

LOST MAN'S LANE.

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

CHAPTER XXIII

Ere they reached the foot a doubt struck me. Would it be better to follow them or to take the opportunity of every member of the household being engaged in this task to take a peep into the room where the death had occurred? I had not decided when I heard them take the forward course from the foot of the stairs to what to my straining ear seemed to be the entrance to the dining room corridor. But as in my anxiety to determine this fact I slipped far enough forward to make sure that their destination lay somewhere within reach of the flower parlor, I was so struck by the advantages to be gained by a cautious use of the trapdoor in William's room that I hesitated no longer, but sped with what swiftness I could toward the spot from which I had so lately heard this strange procession come.

A narrow band of light lying across the upper end of this long corridor proved that the door was not only ajar, but that a second candle was burning in the room I was about to so daringly invade, but this was scarcely to be regretted since there could be no question of the emptiness of the room. The six figures I had seen go by embraced every one who by any possibility could be considered as having part in this transaction—William, Mr. Simsbury, Miss Knollys, Lucetta, Hannah and Mother Jane. No one else was left to guard this room, so I pushed the door open quite boldly and entered.

What I saw there I will relate later, or, rather, I will but hint at now. There were a bed with a sheet thrown back, a stand covered with vials, a bureau with a man's shaving paraphernalia upon it, and on the wall such pictures as only sporting gentlemen delight in. The candle was guttering on a small table upon which, to my momentary astonishment, a Bible lay open. Not having my glasses with me, I could not see what portion of the sacred word was thus disclosed, but I took the precaution to indent the upper leaf with my thumb nail, that I might find it again in case of future opportunity. My attention was attracted by other small matters that would be food for thought at a more propitious moment, but at that instant the sound of voices coming distinctly to my ear from below warned me that a halt had been made at the flower parlor and that the duty of the moment was to locate the trapdoor and if possible determine the means of raising it.

This was less difficult than I anticipated. Either this room was regarded as so safe from intrusion that a secret like this could be safely left unguarded, or the door which was plainly to be seen in one corner had been lately lifted that it had hardly sunk back into its place. I found it, if the expression may be used of a horizontal object, slightly ajar and needing but the slightest pull to make it spring upright and remain so by means of some mechanical contrivance. I will not attempt to describe the hole thus disclosed was filled with the little staircase up which I had partly mounted in my daring explorations of the day before. It was dark now, darker than it was then, but I felt I must descend by it, for plainly to be heard now through the crack in the closet door, which seemed to have a knack of standing partly open, I could hear the heavy tread of the six bearers as they entered the parlor below still carrying their burden, concerning the destination of which I was so anxious to gain a clue.

That it could be here I knew to be too improbable for consideration. Yet if they took up their stand in this room it was for a purpose, and what that purpose was I was determined to know. The noise their feet made on the bare boards of the floor and the few words I now heard uttered in William's stolid tones and Lucetta's musical treble assured me that my own light steps in the softest of felt slippers would no more be heard than my dark gown of quiet wool would be seen through the narrow slit through which I was preparing to peer. Yet it took no small degree of what my father used to call pluck for me to put foot on this winding staircase and descend almost as it were in the midst of what I must regard as the last wicked act of a most cowardly and brutal murder.

I did it, however, and after a short but grim communion with my own heart, which would persist in beating somewhat noisily, I leaned forward with all the precaution possible and let my gaze traverse the chamber in which I had previously seen such horrors as should have prepared me for this last and greatest one.

In a moment I understood the whole. A long square hole in the floor, lately sawed, provided an opening through which the plain plank coffin, of which I now caught sight, was to be lowered into the cellar and the grave which had doubtless been dug there. The ropes in the hands of the six persons, in whose identity I had made no mistake, was proof enough of their intention, and, satisfied as I now was of the means and mode of the interment which had been such a boundless mystery to me, I shrank a step upward, fearing lest my indignation and the horror I could not now but feel for Althea's children would betray me into some exclamation which might lead to my discovery and a similar fate.

One other short glance, in which I saw them all ranged around the dark opening, and I was up out of their reach, Lucetta's face and Lucetta's one sob as the ropes began to creak being the one memory which followed me the most persistently. She, at least, was overwhelmed with remorse for a deed she was perhaps only answerable for in that she failed to make known to the world her brother's madness and the horrible crimes to which it gave rise.

I took one other look around his room before I fled to my own, or, rather, to the one in which I had taken refuge while my own was under lock and key. That I spent the next two hours on my knees no one can wonder. When my own door was unlocked, as it was before the day broke, I hastened in there and lay my head with all its unhappy knowledge on my pillow. But I did not sleep. The oddest thing of all this was that I never once thought of giving a single note from the whistle which would have brought the police into that abode of crime. Perhaps it was a wise omission. I had seen enough that was horrible for one night without beholding Althea's children arrested before my eyes.

I rose at my usual hour. I dressed myself with my usual care. I was, to a superficial observer at least, in all respects my usual self when Hannah came to my door to ask what she could do for me. As there was nothing I wanted but to get out of this house, which certainly was now made unbearable to me, I replied with the utmost cheerfulness that my wants were all supplied and that I would soon be down, at which she answered that in that case she must bestir herself or the breakfast would not be ready and hurried away.

There was no one in the dining room when I entered, and judging from appearances that it would be some minutes yet before breakfast would be ready, I took occasion to stroll through the grounds and glance up at the window of William's room. The knot of crape was gone.

I would have gone farther, but just then I heard a great rushing and scampering and, looking up, saw an enormous dog approaching at full gallop from the stables. Saracen was loose.

I did not scream or give way to other feminine expressions of fear, but I did return as quickly as possible to the house, where I now saw I must remain till William chose to take me into town. This I was determined should take place as soon after breakfast as practicable. The knowledge which I now possessed warranted, nay demanded, instant consultation with the police, and as this could best be effected by following out the orders I had received from Mr. Gryce I did not consider any other method than that of meeting the man on duty in room No. 3 at the hotel.

Loreen, Lucetta and William were awaiting me in the hall and made no apology for the flurry into which I had been thrown by my rapid escape from Saracen. Indeed I doubt if they noticed it, for with all the attempt they made to seem gay and at ease the anxieties and fatigue of the foregoing nights were telling upon them, and from Miss Knollys down they looked physically exhausted. But they also looked mentally relieved. In the clear depths of Lucetta's eye there was now no wavering, and the head which was always turning in anxious anticipation over her shoulder rested firm, though not as erect as her sister's, who had less cause perhaps for regret and sorrow.

William was jovial to a degree, but it was a forced joviality which only became real when he heard a sudden, quick bark under the window and the sound of scraping paws against the mastic coating of the wall outside. Then he broke into a loud laugh of unrestrained pleasure, crying out thoughtlessly: "There's Saracen. How quick he knows!"

A warning look from Lucetta stopped him. "I mean," he stammered, "that it's a dull dog who does not know where his master is. Miss Butterworth"—he was absolutely unrestrained in his restored self confidence—"you will have to overcome your fear of dogs if you stay with us long. Saracen is unbound this morning, and"—he used a great oath—"he's going to remain so."

By which I came to understand that it was not out of consideration for me he had been tied up in the court till now, but for reasons connected with their own safety and the preservation of the secret which they so evidently believed had been buried with the body, which I did not like to remember lay at that very minute too nearly under our feet for my own individual comfort.

However, this has nothing to do with the reply I made to William.

"I hope," said I, "he does not run with the buggy. I want to take a ride very much this morning and could get great pleasure out of it if that dog must be our companion."

"I cannot go out this morning," William began, but changed his sentence, possibly at the touch of his sister's foot under the table, into: "But if you say I must, why, I must. You women folks are so plagued changeable. Yesterday I wanted to go; today I don't, but don't let that make any difference to you. A host must follow the wishes of his guest."

Had he been ten years younger I

would have coaxed his ears; had he been that much older I would have taken one and packed up my trunk before he could have finished the cup of coffee he was drinking. But he was just too old to reprimand—that is, in that way, and not old enough to appreciate any display of personal dignity or self respect. Besides, he was a knave; so I just let his impertinence pass with the remark: "I have purchases to make in the village," and so that matter ended, manifestly to the two girls' relief, who naturally did not like to see me insulted even if they did not possess sufficient power over their brother to prevent it.

One other small episode and then I will take you with me to the village. As we were leaving the table, where I ate less than common, notwithstanding all my efforts to seem perfectly unconcerned except at those demonstrations of Saracen, from which they all expected me to shrink, Lucetta, who had waited for her brother to go out, took me gently by the arm, and, looking at me closely, said: "Did you have any dreams last night, Miss Butterworth? You know I promised you some."

I was a little taken aback and for a moment felt like taking those two girls into my confidence and bidding them fly from the shame and doom so soon to fall upon their brother, but the real principle underlying all such momentary impulses on my part deterred me, and in as light a tone as I could assume and not be an absolute hypocrite I replied that I was sorry to disappoint her, but I had no dreams, which seemed to please her more than it should, for if I had had no dreams I certainly had suffered from the most dreadful realities.

I will not describe that ride into town. Saracen did go with us, and indignation not only rendered me speechless, but gave to my thoughts a turn which made that half hour of very little value to me. Mother Jane's burly figure crouching in her doorway might otherwise have given me opportunity



I SHRANK A STEP UPWARD.

for remark, and so might the dubious looks of people we met on the high-road—looks to which I am so wholly unaccustomed that I had difficulty in recognizing myself as the butt of so much doubt and possibly dislike. I attributed this, however, all to the ill repute under which William so deservedly labored and did not allow myself to more than notice it. Indeed, I could only be sorry for people who did not know in what consideration I was held at home and who, either through ignorance or prejudice, allowed themselves privileges they would be the first to regret did they know the heart and mind of the real Amelia Butterworth.

Once in the village, I took the direction of affairs.

"Set me down at the hotel," said I, "and then go about such business as you may have here in town. I am not going to allow myself to be tracked all over by that dog."

"I have no business," was the surly reply.

"Then make some," was my sharp retort. "I want to see the locksmith—that locksmith who wouldn't come to do an honest piece of work for me in your house, and I want to buy dummies and wools and sewing silks at the dry goods store over there. Indeed I have a thousand things to do and expect to spend half the morning before the counters. Why, man, I haven't done any shopping for a week."

He gaped at me perfectly aghast (as I meant he should) and, having but little experience of city ladies to go by, took me at my word and prepared to beat my ten minutes later standing on the top step of the hotel porch, watching William driving away with Saracen perched on the seat beside him. Then I realized that the village held no companions for his glad and did not know whether I felt him or sorry.

To the clerk who came to meet me I said quietly, "Room No. 3 if you please," at which he gave a nod of intelligence and led me as unostentatiously as possible into a small hall, at the end of which I saw the number I had asked for.

"If you will take a seat inside," said he, "I will send you whatever you may desire for your comfort."

"I think you know what that is," said I, at which he nodded again and

left me, closing the door carefully behind him as he went.

The few minutes which elapsed before my quiet was disturbed were spent by me in thinking. I had not only information to give to the police, but I had many little questions to settle in my own mind, for which a spell of interrupted contemplation was necessary. One of these was whether, in the event of finding the police amenable, I should reveal or hide from these children of my old friend the fact that it was through my instrumentality that their nefarious secret had been discovered. I wished—I hoped—that the affair might be so concluded, but it all seemed so impossible, especially since Mr. Gryce was not on hand to direct matters, that I spent very little time on this subject, deep and important as it was to all concerned.

The thing to which I devoted my most serious attention was the necessity of telling my story so as to exonerate the girls as much as possible. They were mistaken in their devotion and most unhappy in the exercise of it, but they were not innately wicked and should not be made to appear so. Perhaps the one thing for which I should yet have the best cause to congratulate myself would be the opportunity I had gained to give to their connection with the affair its true and proper coloring.

I was still dwelling on this thought when there came a knock at my door which advised me that the visitor I expected had arrived. To open and admit him was the work of a moment, but it took more than a moment for me to overcome my surprise at seeing in my visitor no lesser person than Mr. Gryce himself, who in our parting interview had assured me he was too old and too feeble for such affairs and must therefore delegate them to me.

"Ah!" I ejaculated slowly. "It is you, is it? Well, I am not surprised. (I shouldn't have been.) When you say you are old, you mean old enough to pull the wool over other people's eyes, and

is I am not ready yet to state.

"You and I have come to issue over such matters before," said he, "and therefore need not take too much account of the feelings it is likely to engender. I will merely state that my clew points to Mother Jane and ask if you have found in the visit she paid at the house last night anything which would go to strengthen the suspicion against her."

"Perhaps," said I in a state of disdain that was more or less unparliamentary, considering that my own suspicions previous to my discovery of the real tragedy enacted under my eyes at the Knollys mansion had played more or less about this old cron.

"Only perhaps?" He smiled, with a playful forbearance with my mood for which I should have been truly grateful to him.

"She was there for no good purpose," said I, "and yet if you had not characterized her as the person most responsible for the crimes we are here to investigate I should have said from all that I saw then and previously of her conduct that she acted as a supernumerary rather than principal, and that it is to you should look for the correct clew to the criminal, notwithstanding your confidence in your own theories and my momentary hesitation to assert that there was no possible defect in mine."

"Miss Butterworth,"—I thought he looked a trifle shaken—"what did Mother Jane do in that closely shuttered house last night?"

"Mother Jane? Well! Did he think I was going to introduce my tragic story by telling what Mother Jane did? I must have looked irritated, and indeed I think I had cause."

"Mother Jane ate her supper," I snapped out angrily. "Miss Knollys gave it to her. Then she helped a little with a piece of work they had on hand. It will not interest you to know what. It has nothing to do with your clew, I warrant."

He did not get angry. He has an admirable temper, has Mr. Gryce, but he did stop a minute to consider.

"Miss Butterworth," he said at last, "most detectives would have held their peace and let you go on with what you have to tell without a hint that it was either unwelcome or unnecessary, but I have consideration for persons' feelings and for persons' secrets so long as they do not come in collision with the law, and my opinion is, or was when I entered this room, that such discoveries as you have made at your old friend's house (why need he emphasize friend—did he think I forgot for a moment that Althea was my friend?) were connected rather with some family difficulty than with the dreadful affair we are considering. That is why I hastened to tell you that we had found a clew to the disappearances and in Mother Jane's cottage. I wished to save this Miss Knollys."

If he had thought to mollify me this way, he did not succeed. He saw it and made haste to say:

"Not that I doubt your consideration for them, only the justness of your conclusions."

"You have doubted those before and with more reason," I replied, "yet they were not altogether false."

"That I am willing to acknowledge, so willing that if you still think after I have told my story that yours is apropos and touches the case then I will listen to it only too eagerly. My object is to find the real criminal in this matter. I say at the present moment it is Mother Jane."

"God grant it is so," I said, influenced in spite of myself by the calm assurance of his manner. "If she was at the house night before last between 11 and 12, then perhaps she is. But I see no reason to believe it—not yet, Mr. Gryce. Supposing you give me one. It would be better than all this talk. One small reason, Mr. Gryce, as good as that—I did not say what, but the fillip it gave to his intention stood me in good stead, for he launched immediately into the matter with no further play upon my curiosity, which was now, as you can believe, thoroughly aroused, though I could not believe that anything he had to bring up against Mother Jane could for a moment stand against the death and burial I had seen and almost played a part in in Miss Knollys' house during the two previous nights."

(To be continued next Saturday.)

Is Baby Too Thin?

If so, there must be some trouble with its food. Well babies are plump; only the sick are thin. Are you sure the food is all right? Children can't help but grow; they must grow if their food nourishes them. Perhaps a mistake was made in the past and as a result the digestion is weakened. If that is so, don't give the baby a lot of medicine; just use your every-day common sense and help nature a little, and the way to do it is to add half a teaspoonful of

SCOTT'S EMULSION

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