

LOST MAN'S LANE.

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

AUTHOR OF "THE LEAVENWORTH CASE," "BEHIND CLOSED DOORS," "THE AFFAIR NEXT DOOR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER VI A SOMBER EVENING.

The evening, like the afternoon, was spent in the sitting room with one of the sisters. One event alone is worth recording. I had become excessively tired of a conversation that always languished, no matter on what topic it was started, and, observing an old piano in one corner—I once played very well—I sat down before it and impulsively struck a few chords from the yellow keys. Instantly Lucetta—it was Lucetta who was with me then—bounded to my side with a look of horror on her face.

"Don't do that," she cried, laying her hand on mine to stop me. Then, seeing my look of dignified astonishment, she added with an appealing smile, "I beg pardon, but every sound goes through me tonight."

"Are you not well?" I asked.

"I am never very well," she returned, and we went back to the sofa and renewed our forced and pitiful attempts at conversation.

Promptly at 9 o'clock Miss Knollys came in. She was very pale and cast, as usual, a sad and uneasy look at her sister before she spoke to me. Immediately Lucetta rose, and, becoming very pale herself, was hurrying toward the door when her sister stopped her.

"You have forgotten," she said, "to say good night to our guest."

Instantly Lucetta turned, and, with a sudden, uncontrollable impulse seized my hand and pressed it convulsively.

"Good night," she cried. "I hope you will sleep well," and was gone before I could say a word in response.

"Why does Lucetta go out of the room when you come in?" I asked, determined to know the reason for this peculiar conduct. "Have you any other guests in the house?"

The reply came with unexpected vehemence. "No," she cried, "why should you think so? There is no one here but the family." And she turned away with a dignity she must have inherited from her father, for Althea Burroughs had every other interesting quality but that. "You must be very tired," she said. "If you please, we will go now to your room."

I rose at once, glad of the prospect of seeing the upper portion of the house. She took my wraps on her arm, and we passed immediately into the hall. As we did so I heard voices, one of them shrill and full of distress, but the sound was so quickly smothered by a closing door that I failed to discover whether that tone of suffering proceeded from a man or a woman.

Miss Knollys, who was preceding me, glanced back in some alarm, but as I gave no token of having noticed anything out of the ordinary she speedily resumed her way up stairs. As the sounds I had heard had proceeded from above I followed her with alacrity, but felt my enthusiasm diminish somewhat when I found myself passing door after door down a long hall to a room as remote as possible from what seemed to be the living portion of the house.

"Is it necessary to put me off quite so far?" I asked as my young hostess paused and waited for me to join her on the threshold of the most forbidding room it had ever been my fortune to enter.

The blush which mounted to her brow showed that she felt the situation keenly.

"I am sure," she said, "that it is a matter of great regret to me to be obliged to offer you so mean a lodging, but all our other rooms are—out of order," she explained firmly, "and I cannot do otherwise tonight."

"But isn't there some spot nearer you?" I urged. "A couch in the same room with you would be more acceptable to me than this distant room."

"I—I hope you are not timid," she began, but I hastened to disabuse her mind of this at once.

"I am not afraid," said I, "of any earthly thing but dogs, but I do not like solitude. I came here for companionship, my dear. I really would like to sleep with one of you."

This, to see how she would meet such urgency, she met it as I might have known she would by a rebuff.

"I am very sorry," she again repeated, "but it is quite impossible. If I could give you the comforts you are accustomed to, I should be glad, but we are unfortunate, we girls, and—She said no more, but began to busy herself about the room, which held but one object that had the least look of comfort in it. That was my trunk, which had been neatly placed in one corner.

"I suppose you are not used to candles," she remarked, lighting what struck me as a very short end from the one she held in her hand.

"My dear," said I, "I can accommodate myself to much that I am not used to. I have very few old maid's ways or notions. You shall see that I am far from being a difficult guest."

She heaved a sigh, and then, seeing my eye traveling slowly over the gray discolored walls, which were not relieved by so much as a solitary print, she pointed to a bell rope near the head of the bed and considerably remarked:

"If you wish anything in the night or are disturbed in any way, pull that. It communicates with my room, and I will be only too glad to come to you."

I glanced up at the rope, ran my eye along the wire communicating with it and saw that it was broken sheer off before it even entered into the wall.

made me very nearly miserable. I had not included among my effects the alcoholic lamp and all the other private and particular conveniences which I have for making tea in my own apartment. Had I had them with me and had I but been able to make and sip a cup of my own delicious tea through the ordeal of listening for whatever sounds might come to disturb the midnight stillness of this house, what relief it would have been to my spirits and in what a different light I might have regarded Mr. Gryce and the errand into which his suspicions had driven me. But I not only lacked this element of comfort, but the satisfaction of thinking that it was any one's fault but my own. Lela had laid her hand on that teapot, but I had shaken my head, fearing that the sight of it might offend the eyes of my young hostess. But I had not calculated in being put in a remote corner like this of a house large enough to accommodate a dozen families, and if ever I travel again—

But this is a matter personal to Amelia Butterworth, you say, and of no interest to us. And you are right. I will not inflict my little foibles upon you again.

Eleven o'clock came and went. I had heard no sound. Twelve, and I began to think that all was not quite so still as before; that I certainly could hear now and then faint noises as of a door creaking on its hinges, or the smothered sound of stealthily moving feet. Yet all was so far from being distinct that for some time I hesitated to acknowledge to myself that something was going on in the house which was not to be looked for in a home professing to be simply the abode of a decent young man and two very quiet appearing young ladies, and even after the noises and whispering had increased to such an extent that I could even distinguish the sullen tones of the brother from the softer and more carefully modulated accents of Lucetta and her sister, I found myself ready to explain the matter by any conjecture short of that which involved these delicate young ladies in any scheme of secret wickedness.

But when I found there was likely to be no diminution in the various noises and movement that was taking place in

caused by my now rapidly waning candle. "Miss Butterworth, what is the matter?" she asked, making as if she would draw me into my room, a proceeding which I took good care she should not succeed in, however. Giving a glance at her dress, which was the same she had worn at the supper table, I laughingly said:

"Isn't that a question I should rather ask you? It is 2 o'clock by my watch, and you, for all your very evident delicacy and fatigue, are still up. What does it mean, my dear? Have I put you out so completely by my coming that none of you can sleep?"

Her eyes, which had fallen before mine, quickly looked up.

"I am sorry," she began, flushing and trying to take a peep into my room, possibly to see if I had been to bed myself. "We did not mean to disturb you, but— Oh, Miss Butterworth, pray excuse our makeshifts and our poverty. We wished to fix up another room for you, and were ashamed to have you see how little we had to do it with, so we were moving some things out of our own room tonight, and—"

Here her voice broke, and she burst into an almost uncontrollable flood of tears.

"Don't," she murmured, "don't," as, quite thoroughly ashamed, I began to utter some excuses. "I shall be all right in a moment. I am used to humiliations. Only," and her whole body seemed to join in the plea, it trembled so, "do not, I pray, speak quite so loud. My brother is more sensitive than even Loren and myself about these things, and if he should hear—"

Here a suppressed oath from way down the hall assured me that he did hear, but I gave no sign of my recognition of this fact, and Lucetta added quickly: "He would not forgive us for our carelessness in waking you. He is rough sometimes, but so good at heart, so good."

This, with the other small matter I had just mentioned, caused in me a slight reaction. He good? I did not believe it. Yet her eyes showed no wavering when I looked at her fixedly, and feeling that I had perhaps been doing injustice to them all and that all I had seen which was odd and difficult to ex-



IT WAS THE STILLNESS OF INTENT RATHER THAN THAT OF NATURAL REPOSE.

plain in their conduct was, as she evidently meant to intimate, due to their efforts to make a sudden guest comfortable amid their poverty. I put the best face I could on the matter and gave the poor, pitiful, pleading face a kiss. I was startled to feel how cold her forehead was, and, more and more concerned, loaded her down with such assurances of appreciation as came to my lips and sent her back to her own room with the advice that she would trouble herself no more about fixing up any other room for me; that I had emptied my trunk out here and did not propose to move again for the few days I intended to remain with them. "Only," said I, as her whole face showed relief, "we will go to the locksmith tomorrow and get a key, and you shall see that after tonight I have a cup of tea brought to my room just before I retire. I am no good without my cup of tea, my dear. What keeps other people awake makes me sleep."

"Oh, you shall have that!" she cried, with an eagerness that was almost unnatural, and then slipping from my grasp she uttered another hasty apology for having roused me from my sleep and ran hastily back.

I stretched out my arm for the candle guttering in my room and held it up to light her. She seemed to shrink at sight of its rays and the last vision I had of her speeding figure showed me that same look of dread on her pallid features which had aroused my interest in our first interview.

"She may have explained why the three of them are up this time of night," I muttered, "but she has not explained why her every conversation is seasoned by an expression of fear."

And, brooding over this, I went back to my room and, pushing the bed again against the door, lay down upon it and out of sheer chagrin, I think, fell fast asleep.

(To be Continued Next Week.)

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