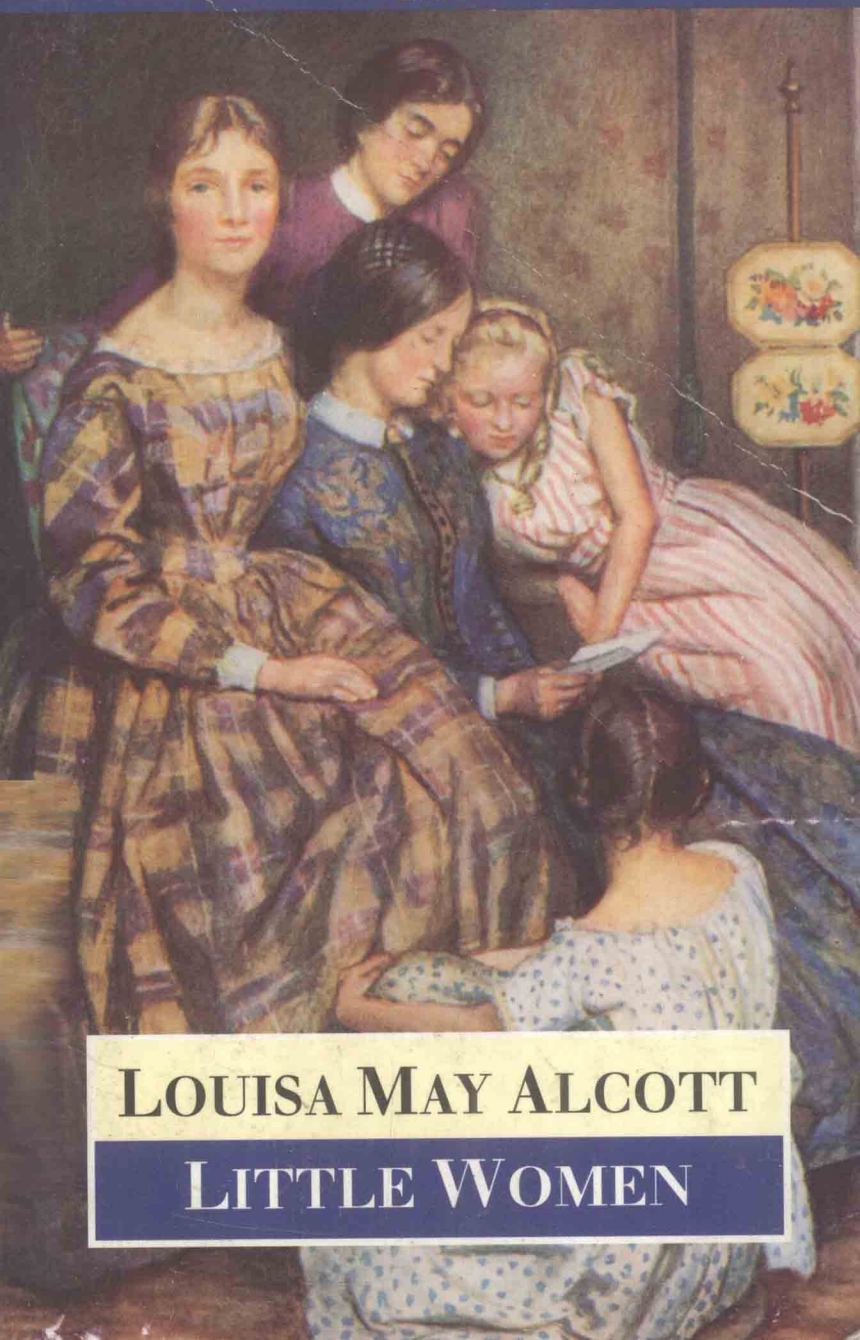


WORLD'S  CLASSICS



LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

LITTLE WOMEN

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

*Little Women*

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*Edited with an Introduction by*

VALERIE ALDERSON

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1878 Louisa Alcott wrote to an admirer, John Preston True, that 'I never copy or "polish" so I have no manuscripts . . .'. *Little Women* was not a product of long and painstaking literary effort, each phrase refined and perfected. Rather it was the reluctant work of a few feverish weeks of writing in order to make money to pay off family debts. The idea for a story about her Pathetic Family, as she called them, had been in Alcott's mind for some years—she had even written a few stories about them such as 'A Modern Cinderella' and 'The Sisters' Trial'. Now, when the editor at Roberts Brothers of Boston, Thomas Niles, suggested she should write 'a story for girls', she resurrected the idea, dusted it down, and wrote what was to prove one of the most significant books in the history of the girls' story.

One should not underestimate the importance of Niles's contribution to the Alcott success. At the time he suggested the idea in autumn 1867, Alcott had little experience of writing for children. Admittedly her first book, *Flower Fables* (1855), had been written for Emerson's young daughter, Ellen, when the author was 16 (she was 23 when the book appeared) and had enjoyed a fleeting success. She had also recently agreed to edit a children's magazine, *Merry's Museum*, for Horace Fuller and was busy paving the way for her first issue with a collection of stories, *Morning Glories*. But despite Fuller's claim in his advertisements that she had 'no superior as a writer for youth in the country', her chief claims to fame were a controversial novel, *Moods*, and a collection of *Hospital Sketches*, first serialized in the *Commonwealth* and afterwards collected into book form, about her brief experiences as a nurse during the American Civil War. She was, however, a prolific contributor of poems, stories, and articles for the family and literary papers; she had written a successful play, and her dramatized sketches from Dickens were much in demand. What was not known was that as 'A. M. Barnard' she was profitably engaged in writing lurid romances, thrillers, and blood-and-thunder adventure tales for the more seedy papers and dime-novel series.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some of these have been traced and reissued in three volumes under the editorship of

What Niles realized was that there was a gap in the market for good, readable, and entertaining stories for girls and that Alcott was the kind of writer who could fill it. The publishing firm of Roberts Brothers had been founded in 1861 by Lewis Augustine Roberts after the bookbinding firm in which he was a principal failed. At first he concentrated on producing photographic albums, but after Niles, an experienced editor, joined him in 1863, they began to build up a list of good-quality books by distinguished authors. In 1867 Niles was negotiating with Louisa Alcott's father to publish his *Tablets* when Louisa visited him to offer a new collection of fairy stories. Instead, Niles suggested the girls' story and Louisa said she'd 'try'.

Alcott put off trying for some months. In February of 1868 Niles enquired of her father how the story was progressing, and Bronson Alcott wrote to his daughter urging her to begin, but it was not till May that she started in earnest. She records in her journal for that month that she was working on it but did not 'enjoy this sort of thing' for she 'never liked girls nor knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting though I doubt it'. ('Good joke', she added later.) The first twelve chapters went off to Niles in June. Alcott noted that both she and Niles thought them 'dull', although Niles wrote to her on 16 June expressing delight: 'consider judgement as favourable'. Alcott plodded on because she believed 'lively, simple books are much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need'. Niles was confident and now asked her to extend the length from two hundred to three hundred pages (it finally reached four hundred) and he also asked her to leave the ending open in anticipation of a sequel. Alcott was uncertain whether she could write another book, but she nevertheless complied, ending with the words: 'So grouped the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. Whether it ever rises again, depends upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama, called LITTLE WOMEN.' (The title was Niles's suggestion.)

On 15 July she mailed the completed copy, together with a set of illustrations by her youngest sister, May, hoping that the engravers would deal kindly with May's amateurish work. She also com-

plained that she had found it difficult to pick up the threads of the story without reference to the first twelve chapters which were already with Niles. Roberts offered her \$1,000 for the rights (the sum she had once hoped to achieve as an annual income from her pen). Niles, however, advised her to take the alternative of a \$300 advance and a royalty of 6.66 per cent as he was now confident that the book would sell well. The gamble was to pay off, and in 1885 Alcott appended a note to her original journal entry: 'An honest publisher and a lucky author, for the copyright made her fortune and the "dull" book was the first golden egg of the ugly duckling.'

Alcott too was more confident, for she found on reading the proofs that it 'reads better than I expected . . . not a bit sensational, but simple and true . . . we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it' (Journal). She also noted that Niles had written to say that some girls who had read the manuscript had found it 'splendid' and 'as it is for them, they are the best critics, so I shall be satisfied'.

The book came out in early October and was an immediate success: so, on 1 November, Alcott began writing the sequel. She reckoned to do a chapter a day and to finish by the end of the month—a way of working which she described as going into a 'vortex'. Later in life she would often bemoan the fact that she was no longer able to sustain this near-trance-like state of frenetic writing. In fact, family troubles intervened and she did not mail the final copy until 1 January 1869. Already the girls were 'clamouring' for more, but they had to wait until April because of problems over the illustration of the new volume. Even Louisa had been forced to accept the shortcomings of May's drawings and so Niles commissioned a well-known illustrator, Hammett Billings. Louisa hated his work. A second suite of drawings was submitted, but Louisa hated these too: 'blew Niles up to such an extent that I thought he'd never come down again', she wrote to Elizabeth Greene, a friend who had illustrated *Morning Glories* for her. However, because of the 'clamouring' girls, Alcott capitulated, and Part 2 appeared 'with all faults'. By publication day it had already sold three thousand copies, with a fourth thousand in the press, while Part 1 was into its seventh thousand.

How much the success of *Little Women* owed to Niles's reading of the market and how much it was luck that the market was ready

for change and Alcott was able to fuel that change is uncertain. What is sure is that after its publication there was a sudden burgeoning of similar books, which continued into the twentieth century.

To understand the background to *Little Women's* phenomenal success, one needs to look at contemporary fiction for girls. In both the United States and in Britain, this was predominantly Evangelical in character. Writers like Charlotte Yonge (*The Heir of Redclyffe*, 1853), Maria Charlesworth (*Ministering Children*, 1854), and Hesba Stretton (*Jessica's First Prayer*, 1866) in Britain and Mrs Cummins (*The Lamplighter*, 1850) and Elizabeth Wetherell (i.e. Susan B. Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 1850) in America were all producing sentimental, religious tear-jerkers. The best-selling *Wide, Wide World*, whose heroine, Ellen Montgomerie, suffers much humiliation and grief in her search for spiritual and temporal perfection, was typical of the genre. (Indeed, so popular was Ellen that she spawned a whole 'library' of children's stories which she was supposed to have read in her search for improvement.)

It is clear from the text of *Little Women* that Alcott was familiar with the books of the day (for example, she has Jo crying her eyes out over *The Heir of Redclyffe*), and she introduced some of their more popular characteristics into her own work: motherly love; the strength of family ties; a good death. However, she avoided their excesses of sentiment—all that kissing and fondling, which in view of the frequent appearance of consumptive characters was medically dangerous and which also, in our post-Freudian culture, seems deeply suspect since it usually takes place either between young girls or with mature 'gentlemen'. Where Alcott differs most, though, is in her style of presentation. Ellen Montgomerie's path through *The Wide, Wide World* is leading her to the Ideal of Victorian womanhood: totally subjugated to the whims of first parents and guardians, and later husband, with no personal freedom of thought or deed, and always guilty of some fault or other. The family is seen as dominated by authoritarian fathers or brothers whose rule is absolute. One has only to consider 10-year-old Ellen's father, shunting her off on a long journey with strangers and without warning, to an aunt she has never met, scarcely even allowing her time to bid her dying mother goodbye.

Alcott's family is also theoretically dominated by Father, but for almost the whole of *Little Women*, Part 1, Father is 'away at the

war'—a convenient device for allowing her female characters to develop their own personalities. (It is rather like the device of getting the parents out of the way in the family adventure stories of the 1930s.) Even after Father returns, he is a somewhat shadowy character, offering kindly advice, but never dominating. Parents and children are held together by love, not law.

The root of the difference between *Little Women* and its contemporaries lay in the style of its telling, rather than its content. Alcott had found the key when she described it as 'simple and true' for 'we really lived most of it'. Not for her the formal, stilted speech and priggish, cardboard stereotypes of Susan B. Warner and her like. Alcott's characters were real, flesh-and-blood people and they both spoke and behaved like it. For example, one of the most poignant passages in *Little Women* is the account of Beth's death, in Part 2. Here Alcott quoted almost verbatim from some of her own journal accounts of the passing of her sister Elizabeth. The simple, unpretentious telling is in stark contrast to the over-sentimentalized piety of, for example, Little Eva's dying in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Alcott herself said, 'Seldom, except in books, do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beautified countenances . . .'

When the first part of *Little Women* was published it was well received by most reviewers (although there was some criticism of the drawings by May). It was not, however, welcomed quite so unequivocally by the educationists. Sunday-school teachers and librarians objected to the 'play-acting', which apparently offended their moral sensitivities; teachers objected to too much 'slang'. The slang came from Alcott's use of everyday speech for her girls, who, unlike contemporary heroines, used 'unladylike' expressions like 'aint' and 'grub' (a favourite synonym for 'work' in the Alcott family) and 'shouted' instead of 'laughing'.

These unconventional intrusions were mostly formalized in the 1880 edition, together with numerous small word changes such as 'shoes' for 'boots', 'simper' for 'prink', and so on. More significant were the changes to character descriptions. In the 1868 edition, Marmee is described as 'a stout, motherly lady . . . She wasn't a particularly handsome person, but mothers are always lovely to their children . . .', whereas in the 1880 version she has become 'a tall motherly lady . . . She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble



woman . . .'. Laurie too changes: his 'long nose' becomes 'handsome', his 'nice teeth' become 'fine', his 'little hands and feet' become 'small' and instead of being 'as tall as' Jo, he becomes 'taller'. His 'queer little French bow' when asking Jo to dance changes to 'a gallant little bow'. Laurie was being relieved of his more foreign characteristics and transformed into the typical all-American boy, while Marmee was being given a superficially more lady-like, rather than homely, appearance.

How much Alcott had to do with these changes is uncertain, for no letters or journal notes have emerged, apart from a letter to Niles in July 1880 printed in Cheney's edition of *Life, Letters and Journals*. That edition is unreliable, and the original letter has disappeared. The year 1879, when the new edition was in preparation, and the first part of 1880 were hard times for Alcott, for her own health was very poor, interfering with her writing, and she was also greatly distressed by the death of her sister May in childbirth in December 1879. The letter to Niles spoke only of her delight in Merrill's pictures. Merrill had indeed visited her in Boston and spent a lively afternoon discussing the designs and they had obviously got on well together. 'Miss Alcott . . . had a most charming personality, and I felt at once as though I had known her all my life', he wrote in a letter to Mrs Arthur Brintell, recalling, in old age, how they had quoted from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and recited the 'Jabberwock' 'line by line, antiphonically'.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the textual changes were introduced by Niles himself, in order to establish the English copyright, for the earlier editions had been copyright only in America and were relentlessly pirated by British and European publishers, much to Alcott's annoyance. It may be significant that the original text persisted in English editions, long after the 1880 version had become standard in the States.

There had been suggestions, when the book was first published, that Alcott should take out the play-acting, but she refused to countenance such a change (just as she refused to marry Jo to Laurie), for, as she wrote to Mrs Koorders-Boeke in 1875, 'many things in my story truly happened'. When we look at her life-story, we begin to discover the truth of that statement.

<sup>2</sup> Letter now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on her father's birthday, 29 November 1832. Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) had married Abigail May (1800–77) in Boston in May 1830, shortly before opening a school in Philadelphia, where Louisa's elder sister, Anna, was born in 1831. Bronson Alcott was a self-taught philosopher and educationist with a small, but loyal, following. Abigail was the daughter of a well-established Boston family. At first all went well, but by the time of Louisa's birth the school was failing and, after a series of disasters, the family returned to Boston, where, in September 1834, Bronson set up his famous Temple School.

As in Germantown, at first all went well and the school received visits from a number of famous people. Alcott was assisted by Elizabeth Peabody, who many years later was to introduce the Kindergarten system to America, and, later, by Margaret Fuller, scholar and writer on women's suffrage. In 1835 a third daughter, Elizabeth, was born. Then, after a visit from the English writer Harriet Martineau, who was highly critical of Bronson's methods, things began to go wrong. Bronson believed in the Socratic method of teaching by question and answer, but this was to lead him into difficulties when he approached the question of 'generation' during Bible studies. In fact, he handled this primitive 'sex education' with the utmost tact, but inevitably the gossip-mongers got hold of it and blew it out of proportion. Alarmed for her own reputation, Elizabeth Peabody left, thus, unwittingly, giving credence to the rumours, and the numbers of pupils declined. Bronson, from being admired, became a subject of ridicule. The creditors foreclosed and when, after struggling on for another couple of years, Bronson enrolled a black child, the last six students were withdrawn and the school closed. Penniless, the Alcott family moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where Ralph Waldo Emerson (always a staunch friend) found them a house. Here, in July, the last of the 'little women', Abby May, was born.

Louisa had come into the world a 'cross, crying baby, bawling at the disagreeable old world',<sup>3</sup> and she had grown into a rebellious, hasty-tempered child, given to wild changes of mood, as Bronson

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Bronson Alcott, 28 Nov. 1855, commemorating their joint birthdays.

recorded in the records he kept of his children's development. She had 'all the exuberance of a powerful nature, fit for the scuffle of things', he wrote. The young Jo was already in the making.

In Concord, Bronson tended his garden and taught his growing family. He had given up all thoughts of another school and had reached the conclusion that it was demeaning for a man to work for hire (though, as his brother-in-law commented, he had no objection to profiting from the fruits of other men's labours). Louisa and Anna could remember the relative prosperity of the early Temple School days, and this was to be recalled in the 'better times' of the March family. Louisa also incorporated her father's teaching methods from those days for the school which Jo and her Professor husband were to set up at Plumtree. One of the devices which Bronson Alcott employed for teaching his children the alphabet was to form the letters with his body, and we find Professor Bhaer doing just that. Bronson also read with the family. Sometimes it was the stories by Maria Edgeworth, whom he much admired, but most of all it was from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a work which he described in his journals as 'a work of pure genius'. It had been the formative work of his childhood and he was to write in his journal for 1839 that 'It unites me with my childhood and seems to chronicle my identity. How I was rapt in it . . .' The little girls too were 'rapt' in it, especially Louisa, who used the framework for the first part of *Little Women*, even adapting part of the opening of Bunyan's Part 2 to preface her story. Like the March girls, the young Alcotts shouldered their burdens and played at journeying from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, often themselves falling into the Slough of Despond.

In 1842, after two years of grinding poverty, Emerson helped Bronson to make a journey to England to meet his admirers there who had set up a school modelled on his principles, near Richmond, Surrey. This may well have given Louisa the idea for her family of girls fending for themselves with Father away. It was certainly an important time, for it gave her mother her first taste of independence and the confidence to manage the family's affairs on her own, a confidence which she was never to lose.

When Bronson returned in the autumn, he brought two friends from England, Charles Lane (with his son) and Henry Wright.

Together they planned to set up a small community based on Transcendental principles.<sup>4</sup> By June the next year they had bought a run-down farm near Harvard, which they renamed 'Fruitlands', and were putting their ideas into practice. This must have been one of the best and the worst times of Alcott's life. She enjoyed the freedom of running in the fields, she even enjoyed the cold baths and the chores, but she hated Lane's teachings and his efforts to break up their family. During the summer they had plenty to eat, but as winter closed in and the crops failed, their diet became more and more restricted till they were surviving on little more than apples, squashes, and water, with sometimes a little bread. Their clothes were of linen only, for cotton was a product of slave labour and wool was the rightful property of sheep, who could not be exploited. Ever more ascetic, Lane now forbade the burning of wood fires except for cooking. Finally, cold and hunger forced Abigail to make a stand, and she arranged to move with the girls to lodgings at a nearby farm, telling Bronson he must choose between his family and his ideals. He chose the former, and from that time onwards Abigail was the driving force, often supporting the family by her own earnings alone, while Bronson philosophized and held occasional 'conversations' or made lecture tours to the West. When Abigail gave up, Louisa took over. The Fruitlands experience had left an indelible mark on her, giving her a terror of debt and a persistent belief that she must eventually shoulder the whole of the family's burdens.

After Fruitlands (which Alcott parodied much later in an extended story, *Transcendental Wild Oats*), the family moved to Still River, where Louisa had a wonderful summer. By the following winter they were back in Concord, where Abigail bought an old farmhouse, Hillside, with some of the trust money now inherited from her father. They were to stay there for nearly four years.

It was here that Louisa 'fell with a crash into girlhood and continued falling over fences, out of trees, up hill and down stairs tumbling from one year to another till strengthened by such violent

<sup>4</sup> American Transcendentalism was derived from the Kantian theory of the nature of experience embodied in Emerson's treatise 'Nature' (1836). Its most extreme aspects were exhibited by Bronson Alcott, whom Carlyle described as 'A Yankee Don Quixote, who guesses that *he* will bring back the Saturnian Kingdom to this forlorn earth by a life of simplicity and a diet of vegetables'.

exercise the topsy-turvey girl shot up into a topsy-turvey woman'.<sup>5</sup> She was turning from the quick-tempered, moody, rebellious child into a tomboyish young woman, running free in the woods, writing and performing melodramas in the barn with her sisters (these were published by Anna after Louisa's death as *Comic Tragedies*), and scribbling stories and poems. Louisa had begun writing in earnest at Fruitlands, where her journal first began to take shape, and she was also writing poems, but the move to Hillside gave her the privacy of a room of her own that she had always wanted. The Jo of *Little Women*, Part 1 is very like the Louisa of this time. In later years, Alcott wrote a short story about this whole period, 'Recollections of my Childhood', in which she recalls making the resolution: 'I will do something by and by. Don't care what, teach, sew, act, write, anything to help the family; and I'll be rich and famous and happy before I die, see if I won't.' Prophetic words. She was, of course, starting her apprenticeship as Jo, 'man of the family'. She was also discovering the joys of Emerson's library. After reading Goethe's *Correspondence with a Child* and *Wilhelm Meister* (both later introduced into *Little Women*) she developed a kind of hero-worship for Emerson, seeing him as a Goethe to her Bettina.

By late 1847 the debts were once again mounting, and the family moved back to Boston, where Abigail's prosperous friends found her employment as a paid charity worker. This was the Marmee of *Little Women*. The two elder girls were also working, Anna as a teacher and Louisa at sewing. Elizabeth, the shy sister, kept house, and May, the 'baby', was at school, and already developing her artistic talents. The girls kept themselves amused by acting plays, holding meetings of their 'Pickwick Club' and writing a family newspaper, *The Olive Leaf* (named after the popular newspaper *The Olive Branch*). It was all very like the March household.

Meanwhile Louisa was still 'scribbling'. In 1851 her poem 'Sunlight' was published in *Peterson's Magazine* under the name 'Flora Fairfield', and the following year a short story, 'The Rival Painters', by L.M.A. appeared in *The Olive Branch*. By 1855 she was earning a modest sum from her writing, though the sewing and teaching were still more profitable activities.

From 1856 onwards, the lives of Jo and Louisa became ever more

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Bronson Alcott, 28 Nov. 1855.

closely entwined, though Alcott took many liberties with time and place. Lizzie, Beth of *Little Women*, contracted scarlet fever at this time, as did May. May recovered rapidly, but Lizzie never regained her strength and began a slow decline, wasting away with what may have been consumption. She survived another two years, becoming ever weaker until her death in March 1858. The effect on Louisa was traumatic and she relived the experience through Beth's death in *Little Women*. Just before Lizzie died, the family had moved back to Concord, where they bought Orchard House. Louisa hated it, calling it 'Apple Slump', but it was the most permanent home they had known, for it remained in the family until after Abigail died in 1877. Louisa used it as a model for the Marches' house and she wrote their story there.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after Lizzie's death, Anna announced her engagement to John Pratt, to Louisa's great distress. It seemed to her, as it was to do to Jo when Meg became engaged to John Brooke, that she was losing another sister and that the family group was breaking down. Later she was to recant and claim that 'we all had cause to bless the day he [John] came into the family'.

Meanwhile, the stories flew from her pen. She indulged her passion for theatre by converting 'The Rival Painters' into a play, *The Rival Prima Donnas*, which was performed in Boston. She was also much in demand for her renderings of Sairey Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Mrs Jarley from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Alcott would have liked to have become a professional actress, but had to content herself with amateur roles. Her stories were paying well, and she wrote to her 'dear boy' Alf Whitman in 1861 that she expected to receive '\$75 or \$100' from *Atlantic* for 'Debby's Debut'. Alf Whitman was a bright 15-year-old pupil of Frank Sanborn's school in Concord when Alcott first befriended him in 1857, and they formed a lasting, but entirely platonic, relationship. A year later she was writing to him again that: 'I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood and thunder tale as they are easy to "compoze" and are better paid than moral and elaborate works of Shakespeare, so don't be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates, wolves, bears and distressed damsels in a grand tableau over

<sup>6</sup> In 1911 the house was reopened as a museum, furnished in the Alcotts' style and with a collection of their memorabilia. It is still a place of pilgrimage today.

a title like this "The Maniac Bride" or "The Bath of Blood". . . ' This was in June, the same month that she read an advertisement in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* for a story competition with a prize of \$100. She submitted 'Pauline's Passion', her first 'lurid' romance.

By the time she heard that she had won, she was nursing in the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown. The Civil War was well under way and Louisa was anxious to take some part in it. She enrolled as a nurse, despite being unmarried, and young for the job at only 30 (35 was the usual minimum age), and was sent to Georgetown at the beginning of December. Conditions among the wounded were appalling, and she found the work arduous and shocking after her relatively sheltered life. By the end of the month she was already ailing and she succumbed to typhoid pneumonia early in the new year. Her father was sent for, but arrived too late to prevent her receiving the massive doses of calomel (mercurous chloride) that were the standard treatment of the day. The cure was worse than the disease, for she was to be haunted by the consequences of mercury poisoning for the rest of her life. As soon as possible, Bronson took her home in a nightmare journey by train. She then lay for weeks in delirium, not leaving her room until the end of March. During the illness she was shorn of her one vanity, her wonderful chestnut hair, so she well understood Jo's sorrow at losing hers. Once she had recovered some strength, she began turning her letters home into a series of *Hospital Sketches*, which were very well received. She also began work on the novel *Moods*, which she had first composed 'in a vortex' the summer before. This too was published, though abridged and edited in ways of which she disapproved.

Illness had once again plunged the family into debt, so as soon as she was able Alcott began writing furiously for money. The success of 'Pauline's Passion' led her into the 'lurid' and 'sensational' market, where easy profits were to be had as 'A. M. Barnard'. This kind of writing may not have been too distasteful to her, for LaSalle Corbell Picket recalled in her reminiscences *Across my Path* (1916) that in an interview with Alcott where they had discussed the lifelike nature of *Little Women* she had suggested that that was Alcott's 'true style'. "Not exactly that", she replied, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies

and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages . . .” When asked why not, she responded: ‘How should I dare interfere with the proper greyness of old Concord?’ and ‘what would my good father think of me if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord.’ With her quirky sense of humour she may have been playing with her interviewer, but what about those melodramatic plays, one of which appears in *Little Women*, and what too of A. M. Barnard? That was something she kept well hidden, even criticizing Jo for her sensational stories, through Professor Bhaer. After the success of *Little Women* Alcott seems to have dropped that side of her writing, for fear lest it should prejudice her new status as a writer of wholesome ‘girls’ stories, although she was to write one more, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, for Roberts Bros.’ No Name series as a kind of joke. She also left an unfinished novel, *Diana and Persis*, set, like her lurid romance *A Marble Woman*, in the art world.

Meanwhile, her chief preoccupation was to earn money. She was now constantly dogged by bouts of ill health, and when she was invited to accompany another invalid, Anna Weld, on a trip to Europe, she readily accepted. They sailed for Liverpool in July 1865. On landing they travelled first to London, and then on through Germany, staying for some weeks near Wiesbaden, to take the waters, before finally settling in Vevey, Switzerland. It was here that Louisa met a young Polish boy, Ladislav Wisniewski, who was to be the model for the lighter, ‘whirligig’ side of Laurie’s character. (The sober side she drew from her other ‘boy’, Alf Whitman.) From Vevey they moved again, to Nice, where Louisa, restless and bored, abandoned her charge. She went first to Paris, where she spent two weeks exploring with Ladislav, and then she travelled on to London, where she seized the opportunity to experience the City haunts of her beloved Dickens. She also visited the publishers, Routledge & Sons, to arrange for an English edition of *Moods*. She received £5 for the English rights and wryly commented that as Milton received only £10 for *Paradise Lost* she supposed she should be grateful.

Once back in Boston, she found her mother sick and the debts again mounting. Anna too was ailing and May, as usual, needing more support for her artistic studies. She fell to work at once, both



on her own account and as A. M. Barnard, so that she was soon ill again and forbidden to write for at least a month. It was August 1867 before she began again, pressed by the accumulation of bills: 'I dread debt more than the devil!' she wrote in her journal. This was when Fuller approached her to edit *Merry's Museum* and Niles suggested the girls' story.

From that time, her life changed. So did her writing. The success of *Little Women* made her a 'hot commodity' who could ask what fees she chose and who could get almost anything she wrote published without question. She owed a great deal of this success and her later wealth and popularity to Niles. He guided her through a series of books along the same pattern as *Little Women*, including two more sequels, *Little Men*, which was written during a second trip to Europe, after the death of Anna's husband, John Pratt, placed yet another financial burden on Louisa, and *Jo's Boys*, which followed much later and was the last of her girls' stories in novel form. There were also a whole series of story collections, largely compiled from her earlier writing (Alcott always tried to get paid more than once for her work) although she usually added a couple of new tales to give the illusion of freshness.

The sudden popularity which Alcott experienced had some repercussions in her private life. She was regularly invited to give talks, attend functions, meet fans. She also became closely involved with the Women's Movement in America, promoting their cause through letters and articles in newspapers and journals. This dedicated group were seeking to free women from the male domination of the time and to gain the right to live independent lives and manage their own finances. They also aimed to achieve equal voting rights with men. Alcott was particularly involved in drumming up support in Concord, where in July 1879 she proudly announced to her journal that she was the first woman to register as a voter.

She was, however, a sick woman, worn down by the stress of caring for her improvident family. Although she had become wealthy, she never seems to have wholly acknowledged the fact but to have continued to worry about financial security. In 1877 her beloved Marmee died, her passing eased by Louisa's support. Two years later, May, who had gone to Paris to study painting and met and married Ernest Nieriker, died from meningitis, almost two