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THE PURPLE ORCHID

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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.

2

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 woman who lay outstretched on the stiff, old-fashioned lounge opposite the door was far from being in accord with the homely type of her surroundings. Though the victim of a violent death, her face and form, both of a beauty seldom to be found among women of any station, were so majestic in their calm repose, that Mr. Sutherland, accustomed as he was to her noble appearance, experienced a shock of surprise that found vent in these words:

"Murdered! she? You have made some mistake, my friends. Look at her face!"

But even in the act of saying this his eyes fell on the blood which had dyed her cotton dress and he cried:

"Where was she struck and where is the weapon which has made this ghastly wound?"

"She was struck while standing or sitting at this table," returned the constable, pointing to two or three drops of blood on its smooth surface. "The weapon we have not found, but the wound shows that it was inflicted by a three-sided dagger."

"A three-sided dagger?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know there was such a thing in town. Philemon could have had no dagger."

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

"I cannot imagine a dagger being among its effects," declared Mr. Sutherland. "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?"

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

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

“But” cried Mr. Sutherland, suddenly rousing, “there is another victim. I saw old woman Batsy hanging from a window ledge, dead.”

“Yes, she is in this other room; but there is no wound on Batsy.”

“How was she killed, then?”

“That the doctors must tell us.”

Mr. Sutherland, guided by Mr. Fenton’s gesture, entered a small room opening into the one in which they stood. His attention was at once attracted by the body of the woman he had seen from below, lying half in and half out of the open window. That she was dead was evident; but, as Mr. Fenton had said, no wound was to be seen upon her, nor were there any marks of blood on or about the place where she lay.

“This is a dreadful business,” groaned Mr. Sutherland, “the worst I have ever had anything to do with. Help me to lift the woman in; she has been long enough a show for the people outside.”

There was a bed in this room (indeed, it was Mrs. Webb’s bedroom), and upon this poor Batsy was laid. As the face came uppermost both gentlemen started and looked at each other in amazement. The expression of terror and alarm which it showed was in striking contrast to the look of exaltation to be seen on the face of her dead mistress.

3

The Empty Drawer

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 was weak enough to let you pass, 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. "Do not blame the men; 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 anyone.

"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 reproof:

"I do not understand you, Miss Page. If this solemn sight has no power to stop your coquetries, 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 farther oblige me."

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

It was a cry from her inner heart, which she probably regretted, for she instantly sought to cover up her inadvertent self-betrayal by a submissive bend of the head and a step backward. Neither Mr. Fenton nor Mr. Sutherland seemed to hear the one or see the other, their attention having returned to the more serious matter in hand.

"The dress which our poor friend wears shows her to have been struck before retiring," commented Mr. Sutherland, after another short survey of Mrs. Webb's figure. "If Philemon—"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the voice of the young man who had been left in the hall, "the lady is listening to what you say. She is still at the head of the stairs."

"She is, is she!" cried Fenton, sharply, his admiration for the fascinating stranger having oozed out at his companion's rebuff. "I will soon show her—" But the words melted into thin air as he reached the door. The young girl had

disappeared, and only a faint perfume remained in the place where she had stood.

"A most extraordinary person," grumbled the constable, turning back, but stopping again as a faint murmur came up from below.

"The gentleman is waking," called up a voice whose lack of music was quite perceptible at a distance.

With a bound Mr. Fenton descended the stairs, followed by Mr. Sutherland.

Miss Page stood before the door of the room in which sat Philemon Webb. As they reached her side, she made a little bow that was half mocking, half deprecatory, and slipped from the house. An almost unbearable sensation of incongruity vanished with her, and Mr. Sutherland, for one, breathed like a man relieved.

"I wish the doctor would come," Fenton said, as they watched the slow lifting of Philemon Webb's head. "Our fastest rider has gone for him, but he's out Portchester way, and it may be an hour yet before he can get here."

"Philemon!"

Mr. Sutherland had advanced and was standing by his old friend's side.

"Philemon, what has become of your guests? You've waited for them here until morning."

The old man with a dazed look surveyed the two plates set on either side of him and shook his head.

"James and John are getting proud," said he, "or they forget, they forget."

James and John. He must mean the Zabels, yet there were many others answering to these names in town. Mr. Sutherland made another effort.

"Philemon, where is your wife? I do not see any place set here for her!"

"Agatha's sick, Agatha's cross; she don't care for a poor old man like me."

“Agatha’s dead and you know it,” thundered back the constable, with ill-judged severity. “Who killed her? tell me that. Who killed her?”

A sudden quenching of the last spark of intelligence in the old man’s eye was the dreadful effect of these words. Laughing with that strange gurgle which proclaims an utterly irresponsible mind, he cried:

“The pussy cat! It was the pussy cat. Who’s killed? I’m not killed. Let’s go to Jericho.”

Mr. Sutherland took him by the arm and led him up-stairs. Perhaps the sight of his dead wife would restore him. But he looked at her with the same indifference he showed to everything else.

“I don’t like her calico dresses,” said he. “She might have worn silk, but she wouldn’t. Agatha, will you wear silk to my funeral?”

The experiment was too painful, and they drew him away. But the constable’s curiosity had been roused, and after they had found some one to take care of him, he drew Mr. Sutherland aside and said:

“What did the old man mean by saying she might have worn silk? Are they better off than they seem?” Mr. Sutherland closed the door before replying.

“They are rich,” he declared, to the utter amazement of the other. “That is, they were; but they may have been robbed; if so, Philemon was not the wretch who killed her. I have been told that she kept her money in an old-fashioned cupboard. Do you suppose they alluded to that one?”

He pointed to a door set in the wall over the fireplace, and Mr. Fenton, perceiving a key sticking in the lock, stepped quickly across the floor and opened it. A row of books met his eyes, but on taking them down a couple of drawers were seen at the back.

“Are they locked?” asked Mr. Sutherland.

“One is and one is not.”

"Open the one that is unlocked."

Mr. Fenton did so.

"It is empty," said he.

Mr. Sutherland cast a look toward the dead woman, and again the perfect serenity of her countenance struck him.

"I do not know whether to regard her as the victim of her husband's imbecility or of some vile robber's cupidity. Can you find the key to the other drawer?"

"I will try."

"Suppose you begin, then, by looking on her person. It should be in her pocket, if no marauder has been here."

"It is not in her pocket."

"Hanging to her neck, then, by a string?"

"No; there is a locket here, but no key. A very handsome locket, Mr. Sutherland, with a child's lock of golden hair—"

"Never mind, we will see that later; it is the key we want just now."

"Good heavens!"

"What is it?"

"It is in her hand; the one that lies underneath."

"Ah! A point, Fenton."

"A great point."

"Stand by her, Fenton. Don't let anyone rob her of that key till the coroner comes, and we are at liberty to take it."

"I will not leave her for an instant."

"Meanwhile, I will put back these books."

He had scarcely done so when a fresh arrival occurred. This time it was one of the village clergymen.

4

The Full Drawer

This gentleman had some information to give. It seems that at an early hour of this same night he had gone by this house on his way home from the bedside of a sick parishioner. As he was passing the gate he was run into by a man who came rushing out of the yard, in a state of violent agitation. In this man's hand was something that glittered, and though the encounter nearly upset them both, he had not stopped to utter an apology, but stumbled away out of sight with a hasty but infirm step, which showed he was neither young nor active. The minister had failed to see his face, but noticed the ends of a long beard blowing over his shoulder as he hurried away.

Philemon was a clean-shaven man.

Asked if he could give the time of this encounter, he replied that it was not far from midnight, as he was in his own house by half- past twelve.

"Did you glance up at these windows in passing?" asked Mr. Fenton.

"I must have; for I now remember they were both lighted."

"Were the shades up?"

"I think not. I would have noticed it if they had been."

“How were the shades when you broke into the house this morning?” inquired Mr. Sutherland of the constable.

“Just as they are now; we have moved nothing. The shades were both down —one of them over an open window.”

“Well, we may find this encounter of yours with this unknown man a matter of vital importance, Mr. Crane.”

“I wish I had seen his face.”

“What do you think the object was you saw glittering in his hand?”

“I should not like to say; I saw it but an instant.”

“Could it have been a knife or an old-fashioned dagger?”

“It might have been.”

“Alas! poor Agatha! That she, who so despised money, should fall a victim to man’s cupidity! Unhappy life, unhappy death! Fenton, I shall always mourn for Agatha Webb.”

“Yet she seems to have found peace at last,” observed the minister. “I have never seen her look so contented.” And leading Mr. Sutherland aside, he whispered: “What is this you say about money? Had she, in spite of appearances, any considerable amount? I ask, because in spite of her humble home and simple manner of living, she always put more on the plate than any of her neighbours. Besides which, I have from time to time during my pastorate received anonymously certain contributions, which, as they were always for sick or suffering children—”

“Yes, yes; they came from her, I have no doubt of it. She was by no means poor, though I myself never knew the extent of her means till lately. Philemon was a good business man once; but they evidently preferred to live simply, having no children living—”

“They have lost six, I have been told.”