LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

# JO'S BOYS

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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*‘My dear girls, stop your mud-pies and hear the news!’*

Ten years after *Little Men*, the boys that Jo raised are all grown-up. But that certainly doesn’t mean that they no longer need her help and advice. Emil, now as sailor, must survive shipwreck and disaster. Dan’s attempt to make his fortune ends in prison. Nat’s career in music takes him to Europe, to a life of frivolity and a tricky romantic muddle. But returning to Plumfield to tell their tales, they are, and will always be, Jo’s boys.

Includes exclusive content: In the ‘Backstory’ you can discover the story behind the *Little Women* series and take the *Jo’s Boys* quiz

# About the Author

Louisa May Alcott was born on 29 November 1832 in Pennsylvania. Her father was friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. Alcott started selling stories in order to help provide financial support for her family. Her first book was *Flower Fables* (1854). She worked as a nurse during the American Civil War and in 1863 she published *Hospital Sketches*, which was based on her experiences. *Little Women* was published in 1868 and was based on her life growing up with her three sisters. She followed it with three sequels, *Good Wives* (1869), *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886) and she also wrote other books for both children and adults. Louisa May Alcott was an abolitionist and a campaigner for women's rights. She died on 6 March 1888.

OTHER BOOKS BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

*Little Women*
*Good Wives*
*Little Men*

Louisa May Alcott

# *JO'S BOYS*

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

# 1

## *Ten Years Later*

‘IF ANYONE HAD told me what wonderful changes were to take place here in ten years, I wouldn’t have believed it,’ said Mrs Jo to Mrs Meg, as they sat on the piazza at Plumfield one summer day, looking about them with faces full of pride and pleasure.

‘This is the sort of magic that money and kind hearts can work. I am sure Mr Laurence could have no nobler monument than the college he so generously endowed; and a home like this will keep Aunt March’s memory green as long as it lasts,’ answered Mrs Meg, always glad to praise the absent.

‘We used to believe in fairies, you remember, and plan what we’d ask for if we could have three wishes. Doesn’t it seem as if mine had been really granted at last? Money, fame, and plenty of the work I love,’ said Mrs Jo, carelessly rumpling up her hair as she clasped her hands over her head just as she used to do when a girl.

‘I have had mine, and Amy is enjoying hers to her heart’s content. If dear Marmee, John, and Beth were here, it

would be quite perfect,’ added Meg, with a tender quiver in her voice; for Marmee’s place was empty now.

Jo put her hand on her sister’s, and both sat silent for a little while, surveying the pleasant scene before them with mingled sad and happy thoughts.

It certainly did look as if magic had been at work, for quiet Plumfield was transformed into a busy little world. The house seemed more hospitable than ever, refreshed now with new paint, added wings, well-kept lawn and garden, and a prosperous air it had not worn when riotous boys swarmed everywhere and it was rather difficult for the Bhaers to make both ends meet. On the hill, where kites used to be flown, stood the fine college which Mr Laurence’s munificent legacy had built. Busy students were going to and fro along the paths once trodden by childish feet, and many young men and women were enjoying all the advantages that wealth, wisdom, and benevolence could give them.

Just inside the gates of Plumfield a pretty brown cottage, very like the Dovecote, nestled among the trees, and on the green slope westward Laurie’s white-pillared mansion glittered in the sunshine; for when the rapid growth of the city shut in the old house, spoilt Meg’s nest, and dared to put a soap-factory under Mr Laurence’s indignant nose, our friends emigrated to Plumfield, and the great changes began.

These were the pleasant ones; and the loss of the dear old people was sweetened by the blessings they left behind; so all prospered now in the little community, and Mr Bhaer as president, and Mr March as chaplain of the college, saw their long-cherished dream beautifully realized. The sisters divided the care of the young people among them, each taking the part that suited her best. Meg was the motherly friend of the young women, Jo the confidante and defender of all the youths, and Amy the lady Bountiful who delicately smoothed the way for needy students, and entertained

them all so cordially that it was no wonder they named her lovely home Mount Parnassus, so full was it of music, beauty, and the culture hungry young hearts and fancies long for.

The original twelve boys had of course scattered far and wide during these years, but all that lived still remembered old Plumfield, and came wandering back from the four quarters of the earth to tell their various experiences, laugh over the pleasures of the past, and face the duties of the present with fresh courage; for such home-comings keep hearts tender and hands helpful with the memories of young and happy days. A few words will tell the history of each, and then we can go on with the new chapter of their lives.

Franz was with a merchant kinsman in Hamburg, a man of twenty-six now, and doing well. Emil was the jolliest tar that ever ‘sailed the ocean blue’. His uncle sent him on a long voyage to disgust him with this adventurous life; but he came home so delighted with it that it was plain this was his profession, and the German kinsman gave him a good chance in his ships; so the lad was happy. Dan was a wanderer still; for after the geological researches in South America he tried sheep-farming in Australia, and was now in California looking up mines. Nat was busy with music at the Conservatory, preparing for a year or two in Germany to finish him off. Tom was studying medicine and trying to like it. Jack was in business with his father, bent on getting rich. Dolly was in college with Stuffy and Ned reading law. Poor little Dick was dead, so was Billy; and no one could mourn for them, since life would never be happy, afflicted as they were in mind and body.

Rob and Teddy were called the ‘Lion and the Lamb’; for the latter was as rampant as the king of beasts, and the former as gentle as any sheep that ever baaed. Mrs Jo called him ‘my daughter’, and found him the most dutiful of children, with plenty of manliness underlying the quiet

manners and tender nature. But in Ted she seemed to see all the faults, whims, aspirations, and fun of her own youth in a new shape. With his tawny locks always in wild confusion, his long legs and arms, loud voice, and continual activity, Ted was a prominent figure at Plumfield. He had his moods of gloom, and fell into the Slough of Despond about once a week, to be hoisted out by patient Rob or his mother, who understood when to let him alone and when to shake him up. He was her pride and joy as well as torment, being a very bright lad for his age, and so full of all sorts of budding talent, that her maternal mind was much exercised as to what this remarkable boy would become.

Demi had gone through college with honour, and Mrs Meg had set her heart on his being a minister – picturing in her fond fancy the first sermon her dignified young parson would preach, as well as the long, useful, and honoured life he was to lead. But John, as she called him now, firmly declined the divinity school, saying he had had enough of books, and needed to know more of men and the world, and caused the dear woman much disappointment by deciding to try a journalist's career. It was a blow; but she knew that young minds cannot be driven, and that experience is the best teacher; so she let him follow his own inclinations, still hoping to see him in the pulpit. Aunt Jo raged when she found that there was to be a reporter in the family, and called him 'Jenkins' on the spot. She liked his literary tendencies, but had reason to detest official Paul Prys, as we shall see later. Demi knew his own mind, however, and tranquilly carried out his plans, unmoved by the tongues of the anxious mammas or the jokes of his mates. Uncle Teddy encouraged him, and painted a splendid career, mentioning Dickens and other celebrities who began as reporters and ended as famous novelists or newspaper men.

The girls were all flourishing. Daisy, as sweet and domestic as ever, was her mother's comfort and companion. Josie at fourteen was a most original young

person, full of pranks and peculiarities, the latest of which was a passion for the stage, which caused her quiet mother and sister much anxiety as well as amusement. Bess had grown into a tall, beautiful girl looking several years older than she was, with the same graceful ways and dainty tastes which the little Princess had, and a rich inheritance of both the father's and mother's gifts, fostered by every aid love and money could give. But the pride of the community was naughty Nan; for, like so many restless, wilful children, she was growing into a woman full of the energy and promise that suddenly blossoms when the ambitious seeker finds the work she is fitted to do well. Nan began to study medicine at sixteen, and at twenty was getting on bravely; for now, thanks to other intelligent women, colleges and hospitals were open to her. She had never wavered in her purpose from the childish days when she shocked Daisy in the old willow by saying: 'I don't want any family to fuss over. I shall have an office, with bottles and pestle things in it, and drive round and cure folks.' The future foretold by the little girl the young woman was rapidly bringing to pass, and finding so much happiness in it that nothing could win her from the chosen work. Several worthy young gentlemen had tried to make her change her mind and choose, as Daisy did, 'a nice little house and family to take care of'. But Nan only laughed, and routed the lovers by proposing to look at the tongue which spoke of adoration, or professionally felt the pulse in the manly hand offered for her acceptance. So all departed but one persistent youth, who was such a devoted Traddles it was impossible to quench him.

This was Tom, who was as faithful to his child sweetheart as she to her 'pestle things', and gave a proof of fidelity that touched her very much. He studied medicine for her sake alone, having no taste for it, and a decided fancy for a mercantile life. But Nan was firm, and Tom stoutly kept on, devoutly hoping he might not kill many of his fellow-beings

when he came to practise. They were excellent friends, however, and caused much amusement to their comrades, by the vicissitudes of this merry love-chase.

Both were approaching Plumfield on the afternoon when Mrs Meg and Mrs Jo were talking on the piazza. Not together; for Nan was walking briskly along the pleasant road alone, thinking over a case that interested her, and Tom was pegging on behind to overtake her, as if by accident, when the suburbs of the city were past – a little way of his, which was part of the joke.

Nan was a handsome girl, with a fresh colour, clear eye, quick smile, and the self-poised look young women with a purpose always have. She was simply and sensibly dressed, walked easily, and seemed full of vigour, with her broad shoulders well back, arms swinging freely, and the elasticity of youth and health in every motion. The few people she met turned to look at her, as if it was a pleasant sight to see a hearty, happy girl walking countryward that lovely day; and the red-faced young man steaming along behind, hat off and every tight curl wagging with impatience, evidently agreed with them.

Presently a mild ‘Hallo!’ was borne upon the breeze, and pausing, with an effort to look surprised that was an utter failure, Nan said affably:

‘Oh, is that you, Tom?’

‘Looks like it. Thought you might be walking out today’; and Tom’s jovial face beamed with pleasure.

‘You knew it. How is your throat?’ asked Nan in her professional tone, which was always a quencher to undue raptures.

‘Throat? Oh, ah! yes, I remember. It is well. The effect of that prescription was wonderful. I’ll never call homoeopathy a humbug again.’

‘You were the humbug this time, and so were the unmedicated pellets I gave you. If sugar or milk can cure

diphtheria in this remarkable manner, I'll make a note of it. O Tom, Tom, will you never be done playing tricks?'

'O Nan, Nan, will you never be done getting the better of me?' And the merry pair laughed at one another just as they did in the old times, which always came back freshly when they went to Plumfield.

'Well, I knew I shouldn't see you for a week if I didn't scare up some excuse for a call at the office. You are so desperately busy all the time I never get a word,' explained Tom.

'You ought to be busy too, and above such nonsense. Really, Tom, if you don't give your mind to your lectures, you'll never get on,' said Nan soberly.

'I have quite enough of them as it is,' answered Tom with an air of disgust. 'A fellow must lark a bit after dissecting corpuses all day. I can't stand it long at a time, though *some people* seem to enjoy it immensely.'

'Then why not leave it, and do what suits you better? I always thought it a foolish thing, you know,' said Nan, with a trace of anxiety in the keen eyes that searched for signs of illness in a face as ruddy as a Baldwin apple.

'You know why I chose it, and why I shall stick to it if it kills me. I may not *look* delicate, but I've a deep-seated heart complaint, and it will carry me off sooner or later; for only one doctor in the world can cure it, and she won't.'

There was an air of pensive resignation about Tom that was both comic and pathetic; for he was in earnest, and kept on giving hints of this sort, without the least encouragement.

Nan frowned; but she was used to it, and knew how to treat him.

'She *is* curing it in the best and only way; but a more refractory patient never lived. Did you go to that ball, as I directed?'

'I did.'

'And devote yourself to pretty Miss West?'

‘Danced with her the whole evening.’

‘No impression made on that susceptible organ of yours?’

‘Not the slightest. I gaped in her face once, forgot to feed her, and gave a sigh of relief when I handed her over to her mamma.’

‘Repeat the dose as often as possible, and note the symptoms. I predict that you’ll “cry for it” by and by.’

‘Never! I’m sure it doesn’t suit my constitution.’

‘We shall see. Obey orders!’ sternly.

‘Yes, Doctor,’ meekly.

Silence reigned for a moment; then, as if the bone of contention was forgotten in the pleasant recollections called up by familiar objects, Nan said suddenly:

‘What fun we used to have in that wood! Do you remember how you tumbled out of the big nut-tree and nearly broke your collar-bones?’

‘Don’t I! and how you steeped me in wormwood till I was a fine mahogany colour, and Aunt Jo wailed over my spoilt jacket,’ laughed Tom, a boy again in a minute.

‘And how you set the house afire?’

‘And you ran off for your band-box?’

‘Do you ever say “Thunder-turtles” now?’

‘Do people ever call you “Giddy-gaddy”?’

‘Daisy does. Dear thing, I haven’t seen her for a week.’

‘I saw Demi this morning, and he said she was keeping house for Mother Bhaer.’

‘She always does when Aunt Jo gets into a vortex. Daisy is a model housekeeper; and you couldn’t do better than make your bow to her, if you can’t go to work and wait till you are grown up before you begin lovering.’

‘Nat would break his fiddle over my head if I suggested such a thing. No, thank you. Another name is engraved upon my heart as indelibly as the blue anchor on my arm. “Hope” is my motto, and “No surrender”, yours; see who will hold out longest.’

‘You silly boys think we must pair off as we did when children; but we shall do nothing of the kind. How well Parnassus looks from here!’ said Nan, abruptly changing the conversation again.

‘It is a fine house; but I love old Plum best. Wouldn’t Aunt March stare if she could see the changes here?’ answered Tom, as they both paused at the great gate to look at the pleasant landscape before them.

A sudden whoop startled them, as a long boy with a wild yellow head came leaping over a hedge like a kangaroo, followed by a slender girl, who stuck in the hawthorn, and sat there laughing like a witch. A pretty little lass she was, with curly dark hair, bright eyes, and a very expressive face. Her hat was at her back, and her skirts a good deal the worse for the brooks she had crossed, the trees she had climbed, and the last leap, which added several fine rents.

‘Take me down, Nan, please. Tom, hold Ted; he’s got my book, and I *will* have it,’ called Josie from her perch, not at all daunted by the appearance of her friends.

Tom promptly collared the thief, while Nan picked Josie from among the thorns and set her on her feet without a word of reproof; for having been a romp in her own girlhood, she was very indulgent to like tastes in others. ‘What’s the matter, dear?’ she asked, pinning up the longest rip, while Josie examined the scratches on her hands.

‘I was studying my part in the willow, and Ted came slyly up and poked the book out of my hands with his rod. It fell in the brook, and before I could scrabble down he was off. You wretch, give it back this moment or I’ll box your ears,’ cried Josie, laughing and scolding in the same breath.

Escaping from Tom, Ted struck a sentimental attitude, and with tender glances at the wet, torn young person before him, delivered Claude Melnotte’s famous speech in a lackadaisical way that was irresistibly funny, ending with ‘Dost like the picture, love?’ as he made an object of

himself by tying his long legs in a knot and distorting his face horribly.

The sound of applause from the piazza put a stop to these antics, and the young folks went up the avenue together very much in the old style when Tom drove four in hand and Nan was the best horse in the team. Rosy, breathless, and merry, they greeted the ladies and sat down on the steps to rest, Aunt Meg sewing up her daughter's rags while Mrs Jo smoothed the Lion's mane, and rescued the book. Daisy appeared in a moment to greet her friend, and all began to talk.

'Muffins for tea; better stay and eat 'em; Daisy's never fail,' said Ted hospitably.

'He's a judge; he ate nine last time. That's why he's so fat,' added Josie, with a withering glance at her cousin, who was as thin as a lath.

'I must go and see Lucy Dove. She has a whitlow, and it's time to lance it. I'll tea at college,' answered Nan, feeling in her pocket to be sure she had not forgotten her case of instruments.

'Thanks, I'm going there also. Tom Merryweather has granulated lids, and I promised to touch them up for him. Save a doctor's fee and be good practice for me. I'm clumsy with my thumbs,' said Tom, bound to be near his idol while he could.

'Hush! Daisy doesn't like to hear you saw-bones talk of your work. Muffins suit us better'; and Ted grinned sweetly, with a view to future favours in the eating line.

'Any news of the Commodore?' asked Tom.

'He is on his way home, and Dan hopes to come soon. I long to see my boys together, and have begged the wanderers to come to Thanksgiving, if not before,' answered Mrs Jo, beaming at the thought.

'They'll come, every man of them, if they can. Even Jack will risk losing a dollar for the sake of one of our jolly old dinners,' laughed Tom.

‘There’s the turkey fattening for the feast. I never chase him now, but feed him well; and he’s “swellin’ wisibly”, bless his drumsticks!’ said Ted, pointing out the doomed fowl proudly parading in a neighbouring field. ‘If Nat goes the last of the month we shall want a farewell frolic for him. I suppose the dear old Chirper will come home a second Ole Bull,’ said Nan to her friend.

A pretty colour came into Daisy’s cheek, and the folds of muslin on her breast rose and fell with a quick breath; but she answered placidly: ‘Uncle Laurie says he has *real* talent, and after the training he will get abroad he can command a good living here, though he may never be famous.’

‘Young people seldom turn out as one predicts, so it is of little use to expect anything,’ said Mrs Meg with a sigh. ‘If our children are good and useful men and women, we should be satisfied; yet it’s very natural to wish them to be brilliant and successful.’

‘They are like my chickens, mighty uncertain. Now, that fine-looking cockerel of mine is the stupidest one of the lot, and the ugly, long-legged chap is the king of the yard, he’s so smart; crows loud enough to wake the Seven Sleepers; but the handsome one croaks, and is no end of a coward. *I* get snubbed; but you wait till I grow up, and then see’; and Ted looked so like his own long-legged pet that everyone laughed at his modest prediction.

‘I want to see Dan settled somewhere. “A rolling stone gathers no moss”, and at twenty-five he is still roaming about the world without a tie to hold him, except this’; and Mrs Meg nodded towards her sister.

‘Dan will find his place at last, and experience is his best teacher. He is rough still, but each time he comes home I see a change for the better, and never lose my faith in him. He may never do anything great, or get rich; but if the wild boy makes an honest man, I’m satisfied,’ said Mrs Jo, who always defended the black sheep of her flock.

‘That’s right, mother, stand by Dan! He’s worth a dozen Jacks and Neds bragging about money and trying to be swells. You see if he doesn’t do something to be proud of and take the wind out of their sails,’ added Ted, whose love for his ‘Danny’ was now strengthened by a boy’s admiration for the bold, adventurous man.

‘Hope so, I’m sure. He’s just the fellow to do rash things and come to glory – climbing the Matterhorn, taking a “header” into Niagara, or finding a big nugget. That’s his way of sowing wild oats, and perhaps it’s better than ours,’ said Tom thoughtfully; for he had gained a good deal of experience in that sort of agriculture since he became a medical student.

‘Much better!’ said Mrs Jo emphatically. ‘I’d rather send my boys off to see the world in that way than leave them alone in a city full of temptations, with nothing to do but waste time, money, and health, as so many are left. Dan has to work his way, and that teaches him courage, patience, and self-reliance. I don’t worry about him as much as I do about George and Dolly at college, no more fit than two babies to take care of themselves.’

‘How about John? He’s knocking round town as a newspaper man, reporting all sorts of things, from sermons to prize-fights,’ asked Tom, who thought that sort of life would be much more to his own taste than medical lectures and hospital wards.

‘Demi has three safeguards – good principles, refined tastes, and a wise mother. He won’t come to harm, and these experiences will be useful to him when he begins to write, as I’m sure he will in time,’ began Mrs Jo in her prophetic tone; for she was anxious to have some of her geese turn out swans.

‘Speak of Jenkins, and you’ll hear the rustling of his paper,’ cried Tom, as a fresh-faced, brown-eyed young man came up the avenue, waving a newspaper over his head.

‘Here’s your *Evening Tattler*! Latest Edition! Awful murder! Bank clerk absconded! Powder-mill explosion, and great strike of the Latin School boys!’ roared Ted, going to meet his cousin with the graceful gait of a young giraffe.

‘The Commodore is in, and will cut his cable and run before the wind as soon as he can get off,’ called Demi, with ‘a nice derangement of nautical epitaphs’, as he came up smiling over his good news.

Everyone talked together for a moment, and the paper passed from hand to hand that each eye might rest on the pleasant fact that the *Brenda*, from Hamburg, was safe in port.

‘He’ll come lurching out by tomorrow with his usual collection of marine monsters and lively yarns. I saw him, jolly and tarry and brown as a coffee-berry. Had a good run, and hopes to be second mate, as the other chap is laid up with a broken leg,’ added Demi.

‘Wish I had the setting of it,’ said Nan to herself, with a professional twist of her hand.

‘How’s Franz?’ asked Mrs Jo.

‘He’s going to be married! There’s news for you. The first of the flock, Aunty, so say good-bye to him. Her name is Ludmilla Heldegard Blumenthal; good family, well-off, pretty, and of course an angel. The dear old boy wants Uncle’s consent, and then he will settle down to be a happy and an honest burgher. Long life to him!’

‘I’m glad to hear it. I do so like to settle my boys with a good wife and a nice little home. Now, if all is right, I shall feel as if Franz was off my mind,’ said Mrs Jo, folding her hands contentedly; for she often felt like a distracted hen with a large brood of mixed chickens and ducks upon her hands.

‘So do I,’ sighed Tom, with a sly glance at Nan. ‘That’s what a fellow needs to keep him steady; and it’s the duty of nice girls to marry as soon as possible, isn’t it, Demi?’

‘If there are enough nice fellows to go round. The female population exceeds the male, you know, especially in New England; which accounts for the high state of culture we are in, perhaps,’ answered John, who was leaning over his mother’s chair, telling his day’s experiences in a whisper.

‘It is a merciful provision, my dears; for it takes three or four women to get each man into, through, and out of the world. You are costly creatures, boys; and it is well that mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters love their duty and do it so well, or you would perish off the face of the earth,’ said Mrs Jo solemnly, as she took up a basket filled with dilapidated hose; for the good Professor was still hard on his socks, and his sons resembled him in that respect.

‘Such being the case, there is plenty for the “superfluous women” to do, in taking care of these helpless men and their families. I see that more clearly every day, and am very glad and grateful that my profession will make me a useful, happy, and independent spinster.’

Nan’s emphasis on the last word caused Tom to groan, and the rest to laugh.

‘I take great pride and solid satisfaction in you, Nan, and hope to see you very successful; for we do need just such helpful women in the world. I sometimes feel as if I’ve missed my vocation and ought to have remained single; but my duty seemed to point this way, and I don’t regret it,’ said Mrs Jo, folding a large and very ragged blue sock to her bosom.

‘Neither do I. What should I ever have done without my dearest Mum?’ added Ted, with a filial hug which caused both to disappear behind the newspaper in which he had been mercifully absorbed for a few minutes.

‘My darling boy, if you would wash your hands semi-occasionally, fond caresses would be less disastrous to my collar. Never mind, my precious touslehead, better grass stains and dirt than no cuddlings at all’; and Mrs Jo emerged from that brief eclipse looking much refreshed,

though her back hair was caught in Ted's buttons and her collar under one ear.

Here Josie, who had been studying her part at the other end of the piazza, suddenly burst forth with a smothered shriek, and gave Juliet's speech in the tomb so effectively that the boys applauded, Daisy shivered, and Nan murmured: 'Too much cerebral excitement for one of her age.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to make up your mind to it, Meg. That child is a born actress. We never did anything so well, not even the *Witch's Curse*,' said Mrs Jo, casting a bouquet of many-coloured socks at the feet of her flushed and panting niece, when she fell gracefully upon the door-mat.

'It is a sort of judgement upon me for my passion for the stage when a girl. Now I know how dear Marmee felt when I begged to be an actress. I never can consent, and yet I may be obliged to give up my wishes, hopes, and plans again.'

There was an accent of reproach in his mother's voice, which made Demi pick up his sister with a gentle shake, and the stern command to 'drop that nonsense in public'.

'Drop me, Minion, or I'll give you the *Maniac Bride*, with my best *Ha-ha!*' cried Josie, glaring at him like an offended kitten.

Being set on her feet, she made a splendid courtesy, and dramatically proclaiming, 'Mrs Woffington's carriage waits,' swept down the steps and round the corner, trailing Daisy's scarlet shawl majestically behind her.

'Isn't she great fun? I couldn't stop in this dull place if I hadn't that child to make it lively for me. If ever she turns prim, I'm off; so mind how you nip her in the bud,' said Teddy, frowning at Demi, who was now writing out shorthand notes on the steps.

'You two are a team, and it takes a strong hand to drive you, but I rather like it. Josie ought to have been my child, and Rob yours, Meg. Then your house would have been all

peace and mine all Bedlam. Now I must go and tell Laurie the news. Come with me, Meg, a little stroll will do us good’; and sticking Ted’s straw hat on her head, Mrs Jo walked off with her sister, leaving Daisy to attend to the muffins, Ted to appease Josie, and Tom and Nan to give their respective patients a very bad quarter of an hour.

# 2

## *Parnassus*

IT WAS WELL named; and the Muses seemed to be at home that day, for as the newcomers went up the slope appropriate sights and sounds greeted them. Passing an open window, they looked in upon a library presided over by Clio, Calliope, and Urania; Melpomene and Thalia were disporting themselves in the hall, where some young people were dancing and rehearsing a play; Erato was walking in the garden with her lover, and in the music-room Phoebus himself was drilling a tuneful choir.

A mature Apollo was our old friend Laurie, but comely and genial as ever; for time had ripened the freakish boy into a noble man. Care and sorrow, as well as ease and happiness, had done much for him; and the responsibility of carrying out his grandfather's wishes had been a duty most faithfully performed. Prosperity suits some people, and they blossom best in a glow of sunshine; others need the shade, and are the sweeter for a touch of frost. Laurie was one of the former sort, and Amy was another; so life had been a kind of poem to them since they married – not only harmonious and happy, but earnest, useful, and rich in the beautiful benevolence which can do so much when wealth and wisdom go hand in hand with charity.

Their house was full of unostentatious beauty and comfort, and here the art-loving host and hostess attracted and entertained artists of all kinds. Laurie had music enough now, and was a generous patron to the class he most liked to help. Amy had her protégés among ambitious

young painters and sculptors, and found her own art double dear as her daughter grew old enough to share its labours and delights with her; for she was one of those who prove that women can be faithful wives and mothers without sacrificing the special gift bestowed upon them for their own development and the good of others.

Her sisters knew where to find her, and Jo went at once to the studio, where mother and daughter worked together. Bess was busy with the bust of a little child, while her mother added the last touches to a fine head of her husband. Time seemed to have stood still with Amy, for happiness had kept her young and prosperity given her the culture she needed. A stately, graceful woman, who showed how elegant simplicity could be made by the taste with which she chose her dress and the grace with which she wore it. As someone said: ‘I never know what Mrs Laurence has on, but I always receive the impression that she is the best-dressed lady in the room.’

It was evident that she adored her daughter, and well she might; for the beauty she had longed for seemed, to her fond eyes at least, to be impersonated in this younger self. Bess inherited her mother’s Diana-like figure, blue eyes, fair skin, and golden hair, tied up in the same classic knot of curls. Also – ah! never-ending source of joy to Amy – she had her father’s handsome nose and mouth, cast in a feminine mould. The severe simplicity of a long linen pinafore suited her; and she worked away with the entire absorption of the true artist, unconscious of the loving eyes upon her, till Aunt Jo came in exclaiming eagerly:

‘My dear girls, stop your mud-pies and hear the news!’

Both artists dropped their tools and greeted the irrepressible woman cordially, though genius had been burning splendidly and her coming spoilt a precious hour. They were in the full tide of gossip when Laurie, who had been summoned by Meg, arrived, and sitting down between

the sisters, with no barricade anywhere, listened with interest to the news of Franz and Emil.

‘The epidemic has broke out, and now it will rage and ravage your flock. Be prepared for every sort of romance and rashness for the next ten years, Jo. Your boys are growing up and will plunge headlong into a sea of worse scrapes than any you have had yet,’ said Laurie, enjoying her look of mingled delight and despair.

‘I know it, and I hope I shall be able to pull them through and land them safely; but it’s an awful responsibility, for they *will* come to me and insist that I can make their poor little loves run smoothly. I like it, though, and Meg is such a mush of sentiment she revels in the prospect,’ answered Jo, feeling pretty easy about her own boys, whose youth made them safe for the present.

‘I’m afraid she won’t revel when our Nat begins to buzz too near her Daisy. Of course you see what all that means? As musical director I am also his confidant, and would like to know what advice to give,’ said Laurie soberly.

‘Hush! you forget that child,’ began Jo, nodding towards Bess, who was at work again.

‘Bless you! she’s in Athens, and doesn’t hear a word. She ought to leave off, though, and go out. My darling, put the baby to sleep, and go for a run. Aunt Meg is in the parlour; go and show her the new pictures till we come,’ added Laurie, looking at his tall girl as Pygmalion might have looked at Galatea; for he considered her the finest statue in the house.

‘Yes, papa; but please tell me if it is good’; and Bess obediently put down her tools, with a lingering glance at the bust.

‘My cherished daughter, truth compels me to confess that one cheek is plumper than the other; and the curls upon its infant brow are rather too much like horns for perfect grace; otherwise it rivals Raphael’s Chanting Cherubs, and I’m proud of it.’

Laurie was laughing as he spoke; for these first attempts were so like Amy's early ones, it was impossible to regard them as soberly as the enthusiastic mamma did.

'You can't see beauty in anything but music,' answered Bess, shaking the golden head that made the one bright spot in the cool north lights of the great studio.

'Well, I see beauty in you, dear. And if you are not art, what is? I wish to put a little more nature into you, and get you away from this cold clay and marble into the sunshine, to dance and laugh as the others do. I want a flesh-and-blood girl, not a sweet statue in a grey pinafore, who forgets everything but her work.'

As he spoke two dusty hands came round his neck, and Bess said earnestly, punctuating her words with soft touches of her lips:

'I never forget *you*, papa; but I do want to do something beautiful that you may be proud of me by and by. Mamma often tells me to stop; but when we get in here we forget there is any world outside, we are so busy and so happy. Now I'll go and run and sing, and be a girl to please you.' And throwing away the apron, Bess vanished from the room, seeming to take all the light with her.

'I'm glad you said that. The dear child is too much absorbed in her artistic dreams for one so young. It is my fault; but I sympathize so deeply in it all, I forget to be wise,' sighed Amy, carefully covering the baby with a wet towel.

'I think this power of living in our children is one of the sweetest things in the world; but I try to remember what Marmee once said to Meg – that fathers should have their share in the education of both girls and boys; so I leave Ted to his father all I can, and Fritz lends me Rob, whose quiet ways are as restful and good for me as Ted's tempests are for his father. Now I advise you, Amy, to let Bess drop the mud-pies for a time, and take up music with Laurie; then she won't be one-sided, and he won't be jealous.'

‘Hear, hear! A Daniel – a very Daniel!’ cried Laurie, well pleased. ‘I thought you’d lend a hand, Jo, and say a word for me. I *am* a little jealous of Amy, and want more of a share in my girl. Come, my lady, let me have her this summer, and next year, when we go to Rome, I’ll give her up to you and high art. Isn’t that a fair bargain?’

‘I agree; but in trying your hobby, nature, with music thrown in, don’t forget that, though only fifteen, our Bess is older than most girls of that age, and cannot be treated like a child. She is so very precious to me, I feel as if I wanted to keep her always as pure and beautiful as the marble she loves so well.’

Amy spoke regretfully as she looked about the lovely room where she had spent so many happy hours with this dear child of hers.

‘“Turn and turn about is fair play”, as we used to say when we all wanted to ride on Ellen Tree or wear the russet boots,’ said Jo briskly; ‘so you must share your girl between you, and see who will do the most for her.’

‘We will,’ answered the fond parents, laughing at the recollections Jo’s proverb brought up to them.

‘How I did use to enjoy bouncing on the limbs of that old apple-tree! No real horse ever gave me half the pleasure or the exercise,’ said Amy, looking out of the high window as if she saw the dear old orchard again and the little girls at play there.

‘And what fun I had with those blessed boots!’ laughed Jo. ‘I’ve got the relics now. The boys reduced them to rags; but I love them still, and would enjoy a good theatrical stalk in them if it were possible.’

‘My fondest memories twine about the warming-pan and the sausage. What larks we had! And how long ago it seems!’ said Laurie, staring at the two women before him as if he found it hard to realize that they ever had been little Amy and riotous Jo.

‘Don’t suggest that we are growing old, my Lord. We have only bloomed; and a very nice bouquet we make with our buds about us,’ answered Mrs Amy, shaking out the folds of her rosy muslin with much the air of dainty satisfaction the girl used to show in a new dress.

‘Not to mention our thorns and dead leaves,’ added Jo, with a sigh; for life had never been very easy to her, and even now she had her troubles both within and without.

‘Come and have a dish of tea, old dear, and see what the young folks are about. You are tired, and want to be “stayed with flagons and comforted with apples”,’ said Laurie, offering an arm to each sister, and leading them away to afternoon tea, which flowed as freely on Parnassus as the nectar of old.

They found Meg in the summer-parlour, an airy and delightful room, full now of afternoon sunshine and the rustle of trees; for the three long windows opened on the garden. The great music-room was at one end, and at the other, in a deep alcove hung with purple curtains, a little household shrine had been made. Three portraits hung there, two marble busts stood in the corners, and a couch, an oval table, with its urn of flowers, were the only articles of furniture the nook contained. The busts were John Brooke and Beth – Amy’s work – both excellent likenesses, and both full of the placid beauty which always recalls the saying, that ‘Clay represents life; plaster, death; marble, immortality’. On the right, as became the founder of the house, hung the portrait of Mr Laurence, with its expression of mingled pride and benevolence, as fresh and attractive as when he caught the girl Jo admiring it. Opposite was Aunt March – a legacy to Amy – in an imposing turban, immense sleeves, and long mittens decorously crossed on the front of her plum-coloured satin gown. Time had mellowed the severity of her aspect; and the fixed regard of the handsome old gentleman opposite

seemed to account for the amiable simper on lips that had not uttered a sharp word for years.

In the place of honour, with the sunshine warm upon it, and a green garland always round it, was Marmee's beloved face, painted with grateful skill by a great artist whom she had befriended when poor and unknown. So beautifully lifelike was it that it seemed to smile down upon her daughters, saying cheerfully: 'Be happy; I am with you still.'

The three sisters stood a moment looking up at the beloved picture with eyes full of tender reverence and the longing that never left them; for this noble mother had been so much to them that no one could ever fill her place. Only two years since she had gone away to live and love anew, leaving such a sweet memory behind her that it was both an inspiration and a comforter to all the household. They felt this as they drew closer to one another, and Laurie put it into words as he said earnestly:

'I can ask nothing better for my child than that she may be a woman like our mother. Please God, she shall be, if I can do it; for I owe the best I have to this dear saint.'

Just then a fresh voice began to sing 'Ave Maria' in the music-room, and Bess unconsciously echoed her father's prayer for her as she dutifully obeyed his wishes. The soft sound of the air Marmee used to sing led the listeners back into the world again from that momentary reaching after the loved and lost, and they sat down together near the open windows enjoying the music, while Laurie brought them tea, making the little service pleasant by the tender care he gave to it.

Nat came in with Demi, soon followed by Ted and Josie, the Professor and his faithful Rob, all anxious to hear more about 'the boys'. The rattle of cups and tongues grew brisk, and the setting sun saw a cheerful company resting in the bright room after the varied labours of the day.

Professor Bhaer was grey now, but robust and genial as ever; for he had the work he loved, and did it so heartily that the whole college felt his beautiful influence. Rob was as much like him as it was possible for a boy to be, and was already called the 'young Professor', he so adored study and closely imitated his honoured father in all ways.

'Well, heart's dearest, we go to have our boys again, all two, and may rejoice greatly,' said Mr Bhaer, seating himself beside Jo with a beaming face and a handshake of congratulation.

'Oh, Fritz, I'm so delighted about Emil, and if you approve about Franz also. Did you know Ludmilla? Is it a wise match?' asked Mrs Jo, handing him her cup of tea and drawing closer, as if she welcomed her refuge in joy as well as sorrow.

'It all goes well. I saw the *Mädchen* when I went over to place Franz. A child then, but most sweet and charming. Blumenthal is satisfied, I think, and the boy will be happy. He is too German to be content away from Vaterland, so we shall have him as a link between the new and the old, and that pleases me much.'

'And Emil, he is to be second mate next voyage; isn't that fine? I'm so happy that both *your* boys have done well; you gave up so much for them and their mother. You make light of it, dear, but I never forget it,' said Jo, with her hand in his as sentimentally as if she was a girl again and her Fritz had come awooing.

He laughed his cheery laugh, and whispered behind her fan: 'If I had not come to America for the poor lads, I never should have found my Jo. The hard times are very sweet now, and I bless Gott for all I seemed to lose, because I gained the blessing of my life.'

'Spooning! spooning! Here's an awful flirtation on the sly,' cried Teddy, peering over the fan just at that interesting moment, much to his mother's confusion and his father's amusement; for the Professor never was