

Little Women

Louisa May **Alcott**



AUDIO CD

Chapter 1

Merry Christmas

It was almost Christmas. Four girls sat by the fire in their living room. There was a lot of snow outside.

"Christmas won't be Christmas without presents," said Jo. "It's terrible to be poor!" said Meg.

"Some girls have a lot of pretty things, but we don't have many," said Amy.

"But we have mother and father, and this nice, warm home," said Beth.

"Father isn't here now," said Jo. "And who knows when he'll return." Their father was away with the Union Army.

Margaret, or Meg, was sixteen years old and very pretty. She had light brown hair and big brown eyes. She liked pretty clothes. Josephine, or Jo, was fifteen, and she was tall and thin. She had gray eyes and long dark hair. She liked climbing trees and doing things that boys do. Elizabeth, or Beth, was thirteen, and had brown hair and kind blue eyes. She was gentle and very timid, and loved playing the piano. Amy was only twelve. She was lively and happy. She felt important and thought she was very pretty, with her blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Mother will soon be home. Oh poor Mother, it's snowing outside," said Beth.

"Let's put her slippers near the fire," said Jo. She looked at them. "These slippers are very old."

"I can get her some new slippers with my dollar," said Beth. This Christmas the sisters had only one dollar each to spend.

"No, *I* can!" said Meg.

"No, *I* am going to buy the slippers for mother," said Jo loudly.

"Oh, girls," said Beth quietly, "Let's each buy mother something, but not anything for ourselves." She always thought about other people.

"Alright," said Meg happily. "I can buy her a pair of gloves."

"And I can buy her some handkerchiefs," said Beth.

"Mother likes perfume," said Amy. "I can buy her a little bottle."

"Let's go out tomorrow and buy mother's Christmas presents," said Beth.

Mrs March came home and took off her wet coat. She sat down near the warm fire and the girls sat near her.

"I have a letter from father!" she said happily. She read it to the girls. Father's letter was cheerful



and full of love for his girls. He told them to work at home and to wait for his return.

"When will he come home, mother?" asked Beth.

"Not for many months," said Mrs March. "He must stay and do his work. And we must work to help all the poor soldiers at war." After dinner the girls made socks and gloves for the soldiers.

The next day was Christmas Eve, and at nine o'clock in the evening Beth played the piano and they sang Christmas carols. Then they went to bed.

Jo got up early on Christmas morning.

"Merry Christmas, everyone!" she said happily.

The four girls dressed quickly and went to the kitchen. Hannah, the family's servant, was already there. There was a special Christmas breakfast for the family on the table.

"Merry Christmas, Hannah. Where's mother?" asked Meg.

"A poor woman came to ask her for some help, so she went to see her," said Hannah.

The girls put their mother's presents in the living room. Just then Mrs March opened the front door.

"Merry Christmas!" they all said together.

"And a Merry Christmas to you," said Mrs March. "Listen, girls, there's a very poor woman near here. She and her family came here from

Germany — they're immigrants. Her name is Mrs Hummel and she has six children and a new baby. They have no fire and no food on Christmas Day. Will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?"

The girls were hungry and looked at the good food on the table.

"I'm glad we didn't start eating," said Jo.

"Oh, yes," said Beth. "We must take it to that poor family."

"I'll take the cakes," said Amy. Cakes were her favorite food, and it was difficult for Amy to give away something she liked.

"I'll prepare a nice basket for them," said Meg.

"Good," said Mrs March. "When we come back we can have some bread and milk."

When they returned home, the sisters gave their mother the presents. She was very happy.

In the evening the four sisters performed a play in the attic. Some friends came to see it too. Everyone had fun and laughed. Jo liked writing stories and plays.

After the play the girls and their friends went downstairs to the kitchen. There were all kinds of delicious food on the table. And there were beautiful flowers too. The girls were very surprised.

"Where did this come from?" asked Amy.



"And the flowers?" asked Jo.

"Mother did it!" said Meg.

"No," said Mrs March, "Old Mr Laurence sent it."

"Mr Laurence and his grandson live alone in that big house and I don't think they have any friends," said one of the girls. "I think the grandson's shy. He stays at home and studies with his tutor."

"I heard that he traveled to Europe," said Amy.

"Old Mr Laurence knows we helped the Hummel family and he was pleased," said Mrs March. "I don't know him, but I think he's a kind gentleman."

Chapter 2

Laurie

Jo! Jo! Where are you?" cried Meg.

"I'm in the attic, Meg," Jo answered. Jo loved reading and the attic was the perfect place because it was quiet. Meg ran upstairs with a letter in her hand. "Look! Mrs Gardiner invited both of us to a New Year's Eve party tomorrow evening!" "That's exciting," said Jo. "But what can we wear?" asked Meg. "Well, I only have one nice dress," said Jo.

"I know, and that's all I have too," said Meg, sadly. "I love beautiful, expensive things. When I'm

eighteen perhaps I can buy myself a beautiful new dress!"

The next afternoon Beth and Amy helped their sisters get ready for the party. Everyone was happy and excited. Soon Meg and Jo were ready to go.

Meg enjoyed the party and danced with some young men. But Jo was bored, and she did not know what to do. She did not like talking to the other girls. She wanted to talk to the boys, but she could not. "A young woman mustn't talk to boys," she thought.

When a young man with red hair came towards her, she quickly decided to move away. She went into a small room and immediately saw another young man inside. He was about seventeen years old and had dark eyes and dark hair.

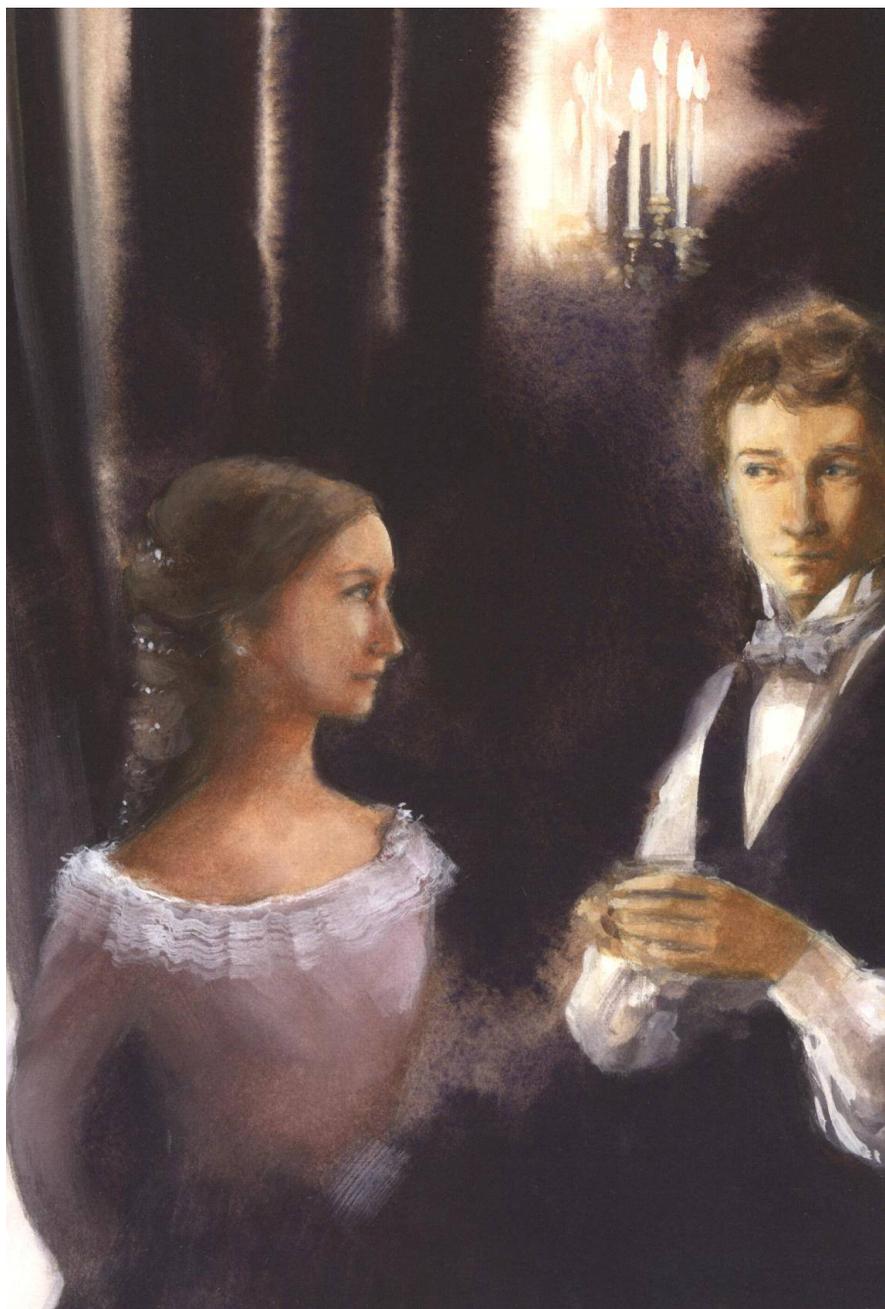
"Oh!" she said. "I didn't know anyone was in here." She turned around and wanted to leave.

The young man laughed. "Please, don't go," he said.

Jo sat down next to him. "You live near us, don't you?"

"I live next door with my grandfather," said the boy. "My name's Theodore Laurence, but my friends call me Laurie."

"My name's Josephine, but everyone calls me Jo. I don't like the name Josephine."



They started talking about Laurie's journeys to France and Italy, and a lot of other interesting things.

Suddenly Meg came into the small room.

"Oh, Jo, these shoes are small! My feet hurt!" said Meg. "Now I can't dance and I can't walk home."

"Your shoes are always small," said Jo. "How can we get home?"

"You can use my grandfather's carriage," said Laurie. "I can take you."

Jo and Meg thanked him and they went home in the carriage. When they arrived home they heard their sisters saying, "Tell us about the party! Tell us about the party, please!"

After the Christmas and New Year festivities the girls returned to their usual lives. Meg worked for the King family. They were rich and lived in a lovely home. She was a tutor for their four children. She did not like it very much, but she wanted to help her family. She remembered when the March family was rich. Her father lost a lot of money when he tried to help a friend.

Jo worked for old Aunt March. She was Mr March's sister. She was a rich, difficult woman. Jo read to her and looked after her pets: a fat dog and an old parrot. She helped with the housework, too.

Amy went to school and wanted to be a famous painter. But Beth stayed at home because she was very shy and didn't want to go to school. Before her father went to war, she did her lessons with him. Now she studied by herself. She loved music and often played the piano in the living room. Unfortunately the piano was very old and didn't play very well.

One winter afternoon, Jo was outside in the garden. She could see the Laurence's big house and Laurie was at the window.

"Laurie looks sad and lonely," she thought. She threw a big snowball at his window. He smiled and opened his window.

"Hello Laurie!" she cried. "How are you?"

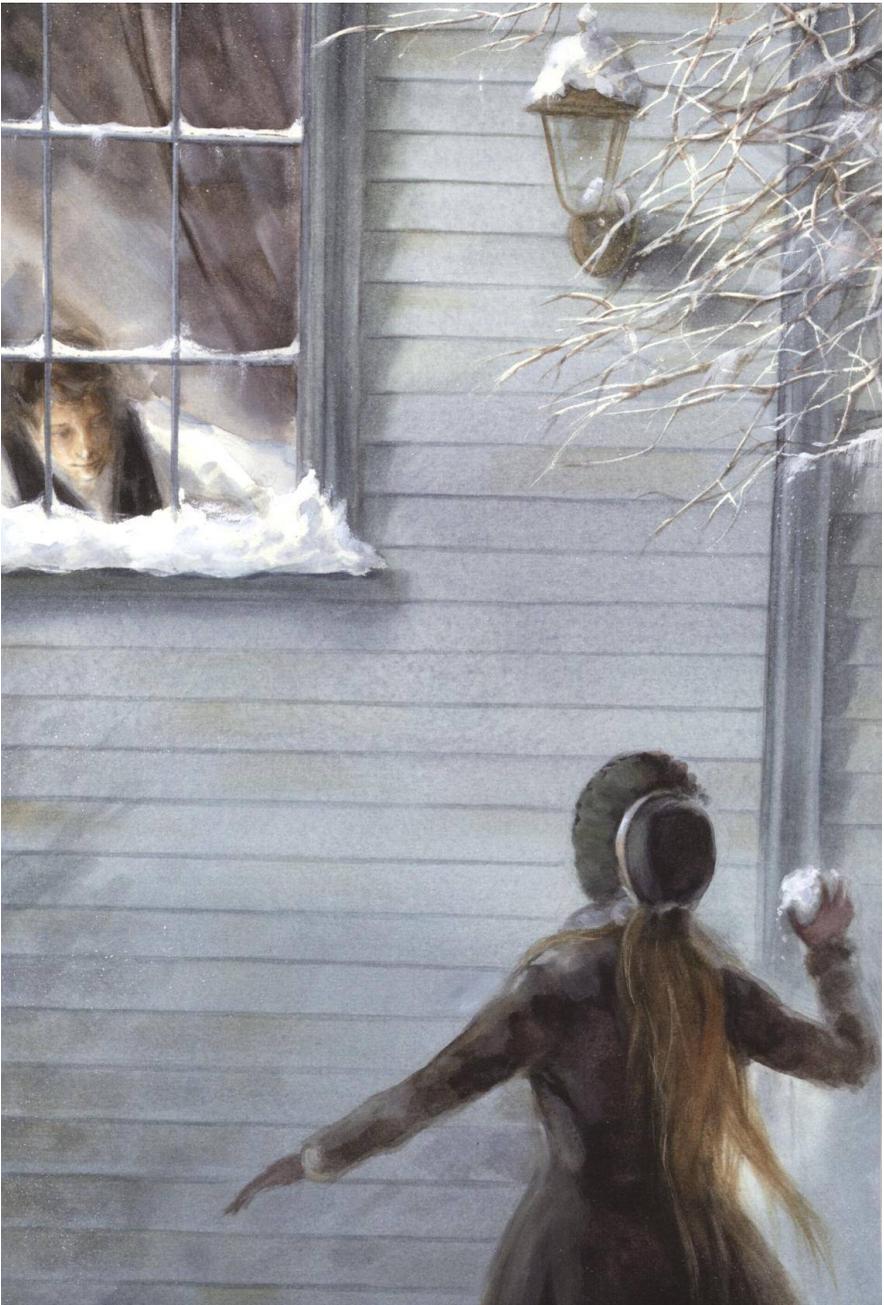
"I was ill, but I'm better now. Can you come and visit me?"

"I must ask mother first." She ran back to her house and a few minutes later she was at Laurie's front door.

"Here I am," she said happily. "Mother sends you her love, and here's some cake from Meg."

Laurie laughed. "You are all very kind. Thank you." They sat in a beautiful living room near a big fire.

"Can I read to you?" asked Jo.



"No, let's talk," Laurie said. "Tell me about your sisters."

Jo and Laurie talked and laughed for a long time. She told him about her sisters and the plays in the attic. She told him about Aunt March's funny dog and old parrot, too. Laurie liked listening to her.

He was a lonely boy. His mother and father were dead. Only his tutor visited him. He did not have any friends and Jo wanted to help him.

"You can come and visit us when you want," said Jo. "You mustn't stay at home all the time. It's bad for you."

"Thanks, Jo, I'll come," said Laurie happily.

They started talking about books and Laurie showed Jo his big library.

"What a wonderful library!" Jo cried. She looked at the books and at the beautiful paintings on the wall.

At that moment a servant came into the library. "The doctor is here to see you, sir."

"Please wait here, Jo," said Laurie. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Jo looked at the painting of Laurence's grandfather on the library wall. "He looks like a kind man," she said. "Some people are afraid of him, but I'm not. I like him."

"Thank you," said a man's voice behind her. Jo was very surprised. It was old Mr Laurence and he smiled at her.

"So you're not afraid of me and you like me," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Jo.

He laughed and invited her to tea with Laurie. He was happy because his grandson finally had a friend.

Chapter 3

The Telegram

Laurie's life changed after meeting the March family. He spent less time with his tutor and more time with his new friends. They had great times together. They played in the snow, went ice-skating and played games.

The March sisters visited the Laurence house very often. Jo liked reading in the big library and Amy liked looking at the beautiful paintings and statues.

Meg liked beautiful, expensive things, so she loved the Laurence house. Only Beth was afraid to go there. She wanted to play the grand piano, but she was afraid of old Mr Laurence.

One day Mr Laurence visited Mrs March. He started talking about music and musicians. Beth listened carefully.

"I have a grand piano that no one plays," said Mr Laurence. "Do your daughters play the piano, Mrs March?"

"Only Beth plays the piano," answered Mrs March, "and she plays it well."

He looked at Beth and smiled. "Do you really play the piano?"

"Yes, I do, sir," said Beth quietly.

"Well, please come and play the piano in my house."

"Oh, thank you, Mr Laurence," said Beth happily.

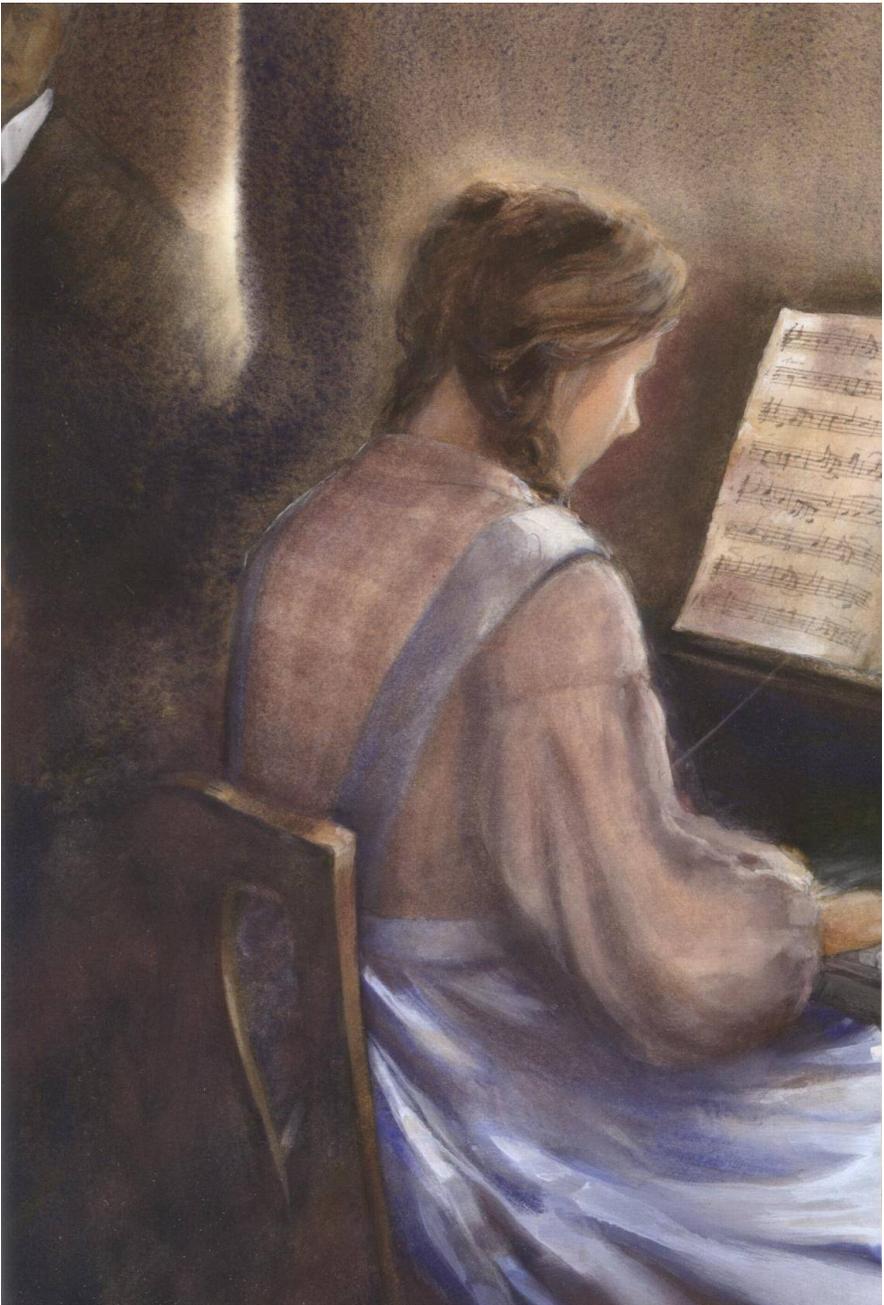
From that day, Beth went to play the piano in the Laurence house every morning. She was very happy. She made Mr Laurence a pair of warm slippers to thank him. Two days later Beth received a letter and a present from Mr Laurence.

She was amazed when she saw a small piano in the living room with a letter on it.

"Is this for me?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes, it's for you!" said Jo. "Now read the letter!"

Beth read the letter.



Dear Miss March,

I am very pleased with my new slippers. They are warm and comfortable. I hope you will enjoy this small piano. It once belonged to my granddaughter.

Yours,

James Laurence

"What a generous gentleman," said Jo.

"Beth has a new friend," said Amy.

"Is this a dream?" asked Meg, and the four sisters laughed.

Beth sat down and played the new piano.

"This piano is perfect!" she said happily.

Summer was a wonderful season for Laurie and the March sisters. They spent a lot of time together outside. They had picnics in the green hills near their town. They talked about their dreams.

Laurie told them about his love for music. His dream was to live in Germany and become a famous musician. But his grandfather wanted him to study at college and then work in the family business.

Meg's dream was to have a lovely house, pretty clothes, a husband and children.

Beth's dream was to stay at home with her mother and father. She wanted to look after the family.

Amy's dream was to go to Rome and paint beautiful pictures. She wanted to become a great artist.

Jo's dream was to have a house full of books. She wanted to become a famous writer.

The summer passed and soon it was October. The days were cold and Jo sat in the attic and wrote stories. One day she took two stories to the newspaper office. Two weeks later the newspaper published her stories.

She brought the newspaper home and read the stories to her sisters. She was excited and everyone was pleased with her.

"Oh, my Jo!" cried Beth. "Now you're a writer!"

"November is a terrible month," said Meg.

It was a cold day. She looked outside the window at the gray sky and the gray garden. "Our lives are always the same. We work and work, and we don't have very much fun."

Beth looked outside the window and smiled. "I see mother and Laurie. They're both coming here."

Mother and Laurie entered the house and went to the living room. A few minutes later Hannah came in with a telegram. She gave it to Mrs March.

After reading it her face turned white and she sat in her chair. Laurie brought her some water. Jo read the telegram to everyone.

Mrs March,
Your husband is very ill.
Come immediately
S. Hale
Blank Hospital, Washington

At first there was a terrible silence in the room. Then the girls started crying. Mrs March read the telegram again. "Your poor father!" she said. "I must go at once." Hannah went to prepare Mrs March's things for the trip.

Chapter 4

Difficult Times

The March family and Laurie were in the living room. They were worried.

"We mustn't cry, girls," said Mrs March. "We must be strong." "How can I help?" said Laurie.

"Please send a telegram to Mr Hale at the hospital," said Mrs March. "Tell him I'll be in Washington tomorrow." "I'll go at once," said Laurie. "What else can I do?" "Please take this short

letter to Aunt March." Laurie took the letter and left.

Then Mrs March wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to Jo.

"Jo, go and buy these things for your father." Jo knew her mother did not have much money.

"Beth, go to Mr Laurence and tell him what happened," said Mrs March. "Meg, come and help me find some clothes for the trip." Everyone worked busily to help Mrs March.

Mr Laurence came back with Beth. He brought some useful things for the girls' father.

"When you're away, Mrs March, I'll look after the girls," said Mr Laurence. "Please don't worry about them."

"You're a true friend. Thank you," said Mrs March.

"I'm happy to help you, Mrs March," said Mr Laurence, smiling.

Mr Brooke, Laurie's tutor, came to see the family.

"Mr Laurence is sending me to Washington on business," he said to Meg. "I'll travel with your mother and help her when she's there."

Meg looked at his kind brown eyes and thanked him. Mrs March was happy to have someone to travel with.



Laurie soon returned with a letter from Aunt March. She did not write kind words, but she sent some money for the journey. Mother put the money in her purse and quickly threw the letter in the fire.

When Jo finally came home she put \$25 in her mother's hand. "This money is for father," she said. "Bring him home soon."

Everyone looked at her in surprise, especially her mother.

"Where did you get this money, Jo?" asked Mrs March.

"I sold my hair!" she cried. She took off her hat and everyone was amazed.

"You cut your hair!" they cried. "Your beautiful hair!"

"Yes," said Jo. "I'm happy I can help father." She looked at her mother's eyes and knew she did the right thing.

Then she looked at her sisters and said, "I always wanted nice, short hair!"

After breakfast the next morning Mrs March said, "Girls, promise me you'll be good. Listen to Hannah and work hard."

"We promise, mother," they said.

Mr Brooke arrived with the carriage, and he and Mrs March left for Washington. The girls were sad but kept their promise. Jo and Meg went to work,



and Beth and Amy stayed at home and helped Hannah.

After a few days they received a letter from their mother. They were happy because the letter had some good news. Mr Brooke wrote every day and his letters were also important to the girls. Every day Mr March was slowly getting better.

The girls tried to be good and work hard, but after a week they were tired of this. Meg, Jo and Amy forgot to do things in the house, so Beth did them. She always tried to help everyone. She also went to see the Hummel family every day.

One afternoon Beth asked, "Meg, can you go and see the Hummel family?"

"I'm too tired, Beth," said Meg.

"Can you go, Jo?" asked Beth.

"But it's raining very hard outside and I have a terrible cold," said Jo.

"Why don't you go, Beth?" asked Meg.

"I go every day, but the baby is ill and I don't know what to do," said Beth. "You or Hannah can help him more."

"Ask Hannah for some medicine and take it to the baby," said Jo.

"Amy will be home soon," said Meg. "She can go."

"Yes, wait for Amy," said Jo.

Beth sat down and waited for Amy but she did not come.

An hour later Beth went to the kitchen. Hannah was asleep by the fire. Beth did not feel well, but she decided to go to the Hummels anyway. She prepared a basket with some good things to eat and left the house.

When she returned she went upstairs to her mother's room. She sat on the bed and Jo found her there.

"What's the matter, Beth?"

Jo started to sit down on the bed, but Beth put out her hand to stop her.

"Jo, did you have scarlet fever a few years ago?"

"Yes, Meg and I had it at the same time. Why?"

"Oh, Jo," said Beth, "the Hummel baby died in my arms. He had scarlet fever and now I think I have it too."

"Beth!" cried Jo. "My poor, dear Beth. Oh, why didn't I go to the Hummels' house this afternoon!"

"Don't worry about me," said Beth. "Amy mustn't come here because she could get it."

"I'm going to call Dr Bangs," said Jo. "Get into bed and rest, Beth."

Dr Bangs came and saw Beth. "Yes, she has scarlet fever, but she's young and strong. She'll get

better. But Amy must leave the house immediately or she'll catch it too."

"Amy can go and stay with Aunt March," said Hannah. But Amy did not want to go.

"I don't like Aunt March!" said Amy. "She's boring and unfriendly. I'm staying here!"

"Oh, Amy," said Jo. "Don't be silly! You can stay with Aunt March for a week or two, and when Beth's better you can come back home."

"Yes," said Meg. "Aunt March will be happy to see you."

"But I won't be happy to see her," said Amy. "I'm not going!"

Meg, Jo and Hannah could not convince her to go. But Laurie did. He promised to visit her every day and take her for a walk or for a ride in the carriage. So Amy went to stay with Aunt March and Jo stayed at home to look after Beth.

Chapter 5

Meg's Glove

Beth did not get better. She was ill with a high fever for weeks. Jo looked after her day and night. Sometimes Beth did not recognize her sisters and asked for her mother. Meg and Jo were worried. They wanted to write to their mother and tell her.

But Hannah said, "No, don't write to her about Beth. Your father is ill too. Beth will get better." These were difficult days for the March girls.

The first day of December was a cold, snowy day. Dr Bangs came to see Beth. He held her hot hand.

"Please tell your mother to come home," he said quietly to Jo and Meg.

Jo's face turned white and Meg could not speak. "I'll go and send mother a telegram at once," said Jo. When she came back home Laurie was there. He had a letter from Mrs March.

"Jo, read this letter from your mother," said Laurie. "Your father is getting better."

Jo read the letter but she was still unhappy.

"What's the matter?" asked Laurie.

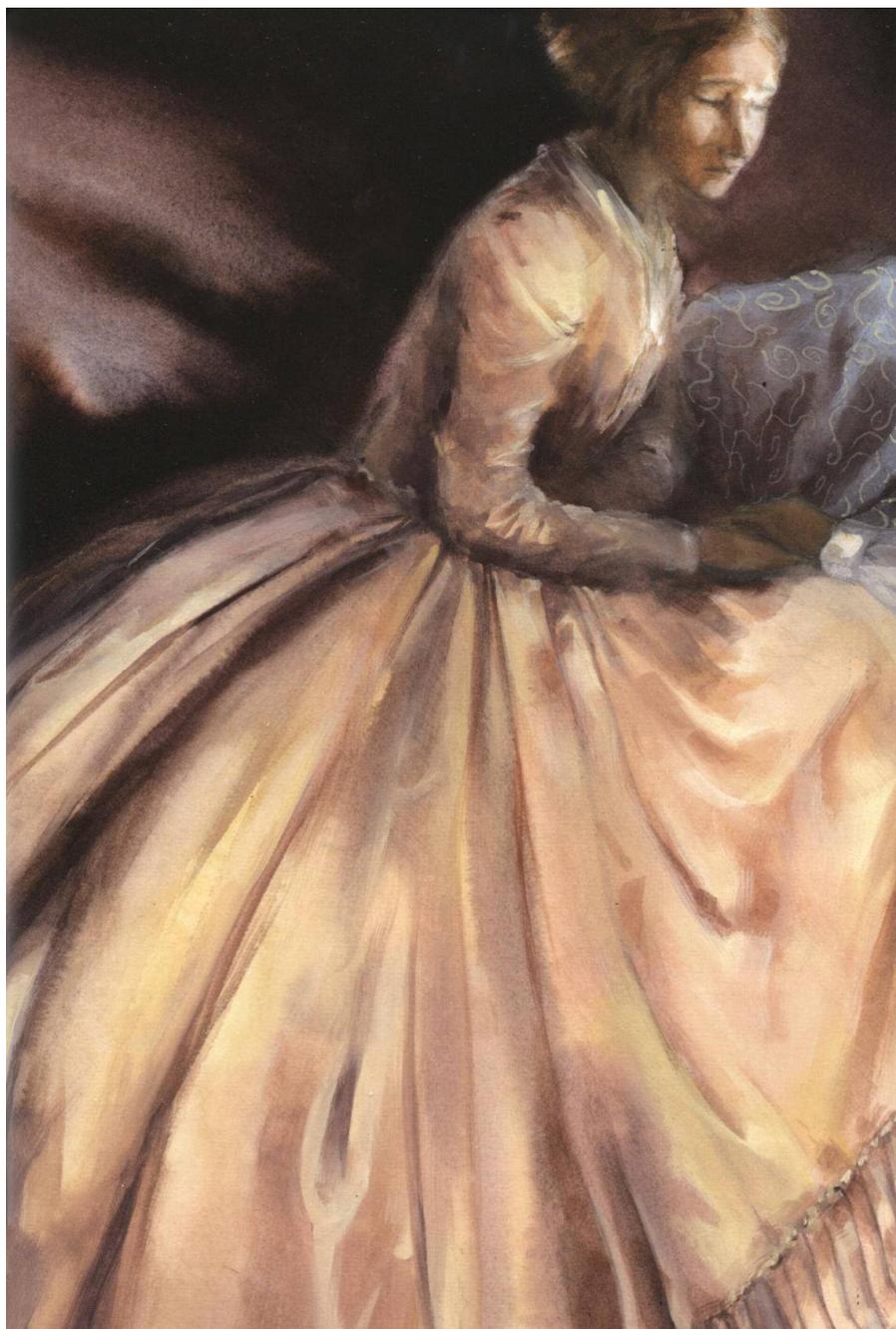
"Beth is very ill," said Jo, sadly. "Dr Bangs told us to send a message to mother."

"Oh, no! Poor Beth," said Laurie. "I'm very sorry."

Jo started crying, "Beth has a high fever and she's very weak. She doesn't recognize us. I'm so frightened, Laurie."

Laurie took her hand. "I'm here, Jo, and I want to help you."

Jo could not speak but she was glad Laurie was there.



"Please don't cry," said Laurie. "I have something good to tell you.

"What is it?" asked Jo.

"I sent a telegram to your mother yesterday and she'll be here late tonight. My grandfather and I decided to tell her about Beth."

"Oh, Laurie, you're a dear friend! How can I thank you?"

Jo told Meg and Hannah the good news.

That evening Dr Bangs came to see Beth again. He examined her carefully.

"How is she?" asked Jo.

"Soon there will be a change," said the doctor. "Beth could get better or worse. Let me know."

"Thank you, Dr Bangs," said Meg quietly.

Jo and Meg sat near Beth silently and waited for their mother to arrive. It was a long night and they could not sleep. They were worried about their sister. At one o'clock in the morning Laurie went to the train station to meet Mrs March.

At two o'clock Jo went to look outside the window. She heard a movement by the bed and turned around quickly. She immediately saw a strange look on Meg's face.

"Oh, no," Jo thought, "Beth's dead, and Meg's afraid to tell me.

Hannah came into the room. She knew all about illness, and looked at Beth to see how she was.

"Girls, she's better! She doesn't have a fever and she's sleeping quietly."

"I can't believe this is true," whispered Meg.

"I can't either," whispered Jo.

They were very happy. It was now early morning and Jo heard a noise at the door. "Girls, she's here," said Laurie. Their mother walked in and hugged her daughters.

"Your father is feeling better and sends his love," said Mrs March to her daughters. "I have so much to tell you."

When Beth woke up she saw her mother's loving face. She was very weak and could not speak. She kissed her mother and fell asleep again.

That evening Meg wrote a letter to her father. Jo went to Beth's room and stayed with her mother.

"I want to tell you something, Mother," said Jo.

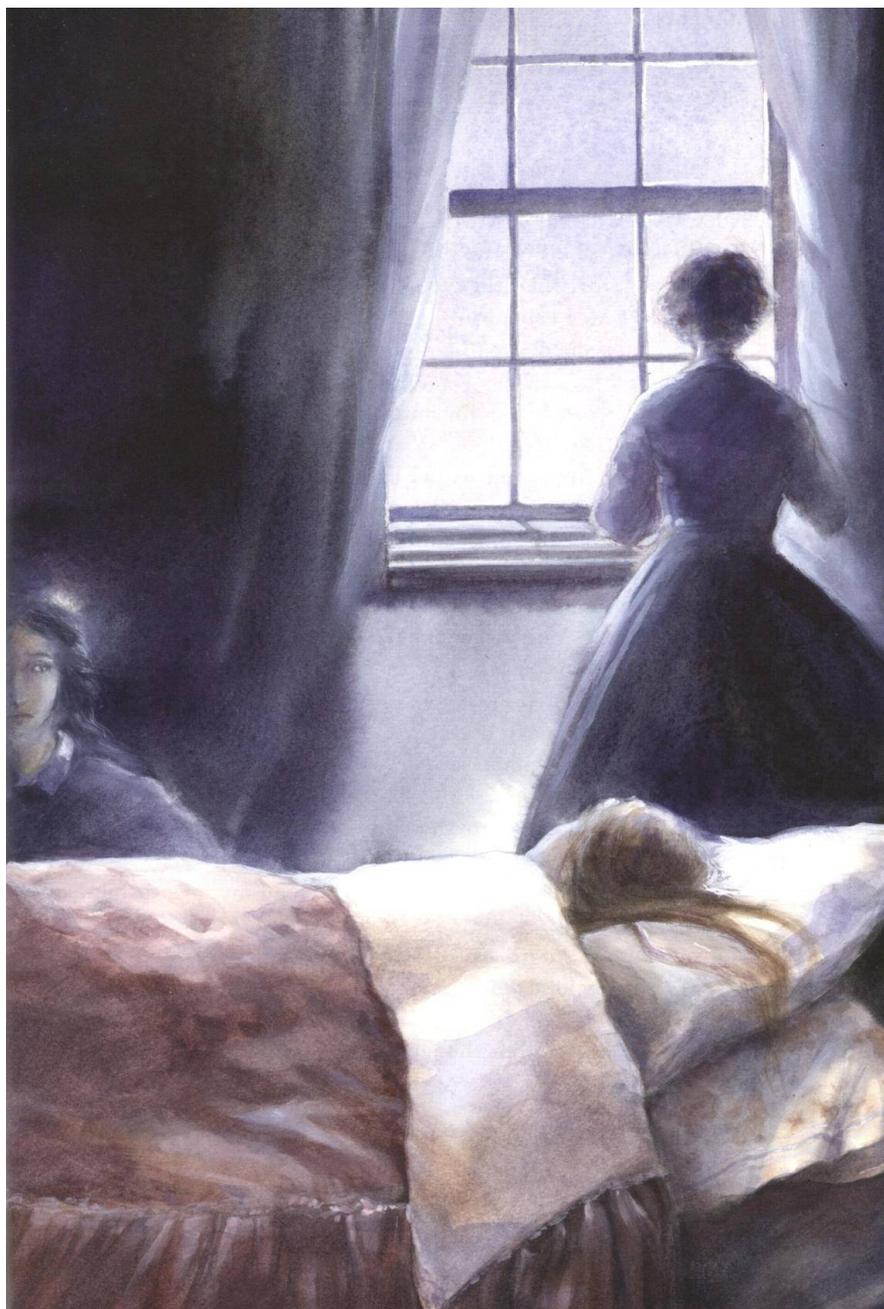
"About Meg?" asked her mother.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Beth is sleeping now. Whisper it."

"Last summer Meg left a pair of gloves at the Laurence's house," said Jo. "Laurie returned only one glove. Mr Brooke kept the other one. He told Laurie that he likes Meg! Isn't that terrible?"

"Does Meg like him?"



"I don't know anything about love and all that nonsense. In books girls are silly when they're in love. They don't eat and they can't sleep. But Meg eats, drinks and sleeps normally."

"Then perhaps she doesn't like John," said her mother.

"Who?" asked Jo.

"Mr Brooke. I call him John now because he was very kind to me and your father. He's looking after him now, you know. He told us he loves Meg, and wants to marry her. But she is too young — she's only seventeen. We don't want her to marry until she's twenty. John can come and visit us, and they can go out together. But they must wait before they marry."

"You like him, don't you?" asked Jo. She looked at her mother. "Oh, no, he'll take Meg away and I'll lose my best friend. Love, marriage — what nonsense!"

Mrs March laughed quietly.

"I wanted Meg to marry Laurie," said Jo. "He's very rich."

"Money isn't always important. Meg must marry the man she loves. Then she'll be happy."

Just then Meg came into the room with the letter for her father. Mrs March read it.

"A lovely letter, Meg. Please write that I send my love to John too."

"Do you call him John?" asked Meg with a smile.

"Yes, he is a very kind young man," said Mrs March.

"Oh, good," said Meg. "Well, good night, mother."

Meg left and her mother thought, "She doesn't love John now, but she will soon."

Chapter 6

Love Letters

Jo wanted to tell Laurie about Mr Brooke and Meg, but she could not. He knew there was a secret and he often asked her, but she did not say anything. He was angry because he wanted to know everything. So he decided to find out in another way.

Over the next few days Meg was quiet and worried. One day she received a letter and began reading it in the study, where her sister and mother were, too. Mrs March and Jo were both busy, when a sound from Meg made them look up. She was staring at her letter with a white, frightened face.



"No, he didn't write this letter!" Meg cried. "Jo, did you do this?" Jo was surprised. "What are you talking about?" she asked. "Look!" said Meg angrily.

She took another letter from her pocket and gave it to Jo. Jo read the letter slowly. "It's a love letter, and it has John's name on it."

"Tell me the truth, Jo," said Mrs March. "Do you know anything about this love letter?"

"No, I don't!" Jo said. "Please believe me, mother. But I know who wrote it."

"Who?" asked Mrs March and Meg.

"Laurie wrote it," said Jo.

"Laurie!" they cried.

Meg showed Jo the other letter she received that morning.

"Look, the writing is the same!" cried Jo.

Mrs March and Meg looked at the other letter. Then Mrs March looked at Meg. "Did you answer the first love letter?"

Meg looked at her feet and her face became red. "Yes, mother, I did." She was ashamed.

"What did you write?" asked Mrs March.

"I wrote, 'Dear Mr Brooke, I am too young and you must speak to my father first. I am happy to be your friend for now.'" She looked at her mother and Jo.

"But he didn't write the first letter and I answered it. Oh, how stupid I was! What will he think of me?" Poor Meg did not know what to do.

Jo started laughing, "Oh, Meg, it's not so bad. Laurie wrote both letters and Mr Brooke doesn't know anything about them. Laurie wanted to discover the secret."

"Thank goodness!" cried Mrs March. "I want to talk to Laurie. Jo, bring him here at once." Her face was serious.

Laurie came to the house with Jo. When he saw Mrs March's face he knew there was trouble. He and Mrs March were alone in the living room. No one heard their conversation, but Mrs March was angry. When he came out of the living room he was ashamed and unhappy. He apologized to Meg and went home quickly.

Winter continued and both Beth and Mr March got better. Mr March and Mr Brooke were still in Washington. They wanted to come home early in the new year.

It was almost Christmas and Amy was home again. Everyone was happy on Christmas Day. Laurie and Jo made a snowman in the garden for Beth.

In the afternoon Laurie came to the living room door. He was very excited.

"Here's another Christmas present for the March family," he said.

Mr March appeared at the door and Mr Brooke was behind him. Mrs March and the girls could not believe their eyes. It was their father! They ran to him and hugged him. It was a wonderful surprise for everyone.

Hannah prepared a big Christmas dinner. Mr Laurence, Laurie and John Brooke ate with the March family. Everyone talked and laughed. There was a lot of noise and happiness. After dinner the visitors left. They wanted the March family to be alone together.

That evening the family sat near the fire in the living room. Mr March looked at his four daughters and smiled at them.

"Meg, my dear," said Mr March, "you worked a lot to help your mother and sisters." He took her small hands and said, "These are very good hands."

Then he looked at Jo. "Jo, your hair is short, but you're not a noisy boy any more. Now you're a lovely young lady."

He looked at Beth. "Beth, my Beth, I'm happy you're well again. We didn't want to lose you," he



put his hand on her head. He turned and looked at Amy.

"And little Amy, you're thinking more about other people and less about yourself. You'll make life good for others," he stopped for a moment and looked at Mrs March. "Yes, you are four wonderful little women!"

Chapter 7

Aunt March's Visit

The day after Christmas there was a snowstorm outside. Mr March sat in the living room in a big, comfortable chair near a warm fire. Mrs March and the four girls sat around him. They were very happy to have him home again. Hannah was happy too and brought hot tea and cookies.

Mr and Mrs March looked at Meg and then looked at each other. They did not say anything but they were worried. Meg was silent and her face became red when someone said John's name.

"What's the matter with everyone?" asked Meg. She looked at her sisters and then at her mother and father. Everyone was silent.

"Well, why is everyone silent?" Meg asked. "Your John is the problem," said Jo, angrily.

"Don't say 'my John'," said Meg. "I don't care about him. We're only friends."

"When he asks you to marry him, what will you say?" asked Jo. "Will your face become red or will you cry? Or will you fall into his arms, like people do in stories?"

"I'm not silly," said Meg. "I already know what to say."

"What will you say?" said Jo.

"I'll say, 'Thank you, Mr Brooke, but I am too young now. Let's just be friends.'"

Jo smiled when she saw Meg's face become red.

Later that afternoon someone suddenly opened the front door. It was John Brooke. He came into the living room.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I came to see your father and to get my umbrella."

"He's resting now, but I'll go and tell him you're here," said Jo, running out of the room. She wanted to leave Meg alone with Mr Brooke.

When Jo left the room Meg got up too.

"I must go and tell mother you're here," said Meg.

Mr Brooke stopped her.

"Don't go, Meg," he said. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No, how can I be afraid of you?" said Meg.
"You were kind to father."

"Tell me, Meg, do you like me a little?" He took her hand and held it.

Meg forgot all the words she wanted to say. She wanted to run away, but she also wanted to listen to him.

"I don't know," she said softly. He looked at her with loving eyes.

"I love you so much, Meg," he said. "Can you love me a little?"

"I'm too young," she said.

"I'll wait," he said. "Perhaps you'll learn to like me."

Meg was confused and did not know what to say.

Suddenly Aunt March appeared in the living room. Mr Brooke left and went into the study.

"Hello Meg," said Aunt March, looking around the room.

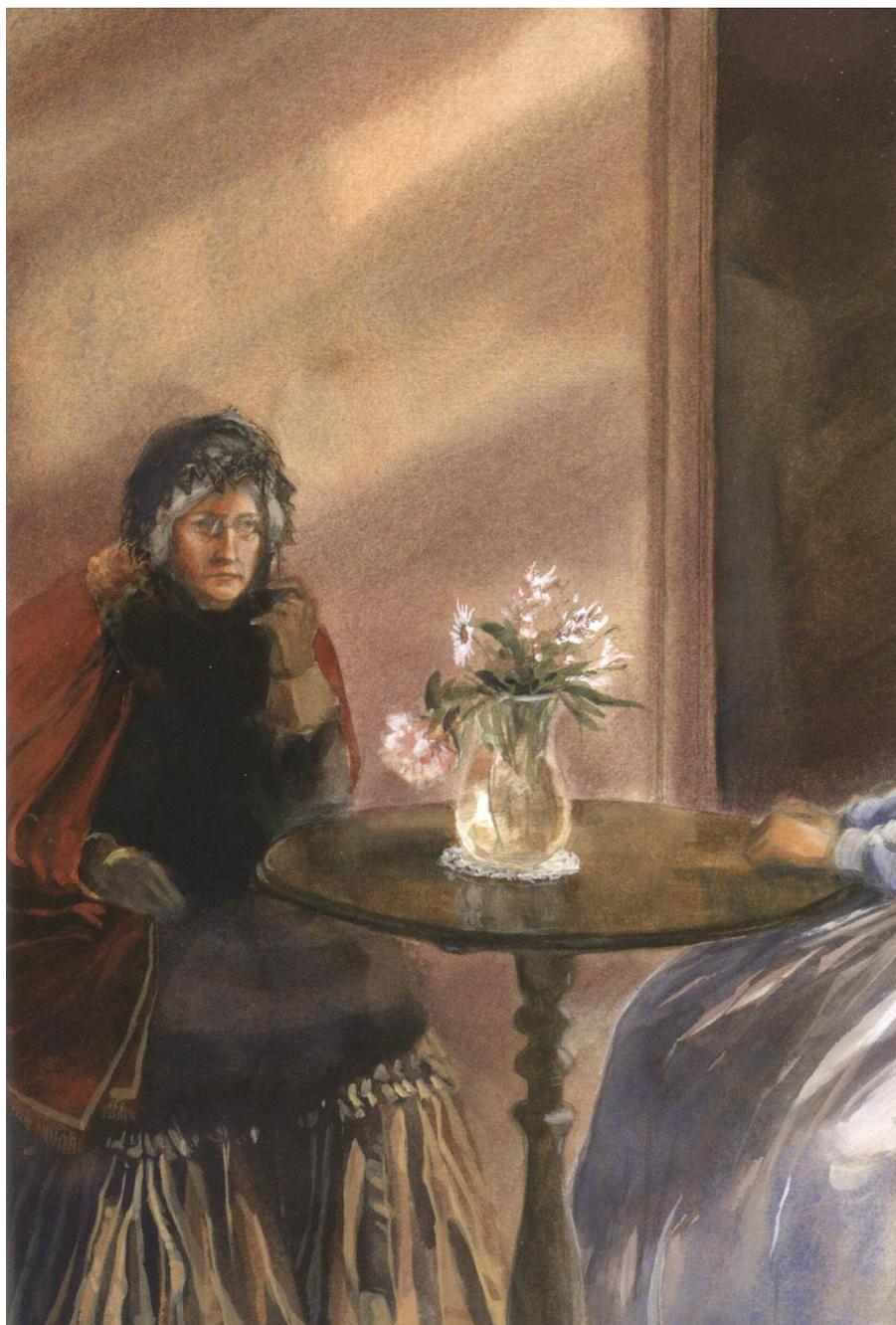
'Aunt March!' cried Meg. "I'm surprised to see you."

"I came to see your father," said Aunt March.

"I'll go and call him," said Meg.

"No, no," said Aunt March. "Wait a moment. Who is that young man?"

"He's...father's friend," said Meg, nervously.



"Your father's friend?" she asked. "Yes, Mr Brooke," said Meg.

"He's Laurie's tutor," she said, surprised. "What's happening here? Is he the man you want to marry?" she asked in a loud voice.

"I don't know," said Meg softly.

"Don't marry him, or there won't be a penny in my will for you!" cried Aunt March. "He's poor! He's a tutor. You can't live on love. Find a man with money — a man with an important job and a big home. That tutor only wants you because he knows I'm rich!"

"What a terrible thing to say, Aunt March!" cried Meg.

"It's not terrible, it's true, you silly girl!" shouted Aunt March.

"John is a kind, honest man. He works hard and he's intelligent. Everyone likes him. I'll be happy with him. And you can leave your money to anyone you want!" replied Meg.

Aunt March was very angry. "Well, you're a very silly girl! You'll be sorry for this. You'll get nothing from me. Goodbye!" She left the living room and went away in her carriage.

Meg sat down. She was confused and tired. The next minute John Brooke came back into the living room and sat next to Meg.

"I heard everything you said, Meg," said John.
"Thank you! Now I know that you like me a little."

"Oh, yes, I do, John," said Meg softly. She looked at his kind, brown eyes and they hugged.

When Jo came back she saw Meg and John together. She did not know what to think.

John stood up and said happily, "Sister Jo, Meg will marry me when she's twenty!"

Jo said nothing and disappeared.

That evening the March family and their friends were in the living room. John was very happy and he told everyone about his plans for the future.

"I want to work hard and make a lovely home for Meg," he said.

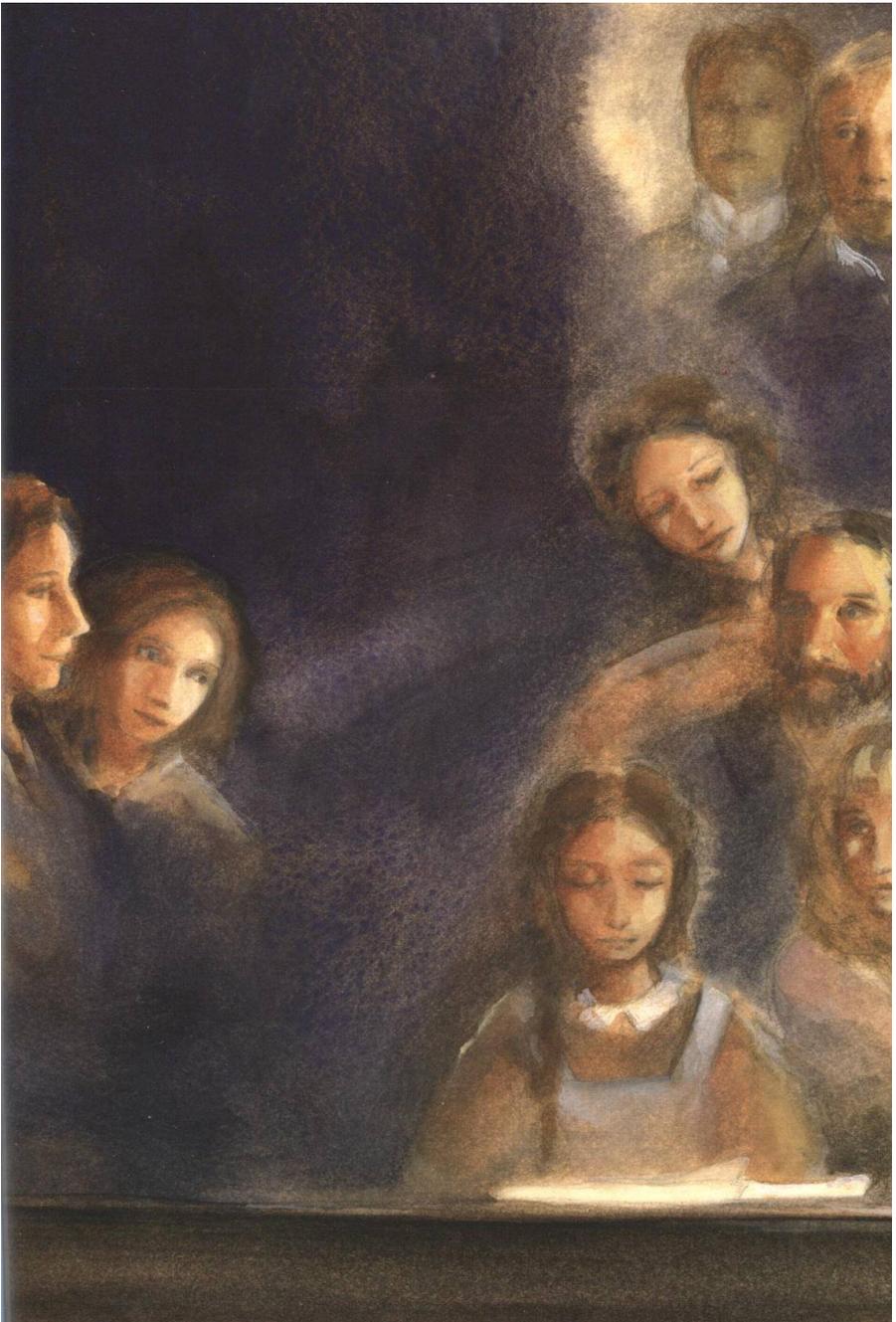
Meg looked at him with loving eyes. Mr and Mrs March already loved him like a son. They knew he was a kind, honest young man. Amy was ready to draw a picture of the two young lovers. She had a big white notebook and artist's pencils.

Beth smiled happily, and Jo and Laurie talked together.

"I'm not happy about Meg and John, because I'm losing my best friend," said Jo sadly.

"Oh, Jo, you have me," said Laurie. "We'll always have great times together, I promise."

"I know we will, Laurie," said Jo. "You're a true friend."



Mr and Mrs March sat together quietly and watched their family and remembered their lives twenty years ago. "What a wonderful moment!" said Mr March.

And so, a difficult year ended for the March family.