

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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"And under the door?"

"A hole or, rather, the entrance to one."

"Very good. The money is in that hole. Pull it out, Mr. Fenton."

The assurance with which Sweetwater spoke was such that Mr. Fenton at once stopped and plunged his hand into the hole; but when, after a hurried search, he drew it out again, there was nothing in it; his hand was empty. Sweetwater stared at that hand amazed.

"Don't you find anything?" he asked. "Isn't there a roll of bills in that hole?"

"No," was the gloomy answer, after a renewed attempt and a second disappointment. "There is nothing to be found here. You are laboring under some misapprehension, Sweetwater."

"But I can't be. I saw the money; saw it in the hand of the person who hid it there. Let me look for it, constable. I will not give up the search till I have turned the place topsy turvy."

Knocking down in Mr. Fenton's place, he thrust his hand into the hole. On either side of him peered the faces of Mr. Fenton and Knapp. (Abel had slipped away at a whisper from Sweetwater.) They were lit with a similar expression of anxious interest and growing doubt. His own countenance was a study of conflicting and by



He showed two rolls of new crisp bills. His aspect changed. With a quick twist of his little, fat, awkward body, he threw himself lengthwise on the ground, and began tearing at the earth inside the hole, like a burrowing animal.

"I cannot be mistaken. Nothing will make me believe it is not here. It has simply been buried deeper than I thought. Ah! What did I tell you? See here! And see here!"

Bringing his hands into the full blaze of the light, he showed two rolls of new crisp bills.

"They were lying under half a foot of earth," said he, "but if they had been buried as deep as Granville Fuller's well, I'd have unearthed them."

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CHAPTER XVII.

MISS PAGE SUSPECTED.

A half hour later these men were all clustered with Dr. Talbot in the Zabel kitchen. Abel had rejoined them, and Sweetwater was telling his story with great earnestness and no little show of pride.

"Gentlemen, when I charge a young woman of respectable appearance and connections with such a revolting crime as murder, I do so with good reason, as I hope presently to make plain to you."

"Gentlemen, on the night and at the hour Agatha Webb was killed, I was playing with four other musicians in Mr. Sutherland's hallway. From the place where I sat I could see what went on in the parlor and also have a clear view of the passageway leading down to the garden door. As the dancing was going on in the parlor I naturally looked that way most, and this is how I came to note the eagerness with which during the first part of the evening Frederick Sutherland and Amabel Page came together in the quadrilles and country dances. Sometimes she spoke as she passed him and sometimes he answered, but not always, although he never failed to show he was pleased with her or would have been if something—perhaps it was his lack of confidence in her, she—had not stood in the way of a perfect understanding. She seemed to notice he did not always respond and after awhile showed less inclination to speak herself, though she did not fail to watch him and that intently. But she didn't watch him any more closely than I did her, though I little thought at the time what would come of my espionage. She wore a white dress and white shoes and was as coquettish and seductive as the evil one makes them. Suddenly I missed her. She was in the middle of the dance one minute and entirely out of it the next."

"Naturally I expected that she had slipped aside with Frederick Sutherland, but no, he was still in sight, but looking so pale and so abstracted I was sure the young miss was up to some sort of mischief. But what mischief? Watching and waiting, but no longer confining my attention to the parlor, I presently espied her stealing along the passageway. I have mentioned carrying a long cloak which she rolled up and hid behind the open door. Then she came back, humming a gay little song which didn't deceive me for a moment. 'Good!' thought I, 'she and that cloak will soon join company.' And they did. As we were playing the Harebell mazurka I again caught sight of her stealthy white figure in that distant doorway. Seizing the cloak, she

swapped it round her, and with one swift look backward, seen, I warrant, by no one but myself, she vanished in the outside dark. 'Now to note who follows her?' thought I. But no body followed her. This struck me as strange, and having a natural love for detective work, in spite of my devotion to the arts, I consulted the clock at the foot of the stairs, and noting that it was half past 11, scribbled the hour on the margin of my music, with the intention of seeing how long my lady would linger outside alone. Gentlemen, it was two hours before I saw her face again. How she got back into the house I do not know. It was not by the garden door, for my eye seldom left it; yet at or near half past 1 I heard her voice on the stair above me and saw her descend and melt into the crowd as if she had not been absent from it for more than five minutes. A half hour later I saw her with Frederick again. They were dancing, but not with the same spirit as before, and even while I watched them they separated. Now where was Miss Page during those two long hours? I think I know, and it is time I unburdened myself to the police."

"But first I must inform you of a small discovery I made while the dance was still in progress. Miss Page had come down stairs, as I have said, from what I now know to have been her own room. Her dress was, in all respects, the same as before, with one exception—her white slippers had been exchanged for blue ones. This seemed to show that they had been rendered unserviceable, or at least unsightly, by the walk she had taken. This in itself was not remarkable, nor would her peculiar escapade have made more than a temporary impression upon my curiosity if she had not afterward shown an unaccountable and extraordinary interest in the murder which had taken place in the town below during the very hours of her absence from Mr. Sutherland's ball. This, in consideration of her sex and her being a stranger to the person attacked, was remarkable, and, though perhaps I had no business to do what I did, I no sooner saw the house emptied of master and servants than I stole softly back, and climbed the stairs to her room. Had no good followed this intrusion, which, I am quite ready to acknowledge, was a trifle presumptuous, I should have held my peace in regard to it; but as I did make a discovery there which has, as I believe, an important bearing on this affair, I have forced myself to mention it. The lights in the house having been left burning, I had no difficulty in finding her apartment. I knew it by the fold-down scattered about. But I did not stop to look at them. I was on a search for her slippers, and presently I came upon them, thrust behind an old picture in the dimmest corner of the room. Taking them down, I examined them closely. They were not only soft, gentlemen, but dreadfully out and rubbed. In short, they were ruined; and, thinking that the young lady herself would be glad to be rid of them, I quietly put them into my pocket, and carried them to my own home. Abel has just been for them, so you can see them for yourselves, and, if your judgment coincides with mine, you will discover something more about them than mud."

Dr. Talbot, though he stared a little at the young man's confessed theft, took the slippers Abel was holding out and carefully turned them over. They were, as Sweetwater had said, grievously torn and soiled and showed, besides several deep earth stains, a mark or two of a bright red color quite unmistakable in character.

"Blood," declared the coroner. "There is no doubt about it. Miss Page was where blood was spilled last night."

"I have another proof against her," Sweetwater went on, in full enjoyment of his prominence among these men who, up till now, had barely recognized his existence. "When full of the suspicion that Miss Page had had a hand in the theft, if not the murder of Mrs. Webb, I hastened down to the scene of the tragedy, I met this young woman issuing from the front gate. She had just been making herself conspicuous by pointing out a trail of blood on the grass plot. Dr. Talbot, who was there, will remember how she looked on that occasion, but I doubt if he noticed how Abel here looked, or so much as remarked the faded flower the silly boy had stuck in his button-hole."

"I did not," ejaculated the coroner. "Yet that flower has a very important bearing on this case. He had found it, as he will tell you, on the floor near Batsy's skirts, and as soon as I saw it in his coat, I bade him take it out and keep it for gentlemen. It was a very uncommon flower, the like of which can only be found in this town in Mr. Sutherland's conservatory. I remember seeing such a one in Miss Page's hair, early in the evening. Have you that flower about you, Abel?"

Abel had, and being filled with importance, too, showed it to the doctor and to Mr. Fenton. It was withered and faded to hue, but it was unmistakably an orchid of the rarest description.

To be Continued.

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