

Chapter 1

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful being poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy.

“We’ve got Father and Mother and each other,” whispered Beth, contentedly, from her corner.

The four young faces brightened at Beth’s words. But then Jo reminded them sadly, “We don’t have Father. And we won’t for a long time.”

Each girl added silently, “And perhaps we won’t ever again.” For their father was far from home, fighting in a dangerous war.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then sixteen-year-old Meg broke the silence. She was the oldest of the four March sisters, and rather vain about her large eyes, soft brown hair, sweet mouth, and fair hands. “Mother said we shouldn’t buy any presents this year because it’s going to be a hard

winter for everyone. We should be glad to sacrifice our own little pleasures to help those who are suffering in the army. But I'm afraid I just don't feel that way." There were so many pretty things she wanted!

Fifteen-year-old Josephine, who liked to be called "Jo," spoke next. She was very tall and thin, with legs as awkward as a colt's. Her sharp gray eyes seemed to see everything. At different times they could be fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Jo's hair was long, thick, and beautiful. But she usually pulled it back into a tight little bun so it would be out of her way. Jo hated having to dress, look, or act like a "young woman." But she loved to read. "We've each got a dollar," she began. "That's too little to help the army very much. Now, I don't expect gifts from anyone else. But I would like to buy a book for myself."

Thirteen-year-old Beth, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, wore a peaceful expression that was seldom disturbed. Quiet and shy, she seemed to live in a happy world of her own. "I was going to buy new piano music," she said, so softly that no one heard.

"Well, I'm going to buy a nice box of drawing pencils!" announced twelve-year-old Amy. Though the youngest sister, she thought of herself as a very important person. Blue-eyed, with yellow hair that curled at her shoulders, Amy always tried to act like a proper young lady.

At that, Jo exclaimed, "Mother wouldn't want us to give up everything. So let's each use our money to buy what we want. We sure work hard enough earning it!"

"I know I do," complained Meg. "Teaching those children nearly all day long!"

"My job's a lot harder than yours," argued Jo. "Shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady who's never satisfied. She pesters me and keeps me running around until I'm ready to jump out the window. Or cry."

"I know it's wrong to complain," Beth added softly. "But housework is the worst work in the world. It makes my hands so rough and stiff that I can't practice the piano."

"Well, I suffer the most!" exclaimed Amy. "I have to go to school with rude girls who tease me if I make a mistake. They laugh at my plain, hand-me-down clothes. And they make fun of my father because he isn't rich."

Meg, who was old enough to remember better times, sighed, "Don't you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little? How happy and good we'd be if only we had no worries!"

"But, Meg. The other day you said we were much happier than the King children. You said they always fight, in spite of all their money," Beth reminded her gently.

"Well, I think we are. Even though we do have to work, we also make fun for ourselves."

At this, Jo sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and started whistling.

“Don’t, Jo. It’s so boyish!” scolded Amy.

“That’s why I do it.”

“Well, I hate rude, unladylike girls!”

“And I hate stuck-up, prissy misses!”

Beth, the peacemaker, sang out, “Birds in their little nests must all agree.”

Meg started lecturing them both. “Really, Josephine. You’re old enough to stop being a tomboy and start acting like a lady.”

“I will not!” cried Jo, undoing the bun and shaking out her hair. “I hate having to grow up and be like Miss March—wearing long gowns and looking prim. It’s bad enough to be a girl when I’d rather play boys’ games and do men’s work. I’m still disappointed that I wasn’t born a boy. I’m dying to go fight with Papa instead of sitting here like a little old lady, knitting blue socks for the soldiers!”

“Poor Jo!” Beth said gently. “It’s too bad, but it can’t be helped. So try to be happy making your name sound boyish and playing ‘brother’ to us girls.”

“As for you, Amy,” Meg continued, “You’re much too fussy and prim. I like your nice manners and your careful way of speaking. But when you try to be elegant, you end up sounding like a silly little goose.”

“If Jo is a tomboy and Amy’s a goose, then what am I?” asked Beth.

“You’re a dear,” answered Meg, for everyone loved Beth, who was the family “pet.”

The sisters continued to knit, while outside the December snow fell quietly, and inside the fire crackled cheerfully. It was a comfortable room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very simple. But it was filled with books, flowers, and a sense of peace.

The clock struck six. Having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers in front of the fireplace to warm up. The sight of the old shoes cheered the girls, and they prepared to welcome Marmee, as they 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 as she held the slippers closer to the fire.

“They’re completely worn out,” observed Jo. “Marmee needs a new pair.”

“I thought I’d get her some with my dollar,” said Beth quietly.

“No, I shall!” exclaimed Amy.

“But I’m the oldest,” began Meg.

Jo interrupted her. “I’m the man of the family now that Papa’s away. He told me to take special care of Mother. So I’ll provide the slippers.”

“I know. Let’s each get something for Marmee, and not get anything for ourselves,” said Beth.

“You’re so sweet!” exclaimed Jo. “What will we get?”

Looking at her own pretty hands, Meg announced, "I'll give her a nice pair of gloves."

"Good army shoes," Jo decided.

"Some nice handkerchiefs," said Beth.

"A pretty little bottle of perfume. She'll like it, and I'll still have some money left over to buy my pencils," added Amy.

"We'll go shopping tomorrow afternoon, and let Marmee think we're getting things for ourselves," suggested Jo. "But now we'd better rehearse our Christmas play."

When the sisters had finished acting out the scene, Beth applauded. "You write such splendid plays, Jo! You're a regular Shakespeare!" Beth believed that each of her sisters was a genius.

Suddenly a cheery voice greeted them from the doorway. "Well, dearies, how are you? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look exhausted." A tall, noble, motherly lady entered the room. She had a truly delightful "Can I help you?" look about her. The girls thought that the simple gray coat and old-fashioned hat covered the most wonderful mother in the world.

As they gathered around the table, Mrs. March said, with a particularly happy face, "I've got a treat for you after supper."

Like a streak of sunshine, a bright smile lit up each face, one after the other. Beth clapped her hands, forgetting that she was holding a biscuit.

Jo tossed her napkin in the air, shouting, "A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!"

"Yes, a nice long letter," said Mrs. March, patting her pocket as if it held a treasure. "He's well and thinks the winter will be easier than we'd feared. He sends his love, and a special message to you girls."

"I think it was wonderful that Father enlisted as an army chaplain—since he's too old and weak to be a soldier," said Meg.

Jo exclaimed, "How I wish I could go as a drummer—or a nurse, so I could help him!"

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

"When will he come home, Marmee?" asked Beth, her voice trembling.

"Not for many months, dear, unless he gets sick. And we won't ask him to come home until he isn't needed there anymore."

After dinner, Mother sat in the big chair, with Meg and Amy perched on its arms, and Beth close at her feet. But Jo stood behind them, so no one would see if she cried. In those hard times, most letters written by soldiers were very touching—especially ones sent by fathers to their families. This time, Father did not write about the terrible hardships, dangers, and homesickness he faced. Instead, it was a cheerful, hopeful letter. Only at the end did his heart overflow with

fatherly love and longing for the girls at home.

“Give them all my dear love and a kiss. I think of them every day, and their love gives me great comfort. A year is a very long time to wait before seeing them. But we can all work to make sure that these hard days are not wasted. I know that the girls will remember all I said to them. And they will be loving children to you, and do their duty faithfully. So when I come back to them, I will be prouder than ever of my little women.”

At that, Amy sobbed, “I’m so selfish! But I’ll truly try to be better, so he won’t be disappointed in me.”

“We all will!” exclaimed Meg. “I think too much of my looks. And I hate to work. But I won’t any more if I can help it.”

“I’ll try and be ‘a little woman’ instead of being so rough and wild,” said Jo, thinking that it would be harder to control her temper than to fight a Southern rebel. “And I’ll do my duty here instead of wishing I were somewhere else.”

Wiping away her tears, Beth added, “And I must stop being afraid of people and envying girls with nice pianos.” Determined to live up to Father’s hopes, she went back to knitting with all her might.

“Everyone has burdens to carry,” Mother said in her cheery voice. “But we must try to do good and be happy. That will help us find our way through our mistakes and our troubles. Why

don't you see how much good you can do before Father comes home?"

"Yes, let's try to act good," said Meg thoughtfully.

"But even good actors need scripts to follow. What shall we do about that?" Jo asked.

"Look under your pillows Christmas morning," replied Mrs. March, "and you will find your guidebooks."

Then needles flew as the girls sewed sheets for Aunt March. The task was boring, but tonight no one grumbled.

At nine they stopped working and sang, as usual. Ever since they were little, the girls had sung "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" every night before going to bed. Beth, with her soft touch, was the only person who could get pleasant music out of the old piano. Meg had a voice like a flute. But Amy chirped like a cricket. And Jo's voice went its own way, never in tune with the melody. Their mother, though, was a born singer. The first sound every morning was Mother, singing like a lark. And the last sound at night was the same cheery sound. For the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby.