

LITTLE WOMEN

A FULL LENGTH PLAY

By Matt Buchanan

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SYNOPSIS: Based on the cherished novel by Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* tells the story of the four March Girls, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, as they grow to adulthood in Civil War era New England. The girls endure hardships and privations, and eventually even a tragic loss, but their courage, their love for each other, and the strength of their family bond never fade. This adaptation stays very close to the original text and is especially popular with those who truly love the book. An evening with sensible Meg, headstrong Jo, quiet Beth and lively Amy makes a wonderful and moving theatrical experience for the whole family.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

YOUNG JO*

YOUNG AMY*

YOUNG BETH*

YOUNG MEG*

MARMEE

HANNAH

MRS. GARDINER**

SALLY**

BOY GUEST**

YOUNG LAURIE*

SERVANT**

MR. LAURENCE

JENNY SNOW**

MR. DAVIS**

JOHN BROOKE

AUNT MARCH

MR. MARCH

OLDER AMY*

OLDER MEG*

OLDER LAURIE*

OLDER JO*

LAD**

OLDER BETH*

MR. SCOTT**

LOTTY**

MR. DASHWOOD**

PROFESSOR BHAER

*The roles of Amy, Beth, Jo, Meg and Laurie may be divided at intermission so that one actor plays the character as a child and another as an adult, or they may be played by the same five actors throughout.

**Indicates ensemble role that may be doubled.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This play is written so that the roles of the four March girls and Laurie can be played either by five actors throughout, or by five younger actors in Act One and five older actors in Act Two. Particularly if you are working with student actors, I strongly urge you to consider the second option. Apart from the difficulty of playing a fifteen-year-old girl and a married adult in the same play (let alone a twelve-year-old and a very glamorous adult), some of these roles, if played by a single actor throughout, are simply enormous. The role of Jo, in particular, is a powerhouse of a role even if it's divided. (Plus, of course, dividing the roles allows you to give twice as many performers the chance to play really plum parts.) There is, however, one thing to keep in mind if you decide to cast the play this way. Except for Jo, the older roles—particularly Meg—are actually smaller roles than the younger ones. In terms of props and scenery, your watchword should be “simplicity.” The play must flow smoothly. Many props can be mimed. Others can be carried in pockets in the actors' costumes from the beginning of the play, so that they are there when you need them. In the original production we discovered that the best way to handle the myriad letters, notes, and clippings that are written, read, or otherwise manipulated throughout the play was to simply store a supply of paper and quills on the mantelpiece, to be grabbed as needed. Slates and other small props were hidden in various spots around the stage as needed so that they could be picked up without exiting. Anything you can do to facilitate the smooth flow of the storytelling should be done. There is only one scene of violence in the play—the schoolroom scene in which Amy is beaten with a switch on her hand. This scene is most effective if the switch really sounds painful, but obviously you can't beat a child for real. In the original production we solved this problem by making a “slapstick.” Two wooden rulers (or similar) are taped tightly together at one end, but with a small shim—no thicker than good card stock—inserted between them a few inches from the taped end, so that they are not quite parallel, and there is a small space between them at the untaped end. This will make a quite satisfyingly loud snap even when struck very lightly against Amy's hand. (The sound comes from the two rulers striking against each other, rather than from them striking her hand.)

COSTUMES

Because the original novel is so well known, this play really must be set in its proper historical period. Audiences who thrill to see Shakespeare set in the Jazz age or Sophocles set in a post-apocalyptic future will not tolerate *Little Women* in any other period than its own—the mid-nineteenth century. That said, however, the costumes need not be elaborate. The March girls are not wealthy, so their clothes are simple, and the narrative structure of the play means that multiple costume changes are not only unnecessary but practically impossible. The same is true for Hannah and Marmee. (Aunt March should be more elegant.) The four girls should have different, more grown-up costumes for Act II even if the same performers are playing the roles, and all but Beth should have some kind of outdoor coat or wrap that can be added for outdoor scenes. Young Jo and Meg must each have something that can be added to the basic costume to make it dressier for the dance scene. The men can also wear the same costumes throughout, except that Laurie should have a younger and an older costume. Laurie and Mr. Laurence are more elegant than the rest, and Professor Bhaer is perhaps more rumpled. Laurie needs a graduation cap and gown, and all of the men need outdoor things. The ensemble roles can be costumed by having a sort of generic female and a generic male costume, to which small elements can be added to indicate character. Just as the set is mostly suggested, so can the costumes be, provided the overall effect of period is maintained.

SET

It is important that the set for this play be very simple. Even if you have the resources to build multiple, fully realized sets, resist the impulse. The narrative structure of the play is such that it can only work if scenes are allowed to flow freely into one another with no breaks. The basic setting is the living room and hearth of the March house. All that is needed is a fireplace, a rocking chair or two, a hearthrug, and a couch that can be set up when Beth is ill. This same hearth becomes the living room of Aunt March, of the Laurences, and of the John Brookes after Meg's marriage, with no physical alteration required. Various chairs or stools can be moved on and off for such scenes as the schoolroom and the lecture hall, and a few small tables can become the Brooke kitchen table, Professor Bhaer's desk, etc. The rowboat can be improvised using two low stools or one low bench. In general, the dialogue contains all of the information the audience will need to locate the various scenes. As a matter of fact, the play can work with an even simpler set. I have seen it done quite successfully with nothing but a few chairs and the fireplace that was a built-in feature of the performance space.

PROP LIST

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Blue knitted sock | Pair of slippers |
| Tea table with tea things | Firewood |
| Various letters, notes and quills | Basket of Christmas gifts |
| Baskets of food | Wooden toy sword |
| Cauldron | Medicine bottles |
| Laden banquet table | Tea cup |
| Plate of ice | Basket of gifts and kittens |
| Small cabinet piano | Bag of limes |
| Switch | Bandages |
| Various newspapers | Telegram |
| Various trunks and cases | Purse of money |
| Lock of hair | Turkey |
| Handful of newspaper clippings | Jelly jars |
| Hand sewing | Twin baby dolls |
| Newspaper hat | Large sketchbook |
| Writing book | Umbrella |
| Magazine clipping | |

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

Little Women was premiered at The Montgomery Academy, Montgomery, AL, in 2003 with the following cast and crew:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Younger Meg | Beth Brantley |
| Younger Jo | Lillian Wilson |
| Younger Beth | Sarah Wool |
| Younger Amy | Parker Garrett |
| Marmee | Pam Froese |
| Hannah | Lauren Sublett |
| Mrs. Gardiner | Caitlin Ackerman |
| Sally Gardiner | Katherine Jones |
| Man at ball | Forrest Flemming |
| Younger Laurie | Bill Butler |
| Old Mr. Laurence | Michael Reilly |
| Mr. Davis | Forrest Flemming |
| Jenny Snow | Caitlin Ackerman |

LITTLE WOMEN

Classmates.....	Marcie Hobbs, Mary Patton Kyser
John Brooke	Jackson McLendon
Aunt March	Blake Coleman
Mr. March	John Burns Paterson
Older Meg	Jessie vanDyke
Older Jo.....	Mary Patton Kyser
Older Beth.....	Katherine Jones
Older Amy	Marcie Hobbs
Older Laurie.....	Tazewell Jones
Lad	Mike Hollabaugh
Lotty.....	Caitlin Ackerman
Mr. Scott	Forrest Flemming
Aunt Carroll	Beth Brantley
Mr. Dashwood.....	Mike Hollabaugh
Prof. Friedrich Bhaer.....	R. B. Walker
Director	Matt Buchanan
Stage Manager	Payne Curlin
Props	Julie Garrett, Gay Curlin, Nan Barganier
Costumes.....	Gay Curlin
Makeup	Mary Margaret Kyser
Hair	Mary Margaret Kyser, Gay Curlin

ACT ONE

AT RISE:

The March hearth. JO enters carrying a blue army sock SHE is knitting. SHE addresses the audience. As SHE speaks, MEG, BETH and AMY enter and sit by the fire.

JO: It was cold that December evening, but it was warm beside the fire in the little house. The four girls who sat around that cheerful blaze knitting socks for the Soldiers' Aid should have been content, but the prospect of the holiday about to take place seemed dismal. Jo was fifteen, and she was the tomboy and the tartar of the family. As usual she was the first to say what everyone was thinking. *(joins the others by the fire)* Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.

AMY: I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all.

BETH: We've got Father and Mother, and each other.

JO: We haven't got Father, and we won't have him for a long time.

MEG: You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it's going to be a hard winter for everyone. 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.

JO: But I don't think the little we'd spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be much helped by that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I did want to buy a book for myself.

BETH: *(quietly)* I planned to spend mine on new music.

AMY: I shall get a nice box of drawing pencils.

JO: Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't want 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.

MEG: I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day. *(to audience)* Meg, who was sixteen, sometimes wished she could be a “real lady,” and spend her days “taking tea,” and “paying calls.” But with Mr. March far away in the army, all the girls had to make sacrifices. Meg worked as a Governess, and Jo spent her days as paid companion to their cantankerous Aunt March.

JO: How would you like to be shut up for hours with a fussy old lady?

BETH: It's naughty to fret, but I think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. My hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all. *(to audience)* Beth was the musician of the family. She was too shy to thrive at school, and did her studies at home as best she could. With her two older sisters away at their jobs and little Amy off at school, it fell to Beth to be the homemaker of the family, but if she complained this once, it was a rarity.

AMY: At least 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.

JO: *(laughing)* If you mean libel, I'd say so, and not talk about labels as if Papa was a pickle bottle.

AMY: I know what I mean, and you needn't be satirical about it! *(to audience)* Twelve-year-old Amy was the baby of the family, and she really did her best at school, but she was better at drawing than at vocabulary, and her schoolmasters always complained that she filled her primers with pictures of clouds and rabbits.

BETH: *(to audience, suiting her actions to her words)* The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm before the fire. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect on the girls. Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her.

JO: *(picks up the slippers and holds them before the fire)* These are quite worn out. Marmee must have a new pair.

BETH: I thought I'd get her some with my dollar.

AMY: No, I shall!

MEG: I'm the oldest—

JO: I'm the man of the family now that Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers.

BETH: Let's each get her something, and not get anything for ourselves.

They pause in thought.

MEG: I shall give her a nice pair of gloves.

JO: Army shoes, best to be had!

BETH: Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed.

AMY: 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.

JO: Let's let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon. There's so much to do about the play for Christmas night.

MEG: I'm not acting any more after this time. I'm getting too old for such things.

JO: Ha! You won't stop acting as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. *(stalks around in a parody of elegance and they all laugh)* You are the best actress we've got, and there'll be an end of everything if you quit.

MARMEE: *(entering)* Glad to find you so merry, my girls. 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. *(The girls rush to hug and kiss MARMEE. SHE addresses the audience as SHE sits by the fire. The girls scurry around, then join her. MEG brings on a little tea table.)* While making these maternal inquiries, Mrs. March got her wet things off and her warm slippers on, and settled down 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 and kitchen, quiet and busy, while Amy gave directions to everyone. *(to the girls)* I've got a treat for you.

BETH and AMY clap their hands.

JO: A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!

MARMEE: Yes, a nice long letter. He is well, and he sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas, and a special message to you girls.

JO: *(to audience)* Letters were all the March women had of their father that hard winter, but as hard as his absence was to bear, they knew his trials were much worse. Yet this 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.

MARMEE: *(reading)* Give them all 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 I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, do their duty faithfully, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.

AMY: I am a selfish girl! But I'll truly try to be better, so he won't be disappointed in me.

MEG: I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but I won't any more.

JO: 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.

BETH: *(to audience)* Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock and began to knit with all her might.

The girls hug MARMEE, yawning, and exit. MARMEE pauses for a second, reading over some part of the letter to herself, then smiles and exits, taking the tea table with her. Lighting signals the passage of time. After a pause, HANNAH enters the kitchen.

HANNAH: When the four girls came downstairs that Christmas morning they found only old Hannah. She had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered, by them all, more as a friend than a servant.

The girls enter. MEG carries a basket of gifts.

MEG: Where's Mother?

HANNAH: Goodness only knows. Some poor creature came a-beggin', and your Ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was a woman like her for giving.

JO: Here she comes! Hide the basket, quick!

MARMEE enters in her outdoor things.

GIRLS: Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! *(Etc.)*

MARMEE: Merry Christmas, little daughters. Come, gather close. I want to say a 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, because they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there. My girls, will you give them your breakfasts as a Christmas present?

Pause, as they contemplate going hungry.

JO: I'm so glad you came before we started to eat!

BETH: May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children?

AMY: I shall take the cream and the muffins.

MARMEE: *(pleased)* I thought you'd do it! You shall all go and help me. *(During the following, the girls scramble around putting together baskets of food, and carry them off. MARMEE addresses the audience.)* It was a very happy breakfast, 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 breakfast on Christmas morning.

MARMEE exits as JO enters and addresses the audience as the girls set up for the "performance." Additional girls may enter and sit in the "audience."

JO: The morning charities took so much time that the rest of the day was devoted to preparations for the evening. Being still too young to go often to the theater, the girls put their wits to work, and, necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. On Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed, which was the dress circle, and the *Operatic Tragedy* began.

JO runs off and almost immediately re-enters as HUGO, the villain. After seeing the air with her wooden sword for a moment or two, SHE strikes a pose.

JO/HUGO: What ho, minion! I need thee!

MEG/HAGAR: (*enters as HAGAR, the witch, with a "cauldron"*) My lord Hugo! What can'st old Hagar, thy miserable servant, do for thee?

JO/HUGO: Ah, Hagar, my faithful minion. Hear me well, for I have need of thee. Can'st thou brew a potion that will make the fair Zara adore me?

MEG/HAGAR: With the greatest ease, master.

(*chanting*) Hither, hither, from thy home,
Airy sprite, I bid thee come!
Bring me here, with elfin speed,
The fragrant philter which I need.

BETH appears as a lovely FAIRY. SHE is obviously nervous, and speaks (or sings) quietly.

BETH/FAIRY: 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! (*drops a bottle at MEG's feet and vanishes*)

JO/HUGO: Ah, faithful Hagar! Is that the potion that will win my love's heart for me?

MEG/HAGAR: Aye, 'tis the love potion.

JO/HUGO: Thanks, repulsive crone! But I have further need of thee.
The varlet Roderigo threatens to upset my plans and carry off my love.

MEG/HAGAR: Ah, there can'st I truly help you, master.
(chanting) Approach now darkly from beyond,
Come from bog and swamp and pond,
Bring to me, with awful haste,
Poison—death at slightest taste.

Enter AMY as an Imp. SHE runs frantically around the others several times, tosses a small bottle into JO's outstretched hands, and exits.

JO/HUGO: At last! This elixir will free me of mine enemies forever!
Roderigo, prepare to meet thy doom! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! *(to audience)* Jo's sisters considered her a regular Shakespeare for the exciting stories she wrote. By the time this one was over the girls were hungry indeed.

A table laden with food is wheeled on by HANNAH and MARMEE.

HANNAH: Just then old Hannah appeared, with Mrs. March's compliments, and to ask 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.

AMY: Is it fairies?

BETH: Santa Claus.

MEG: Mother did it.

JO: Aunt March had a good fit and sent the supper.

MARMEE: All wrong. Old Mr. Laurence sent it.

MEG: The Laurence boy's grandfather?! What in the world put such a thing into his head?

MARMEE: Hannah told one of his servants about your breakfast party. 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.

JO: 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. (*MEG sticks her tongue out at JO, who turns to address the audience as the others clear away the Christmas party.*) "The Laurence boy," as the girls had taken to calling him, was destined to become one of their closest friends, but although he lived next door, he and the girls were to have their first real meeting in another place altogether. It began a few days after Christmas, when Jo and Meg received—

MEG: (*excited*) An invitation! A regular note of invitation from Mrs. Gardiner for tomorrow night! (*reads*) "Mrs. Gardiner would be happy to see Miss March and Miss Josephine at a little dance on New Year's Eve." Marmee says we can go, now what shall we wear?

JO: What's the use of asking that, when you know we shall wear our poplins, because we haven't got anything else? (*to audience*) After various mishaps with her hair and her dress, Meg was ready for the ball, and by the united exertions of the entire family Jo's hair was got up and her dress on.

During the above, the family dress MEG and JO for the ball. As the younger girls, MARMEE and HANNAH exit, MRS. GARDINER, SALLY, and various other Gardiners and guests, including LAURIE, enter.

MRS. GARDINER: Mrs. Gardiner, a stately old lady, greeted them kindly and handed them over to Sally, the eldest of her six daughters. (*to MEG and JO*) Welcome, my dears. So glad you could come. Sally will introduce you 'round.

Dance music.

SALLY: (*to her friends*) Oh, we all know lovely Meg. And this is her sister, Josephine.

BOY GUEST: May I have this dance, Meg?

They whirl away, joined by most of the others. JO is not asked to dance and SHE drifts downstage and away from the others. LAURIE drifts in a similar way and at the end of the following speech they find themselves together.

JO: *(to audience)* Meg knew Sallie and was at ease very soon, but Jo felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden. She saw a big redheaded youth approaching her corner, and, fearing he meant to dance with her, she slipped into a curtained recess. *(to LAURIE)* Dear me, I didn't know anyone was here!

LAURIE: *(a little shy)* Don't mind me, stay if you like. I only came here because I don't know many people and felt rather strange at first, you know.

JO: You live near us, don't you?

LAURIE: Next door. *(laughing)* I've seen you ever so many times. And how is your cat, Miss March?

JO: Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo.

LAURIE: I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie.

JO: Laurie Laurence. What an odd name.

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

JO: I hate my name, too. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?

LAURIE: I thrashed 'em.

JO: I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it.

LAURIE: Don't you like to dance, Miss Jo?

JO: I can't, because I told Meg I wouldn't, because—you won't tell?

LAURIE: Never!

JO: 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.

MEG has left the main body of dancers and stands frantically motioning to JO.

MEG: Jo! JO!

JO: *(to MEG)* All right! *(to LAURIE)* I'm sorry. Will you excuse me?

HE bows and the two girls withdraw to another corner. LAURIE joins the main throng of dancers. MEG speaks in a harsh whisper.

MEG: I've sprained my ankle. That stupid high heel turned. I don't know how I'm ever going to get home.

JO: I knew you'd hurt your feet with those silly shoes. Maybe Mr. Laurence—

MEG: No! Don't ask or tell anyone.

LAURIE: *(entering, to audience)* "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. Jo led the way, and Laurie drew up a little table and was so obliging that even particular Meg pronounced him a "nice boy."

LAURIE: Please let me take you home. It's on my way, you know, and it's starting to rain.

JO: It's so early! You can't mean to go yet?

LAURIE: I always go early. I do, truly! *(to audience)* And that settled that. Soon "The Laurence boy" would be practically one of the family.

The dancers exit, leaving JO on one side of the stage and LAURIE on the other. During the exchange that follows, both actors face front, JO looking up at an imaginary LAURIE and LAURIE looking down at an imaginary JO.)

LAURIE: One day, Jo found herself shoveling paths in the wide expanse of snow between her little house and the Laurence's stately mansion. She could see young Laurie gazing from his window in a forlorn kind of way.

JO: *(to herself and the audience)* That boy is suffering for society and fun. His grandpa doesn't 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 and tell the old gentleman so! *(SHE bends down and forms a snowball, and tosses it at the imaginary LAURIE in his "window." The real LAURIE "opens the window" and looks down.)* How do you do? Are you sick?

LAURIE: (*hoarsely*) Better, thank you. I've had a bad cold, and been shut up a week. It's dull as tombs.

JO: Have someone come and see you then.

LAURIE: There isn't anyone I'd like to see. Boys make such a row, and my head is weak.

JO: Isn't there some nice girl who'd read and amuse you? Girls are quiet.

LAURIE: Don't know any.

JO: You know us. (*stops and covers her mouth, surprised at her own boldness, but can't help laughing at herself*)

LAURIE: (*laughs too*) So I do! Will you come, please?

JO: I'm not quiet and nice, but shut the window, like a good boy, and wait till I come. (*to audience*) With that, Jo shouldered her broom and marched into the house. Laurie was in a flutter of excitement at the idea of having company, and flew about to get ready, brushing his hair, putting on a fresh collar, and trying to tidy up the room.

JO approaches the "door." A surprised-looking SERVANT stands before her, but relaxes at LAURIE's line, bows her in and exits. JO has somehow acquired a basket laden with gifts.

LAURIE: All right, show her up. It's Miss Jo!

JO: Here I am, bag and baggage. Mother sent her love, and was glad if I could do anything for you. Meg wanted me to bring some of her blancmange. She makes it very nicely. And Beth thought her cats would be comforting.

LAURIE: Is Beth the rosy one who stays at home most of the time and sometimes goes out with a little basket?

JO: Yes, that's Beth. She's my girl, and a regular good one she is, too.

LAURIE: The pretty one is Meg, and the little one is Amy, I believe?

JO: Yes, but how—

LAURIE: 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.

JO: We'll never draw that curtain any more, and I give you leave to look as much as you like. I just wish, instead of peeping, you'd come over and see us. Wouldn't your grandpa let you?

LAURIE: I think he would, if your mother asked him. He's very kind, though he doesn't look it, and he lets me do what I like, pretty much—only he's afraid I might be a bother to strangers.

JO: We're not strangers, we're neighbors, and you needn't think you'd be a bother.

LAURIE: You see, Grandpa lives among his books, and doesn't much care what happens outside. Mr. Brooke, my tutor, doesn't stay here, and I have no one to go about with me, so I just stay at home.

JO: That's bad. You ought to make an effort and go visiting everywhere you're asked, then you'll have plenty of friends and pleasant places to go to.

LAURIE: *(to audience)* Laurie opened his mouth to ask a 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. But 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, and the parrot that talked Spanish. 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 right off, the boy lay back and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. *(to JO)* Oh! That does me no end of good. Tell on, please!

JO: 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.

LAURIE: If you like them so much, come down and see ours.

Grandfather is out, so you needn't be afraid.

JO: I'm not afraid of anything.

LAURIE: I don't believe you are! So come on, then.

HE takes her hand and leads her to another part of the stage, where SHE looks around her in utter amazement.

JO: What richness! Theodore Laurence, you ought to be the happiest boy in the world.

LAURIE: (*shrugs*) A fellow can't live on books.

A door slams offstage.

JO: Mercy me! It's your grandpa!

LAURIE: Well, what if it is? You're not afraid of anything.

SERVANT: (*entering*) The doctor to see you.

LAURIE: Would you mind if I left you for a minute? I suppose I must see him.

JO: Don't mind me. I'm happy as a cricket here. (*LAURIE and SERVANT exit. JO addresses the audience.*) 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, "I'm sure I couldn't be afraid of him. 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."

But it isn't LAURIE who has entered—it is old MR. LAURENCE himself. JO jumps when HE speaks.

MR. LAURENCE: Thank you, ma'am. (*gives her a moment to recover*) So, you're not afraid of me, hey?

JO: Not much, sir.

MR. LAURENCE: And you don't think me as handsome as your grandfather?

JO: Not quite, sir.

MR. LAURENCE: And I've got a tremendous will, but you like me in spite of it?

JO: Yes, I do, sir.

MR. LAURENCE: (*takes her under the chin and examines her face carefully*) 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.

JO: Thank you, sir.

MR. LAURENCE: Think the boy needs cheering up a bit, do you?

JO: 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.

MR. LAURENCE: Tut, tut, tut! That was the boy's affair. I shall come and see your mother some fine day. Tell her so. (*A bell rings.*) There's the tea bell. Come down and go on being neighborly.

HE offers her his arm and they exit together. As MARMEE enters, SHE addresses the audience as her daughters enter and surround her.

MARMEE: When all of Jo's adventures had been told, the family found themselves eager to go visiting. Mrs. March wanted to talk about 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 for the fine pictures and statues. Everyone liked Laurie, and he privately informed his tutor that the Marches were regularly splendid girls. He was tired of books, and found people so interesting now that Mr. Brooke was obliged to make very unsatisfactory reports.

BETH: (*to audience*) But Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up the 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 she ran away, declaring she would never go there any more, not even for the dear piano.

MR. LAURENCE: *(to audience, as HE joins them)* No persuasions or enticements could overcome her fear, 'til the fact came to Mr. Laurence's ear in some mysterious way *(glances at JO, who looks away innocently)* and he set about mending matters. *(to MARMEE)* You know, that boy neglects his music now, and 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? *(Though still terrified, BETH involuntarily takes a step forward. But MR. LAURENCE pretends not to notice.)* They needn't see or speak to anyone—just run in any time. 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. *(rising to leave)* Please, tell the young ladies what I say, and if they don't care to come—

BETH: *(quietly slips her hand into his, and speaks very softly)* Oh sir, they do care, very much!

MR. LAURENCE: Are you the musical girl?

BETH: I'm Beth. I love it dearly, and I'll come, if you are quite sure nobody will hear me, and be disturbed.

MR. LAURENCE: Not a soul, my dear. The house is empty half the day, so come and drum away as much as you like.

BETH: How kind you are, sir!

MR. LAURENCE: *(gazes into her face for a moment, then bends and softly kisses her on the forehead)* I had a little girl once, with eyes like those. God bless you, my dear! *(to MARMEE)* Good day, madam. *(exits in a great hurry)*

BETH: *(to audience)* 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. *(to MARMEE)* Mother, I'm going to make Mr. Laurence a pair of slippers. He is so kind to me, always, and I must thank him, and I don't know any other way. Can I do it?

MARMEE: Yes, dear. It will please him very much, and be a nice way of thanking him.

BETH: *(to audience)* Beth worked away early and late, with occasional lifts over the hard parts. Then she wrote a simple note, and with Laurie's help, got her slippers smuggled onto the study table one morning, and waited to see what would happen. All day passed, and part of the next, and she was beginning to fear she had offended her crotchety friend. On the afternoon of the second day, she went out to do an errand, and 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—

MEG: Here's a letter from the old gentleman! Come quick, and read it!

As SHE "returns" to the house, all the family—her sisters, HANNAH and MARMEE—surround her.

AMY: Oh, Beth, he's sent you—

JO: *(claps her hand over AMY's mouth)* Come on! Look there! Look there!

BETH: 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. *(To JO)* For me?

JO: *(hugging her)* 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.

BETH: You read it! I can't! Oh, it is too lovely! *(buries her head in JO's apron)*

JO: *(reads)* "Miss March: Dear Madam—"

AMY: How nice it sounds! I wish someone would write to me like that!

JO: "I have had many pairs of slippers in my life, but never any that suited me so well as yours. Heartsease 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 granddaughter he lost. With hearty thanks and best wishes, I remain your grateful friend and humble servant, James Laurence."

AMY: “Your humble servant.” Think of his writing that to you.

HANNAH: Try it, honey. Let’s hear the sound of the baby pianny.

BETH plays a few bars of a simple tune.

JO: (*teasing*) You’ll have to go and thank him.

BETH: Yes, I guess I’ll go now, before I get frightened thinking about it. (*to audience*) And, to the utter amazement of the assembled family, Beth walked deliberately down the garden, through the hedge, and in at the Laurences’ door.

As the family stares, BETH suits her actions to her words.

HANNAH: Well, I wish I may die if it ain’t the queerest thing I ever seen! The pianny has turned her head!

BETH: 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 and when a gruff voice called out, “come in!” she marched right up to Mr. Laurence and held out her hand, saying, “I came to thank you, sir, for—”

MR. LAURENCE: 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. (*SHE does.*) If the roof of the house had suddenly flown off, the old gentleman couldn’t have been more astonished. But he was so touched and pleased by that confiding little kiss that all his crustiness vanished, and Beth ceased to fear him from that moment. When she went home, he walked with her to her own gate, shook hands cordially, (*HE does*) and touched his hat as he marched back again, looking very stately and erect, like a handsome, soldierly old gentleman, as he was.

The lights indicate the passage of time. AMY and MEG enter. AMY addresses the audience.

AMY: Many things changed that year. One early spring morning, little Amy, who fancied herself quite the fine lady, was feeling sorry for herself. (*to MEG*) I wish I had some money.

MEG: Why?

AMY: I'm dreadfully in debt. I owe at least a dozen pickled limes, and I can't pay them.

MEG: Are limes the fashion now?

AMY: You see, the girls are always buying them, and unless you want to be thought mean, you must do it, too. They treat by turns, and I've had ever so many but haven't returned them, and I must—they are debts of honor, you know.

MEG: (*smiling in amusement*) How much will pay them off and restore your credit?

AMY: A quarter would more than do it, and leave a few cents over for a treat for you. Don't you like limes?

MEG: Not much. You may have my share. (*gives money*) Make it last as long as you can.

AMY: Oh, thank you! It must be so nice to have pocket money! I'll have a grand feast. I haven't tasted a lime this week. I felt delicate about taking any, as I couldn't return them. (*MEG exits, and several schoolgirls, including JENNY SNOW, enter and sit down as at school. MR. DAVIS, the schoolteacher, stands at the head of the class. AMY addresses the audience.*) Next day the rumor that Amy March had twenty-four delicious limes—she ate one on the way—circulated through her “set,” and the attentions of her friends became quite overwhelming. Katy Brown invited her to her next party on the spot 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 and she instantly crushed her hopes. (*to JENNY*) You needn't be so polite all of a sudden, 'cause you won't get any.

JENNY: (*looks daggers at AMY and shoots up her hand*) Excuse me, Mr. Davis, sir, but Amy March has pickled limes in her desk.

MR. DAVIS: *(to audience)* Now, Mr. Davis had declared limes a contraband article, and solemnly vowed to publicly ferrule the first person found breaking the law. This much-enduring man had succeeded in banishing chewing gum after a long and stormy war, made a bonfire of confiscated novels and newspapers, suppressed a private post office, and done all that one man could do to keep half a hundred rebellious girls in order. Mr. Davis had evidently taken his coffee too strong that morning, and there was an east wind, which always affected his neuralgia. To use the expressive 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. *(to the class)* Young ladies, attention, if you please! *(The girls, who have been shuffling and chatting, are instantly still and attentive.)* Miss March, come to the desk, and bring with you the limes. *(SHE moves to his "desk.")* Now take these disgusting things and throw them out of the window. *(AMY does as instructed. There is a pause after SHE is through. Then MR. DAVIS clears his throat ominously and speaks.)* 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. *(SHE hides both her hands behind her back in horror.)* Your hand, Miss March!

AMY holds out her hand, and, as SHE speaks directly to the audience, MR. DAVIS administers several sharp blows to the palm of her hand with a switch.

AMY: Amy set her teeth, *(thwack!)* threw back her head defiantly, *(thwack!)* and bore without flinching *(thwack!)* the tingling blows on her little palm. *(thwack!)* 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 was as deep as if he had knocked her down.

MR. DAVIS: You will now stand on the platform 'til recess.

AMY: During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain she never forgot. But 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!"

MR. DAVIS: You can go, Miss March. *(to audience)* And go she did—straight out of the school and the schoolyard, never to return. No notice was taken of Amy's flight, except by her mates, but the sharp-eyed demoiselles discovered that Mr. Davis was quite absent-minded that afternoon.

JO enters and continues the narration, suiting her actions to her words as MR. DAVIS and SCHOOLGIRLS stare at her.

JO: 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.

SCHOOLGIRLS and MR. DAVIS exit as the family enters. HANNAH is bandaging AMY's hand.

MARMEE: Yes, you can have a vacation from school, but I want you to study a little every day with Beth. I dislike Mr. Davis's manner of teaching and don't think the girls you associate with are doing you any good.

AMY: I wish all the girls would leave, and spoil his old school. It's maddening to think of those lovely limes.

MARMEE: I am not sorry you lost them, for you broke the rules, and you deserved punishment.

AMY: Do you mean you're glad I was disgraced before the whole school?

MARMEE: I should not have chosen that way of mending a fault, but I'm not sure it won't do you more good than a milder 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, but there is no need of parading them.

Despite her harsh words, MARMEE caresses AMY's face lovingly and gives her a little hug. Everyone but AMY exits, and SHE addresses the audience.

AMY: Growing up is never easy, and sometimes older sisters can make the waiting worse. *(MEG and JO enter, deep in conversation, dressed for going out.)* Girls, where are you going?

JO: Never mind. Little girls shouldn't ask questions.

AMY: Do tell me! I should think you might let me go, too.

MEG: I can't, dear, because you aren't invited.

JO: Now, Meg, be quiet or you will spoil it all. You can't go, Amy, so don't be a baby.

AMY: I know! I know! You're going to the theater to see The Seven Castles! I shall go, too. Mother said I could see it, and I've got my rag money. It was mean not to tell me in time. *(sits on the floor and starts to pull on her boots)*

MEG: *(weakening)* Suppose we take her?

JO: If she goes I'm not, 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 in where she isn't wanted.

AMY: *(begins to cry)* You don't care about anybody but yourselves!

MEG: Now, Amy, be sensible, dear—

LAURIE: *(enters cheerfully, unaware of the strife)* Ready, ladies?

HE offers them each an arm, and the three exit without looking back at AMY. Just as they disappear, SHE leaps up and shouts.

AMY: You'll be sorry for this, Jo March, see if you aren't.

JO: Fiddlesticks! (*AMY runs off. MEG and LAURIE continue off in the other direction, but JO remains on stage and addresses the audience.*) When they got home, they found Amy reading in the parlor. She assumed an injured air as they came in, and never lifted her eyes from her book or asked a single question. 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 Jo decided that Amy had forgiven and forgotten her wrongs.

MEG, AMY and BETH enter and sit by the fireplace.

AMY: (*to audience*) There, Jo was mistaken. The next day she made a discovery that produced a tempest.

JO: Has anyone taken my book? (*seeing AMY*) Amy, you've got it!

AMY: No, I haven't.

JO: You know where it is, then!

AMY: No, I don't.

JO: (*taking AMY by the shoulders and shaking her*) That's a fib!

AMY: It isn't. I haven't got it, I don't know where it is now, and I don't care.

JO: You know something about it, and you'd better tell at once.

AMY: Scold as much as you like, you'll never see your silly old book again.

JO: Why not?

AMY: I burned it up.

JO: 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?

AMY: I told you I'd make you pay for being so cross yesterday, and I have, so—

JO: (*shaking her violently*) You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never forgive you as long as I live.

MEG and BETH pull them apart, MEG comforting AMY and BETH trying to soothe JO, but JO storms off. After a moment's stunned pause, MARMEE enters.

MARMEE: *(to audience)* Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise. 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 favorite sister. Mrs. March looked stern and grave, until Amy felt that no one would love her 'til she had asked pardon for the act which she now regretted more than anyone.

JO enters as if on her way somewhere else. SHE sees AMY and stops dead.

AMY: Please forgive me, Jo. I'm very, very sorry.

JO: I will never forgive you. *(AMY runs off in tears. The others follow, leaving JO, who addresses the audience.)* Nothing seemed to go right the next day. Everyone was cross, and Jo decided that only Laurie could be cheerful enough to take her out of herself. It was a bitterly cold day for the time of year, and as it was probably the last day of ice on the river, she invited him to go skating. Naturally, Amy had to tag along. Jo decided to just ignore her.

LAURIE: *(calling from offstage)* Keep near the shore. It isn't safe in the middle.

JO: *(calling offstage)* Amy, did you hear— *(pause; hardening her heart)* Never mind.

After a long pause, we hear AMY scream in terror, followed by LAURIE's voice from offstage.

LAURIE: Bring a rail. Quick, quick!

JO: Amy!

LITTLE WOMEN

JO runs offstage. A moment later LAURIE appears carrying AMY, wrapped in LAURIE's heavy coat and followed by JO, who holds and rubs AMY's hands. From the other side of the stage enter MARMEE, HANNAH, MEG and BETH, with blankets and a hot water bottle. They receive AMY from LAURIE and get her settled by the fire. All of this happens very fast, but very tenderly. The dialogue overlaps the action.

JO: Are you sure she's safe?

MARMEE: Quite safe, dear. She's not hurt, and won't even take cold, I think.

JO: Mother, if she should die, it would be my fault. 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?

HANNAH, MEG and BETH exit.

MARMEE: Watch and pray, dear. Never get tired of trying, and never think it is impossible.

JO: You don't know how bad it is! It seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion. I'm afraid I'll do something dreadful some day. Oh, Mother, help me, do help me!

MARMEE: Jo, dear, we all have our temptations, 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.

JO: Yours, Mother? Why, you are never angry!

MARMEE: 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.

JO squeezes MARMEE's hand in silence for a moment. Then MARMEE exits, leaving JO alone with AMY. SHE gazes down at the sleeping figure, and strokes her hair.

JO: I let the sun go down on my anger. I wouldn't forgive you, and if it hadn't been for Laurie, it might have been too late! How could I be so wicked?

After another pause, AMY opens her eyes and holds out her arms to JO. They embrace warmly as the lights go down. The lights rise again to reveal MEG, BETH, and AMY seated in the living room knitting. MEG addresses the audience.

MEG: Jo never did try to re-make her lost masterpiece, but she continued to write. One summer day, when her sisters had noticed her behaving even more oddly than usual, she arrived home with a surprise. (*JO enters with a newspaper, plops down, and pretends to read.*) Have you anything interesting there?

JO: Nothing but a story, won't amount to much, I guess.

AMY: You'd better read it aloud. That will amuse us and keep you out of mischief.

JO: (*to audience*) With a loud "Hem!" and a long breath, Jo began to read very fast. The girls listened with interest, because the tale was romantic, and somewhat pathetic, as most of the characters died in the end.

AMY: I like that about the splendid picture.

MEG: I prefer the loving part. Viola and Angelo are two of our favorite names, isn't that funny?

BETH: Who wrote it?

Pregnant pause.

JO: Your sister.

BETH: (*rushes over to hug JO*) I knew it! I knew it! Oh, my Jo, I'm so proud!

AMY: Tell us about it.

BETH: When did it come?

MEG: How much did you get for it?

JO: Stop jabbering, and I'll tell you everything. (*very fast*) I submitted two stories, and the man said he liked them both, but didn't pay beginners, only let them print in his paper. So I let him have the two stories, and today this was sent to me. 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 you girls.

BETH: *(to audience)* 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.

As BETH continues, MARMEE enters, and in pantomime JO shows her the story, and MARMEE embraces her daughter proudly. The five Marches then sit down to work together.)

BETH: In the next few months, Jo published a few more stories, and the little family waited happily for the end of the year, when the one member who was missing might join them once again. As fall progressed, and that happy day grew nearer, it seemed also to grow dearer, so that when the terrible blow fell, it was all the more shocking.

A bell rings. A moment later, HANNAH enters with a telegram.

HANNAH: It's one of them horrid telegraph things, mum.

Worried, MARMEE snatches the telegram and reads it. It is brief, and as SHE finishes it SHE seems to lose all of her strength. SHE wavers on her feet, and JO rushes forward with a chair just in time to prevent her sinking to the floor. JO takes the telegram from her hands and with a glance at her sisters, reads.

JO: "Mrs. March: Your husband is very ill. Come at once."

Silence for a long moment. MARMEE takes the telegram from JO, reads it silently a second time, then holds out her arms for her daughters.

MARMEE: I shall go at once, but it may be too late. Oh, children, children, help me to bear it!

A long embrace. HANNAH stands slightly apart, equally moved. Finally SHE breaks the silence.

HANNAH: The Lord keep the dear man! I won't waste no time a-cryin', but git your things ready. (*bustles out, wiping away tears with her apron*)

MARMEE: She's right. There's no time for tears now. Be calm, girls, and let me think. Where's Laurie?

LAURIE: (*entering*) Here, ma'am. Oh, let me do something.

MARMEE: Send a telegram saying I will come at once. The next train goes early in the morning.

LAURIE: What else? I can go anywhere, do anything.

MARMEE: Leave a note at Aunt March's. Jo, give me that pen and paper. (*writes a hasty note and hands it to LAURIE*) Now go, dear, but don't kill yourself riding at a desperate pace. (*SHE continues to write as HE exits. A moment later we hear the sound of his horse galloping off.*) Jo, run to the rooms and tell Mrs. King that I can't come. On the way, get these things I've put down. I must go prepared for nursing. Hospital stores are not always good. (*JO exits.*) Beth, go ask Mr. Laurence for a couple of bottles of wine. I'm not too proud to beg for Father. (*BETH exits.*) Amy, tell Hannah to get down the black trunk, and Meg, come and help me find my things. I'm half bewildered.

AMY exits as MEG puts her hands on MARMEE's shoulders to prevent her from rising.

MEG: Oh, Mother, do sit for a moment and let us! (*to audience*) Everyone scattered like leaves before an evil wind. Old Mr. Laurence came hurrying back with Beth, bringing every comfort the kind old gentleman could think of for the invalid. Later, 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 Laurie's tutor, Mr. Brooke.

JOHN BROOKE enters and stands awkwardly before MEG. SHE is equally flustered.

LITTLE WOMEN

BROOKE: I'm very sorry to hear of this, Miss March. 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.

MEG: How kind you 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!

BROOKE: Not at all.

SHE puts out a hand, which HE takes and holds. They stand there for a moment simply looking at each other.

MEG: *(shyly)* Will you excuse me?

SHE exits. HE watches her leave. After a moment, LAURIE enters and addresses the audience, as JOHN exits. During the following we see MARMEE and all the girls, but JO, working together to pack.

LAURIE: 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 Mr. March to go into the army, and she had always predicted no good would come of it. Mrs. March put the note in the fire and the money in her purse, and went on with her preparations, with her lips folded tightly in a way Jo would have understood. The short afternoon wore away but, still, Jo did not come. They began to get anxious, and Laurie went off to find her, for no one knew what Jo might take into her head.

HE exits, and a moment later JO enters. SHE is wearing a bonnet. Without a word, SHE hands MARMEE a purse of money.

MARMEE: Twenty-five dollars! Jo, I hope you haven't done anything rash?

JO: 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.

JO takes off the bonnet, revealing short-cropped hair.

MARMEE: Your hair! Your beautiful hair! Oh, Jo, how could you?
Your one beauty.

JO: (*pretending indifference*) 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 off.

BETH: (*hugging her*) She doesn't look like my Jo any more, but I love her dearly for it!

MARMEE: 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.

AMY: What made you do it?

JO: I hadn't the least idea of it at first, but as I went along I kept thinking what I could do for Father, 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. I just walked in and asked what they would give for mine.

BETH: I don't see how you dared to do it.

AMY: Didn't you feel dreadful when the first cut came?

JO: 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. The man's wife 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'll ever have a mane again.

MARMEE: *(takes the lock of hair and smiles tenderly)* Go to bed and don't talk, for we must be up early and we need all the sleep we can get. Good night, my darlings. *(As the girls exit, one by one, each hugging and kissing MARMEE as SHE goes, MARMEE addresses the audience.)* 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, but her sister fancied she heard a stifled sob for her one beauty. 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."

The lights fade to black, lingering longest on MARMEE's face. They come up to reveal the four girls, HANNAH, LAURIE and MR. LAURENCE, each sitting apart and writing a letter, which they read aloud in turn as they write.

MEG: 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. The girls are all as good as gold. Jo helps me with the sewing, and insists on doing all sorts of hard jobs. I'd be afraid she might overdo, if I didn't know her "moral fit" won't last long. Beth is as regular about her tasks as a clock, and never forgets what you told her. Amy minds me nicely, and I take great care of her.

JO: My precious Marmee: Three cheers for dear Father! I rushed up to my 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? 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. I made a poem yesterday, when I was helping Hannah wash, and as Father likes my silly little things, I put it in to amuse him.

BETH: 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. 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.

JO: A SONG FROM THE SUDS: Queen of my tub, I merrily sing,
While the white foam rises high, And we sturdily wash and rinse
and wring, And fasten the clothes to dry. I wish we could wash,
from our hearts and souls, the stains of the week away. Then on
the earth there would be indeed, A glorious washing day!

AMY: Ma Chere Mamma, We are all well. I do my lessons always and never corroborate with the girls. Meg says I mean "contradict" so I put in both words and you can take the properest. Laurie is not as respectful 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. 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 interrogation point nice?

MEG: Mr. Laurence watches over us like a motherly old hen, as Jo says, and Laurie is very kind and neighborly. Hannah is a perfect saint. She does not scold at all, and always calls me Miss Margaret, which is quite proper, you know. We are all well and busy, but we long, day and night, to have you back.

HANNAH: Dear Miz March, I just drop a line to say we get on first rate. The girls is clever and fly round right smart. Miss Meg is going to make a proper good housekeeper. Jo does beat all for goin' ahead, but she don't stop to calculate first, and you never know where she's like to bring up. Beth is the best of little critters, and a sight of help to me, bein' so dependable. Amy does well without frettin'. Mr. Laurie turns the house upside down frequent, but he heartens the girls, so I let them have full swing. The old gentleman send a heap of things, and is rather wearin' but he means well, and it aint my place to say nothin'. My bread is riz, so no more at this time.

LAURIE: Head Nurse of Ward No. 2: All serene on the Rappahannock, troops in fine condition, commissary department well conducted, the Home Guard under Colonel Teddy always on duty, Commander in Chief General Laurence reviews the army daily, and Quartermaster Hannah keeps order in camp. A salute of twenty-four guns was fired on receipt of good news from Washington, and a dress parade took place at headquarters.

MR. LAURENCE: 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.

LAURIE: Commander in chief sends best wishes, in which he is heartily joined by. . . Colonel Teddy.

HANNAH: I send my duty to Mr. March, and hope he's seen the last of his Pewmonia. Yours respectful, Hannah Mullet.

MEG: Give my love to Father and to dear Mr. Brooke, and believe me, ever your own—

JO: Give Father my lovingest hug that ever was, and kiss yourself a dozen times for your—

BETH: Kiss dear Father on the cheek he calls mine, and do come soon to your loving—

AMY: Adieu, I send heaps of love to Papa. Your affectionate daughter—

MEG: Meg.

JO: Topsy-Turvy Jo.

BETH: Little Beth.

AMY: Amy Curtis March.

Blackout. Lights come up to reveal MEG, JO and BETH sitting and working by the fire.

BETH: Meg, I wish you'd go and see the Hummels. You know Mother told us not to forget them.

MEG: I'm too tired to go this afternoon.

BETH: Can't you, Jo?

JO: Too stormy for me with my cold.

BETH: I thought it was almost well.

JO: *(laughing a little uncomfortably)* It's well enough for me to go out with Laurie, but not well enough to go to the Hummels.

MEG: Why don't you go yourself?

BETH: 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.

MEG: I'll go see tomorrow, honey. I promise.

JO: Ask Hannah for some nice little treat, and take it round, Beth. The air will do you good. I'd go, but I want to finish my writing.

BETH: My head aches and I'm tired, so I thought maybe some of you would go.

MEG: Amy will be in presently, and she'll run down for us.

During the following, everyone but BETH exits as their name is mentioned, leaving her alone.

BETH: *(to audience)* 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, and went out into the chilly air. It was late when she came back, and no one saw her creep upstairs and shut herself into her mother's room.

LITTLE WOMEN

JO: (*entering, to audience*) Half an hour later, Jo went to "Mother's closet" for something, and found little Beth sitting on the medicine chest, looking very grave, with red eyes and a camphor bottle in her hand. (*to BETH*) Christopher Columbus! What's the matter?

BETH: Stay away! You've had the scarlet fever, haven't you?

JO: Years ago, when Meg did. Why?

BETH: Oh, Jo, the baby's dead!

JO: What baby?

BETH: Mrs. Hummel's. She died in my lap before Mrs. Hummel got home.

JO: (*embracing her*) My poor dear, how dreadful for you! I ought to have gone.

BETH: It wasn't dreadful, Jo, only so sad! I saw in a minute she was sicker, but Lottchen said her mother had gone for a doctor, so I took Baby and let Lotty rest. She seemed asleep, but all of a sudden she gave a little cry and trembled, and then lay very still.

JO: Don't cry, dear! What did you do?

BETH: I just sat and held her softly till Mrs. Hummel came with the doctor. He said she was dead, and looked at Heinrich and Minna, who have sore throats. (*gruffly*) "Scarlet fever, ma'am. Ought to have called me before." 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 I cried with them till he turned round all of a sudden, and told me to go home and take belladonna right away.

JO: Oh, Beth, if you're sick I'll never forgive myself!

BETH: I guess I won'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 took some belladonna, and I feel better.

JO: (*feeling her forehead*) I'll call Hannah. She knows all about sickness.

BETH: Don't let Amy come! She never had it, and I should hate to give it to her.

HANNAH: *(to audience)* Hannah, that good soul, was awake in a minute, and took the lead at once, assuring that there was no need to worry—everyone had scarlet fever. *(MEG enters. HANNAH speaks to the girls.)* Now I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll have Dr. Bangs, just to take a look at you, dear, and see that we start right. 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.

MEG: I shall stay, of course. I'm oldest.

JO: I shall, because it's my fault she is sick. I told Mother I'd do the errands, and I haven't.

MEG: I'll go and tell Amy.

JO and BETH exit one way and MEG the other, leaving HANNAH alone. SHE addresses the audience.

HANNAH: Dr. Bangs came and Amy was ordered off at once, and she departed in great state, with Jo and Laurie as escort. Aunt March received them with her usual hospitality.

HANNAH exits as AUNT MARCH enters. JO, LAURIE and AMY approach her.

AUNT MARCH: What do you want now?

JO: *(to audience)* Laurie retired to the window, and Jo told her story.

AUNT MARCH: 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. Don't cry, child, it worries me to hear people sniff. What do you hear from your mother?

JO: Father is much better.

AUNT MARCH: Well, that won't last long, I fancy. March never had any stamina. Well, Jo, you'd better go at once. It isn't proper to be gadding about so late with a rattlepated boy like this.

AUNT MARCH and AMY exit one way as JO and LAURIE exit another. MEG enters and addresses the audience.

LITTLE WOMEN

MEG: Beth did have the fever, and was much sicker than anyone but Hannah and the doctor suspected. 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. Hannah wouldn't hear of "Mrs. March bein' told, and worried just for sech a trifle."

JO enters, leading BETH to a couch, on which SHE lies. JO addresses the audience, struggling to keep her emotions in check.

JO: 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 voice, to play on the coverlet as if on her little piano, and to 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, and called imploringly for her mother.

MEG: *(gazing at BETH; to audience)* Then it was that Meg felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy.

JO: *(sits with BETH; to audience)* Then it was that Jo learned to see the beauty and the sweetness of Beth's nature, and to acknowledge the worth of Beth's unselfish ambition to live for others.

AMY enters and stands off to one side. The others can't see her as SHE addresses the audience.

AMY: *(to audience)* And Amy, in her exile, longed to be at home, that she might work for Beth, remembering how many neglected tasks those willing hands had done for her.

AMY exits as HANNAH enters. JO still sits with BETH.

HANNAH: *(to audience)* 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, and said, "If Mrs. March can leave her husband, she'd better be sent for." *(All sit quietly and watch over the sleeping BETH.)* The girls never forgot that night. No sleep came to them as they kept their watch.

MEG: If God spares Beth, I never will complain again.

JO: If God spares Beth, I'll try to love and serve Him all my life.

MEG: I wish I had no heart, it aches so.

Pause. HANNAH sleeps. JO moves restlessly to stare out a "window." We hear a clock strike the hour of two. MEG, who is watching BETH closely, suddenly moves forward and looks concerned. The movement attracts JO's attention, and SHE too moves close. SHE stares at the peaceful face for a moment, then bends to kiss her forehead. Her voice is barely audible.

JO: Goodbye, my Beth. Goodbye.

HANNAH awakens. SHE moves to BETH, feels her forehead, and puts her ear close to her lips to listen for her breath. Then SHE falls to the floor and sits rocking. The girls obviously think the worst has happened until they can understand what HANNAH is saying.

HANNAH: The fever's turned! She's sleepin' nat'ral, her skin's damp, and she breathes easy! Praise be given! Oh, my goodness me!

The girls and HANNAH hug each other in silent celebration, careful not to wake BETH.

JO: If Mother would only come now!

MEG: *(comes up with a small white rose)* See. 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 she wakes, the first thing she sees will be the little rose, and Mother's face.

LITTLE WOMEN

The sound of a door slamming offstage, and LAURIE's voice comes to us from without.

LAURIE: Girls, she's come! She's come!

After a moment's pause, MARMEE enters and, from the faces that greet her, knows instantly the BETH will be well. She opens her arms to MEG and JO, as LAURIE appears in the doorway and watches respectfully. As the embrace is broken and MARMEE moves to the bedside, the lights fade. They come up to reveal MARMEE sitting with the still sleeping BETH. MEG enters and addresses the audience.

MEG: Even in their joy they couldn't forget that other hole in their family. Meg sat down immediately to write and tell him the good news.

MARMEE: *(examines the letter MEG has written)* Quite right, and beautifully written. Please add that I send my love to John.

MEG: *(shyly)* Do you call him "John?"

MARMEE: Yes, he has been like a son to us, and we are very fond of him.

MEG: I'm glad. He's so lonely. Good night, Mother.

MARMEE looks thoughtfully at MEG, who smiles and exits. The lights go down. They come up to reveal AMY, MEG and MARMEE in the kitchen. JO enters with letters.

JO: Mail call! Amy. . . Meg. . . Marmee. . . Marmee. . . Here's a note to you, Meg, all sealed up. How odd! Teddy never seals mine.

They all read their mail until a gasp from MEG makes everyone look at her with concern.

MEG: It's all a mistake. He didn't send it. Oh, Jo, how could you?

JO: Me! I've done nothing!

MEG: *(takes a crumpled letter from her pocket and throws it at JO)*
You wrote that, and Laurie helped you. How could you be so cruel?

JO and MARMEE are frantically reading. JO reads aloud.

JO: *(reading)* 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. I implore you to say nothing to your family yet, but to send one word of hope through Laurie to. . . Your devoted John. *(to MEG)* Oh, the little villain! I'll give him a hearty scolding and bring him over to beg pardon.

MARMEE: Stop, Jo, you must clear yourself first. You have played so many pranks that I am afraid you have had a hand in this.

JO: 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! If I had, I'd have written a sensible note. *(to MEG)* I should think you'd have known Mr. Brooke wouldn't write such stuff as that.

MEG: It's like his writing—

MARMEE: Oh, Meg, you didn't answer it?

MEG: *(nodding)* I received the first letter from Laurie, who didn't look as if he knew anything about it. 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.

MARMEE: What did you say to him?

MEG: 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.

JO: What did he say to that?

MEG: 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 oh—! I can never look him in the face again!

JO: *(storms wrathfully about for a moment, then suddenly snatches up both letters and compares them)* I don't believe Brooke ever saw either of these letters. *(MEG looks at her hopefully.)* Teddy wrote both, and keeps yours to gloat over. Ooh, when I get my hands on him!

The girls exit as MARMEE addresses the audience.

MARMEE: When Laurie arrived under guard and much against his will, Meg immediately fled upstairs. One look at Mrs. March's face was enough to tell the poor boy how deep his trouble was, but he was so heartily sorry that Jo forgave him at once—though she thought it prudent not to show it—and even Mrs. March's grave face relaxed when she heard him declare that he would abase himself like a worm before the injured damsel. Before many days had gone by, Meg had pardoned him as well.

LAURIE enters, obviously excited. As HE addresses the audience in a whisper, all four girls and MARMEE enter.

LAURIE: Now and then, in this workaday world, things do happen in storybook fashion. They did that Christmas. Half an hour after everyone said they were so happy they could only hold one drop more, the drop came. (*loudly to everyone*) Here's another Christmas present for the March family!

And with a grand gesture LAURIE ushers in MR. MARCH, leaning heavily on the arm of JOHN BROOKE. After a moment's stunned silence, all five March women rush to embrace him. Everyone also shakes JOHN BROOKE's hand, except MEG, who forgets herself and kisses him, then is embarrassed and moves away to hug her father a second time. Even HANNAH weeps as SHE respectfully greets MR. MARCH—even though SHE has a turkey in one hand!

MR. MARCH: As the initial excitement turned to quieter joy, 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 retired. (*They do.*) After supper the two invalids were ordered to rest, which they did, by both sitting in one big chair and talking hard.

Everyone sits around the fire, BETH on MR. MARCH's knee.

JO: Just a year ago we were groaning over the dismal Christmas we expected to have. Do you remember?

MEG: Rather a pleasant year on the whole!

BETH: I'm glad it's over, because we've got you back.

MR. MARCH: Well, I've made several discoveries today.

MEG: Oh, tell us what they are!

MR. MARCH: Here is one. (*takes her hand*) 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 these seeming blemishes I read a little history. 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. I'm proud to shake this good, industrious hand, and I hope I shall not soon be asked to give it away.

BETH: What about Jo? Please say something nice, for she has tried so hard and been so good to me.

MR. MARCH: Her face is rather thin and pale just now, with watching and anxiety, but I like to look at it, for it has grown gentle. She takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way that 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.

AMY: Now, Beth.

MR. MARCH: 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. (*stops for a moment, overcome*) I've got you safe, my Beth, and I'll keep you so, please God. (*There is a silent pause before MR. MARCH turns to AMY and continues.*) And I observed that Amy gave Meg her place tonight at dinner, ran errands for her mother all the afternoon, and has waited on everyone with patience and good humor. She does not fret much nor look in the mirror, 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. (*SHE hugs him as HE addresses the audience.*) For the next week the family hovered about Mr. March like bees around the queen, neglecting everything to look at, wait upon, and listen to the new invalid, who was nearly 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.

MARMEE: (*to audience*) 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. Meg was absent-minded, shy, and silent, started when the bell rang, and colored when John Brooke's name was mentioned.

The elder Marches and HANNAH exit, leaving the girls, as LAURIE enters. HE addresses the audience and suits his actions to his words.

LAURIE: Laurie went by in the afternoon, and seeing Meg at the window, seemed suddenly possessed with a melodramatic fit. 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.

MEG: *(laughing)* What does the goose mean?

JO: He's showing you how your John will go on by-and-by. Touching, isn't it?

MEG: Don't say "my John." It isn't proper or true. *(obviously enjoys saying the words)* I've told you, I don't care much about him, and there isn't to be anything said.

JO: But 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. I don't mean to plague you, but I hate to wait, so if you're ever going to do it, get it over with!

MEG: I can't say anything till he speaks.

JO: If he did, you wouldn't know what to say.

MEG: I know just what I'll say. I've planned it all, just in case. I'll merely say, quite calmly and decidedly, "Thank you, Mr. Brooke, you are very kind, but I am too young to enter into any engagement at present, so please say no more, but let us be friends as we were." *(JO stifles a snort of derisive laughter.)* And then I shall walk out of the room with dignity.

MEG gets up to demonstrate her dignified exit, and comes face to face with JOHN BROOKE, who has entered.

BROOKE: Good afternoon. I came to get my umbrella—er—to see how your father is today.

JO: It's very well, he's in the rack. I'll get him, and tell it you're here. *(exits in some confusion)*

MEG: *(retreats a little)* Mother will like to see you. Pray, sit down, I'll call her.

BROOKE: Don't go. Are you afraid of me, Margaret?

MEG: How can I be afraid when you have been so kind to Father? I only wish I could thank you for it.

BROOKE: *(taking her hand)* Shall I tell you how?

MEG: Oh no, please don't.

BROOKE: I won't trouble you. I only want to know if you care for me a little, Meg.

MEG: *(softly)* I don't know.

BROOKE: *(smiling and squeezing her hand)* Will you try and find out? I can't go to work with any heart until I learn whether I'm to have my reward in the end or not.

MEG: I'm too young.

BROOKE: I'll wait, and in the meantime, you could be learning to like me. Would it be a very hard lesson?

MEG: No! I mean—not if I chose to learn it, but—

BROOKE: *(taking her other hand)* Please choose to learn, Meg. I love to teach, and this is easier than German.

There is a long moment during which we think SHE's about to go up like kindling, but then SHE douses the fire.

MEG: *(pulling away)* I don't choose. Please go away and let me be!

AUNT MARCH enters and the two instantly separate further.

AUNT MARCH: *(to audience, with some satisfaction)* Poor Mr. Brooke looked as if his lovely castle in the air was tumbling about his ears. What would have happened next, I can't say, if Aunt March had not come hobbling in at this interesting minute, hoping to surprise the family. 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. *(HE exits. SHE raps her umbrella)* Bless me, what's all this?

MEG: It's Father's friend. I'm so surprised to see you!

AUNT MARCH: That's evident. 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.

MEG: *(embarrassed)* We were only talking. Mr. Brooke came for his umbrella.

AUNT MARCH: Brooke? That boy's tutor? Ah! I understand now. You haven't gone and accepted him, child?

MEG: Hush! He'll hear. Shall I call Mother?

AUNT MARCH: Not yet. I've something to say to you. Tell me, do you mean to marry this Cook? If you do, not one penny of my money ever goes to you. Remember that. *(to audience)* Now, Aunt March possessed, in perfection, the art of rousing the spirit of opposition in the gentlest people, and enjoyed doing it. If Aunt March had begged Meg to accept John Brooke, she would probably have declared she couldn't think of it, but as it was—

MEG: I shall marry whom I please, and you can leave your money to anyone you like.

AUNT MARCH: 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.

MEG: It can't be a worse one than some people find in big houses. Father and Mother like John.

AUNT MARCH: Your parents, my dear, have no more worldly wisdom than a pair of babies. This Rook is poor and hasn't got any rich relations, has he?

MEG: No, but he has many warm friends.

AUNT MARCH: You can't live on friends. Try it and see how cool they'll grow.

MEG: John is good and wise! He's got heaps of talent, he's willing to work, and he's 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!

AUNT MARCH: He knows you've got a rich Aunt, child. That's the secret of his liking.

MEG: Aunt March, how dare you say such a thing? I won't listen to you a minute if you talk like that. My John wouldn't marry for money, any more than I would. I'm not afraid of being poor. I've been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him because he loves me, and I— *(covers her mouth in sudden embarrassment)*

AUNT MARCH: 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. Don't expect anything from me when you're married. Your Mr. Book's "friends" must take care of you. I'm done with you forever.

LITTLE WOMEN

SHE storms out, and as soon as SHE's gone, JOHN BROOKE rushes in. The two stare at each other for a brief moment, then MEG rushes into his arms. JO enters and addresses the audience, as the rest of the family enter to congratulate the now engaged pair.

JO: 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 with which he pleaded his suit, told his plans, and persuaded them to arrange everything just as he wanted. So the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, and the first act of the domestic drama called *Little Women*.

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