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# The Mystery of Agatha Webb.

BY ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.

"Then, gentlemen," continued Frederick, still without looking at Amabel, whose smile had acquired a mockery that drew the eyes of the jury toward her more than once during the following recital, "you know, and the public generally now know, that Mrs. Webb has left me the greater portion of the money of which she died possessed. I have never before acknowledged to any one, not even to the good man who awaits this jury's verdict on the other side of that door, that she had reasons for this, good reasons, reasons which up to the very evening of her death I was myself ignorant of, as I was ignorant of her intentions in my regard or that I was the special object of her attention, or that we were under any mutual obligations in any way. Why, then, I should have thought of going to her in the great strait in which I found myself on that day I can hardly say. I knew she had money in her house. This I had unhappily been made acquainted with in an accidental way, and I knew she was of a kindly disposition and quite capable of doing a very unselfish act. Still this would not seem to be reason enough for me to intrude upon her late at night with a plea for a large loan of money had I not been in a desperate condition of mind, which made any attempt seem reasonable that promised relief from the unendurable burden of a pressing and disreputable debt.

"I was obliged to have money—a great deal of money—and I had to have it at once, and while I know this will not serve to lighten the suspicion I have brought upon myself by my late admissions, it is the only explanation I can give you for leaving the ball at my father's house and hurrying down secretly and alone into town to the little cottage where, as I had been told early in the evening, a small entertainment was being given which would insure its being open even at so late an hour as midnight. Miss Page, who will, I am sure, pardon the introduction of her name into this narrative, has taken pains to declare to you that in the expedition she herself made into town that evening she followed some person's steps down hill. This is very likely true, and those steps were probably mine, for after leaving the house by the garden door I came directly down the main road to the corner of the lane running past Mrs. Webb's cottage. Having already seen from the hillside the light burning in her upper windows, I felt encouraged to proceed and so hastened on till I came to the gate on High street. Here I had a moment of hesitation, and thoughts bitter enough for me to recall them at this moment came into my mind, making that instant perhaps the very worst in my life. But they passed, thank God, and with nothing more desperate in mind than a sudden intention of having my own way about this money I lifted the latch of the front door and stepped in.

"I had expected to find a jovial group of friends in her little ground parlor or at least hear the sound of merry voices and laughter in the rooms above, but no sounds of any sort awaited me. Indeed the house seemed strangely silent for one so fully lighted and, astonished at this, I pushed the door ajar at my left and looked in. An unexpected and pitiful sight awaited me. Seated at a table set with abundance of un-tasted food, I saw the master of the house, with his head sunk forward on his arms, asleep. The expected guests had failed to arrive, and he, tired out with waiting, had fallen into a doze at the board.

"This was a condition of things for which I was not prepared. Mrs. Webb, whom I wished to see, was probably up stairs, and while I might summon her by a sturdy rap on the door, beside which I stood, I had so little desire to wake her husband, of whose mental condition I was well aware, that I could not bring myself to make any loud noise within his hearing. Yet I had not the courage to retreat. All my hopes of relief from the many difficulties that menaced me lay in the generosity of this great hearted woman, and if out of pusillanimity I let this hour go by without making my appeal, nothing but shame and disaster awaited me. Yet how could I hope to lure her down stairs without noise? I could not, and so yielding to the impulse of



"If you want my life, I will give it to you with my own hand."

here swear, of the effect which my unexpected presence would have on the noble woman overhead, I slipped up the narrow staircase and, catching at that moment the sound of her voice calling out to Betsy, I stepped up to the door I saw standing open before me and confronted her before she could move from the table before which she was sitting, counting over a large roll of money.

"My look (and it was doubtless not a common look, for the sight of a mass of money at that moment, when money was everything to me, roused every lurking demon in my breast) seemed to appall, if it did not frighten, her, for she rose, and meeting my eyes with a

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gaze in which shock and some strange and poignant agony totally incomprehensible to me were strangely blended, she cried out:

"No, no, Frederick! You don't know what you are doing. If you want my money, take it; if you want my life, I will give it to you with my own hand. Don't stain yours—don't—"

"I did not understand her. I did not know until I thought it over afterward that my hand was thrust convulsively into my breast in a way which, taken with my wild mien, made me look as if I had come to murder her for the money over which she was hovering. I was blind, deaf to everything but that money, and, bending unadvisedly forward in a state of mental intoxication awful enough for me to remember now, I answered her frenzied words by some such broken exclamations as these:

"Give, then! I want hundreds—thousands—now, now, to save myself! Disgrace, shame, prison await me if I don't have them. Give, give! And my hand went out toward it, not toward her; but she mistook the action, mistook my purpose, and, with a heart-broken cry, to save me, me, from crime, the worst crime of which humanity is capable, she caught up a dagger lying only too near her hand in the open drawer against the wall she leaned, and in a moment of faithless anguish, which you who can never know more than the outward scolding of her life can hardly measure, plunged against it and—I can tell you no more. Her blood and Betsy's shriek from the adjoining room swam through my consciousness, and then she fell, as I supposed, dead upon the floor, and I, in scarcely better case, fell also.

"This, as God lives, is the truth concerning the wound found in the breast of this never to be forgotten woman."

The feeling, the pathos, the anguish even, to be found in his tones made this story, strange and incredible as it seemed, appear for the moment plausible.

"And Betsy?" asked the coroner.

"Must have fallen when we did, for I never heard her voice after the first scream. But I shall speak of her again. What I must now explain is how the money in Mrs. Webb's drawer came into my possession and how the dagger she had planted in her breast came to be found on the lawn outside. When I came to myself, and that must have been very soon, I found that the blow I had been such a horrified witness to, I had not yet proved fatal. The eyes I had seen close, as I had supposed, forever, were now open, and she was looking at me with a smile that has never left my memory and never will.

"There is no blood on you," she murmured. "You did not strike the blow. Was it money only that you wanted, Frederick? If so, you could have had it without crime. There are \$1,000 on that table and half as much again in the closet over yonder. Take them and let them pave your way to a better life. My death will help you to remember." Do these words, this action of hers, seem incredible to you, sir? Alas, alas! they will not when I tell you—and here he cast one anxious, deeply anxious, glance at the room in which Mr. Sutherland was hidden—"that, unknown to me, unknown to that good man from whom it can no longer be kept hidden, Agatha Webb was my mother. I am Philemon's son and not the offspring of Charles and Marietta Sutherland!"

CHAPTER XXII.  
HOW HE WAS POOLED.

Impossible! Incredible!

Like a wave suddenly lifted the whole assemblage rose in surprise if not in protest. But there was no outburst. The very depth of the feelings evoked made all ebullition impossible, and as one sees the billow pause ere it breaks and gradually subsides, so this crowd yielded to the awe within them and one by one sank back into their seats till quiet was again restored and only a circle of listening faces confronted the man who had just stirred a whole roomful to its depths. Seeing this and realizing his opportunity, Frederick at once entered into the explanations for which each heart there panted.

"This will be overwhelming news to him who has cared for me since infancy. You have heard him call me son. With what words shall I overthrow his confidence in the truth and rectitude of his long buried wife and make him know in his old age that he has wasted years of patience upon one who was not his blood or lineage? The wonder, the incredulity, you manifest and my best excuse for my long delay in revealing the secret entrusted to me by this dying woman."

An awed silence greeted these words. Never was the interest of a crowd more intense or its passions held in greater restraint. Yet Agnes' tears flowed freely, and Amabel's smiles—well, their expression had changed, and to Sweetwater, who alone had eyes for a now, they were surcharged with a tragic meaning strange to see in one of her callous nature.

Frederick's voice broke as he proceeded in his self imposed task:

"The astounding fact which I have just communicated to you was made known to me by my mother, with the dagger still plunged in her breast. She would not let me draw it out. She knew that death would follow that act, and she prized every moment remaining to her because of the bliss she enjoyed of seeing and having near her her only living child. The love, the passion, the boundless devotion, she showed in those last few minutes knew not let me draw it from a selfish brute into a deeply repentant man. I knew before her in anguish. I made her feel that, wicked as I had been, I was not the conscienceless wretch she had imagined and that she was mistaken as to the motives which led me into her presence. And when I saw by her clearing brow and peaceful look that I had fully persuaded her of

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