

# The Mystery of Agatha Webb.

By Anna Katharine Green.

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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 Sutherland."

"Too gay," muttered another, staring 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 sweet heart," 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 ripe 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 month. "And why does she have every fellow in the room dangling after her, then?" asked the player on the yellow flagolet.

"But she isn'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 catch 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. "But, 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 panted out by more than one harsh voice, and in another instant dozen men and boys came rushing into sight in a state of such excitement that the musicians receded from the gate, and one of them went so far as to start back toward the house. As he did so he noticed a curious thing. The young woman whom they had all perceived standing in the door a moment before had vanished, yet she was known to profess the keenest curiosity of any in town.

"Murder, murder!" A terrible and unprecedented cry in this old, God fearing town. Then came in hoarse explanation from the jostling group as they stopped at the gate: "Mrs. Webb has been killed! Stabbed with a knife! Tell Mr. Sutherland!"

"Mrs. Webb?"

As the musicians heard this name, so

honored and so universally beloved, by 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 son who had"

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

"Wait," said he, "and 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 not 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."

She said not another word against it. Miss Page was under pay in his house,

"But that is incredible. Look at the way she lies! Hands crossed, eyes closed, as though made ready for her burial. Only loving hands could have done this. What does it mean?"

"It means Philemon; that is what it means, Philemon."

Mr. Sutherland shuddered, but said nothing. He was dumfounded by these evidences of a crazy man's work. Philemon Webb always seemed so harmless, though he had been failing in health for the last ten years.

"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 all this? 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 was asleep when we came in and he is asleep yet. Some of the neighbors wanted to awaken 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—but what do these bottles mean and this parade of supper in the room they were not accustomed to eat in?"

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

CHAPTER II.  
A BLOODY SLEEVE.

Sutherland was a seaport. The village, which was a small one, consisted of one long street running parallel with the coast and numerous cross streets running down from the hillside and ending on the wharfs. On one of the corners thus made stood the Webb house, with its front door on the main street and its side door on one of the hillside lanes. As the group of men and boys who had been in search of Mr. Sutherland entered this last mentioned lane they could pick out this house from all the others, as it was the only one in which a light was still burning. Mr. Sutherland lost no time in entering upon the scene of the tragedy. As his imposing figure

emerged from the darkness and paused

CHAPTER III.  
A MENTAL WRECK.

As they re-entered the larger room they were astonished to come upon Miss Page standing in the doorway. She was gazing at the recumbent figure of the dead woman, and for a moment seemed unconscious of their presence.

"How did you get in? Which of my men were weak enough to let you pass

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

"Seats for three and only one occupied," murmured Mr. Sutherland. "Strange! Could be 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 shudder notwithstanding his three-score years of experience.

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

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

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

As Mr. Sutherland became assured of this, he turned slightly pale and looked inquiringly at the two men who were intently watching him.

"This is bad," said he. "Any other marks of blood below stairs?"

"No. That one smear is all."

"Oh, Philemon!" burst from Mr. Sutherland in deep emotion. Then as he looked long and shudderingly at his friend he added slowly:

"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 Sutherland'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.

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

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No one knew.

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"It does not seem so, but one can never tell. Simple cottages like these often contain the most unlooked for surprises."

Mr. Sutherland thought of what this cottage did contain and scrutinized the constable closely. But the latter showed no discomposure.

"I cannot imagine a dagger being among its effects," he pursued. "Where was the body of Mrs. Webb lying when you came in?"

"Where you see it now. Nothing has been moved or changed."

She was found here, on this lounge, in the same position in which we see her now?"

"Yes, sir."

"But that is incredible. Look at the way she lies! Hands crossed, eyes closed, as though made ready for her burial. Only loving hands could have done this. What does it mean?"

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