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Chapter 2 - Parnassus

It was well named; and the Muses seemed to be at home that day, for as the newcomers went up the slope appropriate sights and sounds greeted them. Passing an open window, they looked in upon a library presided over by Clio, Calliope, and Urania; Melpomene and Thalia were disporting themselves in the hall, where some young people were dancing and rehearsing a play; Erato was walking in the garden with her lover, and in the music-room Phoebus himself was drilling a tuneful choir.

A mature Apollo was our old friend Laurie, but comely and genial as ever; for time had ripened the freakish boy into a noble man. Care and sorrow, as well as ease and happiness, had done much for him; and the responsibility of carrying out his grandfather's wishes had been a duty most faithfully performed. Prosperity suits some people, and they blossom best in a glow of sunshine; others need the shade, and are the sweeter for a touch of frost. Laurie was one of the former sort, and Amy was another; so life had been a kind of poem to them since they married - not only harmonious and happy, but earnest, useful, and rich in the beautiful benevolence which can do so much when wealth and wisdom go hand in hand with charity. Their house was full of unostentatious beauty and comfort, and here the art-loving host and hostess attracted and entertained artists of all kinds. Laurie had music enough now, and was a generous patron to the class he most liked to help. Amy had her proteges among ambitious young painters and sculptors, and found her own art double dear as her daughter grew old enough to share its labours and delights with her; for she was one of those who prove that women can be faithful wives and mothers without sacrificing the special gift bestowed upon them for their own development and the good of others.

Her sisters knew where to find her, and Jo went at once to the studio, where mother and daughter worked together. Bess was busy with the bust of a little child, while her mother added the last touches to a fine head of her husband. Time seemed to have stood still with Amy, for happiness had kept her young and prosperity given her the culture she needed. A stately, graceful woman, who showed how elegant simplicity could be made by the taste with which she chose her dress and the grace with which she wore it. As someone said: 'I never know what Mrs Laurence has on, but I always receive the impression that she is the best-dressed lady in the room.'

It was evident that she adored her daughter, and well she might; for the beauty she had longed for seemed, to her fond eyes at least, to be impersonated in this younger self. Bess inherited her mother's Diana-like figure, blue eyes, fair skin, and golden hair, tied up in the same classic knot of curls. Also - ah! never-ending source of joy to Amy - she had her father's handsome nose and mouth, cast in a feminine mould. The severe simplicity of a long linen pinafore suited her; and she worked away with the entire absorption of the true artist, unconscious of the loving eyes upon her, till Aunt Jo came in exclaiming eagerly:

'My dear girls, stop your mud-pies and hear the news!'

Both artists dropped their tools and greeted the irrepressible woman cordially, though genius had been burning splendidly and her coming spoilt a precious hour. They were in the full tide of gossip when Laurie, who had been summoned by Meg, arrived, and sitting down between the sisters, with no barricade anywhere, listened with interest to the news of Franz and Emil.

'The epidemic has broke out, and now it will rage and ravage your flock. Be prepared for every sort of romance and rashness for the next ten years, Jo. Your boys are growing up and will plunge headlong into a sea of worse scrapes than any you have had yet,' said Laurie, enjoying her look of mingled delight and despair.

'I know it, and I hope I shall be able to pull them through and land them safely; but it's an awful responsibility, for they will come to me and insist that I can make their poor little loves run smoothly. I like it, though, and Meg is such a mush of sentiment she revels in the prospect,' answered Jo, feeling pretty easy about her own boys, whose youth made them safe for the present.

'I'm afraid she won't revel when our Nat begins to buzz too near her Daisy. Of course you see what all that means? As musical director I am also his confidante, and would like to know what advice to give,' said Laurie soberly. 'Hush! you forget that child,' began Jo, nodding towards Bess, who was at work again.

'Bless you! she's in Athens, and doesn't hear a word. She ought to leave off, though, and go out. My darling, put the baby to sleep, and go for a run. Aunt Meg is in the parlour; go and show her the new pictures till we come,' added Laurie, looking at his tall girl as Pygmalion might have looked at Galatea; for he considered her the finest statue in the house.

'Yes, papa; but please tell me if it is good'; and Bess obediently put down her tools, with a lingering glance at the bust.

'My cherished daughter, truth compels me to confess that one cheek is plumper than the other; and the curls upon its infant brow are rather too much like horns for perfect grace; otherwise it rivals Raphael's Chanting Cherubs, and I'm proud of it.'

Laurie was laughing as he spoke; for these first attempts were so like Amy's early ones, it was impossible to regard them as soberly as the enthusiastic mamma did.

'You can't see beauty in anything but music,' answered Bess, shaking the golden head that made the one bright spot in the cool north lights of the great studio.

'Well, I see beauty in you, dear. And if you are not art, what is? I wish to put a little more nature into you, and get you away from this cold clay and marble into the sunshine, to dance and laugh as the others do. I want a flesh-and-blood girl, not a sweet statue in a grey pinafore, who forgets everything but her work.' As he spoke, two dusty hands came round his neck, and Bess said earnestly, punctuating her words with soft touches of her lips:

'I never forget you, papa; but I do want to do something beautiful that you may be proud of me by and by. Mamma often tells me to stop; but when we get in here we forget there is any world outside, we are so busy and so happy. Now I'll go and run and sing, and be a girl to please you.' And throwing away the apron, Bess vanished from the room, seeming to take all the light with her.

'I'm glad you said that. The dear child is too much absorbed in her artistic dreams for one so young. It is my fault; but I sympathize so deeply in it all, I forget to be wise,' sighed Amy, carefully covering the baby with a wet towel.

'I think this power of living in our children is one of the sweetest things in the world; but I try to remember what Marmee once said to Meg - that fathers should have their share in the education of both girls and boys; so I leave Ted to his father all I can, and Fritz lends me Rob, whose quiet ways are as restful and good for me as Ted's

tempests are for his father. Now I advise you, Amy, to let Bess drop the mud-pies for a time, and take up music with Laurie; then she won't be one-sided, and he won't be jealous.'

'Hear, hear! A Daniel - a very Daniel!' cried Laurie, well pleased. 'I thought you'd lend a hand, Jo, and say a word for me. I am a little jealous of Amy, and want more of a share in my girl. Come, my lady, let me have her this summer, and next year, when we go to Rome, I'll give her up to you and high art. Isn't that a fair bargain?'

'I agree; but in trying your hobby, nature, with music thrown in, don't forget that, though only fifteen, our Bess is older than most girls of that age, and cannot be treated like a child. She is so very precious to me, I feel as if I wanted to keep her always as pure and beautiful as the marble she loves so well.'

Amy spoke regretfully as she looked about the lovely room where she had spent so many happy hours with this dear child of hers.

"Turn and turn about is fair play", as we used to say when we all wanted to ride on Ellen Tree or wear the russet boots,' said Jo briskly; 'so you must share your girl between you, and see who will do the most for her.'

'We will,' answered the fond parents, laughing at the recollections Jo's proverb brought up to them.

'How I did use to enjoy bouncing on the limbs of that old apple-tree! No real horse ever gave me half the pleasure or the exercise,' said Amy, looking out of the high window as if she saw the dear old orchard again and the little girls at play there.

'And what fun I had with those blessed boots!' laughed Jo. 'I've got the relics now. The boys reduced them to rags; but I love them still, and would enjoy a good theatrical stalk in them if it were possible.'

'My fondest memories twine about the warming-pan and the sausage. What larks we had! And how long ago it seems!' said Laurie, staring at the two women before him as if he found it hard to realize that they ever had been little Amy and riotous Jo.

'Don't suggest that we are growing old, my Lord. We have only bloomed; and a very nice bouquet we make with our buds about us,' answered Mrs Amy, shaking out the folds of her rosy muslin with much the air of dainty satisfaction the girl used to show in a new dress.

'Not to mention our thorns and dead leaves,' added Jo, with a sigh; for life had never been very easy to her, and even now she had her troubles both within and without.

'Come and have a dish of tea, old dear, and see what the young folks are about. You are tired, and want to be "stayed with flagons and comforted with apples",' said Laurie, offering an arm to each sister, and leading them away to afternoon tea, which flowed as freely on Parnassus as the nectar of old.

They found Meg in the summer-parlour, an airy and delightful room, full now of afternoon sunshine and the rustle of trees; for the three long windows opened on the garden. The great music-room was at one end, and at the other, in a deep alcove hung with purple curtains, a little household shrine had been made. Three portraits hung there, two marble busts stood in the corners, and a couch, an oval table, with its urn of flowers, were the only articles of furniture the nook contained. The busts were John Brooke and Beth - Amy's work - both excellent likenesses, and both full of the placid beauty which always recalls the saying, that 'Clay represents life: plaster, death; marble, immortality'. On the right, as became the founder of the house, hung the portrait of Mr Laurence, with its expression of mingled pride and benevolence, as fresh and attractive as when he caught the girl Jo admiring it. Opposite was Aunt March - a legacy to Amy - in an imposing turban, immense sleeves, and long mittens decorously crossed on the front of her plum-coloured satin gown. Time had mellowed the severity of her aspect; and the fixed regard of the handsome old gentleman opposite seemed to account for the amiable simper on lips that had not uttered a sharp word for years.

In the place of honour, with the sunshine warm upon it, and a green garland always round it, was Marmee's beloved face, painted with grateful skill by a great artist whom she had befriended when poor and unknown. So beautifully lifelike was it that it seemed to smile down upon her daughters, saying cheerfully:

'Be happy; I am with you still.'

The three sisters stood a moment looking up at the beloved picture with eyes full of tender reverence and the longing that never left them; for this noble mother had been so much to them that no one could ever fill her place. Only two years since she had gone away to live and love anew, leaving such a sweet memory behind her that it was both an inspiration and a comforter to all the household. They felt this as they drew closer to one another, and Laurie put it into words as he said earnestly:

'I can ask nothing better for my child than that she may be a woman like our mother. Please God, she shall be, if I can do it; for I owe the best I have to this dear saint.'

Just then a fresh voice began to sing 'Ave Maria' in the music-room, and Bess unconsciously echoed her father's prayer for her as she dutifully obeyed his wishes. The soft sound of the air Marmee used to sing led the listeners back into the world again from that momentary reaching after the loved and lost, and they sat down together near the open windows enjoying the music, while Laurie brought them tea, making the little service pleasant by the tender care he gave to it.

Nat came in with Demi, soon followed by Ted and Josie, the Professor and his faithful Rob, all anxious to hear more about 'the boys'. The rattle of cups and tongues grew brisk, and the setting sun saw a cheerful company resting in the bright room after the varied labours of the day.

Professor Bhaer was grey now, but robust and genial as ever; for he had the work he loved, and did it so heartily that the whole college felt his beautiful influence. Rob was as much like him as it was possible for a boy to be, and was already called the 'young Professor', he so adored study and closely imitated his honoured father in all ways.

'Well, heart's dearest, we go to have our boys again, all two, and may rejoice greatly,' said Mr Bhaer, seating himself beside Jo with a beaming face and a handshake of congratulation.

'Oh, Fritz, I'm so delighted about Emil, and if you approve about Franz also. Did you know Ludmilla? Is it a wise match?' asked Mrs Jo, handing him her cup of tea and drawing closer, as if she welcomed her refuge in joy as well as sorrow.

'It all goes well. I saw the Madchen when I went over to place Franz. A child then, but most sweet and charming. Blumenthal is satisfied, I think, and the boy will be happy. He is too German to be content away from Vaterland, so we shall have him as a link between the new and the old, and that pleases me much.'

'And Emil, he is to be second mate next voyage; isn't that fine? I'm so happy that both your boys have done well; you gave up so much for them and their mother. You make light of it, dear, but I never forget it,' said Jo, with her hand in his as sentimentally as if she was a girl again and her Fritz had come a-wooing.

He laughed his cheery laugh, and whispered behind her fan: 'If I had not come to America for the poor lads, I never should have found my Jo. The hard times are very sweet now, and I bless Gott for all I seemed to lose, because I gained the blessing of my life.'

'Spooning! spooning! Here's an flirtation on the sly,' cried Teddy, peering over the fan just at that interesting moment, and to his mother's confusion and his father's amusement; for the Professor never was ashamed of the fact that he still considered his wife the dearest woman in the world. Rob promptly ejected his brother from one window, to see him skip in at the other, while Mrs Jo shut her fan and held it ready to rap her unruly boy's knuckles if he came near her again.

Nat approached in answer to Mr Bhaer's beckoning teaspoon, and stood before them with a face full of the respectful affection he felt for the excellent man who had done so much for him.

'I have the letters ready for thee, my son. They are two old friends of mine in Leipzig, who will befriend thee in that new life. It is well to have them, for thou wilt be heartbroken with Heimweh at the first, Nat, and need comforting,' said the Professor, giving him several letters.

'Thanks, sir. Yes, I expect to be pretty lonely till I get started, then my music and the hope of getting on will cheer me up,' answered Nat, who both longed and dreaded to leave all these friends behind him and make new ones.

He was a man now; but the blue eyes were as honest as ever, the mouth still a little weak, in spite of the carefully cherished moustache over it, and the broad forehead more plainly than ever betrayed the music-loving nature of the youth. Modest, affectionate, and dutiful, Nat was considered a pleasant though not a brilliant success by Mrs Jo. She loved and trusted him, and was sure he would do his best, but did not expect that he would be great in any way, unless the stimulus of foreign training and self-dependence made him a better artist and a stronger man than now seemed likely.

'I've marked all your things - or rather, Daisy did - and as soon as your books are collected, we can see about the packing,' said Mrs Jo, who was so used to fitting boys off for all quarters of the globe that a trip to the North Pole would not have been too much for her.

Nat grew red at mention of that name - or was it the last glow of sunset on his rather pale cheek? - and his heart beat happily at the thought of the dear girl working Nat and Bs on his humble socks and handkerchiefs; for Nat adored Daisy, and the cherished dream of his life was to earn a place for himself as a musician and win this angel for his wife. This hope did more for him than the Professor's counsels, Mrs Jo's care, or Mr Laurie's generous help. For her sake he worked, waited, and hoped, finding courage and patience in the dream of that happy future when Daisy should make a little home for him and he fiddle a fortune into her lap. Mrs Jo knew this; and though he was not exactly the man she would have chosen for her niece, she felt that Nat would always need just the wise and loving care Daisy could give him, and that without it there was danger of his being one of the amiable and aimless men who fail for want of the right pilot to steer them safely through the world. Mrs Meg decidedly frowned upon the poor boy's love, and would not hear of giving her dear girl to any but the best man to be found on the face of the earth. She was very kind, but as firm as such gentle souls can be; and Nat fled for comfort to Mrs Jo, who always espoused the interests of her boys heartily. A new set of anxieties was beginning now that the aforesaid boys were growing up, and she foresaw no end of worry as well as amusement in the love-affairs already budding in her flock. Mrs Meg was usually her best ally and adviser, for she loved romances as well now as when a blooming girl herself. But in this case she hardened her heart, and would not hear a word of entreaty. 'Nat was not man enough, never would be, no one knew his family, a musician's life was a hard one; Daisy was too young, five or six years hence when time had proved both perhaps. Let us see what absence will do for him.' And that was the end of it, for when the maternal Pelican was roused she could be very firm, though for her precious children she would have plucked her last feather and given the last drop of her blood.

Mrs Jo was thinking of this as she looked at Nat while he talked with her husband about Leipzig, and she resolved to have a clear understanding with him before he went; for she was used to confidences, and talked freely with her boys about the trials and temptations that beset all lives in the beginning, and so often mar them, for want of the right word at the right moment.

This is the first duty of parents, and no false delicacy should keep them from the watchful care, the gentle warning, which makes self-knowledge and self-control the compass and pilot of the young as they leave the safe harbour of home.

'Plato and his disciples approach,' announced irreverent Teddy, as Mr March came in with several young men and women about him; for the wise old man was universally beloved, and ministered so beautifully to his flock that many of them thanked him all their lives for the help given to both hearts and souls.

Bess went to him at once; for since Marmee died, Grandpapa was her special care, and it was sweet to see the golden head bend over the silver one as she rolled out his easy-chair and waited on him with tender alacrity.

'Aesthetic tea always on tap here, sir; will you have a flowing bowl or a bit of ambrosia?' asked Laurie, who was wandering about with a sugar-basin in one hand and a plate of cake in the other; for sweetening cups and feeding the hungry was work he loved.

'Neither, thanks; this child has taken care of me'; and Mr March turned to Bess, who sat on one arm of his chair, holding a glass of fresh milk.

'Long may she live to do it, sir, and I be here to see this pretty contradiction of the song that "youth and age cannot live together"! answered Laurie, smiling at the pair. "'Crabbed age", papa; that makes all the difference in the world,' said Bess quickly; for she loved poetry, and read the best.

'Wouldst thou see fresh roses grow
In a reverend bed of snow?'

quoted Mr March, as Josie came and perched on the other arm, looking like a very thorny little rose; for she had been having a hot discussion with Ted, and had got the worst of it.

'Grandpa, must women always obey men and say they are the wisest, just because they are the strongest?' she cried, looking fiercely at her cousin, who came stalking up with a provoking smile on the boyish face that was always very comical atop of that tall figure.

'Well, my dear, that is the old-fashioned belief, and it will take some time to change it. But I think the woman's hour has struck; and it looks to me as if the boys must do their best, for the girls are abreast now, and may reach the goal first,' answered Mr March, surveying with paternal satisfaction the bright faces of the young women, who were among the best students in the college.

'The poor little Atalantas are sadly distracted and delayed by the obstacles thrown in their way - not golden apples, by any means - but I think they will stand a fair chance when they have learned to run better,' laughed Uncle Laurie, stroking Josie's breezy hair, which stood up like the fur of an angry kitten.

'Whole barrels of apples won't stop me when I start, and a dozen Teds won't trip me up, though they may try. I'll show him that a woman can act as well, if not better, than a man. It has been done, and will be again; and I'll never own that my brain isn't as good as his, though it may be smaller,' cried the excited young person.

'If you shake your head in that violent way you'll addle what brains you have got; and I'd take care of 'em, if I were you,' began teasing Ted.

'What started this civil war?' asked Grandpapa, with a gentle emphasis on the adjective, which caused the combatants to calm their ardour a little.

'Why, we were pegging away at the Iliad and came to where Zeus tells Juno not to inquire into his plans or he'll whip her, and Jo was disgusted because Juno meekly hushed up. I said it was all right, and agreed with the old fellow that women didn't know much and ought to obey men,' explained Ted, to the great amusement of his hearers.

'Goddesses may do as they like, but those Greek and Trojan women were poor-spirited things if they minded men who couldn't fight their own battles and had to be hustled off by Pallas, and Venus, and Juno, when they were going to get beaten. The idea of two armies stopping and sitting down while a pair of heroes flung stones at one another! I don't think much of your old Homer. Give me Napoleon or Grant for my hero.'

Josie's scorn was as funny as if a humming-bird scolded at an ostrich, and everyone laughed as she sniffed at the immortal poet and criticized the gods.

'Napoleon's Juno had a nice time; didn't she? That's just the way girls argue - first one way and then the other,' jeered Ted.

'Like Johnson's young lady, who was "not categorical, but all wiggle-waggle",' added Uncle Laurie, enjoying the battle immensely.

'I was only speaking of them as soldiers. But if you come to the woman side of it, wasn't Grant a kind husband and Mrs Grant a happy woman? He didn't threaten to whip her if she asked a natural question; and if Napoleon did do wrong about Josephine, he could fight, and didn't want any Minerva to come fussing over him. They were a stupid set, from dandified Paris to Achilles sulking in his ships, and I won't change my opinion for all the Hectors and Agamemmons in Greece,' said Josie, still unconquered.

'You can fight like a Trojan, that's evident; and we will be the two obedient armies looking on while you and Ted have it out,' began Uncle Laurie, assuming the attitude of a warrior leaning on his spear.

'I fear we must give it up, for Pallas is about to descend and carry off our Hector,' said Mr March, smiling, as Jo came to remind her son that supertime was near.

'We will fight it out later when there are no goddesses to interfere,' said Teddy, as he turned away with unusual alacrity, remembering the treat in store.

'Conquered by a muffin, by Jove!' called Josie after him, exulting in an opportunity to use the classical exclamation forbidden to her sex.

But Ted shot a Parthian arrow as he retired in good order by replying, with a highly virtuous expression:

'Obedience is a soldier's first duty.'

Bent on her woman's privilege of having the last word, Josie ran after him, but never uttered the scathing speech upon her lips, for a very brown young man in a blue suit came leaping up the steps with a cheery 'Ahoy! ahoy! where is everybody?'

'Emil! Emil!' cried Josie, and in a moment Ted was upon him, and the late enemies ended their fray in a joyful welcome to the newcomer.

Muffins were forgotten, and towing their cousin like two fussy little tugs with a fine merchantman, the children returned to the parlour, where Emil kissed all the women and shook hands with all the men except his uncle; him he embraced in the good old German style, to the great delight of the observers.

'Didn't think I could get off today, but found I could, and steered straight for old Plum. Not a soul there, so I luffed and bore away for Parnassus, and here is every man Jack of you. Bless your hearts, how glad I am to see you all!' exclaimed the sailor boy, beaming at them, as he stood with his legs apart as if he still felt the rocking deck under his feet.

'You ought to "shiver your timbers", not "bless our hearts", Emil; it's not nautical at all. Oh, how nice and shippy and tarry you do smell!' said Josie, sniffing at him with great enjoyment of the fresh sea odours he brought with him. This was her favourite cousin, and she was his pet; so she knew that the bulging pockets of the blue jacket contained treasures for her at least.

'Avast, my hearty, and let me take soundings before you dive,' laughed Emil, understanding her affectionate caresses, and holding her off with one hand while with the other he rummaged out sundry foreign little boxes and parcels marked with different names, and handed them round with appropriate remarks, which caused much laughter; for Emil was a wag.

'There's a hawser that will hold our little cock-boat still about five minutes,' he said, throwing a necklace of pretty pink coral over Josie's head; 'and here's something the mermaids sent to Undine,' he added, handing Bess a string of pearly shells on a silver chain.

I thought Daisy would like a fiddle, and Nat can find her a beau,' continued the sailor, with a laugh, as he undid a dainty filigree brooch in the shape of a violin.

'I know she will, and I'll take it to her,' answered Nat, as he vanished, glad of an errand, and sure that he could find Daisy though Emil had missed her.

Emil chuckled, and handed out a quaintly carved bear whose head opened, showing a capacious ink-stand. This he presented, with a scrape, to Aunt Jo.

'Knowing your fondness for these fine animals, I brought this one to your pen.'

'Very good, Commodore! Try again,' said Mrs Jo, much pleased with her gift, which caused the Professor to prophesy 'works of Shakespeare' from its depths, so great would be the inspiration of the beloved bruin.

'As Aunt Meg will wear caps, in spite of her youth, I got Ludmilla to get me some bits of lace. Hope you'll like 'em'; and out of a soft paper came some filmy things, one of which soon lay like a net of snowflakes on Mrs Meg's pretty hair.

'I couldn't find anything swell enough for Aunt Amy, because she has everything she wants, so I brought a little picture that always makes me think of her when Bess was a baby; and he handed her an oval ivory locket, on which was painted a goldenhaired Madonna, with a rosy child folded in her blue mantle.

'How lovely!' cried everyone; and Aunt Amy at once hung it about her neck on the blue ribbon from Bess's hair, charmed with her gift; for it recalled the happiest year of her life.

'Now, I flatter myself I've got just the thing for Nan, neat but not gaudy, a sort of sign you see, and very appropriate for a doctor,' said Emil, proudly displaying a pair of lavender earrings shaped like little skulls.

'Horrid!' And Bess, who hated ugly things, turned her eyes to her own pretty shells.

'She won't wear earrings,' said Josie.

'Well, she'll enjoy punching your ears then. She's never so happy as when she's overhauling her fellow creatures and going for 'em with a knife,' answered Emil, undisturbed. 'I've got a lot of plunder for you fellows in my chest, but I knew I should have no peace till my cargo for the girls was unloaded. Now tell me all the news.' And, seated on Amy's best marbletopped table, the sailor swung his legs and talked at the rate of ten knots an hour, till Aunt Jo carried them all off to a grand family tea in honour of the Commodore.