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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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What she did say was in seeming ex-
planation of her previous sentence. "It
was not the same old man I had seen
on the doorstep, and while I was look-
ing 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 disap-
pearing in the woods above me. I was
bound, gentlemen, as you see, to fol-
low 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 there-
fore 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 oppo-
site this forest, I easily found my way
to the little clearing that I have reason-
ably to think you gentlemen have since be-
come 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 illumined
space, especially as there was every in-
dication of this person having com-
pleted 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 hall. But
later, or, rather, the next day, I re-
turned 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 inter-
view, came upon me with the bills in
my hand, I was but buying deeper the
ill-gotten gains I had come upon."

"Ah, and so making them your own,"
quoth Sweetwater, stung by the sar-
casm 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 my-
self, I would not have risked leaving it
where the murderer could find it by
a bunch of sudden 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 ac-
tion."

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 per-
haps the slightest shade of relenting
in their severity. Sweetwater alone
betrayed restlessness. Knapp showed
no feeling at all, while Frederick look-
ed like one petrified and moved neither
hand nor foot.

"Crime that is the outcome of fore-
thought is despicable," she went on,
with a deliberateness so hard that the
more susceptible of her auditors shud-
dered. "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 undoubt-
edly 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."

"Hal! 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 in-
terpretation.

To Sweetwater, however, this was
but so much display of feminine re-
source 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 reburying 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 deli-
cate curve of her lips was not without
menace 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, in-
stantly 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 pur-
suit 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 ad-
dressed her himself.

"Your conduct," said he, "has not
been that of a strictly honorable per-
son. 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 remind-
ed 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 reck-
less 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 au-
thoritatively. "Do not let us go too far!

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—yet, Miss Page has an air of speak-
ing the truth, strange and unaccount-
able as it may seem. Zabel was an ad-
mirable 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 re-
gret 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 ad-
miration for the lithe, graceful, be-
witching personality before them, with
her childish impulses and womanly
wit which half mystified and half im-
posed upon them.

Mr. Sutherland, on the contrary, was
never charmed from his antagonism
nor convinced of her honesty. There



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

was something in this matter that
could not be explained away by her ar-
gument, and his suspicion of that some-
thing he felt perfectly sure was shared
by his son, toward whose cold, set face
he had frequently cast the most un-
easy glances. He was not ready, how-
ever, to probe into the subject more
nearly, nor could he for the sake of
Frederick urge on to any further con-
fession a young woman whom his un-
happy son professed to love and in
whose discretion he had so little con-
fidence. As for Sweetwater, he had
now fully recovered himself and bore
himself 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 re-
ceived 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 hem of Batsy's
skirt? You distinctly told us that you
did not go up stairs when you were in
Mrs. Webb's house."

"Ah, that's so!" acquiesced the Bos-
ton 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 in your business to
solve," corrected the district attorney.
"Nothing that you have told us in sup-
port 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 Sweet-
water stood lowering upon her from
out his half closed eyes, she impetu-
ously cried: "You, sir, who who with-
out call to do so have presumed to ar-
rogate 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 ex-
planation 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!"

To be Continued.

Ducats are clipped, pence are not.

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