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LITTLE WOMEN AND WEREWOLVES

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT AND PORTER GRAND

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and Werewolves

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BALLANTINE BOOKS | NEW YORK



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Illustrations

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Jo would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and “fall into a vortex.”

The beast’s enormous teeth were bared and dripped foam that was hot when it fell onto his skin.

If there was a full moon in the sky, there would be werewolves aplenty on the grounds.

“We never feared the battlefield werewolves. They had piles of amputated limbs to pick at.”

He cried out only once as the werewolf tore away a fragment of his shoulder.

He couldn’t tear himself free of the waiting bones.

She cowered there on the floor, wishing she had not been so insistent on witnessing these games.

The distraught men gathered the bones reverently.

FROM THE OFFICE OF
WELLS PUBLICATIONS
New York, New York

APRIL 1, 1868

My Dear Miss Alcott,

This novel, as is, has a peculiar flavor, which I do not think will suit the frail palates of women readers. Your vibrant description of war amputees being pursued and felled by salivating, monstrous creatures was nearly enough to send this hale man into a swoon; I can little imagine there to be many women with the vigor and stamina necessary to survive this tale of *Little Women and Werewolves*.

I do, however, find the story of the sisters to be pleasing, appealing, and appropriate. Should you care to have this manuscript reconsidered for publication, expand upon the sisters and extract the werewolves and other unsavory themes.

One last note: If this has been submitted in jest, I heartily applaud your humor.

Very Truly Yours,
MANDRAKE WELLS

Author's Note

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*M*S. BARNARD WAS ODD; A SEVERE AND RIGID LADY with a great deal of hair who read rabidly and usually devoured several books a week. She obviously preferred books to people, blustering into and out of the library with a mute scowl, and as we shared a passion for literary and historical fiction, I was the only librarian to whom she spoke, and then, only about books. Even though librarians often receive small tokens of appreciation from patrons, I was immensely surprised when, before moving to a nursing facility, Ms. Barnard bequeathed to me a smelly cardboard box full of yellowed books. Actually, there were books on top, but below the crumbling volumes nestled a very old manuscript, tied together with a faded, ancient blue ribbon. Below that was an assortment of dried insect husks and a mummified mouse.

I very much enjoyed the manuscript, but I did not believe *Little Women and Werewolves* was really Louisa May Alcott's original version of *Little Women* until I finished it, turned the last page, and found the rejection letter from Mandrake Wells. It was then I remembered having read that Louisa May Alcott preferred writing Gothic pieces and mysteries. *Little Women* was ultimately published by Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, so Louisa May obviously did not approve of Mr. Wells's condescending tone, and so took his advice but sent the rewritten book to a different editor.

Sadly, as the box had sat in my car and then the garage for months before I dug through it, Ms. Barnard was deceased by the time I found the manuscript. And so I dedicate this book to the memory of Ms. A. M. Barnard, and of Blitzkrieg, who was my own handsome, loyal, and beloved werewolf.

CHAPTER 1

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Pouting Pilgrims

“CHRISTMAS NIGHT WILL HAVE A FULL MOON, SO ON TOP of no presents, we can’t go out,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. “It’s fortunate we thought to have a Christmas play, so we could invite friends to stay overnight, or it would have been completely ruined.”

“It’s so dreadful to be poor! And it’s a horror to have no father or brothers about to do heavy chores and protect us from the werewolves,” sighed Meg, rubbing at a spot on her old dress with her thumb.

“Yes, I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things and other girls nothing at all,” declared little Amy, with an injured sniff.

“We’ve got Mother, and each other, anyhow,” said Beth contentedly from her corner. “And we can protect ourselves. Besides, Father is as sad as we that he cannot be here with us. And what does it matter that some girls have lovely clothes when they, just like us, must stay inside during a full moon? Remember that many of them don’t even have sisters, so they must shiver all alone in their pretty boots as they listen to the werewolves howl.”

Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen who spoke in a soft voice, had a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression. Her father called her just that, “Little Tranquility,” since she kept herself happy and safe, beyond the boundaries where harsh reality could invade, within her own little world.

The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words but darkened again when Jo said sadly: “No matter where he wants to be, the fact is we will have no father here for Christmas, and we shall not have him as long as this terrible war goes on.”

“He would want us to be merry,” Beth pointed out. “And we each have a dollar to spend for the occasion.”

“We can do little with that, and I would hardly want to, with such suffering going on all around us,” Meg said, trying to push from her mind all the pretty things she wanted. Meg, or Margaret, was the oldest sister: sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands of which she was rather vain.

“I can do a lot with it. I can buy a new book, maybe two,” Jo said. She was fifteen, very tall, thin, and brown, and brought to mind a new colt trying to learn how to use its long limbs. Her features battled with one another: a firm, set mouth, a comical nose, and sharp gray eyes that were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick chestnut hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way.

“I planned to spend mine on new music,” said Beth with a smile, a lovely tune playing in her head.

“I shall get a nice box of Faber’s drawing pencils; I really need them,” said Amy decidedly. Amy was the youngest. She had icy blue eyes and yellow hair that curled on her shoulders; pale and slender, she always carried herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.

“I have earned a treat, spending my days teaching those dreadful children,” began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

“You don’t have half such a hard time as I do,” said Jo. “How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you’re ready to fly out of the window or box her ears?” It was her lot to spend her days reading to Aunt March, her father’s wealthy and grouchy widowed aunt.

“It’s naughty to fret, but I do think washing and cleaning is the worst work of all. It makes me cross, and my hands are as rough as a man’s. I would so like to have soft hands when I sit at the piano and play,” Beth said, looking down at her work-reddened hands.

“I don’t believe that any of you suffer as I do,” cried Amy; “for you don’t have to go to school with impertinent girls, who tease me when I don’t know my lessons, injure me because my coat is worn, stare at my ugly nose,

and think their father better than mine because of the contents of his wallet,” cried Amy.

“You certainly mean insult rather than injure, don’t you?” Jo laughed. “It isn’t as if they blacken your eyes, or rip the flesh from your bones like the werewolves would if they could get their sharp teeth around your throat.”

“I know what I mean, and I am correct in saying they injure me. It is in the figurative sense. It’s proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabulary*,” returned Amy with dignity.

“Don’t fight your own war within these walls when true war rages outside them,” scolded Meg.

“But Jo does use such slang words, as if she were from the lowest of classes,” observed Amy. Hearing that, Jo sat up and began to whistle.

“Don’t, Jo; it’s so boyish!”

“That’s why I do it.”

“I suppose you also howl like the werewolves.”

Jo raised her face to the ceiling and let out a low and fierce howl.

“I detest rude, unladylike girls.”

“I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits.”

“Foxes sharing a den agree,” sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a fearsome but funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh.

“Really, girls, you are both to be blamed,” said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion. “Jo, you could be concentrating on being a young lady, especially as you have grown so tall and look like one with your hair worn up.”

“I ain’t one! And if I look like a lady with my hair up, I shall wear it down till I’m twenty,” Jo cried, pulling down her hair so the chestnut-colored locks fell over her shoulders and down her back. “It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like the work and play of boys, and have little time to worry about such things as manners. Why, I should be off fighting with Father, but instead have to stay home and knit like a poky old drooling woman. At least my socks get to see battle.” She shook the blue army sock

hanging from the end of her knitting needle till the needles rattled like castanets.

“It is your burden to bear, so make the best of it,” said Beth, stroking her sister’s hair. “Fight werewolves, not your own sister, if you want to fight so badly.”

“As for you, Amy, you are altogether too particular and prim,” continued Meg. “Jo may assume the part of the wolf in our family, but you’ll grow up an affected little goose if you don’t take care.”

“If we have a wolf and a goose, then what am I, please?” Beth asked.

“A dear, and nothing more,” answered Meg warmly; and no one contradicted her. Nobody mentioned aloud that Beth was their mouse, the meek pet of the family, kept carefully caged for her own safety.

The snow fell softly outside as the sisters knit their blue socks for the fighting soldiers. The girls’ father had once been wealthy but had lost a great deal of money, so they were not fully accepted by either the rich or the poor young people in town, but the sisters had, in one another, all the friendship, diversion, and caring they needed. The carpet and furniture in the house were old and well worn, yet it was a comfortable home filled with the warmth of the fire and the scent of Christmas roses that bloomed on the windowsill.

The clock struck the hour of six, and Beth put a pair of slippers by the fire so their mother would have a warm pair to slip into when she returned home. “These are so worn,” she said, holding them out toward her sisters. “I think I’ll buy Marmee a new pair with my dollar.”

“No, I shall!” cried Amy.

“I’m the oldest,” Meg began.

“But I am the man of the family, with our dear father gone, so *I* shall provide the slippers. It was me that Father asked to take care of Mother while he was away,” Jo said.

“Let’s each get her something for Christmas!” Beth exclaimed. “We don’t really need to get anything for ourselves.”

“But what would we get?” asked Jo.

They thought for a moment, and then suddenly began spilling out ideas.

“A pair of gloves!” Meg announced.

“Army shoes, or perhaps boots, for the nights she insists on standing guard defending us against werewolves,” Jo said. “Or, even better for those nights, a pocket knife with a sharp and ready blade made of real silver.”

“A small bottle of cologne doesn’t cost much, so I could also buy myself a few pencils,” Amy added.

“We can shop tomorrow afternoon. Marmee will think we’re going to buy things for ourselves. There is so much to do yet for our Christmas play, but I can think about it and plan it in my head while we walk,” Jo said, pacing the room, back and forth, back and forth.

“This is my last year acting. I am really too old, even now, to be doing so,” observed Meg, who was as much a child as ever about “dressing up” frolics.

“I’ll believe you are stopping when I see it,” Jo said. “You are our best actress, and our productions will end if you quit the boards.”

“What play will we do, Jo?”

“Mine,” Jo replied, trying not to appear too boastful. “The one I wrote. *The Werewolf Curse: An Operatic Tragedy* is perfect for the occasion.”

“Oh, yes, Jo! It will be perfect.” Beth sighed, thinking her sister gifted with wonderful genius in all things.

“And I shall play the fiercest werewolf that ever lived!” Jo marched about the room, teeth bared and fingers curled into claws, as her sisters shrieked and laughed.

“How nice to see my girls so merry!” Marmee said, stepping into the room. Although not elegantly dressed, she was tall, had a noble air, and her girls thought her the most splendid mother on earth.

“You look tired, or sad, Marmee,” Meg said.

“I was helping at the clinic, as you know, and the Brigade stormed in and took three women, three patients away.”

“The Brigade!” Jo cried. “I thought they disbanded due to the war.”

“When the men went off to fight, it certainly appeared that way. But now there are women rising up to fight, as they call it, ‘the threat of werewolves

among us,' and a war hero leads them, one who was injured and sent home, but with a hunger for battle still in his heart. He and others returning from the war are reviving the Brigade with alarming swiftness."

"Did they accuse all three of those women of being werewolves?" Amy asked, eyes wide.

"They said two were werewolves and the other a werewolf sympathizer. One had an infected wound, and they produced a knife said to have cut into a werewolf as it attacked, and they swore it a perfect match to her wound, although I did not think it was, and I said as much."

"I'm glad the clinic is so far from us if that's where werewolves take refuge," Amy said with a sigh.

"But there is no proof they are what they are accused of being. And you're safe here, Amy, just as we have always told you. I know you fear the werewolves more than anything else on this earth, but you are well protected, my child," Marmee said as she smoothed her youngest daughter's hair.

"And the other women?" Jo asked. "What was the Brigade's case against them?"

"The other accused of being a werewolf had a weak infant, and we all know pure werewolves, those born of both werewolf mothers and fathers, languish during their first few years. But hunger and poverty also cause infant weakness, a fact the Brigade chose to ignore completely."

"What of the sympathizer?"

"I have no idea what evidence they had against that woman. They took her out by her hair as she kicked, cried, and screamed; but what is saddest is that sometime during the *mêlée*, the ailing infant perished. It is so unfair that they continue to lay blame only at the feet of the poor; I cannot recall a time that a wealthy person was executed as either a werewolf or a werewolf sympathizer. Oh, but the Brigade frightened us all, stomping about in those horrible breastplates and helmets, and I saw absolutely that some of them were women. The whole affair was surely as brutal and inhuman as anything on the war's battlefields."

“We are all so helpless against that foul Brigade, it’s a wonder they have amassed such great support,” Meg said.

“People are afraid, and they are selfish. They cannot see what it’s like to be another, to live as a werewolf with a need for human meat. And because they are the werewolves’ prey, they vilify the poor creatures and view them as purely evil. I think, although most citizens disapprove of the Brigade’s tactics, they yet view it as necessary.”

“If only the whole world had Father’s generous outlook!” Beth exclaimed.

“If that were the case, he would be here by our sides because there would be no war either against werewolves or against each other,” said Marmee.

“Come warm yourself by the fire, Mother,” Meg suggested.

Marmee nodded and held her hands out toward the comforting flames of the hearth. “I reminded the Brigade that it was nearly Christmas, but they turned the table and reminded me of the woman slaughtered and eaten last month who had children of her own left behind and alone for Christmas. But I then spoke up once more to add that they would be quite busy if they wished to rid us of werewolves completely, for with so many gone in the war, a full one-quarter of our population are now werewolves, rich as well as poor; of all ages and both men and women.”

“And what was their reaction then, Marmee?” asked Jo, inching forward to better hear and memorize her mother’s tale of confrontation.

“They differed, as expected, saying that nowhere near that many werewolves exist, but there were many others present who believed my figures accurate. No one in that room could remember a time when there were no werewolves among us; some recalled even long-dead forebears relating their childhood memories of bolting their doors on nights with full moons.”

“I overheard Father, just before he left, estimating that it was close to one-third of this town’s population who are werewolves,” said Beth.

“It can’t be that many!” Amy exclaimed.

Marmee glanced at her other daughters, and they all quickly assured Amy that the quoted numbers were inflated, although in their hearts they

feared the numbers to be even higher.

“And the werewolves all live far from us, don’t they?” Amy questioned.

“They do, indeed,” Marmee said with a smile. “Just as we have always told you.”

“What happened then, Marmee?” Jo asked, wanting sorely to hear the remaining details of the story.

“The Brigade declared before everyone present that their newly formed band is true to the original goals established nearly one hundred years ago, and that they will hunt any and all werewolves, that privilege carries no weight in their eyes.”

“Privilege always carries weight,” said Meg with a heavy sigh as she looked down at the threadbare carpet.

“I like Father’s idea to school the werewolves in self-control so they might dampen their urges, just as we all learn to resist sin,” Jo said. “I believe it is an innovative concept, one that would prove meritorious, and might allow others to trust them more readily. As Father always said, man slaughters as swiftly as any werewolf. I feel the good sense of his words each time I walk past a butcher shop and see the hapless animal heads and body parts displayed and awaiting some family’s supper table. After all, everyone knows the unfortunate truth that werewolves must, occasionally, eat human meat and blood to be healthy and strong. Eating only animals, they will eventually wither and languish, sicken and die. Some allowances must surely be made for that.”

“Anyone who opens his mind and heart could see as much,” Marmee agreed, “and I am thankful your father is not here now to witness the Brigade’s atrocities. The dear man respects all life equally. He always did, and for that rare, compassionate stripe, I fell in love with him. For there have been instances when werewolves stopped suddenly in mid-attack, and we can only assume it was because they recognized their victim. They, like us, become what they are taught, so I, too, think education is essential.”

“But what of those victims not born werewolves? Those whom if they are bitten, but their hearts are not eaten, then become werewolves?”

“Well, they still live, so can learn. Live and pray and work and love, as we all do, except for that one short night each month. This wrathful contempt for werewolves is impious.”

“Speak no more of this, Marmee. Rather sit and relax,” Beth urged.

“Yes, I should.” Obviously fatigued, she sank into her chair as the girls bustled about and got the tea table ready. “We are all so tired out by this war, that little concern has been paid to the werewolves of late, yet the attacks are now greatly slowed. I much prefer to apply my efforts to helping the poor, not condemning them.”

Once everyone was sitting with tea or toast in hand, Mrs. March produced her prize—a letter from Mr. March.

“Father is quite a saint to go to war as a chaplain, although too old and weak to serve as a soldier,” Meg said.

“I would happily go as a drummer. Or perhaps a nurse, to cut off ruined limbs and throw them to the battlefield werewolves,” Jo said, sawing the air with her butter knife.

“Jo!” Four voices wailed in unison, pretty noses wrinkled with disgust.

Jo sighed. As usual, she had said the wrong thing.

Mr. March’s letter was filled with hope and cheer, and he sent his love to each of his “little women”; and each resolved in her soul to be all that Mr. March hoped to find in his girls when the year brought around the happy coming-home.

They all sat silently, sad and dismal, until Mrs. March broke the silence by reminding them of the *Pilgrim’s Progress* game they used to play, where they would put packs on their backs and pretend to travel the world. They would work their way up from the City of Destruction, which was in the cellar, to the Celestial City, which represented heaven, or eternal reward, on the roof, where a treat of cake and milk awaited the good pilgrims who had survived the valley of the hobgoblins, fighting Apollyon and sneaking past the two roaring lions who tested their faith.

“Now, my little pilgrims,” said Mrs. March, “suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home. Look under your pillows in the morning, my dears, and you

will find your guidebooks,” she added mysteriously, and would say no more.

They worked a couple of hours on their boring, but necessary, sewing, and then stood around the old, out-of-tune piano as Beth coaxed music from the yellowed keys. They sang together, as was their household custom each evening, Marmee’s rich, beautiful voice leading her girls through the tunes, and then they all went contently off to bed with their lullaby yet wafting through their heads.