LITTLE WOMEN by Louisa May Alcott CHAPTER ONE PLAYING PILGRIMS "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress. "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff. "We've got Father and Mother, and each other," said Beth contentedly from her corner. The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, "We haven't got Father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never," but each silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was. Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don't, " and Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted. "But I don't think the little we should spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army won't be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy Undine and Sintran for myself. I've wanted it so long," said Jo, who was a bookworm. "I planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearthbrush and kettle-holder. "I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils; I really need them," said Amy decidedly. "Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a manly manner. "I know I do--teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I'm longing to enjoy myself at home," began Meg, in the complaining tone again. "You don't have half such a hard time as I do," said Jo. "How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to fly out the window or cry?" "It's naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all." And Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that any one could hear that time. "I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy, "for you don't have to go to school with imperti nent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice." "If you mean libel, I'd say so, and not talk about labels, as if Papa was a pickle bottle," advised Jo, laughing. "I know what I mean, and you needn't be statirical about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your vocabilary," returned Amy, with dignity. "Don't peck at one another, children. Don't you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! How happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries!" said Meg, who could remember better times. "You said the other day you thought we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money." "So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are. For though we do have to work, we make fun of ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say." "Jo does use such slang words!" observed Amy, with a reproving look at the long figure stretched on the rug. Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle. "Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!" "That's why I do it." "I detest rude, unladylike girls!" "I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!" "Birds in their little nests agree," sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh, and the "pecking" ended for that time. "Really, girls, you are both to be blamed," said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion. "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady. " "I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I 'll wear it in twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" And Jo shook the blue ball she had wound, and knitted as fast as she could, while she scowled at the needles. Poor Jo! It's too bad, but it can't be helped. So you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls," said Beth, stroking the rough head with a hand that all the dish washing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch. "As for you, Amy," continued Meg, "you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now, but you'll grow up an affected little goose, if you don't take care. I like your nice manners and refined ways of speaking, when you don't try to be elegant. But your absurd words are as bad as Jo's slang." "If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?" asked Beth, ready to share the lecture. "You're a dear, and nothing else," answered Meg warmly, and no one contradicted her, for the "Mouse' was as the pet of the family. As young readers like to know 'how people look', we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a comfortable room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain, for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it. Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it. Eliza beth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her 'Little Miss Tranquility', and the name suited her excellently, for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners. What the characters of the four sisters do when out of sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers to warm. Some how the sight of the shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for Mother was coming, and everyone brightened and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair with a groan, and Jo forgot her work, and sat up to hold the slippers and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair with a groan, and Jo forgot her work, and sat up to hold the slippers air." "I thought I'd get out of the way, and let the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided, "I'm the of the family now Papa is away, and I shall take special care of Mother while he was gone." "I'll tell you what we said Beth, "let's each get her some thing for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves." "That's like you, dear! What will we get?" exclaimed Jo. Everyone thought soberly for a minute, and then Meg announced, as if the idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, "I shall give her a nice pair of gloves." "Army shoes, best to be had," cried Jo. "Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed," said Beth. "I'll get a little bottle of cologne. She likes it, and I will have some left to use," added Amy. "How will we give the things?" asked Meg. "Put them on the table, and call her in, and see her face when she sees the presents, with a kiss." "I used to be the one to give them," said Jo. "Let's have a surprise. We must have a little chair with the crown on, and see you all come marching round to the door, and actors and audience turn time. I'm getting up' frolics. "You must be up and dressed early, for we shall have no end to do," said Meg warmly. "Don't I wish I could go as a dress welry. You are to be here at six sharp," replied Jo. "Costumes and everything if you quit the boards," said t to rehearse tonight. Come, Amy, and I don't choose to make a fuss," added Jo. "We ought to have a chair and be graceful. I do as well as not gifted with dramatic power, but was hosen because she was small and pretty," said Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was oom, crying frantically, "I'm dying to go and fight with Papa." "Do it this way. Clasp your hands so, and stagger across the but she poked her hands into her pockets, with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling. Amy followed ing run into her thanks, and went through the room." with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling. Amy followe n with interest. "It's no use! Do e went by machinery, and her "Ow!" was more suggestive of pins be world in a speech of two pa laughed outright, while Beth let her bread burn as she watched the fu ent his chains asunder," said Meg, as the dead villain sat up and rubbed his elbows. "I me. Come on, Meg." Then things went smoothly, for Don Pedro defied the at her sisters were gifted with cantation over her kettleful of simmering toads, with weird effect. Roderigo r e thing, but I'd like to try Ma ic, with a wild, "Ha! Ha!" "It's the best we've had yet," said Meg, as the dead villa uttered Jo, rolling her eyes and things, Jo. You're a regular Shakespeare!" exclaimed Beth, who firmly believed th bread. Beth's stage-struck!" cried Jo, plied Jo modestly. "I do think The Witches Curse, an Operatic Tragedy is rather a nic Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. 'Is that a dagger that I see before me?" m a famous tragedian do. "No, it's the toasting fork, with Mother's shoe on it instead of the general burst of laughter. "Glad to find you so merry, my girls," said a cheery voice at the 'can I help you' look about her which was truly delightful. She was not elegantly dressed, but bonnet covered the most splendid mother in the world. "Well, dearies, how have you got on to d n't come home to dinner. Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to a rch got her wet things off, her warm slippers on, and sitting down in the easy chair, drew Amy to h ying to make things comfortable, each in her own way. Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood a tted to and fro between parlor kitchen, quiet and busy, while Amy gave directions to everyone, as she sa articularly happy face, "I've got a treat for you after supper." A quick, bright smile went round like a strea ssed up her napkin, crying, "A letter! A letter! Three cheers for Father!" "Yes, a nice long letter. He is w He sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas, and an especial message to you girls," said Mrs. Mar done! Don't stop to quirk your little finger and simper over your plate, Amy," cried Jo, choking on her te a and dropping her bread, butter side down, on the carpet in her h o come, till the others were ready. "I thin k it was s so sp said Meg warmly. "Don't I wish I could go as a dr um me disagreeable to sleep in a tent, and eat all sorts of bad r, a viv an--what's its name? Or a nurse, so I could be near him and help him," exclaimed Jo, with a groan. "It must be very ith a little quiver in her voice. "Not for many months, de ar -tasting things, and drink out of a tin mug," sighed Amy. "When will he come home, Marmee?" asked Beth, w minute sooner than he can be spared. Now come and hear the letter." They all unless he is sick. He will stay and do his work faithfully as long as he can, and we won't ask for him back a air, and Jo leaning on the back, where no one would see any sign of emotion if drew to the fire, Mother in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the ch ially that hose which fathers sent home. In this one little was said of the hardships, dangers faced, or the homesickness conquered. It was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life , mar ches, and military news, and only at the end did the writer's heart overflow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home. "Give them all of my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pr ay for them by night, and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be living children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women." Everybody sniffed when they came to that part. Jo wasn't ashamed of the great tear that dropped off the end of her nose, and Amy never minded the rumpling of her curls as she hid her face on her mother's shoulder and sobbed out, "I am a selfish girl! But I'll truly try to be better, so he mayn't be disappointed in me by-and-by." "We all will," cried Meg. "I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but won't any more, if I can help it." "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman' and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else," said Jo, thinking that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South. Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock and began to knit with all her might, losing no time in doing the duty that lay near her, while she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that Father hoped to find her when the year brought round the happy coming home. Mrs. March broke the silence that followed Jo's words, by saying in her cheery voice, "Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrims Progress when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more than to have me tie my piece bags on your backs for burdens, give you hats and sticks and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the housetop, where you had all the lovely things you take a Celestial City." "What fun it was, especially going by the lions, fighting Apollyon, and passing through the valley where the hobgoblins were," said Jo. "I liked the place where the bundles fell off and tumbled downstairs," said Meg. "I don't remember much about it, except that I was afraid of the dark entry, and always liked the cake and milk we had up at the top. If I wasn't too old for such things, I'd rather like to play it over again," said Amy, who began to talk of renouncing childish things at the mature age of twelve. "We never are too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are heavy, our road is before us, and the longing for good ness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and takes to the Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose we begin where Father and Mother began, and see how far on you can get before tea-time? Where are your bundles?" asked Amy. "Mother has gone home." "Really and truly literal you mean?" asked Mo, looking ladies. "Each of you told what your burden was just now, except Beth. I rather think she has n't any," said Meg, who had been counting her stitches while the others talked. "Yes, I have. Mine is dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos, and being afraid of people." Beth's bundle was such a funny one that everybody wanted to laugh, but nobody did, for it looked so heavy and was tied up with her favorite blue comforter. "Those are my burdens, and I'm ashamed of them, now you have told yours. Mine are dreadfully heavy sometimes, but they seem to grow lighter the moment I tell about them, and I'm much obliged to you, Jo, for making me." "You'll have another one tomorrow, for I shall tell your burden to the whole family," said Jo, who hated to be laughed at, and knew she should have plenty of that when her sisters found out. "Thank you for your books. We read some, and mean to every day," they all cried in chorus. "Merry Christmas, little daughters! I'm glad you began at once, and hope you will keep on. But I want to say one word before we sit down. Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there, and the oldest boy came to tell me they were suffering hunger and cold. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?" They were all unusually hungry, having waited nearly an hour, and for a minute no one spoke, only a minute, for Jo exclaimed impetuously, "I'm so glad you came before we began!" "May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children up the article she most liked. Meg was already covering the buckwheats, and pilingasked Beth eagerly. "I shall take the cream and the muffings," added Amy, heroically giving the bread into one big plate. "I thought you'd do it," said Mrs. March, smiling as if satisfied. "You shall all go and help me, and when we come back we will have bread and milk for breakfast, and make it up at dinnertime." They were soon ready, and the procession set out. Fortunately it was early, and they went through back streets, so few people saw them, and no one laughed at the queer party. A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bedclothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm. How the big eyes stared and the blue lips smiled as the girls went in. "Ach, mein Gott! It is good angels come to us!" said the poor woman, crying for joy. "Funny angels in hoods and mittens," said Jo, and set them to laughing. In a few minutes it really did seem as if kind spirits had be they stopped work, and sang, as usual, before they went to bed. No one but Beth could get much music out of the old piano, but she had a way of softly touching the yellow songs they sang. Meg had a voice like a flute, and sh er own sweet will, always coming out at the wrong place with the high notes. They had always done this, for the mother was a born singer, and her children followed in her footsteps. Amy had a cross voice, and a most unmusical ear, so she was not allowed to sing in public, because she "made a dreadful noise," as Jo said. Beth's shy little warble was very sweet in the home circle, and Jo's alto was pronounced "quite remarkable" by the family, who were not critical. Margaret was the housekeeper, and loved her duties, for she was a domestic little woman, and enjoyed cooking, sewing, and all things belonging to home life. Jo was the literary member of the family, and took charge of the newspaper, which consisted of one sheet, and was passed round every Saturday evening with great solemnity. Beth was the musician, and discoursed sweet music, with her little fingers on the old piano, and Amy was the artist, and proved her right to the name by painting the covers of the paper, illustrating the stories, and sometimes adorning the whole with wreaths of flowers, and fairies dancing on the margins. Meg was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down because it was crammed so full of goodies. Then she remembered her mother's promise and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a little crimson-covered book. She knew it very well, for it was that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it was a true guidebook for any pilgrim going on a long journey. She woke Meg with a "Merry Christmas," and bade her see what was under her pillow. A green-covered book appeared, with the same picture inside, and a few words written by their mother, which made their one present very precious in their eyes. Presently Beth and Amy woke and found their little books also, one dove-colored, the other blue, and all sat looking at and talking about them, while the east grew rosy with the coming day. In spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature, which unconsciously influenced her sisters, especially Jo, who loved her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given. "Girls," said Meg seriously, looking from the tumbled head beside her to the two little night-capped ones in the room beyond, "Mother wants us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once. We used to be faithful about it, but since Father went away and all this war trouble unsettled us, we have neglected many things. You can do as you please, but I shall keep my book on the table here and read a little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know, as long as you can trail round in a white now it will do me good and help me through the day." Then she opened her new book and began to read. Jo put her arm round her and, leaning cheek to cheek, read also, with the quiet expression so seldom seen on her restless face. "How good Meg is! Come, Amy, let's do as they do. I'll help you with the hard words, and explain things if we don't understand," whispered Beth, very much impressed by the pretty books and her sisters' example. "I'm glad mine is blue," said Amy, and then the rooms were very still while the pages were softly turned, and the winter sunshine crept in to touch the bright heads and serious faces with a ray. Christmas greeting. "Where is Mother?" asked Meg, as she and Jo ran down to thank her for their gifts, half an hour later. "Goodness only knows. Some poor creature came a-beggin', and your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and fire, as your mother," replied Hannah, who had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered by them all more as a friend than a servant. "She will be back soon, I think, so fry your cakes, and have everything ready," said Meg, looking over the presents which were collected in a basket and kept under the sofa, ready to be produced at the proper time. "Why, where is Amy's bottle of cologne?" she added, as the little flask did not appear. "She took it out a minute ago, and went off with it to put a ribbon on it, or some such notion," replied Jo, dancing about the room to take the first stiffness off the new army slippers. "How nice them all look, don't they? Hannah washed and ironed them for me, and I marked them all myself," said Beth, looking proudly at the somewhat uneven letters which had cost her such labor. "Bless the child! She's gone and put 'Mother' on them instead of 'M. March'. How funny!" cried Jo, taking one up. "Isn't that right? I thought it was better to do it so, because Meg's initials are M.M., and I don't want anyone to use these but Marmee," said Beth, looking troubled. "It's all right, dear, and a very pretty idea, quite sensible too, for no one can ever mistake now. It will please her very much, I know," said Meg, with a frown for Jo and a smile for Beth. "There's Mother. Hide the basket, quick!" cried Jo, as a door slammed and steps sounded in the hall. Amy came in hastily, and looked rather abashed when she saw her sisters all waiting for her. "Where have you been, and what are you hiding behind you?" asked Meg, surprised to see, by her hood and cloak, that lazy Amy had been out so early. "Don't laugh at me, Jo! I didn't mean anyone should know till the time came. I only meant to change the little bottle for a big one, and I gave all my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any more." As she spoke, Amy showed the handsome flask which replaced the cheap one, and looked so earnest and humble in her little effort to forget herself that Meg hugged her on the spot, and Jo pronounced her 'a trump', while Beth ran to the window, and picked her finest rose to ornament the stately bottle. "You see I felt ashamed of my present, after reading and talking about being good this morning, so I ran round the corner and changed it the minute I was up, and I'm so glad, for mine is the handsomest now." Another bang of the street door sent the basket under the sofa, and the girls to the table, eager for breakfast. "Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! Thank you for our books. We read some, and mean to ever