month ago he came to see me and prayed that, as a relief to his mind, I would tell him why you had separated yourself from James. He had always thought the match had fallen through on account of some foolish quarrel or incompatibility, but lately he had feared there was something more than he suspected in this break, something that he should know. So I told him why you had dismissed James, and, whether he knew James better than we did or whether he had seen something in his long acquaintance with these brothers which influenced his judgment, he said at once: 'This cannot be true of James. It is not in his nature to defraud any man, but John—I might believe it of John. Isn't there some complication here? I had never thought of John and did not see how John could be mixed up with an affair I had supposed to be a secret between James and myself, but when Philemon laid the matter before James he did not deny that John was guilty, but asked that you be not told before your marriage. He knew that you were engaged to a good man, a man that your father approved, a man that could and would make you happy. He did not want to be the means of a second break, and besides—and this, I think, was at the bottom of the stand he took, for James Zabel was always the proudest man I ever knew—he never could bear, he said, to give to one like Agatha a name which he knew and she knew was not entirely free from reproach. It would stand in the way of his happiness and ultimately of hers. His brother's dishonor was his. So, while he loved you still, his only prayer was that after you were safely married and Philemon was sure of your affection he should tell you that the man you once regarded so favorably was not unworthy of that regard. To obey him Philemon has kept silent, while I—Agatha, what are you doing? Are you mad, my child?'"

She looked so for the moment. Tearing off the ring she had worn but an hour, she flung it on the floor. Then she threw her arms high up over her head and burst into an awful voice: "Curses on the father! Curses on the husband who have combined to make me rue the day I was born! The father I cannot disown, but the husband—"

"Hush!"

"It was Mr. Gilchrist who dared her fiery anger. Philemon said nothing."

"Hush! He may be the father of your children. Don't curse!"

But she only towered the higher, and her beauty from being simply majestic became appalling. "Children!" she cried. "If ever I bear children to this man, may the blight of heaven strike them as it has struck me this day. May they die as my hopes have died, or, if they live, may they bruise his heart as mine is bruised and curse their father as—"

Here I fled the house. I was shaking as if this awful denunciation had fallen on my own head. But before the door closed behind me a different cry called me back. Mr. Gilchrist was lying lifeless on the floor, and Philemon, the patient, tender Philemon, had taken Agatha to his breast and was soothing her there as if the words she had showered upon him had been blessings instead of the most fearful curses which had ever left the lips of mortal woman.

The next letter was in Agatha's handwriting. It was dated some months later and was stained and crumpled more than any others in the whole packet. Could Philemon once have told why? Were these blotted lines the result of his tears falling fast upon them, tears of 40 years ago, when he and she were young and love had been doubtful? Was the sheet so yellowed and so seamed because it had been worn on his breast and folded and unfolded so often? Philemon, thou art in thy grave, sleeping sweetly at last by the side of her thou so idolized, but these marks of feeling still remain indissolubly connected with the words that gave them birth.

DEAR PHILEMON—You are gone for a day and a night only, but it seems a lengthened absence to me, meriting a little letter. You have been so good to me, Philemon, ever since that dreadful hour following our marriage I feel that I am beginning to love you and that God did not deal with me so harshly when he cast me into your arms. Yesterday I tried to tell you this when you almost kissed me at parting, but I was afraid it was a momentary sentimentality and so kept still. But today such a warm wellspring of joy rises in my heart when I think that tomorrow the house will be bright again and that in place of the empty wall opposite me at table I shall see your kindly and forbearing face! I know that the heart I had thought impregnable has begun to yield and that daily gentleness and a boundless consideration from one who had excuse for bitter thoughts and re-remembrance is doing what all of us thought impossible a few short months ago.

Oh, I am so happy, Philemon, so happy to love where it is now my duty to love, and if it were not for that dreadful memory of a father dying with harsh words in his ears and the knowledge that you, my husband, yet not my husband, are bearing ever about with

you echoes of words that in another nature would have turned tenderness into gall I could be merry also and sing as I go about the house, making it pleasant and comfortable against your speedy return. As it is, I can but lay my hand softly on my heart as its beatings grow too impetuous and say: "God bless my absent Philemon and help him to forgive me! I forgive him and love him as I never thought I could."

That you may see that these are not the weak outpourings of a lonely woman, I will here write that I heard today that John and James Zabel have gone into partnership in the shipbuilding business, John's uncle having left him a legacy of several thousand dollars. I hope they will do well. James, they say, is to all appearance perfectly cheerful, is full of business and this relieves me from too much worry in his regard. God certainly knew what kind of a husband I needed. May you find yourself equally blessed in your wife.

Another letter to Philemon a year later:

DEAR PHILEMON—Hasten home, Philemon; I do not like these absences. I am just now too weak and fearful. Since we knew the great hope before us I have looked often in your face for a sign that you remembered what this hope cannot but recall to my shuddering memory. Philemon, Philemon, was I mad? When I think what I said in my rage and then feel the little life stirring about my heart, I wonder that God did not strike me dead rather than bestow upon me the greatest blessing that can come to woman, Philemon, Philemon, if anything should happen the child! I think of it by day, I think of it by night. I know you think of it, too, though you show me such a cheerful countenance and make such great plans for the future. Will God remember my words or will he forget? It seems as if my reason hung upon this question.

A note this time in answer to one from John Zabel:

DEAR JOHN—Thank you for words which could have come from nobody else. My child is dead. Could I expect anything different? If I did, God has rebuked me.

Philemon thinks only of me. We understand each other perfectly, now that our greatest suffering comes in each other's pain. My load I can bear, but this—Come and see me, John, and tell James our house is open to him. We have all done wrong, and are caught in one web of misfortune. Let it make us friends again.

Below this in Philemon's hand:

My wife is superstitious. Strong and capable as she is, she has felt that this sudden taking off of our firstborn as a sign that certain words uttered by her on her marriage day, unhappily known to you and, as I take it, to James also, have been remembered by the righteous God above us. This is a weakness which I cannot combat. Can you, who alone of all the world beside know both it and its cause, help me by a renewed friendship, whose cheerful and natural character may gradually make her forget? If so, come like old neighbors and dine with us on our wedding day. If God sees that we have buried the past and are ready to forgive each other the faults of our youth, perhaps He will further spare this good woman. I think she will be able to bear it. She has great strength except where a little child is concerned. That alone can henceforth stir the deepest recesses of her heart.

After this a gap of years. One, two, three, four, five children were laid away to rest in Porchester churchyard, then Philemon and she came to Sutherlandtown, but not till after the certain event had occurred, best made known by this last letter to Philemon:

DEAREST HUSBAND—Our babe is born, our sixth and our dearest, and the reproach of its first look had to be met by me alone. Oh, why did I leave you and come to this great Boston, where I have no friends but Mrs. Sutherland? Did I think I could break the spell of fate or Providence by giving birth to my last darling among strangers?

I shall have to do something more than that if I would save this child to our old age. It is borne in upon me like fate that never will a child prosper of my breast or survive the clasp of my arms. If it is to live, it must be reared by others. Some woman who has not brought down the curse of heaven upon her by her own blasphemies must nourish the tender frame and receive the blessing of its growing love. Neither I nor you can hope to see recognition in our babe's eye. Before it can turn upon us with love it will close in its last sleep, and we will be left desolate. What shall we do, then, with this little son? To whose guardianship can we intrust it? Do you know a man good enough or a woman sufficiently tender? I do not, but if God wills that our little Frederick should live he will raise up some one by the pang of possible separation already tearing my heart. I believe that he will raise up some one.

Meanwhile I did not dare to kiss the child lest I should blight it. He is so sturdy, Philemon, so different from all the other five.

I open this to add that Mrs. Sutherland has just been in with her 5 weeks' old infant. His father is away, too, and has not yet seen his boy, and this is their first after ten years of marriage. Oh, that I had such confidence as she in a future of endless delight in this babe!

The next letter opens with a cry: Philemon! Come to me, Philemon! I have done what I threatened. I have made the sacrifice. Our child is no longer ours, and now perhaps he may live. But, oh, my breaking heart, my empty home! Help me to bear my desolation, for it is for life. We will never have another child. And where is it? Ah, that is the wonder of it! Near you, Philemon, yet not too near. Mrs. Sutherland has it, and you may have

seen its little face through the car window if you were in the station last night when the express passed through to Sutherlandtown. Ah, but she has her burden to bear, too—an awful secret burden, like my own, only she will have the child, for, Philemon, she has taken it in lieu of her own, which died last night in my sight. And Mr. Sutherland does not know what she has done and never will if you keep the secret as I shall for the sake of the life the little innocent has thus won.

What do I mean and how was it all? Philemon, it was God's work, all but the deception, and that is for the good of all and to save four broken hearts.



"Swear you will be a mother to this child!" Listen. Yesterday, only yesterday—it seems a month ago—Mrs. Sutherland came again to see me with her baby in her arms. The baby was looking well, and she was the happiest of women, for the one wish of his heart and hers had been fulfilled, and she was soon going to have the bliss of showing the child to his father. My own babe was on the bed asleep, and I, who am feeling wonderfully strong, was sitting up in a little chair as far away from him as possible, not out of hatred or indifference, oh, no, but because he seemed to rest better when left entirely by himself and not under the hungry look of my eyes. Mrs. Sutherland went over to look at him. "Oh, he is fair, like my baby," she said, "and almost as sturdy, though mine is a month older." And she stooped down and kissed him. Philemon, he smiled for her, though he never had for me. I saw it with a greedy longing that almost made me cry out. Then I turned to her, and we talked. Of what? I cannot remember now. At home we had never been intimate friends. She is from Sutherlandtown, and I am from Porchester, and the distance of nine miles is enough to estrange people. But here, each with her husband absent and a darling infant sleeping under her eyes, interests we have never thought identical drew us to each other, and we chatted with ever increasing pleasure. Suddenly Mrs. Sutherland jumped up in terrible fright. The infant she had been rocking on her breast was blue; the next minute it shuddered; the next it lay in her arms dead.

I hear the shriek yet with which she fell with it in her arms to the floor. Fortunately no other ears were open to her cry. I alone saw her misery. I alone heard her tale. The child had been poisoned, Philemon, poisoned by her. She had mistaken a cup of medicine for a cup of water and had given the child a few drops in a spoon just before setting out from her hotel. She had not known at the time what she had done, but now she remembered that the fatal cup was just like the other and that the two stood very near together. Oh, her innocent child, and oh, her husband! It seemed as if the latter thought would drive her wild. "He has so wished for a child," she moaned. "We have been married ten years and this baby seemed to have been sent from heaven. He will curse me; he will hate me; he will never be able after this to bear me in his sight." This was not true of Mr. Sutherland, but it was useless to argue with her. Instead of attempting it I took another way to stop her ravings. Lifting the child out of her hands, I first listened at its heart and then finding it was really dead—I have seen too many lifeless children not to know—I began slowly to undress it. "What are you doing?" she cried. "Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Webb! What are you doing?" For reply I pointed to the bed where two little angels could be seen feebly fluttering. "You shall have my child," I whispered. "I have carried too many babies to the tomb to dare risk bringing up another." And catching her poor wandering spirit with my eye, I held her while I told her my story. Philemon, I saved that woman. Before I had finished speaking I saw the reason return to her eye and the dawning of a pitiful hope in her passion drawn face. She looked at the child in my arms, and then she looked at the one in the bed, and the long drawn sigh with which she finally bent down and wept over our darling told me that my cause won. The rest was easy. When the clothes of the two children had been exchanged, she took our baby in her arms and prepared to leave. Then I stopped her. "Swear," I cried, holding her by the arm and lifting my other hand to heaven, "swear you will be a mother to this child! Swear you will love it as your own and rear it in the path of truth and righteousness!"

The convulsive clasp with which she drew the baby to her breast told me plainer than her shuddering "I swear!" that her heart had already opened to it. I dropped her arm and covered my face with my hands. I could not see my darling go. It was worse than death. "Oh, God, save him!" I groaned. "God make him an honor!" But here she caught me by the arm. Her

stitch was frenzied, and her teeth were chattering. "Swear in your turn," she gasped; "swear that if I do a mother's duty by this boy you will keep my secret and never, never reveal to my husband, to the boy or to the world that you have any claims upon him." It was like tearing the heart from my breast with my own hand, but I swore, Philemon, and she in her turn stood back. But suddenly she faced me again, terror and doubt in all her looks. "Your husband!" she whispered. "Can you keep such a secret from him? You will breathe it in your dreams." "I shall tell him," I answered. "Tell him!" The hair seemed to rise on her head, and she shook so that I feared she would drop the babe. "Be careful!" I cried. "See, you frighten the babe. My husband has but one heart with me. What I do he will subscribe to. Do not fear Philemon." So I promised in your name. Gradually she grew calmer. When I saw she was steady again, I motioned her to go. Even my more than mortal strength was failing, and the baby—Philemon, I have never kissed it, and I did not kiss it then. I heard her feet draw slowly toward the door. I heard her hand fall on the knob, heard it turn, uttered one cry and then— They found me an hour after lying along the door clasping the dead infant in my arms. I was in a swoon, and they all think I fell with the child, as perhaps I did, and that its little life went out during my insensibility. Of its little features, like and yet unlike our boy's, no one seems to take heed. The nurse who cared for it is gone, and who else would know that little face but me? They are very good to me and are full of self-reproaches for leaving me so long in my part of the building alone. But, though they watch me now, I have contrived to write this letter, which you will get with the one telling of the baby's death and my own dangerous condition.

Under it these words: "Though bidden to destroy this, I have never dared to do so. Some day it may be of inestimable value to us or our boy."

PHILEMON WEBB.

This was the last letter found in the packet. As it was laid down sobs were heard all over the room, and Frederick, who for some time now had been sitting with his head in his hands, ventured to look up and say: "Do you wonder that I endeavored to keep this secret, bought at such a price and sealed by the death of her I thought my mother and of her who really was? Gentlemen, Mr. Sutherland really loved his wife and honored her memory. To tell him, as I shall have to within the hour, that the child she placed in his arms 25 years ago was an alien and that all his love, his care, his disappointment and his sufferings had been lavished on the son of a neighbor, required greater courage than to face doubt on the faces of my fellow townsmen or anything, in short, but absolute arraignment on the charge of murder. Hence my silence, hence my indecision, till this woman here—he pointed a scornful finger at Amabel now shrinking in her chair—"drove me to it by secretly threatening me with a testimony which would have made me the murderer of my mother and the lasting disgrace of a good man who alone has been without blame from the beginning to the end of this desperate affair. She was about to speak when I forestalled her."

That afternoon before the inquest broke up the jury brought in their verdict. It was: "Death by means of a wound inflicted upon herself in a moment of terror and misapprehension."

It was all his fellow townsmen could do for Frederick.

(To Be Continued)

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