LITTLE WOMEN

LOUISA M. ALCOTT

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LITTLE WOMEN

Louisa May Alcott

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Introduction

Little Women: An American Coming-of-Age Story

The enduring popularity of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* with readers of all ages and backgrounds confounds many critics who see the novel as overly sentimental and preachy. So why does a didactic novel about four New England girls of the 1860s continue to fascinate so many, even 150 years after its publication? The lessons learned by the March sisters—avaricious Meg, willful Jo, saintly Beth, and vain Amy—about how to take care of their gloves or behave while making calls appear to have little to do with the lives of American girls today. Yet *Little Women* is more than a lesson book for behavior, and its complexity—even self-contradiction—may well be the key to its continued popularity. On the one hand, it is the moralistic tale of the March girls, who learn to subdue their selfishness, vanity, and ambition and become devoted wives and mothers. On the other, it is the tale of the willful Jo, who strives to remain true to her tomboy self and her calling as a writer. Although composed hastily to support her cash-strapped family, Alcott's masterpiece captures a bittersweet period in the lives of young Americans of any era, when games and "castles in the air" must give way to a life of work, duty, and responsibility.

Little Women addresses a key question confronted by all Americans—especially American women—as they reach adulthood: to what extent are our lives our own to shape as we wish, and to what extent are they bounded by tradition and duty? In the mid–nineteenth century of Alcott's youth, this question was most often answered by the assertion that young men might "sow their wild oats" for a few years before settling down to industrious labor and fatherhood. Young women heard a different message. Dominant ideas of womanhood prescribed education and preparation for marriage and

Christian motherhood. A “true woman” of the era would seek only to influence the world through her role as wife and mother. *Little Women* at once supports and challenges these ideas, through Meg’s and Amy’s renunciation of their own dreams, as well as through Jo’s ongoing desire to earn a living for herself. By remaining ambivalent about the answer to its central question while allowing its characters to feel satisfied with their choices, *Little Women* reflects Americans’ continued struggle with the question of balance between work and family.

Even in our own era of working mothers, parental leave, and stay-at-home dads, these questions about the natural or proper roles for men and women within society and the family continue to bedevil us. As Americans, we believe in “liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as fundamental to who we are as a people. Yet at the same time, to be a nation of selfish individualists risks losing much we hold dear from our traditional cultures. Thus, Jo’s ultimatum to her husband that she would not become reliant on him economically (“Make your mind up to that, or I’ll never go,” she tells him), makes sense to modern readers. The simplicity of the advice dispensed by the March parents and the clear-cut nature of the consequences experienced by Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy when they stray from the straight and narrow way of the “pilgrim,” also please us in their promise of a morally guided universe. Right and wrong exist, Alcott assures us, but we must make our own path toward righteousness. Meg says to Mrs. March, “We do want to be good,” and most readers share her desire. But Americans who want to be good often prefer to do so on their own terms. Because it shows these negotiations between tradition and independence, *Little Women* is a great American coming-of-age story.

The Life and Work of Louisa May Alcott

Even to the first reviewers of *Little Women* in 1868, it was clear that Jo March was largely the alter ego of her creator, Louisa May Alcott, who lived from 1832 to 1888. Like Jo, she was the second of four daughters; her sisters, Anna, Elizabeth, and Abigail, known as “May,” are recognizable in *Little Women* as Meg, Beth, and Amy, respectively. Many events are directly borrowed for the novel: Anna’s engagement, for example, was overshadowed by the death of Elizabeth of scarlet fever in 1858. Mrs.

March’s nickname, “Marmee,” was also that of Louisa’s mother, Abba May Alcott.

But the book also differs markedly from Alcott’s life. Louisa’s father, Bronson Alcott, was not a minister like Mr. March, but a well-known teacher and writer. A central figure in the Transcendentalist movement, Alcott was intimate friends with the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson and well acquainted with such luminaries as Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller. Bronson’s radical views on ending slavery and reforming education would have made him too difficult a fit in the March household, so Mr. March was made a Union army chaplain who serves in the Civil War during the first half of the book.

Meanwhile, life for the real Alcotts at their home in Concord, Massachusetts, was not easy, largely because of Bronson’s inability to earn a regular living from his educational and oratorical efforts. Instead, he lived a life of the mind, lecturing, taking part in discussions, and leaving the burden of supporting his family to his wife and daughters or to the charity of friends. It was in part because of this economic need that Louisa May Alcott turned to writing, and the family wrestled with indebtedness until the success of *Little Women*, first published in 1868.

At first, she found some success writing lurid thrillers for sensational magazines. Her more serious writing, including the early novel *Moods*, was not well received. It was somewhat by accident that she hit on what would become her niche. In May 1868, Alcott noted in her journal that her editor, Thomas Niles, asked for “a *girls story*,” and so she began *Little Women*, basing the plot roughly on the incidents of her childhood. Surprisingly, Alcott seemed uninspired as she produced what would be her most popular work: “So I plod away,” she wrote in her journal, “though I don’t enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it.”

Whatever Alcott’s expectations for her novel, it was an immediate triumph. Readers immediately called for the sequel promised by Alcott at the end of what became Part I. Alcott fell to work at once, writing a chapter a day, and in 1869, the second part of *Little Women* appeared. The pace of her work brought on a serious illness, but as soon as she was able, Alcott threw herself into producing a string of well-selling and critically acclaimed books, including two more following the March family through the

succeeding generation. Until her death in 1888 at age fifty-five, Alcott spent much of her time living with her parents (her beloved mother died in 1877), writing, and caring for the daughter of her sister May, who died soon after the child's birth. In the 1880s, Louisa and her father both slid further into ill health. In March 1888, they died just two days apart and were buried beside Marmee in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

Historical and Literary Context of *Little Women*

The Civil War

Much of the action of *Little Women* takes place from 1861 to 1865, during the U.S. Civil War. Alcott composed the novel just three years after the war's end as the nation grappled with reconstruction of the conquered South. With that in mind it is worth noting how insignificant a role the war plays in *Little Women*. Mr. March serves as a chaplain, of course, but this seems more of a convenient way of ushering him out of the now completely female household. All we learn in his letter home describing army life is that the camp is "colorful," and Mr. March's speech made upon his return is limited to noticing the positive changes the privations of his absence have caused in his daughters.

Because Alcott had traveled to Washington for a harrowing stint as a nurse during the war, she surely had material, should she have wanted to use it. Instead, the Marches and the Laurences seem untouched by the events of the larger world: the only references to the industrialization and urbanization of New England during the era are a few passing, disapproving references to Irish immigrants. Why would Alcott all but omit the major events of the era? We can assume Alcott's decision to keep the war and the culture it divided out of the narrative was a conscious one. By keeping the action limited to the dramas occurring within the March household, Alcott was able to train her reader's eye on the development of the four girls and to root their growth not in events beyond their control, but rather in the moral fortitude they display in a given situation.

The Boston-Concord Literary Milieu

Little Women was produced at a meeting point of two very powerful, but very different, American literary movements. As the daughter of Bronson Alcott, Louisa grew up in the heart of the Boston-Concord literary scene, dominated by the ideas of the Transcendentalists. This school of thinkers, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, argued that individuals were born with the ability to transcend the temporal and physical through communion with nature rather than through convention and tradition. For Alcott, Emerson was not the dour thinker many today may find him, but someone to whom she penned unsent love letters as a girl. Later, she fell in love with Henry David Thoreau and as a teenager paid visits to his cabin on Walden Pond.

On a more philosophical level, we can see the Transcendentalists' optimism about the perfectibility of human consciousness throughout *Little Women*, and likewise their bias toward living simply, surrounded by nature. Although Alcott does not reject God for a Thoreauvian worship of nature in *Little Women*, the novel also bears little mark of the rigid, doctrinaire Puritanism of earlier generations. Instead, the March family labors together to create an earthly paradise free from vice and materialism, worshipping an abstract though loving God. Thus, in Alcott's burnished version of her family's experience, she offers Transcendentalism's idealism rendered in the daily lives of women.

Hawthorne's "Scribbling Women"

Because she was writing a book targeted for an audience of girls and young women, Alcott also worked in the context of the era's popular women's fiction, now commonly referred to as sentimental or domestic fiction. Writers such as Susan Warner (*The Wide, Wide World*, 1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852) achieved fame by writing novels that evoked pity for their downtrodden heroines. Plots often revolved around impoverished but morally pure girls compelled to make their way in a world that constantly threatens their virtue. Most often, they overcome numerous moral obstacles to become valued and respectable women. Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and neighbor to the Alcotts, complained that "serious" writing could make no headway because this "mob of scribbling women" dominated public taste. Despite the elitist and sexist nature of his complaint, Hawthorne was correct in that

sentimental fiction was the most popular genre in mid–nineteenth century America.

Little Women occupies a place between the overtly Christian and sentimental novels like *The Wide, Wide World* and the more realistic fiction of writers like Henry James of the following generation. Alcott knew she was writing for an audience that expected to weep over the struggles of girls without their father as they sought to be good "little women." Yet she also strove for a certain amount of realism, rounding out her characters with both good and bad qualities. Even Beth, the most pure of the March girls, happily neglects her housework and causes her pet bird to die from neglect. In fact, in *Little Women*, Alcott even tells her readers at one point that if Jo "had been the heroine of a moral story-book, she [would] . . . have become quite saintly, renounced the world and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in her pocket. But you see Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others."

In this quick intrusion into her story, Alcott renounces the sentimental novel, assures her reader that this is a realistic work of fiction, and perhaps opens readers' hearts to a deeper, more personal empathy for Jo than domestic fiction could muster. This mixture of the sentimental and the realistic may well be a key factor in why *Little Women* continues to be read widely with pleasure long after the work of Alcott's contemporary writers like Susan Warner has fallen out of print.

Chronology of Louisa May Alcott's Life and Work

1832: Louisa May Alcott born 29 November in Germantown, Pennsylvania, the second of four daughters born to Abigail May Alcott and Amos Bronson Alcott.
1834: Bronson Alcott opens Temple School in Boston, based on his controversial educational methods.
1838: Temple School closes.
1840: Alcotts move to Concord, Massachusetts.
1843: Alcotts move to Fruitlands, a utopian community in Harvard, Massachusetts, run by Bronson Alcott; Louisa begins writing poems.
1845: Alcotts purchase "Hillside" house in Concord.
1847: Louisa begins reading Goethe and other classics in Ralph Waldo Emerson's library.
1848: Writes her first story, "The Rival Painters."
1851: Publishes the poem "Sunlight," in *Peterson's Magazine*, under the name "Flora Fairfield."
1856: Alcott's younger sisters Lizzie and May contract scarlet fever.
1858: Elizabeth "Lizzie" Alcott dies.
1860: Publishes "Love and Self Love" in *Atlantic Monthly*; writes "mature" novel, *Moods*; Alcott's sister Anna marries John Bridge Pratt.
1862: Travels to Washington, D.C., to work as a nurse in Union Hotel Hospital; wins $100 prize for story submitted to competition in

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.

1864: Publishes *Moods.*

1865: Travels to Europe; meets Polish soldier Ladislas Wisniewski, on whom she partially bases character of Laurie.

1868: Composes and publishes Part I of *Little Women*.

1869: Composes and publishes Part II of *Little Women*; publishes *Hospital Sketches*.

1870–71: Visits Europe with sister May.

1871: Publishes *Little Men*.

1873: Publishes *Work*.

1877: Abba May Alcott ("Marmee") dies.

1878: Publishes *Under the Lilacs*.

1880: Sister May dies after birth of first child, Louisa May Nieriker.

1881: Assumes care of niece Louisa.

1884: Moves to Boston with Bronson, both in ill health.

1886: Publishes *Jo's Boys*.

1888: Bronson Alcott dies 4 March. Louisa May Alcott dies 6 March.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Little Women*

1832:	Louisa May Alcott born on 29 November in Germantown, Pennsylvania.
1836:	Ralph Waldo Emerson anonymously publishes the essay "Nature," in which he develops the ideas of Transcendentalism.
1848:	Seneca Falls Conference: leading feminists' "Declaration of Sentiments" calls for equal rights for women, including the right to vote.
1854:	Henry David Thoreau publishes *Walden, or Life in the Woods.*
1859:	John Brown leads a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.
1861–65:	U.S. Civil War.
1863:	Deadly rioting in New York City against military draft, led by Irish immigrants.
1864:	Herbert Spencer publishes *Principles of Biology*, coining the phrase "survival of the fittest."
1866:	Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution guarantees equal rights to all who are born or naturalized in the United States.
1868–69:	*Little Women*, parts one and two, published.
1869:	Transcontinental railroad completed; Wyoming passes first woman's suffrage act.
1873:	Financial panic begins with failure of a New York investment bank; panic leads to four-year economic depression.
1874:	Women's Christian Temperance Union founded.
1877:	Compromise of 1877: Federal "reconstruction" of the South

ends; in return, Republican President Rutherford Hayes is recognized by Democrats.

1880s: New class of wealthy evolves, led by John D. Rockefeller, who controls 90 percent of nation's refined oil.

1878: Henry James publishes *Daisy Miller*.

1886: Statue of Liberty dedicated.

1888: Louisa May Alcott dies.

LITTLE WOMEN

PREFACE

"Go then, my little Book, and show to all
That entertain and bid thee welcome shall,
What thou dost keep close shut up in thy breast;
And wish what thou dost show them may be blest
To them for good, may make them choose to be
Pilgrims better, by far, than thee or me.
Tell them of Mercy; she is one
Who early hath her pilgrimage begun.
Yea, let young damsels learn of her to prize
The world which is to come, and so be wise;
For little tripping maids may follow God
Along the ways which saintly feet have trod."

—Adapted from JOHN BUNYAN[1]

Part I

I

PLAYING PILGRIMS

"CHRISTMAS WON'T be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got Father and Mother and each other," said Beth contentedly from her corner.

The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, "We haven't got Father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never," but each silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.[1]

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don't." And Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.

"But I don't think the little we should spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy *Undine and Sintram*[2] for myself. I've wanted it *so* long," said Jo, who was a bookworm.

"I planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle holder.

"I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils. I really need them," said Amy decidedly.

"Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner.

"I know *I* do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I'm longing to enjoy myself at home," 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 cry?"

"It's naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all." And Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that any one could hear that time.

"I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy, "for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice."

"If you mean *libel*, I'd say so, and not talk about *labels*, as if Papa was a pickle bottle," advised Jo, laughing.

"I know what I mean, and you needn't be *statirical* about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabilary*," returned Amy, with dignity.

"Don't peck at one another, children. Don't you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! how happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries!" said Meg, who could remember better times.

"You said the other day you thought we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money."

"So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are; for, though we do have to work, we make fun for ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say."

"Jo does use such slang words!" observed Amy, with a reproving look at the long figure stretched on the rug. Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle.

"Don't, Jo, it's so boyish!"

"That's why I do it."

"I detest rude, unladylike girls!"

"I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!"

"'Birds in their little nests agree,'" sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh, and the "pecking" ended for that time.

"Really, girls, you are both to blame," said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion. "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady."

"I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster![3] It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" And Jo shook the blue army sock till the needles rattled like castanets, and her ball bounded across the room.

"Poor Jo! It's too bad, but it can't be helped. So you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls," said Beth, stroking the rough head at her knee with a hand that all the dishwashing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch.

"As for you, Amy," continued Meg, "you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now, but you'll grow up an affected little goose, if you don't take care. I like your nice manners and refined ways of speaking, when you don't try to be elegant. But your absurd words are as bad as Jo's slang."

"If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?" asked Beth, ready to share the lecture.

“You’re a dear, and nothing else,” answered Meg warmly; and no one contradicted her, for the “Mouse” was the pet of the family.

As young readers like to know “how people look,” we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a comfortable old room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain; for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it.

Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn’t like it. Elizabeth—or Beth, as everyone called her—was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her “Little Tranquillity,” and the name suited her excellently, for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person—in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners. What the characters of the four sisters were we will leave to be found out.

The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her. Meg stopped lecturing, and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of

the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze.

"They are quite worn out. Marmee must have a new pair."

"I thought I'd get her some with my dollar," said Beth.

"No, I shall!" cried Amy.

"I'm the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided—"I'm the man of the family now Papa is away, and *I* shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Beth, "let's each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves."

"That's like you, dear! What will we get?" exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought soberly for a minute, then Meg announced, as if the idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, "I shall give her a nice pair of gloves."

"Army shoes, best to be had," cried Jo.

"Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed," said Beth.

"I'll get a little bottle of cologne. She likes it, and it won't cost much, so I'll have some left to buy my pencils," added Amy.

"How will we give the things?" asked Meg.

"Put them on the table, and bring her in and see her open the bundles. Don't you remember how we used to do on our birthdays?" answered Jo.

"I used to be *so* frightened when it was my turn to sit in the big chair with the crown on, and see you all come marching round to give the presents, with a kiss. I liked the things and the kisses, but it was dreadful to have you sit looking at me while I opened the bundles," said Beth, who was toasting her face and the bread for tea at the same time.

"Let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon, Meg. There is so much to do about the play for Christmas night," said Jo, marching up and down, with her hands behind her back and her nose in the air.

"I don't mean to act any more after this time. I'm getting too old for such things," observed Meg, who was as much a child as ever about "dressing-up" frolics.

"You won't stop, I know, as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. You are the best actress we've got, and there'll be an end of everything if you quit the boards," said

Jo. “We ought to rehearse tonight. Come here, Amy, and do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that.”

“I can’t help it; I never saw anyone faint, and I don’t choose to make myself all black and blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can go down easily, I’ll drop; if I can’t, I shall fall into a chair and be graceful. I don’t care if Hugo does come at me with a pistol,” returned Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was chosen because she was small enough to be borne out shrieking by the villain of the piece.

“Do it this way: clasp your hands so, and stagger across the room, crying frantically, ‘Roderigo! save me! save me!’” and away went Jo, with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling.

Amy followed, but she poked her hands out stiffly before her, and jerked herself along as if she went by machinery, and her “Ow!” was more suggestive of pins being run into her than of fear and anguish. Jo gave a despairing groan, and Meg laughed outright, while Beth let her bread burn as she watched the fun with interest.

“It’s no use! Do the best you can when the time comes, and if the audience laughs, don’t blame me. Come on, Meg.”

Then things went smoothly, for Don Pedro defied the world in a speech of two pages without a single break; Hagar, the witch, chanted an awful incantation over her kettleful of simmering toads, with weird effect; Roderigo rent his chains asunder manfully, and Hugo died in agonies of remorse and arsenic, with a wild “Ha! ha!”

“It’s the best we’ve had yet,” said Meg, as the dead villain sat up and rubbed his elbows.

“I don’t see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You’re a regular Shakespeare!” exclaimed Beth, who firmly believed that her sisters were gifted with wonderful genius in all things.

“Not quite,” replied Jo modestly. “I do think *The Witch’s Curse, an Operatic Tragedy* is rather a nice thing, but I’d like to try *Macbeth*, if we only had a trapdoor for Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. ‘Is that a dagger that I see before me?’” muttered Jo, rolling her eyes and clutching at the air, as she had seen a famous tragedian do.[4]

“No, it’s the toasting fork, with mother’s shoe on it instead of the bread. Beth’s stage-struck!” cried Meg, and the rehearsal ended in a general burst of laughter.

"Glad to find you so merry, my girls," said a cheery voice at the door, and actors and audience turned to welcome a tall, motherly lady with a "can-I-help-you" look about her which was truly delightful. She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman, and the girls thought the gray cloak and unfashionable bonnet covered the most splendid mother in the world.

"Well, dearies, how have you got on today? There was so much to do, getting the boxes ready to go tomorrow, that I didn't come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death. Come and kiss me, baby."

While making these maternal inquiries Mrs. March got her wet things off, her warm slippers on, and sitting down in the easy chair, drew Amy to her lap, preparing to enjoy the happiest hour of her busy day. The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own way. Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood and set chairs, dropping, overturning, and clattering everything she touched, Beth trotted to and fro between parlor and kitchen, quiet and busy, while Amy gave directions to everyone, as she sat with her hands folded.

As they gathered about the table, Mrs. March said, with a particularly happy face, "I've got a treat for you after supper."

A quick, bright smile went round like a streak of sunshine. Beth clapped her hands, regardless of the biscuit she held, and Jo tossed up her napkin, crying, "A letter! a letter! Three cheers for Father!"

"Yes, a nice long letter. He is well, and thinks he shall get through the cold season better than we feared. He sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas, and an especial message to you girls," said Mrs. March, patting her pocket as if she had got a treasure there.

"Hurry and get done! Don't stop to quirk your little finger and simper[5] over your plate, Amy," cried Jo, choking in her tea and dropping her bread, butter side down, on the carpet in her haste to get at the treat.

Beth ate no more, but crept away to sit in her shadowy corner and brood over the delight to come, till the others were ready.

"I think it was so splendid in Father to go as a chaplain when he was too old to be drafted, and not strong enough for a soldier," said Meg warmly.

"Don't I wish I could go as a drummer, a *vivan*—what's its name? or a nurse, so I could be near him and help him," exclaimed Jo, with a groan.

“It must be very disagreeable to sleep in a tent, and eat all sorts of bad-tasting things, and drink out of a tin mug,” sighed Amy.

“When will he come home, Marmee?” asked Beth, with a little quiver in her voice.

“Not for many months, dear, unless he is sick. He will stay and do his work faithfully as long as he can, and we won’t ask for him back a minute sooner than he can be spared. Now come and hear the letter.”

They all drew to the fire, Mother in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back, where no one would see any sign of emotion if the letter should happen to be touching. Very few letters were written in those hard times that were not touching, especially those which fathers sent home. In this one little was said of the hardships endured, the dangers faced, or the homesickness conquered. It was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life, marches, and military news, and only at the end did the writer’s heart overflow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home.

“Give them all my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pray for them by night, and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.”

Everybody sniffed when they came to that part; Jo wasn’t ashamed of the great tear that dropped off the end of her nose, and Amy never minded the rumpling of her curls as she hid her face on her mother’s shoulder and sobbed out, “I *am* a selfish girl! but I’ll truly try to be better, so he mayn’t be disappointed in me by-and-by.”

“We all will!” cried Meg. “I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but won’t any more, if I can help it.”

“I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, ‘a little woman,’ and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else,” said Jo, thinking that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South.

Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock and began to knit with all her might, losing no time in doing the duty that lay nearest her, while she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that Father hoped to find her when the year brought round the happy coming home.

Mrs. March broke the silence that followed Jo's words, by saying in her cheery voice, "Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrim's Progress when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more than to have me tie my piece bags on your backs for burdens, give you hats and sticks and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the housetop, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City."

"What fun it was, especially going by the lions, fighting Apollyon, and passing through the Valley[6] where the hobgoblins were!" said Jo.

"I liked the place where the bundles fell off and tumbled downstairs," said Meg.

"My favorite part was when we came out on the flat roof where our flowers and arbors and pretty things were, and all stood and sung for joy up there in the sunshine," said Beth, smiling, as if that pleasant moment had come back to her.

"I don't remember much about it, except that I was afraid of the cellar and the dark entry, and always liked the cake and milk we had up at the top. If I wasn't too old for such things, I'd rather like to play it over again," said Amy, who began to talk of renouncing childish things at the mature age of twelve.

"We never are too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home."

"Really, Mother? Where are our bundles?" asked Amy, who was a very literal young lady.

"Each of you told what your burden was just now, except Beth. I rather think she hasn't got any," said her mother.

“Yes, I have. Mine is dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos, and being afraid of people.”

Beth’s bundle was such a funny one that everybody wanted to laugh, but nobody did, for it would have hurt her feelings very much.

“Let us do it,” said Meg thoughtfully. “It is only another name for trying to be good, and the story may help us; for though we do want to be good, it’s hard work and we forget, and don’t do our best.”

“We were in the Slough of Despond tonight, and Mother came and pulled us out as Help did[7] in the book. We ought to have our roll of directions, like Christian. What shall we do about that?” asked Jo, delighted with the fancy which lent a little romance to the very dull task of doing her duty.

“Look under your pillows Christmas morning, and you will find your guidebook,” replied Mrs. March.

They talked over the new plan while old Hannah cleared the table, then out came the four little workbaskets, and the needles flew as the girls made sheets for Aunt March. It was uninteresting sewing, but tonight no one grumbled. They adopted Jo’s plan of dividing the long seams into four parts, and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, and in that way got on capitally, especially when they talked about the different countries as they stitched their way through them.

At nine they stopped work, and sang, as usual, before they went to bed. No one but Beth could get much music out of the old piano, but she had a way of softly touching the yellow keys and making a pleasant accompaniment to the simple songs they sang. Meg had a voice like a flute, and she and her mother led the little choir. Amy chirped like a cricket, and Jo wandered through the airs at her own sweet will, always coming out at the wrong place with a croak or a quaver that spoiled the most pensive tune. They had always done this from the time they could lisp

Crinkle, crinkle, ’ittle ’tar,

and it had become a household custom, for the mother was a born singer. The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby.