

# TO PRESERVE THE HOME OF THE AUTHOR OF "LITTLE WOMEN" AS A MEMORIAL

There stands to-day in Concord town: that centre of pilgrimage for all lovers of American letters, a house much the worse for the wear and tear of many generations, almost a tumble-down house, with a barn at the back equally in need of repair. The pilgrims pause with awe before the lovely New England home of Emerson and thrill at the dark pines where Hawthorne walked, and glow with enthusiasm at the "rude bridge which arched the flood," and its commemorative Minute Man, but it is before the dilapidated house of the Alcotts that the heart grows warmest.

There were wonderful men who lived in Concord in those midcentury days, but the strongest, stoutest, bravest man among them all was Bronson Alcott's tomboy girl, Louisa. All her life she bore the burdens of her "Pathetic Family," as she called the Alcott idealists, and there in the orchard house she wrote that story of their struggles that she called "Little Women," the book that enabled her for the first time to see the possibility of comfort for herself and the transcendental family.

It is proposed now to buy the Orchard House with the contributions of those who are grateful enough to its author to wish to see a memorial established. There are probably few women in this country who had an English speaking girlhood and read any books at all who did not rejoice in Meg and Jo, Beth and Amy, to say nothing of Laurie and the glorious company of boys who lived at the dear German professor's school. There should be a sufficient number, says the Concord Woman's Club, which has the matter in charge, to raise \$5,000 to purchase the Orchard House and turn it over to a society which would keep it forever in memory of Louisa Alcott.

Readers of Miss Alcott's books, "Little Women," "Little Men," "An Old-Fashioned Girl," and all the others, are counted now by millions. Before Miss Alcott died, when she had written no new book, but was receiving only the royalties from these favorites, her annual income was \$16,000.

It would be particularly fitting if the tribute could be paid Miss Alcott's memory now, just about fifty years since she walked down the long path that leads from the Orchard House to the highway and waved farewell and started off to the war. Her journal of November, 1862, has this note and in all the characteristic things she wrote nothing was ever more true to her character than this:

"November: Thirty years old. Decided to go to Washington as nurse if I could find a place. Help needed, and I love nursing and must let out my pent-up energy in some new way. Winter is always a hard and dull time, and if I am away there is one less to feed and warm and worry over."

There you have Louisa Alcott, full of pent-up energy—must help, loves taking care of people; she loved the stir of war, too, she said, thinking always of the anxiety of "Marmee" when there were so many to feed and warm and so little to do it with, father being an idealist.

Later on, before the time of "Little Women," when the literary Jo was just beginning to find her way to publishers' offices, there are again and again in the diary entries like this: "Made \$70. Sent home \$30." Or "Made \$35. Sent \$15 home." She was always fighting and caring for the wounded, whether she was at the front with the soldiers or just struggling in the ranks of breadwinners.

Always she was bright and gay over the family troubles, at least in her diary. She never allowed herself to become morbid with her worries. The financial sacrifices she made for the impractical father she recorded as "investments in the

Alcott sinking fund, the Micawber R. R. and the Skimpole three per cents." Any one who has read "Little Women" knows Louisa Alcott and the Pathetic Family. Her own statement of the relation of the "March" family to the Alcotts is this:

"Facts in the stories that are true, though often changed as to time and place:

"The early plays and experiences, Beth's death, Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences, Meg's happy home, John Brooke and his death, Demi's character. Mr. March did not go to war but Jo did. Mrs. March is all true, but not half good enough. Laurie is not an American boy, though every lad I ever knew claims that character. He was a Polish boy, met abroad in 1865 when she traveled as companion to a friend. Mr. Lawrence is my grandfather, Col. Joseph May, Aunt March is no one."

The characters of the girls are not changed at all. Meg was Anna, pretty and gentle; Jo in the attic with "genius burning" was herself, dear Beth, the delicate third daughter Elizabeth, who died young, and was always Louisa's "angel in the house"; Amy was only the transposed name of May, the artistic sister who irritated Louisa in her youth but became very close to her afterward. Tomboy Jo had many friends, among boys, and she beat them all in foot races, but Laurie was not a Concord boy, as she declares to the disappointment of many a young man.

Miss Alcott was 25 years old when the idea first came to her that the wanderings of the family attached to a transcendental philosopher might make a story. It was not then a clear idea of the tale

## "Orchard House," Where Louisa M. Alcott Lived, Is to be Bought by Admirers of Her Books and Kept as a Literary Shrine.

that became "Little Women," but a note in her journal shows she was on the track.

They had arrived at Orchard House after many a failure. There had been the Temple School in Boston, where Bronson Alcott taught after the Socratic method, and that had failed. There had been the experiment at Fruitlands, whither they had all gone "to live according to nature," and that had failed. There had been the father's trip to England, where he had been honored, but that had failed. She wrote, in 1857:

"I got a hint for a story; and some day will do it, and call it 'The Cost of An Idea.' Spindle Hill, Temple School, Fruitlands, Boston and Concord would make fine chapters. The trials and triumphs of the Pathetic Family would make a capital book; may I live to do it."

Three years later she had not yet done it, though she had written a great deal, mostly sensational tales of adventure, but the idea was still there. A letter to her aunt is dated "Apple Slump"—the family synonym for "Orchard House." She tells how her father "continues to stir up the schools like a mild pudding stick and mother to sing Hebron among her pots and pans," and she gives a lively account of visitors:

"Saturday we had J. G. Whittier, Charlotte Cushman, Miss Stebbins the sculptress, and Mr. Stuart, conductor of the underground railroad in this charming free country. So you see our humble place of abode is perking up; and when the great authoress and artist are fairly out of the shell we shall be an honor to our country and a terror to the foe—provided good fortune don't addle or bad fortune smash us. This is a condensed history of the 'Pathetic Family,' which is also a 'happy family,' owing to the prevalence of friends and lots of kindness in the original packages which are always arriving when the 'Widow Cruise's oil bottle' begins to give out."

"The Pathetic Family" was firmly in her mind as a sort of title to the Alcott adventures, but she first wrote "Transcendental Wild Oats" and when she approached "Little Women" she did not have much enthusiasm.

"Mr. Niles wants a girls' story," she wrote, "and I begin 'Little Women.' Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing." She hoped the queer plays and experiences of herself and her sisters might prove interesting, "though," she adds, "I doubt it." Years

after, Miss Alcott, re-reading her journal, wrote in the margin against this, "Good joke."

But possibly the first draft of the story was lacking in interest, for her publisher, to whom she submitted the first twelve chapters, thought it dull. "So do I," she remarked with her usual lack of conceit, but she intends to "work away and try the experiment, for simple, lively books are very much needed for girls and perhaps I can supply the need."

Evidently the finished book was no longer "dull." Roberts Brothers, the publishers, offered her either a price for the story or royalties, but advised her to accept royalties. She did. "An honest publisher and a lucky author," she says, "for the copyright made her fortune and the 'dull book' was the first golden egg of the ugly duckling."

Mr. Niles liked the story "better now," as she did herself, and when the publisher said he had showed it to some girls and she pronounced it "splendid" the author's mind went in a few weeks, and then the sale began to jump amazingly. The second part was ordered for the Spring, and she found she liked writing it.

"A little success is so inspiring that I

now find my Marches sober, nice people, and as I can launch into the future my fancy has more play. Girls ask me to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one."

Miss Alcott was not sentimental. She does not appear to have had a love affair; her family filled her heart. She objected strenuously to making herself, as Jo, marry at all, and it was only afterward, when readers clamored and she had made her prolonged story of the four girls depart from the strict truth as to the Pathetic Family that she could bring herself to give Jo to her German professor.

The year before "Little Women" came out she made \$1,000. On this she lived in Boston, (she returned to Orchard House to write "Little Women.") helped her artistic sister "Amy"; paid some debts incurred by the transcendental parent, and sent money home. The year after "Little Women" appeared all debts were paid, "every penny that money can pay." She felt as if she could die in peace.

There was no more financial distress in the Alcott family. Some months after she wrote a gay ditty entitled "The Lay of a Golden Goose," in which she described the changed family fortunes. A plain gray goose, well aware she was no nightingale, set out to seek her fortune, accompanied by the careful warnings of the father, "a mild Socratic bird," and the adventurous creature suddenly discovered she could lay golden eggs—which was not to be wondered at, since she came from a "transcendental nest." She found a quiet place, and—

"Here did she build a little nest Beside the waters still, Where the parental goose could rest Unvexed by any bill."

But Orchard House, in spite of its quiet, could not hold Louisa Alcott without attracting visitors. The authoress "dodged in the woods a la Hawthorne." Somehow the world was growing kinder to Bronson Alcott, too. Gentle soul that he was, he had almost begun to believe he must really be crazy; as people said, but he was a common enough tragedy—a great man born out of his time.

She loved and revered her father profoundly, but she was always keen enough to see the impracticality of his schemes, and she adored her overworked mother. She was only 10 years old when she wrote a poem to her mother, telling of her dream to ease the care that pressed upon that fine spirited woman and to make a place for her where she might sit in an easy chair:

"While I sit close beside you, Content at last to see That you can rest, dear mother, And I can cherish thee."

But most likely, if Bronson Alcott had not been a dreamer, if he had given his children the ordinary education—everybody deplored his unmethodical ways with them—"Little Women" would have been the conventional girls' tale of fifty years ago, successful for a year or two, perhaps, but dead now, like the rest of the mawkish stuff fed to young minds at that time. Mr. Frank Sanborn thinks the children were well educated "according to nature," and he thinks, too, that the family troubles were perhaps better for them than anything else.

Given, to begin with, the originality of Louisa Alcott it could not fail to be fostered by the transcendental education. In the home of her childhood, where the "English mystics" came to sit at the feet of Bronson Alcott, these were the theories the girls were taught by their vegetarian father in the form of epigrams: "Pluck your body from the orchard; do not snatch it from the shamblers." And "Apollo eats no flesh and has no beard; his voice is melody itself."

It was an odd school, even looked at in the light of modern educational ideas, and to Massachusetts of seventy years ago it was little short of insane. But it allowed Louisa's active mind to expand along its own lines and accustomed her to think for herself.

Most of these memories gather around Orchard House. It was not there that the Pathetic Family lived when the queer plays described in "Little Women" took place, and since their father's career was one failure after another they lived in many places, but for twenty-five years Orchard House was home. There she made her plans for work, thence she went to the war, and toward Orchard House, with Marmee's worn and patient face and Amy's blue eyes and golden curls in the window, her heart was always turning.

Later, when Marmee had died in the arms of the family prop and stay, when the gentle philosopher had made his last failure and lay beside his wife in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, when "Meg's" dear husband, John, had died, and Amy, too, after a year or two of perfect happiness abroad with her German husband, the brave woman could no longer bear Orchard House. She sold it and went away, to support Meg's two boys and to bring up the baby girl Amy had left to her care.

But when she died she directed that she should be taken back to Concord for burial, to lie near her father and mother and Beth. Not beside them, for that would be choosing one from among the three, but across their feet, so that she could still take care of them all.



Louisa M. Alcott, from Her Latest Photograph.



Orchard House at Concord, Mass., Which Is to be Bought as a Memorial to the Author of "Little Women."



Miss Alcott as a Nurse in the Civil War.