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*Four little chests all in a row...  
Now the white snow melts away...  
I have at last got the little room  
I have wanted so long...*

# Louisa May Alcott

## The Poet of Children

by Jennifer Elvgren  
illustrated by Kailien Singon

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# Louisa May Alcott

The Poet of Children

by

*Jennifer Elvgren*

illustrated by *Kailien Singson*

# VOICES IN HISTORY: BIOGRAPHY SERIES™

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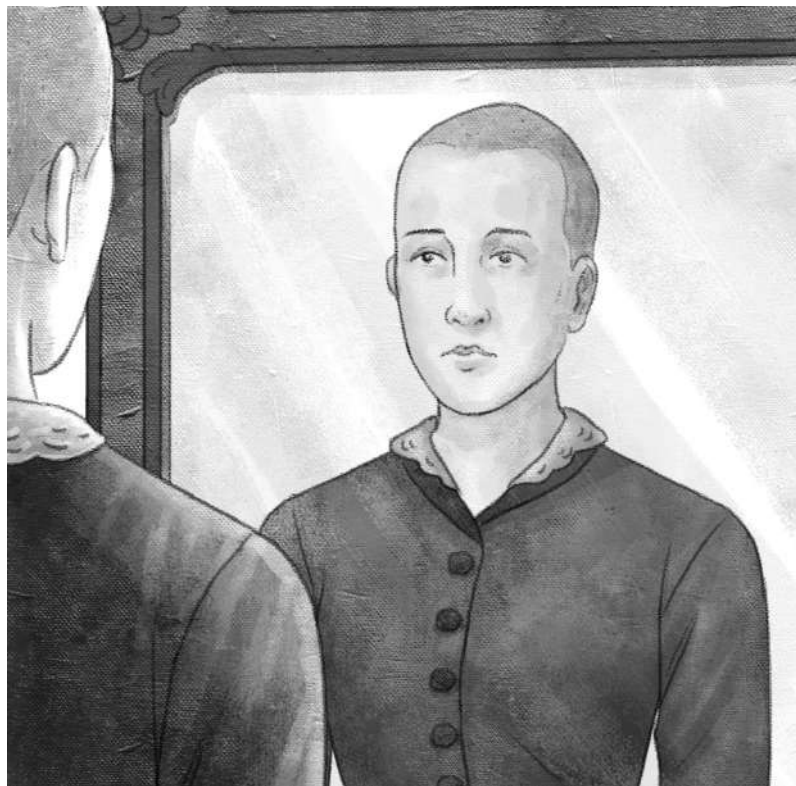
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# INTRODUCTION

## Louisa's Reflection

Louisa May Alcott stared at herself in the mirror. At thirty, she hardly recognized her reflection. Pale. Frail. Gaunt. And worst of all, nearly bald. Doctors had shaved Louisa's crowning glory—her long, thick brown hair—when she fell ill with typhoid pneumonia. She thought, *What a strange and bony face.*



**typhoid pneumonia:** inflammation of the lungs caused by a bacterial disease known as typhoid fever

Maybe Louisa was too vain about her hair. That had crossed her mind. But Louisa quickly dismissed the thought, feeling fortunate to be alive. Too much death recently. Many soldiers had already been killed in Civil War battles. And the same typhoid pneumonia continued to take the lives of not only soldiers but also doctors and nurses at the Union Hotel Hospital in Washington, D.C., where Louisa had volunteered as a nurse. She had left her nursing duties early in 1863, returning home to Concord, Massachusetts, to recover.

Louisa didn't know it at the time, but this experience would be crucial to her writing career. Years of writing romantic thrillers under pen names was nearly over. She was on the cusp of immortal, international fame purely by telling stories from the heart about real-life experiences, starting with her time at the hospital. The world was about to read and fall in love with Louisa's *Little Women*.

As a result of her forthcoming wild literary success, Louisa would finally be able to break her family's poverty cycle and come to terms with the difficult relationship she had with her father. Her life journey to this point had been anything but easy.

# 1

## The Last Plummy Cake

**B**orn into a poor New England flax farming family in 1799, Louisa's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, had taught himself to read by drawing letters on the wood floor with charcoal. He had always loved reading but hated being cooped up in a stale schoolhouse all day. He quit school after the elementary grades and became a laborer, then a peddler.

While he sold sewing notions and cookware up and down the East Coast, Bronson noted how the wealthy lived among books, beautiful art and furniture, and good food. Bronson wanted that life for himself and his future family, despite his growing debt from his time selling on the road. He hoped to find a path that would lead him to that comfortable life. Teaching, he thought, could help bring all those lovely things into not only his own life but also the lives of his students.

Louisa's mother, Abigail May Alcott, on the other hand, came from a wealthy, well-connected New England family. Born Abigail May in 1800, she grew

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**peddler:** someone who sells goods from door to door

up in a Boston mansion on Federal Court, now located in the city's Financial District, and was related to John Hancock, first governor of Massachusetts and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Bronson married Abigail in 1830, when he was thirty and she, considered an old maid, was twenty-nine. She shared his vision for progressive education. Bronson's educational beliefs came from the transcendentalist movement that embraced nature and idealism.

**Bronson Alcott: A Transcendentalist Leader**

*Bronson Alcott was a leader in the New England transcendentalism movement that started in Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1830s. A literary and ideological movement, transcendentalism held that humanity is inherently good; human intuition trumps logic, leading to the revelation of deeper truths; and communing with nature brings people closer to God. Other transcendentalists included literary giants Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, plus educators Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Mary Peabody Mann.*

Willing to support Bronson's educational dreams, Abigail followed him from school to school to school. In future years, the family would move more than twenty times in thirty years, mostly during Louisa's childhood.

Louisa made her entrance, squalling, on November 29, 1832—an unusually mild day for the time of year. Bronson, who turned thirty-three the very same day, wrote to his father-in-law, “It is with great pleasure that I announce to you the *birth of a second daughter*. She was born at half-past 12 this morning . . . and is a very fine healthful child.” Louisa joined her twenty-month-old sister, Anna, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where Bronson had moved the family to run his third school. As part of Bronson’s educational pursuits, he observed his own children and wrote his findings in journals. The differences between Anna and Louisa were stark. Sweet-natured Anna obeyed her parents, while willful Louisa was prone to temper tantrums.

It didn’t take long for Bronson to fill the Germantown cottage with fancy furniture and artwork. He hired a housekeeper and cook. Barely able to afford these luxuries, Bronson was soon further in debt and encouraged Abigail to ask her family for money. But he quickly spent the \$300 loan rather than paying off the debt. A mortified Abigail was forced to ask for another loan. This pattern would repeat itself for decades.

The Germantown school failed, followed by another school. In 1834, just before Louisa turned two, Bronson moved the family again to start the Temple School in

Boston. He thought the community would be more receptive to his ideas. The Masonic Temple on Tremont Street housed the school. At the start, eighteen students from wealthy families learned reading, writing, and spiritual thinking.

Louisa's third birthday was celebrated in her father's schoolroom. That November day in 1835, however, focused more on Bronson, who gave many long speeches until it was finally time for cake.

Louisa stood tall on a table, wearing a flower crown. As each student marched by her, she handed them a little plummy cake. When the last student held out hands to receive the sweet treat, Louisa realized there was only one cake left. If she gave it to the student, she wouldn't have a cake. On *her* birthday! Louisa held the cake tightly.

But then her mother said, "It is always better to give away than to keep the nice things; so I know my Louy will not let the little friend go without." With a heavy heart, Louisa handed the student the last plummy cake.

Marmee, as the girls called their mother, gave Louisa a kiss, but Bronson scolded her for being selfish and headstrong.

The shortage of plummy cakes may have been a mistake, or Bronson may have planned it as a lesson in

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**Masonic Temple:** a building where members of the Freemason organization meet

virtue for Louisa. Either way, throughout her entire life, Louisa would never forget this party and would have a general dislike of November and birthdays. It was foreshadowing of her place in the family—the daughter pushed over and over again toward achievement; the daughter who would go without to feed and clothe her entire family.



# 2

## Wild Exuberance of a Powerful Nature

Louisa's stomach growled. It was before dinner, and she was hungry. Anna was hungry, too. Bronson appeared in the room, holding a shiny red apple. He placed the apple before the sisters and asked them if they would ever take anything without asking. No! both girls shouted. But as soon as Bronson left, Louisa grabbed the apple and sank her teeth into the juicy fruit. She knew it was naughty, but she wanted it.

Again, Bronson left an apple where Louisa would find it. Both Bronson and Marmee watched, unseen, as Louisa struggled to control her desires. Louisa picked up the apple several times but didn't bite into it. Suddenly, Louisa's willpower faded, and she bit into the apple with a big crunch.

Even though Louisa ended up taking the apple, it was clear she had felt conflicted about her behavior. Bronson rejoiced in the sense of conscience that Louisa was developing. However, Louisa could also be wild and

aggressive. She could bully Anna. She could be stubborn. She could let her temper rule her, much like Marmee. Bronson tried to tame her wild ways. When Louisa pinched Anna, Bronson pinched Louisa.

“Hers is the wild exuberance of a powerful nature,” wrote Bronson. He didn’t know yet if that was a good or bad thing.

Not only did Bronson handle the girls’ moral development, but he also oversaw their dietary and educational development. Though the family was unusually comfortable in Boston, their diet was meager and strict. Most meals consisted of water, plain boiled rice, fruit, and vegetables.

Louisa’s education began with reading during her preschool years. Learning letters came first. Bronson taught both girls to bend their bodies into different letters. The letter I, for example, was tall and straight and boastful. Bronson and the girls strutted about, repeating “I, I, I!” with an air of superiority. Then the girls discovered that letters formed words. Words created sentences. And there were sentences about every topic imaginable in books. Louisa especially loved books, even before she could fully read them.

---

**exuberance:** joyful enthusiasm

**moral development:** the process by which children develop a sense of right and wrong

**meager:** low in amount or value



In Bronson's study, Louisa found all sorts of uses for his books. The biggest books, like his dictionaries, could become lovely houses and bridges. Books with pictures made for wonderful pretending. Ones with blank pages were perfect for scribbling. Once, Louisa traced her hand in her father's journal.

As her education progressed, Louisa found she disliked arithmetic and grammar, avoiding these subjects as much as she could. She enjoyed reading, writing, composition, history, and geography, but having stories read to her made Louisa's heart sing. Particular favorites were fairy tales, *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, F. A. Krummacher's *Parables*, and anything by Maria Edgeworth.

Louisa's lessons were about to pause, though. Because she continued to be so rambunctious, Louisa was sent away to stay with her mother's relatives while Marmee was expecting another baby. Bronson hoped that Louisa would obey her Boston relatives and not have temper tantrums. It didn't turn out that way.

After Elizabeth, called Lizzie, was born, an unimpressed Louisa returned home and declared, "I don't love little sister, I wish she was dead, I will throw

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**rambunctious:** unruly due to excess enthusiasm

her out the window.” After being banished to her room, Louisa came around and kissed baby Lizzie. Bronson told this story to his Temple School students as a lesson in remorse. It may have been a good lesson in school, but at home, it’s possible Bronson only caused his own daughters, especially Louisa, to hide their true feelings.

Louisa’s remorseful mood did not last. She continued to make mischief, constantly running away from home. The Alcotts’ neighborhood was busy—peddlers, goods going to market, strangers, and the town crier who proclaimed the latest news. Louisa would disappear for hours to play with poor children in the streets or in Boston Common, the city’s largest park.

One day, Louisa didn’t come home at dark. A worried Marmee and Bronson enlisted the town crier to help them look for a little girl wearing “a pink frock, white hat, and new green shoes.” Hopelessly lost after her friends had gone home, Louisa rested on a doorstep and watched a lamplighter light the lamps. Soon, the kind dog of the house curled up with Louisa, allowing her to use his broad back as a pillow. She and the dog slept until the town crier found them. When Louisa returned home, Marmee tied her to the sofa’s arm so she wouldn’t run away again and would instead think about what she had done.

---

**remorse:** regret caused by guilt for past actions



**In Louisa's Own Words (1889)**

*"Running away was one of the delights of my early days; and I still enjoy sudden flights out of the nest to look about this very interesting world."*

Around the same time, Bronson and Marmee were expecting another baby. When Marmee delivered a boy, their deepest wish came true. But their joy soon turned to sorrow when the baby died shortly after birth. Bronson and Marmee never recovered from this loss. Marmee celebrated his birthday every year. This served as a stark reminder to Louisa and her sisters that they would never be the longed-for son.

Louisa was determined to prove that she was as good as any boy. She outran the neighborhood boys. She drove her hoop around the Common's walking paths without stopping, taking pride that the boys couldn't keep up. But Louisa's time competing with boys in the Common was drawing to a close.

Bronson's assistant and benefactor at the Temple School, Elizabeth Peabody, had spent her time there documenting Bronson's work. She published a book on his teaching methods and his dialogues with his students, which was well received and bolstered the Temple School. The second book, which focused on Bronson's religious dialogues with his students, was not well received by anyone. Even Elizabeth eventually left the school, and

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**hoop:** a large wood or metal ring used in hoop rolling, a game in which players use a stick to keep the hoop upright and rolling along the ground

**benefactor:** someone who provides help to another, often in the form of money

**dialogues:** exchanges of ideas between two or more people

**bolstered:** supported or gave a boost to

her sister Sophia finished the book for her. Bronson asked his students to consider and discuss topics such as the Bible, families and children, financial issues, and parents' beliefs. That Bronson would allow questions or discussions upon any subject angered reviewers and parents alike. This would be the beginning of the end for the Temple School and Bronson's reputation.

One by one, parents pulled their children from the Temple School, and funding began to dry up. Falling further into debt, the Alcotts were forced to auction their belongings. "Go away, bad man, you are making my father unhappy," seven-year-old Louisa yelled at the sheriff who came for their books and fine furniture.

The school was relegated to one dark basement room, and the Alcott family crammed their lives into small, dingy rooms. "We are as poor as rats," a furious Marmee told her family.

After five years at the Temple School, they were deeper in debt than ever. Forced to accept food and clothing donations to survive, Bronson finally accepted that the Temple School was over in 1839. Louisa was quite unhappy with her first experience with poverty. She had no idea then that the family could sink even deeper into the abyss.

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**auction:** sell to the highest bidder

**relegated:** moved to a less important place

### **Bronson Alcott's Unconventional Teaching Methods**

*Bronson and Marmee encouraged their daughters to play, make their own choices, run outside, and climb trees at home. Many of these activities raised eyebrows at the time, as they were thought unladylike.*

*Bronson's unconventional ideas also made their way into his classroom at the Temple School. Some of his methods are now used in modern classrooms, but they were largely unheard of in American classrooms of the 1830s and were even considered radical. Bronson's students were encouraged to move freely around the classroom—singing, clapping, marching. Twice-daily recess allowed the children to run, play, and reset their brains. Bronson detested boring classrooms. He filled his bookshelves with poetry and fairy tales to make imaginations soar. There was paper for drawing, blocks for building, and maps to explore faraway places. All were designed to foster creativity.*

*Above all, Bronson's students thought freely and expressed their opinions.*

# 3

## The Pathetic Family

Louisa loved to run. She liked to imagine she had been a deer or a horse in a previous life. Those lucky enough to be her friends had to keep pace with her when running through fields, leaping fences, and climbing trees.

When the Temple School failed, Louisa was not disappointed to discover the Alcotts were moving to the country—with the help of a friend, the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson.

### **Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Sage of Concord**

*Unitarian preacher and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson soared to fame with his literary ventures. Waldo wrote books and essays on transcendentalism, individualism, self-reliance, and self-cultivation. His 1841 essay “Self-Reliance” encouraged the reader to examine their relationship with nature and God. After his death in 1882, Waldo was remembered as the Sage of Concord.*

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**individualism:** the belief that an individual’s interests are more important than those of the larger community

**self-reliance:** trust in one’s own efforts and abilities

**self-cultivation:** developing one’s mind or abilities through independent effort

**sage:** a very wise person

Waldo, as he was known to his friends, played the role of the Alcott family's guardian angel. He considered Bronson to be one of the most brilliant thinkers of his time, and throughout their friendship, he was known to tuck money under vases or bowls for the family to discover when he had left. After the failure of the Temple School, Waldo bailed out the Alcotts. In 1840, he found them Dove Cottage in the small town of Concord, about twenty miles west of Boston. Waldo also lived in Concord and thought it would be good for Bronson and his family to be in the country, on two acres near the Concord River. He even negotiated a lower rent for them.

**In Louisa's Own Words**

*"I remember running over the hills just at dawn one summer morning, and pausing to rest in the silent woods, saw, through an arch of trees, the sun rise over river, hill, and wide green meadows as I never saw it before.*

*"Something born of the lovely hour, a happy mood, and the unfolding aspirations of a child's soul seemed to bring me very near to God."*

The trees and shrubbery were scraggly, the stairs rickety, the kitchen sooty, and the dining room small for their growing family. But the size of the cottage and the state of their two acres did not matter. Life in Concord was meant to be lived outside. The fields, woods, and river called to Louisa.

**bailed out:** helped out of a difficult situation

**aspirations:** hopes or ambitions

Life at Dove Cottage was peaceful for seven-year-old Louisa—a welcome change. For once, the entire family was happy at the same time. Marmee’s mood lifted. She sang in the morning and the evening. Bronson improved the property inside and out, remembering skills that his father had taught him long ago. He made repairs, planted gardens and trees, and built trellises for blooming vines, expecting to make an income from food that he grew.



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**trellises:** wooden frames used to support climbing plants

Anna went to school in town, while Louisa and Lizzie learned at Waldo's house, where there was a school for younger children. Louisa was enthralled by Waldo's library and continued her love for books. It was during this time that Louisa considered writing and began to take it seriously. Her first poem was called "To the First Robin":

Welcome, welcome, little stranger,  
Fear no harm, and fear no danger;  
We are glad to see you here,  
For you sing "Sweet Spring is near."

Now the white snow melts away;  
Now the flowers blossom gay;  
Come dear bird and build your nest,  
For we love our robin best.

Louisa became fast friends with a young teacher at Waldo's school, Henry David Thoreau, a naturalist and writer. Henry was great fun and immediately connected with his students. The woods were his classroom. Playing his flute along the way, Henry rambled through the forest with the children. He taught them about birds,

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**enthralled:** deeply fascinated

**naturalist:** someone who studies nature

flowers, moss, dens, and animal tracks. Once, Henry fed a chipmunk from his hand. From time to time, lessons were held on Henry's boat, the *Musketaquid*. Henry made sure the children learned about the American Revolution and the "shot heard round the world," as Waldo called it, which, when fired at the Old North Bridge in Concord, had started the American Revolutionary War.

**Henry David Thoreau:**  
**Demonstrating the Satisfying Simple Life**

*A Harvard graduate, author, and teacher, Henry David Thoreau came under the tutelage of Waldo to become a transcendentalist as well as a naturalist. Henry borrowed Bronson's axe to cut wood to build a cottage on Waldo's land near a pond—Walden Pond. For a little more than two years, Henry lived in solitude and documented his surroundings and his response to them, turning them into his most famous book, *Walden*, in 1854. His 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience," written after he spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax in protest of the Mexican-American War, later influenced leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Throughout his lifetime, Henry continued to study and write about nature and became a dedicated abolitionist.*

By summer, Marmee was expecting a baby again, and Louisa was once again in exile due to her wild ways. She sat, suffocating, in Boston with Marmee's proper relatives

---

**solitude:** the state of being alone or away from society

**poll tax:** a fee of a fixed amount that every adult must pay the government

**abolitionist:** a person who fights to end slavery

**exile:** the state of being forced to leave one's home

while her family all wrote to her about their summer adventures. Louisa stewed. When the baby was born, the Alcotts called her Baby until they settled on Abigail May, after her mother, though she would go by her middle name all her life. When Louisa returned home, she was not quite as hostile as she had been when Lizzie was born, but she did ignore May and hide in the kitchen.

Once again, Bronson had no son to raise in his likeness and pass on his transcendentalist duties to—no reflection of himself. He bemoaned the fact that all he had to raise were four “little women.”

Meanwhile, Bronson’s attempt at farming had failed, and he moved on to writing articles for a transcendentalist magazine. His articles were wordy, wandering, and somewhat vague. Waldo wondered if Bronson could ever write as well as he gave lectures. Farming and writing went the way of teaching for the moment, and the family found themselves back in crushing poverty.

When Marmee received an inheritance from her father, she assumed that would ease their suffering. In shock, she discovered her father had forbidden her inheritance from being spent on Bronson’s debt, which was now more than \$6,000, or around \$215,000 in today’s money.

Bronson still would not take a job with regular hours, which he found soul crushing. He barely managed to sustain his family with speaking engagements on education in New England and New York. Surprisingly, two British educators who had read about Bronson's teachings reached out. They had established a school in England called Alcott House, after Bronson's own name, and invited him to visit and lecture there.

In 1842, for the six months that Bronson was gone, Marmee carried the weight of the entire household—housework, cooking, sewing, and making ends meet. At the time, the girls were one, six, nine, and eleven years old. Although Marmee was tired, depressed, and unhappy in her marriage, she focused all her energy and love on her girls. She tried hard to finish her tasks early in the day so she could romp, read, and sing with the children in the afternoon. Instead of lamenting Bronson's debt, she turned her sights on making sure her daughters could earn a living, teaching them cooking, cleaning, sewing, and needlework. She wondered if being a teacher or governess could be in Louisa's future—maybe even a hatmaker, as her needlework was exquisite and the whimsical doll hats she made were popular among her friends.

---

**lamenting:** expressing sadness for

**governess:** a woman who cares for and teaches a child in the child's home

Others in town witnessed Marmee's struggles. One local constable called Bronson a "great feller for talkin' big" and added, "His daughters is the gals though—always *doin'* something." Louisa understood the family dynamics, too. All the women worked endlessly to pay the bills while Bronson did little, yet he was still adored for his educational ideas. She dubbed the Alcotts "the Pathetic Family."

# 4

## My Little Room

Louisa wanted her own room—a room without sisters, where she could dream and write in her journal. From the time she could read and write, Bronson required Louisa, and the rest of the family for that matter, to keep a journal. Sometimes, they would read journal entries aloud to each other. Other times, Louisa would share her feelings with Marmee and let her read the pages:

*DEAREST MOTHER,—I have tried to be more contented, and I think I have been more so. I have been thinking about my little room, which I suppose I never shall have. I should want to be there about all the time, and I should go there and sing and think.*

*But I'll be contented  
With what I have got;  
Of folly repented,  
Then sweet is my lot.*

*From your trying daughter,  
LOUX.*

---

**folly:** a foolish act  
**repented:** regretted

Louisa was a long way away from having that room. Dove Cottage had already been too small when the Alcotts moved in. And when Bronson returned home from England, he brought two new teachers, Henry Wright and Charles Lane, and Lane's ten-year-old son with him. They hoped to start a utopian community combining Bronson's educational ideas with Lane's philosophical ones. While they searched for property and investors, the party from England moved into Dove Cottage with the Alcotts. The guests took over bedrooms and Bronson's study. Lane imposed strict schedules on the entire family. They woke at dawn for their cold baths followed by lectures, studying, and chores. Meager meals were interspersed. There was no time for the girls to play, and Lane criticized Marmee's every move. Inexplicably, Bronson agreed with Lane.

"Circumstances most cruelly drive me from the enjoyment of my domestic life. . . . I seem frowned down into stiff quiet and *peace-less* order," Marmee wrote in her journal about a month after Lane and Wright's arrival. "I am almost suffocated in this atmosphere of restriction and form."

Worse times were right around the corner. Wright,

---

**utopian:** having impossibly ideal conditions

**investors:** people who put money toward a goal in exchange for future benefit

**lectures:** educational speeches

**interspersed:** inserted in several places between other things

who was to serve as headmaster in the new utopian community's school, moved out of Dove Cottage. Unable to find investors, Bronson and Lane decided to fund the project themselves, and they found a farm for their utopian community in the spring of 1843. The ninety-acre farm, which Bronson called Fruitlands, was located about ten miles from Concord, in Harvard, Massachusetts. There were no roads to the farm, only a cart track. There were few people to socialize with. It seemed the end of the earth.

The ramshackle house now housed eight with a handful of extras that came and went at different times. It had no furniture and a nonfunctional kitchen. Young May shared her parents' room, but Anna, Louisa, and Lizzie slept in the attic crawl space, where they froze in the winter and boiled in the summer. Bronson worked out in the fields for twelve hours every day to grow the food the community needed to eat and to sell. His prospects were slim, as the planting was done too late in the year. Meanwhile, Lane ruled the household with an iron fist. Once again, cold baths at dawn. Sermon after sermon. Chores upon chores. And little food.

Marmee tried to rally the girls' morale with a family post office. She made mailboxes for everyone so they

---

**cart track:** a narrow, unpaved road or path

**ramshackle:** looking ready to fall down

**prospects:** possible good outcomes

**sermon:** a religious speech

could exchange letters. But she could only keep spirits and patience up for so long. Lane wanted to separate Bronson and Marmee not only from each other but also from their children. One day, when Lane was away from the commune, Bronson held a family discussion, informing Marmee and the girls that he may need to leave them. Marmee became furious with Lane, and with Bronson for even considering the idea. Despair fell over the female Alcotts. Louisa cried herself to sleep that night.

That winter was among the coldest in New England's history. If the bitter cold wasn't bad enough, one hundred inches of snow fell. Without a bountiful harvest, food was even scarcer, and neighbors had to donate firewood. Marmee had had enough. She and the girls moved in with nearby friends, leaving Bronson at the commune. Bronson felt the strain of choosing between Lane and his wife. It took him a few long, excruciating days to pick his family, but Bronson finally joined them. Soon after, he had a nervous breakdown.

Marmee gave Louisa strength by sending letters to her mailbox:

---

**commune:** a small group of people who live together and share both property and labor

**scarcer:** more difficult to find

**excruciating:** causing great pain

MY DEAREST LOUY,—I often peep into your diary, hoping to see some record of more happy days. “Hope, and keep busy,” dear daughter, and in all perplexity or trouble come freely to your

MOTHER.

Louisa encouraged her mother by sending letters back:

DEAR MOTHER,—You shall see more happy days, and I will come to you with my worries, for you are the best woman in the world.

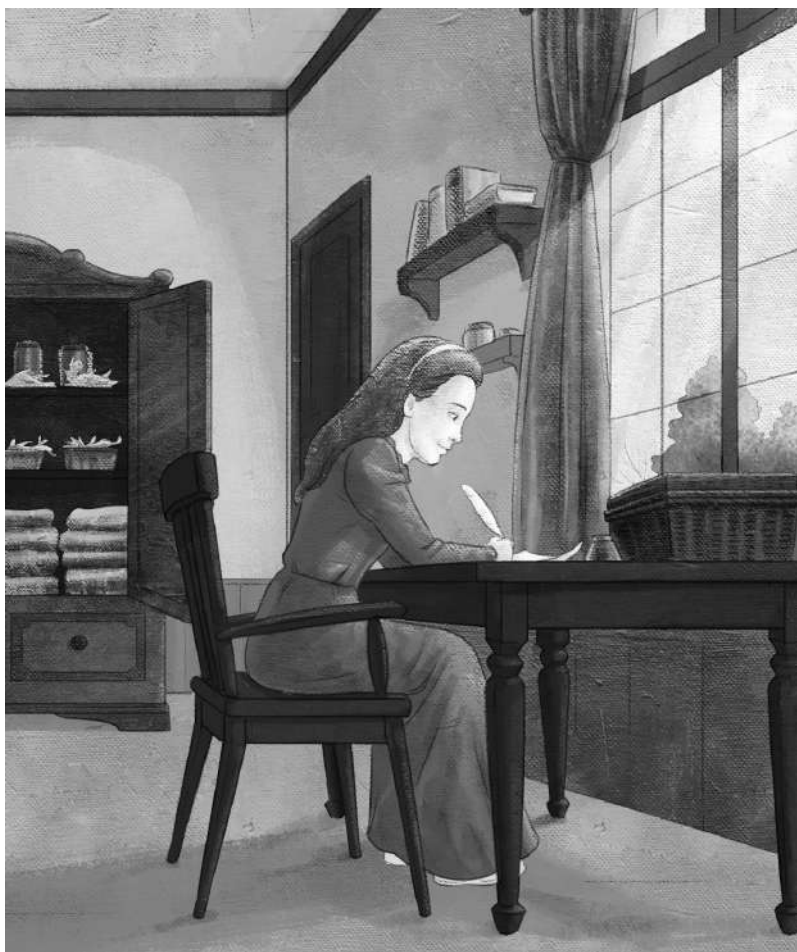
L. M. A.

But first, Bronson had to get well. Week after week, he lay in bed, face to the wall. No eating. No drinking. No speaking. A storm brewed in his mind. He replayed every failure. Marmee and the girls hung on until, once again, Waldo stepped in. In early 1845, he found them another house in Concord, at the edge of his property. Bronson named the house Hillside.

The rambling house fronted the Lexington road, and behind rose a forested hill covered with birch, pine, and hemlock trees. Ponds were near, and a stream ran through a flowered field across the road. To prevent the house from being taken to pay off Bronson’s debt, Marmee’s cousin and brother agreed to buy it for her for \$850, using part

of her inheritance money. Waldo bought them eight acres across the street for \$500 to use as farmland.

But most importantly for thirteen-year-old Louisa, she would finally have a room of her own. It was in this room that Louisa started writing in earnest, drawing from what she called her “real imagination.” She was starting down the pathway to her first publication.



**From Louisa's Journal (Hillside, March 1846)**

*"I have at last got the little room I have wanted so long, and am very happy about it. It does me good to be alone, and Mother has made it very pretty and neat for me. My work-basket and desk are by the window, and my closet is full of dried herbs that smell very nice. The door that opens into the garden will be very pretty in summer, and I can run off to the woods when I like."*

**Stories from Hillside**

*In Hillside, the Alcott sisters lived most of the lives Louisa wrote about in Little Women. After the Alcotts moved, author Nathaniel Hawthorne, best known for his novel The Scarlet Letter (1850), bought the property and renamed it the Wayside. After the Hawthorne family, children's author Harriett Lothrop moved in with her family and, under the pen name Margaret Sidney, wrote eleven of the twelve books in her Five Little Peppers series (1881–1916). The Lothrop family preserved the house for future generations, and in 1965, it became the first literary site to be part of the National Park Service.*

# 5

## Living Little Women

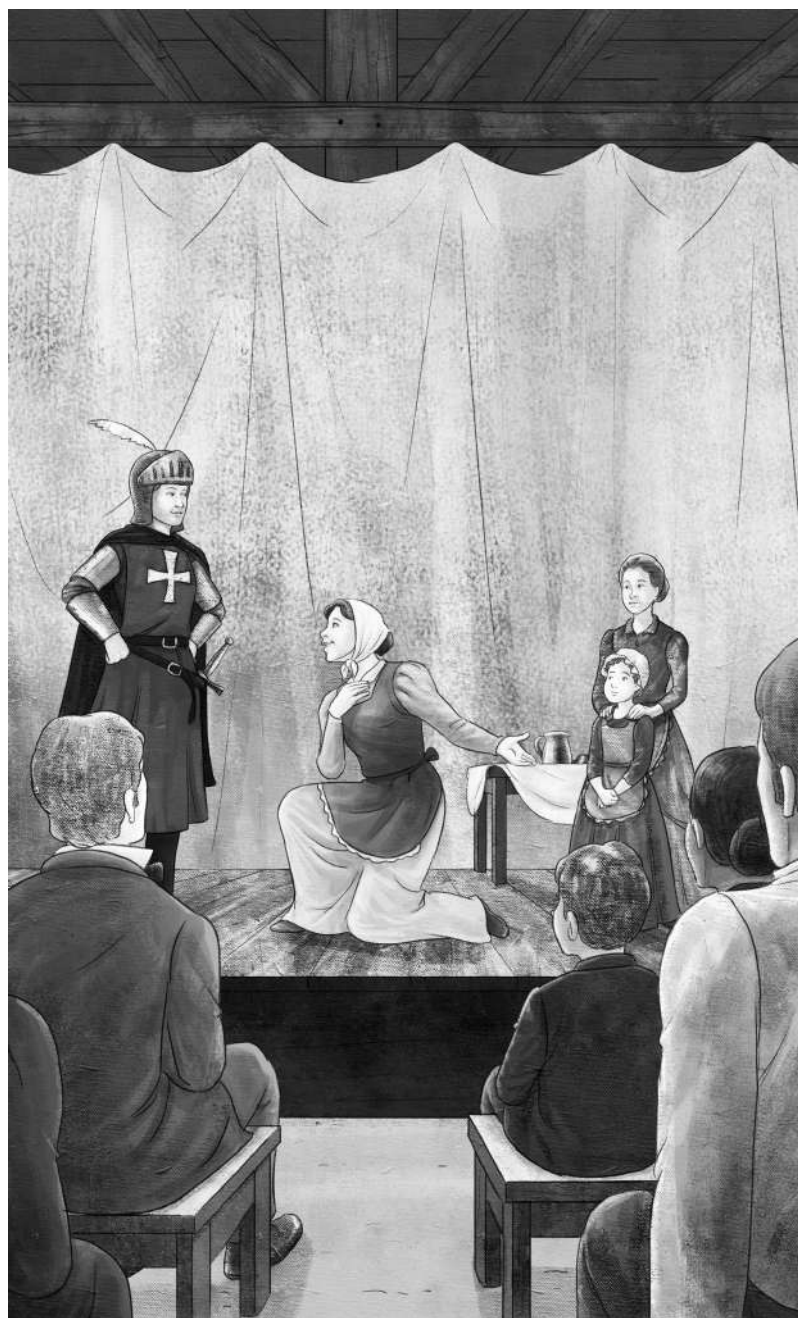
One of the best parts of Louisa's Hillside room was her little door that slipped out to the woods. "I had an early run in the woods before the dew was off the grass," she wrote in her journal one morning. "The moss was like velvet, and as I ran under the arches of yellow and red leaves I sang for joy."

Besides exploring nature, Louisa and her sisters had days full of learning, journaling, reading, writing, and pretend adventures. Once, Marmee stuffed bags with rags, and the sisters pretended the bags were backpacks and reenacted *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which a man named Christian journeys to the Celestial City.

Louisa loved writing complex plays for the golden band of sisters. Louisa played the male leads, Anna the female leads, and Lizzie and May filled in the smaller roles. The sets, props, and costumes were elaborate: scarves, cloaks, daggers, big plumed hats, fairy wings, and boots made from leather scraps. The barn became their theater, and all Concord residents were welcome to come see the productions.

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**props:** objects used onstage or on-screen during a performance



Waldo's son Edward, who was lucky enough to be included in the Alcott girls' circle, recalled the plays: "Love, despair, witchcraft, villainy, fairy intervention, triumphant right, held sway in turn."

It was in that same barn that Louisa's writing career officially began. She created stories for Waldo's daughter Ellen, who was just a few years younger than herself. Each tale featured adventures of elves and fairy sprites, with lush descriptions of flora and fauna. A delighted Ellen spent many happy hours at Hillside with Louisa, just as Louisa spent many happy hours at Waldo's house. Upon reading some of the tales, Waldo said of Louisa, "She is, and is to be, the poet of children. She knows their angels."

### **Flower Fables**

*Flower Fables was Louisa's first book, written at the age of sixteen. These fairy tales and fables were originally told to entertain Concord children, especially Ellen Emerson. Louisa's love of nature resonates through the six original stories and three poems, which laid a foundation of love, kindness, and responsibility for all the children who read them. A Boston publisher released 1,600 copies on December 9, 1854, more than five years after Louisa wrote them. Louisa was paid \$35 for her work, which would be just over \$1,300 today.*

Bronson and Marmee encouraged the plays and the writing, supporting the sisters' full creativity. Once, when **resonates**: fills or expands throughout, as a sound (literal) or a feeling (figurative)

Waldo and Margaret Fuller were visiting to discuss education with Bronson and Marmee, Margaret asked to see his “model children.” She didn’t have to wait long. The adults soon heard what Louisa would later describe as “a wild uproar” from their seats on the porch.

A playful parade rounded the corner of the house. Louisa played the horse, bridled and pulling Queen May in a wheelbarrow behind her. Anna, the eldest, sat at the front of the wheelbarrow, steering her younger sister this way and that. Lizzie ran alongside, barking like a dog. The girls’ shouts and laughter were cut short by their shock at seeing the guests looking on. Louisa tripped and tumbled with her sisters into a giddy pile.

“Here are the model children, Miss Fuller,” said Marmee.

Louisa, full of jokes and tricks, lacked considerably in manners. She spoke her mind, “borrowed” her neighbors’ horses and sleighs, and made such a racket, even annoying Anna as she tried to practice her music. Much like the male characters she portrayed in their barn theater, Louisa also played the role of protector with her sisters. When a boy showed interest in Anna and tried to kiss her, Louisa stopped him. She railed and railed against

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**railed:** scolded or complained

the boy, calling him names and never letting him forget the liberty that he tried to take.

During this time, Louisa's "moods" became longer and more noticeable, and neither parent knew how to handle them. Marmee wrote a worried letter to relatives that Louisa "at times [suffered] the greatest volatility and wretchedness of spirit—no hope, no heart for anything." But Louisa's moods were not unlike Marmee's, perhaps occurring in both of them when more of Bronson's projects failed or he performed new social experiments on his family. For example, when one of the sisters disappointed Bronson, he would serve everyone a plate at dinner except himself. Bronson would then leave the table without eating, making a public display of how the guilty sister had hurt him with her mistake.

Bronson had also all but given up trying to earn a living. Marmee took in sewing and stopped spending money unnecessarily. The sisters taught when they could and relied on hand-me-downs from relatives. When Concord merchants stopped giving them credit, the Alcotts were on the verge of starvation.

Marmee's relatives intervened and offered her a meager paid charity position in Boston. The family was

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**volatility:** tendency to change quickly

**wretchedness:** misery, unhappiness, or distress

to move immediately into a dark little house in a poorer neighborhood of Boston's South End. Hillside would be rented out to make ends meet and try to pay down the debt.

Louisa was heartbroken when she learned of the family's sudden plans to move. Not only would she have to give up the much-longed-for and loved room of her own, but she would have to say goodbye to the fields, the woods, the ponds, and her Concord friends—Edward, Ellen, Waldo, Henry—all of which brought her so much solace.

Louisa vowed to herself that one day she would write a good book—a good book that would make plenty of money. Despite Bronson's continued failure to financially support the family and his often-critical attitude toward Louisa, she still wanted him to be secure. She wished for a “sunny chamber” for Marmee, opportunities for Anna, care for Lizzie, and an education for May. Little did she know that these girlhood dreams would come true.

# 6

## The Vortex

Louisa hated housekeeping. But in the winter of 1848–49, when the six Alcotts stuffed themselves into four dark, airless rooms in Boston, the cooking and cleaning fell to her. Louisa’s beloved woods, fields, and river were gone. Marmee first worked for the charity, then later started an employment company. Meanwhile, Anna served as a governess, then a teacher. Bronson considered starting another school but decided against it, instead falling into a dark state. Isolated from Waldo, Henry, and his other Concord friends, he stopped eating and sleeping. Once, when his mental state was faltering, Bronson showed up at a friend’s house, saying, “I am God. I am greater than God. God is one of my ideas.”

One summer, the entire family contracted smallpox. Using homeopathic medicine and herbs, they all recovered but plunged deeper into debt. Marmee’s family gave money again to what Louisa dubbed “the Alcott Sinking Fund.”

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**smallpox:** a disease caused by a virus that leads to fever and a bumpy skin rash

**homeopathic medicine:** an alternative form of medicine that treats an illness with very small doses of a substance that causes the same symptoms

**In Louisa's Own Words**

*"I was left to keep house, feeling like a caged sea-gull as I washed dishes and cooked in the basement kitchen, where my prospect was limited to a procession of muddy boots."*

Louisa knew that if she didn't do something, her soul would die. She sought her escape in her imagination and her writing. She even started a family newspaper for all the sisters to contribute poems, stories, and articles to. The bulk of her writing through her late teens and her twenties resembled modern-day romantic thrillers. Louisa wrote under the pen name A. M. Barnard, or sometimes published anonymously, because society would never tolerate a woman writing these types of stories at the time. Her female protagonists were often working class and at times ill-mannered. Sometimes they were mentally terrorized by family and friends. Occasionally, they were the perpetrators, not the victims. Louisa sold these stories to keep the Alcotts going in between monetary gifts from Marmee's family.

To shut out the outside world, Louisa fell into what she described as "a vortex" while writing. Nothing else mattered but the pen, paper, and plot.

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**anonymously:** without being named or identified

**protagonists:** main characters

**perpetrators:** people who do harmful, criminal, or other bad things

**vortex:** something that spins like a whirlpool and pulls things toward its center



**From Louisa's Journal (February 1861)**

*"All sorts of fun was going on; but I did n't care if the world returned to chaos if I and my inkstand only 'lit' in the same place.*

*"It was very pleasant and queer while it lasted; but after three weeks of it I found that my mind was too rampant for my body, as my head was dizzy, legs shaky, and no sleep would come."*

**rampant:** out of control

Back in Concord, the renting out of Hillside had not gone as planned, and Bronson decided to sell the property. It had been for sale for quite a while when author Nathaniel Hawthorne took the plunge and purchased it for \$1,500. With the proceeds, the family was able to move to nicer, larger quarters in a better part of Boston—Beacon Hill. Bronson continued to shirk his financial duties, leaving Marmee, Anna, and Louisa to earn around \$700 a year combined from teaching, sewing, writing, and governess work.

In the midst of this, the Alcotts' landlord unexpectedly asked them to move. Cousins from Walpole, New Hampshire, came to the rescue, offering them a rent-free house. The family entered a relatively peaceful summer. Marmee could relax while Bronson gardened. Anna and Louisa performed in summer theater productions, a Boston newspaper even mentioning one of Louisa's memorable performances. A piano was gifted to Lizzie from a local pastor. And May worked on illustrations, honing her artistic skills.

During their second summer in Walpole, Lizzie and May fell ill with scarlet fever likely caught from a family that Marmee had nursed back to health. Louisa returned

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**shirk:** avoid an obligation

**honing:** sharpening or making more effective

**scarlet fever:** a bacterial infection of the throat that causes fever, sore throat, and rash

from Boston where she had been writing and Anna from a governess job in New York. May recovered quickly, but Lizzie's illness only worsened. Anna and Louisa took turns sitting by her bedside. The Alcotts turned again to homeopathic medicine and herbs, assuming that it would work just as it had when the family had smallpox. But it didn't.

Scarlet fever left Lizzie in a weakened state, and she was never able to work again. It was in that weakened state that she contracted a wasting disease. Looking back, some think it could have been a case of tuberculosis, which, without treatment, causes the patient to be fatigued, have night sweats, and generally waste away. She spent much time in bed in her room. Still, she found joy in making little gifts and dropping them out the window to surprise the schoolchildren below.

Around this time, in a happy turn of events, the family finally returned to Concord. Waldo had stepped in once again in 1857 to pay the deposit on twelve acres that held forty apple trees. There was, as the Alcotts always lived in, a dilapidated house that was thrown in for free, dubbed Orchard House. It had been built between 1650 and 1720, and its previous occupants included

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**tuberculosis:** a bacterial infection of the lungs that causes fever and difficulty breathing

**dilapidated:** run-down; in poor condition

Concord minutemen and a state senator. It sat directly next to their beloved Hillside. Because of the orchard, and because so many areas of the house slanted, leaned, or sloped, Louisa, now twenty-five, nicknamed it Apple Slump, after a popular dessert at the time. Bronson went to work again, restoring the foundation and the floors and bringing the orchards back to life.

Despite Lizzie's fading health, there was laughter in the house again, with dinners, games, and picnics with their old Concord friends. The sisters started performing plays once more. They curtained off the dining room from the living room. The audience sat in the living room, while the dining room was the stage. A small staircase led from the dining room to May's bedroom, serving as a prop and dressing room.

These theatrics, though a form of play, showed promise for two of the sisters. Both Louisa and Anna took their acting from the Alcott stage to the Concord Dramatic Union stage, which they both helped to found. It was there, during a production of *The Loan of a Lover*, that Anna met and fell in love with a man named John Pratt.

But amidst all this merrymaking came the family's greatest sorrow. The Alcotts watched Lizzie, in pain,

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**minutemen:** armed civilians who were prepared to fight at a minute's notice during the American Revolution

disappear before their eyes. After two years of wasting away, she at last left them in the middle of the night. Louisa and her mother saw her last breath leave her in what they described as a “light mist” that rose from Lizzie’s body. The mist vanished, leaving only her body. She was twenty-two.

**From Louisa’s Journal (March 14, 1858)**

*“My dear Beth died at three this morning. . . . Last week she put her work away, saying the needle was ‘too heavy,’ and having given us her few possessions, made ready for the parting in her own simple, quiet way.”*

Life continued at Orchard House, as did the changes. Soon after Anna turned twenty-nine, she and John Pratt were married in the parlor at Orchard House, and they eventually had two boys. John may have been handsome and loving, and he may have made Anna happy, but all Louisa could think was how she was losing another sister.

The golden band of sisters were now down to two at home: Louisa and May. Louisa rejoiced that Bronson seemed happy; Marmee, peaceful; Anna, blissful with John; and May, content with sketching and painting. Louisa, however, also felt lonely and sad. So, she did what she had always done—she turned to writing.

**From Louisa's Journal (August 1858)**

*"The weeklies will all take stories; and I can simmer novels while I do my housework, so see my way to a little money, and perhaps more by-and-by if I ever make a hit."*

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**weeklies:** weekly newspapers or magazines

**simmer:** cook slowly just below the boiling point (literal); develop gradually without full attention (figurative)

# 7

## Rack a Bones Lu

Louisa was restless. Her writing had not been giving her satisfaction lately. So much death and loss surrounded her in her personal life, and now in the Civil War, which had been hanging over the country for nearly two years. She had spent many hours sewing for the war effort, but she wanted to do more—for herself and for the Union. So Louisa mailed an application to Dorothea Dix, the Union's superintendent of nurses. Dix was clear: nurses had to be at least thirty and childless, and they had to wear plain clothing. A little less than two weeks after her thirtieth birthday, on December 11, 1862, Louisa received a letter asking her to come to Washington, D.C.

It was certainly a leap of faith for Louisa to step onto the train heading south. She was heading into the unknown, leaving behind her family for the first time. Her earnings, which had so often kept the family afloat—money from writing, teaching, and sewing—would go with her.

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**superintendent:** a person in charge of a place or group

But her family knew they couldn't hold her back. Their neighbor Julian, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son, was not surprised by Louisa's decision, uncommon though it was for the people of their community. He had seen how the war had lit a fire inside her. "She was a big, lovable, tender-hearted, generous girl," he wrote upon her departure, "with black hair, thick and long, and flashing, humorous black eyes."

The farther Louisa traveled south, the more she saw of the war. At first, the train sped past lively encampments bustling with fresh blue Union uniforms with sparkling brass buttons. But when Louisa saw where a Massachusetts Union regiment had been attacked by Confederate soldiers, her mood changed. She became determined to do her job and do it well. "I'm here to fulfill my destiny," she said.

The dilapidated Union Hotel had been pressed into service as a hospital for the soldiers who had been wounded in battle or become sick. When Louisa arrived in the middle of the night, she was met by armed guards and dozens of men milling about. The inside of the building was perhaps worse than the outside. No light. No ventilation. Broken glass windows. Cockroaches. Rats. Filth everywhere. Concord suddenly seemed worlds away.

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**ventilation:** air circulation; a method for providing fresh air

Drawing on the determination she had felt on the journey, Louisa threw herself into her work. There were more sick and wounded soldiers than the doctors and nurses could handle, causing disorder and confusion. The medical staff treated horrific war wounds, some requiring amputations, as well as diseases such as diphtheria, measles, pneumonia, and typhoid. Most nurses, including Louisa, worked double duty to the point of exhaustion.

On rare breaks, Louisa enjoyed the grandeur of Washington, D.C.—the buildings (especially the Capitol), the high fashion, and the hustle and bustle of town. But soon enough, she was back on duty at the dreary hospital.

As the weeks passed, Louisa became more confident in her skills and began to connect with the men she nursed while working the night shift. She comforted her patients when they had bad dreams, held their hands, listened to their secrets, hugged them, and cried when they died.

Shortly after New Year's 1863, Louisa's supervisor, a hospital matron named Hannah Ropes, came down with typhoid pneumonia and soon became deathly ill. Not long after, Louisa also began to feel unwell.

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**diphtheria:** a bacterial infection of the throat that causes fever, sore throat, and a buildup of tissue that makes it difficult to breathe



Yet she pushed through her duties until she couldn't stand anymore. Finally, she collapsed on a staircase, and the nurse became the patient. She became racked with sharp pains, coughing, fever, and dizziness. "A pleasant prospect for a lonely soul five hundred miles from home!" Louisa noted in her journal.

As Louisa's condition worsened, doctors treated her with calomel, a mercury compound that was considered to be the drug of choice for curing illness. When she slept, she was tormented by awful dreams. Then she would wake, as tired as she had been before, and think of home, wondering if she would ever see her family again.

### **The Wrong Medicine**

*Eventually, doctors realized that calomel did more harm than good for patients and removed it from the shelves—but not before Louisa took enough to ruin her health for the rest of her life. Louisa would spend her remaining years suffering from the symptoms of mercury poisoning: loose teeth, debilitating headaches, memory loss, tremors, shortness of breath, fatigue, hair loss, and vertigo. These would lead her to an early grave. Modern historians believe that Louisa, as a healthy young person, would have recovered on her own without the calomel.*

Despite Louisa's protests, Mrs. Ropes sent for Bronson to escort her back to Concord to recover. It was one of the last things the matron did before dying from her own illness. Louisa hated to leave before her three months of nursing were finished, but it was decided for her. Bronson traveled nearly a thousand miles round trip by train to escort his gravely ill daughter home. "Poor Louy . . . left us a brave handsome woman . . . and is returned to us almost a wreck of body and mind," wrote Marmee upon Louisa's return.

For three weeks after Louisa arrived in Concord, she suffered high fevers and delirium. The doctor treating her shaved her head in an attempt to bring her fever down. Under Marmee's tender care, Louisa slowly showed signs of recovery. She sat up in bed, picked at her food, and began answering letters from friends, signing them "Rack a bones Lu."

As winter turned into spring, Louisa's strength returned. She began to reread the letters that she had sent home describing her hospital life and the men she had nursed. After changing some parts of the letters to hide people's identities, she offered excerpts to a Boston newspaper, which printed them. The letters were so moving that they were reprinted and read nationwide.

By June, Louisa felt like writing again. Publishers urged her to make the letters into a book. They believed the country was hungry for it. Certainly, this would be a departure from her thrillers—something more honest and heartfelt. Louisa received a staggering \$200 for *Hospital Sketches*, as she called it, and a thousand copies were printed. "My greatest pride," she wrote, "is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war which put an end to a great wrong."

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**delirium:** a confused mental state often featuring hallucinations, usually caused by an illness

Soon Louisa would be sitting at her half-moon desk by her bedroom window at Orchard House. She would look out over Waldo's fields that sloped down to Henry's Walden Pond. Digging deep into her memory, she would channel the observations and heart that it took to write *Hospital Sketches* and resurrect the childhood voices of the "little women" who lived at Hillside.

### ***The Alcotts' Side of the Civil War***

*The Alcotts were abolitionists who held a deep-seated belief that slavery was wrong and should be stopped. Louisa worked as a nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War, Marmee belonged to the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Bronson helped freedom seekers escaping slavery on the Underground Railroad. The Alcotts sheltered multiple freedom seekers at Hillside and may have received Harriet Tubman at Orchard House.*

*When abolitionist John Brown visited Concord and spoke, he left the whole town enthralled. After the Concord visit, Brown and his men stormed the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in hopes of fueling a revolution among enslaved people from neighboring plantations. That revolution never came. Instead, Brown was hanged as a traitor in 1859.*

*Bronson described Brown as a "martyr" after his death, and Louisa wrote him a memorial poem, ending with:*

*No monument of quarried stone,  
No eloquence of speech,  
Can grave the lessons on the land  
His martyrdom will teach.  
No eulogy like his own words,  
With hero-spirit rife,  
"I truly serve the cause I love,  
By yielding up my life."*

# 8

## The March Family

Louisa struggled in the months following the war. She desperately missed Lizzie and Anna, plus symptoms of her previous mercury poisoning plagued her. Headaches. Fatigue. Vertigo. The accidental publication and success of *Hospital Sketches* was a bright spot. But in 1864, she published her very first novel, *Moods*, which was poorly received by critics. In it, an adventurous young woman camps on the river with her brother and two of his friends. Both friends fall in love with her, but she ultimately marries the wrong man. Louisa felt the editor cut most of what the book was meant to be about—a woman finding a place in a man's world—leaving her deeply disappointed. Robbed of her confidence in her writing, she thought a change of scenery might help—maybe Europe.

In the summer of 1865, when the opportunity arose to be a paid overseas traveling companion to a semi-invalid young woman named Anna Weld, thirty-two-year-old Louisa took it. As a trained nurse, she was well equipped to help her new charge. England and Germany

were a balm to Louisa's soul. Her spirits buoyed. The Alps in Switzerland were even more magical, leaving her with a feeling that something grand was going to happen.

**From Louisa's Journal (October 1865)**

*"I caught my first glimpse of the Alps Oct 8th, mother's birthday. Tall, white, spectral looking shapes they were, towering above the green hills & valleys that lay between. Clouds half hid them & the sun glittered on the everlasting snow that lay upon their tops."*

In this ethereal setting, Louisa met fellow traveler Ladislás Wisniewski, a younger man from Poland. Ladislás, or Laddie, as Louisa called him, quickly became friends with her and Anna Weld. He accompanied them on sightseeing excursions, dined with them, and played them music. When Anna Weld and Louisa departed for France, Laddie felt sad to part ways with them, especially Louisa. And she did, too.

In Nice, France, Louisa felt a pull toward home. She knew her family in Concord must be needing her. She decided to cut her trip short by three months and headed to Paris en route to America. Laddie met Louisa there. They spent a little over two weeks together, experiencing

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**balm:** something that soothes or refreshes  
**buoyed:** raised up  
**ethereal:** light and airy; heavenly

the city without a chaperone. Louisa knew her family would not approve, so she largely kept this time a secret. Laddie was the closest that Louisa had ever come to romance. But Paris couldn't last forever. With probable tears and a scribble of "Couldn't be" in her journal, Louisa left Laddie with a kiss on her way to board the ship home.



After fourteen gray, stormy days, Louisa's ship arrived in America in the middle of the night. Anna's husband, John, was waiting for her. He delivered her home to hugs and tears from her mother, sisters, and baby nephews.

Louisa was also greeted by a mound of new debt and personal loans that her family had taken, some to help finance her trip. Worried by the debt, she went back to

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**chaperone:** someone who travels with young people to ensure their proper behavior

work on some new thrillers, referring to herself as “the money-maker” and “Minerva Moody.” Uninspired by her work and still battling the long-term effects of mercury poisoning, Louisa suffered from fatigue and worsening headaches. She collapsed from overwork in January 1867 and spent many months in bed, unable to walk or even stand.

That summer, her health began to improve, and in September, a publisher asked her to write a girls’ book for them. The publishing house had noticed a hole in the market. Books for boys were flying off the shelves, so why not books for girls? Unenthused, Louisa told them that she would try.

Eight months passed while Louisa mulled over the idea. The publisher even asked Bronson to nudge Louisa toward the project, promising to publish Bronson’s short stories if she said yes. While visions of the “Pathetic Family” swirled in her head, Louisa, now thirty-five, finally put pen to paper and began her journey back through time.

Uninspired by her writing, Louisa trudged along transforming the “pathetic” Alcott family into the March family—not always portrayed as they were in real life, but as she wished them to be. Mrs. March, also called Marmee, controlled her temper. Bronson became

Mr. March, who was heroically serving his country during the Civil War, far away from the family. Anna Alcott became Meg March, who nurtured her sisters and was an excellent student and a compassionate governess. Lizzie Alcott became Beth March, who enjoyed kittens, music, and being the heart of the home. May Alcott became Amy March: graceful, pretty, a little spoiled, and possessing an intense love of art. And finally, Louisa Alcott became tomboyish Jo March, who wrote plays and stories, used far too many slang words, was rough around the edges, and always got herself into trouble—but was loved unconditionally in spite of her faults.

Supporting characters were also pulled from real life. Stuffy Aunt March perhaps reminded Louisa of her exile trips to Boston with Marmee's proper family. John Pratt, Anna Alcott's husband, became the character of John Brooke, a tutor and Meg March's suitor. Laddie was combined with Alf Whitman, a friend of Louisa's from the Concord Dramatic Union—and possibly with others—to create the next-door neighbor Laurie, best friend to Jo March. Laurie's grandfather, the generous Mr. Laurence, could be the Alcotts' guardian angel Waldo. There was even the domestic help, Hannah, who took away washing, cleaning, and mending duties from the March sisters.

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**suitor:** someone who wants a romantic relationship with a specific person

Events from Louisa's life were also reflected in these pages. The March family, a more noble kind of poor, lacked money like the Alcotts to celebrate birthdays and Christmas. Meg and Jo March worked to support the family, as did Anna and Louisa Alcott. Jo sold her hair to make more money for her family, while Louisa lost her hair taking care of Civil War soldiers. The March girls made mailboxes, published newspapers, and performed plays in their home, much like the activities at Hillside. Beth March and Lizzie Alcott both fell ill helping a poor family. Echoing Bronson and Marmee's longing for a son, Jo March cursed the world that she was born a girl. Jo, just like Louisa, used pen names for her work to hide that she was a woman. Jo also fiercely shielded Meg from suitors, including her future love interest, John Brooke. Much like Louisa Alcott, Jo March wanted to freeze the golden band of sisters together in time.

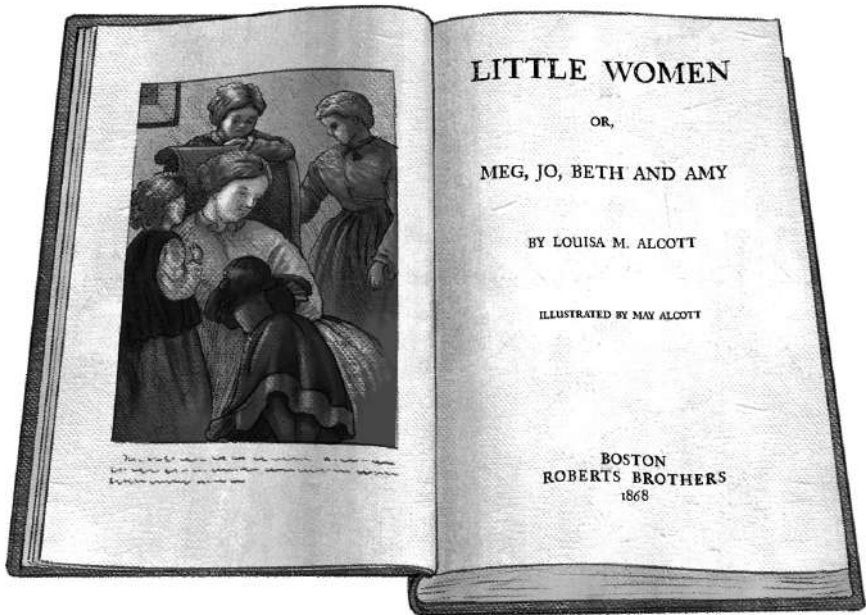
On July 15, 1868, Louisa delivered 402 pages to her publisher. She worried that the book was too ordinary, a series of sketches held together by a scant narrative. The publisher had proclaimed the opening chapters dull, and Louisa didn't disagree. But the book was ultimately deemed worthy of publication, and Louisa was offered a contract with two options—either a \$300 advance with

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**scant:** too little; not enough

royalties of 6.66 percent on each copy sold or a flat fee of \$1,000 to sell the manuscript outright. She accepted the advance with royalties, a decision that would end up breaking the Alcotts' poverty cycle. *Little Women, or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: The Story of Their Lives; A Girl's Book*, was published on September 30, 1868. It sold for \$1.50 a copy.

Bronson had only ever used "little women" as a grievance, but to Louisa, it became an homage to sisterhood.



# 9

## Along the Uphill Road

Louisa held her breath. She had worked hard to draw on real life, using her heart to tell the story that she wanted to tell. But would readers and critics like *Little Women*?

“It reads better than I expected,” she journaled when she read the published version. “Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it.”

And succeed it did. The critics loved it, and letters began arriving at Orchard House, congratulating Louisa. The first printing—two thousand copies—sold out in two weeks, and another printing was called for. Louisa wrote in her journal that the publisher “expect[ed] to sell three or four thousand before the New Year.” There was also an order from a London publisher that wanted to sell the book to readers in England.

Soon, the publisher asked for a sequel. The first part

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**sensational:** intended to cause a strong reaction

**sequel:** a new story that continues a previous one

of *Little Women* ends with Mr. March coming back from the war, and readers were dying to know what would happen to the March family next. In particular, whom would the sisters marry? By November, Louisa had buckled down to write the sequel, mostly in her rooms in Boston.

“Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life,” journaled Louisa. “I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one.” In fact, she didn’t want to marry Jo to anyone at all. Louisa had never considered matrimony to be a happy ending, probably thanks to Bronson and Marmee’s difficult marriage. Her publisher, however, finally convinced her that was what readers wanted.

Louisa continued to write her life. Just as Anna married John Pratt, Meg married the kind John Brooke, lived in a little cottage (based on the Alcotts’ first Concord home, Dove Cottage), and had children—albeit two daughters and a son rather than two little boys. Jo craved adventure like Louisa, and both chose to live for a time in big cities (New York and Boston, respectively), writing away. Sweet Beth and Lizzie both lost their battles with illness and passed away, causing the fictional family and the real family grief beyond measure. May and Amy both traveled to Europe to study art. And in true Louisa form,

she married off Laurie to Amy instead of his best friend, Jo. Jo did, however, get a husband—the older, gruffer Professor Bhaer. Jo and Professor Bhaer share a kiss under an umbrella, just as Louisa and Laddie shared a kiss in Paris. And Jo, much like Louisa, ended up writing her family story in a book that tugged readers' heartstrings.

Louisa felt the sequel's plot was even thinner than the first. She was certain it would not do as well. With the advance and royalties from the first part of *Little Women*, Louisa had paid off some debt at Apple Slump and even had a little left over to invest. She had no idea, though, what was about to happen. Four thousand presales came in for *Little Women* part 2. Homes all over New England bought copies, and by the end of the publication month, thirteen thousand more copies had been sold.

Somehow, the news of the book's success didn't reach Louisa in Concord. She took the train to Boston to check in with her publisher. When Louisa arrived, the publishing house was bustling, and boxes lined the halls. She had no idea what all the fuss was about. When her editor finally noticed her milling about the office, he exclaimed, "My dear—dearest Miss Alcott! . . . Nothing to parallel it has occurred in my experience! All else put aside—street blocked—country aroused—overwhelmed—paralyzed! . . . It's the triumph of the century!" *Little Women* was making history!



Louisa, now thirty-six, returned to Concord later that evening and shared the life-altering news with her family and friends. Later, Julian Hawthorne would write about that night, “Hard times for the Alcott family were over forever. We that evening saw the first flowing of the liberating tide.”

The entire family was bolstered by this literary success. Even Bronson regained esteem for his writing about transcendentalism. But with success came fame, something Louisa had little interest in. Mail poured into Orchard House and her rooms in Boston. Answering all the mail was a chore. Speaking invitations came one after the next. Few were accepted. Louisa was just the opposite of Bronson. She was the better writer; he the better orator. She did agree to one odd request, though. While visiting a women’s college to meet with fans, Louisa refused to give a speech, as she always did. Disappointed, the fans asked if she would instead stand in a prominent position and slowly turn around so they could see her from every angle. That much Louisa was willing to do for her fans, and so she did. Recounting the incident to a professional women’s club in New York City later that month, she dryly offered to “revolve” for this audience as well.

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**liberating:** setting free

**orator:** public speaker

And then there were the unexpected guests. Foot traffic in front of Orchard House was brisk as people hoped to catch a glimpse of Louisa. Bold strangers knocked on the door, asking to meet and visit with her. Aghast, Louisa either pretended she was the housekeeper or asked Anna to entertain the visitors while she slipped out the back and into the woods. She began to feel like her house was a prison.

### **Little Women: Transcending Generations**

*Little Women has sold more than ten million copies and has been translated into more than fifty languages. It has inspired numerous films and television series, a radio play, an opera, and a Broadway musical, among others. Louisa went on to write two more novels about the March family: Little Men and Jo's Boys. Her other popular children's books include An Old Fashioned Girl, Eight Cousins, Rose in Bloom, Under the Lilacs, and Jack and Jill: A Village Story. In all, she wrote nineteen novels, thirteen short-story collections for children, and close to 150 stand-alone short stories and novelettes.*

*Waldo was correct all those years ago when he said that Louisa was "the poet of children." Fortunately, he lived to see Little Women propel Louisa toward international fame before he died in 1882.*

In her later years, Louisa's health deteriorated. Remnants of mercury poisoning continued to plague

**brisk:** very active

**aghaſt:** shocked and upset

**deteriorated:** got worse

her as she moved between Orchard House, Boston, and Europe. Marmee and Bronson also faced physical challenges, and Louisa and Anna did their best to care for them.

In 1870, May moved to Europe to pursue painting and began to compete with Louisa artistically. When May's painting *Still Life with Bottle* was accepted for the 1877 Paris Salon, she wrote to Marmee, "Who would have imagined such good fortune, and so strong a proof that Lu does not monopolize all the Alcott talent. Ha! ha! sister, this is the first feather plucked from your cap." The following year, the Society of Lady Artists in London chose two of May's works, including *Owl Still Life*—a painting dedicated to Louisa—for its annual Ladies' Exhibition. Louisa understood the spirit and competition displayed by her youngest sister, and they became very close friends as adults.

Shortly after the Paris exhibition, Marmee passed away at the age of seventy-seven. Louisa wrote of Marmee, "I never wish her back, but a great warmth seems gone out of life. . . . She was so loyal, tender, and true." In a letter to a friend, she described Marmee as having led "such a lovely, unselfish life."

When May married a Swiss musician named Ernest Nieriker, they settled in Paris. She wrote that she felt grateful for “an ideal life—painting, music, and love.” Shortly after the wedding, May delivered a daughter named Louisa May, or Lulu, after her sister. To the horror of her family, May died seven weeks after Lulu was born, at the age of thirty-nine. May wished for Louisa to raise Lulu, and she made her husband promise to send the baby to America.

As Louisa waited in Boston for the arrival of her niece, she journaled: “Waiting for the steamer that brings my treasure. The ocean seems very wide & terrible when I think of the motherless little creature coming so far to us.”

Because Louisa never married or had children of her own, Lulu became the joy of her final years of life. Year after year, the effects of her mercury poisoning took their toll. At fifty-five, Louisa looked at least twenty years older. At the end of her life, Louisa moved to a nursing home. Barely older than Louisa, Anna—whose husband, John, had died—looked after her own children, Lulu, and Bronson, who was fading in his old age. Louisa had softened toward her father by the end of their lives, and on Bronson’s eighty-sixth birthday, Louisa wrote him a poem:

Dear Pilgrim, waiting patiently,  
The long, long journey nearly done,  
Beside the sacred stream that flows  
Clear shining in the western sun;  
Look backward on the varied road  
Your steadfast feet have trod,  
From youth to age, through weal and woe,  
Climbing forever nearer God.  
Mountain and valley lie behind;  
The slough is crossed, the wicket passed;  
Doubt and despair, sorrow and win,  
Giant and fiend, conquered at last.  
Neglect is changed to honor now;  
The heavy cross may be laid down;  
The white head wins and wears at length  
The prophet's, not the martyr's, crown.

Greatheart and Faithful gone before,  
Brave Christiana, Mercy sweet,  
Are Shining Ones who stand and wait  
The weary wanderer to greet.  
Patience and Love his handmaids are,  
And till time brings release,  
Christian may rest in that bright room  
Whose windows open to the east.

---

**weal and woe:** good times and bad times

**slough:** a swamp or muddy place, or a discouraged state

The staff set by, the sandals off,  
Still pondering the precious scroll,  
Serene and strong, he waits the call  
That frees and wings a happy soul.  
Then, beautiful as when it lured  
The boy's aspiring eyes,  
Before the pilgrim's longing sight  
Shall the Celestial City rise.

November 29, 1885.

L. M. A.

Louisa died of a stroke on March 6, 1888, at the age of fifty-five, in Boston on the day of Bronson's funeral. At eighty-eight, Bronson had passed away two days before she did without Louisa ever knowing.

She is buried in a section of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord called Author's Ridge, with Bronson, Marmee, Anna, and Lizzie, near Waldo's and Henry's graves. Nearby, Orchard House is open to the public and remains a shrine to *Little Women* and the Alcott family. Next door, Hillside, now called the Wayside, also welcomes visitors.

Louisa shouldered her family's financial and emotional needs for a lifetime. She dug down deep and wrote her way into domestic stability. She kept her promise to provide Bronson with security, Marmee with a "sunny

chamber,” Anna with opportunities, and May with an education. Louisa’s success was born of the Alcott family—their struggles, their perseverance, and above all, the love between four sisters and their mother. She made her family’s dreams come true by sharing precious parts of them with the world.

Though the homes had been small and food scarce, Louisa’s life had always overflowed with family and friends. In the end, she felt nothing but gratitude for her journey and those who had joined her on it. “After toiling so many years along the uphill road,—always a hard one to women writers,—” she wrote in a letter to her publishers, “it is peculiarly grateful to me to find the way growing easier at last, with pleasant little surprises blossoming on either side, and the rough places made smooth by the courtesy and kindness of those who have proved themselves friends . . .”

**“In the Garret”**

*While “In the Garret” originally used the names Nan, Lu, Bess, and May, it would be the start of the character sketches for the characters in Louisa’s new book about the March girls—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. A revised version was later included in Little Women as a poem written by Jo.*

**perseverance:** continued effort in response to hardship  
**toiling:** working hard  
**garret:** attic

*Four little chests all in a row,  
Dimmed with dust and gray with time,  
Fashioned and filled so long ago  
By little maids now in their prime.  
Four little keys hung side by side,  
With faded ribbons once so gay,  
When fastened there with childish pride  
Years ago on a rainy day.  
Four little names, one on each lid,  
Carved with skill by a boyish hand,  
And there, within, there lieth hid  
Histories of the sister band  
Once playing here, and pausing oft  
To catch the musical refrain,  
That came and went on the roof aloft,  
In the drip of the summer rain.*

*"Nan" on the first lid, smooth and fair,  
And I look on with loving eyes,  
For folded here with well-known care  
A goodly gathering lies.  
The record of a peaceful life;  
Treasures of gentle child and girl;  
A bridal wreath, gifts to a wife,  
A lover's face, a baby curl.  
No toys in this first chest remain,*

---

**refrain:** a repeated phrase or verse in a poem or song

**aloft:** in the air or at a great height

**bridal wreath:** a circle of white flowers worn on a bride's head, often used to keep a wedding veil in place

*For they have all been carried away,  
In their old age to live again  
Under another small Nan's sway.  
Ah, happy mother! well I know  
To you there comes no sad refrain,  
But lullabies ever sweet and low,  
In the drip of the summer rain.*

*"Lu" on the next lid scratched and worn;  
Within is heaped a motley store  
Of headless dolls, of school books torn,  
Of beasts and birds whose day is o'er.  
Dreams of a future never found,  
Memories of a past still sweet,  
Spoils brought home from the fairy ground,  
Only touched by youthful feet,  
Half-writ poems and stories wild;  
April letters sunny or cold;  
The diaries of a wayward child;  
Hints of a woman early old.  
A woman musing here alone,  
Hearing ever her life's refrain:  
"Labor and love, but make no moan,"  
In the drip of the summer rain.*

*My "Bess," the dust is newly swept  
Away from your beloved name,*

---

**sway:** influence

**lullabies:** soothing songs used to calm children or help them fall asleep

**motley:** varied; made up of many different things

As if by eyes that often wept,  
By tender hands that often came.  
Death canonized for us one saint,  
Meek soul, half human, half divine;  
And still we touch with loving plaint  
The relics in this household shrine.  
The needle once too heavy grown,  
The little cap which last she wore,  
The sweet Saint Catherine that shone  
Through the long nights above the door;  
The lamp unlighted since she left  
Her fragile prison-house of pain,  
The sad lament of those bereft,  
In the drip of the summer rain.

Above the last a sudden ray  
Lights up the ancient garret's gloom,  
As if our living, smiling "May"  
Were passing through the shadowy room.  
Here lie the snoods that bound her hair,  
Slippers that have danced their last,  
Faded flowers once doubly fair,  
Fans whose airy toils are past;  
A mateless glove, two golden hearts,  
A valentine all ardent flames,  
For each and all have played their parts,  
In girlish hopes, and joys, and fames.  
And as I lean with laughter spent,

---

**canonized:** officially declared a saint

**ardent:** devoted; passionate

*I seem to hear a blithe refrain,  
As if some love-lay softly blent  
With the drip of the summer rain.*

*Four little chests all in a row,  
Dimmed with dust and gray with time;  
Four human hearts through weal and woe,  
To God's great harvest in their prime;  
Four sisters parted for the hour,  
Yet wholly one forevermore;  
Bound by love's immortal power,  
None lost, one only "gone before."  
O, when these secret crypts of ours  
Are opened in the Father's sight,  
May they be filled with well-spent hours,  
Deeds that show fairer for the light;  
Lives whose sweet echoes long may ring  
Above death's sorrowful refrain;  
Souls that shall gladly soar and sing  
In the long sunshine after rain.*

---

**blithe:** happy and carefree

**crypts:** underground vaults or chambers, often used to bury dead bodies

## Discussion Questions

1. Louisa loved books from a very young age. One of her favorites was *The Pilgrim's Progress*. What is one of your favorite books? Why?
2. Anna, Louisa, Lizzie, and May played together all the time when they were growing up in the 1830s and 1840s. They ran and climbed trees outside. They put on plays for their neighbors. They created a post office. They wrote a family newspaper. Does that sound like fun? How differently do modern children play? Are there any similarities?
3. Louisa knew she wanted to become a writer from a very young age. Do you have any idea what you want to do when you get older?
4. Louisa wrote many different things throughout her lifetime—journal entries, essays, plays, poetry, letters, and fiction. Do you keep a diary or journal? Do you like to write? What kinds of things do you like to write? Do you like to write from your real-life experiences or from your imagination?
5. Bronson started teaching in the 1820s. He liked his students to ask questions, march around the classroom, clap their hands, look at artwork, read

fairy tales, play with blocks, have at least two recesses, and speak what was on their minds. Many at the time thought that was the wrong way to teach. Do you do any of these things in your classroom? How is teaching the same or different now?

6. Louisa and her family were abolitionists, which means they hated slavery and spoke out against it, even though that position was unpopular with some people at the time. Do you think you would have spoken out against slavery then? Would you have hidden a freedom seeker in your house like the Alcotts did at Hillside?
7. Louisa bravely traveled across the country to become a nurse for injured and sick Union soldiers during the Civil War. How far out of your comfort zone would you go to help a cause that you believe in?
8. Louisa was inspired by nature—ponds, the ocean, flowers, mountains, sunrises, pine trees, birds. What types of things inspire you?
9. Traveling to Europe always relaxed Louisa and helped her feel refreshed to get back to work. She was in awe of the Alps in Switzerland. She also loved London, Paris, and Germany. Where would you like to travel? Why?

10. Louisa had to use a pen name, or pretend name, when she wrote some types of stories because she was a woman. Are there things today that women can't do? Are there things today that men can't do? Why? How would you like to see people change?

## Meet the Author



Before Jennifer Elvgren could read, she woke her parents up early to read to her “just one more chapter” of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. There was something about Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy that resonated with her heart—Jo burning a hole in her fancy dress; Amy suffering her pickled lime humiliation; Beth’s shyness when accepting an invitation to play a grand piano; Meg discovering that her lost glove was in Mr. Brooke’s pocket; but perhaps most of all, the sisters’ deep and abiding love for one another through thick and thin.

When Jennifer was asked to write about Louisa May Alcott, her imagination soared. She tried to tell Louisa's story beyond what her fans thought her happy life might be after reading *Little Women*. Louisa suffered chronic illness, chronic poverty, and chronic relationship struggles with her father. Despite all that was stacked against her, Louisa managed to persevere with her writing and become one of the world's most beloved authors.

A former print journalist, Jennifer's children's books have received the Andersen Prize, The Américas Award, The Prairie Pasque Award, a Sydney Taylor award, and a Jane Addams award. Her work has also appeared on the ALA Children's Notable Book and Bank Street College Best Books lists.

Jennifer lives in Albemarle County, Virginia, with her husband, children, Brontë the rescue Foxhound, Chance the rescue tabby cat, Winslow the rescue donkey, and Gatsby the American Paint horse. She likes to read to Winslow and Gatsby. Their favorite book is *The Wonky Donkey* by Craig Smith.

## Meet the Illustrator



**Kailien Singson.** A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school, and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in Arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.



# Credits

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