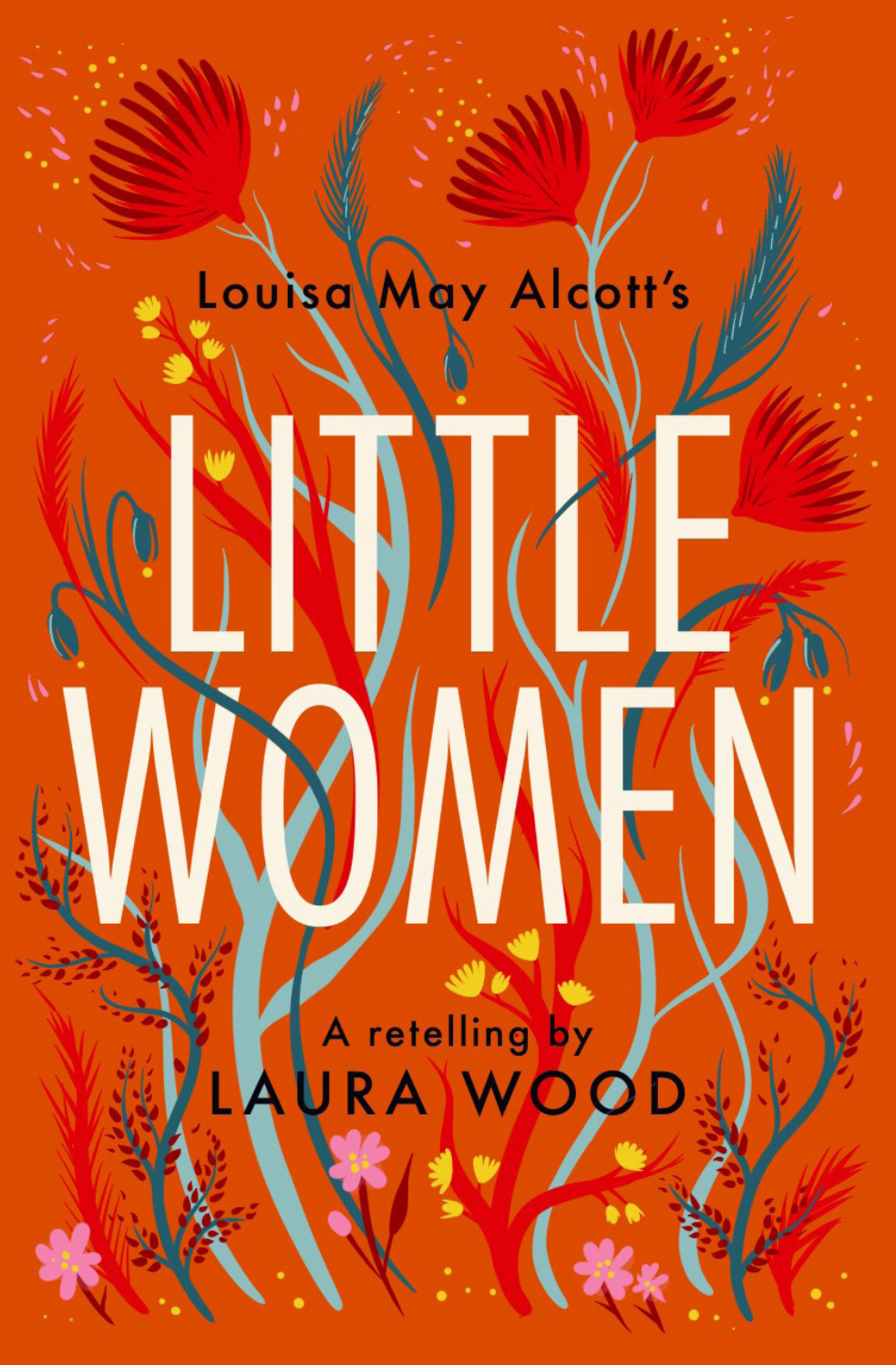

Louisa May Alcott's
LITTLE WOMEN
A retelling by
LAURA WOOD



LITTLE WOMEN

ALSO BY LAURA WOOD

Pride and Prejudice: A Retelling

Louisa May Alcott's

LITTLE WOMEN

A retelling by

LAURA WOOD

Barrington Stoke

First published in 2023 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2023 Laura Wood

The moral right of Laura Wood to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in any part in any form without the written permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-80090-179-7

Printed by Hussar Books, Poland



Little Women *was the first book I ever took out of the library and it lit a fire in me that's been burning ever since, so I'd like to dedicate this book to the librarians who probably don't know just how many lives they're changing.*



1.

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," Jo grumbled, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" Meg sighed, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things and other girls to have nothing at all," little Amy added, sticking out her bottom lip.

"We've got Father and Mother, and each other," Beth said from her corner.

They all smiled at Beth's words, but then those smiles turned to frowns. They had remembered their father was away where the war was being fought.

The firelight shone on the March sisters and their four very different faces. There was Meg, the oldest, who was sixteen. Meg was pretty with dark hair and wide grey eyes, and she thought herself very grown up and in charge.

Meg spent a lot of time being worried. Sometimes she was worried about her sisters, sometimes she was worried about her parents. Other times she couldn't help being worried about all the nice things that sixteen-year-old girls were supposed to have that she didn't – things like pretty dresses and silk stockings and satin gloves.

After Meg there was Jo, who was fifteen. Jo was tall and skinny and let everyone see her emotions. If Jo was cross, then her scowl was fierce and it felt like a thunderstorm rolling in. If she was happy, then her smile seemed to brighten up the whole room. Jo had long, beautiful chestnut hair that her sisters were jealous of but that Jo didn't seem to care about one bit.

The next sister was Beth. Beth was thirteen and she had soft brown hair and soft brown eyes. Every bit of Beth was soft, because Beth was the sweetest girl in the whole world, as Jo was fond of saying.

Finally, there was Amy, who was twelve. Amy looked like a china doll with clear blue eyes and blonde curls. It was clear that one day she would be very beautiful. As the youngest, Amy was a little spoilt. She was very worried about making sure

she wasn't left out of any adventures her sisters might take on.

Nobody spoke for a minute as they thought about Father being away. Then Meg said, "You know the reason Mother said we shouldn't have any presents this Christmas was because it's going to be a hard winter for everyone. She thinks we shouldn't spend money on ourselves when people are suffering. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices and should do it gladly." Meg shook her head and added, "Well, that's what they say, but I'm afraid I don't make my sacrifices gladly. I'm not glad about them at all."

"But I do think we should be able to spend our own pocket money," said Jo. "I really do want a new book."

"I planned to spend mine on new music," said Beth with a little sigh that no one heard.

"I shall get a nice box of drawing pencils. I really need them," said Amy.

"Mother didn't say anything about our pocket money," cried Jo. "She won't wish us to give up *everything*. Let's each buy what we want and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it."

"I know I do, teaching those tiresome children nearly all day," said Meg, who tutored Mr and Mrs King's young daughters.

"You don't have half such a hard time as I do," said Jo. "How would you like to spend hours with a nervous, fussy old lady who keeps you running around and is never satisfied?" Jo's job was looking after their Aunt March, who really was very grumpy.

"I know I shouldn't complain," Beth said, "but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff I can't practise the piano well at all."

"I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy dramatically. "You don't have to go to school with awful girls who make fun of you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses. They say mean things about your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice."

Here, Amy pinched her nose. It was perfectly nice, but Amy thought it was not small and turned-up enough. Sometimes Amy held her nose in a clothes peg to try to change it, but so far the results of this experiment had been unpromising.

"Don't you wish we had the money Father lost when we were little, Jo?" said Meg. "Dear me! How happy and good we'd be if we had no worries!"

"You said the other day you thought *we* were a lot happier than the King children," Beth piped up, "because they were always fighting, in spite of their money."

"Well, I think we are happier," Meg admitted. "We might have to work, but we make fun of ourselves and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say."

"Jo does use such slang words!" Amy said, giving a disapproving look to Jo stretched out on the rug.

Jo sat up, put her hands in her pockets and began to whistle.

"Don't, Jo. Whistling is so boyish!" Amy scolded.

"That's why I do it." Jo stuck out her tongue.

"I detest rude, unladylike girls!" Amy exclaimed.

"I hate stuck-up little children!" Jo snapped.

"Sisters are the best of friends," sang Beth, the peacemaker. She made such a funny face that Jo's and Amy's sharp voices softened to a laugh and the argument ended.

"Really, girls, you are both to be blamed," said Meg. As the oldest, she felt it was her job to keep the others in line. "Amy, you must stop being such

a know-it-all, and, Jo, you are too old to be playing boyish tricks. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall and tie up your hair you should remember that you are a young lady."

"I'm not!" cried Jo. "And if wearing my hair up makes me one, then I'll wear it in pigtails until I'm twenty." She pulled the pins from her hair and shook out her long waves. "I hate to think I've got to grow up. It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway. And it's worse than ever now, because I'm dying to go and fight with Father. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!"

And Jo shook the lumpy-looking blue sock she was knitting until the needles rattled and her ball of wool bounded across the room.

They were interrupted by the clock striking six. Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm by the fire. Somehow this had a good effect upon the girls because it meant the return of Marmee, which was what they all called their mother.

Meg stopped lecturing and lit the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was, holding up the slippers nearer to the blaze.

"These slippers are quite worn out. Marmee must have a new pair," Jo said.

"I thought I'd get her some with my dollar," said Beth.

"No, I shall!" cried Amy.

"I'm the oldest," began Meg.

But Jo cut in with, "I'm the man of the family now Father is away. I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Marmee while he was gone."

"I'll tell you what we could do," said Beth. "Let's each get Marmee something for Christmas and not get anything for ourselves."

"What will we get?" exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought for a minute. Then Meg announced, "I shall give her a nice pair of gloves."

"New slippers, the best to be had," cried Jo.

"Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed," said Beth.

"I'll get a little bottle of perfume," added Amy. "Marmee likes it, and it won't cost much, so I'll have some left to buy my pencils."

"Glad to find you so merry, my girls," said a cheery voice at the door. The sisters all stopped talking at once, careful to make sure their plans weren't overheard.

"Well, dearies, how have you got on today?" Marmee asked. "There was so much to do that I didn't come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death. Come and kiss me, Amy." Marmee bustled in, her cheeks pink, and she was wrapped up in a shabby grey coat.

The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable. Meg arranged the tea table and Jo brought wood and set chairs, dropping and clattering everything she touched. Beth trotted out to the kitchen and back, quiet and busy. Meanwhile Amy gave directions to everyone as she sat with her hands folded.

They gathered about the table for tea, and Mrs March said, with a happy face, "I've got a treat for you after supper."

Smiles flashed on their faces like a streak of sunshine. Beth clapped her hands and Jo tossed up her napkin, crying, "A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!"

"Yes, a nice long letter," said Marmee. "He is well and thinks he shall get past the cold season better than we feared. Father sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas and a special message

to you girls." Marmee patted her pocket as if she had a treasure there.

"Hurry and get done eating!" cried Jo. "Don't stop to quirk your little finger and simper over your plate, Amy." She choked on her tea and dropped her bread, butter side down, on the carpet.

"I wish I could have gone to the war as a drummer, or a nurse," Jo continued. "Then I could be near Father and help him."

"It must be very disagreeable to sleep in a tent, and eat all sorts of bad-tasting things, and drink out of a tin mug," sighed Amy.

"When will Father come home, Marmee?" asked Beth with a quiver in her voice.

"Not for many months, dear, unless he is sick. Your father will stay and do his work as long as he can, and we won't ask for him back a minute sooner than he can be spared. Now come and hear the letter."

They all drew to the fire. Marmee was in the big chair with Beth at her feet. Meg and Amy were perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaned on the back, where no one would see any sign of emotion if the letter should be touching.

It was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life, marches and military news. Only at the end did it become sentimental:

> *Give the girls all of my love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them all the time. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.*

They were all emotional after that. Even Jo wasn't ashamed of the great tear that dropped off the end of her nose.