

LOST MAN'S COLLEGE

A SECOND EPIISODE
IN THE LIFE OF AMELIA BUTTERWORTH

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"BEHIND CLOSED DOORS," "THE AFFAIR NEXT DOOR,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER IV.
A SPECTRAL HOME.

The hall into which I had stepped was so dark that for a few minutes I could see nothing but the indistinct outline of a young woman with a very white face. She had uttered a sort of murmur at my words, but for some reason was strangely silent, and if I could trust my eyes seemed rather to be looking back and over her shoulder than into the face of her advancing guest. This was odd, but before I could quite satisfy myself as to the cause of her abstraction she suddenly bethought herself, and throwing open the door of an adjoining room she let in a stream of light by which we were enabled to see each other and exchange the greetings suitable to the occasion.

"Miss Butterworth, my mother's old friend," she murmured with an almost piteous effort to be cordial, "we are so glad to have you visit us. Won't you— you sit down?"

What did it mean? She had pointed to a chair in the sitting room, but her face was turned away again as if drawn irresistibly toward some secret object of fear. Was there any one or anything at the top of the dim staircase I could faintly see in the distance? It would not do for me to ask nor was it wise for me to show that I thought this reception a strange one. Stepping into the room she pointed out to me. I waited for her to follow me, which she did with manifest reluctance. But when she was once out of the atmosphere of the hall, or out of reach of the sight or sound of whatever it was that frightened her, her face took on a smile that gratified her with me at once and gave to her very delicate aspect, which up to that moment had not suggested the remotest likeness to her mother, a piquant charm and subtle fascination that were not unworthy of the daughter of Althea Burroughs.

"You—you must not mind the poverty of your welcome," she said, with a half proud, half apologetic look around her, which I must say the bareness and shabby character of the room were in fully justified. "We have not been very well off since father died, and mother"—again that look, this time one of unmistakable fear, but she soon checked it and smiled again, though without any show of piquancy—"and mother left us. Had you given us a chance we would have written you that our home would not offer many inducements to you after your own, but you have come unexpectedly and"—

"There, there," I put in, for I saw that her embarrassment would soon get the better of her, "do not speak of it. I did not come to enjoy your home, but to see you. Are you the eldest, my dear, and where is your sister and brother?"

"I am Lucretia," she said, "I am Lucretia. My sister"—here her head stole irresistibly back to its old position of listening—"will—will come soon. My brother is not in the house."

"Well," said I, astonished that she did not ask me to take off my things, "you are a pretty girl, but you do not look very strong. Are you quite well, my dear?"

She started, looked at me eagerly, almost anxiously, for a moment, then straightened herself and began to lose some of her abstraction.

"I am not a strong person," she smiled, "but neither am I so very weak either. I was always small. So was my mother, you know."

She seemed to think she must talk of her mother, though I noticed that the word gave her pain. As for me, no topic could be more agreeable save one. I therefore answered her in a way to prolong the conversation.

"Yes, your mother was small," said I, "but never thin or pallid. She was like a fairy among us schoolgirls. Does it seem odd to hear so old a woman as I speak of herself as a schoolgirl?"

"Oh, no!" she said, but there was no heart in her voice.

"I had almost forgotten those days," I proceeded, seeing I must keep up the conversation if we were not to sit in total silence, "till I happened to hear the name of Althea mentioned the other day. Then my whole early friendship with your mother recurred to me, and I started up—as I always do when I come to any decision, my dear—and sent that telegram, which I hope I have not followed by an unwelcome presence."

"Oh, no," she repeated, but this time with some feeling, "we need friends, and if you will overlook our shortcomings— But you have not taken off your hat. What will Lucretia say to me?"

And with a sudden nervous action as marked as her late listlessness she jumped up and began busying herself over me, untying my bonnet and laying aside my bundles, which up to this moment I had held in my hands.

"I—I am so absentminded," she murmured. "I—I did not think—I hope you will excuse me. Lucretia would have given you a much better welcome."

"Then Lucretia should have been here," I said, with a smile. I could not restrain that slight rebuke, yet I liked the girl, notwithstanding everything I had heard, and her own odd and unaccountable behavior there was a sweetness in her face when she chose to smile that proved an irresistible attraction. And then, for all her absentmindedness and abstracted ways, she was such a lady! Not even the plainest of

crosses and the total absence of anything like adornment to her person could hide that fact. It was in every line of her thin but graceful form and in every inflection of her musical but constrained voice. Had I seen her in my own parlor instead of between these bare and moldering walls I should have said the same thing. She is such a lady! But this only passed through my mind at the time. I was not studying her personality, but trying to understand why my presence in the house had so visibly disturbed her. Was it the embarrassment of poverty not knowing how to meet the call made so suddenly upon it? I hardly thought so. Fear would not enter into a sensation of this kind, and fear was what I had seen in her face before the front door had closed upon me. But that fear—was it dread of me or of something disconnected with me and threatening her from another portion of the house?

I could not but think the latter. The way her ear was turned, the slight start she gave as some sound—I could not gather what—came from the farther recesses of the house, convinced me that her cause of dread lay elsewhere than with myself and therefore was of a character worthy of my deepest attention. Though I chatted and tried in a way to arouse her confidence and set her at ease in regard to myself at least, I could not help asking myself between my sentences: Is it her sister? Would it prove to be her brother? Was it anything connected with the dreadful matter that had been the first cause to draw me here, or was it the sign of some habitual distemper which, misunderstood by Mr. Gryce, had given rise to the suspicions which it was my possible mission here to dispel?

Anxious to force things a little, I said, with a glance at the dismal branches that almost forced their way into the open casements of this side of the house: "What a scene for young eyes like yours! Do you never get tired of those pine boughs and clustering shadows? Would not a little cottage in the summer part of the town be preferable to all this dreary grandeur?"

She looked up with sudden wistfulness that made her smile piteous.

"Some of my happiest days have been passed here and some of my saddest. I do not think I should like to leave it for any sunny cottage. We were not made for sunny homes," said she. "The somberness of this old house suits us."

"And of this road," I ventured. "It is the darkest and most picturesque I ever entered. I thought I was entering a wilderness."

She for a moment forgot her cause of anxiety beyond. She looked at me quite intently, and a subtle shade of doubt passed slowly over her features.

"It is a solitary one," said she; "quite solitary. I do not wonder it struck you as dismal. Have you heard—has any one ever told you that—that it was not considered as being quite safe?"

"Safe?" I repeated, with—God forgive me—an expression of mild wonder in my eyes.

"Yes, it has not the best of names. Strange things have happened in it, or have been thought to, which is just as bad. I thought that some one might have been kind enough to tell you at the station."

There was a gentle sort of sarcasm in the tone; only that, or so I thought at the time. I began to feel myself in a maze.

"Somebody—I suppose it was the station master—did say something to me about a boy lost somewhere in this portion of the woods. Do you mean that, my dear?"

She nodded, glancing again over her shoulder and partly rising as if moved by some instinct of flight.

"They are dark enough," I observed with another look toward the heavily curtained windows, "for more than one person to be lost in their recesses."

"Yes," she murmured, reseating herself and eying me nervously while she spoke. "We are used to the terrors they inspire in strangers, but if you"—she leaped to her feet in manifest eagerness and her whole face changed in a way she little realized herself—"if you have any fear of sleeping amid such gloomy surroundings, we can procure you a room in the village where you will be more comfortable and where we—we can visit you almost as well as here. Shall I do it? Shall I call?"

My face must have assumed a very grim look, for her words tripped at that point and a flush, the first I had seen on her cheek, rose up to her forehead, giving her an appearance of great distress.

"Oh, I wish Lucretia would come! I am not at all happy in my suggestions," she said, with a deprecatory twitch of her lip that was one of her subtle charms. "Oh, there she is! Now I may go," said she, and without the least appearance of realizing that she had said anything out of place she rushed from the room almost before her sister had entered it.

But not before their eyes had met in a look of unusual significance.

CHAPTER V.
LOREEN, LUCETTA AND WILLIAM.

Had I not caught that look I might have received an impression of Miss Knollys that would in a measure have counteracted that made by the more nervous and less restrained Lucretia.

The dignified reserve of her bearing, the quiet way in which she approached and above all the even tones in which she uttered her welcome were such as to win my confidence and put me at my ease in the house of which she was the nominal mistress. But that look! With that in my memory I was enabled to see below the surface of this placid nature and in the very constraint she put on herself detect the presence of that same secret uneasiness which had been so openly if unconsciously manifested by her sister.

She was more beautiful than Lucretia in form and feature, and even more markedly elegant in her plain black gown and fine lawn ruffles, but she lacked the evanescent charm of the other's smile, and though admirable to all appearance was less lovable on a short acquaintance. She had not had as much suffering as Lucretia.

But this delays my tale, which is one of action rather than reflection. I had naturally expected that with the appearance of the elder Miss Knollys I would be taken to my room, but on the contrary she sat down and with an apologetic air informed me that she was sorry she could not show me the precise attentions she wished. Circumstances, she said, over which she had no control had made it impossible for them to offer me the guest chamber, but if I would be so good as to accept another for this one night she would endeavor to provide me with better accommodations on the morrow.

Satisfied of the almost painful nature of their poverty and determined to submit to privations if necessary rather than depart before I had penetrated the mystery of this remarkable household, I hastened to say, with what I hope was sincere good feeling, that any room would be acceptable to me, and still expecting to be taken up stairs I began to gather up my wraps, but Miss Knollys again surprised me by saying that my room was not yet ready; that they had not been able to complete all their arrangements, and would I make myself at home where I was till evening.

As this was asking a good deal of a woman of my years, fresh from a railroad journey and with natural habits of great neatness and order, I felt somewhat disconcerted, but hiding it for the reasons before given I laid down my bundles again and endeavored to make the best of the somewhat trying situation.

Launching at once into conversation, I began, as with her sister, to talk about her mother. I had never known, save in the vaguest way, why Mrs. Knollys had taken that journey abroad which had ended in her death and burial in a foreign land. I had heard she had gone abroad for her health, which had begun to fail after the birth of Lucretia, but as she had gone unaccompanied by her husband or children there was much that it would be interesting for me to know concerning these events which I felt that these girls might be willing to tell me, but Miss Knollys, intentionally or unintentionally, assumed an air so cold at these well meant questions on my part that I desisted from pressing her and began to talk about myself in a way which I hoped would establish really friendly relations between us and make it possible for her to tell me later, if not at the present moment, what it was that weighed so heavily upon the household that no one could enter into it without feeling the shadow of the secret terror that enveloped it.

But Miss Knollys, while more attentive to my remarks than her sister had been, showed still by certain unmistakable signs that her heart and interest were anywhere but in that room, and while I could not regard this as throwing any discredit upon my powers of pleasing—which have rarely failed when I have exerted them to their utmost—I still could not but experience the dampening effect of her manner. I went on chatting, but in a desultory way, noting all that was odd in her unaccountable reception of me, but giving, as I firmly believe, no evidence of my concern and rapidly increasing curiosity.

The peculiarities observable in this my first interview with these interesting but by no means easily to be understood sisters continued all day. When one sister came in, the other stepped out, and when dinner time came and I was ushered down the bare and dismal hall into an equally bare and unattractive dining room it was to find the seats laid for four and Lucretia only seated at the head of the board.

"Where is Lucretia?" I asked wonderingly, as I took the seat she pointed out to me with one of her faint and quickly vanishing smiles.

"She—she cannot come at present," my young hostess stammered with the least glance of distress at the large, hearty looking woman who had summoned me to the dining room.

"Ah," I murmured, thinking that possibly Lucretia had found it necessary to assist in the preparation of the meal, "and your brother?"

It was the first time he had been mentioned by any of us. I had shrunk from the venture out of a motive of pure compassion, I think, and they had not seen fit to introduce his name into any of our conversations. Consequently I waited her response with some anxiety, having a secret premonition that in some way he was at the bottom of my strange reception.

Her hasty answer, given, however, without any increase of embarrassment, somewhat dispelled this supposition.

JOE PHEASANT SCALDED.

Received Painful Burns in Boiler Room at the Sugar Factory.

Joe Pheasant was the victim of an accident at the sugar factory yesterday and is now suffering from some very severe and painful burns.

He was employed in the boiler room of the institution and was yesterday sent into the firebox, under one of the boilers from which the fire had been drawn, to remove some brick so that the boiler, which had been leaking, could be repaired.

While he was engaged in this work the man hole of the boiler was removed allowing several buckets of hot water to be contained, but of which it was supposed it had been emptied, escape.

Pheasant was frightened and, prompted by his first impulse, got out of the firebox as rapidly as possible, getting directly under the falling water, which scalded him severely on his back, and left arm.

Dr. Frank Salter was at once summoned and gave the young man professional attention.

He is now getting along quite nicely at the home of his mother on Phillip avenue and it is thought he will be able to be about again within a few days.

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"I thought you promised me that you would never again ask Mr. Trohm for any of his fruit."

"Oh, I didn't ask! I just stood at the fence and looked over. Mr. Trohm and I are good friends. Why shouldn't I eat his fruit?"

The look she gave him might have moved a stone, but he seemed perfectly impervious to it. Seeing him so stolid, her head drooped and she did not utter a word. Yet somehow I felt that even while she was so manifestly a prey to very natural mortification her attention was not wholly given over to this one emotion. There was something over and beyond all this that she feared. Hoping to relieve her and lighten the situation, I forced myself to smile on the young man as I said:

"Why don't you raise melons yourself? I think I should be anxious to raise everything possible if I had so much ground as you possess."

"Oh, you're a woman!" he answered almost roughly. "It's a good business for women and for men, too, perhaps, who love to see fruit hang, but I only care to eat it."

"Don't," Lucretia put in, but not with the vigor I had expected.

"I like to hunt, train dogs and enjoy other people's fruit," he laughed, with a nod at the blushing Lucretia. "I don't see any use in a man's putting himself out for things he can get for the asking. Life's too short for such folly. I mean to have a good time while I'm on this blessed sphere."

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