

# LITTLE WOMEN



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# CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1</b> .....	4
Activities .....	22
<b>Chapter 2</b> .....	24
Activities .....	42
<b>Chapter 3</b> .....	44
Activities .....	63
<b>Chapter 4</b> .....	65
Activities .....	87
Glossary .....	89
About the Author .....	94

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## CHAPTER 1

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It was an afternoon in December. It was snowing outside, and the four sisters were knitting socks in front of the fireplace. It was a comfortable room. The carpet was old, and the furniture was very plain. There were some pictures on the walls and books on the shelves. There were chrysanthemums and roses in vases. It was a pleasant and peaceful atmosphere.

Margaret, the eldest of the four sisters, was sixteen. Everyone called her Meg. She was very pretty, with large eyes, soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands. Fifteen-year-old Josephine was called Jo. She was very tall and thin and had sharp, gray eyes, which saw everything. Her long, thick hair was her only beauty. Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, had pink cheeks, smooth hair, and bright eyes. She was thirteen and was very shy. She had a soft voice and a peaceful expression. Amy was the youngest; she was twelve. She was pale and had blue eyes and yellow hair. She had a strong character and always acted like a polite young lady.

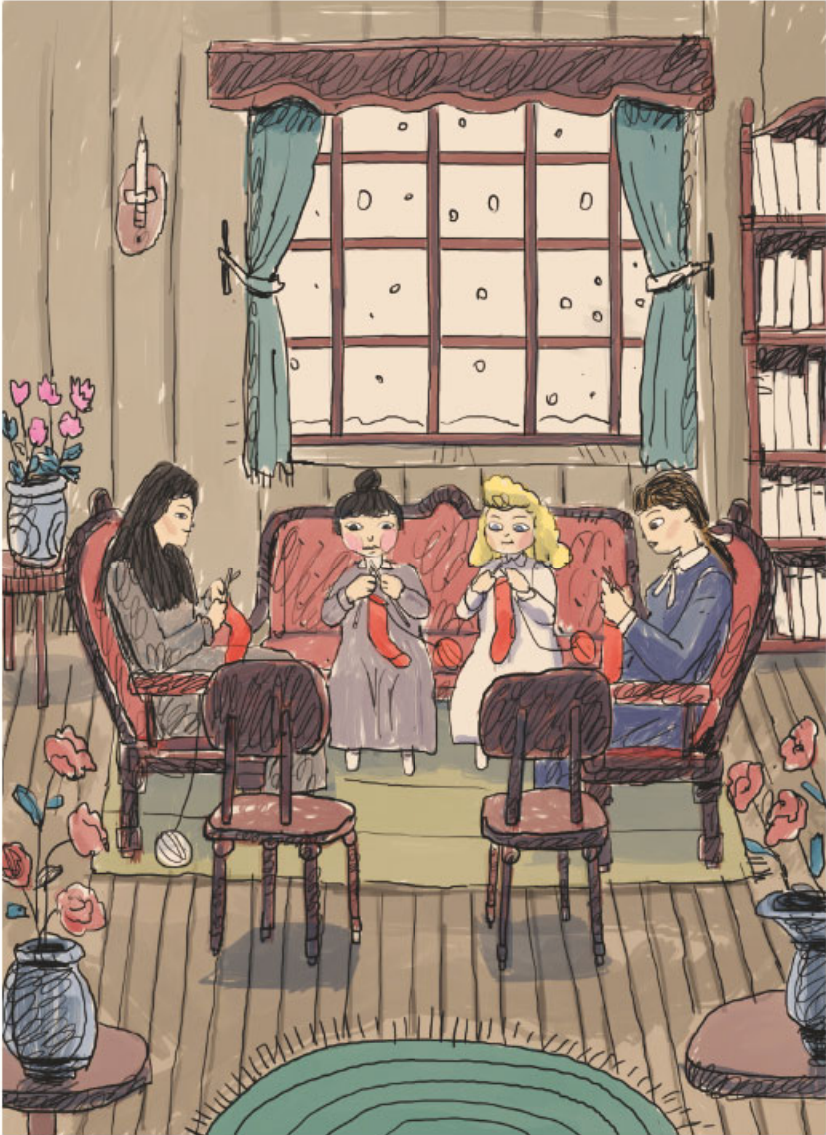
‘Christmas won’t be the same without any presents,’ said Jo.

‘It’s terrible to be poor!’ said Meg.

‘It’s not fair,’ said little Amy. ‘Some girls have plenty of pretty things, and other girls have nothing at all.’

‘But we’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,’ said Beth.

The four girls smiled, but then Jo said sadly, ‘But Father is not with us, and he won’t be with us for a long time.’ Their father was far away, fighting in the war.



*It was snowing outside, and the four sisters were knitting socks in front of the fireplace.*

After a pause, Meg said, 'We won't have any presents this Christmas because Mother thinks winter is going to be difficult.'

'Each of us have got a dollar. I wanted to spend mine on a book,' said Jo. She was a bookworm.

'I planned to spend mine in new music,' said Beth with a little sigh.

'I wanted a nice box of drawing pencils. I really need them,' said Amy.

'Mother didn't say anything about our money. Let's buy what we want and have a little fun. We work hard enough to earn it,' cried Jo.

'I know I work hard,' said Meg. 'Teaching those children all day is tiring.'

'My job is harder than yours,' said Jo. 'I am shut up for hours with a nervous, difficult old lady. She is never **satisfied**.'

'I don't want to **complain**, but I think washing the dishes, and cleaning the house is the worst work in the world,' said Beth. 'My hands get very stiff, so I can't practice the piano well.' She looked at her rough hands.

'I think I **suffer** the most,' said Amy. 'You don't have to go to school with girls who make fun of you and laugh at your dresses and tell you your father isn't rich.'

Jo and Meg looked at each other. They could remember the good times when their father had not lost all his money.

Jo started walking up and down the room, her hands in her pockets, and whistling.

'Don't whistle, Jo. It's so boyish! You're so unladylike,' said Amy.

‘That’s why I do it.’

‘I don’t like rude, unladylike girls!’

‘Well, I don’t like pretentious show-offs!’

Meg stopped the fighting. ‘Girls, you are both wrong,’ she said. ‘Josephine, you are old enough to stop acting like a boy. You are not a little girl anymore. You are a young lady.’

‘I’m not!’ cried Jo. ‘I hate that I have got to grow up and be Miss March and wear long dresses. I like boys’ games and work! I wish I could go and fight in the war with Father.’

‘And you, Amy,’ continued Meg, ‘You are too pretentious and difficult to please. I’m afraid you will become a showy little person when you grow up.’

The clock struck six. The girls were suddenly excited because their mother was coming home soon. Meg stopped lecturing and lighted the lamp. Beth put Mother’s slippers in front of the fireplace to warm.

‘They are quite old,’ said Jo. ‘Marmee must have a new pair of slippers.’ They called their mother ‘Marmee’.

‘I will get her a new pair with my dollar,’ said Beth.

‘No, I will!’ cried Amy.

‘I’m the oldest,’ said Meg.

Jo interrupted her. ‘I will get the slippers because Father told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone,’ she said.

‘I’ll tell you what we’ll do,’ said Beth. ‘Each of us will get Mother something for Christmas. We won’t get anything for ourselves.’

‘That’s a wonderful idea,’ said Jo. ‘You are so thoughtful, dear.’

Everyone thought about what they would get their mother. Meg said she would give her a pair of gloves. Jo said she would get a pair of slippers. Beth said she would get her some nice handkerchiefs, and Amy said she would get her a little bottle of cologne. They decided to put all the gifts on the table and surprise their mother. They were all very cheerful now.

‘I’m glad to see you all so happy, my girls,’ said a voice at the door. It was their mother, Mrs. March. She was a tall, pretty lady with a loving look on her face. The girls turned to welcome her. They thought that she was the most wonderful mother in the world.

‘Well, dearies, how was your day? We were getting the boxes ready at the hospital, and there was a lot to do, so I didn’t come home to dinner.’

Mrs. March got her wet things off, put on her warm slippers. She sat down in the chair. This was the happiest hour of her busy day. The girls gathered around her, trying to make her comfortable. Meg prepared the table, Jo brought wood and set chairs, Beth prepared the food, and Amy gave directions to everyone, as she sat in her mother’s lap.

They gathered around the table and began eating.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you after supper,’ said Mrs. March.

The girls were suddenly excited. Beth clapped her hands, and Jo cried, ‘A letter! Is it a letter from Father?’

‘Yes, a nice long letter. He is well. He sends his love and a special message to you girls,’ said Mrs. March.



The girls quickly finished eating their food. They all gathered around the fireplace. Mother sat in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy sat on the arms of the chair, and Jo leaned on the back. The letter did not talk about the dangers and difficulties of the war. It was a cheerful and hopeful letter. Their father talked about camp life and military news. But at the end of the letter, he wrote about how much he loved and missed his daughters.

*'Give them all my love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them every day. It may take a year for me to see them again. I know they will remember what I told them. They will be loving children and will work hard and be brave, and develop good, strong characters. And when I come back home, I will be **proud** of my little women.'*

Everybody had tears in their eyes. The girls said they would try to be better and more hard-working. They wanted to be as good as Father wanted them to be.

\* \* \*

Christmas Day was here at last. When the girls woke up in the morning, they found that their mother had left little presents under their pillows. They had each **received** a book, with a few words written by their mother. Jo's book was red, Meg's was green, Beth's was white, and Amy's was blue. It was the best present in their eyes. They all sat looking at the books and talking about them.

Half an hour later, the girls ran down to thank their mother for their gifts. Hannah was downstairs. Hannah was the family's maid. She had been with them since Meg was born and was more like a friend than a maid. They asked her where Marmee was.

Hannah told them that a poor little boy had come asking for help, and their mother had gone away with him to see what the problem was.

‘She will be back soon,’ said Meg to the others. ‘We must have everything ready before she arrives.’ The presents that they had bought their mother were in a basket under the sofa. They took the basket out and talked about their presents.

A few minutes later, they heard the front door shut.

‘Mother is coming. Hide the basket, quick!’ cried Jo.

The girls quickly put the basket under the sofa and went to the table for breakfast. Their mother came in.

‘Merry Christmas, Marmee! Thank you for our books.’

‘Merry Christmas, little daughters! Before we sit down for breakfast, I want to tell you something. I just saw a very poor family who live nearby. They are the Hummel family. The poor woman has a newborn baby and six other children. They are freezing because they have no fire. They have nothing to eat, and the oldest boy came to tell me they were suffering. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?’

The girls were very hungry, but they told their mother that they would. Immediately, they started packing the food.

Mrs. March was happy. ‘You will all go with me and help me, and when we come back, we will have bread and milk for breakfast.’

They were soon ready and set out. They went through back streets and came to the Hummels’ house. The poor family lived in a small room with broken windows and no fire. The mother was sick, and the

baby was crying. The pale and hungry children were under a blanket, trying to keep warm.

In a few minutes, everything changed. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fire and covered the holes in the windows with old pieces of cloth. Mrs. March gave the sick mother soup and dressed the little baby. The girls prepared the table, put the children around the fire, and fed them. They laughed and talked. It was a happy breakfast.

When they came back home, they had their own breakfast with bread and milk. The girls were very happy that they had given away their food. When their mother went upstairs, the girls took out their presents. They prepared a vase of very pretty flowers and put it in the middle of the table.

‘She’s coming! Quick!’ cried Jo.

Beth played a cheerful song on the piano, Amy threw open the door, and Meg took Mother to her chair. Mrs. March was surprised and touched. She smiled as she **examined** her presents and read the little notes. There was a lot of laughing and kissing.

It was now time to prepare for the evening. The girls loved the theater, but were too young to go and see a play often. So, they would prepare their own performances at home and act out in plays. They made their own décor and costumes. They used boxes, biscuit tins, cardboard, and old cotton to make lamps, guitars, and beautiful dresses. Jo would always play the male parts in the plays.

For the play on Christmas night, they had **invited** ten of their good friends. The girls sat on the bed, while the sisters prepared behind the curtains in front of them. The bell rang, and the play began. It was a

love story about a boy called Roderigo and a girl called Zara, who had to fight against an evil man called Hugo. The play was very **successful**, and everybody enjoyed it. The audience clapped their hands when it was over.

Then, Hannah came in to tell them that supper was ready. This was their mother's surprise for the girls. There were so many sweet things on the table that they were shocked. There was ice cream, pink and white, and cake and fruit, and bonbons. There were lots of pretty flowers in the middle of the table. The girls looked at the table and then at their mother.

'But how is this possible?' asked Amy.

'Mother did it,' said Meg as she smiled.

'No,' said Mrs. March. 'Old Mr. Laurence sent it.'

Mr. Laurence was a very rich man who lived in the big house next to theirs. He lived with his grandson.

'Mr. Laurence? But why?' asked Meg. 'We don't even know him!'

'Hannah told one of his servants about your breakfast party this morning. He is a strange old gentleman, but he was happy to hear that you helped the Hummel family. He knew my father years ago, and he sent me a polite note this afternoon. He wrote that he wanted to send my children some treats for their **generosity**. I could not say no, so you have a little feast tonight.'

The plates went around, and the ice cream began to disappear. The girls enjoyed it very much.

'Do you mean the people who live in the big house next door?'

asked one of the girls. 'My mother knows old Mr. Laurence. She says he's very proud and doesn't like to socialize with his neighbors. He keeps his grandson shut up in the house. The boy can go out only when he is riding or walking with his teacher. The old man makes him study hard. We invited him to our party, but he didn't come.'

'He looks like a nice boy,' said Jo. 'Our cat ran away once, and he brought her back. We talked a little bit about sports, but when he saw Meg coming, he walked away. He is very shy. I would like to get to know him one day. He looks like he needs some fun in his life.'

'He is a polite young man,' said Mrs. March. 'He brought the flowers today. I was going to invite him, but I didn't know what you girls were doing upstairs. He heard the laughter from upstairs, and he looked sad as he went away.'

'We'll have another play sometime. Maybe we can invite him,' said Jo.

\* \* \*

The day before new year, Jo and Meg received a note from Mrs. Gardiner, who was a family friend. She was inviting the two girls to the dance on New Year's Eve. Meg was very excited.

'What shall we wear?' she asked.

'You know we only have our plain dresses,' said Jo.

'I wish I had a silk dress,' said Meg. 'Mother says that I may have one when I'm eighteen, but two years is a very long time.'

'Our dresses are nice enough. Yours is as good as new, but I forgot the burn in mine. What will I do? I can't wear it to the dance.'

‘You must sit still and keep your back to the wall. The front of the dress is all right. I will have a new ribbon for my hair, and my new shoes are lovely.’

‘I spilled lemonade on my gloves. I will have to go without gloves,’ said Jo.

‘But you must have gloves,’ cried Meg. ‘Gloves are more important than anything else. You can’t dance without them.’

‘Then I’ll stay still. I don’t like dancing very much. Wait! We can wear your good gloves. Each of us can wear one and carry one of mine.’

‘But your hands are bigger than mine, and you will stretch my glove,’ said Meg.

‘Then I’ll go without gloves. I don’t care what people say!’

‘All right. You may have it! But please be careful.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Jo. ‘Now go and answer Mrs. Gardiner’s note.’

\* \* \*

On New Year’s Eve, the four girls were in their rooms. The two elder girls were getting ready for the dance, and the two younger girls were helping them. They laughed and talked and ran around. After some little accidents, the girls were finally ready. They looked pretty in their simple dresses. Meg wore a silver dress, with a blue ribbon on her head. Jo’s dress was dark red, with white flower patterns. The girls put on one glove on one hand and carried one in the other. Meg wore high-heeled shoes that were very tight and hurt her. Jo said that the nineteen hairpins in her hair hurt her head.

‘Have a good time, my dears!’ said Mrs. March. ‘Don’t eat too much and leave at eleven when Hannah comes for you.’

The girls arrived at Mrs. Gardiner’s house.

‘Now don’t forget the burn in your dress, Jo. You must hide it,’ said Meg.

‘I know I will forget. If you see me doing anything wrong, just wink at me, will you?’

‘No, winking isn’t ladylike. I’ll lift my eyebrows if anything is wrong, and nod if you are all right. Now hold your shoulder straight and take short steps.’

Mrs. Gardiner was an elegant old lady. She greeted the sisters kindly and handed them over to her eldest daughter, Sallie. Meg knew Sallie and was relaxed very soon, but Jo, didn’t like girls or girlish gossip very much. She stood about, with her back carefully against the wall. She felt out of place. Some boys were talking cheerfully about sports in another part of the room, and Jo wanted to go and join them. She signaled her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows went up to say no. No one came to talk to her, and she could not move around the room because of the burn in her dress. When the dancing began, Jo saw a young man **approaching** her. She was afraid that he would ask her for a dance, so she quickly went into the curtained little room behind her. Suddenly, she was face to face with Mr. Laurence’s grandson.

‘Oh dear, I didn’t know anyone was here!’ said Jo, preparing to leave.

But the boy laughed. ‘Don’t mind me, stay if you like,’ he said.

‘Won’t I **disturb** you?’

‘Not at all. I only came here because I don’t know many people, and I felt strange at first.’

‘So did I. Don’t go away, please.’

The boy sat down again and looked at his shoes.

‘I think I’ve seen you before. You live near us, don’t you?’ asked Jo.

‘Next door.’ And he looked up and laughed because he remembered how they had chatted about sports when he brought the cat home.

Jo was relaxed. ‘We enjoyed your nice Christmas present.’

‘Grandpa sent it.’

‘But it was your idea, wasn’t it?’

‘How is your cat, Miss March?’ asked the boy.

‘Good, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I’m only Jo.’

‘I’m not Mr. Laurence, I’m only Laurie.’





*And he looked up and laughed because he remembered how they had chatted about sports when he brought the cat home.*

Jo smiled. Soon they relaxed and started chatting. They talked about many things. They talked about dancing. Then, Laurie told her about his schooldays in France, and the trips that he took to Switzerland. Then they watched the dancers and talked about them like two old friends. Laurie was no longer shy, and Jo's normal cheerfulness returned.

'Are you going to college soon?' Jo asked. 'You are studying very hard.'

Laurie smiled. 'Not for a year or two. I'll go when I'm seventeen. I'll be sixteen soon.'

'I wish I was going to college!'

'I hate it. I'd like to live in Italy, and to enjoy myself in my own way.'

Music started. 'That's a wonderful song!' said Jo. 'Why don't you dance?'

'If you will come too,' said Laurie.

'I can't. I promised Meg because...' Jo stopped.

'Because, what?'

'Don't tell anyone. I can't dance because I stood in front of the fire and burned the back of my dress. You can laugh. I know it is funny.'

But Laurie didn't laugh. He thought for a minute, and then he said, 'Never mind that. We can dance in the long hall out there, and no one will see us. Please come.'

They went. The hall was empty, and they danced. When the music stopped, they sat down on the stairs. They talked about many things. Then, Meg **appeared**. She was looking for her sister. Jo followed her into a side room. Meg was holding her foot. She was in pain.

‘I’ve hurt my ankle,’ she said. ‘I can’t stand on my foot. I don’t know how I’ll get home.’

‘I knew you’d hurt your feet in those silly high heeled shoes. You must get a carriage, or stay here all night,’ answered Jo.

‘I can’t get a carriage. It costs too much. It’s already past nine o’clock. I’ll rest here until Hannah comes, and then I’ll try to walk.’

Jo stayed with Meg. Later, Laurie joined them. He brought some coffee and sweets. They chatted for a while and then played a card game. They had a great time. At eleven o’clock, Hannah came to take the girls home. Meg forgot her foot and stood up quickly, but she was unable to stand on her feet.

Jo ran outside to find a carriage. She was looking around for help when Laurie came. He **offered** them a ride in his grandfather’s carriage.

‘But it is too early. You don’t want to go so soon,’ Jo said.

‘I always go early,’ said Laurie. ‘Please let me take you home. Your house is on my way, and it is raining.’

Jo thanked him and accepted the offer. The girls and Hannah got into the luxurious carriage. Laurie sat outside so Meg could keep her foot up. The girls talked about the party all the way home.

\* \* \*

The girls’ father, Mr. March, had lost his wealth years ago when he was trying to help a friend in need. After that, the two elder girls, Meg and Jo, told their parents that they wanted to work. Their parents thought about it and agreed.

Meg found a small job as nursery governess. She looked after and taught small children and received a small salary. Meg had difficulty getting used to **poverty** because she had seen the times when they were rich. She tried not to be jealous, but she wanted pretty things and a happy life. In the house where she worked, she saw richness and the things she wanted: pretty dresses, flowers, theater, concerts, and parties. She did not complain much, but sometimes she felt bitter towards other people.

Jo found a job working for their old relative, Aunt March, who was sick and needed someone to look after her. She was short-tempered and difficult to get along with, but, surprisingly, Jo got on well with the old lady. Occasionally, they would have a disagreement, and Jo would say she could not take it any longer. But Aunt March would send a message for her to come back, and she would return. She actually liked the old lady.

There was another reason why Jo liked to work with Aunt March. She had a wonderful library in her home. It was a large library with lots of books that used to belong to Uncle March, who died a long time ago. Jo remembered the kind old gentleman. He used to tell her stories and let her play in his library. Jo loved spending time there. The moment Aunt March had a guest or went to sleep, Jo ran to this quiet place, and read. She read all kinds of books like a bookworm.

Jo dreamed of doing something important one day. She did not know what it was yet. She loved to read, run, and ride, and she was unhappy that she did not have enough time to do these things. But she was happy that she was able to make her own money.

Beth was too shy and quiet to go to school. She had tried going,

but it had been too painful for her. So, she was taught at home by her father. After he went to war, Beth continued studying by herself. She liked doing housework and helped Hannah keep the house tidy. She was never lonely or lazy at home.

Beth loved music. She was unhappy because she wanted a good piano and music lessons. She tried to practice by herself on the old instrument they had at home.

Amy had a talent for drawing. She was the happiest when she was drawing flowers, designing fairies, and illustrating stories. Her teachers at school complained because she spent her time drawing animals and caricatures instead of doing arithmetic. All her friends loved her because she was good-tempered and friendly.

Because everyone liked Amy, she had become selfish and proud. She was very unhappy because she had to wear her cousin Florence's old clothes. She complained that she had to wear ugly dresses that she did not like.

Amy was very close with Meg and told her about her troubles. Similarly, Beth was very close with Jo. The shy child could only share her thoughts with Jo.



### ACTIVITIES

#### A. Do the puzzle.

**ACROSS:**

3. (n) the state of being poor

4. (adj) someone who has achieved their aims

5. (adj) someone who gives things freely

**DOWN:**

1. (adj) happy because you have got what you wanted or needed

2. (adj) pleased about something one owns or has done

#### B. True or False?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The four sisters were depressed because they did not have enough money to buy presents for Christmas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Jo wished she could buy nice dresses and go to dances.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The girls decided to earn some money to buy their mother presents.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In his letter, their father wanted the girls to be hard working and brave.

**C. Unscramble the words and complete the sentences with them.**



1. The sisters talked about the difficulties in their lives and told each other that they **s \_ f f \_ \_** ed the most.
2. The girls prepared breakfast before their mother **a \_ r \_ v \_ d** home.
3. Amy was unhappy that she had to wear her cousin's clothes. She often **c \_ \_ p l \_ \_ n** ed about this.
4. Mrs. March **e \_ \_ m \_ ne** d the presents that the girls had prepared for her.

**D. Discuss the following questions.**

1. How did the girls feel after they helped the Hummel family?
2. Where had the ice cream, cake, fruit, and flowers come from?
3. During the New Year's dance, why did Jo hide behind the curtained room?
4. What did the girls do after their father lost all his money?

## GLOSSARY

### Chapter 1

**appear** (v) to start to be seen

*ant.* disappear (v)

**approach** (v) to come near to somebody/something in distance or time

**arrive** (v) to get to a place, especially at the end of a journey

**complain** (v) to say that something is wrong or not satisfactory

complaint (n)

**disturb** (v) 1. to interrupt what someone is doing; 2. to make someone feel upset or worried

**examine** (v) to look at somebody or something closely, to see if there is anything wrong or to find the cause of a problem

**generosity** (n) the fact of being generous (= willing to give somebody money, gifts, time or kindness freely)

generous (adj)

**invite** (v) to ask somebody to come to a social event

**offer** (v) if you offer something to someone, you ask them if they would like to have it or use it

**poverty** (n) the state of being poor

**proud** (adj) 1. feeling pleased and satisfied because you or people connected with you have done or got something good; 2. feeling that you are better and more important than other people

pride (n)

**receive** (v) to get or accept something that is sent or given to you



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) was an American author known for her children's books, especially the classic *Little Women*.

Alcott was taught by her father until 1848 and studied informally with family friends such as poets and philosophers H.D. Thoreau and R.W. Emerson. At 18, she started working to help support her family and worked at different jobs. During the Civil War, she went to Washington, D.C. to work as a nurse, but she contracted typhoid and was sent home. She was never completely well again.

Alcott's stories began to appear in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. In 1869, she wrote the autobiographical *Little Women*, which became an immediate success. The book was based on her own childhood memories and described the adventures of a New England family. *Little Women* created a realistic and positive picture of family life which younger readers could easily relate to.

The great success of *Little Women* gave Alcott financial independence. During her later years, she wrote constantly. She wrote novels and short stories, mostly for young people. Her books include *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins* (1875), and *Jo's Boys* (1886). Alcott also wrote novels for adults, such as *Work* (1873) and *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), but these were not as popular as her other books.

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