

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Little Men

Illustrated

Introduction

Complete and Unabridged



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Louisa May Alcott



AIRMONT

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

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ISBN: 0-8049-0194-5

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Introduction

For those who have already come to know the March family in *Little Women*, *Little Men* needs no introduction, for it is a continuation of that story with Jo March, the headstrong tomboy, a married woman and the mistress of Plumfield, a school for boys. The other little women are married, too, with children of their own. Meg, the oldest and most domestic sister, is the mother of Daisy and Demi, twins whose sweet and earnest natures mirror those of their mother and father. Daisy and Demi both attend school with Jo and her scholarly, moral, and warm-hearted husband, Professor Bhaer. Amy, Jo's younger sister, has married Laurie, the boy next door, and their graceful, dainty daughter, so like her mother, is an occasional and much-welcomed visitor at Plumfield.

If the Marches with their frolics, problems, and pervading love for each other were the ideal family, then Plumfield, under Jo's and Mr. Bhaer's guidance, is the ideal school. Their educational philosophy is simple, but at the same time extremely difficult to implement. Instead of the regimentation and authoritarianism of the nineteenth century schools, with emphasis upon strict discipline and the cram method of learning, each child at

Plumfield is to be treated as a separate variety of flower, with its own special beauty, to be cared for according to its own individual needs. The threat of physical pain is removed, and the two teachers strive to instill a moral sense. Nat, the new boy, has the habit of lying, and the Bhaers attack this problem by telling Nat that if he lies again, he will be "punished" in a most unusual manner. Instead of being ferruled, a classic schoolboy punishment, he will himself have to hit Mr. Bhaer's outstretched hand with a ruler. While this may not be an example to follow in the modern disciplining of children, its thrust is still significant. The child, according to the Bhaers' philosophy, will learn best not from fear but from love. And love is the prime ingredient in Plumfield's success.

At the conclusion of one of her opening chapters, in which she has introduced the reader to the character and idiosyncrasies of each of the twelve Plumfield boys, the author sums up the educational objectives of the school:

"These were the boys, and they lived together as happily as twelve lads could, studying and playing, working and squabbling, fighting faults and cultivating virtues in the good, old-fashioned way. Boys at other schools probably learned more from books, but less of that better wisdom which makes good men. Latin, Greek and mathematics were all very well, but in Professor Bhaer's opinion, self-knowledge, self-help and self-control were more important, and he tried to teach them carefully. People shook their heads sometimes at his ideas, even while they owned that the boys improved wonderfully in manners and morals. But then, as Mrs. Jo said to Nat, it was an "odd school."

Like John Dewey, whose philosophy still leads educators in the twentieth century, Jo's pupils were to learn by doing, and simple tasks such as tending their own garden, or observing the habits of the different animals in nature, rather than reading about them in books. The students observed and recorded according to their own interests and abilities.

Louisa Alcott has varied the members of the small school so that, in a certain sense, it resembles a small democracy. The sons of wealthy parents mingle freely with the children of the streets, and all are judged by the same standard. Those with the most sordid backgrounds can be equal in virtue to those born in security and surrounded by the amenities of life.

One Sunday morning, for the edification of the boys, Professor Bhaer relates an allegory: a variation upon the Biblical parable of the good seed and the bad seed, and indeed, the garden metaphor is pervasive in the book. The story ends with a harvest hymn, and the children are likened to good crops, fostered by love and safely gathered in.

The younger brother, *Little Men*, does not equal its older sister, *Little Women*, for several reasons, but primary among these is that the characters are too like figures in a parable or allegory. None of them is as memorable as the four sisters. *Little Women*, too, is a sentimental and moralistic book, but Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are real to the reader, their exploits fascinating. The plot always remains superior to the moralizing. But, although *Little Men* cannot compare to *Little Women* for interest or durability, it can still be read with enjoyment by young girls today. Those who loved the impetuous Jo will be happy to know about her later life, and even those who do not have that inducement will like the simple and pleasing story of Jo's boys.

Louisa May Alcott, born November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, became the famous daughter of a well-known father. Bronson Alcott was a social reformer, a man of many ideas which, although ignored or scorned in his own day have since become the law of the land. He was associated with the "Transcendentalists," a group of New England writers that left an indelible stamp on American literature. The most noted figures in this group were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and it was men of this caliber that Louisa knew while growing up. Bronson was an educator and the founder of a short-lived Utopian community, and it is

certain that many of the educational ideas in *Little Men* came to Louisa through her father. In fact, the figure of Professor Bhaer, the German scholar who is the inspiration for and founder of Plumfield, may well have much in common with Miss Alcott's father, and Plumfield may be viewed as the Utopian community revisited. Bronson Alcott's failed, but Plumfield is a success. By the end of the story, the boys school has become a boys and girls school and represents a happy microcosm of the world as it could be if Jo's education could be universally applied. It would be like the March family enlarged. Indeed, at the end of *Little Men*, the story begun in *Little Women* has come full circle, and among the girls in the school, one can pick out small editions of Jo, Meg and Amy, ready to begin their tale again.

B.J.L.

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Chapter One

NAT

"Please, sir, is this Plumfield?" asked a ragged boy of the man who opened the great gate at which the omnibus left him.

"Yes. Who sent you?"

"Mr. Laurence. I have got a letter for the lady."

"All right; go up to the house, and give it to her; she'll see to you, little chap."

The man spoke pleasantly, and the boy went on, feeling much cheered by the words. Through the soft spring rain that fell on sprouting grass and budding trees, Nat saw a large square house before him—a hospitable-looking house, with an old-fashioned porch, wide steps, and lights shining in many windows. Neither curtains nor shutters hid the cheerful glimmer; and, pausing a moment before he rang, Nat saw many little shadows dancing on the walls, heard the pleasant hum of young voices, and felt that it was hardly possible that the light and warmth and comfort within could be for a homeless "little chap" like him.

"I hope the lady *will* see to me," he thought, and gave a timid rap with the great bronze knocker, which was a jovial griffin's head.

A rosy-faced servant-maid opened the door, and smiled as she took the letter which he silently offered.

She seemed used to receiving strange boys, for she pointed to a seat in the hall, and said, with a nod:

"Sit there and drip on the mat a bit, while I take this in to missis."

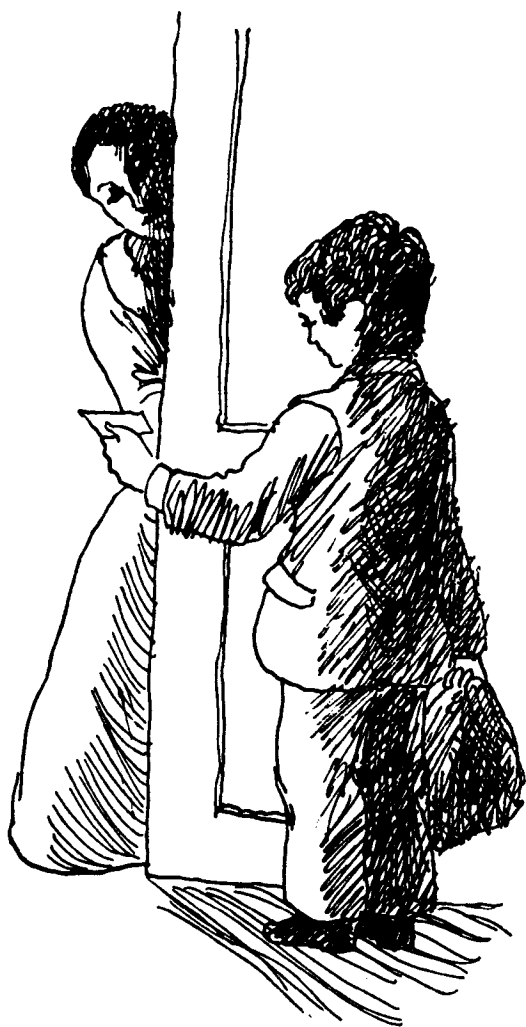
Nat found plenty to amuse him while he waited, and stared about him curiously, enjoying the view, yet glad to do so unobserved in the dusky recess by the door.

The house seemed swarming with boys, who were beguiling the rainy twilight with all sorts of amusements. There were boys everywhere, "upstairs and downstairs and in the lady's chamber," apparently, for various open doors showed pleasant groups of big boys, little boys, and middle-sized boys in all stages of evening relaxation, not to say effervescence. Two large rooms on the right were evidently schoolrooms, for desks, maps, blackboards, and books were scattered about. An open fire burned on the hearth, and several indolent lads lay on their backs before it, discussing a new cricket ground with such animation that their boots waved in the air. A tall youth was practicing on the flute in one corner, quite undisturbed by the racket all about him. Two or three others were jumping over the desks, pausing, now and then, to get their breath and laugh at the droll sketches of a little wag who was caricaturing the whole household on a blackboard.

In the room on the left a long supper table was seen, set forth with great pitchers of new milk, piles of brown and white bread, and perfect stacks of the shiny gingerbread so dear to boyish souls. A flavor of toast was in the air, also suggestions of baked apples, very tantalizing to one hungry little nose and stomach.

The hall, however, presented the most inviting prospect of all, for a brisk game of tag was going on in the upper entry. One landing was devoted to marbles, the other to checkers, while the stairs were occupied by a boy reading, a girl singing a lullaby to her doll, two puppies, a kitten, and a constant succession of small boys sliding down the banisters, to the great detriment of their clothes and danger to their limbs.

So absorbed did Nat become in this exciting race that



he ventured farther and farther out of his corner; and when one very lively boy came down so swiftly that he could not stop himself, but fell off the banisters, with a crash that would have broken any head but one rendered nearly as hard as a cannon ball by eleven years of constant bumping, Nat forgot himself and ran up to the fallen rider, expecting to find him half dead. The boy, however, only winked rapidly for a second, then lay calmly looking up at the new face with a surprise "Hullo!"

"Hullo!" returned Nat, not knowing what else to say, and thinking that form of reply both brief and easy.

"Are you a new boy?" asked the recumbent youth, without stirring.

"Don't know yet."

"What's your name?"

"Nat Blake."

"Mine's Tommy Bangs. Come up and have a go, will you?" and Tommy got upon his legs like one suddenly remembering the duties of hospitality.

"Guess I won't, till I see whether I'm going to stay or not," returned Nat, feeling the desire to stay increase every moment.

"I say, Demi, here's a new one—come and see to him," and the lively Thomas returned to his sport with unabated relish.

At his call, the boy reading on the stairs looked up with a pair of big brown eyes, and after an instant's pause, as if a little shy, he put the book under his arm and came soberly down to greet the newcomer, who found something very attractive in the pleasant face of this slender, mild-eyed boy.

"Have you seen Aunt Jo?" he asked, as if that was some sort of important ceremony.

"I haven't seen anybody yet but you boys; I'm waiting," answered Nat.

"Did Uncle Laurie send you?" proceeded Demi politely, but gravely.

"Mr. Laurence did."

"He is Uncle Laurie; and he always sends nice boys."

Nat looked gratified at the remark, and smiled in a way

that made his thin face very pleasant. He did not know what to say next, so the two stood staring at one another in friendly silence, till the little girl came up with her doll in her arms. She was very like Demi, only not so tall, and had a rounder, rosier face, and blue eyes.

"This is my sister Daisy," announced Demi, as if presenting a rare and precious creature.

The children nodded to one another; and the little girl's face dimpled with pleasure, as she said affably:

"I hope you'll stay. We have such good times here; don't we, Demi?"

"Of course, we do. That's what Aunt Jo has Plumfield for."

"It seems a very nice place indeed," observed Nat, feeling that he must respond to these amiable young persons.

"It's the nicest place in the world; isn't it, Demi?" said Daisy, who evidently regarded her brother as authority on all subjects.

"No; I think Greenland, where the icebergs and seals are, is more interesting. But I'm fond of Plumfield, and it is a very nice place to be in," returned Demi, who was interested just now in a book on Greenland. He was about to offer to show Nat the pictures and explain them when the servant returned, saying, with a nod toward the parlor door:

"All right; you are to stop."

"I'm glad; now come to Aunt Jo." And Daisy took him by the hand with a pretty protecting air, which made Nat feel at home at once.

Demi returned to his beloved book, while his sister led the newcomer into a back room, where a stout gentleman was frolicking with two little boys on the sofa, and a thin lady was just finishing the letter which she seemed to have been rereading.

"Here he is, aunty!" cried Daisy.

"So this is my new boy? I am glad to see you, my dear, and hope you'll be happy here," said the lady, drawing him to her, and stroking back the hair from his forehead

with a kind hand and a motherly look, which made Nat's lonely little heart yearn toward her.

She was not at all handsome, but she had a merry sort of face that never seemed to have forgotten certain childish ways and looks, any more than her voice and manner had; and these things, hard to describe but very plain to see and feel, made her a genial, comfortable kind of person, easy to get on with, and generally "jolly," as boys would say. She saw the little tremble of Nat's lips as she smoothed his hair, and her keen eyes grew softer, but she only drew the shabby figure nearer and said, laughing:

"I am Mother Bhaer, that gentleman is Father Bhaer, and these are the two little Bhaers.—Come here, boys, and see Nat."

The three wrestlers obeyed at once; and the stout man, with a chubby child on each shoulder, came up to welcome the new boy. Rob and Teddy merely grinned at him, but Mr. Bhaer shook hands, and pointing to a low chair near the fire, said in a cordial voice:

"There is a place all ready for thee, my son; sit down and dry thy wet feet at once."

"Wet? So they are! My dear, off with your shoes this minute, and I'll have some dry things ready for you in a jiffy," cried Mrs. Bhaer, bustling about so energetically that Nat found himself in the cozy little chair, with dry socks and warm slippers on his feet, before he would have had time to say Jack Robinson, if he had wanted to try. He said "Thank you, ma'am," instead; and said it so gratefully that Mrs. Bhaer's eyes grew soft again, and she said something merry, because she felt so tender, which was a way she had.

"These are Tommy Bangs's slippers; but he never will remember to put them on in the house; so he shall not have them. They are too big; but that's all the better; you can't run away from us so fast as if they fitted."

"I don't want to run away, ma'am." And Nat spread his grimy little hands before the comfortable blaze, with a long sigh of satisfaction.

"That's good! Now I am going to toast you well, and

try to get rid of that ugly cough. How long have you had it, dear?" asked Mrs. Bhaer, as she rummaged in her big basket for a strip of flannel.

"All winter. I got cold, and it wouldn't get better, somehow."

"No wonder, living in that damp cellar with hardly a rag to his poor dear back!" said Mrs. Bhaer, in a low tone to her husband, who was looking at the boy with a skillful pair of eyes that marked the thin temples and feverish lips, as well as the hoarse voice and frequent fits of coughing that shook the bent shoulders under the patched jacket.

"Robin, my man, trot up to Nursey, and tell her to give thee the cough bottle and the liniment," said Mr. Bhaer, after his eyes had exchanged telegrams with his wife's.

Nat looked a little anxious at the preparations, but forgot his fears in a hearty laugh when Mrs. Bhaer whispered to him, with a droll look:

"Hear my rogue Teddy try to cough. The syrup I'm going to give you has honey in it; and he wants some."

Little Ted was red in the face with his exertions by the time the bottle came, and was allowed to suck the spoon, after Nat had manfully taken a dose and had the bit of flannel put about his throat.

These first steps toward a cure were hardly completed when a great bell rang, and a loud tramping through the hall announced supper. Bashful Nat quaked at the thought of meeting many strange boys, but Mrs. Bhaer held out her hand to him, and Rob said patronizingly, "Don't be 'fraid; I'll take care of you."

Twelve boys, six on a side, stood behind their chairs, prancing with impatience to begin, while the tall flute-playing youth was trying to curb their ardor. But no one sat down till Mrs. Bhaer was in her place behind the teapot, with Teddy on her left, and Nat on her right.

"This is our new boy, Nat Blake. After supper you can say how do you do. Gently, boys, gently."

As she spoke everyone stared at Nat, and then whisked into their seats, trying to be orderly and failing utterly. The Bhaers did their best to have the lads behave well at

mealtimes, and generally succeeded pretty well, for their rules were few and sensible, and the boys, knowing that they tried to make things easy and happy, did their best to obey. But there *are* times when hungry boys cannot be repressed without real cruelty, and Saturday evening, after a half holiday, was one of those times.

"Dear little souls, do let them have one day in which they can howl and racket and frolic to their hearts' content. A holiday isn't a holiday without plenty of freedom and fun; and they shall have full swing once a week," Mrs. Bhaer used to say, when prim people wondered why banister sliding, pillow fights, and all manner of jovial games were allowed under the once decorous roof of Plumfield.

It did seem at times as if the aforesaid roof was in danger of flying off; but it never did, for a word from Father Bhaer could at any time produce a lull, and the lads had learned that liberty must not be abused. So, inspite of many dark predictions, the school flourished, and manners and morals were insinuated, without the pupils exactly knowing how it was done.

Nat found himself very well off behind the tall pitchers, with Tommy Bangs just round the corner, and Mrs. Bhaer close by to fill up plate and mug as fast as he could empty them.

"Who is that boy next the girl down at the other end?" whispered Nat to his young neighbor under cover of a general laugh.

"That's Demi Brooke. Mr. Bhaer is his uncle."

"What a queer name!"

"His real name is John, but they call him Demijohn, because his father is John too. That's a joke, don't you see?" said Tommy, kindly explaining. Nat did not see, but politely smiled, and asked, with interest:

"Isn't he a very nice boy?"

"I bet you he is; knows lots and reads like anything."

"Who is the fat one next him?"

"Oh, that's Stuffy Cole. His name is George, but we call him Stuffy 'cause he eats so much. The little fellow next Father Bhaer is his boy Rob, and then there's big