

EXCERPT

Before You Begin . . .

The story that we now think of as *Little Women* was originally published as two separate volumes written by Louisa May Alcott in 1868 and 1869.

In those pages, Jo March—one of young adult literature’s most beloved writers and sisters—writes and publishes the story of her life with her family at Orchard House.

Our own reimagined story takes place between the two volumes, after the success of the first, as Jo struggles to write the second.

Just as we expect “Lu” did.

—MS & MdIC

Prologue

*Little Women*

The Offices of Roberts Brothers, Publishers and Bookbinders

Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts

1868

“Little Women? That’s the title?” The author looked concerned. Above her light brown eyes and beneath her threadbare linen cap, the chestnut curls that framed her face were shaking. Miss Josephine March was all of seventeen years old, and though her girlish curves were slight, her spirit was immense.

There was nothing little about her, or her characters.

Or so she had thought.

The book in question—a volume of domestic stories, loosely inspired by her own family—was one she hadn’t wanted to write, had in fact steadfastly refused to write, until her editor had offered a notably unrefusable royalty, instead of the usual piffling advance. Only then had she dashed off a dozen chapters in a fit of pique. To her dismay, he’d loved them, and she’d had no choice but to finish the final chapters, which she’d come to deliver now.

And lo—insult beyond injury—it would be called Little Women.

“Isn’t it perfect?” Mr. Thomas Niles beamed at her over his spectacles. Her editor at Boston’s (moderately) respected and (moderately) solvent Roberts Brothers Press, Niles felt he had developed some (moderate) expertise in the publishing industry. His authors, at times, disagreed.

This was one of those times.

“Far from it!” Jo drew a worn cambric handkerchief square from her pinafore pocket and dabbed dramatically at the corner of her left eye, although both author and editor knew there was no actual tear to be wiped away.

Only fury, and there’s not a cambric square big enough in the world for that—

“It’s dismissive!” Jo seethed. “It’s pap!”

“Oh?” Niles pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his bulbous red nose. “How so?”

“It’s . . . trite!” Jo dropped the handkerchief upon the bundled pages in front of her. They were tied with string, the requested final chapters, as painstakingly inked as the others before them. Her hands hovered, as always, just above the parcel; it was never easy, letting go of the fruit of so many stolen hours in her damp writing garret under the attic eaves, where she’d burnt her last saved stumps of candle-wax—as well as her fingers—and ruined her eyes in the service of one of these so-called little stories. The nerve!

Niles sighed.

“Trivial!” Jo huffed.

“When you say trivial,” Niles began, “do you mean—?”

“For starters, that’s not a title, it’s a literal restatement of the very essence of the plot,” Jo interrupted.

He eyed the parcel hungrily. “Yes, and I’m told it’s charming.”

Jo’s head-shake was very nearly violent. “It’s not charming. I’m not charming.” After making a living writing her customary blood-and-thunder tales—or so she thought of them—this business of feminine tradition and treacle was all very unfamiliar. To be fair, with the exception of her sisters, Jo knew and liked hardly any girls at all.

“You’re very charming, Miss March. Nearly as charming as your book,” Niles said, looking amused. “And a tribute to little women everywhere.” He pulled a tin from his outer vest pocket. “Peppermint?”

Buying time with sweets, again. Niles offered them up only when he found himself in a tough conversational crossroads, Jo knew.

So that’s it, then.

There really is no changing the title.

“Thank you, no.” Jo looked out the window as a horse and carriage clattered up Washington Street, spraying mud in every direction, including onto the glass of the (moderately) well-kept Roberts Brothers offices. She tried not to wring her hands in despair and failed. “I suppose it is what it is. Perhaps it

doesn't matter what you call it. I dashed the thing off in weeks, and for what?"

"Money," Niles said. "The almighty dollar. Which you happen to need, not unlike the rest of us. Speaking of earning your wage, are those the chapters you owe me?" He reached for the bundled pages between them.

"It's not about earning my wages," Jo said, tightening her grip on the manuscript. "Not just about that." She'd written it on assignment, because Niles was experimenting beyond the standard Continental Gothic that came flowing from Jo's pen so easily.

And, yes, because of the money.

The result was a collection of domestic moments, sure, but it had surprised even her; it wasn't just feminine drivel, even if the title might perhaps now doom it to be. She hadn't expected it to come as quickly as it had, or as pleasantly. Not that she would admit that to her editor. "Money's not a reason. Not a proper one, anyway." Even if we are poor as rats.

"Many people—most—seem to think otherwise," Niles said, yanking his handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow, which was beginning to perspire as they argued. He was never without a handkerchief; decades of sobbing authors, Jo suspected, had trained him thus.

"Not all people," she sniffed.

"Certainly my investors do. You aren't the only family with war debts, you know."

Jo had no answer for that, for he was right. She supposed she would never be considered a real writer now, never be taken seriously by the public. Never invited to lecture at the Athenaeum with Ralph and Henry and . . . Who was that other chap? Perhaps this was what happened to feminine scribblers who aspired above their little place in the Concord world.

Strike another blow to the weaker sex—and all that rot.

“Charming,” she sighed.

“Ideally, you’ve written equally charming last chapters as well.” Niles eyed the stack hopefully. “Seeing as my typesetters have very nearly caught up with you.”

Jo snorted, which was a good indication of her feelings concerning the process that put her words on the page. Lottie Roberts, who manned the letterpress, had once changed “Christopher Columbus!”—Jo’s most oft-uttered oath—to “My Heavens!” and Jo had never forgiven her. This was, truthfully, not an isolated event; “Blazes!” had been mysteriously printed as “How sad!”—“Hell” as “The Down Below”—“Blow me down!” as “No!”—and “A French pox upon you, Adventuress!” had been eliminated altogether.

“Your typesetters go too far.” She glared, repeating the warning not to change a word of her text for the twentieth time.

“Yes, well.” He snapped shut his peppermint tin. “When women of polite society are allowed to speak like common sailors, you are welcome to terminate their employment yourself, Miss March.”

“And I look forward to the day, sir.” Jo pursed her lips.

“I am confident you shall meet it.” Niles smiled. For despite all indications to the contrary, the two were fond friends. Niles reminded Jo of her father, who had left Concord years earlier to join the Union army as a chaplain. Mr. March had come home only once in all that time—when the Union prevailed and the war was won, three years ago. Shortly thereafter, he’d left once more to volunteer in the Reconstruction efforts in the South, helping to build schools and churches for previously enslaved people. And though his letters usually came frequently, the March women felt his absence keenly.

But Jo still had Niles, and if they fought, they fought well, each considering the other the more harmless version of their species. (The dollar a story Niles paid to run Jo’s wild romantic adventures didn’t hurt, either. Neither did the fact that subscriptions to his circular, *The Tall Taler*, had gone up by forty-three since engaging her. Forty-three!)

“Call it what you will. No one will read it, anyway.” Jo tapped her fingers along the brown-paper-wrapped parcel. “I don’t know why you believed you could sell it.”

“Perhaps.” Niles nodded.

“I should have used a different name instead of my own,” she sighed.  
“Eustacia. Thomasina.”

“Possibly.” He nodded again. “Eustacia Emerson is lovely. I’m quite partial to Thomasina Thoreau, but Hildegarde Hawthorne could also do just fine.” He

winked.

Hawthorne. That was his name, the other Athenaeum chap!

“Fine.” She picked at the string about the parcel. “Take my daft little book of scribbles and do with it as you will.”

“I’ve seen dafter. Trust me.”

“Trust you? You have no sense of anything, least of all publishing! Why, you couldn’t sell *Romeo and Juliet* if I wrote it for you.”

“Admittedly a bit somber for my taste—I do prefer a happy ending to my sensation stories. So do our Tall Taler readers. Why couldn’t *Romeo* have married *Juliet* and settled down in a nice Tuscan villa? A sequel by any other name . . .”

The author bit her lip; it kept her from responding in a discourteous manner.

“Now give it here,” the editor said, sliding his fingers impatiently across the blotter atop his desk and taking the manuscript from her hands.

“Take it.” She scowled.

Manuscript obtained, Niles traded his peppermints for the bottle of peppermint schnapps he kept in the bottom of his drawer for special



occasions.

“A toast!” he offered, pouring two thimblefuls into two cups.

Jo grudgingly accepted.

“To our Little Women!” her publisher cried. “And to the bright future of Jo March, Thomas Niles, and Roberts Brothers! May 1868 prove to be a banner year for us all!”

Jo clinked her glass against his. It seemed rude otherwise. With a final sigh and a shake of her curls, the author drank to her defeat. The editor drank to her success.

Little Women it was.

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