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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LETTERS TO FIVE GIRLS

WRITTEN BY HER TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

NOW EDITED AND PRINTED FOR THE FIRST TIME

By Edward W. Bok

[By Special Permission of Miss Alcott's Heirs]

HERE was a delightful disclosure when Louisa M. Alcott's "Life and Letters," by Mrs. Edna D. Cheney, was published a few years ago. Affluent as that extraordinary nature had been felt to be by all who had known her through her books, it was a yet deeper sympathy, a still more fascinating freshness, which she revealed in the free play of her correspondence. Outside of that volume the following are the only letters of Miss Alcott's which have been given to the public.

Nor is the story which attaches itself to the letters of scarcely less interest than the letters. It is the story of twenty-four years ago, when a small girl living in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, read Miss Alcott's "Little Women." The child was much impressed with the book, particularly with that part of the story where the author represents the "March girls" as writing the "Pickwick Portfolio." The thought instantly came to the youthful reader to copy the example of the "March girls," and the idea was laid before her four sisters. By them it was enthusiastically received, and it was not long before the five little girls began their career as journalists. In a few months the first two numbers of their paper were issued, but only in manuscript. Then the father of the youthful editors became interested, bought some type and a small printing press, and in a short time the first printed issue of "Little Things" appeared, edited by Carrie, Maggie, Nellie, Emma and Helen Lukens, the eldest of whom was barely seventeen. The first printed issue consisted of four pages.

It was only natural that the young journalists should wish to send one of the first copies of their paper to Miss Alcott, and so a copy was dispatched to the author of "Little Women," with an explanation of the circumstances which had led to the starting of the enterprise.

In a few days came an acknowledgment from Miss Alcott—the first of this series of letters:

CONCORD, August, 3, 1872.

My Dear Little Women: I will certainly answer your pleasant letter and very gladly subscribe to your paper, although it has not yet arrived. My two little men at once demanded it, and were much impressed by the idea of girls having a printing press and getting out a "truly paper." I admire your pluck and perseverance, and heartily believe in women's right to any branch of labor for which they prove their fitness. Work is such a beautiful and helpful thing and independence so delightful that I wonder there are any lazy people in the world. I hope you preach that doctrine in your paper, not in the rampant Women's Rights fashion, but by showing how much women can do even in attending skillfully and cheerfully to the little things that have such an influence on home-life, and through it upon the world outside. I should like to see that printing office of yours, and the five sisters getting out their paper. Won't you tell me about it, for I find it more interesting than the famous Riverside Printing House, and so do Demi and Daisy, who went to see it the other day? Do you let any one write for your paper but yourselves? Which of you is editor, and don't you have great fun over it? Please present my respects to the wise father of the five happy girls, and with the best wishes for the success of the paper, believe me very sincerely your friend and fellow-worker,
LOUISA M. ALCOTT.

It was only to be expected that the young editors should have become perplexed about financial matters, and who was more likely to straighten them out than Miss Alcott? So in a subsequent letter the young editors asked about the prices paid for stories, and, with frankness, their wise counselor replied:

CONCORD, September 4, 1873.

Dear Girls: You ask about little stories. Well, Mr. Ford, of "The Youth's Companion," pays fifty dollars apiece for them, much more than they are worth, of course, but he says he pays for the name, and seems satisfied with his bargain. I write for nothing else except a tale for "The Independent" now and then, which brings one hundred dollars. This winter I shall write for "Scribner's," at their request, as I

have no book on the stocks. For you, I will, if I have time, write a tale or sketch now and then for love, not money, and if the name is of any use you are very welcome to it. I remember the dear little "Pickwick Portfolio" of twenty years ago, and the spirit of an editor stirs within me prompting me to lend a hand to a sister editor. I like to help women help themselves, as that is, in my opinion, the best way to settle the woman question. Whatever we can do and do well we have a right to, and I don't think any one will deny us. So best wishes for the success of "Little Things" and its brave young proprietors.
Yours truly,
LOUISA M. ALCOTT.



ONE OF THE LAST, AND MOST ACCEPTABLE, OF MISS ALCOTT'S PORTRAITS

P. S. I did not like the suicide in "Work," but as much of that chapter was true I let it stand as a warning to several people who need it to my knowledge, and to many whom I do not know. I have already had letters from strangers thanking me for it, so I am not sorry it went in. One must have both the dark and the light side to paint life truly. I send you the last style of photograph I have, not very good, but you can't make a Venus out of a tired old lady.

UPON receiving the photograph of their valued friend the youthful editors felt that their portraits should be sent in return, and within a few days came the reply:

CONCORD, September 20, 1873.

Dear Sisters: I waited till the five were all here before I sent my thanks for them. They make a very pretty little "landscape," as Jo used to say, all in a group on my table, and I am glad to show such a posy of bright, enterprising girls. Long may they wave! My Marmee, though very feeble now, was much pleased at your message, and said, in her motherly way, as she looked at the five faces, "Little dears, I wish I could see 'em all and do something for 'em." Perhaps some of these summers we may see a band of pilgrims coming up to our door, and then the three old "March girls" and the five young L— ditto will sit in a bunch and spin yarns. Play we do. Of one thing let me, an old scribbler, warn you: Don't write with steel pens or you will get what is called "writer's cramp," and lose the use of your thumb, as I have. I have to wobble around with two fingers while my absurd thumb is folded under and no good for pen work, though all right for other things. Look at my wild scribbles and use cork pen-holders or gold pens, and don't write fourteen hours at a stretch, as I used to do. I'm glad there is ironing and preserving to rest the busy brains with good wholesome work. I believe in it so heartily that I sweep my eight rooms twice a week, iron and scrub round for health sake, as I have found it better medicine than any doctor ever gave me. Keep the bodies strong and healthy and the nerves won't get out of order or the spirits turn blue. Old ladies will advise. With many thanks and best love, I am yours truly,
L. M. A.

P. S. You may like to know that my Polish boy, Laddie (or Laurie), has turned up in New York alive and well with a wife and "little two daughters," as he says in his funny English. He is coming to see me, and I expect to find my romantic boy a stout papa, the glory all gone. Isn't it sad?

As I can't give or lend you the dear old original, I send you a picture of Marmee, taken some ten or fifteen years ago. She is much changed now, wears caps and is old and broken sadly.

MERRILY did the exchange of letters keep up. A more delightfully characteristic letter than this one it would be hard to imagine:

BOSTON, October 2, 1873.

Dear Girls: I am writing a story, but it is not about you, however, for I did not know enough to do it. I shall like anything you may choose to send me about your paper and yourselves, as I may like to use it some time. I shall not go West this fall as I am not well enough to travel. My father has already started, but I am in my winter den, 17 Beacon Street, Boston, spinning away at "The Ant Hill" or "Rose and the Rest"—haven't decided which the name shall be. I'm afraid it will be a dull story, for my head is not in it a bit and my bones ache like fun most of the time. However, as I wrote "Little Women" with one arm in a sling, my head tied up and one foot in misery, perhaps pain has a good effect upon my works. I sympathize with the disappointment of your friends on seeing my picture, for I remember I was so upset when I saw Frederika Bremer, whose books I loved, that my sister, Nan, and I went into the closet and cried, though we were great girls of sixteen and eighteen. Why people will think "Jo" small when she is described as tall, I don't see; and why insist that she must be young when she is said to be thirty at the end of the book? After seeing the photograph it is hardly necessary to say that "Jo" and L. M. A. are not one, and that the latter is a tired-out old lady of forty-two with nothing left of her youth but a yard or more of chestnut hair that won't turn gray, though it is time it did. Yes, I got your letter about the paper, and though I was sorry to lose the little sheet, I think you are wise to give it up. As you are in the business I'll tell you that I'm going to write "Youth's Companion" a serial of six chapters this winter. A temperance tale, so if you have any facts to contribute, pray do so. With love to all the sisters, I am, as ever, your friend,
L. M. A.

If you come to Boston do not forget to call upon me.

ILLNESS and the death of her mother came into Miss Alcott's life, and although the sisters wrote to their kind friend, only a few brief lines came at irregular intervals. Then she wrote her mother's memoir, and for a longer time the correspondence was interrupted. The little paper had been given up by the sisters, one of whom had died, and this latter fact, when written to Miss Alcott, immediately brought forth a reply:

BOSTON, January 14, 1884.

Dear M—: I have not forgotten my five sisters, and was glad to hear from them again, though sincerely grieved to learn that one of the dear group had gone. I know how hard it is to spare these dear sisters, having lost two, and how empty the world seems for a long time. But faith, submission and work sustain, cheer and help so much that after the first sharpness of the loss is over, we often find a very sweet and precious tie still binds us even more tenderly together than when the visible presence was here. Beth and May are always mine, although twenty-five years have passed since we laid the poor shadow of one under the pines at Concord, and the dust of the other sleeps far away in Paris. Both are young and bright, and live so always in my mind, for the pain and the parting, the years and the sea are all as nothing, and I see them safe with Marmee waiting for the rest to come. May's blooming baby, which she gave me with all of her lovely pictures, is a great comfort to me, and promises to be as full of courage, talent and nobility as her gifted mother. I am so busy helping little Louisa May Nieriker live her own sweet story that I find no time to write others, and am settling down to be a cozy old granny with my specs and knitting. My dear old father, now eighty-four, is quite helpless and feeble in mind, but serene and happy as a child, suffering little, but waiting cheerfully to slip away in God's good time after a long and blameless life.

You speak of "breaking away"; if it can be dutifully and wisely done, I think girls should see a little of the world, try their own powers, and keep well and cheerful, mind

*One of the "little girls," writing in explanation to me of this paragraph, says: "I do not know what we girls had the presumption to say to prompt this from Miss Alcott. But, of course, we were very young and inexperienced."—EDITOR.



The portrait of Miss Alcott which so disappointed her young correspondents

[See letter dated October 2, 1873]



MARMEE

and body, because life has so much for us to learn, and young people need change. Many ways are open now, and women can learn, be and do much if they have the will and opportunity. I hope to see you if you take flight from the nest. With much love and sympathy to all I am, dear M—, your friend, as always,
L. M. ALCOTT.

YEARS had now made women of the "little girls," and Miss Alcott began to write to Maggie, who sustained the correspondence, more as one woman to another, and on weightier topics. The most remarkable letter of the series is found in the following:

February 5, 1884.

My Dear M—: I hope I never shall be too busy, or too old, to answer letters like yours as far as I can, for to all of us comes this desire for something to hold by, look up to, and believe in. I will tell you my experience, and as it has stood the test of youth and age, health and sickness, joy and sorrow, poverty and wealth, I feel that it is genuine, and seem to get more light, warmth and help as I go on learning more of it year by year. My parents never bound us to any church, but taught us that the love of goodness was the love of God, the cheerful doing of duty made life happy, and that the love of one's neighbor in its widest sense was the best help for one's self. Their lives showed us how lovely this simple faith was, how much honor, gratitude and affection it brought them, and what a sweet memory they left behind, for, though father still lives, his life is over, as far as thought or usefulness are possible. Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson did much to help me to see that one can shape life best by trying to build up a strong and noble character, through good books, wise people's society, an interest in all reforms that help the world, and a cheerful acceptance of whatever is inevitable; seeing a beautiful compensation in what often seems a great sacrifice, sorrow or loss, and believing always that a wise, loving and just Father cares for us, sees our weakness and is near to help if we call. Have you read Emerson? He is called a Pantheist or believer in Nature instead of God. He was truly Christian, and saw God in Nature, finding strength and comfort in the same sweet influences of the great Mother as well as the Father of all. I too believe this, and when tired, sad or tempted find my best comfort in the woods, the sky, the healing solitude that lets my poor, weary soul find the rest, the fresh hope or the patience which only God can give us. People used to tell me that when sorrow came I should find my faith faulty because it had no name, but they were wrong for when the heavy loss of my dear, gifted sister found me too feeble to do anything but suffer passively, I still had the sustaining sense of a love that never failed, even when I could not see why this lovely life should end when it was happiest. As a poor, proud, struggling girl I held to the belief that if I *deserved* success it would surely come so long as my ambition was not for selfish ends but for my dear family, and it did come, far more fully than I ever hoped or dreamed, though youth, health and many hopes went to earn it. Now, when I might enjoy rest, pleasure and travel, I am still tied by new duties to my baby, and give up my dreams, sure that something better will be given me in time. Freedom was always my longing, but I have never had it, so I am still trying to feel that this is the discipline I need, and when I am ready the liberty will come.

I think you need not worry about any name for your faith, but simply try to be and do good, to love virtue in others, and study the lives of those who are truly worthy of imitation. Women need a religion of their own, for they are called upon to lead a quiet, self-sacrificing life with peculiar trials, needs and joys, and it seems to me that a very simple one is fitted to us whose hearts are usually more alive than heads, and whose hands are tied in many ways. Health of body helps health of soul; cheerful views of all things keep up the courage and brace the nerves. Work for the mind *must* be had, or daily duty becomes drudgery, and the power to enjoy higher things is lost. Change of scene is sometimes salvation for girls or women, who outgrow the place they are born in, and it is their duty to go away, even if it is to harder work, for hungry minds prey on themselves, and bodies suffer for escape from a too pale or narrow life. I have felt this, and often gone away from Concord to teach, which I never liked, because there was no food for my mind in that small conservative town, especially since Mr. Emerson died. Food, fire and shelter are not *all* that women need, and the noble discontent that asks for more should not be condemned, but helped if possible. At twenty-one I took my little earnings (\$20) and a few clothes, and went to seek my fortune, though I might have sat still and been supported by rich friends. All those hard years were teaching me what I afterward put into the books, and so I made my fortune out of my seeming misfortune. I speak of myself because what one has *lived* one really knows and so can speak honestly.

I wish I had my own house (as I still hope to have), so that I might ask the young women who often write to me as you do, to come and see me, and look about and find what they need, and see the world of wise, good people to whom I could introduce them as others did me thirty years ago. I hope to have it soon, and then you must come and have our talk and see if any change can be made without neglecting duty. When one cannot go away one can travel in spirit by means of books. Tell me what you read and like, and perhaps I can send you a key that will at least open a window through which your eyes can wander while the faithful hands and feet are tied by duty at home. Write freely to me, dear girl, and if I can help in any way be sure I gladly will. A great sorrow often softens and prepares the heart for a new harvest of good seed, and the sowers God sends are often very humble ones, used only as instruments by Him, because being very human they come naturally and by every-day ways to the help of those who are passing through trials like their own. I find one of the compensations for age in the fact that it seems to bring young people nearer to me, and that the experience so hard to live through now helps me to understand others. So I am always glad to do what I can, remembering how I wrote to my father for just such help as you ask, and how he answered as I have tried to answer you. Let me know if it does comfort you any. With love to my other girls I am always your friend,
L. M. A.

UPON learning that her letter pleased her correspondent, and gave her strength, Miss Alcott writes again only a few days later:

February 14, 1884.

Dear M—: I am glad that my letter pleased you, and though always busy I at once answer your last because if by word or act one can help a fellow-creature in the care or conduct of a soul that is one's first duty. About the great Hereafter I can only give you my own feeling and belief, for we can *know* nothing, and must wait hopefully and patiently to learn the secret. Death never seemed terrible to me, the fact, I mean, though the ways of going and the sad blow of a sudden end are, of course, hard to bear and understand. I

feel that in this life we are learning to enjoy a higher, and fitting ourselves to take our place there. If we use well our talents, opportunities, trials and joys here, when we pass on it is to the society of nobler souls, as in this world we find our level inevitably.

I think immortality is the passing of a soul through many lives or experiences, and such as are *truly* lived, used and learned, help on to the next, each growing richer, happier, higher, carrying with it only the real memories of what has gone before. If in my present life I love one person truly, no matter who it is, I believe that we meet somewhere again, though where or how I don't know or care, for genuine love is immortal. So is real wisdom, virtue, heroism, etc., and these noble attributes lift humble lives into the next experience, and prepare them to go on with greater power and happiness. I seem to remember former states before this, and feel that in them I have learned some of the lessons that have never been mine here, and in my next step I hope to leave behind many of the trials that I have struggled to bear here and begin to find lightened as I go on. This accounts for the genius and the great virtue some show here. They have done well in many phases of this great school, and bring into our class the virtue or the gifts that make them great and good. We don't remember the lesser things, they slip away as childish trifles, and we carry on only the real experiences. Some are born sad, some bad, some feeble, mentally and morally, I mean, and all their life here is an effort to get rid of this shadow of grief, sin, weakness in the life before. Others come, as Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, etc., bringing their lovely reward with them, and pass on leaving us the better for their lives.

This is my idea of immortality. An endless life of helpful change, with the instinct, the longing to rise, to learn, to love, to get nearer the source of all good, and go on from the lowest plane to the highest, rejoicing more and more, as we climb into the clearer light, the purer air, the happier life which must exist, for, as Plato said, "The soul cannot imagine what does not exist because it is the shadow of God who knows and creates all things."

I don't believe in spiritualism as commonly presented. I don't want to see or feel or hear dead friends, except in my

and being so should rule. This will give you something to think of, and as delicate, gentle people often grasp these things more quickly than the positive ones you may get ahead of me in the new science. Just believe that you will be better and you will, they say. Try it. Love to the sisters,
Yours ever,
L. M. A.

ABOUT a year later Miss Alcott was resting and reading a great deal:

My Dear M—: George Eliot's "Life and Letters" is wonderfully interesting, and comes in the cheap form so all can enjoy it. What book do you want to see? Let me know and have the pleasure of sending it. What of Emerson's have you beside the "Essays"? I am glad any advice I have given has been useful or comfortable to you, and I wish I were really "good." I began to try very young, and still keep on even more earnestly at fifty than at fifteen, though I often feel as if I didn't get on at all. But the desire and effort are something, and in the end help us up the long way toward our ideal. I have not been very ill, only my tired head gave out and I am resting.

I shall try to get the book you speak of, for I often have letters from girls asking me about these classes and what they read or study. Miss Killikelly's "Curious Questions" must be very helpful and good, and this method of study is a grand plan for many hungry minds. I read "John Inglesant" but don't remember it. I am in Boston this winter settling my nephews in business, and being very lazy myself. Let me hear from you whenever the spirit moves, and tell me how to help if I can. That is the sweetest service we can do one another, and it always cheers me up to know I have done even a little for one of my girls. I send you a little bunch of forget-me-nots that won't fade. Wear them for my sake. Love to the sisters.
Yours ever,
L. M. A.

AT the time Miss Alcott sent her correspondent the promised copy of Emerson's "Essays," she wrote:

I hope it will be as helpful to you as it has been to me and many others. The marked essays are those I like best. They will bear study, and, I think, are what you need to feed upon now.

The marked essays were those on "Compensation," "Love," "Friendship," "Heroism" and "Self-Reliance." A little later Miss Alcott sent the second volume of the "Essays," and marked with lead pencil her favorite passages here and there through the book. In one of these marked passages she underscored the word *individual* and wrote her father's name below it. It was in Emerson's essay on "Manners," where, after saying that "once or twice in a lifetime we are permitted to enjoy the charm of noble manners, in the presence of a man or woman who have no bar in their nature, but whose character emanates freely in their word and gesture," etc., he continues: "I have seen an *individual* whose manners, though wholly within the conventions of elegant society, were never learned there, but were original and commanding, and held out protection and prosperity; one who did not need the aid of a court suit, but carried the holiday in his eye; who exhilarated the fancy by flinging wide the doors of new modes of existence; who shook off the captivity of etiquette, with happy, spirited bearing, good-natured and free as 'Robin Hood,' yet with the part of an emperor, if need be—calm, serious and fit to stand the gaze of millions."

IN February, 1886, a copy of Miss Killikelly's "Curious Questions" was sent to Miss Alcott by her correspondent, and this brought forth the following reply:

February 21, 1886.

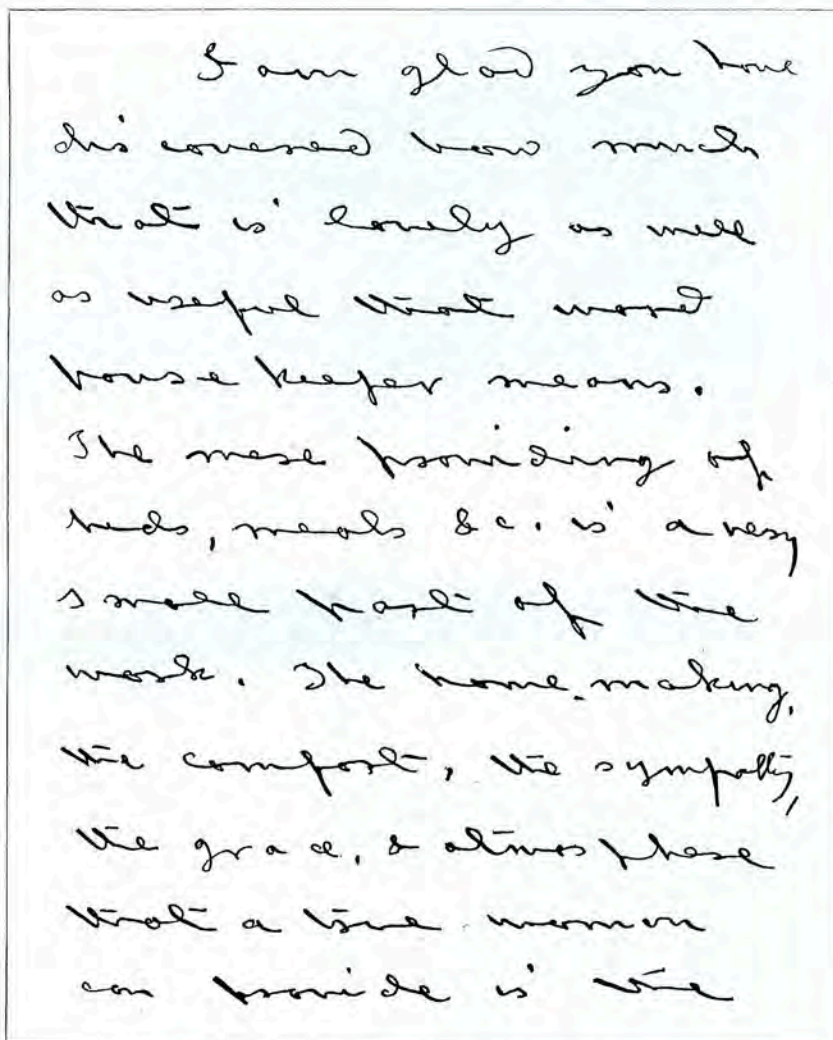
Dear M—: The book has come and I have read it with much interest, and showed it to my literary nephew. We both think it excellent, and I am glad to have it to refresh my own memory of what I do know as well as to teach me many facts that I do not know. I am glad you have discovered how much that is lovely as well as useful that word house-keeper means. The mere providing of beds, meals, etc., is a very small part of the work. The home-making, the comfort, the sympathy, the grace and atmosphere that a true woman can provide is the noble part, and embraces all that is helpful for soul as well as body. I wish our girls would see this, and set about being the true housekeepers. Mrs. Ripley used to rock her baby's cradle, shell peas, or sew, and fit a class of young men for college at the same time. One can discuss Greek poetry and chop meat, as I saw her doing once with Mr. Emerson and Margaret Fuller, and the one task ennobled the other because it was duty.

I have been plagued with bronchitis this winter but am better now. Lulu is well and merry. With love to the sisters I am, as ever, affectionately yours,
L. M. A.

It was the last letter which Miss Alcott wrote to her unseen correspondent. Miss Alcott never saw any one of the five "little girls" to whom her letters were so helpful. In 1888 she died, and now, for the first time, these letters are given to the public. That they will do much to deepen the respect held for the memory of Louisa May Alcott admits of not a single doubt.

WHERE MISS ALCOTT WAS BORN

IT has always seemed a most curious and interesting fact that despite Louisa May Alcott's constant thought of New England as her home, her actual birthplace was in Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia. Mr. Alcott, immediately after his marriage, accepted, in coöperation with Mr. William Russel, the position of principal of the Female Department of the Germantown Academy. He brought his young wife with him to Germantown, and there they made their home from 1831 to 1834. After a short term Mr. Alcott resigned his position in the Academy and opened a children's school in his residence, which, proving unsuccessful, resulted in his return to Boston. In Germantown his eldest two daughters, Anna Bronson and Louisa May, were born, the latter on November 29, 1832. The house in which they resided was on the main street, its present site being 4761 and 4763 Germantown Avenue. It was known for many years as "The Pines," and afterward as "The Roocker Cottage," the name under which the Alcotts knew it. In 1874 it was torn down, and a handsome building was erected. It is now the local Masonic Hall—a large brick and stone structure.



A SAMPLE PAGE FROM ONE OF MISS ALCOTT'S LETTERS

[From the last letter in this series—dated February 21, 1886]

own sense of nearness, and as my love and memory paint them. I do believe that they remember us, are with us in a spiritual sense when we need them, and we feel their presence with joy and comfort, not with fear or curiosity. My mother is near me sometimes, I am sure, for help comes of the sort she alone gave me, and May is about her baby, I feel, for out of the innocent blue eyes sometimes come looks so like her mother's that I am startled, for I tended May as a child as I now tend Lulu. This slight tie is enough to still hold us tenderly together, though death drops a veil between us, and I look without doubt or fear toward the time when in some way we shall meet again.

About books, yes, I've read "Mr. Isaacs" and "Dr. Claudius," and like them both. The other, "To Leeward," is not so good. "Little Pilgrim" was pretty, but why try to paint Heaven? Let it alone, and prepare for it whatever it is, sure that God knows what we need and deserve. I will send you Emerson's "Essays." Read those marked and see what you think of them. They did much for me, and if you like them you shall have more.
Ever your friend,
L. M. A.

IN 1884-85 there was much discussion and interest in Boston in the science of the power of mind over mind, and the application of mental power to the ails of the body. This latter application of the old faith in God and our highest self was extremely interesting and fascinating to Miss Alcott, and it absorbed much of her attention. Miss Alcott's studies of the subject finally led her to the acceptance of the belief that ills of the mind might be cured by the mind, but she did not eventually accept the application of the power of mind over bodily ails.

The subject entered into a letter of March 15, 1884:

It is very interesting, and I have had some high moments, but they don't last long, and though my mind is cheered up my body does not get over its ills. . . . I have my doubts still about the truth of *all* the good enthusiasts say. . . . A very sweet doctrine if one can only *do* it. I can't yet, but try it out of interest in the new application of the old truth and religion, which we all believe: that soul is greater than body,