

LOST MAN'S PLANE.

A SECOND EPIQUE IN THE LIFE OF AMELIA BUTTERWORTH BY ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

CHAPTER I.

Ever since my fortunate—or shall I say unfortunate, connection with that famous case of murder in Gramercy park I have had it intimated to me by many of my friends—and by innumerable acquaintances—that no woman who had met with such success in detective work would ever be satisfied with a single display of her powers and that sooner or later I would find myself again at work upon some other case of striking peculiarities.

As vanity has never been my foible, and as, moreover, I never have and never would be likely to forsake the plain path marked out for my sex at any other call than that of duty, I invariably responded to these insinuations by an affable but incredulous smile, striving to excuse their presumption by remembering their ignorance of my nature and the very excellent reasons I had for my one notable interference in the police affairs of New York city.

Besides, though I appeared to be resting quietly, if not in entire contentment, on my laurels, I was not so utterly removed from the old atmosphere of crime and its detection as the world in general considered me. Mr. Gryce still visited me; not on business, of course, but as a friend, and a man for whom I had some regard, and naturally our conversation was not always confined to the weather or even to city politics, provocative as the latter subject is of controversy between all right thinking men and women just now.

Not that he ever betrayed any of the secrets of the office or even any of his own—oh, no; that would have been too much to expect—but he did sometimes mention some of the outward aspects of some celebrated case, and though I never ventured upon advice—I know too much for that, I hope—I found my wits more or less exercised by a conversation from which he expected to gain something without acknowledging it, and I to give something without appearing to be conscious of the fact.

I was therefore satisfied in my mind and was finding life pleasant and full of interest when suddenly I had no right to expect it, and I do not blame myself for not expecting it or for holding my head so high at the prognostications of my friends an opportunity came for a direct exercise of my detective powers in a line seemingly so laid out for me by Providence that I felt I would be slighting the powers above if I refused to enter it, though now I see that the line was laid out for me by Mr. Gryce and that I was obeying anything but the call of duty in embracing it.

But this is not explicit. Let me tell the whole from the beginning. One night Mr. Gryce came to my house looking older and more feeble than usual. He was engaged in a perplexing case, he said, and missed his early hour and persistence. Would I like to hear about it? It was not in the line of his usual work, yet it had points—and well—it would do him good to talk about it to a non-professional who was capable of sympathizing with its baffling and worrisome features and yet would never have to be told to hold her peace.

I ought to have been on my guard. I ought to have known the old fox well enough to feel certain that when he went so manifestly out of his way to take me into his confidence he did it for a purpose it would be well enough for me to understand before placing too great stress on his disabilities, but Jove nods now and then—or so I have been assured by what should be considered as unimpeachable authority—and if Jove has ever been caught napping surely Amelia Butterworth may be pardoned for one such inconsistency.

"It is not a city crime," Mr. Gryce went on to explain, and here he was base enough to sigh. "At my time of life that is an important and a far from desirable consideration. It is no longer a simple matter for me to pack up a valise and go off to some distant village, way up in the mountains perhaps, where comforts are few and secrecy an impossibility. Comforts have become indispensable to my threescore years and ten, and secrecy—well, if ever there was a case where one needs to go softly, it is this one, as you will see if you will allow me to give you the facts of the case as known at headquarters today."

I bowed, trying not to show my surprise or my extreme satisfaction. Mr. Gryce assumed his most benignant aspect, always a dangerous one with him, and began his story.

CHAPTER II. I AM TEMPTED.

Some 90 miles from here, in a more or less inaccessible region, there is a small but beautiful village which has been the scene of so many strange and unaccountable disappearances, presumably murders, that the attention of the New York police has been at last directed to it. The town, which is at least nine miles from any railroad, is one of those quiet, placid little spots found now and then among the mountains, where life is of the simplest and crime, to all appearance, an element so out-

accord with every other characteristic of the place as to seem a complete anomaly. Yet crime or some other hideous mystery almost equally revolting has during the last five years been accountable for the disappearance in or about this village of four persons of various ages and occupations. Of these, three were strangers and one a well known vagabond accustomed to tramp the hills and live on the bounty of farmers' wives. All were of the male sex, and in no case has any clew ever come to light as to their fate. They were seen in town or near it and then suddenly were not seen or ever heard of again. That is the matter as it "stands before the police today."

"A serious affair," I remarked. "Seems to me I have read of such things in novels. Is there a tumbling down old inn in the vicinity where beds are made up over trapdoors?"

His smile was a mild protest against my flippancy.

"I have visited the town myself. There is no inn there, but a comfortable hotel of the most matter of fact sort, kept by the frankest and most open minded of landlords. Besides, these disappearances as a rule did not take place at night, but in broad daylight. Imagine this street at noon. It is a short one, and you know every house on it, and, you think, every lurking place. You see a man enter it at one end and you expect him to issue from it at the other. But suppose he never does. More than that, suppose he is never heard of again and that this thing should happen just here on this one street six times during five years."

"I should move," I responded dryly. "Would you? Many good people have moved from the place I speak of, but that has not helped matters. The disappearances go on, and the why and the where are just as much a mystery as ever."

"You interest me," I said. "Come to think of it, if this street were the scene of such an unexplained series of horrors as you have described, I do not think I would move."

"I thought not," he responded curtly. "But since you are interested let me be more explicit in my statements. The first person whose disappearance was noted—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "Have you a map of the place?"

He smiled, nodded quite affectionately to an old friend of his on the mantelpiece, but did not produce the map.

"That detail will keep," said he. "Let me go on with my story. As I was saying, madam, the first person whose disappearance there was noted was a peddler of small wares, accustomed to tramp the mountains. On this occasion he had been in town longer than usual and was known to have sold fully half of his goods. Consequently he must have had quite a sum of money upon him. One day his pack was found lying under a cluster of bushes in a wood, but of him nothing was ever again heard. It made an excitement for a few days while the bodies were being searched for his body, but nothing having been discovered he was forgotten and everything went on as before, till suddenly public attention was again aroused by the pouring in of letters containing inquiries in regard to a young man who had been sent there from Duluth to collect facts in a law case and who after a certain date had failed to communicate with his firm or show up at any of the places where he was known. Instantly the village was in arms. Many remembered the young man, and some two or three of the villagers could recall the fact of having seen him go up the street with his hand bag in his hand as if on his way to the mountain station. The landlord of the hotel could fix the very day at which he left his house, but inquiries at the station failed to establish the fact that he took train from there, nor were the most minute inquiries into his fate at that time or afterward ever attended by the least result. He was not known to have carried much money, but he wore a very handsome watch and chain and a ring of more than ordinary value, none of which has ever shown up at any pawnbroker's within the knowledge of the police. This was three years ago."

"The next occurrence of a like character did not take place till a year after. This time it was a poor old man from Hartford who vanished almost as it were before the eyes of these astounded villagers. He had come to town to get subscriptions for a valuable book issued by a well known publisher. He had been more or less successful and was looking very cheerful and contented when one morning, after making a sale at a certain farmhouse, he sat down to dine with them, it being close on to 12 o'clock. He had eaten several mouthfuls and was chatting quite freely when suddenly they saw him pause, clap his hand to his pocket and rise up very much disturbed. 'I have left my pocketbook behind me at Deacon Spear's,' said he. 'I cannot eat with it out of my possession. Excuse me if I go for it.' And without any further apologies he ran out of the house and down the road in the direction of Deacon Spear's. He never reached Deacon Spear's, nor was he ever seen in that village again or in his home in Hartford. This was the most astonishing mystery of all. Within a half mile of a certain spot in a popu-

country town this man disappeared as if the road had swallowed him and closed again. It was marvelous, incredible and remained so even after the best efforts of the county police to solve the mystery had exhausted themselves. After this the town began to acquire a bad name, and one or two families moved away. Yet no one was found who was willing to admit that these various persons had been the victims of foul play till a month later another case came to light of a young man who had left the village for the hillside station and had never arrived at that or any other destination so far as could be learned. As he was a distant relative of a wealthy cattle owner in Iowa, who came on posthaste to inquire into his nephew's fate, the excitement ran high, and through his efforts and that of Mr. Trohm the services of our office were called into play. But the result has been nil. We have found neither the bodies of these men nor any clew to their fate."

"I could not help casting an envious glance at the pocket where I lay sure that the map I had asked for, I suggested. "Yet you have been there?" I suggested.

He nodded.

"Wonderful!" I exclaimed. "And you came upon no suspicious house, no suspicious person?"

The finger with which he was rubbing his eyeglasses went round and round the rims with a slower and slower and still more thoughtful motion.

"Every town has its suspicious looking houses," he slowly remarked, "and, as for persons, the most honest often wear a lowering look in which an unbridled imagination can see guilt. I never trust in appearances of that kind."

"What else can you trust in," I said, "where all is impenetrable as in this case?"

His finger, going slower and slower, suddenly stopped.

"In my knowledge of persons," said he, "knowledge of their fears, their hopes and their individual concerns. If I were 20 years younger—here he stole a glance at me in the mirror which made me bridle; did he think I was only 20 years younger than myself?—I would," he went on, "make myself so acquainted with every man, woman and child there—Here he drew himself up with a jerk. "But the day for that is passed," said he. "I am too old and too crippled to succeed in that undertaking. Having been there once, I am a marked man. My walk alone betrays me. He whose good fortune it will be to get at the bottom of these people's hearts must awaken no suspicions as to his connection with the police. Indeed I do not think that any man can succeed in doing this now."

I started. This was a frank showing of his hand at least. No man! It was a woman's aid he was after, then. I laughed as I thought of it. I had not thought him either so presumptuous or so appreciative of talents of a character so directly in line with his own.

"Don't you agree with me, madam?" I did agree with him, but I had a character of great dignity to maintain, so I only looked at him with an air of marked severity.

"I do not know of any woman who would undertake such a task," I observed.

"No?" He smiled with that air of forbearance which is so exasperating to me. "Well, perhaps there isn't any such woman to be found. It would take one of very uncommon characteristics, I own."

"Pish!" I cried. "Not so very!"

"Indeed I think you have not fully taken in the case," he urged in quiet superiority. "The people there are of the higher order of country folk. Many of them are of extreme refinement. One family—I thought his tone changed the least in the world here—"is poor enough and elegant enough to interest even such a woman as yourself."

"Indeed!" I answered, with just a touch of my father's hauteur to hide the stir of curiosity his words naturally evoked.

"It is in some such home," he went on with an ease that should have warned me that he had started on this pursuit with a quiet determination to win, "that the clew will be found to the mystery we are considering. Yes, you may well look startled, but that conclusion is the one thing I brought away with me from—X, let us say. I regard it as one of some moment. What do you think of it?"

"Well," said I, "it makes me feel like recalling that pish I uttered a few minutes ago. It would take a woman of uncommon characteristics to assist you in this matter."

"I am glad we have got that far," said he.

"A lady," I went on.

"Most assuredly a lady."

I paused. Sometimes discreet silence is more sarcastic than speech.

"Well, what lady would lend herself to this scheme?" I asked at last.

The tap, tap of his fingers on the rim of his glasses was my only answer.

"I do not know of any," said I.

His eyebrows rose perhaps a hair's breadth, but I noted the implied sarcasm and for an instant forgot my dignity.

"Now," said I, "this will not do. You mean me—Amelia Butterworth, a woman who—but I do not think it is necessary to tell you either who or what I am. You have presumed—Now do not put on that look of innocence, and above all do not attempt to deny what is so manifestly in your thoughts, for that is the one thing which you could do which would make me feel like showing you the door."

"Then," he smiled, "I shall be sure not to make it. I am not anxious to leave—yet. Besides, who could I mean but you? A lady visiting friends in this remote and beautiful region—what opportunities might she not have to probe this important mystery if, like yourself, she had tact, discretion, excellent understanding and an experience which if not broad or deep is certainly such as to give her a certain confidence in herself

and an undoubted influence with the man fortunate enough to receive her advice."

"Bah!" I exclaimed. It was one of his favorite expressions. That was perhaps why I used it. "One would think I was a member of your police."

"You flatter us too deeply," was his instant deferential answer. "Such an honor as that would be beyond our deserts."

To this I gave but the faintest sniff. That he should think that I, Amelia Butterworth, could be amenable to such barbed flattery! Then I faced him with some asperity and said bluntly: "You waste your time. I have no more intention of meddling in another affair than—"

"You had in meddling in the first," he politely, too politely, interpolated. "I understand, madam."

I was angry, but put a curb on every expression of it. I was not willing he should see that I could be affected by anything he could say.

"The Van Burnams are my next door neighbors," I remarked sweetly. "I had the best of excuses for the interest I took in their affairs."

"So you had," he acquiesced. "I am glad to be reminded of the fact. I wonder I was able to forget it."

Angry now to the point of not being able to hide it, I turned upon him with firm determination.

"Let us talk of something else," I said.

But he was equal to the occasion. Drawing a folded paper from his pocket, he opened it out before my eyes, saying quite naturally: "That is a happy thought. Let us look over this sketch you were sharp enough to ask for a few moments ago. It shows the streets of the village and the places where each of the persons I have mentioned to you was last seen. Is it not what you wanted?"

I know that I should have drawn back with a frown, that I never should have allowed myself the satisfaction of casting so much as a glance toward the paper, but the human nature which links me to my kind was too much for me, and with an involuntary "Exactly!" I leaned over it with an eagerness I

For two years now it has been called Lost Man's lane."

"Indeed!" I cried. "They have got the matter down as close as that and yet have not solved its mystery? How long is this road?"

"A half mile or so."

I must have looked, my disgust, for his hands opened deprecatingly.

"The ground has undergone a thorough search," said he. "Not a square foot in those woods you see on either side but has been gone over."

"And the houses? I see there are three houses on this road."

"Oh, they are owned by most respectable people—most respectable people," he repeated with a lingering emphasis that gave me an inward shudder. "I think I had the honor of intimating as much to you a few minutes ago."

I looked at him earnestly and irresistibly drew a little nearer to him over the diagram.

"Has none of these houses been visited by you?" I asked. "Do you mean to say you have not seen the inside of them all?"

"Oh," said he, "I have been in them all, of course, but a mystery such as we are investigating, is not written upon the walls of parlors or halls."

"You freeze my blood," I murmured. Somehow the sight of these houses drawn out before me seemed to bring me into more intimate sympathy with the affair.

His shrug was significant.

"I told you that this was no vulgar mystery," said he, "or why should I be considering it with you? It is quite worthy of your interest. Do you see that house marked A?"

"I do," I nodded.

"Well, that is a decayed mansion of imposing proportions set in a forest of overgrown shrubbery. The ladies who inhabit it—"

"Ladies!" I put in, with a small shock of horror.

"Young ladies," he explained, "of a refined if not overprosperous appearance. They are what is left of a family of some repute. Their father was a judge, I believe."

"And do they live there alone," I asked, "two young ladies in a house so large and in a neighborhood so full of mystery?"

"Oh, they have a brother with them, a lot of no great attractions," he responded carelessly—too carelessly, I thought.

I made a note of the house A in my mind.

"And who lives there?" I now queried, pointing to the house marked B.

"A Mr. Trohm. It was through his exertions that the services of the New York police were insured. His place there is one of the most interesting in town, and he does not wish to be forced to leave it, but he will be obliged to do so if the road is not soon relieved of its bad name, and so will Deacon Spear. The very children shun the road now. I do not know of a lonelier place."

"I see a little cross marked up here on the verge of the woods. What does that mean?"

"That is a hut—it can hardly be called a cottage—where a poor old woman lives called Mother Jane. She is a harmless old imbecile, against whom no one has ever directed a suspicion. You may take your finger off that mark, Miss Butterworth."

I did so, but I did not forget that it stood very near the footpath branching off to the station.

"You entered this hut as well as the big houses?" I intimated.

"Four walls," was his answer. "Just four walls; nothing more."

I let my finger travel along the footpath I have just mentioned.

"Steep," was his comment. "Up, up all the way, but no precipices. Nothing but pine woods on either side, thickly carpeted with needles."

My finger came back and stopped at the house marked M.

"Why is a letter affixed to this spot?" I asked.

"Because it stands at the head of the lane just as Deacon Spear's guards the foot. Any one sitting at the window I can see whoever enters or leaves the lane at this end. And some one is always sitting there. The woman who lives there has two crippled children, a boy and a girl. One of them is always in that window."

"I see," said I. Then abruptly,

"What do you think of Deacon Spear?"

"Oh," said he, "a well meaning man, none too fine in his feelings. He does not mind the neighborhood, likes quiet, he says. I hope you will know him for yourself some day," said he.

At this return to the forbidden subject I held myself very much aloof.

"Your diagram is interesting," said I, "but it has not in the least changed my determination. It is you who will go back there and that very soon."

"Not very soon," said he. "Whoever goes there on this errand must go at once, tonight, if possible; if not, to-morrow at the latest."

"Tonight! Tomorrow!" I cried. "And you thought—"

"No matter what I thought," he sighed. "It seems I had no groundwork for it." And folding up the map he slowly rose. "The young man we have left there is doing more harm than good. That is why I say some one of real ability must replace him and that immediately. The detective from New York must see to have left the place."

I made him my most ladylike bow of dismissal.

"I shall watch the papers," I said. "I have no doubt that I shall soon see in them some token of your success."

He cast a rueful look at his hands, took a painful step toward the door and dolefully shook his head.

I kept my silence undisturbed.

He took another painful step.

"By the way," he remarked as I stood watching him with an unconcerning air, "I have forgotten to mention the name of the town in which these disappearances have occurred. It is called X, and it is to be found on one of the spurs of the Berkshire hills."

And being by this time at the door he gave me a low in which was concentrated all the insinuating suavity of which he was capable and in another moment was gone. The old fox was so sure of his triumph that he did not even wait to see it. He knew—how I never have thought it necessary to inquire—that X was a place I had often threatened to visit. There was living there the family of one of my dearest friends. She had been a schoolmate of mine, and when she died I had promised myself that I would not let many months pass before making the acquaintance of her children. Alas, I had let years go by!

(To be continued next Saturday.)

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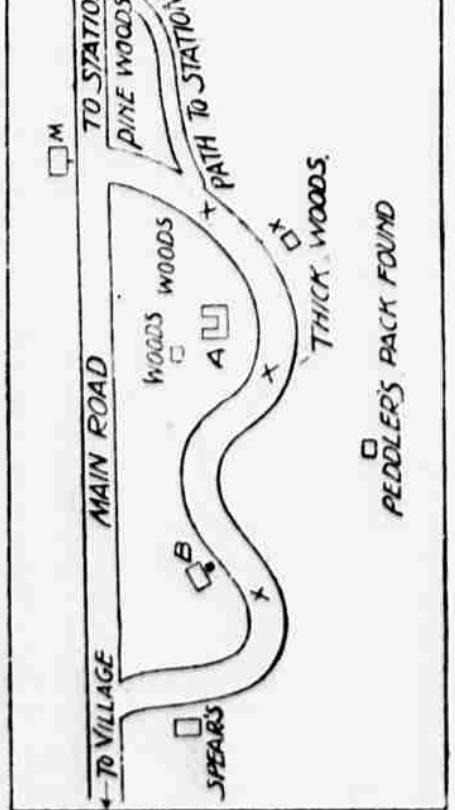
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strove hard even at that exciting moment to keep within the bounds I thought proper to my position as a non-professional, interested in the matter from curiosity alone.

This is what I saw:



"Mr. Gryce"—this after a few minutes' close contemplation of the diagram before me—"I do not suppose you want any opinion from me."

"Madam," said he, "it is all you have left me free to ask for."

Receiving this as a permission to speak, I put my finger on the road marked X.

"Then," said I, "so far as I can gather from this drawing all the disappearances seem to have taken place in or about this special road."

"You are as correct as usual," said he. "So true is this that the people there have already given to this winding way a special cognomen of its own."



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