

Mr Laurence Ah, we were close friends, and saw much of each other until fate sent us our different ways. Just fancy, I knew you as a little girl, and now you have four daughters of your own! (*There is a slight pause. His voice saddens a little*) You know, perhaps, that I had two children—and lost them both?

Marmee (*knowing only part of the story*) I believe that you have endured much heartache.

Mr Laurence My little daughter died of fever when she was about the age of your youngest girl, and I have never quite reconciled myself to that loss. But, as to my son . . . (*He pauses again in a moment of reflection before continuing*) He was in his early twenties when he met a young, Italian lady. She was lovely and good and, in every way accomplished . . . indeed, there was nothing against her, but an old man's prejudice. They fell deeply in love and wished to marry, but I had other plans for my son, and strongly opposed such an alliance. I should have known better, but stubborn pride would have its way. Within a month they were wed. (*Turning to Marmee with a rueful smile*) Does that surprise you very greatly, ma'am?

Marmee (*gently, returning the smile*) Not really.

Mr Laurence (*resuming his story*) My son had never been strong; (*he indicates his chest*) his lungs, you know. He needed a warmer climate, so they went to live in Italy. I declined to have anything to do with them . . . even to see them before they left. I never had the chance to see either of them again. She, poor lady, died in giving birth to Laurie, and, two months later, my son was laid to rest beside her.

Marmee Oh, I am sorry; what a terrible loss for you.

Mr Laurence I realized, too late, just what I had lost. Pride is a great sin, ma'am. There was only one thing left for me to do. I fetched my grandson home from Italy, and have devoted what is left of my life to giving him the same upbringing and education that his father had.

There is a little pause before Marmee speaks again

Marmee I am sure that you have only the boy's welfare at heart, but, if you will forgive me, I do feel that he is too much by himself. He is young, Mr Laurence, and so full of life. He needs young society, a measure of amusement, and healthful exercise.

Mr Laurence I suspect that you are right, ma'am. If I am inclined to keep him too much to myself, and coddle him, it is only because I remember the loss of the others.

Marmee That is understandable; but he will study harder and grow stronger for a little recreation among young people of his own age.

Mr Laurence (*with a smile; his manner relaxing*) On your own head be it, Mrs March! For your young ladies are the nearest young company, and he has already declared that "the Marches are regular splendid girls". I shall send him to plague you whenever he tires of his studies.

Marmee (*smiling also*) I shall be very pleased to see him, and I am sure the girls will make him very welcome. Jo will be delighted, she finds it difficult enough to resign herself to being a girl, and is always deploring the lack of

a brother. You saw how anxious she was to get through tea when Laurie was kind enough to suggest showing her the horses in your stable. I fear that her enthusiasms sometimes make her forgetful of her manners.

Mr Laurence Not at all, I like to see enthusiasm in young people. Besides, their running off to see the horses has enabled us to talk more freely about old times, and nothing bores the young more quickly than that! But where are your other daughters? I should like to meet them as well.

Marmee Beth and Amy have been having tea with Meg who is spending the day in bed. Her ankle is rather swollen after that little misadventure last evening, and I thought the rest would do it good.

Mr Laurence Quite so. I am glad that Laurie and Brooke were at hand to be of assistance.

Marmee (*rising*) If you would care to come up, Mr Laurence, I should like very much for you to meet them.

Mr Laurence rises and they move to the stairs

To be quite frank, Beth is very shy of meeting you. I think that is why they asked leave to take tea upstairs—for Amy declared that she, too, would rather not come down without the others.

Mr Laurence (*surprised*) Frightened of meeting me? Dear me, we must do something to set that right. Let me see, isn't Beth the one I hear playing the piano sometimes when I pass the house?

Marmee Yes, she plays quite well, really, but I am afraid that on that piano in her room not all the notes are true!

Marmee exits up the stairs

Mr Laurence pauses briefly, and considers her last remark before following her

They pass out of sight, and for a moment the stage is empty

The clock on the mantelpiece chimes the half-hour and, then, voices are heard in the hall

Jo and Laurie enter from the kitchen. Jo is wearing a cloak and a wide scarf draped around her head and over her shoulders. Laurie has a long scarf around his neck. They are full of happy exhilaration. It is obvious that an immediate friendship has developed between them, but it is a friendship based on mutual enthusiasms rather than romantic attraction

Jo (*looking around the room*) Oh, the tea-party seems to be over. Your grandfather must have gone home; I expect we missed him by coming around the other way. (*She moves to the table, removing her scarf and cloak, and examines the remains of tea*) Oh, good! There's still some of Hannah's fruit cake left. I am ready for another piece after our walk. Would you like some?

Laurie hesitates

Oh, go on! Here, catch! (*She throws a piece of fruit cake to him*)