

An Agacella Or

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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GEORGE STAFFORD HAD BEEN—BELIEVE him—from his infancy a most unique and interesting personality. But if you will believe me instead, he had been nothing of the sort.

I know very well the conclusion at which you will immediately arrive when I say that George Stafford was phlegmatic. But you will be wrong. In these days of extreme specialization, even our adjectives are not free; it has come to the place where nothing can properly be called occult except a science, nothing can be high—in the figurative sense—except ideals, and no one can be phlegmatic except a Dutchman. Nevertheless, in spite of the facts that he was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, that he spoke nothing but United States (being as ignorant of English as he was of Sanskrit), and that his father had made some half a million dollars solely through the benevolent protection of the New York Custom House, George Stafford was phlegmatic. More than that, he was unimaginative, he considered

billiards a rather violent form of exercise, and, if the truth be told, he was even a trifle stupid.

To let you at once into the secrets of George's mind and character, it is only necessary to say that he was spending his vacation at the Hotel Thiersberry, in the Berkshires. With the single exception of an orchestra chair in a New York theater, the Hotel Thiersberry is admitted to be the very dullest spot in all America. It is eminently proper, fearfully expensive, and in the last degree exclusive. "Exclusive" is a terrible word, and the Hotel Thiersberry is a terrible place. And it was here that George Stafford was spending his vacation.

I use the term "vacation" merely for the sake of politeness. For, consulting my dictionary, I find that a vacation is an intermission of stated employment, and it would be absurd to imagine George as consorting with anything so vulgar as stated employment. Not that he was spiritualistic or esthetic or artistic; work—or anything else—could never have disturbed George's soul; but it would most certainly have disturbed his body. And yet he had an excuse—such as it was—for his use of the word "vacation." For, having existed through thirty years in a state of habitual and supreme idleness, George had been persuaded by a friend to put on at least the semblance of endeavor, and had submitted to the painting of a sign, "Rainier & Stafford, Architects," on the door of a modest suite on the fifty-eighth floor of a downtown skyscraper. The check which the elder Stafford drew each month to help pay George's share of the office expenses was surprisingly small, everything considered.

It was through the influence of Rainier, his partner, that George had been permitted to enter the jealous portals of the Hotel Thiersberry; for the House of Stafford, though favorably known on Mercer Street, was beyond the pale socially. It had not yet arrived. George, though idle, had never been fashionably idle; indeed, that is an art that is seldom acquired as early as the second generation. Thus it was that upon registering at the Hotel Thiersberry George had found himself entering on an entirely new phase of existence.

It was not at all the same as an ordinary hotel. To mention only one peculiarity, George found soon after his arrival, on going into the library to write a letter to his partner, that there was no letter paper. On investigation, he learned that at the Hotel Thiersberry one was supposed to be desirous of using one's own letter paper. George had none, and he distinctly desired to write a letter; in fact, now that he came to think of it, several of them.

The third morning of his vacation found George in the library, writing letters. He had bought the paper the day before, in a shop in the village, five miles away. He was half-ashamed to use it, and it was indeed very unusual paper; but the shop had contained nothing else that was even possible. This that he had finally chosen was tinted a magnificent purple, and there was embossed in flaming gold at the top of each sheet the figure of an animal that greatly resembled a cow, holding in its hoofs what appeared to be a bundle of kindling wood. It was one of those atrocities which you may see in any stationery shop window; and even George, deficient in taste as he was, had been almost tempted to buy a linen tablet instead.

George was writing on the large mahogany table in the center of the library. Seated opposite him was the lank and angular Mrs. Gerard-Lee, copying a list of

synonyms from Graves; for Mrs. Gerard-Lee was an authority. Over by a window were young Mr. Amblethwaite and Miss Lorry Carson, engaged in a hot dispute concerning the proper shape of legs, it being understood that the legs were supposed to be attached to a Pelton saddler; while in front of the door leading to the veranda were gathered a half-dozen old females representing at least twelve hundred pounds avoirdupois and about twelve million sterling. "How Mother would enjoy this!" thought George. And he wrote:

I just overheard Mrs. Scott-Wickersham say that she returned to America a month later than usual in order to attend the Duchess of Wimbledon's masque ball. And yet she doesn't seem—

At this moment George became aware of the fact that someone was standing at his right elbow. Turning, he beheld a middle-aged lady of impressive build and a somewhat florid countenance peering through a lorgnette at the sheets of letter paper lying before him. At his movement, her gaze slowly traveled from the paper to his upturned face.

"Sir," she said, "what is your name?"

"What?" said George, taken aback. "My—oh, yes, my name—of course, certainly, my name." Then, somewhat recovering himself, "Stafford is my name," he said with dignity.

His questioner regarded him with a look of triumph. "It is he," she said to herself, aloud. "I am sure of it, since he can't remember his name." Whereupon she winked at George distinctly, even painfully.

Now, George had learned in the last three days that one must be willing to undergo a certain amount of humiliation when one is breaking into the Hotel Thiersberry. But to have a strange lady stand before you and make remarks about you to your face and wink at you was too much. He opened his mouth to protest, but before he could speak, the lady continued. "Mr. Stafford," she said, "I am Mrs. Gordon Wheeler, of Lenox; and this is my daughter... Cecily, Mr. Stafford."

Whatever protest George had decided to utter was drowned in amazement as Mrs. Gordon Wheeler stepped aside to make way for her daughter. For the first time in quite ten years he became conscious of the blood in his veins. While he stood half-dazed by the vision of loveliness disclosed by Mrs. Wheeler's timely eclipse, Cecily, her cheeks a delightful rosy pink, stepped up to him with outstretched hands.

"Mr. Stafford," she said in a low, sweet voice. And then she stopped, as if finding it impossible to express her feelings in words.

"My dear girl," said George, taking the hands and holding on to them, "if you will sit in this chair for a few minutes, till I finish my letter, I shall be ready to talk to you. I trust your mother sleeps in the afternoon?"

"Good heavens!" said Mrs. Wheeler. "Here I am with an unmarried daughter, and the man accuses me of sleeping! My dear sir, it is impossible. In these days of the vulgar competition of the *nouveau riche*, one must be constantly on one's guard. However, I often close my eyes."

"I am sure you do," said George approvingly; and then, under his breath, "Goodness knows they need it!"

"You will eat at our table?" asked Mrs. Wheeler.

"Certainly," said George, "and thank you."

After Mrs. Wheeler had gone, it took George a full hour to finish the letter to his mother. Within two minutes, Cecily, seated beside him, became impatient and began lassoing the toe of her slipper with the cord of her handbag; and George, wanting an excuse to gaze at the slipper, which was worth it, offered a wager that she couldn't do it once in ten.

"That is very silly," said Cecily, "as I have been walking and am covered with dust."

"My dear girl—" began George, embarrassed.

"You called me that before," Cecily interrupted, "and I don't like it. And now, if you don't mind, I shall read while you finish your letter." But she raised her eyes every few seconds to see if George was through writing, which accounts for the fact that he spoiled four sheets of the wonderfully embossed paper with blots, and found himself writing upside down on the fifth.

The early afternoon found George and Cecily together in a canoe on the lake in front of the hotel. The water was still and crystal clear, save where here and there a leaping trout or bass disturbed its surface. Above their heads the overhanging boughs swayed gently back and forth with the sinuous grace of an Indian punkah; and the water trickled from the up-sprung leaves with a soothing, continuous music. George, leaning back contentedly, lit a cigarette—his fifth in half an hour—and blew caressing rings around the neck of a greedy swan.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get overheated?" said Cecily sarcastically.

"No," said George, in innocent surprise. "It's perfectly safe here in the shade. Really, I'm quite cool."

Cecily sat up straight and regarded him with speechless indignation. "Do you think," she finally demanded, "that I came out in this boat to sit and watch you smoke? Look at that!"—pointing across the lake, where another canoe could be seen shooting along the father shore. "They started after we did. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Take me back to the hotel."

At this command George sat up and regarded his companion with surprise. "What the dickens have I done?" he demanded. "What's the trouble?"

"The trouble is," said Cecily severely, "that this is a canoe and not a houseboat. It's supposed to move. This swaying motion which I experience whenever you shift to a more comfortable position is no doubt very delightful, but I can get the same effect in a rocking chair, where there is no danger of being spilled into the water at every—"

"Do you mean," George interrupted, "that you want to cross the lake?"

"I do," said Cecily decidedly.

The young man sat up again, this time quite erect, and surveyed his companion with unfeigned astonishment. "Good heavens!" he said. "What for? Look at that!"—pointing to the float at the bottom of the steps leading to the hotel. It was quite two hundred feet away. "Haven't we come all the way from there to here? I know we drifted, but we came, didn't we? Anyway, why should we want to get anywhere? I don't see why you want to go so fast."

Cecily regarded him with unmixed contempt. "Very well," she said finally. "If you will hand me that paddle, I shall return to the hotel. I suppose I must take you too, since you're too heavy to throw overboard. Give me the paddle, please."

At last George was aroused. Now, there was not less than two hundred pounds of George; and a mass of two hundred pounds, when once aroused, can do almost anything with a canoe. Within ten seconds of the commencement of the young man's unwonted and sudden activity, the canoe was resting on the surface of the lake bottom upwards, with Cecily clinging desperately on one end, and George on the other.

"I *asked* you to hand me the paddle," said Cecily in chilling tones.

George glared at her across the shiny bottom. "Here it is," said he grimly, reaching for it as it floated by some two feet away.

"Be careful!" screamed Cecily; whereupon George, losing his hold on the canoe, floundered frantically about like a young whale, causing Cecily's end, with Cecily attached, to sink some four or five feet into the lake. When she emerged, dripping with water and pink with rage, George had again caught hold of the canoe, and was trying to hold on to the paddle and wipe the water from his eyes with one hand.

"I suppose," said Cecily, with withering contempt, "that you can swim?"

"I can," said George, "but I hate to."

"I honestly believe that, if I could, you would let me tow you ashore."

"No-o"—doubtfully. "But if you could go to the hotel and get someone to fetch a boat—"

Cecily was speechless. Without another word, she gave the canoe a push against George's breast, and started swimming toward the float with one hand, guiding her cargo with the other. George floated calmly on his back, eyeing the performance with admiring approval. By virtue of his position, he arrived at the float first; and, clambering upon it, he pulled first Cecily, and then the canoe, out after him.

"That was a jolly ducking, wasn't it?" he said pleasantly.

During the week that followed, George Stafford was subjected, for the first time in his life, to discipline. Far from being offended at his willingness to be towed ashore, Cecily seemed to take an even deeper interest in him, and lost no time in undertaking his reformation. After many attempts, she found his wits incapable of exercise; but she had less difficulty with his arms and legs. By the end of the week he presented almost an athletic appearance, though it is true that he was eternally out of breath.

Behold him, then, on a Friday afternoon, dressed in flannels and batting wildly at a tennis ball which Cecily always managed to send just beyond his reach. George's flannels were not immaculate—he tumbled too often in his vain lunges after the ball—his face was dripping with perspiration, and his collar had somewhat the appearance of a lettuce salad. Cecily stopped suddenly with her racket uplifted ready to serve, and began to laugh.

"What's the matter?" her opponent demanded.

"Nothing," said Cecily, "only—" and then she laughed again.

"Look a' here," said George hotly, "if you think—"

"But I don't. I can't. Are you tired?"

“No!”—indignantly.

“Well, I am. Besides, I want to talk. I’ve just thought of something I want to tell you.”

“What is it?” asked George, after they had walked over to a tree and seated themselves in the shade. He was lying flat on his back, with a cigarette between his lips, blinking stupidly at a fleecy, puffed-up cloud that showed through a rift in the leaves. Cecily, seated beside him, was idly stuffing the pocket of his shirt with grass. When she spoke it was in a slow, impressive tone.

“Mamma suspects,” said she.

George turned and looked at her uneasily. “Suspects what?”

“Why,” said Cecily, embarrassed, “don’t you know? Our—my—us.”

“Oh!” said George, in a tone of relief. Then, raising himself to his elbow in irritation, “I don’t like people who suspect,” he declared. “It’s uncomfortable, and it’s dangerous, and it’s bad form. Now, I never suspect anyone. Why should she?”

“Perhaps she saw us.”

“When?”

“Last night. You remember you kissed me good night on the veranda, and then followed me up to the hall and—”

“All right,” said George; “that settles it. I’m through. If every time you turn around—”

“Don’t be silly,” Cecily interrupted impatiently. “You know we’ve got to tell her.”

“My dear girl,” said George, “we have nothing to do with it. It’s you. You pulled me ashore. You made me play tennis. You called me George. And now—it’s up to you.”

“But I’ve tried, and I can’t. I really can’t.”

“Very well,” said George. “Then, we’ll have to call it off. Rather than face that—your mother, I’ll go away from here and never see you again. You’re killing me, anyway. Look at that sun! I’ve been out in it for three hours, when I should have been asleep. I’ve done nothing but work ever since I met you. I wake up in the morning all ready for a good rest, and here you are at the door loaded down with paddles and rods and lines. You can’t even let the fish alone. And if you think for a minute that I—”

“All right,” said Cecily. “I’ll tell her. But you’ll have to be with me.”

Accordingly, nine o’clock of that evening found a young man and a girl walking hand in hand down the corridor in the Hotel Thiersberry which led to the apartments of Mrs. Gordon Wheeler. They walked slowly, even timidly. As they passed an elevator shaft, the young man might have been observed glancing at it longingly; whereupon the girl tightened her grasp on his hand and hurried her step.

The loud bang of a door stopped them halfway down the hall. Then came heavy footsteps; and they stood still, hesitating, while the ponderous form of Mrs. Gordon Wheeler bore down upon them from the direction of her rooms.

“There you are!” exclaimed Mrs. Wheeler, in the tone of one who has made an important, if not wholly pleasing, discovery.

“We are, indeed,” agreed George, with admirable presence of mind.

Mrs. Wheeler paused, regarding the pair sternly with set lips, then pointed silently to the door of her rooms.

"We can't talk here," she said.

"Now," she continued, after they were seated inside the apartment, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Mrs. Wheeler," said George, "in view of the eloquence of your eyes, I am silent. I am sure there is something you wish to say to me."

"Young man, are you entirely without morals?"

"I hope so. They are inconvenient. Have I ever given you reason to doubt it?" demanded George.

"Don't be funny," Mrs. Wheeler said sternly. "This is no laughing matter. Don't try to be witty, sir."

"He won't, Mamma," put in Cecily. "I can promise you that."

"Be silent, child! You don't know what you've escaped," said her mother. "As for you"—turning to George—"what do you think of this?"

George took the slip—a newspaper clipping—and read it through. "Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"Of course you don't understand it," said Mrs. Wheeler sarcastically. "I am surprised—I am really surprised—at your shamelessness. Listen." She read aloud from the newspaper clipping:

"The Earl of Woodstock, who has been staying since early July at the Severance villa in Newport, is reported to have retreated to a hotel in the Berkshires for a month's rest. He is preserving a strict incognito, having been advised by his physicians to obtain absolute quiet, if possible."

"Well," said George, "it's a good thing for the Earl that Cecily didn't get hold of him."

Mrs. Wheeler, ignoring him, walked to her writing desk and took from the top thereof a large book bound in red leather.

"That," she said, pointing to the clipping she had just read, "was in the *Herald* two weeks ago. It naturally led me to investigate, since Cecily and I also had arranged to come to the Berkshires, and among other information I found the following"—reading aloud from the book:

"Woodstock, Earl of, and Baron Dynely of Aldingbourne, county Oxford, in England; an agecella or, pied sable, armed, unguled, and bearing rods. *Virtus dedit, cura servabit.*"

"Now," said Mrs. Wheeler, closing the book and dropping it on the table with a bang that caused Cecily to jump clear out of her chair, "what do you think of that?"

"Fine," said George approvingly. "Quite interesting. What does it mean?"

"It means that you're an impostor," said Mrs. Wheeler, glaring at him. "But, thank God, I've found you out in time! One week after that notice appeared in the *Herald* I walked into the library of this hotel. What did I see? I saw a fat, overfed, and foolish-looking young man writing letters. Looking closer, I saw that the paper he was using bore a crest consisting of an agacella or, armed, and bearing rods."

"It was nothing of the sort," said George hotly. "It was a cow getting ready to light a fire."

“Don’t interrupt,” said Mrs. Wheeler. “Don’t you think I know an agacella when I see one? I asked the young man his name. It took him quite two minutes to think of it. On questioning him further, I discovered that he was completely an ass. The conclusion was inevitable: it was the Earl of Woodstock!”

“It was nothing of the sort!” said George again, indignantly. “It was me!”

“Of course,” Mrs. Wheeler went on, again ignoring him, “I immediately introduced him to my daughter. Cecily—dear child—did her part nobly. She became your constant companion. You became inseparable. And just as I was preparing to send to London to find out what repairs were needed at your town house, I look over my evening’s mail, and I find—this!” She snatched up a newspaper from a heap on the desk and read aloud from its columns:

“The Earl of Woodstock, who has been taking a much-needed rest at the Hope cottage in the Berkshires, has returned to the Severance villa at Newport.”

“Now,” said Mrs. Wheeler, pointing an accusing finger at George, “who are you?”

“That was the first question you asked me,” said George. “Are you going to begin all over again? Because if you are—” He rose and picked up his hat.

“No, you don’t,” said Mrs. Wheeler grimly, getting between him and the door. “You wait till I’m through with you.”

“George!” cried Cecily. “Are you going to leave me?”

George, incapable of the exertion required to stand and talk at the same time, reseated himself.

“Cecily,” said he, “you ask too much of me. I could forgive you anything but your choice of a mother. That was your great mistake. As it is, we must part. I shall never see you again. The fact that we are married makes no difference.”

“Married!” shrieked Mrs. Wheeler, dropping upon a divan and clutching wildly at the air.

“Yes, married,” said George calmly. “Married by a fool of a parson in the village yonder. Cecily has won me. She had rather a hard time of it, and so did I. I’m completely tired out. The truth is, I was in a state of utter exhaustion, and didn’t realize what I was doing. I was in no condition to resist.”

Mrs. Wheeler arose, trembling, resting her hand on her bosom tragically. “Mr. Stafford,” she said, “this is incredible. I can scarcely believe my ears. As for you, Cecily, you shall hear from me; but not now—not tonight. I am inexpressibly shocked. My nerves are completely upset. Tomorrow we shall talk the matter over and do the best we can with this awful mess. Good night.” She walked falteringly to the door of her bedroom and disappeared within.

“George,” said Cecily, walking over to him and taking his hands in her own, “do you love me?”

“Of course I do,” said George. “Haven’t I proved it?”

Cecily stopped and kissed his cheek. “I don’t mind it a bit because you’re not an earl, dear,” she said tenderly. “You’re stupid enough to be one.”

