

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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CHAPTER I.

"MURDER!"

THE dance was over. From the great house on the hill the guests had all departed, and only the musicians remained. As they filed out through the ample doorway, with their instruments under their arms, the first faint streak of early dawn became visible in the east. One of them, a lank, plain featured young man of ungainly aspect, but penetrating eye, called the attention of the others to it.

"Look!" said he. "There is the daylight! This has been a gay night for Sutherlandtown."

"Too zay," muttered another, starting aside as the slight figure of a young man coming from the house behind them rushed hastily by. "Why, who's that?"

As they one and all had recognized the person thus alluded to, no one answered till he had dashed out of the gate and disappeared in the woods on the other side of the road. Then they all spoke at once.

"It's Mr. Frederick!"

"He seems in a desperate hurry."

"He trod on my toes."

"Did you hear the words he was muttering as he went by?"

As only the last question was calculated to rouse an interest, it alone received attention.

"No; what were they? I heard him say something, but I did not catch the words."

"He wasn't talking to you or me, either, but I have ears that can hear an eye wink. He said, 'Thank God, this terrible night is over.' Think of that! After such a dance and such a spread, he calls this night terrible and thanks God that it is over. I thought he was one to enjoy this kind of thing more than most folks."

"So did I."

"And so did I."

The five musicians exchanged looks, then huddled in a group at the gate.

"He has quarreled with his sweetheart," suggested one.

"I'm not surprised at that," declared another, "I never thought it would be a match."

"Shame if it were!" muttered the ungainly youth who had spoken first.

As the subject of this comment was the son of the gentleman whose house they were just leaving they necessarily spoke low, but their tones were rife with curiosity and it was evident that the topic deeply interested them. One of the five who had not previously spoken now put in a word.

"I saw him when he first led out Miss Page to dance, and I saw him again when he stood up opposite her in the last quadrille, and I tell you, boys, there was a mighty deal of difference in the way he looked at her the last time from what he did the first. You wouldn't have thought him the same man. Reckless young fellows like him are not to be caught by dimples only. They want cash."

"Or family, at least, and she hasn't either. But what a pretty girl she is! Some fellow as rich as he and as well connected would be satisfied with her good looks alone."

"Good looks!" High scorn was observable in this exclamation, which was made by the young man who I have before characterized as ungainly. "I refuse to acknowledge that she has any good looks. On the contrary, I consider her plain."

"Oh, oh!" burst in protest from more than one mouth. "And why does she have every fellow in the room dangling after her, then?" asked the player on the yellow flageolet.

"But she hasn't a regular feature."

"What difference does that make when it isn't her features you notice, but herself?"

"I don't like her."

A laugh followed this.

"That won't trouble her, Sweetwater. Sutherland does, if you don't, and that's much more to the point. And he'll marry her yet. He can't help it. Why, she'd witch the devil into leading her to the altar if she took a notion to have him for her bridegroom."

"There would be consistency in that," muttered the fellow just addressed, "that Mr. Frederick!"

"Hush! There's some one on the doorstep. Why, it's she!"

They all glanced back. The graceful figure of a young girl dressed in white was to be seen leaning toward them from the open doorway. Behind her shone a blaze of light—the candles not having been yet extinguished in the hall—and against this brilliant background her slight form, with all its bewitching outlines, stood out in plain relief. There was an anxious bend to it, however, which none of them had ever observed in it before.

"Who was that?" she began in a high, almost strident voice, totally out of keeping with the sensuous curves of her strange, sweet face. But the question remained incomplete, as well as unanswered, for at that moment her attention, as well as that of the men lingering at the gate, was attracted by the sound of hurrying feet and confused cries coming up the hill.

"Murder, murder!" was the word shouted out by more than one harsh voice, and in another instant a dozen men and boys came rushing into sight in a state of such excitement that the

honored and so universally beloved, they to a man uttered a cry. Mrs. Webb! Why, it was impossible. Shouting in their turn for Mr. Sutherland, they all crowded forward.

"Not Mrs. Webb?" they protested. "Who could have the daring or the heart to kill her?" "God knows," answered a voice from the highway. "But she's dead—we've just seen her!"

"Then it's the old man's work," quavered a piping voice well known as that of the village shoemaker's. "I've always said he would turn on his best friend some day. 'Sylum's the best place for folks as has lost their wits!'"

But here a hand was put over his mouth, and the rest of the words became an inarticulate gurgle. Mr. Sutherland had just appeared on the porch, and these were not men to let their voices be heard in his presence.

He was a superb looking man, with an expression of mingled kindness and dignity that invariably awakened both awe and admiration in the spectator. No man in the country—I was going to say no woman—was more beloved, nor was any held in higher esteem. Yet he could not control his only son, as every one within ten miles of the hill well knew.

At this moment his face showed both pain and shock.

"What name are you shouting out there?" he brokenly demanded. "Agatha Webb?"

"Is Agatha Webb hurt?"

"Yes, sir, killed," repeated a half dozen voices at once. "We've just come from the house. All the town is up. Some say her husband did it."

"No, no," was Mr. Sutherland's decisive, though half inaudible response. "Philemon Webb might end his own life, but not Agatha's. It was the money!"

Here he caught himself up, and, raising his voice, addressed the crowd of villagers more directly.

"Wait," said he, "I will go back with you. Where is Frederick?" he demanded of such members of his own household as stood about him.

No one knew.

"I wish some one would find my son. I want him to go into town with me."

"He's over in the woods there," volunteered a voice from without.

"In the woods?" repeated the father in a surprised tone.

"Yes, sir, we all saw him go. Shall we sing out to him?"

"No, no; I will manage very well without him." And taking up his hat Mr. Sutherland stepped out again upon the porch.

Suddenly he stopped. A hand had been laid on his arm and an insinuating voice was murmuring in his ear:

"Do you mind if I go with you? I will make any trouble."

It was the same young lady we have seen before.

The old gentleman frowned, he who never frowned, and remarked shortly:

"A scene of murder is no place for women."

The face upturned to his remained unmoved.

"I think I will go," she quickly persisted. "I can easily mingle with the crowd."

He said no other word against it. Miss Page was under pay in his house,

and he found himself in a small hall with a staircase in front and an open door at the left. On the threshold of this open door a man stood, who at sight of him doffed his hat. Passing by this man, Mr. Sutherland entered the room beyond. A table spread with eatables met his view, beside which, in an attitude which struck him at the moment as peculiar, sat Philemon Webb, the well known master of the house.

Astonished at seeing his old friend in this room and in such a position, he was about to address him when Mr. Fenton stopped him.

"Wait," said he. "Take a look at poor Philemon before you disturb him. He was sitting just as you see him when we broke into the house a half hour ago, and we have let him be for reasons you can easily appreciate. Examine him closely, Mr. Sutherland; he won't notice it."

"But what ails him? Why does he sit crouched against the table? Is he hurt, too?"

"No; look at his eyes."

"Mr. Sutherland stopped and pushed aside the long gray locks that half concealed the countenance of his aged friend.

"Why," he cried startled, "they are closed! He isn't dead?"

"No; he is asleep."

"Asleep?"

"Yes, he is asleep when we came in and he is asleep yet. Some of the neighbors wanted to awake him, but I would not let them. His wits are not strong enough to bear a sudden shock."

"No, no, poor Philemon! But that he should sit sleeping here while she—what do these bottles mean and why are they not accustomed to eat in?"

"We don't know. It has not been eaten, you see. He has swallowed a

glass of port, but that is all. The other

glasses have had no wine in them, nor have the victuals been touched."

"Seats for three and only one occupied," murmured Mr. Sutherland. "Strange! Could he have expected guests?"

"It looks like it. I don't know that his wife allowed him such privileges. But she was always too good to him and I fear has paid for it with her life."

"Nonsense! He never killed her. Had his love been anything short of the worship it was, he stood in too much awe of her to lift his hand against her, even in his most demented moments."

"I don't trust men of uncertain wits," returned the other. "You have not noticed everything that is to be seen in this room."

Mr. Sutherland, recalled to his duty by these words, looked quickly about him. With the exception of the table and what was on and by it there was nothing else in the room. Naturally his glance returned to Philemon Webb.

"I don't see anything but this poor sleeping man," he began.

"Look at his sleeve,"

he did so and saw a woman's body hanging half out of an upper window. It hung limp, and the sight made him sick notwithstanding his threescore years of experience.

"Who's that?" he cried. "That's not Agatha Webb's head and shoulders, is it?"

"No, it's Betsy, the cook. She's dead too. We left her where we found her for the corner to see."

"But this is horrible!" murmured Mr. Sutherland. "Has there been a butcher here?"

As he uttered these words he felt another quick pressure on his arm. Looking down, he saw leaning against him the form of a young woman, but before he could address her she had started upright again and was moving on by the throng. It was Miss Page.

"It was the sight of this woman hanging from the window which first drew attention to the house," volunteered a man who was standing as a sort of guardian at the main gateway. "Some of the sailors' wives who had been to the wharfs to see their husbands off on the ship that sailed at daybreak saw it as they came up the lane on their way home and gave the alarm. Without that we might not yet have known what had happened."

"But Mrs. Webb?"

"Come in and see."

There was a board fence about the simple yard within which stood the humble house forever after to be pointed out as the scene of Sutherlandtown's most heartrending tragedy. In this fence was a gate, and through this gate now passed Mr. Sutherland and his would be companion, Miss Page. A path bordered by lilac bushes led the way to the house, the door of which stood wide open. As soon as Mr. Sutherland entered upon this path a man appeared from the house and came directly toward him. It was Amos Fenton, the constable.

"Ah, Mr. Sutherland," said he, "sad business, a very sad business! But what little girl have you there?"

"This is Miss Page, my housekeeper's niece. She would come. Inquisitiveness, the cause. I do not approve of it."

"Miss Page must remain on the doorstep. We allow no one inside excepting yourself," he said respectfully, in recognition of the fact that nothing of importance was ever undertaken in Sutherlandtown without the presence of Mr. Sutherland.

Miss Page courtesied, looking so bewitching in the fresh morning light that the tough old constable scratched his chin in grudging admiration. But he did not reconsider his determination. Seeing this, she accepted her defeat gracefully and moved aside to where the bushes offered her more or less protection from the curiosity of those about her. Meanwhile Mr. Sutherland had stepped into the house.

He found himself in a small hall with a staircase in front and an open door at the left. On the threshold of this open door a man stood, who at sight of him doffed his hat. Passing by this man, Mr. Sutherland entered the room beyond. A table spread with eatables met his view, beside which, in an attitude which struck him at the moment as peculiar, sat Philemon Webb, the well known master of the house.

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against my express instructions," asked the constable, who was of an irritable and suspicious nature. "She let the hood drop from her head and, turning, surveyed him with a slow smile. There was witchery in that smile sufficient to affect a much more cultivated and callous nature than his, and though he had been proof against it once he could not quite resist the effect of its repetition."

"I insisted upon entering," said she. "Don't blame the man. They did not want to use force against a woman." She had not a good voice and she knew it, but she covered up this defect by a choice of intonations that carried her lightest speech to the heart. Hard visaged Amos Fenton gave a grunt, which was as near an expression of approval as he ever gave to any one.

"Well, well," he growled, but not ill naturedly. "It's a morbid curiosity that brings you here. Better drop it, girl. It won't do you any good in the eyes of sensible people."

"Thank you," was her demure reply, her lips dimpling at the corners in a way to shock the sensitive Mr. Sutherland.

Glancing from her to the still outlines of the noble figure on the couch, he remarked with an air of mild reproach:

"I do not understand you, Miss Page. If this solemn sight has no power to stop your coquettish nothing can. As for your curiosity, it is both ill timed and unwomanly. Let me see you leave this house at once, Miss Page, and if in the few hours which must elapse before breakfast you can find time to pack your trunks, you will still further offend me."

"Oh, don't send me away. I entreat