

LOST MAN'S LANE.

A SECOND EPIISODE
IN THE LIFE OF AMELIA BUTTERWORTH
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"BEHIND CLOSED DOORS," "THAT AFFAIR NEXT DOOR,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER X.
SECRET INSTRUCTIONS.

For a moment William and myself stood looking at each other over this frail and prostrate figure. Then he stooped and with an unexpected show of kindness raised her up and began carrying her toward the house.

"Lucetta is a fool," he cried suddenly, stopping and giving me a quick glance over his shoulder. "Because folks are terrified of this road and come to see us but seldom, she has got to feel a most unreasonable dread of visitors. She was even afraid of you coming till we showed her what folly it was for her to think we could always live here like hermits. Then she doesn't like Mr. Trohm; thinks he is altogether too friendly to me—as if that was any of her business. Am I an idiot? Have I no sense? Cannot I be trusted to take care of my own affairs and keep my own secrets? She's a weak, silly chit, to go and flop over like this when, if—well, we have enough to look after without nursing her up and—well, I mean," he said, tripping himself up with an air of polite consideration so out of keeping with his usual churlishness as to be more than noticeable, "that it cannot add much to the pleasure of your visit to have such things happen as this."

"Oh, don't worry about me!" I cried curtly. "Get the poor girl in. I'll look after her."

But as if she heard these words and was startled by them Lucetta roused in her brother's arms and struggled passionately to her feet. "Oh, what has happened to me?" she cried. "Have I said anything? William, have I said anything?" she asked wildly, clinging to her brother in terror.

He gave her a look and pushed her off. "What are you talking about?" he cried. "One would think you had something to conceal."

She staid herself up in an instant. "I am the weakest of the family," said she, walking straight up to me and taking me affectionately by the arm. "All my life I have been delicate and these turns are nothing new to me. Sometimes I think I will die in one of them; but I am quite restored now," she hastily added, as I could not help showing my concern. "See! I can walk quite alone." And she ran, rather than walked, up the few short steps of the porch, at which we had now arrived. "Don't tell Loren, she begged, as I followed her into the house. "She worries so about me and it will do no good."

William had stalked off toward the stables. We were therefore alone. I turned and laid a finger on her arm. "My dear, said I, "I never make promises of this kind, but I can be trusted never to heedlessly slight any one's wishes. If I see no good reason why I should tell your sister of this fainting fit, I shall certainly hold my peace."

She seemed moved by my manner, if not by my words. "Oh," she cried, seizing my hand and pressing it. "If I dared to tell you of my troubles! But it is impossible, quite impossible." And before I could urge a plea for her confidence she was gone, leaving me in the company of Hannah, who at this moment was busy herself with something at the other end of the hall.

I had no wish to interfere with Hannah just then. I had my letter to read and wished to do it undisturbed. So I slipped into the sitting room and carefully closed the door. Then I opened my letter.

It was, as I supposed, from Mr. Gryoo, and ran thus:

DEAR MISS BUTTERWORTH—I am astonished at your determination, but since your desire to visit your friends is such as to lead you to brave the dangers of Lost Man's Lane, allow me to suggest certain precautions which it is for our credit as well as your own that you regard.

"Ah," I cried; "some one sick in the house?"

The attack was too sudden. I saw her recoil and for one instant hesitate before replying. Then her natural self-possession came to her aid and she placidly remarked:

"We were all up to a late hour last night, as you know. It was necessary for us to have some food."

I accepted the explanation and made no further remarks, but as I had caught sight on the tray of the half eaten portion of a certain dish we had had for breakfast I reserved to myself the privilege of doubting its exact truthfulness.

To me the sight of this partially consumed breakfast was proof positive of there being in the house some person of whose presence I was supposed to be ignorant—not a pleasant thought under the circumstances, but quite an important fact to have established. I felt that in this discovery I had clutched the thread that would yet lead me out of the labyrinth of this mystery.

Miss Knollys, who was on her way down stairs, called Hannah to take the tray and, coming back, beckoned me toward a door opening into one of the front rooms.

"This is to be your room," said she, "but I do not know that I can move you today."

She was so calm, so perfectly mistress of herself, that I could not but admire her. Lucetta would have flushed and fidgeted, but Loren stood as erect and placid as if no trouble weighed upon her heart and the words were as unimportant in their character as they seemed.

"Do not distress yourself," said I. "I told Lucetta last night that I was perfectly comfortable and had no wish to change my quarters. I am sorry you should have thought it necessary to disturb yourself on my account last night. Don't do it again, I pray you. A woman like myself had rather put herself to some slight inconvenience than move."

"I am much obliged to you," said she and came at once from the door. I don't know but after all I like Lucetta's fidgety ways as well as this unmoved self-possession.

"Shall I order the coach for you?" she suddenly asked as I turned toward the corridor leading to my room.

"The coach?" I repeated.

"I thought that perhaps you might like to ride into town. Mr. Simsbury is at leisure this morning. I regret that neither Lucetta nor myself will be able to accompany you."

I thought what this same Mr. Simsbury had said about Lucetta's plan and hesitated. It was evidently their wish to have me spend my morning elsewhere than with them. Should I humor them or find excuses for remaining home. Either course had its difficulties. If I went, what might not take place in my absence. If I remained, what suspicions I might rouse. I decided to compromise matters and start for town even if I did not quite go there.

"I am hesitating," said I, "because I noticed when I was standing at the gate with your brother two or three rather threatening looking clouds toward the east. But if you are sure Mr. Simsbury can be spared I think I will risk it. I really would like to get a key for my door, and then riding in the country is so pleasant."

"Why do you go that way?" I cried. "Isn't it the longest way to the village?"

"It's the way I am most accustomed to," said he. "But we can go the other way if you like. Perhaps we will get a glimpse of Deacon Spear. He's a widower, you know."

The lever with which he said this was intolerable. I bridled up—but no, I will not admit that I so much as manifested by my manner that I understood him. I merely expressed my wish to go the old way.

He whipped up the horse at once, almost laughing outright. I began to think this man also capable of most any wicked deed. He was forced, however, to pull up suddenly. Directly in our road was the stooping figure of a woman. She did not move as we advanced, and so we had no alternative but to stop. Not till the horse's head touched her shoulder did she move. Then she rose up and looked at us somewhat indignantly.

"Didn't you hear us?" I asked, willing to open conversation with the old crone, whom I had no difficulty in recognizing as Mother Jane.

"She's deaf—deaf as a post," muttered Mr. Simsbury. "No use shouting at her." His tone was brusque, yet I noticed he waited with great patience for her to hobble out of the way.

Meanwhile I was watching the old creature with much interest. She had not a common face or a common manner. She was gray, she was toothless, she was haggard and she was bent, but she was not ordinary or just one of the crowd of old women to be seen on country doorsteps. There was force in her aged movements and a strong individuality in the glances she shot at us as she backed slowly out of the roadway.

"Do they say she is imbecile?" I asked. "She looks far from foolish to me."

"Hearken a bit," said he. "Don't you see she is muttering? She talks to herself all the time." And in fact her lips were moving.

"I cannot hear her," I said. "Make her come nearer. Somehow the old creature interests me."

her greed. I was inclined to think it the latter, for her portly figure was far from looking either ill fed or poorly cared for. Her dress was a decent calico and her pipe had evidently been lately filled, for I could smell the odor of tobacco about her. Indeed, as I afterward heard, the good people of X had never allowed her to suffer. Yet her fingers closed upon that coin as if in it she grasped the salvation of her life and into her eyes leaped a light that made her look almost young, though she must have been fully 80, if not more.

"What do you suppose she will do with that?" I asked Mr. Simsbury, as she turned away in an evident fear I might repent me of my bargain.

"Hark!" was his brief response. "She is talking now."

I did hark and heard these words fall from her quickly moving lips: "Seventy; 38, and now, 3 or 10, which shall it be?"

Jargon, for I had given her 25 cents, an amount quite different from any she had mentioned.

"Seventy!" She was repeating the figures again, this time in a tone of almost frenzied elation. "Seventy! Thirty-eight, and now 3 or 10! Won't Lizzie be surprised! Seventy! Thirty!—I heard no more—she had bounded into her cottage and shut the door."

"Well, what do you think of her now?" chuckled Mr. Simsbury, touching up his horse. "She's always like that, saying over numbers and muttering about Lizzie. Lizzie was her daughter. Forty years ago she ran off with a man from Boston, and for 38 years she's been lying in a Massachusetts grave. But her mother still thinks she is alive and is coming back. Nothing will ever make her think different. But she's harmless, perfectly harmless. You needn't be afraid of her."

This because I cast a look behind me of more than ordinary curiosity, I suppose. Why were they all so sure she was harmless? I had thought her expression a little alarming at times, especially when she took the money from my hand. If I had refused it or even held it back a little, I think she would have

You'll see him in his old place tomorrow." And she drew back as if in polite intimation that we might drive on.

Mr. Simsbury responded to the suggestion, and in another moment we were trotting down the road. Had we staid a minute longer, I think the child would have said something more or less interesting to hear. She looked bursting with a desire for gossip, but then, goodness me, who wouldn't if obliged, like her, to sit in one window the half of the life you did not spend in a little dark bedroom under the eaves of a cottage whose whole dimensions could be embraced by the walls of my parlor?

The horse which had brought us thus far at a pretty sharp trot now began to lag as we drew into town, taking up so much of Mr. Simsbury's attention that he forgot to answer even by a grunt more than half of my questions. He spent most of his time looking at the nag's hind feet, and finally, just as we came in sight of the stores, he fumed his tongue sufficiently to announce that the horse was casting a shoe and that he would be obliged to go to the blacksmith's with her.

"Humph, and how long will that take?" I asked.

He hesitated so long, rubbing his nose with his finger, that I grow suspicious and cast a glance at the horse's foot myself. The shoe was loose. I began to hear it clang.

"Well, it may be a matter of a couple of hours," he finally drawled. "We have no blacksmith in town, and the ride up there is twofold. Sorry it happened, ma'am, but there's shops here, you see, and I've allers heard that a woman can easily spend two hours haggling away in shops."

I glanced at the two ill furnished windows he pointed out, thought of Arnold & Constable's, Tiffany's and the other New York establishments I had been in the habit of visiting and suppressed my disdain. Either the man was a fool or he was acting a part in the interests of Lucetta and her family. I rather inclined to the latter supposition. If the plan was to keep me out most of the morning, why could that shoe not have been loosened before he left the stable?

"I made all necessary purchases while in New York," said I, "but if you must get the horse shod, why, take him off and do it. I suppose there is a hotel parlor near here where I can sit."

"Oh, yes," and he made haste to point out to me where the hotel stood. "And it's a very nice place, ma'am. Mrs. Carter, the landlady, is the nicest sort of person. Only you won't try to go home, ma'am, on foot? You'll wait till I can come back for you."

"It isn't likely I'll go streaking through Lost Man's Lane alone," I exclaimed indignantly. "I'd rather sit in Mrs. Carter's parlor till night."

"And I would advise you to," he said. "No use making gossip for the village folks. They have enough to talk about as it is."

Not exactly seeing the force of this reasoning, but quite willing, seeing that he had no intention of taking me back at once, that he should leave me to my own devices as soon as possible, I pointed to a locksmith's shop I saw near by and bade him put me down there.

With a sniff I might have interpreted in any way, he drove up to the spot I pointed out and awkwardly assisted me to alight.

"Trunk key missing?" he ventured before getting back into his seat. I did not think it necessary to answer him, but walked immediately into the shop. I thought he looked dissatisfied at this, but whatever were his feelings he mounted presently to his place and drove off. I was left confronting the lock fitting interests in X.

I found some difficulty in broaching my errand. Finally I said: "Miss Knollys, who lives up the road over there, wishes a key fitted to one of her doors. Will you come or send up there today? She was too occupied to see about it herself."

The man must have been struck by my appearance, for he stared at me quite curiously for a minute. Then he gave a hen and a haw and said: "Certainly. What kind of a door is it?" When I had answered, he gave me another curious glance and seemed uneasy to step back to where his assistant was working with a file.

"You will be sure to come in time to have the lock fitted by night," I said in that peremptory manner of mine which means simply, "I attend to things when and where I promise and expect you to do the same."

His "Certainly" struck me as a little weaker this time, possibly because his curiosity was excited. "Are you the lady who is staying with them from New York?" he asked, stepping back, seemingly quite unawed by my positive demeanor.

I don't think you would find any one in this village that would sleep there all night."

"A pleasing preparation for my rest tonight," I grimly laughed. "Dangers on the road and ghosts in the house. Happily I don't believe in the latter."

The gesture he made showed incredulity. He had ceased rapping with the key or even to show any wish to join his assistant. All his thoughts for the moment seemed to be concentrated on me.

"You don't know little Rob," he inquired, "the crippled lad who lives at the head of the lane?"

"No," I said. "I haven't been in town a day yet, but I mean to know Rob and his sister too. Two cripples in one family never my interest."

He did not say why he had spoken of him, but began tapping with his key again.

"And you are sure you saw nothing?" he whispered. "Lots of things can happen in a lonely road like that."

"Not if everybody is as afraid to enter it as you say your villagers are," I retorted.

But he didn't yield a jot. "Some folks don't mind present dangers," said he. "Spirits!"

But he received no encouragement in his return to this topic. "You don't believe in spirits?" said he. "Well, they are doubtful sort of folks, but when honest and respectable people such as live in this town, when children even, see what answers to nothing but phantoms, then I remember what a wise man than any of us once said—'But perhaps you don't read Shakespeare, madam!'"

Nonplused for the moment, but interested in the man's talk more than was consistent with my need of haste, I said with some spirit, for it struck me as very ridiculous that this country mechanic should question my knowledge of the greatest dramatist of all time, "Shakespeare and the Bible form the staple of my reading." At which he gave me a little nod of apology and hastened to remark:

"Then you know what I mean—Hannibal's remark to Horatio, madam. 'There are more things, etc.' Your memory will readily supply you with the words."

I signified my satisfaction and perfect comprehension of his meaning, and feeling that something more important lay behind his words than had yet appeared I endeavored to make him speak more explicitly.

"The Misses Knollys show no terror of their home," I observed. "They cannot believe in spirits either."

"Miss Knollys is a woman of a great deal of character," said he. "But look at Lucetta. There is a face for you, for a girl not yet out of her twenties, and such a round checked lass as she was once! Now what has made the change? The sights and sounds of that old house, I say. Nothing else would give her that scared look—nothing merely mortal, I mean."

"This was going a step too far. I could not discuss Lucetta with this stranger, much as I would like to have known just what he had to say about her."

"I don't know," I remonstrated, taking up my black satin bag, without which I never stir. "One would think the terrors of the lane she lives in might account for some appearance of fear on her part."

"Yes," said he, but with no very hearty admittance, "so it might. But Lucetta has never spoken of those dangers. The people in the lane do not seem to fear them at all. It is we outsiders who don't know what to make of the thing. Even Deacon Spear says that, set aside the wickedness of the thing, he rather enjoys the quiet which the ill repute of the lane gives him. I don't understand this myself. I have no relish for mysteries like that or for ghosts either."

"You won't forget the key," I said, preparing to walk out, in my dread lest he would introduce again the subject of Lucetta.



"LUCETTA IS A FOOL," HE CRIED.

He at once beckoned to the crone, but he might as well have beckoned to the tree against which she had pushed herself. She neither answered him nor gave any indication that she understood the gesture he had made. Yet her eyes never moved from our faces.

"Well, well," said I, "she seems dull as well as deaf. You had better drive on." But before he could give the necessary jerk to the reins I caught sight of some pennyroyal growing about the front of the cottage a few steps beyond, and pointing to it with some eagerness I cried: "If there isn't some of the very herb I want to take home with me! Do you think she would give me a handful of it if I paid her?"

With an obliging grunt he again pulled up. "If you can make her understand," said he.

I thought it worth the effort. Though Mr. Gryoo had been at pains to tell me there was no harm in this woman and that I need not even consider her in my inquiries I remembered that Mr. Gryoo had sometimes made mistakes in just such matters as these and that Amelia Butterworth had felt herself called upon to set him right. If that could happen once, why not twice? At all events, I was not going to lose the least chance of making the acquaintance of the people living in this lane. Had he not himself said that only in this way could we hope to come upon the clew that had eluded all open efforts to find it?

Knowing that the sight of money was the strongest appeal that could be made to one living in such abject poverty as this woman, making the blind to see and the deaf to hear, I drew out my purse and held up before her a piece of silver. She bounded as if she had been shot, and when I held it toward her she came greedily forward and stood close beside the wheels looking up.

"For you," I indicated, after making a motion toward the plant which had attracted my attention.

She looked from me to the herb and nodded with quick appreciation. As in a flash she seemed to take in the fact that I was a stranger, a city lady with memories of the country and this humble plant, and going to it with the same swiftness she had displayed in advancing to the carriage, she tore off several of the sprays and brought them back to me, holding out her hand for the money.

I had never seen greater eagerness and I think even Mr. Simsbury was astonished at this proof of her poverty or

fallen upon me tooth and nail. I wished I could have had a peep into her cottage. Mr. Gryoo had described it as four walls and nothing more, and indeed it was not only of the humblest proportions, but had the look of being a mere shanty raised to protect her from the weather. There was even no yard attached to it, only a little open place in front in which a few of the commonest vegetables grew, such as turnips, carrots and onions. Elsewhere grew the forest—the great pine forest through which this portion of the road ran.

Mr. Simsbury had been so talkative up to now that I was in hope he would enter into some details about the persons and things we encountered which might assist me in the acquaintanceship I was anxious to make. But his loquaciousness ended with this small adventure I have just described. Not till we were well quit of the pines and had entered into the main thoroughfare did he deign to respond to any of my suggestions, and then it was in a manner totally unsatisfactory and quite noncommunicative. The only thing he deigned to offer a remark upon was the little crippled child we saw looking from his window as we emerged from the forest.

"Why, how's this?" said he. "That's Sue you see there, and her time isn't till arter noon. Bob allers sits there of a mornin'. I wonder if the little chap's sick. S'pose I ask."

As this was just what I would have suggested if he had given me time, I nodded complacently, and we drove up and stopped.

The piping voice of the child at once spoke up: "How d'ye do, Mr. Simsbury? Ma's in the kitchen. Bob isn't feelin' good today."

I thought her tone had a touch of mysteriousness in it. I greeted the pale little thing and asked if Bob was often sick.

"Never," she answered, "except, like me, he cannot walk. But I'm not to talk about it, ma says. I'd like to, but—"

Ma's face appearing at this moment over her shoulder put an end to this innocent garrulity.

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