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 wouldn't be missed ped 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 plan to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush 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 gentlemanly 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 at the thought of the time when she 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 impertinent 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 whenever you'd like. I'm sure our noses 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 vocabulary," 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 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. 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 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 hate to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and test rude, unlady like 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 bothering tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are 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 two tails till I'm 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 army sock till the needles rattled like castanets, and her ball bounded across the room. "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 do. "You're 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 the pet of the family. As young readers like to know 'how people look', ke 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 without. 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, boo ks filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the window. 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, yes, 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 rem inded one of a colt, for she had 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 seemed to see everything, and were usually turns finding out funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, hands and feet t, 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. Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired 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 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 s, 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 were, we will leave to be found out. The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for Mother was coming, and everyone brightened ome her. Meg stopped lecturing, and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze. "They are quite worn out, e must have a new pair." "I thought I'd get her some with my dollar," said Beth. "No, I shall!" cried Amy. "I'm the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided, "I'm the man of the family now Papa is away, and I shall be the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone." "I'll tell you what we'll do," said Beth, "let's each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves." "The idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, "I shall give her a nice pair of at's like you, dear! What shall give her a nice pair of gloves." "A army shoes, best pencils," added Amy. "How will we give the things?" "I'll give my hair pins," said Meg, with a sigh for her own pretty hair. "I'll give my new Polonaise," said Jo, who was wearing her best jacket t was my turn to sit in the chair with the crown on, and see you all come marching round to get your gifts. There ve you sit looking at me while I opened the bundles," said Beth, who was toasting her face and the bread for urprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon, Meg. There is so much to do about the play for Christmas ean to act any more after this time. I'm getting too old for such things," observed Meg, who was nd in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. "You are the best actress arse tonight. Come here, Amy, and do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that. d blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can't, I shall fall into a c d Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was chosen because he was small e ay. Clasp your hands so, and stagger across the room, crying frantically, 'Roderigo! ch was truly thrilling. Amy followed, but she poked her hands out stiffly be fore her, and j suggestive of pins being run into her than of fear and anguish. Jo gave a d espairing groa ith interest. "It's no use! Do the best you can, when the time comes, and if t o defied the world in a speech of two pages with hout a single break. Haga . Roderigo rent his chains as under man full y, and Hugo died in ag dead villain sat up and rub be d his elbows. "I don't see how you c believed that her sister rs were gifted wonderful genius in all t y is rather a nice thing, but I'd like to t o t ry Macbeth, if we only had a uttered Jo, rolling he r eyes and cl utching at the air, as she had th's stage -s truck! " cr ied Meg, and the rehear he do or, and act ors an d audience turned to ful. She was not el egantly dr essed, but a noble-lo did mo the r in t he w orld. "Well, dearies, how have yo om e ho m e to d inne r. Has anyone called, Be kin g th es e m ate rnal in quirie s Mrs. March got her wet t njo y th e h appi est hour of her bus y day. The girls flew about od an d s ets hair s, dro pping , over-turning, and clatteri nd bu sy, w hil e Amy gave dire ctions to everyone, as she arti c ul arly ha ppy face , "I've got a treat for you after supper." ds, re gardless o f the b iscuit she held, and Jo tossed up her napkin, crying a ni ce lon g let ter. He is well, and thinks he shall get through the all s or ts of lo vi ng w ishes for Christm as, and an especial message to you easur e there. "Hurry a n d get done! Don't stop to quirk you ea an d drop ping her bread, butter side down, on the carpet in an d b r ood over the del ig ht to come, till the others were ready. "I think no ug h fo r a s oldier," said Meg warmly. "Don't wish I could go a lp him," ex claimed Jo, with a groan. "It must be very disagreeabl gh ed Amy. "When will he come home, Marmee?" asked Beth, with a l wor k faithfu lly as long as he can, and we won't ask for him bac e fi re , Mother in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and A any sign of em otion if the lette r should happen to be touching. Very fe rs sent h ome . In th is one little was said of the hardships endured, the of camp life, m arche s, and military news, and only at the end did the writer's heart over-fl ink of the m by day, p ray for them by night, and find my best comfort in t heir y a ll work, s o t ha t these hard days need not be wasted . I know bo so m e nem ies b ravely, and conquer themselves so beautiful I y th me to tha t pa rt. Jo was sn't a shamed of the great tear that dropped nd sob b ed out, "I am a selfish girl! But I 'll truly tr hat e to w ork, but won't any more, if I can h el nti n g to b e so mewhere else," said Jo, thinking a wa y her t e ar s with the blue army sock and al l tha t Father h oped to find her when the y r em em ber how y ou u sed to play Pilgrims Progress ic ks and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the e a Celestial City." "What fu n it was, especially goin nd tumbled downstairs ," sa id Meg. "I don't rem or suc h th ings, I' d ra ther like to play it ove pla yi ng all th e t ime in one way or an ce which is a t ru e Celestial City. N dle s?" a sked Amy , wh o was a very lite ers, and envying girls with n ic e pianos, and bein d her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given. "Girls," s aid Meg seriously, looking from the tumbled head beside her to the two little night-capped ones in the room beyo 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 orning as soon as I wake, for I know 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, w face. "How good Meg is! Come, Amy, let's do as they do. I'll help you with the hard words, and they'll explain things if we don't understand," whispered Beth, very much impr essed by the pretty books and her sisters' example. "I'm glad mine is blue," said Amy. and then t he 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 Christmas greeting. "Where is Mother? " asked Meg, as she and Jo ran dow n to thank her for their gifts, half an hour later. "Goodness only knows. Some poor creeter came a-beggin', and y our ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for giv es and firin'," 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. " in' away vittles and drink, cloth aid Meg, looking over the e 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 She will be back soon, I think, so fry your cakes, and have everything ready," s . "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 my handkerchiefs look, don't th the little flask did not appear ? 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 in stea d of 'M. March'. How funny!" cried Jo, takin g one up. "Isn't that right? I thought it was better to do it so, because Meg's initials are the M.M., and I don't want anyone to use these but Marmee," said Beth, I ooking 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 M eg, 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 abash ed when she saw her sisters all wai ting for her. "Where have you been, and what are you hiding behind your cloak, that lazy Amy had been out so early. "Do n't l augh at me, Jo! I didn't mean any one should know ti ll the time came. I only mean to change the little bottle for a big one, and I gave all my m oney to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any more." As she spoke, Amy showed the handsome ottle for a big one, and I gave all my money to get it, and humble in her little effort to forget herself that Meg hugged her on the spot, and Jo replaced the cheap one, and looked so earnest and w, a nd picked her finest rose to or nament the state ly bottle. "You see I ronounced her 'a trump', while Beth ran to the window, about being good th is mo rni ng, so I ran round felt ashamed of my present, after reading and talking glad , for m ine is the handsome est n e corner and changed it the minute I was up, and I'm so nder the sofa, and the girls to the table ow." Another bang of the street door sent the basket up y of them! Thank you for o ur bo oks. We read so me, a , eager for breakfast. "Merry Christmas, Marmee!" 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 lie s a po or w oman with a littl e ne wborn 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 h unger and cold. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present? " Th ey were all unusually hungry, ha ving waited nearly an hour, and for a minute no one only a min ute, fo r Jo ex cl aim ed impetu ously, "I'm so glad you came before we an!" May I go a nd help carry the things to the poor little children?" asked Beth eagerly. "I shall take the cream and the muffins," added Amy, heroically giving up the article she most liked. Meg was lready cover ing the buck whe ats, an d piling the breakfast into one big plate. "I thought you'd do it, " said Mrs. March, smiling as if sa tisf ied . "Y ou sha ll all go and help me, and when we come back we will t, a nd make it up at dinnertime." They were soon ready, and the ave bread and milk for break fas t, a s early, and they went through back streets , so few people le saw them, and no one laughed at the queer pa rty. A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken wind ows, 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. H ow the big eyes stared and the blue lips smile d 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 s piri ts had been at work t here. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fire, and stopped up the broken panes with old hats and her own cloak. Mrs. March ch g ave the mother tea and gruel, and comforted her with promises of help, while she dressed the little baby as tenderly as if it had been her own. The girls meant time spread the table, set the children round the fire, and fed them like so many hungry birds, laughing, talking, and trying to understand the funny broken English. "Das ist gut!" "Die Engel-kinder!" cried the poor thing as the

y ate an d warm ed the ir pu rpl e hands at the co mfort able bl aze. The girls had never been called ang el child ren b efore, a nd though t it v ery agreeable, espe cially Jo, wh o had been c onsidered a 'Sanc ho' e ver s ince sh e wa s born. That was a v ery happy breakfast, thou gh they didn't get any of it. And when they went t aw ay, l eaving comfo rt behind, I thi nk there were not in all the city four merri er people than the hung ry little girl s wh o gave awa y their breakfasts and co ntented themselves wi th br ea d and milk on Christmas morni ng. " That ' s lo vin g ou r neigh bor b etter th an ourselves, a nd I like it," said Me g, as they s et out their presents whil e their mot her wa s upsta ir s c ollecting clothes for the poor Hummels. Not a very splendid show, but ther e wa s a great deal of love don e up in t he few little bundles, an d the tall vas e of re d roses, white chrysanthemums, and trailing vines, which stood in the middle, gave quite an elegant air to the table. "She's coming ! Stri ke up, Beth! Open the door , Amy! T hree cheers for Marmee!" cried Jo, prancing about while Meg went to conduct Mother to the seat of honor. Beth played her gay est march, Amy threw open the door, and Meg enacted rt with great dig n ity. Mrs. March was both surprised and touched, and smiled with her eyes full as she examined her presents and read the lit tle n ote s which accompanied them. The slippers went on at once, a new han dkerchief was slipped into her pocket, well scented with Amy's cologne, the rose was fastened in her bosom, and the nice gloves we re pronounced a perfect fit. Ther e was a good deal of la ughin g and kissing and explaining, in the simple, loving fashion which makes these home festivals so pleasant at the time, so swee t to remember long aft erward, and t he n all fell to work. The morning charities and ceremonies took so much time that the rest of the day was devoted to preparations for the evening festivities. Being still too young to go oft en t o th e t heater, and not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. Ver y cle ver were so me of their productions, pasteboard guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter boats covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin s pangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond shaped bits left in sheets when the lids of preserve pots were cut out. The big chamber was the scen e of many innocent revels. No gentleman were admitted, so Jo played male parts to her heart's content and took immense satisfaction in a pair of russet leather boots given her by a friend, who knew a lady who knew an actor. These boots, an old foil, and a slashed doublet once used by an artist for some picture, were Jo's chief treasures and appeared on all occasions. The small ness of the company made it necessary for the two principal actors to take several parts apiece, and they certainly deserved some credit for the hard work they did in learning three or four different parts, whi sking in and out of various costumes, and managing the stage besides. It was excellent drill for their memories, a harmless amusement, and employed many hours when other wise would have been idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society. On Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed which was the dress circle, and sat before the blu e and yellow chintz curtains in a most flattering state of expectancy. There was a good deal of rustling and whispering behind the curtain, a tr ifle of lamp smoke, and an occasional gig gle from Amy, who was apt to get hysterical in the excitement of the moment. Presently a bell sounded, the curtains flew apart, and the operatic tragedy began. "A gloomy wood ," ac cording to the one playbill, was represented by a few shrubs in pots, green baize on the floor, and a cave in the distance. This cave was made with a clothes horse fo r a r oof, bureaus for walls, and in it was a small furnace in full blast, with a black pot on it and an old witch bending over it. The stage was dark and the glow of the furnace had a fine effect, especially as real steam issued from the kettle when the witch took off the cover. A moment was allowed for the first thrill to subside, then Hugo, the villain, stalked in with a clanking sword at his side, a slouching hat, black beard, mysterious cloak, and the boots. After pacing to and fro in much agitation, he struck his forehead , a nd bu rst out in a wild strain, singing of his hatred for Roderigo, his love for Zara, and his pleasing resolution to kill the one and win the other. The gruff tones of Hugo's voice, with an occasional sho ut when his s f eelings over came him, were very impressive, and the audience applauded the moment he paused for breath. Bowing with the air of one accustomed to public praise, he stole to the cavern and ordered Hagar to come forth with a comman ding, "Wh at h o, minion! I need thee!" Out came Meg, with gray horsehair hanging about her face, a red and black robe, a staff, and cabalistic signs upon her cloak. Hugo demanded a potion to make Zara adore him, and one to destroy Roderigo. Hagar, in a fine dramatic melody, promised both, and proceeded to call up the spirit who would bring the love philter. Hither, hither, from thy home, Airy sprite, I bid thee come! Born of roses, fed on dew, Charms and potions canst th o u brew? Bring me here, with elfin speed, The fragrant philter which I need. Make it sweet and swift and strong, Spirit, answer now my song! A soft strain of music sounded, and then at the back of the cave appeared a little figure in cloudy white, with glittering wings, golden hair, and a garland of roses on its head . Waving a wand, it sang... Hither I come, From my airy home, Afar in the silver moon. Take the magic spell, And use it well, Or its power will vanish soon! And dropping a small, gilded bottle at the witch's feet, the spirit vanished. Another chant from Hagar produced another apparition, not a lovely one, for with a bang an ugly black imp appeared and, having croaked a reply, tossed a dark bottle at Hugo and disappeared with a mocking laugh. Having warbled his thanks and put the potions in his boots , Hugo departed, and Hagar informed the audience that as he had killed a few of her friends in times past, she had cursed him, and intends to thwart his plans, and be revenged on him. Then the curtain fell, and the audience repossed and ate candy while discussing the merits of the play. A good deal of hammering went on before the curtain rose again, but when it became evident what a masterpiece of stage carpentery had been got up, no one murmured at the delay. It was truly superb. A tower rose to the ceiling, halfway up appeared a window with a lamp burning in it, and behind the white curtain appeared Zara in a lovely blue and silver dress, waiting for Roderigo. He came in gorgeous array, with plumed cap, red cloak, chestnut lovelocks, a guitar, and the boots, of course. Kneeling at the foot of the tower, he sang a serenade in melting tones. Zara replied and, after a musical dialogue, consented to fly. The n came the grand effect of the play. Roderigo produced a rope ladder, with five steps to it, threw up one end, and invited Zara to descend. Timidly she crept from her lattice, put her hand on Roderigo's shoulder, and was about to leap gracefully down when "Alas! Alas for Zara!" she forgot her train. It caught in the window, the tower tottered, leaned forward, fell with a crash, and buried the unhappy lovers in the ruins. A universal shriek arose as the russet boots waved wildly from the wreck and a golden head emerged, exclaiming, "I told you so! I told you so!" With wonderful presence of mind, Don Pedro, the cruel sire, rushed in, dragged out his daughter, with a hasty aside... "Don't laugh! Act as if it was all right!" and, ordering Roderigo up, banished him from the kingdom with wrath and scorn. Though decidedly shaken by the fright, all from the tower upon him, Roderigo defied the old gentleman and refused to stir. This dauntless example fired Zara. She also defied her sire, and he ordered them both to the deepest dungeons of the castle. A stout little retainer came in with chains and led them away, looking very much frightened and evidently forgetting the spell. He ought to have made. Act third was the castle hall, and here Hagar appeared, having come to free the lovers and finish Hugo. She hears him coming and hides, sees him put the potions into two cups of wine and bid the timid little servant, "Bear them to the captives in their cells, and tell them I shall come anon." The servant takes Hugo aside to tell him something, and Hagar changes the cups for two others which are harmless. Ferdinando, the 'minion', carries them away, and Hagar puts back the cup which holds the poison meant for Roderigo. Hugo, getting thirsty after a long warble, drinks it, loses his wits, and after a good deal of clutching and stamping, falls flat and dies, while Hagar informs him what she has done in a song of exquisite power and melody. This was a truly thrilling scene, though some persons might have thought that the sudden tumbling down of a quantity of long red hair rather marred the effect of the villain's death. He was called before the curtain, and with great propriety appeared, leading Hagar, whose singing was considered more wonderful than all the rest of the performance put together. Act fourth displayed the despairing Roderigo on the point of stabbing himself because he has been told that Zara has deserted him. Just as the dagger is at his heart, a lovely song is sung under his window, informing him that Zara is true but in danger, and he can save her if he will. A key is thrown in, which unlocks the door, and in a spasm of rapture he tears off his chains and rushes away to find and rescue his lady love. Act fifth opened with a stormy scene between Zara and Don Pedro. He wishes her to go into a convent, but she won't hear of it, and after a touching appeal, is about to faint when Roderigo dashes in and demands her hand. Don Pedro refuses, because he is not rich. They shout and gesticulate tremendously but cannot agree, and Rodrigo is about to bear away the exhausted Zara, when the timid servant enters with a letter and a bag from Hagar, who has mysteriously disappeared. The latter informs the party that she bequeaths untold wealth to the young pair and an awful doom to Don Pedro, if he doesn't make them happy. The bag is opened, and several quarts of tin money shower down upon the stage till it is quite glorified with the glitter. This entirely softens the stern sire. He consents without a murmur, all join in a joyful chorus, and the curtain falls upon the lovers kneeling to receive Don Pedro's blessing in attitudes of the most romantic grace . Tumultuous applause followed but received an unexpected check, for the cot bed, on which the dress circle was built, suddenly shut up and extinguished the enthusiastic audience. Roderigo and Don Pedro flew to the rescue, and all were taken out u

eresting sewing, but tonight no one gr u mbl ed. The y adopted Jo's plan of dividing the long seams into four parts, and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, and in that way got on capitally, especially when the y t alked a bou t the different countries as they stitched their way through them. At nine 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 keys and making a pleasant accompaniment to the simple songs they sang. Meg had a voice like a flute, and she and her mother led the little choir. Amy chirped like a cricket, and Jo wandered through the airs at her own sweet will, always coming out at the wrong place with a croak or a quaver that spoiled the most pensive tune. They had always done this from the time they could lisp... Crinkle, crinkle, 'ittle 'tar, and it had become a household custom, for the mother was a born singer. The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby. CHAPTER TWO A MERRY CHRISTMAS 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 too 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 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 in other, which made their one present very precious in their eyes. Presently Beth and Amy woke to rummage and find their little books also, one dove-colored, the other blue, and all sat looking at and talking about them, while the east grew 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 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 they'll 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 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 creeter came a-beggin', and your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for giving away vittles and drink, cloth es and firin'," 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 my handkerchiefs 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 the 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 your cloak, that lazy Amy had been out so early. "Do n't l augh at me, Jo! I didn't mean any one should know 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 bottle, and Jo 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 state bottle. "You see I felt ashamed of my present, after reading and talking about being good the minute I was up, and I'm so glad , for mine is the handsome est n e corner and changed it the minute I was up, and I'm so ow." Another bang of the street door sent the basket up and the girls to the table , eager for breakfast. "Merry Christmas, Marmee!" 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 lie s a po or w oman with a littl e ne wborn 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 h unger and cold. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present? " Th ey were all unusually hungry, having waited nearly an hour, and for a minute no one only a min ute, fo r Jo ex cl aim ed impetu ously, "I'm so glad you came before we an!" May I go a nd help carry the things to the poor little children?" asked Beth eagerly. "I shall take the c ream and the mu ffin s," added Amy, heroically giving up the article she most liked. Meg was lready c overi ng the buck whe ats, an d piling the breakfast into one big plate. "I thought you'd do it, " said Mrs. March, smiling as if sa tisf ied . "Y ou sha ll all go and help me, and when we come back we will t, a nd make it up at dinnertime." They were soon ready, and the ave bread and milk for br eak fas t, a s early, and they went through back streets , so few people le saw the m, and no one laughed at the queer pa rty. A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken wind ows, 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. H ow the big eyes stared and the blue lips smile d 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 s piri ts had been at work t here. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fi re, and stopped up the broken panes with old hats and her own cloak. Mrs. Mar ch g ave the mother tea and gruel, and comforted her with promises of help, while she dressed the little baby as tenderly as if it had been her own. The girls meant time spread the table, set the children round the fire, and fed them like so many hungry birds, laughing, talking, and trying to understand the funny broken English. "Das ist gut!" "Die Engel-kinder!" cried the poor thing as the