

LITTLE WOMEN

Louisa May Alcott

Part 1

CHAPTER ONE PLAYING PILGRIMS

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

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

“We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,” said Beth from her corner.

The four young faces 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, “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 at war.”

“But I don’t think the little we should spend would do any good. We’ve each got a dollar. 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 Sintran* 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.

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

"Mother didn't say anything about our money. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo.

"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**¹ for hours with a nervous old lady, who is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to cry?"

"I 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." Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh.

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

"Don't peck at one another, children. Even 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.

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!"

¹ **to be shut up** — БЫТЬ ЗАПЕРТОЙ

“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 behave better, Josephine. You should remember that you are a young lady.”

“I’m not! I hate to think I’ve got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners! I’m dying to go and fight with Papa, but I can only stay home and knit, like an old woman!”

Jo shook the blue army sock till the needles rattled like castanets, and her ball bounded across the room.

“As for you, Amy,” continued Meg, “you are altogether too prim. 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.

“You’re a dear, and nothing else,” answered Meg warmly, and no one contradicted her.

We will take this moment to give the reader a little sketch of the four sisters. Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and very pretty, with large eyes and soft brown hair. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown. She had sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything. Her long, thick hair was usually bundled into a net. Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner and a timid voice. Her father called her ‘Little Miss Tranquility’. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least. Pale and slender, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, she was carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.

The clock struck six and Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. The sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls—it reminded them that Mother was coming.

“They are quite worn out. **Marmee**² must have a new pair.”

“I thought I’d get her a pair 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**³ now Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers.”

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

“What will we get?” exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought for a minute, then Meg announced, “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 them.” answered Jo.

“Let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon, Meg,” said Jo, marching up and down, with her hands behind her back. “Meg, you are the best actress we’ve got. We ought to rehearse tonight.”

“Glad to find you so merry, my girls,” said a cheery voice at the door, and the girls turned to welcome their Mother. She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman.

“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

² **Marmee** — мамочка

³ **the man of the family** — глава семьи

come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death. Come and kiss me.”

Mrs. March got her wet things off and put her warm slippers on. She sat down in **the easy chair**⁴, and drew Amy to her lap. The girls ran about, trying to make things comfortable. Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood and set chairs.

As they gathered about the table, Mrs. March said, “I’ve got a treat for you after supper.”

A quick, bright smile went round like a streak of sunshine. Beth clapped her hands. Jo tossed up her napkin, crying, “A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!”

“Yes, a nice long letter. He is well, and sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas, and a special message to you girls,” said Mrs. March.

“Hurry, 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.

“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. Now come and hear the letter.”

Very few letters were written in those hard times that were not touching, especially those which fathers sent home. This one was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life, marches, and military news.

“Give them all of my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them every day, and pray for them every night. A year seems very long, but while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days are not 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 when I come back I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.”

⁴ **the easy chair** — кресло

Everybody sniffed when they came to that part. Amy hid her face on her mother's shoulder and sobbed out, "I am a selfish girl! But I'll truly try to be better."

"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.

Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears and began to knit.

Mrs. March broke the silence, "Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrims Progress when you were little things? How you came up with stories? Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you try it again, but **in earnest**⁵, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home."

"Let us do it," said Meg thoughtfully. "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."

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

At nine they sang, as usual, before they went to bed. Their mother was a born singer. The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby.

CHAPTER TWO

A MERRY CHRISTMAS

Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. She remembered her mother's promise and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a little crimson-covered book. She woke Meg with a "Merry Christmas," and made her see what was under her pillow. A green-covered book

⁵ **in earnest** — *взаправду*

appeared. Beth and Amy woke up and found their little books also, one dove-colored, the other blue.

“Girls,” said Meg seriously, “Mother wants us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once.”

Then she opened her new book and began to read. Jo put her arm round her and, leaning cheek to cheek, read also.

“How good Meg is! Come, Amy, let’s do as they do. I’ll help you with the hard words, and they’ll explain things if we don’t understand,” whispered Beth.

And then the rooms were very still while the pages were softly turned.

“Where is Mother?” asked Meg, half an hour later.

“Goodness only knows. Some poor creeter came a-beggin’, and your ma went straight off to see what was needed,” replied Hannah, who had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered by them all more as a friend than a servant.

“She will be back soon, I think, so fry your cakes, and have everything ready,” said Meg, looking over the presents which were collected in a basket

“There’s Mother. Hide the basket, quick!” cried Jo, as a door slammed and steps sounded in the hall.

“Merry Christmas, Marmee! Thank you for our books. We read some, and mean to every day,” they all cried in chorus.

Mrs. March was both surprised and touched, and smiled as she examined her presents and read the little notes which accompanied them. The slippers went on at once, a new handkerchief was slipped into her pocket, well scented with Amy’s cologne, the rose was fastened in her bosom, and the nice gloves were pronounced a perfect fit.

The rest of the day was devoted to preparations for the evening festivities. Being still too young to go often to the theater, and not rich enough to afford private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and made whatever they needed to put on a play. Very clever were some of their productions. They

had pasteboard guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter boats covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond shaped bits left in sheets when the lids of preserve pots were cut out.

This Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed which was the dress circle, and sat before the blue and yellow curtains in a most flattering state of expectancy. There was a good deal of rustling and whispering behind the curtain, a trifle of lamp smoke, and an occasional giggle from Amy, who was apt to get hysterical in the excitement of the moment. Presently a bell sounded, the curtains flew apart, and the *operatic tragedy* about love and magic began.

When the performance was finished, applause followed. The excitement had hardly subsided when Hannah appeared, with "Mrs. March's compliments, and would the ladies walk down to supper."

This was a surprise, and when they saw the table, they looked at one another in rapturous amazement. There was ice cream, actually two dishes of it, pink and white, and cake and fruit and distracting French bonbons and, in the middle of the table, four great bouquets of hot house flowers.

It quite took their breath away, and they stared first at the table and then at their mother, who looked as if she enjoyed it immensely.

"Is it fairies?" asked Amy.

"Santa Claus," said Beth.

"Mother did it." And Meg smiled her sweetest.

"Aunt March had a good fit and sent the supper," cried Jo, with a sudden inspiration.

"All wrong. Old Mr. Laurence sent it," replied Mrs. March. "He is an odd old gentleman. He knew my father years ago, and he sent me a polite note this afternoon, saying he hoped I would allow him to express his friendly feeling toward my

children by sending them a few trifles in honor of the day. I could not refuse."

"That boy put it into his head, I know he did! He's a capital fellow, and I wish we could get acquainted. He looks as if he'd like to know us but he's bashful, and Meg is so prim she won't let me speak to him when we pass," said Jo, as the plates went round. "Our cat ran away once, and he brought her back, and we talked over the fence. Then he saw Meg coming, and walked off. I mean to know him some day, for he needs fun, I'm sure he does," said Jo decidedly.

"I like his manners, and he looks like a little gentleman. He brought the flowers himself."

"We'll have another play sometime that he can see. Perhaps he'll help act. Wouldn't that be jolly?"

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAURENCE BOY

"Jo! Jo! Where are you?" cried Meg at the foot of the stairs.

"Here!" answered a husky voice from above, and, running up, Meg found her sister eating apples and crying over *the Heir of Redclyffe*, wrapped up in a comforter on a sofa.

"A note of invitation from Mrs. Gardiner for tomorrow night!" cried Meg, waving the precious paper and then proceeding to read it with girlish delight.

"*Mrs. Gardiner would be happy to see Miss March and Miss Josephine at a little dance on New Year's Eve.*' Marmee is willing we should go, now what shall we wear?"

"What's the use of asking that, when you know we shall wear our poplins, because we haven't got anything else?" answered Jo with her mouth full.

"If I only had a silk!" sighed Meg. "Mother says I may when I'm eighteen perhaps."

"I'm sure our pops look like silk. Yours is as good as new."

"I shall have a new ribbon for my hair, and Marmee will lend me her little pearl pin, and my new slippers are lovely, and my gloves will do, though they aren't as nice as I'd like."

"Mine are spoiled with lemonade, and I can't get any new ones, so I shall have to go without," said Jo, who never troubled herself much about dress.

"You must have gloves, or I won't go," cried Meg decidedly. "Gloves are more important than anything else. You can't dance without them, and if you don't I should be so mortified."

"Then I'll stay still. I don't care much for company dancing."

"You can't ask Mother for new ones, they are so expensive. Can't you make them do?"

"I can hold them crumpled up in my hand, so no one will know how stained they are. I'll go without. I don't care what people say!" cried Jo, taking up her book. "Don't worry about me. I'll be as prim as I can, if I can help it. Now go and answer your note, and let me finish this story."

So Meg went away to look over her dress.

On New Year's Eve the two younger girls played dressing maids and the two elder were absorbed in the all-important business of 'getting ready for the party'. After various lesser mishaps, they were finished. They looked very well in their simple suits, Meg's in silvery drab, with a blue velvet snood, lace frills, and the pearl pin. Jo in maroon, with a stiff, gentlemanly linen collar, and a white chrysanthemum or two for her only ornament. Each put on one nice light glove, and carried one soiled one, and all pronounced the effect "quite easy and fine". Meg's high-heeled slippers were very tight and hurt her, though **she would not own it**⁶, and Jo's nineteen hairpins all seemed stuck straight into her head, which was not exactly comfortable, but, dear me, let us be elegant or die.

⁶ **she would not own it** — она не признавалась себе в этом

"Have a good time, dearies!" said Mrs. March. "Don't eat much supper, and come away at eleven when I send Hannah for you."

"If you see me doing anything wrong, just remind me by a wink, will you?" asked Jo, once they were out of the gates.

"No, winking isn't ladylike. I'll lift my eyebrows if anything is wrong, and nod if you are all right."

Down they went, feeling a trifle timid, for they seldom went to parties.

Mrs. Gardiner greeted them kindly and handed them over to the eldest of her six daughters. Meg knew Sallie and was at her ease very soon, but Jo, who didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden. Half a dozen jovial lads were talking about skates in another part of the room, and she wanted to go and join them. She telegraphed her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows went up so alarmingly that she dared not to move. Then the dancing began. Jo saw a big red headed youth approaching her corner, and fearing he meant to engage her, she slipped into a curtained recess. Unfortunately, another person had chosen the same refuge, and she found herself face to face with the 'Laurence boy'.

"Dear me, I didn't know anyone was here!" stammered Jo, preparing to back out as speedily as she had bounced in.

But the boy laughed and said pleasantly, though he looked a little startled, "Don't mind me, stay if you like."

"Shan't I disturb you?"

"Not a bit. I only came here because I don't know many people and felt rather strange at first, you know."

"So did I. Don't go away, please, unless you'd rather."

The boy sat down again. Trying to be polite and easy, Jo said, "I think I've had the pleasure of seeing you before. You live near us, don't you?"

"Next door." And he looked up and laughed.

That put Jo at her ease and she laughed too, as she said, "We did have such a good time over your nice Christmas present."

"Grandpa sent it."

"But you put it into his head, didn't you, now?"

"How is your cat, Miss March?" asked the boy.

"Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo," returned the young lady.

"I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie."

"Laurie Laurence, what an odd name."

"My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead."

"I hate my name, too, so sentimental! I wish everyone would say Jo instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?"

"I thrashed 'em."

"I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it." And Jo resigned herself with a sigh.

"Don't you like to dance, Miss Jo?" asked Laurie, looking as if he thought the name suited her.

"I like it well enough if there is plenty of room, and everyone is lively. In a place like this I'm sure to upset something. Don't you dance?"

"Sometimes. You see I've been abroad a good many years, and haven't been into company enough yet to know how you do things here."

"Abroad!" cried Jo. "Oh, tell me about it!"

Laurie told her how he had been at school in Vevay, where the boys never wore hats and had a fleet of boats on the lake, and for holiday fun went on walking trips about Switzerland with their teachers.

"Don't I wish I'd been there!" cried Jo. "Did you go to Paris?"

"We spent last winter there."

"Can you talk French?"