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CLASSICS SERIES C1106

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

LITTLE WOMEN

Illustrated



Introduction by Dr. Norman Budgey

Complete and Unabridged

Little Women

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Louisa May Alcott

(1832-1888)

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AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

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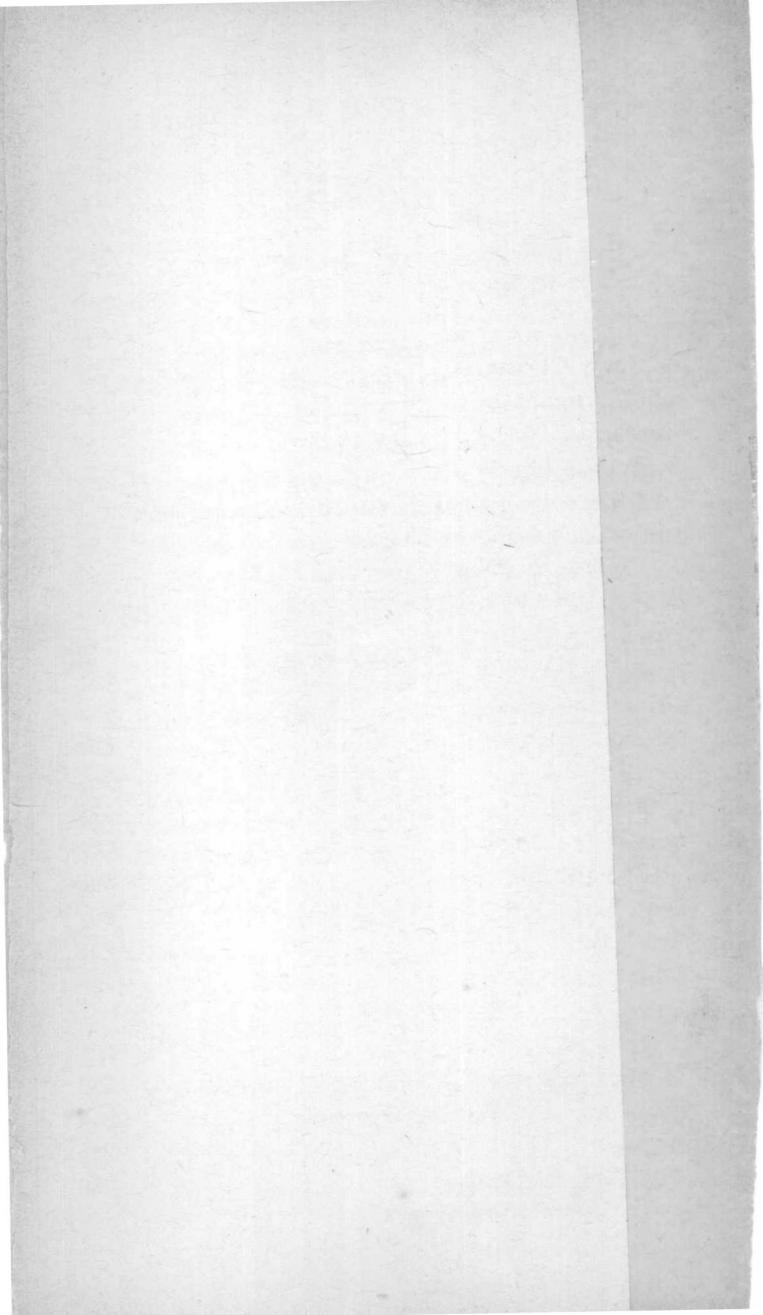
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PREFACE

"GO THEN, MY LITTLE BOOK, AND SHOW TO ALL
THAT ENTERTAIN AND BID THEE WELCOME SHALL,
WHAT THOU DOST KEEP CLOSE SHUT UP IN THY BREAST;
AND WISH WHAT THOU DOST SHOW THEM MAY BE BLEST
TO THEM FOR GOOD, MAY MAKE THEM CHOOSE TO BE
PILGRIMS BETTER, BY FAR, THAN THEE OR ME.
TELL THEM OF MERCY; SHE IS ONE
WHO EARLY HATH HER PILGRIMAGE BEGUN.
YEA, LET YOUNG DAMSELS LEARN OF HER TO PRIZE
THE WORLD WHICH IS TO COME, AND SO BE WISE;
FOR LITTLE TRIPPING MAIDS MAY FOLLOW GOD
ALONG THE WAYS WHICH SAINTLY FEET HAVE TROD."

Adapted from JOHN BUNYAN



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Little Women



Louisa May Alcott

INTRODUCTION

Now that Little Women has been an established favorite with young readers for nearly a century, it is a little difficult to think of Louisa May Alcott as an innovator. Startling would, of course, be too strong a word for her subject matter, for Miss Alcott's was the Victorian era-an age of large close-knit families and corporate domestic activities. But it was also an age of paternal tyranny, rigid Sabbatarianism, and pompous didacticism, and to the young girl brought up on the precept that children were meant to be seen and not heard, the atmosphere in the March family must have seemed almost like a glimpse of heaven. Compared, too, with the other little women of contemporary children's literature, and we need scarcely go further than Miss Finley's prig-gish little Elsie, who had appeared a few months earlier, the March girls must have seemed refreshingly sincere and straightforward.

The particularly low ebb which had been reached by children's literature in North America at the beginning of the 19th century can best be viewed in historical perspective. The northern part of the United States was very much under the influence of the New England Puritans, people who had deliberately renounced the English

way of life and who were prepared to countenance literature only in as far as it provided for them and their children that particular form of spiritual sustenance which tallied with the Puritan view of life and death. For a long time, Pilgrim's Progress and Foxe's Book of Martyrs must have seemed wildly adventurous to little pilgrims brought up on the New England Primer. This latter, however, being a little vague on certain doctrinal topics was supplemented by such edifying works as the English A Token for Children, modified and republished in Massachusetts in 1700 as:

A Token for Children; Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyous Deaths of several young children. To which is added A Token for the children of New England of some Examples of Children in whom the Fear of God was remarkably budding before they died in several parts of New England, Preserved and Published for the Encouragement of Piety in other Children.

Little by little, less austere works began to creep in from England and were possibly freely available to the children of the South, but the settlers of New England were to remain very selective in what they permitted their young people to read. With a few notable exceptions, largely novels not really intended for the young reader, the books available to children at the beginning of the 19th century were not much more suitable than those of the 18th century. The stories most readily accessible to the greatest number of children, if for no other reason than that they were much cheaper, were to be found in the evangelical periodicals and Sunday-school tracts of the era. Since these were written by people who had apparently never come to realize that there is any difference between children and adults, and since they were concerned primarily with saving the infant soul from hell, they assumed in their child characters a grotesquely exaggerated degree of moral responsibility. Children, like their adult counterparts in the same type of writing, were either unspeakably wicked or almost saintly. The former met with harrowing experiences which generally

killed them or, occasionally, miraculously converted them, while the latter, paragons of moral virtue and indefatigable in their missionary endeavors, even in the most sinful environment, frequently sickened and passed away in a most edifying manner.

The American Tract Society, which came into existence in 1825, was unrelenting in its condemnation of fiction and declared that a single novel could undermine the

effects of a whole string of sermons.

To the children of 1867, then, it must have come as a great relief to meet four young girls who read not only Pilgrim's Progress but Scott, Dickens, and Edgeworth and who can invite their mother to read another story—one with a moral to it but one which is "real and not too preachy." Indeed, circumstances of the time were such that a family story related with the spontaneous sincerity of Little Women could not fail to evoke an enthusiastic response in its readers. Miss Alcott's talent lay in being able to offer her young audience not simply what their elders thought would be good for them but what they themselves wanted and enjoyed. Persuaded by a Boston publisher to write a book for girls, she decided to put into it her family and herself and present to her readers the details of what, at that time, was a singularly progressive upbringing in a most unusual family.

Louisa May Alcott was born in Philadelphia in 1832, but records show that the family left there soon after and were to live in a score of different houses in the same number of years. The explanation for this peripatetic existence lay largely in the character of the father of the authoress. Amos Bronson Alcott was a philosopher and educational theorist whose views on education, fifty years ahead of their time, were rejected by the majority of his generation and made it difficult for him to gain real acceptance anywhere. Although his theories received some degree of recognition in England, his American supporters were few, and even his staunch friend Emerson does not seem to have been wholly convinced by them. The visionary tenacity with which he adhered to his ideals, however, kept Bronson Alcott's family continually in precarious material and financial circumstances.

The number of attempts which he made, with the aid of various well-wishers, to found schools were virtually

foredoomed and when, inevitably, each short-lived enterprise left the Alcotts with neither funds nor prospects, the family found itself forced to start from scratch again somewhere else. At Concord, where they spent many years, Bronson worked hard as a day laborer to provide his

family with the bare necessities of life.

Later in life, obviously with her father in mind, Louisa May Alcott was to define a philosopher as a man up in a balloon with his family and friends holding onto the ropes to prevent him from being completely carried away. It was fortunate that Mrs. Abba May Alcott was as practical and versatile as her husband was impractical. The atmosphere of the family was one of affection between parents and children and between the four sisters themselves. With no heavy-handed patriarch to tyrannize wife and children, they developed a vital interest in each other as individuals, a respect for personal differences but, at the same time, a community of shared ideas and activities. The family joined together in the old seasonal celebrations at Christmas, Easter, May Day, etc., wrote dramatic pieces which they produced and acted for them-

selves and friends, played and sang for each other.

Since the March girls of Little Women are clearly the

Alcott sisters themselves and the various relatives and friends of the Little Women are the Alcott friends and relatives but thinly disguised, it was the warmth and intimacy of her own home life that Louisa May Alcott was to bequeath to generations of youthful readers. The portraits of understanding elders and of the four girls themselves are drawn with affectionate attention to detail. The sisters emerge not as the goody-goody little girls of the didactic periodicals but as very real beings who at times wish the family were better off and sometimes find it hard to convince themselves that a shining soul can completely offset a threadbare dress. Indeed, we are told that Beth often "wept a little weep" because she could not take music lessons and have a fine piano. The sister who stands out most is Jo, coltish and a little gauche, who can at times be rather impatient and bad-tempered but always ends up by revealing such sincerity and unselfishness that the reader probably finds her the most attractive member of the family. This portrait, drawn

with such disarming honesty, was Miss Alcott's picture of herself.

The work is, of course, not without its pieces of good advice but these are offered in so constructive a manner by the kindly Mrs. March that a young girl probably has little difficulty in accepting them. Mrs. March permits the girls to try out a week of idleness, but one suspects that the account of the catastrophic Sunday dinner makes a greater impression on a young girl than whole pages of

moralizing.

But, despite the apparently ideal family life, the Alcott sisters did not have an entirely easy childhood and at a very early age were frequently preoccupied in finding new ways of raising a little ready cash. Even as a young girl, Louisa tried a variety of odd jobs in an endeavor to supplement the family funds, and at the age of seventeen, after much soul-searching, she decided to go to Boston, where she taught young children, took in sewing, and even tried a spell of domestic service. It was during this period in Boston that she produced a number of rather lurid melodramatic stories which she managed to sell for very modest sums to popular magazines.

Her first book, Flower Fables, was a slight collection of stories originally written for Emerson's daughter, but it was with Hospital Sketches, published first in serial form and then as a book in 1863, that the authoress obtained widespread recognition. Little Women, 1868, brought her fame and fortune. Although Little Women probably contains the largest proportion of biographical material, all the other works are based on the experiences of the authoress and her wider family circle. In certain respects, these works were also able to gain for her father's educational theories a wider acceptance than he was ever

able to achieve himself.

The works which followed Little Women included Little Women Part II (1869), An Old-Fashioned Girl, 1869, Little Men, 1871, Eight Cousins, 1874, Rose in Bloom, 1876, Under the Lilacs, 1878, Jack and Jill, 1880, Jo's Boys, 1886, A Whisper in the Dark, 1889, and a succession of short stories.

A number of the longer works are still read but Miss Alcott's reputation today rests mainly upon the book which first made it. Little Women has been translated into a dozen different languages and has probably reached a larger public than any other family chronicle for children. In its minutely detailed picture of everyday life a century ago, it has achieved almost the validity of a historical document.

Although the girl reader, depending upon her mood, is likely to identify herself emotionally with each of the sisters in turn, the true appeal of Little Women lies less in individuals than in its totality. It is the interplay of the various characters within the intimacy of the family circle which constitutes the real charm of the book and makes of the Marches the ideal and universal family.

NORMAN E. BUDGEY