



Learning to Love

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Category: Historical

Description: In this exploration of *Little Women* and *Pride and Prejudice*, can Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam Darcy help unite two young lovers?

Amy March has been in love with her neighbor Laurie for years, but he only had eyes for her older sister. Now living in Europe, Amy is choosing her path to happiness despite her heartache. But her equilibrium is challenged when a single and melancholy Laurie pays her a visit.

Soundly rejected by his childhood love and best friend, Laurie is now wandering around Europe, taking little interest in anything or anyone. Things change in France, where he reunites with his old friend Amy. Disappointed in his behavior, she convinces him to take charge of his life and engineer his own happiness.

Laurie returns to London to make a fresh start, but he cannot get Amy out of his mind. Confused and lovestruck, he appeals to his grandfather's close friends, the Darcys, for advice. Will this wise, elderly couple be able to guide him through his heartache?

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Page 1

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Amy March descended from the carriage in the same way that she did everything: with elegance and poise. She took care not to let her skirt get caught in the wheel as she stepped gracefully to the ground. The footman handed down her smock and art box, and Amy thanked him in her frank American way. She couldn't quite leave the last of her Concord flavor behind; the longer she stayed in Europe, the more she appreciated her simple and honest upbringing. It kept her grounded when those around her lost sight of what was truly important. At least, she liked to tell herself so.

Amy had been on the continent for a year now, travelling with her cousin Flo. They were currently in Nice, which Amy found she liked even better than Paris. Nice, with its wild gardens and romantic castle ruins, presented plenty of vistas for her artist's eye.

She entered her lodgings and found her Aunt Carol lying upon the stiff sedan in their apartment. "Aunt, are you unwell?"

"I am fine, dear. Just a little tired. How was your art lesson?"

"It went very well, thank you."

"Oh, a letter came for you." Her aunt waved vaguely in the direction of the table.

Amy moved immediately to find the precious missive, eager to see which of her dear people had written. A letter from any of her three sisters was always read with care, and every note from her mother or father was cherished. She saw that this one came from her family's neighbor, Mr. Laurence, who was a close friend of the family, as was his grandson Laurie.

Amy excused herself and went directly to her room. Tossing her smock upon the chair, she flounced onto the bed, carefully broke the wax seal, and began to read.

According to the missive, Mr. Laurence had come to Europe and was now in London, where he had many friends. It was surprising that he had journeyed abroad; the gentleman was not overly fond of travel. Reading on, she stopped when she came across some unexpected news.

Theodore is in Europe with me. I expect him from Berlin any day. We came abroad so he might experience a little freedom after the hard work of university. And I hope his heart will be at ease here.

Mr. Laurence's letter said nothing more about it, but Amy felt a pang of anxiety at these words. Why was Laurie's heart not at ease at home?

An image of her sister Jo flashed into her mind. Was it possible he had proposed to her? Jo was in New York, so perhaps not. Amy read and reread the note but discerned no helpful information. Surely, her family would write to her if anything of significance had happened.

She took a slow, deliberate breath, folded the letter neatly, and tucked it in her dress pocket. She would write to Mr. Laurence and beg them both to visit. She must find the words to ask after Laurie in a way that would garner more information about the state of her friend's heart. Sitting at the little writing desk in her room, Amy was about to begin her letter when the maid tapped on the open door and stepped in.

"Monsieur Vaughn has arrived, Mademoiselle."

Amy stood at once. "I shall be just a moment, Evelyn." She adjusted her skirts and smoothed the wrinkles in the fabric. A glance in the mirror assured her that her blonde hair remained perfectly coifed.

As she entered the parlor, she noted that her aunt was nowhere to be seen, having evidently excused herself.

Fred stood. "Amy March, you look lovely this morning."

She gave a demure curtsy and asked him to sit.

"I thought we might go for a drive later." He looked to her for approval.

"That sounds delightful. It is a fine day."

Unbidden, an image of Laurie popped into her mind. She did hope he was enjoying his visit despite the state of his heart. But what troubled him?

"What are you thinking about so deeply? You appear worried." Fred's voice, ever polite, held a note of concern.

"Oh! Forgive me, Fred. I just had a letter from Mr. Laurence. You remember him, of course?"

"Indeed. I hope nothing is wrong?" His handsome brow furrowed.

"No, not at all. Mr. Laurence is perfectly well. He simply mentioned that he and Laurie have come to Europe."

Fred's jaw stiffened, but when he spoke, his tone was as cordial as ever. "Laurence has come to Europe? Well, I do hope he has a pleasant trip."

"As do I, of course." Amy felt a little awkward. Fred did not seem pleased by this turn in their conversation. She could not imagine why. He and Laurie had always been good friends.

“And do the Laurences plan to visit you here in Nice?”

“I hope so. I was about to write to Mr. Laurence and invite them when you arrived.”

“I see. Well, then, I shall leave you to it.” He stood and bowed. “Shall I call for you after luncheon so we may take that drive?”

“I look forward to it.” Amy gave him her best smile.

He returned it, although his seemed rather forced. “Then let us say two o’clock.” He took her hand and kissed it before leaving the room.

His abrupt change in manner puzzled her. Had she said something to upset him? She replayed the conversation in her mind, concluding that he must be preoccupied with something else. Surely there was nothing wrong with speaking of mutual friends.

Flo entered a few moments later. “Did I miss Mr. Vaughn?”

“I am afraid so.”

Her cousin walked to the writing table, absentmindedly picking up a pen and twirling it in her delicate fingers. “Well, he only looks at you anyway, so I daresay he did not notice my absence.”

Her infectious smile prompted Amy’s in response. That was the nice thing about Flo—she was such an amiable companion. You could laugh and joke with her, but she behaved like a proper lady when the occasion called for it.

“Shall we have lunch, Flo? I am so very hungry!”

“I do hope there is something good today. I will find Mama. You call for the feast!”

She strode from the room and left Amy, who once again pondered Fred's strange behavior.

It was quite some time before Flo returned. At once, Amy could see that something was wrong.

"What is it, dear?"

Flo shook her head with an unconvincing smile. "Oh, nothing much. Mama has a headache and wishes to rest. She said she would take a tray in her room." Aunt Carrol had been looking poorly all day.

Amy did not like when anyone she loved was ill. Her mind flashed to Beth. Was her sister doing well? Had the change in the weather negatively affected her? Though Amy had just sent a letter to her the day before, she resolved to write again that evening.

Flo was rather quiet during lunch. They sat in companionable silence, each enjoying their meal and lost in their thoughts.

"Should I postpone my outing with Fred?" Amy asked after a while.

"Of course not! It's not like Mama was planning to go with you."

"If you are sure you do not need me, I shall go."

Shortly after, Amy retired to her room. She needed to choose the appropriate outfit for the afternoon and despised being rushed. The weather was pleasant though rather chilly. Amy smiled to herself, pleased at the opportunity to wear her new fur-lined cape. It was a beautiful shade of blue that brought out the color of her eyes.

It was comforting to have such lovely eyes, especially because she could do nothing about her horrible nose. For as long as she could remember, she had lamented its shape. Despite her many prayers and silly attempts to alter it, it remained unchanged, as did her feelings about it.

Fred was prompt, as usual, arriving almost exactly at two in the afternoon. He handed her up into the phaeton and Amy settled herself, making sure her hat was just so before Fred pulled himself up into the driver's seat.

Though his comportment was as kind and polite as ever, there seemed to be an edginess about him. Amy decided to be extra charming and put him at ease. If that did not work, she would use her American frankness and simply ask what was bothering him. It was unlike Fred to be anything other than charming and friendly.

Placing a hand on his arm, she pointed out a picturesque little stand of trees as they drove by. "I would love to paint that!"

"Then we should make a point to return soon with your artist's supplies."

"We could make an afternoon of it." Amy smiled warmly.

Fred nodded his approbation. "With a boxed lunch."

"Exactly! How well you understand my likes and dislikes. It is very pleasant to have such a friend."

At this, the last of Fred's tension seemed to melt away. "I value your friendship, too."

"I am glad of it." Amy said with sincerity.

"How are your aunt and cousin? I missed seeing them this morning."

She knew he was not asking merely out of politeness. It was one of the reasons Amy liked him so much; he genuinely cared. "Flo is quite well, but my aunt was feeling rather ill today, I am afraid."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I hope not. It is just a headache and fatigue. Yet...I tend to worry overmuch about people when they feel poorly. When I was a girl, my sister Beth had a very serious case of scarlet fever. You remember Beth, don't you?"

"Of course! She was kind to my brother. He remembers her fondly."

"That's right! When you came to visit Laurie, your brother was nursing an injured leg."

"He was very cross about missing out on all the fun!" Fred laughed at the memory. "But Beth took good care of him and was so gentle and quiet that he could not help but feel comforted."

"Beth is such a dear, dear person. I miss her dreadfully."

"I hope she is well."

"I must admit, I am worried about her. She never fully recovered her strength after her illness. It seemed to leave a shadow."

"The Beth I remember from my youth would not let that trouble her."

"How well you recall her! You are exactly right. She speaks only of how lucky she is and all the pleasures and comforts of home whenever she writes to me, which is very often."

“And how is your elder sister, Meg? Does she have time to write to you?”

“She is as faithful as she ever was. But oh! How I wish I were there to meet her sweet, darling children! Being abroad is wonderful, but I do miss those at home.”

“Of course.” Fred was silent for a moment, his cloudy look returning. But then he regained his equanimity and asked politely, “And Josephine? Is she well?”

Amy laughed at his use of her sister’s full name. “Jo detests being called Josephine! So you must promise to never do so in her hearing. I’m afraid she would scold you dreadfully.”

“I forget how free and independent young ladies from America are.” Fred smiled down at her.

“Jo is the most independent of us all. She never would learn to make calls properly, and her skirts were always full of rips from climbing trees. She is working as a tutor in New York, which is a fine job for her. She tutored me as a child.”

“Indeed? And how did you like that arrangement?”

“Not at all!” Amy laughed, recalling the silly fights she and Jo used to get into. “For I was sullen and Jo impatient. But she is a dear sister, and she writes to me with such faithfulness that it warms my heart.”

“I wish my sister was as diligent a correspondent. Ever since Grace married, she seems too busy to write to her elder brother.” Despite his words, Fred’s tone was indulgent. Amy knew how much he cared for his sister.

“I am sure she keeps house very well.” Amy said this with the air of someone who knew all about the matter, though in truth she had no personal experience.

“Oh, indeed.”

“My sister Meg shares her stories with me, you know. There is quite a lot to running a home.”

“I completely agree. It is something you would excel at, I believe.” He gave her a meaningful look, and Amy colored despite herself. They passed the next few minutes in silence.

“Amy, I must speak with you about something.”

His words left her breathless. Was he about to ask her to marry him? Surely not! It was too early in their courtship. And they were in a carriage!

She was just thinking about proposals due to her concern over Laurie and Jo. An image of her childhood friend flashed into her mind, but she firmly pushed it aside.

Fred continued, “I must return to England shortly. I am afraid I will not be able to spend Christmas here in Nice as I had planned.”

The sense of relief Amy felt was alarming. She gave herself a mental shake. Just because she was not ready for a proposal today hardly meant that she would not be when the time was right. “That is quite all right. I understand. I only hope that whatever calls you home is not of a serious nature.”

“You are goodness itself. It is nothing but business that cannot be put off.” They had arrived back at the chateau, and Fred pulled the horses to a stop. He leaped out and hurried over to hand her down.

“Thank you.” Amy’s smile was slightly timid. Her mind’s foolish discombobulation over proposals and friends old and new left her feeling shaken.

Fred kissed her hand and bid her farewell, promising to call as often as he could before his departure for England. Her Christmas would be a bit lonely. But she did have her cousin Flo and her Aunt and Uncle Carrol to keep her in good spirits.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Driving her little cabriolet down the street, Amy experienced a strange mixture of pleasure and homesickness. The ponies trotted blithely along on this Christmas Day, and she took delight in the fine weather and the way her blue dress matched the blue of the reins so nicely. But it was hard to be away from home on Christmas.

Suddenly, a tall young man waving his hat at her energetically caught her eye. As her gaze alighted on his tall frame, dark hair, and fine features, her heart leaped.

“Laurie!” She pulled the ponies to a stop and held out both hands to him. “Is it really you? Oh! I thought you would never come!”

“Amy dear, how good it is to see you!” Laurie took her offered hands and gave them a friendly squeeze. “I called at your hotel, but you were out.”

“Come,” Amy said, pulling her skirts to the side so he could join her in the Hansom cab. He jumped in easily and sat next to her as comfortably as if they had been at home. “How is Grandfather? When did you arrive? And where are you staying?”

He laughed at her eagerness. “He is very well. I arrived last night and am ensconced at the Chauvain.”

“Oh Laurie, it’s so good to see you!”

He smiled down at her with the warmth of one reunited with an old friend after a long absence. “And where are you off to, Mademoiselle?”

“I am going to the bank first for letters, then to Castle Hill. It’s beautiful, and I love to

feed the peacocks. Have you ever been there?”

“I used to go often, years ago. A school friend of mine and I liked to feed the peacocks, too.”

“Who? Not Fred? He says he doesn’t care much for them.”

At the mention of Fred, Laurie cast her a cautious look of inquiry, which she dutifully ignored.

“Fitz Darcy. I mean to visit him after you.” He leaned back in the seat, crossing his arms behind his head. Amy took up the reins and urged the ponies into motion once more.

“You mustn’t leave too soon, Laurie,” Amy admonished seriously.

“I am here for a week at least, my dear.”

Amy clicked her tongue as if to say that this was not at all sufficient, but she let it drop. “I’m longing for letters from home. Do you have any news to share of my family?”

From the corner of her eye, Amy thought she saw his face fall, but when she turned her head toward him, his smile was firmly in place.

“Not a word, my dear, except to say that everyone was well when we left.”

She pressed her lips together at this unsatisfying reply but then remembered something. “There is a Christmas party tonight at our hotel. You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Thank you, I shall.”

“Splendid! Now tell me all about yourself. The last news I had of you was from Grandfather. He wrote that you were to be returning to him from Berlin.”

“Yes, I spent a month in Berlin. Grandfather remained in London. He has many friends there, so he stays on while I roam around. We get on capitally.”

“That sounds like a sociable arrangement,” Amy said, but her heart was troubled. Laurie seemed different somehow. Perhaps it was merely the long absence; it had been two long years since she had seen him. To think that Laurie had been in Europe for several months and had only now come to see her! It left her feeling lonely and nettled at the same time.

Laurie seemed oblivious to her reaction. “Why, you see, Grandfather hates to travel and I hate to keep still, so we each suit ourselves, and there is no trouble. And how are you enjoying Nice?”

“The river and the hills are delicious, and these glimpses of the narrow cross streets are my delight. Now we shall have to wait for that procession to pass; it’s going to the Church of St. John.”

Laurie watched the procession of priests, nuns, and brothers pass by with a listless air that bothered Amy. A new sort of shyness stole over her as she watched him, for she could not find the merry-faced boy she knew in the moody-looking man beside her. He was more handsome than ever, though she knew she had always been partial to his dark looks and fine features. But there was something new about him that she couldn’t understand. He seemed older and graver.

“Are you quite well, Laurie?”

At this inquiry, her companion shook off his pensive air and gave her a cavalier smile. "Very well. All the more so for seeing Mademoiselle." He put his hand on his heart and gave her a bow. His admiring look, however, was disingenuous.

Amy recalled his blunt manner and easy compliments back home. Although a curious kind of discomfort filled her, she did her best to appear easy and gay.

They arrived at the bank, and Amy retrieved her precious letters from home. Laurie took the reins, allowing her time to read them. They wound up on a shady road between green hedges filled with blooming tea roses. The weather was much milder here in Nice than it would have been at home, but Amy missed the cold winter months of Concord.

The letters were troubling. Though Meg spoke mostly of her children, Daisy and Demi, and her father admonished her to keep up with her diary, her mother's letter bore a truth that brought a tear to her eye.

Laurie looked at her sharply. "What is it? You look as if you've received bad news."

"Beth is not well. Perhaps I ought to go home."

"And what do Beth and your mother say?"

"‘Stay,’ for I shall never have another opportunity such as this."

"I think you are right to stay. There is nothing you could do at home, and you are more of a comfort to them here, where they know you are well and happy."

"But Laurie, what shall I do if..." She could not finish the thought but feared she would not have the opportunity to say goodbye to dear Beth should the worst happen.

“Beth knows how much you love her, dear.” He said it kindly, finally reminding her of the sweet boy she had left on the docks two years ago. Laurie had accompanied her father to see her safely aboard the ship that took her to Europe. He had hugged her close and promised to watch over her family while she was gone.

Now they had come to the ruins of the old fort. Many tame peacocks rushed to greet them in hopes of getting an easy meal. Amy did not disappoint them, fetching bread from her reticule and laughing at their antics as she cast the food wide.

They spent an hour or so in the little park before returning to the hotel. Laurie paid his respects to her aunt and then left her with the promise that he would come again that night for the Christmas party.

Amy took extra care when she dressed for the party. Though the white silk ball gown she wore was a hand-me-down, it looked well on her. She took armfuls of soft tulle and draped it over her skirts, bodice, and shoulders, giving the effect of a Christmas angel. With no jewelry suitable for the occasion, she artfully wound green vines around the shoulders of her gown and added a posy of azaleas here and there. The effect was altogether fresh and lovely.

She wore her white satin boots, which gave her great satisfaction. And her new fan matched the flowers in her hair perfectly. She was conscious of a desire to find favor in Laurie’s eyes, telling herself it was so he would tell her beloved family she was well when he wrote to them.

A small voice locked deeply away in her heart knew that not to be true.

Flo met her as she emerged from her room. “Amy, you are a vision!”

“You look beautiful, too! Look how well that new bustle suits you!” Amy felt a pang of envy as she admired Flo’s new green and white silk gown, which was done up in

the latest style.

“Are you certain?” Flo angled her head to try and see the bustle. “I feel as if I might fall over backward with so much of the skirt behind me!”

“You shall do no such thing!” Amy tried and failed to suppress a laugh. “But where is Aunt Carrol?”

“Here I am, dears.” Aunt Carrol appeared, looking matronly in her old-fashioned evening gown. “Are you ready to go down?”

Amy noted her tired eyes and pale skin. “Are you sure you feel up for a celebration tonight, Aunt?”

“Of course! It is Christmas, after all.”

“We shall have a merry evening.” Flo took her mother’s arm.

“Then let us go!” Amy opened the door to their apartment and threw her arm wide with a theatrical flourish. Flo laughed gaily, and the three ladies made their way down to the merriment below.

Amy expected to find Laurie waiting for them, but she was disappointed.

“Is Mr. Laurence not here yet?” Aunt Carrol’s tone conveyed her disapproval.

“He just arrived today, Aunt. Perhaps his luggage was delayed.”

Her aunt did not reply but pressed her lips together with dissatisfaction.

“You two go on in. I shall wait for him here.”

Aunt Carrol looked as if she was about to object, but Flo cut her off. “Perfect! Don’t be too long. I am sure the count wishes to dance with you!”

Amy spent several minutes walking up and down the long hall as she watched for Laurie. At one point, she positioned herself under the chandelier, conscious that the candlelight made her hair glow in a becoming way. Then she chanced to think of Jo and how she would laugh. Shaking herself, she walked resolutely to the side of the room to wait for her friend.

Without a doubt, the last place Laurie wanted to be was in a ballroom full of gay, happy people. But he could not disappoint Amy.

He arrived late and expected her to be waiting near the door with a look of admonishment. But she was not. Puzzled, he surveyed the room.

He caught sight of her then—all in white, standing next to the deep red curtains. She was rather enchanting, and Laurie was properly dazzled. That he should be thinking of little Amy in such a way surprised him. Looking at her now, all he saw was an elegant young woman.

“Good evening, Diana.” He bowed with a flourish. She turned at the sound of his voice, and her welcoming smile greeted him.

“Good evening, Apollo!” Her eyes, so bright and joyful, distracted him from his purpose for a moment. Remembering, he held out a little posy.

“Here are your flowers. I arranged them myself.”

Amy took the offered posy. “How kind you are! I have admired this charming little

holder in the shop window every day for a week! How did you know?"

"It seemed to fit you," Laurie snapped the silver bracelet that held the flowers around her wrist. "It is not what it should be, but you have improved it." Even he could hear the forced smoothness in his voice. But it was the thing in Nice to smother one's partner with niceties.

"Please don't!" Amy's tone of voice startled him.

"I thought you liked that sort of thing?"

"Not from you. It doesn't feel natural. I like your old bluntness better." Her eyes held something of a challenge in them, and Laurie smiled.

"I'm glad of it." He straightened to his full height for her inspection. "Is my tie straight?"

Her slim fingers came up and adjusted his bowtie slightly. "There! You are as handsome as ever."

She smiled up at him, and the sight produced a strange tug somewhere deep in his core. Shaking off the feeling, he offered his arm, and they walked into the ballroom.

Laurie felt somehow suffocated by the gaiety surrounding them. He offended Amy almost immediately, asking her if she cared to dance in a less than enthusiastic manner.

"One usually does at a ball," she said primly, and he grinned in spite of himself. He had always enjoyed Amy's spunk. She was never afraid to tell him when he had stepped out of line. Somehow, her admonishments never stung the way Jo's did.

“I meant the first dance. May I have the honor?”

“I can give you one if I put off the count. He dances divinely, but he will excuse me, as you are an old friend.”

Laurie followed her gaze to the Polish count standing amongst a throng of ladies. He was strikingly young, and Laurie wondered if he was even eighteen. “Nice little boy, but rather short.”

“How rude you are!” Amy made a dignified sniff. But then the music started, and she forgot to be offended for her friend the count.

The cotillion was rather slow and dignified for their American tastes. Nonetheless, they danced it gracefully. When the music ended, Laurie led her to the count and excused himself to dance with Flo.

For the next several hours, Laurie watched Amy dance with all the eligible men in the room. She moved with spirit and elegance, and he found he was keeping time with the music despite his melancholy.

The count seemed especially drawn to her and danced with Amy more than any other young lady. He finally relinquished her, but only because he was compelled to leave the ball early for some unknown reason.

Though Laurie thought the gentleman was foolish to let go of his prize so easily, he was happy to have Amy back to keep him company. “You seem to be enjoying yourself this evening. Come and sit, and allow me to get you some supper.”

She flashed him a satisfied smile, showing he was forgiven for his earlier slight. It wasn’t anything to do with Amy, of course. He just could not seem to shake the unsatisfied, restless feeling that followed him everywhere. But seeing her now, so full

of youth and vigor, brought a smile to his lips and a warmth to his heart.

“You look like Balzac’s ‘Femme Peinte Par Elle-Meme.’” He handed her the supper plate.

“My rouge won’t come off.” Amy rubbed her brilliant cheek and showed him her white glove with a sober simplicity that made him laugh outright.

He touched a fold of her dress that had blown over his knee. “What do you call this stuff?”

“Illusion.”

“Good name for it. It’s very pretty—new thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s as old as the hills; you’ve seen it on dozens of girls, and you never found out that it’s pretty until now—stupide!”

“I’ve never seen it on you before, which accounts for the mistake, you see.”

“None of that! It is forbidden! I’d rather take coffee than compliments just now.”

Laurie laughed at her bossy tone and dutifully went to fetch a cup of coffee for her. They sat together as she refreshed herself.

“Where did you learn all this sort of thing?” he asked.

“As ‘this sort of thing’ is a rather vague expression, would you kindly explain?”

“Well—the general air, the style, the self-possession, the, the...illusion...you know.” He laughed as he waved his hand vaguely in the air.

Amy posed her head regally. “Foreign life polishes one in spite of one’s self. I study as well as I play, and as for this” she gestured to her dress—“tulle is cheap, posies to be had for nothing, and I am used to making the most out of my poor little things.”

Laurie gazed at her with satisfaction. She looked down as if regretting her frankness, but he liked her all the more for it. She charged after life with infectious enthusiasm.

Taking her wrist, he gently untethered her ball book, filling the remaining blank spaces with his own name. He replaced it with a gentle touch and momentarily became distracted by the look of pleasure that filled her expression.

Burying his gloom, at least for a moment, he decided to devote himself to making sure Amy’s Christmas was full of good cheer.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie had meant to stay only a week in Nice, but now he found himself unwilling to leave. It had been three weeks already, and he had no plans to go anytime soon. He enjoyed being around Amy, receiving time and attention from one he knew so well.

Though, he admitted to himself, time spent with Amy was not always calm and easy. She seemed to discern that there was more going on than he cared to say.

Being in her presence helped, but he could not shake the gloom that followed him everywhere. Why leave Nice when there was nowhere pressing to go? No one needed him, and nothing of importance required his time and attention. He called upon Amy partly because he enjoyed her company and partly because he simply had nothing else to do. Perhaps she sensed this. He hoped it did not pain her. Amy did not cause his poor mood, as he was certain she understood.

This morning he found her alone in the parlor at the little writing desk.

“All the rest have gone to Monaco for the day. I wanted to stay home and write letters.”

“Then I have you all to myself.” Laurie lounged on the settee across from the writing table. Amy looked at him with a half-scornful, half-sorrowful expression and finished her correspondence. Her keen blue eyes often unsettled him these days.

“I am going to go to Valrosa to sketch. Will you come?”

“Well, yes, but it’s a rather long walk, isn’t it?”

“I shall have Baptiste drive us in the carriage, so you’ll have nothing to do but hold your umbrella and keep your gloves nice.”

He glanced at his kid gloves, a weakness of his. He always took pride in wearing immaculate gloves. “I will go with pleasure, of course.”

He put out a hand for her sketchbook, but she tucked it under her arm. “Don’t trouble yourself. It’s no exertion to me, but you don’t seem up to it.”

Laurie raised his eyebrows at this little speech. It was unlike Amy to be snappish.

He respectfully dismissed Baptiste and drove them to Valrosa himself. They enjoyed the drive together, taking in the gnarled olive trees and scarlet anemones that fringed the roadways. Neither of them ever remained aggravated with the other for long, for Amy was too well bred and Laurie lacked the energy.

The scent of flowers assaulted their noses as they alighted from the carriage.

“This is a regular honeymoon paradise, isn’t it?” Amy said with delight as she bent to breathe in the scent of a particularly striking rose. “I shall sketch this one.”

She settled herself down on a rustic seat, and Laurie flung himself upon the grass, content to watch her. They were quiet for a while, Amy’s pencil busy with her sketch, her blue eyes sharp with concentration.

“Laurie, when do you go to your grandfather?”

“Very soon,” he answered, aware he was being vague.

“You’ve said the same these past three weeks.”

“I daresay, short answers save time.”

“You really ought to go.” She flipped over the page of her sketchbook and started anew. Only this time her eyes studied him.

“Aren’t you a hospitable creature? Do you wish me to leave?”

“You know I don’t. But you are a man of your word, and your grandfather expects you. Why don’t you go?”

“Natural depravity, I suppose.” He was being morose, but he couldn’t help it. Amy didn’t have any idea why this melancholy plagued him.

“Natural indolence, you mean. It’s really dreadful!”

“Not so bad as it seems, for I’d only plague him if I went, so I might as well stay and plague you a little longer. You can bear it better. In fact, I think it agrees with you.”

“I wish you would do me the favor to rouse yourself a little,” Amy said sharply.

“Do it for me, there’s a dear girl.” He could see that she meant to lecture him, and it amused him somewhat.

“I could if I tried,” she returned, eyes flashing.

“Try, then. I give you leave.” It was rather refreshing to tease someone again.

“You’d be angry with me in five minutes.”

“I’m never angry with you. It takes two flints to make a fire, and you are as cool and soft as snow.”

“Snow produces a glow and a tingle, if applied rightly. A good stirring up might do you good.”

“Stir away then, if that sort of exercise agrees with you.” He kept his tone deliberately nonchalant, though her words chafed a bit.

Amy lifted her chin in a familiar way. “Do you want to know what I really think of you?”

“I’m pining to be told.”

“Right now, I despise you.”

He thought she might berate him for his laziness or try to shake him out of his depressed spirits, but he never expected to hear that Amy March despised him.

“Why, if you please?” He tried to keep the anxiety out of his voice.

“Because with every chance of being good, useful, and happy, you are faulty, idle, and miserable.”

“Strong language, Mademoiselle.” He was hardly sure how Amy had the right to admonish him like this.

“If you like it, I’ll go on.”

“Oh, please do. It’s quite interesting.” This time he failed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“I thought you’d find it so. Selfish people always enjoy talking about themselves.”

“Am I selfish?” The words slipped out of their own accord. He had always prided himself on his generosity.

“You have been abroad nearly six months and have done nothing but waste time, spend your grandfather’s money, and disappoint your friends.”

“I was four years at university! Isn’t a fellow to have any pleasure after a four-year grind?”

“I should think you would have had enough of that by now!” Amy tossed her head. “How I wish Jo were here to help me explain it to you.”

“So do I!” Laurie threw his arm over his face in embarrassment.

Amy fell silent.

When she spoke again, her voice was considerably softer. “Has something happened? I scolded because I could not bear to think that they should be disappointed with you at home. But perhaps they would understand the truth of the matter better than I do.”

He could feel the humiliation burning his cheeks. “I think they would.”

“They ought to have told me!” Amy said hotly. “I never liked Miss Randal, and now I hate her!”

Laurie clearly heard the artifice in her tone. He pulled himself up into a sitting position. “Hang Miss Randal! You know very well it was Jo.”

At this, he read genuine shock on Amy’s features. Had she really been in ignorance of his feelings for Jo? Everyone had known, even Jo.

“She...she would not be kind to you?” Amy’s voice was almost a whisper.

“Oh, she was very kind, but not in the way I wanted.” He could hear the bitterness in his voice.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize she had refused you.”

They were silent for a time. Amy had stopped sketching and was looking out on the horizon with a worried expression. When she did speak, her tone was gentle. “I can’t help wishing you would bear it better.”

He sat up abruptly. “I thought and planned for her! I went to college, abandoned my dream of being a composer, prepared to follow Grandfather’s footsteps and go into business—all for her! I feel adrift, like a ship without a captain.”

“I understand.”

“I cannot think that you do. You have your Mr. Vaughn, after all.”

Amy closed her sketchbook and looked at him earnestly. “You must choose your own path, Laurie, as I have done.”

“Pursuing your art? It’s an admirable thing, to be sure, but it is not quite the same as my current problem.”

“That is not what I mean.”

“Then what path do you speak of, if you please?”

“I believe Fred means to propose. If he does, I shall accept him. It is the life I have chosen.”

This bothered him, though he could not say why. "That's all very well, if you love him. Do you?"

Now she began flipping through her sketchbook. "What a question! I am fond of him, and he is a respectable man."

"That is not love, my dear."

"One does have a choice of whom one loves."

"And what of Fred Vaughn? Does he love you? Or is his choice as disinterested?"

Amy looked him square in the eye. "I am not a fool, Laurie. I am content to think that we may come to love each other in time."

"That doesn't sound like one of your mother's daughters."

"And you act nothing like your grandfather's charge! Drifting about Europe. Wasting your gifts because of one foolish girl who could not see the gift that you were offering her!"

Laurie blinked at this passionate response. But Amy was not finished yet.

"We are not so different, you and I. Only I have made the choice to be respected, if I could not be loved."

There was a beat of silence. On impulse he took her hand and pressed it, saying earnestly, "Who is it that has denied your affections? Tell me, and I will make him love you."

For a moment it looked as though she might cry, but then she gave him a small, sad

smile. “Do not trouble yourself, Laurie. I will be fine. And you will too, if you would only exert yourself.”

She carefully detached the sketch from her book and turned it to show him. He looked upon himself as she saw him—a long, listless figure stretched out upon the grass, his eyes half-closed. It wasn’t how he thought of himself at all.

“And this is how you were.” She pulled out a smaller, much older sketch and handed it to him. “I found this among my drawings and kept it to show you.”

He looked at the rough sketch, a strange feeling growing within his heart. She had drawn him taming a horse. His hat and coat were off, and every line suggested movement, life, and vigor. It was a stark contrast to the drawing she had sketched today.

“It was years ago. Do you remember? Beth was so worried you would come to harm.”

He stared at the drawing. He had been completely unaware that Amy had been watching him that day. He had been intent on impressing Jo with his devil-may-care attitude. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible. “That was so long ago. It feels like a lifetime.”

Amy said nothing. When he glanced up, she was looking at him with a seriousness that she rarely displayed. “I plan to give up my pursuit of artistic fame.”

Laurie blinked. “What?”

“I have talent, I know, but it is not genius. Studying in Europe has taught me humility.”

She looked away, staring at the scenery once more. He wasn't sure what to say; her honesty left him nonplussed.

Long moments passed with Amy looking out to the horizon and Laurie lost in thought. Finally, he spoke. "Amy, are you happy?"

She turned to look at him but said nothing.

"You say you are giving up your art and that you do not love Fred Vaugh, though you plan to marry him if he should ask. It makes me wonder—are you happy?"

She held his gaze for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I am well, Laurie. You need not concern yourself."

"I do concern myself, Amy. We are friends—old friends. I care about you."

She glanced at him sharply. "I know. Do not worry, Laurie. I am making my own way in this world."

"You will not confide in me?"

She hesitated. "Laurie, there is nothing that I can confide. I have told you about my plan to pursue a marriage I can be proud of. Though I may not love Fred, I do care for him as a friend. That is a better foundation than many marriages."

"I suppose you are right."

She closed her sketchbook and stood up. "Shall we return?"

"Of course." He stood and offered her his arm.

Amy took it easily enough, but Laurie knew she could feel the tension between them. They had just shared confidences in a way they never had before. And Amy had shown him what no one else had been able to: his true self.

She was utterly correct. He had allowed his heartache to go on too long; he had become lazy and dissolute, and perhaps worst of all, selfish. The grief in her eyes when she spoke of her own heartache and her noble intention of living well despite it—it all left him a little dazed.

When he returned to his chateau that afternoon, he made plans for his immediate departure for London. It was time to return to his grandfather and make his own path.

He sat down and penned a note to Amy. He kept the tone purposefully light, though his heart felt anything but.

My dear mentor,

Please make my adieux to your aunt and exult within yourself, for Lazy Laurence has gone to his grandpa, like the best of boys. A pleasant winter to you, and may the gods grant you a blissful honeymoon at Valrosa! I think Fred would benefit from a rouser such as the one you gave me. Tell him so, with my congratulations.

Yours gratefully,

Telemachus

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

A week had gone by since Laurie had left Nice for London. He hoped Amy wasn't cross at him for leaving without a proper farewell. He'd stood in the lobby of her hotel for a full fifteen minutes, debating whether he should go up and see her.

But something had stopped him. She had been blunt and honest with him. There was nothing unusual in this, as he and Amy had always been good friends. Yet he felt as if something had shifted. She had admonished him sharply, which was unusual for her. It was Jo who had always tried to improve his character. Though he often took Jo's advice to heart, Amy's reproof had roused him in a way that Jo's mothering never had.

"Theodore? We have arrived, my boy."

Laurie looked up at the worried face of his grandfather. The carriage had indeed stopped, and the liveried servant was holding the door open for them. Rather than make yet another excuse for his inattentiveness, he nodded and hopped out of the vehicle.

They walked up the steps of the very fashionable townhome and wrapped lightly on the door. It opened a moment later. They were greeted by the butler, who escorted them at once to the parlor, where an elderly couple was taking tea. The pair stood as he and Grandfather entered.

"My dear James!" the lady said. She was strikingly elegant, with silver hair and a pleasant smile. She took Grandfather's hands in hers and gazed at him with open affection. "I'm delighted you could visit today."

“Mrs. Darcy, you know I could never decline an invitation from you and Darcy.”

At this, she laughed. It was a musical sound that made Laurie smile despite his melancholy.

“Darcy.” Grandfather shook the hand of the tall, imposing man standing next to Mrs. Darcy.

“Good to see you, Laurence.”

“May I present my grandson, Theodore Laurence? Theodore, this is Mr. and Mrs. Darcy of Derbyshire. They are old friends of mine.”

Laurie gave them an elegant bow. “I am very pleased to meet you at last, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. Your grandson and I have been friends since our school days.”

“Ah yes!” Mrs. Darcy said. “Fitz was heartbroken when you moved to America.”

Laurie tried to smile, but it was difficult. He had moved to America when his father died. It was long ago but still felt painful to remember. He had lost so much at a young age.

Then he had come to live with Grandfather and met Jo. That first winter, he had been so very lonely, and Jo was liveliness itself. Was it any wonder he had fallen for her?

“Theodore? Do you attend?” Grandfather’s tone was gentle, but it brought Laurie out of his reverie with a start.

“Forgive me, Mrs. Darcy. I became lost in thoughts of the past.”

“It is no matter, Theodore.”

“Please, call me Laurie. Most everyone else does.”

“Except me, of course,” Grandfather said with a gruff laugh.

“Please, do be seated.” She gestured to the seats near the fire. “I was simply asking about your travels, Laurie.”

“I have just come from Nice, ma’am.”

“Ah! We were there many years ago. A few years after we were married. Do you remember, dear?” Mrs. Darcy turned toward her husband, who stood next to the fireplace.

“I do. I remember your fondness for the ruins.”

The comment reminded Laurie of Amy standing among the peacocks in her blue dress. What a pretty picture she had been!

“Theodore roams much more than I do.” Grandfather took the tea that Mrs. Darcy offered him. “I find I grow weary of travel.”

Laurie considered him for a moment. It had never occurred to him that perhaps his grandfather was tired of being abroad. “Do you wish to return to Concord, Grandfather?”

“Not at all! Oh, I miss our country, to be sure, but with such good friends as these about, I am perfectly content.” He raised his teacup in a sort of salute at Mr. Darcy, who returned the gesture with a small smile before turning back to Laurie.

“How long do you plan on staying here in London, young man?”

Again, the image of Amy appeared in his mind. He could easily imagine her look of disappointment if he left Grandfather too soon. “For a while, I imagine. I plan to pursue my music more diligently while I am here. Don’t you think it is time that I made a start, Grandfather?”

The old gentleman looked at him rather seriously, and then his sharp eyes softened. “I do believe visiting Amy has done you good, dear boy.”

Laurie felt his face heat at these words and hoped his embarrassment was not too noticeable. “She gives as good advice as ever.”

Mrs. Darcy’s eyes glanced between them both, and Laurie hastily gulped his tea. It scalded his mouth, but he manfully swallowed it anyway.

“And who is this Amy, may I ask?” She arched a brow at him in expectation.

It was Grandfather who answered. “Miss Amy March of Concord. The March family lives quite close to us. Amy is the youngest of four daughters.” He slid a worried look toward Laurie, who made sure to keep his features neutral. Grandfather always fretted about him these days.

Mrs. Darcy gave an understanding smile. “I come from a family of five sisters, you know.”

“Five daughters! Your father must have had quite the time of it,” Grandfather said.

Laurie thought that something of a shadow passed over Mrs. Darcy’s features, but she answered lightly, “He did, indeed.”

From near the fireplace, Mr. Darcy spoke. “Our Fitz plans to visit us soon, Mr. Laurence. You must come and stay with us while he does.”

It took Laurie a moment to realize that Mr. Darcy was speaking to him and not his grandfather. “Oh, you are too kind, sir.”

“What a wonderful idea, Darcy!” Grandfather beamed at their hosts.

“He shall be here in two weeks’ time. Will that be convenient for you, dear?” Mrs. Darcy had such a comfortable, motherly way of speaking to him. He decided he liked her immensely.

“That shall be more than convenient, thank you, Mrs. Darcy.”

So it was decided that Laurie would come and stay with the Darcys during Fitz’s visit.

In the carriage on the way home, Grandfather asked Laurie his opinion of their host.

“Mr. Darcy?” Laurie thought for a moment. “He is a very private person, isn’t he?”

“He is indeed. Quiet and particular, but a man of probity.”

Laurie smiled at his grandfather’s obvious affection for Mr. Darcy. “When did you first meet him?”

A nostalgic smile spread over the old gentleman’s face. “Oh, so many years ago. I was here on holiday after just graduating from university, and I was introduced to Mr. Darcy. He was a young man from a very wealthy family, and all the mamas of eligible daughters had their eye on him. He hated the attention.”

Laurie laughed. “I am sure he did. And then he met Mrs. Darcy and lived happily

ever after?"

The smile faded from Grandfather's lips. "Sadly, no. His father passed away, leaving Darcy as head of the household at only twenty-three years of age. He has a sister named Georgiana. She was just a child when their father died. They had each other, but it was a heavy burden for a young man to bear."

"Yes. I understand only too well." Laurie looked out the window, picturing his own father as he lay dying. He had been taken from Laurie too soon. It was a heartache that followed him everywhere.

"After a time, he did meet Mrs. Darcy—Miss Bennet then."

"And then they lived happily ever after?"

"Well...it is not my story to tell. You should ask them." Grandfather had a distinctive twinkle in his eye. The clock on the mantel chimed the hour, and he pulled out his pocket watch to check the time. "Can you be ready in an hour?"

"You may depend upon it." Laurie rose and made his way upstairs to dress for an evening with Grandfather and his friends. The Darcys really were charming people. Of course, Laurie was more comfortable with Fitz but was unsurprised that his friend's grandparents exuded the same warmth and generosity he had known as a boy when staying with Fitz's parents.

"Do you really plan to pursue your music while you are here?"

"I do. I have lazed about long enough. I mean to have a serious go at the opera I have been thinking of for all these months. It is time to decide if there is talent or genius here, as Amy has done."

Her name had escaped his lips quite unexpectedly. Why did he feel so at odds whenever he thought of her? It wasn't as if they were anything different from what they had always been. Dear friends—almost family, really.

“And what has Amy concluded? Is it talent or genius?”

“Talent. She has laid aside her great ambitions—regarding art, at least.” He recalled their conversation about Fred Vaughn, and the nettled feeling returned.

“I see. Well, I shall always believe her the best artist of my acquaintance.”

His loyalty touched Laurie, and he gave his grandfather a genuine smile. “I think I may follow her example.”

“What do you mean?”

“I shall have a go at my music. If there is no genius to be found, I shall come to you and learn the business. What do you think?”

For a moment his grandfather just blinked at him. When he spoke, his voice was a little hoarse. “I think that's an excellent idea, my dear boy. An excellent idea.”

If there was one thing that Amy hated about being in Europe, it was the long delay between writing a letter and receiving a response. She had penned a missive to her mother weeks ago confessing that, though she did not love Fred, she expected him to propose and planned to accept him. Today, at last, she had received a reply.

Marmee's letter encouraged Amy to follow her heart but advised her to think long and hard about accepting a proposal from a man she did not love. Remember, my

dear child, marriage without love may lead to an empty kind of life. It is not something that I wish for you. I am certain you will make the best choice for you, my dear. And you have my blessing, whichever path you choose.

It had been a rather unsatisfactory response. Although, Amy had to admit to herself, she wasn't sure what she had hoped to hear. She knew her mother could not encourage her to marry without affection.

Yet how could she marry for love? Marmee did not know all the particulars of Amy's heart. No one did.

She sat at the little writing desk now, pen in hand, considering how exactly to reply, when the maid entered and announced Mr. Fred Vaughn had come to call. Her aunt was feeling rather poorly again, and Flo was in bed with a headache, so only Amy was at home to receive him.

As he came in, elegant in his suit, warm in his greeting, she felt her heart break a little. She was fond of Fred Vaughn. What she had written to her mother was true; he was amiable, kind, and could offer her a life of comfort.

But she could not love him.

"Miss Amy March, I cannot believe it has been over six weeks since I have seen you!"

She stood to greet him, and he took both her hands in his. "I am so glad you are back, Fred. Please sit. Would you like some tea?"

Fred was English, and Amy always called for tea when he came to call. Returning to her seat, she found him gazing at her.

A slight flutter of panic rose in her breast, but she repressed it and gave him a welcoming smile. “How was your trip to Vevay?”

“Very good, except for your absence,” he said, his English accent as charming as it had been all those years ago when they had met in Concord.

She could find no response to these words, her usual flirtatious response feeling like poison in her mouth. “You missed Laurie,” she said finally.

“Today? He was here?”

“No, no. He left over a week ago.” She could not keep the sadness out of her voice and was not unconscious of the pinched look Fred wore at the mention of Laurie’s name.

“Ah. Well, that is a shame. I am sure you miss him.” His tone sounded resigned.

“I do.”

Fred looked at her seriously for a moment, his eyes holding a sadness that pierced her heart. When he spoke, his voice was rather low. “And did you miss me as much as you miss him?”

Amy was startled at this direct question. She was accustomed to his very British, restrained way of speaking that always lacked the blunt manners of her American friends.

“I...of course I missed you, too, Fred!” She could hear the waver in her voice.

Fred gave a little nod. “You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

Amy gasped. "I am not sure what you mean, Mr. Vaughn."

He sighed. "I saw it the moment I met you, all those years ago. At Camp Laurence—do you remember? We all rowed our boats out to the little island and had a picnic. You spent most of your time with my sister. But when we were all together, you couldn't keep your eyes off Laurie."

"We were children, Fred," Amy replied, her voice shaking.

They sat there for a moment, the silence growing.

Finally, Fred leaned forward and took Amy's hand in his. He gave it a little squeeze, holding her gaze. "My dear Amy, I have an affection for you that runs deep, and you cannot imagine how it hurts me to say this. But I think we should stop here."

"Stop?" Amy's mind was buzzing.

"I can see that you cannot love me, Amy. I will think of you fondly, always. And I wish you all the happiness in the world."

He dropped her hand and stood abruptly, his eyes full of pain. She stood also, thinking of everything all at once. She should stop him—should tell him that she would grow to love him—but found that she could not. He had seen what no one else had.

Impulsively, she reached for his hand once more and whispered, "I'm sorry, Fred. I tried."

"I know." He looked at her with a small, sad smile on his face. "Goodbye, my dear."

And then he was gone. Amy was left alone in the parlor, trying to understand what

had just happened.

Fred Vaughn, of all people, had recognized her feelings for Laurie. No one else had ever spoken to her about it. No one else had ever seen that her affection for Laurie was much more than that of a friend.

Flo walked in a moment later and found, to her surprise, Amy sitting alone upon the settee in tears.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie's stay with the Darcys had an inauspicious start. The day before his arrival, he had received a letter from Jo in response to his own. Once again, she had emphatically rejected any possibility of a future for them. She had also confided that Beth was gravely ill.

He had written his last letter to Jo knowing he could not rest until the matter was well and truly closed. Hearts may change after absence, and Laurie could not settle to his music until he was certain of Jo's feelings. Yet even as he had been writing, he had correctly guessed what she would say.

Reading the words on the page, he saw anew every rejected embrace, every time Jo had slammed the old pillow on the couch between them, every cold reception to a flirtatious comment. She had never cared for him in that way. He had just been too stubborn to accept it. She had tried, thoughtful girl that she was, to spare him his heartache, but he would insist on loving her.

Loving her...

Did he, even now? His thoughts were all in disarray. His heart ached whenever he thought of Jo, yet it didn't feel like the heartache of love. It felt more as if he had lost his father all over again.

The loneliness was still there, but his mind was not filled with thoughts of Jo anymore. Instead, he was focused on his music, as he had promised Amy.

He thought of her often, alone in Nice and away from her family while dear Bethy suffered once more.

Beth would be well, wouldn't she? A heavy feeling settled in his heart. What of Grandfather? How would he bear it if Beth died? How would any of them? He hated to even think in those terms, but he was truly troubled.

"Laurie! Come down!" Fitz called from the stairs. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy had arranged for a fine dinner, and Grandfather meant to come and join them. Fitz was waiting for him as Laurie skipped down the steps. "Your grandfather already arrived."

"I hope your grandmother planned a large feast, Fitz. I'm positively starving."

His friend laughed as they walked together into the parlor, where they found Grandfather and Mr. and Mrs. Darcy in amiable conversation.

Mrs. Darcy looked up at them. "Ah! There you two are! Come, the table is ready for us."

She and Mr. Darcy led the way into the dining room, and Laurie took a seat opposite Fitz, next to Grandfather.

For a moment his attention was arrested by a pained look on Grandfather's face. It was gone in a moment, but Laurie had seen it. He must have had a letter from one of the March ladies about Beth.

Laurie leaned in. "Are you quite well, Grandfather?"

The old man turned to him and gave a quick nod. "Fine, Theodore. Fine."

"Laurie, dear," Mrs. Darcy said. "Do tell us more about your trip to Nice. We never had the chance to discuss it."

"Are the ruins still as fun?" Fitz had a cheeky gleam in his eye.

“Not by half! I was forced to act a gentleman and could not climb them as we used to.”

Mrs. Darcy let out her sweet laugh, and Laurie smiled at her. She was such a genuine, cheery lady. “Fitz, your father used to climb all over the old castle ruins of Peveril Castle when he was a boy. We picnicked there often when he was a child.” Mrs. Darcy turned to Laurie. “Peveril Castle is quite near our home in Derbyshire.”

“Father has told me many hair-raising tales of daring.” Fitz smiled broadly.

Mr. Darcy leaned forward. “And did he tell you of the time that he got himself stuck inside a loophole window? It took me and two servants nearly an hour to get him out!”

Fitz let out a loud laugh. “That memory seems to have escaped him.”

“Tell me, Laurie, why could you not scamper over the ruins? Have you grown too sophisticated for such things?” Mrs. Darcy asked.

Laurie took a sip of wine before answering. “I was escorting a dear friend, and she has very particular feelings about how a gentleman ought to behave.” As he thought of Amy and her sketchbook, a warm feeling filled his breast. During her stay in Europe, she had grown into a woman. When he saw her in Nice, she had been so open and honest with him.

A pang of worry distracted him for a moment. She had her aunt and cousin, but they weren’t close to her the way he was. With Beth having taken a turn for the worse, would she shorten her stay and go home early? But how could she leave if the Carrols decided to stay here in Europe? Perhaps he and Grandfather might escort her home...

The conversation flowed around him, but Laurie’s thoughts remained distracted. He

really ought to write to Amy tonight and make sure she was well.

“Did you see Fred Vaughn while you were in Nice, Laurie?” Fitz took a spoonful of his soup and looked at him expectantly.

“Fred? No, he was away while I was there.”

“Ah, I see.” Fitz turned to his grandmother. “I think our old friend Fred is in love with the Miss Amy March of whom we spoke earlier.”

Mrs. Darcy’s sharp eyes flicked toward Laurie. He felt the keenness of her appraisal. Swallowing his own soup, he gave a noncommittal nod. “I heard something like that, yes.”

“And Miss March?” Fitz asked. “Do you know if she returns his affections?”

Something that Amy had said flashed through Laurie’s mind. “What a question! I am fond of him, and he is a respectable man. One does have a choice in whom one loves.”

“I would not presume to answer for the lady,” he replied.

“A wise choice,” Mr. Darcy said from the head of the table. He exchanged a look with his wife, and Laurie was struck by the obvious strength of their bond.

He wished that for himself—and for Amy, as well. Could she truly be happy with Fred? Would she really accept a man she did not love? He wished that she would not.

“My dear, I believe we are acquainted with the Vaughns, are we not?” Mrs. Darcy asked.

“We are, in fact,” her husband confirmed. “The elder Mr. Vaughn is a good friend of the Bingleys.”

“Yes, of course! Now I remember. And they had the sweetest little boy. I suppose that must be the Fred Vaughn of whom you speak, Fitz.”

“It must be.” Fitz took a sip of wine. “Perhaps we shall all be together again for a certain happy event.” He threw a wink at Laurie, who couldn’t help scowling back.

“Fitz, you are incorrigible!” Mrs. Darcy said. “If the lady and Mr. Vaughn do get married, I am quite sure we will not be invited.”

“And how is Auntie Jane, Grandmother? Is she quite well?”

“My sister is very well, indeed, thank you. She and Charles decided to stay in Derbyshire. They do not love to travel as much as I do.”

“It has been far too long since I have seen them.”

“Will you come soon to Derbyshire?” Mrs. Darcy looked at her grandson with fondness, and Laurie smiled.

“Of course, Grandmother! Just as soon as Mother and Father return from the continent. We shall all travel north together.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Mr. Darcy said. “It has been many long months since we have seen William and Cassandra.”

“They are eager to be home, I believe,” Fitz said.

“Travel is all very well, but it does become tiresome,” Grandfather agreed.

Laurie looked at him closely and saw that he looked fatigued. A wave of guilt flowed through him as he studied his dear grandfather. The man had selflessly traveled to Europe with him, though Laurie knew full well that travel was not his favorite pastime. He must miss home.

Something that felt a bit like resolve settled in Laurie's heart. He would repay Grandfather's kindness by working hard—be it music or business. He owed the man that much.

The next morning at breakfast, Laurie asked Mrs. Darcy if he might use her music room to work on his composition whilst staying at Darcy House.

"Of course you may, my dear." She smiled at him with motherly affection.

"My sister, Georgiana, is an accomplished musician. You will find staff paper in the little desk near the window," Mr. Darcy said.

"Indeed? Is she a composer as well?"

"She is, but only as a hobby. She confided in me once that composition never held as much joy for her as playing."

Laurie nodded. "I am afraid that I will feel the same."

"It never bothered my sister that she was no composer. She takes pleasure in learning and playing music because she genuinely loves it. When I gave her a new pianoforte for her sixteenth birthday, she was rarely out of the music room."

"A very dear friend of mine is just the same with her piano." Laurie remembered that, after Beth had recovered from scarlet fever, Grandfather had given her his piano. How Beth treasured it!

“Are you well, Laurie?” Mrs. Darcy looked at him with concern.

“Forgive me. I was thinking of a friend. She is...she is rather ill at present.”

Mrs. Darcy said nothing but reached over and patted his hand.

“Beth has always been as quiet and shy as a mouse. She takes great comfort in her piano. She contracted scarlet fever as a young girl. We feared the worst, but her mother pulled her through.”

“That illness can leave a lasting weakness of heart, I believe,” Mr. Darcy said, his tone quiet.

Laurie just nodded. He thought of Beth often. He remembered how terrified she had been of him in the beginning. Yet was it not Beth who had encouraged the other girls to let him join their little dramatic troupe? They had all had such fun together, putting on wild theatricals, having picnics in the spring, leaving notes and treats in the special mailbox he had set up in the hedge between their homes.

He had yearned for acceptance, for belonging, for love. And the March family had given it all to him, freely and without reserve. He had never wanted it to change. Perhaps that was why he had attached himself to Jo. Surely they would marry and keep on making merry their whole lives?

But Jo had refused him, stating emphatically that they did not suit. They were friends, but it did not follow that they could be lovers. He understood that now. Jo would never make the same decision as Amy to marry where there was affection but no love.

Mrs. Darcy’s gentle voice interrupted his musings. “Play as much as you want in the music room, dear. You shall delight us by filling Darcy House with music once

more.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie sat at the writing desk in his room later that night facing a blank page, unsure of how he should address Amy. Since he hoped his note would cheer her up, he decided to be silly and dramatic.

My dearest mentor,

I write to you from the Darcy home in London. I have sought out my wise grandfather, and we have a plan of action. Action, my dear! Take heart, your lazy friend has made a fresh start. I plan to apply myself to my music as you urged. In fact, I have already begun!

If it is talent (as I fear it may be) and not genius, I shall accept defeat and practice my business skills with Grandfather. There, now—Isn't that what you wished for?

Is Fred Vaughn keeping you entertained in Nice? I trust his behavior is as gallant as it ought to be with your fair self.

Here he paused. No, he didn't want to write about Fred and Amy. He left the sentence on the page but decided against pursuing that line of inquiry. Instead he spoke of Grandfather's homesickness, which made him wonder if Amy longed for home, too.

And what of you, my golden girl of the lake? What say you about Nice versus Concord? Does France still charm you as it did when you first arrived, or do you grow wistful about the woods of home, as I do?

Write to me and tell me how you get on.

Your friend as always,

Laurie

He deliberately did not mention Beth, though he regretted it the moment the letter was sent. He should not act as though nothing was wrong—not with Amy. They had known each other far too long.

Yet meeting her in Nice was like meeting someone new. She had changed a great deal in the two years they had been apart. Oh, in many ways, she was the same Amy. She was just as opinionated, elegant, direct, and caring as she had always been. But there was a womanly aspect to her character now.

He had always been trotting after Jo; had he really never noticed how lovely Amy had become? When they said farewell on the docks two years ago, he had merely considered her a pretty young girl. Thinking about the way she looked now, he realized she was nothing less than beautiful.

Laurie did not have long to wait for Amy's reply. The mail service in Europe was, of course, much faster than letters coming from America. Her letter arrived later that week as he was scribbling away at his music. When the liveried servant presented the missive on a silver tray, Laurie snatched it up, easily abandoning his work.

My dear composer,

I am excessively pleased to hear that you are applying yourself to your music. You have always had talent, and I am sure you will find your genius if you search diligently for it.

Your letter made me long for home! How dare you speak of Concord in such a way? I grew even more homesick than I already was! It makes me sad to think that the old

post office between your house and mine sits empty. I remember looking eagerly every chance I could for treats and notes from you. What wonderful times we had! It seems so long ago.

I have had sad news from home. Jo writes that Beth has taken a bad turn. Have you heard of it? Again Marmee says I should stay, but I feel I must go home. Yet how can I? Aunt is ill, and I cannot travel alone. Take very good care of your grandfather, Laurie.

Fred has returned to England.

Write soon,

Amy

Laurie read the letter twice—the sentence about Fred three times. What did she mean, he's returned to England? On business? To secure his parents' consent to his marriage to Amy?

The thought put a sour taste in his mouth. Why was Fred trotting off to England, leaving poor Amy alone in France? She must be doubly lonely now! Fred had gone, Aunt Carol was ill, and Flo would be spending much of her time tending to her mother. Laurie hoped she wasn't severely sick, for Amy was already worried about Beth.

Amy had no one to entertain her and nothing with which to occupy her time—except her art, of course. She had spoken emphatically about giving it up, but perhaps Laurie might find a way to persuade her otherwise.

Impatient to respond, Laurie flipped his staff paper over and scribbled a reply.

My dear artist,

My deepest apologies for provoking homesickness beyond repair! I confess I miss the woods of Concord as much as you do, but I am determined to finish what I have started.

The composing goes very ill indeed. My heroine has no strength, my tunes no originality.

We have had the news of Beth here, too. Take heart, she will rally yet! God would not take such an angel from us. Do take up your artist's brush once again, for it might bring you much comfort.

In fact, I would like to commission a piece. I am quite desirous to give grandfather a gift of thanks, for he has always been so good to me. Perhaps you might create a painting for him? I leave the subject to you.

Did I tell you I am staying with Mr. and Mrs. Darcy of Derbyshire? I went to school with their grandson Fitz for some time in my boyhood. Fitz is a dear friend and was there for me when I lost Father. Perhaps you shall meet him one day. I know your fondness for the English way of speaking.

Write again soon, if only to distract me from this miserable excuse for an opera.

Your friend,

Laurie

“Theodore Laurence, would you take a turn with me in the garden?” Mr. Darcy

looked a trifle awkward as he said this, studiously ignoring his wife's raised eyebrows.

"The garden, sir?" Laurie repeated. They were at the breakfast table. Fitz had not come down yet, so Laurie sat alone across from Mr. and Mrs. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy looked out the window. "It is very fine out."

"Yes. I mean...yes, of course, sir." Laurie got to his feet but waited for his host, as he was not sure which direction to go.

As he stood, Mr. Darcy addressed his wife. "If you will excuse us for a moment, my dear." She smiled and nodded as if it were an everyday occurrence for her austere husband to interrupt breakfast for a stroll.

Laurie followed Mr. Darcy through a small door tucked in the corner of the room.

"Mrs. Darcy had that door installed after we were first married. She wanted to be able to 'escape to the wilds' whenever she felt oppressed by city life."

"Mrs. Darcy's opinions seem to match my own," Laurie admitted. "I love being out of doors."

"As do I. We have that in common." Mr. Darcy strode ahead a few paces, hands laced behind his back. He was tall with silver hair and a graceful way of walking.

Laurie decided that Amy would like him immensely. She would probably wish to paint his portrait. He walked slowly behind his host. The garden was rather small, but a cheery fountain bubbled away in the center.

When Mr. Darcy reached the charming edifice, he turned and cleared his throat. "Mr.

Laurence, I am not a particularly loquacious individual, though I have endeavored to practice these many years. I am not accustomed to speaking about private matters with those beyond my family circle. However, I feel that you and I have something beyond our fondness for nature in common.”

“Do we, sir?” Laurie felt baffled.

“We do. I believe you lost your father when you were young.”

Laurie stared at him. His heart ached with the familiar feeling of loss that surfaced whenever he thought of his father. “Yes, sir. I was quite young.”

Compassionate understanding passed over Mr. Darcy’s face as he looked at Laurie. “I understand. I also lost my father when I was young. He was an excellent man, and I felt his loss keenly, although I was not given time to process the depth of my deprivation.”

“No?” Laurie fiddled with the frond of a leaf that leaned out from the bush next to him.

“My mother had passed some years before my father. When my father died, I was left to run the estate and care for my sister, who was but a girl. There was much to think about, much to do. It was some time before I could fully process what had happened.”

Laurie looked up. What Mr. Darcy described was incredibly familiar. Laurie had never spoken much about the loss of his father to anyone. Grandfather had been too overwhelmed by his own grief to offer guidance to his grandson.

Mr. Darcy looked at him with a keen eye. “Perhaps you understand my feelings?”

“I do. I was living here in Europe when my father died. Grandfather sent for me, of

course. I crossed the Atlantic alone and had plenty of time to feel the loss but no one to speak to about it.”

“Were you close with your grandfather?”

“No, truthfully. He had...” Laurie stopped, not wishing to sound disloyal.

“He had disapproved of your father’s choice of bride?” Mr. Darcy asked gently.

“Laurence confided that much to me.”

Laurie shoved his hands in his pockets and nodded glumly. “Yes, he disapproved of Mama. She was a pianist and not quite what grandfather had pictured for his only son.”

“I suppose you did not feel comfortable living with your grandfather at first.”

“No, I was terribly lonely that first winter. I never left the house. Grandfather hired a private tutor, and I was a rather shy boy, to own the truth.”

“As was I,” Mr. Darcy admitted with a wry smile.

Laurie smiled back. “I used to look out the window at the girls across the lane. They were always so merry. Having larks and playing games. And their mother...she seemed like the embodiment of sunshine itself.”

“I hope they befriended you despite your shyness.”

“They did. It was Jo who first pulled me out into the bright, wide world. She was always so frankly herself—there was no need at all to be shy around her. I grew up with the March family. And it did me a world of good.”

“I’m sure it did, Theodore. Forgive me, Laurie. I am not used to using nicknames.”

“You may call me whatever you wish, Mr. Darcy.”

“I would like to call you a friend, despite our very great age difference. I am no great orator, but my wife tells me I am rather good at listening. I offer my services in that regard, as a friend, should you ever wish to talk about your father. Even just to reminisce.”

Laurie considered the old gentleman. What an extraordinary man! Laurie wished he could have known him when Mr. Darcy was young.

Unbidden, the very great fear that he carried in his heart rose to his lips. “I worry that I will disappoint him. That is, if he were here today, would he...would he be proud of me?”

Mr. Darcy nodded, his look one of complete understanding. “It is something I often wondered, especially in my youth. Almost everything I did, I thought of my father—what his thoughts and wishes might have been.”

“Did it help? Having his memory to guide you?”

“Yes...and no.” Mr. Darcy sat on the pretty little bench situated on the edge of the path. He indicated the seat next to him, and Laurie sat as well. “It was helpful in the beginning. Especially when it came to the management of our estate in Derbyshire. He had been teaching me the particulars of running the estate since I was a child, and I fell back on these teachings often. But in some ways it nearly cost me my own happiness.”

“How? If you don’t mind telling me, I mean.”

“I became rather obsessed with maintaining the honor of the Darcy name. So much so that I nearly didn’t propose to Mrs. Darcy. And when I did, it was absolutely disastrous.”

Laurie’s eyebrows shot up, and Mr. Darcy actually let out a chuckle.

“Surely you are not surprised that I would not have done well at proposing.”

“I cannot imagine it, sir.”

“Everyone assumed that I would marry well. In those days, it was even more expected than it is now. I was a wealthy, landed gentleman. I was expected to marry a wealthy woman from the upper echelons.”

“I see.”

“But I fell in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. A gentleman’s daughter, to be sure, but no one of consequence. She was a country girl with no family name or fortune to recommend her. By all accounts, I should not have offered for her.”

“But you did.” Laurie smiled, enjoying this romantic tale.

“I did, though I will let Mrs. Darcy tell you just how horribly I managed my initial proposal.”

“Initial?”

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat. “I bring it up because I wish to counsel you on this point. There are times in our lives when we seem to awaken to the knowledge that we have been operating under false assumptions or misguided principles. If you find yourself feeling adrift, you might take some time to reflect upon this. Are you

piloting your own ship? Or have you chosen a path based on someone else's ideas of happiness?"

This was the most Laurie had ever heard Mr. Darcy say in one sitting. He felt the import of such a moment and so took his time to answer.

"I am musical, like my mother, and rather impulsive, like my father. I have got on well enough in life until now. Have you ever planned for something, knowing it to be a sure thing, and then realized that you were utterly and completely wrong?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have."

What an intriguing man Mr. Darcy was! The more they spoke together, the more Laurie liked him. He was so imposing at first glance, elegant almost to the point of coldness. Apparently, that exterior was not the true Mr. Darcy.

"Well then, perhaps you might know how I am feeling." Laurie suddenly felt that he could trust Mr. Darcy with his heartache. "I fell in love with the girl across the lane. Everyone assumed we would marry. But when I asked her, she refused."

Mr. Darcy was silent a moment. "Did you care for her as more than a friend?"

"I did."

"And do you still?"

"I..." Did he still care for Jo? Laurie felt suddenly sure. "No. I think I understand why she refused me. It is the loss of direction that plagues me now. I feel as if my whole life has been turned upside down, just as it was when Father died."

Mr. Darcy surprised him by patting his shoulder in a grandfatherly way. "You will

find your way, Mr. Laurence. Give yourself the grace of time.”

“Time? I thought ‘time and tide wait for no man.’”

Mr. Darcy smiled in acknowledgement. “True. Yet ‘let every man be master of his time.’”

Mrs. Darcy stuck her head around the little door in the wall. “Fitzwilliam, Mr. Smith is asking for you.”

“A moment, my dear.” Mr. Darcy turned back to Laurie. “Forgive me, but I have business to attend to. Do remember what I said. If you ever need assistance, please consider me.”

Laurie stood, held his hand out to Mr. Darcy, and gave him a hearty American handshake. “Thank you, sir. I shall remember.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

In Laurie's latest letter, he had asked for a painting for Grandfather. Amy intended to put forth her very best effort to fulfill his request.

Returning to her artist studio for the first time in weeks, she took up her paint and brushes. As she held them in her delicate hands, she felt a sense of rightness. No, she was not a genius of the art world, but painting and sketching brought her joy. Although she might not pursue art in the serious way she had imagined as a girl, she could still paint and sketch to ease her worried heart.

Beth was very ill, she knew. There was absolutely nothing she could do but pray and write home often, filling the pages with tales of her adventures in the Old Country.

Now she stood alone in front of a small canvas, brushes and pallet in hand. She knew what she wanted to create for Mr. Laurence but was unsure of her ability to execute it. Taking a deep breath, she began.

The delicate curves of Beth's features started to fill the blank space as Amy first sketched out her sister's face. She made it so Beth was looking past the viewer with an expression of peace and love. That was what her dear Beth looked like in Amy's mind. Always cheerful, always loving. She never had a harsh word for anyone.

Amy worked well into the evening. She hadn't finished, but she had made a good start on something that she hoped might bring Grandfather happiness.

As she packed up her things, she thought again of Laurie. He occupied her thoughts often these days. He had not mentioned Fred in his last letter. Had he understood her message when she had written that Fred was gone? Probably not. Laurie had never

understood that part of her. They got on so well together, yet he was horribly obtuse when it came to matters of the heart.

She had believed herself resigned to the fact that Laurie was to marry Jo, and that was that. It had never occurred to her that Jo would refuse him. Jo had never been openly affectionate in that way toward their neighbor, but she was always with him. Jo loved being exclusive with Laurie and often stole him away from Amy when they were all children. Both families assumed those two would marry.

But Jo had refused him.

Foolish girl! How could she hurt Laurie so deeply? Had she fallen in love with someone else, perhaps? She often mentioned a German professor in her letters, but Amy understood him to be rather old. Would Jo really reject Laurie for this professor person?

Oh! It was impossible to be in this position! She was angry with Jo for hurting Laurie. At the same time, a sense of hope that had long been absent grew in her heart. Might Laurie actually see her—the real her—now that Jo was not nearby to distract him?

When Amy returned to the hotel in time to change for dinner, she found several letters waiting for her. She leafed through them, her heart skipping a beat when she realized that Laurie had written again.

Then her eyes fell on a letter from Marmee. She held her breath as she opened it, dread pooling in her belly.

The news was not what she feared but did not offer any hope for the future. Beth continued to weaken. Her sister was too ill to write now, though Marmee relayed Beth's best blessings to her. A tear fell on the page as Amy read of her beloved

family in America, so very far away. Once again, she was filled with an urgent desire to go home to see Beth.

However, Marmee had closed the letter with a firm admonishment that she remain in Europe with her aunt and cousin. There is nothing you can do here, dear child. Beth takes great joy in your letters and speaks often of how happy she is that you are following your dream.

Amy folded the missive carefully and put it with the others in the hat box she had gotten in Paris. Her eyes fell on Laurie's note, which still lay on the dressing table unopened. She turned from it in a moment of overwhelming emotion. What was she to do? Everything seemed too much to bear these days. She could not be sure of anything.

Letters took so long to reach her from home. What if something had happened since Marmee last wrote? Aunt Carol was ill, and Amy could not be sure when they would go home. She was dependent upon her aunt's kindness, after all.

Adding to her frustration was this new unsettled feeling regarding Laurie. Why did things suddenly feel different between them?

With a little huff of annoyance, she sat upon the bed, the sudden motion causing the ribbons in her hair to flounce around her. Was that really true? What had changed regarding Laurie? Nothing, in reality.

Amy spoke to herself firmly, as she had done these many years. Laurie does not care for you in that way. Nothing has changed. I will be respected if I cannot be loved. The words brought a sense of calm, as they always did. She rose from the bed and ignored how her fingers shook ever so slightly as she opened Laurie's letter.

My dear Amy,

How are you, really? You must be lonely. I find I am, as well. I am surrounded by friends, but I feel as if I am lost at sea.

I hope I do not burden you to speak so frankly. But when we last met, you did say that you missed my blunt, natural way of talking. So many things have changed recently. It seems too much all at once.

I am no composer. I have decided to put my music aside and pursue business with Grandfather. If he agrees, I shall begin as soon as I return to our London home from Darcy House. He can teach me the inner workings of the business here before we return to America.

I wish you could come to London. I would love to introduce you to Mrs. Darcy. She is a charming, elegant lady, and the two of you would get on splendidly.

Now it is my turn to thank you. Your lecture to me during the Christmas holidays has done me the world of good. If you have any other observations to share, I am at your service.

When does Fred Vaughn return from England?

Your friend,

Laurie

Amy read his letter twice before setting it down upon the little table. He asked about Fred, surely to see how much longer she would be alone in Nice. She longed to go to London. Mrs. Darcy sounded rather intriguing, and it would be lovely to be surrounded by friends.

The dinner bell rang. Amy stood at once to go down, as Flo would be waiting alone

for her. Answering Laurie's letter would have to wait until after dinner.

The two young ladies had a rather quiet supper. Aunt Carrol was slowly recovering. The doctor said it was a serious fever but was confident she would heal if given time and space to rest. Amy shared her news of Beth.

"Why does it feel that the world has shifted lately?" Flo asked, her usual carefree demeanor dimmed.

"I feel just the same. Everything I was sure of seems wrong."

"Do you miss Fred?"

Amy shook her head. "I can at least ease your mind on that point. I miss him as a friend, but my heart is not broken."

"Why did you not accept him, Amy?"

Her cousin had never inquired about it before this, and Amy found she did not wish to explain. "He never asked, Flo. We just...I suppose we both realized that we were not meant to be."

Flo seemed satisfied by this answer, if not a little puzzled.

"I grow tired of Nice." Flo sounded dejected. "The doctor suggested a milder climate for Mama to ease her recovery."

"Perhaps it is time to move on." Amy looked out the window at the city beyond, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

“Theodore, the Darcys have invited us for supper. I presumed you were free and sent our acceptance.”

“I am at your service.” Laurie was delighted at the opportunity to see Fritz and his grandparents.

“Good! I believe it will be a larger party than usual, but do not worry. My friend is no lover of large gatherings.”

All feelings of warmth fled from Laurie’s body as soon as he entered the sitting room at Darcy House. There were, indeed, more people than there had been at their last dinner party. It was not the number of people, however, that disturbed him.

Standing at the other end of the room and looking at him with a distinctly sour expression was none other than Fred Vaughn.

Laurie’s steps faltered as their eyes met. What the devil was he doing here?

His memory of Fitz explaining the Darcy relation to the Vaughns came back to him, but he still felt unpleasantly surprised. Vaughn had left Amy alone in Nice, after all. Her dear sister was ill, and he had left her to come home to dinner parties?

“Ah! Laurie, James, I am so pleased to see you! Look who we have found here in London! The very same Fred Vaughn we were speaking of last week.” Mrs. Darcy motioned to Fred, who took a step forward and extended his hand to Grandfather.

“It is good to see you again, sir,” he said in his crisp, British accent. Amy had always admired the sound of his voice.

“Fred, it has been quite a while.” Laurie did not offer his hand.

“Indeed.” He spoke the word with a bitterness that struck Laurie like a blow. Tension suddenly filled the room.

Mrs. Darcy glanced sharply between the two of them. “You are acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Vaughn, I presume?” She motioned to the older couple standing a little to the side.

Mrs. Vaughn gave a delicate curtsy. “It is good to see you again, Theodore.”

Her husband offered a curt nod and mumbled something about it being a long time.

“It is good to see you both,” Laurie said.

“It has been many years. I am very happy to see you all again.” Grandfather did not seem to notice the strained atmosphere as he stepped into the room.

Laurie recognized he must attempt to converse with Fred civilly, no matter how annoyed he felt at the fellow’s tendency to leave women alone when they needed a friend. “I hope you have been well. Your younger sister is recently married, I believe?”

“Yes, Grace was married last fall. She is very happy living here in London.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“And you, Laurence? You have been traveling, I hear. Does it suit you?”

Laurie considered his response. “It does. I grew anxious and fretful in Concord, and so my grandfather and I ventured across the wide ocean to the Old Country.”

“My grandson never seems to tire of traveling,” Grandfather offered. “He returned

very recently from Nice.”

Fred Vaughn’s lips thinned, but he said nothing. The dinner bell rang, saving Laurie from having to reply.

He was seated between Fred and Fitz. He glanced toward Grandfather, who was speaking to the senior Mr. Vaughn, seemingly at ease. Why then, was Laurie so out of sorts? He glanced at Fred. They were still friends, weren’t they? Why did Laurie feel the need to trounce him? He thought of Amy alone in Nice. That was why, of course.

“Was Amy well when you left her?” He spoke in what he hoped was a neutral tone.

Fred froze with his soup spoon halfway to his mouth. “She was.”

“I wonder that you left her to come back to England. I assume it was something very important to take you away.”

Fred set his spoon down with an audible clank. “Do not concern yourself, Laurence.”

“And when do you return to Nice?”

The conversation of the table flowed around them for a moment. Fred was silent, but his pleasantly bland smile seemed forced. Fitz, sensing a lull in their conversation, commanded Fred’s attention.

Laurie looked across the table and saw Mrs. Vaughn looking at her son with an anxious expression. He returned his attention to his soup. However, a moment later, Fred turned to him slightly and asked a question of his own rather than answer Laurie’s.

“And you, Laurence? When do you return to Nice?”

“I? I have no plan to do so.”

Fred nodded as if he had expected this answer. “Even if someone is waiting for you?”

His tone was positively unpleasant. Confused, Laurie felt his temper rising. “And what about the one who waits for you? You have heard, I assume, that Amy’s sister Beth is very ill?”

Fred looked at him warily. “I have. I hope nothing has happened.”

Laurie shook his head. “Amy is alone in Nice, yet you are here. I thought you cared about her.”

“You know nothing about it, Theodora!”

The entire table fell silent. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy shared a look of concern. Fred was staring at him with absolute dislike.

Fitz let out a forced laugh. “Theodora! I haven’t heard that moniker in quite some time, Fred. You had better watch out, or Laurie will thrash you like he did all those years ago.”

“Boys at school can be so dramatic, don’t you agree, Lillian?” Mrs. Darcy said lightly.

Mrs. Vaughn muttered something in agreement.

“You are quite right, my dear,” Mr. Darcy said. “Mr. Laurence, how goes your composition?”

The message was clear; it was time to change the subject. Laurie felt a trifle guilty for putting his hosts in an awkward position. Turning his body to face Mr. Darcy, he replied, "I am a musician, sir, I am no composer."

"You sound like my sister, Georgiana."

"He does, doesn't he?" Mrs. Darcy agreed. "Georgiana preferred playing to composing, though we all thought she was quite good at both. She has always been one of the most accomplished women of my acquaintance."

"I would very much like to meet her," Laurie replied.

"I am sure she would love you, as we do. Alas, she rarely leaves Derbyshire. She is even more attached to the country than my husband." Mrs. Darcy smiled indulgently at Mr. Darcy, who raised his glass in salute.

The evening wore on in a more agreeable fashion than it began, although Laurie was careful not to speak with Fred again. Indeed, he tried not to look at him. Whenever he did, he felt angry for Amy's sake.

The Vaughns moved to leave a trifle earlier than was customary for such a gathering, but the Darcys seemed not to notice. As his parents spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, Fred Vaughn walked purposefully toward Laurie. "Goodbye, Laurence. I do not think that we shall meet again."

Laurie was taken aback. They had shared harsh words, but did that dissolve a friendship of such long standing? Fred stared at him hard, and then his face seemed to soften just slightly.

"It will be difficult for me to meet you often, I believe."

“Will you be traveling?”

Fred ignored this question and offered his hand instead. Laurie took it, though he still felt confused. “I see that you are still unaware. I hope you can understand me someday.”

Utterly bewildered, Laurie simply answered, “So do I, Freddie.”

A wistful look ghosted across Fred Vaughn’s face. He seemed as if he might say more, but he shook his head sadly and left to join his parents.

Laurie watched him go, hoping that they might mend their friendship someday. He was only thinking of Amy—after all, didn’t they have that in common? Her welfare was important to them both, he was certain.

A short while later, he and Grandfather took their leave. As he said farewell to Mrs. Darcy, Laurie took the opportunity to apologize. “I must ask your forgiveness for earlier, ma’am. It was uncivil of me to put you in such a position.”

“Do not worry. I am old enough to have witnessed many an awkward scene at a dinner party. But allow me to beg your pardon. I thought that you and Fred were friends. Had I known there was some animosity between you, I would not have invited the Vaughns this evening.”

Laurie blinked at her, trying to find the words to explain. “We are friends...or rather, we were friends. I hope we shall be again.”

The lady puts her hand up to forestall him. “No further explanation is necessary, my dear. Now, you must come to visit again before you leave. Promise me?”

“I promise, ma’am. And thank you.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Grandfather had been delighted with Laurie's enthusiasm to learn the business. For his part, Laurie was pleasantly surprised at how well the work suited him. He had thought of business as all numbers, but there was a great deal of communication and management involved that he actually enjoyed.

The two were having lunch together when the letters arrived. Amy's lay on top, and Laurie grabbed it up with an eagerness that drew his grandfather's attention. Refusing to meet his eye, Laurie opened the letter as calmly as he could.

My dear Laurie,

I shall first address the issue of Fred Vaughn. He has gone back to England, and I will have no more news of him to relay. We parted as friends. Fred could see my feelings more clearly than anyone else has ever done, and for that I am grateful.

Now, onto more pleasant topics. I have been hard at work fulfilling your commission for your grandfather. I do hope you will both be pleased once it is finished. Your advice to me was most helpful. I have returned to my sketches and paintings as you urged and find enjoyment in the pursuit—more so than I did when I was pursuing genius. My heart is at ease now when I paint and sketch.

So I shall admonish you to do the same. You must keep playing, Laurie. Music cannot be gone from your life, for you play so beautifully. I wish I could come to London and hear you play, but you know I cannot. Although I thank you for the invitation, I must stay here with my aunt and Flo.

From your description, it is apparent that Mrs. and Mr. Darcy are very amiable,

lovely people. Perhaps I shall be lucky enough to meet them one day.

It is wonderful to know that you are working closely with your grandfather now. You will make him even more proud of you than he already is. And though it is not so monumental as the recognition from dear Mr. Laurence, I am proud of you too.

Write to me soon.

Amy

Fred had come back to England permanently? What the devil did she mean when she said that he had seen her feelings clearly? Was she heartbroken? Did she wish that Fred would return?

He thought back to the dinner party at Darcy House. No wonder Fred had appeared displeased when Laurie spoke of Amy.

Laurie looked up to see Grandfather watching him keenly and felt a sharp pang of regret. Grandfather anticipated only news of Beth.

“No news, Grandfather.”

The old man nodded thoughtfully. “Surely Amy has something to share?”

“Of course. Her aunt is still ill. She would love to visit us, but cannot at the present time. And, um...Fred Vaughn has returned to England permanently.”

At this, Grandfather raised an eyebrow. “I see. I assumed he was to return directly. Does Amy...is she quite well?”

Laurie knew what he was asking. It was, in fact, the very thing he wanted to know.

How did Amy feel about Fred's departure?

"I cannot tell. She seems resigned to it."

"That does not mean that her heart is untouched."

"That's absolutely true. Though she guards it well, she has a soft heart. Jo often criticized Amy for her sharp tongue and snobbish way, but I think Jo misunderstood Amy's motivations."

He looked up from his lunch to find his grandfather staring at him.

"What?"

Grandfather cleared his throat. "That is the first time you have spoken of Jo since we left Concord."

Was it? Had he really never mentioned her? "I suppose you're right."

"And I agree with you. Amy March is a good woman. I have a letter from her today, though you may not have noticed."

There was something in his tone that made Laurie wary. "Oh, I had not noticed, I must confess."

"She asked after you. Says you told her about your plan to pursue business. She is very proud of you—I can tell by her way of expressing herself."

Laurie felt a warmth in his chest, and he smiled. "She's a dear."

"Perhaps you might go to Nice and visit her once again? She must be lonely."

Laurie was a bit taken aback by this suggestion. “I believe she would not like that, Grandfather. She would want me to keep up my studies with you.”

His grandfather nodded knowingly. “Yes, she would want you to finish what you started. She is her mother’s daughter.”

Now that they had begun speaking of her, Laurie found he wanted to continue. “She has returned to her art.”

“That is an excellent thing. I was quite worried when she told me she would give it up. There is no need to be a genius to pursue something.”

“Precisely. She urges me to do the same with my music.”

“I hope you take her advice.”

“I believe I will. That’s twice now that she has aided me.”

“Twice?”

“Yes. She admonished me to be serious once more and to stop my idle ways.”

“Then I owe her thanks, as well. I had been quite worried about you. But when you returned from Nice you seemed changed, somehow. For the better.”

“Yes, my time with Amy did me good.”

“Perhaps...” Grandfather looked at him seriously and then shook his head. “Never mind.”

Laurie took a large gulp of his coffee, extremely grateful that his grandfather had

thought better of suggesting something. Whatever it was, he felt too shaky in his mind and heart to respond with any sort of clarity.

Amy had written that Fred had seen what no one else had. What did that mean? If he had recognized that Amy didn't love him...well, others had seen that. Laurie had, at any rate, and he was willing to wager that Marmee had, as well.

An image of Amy at the ball on Christmas Day flashed into his mind. She had been absolutely stunning, standing near the red curtains with her white dress and golden hair making her look like an angel.

With a shudder, he remembered his rudeness—his refusal to dance with her, his lounging and insufferable moping. How had she put up with him?

In the end, she had decided to ignore him and wound up dancing with that Polish count all night. Laurie chuckled as he recalled her poise when her dance partner had more energy than grace.

He returned to his own room, eager to reread Amy's missive and pen one of his own. He sat at his writing desk for several moments, contemplating how to begin. After some thought, he decided on honesty—he and Amy had always had that bond between them.

Dear Amy,

I find myself surprised by your letter. You and Fred seemed like a good match, and I am very sorry if his absence causes you pain. I recall you saying that you had chosen this path. I hope that the decision to end things between you and Fred was yours or, at least, one that you are at peace with.

It is wonderful to hear that you are hard at work on Grandfather's painting. Whatever

you make will be brilliant, I am sure. Grandfather mentioned the other day that you will always be the favorite artist of his acquaintance. There, that is high praise for you! The old man knows quite a few more artists that you might suppose.

Sometimes I wonder what he was like when he was my age. He came to Europe then too, you know. What did he do here? What kind of scrapes did he get into? What kind of friends did he make?

I do know the Darcys are among those he met at that time. They are such dear people, Amy. I know you cannot travel now but, as I said before, someday I must introduce you to them. Mrs. Darcy reminds me of Marmee, which makes me miss your mother all the more.

Though Mr. Darcy at first struck me as rather standoffish, I have since discovered he is as warm and caring an individual as your own wonderful father. We had a long talk one afternoon about our fathers. Like me, Mr. Darcy lost his when he was young. It was good to speak with someone who understands.

Perhaps you might feel the same. Speaking with a friend about heartache can be a balm. My dear, what did Fred see that no one else has? I cannot but ask, for I mean to help you if I can.

Your friend,

Laurie

After signing his name, he read the letter again. Was he wrong to probe for an explanation? He thought of their trip to the ruins and Amy's declaration: I shall be respected if I cannot be loved.

He wrote a postscript to the letter.

If you are very lonely, you only have to ask and I shall come to you in Nice.

Amy read Laurie's letter several times before finally sitting at her desk to reply. What should she say? She desperately wanted Laurie to return, but she would not ask him. He was finally pursuing business with Grandfather, making a life for himself, and she could not interrupt that—no matter how badly she wished to see him.

She thought over her response very carefully. At last, she began.

My dear Laurie,

First, I must tell you that Aunt is a little better. We are traveling to Vevay this week. The doctor here believes her condition will improve in the clean air, so we are all a-tumble packing and making preparations. I am eager to leave, for I feel like we have been in Nice for quite some time.

I cannot imagine your grandfather getting into any scrapes! He has always been the epitome of a gentleman. That image of him is firmly ensconced in my mind, so I cannot think of him in any other way!

Thank you, my dear friend, for your offer to come to me. I cannot ask you to do that when you have just started making a diligent effort to learn the business from Grandfather. Do you find you like it after all? I always thought that you would. You are marvelously creative, and you have a quick mind. The world of business might fit you very well indeed.

I am quite artistic like you, but I find that, despite my creative nature, I like order and rightness. The business world might suit me, if women were allowed that kind of freedom! So try to find joy in the work, Laurie, even if the joy is only from a job well

done.

Regarding Fred Vaughn, I appreciate your kind words and offer of help more than I can express. I am sorry, but I cannot tell you more about it. It is a matter of the heart that must be felt to be understood.

If I might be so bold, how is your heart faring? I do not wish to pry, but I hope you are well in spirit.

Laurie, I have had a letter from Marmee today. Beth will not recover, I am sure of it now. Marmee says she is too weak to write. I am sick at heart about it. My dear, dear Beth! However shall we get on without her? I feel as if I am staring into a void. I cannot prevent what I know is coming, however desperate I am to avoid such pain. Take very good care of Grandfather, for he shall feel it keenly.

Oh, how I wish I were home!

Your friend,

Amy

Amy looked over the letter, blotting away the tears that had fallen as she wrote of Beth. Though Laurie always championed Beth's recovery, Amy knew that her sister's heart was too weak—physically, at least. She retrieved her handkerchief from her pocket and did not try to stem the tears that came. Her heart was full of sorrow.

Part of her wished she had never traveled to Europe at all.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie usually enjoyed reading every bit of Amy's letters, but this last missive left him heartbroken.

His first concern was for Beth. Did Amy truly believe she would not recover? Surely their little Bethy would be well again! Even as he thought this, he felt the truth in his heart. Beth had not been strong since her childhood, when scarlet fever had nearly stolen her away from them.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers. How he missed them all! Dear Beth, Meg and John, Marmee and Mr. March...and even Jo. He thought of her now with a heartache that had nothing to do with romance. Jo was close to Beth. She would feel her absence keenly.

And what of Amy, alone in Vevay? She told him to stay with grandfather, but how could he, knowing that Beth was so ill? And why would she not speak to him about Fred? They were old friends, after all. He took her letter out once more and reread the short lines.

Regarding Fred Vaughn, I appreciate your kind words and offer of help more than I can express. I am sorry, but I cannot tell you more about it. It is a matter of the heart that must be felt in order to be understood.

What the devil did that mean?

Laurie had always prided himself on having a perceptive and sensitive nature. Even when they were children, he could always discern Amy's mood—whether she was merely in a pout or truly upset about something, or whether she was excited and

happy but trying to be elegant and refined.

He recalled the day Aunt Carrol had offered to take her to Europe. How excited she was to have the opportunity to study art abroad! Her castles in the air were coming true, and all that was missing was a good match.

Laurie tossed Amy's letter onto the desk with a grunt of annoyance. Well, Fred was a good match, but she had rejected him. Or had Fred ended things? Why? Amy was perfect. Any man would be lucky to marry her.

And why the devil was she so guarded? He would simply write to her and tell her she was being a ninny. Laurie sat down at once, pulling out a piece of paper and his favorite pen.

But instead of admonishments about not sharing her confidences with him—which would have been a ridiculous thing to write—he told her again that he would come the moment she needed him.

My dear friend,

I am troubled in my mind and heart over the news of Beth. I cannot help but think that you should not be alone just now. Be sure to share this burden with Flo and Aunt Carrol, as I know they would wish to comfort you as I do. If there is anything I can do, please write to me. I feel helpless here in London but do my very best to take care of Grandfather. He deserves no less.

The world continues to shift beneath our feet, no matter how hard we try to right ourselves. Our trials and tribulations continue. We must try to bear it, I suppose. After all, 'what God says is best, is best, though all the men in the world are against it.'

I will not fill these pages with sorrow but strive to make you smile as I did all those

years ago when you stayed alone with Aunt March. Do you remember? Our afternoon visits were the highlight of my day during that difficult time. You were so very prim and proper, and I remember spying upon you as you dressed yourself in various old frocks. A pink turban, as I recall! How you loved everything elegant, even then!

You are all grown up now and a fine woman, but I have stumbled upon a book for children that may amuse you. It is utterly strange and wonderful. The title itself should entice you: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The author is one Mr. Lewis Carroll. No relation, I trust, to your own lovely relatives? The work is fascinating, though very odd. Ms. Alice travels through a looking glass to find a world of bizarre and fantastical things. I suggest you find a copy if you need something to transport you.

How do you get on with A Tale of Two Cities?

Write to me often, will you? I enjoy your letters very much.

Your friend,

Laurie

Amy's response came within days, which Laurie found rather gratifying. This letter was shorter than the last but rather less bleak.

My dear friend,

Thank you for your letter and for your attempts to cheer me with talk of nonsense. Through a looking glass! It sounded diverting, so I went out at once to procure the volume. It was not to be had at any of the shops here in Vevay, so you must save your copy and let me read it soon.

Your reminiscence of those hours spent at Aunt March's made me laugh. How homesick I was! You were comfort itself. I was so pleased to have you all to myself as we walked or rode each day. And yes, I recall the pink turban I wore! That old attic room was full of beautiful old things. What a treasure trove!

No word from home about Beth. Thoughts of her and dread of the news to come are my constant companions, for 'as my love is siz'd, my fear is so.' Do not imagine, dear friend, that I write these words as a secret plea for you to quit your sphere of business and rush to my side. We must both work hard and well in our own ways.

I have almost finished my work for Grandfather. I intend to deliver it in person once it is complete, as I would not feel easy sending it off. I know you will understand. It is a comfort to me that you always do, and I thank you for it.

How goes it with you? Are you learning the business well? Do you like it? Is the weather behaving itself in London? And do you attend to your grandfather as you ought? I hope so, for he is a dear that deserves nothing less. I miss you both.

Take care, my friend, and write to me soon, for I admit that my heart aches with loneliness.

Your friend,

Amy

Well, at least she had found his review of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland amusing. He made a mental note to send her his volume. He would rather just bring it to her himself, but Amy would scold him for abandoning his duty to grandfather.

Yet who was taking care of her? Flo was probably quite preoccupied with her mother. Again, the desire to go to Amy pulled at him. Since he could not go see her, he could

at least write to her immediately and tell her how much he wished to visit. He knew his Amy would appreciate such words.

His mind tumbled over the unspoken words. His Amy? His dear friend, Amy. Yes, he could call her that without worry. He knew she valued their friendship, as did he.

My dear Mademoiselle Cassat,

Thank you for your hard work on the commission for Grandfather. I must confess that I am wild to see it. Your artwork has improved so much with your diligent study abroad. Truly, it is remarkable how much you have learned in such a short time. Do not think, my dear, that I mean to say your work was not remarkable before your crossing of the ‘unpathed waters’ to ‘undreamed shores,’ only that you have improved upon the gifts that are rightfully yours.

It is rather unfair of you to keep insisting I must stay here in London and be dutiful. What I wish is to run off and see your fair person. Do you know, Amy, what a help you have been to me these past few months? I came to Europe confused and melancholy; it was your influence that stirred me from my malaise to become a contributing member of society once more. More than that, seeing you and exchanging letters with you have brought a lightness to my heart. As the bard says, ‘Thy friendship makes us fresh and doth beget new courage in our breast.’

I hope you are well and enjoying your surroundings despite your worries. How do you like Vevay? It has been many years since I have been there, though I remember it fondly. The lake is stunning, and your artist’s eye should be finding much to delight in.

Though you have not spoken of it, I must risk your displeasure by asking if your heart aches beyond your worry over Beth. Does it hurt for reasons that, in your words, “must be felt to be understood?”

Write soon and assure me that you are well, for I think of you daily. If you are unhappy, I shall be there in a moment.

Your friend,

Laurie

After posting his letter, Laurie became unsettled and irritable. Had he been too intrusive, requesting that Amy explain herself once again? He had asked about Fred already, and she had politely but firmly put him off. Would she take offense? How could he but ask when she wrote of her heartache?

“Are you quite well this afternoon?” his grandfather asked as they went through some business affairs together.

“Yes, but I find myself slightly distracted—that is all.”

His grandfather nodded. “I understand. I feel it too.”

Laurie knew he was speaking of Beth. A wave of guilt hit him as he realized that, on the contrary, he had been thinking of Amy. He was concerned for Beth, of course, but somehow it was Amy who worried him more.

From what Marmee wrote in her frequent letters, Beth had known for quite some time that her heart was weakening—long before she told her family. Not that the knowing made it any easier, but it must have been a shock to Amy, here in Europe and away from her dear sister.

“Why don’t we take a break, Theodore? I find I am in need of one, as well. Would you like some tea or coffee?”

Laurie felt unbearably restless. “Please excuse me, Grandfather. I believe I need to refresh myself with air and movement.”

For lack of a better option, he took himself off to Hyde Park. It couldn’t compare to the wildness of his dear home in Concord, where he could have enjoyed the solitude of the woods instead of being surrounded by people. However, it would have to do.

He walked alone through the park, not seeing any of the elegantly dressed gentlemen on their horses nor the fashionable ladies in their phaetons. His eyes remained on the ground in front of him as if his shoes were the most interesting thing in the world. Concern for Amy overrode attention to his surroundings.

What of Amy’s heart? Was she sad about Fred? When they had shared the honest truths about their hearts in the garden that day in Valrosa, she had told him that she was content to be respected if she could not be loved.

No, that was not exactly right. She had not mentioned being content or happy about it. Instead, she had sounded...resigned. Although he had begged her to tell him who would not return her affections, she had demurred.

Someone had broken her heart—he could see that now. She had behaved in the most ladylike manner, pursuing her art, attending to her aunt and cousin. She hadn’t allowed herself to become morose and apathetic.

But who was it that had disappointed her? Who could help loving Amy? She was kind-hearted, engaging, attractive, talented and intelligent; in short, she was everything a man could want. Whoever it was must be a complete idiot. A gentleman would be lucky, indeed, to possess Amy’s heart. He couldn’t imagine a better partner to walk through life with.

Of course, there was no one that really deserved her. She was too good for Fred

Vaughn—that much was certain. He was as stiff as a poker and, besides, hadn't he left her just when she needed him most? She said they had parted as friends, but any man that would leave Amy March was a fool, and she deserved better.

In fact, there was no one of his acquaintance worthy of her—no one for whom he would willingly part with her.

He stumbled to a stop, at last looking up from the dust at his feet. He blinked and turned around slowly. His mind buzzed, like the feeling one gets when they abruptly wake up from a dream. How had he been so completely blind?

I am in love with Amy March!

Amy. Little Amy. Amy, who had doted on him as a child. Amy, who had flirted with him so amiably as a young woman. Amy, who had made him promise to take care of her dear people while she was in Europe. Amy.

How could he be in love with Amy? It had always been Jo.

When he thought of Jo now, an entirely different feeling filled his heart. She was a dear girl who had helped him through a dark time in his life. She had brought him into the March family and filled his days with joy when his heart was aching over the loss of his father.

But he was not in love with Jo. He was in love with Amy.

Just thinking about her filled him with longing. And guilt.

Dear God, how could he love her? How could she ever accept his feelings with her intimate knowledge of how he had followed Jo around, waiting for the day they could be married? He cringed inwardly. She would believe she was his second choice

behind Jo, and her pride would never allow her to accept that.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and resumed his walk. Amy would soundly reject him. And he could not blame her at all.

His mind returned to wondering who it was that would not love her back. He thought long and hard, his feet taking him back home on their own accord. What men were there in her life that had not fallen at her feet?

Was it that she actually did love Fred, but he did not love her back? No. Laurie had asked her frankly about that, and she had replied honestly enough. Could it be someone back in Concord?

He thought of the young men there, uncertain if his memories were distorted by his affection for the lady. But truly he could think of no one. Perhaps Grandfather had noticed what he had not.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie found his grandfather having lunch in the little garden behind their townhome. The weather was turning warm, and today was particularly fine. Grandfather looked up when he sat down across from him.

“There you are, my dear boy. Are you hungry?” Without waiting for an answer, he signaled his servant to bring food.

“Grandfather, I wish to ask you a question of a rather... delicate nature.”

The old man looked up. “You have my permission to ask any nature of question. If I can be of help to you, I will.”

Laurie nodded but seemed unable to form the question he truly wanted to ask. He decided to come at the issue sideways. “Amy wrote that Fred Vaughn is to remain here in England.”

“Yes, so you said this morning.”

“Right.” Laurie fell silent and his grandfather looked at him patiently, waiting for him to go on. “Well, while I was in Nice, Amy and I had a conversation about him.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. I-I asked her if she loved him, and she said that she was fond of him. She said...well, that is...she said that she and I were not so different. And she encouraged me to be respectable in my heartbreak, as she had done.”

Grandfather was silent for a moment. "Amy heartbroken? Yet not about Fred Vaughn? Then perhaps it is best that they have parted ways. Someone with such a loving heart deserves a loving marriage."

Laurie nodded, gulping hard. "Grandfather... I wished to ask you if you might know..." As the silence stretched, Laurie found himself unable to say what he had come to ask. He shook his head. "Never mind."

"You wish to know who did not return Amy's affections."

"Yes. I was wondering if she had ever confided in you. But now that I say it, I realize that, if she had, you had better not tell me. It would be a betrayal of her confidence."

The old man smiled knowingly. "Which would indeed be a serious matter. Amy has never confided such a thing to me. She is a very private person."

"Yes, you're right about that."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I did, but she would not tell me."

"I see." His grandfather said nothing more but returned to his lunch.

The servant set a plate before Laurie and he ate, tasting nothing. He wished he could talk the matter out with someone. He was hesitant to speak openly about it with Grandfather, who was already too worried about Beth. And the old man had been as downcast as he when Jo refused him. Would he accept Laurie's feelings about Amy?

A sudden idea struck him. Perhaps Mr. Darcy might offer some advice? Laurie's thoughts were all a-tumble, but he remembered how insightful the old gentleman had

been and his offer of assistance should Laurie ever need it. Well, he certainly needed some guidance now!

He made his way to the Darcy home later that afternoon. The weather was fine, so he walked instead of taking the carriage. Loping along with his hands in his pockets, he was the picture of a visiting American. When the liveried servant opened the door, Laurie gave his card, asked if Mr. and Mrs. Darcy were at home, and was promptly ushered inside to wait in the sitting room. It wasn't the usual calling hours, and he hoped they would be available all the same.

He didn't wait long, as Mrs. Darcy soon opened the door. "My dear Laurie!" She walked across the room and took both his hands in hers as he stood to greet her. "I am so glad to see you!"

"As am I, Mrs. Darcy."

"My husband is just finishing some correspondence."

He tried his best to keep the anxiety off his features, but he knew at once that he had been unsuccessful. The sharp-eyed mistress of the house cocked her head at him. "My dear Mr. Laurence, whatever is the matter?"

"Nothing at all, ma'am."

Mr. Darcy arrived a moment later. "Forgive me, Mr. Laurence, I was finishing a letter to my son."

"Thank you for making time for me, Mr. Darcy."

He was rewarded with one of Mr. Darcy's rare smiles.

“I-I have no wish to burden you, yet I find myself in need of someone to talk with about something that has me utterly confused.”

“Sit, my dear,” Mrs. Darcy commanded. She rang for tea and took the chair opposite him. Mr. Darcy walked to the mantle and took up his usual pose of leaning against it.

“I am glad you thought of us,” he said.

“Well, sir, I found great comfort in our conversation in the garden. And, well...you see, I think my problem today relates.”

Mrs. Darcy glanced at her husband, who nodded in understanding. “Mr. Laurence and I spoke of our fathers, my dear. And of expectations.”

“I see. Of course, you two do have that sadness in common.” She turned her attention back to Laurie.

“When I spoke with Mr. Darcy about my father, I also hinted at a different kind of loss that I recently experienced. I...” He sighed. It was a bit more difficult to talk about than he had expected. Would they think him an awful man?

Mrs. Darcy waited patiently. He took a deep breath and manfully confessed about his proposal to Jo. He told them how he had loved her since the moment he met her at a party all those years ago. How he had worked through college for her, content in the knowledge that they would marry in the end. How she had rejected him.

"Not every lady is ready to accept a marriage proposal when first offered." Mrs. Darcy tilted her head slightly as if considering him. "But I sense that Miss Josephine March knows her own mind."

"That she most certainly does." Thinking of Jo now, Laurie remembered her emphatic

refusal. She was kind but clear and firm. She could never love him in that way.

Amy's face flitted across his mind, and the now familiar pang of guilt pierced his heart.

"It is this lady, I assume, that causes you such heartache now?" Mrs. Darcy asked.

"No. It is another lady entirely."

At this she raised her eyebrows. Laurie stood up abruptly, agitation driving him to the fireplace. Mr. Darcy eyed him as he paced back and forth but said nothing.

"You will think me unfaithful, surely. Unfaithful and fickle."

"I declare you to be a very good boy, Theodore Laurence. Come. Tell us the heart of the matter."

Seeing nothing for it, Laurie continued his confession. "A month or so ago I encountered a young lady that I have known since she and I were children."

"Another such lady?" Mrs. Darcy asked.

"Yes. We had not seen each other for several years. We were always good friends, like family. Now I find myself unable to think of little else but her. It was she who accused me of idleness, and she who made me realize I was wasting my life. It was she who urged me to return to my grandfather and pursue music seriously."

"Is the problem your youthful love?" Mrs. Darcy's sweet tone soothed him.

"In a way."

"There is more to the story, is there not? Might this lady currently reside in Nice?" Mr. Darcy asked.

He had guessed it. Forcing himself to face them, Laurie confessed. "I think of Miss Amy March with affection that goes beyond friendship. Yet how can she accept this from me? She knows I thought myself in love with her sister!"

A silence followed this statement. Laurie felt all the awkwardness of his situation.

"I have not confessed this to the lady in question. I know she would be uneasy."

"I can well believe she would be," Mrs. Darcy said.

"The principal point is whether or not the lady returns to your affections." Mr. Darcy said, startling them both.

Laurie turned to the older gentleman. "But what of her sister?"

Mr. Darcy looked at him sternly. "Her sister does not care for you, but Miss Amy March might indeed share your feelings. Unless you mean not to act, the sooner you ascertain her position, the better."

"My dear, it is not a business proposition," Mrs. Darcy said lightly. She turned her attention to Laurie. "I do believe my husband is correct, however. If you mean to keep your feelings to yourself forever, well, there is nothing to be done. But if you wish to pursue Miss Amy, then you must do so openly and honestly. You are not the first man to fall in love with a sister of your chosen one."

"But that's just it!" Laurie said with sudden feeling. "Jo is not my chosen one! I mean, I thought she was. But now I see that she was correct. We don't suit at all! But how can I know my feelings for Miss Amy are true when I spent years thinking that

Jo was the only woman for me? How can I be so...so...fickle?"

To his surprise, Mrs. Darcy smiled at him. "My dear boy, I understand your feelings completely."

He looked at her, nonplussed.

"When Mr. Darcy first proposed, I emphatically refused him."

Laurie blinked and then threw a glance at Mr. Darcy.

"I told you my initial proposal was disastrous," the gentleman confirmed.

"It was not six months later that I realized my feelings for him had changed. I began the year 12 with such conviction in my thoughts and judgment of character. My confidence was severely shaken by certain events within my own family. By that summer, for the first time in my life, I found myself without a clear sense of my thoughts and feelings."

"Lost," Laurie said quietly.

"Just so."

"How did you...mend things?"

It was Mr. Darcy who answered. "I was rather persistent." This drew a musical laugh from his wife.

"I spent many a long, solitary walk trying to understand myself. How could I have fallen in love with a gentleman after I refused his proposal? Was I truly in love with him at all? Had I simply been awed by his glorious home and elegant manner? But

when I saw Mr. Darcy again, my questions were answered in a moment. My doubts and fears fell away, and I knew I had to act. I only hoped that his feelings for me had not cooled to dislike, considering my earlier treatment of him.”

“What did you do? That is, if I may be so bold as to inquire.”

“I tried my very best to show Mr. Darcy that I no longer thought of him as the last man in the world I would ever choose to marry.”

Laurie’s jaw dropped in surprise, and Mrs. Darcy laughed. She looked up at her husband, who still stood near the fireplace. He was shaking his head, but a smile graced his lips. Then he walked to her side and took her hand. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. “Do not worry, Theodore Laurence. You will find your way through this maze in time.”

Laurie felt comforted, though his head and heart were still all in a jumble. Watching Mr. and Mrs. Darcy gave him a strange sense of peace, as if he could really believe their promise that everything would work out well.

“Thank you both. Truly.”

“I believe I may answer for us both when I assure you that my wife and I are gratified that you feel you can confide in us.”

“Laurie, may I offer one more modicum of advice?” Mrs. Darcy asked.

“Of course.”

“Do not be afraid to trust your heart. Your head will catch up in time.” She took his hand and pressed it. In that moment she reminded him so much of Marmee that he longed for home.

That afternoon, Laurie returned to his piano. He leafed through the sheets of music until he found the piece he was looking for. The notes of Franz Litz's Liebestraum flowed as he played Amy's favorite piece. How many times had she leaned on the piano as he had played it, always proclaiming it the most beautiful piece of music in the world? That was Amy. When she loved something, it was fully—be it her art, a piece of music, or a friend.

As he played, memories of Amy flowed about him. When Beth had first fallen ill, all those years ago, he had taken Amy away to stay with Aunt March. She had been dreadfully worried about Beth and genuinely afraid of catching scarlet fever herself. He had been just a boy, only a handful of years older than she was, but he had tried very hard to be a steady shoulder for her to lean on during that time.

He had gone every day to see her and tried to bring cheer, though they both constantly worried about Beth. They had made it through in the end. And now here they were, so many years later, facing the same fear together again. But this time, he couldn't run and see Amy every day. She was miles away in Vevay. He sighed and continued playing on long into the night.

A special messenger arrived the next morning with a letter from Amy. He opened it with a heavy heart, knowing very well what news it brought.

Laurie,

My heart is broken, truly broken. Our Beth has gone from us.

Hold onto dear Grandfather and give him my love. I send my love to you as well, dear friend. I do not say it enough, but I very much value your friendship. More than you know.

Your,

Amy

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Amy had received the letter from Marmee late, as the missive had first traveled to Nice before being forwarded on to Vevay. Though she had been expecting its contents for months now, the news hit her with such force that she collapsed to the floor, overcome with grief.

Her dear sister was dead.

Flo had rushed to her side, embracing her wordlessly. She had held Amy as she wept, and Aunt Carrol stroked her hair, murmuring words of sympathy. That had been several days ago.

Though her aunt and cousin were kind, Amy longed for solitude. If she could not be with the people she loved the most, she wished to be alone. Flo tried her best to cheer her, but nothing could console her just now. It was a grief that must be experienced and moved through if any peace was to be found on the other side.

Since the news of Beth's death, Amy had walked out every morning to a local park situated on the lake. The yard offered a green sanctuary shaded by trees with an excellent view of the water, and Amy sat for hours each day staring out across its wide blue expanse.

She sat there now, alone as usual, with a pile of letters in her lap. Behind her, a bed of flowers bloomed with roses, her black crepe dress standing in stark contrast to the riotous blooms of pink and yellow behind her. How she wished for Laurie to be here! But she had told him to stay with his grandfather, and she would not be so selfish as to pull him away. Nevertheless, she felt certain that, once he heard the sad news, he would come. Her dear sister had been gone almost a month now.

Tears slid down her cheeks once again. She should have gone home long ago. How would she ever bear this heartache alone? And how could she have missed the opportunity to say farewell to her beloved Beth?

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, absentmindedly fingering the black cross she wore around her neck. Laurie had given it to her many years ago. Jo had laughed at such a serious gift, but Laurie knew her better. Amy had a solemn, serious side that her sisters did not often appreciate. Meg understood, perhaps, but Jo never would. Though they had quarreled often as children, she and Jo had come to a pleasant place of understanding as they grew older. Her sister's letters were full of affection and came with endearing regularity. Jo's pages overflowed with snippets of stories she was working on, tales of her life in New York as a tutor, and the everyday ups and downs of life at Orchard House. All that would change if Jo ever found out about Amy's love for Laurie.

Amy thought that Beth might have suspected, but—as was her gentle sister's way—she had never asked about it, unwilling to force a confidence. She should have confided in Beth. Now she would never get the chance. A fresh wave of tears overcame her, and she buried her face in her handkerchief. The loneliness of Vevay was suffocating.

She longed for Laurie with a force that shook her confidence. She had practiced for so many years! Taking a deep breath, she tried to focus on the mantra that she often repeated to herself: He does not care for you in that way. You will be respected if you cannot be loved.

But the words did not bring her comfort now. The letters from Laurie had drawn him too close to her heart. She loved him so very much but was still in ignorance of his feelings. He had never shown her more than brotherly affection.

Yet the tone of his letters had changed. He spoke to her now as an equal, not a

younger sister to be teased. His words were of a man to a woman. And though they were friends as they always had been, she felt that their friendship had deepened in a way she didn't quite understand.

Laurie—would he not come?

She looked up and gasped. He stood on the other side of the courtyard, handsome as ever, though he wore a suit of mourning. Blinking to be certain she was really seeing him, her lips formed his name, though no sound escaped them.

In a moment, she was on her feet and running toward him. The forgotten letters fluttered to the ground as she opened her arms. “Oh, Laurie! I knew you would come to me!”

The words escaped her lips without her realizing it. In a moment, she was safe in his embrace. His strong arms came around her and she rested her head on his lapel, taking in his familiar smell and the comfort that only his presence could bring.

“I came as soon as I got your letter,” he muttered against her hair.

After a long moment, she realized she was still holding onto him. She stepped back, feeling the flush on her skin. “I’m so sorry! I couldn’t help it. I was just so lonely, and I looked up and saw you, and...well...”

He took her arm in his, leading her back to the bench. She sat and watched him gather up the forgotten letters. She felt her cheeks heat again when she realized just how many of them were from him. As he sat beside her and handed her the letters, his look was almost shy. She tucked them away in her reticule and struggled to meet his gaze.

“How are you doing, my dear? Really?” His voice was gentle, and she felt tears

coming on again.

“I shall be well in time.”

“I wish I could say something to comfort you for the loss of dear Beth, but I can only feel and...” Unable to finish his thought, Laurie took her hand instead, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“You needn’t say anything. This comforts me.”

They sat for a moment in silence, thinking of Beth and all they had lost.

“Beth is at peace now,” Amy whispered at last. “I am so grateful you have come, Laurie. My Aunt and Flo have been very kind, but they didn’t love Beth the way we did.” She looked at him with sudden anxiety. “You need not return right away?”

“I shall stay as long as you want me, my dear.”

Something in his voice struck her heart in a way that stole her tongue. She could not trust herself to reply, so she nodded instead. Still, he said nothing, and she whispered, “I do want you. Very much.”

She chanced a look at Laurie’s face and saw something there that made her heart beat faster. He was looking at her tenderly—in a way he never had before.

The moment passed, and he said in his usual way, “Poor little soul! I am going to take care of you now. Come. It is too chilly to sit still here in the shade. Let us walk together.”

He slipped her arm through his and led her out into the sunlight. They walked along the stone walkway near the lake’s edge, admiring its beauty together.

Despite the grief he and Amy shared over Beth's death, Laurie felt a peace that he had not known in many months. He was hopeful. Amy had greeted him with such open warmth, and he had not failed to notice that it was his letters she had been rereading as she sat amongst the roses.

He had watched her for some time before she had noticed him. With her black dress and blonde hair, she looked like a distressed angel, with heaven above offering her roses for her pain. The necklace he had bought her before she left for Europe adorned her neck. It was her only ornament save the black ribbon that held her hair.

She was magnificent. He had been aware of this, but now he recognized it in a new way.

They walked arm in arm along the lake, speaking little, simply content in one another's company. Poor Amy—how terribly lonely she must have been! He did not count her cousin and aunt, for they didn't know her the way he did. She had gone far too long without being able to be comfortable and easy with someone.

"Laurie, how is Grandfather?"

"His heart is broken. But he urged me to come here and be with you."

"He did?" She bit her lip, and Laurie had the sudden urge to clarify himself.

"Yes. Good man that he is, he was worried for you. Of course, I had already begun packing before he suggested it."

She seemed to relax. "Are you sure Grandfather is well?"

He smiled down at her. She was such a warm-hearted person. “Yes, dear. He will bear it on his own now—just as you have been forced to do until I arrived. He plans to spend time with the Darcys, who will do all they can to comfort and distract him. And I believe we will travel home soon.”

“Oh!” At this, she stopped walking and turned to face him. “You will? Not directly, I hope? For I cannot leave with Aunt Carrol being ill.”

Laurie’s brow pinched in concern. “Is she feeling any better at all?”

“Yes, some. But it has been a hard winter for her. The fever has well and truly passed, but she is weak and fatigued. The journey here wore her out considerably. The doctors advise her to stay until she is fully recovered. But that may be months!”

“Come home with us, then.”

The thought of going home was irresistible. However, Amy did not immediately reply. “I shall ask Aunt Carrol. She has gotten rather European in her ways of thinking. As you are old family friends, perhaps she may relent and let me go.”

They said no more about it at that time but turned and walked back to the chateau where Amy was staying.

Laurie had disembarked from the boat that brought him and had come to Amy immediately without even securing his lodging. He left her now to find accommodations, first holding her hand in his and making her promise to take tea with him that afternoon.

“Of course I will, Laurie. I’ll be waiting for you.”

As Laurie walked toward the town, he meditated on how pleasant Amy’s promise felt

in his heart. He was so glad to be here with her—to be a source of strength for her once again.

Fortunately, a room was available in his favorite chateau that was not far from where Amy and the Carrols resided. Vevay was beautiful this time of year, but all Laurie could think of was his poor girl and how she must be aching for home. He would just have to convince Aunt Carrol to allow Amy to travel with him and Grandfather.

True to her word, Amy was waiting for him when he got to the little courtyard behind her hotel. He saw her peering about before she noticed him. When their eyes met, hers lit with unmistakable warmth.

Laurie thought of Mrs. Darcy's advice. If you wish to pursue Miss Amy, then you must do so openly and honestly. Even so, would it not be poor timing to approach her now? With dear Beth so recently lost?

Amy beckoned to him, and he immediately went to her side. Once he was sitting at the little table, she gestured to the plate in front of them. "I asked for the croute au fromage. I do hope you like it."

"Of course I do," Laurie said with a smile. "Cheese, toast, and wine. What a marvelous combination."

"The Swiss make delicious food." Amy took a delicate bite of her toasted cheese. Her smile reached her eyes for a moment, which lightened Laurie's heart to see. Only a moment later, her sadness returned. "Beth would have loved croute au fromage, don't you think?"

It was a simple, hearty dish that gave one a homey sense of comfort. "Yes, dear. I think she would have."

Amy sniffed and then gave herself a little shake. “It is so hard not to fall into melancholy. I’m sure Beth wouldn’t want it, but I cannot seem to help myself.”

Laurie cut a portion of the crusty bread for himself. “With a heart such as yours? Of course you cannot help it. You feel things deeply, I know.” When he looked up, Amy was staring at him. He blinked, wondering what he had said that made her look at him so seriously.

The moment passed, and she looked away, out toward the lake. They could just glimpse it from the courtyard. The old stone buildings rose up protectively around them, making the yard seem cozy despite the slight chill in the air.

“I never lost someone I truly loved before now.” She brushed a tear from her eye. Laurie desperately wished he could hold her and let her cry. The struggle to keep it all in and maintain an aura of staid serenity was a burden he remembered well.

“As you know, I have.” Laurie met her gaze. They had never spoken of his father; Laurie had avoided it, burying his pain. “My father and I were always together. After his death, I was at a loss.”

She just looked at him, her sympathetic expression urging him to continue. “I felt as if my world had ended when he died.” Memories of that awful day filled his mind. He had stayed by his father’s side until the very end. The fever had made Father delirious, but in a moment of clarity, he had taken Laurie’s hand and promised that everything would be well.

“Father promised that Grandfather would take good care of me. He told me to be happy. He...” Unable to continue, Laurie covered his eyes with his hand. The pain was too near the surface now—he could not hold back the tears.

Amy took his free hand and they sat in silence for a while, both thinking of their dear

loved ones lost to this world.

“We shall see them again,” she whispered.

Laurie swallowed hard. “Grandfather did take care of me, and we have grown close over the many years since Father died. But I was very alone at first, Amy. I came to America from Europe alone. There was no one I could talk to about any of it.”

Amy just squeezed his hand. She was crying again.

“I am sorry, my dear. I did not wish to burden you with my own suffering. I simply hoped to show you that you are not alone. I loved Beth as if she’d been my own sister. This is a pain I have experienced before.”

“Thank you, Laurie. It means so much to have you here now.” She released his hand to retrieve her handkerchief, and Laurie felt the loss. All he wanted to do was hold onto her.

“I feel the same, you know. I can be myself with you.”

Her mouth parted slightly in surprise at this direct statement. “I’m glad.”

Once they finished eating, Amy wanted to rest, and Laurie promised he would visit in the morning. They had each other now and would find their way through this unbearable sadness together.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Amy came down to breakfast the next morning to find Laurie waiting for her. He met her surprised expression with a smile.

“I hereby give you notice that I shall be by your side until you tire of me and send me on my way.”

His gallant way of speaking reminded her of the way he had acted when they were growing up. Jo may have been his clear favorite, but Amy had enjoyed every moment with Laurie. “Then I should inform you that I shall never tire of your company. You may well expire by my side.”

“I hope it might be so,” he said with a wink.

Her heart fluttered, as it always did when he flirted with her. His lack of awareness of what words such as these did to her did not make it easier. She sighed, and his expression immediately changed.

“Are you tired, Amy? Perhaps you should have rested longer this morning.”

His concern was genuine. Taking his arm, she looked up at him. “Let us go get some coffee and warm bread. I have heard that many women cannot eat when they are grieving, but I am not one of them.”

“I am glad of it. You need to keep up your strength.”

He escorted her into the breakfast room. A small buffet of coffee, hot chocolate, bread, and fresh butter was laid upon a sideboard for the guests to enjoy. Laurie

helped Amy into her seat and insisted on filling her plate himself.

His attentiveness warmed her heart. It brought to her mind the time he had rallied to her defense at a little art fair in Concord. A society friend of Amy's had slighted her work, and Laurie had brought all his fellows in response. He and his friends had swarmed her table and bought every piece. Then, when she had asked him, he had gone and bought two hideous vases from the girl who had insulted her.

Laurie set a plate in front of her before sitting beside her. "It is good to see you smile."

"I was thinking of the art fair the Chesters hosted for the benefit of the freedmen all those years ago. Do you remember?"

"How could I not? After May Chester insulted you so egregiously?"

Amy smiled at his indignation, delighted that he recalled that day, too. She sipped her coffee. She had tried so hard not to laugh as Laurie paraded around the art room, a vase under each arm. That was Laurie—loyal to a fault.

Again, she thought of Jo. He was devoted to her. How could it be that she refused him after he had shown her such steadfast adoration?

Yet Amy found she could not be angry with Jo. Having lost their dear Beth, any difference of opinion between sisters seemed trivial—even when it came to Laurie. And Jo was entirely correct; she and Laurie did not suit at all. Why, then, could Laurie not see it?

"What is going through that fine mind now? You seem nettled. Are you thinking of Miss Chester and her deplorable behavior?"

He gave her a courtly smile, and Amy's treacherous heart gave another little flip of pleasure. Why did she find his presence so unsettling? Every smile sent her heart beating. It was both distracting and frustrating.

Laurie didn't press her for an answer and changed the subject. "Shall we walk out into the sunshine after breakfast?"

"Let's. I have been finding solace in nature these past few weeks."

"You have had to bear it alone for so long. You must be exhausted." He patted her hand. He was correct, of course. She was weary in body and soul and longed to place her head on his shoulder and have a long cry. Instead, she squared her shoulders and ate her warm bread and marmalade.

When they finished eating, Laurie stood and offered her his arm. "Are you warm enough? I do not want you to catch a chill."

"I am quite comfortable, thank you."

They walked out together into the bright sunshine and to the gardens. Amy had come here every day since receiving Marmee's letter telling her that Beth had left them. Today, however, the garden did not feel so melancholy.

"Are you sleeping well?" Laurie asked.

"No. My heart and mind are so unsettled that I cannot fall asleep."

"I understand. After father died, I struggled with the utter stillness of the night. It felt... oppressive."

"Exactly. It is only me and my thoughts alone in the dark."

“I wish I could stay with you and keep the darkness away.” A moment after saying it, Laurie seemed to realize the impropriety of such a statement and stammered an explanation.

Amy kept her eyes forward, ignoring the sudden racing of her heart. She shook her head at him and let out a little tsk of annoyance. “Theodore Laurence, you are a careless boy sometimes. But you needn’t worry. It is only me.”

He gave her a winning smile. “Only you? Not only, but especially you.”

“You are speaking nonsense.”

“Yes. Purposely—to cheer you up. Is it working?”

Amy allowed herself a quiet laugh. “It is, my dear friend.”

“Would you care to come to my chateau for lunch today? I shall have them prepare something special for you.”

“Yes, please. What shall we eat?”

“Anything you like! If I have to fetch it from Paris myself!”

“I could not accept such gallantry, for that would take you away, and your company is what helps me the most.”

“What then? More toasted cheese? A special soup?”

She thought for a moment. “Gingerbread! I haven’t had it in so long. But I do not know if they can make it.”

“I shall ask them.”

They had been walking for some time now, and Amy’s energy waned due to her sleeplessness the night before. Laurie stopped walking and turned to face her. He bent down to peer directly into her face.

“You are overtired. I insist that you return to your room and rest. We shall meet again for lunch.”

Ordinarily, Amy would argue, but she was truly exhausted. She elicited a solemn promise from Laurie that he would fetch her for the promised luncheon and then allowed herself to be led back to her hotel.

She retired to her room after assuring Flo that she was well enough—only fatigued. The window was open just enough for a gentle breeze to blow the gauzy curtains slightly. Amy lay on her side and watched them.

She had lost her equilibrium. With every touch, it became harder and harder to act in a neutral way towards Laurie. Was it the loss of their dear Beth that kept her emotions so close to the surface?

Amy had long considered friendship the only way to keep him in her life. It seemed distasteful now—to keep pretending that she did not feel far more than friendship for him. Beth had gone from them, and Jo had rejected his proposal. Their lives were not what they were before, so how could their relationship be? These confusing thoughts swirled in her mind until Amy finally fell asleep.

She woke to Flo’s light touch. “Are you quite well, Amy?” Her cousin had been so kind these past few weeks. Amy smiled up at her.

“I was able to rest, so I am much better, thank you.”

“Laurie is here, but I promised him I would urge you to stay in bed longer if you wished.”

Amy sat up and stretched. “No. Thank you, dear. Please tell him I will be out in a moment.”

Flo patted Amy’s hand and left to relay the message. Amy fixed her hair, which had all come undone as she had slept, and smoothed the creases in her dress as much as she could before going to her dearest friend.

When she entered the parlor, he was speaking quietly with Flo. He rose when he saw her and then regarded her with concern.

“Are you quite sure you have slept enough? It is no trouble for me to call later.”

“You are thoughtful, but I feel quite refreshed.” She turned to Flo. “Would you care to join us, Cousin?”

Flo shook her head. “I thank you, no. I should stay with Mama.”

“You are a dutiful daughter, as always, Miss Florence,” Laurie said with a bow. Flo just shook her head at him with an indulgent smile.

Laurie led Amy outside to enjoy the sunny day, appreciating how the light seemed to dance on her golden hair. They walked arm-in-arm to his chateau in companionable silence.

As they seated themselves in the courtyard, Laurie spoke to the waiter. “The Biber cake, please.”

“What is that?” Amy asked, clearly intrigued.

“You’ll see, Mademoiselle.”

In a moment, the waiter returned with a plate of small, delicate looking cakes. They were a wonderful golden brown color and smelled fragrant and sweet. Each cake was decorated with a different scene.

“Oh!” Amy examined them closely with a fascinated expression. “However do they get these pictures on them?”

“I am told that they use a mold. They press the dough into the mold, and it creates the picture on the surface of the cake itself.” He picked up a little round cake with a flower upon it and handed it to Amy.

She took the delicate confection and sniffed it. “It smells like gingerbread!”

Her delight was like a balm. She was so unaffected and good, taking pleasure in simple things of life. He chose a small cake for himself and lifted it to her in a sort of solute, encouraging her to try hers. Upon taking a bite, she closed her eyes in appreciation of the delicious flavor.

“They taste like gingerbread, but they have such a sweet filling! Tell me again what they are called.”

“Biber cakes. They are a Swiss specialty.”

She took another bite of hers and beamed at him. “Thank you, Laurie.”

His heart swelled as he watched her smile, her heartache evidently forgotten for one small moment. Amy closed her eyes again as she took the next bite, and Laurie

allowed himself to drink in her beauty—her golden hair, her contented smile, the delicate curve of her neck. She opened her eyes and caught him staring.

“Would you like to visit Chillon Castle today?” he asked abruptly.

Amy’s interest was immediately apparent. “Is the home open for visitors?”

“I believe so. We should ask the concierge.”

“I’ve heard it is stunningly beautiful,” Amy said, her voice almost a whisper. Unexpectedly, the light in her eyes faded, and she looked down.

“What’s wrong, my dear?”

“Is it right to go and take pleasure in a place of beauty when dear Beth is so recently lost to us?”

In response to her distress, he reached across the table and took her hand. “What does your heart tell you?”

Amy was silent for a moment, but her fingers squeezed his as she considered. “I think Beth would not want me to sit sad and idle but to take every opportunity to see and enjoy Vevay. She always appreciated lovely things.”

“That is just what I think.” Reluctantly, he released her hand. His feelings for Amy were increasingly difficult to conceal.

“Do you know, I find myself wondering how dear Joanna fares.”

Unable to place the name, Laurie blinked at her for a moment. “I do not think I know the lady. Who is Joanna?”

This prompted a delicate smile from his companion. “Surely you remember her? Beth was hardly ever without her. Why, even as a young woman, Beth kept Joanna in a place of honor in her bedroom.”

“Not her doll? The one with the rather horrid face?”

“Just the same. Dear old Joanna.”

The memory made him smile. “Do you remember how Beth used to bring all her dolls with her when we would picnic outside?”

“She was as dutiful a caregiver as one might wish. She was always rescuing Jo’s old dolls. They would lose arms and legs from Jo’s rough play, and Beth could never let them go to the waste bin. She cared for each like a true mother.”

“Those dolls were wasted on Jo. I’m glad Bethy took care of them.”

Amy peered at him for a moment, and Laurie was conscious of the fact that he had willingly brought up Jo’s name. As close as Amy was to her family, there was simply no way they could go on without talking of all her sisters. He could speak of Jo with ease now.

“I worry about Meg,” Amy said. “She has her little ones to care for. Oh! To think of all I have missed!”

She put a delicate hand over her eyes, and Laurie knew he must say something to cheer her. “Just think of all the nappies you would have been asked to change.”

Amy’s shocked expression dissolved into a soft laugh; it was like winning a prize at a country fair to see her smile like that.

“You are very wicked, you know.”

“Not too wicked, I hope. I only ever tease to bring merriment.”

“You are a dear to lighten my mood. I have not forgotten how dutiful you were when Beth was first ill.”

“Remember Aunt March’s old bird?”

“Yes! Oh! He was horrid. Always getting me into trouble by saying something rude.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at her serious look of indignation. Old Polly had been gone now for many years, but what a devil he had been! Laurie would tweak the bird’s tail to make Amy laugh.

“You would come and visit me every day. I’m not sure I ever told you how grateful I was.”

“Do you remember reading Pilgrim’s Progress together when we were children, and we used to bring our work with us outside?”

“I do. I remember seeing you all going off without me and being horribly jealous. I wasn’t about to miss the fun, so I invited myself.”

Amy laughed at the memory. “It was much easier to be good when we were pretending. But how I struggled! I hated sewing for Aunt March. In fact, I hated sewing. I still hate it.”

Laurie gave a look of solemn understanding. Only the slight quirk of his lips gave away his humor.

“I suppose it is not something you would understand,” she said primly.

“I was never forced to sew, it is true.”

The moment of levity passed, and Laurie felt the enormity of their loss pressing upon them both.

“We pulled through together during those dark times.” He placed his hand over hers.

“We can pull through once more.”

Tears welled once more in Amy’s eyes, but she nodded and gave him a watery smile.

“Thank you for coming, Laurie. Truly.”

Now he was the one who couldn’t speak. So he squeezed her hand again.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

The concierge at the chateau informed them that Chillon Castle was indeed open for visitors. He offered one of the phaetons that were kept available for guests but noted that the castle was near enough to reach on foot.

Laurie turned to Amy. "Shall we walk, then?"

She nodded and slipped her arm through his. "Are you sure you do not mind walking?"

"Very sure, although we may return immediately if you feel tired."

"No, no. I simply wish you to be comfortable. That is, I do not want to inconvenience you."

"Amy, I am here for you. Walking with you could never be an inconvenience."

She fell silent, and Laurie was acutely aware of her pinched look and furrowed brow.

Something had altered between them. Was it just his perception of things, or did Amy feel it as well? Her nearness left him rather tongue tied. After remarking upon the weather, he fell silent, unwilling to speak if he was only going to utter nonsense. Amy seemed lost in her own thoughts, and he left her to them, wishing to be a comfort rather than a burden. She need not make conversation to please him.

The castle was stunning. Only accessible by bridge, it boasted high walls of a defensive nature. The facade that faced the lake, however, was fit for a prince. Large windows looked out onto the water and the mountains beyond. It was full of romantic

charm.

Amy wished to tour the three courtyards, so they walked arm-in-arm down the little path that led to the gardens. As they enjoyed the beauty around them, she seemed to relax a little, her grasp on his arm becoming less stiff.

“Laurie, I am so glad you came. My heart feels lighter now that you are here.”

“I could not have stayed away.”

She was not looking at him as he said this, but he noticed her sharp intake of breath. When at last Amy did meet his eyes, her own were rather tight as if she were trying to control some great emotion. Was she thinking of Beth?

“It’s fine, dear. You can cry if you need to.”

“It’s not that.”

“What, then?” She shook her head and looked away once more.

The tension built to an intolerable level. Laurie could not bear it a moment longer—he must take Mr. Darcy’s advice and ascertain the lady’s feelings once and for all.

“Amy, do you remember when I visited you in Nice?”

“Of course I do.”

“And do you remember when we went to the ruins and sat among the roses there?”
He looked down in time to observe a blush rising in her cheeks.

“Yes, I remember. I scolded you dreadfully, and for that I am sorry.”

His steps faltered, and he turned to face her. “Do not apologize! That scolding woke me from my melancholy! I would still be wasting my life but for you.”

Amy blinked at him. “Why do you bring up Nice and the flower garden if you did not intend to rebuke me?”

Laurie cleared his throat and found himself unable to formulate a coherent answer. Instead, he silently led them further along the pathway. The roses were in bloom here, too. Their delicate fragrance enveloped them both as they walked among the thorny bushes.

Gathering his courage, he continued. “When we were talking that day in Nice, you mentioned something, and I have not been able to get it out of my mind.”

He felt Amy stiffen beside him, and his heart sank. Apparently, she had no wish to speak of such things. Still, he was determined. “You said we were not so different—that we both had experienced unrequited love. Do you remember?”

Amy only nodded. Laurie suddenly realized he must make her understand about Jo. “Well, I was completely mistaken about my heartache. Jo came into my life so soon after I had lost my father. I was lonely, and she was vivacious and welcoming. My boyish heart loved her dearly, and I assumed that she cared for me, too.”

“She does care for you, Laurie.” Amy gave him a sad smile. “I am sorry it could not be in the way you wished.”

“That’s just what I’m trying to say. I love Jo, but I am not in love with Jo.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m doing a bad job of explaining myself.” As they walked a few more paces, Laurie searched his mind for a way to make Amy understand what he had only recently come to recognize.

“You know Romeo and Juliet, of course?”

“Of course,” Amy said, clearly confused at his mention of the tragic pair of lovers.

“Remember Rosaline?”

“A beauty that could not match the sun? Yes, I remember. The play begins with Romeo practically weeping over her.”

Laurie cleared his throat, a feeling of awkward embarrassment washing over him. “Yes, he thinks himself in love with Rosaline, but then he comes to realize it wasn't love at all. He meets Juliet and understands what true love is.”

Amy stopped walking, her eyes still trained on the ground. Despite noting that her breath seemed to quicken, Laurie decided to press on, come what may. “I have grown up, Amy. I understand things that I did not before. ‘Did my heart love till now?’”

“‘For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night,’” Amy recited.

“Who was it that would not love you, Amy? Will you not tell me?”

When she spoke, her voice shook ever so slightly. “I do not think you will like the answer.”

He thought for a moment. She was right. If she told him she would forever love another, he would hate the answer.

“Though that may be true, I still wish to know. I...I need to know.”

“Do you?” She raised her head, her eyes locking with his. He felt as if they were standing on the edge of a cliff. One wrong step would send them tumbling into oblivion.

“I am being a coward, my dear,” he said in a soft voice. “Instead of asking for your truth, let me tell you mine.”

Slowly, he raised his hand to her cheek and let his fingers gently stroke her soft skin. “I have fallen in love with you. You alone have my heart.”

Tears welled up in Amy’s eyes, their blue depths magnified by the glistening drops. One slid down to meet his hand where it rested. When she continued to say nothing, Laurie let his hand drop, unsure of her feelings.

Had he ruined their friendship forever?

Then Amy reached out and put her delicate hand in his. She seemed unable to speak, but this motion said enough. He lifted his other hand and stroked along her hair, coming to rest at the back of her neck. Gently, hesitantly enough to allow her time to step back, he leaned toward her. In response, she stepped up to him, and he pulled her even closer, her lips mere inches from his. His heart was beating so fast, he could barely think. He felt his emotions building to a boiling point. Her closeness, her scent, her warmth—it flowed in and around him, mixing with the scent of the roses.

Just before his lips met hers, she stopped, her eyes lifting to his. “It has always been you, Laurie.”

The explosion of feeling at her words caught him by surprise, and he pressed his lips to hers with more force than he had intended. But she matched his intensity, her arms

rising to wind around his neck. Then he hugged her close, one hand still resting on the back of her head.

“My darling Amy. My heart is so full.”

Amy sat at her vanity and stared dreamily into the glass. Theodore Laurence was in love with her! She smiled, absentmindedly twirling a lock of hair around her finger. How could it possibly be true? Closing her eyes, she replayed the moment in her mind. Laurie had declared his love for her!

A knock at the door startled her out of her reverie. “Yes?”

The maid entered and announced the arrival of Mr. Laurence.

“Oh! Thank you, Evelyn. Tell him I shall just be a moment.” Amy looked with earnestness in the glass now, made a few adjustments to her adornments, and then hurried out to meet Laurie.

A smile lit his eyes when he turned from the window as she entered. “Good evening, Diana.”

She brightened at the memory of their Christmas together in Nice. Offering her hand, she dipped a formal curtsy. “Good evening, Apollo.”

Laurie bent and kissed her hand, sending a thrill through her happy heart. “You look beautiful, as always, my dear.”

How those two little words had changed! Laurie had often addressed her in such a way, but it held a different meaning now that she knew he loved her.

Flo entered the room, closing the door softly behind her. “Theodore Laurence, how good you are to come.”

Laurie shook his head as if to wave this comment away and dutifully kissed Flo’s hand. “I am happy to see you again. How is your mother?”

“A little better, thank you.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Shall we go in? I believe dinner is ready.” Flo led the way into the small dining parlor.

The three of them enjoyed a simple supper of ?lplermagronen, a delicious Swiss meal of pasta, cream, cheese, and potatoes. Though it was a dish she had only had here in Switzerland, it reminded Amy of home.

“I have not had this in many years,” Laurie said.

“It’s one of my favorites,” Amy replied.

“It tastes like home.”

“Exactly!” She beamed at him.

“We must get the recipe so we can make it for your mother and sisters when we return to America.” Laurie took another bite.

“This and those wonderful Biber cakes.”

“Marmee would like them. She is particularly fond of gingerbread.”

“She is, indeed. I wonder if Meg’s little ones have tried gingerbread yet. I plan to be the aunt who spoils them the most.”

“You will be the perfect aunt, I have no doubt,” Laurie said. “Though Jo may let them get into all kinds of scrapes, you will give them presents and teach them to be elegant.”

Amy giggled. “You make me sound quite frivolous.”

“Not in the slightest. Meg’s children will value pretty things just as you and their mother do. And I am sure Daisy will find you absolutely enchanting with your beauty and European ways.”

“How I wish they knew me!”

“They will come to know us both. And I am sure they will love you as—as everyone does.”

Amy felt her cheeks heat. She glanced over to Flo, who was observing her with some bemusement. “Forgive me, Flo. How are you enjoying the ?lplermagronen?”

Her cousin laughed merrily. “Please do not stop your conversation on my account. This is the happiest I have seen you in many weeks.” She looked at Laurie with an approving nod. “I am pleased you have come, Mr. Laurence. You have done our Amy a world of good.”

He acknowledged Flo’s compliment with a smile. “That was my intention, though I would be lying if I claimed to be the only one performing a good service. Being with Amy has eased my heart, as well.”

Flo’s eyes went again to Amy, who perceived some suspicion there. It was gone in a

moment, however, replaced by a benevolent smile.

The rest of the evening was spent in pleasant reminiscence about Concord. Flo was also rather homesick and eager to return once her mother was well enough to travel.

“When do you think that might be?” Laurie asked.

“The doctor has advised at least two more months of rest here in Vevay, but we cannot know if Mother will be strong enough even then.”

“She is recovering, though?” Laurie asked with some anxiety.

“She is, truly. Every day she is a little better.”

“This winter must have been difficult for you as well as your mother.”

Amy looked at her cousin. “Yes. It’s been a trying time, hasn’t it, Flo?”

“It has, there is no denying. But perhaps we have turned the tide now.” She smiled at Laurie, and then her eyes shifted once more to Amy, whose attention returned to her plate.

For dessert, they enjoyed a delicious walnut cake. The Swiss certainly knew how to create a sweet confection! By the time the evening was over, Amy was full to bursting.

Too soon, it was time for Laurie to go. She felt almost bereft even before he left. He gave them both a low bow and promised to call first thing in the morning. She sighed as the door closed behind him.

Flo put her arm around Amy’s waist. “It is good that he is here with you.”

“Yes. I am grateful that he came.”

“He looks happier than he did when we saw him in Nice. Now he seems to benefit from being near you, and you clearly take solace from his company.”

Amy blushed. “Having a friend like Laurie who shares my heartache makes it easier to bear.”

“I must go and see Mama.” Flo turned toward her. She took Amy’s hands and gave them a squeeze. “Is there anything you need, my dear cousin?”

Amy smiled at her concern. “I am feeling more myself this evening than I have in quite some time. I shall be well.”

“Then I shall see you tomorrow. Rest well.”

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

After leaving Amy, Laurie walked the streets of Vevay for some time in a contemplative mood. As he stared up at the stars twinkling placidly in the heavens, an image of Beth suddenly came to mind. It was the last time he had seen her before he left for Europe. She had already begun to weaken, but he had ignored all the evidence of her suffering.

“I’m sorry, Beth,” he whispered to the night.

He recalled the conversation they had shared that day. He had sat beside her on the old sofa, and she had looked at him in her serious way. “Take good care of Grandfather, Laurie,” she had said.

“I shall, Beth. I promise.” He had laid his hand against his heart with mock gravitas.

She had laughed, but then her face became solemn once more. “And do take good care of yourself. I know nothing of matters of the heart, Laurie, but I know that our Jo is a wild bird that must fly free.”

At the time, Laurie had been unable to respond. Jo had refused him, and he had been full of bitter disappointment. Beth was trying to tell him to let her go, but he had been so attached to the vision he had set for his life that he would not even consider it. Many changes were already happening that he had been unable to face: Jo growing up and away from him, Beth weakening, and Meg and John Brooke no longer playfellows but adults.

“You knew even then, didn’t you?” Laurie spoke to the sky again. “You knew you would have to leave us, yet you weathered your own storm. Oh, Bethy! How we shall

miss you!”

He reached the quiet of his own room. Grandfather was back in England and, though Amy was only a street away, Laurie felt isolated. Remembering his promise to Beth, he realized that his grandfather must feel an even deeper loneliness.

After shrugging out of his coat and draping it over the chair near his little desk, Laurie sat and pulled out fresh paper and a pen. He proceeded to write to his grandfather, urging him to come to Vevay.

The next morning, Laurie went to Amy’s chateau early and spoke with the concierge, who agreed to arrange for a picnic lunch to be prepared and for flowers to be delivered that evening to Amy and Flo.

Pleased with his plans, Laurie waited in the breakfast room. It was not long before Amy appeared. Her black satin skirt was bustled in the latest fashion, though her simple bodice lacked either tassels or beaded fringe. Her hair was pulled back into a knot near the base of her neck. She was the picture of solemnity...and she was entirely beautiful.

He stood as she neared and took her hand, bowing over it in the fancy way she liked. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Have you waited long?”

“Not in the slightest. Now sit down at once. I mean to take care of you.”

She smiled at him sweetly. “What shall we do today?”

“It is warmer than yesterday. Do you fancy a picnic?”

“That sounds delightful.”

“And will Flo accompany us?”

“I shall ask her, of course, but I suspect she will choose to stay with Aunt Carrol instead. Poor Flo! It is quite a burden for her to carry the worry over her mother all alone.”

“She has not been alone. She has you.”

“Though we are very fond of each other, we did not grow up as sisters. We do not have that bond that sisters share.”

“I think the bond between the March sisters is unusually close. I have never seen the like.”

“Being away has helped me realize how much I have always depended on them.”

He thought a moment. “I suppose John Brooke is the closest I have to a brother. I would like to add more brothers like him one day.”

“And how will you do that?”

“Well, if Jo should marry, I hope to gain a brother there, as well. I do have friends—just as you have Flo. Fitz Darcy is one such person.”

“Ah, yes. You wrote about him and his family.”

“He and his grandparents treated me like family when I stayed with them. They are

very good people.”

“So you said in your letters. You mentioned that Mrs. Darcy is elegant, but you never offered any description. Tell me, what does she look like?”

Laurie thought for a moment. “She is not very tall and has silvery gray hair and sparkling eyes. Her expression...she always seems as if she finds something diverting.”

“A joyful woman, then?”

“Oh, very! She reminded me of Marmee.”

“How I would love to meet her!”

They continued to converse over an unhurried meal at the breakfast table and followed it with a leisurely stroll in the garden, speaking of everything and nothing. How strange it was to experience such happiness while also grieving so deeply over Beth’s death. Amy’s presence gave Laurie an indescribable peace that calmed the swirl of his emotions.

Eventually, it was time to leave for their picnic. As Amy predicted, Flo preferred to stay with her mother. Owning only the one mourning dress, Amy had little to do to get ready. Laurie brought her to a sunny spot near the lake, spread out the blanket, and set the little basket of food to one side. They settled themselves on the ground and enjoyed the simple fare of bread and fruit Laurie had arranged.

Their conversation turned to his experience at college. “I see clearly now—after a few years’ distance—that I could have done much better. Just think if I had not

wasted time playing billiards.”

“Or smoking.” Amy gave him a severe look that made him laugh.

“I have given it up, my dear. Meg asked me so sweetly before I left that I promised. And I cannot go against a promise.”

An unpleasant thought suddenly occurred to Amy. “Do you consider a promise and a pledge the same thing?”

Laurie took an apple, cut it, and handed her half. “What kind of pledge?”

“Any kind.”

“Any kind?” He ducked his head to study her eyes. She saw the moment he understood. When Jo had rejected his offer of marriage, Laurie had pledged that he would never love another.

He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, “I have a very good story to tell you. It involves the elegant Mrs. Darcy.”

Amy pressed her lips together. Whatever could Mrs. Darcy have to do with her question? But practiced manners won out, and she nodded that he should continue.

“The first time Mr. Darcy proposed, the then Miss Bennet adamantly refused him.”

“Truly?”

“Not only did she refuse him, but she vowed that he was the last man on earth she would ever marry.”

“My goodness! That is strong language, indeed.”

“It is. And she meant it, of course. However, as time wore on and she came to understand the situation better, she realized that not only would she marry him, but that he was the only man for her.”

Amy smiled. “That is very romantic.”

“Very. And I understand it completely. I swore that I would never love another as I loved Jo. I suppose, in a way, I hold to that. I love Jo as one loves a hero. She was larger than life—the one who pulled me out of darkness after my father died. But that is not love. Not the true love between a man and a woman.”

Amy peered at him intently. “You speak about her freely now.”

His look was serious. “She is my friend and your sister. She shall always be in our lives. It causes me no pain to speak of her.”

“I am glad of that.”

He gave a wry laugh. “You have seen all my follies! Each and every childhood mistake is known to you.”

“And mine to you! Oh, how horrid I was as a girl!”

“You weren’t the least bit horrid.”

“I was. I was too competitive with Jo and far too concerned with my appearance...a failing that plagues me still. I shudder to think of some of the things I said and did.”

“You grew into a lovely young woman and left behind those follies.”

“No one ever leaves all their struggles behind. But I think I have made improvements in some ways. I try to be good with more sincerity now than I ever did as a child.”

Laurie gazed at her with a solemn expression. “I have known you all my life, yet I sometimes feel as if I am meeting you for the first time.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is so much more to know about you. I want to know it all. Your thoughts and feelings, your worries and cares. I want to share my life with you.”

She had never dared to hope that he would consider her in this way. Now that he was here with her, it was more than she had ever imagined it could be. She felt safe with him—steady and sure—and she knew she truly had found her match.

They stayed in the garden for many hours, returning only when the nearby clock tower chimed the hour that signaled the time to change for dinner. When they parted at Amy’s hotel, Laurie bent low over her hand and kissed it.

“Goodbye for now, my darling. I shall be back before you can miss me.”

As she watched him walk away, Amy realized that would never be possible.

One afternoon, she expressed a desire to go boating on the lake. They had watched other couples punting across the gleaming water. As the weather was fine, Laurie dutifully procured a boat and some refreshments.

Amy entered the boat calmly, her American taste for adventure masking any fear she might have felt. If she was nervous about falling into the water, she didn’t show it.

She let go of his hand as she sat across from him, and he gave her a wide smile.

“You did that remarkably well, my dear.”

“Did you expect otherwise?” Her chin went up in her adorable way, challenging him.

“No. You do everything remarkably well.”

At this compliment, she ducked her head, and he reveled in the blush that rose up her throat. How had he never noticed her reactions to him? He began to row, pulling them out onto the lake.

“Were you always this way with me? Was I too thick to notice?”

Her eyes flashed at him, and she gave a delicate little laugh. “Always what way?”

“You blush when I compliment you now. I wonder if you always did and I was just too obtuse.”

“Of course I didn’t! I trained myself quite well, you know.” She opened her parasol, the cheerful white lace contrasting sharply with her black gown. Though it had been nearly five months since Beth had died, Amy still wore mourning clothes.

“‘Trained yourself’? Whatever do you mean?”

Amy answered him easily enough, but she gazed intently at the mountains around them as she spoke. “I used to tell myself, ‘Laurie does not think of you that way. You will be respected if you cannot be loved.’”

Laurie stopped rowing. Her words struck him like an arrow to the heart.

“I knew you were in love with Jo, and I never thought her stupid enough to refuse you. So you see, I had to do something.” She gave a delicate shrug.

He pulled the oars in, settling them in their locks. Amy looked at him with surprise. He took both her hands in his and spoke directly into her beautiful blue eyes. “I am not in love with Jo.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“The moment I saw you in Nice, I knew things had changed between us. When you spoke of Fred Vaughn, I felt nettled. And when you explained that you loved someone that could not return your affections, I felt both angry for you and strangely relieved. In Paris, I kept picturing you in your blue gown with all those silly peacocks around you. When you wrote to me and told me that Fred had returned to England, a hope rose within me that I could not explain. I walked alone that day through Hyde Park and I knew. I knew I loved you in a way that I had never loved Jo.”

This heated speech was met with silence. Feeling that his love must be convinced further, he leaned forward and kissed her. When he pulled away, he kept her hands in his.

“I am sorry that I’ve been such an idiot. I am sorry that it was Fred who realized first what I could not. I am sorry that I could not understand what Jo saw so plainly. But more than anything else, I am sorry that I caused you pain.”

Amy’s eyes were wet, but she smiled through her tears. “Theodore Laurence, your affection has brought me more happiness than anything else in this world.”

His heart was too full; he was sure it would burst. Taking the oars once more, he rowed them far out onto the lake. The sunlight sparkled off the water, and the mountains around them were stark and stunningly beautiful. Amy opened the basket

of food, and they ate the still-warm buns while enjoying the wild beauty around them.

After a time, when they decided they should return, Amy moved to sit beside him. “Let’s row together, shall we? You must be tired.”

“I am not, but I like these seating arrangements much better.” Again, he enjoyed her blush. He would compliment her every hour, every minute, just to see her alluring reaction.

A sudden surety settled in his breast. He could wait no longer.

“How well we row together!” She remarked, clearly pleased by the evenness of their progress through the water.

“We should row together always.”

Her stroke faltered. He docked his own oar before reaching across and securing hers. They drifted in silence for a moment before Laurie placed a hand on her cheek, gently turning her to face him.

“Will you, Amy dear? Will you marry me?” He could hear the anxiety in his own voice.

“Yes, Laurie.” Her voice was quiet but firm. She looked at him with the fierceness that was purely hers. “I will.”

He bent his head, kissing her tenderly. “I love you, Amy March.”

“I love you, Theodore Laurence.”

Amy watched Laurie jump out of the boat with the easy grace that was uniquely his. He turned and offered her his hand, and she took it with a freedom and lightness that were new to her. She would be his wife!

A wide smile spread across her face as she alighted on the dock. Laurie still held her hand and he smiled back at her, not needing to ask what made her so happy. He knew. He knew her in a way no one else ever had, and now that she need not be guarded around him, he would come to know her even better. It was with great reluctance that they parted at her hotel.

“I feel so lonely when you are gone,” she confessed. “Even though I know I could see you in a minute if I needed to.”

“It is the same for me, my love.”

“Will you come for dinner?”

“Nothing could keep me away.” He bent, kissed her hand, and took his leave. She watched until he was out of sight.

Aunt Carrol and Flo were all happiness and smiles for her until Amy brought up the idea of returning home without them.

“You cannot travel unaccompanied, Amy.” Aunt Carrol’s tone was firm.

“Grandfather will be with us,” Amy protested. “And I have known the Laurences all my life.”

“That may be, but now you are a young woman, and you are engaged to Mr.

Laurence. You cannot travel with him without a proper chaperone.”

“Mama, surely it will do no harm for them to travel together,” Flo said. Amy threw her a grateful look.

“I have been charged with protecting your cousin’s reputation,” Aunt Carrol replied, not unkindly. “I understand your wish to return home, Amy, but I cannot let you go unaccompanied. And I am afraid I must keep Flo with me.”

“Of course you must.” Amy’s good breeding kept her frustration at bay. Somehow, she and Laurie would find a solution.

Grandfather was on his way to Vevay. Perhaps he could convince Aunt Carrol. They had been friends for many years, after all.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:36 am

Laurie and Amy had a joyful reunion with Grandfather at the station together, brought him to the chateau where his grandson was staying, and saw that he was comfortably settled there. The traveler went to rest, the journey having tired him out considerably. It shouldn't have been a surprise, but Laurie suddenly realized how much older his grandfather was getting. It would be wise for them to return to the comforts of their home in Concord before too long.

He and Amy spent a few hours strolling together in a nearby park. Afterward, she brought him to the little studio where she painted. It was a small space, but Amy had made it her own. Sketches and line drawings were tacked upon each wall, and gauzy curtains filtered the bright sunlight. Laurie strolled around the space, gazing at each painting with pleasure. There was one, however, that hid under a sheet of fabric. Amy watched him curiously.

"I like being in your studio surrounded by your work," Laurie explained. "It's a little piece of you."

She beamed at him. "Yes, I believe it is! But you must not look at that painting. It is your commission for Grandfather, and I wish you both to see it at the same time."

"I promise—no matter how sorely I am tempted to peek."

Amy laughed, and Laurie walked to her side, looping his arm around her waist. "I am pleased to see you painting again."

"As am I. You were right. Painting brings me joy. There is no need for genius to pursue art."

“I feel the same. Having put aside my ambitions, I play piano now with a lighter heart.”

“I am glad you did not give it up. I love to hear you play.”

Unable to resist, he bent and kissed her. “And I love to watch you sketch and paint,” he murmured.

They were interrupted by the sound of a subtle cough. Turning, they found Grandfather looking rather embarrassed as he stood in the doorway. “Forgive me...you, ah, did ask me to meet you at the studio.”

Laurie glanced at Amy, unsurprised to see her pale skin flushed with color. He smiled at his grandfather a little sheepishly.

“Well, you have found us out. Come in and let us share our news. I have found my heart at last. She was right here all along, but I did not have the wit to see her.”

He looked up at Grandfather, who smiled at them both. “I must say I suspected something had changed. You have been very happy of late, except, of course, for the loss we all feel.”

Amy went and embraced him, holding him tight. “I know you loved Beth as much as I,” she whispered.

Overcome with emotion, he was quite unable to respond. Laurie knew that sorrow would remain with all of them forever.

“I have something for you. Laurie commissioned a gift just when I had almost decided to give up my art completely. I do hope you like it.”

She moved to the easel holding the concealed painting and pulled off the cloth. Beth's angelic face shone out from the canvas. Amy had painted Beth at the piano with sunlight streaming in through a window behind her. Laurie had never seen a work so beautifully done.

Looking at the painting, Grandfather's eyes grew misty. "I cannot imagine a greater tribute. It is a masterpiece!" He turned to Amy and took her hands in his. "We have lost someone precious to us. It has been difficult, very difficult indeed. You must feel it all the more, having lost a sister."

Quiet tears streamed down her face. "In my heart, I know that Beth is well and happy now, but how much I miss her!"

Grandfather brought her in for another hug, and Laurie stood by, watching the two people he loved most in the world. His grandfather turned to him then. "Thank you, Theodore, for asking Amy to create such a piece. It was thoughtful of you."

"I wish I could accept such gratitude, but I did not specify the subject. I thought only of encouraging Amy to paint once more. I knew she would never refuse a commission meant for you."

"Well then, I thank you for that. I was concerned when Amy said she was giving up her art."

"Laurie helped me see that I need not be a genius to pursue that which makes me happy."

"And it seems you have guided him in that, as well," Grandfather said. "Though he has applied himself to business admirably, I still hear him playing Liebestraum late into the night."

“My favorite piece!” Amy turned to gaze up at him.

“What else would I play when I missed you so?” Laurie said quietly.

Grandfather cleared his throat, and Amy blushed again. Laurie bent down and said in a conspiratorial way, “Shall we tell him all of our news?”

She bit her lip but nodded. Grandfather looked at him expectantly.

“Amy has agreed to be my wife! Can you believe it?”

“My boy, you are full of surprises!” He looked at Amy with some concern. “But what is this? The bride-to-be looks a trifle distressed. Are you not happy with the idea, Amy?”

“Oh! Of course I am happy!” Amy actually wrung her hands—something Laurie had never seen her do. “I am only concerned that you will think us rather rash, I suppose.”

“Rash? You have known one another for more than ten years! No one could call this natural next step a rash one. As long as you are happy, there is no need to worry on my account.”

“Thank you!” Amy said. “I am very, very happy.”

Flo joined them for dinner, and they had a lovely time swapping tales of their travels in Europe.

Laurie asked, “When shall we journey home, Grandfather?” Amy glanced warily at Flo, glad her aunt had not joined them this evening.

“I am at your service, my boy.”

“I am anxious to be home, as I know Amy is.”

Amy felt the need to voice her aunt’s concerns. “Aunt Carrol is not sure I should travel with you without a chaperone.”

“I have tried convincing her that she need not worry,” Laurie said in an exasperated tone.

“I quite understand Mrs. Carrol’s concerns,” Grandfather said. “Perhaps I might talk with her and ease her fears on this account.”

“Thank you,” Amy said. “Laurie is correct. I am wild to be home. I miss my family so much!”

Flo gave Amy’s hands a little squeeze. “Do not worry, Cousin. Mr. Laurence will convince Mama!”

The betrothed couple did not have long to wait; he approached Aunt Carrol the next day.

“Well? What did old Aunt Carrol say?” Laurie had stopped his pacing long enough to confront his grandfather as soon as the gentleman walked through the door.

“Laurie!” Amy admonished. He gave her an apologetic smile.

“I’m afraid Mrs. Carrol has not changed her stance. She does not wish Amy’s reputation to be tarnished.”

“Oh, hang reputations!” Laurie huffed.

Amy stood and put a delicate hand on his arm. "Laurie, be calm. Aunt Carrol is trying to do what is best for me."

"That may be, my darling, but she is giving me a devil of a time in the process. We all wish to go home, and you are to be my wife! What could possibly be wrong with us traveling together?"

"It is simply not what is done here. You must understand that much, at least."

Grandfather was looking at him with a bemused expression. "You never were a patient boy."

"And I make a much less patient man," Laurie conceded. He let out a resigned sigh. "Well, what shall we do then?"

Grandfather stroked his beard and looked at them with a contemplative expression. "I have a thought, but I daresay Amy will not like it."

"What is it?" Amy asked.

"Well, if Aunt Carrol is concerned about you traveling with your intended without a chaperone, perhaps she would concede to you traveling with your husband."

"My husband?" Amy's eyes widened.

"Of course! We could marry at once and travel together to America as a family. Grandfather, you're a genius!"

"Thank you, my boy, but I think you and Amy had better discuss the matter. I shall leave you to it." He gave Amy's hand a little pat and left them alone together.

Amy turned toward Laurie as he wound his arms around her. He detected anxiety behind her cool exterior.

“Out with it, my darling.”

“Married!” Her voice was slightly higher than usual.

“Well, it is what we intend to do.”

“Yes, but...after we return home!”

“I think it’s a capital idea.”

She gave his arm a little slap. “You would! Grandfather is entirely correct. You cannot be patient.”

“But why should we wait, my love? You cannot travel with me as a mademoiselle, so you shall travel with me as madame.”

“But Laurie!”

He bent his head, searching her eyes for the true meaning behind her reluctance.

“What is it? Is it because it must be a small ceremony if we marry here?”

“That matters little.”

“Then what?”

“What about my family?”

“That is a pity. I wish they could be with us as well, to celebrate our union.” The word union had such a pleasant feel on his lips that he smiled and popped a kiss on Amy’s nose.

“Laurie!”

“I can’t help it. Your nose is perfection.”

She tried to shove him away, but he held fast. “It is not! You know how much its shape troubles me.” She sighed, then reached a hand up and traced his nose with her slender finger. “Don’t laugh, but the ideal shape of your nose is such a comfort to me.”

He did laugh but pulled her closer all the same. She was too adorable. Unable to resist, he dipped his head and kissed her. She was smiling when he released her.

“I suppose I can forgive you for laughing since you apologized so sweetly.” She arched her brow at him and Laurie grinned.

“Marry me here, Amy. I know your family can’t be with us, but I also know they will wish us joy. And what a merry surprise it will be!”

There was a long pause, and Amy sighed. “I suppose you are right.”

“Of course I am! About what, darling?”

Shaking her head and laughing, she took hold of his hands and tugged him to her. “Let us get married here and travel home together as a family.”

The idea of it sent a thrill through him. He tucked her head under his chin, holding her close. They stood together that way for a long while. Laurie stroked her hair,

enjoying how she relaxed into him, freely resting her head on his lapel. After some time, he let her go, keeping hold of one hand.

“Shall we tell Grandfather, then?”

Amy beamed, her uncertainty gone. “Yes, let’s. Now we must decide where to marry.”

“Here in Vevay?” When she bit her lip, he prodded, “Where do you wish to be married?”

“There is an American Consulate in Paris, you know.”

“Of course! Paris it is, then!”

Though she may have dropped a hint or two about the rash actions of youth, Aunt Carrol finally approved of the lovers’ plan and even allowed Flo to accompany Amy, Laurie, and Mr. Laurence and bear witness to the wedding. In mere days, the jubilant foursome took the train from Vevay to Paris. Laurie had arranged elegant lodgings for them at the Hotel Westminster, where they stayed overnight the first evening, but Amy found it difficult to sleep.

Now they were leaving their Paris hotel for the American Consulate, and she felt a little breathless. She was marrying Laurie—marrying Laurie!

The consul, a jovial man of forty or so with a bounce in his step and a ready smile, greeted them as soon as they entered. “Welcome! I am Mr. Bailey, at your service.”

“Thank you for accommodating us.” Laurie extended his hand in greeting, and the

older gentleman shook it with vigor.

“Of course, of course! I am happy to be of service.” He took Amy’s hand and bowed over it. “May I say you look quite lovely this fine morning, Miss March.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“If you all are ready, shall we adjourn to the meeting room?”

The group walked to a large carpeted room that contained many wooden chairs and a desk at one end. Mr. Bailey stepped behind it, shuffled some papers, and opened his bottle of ink, laying his pen beside it. Then he came to stand before the couple.

He cleared his throat. “Let us begin.”

Amy wondered if Laurie could feel her shaking. Grandfather and Flo stood off to the side, both wearing wide smiles.

“Who comes here this day to be married?” Mr. Bailey asked.

“Mr. Theodore Laurence and Miss Amy March of Concord, Massachusetts,” Laurie said in a clear, strong voice.

Mr. Bailey smiled and turned to Amy. “Repeat after me, Miss March.”

He recited the vows, and Amy repeated the words that would make her felicity complete. “I, Amy March, take you, Theodore Laurence, to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish always.”

She looked into Laurie’s eyes as she spoke her promise, and his eyes shined with

emotion. Then it was his turn.

Amy's heart was beating very fast as she listened to Laurie promise to cherish her always. Mr. Bailey spoke once more. "Then by the power vested in me by the United States of America, I pronounce you husband and wife."

Laurie was positively glowing with joy. Amy felt just the same. They signed the register, and then they were bidding Mr. Bailey farewell and walking out into the sunny morning. The newlyweds were met by a shower of rice tossed by Flo and Grandfather.

Halfway down the steps of the building, Laurie stopped, pulled her in, and kissed her lightly. She felt his lips near her ear as he whispered, "I love you, Amy Laurence."

Page 16

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The new Mr. and Mrs. Laurence were eager to travel home to America and wasted no time in securing passage on a steamer. They left Flo and Aunt Carrol in Nice and returned to London with Grandfather. Each day was filled with preparations for their imminent departure. Amy's paintings needed to be carefully packed, and there were many London acquaintances to take leave of.

It was with bittersweet happiness, then, that Laurie took Amy to meet Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. They were shown to the drawing room, where Mrs. Darcy awaited them.

She rose at once. "Mr. Laurence! Laurie! Do come in."

She looked at Amy and cocked her head to the side as if contemplating something. "Could this be Miss Amy March? You seem to fit her description perfectly."

"It is Amy Laurence now, ma'am." Laurie beamed with satisfaction with the words.

Mrs. Darcy's expression showed her surprise and softened at once into pleasure. "Mrs. Laurence, how very pleased I am to make your acquaintance!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Darcy, the pleasure is mine. Laurie told me much about you."

"Indeed? That is gratifying. Please, do sit down and let me look at you. I have heard tales of your adventures with Laurie in Nice. Now I can see the attractive face behind the stories for myself. I must say, Laurie did not exaggerate. You are as beautiful as he professed."

Amy blushed up to her golden hair, and her husband laughed. "Thank you, ma'am."

As she took a seat near the fireplace, Mrs. Darcy called for tea. The parlor door opened a moment later to reveal Mr. Darcy.

“Forgive me, my dear. I was just finishing up a letter to Charles.”

“Come and meet Mrs. Amy Laurence.”

Mr. Darcy raised a brow and bowed respectfully. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Laurence.”

Amy looked rather breathless while greeting the stately gentleman. “Mr. Darcy, how lovely to meet you.”

The door opened a second time, and tea was served. Laurie felt a wave of contentment as polite conversation flowed. He inquired after Fitz, and the Darcys explained that he had already returned to Derbyshire.

“How long have you been in town?” Mrs. Darcy asked.

“We arrived yesterday, and we travel home to Concord next week,” Laurie answered.

Mrs. Darcy gave him a sad smile. “I am sure you are pleased to be going home, but we shall miss your visits. That puts me in mind—I have a book that I should like to show you before you leave. Would you accompany me to the library?”

Laurie was slightly confused by this rather random request but nodded genially.

“You are your mother’s daughter, my dear.” Mr. Darcy’s comment earned him a sharp look of reproof that was followed immediately by a tinkling laugh as Mrs. Darcy tried and failed to maintain a stern countenance.

“Come, Laurie.” She beckoned to him and turned to the rest of the party. “Please

excuse us for a moment.”

The library was cool, calm, and everything a library should be. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy certainly had an impressive collection of books!

“My husband has found me out. I have no book to show you at all.” Mrs. Darcy clasped her hands in front of her as she faced Laurie. “I simply wanted to ask if all was well. I see that you are happy, but I also see that you wear half-mourning clothes. Your grandfather told us of your loss. I did not wish to inquire in front of your wife for fear of causing distress. Is she well?”

“Amy is bearing up, but she is terribly anxious to be with her parents and sisters. The grief weighs on all of us. Our Beth was the gentlest creature you could imagine, and Grandfather became particularly close to her. ”

“Yes, poor James! He has known too much heartache in his life.”

“I agree, ma’am. First his wife, his granddaughter, then my father, and now Beth. She was the best of us. She was musical without ambition, kind without artifice. She was home. And we are...” Laurie felt unable to continue. Clearing his throat, he looked away for a moment to gather himself. “Amy feels it keenly. She blames herself for being here in Europe, though Beth kept telling her to stay.”

“I know what it is like to lose a sister. I am sorry, very sorry for your loss. I have no wish to upset Amy, but you will tell her I said so?”

“I will, ma’am. And I thank you.”

“You found your way, Laurie.” Her smile was so warm and maternal that Laurie couldn’t help but take her hand and give it a little squeeze.

“I did, and I have you and your husband to thank for it. When I spoke with you that

day, I was lost and heartbroken, thinking I had ruined my life through my own stupidity. You helped me see there was a way through.”

“You are a dear boy. When you have lived as long as I have, you come to know certain truths. Hearts change. Sometimes it is for the worse, but often it is very much for the better. I am glad you have found happiness. Your lovely bride seems content, as well.”

“Would you believe she has loved me for years? A good-for-nothing like myself? How can I make amends for being such a fool?”

“Well, you have the rest of your life to devote to her felicity. I should think that would suffice.”

“You are quite right, as always, ma’am.”

She opened her arms to him. “Might I hug you goodbye as I would one of my own grandsons?”

Laurie was touched by the gesture, coming as it was from such a proper English lady. He accepted her embrace with pleasure. “Thank you for everything.”

She gave his cheek a motherly pat and led him back to the drawing room, where Mr. Darcy was entertaining Amy. Or rather, Amy was entertaining Mr. Darcy. As they entered the room, the usually reserved gentleman let out a bark of laughter.

“I can well believe it!” He looked up and saw them approaching. Schooling his features once more, he spoke in a more dignified tone, “Mrs. Laurence was telling me about how you two came to be married.”

Laurie gave a look of mock trepidation. “My darling wife, are you sharing all my follies with Mr. Darcy? I shall lose his favorable opinion if you tell all.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Darcy said. “I admire your forthright actions.”

Laurie offered the gentleman a bow. “Thank you, sir.”

“Laurence tells me you are booked on the RMS Scotia,” Mr. Darcy said.

“Yes, it is considered to be the fastest paddle steamer.”

“I hope you have no trouble with the sea voyage, Mrs. Laurence. It can be very cramped,” Mrs. Darcy said seriously.

“The sea offers space and time for the imagination to flourish, and I am a sturdy traveler.”

“Elizabeth was always up for an adventure, as well,” Mr. Darcy’s voice lightened on his wife’s name, and she met his eyes with obvious affection.

Amy smiled at Grandfather. “I hope we have good weather so the three of us may spend as much time on the deck as possible.”

“As do I. I am not as young as I used to be, and I find travel a trifle more challenging than when I was your age.” He laughed and then sobered as he addressed his friends. “Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth, I am not certain if we shall meet again.”

Mrs. Darcy looked at him somberly for a moment. “I wish we could see you off at the docks, but unfortunately we have other obligations tomorrow.”

Grandfather nodded and then shook Mr. Darcy’s hand firmly.

Mrs. Darcy embraced him. “We shall miss you. Do write to us often.”

“I shall.”

“Goodbye, Mrs. Darcy, Mr. Darcy,” Laurie said. “I sincerely hope we meet again.”

“As do we.” Mrs. Darcy took Amy’s hands in hers. “Will you write to me and tell me how you get on? I would love to have an American correspondent.”

“With pleasure. And I am sure I shall be seeking your advice before too long. The manor is much larger than Orchard House, and I have no experience running a home.” Amy’s blue eyes twinkled with undisguised relish at the prospect.

“You are lucky to have your mother so near.” At Mrs. Darcy’s remark, Mr. Darcy raised an eyebrow, and she laughed. “Yes, dear, she is lucky. Near and far are relative terms, I know. But I believe Mrs. Laurence is glad to be settling so close to her family.”

“Oh yes! I cannot wait to be living at home once more.”

““You must have much to do to get ready. Fitzwilliam and I are so grateful that you took the time to call.” Mrs. Darcy said. “Go now, before I keep you for an hour longer!”

They left the townhouse, waving goodbye from the carriage to Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, who waved back from the steps.

“My darling, I hope we shall be as happy together as they are,” Laurie said.

“We will be, my lord. We will be.”