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LITTLE WOMEN

A Play
by Peter Clapham

Adapted from the novel
by Louisa M. Alcott

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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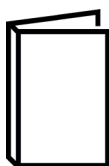
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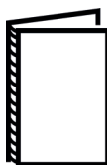


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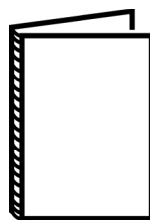
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INTRODUCTION

Louisa May Alcott published her first book, a volume of short stories, in 1854 at the age of twenty-two, but it was not until fourteen years later that the March family made their debut in her most successful novel, *Little Women*. Written during the summer of 1868 at Orchard House, the Alcott home in Concord, Massachusetts, it chronicled to a large degree actual events that had happened to her and her family in their youth.

Her own life was not an easy one, and, for much of the time, she was the main support of her family, but throughout difficult days and happier times one of her greatest pleasures was always the theatre. She delighted in the performances of all the famous actors and actresses of her day – Laura Keane, John Gilbert, Clara Morris, the Booths and Fanny Kemble – whom she always went to see whenever they visited nearby Boston, or when she herself was in New York.

Later, when the success of *Little Women* had brought her fame, fortune and international prestige, she was feted in fashionable drawing rooms everywhere. In these surroundings she was able to meet, at first hand and on an equal footing, some of the theatrical personalities she had before been able to admire only from afar. In 1883 she joined the literary great of the time to meet Ellen Terry on a visit to Boston, and the year before had been guest of honour at a reception in New York to welcome the young Oscar Wilde. They must have made an oddly contrasted pair – the unsophisticated spinster from New England, discreetly dressed in black, and the exuberant exhibitionist from the Old Country, also in black, but sporting knee-breeches, sparkling buckles, diamond studs and luxuriant curls falling to his shoulders.

From childhood an enthusiastic amateur actress and stage director, she had also written numerous pieces for both family plays and the various amateur dramatic societies with whom she worked. This area of her early life she included with loving detail in her story of the Marches. These plays were full-length with, in the fashion of the times, title, sub-title and fourteen scenes. Their themes seem to have been largely melodramatic if we are to judge by titles such as *Norna; or the Witch's Curse* (a sub-title which she later used for one of Jo's plays in *Little Women*), or *The Captive of Castile*; but she had also a great

affection for the novels of Charles Dickens from whose work she dramatised selections which she called *Scenes from Dickens*.

As an actress her forte seems, rather surprisingly, to have been broad comedy roles such as Widow Pottle, in Planché's *The Jacobite*, and Mrs O'Scuttle in *Poor Pillicoddy*, though, on one occasion, she did rise to the dizzy heights of Mrs Malaprop in *The Rivals*. She was particularly taken by Mrs Jarley in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and dramatised the episode of the waxworks to make a monologue for herself to which she returned repeatedly when asked to do charity performances.

With such an active and varied interest in the theatre, it seems more than likely that Louisa Alcott would rejoice in a stage version of her most famous book. Certainly, audiences everywhere have rejoiced across the years. There has been more than one adaptation for the theatre, as well as film versions and television series.

This adaptation has been presented regularly all over the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the English-speaking world, since it was first produced in 1960. In this country it has been given national tours with star names, numerous repertory productions and many more amateur productions. Like the original novel, its appeal seems as fresh as ever, and, whether it has been a polished, professional version in a large theatre or a much simpler production in a village hall, audiences have received it with warmth and enthusiasm.

Ivan Butler has paid it the compliment of including it in his book, *The Hundred Best Full-Length Plays for Amateurs*, and in 1972 it was accorded the greatest compliment of all when this version was chosen to be presented in Concord to celebrate the one hundred and fortieth anniversary of Louisa Alcott's birth.

New editions of the novel appear each year, and its enduring charm seems to capture the imagination of modern readers as firmly as those who took the March family to their hearts when they made their first appearance in 1868. Intended originally as a book for younger readers, with whom it was an instant and lasting success, it was also acclaimed by all ages of general reader. Copies sold by the tens of thousands, and in the following year it made its first appearance in England – again with immediate success.

Into this tale of a year in the life of a New England family Louisa Alcott had woven so much of her own earlier life and that of her family – everyone with the exception of Aunt March

had a prototype – that fact and fiction grew firmly together to create a domestic novel which went far beyond its setting. Despite the fact that one critic deplored the lack of Christian religion in it, and declared it to be ‘no good book for the Sunday-school library’, contemporary comment in general acclaimed it as a truthful picture of American home-life. However, a wider appeal soon made itself felt, the secret of which lies, perhaps, in the fact that it is something more than just an American story; it has a universal quality drawing readers and audiences alike, irrespective of time and place, to identify with both the characters and the situations.

A family story is a classic format which rarely fails with audiences as countless plays, films and television serials using this theme continue to prove. Furthermore, in this instance, what was once a contemporary novel has, with the passage of time, now acquired the golden glow of a period piece – evoking a nostalgia for the charm of yesteryear and those salad days when everything seemed simpler, kinder and more clearly defined.

There are those who will always find it too sentimental for their taste, but the fact remains that it continues to enchant successive generations of new devotees.

In the United States *Little Women* appears as a two-volume novel; in the United Kingdom it is published as two books – *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. This adaptation covers only *Little Women* as it is known in this country; there seemed more than enough material and incident to form the basis of a play, and I subsequently adapted *Good Wives* into a sequel. Occasionally, someone, confusing the two books, will query why Beth still survives at the end of the play; her sad demise takes place, of course, in *Good Wives*. This third edition has been extensively revised and, in some places, re-written to make a tighter script with a reduced running time. One character from the earlier editions has been removed – that of the doctor whose appearance was not essential to the plot. Otherwise, my endeavour has remained the same – quite simply, to be true to Louisa Alcott’s original novel; many well-remembered incidents have had to be left out, but the continuing popularity of the play encourages the conclusion that the essential charm of the story and its characters have moved successfully from page to stage.

Peter Clapham
February 1986

PRODUCTION NOTES

These notes are intended to help the less experienced director; in particular those working with school or youth groups who might feel drawn to doing a period play, but a little apprehensive in what seems to be a specialised field. Let me say at once that it's not really as difficult as it may appear!

Certainly, since this adaptation of *Little Women* was first published, an enormous number of directors in this category, often working with slender means and only limited stage facilities, have tackled it with great success and with equal enjoyment to both audience and cast alike.

Production

As a period piece, *Little Women* calls, of course, for careful attention to such things as movement, the wearing of costume (so that it looks like costume, and not fancy dress), and the manners and speech of a bygone age. Without thought for and preparation in these matters at rehearsal much is lost or never achieved in the final production.

The value of low-heeled shoes or dancing-pumps (ideally, the actual ones to be worn in performance) and long, practice skirts for the ladies, worn from an early stage in rehearsal, cannot be too heavily stressed. This makes for ease of movement and lack of consciousness of full skirts in performance which is not only desirable, but gives added confidence to those wearing them.

The keynote of the whole production should be simple sincerity, and every effort should be made to create the atmosphere of a warm, affectionate family. This intangible quality cannot be achieved entirely by the dialogue or specific moves; it is something that each member of the cast must feel and seek ways to express through the character which they portray. To the cast who has thought about the play and their parts, rather than just learned the lines, ideas will suggest themselves as rehearsals proceed. The director should do everything to encourage such lines of thought, as well as offer his or her own suggestions. Achieving this sense of family warmth and unity does enrich and add dimension to the final production in performance.

The contrast between the characters, especially of the four girls, should be brought out to give variety and life not only to the parts, but to the play as a whole. There can be, of course, no

better guide to a complete understanding of all the characters than by a study of the original novel. It is more than just a good idea to get the cast to read it before rehearsals begin.

The period and the costumes lend themselves to attractive grouping, and particular use may be made of this at the opening of nearly all the scenes, and at many other moments throughout the play. The visual and pictorial possibilities are endless.

A good pace is desirable throughout, and simple, straightforward playing is all that is required in the more tender scenes; anything approaching the mawkishly sentimental or beautifully tragic should be avoided at all costs as it will kill these passages stone dead, and make your audience restless or embarrassed – or both.

The opening of each new scene should be lifted and not allowed to drag, so that the audience's interest and attention is immediately recaptured. Ideally, scenes should be divided by the fading of the lights in and out of a blackout; bringing in the front curtain each time is inclined to cut the evening into a series of one-act plays. However, for groups working with limited stage facilities, the use of the front curtain may be unavoidable. Either way, it is vital that the pauses between the scenes should be kept as brief as possible.

It is necessary, therefore, for members of the cast, who are left on stage at the end of a scene, to clear quickly and – above all – quietly during the break before the next scene, whether it be in a blackout or not, and for those who are to open the next scene to take their places with equal speed and silence. This is quite simple to do and can be achieved, literally, in a matter of seconds, but it does require some rehearsal, and for the on-coming members of the cast to be standing by ready to take up their positions.

To prevent wholesale confusion during a change-over it is a good idea for those concluding a scene to clear first before anyone else sets foot on stage, and for the backstage crew to keep their activities on stage to an absolute minimum during the change. The on-coming cast can be rehearsed in bringing on any new props (such as the tea-tray for ACT I, Scene 3), and retiring members in removing props that are finished with, but which have not been removed in the course of the action of the play. Backstage staff should be waiting immediately in the wings to relieve the cast of these props as they leave the stage.

On a small stage, in particular, this system removes the danger of any clash – both physical and temperamental – between cast and property people struggling to get things in place. Too many bodies on stage at moments like this only make for short tempers and long scene changes.

As a scheme it works well, but it does require adequate rehearsal and the discipline of everyone working together swiftly and quietly. The flow of the action will not be broken if the scene changes are kept to a handful of seconds (as they can be), and covered with curtain music.

The use of an American accent by an inexperienced cast is debatable. Too often the harsher notes of the mid-West or the Bronx – culled from a half-digested diet of television cop and cowboy films – are churned out by English tongues as being “American”. The New England accent is a gentle one, and one might reasonably suppose that in the 1860s it was, perhaps, even gentler—especially in educated circles. If, therefore, a light accent can be achieved by the cast – and maintained – it will, of course, add authenticity to the whole, but if the sense of what is being said begins to get lost in a welter of distorted vowels then it’s probably as well to play it with no accent at all. The director must decide!

Setting

The setting can be considerably modified from that described without any real loss of dramatic effect. The scene is, after all, a simple parlour and not a grand drawing-room. Its old-fashioned charm should be its essential quality.

The archway at the back with the hall and stairs beyond is an attractive and useful feature as it offers three definite exits (i.e. upstairs, off right to the kitchen, and off left to the dining room and front door), but it is not essential to the plot or action, and can be dispensed with on a shallow stage where an exit upstage centre is difficult to arrange. In this case the exit to the hall should be above the fireplace in the wall at stage right.

Similarly, the window upstage left can also be simplified, if necessary, to an ordinary sash window, but a small bow or bay window, if it can be contrived, does give added interest and character to the room.

Patterned walls in a not too obtrusive design give a better period effect than plain ones. The use of a dado with patterned

walls above it was fashionable at the time, and creates a greater feeling of space. But, whatever is chosen, the end result must have a comfortable 'lived-in' appearance. Any suggestion of a bright, freshly decorated look should be avoided at all costs.

Lighting

The period atmosphere and the many changing dramatic moods of the play can be heightened and enriched by imaginative lighting, but, once more, the director will be limited by the lighting facilities at his or her disposal. As a brief general note, it should be remembered when lighting evening scenes that this was the period of the flattering golden glow of lamplight. But, in any case, all scenes should be lit as softly and romantically as possible. Harsh, white light is not suitable.

Furnishings

Furniture should be early Victorian (circa 1840/60) with, ideally, a piece or two of earlier American "Colonial". Directors working on a small budget will have to settle for what they can beg or borrow, of course, but, even so, they should keep an eye open for pieces with charm and elegance.

It is the home of a comfortable, middle-class family in reduced circumstances. The furnishings are meant to be good and well-cared for; whilst a worn, faded look is acceptable, anything drab or downright shabby would strike the wrong note.

Round tables of varying diameter were popular at this time, and are useful on stage as they take up less room and are easier to walk around than square ones. Difficulty in obtaining the size required can be overcome by having a top made from the cheapest materials, and placing it on an existing base – square or round. It need only be rough-finished and covered with a floor-length cloth, no one will be the wiser.

The piano should be set downstage left during the interval between Acts I and II. However, if restricted space makes it difficult to introduce additional furniture once the set is up, or to store it backstage until required, it can stay permanently in position on stage, and be hidden during Act I by one of those scrapbook screens which were familiar features in homes of the period.

In the original production a small table-piano of about 1830 was used; this was exactly right in every way, and a very lucky

find in a local music shop, but a later, upright piano, providing it is not too modern in appearance, would do equally well.

Whilst on this subject, it might be as well to mention that, if the actresses playing Beth or Marmee are unable to play the piano, a ghost-pianist, offstage at another piano, works more successfully than using taped music, especially when accompanying the singing. Again, it needs careful rehearsal, but by “striking a chord” before starting to “play”, the actress should be able to follow the ghost-pianist without fear of making a false start.

A tremendous sense of period can be achieved for the set by careful attention to detail in such things as ornaments, pictures, lamps, cushion covers (patchwork, bead or woollen embroidery, crochet, applique work, etc.), china, books, chenille tablecloths, antimacassars, potted plants and so on.

Costumes

The costumes should be kept fairly simple. Apart from the fact that the family is passing through hard times, clothes, at that period, were made to last much longer than they are today. Furthermore, the action of the play covers only one year, so there is no need for numerous changes of costume.

Woollen homespun gowns are suitable for ACT I (with the obvious exception of the party dresses which should also be quite simple), with a change to light, cotton dresses for ACT II, and a return to the ACT I dresses for ACT III.

Shawls were very much in vogue – both for the warmth they afforded and their considerable decorative value. They came in all sizes from the very large all-enveloping to the very small shoulder-covering, and in all materials from heavy wool to fine lace. Considerable variety can be given to the same costume by making use of this fashion; for example, in Act I, Marmee might well pull on a warm, knitted shawl to read by the fire, whilst the girls are at the Gardiners’ party, and don a pretty, silk one over the same dress when entertaining Mr Laurence to tea.

Aunt March’s clothes should be as rich and elaborate as possible in marked contrast to the rest of the family, and the Laurences must also give the impression of wealth in their attire.

Most costumiers – even relatively small firms – should be able to dress the show without difficulty. However, for the enterprising group who elects to make its own costumes

there is a wide range of books to help them. For quick, easy reference Lucy Barton's *Historic Costume for the Stage*, long accepted as a standard work on the subject, remains a rich source of information with very useful sections on cutting and reproducing costumes, suitable materials, application of decoration, accessories and so on.

Hair

Careful attention to the matter of hairstyles is very important in any period play, and *Little Women* is no exception. No matter how accurate a costume may be, if the hair-style doesn't match it the whole effect will be wrong.

Wigs are by no means essential, and excellent results can be achieved by dressing the actresses' own hair – using matching hairpieces where necessary. For the older characters there is less of a problem. The larger part of Marmee's hair will be concealed under a lace house-cap; Hannah, too, will have most of her hair caught up under a mob-cap, and Aunt March never removes her bonnet. For the girls, however, a definite and different style should be thought out to suit each character and to give contrast and visual interest. The local public library should be able to provide a good reference book to give inspiration in detail, but Lucy Barton's book, already mentioned, will supply good general information on the subject.

The business of Jo's hair being loosened in ACT I, and cut off in ACT II can be tackled in various ways – depending on the actress playing the part. Assuming that her hair is the right colour – chestnut – and cut quite short, the problem can be overcome with a carefully matched hairpiece pinned firmly in place so that it can be released from the hairnet in the first scene, and removed altogether for the scenes after she is supposed to have had it cut off. If the reverse applies, and the actress has long hair, then a matching short-haired wig is needed for the change-over. If the hair is not the right colour, or of a length which is neither one thing nor the other, then the only solution is two wigs – one short, one long.

Meg's scorched curls in ACT I can be made by wrapping ordinary crepe-hair in paper, and pinning them lightly in place with hairpins or grips. Jo, by holding her hand in front of them in a perfectly natural way as she applies the curlers, hides the

fact that she is not really touching them at all. A light tug pulls them away at the right moment giving the desired effect.

Music

The right music in the right form adds considerably to any production – creating mood and atmosphere as well as a feeling for a particular period. In this instance it helps, also, to maintain those qualities, provide continuity between the scenes, and keep the flow of the production unbroken.

In the original production, “Home, Sweet Home” and other contemporary melodies taped from those large, perforated-steel discs which preceded the gramophone achieved a charming musical-box sound and made ideal curtain music. However, simple piano arrangements of the same sort of music – either taped or live – would be just as effective.

The piano piece which Beth is playing at the opening of ACT II does not have to be Brahms’s Cradle Song, any other popular piano solo of the time may be used – such as “The Last Rose of Summer” or “The Bluebells of Scotland”. Incidentally, only the last few bars are required; it should not be allowed to develop into a musical interlude as this will slow down the action and make the opening of the second act sluggish.

“O, Worship the King” – a favourite mid-nineteenth century hymn – is an appropriate choice for “Father’s favourite” at the close of ACT II.

In conclusion

Louisa Alcott describes, in an early chapter in the original novel, the theatrical activities of the March girls as they prepare a family play for Christmas. They had their problems too...

“Not rich enough to afford any great outlay...the girls put their wits to work, and – necessity being the mother of invention – made whatever they needed.”

And after the performance? Well...

“Tumultuous applause followed”.

What further incentive is needed?

Peter Clapham

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LITTLE WOMEN

First presented at the Palace Avenue Theatre, Paignton, on
26th January 1960, with the following cast:

AMY MARCH	Anne Bushell
JO MARCH	Brenda Simpson
MEG MARCH	Pauline Bellamy
BETH MARCH	Sadie Bonstow
HANNAH	Peggy Risely
MRS MARCH (MARMEE)	Audrey Miller
AUNT MARCH	Elizabeth Heslop
LAURIE	Michael Tearle
JOHN BROOKE	Bruce Kent
MR LAURENCE	Howard Baker
DR BANGS	Peter Pitman
MR MARCH	Clive Bailly

Directed by Peter Clapham

CHARACTERS

AMY MARCH

BETH MARCH

JO MARCH

MEG MARCH

HANNAH

MRS MARCH (MARMEE)

AUNT MARCH

LAURIE

JOHN BROOKE

MR LAURENCE

MR MARCH

The action of the play passes in the parlour of the home of the March family on the outskirts of Concord, a small town in Massachusetts, New England, in the 1860s, during the American Civil War.

ACT I	Scene One	A few days before Christmas – late afternoon
	Scene Two	New Year's Eve – early evening
	Scene Three	The following afternoon
ACT II	Scene One	The following summer – later afternoon
	Scene Two	The following day – about the same time
ACT III	Scene One	November of the same year – a Sunday morning
	Scene Two	Ten days later – late evening
	Scene Three	Christmas morning – about noon



ACT I

Scene One

The parlour of the MARCH family. Late afternoon.

The parlour is a large, comfortable room. There is a fireplace downstage right and a large bay window upstage left which overlooks a pleasant, informal garden and the path to the front door. A draped archway at the back leads to a hallway in which can be seen the foot of a staircase leading to the upper floor. Off left in the hallway, but out of sight, is the front door and a door to the dining room on the other side of the house; off right leads to the kitchen and the back of the house. The furnishings are good and include several graceful pieces, but the drapes and carpets are all a little worn and faded for the family have known both better times and financial hardship. However the room is well-cared for and looks warmly inviting with its books, pictures, ornaments and potted plants. The original novel describes it as being pervaded by "a pleasant atmosphere of home peace".

The play opens a few days before Christmas and the room has been decorated with holly and evergreens. In the bay window stands a Christmas tree bright with ribbons, tinsel and little silver ornaments.

The curtain rises in darkness and the lights come up gently on the four March sisters.

MEG, *the eldest, a pretty, good-natured girl who, feeling she is a much more mature young lady than her sisters, expresses it in a growing awareness of her clothes and appearance, is seated by the fire industriously knitting a man's dark blue sock.*

JO, *the tomboy of the family, only a year younger, "rapidly shooting up into a woman" and not liking it, is stretched out moodily on the hearth rug turning the pages of a book. She is not the beauty of the family, and her coltish manner and movements do little to add to her femininity. Her best feature is her long, thick hair which, at the moment, she has bundled up into a net at the nape of her neck to be out of her way.*

BETH, *the gentlest and shyest of the four, stands, bright-eyed and patient, holding a box of decorations from which AMY, the youngest, the prettiest and – in her opinion at least – the most important, is putting the finishing touches to the Christmas tree.*

AMY *puts the last silver star in place and regards her handiwork with great satisfaction.*

AMY There, that's done!

BETH It looks lovely, Amy. Now we're all ready for Christmas!

JO (*moodily*) Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents. And, even worse, Father's away at the war and won't be able to get home.

MEG (*gently*) We don't really have the money to spend on presents this year, Jo, but we do have each other and Mother to look after us.

BETH And dear old Hannah.

MEG Yes, we've lots to be thankful for.

JO (*turning a page, unconvinced*) Humph!

AMY *puts the Christmas decoration box away.*

AMY *(a little self-righteously)* Marmee says it's going to be a hard winter for everyone, and she thinks that we ought not to spend money for pleasure when our men in the army are suffering so. She says it's our way of making some sort of sacrifice, and we ought to do it gladly... *(Pausing briefly as she faces reality)* but I'm afraid I don't.

JO I can't see that the little we should spend would do any good. *(Sitting up)* Look, we've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Marmee or you, but there is a book I've wanted to buy for ages.

AMY Oh, you and your old books! You never think of anything else! I was going to get some drawing pencils with my dollar; I really need them.

BETH *(rather ashamed of admitting it)* And I'd planned to spend mine on some new piano music.

Pause. Four consciences take a step backward.

MEG *(a little uncertainly)* Well, I don't suppose Mother would want us to give up everything...

JO *(decisively)* Let's each buy what we want and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it.

MEG I know *I* do – teaching those tiresome children of Mrs King's all day!

JO Being a governess isn't half as bad as being shut up for hours on end as a companion to Aunt March! There never was such a tiresome old fusspot!

BETH I don't know how you cope with her, Jo. She just frightens me to death. I'm glad I have only to stay at home and help.

JO Oh, she keeps me on the trot, I can tell you, and she's never satisfied. Then, every day I have to read to her – and what do I have to read? It's always the same – those odious essays of Mr Belsham. When I think of all the wonderful books Aunt

March could buy with all the money she has. But, no! We just read, read and re-read Mr Belsham's boring old book!

BETH It's wrong to grumble, I know, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things clean and tidy at home here is just the worst work in the world. My hands get so stiff that I can't practise well at the piano at all.

AMY I don't believe any of you suffer as I do for you don't have to go to school. It's such a *deggerregregation* to have to mix with impertinent girls who laugh at your dresses because they're not new, and insult you when your nose isn't nice, and *label* your father because he isn't rich.

JO If you mean *libel*, I'd say so, and not talk about *labels* as if Father was a jar of pickles.

AMY I know what I mean, and you needn't be *statirical* about it. It's proper to use words, and improve your *vocabulary*. Anyway I don't use slang words like you.

JO *starts to whistle.*

And I don't whistle either. It's so boyish.

JO That's why I do it.

AMY I detest rude, unladylike girls!

JO And I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!

MEG Jo! Amy! Don't peck at one another! Josephine, you are old enough to leave off boyish tricks and behave better. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are older and turn up your hair you should remember that you are a young lady.

JO I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one then I'll wear it in two tails till I'm thirty! (*She pulls off her hair net and shakes her hair out*) I hate to think I've got to grow up and be "Miss March". It's bad enough to be a girl anyway. (*She collects her knitting from a workbasket on the table*) I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now. I'm dying to go and fight with

Father, but I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman! *(She flops into a chair and starts to knit)*

BETH *(going to JO)* Poor Jo! It's too bad, but it can't be helped, so you must try to be content with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls.

MEG As for you, Amy, you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now; but you'll grow up an affected goose if you don't take care. It is good to cultivate nice manners and a refined way of speaking, but your absurd words are quite as bad as Jo's slang.

BETH *(trying to brighten the situation)* If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I?

MEG You're a dear and nothing else.

The clock on the mantelpiece begins to strike six.

Six o'clock! Mother will be here at any minute and nothing ready for her – oh, dear, what a self-pitying, bickery lot we are! Come along, let's put things to rights and have everything ready for her when she comes in.

There is a good-natured bustle as the girls tidy the room for their mother's return. JO adjusts the chair in which MEG has been sitting. MEG packs up the knitting. BETH fetches an extra cushion.

AMY fetches her mother's slippers to warm them by the fire.

AMY These slippers of Marmee's are quite worn out. She needs a new pair badly.

Pause. Four consciences are pricked.

BETH I think I'll get her some for Christmas with my dollar.

AMY No, I will!

MEG I'm the eldest, so I think that...

JO (*cutting in*) I am the man of the family now Father is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone.

BETH I'll tell you what we'll do! Let's each get her something for Christmas and not get anything for ourselves. We don't deserve anything sitting around at home grumbling when Marmee has been down at the Soldiers Aid Society working hard all day.

MEG Beth is quite right – we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I think I shall give Mother some gloves; she has only two pairs and they are both very darned.

Their voices rise to a loud babble as they all talk at once.

AMY I shall give her a nice bottle of cologne.

BETH I did see some pretty handkerchiefs in town which would make a lovely present.

JO And I shall get the best slippers to be had!

HANNAH *enters from the hall bearing a tray laden with tea things. She is a middle-aged to elderly woman who has been with the family since MEG was born, and is considered by them all more as a friend than a servant. Her rather abrupt manner and dry humour do not entirely conceal a warm and loyal affection for her adopted family.*

HANNAH (*setting her tray down on the table*) Land sakes! What's going on here? You girls are making a rare old noise and no mistake!

AMY We're planning Christmas surprises for Marmee.

HANNAH Well, I reckon she'll need some peace and quiet when she gets home. She's been helping pack Christmas boxes for the soldiers all day – couldn't even come home to dinner – and, as if that weren't enough, she said she had a mind to call on that poor Hummel family on her way back. I guess they're in need again, and your Ma will help them. There

never was such a woman for giving away vittles and clothes and things – no matter how little she has for herself.

BETH Poor Mrs Hummel. Her husband's just died, and she has six children and a new baby to look after.

HANNAH Well, they've a guardian angel in your ma. She'll not be long now; as soon as I hear her come in I shall make the tea, and you see that she drinks a good strong cupful while it's nice and hot. She'll be tired, and it's mortal cold outside. (*Turning to go*) Oh, I'd forgotten all about this. (*She produces an envelope from under her apron*) It came by hand this afternoon. (*To MEG*) It's for you, Miss Meg.

MEG Whoever can it be from?

HANNAH If you really want to find out, I reckon the easiest thing to do is to open it.

MEG (*opening it*) Oh, what fun! It's a note of invitation from Mrs Gardiner! Just listen to this – “Mrs Gardiner would be happy to see Miss March and Miss Josephine at a little party on New Year's Eve”. Doesn't that sound grand? Do you think Marmee will let us go?

HANNAH I don't see any reason why not – you're young ladies now.

JO *winces.*

Well, I must get back to my kitchen. Now, don't let this fancy invite make you forget your ma's toast.

HANNAH *exits.*

BETH *takes up the toasting fork and bread from the tray, and settles by the fire.*

MEG Oh, Jo! Isn't it wonderful! It's ages since we went to a party! Now what shall we wear?

JO What's the use of asking that, when you know we shall wear our poplins because we haven't anything else?

AMY (*somewhat piqued that the invitation did not include her*) Oh, bother the Gardiners and their wretched party. We must decide what to do about Marmee's presents, and she'll be here at any moment.

BETH We must let her think that we are getting things for ourselves and then we can surprise her.

AMY We'd better go shopping tomorrow afternoon for there won't be any other time, and we still need to rehearse for our play on Christmas night.

JO Yes, and it has to be extra specially good this year. Marmee always enjoys our Christmas plays, and, with Father away, she needs cheering up as much as possible.

MEG I don't think I shall act in any more after this one. I'm getting too old for such things.

JO Oh, fiddlesticks, Meg! You won't stop as long as you can trail round in a long white gown with your hair down, and wear gold paper jewellery. Besides you're the best actress we've got and there'll be an end of everything if you quit the boards. (*Becoming more practical*) We could rehearse a bit now. Come on, Amy, let's do the fainting scene. You are as stiff as a poker in that.

AMY I can't help it; I never saw anyone faint in the whole of my entire life – 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 – and I don't care if Hugo does come at me with a pistol in that scene.

JO Look, do it this way. Clasp your hands so, and stagger across the stage crying frantically "Roderigo! Save me! Save me!" (*She demonstrates in highly melodramatic manner, completing her performance with a harrowing scream*)

After a moment or two of uncertainty AMY endeavours to follow her example, but her movements are stiff and

jerky, her delivery matter of fact and her final scream a little more than a loud "Ow!"

JO (*hiding her face and groaning in despair*) It's no use! Oh, well, do the best you can when the time comes, and if the audience laugh don't blame me.

BETH (*endeavouring to pour oil on troubled waters*) I don't see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You're a regular Shakespeare!

JO Not quite, but I do think that my effort this year, *The Witches' Curse, An Operatic Tragedy* is my best yet. What I should really like to try is *Macbeth* – if only we had a trapdoor for Banquo. I've always wanted to do the killing part. "Is that a dagger I see before me?" (*She adopts an exaggerated pose of highly theatrical terror rolling her eyes and clutching at the air, as she had seen a famous tragedian do*)

As she lurches about the room, BETH rises from the fireplace to confront her with the toasting fork.

BETH No, it's a toasting fork! (*She advances on JO, forcing her back into the sofa amid laughter and loud applause from the others*)

At this moment, the sound of her arrival lost in the noise, MARMEE appears in the archway still wearing her cloak and bonnet. She is tired after a hard day and a long, cold walk home, but her nature is a warm and sympathetic one. Despite her fatigue, the uproar does not distress her; her eyes twinkle, and she smiles in pleasure at the scene before her. To the girls she is simply "the most splendid mother in the world".

MARMEE (*as the noise subsides*) Well, girls, I am glad to find you so merry!

The girls turn and greet their mother loudly and affectionately. JO flings her arms about her and hugs her. MEG takes her bonnet and cloak. AMY follows JO's

example. BETH puts the final touches to the chair by the fire while she waits to greet her mother there.

JO Marmee! How are you? (*She calls*) Hannah, Marmee's home! Time for the tea.

MEG Mother, we were beginning to wonder what had happened to you.

BETH Come and sit down, Marmee, you must be tired.

AMY Hannah says you are to have your tea good and hot.

MARMEE is helped out of her cloak and bonnet and into her slippers.

MARMEE Thank you, my dears. How have you got on today? Is your cold better, Meg? Jo, you look tired out. Has anyone called, Beth? How was school today, Amy?

The girls answer her queries as JO makes up the fire.

MEG busies herself with the tea things. BETH brings a footstool. AMY holds on firmly to her mother's hand.

HANNAH reappears with the teapot.

MARMEE settles thankfully into the chair by the fire.

My, it's been a busy day; there was so much to do getting the Christmas boxes ready to go tomorrow.

MEG Hannah said you were calling on poor Mrs Hummel on your way home.

MARMEE Yes, I took them firewood and a basket of food. They are in a desperate plight.

BETH How is the new baby, Marmee?

MARMEE Very thin and undernourished like all the children. They have no fire and they are all huddled into one bed to keep warm.

MEG Mother, how dreadful!

MARMEE That's not all. Mrs Hummel has been so poorly since the new baby came that she has been unable to work, and until I got there they had literally nothing to eat. (*She pauses, looking around at all four faces*) My girls, I wonder, shall we give them some of the good things we have put by for our Christmas so that theirs may be a little happier?

GIRLS Yes, oh, yes! Let's do what we can to help them.

MARMEE I thought you would want to help. Tomorrow we will all go around together and deliver our gifts. Bless you! Now, as a reward for your goodness of heart, what do you think a soldier home on leave brought me today?

Slight pause.

JO A letter! A letter from Father!

MEG Oh, Mother, really?

AMY What does he say, Marmee, please tell us!

BETH How is he? Is he well?

MARMEE Yes, a letter – a nice long letter. He is well and sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas and an especial message for you girls. (*Looking through the letter*) Yes, here it is; he says: "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 and conduct themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

There is a silence during which MARMEE folds up the letter, and hands feel for handkerchiefs. Suddenly HANNAH, who has listened entranced and fought her emotion unsuccessfully, throws her apron over her face and sobs.

HANNAH Oh, the dear, good man!

HANNAH *exits hurriedly to the kitchen.*

MARMEE Poor Hannah. She has been with us for so long now that she misses your father as much as the rest of us.

MEG *pulls herself together and turns her attention to the teapot.*

MEG Oh, Marmee, we've forgotten all about your tea. (*She pours*) I think it was so splendid of Father to go as a chaplain when he was too old to be drafted and not strong enough to be a soldier.

JO I wish *I* could go as a drummer or a nurse, so I could be near him and help him.

AMY 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.

BETH When will he come home, Marmee?

MARMEE Not for many months, I'm afraid, dear. 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. (*Brightening*) Jo dear, draw the curtains and let us make ourselves cosy for the evening. There is some sewing to do and, perhaps, you will read aloud to us as we work, eh?

JO (*at the window*) Oh, look! The lamps are lit in the drawing room of the big house next door, and they haven't drawn the curtains. I can see right in!

MEG Jo, you shouldn't do that; it's like eavesdropping.

JO (*unheeding this rebuke*) There's old Mr Laurence sitting in a great chair and the Laurence boy playing to him on the most beautiful grand piano. It's simply enormous – oh, Beth, do come and see it, it will make you quite green...

MARMEE (*before BETH can move*) Certainly not! Jo, draw the curtains at once and come away from the window. What

would Mr Laurence and his grandson think if they saw you peering over at them?

JO (*turning into the room, but without drawing the curtains*) But, Marmee, it isn't as if they are complete strangers to us. You told us once that old Mr Laurence knew your father years ago, and I have spoken to the Laurence boy.

AMY (*scandalised*) Without a formal introduction?

JO Oh, don't be so stuffy, Amy. It was when one of Beth's kittens ran over into their garden and he brought it back.

BETH He seems very nice, and he looks as if he'd like to know us, but he's bashful.

JO I think he is a capital fellow, and I mean to get to know him for he needs friends. I am sure he does.

MARMEE I have no objection to your knowing him if a proper opportunity occurs. But Mr Laurence keeps very much to himself, and I wouldn't wish to presume on a very slight acquaintance.

MEG Why does he do that, Mother?

MARMEE I believe he has had some very great tragedy in his family which has made him disinclined to mix with other people, and that, of course, makes it difficult for his grandson to get to know anyone.

JO He keeps the boy shut up, when he isn't riding or walking with his tutor, and makes him study very hard.

MEG The Moffats told me that they asked him to their party, but he didn't go.

JO Well, I think it's jolly hard luck and...

MARMEE Now, that will do! It is not for us to criticise and know better. Please draw the curtains and come to the fire.

JO (*at the window*) Oh, they've gone now! (*As she starts to draw the curtains she is arrested by something else, and abruptly pauses*) Christopher Columbus! It's... (*Peering out, unable*

to believe her eyes) ...it's...yes, it is! (She turns back into the room) It's Aunt March! Oh, Marmee, Aunt March's carriage is drawing up outside...!

Everyone is astounded! There are general cries of "Aunt March?", "Here?", "Never!", "Coming here?", "But she never calls on us", etc.

MARMEE *(rising)* Whatever can she want? I don't think she has called on us in ten years. Jo, did she say anything to you about calling this evening?

JO No, Marmee, I can't understand it.

MARMEE Well, she's here now. Quick, girls, let's make the room tidy. Meg, take the tray back to the kitchen and ask Hannah to make some fresh tea. Beth, Amy, I think you had better go upstairs and wait there until I send for you. Jo, you stay here in case Aunt March wishes to speak to you.

The front door bell rings loudly and autocratically.

There she is!

MEG, BETH and AMY *exit quickly.*

You let her in, Jo; Hannah is busy and, anyway, I think Aunt March rather terrifies her!

JO *goes out to the front door.*

MARMEE *positions herself in front of the fire bracing herself for something of an ordeal.*

A moment later AUNT MARCH enters and pauses in the archway surveying the room. She is a formidable, autocratic old lady, richly dressed, and walking with a cane. She has a slight limp.

AUNT MARCH *(before MARMEE has time to greet her)* Well, niece, aren't you going to ask me to sit down?

MARMEE Good evening, Aunt March, do come in and make yourself at home. May I take your cloak?

AUNT MARCH *moves to the sofa.*

JO *enters.*

AUNT MARCH (*sitting*) No, thank you, don't intend to stay that long. Just thought I'd come around and see how you and the girls were – can never get any information out of Josephine here. (*She pronounces this "Josy-phine" – much to JO's disgust*)

MARMEE We are all well, I am glad to say. Meg has had a slight cold...

AUNT MARCH Cold? Not surprised, the way young people go on these days it's a wonder they don't all die of pneumonia.

MARMEE And are you keeping well, Aunt March?

AUNT MARCH (*affronted by such an enquiry*) Me? Well? I am never well! My old trouble here (*patting her leg*) gives me constant pain, and, of course, I get so little sleep.

MARMEE But Jo tells me that you always sleep soundly for an hour or so every day after dinner.

AUNT MARCH (*annoyed at being caught out*) Nonsense! I am only resting my eyes from the light while she reads to me. I have never really slept for over thirty years – I just lose myself for a little while, that's all.

JO (*with studied innocence*) But you never find yourself again very soon, do you, Aunt?

MARMEE Jo, don't be impertinent. It must be very trying for you, Aunt March.

AUNT MARCH (*after a baleful glare at JO*) How's that husband of yours? My nephew?

MARMEE He is well, thank you, and seems to find the rigours of camp life not too difficult to bear.

AUNT MARCH Beyond me what he wanted to go gallivanting off to the war for at all at his age. Why couldn't he stay at home and be a chaplain?

MARMEE (*quietly*) He did what he knew to be the right thing, and, though I miss him dearly, I would not have it otherwise. The men need him, and he feels that he is doing good work among them.

AUNT MARCH That's questionable! Can't say that his judgement is always unerring. Look how he lost all his money helping that good-for-nothing friend of his a few years ago. I told him, I said to him at the time...

MARMEE Aunt March. Whatever my husband did he did as a Christian gentleman to help a dear friend in misfortune; that everything was lost in the transaction is no reflection on either of them. I am sorry, but I cannot sit here in his own house and hear you speak ill of him when...

AUNT MARCH Highty-tighty, then! Highty-tighty! Didn't I do what I could to help? Didn't I offer to adopt one of the girls and bring her up?

MARMEE We told you then that we couldn't give up one of our girls, not for a fortune. Rich or poor we will keep together and be happy in one another.

AUNT MARCH Mighty independent, I must say. Well, you know your own business best, I suppose. Though it seems a pity that you didn't take up my offer.

MARMEE We are, of course, most grateful to you for having Jo as a help and companion.

AUNT MARCH Wouldn't have her if she didn't suit me! I took a fancy to her and I am always right in these matters. She does well enough – though I think sometimes that she takes more interest in her late Uncle March's library than in attending to my wants.

JO Oh, but Aunt March, I...

AUNT MARCH That is enough, Miss! You know as well as I do that you spend every spare minute you can find in among those books.

MARMEE I am afraid that Jo has a great weakness for reading, but she should not neglect her duties to indulge her pleasures.

AUNT MARCH Oh! Her duties! They are light enough in all conscience – wind yarn, wash the poodle, feed Polly, my sweet parrot, fetch and carry, and read aloud Belsham's Essays (*with a look at JO*) of which I, at least, never tire.

MARMEE Am I to understand then, Aunt March, that you are here this evening to complain of Jo's behaviour?

AUNT MARCH (*astounded*) Complain! Complain? Whatever gave you the idea that I would ever complain about anything?

MARMEE (*at a loss*) Oh, I see – then may I ask the reason for your visit?

AUNT MARCH Reason! Mercy on us! That should be plain enough, I should think! Why should an invalid like myself, racked with pain, turn out on a cold winter's night? For no reason other than to wish you a happy Christmas, of course, what else?

MARMEE I – oh – er – thank you, Aunt March, I...

AUNT MARCH (*cutting in*) And with my nephew away playing at soldiers, I have no doubt that things will not be so plentiful here at home this year. Josephine, run to the carriage, girl, and fetch the parcels from the coachman.

JO *exits upstage left.*

(*turning to MARMEE*) Nothing much, you know, just a small gift for each girl – a trifle of lace, a little brooch, some ribbons, and so on. Oh, yes, and there is a basket with a ham and butter and cakes and things. Good, wholesome produce – I do not think rich food is good for young people. At any rate, it will keep all of you from starving.

JO *reappears laden with a basket of food, and a number of packages.*

Ah! Put them down, girl, before you drop them! (*She turns to go*) Now, I must go, there are a great many things

requiring my attention, and I have not the time to stay here listening to your gossip. (*She pauses at the archway*) And, remember – none of the parcels may be opened until Christmas morning!

With a brisk tug at her gloves AUNT MARCH exits before either MARMEE or JO can reply.

For a moment they are speechless with surprise.

JO Marmee!

MARMEE (*amid mutual laughter*) Well, Jo, I really don't know what to say, and to think that after we refused to let her adopt one of you, she wouldn't speak to us for a whole year!

JO After Christmas I'll be extra good, I promise, and do all she asks me with a smile – even to reading the boring... I mean, *brilliant* essays of Mr Belsham!

MARMEE Now, you run upstairs, dear, and tell the others that the ordeal is over and I'll pack all these good things away (*imitating AUNT MARCH*) "for Christmas morning"!

JO Marmee, may we have some time to rehearse our play upstairs, please? There is still quite a lot to do for it.

MARMEE Why, yes, of course, I have several things to do down here and will call you when I am done – but, Jo dear, try not to make too much noise!

JO All right, Marmee!

JO exits noisily upstairs.

MARMEE sorts the gifts, reading the messages on them and smiling to herself. These she puts on one side, then gathers up the basket and begins to move towards the kitchen.

The front door bell rings.

She pauses momentarily in surprise.

HANNAH *appears on her way to answer it.*

MARMEE *moves up to the archway, speaking as she goes.*

MARMEE It's all right, Hannah, I'll go. Would you take these things, please? They are Christmas presents from Aunt March!

HANNAH Christmas presents from your Aunt March! Land sakes! That'll make the angels sing!

HANNAH *exits as MARMEE goes to the front door.*

Voices are heard off left.

MARMEE *enters, followed by LAURIE. He is a tall young man with dark, good looks which betray his part-Italian blood. Normally lively and confident, at the moment he is a little nervous and hesitant in unfamiliar company. He is carrying a bunch of beautiful, hothouse flowers and two bottles of wine wrapped in tissue paper.*

MARMEE Do please come in, Mr Laurence, it is nice of you to call.

LAURIE Thank you, Mrs March, I am really here on behalf of my grandfather. He asked me to present his compliments and his apologies.

MARMEE His apologies?

LAURIE Yes, he asked me to say (*thinking hard as he strives to remember exactly what his grandfather has told him to say*) that he feels he has been very remiss in not calling to pay his respects to you, the daughter of his old friend, but he hopes that you will forgive the tardiness of an old man who ventures but rarely into society.

MARMEE How very kind of him. Please sit down.

LAURIE *is about to do so when he suddenly remembers that there is something more of his grandfather's message.*

LAURIE And he hopes that you will do him the honour of accepting these two bottles of Madeira with the compliments of the season.

MARMEE (*taking the bottles*) Thank you. (*With a smile*) Dear me, you did have to learn a long speech, didn't you?

LAURIE (*relaxing with a laugh*) Yes, it was rather – I was afraid I should forget half of it – oh, and these flowers are from me. I picked them myself in the conservatory.

MARMEE How very sweet of you! They are lovely! Please thank your grandfather most warmly for me. Perhaps you would both like to come and take tea with us one day and meet my family? (*She puts the gifts on the table above the sofa*)

LAURIE I should like that very much indeed, Mrs March.

MARMEE (*sitting*) I believe that you have met my daughter, Jo, already?

LAURIE (*sitting*) Yes, when the kitten ran into our garden. She is full of life, isn't she? She told me that she wants to be an authoress.

MARMEE Oh, yes, our Jo is very lively and she is always busy scribbling away up in a little study she has made for herself in the attic.

LAURIE Meg is the pretty one, isn't she, and Beth the rosy one who stays at home a good deal; and the curly-haired one who sketches and paints is Amy, I believe?

MARMEE (*laughing*) For someone who has never really met my girls, you seem to know a great deal about them! Pray how did you discover all that?

LAURIE (*feeling that perhaps he has said too much*) Why, you see, I often hear them calling to one another, and when I am alone at home I can't help looking over here at your house; you seem always to be having such good times. Sometimes you don't draw the curtains, and when the lamps are lighted it's like a picture to look in and see you all at table or busy

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