

Little Women

by

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CHAPTER ONE

‘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.

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* 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 you’re ready to fly out 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 vocabulary,’ 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 of 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 be blamed,’ 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! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s 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 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 with a hand that all the dish washing 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 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 Miss Tranquility', 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 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 WITCHES CURSE, an Operatic Tragedy is rather a nice thing, but I'd like to try McBETH, 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.

'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, dearest, 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, over-turning, and clattering everything she touched. Beth trotted to and fro between parlor 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 over your plate, Amy,' cried Jo, choking on 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 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 over-flow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home.

'Give them all of 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 Pilgrims 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 where the hob-goblins were,' said Jo.

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

'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 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 work baskets, 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.

stop it. Everybody's health was proposed, from Mr. Laurence, who was considered their special patron, to the astonished guinea pig, who had strayed from its proper sphere in search of its young master. Demi, as the oldest grandchild, then presented the queen of the day with various gifts, so numerous that they were transported to the festive scene in a wheelbarrow. Funny presents, some of them, but what would have been defects to other eyes were ornaments to Grandma's—for the children's gifts were all their own. Every stitch Daisy's patient little fingers had put into the handkerchiefs she hemmed was better than embroidery to Mrs. March. Demi's miracle of mechanical skill, though the cover wouldn't shut, Rob's footstool had a wiggle in its uneven legs that she declared was soothing, and no page of the costly book Amy's child gave her was so fair as that on which appeared in tipsy capitals, the words— 'To dear Grandma, from her little Beth.'

During the ceremony the boys had mysteriously disappeared, and when Mrs. March had tried to thank her children, and broken down, while Teddy wiped her eyes on his pinafore, the Professor suddenly began to sing. Then, from above him, voice after voice took up the words, and from tree to tree echoed the music of the unseen choir, as the boys sang with all their hearts the little song that Jo had written, Laurie set to music, and the Professor trained his lads to give with the best effect. This was something altogether new, and it proved a grand success, for Mrs. March couldn't get over her surprise, and insisted on shaking hands with every one of the featherless birds, from tall Franz and Emil to the little quadron, who had the sweetest voice of all.

After this, the boys dispersed for a final lark, leaving Mrs. March and her daughters under the festival tree.

'I don't think I ever ought to call myself 'unlucky Jo' again, when my greatest wish has been so beautifully gratified,' said Mrs. Bhaer, taking Teddy's little fist out of the milk pitcher, in which he was rapturously churning.

'And yet your life is very different from the one you pictured so long ago. Do you remember our castles in the air?' asked Amy, smiling as she watched Laurie and John playing cricket with the boys.

'Dear fellows! It does my heart good to see them forget business and frolic for a day,' answered Jo, who now spoke in a maternal way of all mankind. 'Yes, I remember, but the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these.' And Jo pointed from the lively lads in the distance to her father, leaning on the Professor's arm, as they walked to and fro in the sunshine, deep in one of the conversations which both enjoyed so much, and then to her mother, sitting enthroned among her daughters, with their children in her lap and at her feet, as if all found help and happiness in the face which never could grow old to them.

'My castle was the most nearly realized of all. I asked for splendid things, to be sure, but in my heart I knew I should be satisfied, if I had a little home, and John, and some dear children like these. I've got them all, thank God, and am the happiest woman in the world.' And Meg laid her hand on her tall boy's head, with a face full of tender and devout content.

'My castle is very different from what I planned, but I would not alter it, though, like Jo, I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty. I've begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done. I think so, myself, and mean to do it in marble, so that, whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel.'

As Amy spoke, a great tear dropped on the golden hair of the sleeping child in her arms, for her one well-beloved daughter was a frail little creature and the dread of losing her was the shadow over Amy's sunshine. This cross was doing much for both father and mother, for one love and

sorrow bound them closely together. Amy's nature was growing sweeter, deeper, and more tender. Laurie was growing more serious, strong, and firm, and both were learning that beauty, youth, good fortune, even love itself, cannot keep care and pain, loss and sorrow, from the most blessed for ...

*Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and sad and dreary.*

'She is growing better, I am sure of it, my dear. Don't despond, but hope and keep happy,' said Mrs. March, as tenderhearted Daisy stooped from her knee to lay her rosy cheek against her little cousin's pale one.

'I never ought to, while I have you to cheer me up, Marmee, and Laurie to take more than half of every burden,' replied Amy warmly. 'He never lets me see his anxiety, but is so sweet and patient with me, so devoted to Beth, and such a stay and comfort to me always that I can't love him enough. So, in spite of my one cross, I can say with Meg, 'Thank God, I'm a happy woman.''

'There's no need for me to say it, for everyone can see that I'm far happier than I deserve,' added Jo, glancing from her good husband to her chubby children, tumbling on the grass beside her. 'Fritz is getting gray and stout. I'm growing as thin as a shadow, and am thirty. We never shall be rich, and Plumfield may burn up any night, for that incorrigible Tommy Bangs will smoke sweet-fern cigars under the bed-clothes, though he's set himself afire three times already. But in spite of these unromantic facts, I have nothing to complain of, and never was so jolly in my life. Excuse the remark, but living among boys, I can't help using their expressions now and then.'

'Yes, Jo, I think your harvest will be a good one,' began Mrs. March, frightening away a big black cricket that was staring Teddy out of countenance.

'Not half so good as yours, Mother. Here it is, and we never can thank you enough for the patient sowing and reaping you have done,' cried Jo, with the loving impetuosity which she never would outgrow.

'I hope there will be more wheat and fewer tares every year,' said Amy softly.

'A large sheaf, but I know there's room in your heart for it, Marmee dear,' added Meg's tender voice.

Touched to the heart, Mrs. March could only stretch out her arms, as if to gather children and grandchildren to herself, and say, with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility...

'Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!'