



Louisa M. Alcott,
the author of "Little
Women." A hitherto
unpublished
photograph

The "Little Women" of Long Ago

*Stories of Louisa M. Alcott, and the Old Days in Concord, Apropos the
Highly Successful Play Based on the Book*

By John S. P. Alcott

Nephew of Louisa M. Alcott

Women and girls all over this country, hundreds of thousands of them, know and love "Little Women" and its author, the late Louisa M. Alcott. The work is still, after two score years, one of the "best sellers," and the play is a huge success.

ALTHOUGH the librarians and the publishers tell us that the popularity of "Little Women" has never been on the wane, since the days when it was brought out, I find that the personal interest of its readers in the author has had a revival since the book has been dramatized and its characters have been brought to life upon the stage. As the only living descendant of Miss Alcott in America who can claim a personal acquaintance with her, I find myself in the peculiar position of answering the same questions and queries in regard to "Little Women" that deluged my aunt, ever after the book was published.

She hated publicity, reporters, lionizing, autograph-hunters and all the other con-

comitants of fame, but always tried to send a personal answer to the little tots who wrote her a nice note about one of her books and asked her sensible questions about its characters. To be sure, she once did plan to publish "Aunt Jo's Funny Budget," a collection of funny letters which she had received from her readers, as a warning to her own nephews and nieces not to go and do likewise, and "to nip a new generation of innocent bores in the bud," but I know, also, that nothing pleased her more than spontaneous praise from a youngster, and that she was always willing and eager to give of herself to others if she thought it of any help or benefit to them. Therefore, it is in the spirit of her generosity and with no



Photo by White, N. Y.

Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts, where "Little Women" was written

fear of violating a trust that I am going to try to share some of my memories and recollections of a wonderful woman with the countless numbers who have felt the influence of her strong and beautiful personality through her books.

Judging from the queries, it doesn't seem to be known generally, even yet, that the March family is the Alcott family in a very thin disguise. "Meg" was Anna, the oldest of the four girls, who married John Bridge

Pratt: Jo was Louisa, of course, who never married anybody, because, as she said, "Somebody has to be the old maid in the family;" "Beth" was Elizabeth, who died when she was a little over twenty years old; and "Amy" was May, the artistic one of the quartette, who studied art abroad and later married a Swiss by the name of Ernest Nieriker, with whom she lived in Paris only two short years before her death. And I? I am "Daisy." You see, I was more care-



Photo by White, N. Y.

fully disguised, for I am neither a twin,

nor a girl—only Meg's youngest boy.

Because it is all about our own dear relatives,—my brother, Amy's daughter and I—hesitated for eight years or more before we would sanction the dramatization of "Little Women." It wasn't that we thought that our Aunt Louisa wouldn't like it—on the contrary, we had every reason to believe that she would, since she was always keenly interested in the stage, even to the extent of wanting to make it her own profession at one time—but because we feared that no dramatist could or would make a play of the book that would preserve its atmosphere of sweet wholesomeness; we feared that the taint of theatricality might make a sacrilege of our home. To us "Little Women" was the story of our home and our family, a theme too intimate for the publicity to which the stage might subject it.

But when we grew to appreciate the reverence and the love which Miss Jessie Bonstelle,—one of the first and the most persistent applicant for the stage rights of the book—harbored for Jo and for "Little Women," and when she agreed to submit

Aunt March warns Meg against making an unsuitable "alliance." Scene in the play, "Little Women"

everything to us for approval before mak-

ing it final, we gave in. And we have not once had cause to regret it—not even I when I saw myself brought on the stage as a papiermâché baby in swaddling clothes. It has meant much work to Mrs. Alcott and myself, but it has meant more joy and pleasure. We have come to realize, too, that instead of hurting the book, as we had feared it would do, the dramatization is helping it by bringing its story into the lives of people who have never read it, but who would go to see the play. How many men and boys, who scorn to read what they regard as a girl's book, will refuse to escort their wives or sisters or friends or sweethearts to the theater?

If the play seems real, that is because it tells a story that was real, in the midst of a stage-setting that is as real as we could make it, with the help of history and memory and family chronicles. What I did not remember—I was twenty-three years old when my Aunt Louisa died,—I was able to read up in the diaries and journals of the Alcotts. Fortunately, for us, the keeping of a daily record of deeds and thoughts



Photo by White, N. Y.

Amy, dressed for the ball, requests Lawrie to fasten her glove. A scene in the play "Little Women"

was more important to them than eating,

and, thanks to the economy they had to practice and the sentiment they attached to all family things, they saved everything of big or little or no importance, so that we could, when the play was to be produced, dig up all the information, the pictures, descriptions, or the things themselves that were necessary to restore the March household.

When Miss Bonstelle had finally succeeded in finding in William A. Brady a manager who had the courage to produce this simple, narrative play, so unlike the Broadway successes, a play without a big thrill, without a gripping climax, without a star and without a problem, she and the scenic artist, Mr. Law, also Mr. Luce, the representative of the Shuberts in Boston, Mrs. Alcott and I went out to Concord one day to get the atmosphere, the correct background, the "local color," if you will, for the production.

Three houses in this historic village, the home of New England philosophers, harbored the Alcott family at different times. The first, which was afterward bought by

the Hawthornes and called "The Wayside," is now owned by Mrs. Daniel Lothrop (Margaret Sidney, the author of "The Five Little Peppers"), the second is "Orchard House," where "Little Women" was lived and written, and the third is the house on Main Street, once owned by Thoreau, in which my sister-in-law, Mrs. F. Alcott Pratt, still lives. But it is only the second that really concerns us here. For many years it stood empty, rotting away in its little hollow by the roadside. It was a very damp sort of place, as I remember it; I don't know how they kept it warm, for they used only wood in the grate fires for many years for all their heating. Only a few days ago, Mr. Edward Gaylord, who knew the Alcotts earlier, probably, than anyone living today, told me how he had come upon the girls fetching in wood from the pile outside and how he twitted them about the small quantity that they could carry, to which Louisa, being then but a tiny little bit of a mite, replied, "Pwetty good for vegetables, though."

They were vegetarians, not from economy but from principle, for Grandfather Alcott

believed that any food obtained by hurting or robbing an animal, would corrupt the body and, through it, the soul. It was not until they were quite grown up that any of his children ever tasted meat. That was only one of his many ideas that seem strange to us now; they were certainly all more ideal than practical. He could develop a new system of philosophy and evolve ideas that were far ahead of his times, but he could not make money.

Money meant nothing to him and so, of course, he never cared whether or not he had five cents in his pocket, and when he had, he was certain to give them to the first one who asked him for them. He was one of the most lovable, one of the most ideally inclined men that ever lived, and just because he was so gentle and high-minded and guileless, everyone forgave him for what he was not—a financial success, a "good provider." "Mar-mee,"—that is, my grandmother, Mrs. Alcott,—suffered the most through this, but she never complained, for had she not been willing to give up much besides her social prestige in marrying this impecunious school teacher only because of the love she bore him? She was indeed a wonderful woman, strong and patient, gentle and practical. Judging from the quality of her letters, her children inherited as much of their mentality and their talents from her as they did from their father. Do you remember what Miss Alcott wrote in her diary, "All the philosophy in our house is not in the study; a good deal is in the kitchen, where a fine old lady thinks high thoughts and does kind deeds while she cooks and scrubs."

Many of the educational ideas they held in common may seem odd to us today. For example, they never admonished the children openly or reproved them in one another's presence. If one of them did

anything reprehensible, she wouldn't know that it had displeased her parents until she went to bed and found under her pillow a little note from mother or father, discussing the fault committed and hinting at more desirable methods of behavior. The children thought these things over at leisure and then sent back their replies and conclusions in the same quiet, unobserved way.

There was no chance for a flare of temper here, no opportunity to answer back; only a little silent contemplation of one's wrongdoings and then an endeavor to express contriteness and apology in writing. What a chastening of the spirit! One of these periods of meditation brought the following note from Louisa to her mother:

"I'll be contented
With what I've got;
Of folly repented,
Then sweet is my lot.
From your trying daughter,
"Louy."

To which her mother replied:

"MY DEAR LOUISA:

"Your note gave me so much delight that I cannot close my eyes without first thanking you, dear, for making me so happy, and blessing God who gave you this tender love for your mother. I have observed all day your patience with baby, your obedience to me and your kindness to all.

"Go on 'trying,' my child; God will give you strength and courage, and help you fill each day with words and deeds of love. I shall lay this on your pillow, put a warm kiss on your lips and say a little prayer over you in your sleep.

"Mother."

I think it has been rightly said that the Alcott girls put their hearts into their mother's keeping; their souls they intrusted to their father.

How far afield from Orchard House I have strayed! It was the dampness of the house and the poverty of its inhabitants that led me to digress. Neither of these factors, however, prevented the happiest sort of a home life; on the contrary, they only served to knit the ties closer, to develop the re-



Photo by White, N. Y.

The old elm where the owl had his nest

sourcefulness of the girls and to bring to the fore the strength and the force in Louisa, who felt herself called upon to assume the responsibilities "of the man in the family." This house is associated with the jolliest and the saddest things in their lives; here they played their melodramas, here they acted "Pilgrim's Progress," here Beth died, and Meg was married; and it was here, up in the attic at the base of the chimneys, that Louisa sat "when genius burned." "With my papers 'round me and a pile of apples to eat while I write my journal, plan stories and enjoy the patter of rain on the roof, in peace and quiet," as she said.

I suppose it was because it was right in their midst the people at Concord forgot the existence of Orchard House. We tried many times to buy it, but it was not until the club women of the town brought their united efforts to bear that the price was put within reasonable limits. Two

years ago they bought it, and when they had collected enough money they set right at work, making the necessary repairs and putting on the needed patches. The house was in such a bad condition that one of the carpenters called into consultation advised Mrs. Henry Rolfe, the president of the Louisa Alcott Memorial Association, "to tear it all down and build a new one." The house has been restored, practically, through little self-denials. Just as soon as it became known that it had been bought, the contributions came pouring in. One of the first was from a little girl who wrote: "I have an allowance of one cent a week. I have saved it for 5 weeks. Please, I want to buy Miss Alcott's home." Another wrote that she hadn't eaten any candy for ten days and here, were the ten cents she had saved—how much of the house would it buy? One poor old woman to whom the cost of living was almost unattainable,

sent in a quarter of a dollar, saying that she had denied herself little things here and there for a year that she might add her contribution to the fund, and another one who had read "Little Women" in the edition for the blind, got up an entertainment in her own home out West somewhere to make money for the fund. So the stories go—from East and West, from over the seas,

even; women and children, and here and there a man or two, have sent in their mickles that go to make the muckle that will make the home of the "Little Women" live forever. I do not know where nor how they hear of it, but they do, and pilgrims come from far and near to visit at this shrine. Since the nineteenth of last April, I believe, there have been over seven-thousand visitors in the house, who have left over one-thousand dollars in the free contribution box at the door.

The work of restoring is slow, but although there

isn't so very much to see as yet, the visitors all tell Miss Moore and Miss Freeman, the two young Concord girls who are guides and custodians of Orchard House, that there was plenty of atmosphere there already; that one could fairly see the March girls revelling in its cosy corners, its commodious closets and its comfortable little nooks. I know that Miss Bonstelle and Miss Marian de Forest, who dramatized the book, felt this way about it. I almost feared that they had taken all the atmosphere home with them and put it on the stage!

It is a homey looking place, that yellowish-brown house tucked away under the shade of kindly elms. What fun we used to have in that old grove behind the house! There never was a jollier party than the one Aunt Louisa gave me on my sixteenth birthday. We played games and charades under the direction of the inimitable Aunt Louisa, and as a glorious climax, there was a won-

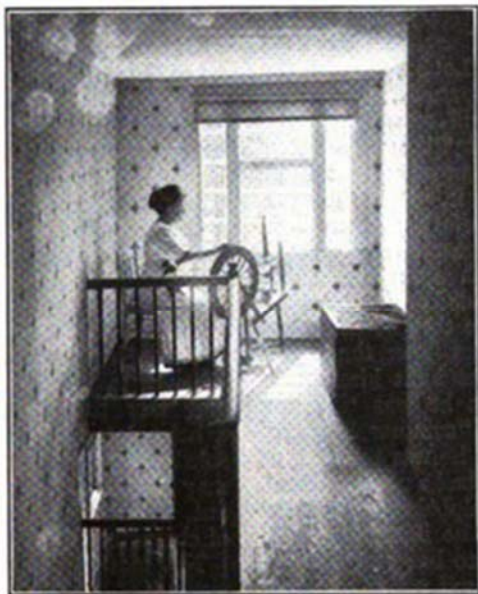


Photo by White, N. Y.

The upper hall of the Orchard House

derful cake with all the sixteen candles and this little verse of dedication:

"A sunshiny cake
For a sunshiny boy,
For him and his friends
To eat and enjoy;
Sixteen years hence
When he is thirty-two
May his friends be as many
And his sorrows be as few."

The big tree on the right, which was a favorite hiding place of my youthful days and the haunt of Aunt Louisa's friend, the owl,—which Amy perpetuated over her mantelpiece, as you will remember,—has just been plumed up by the tree-doctor, so that no more little boys and no more owls can find refuge in it. It is the same tree under which Grandfather Alcott used to sit as he discussed transcendentalism with his friends. The bench around it, as so many little odds and ends in and about the house, like the bookcase that he made out of a melodeon, the clothes dryer, the garden fence and the arbor, he built himself. I remember him best as he was tinkering with his tools in the "summer kitchen" or woodshed, and when he was teaching us our alphabet. Here, he had a novel method. Instead of using a book alphabet he invented one of his own, which he illustrated with anything he happened to have on hand,—even if it was only himself, as, when, lying on his back, with his legs straddled in the air, he personified a "Y," to our intense enjoyment and edification—for I have never forgotten how a Y looks from that day to this.

The living room was our real joy. The carpet was threadbare, perhaps, and the furniture worn, but it was full of books piled up on shelves which our grandfather-carpenter had built into every available bit of space and the scene of all our glorious charade parties and story-telling bees. When we had our theatricals, it was the auditorium, and the dining room was the stage. It seems to me that we were always having theatricals, my mother and Aunt Louisa were an everflowing source of plots. One of their chief diversions, as I remember, was to play that they were Sairey Gamp and Betsy Prig and act out long scenes from the Dickens' book. Aunt Louisa could really act and mimic very well, and sometimes even put this ability to practical use, as, for instance, when she went to the door herself, dressed as the maid, to tell a trouble-

some reporter that she was out of town. We played "Pilgrim's Progress" just as they did in "Little Women," and to this day, I remember my entire part in "Box and Cox," which had been drilled into me until I could say it backward. I was Cox, my brother Fred was Box, and my mother, Mrs. Bouncer; Aunt Louisa was the stage-director. We kept the audience in an uproar of laughter, but I don't believe anyone enjoyed the performance more than we children did. People were always laughing when Aunt Louisa was around, for without trying to be entertaining she could keep her guests and callers in a roar. Even her every-day talk to us in the household was bright and witty. But while she was talking with people, she was always making a study of them, too, drawing them out, watching them,—you never could be sure that you weren't going to get into some story of hers, some day! When May,—that is "Amy"—died and left her a little baby-girl as a legacy, she dreaded the responsibility of taking care of so precious a thing and was probably a little worried lest a baby interfere with her work, but consoled herself with the thought that "she may have a literary turn and be my assistant, by offering hints and giving studies of character for my work."

No matter what interfered with her work, if it belonged to the family, if it was anything connected with the family, it didn't matter. Many a time she gave up whole months to minister to someone who was ill, to visit someone in the family who was lonely, to do the cleaning or the sewing or the cooking to the neglect of her literary work, which was much more to her liking, of course, and her real work. There wasn't a thing she couldn't do, from trimming hats to discussing philosophy, and if it would make any member of her family happy, she would do any and all of them at once. No sacrifice she could make for them could be too great.

Had she not been so generous with her time she would doubtless have written more novels; as it was, she was always waiting for an opportunity to write another book like "Moods," which I believe to have been her own favorite. When her publishers first asked her to write a girl's book, she protested, saying that if she must write for children, she would rather write for boys. She always wanted to be a boy, you know, and somehow she felt that she under-

stood boy-nature better. I don't think the fact that we two youngsters were boys had anything to do with it. I doubt whether she ever got more enjoyment out of anything than the writing of her first "penny-dreadfuls," her melodramas, full of romance and adventure. Only the other day I noticed in looking over the manuscript of "The Witch's Curse," the play which they act in "Little Women," which shows with what fervor it was written, that the love passages are penned in a flowing hand and the parts dealing with the villain, with a fierce, defiant looking back-hand.

She wrote very little in Concord, but usually escaped to the quiet of some hotel in Boston. This she did to free herself from an environment that meant much sorrow and worry to her. Once or twice, in the earlier years, she walked the eighteen miles into town (which she did in five hours, according to her diary) and whenever Amy was at home, she took her along for company.

Miss Alcott was keenly in sympathy with every movement which would tend to increase woman's educational and political

opportunities. From the very beginning, one might almost say, she was a firm believer in woman suffrage, and although she was certainly not in sympathy with militant methods, she was always willing and glad to do what she could to help the cause. At one time she wrote in her diary: "Saw

my townswomen about voting, etc. Hard work to stir them up; cake and servants are more interesting." But later, in writing to her publisher about a book which a friend of hers had written on suffrage, she took a more confident view of the success of the cause, for here she wrote: "Will you look at the manu-

script, by and by, or do you scorn the whole thing? Better not; for we are going to win

in time, and the friend of literary ladies ought to be also the friend of women generally."

None of her pictures do this fine woman justice, for her chief charm lay in her coloring and in the spirituality of her expression. As she said herself, "my pictures are never successes. When I don't look like a tragic muse, I look like a smoky relic of the great Boston fire."



Photo by White, N. Y.

A group at Orchard House, Concord, Massachusetts, last summer. The young ladies seated on the steps are the attendants who had charge of the house during the summer, when it was open to visitors. Mr. Alcott stands in the doorway.

