

Agatha Webb

by

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Book I. The Purple Orchid

I. A CRY ON THE HILL

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, on their way home, 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 gay," 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 recognised 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 any interest, it alone received attention.

"No; what were they? I heard him say something, but I failed to catch the words."

"He wasn't talking to you, or to me either, for that matter; but I have ears that can hear an eye wink. He said: 'Thank God, this night of horror is over!' Think of that! After such a dance and such a spread, he calls the night horrible and thanks God that it is over. I thought he was the very man to enjoy this kind of thing."

"So did I."

"And so did I."

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

"He has quarrelled 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 conducted himself toward her in the beginning of the evening and the last. 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! Many a 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 whom I have before characterised 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 flageolet.

"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. "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.

"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 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 a dozen men and boys came rushing into sight in a state of such excitement that the five musicians recoiled 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 possess the keenest curiosity of any one 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 honoured 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. "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. I--"

But here a hand was put over his mouth, and the rest of the words was lost in an inarticulate gurgle. Mr. Sutherland had just appeared on the porch.

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, or held in higher esteem. Yet he could not control his only son, as everyone 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, "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 quietly persisted. "I can easily mingle with the crowd."

He said not another word against it. Miss Page was under pay in his house, but for the last few weeks no one had undertaken to contradict her. In the interval since her first appearance on the porch, she had exchanged the light dress in which she had danced at the ball, for a darker and more serviceable one, and perhaps this token of her determination may have had its influence in silencing him. He joined the crowd, and together they moved down- hill. This was too much for the servants of the house. One by one they too left the house till it stood absolutely empty. Jerry snuffed out the candles and shut the front door, but the side entrance stood wide open, and into this entrance, as the last footstep died out on the hillside, passed a slight and resolute figure. It was that of the musician who had questioned Miss Page's attractions.

II. ONE NIGHT'S WORK

Sutherlandtown was a seaport. The village, which was a small one, consisted of one long street and numerous cross streets running down from the hillside and ending on the wharves. 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 tragedy. As his imposing figure emerged from the darkness and paused on the outskirts of the crowd that was blocking up every entrance to the house, a murmur of welcome went up, after which a way was made for him to the front door.

But before he could enter, some one plucked him by the sleeve.

"Look up!" whispered a voice into his ear.

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."

"No, that's Batsy, the cook. She's dead as well as her mistress. We left her where we found her for the coroner 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 with 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 wharves 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 have known to this hour 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, followed by his would-be companion, Miss Page. A path bordered by lilac bushes led up to the house, the door of which stood wide open. As soon as Mr. Sutherland entered upon this path a man approached him from the doorway. 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 Sutherland town without the presence of Mr. Sutherland.

Miss Page curtsied, 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.

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. When we broke into the house a half-hour ago he was sitting just as you see him now, 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 stooped and pushed aside the long grey 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 neighbours wanted to wake 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 a room they were 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 set for three and only one occupied," murmured Mr. Sutherland. "Strange! Could he have expected guests?"

"It looks like it. I didn'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 himself 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."

Mr. Sutherland, with a start, again bent down. The arm of his old friend lay crooked upon the table, and on its blue cotton sleeve there was a smear which might have been wine, but which was-- blood.

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:

"He has been in the room where she was killed; so much is evident. But that he understood what was done there I cannot believe, or he would not be sleeping here like a log. Come, let us go up-stairs."

Fenton, with an admonitory gesture toward his subordinate, turned directly toward the staircase. Mr. Sutherland followed him, and they at once proceeded to the upper hall and into the large front room which had been the scene of the tragedy.

It was the parlour or sitting-room of this small and unpretentious house. A rag carpet covered the floor and the furniture was of the plainest kind, but the

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