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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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Knapp shook his head and smiled. "Young enthusiasts like yourself are great at forming theories which well reasoned men like myself must regard as fantastical. However," he went on, "there is no doubt that Miss Page was a witness to, even if she has not profited by, the murder we have been considering. But with this palpable proof of the Zabels' direct connection with the affair I would not recommend her arrest yet."

"One should be under surveillance, though," intimated the coroner. "Most certainly," acquiesced Knapp. As for Sweetwater, he remained silent till the opportunity came for him to whisper apart to Dr. Talbot, when he said:

"For all the palpable proof of which Mr. Knapp speaks—the 'Y. Z.' on the dagger and the possibility of this being the object he was seen carrying out of Philemon Webb's gate—I maintain that this old man in his moribund condition never struck the blow that killed Agatha Webb. He hadn't strength enough even if his lifelong love for her had not been sufficient to prevent him."

The coroner looked thoughtful. "You are right," said he. "He hadn't strength enough. But don't expend too much energy in talk. Wait and see what a few direct questions will elicit from Miss Page."

CHAPTER XVIII. A WILY WITNESS.

Frederick rose early. He had slept but little. The words he had overheard at the end of the lot the night before were still ringing in his ears. Going down the back stairs in his anxiety to avoid Amabel, he came upon one of the waiters.

"Been to the village this morning?" he asked.

"No, sir, but Lem has. There's great news there. I wonder if any one has told Mr. Sutherland?"

"What news, Jake? I don't think my father is up yet."

"Why, sir, there were two more deaths in town last night—the brothers Zabel—and folks do say (Lem heard it a dozen times between the grocery and the fish market) that it was one of these old men who killed Mrs. Webb. The dagger has been found in their house and most of the money. Why, sir, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

Frederick made an effort and stood upright. He had nearly fallen.

"No—that is, I am not quite myself. So many horrors, Jake."

"What did they die of? You say they are both dead—both?"

"Yes, sir, and it's dreadful to think of, but it was hunger, sir. Bread came too late. Both men are mere skeletons to look at. They have kept themselves close for weeks now, and nobody knew how bad off they were. I don't wonder it upset you, sir. We all feel it a bit, and I just dread to tell Mr. Sutherland."

Frederick staggered away. He had never in his life been so near mental and physical collapse. At the threshold of the sitting room door he met his father. Mr. Sutherland was looking both troubled and anxious—more so, Frederick thought, than when he signed the check for him on the previous night. As their eyes met both showed embarrassment, but Frederick, whose nerves had been highly strung up by what he had just heard, soon controlled himself and, surveying his father with forced calmness, began:

"This is dreadful news, sir."

But his father, intent on his own thought, hurriedly interrupted him.

"You told me yesterday that everything was broken off between you and Miss Page, yet I saw you re-enter the house together last night, a little while after I gave you the money you asked for."

"I know, and it must have had a bad appearance. I entreat you, however, to

Mr. Sutherland, evidently startled, asked what news, to which Frederick replied:

"The news about the Zabels. They are both dead, sir—dead from hunger. Can you imagine it?"

This was something so different from what his father had expected to hear that he did not take it in at first. When he did, his surprise and grief were even greater than Frederick had anticipated. Seeing him so affected, Frederick, who thought that the whole truth would be no harder to bear than the half, added the suspicion which had been attached to the younger one's name and then stood back, scarcely daring to be a witness to the outraged feelings which such a communication could not fail to awaken in one of his father's temperament.

But, though he thus escaped the shocked look which crossed his father's countenance, he could not fail to hear the indignant exclamation which burst from his lips or help perceiving that it would take more than the most complete circumstantial evidence to convince his father of the guilt of men he had known and respected for so many years.

For some reason Frederick experienced great relief at this and was bracing himself to meet the fire of questions which his statement must necessarily call forth when the sound of approaching steps drew the attention of both toward a party of men coming up the hillside.

Among them was Mr. Courtney, prosecuting attorney for this district, and as Mr. Sutherland recognized him he sprang forward, saying, "There's Courtney; he will explain this."

Frederick followed, anxious and bewildered, and soon had the doubtful pleasure of seeing his father enter his study in company with the four men considered to be most interested in the elucidation of the Webb mystery.

As he was lingering in an undecided mood in the small passageway leading up stairs he felt the pressure of a finger on his shoulder. Looking up, he met the eyes of Amabel, who was leaning toward him over the banisters. She was smiling, and though her face was not without evidences of physical languor, there was a charm about her person which would have been sufficient to enthrall to him 24 hours before, but which now caused him such a physical repulsion that he started back in the effort to rid his shoulder from her disturbing touch.



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She frowned. It was an instantaneous expression of displeasure which was soon lost in one of her gurgling laughs.

"Is my touch so burdensome?" she demanded. "If the pressure of one finger is so unbearable to your sensitive nerves, how will you relish the weight of my whole hand?"

There was a fierceness in her tone, a purpose in her look that for the first time in his struggle with her revealed the full depth of her dark nature. Shrinking from her appalled, he put up his hand in protest, at which she changed again in a twinkling, and with a cautious gesture toward the room in which Mr. Sutherland and his friends had disappeared, she whispered significantly:

"We may not have another chance to confer together. Understand, then, that it will not be necessary for you to tell me, in so many words, that you are ready to link your fortunes to mine; the taking off of the ring you wear and your slow putting of it on again, in my presence, will be understood by me as a token that you have reconsidered your present attitude and desire my silence and—myself."

Frederick could not repress a shudder.

For an instant he was tempted to succumb on the spot and have the long agony over. Then his horror of the woman rose to such a pitch that he uttered an exclamation, and, turning away from her face, which was rapidly growing loathsome to him, he ran out of the passageway into the garden, seeing as he ran a persistent vision of himself pulling off the ring and putting it back again, under the spell of a look he rebelled against even while he yielded to its influence.

"I will not wear a ring. I will not subject myself to the possibility of obeying her behest under a sudden stress of fear or fascination," he exclaimed, pausing by the well curb and looking over it at his reflection in the water beneath. "If I drop it here, I at least lose the horror of doing what she suggests under some involuntary impulse." But the thought that the mere abuse of the ring from his finger would not stand in the way of his going through the motions to which she had just given such significance deterred him from the sacrifice of a valuable family jewel, and he left the spot with an air of frenzy such as a man displays when he feels himself on the verge of a doom he can neither meet nor avert.

As he re-entered the house he felt himself enveloped in the atmosphere of a coming crisis. He could hear voices in the upper hall, and among them he caught the accents of her he had learned so lately to fear. Impelled by something deeper than curiosity and more potent even than dread, he hastened toward the stairs. When half way up them, he caught sight of Amabel. She was leaning back against the balustrade that ran across the upper hall, with her hands gripping the rail on either side of her and her face turned toward the five men who had evidently issued from Mr. Sutherland's study to interview her.

As her back was to Frederick, he could not judge of the expression of that face save by the effect it had upon the different men confronting her. But to see them was enough. From their looks he could perceive that this young girl was in one of her baffling moods and that, from his father down, not one of the men present knew what to make of her.

At the sound his feet made, a relaxation took place in her body, and she lost something of the defiant attitude she had before maintained. Presently he heard her voice:

"I am willing to answer any questions you may choose to put me here, but I cannot consent to shut myself in with you in that small study. I should suffocate."

Frederick could perceive the looks which passed between the five men assembled before her and was astonished to note that the insignificant fellow they called Sweetwater was the first to answer.

"Very well," said he. "If you enjoy the publicity of the open hall, no one here will object. Is not that so, gentlemen?"

Her two little fingers, which were turned toward Frederick, ran up and down the rail, making a peculiar rasping noise, which for a moment was the only sound to be heard. Then Mr. Courtney said:

To be Continued.

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