



# DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of Amelia Martin*



## *A Light in the Storm*

KAREN HESSE

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*This book is dedicated to all  
Lightkeepers — past, present,  
and future — who kindle their lamps  
of hope against the darkness.*



While the events described and some of the characters in this book  
may be based on actual historical events and real people,  
Amelia Martin is a fictional character, created by the author,  
and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.  
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off the coast of Delaware, fifteen-year-old Amelia records in her diary how the  
Civil War is beginning to devastate her divided state.

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*Fenwick Island,  
Delaware*



1860

# Gains for All Our Losses

by R. H. Stoddard

*There are gains for all our losses —*

*There are balms for all our pains;  
But when youth, the dream, departs,  
It takes something from our hearts,  
And never comes again.*

*We are stronger, and are better,*

*Under manhood's sterner reign;  
Still we feel that something sweet  
Followed youth with flying feet,  
And will never come again.*

*Something beautiful is vanished,*

*And we sigh for it in vain;  
We behold it everywhere —  
On the earth and in the air —  
But it never comes again.*

*Monday, December 24, 1860*

*Stormy. Wind N.E. Light.*

I rowed across the Ditch this morning. Wish there were some other way to reach the mainland. Wind bit at my knuckles and stung my nose. Pulled hard at the oars to keep warm, landing Bayville beach in record time.

Bayville looked festive in its wreaths and ribbons and windows gold with candle glow.

Visited with Uncle Edward briefly. He has shaved off his beard! He looked so new with his whiskers gone, his chin so pale and tender. Beardless, he resembles Father less, but still enough. Even now, a stranger would know the two fair-haired men as brothers.

Uncle Edward slipped a package to me from under the counter. "Merry Christmas, Wickie," he said. "Open this tonight."

I hugged and thanked him, then handed over my present to him. He weighed it in his good hand, guessing.

It is *On the Origin of Species* by a man named Charles Darwin. Mr. Warner recommended

Darwin's book for Uncle Edward particularly.

At the confectionery, I purchased sweets for Father. Bought handkerchiefs for Keeper Dunne, and for William. Bought gloves for Grandmother.

But Mother's gift is best of all. I picked it up after finishing Grandmother's chores. Dear diary, let me tell you. Mother loathes the sea. Even though our rooms and the Lighthouse set back a good distance from shore, still we hear the waves breaking, the bell-buoy boat clanging. Mother longs to move back to the mainland, to Grandmother's cottage, away from Fenwick Island and the Light.

I expected Reenie O'Connell to do a good job. Day after day, she would arrive at the schoolhouse, her hands smudged with charcoal. But this afternoon, when I saw the finished drawing Reenie had made for Mother, it exceeded even my hopes. A charcoal window, captured in just a few strokes and smudges, the heavy hinged door, all in shadow, opening onto Commerce Street. "You have got the cottage just right," I told Reenie.

I paid her and brought the sketch to the Worthington house to show William, and to deliver his Christmas gift. All the Worthingtons approved of Reenie's sketch. Even Daniel.

William walked me back to the skiff. "Can you come skating with me and Daniel this week?"

I asked if the ice was thick enough for skating. William grinned. "Not yet."

William! He is forever taking risks. That is how we became such good friends. Because of his risk taking.

It's almost nine now. Near the end of my watch. Father insists I take first watch. I don't mind. Sometimes the colors of the sunset paint the sky beyond the balcony of the Light. Then all the sea is awash with orange and dappled rose.

Only three hours more until midnight, until Christmas.

Father should be out to relieve me soon. The lamps are all burning well. The wind remains low. An occasional fit of rain slicks the glass

surrounding the Light, but it is not a freezing rain and not too worrisome.

All the Christmas gifts are ready and waiting for tomorrow.

You, my diary, were in the package from Uncle Edward. Written upon the brown paper parcel, in Uncle Edward's peculiar script, was this note. *Open while you are on watch tonight, Wickie. You need a friend on the island. This might do.*

On the first page Uncle Edward has copied out a poem. It is a sad poem about gains and losses, about fleeting dreams, and the end of youth. I wonder why he chose to begin my diary with such a poem, but Uncle Edward is wise. Someday I will understand. My uncle knows me well. I do need a friend on Fenwick Island. You, dear diary, should do perfectly.

*Tuesday, December 25, 1860*  
*Stormy. Wind S.E. Moderate.*

Christmas morning passed pleasantly. While Father, Keeper Dunne, and I cleaned the glass in the lantern room, Mother baked and made a good



meal for us. Her happy presence in the kitchen cheered me mightily.

We gathered for Christmas dinner in the early afternoon, downstairs, in Keeper Dunne's quarters. Everything is dark there. Heavy draperies hang across his windows. Not even the light of the sea gets through. And Keeper Dunne looks just like his surroundings. Dark eyes droop at the same angle as his mustaches. But our Christmas was so pleasant, even Keeper Dunne smiled during our party.

Mother was at her best today. Sometimes she is waspish with Father. She can't seem to forgive him for landing us on this island off the coast of Delaware where the work never ends and the wind never ceases, where the sand is forever scratching at our skin and grinding between our teeth. Where nothing she plants survives the restless Atlantic and the ever-hungry water rats.

Keeper Dunne ignores the trouble between my parents. I try to do the same. I dream that things will be good again between them, the way they

were before we came to live here, when Father commanded his own ship and came home to us at the cottage in Bayville, after months at sea. Mother and Father never fought then.

After our meal of pork, corn cakes, and beans, at last we opened Christmas gifts. Father gave me ribbons, one a dark, dark brown to match my hair, one the gray-green of the sea when it runs wild with spume. He also carved a model of our Lighthouse, hollowed out, so I might place a candle within its walls. I told him I loved his gifts and threw my arms around him.

Mother says that at fifteen I am too old to be so affectionate. When I am at school, assisting Mr. Warner, I try to behave as Mother says. But even then it is hard not to hug a child who has just read his own name for the first time.

Father has a way of smiling with his eyes when he is happy, and today his eyes were as gay as ever I can remember. "I'm pleased you like your gifts, Wickie," he said.

Though my Christian name is Amelia, Father has called me Wickie for more than a year now,

since he became Assistant Lightkeeper and we moved here to Fenwick Island. Wickie is a name of affection bestowed upon lightkeepers—I suppose because we are always tending the wicks. Mother hates to have me called so. She fears it will bind me to a lightkeeper's life. But I am already bound . . . in my heart and my soul, I am bound!

Mother handed me a small bundle. "Merry Christmas, Amelia," she said.

I opened her package to find two new aprons. What a sacrifice such a gift was for her. To sew when her hands and fingers often ache these days.

"Thank you, Mother," I said, coming over and kissing her dark hair. She blinked up at me, tears pooling in her eyes. "It is a wonderful gift," I told her. And I meant it.

Then I gave Mother Reenie's drawing of the cottage.

I could tell right away how very much she liked it. She sat in silence for several moments. Then, "Oh, Amelia, how lovely, how very, very lovely," and she would not let the little charcoal

drawing out of her sight the rest of the afternoon. Father offered to fashion a frame for her and Mother thanked him, and there was a flicker of warmth between them in that moment that was for me the greatest gift of the entire day. If only the day could have ended then.

But we tarried by Keeper Dunne's fire. Father and I sang "Jingle Bells" and "Listen to the Mockingbird" and Mother and Keeper Dunne joined in. But then Father sang "The Old Gray Mare," the song used for Abraham Lincoln's campaign, though Father sang the original words, not the words about Lincoln coming out of the wilderness. And then he sang "Darling Nelly Gray," a song Mother abhors because of its abolitionist sentiment. Shortly after, Mother retired upstairs to our quarters, carrying Reenie's drawing. The spots on her cheeks told everything. She was angry at Father again, for bringing up the troubles so much on our minds these days.

Like Mother, I once believed unquestioningly

in the institution of slavery. Then, a little over a year ago, a storm shipwrecked a family of fugitive slaves here on the island. That is when I first truly noticed the difference between my parents. Father wished to help the fugitives along to Philadelphia, to freedom. Mother insisted we turn them over to the authorities immediately, so they might be returned to their owner. You see, dear diary, Delaware is a border state. There are those here who oppose slavery, but there are also many who uphold it.

I remember rescuing the five limp, salt-streaked bodies clinging to their battered raft. A male, a female, and three bedraggled children. I had always thought Mother was right, that slaves were simpleminded. But these slaves, there was something in their eyes, in their way with one another, that made me question how simpleminded, in fact, they were. Still Mother insisted that getting them back home was the greatest kindness we could do them. Father disagreed. While they argued, our neighbor, Oda Lee Monkton, turned

the fugitives over to the slave catchers and collected the reward.

Such a memory to recall on Christmas Day!

I left our rooms well before dark with a saucer of tasty bits for Napoleon. This past summer, Mother lost her entire garden to rats. I rowed to Bayville that very day and found Napoleon. He was a half-grown barn cat, then.

He is full grown now and worth his weight in gold. Our rat problem is greatly reduced. And he is my dearest companion on the island. Father and Keeper Dunne, too, find he makes for good company in the long, quiet hours on watch.

Napoleon ate the drippings and shreds of Christmas dinner eagerly, then scrubbed the saucer and himself, purring all the while. I stayed to play with him as long as I dared before running up the spiral stair to assist Father and Keeper Dunne in our nightly kindling of Fenwick Light.

