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Little Women

Louisa May Alcott

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Sample extract from *Little Women* includes:

Introduction by Louise Rennison

Who's who in *Little Women*

Extract from *Little Women*

Biography of Louisa May Alcott

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INTRODUCTION BY 'GEORGIA NICOLSON'

Bonsoir, introduction readers, it is me, Georgia Nicolson here, I have been asked to write some words of wisdomosity about this classic book *Little Women*. And before you start it is not about really tiny girls, even I know that. (However, strangely enough, Louisa May Alcott did write another book called *Little Men* and that really *is* about tiny blokes. I wish. Sadly that last bit is not true but it would be eggcellent if it was.)

Anyway where was I before I so rudely interrupted myself mid-flow of wisdomosity? Ah yes, the classics. Now those of you vair, vair clever people who have read my diaries will know that on the whole I am not normally a fan of the classics. Mostly because they are written by beardy Elizabethan folk rambling on for England. I have made an exception of Loulou Alcott and there are many reasons for this. Number one being that she is not an Elizabethan beardy bloke in tights. She never to anyone's knowledge said, 'Forsooth and lack-a-day I have a hole in my tights.'

In fact, Louisa M. was a jolly good egg during the . . . er . . . Civil War in Hamburgeragoland between the deep South and the North people. She helped people in hospitals A LOT. Still finding time to do her writing. Unlike Jas, my so called besty, who fainted when we went to do a day's work experience in a doctor's surgery. And she wasn't even helping a bleeding-to-death patient; the doctor just came up behind her unexpectedly and she had to be taken home in a cab.

Loulou Alcott is not known for her nurse skills; she is known (much like me) for her huge talentosity *vis à vis* writing about her life. She wrote it about her own family as I did mine. I just hope her family appreciated her efforts a bit more than mine have.

Because *Little Women* was written ages ago by a girly type person about girly type people, it is good. It's about a family called the Marches living during the Civil War years. There is a mum (or mutti) and four daughters, Meg who is sixteen, Jo fifteen, Beth thirteen and Amy the little annoying one. It is all about their lives in a quietish town in the South, the ups the downs, the frocks, the putting of clothes pegs on your nose to make it smaller. (I tried this at home, and this is my advice, don't do it, unless you love pain and agony and a red nose clown effect.) It makes you laugh, it makes you cry, it makes you even more convinced that there is something really, really wrong with boys. But the really great thing is this, there is no bloke hanging around

wearing ridiculous shorts and embarrassing you by dancing to Abba records. Yes, yes it is true, this book is a vati free zone!!! The vati is away at the Front. How lucky is that? The only unrealistic note in the book (besides the amount of knitting that goes on) is that all the girls and the mutti miss him and keep reading his letters out to each other. And they look forward to him coming back. Still although this is based on real life, I feel that imagination has played a great part in it. (This is what my mutti says when I write in my diaries about the ludicrous size of her basoomas.)

Anyway get reading. Enter into the spirit of a different time and life for teenagers. Go on. You know you want to.

You do.

Don't fight it.

Georgia.

PS I have taken many, many minutes to write this introduction, minutes when I could easily have been busily er . . . anyway my point is, I have done it only because I love you. A LOT.

I do.

PPS I know I don't know you all personally to love but now you are just being picky.

PPPS But I still love you. xxxxxxxx

WHO'S WHO IN *LITTLE WOMEN*

Jo March – the main protagonist and the second eldest of the March sisters, Jo is the tomboy of the family and in her father's absence takes on the role of man of the house. Passionate about her family's solidarity, she is willing to make sacrifices for the greater good – most notably she has all her beautiful hair cut off to raise money for Marmee's trip to Washington. Of an adventurous spirit, her greatest ambition is to become a successful writer. Jo also possesses a fiery temper which she struggles to control (yet regrets at every outburst). Touchingly, she acts as quiet Beth's mentor and, in turn, views her younger sister as her confidante.

Meg March – the eldest of the March sisters, sweet and gentle Meg has a motherly influence on her siblings who have great respect for her. She is a pretty, young woman prone to a weakness for luxury and fashion, which she battles with – a fight she ultimately wins when her heart leads her to accept the hand of a good, honest man who is poor and will not be able to give her any of the finery that she yearns for. Meg can also be influenced by others (notably, she lets the Moffat sisters dress her up like a doll for a party which thrills her but then shames her) but no more so than any teenage girl. Although mentor to all of her sisters, she has a particular bond with Amy.

Beth March – the third March sister, shy and homely Beth wants nothing more than to please her sisters and uncomplainingly works hard to maintain the smooth running of the

household. She loves animals, but her real passion is music and she is an accomplished piano player. Yet patient, selfless Beth weeps in secret over not being able to pursue her musical ambition. She is justly rewarded by Mr Laurie, who gives her his deceased granddaughter's piano. Like Jo (who is unconventional), Beth is antisocial because of her timidity, but once she has made a friend she is loyal and steadfast.

Amy March – the youngest of the March sisters, Amy has been spoiled by her doting family and has become relatively selfish and stubborn (compared to her sisters). She is also vain and this is characterized by her belief that her greatest weakness is her nose. Among her attributes are her sociable personality which draws people to her, and her talent for drawing. Ultimately, like all of the March sisters, it is in her nature to be self-effacing – when Beth is very ill she comes to realize that she would give *anything* for her sister's health, and during her quarantine at Aunt March's, where she has the opportunity for silent meditation, her character is much improved.

Marmee – the mother of the March girls, Marmee is their guiding light. She has a charitable nature and works tirelessly to support her family, but is always ready to spare a thought for those worse off than herself. Considerate, passionate and honest (she confesses to Jo that she too has a temper which she constantly has to control), Marmee leads her daughters on the correct moral path with a sense of humour and not a hint of sanctimony. Having known better times, Marmee understands that love is more important than money.

Mr March – the March girls' father, Mr March is predominantly absent from the novel as he is away serving the army in the Civil War. His gentle, philosophical character is evident in the unwavering love and respect emanating from his family. When he returns home (due to illness), the idyllic family picture is complete.

Hannah – the Marches' servant, Hannah has watched all the children grow up and is as much part of the family as loyal, hardworking employee.

Aunt March – spinster and aunt to the March girls, Aunt March is, on the surface, a disagreeable old lady. Yet, as Jo (who is paid to be her companion) learns, under the surface she has a softer side and quite an interesting character. Although critical of her brother's family, she clearly adores them all.

Laurie (Teddy Laurence) – grandson to the Marches' rich neighbour, Laurie forms a fast friendship with Jo and then becomes close to all of the sisters and like a son to Marmee. He is charming, impetuous and hot-headed – and, like Jo, struggles against society's expectations of him. He does not want to become a successful businessman but has a strong desire to explore the world – this angers his grandfather but the old man cannot help but love his endearing grandson.

Mr Laurence – a rich, old neighbour of the Marches, on the surface Mr Laurence appears unapproachable and stern, but

they soon learn that he is kind and warm-hearted. Shy Beth especially develops an attachment to the old man.

Mr Brooke – tutor to Laurie, John Brooke is a thoughtful, intelligent man. He accompanies Marmee to Washington when Mr March is ill and shows his loyal, patient nature. He also falls for Meg and patiently pursues her, promising to work hard and be a good husband. He is poor but virtuous and Meg can't help but return his affection.

The Hummels – a poverty-stricken family suffering from ill health, they are the beneficiaries of much charity from the March family, including receiving their own Christmas dinner.

The Moffats – a rich family that befriend Meg. Annie Moffat has all the dresses and trinkets that Meg covets, and her pompous brother Ned takes a fancy to the eldest March sister. Yet despite being transiently flattered by the attention the Moffats show her, Meg doesn't bask in it for long and it is plain that Alcott uses them as an antidote to Meg's desires. She soon learns that money does not bring the kind of happiness or rewards that is abundant in familial love.

The Vaughns – British friends of Laurie's, we meet the Vaughn family in *Little Women* and the characters reappear in Alcott's sequels. The family consists of haughty Kate, the twins – Fred and sickly Frank, whom Beth mothers – and Grace, who strikes up a friendship with Amy.

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

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Playing Pilgrims

‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’
Cgrumbled 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, and 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 on new music,' said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearthbrush 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 am 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 practise well at all’; and Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that anyone 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 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 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 her 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 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 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 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, grey 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 in a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away 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 jewellery. 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 laugh, 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 trap-door for Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. "Is that a dagger 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 grey 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 parlour 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 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 of 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 home-sickness 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 where the hobgoblins were!' said Jo.

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

'My favourite part was when we came out on the flat roof where our flowers and arbours and pretty things were, and all stood and sang 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 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 guide-book,' 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 spoilt 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.

AUTHOR FILE

NAME: Louisa May Alcott

BORN: 29 November 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania

DIED: 6 March 1888 in Boston, Massachusetts

NATIONALITY: American

LIVED: Grew up in Concord, Massachusetts. The family moved countless times, but the family plot (where Alcott is buried) is in Concord.

What was she like?

Even as a child Alcott was an avid reader and writer. She was surrounded by philosophers and writers as her father was part of a group of transcendentalists (who, above all, believe in the influence of nature and reason) and this had a lasting effect on her. Yet she was not entirely a quiet, bookish girl. Like the fictional character Jo March, Alcott was a tomboy who struggled against society's genteel expectations of young ladies. Also like her protagonist, she spent her life struggling to control her quick temper.

Alcott was a feminist and never married – unwilling to make the sacrifices to her career that becoming a wife would entail. Yet she was devoted to her family, and when her younger sister Abba died, she adopted her two-year-old daughter (also named Louisa May, but nicknamed 'Lulu').

During her time working as a nurse, Alcott contracted typhoid fever and pneumonia. She was treated with mercury which, in turn, gave her mercury poisoning, and the remainder of her life was riddled with pain and ill-health. But,

a determined soul, Alcott never let it defeat her and she continued to work hard at her writing.

Where did she grow up?

Alcott grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, where she loved roaming through the fields and running wild. But the family were compelled by poverty to move from place to place in search of work.

What did she do apart from writing books?

Because of the family's financial difficulties (her father's radical ideology resulted in failed schemes at a severe cost to the Alcotts), Louisa May had to earn money from an early age and as a teenager began writing sensational short stories for newspapers and magazines. She also worked as a governess, teacher, seamstress and domestic help. Driven by her disappointment at not being able to fight in the Civil War, in 1862 she spent six weeks in Georgetown, Washington DC, working as a nurse. This career was cut short by the appalling conditions that resulted in her contracting typhoid and pneumonia.

Alcott was a staunch feminist and, as a fervent supporter of women's suffrage, was the first woman to register to vote in Concord.

What did people think of Little Women when it was first published in the 1860s?

The book was originally serialized in a magazine and was an immediate hit with both adults and children, who eagerly awaited the next instalment of the family drama. The book

itself, which appeared in 1868, was the first American book to become a children's classic. *Good Wives*, first published in 1869, is often published together with *Little Women* as if it were a single work. *Good Wives* picks up three years after the events in the last chapter of *Little Women* ('Aunt March Settles the Question'), and includes characters and events often felt by fans to be essential to the *Little Women* story.

Where did Louisa May Alcott get the idea for Little Women?

Despite acclaim for her adult novel *Moods* and her series of *Hospital Sketches* based on her time as a nurse (both published in 1864), Alcott was not gaining widespread success as a writer. Then an astute publisher suggested that she tried her hand at writing a children's book. Alcott was not enthusiastic at first, until she realized that her own family (she came from a family of four sisters, one of whom, Lizzie, died in her early twenties) was the ideal model for an interesting family saga. Louisa wrote *Little Women* in Orchard House, the Alcott family home, and set the lives of the March girls within it. Thus, although not entirely factual, *Little Women* is semi-autobiographical.

What other books did she write?

Louisa May Alcott was a prolific writer. Under the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, she wrote numerous 'potboilers' (melodramatic stories with selfish, wilful protagonists), and under her own name the aforementioned *Moods* (based on her love for Henry David Thoreau – one of the philosophers she grew up around) and *Hospital Sketches*. Yet on receiving resounding

acclaim for *Little Women*, she returned to writing books for adults only twice (one of which was an anonymous work). As well as the renowned sequels that followed *Little Women – Good Wives*; *Little Men*, which tells of Jo's life at Plumfield, where she runs a school for boys; and *Jo's Boys*, which continues the adventures of the boys from Jo's school – Alcott had over a dozen more children's books published, writing industriously right up until her death.

GLOSSARY

Apollyon – a biblical term meaning destroyer; in this case it refers to Jo's temper being the destroyer of her good character

arsenicum – a homeopathic medicine

Atalanta – a female athlete in Greek myth, known for taking part in male activities

betokening – displaying

blowzy – dishevelled in appearance

Boaz – husband of Ruth in the Bible; a charitable man

China-aster – a plant known for its variety of colourful flowers, sometimes described as 'mumsy'; in this context, likened for its primness

dyspeptic – ill-humoured

ennui – boredom

ferrule – a flat ruler used for striking the hand (as a corporal punishment)

go to the deuce – euphemism for 'go to hell'