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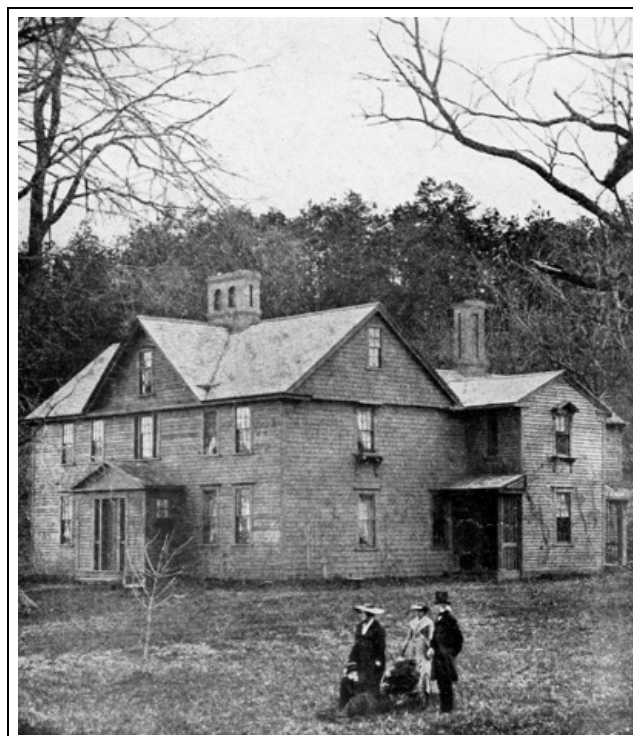
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LITTLE WOMEN LETTERS FROM THE HOUSE OF ALCOTT ***

LITTLE WOMEN LETTERS

FROM THE

HOUSE OF ALCOTT



Frontispiece.

ORCHARD HOUSE, THE ALCOTT HOMESTEAD.

LITTLE WOMEN
LETTERS
FROM THE
HOUSE OF ALCOTT

SELECTED BY
JESSIE BONSTELLE
AND
MARIAN DEFOREST



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1914

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FOREWORD

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NEXT to the joy of giving to the Alcott-loving public "Little Women" as a play, is the privilege and pleasure of offering this book of letters, revealing the childhood and home life of the beloved Little Women.

May they bring help and happiness to many mothers and inspiration and love to many children.

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LITTLE WOMEN LETTERS FROM THE HOUSE OF ALCOTT

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

THE "REALLY, TRULY" TRUE

WHEN "Little Women," the play, reopened to many readers the pages of "Little Women," the book, that delightful chronicle of family life, dramatist and producer learned from many unconscious sources the depth of Louisa M. Alcott's human appeal. Standing one night at the back of the theater as the audience was dispersing, they listened to its comments on the play.

"A wonderful picture of home life, only we don't have such homes," said a big, prosperous-looking man to his wife, with a touch of regret in his voice.

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"Yes," agreed his young daughter, a tall, slender, graceful girl, as she snuggled down cosily into her fur coat and tucked a bunch of violets away from the touch of the frosty night, "it is beautiful; but, daddy, it isn't real. There never was such a family."

But it is real; there was such a family, and in letters, journals, and illustration this little book gives the history of the four Little Women, the Alcott girls, whom Louisa immortalized in her greatest story: Anna, who is Meg in "Little Women"; Louisa, the irrepressible and ambitious Jo; Elizabeth, the little Beth of the book; and Abba May, the graceful and statuesque Amy.

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Rare influences were at work in this ideal American home, where the intellectual and brilliant father was gifted in all ways except those that led to material success, and the wise and gentle mother combined with her loyalty and devotion to her husband a stanch, practical common sense, which more than once served to guide the frail Alcott bark through troubled seas.

Following her remarkable success as a writer of short stories, Louisa M. Alcott was asked for a book. She said at first it was impossible, but repeated requests from her publishers brought from her the announcement that the only long story she could write would be about her own family. "Little Women" resulted, and, in erecting this House of Delight for young and old, Louisa Alcott builded better than she knew. Her Jo has been the inspiration of countless girls, and the many-sidedness of her character is indicated by the widely diverging lines of endeavor which Jo's example has suggested to the girl readers of the story.

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In the case of the two editors, both from early childhood found their inspiration in Jo. One, patterning after her idol, sought success in a stage career, beginning to "act" before a mirror, with a kitchen apron for a train and a buttonhook for a dagger. The other, always with a pencil in hand, first copied Jo by writing "lurid tales" for the weekly sensation papers, and later emerged into Newspaper Row.

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It was more than a year after the success of "Little Women" as a play had become a part of

theatrical history that they visited the scenes hallowed by the memories of the Little Women. They wished to see Concord together, so they made a Sentimental Journey to the House of Alcott.

The sun was shining, and the air was crisp—just such a day as Miss Alcott described in the Plumfield harvest home, the last chapter in "Little Women." They spent hours in Orchard House, touching reverently the small personal effects of Louisa M. Alcott, seeing the shelf between the windows in that little upper room, where she wrote and dreamed. They even climbed to the garret and wondered which window was her favorite scribbling seat, with a tin kitchen for her manuscripts, a pile of apples for her refreshment, and Scrabble, the bewhiskered rat, for her playfellow.

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Through the woods back of Orchard House they followed the winding pathway to the Hall of Philosophy, half hidden among the trees, where Bronson Alcott had his Conversations, where Emerson and Thoreau were often heard, and the most intellectual debates of the century took place.

At sunset they visited Sleepy Hollow, the resting place of the Alcotts, with Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne close by—a goodly company, neighbors still as they were for so many years when they made Concord America's literary shrine.

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Evening came, and the two pilgrims read together the Alcott journals and letters. The ink was faded, the quaint, old-fashioned writing was hard to decipher, but, beginning with a letter to Louisa written by Bronson Alcott when his daughter was seven years old, they read on until the dawn.

Only one result could be expected from such an experience. They asked permission to publish the letters and such portions of the journals as would most completely reveal the rare spiritual companionship existing between the Alcott parents and children. And, asking, they were refused, because of a feeling that the letters and journals were intimate family records, to be read, not by the many, but by the few. This same sentiment withheld the dramatization of "Little Women" for many years.

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"You forget," they argued, holding fast to the dimly written pages, "that Bronson Alcott and Louisa Alcott are a part of America's literary heritage. They belong to the nation, to the world, not alone to you."

This course of reasoning finally prevailed, but not without many months of waiting. And thus, with the consent of the Alcott heirs, the book of "Little Women Letters from the House of Alcott" came to be.

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CHAPTER II

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I

THE ALCOTT BOY

ONCE upon a time in the little town of Wolcott, Connecticut, was born a boy destined to offer to the world new and beautiful thoughts. He was laughed at and misunderstood; but the thoughts were truth, and they have lived, although the boy grew weary and old and passed on.

The boy was Amos Bronson Alcott. He was a country lad, used from infancy to the rugged life of the farm, with its self-denial and makeshifts. The seeming disadvantage, however, proved quite the opposite. His close communion with Nature brought him nearer to the truths of life. For him God ceased to be a mythical object to be studied and read about on Sunday; but, as he roamed the fields and climbed the hills, the lad found Him in the rocks and the woodlands, and in the sparkling streams. He became a reality. The boy and God were friends.

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Of schooling he had little. When work at the farm permitted, he attended the country school near his father's house. "Our copies," he told his little daughters, "were set by the schoolmaster in books made of a few sheets of foolscap, stitched together and ruled with a leather plummet. We used ink made of maple and oak bark, which we manufactured ourselves. With this I began keeping a diary of my doings."

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This was when the boy was twelve. His hours at school were few, but as he went about his daily tasks on the farm, his thoughts grew and grew until his mental stature far exceeded his physical. He read as he guided the plow along the furrow, sometimes unmindful of his work until a sudden punch from a neglected handle, as the plow struck a stone, would bring him back to earth with a thump. He sowed seeds in the moist, sweet earth, but his face was turned to the skies, and he knew the clouds and the stars. When he gathered firewood, his eyes were keen for the soft, dainty mosses, the clinging lichens. As he picked berries for the home table, he never missed the whirr of a bird wing or passed unnoticed the modest flowers half hidden in the soil. Nature was his library, and she spread out her choicest treasures to this growing boy.

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A love for all of God's creations characterized him. He was fond, not only of the growing things in the wood, but of all life. His love for animals amounted almost to a passion, one reason for his being a strict vegetarian and insisting upon bringing up his little family on a vegetable diet. But in boyhood it was not always clear whether humanity or the craving for knowledge made him so considerate of the plodding team in the field. Never was team more carefully tended. Many were its hours of grazing, when the noonday sun rode high in the heavens, and the Alcott boy, book in hand, curled up under the shade of a gigantic elm and read until the shadows began to lengthen. But these lapses were only occasional, for the lad was faithful to his tasks, except when he yielded to the lure of the printed page.

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When scarcely more than a child he began to keep a record of his books and his reading, showing the first traces of the reflective, introspective quality of mind which later led him to set down in letters and unpublished manuscripts his inmost thoughts. He cultivated the same habits of thought in his children, one reason, doubtless, for Louisa's accurate and realistic descriptions of the lives of the four Little Women of the Alcott family.

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His favorite books in boyhood, and, for that matter, in manhood, were the Bible and Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," which he read and reread and commented upon. Years later he mentions in his journal that he made it a practice to read "Pilgrim's Progress" every year, which is a remarkable record to the modern boy and girl who find it difficult to struggle through that wonderful allegory even once.

Bronson Alcott took his chance and made a stepping-stone of every difficulty. Each obstacle he encountered in getting an education created in him an even stronger determination to gain one. The modern boy has the world of books opened wide to him through the library and the free school. The treasures of art are spread out before him in the museums. He is surrounded by helps. The boy of to-day is studied as an entity. The boy of the last century could tell quite a different story.

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So the Alcott boy, passing long hours in the woods, reading, thinking, getting close to Nature and to God, walked as one apart, seeing the invisible. While still a boy, he began casting off the garment of a conventional creed and to think for himself of God, the creation, of life, unconsciously putting from him the trammeling, cumbersome conventions with which man has often hidden truth.

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Out of this the man Alcott emerged—a great soul.

II

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THE ALCOTT MAN

With Bronson Alcott the craving for knowledge was scarcely stronger than the craving for adventure, so it is not surprising that in the first flush of young manhood he did not settle down to life on the farm. He longed for the great world lying beyond the hills and valleys of peaceful New England. He wanted experience, and experience he had.

He went South, hoping to teach school, as he had original ideas on the training of children. Unsuccessful in this, he decided to be a peddler, naively remarking that "honesty of purpose could dignify any profession."

Think of the courage of this boy, for he was scarcely more than a boy, a philosopher at heart, living in a world of dreams and books, his ambitions all for intellectual rather than material achievement, tramping the southern countryside, undauntedly peddling buttons, elastic, pins and needles, and supplying all the small wants of the country housewife! Often he encountered rebuffs, sometimes he had a hearty welcome, for the visit of the country peddler was eagerly awaited by the children. At times, when night came and he was far from the shelter of an inn, he had to beg a lodging from some planter. On one such occasion, as he entered the grounds, he saw a huge sign, "Beware the dog." A shout from the house also warned him, and he saw dashing toward him a savage-looking dog, powerful enough to have torn to pieces the slender young peddler-student. But his love for animals triumphed. Alcott stretched out his hand. The huge creature stopped short; then, recognizing a friend and a fearless one, he bounded on, tail wagging, barking joyously, snuggling his nose into the young man's palm, which he licked as he escorted his new-found friend to the house. Animals always recognized in Alcott an understanding comrade.

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From most of these trips Alcott brought back money to add to the scanty funds at home, but on one memorable occasion the love of finery proved stronger than the necessity for saving, and he returned to the farm penniless, but dressed in the latest fashion, having used his savings for a wardrobe that was the wonder of the countryside. That one debauch of clothes satisfied him for life; after that his tastes were markedly simple. With him the "dandy period" was short-lived indeed. That he repented bitterly of this one excess of folly is shown in his journals, where he sets down minutely what to him was a mistake that amounted almost to a sin. As a rule, he was singularly free from folly. His thoughts were too high, his ideals too lofty, for him to be long concerned with trifles such as clothes, and the next expenditure mentioned in his journal is for

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the "Vicar of Wakefield" and Johnson's "Rasselas." Ever impractical, one likes him the better for the little human moment when the vanities of the world overcame him.

At last he secured a school, and then began the realization of his ideals regarding the teaching of children. His methods were original and highly successful, especially with the very young. He established a mental kindergarten, and the fame of his teaching spread abroad. Through his work as a teacher he achieved his greatest happiness, for it led to his meeting with the woman who was destined to become his wife.

As the result of correspondence between himself and Mr. May of Brooklyn, Connecticut, whose attention had been attracted to the work of the young teacher, Alcott, then twenty-eight years old, drove from the Wolcott home to Brooklyn, where he met Abigail May of Boston, who was visiting her brother. With both it was love at first sight, a love that grew into a perfect spiritual union. [Pg 23]

It seemed almost providential that Bronson Alcott should have come into Abigail May's life at just this time, when her heart had been touched by its first great sorrow—the loss of her mother. Hitherto she had been a light-hearted girl, fond of dancing and of the material side of life. The young philosopher, with his dreams and his ideals, brought a new interest into her now lonely life, and all that was spiritual in her nature responded as he freely discussed his plans and ambitions with her. In her he found both sympathy and understanding. [Pg 24]

A year of letter-writing, a frank and honest exchange of thought, brought out the harmony of their natures and developed in both a sense of oneness, laying a firm foundation for the comradeship which was not broken through all the years, even when the wife and mother passed into the Great Beyond.

The Alcott-May courtship was ideal. Retaining the heaven that lay about him in his infancy, keeping his close companionship with God and God's great laboratory, Nature, Bronson Alcott demanded something more than mere physical attraction in choosing his wife. A certain quaint circumspection characterized their love-making. Abigail May once wrote: "Mr. Alcott's views on education were very attractive, and I was charmed by his modesty," and long after their engagement she spoke of her lover as "her friend." He was, and so he continued to be in the highest sense of the word. [Pg 25]

So satisfying were those friendship-courtship days, that apparently both were loath to end them, for another twelvemonth passed before the announcement of their betrothal, and it was nearly three years from the date of their first meeting before their marriage in King's Chapel, Boston, where the brother who had been the means of bringing them together performed the ceremony. [Pg 26]

As their marriage day approached, there was little festivity and none of the rush that usually precedes a modern wedding. Everything was simple, quiet, and sure.

This is Bronson Alcott's letter, asking a friend to act as best man at his wedding.

Dear Sir:

Permit me to ask the favor of your calling at Col. May's at 4 o'clock precisely on Sunday afternoon next, to accompany me and my friend Miss May to King's Chapel.

With esteem,
A. B. Alcott

Thursday, May 20,
112 Franklin St.

1830.

So began the Alcott pilgrimage, their fortune consisting of love and faith and brains. In these they were rich indeed, and thus closed another chapter in the life of the gentle philosopher, of whom Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Our Alcott has only just missed being a seraph." [Pg 27]

CHAPTER III

THE ALCOTT CHILDREN

FOR some months after their marriage the Alcotts lived in Boston, where the young enthusiast taught a school for infants. Again his fame as a teacher traveled, and he received an offer from the Quakers of Philadelphia to start a school there, an offer so tempting that the Alcotts moved to Germantown, Pennsylvania, where Anna and Louisa were born. [Pg 28]

Eugenics and prenatal influence were not discussed then as they are to-day, but in the Alcott family nearly a century ago they were being thought and lived. Bronson Alcott and his wife considered children an expression, not of themselves, but of divinity, and as such to be accepted as a trust, rather than as a gratification of their own human longing for fatherhood and motherhood. They felt it their parental privilege rather than their duty to aid the human [Pg 29]

development of the child and thus further the fulfillment of its destiny. Each little soul was humbly asked for and reverently prepared for. From the moment they knew their prayer had been granted, the individuality and rights of that soul were respected. It was considered as a little guest that must be made happy and comfortable, carefully cherished, mentally and physically, while its fleshly garment was being prepared and the little personality made ready for its earthly appearance. How careful they were of every thought and influence, for to both parents this period was the most sacred and wonderful in their lives and in the lives of their children.

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The depth of his joy and the simplicity of his faith are exquisitely expressed in the lines which Bronson Alcott wrote before the birth of his first child, Anna:

TO AN EXPECTANT MOTHER

The long advancing hour draws nigh—the hour
When life's young pulse begins its mystic play,
And deep affection's dreams of Form or Joy
Shall be unveiled, a bodily presence
To thy yearning heart and fond maternal eye,
The primal Soul, a semblance of thine own,
Its high abode shall leave and dwell in day,
Thyself its forming Parent. A miracle, indeed,
Shall nature work. Thou shalt become
The bearing mother of an Infant Soul—
Its guardian spirit to its home above.
But yet erewhile the lagging moments come
That layeth the living, conscious, burden down,
Firm faith may rest in hope. Accordant toils
Shall leave no time for fear, nor doubt, nor gloom.
Love, peace, and virtue, are all born of Pain,
And He who rules o'er these is ever good.
The joyous promise is to her who trusts,
Who trusting, gains the vital boon she asks,
And meekly asking, learns to trust aright.

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Louisa, the second child, born on her father's birthday, was the most intellectual and the most resourceful of the Alcott children, reflecting in her own buoyant personality the happy conditions existing before and at the time of her birth, when her father had attained his greatest material prosperity and was also realizing his mental ambitions in his little school, and her mother was temporarily relieved from the cares that so often weighed heavily upon her.

Shortly before the birth of Elizabeth the father makes this entry in his journal:

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THE ADVENT COMETH

Daily am I in expectation of beholding with the eye of sense, the spirit that now lingers on the threshold of this terrestrial life, and only awaits the bidding of the Reaper within, to usher itself into the presence of mortals. It standeth at the door and waiteth for admission to the exterior scene of things.... Let the time come. Two little ones in advance await its coming; and greetings of joy shall herald its approach.

The birth of Elizabeth is followed by this entry in his journal:

At sunset this day a daughter was born to us.

One of the most trying of the Alcott family's experiences came after the birth of Elizabeth, when Bronson Alcott, again in Boston, aroused a storm of protest with his radical teachings and his advanced interpretations of the Bible. Shocked that the city where he expected to find sympathy and encouragement should have repudiated him, his school disrupted and abject poverty his lot, broken mentally and physically, he met with another cruel disappointment in the death of his infant son. Yet even then there was no word of bitterness, and no mention is made in his journal of the father's grief. Indirectly it is expressed in a subsequent entry announcing the birth of the fourth daughter, Abba May.

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She was born under sunny skies. The storm had passed, and the Alcott family had removed to Concord, where they enjoyed many of their happiest years. A presage of May Alcott's artistic gifts, her queenly bearing, elegance, and charm, all familiar to readers of "Little Women," is found in this entry in the father's journal:

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July, 1840.

A new life has arrived to us (July 26th). She was born with the dawn, and is a proud little Queen, not deigning to give us the light of her royal presence, but persists in sleeping all the time, without notice of the broad world or ourselves. Providence, it seems, decrees that we shall provide selectest ministries alone, and so sends us successive daughters of Love to quicken the Sons of Life. We joyfully acquiesce in the Divine behest and are content to rear women for the future world. As yet the ministry is unknown in the

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culture of the nations, but the hour draws near when love shall be felt as a chosen Bride of Wisdom, and the celestial pair preside over all the household of mankind.

Bronson Alcott did not feel his responsibility as a father alone; he appreciated his own debt to his children, the mental and spiritual help that came to him through them, an appreciation that found expression in this poem, entered in his journal before the birth of Elizabeth:

June, 1835

INVOCATION TO A CHILD

She comes from Heaven, she dawns upon my sight,
O'er earth's dark scenes to pour her holy light!
In sense and blest the Infinite to see
And feel the heavenly mystery—*To Be*.

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She comes—in Nature's tenderest, fondest name—
Daughter of God—'tis she—the same—the same
Mine is she too—my own—my latest child,
Myself, wrapt in Divinity, yet unbeguiled!

Blest Infant! God's and mine! yet to me given,
That I might feel anew my Being's Heaven—
In love and faith to urge my human way,
Till conscious time be lost in Immortality!

Love thee I will; for thou didst first love me—
My faith shall quicken as I dwell on thee,
Thy Spirit lift me from this "Grave of Things,"
And bear me homeward, to the King of Kings.

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CHAPTER IV

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THE ALCOTT BABY BOOK

BRONSON ALCOTT wrote the first Baby Book, a book which throws new light on the character of the lovable philosopher, showing one of New England's intellectual leaders as a very human and lovable man as well as "a fond and foolish father."

His Baby Book, however, contains no minute record of the first tooth, or when the baby began to say "Goo" and "Pitty light"; rather it is the father's earnest effort to learn how early in life the infant mind begins to awaken, to indicate comprehension, thought, or logic. As Maeterlinck studied the bee, so Alcott studied his children, and his findings are a revelation, even to-day, when the study of the child has become a science.

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Mr. Alcott considered vital the development of the child's individuality and mind; the body seemed to him of secondary importance, for this disregard of the material care of his family he has been severely censured; but, not recognizing in his own life the claims of the body, devoting all his energies to mental growth, it is not surprising that he found his fatherly duty in the guidance of his children's minds. His firm faith in the admonition, "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you," was to him excuse enough for considering the intellect more than the body.

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His practical shortcomings reaped a rich and unexpected reward in the next generation, for Louisa M. Alcott would probably not have developed her original and highly entertaining literary gift without the vicissitudes caused by her father's impractical nature and his sublime faith that at all times and in all emergencies the Lord would provide. He did provide; but Louisa was usually the channel, and many of her stories were written under the whip of stern necessity.

Doing without has its advantages. The Alcott children, never overfed, overentertained, overburdened to baby boredom with dolls and toys and games, developed appreciation, observation, and ingenuity. The creative faculty was aroused. They found resources within themselves. What a handbook Louisa might have written on How to be Happy though Poor!

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Mrs. Alcott's keen sense of humor, a characteristic inherited by Louisa, often came to her rescue and allowed her to get fun out of a harassing situation. In a letter to her brother, Colonel May, praising her husband's intellect, she laughingly comments upon his disregard of physical necessities: "I am not sure that we shall not blush into obscurity and contemplate into starvation."

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But, to get back to the baby book, or, as Mr. Alcott called it, "the psychological history," it was started with a high and unselfish motive; it was developed to an astonishing degree. Its purpose

and scope are best expressed in this extract from Mr. Alcott's journal:

The history of a human mind during its progressive stages of earthly experience has never as yet, I believe, been attempted. Faithfully compiled, from verified data, it would be a treasure of wisdom to all mankind, replete with light to the metaphysical and ethical inquirer. Comparative philosophy deduced from an observation of man during all circumstances and stages of his existence is a thing yet unthought of among us. From such a work the unity of Humanity might be revealed.

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When Anna was born, the father began keeping a record of her "physical and intellectual progress." When she was seven weeks old, her mother wrote: "It seems as if she were conscious of his observations and desirous of furnishing him daily with an item for this record."

The following excerpt from the father's diary shows how well Anna succeeded in her baby attempt:

I am much interested in the progress of my little girl, now five months old, which I have recorded from the day of her birth. This record has swollen to a hundred pages. I have attempted to discover, as far as this could be done by external indication, the successive steps of her physical, mental and moral advancement.

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Moral advancement of a baby five months old!

BIRTH OF LOUISA

On November 29, 1832, his thirty-third birthday and also the natal day of his friend, Ellery Channing, the poet, Mr. Alcott chronicles an "interesting event," how interesting the father little dreamed, nor how important, not alone to the house of Alcott, but to the world. Under the heading of Circumstances, the father thus records the birth of Louisa May Alcott:

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A daughter born, on the 29th. ulto., my birthday, being 33 years of age. This is a most interesting event. Unless those ties which connect it with others are formed, the wants of the soul become morbid and all its fresh and primal affections become dim and perverted.... Few can be happy shut out of the nursery of the soul.

While the New England philosopher was studying the development of his little daughters and deducing therefrom facts for his psychological history, these same little daughters were developing him, for, as the child nature unfolded, the father's understanding of childhood expanded.

Thus the baby book grew:

The influence of children I regard as important to my own improvement and happiness. It is also necessary to the prosecution of my studies. Dwelling in the primal regions which I wish to explore, they are the purest manifestations of its phenomena, and the only subjects from which humanity is to be interpreted in its purity.

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When Anna was three years old and Louisa eighteen months, the father writes in his journal:

I passed some time with the children, fitting up their playthings, conversing with them and learning as far as I could through the subtle meaning of looks, accents and gestures, their thoughts and feelings. The avenues to the spirit are all open, but how dim are our perceptions, how cold our sympathies, to appreciate the pure and bright things which glitter in the arena of the young mind! How little of this fairy land do we know—we, whose early associations have all been swept from the heart—over whose spirits have passed the cold winds, the pelting storms, withering and destroying the heart's young verdure! What is there to unite us with the spirit of a child? What have we in common with its joyous yearning for the beautiful, its trust in human sayings, its deep love for those on whom it relies for attention and support, its vivid picturing of ideal life, its simplicity, its freedom from prejudice and false sentiment? Where are these to be seen in our dim nature?

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He might have answered the question by looking within himself. Child companionship kept alive the spirit of the Alcott boy, which constantly shone through the man's philosophy. As the boy saw in every rock and tree and flower an expression of the Infinite, is it any wonder that the man should have recognized God's higher manifestation in the child, and should have written in his journal these lines, which are the very glorification of fatherhood and reveal the sacredness with which he looked upon his stewardship?

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He who deals with the child deals—did he know it—with the Infinite. Within the young spirit committed to his care are infinite capacities to be filled, infinite energies to be developed, and on him devolves the amazing responsibility—sacred, personal, all his own—of filling these capacities, unfolding these energies, from the stores and life of his own spirit. This is his

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office as a parent. But how can he who knows nothing of the Infinite within himself call it forth and direct its forces in others?

From the first, Louisa must have shown strong individuality and unusual tendencies, for Mr. Alcott's notes on Louisa are entitled "Observations on the Vital Phenomena of My Second Child." A more vital, lovable, contradictory specimen of childhood cannot be imagined. Blessed with her father's brilliancy of mind, her mother's quick wit and love of fun, Louisa furnished a problem for endless study. She was less than two years old when her individuality had so asserted itself that her father found himself puzzled and admitted that elements were finding their way into his observations of whose origin he could give no account. "My analysis, however accurate and elaborate, was still imperfect, and I was left in doubt. I had made no provision for the admission of innate influences from the mind itself."

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Here is a quaint little record of the Alcott babies' school days, when Anna was four years old and Louisa a little more than two:

At school Anna reads, marks and listens to conversations and stories. Louisa works with her in all except the reading and marking. They have a playroom, where they enjoy their own amusements, uninterrupted by the presence of adults—often a bar to the genuine happiness of childhood. Anna reads simple sentences from Leffanoch's Primer, writes intelligibly on tablets and slates, and is improving in work and manners.

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(This of a baby of four.)

A spiritual and moral inventory of the progress of Anna and Louisa is set down by the father when his daughters had reached the dignified ages of six and four:

The children have improved under my training. Anna, who has been with me more of the time than Louisa, has been greatly benefited. She is happier, more capable of self control, more docile and obeys from love and faith. She has fine elements for excellence, moral and intellectual. If she does not evince a pure and exalted character, it will be our failure, not hers, in the improvement of her natural endowments.

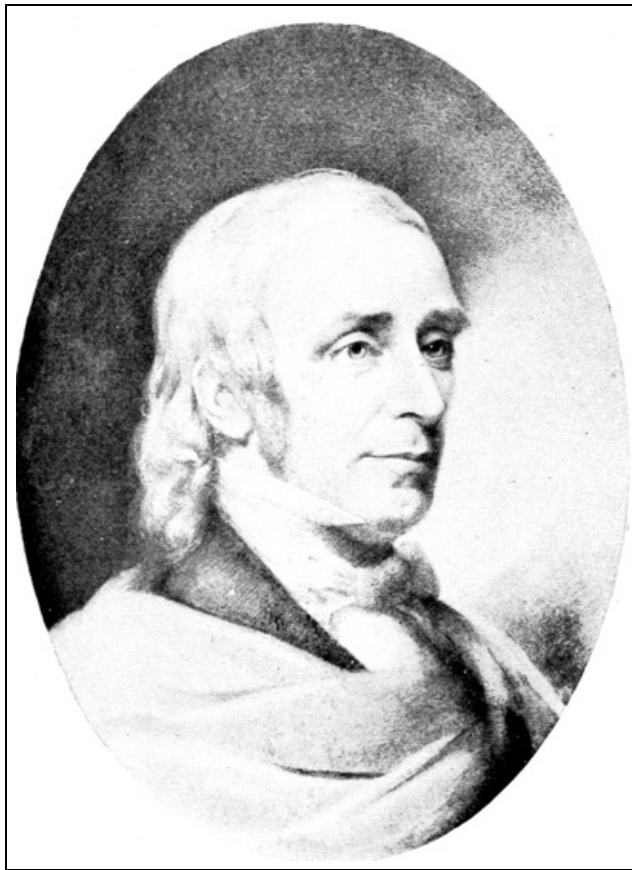
[Pg 53]

Louisa is yet too young for the formation of just views of her character. She manifests uncommon activity and force of mind at present, and is much in advance of her sister at the same age; example has done much to call forth her nature. She is more active and practical than Anna. Anna is ideal, sentimental. Louisa is practical, energetic. The first imagines much more than she can realize; the second, by force of will and practical talent, realizes all that she conceives—but conceives less; understanding, rather than imagination—the gift of her sister—seems to be her prominent faculty. She finds no difficulty in developing ways and means to obtain her purpose; while her sister, aiming at much, imagining ideal forms of good, and shaping them out so vividly in her mind that they become actual enjoyments, fails, when she attempts to realize them in nature—she has been dwelling on the higher and more speculative relations of things.

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Both represent interesting forms of character, both have wide and useful spheres of action indicated in their conformation and will doubtless if continued to us, be real blessings.

That they did prove real blessings the history of the Alcott family has shown.



A. BRONSON ALCOTT AT THE AGE OF 53.
From the portrait by Mrs. Hildreth.
Page 54.

How many fathers ever acknowledge their spiritual debt to the gift of fatherhood as has Bronson Alcott:

I know not how much more spiritual I am from the parental relation (he writes), how much I have been indebted to them for the light that hath dawned upon my own mind from the radiance of their simple spirits. Certain it is that the more I associate with them in the simple ways they love, the more do I seem to revere. Verily had I not been called to associate with children, had I not devoted myself to the study of human nature in its period of infancy and childhood, I should never have found the tranquil repose, the steady faith, the vivid hope that now sheds a glory and a dignity around the humble path of my life. Childhood hath saved me.

[Pg 55]

Out of his theories, his studies, and meditations came a sublime ambition, a desire to become a laborer in the "Field of the Soul."

Infancy I shall invest with a glory—a spirituality which the disciples of Jesus, deeply as they entered into His spirit and caught the life of His mind, have failed to bring forth in their records of His sayings and life. I shall redeem infancy and childhood, and, if a Saviour of Adults was given in the person of Jesus, let me, without impiety or arrogance, regard myself as the Children's Saviour. Divine are both missions. Both seek out and endeavor to redeem the Infinite in man, which, by reason of the clogs of sense and custom, is in perpetual danger of being lost. The chief obstacle in the way of human regeneration is the want of a due appreciation of human nature, and particularly of the nature of children.

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Home and its influence upon children meant much to Mr. Alcott, and in all his writing the nearest approach to a protest against the poverty he was called upon to endure was when, for a time, he was obliged to give up that home. Deep is the pathos that lies between the lines of this entry in his journal:

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HOME FOR CHILDREN

I deem it very important to the well being of my children to insure them a home. At least their means of improvement are limited, their pleasures are abridged, the domestic relations, so vital to virtue—to all that lives in the heart and imagination, are robbed of their essential glory, and the effect is felt throughout the character in after life. I feel that my duty as a father

cannot be fully carried out when I am thus restricted. Whether we can yet improve this condition remains to be determined.

The home was reestablished—and such a home! An influence felt throughout the world, the inspiration of every book Louisa Alcott wrote.

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CHAPTER V

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LETTERS AND CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN

HAPPINESS reigned in the Alcott home, and poverty seldom brought with it a shadow. The girls had toys and a variety of them,—rag dolls, kittens, gingerbread men, and barnyard animals (the latter skillfully cut out of cake dough by the mother, who had a genius for inventing surprises). As they grew older, they delighted in private theatricals. Some of their plays, written by Anna and Louisa, have been published under the title of "Comic Tragedies." They are thrillingly melodramatic, thickly sprinkled with villains and heroes, witches and ruffians, lovely ladies in distress, gallant knights to the rescue, evil spirits and good fairies, gnomes and giants. All are direfully tragic and splendidly spectacular. Louisa as a child showed the dramatic quality which later found artistic expression in her stories. On a rainy afternoon the children were never at a loss for entertainment. They "acted" in the attic or played dolls in their own playroom, and such dolls! Old Joanna, of whom Louisa has drawn a lifelike picture in "Little Women," is to-day in existence, battered, scarred, but none the less precious, one foot carefully bandaged, after the army-nurse method.

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Poverty was made interesting. At Christmas a tree was hung with apples, nuts, and popped corn, and small trifles made by the children were fastened to the branches. Father and mother made much of the spirit of the Christ birthday, which was celebrated in simple, wholesome fashion, in vivid contrast to the modern Christmas festival.

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The Alcott letters and journals show tremendous intellectual activity on the part of the small atoms of humanity who came to grace the Alcott home. Anna and her father held moral and intellectual discussions when Anna was four. Louisa was writing a daily journal before she could more than print. As soon as a child could read, family reproofs were administered by notes from father and mother to the erring one, not only pointing out the fault, but how to correct it.

[Pg 62]

The father encouraged his daughters to study themselves and to write down their thoughts. Their journals, in consequence, reflect the characteristics of each one and are storehouses of information. Louisa, poor little soul, in her happy, hoydenish childhood, found time one day in a fit of mentality to set down in black and white her chief faults. One of her most serious, according to the self-imposed confession, was "love of cats," a sin which easily beset her all her days, for she inherited her father's love of animals and of children.

Widely varied in character and temperament were the four Alcott girls. Anna, the first, reflected the beauty, the happiness, and the romance of the Alcotts' first year of married life. Louisa, born some eighteen months later, when father and mother had grown even closer together through the new bond formed by the love of their little daughter, embodied a deeper, stronger, surer character. She was decisive, with a determination and surety of self and brilliancy of mind that reflected the best in both parents. Elizabeth, the third child, was, in some respects, the most beautiful character of all. About her, from the hour of her conception, seemed to hover a spiritual, protecting love. Seemingly from earliest infancy she stood on the borderland of the spiritual world, in flesh all too fragile to retain the spirit which remembered and longed, notwithstanding the love with which she was surrounded, to return to the mystical beauty from which she had come. A child of dreams and fancies, loving all that was harmonious, she entered this life at twilight, she left it at the dawn, a coming and going typical of this dream child, who was lent for a little time to make the world more glad.

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[Pg 64]

The birth of Amy is also symbolical, the one sunny-haired, sunny-hearted girl of the family, who came with the rising of the sun. She seemed made for love, sunshine, and happiness, and had them all, but she was brave to face hardships and equally ready to accept comfort and luxury. A queen, the father called her the morning of her birth, and so they brought her up, the Little Snow Queen.

[Pg 65]

The wise, fostering love of the father, the helpful, understanding watchfulness of the mother, are reflected in their letters to their children. Time was not considered wasted that was devoted to these letters of gentle admonition and kindly counsel. There was no discussion of faults or mistakes in the Alcott household; reproofs remained little secrets between father and daughter, or mother and daughter, and the effect of this wise and constant watchfulness grows more apparent as the children advance from childhood to girlhood and on to womanhood. They were taught to know themselves. They were taught, too, the relation of the Christ child with their own childhood, beautifully expressed in some of the letters from Bronson Alcott to his eldest daughter.

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It was the father's habit to write each child on her birthday anniversary and at Christmas. Anna was six years old when he gave her this beautiful description of the coming of the Christ:

For Anna
1837

To my Daughter Anna.

A longer time ago than you can understand, a beautiful Babe was born. Angels sang at his birth. And stars shone brightly. Shepherds watched their flocks by their light. The Babe was laid in his Manger-cradle. And harmless oxen fed by his side. There was no room for him nor his mother in the Inn, as she journeyed from her own home.

[Pg 67]

This Babe was born at this time of the year. His name was Jesus. And he is also called Christ. This is his birth night. And we call it Christ-mas, after him.

I write you this little note as a Christmas Gift, and hope my little girl will remember the birth night of Jesus. Think how beautiful he was, and try to shine in lovely actions as he did. God never had a child that pleased him so well. Be like a kind sister of his, and so please your Father, who loves you very much.

Christmas Eve,
December 24th, 1837.
From your
Father.

Again on Christmas Eve, two years later, he describes to his little daughter of eight years her own coming into the world of material things.

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The belief in prenatal influence is strongly indicated, for the father tells his little girl that they thought just how she would look and pictures to her the joy and the love with which she was surrounded before her coming into the land of the material and first seeing with her baby eyes the light of a world day.

For Anna
1839

You were once pleased, my daughter, with a little note which I wrote you on Christmas Eve, concerning the birth of Jesus. I am now going to write a few words about your own Birth. Mother and I had no child. We wanted one—a little girl just like you; and we thought how you would look, and waited a good while for you to come, so that we might see you and have you for our own. At last you came. We felt so happy that joy stood in our eyes. You looked just as we wanted to have you. You were draped in a pretty little white frock, and father took you in his arms every day, and we loved you very much. Your large bright eyes looked lovingly into ours, and you soon learned to love and know us. When you were a few weeks old, you smiled on us. We lived then in Germantown. It is now more than eight years since this happened, but I sometimes see the same look and the same smile on your face, and feel that my daughter is yet good and pure. O keep it there, my daughter, and never lose it.

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[Pg 70]

Your Father,

Christmas Eve,
Beach Street,
Dec. 24, 1839.

On her birthday some three months later, he continues the thought in this exquisite letter:

March 16, 1840.

My dear Daughter,

With this morning's dawn opens a new year of your Life on Earth. Nine years ago you were sent, a sweet Babe into this world, a joy and hope to your father and mother. After a while, through many smiles and some few tears, you learned to lisp the names of father and mother, and to make them feel once more how near and dear you were to their hearts whenever you named their names. Now you are a still dearer object of Love and hope to them as your love buds and blossoms under their eye. They watch this flower as it grows in the Garden of Life, and scents the air with its fragrance, and delights the eye by its colours. Soon they will look not for Beauty and fragrance alone, but for the ripening and ripe fruit. May it be the Spirit of Goodness; may its leaves never wither, its flowers never fade; its fragrance never cease; but may it flourish in perpetual youth and beauty, and be transplanted in its time, into the Garden of God, whose plants are ever green, ever fresh, and bloom alway, the amaranth of Heaven, the pride and joy of angels. Thus writes your Father to you on this your birth morn.

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[Pg 72]

Monday, 16 March, 1840.

For
Anna,
in the Garden of Life.

This letter and his allusion to "your life on earth" show plainly his belief in life eternal, for Bronson Alcott considered earthly existence merely a period in the evolution of the soul.

On Christmas Eve, 1840; when Anna was nearly ten, Louisa just past her eighth birthday, May, the golden-haired baby of the Alcott household, and Elizabeth the little shadow child of four, he wrote Christmas letters to his daughters, which show his appreciation of their special needs, and his respect for their individualities. The letter to Elizabeth is missing; to Anna he wrote:

[Pg 73]

For Anna
1840

BEAUTY OR DUTY
which
loves Anna best?

a
Question
from her

FATHER
Christmas Eve
Dec. 1840
Concordia.

For Louisa, the father's message was this:

[Pg 74]

For Louisa
1840

Louisa loves—
What?
(Softly)

FUN
Have some then,
Father
says.
Christmas Eve, Dec. 1840
Concordia.

For the baby of the household, the father's love message took poetic form:

[Pg 75]

For Abba
1840

For Abba
Babe fair,
Pretty hair,
Bright eye,
Deep sigh,
Sweet lip,
Feet slip,
Handsome hand,
Stout grand,
Happy smile,
Time beguile,
All I ween,
Concordia's Queen.

Almost without the dates, one could keep track of the development of the Alcott girls through their father's letters. This one demonstrates his gift of teaching by the use of suggestion:

[Pg 76]

For Anna
1842

A Father's Gift
to his
Daughter
on her
Eleventh Birthday.
Concordia
16th March
1842

My dear daughter,

This is your eleventh birthday, and as I have heretofore addressed a few

words to you on these interesting occasions, I will not depart from my former custom now.

[Pg 77]

And my daughter, what shall I say to you? Shall I say something to please or to instruct you—to flatter or benefit you? I know you dislike being pleased unless the pleasure make you better, and you dislike all flattery. And you know too, that your father never gave you a word of flattery in his life. So there remains for you the true and purest pleasure of being instructed and benefited by words of love and the deepest regard for your improvement in all that shall make you more happy in yourself and beautiful to others. And so I shall speak plainly to you of yourself, and of my desire for your improvement in several important things.

First—Your Manners. Try to be more gentle. You like gentle people and every one is more agreeable as he cultivates this habit. None can be agreeable who are destitute of it and how shall you become more gentle? Only by governing your passions, and cherishing your love to everyone who is near you. Love is gentle: Hate is violent. Love is well-mannered; Selfishness is rude, vulgar. Love gives sweet tone to the voice, and makes the countenance lovely. Love then, and grow fair and agreeable.

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Second: Be Patient. This is one of the most difficult things to everyone, old or young. But it is also one of the greatest things. And this comes of Love too. Love is Patient: it bears; it suffers long; it is kind; it is beautiful; it makes us like angels. Patience is, indeed, angelic; it is the Gate that opens into the House of Happiness. Open it, my daughter, and enter in and take all your sisters in with you.

[Pg 79]

Third: Be Resolute. Shake off all Sluggishness, and follow your Confidence as fast as your feelings, your thoughts, your eye, your hand, your foot, will carry you. Hate all excuses: almost always, these are lies. Be quick in your obedience: delay is a laggard, who never gets up with himself, and loses the company of confidence always. Resolution is the ladder to Happiness. Resolve and be a wise and happy girl.

Fourth: Be Diligent. Put your heart into all you do: and fix your thoughts on your doings. Halfness is almost as bad as nothing: be whole then in all you do and say.

But I am saying a great deal and will stop now with the hope of meeting you on the 16th March, 1843 (the good God sparing us till then) a gentler, a meeker, more determined and obligent girl.

[Pg 80]

Your friend
and
Father

Concordia
16 March
1842

For
Anna Bronson Alcott.

Such a gift to an eleven-year-old girl on her birthday! One would expect not kindly counsel, but a toy, a picture book, something pretty for her body, not much for her mind. The spirituality and the wisdom of the poet-philosopher are shown in this letter with its "excuses, almost always lies," and "delay is a laggard."

[Pg 81]

When Louisa was seven years old, her mother was ill, and the child was sent away from home for a time. To his little absent daughter the father sends this letter, printed so that she might read it for herself:

For Louisa.

1839

My dear Little Girl.

Father hopes you are well and happy. Mother will soon be well enough we hope for you to come home. You want to see us all I know. And we want to see you very much. Be a good girl and try to do as they tell you. You shall see us all in a few days.

[Pg 82]

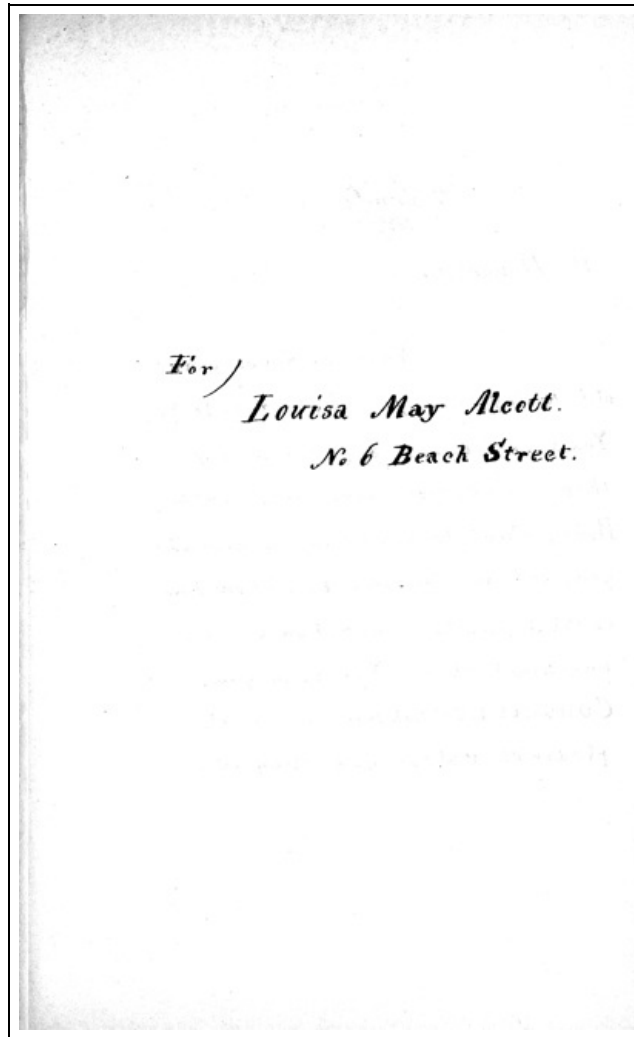
You were never away from home so long before. It has given you some new feelings.

I have printed this note. I hope you can read it all yourself.

Good Bye
From Father.

Saturday
11 o'clock in the School Room.
1839

On her seventh birthday he writes her one of the most wonderful letters of the many that have been preserved in the volumes of the Alcott manuscripts:



F. L. Smith
1839.

My Daughter,

You are Seven years old to day, and your Father is forty. You have learned a great many things, since you have lived in a Body, about things going on around you, and within you. You know how to think, how to resolve, how to love and how to obey. You feel your Conscience, and have no real pleasure unless you obey it.

You cannot love yourself, or any one else, when you do not mind its Commandments. It asks you always to **BE GOOD**, and bears, O how gently! how patiently! with all endeavours to hate, and treat it cruelly. How kindly it bears with you all the while! How sweetly it whispers Happiness in your **HEART** when you Obey its soft words. How it smiles upon you, and makes you Glad when you Resolve to Obey it! How terrible its

*Punishments! It is GOD trying
in your SOUL to keep you always
Good.*

*You begin, my dear daugh-
ter, another year this morning.
Your Father, your Mother, and
Sisters, with your little friends,
show their love on this your Birth-
Day, by giving you this BOX :
Open it, and take what is in it :
and the best wishes of
Your Father.*

Beach Street,

Friday Morning, Nov 29 1839

For Louisa

[Pg 83]

1839

My Daughter,

You are Seven years old to-day and your Father is forty. You have learned a great many things, since you have lived in a Body, about things going on around you and within you. You know how to think, how to resolve, how to love, and how to obey. You feel your Conscience, and have no real pleasure unless you obey it. You cannot love yourself, or anyone else, when you do not mind its commandments. It asks you always to BE GOOD, and bears, O how gently! how patiently! with all endeavors to hate, and treat it cruelly. How kindly it bears with you all the while. How sweetly it whispers Happiness in your HEART when you Obey its soft words. How it smiles upon you, and makes you Glad when you Resolve to Obey it! How terrible its PUNISHMENTS. It is GOD trying in your soul to keep you always Good.

[Pg 84]

You begin, my dear daughter, another year this morning. Your Father, your Mother, and Sisters, with your little friends, show their love on this your Birthday, by giving you this BOX. Open it, and take what is in it, and the best wishes of

Your Father.

Beach Street,

Friday morning, Nov. 29, 1839.

His explanation to a seven-year-old girl that conscience is "God in your soul," and the lines, "since you have lived in a body," are eloquent manifestations of his belief. It is not surprising that, given such thoughts at seven, Louisa at ten or eleven wrote that she was sure in some previous life she must have been a horse,—she loved so to run. A month before May Alcott was born, little Louisa, then eight, again away from home, received this letter from her father:

[Pg 85]

For

Louisa May Alcott
at her Grandfather's
in Boston.

from Father. }

Cottage, Sunday, June 21st,
1840.



We all miss the noisy
little girl who used to make house and
garden, barn and field ring with her
footsteps, and even the hens and chick-
ens seem to miss her too. Right glad
would Father and Mother, Anna and
Elisabeth, and all the little mates at
School, and Miss Russell, the House
Play-room, Dolls, Hoop, Garden, Flow-
ers, Fields, Woods and Brooks, all
be to see and answer the voice
and footsteps, the eye and hand, of
their little companion. But yet all
make themselves happy and beau-
tiful

without her ; all seem to say, "Be Good, little Miss, while away from us, and when we meet again, we shall love and please one another all the more ; we find how much we love now we are separated."

I wished you here very much on the morning when the Hen left her nest and came proudly down with six little chickens, every one knowing how to walk, fly, eat and drink almost as well as its own mother : to-day (Sunday) they all came to the house and took their breakfast from their nice little feeding trough ; you would
have

enjoyed the sight very much. But this and many other pleasures all wait for you when you return. Be good, kind, gentle, while you are away, step lightly, and speak soft, about the house; Grandpa loves quiet, as well as your sober Father, and other grown people.

Elisabeth says often, "Oh I wish I could see Louisa, when will she come home, mother." And another feels so too. who is it?

Your

Father.

I forgot to write how much Kit missed you.

Cottage, Sunday June 21st,
1840.

We all miss the noisy little girl who used to make house and garden, barn and field, ring with her footsteps, and even the hens and chickens seem to miss her too. Right glad would father and mother, Anna and Elizabeth, and all the little mates at School, and Miss Russell, the House Playroom, Dolls, Hoop, Garden, Flowers, Fields, Woods and Brooks, all be to see and answer the voice and footsteps, the eye and hand of their little companion. But yet all make themselves happy and beautiful without her; all seem to say, "Be Good, little Miss, while away from us, and when we meet again we shall love and please one another all the more; we find how much we love now we are separated."

[Pg 86]

I wished you here very much on the morning when the Hen left her nest and came proudly down with six little chickens, everyone knowing how to walk, fly, eat and drink almost as well as its own mother; to-day (Sunday) they all came to see the house and took their breakfast from their nice little feeding trough; you would have enjoyed the sight very much. But this and many other pleasures all wait for you when you return. Be good, kind, gentle, while you are away, step lightly, and speak soft about the house;

Grandpa loves quiet, as well as your sober father and other grown people.

[Pg 87]

Elizabeth says often, "Oh I wish I could see Louisa, when will she come home, Mother?" And another feels so too; who is it?

Your
Father.

I forgot to write how much Kit missed you.

On her eighth birthday, her father writes:

For Louisa

1840

Two Passions strong divide our Life,

Meek gentle Love, or boisterous Strife.

Love—Music
Concord

Anger—Arrow
Discord
From her Father

On her eighth birthday Nov. 29th.

At ten, her birthday greeting from her father is this:

[Pg 88]

For Louisa

1842

My Daughter,

This is your birthday: you are ten years of age to-day. I sought amidst my papers for some pretty picture to place at the top of this note, but I did not find anything that seemed at all expressive of my interest in your well-being, or well-doing, and so this note comes to you without any such emblem. Let me say, my honest little girl, that I have had you often in my mind during my separation from you and your devoted mother, and well-meaning sisters, while on the sea or the land, and now that I have returned to be with you and them again, meeting you daily at fireside, at table, at study, and in your walk, and amusements, in conversation and in silence, being daily with you, I would have you feel my presence and be the happier, and better that I am here. I want, most of all things, to be a kindly influence on you, helping you to guide and govern your heart, keeping it in a state of sweet and loving peacefulness, so that you may feel how good and kind is that Love which lives always in our breasts, and which we may always feel, if we will keep the passions all in stillness and give up ourselves entirely to its soft desires. I live, my dear daughter, to be good and to do good to all, and especially to you and your mother and sisters. Will you not let me do you all the good that I would? And do you not know that I can do you little or none, unless you give me your affections, incline your ears, and earnestly desire to become daily better and wiser, more kind, gentle, loving, diligent, heedful, serene. The good Spirit comes into the Breast of the meek and loveful to abide long; anger, discontent, impatience, evil appetites, greedy wants, complainings, ill-speakings, idleness, heedlessness, rude behaviour and all such, these drive it away, or grieve it so that it leaves the poor misguided soul to live in its own obstinate, perverse, proud discomfort, which is the very Pain of Sin, and is in the Bible called the worm that never dies, the gnawing worm, the sting of CONSCIENCE: while the pleasures of love and goodness are beyond all description—a peacefulness that passes all understanding. I pray that my daughter may know much of the last, and little of the first of these feelings. I shall try every day to help her to the knowledge and love of this good Spirit. I shall be with her, and as she and her sisters come more and more into the presence of this Spirit, shall we become a family more closely united in loves that can never sunder us from each other.

[Pg 89]

[Pg 90]

[Pg 91]

This your
Father
in Hope and Love
on your
Birthday

Concordia,
Nov. 29, 1842.

To little Elizabeth the letters were few. The child was so constantly the companion of father and mother, that by speech rather than written word, their messages were given. But on her fifth birthday, her father carefully printed this letter:

[Pg 92]

For

Elisabeth S. Alcott

at the Table

on her Birth-Day.

Concordia June 24.
1840

For Elisabeth.
1840

IIIIII Years.
one two three four five

Birth-Day.

in the

Cottage.

My very dear little girl,

You make me
very happy every time I look at
your smiling pleasant face - and
you make me very sorry every
time I see your face look cross and
unpleasant. You are now five years
old You can keep your little face

pleasant all the time, if you will try,
and be happy yourself, and make every
body else happy too. Father wants to
have his little girl happy all the time.
He hopes her little friends and her
presents and plays will make her
happy to-day; and this little note
too. Last birth-day, you were in
Beach Street in the great City.
Now you are at your little cottage
in the country where all is pretty
and pleasant, and you have fields
and woods, and brooks and flowers

*to please my little Queen, and keep
her eyes, and ears, and hands and
tongue and feet, all busy. This
little note is from*

FATHER,

*who loves his little girl very much,
and knows that she loves him very
dearly.*

*Play, play,
All the day,
Jump and run,
Every one,
Full of fun,
All take
A piece of cake
For my sake.*

For Elizabeth
1840

I I I I I Years
one two three four five
BIRTH-DAY
in the
COTTAGE

My very dear little girl,

You make me very happy every time I look at your smiling pleasant face—and you make me very sorry every time I see your face look cross and unpleasant. You are now five years old. You can keep your little face pleasant all the time, if you will try, and be happy yourself, and make everybody else happy too. Father wants to have his little girl happy all the time. He hopes her little friends and her presents and plays will make her happy to-day; and this little note too. Last birthday you were in Beach Street, in the great City, now you are at your little cottage in the country where all is pretty and pleasant, and you have fields and woods, and brooks and flowers to please my little Queen, and keep her eyes, and ears, and hands and tongue and feet, all busy. This little note is from

FATHER,

who loves his little girl very much, and knows that she loves him very dearly.

Play, play,
All the day,
Jump and run
Every one,
Full of fun,
All take
A piece of cake,
For my sake.

[Pg 93]

[Pg 94]

His wish to encourage the little girl in her efforts to be good, kind, gentle, and patient, and his appreciation of her accomplishment, is set forth in this characteristic little note:

Concord, Cottage,
February 2nd, 1842.

My dear Elizabeth,

You give me much pleasure by your still, quiet manners, and your desire to do things, without asking impatiently and selfishly for others to help you without trying first to help yourself. Trying is doing; doing is but trying; try then always and you will do; and every one loves to help those who try. I will print a little sentence for you in large letters and you who have already found it so easy to do things for yourself will, I dare say, remember it, and follow it too—This is it—

[Pg 95]

TRY FIRST: AND
THEN ASK: AND
PATIENTLY TILL
YOU HAVE TRIED
YOUR BEST: AND
YOU WILL NOT NEED
TO ASK AT ALL.

Trying is the only
Schoolmaster
whose
Scholars
always
Succeed.

Your Father.

Cottage,
Feb. 2nd.

Little May, the youngest, was the pet, not only of the Alcott household, but of all the Alcott kin. This quaint little dolly letter, written to her by her Uncle Junius, has been framed and hangs today in the library of May Alcott's nephew, John:

[Pg 96]

Gift of Junius S. Alcott

to
Abby.

A
Little Face
once smiling
woke
to
greet, the day,
with sport and play,
Hands) on her Birthday, in shaking (Hands
with her sisters,
and, her visitors,
that, came, to, chime,
a, happy, time, with, Lizzy,
To, give, you, pleasure, uncle,
gives, this, treasure, to you, so, sweet,
So, keep, it, neat, and please, my,
Brother, & your Mother, by always,
finding that, by, minding, you
are, the kindest, little girl, that,
that, ever
stood d, in,
(Shoes) (Shoes)

[Pg 97]

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 98]

THE MOTHER'S INFLUENCE

UPON the lives of all four of her daughters the mother's influence rested like a benediction. It is felt in her letters; it is reflected in the journals of her girls and in the musings of Bronson Alcott, as set down in his voluminous journals. And the mother spirit hovers over Orchard House, where "Little Women" was written and lived.

While letters to Anna from her mother are missing, Anna's journal shows how vital was Mrs. Alcott's power in the upbuilding of her noble character. Louisa in "Little Women" has said that the girls gave their hearts into their mother's keeping, their souls into their father's. Anna's letters bear eloquent testimony to the strong, helpful, cheery influence of the mother upon the child. Among the first was this letter, written by Anna when she was five years old and visiting Mr. Alcott's family at Wolcott:

[Pg 99]

Letter to Mrs. Alcott.
Wolcott Aug. 12th, 1836.
Friday Morning.

My dear Mother,

I have to go away by myself and cry because I want to see you so much, and little sister Lizy and Louisa. Doctor Fuller is coming to cure Grandmother. I shall see you in a few days. You have a splendid husband

[Pg 100]

Anna
V years of age—

(On this she had drawn her hand.)

She was six years old when she wrote this:

Dear Mother,

I have not had a note from you for a great while. You wanted some wafers yesterday will you accept of them from me There is not many but it is all that I have got. I am very glad my birthday is so near for as I grow older, I hope I shall grow better and more useful to you, I hope soon we shall be settled down in some comfortable little home of our own and then shall be contented and happy I hope. I must go to my sums now, so goodbye dearest mother

[Pg 101]

Your loving Anna

A letter eloquent of the tender relation between mother and child is this written during the Fruitlands period:

For

Dearest mother
fruitlands.

Dear mother.

I wish that you would come to the table again. I enjoy my meals much better when you are at the table. Was not "Heraclitus" that father read about to-day, a dear good man, it seems as though I wanted to hug him up and kiss him. I wish men had understood his thoughts better than they did he would have been happier I think. I have enjoyed this morning readings and conversations better than I have before for a good while, I suppose, because I talked and I understood it so well. I do not write to you very often dear mother but I love to dearly when I feel like it, and I love to have letters from you. I have not been as good as I wish I had this week. I send a little bunch of flowers to you they are not very pretty but they are beautifully made and I thought you would like them. I had a beautiful time walking this morning with Louisa. Good bye dearest mother from your loving

[Pg 102]

Anna.

Many copies of her mother's letters are found in Louisa's journals, showing the daughter's intense, almost idolatrous affection. Louisa admired, respected, and loved her father, but to her mother her tenderest thought was given. Marmee understood the wayward, tempestuous, lovable child as no one else did, not even loyal Anna, or admiring Elizabeth. On her birthday the mother writes to Louisa:

[Pg 103]

My dear little girl,

Will you accept this doll from me on your 7th birthday. She will be a quiet play mate for my active Louisa for seven years more. Be a kind mamma and love her for my sake.

Your mother.

Beach St., Boston, 1839.

Louisa was ten when this birthday letter was sent:

[Pg 104]

Cottage in Concord.

Dear Daughter,

Your 10th birthday has arrived, may it be a happy one, & on each returning

birthday may you feel new strength and resolution to be gentle with sisters, obedient to parents, loving to everyone & happy in yourself.

I give you the pencil case I promised, for I have observed that you are fond of writing & wish to encourage the habit.

Go on trying, dear, & each day it will be easier to be & do good. You must help yourself, for the cause of your little troubles is in yourself, & patience & courage only will make you what mother prays to see you her good and happy girl.

During the Fruitlands period, when Louisa was eleven, she found this little note tucked carefully away in a spot where only she would find and read it: [Pg 105]

Fruitlands.

My dear,

Thank you for your sweet note and sweeter poetry. The second verse is very good. Your love of nature is pure and true. It is a lovely school in which good lessons may be learned. The happy industry of birds, the beautiful lives of flowers, the music of brooks all help—

"The little fountain flows
So noiseless thro the wood,
The wanderer tastes repose,
And from the silent flood
Learns meekly to do good."

In the following letter, a pretty little deference to the child's own personality is shown by the mother, in that way bringing out in the child respect and deference for others: [Pg 106]

Dear Daughter,

I hope you will not consider me an intruder for stopping a moment in your "poet's corner" to admire the neatness of your desk, the sweetness of your poetry, the beauty of the prospect from your window. Cherish this love of nature, dear, enjoy all it gives you, for God made these helps to charm contemplation, and they strengthen the noble desire to be or to do all that is sent for our training & our good. Heaven be about you my child, is mother's Sunday prayer.

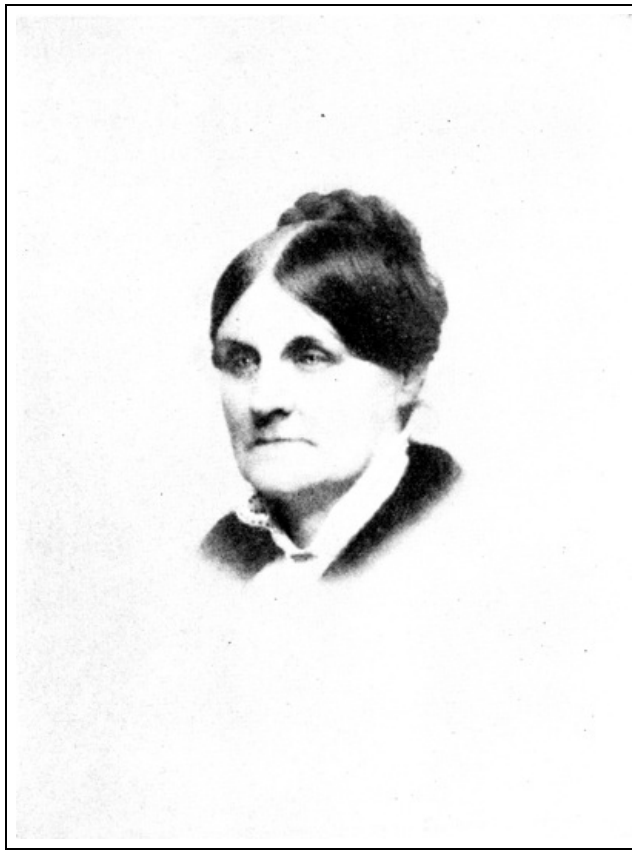
Louisa Alcott filled her diary with letters from her mother, occasionally adding in later life annotations of her own. This letter from her mother when Louisa was eleven is an example: [Pg 107]

(From Louisa Alcott's Diary.)
Concord, 1843.

Dear Louy,

I enclose a picture for you which I always liked very much, for I have imagined that you might be just such an industrious daughter & I such a feeble but loving mother, looking to your labor for my daily bread. Keep it for my sake, & your own, for you and I always like to be grouped together.

Mother.



ABIGAIL MAY, MRS. A. BRONSON ALCOTT.
From a daguerreotype.
Page 106.

Then follows the picture and the lines written by Louisa in her journal:

[Pg 108]

To Mother.

I hope that soon dear mother, you & I may be
In the quiet room my fancy has so often made for thee,
The pleasant sunny chamber, the cushioned easy chair,
The books laid for your reading, the vase of flowers fair.
The desk beside the window where the sun shines warm and
bright,
And there in ease and quiet, the promised book you write,
While I sit close beside you, content at last to see,
That you can rest dear mother, & I can cherish thee.

Louisa lived to see her hope realized and the dream of many years a beautiful reality.

Like most writers, Louisa was moody, and in her hours of depression and despondency she looked upon her work as a failure and herself as a useless drag upon the family. At such times Marmee invariably came to the rescue and persuaded her discouraged daughter to use the pen she was ready to lay down. Even in Louisa's childhood, when her only promise of future literary achievement were her tragedies and melodramas of lurid style, little gifts show the mother's faith and pride in her daughter's work. So did her letters, of which this is an example:

[Pg 109]

Dear Louisa:

I sometimes stray about the house and take a peep into the journal. Your pages lately are blank. I am sure your life has many fine passages well worth recording, and to me they are always precious. Anything like intellectual progress in my children seems to compensate for much disappointment & perplexity in my own life. Do write a little each day, dear, if but a line, to show me how bravely you begin the battle, how patiently you wait for the rewards sure to come when the victory is nobly won.

[Pg 110]

Ever yrs.
Mother.

On her fourteenth birthday the mother accompanies the gift of a pen with this little poem:

Oh, may this pen your muse inspire,
When wrapt in pure poetic fire,
To write some sweet, some thrilling verse;
A song of love or sorrow's lay,

[Pg 111]

Or duty's clear but tedious way
In brighter hope rehearse.
Oh, let your strain be soft and high,
Of crosses here, of crowns beyond the sky;
Truth guide your pen, inspire your theme,
And from each note joy's music stream.

Louisa Alcott owed much to her mother's example and perhaps even more to her mother's influence. This letter, carefully preserved in the daughter's journal, reveals a wealth of mother-love and of God-given wisdom:

15th Birthday,
Hillside.

Dearest,

Accept this pen from your mother and for her sake use it freely & worthily that each day of this your fifteenth year may testify to some good word or thought or work.

[Pg 112]

I know there will be born into your spirit new hopes, new gifts, for God helps the loving, trusting heart that turns to Him. Lift up your soul to meet the highest, for that alone will satisfy your yearning, aspiring nature.

Your temperament is a peculiar one, & there are few who can really help you. Set about the formation of character & believe me you are capable of obtaining a noble one. Industry, patience, love, creates, endures, gives all things, for these are the attributes of the Almighty, & they make us mighty in all things. May eternal love sustain you, infinite wisdom guide you, & the peace which passeth understanding reward you, my daughter.

Mother.

Nov. 29th, 1846.

Deeds, not words, characterized Elizabeth Alcott, as readers of "Little Women" will recall. She was about seven when she sent this letter, one of the very few she wrote, to her mother:

[Pg 113]

May, Friday 29.

Dear Mother,

I thank you very much for your note. I will try to write better than I have done. I have not always had a good pen. I hope I shall improve in all my studies this summer. I hope I can read German & French very well, and know a great deal about the countries. I must write my journal now so I will bid you good bye.

From your loving
Elizabeth.

Birthdays were always celebrated with much rejoicing in the Alcott household, the gift made secondary to the spirit of the day. From the time they were old enough to print, the Alcott children on the mother's birthday made her some little gift, accompanying it with a note. Abba May or May, as she was always called, at nine years old, began in prose but lapsed into poetry:

[Pg 114]

Dear Mother,

I wish you a very happy birthday. I hope you will find my present Useful, and when you wear it think of me. I have taken a great-deal of Pleasure in making it for you. Please take this Present mother on your 49 birthday

With the dearest Love and wishes
of your little daughter A.

[Pg 115]

With Mrs. Alcott, hardship, poverty, the grief of seeing her husband misunderstood and often scoffed at, never lessened her love for him, or her contentment in the marriage relation. The year following her marriage in a letter to her brother she wrote: "My father has never married a daughter or son more completely happy than I am. I have cares, and soon they will be arduous ones, but with the mild, constant, and affectionate sympathy and aid of my husband, with the increasing health and loveliness of my quiet and bright little Anna, with good health, clear head, grateful heart and ready hand,—what can I not do when surrounded by influences like this?"

[Pg 116]

Ideals were never shattered; illusions, if so they may be called, were never lost by Mrs. Alcott through the stormy years that laid between the first happy months of her married life and the sunset days when all her burdens were laid down. To her, the husband who was so long denied material success and intellectual sympathy ever remained the lover and friend. Her admiration for him was unbounded, her faith in him complete. So high she held him in heart and mind, that it was difficult even for those who loved him most to appreciate her estimate of him as Poet, Philosopher, and Sage.

Concerning the most famous portrait ever made of Bronson Alcott, done in crayons by Mrs.

[Pg 117]

Richard Hildredth, wife of the historian and aunt of the portrait painter, George Fuller, which, beautiful as it was, did not satisfy the wife's ideal, Mrs. Alcott writes:

A tinge of the incomprehensible lies softly around it, a field of atmosphere, as if she had worked with down from an angel's wing rather than with a crayon,—as if the moonlight had cast a shadow on the lights of her picture, and a divinity had touched with a soft shade, the dark portion of the figure. Mrs. Hildredth has changed the costume from a dress suit to a mantle draped about the shoulders. This, I do not like. The chaste simplicity of Mr. Alcott's dress is more in character and keeping with the severe simplicity and rectitude of his life. Louisa admirably describes her father's appearance as she met him at the cars. "His dress was neat and poor. He looked cold and thin as an icicle, but serene as God." After such a testimony, from such a daughter, he can afford to dress shabbily.

[Pg 118]

Contentment, whatever her lot, was an attribute of Marmee; she underestimated herself always. Unquestionably, Louisa inherited her literary gift quite as much from mother as from father, and flashes of the quaint humor so delightful in the daughter's books are found in the mother's letters. To a friend she writes: "My gifts are few. I live, love and learn, and find myself more content every day of my life with humble conditions."

[Pg 119]

Louisa Alcott never laid claim to poetic gift, but on a few occasions her verses take to themselves true poetic beauty. One of the most exquisite of these poems was written by her on the death of her mother, and was first published anonymously in the "Masque of Poets" of 1878:

TRANSFIGURATION In Memoriam

Mysterious death; who in a single hour
Life's gold can so refine,
And by thy art divine
Change mortal weakness to immortal power:

Bending beneath the weight of eighty years,
Spent with the noble strife
Of a victorious life,
We watched her fading heavenward, through our tears.

[Pg 120]

But ere the sense of loss our hearts had wrung,
A miracle was wrought:
And swift as happy thought
She lived again—brave, beautiful and young.

Age, pain and sorrow dropped the veils they wore,
And showed the tender eyes
Of angels in disguise,
Whose discipline so patiently she bore.

The past years brought their harvest rich and fair;
While memory and love,
Together fondly wove
A golden garland for the silver hair.

[Pg 121]

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 122]

CHILDREN'S DIARIES

THE Alcott children were brought up to think for themselves, to reflect, and to give expression to their thoughts. Never laughed at, they were not afraid to speak or write of what was in their minds. Each kept a diary, and no incident that concerned the little girls was too trivial for mention in the record of the day. These incidents, collected, give a more comprehensive view of the Alcotts as a family than do the father's voluminous journals.



ANNA BRONSON ALCOTT.
From a daguerreotype.
Page 122.

When Anna was ten, she gravely explains under date of April 13, 1841:

[Pg 123]

Father was too unwell to come down stairs and mother ironed, Louisa and I helped a little while. I wrote my journal and a journal for Louisa as she thought she could not write well enough. I had no other lessons than that. We watched a little spider and gave it some water to drink. In the afternoon mother read loud the story of the good aunt or part of it while we sewed on the clean clothes I mended up the holes and Louisa and Lizzy sewed on a sheet. In the evening we played mother lets us play in the evening. We went to bed soon.

This sewing bee recalls the long evenings in the March home, described in "Little Women," when the four girls and the mother sewed dutifully on sheets for Aunt March, dividing seams into countries, discussing Europe, Asia, Africa, and America as they stitched.

[Pg 124]

When she was twelve, Anna's literary aspirations sought a vent in attempted poetry. Later she collaborated with Louisa in writing the "Comic Tragedies." Anna's confidante and comrade, Louisa, was frequently the victim of these poetic effusions, her reception of which gives quite a line on her ardent temperament. This entry in Anna's journal for April 23, 1843, is eloquent:

This morning I rose pretty early—After breakfast I read and wrote stories. In the afternoon I wrote some letters and the following one to Louisa:

[Pg 125]

Louisa dear
With love sincere
Accept this little gift from me
It is with pleasure
I send this treasure
And with it send much love to thee.

Sister dear
Never fear
God will help you if you try.
Do not despair
But always care
To be good and love to try.

In the evening I read in a book called 'Stories on the Lord's-prayer.' I talked with Louisa after I went to bed and she pinched me on my leg.

Two or three years later Anna writes:

[Pg 126]

Monday.

Mother went to Boston and Louisa and I cleaned house all day. I love order above all things and I take great pleasure in seeing all neat about the house.

Tuesday.

I worked hard till 2 o'clock when we all met to sew while mother read aloud from "Miss Bremers Brothers and Sister's." It is most beautiful such a happy family. I think Miss Bremer would make a lovely mother the mothers in her books are so sweet and she has beautiful idear's about family's. I love to read natural stories.

Wednesday 30th.

We rose very early and eat breakfast. I think it is a dreadful thing to grow old and not be able to fly about, but then I suppose I shall not care about flying when I grow older, still it is horrid to think about being an old woman all wrinkled and blind. I wish I could keep young forever. I should love to live among all those I love and be with them all the time.

[Pg 127]

Reading was a part of the daily routine in the Alcott household, and Anna's taste for German recalls vividly certain episodes between Meg and John Brooks in "Little Women."

Friday 18th.

I read one of Krummacher's parables in German. I think they are very beautiful, the language is so elegant. I love to hear beautiful words and these stories are told so simply and are full of such sweet thought. I found a great many which have never been translated and I intend to try myself to translate them. I think it is the pleasantest thing I do to read German. It is such a splendid language. I mean Elizabeth shall learn to read it, she will enjoy it so much.

[Pg 128]

Saturday 19th.

In the afternoon I sewed and Louisa read me a very silly story called 'The Golden Cup.' I think there is a great deal of nonsense written now a days, the papers are full of silly stories.

Sunday 20th.

I have been reading lately a very beautiful book given me by my mother. It is "Characteristics of Women" by Mrs. Jameson. I like it very much. It is a description of Shakespear's Heroines, Portia is my favorite, she was so noble and I liked the Trial scene better than any of Shakespears that I ever read. I think this part is beautiful.

[Pg 129]

'Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then if he love he make a swan like end
Fading in music.'

I think this was a beautiful idea.

I passed a pleasant morning in school, translating one of Krummacher's beautiful parables. I find great pleasure in this. I like German better than I do French. I want much to study Italian. I have tried myself several times but cannot manage it without help. I think I should be very happy if I could go to school. I think about it most all the time and when I am in bed I imagine myself in Boston going to Miss Peabody's school with other girls and know that I am learning something. And I think I lead rather too solitary a life. I love to see people. Mother read in the afternoon from Miss Sedgwick's Letters. It was about the Germans. She says they are a very cheerful people and though poor yet they always have a happy smile and cheerful face. That their manners are beautiful. They are so kind and simple. I know I should love them, for I like everything German, except their food, which I think must be horrid, greasy cabbage and sour bread. That seems bad. I should think they are so fond of beautiful things; music, poetry and flowers, that they would not like such stuff.

[Pg 130]

September, 1845.

Friday 1st.

I walked before breakfast, the sun was bright and there was a cool wind. The lane was full of beautiful flowers and the grass was green and fresh. I had a lovely walk and gathered a bunch of goldenrod, spirian and gerandia. Everything was so beautiful that all my unhappy thoughts of last night flew away. I sometimes have strange feelings, a sort of longing after something I don't know what it is. I have a great many wishes. I spent the day in the usual manner, sewing and studying. In the evening Louisa and I walked through the lane and talked about how we should like to live and dress and imagined all kinds of beautiful things.

[Pg 131]

Sunday 3rd.

I sewed all day and mother read from "Miss Sedgwick's Letters." I will write a piece of poetry, as I have nothing very pleasant to write about:

"Oh when thy heart is full of fears
And the way is dim to Heaven
When the sorrow and the sin of years
Peace from thy soul has driven
Then through the mist of falling tears
Look up and be forgiven.

[Pg 132]

"And then rise up and sin no more
And from thy dark ways flee
Let Virtue o'er thy appetites
Have full and perfect mastery
And the kindly ones that hover o'er
Will ever strengthen thee.

"And though thou art helpless and forlorn
Let not thy heart's peace go
And though the riches of this world are gone
And thy lot is care and woe
Faint not, but journey ever on
True wealth is not below.

"Oh, falter not but still look up
Let Patience be thy guide
Bless the rod and take the cup
And trustfully abide
Let not temptation vanquish thee
And the Father will provide."

[Pg 133]

Louisa composed these lines, which I think are beautiful. She is a beautiful girl and writes as good poetry as Lucretia Davidson, about whom so much has been written. I think she will write something great one of these days. As for me I am perfect in nothing. I have no genius. I know a little of music, a little of French, German and Drawing, but none of them well. I have a foolish wish to be something great and I shall probably spend my life in a kitchen and die in the poor-house. I want to be Jenny Lind or Mrs. Seguin and I can't and so I cry. Here is another of Louisa's pieces to mother.

[Pg 134]

"God comfort thee dear mother,
For sorrow sad and deep
Is lying heavy on thy heart
And this hath made thee weep.

"There is a Father o'er us, mother,
Who orders for the best
And peace shall come ere long, mother,
And dwell within thy breast.

"Then let us journey onward, mother,
And trustfully abide,
The coming forth of good or ill
Whatever may betide."

Helpfulness was encouraged in the Alcott household; habits of industry were carefully fostered. The Alcott children worked when they worked, played when they played, but wasted hours were unknown. They were taught to make the most of every day. When Anna was seventeen she wrote in her diary:

[Pg 135]

August, 1848.
Thursday 17th.

Lizzy and I are making plans for spending our days usefully. Here is mine.

Plan.

Rise at half past 4, bathe, dress and walk till half past 5.

Dress and bathe the children.

Breakfast at 7. Work till 9. School till 12. Work till 2.

Sew till 4. Practice till 5.

Hear Lizzy recite German and French till 6. Supper.

[Pg 136]

This will keep me pretty busy, but I find I accomplish so much more when I have a plan and certain times for certain things. I never can do things without order. I like to have something planned for every moment of the day, so that when I get up in the morning I may know what to do. I wish I could be

learned.

An entry in Louisa's diary during the Fruitlands period gives this insight into one of her average days, when a child of eleven:

I rose at five, and after breakfast washed the dishes and then helped mother work. I took care of May in the afternoon. In the evening I made some pretty things for my dolly. Father and Mr. Lane had a talk and father asked us if we saw any reason for us to separate. Mother wanted to, she is so tired. I like it, but not the school part or Mr. L.

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Note, too, that when it came to a conference concerning family affairs, the father asked the advice of his eleven-year-old daughter, instead of following the more customary method of withholding from her the family confidence and deferring discussion of plans until the children had gone to bed.

"Know Thyself," was ever the aim of Bronson Alcott in the training of his children, and Mr. Lane at Fruitlands followed this same line of mental development. This is one of his sample lessons which Louisa Alcott has copied into her journal:

[Pg 138]

Sample of our Lessons

"What virtues do you wish more of," asked Mr. L. I answer:

Patience	Obedience	Industry
Love	Generosity	Respect
Silence	Perseverance	Self-denial

"What vices less of?"

Idleness	Impatience	Selfishness
Wilfulness	Impudence	Activity
Vanity	Pride	Love of cats

In this same lesson comes the twelve-year-old Louisa's explanation of the difference between faith and hope:

Faith can believe without seeing; hope is not sure, but tries to have faith when it desires.

Louisa's love of nature, her trained habits of thought, her poetic imagination, and her keen appreciation of beauty are indicated in this entry in her journal, written at Fruitlands in 1843 or 1844, when she was a child of ten or eleven:

[Pg 139]

I wrote in my imagination book, and enjoyed it very much. Life is pleasanter than it used to be, and I don't care about dying any more. Had a splendid run, and got a box of cones to burn. Sat and heard the pines sing a long time. Had good dreams, and woke now and then to think, and watch the moon. I had a pleasant time with my mind, for it was happy.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 140]

GIRLHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

FAMILIAR to every reader of "Little Women" is the March family's quaint brown house with its many windows, its old-fashioned garden, its homely, homelike air, its unflinching hospitality.

This home, as described by Louisa M. Alcott, is a picture of the Alcott home at Concord, the scene of the girlhood and young womanhood of the Alcott children. Many of Louisa's books were written there; "Little Women" was lived there. In Concord, Anna met John Pratt, and the first love story in "Little Women" is Anna's life romance. There little Beth passed from the material to the spiritual life, and Amy first developed the artistic talents which later caused her work to be sought for by art museums and private collectors.

[Pg 141]

Anna's marriage was a great trial to Louisa, for from early childhood the two girls had been inseparable companions, and after Anna's marriage Louisa learned to look upon John as her brother.

Louisa's diary in the April following the passing of Elizabeth touches upon the change of homes in Concord, the absence of May, who was studying art in Boston, of Elizabeth and of Anna:

April.

[Pg 142]

Came to occupy one wing of Hawthorne's house (once ours) while the new one was being repaired. Father, mother and I kept house together, May being in Boston, Anna at Pratt farm, & for the first time Lizzy absent. I don't miss

her as I expected to do, for she seems nearer & dearer than before, & I am glad to know she is safe from pain & age in some world where her innocent soul must be happy.

Death never seemed terrible to me, & now is beautiful, so I cannot fear it, but find it friendly and wonderful.



ABBA MAY ALCOTT.
From a photograph.
Page 142.

Amy's artistic efforts and her failures in "Little Women" are taken from May's actual experiences in Concord. Turning the career of the youngest of the Alcott girls into a romance earlier in "Little Women" than it actually occurred in life, doubtless prevented Louisa Alcott from chronicling the artistic success of her youngest sister, a success to which she largely contributed and in which she took great pride. [Pg 143]

May Alcott's pictures are found to-day in art museums and in leading private collections in this country and abroad. Her copies of Turner are remarkable. In the Kensington Gallery in London students are given them to study in preference to the originals. Several fine examples are in American museums, and a few are owned by members of the Alcott family.

When the Alcotts moved into Orchard House, the girls painted and papered the interior themselves. May filled the nooks and corners with panels, on which she painted birds and flowers. Over the fireplaces she inscribed mottoes in Old English characters. [Pg 144]

The study in Orchard House was the real center of the household. For the chimney piece Ellery Channing wrote an epigram, which May Alcott painted upon it, and which has been used in the stage reproduction of "Little Women":

"The Hills are reared, the Valleys scooped in vain,
If Learning's Altars vanish from the Plain."

In Orchard House to-day, walls, doors, and window casings are etched with May Alcott's drawings, many preserved under glass, including a miniature portrait of a little girl, naïvely and modestly inscribed "The Artist." [Pg 145]

High thoughts and cheerful minds triumphed over poverty in those Concord days. Shortly after the family's return from Fruitlands, Louisa wrote for Ellen Emerson the fairy stories, "Flower Fables." She was at the time only sixteen. This was her earliest published work, and it was many years before she achieved literary fame, although, as did Jo in "Little Women," she materially helped in the support of the family by writing lurid tales.

Literature rather than commerce freed the Alcotts from the burden of debt. Louisa's fame was

the result, neither of accident, nor of a single achievement, but had for its background the whole generous past of her family. Her "Hospital Sketches" were her letters home, when she was serving as hospital nurse during the Civil War. "Little Women" is a chronicle of her family. Louisa certainly made good use of the vicissitudes of the Alcotts. She always saw the funny side and was not afraid to make book material of the home experiences, elevating or humiliating. Her books number between twenty-five and thirty. Nearly every one takes its basic idea from some real experience. The books written by the Alcott family, including some eight or ten published by Mr. Alcott, Louisa's output, and one or two written by May, fill two shelves of an alcove devoted to Concord authors in the Alcott town library.

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[Pg 147]

Anna's little sons, familiarly known in the Alcott household as Freddie and Johnnie, or Jack, gave to Bronson Alcott in his later days fresh opportunity for his favorite study—childhood. To both boys came frequent messages and gifts from Grandpa, Grandma, and Aunt Louisa.

Louisa Alcott sent to Freddie this poem on his third birthday:

A song for little Freddie
On his third Birthday.

Down in the field
Where the brook goes,
Lives a white lammie
With a little black nose.

[Pg 148]

He eats the grass so green,
He drinks the "la la" sweet,
"Buttertups" and daisies,
Grow all about his feet.

The "birdies" they sing to him,
The big sun in the sky,
Warms his little "Toe-toes,"
And peeps into his eye.

He's a very gentle lammie,
He never makes a fuss,
He never "saps his marmar,"
He never says "I muss."

He hops and he runs,
"Wound and wound" all day,
And when the night comes,
He goes "bye low" on the hay.

[Pg 149]

In a nice little barn,
Where the "moo-moos" are;
Freddie says "Good night,"
But the lammie he says "Baa!"

To be sung by Marmar with appropriate accompaniment of gesture, etc.

On the outside of the letter appears:

A little song for Freddie,
On his third birthday,
With "lots" of loving kisses,
From his Wee-wee far away.

On his sixth birthday Grandpa contributes:

[Pg 150]

Concord, Freddie's
6th Birthday,
1869.

Dear Freddy,

I give you for your Birth Day Present this new Picture Book. It has plain words for you to pick out and read. The stories are short and about things that you know. Now, my little scholar, look among the leaves every day, and see how many words you can tell,—Very soon you will find you can read whole pages, spell the whole book through, and write the stories, word for word on your slate or in your little writing book. Then you will not be a little Dunce, and when Grandpa comes to see you, you will be glad to show him how well you can read.

Grandma gives the top to Johnny.

From Grandpa.

Grandma, not to be outdone, sent this:

[Pg 151]

Dear Freddy,

If worms give us the silk thread—can't we find time enough to find out how the Fabric is made which dresses are formed of—minutes and days—ours. Days and Years are passing away—let us be busy—and I guess we will get to the Vienna Exposition—

"How doth the little busy Bee"

Improve each shining hour—Be a Bee—and your hours will be too few for the Flowers of Science and the Wheels of Use. Grandma will help you with her one dim eye and Grandpa will explain a great deal to you with his Shining Light—Mama with your help will make you a true, good man.—

1873.

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On his twelfth birthday Aunt Louisa again lapsed into poetry:

F. A. P.

Who likes to read a fairy tale,
Or stories told of sword and sail,
Until his little optics fail?

Our boy.

Who loves his father's watch to wear
And often draw it out with care
Upon its round white face to stare?

Our boy.

Who rather proud of his small feet
When wearing slippers new and neat,
And stockings red as any beet?

Our boy.

Who in his pocket keeps his hands
As round the house he "mooning" stands
Or reads the paper like the mans?

Our boy.

[Pg 153]

Who likes to "boss" it over Jack,
And sometimes gives a naughty whack,
But gets it heartily paid back?

Our boy.

Who likes to have a birthday frolic
And eats until he has a colic,
That for the time is diabolic?

Our boy.

Who is the dearest little lad,
That aunt or mother ever had,
To love when gay and cheer when sad?

Our boy.

May angels guard him with their wings,
And all brave, good and happy things,
Make nobler thou than crowned kings.

Our boy.

[Pg 154]

March 28th, 1875.

John, the original of Daisy in "Little Women," received in his babyhood days from Aunt Louisa, some tiny blue stockings with this verse:

Two pair of blue hose,
For Johnny's white toes,
So Jack Frost can't freeze em,
Nor darned stockings tease em,
So pretty and neat
I hope the small feet
Will never go wrong,
But walk straight and strong,
The way father went.
We shall all be content,
If the dear little son
Be a second good John.

[Pg 155]

On his tenth birthday, both Grandpa and Grandma Alcott sent these characteristic greetings to their younger grandson:

Grandma Alcott to Johnny.

10th birthday.

June 24th. 1875.

Giving song, all day long,
Under the elm or willow;
With sunshine shed
On the little head
That rests on Grandma's pillow.
To and fro,
Let it go,
While inside piping cheery,
As he takes his rest
In his hang-bird's nest
Lies Grandma's little deary.

[Pg 156]

Grandpa Alcott to Johnny.
June 24th. 1875.

A fine little sword
For gallant Capt. Jack,
As he marches down the hill
His army at his back.

No giants will it kill
Since its only made for show,
And the best way to fight,
Is a kiss for a blow.

In these days of private secretaries, labor-saving devices, and specialization, it is difficult to comprehend the obstacles that Louisa Alcott encountered in writing. Her day was filled with other tasks, housework, sewing, teaching, nursing—yet the pen was never idle, the busy brain was never still. Her power of concentration made it possible for her to write under harassing conditions. This is her own description of her methods of work:

[Pg 157]

My methods of work are very simple and soon told. My head is my study, and there I keep the various plans of stories for years sometimes, letting them grow as they will till I am ready to put them on paper. Then it is quick work, as chapters go down word for word as they stand in my mind, and need no alteration. I never copy, since I find by experience that the work I spend the least time upon is best liked by critics and speakers.

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Any paper, any pen, any place that is quiet suit me, and I used to write from morning till night without fatigue when "the steam was up." Now, however, I am paying the penalty of twenty years of over work, and can write but two hours a day, doing about twenty pages, sometimes more, though my right thumb is useless from writer's cramp.

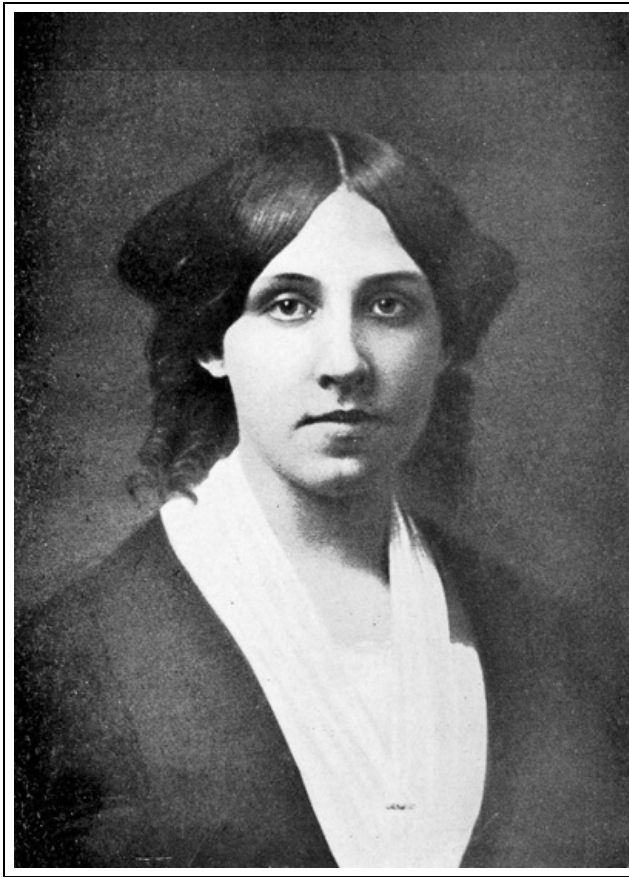
While a story is under way I live in it, see the people more plainly than real ones around me, hear them talk, and am much interested, surprised and provoked at their actions, for I seem to have no power to rule them, and can simply record their experiences and performances.

Materials for the children's tales I find in the lives of the little people about me, for no one can invent anything so droll, pretty or pathetic as the sayings and doings of these small actors, poets and martyrs. In the older books, the events are mostly from real life, the strongest the truest, and I yet hope to write a few of the novels which have been simmering in my brain while necessity and unexpected success have confined me to juvenile literature.

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I gave Mrs. Moulton many facts for her article in "Famous Women," and there are many other sketches which will add more if they are wanted. The first edition of "Jo's Boys" was twenty thousand I believe, and over fifty thousand were soon gone. Since January I know little about the sales. People usually ask "How much have you made?" I am contented with a hundred thousand, and find my best success in the comfort my family enjoy; also a naughty satisfaction in proving that it was better *not* to "stick to teaching" as advised, but to write.

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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.
From a daguerreotype.
Page 160.

With all her love for her father, irreverent Louisa delighted in making fun of him. The complacent philosopher, with his voluminous journals, his several books in manuscript, his liking, despite the brilliancy of his conversations, for the written rather than the spoken word, was a wasteful user of paper and a careless dispenser of ink. That her father enjoyed her good-natured banter is shown by the fact that in his journal he has entered the following poem, written by Louisa at nineteen:

From Louisa on my 52nd birthday.

[Pg 161]

Nov. 29th, 1851.

To Father.

A cloth on the table where dear Plato sits
By one of the Graces was spread
With the single request that he would not design
New patterns with black ink or red.
And when he is soaring away in the clouds
I beg he'll remember and think
Though the "blackbirds" are fair his cloth will be fairer
For not being deluged with ink.
May plenty of paper of pens and of quiet
To my dear pa forever be given
Till he has written such piles that when on the top
He can walk calmly on into Heaven.

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 162]

FRIENDSHIPS AND BELIEFS

RARE friendships existed among the great minds of that period, when Transcendentalism in America was first talked and lived, a close bond of sympathy uniting Bronson Alcott, Emerson, Thoreau, Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody. Such association made its impress upon the Alcott daughters. Anna's diary is filled with references to visits with the Emersons. Louisa's deal less with the family and more with the intellectual life of

the great philosopher, whom she made her idol. Through life he was her stanch and understanding friend. [Pg 163]

"The Apostles of the Newness" was the scoffing term applied to these literary giants of New England by those who lacked the mental and spiritual insight to recognize greatness in others.

This attitude of ridicule was largely responsible for the continued attacks upon the *Dial*, a quarterly issued by the Transcendentalists, edited from 1840 to 1844 by Emerson, Margaret Fuller, George Ripley, and Thoreau. Between its modest covers were many of the intellectual masterpieces of the time: its rare volumes are still treasure-houses of literature which to-day command any price. Mr. Alcott selected its title and was to a large extent responsible for its policy. His Orphic Sayings in the *Dial*, now looked upon as classics, were the butt of the press at the time, and the derision of Boston society. [Pg 164]

In these Orphic Sayings, he gave this remarkable definition of Reform: "Reforms are the noblest of facts. Extant in time, they work for eternity: dwelling with men, they are with God."

Conversation among these friends was neither trivial nor useless, and in the Alcott circle, which included Emerson, Thoreau, Theodore Parker, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Elizabeth Peabody, Mrs. Cheney, and other of the early Transcendentalists, later on augmented by James Russell Lowell and Nathaniel Hawthorne, a series of drawing-room symposiums was established, with Alcott, whom Emerson called "serious and superior," as a leader. Much of the substance of these conversations is found in the Alcott journals, and in the unpublished manuscripts of the poet-philosopher. [Pg 165]

In Concord, the Alcotts once more enjoyed the literary companionship they craved. Emerson was a near neighbor. Thoreau had his cabin at Walden, where he had established "a community of one." To and from Boston came others of the Transcendental group, and Concord became the center of thought for New England.

Thinking, however, was not the only occupation of Bronson Alcott. Dreamer he was, but he delighted in toil and ever upheld the dignity of labor, not ashamed nor afraid to work for hire as a laborer in his neighbor's field, while nightly conducting drawing-room conversations with a company of peers and students. [Pg 166]

When Thoreau built his cabin, Alcott helped him. They cut the trees from Emerson's grove. While Emerson was abroad, they built a summer-house for him on his grounds. It stood for many years, a picturesque temple of friendship. William Henry Channing mentions a morning spent there, reading Margaret Fuller's Italian letters. May Alcott has made drawings of it, which were published in a volume of "Concord Sketches" that also contained her drawing of Hawthorne's house. [Pg 167]

Mr. Alcott practically rebuilt Orchard House for his own family. Mrs. Child, a friend of Mrs. Alcott, thus describes this home, which is now preserved as a memorial to Louisa M. Alcott and is visited by thousands every year:

When they bought the place the house was so very old that it was thrown into the bargain, with the supposition that it was fit for nothing but firewood. But Mr. Alcott had an architectural taste, more intelligible than his Orphic Sayings. He let every old rafter and beam stay in its place, changed old ovens and ash holes into Saxon arched alcoves, and added a washerwoman's old shanty to the rear. The result is a house full of queer nooks and corners, with all manner of juttings in and out. It seems as if the spirit of some old architect had dropped it down in Concord. [Pg 168]

Thoreau, master builder himself, has paid to Bronson Alcott this tribute:

One of the last of the philosophers, Connecticut gave him to the world. He peddled first her wares, afterwards, as he declares, his brains. These he peddles still, bearing for fruit, only his brain, like the nut its kernel. His words and attitude always suppose a better state of things than other men are acquainted with, and he will be the last man to be disappointed when the ages revolve. He has no venture in the present. But though comparatively disregarded now, when his day comes, laws unsuspected by most will take effect, and rulers will come to him for advice. [Pg 169]

Emerson, who saw the boy mind beneath the philosopher's dignity, said tenderly of Bronson Alcott: "He is certainly the youngest man of his age we have seen. When I looked at his gray hairs, his conversation sounded pathetic; but I looked again and they reminded me of the gray dawn."

Even his friends, to say nothing of Louisa, occasionally poked fun at him for chronicling so minutely all his thoughts. Ellery Channing called his library, "Encyclopediea de Moi-meme, en cents volumes." Yet these journals and records are now worth more than the fine library he collected and in which he delighted. [Pg 170]

Emerson has thus described the origin of the Fruitlands community:

On the invitation of James P. Greaves of London, the friend and fellow-laborer of Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Mr. Alcott went to England in 1842. Mr.

Greaves died before his arrival, but Mr. Alcott was received cordially by his friends, who had given his name to their school, Alcott House, Ham, near London. He spent several months in making acquaintance with various classes of reformers. On his return to America, he brought with him two of his English friends, Chas. Lane and H. C. Wright; and Mr. Lane having bought a farm which he called Fruitlands, at Harvard, Mass., they all went there to found a new community.

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The Fruitlands experiment and its failure have been immortalized by Louisa Alcott in her "Transcendental Wild Oats." The detail of it is thus described by a friend of the Alcott family, who had the story from Bronson Alcott himself:

The crop failures necessitated the community living on a barley diet, as anything animal was not allowed, not even milk and eggs. Now and then they gave a thought as to what they should do for shoes when those they had were gone; for depriving the cow of her skin was a crime not to be tolerated. The barley crop was injured in harvesting, and before long want was staring them in the face. The Alcotts remained at Fruitlands till mid-winter in dire poverty, all the guests having taken their departure as provisions vanished. Friends came to the rescue, and, Mr. Alcott concluded with pathos in his voice, "We put our little women on an ox-sled and made our way to Concord! So faded one of the dreams of my youth. I have given you the facts as they were; Louisa has given the comic side in 'Transcendental Wild Oats'; but Mrs. Alcott could give you the tragic side."

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Indeed, it was always Mrs. Alcott who could have given the tragic side, skillfully as she kept her worries hidden. Her own family, indignant because Bronson Alcott could not better provide the material needs for his family, on more than one occasion besought the faithful wife to leave him.

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A letter from her brother, urging this step, drew forth from her a defense of Bronson Alcott which the husband enters in his journal as follows:

November
1840

Passages of a letter from my wife to one who misapprehends and perverts my life and purposes.

"If I do not mistake the spirit as well as letter of your remark you would have us believe that a righteous retribution has overtaken us, (or my husband, and we are one,) and that the world is justly punishing him for not having conciliated it, by conforming to its wills and ways.—You say that my husband was told ten years ago, that the world could not understand him. It perhaps fell dead on his ears and ever will. There is no human voice can convince him that the path he has chosen to tread, thorny, bleak, solitary, as it is, is not the right one for him. Just so did that man of Nazareth whom all the world profess to admire and adore, but few to imitate; and these few are the laughing-stock of the Christian Community. They are branded as visionaries and fools. But this little band when alone and disencumbered of idle observation, enjoy the recital of their privations; they have been reviled, but they revile not again; they know sorrow and are acquainted with grief; and yet there is joy in that group of sinless men, such as angels might desire to partake of. I am not writing poetry, but I have tried to place before your mind, in as brief, but clear a manner as I am able, our real condition, and Mr. Alcott's merit as a man, who, though punished and neglected by a wicked world, has much to console and encourage him in the confidence and cooperation of some of the wisest and best men living. Ten such, were they permitted in their several vocations to act as teachers, preachers, and printers, would save our wicked city from the ruin that awaits it. But they are turned, like the Nazarene, into solitary places to lament the blindness and folly of mankind, who are following the vain and fleeting shadow for the real and abiding substance. But to return to Mr. Alcott, is he to sell his soul, or what is the same thing, his principles, for the bread that perisheth? No one will employ him in his way; he cannot work in theirs, if he thereby involve his conscience. He is so resolved in this matter that I believe he will starve and freeze before he will sacrifice principle to comfort. In this, I and my children are necessarily implicated: we make and mean to make all the sacrifices we can to sustain him, but we have less to sustain us in the spirit, and therefore, are more liable to be overcome of the flesh. He has, for a long time gone without everything which he could not produce by labor, from his own place, that no one could in truth reproach him with wantonly eating of the fruits of another's labor.

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He was sent for by friends in Hingham to talk with them; which he did two evenings; his expenses were paid and \$23. put into his hands as a slight compensation for the benefit they felt he had conferred upon them by his conversations. I should like to copy the note accompanying it, but you never care to see how his fellow fanatics rave on these holy themes, life, duty, destiny of man. Thus he occasionally finds a market for his thoughts and

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experiences, which, though inadequate to our support, is richly prized as the honest gains of an innocent and righteous labor. You spoke of his "poetical wardrobe" whether in satire or in a worthier spirit, I cannot tell. However spiritual he may have become, there is still enough of the carnal to feel the chills of winter, and the chiller blasts of satire. His tatters are the rags of righteousness and keep him warmer than they would anyone whose spirit was less cheered and warmed by the fires of eternal love and truth.

An appreciative account of Mr. Alcott's famous school in the Masonic Temple, Boston, is found in the "Record of a School," edited by Elizabeth Peabody, published in 1835, republished in 1874. The "Conversations with Children on the Gospels," edited by Mr. Alcott in two volumes, appearing in 1836-1837, caused such a commotion in Boston as to result in the downfall of the Temple School. Reading these conversations to-day, one is impressed with the modern quality of their thought. They were forerunners of that higher criticism, which with the Bible student now supplants the old blind acceptance without reflection of even obscure Biblical passages.

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On philosophy and religion Mr. Alcott and Miss Peabody delighted to talk and write. Their discussion of the existence of evil is startlingly modern.

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"I do not think that evil should be clothed in form by the imagination," writes Miss Peabody to Mr. Alcott; "I think every effort should be made to strip it of all individuality, all shaping and all coloring. And the reason is, that Evil has in truth no substantial existence, that it acquires all the existence it has from want of faith and soul cultivation, and that this is sufficient reason why all cultivation should be directed to give positiveness, coloring, shaping, to all kinds of good—Good only being eternal truth."

In reply, the philosopher thus comments in his diary: "Evil has no positive existence, I agree with Miss Peabody, but it has usurped a positive place and being in the popular imagination, and by the imagination must it be made to flee away into its negative life. How shall this be done? By shadowing forth in vivid colors the absolute beauty and phenomena of good, by assuming evil not as positive, but as negative."

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"I shall always love you for loving Alcott," writes Emerson to his schoolmate and lifelong friend, the Reverend W. H. Furness. "He is a great man, the god with the herdsman of Admetus. His conversation is sublime; yet when I see how he is underestimated by cultivated people, I fancy none but I have heard him talk."

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In the midst of slander and petty persecutions, Alcott writes in his diary for April, 1837:

I have been striving to apprehend the real in the seeming, to strip ideas of their adventitious phrases and behold them in their order and powers. I have sought to penetrate the showy terrestrial to find the heavenly things. I have tried to translate into ideas the language and images of spirit, and thus to read God in his works. The outward I have seen as the visage and type of the inward. Ever doth this same nature double its design and stand forth—now before the inner, now before the outer sense of man, at once substance and form, image and idea, so that God shall never slip wholly from the consciousness of the soul.

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Emerson, weary of seeing his friend misunderstood, urges him to give up teaching and become an author, picturing as his golden view for Alcott that one day he will leave the impracticable world to wag its own way, sit apart, and write his oracles for its behoof.

"Write! let them hear or let them forbear," he thunders. "The written word abides until, slowly and unexpectedly, and in widely sundered places, it has created its own church."

The unreality of evil, as taught and believed by Alcott nearly a century ago, laughed and scoffed at then, was twenty-five years later practically the foundation of a belief which gained its first foothold in New England, and, with headquarters in Boston, has spread, until to-day its followers and churches circle the civilized globe—a new-old religion, based on the literal acceptance of the teachings of Christ. What to-day is called metaphysical teaching was in the Alcott period scoffed at as Transcendentalism.

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Mr. Alcott's strict adherence to a vegetarian diet was also the topic of ridicule from public and press, although the Alcott children seemed to thrive on it, and certainly, as four-year-old Louisa once remarked, "Did pitty well for a wegetable diet."

Louisa, in her journal, gives this sample of the vegetarian wafers they had at Fruitlands:

[Pg 184]

Vegetable diet and sweet repose Animal food and nightmare.	Pluck your body from the orchard; do not snatch it from the shamble.	Without flesh diet there could be no blood-shedding war.
--	--	--

Appollo eats no
flesh and has no
beard; his voice is
melody itself.

Snuff is no less snuff
though accepted
from a gold box.

Bronson Alcott constantly sought self-improvement, and the shortcomings of his early education were more than offset by his untiring study. Realizing at one time his lack of a vocabulary, he comments in his journal, that to rectify this he has just bought two books, "A Symposium of Melancholy," and "Hunter on the Blood."

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In their memoirs of Bronson Alcott, F. B. Sanborn and W. T. Harris have thus summed up his character: "He was the most filial son, the most faithful lover, the most attached friend, the most generous philanthropist of his time. And when he died, he left fewer enemies than any man of equal age can have provoked or encountered in so long a career."

In his study of childhood, Mr. Alcott sought first to reach the mind, recognizing that as "the God within us." He encouraged individuality in his children, trying in their earliest years to make them think for themselves. All through his teaching runs the boy's friendship with God, and his sense of oneness with his Maker was a part of the divine heritage he passed on to his daughters.

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He records in his diary a conversation with Anna, who was four, and Louisa, who was two, after reading to them the story of Jesus, which he made so vital that, given their choice, they asked for it in preference to a fairy tale. Anna remarked that Jesus did not really die. "They killed his body, but not his soul." Her father asked: "What is the soul, Anna?" The little four-year-old replied: "It's this inside of me that makes me feel and think and love." "And," said the father, "what became of Jesus' soul?" Anna replied: "It went back to God." Whereat little two-year-old Louisa asked: "Why, isn't Dod inside of me?"

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A note in the father's diary at the birth of Elizabeth records "Anna's first interview with her sister" (Elizabeth a few hours old), and a day later comes this record: "Anna and Louisa interview their sister." Louisa, two years old, wishes to have the baby sister put in her arms, when four-year-old Anna says warningly: "Treat her very carefully, Louisa, she comes from God." What a beautiful thought to give a child of the divine mystery of birth!

Instead of asserting what he intended to make of his children, Alcott encouraged the child to make itself, beginning when it was a small baby, treating it as an individual, giving it opportunity to use its mentality, instilling principles of right and wrong by suggestion. Alcott never commanded. "You don't wish to do that," was his way, not exacting blind obedience, but expressing his conviction that the child wished to do right.

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To him, God was love. He had no fear of God, for perfect love had cast out fear. This same spirit was manifested in all his children. To them the change called Death was not to be dreaded; it was a stepping forward and upward.

This thought that death is not the end, but the beginning, is expressed in one of Louisa's most beautiful poems:

THOREAU'S FLUTE

[Pg 189]

We sighing said, "Our Pan is dead;
His pipe hangs mute beside the river.
Around it wistful sunbeams quiver,
And Music's airy voice is fled.
Spring mourns as for untimely frost;
The bluebird chants a requiem;
The willow-blossom waits for him;—
The Genius of the wood is lost."

Then from the flute, untouched by hands,
There came a low, harmonious breath;
"For such as he there is no death—
His life the eternal life commands;
Above man's aims his nature rose,
The wisdom of a just content
Made one small spot a continent
And tuned to poetry life's prose.

"Haunting the hills, the stream, the wild,
Swallow and aster, lake and pine,
To him grew human or divine,—
Fit mates for this large-hearted child.
Such homage Nature ne'er forgets,
And yearly on the coverlid
'Neath which her darling lieth hid
Will write his name in violets.

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"To him no vain regrets belong,
Whose soul, that finer instrument,

Anna Bronson1831-1893
Louisa May 1832-1888
Elizabeth 1835-1858
Abby May1840-1879

Anna Bronson married John Bridge Pratt, 1860.

Their Children
Frederick Alcott1863-1910
John Sewall 1865

Abby May married Ernst Nieriker, March,
1878.

Children
Louisa May 1879

Frederick Alcott Pratt
married
Jessica Cate
February, 1888

Their Children
Bronson Alcott 1889
Elizabeth Sewall . . . 1891
Louisa May 1900
Frederick Woolsey . . . 1902

Elizabeth Sewall married Alfred Redfield
June, 1913

[A] John Sewall Pratt
married
Eunie May Hunting
January, 1909

Children
Elverton Hunting

[A] John Sewall Pratt adopted in 1888 by Louisa May Alcott and name changed to John Sewall Pratt Alcott.

Louisa May Nieriker . . . 1878
married
Ernst Rasim

Children
Ernestine

Transcriber's Notes:

Spelling errors, grammatical errors, and typographical errors within letters were not corrected, in order to preserve the flavor of the historical record of those letters. After all, some of these letters were written by girls as young as five.

Some of the illustrations have been moved so that they do not break up paragraphs, thus

the page number of the illustration might not match the page number in the List of Illustrations.

On page 58, "reestablished" was replaced with "reestablished".

On page 173, has a quotation mark at the beginning of "If I do not mistake" but no closing quotation mark, and it is less than clear where the closing quotation mark should be.

In the Chronology, horizontal rules were added to give clarity to the tables.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LITTLE WOMEN LETTERS FROM THE HOUSE OF ALCOTT ***

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