LITTLE WOMEN

by

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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 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 Sintran\_ for myself. I've wanted it so long," said

Jo, who was a bookworm.

"I planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh,

which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle-holder.

"I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils; I really need

them," said Amy decidedly.

"Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to

give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little

fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the

heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner.

"I know I do--teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I'm

longing to enjoy myself at home," began Meg, in the complaining tone

again.

"You don't have half such a hard time as I do," said Jo. "How would you

like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps

you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to

fly out the window or cry?"

"It's naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things

tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands

get so stiff, I can't practice well at all." And Beth looked at her

rough hands with a sigh that any one could hear that time.

"I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy, "for you don't

have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you

don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your

father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice."

"If you mean libel, I'd say so, and not talk about labels, as if Papa

was a pickle bottle," advised Jo, laughing.

"I know what I mean, and you needn't be statirical about it. It's

proper to use good words, and improve your vocabilary," returned Amy,

with dignity.

"Don't peck at one another, children. Don't you wish we had the money

Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! How happy and good we'd

be, if we had no worries!" said Meg, who could remember better times.

"You said the other day you thought we were a deal happier than the

King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in

spite of their money."

"So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are. For though we do have to work,

we make fun 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

\_Macbeth\_, if we only had a trapdoor for Banquo. I always wanted to do

the killing part. 'Is that a dagger that I see before me?" muttered

Jo, rolling her eyes and clutching at the air, as she had seen a famous

tragedian do.

"No, it's the toasting fork, with Mother's shoe on it instead of the

bread. Beth's stage-struck!" cried Meg, and the rehearsal ended in a

general burst of laughter.

"Glad to find you so merry, my girls," said a cheery voice at the door,

and actors and audience turned to welcome a tall, motherly lady with a

'can I help you' look about her which was truly delightful. She was not

elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman, and the girls thought the

gray cloak and unfashionable bonnet covered the most splendid mother in

the world.

"Well, dearies, how have you got on today? There was so much to do,

getting the boxes ready to go tomorrow, that I didn't come home to

dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look

tired to death. Come and kiss me, baby."

While making these maternal inquiries Mrs. March got her wet things

off, her warm slippers on, and sitting down in the easy chair, drew Amy

to her lap, preparing to enjoy the happiest hour of her busy day. The

girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own

way. Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood and set chairs,

dropping, 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.

CHAPTER TWO

A MERRY CHRISTMAS

Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No

stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much

disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down

because it was crammed so full of goodies. Then she remembered her

mother's promise and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a

little crimson-covered book. She knew it very well, for it was that

beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it

was a true guidebook for any pilgrim going on a long journey. She woke

Meg with a "Merry Christmas," and bade her see what was under her

pillow. A green-covered book appeared, with the same picture inside,

and a few words written by their mother, which made their one present

very precious in their eyes. Presently Beth and Amy woke to rummage

and find their little books also, one dove-colored, the other blue, and

all sat looking at and talking about them, while the east grew rosy

with the coming day.

In spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature,

which unconsciously influenced her sisters, especially Jo, who loved

her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently

given.

"Girls," said Meg seriously, looking from the tumbled head beside her

to the two little night-capped ones in the room beyond, "Mother wants

us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once.

We used to be faithful about it, but since Father went away and all

this war trouble unsettled us, we have neglected many things. You can

do as you please, but I shall keep my book on the table here and read a

little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know it will do me good

and help me through the day."

Then she opened her new book and began to read. Jo put her arm round

her and, leaning cheek to cheek, read also, with the quiet expression

so seldom seen on her restless face.

"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, very much impressed by the pretty books and her

sisters' example.

"I'm glad mine is blue," said Amy. and then the rooms were very still

while the pages were softly turned, and the winter sunshine crept in to

touch the bright heads and serious faces with a Christmas greeting.

"Where is Mother?" asked Meg, as she and Jo ran down to thank her for

their gifts, half an hour later.

"Goodness only knows. Some poor creeter came a-beggin', and your ma

went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman

for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and firin'," 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 and kept under the sofa, ready to be produced at the proper

time. "Why, where is Amy's bottle of cologne?" she added, as the

little flask did not appear.

"She took it out a minute ago, and went off with it to put a ribbon on

it, or some such notion," replied Jo, dancing about the room to take

the first stiffness off the new army slippers.

"How nice my handkerchiefs look, don't they? Hannah washed and ironed

them for me, and I marked them all myself," said Beth, looking proudly

at the somewhat uneven letters which had cost her such labor.

"Bless the child! She's gone and put 'Mother' on them instead of 'M.

March'. How funny!" cried Jo, taking one up.

"Isn't that right? I thought it was better to do it so, because Meg's

initials are M.M., and I don't want anyone to use these but Marmee,"

said Beth, looking troubled.

"It's all right, dear, and a very pretty idea, quite sensible too, for

no one can ever mistake now. It will please her very much, I know,"

said Meg, with a frown for Jo and a smile for Beth.

"There's Mother. Hide the basket, quick!" cried Jo, as a door slammed

and steps sounded in the hall.

Amy came in hastily, and looked rather abashed when she saw her sisters

all waiting for her.

"Where have you been, and what are you hiding behind you?" asked Meg,

surprised to see, by her hood and cloak, that lazy Amy had been out so

early.

"Don't laugh at me, Jo! I didn't mean anyone should know till the time

came. I only meant to change the little bottle for a big one, and I

gave all my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any

more."

As she spoke, Amy showed the handsome flask which replaced the cheap

one, and looked so earnest and humble in her little effort to forget

herself that Meg hugged her on the spot, and Jo pronounced her 'a

trump', while Beth ran to the window, and picked her finest rose to

ornament the stately bottle.

"You see I felt ashamed of my present, after reading and talking about

being good this morning, so I ran round the corner and changed it the

minute I was up, and I'm so glad, for mine is the handsomest now."

Another bang of the street door sent the basket under the sofa, and the

girls to the table, eager for breakfast.

"Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! Thank you for our books. We

read some, and mean to every day," they all cried in chorus.

"Merry Christmas, little daughters! I'm glad you began at once, and

hope you will keep on. But I want to say one word before we sit down.

Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby.

Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they

have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there, and the oldest boy

came to tell me they were suffering hunger and cold. My girls, will

you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?"

They were all unusually hungry, having waited nearly an hour, and for a

minute no one spoke, only a minute, for Jo exclaimed impetuously, "I'm

so glad you came before we began!"

"May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children?" asked

Beth eagerly.

"I shall take the cream and the muffings," added Amy, heroically giving

up the article she most liked.

Meg was already covering the buckwheats, and piling the bread into one

big plate.

"I thought you'd do it," said Mrs. March, smiling as if satisfied. "You

shall all go and help me, and when we come back we will have bread and

milk for breakfast, and make it up at dinnertime."

They were soon ready, and the procession set out. Fortunately it was

early, and they went through back streets, so few people saw them, and

no one laughed at the queer party.

A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire,

ragged bedclothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale,

hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm.

How the big eyes stared and the blue lips smiled as the girls went in.

"Ach, mein Gott! It is good angels come to us!" said the poor woman,

crying for joy.

"Funny angels in hoods and mittens," said Jo, and set them to laughing.

In a few minutes it really did seem as if kind spirits had been at work

there. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fire, and stopped up the

broken panes with old hats and her own cloak. Mrs. March gave the

mother tea and gruel, and comforted her with promises of help, while

she dressed the little baby as tenderly as if it had been her own. The

girls meantime spread the table, set the children round the fire, and

fed them like so many hungry birds, laughing, talking, and trying to

understand the funny broken English.

"Das ist gut!" "Die Engel-kinder!" cried the poor things as they ate

and warmed their purple hands at the comfortable blaze. The girls had

never been called angel children before, and thought it very agreeable,

especially Jo, who had been considered a 'Sancho' ever since she was

born. That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn't get any of

it. And when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there

were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little

girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with

bread and milk on Christmas morning.

"That's loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it," said

Meg, as they set out their presents while their mother was upstairs

collecting clothes for the poor Hummels.

Not a very splendid show, but there was a great deal of love done up in

the few little bundles, and the tall vase of red roses, white

chrysanthemums, and trailing vines, which stood in the middle, gave

quite an elegant air to the table.

"She's coming! Strike up, Beth! Open the door, Amy! Three cheers for

Marmee!" cried Jo, prancing about while Meg went to conduct Mother to

the seat of honor.

Beth played her gayest march, Amy threw open the door, and Meg enacted

escort with great dignity. Mrs. March was both surprised and touched,

and smiled with her eyes full 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.

There was a good deal of laughing and kissing and explaining, in the

simple, loving fashion which makes these home festivals so pleasant at

the time, so sweet to remember long afterward, and then all fell to

work.

The morning charities and ceremonies took so much time that 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 any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their

wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made

whatever they needed. Very clever were some of their productions,

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. The big chamber was the scene of many

innocent revels.

No gentleman were admitted, so Jo played male parts to her heart's

content and took immense satisfaction in a pair of russet leather boots

given her by a friend, who knew a lady who knew an actor. These boots,

an old foil, and a slashed doublet once used by an artist for some

picture, were Jo's chief treasures and appeared on all occasions. The

smallness of the company made it necessary for the two principal actors

to take several parts apiece, and they certainly deserved some credit

for the hard work they did in learning three or four different parts,

whisking in and out of various costumes, and managing the stage

besides. It was excellent drill for their memories, a harmless

amusement, and employed many hours which otherwise would have been

idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society.

On Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed which was the

dress circle, and sat before the blue and yellow chintz 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\_ began.

"A gloomy wood," according to the one playbill, was represented by a

few shrubs in pots, green baize on the floor, and a cave in the

distance. This cave was made with a clothes horse for a roof, bureaus

for walls, and in it was a small furnace in full blast, with a black

pot on it and an old witch bending over it. The stage was dark and the

glow of the furnace had a fine effect, especially as real steam issued

from the kettle when the witch took off the cover. A moment was

allowed for the first thrill to subside, then Hugo, the villain,

stalked in with a clanking sword at his side, a slouching hat, black

beard, mysterious cloak, and the boots. After pacing to and fro in

much agitation, he struck his forehead, and burst out in a wild strain,

singing of his hatred for Roderigo, his love for Zara, and his pleasing

resolution to kill the one and win the other. The gruff tones of Hugo's

voice, with an occasional shout when his feelings overcame him, were

very impressive, and the audience applauded the moment he paused for

breath. Bowing with the air of one accustomed to public praise, he

stole to the cavern and ordered Hagar to come forth with a commanding,

"What ho, minion! I need thee!"

Out came Meg, with gray horsehair hanging about her face, a red and

black robe, a staff, and cabalistic signs upon her cloak. Hugo

demanded a potion to make Zara adore him, and one to destroy Roderigo.

Hagar, in a fine dramatic melody, promised both, and proceeded to call

up the spirit who would bring the love philter.

Hither, hither, from thy home,

Airy sprite, I bid thee come!

Born of roses, fed on dew,

Charms and potions canst thou brew?

Bring me here, with elfin speed,

The fragrant philter which I need.

Make it sweet and swift and strong,

Spirit, answer now my song!

A soft strain of music sounded, and then at the back of the cave

appeared a little figure in cloudy white, with glittering wings, golden

hair, and a garland of roses on its head. Waving a wand, it sang...

Hither I come,

From my airy home,

Afar in the silver moon.

Take the magic spell,

And use it well,

Or its power will vanish soon!

And dropping a small, gilded bottle at the witch's feet, the spirit

vanished. Another chant from Hagar produced another apparition, not a

lovely one, for with a bang an ugly black imp appeared and, having

croaked a reply, tossed a dark bottle at Hugo and disappeared with a

mocking laugh. Having warbled his thanks and put the potions in his

boots, Hugo departed, and Hagar informed the audience that as he had

killed a few of her friends in times past, she had cursed him, and

intends to thwart his plans, and be revenged on him. Then the curtain

fell, and the audience reposed and ate candy while discussing the

merits of the play.

A good deal of hammering went on before the curtain rose again, but

when it became evident what a masterpiece of stage carpentery had been

got up, no one murmured at the delay. It was truly superb. A tower

rose to the ceiling, halfway up appeared a window with a lamp burning

in it, and behind the white curtain appeared Zara in a lovely blue and

silver dress, waiting for Roderigo. He came in gorgeous array, with

plumed cap, red cloak, chestnut lovelocks, a guitar, and the boots, of

course. Kneeling at the foot of the tower, he sang a serenade in

melting tones. Zara replied and, after a musical dialogue, consented

to fly. Then came the grand effect of the play. Roderigo produced a

rope ladder, with five steps to it, threw up one end, and invited Zara

to descend. Timidly she crept from her lattice, put her hand on

Roderigo's shoulder, and was about to leap gracefully down when "Alas!

Alas for Zara!" she forgot her train. It caught in the window, the

tower tottered, leaned forward, fell with a crash, and buried the

unhappy lovers in the ruins.

A universal shriek arose as the russet boots waved wildly from the

wreck and a golden head emerged, exclaiming, "I told you so! I told

you so!" With wonderful presence of mind, Don Pedro, the cruel sire,

rushed in, dragged out his daughter, with a hasty aside...

"Don't laugh! Act as if it was all right!" and, ordering Roderigo up,

banished him from the kingdom with wrath and scorn. Though decidedly

shaken by the fall from the tower upon him, Roderigo defied the old

gentleman and refused to stir. This dauntless example fired Zara. She

also defied her sire, and he ordered them both to the deepest dungeons

of the castle. A stout little retainer came in with chains and led

them away, looking very much frightened and evidently forgetting the

speech he ought to have made.

Act third was the castle hall, and here Hagar appeared, having come to

free the lovers and finish Hugo. She hears him coming and hides, sees

him put the potions into two cups of wine and bid the timid little

servant, "Bear them to the captives in their cells, and tell them I

shall come anon." The servant takes Hugo aside to tell him something,

and Hagar changes the cups for two others which are harmless.

Ferdinando, the 'minion', carries them away, and Hagar puts back the

cup which holds the poison meant for Roderigo. Hugo, getting thirsty

after a long warble, drinks it, loses his wits, and after a good deal

of clutching and stamping, falls flat and dies, while Hagar informs him

what she has done in a song of exquisite power and melody.

This was a truly thrilling scene, though some persons might have

thought that the sudden tumbling down of a quantity of long red hair

rather marred the effect of the villain's death. He was called before

the curtain, and with great propriety appeared, leading Hagar, whose

singing was considered more wonderful than all the rest of the

performance put together.

Act fourth displayed the despairing Roderigo on the point of stabbing

himself because he has been told that Zara has deserted him. Just as

the dagger is at his heart, a lovely song is sung under his window,

informing him that Zara is true but in danger, and he can save her if

he will. A key is thrown in, which unlocks the door, and in a spasm of

rapture he tears off his chains and rushes away to find and rescue his

lady love.

Act fifth opened with a stormy scene between Zara and Don Pedro. He

wishes her to go into a convent, but she won't hear of it, and after a

touching appeal, is about to faint when Roderigo dashes in and demands

her hand. Don Pedro refuses, because he is not rich. They shout and

gesticulate tremendously but cannot agree, and Rodrigo is about to bear

away the exhausted Zara, when the timid servant enters with a letter

and a bag from Hagar, who has mysteriously disappeared. The latter

informs the party that she bequeaths untold wealth to the young pair

and an awful doom to Don Pedro, if he doesn't make them happy. The bag

is opened, and several quarts of tin money shower down upon the stage

till it is quite glorified with the glitter. This entirely softens the

stern sire. He consents without a murmur, all join in a joyful chorus,

and the curtain falls upon the lovers kneeling to receive Don Pedro's

blessing in attitudes of the most romantic grace.

Tumultuous applause followed but received an unexpected check, for the

cot bed, on which the dress circle was built, suddenly shut up and

extinguished the enthusiastic audience. Roderigo and Don Pedro flew to

the rescue, and all were taken out unhurt, though many were speechless

with laughter. 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 even to the actors, and when they saw the table,

they looked at one another in rapturous amazement. It was like Marmee

to get up a little treat for them, but anything so fine as this was

unheard of since the departed days of plenty. 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, in spite of her gray

beard and white eyebrows.

"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.

"The Laurence boy's grandfather! What in the world put such a thing

into his head? We don't know him!" exclaimed Meg.

"Hannah told one of his servants about your breakfast party. He is an

odd old gentleman, but that pleased him. 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, and so you

have a little feast at night to make up for the bread-and-milk

breakfast."

"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, and the ice began to

melt out of sight, with ohs and ahs of satisfaction.

"You mean the people who live in the big house next door, don't you?"

asked one of the girls. "My mother knows old Mr. Laurence, but says

he's very proud and doesn't like to mix with his neighbors. He keeps

his grandson shut up, when he isn't riding or walking with his tutor,

and makes him study very hard. We invited him to our party, but he

didn't come. Mother says he's very nice, though he never speaks to us

girls."

"Our cat ran away once, and he brought her back, and we talked over the

fence, and were getting on capitally, all about cricket, and so on,

when 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, so I've no

objection to your knowing him, if a proper opportunity comes. He

brought the flowers himself, and I should have asked him in, if I had

been sure what was going on upstairs. He looked so wistful as he went

away, hearing the frolic and evidently having none of his own."

"It's a mercy you didn't, Mother!" laughed Jo, looking at her boots.

"But we'll have another play sometime that he can see. Perhaps he'll

help act. Wouldn't that be jolly?"

"I never had such a fine bouquet before! How pretty it is!" And Meg

examined her flowers with great interest.

"They are lovely. But Beth's roses are sweeter to me," said Mrs.

March, smelling the half-dead posy in her belt.

Beth nestled up to her, and whispered softly, "I wish I could send my

bunch to Father. I'm afraid he isn't having such a merry Christmas as

we are."

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAURENCE BOY

"Jo! Jo! Where are you?" cried Meg at the foot of the garret 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 an old three-legged sofa by the sunny window.

This was Jo's favorite refuge, and here she loved to retire with half a

dozen russets and a nice book, to enjoy the quiet and the society of a

pet rat who lived near by and didn't mind her a particle. As Meg

appeared, Scrabble whisked into his hole. Jo shook the tears off her

cheeks and waited to hear the news.

"Such fun! Only see! A regular 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, but two years is an everlasting time to wait."

"I'm sure our pops look like silk, and they are nice enough for us.

Yours is as good as new, but I forgot the burn and the tear in mine.

Whatever shall I do? The burn shows badly, and I can't take any out."

"You must sit still all you can and keep your back out of sight. The

front is all right. 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. It's no

fun to go sailing round. I like to fly about and cut capers."

"You can't ask Mother for new ones, they are so expensive, and you are

so careless. She said when you spoiled the others that she shouldn't

get you any more this winter. Can't you make them do?"

"I can hold them crumpled up in my hand, so no one will know how

stained they are. That's all I can do. No! I'll tell you how we can

manage, each wear one good one and carry a bad one. Don't you see?"

"Your hands are bigger than mine, and you will stretch my glove

dreadfully," began Meg, whose gloves were a tender point with her.

"Then I'll go without. I don't care what people say!" cried Jo, taking

up her book.

"You may have it, you may! Only don't stain it, and do behave nicely.

Don't put your hands behind you, or stare, or say 'Christopher

Columbus!' will you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be as prim as I can and not get into any

scrapes, if I can help it. Now go and answer your note, and let me

finish this splendid story."

So Meg went away to 'accept with thanks', look over her dress, and sing

blithely as she did up her one real lace frill, while Jo finished her

story, her four apples, and had a game of romps with Scrabble.

On New Year's Eve the parlor was deserted, for the two younger girls

played dressing maids and the two elder were absorbed in the

all-important business of 'getting ready for the party'. Simple as the

toilets were, there was a great deal of running up and down, laughing

and talking, and at one time a strong smell of burned hair pervaded the

house. Meg wanted a few curls about her face, and Jo undertook to

pinch the papered locks with a pair of hot tongs.

"Ought they to smoke like that?" asked Beth from her perch on the bed.

"It's the dampness drying," replied Jo.

"What a queer smell! It's like burned feathers," observed Amy,

smoothing her own pretty curls with a superior air.

"There, now I'll take off the papers and you'll see a cloud of little

ringlets," said Jo, putting down the tongs.

She did take off the papers, but no cloud of ringlets appeared, for the

hair came with the papers, and the horrified hairdresser laid a row of

little scorched bundles on the bureau before her victim.

"Oh, oh, oh! What have you done? I'm spoiled! I can't go! My hair,

oh, my hair!" wailed Meg, looking with despair at the uneven frizzle on

her forehead.

"Just my luck! You shouldn't have asked me to do it. I always spoil

everything. I'm so sorry, but the tongs were too hot, and so I've made

a mess," groaned poor Jo, regarding the little black pancakes with

tears of regret.

"It isn't spoiled. Just frizzle it, and tie your ribbon so the ends

come on your forehead a bit, and it will look like the last fashion.

I've seen many girls do it so," said Amy consolingly.

"Serves me right for trying to be fine. I wish I'd let my hair alone,"

cried Meg petulantly.

"So do I, it was so smooth and pretty. But it will soon grow out

again," said Beth, coming to kiss and comfort the shorn sheep.

After various lesser mishaps, Meg was finished at last, and by the

united exertions of the entire family Jo's hair was got up and her

dress on. 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, 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.

"Have a good time, dearies!" said Mrs. March, as the sisters went

daintily down the walk. "Don't eat much supper, and come away at

eleven when I send Hannah for you." As the gate clashed behind them, a

voice cried from a window...

"Girls, girls! Have you you both got nice pocket handkerchiefs?"

"Yes, yes, spandy nice, and Meg has cologne on hers," cried Jo, adding

with a laugh as they went on, "I do believe Marmee would ask that if we

were all running away from an earthquake."

"It is one of her aristocratic tastes, and quite proper, for a real

lady is always known by neat boots, gloves, and handkerchief," replied

Meg, who had a good many little 'aristocratic tastes' of her own.

"Now don't forget to keep the bad breadth out of sight, Jo. Is my sash

right? And does my hair look very bad?" said Meg, as she turned from

the glass in Mrs. Gardiner's dressing room after a prolonged prink.

"I know I shall forget. If you see me doing anything wrong, just

remind me by a wink, will you?" returned Jo, giving her collar a twitch

and her head a hasty brush.

"No, winking isn't ladylike. I'll lift my eyebrows if any thing is

wrong, and nod if you are all right. Now hold your shoulder straight,

and take short steps, and don't shake hands if you are introduced to

anyone. It isn't the thing."

"How do you learn all the proper ways? I never can. Isn't that music

gay?"

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

parties, and informal as this little gathering was, it was an event to

them. Mrs. Gardiner, a stately old lady, 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 about, 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 longed to go and join them, for skating was one of the

joys of her life. She telegraphed her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows

went up so alarmingly that she dared not stir. No one came to talk to

her, and one by one the group dwindled away till she was left alone.

She could not roam about and amuse herself, for the burned breadth

would show, so she stared at people rather forlornly till the dancing

began. Meg was asked at once, and the tight slippers tripped about so

briskly that none would have guessed the pain their wearer suffered

smilingly. Jo saw a big red headed youth approaching her corner, and

fearing he meant to engage her, she slipped into a curtained recess,

intending to peep and enjoy herself in peace. Unfortunately, another

bashful person had chosen the same refuge, for, as the curtain fell

behind her, 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 and looked at his pumps, till Jo said, trying to

be polite and easy, "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 outright, for Jo's prim

manner was rather funny when he remembered how they had chatted about

cricket when he brought the cat home.

That put Jo at her ease and she laughed too, as she said, in her

heartiest way, "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, trying to look sober

while his black eyes shone with fun.

"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 every one 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, tread on

people's toes, or do something dreadful, so I keep out of mischief and

let Meg sail about. 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! I love dearly to hear

people describe their travels."

Laurie didn't seem to know where to begin, but Jo's eager questions

soon set him going, and he 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?"

"We were not allowed to speak anything else at Vevay."

"Do say some! I can read it, but can't pronounce."

"Quel nom a cette jeune demoiselle en les pantoufles jolis?"

"How nicely you do it! Let me see ... you said, 'Who is the young lady

in the pretty slippers', didn't you?"

"Oui, mademoiselle."

"It's my sister Margaret, and you knew it was! Do you think she is

pretty?"

"Yes, she makes me think of the German girls, she looks so fresh and

quiet, and dances like a lady."

Jo quite glowed with pleasure at this boyish praise of her sister, and

stored it up to repeat to Meg. Both peeped and criticized and chatted

till they felt like old acquaintances. Laurie's bashfulness soon wore

off, for Jo's gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at his ease, and

Jo was her merry self again, because her dress was forgotten and nobody

lifted their eyebrows at her. She liked the 'Laurence boy' better than

ever and took several good looks at him, so that she might describe him

to the girls, for they had no brothers, very few male cousins, and boys

were almost unknown creatures to them.

"Curly black hair, brown skin, big black eyes, handsome nose, fine

teeth, small hands and feet, taller than I am, very polite, for a boy,

and altogether jolly. Wonder how old he is?"

It was on the tip of Jo's tongue to ask, but she checked herself in

time and, with unusual tact, tried to find out in a round-about way.

"I suppose you are going to college soon? I see you pegging away at

your books, no, I mean studying hard." And Jo blushed at the dreadful

'pegging' which had escaped her.

Laurie smiled but didn't seem shocked, and answered with a shrug. "Not

for a year or two. I won't go before seventeen, anyway."

"Aren't you but fifteen?" asked Jo, looking at the tall lad, whom she

had imagined seventeen already.

"Sixteen, next month."

"How I wish I was going to college! You don't look as if you liked it."

"I hate it! Nothing but grinding or skylarking. And I don't like the

way fellows do either, in this country."

"What do you like?"

"To live in Italy, and to enjoy myself in my own way."

Jo wanted very much to ask what his own way was, but his black brows

looked rather threatening as he knit them, so she changed the subject

by saying, as her foot kept time, "That's a splendid polka! Why don't

you go and try it?"

"If you will come too," he answered, with a gallant little bow.

"I can't, for I told Meg I wouldn't, because..." There Jo stopped, and

looked undecided whether to tell or to laugh.

"Because, what?"

"You won't tell?"

"Never!"

"Well, I have a bad trick of standing before the fire, and so I burn my

frocks, and I scorched this one, and though it's nicely mended, it

shows, and Meg told me to keep still so no one would see it. You may

laugh, if you want to. It is funny, I know."

But Laurie didn't laugh. He only looked down a minute, and the

expression of his face puzzled Jo when he said very gently, "Never mind

that. I'll tell you how we can manage. There's a long hall out there,

and we can dance grandly, and no one will see us. Please come."

Jo thanked him and gladly went, wishing she had two neat gloves when

she saw the nice, pearl-colored ones her partner wore. The hall was

empty, and they had a grand polka, for Laurie danced well, and taught

her the German step, which delighted Jo, being full of swing and

spring. When the music stopped, they sat down on the stairs to get

their breath, and Laurie was in the midst of an account of a students'

festival at Heidelberg when Meg appeared in search of her sister. She

beckoned, and Jo reluctantly followed her into a side room, where she

found her on a sofa, holding her foot, and looking pale.

"I've sprained my ankle. That stupid high heel turned and gave me a

sad wrench. It aches so, I can hardly stand, and I don't know how I'm

ever going to get home," she said, rocking to and fro in pain.

"I knew you'd hurt your feet with those silly shoes. I'm sorry. But I

don't see what you can do, except get a carriage, or stay here all

night," answered Jo, softly rubbing the poor ankle as she spoke.

"I can't have a carriage without its costing ever so much. I dare say

I can't get one at all, for most people come in their own, and it's a

long way to the stable, and no one to send."

"I'll go."

"No, indeed! It's past nine, and dark as Egypt. I can't stop here,

for the house is full. Sallie has some girls staying with her. I'll

rest till Hannah comes, and then do the best I can."

"I'll ask Laurie. He will go," said Jo, looking relieved as the idea

occurred to her.

"Mercy, no! Don't ask or tell anyone. Get me my rubbers, and put

these slippers with our things. I can't dance anymore, but as soon as

supper is over, watch for Hannah and tell me the minute she comes."

"They are going out to supper now. I'll stay with you. I'd rather."

"No, dear, run along, and bring me some coffee. I'm so tired I can't

stir."

So Meg reclined, with rubbers well hidden, and Jo went blundering away

to the dining room, which she found after going into a china closet,

and opening the door of a room where old Mr. Gardiner was taking a

little private refreshment. Making a dart at the table, she secured

the coffee, which she immediately spilled, thereby making the front of

her dress as bad as the back.

"Oh, dear, what a blunderbuss I am!" exclaimed Jo, finishing Meg's

glove by scrubbing her gown with it.

"Can I help you?" said a friendly voice. And there was Laurie, with a

full cup in one hand and a plate of ice in the other.

"I was trying to get something for Meg, who is very tired, and someone

shook me, and here I am in a nice state," answered Jo, glancing

dismally from the stained skirt to the coffee-colored glove.

"Too bad! I was looking for someone to give this to. May I take it

to your sister?"

"Oh, thank you! I'll show you where she is. I don't offer to take it

myself, for I should only get into another scrape if I did."

Jo led the way, and as if used to waiting on ladies, Laurie drew up a

little table, brought a second installment of coffee and ice for Jo,

and was so obliging that even particular Meg pronounced him a 'nice

boy'. They had a merry time over the bonbons and mottoes, and were in

the midst of a quiet game of \_Buzz\_, with two or three other young

people who had strayed in, when Hannah appeared. Meg forgot her foot

and rose so quickly that she was forced to catch hold of Jo, with an

exclamation of pain.

"Hush! Don't say anything," she whispered, adding aloud, "It's

nothing. I turned my foot a little, that's all," and limped upstairs

to put her things on.

Hannah scolded, Meg cried, and Jo was at her wits' end, till she

decided to take things into her own hands. Slipping out, she ran down

and, finding a servant, asked if he could get her a carriage. It

happened to be a hired waiter who knew nothing about the neighborhood

and Jo was looking round for help when Laurie, who had heard what she

said, came up and offered his grandfather's carriage, which had just

come for him, he said.

"It's so early! You can't mean to go yet?" began Jo, looking relieved

but hesitating to accept the offer.

"I always go early, I do, truly! Please let me take you home. It's all

on my way, you know, and it rains, they say."

That settled it, and telling him of Meg's mishap, Jo gratefully

accepted and rushed up to bring down the rest of the party. Hannah

hated rain as much as a cat does so she made no trouble, and they

rolled away in the luxurious close carriage, feeling very festive and

elegant. Laurie went on the box so Meg could keep her foot up, and the

girls talked over their party in freedom.

"I had a capital time. Did you?" asked Jo, rumpling up her hair, and

making herself comfortable.

"Yes, till I hurt myself. Sallie's friend, Annie Moffat, took a fancy

to me, and asked me to come and spend a week with her when Sallie does.

She is going in the spring when the opera comes, and it will be

perfectly splendid, if Mother only lets me go," answered Meg, cheering

up at the thought.

"I saw you dancing with the red headed man I ran away from. Was he

nice?"

"Oh, very! His hair is auburn, not red, and he was very polite, and I

had a delicious redowa with him."

"He looked like a grasshopper in a fit when he did the new step. Laurie

and I couldn't help laughing. Did you hear us?"

"No, but it was very rude. What were you about all that time, hidden

away there?"

Jo told her adventures, and by the time she had finished they were at

home. With many thanks, they said good night and crept in, hoping to

disturb no one, but the instant their door creaked, two little

nightcaps bobbed up, and two sleepy but eager voices cried out...

"Tell about the party! Tell about the party!"

With what Meg called 'a great want of manners' Jo had saved some

bonbons for the little girls, and they soon subsided, after hearing the

most thrilling events of the evening.

"I declare, it really seems like being a fine young lady, to come home

from the party in a carriage and sit in my dressing gown with a maid to

wait on me," said Meg, as Jo bound up her foot with arnica and brushed

her hair.

"I don't believe fine young ladies enjoy themselves a bit more than we

do, in spite of our burned hair, old gowns, one glove apiece and tight

slippers that sprain our ankles when we are silly enough to wear them."

And I think Jo was quite right.

CHAPTER FOUR

BURDENS

"Oh, dear, how hard it does seem to take up our packs and go on,"

sighed Meg the morning after the party, for now the holidays were over,

the week of merrymaking did not fit her for going on easily with the

task she never liked.

"I wish it was Christmas or New Year's all the time. Wouldn't it be

fun?" answered Jo, yawning dismally.

"We shouldn't enjoy ourselves half so much as we do now. But it does

seem so nice to have little suppers and bouquets, and go to parties,

and drive home, and read and rest, and not work. It's like other

people, you know, and I always envy girls who do such things, I'm so

fond of luxury," said Meg, trying to decide which of two shabby gowns

was the least shabby.

"Well, we can't have it, so don't let us grumble but shoulder our

bundles and trudge along as cheerfully as Marmee does. I'm sure Aunt

March is a regular Old Man of the Sea to me, but I suppose when I've

learned to carry her without complaining, she will tumble off, or get

so light that I shan't mind her."

This idea tickled Jo's fancy and put her in good spirits, but Meg

didn't brighten, for her burden, consisting of four spoiled children,

seemed heavier than ever. She had not heart enough even to make herself

pretty as usual by putting on a blue neck ribbon and dressing her hair

in the most becoming way.

"Where's the use of looking nice, when no one sees me but those cross

midgets, and no one cares whether I'm pretty or not?" she muttered,

shutting her drawer with a jerk. "I shall have to toil and moil all my

days, with only little bits of fun now and then, and get old and ugly

and sour, because I'm poor and can't enjoy my life as other girls do.

It's a shame!"

So Meg went down, wearing an injured look, and wasn't at all agreeable

at breakfast time. Everyone seemed rather out of sorts and inclined to

croak.

Beth had a headache and lay on the sofa, trying to comfort herself with

the cat and three kittens. Amy was fretting because her lessons were

not learned, and she couldn't find her rubbers. Jo would whistle and

make a great racket getting ready.

Mrs. March was very busy trying to finish a letter, which must go at

once, and Hannah had the grumps, for being up late didn't suit her.

"There never was such a cross family!" cried Jo, losing her temper when

she had upset an inkstand, broken both boot lacings, and sat down upon

her hat.

"You're the crossest person in it!" returned Amy, washing out the sum

that was all wrong with the tears that had fallen on her slate.

"Beth, if you don't keep these horrid cats down cellar I'll have them

drowned," exclaimed Meg angrily as she tried to get rid of the kitten

which had scrambled up her back and stuck like a burr just out of reach.

Jo laughed, Meg scolded, Beth implored, and Amy wailed because she

couldn't remember how much nine times twelve was.

"Girls, girls, do be quiet one minute! I must get this off by the

early mail, and you drive me distracted with your worry," cried Mrs.

March, crossing out the third spoiled sentence in her letter.

There was a momentary lull, broken by Hannah, who stalked in, laid two

hot turnovers on the table, and stalked out again. These turnovers were

an institution, and the girls called them 'muffs', for they had no

others and found the hot pies very comforting to their hands on cold

mornings.

Hannah never forgot to make them, no matter how busy or grumpy she

might be, for the walk was long and bleak. The poor things got no other

lunch and were seldom home before two.

"Cuddle your cats and get over your headache, Bethy. Goodbye, Marmee.

We are a set of rascals this morning, but we'll come home regular

angels. Now then, Meg!" And Jo tramped away, feeling that the

pilgrims were not setting out as they ought to do.

They always looked back before turning the corner, for their mother was

always at the window to nod and smile, and wave her hand to them.

Somehow it seemed as if they couldn't have got through the day without

that, for whatever their mood might be, the last glimpse of that

motherly face was sure to affect them like sunshine.

"If Marmee shook her fist instead of kissing her hand to us, it would

serve us right, for more ungrateful wretches than we are were never

seen," cried Jo, taking a remorseful satisfaction in the snowy walk and

bitter wind.

"Don't use such dreadful expressions," replied Meg from the depths of

the veil in which she had shrouded herself like a nun sick of the world.

"I like good strong words that mean something," replied Jo, catching

her hat as it took a leap off her head preparatory to flying away

altogether.

"Call yourself any names you like, but I am neither a rascal nor a

wretch and I don't choose to be called so."

"You're a blighted being, and decidedly cross today because you can't

sit in the lap of luxury all the time. Poor dear, just wait till I

make my fortune, and you shall revel in carriages and ice cream and

high-heeled slippers, and posies, and red-headed boys to dance with."

"How ridiculous you are, Jo!" But Meg laughed at the nonsense and felt

better in spite of herself.

"Lucky for you I am, for if I put on crushed airs and tried to be

dismal, as you do, we should be in a nice state. Thank goodness, I can

always find something funny to keep me up. Don't croak any more, but

come home jolly, there's a dear."

Jo gave her sister an encouraging pat on the shoulder as they parted

for the day, each going a different way, each hugging her little warm

turnover, and each trying to be cheerful in spite of wintry weather,

hard work, and the unsatisfied desires of pleasure-loving youth.

When Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate

friend, the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something

toward their own support, at least. Believing that they could not

begin too early to cultivate energy, industry, and independence, their

parents consented, and both fell to work with the hearty good will

which in spite of all obstacles is sure to succeed at last.

Margaret found a place as nursery governess and felt rich with her

small salary. As she said, she was 'fond of luxury', and her chief

trouble was poverty. She found it harder to bear than the others

because she could remember a time when home was beautiful, life full of

ease and pleasure, and want of any kind unknown. She tried not to be

envious or discontented, but it was very natural that the young girl

should long for pretty things, gay friends, accomplishments, and a

happy life. At the Kings' she daily saw all she wanted, for the

children's older sisters were just out, and Meg caught frequent

glimpses of dainty ball dresses and bouquets, heard lively gossip about

theaters, concerts, sleighing parties, and merrymakings of all kinds,

and saw money lavished on trifles which would have been so precious to

her. Poor Meg seldom complained, but a sense of injustice made her

feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she had not yet learned to

know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy.

Jo happened to suit Aunt March, who was lame and needed an active

person to wait upon her. The childless old lady had offered to adopt

one of the girls when the troubles came, and was much offended because

her offer was declined. Other friends told the Marches that they had

lost all chance of being remembered in the rich old lady's will, but

the unworldly Marches only said...

"We can't give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we

will keep together and be happy in one another."

The old lady wouldn't speak to them for a time, but happening to meet

Jo at a friend's, something in her comical face and blunt manners

struck the old lady's fancy, and she proposed to take her for a

companion. This did not suit Jo at all, but she accepted the place

since nothing better appeared and, to every one's surprise, got on

remarkably well with her irascible relative. There was an occasional

tempest, and once Jo marched home, declaring she couldn't bear it

longer, but Aunt March always cleared up quickly, and sent for her to

come back again with such urgency that she could not refuse, for in her

heart she rather liked the peppery old lady.

I suspect that the real attraction was a large library of fine books,

which was left to dust and spiders since Uncle March died. Jo

remembered the kind old gentleman, who used to let her build railroads

and bridges with his big dictionaries, tell her stories about queer

pictures in his Latin books, and buy her cards of gingerbread whenever

he met her in the street. The dim, dusty room, with the busts staring

down from the tall bookcases, the cozy chairs, the globes, and best of

all, the wilderness of books in which she could wander where she liked,

made the library a region of bliss to her.

The moment Aunt March took her nap, or was busy with company, Jo

hurried to this quiet place, and curling herself up in the easy chair,

devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures like a regular

bookworm. But, like all happiness, it did not last long, for as sure

as she had just reached the heart of the story, the sweetest verse of a

song, or the most perilous adventure of her traveler, a shrill voice

called, "Josy-phine! Josy-phine!" and she had to leave her paradise to

wind yarn, wash the poodle, or read Belsham's Essays by the hour

together.

Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid. What it was, she had

no idea as yet, but left it for time to tell her, and meanwhile, found

her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn't read, run, and

ride as much as she liked. A quick temper, sharp tongue, and restless

spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series

of ups and downs, which were both comic and pathetic. But the training

she received at Aunt March's was just what she needed, and the thought

that she was doing something to support herself made her happy in spite

of the perpetual "Josy-phine!"

Beth was too bashful to go to school. It had been tried, but she

suffered so much that it was given up, and she did her lessons at home

with her father. Even when he went away, and her mother was called to

devote her skill and energy to Soldiers' Aid Societies, Beth went

faithfully on by herself and did the best she could. She was a

housewifely little creature, and helped Hannah keep home neat and

comfortable for the workers, never thinking of any reward but to be

loved. Long, quiet days she spent, not lonely nor idle, for her little

world was peopled with imaginary friends, and she was by nature a busy

bee. There were six dolls to be taken up and dressed every morning,

for Beth was a child still and loved her pets as well as ever. Not one

whole or handsome one among them, all were outcasts till Beth took them

in, for when her sisters outgrew these idols, they passed to her

because Amy would have nothing old or ugly. Beth cherished them all the

more tenderly for that very reason, and set up a hospital for infirm

dolls. No pins were ever stuck into their cotton vitals, no harsh

words or blows were ever given them, no neglect ever saddened the heart

of the most repulsive, but all were fed and clothed, nursed and

caressed with an affection which never failed. One forlorn fragment of

dollanity had belonged to Jo and, having led a tempestuous life, was

left a wreck in the rag bag, from which dreary poorhouse it was rescued

by Beth and taken to her refuge. Having no top to its head, she tied

on a neat little cap, and as both arms and legs were gone, she hid

these deficiencies by folding it in a blanket and devoting her best bed

to this chronic invalid. If anyone had known the care lavished on that

dolly, I think it would have touched their hearts, even while they

laughed. She brought it bits of bouquets, she read to it, took it out

to breathe fresh air, hidden under her coat, she sang it lullabies and

never went to bed without kissing its dirty face and whispering

tenderly, "I hope you'll have a good night, my poor dear."

Beth had her troubles as well as the others, and not being an angel but

a very human little girl, she often 'wept a little weep' as Jo said,

because she couldn't take music lessons and have a fine piano. She

loved music so dearly, tried so hard to learn, and practiced away so

patiently at the jingling old instrument, that it did seem as if

someone (not to hint Aunt March) ought to help her. Nobody did,

however, and nobody saw Beth wipe the tears off the yellow keys, that

wouldn't keep in tune, when she was all alone. She sang like a little

lark about her work, never was too tired for Marmee and the girls, and

day after day said hopefully to herself, "I know I'll get my music some

time, if I'm good."

There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners

till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the

sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and

the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow

behind.

If anybody had asked Amy what the greatest trial of her life was, she

would have answered at once, "My nose." When she was a baby, Jo had

accidently dropped her into the coal hod, and Amy insisted that the

fall had ruined her nose forever. It was not big nor red, like poor

'Petrea's', it was only rather flat, and all the pinching in the world

could not give it an aristocratic point. No one minded it but herself,

and it was doing its best to grow, but Amy felt deeply the want of a

Grecian nose, and drew whole sheets of handsome ones to console herself.

"Little Raphael," as her sisters called her, had a decided talent for

drawing, and was never so happy as when copying flowers, designing

fairies, or illustrating stories with queer specimens of art. Her

teachers complained that instead of doing her sums she covered her

slate with animals, the blank pages of her atlas were used to copy maps

on, and caricatures of the most ludicrous description came fluttering

out of all her books at unlucky moments. She got through her lessons

as well as she could, and managed to escape reprimands by being a model

of deportment. She was a great favorite with her mates, being

good-tempered and possessing the happy art of pleasing without effort.

Her little airs and graces were much admired, so were her

accomplishments, for besides her drawing, she could play twelve tunes,

crochet, and read French without mispronouncing more than two-thirds of

the words. She had a plaintive way of saying, "When Papa was rich we

did so-and-so," which was very touching, and her long words were

considered 'perfectly elegant' by the girls.

Amy was in a fair way to be spoiled, for everyone petted her, and her

small vanities and selfishnesses were growing nicely. One thing,

however, rather quenched the vanities. She had to wear her cousin's

clothes. Now Florence's mama hadn't a particle of taste, and Amy

suffered deeply at having to wear a red instead of a blue bonnet,

unbecoming gowns, and fussy aprons that did not fit. Everything was

good, well made, and little worn, but Amy's artistic eyes were much

afflicted, especially this winter, when her school dress was a dull

purple with yellow dots and no trimming.

"My only comfort," she said to Meg, with tears in her eyes, "is that

Mother doesn't take tucks in my dresses whenever I'm naughty, as Maria

Parks's mother does. My dear, it's really dreadful, for sometimes she

is so bad her frock is up to her knees, and she can't come to school.

When I think of this \_deggerredation\_, I feel that I can bear even my

flat nose and purple gown with yellow sky-rockets on it."

Meg was Amy's confidant and monitor, and by some strange attraction of

opposites Jo was gentle Beth's. To Jo alone did the shy child tell her

thoughts, and over her big harum-scarum sister Beth unconsciously

exercised more influence than anyone in the family. The two older

girls were a great deal to one another, but each took one of the

younger sisters into her keeping and watched over her in her own way,

'playing mother' they called it, and put their sisters in the places of

discarded dolls with the maternal instinct of little women.

"Has anybody got anything to tell? It's been such a dismal day I'm

really dying for some amusement," said Meg, as they sat sewing together

that evening.

"I had a queer time with Aunt today, and, as I got the best of it, I'll

tell you about it," began Jo, who dearly loved to tell stories. "I was

reading that everlasting Belsham, and droning away as I always do, for

Aunt soon drops off, and then I take out some nice book, and read like

fury till she wakes up. I actually made myself sleepy, and before she

began to nod, I gave such a gape that she asked me what I meant by

opening my mouth wide enough to take the whole book in at once."

"I wish I could, and be done with it," said I, trying not to be saucy.

"Then she gave me a long lecture on my sins, and told me to sit and

think them over while she just 'lost' herself for a moment. She never

finds herself very soon, so the minute her cap began to bob like a

top-heavy dahlia, I whipped the \_Vicar of Wakefield\_ out of my pocket,

and read away, with one eye on him and one on Aunt. I'd just got to

where they all tumbled into the water when I forgot and laughed out

loud. Aunt woke up and, being more good-natured after her nap, told me

to read a bit and show what frivolous work I preferred to the worthy

and instructive Belsham. I did my very best, and she liked it, though

she only said...

"'I don't understand what it's all about. Go back and begin it,

child.'"

"Back I went, and made the Primroses as interesting as ever I could.

Once I was wicked enough to stop in a thrilling place, and say meekly,

'I'm afraid it tires you, ma'am. Shan't I stop now?'"

"She caught up her knitting, which had dropped out of her hands, gave

me a sharp look through her specs, and said, in her short way, 'Finish

the chapter, and don't be impertinent, miss'."

"Did she own she liked it?" asked Meg.

"Oh, bless you, no! But she let old Belsham rest, and when I ran back

after my gloves this afternoon, there she was, so hard at the Vicar

that she didn't hear me laugh as I danced a jig in the hall because of

the good time coming. What a pleasant life she might have if only she

chose! I don't envy her much, in spite of her money, for after all

rich people have about as many worries as poor ones, I think," added Jo.

"That reminds me," said Meg, "that I've got something to tell. It isn't

funny, like Jo's story, but I thought about it a good deal as I came

home. At the Kings' today I found everybody in a flurry, and one of

the children said that her oldest brother had done something dreadful,

and Papa had sent him away. I heard Mrs. King crying and Mr. King

talking very loud, and Grace and Ellen turned away their faces when

they passed me, so I shouldn't see how red and swollen their eyes were.

I didn't ask any questions, of course, but I felt so sorry for them and

was rather glad I hadn't any wild brothers to do wicked things and

disgrace the family."

"I think being disgraced in school is a great deal try\_inger\_ than

anything bad boys can do," said Amy, shaking her head, as if her

experience of life had been a deep one. "Susie Perkins came to school

today with a lovely red carnelian ring. I wanted it dreadfully, and

wished I was her with all my might. Well, she drew a picture of Mr.

Davis, with a monstrous nose and a hump, and the words, 'Young ladies,

my eye is upon you!' coming out of his mouth in a balloon thing. We

were laughing over it when all of a sudden his eye \_was\_ on us, and he

ordered Susie to bring up her slate. She was \_parry\_lized with fright,

but she went, and oh, what \_do\_ you think he did? He took her by the

ear--the ear! Just fancy how horrid!--and led her to the recitation

platform, and made her stand there half an hour, holding the slate so

everyone could see."

"Didn't the girls laugh at the picture?" asked Jo, who relished the

scrape.

"Laugh? Not one! They sat still as mice, and Susie cried quarts, I know

she did. I didn't envy her then, for I felt that millions of carnelian

rings wouldn't have made me happy after that. I never, never should

have got over such a agonizing mortification." And Amy went on with her

work, in the proud consciousness of virtue and the successful utterance

of two long words in a breath.

"I saw something I liked this morning, and I meant to tell it at

dinner, but I forgot," said Beth, putting Jo's topsy-turvy basket in

order as she talked. "When I went to get some oysters for Hannah, Mr.

Laurence was in the fish shop, but he didn't see me, for I kept behind

the fish barrel, and he was busy with Mr. Cutter the fish-man. A poor

woman came in with a pail and a mop, and asked Mr. Cutter if he would

let her do some scrubbing for a bit of fish, because she hadn't any

dinner for her children, and had been disappointed of a day's work.

Mr. Cutter was in a hurry and said 'No', rather crossly, so she was

going away, looking hungry and sorry, when Mr. Laurence hooked up a big

fish with the crooked end of his cane and held it out to her. She was

so glad and surprised she took it right into her arms, and thanked him

over and over. He told her to 'go along and cook it', and she hurried

off, so happy! Wasn't it good of him? Oh, she did look so funny,

hugging the big, slippery fish, and hoping Mr. Laurence's bed in heaven

would be 'aisy'."

When they had laughed at Beth's story, they asked their mother for one,

and after a moments thought, she said soberly, "As I sat cutting out

blue flannel jackets today at the rooms, I felt very anxious about

Father, and thought how lonely and helpless we should be, if anything

happened to him. It was not a wise thing to do, but I kept on worrying

till an old man came in with an order for some clothes. He sat down

near me, and I began to talk to him, for he looked poor and tired and

anxious.

"'Have you sons in the army?' I asked, for the note he brought was not

to me."

"Yes, ma'am. I had four, but two were killed, one is a prisoner, and

I'm going to the other, who is very sick in a Washington hospital.' he

answered quietly."

"'You have done a great deal for your country, sir,' I said, feeling

respect now, instead of pity."

"'Not a mite more than I ought, ma'am. I'd go myself, if I was any

use. As I ain't, I give my boys, and give 'em free.'"

"He spoke so cheerfully, looked so sincere, and seemed so glad to give

his all, that I was ashamed of myself. I'd given one man and thought

it too much, while he gave four without grudging them. I had all my

girls to comfort me at home, and his last son was waiting, miles away,

to say good-by to him, perhaps! I felt so rich, so happy thinking of

my blessings, that I made him a nice bundle, gave him some money, and

thanked him heartily for the lesson he had taught me."

"Tell another story, Mother, one with a moral to it, like this. I like

to think about them afterward, if they are real and not too preachy,"

said Jo, after a minute's silence.

Mrs. March smiled and began at once, for she had told stories to this

little audience for many years, and knew how to please them.

"Once upon a time, there were four girls, who had enough to eat and

drink and wear, a good many comforts and pleasures, kind friends and

parents who loved them dearly, and yet they were not contented." (Here

the listeners stole sly looks at one another, and began to sew

diligently.) "These girls were anxious to be good and made many

excellent resolutions, but they did not keep them very well, and were

constantly saying, 'If only we had this,' or 'If we could only do

that,' quite forgetting how much they already had, and how many things

they actually could do. So they asked an old woman what spell they

could use to make them happy, and she said, 'When you feel

discontented, think over your blessings, and be grateful.'" (Here Jo

looked up quickly, as if about to speak, but changed her mind, seeing

that the story was not done yet.)

"Being sensible girls, they decided to try her advice, and soon were

surprised to see how well off they were. One discovered that money

couldn't keep shame and sorrow out of rich people's houses, another

that, though she was poor, she was a great deal happier, with her

youth, health, and good spirits, than a certain fretful, feeble old

lady who couldn't enjoy her comforts, a third that, disagreeable as it

was to help get dinner, it was harder still to go begging for it and

the fourth, that even carnelian rings were not so valuable as good

behavior. So they agreed to stop complaining, to enjoy the blessings

already possessed, and try to deserve them, lest they should be taken

away entirely, instead of increased, and I believe they were never

disappointed or sorry that they took the old woman's advice."

"Now, Marmee, that is very cunning of you to turn our own stories

against us, and give us a sermon instead of a romance!" cried Meg.

"I like that kind of sermon. It's the sort Father used to tell us,"

said Beth thoughtfully, putting the needles straight on Jo's cushion.

"I don't complain near as much as the others do, and I shall be more

careful than ever now, for I've had warning from Susie's downfall,"

said Amy morally.

"We needed that lesson, and we won't forget it. If we do so, you just

say to us, as old Chloe did in \_Uncle Tom\_, 'Tink ob yer marcies,

chillen!' 'Tink ob yer marcies!'" added Jo, who could not, for the life

of her, help getting a morsel of fun out of the little sermon, though

she took it to heart as much as any of them.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEING NEIGHBORLY

"What in the world are you going to do now, Jo?" asked Meg one snowy

afternoon, as her sister came tramping through the hall, in rubber

boots, old sack, and hood, with a broom in one hand and a shovel in the

other.

"Going out for exercise," answered Jo with a mischievous twinkle in her

eyes.

"I should think two long walks this morning would have been enough!

It's cold and dull out, and I advise you to stay warm and dry by the

fire, as I do," said Meg with a shiver.

"Never take advice! Can't keep still all day, and not being a

pussycat, I don't like to doze by the fire. I like adventures, and I'm

going to find some."

Meg went back to toast her feet and read \_Ivanhoe\_, and Jo began to dig

paths with great energy. The snow was light, and with her broom she

soon swept a path all round the garden, for Beth to walk in when the

sun came out and the invalid dolls needed air. Now, the garden

separated the Marches' house from that of Mr. Laurence. Both stood in

a suburb of the city, which was still country-like, with groves and

lawns, large gardens, and quiet streets. A low hedge parted the two

estates. On one side was an old, brown house, looking rather bare and

shabby, robbed of the vines that in summer covered its walls and the

flowers, which then surrounded it. On the other side was a stately

stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury,

from the big coach house and well-kept grounds to the conservatory and

the glimpses of lovely things one caught between the rich curtains.

Yet it seemed a lonely, lifeless sort of house, for no children

frolicked on the lawn, no motherly face ever smiled at the windows, and

few people went in and out, except the old gentleman and his grandson.

To Jo's lively fancy, this fine house seemed a kind of enchanted

palace, full of splendors and delights which no one enjoyed. She had

long wanted to behold these hidden glories, and to know the Laurence

boy, who looked as if he would like to be known, if he only knew how to

begin. Since the party, she had been more eager than ever, and had

planned many ways of making friends with him, but he had not been seen

lately, and Jo began to think he had gone away, when she one day spied

a brown face at an upper window, looking wistfully down into their

garden, where Beth and Amy were snow-balling one another.

"That boy is suffering for society and fun," she said to herself. "His

grandpa does not know what's good for him, and keeps him shut up all

alone. He needs a party of jolly boys to play with, or somebody young

and lively. I've a great mind to go over and tell the old gentleman

so!"

The idea amused Jo, who liked to do daring things and was always

scandalizing Meg by her queer performances. The plan of 'going over'

was not forgotten. And when the snowy afternoon came, Jo resolved to

try what could be done. She saw Mr. Lawrence drive off, and then

sallied out to dig her way down to the hedge, where she paused and took

a survey. All quiet, curtains down at the lower windows, servants out

of sight, and nothing human visible but a curly black head leaning on a

thin hand at the upper window.

"There he is," thought Jo, "Poor boy! All alone and sick this dismal

day. It's a shame! I'll toss up a snowball and make him look out, and

then say a kind word to him."

Up went a handful of soft snow, and the head turned at once, showing a

face which lost its listless look in a minute, as the big eyes

brightened and the mouth began to smile. Jo nodded and laughed, and

flourished her broom as she called out...

"How do you do? Are you sick?"

Laurie opened the window, and croaked out as hoarsely as a raven...

"Better, thank you. I've had a bad cold, and been shut up a week."

"I'm sorry. What do you amuse yourself with?"

"Nothing. It's dull as tombs up here."

"Don't you read?"

"Not much. They won't let me."

"Can't somebody read to you?"

"Grandpa does sometimes, but my books don't interest him, and I hate to

ask Brooke all the time."

"Have someone come and see you then."

"There isn't anyone I'd like to see. Boys make such a row, and my head

is weak."

"Isn't there some nice girl who'd read and amuse you? Girls are quiet

and like to play nurse."

"Don't know any."

"You know us," began Jo, then laughed and stopped.

"So I do! Will you come, please?" cried Laurie.

"I'm not quiet and nice, but I'll come, if Mother will let me. I'll go

ask her. Shut the window, like a good boy, and wait till I come."

With that, Jo shouldered her broom and marched into the house,

wondering what they would all say to her. Laurie was in a flutter of

excitement at the idea of having company, and flew about to get ready,

for as Mrs. March said, he was 'a little gentleman', and did honor to

the coming guest by brushing his curly pate, putting on a fresh color,

and trying to tidy up the room, which in spite of half a dozen

servants, was anything but neat. Presently there came a loud ring,

than a decided voice, asking for 'Mr. Laurie', and a surprised-looking

servant came running up to announce a young lady.

"All right, show her up, it's Miss Jo," said Laurie, going to the door

of his little parlor to meet Jo, who appeared, looking rosy and quite

at her ease, with a covered dish in one hand and Beth's three kittens

in the other.

"Here I am, bag and baggage," she said briskly. "Mother sent her love,

and was glad if I could do anything for you. Meg wanted me to bring

some of her blanc mange, she makes it very nicely, and Beth thought her

cats would be comforting. I knew you'd laugh at them, but I couldn't

refuse, she was so anxious to do something."

It so happened that Beth's funny loan was just the thing, for in

laughing over the kits, Laurie forgot his bashfulness, and grew

sociable at once.

"That looks too pretty to eat," he said, smiling with pleasure, as Jo

uncovered the dish, and showed the blanc mange, surrounded by a garland

of green leaves, and the scarlet flowers of Amy's pet geranium.

"It isn't anything, only they all felt kindly and wanted to show it.

Tell the girl to put it away for your tea. It's so simple you can eat

it, and being soft, it will slip down without hurting your sore throat.

What a cozy room this is!"

"It might be if it was kept nice, but the maids are lazy, and I don't

know how to make them mind. It worries me though."

"I'll right it up in two minutes, for it only needs to have the hearth

brushed, so--and the things made straight on the mantelpiece, so--and

the books put here, and the bottles there, and your sofa turned from

the light, and the pillows plumped up a bit. Now then, you're fixed."

And so he was, for, as she laughed and talked, Jo had whisked things

into place and given quite a different air to the room. Laurie watched

her in respectful silence, and when she beckoned him to his sofa, he

sat down with a sigh of satisfaction, saying gratefully...

"How kind you are! Yes, that's what it wanted. Now please take the

big chair and let me do something to amuse my company."

"No, I came to amuse you. Shall I read aloud?" and Jo looked

affectionately toward some inviting books near by.

"Thank you! I've read all those, and if you don't mind, I'd rather

talk," answered Laurie.

"Not a bit. I'll talk all day if you'll only set me going. Beth says I

never know when to stop."

"Is Beth the rosy one, who stays at home good deal and sometimes goes

out with a little basket?" asked Laurie with interest.

"Yes, that's Beth. She's my girl, and a regular good one she is, too."

"The pretty one is Meg, and the curly-haired one is Amy, I believe?"

"How did you find that out?"

Laurie colored up, but answered frankly, "Why, you see I often hear you

calling to one another, and when I'm alone up here, I can't help

looking over at your house, you always seem to be having such good

times. I beg your pardon for being so rude, but sometimes you forget

to put down the curtain at the window where the flowers are. And when

the lamps are lighted, it's like looking at a picture to see the fire,

and you all around the table with your mother. Her face is right

opposite, and it looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can't help

watching it. I haven't got any mother, you know." And Laurie poked the

fire to hide a little twitching of the lips that he could not control.

The solitary, hungry look in his eyes went straight to Jo's warm heart.

She had been so simply taught that there was no nonsense in her head,

and at fifteen she was as innocent and frank as any child. Laurie was

sick and lonely, and feeling how rich she was in home and happiness,

she gladly tried to share it with him. Her face was very friendly and

her sharp voice unusually gentle as she said...

"We'll never draw that curtain any more, and I give you leave to look

as much as you like. I just wish, though, instead of peeping, you'd

come over and see us. Mother is so splendid, she'd do you heaps of

good, and Beth would sing to you if I begged her to, and Amy would

dance. Meg and I would make you laugh over our funny stage properties,

and we'd have jolly times. Wouldn't your grandpa let you?"

"I think he would, if your mother asked him. He's very kind, though he

does not look so, and he lets me do what I like, pretty much, only he's

afraid I might be a bother to strangers," began Laurie, brightening

more and more.

"We are not strangers, we are neighbors, and you needn't think you'd be

a bother. We want to know you, and I've been trying to do it this ever

so long. We haven't been here a great while, you know, but we have got

acquainted with all our neighbors but you."

"You see, Grandpa lives among his books, and doesn't mind much what

happens outside. Mr. Brooke, my tutor, doesn't stay here, you know,

and I have no one to go about with me, so I just stop at home and get

on as I can."

"That's bad. You ought to make an effort and go visiting everywhere

you are asked, then you'll have plenty of friends, and pleasant places

to go to. Never mind being bashful. It won't last long if you keep

going."

Laurie turned red again, but wasn't offended at being accused of

bashfulness, for there was so much good will in Jo it was impossible

not to take her blunt speeches as kindly as they were meant.

"Do you like your school?" asked the boy, changing the subject, after a

little pause, during which he stared at the fire and Jo looked about

her, well pleased.

"Don't go to school, I'm a businessman--girl, I mean. I go to wait on

my great-aunt, and a dear, cross old soul she is, too," answered Jo.

Laurie opened his mouth to ask another question, but remembering just

in time that it wasn't manners to make too many inquiries into people's

affairs, he shut it again, and looked uncomfortable.

Jo liked his good breeding, and didn't mind having a laugh at Aunt

March, so she gave him a lively description of the fidgety old lady,

her fat poodle, the parrot that talked Spanish, and the library where

she reveled.

Laurie enjoyed that immensely, and when she told about the prim old

gentleman who came once to woo Aunt March, and in the middle of a fine

speech, how Poll had tweaked his wig off to his great dismay, the boy

lay back and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks, and a maid

popped her head in to see what was the matter.

"Oh! That does me no end of good. Tell on, please," he said, taking

his face out of the sofa cushion, red and shining with merriment.

Much elated with her success, Jo did 'tell on', all about their plays

and plans, their hopes and fears for Father, and the most interesting

events of the little world in which the sisters lived. Then they got

to talking about books, and to Jo's delight, she found that Laurie

loved them as well as she did, and had read even more than herself.

"If you like them so much, come down and see ours. Grandfather is out,

so you needn't be afraid," said Laurie, getting up.

"I'm not afraid of anything," returned Jo, with a toss of the head.

"I don't believe you are!" exclaimed the boy, looking at her with much

admiration, though he privately thought she would have good reason to

be a trifle afraid of the old gentleman, if she met him in some of his

moods.

The atmosphere of the whole house being summerlike, Laurie led the way

from room to room, letting Jo stop to examine whatever struck her

fancy. And so, at last they came to the library, where she clapped her

hands and pranced, as she always did when especially delighted. It was

lined with books, and there were pictures and statues, and distracting

little cabinets full of coins and curiosities, and Sleepy Hollow

chairs, and queer tables, and bronzes, and best of all, a great open

fireplace with quaint tiles all round it.

"What richness!" sighed Jo, sinking into the depth of a velour chair

and gazing about her with an air of intense satisfaction. "Theodore

Laurence, you ought to be the happiest boy in the world," she added

impressively.

"A fellow can't live on books," said Laurie, shaking his head as he

perched on a table opposite.

Before he could more, a bell rang, and Jo flew up, exclaiming with

alarm, "Mercy me! It's your grandpa!"

"Well, what if it is? You are not afraid of anything, you know,"

returned the boy, looking wicked.

"I think I am a little bit afraid of him, but I don't know why I should

be. Marmee said I might come, and I don't think you're any the worse

for it," said Jo, composing herself, though she kept her eyes on the

door.

"I'm a great deal better for it, and ever so much obliged. I'm only

afraid you are very tired of talking to me. It was so pleasant, I

couldn't bear to stop," said Laurie gratefully.

"The doctor to see you, sir," and the maid beckoned as she spoke.

"Would you mind if I left you for a minute? I suppose I must see him,"

said Laurie.

"Don't mind me. I'm happy as a cricket here," answered Jo.

Laurie went away, and his guest amused herself in her own way. She was

standing before a fine portrait of the old gentleman when the door

opened again, and without turning, she said decidedly, "I'm sure now

that I shouldn't be afraid of him, for he's got kind eyes, though his

mouth is grim, and he looks as if he had a tremendous will of his own.

He isn't as handsome as my grandfather, but I like him."

"Thank you, ma'am," said a gruff voice behind her, and there, to her

great dismay, stood old Mr. Laurence.

Poor Jo blushed till she couldn't blush any redder, and her heart began

to beat uncomfortably fast as she thought what she had said. For a

minute a wild desire to run away possessed her, but that was cowardly,

and the girls would laugh at her, so she resolved to stay and get out

of the scrape as she could. A second look showed her that the living

eyes, under the bushy eyebrows, were kinder even than the painted ones,

and there was a sly twinkle in them, which lessened her fear a good

deal. The gruff voice was gruffer than ever, as the old gentleman said

abruptly, after the dreadful pause, "So you're not afraid of me, hey?"

"Not much, sir."

"And you don't think me as handsome as your grandfather?"

"Not quite, sir."

"And I've got a tremendous will, have I?"

"I only said I thought so."

"But you like me in spite of it?"

"Yes, I do, sir."

That answer pleased the old gentleman. He gave a short laugh, shook

hands with her, and, putting his finger under her chin, turned up her

face, examined it gravely, and let it go, saying with a nod, "You've

got your grandfather's spirit, if you haven't his face. He was a fine

man, my dear, but what is better, he was a brave and an honest one, and

I was proud to be his friend."

"Thank you, sir," And Jo was quite comfortable after that, for it

suited her exactly.

"What have you been doing to this boy of mine, hey?" was the next

question, sharply put.

"Only trying to be neighborly, sir." And Jo told how her visit came

about.

"You think he needs cheering up a bit, do you?"

"Yes, sir, he seems a little lonely, and young folks would do him good

perhaps. We are only girls, but we should be glad to help if we could,

for we don't forget the splendid Christmas present you sent us," said

Jo eagerly.

"Tut, tut, tut! That was the boy's affair. How is the poor woman?"

"Doing nicely, sir." And off went Jo, talking very fast, as she told

all about the Hummels, in whom her mother had interested richer friends

than they were.

"Just her father's way of doing good. I shall come and see your mother

some fine day. Tell her so. There's the tea bell, we have it early on

the boy's account. Come down and go on being neighborly."

"If you'd like to have me, sir."

"Shouldn't ask you, if I didn't." And Mr. Laurence offered her his arm

with old-fashioned courtesy.

"What would Meg say to this?" thought Jo, as she was marched away,

while her eyes danced with fun as she imagined herself telling the

story at home.

"Hey! Why, what the dickens has come to the fellow?" said the old

gentleman, as Laurie came running downstairs and brought up with a

start of surprise at the astounding sight of Jo arm in arm with his

redoubtable grandfather.

"I didn't know you'd come, sir," he began, as Jo gave him a triumphant

little glance.

"That's evident, by the way you racket downstairs. Come to your tea,

sir, and behave like a gentleman." And having pulled the boy's hair by

way of a caress, Mr. Laurence walked on, while Laurie went through a

series of comic evolutions behind their backs, which nearly produced an

explosion of laughter from Jo.

The old gentleman did not say much as he drank his four cups of tea,

but he watched the young people, who soon chatted away like old

friends, and the change in his grandson did not escape him. There was

color, light, and life in the boy's face now, vivacity in his manner,

and genuine merriment in his laugh.

"She's right, the lad is lonely. I'll see what these little girls can

do for him," thought Mr. Laurence, as he looked and listened. He liked

Jo, for her odd, blunt ways suited him, and she seemed to understand

the boy almost as well as if she had been one herself.

If the Laurences had been what Jo called 'prim and poky', she would not

have got on at all, for such people always made her shy and awkward.

But finding them free and easy, she was so herself, and made a good

impression. When they rose she proposed to go, but Laurie said he had

something more to show her, and took her away to the conservatory,

which had been lighted for her benefit. It seemed quite fairylike to

Jo, as she went up and down the walks, enjoying the blooming walls on

either side, the soft light, the damp sweet air, and the wonderful

vines and trees that hung about her, while her new friend cut the

finest flowers till his hands were full. Then he tied them up, saying,

with the happy look Jo liked to see, "Please give these to your mother,

and tell her I like the medicine she sent me very much."

They found Mr. Laurence standing before the fire in the great drawing

room, but Jo's attention was entirely absorbed by a grand piano, which

stood open.

"Do you play?" she asked, turning to Laurie with a respectful

expression.

"Sometimes," he answered modestly.

"Please do now. I want to hear it, so I can tell Beth."

"Won't you first?"

"Don't know how. Too stupid to learn, but I love music dearly."

So Laurie played and Jo listened, with her nose luxuriously buried in

heliotrope and tea roses. Her respect and regard for the 'Laurence'

boy increased very much, for he played remarkably well and didn't put

on any airs. She wished Beth could hear him, but she did not say so,

only praised him till he was quite abashed, and his grandfather came to

his rescue.

"That will do, that will do, young lady. Too many sugarplums are not

good for him. His music isn't bad, but I hope he will do as well in

more important things. Going? well, I'm much obliged to you, and I

hope you'll come again. My respects to your mother. Good night, Doctor

Jo."

He shook hands kindly, but looked as if something did not please him.

When they got into the hall, Jo asked Laurie if she had said something

amiss. He shook his head.

"No, it was me. He doesn't like to hear me play."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you some day. John is going home with you, as I can't."

"No need of that. I am not a young lady, and it's only a step. Take

care of yourself, won't you?"

"Yes, but you will come again, I hope?"

"If you promise to come and see us after you are well."

"I will."

"Good night, Laurie!"

"Good night, Jo, good night!"

When all the afternoon's adventures had been told, the family felt

inclined to go visiting in a body, for each found something very

attractive in the big house on the other side of the hedge. Mrs. March

wanted to talk of her father with the old man who had not forgotten

him, Meg longed to walk in the conservatory, Beth sighed for the grand

piano, and Amy was eager to see the fine pictures and statues.

"Mother, why didn't Mr. Laurence like to have Laurie play?" asked Jo,

who was of an inquiring disposition.

"I am not sure, but I think it was because his son, Laurie's father,

married an Italian lady, a musician, which displeased the old man, who

is very proud. The lady was good and lovely and accomplished, but he

did not like her, and never saw his son after he married. They both

died when Laurie was a little child, and then his grandfather took him

home. I fancy the boy, who was born in Italy, is not very strong, and

the old man is afraid of losing him, which makes him so careful.

Laurie comes naturally by his love of music, for he is like his mother,

and I dare say his grandfather fears that he may want to be a musician.

At any rate, his skill reminds him of the woman he did not like, and so

he 'glowered' as Jo said."

"Dear me, how romantic!" exclaimed Meg.

"How silly!" said Jo. "Let him be a musician if he wants to, and not

plague his life out sending him to college, when he hates to go."

"That's why he has such handsome black eyes and pretty manners, I

suppose. Italians are always nice," said Meg, who was a little

sentimental.

"What do you know about his eyes and his manners? You never spoke to

him, hardly," cried Jo, who was not sentimental.

"I saw him at the party, and what you tell shows that he knows how to

behave. That was a nice little speech about the medicine Mother sent

him."

"He meant the blanc mange, I suppose."

"How stupid you are, child! He meant you, of course."

"Did he?" And Jo opened her eyes as if it had never occurred to her

before.

"I never saw such a girl! You don't know a compliment when you get

it," said Meg, with the air of a young lady who knew all about the

matter.

"I think they are great nonsense, and I'll thank you not to be silly

and spoil my fun. Laurie's a nice boy and I like him, and I won't have

any sentimental stuff about compliments and such rubbish. We'll all be

good to him because he hasn't got any mother, and he may come over and

see us, mayn't he, Marmee?"

"Yes, Jo, your little friend is very welcome, and I hope Meg will

remember that children should be children as long as they can."

"I don't call myself a child, and I'm not in my teens yet," observed

Amy. "What do you say, Beth?"

"I was thinking about our '\_Pilgrim's Progress\_'," answered Beth, who

had not heard a word. "How we got out of the Slough and through the

Wicket Gate by resolving to be good, and up the steep hill by trying,

and that maybe the house over there, full of splendid things, is going

to be our Palace Beautiful."

"We have got to get by the lions first," said Jo, as if she rather

liked the prospect.

CHAPTER SIX

BETH FINDS THE PALACE BEAUTIFUL

The big house did prove a Palace Beautiful, though it took some time

for all to get in, and Beth found it very hard to pass the lions. Old

Mr. Laurence was the biggest one, but after he had called, said

something funny or kind to each one of the girls, and talked over old

times with their mother, nobody felt much afraid of him, except timid

Beth. The other lion was the fact that they were poor and Laurie rich,

for this made them shy of accepting favors which they could not return.

But, after a while, they found that he considered them the benefactors,

and could not do enough to show how grateful he was for Mrs. March's

motherly welcome, their cheerful society, and the comfort he took in

that humble home of theirs. So they soon forgot their pride and

interchanged kindnesses without stopping to think which was the greater.

All sorts of pleasant things happened about that time, for the new

friendship flourished like grass in spring. Every one liked Laurie,

and he privately informed his tutor that "the Marches were regularly

splendid girls." With the delightful enthusiasm of youth, they took

the solitary boy into their midst and made much of him, and he found

something very charming in the innocent companionship of these

simple-hearted girls. Never having known mother or sisters, he was

quick to feel the influences they brought about him, and their busy,

lively ways made him ashamed of the indolent life he led. He was tired

of books, and found people so interesting now that Mr. Brooke was

obliged to make very unsatisfactory reports, for Laurie was always

playing truant and running over to the Marches'.

"Never mind, let him take a holiday, and make it up afterward," said

the old gentleman. "The good lady next door says he is studying too

hard and needs young society, amusement, and exercise. I suspect she

is right, and that I've been coddling the fellow as if I'd been his

grandmother. Let him do what he likes, as long as he is happy. He

can't get into mischief in that little nunnery over there, and Mrs.

March is doing more for him than we can."

What good times they had, to be sure. Such plays and tableaux, such

sleigh rides and skating frolics, such pleasant evenings in the old

parlor, and now and then such gay little parties at the great house.

Meg could walk in the conservatory whenever she liked and revel in

bouquets, Jo browsed over the new library voraciously, and convulsed

the old gentleman with her criticisms, Amy copied pictures and enjoyed

beauty to her heart's content, and Laurie played 'lord of the manor' in

the most delightful style.

But Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up

courage to go to the 'Mansion of Bliss', as Meg called it. She went

once with Jo, but the old gentleman, not being aware of her infirmity,

stared at her so hard from under his heavy eyebrows, and said "Hey!" so

loud, that he frightened her so much her 'feet chattered on the floor',

she never told her mother, and she ran away, declaring she would never

go there any more, not even for the dear piano. No persuasions or

enticements could overcome her fear, till, the fact coming to Mr.

Laurence's ear in some mysterious way, he set about mending matters.

During one of the brief calls he made, he artfully led the conversation

to music, and talked away about great singers whom he had seen, fine

organs he had heard, and told such charming anecdotes that Beth found

it impossible to stay in her distant corner, but crept nearer and

nearer, as if fascinated. At the back of his chair she stopped and

stood listening, with her great eyes wide open and her cheeks red with

excitement of this unusual performance. Taking no more notice of her

than if she had been a fly, Mr. Laurence talked on about Laurie's

lessons and teachers. And presently, as if the idea had just occurred

to him, he said to Mrs. March...

"The boy neglects his music now, and I'm glad of it, for he was getting

too fond of it. But the piano suffers for want of use. Wouldn't some

of your girls like to run over, and practice on it now and then, just

to keep it in tune, you know, ma'am?"

Beth took a step forward, and pressed her hands tightly together to

keep from clapping them, for this was an irresistible temptation, and

the thought of practicing on that splendid instrument quite took her

breath away. Before Mrs. March could reply, Mr. Laurence went on with

an odd little nod and smile...

"They needn't see or speak to anyone, but run in at any time. For I'm

shut up in my study at the other end of the house, Laurie is out a

great deal, and the servants are never near the drawing room after nine

o'clock."

Here he rose, as if going, and Beth made up her mind to speak, for that

last arrangement left nothing to be desired. "Please, tell the young

ladies what I say, and if they don't care to come, why, never mind."

Here a little hand slipped into his, and Beth looked up at him with a

face full of gratitude, as she said, in her earnest yet timid way...

"Oh sir, they do care, very very much!"

"Are you the musical girl?" he asked, without any startling "Hey!" as

he looked down at her very kindly.

"I'm Beth. I love it dearly, and I'll come, if you are quite sure

nobody will hear me, and be disturbed," she added, fearing to be rude,

and trembling at her own boldness as she spoke.

"Not a soul, my dear. The house is empty half the day, so come and

drum away as much as you like, and I shall be obliged to you."

"How kind you are, sir!"

Beth blushed like a rose under the friendly look he wore, but she was

not frightened now, and gave the hand a grateful squeeze because she

had no words to thank him for the precious gift he had given her. The

old gentleman softly stroked the hair off her forehead, and, stooping

down, he kissed her, saying, in a tone few people ever heard...

"I had a little girl once, with eyes like these. God bless you, my

dear! Good day, madam." And away he went, in a great hurry.

Beth had a rapture with her mother, and then rushed up to impart the

glorious news to her family of invalids, as the girls were not home.

How blithely she sang that evening, and how they all laughed at her

because she woke Amy in the night by playing the piano on her face in

her sleep. Next day, having seen both the old and young gentleman out

of the house, Beth, after two or three retreats, fairly got in at the

side door, and made her way as noiselessly as any mouse to the drawing

room where her idol stood. Quite by accident, of course, some pretty,

easy music lay on the piano, and with trembling fingers and frequent

stops to listen and look about, Beth at last touched the great

instrument, and straightway forgot her fear, herself, and everything

else but the unspeakable delight which the music gave her, for it was

like the voice of a beloved friend.

She stayed till Hannah came to take her home to dinner, but she had no

appetite, and could only sit and smile upon everyone in a general state

of beatitude.

After that, the little brown hood slipped through the hedge nearly

every day, and the great drawing room was haunted by a tuneful spirit

that came and went unseen. She never knew that Mr. Laurence opened his

study door to hear the old-fashioned airs he liked. She never saw

Laurie mount guard in the hall to warn the servants away. She never

suspected that the exercise books and new songs which she found in the

rack were put there for her especial benefit, and when he talked to her

about music at home, she only thought how kind he was to tell things

that helped her so much. So she enjoyed herself heartily, and found,

what isn't always the case, that her granted wish was all she had

hoped. Perhaps it was because she was so grateful for this blessing

that a greater was given her. At any rate she deserved both.

"Mother, I'm going to work Mr. Laurence a pair of slippers. He is so

kind to me, I must thank him, and I don't know any other way. Can I do

it?" asked Beth, a few weeks after that eventful call of his.

"Yes, dear. It will please him very much, and be a nice way of

thanking him. The girls will help you about them, and I will pay for

the making up," replied Mrs. March, who took peculiar pleasure in

granting Beth's requests because she so seldom asked anything for

herself.

After many serious discussions with Meg and Jo, the pattern was chosen,

the materials bought, and the slippers begun. A cluster of grave yet

cheerful pansies on a deeper purple ground was pronounced very

appropriate and pretty, and Beth worked away early and late, with

occasional lifts over hard parts. She was a nimble little needlewoman,

and they were finished before anyone got tired of them. Then she wrote

a short, simple note, and with Laurie's help, got them smuggled onto

the study table one morning before the old gentleman was up.

When this excitement was over, Beth waited to see what would happen.

All day passed and a part of the next before any acknowledgement

arrived, and she was beginning to fear she had offended her crochety

friend. On the afternoon of the second day, she went out to do an

errand, and give poor Joanna, the invalid doll, her daily exercise. As

she came up the street, on her return, she saw three, yes, four heads

popping in and out of the parlor windows, and the moment they saw her,

several hands were waved, and several joyful voices screamed...

"Here's a letter from the old gentleman! Come quick, and read it!"

"Oh, Beth, he's sent you..." began Amy, gesticulating with unseemly

energy, but she got no further, for Jo quenched her by slamming down

the window.

Beth hurried on in a flutter of suspense. At the door her sisters

seized and bore her to the parlor in a triumphal procession, all

pointing and all saying at once, "Look there! Look there!" Beth did

look, and turned pale with delight and surprise, for there stood a

little cabinet piano, with a letter lying on the glossy lid, directed

like a sign board to "Miss Elizabeth March."

"For me?" gasped Beth, holding onto Jo and feeling as if she should

tumble down, it was such an overwhelming thing altogether.

"Yes, all for you, my precious! Isn't it splendid of him? Don't you

think he's the dearest old man in the world? Here's the key in the

letter. We didn't open it, but we are dying to know what he says,"

cried Jo, hugging her sister and offering the note.

"You read it! I can't, I feel so queer! Oh, it is too lovely!" and

Beth hid her face in Jo's apron, quite upset by her present.

Jo opened the paper and began to laugh, for the first words she saw

were...

"Miss March: "Dear Madam--"

"How nice it sounds! I wish someone would write to me so!" said Amy,

who thought the old-fashioned address very elegant.

"'I have had many pairs of slippers in my life, but I never had any

that suited me so well as yours,'" continues Jo. "'Heart's-ease is my

favorite flower, and these will always remind me of the gentle giver.

I like to pay my debts, so I know you will allow 'the old gentleman' to

send you something which once belonged to the little grand daughter he

lost. With hearty thanks and best wishes, I remain "'Your grateful

friend and humble servant, 'JAMES LAURENCE'."

"There, Beth, that's an honor to be proud of, I'm sure! Laurie told me

how fond Mr. Laurence used to be of the child who died, and how he kept

all her little things carefully. Just think, he's given you her piano.

That comes of having big blue eyes and loving music," said Jo, trying

to soothe Beth, who trembled and looked more excited than she had ever

been before.

"See the cunning brackets to hold candles, and the nice green silk,

puckered up, with a gold rose in the middle, and the pretty rack and

stool, all complete," added Meg, opening the instrument and displaying

its beauties.

"'Your humble servant, James Laurence'. Only think of his writing that

to you. I'll tell the girls. They'll think it's splendid," said Amy,

much impressed by the note.

"Try it, honey. Let's hear the sound of the baby pianny," said Hannah,

who always took a share in the family joys and sorrows.

So Beth tried it, and everyone pronounced it the most remarkable piano

ever heard. It had evidently been newly tuned and put in apple-pie

order, but, perfect as it was, I think the real charm lay in the

happiest of all happy faces which leaned over it, as Beth lovingly

touched the beautiful black and white keys and pressed the bright

pedals.

"You'll have to go and thank him," said Jo, by way of a joke, for the

idea of the child's really going never entered her head.

"Yes, I mean to. I guess I'll go now, before I get frightened thinking

about it." And, to the utter amazement of the assembled family, Beth

walked deliberately down the garden, through the hedge, and in at the

Laurences' door.

"Well, I wish I may die if it ain't the queerest thing I ever see! The

pianny has turned her head! She'd never have gone in her right mind,"

cried Hannah, staring after her, while the girls were rendered quite

speechless by the miracle.

They would have been still more amazed if they had seen what Beth did

afterward. If you will believe me, she went and knocked at the study

door before she gave herself time to think, and when a gruff voice

called out, "come in!" she did go in, right up to Mr. Laurence, who

looked quite taken aback, and held out her hand, saying, with only a

small quaver in her voice, "I came to thank you, sir, for..." But she

didn't finish, for he looked so friendly that she forgot her speech

and, only remembering that he had lost the little girl he loved, she

put both arms round his neck and kissed him.

If the roof of the house had suddenly flown off, the old gentleman

wouldn't have been more astonished. But he liked it. Oh, dear, yes, he

liked it amazingly! And was so touched and pleased by that confiding

little kiss that all his crustiness vanished, and he just set her on

his knee, and laid his wrinkled cheek against her rosy one, feeling as

if he had got his own little granddaughter back again. Beth ceased to

fear him from that moment, and sat there talking to him as cozily as if

she had known him all her life, for love casts out fear, and gratitude

can conquer pride. When she went home, he walked with her to her own

gate, shook hands cordially, and touched his hat as he marched back

again, looking very stately and erect, like a handsome, soldierly old

gentleman, as he was.

When the girls saw that performance, Jo began to dance a jig, by way of

expressing her satisfaction, Amy nearly fell out of the window in her

surprise, and Meg exclaimed, with up-lifted hands, "Well, I do believe

the world is coming to an end."

CHAPTER SEVEN

AMY'S VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

"That boy is a perfect cyclops, isn't he?" said Amy one day, as Laurie

clattered by on horseback, with a flourish of his whip as he passed.

"How dare you say so, when he's got both his eyes? And very handsome

ones they are, too," cried Jo, who resented any slighting remarks about

her friend.

"I didn't say anything about his eyes, and I don't see why you need

fire up when I admire his riding."

"Oh, my goodness! That little goose means a centaur, and she called

him a Cyclops," exclaimed Jo, with a burst of laughter.

"You needn't be so rude, it's only a 'lapse of lingy', as Mr. Davis

says," retorted Amy, finishing Jo with her Latin. "I just wish I had a

little of the money Laurie spends on that horse," she added, as if to

herself, yet hoping her sisters would hear.

"Why?" asked Meg kindly, for Jo had gone off in another laugh at Amy's

second blunder.

"I need it so much. I'm dreadfully in debt, and it won't be my turn to

have the rag money for a month."

"In debt, Amy? What do you mean?" And Meg looked sober.

"Why, I owe at least a dozen pickled limes, and I can't pay them, you

know, till I have money, for Marmee forbade my having anything charged

at the shop."

"Tell me all about it. Are limes the fashion now? It used to be

pricking bits of rubber to make balls." And Meg tried to keep her

countenance, Amy looked so grave and important.

"Why, you see, the girls are always buying them, and unless you want to

be thought mean, you must do it too. It's nothing but limes now, for

everyone is sucking them in their desks in schooltime, and trading them

off for pencils, bead rings, paper dolls, or something else, at recess.

If one girl likes another, she gives her a lime. If she's mad with

her, she eats one before her face, and doesn't offer even a suck. They

treat by turns, and I've had ever so many but haven't returned them,

and I ought for they are debts of honor, you know."

"How much will pay them off and restore your credit?" asked Meg, taking

out her purse.

"A quarter would more than do it, and leave a few cents over for a

treat for you. Don't you like limes?"

"Not much. You may have my share. Here's the money. Make it last as

long as you can, for it isn't very plenty, you know."

"Oh, thank you! It must be so nice to have pocket money! I'll have a

grand feast, for I haven't tasted a lime this week. I felt delicate

about taking any, as I couldn't return them, and I'm actually suffering

for one."

Next day Amy was rather late at school, but could not resist the

temptation of displaying, with pardonable pride, a moist brown-paper

parcel, before she consigned it to the inmost recesses of her desk.

During the next few minutes the rumor that Amy March had got

twenty-four delicious limes (she ate one on the way) and was going to

treat circulated through her 'set', and the attentions of her friends

became quite overwhelming. Katy Brown invited her to her next party on

the spot. Mary Kinglsey insisted on lending her her watch till recess,

and Jenny Snow, a satirical young lady, who had basely twitted Amy upon

her limeless state, promptly buried the hatchet and offered to furnish

answers to certain appalling sums. But Amy had not forgotten Miss

Snow's cutting remarks about 'some persons whose noses were not too

flat to smell other people's limes, and stuck-up people who were not

too proud to ask for them', and she instantly crushed 'that Snow

girl's' hopes by the withering telegram, "You needn't be so polite all

of a sudden, for you won't get any."

A distinguished personage happened to visit the school that morning,

and Amy's beautifully drawn maps received praise, which honor to her

foe rankled in the soul of Miss Snow, and caused Miss March to assume

the airs of a studious young peacock. But, alas, alas! Pride goes

before a fall, and the revengeful Snow turned the tables with

disastrous success. No sooner had the guest paid the usual stale

compliments and bowed himself out, than Jenny, under pretense of asking

an important question, informed Mr. Davis, the teacher, that Amy March

had pickled limes in her desk.

Now Mr. Davis had declared limes a contraband article, and solemnly

vowed to publicly ferrule the first person who was found breaking the

law. This much-enduring man had succeeded in banishing chewing gum

after a long and stormy war, had made a bonfire of the confiscated

novels and newspapers, had suppressed a private post office, had

forbidden distortions of the face, nicknames, and caricatures, and done

all that one man could do to keep half a hundred rebellious girls in

order. Boys are trying enough to human patience, goodness knows, but

girls are infinitely more so, especially to nervous gentlemen with

tyrannical tempers and no more talent for teaching than Dr. Blimber.

Mr. Davis knew any quantity of Greek, Latin, algebra, and ologies of

all sorts so he was called a fine teacher, and manners, morals,

feelings, and examples were not considered of any particular

importance. It was a most unfortunate moment for denouncing Amy, and

Jenny knew it. Mr. Davis had evidently taken his coffee too strong

that morning, there was an east wind, which always affected his

neuralgia, and his pupils had not done him the credit which he felt he

deserved. Therefore, to use the expressive, if not elegant, language

of a schoolgirl, "He was as nervous as a witch and as cross as a bear".

The word 'limes' was like fire to powder, his yellow face flushed, and

he rapped on his desk with an energy which made Jenny skip to her seat

with unusual rapidity.

"Young ladies, attention, if you please!"

At the stern order the buzz ceased, and fifty pairs of blue, black,

gray, and brown eyes were obediently fixed upon his awful countenance.

"Miss March, come to the desk."

Amy rose to comply with outward composure, but a secret fear oppressed

her, for the limes weighed upon her conscience.

"Bring with you the limes you have in your desk," was the unexpected

command which arrested her before she got out of her seat.

"Don't take all." whispered her neighbor, a young lady of great

presence of mind.

Amy hastily shook out half a dozen and laid the rest down before Mr.

Davis, feeling that any man possessing a human heart would relent when

that delicious perfume met his nose. Unfortunately, Mr. Davis

particularly detested the odor of the fashionable pickle, and disgust

added to his wrath.

"Is that all?"

"Not quite," stammered Amy.

"Bring the rest immediately."

With a despairing glance at her set, she obeyed.

"You are sure there are no more?"

"I never lie, sir."

"So I see. Now take these disgusting things two by two, and throw them

out of the window."

There was a simultaneous sigh, which created quite a little gust, as

the last hope fled, and the treat was ravished from their longing lips.

Scarlet with shame and anger, Amy went to and fro six dreadful times,

and as each doomed couple, looking oh, so plump and juicy, fell from

her reluctant hands, a shout from the street completed the anguish of

the girls, for it told them that their feast was being exulted over by

the little Irish children, who were their sworn foes. This--this was

too much. All flashed indignant or appealing glances at the inexorable

Davis, and one passionate lime lover burst into tears.

As Amy returned from her last trip, Mr. Davis gave a portentous "Hem!"

and said, in his most impressive manner...

"Young ladies, you remember what I said to you a week ago. I am sorry

this has happened, but I never allow my rules to be infringed, and I

never break my word. Miss March, hold out your hand."

Amy started, and put both hands behind her, turning on him an imploring

look which pleaded for her better than the words she could not utter.

She was rather a favorite with 'old Davis', as, of course, he was

called, and it's my private belief that he would have broken his word

if the indignation of one irrepressible young lady had not found vent

in a hiss. That hiss, faint as it was, irritated the irascible

gentleman, and sealed the culprit's fate.

"Your hand, Miss March!" was the only answer her mute appeal received,

and too proud to cry or beseech, Amy set her teeth, threw back her head

defiantly, and bore without flinching several tingling blows on her

little palm. They were neither many nor heavy, but that made no

difference to her. For the first time in her life she had been struck,

and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her

down.

"You will now stand on the platform till recess," said Mr. Davis,

resolved to do the thing thoroughly, since he had begun.

That was dreadful. It would have been bad enough to go to her seat,

and see the pitying faces of her friends, or the satisfied ones of her

few enemies, but to face the whole school, with that shame fresh upon

her, seemed impossible, and for a second she felt as if she could only

drop down where she stood, and break her heart with crying. A bitter

sense of wrong and the thought of Jenny Snow helped her to bear it,

and, taking the ignominious place, she fixed her eyes on the stove

funnel above what now seemed a sea of faces, and stood there, so

motionless and white that the girls found it hard to study with that

pathetic figure before them.

During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive

little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. To

others it might seem a ludicrous or trivial affair, but to her it was a

hard experience, for during the twelve years of her life she had been

governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her

before. The smart of her hand and the ache of her heart were forgotten

in the sting of the thought, "I shall have to tell at home, and they

will be so disappointed in me!"

The fifteen minutes seemed an hour, but they came to an end at last,

and the word 'Recess!' had never seemed so welcome to her before.

"You can go, Miss March," said Mr. Davis, looking, as he felt,

uncomfortable.

He did not soon forget the reproachful glance Amy gave him, as she

went, without a word to anyone, straight into the anteroom, snatched

her things, and left the place "forever," as she passionately declared

to herself. She was in a sad state when she got home, and when the

older girls arrived, some time later, an indignation meeting was held

at once. Mrs. March did not say much but looked disturbed, and

comforted her afflicted little daughter in her tenderest manner. Meg

bathed the insulted hand with glycerine and tears, Beth felt that even

her beloved kittens would fail as a balm for griefs like this, Jo

wrathfully proposed that Mr. Davis be arrested without delay, and

Hannah shook her fist at the 'villain' and pounded potatoes for dinner

as if she had him under her pestle.

No notice was taken of Amy's flight, except by her mates, but the

sharp-eyed demoiselles discovered that Mr. Davis was quite benignant in

the afternoon, also unusually nervous. Just before school closed, Jo

appeared, wearing a grim expression as she stalked up to the desk, and

delivered a letter from her mother, then collected Amy's property, and

departed, carefully scraping the mud from her boots on the door mat, as

if she shook the dust of the place off her feet.

"Yes, you can have a vacation from school, but I want you to study a

little every day with Beth," said Mrs. March that evening. "I don't

approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls. I dislike Mr.

Davis's manner of teaching and don't think the girls you associate with

are doing you any good, so I shall ask your father's advice before I

send you anywhere else."

"That's good! I wish all the girls would leave, and spoil his old

school. It's perfectly maddening to think of those lovely limes,"

sighed Amy, with the air of a martyr.

"I am not sorry you lost them, for you broke the rules, and deserved

some punishment for disobedience," was the severe reply, which rather

disappointed the young lady, who expected nothing but sympathy.

"Do you mean you are glad I was disgraced before the whole school?"

cried Amy.

"I should not have chosen that way of mending a fault," replied her

mother, "but I'm not sure that it won't do you more good than a bolder

method. You are getting to be rather conceited, my dear, and it is

quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little

gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit

spoils the finest genius. There is not much danger that real talent or

goodness will be overlooked long, even if it is, the consciousness of

possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of

all power is modesty."

"So it is!" cried Laurie, who was playing chess in a corner with Jo.

"I knew a girl once, who had a really remarkable talent for music, and

she didn't know it, never guessed what sweet little things she composed

when she was alone, and wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told

her."

"I wish I'd known that nice girl. Maybe she would have helped me, I'm

so stupid," said Beth, who stood beside him, listening eagerly.

"You do know her, and she helps you better than anyone else could,"

answered Laurie, looking at her with such mischievous meaning in his

merry black eyes that Beth suddenly turned very red, and hid her face

in the sofa cushion, quite overcome by such an unexpected discovery.

Jo let Laurie win the game to pay for that praise of her Beth, who

could not be prevailed upon to play for them after her compliment. So

Laurie did his best, and sang delightfully, being in a particularly

lively humor, for to the Marches he seldom showed the moody side of his

character. When he was gone, Amy, who had been pensive all evening,

said suddenly, as if busy over some new idea, "Is Laurie an

accomplished boy?"

"Yes, he has had an excellent education, and has much talent. He will

make a fine man, if not spoiled by petting," replied her mother.

"And he isn't conceited, is he?" asked Amy.

"Not in the least. That is why he is so charming and we all like him

so much."

"I see. It's nice to have accomplishments and be elegant, but not to

show off or get perked up," said Amy thoughtfully.

"These things are always seen and felt in a person's manner and

conversations, if modestly used, but it is not necessary to display

them," said Mrs. March.

"Any more than it's proper to wear all your bonnets and gowns and

ribbons at once, that folks may know you've got them," added Jo, and

the lecture ended in a laugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JO MEETS APOLLYON

"Girls, where are you going?" asked Amy, coming into their room one

Saturday afternoon, and finding them getting ready to go out with an

air of secrecy which excited her curiosity.

"Never mind. Little girls shouldn't ask questions," returned Jo

sharply.

Now if there is anything mortifying to our feelings when we are young,

it is to be told that, and to be bidden to "run away, dear" is still

more trying to us. Amy bridled up at this insult, and determined to

find out the secret, if she teased for an hour. Turning to Meg, who

never refused her anything very long, she said coaxingly, "Do tell me!

I should think you might let me go, too, for Beth is fussing over her

piano, and I haven't got anything to do, and am so lonely."

"I can't, dear, because you aren't invited," began Meg, but Jo broke in

impatiently, "Now, Meg, be quiet or you will spoil it all. You can't

go, Amy, so don't be a baby and whine about it."

"You are going somewhere with Laurie, I know you are. You were

whispering and laughing together on the sofa last night, and you

stopped when I came in. Aren't you going with him?"

"Yes, we are. Now do be still, and stop bothering."

Amy held her tongue, but used her eyes, and saw Meg slip a fan into her

pocket.

"I know! I know! You're going to the theater to see the \_Seven

Castles!\_" she cried, adding resolutely, "and I shall go, for Mother

said I might see it, and I've got my rag money, and it was mean not to

tell me in time."

"Just listen to me a minute, and be a good child," said Meg soothingly.

"Mother doesn't wish you to go this week, because your eyes are not

well enough yet to bear the light of this fairy piece. Next week you

can go with Beth and Hannah, and have a nice time."

"I don't like that half as well as going with you and Laurie. Please

let me. I've been sick with this cold so long, and shut up, I'm dying

for some fun. Do, Meg! I'll be ever so good," pleaded Amy, looking as

pathetic as she could.

"Suppose we take her. I don't believe Mother would mind, if we bundle

her up well," began Meg.

"If she goes I shan't, and if I don't, Laurie won't like it, and it

will be very rude, after he invited only us, to go and drag in Amy. I

should think she'd hate to poke herself where she isn't wanted," said

Jo crossly, for she disliked the trouble of overseeing a fidgety child

when she wanted to enjoy herself.

Her tone and manner angered Amy, who began to put her boots on, saying,

in her most aggravating way, "I shall go. Meg says I may, and if I pay

for myself, Laurie hasn't anything to do with it."

"You can't sit with us, for our seats are reserved, and you mustn't sit

alone, so Laurie will give you his place, and that will spoil our

pleasure. Or he'll get another seat for you, and that isn't proper

when you weren't asked. You shan't stir a step, so you may just stay

where you are," scolded Jo, crosser than ever, having just pricked her

finger in her hurry.

Sitting on the floor with one boot on, Amy began to cry and Meg to

reason with her, when Laurie called from below, and the two girls

hurried down, leaving their sister wailing. For now and then she

forgot her grown-up ways and acted like a spoiled child. Just as the

party was setting out, Amy called over the banisters in a threatening

tone, "You'll be sorry for this, Jo March, see if you ain't."

"Fiddlesticks!" returned Jo, slamming the door.

They had a charming time, for \_The Seven Castles Of The Diamond Lake\_

was as brilliant and wonderful as heart could wish. But in spite of the

comical red imps, sparkling elves, and the gorgeous princes and

princesses, Jo's pleasure had a drop of bitterness in it. The fairy

queen's yellow curls reminded her of Amy, and between the acts she

amused herself with wondering what her sister would do to make her

'sorry for it'. She and Amy had had many lively skirmishes in the

course of their lives, for both had quick tempers and were apt to be

violent when fairly roused. Amy teased Jo, and Jo irritated Amy, and

semioccasional explosions occurred, of which both were much ashamed

afterward. Although the oldest, Jo had the least self-control, and had

hard times trying to curb the fiery spirit which was continually

getting her into trouble. Her anger never lasted long, and having

humbly confessed her fault, she sincerely repented and tried to do

better. Her sisters used to say that they rather liked to get Jo into a

fury because she was such an angel afterward. Poor Jo tried

desperately to be good, but her bosom enemy was always ready to flame

up and defeat her, and it took years of patient effort to subdue it.

When they got home, they found Amy reading in the parlor. She assumed

an injured air as they came in, never lifted her eyes from her book, or

asked a single question. Perhaps curiosity might have conquered

resentment, if Beth had not been there to inquire and receive a glowing

description of the play. On going up to put away her best hat, Jo's

first look was toward the bureau, for in their last quarrel Amy had

soothed her feelings by turning Jo's top drawer upside down on the

floor. Everything was in its place, however, and after a hasty glance

into her various closets, bags, and boxes, Jo decided that Amy had

forgiven and forgotten her wrongs.

There Jo was mistaken, for next day she made a discovery which produced

a tempest. Meg, Beth, and Amy were sitting together, late in the

afternoon, when Jo burst into the room, looking excited and demanding

breathlessly, "Has anyone taken my book?"

Meg and Beth said, "No." at once, and looked surprised. Amy poked the

fire and said nothing. Jo saw her color rise and was down upon her in

a minute.

"Amy, you've got it!"

"No, I haven't."

"You know where it is, then!"

"No, I don't."

"That's a fib!" cried Jo, taking her by the shoulders, and looking

fierce enough to frighten a much braver child than Amy.

"It isn't. I haven't got it, don't know where it is now, and don't

care."

"You know something about it, and you'd better tell at once, or I'll

make you." And Jo gave her a slight shake.

"Scold as much as you like, you'll never see your silly old book

again," cried Amy, getting excited in her turn.

"Why not?"

"I burned it up."

"What! My little book I was so fond of, and worked over, and meant to

finish before Father got home? Have you really burned it?" said Jo,

turning very pale, while her eyes kindled and her hands clutched Amy

nervously.

"Yes, I did! I told you I'd make you pay for being so cross yesterday,

and I have, so..."

Amy got no farther, for Jo's hot temper mastered her, and she shook Amy

till her teeth chattered in her head, crying in a passion of grief and

anger...

"You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never

forgive you as long as I live."

Meg flew to rescue Amy, and Beth to pacify Jo, but Jo was quite beside

herself, and with a parting box on her sister's ear, she rushed out of

the room up to the old sofa in the garret, and finished her fight alone.

The storm cleared up below, for Mrs. March came home, and, having heard

the story, soon brought Amy to a sense of the wrong she had done her

sister. Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her

family as a literary sprout of great promise. It was only half a dozen

little fairy tales, but Jo had worked over them patiently, putting her

whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to

print. She had just copied them with great care, and had destroyed the

old manuscript, so that Amy's bonfire had consumed the loving work of

several years. It seemed a small loss to others, but to Jo it was a

dreadful calamity, and she felt that it never could be made up to her.

Beth mourned as for a departed kitten, and Meg refused to defend her

pet. Mrs. March looked grave and grieved, and Amy felt that no one

would love her till she had asked pardon for the act which she now

regretted more than any of them.

When the tea bell rang, Jo appeared, looking so grim and unapproachable

that it took all Amy's courage to say meekly...

"Please forgive me, Jo. I'm very, very sorry."

"I never shall forgive you," was Jo's stern answer, and from that

moment she ignored Amy entirely.

No one spoke of the great trouble, not even Mrs. March, for all had

learned by experience that when Jo was in that mood words were wasted,

and the wisest course was to wait till some little accident, or her own

generous nature, softened Jo's resentment and healed the breach. It

was not a happy evening, for though they sewed as usual, while their

mother read aloud from Bremer, Scott, or Edgeworth, something was

wanting, and the sweet home peace was disturbed. They felt this most

when singing time came, for Beth could only play, Jo stood dumb as a

stone, and Amy broke down, so Meg and Mother sang alone. But in spite

of their efforts to be as cheery as larks, the flutelike voices did not

seem to chord as well as usual, and all felt out of tune.

As Jo received her good-night kiss, Mrs. March whispered gently, "My

dear, don't let the sun go down upon your anger. Forgive each other,

help each other, and begin again tomorrow."

Jo wanted to lay her head down on that motherly bosom, and cry her

grief and anger all away, but tears were an unmanly weakness, and she

felt so deeply injured that she really couldn't quite forgive yet. So

she winked hard, shook her head, and said gruffly because Amy was

listening, "It was an abominable thing, and she doesn't deserve to be

forgiven."

With that she marched off to bed, and there was no merry or

confidential gossip that night.

Amy was much offended that her overtures of peace had been repulsed,

and began to wish she had not humbled herself, to feel more injured

than ever, and to plume herself on her superior virtue in a way which

was particularly exasperating. Jo still looked like a thunder cloud,

and nothing went well all day. It was bitter cold in the morning, she

dropped her precious turnover in the gutter, Aunt March had an attack

of the fidgets, Meg was sensitive, Beth would look grieved and wistful

when she got home, and Amy kept making remarks about people who were

always talking about being good and yet wouldn't even try when other

people set them a virtuous example.

"Everybody is so hateful, I'll ask Laurie to go skating. He is always

kind and jolly, and will put me to rights, I know," said Jo to herself,

and off she went.

Amy heard the clash of skates, and looked out with an impatient

exclamation.

"There! She promised I should go next time, for this is the last ice

we shall have. But it's no use to ask such a crosspatch to take me."

"Don't say that. You were very naughty, and it is hard to forgive the

loss of her precious little book, but I think she might do it now, and

I guess she will, if you try her at the right minute," said Meg. "Go

after them. Don't say anything till Jo has got good-natured with

Laurie, than take a quiet minute and just kiss her, or do some kind

thing, and I'm sure she'll be friends again with all her heart."

"I'll try," said Amy, for the advice suited her, and after a flurry to

get ready, she ran after the friends, who were just disappearing over

the hill.

It was not far to the river, but both were ready before Amy reached

them. Jo saw her coming, and turned her back. Laurie did not see, for

he was carefully skating along the shore, sounding the ice, for a warm

spell had preceded the cold snap.

"I'll go on to the first bend, and see if it's all right before we

begin to race," Amy heard him say, as he shot away, looking like a

young Russian in his fur-trimmed coat and cap.

Jo heard Amy panting after her run, stamping her feet and blowing on

her fingers as she tried to put her skates on, but Jo never turned and

went slowly zigzagging down the river, taking a bitter, unhappy sort of

satisfaction in her sister's troubles. She had cherished her anger till

it grew strong and took possession of her, as evil thoughts and

feelings always do unless cast out at once. As Laurie turned the bend,

he shouted back...

"Keep near the shore. It isn't safe in the middle." Jo heard, but Amy

was struggling to her feet and did not catch a word. Jo glanced over

her shoulder, and the little demon she was harboring said in her ear...

"No matter whether she heard or not, let her take care of herself."

Laurie had vanished round the bend, Jo was just at the turn, and Amy,

far behind, striking out toward the smoother ice in the middle of the

river. For a minute Jo stood still with a strange feeling in her

heart, then she resolved to go on, but something held and turned her

round, just in time to see Amy throw up her hands and go down, with a

sudden crash of rotten ice, the splash of water, and a cry that made

Jo's heart stand still with fear. She tried to call Laurie, but her

voice was gone. She tried to rush forward, but her feet seemed to have

no strength in them, and for a second, she could only stand motionless,

staring with a terror-stricken face at the little blue hood above the

black water. Something rushed swiftly by her, and Laurie's voice cried

out...

"Bring a rail. Quick, quick!"

How she did it, she never knew, but for the next few minutes she worked

as if possessed, blindly obeying Laurie, who was quite self-possessed,

and lying flat, held Amy up by his arm and hockey stick till Jo dragged

a rail from the fence, and together they got the child out, more

frightened than hurt.

"Now then, we must walk her home as fast as we can. Pile our things on

her, while I get off these confounded skates," cried Laurie, wrapping

his coat round Amy, and tugging away at the straps which never seemed

so intricate before.

Shivering, dripping, and crying, they got Amy home, and after an

exciting time of it, she fell asleep, rolled in blankets before a hot

fire. During the bustle Jo had scarcely spoken but flown about,

looking pale and wild, with her things half off, her dress torn, and

her hands cut and bruised by ice and rails and refractory buckles. When

Amy was comfortably asleep, the house quiet, and Mrs. March sitting by

the bed, she called Jo to her and began to bind up the hurt hands.

"Are you sure she is safe?" whispered Jo, looking remorsefully at the

golden head, which might have been swept away from her sight forever

under the treacherous ice.

"Quite safe, dear. She is not hurt, and won't even take cold, I think,

you were so sensible in covering and getting her home quickly," replied

her mother cheerfully.

"Laurie did it all. I only let her go. Mother, if she should die, it

would be my fault." And Jo dropped down beside the bed in a passion of

penitent tears, telling all that had happened, bitterly condemning her

hardness of heart, and sobbing out her gratitude for being spared the

heavy punishment which might have come upon her.

"It's my dreadful temper! I try to cure it, I think I have, and then

it breaks out worse than ever. Oh, Mother, what shall I do? What

shall I do?" cried poor Jo, in despair.

"Watch and pray, dear, never get tired of trying, and never think it is

impossible to conquer your fault," said Mrs. March, drawing the blowzy

head to her shoulder and kissing the wet cheek so tenderly that Jo

cried even harder.

"You don't know, you can't guess how bad it is! It seems as if I could

do anything when I'm in a passion. I get so savage, I could hurt

anyone and enjoy it. I'm afraid I shall do something dreadful some

day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me. Oh, Mother, help

me, do help me!"

"I will, my child, I will. Don't cry so bitterly, but remember this

day, and resolve with all your soul that you will never know another

like it. Jo, dear, we all have our temptations, some far greater than

yours, and it often takes us all our lives to conquer them. You think

your temper is the worst in the world, but mine used to be just like

it."

"Yours, Mother? Why, you are never angry!" And for the moment Jo

forgot remorse in surprise.

"I've been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded

in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I

have learned not to show it, and I still hope to learn not to feel it,

though it may take me another forty years to do so."

The patience and the humility of the face she loved so well was a

better lesson to Jo than the wisest lecture, the sharpest reproof. She

felt comforted at once by the sympathy and confidence given her. The

knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it,

made her own easier to bear and strengthened her resolution to cure it,

though forty years seemed rather a long time to watch and pray to a

girl of fifteen.

"Mother, are you angry when you fold your lips tight together and go

out of the room sometimes, when Aunt March scolds or people worry you?"

asked Jo, feeling nearer and dearer to her mother than ever before.

"Yes, I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips, and

when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away

for a minute, and give myself a little shake for being so weak and

wicked," answered Mrs. March with a sigh and a smile, as she smoothed

and fastened up Jo's disheveled hair.

"How did you learn to keep still? That is what troubles me, for the

sharp words fly out before I know what I'm about, and the more I say

the worse I get, till it's a pleasure to hurt people's feelings and say

dreadful things. Tell me how you do it, Marmee dear."

"My good mother used to help me..."

"As you do us..." interrupted Jo, with a grateful kiss.

"But I lost her when I was a little older than you are, and for years

had to struggle on alone, for I was too proud to confess my weakness to

anyone else. I had a hard time, Jo, and shed a good many bitter tears

over my failures, for in spite of my efforts I never seemed to get on.

Then your father came, and I was so happy that I found it easy to be

good. But by-and-by, when I had four little daughters round me and we

were poor, then the old trouble began again, for I am not patient by

nature, and it tried me very much to see my children wanting anything."

"Poor Mother! What helped you then?"

"Your father, Jo. He never loses patience, never doubts or complains,

but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully that one is ashamed

to do otherwise before him. He helped and comforted me, and showed me

that I must try to practice all the virtues I would have my little

girls possess, for I was their example. It was easier to try for your

sakes than for my own. A startled or surprised look from one of you

when I spoke sharply rebuked me more than any words could have done,

and the love, respect, and confidence of my children was the sweetest

reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them

copy."

"Oh, Mother, if I'm ever half as good as you, I shall be satisfied,"

cried Jo, much touched.

"I hope you will be a great deal better, dear, but you must keep watch

over your 'bosom enemy', as father calls it, or it may sadden, if not

spoil your life. You have had a warning. Remember it, and try with

heart and soul to master this quick temper, before it brings you

greater sorrow and regret than you have known today."

"I will try, Mother, I truly will. But you must help me, remind me,

and keep me from flying out. I used to see Father sometimes put his

finger on his lips, and look at you with a very kind but sober face,

and you always folded your lips tight and went away. Was he reminding

you then?" asked Jo softly.

"Yes. I asked him to help me so, and he never forgot it, but saved me

from many a sharp word by that little gesture and kind look."

Jo saw that her mother's eyes filled and her lips trembled as she

spoke, and fearing that she had said too much, she whispered anxiously,

"Was it wrong to watch you and to speak of it? I didn't mean to be

rude, but it's so comfortable to say all I think to you, and feel so

safe and happy here."

"My Jo, you may say anything to your mother, for it is my greatest

happiness and pride to feel that my girls confide in me and know how

much I love them."

"I thought I'd grieved you."

"No, dear, but speaking of Father reminded me how much I miss him, how

much I owe him, and how faithfully I should watch and work to keep his

little daughters safe and good for him."

"Yet you told him to go, Mother, and didn't cry when he went, and never

complain now, or seem as if you needed any help," said Jo, wondering.

"I gave my best to the country I love, and kept my tears till he was

gone. Why should I complain, when we both have merely done our duty

and will surely be the happier for it in the end? If I don't seem to

need help, it is because I have a better friend, even than Father, to

comfort and sustain me. My child, the troubles and temptations of your

life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive

them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your

Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one. The more you love

and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will

depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or

change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of

lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go

to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as

freely and confidingly as you come to your mother."

Jo's only answer was to hold her mother close, and in the silence which

followed the sincerest prayer she had ever prayed left her heart

without words. For in that sad yet happy hour, she had learned not

only the bitterness of remorse and despair, but the sweetness of

self-denial and self-control, and led by her mother's hand, she had

drawn nearer to the Friend who always welcomes every child with a love

stronger than that of any father, tenderer than that of any mother.

Amy stirred and sighed in her sleep, and as if eager to begin at once

to mend her fault, Jo looked up with an expression on her face which it

had never worn before.

"I let the sun go down on my anger. I wouldn't forgive her, and today,

if it hadn't been for Laurie, it might have been too late! How could I

be so wicked?" said Jo, half aloud, as she leaned over her sister

softly stroking the wet hair scattered on the pillow.

As if she heard, Amy opened her eyes, and held out her arms, with a

smile that went straight to Jo's heart. Neither said a word, but they

hugged one another close, in spite of the blankets, and everything was

forgiven and forgotten in one hearty kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

MEG GOES TO VANITY FAIR

"I do think it was the most fortunate thing in the world that those

children should have the measles just now," said Meg, one April day, as

she stood packing the 'go abroady' trunk in her room, surrounded by her

sisters.

"And so nice of Annie Moffat not to forget her promise. A whole

fortnight of fun will be regularly splendid," replied Jo, looking like

a windmill as she folded skirts with her long arms.

"And such lovely weather, I'm so glad of that," added Beth, tidily

sorting neck and hair ribbons in her best box, lent for the great

occasion.

"I wish I was going to have a fine time and wear all these nice

things," said Amy with her mouth full of pins, as she artistically

replenished her sister's cushion.

"I wish you were all going, but as you can't, I shall keep my

adventures to tell you when I come back. I'm sure it's the least I can

do when you have been so kind, lending me things and helping me get

ready," said Meg, glancing round the room at the very simple outfit,

which seemed nearly perfect in their eyes.

"What did Mother give you out of the treasure box?" asked Amy, who had

not been present at the opening of a certain cedar chest in which Mrs.

March kept a few relics of past splendor, as gifts for her girls when

the proper time came.

"A pair of silk stockings, that pretty carved fan, and a lovely blue

sash. I wanted the violet silk, but there isn't time to make it over,

so I must be contented with my old tarlaton."

"It will look nice over my new muslin skirt, and the sash will set it

off beautifully. I wish I hadn't smashed my coral bracelet, for you

might have had it," said Jo, who loved to give and lend, but whose

possessions were usually too dilapidated to be of much use.

"There is a lovely old-fashioned pearl set in the treasure chest, but

Mother said real flowers were the prettiest ornament for a young girl,

and Laurie promised to send me all I want," replied Meg. "Now, let me

see, there's my new gray walking suit, just curl up the feather in my

hat, Beth, then my poplin for Sunday and the small party, it looks

heavy for spring, doesn't it? The violet silk would be so nice. Oh,

dear!"

"Never mind, you've got the tarlaton for the big party, and you always

look like an angel in white," said Amy, brooding over the little store

of finery in which her soul delighted.

"It isn't low-necked, and it doesn't sweep enough, but it will have to

do. My blue housedress looks so well, turned and freshly trimmed, that

I feel as if I'd got a new one. My silk sacque isn't a bit the

fashion, and my bonnet doesn't look like Sallie's. I didn't like to

say anything, but I was sadly disappointed in my umbrella. I told

Mother black with a white handle, but she forgot and bought a green one

with a yellowish handle. It's strong and neat, so I ought not to

complain, but I know I shall feel ashamed of it beside Annie's silk one

with a gold top," sighed Meg, surveying the little umbrella with great

disfavor.

"Change it," advised Jo.

"I won't be so silly, or hurt Marmee's feelings, when she took so much

pains to get my things. It's a nonsensical notion of mine, and I'm not

going to give up to it. My silk stockings and two pairs of new gloves

are my comfort. You are a dear to lend me yours, Jo. I feel so rich

and sort of elegant, with two new pairs, and the old ones cleaned up

for common." And Meg took a refreshing peep at her glove box.

"Annie Moffat has blue and pink bows on her nightcaps. Would you put

some on mine?" she asked, as Beth brought up a pile of snowy muslins,

fresh from Hannah's hands.

"No, I wouldn't, for the smart caps won't match the plain gowns without

any trimming on them. Poor folks shouldn't rig," said Jo decidedly.

"I wonder if I shall ever be happy enough to have real lace on my

clothes and bows on my caps?" said Meg impatiently.

"You said the other day that you'd be perfectly happy if you could only

go to Annie Moffat's," observed Beth in her quiet way.

"So I did! Well, I am happy, and I won't fret, but it does seem as if

the more one gets the more one wants, doesn't it? There now, the trays

are ready, and everything in but my ball dress, which I shall leave for

Mother to pack," said Meg, cheering up, as she glanced from the

half-filled trunk to the many times pressed and mended white tarlaton,

which she called her 'ball dress' with an important air.

The next day was fine, and Meg departed in style for a fortnight of

novelty and pleasure. Mrs. March had consented to the visit rather

reluctantly, fearing that Margaret would come back more discontented

than she went. But she begged so hard, and Sallie had promised to take

good care of her, and a little pleasure seemed so delightful after a

winter of irksome work that the mother yielded, and the daughter went

to take her first taste of fashionable life.

The Moffats were very fashionable, and simple Meg was rather daunted,

at first, by the splendor of the house and the elegance of its

occupants. But they were kindly people, in spite of the frivolous life

they led, and soon put their guest at her ease. Perhaps Meg felt,

without understanding why, that they were not particularly cultivated

or intelligent people, and that all their gilding could not quite

conceal the ordinary material of which they were made. It certainly

was agreeable to fare sumptuously, drive in a fine carriage, wear her

best frock every day, and do nothing but enjoy herself. It suited her

exactly, and soon she began to imitate the manners and conversation of

those about her, to put on little airs and graces, use French phrases,

crimp her hair, take in her dresses, and talk about the fashions as

well as she could. The more she saw of Annie Moffat's pretty things,

the more she envied her and sighed to be rich. Home now looked bare

and dismal as she thought of it, work grew harder than ever, and she

felt that she was a very destitute and much-injured girl, in spite of

the new gloves and silk stockings.

She had not much time for repining, however, for the three young girls

were busily employed in 'having a good time'. They shopped, walked,

rode, and called all day, went to theaters and operas or frolicked at

home in the evening, for Annie had many friends and knew how to

entertain them. Her older sisters were very fine young ladies, and one

was engaged, which was extremely interesting and romantic, Meg thought.

Mr. Moffat was a fat, jolly old gentleman, who knew her father, and

Mrs. Moffat, a fat, jolly old lady, who took as great a fancy to Meg as

her daughter had done. Everyone petted her, and 'Daisey', as they

called her, was in a fair way to have her head turned.

When the evening for the small party came, she found that the poplin

wouldn't do at all, for the other girls were putting on thin dresses

and making themselves very fine indeed. So out came the tarlatan,

looking older, limper, and shabbier than ever beside Sallie's crisp new

one. Meg saw the girls glance at it and then at one another, and her

cheeks began to burn, for with all her gentleness she was very proud.

No one said a word about it, but Sallie offered to dress her hair, and

Annie to tie her sash, and Belle, the engaged sister, praised her white

arms. But in their kindness Meg saw only pity for her poverty, and her

heart felt very heavy as she stood by herself, while the others

laughed, chattered, and flew about like gauzy butterflies. The hard,

bitter feeling was getting pretty bad, when the maid brought in a box

of flowers. Before she could speak, Annie had the cover off, and all

were exclaiming at the lovely roses, heath, and fern within.

"It's for Belle, of course, George always sends her some, but these are

altogether ravishing," cried Annie, with a great sniff.

"They are for Miss March, the man said. And here's a note," put in the

maid, holding it to Meg.

"What fun! Who are they from? Didn't know you had a lover," cried the

girls, fluttering about Meg in a high state of curiosity and surprise.

"The note is from Mother, and the flowers from Laurie," said Meg

simply, yet much gratified that he had not forgotten her.

"Oh, indeed!" said Annie with a funny look, as Meg slipped the note

into her pocket as a sort of talisman against envy, vanity, and false

pride, for the few loving words had done her good, and the flowers

cheered her up by their beauty.

Feeling almost happy again, she laid by a few ferns and roses for

herself, and quickly made up the rest in dainty bouquets for the

breasts, hair, or skirts of her friends, offering them so prettily that

Clara, the elder sister, told her she was 'the sweetest little thing

she ever saw', and they looked quite charmed with her small attention.

Somehow the kind act finished her despondency, and when all the rest

went to show themselves to Mrs. Moffat, she saw a happy, bright-eyed

face in the mirror, as she laid her ferns against her rippling hair and

fastened the roses in the dress that didn't strike her as so very

shabby now.

She enjoyed herself very much that evening, for she danced to her

heart's content. Everyone was very kind, and she had three

compliments. Annie made her sing, and some one said she had a

remarkably fine voice. Major Lincoln asked who 'the fresh little girl

with the beautiful eyes' was, and Mr. Moffat insisted on dancing with

her because she 'didn't dawdle, but had some spring in her', as he

gracefully expressed it. So altogether she had a very nice time, till

she overheard a bit of conversation, which disturbed her extremely.

She was sitting just inside the conservatory, waiting for her partner

to bring her an ice, when she heard a voice ask on the other side of

the flowery wall...

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen or seventeen, I should say," replied another voice.

"It would be a grand thing for one of those girls, wouldn't it? Sallie

says they are very intimate now, and the old man quite dotes on them."

"Mrs. M. has made her plans, I dare say, and will play her cards well,

early as it is. The girl evidently doesn't think of it yet," said Mrs.

Moffat.

"She told that fib about her momma, as if she did know, and colored up

when the flowers came quite prettily. Poor thing! She'd be so nice if

she was only got up in style. Do you think she'd be offended if we

offered to lend her a dress for Thursday?" asked another voice.

"She's proud, but I don't believe she'd mind, for that dowdy tarlaton

is all she has got. She may tear it tonight, and that will be a good

excuse for offering a decent one."

Here Meg's partner appeared, to find her looking much flushed and

rather agitated. She was proud, and her pride was useful just then,

for it helped her hide her mortification, anger, and disgust at what

she had just heard. For, innocent and unsuspicious as she was, she

could not help understanding the gossip of her friends. She tried to

forget it, but could not, and kept repeating to herself, "Mrs. M. has

made her plans," "that fib about her mamma," and "dowdy tarlaton," till

she was ready to cry and rush home to tell her troubles and ask for

advice. As that was impossible, she did her best to seem gay, and

being rather excited, she succeeded so well that no one dreamed what an

effort she was making. She was very glad when it was all over and she

was quiet in her bed, where she could think and wonder and fume till

her head ached and her hot cheeks were cooled by a few natural tears.

Those foolish, yet well meant words, had opened a new world to Meg, and

much disturbed the peace of the old one in which till now she had lived

as happily as a child. Her innocent friendship with Laurie was spoiled

by the silly speeches she had overheard. Her faith in her mother was a

little shaken by the worldly plans attributed to her by Mrs. Moffat,

who judged others by herself, and the sensible resolution to be

contented with the simple wardrobe which suited a poor man's daughter

was weakened by the unnecessary pity of girls who thought a shabby

dress one of the greatest calamities under heaven.

Poor Meg had a restless night, and got up heavy-eyed, unhappy, half

resentful toward her friends, and half ashamed of herself for not

speaking out frankly and setting everything right. Everybody dawdled

that morning, and it was noon before the girls found energy enough even

to take up their worsted work. Something in the manner of her friends

struck Meg at once. They treated her with more respect, she thought,

took quite a tender interest in what she said, and looked at her with

eyes that plainly betrayed curiosity. All this surprised and flattered

her, though she did not understand it till Miss Belle looked up from

her writing, and said, with a sentimental air...

"Daisy, dear, I've sent an invitation to your friend, Mr. Laurence, for

Thursday. We should like to know him, and it's only a proper

compliment to you."

Meg colored, but a mischievous fancy to tease the girls made her reply

demurely, "You are very kind, but I'm afraid he won't come."

"Why not, Cherie?" asked Miss Belle.

"He's too old."

"My child, what do you mean? What is his age, I beg to know!" cried

Miss Clara.

"Nearly seventy, I believe," answered Meg, counting stitches to hide

the merriment in her eyes.

"You sly creature! Of course we meant the young man," exclaimed Miss

Belle, laughing.

"There isn't any, Laurie is only a little boy." And Meg laughed also

at the queer look which the sisters exchanged as she thus described her

supposed lover.

"About your age," Nan said.

"Nearer my sister Jo's; I am seventeen in August," returned Meg,

tossing her head.

"It's very nice of him to send you flowers, isn't it?" said Annie,

looking wise about nothing.

"Yes, he often does, to all of us, for their house is full, and we are

so fond of them. My mother and old Mr. Laurence are friends, you know,

so it is quite natural that we children should play together," and Meg

hoped they would say no more.

"It's evident Daisy isn't out yet," said Miss Clara to Belle with a nod.

"Quite a pastoral state of innocence all round," returned Miss Belle

with a shrug.

"I'm going out to get some little matters for my girls. Can I do

anything for you, young ladies?" asked Mrs. Moffat, lumbering in like

an elephant in silk and lace.

"No, thank you, ma'am," replied Sallie. "I've got my new pink silk for

Thursday and don't want a thing."

"Nor I..." began Meg, but stopped because it occurred to her that she

did want several things and could not have them.

"What shall you wear?" asked Sallie.

"My old white one again, if I can mend it fit to be seen, it got sadly

torn last night," said Meg, trying to speak quite easily, but feeling

very uncomfortable.

"Why don't you send home for another?" said Sallie, who was not an

observing young lady.

"I haven't got any other." It cost Meg an effort to say that, but

Sallie did not see it and exclaimed in amiable surprise, "Only that?

How funny..." She did not finish her speech, for Belle shook her head

at her and broke in, saying kindly...

"Not at all. Where is the use of having a lot of dresses when she

isn't out yet? There's no need of sending home, Daisy, even if you had

a dozen, for I've got a sweet blue silk laid away, which I've outgrown,

and you shall wear it to please me, won't you, dear?"

"You are very kind, but I don't mind my old dress if you don't, it does

well enough for a little girl like me," said Meg.

"Now do let me please myself by dressing you up in style. I admire to

do it, and you'd be a regular little beauty with a touch here and

there. I shan't let anyone see you till you are done, and then we'll

burst upon them like Cinderella and her godmother going to the ball,"

said Belle in her persuasive tone.

Meg couldn't refuse the offer so kindly made, for a desire to see if

she would be 'a little beauty' after touching up caused her to accept

and forget all her former uncomfortable feelings toward the Moffats.

On the Thursday evening, Belle shut herself up with her maid, and

between them they turned Meg into a fine lady. They crimped and curled

her hair, they polished her neck and arms with some fragrant powder,

touched her lips with coralline salve to make them redder, and Hortense

would have added 'a soupcon of rouge', if Meg had not rebelled. They

laced her into a sky-blue dress, which was so tight she could hardly

breathe and so low in the neck that modest Meg blushed at herself in

the mirror. A set of silver filagree was added, bracelets, necklace,

brooch, and even earrings, for Hortense tied them on with a bit of pink

silk which did not show. A cluster of tea-rose buds at the bosom, and

a ruche, reconciled Meg to the display of her pretty, white shoulders,

and a pair of high-heeled silk boots satisfied the last wish of her

heart. A lace handkerchief, a plumy fan, and a bouquet in a shoulder

holder finished her off, and Miss Belle surveyed her with the

satisfaction of a little girl with a newly dressed doll.

"Mademoiselle is charmante, tres jolie, is she not?" cried Hortense,

clasping her hands in an affected rapture.

"Come and show yourself," said Miss Belle, leading the way to the room

where the others were waiting.

As Meg went rustling after, with her long skirts trailing, her earrings

tinkling, her curls waving, and her heart beating, she felt as if her

fun had really begun at last, for the mirror had plainly told her that

she was 'a little beauty'. Her friends repeated the pleasing phrase

enthusiastically, and for several minutes she stood, like a jackdaw in

the fable, enjoying her borrowed plumes, while the rest chattered like

a party of magpies.

"While I dress, do you drill her, Nan, in the management of her skirt

and those French heels, or she will trip herself up. Take your silver

butterfly, and catch up that long curl on the left side of her head,

Clara, and don't any of you disturb the charming work of my hands,"

said Belle, as she hurried away, looking well pleased with her success.

"You don't look a bit like yourself, but you are very nice. I'm nowhere

beside you, for Belle has heaps of taste, and you're quite French, I

assure you. Let your flowers hang, don't be so careful of them, and be

sure you don't trip," returned Sallie, trying not to care that Meg was

prettier than herself.

Keeping that warning carefully in mind, Margaret got safely down stairs

and sailed into the drawing rooms where the Moffats and a few early

guests were assembled. She very soon discovered that there is a charm

about fine clothes which attracts a certain class of people and secures

their respect. Several young ladies, who had taken no notice of her

before, were very affectionate all of a sudden. Several young

gentlemen, who had only stared at her at the other party, now not only

stared, but asked to be introduced, and said all manner of foolish but

agreeable things to her, and several old ladies, who sat on the sofas,

and criticized the rest of the party, inquired who she was with an air

of interest. She heard Mrs. Moffat reply to one of them...

"Daisy March--father a colonel in the army--one of our first families,

but reverses of fortune, you know; intimate friends of the Laurences;

sweet creature, I assure you; my Ned is quite wild about her."

"Dear me!" said the old lady, putting up her glass for another

observation of Meg, who tried to look as if she had not heard and been

rather shocked at Mrs. Moffat's fibs. The 'queer feeling' did not pass

away, but she imagined herself acting the new part of fine lady and so

got on pretty well, though the tight dress gave her a side-ache, the

train kept getting under her feet, and she was in constant fear lest

her earrings should fly off and get lost or broken. She was flirting

her fan and laughing at the feeble jokes of a young gentleman who tried

to be witty, when she suddenly stopped laughing and looked confused,

for just opposite, she saw Laurie. He was staring at her with

undisguised surprise, and disapproval also, she thought, for though he

bowed and smiled, yet something in his honest eyes made her blush and

wish she had her old dress on. To complete her confusion, she saw Belle

nudge Annie, and both glance from her to Laurie, who, she was happy to

see, looked unusually boyish and shy.

"Silly creatures, to put such thoughts into my head. I won't care for

it, or let it change me a bit," thought Meg, and rustled across the

room to shake hands with her friend.

"I'm glad you came, I was afraid you wouldn't." she said, with her most

grown-up air.

"Jo wanted me to come, and tell her how you looked, so I did," answered

Laurie, without turning his eyes upon her, though he half smiled at her

maternal tone.

"What shall you tell her?" asked Meg, full of curiosity to know his

opinion of her, yet feeling ill at ease with him for the first time.

"I shall say I didn't know you, for you look so grown-up and unlike

yourself, I'm quite afraid of you," he said, fumbling at his glove

button.

"How absurd of you! The girls dressed me up for fun, and I rather like

it. Wouldn't Jo stare if she saw me?" said Meg, bent on making him say

whether he thought her improved or not.

"Yes, I think she would," returned Laurie gravely.

"Don't you like me so?" asked Meg.

"No, I don't," was the blunt reply.

"Why not?" in an anxious tone.

He glanced at her frizzled head, bare shoulders, and fantastically

trimmed dress with an expression that abashed her more than his answer,

which had not a particle of his usual politeness in it.

"I don't like fuss and feathers."

That was altogether too much from a lad younger than herself, and Meg

walked away, saying petulantly, "You are the rudest boy I ever saw."

Feeling very much ruffled, she went and stood at a quiet window to cool

her cheeks, for the tight dress gave her an uncomfortably brilliant

color. As she stood there, Major Lincoln passed by, and a minute after

she heard him saying to his mother...

"They are making a fool of that little girl. I wanted you to see her,

but they have spoiled her entirely. She's nothing but a doll tonight."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Meg. "I wish I'd been sensible and worn my own

things, then I should not have disgusted other people, or felt so

uncomfortable and ashamed of myself."

She leaned her forehead on the cool pane, and stood half hidden by the

curtains, never minding that her favorite waltz had begun, till some

one touched her, and turning, she saw Laurie, looking penitent, as he

said, with his very best bow and his hand out...

"Please forgive my rudeness, and come and dance with me."

"I'm afraid it will be too disagreeable to you," said Meg, trying to

look offended and failing entirely.

"Not a bit of it, I'm dying to do it. Come, I'll be good. I don't like

your gown, but I do think you are just splendid." And he waved his

hands, as if words failed to express his admiration.

Meg smiled and relented, and whispered as they stood waiting to catch

the time, "Take care my skirt doesn't trip you up. It's the plague of

my life and I was a goose to wear it."

"Pin it round your neck, and then it will be useful," said Laurie,

looking down at the little blue boots, which he evidently approved of.

Away they went fleetly and gracefully, for having practiced at home,

they were well matched, and the blithe young couple were a pleasant

sight to see, as they twirled merrily round and round, feeling more

friendly than ever after their small tiff.

"Laurie, I want you to do me a favor, will you?" said Meg, as he stood

fanning her when her breath gave out, which it did very soon though she

would not own why.

"Won't I!" said Laurie, with alacrity.

"Please don't tell them at home about my dress tonight. They won't

understand the joke, and it will worry Mother."

"Then why did you do it?" said Laurie's eyes, so plainly that Meg

hastily added...

"I shall tell them myself all about it, and 'fess' to Mother how silly

I've been. But I'd rather do it myself. So you'll not tell, will you?"

"I give you my word I won't, only what shall I say when they ask me?"

"Just say I looked pretty well and was having a good time."

"I'll say the first with all my heart, but how about the other? You

don't look as if you were having a good time. Are you?" And Laurie

looked at her with an expression which made her answer in a whisper...

"No, not just now. Don't think I'm horrid. I only wanted a little

fun, but this sort doesn't pay, I find, and I'm getting tired of it."

"Here comes Ned Moffat. What does he want?" said Laurie, knitting his

black brows as if he did not regard his young host in the light of a

pleasant addition to the party.

"He put his name down for three dances, and I suppose he's coming for

them. What a bore!" said Meg, assuming a languid air which amused

Laurie immensely.

He did not speak to her again till suppertime, when he saw her drinking

champagne with Ned and his friend Fisher, who were behaving 'like a

pair of fools', as Laurie said to himself, for he felt a brotherly sort

of right to watch over the Marches and fight their battles whenever a

defender was needed.

"You'll have a splitting headache tomorrow, if you drink much of that.

I wouldn't, Meg, your mother doesn't like it, you know," he whispered,

leaning over her chair, as Ned turned to refill her glass and Fisher

stooped to pick up her fan.

"I'm not Meg tonight, I'm 'a doll' who does all sorts of crazy things.

Tomorrow I shall put away my 'fuss and feathers' and be desperately

good again," she answered with an affected little laugh.

"Wish tomorrow was here, then," muttered Laurie, walking off,

ill-pleased at the change he saw in her.

Meg danced and flirted, chattered and giggled, as the other girls did.

After supper she undertook the German, and blundered through it, nearly

upsetting her partner with her long skirt, and romping in a way that

scandalized Laurie, who looked on and meditated a lecture. But he got

no chance to deliver it, for Meg kept away from him till he came to say

good night.

"Remember!" she said, trying to smile, for the splitting headache had

already begun.

"Silence a la mort," replied Laurie, with a melodramatic flourish, as

he went away.

This little bit of byplay excited Annie's curiosity, but Meg was too

tired for gossip and went to bed, feeling as if she had been to a

masquerade and hadn't enjoyed herself as much as she expected. She was

sick all the next day, and on Saturday went home, quite used up with

her fortnight's fun and feeling that she had 'sat in the lap of luxury'

long enough.

"It does seem pleasant to be quiet, and not have company manners on all

the time. Home is a nice place, though it isn't splendid," said Meg,

looking about her with a restful expression, as she sat with her mother

and Jo on the Sunday evening.

"I'm glad to hear you say so, dear, for I was afraid home would seem

dull and poor to you after your fine quarters," replied her mother, who

had given her many anxious looks that day. For motherly eyes are quick

to see any change in children's faces.

Meg had told her adventures gayly and said over and over what a

charming time she had had, but something still seemed to weigh upon her

spirits, and when the younger girls were gone to bed, she sat

thoughtfully staring at the fire, saying little and looking worried.

As the clock struck nine and Jo proposed bed, Meg suddenly left her

chair and, taking Beth's stool, leaned her elbows on her mother's knee,

saying bravely...

"Marmee, I want to 'fess'."

"I thought so. What is it, dear?"

"Shall I go away?" asked Jo discreetly.

"Of course not. Don't I always tell you everything? I was ashamed to

speak of it before the younger children, but I want you to know all the

dreadful things I did at the Moffats'."

"We are prepared," said Mrs. March, smiling but looking a little

anxious.

"I told you they dressed me up, but I didn't tell you that they

powdered and squeezed and frizzled, and made me look like a

fashion-plate. Laurie thought I wasn't proper. I know he did, though

he didn't say so, and one man called me 'a doll'. I knew it was silly,

but they flattered me and said I was a beauty, and quantities of

nonsense, so I let them make a fool of me."

"Is that all?" asked Jo, as Mrs. March looked silently at the downcast

face of her pretty daughter, and could not find it in her heart to

blame her little follies.

"No, I drank champagne and romped and tried to flirt, and was

altogether abominable," said Meg self-reproachfully.

"There is something more, I think." And Mrs. March smoothed the soft

cheek, which suddenly grew rosy as Meg answered slowly...

"Yes. It's very silly, but I want to tell it, because I hate to have

people say and think such things about us and Laurie."

Then she told the various bits of gossip she had heard at the Moffats',

and as she spoke, Jo saw her mother fold her lips tightly, as if ill

pleased that such ideas should be put into Meg's innocent mind.

"Well, if that isn't the greatest rubbish I ever heard," cried Jo

indignantly. "Why didn't you pop out and tell them so on the spot?"

"I couldn't, it was so embarrassing for me. I couldn't help hearing at

first, and then I was so angry and ashamed, I didn't remember that I

ought to go away."

"Just wait till I see Annie Moffat, and I'll show you how to settle

such ridiculous stuff. The idea of having 'plans' and being kind to

Laurie because he's rich and may marry us by-and-by! Won't he shout

when I tell him what those silly things say about us poor children?"

And Jo laughed, as if on second thoughts the thing struck her as a good

joke.

"If you tell Laurie, I'll never forgive you! She mustn't, must she,

Mother?" said Meg, looking distressed.

"No, never repeat that foolish gossip, and forget it as soon as you

can," said Mrs. March gravely. "I was very unwise to let you go among

people of whom I know so little, kind, I dare say, but worldly,

ill-bred, and full of these vulgar ideas about young people. I am more

sorry than I can express for the mischief this visit may have done you,

Meg."

"Don't be sorry, I won't let it hurt me. I'll forget all the bad and

remember only the good, for I did enjoy a great deal, and thank you

very much for letting me go. I'll not be sentimental or dissatisfied,

Mother. I know I'm a silly little girl, and I'll stay with you till

I'm fit to take care of myself. But it is nice to be praised and

admired, and I can't help saying I like it," said Meg, looking half

ashamed of the confession.

"That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not

become a passion and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things.

Learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite

the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty,

Meg."

Margaret sat thinking a moment, while Jo stood with her hands behind

her, looking both interested and a little perplexed, for it was a new

thing to see Meg blushing and talking about admiration, lovers, and

things of that sort. And Jo felt as if during that fortnight her

sister had grown up amazingly, and was drifting away from her into a

world where she could not follow.

"Mother, do you have 'plans', as Mrs. Moffat said?" asked Meg bashfully.

"Yes, my dear, I have a great many, all mothers do, but mine differ

somewhat from Mrs. Moffat's, I suspect. I will tell you some of them,

for the time has come when a word may set this romantic little head and

heart of yours right, on a very serious subject. You are young, Meg,

but not too young to understand me, and mothers' lips are the fittest

to speak of such things to girls like you. Jo, your turn will come in

time, perhaps, so listen to my 'plans' and help me carry them out, if

they are good."

Jo went and sat on one arm of the chair, looking as if she thought they

were about to join in some very solemn affair. Holding a hand of each,

and watching the two young faces wistfully, Mrs. March said, in her

serious yet cheery way...

"I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be

admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and

wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care

and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen

by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a

woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful

experience. It is natural to think of it, Meg, right to hope and wait

for it, and wise to prepare for it, so that when the happy time comes,

you may feel ready for the duties and worthy of the joy. My dear

girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the

world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid

houses, which are not homes because love is wanting. Money is a

needful and precious thing, and when well used, a noble thing, but I

never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for.

I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved,

contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace."

"Poor girls don't stand any chance, Belle says, unless they put

themselves forward," sighed Meg.

"Then we'll be old maids," said Jo stoutly.

"Right, Jo. Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or

unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands," said Mrs. March

decidedly. "Don't be troubled, Meg, poverty seldom daunts a sincere

lover. Some of the best and most honored women I know were poor girls,

but so love-worthy that they were not allowed to be old maids. Leave

these things to time. Make this home happy, so that you may be fit for

homes of your own, if they are offered you, and contented here if they

are not. One thing remember, my girls. Mother is always ready to be

your confidant, Father to be your friend, and both of us hope and trust

that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and

comfort of our lives."

"We will, Marmee, we will!" cried both, with all their hearts, as she

bade them good night.

CHAPTER TEN

THE P.C. AND P.O.

As spring came on, a new set of amusements became the fashion, and the

lengthening days gave long afternoons for work and play of all sorts.

The garden had to be put in order, and each sister had a quarter of the

little plot to do what she liked with. Hannah used to say, "I'd know

which each of them gardings belonged to, ef I see 'em in Chiny," and so

she might, for the girls' tastes differed as much as their characters.

Meg's had roses and heliotrope, myrtle, and a little orange tree in it.

Jo's bed was never alike two seasons, for she was always trying

experiments. This year it was to be a plantation of sun flowers, the

seeds of which cheerful land aspiring plant were to feed Aunt

Cockle-top and her family of chicks. Beth had old-fashioned fragrant

flowers in her garden, sweet peas and mignonette, larkspur, pinks,

pansies, and southernwood, with chickweed for the birds and catnip for

the pussies. Amy had a bower in hers, rather small and earwiggy, but

very pretty to look at, with honeysuckle and morning-glories hanging

their colored horns and bells in graceful wreaths all over it, tall

white lilies, delicate ferns, and as many brilliant, picturesque plants

as would consent to blossom there.

Gardening, walks, rows on the river, and flower hunts employed the fine

days, and for rainy ones, they had house diversions, some old, some

new, all more or less original. One of these was the 'P.C.', for as

secret societies were the fashion, it was thought proper to have one,

and as all of the girls admired Dickens, they called themselves the

Pickwick Club. With a few interruptions, they had kept this up for a

year, and met every Saturday evening in the big garret, on which

occasions the ceremonies were as follows: Three chairs were arranged

in a row before a table on which was a lamp, also four white badges,

with a big 'P.C.' in different colors on each, and the weekly newspaper

called, The Pickwick Portfolio, to which all contributed something,

while Jo, who reveled in pens and ink, was the editor. At seven

o'clock, the four members ascended to the clubroom, tied their badges

round their heads, and took their seats with great solemnity. Meg, as

the eldest, was Samuel Pickwick, Jo, being of a literary turn, Augustus

Snodgrass, Beth, because she was round and rosy, Tracy Tupman, and Amy,

who was always trying to do what she couldn't, was Nathaniel Winkle.

Pickwick, the president, read the paper, which was filled with original

tales, poetry, local news, funny advertisements, and hints, in which

they good-naturedly reminded each other of their faults and short

comings. On one occasion, Mr. Pickwick put on a pair of spectacles

without any glass, rapped upon the table, hemmed, and having stared

hard at Mr. Snodgrass, who was tilting back in his chair, till he

arranged himself properly, began to read:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

"THE PICKWICK PORTFOLIO"

MAY 20, 18--

POET'S CORNER

ANNIVERSARY ODE

Again we meet to celebrate

With badge and solemn rite,

Our fifty-second anniversary,

In Pickwick Hall, tonight.

We all are here in perfect health,

None gone from our small band:

Again we see each well-known face,

And press each friendly hand.

Our Pickwick, always at his post,

With reverence we greet,

As, spectacles on nose, he reads

Our well-filled weekly sheet.

Although he suffers from a cold,

We joy to hear him speak,

For words of wisdom from him fall,

In spite of croak or squeak.

Old six-foot Snodgrass looms on high,

With elephantine grace,

And beams upon the company,

With brown and jovial face.

Poetic fire lights up his eye,

He struggles 'gainst his lot.

Behold ambition on his brow,

And on his nose, a blot.

Next our peaceful Tupman comes,

So rosy, plump, and sweet,

Who chokes with laughter at the puns,

And tumbles off his seat.

Prim little Winkle too is here,

With every hair in place,

A model of propriety,

Though he hates to wash his face.

The year is gone, we still unite

To joke and laugh and read,

And tread the path of literature

That doth to glory lead.

Long may our paper prosper well,

Our club unbroken be,

And coming years their blessings pour

On the useful, gay 'P. C.'.

A. SNODGRASS

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE MASKED MARRIAGE

(A Tale Of Venice)

Gondola after gondola swept up to the marble

steps, and left its lovely load to swell the

brilliant throng that filled the stately halls of Count

Adelon. Knights and ladies, elves and pages, monks

and flower girls, all mingled gaily in the dance.

Sweet voices and rich melody filled the air, and so

with mirth and music the masquerade went on.

"Has your Highness seen the Lady Viola tonight?"

asked a gallant troubadour of the fairy queen who

floated down the hall upon his arm.

"Yes, is she not lovely, though so sad! Her

dress is well chosen, too, for in a week she weds

Count Antonio, whom she passionately hates."

"By my faith, I envy him. Yonder he comes,

arrayed like a bridegroom, except the black mask.

When that is off we shall see how he regards the

fair maid whose heart he cannot win, though her

stern father bestows her hand," returned the troubadour.

"Tis whispered that she loves the young English

artist who haunts her steps, and is spurned by the

old Count," said the lady, as they joined the dance.

The revel was at its height when a priest

appeared, and withdrawing the young pair to an alcove,

hung with purple velvet, he motioned them to kneel.

Instant silence fell on the gay throng, and not a

sound, but the dash of fountains or the rustle of

orange groves sleeping in the moonlight, broke the

hush, as Count de Adelon spoke thus:

"My lords and ladies, pardon the ruse by which

I have gathered you here to witness the marriage of

my daughter. Father, we wait your services."

All eyes turned toward the bridal party, and a

murmur of amazement went through the throng, for

neither bride nor groom removed their masks. Curiosity

and wonder possessed all hearts, but respect restrained

all tongues till the holy rite was over. Then the

eager spectators gathered round the count, demanding

an explanation.

"Gladly would I give it if I could, but I only

know that it was the whim of my timid Viola, and I

yielded to it. Now, my children, let the play end.

Unmask and receive my blessing."

But neither bent the knee, for the young bridegroom

replied in a tone that startled all listeners

as the mask fell, disclosing the noble face of Ferdinand

Devereux, the artist lover, and leaning on the

breast where now flashed the star of an English earl

was the lovely Viola, radiant with joy and beauty.

"My lord, you scornfully bade me claim your

daughter when I could boast as high a name and vast a

fortune as the Count Antonio. I can do more, for even

your ambitious soul cannot refuse the Earl of Devereux

and De Vere, when he gives his ancient name and boundless

wealth in return for the beloved hand of this fair lady,

now my wife."

The count stood like one changed to stone, and

turning to the bewildered crowd, Ferdinand added, with

a gay smile of triumph, "To you, my gallant friends, I

can only wish that your wooing may prosper as mine has

done, and that you may all win as fair a bride as I have

by this masked marriage."

S. PICKWICK

Why is the P. C. like the Tower of Babel?

It is full of unruly members.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE HISTORY OF A SQUASH

Once upon a time a farmer planted a little seed

in his garden, and after a while it sprouted and became

a vine and bore many squashes. One day in October,

when they were ripe, he picked one and took it

to market. A gorcerman bought and put it in his shop.

That same morning, a little girl in a brown hat

and blue dress, with a round face and snub nose, went

and bought it for her mother. She lugged it home, cut

it up, and boiled it in the big pot, mashed some of it

with salt and butter, for dinner. And to the rest she added

a pint of milk, two eggs, four spoons of sugar, nutmeg,

and some crackers, put it in a deep dish, and baked it

till it was brown and nice, and next day it was eaten

by a family named March.

T. TUPMAN

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Mr. Pickwick, Sir:--

I address you upon the subject of sin the sinner

I mean is a man named Winkle who makes trouble in his

club by laughing and sometimes won't write his piece in

this fine paper I hope you will pardon his badness and

let him send a French fable because he can't write out

of his head as he has so many lessons to do and no brains

in future I will try to take time by the fetlock and

prepare some work which will be all commy la fo that

means all right I am in haste as it is nearly school

time.

Yours respectably,

N. WINKLE

[The above is a manly and handsome acknowledgment of past

misdemeanors. If our young friend studied punctuation, it

would be well.]

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A SAD ACCIDENT

On Friday last, we were startled by a violent shock

in our basement, followed by cries of distress.

On rushing in a body to the cellar, we discovered our beloved

President prostrate upon the floor, having tripped and

fallen while getting wood for domestic purposes. A perfect

scene of ruin met our eyes, for in his fall Mr. Pickwick

had plunged his head and shoulders into a tub of water,

upset a keg of soft soap upon his manly form, and torn

his garments badly. On being removed from this perilous

situation, it was discovered that he had suffered

no injury but several bruises, and we are happy to add,

is now doing well.

ED.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

THE PUBLIC BEREAVEMENT

It is our painful duty to record the sudden and

mysterious disappearance of our cherished friend, Mrs.

Snowball Pat Paw. This lovely and beloved cat was the

pet of a large circle of warm and admiring friends; for

her beauty attracted all eyes, her graces and virtues

endeared her to all hearts, and her loss is deeply felt

by the whole community.

When last seen, she was sitting at the gate, watching

the butcher's cart, and it is feared that some villain,

tempted by her charms, basely stole her. Weeks have passed,

but no trace of her has been discovered, and we relinquish

all hope, tie a black ribbon to her basket, set aside her

dish, and weep for her as one lost to us forever.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A sympathizing friend sends the following gem:

A LAMENT

(FOR S. B. PAT PAW)

We mourn the loss of our little pet,

And sigh o'er her hapless fate,

For never more by the fire she'll sit,

Nor play by the old green gate.

The little grave where her infant sleeps

Is 'neath the chestnut tree.

But o'er her grave we may not weep,

We know not where it may be.

Her empty bed, her idle ball,

Will never see her more;

No gentle tap, no loving purr

Is heard at the parlor door.

Another cat comes after her mice,

A cat with a dirty face,

But she does not hunt as our darling did,

Nor play with her airy grace.

Her stealthy paws tread the very hall

Where Snowball used to play,

But she only spits at the dogs our pet

So gallantly drove away.

She is useful and mild, and does her best,

But she is not fair to see,

And we cannot give her your place dear,

Nor worship her as we worship thee.

A.S.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

ADVERTISEMENTS

MISS ORANTHY BLUGGAGE, the accomplished

strong-minded lecturer, will deliver her

famous lecture on "WOMAN AND HER POSITION"

at Pickwick Hall, next Saturday Evening,

after the usual performances.

A WEEKLY MEETING will be held at Kitchen

Place, to teach young ladies how to cook.

Hannah Brown will preside, and all are

invited to attend.

The DUSTPAN SOCIETY will meet on Wednesday

next, and parade in the upper story of the

Club House. All members to appear in uniform

and shoulder their brooms at nine precisely.

Mrs. BETH BOUNCER will open her new

assortment of Doll's Millinery next week.

The latest Paris fashions have arrived,

and orders are respectfully solicited.

A NEW PLAY will appear at the Barnville

Theatre, in the course of a few weeks, which

will surpass anything ever seen on the American stage.

"The Greek Slave, or Constantine the Avenger," is the name

of this thrilling drama!!!

HINTS

If S.P. didn't use so much soap on his hands,

he wouldn't always be late at breakfast. A.S.

is requested not to whistle in the street. T.T.

please don't forget Amy's napkin. N.W. must

not fret because his dress has not nine tucks.

WEEKLY REPORT

Meg--Good.

Jo--Bad.

Beth--Very Good.

Amy--Middling.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

As the President finished reading the paper (which I beg leave to

assure my readers is a bona fide copy of one written by bona fide girls

once upon a time), a round of applause followed, and then Mr. Snodgrass

rose to make a proposition.

"Mr. President and gentlemen," he began, assuming a parliamentary

attitude and tone, "I wish to propose the admission of a new

member--one who highly deserves the honor, would be deeply grateful for

it, and would add immensely to the spirit of the club, the literary

value of the paper, and be no end jolly and nice. I propose Mr.

Theodore Laurence as an honorary member of the P. C. Come now, do

have him."

Jo's sudden change of tone made the girls laugh, but all looked rather

anxious, and no one said a word as Snodgrass took his seat.

"We'll put it to a vote," said the President. "All in favor of this

motion please to manifest it by saying, 'Aye'."

A loud response from Snodgrass, followed, to everybody's surprise, by a

timid one from Beth.

"Contrary-minded say, 'No'."

Meg and Amy were contrary-minded, and Mr. Winkle rose to say with great

elegance, "We don't wish any boys, they only joke and bounce about.

This is a ladies' club, and we wish to be private and proper."

"I'm afraid he'll laugh at our paper, and make fun of us afterward,"

observed Pickwick, pulling the little curl on her forehead, as she

always did when doubtful.

Up rose Snodgrass, very much in earnest. "Sir, I give you my word as a

gentleman, Laurie won't do anything of the sort. He likes to write,

and he'll give a tone to our contributions and keep us from being

sentimental, don't you see? We can do so little for him, and he does

so much for us, I think the least we can do is to offer him a place

here, and make him welcome if he comes."

This artful allusion to benefits conferred brought Tupman to his feet,

looking as if he had quite made up his mind.

"Yes; we ought to do it, even if we are afraid. I say he may come, and

his grandpa, too, if he likes."

This spirited burst from Beth electrified the club, and Jo left her

seat to shake hands approvingly. "Now then, vote again. Everybody

remember it's our Laurie, and say, 'Aye!'" cried Snodgrass excitedly.

"Aye! Aye! Aye!" replied three voices at once.

"Good! Bless you! Now, as there's nothing like 'taking time by the

fetlock', as Winkle characteristically observes, allow me to present

the new member." And, to the dismay of the rest of the club, Jo threw

open the door of the closet, and displayed Laurie sitting on a rag bag,

flushed and twinkling with suppressed laughter.

"You rogue! You traitor! Jo, how could you?" cried the three girls,

as Snodgrass led her friend triumphantly forth, and producing both a

chair and a badge, installed him in a jiffy.

"The coolness of you two rascals is amazing," began Mr. Pickwick,

trying to get up an awful frown and only succeeding in producing an

amiable smile. But the new member was equal to the occasion, and

rising, with a grateful salutation to the Chair, said in the most

engaging manner, "Mr. President and ladies--I beg pardon,

gentlemen--allow me to introduce myself as Sam Weller, the very humble

servant of the club."

"Good! Good!" cried Jo, pounding with the handle of the old warming

pan on which she leaned.

"My faithful friend and noble patron," continued Laurie with a wave of

the hand, "who has so flatteringly presented me, is not to be blamed

for the base stratagem of tonight. I planned it, and she only gave in

after lots of teasing."

"Come now, don't lay it all on yourself. You know I proposed the

cupboard," broke in Snodgrass, who was enjoying the joke amazingly.

"Never mind what she says. I'm the wretch that did it, sir," said the

new member, with a Welleresque nod to Mr. Pickwick. "But on my honor,

I never will do so again, and henceforth devote myself to the interest

of this immortal club."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Jo, clashing the lid of the warming pan like a

cymbal.

"Go on, go on!" added Winkle and Tupman, while the President bowed

benignly.

"I merely wish to say, that as a slight token of my gratitude for the

honor done me, and as a means of promoting friendly relations between

adjoining nations, I have set up a post office in the hedge in the

lower corner of the garden, a fine, spacious building with padlocks on

the doors and every convenience for the mails, also the females, if I

may be allowed the expression. It's the old martin house, but I've

stopped up the door and made the roof open, so it will hold all sorts

of things, and save our valuable time. Letters, manuscripts, books,

and bundles can be passed in there, and as each nation has a key, it

will be uncommonly nice, I fancy. Allow me to present the club key,

and with many thanks for your favor, take my seat."

Great applause as Mr. Weller deposited a little key on the table and

subsided, the warming pan clashed and waved wildly, and it was some

time before order could be restored. A long discussion followed, and

everyone came out surprising, for everyone did her best. So it was an

unusually lively meeting, and did not adjourn till a late hour, when it

broke up with three shrill cheers for the new member.

No one ever regretted the admittance of Sam Weller, for a more devoted,

well-behaved, and jovial member no club could have. He certainly did

add 'spirit' to the meetings, and 'a tone' to the paper, for his

orations convulsed his hearers and his contributions were excellent,

being patriotic, classical, comical, or dramatic, but never

sentimental. Jo regarded them as worthy of Bacon, Milton, or

Shakespeare, and remodeled her own works with good effect, she thought.

The P. O. was a capital little institution, and flourished

wonderfully, for nearly as many queer things passed through it as

through the real post office. Tragedies and cravats, poetry and

pickles, garden seeds and long letters, music and gingerbread, rubbers,

invitations, scoldings, and puppies. The old gentleman liked the fun,

and amused himself by sending odd bundles, mysterious messages, and

funny telegrams, and his gardener, who was smitten with Hannah's

charms, actually sent a love letter to Jo's care. How they laughed

when the secret came out, never dreaming how many love letters that

little post office would hold in the years to come.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EXPERIMENTS

"The first of June! The Kings are off to the seashore tomorrow, and

I'm free. Three months' vacation--how I shall enjoy it!" exclaimed

Meg, coming home one warm day to find Jo laid upon the sofa in an

unusual state of exhaustion, while Beth took off her dusty boots, and

Amy made lemonade for the refreshment of the whole party.

"Aunt March went today, for which, oh, be joyful!" said Jo. "I was

mortally afraid she'd ask me to go with her. If she had, I should have

felt as if I ought to do it, but Plumfield is about as gay as a

churchyard, you know, and I'd rather be excused. We had a flurry

getting the old lady off, and I had a fright every time she spoke to

me, for I was in such a hurry to be through that I was uncommonly

helpful and sweet, and feared she'd find it impossible to part from me.

I quaked till she was fairly in the carriage, and had a final fright,

for as it drove of, she popped out her head, saying, 'Josyphine, won't

you--?' I didn't hear any more, for I basely turned and fled. I did

actually run, and whisked round the corner where I felt safe."

"Poor old Jo! She came in looking as if bears were after her," said

Beth, as she cuddled her sister's feet with a motherly air.

"Aunt March is a regular samphire, is she not?" observed Amy, tasting

her mixture critically.

"She means vampire, not seaweed, but it doesn't matter. It's too warm

to be particular about one's parts of speech," murmured Jo.

"What shall you do all your vacation?" asked Amy, changing the subject

with tact.

"I shall lie abed late, and do nothing," replied Meg, from the depths

of the rocking chair. "I've been routed up early all winter and had to

spend my days working for other people, so now I'm going to rest and

revel to my heart's content."

"No," said Jo, "that dozy way wouldn't suit me. I've laid in a heap of

books, and I'm going to improve my shining hours reading on my perch in

the old apple tree, when I'm not having l----"

"Don't say 'larks!'" implored Amy, as a return snub for the 'samphire'

correction.

"I'll say 'nightingales' then, with Laurie. That's proper and

appropriate, since he's a warbler."

"Don't let us do any lessons, Beth, for a while, but play all the time

and rest, as the girls mean to," proposed Amy.

"Well, I will, if Mother doesn't mind. I want to learn some new songs,

and my children need fitting up for the summer. They are dreadfully

out of order and really suffering for clothes."

"May we, Mother?" asked Meg, turning to Mrs. March, who sat sewing in

what they called 'Marmee's corner'.

"You may try your experiment for a week and see how you like it. I

think by Saturday night you will find that all play and no work is as

bad as all work and no play."

"Oh, dear, no! It will be delicious, I'm sure," said Meg complacently.

"I now propose a toast, as my 'friend and pardner, Sairy Gamp', says.

Fun forever, and no grubbing!" cried Jo, rising, glass in hand, as the

lemonade went round.

They all drank it merrily, and began the experiment by lounging for the

rest of the day. Next morning, Meg did not appear till ten o'clock.

Her solitary breakfast did not taste good, and the room seemed lonely

and untidy, for Jo had not filled the vases, Beth had not dusted, and

Amy's books lay scattered about. Nothing was neat and pleasant but

'Marmee's corner', which looked as usual. And there Meg sat, to 'rest

and read', which meant to yawn and imagine what pretty summer dresses

she would get with her salary. Jo spent the morning on the river with

Laurie and the afternoon reading and crying over \_The Wide, Wide

World\_, up in the apple tree. Beth began by rummaging everything out

of the big closet where her family resided, but getting tired before

half done, she left her establishment topsy-turvy and went to her

music, rejoicing that she had no dishes to wash. Amy arranged her

bower, put on her best white frock, smoothed her curls, and sat down to

draw under the honeysuckle, hoping someone would see and inquire who

the young artist was. As no one appeared but an inquisitive

daddy-longlegs, who examined her work with interest, she went to walk,

got caught in a shower, and came home dripping.

At teatime they compared notes, and all agreed that it had been a

delightful, though unusually long day. Meg, who went shopping in the

afternoon and got a 'sweet blue muslin', had discovered, after she had

cut the breadths off, that it wouldn't wash, which mishap made her

slightly cross. Jo had burned the skin off her nose boating, and got a

raging headache by reading too long. Beth was worried by the confusion

of her closet and the difficulty of learning three or four songs at

once, and Amy deeply regretted the damage done her frock, for Katy

Brown's party was to be the next day and now like Flora McFlimsey, she

had 'nothing to wear'. But these were mere trifles, and they assured

their mother that the experiment was working finely. She smiled, said

nothing, and with Hannah's help did their neglected work, keeping home

pleasant and the domestic machinery running smoothly. It was

astonishing what a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things was

produced by the 'resting and reveling' process. The days kept getting

longer and longer, the weather was unusually variable and so were

tempers; an unsettled feeling possessed everyone, and Satan found

plenty of mischief for the idle hands to do. As the height of luxury,

Meg put out some of her sewing, and then found time hang so heavily,

that she fell to snipping and spoiling her clothes in her attempts to

furbish them up a la Moffat. Jo read till her eyes gave out and she

was sick of books, got so fidgety that even good-natured Laurie had a

quarrel with her, and so reduced in spirits that she desperately wished

she had gone with Aunt March. Beth got on pretty well, for she was

constantly forgetting that it was to be all play and no work, and fell

back into her old ways now and then. But something in the air affected

her, and more than once her tranquility was much disturbed, so much so

that on one occasion she actually shook poor dear Joanna and told her

she was 'a fright'. Amy fared worst of all, for her resources were

small, and when her sisters left her to amuse herself, she soon found

that accomplished and important little self a great burden. She didn't

like dolls, fairy tales were childish, and one couldn't draw all the

time. Tea parties didn't amount to much, neither did picnics, unless

very well conducted. "If one could have a fine house, full of nice

girls, or go traveling, the summer would be delightful, but to stay at

home with three selfish sisters and a grown-up boy was enough to try

the patience of a Boaz," complained Miss Malaprop, after several days

devoted to pleasure, fretting, and ennui.

No one would own that they were tired of the experiment, but by Friday

night each acknowledged to herself that she was glad the week was

nearly done. Hoping to impress the lesson more deeply, Mrs. March, who

had a good deal of humor, resolved to finish off the trial in an

appropriate manner, so she gave Hannah a holiday and let the girls

enjoy the full effect of the play system.

When they got up on Saturday morning, there was no fire in the kitchen,

no breakfast in the dining room, and no mother anywhere to be seen.

"Mercy on us! What has happened?" cried Jo, staring about her in

dismay.

Meg ran upstairs and soon came back again, looking relieved but rather

bewildered, and a little ashamed.

"Mother isn't sick, only very tired, and she says she is going to stay

quietly in her room all day and let us do the best we can. It's a very

queer thing for her to do, she doesn't act a bit like herself. But she

says it has been a hard week for her, so we mustn't grumble but take

care of ourselves."

"That's easy enough, and I like the idea, I'm aching for something to

do, that is, some new amusement, you know," added Jo quickly.

In fact it was an immense relief to them all to have a little work, and

they took hold with a will, but soon realized the truth of Hannah's

saying, "Housekeeping ain't no joke." There was plenty of food in the

larder, and while Beth and Amy set the table, Meg and Jo got breakfast,

wondering as they did why servants ever talked about hard work.

"I shall take some up to Mother, though she said we were not to think

of her, for she'd take care of herself," said Meg, who presided and

felt quite matronly behind the teapot.

So a tray was fitted out before anyone began, and taken up with the

cook's compliments. The boiled tea was very bitter, the omelet

scorched, and the biscuits speckled with saleratus, but Mrs. March

received her repast with thanks and laughed heartily over it after Jo

was gone.

"Poor little souls, they will have a hard time, I'm afraid, but they

won't suffer, and it will do them good," she said, producing the more

palatable viands with which she had provided herself, and disposing of

the bad breakfast, so that their feelings might not be hurt, a motherly

little deception for which they were grateful.

Many were the complaints below, and great the chagrin of the head cook

at her failures. "Never mind, I'll get the dinner and be servant, you

be mistress, keep your hands nice, see company, and give orders," said

Jo, who knew still less than Meg about culinary affairs.

This obliging offer was gladly accepted, and Margaret retired to the

parlor, which she hastily put in order by whisking the litter under the

sofa and shutting the blinds to save the trouble of dusting. Jo, with

perfect faith in her own powers and a friendly desire to make up the

quarrel, immediately put a note in the office, inviting Laurie to

dinner.

"You'd better see what you have got before you think of having

company," said Meg, when informed of the hospitable but rash act.

"Oh, there's corned beef and plenty of potatoes, and I shall get some

asparagus and a lobster, 'for a relish', as Hannah says. We'll have

lettuce and make a salad. I don't know how, but the book tells. I'll

have blanc mange and strawberries for dessert, and coffee too, if you

want to be elegant."

"Don't try too many messes, Jo, for you can't make anything but

gingerbread and molasses candy fit to eat. I wash my hands of the

dinner party, and since you have asked Laurie on your own

responsibility, you may just take care of him."

"I don't want you to do anything but be civil to him and help to the

pudding. You'll give me your advice if I get in a muddle, won't you?"

asked Jo, rather hurt.

"Yes, but I don't know much, except about bread and a few trifles. You

had better ask Mother's leave before you order anything," returned Meg

prudently.

"Of course I shall. I'm not a fool." And Jo went off in a huff at the

doubts expressed of her powers.

"Get what you like, and don't disturb me. I'm going out to dinner and

can't worry about things at home," said Mrs. March, when Jo spoke to

her. "I never enjoyed housekeeping, and I'm going to take a vacation

today, and read, write, go visiting, and amuse myself."

The unusual spectacle of her busy mother rocking comfortably and

reading early in the morning made Jo feel as if some unnatural

phenomenon had occurred, for an eclipse, an earthquake, or a volcanic

eruption would hardly have seemed stranger.

"Everything is out of sorts, somehow," she said to herself, going

downstairs. "There's Beth crying, that's a sure sign that something is

wrong in this family. If Amy is bothering, I'll shake her."

Feeling very much out of sorts herself, Jo hurried into the parlor to

find Beth sobbing over Pip, the canary, who lay dead in the cage with

his little claws pathetically extended, as if imploring the food for

want of which he had died.

"It's all my fault, I forgot him, there isn't a seed or a drop left.

Oh, Pip! Oh, Pip! How could I be so cruel to you?" cried Beth, taking

the poor thing in her hands and trying to restore him.

Jo peeped into his half-open eye, felt his little heart, and finding

him stiff and cold, shook her head, and offered her domino box for a

coffin.

"Put him in the oven, and maybe he will get warm and revive," said Amy

hopefully.

"He's been starved, and he shan't be baked now he's dead. I'll make

him a shroud, and he shall be buried in the garden, and I'll never have

another bird, never, my Pip! for I am too bad to own one," murmured

Beth, sitting on the floor with her pet folded in her hands.

"The funeral shall be this afternoon, and we will all go. Now, don't

cry, Bethy. It's a pity, but nothing goes right this week, and Pip has

had the worst of the experiment. Make the shroud, and lay him in my

box, and after the dinner party, we'll have a nice little funeral,"

said Jo, beginning to feel as if she had undertaken a good deal.

Leaving the others to console Beth, she departed to the kitchen, which

was in a most discouraging state of confusion. Putting on a big apron,

she fell to work and got the dishes piled up ready for washing, when

she discovered that the fire was out.

"Here's a sweet prospect!" muttered Jo, slamming the stove door open,

and poking vigorously among the cinders.

Having rekindled the fire, she thought she would go to market while the

water heated. The walk revived her spirits, and flattering herself

that she had made good bargains, she trudged home again, after buying a

very young lobster, some very old asparagus, and two boxes of acid

strawberries. By the time she got cleared up, the dinner arrived and

the stove was red-hot. Hannah had left a pan of bread to rise, Meg had

worked it up early, set it on the hearth for a second rising, and

forgotten it. Meg was entertaining Sallie Gardiner in the parlor, when

the door flew open and a floury, crocky, flushed, and disheveled figure

appeared, demanding tartly...

"I say, isn't bread 'riz' enough when it runs over the pans?"

Sallie began to laugh, but Meg nodded and lifted her eyebrows as high

as they would go, which caused the apparition to vanish and put the

sour bread into the oven without further delay. Mrs. March went out,

after peeping here and there to see how matters went, also saying a

word of comfort to Beth, who sat making a winding sheet, while the dear

departed lay in state in the domino box. A straLanguage cannot describe

nge sense of

helplessness fell upon the girls as the gray bonnet vanished round the

corner, and despair seized them when a few minutes later Miss Crocker

appeared, and said she'd come to dinner. Now this lady was a thin,

yellow spinster, with a sharp nose and inquisitive eyes, who saw

everything and gossiped about all she saw. They disliked her, but had

been taught to be kind to her, simply because she was old and poor and

had few friends. So Meg gave her the easy chair and tried to entertain

her, while she asked questions, criticized everything, and told stories

of the people whom she knew.

Language cannot describe the anxieties, experiences, and exertions

which Jo underwent that morning, and the dinner she served up became a

standing joke. Fearing to ask any more advice, she did her best alone,

and discovered that something more than energy and good will is

necessary to make a cook. She boiled the asparagus for an hour and was

grieved to find the heads cooked off and the stalks harder than ever.

The bread burned black; for the salad dressing so aggravated her that

she could not make it fit to eat. The lobster was a scarlet mystery to

her, but she hammered and poked till it was unshelled and its meager

proportions concealed in a grove of lettuce leaves. The potatoes had

to be hurried, not to keep the asparagus waiting, and were not done at

the last. The blanc mange was lumpy, and the strawberries not as ripe

as they looked, having been skilfully 'deaconed'.

"Well, they can eat beef and bread and butter, if they are hungry, only

it's mortifying to have to spend your whole morning for nothing,"

thought Jo, as she rang the bell half an hour later than usual, and

stood, hot, tired, and dispirited, surveying the feast spread before

Laurie, accustomed to all sorts of elegance, and Miss Crocker, whose

tattling tongue would report them far and wide.

Poor Jo would gladly have gone under the table, as one thing after

another was tasted and left, while Amy giggled, Meg looked distressed,

Miss Crocker pursed her lips, and Laurie talked and laughed with all

his might to give a cheerful tone to the festive scene. Jo's one

strong point was the fruit, for she had sugared it well, and had a

pitcher of rich cream to eat with it. Her hot cheeks cooled a trifle,

and she drew a long breath as the pretty glass plates went round, and

everyone looked graciously at the little rosy islands floating in a sea

of cream. Miss Crocker tasted first, made a wry face, and drank some

water hastily. Jo, who refused, thinking there might not be enough,

for they dwindled sadly after the picking over, glanced at Laurie, but

he was eating away manfully, though there was a slight pucker about his

mouth and he kept his eye fixed on his plate. Amy, who was fond of

delicate fare, took a heaping spoonful, choked, hid her face in her

napkin, and left the table precipitately.

"Oh, what is it?" exclaimed Jo, trembling.

"Salt instead of sugar, and the cream is sour," replied Meg with a

tragic gesture.

Jo uttered a groan and fell back in her chair, remembering that she had

given a last hasty powdering to the berries out of one of the two boxes

on the kitchen table, and had neglected to put the milk in the

refrigerator. She turned scarlet and was on the verge of crying, when

she met Laurie's eyes, which would look merry in spite of his heroic

efforts. The comical side of the affair suddenly struck her, and she

laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. So did everyone else, even

'Croaker' as the girls called the old lady, and the unfortunate dinner

ended gaily, with bread and butter, olives and fun.

"I haven't strength of mind enough to clear up now, so we will sober

ourselves with a funeral," said Jo, as they rose, and Miss Crocker made

ready to go, being eager to tell the new story at another friend's

dinner table.

They did sober themselves for Beth's sake. Laurie dug a grave under

the ferns in the grove, little Pip was laid in, with many tears by his

tender-hearted mistress, and covered with moss, while a wreath of

violets and chickweed was hung on the stone which bore his epitaph,

composed by Jo while she struggled with the dinner.

Here lies Pip March,

Who died the 7th of June;

Loved and lamented sore,

And not forgotten soon.

At the conclusion of the ceremonies, Beth retired to her room, overcome

with emotion and lobster, but there was no place of repose, for the

beds were not made, and she found her grief much assuaged by beating up

the pillows and putting things in order. Meg helped Jo clear away the

remains of the feast, which took half the afternoon and left them so

tired that they agreed to be contented with tea and toast for supper.

Laurie took Amy to drive, which was a deed of charity, for the sour

cream seemed to have had a bad effect upon her temper. Mrs. March came

home to find the three older girls hard at work in the middle of the

afternoon, and a glance at the closet gave her an idea of the success

of one part of the experiment.

Before the housewives could rest, several people called, and there was

a scramble to get ready to see them. Then tea must be got, errands

done, and one or two necessary bits of sewing neglected until the last

minute. As twilight fell, dewy and still, one by one they gathered on

the porch where the June roses were budding beautifully, and each

groaned or sighed as she sat down, as if tired or troubled.

"What a dreadful day this has been!" began Jo, usually the first to

speak.

"It has seemed shorter than usual, but so uncomfortable," said Meg.

"Not a bit like home," added Amy.

"It can't seem so without Marmee and little Pip," sighed Beth, glancing

with full eyes at the empty cage above her head.

"Here's Mother, dear, and you shall have another bird tomorrow, if you

want it."

As she spoke, Mrs. March came and took her place among them, looking as

if her holiday had not been much pleasanter than theirs.

"Are you satisfied with your experiment, girls, or do you want another

week of it?" she asked, as Beth nestled up to her and the rest turned

toward her with brightening faces, as flowers turn toward the sun.

"I don't!" cried Jo decidedly.

"Nor I," echoed the others.

"You think then, that it is better to have a few duties and live a

little for others, do you?"

"Lounging and larking doesn't pay," observed Jo, shaking her head. "I'm

tired of it and mean to go to work at something right off."

"Suppose you learn plain cooking. That's a useful accomplishment,

which no woman should be without," said Mrs. March, laughing inaudibly

at the recollection of Jo's dinner party, for she had met Miss Crocker

and heard her account of it.

"Mother, did you go away and let everything be, just to see how we'd

get on?" cried Meg, who had had suspicions all day.

"Yes, I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing

her share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work, you got on

pretty well, though I don't think you were very happy or amiable. So I

thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when

everyone thinks only of herself. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter

to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when

it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and

lovely to us all?"

"We do, Mother, we do!" cried the girls.

"Then let me advise you to take up your little burdens again, for

though they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as

we learn to carry them. Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for

everyone. It keeps us from ennui and mischief, is good for health and

spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than

money or fashion."

"We'll work like bees, and love it too, see if we don't," said Jo.

"I'll learn plain cooking for my holiday task, and the next dinner

party I have shall be a success."

"I'll make the set of shirts for father, instead of letting you do it,

Marmee. I can and I will, though I'm not fond of sewing. That will be

better than fussing over my own things, which are plenty nice enough as

they are." said Meg.

"I'll do my lessons every day, and not spend so much time with my music

and dolls. I am a stupid thing, and ought to be studying, not

playing," was Beth's resolution, while Amy followed their example by

heroically declaring, "I shall learn to make buttonholes, and attend to

my parts of speech."

"Very good! Then I am quite satisfied with the experiment, and fancy

that we shall not have to repeat it, only don't go to the other extreme

and delve like slaves. Have regular hours for work and play, make each

day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth

of time by employing it well. Then youth will be delightful, old age

will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite

of poverty."

"We'll remember, Mother!" and they did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CAMP LAURENCE

Beth was postmistress, for, being most at home, she could attend to it

regularly, and dearly liked the daily task of unlocking the little door

and distributing the mail. One July day she came in with her hands

full, and went about the house leaving letters and parcels like the

penny post.

"Here's your posy, Mother! Laurie never forgets that," she said,

putting the fresh nosegay in the vase that stood in 'Marmee's corner',

and was kept supplied by the affectionate boy.

"Miss Meg March, one letter and a glove," continued Beth, delivering

the articles to her sister, who sat near her mother, stitching

wristbands.

"Why, I left a pair over there, and here is only one," said Meg,

looking at the gray cotton glove. "Didn't you drop the other in the

garden?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't, for there was only one in the office."

"I hate to have odd gloves! Never mind, the other may be found. My

letter is only a translation of the German song I wanted. I think Mr.

Brooke did it, for this isn't Laurie's writing."

Mrs. March glanced at Meg, who was looking very pretty in her gingham

morning gown, with the little curls blowing about her forehead, and

very womanly, as she sat sewing at her little worktable, full of tidy

white rolls, so unconscious of the thought in her mother's mind as she

sewed and sang, while her fingers flew and her thoughts were busied

with girlish fancies as innocent and fresh as the pansies in her belt,

that Mrs. March smiled and was satisfied.

"Two letters for Doctor Jo, a book, and a funny old hat, which covered

the whole post office and stuck outside," said Beth, laughing as she

went into the study where Jo sat writing.

"What a sly fellow Laurie is! I said I wished bigger hats were the

fashion, because I burn my face every hot day. He said, 'Why mind the

fashion? Wear a big hat, and be comfortable!' I said I would if I had

one, and he has sent me this, to try me. I'll wear it for fun, and

show him I don't care for the fashion." And hanging the antique

broad-brim on a bust of Plato, Jo read her letters.

One from her mother made her cheeks glow and her eyes fill, for it said

to her...

My Dear:

I write a little word to tell you with how much satisfaction I watch

your efforts to control your temper. You say nothing about your

trials, failures, or successes, and think, perhaps, that no one sees

them but the Friend whose help you daily ask, if I may trust the

well-worn cover of your guidebook. I, too, have seen them all, and

heartily believe in the sincerity of your resolution, since it begins

to bear fruit. Go on, dear, patiently and bravely, and always believe

that no one sympathizes more tenderly with you than your loving...

Mother

"That does me good! That's worth millions of money and pecks of

praise. Oh, Marmee, I do try! I will keep on trying, and not get

tired, since I have you to help me."

Laying her head on her arms, Jo wet her little romance with a few happy

tears, for she had thought that no one saw and appreciated her efforts

to be good, and this assurance was doubly precious, doubly encouraging,

because unexpected and from the person whose commendation she most

valued. Feeling stronger than ever to meet and subdue her Apollyon,

she pinned the note inside her frock, as a shield and a reminder, lest

she be taken unaware, and proceeded to open her other letter, quite

ready for either good or bad news. In a big, dashing hand, Laurie

wrote...

Dear Jo, What ho!

Some English girls and boys are coming to see me tomorrow and I want to

have a jolly time. If it's fine, I'm going to pitch my tent in

Longmeadow, and row up the whole crew to lunch and croquet--have a

fire, make messes, gypsy fashion, and all sorts of larks. They are

nice people, and like such things. Brooke will go to keep us boys

steady, and Kate Vaughn will play propriety for the girls. I want you

all to come, can't let Beth off at any price, and nobody shall worry

her. Don't bother about rations, I'll see to that and everything else,

only do come, there's a good fellow!

In a tearing hurry, Yours ever, Laurie.

"Here's richness!" cried Jo, flying in to tell the news to Meg.

"Of course we can go, Mother? It will be such a help to Laurie, for I

can row, and Meg see to the lunch, and the children be useful in some

way."

"I hope the Vaughns are not fine grown-up people. Do you know anything

about them, Jo?" asked Meg.

"Only that there are four of them. Kate is older than you, Fred and

Frank (twins) about my age, and a little girl (Grace), who is nine or

ten. Laurie knew them abroad, and liked the boys. I fancied, from the

way he primmed up his mouth in speaking of her, that he didn't admire

Kate much."

"I'm so glad my French print is clean, it's just the thing and so

becoming!" observed Meg complacently. "Have you anything decent, Jo?"

"Scarlet and gray boating suit, good enough for me. I shall row and

tramp about, so I don't want any starch to think of. You'll come,

Betty?"

"If you won't let any boys talk to me."

"Not a boy!"

"I like to please Laurie, and I'm not afraid of Mr. Brooke, he is so

kind. But I don't want to play, or sing, or say anything. I'll work

hard and not trouble anyone, and you'll take care of me, Jo, so I'll

go."

"That's my good girl. You do try to fight off your shyness, and I love

you for it. Fighting faults isn't easy, as I know, and a cheery word

kind of gives a lift. Thank you, Mother," And Jo gave the thin cheek a

grateful kiss, more precious to Mrs. March than if it had given back

the rosy roundness of her youth.

"I had a box of chocolate drops, and the picture I wanted to copy,"

said Amy, showing her mail.

"And I got a note from Mr. Laurence, asking me to come over and play to

him tonight, before the lamps are lighted, and I shall go," added Beth,

whose friendship with the old gentleman prospered finely.

"Now let's fly round, and do double duty today, so that we can play

tomorrow with free minds," said Jo, preparing to replace her pen with a

broom.

When the sun peeped into the girls' room early next morning to promise

them a fine day, he saw a comical sight. Each had made such

preparation for the fete as seemed necessary and proper. Meg had an

extra row of little curlpapers across her forehead, Jo had copiously

anointed her afflicted face with cold cream, Beth had taken Joanna to

bed with her to atone for the approaching separation, and Amy had

capped the climax by putting a clothespin on her nose to uplift the

offending feature. It was one of the kind artists use to hold the

paper on their drawing boards, therefore quite appropriate and

effective for the purpose it was now being put. This funny spectacle

appeared to amuse the sun, for he burst out with such radiance that Jo

woke up and roused her sisters by a hearty laugh at Amy's ornament.

Sunshine and laughter were good omens for a pleasure party, and soon a

lively bustle began in both houses. Beth, who was ready first, kept

reporting what went on next door, and enlivened her sisters' toilets by

frequent telegrams from the window.

"There goes the man with the tent! I see Mrs. Barker doing up the

lunch in a hamper and a great basket. Now Mr. Laurence is looking up

at the sky and the weathercock. I wish he would go too. There's

Laurie, looking like a sailor, nice boy! Oh, mercy me! Here's a

carriage full of people, a tall lady, a little girl, and two dreadful

boys. One is lame, poor thing, he's got a crutch. Laurie didn't tell

us that. Be quick, girls! It's getting late. Why, there is Ned

Moffat, I do declare. Meg, isn't that the man who bowed to you one day

when we were shopping?"

"So it is. How queer that he should come. I thought he was at the

mountains. There is Sallie. I'm glad she got back in time. Am I all

right, Jo?" cried Meg in a flutter.

"A regular daisy. Hold up your dress and put your hat on straight, it

looks sentimental tipped that way and will fly off at the first puff.

Now then, come on!"

"Oh, Jo, you are not going to wear that awful hat? It's too absurd!

You shall not make a guy of yourself," remonstrated Meg, as Jo tied

down with a red ribbon the broad-brimmed, old-fashioned leghorn Laurie

had sent for a joke.

"I just will, though, for it's capital, so shady, light, and big. It

will make fun, and I don't mind being a guy if I'm comfortable." With

that Jo marched straight away and the rest followed, a bright little

band of sisters, all looking their best in summer suits, with happy

faces under the jaunty hatbrims.

Laurie ran to meet and present them to his friends in the most cordial

manner. The lawn was the reception room, and for several minutes a

lively scene was enacted there. Meg was grateful to see that Miss

Kate, though twenty, was dressed with a simplicity which American girls

would do well to imitate, and who was much flattered by Mr. Ned's

assurances that he came especially to see her. Jo understood why

Laurie 'primmed up his mouth' when speaking of Kate, for that young

lady had a standoff-don't-touch-me air, which contrasted strongly with

the free and easy demeanor of the other girls. Beth took an

observation of the new boys and decided that the lame one was not

'dreadful', but gentle and feeble, and she would be kind to him on that

account. Amy found Grace a well-mannered, merry, little person, and

after staring dumbly at one another for a few minutes, they suddenly

became very good friends.

Tents, lunch, and croquet utensils having been sent on beforehand, the

party was soon embarked, and the two boats pushed off together, leaving

Mr. Laurence waving his hat on the shore. Laurie and Jo rowed one

boat, Mr. Brooke and Ned the other, while Fred Vaughn, the riotous

twin, did his best to upset both by paddling about in a wherry like a

disturbed water bug. Jo's funny hat deserved a vote of thanks, for it

was of general utility. It broke the ice in the beginning by producing

a laugh, it created quite a refreshing breeze, flapping to and fro as

she rowed, and would make an excellent umbrella for the whole party, if

a shower came up, she said. Miss Kate decided that she was 'odd', but

rather clever, and smiled upon her from afar.

Meg, in the other boat, was delightfully situated, face to face with

the rowers, who both admired the prospect and feathered their oars with

uncommon 'skill and dexterity'. Mr. Brooke was a grave, silent young

man, with handsome brown eyes and a pleasant voice. Meg liked his

quiet manners and considered him a walking encyclopedia of useful

knowledge. He never talked to her much, but he looked at her a good

deal, and she felt sure that he did not regard her with aversion. Ned,

being in college, of course put on all the airs which freshmen think it

their bounden duty to assume. He was not very wise, but very

good-natured, and altogether an excellent person to carry on a picnic.

Sallie Gardiner was absorbed in keeping her white pique dress clean and

chattering with the ubiquitous Fred, who kept Beth in constant terror

by his pranks.

It was not far to Longmeadow, but the tent was pitched and the wickets

down by the time they arrived. A pleasant green field, with three

wide-spreading oaks in the middle and a smooth strip of turf for

croquet.

"Welcome to Camp Laurence!" said the young host, as they landed with

exclamations of delight.

"Brooke is commander in chief, I am commissary general, the other

fellows are staff officers, and you, ladies, are company. The tent is

for your especial benefit and that oak is your drawing room, this is

the messroom and the third is the camp kitchen. Now, let's have a game

before it gets hot, and then we'll see about dinner."

Frank, Beth, Amy, and Grace sat down to watch the game played by the

other eight. Mr. Brooke chose Meg, Kate, and Fred. Laurie took Sallie,

Jo, and Ned. The English played well, but the Americans played better,

and contested every inch of the ground as strongly as if the spirit of

'76 inspired them. Jo and Fred had several skirmishes and once

narrowly escaped high words. Jo was through the last wicket and had

missed the stroke, which failure ruffled her a good deal. Fred was

close behind her and his turn came before hers. He gave a stroke, his

ball hit the wicket, and stopped an inch on the wrong side. No one was

very near, and running up to examine, he gave it a sly nudge with his

toe, which put it just an inch on the right side.

"I'm through! Now, Miss Jo, I'll settle you, and get in first," cried

the young gentleman, swinging his mallet for another blow.

"You pushed it. I saw you. It's my turn now," said Jo sharply.

"Upon my word, I didn't move it. It rolled a bit, perhaps, but that is

allowed. So, stand off please, and let me have a go at the stake."

"We don't cheat in America, but you can, if you choose," said Jo

angrily.

"Yankees are a deal the most tricky, everybody knows. There you go!"

returned Fred, croqueting her ball far away.

Jo opened her lips to say something rude, but checked herself in time,

colored up to her forehead and stood a minute, hammering down a wicket

with all her might, while Fred hit the stake and declared himself out

with much exultation. She went off to get her ball, and was a long

time finding it among the bushes, but she came back, looking cool and

quiet, and waited her turn patiently. It took several strokes to

regain the place she had lost, and when she got there, the other side

had nearly won, for Kate's ball was the last but one and lay near the

stake.

"By George, it's all up with us! Goodbye, Kate. Miss Jo owes me one,

so you are finished," cried Fred excitedly, as they all drew near to

see the finish.

"Yankees have a trick of being generous to their enemies," said Jo,

with a look that made the lad redden, "especially when they beat them,"

she added, as, leaving Kate's ball untouched, she won the game by a

clever stroke.

Laurie threw up his hat, then remembered that it wouldn't do to exult

over the defeat of his guests, and stopped in the middle of the cheer

to whisper to his friend, "Good for you, Jo! He did cheat, I saw him.

We can't tell him so, but he won't do it again, take my word for it."

Meg drew her aside, under pretense of pinning up a loose braid, and

said approvingly, "It was dreadfully provoking, but you kept your

temper, and I'm so glad, Jo."

"Don't praise me, Meg, for I could box his ears this minute. I should

certainly have boiled over if I hadn't stayed among the nettles till I

got my rage under control enough to hold my tongue. It's simmering now,

so I hope he'll keep out of my way," returned Jo, biting her lips as

she glowered at Fred from under her big hat.

"Time for lunch," said Mr. Brooke, looking at his watch. "Commissary

general, will you make the fire and get water, while Miss March, Miss

Sallie, and I spread the table? Who can make good coffee?"

"Jo can," said Meg, glad to recommend her sister. So Jo, feeling that

her late lessons in cookery were to do her honor, went to preside over

the coffeepot, while the children collected dry sticks, and the boys

made a fire and got water from a spring near by. Miss Kate sketched

and Frank talked to Beth, who was making little mats of braided rushes

to serve as plates.

The commander in chief and his aides soon spread the tablecloth with an

inviting array of eatables and drinkables, prettily decorated with

green leaves. Jo announced that the coffee was ready, and everyone

settled themselves to a hearty meal, for youth is seldom dyspeptic, and

exercise develops wholesome appetites. A very merry lunch it was, for

everything seemed fresh and funny, and frequent peals of laughter

startled a venerable horse who fed near by. There was a pleasing

inequality in the table, which produced many mishaps to cups and

plates, acorns dropped in the milk, little black ants partook of the

refreshments without being invited, and fuzzy caterpillars swung down

from the tree to see what was going on. Three white-headed children

peeped over the fence, and an objectionable dog barked at them from the

other side of the river with all his might and main.

"There's salt here," said Laurie, as he handed Jo a saucer of berries.

"Thank you, I prefer spiders," she replied, fishing up two unwary

little ones who had gone to a creamy death. "How dare you remind me of

that horrid dinner party, when yours is so nice in every way?" added

Jo, as they both laughed and ate out of one plate, the china having run

short.

"I had an uncommonly good time that day, and haven't got over it yet.

This is no credit to me, you know, I don't do anything. It's you and

Meg and Brooke who make it all go, and I'm no end obliged to you. What

shall we do when we can't eat anymore?" asked Laurie, feeling that his

trump card had been played when lunch was over.

"Have games till it's cooler. I brought Authors, and I dare say Miss

Kate knows something new and nice. Go and ask her. She's company, and

you ought to stay with her more."

"Aren't you company too? I thought she'd suit Brooke, but he keeps

talking to Meg, and Kate just stares at them through that ridiculous

glass of hers. I'm going, so you needn't try to preach propriety, for

you can't do it, Jo."

Miss Kate did know several new games, and as the girls would not, and

the boys could not, eat any more, they all adjourned to the drawing

room to play Rig-marole.

"One person begins a story, any nonsense you like, and tells as long as

he pleases, only taking care to stop short at some exciting point, when

the next takes it up and does the same. It's very funny when well

done, and makes a perfect jumble of tragical comical stuff to laugh

over. Please start it, Mr. Brooke," said Kate, with a commanding air,

which surprised Meg, who treated the tutor with as much respect as any

other gentleman.

Lying on the grass at the feet of the two young ladies, Mr. Brooke

obediently began the story, with the handsome brown eyes steadily fixed

upon the sunshiny river.

"Once on a time, a knight went out into the world to seek his fortune,

for he had nothing but his sword and his shield. He traveled a long

while, nearly eight-and-twenty years, and had a hard time of it, till

he came to the palace of a good old king, who had offered a reward to

anyone who could tame and train a fine but unbroken colt, of which he

was very fond. The knight agreed to try, and got on slowly but surely,

for the colt was a gallant fellow, and soon learned to love his new

master, though he was freakish and wild. Every day, when he gave his

lessons to this pet of the king's, the knight rode him through the

city, and as he rode, he looked everywhere for a certain beautiful

face, which he had seen many times in his dreams, but never found. One

day, as he went prancing down a quiet street, he saw at the window of a

ruinous castle the lovely face. He was delighted, inquired who lived

in this old castle, and was told that several captive princesses were

kept there by a spell, and spun all day to lay up money to buy their

liberty. The knight wished intensely that he could free them, but he

was poor and could only go by each day, watching for the sweet face and

longing to see it out in the sunshine. At last he resolved to get into

the castle and ask how he could help them. He went and knocked. The

great door flew open, and he beheld..."

"A ravishingly lovely lady, who exclaimed, with a cry of rapture, 'At

last! At last!'" continued Kate, who had read French novels, and

admired the style. "'Tis she!' cried Count Gustave, and fell at her

feet in an ecstasy of joy. 'Oh, rise!' she said, extending a hand of

marble fairness. 'Never! Till you tell me how I may rescue you,' swore

the knight, still kneeling. 'Alas, my cruel fate condemns me to remain

here till my tyrant is destroyed.' 'Where is the villain?' 'In the

mauve salon. Go, brave heart, and save me from despair.' 'I obey, and

return victorious or dead!' With these thrilling words he rushed away,

and flinging open the door of the mauve salon, was about to enter, when

he received..."

"A stunning blow from the big Greek lexicon, which an old fellow in a

black gown fired at him," said Ned. "Instantly, Sir What's-his-name

recovered himself, pitched the tyrant out of the window, and turned to

join the lady, victorious, but with a bump on his brow, found the door

locked, tore up the curtains, made a rope ladder, got halfway down when

the ladder broke, and he went headfirst into the moat, sixty feet

below. Could swim like a duck, paddled round the castle till he came

to a little door guarded by two stout fellows, knocked their heads

together till they cracked like a couple of nuts, then, by a trifling

exertion of his prodigious strength, he smashed in the door, went up a

pair of stone steps covered with dust a foot thick, toads as big as

your fist, and spiders that would frighten you into hysterics, Miss

March. At the top of these steps he came plump upon a sight that took

his breath away and chilled his blood..."

"A tall figure, all in white with a veil over its face and a lamp in

its wasted hand," went on Meg. "It beckoned, gliding noiselessly

before him down a corridor as dark and cold as any tomb. Shadowy

effigies in armor stood on either side, a dead silence reigned, the

lamp burned blue, and the ghostly figure ever and anon turned its face

toward him, showing the glitter of awful eyes through its white veil.

They reached a curtained door, behind which sounded lovely music. He

sprang forward to enter, but the specter plucked him back, and waved

threateningly before him a..."

"Snuffbox," said Jo, in a sepulchral tone, which convulsed the

audience. "'Thankee,' said the knight politely, as he took a pinch and

sneezed seven times so violently that his head fell off. 'Ha! Ha!'

laughed the ghost, and having peeped through the keyhole at the

princesses spinning away for dear life, the evil spirit picked up her

victim and put him in a large tin box, where there were eleven other

knights packed together without their heads, like sardines, who all

rose and began to..."

"Dance a hornpipe," cut in Fred, as Jo paused for breath, "and, as they

danced, the rubbishy old castle turned to a man-of-war in full sail.

'Up with the jib, reef the tops'l halliards, helm hard alee, and man

the guns!' roared the captain, as a Portuguese pirate hove in sight,

with a flag black as ink flying from her foremast. 'Go in and win, my

hearties!' says the captain, and a tremendous fight began. Of course

the British beat--they always do."

"No, they don't!" cried Jo, aside.

"Having taken the pirate captain prisoner, sailed slap over the

schooner, whose decks were piled high with dead and whose lee scuppers

ran blood, for the order had been 'Cutlasses, and die hard!' 'Bosun's

mate, take a bight of the flying-jib sheet, and start this villain if

he doesn't confess his sins double quick,' said the British captain.

The Portuguese held his tongue like a brick, and walked the plank,

while the jolly tars cheered like mad. But the sly dog dived, came up

under the man-of-war, scuttled her, and down she went, with all sail

set, 'To the bottom of the sea, sea, sea' where..."

"Oh, gracious! What shall I say?" cried Sallie, as Fred ended his

rigmarole, in which he had jumbled together pell-mell nautical phrases

and facts out of one of his favorite books. "Well, they went to the

bottom, and a nice mermaid welcomed them, but was much grieved on

finding the box of headless knights, and kindly pickled them in brine,

hoping to discover the mystery about them, for being a woman, she was

curious. By-and-by a diver came down, and the mermaid said, 'I'll give

you a box of pearls if you can take it up,' for she wanted to restore

the poor things to life, and couldn't raise the heavy load herself. So

the diver hoisted it up, and was much disappointed on opening it to

find no pearls. He left it in a great lonely field, where it was found

by a..."

"Little goose girl, who kept a hundred fat geese in the field," said

Amy, when Sallie's invention gave out. "The little girl was sorry for

them, and asked an old woman what she should do to help them. 'Your

geese will tell you, they know everything.' said the old woman. So she

asked what she should use for new heads, since the old ones were lost,

and all the geese opened their hundred mouths and screamed..."

"'Cabbages!'" continued Laurie promptly. "'Just the thing,' said the

girl, and ran to get twelve fine ones from her garden. She put them on,

the knights revived at once, thanked her, and went on their way

rejoicing, never knowing the difference, for there were so many other

heads like them in the world that no one thought anything of it. The

knight in whom I'm interested went back to find the pretty face, and

learned that the princesses had spun themselves free and all gone and

married, but one. He was in a great state of mind at that, and

mounting the colt, who stood by him through thick and thin, rushed to

the castle to see which was left. Peeping over the hedge, he saw the

queen of his affections picking flowers in her garden. 'Will you give

me a rose?' said he. 'You must come and get it. I can't come to you,

it isn't proper,' said she, as sweet as honey. He tried to climb over

the hedge, but it seemed to grow higher and higher. Then he tried to

push through, but it grew thicker and thicker, and he was in despair.

So he patiently broke twig after twig till he had made a little hole

through which he peeped, saying imploringly, 'Let me in! Let me in!'

But the pretty princess did not seem to understand, for she picked her

roses quietly, and left him to fight his way in. Whether he did or

not, Frank will tell you."

"I can't. I'm not playing, I never do," said Frank, dismayed at the

sentimental predicament out of which he was to rescue the absurd

couple. Beth had disappeared behind Jo, and Grace was asleep.

"So the poor knight is to be left sticking in the hedge, is he?" asked

Mr. Brooke, still watching the river, and playing with the wild rose in

his buttonhole.

"I guess the princess gave him a posy, and opened the gate after a

while," said Laurie, smiling to himself, as he threw acorns at his

tutor.

"What a piece of nonsense we have made! With practice we might do

something quite clever. Do you know Truth?"

"I hope so," said Meg soberly.

"The game, I mean?"

"What is it?" said Fred.

"Why, you pile up your hands, choose a number, and draw out in turn,

and the person who draws at the number has to answer truly any question

put by the rest. It's great fun."

"Let's try it," said Jo, who liked new experiments.

Miss Kate and Mr. Brooke, Meg, and Ned declined, but Fred, Sallie, Jo,

and Laurie piled and drew, and the lot fell to Laurie.

"Who are your heroes?" asked Jo.

"Grandfather and Napoleon."

"Which lady here do you think prettiest?" said Sallie.

"Margaret."

"Which do you like best?" from Fred.

"Jo, of course."

"What silly questions you ask!" And Jo gave a disdainful shrug as the

rest laughed at Laurie's matter-of-fact tone.

"Try again. Truth isn't a bad game," said Fred.

"It's a very good one for you," retorted Jo in a low voice. Her turn

came next.

"What is your greatest fault?" asked Fred, by way of testing in her the

virtue he lacked himself.

"A quick temper."

"What do you most wish for?" said Laurie.

"A pair of boot lacings," returned Jo, guessing and defeating his

purpose.

"Not a true answer. You must say what you really do want most."

"Genius. Don't you wish you could give it to me, Laurie?" And she

slyly smiled in his disappointed face.

"What virtues do you most admire in a man?" asked Sallie.

"Courage and honesty."

"Now my turn," said Fred, as his hand came last.

"Let's give it to him," whispered Laurie to Jo, who nodded and asked at

once...

"Didn't you cheat at croquet?"

"Well, yes, a little bit."

"Good! Didn't you take your story out of \_The Sea Lion?\_" said Laurie.

"Rather."

"Don't you think the English nation perfect in every respect?" asked

Sallie.

"I should be ashamed of myself if I didn't."

"He's a true John Bull. Now, Miss Sallie, you shall have a chance

without waiting to draw. I'll harrrow up your feelings first by asking

if you don't think you are something of a flirt," said Laurie, as Jo

nodded to Fred as a sign that peace was declared.

"You impertinent boy! Of course I'm not," exclaimed Sallie, with an

air that proved the contrary.

"What do you hate most?" asked Fred.

"Spiders and rice pudding."

"What do you like best?" asked Jo.

"Dancing and French gloves."

"Well, I think Truth is a very silly play. Let's have a sensible game

of Authors to refresh our minds," proposed Jo.

Ned, Frank, and the little girls joined in this, and while it went on,

the three elders sat apart, talking. Miss Kate took out her sketch

again, and Margaret watched her, while Mr. Brooke lay on the grass with

a book, which he did not read.

"How beautifully you do it! I wish I could draw," said Meg, with

mingled admiration and regret in her voice.

"Why don't you learn? I should think you had taste and talent for it,"

replied Miss Kate graciously.

"I haven't time."

"Your mamma prefers other accomplishments, I fancy. So did mine, but I

proved to her that I had talent by taking a few lessons privately, and

then she was quite willing I should go on. Can't you do the same with

your governess?"

"I have none."

"I forgot young ladies in America go to school more than with us. Very

fine schools they are, too, Papa says. You go to a private one, I

suppose?"

"I don't go at all. I am a governess myself."

"Oh, indeed!" said Miss Kate, but she might as well have said, "Dear

me, how dreadful!" for her tone implied it, and something in her face

made Meg color, and wish she had not been so frank.

Mr. Brooke looked up and said quickly, "Young ladies in America love

independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and

respected for supporting themselves."

"Oh, yes, of course it's very nice and proper in them to do so. We

have many most respectable and worthy young women who do the same and

are employed by the nobility, because, being the daughters of

gentlemen, they are both well bred and accomplished, you know," said

Miss Kate in a patronizing tone that hurt Meg's pride, and made her

work seem not only more distasteful, but degrading.

"Did the German song suit, Miss March?" inquired Mr. Brooke, breaking

an awkward pause.

"Oh, yes! It was very sweet, and I'm much obliged to whoever

translated it for me." And Meg's downcast face brightened as she spoke.

"Don't you read German?" asked Miss Kate with a look of surprise.

"Not very well. My father, who taught me, is away, and I don't get on

very fast alone, for I've no one to correct my pronunciation."

"Try a little now. Here is Schiller's Mary Stuart and a tutor who

loves to teach." And Mr. Brooke laid his book on her lap with an

inviting smile.

"It's so hard I'm afraid to try," said Meg, grateful, but bashful in

the presence of the accomplished young lady beside her.

"I'll read a bit to encourage you." And Miss Kate read one of the most

beautiful passages in a perfectly correct but perfectly expressionless

manner.

Mr. Brooke made no comment as she returned the book to Meg, who said

innocently, "I thought it was poetry."

"Some of it is. Try this passage."

There was a queer smile about Mr. Brooke's mouth as he opened at poor

Mary's lament.

Meg obediently following the long grass-blade which her new tutor used

to point with, read slowly and timidly, unconsciously making poetry of

the hard words by the soft intonation of her musical voice. Down the

page went the green guide, and presently, forgetting her listener in

the beauty of the sad scene, Meg read as if alone, giving a little

touch of tragedy to the words of the unhappy queen. If she had seen

the brown eyes then, she would have stopped short, but she never looked

up, and the lesson was not spoiled for her.

"Very well indeed!" said Mr. Brooke, as she paused, quite ignoring her

many mistakes, and looking as if he did indeed love to teach.

Miss Kate put up her glass, and, having taken a survey of the little

tableau before her, shut her sketch book, saying with condescension,

"You've a nice accent and in time will be a clever reader. I advise

you to learn, for German is a valuable accomplishment to teachers. I

must look after Grace, she is romping." And Miss Kate strolled away,

adding to herself with a shrug, "I didn't come to chaperone a

governess, though she is young and pretty. What odd people these

Yankees are. I'm afraid Laurie will be quite spoiled among them."

"I forgot that English people rather turn up their noses at governesses

and don't treat them as we do," said Meg, looking after the retreating

figure with an annoyed expression.

"Tutors also have rather a hard time of it there, as I know to my

sorrow. There's no place like America for us workers, Miss Margaret."

And Mr. Brooke looked so contented and cheerful that Meg was ashamed to

lament her hard lot.

"I'm glad I live in it then. I don't like my work, but I get a good

deal of satisfaction out of it after all, so I won't complain. I only

wished I liked teaching as you do."

"I think you would if you had Laurie for a pupil. I shall be very

sorry to lose him next year," said Mr. Brooke, busily punching holes in

the turf.

"Going to college, I suppose?" Meg's lips asked the question, but her

eyes added, "And what becomes of you?"

"Yes, it's high time he went, for he is ready, and as soon as he is

off, I shall turn soldier. I am needed."

"I am glad of that!" exclaimed Meg. "I should think every young man

would want to go, though it is hard for the mothers and sisters who

stay at home," she added sorrowfully.

"I have neither, and very few friends to care whether I live or die,"

said Mr. Brooke rather bitterly as he absently put the dead rose in the

hole he had made and covered it up, like a little grave.

"Laurie and his grandfather would care a great deal, and we should all

be very sorry to have any harm happen to you," said Meg heartily.

"Thank you, that sounds pleasant," began Mr. Brooke, looking cheerful

again, but before he could finish his speech, Ned, mounted on the old

horse, came lumbering up to display his equestrian skill before the

young ladies, and there was no more quiet that day.

"Don't you love to ride?" asked Grace of Amy, as they stood resting

after a race round the field with the others, led by Ned.

"I dote upon it. My sister, Meg, used to ride when Papa was rich, but

we don't keep any horses now, except Ellen Tree," added Amy, laughing.

"Tell me about Ellen Tree. Is it a donkey?" asked Grace curiously.

"Why, you see, Jo is crazy about horses and so am I, but we've only got

an old sidesaddle and no horse. Out in our garden is an apple tree

that has a nice low branch, so Jo put the saddle on it, fixed some

reins on the part that turns up, and we bounce away on Ellen Tree

whenever we like."

"How funny!" laughed Grace. "I have a pony at home, and ride nearly

every day in the park with Fred and Kate. It's very nice, for my

friends go too, and the Row is full of ladies and gentlemen."

"Dear, how charming! I hope I shall go abroad some day, but I'd rather

go to Rome than the Row," said Amy, who had not the remotest idea what

the Row was and wouldn't have asked for the world.

Frank, sitting just behind the little girls, heard what they were

saying, and pushed his crutch away from him with an impatient gesture

as he watched the active lads going through all sorts of comical

gymnastics. Beth, who was collecting the scattered Author cards,

looked up and said, in her shy yet friendly way, "I'm afraid you are

tired. Can I do anything for you?"

"Talk to me, please. It's dull, sitting by myself," answered Frank,

who had evidently been used to being made much of at home.

If he asked her to deliver a Latin oration, it would not have seemed a

more impossible task to bashful Beth, but there was no place to run to,

no Jo to hide behind now, and the poor boy looked so wistfully at her

that she bravely resolved to try.

"What do you like to talk about?" she asked, fumbling over the cards

and dropping half as she tried to tie them up.

"Well, I like to hear about cricket and boating and hunting," said

Frank, who had not yet learned to suit his amusements to his strength.

My heart! What shall I do? I don't know anything about them, thought

Beth, and forgetting the boy's misfortune in her flurry, she said,

hoping to make him talk, "I never saw any hunting, but I suppose you

know all about it."

"I did once, but I can never hunt again, for I got hurt leaping a

confounded five-barred gate, so there are no more horses and hounds for

me," said Frank with a sigh that made Beth hate herself for her

innocent blunder.

"Your deer are much prettier than our ugly buffaloes," she said,

turning to the prairies for help and feeling glad that she had read one

of the boys' books in which Jo delighted.

Buffaloes proved soothing and satisfactory, and in her eagerness to

amuse another, Beth forgot herself, and was quite unconscious of her

sisters' surprise and delight at the unusual spectacle of Beth talking

away to one of the dreadful boys, against whom she had begged

protection.

"Bless her heart! She pities him, so she is good to him," said Jo,

beaming at her from the croquet ground.

"I always said she was a little saint," added Meg, as if there could be

no further doubt of it.

"I haven't heard Frank laugh so much for ever so long," said Grace to

Amy, as they sat discussing dolls and making tea sets out of the acorn

cups.

"My sister Beth is a very fastidious girl, when she likes to be," said

Amy, well pleased at Beth's success. She meant 'facinating', but as

Grace didn't know the exact meaning of either word, fastidious sounded

well and made a good impression.

An impromptu circus, fox and geese, and an amicable game of croquet

finished the afternoon. At sunset the tent was struck, hampers packed,

wickets pulled up, boats loaded, and the whole party floated down the

river, singing at the tops of their voices. Ned, getting sentimental,

warbled a serenade with the pensive refrain...

Alone, alone, ah! Woe, alone,

and at the lines...

We each are young, we each have a heart,

Oh, why should we stand thus coldly apart?

he looked at Meg with such a lackadiasical expression that she laughed

outright and spoiled his song.

"How can you be so cruel to me?" he whispered, under cover of a lively

chorus. "You've kept close to that starched-up Englishwoman all day,

and now you snub me."

"I didn't mean to, but you looked so funny I really couldn't help it,"

replied Meg, passing over the first part of his reproach, for it was

quite true that she had shunned him, remembering the Moffat party and

the talk after it.

Ned was offended and turned to Sallie for consolation, saying to her

rather pettishly, "There isn't a bit of flirt in that girl, is there?"

"Not a particle, but she's a dear," returned Sallie, defending her

friend even while confessing her shortcomings.

"She's not a stricken deer anyway," said Ned, trying to be witty, and

succeeding as well as very young gentlemen usually do.

On the lawn where it had gathered, the little party separated with

cordial good nights and good-byes, for the Vaughns were going to Canada.

As the four sisters went home through the garden, Miss Kate looked

after them, saying, without the patronizing tone in her voice, "In

spite of their demonstrative manners, American girls are very nice when

one knows them."

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Brooke.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CASTLES IN THE AIR

Laurie lay luxuriously swinging to and fro in his hammock one warm

September afternoon, wondering what his neighbors were about, but too

lazy to go and find out. He was in one of his moods, for the day had

been both unprofitable and unsatisfactory, and he was wishing he could

live it over again. The hot weather made him indolent, and he had

shirked his studies, tried Mr. Brooke's patience to the utmost,

displeased his grandfather by practicing half the afternoon, frightened

the maidservants half out of their wits by mischievously hinting that

one of his dogs was going mad, and, after high words with the stableman

about some fancied neglect of his horse, he had flung himself into his

hammock to fume over the stupidity of the world in general, till the

peace of the lovely day quieted him in spite of himself. Staring up

into the green gloom of the horse-chestnut trees above him, he dreamed

dreams of all sorts, and was just imagining himself tossing on the

ocean in a voyage round the world, when the sound of voices brought him

ashore in a flash. Peeping through the meshes of the hammock, he saw

the Marches coming out, as if bound on some expedition.

"What in the world are those girls about now?" thought Laurie, opening

his sleepy eyes to take a good look, for there was something rather

peculiar in the appearance of his neighbors. Each wore a large,

flapping hat, a brown linen pouch slung over one shoulder, and carried

a long staff. Meg had a cushion, Jo a book, Beth a basket, and Amy a

portfolio. All walked quietly through the garden, out at the little

back gate, and began to climb the hill that lay between the house and

river.

"Well, that's cool," said Laurie to himself, "to have a picnic and

never ask me! They can't be going in the boat, for they haven't got

the key. Perhaps they forgot it. I'll take it to them, and see what's

going on."

Though possessed of half a dozen hats, it took him some time to find

one, then there was a hunt for the key, which was at last discovered in

his pocket, so that the girls were quite out of sight when he leaped

the fence and ran after them. Taking the shortest way to the

boathouse, he waited for them to appear, but no one came, and he went

up the hill to take an observation. A grove of pines covered one part

of it, and from the heart of this green spot came a clearer sound than

the soft sigh of the pines or the drowsy chirp of the crickets.

"Here's a landscape!" thought Laurie, peeping through the bushes, and

looking wide-awake and good-natured already.

It was a rather pretty little picture, for the sisters sat together in

the shady nook, with sun and shadow flickering over them, the aromatic

wind lifting their hair and cooling their hot cheeks, and all the

little wood people going on with their affairs as if these were no

strangers but old friends. Meg sat upon her cushion, sewing daintily

with her white hands, and looking as fresh and sweet as a rose in her

pink dress among the green. Beth was sorting the cones that lay thick

under the hemlock near by, for she made pretty things with them. Amy

was sketching a group of ferns, and Jo was knitting as she read aloud.

A shadow passed over the boy's face as he watched them, feeling that he

ought to go away because uninvited; yet lingering because home seemed

very lonely and this quiet party in the woods most attractive to his

restless spirit. He stood so still that a squirrel, busy with its

harvesting, ran down a pine close beside him, saw him suddenly and

skipped back, scolding so shrilly that Beth looked up, espied the

wistful face behind the birches, and beckoned with a reassuring smile.

"May I come in, please? Or shall I be a bother?" he asked, advancing

slowly.

Meg lifted her eyebrows, but Jo scowled at her defiantly and said at

once, "Of course you may. We should have asked you before, only we

thought you wouldn't care for such a girl's game as this."

"I always like your games, but if Meg doesn't want me, I'll go away."

"I've no objection, if you do something. It's against the rules to be

idle here," replied Meg gravely but graciously.

"Much obliged. I'll do anything if you'll let me stop a bit, for it's

as dull as the Desert of Sahara down there. Shall I sew, read, cone,

draw, or do all at once? Bring on your bears. I'm ready." And Laurie

sat down with a submissive expression delightful to behold.

"Finish this story while I set my heel," said Jo, handing him the book.

"Yes'm." was the meek answer, as he began, doing his best to prove his

gratitude for the favor of admission into the 'Busy Bee Society'.

The story was not a long one, and when it was finished, he ventured to

ask a few questions as a reward of merit.

"Please, ma'am, could I inquire if this highly instructive and charming

institution is a new one?"

"Would you tell him?" asked Meg of her sisters.

"He'll laugh," said Amy warningly.

"Who cares?" said Jo.

"I guess he'll like it," added Beth.

"Of course I shall! I give you my word I won't laugh. Tell away, Jo,

and don't be afraid."

"The idea of being afraid of you! Well, you see we used to play

Pilgrim's Progress, and we have been going on with it in earnest, all

winter and summer."

"Yes, I know," said Laurie, nodding wisely.

"Who told you?" demanded Jo.

"Spirits."

"No, I did. I wanted to amuse him one night when you were all away,

and he was rather dismal. He did like it, so don't scold, Jo," said

Beth meekly.

"You can't keep a secret. Never mind, it saves trouble now."

"Go on, please," said Laurie, as Jo became absorbed in her work,

looking a trifle displeased.

"Oh, didn't she tell you about this new plan of ours? Well, we have

tried not to waste our holiday, but each has had a task and worked at

it with a will. The vacation is nearly over, the stints are all done,

and we are ever so glad that we didn't dawdle."

"Yes, I should think so," and Laurie thought regretfully of his own

idle days.

"Mother likes to have us out-of-doors as much as possible, so we bring

our work here and have nice times. For the fun of it we bring our

things in these bags, wear the old hats, use poles to climb the hill,

and play pilgrims, as we used to do years ago. We call this hill the

Delectable Mountain, for we can look far away and see the country where

we hope to live some time."

Jo pointed, and Laurie sat up to examine, for through an opening in the

wood one could look cross the wide, blue river, the meadows on the

other side, far over the outskirts of the great city, to the green

hills that rose to meet the sky. The sun was low, and the heavens

glowed with the splendor of an autumn sunset. Gold and purple clouds

lay on the hilltops, and rising high into the ruddy light were silvery

white peaks that shone like the airy spires of some Celestial City.

"How beautiful that is!" said Laurie softly, for he was quick to see

and feel beauty of any kind.

"It's often so, and we like to watch it, for it is never the same, but

always splendid," replied Amy, wishing she could paint it.

"Jo talks about the country where we hope to live sometime--the real

country, she means, with pigs and chickens and haymaking. It would be

nice, but I wish the beautiful country up there was real, and we could

ever go to it," said Beth musingly.

"There is a lovelier country even than that, where we shall go,

by-and-by, when we are good enough," answered Meg with her sweetest

voice.

"It seems so long to wait, so hard to do. I want to fly away at once,

as those swallows fly, and go in at that splendid gate."

"You'll get there, Beth, sooner or later, no fear of that," said Jo.

"I'm the one that will have to fight and work, and climb and wait, and

maybe never get in after all."

"You'll have me for company, if that's any comfort. I shall have to do

a deal of traveling before I come in sight of your Celestial City. If

I arrive late, you'll say a good word for me, won't you, Beth?"

Something in the boy's face troubled his little friend, but she said

cheerfully, with her quiet eyes on the changing clouds, "If people

really want to go, and really try all their lives, I think they will

get in, for I don't believe there are any locks on that door or any

guards at the gate. I always imagine it is as it is in the picture,

where the shining ones stretch out their hands to welcome poor

Christian as he comes up from the river."

"Wouldn't it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could

come true, and we could live in them?" said Jo, after a little pause.

"I've made such quantities it would be hard to choose which I'd have,"

said Laurie, lying flat and throwing cones at the squirrel who had

betrayed him.

"You'd have to take your favorite one. What is it?" asked Meg.

"If I tell mine, will you tell yours?"

"Yes, if the girls will too."

"We will. Now, Laurie."

"After I'd seen as much of the world as I want to, I'd like to settle

in Germany and have just as much music as I choose. I'm to be a famous

musician myself, and all creation is to rush to hear me. And I'm never

to be bothered about money or business, but just enjoy myself and live

for what I like. That's my favorite castle. What's yours, Meg?"

Margaret seemed to find it a little hard to tell hers, and waved a

brake before her face, as if to disperse imaginary gnats, while she

said slowly, "I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of

luxurious things--nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture,

pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and

manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a

bit. How I should enjoy it! For I wouldn't be idle, but do good, and

make everyone love me dearly."

"Wouldn't you have a master for your castle in the air?" asked Laurie

slyly.

"I said 'pleasant people', you know," and Meg carefully tied up her

shoe as she spoke, so that no one saw her face.

"Why don't you say you'd have a splendid, wise, good husband and some

angelic little children? You know your castle wouldn't be perfect

without," said blunt Jo, who had no tender fancies yet, and rather

scorned romance, except in books.

"You'd have nothing but horses, inkstands, and novels in yours,"

answered Meg petulantly.

"Wouldn't I though? I'd have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms

piled high with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand, so that

my works should be as famous as Laurie's music. I want to do something

splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that

won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the

watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall

write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my

favorite dream."

"Mine is to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take

care of the family," said Beth contentedly.

"Don't you wish for anything else?" asked Laurie.

"Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we

may all keep well and be together, nothing else."

"I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go

to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole

world," was Amy's modest desire.

"We're an ambitious set, aren't we? Every one of us, but Beth, wants

to be rich and famous, and gorgeous in every respect. I do wonder if

any of us will ever get our wishes," said Laurie, chewing grass like a

meditative calf.

"I've got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the

door remains to be seen," observed Jo mysteriously.

"I've got the key to mine, but I'm not allowed to try it. Hang

college!" muttered Laurie with an impatient sigh.

"Here's mine!" and Amy waved her pencil.

"I haven't got any," said Meg forlornly.

"Yes, you have," said Laurie at once.

"Where?"

"In your face."

"Nonsense, that's of no use."

"Wait and see if it doesn't bring you something worth having," replied

the boy, laughing at the thought of a charming little secret which he

fancied he knew.

Meg colored behind the brake, but asked no questions and looked across

the river with the same expectant expression which Mr. Brooke had worn

when he told the story of the knight.

"If we are all alive ten years hence, let's meet, and see how many of

us have got our wishes, or how much nearer we are then than now," said

Jo, always ready with a plan.

"Bless me! How old I shall be, twenty-seven!" exclaimed Meg, who felt

grown up already, having just reached seventeen.

"You and I will be twenty-six, Teddy, Beth twenty-four, and Amy

twenty-two. What a venerable party!" said Jo.

"I hope I shall have done something to be proud of by that time, but

I'm such a lazy dog, I'm afraid I shall dawdle, Jo."

"You need a motive, Mother says, and when you get it, she is sure

you'll work splendidly."

"Is she? By Jupiter, I will, if I only get the chance!" cried Laurie,

sitting up with sudden energy. "I ought to be satisfied to please

Grandfather, and I do try, but it's working against the grain, you see,

and comes hard. He wants me to be an India merchant, as he was, and

I'd rather be shot. I hate tea and silk and spices, and every sort of

rubbish his old ships bring, and I don't care how soon they go to the

bottom when I own them. Going to college ought to satisfy him, for if

I give him four years he ought to let me off from the business. But

he's set, and I've got to do just as he did, unless I break away and

please myself, as my father did. If there was anyone left to stay with

the old gentleman, I'd do it tomorrow."

Laurie spoke excitedly, and looked ready to carry his threat into

execution on the slightest provocation, for he was growing up very fast

and, in spite of his indolent ways, had a young man's hatred of

subjection, a young man's restless longing to try the world for himself.

"I advise you to sail away in one of your ships, and never come home

again till you have tried your own way," said Jo, whose imagination was

fired by the thought of such a daring exploit, and whose sympathy was

excited by what she called 'Teddy's Wrongs'.

"That's not right, Jo. You mustn't talk in that way, and Laurie

mustn't take your bad advice. You should do just what your grandfather

wishes, my dear boy," said Meg in her most maternal tone. "Do your best

at college, and when he sees that you try to please him, I'm sure he

won't be hard on you or unjust to you. As you say, there is no one

else to stay with and love him, and you'd never forgive yourself if you

left him without his permission. Don't be dismal or fret, but do your

duty and you'll get your reward, as good Mr. Brooke has, by being

respected and loved."

"What do you know about him?" asked Laurie, grateful for the good

advice, but objecting to the lecture, and glad to turn the conversation

from himself after his unusual outbreak.

"Only what your grandpa told us about him, how he took good care of his

own mother till she died, and wouldn't go abroad as tutor to some nice

person because he wouldn't leave her. And how he provides now for an

old woman who nursed his mother, and never tells anyone, but is just as

generous and patient and good as he can be."

"So he is, dear old fellow!" said Laurie heartily, as Meg paused,

looking flushed and earnest with her story. "It's like Grandpa to find

out all about him without letting him know, and to tell all his

goodness to others, so that they might like him. Brooke couldn't

understand why your mother was so kind to him, asking him over with me

and treating him in her beautiful friendly way. He thought she was

just perfect, and talked about it for days and days, and went on about

you all in flaming style. If ever I do get my wish, you see what I'll

do for Brooke."

"Begin to do something now by not plaguing his life out," said Meg

sharply.

"How do you know I do, Miss?"

"I can always tell by his face when he goes away. If you have been

good, he looks satisfied and walks briskly. If you have plagued him,

he's sober and walks slowly, as if he wanted to go back and do his work

better."

"Well, I like that? So you keep an account of my good and bad marks in

Brooke's face, do you? I see him bow and smile as he passes your

window, but I didn't know you'd got up a telegraph."

"We haven't. Don't be angry, and oh, don't tell him I said anything!

It was only to show that I cared how you get on, and what is said here

is said in confidence, you know," cried Meg, much alarmed at the

thought of what might follow from her careless speech.

"I don't tell tales," replied Laurie, with his 'high and mighty' air,

as Jo called a certain expression which he occasionally wore. "Only if

Brooke is going to be a thermometer, I must mind and have fair weather

for him to report."

"Please don't be offended. I didn't mean to preach or tell tales or be

silly. I only thought Jo was encouraging you in a feeling which you'd

be sorry for by-and-by. You are so kind to us, we feel as if you were

our brother and say just what we think. Forgive me, I meant it kindly."

And Meg offered her hand with a gesture both affectionate and timid.

Ashamed of his momentary pique, Laurie squeezed the kind little hand,

and said frankly, "I'm the one to be forgiven. I'm cross and have been

out of sorts all day. I like to have you tell me my faults and be

sisterly, so don't mind if I am grumpy sometimes. I thank you all the

same."

Bent on showing that he was not offended, he made himself as agreeable

as possible, wound cotton for Meg, recited poetry to please Jo, shook

down cones for Beth, and helped Amy with her ferns, proving himself a

fit person to belong to the 'Busy Bee Society'. In the midst of an

animated discussion on the domestic habits of turtles (one of those

amiable creatures having strolled up from the river), the faint sound

of a bell warned them that Hannah had put the tea 'to draw', and they

would just have time to get home to supper.

"May I come again?" asked Laurie.

"Yes, if you are good, and love your book, as the boys in the primer

are told to do," said Meg, smiling.

"I'll try."

"Then you may come, and I'll teach you to knit as the Scotchmen do.

There's a demand for socks just now," added Jo, waving hers like a big

blue worsted banner as they parted at the gate.

That night, when Beth played to Mr. Laurence in the twilight, Laurie,

standing in the shadow of the curtain, listened to the little David,

whose simple music always quieted his moody spirit, and watched the old

man, who sat with his gray head on his hand, thinking tender thoughts

of the dead child he had loved so much. Remembering the conversation of

the afternoon, the boy said to himself, with the resolve to make the

sacrifice cheerfully, "I'll let my castle go, and stay with the dear

old gentleman while he needs me, for I am all he has."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SECRETS

Jo was very busy in the garret, for the October days began to grow

chilly, and the afternoons were short. For two or three hours the sun

lay warmly in the high window, showing Jo seated on the old sofa,

writing busily, with her papers spread out upon a trunk before her,

while Scrabble, the pet rat, promenaded the beams overhead, accompanied

by his oldest son, a fine young fellow, who was evidently very proud of

his whiskers. Quite absorbed in her work, Jo scribbled away till the

last page was filled, when she signed her name with a flourish and

threw down her pen, exclaiming...

"There, I've done my best! If this won't suit I shall have to wait

till I can do better."

Lying back on the sofa, she read the manuscript carefully through,

making dashes here and there, and putting in many exclamation points,

which looked like little balloons. Then she tied it up with a smart

red ribbon, and sat a minute looking at it with a sober, wistful

expression, which plainly showed how earnest her work had been. Jo's

desk up here was an old tin kitchen which hung against the wall. In it

she kept her papers, and a few books, safely shut away from Scrabble,

who, being likewise of a literary turn, was fond of making a

circulating library of such books as were left in his way by eating the

leaves. From this tin receptacle Jo produced another manuscript, and

putting both in her pocket, crept quietly downstairs, leaving her

friends to nibble on her pens and taste her ink.

She put on her hat and jacket as noiselessly as possible, and going to

the back entry window, got out upon the roof of a low porch, swung

herself down to the grassy bank, and took a roundabout way to the road.

Once there, she composed herself, hailed a passing omnibus, and rolled

away to town, looking very merry and mysterious.

If anyone had been watching her, he would have thought her movements

decidedly peculiar, for on alighting, she went off at a great pace till

she reached a certain number in a certain busy street. Having found

the place with some difficulty, she went into the doorway, looked up

the dirty stairs, and after standing stock still a minute, suddenly

dived into the street and walked away as rapidly as she came. This

maneuver she repeated several times, to the great amusement of a

black-eyed young gentleman lounging in the window of a building

opposite. On returning for the third time, Jo gave herself a shake,

pulled her hat over her eyes, and walked up the stairs, looking as if

she were going to have all her teeth out.

There was a dentist's sign, among others, which adorned the entrance,

and after staring a moment at the pair of artificial jaws which slowly

opened and shut to draw attention to a fine set of teeth, the young

gentleman put on his coat, took his hat, and went down to post himself

in the opposite doorway, saying with a smile and a shiver, "It's like

her to come alone, but if she has a bad time she'll need someone to

help her home."

In ten minutes Jo came running downstairs with a very red face and the

general appearance of a person who had just passed through a trying

ordeal of some sort. When she saw the young gentleman she looked

anything but pleased, and passed him with a nod. But he followed,

asking with an air of sympathy, "Did you have a bad time?"

"Not very."

"You got through quickly."

"Yes, thank goodness!"

"Why did you go alone?"

"Didn't want anyone to know."

"You're the oddest fellow I ever saw. How many did you have out?"

Jo looked at her friend as if she did not understand him, then began to

laugh as if mightily amused at something.

"There are two which I want to have come out, but I must wait a week."

"What are you laughing at? You are up to some mischief, Jo," said

Laurie, looking mystified.

"So are you. What were you doing, sir, up in that billiard saloon?"

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, it wasn't a billiard saloon, but a

gymnasium, and I was taking a lesson in fencing."

"I'm glad of that."

"Why?"

"You can teach me, and then when we play \_Hamlet\_, you can be Laertes,

and we'll make a fine thing of the fencing scene."

Laurie burst out with a hearty boy's laugh, which made several

passers-by smile in spite of themselves.

"I'll teach you whether we play \_Hamlet\_ or not. It's grand fun and

will straighten you up capitally. But I don't believe that was your

only reason for saying 'I'm glad' in that decided way, was it now?"

"No, I was glad that you were not in the saloon, because I hope you

never go to such places. Do you?"

"Not often."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"It's no harm, Jo. I have billiards at home, but it's no fun unless

you have good players, so, as I'm fond of it, I come sometimes and have

a game with Ned Moffat or some of the other fellows."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry, for you'll get to liking it better and better,

and will waste time and money, and grow like those dreadful boys. I

did hope you'd stay respectable and be a satisfaction to your friends,"

said Jo, shaking her head.

"Can't a fellow take a little innocent amusement now and then without

losing his respectability?" asked Laurie, looking nettled.

"That depends upon how and where he takes it. I don't like Ned and his

set, and wish you'd keep out of it. Mother won't let us have him at

our house, though he wants to come. And if you grow like him she won't

be willing to have us frolic together as we do now."

"Won't she?" asked Laurie anxiously.

"No, she can't bear fashionable young men, and she'd shut us all up in

bandboxes rather than have us associate with them."

"Well, she needn't get out her bandboxes yet. I'm not a fashionable

party and don't mean to be, but I do like harmless larks now and then,

don't you?"

"Yes, nobody minds them, so lark away, but don't get wild, will you?

Or there will be an end of all our good times."

"I'll be a double distilled saint."

"I can't bear saints. Just be a simple, honest, respectable boy, and

we'll never desert you. I don't know what I should do if you acted

like Mr. King's son. He had plenty of money, but didn't know how to

spend it, and got tipsy and gambled, and ran away, and forged his

father's name, I believe, and was altogether horrid."

"You think I'm likely to do the same? Much obliged."

"No, I don't--oh, dear, no!--but I hear people talking about money

being such a temptation, and I sometimes wish you were poor. I

shouldn't worry then."

"Do you worry about me, Jo?"

"A little, when you look moody and discontented, as you sometimes do,

for you've got such a strong will, if you once get started wrong, I'm

afraid it would be hard to stop you."

Laurie walked in silence a few minutes, and Jo watched him, wishing she

had held her tongue, for his eyes looked angry, though his lips smiled

as if at her warnings.

"Are you going to deliver lectures all the way home?" he asked

presently.

"Of course not. Why?"

"Because if you are, I'll take a bus. If you're not, I'd like to walk

with you and tell you something very interesting."

"I won't preach any more, and I'd like to hear the news immensely."

"Very well, then, come on. It's a secret, and if I tell you, you must

tell me yours."

"I haven't got any," began Jo, but stopped suddenly, remembering that

she had.

"You know you have--you can't hide anything, so up and 'fess, or I

won't tell," cried Laurie.

"Is your secret a nice one?"

"Oh, isn't it! All about people you know, and such fun! You ought to

hear it, and I've been aching to tell it this long time. Come, you

begin."

"You'll not say anything about it at home, will you?"

"Not a word."

"And you won't tease me in private?"

"I never tease."

"Yes, you do. You get everything you want out of people. I don't know

how you do it, but you are a born wheedler."

"Thank you. Fire away."

"Well, I've left two stories with a newspaperman, and he's to give his

answer next week," whispered Jo, in her confidant's ear.

"Hurrah for Miss March, the celebrated American authoress!" cried

Laurie, throwing up his hat and catching it again, to the great delight

of two ducks, four cats, five hens, and half a dozen Irish children,

for they were out of the city now.

"Hush! It won't come to anything, I dare say, but I couldn't rest till

I had tried, and I said nothing about it because I didn't want anyone

else to be disappointed."

"It won't fail. Why, Jo, your stories are works of Shakespeare

compared to half the rubbish that is published every day. Won't it be

fun to see them in print, and shan't we feel proud of our authoress?"

Jo's eyes sparkled, for it is always pleasant to be believed in, and a

friend's praise is always sweeter than a dozen newspaper puffs.

"Where's your secret? Play fair, Teddy, or I'll never believe you

again," she said, trying to extinguish the brilliant hopes that blazed

up at a word of encouragement.

"I may get into a scrape for telling, but I didn't promise not to, so I

will, for I never feel easy in my mind till I've told you any plummy

bit of news I get. I know where Meg's glove is."

"Is that all?" said Jo, looking disappointed, as Laurie nodded and

twinkled with a face full of mysterious intelligence.

"It's quite enough for the present, as you'll agree when I tell you

where it is."

"Tell, then."

Laurie bent, and whispered three words in Jo's ear, which produced a

comical change. She stood and stared at him for a minute, looking both

surprised and displeased, then walked on, saying sharply, "How do you

know?"

"Saw it."

"Where?"

"Pocket."

"All this time?"

"Yes, isn't that romantic?"

"No, it's horrid."

"Don't you like it?"

"Of course I don't. It's ridiculous, it won't be allowed. My

patience! What would Meg say?"

"You are not to tell anyone. Mind that."

"I didn't promise."

"That was understood, and I trusted you."

"Well, I won't for the present, anyway, but I'm disgusted, and wish you

hadn't told me."

"I thought you'd be pleased."

"At the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away? No, thank you."

"You'll feel better about it when somebody comes to take you away."

"I'd like to see anyone try it," cried Jo fiercely.

"So should I!" and Laurie chuckled at the idea.

"I don't think secrets agree with me, I feel rumpled up in my mind

since you told me that," said Jo rather ungratefully.

"Race down this hill with me, and you'll be all right," suggested

Laurie.

No one was in sight, the smooth road sloped invitingly before her, and

finding the temptation irresistible, Jo darted away, soon leaving hat

and comb behind her and scattering hairpins as she ran. Laurie reached

the goal first and was quite satisfied with the success of his

treatment, for his Atlanta came panting up with flying hair, bright

eyes, ruddy cheeks, and no signs of dissatisfaction in her face.

"I wish I was a horse, then I could run for miles in this splendid air,

and not lose my breath. It was capital, but see what a guy it's made

me. Go, pick up my things, like a cherub, as you are," said Jo,

dropping down under a maple tree, which was carpeting the bank with

crimson leaves.

Laurie leisurely departed to recover the lost property, and Jo bundled

up her braids, hoping no one would pass by till she was tidy again.

But someone did pass, and who should it be but Meg, looking

particularly ladylike in her state and festival suit, for she had been

making calls.

"What in the world are you doing here?" she asked, regarding her

disheveled sister with well-bred surprise.

"Getting leaves," meekly answered Jo, sorting the rosy handful she had

just swept up.

"And hairpins," added Laurie, throwing half a dozen into Jo's lap.

"They grow on this road, Meg, so do combs and brown straw hats."

"You have been running, Jo. How could you? When will you stop such

romping ways?" said Meg reprovingly, as she settled her cuffs and

smoothed her hair, with which the wind had taken liberties.

"Never till I'm stiff and old and have to use a crutch. Don't try to

make me grow up before my time, Meg. It's hard enough to have you

change all of a sudden. Let me be a little girl as long as I can."

As she spoke, Jo bent over the leaves to hide the trembling of her

lips, for lately she had felt that Margaret was fast getting to be a

woman, and Laurie's secret made her dread the separation which must

surely come some time and now seemed very near. He saw the trouble in

her face and drew Meg's attention from it by asking quickly, "Where

have you been calling, all so fine?"

"At the Gardiners', and Sallie has been telling me all about Belle

Moffat's wedding. It was very splendid, and they have gone to spend

the winter in Paris. Just think how delightful that must be!"

"Do you envy her, Meg?" said Laurie.

"I'm afraid I do."

"I'm glad of it!" muttered Jo, tying on her hat with a jerk.

"Why?" asked Meg, looking surprised.

"Because if you care much about riches, you will never go and marry a

poor man," said Jo, frowning at Laurie, who was mutely warning her to

mind what she said.

"I shall never '\_go\_ and marry' anyone," observed Meg, walking on with

great dignity while the others followed, laughing, whispering, skipping

stones, and 'behaving like children', as Meg said to herself, though

she might have been tempted to join them if she had not had her best

dress on.

For a week or two, Jo behaved so queerly that her sisters were quite

bewildered. She rushed to the door when the postman rang, was rude to

Mr. Brooke whenever they met, would sit looking at Meg with a

woe-begone face, occasionally jumping up to shake and then kiss her in

a very mysterious manner. Laurie and she were always making signs to

one another, and talking about 'Spread Eagles' till the girls declared

they had both lost their wits. On the second Saturday after Jo got out

of the window, Meg, as she sat sewing at her window, was scandalized by

the sight of Laurie chasing Jo all over the garden and finally

capturing her in Amy's bower. What went on there, Meg could not see,

but shrieks of laughter were heard, followed by the murmur of voices

and a great flapping of newspapers.

"What shall we do with that girl? She never \_will\_ behave like a young

lady," sighed Meg, as she watched the race with a disapproving face.

"I hope she won't. She is so funny and dear as she is," said Beth, who

had never betrayed that she was a little hurt at Jo's having secrets

with anyone but her.

"It's very trying, but we never can make her \_commy la fo\_," added Amy,

who sat making some new frills for herself, with her curls tied up in a

very becoming way, two agreeable things that made her feel unusually

elegant and ladylike.

In a few minutes Jo bounced in, laid herself on the sofa, and affected

to read.

"Have you anything interesting there?" asked Meg, with condescension.

"Nothing but a story, won't amount to much, I guess," returned Jo,

carefully keeping the name of the paper out of sight.

"You'd better read it aloud. That will amuse us and keep you out of

mischief," said Amy in her most grown-up tone.

"What's the name?" asked Beth, wondering why Jo kept her face behind

the sheet.

"The Rival Painters."

"That sounds well. Read it," said Meg.

With a loud "Hem!" and a long breath, Jo began to read very fast. The

girls listened with interest, for the tale was romantic, and somewhat

pathetic, as most of the characters died in the end. "I like that about

the splendid picture," was Amy's approving remark, as Jo paused.

"I prefer the lovering part. Viola and Angelo are two of our favorite

names, isn't that queer?" said Meg, wiping her eyes, for the lovering

part was tragical.

"Who wrote it?" asked Beth, who had caught a glimpse of Jo's face.

The reader suddenly sat up, cast away the paper, displaying a flushed

countenance, and with a funny mixture of solemnity and excitement

replied in a loud voice, "Your sister."

"You?" cried Meg, dropping her work.

"It's very good," said Amy critically.

"I knew it! I knew it! Oh, my Jo, I am so proud!" and Beth ran to hug

her sister and exult over this splendid success.

Dear me, how delighted they all were, to be sure! How Meg wouldn't

believe it till she saw the words. "Miss Josephine March," actually

printed in the paper. How graciously Amy criticized the artistic parts

of the story, and offered hints for a sequel, which unfortunately

couldn't be carried out, as the hero and heroine were dead. How Beth

got excited, and skipped and sang with joy. How Hannah came in to

exclaim, "Sakes alive, well I never!" in great astonishment at 'that

Jo's doin's'. How proud Mrs. March was when she knew it. How Jo

laughed, with tears in her eyes, as she declared she might as well be a

peacock and done with it, and how the 'Spread Eagle' might be said to

flap his wings triumphantly over the House of March, as the paper

passed from hand to hand.

"Tell us about it." "When did it come?" "How much did you get for it?"

"What will Father say?" "Won't Laurie laugh?" cried the family, all in

one breath as they clustered about Jo, for these foolish, affectionate

people made a jubilee of every little household joy.

"Stop jabbering, girls, and I'll tell you everything," said Jo,

wondering if Miss Burney felt any grander over her Evelina than she did

over her 'Rival Painters'. Having told how she disposed of her tales,

Jo added, "And when I went to get my answer, the man said he liked them

both, but didn't pay beginners, only let them print in his paper, and

noticed the stories. It was good practice, he said, and when the

beginners improved, anyone would pay. So I let him have the two

stories, and today this was sent to me, and Laurie caught me with it

and insisted on seeing it, so I let him. And he said it was good, and

I shall write more, and he's going to get the next paid for, and I am

so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the

girls."

Jo's breath gave out here, and wrapping her head in the paper, she

bedewed her little story with a few natural tears, for to be

independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest

wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that

happy end.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A TELEGRAM

"November is the most disagreeable month in the whole year," said

Margaret, standing at the window one dull afternoon, looking out at the

frostbitten garden.

"That's the reason I was born in it," observed Jo pensively, quite

unconscious of the blot on her nose.

"If something very pleasant should happen now, we should think it a

delightful month," said Beth, who took a hopeful view of everything,

even November.

"I dare say, but nothing pleasant ever does happen in this family,"

said Meg, who was out of sorts. "We go grubbing along day after day,

without a bit of change, and very little fun. We might as well be in a

treadmill."

"My patience, how blue we are!" cried Jo. "I don't much wonder, poor

dear, for you see other girls having splendid times, while you grind,

grind, year in and year out. Oh, don't I wish I could manage things

for you as I do for my heroines! You're pretty enough and good enough

already, so I'd have some rich relation leave you a fortune

unexpectedly. Then you'd dash out as an heiress, scorn everyone who

has slighted you, go abroad, and come home my Lady Something in a blaze

of splendor and elegance."

"People don't have fortunes left them in that style nowadays, men have

to work and women marry for money. It's a dreadfully unjust world,"

said Meg bitterly.

"Jo and I are going to make fortunes for you all. Just wait ten years,

and see if we don't," said Amy, who sat in a corner making mud pies, as

Hannah called her little clay models of birds, fruit, and faces.

"Can't wait, and I'm afraid I haven't much faith in ink and dirt,

though I'm grateful for your good intentions."

Meg sighed, and turned to the frostbitten garden again. Jo groaned and

leaned both elbows on the table in a despondent attitude, but Amy

spatted away energetically, and Beth, who sat at the other window,

said, smiling, "Two pleasant things are going to happen right away.

Marmee is coming down the street, and Laurie is tramping through the

garden as if he had something nice to tell."

In they both came, Mrs. March with her usual question, "Any letter from

Father, girls?" and Laurie to say in his persuasive way, "Won't some of

you come for a drive? I've been working away at mathematics till my

head is in a muddle, and I'm going to freshen my wits by a brisk turn.

It's a dull day, but the air isn't bad, and I'm going to take Brooke

home, so it will be gay inside, if it isn't out. Come, Jo, you and

Beth will go, won't you?"

"Of course we will."

"Much obliged, but I'm busy." And Meg whisked out her workbasket, for

she had agreed with her mother that it was best, for her at least, not

to drive too often with the young gentleman.

"We three will be ready in a minute," cried Amy, running away to wash

her hands.

"Can I do anything for you, Madam Mother?" asked Laurie, leaning over

Mrs. March's chair with the affectionate look and tone he always gave

her.

"No, thank you, except call at the office, if you'll be so kind, dear.

It's our day for a letter, and the postman hasn't been. Father is as

regular as the sun, but there's some delay on the way, perhaps."

A sharp ring interrupted her, and a minute after Hannah came in with a

letter.

"It's one of them horrid telegraph things, mum," she said, handling it

as if she was afraid it would explode and do some damage.

At the word 'telegraph', Mrs. March snatched it, read the two lines it

contained, and dropped back into her chair as white as if the little

paper had sent a bullet to her heart. Laurie dashed downstairs for

water, while Meg and Hannah supported her, and Jo read aloud, in a

frightened voice...

Mrs. March:

Your husband is very ill. Come at once.

S. HALE

Blank Hospital, Washington.

How still the room was as they listened breathlessly, how strangely the

day darkened outside, and how suddenly the whole world seemed to

change, as the girls gathered about their mother, feeling as if all the

happiness and support of their lives was about to be taken from them.

Mrs. March was herself again directly, read the message over, and

stretched out her arms to her daughters, saying, in a tone they never

forgot, "I shall go at once, but it may be too late. Oh, children,

children, help me to bear it!"

For several minutes there was nothing but the sound of sobbing in the

room, mingled with broken words of comfort, tender assurances of help,

and hopeful whispers that died away in tears. Poor Hannah was the

first to recover, and with unconscious wisdom she set all the rest a

good example, for with her, work was panacea for most afflictions.

"The Lord keep the dear man! I won't waste no time a-cryin', but git

your things ready right away, mum," she said heartily, as she wiped her

face on her apron, gave her mistress a warm shake of the hand with her

own hard one, and went away to work like three women in one.

"She's right, there's no time for tears now. Be calm, girls, and let

me think."

They tried to be calm, poor things, as their mother sat up, looking

pale but steady, and put away her grief to think and plan for them.

"Where's Laurie?" she asked presently, when she had collected her

thoughts and decided on the first duties to be done.

"Here, ma'am. Oh, let me do something!" cried the boy, hurrying from

the next room whither he had withdrawn, feeling that their first sorrow

was too sacred for even his friendly eyes to see.

"Send a telegram saying I will come at once. The next train goes early

in the morning. I'll take that."

"What else? The horses are ready. I can go anywhere, do anything," he

said, looking ready to fly to the ends of the earth.

"Leave a note at Aunt March's. Jo, give me that pen and paper."

Tearing off the blank side of one of her newly copied pages, Jo drew

the table before her mother, well knowing that money for the long, sad

journey must be borrowed, and feeling as if she could do anything to

add a little to the sum for her father.

"Now go, dear, but don't kill yourself driving at a desperate pace.

There is no need of that."

Mrs. March's warning was evidently thrown away, for five minutes later

Laurie tore by the window on his own fleet horse, riding as if for his

life.

"Jo, run to the rooms, and tell Mrs. King that I can't come. On the way

get these things. I'll put them down, they'll be needed and I must go

prepared for nursing. Hospital stores are not always good. Beth, go

and ask Mr. Laurence for a couple of bottles of old wine. I'm not too

proud to beg for Father. He shall have the best of everything. Amy,

tell Hannah to get down the black trunk, and Meg, come and help me find

my things, for I'm half bewildered."

Writing, thinking, and directing all at once might well bewilder the

poor lady, and Meg begged her to sit quietly in her room for a little

while, and let them work. Everyone scattered like leaves before a gust

of wind, and the quiet, happy household was broken up as suddenly as if

the paper had been an evil spell.

Mr. Laurence came hurrying back with Beth, bringing every comfort the

kind old gentleman could think of for the invalid, and friendliest

promises of protection for the girls during the mother's absence, which

comforted her very much. There was nothing he didn't offer, from his

own dressing gown to himself as escort. But the last was impossible.

Mrs. March would not hear of the old gentleman's undertaking the long

journey, yet an expression of relief was visible when he spoke of it,

for anxiety ill fits one for traveling. He saw the look, knit his heavy

eyebrows, rubbed his hands, and marched abruptly away, saying he'd be

back directly. No one had time to think of him again till, as Meg ran

through the entry, with a pair of rubbers in one hand and a cup of tea

in the other, she came suddenly upon Mr. Brooke.

"I'm very sorry to hear of this, Miss March," he said, in the kind,

quiet tone which sounded very pleasantly to her perturbed spirit. "I

came to offer myself as escort to your mother. Mr. Laurence has

commissions for me in Washington, and it will give me real satisfaction

to be of service to her there."

Down dropped the rubbers, and the tea was very near following, as Meg

put out her hand, with a face so full of gratitude that Mr. Brooke

would have felt repaid for a much greater sacrifice than the trifling

one of time and comfort which he was about to take.

"How kind you all are! Mother will accept, I'm sure, and it will be

such a relief to know that she has someone to take care of her. Thank

you very, very much!"

Meg spoke earnestly, and forgot herself entirely till something in the

brown eyes looking down at her made her remember the cooling tea, and

lead the way into the parlor, saying she would call her mother.

Everything was arranged by the time Laurie returned with a note from

Aunt March, enclosing the desired sum, and a few lines repeating what

she had often said before, that she had always told them it was absurd

for March to go into the army, always predicted that no good would come

of it, and she hoped they would take her advice the next time. Mrs.

March put the note in the fire, the money in her purse, and went on

with her preparations, with her lips folded tightly in a way which Jo

would have understood if she had been there.

The short afternoon wore away. All other errands were done, and Meg

and her mother busy at some necessary needlework, while Beth and Amy

got tea, and Hannah finished her ironing with what she called a 'slap

and a bang', but still Jo did not come. They began to get anxious, and

Laurie went off to find her, for no one knew what freak Jo might take

into her head. He missed her, however, and she came walking in with a

very queer expression of countenance, for there was a mixture of fun

and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family as

much as did the roll of bills she laid before her mother, saying with a

little choke in her voice, "That's my contribution toward making Father

comfortable and bringing him home!"

"My dear, where did you get it? Twenty-five dollars! Jo, I hope you

haven't done anything rash?"

"No, it's mine honestly. I didn't beg, borrow, or steal it. I earned

it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own."

As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general outcry arose, for

all her abundant hair was cut short.

"Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one

beauty." "My dear girl, there was no need of this." "She doesn't look

like my Jo any more, but I love her dearly for it!"

As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the cropped head tenderly, Jo

assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a particle,

and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked

it, "It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth. It

will be good for my vanity, I was getting too proud of my wig. It will

do my brains good to have that mop taken off. My head feels

deliciously light and cool, and the barber said I could soon have a

curly crop, which will be boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order.

I'm satisfied, so please take the money and let's have supper."

"Tell me all about it, Jo. I am not quite satisfied, but I can't blame

you, for I know how willingly you sacrificed your vanity, as you call

it, to your love. But, my dear, it was not necessary, and I'm afraid

you will regret it one of these days," said Mrs. March.

"No, I won't!" returned Jo stoutly, feeling much relieved that her

prank was not entirely condemned.

"What made you do it?" asked Amy, who would as soon have thought of

cutting off her head as her pretty hair.

"Well, I was wild to do something for Father," replied Jo, as they

gathered about the table, for healthy young people can eat even in the

midst of trouble. "I hate to borrow as much as Mother does, and I knew

Aunt March would croak, she always does, if you ask for a ninepence.

Meg gave all her quarterly salary toward the rent, and I only got some

clothes with mine, so I felt wicked, and was bound to have some money,

if I sold the nose off my face to get it."

"You needn't feel wicked, my child! You had no winter things and got

the simplest with your own hard earnings," said Mrs. March with a look

that warmed Jo's heart.

"I hadn't the least idea of selling my hair at first, but as I went

along I kept thinking what I could do, and feeling as if I'd like to

dive into some of the rich stores and help myself. In a barber's

window I saw tails of hair with the prices marked, and one black tail,

not so thick as mine, was forty dollars. It came to me all of a sudden

that I had one thing to make money out of, and without stopping to

think, I walked in, asked if they bought hair, and what they would give

for mine."

"I don't see how you dared to do it," said Beth in a tone of awe.

"Oh, he was a little man who looked as if he merely lived to oil his

hair. He rather stared at first, as if he wasn't used to having girls

bounce into his shop and ask him to buy their hair. He said he didn't

care about mine, it wasn't the fashionable color, and he never paid

much for it in the first place. The work put into it made it dear, and

so on. It was getting late, and I was afraid if it wasn't done right

away that I shouldn't have it done at all, and you know when I start to

do a thing, I hate to give it up. So I begged him to take it, and told

him why I was in such a hurry. It was silly, I dare say, but it

changed his mind, for I got rather excited, and told the story in my

topsy-turvy way, and his wife heard, and said so kindly, 'Take it,

Thomas, and oblige the young lady. I'd do as much for our Jimmy any

day if I had a spire of hair worth selling."

"Who was Jimmy?" asked Amy, who liked to have things explained as they

went along.

"Her son, she said, who was in the army. How friendly such things make

strangers feel, don't they? She talked away all the time the man

clipped, and diverted my mind nicely."

"Didn't you feel dreadfully when the first cut came?" asked Meg, with a

shiver.

"I took a last look at my hair while the man got his things, and that

was the end of it. I never snivel over trifles like that. I will

confess, though, I felt queer when I saw the dear old hair laid out on

the table, and felt only the short rough ends of my head. It almost

seemed as if I'd an arm or leg off. The woman saw me look at it, and

picked out a long lock for me to keep. I'll give it to you, Marmee,

just to remember past glories by, for a crop is so comfortable I don't

think I shall ever have a mane again."

Mrs. March folded the wavy chestnut lock, and laid it away with a short

gray one in her desk. She only said, "Thank you, deary," but something

in her face made the girls change the subject, and talk as cheerfully

as they could about Mr. Brooke's kindness, the prospect of a fine day

tomorrow, and the happy times they would have when Father came home to

be nursed.

No one wanted to go to bed when at ten o'clock Mrs. March put by the

last finished job, and said, "Come girls." Beth went to the piano and

played the father's favorite hymn. All began bravely, but broke down

one by one till Beth was left alone, singing with all her heart, for to

her music was always a sweet consoler.

"Go to bed and don't talk, for we must be up early and shall need all

the sleep we can get. Good night, my darlings," said Mrs. March, as

the hymn ended, for no one cared to try another.

They kissed her quietly, and went to bed as silently as if the dear

invalid lay in the next room. Beth and Amy soon fell asleep in spite

of the great trouble, but Meg lay awake, thinking the most serious

thoughts she had ever known in her short life. Jo lay motionless, and

her sister fancied that she was asleep, till a stifled sob made her

exclaim, as she touched a wet cheek...

"Jo, dear, what is it? Are you crying about father?"

"No, not now."

"What then?"

"My... My hair!" burst out poor Jo, trying vainly to smother her

emotion in the pillow.

It did not seem at all comical to Meg, who kissed and caressed the

afflicted heroine in the tenderest manner.

"I'm not sorry," protested Jo, with a choke. "I'd do it again

tomorrow, if I could. It's only the vain part of me that goes and

cries in this silly way. Don't tell anyone, it's all over now. I

thought you were asleep, so I just made a little private moan for my

one beauty. How came you to be awake?"

"I can't sleep, I'm so anxious," said Meg.

"Think about something pleasant, and you'll soon drop off."

"I tried it, but felt wider awake than ever."

"What did you think of?"

"Handsome faces--eyes particularly," answered Meg, smiling to herself

in the dark.

"What color do you like best?"

"Brown, that is, sometimes. Blue are lovely."

Jo laughed, and Meg sharply ordered her not to talk, then amiably

promised to make her hair curl, and fell asleep to dream of living in

her castle in the air.

The clocks were striking midnight and the rooms were very still as a

figure glided quietly from bed to bed, smoothing a coverlet here,

settling a pillow there, and pausing to look long and tenderly at each

unconscious face, to kiss each with lips that mutely blessed, and to

pray the fervent prayers which only mothers utter. As she lifted the

curtain to look out into the dreary night, the moon broke suddenly from

behind the clouds and shone upon her like a bright, benignant face,

which seemed to whisper in the silence, "Be comforted, dear soul!

There is always light behind the clouds."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LETTERS

In the cold gray dawn the sisters lit their lamp and read their chapter

with an earnestness never felt before. For now the shadow of a real

trouble had come, the little books were full of help and comfort, and

as they dressed, they agreed to say goodbye cheerfully and hopefully,

and send their mother on her anxious journey unsaddened by tears or

complaints from them. Everything seemed very strange when they went

down, so dim and still outside, so full of light and bustle within.

Breakfast at that early hour seemed odd, and even Hannah's familiar

face looked unnatural as she flew about her kitchen with her nightcap

on. The big trunk stood ready in the hall, Mother's cloak and bonnet

lay on the sofa, and Mother herself sat trying to eat, but looking so

pale and worn with sleeplessness and anxiety that the girls found it

very hard to keep their resolution. Meg's eyes kept filling in spite

of herself, Jo was obliged to hide her face in the kitchen roller more

than once, and the little girls wore a grave, troubled expression, as

if sorrow was a new experience to them.

Nobody talked much, but as the time drew very near and they sat waiting

for the carriage, Mrs. March said to the girls, who were all busied

about her, one folding her shawl, another smoothing out the strings of

her bonnet, a third putting on her overshoes, and a fourth fastening up

her travelling bag...

"Children, I leave you to Hannah's care and Mr. Laurence's protection.

Hannah is faithfulness itself, and our good neighbor will guard you as

if you were his own. I have no fears for you, yet I am anxious that

you should take this trouble rightly. Don't grieve and fret when I am

gone, or think that you can be idle and comfort yourselves by being

idle and trying to forget. Go on with your work as usual, for work is

a blessed solace. Hope and keep busy, and whatever happens, remember

that you never can be fatherless."

"Yes, Mother."

"Meg, dear, be prudent, watch over your sisters, consult Hannah, and in

any perplexity, go to Mr. Laurence. Be patient, Jo, don't get

despondent or do rash things, write to me often, and be my brave girl,

ready to help and cheer all. Beth, comfort yourself with your music,

and be faithful to the little home duties, and you, Amy, help all you

can, be obedient, and keep happy safe at home."

"We will, Mother! We will!"

The rattle of an approaching carriage made them all start and listen.

That was the hard minute, but the girls stood it well. No one cried,

no one ran away or uttered a lamentation, though their hearts were very

heavy as they sent loving messages to Father, remembering, as they

spoke that it might be too late to deliver them. They kissed their

mother quietly, clung about her tenderly, and tried to wave their hands

cheerfully when she drove away.

Laurie and his grandfather came over to see her off, and Mr. Brooke

looked so strong and sensible and kind that the girls christened him

'Mr. Greatheart' on the spot.

"Good-by, my darlings! God bless and keep us all!" whispered Mrs.

March, as she kissed one dear little face after the other, and hurried

into the carriage.

As she rolled away, the sun came out, and looking back, she saw it

shining on the group at the gate like a good omen. They saw it also,

and smiled and waved their hands, and the last thing she beheld as she

turned the corner was the four bright faces, and behind them like a

bodyguard, old Mr. Laurence, faithful Hannah, and devoted Laurie.

"How kind everyone is to us!" she said, turning to find fresh proof of

it in the respectful sympathy of the young man's face.

"I don't see how they can help it," returned Mr. Brooke, laughing so

infectiously that Mrs. March could not help smiling. And so the journey

began with the good omens of sunshine, smiles, and cheerful words.

"I feel as if there had been an earthquake," said Jo, as their

neighbors went home to breakfast, leaving them to rest and refresh

themselves.

"It seems as if half the house was gone," added Meg forlornly.

Beth opened her lips to say something, but could only point to the pile

of nicely mended hose which lay on Mother's table, showing that even in

her last hurried moments she had thought and worked for them. It was a

little thing, but it went straight to their hearts, and in spite of

their brave resolutions, they all broke down and cried bitterly.

Hannah wisely allowed them to relieve their feelings, and when the

shower showed signs of clearing up, she came to the rescue, armed with

a coffeepot.

"Now, my dear young ladies, remember what your ma said, and don't fret.

Come and have a cup of coffee all round, and then let's fall to work

and be a credit to the family."

Coffee was a treat, and Hannah showed great tact in making it that

morning. No one could resist her persuasive nods, or the fragrant

invitation issuing from the nose of the coffee pot. They drew up to

the table, exchanged their handkerchiefs for napkins, and in ten

minutes were all right again.

"'Hope and keep busy', that's the motto for us, so let's see who will

remember it best. I shall go to Aunt March, as usual. Oh, won't she

lecture though!" said Jo, as she sipped with returning spirit.

"I shall go to my Kings, though I'd much rather stay at home and attend

to things here," said Meg, wishing she hadn't made her eyes so red.

"No need of that. Beth and I can keep house perfectly well," put in

Amy, with an important air.

"Hannah will tell us what to do, and we'll have everything nice when

you come home," added Beth, getting out her mop and dish tub without

delay.

"I think anxiety is very interesting," observed Amy, eating sugar

pensively.

The girls couldn't help laughing, and felt better for it, though Meg

shook her head at the young lady who could find consolation in a sugar

bowl.

The sight of the turnovers made Jo sober again; and when the two went

out to their daily tasks, they looked sorrowfully back at the window

where they were accustomed to see their mother's face. It was gone,

but Beth had remembered the little household ceremony, and there she

was, nodding away at them like a rosyfaced mandarin.

"That's so like my Beth!" said Jo, waving her hat, with a grateful

face. "Goodbye, Meggy, I hope the Kings won't strain today. Don't

fret about Father, dear," she added, as they parted.

"And I hope Aunt March won't croak. Your hair is becoming, and it

looks very boyish and nice," returned Meg, trying not to smile at the

curly head, which looked comically small on her tall sister's shoulders.

"That's my only comfort." And, touching her hat a la Laurie, away went

Jo, feeling like a shorn sheep on a wintry day.

News from their father comforted the girls very much, for though

dangerously ill, the presence of the best and tenderest of nurses had

already done him good. Mr. Brooke sent a bulletin every day, and as

the head of the family, Meg insisted on reading the dispatches, which

grew more cheerful as the week passed. At first, everyone was eager to

write, and plump envelopes were carefully poked into the letter box by

one or other of the sisters, who felt rather important with their

Washington correspondence. As one of these packets contained

characteristic notes from the party, we will rob an imaginary mail, and

read them.

My dearest Mother:

It is impossible to tell you how happy your last letter made us, for

the news was so good we couldn't help laughing and crying over it. How

very kind Mr. Brooke is, and how fortunate that Mr. Laurence's business

detains him near you so long, since he is so useful to you and Father.

The girls are all as good as gold. Jo helps me with the sewing, and

insists on doing all sorts of hard jobs. I should be afraid she might

overdo, if I didn't know her 'moral fit' wouldn't last long. Beth is

as regular about her tasks as a clock, and never forgets what you told

her. She grieves about Father, and looks sober except when she is at

her little piano. Amy minds me nicely, and I take great care of her.

She does her own hair, and I am teaching her to make buttonholes and

mend her stockings. She tries very hard, and I know you will be pleased

with her improvement when you come. Mr. Laurence watches over us like

a motherly old hen, as Jo says, and Laurie is very kind and neighborly.

He and Jo keep us merry, for we get pretty blue sometimes, and feel

like orphans, with you so far away. Hannah is a perfect saint. She

does not scold at all, and always calls me Miss Margaret, which is

quite proper, you know, and treats me with respect. We are all well

and busy, but we long, day and night, to have you back. Give my

dearest love to Father, and believe me, ever your own...

MEG

This note, prettily written on scented paper, was a great contrast to

the next, which was scribbled on a big sheet of thin foreign paper,

ornamented with blots and all manner of flourishes and curly-tailed

letters.

My precious Marmee:

Three cheers for dear Father! Brooke was a trump to telegraph right

off, and let us know the minute he was better. I rushed up garret when

the letter came, and tried to thank god for being so good to us, but I

could only cry, and say, "I'm glad! I'm glad!" Didn't that do as well

as a regular prayer? For I felt a great many in my heart. We have

such funny times, and now I can enjoy them, for everyone is so

desperately good, it's like living in a nest of turtledoves. You'd

laugh to see Meg head the table and try to be motherish. She gets

prettier every day, and I'm in love with her sometimes. The children

are regular archangels, and I--well, I'm Jo, and never shall be

anything else. Oh, I must tell you that I came near having a quarrel

with Laurie. I freed my mind about a silly little thing, and he was

offended. I was right, but didn't speak as I ought, and he marched

home, saying he wouldn't come again till I begged pardon. I declared I

wouldn't and got mad. It lasted all day. I felt bad and wanted you

very much. Laurie and I are both so proud, it's hard to beg pardon.

But I thought he'd come to it, for I was in the right. He didn't come,

and just at night I remembered what you said when Amy fell into the

river. I read my little book, felt better, resolved not to let the sun

set on my anger, and ran over to tell Laurie I was sorry. I met him at

the gate, coming for the same thing. We both laughed, begged each

other's pardon, and felt all good and comfortable again.

I made a 'pome' yesterday, when I was helping Hannah wash, and as

Father likes my silly little things, I put it in to amuse him. Give

him my lovingest hug that ever was, and kiss yourself a dozen times for

your...

TOPSY-TURVY JO

A SONG FROM THE SUDS

Queen of my tub, I merrily sing,

While the white foam rises high,

And sturdily wash and rinse and wring,

And fasten the clothes to dry.

Then out in the free fresh air they swing,

Under the sunny sky.

I wish we could wash from our hearts and souls

The stains of the week away,

And let water and air by their magic make

Ourselves as pure as they.

Then on the earth there would be indeed,

A glorious washing day!

Along the path of a useful life,

Will heart's-ease ever bloom.

The busy mind has no time to think

Of sorrow or care or gloom.

And anxious thoughts may be swept away,

As we bravely wield a broom.

I am glad a task to me is given,

To labor at day by day,

For it brings me health and strength and hope,

And I cheerfully learn to say,

"Head, you may think, Heart, you may feel,

But, Hand, you shall work alway!"

Dear Mother,

There is only room for me to send my love, and some pressed pansies

from the root I have been keeping safe in the house for Father to see.

I read every morning, try to be good all day, and sing myself to sleep

with Father's tune. I can't sing 'LAND OF THE LEAL' now, it makes me

cry. Everyone is very kind, and we are as happy as we can be without

you. Amy wants the rest of the page, so I must stop. I didn't forget

to cover the holders, and I wind the clock and air the rooms every day.

Kiss dear Father on the cheek he calls mine. Oh, do come soon to your

loving...

LITTLE BETH

Ma Chere Mamma,

We are all well I do my lessons always and never corroberate the

girls--Meg says I mean contradick so I put in both words and you can

take the properest. Meg is a great comfort to me and lets me have

jelly every night at tea its so good for me Jo says because it keeps me

sweet tempered. Laurie is not as respeckful as he ought to be now I am

almost in my teens, he calls me Chick and hurts my feelings by talking

French to me very fast when I say Merci or Bon jour as Hattie King

does. The sleeves of my blue dress were all worn out, and Meg put in

new ones, but the full front came wrong and they are more blue than the

dress. I felt bad but did not fret I bear my troubles well but I do

wish Hannah would put more starch in my aprons and have buckwheats

every day. Can't she? Didn't I make that interrigation point nice?

Meg says my punchtuation and spelling are disgraceful and I am

mortyfied but dear me I have so many things to do, I can't stop.

Adieu, I send heaps of love to Papa. Your affectionate daughter...

AMY CURTIS MARCH

Dear Mis March,

I jes drop a line to say we git on fust rate. The girls is clever and

fly round right smart. Miss Meg is going to make a proper good

housekeeper. She hes the liking for it, and gits the hang of things

surprisin quick. Jo doos beat all for goin ahead, but she don't stop

to cal'k'late fust, and you never know where she's like to bring up.

She done out a tub of clothes on Monday, but she starched 'em afore

they was wrenched, and blued a pink calico dress till I thought I

should a died a laughin. Beth is the best of little creeters, and a

sight of help to me, bein so forehanded and dependable. She tries to

learn everything, and really goes to market beyond her years, likewise

keeps accounts, with my help, quite wonderful. We have got on very

economical so fur. I don't let the girls hev coffee only once a week,

accordin to your wish, and keep em on plain wholesome vittles. Amy

does well without frettin, wearin her best clothes and eatin sweet

stuff. Mr. Laurie is as full of didoes as usual, and turns the house

upside down frequent, but he heartens the girls, so I let em hev full

swing. The old gentleman sends heaps of things, and is rather wearin,

but means wal, and it aint my place to say nothin. My bread is riz, so

no more at this time. I send my duty to Mr. March, and hope he's seen

the last of his Pewmonia.

Yours respectful,

Hannah Mullet

Head Nurse of Ward No. 2,

All serene on the Rappahannock, troops in fine condition, commisary

department well conducted, the Home Guard under Colonel Teddy always on

duty, Commander in Chief General Laurence reviews the army daily,

Quartermaster Mullet keeps order in camp, and Major Lion does picket

duty at night. A salute of twenty-four guns was fired on receipt of

good news from Washington, and a dress parade took place at

headquarters. Commander in chief sends best wishes, in which he is

heartily joined by...

COLONEL TEDDY

Dear Madam:

The little girls are all well. Beth and my boy report daily. Hannah is

a model servant, and guards pretty Meg like a dragon. Glad the fine

weather holds. Pray make Brooke useful, and draw on me for funds if

expenses exceed your estimate. Don't let your husband want anything.

Thank God he is mending.

Your sincere friend and servant, JAMES LAURENCE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LITTLE FAITHFUL

For a week the amount of virtue in the old house would have supplied

the neighborhood. It was really amazing, for everyone seemed in a

heavenly frame of mind, and self-denial was all the fashion. Relieved

of their first anxiety about their father, the girls insensibly relaxed

their praiseworthy efforts a little, and began to fall back into old

ways. They did not forget their motto, but hoping and keeping busy

seemed to grow easier, and after such tremendous exertions, they felt

that Endeavor deserved a holiday, and gave it a good many.

Jo caught a bad cold through neglect to cover the shorn head enough,

and was ordered to stay at home till she was better, for Aunt March

didn't like to hear people read with colds in their heads. Jo liked

this, and after an energetic rummage from garret to cellar, subsided on

the sofa to nurse her cold with arsenicum and books. Amy found that

housework and art did not go well together, and returned to her mud

pies. Meg went daily to her pupils, and sewed, or thought she did, at

home, but much time was spent in writing long letters to her mother, or

reading the Washington dispatches over and over. Beth kept on, with

only slight relapses into idleness or grieving.

All the little duties were faithfully done each day, and many of her

sisters' also, for they were forgetful, and the house seemed like a

clock whose pendulum was gone a-visiting. When her heart got heavy

with longings for Mother or fears for Father, she went away into a

certain closet, hid her face in the folds of a dear old gown, and made

her little moan and prayed her little prayer quietly by herself.

Nobody knew what cheered her up after a sober fit, but everyone felt

how sweet and helpful Beth was, and fell into a way of going to her for

comfort or advice in their small affairs.

All were unconscious that this experience was a test of character, and

when the first excitement was over, felt that they had done well and

deserved praise. So they did, but their mistake was in ceasing to do

well, and they learned this lesson through much anxiety and regret.

"Meg, I wish you'd go and see the Hummels. You know Mother told us not

to forget them." said Beth, ten days after Mrs. March's departure.

"I'm too tired to go this afternoon," replied Meg, rocking comfortably

as she sewed.

"Can't you, Jo?" asked Beth.

"Too stormy for me with my cold."

"I thought it was almost well."

"It's well enough for me to go out with Laurie, but not well enough to

go to the Hummels'," said Jo, laughing, but looking a little ashamed of

her inconsistency.

"Why don't you go yourself?" asked Meg.

"I have been every day, but the baby is sick, and I don't know what to

do for it. Mrs. Hummel goes away to work, and Lottchen takes care of

it. But it gets sicker and sicker, and I think you or Hannah ought to

go."

Beth spoke earnestly, and Meg promised she would go tomorrow.

"Ask Hannah for some nice little mess, and take it round, Beth, the air

will do you good," said Jo, adding apologetically, "I'd go but I want

to finish my writing."

"My head aches and I'm tired, so I thought maybe some of you would go,"

said Beth.

"Amy will be in presently, and she will run down for us," suggested Meg.

So Beth lay down on the sofa, the others returned to their work, and

the Hummels were forgotten. An hour passed. Amy did not come, Meg

went to her room to try on a new dress, Jo was absorbed in her story,

and Hannah was sound asleep before the kitchen fire, when Beth quietly

put on her hood, filled her basket with odds and ends for the poor

children, and went out into the chilly air with a heavy head and a

grieved look in her patient eyes. It was late when she came back, and

no one saw her creep upstairs and shut herself into her mother's room.

Half an hour after, Jo went to 'Mother's closet' for something, and

there found little Beth sitting on the medicine chest, looking very

grave, with red eyes and a camphor bottle in her hand.

"Christopher Columbus! What's the matter?" cried Jo, as Beth put out

her hand as if to warn her off, and asked quickly. . .

"You've had the scarlet fever, haven't you?"

"Years ago, when Meg did. Why?"

"Then I'll tell you. Oh, Jo, the baby's dead!"

"What baby?"

"Mrs. Hummel's. It died in my lap before she got home," cried Beth

with a sob.

"My poor dear, how dreadful for you! I ought to have gone," said Jo,

taking her sister in her arms as she sat down in her mother's big

chair, with a remorseful face.

"It wasn't dreadful, Jo, only so sad! I saw in a minute it was sicker,

but Lottchen said her mother had gone for a doctor, so I took Baby and

let Lotty rest. It seemed asleep, but all of a sudden if gave a little

cry and trembled, and then lay very still. I tried to warm its feet,

and Lotty gave it some milk, but it didn't stir, and I knew it was

dead."

"Don't cry, dear! What did you do?"

"I just sat and held it softly till Mrs. Hummel came with the doctor.

He said it was dead, and looked at Heinrich and Minna, who have sore

throats. 'Scarlet fever, ma'am. Ought to have called me before,' he

said crossly. Mrs. Hummel told him she was poor, and had tried to cure

baby herself, but now it was too late, and she could only ask him to

help the others and trust to charity for his pay. He smiled then, and

was kinder, but it was very sad, and I cried with them till he turned

round all of a sudden, and told me to go home and take belladonna right

away, or I'd have the fever."

"No, you won't!" cried Jo, hugging her close, with a frightened look.

"Oh, Beth, if you should be sick I never could forgive myself! What

shall we do?"

"Don't be frightened, I guess I shan't have it badly. I looked in

Mother's book, and saw that it begins with headache, sore throat, and

queer feelings like mine, so I did take some belladonna, and I feel

better," said Beth, laying her cold hands on her hot forehead and

trying to look well.

"If Mother was only at home!" exclaimed Jo, seizing the book, and

feeling that Washington was an immense way off. She read a page,

looked at Beth, felt her head, peeped into her throat, and then said

gravely, "You've been over the baby every day for more than a week, and

among the others who are going to have it, so I'm afraid you are going

to have it, Beth. I'll call Hannah, she knows all about sickness."

"Don't let Amy come. She never had it, and I should hate to give it to

her. Can't you and Meg have it over again?" asked Beth, anxiously.

"I guess not. Don't care if I do. Serve me right, selfish pig, to let

you go, and stay writing rubbish myself!" muttered Jo, as she went to

consult Hannah.

The good soul was wide awake in a minute, and took the lead at once,

assuring that there was no need to worry; every one had scarlet fever,

and if rightly treated, nobody died, all of which Jo believed, and felt

much relieved as they went up to call Meg.

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do," said Hannah, when she had examined

and questioned Beth, "we will have Dr. Bangs, just to take a look at

you, dear, and see that we start right. Then we'll send Amy off to

Aunt March's for a spell, to keep her out of harm's way, and one of you

girls can stay at home and amuse Beth for a day or two."

"I shall stay, of course, I'm oldest," began Meg, looking anxious and

self-reproachful.

"I shall, because it's my fault she is sick. I told Mother I'd do the

errands, and I haven't," said Jo decidedly.

"Which will you have, Beth? There ain't no need of but one," aid

Hannah.

"Jo, please." And Beth leaned her head against her sister with a

contented look, which effectually settled that point.

"I'll go and tell Amy," said Meg, feeling a little hurt, yet rather

relieved on the whole, for she did not like nursing, and Jo did.

Amy rebelled outright, and passionately declared that she had rather

have the fever than go to Aunt March. Meg reasoned, pleaded, and

commanded, all in vain. Amy protested that she would not go, and Meg

left her in despair to ask Hannah what should be done. Before she came

back, Laurie walked into the parlor to find Amy sobbing, with her head

in the sofa cushions. She told her story, expecting to be consoled,

but Laurie only put his hands in his pockets and walked about the room,

whistling softly, as he knit his brows in deep thought. Presently he

sat down beside her, and said, in his most wheedlesome tone, "Now be a

sensible little woman, and do as they say. No, don't cry, but hear what

a jolly plan I've got. You go to Aunt March's, and I'll come and take

you out every day, driving or walking, and we'll have capital times.

Won't that be better than moping here?"

"I don't wish to be sent off as if I was in the way," began Amy, in an

injured voice.

"Bless your heart, child, it's to keep you well. You don't want to be

sick, do you?"

"No, I'm sure I don't, but I dare say I shall be, for I've been with

Beth all the time."

"That's the very reason you ought to go away at once, so that you may

escape it. Change of air and care will keep you well, I dare say, or

if it does not entirely, you will have the fever more lightly. I

advise you to be off as soon as you can, for scarlet fever is no joke,

miss."

"But it's dull at Aunt March's, and she is so cross," said Amy, looking

rather frightened.

"It won't be dull with me popping in every day to tell you how Beth is,

and take you out gallivanting. The old lady likes me, and I'll be as

sweet as possible to her, so she won't peck at us, whatever we do."

"Will you take me out in the trotting wagon with Puck?"

"On my honor as a gentleman."

"And come every single day?"

"See if I don't!"

"And bring me back the minute Beth is well?"

"The identical minute."

"And go to the theater, truly?"

"A dozen theaters, if we may."

"Well--I guess I will," said Amy slowly.

"Good girl! Call Meg, and tell her you'll give in," said Laurie, with

an approving pat, which annoyed Amy more than the 'giving in'.

Meg and Jo came running down to behold the miracle which had been

wrought, and Amy, feeling very precious and self-sacrificing, promised

to go, if the doctor said Beth was going to be ill.

"How is the little dear?" asked Laurie, for Beth was his especial pet,

and he felt more anxious about her than he liked to show.

"She is lying down on Mother's bed, and feels better. The baby's death

troubled her, but I dare say she has only got cold. Hannah says she

thinks so, but she looks worried, and that makes me fidgety," answered

Meg.

"What a trying world it is!" said Jo, rumpling up her hair in a fretful

way. "No sooner do we get out of one trouble than down comes another.

There doesn't seem to be anything to hold on to when Mother's gone, so

I'm all at sea."

"Well, don't make a porcupine of yourself, it isn't becoming. Settle

your wig, Jo, and tell me if I shall telegraph to your mother, or do

anything?" asked Laurie, who never had been reconciled to the loss of

his friend's one beauty.

"That is what troubles me," said Meg. "I think we ought to tell her if

Beth is really ill, but Hannah says we mustn't, for Mother can't leave

Father, and it will only make them anxious. Beth won't be sick long,

and Hannah knows just what to do, and Mother said we were to mind her,

so I suppose we must, but it doesn't seem quite right to me."

"Hum, well, I can't say. Suppose you ask Grandfather after the doctor

has been."

"We will. Jo, go and get Dr. Bangs at once," commanded Meg. "We can't

decide anything till he has been."

"Stay where you are, Jo. I'm errand boy to this establishment," said

Laurie, taking up his cap.

"I'm afraid you are busy," began Meg.

"No, I've done my lessons for the day."

"Do you study in vacation time?" asked Jo.

"I follow the good example my neighbors set me," was Laurie's answer,

as he swung himself out of the room.

"I have great hopes for my boy," observed Jo, watching him fly over the

fence with an approving smile.

"He does very well, for a boy," was Meg's somewhat ungracious answer,

for the subject did not interest her.

Dr. Bangs came, said Beth had symptoms of the fever, but he thought she

would have it lightly, though he looked sober over the Hummel story.

Amy was ordered off at once, and provided with something to ward off

danger, she departed in great state, with Jo and Laurie as escort.

Aunt March received them with her usual hospitality.

"What do you want now?" she asked, looking sharply over her spectacles,

while the parrot, sitting on the back of her chair, called out...

"Go away. No boys allowed here."

Laurie retired to the window, and Jo told her story.

"No more than I expected, if you are allowed to go poking about among

poor folks. Amy can stay and make herself useful if she isn't sick,

which I've no doubt she will be, looks like it now. Don't cry, child,

it worries me to hear people sniff."

Amy was on the point of crying, but Laurie slyly pulled the parrot's

tail, which caused Polly to utter an astonished croak and call out,

"Bless my boots!" in such a funny way, that she laughed instead.

"What do you hear from your mother?" asked the old lady gruffly.

"Father is much better," replied Jo, trying to keep sober.

"Oh, is he? Well, that won't last long, I fancy. March never had any

stamina," was the cheerful reply.

"Ha, ha! Never say die, take a pinch of snuff, goodbye, goodbye!"

squalled Polly, dancing on her perch, and clawing at the old lady's cap

as Laurie tweaked him in the rear.

"Hold your tongue, you disrespectful old bird! And, Jo, you'd better

go at once. It isn't proper to be gadding about so late with a

rattlepated boy like..."

"Hold your tongue, you disrespectful old bird!" cried Polly, tumbling

off the chair with a bounce, and running to peck the 'rattlepated' boy,

who was shaking with laughter at the last speech.

"I don't think I can bear it, but I'll try," thought Amy, as she was

left alone with Aunt March.

"Get along, you fright!" screamed Polly, and at that rude speech Amy

could not restrain a sniff.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DARK DAYS

Beth did have the fever, and was much sicker than anyone but Hannah and

the doctor suspected. The girls knew nothing about illness, and Mr.

Laurence was not allowed to see her, so Hannah had everything her own

way, and busy Dr. Bangs did his best, but left a good deal to the

excellent nurse. Meg stayed at home, lest she should infect the Kings,

and kept house, feeling very anxious and a little guilty when she wrote

letters in which no mention was made of Beth's illness. She could not

think it right to deceive her mother, but she had been bidden to mind

Hannah, and Hannah wouldn't hear of 'Mrs. March bein' told, and worried

just for sech a trifle.'

Jo devoted herself to Beth day and night, not a hard task, for Beth was

very patient, and bore her pain uncomplainingly as long as she could

control herself. But there came a time when during the fever fits she

began to talk in a hoarse, broken voice, to play on the coverlet as if

on her beloved little piano, and try to sing with a throat so swollen

that there was no music left, a time when she did not know the familiar

faces around her, but addressed them by wrong names, and called

imploringly for her mother. Then Jo grew frightened, Meg begged to be

allowed to write the truth, and even Hannah said she 'would think of

it, though there was no danger yet'. A letter from Washington added to

their trouble, for Mr. March had had a relapse, and could not think of

coming home for a long while.

How dark the days seemed now, how sad and lonely the house, and how

heavy were the hearts of the sisters as they worked and waited, while

the shadow of death hovered over the once happy home. Then it was that

Margaret, sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how

rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could

buy--in love, protection, peace, and health, the real blessings of

life. Then it was that Jo, living in the darkened room, with that

suffering little sister always before her eyes and that pathetic voice

sounding in her ears, learned to see the beauty and the sweetness of

Beth's nature, to feel how deep and tender a place she filled in all

hearts, and to acknowledge the worth of Beth's unselfish ambition to

live for others, and make home happy by that exercise of those simple

virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more

than talent, wealth, or beauty. And Amy, in her exile, longed eagerly

to be at home, that she might work for Beth, feeling now that no

service would be hard or irksome, and remembering, with regretful

grief, how many neglected tasks those willing hands had done for her.

Laurie haunted the house like a restless ghost, and Mr. Laurence locked

the grand piano, because he could not bear to be reminded of the young

neighbor who used to make the twilight pleasant for him. Everyone

missed Beth. The milkman, baker, grocer, and butcher inquired how she

did, poor Mrs. Hummel came to beg pardon for her thoughtlessness and to

get a shroud for Minna, the neighbors sent all sorts of comforts and

good wishes, and even those who knew her best were surprised to find

how many friends shy little Beth had made.

Meanwhile she lay on her bed with old Joanna at her side, for even in

her wanderings she did not forget her forlorn protege. She longed for

her cats, but would not have them brought, lest they should get sick,

and in her quiet hours she was full of anxiety about Jo. She sent

loving messages to Amy, bade them tell her mother that she would write

soon, and often begged for pencil and paper to try to say a word, that

Father might not think she had neglected him. But soon even these

intervals of consciousness ended, and she lay hour after hour, tossing

to and fro, with incoherent words on her lips, or sank into a heavy

sleep which brought her no refreshment. Dr. Bangs came twice a day,

Hannah sat up at night, Meg kept a telegram in her desk all ready to

send off at any minute, and Jo never stirred from Beth's side.

The first of December was a wintry day indeed to them, for a bitter

wind blew, snow fell fast, and the year seemed getting ready for its

death. When Dr. Bangs came that morning, he looked long at Beth, held

the hot hand in both his own for a minute, and laid it gently down,

saying, in a low voice to Hannah, "If Mrs. March can leave her husband

she'd better be sent for."

Hannah nodded without speaking, for her lips twitched nervously, Meg

dropped down into a chair as the strength seemed to go out of her limbs

at the sound of those words, and Jo, standing with a pale face for a

minute, ran to the parlor, snatched up the telegram, and throwing on

her things, rushed out into the storm. She was soon back, and while

noiselessly taking off her cloak, Laurie came in with a letter, saying

that Mr. March was mending again. Jo read it thankfully, but the heavy

weight did not seem lifted off her heart, and her face was so full of

misery that Laurie asked quickly, "What is it? Is Beth worse?"

"I've sent for Mother," said Jo, tugging at her rubber boots with a

tragic expression.

"Good for you, Jo! Did you do it on your own responsibility?" asked

Laurie, as he seated her in the hall chair and took off the rebellious

boots, seeing how her hands shook.

"No. The doctor told us to."

"Oh, Jo, it's not so bad as that?" cried Laurie, with a startled face.

"Yes, it is. She doesn't know us, she doesn't even talk about the

flocks of green doves, as she calls the vine leaves on the wall. She

doesn't look like my Beth, and there's nobody to help us bear it.

Mother and father both gone, and God seems so far away I can't find

Him."

As the tears streamed fast down poor Jo's cheeks, she stretched out her

hand in a helpless sort of way, as if groping in the dark, and Laurie

took it in his, whispering as well as he could with a lump in his

throat, "I'm here. Hold on to me, Jo, dear!"

She could not speak, but she did 'hold on', and the warm grasp of the

friendly human hand comforted her sore heart, and seemed to lead her

nearer to the Divine arm which alone could uphold her in her trouble.

Laurie longed to say something tender and comfortable, but no fitting

words came to him, so he stood silent, gently stroking her bent head as

her mother used to do. It was the best thing he could have done, far

more soothing than the most eloquent words, for Jo felt the unspoken

sympathy, and in the silence learned the sweet solace which affection

administers to sorrow. Soon she dried the tears which had relieved

her, and looked up with a grateful face.

"Thank you, Teddy, I'm better now. I don't feel so forlorn, and will

try to bear it if it comes."

"Keep hoping for the best, that will help you, Jo. Soon your mother

will be here, and then everything will be all right."

"I'm so glad Father is better. Now she won't feel so bad about leaving

him. Oh, me! It does seem as if all the troubles came in a heap, and

I got the heaviest part on my shoulders," sighed Jo, spreading her wet

handkerchief over her knees to dry.

"Doesn't Meg pull fair?" asked Laurie, looking indignant.

"Oh, yes, she tries to, but she can't love Bethy as I do, and she won't

miss her as I shall. Beth is my conscience, and I can't give her up.

I can't! I can't!"

Down went Jo's face into the wet handkerchief, and she cried

despairingly, for she had kept up bravely till now and never shed a

tear. Laurie drew his hand across his eyes, but could not speak till

he had subdued the choky feeling in his throat and steadied his lips.

It might be unmanly, but he couldn't help it, and I am glad of it.

Presently, as Jo's sobs quieted, he said hopefully, "I don't think she

will die. She's so good, and we all love her so much, I don't believe

God will take her away yet."

"The good and dear people always do die," groaned Jo, but she stopped

crying, for her friend's words cheered her up in spite of her own

doubts and fears.

"Poor girl, you're worn out. It isn't like you to be forlorn. Stop a

bit. I'll hearten you up in a jiffy."

Laurie went off two stairs at a time, and Jo laid her wearied head down

on Beth's little brown hood, which no one had thought of moving from

the table where she left it. It must have possessed some magic, for

the submissive spirit of its gentle owner seemed to enter into Jo, and

when Laurie came running down with a glass of wine, she took it with a

smile, and said bravely, "I drink-- Health to my Beth! You are a good

doctor, Teddy, and such a comfortable friend. How can I ever pay you?"

she added, as the wine refreshed her body, as the kind words had done

her troubled mind.

"I'll send my bill, by-and-by, and tonight I'll give you something that

will warm the cockles of your heart better than quarts of wine," said

Laurie, beaming at her with a face of suppressed satisfaction at

something.

"What is it?" cried Jo, forgetting her woes for a minute in her wonder.

"I telegraphed to your mother yesterday, and Brooke answered she'd come

at once, and she'll be here tonight, and everything will be all right.

Aren't you glad I did it?"

Laurie spoke very fast, and turned red and excited all in a minute, for

he had kept his plot a secret, for fear of disappointing the girls or

harming Beth. Jo grew quite white, flew out of her chair, and the

moment he stopped speaking she electrified him by throwing her arms

round his neck, and crying out, with a joyful cry, "Oh, Laurie! Oh,

Mother! I am so glad!" She did not weep again, but laughed

hysterically, and trembled and clung to her friend as if she was a

little bewildered by the sudden news.

Laurie, though decidedly amazed, behaved with great presence of mind.

He patted her back soothingly, and finding that she was recovering,

followed it up by a bashful kiss or two, which brought Jo round at

once. Holding on to the banisters, she put him gently away, saying

breathlessly, "Oh, don't! I didn't mean to, it was dreadful of me, but

you were such a dear to go and do it in spite of Hannah that I couldn't

help flying at you. Tell me all about it, and don't give me wine

again, it makes me act so."

"I don't mind," laughed Laurie, as he settled his tie. "Why, you see I

got fidgety, and so did Grandpa. We thought Hannah was overdoing the

authority business, and your mother ought to know. She'd never forgive

us if Beth... Well, if anything happened, you know. So I got grandpa

to say it was high time we did something, and off I pelted to the

office yesterday, for the doctor looked sober, and Hannah most took my

head off when I proposed a telegram. I never can bear to be 'lorded

over', so that settled my mind, and I did it. Your mother will come, I

know, and the late train is in at two A.M. I shall go for her, and

you've only got to bottle up your rapture, and keep Beth quiet till

that blessed lady gets here."

"Laurie, you're an angel! How shall I ever thank you?"

"Fly at me again. I rather liked it," said Laurie, looking

mischievous, a thing he had not done for a fortnight.

"No, thank you. I'll do it by proxy, when your grandpa comes. Don't

tease, but go home and rest, for you'll be up half the night. Bless

you, Teddy, bless you!"

Jo had backed into a corner, and as she finished her speech, she

vanished precipitately into the kitchen, where she sat down upon a

dresser and told the assembled cats that she was "happy, oh, so happy!"

while Laurie departed, feeling that he had made a rather neat thing of

it.

"That's the interferingest chap I ever see, but I forgive him and do

hope Mrs. March is coming right away," said Hannah, with an air of

relief, when Jo told the good news.

Meg had a quiet rapture, and then brooded over the letter, while Jo set

the sickroom in order, and Hannah "knocked up a couple of pies in case

of company unexpected". A breath of fresh air seemed to blow through

the house, and something better than sunshine brightened the quiet

rooms. Everything appeared to feel the hopeful change. Beth's bird

began to chirp again, and a half-blown rose was discovered on Amy's

bush in the window. The fires seemed to burn with unusual cheeriness,

and every time the girls met, their pale faces broke into smiles as

they hugged one another, whispering encouragingly, "Mother's coming,

dear! Mother's coming!" Every one rejoiced but Beth. She lay in that

heavy stupor, alike unconscious of hope and joy, doubt and danger. It

was a piteous sight, the once rosy face so changed and vacant, the once

busy hands so weak and wasted, the once smiling lips quite dumb, and

the once pretty, well-kept hair scattered rough and tangled on the

pillow. All day she lay so, only rousing now and then to mutter,

"Water!" with lips so parched they could hardly shape the word. All

day Jo and Meg hovered over her, watching, waiting, hoping, and

trusting in God and Mother, and all day the snow fell, the bitter wind

raged, and the hours dragged slowly by. But night came at last, and

every time the clock struck, the sisters, still sitting on either side

of the bed, looked at each other with brightening eyes, for each hour

brought help nearer. The doctor had been in to say that some change,

for better or worse, would probably take place about midnight, at which

time he would return.

Hannah, quite worn out, lay down on the sofa at the bed's foot and fell

fast asleep, Mr. Laurence marched to and fro in the parlor, feeling

that he would rather face a rebel battery than Mrs. March's countenance

as she entered. Laurie lay on the rug, pretending to rest, but staring

into the fire with the thoughtful look which made his black eyes

beautifully soft and clear.

The girls never forgot that night, for no sleep came to them as they

kept their watch, with that dreadful sense of powerlessness which comes

to us in hours like those.

"If God spares Beth, I never will complain again," whispered Meg

earnestly.

"If god spares Beth, I'll try to love and serve Him all my life,"

answered Jo, with equal fervor.

"I wish I had no heart, it aches so," sighed Meg, after a pause.

"If life is often as hard as this, I don't see how we ever shall get

through it," added her sister despondently.

Here the clock struck twelve, and both forgot themselves in watching

Beth, for they fancied a change passed over her wan face. The house was

still as death, and nothing but the wailing of the wind broke the deep

hush. Weary Hannah slept on, and no one but the sisters saw the pale

shadow which seemed to fall upon the little bed. An hour went by, and

nothing happened except Laurie's quiet departure for the station.

Another hour, still no one came, and anxious fears of delay in the

storm, or accidents by the way, or, worst of all, a great grief at

Washington, haunted the girls.

It was past two, when Jo, who stood at the window thinking how dreary

the world looked in its winding sheet of snow, heard a movement by the

bed, and turning quickly, saw Meg kneeling before their mother's easy

chair with her face hidden. A dreadful fear passed coldly over Jo, as

she thought, "Beth is dead, and Meg is afraid to tell me."

She was back at her post in an instant, and to her excited eyes a great

change seemed to have taken place. The fever flush and the look of

pain were gone, and the beloved little face looked so pale and peaceful

in its utter repose that Jo felt no desire to weep or to lament.

Leaning low over this dearest of her sisters, she kissed the damp

forehead with her heart on her lips, and softly whispered, "Good-by, my

Beth. Good-by!"

As if awaked by the stir, Hannah started out of her sleep, hurried to

the bed, looked at Beth, felt her hands, listened at her lips, and

then, throwing her apron over her head, sat down to rock to and fro,

exclaiming, under her breath, "The fever's turned, she's sleepin'

nat'ral, her skin's damp, and she breathes easy. Praise be given! Oh,

my goodness me!"

Before the girls could believe the happy truth, the doctor came to

confirm it. He was a homely man, but they thought his face quite

heavenly when he smiled and said, with a fatherly look at them, "Yes,

my dears, I think the little girl will pull through this time. Keep

the house quiet, let her sleep, and when she wakes, give her..."

What they were to give, neither heard, for both crept into the dark

hall, and, sitting on the stairs, held each other close, rejoicing with

hearts too full for words. When they went back to be kissed and

cuddled by faithful Hannah, they found Beth lying, as she used to do,

with her cheek pillowed on her hand, the dreadful pallor gone, and

breathing quietly, as if just fallen asleep.

"If Mother would only come now!" said Jo, as the winter night began to

wane.

"See," said Meg, coming up with a white, half-opened rose, "I thought

this would hardly be ready to lay in Beth's hand tomorrow if she--went

away from us. But it has blossomed in the night, and now I mean to put

it in my vase here, so that when the darling wakes, the first thing she

sees will be the little rose, and Mother's face."

Never had the sun risen so beautifully, and never had the world seemed

so lovely as it did to the heavy eyes of Meg and Jo, as they looked out

in the early morning, when their long, sad vigil was done.

"It looks like a fairy world," said Meg, smiling to herself, as she

stood behind the curtain, watching the dazzling sight.

"Hark!" cried Jo, starting to her feet.

Yes, there was a sound of bells at the door below, a cry from Hannah,

and then Laurie's voice saying in a joyful whisper, "Girls, she's come!

She's come!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AMY'S WILL

While these things were happening at home, Amy was having hard times at

Aunt March's. She felt her exile deeply, and for the first time in her

life, realized how much she was beloved and petted at home. Aunt March

never petted any one; she did not approve of it, but she meant to be

kind, for the well-behaved little girl pleased her very much, and Aunt

March had a soft place in her old heart for her nephew's children,

though she didn't think it proper to confess it. She really did her

best to make Amy happy, but, dear me, what mistakes she made. Some old

people keep young at heart in spite of wrinkles and gray hairs, can

sympathize with children's little cares and joys, make them feel at

home, and can hide wise lessons under pleasant plays, giving and

receiving friendship in the sweetest way. But Aunt March had not this

gift, and she worried Amy very much with her rules and orders, her prim

ways, and long, prosy talks. Finding the child more docile and amiable

than her sister, the old lady felt it her duty to try and counteract,

as far as possible, the bad effects of home freedom and indulgence. So

she took Amy by the hand, and taught her as she herself had been taught

sixty years ago, a process which carried dismay to Amy's soul, and made

her feel like a fly in the web of a very strict spider.

She had to wash the cups every morning, and polish up the old-fashioned

spoons, the fat silver teapot, and the glasses till they shone. Then

she must dust the room, and what a trying job that was. Not a speck

escaped Aunt March's eye, and all the furniture had claw legs and much

carving, which was never dusted to suit. Then Polly had to be fed, the

lap dog combed, and a dozen trips upstairs and down to get things or

deliver orders, for the old lady was very lame and seldom left her big

chair. After these tiresome labors, she must do her lessons, which was

a daily trial of every virtue she possessed. Then she was allowed one

hour for exercise or play, and didn't she enjoy it?

Laurie came every day, and wheedled Aunt March till Amy was allowed to

go out with him, when they walked and rode and had capital times.

After dinner, she had to read aloud, and sit still while the old lady

slept, which she usually did for an hour, as she dropped off over the

first page. Then patchwork or towels appeared, and Amy sewed with

outward meekness and inward rebellion till dusk, when she was allowed

to amuse herself as she liked till teatime. The evenings were the

worst of all, for Aunt March fell to telling long stories about her

youth, which were so unutterably dull that Amy was always ready to go

to bed, intending to cry over her hard fate, but usually going to sleep

before she had squeezed out more than a tear or two.

If it had not been for Laurie, and old Esther, the maid, she felt that

she never could have got through that dreadful time. The parrot alone

was enough to drive her distracted, for he soon felt that she did not

admire him, and revenged himself by being as mischievous as possible.

He pulled her hair whenever she came near him, upset his bread and milk

to plague her when she had newly cleaned his cage, made Mop bark by

pecking at him while Madam dozed, called her names before company, and

behaved in all respects like an reprehensible old bird. Then she could

not endure the dog, a fat, cross beast who snarled and yelped at her

when she made his toilet, and who lay on his back with all his legs in

the air and a most idiotic expression of countenance when he wanted

something to eat, which was about a dozen times a day. The cook was

bad-tempered, the old coachman was deaf, and Esther the only one who

ever took any notice of the young lady.

Esther was a Frenchwoman, who had lived with 'Madame', as she called her

mistress, for many years, and who rather tyrannized over the old lady,

who could not get along without her. Her real name was Estelle, but

Aunt March ordered her to change it, and she obeyed, on condition that

she was never asked to change her religion. She took a fancy to

Mademoiselle, and amused her very much with odd stories of her life in

France, when Amy sat with her while she got up Madame's laces. She

also allowed her to roam about the great house, and examine the curious

and pretty things stored away in the big wardrobes and the ancient

chests, for Aunt March hoarded like a magpie. Amy's chief delight was

an Indian cabinet, full of queer drawers, little pigeonholes, and

secret places, in which were kept all sorts of ornaments, some

precious, some merely curious, all more or less antique. To examine and

arrange these things gave Amy great satisfaction, especially the jewel

cases, in which on velvet cushions reposed the ornaments which had

adorned a belle forty years ago. There was the garnet set which Aunt

March wore when she came out, the pearls her father gave her on her

wedding day, her lover's diamonds, the jet mourning rings and pins, the

queer lockets, with portraits of dead friends and weeping willows made

of hair inside, the baby bracelets her one little daughter had worn,

Uncle March's big watch, with the red seal so many childish hands had

played with, and in a box all by itself lay Aunt March's wedding ring,

too small now for her fat finger, but put carefully away like the most

precious jewel of them all.

"Which would Mademoiselle choose if she had her will?" asked Esther,

who always sat near to watch over and lock up the valuables.

"I like the diamonds best, but there is no necklace among them, and I'm

fond of necklaces, they are so becoming. I should choose this if I

might," replied Amy, looking with great admiration at a string of gold

and ebony beads from which hung a heavy cross of the same.

"I, too, covet that, but not as a necklace. Ah, no! To me it is a

rosary, and as such I should use it like a good catholic," said Esther,

eyeing the handsome thing wistfully.

"Is it meant to use as you use the string of good-smelling wooden beads

hanging over your glass?" asked Amy.

"Truly, yes, to pray with. It would be pleasing to the saints if one

used so fine a rosary as this, instead of wearing it as a vain bijou."

"You seem to take a great deal of comfort in your prayers, Esther, and

always come down looking quiet and satisfied. I wish I could."

"If Mademoiselle was a Catholic, she would find true comfort, but as

that is not to be, it would be well if you went apart each day to

meditate and pray, as did the good mistress whom I served before

Madame. She had a little chapel, and in it found solacement for much

trouble."

"Would it be right for me to do so too?" asked Amy, who in her

loneliness felt the need of help of some sort, and found that she was

apt to forget her little book, now that Beth was not there to remind

her of it.

"It would be excellent and charming, and I shall gladly arrange the

little dressing room for you if you like it. Say nothing to Madame,

but when she sleeps go you and sit alone a while to think good

thoughts, and pray the dear God preserve your sister."

Esther was truly pious, and quite sincere in her advice, for she had an

affectionate heart, and felt much for the sisters in their anxiety.

Amy liked the idea, and gave her leave to arrange the light closet next

her room, hoping it would do her good.

"I wish I knew where all these pretty things would go when Aunt March

dies," she said, as she slowly replaced the shining rosary and shut the

jewel cases one by one.

"To you and your sisters. I know it, Madame confides in me. I

witnessed her will, and it is to be so," whispered Esther smiling.

"How nice! But I wish she'd let us have them now. Procrastination is

not agreeable," observed Amy, taking a last look at the diamonds.

"It is too soon yet for the young ladies to wear these things. The

first one who is affianced will have the pearls, Madame has said it,

and I have a fancy that the little turquoise ring will be given to you

when you go, for Madame approves your good behavior and charming

manners."

"Do you think so? Oh, I'll be a lamb, if I can only have that lovely

ring! It's ever so much prettier than Kitty Bryant's. I do like Aunt

March after all." And Amy tried on the blue ring with a delighted face

and a firm resolve to earn it.

From that day she was a model of obedience, and the old lady

complacently admired the success of her training. Esther fitted up the

closet with a little table, placed a footstool before it, and over it a

picture taken from one of the shut-up rooms. She thought it was of no

great value, but, being appropriate, she borrowed it, well knowing that

Madame would never know it, nor care if she did. It was, however, a

very valuable copy of one of the famous pictures of the world, and

Amy's beauty-loving eyes were never tired of looking up at the sweet

face of the Divine Mother, while her tender thoughts of her own were

busy at her heart. On the table she laid her little testament and

hymnbook, kept a vase always full of the best flowers Laurie brought

her, and came every day to 'sit alone' thinking good thoughts, and

praying the dear God to preserve her sister. Esther had given her a

rosary of black beads with a silver cross, but Amy hung it up and did

not use it, feeling doubtful as to its fitness for Protestant prayers.

The little girl was very sincere in all this, for being left alone

outside the safe home nest, she felt the need of some kind hand to hold

by so sorely that she instinctively turned to the strong and tender

Friend, whose fatherly love most closely surrounds His little children.

She missed her mother's help to understand and rule herself, but having

been taught where to look, she did her best to find the way and walk in

it confidingly. But, Amy was a young pilgrim, and just now her burden

seemed very heavy. She tried to forget herself, to keep cheerful, and

be satisfied with doing right, though no one saw or praised her for it.

In her first effort at being very, very good, she decided to make her

will, as Aunt March had done, so that if she did fall ill and die, her

possessions might be justly and generously divided. It cost her a pang

even to think of giving up the little treasures which in her eyes were

as precious as the old lady's jewels.

During one of her play hours she wrote out the important document as

well as she could, with some help from Esther as to certain legal

terms, and when the good-natured Frenchwoman had signed her name, Amy

felt relieved and laid it by to show Laurie, whom she wanted as a

second witness. As it was a rainy day, she went upstairs to amuse

herself in one of the large chambers, and took Polly with her for

company. In this room there was a wardrobe full of old-fashioned

costumes with which Esther allowed her to play, and it was her favorite

amusement to array herself in the faded brocades, and parade up and

down before the long mirror, making stately curtsies, and sweeping her

train about with a rustle which delighted her ears. So busy was she on

this day that she did not hear Laurie's ring nor see his face peeping

in at her as she gravely promenaded to and fro, flirting her fan and

tossing her head, on which she wore a great pink turban, contrasting

oddly with her blue brocade dress and yellow quilted petticoat. She

was obliged to walk carefully, for she had on high-heeled shoes, and, as

Laurie told Jo afterward, it was a comical sight to see her mince along

in her gay suit, with Polly sidling and bridling just behind her,

imitating her as well as he could, and occasionally stopping to laugh

or exclaim, "Ain't we fine? Get along, you fright! Hold your tongue!

Kiss me, dear! Ha! Ha!"

Having with difficulty restrained an explosion of merriment, lest it

should offend her majesty, Laurie tapped and was graciously received.

"Sit down and rest while I put these things away, then I want to

consult you about a very serious matter," said Amy, when she had shown

her splendor and driven Polly into a corner. "That bird is the trial

of my life," she continued, removing the pink mountain from her head,

while Laurie seated himself astride a chair.

"Yesterday, when Aunt was asleep and I was trying to be as still as a

mouse, Polly began to squall and flap about in his cage, so I went to

let him out, and found a big spider there. I poked it out, and it ran

under the bookcase. Polly marched straight after it, stooped down and

peeped under the bookcase, saying, in his funny way, with a cock of his

eye, 'Come out and take a walk, my dear.' I couldn't help laughing,

which made Poll swear, and Aunt woke up and scolded us both."

"Did the spider accept the old fellow's invitation?" asked Laurie,

yawning.

"Yes, out it came, and away ran Polly, frightened to death, and

scrambled up on Aunt's chair, calling out, 'Catch her! Catch her! Catch

her!' as I chased the spider."

"That's a lie! Oh, lor!" cried the parrot, pecking at Laurie's toes.

"I'd wring your neck if you were mine, you old torment," cried Laurie,

shaking his fist at the bird, who put his head on one side and gravely

croaked, "Allyluyer! bless your buttons, dear!"

"Now I'm ready," said Amy, shutting the wardrobe and taking a piece of

paper out of her pocket. "I want you to read that, please, and tell me

if it is legal and right. I felt I ought to do it, for life is

uncertain and I don't want any ill feeling over my tomb."

Laurie bit his lips, and turning a little from the pensive speaker,

read the following document, with praiseworthy gravity, considering the

spelling:

MY LAST WILL AND TESTIMENT

I, Amy Curtis March, being in my sane mind, go give and bequeethe all

my earthly property--viz. to wit:--namely

To my father, my best pictures, sketches, maps, and works of art,

including frames. Also my $100, to do what he likes with.

To my mother, all my clothes, except the blue apron with pockets--also

my likeness, and my medal, with much love.

To my dear sister Margaret, I give my turkquoise ring (if I get it),

also my green box with the doves on it, also my piece of real lace for

her neck, and my sketch of her as a memorial of her 'little girl'.

To Jo I leave my breastpin, the one mended with sealing wax, also my

bronze inkstand--she lost the cover--and my most precious plaster

rabbit, because I am sorry I burned up her story.

To Beth (if she lives after me) I give my dolls and the little bureau,

my fan, my linen collars and my new slippers if she can wear them being

thin when she gets well. And I herewith also leave her my regret that

I ever made fun of old Joanna.

To my friend and neighbor Theodore Laurence I bequeethe my paper mashay

portfolio, my clay model of a horse though he did say it hadn't any

neck. Also in return for his great kindness in the hour of affliction

any one of my artistic works he likes, Noter Dame is the best.

To our venerable benefactor Mr. Laurence I leave my purple box with a

looking glass in the cover which will be nice for his pens and remind

him of the departed girl who thanks him for his favors to her family,

especially Beth.

I wish my favorite playmate Kitty Bryant to have the blue silk apron

and my gold-bead ring with a kiss.

To Hannah I give the bandbox she wanted and all the patchwork I leave

hoping she 'will remember me, when it you see'.

And now having disposed of my most valuable property I hope all will be

satisfied and not blame the dead. I forgive everyone, and trust we may

all meet when the trump shall sound. Amen.

To this will and testiment I set my hand and seal on this 20th day of

Nov. Anni Domino 1861.

Amy Curtis March

Witnesses:

Estelle Valnor, Theodore Laurence.

The last name was written in pencil, and Amy explained that he was to

rewrite it in ink and seal it up for her properly.

"What put it into your head? Did anyone tell you about Beth's giving

away her things?" asked Laurie soberly, as Amy laid a bit of red tape,

with sealing wax, a taper, and a standish before him.

She explained and then asked anxiously, "What about Beth?"

"I'm sorry I spoke, but as I did, I'll tell you. She felt so ill one

day that she told Jo she wanted to give her piano to Meg, her cats to

you, and the poor old doll to Jo, who would love it for her sake. She

was sorry she had so little to give, and left locks of hair to the rest

of us, and her best love to Grandpa. She never thought of a will."

Laurie was signing and sealing as he spoke, and did not look up till a

great tear dropped on the paper. Amy's face was full of trouble, but

she only said, "Don't people put sort of postscripts to their wills,

sometimes?"

"Yes, 'codicils', they call them."

"Put one in mine then, that I wish all my curls cut off, and given

round to my friends. I forgot it, but I want it done though it will

spoil my looks."

Laurie added it, smiling at Amy's last and greatest sacrifice. Then he

amused her for an hour, and was much interested in all her trials. But

when he came to go, Amy held him back to whisper with trembling lips,

"Is there really any danger about Beth?"

"I'm afraid there is, but we must hope for the best, so don't cry,

dear." And Laurie put his arm about her with a brotherly gesture which

was very comforting.

When he had gone, she went to her little chapel, and sitting in the

twilight, prayed for Beth, with streaming tears and an aching heart,

feeling that a million turquoise rings would not console her for the

loss of her gentle little sister.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CONFIDENTIAL

I don't think I have any words in which to tell the meeting of the

mother and daughters. Such hours are beautiful to live, but very hard

to describe, so I will leave it to the imagination of my readers,

merely saying that the house was full of genuine happiness, and that

Meg's tender hope was realized, for when Beth woke from that long,

healing sleep, the first objects on which her eyes fell were the little

rose and Mother's face. Too weak to wonder at anything, she only

smiled and nestled close in the loving arms about her, feeling that the

hungry longing was satisfied at last. Then she slept again, and the

girls waited upon their mother, for she would not unclasp the thin hand

which clung to hers even in sleep.

Hannah had 'dished up' an astonishing breakfast for the traveler,

finding it impossible to vent her excitement in any other way, and Meg

and Jo fed their mother like dutiful young storks, while they listened

to her whispered account of Father's state, Mr. Brooke's promise to

stay and nurse him, the delays which the storm occasioned on the

homeward journey, and the unspeakable comfort Laurie's hopeful face had

given her when she arrived, worn out with fatigue, anxiety, and cold.

What a strange yet pleasant day that was. So brilliant and gay

without, for all the world seemed abroad to welcome the first snow. So

quiet and reposeful within, for everyone slept, spent with watching,

and a Sabbath stillness reigned through the house, while nodding Hannah

mounted guard at the door. With a blissful sense of burdens lifted

off, Meg and Jo closed their weary eyes, and lay at rest, like

storm-beaten boats safe at anchor in a quiet harbor. Mrs. March would

not leave Beth's side, but rested in the big chair, waking often to

look at, touch, and brood over her child, like a miser over some

recovered treasure.

Laurie meanwhile posted off to comfort Amy, and told his story so well

that Aunt March actually 'sniffed' herself, and never once said "I told

you so". Amy came out so strong on this occasion that I think the good

thoughts in the little chapel really began to bear fruit. She dried

her tears quickly, restrained her impatience to see her mother, and

never even thought of the turquoise ring, when the old lady heartily

agreed in Laurie's opinion, that she behaved 'like a capital little

woman'. Even Polly seemed impressed, for he called her a good girl,

blessed her buttons, and begged her to "come and take a walk, dear", in

his most affable tone. She would very gladly have gone out to enjoy

the bright wintry weather, but discovering that Laurie was dropping

with sleep in spite of manful efforts to conceal the fact, she

persuaded him to rest on the sofa, while she wrote a note to her

mother. She was a long time about it, and when she returned, he was

stretched out with both arms under his head, sound asleep, while Aunt

March had pulled down the curtains and sat doing nothing in an unusual

fit of benignity.

After a while, they began to think he was not going to wake up till

night, and I'm not sure that he would, had he not been effectually

roused by Amy's cry of joy at sight of her mother. There probably were

a good many happy little girls in and about the city that day, but it

is my private opinion that Amy was the happiest of all, when she sat in

her mother's lap and told her trials, receiving consolation and

compensation in the shape of approving smiles and fond caresses. They

were alone together in the chapel, to which her mother did not object

when its purpose was explained to her.

"On the contrary, I like it very much, dear," looking from the dusty

rosary to the well-worn little book, and the lovely picture with its

garland of evergreen. "It is an excellent plan to have some place

where we can go to be quiet, when things vex or grieve us. There are a

good many hard times in this life of ours, but we can always bear them

if we ask help in the right way. I think my little girl is learning

this."

"Yes, Mother, and when I go home I mean to have a corner in the big

closet to put my books and the copy of that picture which I've tried to

make. The woman's face is not good, it's too beautiful for me to draw,

but the baby is done better, and I love it very much. I like to think

He was a little child once, for then I don't seem so far away, and that

helps me."

As Amy pointed to the smiling Christ child on his Mother's knee, Mrs.

March saw something on the lifted hand that made her smile. She said

nothing, but Amy understood the look, and after a minute's pause, she

added gravely, "I wanted to speak to you about this, but I forgot it.

Aunt gave me the ring today. She called me to her and kissed me, and

put it on my finger, and said I was a credit to her, and she'd like to

keep me always. She gave that funny guard to keep the turquoise on, as

it's too big. I'd like to wear them Mother, can I?"

"They are very pretty, but I think you're rather too young for such

ornaments, Amy," said Mrs. March, looking at the plump little hand,

with the band of sky-blue stones on the forefinger, and the quaint

guard formed of two tiny golden hands clasped together.

"I'll try not to be vain," said Amy. "I don't think I like it only

because it's so pretty, but I want to wear it as the girl in the story

wore her bracelet, to remind me of something."

"Do you mean Aunt March?" asked her mother, laughing.

"No, to remind me not to be selfish." Amy looked so earnest and

sincere about it that her mother stopped laughing, and listened

respectfully to the little plan.

"I've thought a great deal lately about my 'bundle of naughties', and

being selfish is the largest one in it, so I'm going to try hard to

cure it, if I can. Beth isn't selfish, and that's the reason everyone

loves her and feels so bad at the thoughts of losing her. People

wouldn't feel so bad about me if I was sick, and I don't deserve to

have them, but I'd like to be loved and missed by a great many friends,

so I'm going to try and be like Beth all I can. I'm apt to forget my

resolutions, but if I had something always about me to remind me, I

guess I should do better. May we try this way?"

"Yes, but I have more faith in the corner of the big closet. Wear your

ring, dear, and do your best. I think you will prosper, for the

sincere wish to be good is half the battle. Now I must go back to

Beth. Keep up your heart, little daughter, and we will soon have you

home again."

That evening while Meg was writing to her father to report the

traveler's safe arrival, Jo slipped upstairs into Beth's room, and

finding her mother in her usual place, stood a minute twisting her

fingers in her hair, with a worried gesture and an undecided look.

"What is it, deary?" asked Mrs. March, holding out her hand, with a

face which invited confidence.

"I want to tell you something, Mother."

"About Meg?"

"How quickly you guessed! Yes, it's about her, and though it's a

little thing, it fidgets me."

"Beth is asleep. Speak low, and tell me all about it. That Moffat

hasn't been here, I hope?" asked Mrs. March rather sharply.

"No. I should have shut the door in his face if he had," said Jo,

settling herself on the floor at her mother's feet. "Last summer Meg

left a pair of gloves over at the Laurences' and only one was returned.

We forgot about it, till Teddy told me that Mr. Brooke owned that he

liked Meg but didn't dare say so, she was so young and he so poor.

Now, isn't it a dreadful state of things?"

"Do you think Meg cares for him?" asked Mrs. March, with an anxious

look.

"Mercy me! I don't know anything about love and such nonsense!" cried

Jo, with a funny mixture of interest and contempt. "In novels, the

girls show it by starting and blushing, fainting away, growing thin,

and acting like fools. Now Meg does not do anything of the sort. She

eats and drinks and sleeps like a sensible creature, she looks straight

in my face when I talk about that man, and only blushes a little bit

when Teddy jokes about lovers. I forbid him to do it, but he doesn't

mind me as he ought."

"Then you fancy that Meg is not interested in John?"

"Who?" cried Jo, staring.

"Mr. Brooke. I call him 'John' now. We fell into the way of doing so

at the hospital, and he likes it."

"Oh, dear! I know you'll take his part. He's been good to Father, and

you won't send him away, but let Meg marry him, if she wants to. Mean

thing! To go petting Papa and helping you, just to wheedle you into

liking him." And Jo pulled her hair again with a wrathful tweak.

"My dear, don't get angry about it, and I will tell you how it

happened. John went with me at Mr. Laurence's request, and was so

devoted to poor Father that we couldn't help getting fond of him. He

was perfectly open and honorable about Meg, for he told us he loved

her, but would earn a comfortable home before he asked her to marry

him. He only wanted our leave to love her and work for her, and the

right to make her love him if he could. He is a truly excellent young

man, and we could not refuse to listen to him, but I will not consent

to Meg's engaging herself so young."

"Of course not. It would be idiotic! I knew there was mischief

brewing. I felt it, and now it's worse than I imagined. I just wish I

could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family."

This odd arrangement made Mrs. March smile, but she said gravely, "Jo,

I confide in you and don't wish you to say anything to Meg yet. When

John comes back, and I see them together, I can judge better of her

feelings toward him."

"She'll see those handsome eyes that she talks about, and then it will

be all up with her. She's got such a soft heart, it will melt like

butter in the sun if anyone looks sentimentlly at her. She read the

short reports he sent more than she did your letters, and pinched me

when I spoke of it, and likes brown eyes, and doesn't think John an

ugly name, and she'll go and fall in love, and there's an end of peace

and fun, and cozy times together. I see it all! They'll go lovering

around the house, and we shall have to dodge. Meg will be absorbed and

no good to me any more. Brooke will scratch up a fortune somehow, carry

her off, and make a hole in the family, and I shall break my heart, and

everything will be abominably uncomfortable. Oh, dear me! Why weren't

we all boys, then there wouldn't be any bother."

Jo leaned her chin on her knees in a disconsolate attitude and shook

her fist at the reprehensible John. Mrs. March sighed, and Jo looked

up with an air of relief.

"You don't like it, Mother? I'm glad of it. Let's send him about his

business, and not tell Meg a word of it, but all be happy together as

we always have been."

"I did wrong to sigh, Jo. It is natural and right you should all go to

homes of your own in time, but I do want to keep my girls as long as I

can, and I am sorry that this happened so soon, for Meg is only

seventeen and it will be some years before John can make a home for

her. Your father and I have agreed that she shall not bind herself in

any way, nor be married, before twenty. If she and John love one

another, they can wait, and test the love by doing so. She is

conscientious, and I have no fear of her treating him unkindly. My

pretty, tender hearted girl! I hope things will go happily with her."

"Hadn't you rather have her marry a rich man?" asked Jo, as her

mother's voice faltered a little over the last words.

"Money is a good and useful thing, Jo, and I hope my girls will never

feel the need of it too bitterly, nor be tempted by too much. I should

like to know that John was firmly established in some good business,

which gave him an income large enough to keep free from debt and make

Meg comfortable. I'm not ambitious for a splendid fortune, a

fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money

come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and

enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine

happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is

earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures. I am

content to see Meg begin humbly, for if I am not mistaken, she will be

rich in the possession of a good man's heart, and that is better than a

fortune."

"I understand, Mother, and quite agree, but I'm disappointed about Meg,

for I'd planned to have her marry Teddy by-and-by and sit in the lap of

luxury all her days. Wouldn't it be nice?" asked Jo, looking up with a

brighter face.

"He is younger than she, you know," began Mrs. March, but Jo broke in...

"Only a little, he's old for his age, and tall, and can be quite

grown-up in his manners if he likes. Then he's rich and generous and

good, and loves us all, and I say it's a pity my plan is spoiled."

"I'm afraid Laurie is hardly grown-up enough for Meg, and altogether

too much of a weathercock just now for anyone to depend on. Don't make

plans, Jo, but let time and their own hearts mate your friends. We

can't meddle safely in such matters, and had better not get 'romantic

rubbish' as you call it, into our heads, lest it spoil our friendship."

"Well, I won't, but I hate to see things going all crisscross and

getting snarled up, when a pull here and a snip there would straighten

it out. I wish wearing flatirons on our heads would keep us from

growing up. But buds will be roses, and kittens cats, more's the pity!"

"What's that about flatirons and cats?" asked Meg, as she crept into

the room with the finished letter in her hand.

"Only one of my stupid speeches. I'm going to bed. Come, Peggy," said

Jo, unfolding herself like an animated puzzle.

"Quite right, and beautifully written. Please add that I send my love

to John," said Mrs. March, as she glanced over the letter and gave it

back.

"Do you call him 'John'?" asked Meg, smiling, with her innocent eyes

looking down into her mother's.

"Yes, he has been like a son to us, and we are very fond of him,"

replied Mrs. March, returning the look with a keen one.

"I'm glad of that, he is so lonely. Good night, Mother, dear. It is

so inexpressibly comfortable to have you here," was Meg's answer.

The kiss her mother gave her was a very tender one, and as she went

away, Mrs. March said, with a mixture of satisfaction and regret, "She

does not love John yet, but will soon learn to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LAURIE MAKES MISCHIEF, AND JO MAKES PEACE

Jo's face was a study next day, for the secret rather weighed upon her,

and she found it hard not to look mysterious and important. Meg

observed it, but did not trouble herself to make inquiries, for she had

learned that the best way to manage Jo was by the law of contraries, so

she felt sure of being told everything if she did not ask. She was

rather surprised, therefore, when the silence remained unbroken, and Jo

assumed a patronizing air, which decidedly aggravated Meg, who in turn

assumed an air of dignified reserve and devoted herself to her mother.

This left Jo to her own devices, for Mrs. March had taken her place as

nurse, and bade her rest, exercise, and amuse herself after her long

confinement. Amy being gone, Laurie was her only refuge, and much as

she enjoyed his society, she rather dreaded him just then, for he was

an incorrigible tease, and she feared he would coax the secret from her.

She was quite right, for the mischief-loving lad no sooner suspected a

mystery than he set himself to find it out, and led Jo a trying life of

it. He wheedled, bribed, ridiculed, threatened, and scolded; affected

indifference, that he might surprise the truth from her; declared he

knew, then that he didn't care; and at last, by dint of perseverance,

he satisfied himself that it concerned Meg and Mr. Brooke. Feeling

indignant that he was not taken into his tutor's confidence, he set his

wits to work to devise some proper retaliation for the slight.

Meg meanwhile had apparently forgotten the matter and was absorbed in

preparations for her father's return, but all of a sudden a change

seemed to come over her, and, for a day or two, she was quite unlike

herself. She started when spoken to, blushed when looked at, was very

quiet, and sat over her sewing, with a timid, troubled look on her

face. To her mother's inquiries she answered that she was quite well,

and Jo's she silenced by begging to be let alone.

"She feels it in the air--love, I mean--and she's going very fast.

She's got most of the symptoms--is twittery and cross, doesn't eat,

lies awake, and mopes in corners. I caught her singing that song he

gave her, and once she said 'John', as you do, and then turned as red

as a poppy. Whatever shall we do?" said Jo, looking ready for any

measures, however violent.

"Nothing but wait. Let her alone, be kind and patient, and Father's

coming will settle everything," replied her mother.

"Here's a note to you, Meg, all sealed up. How odd! Teddy never seals

mine," said Jo next day, as she distributed the contents of the little

post office.

Mrs. March and Jo were deep in their own affairs, when a sound from Meg

made them look up to see her staring at her note with a frightened face.

"My child, what is it?" cried her mother, running to her, while Jo

tried to take the paper which had done the mischief.

"It's all a mistake, he didn't send it. Oh, Jo, how could you do it?"

and Meg hid her face in her hands, crying as if her heart were quite

broken.

"Me! I've done nothing! What's she talking about?" cried Jo,

bewildered.

Meg's mild eyes kindled with anger as she pulled a crumpled note from

her pocket and threw it at Jo, saying reproachfully, "You wrote it, and

that bad boy helped you. How could you be so rude, so mean, and cruel

to us both?"

Jo hardly heard her, for she and her mother were reading the note,

which was written in a peculiar hand.

"My Dearest Margaret,

"I can no longer restrain my passion, and must know my fate before I

return. I dare not tell your parents yet, but I think they would

consent if they knew that we adored one another. Mr. Laurence will

help me to some good place, and then, my sweet girl, you will make me

happy. I implore you to say nothing to your family yet, but to send

one word of hope through Laurie to,

"Your devoted John."

"Oh, the little villain! That's the way he meant to pay me for keeping

my word to Mother. I'll give him a hearty scolding and bring him over

to beg pardon," cried Jo, burning to execute immediate justice. But

her mother held her back, saying, with a look she seldom wore...

"Stop, Jo, you must clear yourself first. You have played so many

pranks that I am afraid you have had a hand in this."

"On my word, Mother, I haven't! I never saw that note before, and

don't know anything about it, as true as I live!" said Jo, so earnestly

that they believed her. "If I had taken part in it I'd have done it

better than this, and have written a sensible note. I should think

you'd have known Mr. Brooke wouldn't write such stuff as that," she

added, scornfully tossing down the paper.

"It's like his writing," faltered Meg, comparing it with the note in

her hand.

"Oh, Meg, you didn't answer it?" cried Mrs. March quickly.

"Yes, I did!" and Meg hid her face again, overcome with shame.

"Here's a scrape! Do let me bring that wicked boy over to explain and

be lectured. I can't rest till I get hold of him." And Jo made for the

door again.

"Hush! Let me handle this, for it is worse than I thought. Margaret,

tell me the whole story," commanded Mrs. March, sitting down by Meg,

yet keeping hold of Jo, lest she should fly off.

"I received the first letter from Laurie, who didn't look as if he knew

anything about it," began Meg, without looking up. "I was worried at

first and meant to tell you, then I remembered how you liked Mr.

Brooke, so I thought you wouldn't mind if I kept my little secret for a

few days. I'm so silly that I liked to think no one knew, and while I

was deciding what to say, I felt like the girls in books, who have such

things to do. Forgive me, Mother, I'm paid for my silliness now. I

never can look him in the face again."

"What did you say to him?" asked Mrs. March.

"I only said I was too young to do anything about it yet, that I didn't

wish to have secrets from you, and he must speak to father. I was very

grateful for his kindness, and would be his friend, but nothing more,

for a long while."

Mrs. March smiled, as if well pleased, and Jo clapped her hands,

exclaiming, with a laugh, "You are almost equal to Caroline Percy, who

was a pattern of prudence! Tell on, Meg. What did he say to that?"

"He writes in a different way entirely, telling me that he never sent

any love letter at all, and is very sorry that my roguish sister, Jo,

should take liberties with our names. It's very kind and respectful,

but think how dreadful for me!"

Meg leaned against her mother, looking the image of despair, and Jo

tramped about the room, calling Laurie names. All of a sudden she

stopped, caught up the two notes, and after looking at them closely,

said decidedly, "I don't believe Brooke ever saw either of these

letters. Teddy wrote both, and keeps yours to crow over me with

because I wouldn't tell him my secret."

"Don't have any secrets, Jo. Tell it to Mother and keep out of

trouble, as I should have done," said Meg warningly.

"Bless you, child! Mother told me."

"That will do, Jo. I'll comfort Meg while you go and get Laurie. I

shall sift the matter to the bottom, and put a stop to such pranks at

once."

Away ran Jo, and Mrs. March gently told Meg Mr. Brooke's real feelings.

"Now, dear, what are your own? Do you love him enough to wait till he

can make a home for you, or will you keep yourself quite free for the

present?"

"I've been so scared and worried, I don't want to have anything to do

with lovers for a long while, perhaps never," answered Meg petulantly.

"If John doesn't know anything about this nonsense, don't tell him, and

make Jo and Laurie hold their tongues. I won't be deceived and plagued

and made a fool of. It's a shame!"

Seeing Meg's usually gentle temper was roused and her pride hurt by

this mischievous joke, Mrs. March soothed her by promises of entire

silence and great discretion for the future. The instant Laurie's step

was heard in the hall, Meg fled into the study, and Mrs. March received

the culprit alone. Jo had not told him why he was wanted, fearing he

wouldn't come, but he knew the minute he saw Mrs. March's face, and

stood twirling his hat with a guilty air which convicted him at once.

Jo was dismissed, but chose to march up and down the hall like a

sentinel, having some fear that the prisoner might bolt. The sound of

voices in the parlor rose and fell for half an hour, but what happened

during that interview the girls never knew.

When they were called in, Laurie was standing by their mother with such

a penitent face that Jo forgave him on the spot, but did not think it

wise to betray the fact. Meg received his humble apology, and was much

comforted by the assurance that Brooke knew nothing of the joke.

"I'll never tell him to my dying day, wild horses shan't drag it out of

me, so you'll forgive me, Meg, and I'll do anything to show how

out-and-out sorry I am," he added, looking very much ashamed of himself.

"I'll try, but it was a very ungentlemanly thing to do, I didn't think

you could be so sly and malicious, Laurie," replied Meg, trying to hide

her maidenly confusion under a gravely reproachful air.

"It was altogether abominable, and I don't deserve to be spoken to for

a month, but you will, though, won't you?" And Laurie folded his hands

together with such and imploring gesture, as he spoke in his

irresistibly persuasive tone, that it was impossible to frown upon him

in spite of his scandalous behavior.

Meg pardoned him, and Mrs. March's grave face relaxed, in spite of her

efforts to keep sober, when she heard him declare that he would atone

for his sins by all sorts of penances, and abase himself like a worm

before the injured damsel.

Jo stood aloof, meanwhile, trying to harden her heart against him, and

succeeding only in primming up her face into an expression of entire

disapprobation. Laurie looked at her once or twice, but as she showed

no sign of relenting, he felt injured, and turned his back on her till

the others were done with him, when he made her a low bow and walked

off without a word.

As soon as he had gone, she wished she had been more forgiving, and

when Meg and her mother went upstairs, she felt lonely and longed for

Teddy. After resisting for some time, she yielded to the impulse, and

armed with a book to return, went over to the big house.

"Is Mr. Laurence in?" asked Jo, of a housemaid, who was coming

downstairs.

"Yes, Miss, but I don't believe he's seeable just yet."

"Why not? Is he ill?"

"La, no Miss, but he's had a scene with Mr. Laurie, who is in one of

his tantrums about something, which vexes the old gentleman, so I

dursn't go nigh him."

"Where is Laurie?"

"Shut up in his room, and he won't answer, though I've been a-tapping.

I don't know what's to become of the dinner, for it's ready, and

there's no one to eat it."

"I'll go and see what the matter is. I'm not afraid of either of them."

Up went Jo, and knocked smartly on the door of Laurie's little study.

"Stop that, or I'll open the door and make you!" called out the young

gentleman in a threatening tone.

Jo immediately knocked again. The door flew open, and in she bounced

before Laurie could recover from his surprise. Seeing that he really

was out of temper, Jo, who knew how to manage him, assumed a contrite

expression, and going artistically down upon her knees, said meekly,

"Please forgive me for being so cross. I came to make it up, and can't

go away till I have."

"It's all right. Get up, and don't be a goose, Jo," was the cavalier

reply to her petition.

"Thank you, I will. Could I ask what's the matter? You don't look

exactly easy in your mind."

"I've been shaken, and I won't bear it!" growled Laurie indignantly.

"Who did it?" demanded Jo.

"Grandfather. If it had been anyone else I'd have..." And the injured

youth finished his sentence by an energetic gesture of the right arm.

"That's nothing. I often shake you, and you don't mind," said Jo

soothingly.

"Pooh! You're a girl, and it's fun, but I'll allow no man to shake me!"

"I don't think anyone would care to try it, if you looked as much like

a thundercloud as you do now. Why were you treated so?"

"Just because I wouldn't say what your mother wanted me for. I'd

promised not to tell, and of course I wasn't going to break my word."

"Couldn't you satisfy your grandpa in any other way?"

"No, he would have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth. I'd have told my part of the scrape, if I could without

bringing Meg in. As I couldn't, I held my tongue, and bore the

scolding till the old gentleman collared me. Then I bolted, for fear I

should forget myself."

"It wasn't nice, but he's sorry, I know, so go down and make up. I'll

help you."

"Hanged if I do! I'm not going to be lectured and pummelled by

everyone, just for a bit of a frolic. I was sorry about Meg, and

begged pardon like a man, but I won't do it again, when I wasn't in the

wrong."

"He didn't know that."

"He ought to trust me, and not act as if I was a baby. It's no use,

Jo, he's got to learn that I'm able to take care of myself, and don't

need anyone's apron string to hold on by."

"What pepper pots you are!" sighed Jo. "How do you mean to settle this

affair?"

"Well, he ought to beg pardon, and believe me when I say I can't tell

him what the fuss's about."

"Bless you! He won't do that."

"I won't go down till he does."

"Now, Teddy, be sensible. Let it pass, and I'll explain what I can.

You can't stay here, so what's the use of being melodramatic?"

"I don't intend to stay here long, anyway. I'll slip off and take a

journey somewhere, and when Grandpa misses me he'll come round fast

enough."

"I dare say, but you ought not to go and worry him."

"Don't preach. I'll go to Washington and see Brooke. It's gay there,

and I'll enjoy myself after the troubles."

"What fun you'd have! I wish I could run off too," said Jo, forgetting

her part of mentor in lively visions of martial life at the capital.

"Come on, then! Why not? You go and surprise your father, and I'll

stir up old Brooke. It would be a glorious joke. Let's do it, Jo.

We'll leave a letter saying we are all right, and trot off at once.

I've got money enough. It will do you good, and no harm, as you go to

your father."

For a moment Jo looked as if she would agree, for wild as the plan was,

it just suited her. She was tired of care and confinement, longed for

change, and thoughts of her father blended temptingly with the novel

charms of camps and hospitals, liberty and fun. Her eyes kindled as

they turned wistfully toward the window, but they fell on the old house

opposite, and she shook her head with sorrowful decision.

"If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time, but

as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper and stop at home. Don't tempt

me, Teddy, it's a crazy plan."

"That's the fun of it," began Laurie, who had got a willful fit on him

and was possessed to break out of bounds in some way.

"Hold your tongue!" cried Jo, covering her ears. "'Prunes and prisms'

are my doom, and I may as well make up my mind to it. I came here to

moralize, not to hear things that make me skip to think of."

"I know Meg would wet-blanket such a proposal, but I thought you had

more spirit," began Laurie insinuatingly.

"Bad boy, be quiet! Sit down and think of your own sins, don't go

making me add to mine. If I get your grandpa to apologize for the

shaking, will you give up running away?" asked Jo seriously.

"Yes, but you won't do it," answered Laurie, who wished to make up, but

felt that his outraged dignity must be appeased first.

"If I can manage the young one, I can the old one," muttered Jo, as she

walked away, leaving Laurie bent over a railroad map with his head

propped up on both hands.

"Come in!" and Mr. Laurence's gruff voice sounded gruffer than ever, as

Jo tapped at his door.

"It's only me, Sir, come to return a book," she said blandly, as she

entered.

"Want any more?" asked the old gentleman, looking grim and vexed, but

trying not to show it.

"Yes, please. I like old Sam so well, I think I'll try the second

volume," returned Jo, hoping to propitiate him by accepting a second

dose of Boswell's Johnson, as he had recommended that lively work.

The shaggy eyebrows unbent a little as he rolled the steps toward the

shelf where the Johnsonian literature was placed. Jo skipped up, and

sitting on the top step, affected to be searching for her book, but was

really wondering how best to introduce the dangerous object of her

visit. Mr. Laurence seemed to suspect that something was brewing in

her mind, for after taking several brisk turns about the room, he faced

round on her, speaking so abruptly that Rasselas tumbled face downward

on the floor.

"What has that boy been about? Don't try to shield him. I know he has

been in mischief by the way he acted when he came home. I can't get a

word from him, and when I threatened to shake the truth out of him he

bolted upstairs and locked himself into his room."

"He did wrong, but we forgave him, and all promised not to say a word

to anyone," began Jo reluctantly.

"That won't do. He shall not shelter himself behind a promise from you

softhearted girls. If he's done anything amiss, he shall confess, beg

pardon, and be punished. Out with it, Jo. I won't be kept in the dark."

Mr. Laurence looked so alarming and spoke so sharply that Jo would have

gladly run away, if she could, but she was perched aloft on the steps,

and he stood at the foot, a lion in the path, so she had to stay and

brave it out.

"Indeed, Sir, I cannot tell. Mother forbade it. Laurie has confessed,

asked pardon, and been punished quite enough. We don't keep silence to

shield him, but someone else, and it will make more trouble if you

interfere. Please don't. It was partly my fault, but it's all right

now. So let's forget it, and talk about the \_Rambler\_ or something

pleasant."

"Hang the \_Rambler!\_ Come down and give me your word that this

harum-scarum boy of mine hasn't done anything ungrateful or

impertinent. If he has, after all your kindness to him, I'll thrash

him with my own hands."

The threat sounded awful, but did not alarm Jo, for she knew the

irascible old gentleman would never lift a finger against his grandson,

whatever he might say to the contrary. She obediently descended, and

made as light of the prank as she could without betraying Meg or

forgetting the truth.

"Hum... ha... well, if the boy held his tongue because he promised, and

not from obstinacy, I'll forgive him. He's a stubborn fellow and hard

to manage," said Mr. Laurence, rubbing up his hair till it looked as if

he had been out in a gale, and smoothing the frown from his brow with

an air of relief.

"So am I, but a kind word will govern me when all the king's horses and

all the king's men couldn't," said Jo, trying to say a kind word for

her friend, who seemed to get out of one scrape only to fall into

another.

"You think I'm not kind to him, hey?" was the sharp answer.

"Oh, dear no, Sir. You are rather too kind sometimes, and then just a

trifle hasty when he tries your patience. Don't you think you are?"

Jo was determined to have it out now, and tried to look quite placid,

though she quaked a little after her bold speech. To her great relief

and surprise, the old gentleman only threw his spectacles onto the

table with a rattle and exclaimed frankly, "You're right, girl, I am!

I love the boy, but he tries my patience past bearing, and I know how

it will end, if we go on so."

"I'll tell you, he'll run away." Jo was sorry for that speech the

minute it was made. She meant to warn him that Laurie would not bear

much restraint, and hoped he would be more forebearing with the lad.

Mr. Laurence's ruddy face changed suddenly, and he sat down, with a

troubled glance at the picture of a handsome man, which hung over his

table. It was Laurie's father, who had run away in his youth, and

married against the imperious old man's will. Jo fancied he remembered

and regretted the past, and she wished she had held her tongue.

"He won't do it unless he is very much worried, and only threatens it

sometimes, when he gets tired of studying. I often think I should like

to, especially since my hair was cut, so if you ever miss us, you may

advertise for two boys and look among the ships bound for India."

She laughed as she spoke, and Mr. Laurence looked relieved, evidently

taking the whole as a joke.

"You hussy, how dare you talk in that way? Where's your respect for

me, and your proper bringing up? Bless the boys and girls! What

torments they are, yet we can't do without them," he said, pinching her

cheeks good-humoredly. "Go and bring that boy down to his dinner, tell

him it's all right, and advise him not to put on tragedy airs with his

grandfather. I won't bear it."

"He won't come, Sir. He feels badly because you didn't believe him

when he said he couldn't tell. I think the shaking hurt his feelings

very much."

Jo tried to look pathetic but must have failed, for Mr. Laurence began

to laugh, and she knew the day was won.

"I'm sorry for that, and ought to thank him for not shaking me, I

suppose. What the dickens does the fellow expect?" and the old

gentleman looked a trifle ashamed of his own testiness.

"If I were you, I'd write him an apology, Sir. He says he won't come

down till he has one, and talks about Washington, and goes on in an

absurd way. A formal apology will make him see how foolish he is, and

bring him down quite amiable. Try it. He likes fun, and this way is

better than talking. I'll carry it up, and teach him his duty."

Mr. Laurence gave her a sharp look, and put on his spectacles, saying

slowly, "You're a sly puss, but I don't mind being managed by you and

Beth. Here, give me a bit of paper, and let us have done with this

nonsense."

The note was written in the terms which one gentleman would use to

another after offering some deep insult. Jo dropped a kiss on the top

of Mr. Laurence's bald head, and ran up to slip the apology under

Laurie's door, advising him through the keyhole to be submissive,

decorous, and a few other agreeable impossibilities. Finding the door

locked again, she left the note to do its work, and was going quietly

away, when the young gentleman slid down the banisters, and waited for

her at the bottom, saying, with his most virtuous expression of

countenance, "What a good fellow you are, Jo! Did you get blown up?" he

added, laughing.

"No, he was pretty mild, on the whole."

"Ah! I got it all round. Even you cast me off over there, and I felt

just ready to go to the deuce," he began apologetically.

"Don't talk that way, turn over a new leaf and begin again, Teddy, my

son."

"I keep turning over new leaves, and spoiling them, as I used to spoil

my copybooks, and I make so many beginnings there never will be an

end," he said dolefully.

"Go and eat your dinner, you'll feel better after it. Men always croak

when they are hungry," and Jo whisked out at the front door after that.

"That's a 'label' on my 'sect'," answered Laurie, quoting Amy, as he

went to partake of humble pie dutifully with his grandfather, who was

quite saintly in temper and overwhelmingly respectful in manner all the

rest of the day.

Everyone thought the matter ended and the little cloud blown over, but

the mischief was done, for though others forgot it, Meg remembered.

She never alluded to a certain person, but she thought of him a good

deal, dreamed dreams more than ever, and once Jo, rummaging her

sister's desk for stamps, found a bit of paper scribbled over with the

words, 'Mrs. John Brooke', whereat she groaned tragically and cast it

into the fire, feeling that Laurie's prank had hastened the evil day

for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PLEASANT MEADOWS

Like sunshine after a storm were the peaceful weeks which followed.

The invalids improved rapidly, and Mr. March began to talk of returning

early in the new year. Beth was soon able to lie on the study sofa all

day, amusing herself with the well-beloved cats at first, and in time

with doll's sewing, which had fallen sadly behind-hand. Her once

active limbs were so stiff and feeble that Jo took her for a daily

airing about the house in her strong arms. Meg cheerfully blackened

and burned her white hands cooking delicate messes for 'the dear',

while Amy, a loyal slave of the ring, celebrated her return by giving

away as many of her treasures as she could prevail on her sisters to

accept.

As Christmas approached, the usual mysteries began to haunt the house,

and Jo frequently convulsed the family by proposing utterly impossible

or magnificently absurd ceremonies, in honor of this unusually merry

Christmas. Laurie was equally impracticable, and would have had

bonfires, skyrockets, and triumphal arches, if he had had his own way.

After many skirmishes and snubbings, the ambitious pair were considered

effectually quenched and went about with forlorn faces, which were

rather belied by explosions of laughter when the two got together.

Several days of unusually mild weather fitly ushered in a splendid

Christmas Day. Hannah 'felt in her bones' that it was going to be an

unusually fine day, and she proved herself a true prophetess, for

everybody and everything seemed bound to produce a grand success. To

begin with, Mr. March wrote that he should soon be with them, then Beth

felt uncommonly well that morning, and, being dressed in her mother's

gift, a soft crimson merino wrapper, was borne in high triumph to the

window to behold the offering of Jo and Laurie. The Unquenchables had

done their best to be worthy of the name, for like elves they had

worked by night and conjured up a comical surprise. Out in the garden

stood a stately snow maiden, crowned with holly, bearing a basket of

fruit and flowers in one hand, a great roll of music in the other, a

perfect rainbow of an Afghan round her chilly shoulders, and a

Christmas carol issuing from her lips on a pink paper streamer.

THE JUNGFRAU TO BETH

God bless you, dear Queen Bess!

May nothing you dismay,

But health and peace and happiness

Be yours, this Christmas day.

Here's fruit to feed our busy bee,

And flowers for her nose.

Here's music for her pianee,

An afghan for her toes,

A portrait of Joanna, see,

By Raphael No. 2,

Who laboured with great industry

To make it fair and true.

Accept a ribbon red, I beg,

For Madam Purrer's tail,

And ice cream made by lovely Peg,

A Mont Blanc in a pail.

Their dearest love my makers laid

Within my breast of snow.

Accept it, and the Alpine maid,

From Laurie and from Jo.

How Beth laughed when she saw it, how Laurie ran up and down to bring

in the gifts, and what ridiculous speeches Jo made as she presented

them.

"I'm so full of happiness, that if Father was only here, I couldn't

hold one drop more," said Beth, quite sighing with contentment as Jo

carried her off to the study to rest after the excitement, and to

refresh herself with some of the delicious grapes the 'Jungfrau' had

sent her.

"So am I," added Jo, slapping the pocket wherein reposed the

long-desired \_Undine and Sintram\_.

"I'm sure I am," echoed Amy, poring over the engraved copy of the

Madonna and Child, which her mother had given her in a pretty frame.

"Of course I am!" cried Meg, smoothing the silvery folds of her first

silk dress, for Mr. Laurence had insisted on giving it. "How can I be

otherwise?" said Mrs. March gratefully, as her eyes went from her

husband's letter to Beth's smiling face, and her hand carressed the

brooch made of gray and golden, chestnut and dark brown hair, which the

girls had just fastened on her breast.

Now and then, in this workaday world, things do happen in the

delightful storybook fashion, and what a comfort it is. Half an hour

after everyone had said they were so happy they could only hold one

drop more, the drop came. Laurie opened the parlor door and popped his

head in very quietly. He might just as well have turned a somersault

and uttered an Indian war whoop, for his face was so full of suppressed

excitement and his voice so treacherously joyful that everyone jumped

up, though he only said, in a queer, breathless voice, "Here's another

Christmas present for the March family."

Before the words were well out of his mouth, he was whisked away

somehow, and in his place appeared a tall man, muffled up to the eyes,

leaning on the arm of another tall man, who tried to say something and

couldn't. Of course there was a general stampede, and for several

minutes everybody seemed to lose their wits, for the strangest things

were done, and no one said a word.

Mr. March became invisible in the embrace of four pairs of loving arms.

Jo disgraced herself by nearly fainting away, and had to be doctored by

Laurie in the china closet. Mr. Brooke kissed Meg entirely by mistake,

as he somewhat incoherently explained. And Amy, the dignified, tumbled

over a stool, and never stopping to get up, hugged and cried over her

father's boots in the most touching manner. Mrs. March was the first

to recover herself, and held up her hand with a warning, "Hush!

Remember Beth."

But it was too late. The study door flew open, the little red wrapper

appeared on the threshold, joy put strength into the feeble limbs, and

Beth ran straight into her father's arms. Never mind what happened

just after that, for the full hearts overflowed, washing away the

bitterness of the past and leaving only the sweetness of the present.

It was not at all romantic, but a hearty laugh set everybody straight

again, for Hannah was discovered behind the door, sobbing over the fat

turkey, which she had forgotten to put down when she rushed up from the

kitchen. As the laugh subsided, Mrs. March began to thank Mr. Brooke

for his faithful care of her husband, at which Mr. Brooke suddenly

remembered that Mr. March needed rest, and seizing Laurie, he

precipitately retired. Then the two invalids were ordered to repose,

which they did, by both sitting in one big chair and talking hard.

Mr. March told how he had longed to surprise them, and how, when the

fine weather came, he had been allowed by his doctor to take advantage

of it, how devoted Brooke had been, and how he was altogether a most

estimable and upright young man. Why Mr. March paused a minute just

there, and after a glance at Meg, who was violently poking the fire,

looked at his wife with an inquiring lift of the eyebrows, I leave you

to imagine. Also why Mrs. March gently nodded her head and asked,

rather abruptly, if he wouldn't like to have something to eat. Jo saw

and understood the look, and she stalked grimly away to get wine and

beef tea, muttering to herself as she slammed the door, "I hate

estimable young men with brown eyes!"

There never was such a Christmas dinner as they had that day. The fat

turkey was a sight to behold, when Hannah sent him up, stuffed,

browned, and decorated. So was the plum pudding, which melted in one's

mouth, likewise the jellies, in which Amy reveled like a fly in a

honeypot. Everything turned out well, which was a mercy, Hannah said,

"For my mind was that flustered, Mum, that it's a merrycle I didn't

roast the pudding, and stuff the turkey with raisins, let alone bilin'

of it in a cloth."

Mr. Laurence and his grandson dined with them, also Mr. Brooke, at whom

Jo glowered darkly, to Laurie's infinite amusement. Two easy chairs

stood side by side at the head of the table, in which sat Beth and her

father, feasting modestly on chicken and a little fruit. They drank

healths, told stories, sang songs, 'reminisced', as the old folks say,

and had a thoroughly good time. A sleigh ride had been planned, but the

girls would not leave their father, so the guests departed early, and

as twilight gathered, the happy family sat together round the fire.

"Just a year ago we were groaning over the dismal Christmas we expected

to have. Do you remember?" asked Jo, breaking a short pause which had

followed a long conversation about many things.

"Rather a pleasant year on the whole!" said Meg, smiling at the fire,

and congratulating herself on having treated Mr. Brooke with dignity.

"I think it's been a pretty hard one," observed Amy, watching the light

shine on her ring with thoughtful eyes.

"I'm glad it's over, because we've got you back," whispered Beth, who

sat on her father's knee.

"Rather a rough road for you to travel, my little pilgrims, especially

the latter part of it. But you have got on bravely, and I think the

burdens are in a fair way to tumble off very soon," said Mr. March,

looking with fatherly satisfaction at the four young faces gathered

round him.

"How do you know? Did Mother tell you?" asked Jo.

"Not much. Straws show which way the wind blows, and I've made several

discoveries today."

"Oh, tell us what they are!" cried Meg, who sat beside him.

"Here is one." And taking up the hand which lay on the arm of his

chair, he pointed to the roughened forefinger, a burn on the back, and

two or three little hard spots on the palm. "I remember a time when

this hand was white and smooth, and your first care was to keep it so.

It was very pretty then, but to me it is much prettier now, for in this

seeming blemishes I read a little history. A burnt offering has been

made to vanity, this hardened palm has earned something better than

blisters, and I'm sure the sewing done by these pricked fingers will

last a long time, so much good will went into the stitches. Meg, my

dear, I value the womanly skill which keeps home happy more than white

hands or fashionable accomplishments. I'm proud to shake this good,

industrious little hand, and hope I shall not soon be asked to give it

away."

If Meg had wanted a reward for hours of patient labor, she received it

in the hearty pressure of her father's hand and the approving smile he

gave her.

"What about Jo? Please say something nice, for she has tried so hard

and been so very, very good to me," said Beth in her father's ear.

He laughed and looked across at the tall girl who sat opposite, with an

unusually mild expression in her face.

"In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the 'son Jo' whom I left a

year ago," said Mr. March. "I see a young lady who pins her collar

straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang,

nor lies on the rug as she used to do. Her face is rather thin and

pale just now, with watching and anxiety, but I like to look at it, for

it has grown gentler, and her voice is lower. She doesn't bounce, but

moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly

way which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl, but if I get a

strong, helpful, tenderhearted woman in her place, I shall feel quite

satisfied. I don't know whether the shearing sobered our black sheep,

but I do know that in all Washington I couldn't find anything beautiful

enough to be bought with the five-and-twenty dollars my good girl sent

me."

Jo's keen eyes were rather dim for a minute, and her thin face grew

rosy in the firelight as she received her father's praise, feeling that

she did deserve a portion of it.

"Now, Beth," said Amy, longing for her turn, but ready to wait.

"There's so little of her, I'm afraid to say much, for fear she will

slip away altogether, though she is not so shy as she used to be,"

began their father cheerfully. But recollecting how nearly he had lost

her, he held her close, saying tenderly, with her cheek against his

own, "I've got you safe, my Beth, and I'll keep you so, please God."

After a minute's silence, he looked down at Amy, who sat on the cricket

at his feet, and said, with a caress of the shining hair...

"I observed that Amy took drumsticks at dinner, ran errands for her

mother all the afternoon, gave Meg her place tonight, and has waited on

every one with patience and good humor. I also observe that she does

not fret much nor look in the glass, and has not even mentioned a very

pretty ring which she wears, so I conclude that she has learned to

think of other people more and of herself less, and has decided to try

and mold her character as carefully as she molds her little clay

figures. I am glad of this, for though I should be very proud of a

graceful statue made by her, I shall be infinitely prouder of a lovable

daughter with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others."

"What are you thinking of, Beth?" asked Jo, when Amy had thanked her

father and told about her ring.

"I read in \_Pilgrim's Progress\_ today how, after many troubles,

Christian and Hopeful came to a pleasant green meadow where lilies

bloomed all year round, and there they rested happily, as we do now,

before they went on to their journey's end," answered Beth, adding, as

she slipped out of her father's arms and went to the instrument, "It's

singing time now, and I want to be in my old place. I'll try to sing

the song of the shepherd boy which the Pilgrims heard. I made the

music for Father, because he likes the verses."

So, sitting at the dear little piano, Beth softly touched the keys, and

in the sweet voice they had never thought to hear again, sang to her

own accompaniment the quaint hymn, which was a singularly fitting song

for her.

He that is down need fear no fall,

He that is low no pride.

He that is humble ever shall

Have God to be his guide.

I am content with what I have,

Little be it, or much.

And, Lord! Contentment still I crave,

Because Thou savest such.

Fulness to them a burden is,

That go on pilgrimage.

Here little, and hereafter bliss,

Is best from age to age!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AUNT MARCH SETTLES THE QUESTION

Like bees swarming after their queen, mother and daughters hovered

about Mr. March the next day, neglecting everything to look at, wait

upon, and listen to the new invalid, who was in a fair way to be killed

by kindness. As he sat propped up in a big chair by Beth's sofa, with

the other three close by, and Hannah popping in her head now and then

'to peek at the dear man', nothing seemed needed to complete their

happiness. But something was needed, and the elder ones felt it,

though none confessed the fact. Mr. and Mrs. March looked at one

another with an anxious expression, as their eyes followed Meg. Jo had

sudden fits of sobriety, and was seen to shake her fist at Mr. Brooke's

umbrella, which had been left in the hall. Meg was absent-minded, shy,

and silent, started when the bell rang, and colored when John's name

was mentioned. Amy said, "Everyone seemed waiting for something, and

couldn't settle down, which was queer, since Father was safe at home,"

and Beth innocently wondered why their neighbors didn't run over as

usual.

Laurie went by in the afternoon, and seeing Meg at the window, seemed

suddenly possessed with a melodramatic fit, for he fell down on one

knee in the snow, beat his breast, tore his hair, and clasped his hands

imploringly, as if begging some boon. And when Meg told him to behave

himself and go away, he wrung imaginary tears out of his handkerchief,

and staggered round the corner as if in utter despair.

"What does the goose mean?" said Meg, laughing and trying to look

unconscious.

"He's showing you how your John will go on by-and-by. Touching, isn't

it?" answered Jo scornfully.

"Don't say my John, it isn't proper or true," but Meg's voice lingered

over the words as if they sounded pleasant to her. "Please don't

plague me, Jo, I've told you I don't care much about him, and there

isn't to be anything said, but we are all to be friendly, and go on as

before."

"We can't, for something has been said, and Laurie's mischief has

spoiled you for me. I see it, and so does Mother. You are not like

your old self a bit, and seem ever so far away from me. I don't mean

to plague you and will bear it like a man, but I do wish it was all

settled. I hate to wait, so if you mean ever to do it, make haste and

have it over quickly," said Jo pettishly.

"I can't say anything till he speaks, and he won't, because Father said

I was too young," began Meg, bending over her work with a queer little

smile, which suggested that she did not quite agree with her father on

that point.

"If he did speak, you wouldn't know what to say, but would cry or

blush, or let him have his own way, instead of giving a good, decided

no."

"I'm not so silly and weak as you think. I know just what I should

say, for I've planned it all, so I needn't be taken unawares. There's

no knowing what may happen, and I wished to be prepared."

Jo couldn't help smiling at the important air which Meg had

unconsciously assumed and which was as becoming as the pretty color

varying in her cheeks.

"Would you mind telling me what you'd say?" asked Jo more respectfully.

"Not at all. You are sixteen now, quite old enough to be my confident,

and my experience will be useful to you by-and-by, perhaps, in your own

affairs of this sort."

"Don't mean to have any. It's fun to watch other people philander, but

I should feel like a fool doing it myself," said Jo, looking alarmed at

the thought.

"I think not, if you liked anyone very much, and he liked you." Meg

spoke as if to herself, and glanced out at the lane where she had often

seen lovers walking together in the summer twilight.

"I thought you were going to tell your speech to that man," said Jo,

rudely shortening her sister's little reverie.

"Oh, I should merely say, quite calmly and decidedly, 'Thank you, Mr.

Brooke, you are very kind, but I agree with Father that I am too young

to enter into any engagement at present, so please say no more, but let

us be friends as we were.'"

"Hum, that's stiff and cool enough! I don't believe you'll ever say

it, and I know he won't be satisfied if you do. If he goes on like the

rejected lovers in books, you'll give in, rather than hurt his

feelings."

"No, I won't. I shall tell him I've made up my mind, and shall walk

out of the room with dignity."

Meg rose as she spoke, and was just going to rehearse the dignified

exit, when a step in the hall made her fly into her seat and begin to

sew as fast as if her life depended on finishing that particular seam

in a given time. Jo smothered a laugh at the sudden change, and when

someone gave a modest tap, opened the door with a grim aspect which was

anything but hospitable.

"Good afternoon. I came to get my umbrella, that is, to see how your

father finds himself today," said Mr. Brooke, getting a trifle confused

as his eyes went from one telltale face to the other.

"It's very well, he's in the rack. I'll get him, and tell it you are

here." And having jumbled her father and the umbrella well together in

her reply, Jo slipped out of the room to give Meg a chance to make her

speech and air her dignity. But the instant she vanished, Meg began to

sidle toward the door, murmuring...

"Mother will like to see you. Pray sit down, I'll call her."

"Don't go. Are you afraid of me, Margaret?" and Mr. Brooke looked so

hurt that Meg thought she must have done something very rude. She

blushed up to the little curls on her forehead, for he had never called

her Margaret before, and she was surprised to find how natural and

sweet it seemed to hear him say it. Anxious to appear friendly and at

her ease, she put out her hand with a confiding gesture, and said

gratefully...

"How can I be afraid when you have been so kind to Father? I only wish

I could thank you for it."

"Shall I tell you how?" asked Mr. Brooke, holding the small hand fast

in both his own, and looking down at Meg with so much love in the brown

eyes that her heart began to flutter, and she both longed to run away

and to stop and listen.

"Oh no, please don't, I'd rather not," she said, trying to withdraw her

hand, and looking frightened in spite of her denial.

"I won't trouble you. I only want to know if you care for me a little,

Meg. I love you so much, dear," added Mr. Brooke tenderly.

This was the moment for the calm, proper speech, but Meg didn't make

it. She forgot every word of it, hung her head, and answered, "I don't

know," so softly that John had to stoop down to catch the foolish

little reply.

He seemed to think it was worth the trouble, for he smiled to himself

as if quite satisfied, pressed the plump hand gratefully, and said in

his most persuasive tone, "Will you try and find out? I want to know

so much, for I can't go to work with any heart until I learn whether I

am to have my reward in the end or not."

"I'm too young," faltered Meg, wondering why she was so fluttered, yet

rather enjoying it.

"I'll wait, and in the meantime, you could be learning to like me.

Would it be a very hard lesson, dear?"

"Not if I chose to learn it, but. . ."

"Please choose to learn, Meg. I love to teach, and this is easier than

German," broke in John, getting possession of the other hand, so that

she had no way of hiding her face as he bent to look into it.

His tone was properly beseeching, but stealing a shy look at him, Meg

saw that his eyes were merry as well as tender, and that he wore the

satisfied smile of one who had no doubt of his success. This nettled

her. Annie Moffat's foolish lessons in coquetry came into her mind,

and the love of power, which sleeps in the bosoms of the best of little

women, woke up all of a sudden and took possession of her. She felt

excited and strange, and not knowing what else to do, followed a

capricious impulse, and, withdrawing her hands, said petulantly, "I

don't choose. Please go away and let me be!"

Poor Mr. Brooke looked as if his lovely castle in the air was tumbling

about his ears, for he had never seen Meg in such a mood before, and it

rather bewildered him.

"Do you really mean that?" he asked anxiously, following her as she

walked away.

"Yes, I do. I don't want to be worried about such things. Father says

I needn't, it's too soon and I'd rather not."

"Mayn't I hope you'll change your mind by-and-by? I'll wait and say

nothing till you have had more time. Don't play with me, Meg. I

didn't think that of you."

"Don't think of me at all. I'd rather you wouldn't," said Meg, taking

a naughty satisfaction in trying her lover's patience and her own power.

He was grave and pale now, and looked decidedly more like the novel

heroes whom she admired, but he neither slapped his forehead nor

tramped about the room as they did. He just stood looking at her so

wistfully, so tenderly, that she found her heart relenting in spite of

herself. What would have happened next I cannot say, if Aunt March had

not come hobbling in at this interesting minute.

The old lady couldn't resist her longing to see her nephew, for she had

met Laurie as she took her airing, and hearing of Mr. March's arrival,

drove straight out to see him. The family were all busy in the back

part of the house, and she had made her way quietly in, hoping to

surprise them. She did surprise two of them so much that Meg started

as if she had seen a ghost, and Mr. Brooke vanished into the study.

"Bless me, what's all this?" cried the old lady with a rap of her cane

as she glanced from the pale young gentleman to the scarlet young lady.

"It's Father's friend. I'm so surprised to see you!" stammered Meg,

feeling that she was in for a lecture now.

"That's evident," returned Aunt March, sitting down. "But what is

Father's friend saying to make you look like a peony? There's mischief

going on, and I insist upon knowing what it is," with another rap.

"We were only talking. Mr. Brooke came for his umbrella," began Meg,

wishing that Mr. Brooke and the umbrella were safely out of the house.

"Brooke? That boy's tutor? Ah! I understand now. I know all about

it. Jo blundered into a wrong message in one of your Father's letters,

and I made her tell me. You haven't gone and accepted him, child?"

cried Aunt March, looking scandalized.

"Hush! He'll hear. Shan't I call Mother?" said Meg, much troubled.

"Not yet. I've something to say to you, and I must free my mind at

once. Tell me, do you mean to marry this Cook? If you do, not one

penny of my money ever goes to you. Remember that, and be a sensible

girl," said the old lady impressively.

Now Aunt March possessed in perfection the art of rousing the spirit of

opposition in the gentlest people, and enjoyed doing it. The best of

us have a spice of perversity in us, especially when we are young and

in love. If Aunt March had begged Meg to accept John Brooke, she would

probably have declared she couldn't think of it, but as she was

preemptorily ordered not to like him, she immediately made up her mind

that she would. Inclination as well as perversity made the decision

easy, and being already much excited, Meg opposed the old lady with

unusual spirit.

"I shall marry whom I please, Aunt March, and you can leave your money

to anyone you like," she said, nodding her head with a resolute air.

"Highty-tighty! Is that the way you take my advice, Miss? You'll be

sorry for it by-and-by, when you've tried love in a cottage and found

it a failure."

"It can't be a worse one than some people find in big houses," retorted

Meg.

Aunt March put on her glasses and took a look at the girl, for she did

not know her in this new mood. Meg hardly knew herself, she felt so

brave and independent, so glad to defend John and assert her right to

love him, if she liked. Aunt March saw that she had begun wrong, and

after a little pause, made a fresh start, saying as mildly as she

could, "Now, Meg, my dear, be reasonable and take my advice. I mean it

kindly, and don't want you to spoil your whole life by making a mistake

at the beginning. You ought to marry well and help your family. It's

your duty to make a rich match and it ought to be impressed upon you."

"Father and Mother don't think so. They like John though he is poor."

"Your parents, my dear, have no more worldly wisdom than a pair of

babies."

"I'm glad of it," cried Meg stoutly.

Aunt March took no notice, but went on with her lecture. "This Rook is

poor and hasn't got any rich relations, has he?"

"No, but he has many warm friends."

"You can't live on friends, try it and see how cool they'll grow. He

hasn't any business, has he?"

"Not yet. Mr. Laurence is going to help him."

"That won't last long. James Laurence is a crotchety old fellow and

not to be depended on. So you intend to marry a man without money,

position, or business, and go on working harder than you do now, when

you might be comfortable all your days by minding me and doing better?

I thought you had more sense, Meg."

"I couldn't do better if I waited half my life! John is good and wise,

he's got heaps of talent, he's willing to work and sure to get on, he's

so energetic and brave. Everyone likes and respects him, and I'm proud

to think he cares for me, though I'm so poor and young and silly," said

Meg, looking prettier than ever in her earnestness.

"He knows you have got rich relations, child. That's the secret of his

liking, I suspect."

"Aunt March, how dare you say such a thing? John is above such

meanness, and I won't listen to you a minute if you talk so," cried Meg

indignantly, forgetting everything but the injustice of the old lady's

suspicions. "My John wouldn't marry for money, any more than I would.

We are willing to work and we mean to wait. I'm not afraid of being

poor, for I've been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him

because he loves me, and I..."

Meg stopped there, remembering all of a sudden that she hadn't made up

her mind, that she had told 'her John' to go away, and that he might be

overhearing her inconsistent remarks.

Aunt March was very angry, for she had set her heart on having her

pretty niece make a fine match, and something in the girl's happy young

face made the lonely old woman feel both sad and sour.

"Well, I wash my hands of the whole affair! You are a willful child,

and you've lost more than you know by this piece of folly. No, I won't

stop. I'm disappointed in you, and haven't spirits to see your father

now. Don't expect anything from me when you are married. Your Mr.

Brooke's friends must take care of you. I'm done with you forever."

And slamming the door in Meg's face, Aunt March drove off in high

dudgeon. She seemed to take all the girl's courage with her, for when

left alone, Meg stood for a moment, undecided whether to laugh or cry.

Before she could make up her mind, she was taken possession of by Mr.

Brooke, who said all in one breath, "I couldn't help hearing, Meg.

Thank you for defending me, and Aunt March for proving that you do care

for me a little bit."

"I didn't know how much till she abused you," began Meg.

"And I needn't go away, but may stay and be happy, may I, dear?"

Here was another fine chance to make the crushing speech and the

stately exit, but Meg never thought of doing either, and disgraced

herself forever in Jo's eyes by meekly whispering, "Yes, John," and

hiding her face on Mr. Brooke's waistcoat.

Fifteen minutes after Aunt March's departure, Jo came softly

downstairs, paused an instant at the parlor door, and hearing no sound

within, nodded and smiled with a satisfied expression, saying to

herself, "She has seen him away as we planned, and that affair is

settled. I'll go and hear the fun, and have a good laugh over it."

But poor Jo never got her laugh, for she was transfixed upon the

threshold by a spectacle which held her there, staring with her mouth

nearly as wide open as her eyes. Going in to exult over a fallen enemy

and to praise a strong-minded sister for the banishment of an

objectionable lover, it certainly was a shock to behold the aforesaid

enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strongminded sister

enthroned upon his knee and wearing an expression of the most abject

submission. Jo gave a sort of gasp, as if a cold shower bath had

suddenly fallen upon her, for such an unexpected turning of the tables

actually took her breath away. At the odd sound the lovers turned and

saw her. Meg jumped up, looking both proud and shy, but 'that man', as

Jo called him, actually laughed and said coolly, as he kissed the

astonished newcomer, "Sister Jo, congratulate us!"

That was adding insult to injury, it was altogether too much, and

making some wild demonstration with her hands, Jo vanished without a

word. Rushing upstairs, she startled the invalids by exclaiming

tragically as she burst into the room, "Oh, do somebody go down quick!

John Brooke is acting dreadfully, and Meg likes it!"

Mr. and Mrs. March left the room with speed, and casting herself upon

the bed, Jo cried and scolded tempestuously as she told the awful news

to Beth and Amy. The little girls, however, considered it a most

agreeable and interesting event, and Jo got little comfort from them,

so she went up to her refuge in the garret, and confided her troubles

to the rats.

Nobody ever knew what went on in the parlor that afternoon, but a great

deal of talking was done, and quiet Mr. Brooke astonished his friends

by the eloquence and spirit with which he pleaded his suit, told his

plans, and persuaded them to arrange everything just as he wanted it.

The tea bell rang before he had finished describing the paradise which

he meant to earn for Meg, and he proudly took her in to supper, both

looking so happy that Jo hadn't the heart to be jealous or dismal. Amy

was very much impressed by John's devotion and Meg's dignity, Beth

beamed at them from a distance, while Mr. and Mrs. March surveyed the

young couple with such tender satisfaction that it was perfectly

evident Aunt March was right in calling them as 'unworldly as a pair of

babies'. No one ate much, but everyone looked very happy, and the old

room seemed to brighten up amazingly when the first romance of the

family began there.

"You can't say nothing pleasant ever happens now, can you, Meg?" said

Amy, trying to decide how she would group the lovers in a sketch she

was planning to make.

"No, I'm sure I can't. How much has happened since I said that! It

seems a year ago," answered Meg, who was in a blissful dream lifted far

above such common things as bread and butter.

"The joys come close upon the sorrows this time, and I rather think the

changes have begun," said Mrs. March. "In most families there comes,

now and then, a year full of events. This has been such a one, but it

ends well, after all."

"Hope the next will end better," muttered Jo, who found it very hard to

see Meg absorbed in a stranger before her face, for Jo loved a few

persons very dearly and dreaded to have their affection lost or

lessened in any way.

"I hope the third year from this will end better. I mean it shall, if

I live to work out my plans," said Mr. Brooke, smiling at Meg, as if

everything had become possible to him now.

"Doesn't it seem very long to wait?" asked Amy, who was in a hurry for

the wedding.

"I've got so much to learn before I shall be ready, it seems a short

time to me," answered Meg, with a sweet gravity in her face never seen

there before.

"You have only to wait, I am to do the work," said John beginning his

labors by picking up Meg's napkin, with an expression which caused Jo

to shake her head, and then say to herself with an air of relief as the

front door banged, "Here comes Laurie. Now we shall have some sensible

conversation."

But Jo was mistaken, for Laurie came prancing in, overflowing with good

spirits, bearing a great bridal-looking bouquet for 'Mrs. John Brooke',

and evidently laboring under the delusion that the whole affair had

been brought about by his excellent management.

"I knew Brooke would have it all his own way, he always does, for when

he makes up his mind to accomplish anything, it's done though the sky

falls," said Laurie, when he had presented his offering and his

congratulations.

"Much obliged for that recommendation. I take it as a good omen for

the future and invite you to my wedding on the spot," answered Mr.

Brooke, who felt at peace with all mankind, even his mischievous pupil.

"I'll come if I'm at the ends of the earth, for the sight of Jo's face

alone on that occasion would be worth a long journey. You don't look

festive, ma'am, what's the matter?" asked Laurie, following her into a

corner of the parlor, whither all had adjourned to greet Mr. Laurence.

"I don't approve of the match, but I've made up my mind to bear it, and

shall not say a word against it," said Jo solemnly. "You can't know

how hard it is for me to give up Meg," she continued with a little

quiver in her voice.

"You don't give her up. You only go halves," said Laurie consolingly.

"It can never be the same again. I've lost my dearest friend," sighed

Jo.

"You've got me, anyhow. I'm not good for much, I know, but I'll stand

by you, Jo, all the days of my life. Upon my word I will!" and Laurie

meant what he said.

"I know you will, and I'm ever so much obliged. You are always a great

comfort to me, Teddy," returned Jo, gratefully shaking hands.

"Well, now, don't be dismal, there's a good fellow. It's all right you

see. Meg is happy, Brooke will fly round and get settled immediately,

Grandpa will attend to him, and it will be very jolly to see Meg in her

own little house. We'll have capital times after she is gone, for I

shall be through college before long, and then we'll go abroad on some

nice trip or other. Wouldn't that console you?"

"I rather think it would, but there's no knowing what may happen in

three years," said Jo thoughtfully.

"That's true. Don't you wish you could take a look forward and see

where we shall all be then? I do," returned Laurie.

"I think not, for I might see something sad, and everyone looks so

happy now, I don't believe they could be much improved." And Jo's eyes

went slowly round the room, brightening as they looked, for the

prospect was a pleasant one.

Father and Mother sat together, quietly reliving the first chapter of

the romance which for them began some twenty years ago. Amy was drawing

the lovers, who sat apart in a beautiful world of their own, the light

of which touched their faces with a grace the little artist could not

copy. Beth lay on her sofa, talking cheerily with her old friend, who

held her little hand as if he felt that it possessed the power to lead

him along the peaceful way she walked. Jo lounged in her favorite low

seat, with the grave quiet look which best became her, and Laurie,

leaning on the back of her chair, his chin on a level with her curly

head, smiled with his friendliest aspect, and nodded at her in the long

glass which reflected them both.

So the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Whether it ever

rises again, depends upon the reception given the first act of the

domestic drama called \_Little Women\_.

LITTLE WOMEN PART 2

In order that we may start afresh and go to Meg's wedding...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GOSSIP

In order that we may start afresh and go to Meg's wedding with free

minds, it will be well to begin with a little gossip about the Marches.

And here let me premise that if any of the elders think there is too

much 'lovering' in the story, as I fear they may (I'm not afraid the

young folks will make that objection), I can only say with Mrs. March,

"What can you expect when I have four gay girls in the house, and a

dashing young neighbor over the way?"

The three years that have passed have brought but few changes to the

quiet family. The war is over, and Mr. March safely at home, busy with

his books and the small parish which found in him a minister by nature

as by grace, a quiet, studious man, rich in the wisdom that is better

than learning, the charity which calls all mankind 'brother', the piety

that blossoms into character, making it august and lovely.

These attributes, in spite of poverty and the strict integrity which

shut him out from the more worldly successes, attracted to him many

admirable persons, as naturally as sweet herbs draw bees, and as

naturally he gave them the honey into which fifty years of hard

experience had distilled no bitter drop. Earnest young men found the

gray-headed scholar as young at heart as they; thoughtful or troubled

women instinctively brought their doubts to him, sure of finding the

gentlest sympathy, the wisest counsel. Sinners told their sins to the

pure-hearted old man and were both rebuked and saved. Gifted men found

a companion in him. Ambitious men caught glimpses of nobler ambitions

than their own, and even worldlings confessed that his beliefs were

beautiful and true, although 'they wouldn't pay'.

To outsiders the five energetic women seemed to rule the house, and so

they did in many things, but the quiet scholar, sitting among his

books, was still the head of the family, the household conscience,

anchor, and comforter, for to him the busy, anxious women always turned

in troublous times, finding him, in the truest sense of those sacred

words, husband and father.

The girls gave their hearts into their mother's keeping, their souls

into their father's, and to both parents, who lived and labored so

faithfully for them, they gave a love that grew with their growth and

bound them tenderly together by the sweetest tie which blesses life and

outlives death.

Mrs. March is as brisk and cheery, though rather grayer, than when we

saw her last, and just now so absorbed in Meg's affairs that the

hospitals and homes still full of wounded 'boys' and soldiers' widows,

decidedly miss the motherly missionary's visits.

John Brooke did his duty manfully for a year, got wounded, was sent

home, and not allowed to return. He received no stars or bars, but he

deserved them, for he cheerfully risked all he had, and life and love

are very precious when both are in full bloom. Perfectly resigned to

his discharge, he devoted himself to getting well, preparing for

business, and earning a home for Meg. With the good sense and sturdy

independence that characterized him, he refused Mr. Laurence's more

generous offers, and accepted the place of bookkeeper, feeling better

satisfied to begin with an honestly earned salary than by running any

risks with borrowed money.

Meg had spent the time in working as well as waiting, growing womanly

in character, wise in housewifely arts, and prettier than ever, for

love is a great beautifier. She had her girlish ambitions and hopes,

and felt some disappointment at the humble way in which the new life

must begin. Ned Moffat had just married Sallie Gardiner, and Meg

couldn't help contrasting their fine house and carriage, many gifts,

and splendid outfit with her own, and secretly wishing she could have

the same. But somehow envy and discontent soon vanished when she

thought of all the patient love and labor John had put into the little

home awaiting her, and when they sat together in the twilight, talking

over their small plans, the future always grew so beautiful and bright

that she forgot Sallie's splendor and felt herself the richest,

happiest girl in Christendom.

Jo never went back to Aunt March, for the old lady took such a fancy to

Amy that she bribed her with the offer of drawing lessons from one of

the best teachers going, and for the sake of this advantage, Amy would

have served a far harder mistress. So she gave her mornings to duty,

her afternoons to pleasure, and prospered finely. Jo meantime devoted

herself to literature and Beth, who remained delicate long after the

fever was a thing of the past. Not an invalid exactly, but never again

the rosy, healthy creature she had been, yet always hopeful, happy, and

serene, and busy with the quiet duties she loved, everyone's friend,

and an angel in the house, long before those who loved her most had

learned to know it.

As long as \_The Spread Eagle\_ paid her a dollar a column for her

'rubbish', as she called it, Jo felt herself a woman of means, and spun

her little romances diligently. But great plans fermented in her busy

brain and ambitious mind, and the old tin kitchen in the garret held a

slowly increasing pile of blotted manuscript, which was one day to

place the name of March upon the roll of fame.

Laurie, having dutifully gone to college to please his grandfather, was

now getting through it in the easiest possible manner to please

himself. A universal favorite, thanks to money, manners, much talent,

and the kindest heart that ever got its owner into scrapes by trying to

get other people out of them, he stood in great danger of being

spoiled, and probably would have been, like many another promising boy,

if he had not possessed a talisman against evil in the memory of the

kind old man who was bound up in his success, the motherly friend who

watched over him as if he were her son, and last, but not least by any

means, the knowledge that four innocent girls loved, admired, and

believed in him with all their hearts.

Being only 'a glorious human boy', of course he frolicked and flirted,

grew dandified, aquatic, sentimental, or gymnastic, as college fashions

ordained, hazed and was hazed, talked slang, and more than once came

perilously near suspension and expulsion. But as high spirits and the

love of fun were the causes of these pranks, he always managed to save

himself by frank confession, honorable atonement, or the irresistible

power of persuasion which he possessed in perfection. In fact, he

rather prided himself on his narrow escapes, and liked to thrill the

girls with graphic accounts of his triumphs over wrathful tutors,

dignified professors, and vanquished enemies. The 'men of my class',

were heroes in the eyes of the girls, who never wearied of the exploits

of 'our fellows', and were frequently allowed to bask in the smiles of

these great creatures, when Laurie brought them home with him.

Amy especially enjoyed this high honor, and became quite a belle among

them, for her ladyship early felt and learned to use the gift of

fascination with which she was endowed. Meg was too much absorbed in

her private and particular John to care for any other lords of

creation, and Beth too shy to do more than peep at them and wonder how

Amy dared to order them about so, but Jo felt quite in her own element,

and found it very difficult to refrain from imitating the gentlemanly

attitudes, phrases, and feats, which seemed more natural to her than

the decorums prescribed for young ladies. They all liked Jo immensely,

but never fell in love with her, though very few escaped without paying

the tribute of a sentimental sigh or two at Amy's shrine. And speaking

of sentiment brings us very naturally to the 'Dovecote'.

That was the name of the little brown house Mr. Brooke had prepared for

Meg's first home. Laurie had christened it, saying it was highly

appropriate to the gentle lovers who 'went on together like a pair of

turtledoves, with first a bill and then a coo'. It was a tiny house,

with a little garden behind and a lawn about as big as a pocket

handkerchief in the front. Here Meg meant to have a fountain,

shrubbery, and a profusion of lovely flowers, though just at present

the fountain was represented by a weather-beaten urn, very like a

dilapidated slopbowl, the shrubbery consisted of several young larches,

undecided whether to live or die, and the profusion of flowers was

merely hinted by regiments of sticks to show where seeds were planted.

But inside, it was altogether charming, and the happy bride saw no

fault from garret to cellar. To be sure, the hall was so narrow it was

fortunate that they had no piano, for one never could have been got in

whole, the dining room was so small that six people were a tight fit,

and the kitchen stairs seemed built for the express purpose of

precipitating both servants and china pell-mell into the coalbin. But

once get used to these slight blemishes and nothing could be more

complete, for good sense and good taste had presided over the

furnishing, and the result was highly satisfactory. There were no

marble-topped tables, long mirrors, or lace curtains in the little

parlor, but simple furniture, plenty of books, a fine picture or two, a

stand of flowers in the bay window, and, scattered all about, the

pretty gifts which came from friendly hands and were the fairer for the

loving messages they brought.

I don't think the Parian Psyche Laurie gave lost any of its beauty

because John put up the bracket it stood upon, that any upholsterer

could have draped the plain muslin curtains more gracefully than Amy's

artistic hand, or that any store-room was ever better provided with

good wishes, merry words, and happy hopes than that in which Jo and her

mother put away Meg's few boxes, barrels, and bundles, and I am morally

certain that the spandy new kitchen never could have looked so cozy and

neat if Hannah had not arranged every pot and pan a dozen times over,

and laid the fire all ready for lighting the minute 'Mis. Brooke came

home'. I also doubt if any young matron ever began life with so rich a

supply of dusters, holders, and piece bags, for Beth made enough to

last till the silver wedding came round, and invented three different

kinds of dishcloths for the express service of the bridal china.

People who hire all these things done for them never know what they

lose, for the homeliest tasks get beautified if loving hands do them,

and Meg found so many proofs of this that everything in her small nest,

from the kitchen roller to the silver vase on her parlor table, was

eloquent of home love and tender forethought.

What happy times they had planning together, what solemn shopping

excursions, what funny mistakes they made, and what shouts of laughter

arose over Laurie's ridiculous bargains. In his love of jokes, this

young gentleman, though nearly through college, was a much of a boy as

ever. His last whim had been to bring with him on his weekly visits

some new, useful, and ingenious article for the young housekeeper. Now

a bag of remarkable clothespins, next, a wonderful nutmeg grater which

fell to pieces at the first trial, a knife cleaner that spoiled all the

knives, or a sweeper that picked the nap neatly off the carpet and left

the dirt, labor-saving soap that took the skin off one's hands,

infallible cements which stuck firmly to nothing but the fingers of the

deluded buyer, and every kind of tinware, from a toy savings bank for

odd pennies, to a wonderful boiler which would wash articles in its own

steam with every prospect of exploding in the process.

In vain Meg begged him to stop. John laughed at him, and Jo called him

'Mr. Toodles'. He was possessed with a mania for patronizing Yankee

ingenuity, and seeing his friends fitly furnished forth. So each week

beheld some fresh absurdity.

Everything was done at last, even to Amy's arranging different colored

soaps to match the different colored rooms, and Beth's setting the

table for the first meal.

"Are you satisfied? Does it seem like home, and do you feel as if you

should be happy here?" asked Mrs. March, as she and her daughter went

through the new kingdom arm in arm, for just then they seemed to cling

together more tenderly than ever.

"Yes, Mother, perfectly satisfied, thanks to you all, and so happy that

I can't talk about it," with a look that was far better than words.

"If she only had a servant or two it would be all right," said Amy,

coming out of the parlor, where she had been trying to decide whether

the bronze Mercury looked best on the whatnot or the mantlepiece.

"Mother and I have talked that over, and I have made up my mind to try

her way first. There will be so little to do that with Lotty to run my

errands and help me here and there, I shall only have enough work to

keep me from getting lazy or homesick," answered Meg tranquilly.

"Sallie Moffat has four," began Amy.

"If Meg had four, the house wouldn't hold them, and master and missis

would have to camp in the garden," broke in Jo, who, enveloped in a big

blue pinafore, was giving the last polish to the door handles.

"Sallie isn't a poor man's wife, and many maids are in keeping with her

fine establishment. Meg and John begin humbly, but I have a feeling

that there will be quite as much happiness in the little house as in

the big one. It's a great mistake for young girls like Meg to leave

themselves nothing to do but dress, give orders, and gossip. When I

was first married, I used to long for my new clothes to wear out or get

torn, so that I might have the pleasure of mending them, for I got

heartily sick of doing fancywork and tending my pocket handkerchief."

"Why didn't you go into the kitchen and make messes, as Sallie says she

does to amuse herself, though they never turn out well and the servants

laugh at her," said Meg.

"I did after a while, not to 'mess' but to learn of Hannah how things

should be done, that my servants need not laugh at me. It was play

then, but there came a time when I was truly grateful that I not only

possessed the will but the power to cook wholesome food for my little

girls, and help myself when I could no longer afford to hire help. You

begin at the other end, Meg, dear, but the lessons you learn now will

be of use to you by-and-by when John is a richer man, for the mistress

of a house, however splendid, should know how work ought to be done, if

she wishes to be well and honestly served."

"Yes, Mother, I'm sure of that," said Meg, listening respectfully to

the little lecture, for the best of women will hold forth upon the all

absorbing subject of house keeping. "Do you know I like this room most

of all in my baby house," added Meg, a minute after, as they went

upstairs and she looked into her well-stored linen closet.

Beth was there, laying the snowy piles smoothly on the shelves and

exulting over the goodly array. All three laughed as Meg spoke, for

that linen closet was a joke. You see, having said that if Meg married

'that Brooke' she shouldn't have a cent of her money, Aunt March was

rather in a quandary when time had appeased her wrath and made her

repent her vow. She never broke her word, and was much exercised in

her mind how to get round it, and at last devised a plan whereby she

could satisfy herself. Mrs. Carrol, Florence's mamma, was ordered to

buy, have made, and marked a generous supply of house and table linen,

and send it as her present, all of which was faithfully done, but the

secret leaked out, and was greatly enjoyed by the family, for Aunt

March tried to look utterly unconscious, and insisted that she could

give nothing but the old-fashioned pearls long promised to the first

bride.

"That's a housewifely taste which I am glad to see. I had a young

friend who set up housekeeping with six sheets, but she had finger

bowls for company and that satisfied her," said Mrs. March, patting the

damask tablecloths, with a truly feminine appreciation of their

fineness.

"I haven't a single finger bowl, but this is a setout that will last me

all my days, Hannah says." And Meg looked quite contented, as well she

might.

A tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, with a cropped head, a felt

basin of a hat, and a flyaway coat, came tramping down the road at a

great pace, walked over the low fence without stopping to open the

gate, straight up to Mrs. March, with both hands out and a hearty...

"Here I am, Mother! Yes, it's all right."

The last words were in answer to the look the elder lady gave him, a

kindly questioning look which the handsome eyes met so frankly that the

little ceremony closed, as usual, with a motherly kiss.

"For Mrs. John Brooke, with the maker's congratulations and

compliments. Bless you, Beth! What a refreshing spectacle you are,

Jo. Amy, you are getting altogether too handsome for a single lady."

As Laurie spoke, he delivered a brown paper parcel to Meg, pulled

Beth's hair ribbon, stared at Jo's big pinafore, and fell into an

attitude of mock rapture before Amy, then shook hands all round, and

everyone began to talk.

"Where is John?" asked Meg anxiously.

"Stopped to get the license for tomorrow, ma'am."

"Which side won the last match, Teddy?" inquired Jo, who persisted in

feeling an interest in manly sports despite her nineteen years.

"Ours, of course. Wish you'd been there to see."

"How is the lovely Miss Randal?" asked Amy with a significant smile.

"More cruel than ever. Don't you see how I'm pining away?" and Laurie

gave his broad chest a sounding slap and heaved a melodramatic sigh.

"What's the last joke? Undo the bundle and see, Meg," said Beth, eying

the knobby parcel with curiosity.

"It's a useful thing to have in the house in case of fire or thieves,"

observed Laurie, as a watchman's rattle appeared, amid the laughter of

the girls.

"Any time when John is away and you get frightened, Mrs. Meg, just

swing that out of the front window, and it will rouse the neighborhood

in a jiffy. Nice thing, isn't it?" and Laurie gave them a sample of

its powers that made them cover up their ears.

"There's gratitude for you! And speaking of gratitude reminds me to

mention that you may thank Hannah for saving your wedding cake from

destruction. I saw it going into your house as I came by, and if she

hadn't defended it manfully I'd have had a pick at it, for it looked

like a remarkably plummy one."

"I wonder if you will ever grow up, Laurie," said Meg in a matronly

tone.

"I'm doing my best, ma'am, but can't get much higher, I'm afraid, as

six feet is about all men can do in these degenerate days," responded

the young gentleman, whose head was about level with the little

chandelier.

"I suppose it would be profanation to eat anything in this

spick-and-span bower, so as I'm tremendously hungry, I propose an

adjournment," he added presently.

"Mother and I are going to wait for John. There are some last things

to settle," said Meg, bustling away.

"Beth and I are going over to Kitty Bryant's to get more flowers for

tomorrow," added Amy, tying a picturesque hat over her picturesque

curls, and enjoying the effect as much as anybody.

"Come, Jo, don't desert a fellow. I'm in such a state of exhaustion I

can't get home without help. Don't take off your apron, whatever you

do, it's peculiarly becoming," said Laurie, as Jo bestowed his especial

aversion in her capacious pocket and offered her arm to support his

feeble steps.

"Now, Teddy, I want to talk seriously to you about tomorrow," began Jo,

as they strolled away together. "You must promise to behave well, and

not cut up any pranks, and spoil our plans."

"Not a prank."

"And don't say funny things when we ought to be sober."

"I never do. You are the one for that."

"And I implore you not to look at me during the ceremony. I shall

certainly laugh if you do."

"You won't see me, you'll be crying so hard that the thick fog round

you will obscure the prospect."

"I never cry unless for some great affliction."

"Such as fellows going to college, hey?" cut in Laurie, with suggestive

laugh.

"Don't be a peacock. I only moaned a trifle to keep the girls company."

"Exactly. I say, Jo, how is Grandpa this week? Pretty amiable?"

"Very. Why, have you got into a scrape and want to know how he'll take

it?" asked Jo rather sharply.

"Now, Jo, do you think I'd look your mother in the face and say 'All

right', if it wasn't?" and Laurie stopped short, with an injured air.

"No, I don't."

"Then don't go and be suspicious. I only want some money," said

Laurie, walking on again, appeased by her hearty tone.

"You spend a great deal, Teddy."

"Bless you, I don't spend it, it spends itself somehow, and is gone

before I know it."

"You are so generous and kind-hearted that you let people borrow, and

can't say 'No' to anyone. We heard about Henshaw and all you did for

him. If you always spent money in that way, no one would blame you,"

said Jo warmly.

"Oh, he made a mountain out of a molehill. You wouldn't have me let

that fine fellow work himself to death just for want of a little help,

when he is worth a dozen of us lazy chaps, would you?"

"Of course not, but I don't see the use of your having seventeen

waistcoats, endless neckties, and a new hat every time you come home. I

thought you'd got over the dandy period, but every now and then it

breaks out in a new spot. Just now it's the fashion to be hideous, to

make your head look like a scrubbing brush, wear a strait jacket,

orange gloves, and clumping square-toed boots. If it was cheap

ugliness, I'd say nothing, but it costs as much as the other, and I

don't get any satisfaction out of it."

Laurie threw back his head, and laughed so heartily at this attack,

that the felt hat fell off, and Jo walked on it, which insult only

afforded him an opportunity for expatiating on the advantages of a

rough-and-ready costume, as he folded up the maltreated hat, and

stuffed it into his pocket.

"Don't lecture any more, there's a good soul! I have enough all

through the week, and like to enjoy myself when I come home. I'll get

myself up regardless of expense tomorrow and be a satisfaction to my

friends."

"I'll leave you in peace if you'll only let your hair grow. I'm not

aristocratic, but I do object to being seen with a person who looks

like a young prize fighter," observed Jo severely.

"This unassuming style promotes study, that's why we adopt it,"

returned Laurie, who certainly could not be accused of vanity, having

voluntarily sacrificed a handsome curly crop to the demand for

quarter-inch-long stubble.

"By the way, Jo, I think that little Parker is really getting desperate

about Amy. He talks of her constantly, writes poetry, and moons about

in a most suspicious manner. He'd better nip his little passion in the

bud, hadn't he?" added Laurie, in a confidential, elder brotherly tone,

after a minute's silence.

"Of course he had. We don't want any more marrying in this family for

years to come. Mercy on us, what are the children thinking of?" and Jo

looked as much scandalized as if Amy and little Parker were not yet in

their teens.

"It's a fast age, and I don't know what we are coming to, ma'am. You

are a mere infant, but you'll go next, Jo, and we'll be left

lamenting," said Laurie, shaking his head over the degeneracy of the

times.

"Don't be alarmed. I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will

want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a

family."

"You won't give anyone a chance," said Laurie, with a sidelong glance

and a little more color than before in his sunburned face. "You won't

show the soft side of your character, and if a fellow gets a peep at it

by accident and can't help showing that he likes it, you treat him as

Mrs. Gummidge did her sweetheart, throw cold water over him, and get so

thorny no one dares touch or look at you."

"I don't like that sort of thing. I'm too busy to be worried with

nonsense, and I think it's dreadful to break up families so. Now don't

say any more about it. Meg's wedding has turned all our heads, and we

talk of nothing but lovers and such absurdities. I don't wish to get

cross, so let's change the subject;" and Jo looked quite ready to

fling cold water on the slightest provocation.

Whatever his feelings might have been, Laurie found a vent for them in

a long low whistle and the fearful prediction as they parted at the

gate, "Mark my words, Jo, you'll go next."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE FIRST WEDDING

The June roses over the porch were awake bright and early on that

morning, rejoicing with all their hearts in the cloudless sunshine,

like friendly little neighbors, as they were. Quite flushed with

excitement were their ruddy faces, as they swung in the wind,

whispering to one another what they had seen, for some peeped in at the

dining room windows where the feast was spread, some climbed up to nod

and smile at the sisters as they dressed the bride, others waved a

welcome to those who came and went on various errands in garden, porch,

and hall, and all, from the rosiest full-blown flower to the palest

baby bud, offered their tribute of beauty and fragrance to the gentle

mistress who had loved and tended them so long.

Meg looked very like a rose herself, for all that was best and sweetest

in heart and soul seemed to bloom into her face that day, making it

fair and tender, with a charm more beautiful than beauty. Neither silk,

lace, nor orange flowers would she have. "I don't want a fashionable

wedding, but only those about me whom I love, and to them I wish to

look and be my familiar self."

So she made her wedding gown herself, sewing into it the tender hopes

and innocent romances of a girlish heart. Her sisters braided up her

pretty hair, and the only ornaments she wore were the lilies of the

valley, which 'her John' liked best of all the flowers that grew.

"You do look just like our own dear Meg, only so very sweet and lovely

that I should hug you if it wouldn't crumple your dress," cried Amy,

surveying her with delight when all was done.

"Then I am satisfied. But please hug and kiss me, everyone, and don't

mind my dress. I want a great many crumples of this sort put into it

today," and Meg opened her arms to her sisters, who clung about her

with April faces for a minute, feeling that the new love had not

changed the old.

"Now I'm going to tie John's cravat for him, and then to stay a few

minutes with Father quietly in the study," and Meg ran down to perform

these little ceremonies, and then to follow her mother wherever she

went, conscious that in spite of the smiles on the motherly face, there

was a secret sorrow hid in the motherly heart at the flight of the

first bird from the nest.

As the younger girls stand together, giving the last touches to their

simple toilet, it may be a good time to tell of a few changes which

three years have wrought in their appearance, for all are looking their

best just now.

Jo's angles are much softened, she has learned to carry herself with

ease, if not grace. The curly crop has lengthened into a thick coil,

more becoming to the small head atop of the tall figure. There is a

fresh color in her brown cheeks, a soft shine in her eyes, and only

gentle words fall from her sharp tongue today.

Beth has grown slender, pale, and more quiet than ever. The beautiful,

kind eyes are larger, and in them lies an expression that saddens one,

although it is not sad itself. It is the shadow of pain which touches

the young face with such pathetic patience, but Beth seldom complains

and always speaks hopefully of 'being better soon'.

Amy is with truth considered 'the flower of the family', for at sixteen

she has the air and bearing of a full-grown woman, not beautiful, but

possessed of that indescribable charm called grace. One saw it in the

lines of her figure, the make and motion of her hands, the flow of her

dress, the droop of her hair, unconscious yet harmonious, and as

attractive to many as beauty itself. Amy's nose still afflicted her,

for it never would grow Grecian, so did her mouth, being too wide, and

having a decided chin. These offending features gave character to her

whole face, but she never could see it, and consoled herself with her

wonderfully fair complexion, keen blue eyes, and curls more golden and

abundant than ever.

All three wore suits of thin silver gray (their best gowns for the

summer), with blush roses in hair and bosom, and all three looked just

what they were, fresh-faced, happy-hearted girls, pausing a moment in

their busy lives to read with wistful eyes the sweetest chapter in the

romance of womanhood.

There were to be no ceremonious performances, everything was to be as

natural and homelike as possible, so when Aunt March arrived, she was

scandalized to see the bride come running to welcome and lead her in,

to find the bridegroom fastening up a garland that had fallen down, and

to catch a glimpse of the paternal minister marching upstairs with a

grave countenance and a wine bottle under each arm.

"Upon my word, here's a state of things!" cried the old lady, taking

the seat of honor prepared for her, and settling the folds of her

lavender moire with a great rustle. "You oughtn't to be seen till the

last minute, child."

"I'm not a show, Aunty, and no one is coming to stare at me, to

criticize my dress, or count the cost of my luncheon. I'm too happy to

care what anyone says or thinks, and I'm going to have my little

wedding just as I like it. John, dear, here's your hammer." And away

went Meg to help 'that man' in his highly improper employment.

Mr. Brooke didn't even say, "Thank you," but as he stooped for the

unromantic tool, he kissed his little bride behind the folding door,

with a look that made Aunt March whisk out her pocket handkerchief with

a sudden dew in her sharp old eyes.

A crash, a cry, and a laugh from Laurie, accompanied by the indecorous

exclamation, "Jupiter Ammon! Jo's upset the cake again!" caused a

momentary flurry, which was hardly over when a flock of cousins

arrived, and 'the party came in', as Beth used to say when a child.

"Don't let that young giant come near me, he worries me worse than

mosquitoes," whispered the old lady to Amy, as the rooms filled and

Laurie's black head towered above the rest.

"He has promised to be very good today, and he can be perfectly elegant

if he likes," returned Amy, and gliding away to warn Hercules to beware

of the dragon, which warning caused him to haunt the old lady with a

devotion that nearly distracted her.

There was no bridal procession, but a sudden silence fell upon the room

as Mr. March and the young couple took their places under the green

arch. Mother and sisters gathered close, as if loath to give Meg up.

The fatherly voice broke more than once, which only seemed to make the

service more beautiful and solemn. The bridegroom's hand trembled

visibly, and no one heard his replies. But Meg looked straight up in

her husband's eyes, and said, "I will!" with such tender trust in her

own face and voice that her mother's heart rejoiced and Aunt March

sniffed audibly.

Jo did not cry, though she was very near it once, and was only saved

from a demonstration by the consciousness that Laurie was staring

fixedly at her, with a comical mixture of merriment and emotion in his

wicked black eyes. Beth kept her face hidden on her mother's shoulder,

but Amy stood like a graceful statue, with a most becoming ray of

sunshine touching her white forehead and the flower in her hair.

It wasn't at all the thing, I'm afraid, but the minute she was fairly

married, Meg cried, "The first kiss for Marmee!" and turning, gave it

with her heart on her lips. During the next fifteen minutes she looked

more like a rose than ever, for everyone availed themselves of their

privileges to the fullest extent, from Mr. Laurence to old Hannah, who,

adorned with a headdress fearfully and wonderfully made, fell upon her

in the hall, crying with a sob and a chuckle, "Bless you, deary, a

hundred times! The cake ain't hurt a mite, and everything looks

lovely."

Everybody cleared up after that, and said something brilliant, or tried

to, which did just as well, for laughter is ready when hearts are

light. There was no display of gifts, for they were already in the

little house, nor was there an elaborate breakfast, but a plentiful

lunch of cake and fruit, dressed with flowers. Mr. Laurence and Aunt

March shrugged and smiled at one another when water, lemonade, and

coffee were found to be to only sorts of nectar which the three Hebes

carried round. No one said anything, till Laurie, who insisted on

serving the bride, appeared before her, with a loaded salver in his

hand and a puzzled expression on his face.

"Has Jo smashed all the bottles by accident?" he whispered, "or am I

merely laboring under a delusion that I saw some lying about loose this

morning?"

"No, your grandfather kindly offered us his best, and Aunt March

actually sent some, but Father put away a little for Beth, and

dispatched the rest to the Soldier's Home. You know he thinks that

wine should be used only in illness, and Mother says that neither she

nor her daughters will ever offer it to any young man under her roof."

Meg spoke seriously and expected to see Laurie frown or laugh, but he

did neither, for after a quick look at her, he said, in his impetuous

way, "I like that! For I've seen enough harm done to wish other women

would think as you do."

"You are not made wise by experience, I hope?" and there was an anxious

accent in Meg's voice.

"No. I give you my word for it. Don't think too well of me, either,

this is not one of my temptations. Being brought up where wine is as

common as water and almost as harmless, I don't care for it, but when a

pretty girl offers it, one doesn't like to refuse, you see."

"But you will, for the sake of others, if not for your own. Come,

Laurie, promise, and give me one more reason to call this the happiest

day of my life."

A demand so sudden and so serious made the young man hesitate a moment,

for ridicule is often harder to bear than self-denial. Meg knew that if

he gave the promise he would keep it at all costs, and feeling her

power, used it as a woman may for her friend's good. She did not speak,

but she looked up at him with a face made very eloquent by happiness,

and a smile which said, "No one can refuse me anything today."

Laurie certainly could not, and with an answering smile, he gave her

his hand, saying heartily, "I promise, Mrs. Brooke!"

"I thank you, very, very much."

"And I drink 'long life to your resolution', Teddy," cried Jo,

baptizing him with a splash of lemonade, as she waved her glass and

beamed approvingly upon him.

So the toast was drunk, the pledge made and loyally kept in spite of

many temptations, for with instinctive wisdom, the girls seized a happy

moment to do their friend a service, for which he thanked them all his

life.

After lunch, people strolled about, by twos and threes, through the

house and garden, enjoying the sunshine without and within. Meg and

John happened to be standing together in the middle of the grass plot,

when Laurie was seized with an inspiration which put the finishing

touch to this unfashionable wedding.

"All the married people take hands and dance round the new-made husband

and wife, as the Germans do, while we bachelors and spinsters prance in

couples outside!" cried Laurie, promenading down the path with Amy,

with such infectious spirit and skill that everyone else followed their

example without a murmur. Mr. and Mrs. March, Aunt and Uncle Carrol

began it, others rapidly joined in, even Sallie Moffat, after a

moment's hesitation, threw her train over her arm and whisked Ned into

the ring. But the crowning joke was Mr. Laurence and Aunt March, for

when the stately old gentleman chasseed solemnly up to the old lady,

she just tucked her cane under her arm, and hopped briskly away to join

hands with the rest and dance about the bridal pair, while the young

folks pervaded the garden like butterflies on a midsummer day.

Want of breath brought the impromptu ball to a close, and then people

began to go.

"I wish you well, my dear, I heartily wish you well, but I think you'll

be sorry for it," said Aunt March to Meg, adding to the bridegroom, as

he led her to the carriage, "You've got a treasure, young man, see that

you deserve it."

"That is the prettiest wedding I've been to for an age, Ned, and I

don't see why, for there wasn't a bit of style about it," observed Mrs.

Moffat to her husband, as they drove away.

"Laurie, my lad, if you ever want to indulge in this sort of thing, get

one of those little girls to help you, and I shall be perfectly

satisfied," said Mr. Laurence, settling himself in his easy chair to

rest after the excitement of the morning.

"I'll do my best to gratify you, Sir," was Laurie's unusually dutiful

reply, as he carefully unpinned the posy Jo had put in his buttonhole.

The little house was not far away, and the only bridal journey Meg had

was the quiet walk with John from the old home to the new. When she

came down, looking like a pretty Quakeress in her dove-colored suit and

straw bonnet tied with white, they all gathered about her to say

'good-by', as tenderly as if she had been going to make the grand tour.

"Don't feel that I am separated from you, Marmee dear, or that I love

you any the less for loving John so much," she said, clinging to her

mother, with full eyes for a moment. "I shall come every day, Father,

and expect to keep my old place in all your hearts, though I am

married. Beth is going to be with me a great deal, and the other girls

will drop in now and then to laugh at my housekeeping struggles. Thank

you all for my happy wedding day. Good-by, good-by!"

They stood watching her, with faces full of love and hope and tender

pride as she walked away, leaning on her husband's arm, with her hands

full of flowers and the June sunshine brightening her happy face--and

so Meg's married life began.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ARTISTIC ATTEMPTS

It takes people a long time to learn the difference between talent and

genius, especially ambitious young men and women. Amy was learning

this distinction through much tribulation, for mistaking enthusiasm for

inspiration, she attempted every branch of art with youthful audacity.

For a long time there was a lull in the 'mud-pie' business, and she

devoted herself to the finest pen-and-ink drawing, in which she showed

such taste and skill that her graceful handiwork proved both pleasant

and profitable. But over-strained eyes caused pen and ink to be laid

aside for a bold attempt at poker-sketching. While this attack lasted,

the family lived in constant fear of a conflagration, for the odor of

burning wood pervaded the house at all hours, smoke issued from attic

and shed with alarming frequency, red-hot pokers lay about

promiscuously, and Hannah never went to bed without a pail of water and

the dinner bell at her door in case of fire. Raphael's face was found

boldly executed on the underside of the moulding board, and Bacchus on

the head of a beer barrel. A chanting cherub adorned the cover of the

sugar bucket, and attempts to portray Romeo and Juliet supplied

kindling for some time.

From fire to oil was a natural transition for burned fingers, and Amy

fell to painting with undiminished ardor. An artist friend fitted her

out with his castoff palettes, brushes, and colors, and she daubed

away, producing pastoral and marine views such as were never seen on

land or sea. Her monstrosities in the way of cattle would have taken

prizes at an agricultural fair, and the perilous pitching of her

vessels would have produced seasickness in the most nautical observer,

if the utter disregard to all known rules of shipbuilding and rigging

had not convulsed him with laughter at the first glance. Swarthy boys

and dark-eyed Madonnas, staring at you from one corner of the studio,

suggested Murillo; oily brown shadows of faces with a lurid streak in

the wrong place, meant Rembrandt; buxom ladies and dropiscal infants,

Rubens; and Turner appeared in tempests of blue thunder, orange

lightning, brown rain, and purple clouds, with a tomato-colored splash

in the middle, which might be the sun or a bouy, a sailor's shirt or a

king's robe, as the spectator pleased.

Charcoal portraits came next, and the entire family hung in a row,

looking as wild and crocky as if just evoked from a coalbin. Softened

into crayon sketches, they did better, for the likenesses were good,

and Amy's hair, Jo's nose, Meg's mouth, and Laurie's eyes were

pronounced 'wonderfully fine'. A return to clay and plaster followed,

and ghostly casts of her acquaintances haunted corners of the house, or

tumbled off closet shelves onto people's heads. Children were enticed

in as models, till their incoherent accounts of her mysterious doings

caused Miss Amy to be regarded in the light of a young ogress. Her

efforts in this line, however, were brought to an abrupt close by an

untoward accident, which quenched her ardor. Other models failing her

for a time, she undertook to cast her own pretty foot, and the family

were one day alarmed by an unearthly bumping and screaming and running

to the rescue, found the young enthusiast hopping wildly about the shed

with her foot held fast in a pan full of plaster, which had hardened

with unexpected rapidity. With much difficulty and some danger she was

dug out, for Jo was so overcome with laughter while she excavated that

her knife went too far, cut the poor foot, and left a lasting memorial

of one artistic attempt, at least.

After this Amy subsided, till a mania for sketching from nature set her

to haunting river, field, and wood, for picturesque studies, and

sighing for ruins to copy. She caught endless colds sitting on damp

grass to book 'a delicious bit', composed of a stone, a stump, one

mushroom, and a broken mullein stalk, or 'a heavenly mass of clouds',

that looked like a choice display of featherbeds when done. She

sacrificed her complexion floating on the river in the midsummer sun to

study light and shade, and got a wrinkle over her nose trying after

'points of sight', or whatever the squint-and-string performance is

called.

If 'genius is eternal patience', as Michelangelo affirms, Amy had some

claim to the divine attribute, for she persevered in spite of all

obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time

she should do something worthy to be called 'high art'.

She was learning, doing, and enjoying other things, meanwhile, for she

had resolved to be an attractive and accomplished woman, even if she

never became a great artist. Here she succeeded better, for she was

one of those happily created beings who please without effort, make

friends everywhere, and take life so gracefully and easily that less

fortunate souls are tempted to believe that such are born under a lucky

star. Everybody liked her, for among her good gifts was tact. She had

an instinctive sense of what was pleasing and proper, always said the

right thing to the right person, did just what suited the time and

place, and was so self-possessed that her sisters used to say, "If Amy

went to court without any rehearsal beforehand, she'd know exactly what

to do."

One of her weaknesses was a desire to move in 'our best society',

without being quite sure what the best really was. Money, position,

fashionable accomplishments, and elegant manners were most desirable

things in her eyes, and she liked to associate with those who possessed

them, often mistaking the false for the true, and admiring what was not

admirable. Never forgetting that by birth she was a gentlewoman, she

cultivated her aristocratic tastes and feelings, so that when the

opportunity came she might be ready to take the place from which

poverty now excluded her.

"My lady," as her friends called her, sincerely desired to be a genuine

lady, and was so at heart, but had yet to learn that money cannot buy

refinement of nature, that rank does not always confer nobility, and

that true breeding makes itself felt in spite of external drawbacks.

"I want to ask a favor of you, Mamma," Amy said, coming in with an

important air one day.

"Well, little girl, what is it?" replied her mother, in whose eyes the

stately young lady still remained 'the baby'.

"Our drawing class breaks up next week, and before the girls separate

for the summer, I want to ask them out here for a day. They are wild

to see the river, sketch the broken bridge, and copy some of the things

they admire in my book. They have been very kind to me in many ways,

and I am grateful, for they are all rich and I know I am poor, yet they

never made any difference."

"Why should they?" and Mrs. March put the question with what the girls

called her 'Maria Theresa air'.

"You know as well as I that it does make a difference with nearly

everyone, so don't ruffle up like a dear, motherly hen, when your

chickens get pecked by smarter birds. The ugly duckling turned out a

swan, you know." and Amy smiled without bitterness, for she possessed

a happy temper and hopeful spirit.

Mrs. March laughed, and smoothed down her maternal pride as she asked,

"Well, my swan, what is your plan?"

"I should like to ask the girls out to lunch next week, to take them

for a drive to the places they want to see, a row on the river,

perhaps, and make a little artistic fete for them."

"That looks feasible. What do you want for lunch? Cake, sandwiches,

fruit, and coffee will be all that is necessary, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, no! We must have cold tongue and chicken, French chocolate

and ice cream, besides. The girls are used to such things, and I want

my lunch to be proper and elegant, though I do work for my living."

"How many young ladies are there?" asked her mother, beginning to look

sober.

"Twelve or fourteen in the class, but I dare say they won't all come."

"Bless me, child, you will have to charter an omnibus to carry them

about."

"Why, Mother, how can you think of such a thing? Not more than six or

eight will probably come, so I shall hire a beach wagon and borrow Mr.

Laurence's cherry-bounce." (Hannah's pronunciation of char-a-banc.)

"All of this will be expensive, Amy."

"Not very. I've calculated the cost, and I'll pay for it myself."

"Don't you think, dear, that as these girls are used to such things,

and the best we can do will be nothing new, that some simpler plan

would be pleasanter to them, as a change if nothing more, and much

better for us than buying or borrowing what we don't need, and

attempting a style not in keeping with our circumstances?"

"If I can't have it as I like, I don't care to have it at all. I know

that I can carry it out perfectly well, if you and the girls will help

a little, and I don't see why I can't if I'm willing to pay for it,"

said Amy, with the decision which opposition was apt to change into

obstinacy.

Mrs. March knew that experience was an excellent teacher, and when it

was possible she left her children to learn alone the lessons which she

would gladly have made easier, if they had not objected to taking

advice as much as they did salts and senna.

"Very well, Amy, if your heart is set upon it, and you see your way

through without too great an outlay of money, time, and temper, I'll

say no more. Talk it over with the girls, and whichever way you

decide, I'll do my best to help you."

"Thanks, Mother, you are always so kind." and away went Amy to lay her

plan before her sisters.

Meg agreed at once, and promised her aid, gladly offering anything she

possessed, from her little house itself to her very best saltspoons.

But Jo frowned upon the whole project and would have nothing to do with

it at first.

"Why in the world should you spend your money, worry your family, and

turn the house upside down for a parcel of girls who don't care a

sixpence for you? I thought you had too much pride and sense to

truckle to any mortal woman just because she wears French boots and

rides in a coupe," said Jo, who, being called from the tragic climax of

her novel, was not in the best mood for social enterprises.

"I don't truckle, and I hate being patronized as much as you do!"

returned Amy indignantly, for the two still jangled when such questions

arose. "The girls do care for me, and I for them, and there's a great

deal of kindness and sense and talent among them, in spite of what you

call fashionable nonsense. You don't care to make people like you, to

go into good society, and cultivate your manners and tastes. I do, and

I mean to make the most of every chance that comes. You can go through

the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it

independence, if you like. That's not my way."

When Amy had whetted her tongue and freed her mind she usually got the

best of it, for she seldom failed to have common sense on her side,

while Jo carried her love of liberty and hate of conventionalities to

such an unlimited extent that she naturally found herself worsted in an

argument. Amy's definition of Jo's idea of independence was such a

good hit that both burst out laughing, and the discussion took a more

amiable turn. Much against her will, Jo at length consented to

sacrifice a day to Mrs. Grundy, and help her sister through what she

regarded as 'a nonsensical business'.

The invitations were sent, nearly all accepted, and the following

Monday was set apart for the grand event. Hannah was out of humor

because her week's work was deranged, and prophesied that "ef the

washin' and ironin' warn't done reg'lar, nothin' would go well

anywheres". This hitch in the mainspring of the domestic machinery had

a bad effect upon the whole concern, but Amy's motto was 'Nil

desperandum', and having made up her mind what to do, she proceeded to

do it in spite of all obstacles. To begin with, Hannah's cooking

didn't turn out well. The chicken was tough, the tongue too salty, and

the chocolate wouldn't froth properly. Then the cake and ice cost more

than Amy expected, so did the wagon, and various other expenses, which

seemed trifling at the outset, counted up rather alarmingly afterward.

Beth got a cold and took to her bed. Meg had an unusual number of

callers to keep her at home, and Jo was in such a divided state of mind

that her breakages, accidents, and mistakes were uncommonly numerous,

serious, and trying.

If it was not fair on Monday, the young ladies were to come on Tuesday,

an arrangement which aggravated Jo and Hannah to the last degree. On

Monday morning the weather was in that undecided state which is more

exasperating than a steady pour. It drizzled a little, shone a little,

blew a little, and didn't make up its mind till it was too late for

anyone else to make up theirs. Amy was up at dawn, hustling people out

of their beds and through their breakfasts, that the house might be got

in order. The parlor struck her as looking uncommonly shabby, but

without stopping to sigh for what she had not, she skillfully made the

best of what she had, arranging chairs over the worn places in the

carpet, covering stains on the walls with homemade statuary, which gave

an artistic air to the room, as did the lovely vases of flowers Jo

scattered about.

The lunch looked charming, and as she surveyed it, she sincerely hoped

it would taste well, and that the borrowed glass, china, and silver

would get safely home again. The carriages were promised, Meg and

Mother were all ready to do the honors, Beth was able to help Hannah

behind the scenes, Jo had engaged to be as lively and amiable as an

absent mind, and aching head, and a very decided disapproval of

everybody and everything would allow, and as she wearily dressed, Amy

cheered herself with anticipations of the happy moment when, lunch

safely over, she should drive away with her friends for an afternoon of

artistic delights, for the 'cherry bounce' and the broken bridge were

her strong points.

Then came the hours of suspense, during which she vibrated from parlor

to porch, while public opinion varied like the weathercock. A smart

shower at eleven had evidently quenched the enthusiasm of the young

ladies who were to arrive at twelve, for nobody came, and at two the

exhausted family sat down in a blaze of sunshine to consume the

perishable portions of the feast, that nothing might be lost.

"No doubt about the weather today, they will certainly come, so we must

fly round and be ready for them," said Amy, as the sun woke her next

morning. She spoke briskly, but in her secret soul she wished she had

said nothing about Tuesday, for her interest like her cake was getting

a little stale.

"I can't get any lobsters, so you will have to do without salad today,"

said Mr. March, coming in half an hour later, with an expression of

placid despair.

"Use the chicken then, the toughness won't matter in a salad," advised

his wife.

"Hannah left it on the kitchen table a minute, and the kittens got at

it. I'm very sorry, Amy," added Beth, who was still a patroness of

cats.

"Then I must have a lobster, for tongue alone won't do," said Amy

decidedly.

"Shall I rush into town and demand one?" asked Jo, with the magnanimity

of a martyr.

"You'd come bringing it home under your arm without any paper, just to

try me. I'll go myself," answered Amy, whose temper was beginning to

fail.

Shrouded in a thick veil and armed with a genteel traveling basket, she

departed, feeling that a cool drive would soothe her ruffled spirit and

fit her for the labors of the day. After some delay, the object of her

desire was procured, likewise a bottle of dressing to prevent further

loss of time at home, and off she drove again, well pleased with her

own forethought.

As the omnibus contained only one other passenger, a sleepy old lady,

Amy pocketed her veil and beguiled the tedium of the way by trying to

find out where all her money had gone to. So busy was she with her

card full of refractory figures that she did not observe a newcomer,

who entered without stopping the vehicle, till a masculine voice said,

"Good morning, Miss March," and, looking up, she beheld one of Laurie's

most elegant college friends. Fervently hoping that he would get out

before she did, Amy utterly ignored the basket at her feet, and

congratulating herself that she had on her new traveling dress,

returned the young man's greeting with her usual suavity and spirit.

They got on excellently, for Amy's chief care was soon set at rest by

learning that the gentleman would leave first, and she was chatting

away in a peculiarly lofty strain, when the old lady got out. In

stumbling to the door, she upset the basket, and--oh horror!--the

lobster, in all its vulgar size and brilliancy, was revealed to the

highborn eyes of a Tudor!

"By Jove, she's forgotten her dinner!" cried the unconscious youth,

poking the scarlet monster into its place with his cane, and preparing

to hand out the basket after the old lady.

"Please don't--it's--it's mine," murmured Amy, with a face nearly as

red as her fish.

"Oh, really, I beg pardon. It's an uncommonly fine one, isn't it?"

said Tudor, with great presence of mind, and an air of sober interest

that did credit to his breeding.

Amy recovered herself in a breath, set her basket boldly on the seat,

and said, laughing, "Don't you wish you were to have some of the salad

he's going to make, and to see the charming young ladies who are to eat

it?"

Now that was tact, for two of the ruling foibles of the masculine mind

were touched. The lobster was instantly surrounded by a halo of

pleasing reminiscences, and curiosity about 'the charming young ladies'

diverted his mind from the comical mishap.

"I suppose he'll laugh and joke over it with Laurie, but I shan't see

them, that's a comfort," thought Amy, as Tudor bowed and departed.

She did not mention this meeting at home (though she discovered that,

thanks to the upset, her new dress was much damaged by the rivulets of

dressing that meandered down the skirt), but went through with the

preparations which now seemed more irksome than before, and at twelve

o'clock all was ready again. Feeling that the neighbors were

interested in her movements, she wished to efface the memory of

yesterday's failure by a grand success today, so she ordered the

'cherry bounce', and drove away in state to meet and escort her guests

to the banquet.

"There's the rumble, they're coming! I'll go onto the porch and meet

them. It looks hospitable, and I want the poor child to have a good

time after all her trouble," said Mrs. March, suiting the action to the

word. But after one glance, she retired, with an indescribable

expression, for looking quite lost in the big carriage, sat Amy and one

young lady.

"Run, Beth, and help Hannah clear half the things off the table. It

will be too absurd to put a luncheon for twelve before a single girl,"

cried Jo, hurrying away to the lower regions, too excited to stop even

for a laugh.

In came Amy, quite calm and delightfully cordial to the one guest who

had kept her promise. The rest of the family, being of a dramatic

turn, played their parts equally well, and Miss Eliott found them a

most hilarious set, for it was impossible to control entirely the

merriment which possessed them. The remodeled lunch being gaily

partaken of, the studio and garden visited, and art discussed with

enthusiasm, Amy ordered a buggy (alas for the elegant cherry-bounce),

and drove her friend quietly about the neighborhood till sunset, when

'the party went out'.

As she came walking in, looking very tired but as composed as ever, she

observed that every vestige of the unfortunate fete had disappeared,

except a suspicious pucker about the corners of Jo's mouth.

"You've had a loverly afternoon for your drive, dear," said her mother,

as respectfully as if the whole twelve had come.

"Miss Eliott is a very sweet girl, and seemed to enjoy herself, I

thought," observed Beth, with unusual warmth.

"Could you spare me some of your cake? I really need some, I have so

much company, and I can't make such delicious stuff as yours," asked

Meg soberly.

"Take it all. I'm the only one here who likes sweet things, and it

will mold before I can dispose of it," answered Amy, thinking with a

sigh of the generous store she had laid in for such an end as this.

"It's a pity Laurie isn't here to help us," began Jo, as they sat down

to ice cream and salad for the second time in two days.

A warning look from her mother checked any further remarks, and the

whole family ate in heroic silence, till Mr. March mildly observed,

"salad was one of the favorite dishes of the ancients, and Evelyn..."

Here a general explosion of laughter cut short the 'history of salads',

to the great surprise of the learned gentleman.

"Bundle everything into a basket and send it to the Hummels. Germans

like messes. I'm sick of the sight of this, and there's no reason you

should all die of a surfeit because I've been a fool," cried Amy,

wiping her eyes.

"I thought I should have died when I saw you two girls rattling about

in the what-you-call-it, like two little kernels in a very big

nutshell, and Mother waiting in state to receive the throng," sighed

Jo, quite spent with laughter.

"I'm very sorry you were disappointed, dear, but we all did our best to

satisfy you," said Mrs. March, in a tone full of motherly regret.

"I am satisfied. I've done what I undertook, and it's not my fault

that it failed. I comfort myself with that," said Amy with a little

quiver in her voice. "I thank you all very much for helping me, and

I'll thank you still more if you won't allude to it for a month, at

least."

No one did for several months, but the word 'fete' always produced a

general smile, and Laurie's birthday gift to Amy was a tiny coral

lobster in the shape of a charm for her watch guard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LITERARY LESSONS

Fortune suddenly smiled upon Jo, and dropped a good luck penny in her

path. Not a golden penny, exactly, but I doubt if half a million would

have given more real happiness then did the little sum that came to her

in this wise.

Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her

scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex', as she expressed it, writing

away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was

finished she could find no peace. Her 'scribbling suit' consisted of a

black woolen pinafore on which she could wipe her pen at will, and a

cap of the same material, adorned with a cheerful red bow, into which

she bundled her hair when the decks were cleared for action. This cap

was a beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family, who during these

periods kept their distance, merely popping in their heads

semi-occasionally to ask, with interest, "Does genius burn, Jo?" They

did not always venture even to ask this question, but took an

observation of the cap, and judged accordingly. If this expressive

article of dress was drawn low upon the forehead, it was a sign that

hard work was going on, in exciting moments it was pushed rakishly

askew, and when despair seized the author it was plucked wholly off,

and cast upon the floor. At such times the intruder silently withdrew,

and not until the red bow was seen gaily erect upon the gifted brow,

did anyone dare address Jo.

She did not think herself a genius by any means, but when the writing

fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a

blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat

safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real

and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals

stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness

which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth

living, even if they bore no other fruit. The devine afflatus usually

lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from her 'vortex', hungry,

sleepy, cross, or despondent.

She was just recovering from one of these attacks when she was

prevailed upon to escort Miss Crocker to a lecture, and in return for

her virtue was rewarded with a new idea. It was a People's Course, the

lecture on the Pyramids, and Jo rather wondered at the choice of such a

subject for such an audience, but took it for granted that some great

social evil would be remedied or some great want supplied by unfolding

the glories of the Pharaohs to an audience whose thoughts were busy

with the price of coal and flour, and whose lives were spent in trying

to solve harder riddles than that of the Sphinx.

They were early, and while Miss Crocker set the heel of her stocking,

Jo amused herself by examining the faces of the people who occupied the

seat with them. On her left were two matrons, with massive foreheads

and bonnets to match, discussing Women's Rights and making tatting.

Beyond sat a pair of humble lovers, artlessly holding each other by the

hand, a somber spinster eating peppermints out of a paper bag, and an

old gentleman taking his preparatory nap behind a yellow bandanna. On

her right, her only neighbor was a studious looking lad absorbed in a

newspaper.

It was a pictorial sheet, and Jo examined the work of art nearest her,

idly wondering what fortuitous concatenation of circumstances needed

the melodramatic illustration of an Indian in full war costume,

tumbling over a precipice with a wolf at his throat, while two

infuriated young gentlemen, with unnaturally small feet and big eyes,

were stabbing each other close by, and a disheveled female was flying

away in the background with her mouth wide open. Pausing to turn a

page, the lad saw her looking and, with boyish good nature offered half

his paper, saying bluntly, "want to read it? That's a first-rate story."

Jo accepted it with a smile, for she had never outgrown her liking for

lads, and soon found herself involved in the usual labyrinth of love,

mystery, and murder, for the story belonged to that class of light

literature in which the passions have a holiday, and when the author's

invention fails, a grand catastrophe clears the stage of one half the

dramatis personae, leaving the other half to exult over their downfall.

"Prime, isn't it?" asked the boy, as her eye went down the last

paragraph of her portion.

"I think you and I could do as well as that if we tried," returned Jo,

amused at his admiration of the trash.

"I should think I was a pretty lucky chap if I could. She makes a good

living out of such stories, they say." and he pointed to the name of

Mrs. S.L.A.N.G. Northbury, under the title of the tale.

"Do you know her?" asked Jo, with sudden interest.

"No, but I read all her pieces, and I know a fellow who works in the

office where this paper is printed."

"Do you say she makes a good living out of stories like this?" and Jo

looked more respectfully at the agitated group and thickly sprinkled

exclamation points that adorned the page.

"Guess she does! She knows just what folks like, and gets paid well

for writing it."

Here the lecture began, but Jo heard very little of it, for while

Professor Sands was prosing away about Belzoni, Cheops, scarabei, and

hieroglyphics, she was covertly taking down the address of the paper,

and boldly resolving to try for the hundred-dollar prize offered in its

columns for a sensational story. By the time the lecture ended and the

audience awoke, she had built up a splendid fortune for herself (not

the first founded on paper), and was already deep in the concoction of

her story, being unable to decide whether the duel should come before

the elopement or after the murder.

She said nothing of her plan at home, but fell to work next day, much

to the disquiet of her mother, who always looked a little anxious when

'genius took to burning'. Jo had never tried this style before,

contenting herself with very mild romances for \_The Spread Eagle\_. Her

experience and miscellaneous reading were of service now, for they gave

her some idea of dramatic effect, and supplied plot, language, and

costumes. Her story was as full of desperation and despair as her

limited acquaintance with those uncomfortable emotions enabled her to

make it, and having located it in Lisbon, she wound up with an

earthquake, as a striking and appropriate denouement. The manuscript

was privately dispatched, accompanied by a note, modestly saying that

if the tale didn't get the prize, which the writer hardly dared expect,

she would be very glad to receive any sum it might be considered worth.

Six weeks is a long time to wait, and a still longer time for a girl to

keep a secret, but Jo did both, and was just beginning to give up all

hope of ever seeing her manuscript again, when a letter arrived which

almost took her breath away, for on opening it, a check for a hundred

dollars fell into her lap. For a minute she stared at it as if it had

been a snake, then she read her letter and began to cry. If the

amiable gentleman who wrote that kindly note could have known what

intense happiness he was giving a fellow creature, I think he would

devote his leisure hours, if he has any, to that amusement, for Jo

valued the letter more than the money, because it was encouraging, and

after years of effort it was so pleasant to find that she had learned

to do something, though it was only to write a sensation story.

A prouder young woman was seldom seen than she, when, having composed

herself, she electrified the family by appearing before them with the

letter in one hand, the check in the other, announcing that she had won

the prize. Of course there was a great jubilee, and when the story

came everyone read and praised it, though after her father had told her

that the language was good, the romance fresh and hearty, and the

tragedy quite thrilling, he shook his head, and said in his unworldly

way...

"You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind

the money."

"I think the money is the best part of it. What will you do with such

a fortune?" asked Amy, regarding the magic slip of paper with a

reverential eye.

"Send Beth and Mother to the seaside for a month or two," answered Jo

promptly.

To the seaside they went, after much discussion, and though Beth didn't

come home as plump and rosy as could be desired, she was much better,

while Mrs. March declared she felt ten years younger. So Jo was

satisfied with the investment of her prize money, and fell to work with

a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She

did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the

house, for by the magic of a pen, her 'rubbish' turned into comforts

for them all. The Duke's Daughter paid the butcher's bill, A Phantom

Hand put down a new carpet, and the Curse of the Coventrys proved the

blessing of the Marches in the way of groceries and gowns.

Wealth is certainly a most desirable thing, but poverty has its sunny

side, and one of the sweet uses of adversity is the genuine

satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand, and to the

inspiration of necessity, we owe half the wise, beautiful, and useful

blessings of the world. Jo enjoyed a taste of this satisfaction, and

ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that

she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny.

Little notice was taken of her stories, but they found a market, and

encouraged by this fact, she resolved to make a bold stroke for fame

and fortune. Having copied her novel for the fourth time, read it to

all her confidential friends, and submitted it with fear and trembling

to three publishers, she at last disposed of it, on condition that she

would cut it down one third, and omit all the parts which she

particularly admired.

"Now I must either bundle it back in to my tin kitchen to mold, pay for

printing it myself, or chop it up to suit purchasers and get what I can

for it. Fame is a very good thing to have in the house, but cash is

more convenient, so I wish to take the sense of the meeting on this

important subject," said Jo, calling a family council.

"Don't spoil your book, my girl, for there is more in it than you know,

and the idea is well worked out. Let it wait and ripen," was her

father's advice, and he practiced what he preached, having waited

patiently thirty years for fruit of his own to ripen, and being in no

haste to gather it even now when it was sweet and mellow.

"It seems to me that Jo will profit more by taking the trial than by

waiting," said Mrs. March. "Criticism is the best test of such work,

for it will show her both unsuspected merits and faults, and help her

to do better next time. We are too partial, but the praise and blame

of outsiders will prove useful, even if she gets but little money."

"Yes," said Jo, knitting her brows, "that's just it. I've been fussing

over the thing so long, I really don't know whether it's good, bad, or

indifferent. It will be a great help to have cool, impartial persons

take a look at it, and tell me what they think of it."

"I wouldn't leave a word out of it. You'll spoil it if you do, for the

interest of the story is more in the minds than in the actions of the

people, and it will be all a muddle if you don't explain as you go on,"

said Meg, who firmly believed that this book was the most remarkable

novel ever written.

"But Mr. Allen says, 'Leave out the explanations, make it brief and

dramatic, and let the characters tell the story'," interrupted Jo,

turning to the publisher's note.

"Do as he tells you. He knows what will sell, and we don't. Make a

good, popular book, and get as much money as you can. By-and-by, when

you've got a name, you can afford to digress, and have philosophical

and metaphysical people in your novels," said Amy, who took a strictly

practical view of the subject.

"Well," said Jo, laughing, "if my people are 'philosophical and

metaphysical', it isn't my fault, for I know nothing about such things,

except what I hear father say, sometimes. If I've got some of his wise

ideas jumbled up with my romance, so much the better for me. Now,

Beth, what do you say?"

"I should so like to see it printed soon," was all Beth said, and

smiled in saying it. But there was an unconscious emphasis on the last

word, and a wistful look in the eyes that never lost their childlike

candor, which chilled Jo's heart for a minute with a forboding fear,

and decided her to make her little venture 'soon'.

So, with Spartan firmness, the young authoress laid her first-born on

her table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre. In the hope of

pleasing everyone, she took everyone's advice, and like the old man and

his donkey in the fable suited nobody.

Her father liked the metaphysical streak which had unconsciously got

into it, so that was allowed to remain though she had her doubts about

it. Her mother thought that there was a trifle too much description.

Out, therefore it came, and with it many necessary links in the story.

Meg admired the tragedy, so Jo piled up the agony to suit her, while

Amy objected to the fun, and, with the best intentions in life, Jo

quenched the spritly scenes which relieved the somber character of the

story. Then, to complicate the ruin, she cut it down one third, and

confidingly sent the poor little romance, like a picked robin, out into

the big, busy world to try its fate.

Well, it was printed, and she got three hundred dollars for it,

likewise plenty of praise and blame, both so much greater than she

expected that she was thrown into a state of bewilderment from which it

took her some time to recover.

"You said, Mother, that criticism would help me. But how can it, when

it's so contradictory that I don't know whether I've written a

promising book or broken all the ten commandments?" cried poor Jo,

turning over a heap of notices, the perusal of which filled her with

pride and joy one minute, wrath and dismay the next. "This man says,

'An exquisite book, full of truth, beauty, and earnestness.' 'All is

sweet, pure, and healthy.'" continued the perplexed authoress. "The

next, 'The theory of the book is bad, full of morbid fancies,

spiritualistic ideas, and unnatural characters.' Now, as I had no

theory of any kind, don't believe in Spiritualism, and copied my

characters from life, I don't see how this critic can be right.

Another says, 'It's one of the best American novels which has appeared

for years.' (I know better than that), and the next asserts that

'Though it is original, and written with great force and feeling, it is

a dangerous book.' 'Tisn't! Some make fun of it, some overpraise, and

nearly all insist that I had a deep theory to expound, when I only

wrote it for the pleasure and the money. I wish I'd printed the whole

or not at all, for I do hate to be so misjudged."

Her family and friends administered comfort and commendation liberally.

Yet it was a hard time for sensitive, high-spirited Jo, who meant so

well and had apparently done so ill. But it did her good, for those

whose opinion had real value gave her the criticism which is an

author's best education, and when the first soreness was over, she

could laugh at her poor little book, yet believe in it still, and feel

herself the wiser and stronger for the buffeting she had received.

"Not being a genius, like Keats, it won't kill me," she said stoutly,

"and I've got the joke on my side, after all, for the parts that were

taken straight out of real life are denounced as impossible and absurd,

and the scenes that I made up out of my own silly head are pronounced

'charmingly natural, tender, and true'. So I'll comfort myself with

that, and when I'm ready, I'll up again and take another."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DOMESTIC EXPERIENCES

Like most other young matrons, Meg began her married life with the

determination to be a model housekeeper. John should find home a

paradise, he should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously

every day, and never know the loss of a button. She brought so much

love, energy, and cheerfulness to the work that she could not but

succeed, in spite of some obstacles. Her paradise was not a tranquil

one, for the little woman fussed, was over-anxious to please, and

bustled about like a true Martha, cumbered with many cares. She was

too tired, sometimes, even to smile, John grew dyspeptic after a course

of dainty dishes and ungratefully demanded plain fare. As for buttons,

she soon learned to wonder where they went, to shake her head over the

carelessness of men, and to threaten to make him sew them on himself,

and see if his work would stand impatient and clumsy fingers any better

than hers.

They were very happy, even after they discovered that they couldn't

live on love alone. John did not find Meg's beauty diminished, though

she beamed at him from behind the familiar coffee pot. Nor did Meg

miss any of the romance from the daily parting, when her husband

followed up his kiss with the tender inquiry, "Shall I send some veal

or mutton for dinner, darling?" The little house ceased to be a

glorified bower, but it became a home, and the young couple soon felt

that it was a change for the better. At first they played keep-house,

and frolicked over it like children. Then John took steadily to

business, feeling the cares of the head of a family upon his shoulders,

and Meg laid by her cambric wrappers, put on a big apron, and fell to

work, as before said, with more energy than discretion.

While the cooking mania lasted she went through Mrs. Cornelius's

Receipt Book as if it were a mathematical exercise, working out the

problems with patience and care. Sometimes her family were invited in

to help eat up a too bounteous feast of successes, or Lotty would be

privately dispatched with a batch of failures, which were to be

concealed from all eyes in the convenient stomachs of the little

Hummels. An evening with John over the account books usually produced

a temporary lull in the culinary enthusiasm, and a frugal fit would

ensue, during which the poor man was put through a course of bread

pudding, hash, and warmed-over coffee, which tried his soul, although

he bore it with praiseworthy fortitude. Before the golden mean was

found, however, Meg added to her domestic possessions what young

couples seldom get on long without, a family jar.

Fired a with housewifely wish to see her storeroom stocked with

homemade preserves, she undertook to put up her own currant jelly. John

was requested to order home a dozen or so of little pots and an extra

quantity of sugar, for their own currants were ripe and were to be

attended to at once. As John firmly believed that 'my wife' was equal

to anything, and took a natural pride in her skill, he resolved that

she should be gratified, and their only crop of fruit laid by in a most

pleasing form for winter use. Home came four dozen delightful little

pots, half a barrel of sugar, and a small boy to pick the currants for

her. With her pretty hair tucked into a little cap, arms bared to the

elbow, and a checked apron which had a coquettish look in spite of the

bib, the young housewife fell to work, feeling no doubts about her

success, for hadn't she seen Hannah do it hundreds of times? The array

of pots rather amazed her at first, but John was so fond of jelly, and

the nice little jars would look so well on the top shelf, that Meg

resolved to fill them all, and spent a long day picking, boiling,

straining, and fussing over her jelly. She did her best, she asked

advice of Mrs. Cornelius, she racked her brain to remember what Hannah

did that she left undone, she reboiled, resugared, and restrained, but

that dreadful stuff wouldn't 'jell'.

She longed to run home, bib and all, and ask Mother to lend her a hand,

but John and she had agreed that they would never annoy anyone with

their private worries, experiments, or quarrels. They had laughed over

that last word as if the idea it suggested was a most preposterous one,

but they had held to their resolve, and whenever they could get on

without help they did so, and no one interfered, for Mrs. March had

advised the plan. So Meg wrestled alone with the refractory sweetmeats

all that hot summer day, and at five o'clock sat down in her

topsy-turvey kitchen, wrung her bedaubed hands, lifted up her voice and

wept.

Now, in the first flush of the new life, she had often said, "My

husband shall always feel free to bring a friend home whenever he

likes. I shall always be prepared. There shall be no flurry, no

scolding, no discomfort, but a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good

dinner. John, dear, never stop to ask my leave, invite whom you

please, and be sure of a welcome from me."

How charming that was, to be sure! John quite glowed with pride to

hear her say it, and felt what a blessed thing it was to have a

superior wife. But, although they had had company from time to time,

it never happened to be unexpected, and Meg had never had an

opportunity to distinguish herself till now. It always happens so in

this vale of tears, there is an inevitability about such things which

we can only wonder at, deplore, and bear as we best can.

If John had not forgotten all about the jelly, it really would have

been unpardonable in him to choose that day, of all the days in the

year, to bring a friend home to dinner unexpectedly. Congratulating

himself that a handsome repast had been ordered that morning, feeling

sure that it would be ready to the minute, and indulging in pleasant

anticipations of the charming effect it would produce, when his pretty

wife came running out to meet him, he escorted his friend to his

mansion, with the irrepressible satisfaction of a young host and

husband.

It is a world of disappointments, as John discovered when he reached

the Dovecote. The front door usually stood hospitably open. Now it was

not only shut, but locked, and yesterday's mud still adorned the steps.

The parlor windows were closed and curtained, no picture of the pretty

wife sewing on the piazza, in white, with a distracting little bow in

her hair, or a bright-eyed hostess, smiling a shy welcome as she

greeted her guest. Nothing of the sort, for not a soul appeared but a

sanginary-looking boy asleep under the current bushes.

"I'm afraid something has happened. Step into the garden, Scott, while

I look up Mrs. Brooke," said John, alarmed at the silence and solitude.

Round the house he hurried, led by a pungent smell of burned sugar, and

Mr. Scott strolled after him, with a queer look on his face. He paused

discreetly at a distance when Brooke disappeared, but he could both see

and hear, and being a bachelor, enjoyed the prospect mightily.

In the kitchen reigned confusion and despair. One edition of jelly was

trickled from pot to pot, another lay upon the floor, and a third was

burning gaily on the stove. Lotty, with Teutonic phlegm, was calmly

eating bread and currant wine, for the jelly was still in a hopelessly

liquid state, while Mrs. Brooke, with her apron over her head, sat

sobbing dismally.

"My dearest girl, what is the matter?" cried John, rushing in, with

awful visions of scalded hands, sudden news of affliction, and secret

consternation at the thought of the guest in the garden.

"Oh, John, I am so tired and hot and cross and worried! I've been at

it till I'm all worn out. Do come and help me or I shall die!" and the

exhausted housewife cast herself upon his breast, giving him a sweet

welcome in every sense of the word, for her pinafore had been baptized

at the same time as the floor.

"What worries you dear? Has anything dreadful happened?" asked the

anxious John, tenderly kissing the crown of the little cap, which was

all askew.

"Yes," sobbed Meg despairingly.

"Tell me quick, then. Don't cry. I can bear anything better than

that. Out with it, love."

"The... The jelly won't jell and I don't know what to do!"

John Brooke laughed then as he never dared to laugh afterward, and the

derisive Scott smiled involuntarily as he heard the hearty peal, which

put the finishing stroke to poor Meg's woe.

"Is that all? Fling it out of the window, and don't bother any more

about it. I'll buy you quarts if you want it, but for heaven's sake

don't have hysterics, for I've brought Jack Scott home to dinner,

and..."

John got no further, for Meg cast him off, and clasped her hands with a

tragic gesture as she fell into a chair, exclaiming in a tone of

mingled indignation, reproach, and dismay...

"A man to dinner, and everything in a mess! John Brooke, how could you

do such a thing?"

"Hush, he's in the garden! I forgot the confounded jelly, but it can't

be helped now," said John, surveying the prospect with an anxious eye.

"You ought to have sent word, or told me this morning, and you ought to

have remembered how busy I was," continued Meg petulantly, for even

turtledoves will peck when ruffled.

"I didn't know it this morning, and there was no time to send word, for

I met him on the way out. I never thought of asking leave, when you

have always told me to do as I liked. I never tried it before, and

hang me if I ever do again!" added John, with an aggrieved air.

"I should hope not! Take him away at once. I can't see him, and there

isn't any dinner."

"Well, I like that! Where's the beef and vegetables I sent home, and

the pudding you promised?" cried John, rushing to the larder.

"I hadn't time to cook anything. I meant to dine at Mother's. I'm

sorry, but I was so busy," and Meg's tears began again.

John was a mild man, but he was human, and after a long day's work to

come home tired, hungry, and hopeful, to find a chaotic house, an empty

table, and a cross wife was not exactly conducive to repose of mind or

manner. He restrained himself however, and the little squall would

have blown over, but for one unlucky word.

"It's a scrape, I acknowledge, but if you will lend a hand, we'll pull

through and have a good time yet. Don't cry, dear, but just exert

yourself a bit, and fix us up something to eat. We're both as hungry

as hunters, so we shan't mind what it is. Give us the cold meat, and

bread and cheese. We won't ask for jelly."

He meant it to be a good-natured joke, but that one word sealed his

fate. Meg thought it was too cruel to hint about her sad failure, and

the last atom of patience vanished as he spoke.

"You must get yourself out of the scrape as you can. I'm too used up

to 'exert' myself for anyone. It's like a man to propose a bone and

vulgar bread and cheese for company. I won't have anything of the sort

in my house. Take that Scott up to Mother's, and tell him I'm away,

sick, dead, anything. I won't see him, and you two can laugh at me and

my jelly as much as you like. You won't have anything else here." and

having delivered her defiance all on one breath, Meg cast away her

pinafore and precipitately left the field to bemoan herself in her own

room.

What those two creatures did in her absence, she never knew, but Mr.

Scott was not taken 'up to Mother's', and when Meg descended, after

they had strolled away together, she found traces of a promiscuous

lunch which filled her with horror. Lotty reported that they had eaten

"a much, and greatly laughed, and the master bid her throw away all the

sweet stuff, and hide the pots."

Meg longed to go and tell Mother, but a sense of shame at her own

short-comings, of loyalty to John, "who might be cruel, but nobody

should know it," restrained her, and after a summary cleaning up, she

dressed herself prettily, and sat down to wait for John to come and be

forgiven.

Unfortunately, John didn't come, not seeing the matter in that light.

He had carried it off as a good joke with Scott, excused his little

wife as well as he could, and played the host so hospitably that his

friend enjoyed the impromptu dinner, and promised to come again, but

John was angry, though he did not show it, he felt that Meg had

deserted him in his hour of need. "It wasn't fair to tell a man to

bring folks home any time, with perfect freedom, and when he took you

at your word, to flame up and blame him, and leave him in the lurch, to

be laughed at or pitied. No, by George, it wasn't! And Meg must know

it."

He had fumed inwardly during the feast, but when the flurry was over

and he strolled home after seeing Scott off, a milder mood came over

him. "Poor little thing! It was hard upon her when she tried so

heartily to please me. She was wrong, of course, but then she was

young. I must be patient and teach her." He hoped she had not gone

home--he hated gossip and interference. For a minute he was ruffled

again at the mere thought of it, and then the fear that Meg would cry

herself sick softened his heart, and sent him on at a quicker pace,

resolving to be calm and kind, but firm, quite firm, and show her where

she had failed in her duty to her spouse.

Meg likewise resolved to be 'calm and kind, but firm', and show him his

duty. She longed to run to meet him, and beg pardon, and be kissed and

comforted, as she was sure of being, but, of course, she did nothing of

the sort, and when she saw John coming, began to hum quite naturally,

as she rocked and sewed, like a lady of leisure in her best parlor.

John was a little disappointed not to find a tender Niobe, but feeling

that his dignity demanded the first apology, he made none, only came

leisurely in and laid himself upon the sofa with the singularly

relevant remark, "We are going to have a new moon, my dear."

"I've no objection," was Meg's equally soothing remark. A few other

topics of general interest were introduced by Mr. Brooke and

wet-blanketed by Mrs. Brooke, and conversation languished. John went

to one window, unfolded his paper, and wrapped himself in it,

figuratively speaking. Meg went to the other window, and sewed as if

new rosettes for slippers were among the necessaries of life. Neither

spoke. Both looked quite 'calm and firm', and both felt desperately

uncomfortable.

"Oh, dear," thought Meg, "married life is very trying, and does need

infinite patience as well as love, as Mother says." The word 'Mother'

suggested other maternal counsels given long ago, and received with

unbelieving protests.

"John is a good man, but he has his faults, and you must learn to see

and bear with them, remembering your own. He is very decided, but

never will be obstinate, if you reason kindly, not oppose impatiently.

He is very accurate, and particular about the truth--a good trait,

though you call him 'fussy'. Never deceive him by look or word, Meg,

and he will give you the confidence you deserve, the support you need.

He has a temper, not like ours--one flash and then all over--but the

white, still anger that is seldom stirred, but once kindled is hard to

quench. Be careful, be very careful, not to wake his anger against

yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch

yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err, and guard against

the little piques, misunderstandings, and hasty words that often pave

the way for bitter sorrow and regret."

These words came back to Meg, as she sat sewing in the sunset,

especially the last. This was the first serious disagreement, her own

hasty speeches sounded both silly and unkind, as she recalled them, her

own anger looked childish now, and thoughts of poor John coming home to

such a scene quite melted her heart. She glanced at him with tears in

her eyes, but he did not see them. She put down her work and got up,

thinking, "I will be the first to say, 'Forgive me'", but he did not

seem to hear her. She went very slowly across the room, for pride was

hard to swallow, and stood by him, but he did not turn his head. For a

minute she felt as if she really couldn't do it, then came the thought,

"This is the beginning. I'll do my part, and have nothing to reproach

myself with," and stooping down, she softly kissed her husband on the

forehead. Of course that settled it. The penitent kiss was better than

a world of words, and John had her on his knee in a minute, saying

tenderly...

"It was too bad to laugh at the poor little jelly pots. Forgive me,

dear. I never will again!"

But he did, oh bless you, yes, hundreds of times, and so did Meg, both

declaring that it was the sweetest jelly they ever made, for family

peace was preserved in that little family jar.

After this, Meg had Mr. Scott to dinner by special invitation, and

served him up a pleasant feast without a cooked wife for the first

course, on which occasion she was so gay and gracious, and made

everything go off so charmingly, that Mr. Scott told John he was a

lucky fellow, and shook his head over the hardships of bachelorhood all

the way home.

In the autumn, new trials and experiences came to Meg. Sallie Moffat

renewed her friendship, was always running out for a dish of gossip at

the little house, or inviting 'that poor dear' to come in and spend the

day at the big house. It was pleasant, for in dull weather Meg often

felt lonely. All were busy at home, John absent till night, and

nothing to do but sew, or read, or potter about. So it naturally fell

out that Meg got into the way of gadding and gossiping with her friend.

Seeing Sallie's pretty things made her long for such, and pity herself

because she had not got them. Sallie was very kind, and often offered

her the coveted trifles, but Meg declined them, knowing that John

wouldn't like it, and then this foolish little woman went and did what

John disliked even worse.

She knew her husband's income, and she loved to feel that he trusted

her, not only with his happiness, but what some men seem to value

more--his money. She knew where it was, was free to take what she

liked, and all he asked was that she should keep account of every

penny, pay bills once a month, and remember that she was a poor man's

wife. Till now she had done well, been prudent and exact, kept her

little account books neatly, and showed them to him monthly without

fear. But that autumn the serpent got into Meg's paradise, and tempted

her like many a modern Eve, not with apples, but with dress. Meg

didn't like to be pitied and made to feel poor. It irritated her, but

she was ashamed to confess it, and now and then she tried to console

herself by buying something pretty, so that Sallie needn't think she

had to economize. She always felt wicked after it, for the pretty

things were seldom necessaries, but then they cost so little, it wasn't

worth worrying about, so the trifles increased unconsciously, and in

the shopping excursions she was no longer a passive looker-on.

But the trifles cost more than one would imagine, and when she cast up

her accounts at the end of the month the sum total rather scared her.

John was busy that month and left the bills to her, the next month he

was absent, but the third he had a grand quarterly settling up, and Meg

never forgot it. A few days before she had done a dreadful thing, and

it weighed upon her conscience. Sallie had been buying silks, and Meg

longed for a new one, just a handsome light one for parties, her black

silk was so common, and thin things for evening wear were only proper

for girls. Aunt March usually gave the sisters a present of

twenty-five dollars apiece at New Year's. That was only a month to

wait, and here was a lovely violet silk going at a bargain, and she had

the money, if she only dared to take it. John always said what was his

was hers, but would he think it right to spend not only the prospective

five-and-twenty, but another five-and-twenty out of the household fund?

That was the question. Sallie had urged her to do it, had offered to

lend the money, and with the best intentions in life had tempted Meg

beyond her strength. In an evil moment the shopman held up the lovely,

shimmering folds, and said, "A bargain, I assure, you, ma'am." She

answered, "I'll take it," and it was cut off and paid for, and Sallie

had exulted, and she had laughed as if it were a thing of no

consequence, and driven away, feeling as if she had stolen something,

and the police were after her.

When she got home, she tried to assuage the pangs of remorse by

spreading forth the lovely silk, but it looked less silvery now, didn't

become her, after all, and the words 'fifty dollars' seemed stamped

like a pattern down each breadth. She put it away, but it haunted her,

not delightfully as a new dress should, but dreadfully like the ghost

of a folly that was not easily laid. When John got out his books that

night, Meg's heart sank, and for the first time in her married life,

she was afraid of her husband. The kind, brown eyes looked as if they

could be stern, and though he was unusually merry, she fancied he had

found her out, but didn't mean to let her know it. The house bills

were all paid, the books all in order. John had praised her, and was

undoing the old pocketbook which they called the 'bank', when Meg,

knowing that it was quite empty, stopped his hand, saying nervously...

"You haven't seen my private expense book yet."

John never asked to see it, but she always insisted on his doing so,

and used to enjoy his masculine amazement at the queer things women

wanted, and made him guess what piping was, demand fiercely the meaning

of a hug-me-tight, or wonder how a little thing composed of three

rosebuds, a bit of velvet, and a pair of strings, could possibly be a

bonnet, and cost six dollars. That night he looked as if he would like

the fun of quizzing her figures and pretending to be horrified at her

extravagance, as he often did, being particularly proud of his prudent

wife.

The little book was brought slowly out and laid down before him. Meg

got behind his chair under pretense of smoothing the wrinkles out of

his tired forehead, and standing there, she said, with her panic

increasing with every word...

"John, dear, I'm ashamed to show you my book, for I've really been

dreadfully extravagant lately. I go about so much I must have things,

you know, and Sallie advised my getting it, so I did, and my New Year's

money will partly pay for it, but I was sorry after I had done it, for

I knew you'd think it wrong in me."

John laughed, and drew her round beside him, saying goodhumoredly,

"Don't go and hide. I won't beat you if you have got a pair of killing

boots. I'm rather proud of my wife's feet, and don't mind if she does

pay eight or nine dollars for her boots, if they are good ones."

That had been one of her last 'trifles', and John's eye had fallen on

it as he spoke. "Oh, what will he say when he comes to that awful

fifty dollars!" thought Meg, with a shiver.

"It's worse than boots, it's a silk dress," she said, with the calmness

of desperation, for she wanted the worst over.

"Well, dear, what is the 'dem'd total', as Mr. Mantalini says?"

That didn't sound like John, and she knew he was looking up at her with

the straightforward look that she had always been ready to meet and

answer with one as frank till now. She turned the page and her head at

the same time, pointing to the sum which would have been bad enough

without the fifty, but which was appalling to her with that added. For

a minute the room was very still, then John said slowly--but she could

feel it cost him an effort to express no displeasure--. . .

"Well, I don't know that fifty is much for a dress, with all the

furbelows and notions you have to have to finish it off these days."

"It isn't made or trimmed," sighed Meg, faintly, for a sudden

recollection of the cost still to be incurred quite overwhelmed her.

"Twenty-five yards of silk seems a good deal to cover one small woman,

but I've no doubt my wife will look as fine as Ned Moffat's when she

gets it on," said John dryly.

"I know you are angry, John, but I can't help it. I don't mean to

waste your money, and I didn't think those little things would count up

so. I can't resist them when I see Sallie buying all she wants, and

pitying me because I don't. I try to be contented, but it is hard, and

I'm tired of being poor."

The last words were spoken so low she thought he did not hear them, but

he did, and they wounded him deeply, for he had denied himself many

pleasures for Meg's sake. She could have bitten her tongue out the

minute she had said it, for John pushed the books away and got up,

saying with a little quiver in his voice, "I was afraid of this. I do

my best, Meg." If he had scolded her, or even shaken her, it would not

have broken her heart like those few words. She ran to him and held

him close, crying, with repentant tears, "Oh, John, my dear, kind,

hard-working boy. I didn't mean it! It was so wicked, so untrue and

ungrateful, how could I say it! Oh, how could I say it!"

He was very kind, forgave her readily, and did not utter one reproach,

but Meg knew that she had done and said a thing which would not be

forgotten soon, although he might never allude to it again. She had

promised to love him for better or worse, and then she, his wife, had

reproached him with his poverty, after spending his earnings

recklessly. It was dreadful, and the worst of it was John went on so

quietly afterward, just as if nothing had happened, except that he

stayed in town later, and worked at night when she had gone to cry

herself to sleep. A week of remorse nearly made Meg sick, and the

discovery that John had countermanded the order for his new greatcoat

reduced her to a state of despair which was pathetic to behold. He had

simply said, in answer to her surprised inquiries as to the change, "I

can't afford it, my dear."

Meg said no more, but a few minutes after he found her in the hall with

her face buried in the old greatcoat, crying as if her heart would

break.

They had a long talk that night, and Meg learned to love her husband

better for his poverty, because it seemed to have made a man of him,

given him the strength and courage to fight his own way, and taught him

a tender patience with which to bear and comfort the natural longings

and failures of those he loved.

Next day she put her pride in her pocket, went to Sallie, told the

truth, and asked her to buy the silk as a favor. The good-natured Mrs.

Moffat willingly did so, and had the delicacy not to make her a present

of it immediately afterward. Then Meg ordered home the greatcoat, and

when John arrived, she put it on, and asked him how he liked her new

silk gown. One can imagine what answer he made, how he received his

present, and what a blissful state of things ensued. John came home

early, Meg gadded no more, and that greatcoat was put on in the morning

by a very happy husband, and taken off at night by a most devoted

little wife. So the year rolled round, and at midsummer there came to

Meg a new experience, the deepest and tenderest of a woman's life.

Laurie came sneaking into the kitchen of the Dovecote one Saturday,

with an excited face, and was received with the clash of cymbals, for

Hannah clapped her hands with a saucepan in one and the cover in the

other.

"How's the little mamma? Where is everybody? Why didn't you tell me

before I came home?" began Laurie in a loud whisper.

"Happy as a queen, the dear! Every soul of 'em is upstairs a

worshipin'. We didn't want no hurrycanes round. Now you go into the

parlor, and I'll send 'em down to you," with which somewhat involved

reply Hannah vanished, chuckling ecstatically.

Presently Jo appeared, proudly bearing a flannel bundle laid forth upon

a large pillow. Jo's face was very sober, but her eyes twinkled, and

there was an odd sound in her voice of repressed emotion of some sort.

"Shut your eyes and hold out your arms," she said invitingly.

Laurie backed precipitately into a corner, and put his hands behind him

with an imploring gesture. "No, thank you. I'd rather not. I shall

drop it or smash it, as sure as fate."

"Then you shan't see your nevvy," said Jo decidedly, turning as if to

go.

"I will, I will! Only you must be responsible for damages." and

obeying orders, Laurie heroically shut his eyes while something was put

into his arms. A peal of laughter from Jo, Amy, Mrs. March, Hannah,

and John caused him to open them the next minute, to find himself

invested with two babies instead of one.

No wonder they laughed, for the expression of his face was droll enough

to convulse a Quaker, as he stood and stared wildly from the

unconscious innocents to the hilarious spectators with such dismay that

Jo sat down on the floor and screamed.

"Twins, by Jupiter!" was all he said for a minute, then turning to the

women with an appealing look that was comically piteous, he added,

"Take 'em quick, somebody! I'm going to laugh, and I shall drop 'em."

Jo rescued his babies, and marched up and down, with one on each arm,

as if already initiated into the mysteries of babytending, while Laurie

laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"It's the best joke of the season, isn't it? I wouldn't have told you,

for I set my heart on surprising you, and I flatter myself I've done

it," said Jo, when she got her breath.

"I never was more staggered in my life. Isn't it fun? Are they boys?

What are you going to name them? Let's have another look. Hold me up,

Jo, for upon my life it's one too many for me," returned Laurie,

regarding the infants with the air of a big, benevolent Newfoundland

looking at a pair of infantile kittens.

"Boy and girl. Aren't they beauties?" said the proud papa, beaming

upon the little red squirmers as if they were unfledged angels.

"Most remarkable children I ever saw. Which is which?" and Laurie bent

like a well-sweep to examine the prodigies.

"Amy put a blue ribbon on the boy and a pink on the girl, French

fashion, so you can always tell. Besides, one has blue eyes and one

brown. Kiss them, Uncle Teddy," said wicked Jo.

"I'm afraid they mightn't like it," began Laurie, with unusual timidity

in such matters.

"Of course they will, they are used to it now. Do it this minute,

sir!" commanded Jo, fearing he might propose a proxy.

Laurie screwed up his face and obeyed with a gingerly peck at each

little cheek that produced another laugh, and made the babies squeal.

"There, I knew they didn't like it! That's the boy, see him kick, he

hits out with his fists like a good one. Now then, young Brooke, pitch

into a man of your own size, will you?" cried Laurie, delighted with a

poke in the face from a tiny fist, flapping aimlessly about.

"He's to be named John Laurence, and the girl Margaret, after mother

and grandmother. We shall call her Daisey, so as not to have two Megs,

and I suppose the mannie will be Jack, unless we find a better name,"

said Amy, with aunt-like interest.

"Name him Demijohn, and call him Demi for short," said Laurie

"Daisy and Demi, just the thing! I knew Teddy would do it," cried Jo

clapping her hands.

Teddy certainly had done it that time, for the babies were 'Daisy' and

'Demi' to the end of the chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CALLS

"Come, Jo, it's time."

"For what?"

"You don't mean to say you have forgotten that you promised to make

half a dozen calls with me today?"

"I've done a good many rash and foolish things in my life, but I don't

think I ever was mad enough to say I'd make six calls in one day, when

a single one upsets me for a week."

"Yes, you did, it was a bargain between us. I was to finish the crayon

of Beth for you, and you were to go properly with me, and return our

neighbors' visits."

"If it was fair, that was in the bond, and I stand to the letter of my

bond, Shylock. There is a pile of clouds in the east, it's not fair,

and I don't go."

"Now, that's shirking. It's a lovely day, no prospect of rain, and you

pride yourself on keeping promises, so be honorable, come and do your

duty, and then be at peace for another six months."

At that minute Jo was particularly absorbed in dressmaking, for she was

mantua-maker general to the family, and took especial credit to herself

because she could use a needle as well as a pen. It was very provoking

to be arrested in the act of a first trying-on, and ordered out to make

calls in her best array on a warm July day. She hated calls of the

formal sort, and never made any till Amy compelled her with a bargain,

bribe, or promise. In the present instance there was no escape, and

having clashed her scissors rebelliously, while protesting that she

smelled thunder, she gave in, put away her work, and taking up her hat

and gloves with an air of resignation, told Amy the victim was ready.

"Jo March, you are perverse enough to provoke a saint! You don't

intend to make calls in that state, I hope," cried Amy, surveying her

with amazement.

"Why not? I'm neat and cool and comfortable, quite proper for a dusty

walk on a warm day. If people care more for my clothes than they do

for me, I don't wish to see them. You can dress for both, and be as

elegant as you please. It pays for you to be fine. It doesn't for me,

and furbelows only worry me."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Amy, "now she's in a contrary fit, and will drive me

distracted before I can get her properly ready. I'm sure it's no

pleasure to me to go today, but it's a debt we owe society, and there's

no one to pay it but you and me. I'll do anything for you, Jo, if

you'll only dress yourself nicely, and come and help me do the civil.

You can talk so well, look so aristocratic in your best things, and

behave so beautifully, if you try, that I'm proud of you. I'm afraid

to go alone, do come and take care of me."

"You're an artful little puss to flatter and wheedle your cross old

sister in that way. The idea of my being aristocratic and well-bred,

and your being afraid to go anywhere alone! I don't know which is the

most absurd. Well, I'll go if I must, and do my best. You shall be

commander of the expedition, and I'll obey blindly, will that satisfy

you?" said Jo, with a sudden change from perversity to lamblike

submission.

"You're a perfect cherub! Now put on all your best things, and I'll

tell you how to behave at each place, so that you will make a good

impression. I want people to like you, and they would if you'd only

try to be a little more agreeable. Do your hair the pretty way, and

put the pink rose in your bonnet. It's becoming, and you look too

sober in your plain suit. Take your light gloves and the embroidered

handkerchief. We'll stop at Meg's, and borrow her white sunshade, and

then you can have my dove-colored one."

While Amy dressed, she issued her orders, and Jo obeyed them, not

without entering her protest, however, for she sighed as she rustled

into her new organdie, frowned darkly at herself as she tied her bonnet

strings in an irreproachable bow, wrestled viciously with pins as she

put on her collar, wrinkled up her features generally as she shook out

the handkerchief, whose embroidery was as irritating to her nose as the

present mission was to her feelings, and when she had squeezed her

hands into tight gloves with three buttons and a tassel, as the last

touch of elegance, she turned to Amy with an imbecile expression of

countenance, saying meekly...

"I'm perfectly miserable, but if you consider me presentable, I die

happy."

"You're highly satisfactory. Turn slowly round, and let me get a

careful view." Jo revolved, and Amy gave a touch here and there, then

fell back, with her head on one side, observing graciously, "Yes,

you'll do. Your head is all I could ask, for that white bonnet with

the rose is quite ravishing. Hold back your shoulders, and carry your

hands easily, no matter if your gloves do pinch. There's one thing you

can do well, Jo, that is, wear a shawl. I can't, but it's very nice to

see you, and I'm so glad Aunt March gave you that lovely one. It's

simple, but handsome, and those folds over the arm are really artistic.

Is the point of my mantle in the middle, and have I looped my dress

evenly? I like to show my boots, for my feet are pretty, though my nose

isn't."

"You are a thing of beauty and a joy forever," said Jo, looking through

her hand with the air of a connoisseur at the blue feather against the

golden hair. "Am I to drag my best dress through the dust, or loop it

up, please, ma'am?"

"Hold it up when you walk, but drop it in the house. The sweeping

style suits you best, and you must learn to trail your skirts

gracefully. You haven't half buttoned one cuff, do it at once. You'll

never look finished if you are not careful about the little details,

for they make up the pleasing whole."

Jo sighed, and proceeded to burst the buttons off her glove, in doing

up her cuff, but at last both were ready, and sailed away, looking as

'pretty as picters', Hannah said, as she hung out of the upper window

to watch them.

"Now, Jo dear, the Chesters consider themselves very elegant people, so

I want you to put on your best deportment. Don't make any of your

abrupt remarks, or do anything odd, will you? Just be calm, cool, and

quiet, that's safe and ladylike, and you can easily do it for fifteen

minutes," said Amy, as they approached the first place, having borrowed

the white parasol and been inspected by Meg, with a baby on each arm.

"Let me see. 'Calm, cool, and quiet', yes, I think I can promise that.

I've played the part of a prim young lady on the stage, and I'll try it

off. My powers are great, as you shall see, so be easy in your mind,

my child."

Amy looked relieved, but naughty Jo took her at her word, for during

the first call she sat with every limb gracefully composed, every fold

correctly draped, calm as a summer sea, cool as a snowbank, and as

silent as the sphinx. In vain Mrs. Chester alluded to her 'charming

novel', and the Misses Chester introduced parties, picnics, the opera,

and the fashions. Each and all were answered by a smile, a bow, and a

demure "Yes" or "No" with the chill on. In vain Amy telegraphed the

word 'talk', tried to draw her out, and administered covert pokes with

her foot. Jo sat as if blandly unconscious of it all, with deportment

like Maud's face, 'icily regular, splendidly null'.

"What a haughty, uninteresting creature that oldest Miss March is!" was

the unfortunately audible remark of one of the ladies, as the door

closed upon their guests. Jo laughed noiselessly all through the hall,

but Amy looked disgusted at the failure of her instructions, and very

naturally laid the blame upon Jo.

"How could you mistake me so? I merely meant you to be properly

dignified and composed, and you made yourself a perfect stock and

stone. Try to be sociable at the Lambs'. Gossip as other girls do,

and be interested in dress and flirtations and whatever nonsense comes

up. They move in the best society, are valuable persons for us to

know, and I wouldn't fail to make a good impression there for anything."

"I'll be agreeable. I'll gossip and giggle, and have horrors and

raptures over any trifle you like. I rather enjoy this, and now I'll

imitate what is called 'a charming girl'. I can do it, for I have May

Chester as a model, and I'll improve upon her. See if the Lambs don't

say, 'What a lively, nice creature that Jo March is!"

Amy felt anxious, as well she might, for when Jo turned freakish there

was no knowing where she would stop. Amy's face was a study when she

saw her sister skim into the next drawing room, kiss all the young

ladies with effusion, beam graciously upon the young gentlemen, and

join in the chat with a spirit which amazed the beholder. Amy was taken

possession of by Mrs. Lamb, with whom she was a favorite, and forced to

hear a long account of Lucretia's last attack, while three delightful

young gentlemen hovered near, waiting for a pause when they might rush

in and rescue her. So situated, she was powerless to check Jo, who

seemed possessed by a spirit of mischief, and talked away as volubly as

the lady. A knot of heads gathered about her, and Amy strained her

ears to hear what was going on, for broken sentences filled her with

curiosity, and frequent peals of laughter made her wild to share the

fun. One may imagine her suffering on overhearing fragments of this

sort of conversation.

"She rides splendidly. Who taught her?"

"No one. She used to practice mounting, holding the reins, and sitting

straight on an old saddle in a tree. Now she rides anything, for she

doesn't know what fear is, and the stableman lets her have horses cheap

because she trains them to carry ladies so well. She has such a

passion for it, I often tell her if everything else fails, she can be a

horsebreaker, and get her living so."

At this awful speech Amy contained herself with difficulty, for the

impression was being given that she was rather a fast young lady, which

was her especial aversion. But what could she do? For the old lady

was in the middle of her story, and long before it was done, Jo was off

again, making more droll revelations and committing still more fearful

blunders.

"Yes, Amy was in despair that day, for all the good beasts were gone,

and of three left, one was lame, one blind, and the other so balky that

you had to put dirt in his mouth before he would start. Nice animal for

a pleasure party, wasn't it?"

"Which did she choose?" asked one of the laughing gentlemen, who

enjoyed the subject.

"None of them. She heard of a young horse at the farm house over the

river, and though a lady had never ridden him, she resolved to try,

because he was handsome and spirited. Her struggles were really

pathetic. There was no one to bring the horse to the saddle, so she

took the saddle to the horse. My dear creature, she actually rowed it

over the river, put it on her head, and marched up to the barn to the

utter amazement of the old man!"

"Did she ride the horse?"

"Of course she did, and had a capital time. I expected to see her

brought home in fragments, but she managed him perfectly, and was the

life of the party."

"Well, I call that plucky!" and young Mr. Lamb turned an approving

glance upon Amy, wondering what his mother could be saying to make the

girl look so red and uncomfortable.

She was still redder and more uncomfortable a moment after, when a

sudden turn in the conversation introduced the subject of dress. One

of the young ladies asked Jo where she got the pretty drab hat she wore

to the picnic and stupid Jo, instead of mentioning the place where it

was bought two years ago, must needs answer with unnecessary frankness,

"Oh, Amy painted it. You can't buy those soft shades, so we paint ours

any color we like. It's a great comfort to have an artistic sister."

"Isn't that an original idea?" cried Miss Lamb, who found Jo great fun.

"That's nothing compared to some of her brilliant performances. There's

nothing the child can't do. Why, she wanted a pair of blue boots for

Sallie's party, so she just painted her soiled white ones the loveliest

shade of sky blue you ever saw, and they looked exactly like satin,"

added Jo, with an air of pride in her sister's accomplishments that

exasperated Amy till she felt that it would be a relief to throw her

cardcase at her.

"We read a story of yours the other day, and enjoyed it very much,"

observed the elder Miss Lamb, wishing to compliment the literary lady,

who did not look the character just then, it must be confessed.

Any mention of her 'works' always had a bad effect upon Jo, who either

grew rigid and looked offended, or changed the subject with a brusque

remark, as now. "Sorry you could find nothing better to read. I write

that rubbish because it sells, and ordinary people like it. Are you

going to New York this winter?"

As Miss Lamb had 'enjoyed' the story, this speech was not exactly

grateful or complimentary. The minute it was made Jo saw her mistake,

but fearing to make the matter worse, suddenly remembered that it was

for her to make the first move toward departure, and did so with an

abruptness that left three people with half-finished sentences in their

mouths.

"Amy, we must go. Good-by, dear, do come and see us. We are pining

for a visit. I don't dare to ask you, Mr. Lamb, but if you should

come, I don't think I shall have the heart to send you away."

Jo said this with such a droll imitation of May Chester's gushing style

that Amy got out of the room as rapidly as possible, feeling a strong

desire to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Didn't I do well?" asked Jo, with a satisfied air as they walked away.

"Nothing could have been worse," was Amy's crushing reply. "What

possessed you to tell those stories about my saddle, and the hats and

boots, and all the rest of it?"

"Why, it's funny, and amuses people. They know we are poor, so it's no

use pretending that we have grooms, buy three or four hats a season,

and have things as easy and fine as they do."

"You needn't go and tell them all our little shifts, and expose our

poverty in that perfectly unnecessary way. You haven't a bit of proper

pride, and never will learn when to hold your tongue and when to

speak," said Amy despairingly.

Poor Jo looked abashed, and silently chafed the end of her nose with

the stiff handkerchief, as if performing a penance for her misdemeanors.

"How shall I behave here?" she asked, as they approached the third

mansion.

"Just as you please. I wash my hands of you," was Amy's short answer.

"Then I'll enjoy myself. The boys are at home, and we'll have a

comfortable time. Goodness knows I need a little change, for elegance

has a bad effect upon my constitution," returned Jo gruffly, being

disturbed by her failure to suit.

An enthusiastic welcome from three big boys and several pretty children

speedily soothed her ruffled feelings, and leaving Amy to entertain the

hostess and Mr. Tudor, who happened to be calling likewise, Jo devoted

herself to the young folks and found the change refreshing. She

listened to college stories with deep interest, caressed pointers and

poodles without a murmur, agreed heartily that "Tom Brown was a brick,"

regardless of the improper form of praise, and when one lad proposed a

visit to his turtle tank, she went with an alacrity which caused Mamma

to smile upon her, as that motherly lady settled the cap which was left

in a ruinous condition by filial hugs, bearlike but affectionate, and

dearer to her than the most faultless coiffure from the hands of an

inspired Frenchwoman.

Leaving her sister to her own devices, Amy proceeded to enjoy herself

to her heart's content. Mr. Tudor's uncle had married an English lady

who was third cousin to a living lord, and Amy regarded the whole

family with great respect, for in spite of her American birth and

breeding, she possessed that reverence for titles which haunts the best

of us--that unacknowledged loyalty to the early faith in kings which

set the most democratic nation under the sun in ferment at the coming

of a royal yellow-haired laddie, some years ago, and which still has

something to do with the love the young country bears the old, like

that of a big son for an imperious little mother, who held him while

she could, and let him go with a farewell scolding when he rebelled.

But even the satisfaction of talking with a distant connection of the

British nobility did not render Amy forgetful of time, and when the

proper number of minutes had passed, she reluctantly tore herself from

this aristocratic society, and looked about for Jo, fervently hoping

that her incorrigible sister would not be found in any position which

should bring disgrace upon the name of March.

It might have been worse, but Amy considered it bad. For Jo sat on the

grass, with an encampment of boys about her, and a dirty-footed dog

reposing on the skirt of her state and festival dress, as she related

one of Laurie's pranks to her admiring audience. One small child was

poking turtles with Amy's cherished parasol, a second was eating

gingerbread over Jo's best bonnet, and a third playing ball with her

gloves, but all were enjoying themselves, and when Jo collected her

damaged property to go, her escort accompanied her, begging her to come

again, "It was such fun to hear about Laurie's larks."

"Capital boys, aren't they? I feel quite young and brisk again after

that." said Jo, strolling along with her hands behind her, partly from

habit, partly to conceal the bespattered parasol.

"Why do you always avoid Mr. Tudor?" asked Amy, wisely refraining from

any comment upon Jo's dilapidated appearance.

"Don't like him, he puts on airs, snubs his sisters, worries his

father, and doesn't speak respectfully of his mother. Laurie says he

is fast, and I don't consider him a desirable acquaintance, so I let

him alone."

"You might treat him civilly, at least. You gave him a cool nod, and

just now you bowed and smiled in the politest way to Tommy Chamberlain,

whose father keeps a grocery store. If you had just reversed the nod

and the bow, it would have been right," said Amy reprovingly.

"No, it wouldn't," returned Jo, "I neither like, respect, nor admire

Tudor, though his grandfather's uncle's nephew's niece was a third

cousin to a lord. Tommy is poor and bashful and good and very clever.

I think well of him, and like to show that I do, for he is a gentleman

in spite of the brown paper parcels."

"It's no use trying to argue with you," began Amy.

"Not the least, my dear," interrupted Jo, "so let us look amiable, and

drop a card here, as the Kings are evidently out, for which I'm deeply

grateful."

The family cardcase having done its duty the girls walked on, and Jo

uttered another thanksgiving on reaching the fifth house, and being

told that the young ladies were engaged.

"Now let us go home, and never mind Aunt March today. We can run down

there any time, and it's really a pity to trail through the dust in our

best bibs and tuckers, when we are tired and cross."

"Speak for yourself, if you please. Aunt March likes to have us pay

her the compliment of coming in style, and making a formal call. It's a

little thing to do, but it gives her pleasure, and I don't believe it

will hurt your things half so much as letting dirty dogs and clumping

boys spoil them. Stoop down, and let me take the crumbs off of your

bonnet."

"What a good girl you are, Amy!" said Jo, with a repentant glance from

her own damaged costume to that of her sister, which was fresh and

spotless still. "I wish it was as easy for me to do little things to

please people as it is for you. I think of them, but it takes too much

time to do them, so I wait for a chance to confer a great favor, and

let the small ones slip, but they tell best in the end, I fancy."

Amy smiled and was mollified at once, saying with a maternal air,

"Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they

have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive. If you'd

remember that, and practice it, you'd be better liked than I am,

because there is more of you."

"I'm a crotchety old thing, and always shall be, but I'm willing to own

that you are right, only it's easier for me to risk my life for a

person than to be pleasant to him when I don't feel like it. It's a

great misfortune to have such strong likes and dislikes, isn't it?"

"It's a greater not to be able to hide them. I don't mind saying that

I don't approve of Tudor any more than you do, but I'm not called upon

to tell him so. Neither are you, and there is no use in making

yourself disagreeable because he is."

"But I think girls ought to show when they disapprove of young men, and

how can they do it except by their manners? Preaching does not do any

good, as I know to my sorrow, since I've had Teddie to manage. But

there are many little ways in which I can influence him without a word,

and I say we ought to do it to others if we can."

"Teddy is a remarkable boy, and can't be taken as a sample of other

boys," said Amy, in a tone of solemn conviction, which would have

convulsed the 'remarkable boy' if he had heard it. "If we were belles,

or women of wealth and position, we might do something, perhaps, but

for us to frown at one set of young gentlemen because we don't approve

of them, and smile upon another set because we do, wouldn't have a

particle of effect, and we should only be considered odd and

puritanical."

"So we are to countenance things and people which we detest, merely

because we are not belles and millionaires, are we? That's a nice sort

of morality."

"I can't argue about it, I only know that it's the way of the world,

and people who set themselves against it only get laughed at for their

pains. I don't like reformers, and I hope you never try to be one."

"I do like them, and I shall be one if I can, for in spite of the

laughing the world would never get on without them. We can't agree

about that, for you belong to the old set, and I to the new. You will

get on the best, but I shall have the liveliest time of it. I should

rather enjoy the brickbats and hooting, I think."

"Well, compose yourself now, and don't worry Aunt with your new ideas."

"I'll try not to, but I'm always possessed to burst out with some

particularly blunt speech or revolutionary sentiment before her. It's

my doom, and I can't help it."

They found Aunt Carrol with the old lady, both absorbed in some very

interesting subject, but they dropped it as the girls came in, with a

conscious look which betrayed that they had been talking about their

nieces. Jo was not in a good humor, and the perverse fit returned, but

Amy, who had virtuously done her duty, kept her temper and pleased

everybody, was in a most angelic frame of mind. This amiable spirit

was felt at once, and both aunts 'my deared' her affectionately,

looking what they afterward said emphatically, "That child improves

every day."

"Are you going to help about the fair, dear?" asked Mrs. Carrol, as Amy

sat down beside her with the confiding air elderly people like so well

in the young.

"Yes, Aunt. Mrs. Chester asked me if I would, and I offered to tend a

table, as I have nothing but my time to give."

"I'm not," put in Jo decidedly. "I hate to be patronized, and the

Chesters think it's a great favor to allow us to help with their highly

connected fair. I wonder you consented, Amy, they only want you to

work."

"I am willing to work. It's for the freedmen as well as the Chesters,

and I think it very kind of them to let me share the labor and the fun.

Patronage does not trouble me when it is well meant."

"Quite right and proper. I like your grateful spirit, my dear. It's a

pleasure to help people who appreciate our efforts. Some do not, and

that is trying," observed Aunt March, looking over her spectacles at

Jo, who sat apart, rocking herself, with a somewhat morose expression.

If Jo had only known what a great happiness was wavering in the balance

for one of them, she would have turned dove-like in a minute, but

unfortunately, we don't have windows in our breasts, and cannot see

what goes on in the minds of our friends. Better for us that we cannot

as a general thing, but now and then it would be such a comfort, such a

saving of time and temper. By her next speech, Jo deprived herself of

several years of pleasure, and received a timely lesson in the art of

holding her tongue.

"I don't like favors, they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd

rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent."

"Ahem!" coughed Aunt Carrol softly, with a look at Aunt March.

"I told you so," said Aunt March, with a decided nod to Aunt Carrol.

Mercifully unconscious of what she had done, Jo sat with her nose in

the air, and a revolutionary aspect which was anything but inviting.

"Do you speak French, dear?" asked Mrs. Carrol, laying a hand on Amy's.

"Pretty well, thanks to Aunt March, who lets Esther talk to me as often

as I like," replied Amy, with a grateful look, which caused the old

lady to smile affably.

"How are you about languages?" asked Mrs. Carrol of Jo.

"Don't know a word. I'm very stupid about studying anything, can't

bear French, it's such a slippery, silly sort of language," was the

brusque reply.

Another look passed between the ladies, and Aunt March said to Amy,

"You are quite strong and well now, dear, I believe? Eyes don't

trouble you any more, do they?"

"Not at all, thank you, ma'am. I'm very well, and mean to do great

things next winter, so that I may be ready for Rome, whenever that

joyful time arrives."

"Good girl! You deserve to go, and I'm sure you will some day," said

Aunt March, with an approving pat on the head, as Amy picked up her

ball for her.

Crosspatch, draw the latch,

Sit by the fire and spin,

squalled Polly, bending down from his perch on the back of her chair to

peep into Jo's face, with such a comical air of impertinent inquiry

that it was impossible to help laughing.

"Most observing bird," said the old lady.

"Come and take a walk, my dear?" cried Polly, hopping toward the china

closet, with a look suggestive of a lump of sugar.

"Thank you, I will. Come Amy." and Jo brought the visit to an end,

feeling more strongly than ever that calls did have a bad effect upon

her constitution. She shook hands in a gentlemanly manner, but Amy

kissed both the aunts, and the girls departed, leaving behind them the

impression of shadow and sunshine, which impression caused Aunt March

to say, as they vanished...

"You'd better do it, Mary. I'll supply the money." and Aunt Carrol to

reply decidedly, "I certainly will, if her father and mother consent."

CHAPTER THIRTY

CONSEQUENCES

Mrs. Chester's fair was so very elegant and select that it was

considered a great honor by the young ladies of the neighborhood to be

invited to take a table, and everyone was much interested in the

matter. Amy was asked, but Jo was not, which was fortunate for all

parties, as her elbows were decidedly akimbo at this period of her

life, and it took a good many hard knocks to teach her how to get on

easily. The 'haughty, uninteresting creature' was let severely alone,

but Amy's talent and taste were duly complimented by the offer of the

art table, and she exerted herself to prepare and secure appropriate

and valuable contributions to it.

Everything went on smoothly till the day before the fair opened, then

there occurred one of the little skirmishes which it is almost

impossible to avoid, when some five-and-twenty women, old and young,

with all their private piques and prejudices, try to work together.

May Chester was rather jealous of Amy because the latter was a greater

favorite than herself, and just at this time several trifling

circumstances occurred to increase the feeling. Amy's dainty

pen-and-ink work entirely eclipsed May's painted vases--that was one

thorn. Then the all conquering Tudor had danced four times with Amy at

a late party and only once with May--that was thorn number two. But

the chief grievance that rankled in her soul, and gave an excuse for

her unfriendly conduct, was a rumor which some obliging gossip had

whispered to her, that the March girls had made fun of her at the

Lambs'. All the blame of this should have fallen upon Jo, for her

naughty imitation had been too lifelike to escape detection, and the

frolicsome Lambs had permitted the joke to escape. No hint of this had

reached the culprits, however, and Amy's dismay can be imagined, when,

the very evening before the fair, as she was putting the last touches

to her pretty table, Mrs. Chester, who, of course, resented the

supposed ridicule of her daughter, said, in a bland tone, but with a

cold look...

"I find, dear, that there is some feeling among the young ladies about

my giving this table to anyone but my girls. As this is the most

prominent, and some say the most attractive table of all, and they are

the chief getters-up of the fair, it is thought best for them to take

this place. I'm sorry, but I know you are too sincerely interested in

the cause to mind a little personal disappointment, and you shall have

another table if you like."

Mrs. Chester fancied beforehand that it would be easy to deliver this

little speech, but when the time came, she found it rather difficult to

utter it naturally, with Amy's unsuspicious eyes looking straight at

her full of surprise and trouble.

Amy felt that there was something behind this, but could not guess

what, and said quietly, feeling hurt, and showing that she did,

"Perhaps you had rather I took no table at all?"

"Now, my dear, don't have any ill feeling, I beg. It's merely a matter

of expediency, you see, my girls will naturally take the lead, and this

table is considered their proper place. I think it very appropriate to

you, and feel very grateful for your efforts to make it so pretty, but

we must give up our private wishes, of course, and I will see that you

have a good place elsewhere. Wouldn't you like the flower table? The

little girls undertook it, but they are discouraged. You could make a

charming thing of it, and the flower table is always attractive you

know."

"Especially to gentlemen," added May, with a look which enlightened Amy

as to one cause of her sudden fall from favor. She colored angrily,

but took no other notice of that girlish sarcasm, and answered with

unexpected amiability...

"It shall be as you please, Mrs. Chester. I'll give up my place here

at once, and attend to the flowers, if you like."

"You can put your own things on your own table, if you prefer," began

May, feeling a little conscience-stricken, as she looked at the pretty

racks, the painted shells, and quaint illuminations Amy had so

carefully made and so gracefully arranged. She meant it kindly, but

Amy mistook her meaning, and said quickly...

"Oh, certainly, if they are in your way," and sweeping her

contributions into her apron, pell-mell, she walked off, feeling that

herself and her works of art had been insulted past forgiveness.

"Now she's mad. Oh, dear, I wish I hadn't asked you to speak, Mama,"

said May, looking disconsolately at the empty spaces on her table.

"Girls' quarrels are soon over," returned her mother, feeling a trifle

ashamed of her own part in this one, as well she might.

The little girls hailed Amy and her treasures with delight, which

cordial reception somewhat soothed her perturbed spirit, and she fell

to work, determined to succeed florally, if she could not artistically.

But everything seemed against her. It was late, and she was tired.

Everyone was too busy with their own affairs to help her, and the

little girls were only hindrances, for the dears fussed and chattered

like so many magpies, making a great deal of confusion in their artless

efforts to preserve the most perfect order. The evergreen arch

wouldn't stay firm after she got it up, but wiggled and threatened to

tumble down on her head when the hanging baskets were filled. Her best

tile got a splash of water, which left a sepia tear on the Cupid's

cheek. She bruised her hands with hammering, and got cold working in a

draft, which last affliction filled her with apprehensions for the

morrow. Any girl reader who has suffered like afflictions will

sympathize with poor Amy and wish her well through her task.

There was great indignation at home when she told her story that

evening. Her mother said it was a shame, but told her she had done

right. Beth declared she wouldn't go to the fair at all, and Jo

demanded why she didn't take all her pretty things and leave those mean

people to get on without her.

"Because they are mean is no reason why I should be. I hate such

things, and though I think I've a right to be hurt, I don't intend to

show it. They will feel that more than angry speeches or huffy

actions, won't they, Marmee?"

"That's the right spirit, my dear. A kiss for a blow is always best,

though it's not very easy to give it sometimes," said her mother, with

the air of one who had learned the difference between preaching and

practicing.

In spite of various very natural temptations to resent and retaliate,

Amy adhered to her resolution all the next day, bent on conquering her

enemy by kindness. She began well, thanks to a silent reminder that

came to her unexpectedly, but most opportunely. As she arranged her

table that morning, while the little girls were in the anteroom filling

the baskets, she took up her pet production, a little book, the antique

cover of which her father had found among his treasures, and in which

on leaves of vellum she had beautifully illuminated different texts.

As she turned the pages rich in dainty devices with very pardonable

pride, her eye fell upon one verse that made her stop and think.

Framed in a brilliant scrollwork of scarlet, blue and gold, with little

spirits of good will helping one another up and down among the thorns

and flowers, were the words, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

"I ought, but I don't," thought Amy, as her eye went from the bright

page to May's discontented face behind the big vases, that could not

hide the vacancies her pretty work had once filled. Amy stood a

minute, turning the leaves in her hand, reading on each some sweet

rebuke for all heartburnings and uncharitableness of spirit. Many wise

and true sermons are preached us every day by unconscious ministers in

street, school, office, or home. Even a fair table may become a

pulpit, if it can offer the good and helpful words which are never out

of season. Amy's conscience preached her a little sermon from that

text, then and there, and she did what many of us do not always do,

took the sermon to heart, and straightway put it in practice.

A group of girls were standing about May's table, admiring the pretty

things, and talking over the change of saleswomen. They dropped their

voices, but Amy knew they were speaking of her, hearing one side of the

story and judging accordingly. It was not pleasant, but a better

spirit had come over her, and presently a chance offered for proving

it. She heard May say sorrowfully...

"It's too bad, for there is no time to make other things, and I don't

want to fill up with odds and ends. The table was just complete then.

Now it's spoiled."

"I dare say she'd put them back if you asked her," suggested someone.

"How could I after all the fuss?" began May, but she did not finish,

for Amy's voice came across the hall, saying pleasantly...

"You may have them, and welcome, without asking, if you want them. I

was just thinking I'd offer to put them back, for they belong to your

table rather than mine. Here they are, please take them, and forgive

me if I was hasty in carrying them away last night."

As she spoke, Amy returned her contribution, with a nod and a smile,

and hurried away again, feeling that it was easier to do a friendly

thing than it was to stay and be thanked for it.

"Now, I call that lovely of her, don't you?" cried one girl.

May's answer was inaudible, but another young lady, whose temper was

evidently a little soured by making lemonade, added, with a

disagreeable laugh, "Very lovely, for she knew she wouldn't sell them

at her own table."

Now, that was hard. When we make little sacrifices we like to have

them appreciated, at least, and for a minute Amy was sorry she had done

it, feeling that virtue was not always its own reward. But it is, as

she presently discovered, for her spirits began to rise, and her table

to blossom under her skillful hands, the girls were very kind, and that

one little act seemed to have cleared the atmosphere amazingly.

It was a very long day and a hard one for Amy, as she sat behind her

table, often quite alone, for the little girls deserted very soon. Few

cared to buy flowers in summer, and her bouquets began to droop long

before night.

The art table was the most attractive in the room. There was a crowd

about it all day long, and the tenders were constantly flying to and

fro with important faces and rattling money boxes. Amy often looked

wistfully across, longing to be there, where she felt at home and

happy, instead of in a corner with nothing to do. It might seem no

hardship to some of us, but to a pretty, blithe young girl, it was not

only tedious, but very trying, and the thought of Laurie and his

friends made it a real martyrdom.

She did not go home till night, and then she looked so pale and quiet

that they knew the day had been a hard one, though she made no

complaint, and did not even tell what she had done. Her mother gave

her an extra cordial cup of tea. Beth helped her dress, and made a

charming little wreath for her hair, while Jo astonished her family by

getting herself up with unusual care, and hinting darkly that the

tables were about to be turned.

"Don't do anything rude, pray Jo; I won't have any fuss made, so let it

all pass and behave yourself," begged Amy, as she departed early,

hoping to find a reinforcement of flowers to refresh her poor little

table.

"I merely intend to make myself entrancingly agreeable to every one I

know, and to keep them in your corner as long as possible. Teddy and

his boys will lend a hand, and we'll have a good time yet." returned

Jo, leaning over the gate to watch for Laurie. Presently the familiar

tramp was heard in the dusk, and she ran out to meet him.

"Is that my boy?"

"As sure as this is my girl!" and Laurie tucked her hand under his arm

with the air of a man whose every wish was gratified.

"Oh, Teddy, such doings!" and Jo told Amy's wrongs with sisterly zeal.

"A flock of our fellows are going to drive over by-and-by, and I'll be

hanged if I don't make them buy every flower she's got, and camp down

before her table afterward," said Laurie, espousing her cause with

warmth.

"The flowers are not at all nice, Amy says, and the fresh ones may not

arrive in time. I don't wish to be unjust or suspicious, but I

shouldn't wonder if they never came at all. When people do one mean

thing they are very likely to do another," observed Jo in a disgusted

tone.

"Didn't Hayes give you the best out of our gardens? I told him to."

"I didn't know that, he forgot, I suppose, and, as your grandpa was

poorly, I didn't like to worry him by asking, though I did want some."

"Now, Jo, how could you think there was any need of asking? They are

just as much yours as mine. Don't we always go halves in everything?"

began Laurie, in the tone that always made Jo turn thorny.

"Gracious, I hope not! Half of some of your things wouldn't suit me at

all. But we mustn't stand philandering here. I've got to help Amy, so

you go and make yourself splendid, and if you'll be so very kind as to

let Hayes take a few nice flowers up to the Hall, I'll bless you

forever."

"Couldn't you do it now?" asked Laurie, so suggestively that Jo shut

the gate in his face with inhospitable haste, and called through the

bars, "Go away, Teddy, I'm busy."

Thanks to the conspirators, the tables were turned that night, for

Hayes sent up a wilderness of flowers, with a loverly basket arranged

in his best manner for a centerpiece. Then the March family turned out

en masse, and Jo exerted herself to some purpose, for people not only

came, but stayed, laughing at her nonsense, admiring Amy's taste, and

apparently enjoying themselves very much. Laurie and his friends

gallantly threw themselves into the breach, bought up the bouquets,

encamped before the table, and made that corner the liveliest spot in

the room. Amy was in her element now, and out of gratitude, if nothing

more, was as spritely and gracious as possible, coming to the

conclusion, about that time, that virtue was its own reward, after all.

Jo behaved herself with exemplary propriety, and when Amy was happily

surrounded by her guard of honor, Jo circulated about the Hall, picking

up various bits of gossip, which enlightened her upon the subject of

the Chester change of base. She reproached herself for her share of

the ill feeling and resolved to exonerate Amy as soon as possible. She

also discovered what Amy had done about the things in the morning, and

considered her a model of magnanimity. As she passed the art table,

she glanced over it for her sister's things, but saw no sign of them.

"Tucked away out of sight, I dare say," thought Jo, who could forgive

her own wrongs, but hotly resented any insult offered her family.

"Good evening, Miss Jo. How does Amy get on?" asked May with a

conciliatory air, for she wanted to show that she also could be

generous.

"She has sold everything she had that was worth selling, and now she is

enjoying herself. The flower table is always attractive, you know,

'especially to gentlemen'." Jo couldn't resist giving that little slap,

but May took it so meekly she regretted it a minute after, and fell to

praising the great vases, which still remained unsold.

"Is Amy's illumination anywhere about? I took a fancy to buy that for

Father," said Jo, very anxious to learn the fate of her sister's work.

"Everything of Amy's sold long ago. I took care that the right people

saw them, and they made a nice little sum of money for us," returned

May, who had overcome sundry small temptations, as well as Amy had,

that day.

Much gratified, Jo rushed back to tell the good news, and Amy looked

both touched and surprised by the report of May's word and manner.

"Now, gentlemen, I want you to go and do your duty by the other tables

as generously as you have by mine, especially the art table," she said,

ordering out 'Teddy's own', as the girls called the college friends.

"'Charge, Chester, charge!' is the motto for that table, but do your

duty like men, and you'll get your money's worth of art in every sense

of the word," said the irrepressible Jo, as the devoted phalanx

prepared to take the field.

"To hear is to obey, but March is fairer far than May," said little

Parker, making a frantic effort to be both witty and tender, and

getting promptly quenched by Laurie, who said...

"Very well, my son, for a small boy!" and walked him off, with a

paternal pat on the head.

"Buy the vases," whispered Amy to Laurie, as a final heaping of coals

of fire on her enemy's head.

To May's great delight, Mr. Laurence not only bought the vases, but

pervaded the hall with one under each arm. The other gentlemen

speculated with equal rashness in all sorts of frail trifles, and

wandered helplessly about afterward, burdened with wax flowers, painted

fans, filigree portfolios, and other useful and appropriate purchases.

Aunt Carrol was there, heard the story, looked pleased, and said

something to Mrs. March in a corner, which made the latter lady beam

with satisfaction, and watch Amy with a face full of mingled pride and

anxiety, though she did not betray the cause of her pleasure till

several days later.

The fair was pronounced a success, and when May bade Amy goodnight, she

did not gush as usual, but gave her an affectionate kiss, and a look

which said 'forgive and forget'. That satisfied Amy, and when she got

home she found the vases paraded on the parlor chimney piece with a

great bouquet in each. "The reward of merit for a magnanimous March,"

as Laurie announced with a flourish.

"You've a deal more principle and generosity and nobleness of character

than I ever gave you credit for, Amy. You've behaved sweetly, and I

respect you with all my heart," said Jo warmly, as they brushed their

hair together late that night.

"Yes, we all do, and love her for being so ready to forgive. It must

have been dreadfully hard, after working so long and setting your heart

on selling your own pretty things. I don't believe I could have done

it as kindly as you did," added Beth from her pillow.

"Why, girls, you needn't praise me so. I only did as I'd be done by.

You laugh at me when I say I want to be a lady, but I mean a true

gentlewoman in mind and manners, and I try to do it as far as I know

how. I can't explain exactly, but I want to be above the little

meannesses and follies and faults that spoil so many women. I'm far

from it now, but I do my best, and hope in time to be what Mother is."

Amy spoke earnestly, and Jo said, with a cordial hug, "I understand now

what you mean, and I'll never laugh at you again. You are getting on

faster than you think, and I'll take lessons of you in true politeness,

for you've learned the secret, I believe. Try away, deary, you'll get

your reward some day, and no one will be more delighted than I shall."

A week later Amy did get her reward, and poor Jo found it hard to be

delighted. A letter came from Aunt Carrol, and Mrs. March's face was

illuminated to such a degree when she read it that Jo and Beth, who

were with her, demanded what the glad tidings were.

"Aunt Carrol is going abroad next month, and wants..."

"Me to go with her!" burst in Jo, flying out of her chair in an

uncontrollable rapture.

"No, dear, not you. It's Amy."

"Oh, Mother! She's too young, it's my turn first. I've wanted it so

long. It would do me so much good, and be so altogether splendid. I

must go!"

"I'm afraid it's impossible, Jo. Aunt says Amy, decidedly, and it is

not for us to dictate when she offers such a favor."

"It's always so. Amy has all the fun and I have all the work. It isn't

fair, oh, it isn't fair!" cried Jo passionately.

"I'm afraid it's partly your own fault, dear. When Aunt spoke to me

the other day, she regretted your blunt manners and too independent

spirit, and here she writes, as if quoting something you had said--'I

planned at first to ask Jo, but as 'favors burden her', and she 'hates

French', I think I won't venture to invite her. Amy is more docile,

will make a good companion for Flo, and receive gratefully any help the

trip may give her."

"Oh, my tongue, my abominable tongue! Why can't I learn to keep it

quiet?" groaned Jo, remembering words which had been her undoing. When

she had heard the explanation of the quoted phrases, Mrs. March said

sorrowfully...

"I wish you could have gone, but there is no hope of it this time, so

try to bear it cheerfully, and don't sadden Amy's pleasure by

reproaches or regrets."

"I'll try," said Jo, winking hard as she knelt down to pick up the

basket she had joyfully upset. "I'll take a leaf out of her book, and

try not only to seem glad, but to be so, and not grudge her one minute

of happiness. But it won't be easy, for it is a dreadful

disappointment," and poor Jo bedewed the little fat pincushion she held

with several very bitter tears.

"Jo, dear, I'm very selfish, but I couldn't spare you, and I'm glad you

are not going quite yet," whispered Beth, embracing her, basket and

all, with such a clinging touch and loving face that Jo felt comforted

in spite of the sharp regret that made her want to box her own ears,

and humbly beg Aunt Carrol to burden her with this favor, and see how

gratefully she would bear it.

By the time Amy came in, Jo was able to take her part in the family

jubilation, not quite as heartily as usual, perhaps, but without

repinings at Amy's good fortune. The young lady herself received the

news as tidings of great joy, went about in a solemn sort of rapture,

and began to sort her colors and pack her pencils that evening, leaving

such trifles as clothes, money, and passports to those less absorbed in

visions of art than herself.

"It isn't a mere pleasure trip to me, girls," she said impressively, as

she scraped her best palette. "It will decide my career, for if I have

any genius, I shall find it out in Rome, and will do something to prove

it."

"Suppose you haven't?" said Jo, sewing away, with red eyes, at the new

collars which were to be handed over to Amy.

"Then I shall come home and teach drawing for my living," replied the

aspirant for fame, with philosophic composure. But she made a wry face

at the prospect, and scratched away at her palette as if bent on

vigorous measures before she gave up her hopes.

"No, you won't. You hate hard work, and you'll marry some rich man,

and come home to sit in the lap of luxury all your days," said Jo.

"Your predictions sometimes come to pass, but I don't believe that one

will. I'm sure I wish it would, for if I can't be an artist myself, I

should like to be able to help those who are," said Amy, smiling, as if

the part of Lady Bountiful would suit her better than that of a poor

drawing teacher.

"Hum!" said Jo, with a sigh. "If you wish it you'll have it, for your

wishes are always granted--mine never."

"Would you like to go?" asked Amy, thoughtfully patting her nose with

her knife.

"Rather!"

"Well, in a year or two I'll send for you, and we'll dig in the Forum

for relics, and carry out all the plans we've made so many times."

"Thank you. I'll remind you of your promise when that joyful day

comes, if it ever does," returned Jo, accepting the vague but

magnificent offer as gratefully as she could.

There was not much time for preparation, and the house was in a ferment

till Amy was off. Jo bore up very well till the last flutter of blue

ribbon vanished, when she retired to her refuge, the garret, and cried

till she couldn't cry any more. Amy likewise bore up stoutly till the

steamer sailed. Then just as the gangway was about to be withdrawn, it

suddenly came over her that a whole ocean was soon to roll between her

and those who loved her best, and she clung to Laurie, the last

lingerer, saying with a sob...

"Oh, take care of them for me, and if anything should happen..."

"I will, dear, I will, and if anything happens, I'll come and comfort

you," whispered Laurie, little dreaming that he would be called upon to

keep his word.

So Amy sailed away to find the Old World, which is always new and

beautiful to young eyes, while her father and friend watched her from

the shore, fervently hoping that none but gentle fortunes would befall

the happy-hearted girl, who waved her hand to them till they could see

nothing but the summer sunshine dazzling on the sea.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

OUR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

London

Dearest People, Here I really sit at a front window of the Bath Hotel,

Piccadilly. It's not a fashionable place, but Uncle stopped here years

ago, and won't go anywhere else. However, we don't mean to stay long,

so it's no great matter. Oh, I can't begin to tell you how I enjoy it

all! I never can, so I'll only give you bits out of my notebook, for

I've done nothing but sketch and scribble since I started.

I sent a line from Halifax, when I felt pretty miserable, but after

that I got on delightfully, seldom ill, on deck all day, with plenty of

pleasant people to amuse me. Everyone was very kind to me, especially

the officers. Don't laugh, Jo, gentlemen really are very necessary

aboard ship, to hold on to, or to wait upon one, and as they have

nothing to do, it's a mercy to make them useful, otherwise they would

smoke themselves to death, I'm afraid.

Aunt and Flo were poorly all the way, and liked to be let alone, so

when I had done what I could for them, I went and enjoyed myself. Such

walks on deck, such sunsets, such splendid air and waves! It was

almost as exciting as riding a fast horse, when we went rushing on so

grandly. I wish Beth could have come, it would have done her so much

good. As for Jo, she would have gone up and sat on the maintop jib, or

whatever the high thing is called, made friends with the engineers, and

tooted on the captain's speaking trumpet, she'd have been in such a

state of rapture.

It was all heavenly, but I was glad to see the Irish coast, and found

it very lovely, so green and sunny, with brown cabins here and there,

ruins on some of the hills, and gentlemen's countryseats in the

valleys, with deer feeding in the parks. It was early in the morning,

but I didn't regret getting up to see it, for the bay was full of

little boats, the shore so picturesque, and a rosy sky overhead. I

never shall forget it.

At Queenstown one of my new acquaintances left us, Mr. Lennox, and when

I said something about the Lakes of Killarney, he sighed, and sung,

with a look at me...

"Oh, have you e'er heard of Kate Kearney?

She lives on the banks of Killarney;

From the glance of her eye,

Shun danger and fly,

For fatal's the glance of Kate Kearney."

Wasn't that nonsensical?

We only stopped at Liverpool a few hours. It's a dirty, noisy place,

and I was glad to leave it. Uncle rushed out and bought a pair of

dogskin gloves, some ugly, thick shoes, and an umbrella, and got shaved

\_Ã  la\_ mutton chop, the first thing. Then he flattered himself that he

looked like a true Briton, but the first time he had the mud cleaned

off his shoes, the little bootblack knew that an American stood in

them, and said, with a grin, "There yer har, sir. I've given 'em the

latest Yankee shine." It amused Uncle immensely. Oh, I must tell you

what that absurd Lennox did! He got his friend Ward, who came on with

us, to order a bouquet for me, and the first thing I saw in my room was

a lovely one, with "Robert Lennox's compliments," on the card. Wasn't

that fun, girls? I like traveling.

I never shall get to London if I don't hurry. The trip was like riding

through a long picture gallery, full of lovely landscapes. The

farmhouses were my delight, with thatched roofs, ivy up to the eaves,

latticed windows, and stout women with rosy children at the doors. The

very cattle looked more tranquil than ours, as they stood knee-deep in

clover, and the hens had a contented cluck, as if they never got

nervous like Yankee biddies. Such perfect color I never saw, the grass

so green, sky so blue, grain so yellow, woods so dark, I was in a

rapture all the way. So was Flo, and we kept bouncing from one side to

the other, trying to see everything while we were whisking along at the

rate of sixty miles an hour. Aunt was tired and went to sleep, but

Uncle read his guidebook, and wouldn't be astonished at anything. This

is the way we went on. Amy, flying up--"Oh, that must be Kenilworth,

that gray place among the trees!" Flo, darting to my window--"How

sweet! We must go there sometime, won't we Papa?" Uncle, calmly

admiring his boots--"No, my dear, not unless you want beer, that's a

brewery."

A pause--then Flo cried out, "Bless me, there's a gallows and a man

going up." "Where, where?" shrieks Amy, staring out at two tall posts

with a crossbeam and some dangling chains. "A colliery," remarks

Uncle, with a twinkle of the eye. "Here's a lovely flock of lambs all

lying down," says Amy. "See, Papa, aren't they pretty?" added Flo

sentimentally. "Geese, young ladies," returns Uncle, in a tone that

keeps us quiet till Flo settles down to enjoy the \_Flirtations of

Captain Cavendish\_, and I have the scenery all to myself.

Of course it rained when we got to London, and there was nothing to be

seen but fog and umbrellas. We rested, unpacked, and shopped a little

between the showers. Aunt Mary got me some new things, for I came off

in such a hurry I wasn't half ready. A white hat and blue feather, a

muslin dress to match, and the loveliest mantle you ever saw. Shopping

in Regent Street is perfectly splendid. Things seem so cheap, nice

ribbons only sixpence a yard. I laid in a stock, but shall get my

gloves in Paris. Doesn't that sound sort of elegant and rich?

Flo and I, for the fun of it, ordered a hansom cab, while Aunt and

Uncle were out, and went for a drive, though we learned afterward that

it wasn't the thing for young ladies to ride in them alone. It was so

droll! For when we were shut in by the wooden apron, the man drove so

fast that Flo was frightened, and told me to stop him, but he was up

outside behind somewhere, and I couldn't get at him. He didn't hear me

call, nor see me flap my parasol in front, and there we were, quite

helpless, rattling away, and whirling around corners at a breakneck

pace. At last, in my despair, I saw a little door in the roof, and on

poking it open, a red eye appeared, and a beery voice said...

"Now, then, mum?"

I gave my order as soberly as I could, and slamming down the door, with

an "Aye, aye, mum," the man made his horse walk, as if going to a

funeral. I poked again and said, "A little faster," then off he went,

helter-skelter as before, and we resigned ourselves to our fate.

Today was fair, and we went to Hyde Park, close by, for we are more

aristocratic than we look. The Duke of Devonshire lives near. I often

see his footmen lounging at the back gate, and the Duke of Wellington's

house is not far off. Such sights as I saw, my dear! It was as good

as Punch, for there were fat dowagers rolling about in their red and

yellow coaches, with gorgeous Jeameses in silk stockings and velvet

coats, up behind, and powdered coachmen in front. Smart maids, with

the rosiest children I ever saw, handsome girls, looking half asleep,

dandies in queer English hats and lavender kids lounging about, and

tall soldiers, in short red jackets and muffin caps stuck on one side,

looking so funny I longed to sketch them.

Rotten Row means 'Route de Roi', or the king's way, but now it's more

like a riding school than anything else. The horses are splendid, and

the men, especially the grooms, ride well, but the women are stiff, and

bounce, which isn't according to our rules. I longed to show them a

tearing American gallop, for they trotted solemnly up and down, in

their scant habits and high hats, looking like the women in a toy

Noah's Ark. Everyone rides--old men, stout ladies, little

children--and the young folks do a deal of flirting here, I saw a pair

exchange rose buds, for it's the thing to wear one in the button-hole,

and I thought it rather a nice little idea.

In the P.M. to Westminster Abbey, but don't expect me to describe it,

that's impossible, so I'll only say it was sublime! This evening we are

going to see Fechter, which will be an appropriate end to the happiest

day of my life.

It's very late, but I can't let my letter go in the morning without

telling you what happened last evening. Who do you think came in, as

we were at tea? Laurie's English friends, Fred and Frank Vaughn! I

was so surprised, for I shouldn't have known them but for the cards.

Both are tall fellows with whiskers, Fred handsome in the English

style, and Frank much better, for he only limps slightly, and uses no

crutches. They had heard from Laurie where we were to be, and came to

ask us to their house, but Uncle won't go, so we shall return the call,

and see them as we can. They went to the theater with us, and we did

have such a good time, for Frank devoted himself to Flo, and Fred and I

talked over past, present, and future fun as if we had known each other

all our days. Tell Beth Frank asked for her, and was sorry to hear of

her ill health. Fred laughed when I spoke of Jo, and sent his

'respectful compliments to the big hat'. Neither of them had forgotten

Camp Laurence, or the fun we had there. What ages ago it seems,

doesn't it?

Aunt is tapping on the wall for the third time, so I must stop. I

really feel like a dissipated London fine lady, writing here so late,

with my room full of pretty things, and my head a jumble of parks,

theaters, new gowns, and gallant creatures who say "Ah!" and twirl

their blond mustaches with the true English lordliness. I long to see

you all, and in spite of my nonsense am, as ever, your loving...

AMY

PARIS

Dear girls,

In my last I told you about our London visit, how kind the Vaughns

were, and what pleasant parties they made for us. I enjoyed the trips

to Hampton Court and the Kensington Museum more than anything else, for

at Hampton I saw Raphael's cartoons, and at the Museum, rooms full of

pictures by Turner, Lawrence, Reynolds, Hogarth, and the other great

creatures. The day in Richmond Park was charming, for we had a regular

English picnic, and I had more splendid oaks and groups of deer than I

could copy, also heard a nightingale, and saw larks go up. We 'did'

London to our heart's content, thanks to Fred and Frank, and were sorry

to go away, for though English people are slow to take you in, when

they once make up their minds to do it they cannot be outdone in

hospitality, I think. The Vaughns hope to meet us in Rome next winter,

and I shall be dreadfully disappointed if they don't, for Grace and I

are great friends, and the boys very nice fellows, especially Fred.

Well, we were hardly settled here, when he turned up again, saying he

had come for a holiday, and was going to Switzerland. Aunt looked sober

at first, but he was so cool about it she couldn't say a word. And now

we get on nicely, and are very glad he came, for he speaks French like

a native, and I don't know what we should do without him. Uncle

doesn't know ten words, and insists on talking English very loud, as if

it would make people understand him. Aunt's pronunciation is

old-fashioned, and Flo and I, though we flattered ourselves that we

knew a good deal, find we don't, and are very grateful to have Fred do

the '\_parley vooing\_', as Uncle calls it.

Such delightful times as we are having! Sight-seeing from morning till

night, stopping for nice lunches in the gay \_cafes\_, and meeting with

all sorts of droll adventures. Rainy days I spend in the Louvre,

revelling in pictures. Jo would turn up her naughty nose at some of

the finest, because she has no soul for art, but I have, and I'm

cultivating eye and taste as fast as I can. She would like the relics

of great people better, for I've seen her Napoleon's cocked hat and

gray coat, his baby's cradle and his old toothbrush, also Marie

Antoinette's little shoe, the ring of Saint Denis, Charlemagne's sword,

and many other interesting things. I'll talk for hours about them when

I come, but haven't time to write.

The Palais Royale is a heavenly place, so full of \_bijouterie\_ and

lovely things that I'm nearly distracted because I can't buy them.

Fred wanted to get me some, but of course I didn't allow it. Then the

Bois and Champs Elysees are \_tres magnifique\_. I've seen the imperial

family several times, the emperor an ugly, hard-looking man, the

empress pale and pretty, but dressed in bad taste, I thought--purple

dress, green hat, and yellow gloves. Little Nap is a handsome boy, who

sits chatting to his tutor, and kisses his hand to the people as he

passes in his four-horse barouche, with postilions in red satin jackets

and a mounted guard before and behind.

We often walk in the Tuileries Gardens, for they are lovely, though the

antique Luxembourg Gardens suit me better. Pere la Chaise is very

curious, for many of the tombs are like small rooms, and looking in,

one sees a table, with images or pictures of the dead, and chairs for

the mourners to sit in when they come to lament. That is so Frenchy.

Our rooms are on the Rue de Rivoli, and sitting on the balcony, we look

up and down the long, brilliant street. It is so pleasant that we

spend our evenings talking there when too tired with our day's work to

go out. Fred is very entertaining, and is altogether the most

agreeable young man I ever knew--except Laurie, whose manners are more

charming. I wish Fred was dark, for I don't fancy light men, however,

the Vaughns are very rich and come of an excellent family, so I won't

find fault with their yellow hair, as my own is yellower.

Next week we are off to Germany and Switzerland, and as we shall travel

fast, I shall only be able to give you hasty letters. I keep my diary,

and try to 'remember correctly and describe clearly all that I see and

admire', as Father advised. It is good practice for me, and with my

sketchbook will give you a better idea of my tour than these scribbles.

Adieu, I embrace you tenderly. \_"Votre Amie."\_

HEIDELBERG

My dear Mamma,

Having a quiet hour before we leave for Berne, I'll try to tell you

what has happened, for some of it is very important, as you will see.

The sail up the Rhine was perfect, and I just sat and enjoyed it with

all my might. Get Father's old guidebooks and read about it. I

haven't words beautiful enough to describe it. At Coblentz we had a

lovely time, for some students from Bonn, with whom Fred got acquainted

on the boat, gave us a serenade. It was a moonlight night, and about

one o'clock Flo and I were waked by the most delicious music under our

windows. We flew up, and hid behind the curtains, but sly peeps showed

us Fred and the students singing away down below. It was the most

romantic thing I ever saw--the river, the bridge of boats, the great

fortress opposite, moonlight everywhere, and music fit to melt a heart

of stone.

When they were done we threw down some flowers, and saw them scramble

for them, kiss their hands to the invisible ladies, and go laughing

away, to smoke and drink beer, I suppose. Next morning Fred showed me

one of the crumpled flowers in his vest pocket, and looked very

sentimental. I laughed at him, and said I didn't throw it, but Flo,

which seemed to disgust him, for he tossed it out of the window, and

turned sensible again. I'm afraid I'm going to have trouble with that

boy, it begins to look like it.

The baths at Nassau were very gay, so was Baden-Baden, where Fred lost

some money, and I scolded him. He needs someone to look after him when

Frank is not with him. Kate said once she hoped he'd marry soon, and I

quite agree with her that it would be well for him. Frankfurt was

delightful. I saw Goethe's house, Schiller's statue, and Dannecker's

famous 'Ariadne.' It was very lovely, but I should have enjoyed it

more if I had known the story better. I didn't like to ask, as

everyone knew it or pretended they did. I wish Jo would tell me all

about it. I ought to have read more, for I find I don't know anything,

and it mortifies me.

Now comes the serious part, for it happened here, and Fred has just

gone. He has been so kind and jolly that we all got quite fond of him.

I never thought of anything but a traveling friendship till the

serenade night. Since then I've begun to feel that the moonlight

walks, balcony talks, and daily adventures were something more to him

than fun. I haven't flirted, Mother, truly, but remembered what you

said to me, and have done my very best. I can't help it if people like

me. I don't try to make them, and it worries me if I don't care for

them, though Jo says I haven't got any heart. Now I know Mother will

shake her head, and the girls say, "Oh, the mercenary little wretch!",

but I've made up my mind, and if Fred asks me, I shall accept him,

though I'm not madly in love. I like him, and we get on comfortably

together. He is handsome, young, clever enough, and very rich--ever so

much richer than the Laurences. I don't think his family would object,

and I should be very happy, for they are all kind, well-bred, generous

people, and they like me. Fred, as the eldest twin, will have the

estate, I suppose, and such a splendid one it is! A city house in a

fashionable street, not so showy as our big houses, but twice as

comfortable and full of solid luxury, such as English people believe

in. I like it, for it's genuine. I've seen the plate, the family

jewels, the old servants, and pictures of the country place, with its

park, great house, lovely grounds, and fine horses. Oh, it would be

all I should ask! And I'd rather have it than any title such as girls

snap up so readily, and find nothing behind. I may be mercenary, but I

hate poverty, and don't mean to bear it a minute longer than I can

help. One of us \_must\_ marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't

yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all round. I wouldn't marry

a man I hated or despised. You may be sure of that, and though Fred is

not my model hero, he does very well, and in time I should get fond

enough of him if he was very fond of me, and let me do just as I liked.

So I've been turning the matter over in my mind the last week, for it

was impossible to help seeing that Fred liked me. He said nothing, but

little things showed it. He never goes with Flo, always gets on my

side of the carriage, table, or promenade, looks sentimental when we

are alone, and frowns at anyone else who ventures to speak to me.

Yesterday at dinner, when an Austrian officer stared at us and then

said something to his friend, a rakish-looking baron, about '\_ein

wonderschones Blondchen'\_, Fred looked as fierce as a lion, and cut his

meat so savagely it nearly flew off his plate. He isn't one of the

cool, stiff Englishmen, but is rather peppery, for he has Scotch blood

in him, as one might guess from his bonnie blue eyes.

Well, last evening we went up to the castle about sunset, at least all

of us but Fred, who was to meet us there after going to the Post

Restante for letters. We had a charming time poking about the ruins,

the vaults where the monster tun is, and the beautiful gardens made by

the elector long ago for his English wife. I liked the great terrace

best, for the view was divine, so while the rest went to see the rooms

inside, I sat there trying to sketch the gray stone lion's head on the

wall, with scarlet woodbine sprays hanging round it. I felt as if I'd

got into a romance, sitting there, watching the Neckar rolling through

the valley, listening to the music of the Austrian band below, and

waiting for my lover, like a real storybook girl. I had a feeling that

something was going to happen and I was ready for it. I didn't feel

blushy or quakey, but quite cool and only a little excited.

By-and-by I heard Fred's voice, and then he came hurrying through the

great arch to find me. He looked so troubled that I forgot all about

myself, and asked what the matter was. He said he'd just got a letter

begging him to come home, for Frank was very ill. So he was going at

once on the night train and only had time to say good-by. I was very

sorry for him, and disappointed for myself, but only for a minute

because he said, as he shook hands, and said it in a way that I could

not mistake, "I shall soon come back, you won't forget me, Amy?"

I didn't promise, but I looked at him, and he seemed satisfied, and

there was no time for anything but messages and good-byes, for he was

off in an hour, and we all miss him very much. I know he wanted to

speak, but I think, from something he once hinted, that he had promised

his father not to do anything of the sort yet a while, for he is a rash

boy, and the old gentleman dreads a foreign daughter-in-law. We shall

soon meet in Rome, and then, if I don't change my mind, I'll say "Yes,

thank you," when he says "Will you, please?"

Of course this is all \_very private\_, but I wished you to know what was

going on. Don't be anxious about me, remember I am your 'prudent Amy',

and be sure I will do nothing rashly. Send me as much advice as you

like. I'll use it if I can. I wish I could see you for a good talk,

Marmee. Love and trust me.

Ever your AMY

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

TENDER TROUBLES

"Jo, I'm anxious about Beth."

"Why, Mother, she has seemed unusually well since the babies came."

"It's not her health that troubles me now, it's her spirits. I'm sure

there is something on her mind, and I want you to discover what it is."

"What makes you think so, Mother?"

"She sits alone a good deal, and doesn't talk to her father as much as

she used. I found her crying over the babies the other day. When she

sings, the songs are always sad ones, and now and then I see a look in

her face that I don't understand. This isn't like Beth, and it worries

me."

"Have you asked her about it?"

"I have tried once or twice, but she either evaded my questions or

looked so distressed that I stopped. I never force my children's

confidence, and I seldom have to wait for long."

Mrs. March glanced at Jo as she spoke, but the face opposite seemed

quite unconscious of any secret disquietude but Beth's, and after

sewing thoughtfully for a minute, Jo said, "I think she is growing up,

and so begins to dream dreams, and have hopes and fears and fidgets,

without knowing why or being able to explain them. Why, Mother, Beth's

eighteen, but we don't realize it, and treat her like a child,

forgetting she's a woman."

"So she is. Dear heart, how fast you do grow up," returned her mother

with a sigh and a smile.

"Can't be helped, Marmee, so you must resign yourself to all sorts of

worries, and let your birds hop out of the nest, one by one. I promise

never to hop very far, if that is any comfort to you."

"It's a great comfort, Jo. I always feel strong when you are at home,

now Meg is gone. Beth is too feeble and Amy too young to depend upon,

but when the tug comes, you are always ready."

"Why, you know I don't mind hard jobs much, and there must always be

one scrub in a family. Amy is splendid in fine works and I'm not, but

I feel in my element when all the carpets are to be taken up, or half

the family fall sick at once. Amy is distinguishing herself abroad, but

if anything is amiss at home, I'm your man."

"I leave Beth to your hands, then, for she will open her tender little

heart to her Jo sooner than to anyone else. Be very kind, and don't

let her think anyone watches or talks about her. If she only would get

quite strong and cheerful again, I shouldn't have a wish in the world."

"Happy woman! I've got heaps."

"My dear, what are they?"

"I'll settle Bethy's troubles, and then I'll tell you mine. They are

not very wearing, so they'll keep." and Jo stitched away, with a wise

nod which set her mother's heart at rest about her for the present at

least.

While apparently absorbed in her own affairs, Jo watched Beth, and

after many conflicting conjectures, finally settled upon one which

seemed to explain the change in her. A slight incident gave Jo the

clue to the mystery, she thought, and lively fancy, loving heart did

the rest. She was affecting to write busily one Saturday afternoon,

when she and Beth were alone together. Yet as she scribbled, she kept

her eye on her sister, who seemed unusually quiet. Sitting at the

window, Beth's work often dropped into her lap, and she leaned her head

upon her hand, in a dejected attitude, while her eyes rested on the

dull, autumnal landscape. Suddenly some one passed below, whistling

like an operatic blackbird, and a voice called out, "All serene! Coming

in tonight."

Beth started, leaned forward, smiled and nodded, watched the passer-by

till his quick tramp died away, then said softly as if to herself, "How

strong and well and happy that dear boy looks."

"Hum!" said Jo, still intent upon her sister's face, for the bright

color faded as quickly as it came, the smile vanished, and presently a

tear lay shining on the window ledge. Beth whisked it off, and in her

half-averted face read a tender sorrow that made her own eyes fill.

Fearing to betray herself, she slipped away, murmuring something about

needing more paper.

"Mercy on me, Beth loves Laurie!" she said, sitting down in her own

room, pale with the shock of the discovery which she believed she had

just made. "I never dreamed of such a thing. What will Mother say? I

wonder if her..." there Jo stopped and turned scarlet with a sudden

thought. "If he shouldn't love back again, how dreadful it would be.

He must. I'll make him!" and she shook her head threateningly at the

picture of the mischievous-looking boy laughing at her from the wall.

"Oh dear, we are growing up with a vengeance. Here's Meg married and a

mamma, Amy flourishing away at Paris, and Beth in love. I'm the only

one that has sense enough to keep out of mischief." Jo thought intently

for a minute with her eyes fixed on the picture, then she smoothed out

her wrinkled forehead and said, with a decided nod at the face

opposite, "No thank you, sir, you're very charming, but you've no more

stability than a weathercock. So you needn't write touching notes and

smile in that insinuating way, for it won't do a bit of good, and I

won't have it."

Then she sighed, and fell into a reverie from which she did not wake

till the early twilight sent her down to take new observations, which

only confirmed her suspicion. Though Laurie flirted with Amy and joked

with Jo, his manner to Beth had always been peculiarly kind and gentle,

but so was everybody's. Therefore, no one thought of imagining that he

cared more for her than for the others. Indeed, a general impression

had prevailed in the family of late that 'our boy' was getting fonder

than ever of Jo, who, however, wouldn't hear a word upon the subject

and scolded violently if anyone dared to suggest it. If they had known

the various tender passages which had been nipped in the bud, they

would have had the immense satisfaction of saying, "I told you so."

But Jo hated 'philandering', and wouldn't allow it, always having a

joke or a smile ready at the least sign of impending danger.

When Laurie first went to college, he fell in love about once a month,

but these small flames were as brief as ardent, did no damage, and much

amused Jo, who took great interest in the alternations of hope,

despair, and resignation, which were confided to her in their weekly

conferences. But there came a time when Laurie ceased to worship at

many shrines, hinted darkly at one all-absorbing passion, and indulged

occasionally in Byronic fits of gloom. Then he avoided the tender

subject altogether, wrote philosophical notes to Jo, turned studious,

and gave out that he was going to 'dig', intending to graduate in a

blaze of glory. This suited the young lady better than twilight

confidences, tender pressures of the hand, and eloquent glances of the

eye, for with Jo, brain developed earlier than heart, and she preferred

imaginary heroes to real ones, because when tired of them, the former

could be shut up in the tin kitchen till called for, and the latter

were less manageable.

Things were in this state when the grand discovery was made, and Jo

watched Laurie that night as she had never done before. If she had not

got the new idea into her head, she would have seen nothing unusual in

the fact that Beth was very quiet, and Laurie very kind to her. But

having given the rein to her lively fancy, it galloped away with her at

a great pace, and common sense, being rather weakened by a long course

of romance writing, did not come to the rescue. As usual Beth lay on

the sofa and Laurie sat in a low chair close by, amusing her with all

sorts of gossip, for she depended on her weekly 'spin', and he never

disappointed her. But that evening Jo fancied that Beth's eyes rested

on the lively, dark face beside her with peculiar pleasure, and that

she listened with intense interest to an account of some exciting

cricket match, though the phrases, 'caught off a tice', 'stumped off

his ground', and 'the leg hit for three', were as intelligible to her

as Sanskrit. She also fancied, having set her heart upon seeing it,

that she saw a certain increase of gentleness in Laurie's manner, that

he dropped his voice now and then, laughed less than usual, was a

little absent-minded, and settled the afghan over Beth's feet with an

assiduity that was really almost tender.

"Who knows? Stranger things have happened," thought Jo, as she fussed

about the room. "She will make quite an angel of him, and he will make

life delightfully easy and pleasant for the dear, if they only love

each other. I don't see how he can help it, and I do believe he would

if the rest of us were out of the way."

As everyone was out of the way but herself, Jo began to feel that she

ought to dispose of herself with all speed. But where should she go?

And burning to lay herself upon the shrine of sisterly devotion, she

sat down to settle that point.

Now, the old sofa was a regular patriarch of a sofa--long, broad,

well-cushioned, and low, a trifle shabby, as well it might be, for the

girls had slept and sprawled on it as babies, fished over the back,

rode on the arms, and had menageries under it as children, and rested

tired heads, dreamed dreams, and listened to tender talk on it as young

women. They all loved it, for it was a family refuge, and one corner

had always been Jo's favorite lounging place. Among the many pillows

that adorned the venerable couch was one, hard, round, covered with

prickly horsehair, and furnished with a knobby button at each end.

This repulsive pillow was her especial property, being used as a weapon

of defense, a barricade, or a stern preventive of too much slumber.

Laurie knew this pillow well, and had cause to regard it with deep

aversion, having been unmercifully pummeled with it in former days when

romping was allowed, and now frequently debarred by it from the seat he

most coveted next to Jo in the sofa corner. If 'the sausage' as they

called it, stood on end, it was a sign that he might approach and

repose, but if it lay flat across the sofa, woe to man, woman, or child

who dared disturb it! That evening Jo forgot to barricade her corner,

and had not been in her seat five minutes, before a massive form

appeared beside her, and with both arms spread over the sofa back, both

long legs stretched out before him, Laurie exclaimed, with a sigh of

satisfaction...

"Now, this is filling at the price."

"No slang," snapped Jo, slamming down the pillow. But it was too late,

there was no room for it, and coasting onto the floor, it disappeared

in a most mysterious manner.

"Come, Jo, don't be thorny. After studying himself to a skeleton all

the week, a fellow deserves petting and ought to get it."

"Beth will pet you. I'm busy."

"No, she's not to be bothered with me, but you like that sort of thing,

unless you've suddenly lost your taste for it. Have you? Do you hate

your boy, and want to fire pillows at him?"

Anything more wheedlesome than that touching appeal was seldom heard,

but Jo quenched 'her boy' by turning on him with a stern query, "How

many bouquets have you sent Miss Randal this week?"

"Not one, upon my word. She's engaged. Now then."

"I'm glad of it, that's one of your foolish extravagances, sending

flowers and things to girls for whom you don't care two pins,"

continued Jo reprovingly.

"Sensible girls for whom I do care whole papers of pins won't let me

send them 'flowers and things', so what can I do? My feelings need a

'vent'."

"Mother doesn't approve of flirting even in fun, and you do flirt

desperately, Teddy."

"I'd give anything if I could answer, 'So do you'. As I can't, I'll

merely say that I don't see any harm in that pleasant little game, if

all parties understand that it's only play."

"Well, it does look pleasant, but I can't learn how it's done. I've

tried, because one feels awkward in company not to do as everybody else

is doing, but I don't seem to get on", said Jo, forgetting to play

mentor.

"Take lessons of Amy, she has a regular talent for it."

"Yes, she does it very prettily, and never seems to go too far. I

suppose it's natural to some people to please without trying, and

others to always say and do the wrong thing in the wrong place."

"I'm glad you can't flirt. It's really refreshing to see a sensible,

straightforward girl, who can be jolly and kind without making a fool

of herself. Between ourselves, Jo, some of the girls I know really do

go on at such a rate I'm ashamed of them. They don't mean any harm, I'm

sure, but if they knew how we fellows talked about them afterward,

they'd mend their ways, I fancy."

"They do the same, and as their tongues are the sharpest, you fellows

get the worst of it, for you are as silly as they, every bit. If you

behaved properly, they would, but knowing you like their nonsense, they

keep it up, and then you blame them."

"Much you know about it, ma'am," said Laurie in a superior tone. "We

don't like romps and flirts, though we may act as if we did sometimes.

The pretty, modest girls are never talked about, except respectfully,

among gentleman. Bless your innocent soul! If you could be in my place

for a month you'd see things that would astonish you a trifle. Upon my

word, when I see one of those harum-scarum girls, I always want to say

with our friend Cock Robin...

"Out upon you, fie upon you,

Bold-faced jig!"

It was impossible to help laughing at the funny conflict between

Laurie's chivalrous reluctance to speak ill of womankind, and his very

natural dislike of the unfeminine folly of which fashionable society

showed him many samples. Jo knew that 'young Laurence' was regarded as

a most eligible parti by worldly mamas, was much smiled upon by their

daughters, and flattered enough by ladies of all ages to make a coxcomb

of him, so she watched him rather jealously, fearing he would be

spoiled, and rejoiced more than she confessed to find that he still

believed in modest girls. Returning suddenly to her admonitory tone,

she said, dropping her voice, "If you must have a 'vent', Teddy, go and

devote yourself to one of the 'pretty, modest girls' whom you do

respect, and not waste your time with the silly ones."

"You really advise it?" and Laurie looked at her with an odd mixture of

anxiety and merriment in his face.

"Yes, I do, but you'd better wait till you are through college, on the

whole, and be fitting yourself for the place meantime. You're not half

good enough for--well, whoever the modest girl may be." and Jo looked a

little queer likewise, for a name had almost escaped her.

"That I'm not!" acquiesced Laurie, with an expression of humility quite

new to him, as he dropped his eyes and absently wound Jo's apron tassel

round his finger.

"Mercy on us, this will never do," thought Jo, adding aloud, "Go and

sing to me. I'm dying for some music, and always like yours."

"I'd rather stay here, thank you."

"Well, you can't, there isn't room. Go and make yourself useful, since

you are too big to be ornamental. I thought you hated to be tied to a

woman's apron string?" retorted Jo, quoting certain rebellious words of

his own.

"Ah, that depends on who wears the apron!" and Laurie gave an audacious

tweak at the tassel.

"Are you going?" demanded Jo, diving for the pillow.

He fled at once, and the minute it was well, "Up with the bonnets of

bonnie Dundee," she slipped away to return no more till the young

gentleman departed in high dudgeon.

Jo lay long awake that night, and was just dropping off when the sound

of a stifled sob made her fly to Beth's bedside, with the anxious

inquiry, "What is it, dear?"

"I thought you were asleep," sobbed Beth.

"Is it the old pain, my precious?"

"No, it's a new one, but I can bear it," and Beth tried to check her

tears.

"Tell me all about it, and let me cure it as I often did the other."

"You can't, there is no cure." There Beth's voice gave way, and

clinging to her sister, she cried so despairingly that Jo was

frightened.

"Where is it? Shall I call Mother?"

"No, no, don't call her, don't tell her. I shall be better soon. Lie

down here and 'poor' my head. I'll be quiet and go to sleep, indeed I

will."

Jo obeyed, but as her hand went softly to and fro across Beth's hot

forehead and wet eyelids, her heart was very full and she longed to

speak. But young as she was, Jo had learned that hearts, like flowers,

cannot be rudely handled, but must open naturally, so though she

believed she knew the cause of Beth's new pain, she only said, in her

tenderest tone, "Does anything trouble you, deary?"

"Yes, Jo," after a long pause.

"Wouldn't it comfort you to tell me what it is?"

"Not now, not yet."

"Then I won't ask, but remember, Bethy, that Mother and Jo are always

glad to hear and help you, if they can."

"I know it. I'll tell you by-and-by."

"Is the pain better now?"

"Oh, yes, much better, you are so comfortable, Jo."

"Go to sleep, dear. I'll stay with you."

So cheek to cheek they fell asleep, and on the morrow Beth seemed quite

herself again, for at eighteen neither heads nor hearts ache long, and

a loving word can medicine most ills.

But Jo had made up her mind, and after pondering over a project for

some days, she confided it to her mother.

"You asked me the other day what my wishes were. I'll tell you one of

them, Marmee," she began, as they sat along together. "I want to go

away somewhere this winter for a change."

"Why, Jo?" and her mother looked up quickly, as if the words suggested

a double meaning.

With her eyes on her work Jo answered soberly, "I want something new.

I feel restless and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning more than

I am. I brood too much over my own small affairs, and need stirring

up, so as I can be spared this winter, I'd like to hop a little way and

try my wings."

"Where will you hop?"

"To New York. I had a bright idea yesterday, and this is it. You know

Mrs. Kirke wrote to you for some respectable young person to teach her

children and sew. It's rather hard to find just the thing, but I think

I should suit if I tried."

"My dear, go out to service in that great boarding house!" and Mrs.

March looked surprised, but not displeased.

"It's not exactly going out to service, for Mrs. Kirke is your

friend--the kindest soul that ever lived--and would make things

pleasant for me, I know. Her family is separate from the rest, and no

one knows me there. Don't care if they do. It's honest work, and I'm

not ashamed of it."

"Nor I. But your writing?"

"All the better for the change. I shall see and hear new things, get

new ideas, and even if I haven't much time there, I shall bring home

quantities of material for my rubbish."

"I have no doubt of it, but are these your only reasons for this sudden

fancy?"

"No, Mother."

"May I know the others?"

Jo looked up and Jo looked down, then said slowly, with sudden color in

her cheeks. "It may be vain and wrong to say it, but--I'm

afraid--Laurie is getting too fond of me."

"Then you don't care for him in the way it is evident he begins to care

for you?" and Mrs. March looked anxious as she put the question.

"Mercy, no! I love the dear boy, as I always have, and am immensely

proud of him, but as for anything more, it's out of the question."

"I'm glad of that, Jo."

"Why, please?"

"Because, dear, I don't think you suited to one another. As friends

you are very happy, and your frequent quarrels soon blow over, but I

fear you would both rebel if you were mated for life. You are too much

alike and too fond of freedom, not to mention hot tempers and strong

wills, to get on happily together, in a relation which needs infinite

patience and forbearance, as well as love."

"That's just the feeling I had, though I couldn't express it. I'm glad

you think he is only beginning to care for me. It would trouble me

sadly to make him unhappy, for I couldn't fall in love with the dear

old fellow merely out of gratitude, could I?"

"You are sure of his feeling for you?"

The color deepened in Jo's cheeks as she answered, with the look of

mingled pleasure, pride, and pain which young girls wear when speaking

of first lovers, "I'm afraid it is so, Mother. He hasn't said

anything, but he looks a great deal. I think I had better go away

before it comes to anything."

"I agree with you, and if it can be managed you shall go."

Jo looked relieved, and after a pause, said, smiling, "How Mrs. Moffat

would wonder at your want of management, if she knew, and how she will

rejoice that Annie may still hope."

"Ah, Jo, mothers may differ in their management, but the hope is the

same in all--the desire to see their children happy. Meg is so, and I

am content with her success. You I leave to enjoy your liberty till

you tire of it, for only then will you find that there is something

sweeter. Amy is my chief care now, but her good sense will help her.

For Beth, I indulge no hopes except that she may be well. By the way,

she seems brighter this last day or two. Have you spoken to her?'

"Yes, she owned she had a trouble, and promised to tell me by-and-by.

I said no more, for I think I know it," and Jo told her little story.

Mrs. March shook her head, and did not take so romantic a view of the

case, but looked grave, and repeated her opinion that for Laurie's sake

Jo should go away for a time.

"Let us say nothing about it to him till the plan is settled, then I'll

run away before he can collect his wits and be tragic. Beth must think

I'm going to please myself, as I am, for I can't talk about Laurie to

her. But she can pet and comfort him after I'm gone, and so cure him

of this romantic notion. He's been through so many little trials of

the sort, he's used to it, and will soon get over his lovelornity."

Jo spoke hopefully, but could not rid herself of the foreboding fear

that this 'little trial' would be harder than the others, and that

Laurie would not get over his 'lovelornity' as easily as heretofore.

The plan was talked over in a family council and agreed upon, for Mrs.

Kirke gladly accepted Jo, and promised to make a pleasant home for her.

The teaching would render her independent, and such leisure as she got

might be made profitable by writing, while the new scenes and society

would be both useful and agreeable. Jo liked the prospect and was

eager to be gone, for the home nest was growing too narrow for her

restless nature and adventurous spirit. When all was settled, with

fear and trembling she told Laurie, but to her surprise he took it very

quietly. He had been graver than usual of late, but very pleasant, and

when jokingly accused of turning over a new leaf, he answered soberly,

"So I am, and I mean this one shall stay turned."

Jo was very much relieved that one of his virtuous fits should come on

just then, and made her preparations with a lightened heart, for Beth

seemed more cheerful, and hoped she was doing the best for all.

"One thing I leave in your especial care," she said, the night before

she left.

"You mean your papers?" asked Beth.

"No, my boy. Be very good to him, won't you?"

"Of course I will, but I can't fill your place, and he'll miss you

sadly."

"It won't hurt him, so remember, I leave him in your charge, to plague,

pet, and keep in order."

"I'll do my best, for your sake," promised Beth, wondering why Jo

looked at her so queerly.

When Laurie said good-by, he whispered significantly, "It won't do a

bit of good, Jo. My eye is on you, so mind what you do, or I'll come

and bring you home."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

JO'S JOURNAL

New York, November

Dear Marmee and Beth,

I'm going to write you a regular volume, for I've got heaps to tell,

though I'm not a fine young lady traveling on the continent. When I

lost sight of Father's dear old face, I felt a trifle blue, and might

have shed a briny drop or two, if an Irish lady with four small

children, all crying more or less, hadn't diverted my mind, for I

amused myself by dropping gingerbread nuts over the seat every time

they opened their mouths to roar.

Soon the sun came out, and taking it as a good omen, I cleared up

likewise and enjoyed my journey with all my heart.

Mrs. Kirke welcomed me so kindly I felt at home at once, even in that

big house full of strangers. She gave me a funny little sky

parlor--all she had, but there is a stove in it, and a nice table in a

sunny window, so I can sit here and write whenever I like. A fine view

and a church tower opposite atone for the many stairs, and I took a

fancy to my den on the spot. The nursery, where I am to teach and sew,

is a pleasant room next Mrs. Kirke's private parlor, and the two little

girls are pretty children, rather spoiled, I fancy, but they took to me

after telling them The Seven Bad Pigs, and I've no doubt I shall make a

model governess.

I am to have my meals with the children, if I prefer it to the great

table, and for the present I do, for I am bashful, though no one will

believe it.

"Now, my dear, make yourself at home," said Mrs. K. in her motherly

way, "I'm on the drive from morning to night, as you may suppose with

such a family, but a great anxiety will be off my mind if I know the

children are safe with you. My rooms are always open to you, and your

own shall be as comfortable as I can make it. There are some pleasant

people in the house if you feel sociable, and your evenings are always

free. Come to me if anything goes wrong, and be as happy as you can.

There's the tea bell, I must run and change my cap." And off she

bustled, leaving me to settle myself in my new nest.

As I went downstairs soon after, I saw something I liked. The flights

are very long in this tall house, and as I stood waiting at the head of

the third one for a little servant girl to lumber up, I saw a gentleman

come along behind her, take the heavy hod of coal out of her hand,

carry it all the way up, put it down at a door near by, and walk away,

saying, with a kind nod and a foreign accent, "It goes better so. The

little back is too young to haf such heaviness."

Wasn't it good of him? I like such things, for as Father says, trifles

show character. When I mentioned it to Mrs. K., that evening, she

laughed, and said, "That must have been Professor Bhaer, he's always

doing things of that sort."

Mrs. K. told me he was from Berlin, very learned and good, but poor as

a church mouse, and gives lessons to support himself and two little

orphan nephews whom he is educating here, according to the wishes of

his sister, who married an American. Not a very romantic story, but it

interested me, and I was glad to hear that Mrs. K. lends him her

parlor for some of his scholars. There is a glass door between it and

the nursery, and I mean to peep at him, and then I'll tell you how he

looks. He's almost forty, so it's no harm, Marmee.

After tea and a go-to-bed romp with the little girls, I attacked the

big workbasket, and had a quiet evening chatting with my new friend. I

shall keep a journal-letter, and send it once a week, so goodnight, and

more tomorrow.

Tuesday Eve

Had a lively time in my seminary this morning, for the children acted

like Sancho, and at one time I really thought I should shake them all

round. Some good angel inspired me to try gymnastics, and I kept it up

till they were glad to sit down and keep still. After luncheon, the

girl took them out for a walk, and I went to my needlework like little

Mabel 'with a willing mind'. I was thanking my stars that I'd learned

to make nice buttonholes, when the parlor door opened and shut, and

someone began to hum, Kennst Du Das Land, like a big bumblebee. It was

dreadfully improper, I know, but I couldn't resist the temptation, and

lifting one end of the curtain before the glass door, I peeped in.

Professor Bhaer was there, and while he arranged his books, I took a

good look at him. A regular German--rather stout, with brown hair

tumbled all over his head, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I

ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's ears good, after our

sharp or slipshod American gabble. His clothes were rusty, his hands

were large, and he hadn't a really handsome feature in his face, except

his beautiful teeth, yet I liked him, for he had a fine head, his linen

was very nice, and he looked like a gentleman, though two buttons were

off his coat and there was a patch on one shoe. He looked sober in

spite of his humming, till he went to the window to turn the hyacinth

bulbs toward the sun, and stroke the cat, who received him like an old

friend. Then he smiled, and when a tap came at the door, called out in

a loud, brisk tone, "Herein!"

I was just going to run, when I caught sight of a morsel of a child

carrying a big book, and stopped, to see what was going on.

"Me wants me Bhaer," said the mite, slamming down her book and running

to meet him.

"Thou shalt haf thy Bhaer. Come, then, and take a goot hug from him,

my Tina," said the Professor, catching her up with a laugh, and holding

her so high over his head that she had to stoop her little face to kiss

him.

"Now me mus tuddy my lessin," went on the funny little thing. So he

put her up at the table, opened the great dictionary she had brought,

and gave her a paper and pencil, and she scribbled away, turning a leaf

now and then, and passing her little fat finger down the page, as if

finding a word, so soberly that I nearly betrayed myself by a laugh,

while Mr. Bhaer stood stroking her pretty hair with a fatherly look

that made me think she must be his own, though she looked more French

than German.

Another knock and the appearance of two young ladies sent me back to my

work, and there I virtuously remained through all the noise and

gabbling that went on next door. One of the girls kept laughing

affectedly, and saying, "Now Professor," in a coquettish tone, and the

other pronounced her German with an accent that must have made it hard

for him to keep sober.

Both seemed to try his patience sorely, for more than once I heard him

say emphatically, "No, no, it is not so, you haf not attend to what I

say," and once there was a loud rap, as if he struck the table with his

book, followed by the despairing exclamation, "Prut! It all goes bad

this day."

Poor man, I pitied him, and when the girls were gone, took just one

more peep to see if he survived it. He seemed to have thrown himself

back in his chair, tired out, and sat there with his eyes shut till the

clock struck two, when he jumped up, put his books in his pocket, as if

ready for another lesson, and taking little Tina who had fallen asleep

on the sofa in his arms, he carried her quietly away. I fancy he has a

hard life of it. Mrs. Kirke asked me if I wouldn't go down to the five

o'clock dinner, and feeling a little bit homesick, I thought I would,

just to see what sort of people are under the same roof with me. So I

made myself respectable and tried to slip in behind Mrs. Kirke, but as

she is short and I'm tall, my efforts at concealment were rather a

failure. She gave me a seat by her, and after my face cooled off, I

plucked up courage and looked about me. The long table was full, and

every one intent on getting their dinner, the gentlemen especially, who

seemed to be eating on time, for they bolted in every sense of the

word, vanishing as soon as they were done. There was the usual

assortment of young men absorbed in themselves, young couples absorbed

in each other, married ladies in their babies, and old gentlemen in

politics. I don't think I shall care to have much to do with any of

them, except one sweetfaced maiden lady, who looks as if she had

something in her.

Cast away at the very bottom of the table was the Professor, shouting

answers to the questions of a very inquisitive, deaf old gentleman on

one side, and talking philosophy with a Frenchman on the other. If Amy

had been here, she'd have turned her back on him forever because, sad

to relate, he had a great appetite, and shoveled in his dinner in a

manner which would have horrified 'her ladyship'. I didn't mind, for I

like 'to see folks eat with a relish', as Hannah says, and the poor man

must have needed a deal of food after teaching idiots all day.

As I went upstairs after dinner, two of the young men were settling

their hats before the hall mirror, and I heard one say low to the

other, "Who's the new party?"

"Governess, or something of that sort."

"What the deuce is she at our table for?"

"Friend of the old lady's."

"Handsome head, but no style."

"Not a bit of it. Give us a light and come on."

I felt angry at first, and then I didn't care, for a governess is as

good as a clerk, and I've got sense, if I haven't style, which is more

than some people have, judging from the remarks of the elegant beings

who clattered away, smoking like bad chimneys. I hate ordinary people!

Thursday

Yesterday was a quiet day spent in teaching, sewing, and writing in my

little room, which is very cozy, with a light and fire. I picked up a

few bits of news and was introduced to the Professor. It seems that

Tina is the child of the Frenchwoman who does the fine ironing in the

laundry here. The little thing has lost her heart to Mr. Bhaer, and

follows him about the house like a dog whenever he is at home, which

delights him, as he is very fond of children, though a 'bacheldore'.

Kitty and Minnie Kirke likewise regard him with affection, and tell all

sorts of stories about the plays he invents, the presents he brings,

and the splendid tales he tells. The younger men quiz him, it seems,

call him Old Fritz, Lager Beer, Ursa Major, and make all manner of

jokes on his name. But he enjoys it like a boy, Mrs. Kirke says, and

takes it so good-naturedly that they all like him in spite of his

foreign ways.

The maiden lady is a Miss Norton, rich, cultivated, and kind. She

spoke to me at dinner today (for I went to table again, it's such fun

to watch people), and asked me to come and see her at her room. She

has fine books and pictures, knows interesting persons, and seems

friendly, so I shall make myself agreeable, for I do want to get into

good society, only it isn't the same sort that Amy likes.

I was in our parlor last evening when Mr. Bhaer came in with some

newspapers for Mrs. Kirke. She wasn't there, but Minnie, who is a

little old woman, introduced me very prettily. "This is Mamma's friend,

Miss March."

"Yes, and she's jolly and we like her lots," added Kitty, who is an

'enfant terrible'.

We both bowed, and then we laughed, for the prim introduction and the

blunt addition were rather a comical contrast.

"Ah, yes, I hear these naughty ones go to vex you, Mees Marsch. If so

again, call at me and I come," he said, with a threatening frown that

delighted the little wretches.

I promised I would, and he departed, but it seems as if I was doomed to

see a good deal of him, for today as I passed his door on my way out,

by accident I knocked against it with my umbrella. It flew open, and

there he stood in his dressing gown, with a big blue sock on one hand

and a darning needle in the other. He didn't seem at all ashamed of

it, for when I explained and hurried on, he waved his hand, sock and

all, saying in his loud, cheerful way...

"You haf a fine day to make your walk. Bon voyage, Mademoiselle."

I laughed all the way downstairs, but it was a little pathetic, also to

think of the poor man having to mend his own clothes. The German

gentlemen embroider, I know, but darning hose is another thing and not

so pretty.

Saturday

Nothing has happened to write about, except a call on Miss Norton, who

has a room full of pretty things, and who was very charming, for she

showed me all her treasures, and asked me if I would sometimes go with

her to lectures and concerts, as her escort, if I enjoyed them. She

put it as a favor, but I'm sure Mrs. Kirke has told her about us, and

she does it out of kindness to me. I'm as proud as Lucifer, but such

favors from such people don't burden me, and I accepted gratefully.

When I got back to the nursery there was such an uproar in the parlor

that I looked in, and there was Mr. Bhaer down on his hands and knees,

with Tina on his back, Kitty leading him with a jump rope, and Minnie

feeding two small boys with seedcakes, as they roared and ramped in

cages built of chairs.

"We are playing nargerie," explained Kitty.

"Dis is mine effalunt!" added Tina, holding on by the Professor's hair.

"Mamma always allows us to do what we like Saturday afternoon, when

Franz and Emil come, doesn't she, Mr. Bhaer?" said Minnie.

The 'effalunt' sat up, looking as much in earnest as any of them, and

said soberly to me, "I gif you my wort it is so, if we make too large a

noise you shall say Hush! to us, and we go more softly."

I promised to do so, but left the door open and enjoyed the fun as much

as they did, for a more glorious frolic I never witnessed. They played

tag and soldiers, danced and sang, and when it began to grow dark they

all piled onto the sofa about the Professor, while he told charming

fairy stories of the storks on the chimney tops, and the little

'koblods', who ride the snowflakes as they fall. I wish Americans were

as simple and natural as Germans, don't you?

I'm so fond of writing, I should go spinning on forever if motives of

economy didn't stop me, for though I've used thin paper and written

fine, I tremble to think of the stamps this long letter will need.

Pray forward Amy's as soon as you can spare them. My small news will

sound very flat after her splendors, but you will like them, I know.

Is Teddy studying so hard that he can't find time to write to his

friends? Take good care of him for me, Beth, and tell me all about the

babies, and give heaps of love to everyone. From your faithful Jo.

P.S. On reading over my letter, it strikes me as rather Bhaery, but I

am always interested in odd people, and I really had nothing else to

write about. Bless you!

DECEMBER

My Precious Betsey,

As this is to be a scribble-scrabble letter, I direct it to you, for it

may amuse you, and give you some idea of my goings on, for though

quiet, they are rather amusing, for which, oh, be joyful! After what

Amy would call Herculaneum efforts, in the way of mental and moral

agriculture, my young ideas begin to shoot and my little twigs to bend

as I could wish. They are not so interesting to me as Tina and the

boys, but I do my duty by them, and they are fond of me. Franz and

Emil are jolly little lads, quite after my own heart, for the mixture

of German and American spirit in them produces a constant state of

effervescence. Saturday afternoons are riotous times, whether spent in

the house or out, for on pleasant days they all go to walk, like a

seminary, with the Professor and myself to keep order, and then such

fun!

We are very good friends now, and I've begun to take lessons. I really

couldn't help it, and it all came about in such a droll way that I must

tell you. To begin at the beginning, Mrs. Kirke called to me one day

as I passed Mr. Bhaer's room where she was rummaging.

"Did you ever see such a den, my dear? Just come and help me put these

books to rights, for I've turned everything upside down, trying to

discover what he has done with the six new handkerchiefs I gave him not

long ago."

I went in, and while we worked I looked about me, for it was 'a den' to

be sure. Books and papers everywhere, a broken meerschaum, and an old

flute over the mantlepiece as if done with, a ragged bird without any

tail chirped on one window seat, and a box of white mice adorned the

other. Half-finished boats and bits of string lay among the

manuscripts. Dirty little boots stood drying before the fire, and

traces of the dearly beloved boys, for whom he makes a slave of

himself, were to be seen all over the room. After a grand rummage

three of the missing articles were found, one over the bird cage, one

covered with ink, and a third burned brown, having been used as a

holder.

"Such a man!" laughed good-natured Mrs. K., as she put the relics in

the rag bay. "I suppose the others are torn up to rig ships, bandage

cut fingers, or make kite tails. It's dreadful, but I can't scold him.

He's so absent-minded and goodnatured, he lets those boys ride over him

roughshod. I agreed to do his washing and mending, but he forgets to

give out his things and I forget to look them over, so he comes to a

sad pass sometimes."

"Let me mend them," said I. "I don't mind it, and he needn't know.

I'd like to, he's so kind to me about bringing my letters and lending

books."

So I have got his things in order, and knit heels into two pairs of the

socks, for they were boggled out of shape with his queer darns.

Nothing was said, and I hoped he wouldn't find it out, but one day last

week he caught me at it. Hearing the lessons he gives to others has

interested and amused me so much that I took a fancy to learn, for Tina

runs in and out, leaving the door open, and I can hear. I had been

sitting near this door, finishing off the last sock, and trying to

understand what he said to a new scholar, who is as stupid as I am.

The girl had gone, and I thought he had also, it was so still, and I

was busily gabbling over a verb, and rocking to and fro in a most

absurd way, when a little crow made me look up, and there was Mr. Bhaer

looking and laughing quietly, while he made signs to Tina not to betray

him.

"So!" he said, as I stopped and stared like a goose, "you peep at me, I

peep at you, and this is not bad, but see, I am not pleasanting when I

say, haf you a wish for German?"

"Yes, but you are too busy. I am too stupid to learn," I blundered

out, as red as a peony.

"Prut! We will make the time, and we fail not to find the sense. At

efening I shall gif a little lesson with much gladness, for look you,

Mees Marsch, I haf this debt to pay." And he pointed to my work 'Yes,'

they say to one another, these so kind ladies, 'he is a stupid old

fellow, he will see not what we do, he will never observe that his sock

heels go not in holes any more, he will think his buttons grow out new

when they fall, and believe that strings make theirselves.' "Ah! But I

haf an eye, and I see much. I haf a heart, and I feel thanks for this.

Come, a little lesson then and now, or--no more good fairy works for me

and mine."

Of course I couldn't say anything after that, and as it really is a

splendid opportunity, I made the bargain, and we began. I took four

lessons, and then I stuck fast in a grammatical bog. The Professor was

very patient with me, but it must have been torment to him, and now and

then he'd look at me with such an expression of mild despair that it

was a toss-up with me whether to laugh or cry. I tried both ways, and

when it came to a sniff or utter mortification and woe, he just threw

the grammar on to the floor and marched out of the room. I felt myself

disgraced and deserted forever, but didn't blame him a particle, and

was scrambling my papers together, meaning to rush upstairs and shake

myself hard, when in he came, as brisk and beaming as if I'd covered

myself in glory.

"Now we shall try a new way. You and I will read these pleasant little

\_marchen\_ together, and dig no more in that dry book, that goes in the

corner for making us trouble."

He spoke so kindly, and opened Hans Anderson's fairy tales so

invitingly before me, that I was more ashamed than ever, and went at my

lesson in a neck-or-nothing style that seemed to amuse him immensely.

I forgot my bashfulness, and pegged away (no other word will express

it) with all my might, tumbling over long words, pronouncing according

to inspiration of the minute, and doing my very best. When I finished

reading my first page, and stopped for breath, he clapped his hands and

cried out in his hearty way, "Das ist gut! Now we go well! My turn. I

do him in German, gif me your ear." And away he went, rumbling out the

words with his strong voice and a relish which was good to see as well

as hear. Fortunately the story was \_The Constant Tin Soldier\_, which

is droll, you know, so I could laugh, and I did, though I didn't

understand half he read, for I couldn't help it, he was so earnest, I

so excited, and the whole thing so comical.

After that we got on better, and now I read my lessons pretty well, for

this way of studying suits me, and I can see that the grammar gets

tucked into the tales and poetry as one gives pills in jelly. I like

it very much, and he doesn't seem tired of it yet, which is very good

of him, isn't it? I mean to give him something on Christmas, for I

dare not offer money. Tell me something nice, Marmee.

I'm glad Laurie seems so happy and busy, that he has given up smoking

and lets his hair grow. You see Beth manages him better than I did.

I'm not jealous, dear, do your best, only don't make a saint of him.

I'm afraid I couldn't like him without a spice of human naughtiness.

Read him bits of my letters. I haven't time to write much, and that

will do just as well. Thank Heaven Beth continues so comfortable.

JANUARY

A Happy New Year to you all, my dearest family, which of course

includes Mr. L. and a young man by the name of Teddy. I can't tell you

how much I enjoyed your Christmas bundle, for I didn't get it till

night and had given up hoping. Your letter came in the morning, but

you said nothing about a parcel, meaning it for a surprise, so I was

disappointed, for I'd had a 'kind of feeling' that you wouldn't forget

me. I felt a little low in my mind as I sat up in my room after tea,

and when the big, muddy, battered-looking bundle was brought to me, I

just hugged it and pranced. It was so homey and refreshing that I sat

down on the floor and read and looked and ate and laughed and cried, in

my usual absurd way. The things were just what I wanted, and all the

better for being made instead of bought. Beth's new 'ink bib' was

capital, and Hannah's box of hard gingerbread will be a treasure. I'll

be sure and wear the nice flannels you sent, Marmee, and read carefully

the books Father has marked. Thank you all, heaps and heaps!

Speaking of books reminds me that I'm getting rich in that line, for on

New Year's Day Mr. Bhaer gave me a fine Shakespeare. It is one he

values much, and I've often admired it, set up in the place of honor

with his German Bible, Plato, Homer, and Milton, so you may imagine how

I felt when he brought it down, without its cover, and showed me my own

name in it, "from my friend Friedrich Bhaer".

"You say often you wish a library. Here I gif you one, for between

these lids (he meant covers) is many books in one. Read him well, and

he will help you much, for the study of character in this book will

help you to read it in the world and paint it with your pen."

I thanked him as well as I could, and talk now about 'my library', as

if I had a hundred books. I never knew how much there was in

Shakespeare before, but then I never had a Bhaer to explain it to me.

Now don't laugh at his horrid name. It isn't pronounced either Bear or

Beer, as people will say it, but something between the two, as only

Germans can give it. I'm glad you both like what I tell you about him,

and hope you will know him some day. Mother would admire his warm

heart, Father his wise head. I admire both, and feel rich in my new

'friend Friedrich Bhaer'.

Not having much money, or knowing what he'd like, I got several little

things, and put them about the room, where he would find them

unexpectedly. They were useful, pretty, or funny, a new standish on

his table, a little vase for his flower, he always has one, or a bit of

green in a glass, to keep him fresh, he says, and a holder for his

blower, so that he needn't burn up what Amy calls 'mouchoirs'. I made

it like those Beth invented, a big butterfly with a fat body, and black

and yellow wings, worsted feelers, and bead eyes. It took his fancy

immensely, and he put it on his mantlepiece as an article of virtue, so

it was rather a failure after all. Poor as he is, he didn't forget a

servant or a child in the house, and not a soul here, from the French

laundrywoman to Miss Norton forgot him. I was so glad of that.

They got up a masquerade, and had a gay time New Year's Eve. I didn't

mean to go down, having no dress. But at the last minute, Mrs. Kirke

remembered some old brocades, and Miss Norton lent me lace and

feathers. So I dressed up as Mrs. Malaprop, and sailed in with a mask

on. No one knew me, for I disguised my voice, and no one dreamed of

the silent, haughty Miss March (for they think I am very stiff and

cool, most of them, and so I am to whippersnappers) could dance and

dress, and burst out into a 'nice derangement of epitaphs, like an

allegory on the banks of the Nile'. I enjoyed it very much, and when

we unmasked it was fun to see them stare at me. I heard one of the

young men tell another that he knew I'd been an actress, in fact, he

thought he remembered seeing me at one of the minor theaters. Meg will

relish that joke. Mr. Bhaer was Nick Bottom, and Tina was Titania, a

perfect little fairy in his arms. To see them dance was 'quite a

landscape', to use a Teddyism.

I had a very happy New Year, after all, and when I thought it over in

my room, I felt as if I was getting on a little in spite of my many

failures, for I'm cheerful all the time now, work with a will, and take

more interest in other people than I used to, which is satisfactory.

Bless you all! Ever your loving... Jo

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

FRIEND

Though very happy in the social atmosphere about her, and very busy

with the daily work that earned her bread and made it sweeter for the

effort, Jo still found time for literary labors. The purpose which now

took possession of her was a natural one to a poor and ambitious girl,

but the means she took to gain her end were not the best. She saw that

money conferred power, money and power, therefore, she resolved to

have, not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved

more than life. The dream of filling home with comforts, giving Beth

everything she wanted, from strawberries in winter to an organ in her

bedroom, going abroad herself, and always having more than enough, so

that she might indulge in the luxury of charity, had been for years

Jo's most cherished castle in the air.

The prize-story experience had seemed to open a way which might, after

long traveling and much uphill work, lead to this delightful chateau en

Espagne. But the novel disaster quenched her courage for a time, for

public opinion is a giant which has frightened stouter-hearted Jacks on

bigger beanstalks than hers. Like that immortal hero, she reposed

awhile after the first attempt, which resulted in a tumble and the

least lovely of the giant's treasures, if I remember rightly. But the

'up again and take another' spirit was as strong in Jo as in Jack, so

she scrambled up on the shady side this time and got more booty, but

nearly left behind her what was far more precious than the moneybags.

She took to writing sensation stories, for in those dark ages, even

all-perfect America read rubbish. She told no one, but concocted a

'thrilling tale', and boldly carried it herself to Mr. Dashwood, editor

of the Weekly Volcano. She had never read Sartor Resartus, but she had

a womanly instinct that clothes possess an influence more powerful over

many than the worth of character or the magic of manners. So she

dressed herself in her best, and trying to persuade herself that she

was neither excited nor nervous, bravely climbed two pairs of dark and

dirty stairs to find herself in a disorderly room, a cloud of cigar

smoke, and the presence of three gentlemen, sitting with their heels

rather higher than their hats, which articles of dress none of them

took the trouble to remove on her appearance. Somewhat daunted by this

reception, Jo hesitated on the threshold, murmuring in much

embarrassment...

"Excuse me, I was looking for the Weekly Volcano office. I wished to

see Mr. Dashwood."

Down went the highest pair of heels, up rose the smokiest gentleman,

and carefully cherishing his cigar between his fingers, he advanced

with a nod and a countenance expressive of nothing but sleep. Feeling

that she must get through the matter somehow, Jo produced her

manuscript and, blushing redder and redder with each sentence,

blundered out fragments of the little speech carefully prepared for the

occasion.

"A friend of mine desired me to offer--a story--just as an

experiment--would like your opinion--be glad to write more if this

suits."

While she blushed and blundered, Mr. Dashwood had taken the manuscript,

and was turning over the leaves with a pair of rather dirty fingers,

and casting critical glances up and down the neat pages.

"Not a first attempt, I take it?" observing that the pages were

numbered, covered only on one side, and not tied up with a ribbon--sure

sign of a novice.

"No, sir. She has had some experience, and got a prize for a tale in

the \_Blarneystone Banner\_."

"Oh, did she?" and Mr. Dashwood gave Jo a quick look, which seemed to

take note of everything she had on, from the bow in her bonnet to the

buttons on her boots. "Well, you can leave it, if you like. We've

more of this sort of thing on hand than we know what to do with at

present, but I'll run my eye over it, and give you an answer next week."

Now, Jo did \_not\_ like to leave it, for Mr. Dashwood didn't suit her at

all, but, under the circumstances, there was nothing for her to do but

bow and walk away, looking particularly tall and dignified, as she was

apt to do when nettled or abashed. Just then she was both, for it was

perfectly evident from the knowing glances exchanged among the

gentlemen that her little fiction of 'my friend' was considered a good

joke, and a laugh, produced by some inaudible remark of the editor, as

he closed the door, completed her discomfiture. Half resolving never

to return, she went home, and worked off her irritation by stitching

pinafores vigorously, and in an hour or two was cool enough to laugh

over the scene and long for next week.

When she went again, Mr. Dashwood was alone, whereat she rejoiced. Mr.

Dashwood was much wider awake than before, which was agreeable, and Mr.

Dashwood was not too deeply absorbed in a cigar to remember his

manners, so the second interview was much more comfortable than the

first.

"We'll take this (editors never say I), if you don't object to a few

alterations. It's too long, but omitting the passages I've marked will

make it just the right length," he said, in a businesslike tone.

Jo hardly knew her own MS. again, so crumpled and underscored were its

pages and paragraphs, but feeling as a tender parent might on being

asked to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new

cradle, she looked at the marked passages and was surprised to find

that all the moral reflections--which she had carefully put in as

ballast for much romance--had been stricken out.

"But, Sir, I thought every story should have some sort of a moral, so I

took care to have a few of my sinners repent."

Mr. Dashwoods's editorial gravity relaxed into a smile, for Jo had

forgotten her 'friend', and spoken as only an author could.

"People want to be amused, not preached at, you know. Morals don't

sell nowadays." Which was not quite a correct statement, by the way.

"You think it would do with these alterations, then?"

"Yes, it's a new plot, and pretty well worked up--language good, and so

on," was Mr. Dashwood's affable reply.

"What do you--that is, what compensation--" began Jo, not exactly

knowing how to express herself.

"Oh, yes, well, we give from twenty-five to thirty for things of this

sort. Pay when it comes out," returned Mr. Dashwood, as if that point

had escaped him. Such trifles do escape the editorial mind, it is said.

"Very well, you can have it," said Jo, handing back the story with a

satisfied air, for after the dollar-a-column work, even twenty-five

seemed good pay.

"Shall I tell my friend you will take another if she has one better

than this?" asked Jo, unconscious of her little slip of the tongue, and

emboldened by her success.

"Well, we'll look at it. Can't promise to take it. Tell her to make

it short and spicy, and never mind the moral. What name would your

friend like to put on it?" in a careless tone.

"None at all, if you please, she doesn't wish her name to appear and

has no nom de plume," said Jo, blushing in spite of herself.

"Just as she likes, of course. The tale will be out next week. Will

you call for the money, or shall I send it?" asked Mr. Dashwood, who

felt a natural desire to know who his new contributor might be.

"I'll call. Good morning, Sir."

As she departed, Mr. Dashwood put up his feet, with the graceful

remark, "Poor and proud, as usual, but she'll do."

Following Mr. Dashwood's directions, and making Mrs. Northbury her

model, Jo rashly took a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational

literature, but thanks to the life preserver thrown her by a friend,

she came up again not much the worse for her ducking.

Like most young scribblers, she went abroad for her characters and

scenery, and banditti, counts, gypsies, nuns, and duchesses appeared

upon her stage, and played their parts with as much accuracy and spirit

as could be expected. Her readers were not particular about such

trifles as grammar, punctuation, and probability, and Mr. Dashwood

graciously permitted her to fill his columns at the lowest prices, not

thinking it necessary to tell her that the real cause of his

hospitality was the fact that one of his hacks, on being offered higher

wages, had basely left him in the lurch.

She soon became interested in her work, for her emaciated purse grew

stout, and the little hoard she was making to take Beth to the

mountains next summer grew slowly but surely as the weeks passed. One

thing disturbed her satisfaction, and that was that she did not tell

them at home. She had a feeling that Father and Mother would not

approve, and preferred to have her own way first, and beg pardon

afterward. It was easy to keep her secret, for no name appeared with

her stories. Mr. Dashwood had of course found it out very soon, but

promised to be dumb, and for a wonder kept his word.

She thought it would do her no harm, for she sincerely meant to write

nothing of which she would be ashamed, and quieted all pricks of

conscience by anticipations of the happy minute when she should show

her earnings and laugh over her well-kept secret.

But Mr. Dashwood rejected any but thrilling tales, and as thrills could

not be produced except by harrowing up the souls of the readers,

history and romance, land and sea, science and art, police records and

lunatic asylums, had to be ransacked for the purpose. Jo soon found

that her innocent experience had given her but few glimpses of the

tragic world which underlies society, so regarding it in a business

light, she set about supplying her deficiencies with characteristic

energy. Eager to find material for stories, and bent on making them

original in plot, if not masterly in execution, she searched newspapers

for accidents, incidents, and crimes. She excited the suspicions of

public librarians by asking for works on poisons. She studied faces in

the street, and characters, good, bad, and indifferent, all about her.

She delved in the dust of ancient times for facts or fictions so old

that they were as good as new, and introduced herself to folly, sin,

and misery, as well as her limited opportunities allowed. She thought

she was prospering finely, but unconsciously she was beginning to

desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character.

She was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its

influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on

dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent

bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side

of life, which comes soon enough to all of us.

She was beginning to feel rather than see this, for much describing of

other people's passions and feelings set her to studying and

speculating about her own, a morbid amusement in which healthy young

minds do not voluntarily indulge. Wrongdoing always brings its own

punishment, and when Jo most needed hers, she got it.

I don't know whether the study of Shakespeare helped her to read

character, or the natural instinct of a woman for what was honest,

brave, and strong, but while endowing her imaginary heroes with every

perfection under the sun, Jo was discovering a live hero, who

interested her in spite of many human imperfections. Mr. Bhaer, in one

of their conversations, had advised her to study simple, true, and

lovely characters, wherever she found them, as good training for a

writer. Jo took him at his word, for she coolly turned round and

studied him--a proceeding which would have much surprised him, had he

known it, for the worthy Professor was very humble in his own conceit.

Why everybody liked him was what puzzled Jo, at first. He was neither

rich nor great, young nor handsome, in no respect what is called

fascinating, imposing, or brilliant, and yet he was as attractive as a

genial fire, and people seemed to gather about him as naturally as

about a warm hearth. He was poor, yet always appeared to be giving

something away; a stranger, yet everyone was his friend; no longer

young, but as happy-hearted as a boy; plain and peculiar, yet his face

looked beautiful to many, and his oddities were freely forgiven for his

sake. Jo often watched him, trying to discover the charm, and at last

decided that it was benevolence which worked the miracle. If he had

any sorrow, 'it sat with its head under its wing', and he turned only

his sunny side to the world. There were lines upon his forehead, but

Time seemed to have touched him gently, remembering how kind he was to

others. The pleasant curves about his mouth were the memorials of many

friendly words and cheery laughs, his eyes were never cold or hard, and

his big hand had a warm, strong grasp that was more expressive than

words.

His very clothes seemed to partake of the hospitable nature of the

wearer. They looked as if they were at ease, and liked to make him

comfortable. His capacious waistcoat was suggestive of a large heart

underneath. His rusty coat had a social air, and the baggy pockets

plainly proved that little hands often went in empty and came out full.

His very boots were benevolent, and his collars never stiff and raspy

like other people's.

"That's it!" said Jo to herself, when she at length discovered that

genuine good will toward one's fellow men could beautify and dignify

even a stout German teacher, who shoveled in his dinner, darned his own

socks, and was burdened with the name of Bhaer.

Jo valued goodness highly, but she also possessed a most feminine

respect for intellect, and a little discovery which she made about the

Professor added much to her regard for him. He never spoke of himself,

and no one ever knew that in his native city he had been a man much

honored and esteemed for learning and integrity, till a countryman came

to see him. He never spoke of himself, and in a conversation with Miss

Norton divulged the pleasing fact. From her Jo learned it, and liked

it all the better because Mr. Bhaer had never told it. She felt proud

to know that he was an honored Professor in Berlin, though only a poor

language-master in America, and his homely, hard-working life was much

beautified by the spice of romance which this discovery gave it.

Another and a better gift than intellect was shown her in a most

unexpected manner. Miss Norton had the entree into most society, which

Jo would have had no chance of seeing but for her. The solitary woman

felt an interest in the ambitious girl, and kindly conferred many

favors of this sort both on Jo and the Professor. She took them with

her one night to a select symposium, held in honor of several

celebrities.

Jo went prepared to bow down and adore the mighty ones whom she had

worshiped with youthful enthusiasm afar off. But her reverence for

genius received a severe shock that night, and it took her some time to

recover from the discovery that the great creatures were only men and

women after all. Imagine her dismay, on stealing a glance of timid

admiration at the poet whose lines suggested an ethereal being fed on

'spirit, fire, and dew', to behold him devouring his supper with an

ardor which flushed his intellectual countenance. Turning as from a

fallen idol, she made other discoveries which rapidly dispelled her

romantic illusions. The great novelist vibrated between two decanters

with the regularity of a pendulum; the famous divine flirted openly

with one of the Madame de Staels of the age, who looked daggers at

another Corinne, who was amiably satirizing her, after outmaneuvering

her in efforts to absorb the profound philosopher, who imbibed tea

Johnsonianly and appeared to slumber, the loquacity of the lady

rendering speech impossible. The scientific celebrities, forgetting

their mollusks and glacial periods, gossiped about art, while devoting

themselves to oysters and ices with characteristic energy; the young

musician, who was charming the city like a second Orpheus, talked

horses; and the specimen of the British nobility present happened to be

the most ordinary man of the party.

Before the evening was half over, Jo felt so completely disillusioned,

that she sat down in a corner to recover herself. Mr. Bhaer soon joined

her, looking rather out of his element, and presently several of the

philosophers, each mounted on his hobby, came ambling up to hold an

intellectual tournament in the recess. The conversations were miles

beyond Jo's comprehension, but she enjoyed it, though Kant and Hegel

were unknown gods, the Subjective and Objective unintelligible terms,

and the only thing 'evolved from her inner consciousness' was a bad

headache after it was all over. It dawned upon her gradually that the

world was being picked to pieces, and put together on new and,

according to the talkers, on infinitely better principles than before,

that religion was in a fair way to be reasoned into nothingness, and

intellect was to be the only God. Jo knew nothing about philosophy or

metaphysics of any sort, but a curious excitement, half pleasurable,

half painful, came over her as she listened with a sense of being

turned adrift into time and space, like a young balloon out on a

holiday.

She looked round to see how the Professor liked it, and found him

looking at her with the grimmest expression she had ever seen him wear.

He shook his head and beckoned her to come away, but she was fascinated

just then by the freedom of Speculative Philosophy, and kept her seat,

trying to find out what the wise gentlemen intended to rely upon after

they had annihilated all the old beliefs.

Now, Mr. Bhaer was a diffident man and slow to offer his own opinions,

not because they were unsettled, but too sincere and earnest to be

lightly spoken. As he glanced from Jo to several other young people,

attracted by the brilliancy of the philosophic pyrotechnics, he knit

his brows and longed to speak, fearing that some inflammable young soul

would be led astray by the rockets, to find when the display was over

that they had only an empty stick or a scorched hand.

He bore it as long as he could, but when he was appealed to for an

opinion, he blazed up with honest indignation and defended religion

with all the eloquence of truth--an eloquence which made his broken

English musical and his plain face beautiful. He had a hard fight, for

the wise men argued well, but he didn't know when he was beaten and

stood to his colors like a man. Somehow, as he talked, the world got

right again to Jo. The old beliefs, that had lasted so long, seemed

better than the new. God was not a blind force, and immortality was

not a pretty fable, but a blessed fact. She felt as if she had solid

ground under her feet again, and when Mr. Bhaer paused, outtalked but

not one whit convinced, Jo wanted to clap her hands and thank him.

She did neither, but she remembered the scene, and gave the Professor

her heartiest respect, for she knew it cost him an effort to speak out

then and there, because his conscience would not let him be silent.

She began to see that character is a better possession than money,

rank, intellect, or beauty, and to feel that if greatness is what a

wise man has defined it to be, 'truth, reverence, and good will', then

her friend Friedrich Bhaer was not only good, but great.

This belief strengthened daily. She valued his esteem, she coveted his

respect, she wanted to be worthy of his friendship, and just when the

wish was sincerest, she came near to losing everything. It all grew

out of a cocked hat, for one evening the Professor came in to give Jo

her lesson with a paper soldier cap on his head, which Tina had put

there and he had forgotten to take off.

"It's evident he doesn't look in his glass before coming down," thought

Jo, with a smile, as he said "Goot efening," and sat soberly down,

quite unconscious of the ludicrous contrast between his subject and his

headgear, for he was going to read her the Death of Wallenstein.

She said nothing at first, for she liked to hear him laugh out his big,

hearty laugh when anything funny happened, so she left him to discover

it for himself, and presently forgot all about it, for to hear a German

read Schiller is rather an absorbing occupation. After the reading

came the lesson, which was a lively one, for Jo was in a gay mood that

night, and the cocked hat kept her eyes dancing with merriment. The

Professor didn't know what to make of her, and stopped at last to ask

with an air of mild surprise that was irresistible. . .

"Mees Marsch, for what do you laugh in your master's face? Haf you no

respect for me, that you go on so bad?"

"How can I be respectful, Sir, when you forget to take your hat off?"

said Jo.

Lifting his hand to his head, the absent-minded Professor gravely felt

and removed the little cocked hat, looked at it a minute, and then

threw back his head and laughed like a merry bass viol.

"Ah! I see him now, it is that imp Tina who makes me a fool with my

cap. Well, it is nothing, but see you, if this lesson goes not well,

you too shall wear him."

But the lesson did not go at all for a few minutes because Mr. Bhaer

caught sight of a picture on the hat, and unfolding it, said with great

disgust, "I wish these papers did not come in the house. They are not

for children to see, nor young people to read. It is not well, and I

haf no patience with those who make this harm."

Jo glanced at the sheet and saw a pleasing illustration composed of a

lunatic, a corpse, a villain, and a viper. She did not like it, but

the impulse that made her turn it over was not one of displeasure but

fear, because for a minute she fancied the paper was the Volcano. It

was not, however, and her panic subsided as she remembered that even if

it had been and one of her own tales in it, there would have been no

name to betray her. She had betrayed herself, however, by a look and a

blush, for though an absent man, the Professor saw a good deal more

than people fancied. He knew that Jo wrote, and had met her down among

the newspaper offices more than once, but as she never spoke of it, he

asked no questions in spite of a strong desire to see her work. Now it

occurred to him that she was doing what she was ashamed to own, and it

troubled him. He did not say to himself, "It is none of my business.

I've no right to say anything," as many people would have done. He

only remembered that she was young and poor, a girl far away from

mother's love and father's care, and he was moved to help her with an

impulse as quick and natural as that which would prompt him to put out

his hand to save a baby from a puddle. All this flashed through his

mind in a minute, but not a trace of it appeared in his face, and by

the time the paper was turned, and Jo's needle threaded, he was ready

to say quite naturally, but very gravely...

"Yes, you are right to put it from you. I do not think that good young

girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I

would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad

trash."

"All may not be bad, only silly, you know, and if there is a demand for

it, I don't see any harm in supplying it. Many very respectable people

make an honest living out of what are called sensation stories," said

Jo, scratching gathers so energetically that a row of little slits

followed her pin.

"There is a demand for whisky, but I think you and I do not care to

sell it. If the respectable people knew what harm they did, they would

not feel that the living was honest. They haf no right to put poison

in the sugarplum, and let the small ones eat it. No, they should think

a little, and sweep mud in the street before they do this thing."

Mr. Bhaer spoke warmly, and walked to the fire, crumpling the paper in

his hands. Jo sat still, looking as if the fire had come to her, for

her cheeks burned long after the cocked hat had turned to smoke and

gone harmlessly up the chimney.

"I should like much to send all the rest after him," muttered the

Professor, coming back with a relieved air.

Jo thought what a blaze her pile of papers upstairs would make, and her

hard-earned money lay rather heavily on her conscience at that minute.

Then she thought consolingly to herself, "Mine are not like that, they

are only silly, never bad, so I won't be worried," and taking up her

book, she said, with a studious face, "Shall we go on, Sir? I'll be

very good and proper now."

"I shall hope so," was all he said, but he meant more than she

imagined, and the grave, kind look he gave her made her feel as if the

words Weekly Volcano were printed in large type on her forehead.

As soon as she went to her room, she got out her papers, and carefully

reread every one of her stories. Being a little shortsighted, Mr.

Bhaer sometimes used eye glasses, and Jo had tried them once, smiling

to see how they magnified the fine print of her book. Now she seemed

to have on the Professor's mental or moral spectacles also, for the

faults of these poor stories glared at her dreadfully and filled her

with dismay.

"They are trash, and will soon be worse trash if I go on, for each is

more sensational than the last. I've gone blindly on, hurting myself

and other people, for the sake of money. I know it's so, for I can't

read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it,

and what should I do if they were seen at home or Mr. Bhaer got hold of

them?"

Jo turned hot at the bare idea, and stuffed the whole bundle into her

stove, nearly setting the chimney afire with the blaze.

"Yes, that's the best place for such inflammable nonsense. I'd better

burn the house down, I suppose, than let other people blow themselves

up with my gunpowder," she thought as she watched the Demon of the Jura

whisk away, a little black cinder with fiery eyes.

But when nothing remained of all her three month's work except a heap

of ashes and the money in her lap, Jo looked sober, as she sat on the

floor, wondering what she ought to do about her wages.

"I think I haven't done much harm yet, and may keep this to pay for my

time," she said, after a long meditation, adding impatiently, "I almost

wish I hadn't any conscience, it's so inconvenient. If I didn't care

about doing right, and didn't feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I

should get on capitally. I can't help wishing sometimes, that Mother

and Father hadn't been so particular about such things."

Ah, Jo, instead of wishing that, thank God that 'Father and Mother were

particular', and pity from your heart those who have no such guardians

to hedge them round with principles which may seem like prison walls to

impatient youth, but which will prove sure foundations to build

character upon in womanhood.

Jo wrote no more sensational stories, deciding that the money did not

pay for her share of the sensation, but going to the other extreme, as

is the way with people of her stamp, she took a course of Mrs.

Sherwood, Miss Edgeworth, and Hannah More, and then produced a tale

which might have been more properly called an essay or a sermon, so

intensely moral was it. She had her doubts about it from the

beginning, for her lively fancy and girlish romance felt as ill at ease

in the new style as she would have done masquerading in the stiff and

cumbrous costume of the last century. She sent this didactic gem to

several markets, but it found no purchaser, and she was inclined to

agree with Mr. Dashwood that morals didn't sell.

Then she tried a child's story, which she could easily have disposed of

if she had not been mercenary enough to demand filthy lucre for it.

The only person who offered enough to make it worth her while to try

juvenile literature was a worthy gentleman who felt it his mission to

convert all the world to his particular belief. But much as she liked

to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty

boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls because they did

not go to a particular Sabbath school, nor all the good infants who did

go as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to

escorts of angels when they departed this life with psalms or sermons

on their lisping tongues. So nothing came of these trials, and Jo

corked up her inkstand, and said in a fit of very wholesome humility...

"I don't know anything. I'll wait until I do before I try again, and

meantime, 'sweep mud in the street' if I can't do better, that's

honest, at least." Which decision proved that her second tumble down

the beanstalk had done her some good.

While these internal revolutions were going on, her external life had

been as busy and uneventful as usual, and if she sometimes looked

serious or a little sad no one observed it but Professor Bhaer. He did

it so quietly that Jo never knew he was watching to see if she would

accept and profit by his reproof, but she stood the test, and he was

satisfied, for though no words passed between them, he knew that she

had given up writing. Not only did he guess it by the fact that the

second finger of her right hand was no longer inky, but she spent her

evenings downstairs now, was met no more among newspaper offices, and

studied with a dogged patience, which assured him that she was bent on

occupying her mind with something useful, if not pleasant.

He helped her in many ways, proving himself a true friend, and Jo was

happy, for while her pen lay idle, she was learning other lessons

besides German, and laying a foundation for the sensation story of her

own life.

It was a pleasant winter and a long one, for she did not leave Mrs.

Kirke till June. Everyone seemed sorry when the time came. The

children were inconsolable, and Mr. Bhaer's hair stuck straight up all

over his head, for he always rumpled it wildly when disturbed in mind.

"Going home? Ah, you are happy that you haf a home to go in," he said,

when she told him, and sat silently pulling his beard in the corner,

while she held a little levee on that last evening.

She was going early, so she bade them all goodbye overnight, and when

his turn came, she said warmly, "Now, Sir, you won't forget to come and

see us, if you ever travel our way, will you? I'll never forgive you if

you do, for I want them all to know my friend."

"Do you? Shall I come?" he asked, looking down at her with an eager

expression which she did not see.

"Yes, come next month. Laurie graduates then, and you'd enjoy

commencement as something new."

"That is your best friend, of whom you speak?" he said in an altered

tone.

"Yes, my boy Teddy. I'm very proud of him and should like you to see

him."

Jo looked up then, quite unconscious of anything but her own pleasure

in the prospect of showing them to one another. Something in Mr.

Bhaer's face suddenly recalled the fact that she might find Laurie more

than a 'best friend', and simply because she particularly wished not to

look as if anything was the matter, she involuntarily began to blush,

and the more she tried not to, the redder she grew. If it had not been

for Tina on her knee. She didn't know what would have become of her.

Fortunately the child was moved to hug her, so she managed to hide her

face an instant, hoping the Professor did not see it. But he did, and

his own changed again from that momentary anxiety to its usual

expression, as he said cordially...

"I fear I shall not make the time for that, but I wish the friend much

success, and you all happiness. Gott bless you!" And with that, he

shook hands warmly, shouldered Tina, and went away.

But after the boys were abed, he sat long before his fire with the

tired look on his face and the 'heimweh', or homesickness, lying heavy

at his heart. Once, when he remembered Jo as she sat with the little

child in her lap and that new softness in her face, he leaned his head

on his hands a minute, and then roamed about the room, as if in search

of something that he could not find.

"It is not for me, I must not hope it now," he said to himself, with a

sigh that was almost a groan. Then, as if reproaching himself for the

longing that he could not repress, he went and kissed the two tousled

heads upon the pillow, took down his seldom-used meerschaum, and opened

his Plato.

He did his best and did it manfully, but I don't think he found that a

pair of rampant boys, a pipe, or even the divine Plato, were very

satisfactory substitutes for wife and child at home.

Early as it was, he was at the station next morning to see Jo off, and

thanks to him, she began her solitary journey with the pleasant memory

of a familiar face smiling its farewell, a bunch of violets to keep her

company, and best of all, the happy thought, "Well, the winter's gone,

and I've written no books, earned no fortune, but I've made a friend

worth having and I'll try to keep him all my life."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

HEARTACHE

Whatever his motive might have been, Laurie studied to some purpose

that year, for he graduated with honor, and gave the Latin oration with

the grace of a Phillips and the eloquence of a Demosthenes, so his

friends said. They were all there, his grandfather--oh, so proud--Mr.

and Mrs. March, John and Meg, Jo and Beth, and all exulted over him

with the sincere admiration which boys make light of at the time, but

fail to win from the world by any after-triumphs.

"I've got to stay for this confounded supper, but I shall be home early

tomorrow. You'll come and meet me as usual, girls?" Laurie said, as he

put the sisters into the carriage after the joys of the day were over.

He said 'girls', but he meant Jo, for she was the only one who kept up

the old custom. She had not the heart to refuse her splendid,

successful boy anything, and answered warmly...

"I'll come, Teddy, rain or shine, and march before you, playing 'Hail

the conquering hero comes' on a jew's-harp."

Laurie thanked her with a look that made her think in a sudden panic,

"Oh, deary me! I know he'll say something, and then what shall I do?"

Evening meditation and morning work somewhat allayed her fears, and

having decided that she wouldn't be vain enough to think people were

going to propose when she had given them every reason to know what her

answer would be, she set forth at the appointed time, hoping Teddy

wouldn't do anything to make her hurt his poor feelings. A call at

Meg's, and a refreshing sniff and sip at the Daisy and Demijohn, still

further fortified her for the tete-a-tete, but when she saw a stalwart

figure looming in the distance, she had a strong desire to turn about

and run away.

"Where's the jew's-harp, Jo?" cried Laurie, as soon as he was within

speaking distance.

"I forgot it." And Jo took heart again, for that salutation could not

be called lover-like.

She always used to take his arm on these occasions, now she did not,

and he made no complaint, which was a bad sign, but talked on rapidly

about all sorts of faraway subjects, till they turned from the road

into the little path that led homeward through the grove. Then he

walked more slowly, suddenly lost his fine flow of language, and now

and then a dreadful pause occurred. To rescue the conversation from

one of the wells of silence into which it kept falling, Jo said

hastily, "Now you must have a good long holiday!"

"I intend to."

Something in his resolute tone made Jo look up quickly to find him

looking down at her with an expression that assured her the dreaded

moment had come, and made her put out her hand with an imploring, "No,

Teddy. Please don't!"

"I will, and you must hear me. It's no use, Jo, we've got to have it

out, and the sooner the better for both of us," he answered, getting

flushed and excited all at once.

"Say what you like then. I'll listen," said Jo, with a desperate sort

of patience.

Laurie was a young lover, but he was in earnest, and meant to 'have it

out', if he died in the attempt, so he plunged into the subject with

characteristic impetuousity, saying in a voice that would get choky now

and then, in spite of manful efforts to keep it steady...

"I've loved you ever since I've known you, Jo, couldn't help it, you've

been so good to me. I've tried to show it, but you wouldn't let me.

Now I'm going to make you hear, and give me an answer, for I can't go

on so any longer."

"I wanted to save you this. I thought you'd understand..." began Jo,

finding it a great deal harder than she expected.

"I know you did, but the girls are so queer you never know what they

mean. They say no when they mean yes, and drive a man out of his wits

just for the fun of it," returned Laurie, entrenching himself behind an

undeniable fact.

"I don't. I never wanted to make you care for me so, and I went away

to keep you from it if I could."

"I thought so. It was like you, but it was no use. I only loved you

all the more, and I worked hard to please you, and I gave up billiards

and everything you didn't like, and waited and never complained, for I

hoped you'd love me, though I'm not half good enough..." Here there was

a choke that couldn't be controlled, so he decapitated buttercups while

he cleared his 'confounded throat'.

"You, you are, you're a great deal too good for me, and I'm so grateful

to you, and so proud and fond of you, I don't know why I can't love you

as you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it

would be a lie to say I do when I don't."

"Really, truly, Jo?"

He stopped short, and caught both her hands as he put his question with

a look that she did not soon forget.

"Really, truly, dear."

They were in the grove now, close by the stile, and when the last words

fell reluctantly from Jo's lips, Laurie dropped her hands and turned as

if to go on, but for once in his life the fence was too much for him.

So he just laid his head down on the mossy post, and stood so still

that Jo was frightened.

"Oh, Teddy, I'm sorry, so desperately sorry, I could kill myself if it

would do any good! I wish you wouldn't take it so hard, I can't help

it. You know it's impossible for people to make themselves love other

people if they don't," cried Jo inelegantly but remorsefully, as she

softly patted his shoulder, remembering the time when he had comforted

her so long ago.

"They do sometimes," said a muffled voice from the post. "I don't

believe it's the right sort of love, and I'd rather not try it," was

the decided answer.

There was a long pause, while a blackbird sung blithely on the willow

by the river, and the tall grass rustled in the wind. Presently Jo said

very soberly, as she sat down on the step of the stile, "Laurie, I want

to tell you something."

He started as if he had been shot, threw up his head, and cried out in

a fierce tone, "Don't tell me that, Jo, I can't bear it now!"

"Tell what?" she asked, wondering at his violence.

"That you love that old man."

"What old man?" demanded Jo, thinking he must mean his grandfather.

"That devilish Professor you were always writing about. If you say you

love him, I know I shall do something desperate;" and he looked as if

he would keep his word, as he clenched his hands with a wrathful spark

in his eyes.

Jo wanted to laugh, but restrained herself and said warmly, for she

too, was getting excited with all this, "Don't swear, Teddy! He isn't

old, nor anything bad, but good and kind, and the best friend I've got,

next to you. Pray, don't fly into a passion. I want to be kind, but I

know I shall get angry if you abuse my Professor. I haven't the least

idea of loving him or anybody else."

"But you will after a while, and then what will become of me?"

"You'll love someone else too, like a sensible boy, and forget all this

trouble."

"I can't love anyone else, and I'll never forget you, Jo, Never!

Never!" with a stamp to emphasize his passionate words.

"What shall I do with him?" sighed Jo, finding that emotions were more

unmanagable than she expected. "You haven't heard what I wanted to

tell you. Sit down and listen, for indeed I want to do right and make

you happy," she said, hoping to soothe him with a little reason, which

proved that she knew nothing about love.

Seeing a ray of hope in that last speech, Laurie threw himself down on

the grass at her feet, leaned his arm on the lower step of the stile,

and looked up at her with an expectant face. Now that arrangement was

not conducive to calm speech or clear thought on Jo's part, for how

could she say hard things to her boy while he watched her with eyes

full of love and longing, and lashes still wet with the bitter drop or

two her hardness of heart had wrung from him? She gently turned his

head away, saying, as she stroked the wavy hair which had been allowed

to grow for her sake--how touching that was, to be sure! "I agree with

Mother that you and I are not suited to each other, because our quick

tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable, if we

were so foolish as to..." Jo paused a little over the last word, but

Laurie uttered it with a rapturous expression.

"Marry--no we shouldn't! If you loved me, Jo, I should be a perfect

saint, for you could make me anything you like."

"No, I can't. I've tried and failed, and I won't risk our happiness by

such a serious experiment. We don't agree and we never shall, so we'll

be good friends all our lives, but we won't go and do anything rash."

"Yes, we will if we get the chance," muttered Laurie rebelliously.

"Now do be reasonable, and take a sensible view of the case," implored

Jo, almost at her wit's end.

"I won't be reasonable. I don't want to take what you call 'a sensible

view'. It won't help me, and it only makes it harder. I don't believe

you've got any heart."

"I wish I hadn't."

There was a little quiver in Jo's voice, and thinking it a good omen,

Laurie turned round, bringing all his persuasive powers to bear as he

said, in the wheedlesome tone that had never been so dangerously

wheedlesome before, "Don't disappoint us, dear! Everyone expects it.

Grandpa has set his heart upon it, your people like it, and I can't get

on without you. Say you will, and let's be happy. Do, do!"

Not until months afterward did Jo understand how she had the strength

of mind to hold fast to the resolution she had made when she decided

that she did not love her boy, and never could. It was very hard to

do, but she did it, knowing that delay was both useless and cruel.

"I can't say 'yes' truly, so I won't say it at all. You'll see that

I'm right, by-and-by, and thank me for it..." she began solemnly.

"I'll be hanged if I do!" and Laurie bounced up off the grass, burning

with indignation at the very idea.

"Yes, you will!" persisted Jo. "You'll get over this after a while,

and find some lovely accomplished girl, who will adore you, and make a

fine mistress for your fine house. I shouldn't. I'm homely and awkward

and odd and old, and you'd be ashamed of me, and we should quarrel--we

can't help it even now, you see--and I shouldn't like elegant society

and you would, and you'd hate my scribbling, and I couldn't get on

without it, and we should be unhappy, and wish we hadn't done it, and

everything would be horrid!"

"Anything more?" asked Laurie, finding it hard to listen patiently to

this prophetic burst.

"Nothing more, except that I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm

happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it

up for any mortal man."

"I know better!" broke in Laurie. "You think so now, but there'll come

a time when you will care for somebody, and you'll love him

tremendously, and live and die for him. I know you will, it's your

way, and I shall have to stand by and see it," and the despairing lover

cast his hat upon the ground with a gesture that would have seemed

comical, if his face had not been so tragic.

"Yes, I will live and die for him, if he ever comes and makes me love

him in spite of myself, and you must do the best you can!" cried Jo,

losing patience with poor Teddy. "I've done my best, but you won't be

reasonable, and it's selfish of you to keep teasing for what I can't

give. I shall always be fond of you, very fond indeed, as a friend,

but I'll never marry you, and the sooner you believe it the better for

both of us--so now!"

That speech was like gunpowder. Laurie looked at her a minute as if he

did not quite know what to do with himself, then turned sharply away,

saying in a desperate sort of tone, "You'll be sorry some day, Jo."

"Oh, where are you going?" she cried, for his face frightened her.

"To the devil!" was the consoling answer.

For a minute Jo's heart stood still, as he swung himself down the bank

toward the river, but it takes much folly, sin or misery to send a

young man to a violent death, and Laurie was not one of the weak sort

who are conquered by a single failure. He had no thought of a

melodramatic plunge, but some blind instinct led him to fling hat and

coat into his boat, and row away with all his might, making better time

up the river than he had done in any race. Jo drew a long breath and

unclasped her hands as she watched the poor fellow trying to outstrip

the trouble which he carried in his heart.

"That will do him good, and he'll come home in such a tender, penitent

state of mind, that I shan't dare to see him," she said, adding, as she

went slowly home, feeling as if she had murdered some innocent thing,

and buried it under the leaves. "Now I must go and prepare Mr.

Laurence to be very kind to my poor boy. I wish he'd love Beth,

perhaps he may in time, but I begin to think I was mistaken about her.

Oh dear! How can girls like to have lovers and refuse them? I think

it's dreadful."

Being sure that no one could do it so well as herself, she went

straight to Mr. Laurence, told the hard story bravely through, and then

broke down, crying so dismally over her own insensibility that the kind

old gentleman, though sorely disappointed, did not utter a reproach.

He found it difficult to understand how any girl could help loving

Laurie, and hoped she would change her mind, but he knew even better

than Jo that love cannot be forced, so he shook his head sadly and

resolved to carry his boy out of harm's way, for Young Impetuosity's

parting words to Jo disturbed him more than he would confess.

When Laurie came home, dead tired but quite composed, his grandfather

met him as if he knew nothing, and kept up the delusion very

successfully for an hour or two. But when they sat together in the

twilight, the time they used to enjoy so much, it was hard work for the

old man to ramble on as usual, and harder still for the young one to

listen to praises of the last year's success, which to him now seemed

like love's labor lost. He bore it as long as he could, then went to

his piano and began to play. The windows were open, and Jo, walking

in the garden with Beth, for once understood music better than her

sister, for he played the '\_Sonata Pathetique\_', and played it as he

never did before.

"That's very fine, I dare say, but it's sad enough to make one cry.

Give us something gayer, lad," said Mr. Laurence, whose kind old heart

was full of sympathy, which he longed to show but knew not how.

Laurie dashed into a livelier strain, played stormily for several

minutes, and would have got through bravely, if in a momentary lull

Mrs. March's voice had not been heard calling, "Jo, dear, come in. I

want you."

Just what Laurie longed to say, with a different meaning! As he

listened, he lost his place, the music ended with a broken chord, and

the musician sat silent in the dark.

"I can't stand this," muttered the old gentleman. Up he got, groped

his way to the piano, laid a kind hand on either of the broad

shoulders, and said, as gently as a woman, "I know, my boy, I know."

No answer for an instant, then Laurie asked sharply, "Who told you?"

"Jo herself."

"Then there's an end of it!" And he shook off his grandfather's hands

with an impatient motion, for though grateful for the sympathy, his

man's pride could not bear a man's pity.

"Not quite. I want to say one thing, and then there shall be an end of

it," returned Mr. Laurence with unusual mildness. "You won't care to

stay at home now, perhaps?"

"I don't intend to run away from a girl. Jo can't prevent my seeing

her, and I shall stay and do it as long as I like," interrupted Laurie

in a defiant tone.

"Not if you are the gentleman I think you. I'm disappointed, but the

girl can't help it, and the only thing left for you to do is to go away

for a time. Where will you go?"

"Anywhere. I don't care what becomes of me," and Laurie got up with a

reckless laugh that grated on his grandfather's ear.

"Take it like a man, and don't do anything rash, for God's sake. Why

not go abroad, as you planned, and forget it?"

"I can't."

"But you've been wild to go, and I promised you should when you got

through college."

"Ah, but I didn't mean to go alone!" and Laurie walked fast through the

room with an expression which it was well his grandfather did not see.

"I don't ask you to go alone. There's someone ready and glad to go

with you, anywhere in the world."

"Who, Sir?" stopping to listen.

"Myself."

Laurie came back as quickly as he went, and put out his hand, saying

huskily, "I'm a selfish brute, but--you know--Grandfather--"

"Lord help me, yes, I do know, for I've been through it all before,

once in my own young days, and then with your father. Now, my dear boy,

just sit quietly down and hear my plan. It's all settled, and can be

carried out at once," said Mr. Laurence, keeping hold of the young man,

as if fearful that he would break away as his father had done before

him.

"Well, sir, what is it?" and Laurie sat down, without a sign of

interest in face or voice.

"There is business in London that needs looking after. I meant you

should attend to it, but I can do it better myself, and things here

will get on very well with Brooke to manage them. My partners do

almost everything, I'm merely holding on until you take my place, and

can be off at any time."

"But you hate traveling, Sir. I can't ask it of you at your age,"

began Laurie, who was grateful for the sacrifice, but much preferred to

go alone, if he went at all.

The old gentleman knew that perfectly well, and particularly desired to

prevent it, for the mood in which he found his grandson assured him

that it would not be wise to leave him to his own devices. So,

stifling a natural regret at the thought of the home comforts he would

leave behind him, he said stoutly, "Bless your soul, I'm not

superannuated yet. I quite enjoy the idea. It will do me good, and my

old bones won't suffer, for traveling nowadays is almost as easy as

sitting in a chair."

A restless movement from Laurie suggested that his chair was not easy,

or that he did not like the plan, and made the old man add hastily, "I

don't mean to be a marplot or a burden. I go because I think you'd feel

happier than if I was left behind. I don't intend to gad about with

you, but leave you free to go where you like, while I amuse myself in

my own way. I've friends in London and Paris, and should like to visit

them. Meantime you can go to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, where you

will, and enjoy pictures, music, scenery, and adventures to your

heart's content."

Now, Laurie felt just then that his heart was entirely broken and the

world a howling wilderness, but at the sound of certain words which the

old gentleman artfully introduced into his closing sentence, the broken

heart gave an unexpected leap, and a green oasis or two suddenly

appeared in the howling wilderness. He sighed, and then said, in a

spiritless tone, "Just as you like, Sir. It doesn't matter where I go

or what I do."

"It does to me, remember that, my lad. I give you entire liberty, but

I trust you to make an honest use of it. Promise me that, Laurie."

"Anything you like, Sir."

"Good," thought the old gentleman. "You don't care now, but there'll

come a time when that promise will keep you out of mischief, or I'm

much mistaken."

Being an energetic individual, Mr. Laurence struck while the iron was

hot, and before the blighted being recovered spirit enough to rebel,

they were off. During the time necessary for preparation, Laurie bore

himself as young gentleman usually do in such cases. He was moody,

irritable, and pensive by turns, lost his appetite, neglected his dress

and devoted much time to playing tempestuously on his piano, avoided

Jo, but consoled himself by staring at her from his window, with a

tragic face that haunted her dreams by night and oppressed her with a

heavy sense of guilt by day. Unlike some sufferers, he never spoke of

his unrequited passion, and would allow no one, not even Mrs. March, to

attempt consolation or offer sympathy. On some accounts, this was a

relief to his friends, but the weeks before his departure were very

uncomfortable, and everyone rejoiced that the 'poor, dear fellow was

going away to forget his trouble, and come home happy'. Of course, he

smiled darkly at their delusion, but passed it by with the sad

superiority of one who knew that his fidelity like his love was

unalterable.

When the parting came he affected high spirits, to conceal certain

inconvenient emotions which seemed inclined to assert themselves. This

gaiety did not impose upon anybody, but they tried to look as if it did

for his sake, and he got on very well till Mrs. March kissed him, with

a whisper full of motherly solicitude. Then feeling that he was going

very fast, he hastily embraced them all round, not forgetting the

afflicted Hannah, and ran downstairs as if for his life. Jo followed a

minute after to wave her hand to him if he looked round. He did look

round, came back, put his arms about her as she stood on the step above

him, and looked up at her with a face that made his short appeal

eloquent and pathetic.

"Oh, Jo, can't you?"

"Teddy, dear, I wish I could!"

That was all, except a little pause. Then Laurie straightened himself

up, said, "It's all right, never mind," and went away without another

word. Ah, but it wasn't all right, and Jo did mind, for while the

curly head lay on her arm a minute after her hard answer, she felt as

if she had stabbed her dearest friend, and when he left her without a

look behind him, she knew that the boy Laurie never would come again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BETH'S SECRET

When Jo came home that spring, she had been struck with the change in

Beth. No one spoke of it or seemed aware of it, for it had come too

gradually to startle those who saw her daily, but to eyes sharpened by

absence, it was very plain and a heavy weight fell on Jo's heart as she

saw her sister's face. It was no paler and but littler thinner than in

the autumn, yet there was a strange, transparent look about it, as if

the mortal was being slowly refined away, and the immortal shining

through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty. Jo saw

and felt it, but said nothing at the time, and soon the first

impression lost much of its power, for Beth seemed happy, no one

appeared to doubt that she was better, and presently in other cares Jo

for a time forgot her fear.

But when Laurie was gone, and peace prevailed again, the vague anxiety

returned and haunted her. She had confessed her sins and been

forgiven, but when she showed her savings and proposed a mountain trip,

Beth had thanked her heartily, but begged not to go so far away from

home. Another little visit to the seashore would suit her better, and

as Grandma could not be prevailed upon to leave the babies, Jo took

Beth down to the quiet place, where she could live much in the open

air, and let the fresh sea breezes blow a little color into her pale

cheeks.

It was not a fashionable place, but even among the pleasant people

there, the girls made few friends, preferring to live for one another.

Beth was too shy to enjoy society, and Jo too wrapped up in her to care

for anyone else. So they were all in all to each other, and came and

went, quite unconscious of the interest they exited in those about

them, who watched with sympathetic eyes the strong sister and the

feeble one, always together, as if they felt instinctively that a long

separation was not far away.

They did feel it, yet neither spoke of it, for often between ourselves

and those nearest and dearest to us there exists a reserve which it is

very hard to overcome. Jo felt as if a veil had fallen between her

heart and Beth's, but when she put out her hand to lift it up, there

seemed something sacred in the silence, and she waited for Beth to

speak. She wondered, and was thankful also, that her parents did not

seem to see what she saw, and during the quiet weeks when the shadows

grew so plain to her, she said nothing of it to those at home,

believing that it would tell itself when Beth came back no better. She

wondered still more if her sister really guessed the hard truth, and

what thoughts were passing through her mind during the long hours when

she lay on the warm rocks with her head in Jo's lap, while the winds

blew healthfully over her and the sea made music at her feet.

One day Beth told her. Jo thought she was asleep, she lay so still,

and putting down her book, sat looking at her with wistful eyes, trying

to see signs of hope in the faint color on Beth's cheeks. But she

could not find enough to satisfy her, for the cheeks were very thin,

and the hands seemed too feeble to hold even the rosy little shells

they had been collecting. It came to her then more bitterly than ever

that Beth was slowly drifting away from her, and her arms instinctively

tightened their hold upon the dearest treasure she possessed. For a

minute her eyes were too dim for seeing, and when they cleared, Beth

was looking up at her so tenderly that there was hardly any need for

her to say, "Jo, dear, I'm glad you know it. I've tried to tell you,

but I couldn't."

There was no answer except her sister's cheek against her own, not even

tears, for when most deeply moved, Jo did not cry. She was the weaker

then, and Beth tried to comfort and sustain her, with her arms about

her and the soothing words she whispered in her ear.

"I've known it for a good while, dear, and now I'm used to it, it isn't

hard to think of or to bear. Try to see it so and don't be troubled

about me, because it's best, indeed it is."

"Is this what made you so unhappy in the autumn, Beth? You did not feel

it then, and keep it to yourself so long, did you?" asked Jo, refusing

to see or say that it was best, but glad to know that Laurie had no

part in Beth's trouble.

"Yes, I gave up hoping then, but I didn't like to own it. I tried to

think it was a sick fancy, and would not let it trouble anyone. But

when I saw you all so well and strong and full of happy plans, it was

hard to feel that I could never be like you, and then I was miserable,

Jo."

"Oh, Beth, and you didn't tell me, didn't let me comfort and help you?

How could you shut me out, bear it all alone?"

Jo's voice was full of tender reproach, and her heart ached to think of

the solitary struggle that must have gone on while Beth learned to say

goodbye to health, love, and life, and take up her cross so cheerfully.

"Perhaps it was wrong, but I tried to do right. I wasn't sure, no one

said anything, and I hoped I was mistaken. It would have been selfish

to frighten you all when Marmee was so anxious about Meg, and Amy away,

and you so happy with Laurie--at least I thought so then."

"And I thought you loved him, Beth, and I went away because I

couldn't," cried Jo, glad to say all the truth.

Beth looked so amazed at the idea that Jo smiled in spite of her pain,

and added softly, "Then you didn't, dearie? I was afraid it was so, and

imagined your poor little heart full of lovelornity all that while."

"Why, Jo, how could I, when he was so fond of you?" asked Beth, as

innocently as a child. "I do love him dearly. He is so good to me,

how can I help It? But he could never be anything to me but my

brother. I hope he truly will be, sometime."

"Not through me," said Jo decidedly. "Amy is left for him, and they

would suit excellently, but I have no heart for such things, now. I

don't care what becomes of anybody but you, Beth. You must get well."

"I want to, oh, so much! I try, but every day I lose a little, and

feel more sure that I shall never gain it back. It's like the tide,

Jo, when it turns, it goes slowly, but it can't be stopped."

"It shall be stopped, your tide must not turn so soon, nineteen is too

young, Beth. I can't let you go. I'll work and pray and fight against

it. I'll keep you in spite of everything. There must be ways, it

can't be too late. God won't be so cruel as to take you from me,"

cried poor Jo rebelliously, for her spirit was far less piously

submissive than Beth's.

Simple, sincere people seldom speak much of their piety. It shows

itself in acts rather than in words, and has more influence than

homilies or protestations. Beth could not reason upon or explain the

faith that gave her courage and patience to give up life, and

cheerfully wait for death. Like a confiding child, she asked no

questions, but left everything to God and nature, Father and Mother of

us all, feeling sure that they, and they only, could teach and

strengthen heart and spirit for this life and the life to come. She

did not rebuke Jo with saintly speeches, only loved her better for her

passionate affection, and clung more closely to the dear human love,

from which our Father never means us to be weaned, but through which He

draws us closer to Himself. She could not say, "I'm glad to go," for

life was very sweet for her. She could only sob out, "I try to be

willing," while she held fast to Jo, as the first bitter wave of this

great sorrow broke over them together.

By and by Beth said, with recovered serenity, "You'll tell them this

when we go home?"

"I think they will see it without words," sighed Jo, for now it seemed

to her that Beth changed every day.

"Perhaps not. I've heard that the people who love best are often

blindest to such things. If they don't see it, you will tell them for

me. I don't want any secrets, and it's kinder to prepare them. Meg

has John and the babies to comfort her, but you must stand by Father

and Mother, won't you Jo?"

"If I can. But, Beth, I don't give up yet. I'm going to believe that

it is a sick fancy, and not let you think it's true." said Jo, trying

to speak cheerfully.

Beth lay a minute thinking, and then said in her quiet way, "I don't

know how to express myself, and shouldn't try to anyone but you,

because I can't speak out except to my Jo. I only mean to say that I

have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not

like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I'd do when I

grew up. I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't

seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about

at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away, and

the hard part now is the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems

as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven."

Jo could not speak, and for several minutes there was no sound but the

sigh of the wind and the lapping of the tide. A white-winged gull flew

by, with the flash of sunshine on its silvery breast. Beth watched it

till it vanished, and her eyes were full of sadness. A little

gray-coated sand bird came tripping over the beach 'peeping' softly to

itself, as if enjoying the sun and sea. It came quite close to Beth,

and looked at her with a friendly eye and sat upon a warm stone,

dressing its wet feathers, quite at home. Beth smiled and felt

comforted, for the tiny thing seemed to offer its small friendship and

remind her that a pleasant world was still to be enjoyed.

"Dear little bird! See, Jo, how tame it is. I like peeps better than

the gulls. They are not so wild and handsome, but they seem happy,

confiding little things. I used to call them my birds last summer, and

Mother said they reminded her of me--busy, quaker-colored creatures,

always near the shore, and always chirping that contented little song

of theirs. You are the gull, Jo, strong and wild, fond of the storm

and the wind, flying far out to sea, and happy all alone. Meg is the

turtledove, and Amy is like the lark she writes about, trying to get up

among the clouds, but always dropping down into its nest again. Dear

little girl! She's so ambitious, but her heart is good and tender, and

no matter how high she flies, she never will forget home. I hope I

shall see her again, but she seems so far away."

"She is coming in the spring, and I mean that you shall be all ready to

see and enjoy her. I'm going to have you well and rosy by that time,"

began Jo, feeling that of all the changes in Beth, the talking change

was the greatest, for it seemed to cost no effort now, and she thought

aloud in a way quite unlike bashful Beth.

"Jo, dear, don't hope any more. It won't do any good. I'm sure of

that. We won't be miserable, but enjoy being together while we wait.

We'll have happy times, for I don't suffer much, and I think the tide

will go out easily, if you help me."

Jo leaned down to kiss the tranquil face, and with that silent kiss,

she dedicated herself soul and body to Beth.

She was right. There was no need of any words when they got home, for

Father and Mother saw plainly now what they had prayed to be saved from

seeing. Tired with her short journey, Beth went at once to bed, saying

how glad she was to be home, and when Jo went down, she found that she

would be spared the hard task of telling Beth's secret. Her father

stood leaning his head on the mantelpiece and did not turn as she came

in, but her mother stretched out her arms as if for help, and Jo went

to comfort her without a word.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

NEW IMPRESSIONS

At three o'clock in the afternoon, all the fashionable world at Nice

may be seen on the Promenade des Anglais--a charming place, for the

wide walk, bordered with palms, flowers, and tropical shrubs, is

bounded on one side by the sea, on the other by the grand drive, lined

with hotels and villas, while beyond lie orange orchards and the hills.

Many nations are represented, many languages spoken, many costumes

worn, and on a sunny day the spectacle is as gay and brilliant as a

carnival. Haughty English, lively French, sober Germans, handsome

Spaniards, ugly Russians, meek Jews, free-and-easy Americans, all

drive, sit, or saunter here, chatting over the news, and criticizing

the latest celebrity who has arrived--Ristori or Dickens, Victor

Emmanuel or the Queen of the Sandwich Islands. The equipages are as

varied as the company and attract as much attention, especially the low

basket barouches in which ladies drive themselves, with a pair of

dashing ponies, gay nets to keep their voluminous flounces from

overflowing the diminutive vehicles, and little grooms on the perch

behind.

Along this walk, on Christmas Day, a tall young man walked slowly, with

his hands behind him, and a somewhat absent expression of countenance.

He looked like an Italian, was dressed like an Englishman, and had the

independent air of an American--a combination which caused sundry pairs

of feminine eyes to look approvingly after him, and sundry dandies in

black velvet suits, with rose-colored neckties, buff gloves, and orange

flowers in their buttonholes, to shrug their shoulders, and then envy

him his inches. There were plenty of pretty faces to admire, but the

young man took little notice of them, except to glance now and then at

some blonde girl in blue. Presently he strolled out of the promenade

and stood a moment at the crossing, as if undecided whether to go and

listen to the band in the Jardin Publique, or to wander along the beach

toward Castle Hill. The quick trot of ponies' feet made him look up,

as one of the little carriages, containing a single young lady, came

rapidly down the street. The lady was young, blonde, and dressed in

blue. He stared a minute, then his whole face woke up, and, waving his

hat like a boy, he hurried forward to meet her.

"Oh, Laurie, is it really you? I thought you'd never come!" cried Amy,

dropping the reins and holding out both hands, to the great

scandalization of a French mamma, who hastened her daughter's steps,

lest she should be demoralized by beholding the free manners of these

'mad English'.

"I was detained by the way, but I promised to spend Christmas with you,

and here I am."

"How is your grandfather? When did you come? Where are you staying?"

"Very well--last night--at the Chauvain. I called at your hotel, but

you were out."

"I have so much to say, I don't know where to begin! Get in and we can

talk at our ease. I was going for a drive and longing for company.

Flo's saving up for tonight."

"What happens then, a ball?"

"A Christmas party at our hotel. There are many Americans there, and

they give it in honor of the day. You'll go with us, of course? Aunt

will be charmed."

"Thank you. Where now?" asked Laurie, leaning back and folding his

arms, a proceeding which suited Amy, who preferred to drive, for her

parasol whip and blue reins over the white ponies' backs afforded her

infinite satisfaction.

"I'm going to the bankers first for letters, and then to Castle Hill.

The view is so lovely, and I like to feed the peacocks. Have you ever

been there?"

"Often, years ago, but I don't mind having a look at it."

"Now tell me all about yourself. The last I heard of you, your

grandfather wrote that he expected you from Berlin."

"Yes, I spent a month there and then joined him in Paris, where he has

settled for the winter. He has friends there and finds plenty to amuse

him, so I go and come, and we get on capitally."

"That's a sociable arrangement," said Amy, missing something in

Laurie's manner, though she couldn't tell what.

"Why, you see, he hates to travel, and I hate to keep still, so we each

suit ourselves, and there is no trouble. I am often with him, and he

enjoys my adventures, while I like to feel that someone is glad to see

me when I get back from my wanderings. Dirty old hole, isn't it?" he

added, with a look of disgust as they drove along the boulevard to the

Place Napoleon in the old city.

"The dirt is picturesque, so I don't mind. The river and the hills are

delicious, and these glimpses of the narrow cross streets are my

delight. Now we shall have to wait for that procession to pass. It's

going to the Church of St. John."

While Laurie listlessly watched the procession of priests under their

canopies, white-veiled nuns bearing lighted tapers, and some

brotherhood in blue chanting as they walked, Amy watched him, and felt

a new sort of shyness steal over her, for he was changed, and she could

not find the merry-faced boy she left in the moody-looking man beside

her. He was handsomer than ever and greatly improved, she thought, but

now that the flush of pleasure at meeting her was over, he looked tired

and spiritless--not sick, nor exactly unhappy, but older and graver

than a year or two of prosperous life should have made him. She

couldn't understand it and did not venture to ask questions, so she

shook her head and touched up her ponies, as the procession wound away

across the arches of the Paglioni bridge and vanished in the church.

"Que pensez-vous?" she said, airing her French, which had improved in

quantity, if not in quality, since she came abroad.

"That mademoiselle has made good use of her time, and the result is

charming," replied Laurie, bowing with his hand on his heart and an

admiring look.

She blushed with pleasure, but somehow the compliment did not satisfy

her like the blunt praises he used to give her at home, when he

promenaded round her on festival occasions, and told her she was

'altogether jolly', with a hearty smile and an approving pat on the

head. She didn't like the new tone, for though not blase, it sounded

indifferent in spite of the look.

"If that's the way he's going to grow up, I wish he'd stay a boy," she

thought, with a curious sense of disappointment and discomfort, trying

meantime to seem quite easy and gay.

At Avigdor's she found the precious home letters and, giving the reins

to Laurie, read them luxuriously as they wound up the shady road

between green hedges, where tea roses bloomed as freshly as in June.

"Beth is very poorly, Mother says. I often think I ought to go home,

but they all say 'stay'. So I do, for I shall never have another

chance like this," said Amy, looking sober over one page.

"I think you are right, there. You could do nothing at home, and it is

a great comfort to them to know that you are well and happy, and

enjoying so much, my dear."

He drew a little nearer, and looked more like his old self as he said

that, and the fear that sometimes weighed on Amy's heart was lightened,

for the look, the act, the brotherly 'my dear', seemed to assure her

that if any trouble did come, she would not be alone in a strange land.

Presently she laughed and showed him a small sketch of Jo in her

scribbling suit, with the bow rampantly erect upon her cap, and issuing

from her mouth the words, 'Genius burns!'.

Laurie smiled, took it, put it in his vest pocket 'to keep it from

blowing away', and listened with interest to the lively letter Amy read

him.

"This will be a regularly merry Christmas to me, with presents in the

morning, you and letters in the afternoon, and a party at night," said

Amy, as they alighted among the ruins of the old fort, and a flock of

splendid peacocks came trooping about them, tamely waiting to be fed.

While Amy stood laughing on the bank above him as she scattered crumbs

to the brilliant birds, Laurie looked at her as she had looked at him,

with a natural curiosity to see what changes time and absence had

wrought. He found nothing to perplex or disappoint, much to admire and

approve, for overlooking a few little affectations of speech and

manner, she was as sprightly and graceful as ever, with the addition of

that indescribable something in dress and bearing which we call

elegance. Always mature for her age, she had gained a certain aplomb

in both carriage and conversation, which made her seem more of a woman

of the world than she was, but her old petulance now and then showed

itself, her strong will still held its own, and her native frankness

was unspoiled by foreign polish.

Laurie did not read all this while he watched her feed the peacocks,

but he saw enough to satisfy and interest him, and carried away a

pretty little picture of a bright-faced girl standing in the sunshine,

which brought out the soft hue of her dress, the fresh color of her

cheeks, the golden gloss of her hair, and made her a prominent figure

in the pleasant scene.

As they came up onto the stone plateau that crowns the hill, Amy waved

her hand as if welcoming him to her favorite haunt, and said, pointing

here and there, "Do you remember the Cathedral and the Corso, the

fishermen dragging their nets in the bay, and the lovely road to Villa

Franca, Schubert's Tower, just below, and best of all, that speck far

out to sea which they say is Corsica?"

"I remember. It's not much changed," he answered without enthusiasm.

"What Jo would give for a sight of that famous speck!" said Amy,

feeling in good spirits and anxious to see him so also.

"Yes," was all he said, but he turned and strained his eyes to see the

island which a greater usurper than even Napoleon now made interesting

in his sight.

"Take a good look at it for her sake, and then come and tell me what

you have been doing with yourself all this while," said Amy, seating

herself, ready for a good talk.

But she did not get it, for though he joined her and answered all her

questions freely, she could only learn that he had roved about the

Continent and been to Greece. So after idling away an hour, they drove

home again, and having paid his respects to Mrs. Carrol, Laurie left

them, promising to return in the evening.

It must be recorded of Amy that she deliberately prinked that night.

Time and absence had done its work on both the young people. She had

seen her old friend in a new light, not as 'our boy', but as a handsome

and agreeable man, and she was conscious of a very natural desire to

find favor in his sight. Amy knew her good points, and made the most

of them with the taste and skill which is a fortune to a poor and

pretty woman.

Tarlatan and tulle were cheap at Nice, so she enveloped herself in them

on such occasions, and following the sensible English fashion of simple

dress for young girls, got up charming little toilettes with fresh

flowers, a few trinkets, and all manner of dainty devices, which were

both inexpensive and effective. It must be confessed that the artist

sometimes got possession of the woman, and indulged in antique

coiffures, statuesque attitudes, and classic draperies. But, dear

heart, we all have our little weaknesses, and find it easy to pardon

such in the young, who satisfy our eyes with their comeliness, and keep

our hearts merry with their artless vanities.

"I do want him to think I look well, and tell them so at home," said

Amy to herself, as she put on Flo's old white silk ball dress, and

covered it with a cloud of fresh illusion, out of which her white

shoulders and golden head emerged with a most artistic effect. Her hair

she had the sense to let alone, after gathering up the thick waves and

curls into a Hebe-like knot at the back of her head.

"It's not the fashion, but it's becoming, and I can't afford to make a

fright of myself," she used to say, when advised to frizzle, puff, or

braid, as the latest style commanded.

Having no ornaments fine enough for this important occasion, Amy looped

her fleecy skirts with rosy clusters of azalea, and framed the white

shoulders in delicate green vines. Remembering the painted boots, she

surveyed her white satin slippers with girlish satisfaction, and

chassed down the room, admiring her aristocratic feet all by herself.

"My new fan just matches my flowers, my gloves fit to a charm, and the

real lace on Aunt's mouchoir gives an air to my whole dress. If I only

had a classical nose and mouth I should be perfectly happy," she said,

surveying herself with a critical eye and a candle in each hand.

In spite of this affliction, she looked unusually gay and graceful as

she glided away. She seldom ran--it did not suit her style, she

thought, for being tall, the stately and Junoesque was more appropriate

than the sportive or piquante. She walked up and down the long saloon

while waiting for Laurie, and once arranged herself under the

chandelier, which had a good effect upon her hair, then she thought

better of it, and went away to the other end of the room, as if ashamed

of the girlish desire to have the first view a propitious one. It so

happened that she could not have done a better thing, for Laurie came

in so quietly she did not hear him, and as she stood at the distant

window, with her head half turned and one hand gathering up her dress,

the slender, white figure against the red curtains was as effective as

a well-placed statue.

"Good evening, Diana!" said Laurie, with the look of satisfaction she

liked to see in his eyes when they rested on her.

"Good evening, Apollo!" she answered, smiling back at him, for he too

looked unusually debonair, and the thought of entering the ballroom on

the arm of such a personable man caused Amy to pity the four plain

Misses Davis from the bottom of her heart.

"Here are your flowers. I arranged them myself, remembering that you

didn't like what Hannah calls a 'sot-bookay'," said Laurie, handing her

a delicate nosegay, in a holder that she had long coveted as she daily

passed it in Cardiglia's window.

"How kind you are!" she exclaimed gratefully. "If I'd known you were

coming I'd have had something ready for you today, though not as pretty

as this, I'm afraid."

"Thank you. It isn't what it should be, but you have improved it," he

added, as she snapped the silver bracelet on her wrist.

"Please don't."

"I thought you liked that sort of thing."

"Not from you, it doesn't sound natural, and I like your old bluntness

better."

"I'm glad of it," he answered, with a look of relief, then buttoned her

gloves for her, and asked if his tie was straight, just as he used to

do when they went to parties together at home.

The company assembled in the long salle a manger, that evening, was

such as one sees nowhere but on the Continent. The hospitable

Americans had invited every acquaintance they had in Nice, and having

no prejudice against titles, secured a few to add luster to their

Christmas ball.

A Russian prince condescended to sit in a corner for an hour and talk

with a massive lady, dressed like Hamlet's mother in black velvet with

a pearl bridle under her chin. A Polish count, aged eighteen, devoted

himself to the ladies, who pronounced him, 'a fascinating dear', and a

German Serene Something, having come to supper alone, roamed vaguely

about, seeking what he might devour. Baron Rothschild's private

secretary, a large-nosed Jew in tight boots, affably beamed upon the

world, as if his master's name crowned him with a golden halo. A stout

Frenchman, who knew the Emperor, came to indulge his mania for dancing,

and Lady de Jones, a British matron, adorned the scene with her little

family of eight. Of course, there were many light-footed,

shrill-voiced American girls, handsome, lifeless-looking English ditto,

and a few plain but piquante French demoiselles, likewise the usual set

of traveling young gentlemen who disported themselves gaily, while

mammas of all nations lined the walls and smiled upon them benignly

when they danced with their daughters.

Any young girl can imagine Amy's state of mind when she 'took the

stage' that night, leaning on Laurie's arm. She knew she looked well,

she loved to dance, she felt that her foot was on her native heath in a

ballroom, and enjoyed the delightful sense of power which comes when

young girls first discover the new and lovely kingdom they are born to

rule by virtue of beauty, youth, and womanhood. She did pity the Davis

girls, who were awkward, plain, and destitute of escort, except a grim

papa and three grimmer maiden aunts, and she bowed to them in her

friendliest manner as she passed, which was good of her, as it

permitted them to see her dress, and burn with curiosity to know who

her distinguished-looking friend might be. With the first burst of the

band, Amy's color rose, her eyes began to sparkle, and her feet to tap

the floor impatiently, for she danced well and wanted Laurie to know

it. Therefore the shock she received can better be imagined than

described, when he said in a perfectly tranquil tone, "Do you care to

dance?"

"One usually does at a ball."

Her amazed look and quick answer caused Laurie to repair his error as

fast as possible.

"I meant the first dance. May I have the honor?"

"I can give you one if I put off the Count. He dances devinely, but he

will excuse me, as you are an old friend," said Amy, hoping that the

name would have a good effect, and show Laurie that she was not to be

trifled with.

"Nice little boy, but rather a short Pole to support...

A daughter of the gods,

Devinely tall, and most devinely fair,"

was all the satisfaction she got, however.

The set in which they found themselves was composed of English, and Amy

was compelled to walk decorously through a cotillion, feeling all the

while as if she could dance the tarantella with relish. Laurie

resigned her to the 'nice little boy', and went to do his duty to Flo,

without securing Amy for the joys to come, which reprehensible want of

forethought was properly punished, for she immediately engaged herself

till supper, meaning to relent if he then gave any signs penitence. She

showed him her ball book with demure satisfaction when he strolled

instead of rushed up to claim her for the next, a glorious polka

redowa. But his polite regrets didn't impose upon her, and when she

galloped away with the Count, she saw Laurie sit down by her aunt with

an actual expression of relief.

That was unpardonable, and Amy took no more notice of him for a long

while, except a word now and then when she came to her chaperon between

the dances for a necessary pin or a moment's rest. Her anger had a

good effect, however, for she hid it under a smiling face, and seemed

unusually blithe and brilliant. Laurie's eyes followed her with

pleasure, for she neither romped nor sauntered, but danced with spirit

and grace, making the delightsome pastime what it should be. He very

naturally fell to studying her from this new point of view, and before

the evening was half over, had decided that 'little Amy was going to

make a very charming woman'.

It was a lively scene, for soon the spirit of the social season took

possession of everyone, and Christmas merriment made all faces shine,

hearts happy, and heels light. The musicians fiddled, tooted, and

banged as if they enjoyed it, everybody danced who could, and those who

couldn't admired their neighbors with uncommon warmth. The air was

dark with Davises, and many Joneses gamboled like a flock of young

giraffes. The golden secretary darted through the room like a meteor

with a dashing French-woman who carpeted the floor with her pink satin

train. The serene Teuton found the supper-table and was happy, eating

steadily through the bill of fare, and dismayed the garcons by the

ravages he committed. But the Emperor's friend covered himself with

glory, for he danced everything, whether he knew it or not, and

introduced impromptu pirouettes when the figures bewildered him. The

boyish abandon of that stout man was charming to behold, for though he

'carried weight', he danced like an India-rubber ball. He ran, he

flew, he pranced, his face glowed, his bald head shown, his coattails

waved wildly, his pumps actually twinkled in the air, and when the

music stopped, he wiped the drops from his brow, and beamed upon his

fellow men like a French Pickwick without glasses.

Amy and her Pole distinguished themselves by equal enthusiasm but more

graceful agility, and Laurie found himself involuntarily keeping time

to the rhythmic rise and fall of the white slippers as they flew by as

indefatigably as if winged. When little Vladimir finally relinquished

her, with assurances that he was 'desolated to leave so early', she was

ready to rest, and see how her recreant knight had borne his punishment.

It had been successful, for at three-and-twenty, blighted affections

find a balm in friendly society, and young nerves will thrill, young

blood dance, and healthy young spirits rise, when subjected to the

enchantment of beauty, light, music, and motion. Laurie had a waked-up

look as he rose to give her his seat, and when he hurried away to bring

her some supper, she said to herself, with a satisfied smile, "Ah, I

thought that would do him good!"

"You look like Balzac's '\_Femme Peinte Par Elle-Meme\_'," he said, as he

fanned her with one hand and held her coffee cup in the other.

"My rouge won't come off." and Amy rubbed her brilliant cheek, and

showed him her white glove with a sober simplicity that made him laugh

outright.

"What do you call this stuff?" he asked, touching a fold of her dress

that had blown over his knee.

"Illusion."

"Good name for it. It's very pretty--new thing, isn't it?"

"It's as old as the hills. You have seen it on dozens of girls, and

you never found out that it was pretty till now--stupide!"

"I never saw it on you before, which accounts for the mistake, you see."

"None of that, it is forbidden. I'd rather take coffee than

compliments just now. No, don't lounge, it makes me nervous."

Laurie sat bold upright, and meekly took her empty plate feeling an odd

sort of pleasure in having 'little Amy' order him about, for she had

lost her shyness now, and felt an irrestible desire to trample on him,

as girls have a delightful way of doing when lords of creation show any

signs of subjection.

"Where did you learn all this sort of thing?" he asked with a quizzical

look.

"As 'this sort of thing' is rather a vague expression, would you kindly

explain?" returned Amy, knowing perfectly well what he meant, but

wickedly leaving him to describe what is indescribable.

"Well--the general air, the style, the self-possession,

the--the--illusion--you know", laughed Laurie, breaking down and

helping himself out of his quandary with the new word.

Amy was gratified, but of course didn't show it, and demurely answered,

"Foreign life polishes one in spite of one's self. I study as well as

play, and as for this"--with a little gesture toward her dress--"why,

tulle is cheap, posies to be had for nothing, and I am used to making

the most of my poor little things."

Amy rather regretted that last sentence, fearing it wasn't in good

taste, but Laurie liked her better for it, and found himself both

admiring and respecting the brave patience that made the most of

opportunity, and the cheerful spirit that covered poverty with flowers.

Amy did not know why he looked at her so kindly, nor why he filled up

her book with his own name, and devoted himself to her for the rest of

the evening in the most delightful manner; but the impulse that wrought

this agreeable change was the result of one of the new impressions

which both of them were unconsciously giving and receiving.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ON THE SHELF

In France the young girls have a dull time of it till they are married,

when 'Vive la liberte!' becomes their motto. In America, as everyone

knows, girls early sign the declaration of independence, and enjoy

their freedom with republican zest, but the young matrons usually

abdicate with the first heir to the throne and go into a seclusion

almost as close as a French nunnery, though by no means as quiet.

Whether they like it or not, they are virtually put upon the shelf as

soon as the wedding excitement is over, and most of them might exclaim,

as did a very pretty woman the other day, "I'm as handsome as ever, but

no one takes any notice of me because I'm married."

Not being a belle or even a fashionable lady, Meg did not experience

this affliction till her babies were a year old, for in her little

world primitive customs prevailed, and she found herself more admired

and beloved than ever.

As she was a womanly little woman, the maternal instinct was very

strong, and she was entirely absorbed in her children, to the utter

exclusion of everything and everybody else. Day and night she brooded

over them with tireless devotion and anxiety, leaving John to the

tender mercies of the help, for an Irish lady now presided over the

kitchen department. Being a domestic man, John decidedly missed the

wifely attentions he had been accustomed to receive, but as he adored

his babies, he cheerfully relinquished his comfort for a time,

supposing with masculine ignorance that peace would soon be restored.

But three months passed, and there was no return of repose. Meg looked

worn and nervous, the babies absorbed every minute of her time, the

house was neglected, and Kitty, the cook, who took life 'aisy', kept

him on short commons. When he went out in the morning he was

bewildered by small commissions for the captive mamma, if he came gaily

in at night, eager to embrace his family, he was quenched by a "Hush!

They are just asleep after worrying all day." If he proposed a little

amusement at home, "No, it would disturb the babies." If he hinted at

a lecture or a concert, he was answered with a reproachful look, and a

decided--"Leave my children for pleasure, never!" His sleep was broken

by infant wails and visions of a phantom figure pacing noiselessly to

and fro in the watches of the night. His meals were interrupted by the

frequent flight of the presiding genius, who deserted him, half-helped,

if a muffled chirp sounded from the nest above. And when he read his

paper of an evening, Demi's colic got into the shipping list and

Daisy's fall affected the price of stocks, for Mrs. Brooke was only

interested in domestic news.

The poor man was very uncomfortable, for the children had bereft him of

his wife, home was merely a nursery and the perpetual 'hushing' made

him feel like a brutal intruder whenever he entered the sacred

precincts of Babyland. He bore it very patiently for six months, and

when no signs of amendment appeared, he did what other paternal exiles

do--tried to get a little comfort elsewhere. Scott had married and

gone to housekeeping not far off, and John fell into the way of running

over for an hour or two of an evening, when his own parlor was empty,

and his own wife singing lullabies that seemed to have no end. Mrs.

Scott was a lively, pretty girl, with nothing to do but be agreeable,

and she performed her mission most successfully. The parlor was always

bright and attractive, the chessboard ready, the piano in tune, plenty

of gay gossip, and a nice little supper set forth in tempting style.

John would have preferred his own fireside if it had not been so

lonely, but as it was he gratefully took the next best thing and

enjoyed his neighbor's society.

Meg rather approved of the new arrangement at first, and found it a

relief to know that John was having a good time instead of dozing in

the parlor, or tramping about the house and waking the children. But

by-and-by, when the teething worry was over and the idols went to sleep

at proper hours, leaving Mamma time to rest, she began to miss John,

and find her workbasket dull company, when he was not sitting opposite

in his old dressing gown, comfortably scorching his slippers on the

fender. She would not ask him to stay at home, but felt injured

because he did not know that she wanted him without being told,

entirely forgetting the many evenings he had waited for her in vain.

She was nervous and worn out with watching and worry, and in that

unreasonable frame of mind which the best of mothers occasionally

experience when domestic cares oppress them. Want of exercise robs

them of cheerfulness, and too much devotion to that idol of American

women, the teapot, makes them feel as if they were all nerve and no

muscle.

"Yes," she would say, looking in the glass, "I'm getting old and ugly.

John doesn't find me interesting any longer, so he leaves his faded

wife and goes to see his pretty neighbor, who has no incumbrances.

Well, the babies love me, they don't care if I am thin and pale and

haven't time to crimp my hair, they are my comfort, and some day John

will see what I've gladly sacrificed for them, won't he, my precious?"

To which pathetic appeal Daisy would answer with a coo, or Demi with a

crow, and Meg would put by her lamentations for a maternal revel, which

soothed her solitude for the time being. But the pain increased as

politics absorbed John, who was always running over to discuss

interesting points with Scott, quite unconscious that Meg missed him.

Not a word did she say, however, till her mother found her in tears one

day, and insisted on knowing what the matter was, for Meg's drooping

spirits had not escaped her observation.

"I wouldn't tell anyone except you, Mother, but I really do need

advice, for if John goes on much longer I might as well be widowed,"

replied Mrs. Brooke, drying her tears on Daisy's bib with an injured

air.

"Goes on how, my dear?" asked her mother anxiously.

"He's away all day, and at night when I want to see him, he is

continually going over to the Scotts'. It isn't fair that I should

have the hardest work, and never any amusement. Men are very selfish,

even the best of them."

"So are women. Don't blame John till you see where you are wrong

yourself."

"But it can't be right for him to neglect me."

"Don't you neglect him?"

"Why, Mother, I thought you'd take my part!"

"So I do, as far as sympathizing goes, but I think the fault is yours,

Meg."

"I don't see how."

"Let me show you. Did John ever neglect you, as you call it, while you

made it a point to give him your society of an evening, his only

leisure time?"

"No, but I can't do it now, with two babies to tend."

"I think you could, dear, and I think you ought. May I speak quite

freely, and will you remember that it's Mother who blames as well as

Mother who sympathizes?"

"Indeed I will! Speak to me as if I were little Meg again. I often

feel as if I needed teaching more than ever since these babies look to

me for everything."

Meg drew her low chair beside her mother's, and with a little

interruption in either lap, the two women rocked and talked lovingly

together, feeling that the tie of motherhood made them more one than

ever.

"You have only made the mistake that most young wives make--forgotten

your duty to your husband in your love for your children. A very

natural and forgivable mistake, Meg, but one that had better be

remedied before you take to different ways, for children should draw

you nearer than ever, not separate you, as if they were all yours, and

John had nothing to do but support them. I've seen it for some weeks,

but have not spoken, feeling sure it would come right in time."

"I'm afraid it won't. If I ask him to stay, he'll think I'm jealous,

and I wouldn't insult him by such an idea. He doesn't see that I want

him, and I don't know how to tell him without words."

"Make it so pleasant he won't want to go away. My dear, he's longing

for his little home, but it isn't home without you, and you are always

in the nursery."

"Oughtn't I to be there?"

"Not all the time, too much confinement makes you nervous, and then you

are unfitted for everything. Besides, you owe something to John as

well as to the babies. Don't neglect husband for children, don't shut

him out of the nursery, but teach him how to help in it. His place is

there as well as yours, and the children need him. Let him feel that

he has a part to do, and he will do it gladly and faithfully, and it

will be better for you all."

"You really think so, Mother?"

"I know it, Meg, for I've tried it, and I seldom give advice unless

I've proved its practicability. When you and Jo were little, I went on

just as you are, feeling as if I didn't do my duty unless I devoted

myself wholly to you. Poor Father took to his books, after I had

refused all offers of help, and left me to try my experiment alone. I

struggled along as well as I could, but Jo was too much for me. I

nearly spoiled her by indulgence. You were poorly, and I worried about

you till I fell sick myself. Then Father came to the rescue, quietly

managed everything, and made himself so helpful that I saw my mistake,

and never have been able to get on without him since. That is the

secret of our home happiness. He does not let business wean him from

the little cares and duties that affect us all, and I try not to let

domestic worries destroy my interest in his pursuits. Each do our part

alone in many things, but at home we work together, always."

"It is so, Mother, and my great wish is to be to my husband and

children what you have been to yours. Show me how, I'll do anything

you say."

"You always were my docile daughter. Well, dear, if I were you, I'd

let John have more to do with the management of Demi, for the boy needs

training, and it's none too soon to begin. Then I'd do what I have

often proposed, let Hannah come and help you. She is a capital nurse,

and you may trust the precious babies to her while you do more

housework. You need the exercise, Hannah would enjoy the rest, and

John would find his wife again. Go out more, keep cheerful as well as

busy, for you are the sunshine-maker of the family, and if you get

dismal there is no fair weather. Then I'd try to take an interest in

whatever John likes--talk with him, let him read to you, exchange

ideas, and help each other in that way. Don't shut yourself up in a

bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and

educate yourself to take your part in the world's work, for it all

affects you and yours."

"John is so sensible, I'm afraid he will think I'm stupid if I ask

questions about politics and things."

"I don't believe he would. Love covers a multitude of sins, and of

whom could you ask more freely than of him? Try it, and see if he

doesn't find your society far more agreeable than Mrs. Scott's suppers."

"I will. Poor John! I'm afraid I have neglected him sadly, but I

thought I was right, and he never said anything."

"He tried not to be selfish, but he has felt rather forlorn, I fancy.

This is just the time, Meg, when young married people are apt to grow

apart, and the very time when they ought to be most together, for the

first tenderness soon wears off, unless care is taken to preserve it.

And no time is so beautiful and precious to parents as the first years

of the little lives given to them to train. Don't let John be a

stranger to the babies, for they will do more to keep him safe and

happy in this world of trial and temptation than anything else, and

through them you will learn to know and love one another as you should.

Now, dear, good-by. Think over Mother's preachment, act upon it if it

seems good, and God bless you all."

Meg did think it over, found it good, and acted upon it, though the

first attempt was not made exactly as she planned to have it. Of

course the children tyrannized over her, and ruled the house as soon as

they found out that kicking and squalling brought them whatever they

wanted. Mamma was an abject slave to their caprices, but Papa was not

so easily subjugated, and occasionally afflicted his tender spouse by

an attempt at paternal discipline with his obstreperous son. For Demi

inherited a trifle of his sire's firmness of character, we won't call

it obstinacy, and when he made up his little mind to have or to do

anything, all the king's horses and all the king's men could not change

that pertinacious little mind. Mamma thought the dear too young to be

taught to conquer his prejudices, but Papa believed that it never was

too soon to learn obedience. So Master Demi early discovered that when

he undertook to 'wrastle' with 'Parpar', he always got the worst of it,

yet like the Englishman, baby respected the man who conquered him, and

loved the father whose grave "No, no," was more impressive than all

Mamma's love pats.

A few days after the talk with her mother, Meg resolved to try a social

evening with John, so she ordered a nice supper, set the parlor in

order, dressed herself prettily, and put the children to bed early,

that nothing should interfere with her experiment. But unfortunately

Demi's most unconquerable prejudice was against going to bed, and that

night he decided to go on a rampage. So poor Meg sang and rocked, told

stories and tried every sleep-prevoking wile she could devise, but all

in vain, the big eyes wouldn't shut, and long after Daisy had gone to

byelow, like the chubby little bunch of good nature she was, naughty

Demi lay staring at the light, with the most discouragingly wide-awake

expression of countenance.

"Will Demi lie still like a good boy, while Mamma runs down and gives

poor Papa his tea?" asked Meg, as the hall door softly closed, and the

well-known step went tip-toeing into the dining room.

"Me has tea!" said Demi, preparing to join in the revel.

"No, but I'll save you some little cakies for breakfast, if you'll go

bye-bye like Daisy. Will you, lovey?"

"Iss!" and Demi shut his eyes tight, as if to catch sleep and hurry the

desired day.

Taking advantage of the propitious moment, Meg slipped away and ran

down to greet her husband with a smiling face and the little blue bow

in her hair which was his especial admiration. He saw it at once and

said with pleased surprise, "Why, little mother, how gay we are

tonight. Do you expect company?"

"Only you, dear."

"Is it a birthday, anniversary, or anything?"

"No, I'm tired of being dowdy, so I dressed up as a change. You always

make yourself nice for table, no matter how tired you are, so why

shouldn't I when I have the time?"

"I do it out of respect for you, my dear," said old-fashioned John.

"Ditto, ditto, Mr. Brooke," laughed Meg, looking young and pretty

again, as she nodded to him over the teapot.

"Well, it's altogether delightful, and like old times. This tastes

right. I drink your health, dear." and John sipped his tea with an air

of reposeful rapture, which was of very short duration however, for as

he put down his cup, the door handle rattled mysteriously, and a little

voice was heard, saying impatiently...

"Opy doy. Me's tummin!"

"It's that naughty boy. I told him to go to sleep alone, and here he

is, downstairs, getting his death a-cold pattering over that canvas,"

said Meg, answering the call.

"Mornin' now," announced Demi in joyful tone as he entered, with his

long nightgown gracefully festooned over his arm and every curl bobbing

gayly as he pranced about the table, eyeing the 'cakies' with loving

glances.

"No, it isn't morning yet. You must go to bed, and not trouble poor

Mamma. Then you can have the little cake with sugar on it."

"Me loves Parpar," said the artful one, preparing to climb the paternal

knee and revel in forbidden joys. But John shook his head, and said to

Meg...

"If you told him to stay up there, and go to sleep alone, make him do

it, or he will never learn to mind you."

"Yes, of course. Come, Demi," and Meg led her son away, feeling a

strong desire to spank the little marplot who hopped beside her,

laboring under the delusion that the bribe was to be administered as

soon as they reached the nursery.

Nor was he disappointed, for that shortsighted woman actually gave him

a lump of sugar, tucked him into his bed, and forbade any more

promenades till morning.

"Iss!" said Demi the perjured, blissfully sucking his sugar, and

regarding his first attempt as eminently successful.

Meg returned to her place, and supper was progressing pleasantly, when

the little ghost walked again, and exposed the maternal delinquencies

by boldly demanding, "More sudar, Marmar."

"Now this won't do," said John, hardening his heart against the

engaging little sinner. "We shall never know any peace till that child

learns to go to bed properly. You have made a slave of yourself long

enough. Give him one lesson, and then there will be an end of it. Put

him in his bed and leave him, Meg."

"He won't stay there, he never does unless I sit by him."

"I'll manage him. Demi, go upstairs, and get into your bed, as Mamma

bids you."

"S'ant!" replied the young rebel, helping himself to the coveted

'cakie', and beginning to eat the same with calm audacity.

"You must never say that to Papa. I shall carry you if you don't go

yourself."

"Go 'way, me don't love Parpar." and Demi retired to his mother's

skirts for protection.

But even that refuge proved unavailing, for he was delivered over to

the enemy, with a "Be gentle with him, John," which struck the culprit

with dismay, for when Mamma deserted him, then the judgment day was at

hand. Bereft of his cake, defrauded of his frolic, and borne away by a

strong hand to that detested bed, poor Demi could not restrain his

wrath, but openly defied Papa, and kicked and screamed lustily all the

way upstairs. The minute he was put into bed on one side, he rolled

out on the other, and made for the door, only to be ignominiously

caught up by the tail of his little toga and put back again, which

lively performance was kept up till the young man's strength gave out,

when he devoted himself to roaring at the top of his voice. This vocal

exercise usually conquered Meg, but John sat as unmoved as the post

which is popularly believed to be deaf. No coaxing, no sugar, no

lullaby, no story, even the light was put out and only the red glow of

the fire enlivened the 'big dark' which Demi regarded with curiosity

rather than fear. This new order of things disgusted him, and he

howled dismally for 'Marmar', as his angry passions subsided, and

recollections of his tender bondwoman returned to the captive autocrat.

The plaintive wail which succeeded the passionate roar went to Meg's

heart, and she ran up to say beseechingly...

"Let me stay with him, he'll be good now, John."

"No, my dear. I've told him he must go to sleep, as you bid him, and

he must, if I stay here all night."

"But he'll cry himself sick," pleaded Meg, reproaching herself for

deserting her boy.

"No, he won't, he's so tired he will soon drop off and then the matter

is settled, for he will understand that he has got to mind. Don't

interfere, I'll manage him."

"He's my child, and I can't have his spirit broken by harshness."

"He's my child, and I won't have his temper spoiled by indulgence. Go

down, my dear, and leave the boy to me."

When John spoke in that masterful tone, Meg always obeyed, and never

regretted her docility.

"Please let me kiss him once, John?"

"Certainly. Demi, say good night to Mamma, and let her go and rest,

for she is very tired with taking care of you all day."

Meg always insisted upon it that the kiss won the victory, for after it

was given, Demi sobbed more quietly, and lay quite still at the bottom

of the bed, whither he had wriggled in his anguish of mind.

"Poor little man, he's worn out with sleep and crying. I'll cover him

up, and then go and set Meg's heart at rest," thought John, creeping to

the bedside, hoping to find his rebellious heir asleep.

But he wasn't, for the moment his father peeped at him, Demi's eyes

opened, his little chin began to quiver, and he put up his arms, saying

with a penitent hiccough, "Me's dood, now."

Sitting on the stairs outside Meg wondered at the long silence which

followed the uproar, and after imagining all sorts of impossible

accidents, she slipped into the room to set her fears at rest. Demi

lay fast asleep, not in his usual spreadeagle attitude, but in a

subdued bunch, cuddled close in the circle of his father's arm and

holding his father's finger, as if he felt that justice was tempered

with mercy, and had gone to sleep a sadder and wiser baby. So held,

John had waited with a womanly patience till the little hand relaxed

its hold, and while waiting had fallen asleep, more tired by that

tussle with his son than with his whole day's work.

As Meg stood watching the two faces on the pillow, she smiled to

herself, and then slipped away again, saying in a satisfied tone, "I

never need fear that John will be too harsh with my babies. He does

know how to manage them, and will be a great help, for Demi is getting

too much for me."

When John came down at last, expecting to find a pensive or reproachful

wife, he was agreeably surprised to find Meg placidly trimming a

bonnet, and to be greeted with the request to read something about the

election, if he was not too tired. John saw in a minute that a

revolution of some kind was going on, but wisely asked no questions,

knowing that Meg was such a transparent little person, she couldn't

keep a secret to save her life, and therefore the clue would soon

appear. He read a long debate with the most amiable readiness and then

explained it in his most lucid manner, while Meg tried to look deeply

interested, to ask intelligent questions, and keep her thoughts from

wandering from the state of the nation to the state of her bonnet. In

her secret soul, however, she decided that politics were as bad as

mathematics, and that the mission of politicians seemed to be calling

each other names, but she kept these feminine ideas to herself, and

when John paused, shook her head and said with what she thought

diplomatic ambiguity, "Well, I really don't see what we are coming to."

John laughed, and watched her for a minute, as she poised a pretty

little preparation of lace and flowers on her hand, and regarded it

with the genuine interest which his harangue had failed to waken.

"She is trying to like politics for my sake, so I'll try and like

millinery for hers, that's only fair," thought John the Just, adding

aloud, "That's very pretty. Is it what you call a breakfast cap?"

"My dear man, it's a bonnet! My very best go-to-concert-and-theater

bonnet."

"I beg your pardon, it was so small, I naturally mistook it for one of

the flyaway things you sometimes wear. How do you keep it on?"

"These bits of lace are fastened under the chin with a rosebud, so,"

and Meg illustrated by putting on the bonnet and regarding him with an

air of calm satisfaction that was irresistible.

"It's a love of a bonnet, but I prefer the face inside, for it looks

young and happy again," and John kissed the smiling face, to the great

detriment of the rosebud under the chin.

"I'm glad you like it, for I want you to take me to one of the new

concerts some night. I really need some music to put me in tune. Will

you, please?"

"Of course I will, with all my heart, or anywhere else you like. You

have been shut up so long, it will do you no end of good, and I shall

enjoy it, of all things. What put it into your head, little mother?"

"Well, I had a talk with Marmee the other day, and told her how nervous

and cross and out of sorts I felt, and she said I needed change and

less care, so Hannah is to help me with the children, and I'm to see to

things about the house more, and now and then have a little fun, just

to keep me from getting to be a fidgety, broken-down old woman before

my time. It's only an experiment, John, and I want to try it for your

sake as much as for mine, because I've neglected you shamefully lately,

and I'm going to make home what it used to be, if I can. You don't

object, I hope?"

Never mind what John said, or what a very narrow escape the little

bonnet had from utter ruin. All that we have any business to know is

that John did not appear to object, judging from the changes which

gradually took place in the house and its inmates. It was not all

Paradise by any means, but everyone was better for the division of

labor system. The children throve under the paternal rule, for

accurate, steadfast John brought order and obedience into Babydom, while

Meg recovered her spirits and composed her nerves by plenty of

wholesome exercise, a little pleasure, and much confidential

conversation with her sensible husband. Home grew homelike again, and

John had no wish to leave it, unless he took Meg with him. The Scotts

came to the Brookes' now, and everyone found the little house a

cheerful place, full of happiness, content, and family love. Even

Sallie Moffatt liked to go there. "It is always so quiet and pleasant

here, it does me good, Meg," she used to say, looking about her with

wistful eyes, as if trying to discover the charm, that she might use it

in her great house, full of splendid loneliness, for there were no

riotous, sunny-faced babies there, and Ned lived in a world of his own,

where there was no place for her.

This household happiness did not come all at once, but John and Meg had

found the key to it, and each year of married life taught them how to

use it, unlocking the treasuries of real home love and mutual

helpfulness, which the poorest may possess, and the richest cannot buy.

This is the sort of shelf on which young wives and mothers may consent

to be laid, safe from the restless fret and fever of the world, finding

loyal lovers in the little sons and daughters who cling to them,

undaunted by sorrow, poverty, or age, walking side by side, through

fair and stormy weather, with a faithful friend, who is, in the true

sense of the good old Saxon word, the 'house-band', and learning, as

Meg learned, that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor

the art of ruling it not as a queen, but as a wise wife and mother.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

LAZY LAURENCE

Laurie went to Nice intending to stay a week, and remained a month. He

was tired of wandering about alone, and Amy's familiar presence seemed

to give a homelike charm to the foreign scenes in which she bore a

part. He rather missed the 'petting' he used to receive, and enjoyed a

taste of it again, for no attentions, however flattering, from

strangers, were half so pleasant as the sisterly adoration of the girls

at home. Amy never would pet him like the others, but she was very

glad to see him now, and quite clung to him, feeling that he was the

representative of the dear family for whom she longed more than she

would confess. They naturally took comfort in each other's society and

were much together, riding, walking, dancing, or dawdling, for at Nice

no one can be very industrious during the gay season. But, while

apparently amusing themselves in the most careless fashion, they were

half-consciously making discoveries and forming opinions about each

other. Amy rose daily in the estimation of her friend, but he sank in

hers, and each felt the truth before a word was spoken. Amy tried to

please, and succeeded, for she was grateful for the many pleasures he

gave her, and repaid him with the little services to which womanly

women know how to lend an indescribable charm. Laurie made no effort

of any kind, but just let himself drift along as comfortably as

possible, trying to forget, and feeling that all women owed him a kind

word because one had been cold to him. It cost him no effort to be

generous, and he would have given Amy all the trinkets in Nice if she

would have taken them, but at the same time he felt that he could not

change the opinion she was forming of him, and he rather dreaded the

keen blue eyes that seemed to watch him with such half-sorrowful,

half-scornful surprise.

"All the rest have gone to Monaco for the day. I preferred to stay at

home and write letters. They are done now, and I am going to Valrosa

to sketch, will you come?" said Amy, as she joined Laurie one lovely

day when he lounged in as usual, about noon.

"Well, yes, but isn't it rather warm for such a long walk?" he answered

slowly, for the shaded salon looked inviting after the glare without.

"I'm going to have the little carriage, and Baptiste can drive, so

you'll have nothing to do but hold your umbrella, and keep your gloves

nice," returned Amy, with a sarcastic glance at the immaculate kids,

which were a weak point with Laurie.

"Then I'll go with pleasure." and he put out his hand for her

sketchbook. But she tucked it under her arm with a sharp...

"Don't trouble yourself. It's no exertion to me, but you don't look

equal to it."

Laurie lifted his eyebrows and followed at a leisurely pace as she ran

downstairs, but when they got into the carriage he took the reins

himself, and left little Baptiste nothing to do but fold his arms and

fall asleep on his perch.

The two never quarreled. Amy was too well-bred, and just now Laurie

was too lazy, so in a minute he peeped under her hatbrim with an

inquiring air. She answered him with a smile, and they went on

together in the most amicable manner.

It was a lovely drive, along winding roads rich in the picturesque

scenes that delight beauty-loving eyes. Here an ancient monastery,

whence the solemn chanting of the monks came down to them. There a

bare-legged shepherd, in wooden shoes, pointed hat, and rough jacket

over one shoulder, sat piping on a stone while his goats skipped among

the rocks or lay at his feet. Meek, mouse-colored donkeys, laden with

panniers of freshly cut grass passed by, with a pretty girl in a

capaline sitting between the green piles, or an old woman spinning with

a distaff as she went. Brown, soft-eyed children ran out from the

quaint stone hovels to offer nosegays, or bunches of oranges still on

the bough. Gnarled olive trees covered the hills with their dusky

foliage, fruit hung golden in the orchard, and great scarlet anemones

fringed the roadside, while beyond green slopes and craggy heights, the

Maritime Alps rose sharp and white against the blue Italian sky.

Valrosa well deserved its name, for in that climate of perpetual summer

roses blossomed everywhere. They overhung the archway, thrust

themselves between the bars of the great gate with a sweet welcome to

passers-by, and lined the avenue, winding through lemon trees and

feathery palms up to the villa on the hill. Every shadowy nook, where

seats invited one to stop and rest, was a mass of bloom, every cool

grotto had its marble nymph smiling from a veil of flowers and every

fountain reflected crimson, white, or pale pink roses, leaning down to

smile at their own beauty. Roses covered the walls of the house, draped

the cornices, climbed the pillars, and ran riot over the balustrade of

the wide terrace, whence one looked down on the sunny Mediterranean,

and the white-walled city on its shore.

"This is a regular honeymoon paradise, isn't it? Did you ever see such

roses?" asked Amy, pausing on the terrace to enjoy the view, and a

luxurious whiff of perfume that came wandering by.

"No, nor felt such thorns," returned Laurie, with his thumb in his

mouth, after a vain attempt to capture a solitary scarlet flower that

grew just beyond his reach.

"Try lower down, and pick those that have no thorns," said Amy,

gathering three of the tiny cream-colored ones that starred the wall

behind her. She put them in his buttonhole as a peace offering, and he

stood a minute looking down at them with a curious expression, for in

the Italian part of his nature there was a touch of superstition, and

he was just then in that state of half-sweet, half-bitter melancholy,

when imaginative young men find significance in trifles and food for

romance everywhere. He had thought of Jo in reaching after the thorny

red rose, for vivid flowers became her, and she had often worn ones

like that from the greenhouse at home. The pale roses Amy gave him

were the sort that the Italians lay in dead hands, never in bridal

wreaths, and for a moment he wondered if the omen was for Jo or for

himself, but the next instant his American common sense got the better

of sentimentality, and he laughed a heartier laugh than Amy had heard

since he came.

"It's good advice, you'd better take it and save your fingers," she

said, thinking her speech amused him.

"Thank you, I will," he answered in jest, and a few months later he did

it in earnest.

"Laurie, when are you going to your grandfather?" she asked presently,

as she settled herself on a rustic seat.

"Very soon."

"You have said that a dozen times within the last three weeks."

"I dare say, short answers save trouble."

"He expects you, and you really ought to go."

"Hospitable creature! I know it."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"Natural depravity, I suppose."

"Natural indolence, you mean. It's really dreadful!" and Amy looked

severe.

"Not so bad as it seems, for I should only plague him if I went, so I

might as well stay and plague you a little longer, you can bear it

better, in fact I think it agrees with you excellently," and Laurie

composed himself for a lounge on the broad ledge of the balustrade.

Amy shook her head and opened her sketchbook with an air of

resignation, but she had made up her mind to lecture 'that boy' and in

a minute she began again.

"What are you doing just now?"

"Watching lizards."

"No, no. I mean what do you intend and wish to do?"

"Smoke a cigarette, if you'll allow me."

"How provoking you are! I don't approve of cigars and I will only

allow it on condition that you let me put you into my sketch. I need a

figure."

"With all the pleasure in life. How will you have me, full length or

three-quarters, on my head or my heels? I should respectfully suggest

a recumbent posture, then put yourself in also and call it 'Dolce far

niente'."

"Stay as you are, and go to sleep if you like. I intend to work hard,"

said Amy in her most energetic tone.

"What delightful enthusiasm!" and he leaned against a tall urn with an

air of entire satisfaction.

"What would Jo say if she saw you now?" asked Amy impatiently, hoping

to stir him up by the mention of her still more energetic sister's name.

"As usual, 'Go away, Teddy. I'm busy!'" He laughed as he spoke, but

the laugh was not natural, and a shade passed over his face, for the

utterance of the familiar name touched the wound that was not healed

yet. Both tone and shadow struck Amy, for she had seen and heard them

before, and now she looked up in time to catch a new expression on

Laurie's face--a hard bitter look, full of pain, dissatisfaction, and

regret. It was gone before she could study it and the listless

expression back again. She watched him for a moment with artistic

pleasure, thinking how like an Italian he looked, as he lay basking in

the sun with uncovered head and eyes full of southern dreaminess, for

he seemed to have forgotten her and fallen into a reverie.

"You look like the effigy of a young knight asleep on his tomb," she

said, carefully tracing the well-cut profile defined against the dark

stone.

"Wish I was!"

"That's a foolish wish, unless you have spoiled your life. You are so

changed, I sometimes think--" there Amy stopped, with a half-timid,

half-wistful look, more significant than her unfinished speech.

Laurie saw and understood the affectionate anxiety which she hesitated

to express, and looking straight into her eyes, said, just as he used

to say it to her mother, "It's all right, ma'am."

That satisfied her and set at rest the doubts that had begun to worry

her lately. It also touched her, and she showed that it did, by the

cordial tone in which she said...

"I'm glad of that! I didn't think you'd been a very bad boy, but I

fancied you might have wasted money at that wicked Baden-Baden, lost

your heart to some charming Frenchwoman with a husband, or got into

some of the scrapes that young men seem to consider a necessary part of

a foreign tour. Don't stay out there in the sun, come and lie on the

grass here and 'let us be friendly', as Jo used to say when we got in

the sofa corner and told secrets."

Laurie obediently threw himself down on the turf, and began to amuse

himself by sticking daisies into the ribbons of Amy's hat, that lay

there.

"I'm all ready for the secrets." and he glanced up with a decided

expression of interest in his eyes.

"I've none to tell. You may begin."

"Haven't one to bless myself with. I thought perhaps you'd had some

news from home.."

"You have heard all that has come lately. Don't you hear often? I

fancied Jo would send you volumes."

"She's very busy. I'm roving about so, it's impossible to be regular,

you know. When do you begin your great work of art, Raphaella?" he

asked, changing the subject abruptly after another pause, in which he

had been wondering if Amy knew his secret and wanted to talk about it.

"Never," she answered, with a despondent but decided air. "Rome took

all the vanity out of me, for after seeing the wonders there, I felt

too insignificant to live and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair."

"Why should you, with so much energy and talent?"

"That's just why, because talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy

can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a

common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more."

"And what are you going to do with yourself now, if I may ask?"

"Polish up my other talents, and be an ornament to society, if I get

the chance."

It was a characteristic speech, and sounded daring, but audacity

becomes young people, and Amy's ambition had a good foundation. Laurie

smiled, but he liked the spirit with which she took up a new purpose

when a long-cherished one died, and spent no time lamenting.

"Good! And here is where Fred Vaughn comes in, I fancy."

Amy preserved a discreet silence, but there was a conscious look in her

downcast face that made Laurie sit up and say gravely, "Now I'm going

to play brother, and ask questions. May I?"

"I don't promise to answer."

"Your face will, if your tongue won't. You aren't woman of the world

enough yet to hide your feelings, my dear. I heard rumors about Fred

and you last year, and it's my private opinion that if he had not been

called home so suddenly and detained so long, something would have come

of it, hey?"

"That's not for me to say," was Amy's grim reply, but her lips would

smile, and there was a traitorous sparkle of the eye which betrayed

that she knew her power and enjoyed the knowledge.

"You are not engaged, I hope?" and Laurie looked very elder-brotherly

and grave all of a sudden.

"No."

"But you will be, if he comes back and goes properly down on his knees,

won't you?"

"Very likely."

"Then you are fond of old Fred?"

"I could be, if I tried."

"But you don't intend to try till the proper moment? Bless my soul,

what unearthly prudence! He's a good fellow, Amy, but not the man I

fancied you'd like."

"He is rich, a gentleman, and has delightful manners," began Amy,

trying to be quite cool and dignified, but feeling a little ashamed of

herself, in spite of the sincerity of her intentions.

"I understand. Queens of society can't get on without money, so you

mean to make a good match, and start in that way? Quite right and

proper, as the world goes, but it sounds odd from the lips of one of

your mother's girls."

"True, nevertheless."

A short speech, but the quiet decision with which it was uttered

contrasted curiously with the young speaker. Laurie felt this

instinctively and laid himself down again, with a sense of

disappointment which he could not explain. His look and silence, as

well as a certain inward self-disapproval, ruffled Amy, and made her

resolve to deliver her lecture without delay.

"I wish you'd do me the favor to rouse yourself a little," she said

sharply.

"Do it for me, there's a dear girl."

"I could, if I tried." and she looked as if she would like doing it in

the most summary style.

"Try, then. I give you leave," returned Laurie, who enjoyed having

someone to tease, after his long abstinence from his favorite pastime.

"You'd be angry in five minutes."

"I'm never angry with you. It takes two flints to make a fire. You are

as cool and soft as snow."

"You don't know what I can do. Snow produces a glow and a tingle, if

applied rightly. Your indifference is half affectation, and a good

stirring up would prove it."

"Stir away, it won't hurt me and it may amuse you, as the big man said

when his little wife beat him. Regard me in the light of a husband or

a carpet, and beat till you are tired, if that sort of exercise agrees

with you."

Being decidedly nettled herself, and longing to see him shake off the

apathy that so altered him, Amy sharpened both tongue and pencil, and

began.

"Flo and I have got a new name for you. It's Lazy Laurence. How do you

like it?"

She thought it would annoy him, but he only folded his arms under his

head, with an imperturbable, "That's not bad. Thank you, ladies."

"Do you want to know what I honestly think of you?"

"Pining to be told."

"Well, I despise you."

If she had even said 'I hate you' in a petulant or coquettish tone, he

would have laughed and rather liked it, but the grave, almost sad,

accent in her voice made him open his eyes, and ask quickly...

"Why, if you please?"

"Because, with every chance for being good, useful, and happy, you are

faulty, lazy, and miserable."

"Strong language, mademoiselle."

"If you like it, I'll go on."

"Pray do, it's quite interesting."

"I thought you'd find it so. Selfish people always like to talk about

themselves."

"Am I selfish?" the question slipped out involuntarily and in a tone of

surprise, for the one virtue on which he prided himself was generosity.

"Yes, very selfish," continued Amy, in a calm, cool voice, twice as

effective just then as an angry one. "I'll show you how, for I've

studied you while we were frolicking, and I'm not at all satisfied with

you. Here you have been abroad nearly six months, and done nothing but

waste time and money and disappoint your friends."

"Isn't a fellow to have any pleasure after a four-year grind?"

"You don't look as if you'd had much. At any rate, you are none the

better for it, as far as I can see. I said when we first met that you

had improved. Now I take it all back, for I don't think you half so

nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you

like gossip, and waste time on frivolous things, you are contented to

be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and

respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and

beauty, ah you like that old Vanity! But it's the truth, so I can't

help saying it, with all these splendid things to use and enjoy, you

can find nothing to do but dawdle, and instead of being the man you

ought to be, you are only..." there she stopped, with a look that had

both pain and pity in it.

"Saint Laurence on a gridiron," added Laurie, blandly finishing the

sentence. But the lecture began to take effect, for there was a

wide-awake sparkle in his eyes now and a half-angry, half-injured

expression replaced the former indifference.

"I supposed you'd take it so. You men tell us we are angels, and say

we can make you what we will, but the instant we honestly try to do you

good, you laugh at us and won't listen, which proves how much your

flattery is worth." Amy spoke bitterly, and turned her back on the

exasperating martyr at her feet.

In a minute a hand came down over the page, so that she could not draw,

and Laurie's voice said, with a droll imitation of a penitent child, "I

will be good, oh, I will be good!"

But Amy did not laugh, for she was in earnest, and tapping on the

outspread hand with her pencil, said soberly, "Aren't you ashamed of a

hand like that? It's as soft and white as a woman's, and looks as if

it never did anything but wear Jouvin's best gloves and pick flowers

for ladies. You are not a dandy, thank Heaven, so I'm glad to see

there are no diamonds or big seal rings on it, only the little old one

Jo gave you so long ago. Dear soul, I wish she was here to help me!"

"So do I!"

The hand vanished as suddenly as it came, and there was energy enough

in the echo of her wish to suit even Amy. She glanced down at him with

a new thought in her mind, but he was lying with his hat half over his

face, as if for shade, and his mustache hid his mouth. She only saw

his chest rise and fall, with a long breath that might have been a

sigh, and the hand that wore the ring nestled down into the grass, as

if to hide something too precious or too tender to be spoken of. All in

a minute various hints and trifles assumed shape and significance in

Amy's mind, and told her what her sister never had confided to her.

She remembered that Laurie never spoke voluntarily of Jo, she recalled

the shadow on his face just now, the change in his character, and the

wearing of the little old ring which was no ornament to a handsome

hand. Girls are quick to read such signs and feel their eloquence.

Amy had fancied that perhaps a love trouble was at the bottom of the

alteration, and now she was sure of it. Her keen eyes filled, and when

she spoke again, it was in a voice that could be beautifully soft and

kind when she chose to make it so.

"I know I have no right to talk so to you, Laurie, and if you weren't

the sweetest-tempered fellow in the world, you'd be very angry with me.

But we are all so fond and proud of you, I couldn't bear to think they

should be disappointed in you at home as I have been, though, perhaps

they would understand the change better than I do."

"I think they would," came from under the hat, in a grim tone, quite as

touching as a broken one.

"They ought to have told me, and not let me go blundering and scolding,

when I should have been more kind and patient than ever. I never did

like that Miss Randal and now I hate her!" said artful Amy, wishing to

be sure of her facts this time.

"Hang Miss Randal!" and Laurie knocked the hat off his face with a look

that left no doubt of his sentiments toward that young lady.

"I beg pardon, I thought..." and there she paused diplomatically.

"No, you didn't, you knew perfectly well I never cared for anyone but

Jo," Laurie said that in his old, impetuous tone, and turned his face

away as he spoke.

"I did think so, but as they never said anything about it, and you came

away, I supposed I was mistaken. And Jo wouldn't be kind to you? Why,

I was sure she loved you dearly."

"She was kind, but not in the right way, and it's lucky for her she

didn't love me, if I'm the good-for-nothing fellow you think me. It's

her fault though, and you may tell her so."

The hard, bitter look came back again as he said that, and it troubled

Amy, for she did not know what balm to apply.

"I was wrong, I didn't know. I'm very sorry I was so cross, but I

can't help wishing you'd bear it better, Teddy, dear."

"Don't, that's her name for me!" and Laurie put up his hand with a

quick gesture to stop the words spoken in Jo's half-kind,

half-reproachful tone. "Wait till you've tried it yourself," he added

in a low voice, as he pulled up the grass by the handful.

"I'd take it manfully, and be respected if I couldn't be loved," said

Amy, with the decision of one who knew nothing about it.

Now, Laurie flattered himself that he had borne it remarkably well,

making no moan, asking no sympathy, and taking his trouble away to live

it down alone. Amy's lecture put the matter in a new light, and for

the first time it did look weak and selfish to lose heart at the first

failure, and shut himself up in moody indifference. He felt as if

suddenly shaken out of a pensive dream and found it impossible to go to

sleep again. Presently he sat up and asked slowly, "Do you think Jo

would despise me as you do?"

"Yes, if she saw you now. She hates lazy people. Why don't you do

something splendid, and make her love you?"

"I did my best, but it was no use."

"Graduating well, you mean? That was no more than you ought to have

done, for your grandfather's sake. It would have been shameful to fail

after spending so much time and money, when everyone knew that you

could do well."

"I did fail, say what you will, for Jo wouldn't love me," began Laurie,

leaning his head on his hand in a despondent attitude.

"No, you didn't, and you'll say so in the end, for it did you good, and

proved that you could do something if you tried. If you'd only set

about another task of some sort, you'd soon be your hearty, happy self

again, and forget your trouble."

"That's impossible."

"Try it and see. You needn't shrug your shoulders, and think, 'Much

she knows about such things'. I don't pretend to be wise, but I am

observing, and I see a great deal more than you'd imagine. I'm

interested in other people's experiences and inconsistencies, and

though I can't explain, I remember and use them for my own benefit.

Love Jo all your days, if you choose, but don't let it spoil you, for

it's wicked to throw away so many good gifts because you can't have the

one you want. There, I won't lecture any more, for I know you'll wake

up and be a man in spite of that hardhearted girl."

Neither spoke for several minutes. Laurie sat turning the little ring

on his finger, and Amy put the last touches to the hasty sketch she had

been working at while she talked. Presently she put it on his knee,

merely saying, "How do you like that?"

He looked and then he smiled, as he could not well help doing, for it

was capitally done, the long, lazy figure on the grass, with listless

face, half-shut eyes, and one hand holding a cigar, from which came the

little wreath of smoke that encircled the dreamer's head.

"How well you draw!" he said, with a genuine surprise and pleasure at

her skill, adding, with a half-laugh, "Yes, that's me."

"As you are. This is as you were." and Amy laid another sketch beside

the one he held.

It was not nearly so well done, but there was a life and spirit in it

which atoned for many faults, and it recalled the past so vividly that

a sudden change swept over the young man's face as he looked. Only a

rough sketch of Laurie taming a horse. Hat and coat were off, and

every line of the active figure, resolute face, and commanding attitude

was full of energy and meaning. The handsome brute, just subdued,

stood arching his neck under the tightly drawn rein, with one foot

impatiently pawing the ground, and ears pricked up as if listening for

the voice that had mastered him. In the ruffled mane, the rider's

breezy hair and erect attitude, there was a suggestion of suddenly

arrested motion, of strength, courage, and youthful buoyancy that

contrasted sharply with the supine grace of the '\_Dolce far Niente\_'

sketch. Laurie said nothing but as his eye went from one to the other,

Amy saw him flush up and fold his lips together as if he read and

accepted the little lesson she had given him. That satisfied her, and

without waiting for him to speak, she said, in her sprightly way...

"Don't you remember the day you played Rarey with Puck, and we all

looked on? Meg and Beth were frightened, but Jo clapped and pranced,

and I sat on the fence and drew you. I found that sketch in my

portfolio the other day, touched it up, and kept it to show you."

"Much obliged. You've improved immensely since then, and I

congratulate you. May I venture to suggest in 'a honeymoon paradise'

that five o'clock is the dinner hour at your hotel?"

Laurie rose as he spoke, returned the pictures with a smile and a bow

and looked at his watch, as if to remind her that even moral lectures

should have an end. He tried to resume his former easy, indifferent

air, but it was an affectation now, for the rousing had been more

effacious than he would confess. Amy felt the shade of coldness in his

manner, and said to herself...

"Now, I've offended him. Well, if it does him good, I'm glad, if it

makes him hate me, I'm sorry, but it's true, and I can't take back a

word of it."

They laughed and chatted all the way home, and little Baptiste, up

behind, thought that monsieur and madamoiselle were in charming

spirits. But both felt ill at ease. The friendly frankness was

disturbed, the sunshine had a shadow over it, and despite their

apparent gaiety, there was a secret discontent in the heart of each.

"Shall we see you this evening, mon frere?" asked Amy, as they parted

at her aunt's door.

"Unfortunately I have an engagement. Au revoir, madamoiselle," and

Laurie bent as if to kiss her hand, in the foreign fashion, which

became him better than many men. Something in his face made Amy say

quickly and warmly...

"No, be yourself with me, Laurie, and part in the good old way. I'd

rather have a hearty English handshake than all the sentimental

salutations in France."

"Goodbye, dear," and with these words, uttered in the tone she liked,

Laurie left her, after a handshake almost painful in its heartiness.

Next morning, instead of the usual call, Amy received a note which made

her smile at the beginning and sigh at the end.

My Dear Mentor, Please make my adieux to your aunt, and exult within

yourself, for 'Lazy Laurence' has gone to his grandpa, like the best of

boys. A pleasant winter to you, and may the gods grant you a blissful

honeymoon at Valrosa! I think Fred would be benefited by a rouser.

Tell him so, with my congratulations.

Yours gratefully, Telemachus

"Good boy! I'm glad he's gone," said Amy, with an approving smile. The

next minute her face fell as she glanced about the empty room, adding,

with an involuntary sigh, "Yes, I am glad, but how I shall miss him."

CHAPTER FORTY

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

When the first bitterness was over, the family accepted the inevitable,

and tried to bear it cheerfully, helping one another by the increased

affection which comes to bind households tenderly together in times of

trouble. They put away their grief, and each did his or her part

toward making that last year a happy one.

The pleasantest room in the house was set apart for Beth, and in it was

gathered everything that she most loved, flowers, pictures, her piano,

the little worktable, and the beloved pussies. Father's best books

found their way there, Mother's easy chair, Jo's desk, Amy's finest

sketches, and every day Meg brought her babies on a loving pilgrimage,

to make sunshine for Aunty Beth. John quietly set apart a little sum,

that he might enjoy the pleasure of keeping the invalid supplied with

the fruit she loved and longed for. Old Hannah never wearied of

concocting dainty dishes to tempt a capricious appetite, dropping tears

as she worked, and from across the sea came little gifts and cheerful

letters, seeming to bring breaths of warmth and fragrance from lands

that know no winter.

Here, cherished like a household saint in its shrine, sat Beth,

tranquil and busy as ever, for nothing could change the sweet,

unselfish nature, and even while preparing to leave life, she tried to

make it happier for those who should remain behind. The feeble fingers

were never idle, and one of her pleasures was to make little things for

the school children daily passing to and fro, to drop a pair of mittens

from her window for a pair of purple hands, a needlebook for some small

mother of many dolls, penwipers for young penmen toiling through

forests of pothooks, scrapbooks for picture-loving eyes, and all manner

of pleasant devices, till the reluctant climbers of the ladder of

learning found their way strewn with flowers, as it were, and came to

regard the gentle giver as a sort of fairy godmother, who sat above

there, and showered down gifts miraculously suited to their tastes and

needs. If Beth had wanted any reward, she found it in the bright

little faces always turned up to her window, with nods and smiles, and

the droll little letters which came to her, full of blots and gratitude.

The first few months were very happy ones, and Beth often used to look

round, and say "How beautiful this is!" as they all sat together in her

sunny room, the babies kicking and crowing on the floor, mother and

sisters working near, and father reading, in his pleasant voice, from

the wise old books which seemed rich in good and comfortable words, as

applicable now as when written centuries ago, a little chapel, where a

paternal priest taught his flock the hard lessons all must learn,

trying to show them that hope can comfort love, and faith make

resignation possible. Simple sermons, that went straight to the souls

of those who listened, for the father's heart was in the minister's

religion, and the frequent falter in the voice gave a double eloquence

to the words he spoke or read.

It was well for all that this peaceful time was given them as

preparation for the sad hours to come, for by-and-by, Beth said the

needle was 'so heavy', and put it down forever. Talking wearied her,

faces troubled her, pain claimed her for its own, and her tranquil

spirit was sorrowfully perturbed by the ills that vexed her feeble

flesh. Ah me! Such heavy days, such long, long nights, such aching

hearts and imploring prayers, when those who loved her best were forced

to see the thin hands stretched out to them beseechingly, to hear the

bitter cry, "Help me, help me!" and to feel that there was no help. A

sad eclipse of the serene soul, a sharp struggle of the young life with

death, but both were mercifully brief, and then the natural rebellion

over, the old peace returned more beautiful than ever. With the wreck

of her frail body, Beth's soul grew strong, and though she said little,

those about her felt that she was ready, saw that the first pilgrim

called was likewise the fittest, and waited with her on the shore,

trying to see the Shining Ones coming to receive her when she crossed

the river.

Jo never left her for an hour since Beth had said "I feel stronger when

you are here." She slept on a couch in the room, waking often to renew

the fire, to feed, lift, or wait upon the patient creature who seldom

asked for anything, and 'tried not to be a trouble'. All day she

haunted the room, jealous of any other nurse, and prouder of being

chosen then than of any honor her life ever brought her. Precious and

helpful hours to Jo, for now her heart received the teaching that it

needed. Lessons in patience were so sweetly taught her that she could

not fail to learn them, charity for all, the lovely spirit that can

forgive and truly forget unkindness, the loyalty to duty that makes the

hardest easy, and the sincere faith that fears nothing, but trusts

undoubtingly.

Often when she woke Jo found Beth reading in her well-worn little book,

heard her singing softly, to beguile the sleepless night, or saw her

lean her face upon her hands, while slow tears dropped through the

transparent fingers, and Jo would lie watching her with thoughts too

deep for tears, feeling that Beth, in her simple, unselfish way, was

trying to wean herself from the dear old life, and fit herself for the

life to come, by sacred words of comfort, quiet prayers, and the music

she loved so well.

Seeing this did more for Jo than the wisest sermons, the saintliest

hymns, the most fervent prayers that any voice could utter. For with

eyes made clear by many tears, and a heart softened by the tenderest

sorrow, she recognized the beauty of her sister's life--uneventful,

unambitious, yet full of the genuine virtues which 'smell sweet, and

blossom in the dust', the self-forgetfulness that makes the humblest on

earth remembered soonest in heaven, the true success which is possible

to all.

One night when Beth looked among the books upon her table, to find

something to make her forget the mortal weariness that was almost as

hard to bear as pain, as she turned the leaves of her old favorite,

Pilgrims's Progress, she found a little paper, scribbled over in Jo's

hand. The name caught her eye and the blurred look of the lines made

her sure that tears had fallen on it.

"Poor Jo! She's fast asleep, so I won't wake her to ask leave. She

shows me all her things, and I don't think she'll mind if I look at

this", thought Beth, with a glance at her sister, who lay on the rug,

with the tongs beside her, ready to wake up the minute the log fell

apart.

MY BETH

Sitting patient in the shadow

Till the blessed light shall come,

A serene and saintly presence

Sanctifies our troubled home.

Earthly joys and hopes and sorrows

Break like ripples on the strand

Of the deep and solemn river

Where her willing feet now stand.

O my sister, passing from me,

Out of human care and strife,

Leave me, as a gift, those virtues

Which have beautified your life.

Dear, bequeath me that great patience

Which has power to sustain

A cheerful, uncomplaining spirit

In its prison-house of pain.

Give me, for I need it sorely,

Of that courage, wise and sweet,

Which has made the path of duty

Green beneath your willing feet.

Give me that unselfish nature,

That with charity devine

Can pardon wrong for love's dear sake--

Meek heart, forgive me mine!

Thus our parting daily loseth

Something of its bitter pain,

And while learning this hard lesson,

My great loss becomes my gain.

For the touch of grief will render

My wild nature more serene,

Give to life new aspirations,

A new trust in the unseen.

Henceforth, safe across the river,

I shall see forever more

A beloved, household spirit

Waiting for me on the shore.

Hope and faith, born of my sorrow,

Guardian angels shall become,

And the sister gone before me

By their hands shall lead me home.

Blurred and blotted, faulty and feeble as the lines were, they brought

a look of inexpressible comfort to Beth's face, for her one regret had

been that she had done so little, and this seemed to assure her that

her life had not been useless, that her death would not bring the

despair she feared. As she sat with the paper folded between her

hands, the charred log fell asunder. Jo started up, revived the blaze,

and crept to the bedside, hoping Beth slept.

"Not asleep, but so happy, dear. See, I found this and read it. I knew

you wouldn't care. Have I been all that to you, Jo?" she asked, with

wistful, humble earnestness.

"\_Oh\_, Beth, so much, so much!" and Jo's head went down upon the pillow

beside her sister's.

"Then I don't feel as if I'd wasted my life. I'm not so good as you

make me, but I have tried to do right. And now, when it's too late to

begin even to do better, it's such a comfort to know that someone loves

me so much, and feels as if I'd helped them."

"More than any one in the world, Beth. I used to think I couldn't let

you go, but I'm learning to feel that I don't lose you, that you'll be

more to me than ever, and death can't part us, though it seems to."

"I know it cannot, and I don't fear it any longer, for I'm sure I shall

be your Beth still, to love and help you more than ever. You must take

my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone.

They will turn to you, don't fail them, and if it's hard to work alone,

remember that I don't forget you, and that you'll be happier in doing

that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world, for love is

the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the

end so easy."

"I'll try, Beth." and then and there Jo renounced her old ambition,

pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of

other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the

immortality of love.

So the spring days came and went, the sky grew clearer, the earth

greener, the flowers were up fairly early, and the birds came back in

time to say goodbye to Beth, who, like a tired but trustful child,

clung to the hands that had led her all her life, as Father and Mother

guided her tenderly through the Valley of the Shadow, and gave her up

to God.

Seldom except in books do the dying utter memorable words, see visions,

or depart with beatified countenances, and those who have sped many

parting souls know that to most the end comes as naturally and simply

as sleep. As Beth had hoped, the 'tide went out easily', and in the

dark hour before dawn, on the bosom where she had drawn her first

breath, she quietly drew her last, with no farewell but one loving

look, one little sigh.

With tears and prayers and tender hands, Mother and sisters made her

ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again, seeing with

grateful eyes the beautiful serenity that soon replaced the pathetic

patience that had wrung their hearts so long, and feeling with reverent

joy that to their darling death was a benignant angel, not a phantom

full of dread.

When morning came, for the first time in many months the fire was out,

Jo's place was empty, and the room was very still. But a bird sang

blithely on a budding bough, close by, the snowdrops blossomed freshly

at the window, and the spring sunshine streamed in like a benediction

over the placid face upon the pillow, a face so full of painless peace

that those who loved it best smiled through their tears, and thanked

God that Beth was well at last.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

LEARNING TO FORGET

Amy's lecture did Laurie good, though, of course, he did not own it

till long afterward. Men seldom do, for when women are the advisers,

the lords of creation don't take the advice till they have persuaded

themselves that it is just what they intended to do. Then they act

upon it, and, if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the

credit of it. If it fails, they generously give her the whole. Laurie

went back to his grandfather, and was so dutifully devoted for several

weeks that the old gentleman declared the climate of Nice had improved

him wonderfully, and he had better try it again. There was nothing the

young gentleman would have liked better, but elephants could not have

dragged him back after the scolding he had received. Pride forbid, and

whenever the longing grew very strong, he fortified his resolution by

repeating the words that had made the deepest impression--"I despise

you." "Go and do something splendid that will make her love you."

Laurie turned the matter over in his mind so often that he soon brought

himself to confess that he had been selfish and lazy, but then when a

man has a great sorrow, he should be indulged in all sorts of vagaries

till he has lived it down. He felt that his blighted affections were

quite dead now, and though he should never cease to be a faithful

mourner, there was no occasion to wear his weeds ostentatiously. Jo

wouldn't love him, but he might make her respect and admire him by

doing something which should prove that a girl's 'No' had not spoiled

his life. He had always meant to do something, and Amy's advice was

quite unnecessary. He had only been waiting till the aforesaid

blighted affections were decently interred. That being done, he felt

that he was ready to 'hide his stricken heart, and still toil on'.

As Goethe, when he had a joy or a grief, put it into a song, so Laurie

resolved to embalm his love sorrow in music, and to compose a Requiem

which should harrow up Jo's soul and melt the heart of every hearer.

Therefore the next time the old gentleman found him getting restless

and moody and ordered him off, he went to Vienna, where he had musical

friends, and fell to work with the firm determination to distinguish

himself. But whether the sorrow was too vast to be embodied in music,

or music too ethereal to uplift a mortal woe, he soon discovered that

the Requiem was beyond him just at present. It was evident that his

mind was not in working order yet, and his ideas needed clarifying, for

often in the middle of a plaintive strain, he would find himself

humming a dancing tune that vividly recalled the Christmas ball at

Nice, especially the stout Frenchman, and put an effectual stop to

tragic composition for the time being.

Then he tried an opera, for nothing seemed impossible in the beginning,

but here again unforeseen difficulties beset him. He wanted Jo for his

heroine, and called upon his memory to supply him with tender

recollections and romantic visions of his love. But memory turned

traitor, and as if possessed by the perverse spirit of the girl, would

only recall Jo's oddities, faults, and freaks, would only show her in

the most unsentimental aspects--beating mats with her head tied up in a

bandanna, barricading herself with the sofa pillow, or throwing cold

water over his passion a la Gummidge--and an irresistable laugh spoiled

the pensive picture he was endeavoring to paint. Jo wouldn't be put

into the opera at any price, and he had to give her up with a "Bless

that girl, what a torment she is!" and a clutch at his hair, as became

a distracted composer.

When he looked about him for another and a less intractable damsel to

immortalize in melody, memory produced one with the most obliging

readiness. This phantom wore many faces, but it always had golden

hair, was enveloped in a diaphanous cloud, and floated airily before

his mind's eye in a pleasing chaos of roses, peacocks, white ponies,

and blue ribbons. He did not give the complacent wraith any name, but

he took her for his heroine and grew quite fond of her, as well he

might, for he gifted her with every gift and grace under the sun, and

escorted her, unscathed, through trials which would have annihilated

any mortal woman.

Thanks to this inspiration, he got on swimmingly for a time, but

gradually the work lost its charm, and he forgot to compose, while he

sat musing, pen in hand, or roamed about the gay city to get some new

ideas and refresh his mind, which seemed to be in a somewhat unsettled

state that winter. He did not do much, but he thought a great deal and

was conscious of a change of some sort going on in spite of himself.

"It's genius simmering, perhaps. I'll let it simmer, and see what

comes of it," he said, with a secret suspicion all the while that it

wasn't genius, but something far more common. Whatever it was, it

simmered to some purpose, for he grew more and more discontented with

his desultory life, began to long for some real and earnest work to go

at, soul and body, and finally came to the wise conclusion that

everyone who loved music was not a composer. Returning from one of

Mozart's grand operas, splendidly performed at the Royal Theatre, he

looked over his own, played a few of the best parts, sat staring at the

busts of Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Bach, who stared benignly back

again. Then suddenly he tore up his music sheets, one by one, and as

the last fluttered out of his hand, he said soberly to himself...

"She is right! Talent isn't genius, and you can't make it so. That

music has taken the vanity out of me as Rome took it out of her, and I

won't be a humbug any longer. Now what shall I do?"

That seemed a hard question to answer, and Laurie began to wish he had

to work for his daily bread. Now if ever, occurred an eligible

opportunity for 'going to the devil', as he once forcibly expressed it,

for he had plenty of money and nothing to do, and Satan is proverbially

fond of providing employment for full and idle hands. The poor fellow

had temptations enough from without and from within, but he withstood

them pretty well, for much as he valued liberty, he valued good faith

and confidence more, so his promise to his grandfather, and his desire

to be able to look honestly into the eyes of the women who loved him,

and say "All's well," kept him safe and steady.

Very likely some Mrs. Grundy will observe, "I don't believe it, boys

will be boys, young men must sow their wild oats, and women must not

expect miracles." I dare say you don't, Mrs. Grundy, but it's true

nevertheless. Women work a good many miracles, and I have a persuasion

that they may perform even that of raising the standard of manhood by

refusing to echo such sayings. Let the boys be boys, the longer the

better, and let the young men sow their wild oats if they must. But

mothers, sisters, and friends may help to make the crop a small one,

and keep many tares from spoiling the harvest, by believing, and

showing that they believe, in the possibility of loyalty to the virtues

which make men manliest in good women's eyes. If it is a feminine

delusion, leave us to enjoy it while we may, for without it half the

beauty and the romance of life is lost, and sorrowful forebodings would

embitter all our hopes of the brave, tenderhearted little lads, who

still love their mothers better than themselves and are not ashamed to

own it.

Laurie thought that the task of forgetting his love for Jo would absorb

all his powers for years, but to his great surprise he discovered it

grew easier every day. He refused to believe it at first, got angry

with himself, and couldn't understand it, but these hearts of ours are

curious and contrary things, and time and nature work their will in

spite of us. Laurie's heart wouldn't ache. The wound persisted in

healing with a rapidity that astonished him, and instead of trying to

forget, he found himself trying to remember. He had not foreseen this

turn of affairs, and was not prepared for it. He was disgusted with

himself, surprised at his own fickleness, and full of a queer mixture

of disappointment and relief that he could recover from such a

tremendous blow so soon. He carefully stirred up the embers of his

lost love, but they refused to burst into a blaze. There was only a

comfortable glow that warmed and did him good without putting him into

a fever, and he was reluctantly obliged to confess that the boyish

passion was slowly subsiding into a more tranquil sentiment, very

tender, a little sad and resentful still, but that was sure to pass

away in time, leaving a brotherly affection which would last unbroken

to the end.

As the word 'brotherly' passed through his mind in one of his reveries,

he smiled, and glanced up at the picture of Mozart that was before

him...

"Well, he was a great man, and when he couldn't have one sister he took

the other, and was happy."

Laurie did not utter the words, but he thought them, and the next

instant kissed the little old ring, saying to himself, "No, I won't! I

haven't forgotten, I never can. I'll try again, and if that fails, why

then..."

Leaving his sentence unfinished, he seized pen and paper and wrote to

Jo, telling her that he could not settle to anything while there was

the least hope of her changing her mind. Couldn't she, wouldn't

she--and let him come home and be happy? While waiting for an answer he

did nothing, but he did it energetically, for he was in a fever of

impatience. It came at last, and settled his mind effectually on one

point, for Jo decidedly couldn't and wouldn't. She was wrapped up in

Beth, and never wished to hear the word love again. Then she begged

him to be happy with somebody else, but always keep a little corner of

his heart for his loving sister Jo. In a postscript she desired him

not to tell Amy that Beth was worse, she was coming home in the spring

and there was no need of saddening the remainder of her stay. That

would be time enough, please God, but Laurie must write to her often,

and not let her feel lonely, homesick or anxious.

"So I will, at once. Poor little girl, it will be a sad going home for

her, I'm afraid," and Laurie opened his desk, as if writing to Amy had

been the proper conclusion of the sentence left unfinished some weeks

before.

But he did not write the letter that day, for as he rummaged out his

best paper, he came across something which changed his purpose.

Tumbling about in one part of the desk among bills, passports, and

business documents of various kinds were several of Jo's letters, and

in another compartment were three notes from Amy, carefully tied up

with one of her blue ribbons and sweetly suggestive of the little dead

roses put away inside. With a half-repentant, half-amused expression,

Laurie gathered up all Jo's letters, smoothed, folded, and put them

neatly into a small drawer of the desk, stood a minute turning the ring

thoughtfully on his finger, then slowly drew it off, laid it with the

letters, locked the drawer, and went out to hear High Mass at Saint

Stefan's, feeling as if there had been a funeral, and though not

overwhelmed with affliction, this seemed a more proper way to spend the

rest of the day than in writing letters to charming young ladies.

The letter went very soon, however, and was promptly answered, for Amy

was homesick, and confessed it in the most delightfully confiding

manner. The correspondence flourished famously, and letters flew to

and fro with unfailing regularity all through the early spring. Laurie

sold his busts, made allumettes of his opera, and went back to Paris,

hoping somebody would arrive before long. He wanted desperately to go

to Nice, but would not till he was asked, and Amy would not ask him,

for just then she was having little experiences of her own, which made

her rather wish to avoid the quizzical eyes of 'our boy'.

Fred Vaughn had returned, and put the question to which she had once

decided to answer, "Yes, thank you," but now she said, "No, thank you,"

kindly but steadily, for when the time came, her courage failed her,

and she found that something more than money and position was needed to

satisfy the new longing that filled her heart so full of tender hopes

and fears. The words, "Fred is a good fellow, but not at all the man I

fancied you would ever like," and Laurie's face when he uttered them,

kept returning to her as pertinaciously as her own did when she said in

look, if not in words, "I shall marry for money." It troubled her to

remember that now, she wished she could take it back, it sounded so

unwomanly. She didn't want Laurie to think her a heartless, worldly

creature. She didn't care to be a queen of society now half so much as

she did to be a lovable woman. She was so glad he didn't hate her for

the dreadful things she said, but took them so beautifully and was

kinder than ever. His letters were such a comfort, for the home

letters were very irregular and not half so satisfactory as his when

they did come. It was not only a pleasure, but a duty to answer them,

for the poor fellow was forlorn, and needed petting, since Jo persisted

in being stonyhearted. She ought to have made an effort and tried to

love him. It couldn't be very hard, many people would be proud and

glad to have such a dear boy care for them. But Jo never would act

like other girls, so there was nothing to do but be very kind and treat

him like a brother.

If all brothers were treated as well as Laurie was at this period, they

would be a much happier race of beings than they are. Amy never

lectured now. She asked his opinion on all subjects, she was

interested in everything he did, made charming little presents for him,

and sent him two letters a week, full of lively gossip, sisterly

confidences, and captivating sketches of the lovely scenes about her.

As few brothers are complimented by having their letters carried about

in their sister's pockets, read and reread diligently, cried over when

short, kissed when long, and treasured carefully, we will not hint that

Amy did any of these fond and foolish things. But she certainly did

grow a little pale and pensive that spring, lost much of her relish for

society, and went out sketching alone a good deal. She never had much

to show when she came home, but was studying nature, I dare say, while

she sat for hours, with her hands folded, on the terrace at Valrosa, or

absently sketched any fancy that occurred to her, a stalwart knight

carved on a tomb, a young man asleep in the grass, with his hat over

his eyes, or a curly haired girl in gorgeous array, promenading down a

ballroom on the arm of a tall gentleman, both faces being left a blur

according to the last fashion in art, which was safe but not altogether

satisfactory.

Her aunt thought that she regretted her answer to Fred, and finding

denials useless and explanations impossible, Amy left her to think what

she liked, taking care that Laurie should know that Fred had gone to

Egypt. That was all, but he understood it, and looked relieved, as he

said to himself, with a venerable air...

"I was sure she would think better of it. Poor old fellow! I've been

through it all, and I can sympathize."

With that he heaved a great sigh, and then, as if he had discharged his

duty to the past, put his feet up on the sofa and enjoyed Amy's letter

luxuriously.

While these changes were going on abroad, trouble had come at home.

But the letter telling that Beth was failing never reached Amy, and

when the next found her at Vevay, for the heat had driven them from

Nice in May, and they had travelled slowly to Switzerland, by way of

Genoa and the Italian lakes. She bore it very well, and quietly

submitted to the family decree that she should not shorten her visit,

for since it was too late to say goodbye to Beth, she had better stay,

and let absence soften her sorrow. But her heart was very heavy, she

longed to be at home, and every day looked wistfully across the lake,

waiting for Laurie to come and comfort her.

He did come very soon, for the same mail brought letters to them both,

but he was in Germany, and it took some days to reach him. The moment

he read it, he packed his knapsack, bade adieu to his fellow

pedestrians, and was off to keep his promise, with a heart full of joy

and sorrow, hope and suspense.

He knew Vevay well, and as soon as the boat touched the little quay, he

hurried along the shore to La Tour, where the Carrols were living en

pension. The garcon was in despair that the whole family had gone to

take a promenade on the lake, but no, the blonde mademoiselle might be

in the chateau garden. If monsieur would give himself the pain of

sitting down, a flash of time should present her. But monsieur could

not wait even a 'flash of time', and in the middle of the speech

departed to find mademoiselle himself.

A pleasant old garden on the borders of the lovely lake, with chestnuts

rustling overhead, ivy climbing everywhere, and the black shadow of the

tower falling far across the sunny water. At one corner of the wide,

low wall was a seat, and here Amy often came to read or work, or

console herself with the beauty all about her. She was sitting here

that day, leaning her head on her hand, with a homesick heart and heavy

eyes, thinking of Beth and wondering why Laurie did not come. She did

not hear him cross the courtyard beyond, nor see him pause in the

archway that led from the subterranean path into the garden. He stood

a minute looking at her with new eyes, seeing what no one had ever seen

before, the tender side of Amy's character. Everything about her mutely

suggested love and sorrow, the blotted letters in her lap, the black

ribbon that tied up her hair, the womanly pain and patience in her

face, even the little ebony cross at her throat seemed pathetic to

Laurie, for he had given it to her, and she wore it as her only

ornament. If he had any doubts about the reception she would give him,

they were set at rest the minute she looked up and saw him, for

dropping everything, she ran to him, exclaiming in a tone of

unmistakable love and longing...

"Oh, Laurie, Laurie, I knew you'd come to me!"

I think everything was said and settled then, for as they stood

together quite silent for a moment, with the dark head bent down

protectingly over the light one, Amy felt that no one could comfort and

sustain her so well as Laurie, and Laurie decided that Amy was the only

woman in the world who could fill Jo's place and make him happy. He

did not tell her so, but she was not disappointed, for both felt the

truth, were satisfied, and gladly left the rest to silence.

In a minute Amy went back to her place, and while she dried her tears,

Laurie gathered up the scattered papers, finding in the sight of sundry

well-worn letters and suggestive sketches good omens for the future.

As he sat down beside her, Amy felt shy again, and turned rosy red at

the recollection of her impulsive greeting.

"I couldn't help it, I felt so lonely and sad, and was so very glad to

see you. It was such a surprise to look up and find you, just as I was

beginning to fear you wouldn't come," she said, trying in vain to speak

quite naturally.

"I came the minute I heard. I wish I could say something to comfort

you for the loss of dear little Beth, but I can only feel, and..." He

could not get any further, for he too turned bashful all of a sudden,

and did not quite know what to say. He longed to lay Amy's head down

on his shoulder, and tell her to have a good cry, but he did not dare,

so took her hand instead, and gave it a sympathetic squeeze that was

better than words.

"You needn't say anything, this comforts me," she said softly. "Beth

is well and happy, and I mustn't wish her back, but I dread the going

home, much as I long to see them all. We won't talk about it now, for

it makes me cry, and I want to enjoy you while you stay. You needn't

go right back, need you?"

"Not if you want me, dear."

"I do, so much. Aunt and Flo are very kind, but you seem like one of

the family, and it would be so comfortable to have you for a little

while."

Amy spoke and looked so like a homesick child whose heart was full that

Laurie forgot his bashfulness all at once, and gave her just what she

wanted--the petting she was used to and the cheerful conversation she

needed.

"Poor little soul, you look as if you'd grieved yourself half sick!

I'm going to take care of you, so don't cry any more, but come and walk

about with me, the wind is too chilly for you to sit still," he said,

in the half-caressing, half-commanding way that Amy liked, as he tied

on her hat, drew her arm through his, and began to pace up and down the

sunny walk under the new-leaved chestnuts. He felt more at ease upon

his legs, and Amy found it pleasant to have a strong arm to lean upon,

a familiar face to smile at her, and a kind voice to talk delightfully

for her alone.

The quaint old garden had sheltered many pairs of lovers, and seemed

expressly made for them, so sunny and secluded was it, with nothing but

the tower to overlook them, and the wide lake to carry away the echo of

their words, as it rippled by below. For an hour this new pair walked

and talked, or rested on the wall, enjoying the sweet influences which

gave such a charm to time and place, and when an unromantic dinner bell

warned them away, Amy felt as if she left her burden of loneliness and

sorrow behind her in the chateau garden.

The moment Mrs. Carrol saw the girl's altered face, she was illuminated

with a new idea, and exclaimed to herself, "Now I understand it

all--the child has been pining for young Laurence. Bless my heart, I

never thought of such a thing!"

With praiseworthy discretion, the good lady said nothing, and betrayed

no sign of enlightenment, but cordially urged Laurie to stay and begged

Amy to enjoy his society, for it would do her more good than so much

solitude. Amy was a model of docility, and as her aunt was a good deal

occupied with Flo, she was left to entertain her friend, and did it

with more than her usual success.

At Nice, Laurie had lounged and Amy had scolded. At Vevay, Laurie was

never idle, but always walking, riding, boating, or studying in the

most energetic manner, while Amy admired everything he did and followed

his example as far and as fast as she could. He said the change was

owing to the climate, and she did not contradict him, being glad of a

like excuse for her own recovered health and spirits.

The invigorating air did them both good, and much exercise worked

wholesome changes in minds as well as bodies. They seemed to get

clearer views of life and duty up there among the everlasting hills.

The fresh winds blew away desponding doubts, delusive fancies, and

moody mists. The warm spring sunshine brought out all sorts of

aspiring ideas, tender hopes, and happy thoughts. The lake seemed to

wash away the troubles of the past, and the grand old mountains to look

benignly down upon them saying, "Little children, love one another."

In spite of the new sorrow, it was a very happy time, so happy that

Laurie could not bear to disturb it by a word. It took him a little

while to recover from his surprise at the cure of his first, and as he

had firmly believed, his last and only love. He consoled himself for

the seeming disloyalty by the thought that Jo's sister was almost the

same as Jo's self, and the conviction that it would have been

impossible to love any other woman but Amy so soon and so well. His

first wooing had been of the tempestuous order, and he looked back upon

it as if through a long vista of years with a feeling of compassion

blended with regret. He was not ashamed of it, but put it away as one

of the bitter-sweet experiences of his life, for which he could be

grateful when the pain was over. His second wooing, he resolved, should

be as calm and simple as possible. There was no need of having a

scene, hardly any need of telling Amy that he loved her, she knew it

without words and had given him his answer long ago. It all came about

so naturally that no one could complain, and he knew that everybody

would be pleased, even Jo. But when our first little passion has been

crushed, we are apt to be wary and slow in making a second trial, so

Laurie let the days pass, enjoying every hour, and leaving to chance

the utterance of the word that would put an end to the first and

sweetest part of his new romance.

He had rather imagined that the denoument would take place in the

chateau garden by moonlight, and in the most graceful and decorous

manner, but it turned out exactly the reverse, for the matter was

settled on the lake at noonday in a few blunt words. They had been

floating about all the morning, from gloomy St. Gingolf to sunny

Montreux, with the Alps of Savoy on one side, Mont St. Bernard and the

Dent du Midi on the other, pretty Vevay in the valley, and Lausanne

upon the hill beyond, a cloudless blue sky overhead, and the bluer lake

below, dotted with the picturesque boats that look like white-winged

gulls.

They had been talking of Bonnivard, as they glided past Chillon, and of

Rousseau, as they looked up at Clarens, where he wrote his Heloise.

Neither had read it, but they knew it was a love story, and each

privately wondered if it was half as interesting as their own. Amy had

been dabbling her hand in the water during the little pause that fell

between them, and when she looked up, Laurie was leaning on his oars

with an expression in his eyes that made her say hastily, merely for

the sake of saying something...

"You must be tired. Rest a little, and let me row. It will do me

good, for since you came I have been altogether lazy and luxurious."

"I'm not tired, but you may take an oar, if you like. There's room

enough, though I have to sit nearly in the middle, else the boat won't

trim," returned Laurie, as if he rather liked the arrangement.

Feeling that she had not mended matters much, Amy took the offered

third of a seat, shook her hair over her face, and accepted an oar.

She rowed as well as she did many other things, and though she used

both hands, and Laurie but one, the oars kept time, and the boat went

smoothly through the water.

"How well we pull together, don't we?" said Amy, who objected to

silence just then.

"So well that I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you,

Amy?" very tenderly.

"Yes, Laurie," very low.

Then they both stopped rowing, and unconsciously added a pretty little

tableau of human love and happiness to the dissolving views reflected

in the lake.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

ALL ALONE

It was easy to promise self-abnegation when self was wrapped up in

another, and heart and soul were purified by a sweet example. But when

the helpful voice was silent, the daily lesson over, the beloved

presence gone, and nothing remained but loneliness and grief, then Jo

found her promise very hard to keep. How could she 'comfort Father and

Mother' when her own heart ached with a ceaseless longing for her

sister, how could she 'make the house cheerful' when all its light and

warmth and beauty seemed to have deserted it when Beth left the old

home for the new, and where in all the world could she 'find some

useful, happy work to do', that would take the place of the loving

service which had been its own reward? She tried in a blind, hopeless

way to do her duty, secretly rebelling against it all the while, for it

seemed unjust that her few joys should be lessened, her burdens made

heavier, and life get harder and harder as she toiled along. Some

people seemed to get all sunshine, and some all shadow. It was not

fair, for she tried more than Amy to be good, but never got any reward,

only disappointment, trouble and hard work.

Poor Jo, these were dark days to her, for something like despair came

over her when she thought of spending all her life in that quiet house,

devoted to humdrum cares, a few small pleasures, and the duty that

never seemed to grow any easier. "I can't do it. I wasn't meant for a

life like this, and I know I shall break away and do something

desperate if somebody doesn't come and help me," she said to herself,

when her first efforts failed and she fell into the moody, miserable

state of mind which often comes when strong wills have to yield to the

inevitable.

But someone did come and help her, though Jo did not recognize her good

angels at once because they wore familiar shapes and used the simple

spells best fitted to poor humanity. Often she started up at night,

thinking Beth called her, and when the sight of the little empty bed

made her cry with the bitter cry of unsubmissive sorrow, "Oh, Beth,

come back! Come back!" she did not stretch out her yearning arms in

vain. For, as quick to hear her sobbing as she had been to hear her

sister's faintest whisper, her mother came to comfort her, not with

words only, but the patient tenderness that soothes by a touch, tears

that were mute reminders of a greater grief than Jo's, and broken

whispers, more eloquent than prayers, because hopeful resignation went

hand-in-hand with natural sorrow. Sacred moments, when heart talked to

heart in the silence of the night, turning affliction to a blessing,

which chastened grief and strengthned love. Feeling this, Jo's burden

seemed easier to bear, duty grew sweeter, and life looked more

endurable, seen from the safe shelter of her mother's arms.

When aching heart was a little comforted, troubled mind likewise found

help, for one day she went to the study, and leaning over the good gray

head lifted to welcome her with a tranquil smile, she said very humbly,

"Father, talk to me as you did to Beth. I need it more than she did,

for I'm all wrong."

"My dear, nothing can comfort me like this," he answered, with a falter

in his voice, and both arms round her, as if he too, needed help, and

did not fear to ask for it.

Then, sitting in Beth's little chair close beside him, Jo told her

troubles, the resentful sorrow for her loss, the fruitless efforts that

discouraged her, the want of faith that made life look so dark, and all

the sad bewilderment which we call despair. She gave him entire

confidence, he gave her the help she needed, and both found consolation

in the act. For the time had come when they could talk together not

only as father and daughter, but as man and woman, able and glad to

serve each other with mutual sympathy as well as mutual love. Happy,

thoughtful times there in the old study which Jo called 'the church of

one member', and from which she came with fresh courage, recovered

cheerfulness, and a more submissive spirit. For the parents who had

taught one child to meet death without fear, were trying now to teach

another to accept life without despondency or distrust, and to use its

beautiful opportunities with gratitude and power.

Other helps had Jo--humble, wholesome duties and delights that would

not be denied their part in serving her, and which she slowly learned

to see and value. Brooms and dishcloths never could be as distasteful

as they once had been, for Beth had presided over both, and something

of her housewifely spirit seemed to linger around the little mop and

the old brush, never thrown away. As she used them, Jo found herself

humming the songs Beth used to hum, imitating Beth's orderly ways, and

giving the little touches here and there that kept everything fresh and

cozy, which was the first step toward making home happy, though she

didn't know it till Hannah said with an approving squeeze of the hand...

"You thoughtful creeter, you're determined we shan't miss that dear

lamb ef you can help it. We don't say much, but we see it, and the

Lord will bless you for't, see ef He don't."

As they sat sewing together, Jo discovered how much improved her sister

Meg was, how well she could talk, how much she knew about good, womanly

impulses, thoughts, and feelings, how happy she was in husband and

children, and how much they were all doing for each other.

"Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should

blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it?, always

\_'perwisin'\_ I could," said Jo, as she constructed a kite for Demi in

the topsy-turvy nursery.

"It's just what you need to bring out the tender womanly half of your

nature, Jo. You are like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but

silky-soft within, and a sweet kernal, if one can only get at it. Love

will make you show your heart one day, and then the rough burr will

fall off."

"Frost opens chestnut burrs, ma'am, and it takes a good shake to bring

them down. Boys go nutting, and I don't care to be bagged by them,"

returned Jo, pasting away at the kite which no wind that blows would

ever carry up, for Daisy had tied herself on as a bob.

Meg laughed, for she was glad to see a glimmer of Jo's old spirit, but

she felt it her duty to enforce her opinion by every argument in her

power, and the sisterly chats were not wasted, especially as two of

Meg's most effective arguments were the babies, whom Jo loved tenderly.

Grief is the best opener of some hearts, and Jo's was nearly ready for

the bag. A little more sunshine to ripen the nut, then, not a boy's

impatient shake, but a man's hand reached up to pick it gently from the

burr, and find the kernal sound and sweet. If she suspected this, she

would have shut up tight, and been more prickly than ever, fortunately

she wasn't thinking about herself, so when the time came, down she

dropped.

Now, if she had been the heroine of a moral storybook, she ought at

this period of her life to have become quite saintly, renounced the

world, and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in

her pocket. But, you see, Jo wasn't a heroine, she was only a

struggling human girl like hundreds of others, and she just acted out

her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic, as the mood

suggested. It's highly virtuous to say we'll be good, but we can't do

it all at once, and it takes a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all

together before some of us even get our feet set in the right way. Jo

had got so far, she was learning to do her duty, and to feel unhappy if

she did not, but to do it cheerfully, ah, that was another thing! She

had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard,

and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to

devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to

them as they had to her? And if difficulties were necessary to

increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a

restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and

desires, and cheerfully live for others?

Providence had taken her at her word. Here was the task, not what she

had expected, but better because self had no part in it. Now, could she

do it? She decided that she would try, and in her first attempt she

found the helps I have suggested. Still another was given her, and she

took it, not as a reward, but as a comfort, as Christian took the

refreshment afforded by the little arbor where he rested, as he climbed

the hill called Difficulty.

"Why don't you write? That always used to make you happy," said her

mother once, when the desponding fit over-shadowed Jo.

"I've no heart to write, and if I had, nobody cares for my things."

"We do. Write something for us, and never mind the rest of the world.

Try it, dear. I'm sure it would do you good, and please us very much."

"Don't believe I can." But Jo got out her desk and began to overhaul

her half-finished manuscripts.

An hour afterward her mother peeped in and there she was, scratching

away, with her black pinafore on, and an absorbed expression, which

caused Mrs. March to smile and slip away, well pleased with the success

of her suggestion. Jo never knew how it happened, but something got

into that story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it,

for when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it,

much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and to her

utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested.

Letters from several persons, whose praise was honor, followed the

appearance of the little story, newspapers copied it, and strangers as

well as friends admired it. For a small thing it was a great success,

and Jo was more astonished than when her novel was commended and

condemned all at once.

"I don't understand it. What can there be in a simple little story

like that to make people praise it so?" she said, quite bewildered.

"There is truth in it, Jo, that's the secret. Humor and pathos make it

alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no

thoughts of fame and money, and put your heart into it, my daughter.

You have had the bitter, now comes the sweet. Do your best, and grow

as happy as we are in your success."

"If there is anything good or true in what I write, it isn't mine. I

owe it all to you and Mother and Beth," said Jo, more touched by her

father's words than by any amount of praise from the world.

So taught by love and sorrow, Jo wrote her little stories, and sent

them away to make friends for themselves and her, finding it a very

charitable world to such humble wanderers, for they were kindly

welcomed, and sent home comfortable tokens to their mother, like

dutiful children whom good fortune overtakes.

When Amy and Laurie wrote of their engagement, Mrs. March feared that

Jo would find it difficult to rejoice over it, but her fears were soon

set at rest, for though Jo looked grave at first, she took it very

quietly, and was full of hopes and plans for 'the children' before she

read the letter twice. It was a sort of written duet, wherein each

glorified the other in loverlike fashion, very pleasant to read and

satisfactory to think of, for no one had any objection to make.

"You like it, Mother?" said Jo, as they laid down the closely written

sheets and looked at one another.

"Yes, I hoped it would be so, ever since Amy wrote that she had refused

Fred. I felt sure then that something better than what you call the

'mercenary spirit' had come over her, and a hint here and there in her

letters made me suspect that love and Laurie would win the day."

"How sharp you are, Marmee, and how silent! You never said a word to

me."

"Mothers have need of sharp eyes and discreet tongues when they have

girls to manage. I was half afraid to put the idea into your head,

lest you should write and congratulate them before the thing was

settled."

"I'm not the scatterbrain I was. You may trust me. I'm sober and

sensible enough for anyone's confidante now."

"So you are, my dear, and I should have made you mine, only I fancied

it might pain you to learn that your Teddy loved someone else."

"Now, Mother, did you really think I could be so silly and selfish,

after I'd refused his love, when it was freshest, if not best?"

"I knew you were sincere then, Jo, but lately I have thought that if he

came back, and asked again, you might perhaps, feel like giving another

answer. Forgive me, dear, I can't help seeing that you are very

lonely, and sometimes there is a hungry look in your eyes that goes to

my heart. So I fancied that your boy might fill the empty place if he

tried now."

"No, Mother, it is better as it is, and I'm glad Amy has learned to

love him. But you are right in one thing. I am lonely, and perhaps if

Teddy had tried again, I might have said 'Yes', not because I love him

any more, but because I care more to be loved than when he went away."

"I'm glad of that, Jo, for it shows that you are getting on. There are

plenty to love you, so try to be satisfied with Father and Mother,

sisters and brothers, friends and babies, till the best lover of all

comes to give you your reward."

"Mothers are the best lovers in the world, but I don't mind whispering

to Marmee that I'd like to try all kinds. It's very curious, but the

more I try to satisfy myself with all sorts of natural affections, the

more I seem to want. I'd no idea hearts could take in so many. Mine

is so elastic, it never seems full now, and I used to be quite

contented with my family. I don't understand it."

"I do," and Mrs. March smiled her wise smile, as Jo turned back the

leaves to read what Amy said of Laurie.

"It is so beautiful to be loved as Laurie loves me. He isn't

sentimental, doesn't say much about it, but I see and feel it in all he

says and does, and it makes me so happy and so humble that I don't seem

to be the same girl I was. I never knew how good and generous and

tender he was till now, for he lets me read his heart, and I find it

full of noble impulses and hopes and purposes, and am so proud to know

it's mine. He says he feels as if he 'could make a prosperous voyage

now with me aboard as mate, and lots of love for ballast'. I pray he

may, and try to be all he believes me, for I love my gallant captain

with all my heart and soul and might, and never will desert him, while

God lets us be together. Oh, Mother, I never knew how much like heaven

this world could be, when two people love and live for one another!"

"And that's our cool, reserved, and worldly Amy! Truly, love does work

miracles. How very, very happy they must be!" and Jo laid the rustling

sheets together with a careful hand, as one might shut the covers of a

lovely romance, which holds the reader fast till the end comes, and he

finds himself alone in the workaday world again.

By-and-by Jo roamed away upstairs, for it was rainy, and she could not

walk. A restless spirit possessed her, and the old feeling came again,

not bitter as it once was, but a sorrowfully patient wonder why one

sister should have all she asked, the other nothing. It was not true,

she knew that and tried to put it away, but the natural craving for

affection was strong, and Amy's happiness woke the hungry longing for

someone to 'love with heart and soul, and cling to while God let them

be together'. Up in the garret, where Jo's unquiet wanderings ended

stood four little wooden chests in a row, each marked with its owners

name, and each filled with relics of the childhood and girlhood ended

now for all. Jo glanced into them, and when she came to her own,

leaned her chin on the edge, and stared absently at the chaotic

collection, till a bundle of old exercise books caught her eye. She

drew them out, turned them over, and relived that pleasant winter at

kind Mrs. Kirke's. She had smiled at first, then she looked

thoughtful, next sad, and when she came to a little message written in

the Professor's hand, her lips began to tremble, the books slid out of

her lap, and she sat looking at the friendly words, as they took a new

meaning, and touched a tender spot in her heart.

"Wait for me, my friend. I may be a little late, but I shall surely

come."

"Oh, if he only would! So kind, so good, so patient with me always, my

dear old Fritz. I didn't value him half enough when I had him, but now

how I should love to see him, for everyone seems going away from me,

and I'm all alone."

And holding the little paper fast, as if it were a promise yet to be

fulfilled, Jo laid her head down on a comfortable rag bag, and cried,

as if in opposition to the rain pattering on the roof.

Was it all self-pity, loneliness, or low spirits? Or was it the waking

up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its

inspirer? Who shall say?

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

SURPRISES

Jo was alone in the twilight, lying on the old sofa, looking at the

fire, and thinking. It was her favorite way of spending the hour of

dusk. No one disturbed her, and she used to lie there on Beth's little

red pillow, planning stories, dreaming dreams, or thinking tender

thoughts of the sister who never seemed far away. Her face looked

tired, grave, and rather sad, for tomorrow was her birthday, and she

was thinking how fast the years went by, how old she was getting, and

how little she seemed to have accomplished. Almost twenty-five, and

nothing to show for it. Jo was mistaken in that. There was a good

deal to show, and by-and-by she saw, and was grateful for it.

"An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen

for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence

a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor Johnson, I'm old and can't

enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it.

Well, I needn't be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner, and, I dare say,

old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it, but..." and

there Jo sighed, as if the prospect was not inviting.

It seldom is, at first, and thirty seems the end of all things to

five-and-twenty. But it's not as bad as it looks, and one can get on

quite happily if one has something in one's self to fall back upon. At

twenty-five, girls begin to talk about being old maids, but secretly

resolve that they never will be. At thirty they say nothing about it,

but quietly accept the fact, and if sensible, console themselves by

remembering that they have twenty more useful, happy years, in which

they may be learning to grow old gracefully. Don't laugh at the

spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragic romances are

hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the sober gowns,

and many silent sacrifices of youth, health, ambition, love itself,

make the faded faces beautiful in God's sight. Even the sad, sour

sisters should be kindly dealt with, because they have missed the

sweetest part of life, if for no other reason. And looking at them

with compassion, not contempt, girls in their bloom should remember

that they too may miss the blossom time. That rosy cheeks don't last

forever, that silver threads will come in the bonnie brown hair, and

that, by-and-by, kindness and respect will be as sweet as love and

admiration now.

Gentlemen, which means boys, be courteous to the old maids, no matter

how poor and plain and prim, for the only chivalry worth having is that

which is the readiest to pay deference to the old, protect the feeble,

and serve womankind, regardless of rank, age, or color. Just recollect

the good aunts who have not only lectured and fussed, but nursed and

petted, too often without thanks, the scrapes they have helped you out

of, the tips they have given you from their small store, the stitches

the patient old fingers have set for you, the steps the willing old

feet have taken, and gratefully pay the dear old ladies the little

attentions that women love to receive as long as they live. The

bright-eyed girls are quick to see such traits, and will like you all

the better for them, and if death, almost the only power that can part

mother and son, should rob you of yours, you will be sure to find a

tender welcome and maternal cherishing from some Aunt Priscilla, who

has kept the warmest corner of her lonely old heart for 'the best nevvy

in the world'.

Jo must have fallen asleep (as I dare say my reader has during this

little homily), for suddenly Laurie's ghost seemed to stand before her,

a substantial, lifelike ghost, leaning over her with the very look he

used to wear when he felt a good deal and didn't like to show it. But,

like Jenny in the ballad...

"She could not think it he,"

and lay staring up at him in startled silence, till he stooped and

kissed her. Then she knew him, and flew up, crying joyfully...

"Oh my Teddy! Oh my Teddy!"

"Dear Jo, you are glad to see me, then?"

"Glad! My blessed boy, words can't express my gladness. Where's Amy?"

"Your mother has got her down at Meg's. We stopped there by the way,

and there was no getting my wife out of their clutches."

"Your what?" cried Jo, for Laurie uttered those two words with an

unconscious pride and satisfaction which betrayed him.

"Oh, the dickens! Now I've done it," and he looked so guilty that Jo

was down on him like a flash.

"You've gone and got married!"

"Yes, please, but I never will again," and he went down upon his knees,

with a penitent clasping of hands, and a face full of mischief, mirth,

and triumph.

"Actually married?"

"Very much so, thank you."

"Mercy on us. What dreadful thing will you do next?" and Jo fell into

her seat with a gasp.

"A characteristic, but not exactly complimentary, congratulation,"

returned Laurie, still in an abject attitude, but beaming with

satisfaction.

"What can you expect, when you take one's breath away, creeping in like

a burglar, and letting cats out of bags like that? Get up, you

ridiculous boy, and tell me all about it."

"Not a word, unless you let me come in my old place, and promise not to

barricade."

Jo laughed at that as she had not done for many a long day, and patted

the sofa invitingly, as she said in a cordial tone, "The old pillow is

up garret, and we don't need it now. So, come and 'fess, Teddy."

"How good it sounds to hear you say 'Teddy'! No one ever calls me that

but you," and Laurie sat down with an air of great content.

"What does Amy call you?"

"My lord."

"That's like her. Well, you look it," and Jo's eye plainly betrayed

that she found her boy comelier than ever.

The pillow was gone, but there was a barricade, nevertheless, a natural

one, raised by time, absence, and change of heart. Both felt it, and

for a minute looked at one another as if that invisible barrier cast a

little shadow over them. It was gone directly however, for Laurie

said, with a vain attempt at dignity...

"Don't I look like a married man and the head of a family?"

"Not a bit, and you never will. You've grown bigger and bonnier, but

you are the same scapegrace as ever."

"Now really, Jo, you ought to treat me with more respect," began

Laurie, who enjoyed it all immensely.

"How can I, when the mere idea of you, married and settled, is so

irresistibly funny that I can't keep sober!" answered Jo, smiling all

over her face, so infectiously that they had another laugh, and then

settled down for a good talk, quite in the pleasant old fashion.

"It's no use your going out in the cold to get Amy, for they are all

coming up presently. I couldn't wait. I wanted to be the one to tell

you the grand surprise, and have 'first skim' as we used to say when we

squabbled about the cream."

"Of course you did, and spoiled your story by beginning at the wrong

end. Now, start right, and tell me how it all happened. I'm pining to

know."

"Well, I did it to please Amy," began Laurie, with a twinkle that made

Jo exclaim...

"Fib number one. Amy did it to please you. Go on, and tell the truth,

if you can, sir."

"Now she's beginning to marm it. Isn't it jolly to hear her?" said

Laurie to the fire, and the fire glowed and sparkled as if it quite

agreed. "It's all the same, you know, she and I being one. We planned

to come home with the Carrols, a month or more ago, but they suddenly

changed their minds, and decided to pass another winter in Paris. But

Grandpa wanted to come home. He went to please me, and I couldn't let

him go alone, neither could I leave Amy, and Mrs. Carrol had got

English notions about chaperons and such nonsense, and wouldn't let Amy

come with us. So I just settled the difficulty by saying, 'Let's be

married, and then we can do as we like'."

"Of course you did. You always have things to suit you."

"Not always," and something in Laurie's voice made Jo say hastily...

"How did you ever get Aunt to agree?"

"It was hard work, but between us, we talked her over, for we had heaps

of good reasons on our side. There wasn't time to write and ask leave,

but you all liked it, had consented to it by-and-by, and it was only

'taking time by the fetlock', as my wife says."

"Aren't we proud of those two words, and don't we like to say them?"

interrupted Jo, addressing the fire in her turn, and watching with

delight the happy light it seemed to kindle in the eyes that had been

so tragically gloomy when she saw them last.

"A trifle, perhaps, she's such a captivating little woman I can't help

being proud of her. Well, then Uncle and Aunt were there to play

propriety. We were so absorbed in one another we were of no mortal use

apart, and that charming arrangement would make everything easy all

round, so we did it."

"When, where, how?" asked Jo, in a fever of feminine interest and

curiosity, for she could not realize it a particle.

"Six weeks ago, at the American consul's, in Paris, a very quiet

wedding of course, for even in our happiness we didn't forget dear

little Beth."

Jo put her hand in his as he said that, and Laurie gently smoothed the

little red pillow, which he remembered well.

"Why didn't you let us know afterward?" asked Jo, in a quieter tone,

when they had sat quite still a minute.

"We wanted to surprise you. We thought we were coming directly home,

at first, but the dear old gentleman, as soon as we were married, found

he couldn't be ready under a month, at least, and sent us off to spend

our honeymoon wherever we liked. Amy had once called Valrosa a regular

honeymoon home, so we went there, and were as happy as people are but

once in their lives. My faith! Wasn't it love among the roses!"

Laurie seemed to forget Jo for a minute, and Jo was glad of it, for the

fact that he told her these things so freely and so naturally assured

her that he had quite forgiven and forgotten. She tried to draw away

her hand, but as if he guessed the thought that prompted the

half-involuntary impulse, Laurie held it fast, and said, with a manly

gravity she had never seen in him before...

"Jo, dear, I want to say one thing, and then we'll put it by forever.

As I told you in my letter when I wrote that Amy had been so kind to

me, I never shall stop loving you, but the love is altered, and I have

learned to see that it is better as it is. Amy and you changed places

in my heart, that's all. I think it was meant to be so, and would have

come about naturally, if I had waited, as you tried to make me, but I

never could be patient, and so I got a heartache. I was a boy then,

headstrong and violent, and it took a hard lesson to show me my

mistake. For it was one, Jo, as you said, and I found it out, after

making a fool of myself. Upon my word, I was so tumbled up in my mind,

at one time, that I didn't know which I loved best, you or Amy, and

tried to love you both alike. But I couldn't, and when I saw her in

Switzerland, everything seemed to clear up all at once. You both got

into your right places, and I felt sure that it was well off with the

old love before it was on with the new, that I could honestly share my

heart between sister Jo and wife Amy, and love them dearly. Will you

believe it, and go back to the happy old times when we first knew one

another?"

"I'll believe it, with all my heart, but, Teddy, we never can be boy

and girl again. The happy old times can't come back, and we mustn't

expect it. We are man and woman now, with sober work to do, for

playtime is over, and we must give up frolicking. I'm sure you feel

this. I see the change in you, and you'll find it in me. I shall miss

my boy, but I shall love the man as much, and admire him more, because

he means to be what I hoped he would. We can't be little playmates any

longer, but we will be brother and sister, to love and help one another

all our lives, won't we, Laurie?"

He did not say a word, but took the hand she offered him, and laid his

face down on it for a minute, feeling that out of the grave of a boyish

passion, there had risen a beautiful, strong friendship to bless them

both. Presently Jo said cheerfully, for she didn't want the coming

home to be a sad one, "I can't make it true that you children are

really married and going to set up housekeeping. Why, it seems only

yesterday that I was buttoning Amy's pinafore, and pulling your hair

when you teased. Mercy me, how time does fly!"

"As one of the children is older than yourself, you needn't talk so

like a grandma. I flatter myself I'm a 'gentleman growed' as Peggotty

said of David, and when you see Amy, you'll find her rather a

precocious infant," said Laurie, looking amused at her maternal air.

"You may be a little older in years, but I'm ever so much older in

feeling, Teddy. Women always are, and this last year has been such a

hard one that I feel forty."

"Poor Jo! We left you to bear it alone, while we went pleasuring. You

are older. Here's a line, and there's another. Unless you smile, your

eyes look sad, and when I touched the cushion, just now, I found a tear

on it. You've had a great deal to bear, and had to bear it all alone.

What a selfish beast I've been!" and Laurie pulled his own hair, with a

remorseful look.

But Jo only turned over the traitorous pillow, and answered, in a tone

which she tried to make more cheerful, "No, I had Father and Mother to

help me, and the dear babies to comfort me, and the thought that you

and Amy were safe and happy, to make the troubles here easier to bear.

I am lonely, sometimes, but I dare say it's good for me, and..."

"You never shall be again," broke in Laurie, putting his arm about her,

as if to fence out every human ill. "Amy and I can't get on without

you, so you must come and teach 'the children' to keep house, and go

halves in everything, just as we used to do, and let us pet you, and

all be blissfully happy and friendly together."

"If I shouldn't be in the way, it would be very pleasant. I begin to

feel quite young already, for somehow all my troubles seemed to fly

away when you came. You always were a comfort, Teddy," and Jo leaned

her head on his shoulder, just as she did years ago, when Beth lay ill

and Laurie told her to hold on to him.

He looked down at her, wondering if she remembered the time, but Jo was

smiling to herself, as if in truth her troubles had all vanished at his

coming.

"You are the same Jo still, dropping tears about one minute, and

laughing the next. You look a little wicked now. What is it, Grandma?"

"I was wondering how you and Amy get on together."

"Like angels!"

"Yes, of course, but which rules?"

"I don't mind telling you that she does now, at least I let her think

so, it pleases her, you know. By-and-by we shall take turns, for

marriage, they say, halves one's rights and doubles one's duties."

"You'll go on as you begin, and Amy will rule you all the days of your

life."

"Well, she does it so imperceptibly that I don't think I shall mind

much. She is the sort of woman who knows how to rule well. In fact, I

rather like it, for she winds one round her finger as softly and

prettily as a skein of silk, and makes you feel as if she was doing you

a favor all the while."

"That ever I should live to see you a henpecked husband and enjoying

it!" cried Jo, with uplifted hands.

It was good to see Laurie square his shoulders, and smile with

masculine scorn at that insinuation, as he replied, with his "high and

mighty" air, "Amy is too well-bred for that, and I am not the sort of

man to submit to it. My wife and I respect ourselves and one another

too much ever to tyrannize or quarrel."

Jo liked that, and thought the new dignity very becoming, but the boy

seemed changing very fast into the man, and regret mingled with her

pleasure.

"I am sure of that. Amy and you never did quarrel as we used to. She

is the sun and I the wind, in the fable, and the sun managed the man

best, you remember."

"She can blow him up as well as shine on him," laughed Laurie. "Such a

lecture as I got at Nice! I give you my word it was a deal worse than

any of your scoldings, a regular rouser. I'll tell you all about it

sometime, she never will, because after telling me that she despised

and was ashamed of me, she lost her heart to the despicable party and

married the good-for-nothing."

"What baseness! Well, if she abuses you, come to me, and I'll defend

you."

"I look as if I needed it, don't I?" said Laurie, getting up and

striking an attitude which suddenly changed from the imposing to the

rapturous, as Amy's voice was heard calling, "Where is she? Where's my

dear old Jo?"

In trooped the whole family, and everyone was hugged and kissed all

over again, and after several vain attempts, the three wanderers were

set down to be looked at and exulted over. Mr. Laurence, hale and

hearty as ever, was quite as much improved as the others by his foreign

tour, for the crustiness seemed to be nearly gone, and the

old-fashioned courtliness had received a polish which made it kindlier

than ever. It was good to see him beam at 'my children', as he called

the young pair. It was better still to see Amy pay him the daughterly

duty and affection which completely won his old heart, and best of all,

to watch Laurie revolve about the two, as if never tired of enjoying

the pretty picture they made.

The minute she put her eyes upon Amy, Meg became conscious that her own

dress hadn't a Parisian air, that young Mrs. Moffat would be entirely

eclipsed by young Mrs. Laurence, and that 'her ladyship' was altogether

a most elegant and graceful woman. Jo thought, as she watched the

pair, "How well they look together! I was right, and Laurie has found

the beautiful, accomplished girl who will become his home better than

clumsy old Jo, and be a pride, not a torment to him." Mrs. March and

her husband smiled and nodded at each other with happy faces, for they

saw that their youngest had done well, not only in worldly things, but

the better wealth of love, confidence, and happiness.

For Amy's face was full of the soft brightness which betokens a

peaceful heart, her voice had a new tenderness in it, and the cool,

prim carriage was changed to a gentle dignity, both womanly and

winning. No little affectations marred it, and the cordial sweetness of

her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for

it stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true

gentlewoman she had hoped to become.

"Love has done much for our little girl," said her mother softly.

"She has had a good example before her all her life, my dear," Mr.

March whispered back, with a loving look at the worn face and gray head

beside him.

Daisy found it impossible to keep her eyes off her 'pitty aunty', but

attached herself like a lap dog to the wonderful chatelaine full of

delightful charms. Demi paused to consider the new relationship before

he compromised himself by the rash acceptance of a bribe, which took

the tempting form of a family of wooden bears from Berne. A flank

movement produced an unconditional surrender, however, for Laurie knew

where to have him.

"Young man, when I first had the honor of making your acquaintance you

hit me in the face. Now I demand the satisfaction of a gentleman," and

with that the tall uncle proceeded to toss and tousle the small nephew

in a way that damaged his philosophical dignity as much as it delighted

his boyish soul.

"Blest if she ain't in silk from head to foot; ain't it a relishin'

sight to see her settin' there as fine as a fiddle, and hear folks

calling little Amy 'Mis. Laurence!'" muttered old Hannah, who could

not resist frequent "peeks" through the slide as she set the table in a

most decidedly promiscuous manner.

Mercy on us, how they did talk! first one, then the other, then all

burst out together--trying to tell the history of three years in half

an hour. It was fortunate that tea was at hand, to produce a lull and

provide refreshment--for they would have been hoarse and faint if they

had gone on much longer. Such a happy procession as filed away into

the little dining room! Mr. March proudly escorted Mrs. Laurence. Mrs.

March as proudly leaned on the arm of 'my son'. The old gentleman took

Jo, with a whispered, "You must be my girl now," and a glance at the

empty corner by the fire, that made Jo whisper back, "I'll try to fill

her place, sir."

The twins pranced behind, feeling that the millennium was at hand, for

everyone was so busy with the newcomers that they were left to revel at

their own sweet will, and you may be sure they made the most of the

opportunity. Didn't they steal sips of tea, stuff gingerbread ad

libitum, get a hot biscuit apiece, and as a crowning trespass, didn't

they each whisk a captivating little tart into their tiny pockets,

there to stick and crumble treacherously, teaching them that both human

nature and a pastry are frail? Burdened with the guilty consciousness

of the sequestered tarts, and fearing that Dodo's sharp eyes would

pierce the thin disguise of cambric and merino which hid their booty,

the little sinners attached themselves to 'Dranpa', who hadn't his

spectacles on. Amy, who was handed about like refreshments, returned

to the parlor on Father Laurence's arm. The others paired off as

before, and this arrangement left Jo companionless. She did not mind

it at the minute, for she lingered to answer Hannah's eager inquiry.

"Will Miss Amy ride in her coop (coupe), and use all them lovely silver

dishes that's stored away over yander?"

"Shouldn't wonder if she drove six white horses, ate off gold plate,

and wore diamonds and point lace every day. Teddy thinks nothing too

good for her," returned Jo with infinite satisfaction.

"No more there is! Will you have hash or fishballs for breakfast?"

asked Hannah, who wisely mingled poetry and prose.

"I don't care," and Jo shut the door, feeling that food was an

uncongenial topic just then. She stood a minute looking at the party

vanishing above, and as Demi's short plaid legs toiled up the last

stair, a sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she

looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon,

for even Teddy had deserted her. If she had known what birthday gift

was coming every minute nearer and nearer, she would not have said to

herself, "I'll weep a little weep when I go to bed. It won't do to be

dismal now." Then she drew her hand over her eyes, for one of her

boyish habits was never to know where her handkerchief was, and had

just managed to call up a smile when there came a knock at the porch

door.

She opened with hospitable haste, and started as if another ghost had

come to surprise her, for there stood a tall bearded gentleman, beaming

on her from the darkness like a midnight sun.

"Oh, Mr. Bhaer, I am so glad to see you!" cried Jo, with a clutch, as

if she feared the night would swallow him up before she could get him

in.

"And I to see Miss Marsch, but no, you haf a party," and the Professor

paused as the sound of voices and the tap of dancing feet came down to

them.

"No, we haven't, only the family. My sister and friends have just come

home, and we are all very happy. Come in, and make one of us."

Though a very social man, I think Mr. Bhaer would have gone decorously

away, and come again another day, but how could he, when Jo shut the

door behind him, and bereft him of his hat? Perhaps her face had

something to do with it, for she forgot to hide her joy at seeing him,

and showed it with a frankness that proved irresistible to the solitary

man, whose welcome far exceeded his boldest hopes.

"If I shall not be Monsieur de Trop, I will so gladly see them all.

You haf been ill, my friend?"

He put the question abruptly, for, as Jo hung up his coat, the light

fell on her face, and he saw a change in it.

"Not ill, but tired and sorrowful. We have had trouble since I saw you

last."

"Ah, yes, I know. My heart was sore for you when I heard that," and he

shook hands again, with such a sympathetic face that Jo felt as if no

comfort could equal the look of the kind eyes, the grasp of the big,

warm hand.

"Father, Mother, this is my friend, Professor Bhaer," she said, with a

face and tone of such irrepressible pride and pleasure that she might

as well have blown a trumpet and opened the door with a flourish.

If the stranger had any doubts about his reception, they were set at

rest in a minute by the cordial welcome he received. Everyone greeted

him kindly, for Jo's sake at first, but very soon they liked him for

his own. They could not help it, for he carried the talisman that

opens all hearts, and these simple people warmed to him at once,

feeling even the more friendly because he was poor. For poverty

enriches those who live above it, and is a sure passport to truly

hospitable spirits. Mr. Bhaer sat looking about him with the air of a

traveler who knocks at a strange door, and when it opens, finds himself

at home. The children went to him like bees to a honeypot, and

establishing themselves on each knee, proceeded to captivate him by

rifling his pockets, pulling his beard, and investigating his watch,

with juvenile audacity. The women telegraphed their approval to one

another, and Mr. March, feeling that he had got a kindred spirit,

opened his choicest stores for his guest's benefit, while silent John

listened and enjoyed the talk, but said not a word, and Mr. Laurence

found it impossible to go to sleep.

If Jo had not been otherwise engaged, Laurie's behavior would have

amused her, for a faint twinge, not of jealousy, but something like

suspicion, caused that gentleman to stand aloof at first, and observe

the newcomer with brotherly circumspection. But it did not last long.

He got interested in spite of himself, and before he knew it, was drawn

into the circle. For Mr. Bhaer talked well in this genial atmosphere,

and did himself justice. He seldom spoke to Laurie, but he looked at

him often, and a shadow would pass across his face, as if regretting

his own lost youth, as he watched the young man in his prime. Then his

eyes would turn to Jo so wistfully that she would have surely answered

the mute inquiry if she had seen it. But Jo had her own eyes to take

care of, and feeling that they could not be trusted, she prudently kept

them on the little sock she was knitting, like a model maiden aunt.

A stealthy glance now and then refreshed her like sips of fresh water

after a dusty walk, for the sidelong peeps showed her several

propitious omens. Mr. Bhaer's face had lost the absent-minded

expression, and looked all alive with interest in the present moment,

actually young and handsome, she thought, forgetting to compare him

with Laurie, as she usually did strange men, to their great detriment.

Then he seemed quite inspired, though the burial customs of the

ancients, to which the conversation had strayed, might not be

considered an exhilarating topic. Jo quite glowed with triumph when

Teddy got quenched in an argument, and thought to herself, as she

watched her father's absorbed face, "How he would enjoy having such a

man as my Professor to talk with every day!" Lastly, Mr. Bhaer was

dressed in a new suit of black, which made him look more like a

gentleman than ever. His bushy hair had been cut and smoothly brushed,

but didn't stay in order long, for in exciting moments, he rumpled it

up in the droll way he used to do, and Jo liked it rampantly erect

better than flat, because she thought it gave his fine forehead a

Jove-like aspect. Poor Jo, how she did glorify that plain man, as she

sat knitting away so quietly, yet letting nothing escape her, not even

the fact that Mr. Bhaer actually had gold sleeve-buttons in his

immaculate wristbands.

"Dear old fellow! He couldn't have got himself up with more care if

he'd been going a-wooing," said Jo to herself, and then a sudden

thought born of the words made her blush so dreadfully that she had to

drop her ball, and go down after it to hide her face.

The maneuver did not succeed as well as she expected, however, for

though just in the act of setting fire to a funeral pyre, the Professor

dropped his torch, metaphorically speaking, and made a dive after the

little blue ball. Of course they bumped their heads smartly together,

saw stars, and both came up flushed and laughing, without the ball, to

resume their seats, wishing they had not left them.

Nobody knew where the evening went to, for Hannah skillfully abstracted

the babies at an early hour, nodding like two rosy poppies, and Mr.

Laurence went home to rest. The others sat round the fire, talking

away, utterly regardless of the lapse of time, till Meg, whose maternal

mind was impressed with a firm conviction that Daisy had tumbled out of

bed, and Demi set his nightgown afire studying the structure of

matches, made a move to go.

"We must have our sing, in the good old way, for we are all together

again once more," said Jo, feeling that a good shout would be a safe

and pleasant vent for the jubilant emotions of her soul.

They were not all there. But no one found the words thougtless or

untrue, for Beth still seemed among them, a peaceful presence,

invisible, but dearer than ever, since death could not break the

household league that love made disoluble. The little chair stood in

its old place. The tidy basket, with the bit of work she left

unfinished when the needle grew 'so heavy', was still on its accustomed

shelf. The beloved instrument, seldom touched now had not been moved,

and above it Beth's face, serene and smiling, as in the early days,

looked down upon them, seeming to say, "Be happy. I am here."

"Play something, Amy. Let them hear how much you have improved," said

Laurie, with pardonable pride in his promising pupil.

But Amy whispered, with full eyes, as she twirled the faded stool, "Not

tonight, dear. I can't show off tonight."

But she did show something better than brilliancy or skill, for she

sang Beth's songs with a tender music in her voice which the best

master could not have taught, and touched the listener's hearts with a

sweeter power than any other inspiration could have given her. The

room was very still, when the clear voice failed suddenly at the last

line of Beth's favorite hymn. It was hard to say...

Earth hath no sorrow that heaven cannot heal;

and Amy leaned against her husband, who stood behind her, feeling that

her welcome home was not quite perfect without Beth's kiss.

"Now, we must finish with Mignon's song, for Mr. Bhaer sings that,"

said Jo, before the pause grew painful. And Mr. Bhaer cleared his

throat with a gratified "Hem!" as he stepped into the corner where Jo

stood, saying...

"You will sing with me? We go excellently well together."

A pleasing fiction, by the way, for Jo had no more idea of music than a

grasshopper. But she would have consented if he had proposed to sing a

whole opera, and warbled away, blissfully regardless of time and tune.

It didn't much matter, for Mr. Bhaer sang like a true German, heartily

and well, and Jo soon subsided into a subdued hum, that she might

listen to the mellow voice that seemed to sing for her alone.

Know'st thou the land where the citron blooms,

used to be the Professor's favorite line, for 'das land' meant Germany

to him, but now he seemed to dwell, with peculiar warmth and melody,

upon the words...

There, oh there, might I with thee,

O, my beloved, go

and one listener was so thrilled by the tender invitation that she

longed to say she did know the land, and would joyfully depart thither

whenever he liked.

The song was considered a great success, and the singer retired covered

with laurels. But a few minutes afterward, he forgot his manners

entirely, and stared at Amy putting on her bonnet, for she had been

introduced simply as 'my sister', and no one had called her by her new

name since he came. He forgot himself still further when Laurie said,

in his most gracious manner, at parting...

"My wife and I are very glad to meet you, sir. Please remember that

there is always a welcome waiting for you over the way."

Then the Professor thanked him so heartily, and looked so suddenly

illuminated with satisfaction, that Laurie thought him the most

delightfully demonstrative old fellow he ever met.

"I too shall go, but I shall gladly come again, if you will gif me

leave, dear madame, for a little business in the city will keep me here

some days."

He spoke to Mrs. March, but he looked at Jo, and the mother's voice

gave as cordial an assent as did the daughter's eyes, for Mrs. March

was not so blind to her children's interest as Mrs. Moffat supposed.

"I suspect that is a wise man," remarked Mr. March, with placid

satisfaction, from the hearthrug, after the last guest had gone.

"I know he is a good one," added Mrs. March, with decided approval, as

she wound up the clock.

"I thought you'd like him," was all Jo said, as she slipped away to her

bed.

She wondered what the business was that brought Mr. Bhaer to the city,

and finally decided that he had been appointed to some great honor,

somewhere, but had been too modest to mention the fact. If she had

seen his face when, safe in his own room, he looked at the picture of a

severe and rigid young lady, with a good deal of hair, who appeared to

be gazing darkly into futurity, it might have thrown some light upon

the subject, especially when he turned off the gas, and kissed the

picture in the dark.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

MY LORD AND LADY

"Please, Madam Mother, could you lend me my wife for half an hour? The

luggage has come, and I've been making hay of Amy's Paris finery,

trying to find some things I want," said Laurie, coming in the next day

to find Mrs. Laurence sitting in her mother's lap, as if being made

'the baby' again.

"Certainly. Go, dear, I forgot that you have any home but this," and

Mrs. March pressed the white hand that wore the wedding ring, as if

asking pardon for her maternal covetousness.

"I shouldn't have come over if I could have helped it, but I can't get

on without my little woman any more than a..."

"Weathercock can without the wind," suggested Jo, as he paused for a

simile. Jo had grown quite her own saucy self again since Teddy came

home.

"Exactly, for Amy keeps me pointing due west most of the time, with

only an occasional whiffle round to the south, and I haven't had an

easterly spell since I was married. Don't know anything about the

north, but am altogether salubrious and balmy, hey, my lady?"

"Lovely weather so far. I don't know how long it will last, but I'm

not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship. Come home,

dear, and I'll find your bootjack. I suppose that's what you are

rummaging after among my things. Men are so helpless, Mother," said

Amy, with a matronly air, which delighted her husband.

"What are you going to do with yourselves after you get settled?" asked

Jo, buttoning Amy's cloak as she used to button her pinafores.

"We have our plans. We don't mean to say much about them yet, because

we are such very new brooms, but we don't intend to be idle. I'm going

into business with a devotion that shall delight Grandfather, and prove

to him that I'm not spoiled. I need something of the sort to keep me

steady. I'm tired of dawdling, and mean to work like a man."

"And Amy, what is she going to do?" asked Mrs. March, well pleased at

Laurie's decision and the energy with which he spoke.

"After doing the civil all round, and airing our best bonnet, we shall

astonish you by the elegant hospitalities of our mansion, the brilliant

society we shall draw about us, and the beneficial influence we shall

exert over the world at large. That's about it, isn't it, Madame

Recamier?" asked Laurie with a quizzical look at Amy.

"Time will show. Come away, Impertinence, and don't shock my family by

calling me names before their faces," answered Amy, resolving that

there should be a home with a good wife in it before she set up a salon

as a queen of society.

"How happy those children seem together!" observed Mr. March, finding

it difficult to become absorbed in his Aristotle after the young couple

had gone.

"Yes, and I think it will last," added Mrs. March, with the restful

expression of a pilot who has brought a ship safely into port.

"I know it will. Happy Amy!" and Jo sighed, then smiled brightly as

Professor Bhaer opened the gate with an impatient push.

Later in the evening, when his mind had been set at rest about the

bootjack, Laurie said suddenly to his wife, "Mrs. Laurence."

"My Lord!"

"That man intends to marry our Jo!"

"I hope so, don't you, dear?"

"Well, my love, I consider him a trump, in the fullest sense of that

expressive word, but I do wish he was a little younger and a good deal

richer."

"Now, Laurie, don't be too fastidious and worldly-minded. If they love

one another it doesn't matter a particle how old they are nor how poor.

Women never should marry for money..." Amy caught herself up short as

the words escaped her, and looked at her husband, who replied, with

malicious gravity...

"Certainly not, though you do hear charming girls say that they intend

to do it sometimes. If my memory serves me, you once thought it your

duty to make a rich match. That accounts, perhaps, for your marrying a

good-for-nothing like me."

"Oh, my dearest boy, don't, don't say that! I forgot you were rich

when I said 'Yes'. I'd have married you if you hadn't a penny, and I

sometimes wish you were poor that I might show how much I love you."

And Amy, who was very dignified in public and very fond in private,

gave convincing proofs of the truth of her words.

"You don't really think I am such a mercenary creature as I tried to be

once, do you? It would break my heart if you didn't believe that I'd

gladly pull in the same boat with you, even if you had to get your

living by rowing on the lake."

"Am I an idiot and a brute? How could I think so, when you refused a

richer man for me, and won't let me give you half I want to now, when I

have the right? Girls do it every day, poor things, and are taught to

think it is their only salvation, but you had better lessons, and

though I trembled for you at one time, I was not disappointed, for the

daughter was true to the mother's teaching. I told Mamma so yesterday,

and she looked as glad and grateful as if I'd given her a check for a

million, to be spent in charity. You are not listening to my moral

remarks, Mrs. Laurence," and Laurie paused, for Amy's eyes had an

absent look, though fixed upon his face.

"Yes, I am, and admiring the mole in your chin at the same time. I

don't wish to make you vain, but I must confess that I'm prouder of my

handsome husband than of all his money. Don't laugh, but your nose is

such a comfort to me," and Amy softly caressed the well-cut feature

with artistic satisfaction.

Laurie had received many compliments in his life, but never one that

suited him better, as he plainly showed though he did laugh at his

wife's peculiar taste, while she said slowly, "May I ask you a

question, dear?"

"Of course, you may."

"Shall you care if Jo does marry Mr. Bhaer?"

"Oh, that's the trouble is it? I thought there was something in the

dimple that didn't quite suit you. Not being a dog in the manger, but

the happiest fellow alive, I assure you I can dance at Jo's wedding

with a heart as light as my heels. Do you doubt it, my darling?"

Amy looked up at him, and was satisfied. Her little jealous fear

vanished forever, and she thanked him, with a face full of love and

confidence.

"I wish we could do something for that capital old Professor. Couldn't

we invent a rich relation, who shall obligingly die out there in

Germany, and leave him a tidy little fortune?" said Laurie, when they

began to pace up and down the long drawing room, arm in arm, as they

were fond of doing, in memory of the chateau garden.

"Jo would find us out, and spoil it all. She is very proud of him,

just as he is, and said yesterday that she thought poverty was a

beautiful thing."

"Bless her dear heart! She won't think so when she has a literary

husband, and a dozen little professors and professorins to support. We

won't interfere now, but watch our chance, and do them a good turn in

spite of themselves. I owe Jo for a part of my education, and she

believes in people's paying their honest debts, so I'll get round her

in that way."

"How delightful it is to be able to help others, isn't it? That was

always one of my dreams, to have the power of giving freely, and thanks

to you, the dream has come true."

"Ah, we'll do quantities of good, won't we? There's one sort of

poverty that I particularly like to help. Out-and-out beggars get

taken care of, but poor gentle folks fare badly, because they won't

ask, and people don't dare to offer charity. Yet there are a thousand

ways of helping them, if one only knows how to do it so delicately that

it does not offend. I must say, I like to serve a decayed gentleman

better than a blarnerying beggar. I suppose it's wrong, but I do,

though it is harder."

"Because it takes a gentleman to do it," added the other member of the

domestic admiration society.

"Thank you, I'm afraid I don't deserve that pretty compliment. But I

was going to say that while I was dawdling about abroad, I saw a good

many talented young fellows making all sorts of sacrifices, and

enduring real hardships, that they might realize their dreams. Splendid

fellows, some of them, working like heros, poor and friendless, but so

full of courage, patience, and ambition that I was ashamed of myself,

and longed to give them a right good lift. Those are people whom it's

a satisfaction to help, for if they've got genius, it's an honor to be

allowed to serve them, and not let it be lost or delayed for want of

fuel to keep the pot boiling. If they haven't, it's a pleasure to

comfort the poor souls, and keep them from despair when they find it

out."

"Yes, indeed, and there's another class who can't ask, and who suffer

in silence. I know something of it, for I belonged to it before you

made a princess of me, as the king does the beggarmaid in the old

story. Ambitious girls have a hard time, Laurie, and often have to see

youth, health, and precious opportunities go by, just for want of a

little help at the right minute. People have been very kind to me, and

whenever I see girls struggling along, as we used to do, I want to put

out my hand and help them, as I was helped."

"And so you shall, like an angel as you are!" cried Laurie, resolving,

with a glow of philanthropic zeal, to found and endow an institution

for the express benefit of young women with artistic tendencies. "Rich

people have no right to sit down and enjoy themselves, or let their

money accumulate for others to waste. It's not half so sensible to

leave legacies when one dies as it is to use the money wisely while

alive, and enjoy making one's fellow creatures happy with it. We'll

have a good time ourselves, and add an extra relish to our own pleasure

by giving other people a generous taste. Will you be a little Dorcas,

going about emptying a big basket of comforts, and filling it up with

good deeds?"

"With all my heart, if you will be a brave St. Martin, stopping as you

ride gallantly through the world to share your cloak with the beggar."

"It's a bargain, and we shall get the best of it!"

So the young pair shook hands upon it, and then paced happily on again,

feeling that their pleasant home was more homelike because they hoped

to brighten other homes, believing that their own feet would walk more

uprightly along the flowery path before them, if they smoothed rough

ways for other feet, and feeling that their hearts were more closely

knit together by a love which could tenderly remember those less blest

than they.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

DAISY AND DEMI

I cannot feel that I have done my duty as humble historian of the March

family, without devoting at least one chapter to the two most precious

and important members of it. Daisy and Demi had now arrived at years

of discretion, for in this fast age babies of three or four assert

their rights, and get them, too, which is more than many of their

elders do. If there ever were a pair of twins in danger of being

utterly spoiled by adoration, it was these prattling Brookes. Of

course they were the most remarkable children ever born, as will be

shown when I mention that they walked at eight months, talked fluently

at twelve months, and at two years they took their places at table, and

behaved with a propriety which charmed all beholders. At three, Daisy

demanded a 'needler', and actually made a bag with four stitches in it.

She likewise set up housekeeping in the sideboard, and managed a

microscopic cooking stove with a skill that brought tears of pride to

Hannah's eyes, while Demi learned his letters with his grandfather, who

invented a new mode of teaching the alphabet by forming letters with

his arms and legs, thus uniting gymnastics for head and heels. The boy

early developed a mechanical genius which delighted his father and

distracted his mother, for he tried to imitate every machine he saw,

and kept the nursery in a chaotic condition, with his 'sewinsheen', a

mysterious structure of string, chairs, clothespins, and spools, for

wheels to go 'wound and wound'. Also a basket hung over the back of a

chair, in which he vainly tried to hoist his too confiding sister, who,

with feminine devotion, allowed her little head to be bumped till

rescued, when the young inventor indignantly remarked, "Why, Marmar,

dat's my lellywaiter, and me's trying to pull her up."

Though utterly unlike in character, the twins got on remarkably well

together, and seldom quarreled more than thrice a day. Of course, Demi

tyrannized over Daisy, and gallantly defended her from every other

aggressor, while Daisy made a galley slave of herself, and adored her

brother as the one perfect being in the world. A rosy, chubby,

sunshiny little soul was Daisy, who found her way to everybody's heart,

and nestled there. One of the captivating children, who seem made to

be kissed and cuddled, adorned and adored like little goddesses, and

produced for general approval on all festive occasions. Her small

virtues were so sweet that she would have been quite angelic if a few

small naughtinesses had not kept her delightfully human. It was all

fair weather in her world, and every morning she scrambled up to the

window in her little nightgown to look out, and say, no matter whether

it rained or shone, "Oh, pitty day, oh, pitty day!" Everyone was a

friend, and she offered kisses to a stranger so confidingly that the

most inveterate bachelor relented, and baby-lovers became faithful

worshipers.

"Me loves evvybody," she once said, opening her arms, with her spoon in

one hand, and her mug in the other, as if eager to embrace and nourish

the whole world.

As she grew, her mother began to feel that the Dovecote would be

blessed by the presence of an inmate as serene and loving as that which

had helped to make the old house home, and to pray that she might be

spared a loss like that which had lately taught them how long they had

entertained an angel unawares. Her grandfather often called her

'Beth', and her grandmother watched over her with untiring devotion, as

if trying to atone for some past mistake, which no eye but her own

could see.

Demi, like a true Yankee, was of an inquiring turn, wanting to know

everything, and often getting much disturbed because he could not get

satisfactory answers to his perpetual "What for?"

He also possessed a philosophic bent, to the great delight of his

grandfather, who used to hold Socratic conversations with him, in which

the precocious pupil occasionally posed his teacher, to the undisguised

satisfaction of the womenfolk.

"What makes my legs go, Dranpa?" asked the young philosopher, surveying

those active portions of his frame with a meditative air, while resting

after a go-to-bed frolic one night.

"It's your little mind, Demi," replied the sage, stroking the yellow

head respectfully.

"What is a little mine?"

"It is something which makes your body move, as the spring made the

wheels go in my watch when I showed it to you."

"Open me. I want to see it go wound."

"I can't do that any more than you could open the watch. God winds you

up, and you go till He stops you."

"Does I?" and Demi's brown eyes grew big and bright as he took in the

new thought. "Is I wounded up like the watch?"

"Yes, but I can't show you how, for it is done when we don't see."

Demi felt his back, as if expecting to find it like that of the watch,

and then gravely remarked, "I dess Dod does it when I's asleep."

A careful explanation followed, to which he listened so attentively

that his anxious grandmother said, "My dear, do you think it wise to

talk about such things to that baby? He's getting great bumps over his

eyes, and learning to ask the most unanswerable questions."

"If he is old enough to ask the question he is old enough to receive

true answers. I am not putting the thoughts into his head, but helping

him unfold those already there. These children are wiser than we are,

and I have no doubt the boy understands every word I have said to him.

Now, Demi, tell me where you keep your mind."

If the boy had replied like Alcibiades, "By the gods, Socrates, I

cannot tell," his grandfather would not have been surprised, but when,

after standing a moment on one leg, like a meditative young stork, he

answered, in a tone of calm conviction, "In my little belly," the old

gentleman could only join in Grandma's laugh, and dismiss the class in

metaphysics.

There might have been cause for maternal anxiety, if Demi had not given

convincing proofs that he was a true boy, as well as a budding

philosopher, for often, after a discussion which caused Hannah to

prophesy, with ominous nods, "That child ain't long for this world," he

would turn about and set her fears at rest by some of the pranks with

which dear, dirty, naughty little rascals distract and delight their

parent's souls.

Meg made many moral rules, and tried to keep them, but what mother was

ever proof against the winning wiles, the ingenious evasions, or the

tranquil audacity of the miniature men and women who so early show

themselves accomplished Artful Dodgers?

"No more raisins, Demi. They'll make you sick," says Mamma to the

young person who offers his services in the kitchen with unfailing

regularity on plum-pudding day.

"Me likes to be sick."

"I don't want to have you, so run away and help Daisy make patty cakes."

He reluctantly departs, but his wrongs weigh upon his spirit, and

by-and-by when an opportunity comes to redress them, he outwits Mamma

by a shrewd bargain.

"Now you have been good children, and I'll play anything you like,"

says Meg, as she leads her assistant cooks upstairs, when the pudding

is safely bouncing in the pot.

"Truly, Marmar?" asks Demi, with a brilliant idea in his well-powdered

head.

"Yes, truly. Anything you say," replies the shortsighted parent,

preparing herself to sing, "The Three Little Kittens" half a dozen

times over, or to take her family to "Buy a penny bun," regardless of

wind or limb. But Demi corners her by the cool reply...

"Then we'll go and eat up all the raisins."

Aunt Dodo was chief playmate and confidante of both children, and the

trio turned the little house topsy-turvy. Aunt Amy was as yet only a

name to them, Aunt Beth soon faded into a pleasantly vague memory, but

Aunt Dodo was a living reality, and they made the most of her, for

which compliment she was deeply grateful. But when Mr. Bhaer came, Jo

neglected her playfellows, and dismay and desolation fell upon their

little souls. Daisy, who was fond of going about peddling kisses, lost

her best customer and became bankrupt. Demi, with infantile

penetration, soon discovered that Dodo like to play with 'the bear-man'

better than she did him, but though hurt, he concealed his anguish, for

he hadn't the heart to insult a rival who kept a mine of chocolate

drops in his waistcoat pocket, and a watch that could be taken out of

its case and freely shaken by ardent admirers.

Some persons might have considered these pleasing liberties as bribes,

but Demi didn't see it in that light, and continued to patronize the

'the bear-man' with pensive affability, while Daisy bestowed her small

affections upon him at the third call, and considered his shoulder her

throne, his arm her refuge, his gifts treasures surpassing worth.

Gentlemen are sometimes seized with sudden fits of admiration for the

young relatives of ladies whom they honor with their regard, but this

counterfeit philoprogenitiveness sits uneasily upon them, and does not

deceive anybody a particle. Mr. Bhaer's devotion was sincere, however

likewise effective--for honesty is the best policy in love as in law.

He was one of the men who are at home with children, and looked

particularly well when little faces made a pleasant contrast with his

manly one. His business, whatever it was, detained him from day to

day, but evening seldom failed to bring him out to see--well, he always

asked for Mr. March, so I suppose he was the attraction. The excellent

papa labored under the delusion that he was, and reveled in long

discussions with the kindred spirit, till a chance remark of his more

observing grandson suddenly enlightened him.

Mr. Bhaer came in one evening to pause on the threshold of the study,

astonished by the spectacle that met his eye. Prone upon the floor lay

Mr. March, with his respectable legs in the air, and beside him,

likewise prone, was Demi, trying to imitate the attitude with his own

short, scarlet-stockinged legs, both grovelers so seriously absorbed

that they were unconscious of spectators, till Mr. Bhaer laughed his

sonorous laugh, and Jo cried out, with a scandalized face...

"Father, Father, here's the Professor!"

Down went the black legs and up came the gray head, as the preceptor

said, with undisturbed dignity, "Good evening, Mr. Bhaer. Excuse me for

a moment. We are just finishing our lesson. Now, Demi, make the

letter and tell its name."

"I knows him!" and, after a few convulsive efforts, the red legs took

the shape of a pair of compasses, and the intelligent pupil

triumphantly shouted, "It's a We, Dranpa, it's a We!"

"He's a born Weller," laughed Jo, as her parent gathered himself up,

and her nephew tried to stand on his head, as the only mode of

expressing his satisfaction that school was over.

"What have you been at today, bubchen?" asked Mr. Bhaer, picking up the

gymnast.

"Me went to see little Mary."

"And what did you there?"

"I kissed her," began Demi, with artless frankness.

"Prut! Thou beginnest early. What did the little Mary say to that?"

asked Mr. Bhaer, continuing to confess the young sinner, who stood upon

the knee, exploring the waistcoat pocket.

"Oh, she liked it, and she kissed me, and I liked it. Don't little

boys like little girls?" asked Demi, with his mouth full, and an air of

bland satisfaction.

"You precocious chick! Who put that into your head?" said Jo, enjoying

the innocent revelation as much as the Professor.

"'Tisn't in mine head, it's in mine mouf," answered literal Demi,

putting out his tongue, with a chocolate drop on it, thinking she

alluded to confectionery, not ideas.

"Thou shouldst save some for the little friend. Sweets to the sweet,

mannling," and Mr. Bhaer offered Jo some, with a look that made her

wonder if chocolate was not the nectar drunk by the gods. Demi also

saw the smile, was impressed by it, and artlessy inquired. ..

"Do great boys like great girls, to, 'Fessor?"

Like young Washington, Mr. Bhaer 'couldn't tell a lie', so he gave the

somewhat vague reply that he believed they did sometimes, in a tone

that made Mr. March put down his clothesbrush, glance at Jo's retiring

face, and then sink into his chair, looking as if the 'precocious

chick' had put an idea into his head that was both sweet and sour.

Why Dodo, when she caught him in the china closet half an hour

afterward, nearly squeezed the breath out of his little body with a

tender embrace, instead of shaking him for being there, and why she

followed up this novel performance by the unexpected gift of a big

slice of bread and jelly, remained one of the problems over which Demi

puzzled his small wits, and was forced to leave unsolved forever.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

UNDER THE UMBRELLA

While Laurie and Amy were taking conjugal strolls over velvet carpets,

as they set their house in order, and planned a blissful future, Mr.

Bhaer and Jo were enjoying promenades of a different sort, along muddy

roads and sodden fields.

"I always do take a walk toward evening, and I don't know why I should

give it up, just because I happen to meet the Professor on his way

out," said Jo to herself, after two or three encounters, for though

there were two paths to Meg's whichever one she took she was sure to

meet him, either going or returning. He was always walking rapidly, and

never seemed to see her until quite close, when he would look as if his

short-sighted eyes had failed to recognize the approaching lady till

that moment. Then, if she was going to Meg's he always had something

for the babies. If her face was turned homeward, he had merely

strolled down to see the river, and was just returning, unless they

were tired of his frequent calls.

Under the circumstances, what could Jo do but greet him civilly, and

invite him in? If she was tired of his visits, she concealed her

weariness with perfect skill, and took care that there should be coffee

for supper, "as Friedrich--I mean Mr. Bhaer--doesn't like tea."

By the second week, everyone knew perfectly well what was going on, yet

everyone tried to look as if they were stone-blind to the changes in

Jo's face. They never asked why she sang about her work, did up her

hair three times a day, and got so blooming with her evening exercise.

And no one seemed to have the slightest suspicion that Professor Bhaer,

while talking philosophy with the father, was giving the daughter

lessons in love.

Jo couldn't even lose her heart in a decorous manner, but sternly tried

to quench her feelings, and failing to do so, led a somewhat agitated

life. She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering,

after her many and vehement declarations of independence. Laurie was

her especial dread, but thanks to the new manager, he behaved with

praiseworthy propriety, never called Mr. Bhaer 'a capital old fellow'

in public, never alluded, in the remotest manner, to Jo's improved

appearance, or expressed the least surprise at seeing the Professor's

hat on the Marches' table nearly every evening. But he exulted in

private and longed for the time to come when he could give Jo a piece

of plate, with a bear and a ragged staff on it as an appropriate coat

of arms.

For a fortnight, the Professor came and went with lover-like

regularity. Then he stayed away for three whole days, and made no

sign, a proceeding which caused everybody to look sober, and Jo to

become pensive, at first, and then--alas for romance--very cross.

"Disgusted, I dare say, and gone home as suddenly as he came. It's

nothing to me, of course, but I should think he would have come and bid

us goodbye like a gentleman," she said to herself, with a despairing

look at the gate, as she put on her things for the customary walk one

dull afternoon.

"You'd better take the little umbrella, dear. It looks like rain,"

said her mother, observing that she had on her new bonnet, but not

alluding to the fact.

"Yes, Marmee, do you want anything in town? I've got to run in and get

some paper," returned Jo, pulling out the bow under her chin before the

glass as an excuse for not looking at her mother.

"Yes, I want some twilled silesia, a paper of number nine needles, and

two yards of narrow lavender ribbon. Have you got your thick boots on,

and something warm under your cloak?"

"I believe so," answered Jo absently.

"If you happen to meet Mr. Bhaer, bring him home to tea. I quite long

to see the dear man," added Mrs. March.

Jo heard that, but made no answer, except to kiss her mother, and walk

rapidly away, thinking with a glow of gratitude, in spite of her

heartache, "How good she is to me! What do girls do who haven't any

mothers to help them through their troubles?"

The dry-goods stores were not down among the counting-houses, banks,

and wholesale warerooms, where gentlemen most do congregate, but Jo

found herself in that part of the city before she did a single errand,

loitering along as if waiting for someone, examining engineering

instruments in one window and samples of wool in another, with most

unfeminine interest, tumbling over barrels, being half-smothered by

descending bales, and hustled unceremoniously by busy men who looked as

if they wondered 'how the deuce she got there'. A drop of rain on her

cheek recalled her thoughts from baffled hopes to ruined ribbons. For

the drops continued to fall, and being a woman as well as a lover, she

felt that, though it was too late to save her heart, she might her

bonnet. Now she remembered the little umbrella, which she had

forgotten to take in her hurry to be off, but regret was unavailing,

and nothing could be done but borrow one or submit to a drenching. She

looked up at the lowering sky, down at the crimson bow already flecked

with black, forward along the muddy street, then one long, lingering

look behind, at a certain grimy warehouse, with 'Hoffmann, Swartz, &

Co.' over the door, and said to herself, with a sternly reproachful

air...

"It serves me right! what business had I to put on all my best things

and come philandering down here, hoping to see the Professor? Jo, I'm

ashamed of you! No, you shall not go there to borrow an umbrella, or

find out where he is, from his friends. You shall trudge away, and do

your errands in the rain, and if you catch your death and ruin your

bonnet, it's no more than you deserve. Now then!"

With that she rushed across the street so impetuously that she narrowly

escaped annihilation from a passing truck, and precipitated herself

into the arms of a stately old gentleman, who said, "I beg pardon,

ma'am," and looked mortally offended. Somewhat daunted, Jo righted

herself, spread her handkerchief over the devoted ribbons, and putting

temptation behind her, hurried on, with increasing dampness about the

ankles, and much clashing of umbrellas overhead. The fact that a

somewhat dilapidated blue one remained stationary above the unprotected

bonnet attracted her attention, and looking up, she saw Mr. Bhaer

looking down.

"I feel to know the strong-minded lady who goes so bravely under many

horse noses, and so fast through much mud. What do you down here, my

friend?"

"I'm shopping."

Mr. Bhaer smiled, as he glanced from the pickle factory on one side to

the wholesale hide and leather concern on the other, but he only said

politely, "You haf no umbrella. May I go also, and take for you the

bundles?"

"Yes, thank you."

Jo's cheeks were as red as her ribbon, and she wondered what he thought

of her, but she didn't care, for in a minute she found herself walking

away arm in arm with her Professor, feeling as if the sun had suddenly

burst out with uncommon brilliancy, that the world was all right again,

and that one thoroughly happy woman was paddling through the wet that

day.

"We thought you had gone," said Jo hastily, for she knew he was looking

at her. Her bonnet wasn't big enough to hide her face, and she feared

he might think the joy it betrayed unmaidenly.

"Did you believe that I should go with no farewell to those who haf

been so heavenly kind to me?" he asked so reproachfully that she felt

as if she had insulted him by the suggestion, and answered heartily...

"No, I didn't. I knew you were busy about your own affairs, but we

rather missed you, Father and Mother especially."

"And you?"

"I'm always glad to see you, sir."

In her anxiety to keep her voice quite calm, Jo made it rather cool,

and the frosty little monosyllable at the end seemed to chill the

Professor, for his smile vanished, as he said gravely...

"I thank you, and come one more time before I go."

"You are going, then?"

"I haf no longer any business here, it is done."

"Successfully, I hope?" said Jo, for the bitterness of disappointment

was in that short reply of his.

"I ought to think so, for I haf a way opened to me by which I can make

my bread and gif my Junglings much help."

"Tell me, please! I like to know all about the--the boys," said Jo

eagerly.

"That is so kind, I gladly tell you. My friends find for me a place in

a college, where I teach as at home, and earn enough to make the way

smooth for Franz and Emil. For this I should be grateful, should I

not?"

"Indeed you should. How splendid it will be to have you doing what you

like, and be able to see you often, and the boys!" cried Jo, clinging

to the lads as an excuse for the satisfaction she could not help

betraying.

"Ah! But we shall not meet often, I fear, this place is at the West."

"So far away!" and Jo left her skirts to their fate, as if it didn't

matter now what became of her clothes or herself.

Mr. Bhaer could read several languages, but he had not learned to read

women yet. He flattered himself that he knew Jo pretty well, and was,

therefore, much amazed by the contradictions of voice, face, and

manner, which she showed him in rapid succession that day, for she was

in half a dozen different moods in the course of half an hour. When

she met him she looked surprised, though it was impossible to help

suspecting that she had come for that express purpose. When he offered

her his arm, she took it with a look that filled him with delight, but

when he asked if she missed him, she gave such a chilly, formal reply

that despair fell upon him. On learning his good fortune she almost

clapped her hands. Was the joy all for the boys? Then on hearing his

destination, she said, "So far away!" in a tone of despair that lifted

him on to a pinnacle of hope, but the next minute she tumbled him down

again by observing, like one entirely absorbed in the matter...

"Here's the place for my errands. Will you come in? It won't take

long."

Jo rather prided herself upon her shopping capabilities, and

particularly wished to impress her escort with the neatness and

dispatch with which she would accomplish the business. But owing to the

flutter she was in, everything went amiss. She upset the tray of

needles, forgot the silesia was to be 'twilled' till it was cut off,

gave the wrong change, and covered herself with confusion by asking for

lavender ribbon at the calico counter. Mr. Bhaer stood by, watching

her blush and blunder, and as he watched, his own bewilderment seemed

to subside, for he was beginning to see that on some occasions, women,

like dreams, go by contraries.

When they came out, he put the parcel under his arm with a more

cheerful aspect, and splashed through the puddles as if he rather

enjoyed it on the whole.

"Should we no do a little what you call shopping for the babies, and

haf a farewell feast tonight if I go for my last call at your so

pleasant home?" he asked, stopping before a window full of fruit and

flowers.

"What will we buy?" asked Jo, ignoring the latter part of his speech,

and sniffing the mingled odors with an affectation of delight as they

went in.

"May they haf oranges and figs?" asked Mr. Bhaer, with a paternal air.

"They eat them when they can get them."

"Do you care for nuts?"

"Like a squirrel."

"Hamburg grapes. Yes, we shall drink to the Fatherland in those?"

Jo frowned upon that piece of extravagance, and asked why he didn't buy

a frail of dates, a cask of raisins, and a bag of almonds, and be done

with it? Whereat Mr. Bhaer confiscated her purse, produced his own,

and finished the marketing by buying several pounds of grapes, a pot of

rosy daisies, and a pretty jar of honey, to be regarded in the light of

a demijohn. Then distorting his pockets with knobby bundles, and

giving her the flowers to hold, he put up the old umbrella, and they

traveled on again.

"Miss Marsch, I haf a great favor to ask of you," began the Professor,

after a moist promenade of half a block.

"Yes, sir?" and Jo's heart began to beat so hard she was afraid he

would hear it.

"I am bold to say it in spite of the rain, because so short a time

remains to me."

"Yes, sir," and Jo nearly crushed the small flowerpot with the sudden

squeeze she gave it.

"I wish to get a little dress for my Tina, and I am too stupid to go

alone. Will you kindly gif me a word of taste and help?"

"Yes, sir," and Jo felt as calm and cool all of a sudden as if she had

stepped into a refrigerator.

"Perhaps also a shawl for Tina's mother, she is so poor and sick, and

the husband is such a care. Yes, yes, a thick, warm shawl would be a

friendly thing to take the little mother."

"I'll do it with pleasure, Mr. Bhaer." "I'm going very fast, and he's

getting dearer every minute," added Jo to herself, then with a mental

shake she entered into the business with an energy that was pleasant to

behold.

Mr. Bhaer left it all to her, so she chose a pretty gown for Tina, and

then ordered out the shawls. The clerk, being a married man,

condescended to take an interest in the couple, who appeared to be

shopping for their family.

"Your lady may prefer this. It's a superior article, a most desirable

color, quite chaste and genteel," he said, shaking out a comfortable

gray shawl, and throwing it over Jo's shoulders.

"Does this suit you, Mr. Bhaer?" she asked, turning her back to him,

and feeling deeply grateful for the chance of hiding her face.

"Excellently well, we will haf it," answered the Professor, smiling to

himself as he paid for it, while Jo continued to rummage the counters

like a confirmed bargain-hunter.

"Now shall we go home?" he asked, as if the words were very pleasant to

him.

"Yes, it's late, and I'm \_so\_ tired." Jo's voice was more pathetic than

she knew. For now the sun seemed to have gone in as suddenly as it

came out, and the world grew muddy and miserable again, and for the

first time she discovered that her feet were cold, her head ached, and

that her heart was colder than the former, fuller of pain than the

latter. Mr. Bhaer was going away, he only cared for her as a friend,

it was all a mistake, and the sooner it was over the better. With this

idea in her head, she hailed an approaching omnibus with such a hasty

gesture that the daisies flew out of the pot and were badly damaged.

"This is not our omniboos," said the Professor, waving the loaded

vehicle away, and stopping to pick up the poor little flowers.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't see the name distinctly. Never mind, I

can walk. I'm used to plodding in the mud," returned Jo, winking hard,

because she would have died rather than openly wipe her eyes.

Mr. Bhaer saw the drops on her cheeks, though she turned her head away.

The sight seemed to touch him very much, for suddenly stooping down, he

asked in a tone that meant a great deal, "Heart's dearest, why do you

cry?"

Now, if Jo had not been new to this sort of thing she would have said

she wasn't crying, had a cold in her head, or told any other feminine

fib proper to the occasion. Instead of which, that undignified

creature answered, with an irrepressible sob, "Because you are going

away."

"Ach, mein Gott, that is so good!" cried Mr. Bhaer, managing to clasp

his hands in spite of the umbrella and the bundles, "Jo, I haf nothing

but much love to gif you. I came to see if you could care for it, and

I waited to be sure that I was something more than a friend. Am I?

Can you make a little place in your heart for old Fritz?" he added, all

in one breath.

"Oh, yes!" said Jo, and he was quite satisfied, for she folded both

hands over his arm, and looked up at him with an expression that

plainly showed how happy she would be to walk through life beside him,

even though she had no better shelter than the old umbrella, if he

carried it.

It was certainly proposing under difficulties, for even if he had

desired to do so, Mr. Bhaer could not go down upon his knees, on

account of the mud. Neither could he offer Jo his hand, except

figuratively, for both were full. Much less could he indulge in tender

remonstrations in the open street, though he was near it. So the only

way in which he could express his rapture was to look at her, with an

expression which glorified his face to such a degree that there

actually seemed to be little rainbows in the drops that sparkled on his

beard. If he had not loved Jo very much, I don't think he could have

done it then, for she looked far from lovely, with her skirts in a

deplorable state, her rubber boots splashed to the ankle, and her

bonnet a ruin. Fortunately, Mr. Bhaer considered her the most

beautiful woman living, and she found him more "Jove-like" than ever,

though his hatbrim was quite limp with the little rills trickling

thence upon his shoulders (for he held the umbrella all over Jo), and

every finger of his gloves needed mending.

Passers-by probably thought them a pair of harmless lunatics, for they

entirely forgot to hail a bus, and strolled leisurely along, oblivious

of deepening dusk and fog. Little they cared what anybody thought, for

they were enjoying the happy hour that seldom comes but once in any

life, the magical moment which bestows youth on the old, beauty on the

plain, wealth on the poor, and gives human hearts a foretaste of

heaven. The Professor looked as if he had conquered a kingdom, and the

world had nothing more to offer him in the way of bliss. While Jo

trudged beside him, feeling as if her place had always been there, and

wondering how she ever could have chosen any other lot. Of course, she

was the first to speak--intelligibly, I mean, for the emotional remarks

which followed her impetuous "Oh, yes!" were not of a coherent or

reportable character.

"Friedrich, why didn't you..."

"Ah, heaven, she gifs me the name that no one speaks since Minna died!"

cried the Professor, pausing in a puddle to regard her with grateful

delight.

"I always call you so to myself--I forgot, but I won't unless you like

it."

"Like it? It is more sweet to me than I can tell. Say 'thou', also,

and I shall say your language is almost as beautiful as mine."

"Isn't 'thou' a little sentimental?" asked Jo, privately thinking it a

lovely monosyllable.

"Sentimental? Yes. Thank Gott, we Germans believe in sentiment, and

keep ourselves young mit it. Your English 'you' is so cold, say

'thou', heart's dearest, it means so much to me," pleaded Mr. Bhaer,

more like a romantic student than a grave professor.

"Well, then, why didn't thou tell me all this sooner?" asked Jo

bashfully.

"Now I shall haf to show thee all my heart, and I so gladly will,

because thou must take care of it hereafter. See, then, my Jo--ah, the

dear, funny little name--I had a wish to tell something the day I said

goodbye in New York, but I thought the handsome friend was betrothed to

thee, and so I spoke not. Wouldst thou have said 'Yes', then, if I had

spoken?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid not, for I didn't have any heart just then."

"Prut! That I do not believe. It was asleep till the fairy prince

came through the wood, and waked it up. Ah, well, 'Die erste Liebe ist

die beste', but that I should not expect."

"Yes, the first love is the best, but be so contented, for I never had

another. Teddy was only a boy, and soon got over his little fancy,"

said Jo, anxious to correct the Professor's mistake.

"Good! Then I shall rest happy, and be sure that thou givest me all.

I haf waited so long, I am grown selfish, as thou wilt find,

Professorin."

"I like that," cried Jo, delighted with her new name. "Now tell me

what brought you, at last, just when I wanted you?"

"This," and Mr. Bhaer took a little worn paper out of his waistcoat

pocket.

Jo unfolded it, and looked much abashed, for it was one of her own

contributions to a paper that paid for poetry, which accounted for her

sending it an occasional attempt.

"How could that bring you?" she asked, wondering what he meant.

"I found it by chance. I knew it by the names and the initials, and in

it there was one little verse that seemed to call me. Read and find

him. I will see that you go not in the wet."

IN THE GARRET

Four little chests all in a row,

Dim with dust, and worn by time,

All fashioned and filled, long ago,

By children now in their prime.

Four little keys hung side by side,

With faded ribbons, brave and gay

When fastened there, with childish pride,

Long ago, on a rainy day.

Four little names, one on each lid,

Carved out by a boyish hand,

And underneath there lieth hid

Histories of the happy band

Once playing here, and pausing oft

To hear the sweet refrain,

That came and went on the roof aloft,

In the falling summer rain.

"Meg" on the first lid, smooth and fair.

I look in with loving eyes,

For folded here, with well-known care,

A goodly gathering lies,

The record of a peaceful life--

Gifts to gentle child and girl,

A bridal gown, lines to a wife,

A tiny shoe, a baby curl.

No toys in this first chest remain,

For all are carried away,

In their old age, to join again

In another small Meg's play.

Ah, happy mother! Well I know

You hear, like a sweet refrain,

Lullabies ever soft and low

In the falling summer rain.

"Jo" on the next lid, scratched and worn,

And within a motley store

Of headless dolls, of schoolbooks torn,

Birds and beasts that speak no more,

Spoils brought home from the fairy ground

Only trod by youthful feet,

Dreams of a future never found,

Memories of a past still sweet,

Half-writ poems, stories wild,

April letters, warm and cold,

Diaries of a wilful child,

Hints of a woman early old,

A woman in a lonely home,

Hearing, like a sad refrain--

"Be worthy, love, and love will come,"

In the falling summer rain.

My Beth! the dust is always swept

From the lid that bears your name,

As if by loving eyes that wept,

By careful hands that often came.

Death canonized for us one saint,

Ever less human than divine,

And still we lay, with tender plaint,

Relics in this household shrine--

The silver bell, so seldom rung,

The little cap which last she wore,

The fair, dead Catherine that hung

By angels borne above her door.

The songs she sang, without lament,

In her prison-house of pain,

Forever are they sweetly blent

With the falling summer rain.

Upon the last lid's polished field--

Legend now both fair and true

A gallant knight bears on his shield,

"Amy" in letters gold and blue.

Within lie snoods that bound her hair,

Slippers that have danced their last,

Faded flowers laid by with care,

Fans whose airy toils are past,

Gay valentines, all ardent flames,

Trifles that have borne their part

In girlish hopes and fears and shames,

The record of a maiden heart

Now learning fairer, truer spells,

Hearing, like a blithe refrain,

The silver sound of bridal bells

In the falling summer rain.

Four little chests all in a row,

Dim with dust, and worn by time,

Four women, taught by weal and woe

To love and labor in their prime.

Four sisters, parted for an hour,

None lost, one only gone before,

Made by love's immortal power,

Nearest and dearest evermore.

Oh, when these hidden stores of ours

Lie open to the Father's sight,

May they be rich in golden hours,

Deeds that show fairer for the light,

Lives whose brave music long shall ring,

Like a spirit-stirring strain,

Souls that shall gladly soar and sing

In the long sunshine after rain.

"It's very bad poetry, but I felt it when I wrote it, one day when I

was very lonely, and had a good cry on a rag bag. I never thought it

would go where it could tell tales," said Jo, tearing up the verses the

Professor had treasured so long.

"Let it go, it has done its duty, and I will haf a fresh one when I

read all the brown book in which she keeps her little secrets," said

Mr. Bhaer with a smile as he watched the fragments fly away on the

wind. "Yes," he added earnestly, "I read that, and I think to myself,

She has a sorrow, she is lonely, she would find comfort in true love.

I haf a heart full, full for her. Shall I not go and say, 'If this is

not too poor a thing to gif for what I shall hope to receive, take it

in Gott's name?'"

"And so you came to find that it was not too poor, but the one precious

thing I needed," whispered Jo.

"I had no courage to think that at first, heavenly kind as was your

welcome to me. But soon I began to hope, and then I said, 'I will haf

her if I die for it,' and so I will!" cried Mr. Bhaer, with a defiant

nod, as if the walls of mist closing round them were barriers which he

was to surmount or valiantly knock down.

Jo thought that was splendid, and resolved to be worthy of her knight,

though he did not come prancing on a charger in gorgeous array.

"What made you stay away so long?" she asked presently, finding it so

pleasant to ask confidential questions and get delightful answers that

she could not keep silent.

"It was not easy, but I could not find the heart to take you from that

so happy home until I could haf a prospect of one to gif you, after

much time, perhaps, and hard work. How could I ask you to gif up so

much for a poor old fellow, who has no fortune but a little learning?"

"I'm glad you are poor. I couldn't bear a rich husband," said Jo

decidedly, adding in a softer tone, "Don't fear poverty. I've known it

long enough to lose my dread and be happy working for those I love, and

don't call yourself old--forty is the prime of life. I couldn't help

loving you if you were seventy!"

The Professor found that so touching that he would have been glad of

his handkerchief, if he could have got at it. As he couldn't, Jo wiped

his eyes for him, and said, laughing, as she took away a bundle or

two...

"I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now,

for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing

burdens. I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home.

Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go," she added resolutely, as

he tried to reclaim his load.

"We shall see. Haf you patience to wait a long time, Jo? I must go

away and do my work alone. I must help my boys first, because, even

for you, I may not break my word to Minna. Can you forgif that, and be

happy while we hope and wait?"

"Yes, I know I can, for we love one another, and that makes all the

rest easy to bear. I have my duty, also, and my work. I couldn't enjoy

myself if I neglected them even for you, so there's no need of hurry or

impatience. You can do your part out West, I can do mine here, and

both be happy hoping for the best, and leaving the future to be as God

wills."

"Ah! Thou gifest me such hope and courage, and I haf nothing to gif

back but a full heart and these empty hands," cried the Professor,

quite overcome.

Jo never, never would learn to be proper, for when he said that as they

stood upon the steps, she just put both hands into his, whispering

tenderly, "Not empty now," and stooping down, kissed her Friedrich

under the umbrella. It was dreadful, but she would have done it if the

flock of draggle-tailed sparrows on the hedge had been human beings,

for she was very far gone indeed, and quite regardless of everything

but her own happiness. Though it came in such a very simple guise, that

was the crowning moment of both their lives, when, turning from the

night and storm and loneliness to the household light and warmth and

peace waiting to receive them, with a glad "Welcome home!" Jo led her

lover in, and shut the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

HARVEST TIME

For a year Jo and her Professor worked and waited, hoped and loved, met

occasionally, and wrote such voluminous letters that the rise in the

price of paper was accounted for, Laurie said. The second year began

rather soberly, for their prospects did not brighten, and Aunt March

died suddenly. But when their first sorrow was over--for they loved

the old lady in spite of her sharp tongue--they found they had cause

for rejoicing, for she had left Plumfield to Jo, which made all sorts

of joyful things possible.

"It's a fine old place, and will bring a handsome sum, for of course

you intend to sell it," said Laurie, as they were all talking the

matter over some weeks later.

"No, I don't," was Jo's decided answer, as she petted the fat poodle,

whom she had adopted, out of respect to his former mistress.

"You don't mean to live there?"

"Yes, I do."

"But, my dear girl, it's an immense house, and will take a power of

money to keep it in order. The garden and orchard alone need two or

three men, and farming isn't in Bhaer's line, I take it."

"He'll try his hand at it there, if I propose it."

"And you expect to live on the produce of the place? Well, that sounds

paradisiacal, but you'll find it desperate hard work."

"The crop we are going to raise is a profitable one," and Jo laughed.

"Of what is this fine crop to consist, ma'am?"

"Boys. I want to open a school for little lads--a good, happy,

homelike school, with me to take care of them and Fritz to teach them."

"That's a truly Joian plan for you! Isn't that just like her?" cried

Laurie, appealing to the family, who looked as much surprised as he.

"I like it," said Mrs. March decidedly.

"So do I," added her husband, who welcomed the thought of a chance for

trying the Socratic method of education on modern youth.

"It will be an immense care for Jo," said Meg, stroking the head of her

one all-absorbing son.

"Jo can do it, and be happy in it. It's a splendid idea. Tell us all

about it," cried Mr. Laurence, who had been longing to lend the lovers

a hand, but knew that they would refuse his help.

"I knew you'd stand by me, sir. Amy does too--I see it in her eyes,

though she prudently waits to turn it over in her mind before she

speaks. Now, my dear people," continued Jo earnestly, "just understand

that this isn't a new idea of mine, but a long cherished plan. Before

my Fritz came, I used to think how, when I'd made my fortune, and no

one needed me at home, I'd hire a big house, and pick up some poor,

forlorn little lads who hadn't any mothers, and take care of them, and

make life jolly for them before it was too late. I see so many going

to ruin for want of help at the right minute, I love so to do anything

for them, I seem to feel their wants, and sympathize with their

troubles, and oh, I should so like to be a mother to them!"

Mrs. March held out her hand to Jo, who took it, smiling, with tears in

her eyes, and went on in the old enthusiastic way, which they had not

seen for a long while.

"I told my plan to Fritz once, and he said it was just what he would

like, and agreed to try it when we got rich. Bless his dear heart,

he's been doing it all his life--helping poor boys, I mean, not getting

rich, that he'll never be. Money doesn't stay in his pocket long

enough to lay up any. But now, thanks to my good old aunt, who loved

me better than I ever deserved, I'm rich, at least I feel so, and we

can live at Plumfield perfectly well, if we have a flourishing school.

It's just the place for boys, the house is big, and the furniture

strong and plain. There's plenty of room for dozens inside, and

splendid grounds outside. They could help in the garden and orchard.

Such work is healthy, isn't it, sir? Then Fritz could train and teach

in his own way, and Father will help him. I can feed and nurse and pet

and scold them, and Mother will be my stand-by. I've always longed for

lots of boys, and never had enough, now I can fill the house full and

revel in the little dears to my heart's content. Think what luxury--

Plumfield my own, and a wilderness of boys to enjoy it with me."

As Jo waved her hands and gave a sigh of rapture, the family went off

into a gale of merriment, and Mr. Laurence laughed till they thought

he'd have an apoplectic fit.

"I don't see anything funny," she said gravely, when she could be

heard. "Nothing could be more natural and proper than for my Professor

to open a school, and for me to prefer to reside in my own estate."

"She is putting on airs already," said Laurie, who regarded the idea in

the light of a capital joke. "But may I inquire how you intend to

support the establishment? If all the pupils are little ragamuffins,

I'm afraid your crop won't be profitable in a worldly sense, Mrs.

Bhaer."

"Now don't be a wet-blanket, Teddy. Of course I shall have rich

pupils, also--perhaps begin with such altogether. Then, when I've got

a start, I can take in a ragamuffin or two, just for a relish. Rich

people's children often need care and comfort, as well as poor. I've

seen unfortunate little creatures left to servants, or backward ones

pushed forward, when it's real cruelty. Some are naughty through

mismanagment or neglect, and some lose their mothers. Besides, the best

have to get through the hobbledehoy age, and that's the very time they

need most patience and kindness. People laugh at them, and hustle them

about, try to keep them out of sight, and expect them to turn all at

once from pretty children into fine young men. They don't complain

much--plucky little souls--but they feel it. I've been through

something of it, and I know all about it. I've a special interest in

such young bears, and like to show them that I see the warm, honest,

well-meaning boys' hearts, in spite of the clumsy arms and legs and the

topsy-turvy heads. I've had experience, too, for haven't I brought up

one boy to be a pride and honor to his family?"

"I'll testify that you tried to do it," said Laurie with a grateful

look.

"And I've succeeded beyond my hopes, for here you are, a steady,

sensible businessman, doing heaps of good with your money, and laying

up the blessings of the poor, instead of dollars. But you are not

merely a businessman, you love good and beautiful things, enjoy them

yourself, and let others go halves, as you always did in the old times.

I am proud of you, Teddy, for you get better every year, and everyone

feels it, though you won't let them say so. Yes, and when I have my

flock, I'll just point to you, and say 'There's your model, my lads'."

Poor Laurie didn't know where to look, for, man though he was,

something of the old bashfulness came over him as this burst of praise

made all faces turn approvingly upon him.

"I say, Jo, that's rather too much," he began, just in his old boyish

way. "You have all done more for me than I can ever thank you for,

except by doing my best not to disappoint you. You have rather cast me

off lately, Jo, but I've had the best of help, nevertheless. So, if

I've got on at all, you may thank these two for it," and he laid one

hand gently on his grandfather's head, and the other on Amy's golden

one, for the three were never far apart.

"I do think that families are the most beautiful things in all the

world!" burst out Jo, who was in an unusually up-lifted frame of mind

just then. "When I have one of my own, I hope it will be as happy as

the three I know and love the best. If John and my Fritz were only

here, it would be quite a little heaven on earth," she added more

quietly. And that night when she went to her room after a blissful

evening of family counsels, hopes, and plans, her heart was so full of

happiness that she could only calm it by kneeling beside the empty bed

always near her own, and thinking tender thoughts of Beth.

It was a very astonishing year altogether, for things seemed to happen

in an unusually rapid and delightful manner. Almost before she knew

where she was, Jo found herself married and settled at Plumfield. Then

a family of six or seven boys sprung up like mushrooms, and flourished

surprisingly, poor boys as well as rich, for Mr. Laurence was

continually finding some touching case of destitution, and begging the

Bhaers to take pity on the child, and he would gladly pay a trifle for

its support. In this way, the sly old gentleman got round proud Jo,

and furnished her with the style of boy in which she most delighted.

Of course it was uphill work at first, and Jo made queer mistakes, but

the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters, and the most

rampant ragamuffin was conquered in the end. How Jo did enjoy her

'wilderness of boys', and how poor, dear Aunt March would have lamented

had she been there to see the sacred precincts of prim, well-ordered

Plumfield overrun with Toms, Dicks, and Harrys! There was a sort of

poetic justice about it, after all, for the old lady had been the

terror of the boys for miles around, and now the exiles feasted freely

on forbidden plums, kicked up the gravel with profane boots unreproved,

and played cricket in the big field where the irritable 'cow with a

crumpled horn' used to invite rash youths to come and be tossed. It

became a sort of boys' paradise, and Laurie suggested that it should be

called the 'Bhaer-garten', as a compliment to its master and

appropriate to its inhabitants.

It never was a fashionable school, and the Professor did not lay up a

fortune, but it was just what Jo intended it to be--'a happy, homelike

place for boys, who needed teaching, care, and kindness'. Every room

in the big house was soon full. Every little plot in the garden soon

had its owner. A regular menagerie appeared in barn and shed, for pet

animals were allowed. And three times a day, Jo smiled at her Fritz

from the head of a long table lined on either side with rows of happy

young faces, which all turned to her with affectionate eyes, confiding

words, and grateful hearts, full of love for 'Mother Bhaer'. She had

boys enough now, and did not tire of them, though they were not angels,

by any means, and some of them caused both Professor and Professorin

much trouble and anxiety. But her faith in the good spot which exists

in the heart of the naughtiest, sauciest, most tantalizing little

ragamuffin gave her patience, skill, and in time success, for no mortal

boy could hold out long with Father Bhaer shining on him as

benevolently as the sun, and Mother Bhaer forgiving him seventy times

seven. Very precious to Jo was the friendship of the lads, their

penitent sniffs and whispers after wrongdoing, their droll or touching

little confidences, their pleasant enthusiasms, hopes, and plans, even

their misfortunes, for they only endeared them to her all the more.

There were slow boys and bashful boys, feeble boys and riotous boys,

boys that lisped and boys that stuttered, one or two lame ones, and a

merry little quadroon, who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was

welcome to the 'Bhaer-garten', though some people predicted that his

admission would ruin the school.

Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much

anxiety, and a perpetual racket. She enjoyed it heartily and found the

applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world, for

now she told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers

and admirers. As the years went on, two little lads of her own came to

increase her happiness--Rob, named for Grandpa, and Teddy, a

happy-go-lucky baby, who seemed to have inherited his papa's sunshiny

temper as well as his mother's lively spirit. How they ever grew up

alive in that whirlpool of boys was a mystery to their grandma and

aunts, but they flourished like dandelions in spring, and their rough

nurses loved and served them well.

There were a great many holidays at Plumfield, and one of the most

delightful was the yearly apple-picking. For then the Marches,

Laurences, Brookes and Bhaers turned out in full force and made a day

of it. Five years after Jo's wedding, one of these fruitful festivals

occurred, a mellow October day, when the air was full of an

exhilarating freshness which made the spirits rise and the blood dance

healthily in the veins. The old orchard wore its holiday attire.

Goldenrod and asters fringed the mossy walls. Grasshoppers skipped

briskly in the sere grass, and crickets chirped like fairy pipers at a

feast. Squirrels were busy with their small harvesting. Birds

twittered their adieux from the alders in the lane, and every tree

stood ready to send down its shower of red or yellow apples at the

first shake. Everybody was there. Everybody laughed and sang, climbed

up and tumbled down. Everybody declared that there never had been such

a perfect day or such a jolly set to enjoy it, and everyone gave

themselves up to the simple pleasures of the hour as freely as if there

were no such things as care or sorrow in the world.

Mr. March strolled placidly about, quoting Tusser, Cowley, and

Columella to Mr. Laurence, while enjoying...

The gentle apple's winey juice.

The Professor charged up and down the green aisles like a stout

Teutonic knight, with a pole for a lance, leading on the boys, who made

a hook and ladder company of themselves, and performed wonders in the

way of ground and lofty tumbling. Laurie devoted himself to the little

ones, rode his small daughter in a bushel-basket, took Daisy up among

the bird's nests, and kept adventurous Rob from breaking his neck.

Mrs. March and Meg sat among the apple piles like a pair of Pomonas,

sorting the contributions that kept pouring in, while Amy with a

beautiful motherly expression in her face sketched the various groups,

and watched over one pale lad, who sat adoring her with his little

crutch beside him.

Jo was in her element that day, and rushed about, with her gown pinned

up, and her hat anywhere but on her head, and her baby tucked under her

arm, ready for any lively adventure which might turn up. Little Teddy

bore a charmed life, for nothing ever happened to him, and Jo never

felt any anxiety when he was whisked up into a tree by one lad,

galloped off on the back of another, or supplied with sour russets by

his indulgent papa, who labored under the Germanic delusion that babies

could digest anything, from pickled cabbage to buttons, nails, and

their own small shoes. She knew that little Ted would turn up again in

time, safe and rosy, dirty and serene, and she always received him back

with a hearty welcome, for Jo loved her babies tenderly.

At four o'clock a lull took place, and baskets remained empty, while

the apple pickers rested and compared rents and bruises. Then Jo and

Meg, with a detachment of the bigger boys, set forth the supper on the

grass, for an out-of-door tea was always the crowning joy of the day.

The land literally flowed with milk and honey on such occasions, for

the lads were not required to sit at table, but allowed to partake of

refreshment as they liked--freedom being the sauce best beloved by the

boyish soul. They availed themselves of the rare privilege to the

fullest extent, for some tried the pleasing experiment of drinking milk

while standing on their heads, others lent a charm to leapfrog by

eating pie in the pauses of the game, cookies were sown broadcast over

the field, and apple turnovers roosted in the trees like a new style of

bird. The little girls had a private tea party, and Ted roved among

the edibles at his own sweet will.

When no one could eat any more, the Professor proposed the first

regular toast, which was always drunk at such times--"Aunt March, God

bless her!" A toast heartily given by the good man, who never forgot

how much he owed her, and quietly drunk by the boys, who had been

taught to keep her memory green.

"Now, Grandma's sixtieth birthday! Long life to her, with three times

three!"

That was given with a will, as you may well believe, and the cheering

once begun, it was hard to 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 quadroon, 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!"