

LOREAN MAN'S PLANE

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

CHAPTER XXX.

I was overwhelmed. "What," said I, "you still doubt?" "I always doubt," he gravely replied. "This cellar bottom offers a wide field for speculation. Too wide, perhaps, but I have a plan."

Here he leaned over and whispered a few concise sentences in my ear in a tone so low I should feel that I was betraying his confidence in repeating them. But their import will soon become apparent from what presently occurred.

"Light Miss Butterworth to the stairway," Mr. Gryce now commanded one of the men, and thus accompanied I found my way back to the kitchen, where Hannah was bemoaning uncomfited the shame which had come upon the house.

I did not stop to soothe her. That was not my cue, nor would it have answered my purpose. On the contrary, I exclaimed as I passed her:

"What a shame! Those wretches cannot be got away from the cellar. What do you suppose they expect to find there? I left them poking hither and thither in a way that will be very irritating to Miss Knollys if she is such a woman as I am. I wonder William stands it."

What she said in reply I do not know. I was half way down the hall before my own words were finished.

My next move was to go to my room, where I had among other small necessities a tiny hammer and some small, very sharp pointed tacks. Curious articles, you will think, for a woman to carry on her travels, but I am a woman of experience and have known only too often what it was to want those petty conveniences and not be able to get them. They were to serve me an odd turn now. Taking a half dozen tacks in my hand and concealing the hammer in one bag, I started boldly for William's room. I knew that the girls were not there, for I had heard them talking together in the sitting room when I came up. Besides, if they were, I had a ready answer for any demand they might make.

Searching out his boots, I turned them over, and into the sole of each I drove one of my small tacks. Then I put them back in the same place and position in which I found them. Task No. 1 was done.

When I issued from the room, I went as quickly as I could below. I was now ready for a talk with the girls, whom I found as I had anticipated, talking and weeping together in the sitting room.

They rose as I came in, awaiting my first words in evident anxiety. They had not heard me go up stairs. I immediately let my anxiety and only too deep interest in this matter have full play.

"My poor girls! What is the meaning of this? Your mother just dead, and the matter kept from me, her friend! It is astounding—incomprehensible! I do not know what to make of it or of you."

"It has a strange look," said Lorean gravely, but we had reasons, Miss Butterworth. Our mother, charming and sweet as you remember her, has not always done right, or what you will better understand, committed a criminal act against a person in this town, the penalty of which is state's prison."

With difficulty the words came out. With difficulty she kept down the flush of shame which threatened to overwhelm her and did overwhelm her more sensitive sister. But her self control was great, and she went bravely on, while I, in faint imitation of her courage, restrained my own surprise and intolerable sense of shock and bitter sorrow under a guise of simple sympathy.

"It was forgery," she said. "This has never before passed our lips. Though a cherished wife and a beloved mother she longed for many things that my father could not give her, and in an evil hour she imitated the name of a rich man here and took the check thus signed to Hartford. The fraud was not detected, and she received the money, but ultimately the rich man whose money she had spent discovered the use she had made of his name, and if she had not escaped would have had her arrested. But she left the country, and the only revenge he took was to swear that if she ever set foot again in X, he would call the police down upon her. Yes, if she were dying, and they had to drag her from the brink of the grave. And he would have done it, and knowing this we have lived under the shadow of this fear for 11 years. My father died under it, and my mother—ah, she spent all her life under foreign skies, but when she felt the hand of death upon her affection for her own flesh and blood triumphed over her discretion, and she came, secretly, I own, but still with that horror menacing her, to these doors, and begging our forgiveness lay down under the roof where we were born and died with the halo of our love about her."

"Ah," said I, thinking of all that had happened since I had come into this house and finding nothing but confirmation of what she was saying, "I begin to understand."

But Lucetta shook her head. "No," said she, "you cannot understand yet. We who had worn mourning for her because my father wished to make this very return impossible knew nothing of what was in store for us till a letter came saying she would be at the C. station on the very night we received it. To acknowledge our deception, to

seek and bring her home openly to this house, could not be thought of for a moment. How then could we satisfy her dying wishes without compromising her memory or ourselves? Perhaps you have guessed, Miss Butterworth. You have had time since we revealed the unhappy secret of this household."

"Yes," said I, "I have guessed."

Lucetta, with her hand laid on mine, looked wistfully into my face. "Ah," she said, "when we saw her, she was driven up to our doorstep through the weeds and grass, and William, who had not dared to go to C. lest our stratagem should fail, stepped down to the carriage and lifted her out in his arms. It was while she still clung to him, with her face pressed close against his breast, that Lorean and I first saw her, our mother, yet so small, the smallest of us all. She was wan, but happy and very near to death. Lorean and I blessed God as we carried her up the stairs and laid her in the great front chamber. We did not foresee what would happen the very next morning—I mean the arrival of your telegram, to be followed so soon by yourself."

"Poor girls! Poor girls!" It was all I could say. I was completely overwhelmed.

"The first night after your arrival we moved her into William's room as being more remote and thus a safer refuge for her. The next night she died. The dream which you had of being locked in your room was no dream. Lorean did that in foolish precaution against your trying to search us out in the night. It would have been better now, I see, if we had taken you into our confidence."

"Yes," said I, "that would have been better." But I did not say how much better. That would have been giving away my secret.

"William, who is naturally colder than we and less sensitive in regard to her good name, has shown some little impatience at the restraint imposed upon him, and this was an extra burden, Miss Butterworth, but that and all the others we have been forced to bear (the generous girl did not speak of her own special grief and loss) have all been rendered useless by the unhappy chance which has brought into our midst this agent of the police. Ah, if I only knew whether this was the providence of God rebuking us or just the malice of man seeking to rob us of our one best treasure, a mother's untarnished name!"

"Mr. Gryce acts from no malice!"—I began, but I saw they were not listening.

"Are they done down below?" asked Lucetta.

"Does the man you call Gryce seem satisfied?" asked Lorean.

I drew myself up physically and mentally. My second task was about to begin.

"I do not understand those men," said I. "They seem to want to look farther than the sacred spot where we left them. If they are going through a form, they are doing it very thoroughly."

"That is their duty," said Lorean, but Lucetta took it less calmly.

"It is an unhappy day for us," cried she. "Shame after shame, disgrace after disgrace. I wish we had all died in our childhood. Lorean, I must see William. He will be doing some foolish thing, swearing or—"

"My dear," said I, "let me go to William. He may not like me over-much, but I will at least prove a restraint to him. You are too feeble. See, you ought to be lying on the couch instead of trying to drag yourself out to the stables."

And indeed at that moment Lucetta's strength gave suddenly out, and she sank into Lorean's arms insensible.

When she was restored, I hurried away to the stables, still in pursuit of the task which I had not yet completed. I found William sitting doggedly on a stool in the open doorway, grunting out short sentences to the two men who lounged in his vicinity on either side. He was angry, but not as angry as I had seen him times before. The men were townfolk and listened eagerly to his broken sentences. One or two of these reached my ears.

"Let 'em go. It won't be now or today they'll settle this business. It's the devil's work, and devils are sly. My house won't give up that secret, or any other house they'll be likely to visit. The place I would ransack—But Lorean would say I was babbling. Goodness knows a fellow's got to talk about something when his fellow townfolk come to see him." And here his laugh broke in harsh, cruel and insulting. I felt it did him no good and made haste to show myself.

Immediately his whole appearance changed. He was so astonished to see me there that for a moment he was absolutely silent; then he broke out again into another loud guffaw, but this time in a different tone.

"Ah, ha," he laughed, "Miss Butterworth! Here, Saracen. Come, pay your respects to the lady who likes you so well."

And Saracen came, but I did not forsake my ground. I had seen what I hoped to see in one corner, and Saracen's presence afforded me the opportunity of indulging in one or two rather curious performances.

"I am not afraid of the dog," said I, with marked loftiness, shrinking toward the pail of water I had already marked with my eye. "Not at all afraid," I

continued, catching up the pail and putting it between us as the dog made a wild dash in my direction. "These gentlemen will not see me hurt." And though they all laughed—they would have been fools if they had not—and the dog jumped the pail and I jumped, not a pail, but a broom handle that was lying amid all the rest of the disorder on the floor, they did not see that I had succeeded in doing what I wished, which was to place that pail so near to William's feet that—But wait a moment, everything in its own time. I escaped the dog, and next moment had my eye on him. He did not move after that, which rather put a stop to the laughter, which seeing I drew very near to William, and with a sly gesture to the two men, which for some reason they seemed to understand, whispered in the rude fellow's ear:

"They've found your mother's grave under the flower parlor. Your sisters told me to tell you. But that is not all. They're trampling hither and yon through all the secret places in the cellar, turning up the earth with their spades. I know they won't find anything, but we thought you ought to know."

Here I made a feint of being startled, and ceased. My second task was done. The third only remained. Fortunately at that moment Mr. Gryce and his followers showed themselves in the garden. They had just come from the cellar and played their part in the same spirit I had mine. Though they were too far for their words to be heard, the air of secrecy and the dubious looks they cast toward the stable could not but have even to William's dull understanding that their investigations had resulted in a doubt which left them far from satisfied, but, once this impression made, they did not linger long together. The man with the lantern moved off, and Mr. Gryce turned toward us, changing his whole appearance as he advanced till no one could look more cheerful and good humored.

"Well, that is over," said he. "Mere form, Mr. Knollys—mere form. We have to go through these things at times, and good people like yourself have to submit, but I assure you it is not pleasant, and under the present circumstances—I am sure you understand me, Mr. Knollys—the task has occasioned me a feeling almost of remorse, but that is inseparable from a detective's life. He is obliged every day of his life to ride over the tenderest emotions. Forgive me! And now, you boys scatter till I call you together again. I hope our next search will be without such sorrowful accompaniments."

It succeeded. William stared at him and stared at the men slowly filed off down the yard, but was not for a moment deceived by these overflowing expressions. On the contrary, he looked more concerned than he had while seated between the two men manifestly set to guard him.

"The deuce!" he cried, with a shrug of his shoulders that expressed anything but satisfaction. "Lucetta always said—But even he knew enough not to finish that sentence, low as he had mumbled it. Watching him and watching Mr. Gryce, who at that moment turned to follow his men, I thought the time had come for action. Making another spring as if in fresh terror of Saracen, who, by the way, was eying me with the meekness of a lamb, I tipped over that pail with such suddenness and with such dexterity that its whole contents poured in one flood over William's feet. And my third task was accomplished.

The oath he uttered and the excuses which I most volubly poured forth could not have reached Mr. Gryce's ears, for he did not turn. And yet from the way his shoulders shook as he disappeared around the corner of the house I judge that he was not entirely ignorant of the subterfuge by which I hoped to force this blundering booby of ours to change the boots he wore for one of the pairs into which I had driven those little tacks.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RELIEF.

The plan succeeded. Mr. Gryce's plans usually do. William went immediately to his room, and in a little while came down and hastened into the cellar.

"I want to see what mischief they have done," said he.

When he came back, his face was beaming.

"All right," he shouted to his sisters, who had come into the hall to meet him. "Your secret's out, but—"

"There, there!" interposed Lorean. "you had better go up stairs and prepare for supper. We must eat, William, or rather, Miss Butterworth must eat, whatever our sorrows or disappointments."

He took the rebuke with a grunt and relieved us of his company. Little did he think as he went whistling up the stairs that he had just shown Mr. Gryce where to search for whatever might be lying under the broad sweep of that cellar bottom.

That night—it was after supper, which I did not eat for all my natural stoicism—Hannah came rushing in where we all sat silent, for the girls showed no disposition to enlarge their confidences in regard to their mother, and no other topic seemed possible, and closing the door behind her, said quickly and with evident chagrin:

"Those men are here again. They say they forgot something. What do you think it means, Miss Lorean? They have spades and lanterns and—"

"They are the police, Hannah. If they forgot something, they have the right to return. Don't work yourself up about that. The secret they have already found out was our worst. There is nothing to fear after that." And she dismissed Hannah, merely bidding her let us know when the house was quite clear.

Was she right? Was there nothing worse for them to fear? I longed to leave these trembling sisters, longed to join the party below and follow with them the tiny impressions made by the tacks

I had driven into William's shoes. If there was anything hidden under the cellar bottom, natural anxiety would have carried him to the spot he had to fear; so they would only have to dig at the places where those impressions took a sharp turn.

But was there anything hidden there? From the sisters' words and actions I judged there was nothing serious, but would they know? William was quite capable of deceiving them if he had the wit. Had he done so? It was a question.

It was solved for us by Mr. Gryce's reappearance in the room an hour or so later. From the moment the light fell upon his kindly features in the doorway I knew that I might breathe again freely. It was not the face he showed in the house of a criminal, nor did his brow have any of that false deference in it with which he sometimes tries to hide his secret doubt or contempt.

"I have come to trouble you for the last time, ladies. We have made a double search through this house and through the stables and feel perfectly justified in saying that our duty henceforth will lay us elsewhere. The secrets we have surprised are your own, and if possible shall remain so. Your brother's propensity for vivisection and the return and death of your mother bear so little on the real question which interests this community that we may be able to prevent their spread as gossip through the town. That this may be done conscientiously, however, I ought to know something more of the latter circumstance. If Miss Butterworth will then be good enough to grant me a few minutes' conference with these ladies, I may be able to satisfy myself so far as to let this matter rest where it is."

I rose with right good will. A mountain weight had been lifted from me, proof positive that I had really come to love these girls.

What they told him, whether it was less or more than they told me, I cannot say, and for the moment did not know. That it had not shaken his faith in them was evident, for when he came out to where I was waiting in the hall his aspect was even more encouraging than it had been before.

"No guile in those girls," he whispered, as he passed me. "The clew given by what seemed mysterious in this house has come to naught. Tomorrow we take up another. The trinkets found in Mother Jane's cottage are something real. You may sleep soundly tonight, Miss Butterworth. Your part has been well done, but I know you are glad that it has failed."

And I knew that I was glad, too, which is the best proof that there is something in me besides the detective instinct.

The front door had scarcely closed behind him when William came storming in. He had been gossiping over the fence with Mr. Trohm and had been beguiled into taking a glass of wine in his house. He showed it.

"These sneaks!" cried he. "I hear they've been back again, digging and stirring up our cellar bottom like mad. That's because you're so dreadful shy, you girls. You're afraid of this, you're afraid of that. You don't want folks to know your mother once—Well, well, there it is now! If you had been willing that should be known, I would have been left alone and my affairs left untouched, but now every foot will cry out at me in this staid, puritanical old town, and all because a few bones have been found of animals which have died in the cause of science. I say it's all your fault! Not that I have anything to be ashamed of, because I haven't, but because this other thing, this d—d wicked series of disappearances, taking places for ought we know a dozen rods from our gates (though I think—but no matter what I think—you all like, or say you like, old Deacon Spear), has made every one so touchy in this pharisaical town that to kill a fly has become a crime even if it is to save oneself from poison. I'm going to see if I cannot make folks look askance at some other man than me. I'm going to find who or what causes these disappearances."

This was a declaration to make us all stare and look a little bit foolish. William playing the detective! Well, what might I not live to see next! But the next moment an overpowering thought struck me. Might this Deacon Spear by any chance be the rich man whose animosity Althea Knollys had awakened?

(To be Continued Next Week.)

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