

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.



OUR age has grown almost *blasé* of fiction; biographies interest us more than romance, and the record of the unseen inner life more than the most ingenious network of invention. In proportion as the individuality that reveals itself is marked and potent and the hidden springs of action are decisive and direct, the study is a fruitful one; and judged by these standards, the biography of Miss Alcott is a notable book, well worthy of careful and sympathetic consideration. Louisa Alcott's figure stands out clear-cut in the keen New England air, and firmly set upon the soil—native and typical in every line. "Her fame," says her biographer, "rests upon her works; her American publishers compute the sale of a million copies, from which she realized more than \$200,000." And how charming a fame! The happy, guileless world of children claims her as its own. She comes freely among them—a child herself in her simplicity and *camaraderie*, with that undefinable "something" which means sympathy, comprehension, and, above all, appreciation. We have all been under the spell, whether we can fairly conjure it up anew or not. But now that the story of her life has been told, with its unswerving purpose and will, its gentle and absolutely disinterested affections, her works seem to fade into insignificance, while her fame lifts itself upon a broader basis, and takes ampler scope and proportions. It is the woman who rises before us,—single-minded and single-hearted, with no distractions, no bewilderment, no vagaries, and always a master-voice in her life to be obeyed,—and who comes freely among us, children no more, but struggling men and women less well trained and equipped than she, but all the more grateful to be helped, to be sustained, and even to be rebuked by so valiant an example as hers.

It is difficult to realize that Louisa Alcott, the capable, practical bread-winner who resolutely set aside every idea that could not become an active working principle, should have been the daughter of Bronson Alcott, the visionary and mystic philosopher, the transcendentalist *par excellence*, whose whole life was spent in the clouds. Her journal begins, September 1, 1843, at Fruitlands, the little settlement near Concord established by Mr. Alcott and his friends to carry out their views of social reform. Louisa is ten years old. The child rises

at five o'clock and takes her cold bath. After breakfast she washes the dishes and does housework and ironing. Then a run on the hills, when she has "some thoughts—it was so beautiful up there." Lessons and problems such as these: "Father asked us what was God's noblest work. Anna said, 'Men,' but I said 'Babies.' Men are often bad; babies never are." And again: "What is man? A human being; an animal with a mind; a creature; a body; a soul and a mind." Bread and fruit for dinner, for no meat is allowed. A run in the wind again, playing horse, "and had a lovely time in the woods with Anna and Lizzie [her sisters]. We were fairies, and made gowns and paper wings. I 'fled' the highest of all." Songs in the evening, and to bed, where she cries because she has been naughty; makes good resolutions and puts herself to sleep reciting poetry—Mrs. Sigourney's lines, "I must not tease my mother!" At eleven she writes: "Life is pleasanter than it used to be, and I don't care about dying any more. Had a splendid run, and got a box of cones to burn. Sat and heard the pines sing a long time. Read Miss Bremer's 'Home' in the eve. Had good dreams, and woke now and then to think, and watch the moon. I had a pleasant time with my mind, for it was happy." She reads "dear" "Pilgrim's Progress," Martin Luther, Plutarch, Scott, Bettine's "Correspondence" with Goethe, and much poetry, which she also takes to writing. She begins now to realize the family cares and straits. Mr. Alcott's schemes do not prosper; the children are taken into the counsels, and go crying to bed. "More people coming to live with us," says Louisa; "I wish we could be together, and no one else. I don't see who is to clothe and feed us all when we are so poor now." She is very dismal and writes a poem, "Despondency." But her courage revives, and the light bursts upon her path again. "I had an early run in the woods before the dew was off the grass," she writes. "The moss was like velvet, and as I ran under the arches of yellow and red leaves I sang for joy, my heart was so bright and the world so beautiful. I stopped at the end of the walk and saw the sun shine out over the wide 'Virginia meadows.' It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for

me alone. It seemed as if I *felt* God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life." The pages of the journal are thus saturated with the child's moral experience. She gives samples of her father's teaching—Socratic dialogues on the elements of hope and faith, the virtues and vices. Among the vices to be eradicated she names "love of cats." But of greatest influence in her life were the confidential little notes exchanged between mother and daughter—tender words of sympathy and love, but of wise and gentle guidance as well; the constant presentation of life as a task, a discipline, and a conquest, and, on the child's part, no less a sense of conscience and of duty; of struggle and temptation in her own little world, and of heights to be attained. The mother's code was, Rule yourself, love your neighbor, do the duty which lies nearest you. At thirteen she sums up her plan of life. She is going to *work really to be good*. No use making good resolutions, or writing sad notes and crying over her sins, if it has no result. But now she feels a "true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother." To offset all these rather austere conditions and practice, we have just at the same time a delightful glimpse of merry, romping children—Louisa as the ringleader bursting in unexpectedly upon Mr. Emerson and Margaret Fuller, who were gravely discoursing upon education, and had asked to see Mr. Alcott's "model children."

Fruitlands collapsed, and with it Mr. Alcott's "resources of mind, body, and estate." In "Transcendental Wild Oats" Miss Alcott has given a humorous and yet touching account of the catastrophe, showing up with gentle irony the extravagances and aberrations of an idealism not mated with common sense. Mr. Alcott roused himself after a time and sought manual labor, which naturally proved inadequate for their support, and they found themselves obliged to accept shelter and assistance from friends in Concord. Later on it was decided that they should remove to Boston, where Mrs. Alcott found employment in benevolent societies as a visitor among the poor, and afterward opened an intelligence office. Mr. Alcott began his "Conversations," which furnished mental if not pecuniary resource, and were a means of escape from the sordid cares of life into the intellectual and speculative regions which he loved.

For the children the free, happy life of childhood had come to an end. Pent up in their small city quarters, they missed the range of the fields and woods, and, moreover, found themselves called upon to take part in the actual struggle for existence. Louisa resumed

her diary in Boston, May, 1850. "Seventeen years have I lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire—a truly good and useful woman." She bewails her shortcomings and temptations. "If I look in my glass, I try to keep down vanity about my long hair, my well-shaped head, and my good nose. In the street I try not to covet fine things. My quick tongue is always getting me into trouble, and my moodiness makes it hard to be cheerful when I think how poor we are, how much worry it is to live, and how many things I long to do I never can. So every day is a battle, and I'm so tired I don't want to live; only it's cowardly to die till you have done something." Strangely enough she heads this, "The Sentimental Period," and confides to us her romance, which dated from the reading of a book she found in Mr. Emerson's library,—none other than "The Correspondence of Goethe with a Child,"—which fired her with the desire to be a Bettine to her father's friend. "So I wrote letters to him, but never sent them; sat in a tall cherry tree at midnight, singing to the moon till the owls scared me to bed; left wild flowers on the doorstep of my 'Master' and sung Mignon's song under his window in very bad German. Not till many years later," she says, "did I tell *my* Goethe of this early romance and the part he played in it. He was much amused, and begged for his letters, kindly saying he felt honored to be so worshiped. The letters were burnt long ago, but Emerson remained my 'Master' while he lived, doing more for me—as for many another—than he knew, by the simple beauty of his life, the truth and wisdom of his books, the example of a great, good man, untempted and unspoiled by the world which he made better while in it, and left richer and nobler when he went." But a still wilder vein of romance was her passion for the stage. From her childhood she had composed and acted plays; apparently she was not without dramatic talent, and she was seized now with the fever to become an actress—a great tragic actress. I "shall be a Siddons, if I can," writes the demure Puritan maiden, shrewdly saying, "I could make plenty of money perhaps, and it is a very gay life." But it is her prudent and sensible mother who dissuades her from it, knowing the other side of this "gay life," and realizing that her daughter's gifts were not sufficient to make her a really great actress. One of her plays, however, "The Rival Prima Donnas," was accepted by a leading manager. Owing to some difficulty, it was not brought out, but it procured for her a free pass to the theater, which was a source of never-failing delight.

In the mean while the hard realities of life,

the hand-to-hand struggle with poverty, had every day to be faced. The girls each did their part. "Anna and I taught," says Louisa; "Lizzie was our little housekeeper—our angel in a cellar-kitchen; May went to school; father wrote and talked when he could get classes and conversations." Poor as they were, their home was rich in love and happiness and in a practical charity which made it a refuge for those poorer than themselves—the friendless and the lost, whom Mr. and Mrs. Alcott took into their home without fear, satisfied that the children could not better learn the misery of sin and the habit of sympathy and help. Many a meal was shared—the comforts, and even the necessaries of life, sacrificed for those whose need was greater than their own. In a footnote to the journal, at this time, Louisa says: "We had smallpox in the family this summer, caught from some poor immigrants whom mother took into our garden and fed one day. We girls had it lightly, but father and mother were very ill, and we had a curious time of exile, danger, and trouble. No doctors, and all got well." After the smallpox, Louisa started a little school, which kept her busy through the winter. In the evening, when her day's work was over, she sewed in order to add to her earnings. The school closed in the spring, and she engaged herself to go out to service with a relative "as second girl. I needed the change," she says; "could do the wash, and was glad to earn my \$2 a week. Home in October with \$34 for my wages." Then school again, month after month. Mrs. Alcott was occupied with boarders and sewing. Mr. Alcott went "West to try his luck—so poor, so hopeful, so serene," says Louisa. "In February father came home. . . . A dramatic scene when he arrived in the night. We were waked by hearing the bell. Mother flew down, crying 'My husband!' We rushed after, and five white figures embraced the half-frozen wanderer who came in hungry, tired, cold, and disappointed, but smiling bravely and as serene as ever. We fed and warmed and brooded over him, longing to ask if he had made any money, but not one did till little May said, after he had told all the pleasant things, 'Well, did people pay you?' Then with a queer look he opened his pocket-book and showed one dollar, saying with a smile that made our eyes fill, 'Only that! My overcoat was stolen, and I had to buy a shawl. Many promises were not kept, and traveling is costly; but I have opened the way, and another year shall do better.' I shall never forget how beautifully mother answered him, though the dear, hopeful soul had built much on his success; but with a beaming face she kissed him, saying, 'I call that doing *very well*. Since you are safely home, dear, we don't ask

anything more.' Anna and I choked down our tears and took a little lesson in real love which we never forgot, nor the look that the tired man and the tender woman gave one another. It was half tragic and comic, for father was very dirty and sleepy, and mother in a big nightcap and funny old jacket." So the brave girl looks on and learns the best that life can teach, plucking up spirit and hope where many another would despond, and shouldering the burden more courageously than ever. "I am grubbing away as usual," she says, "trying to get money enough to buy mother a nice warm shawl." She counts up her earnings—eleven dollars in all, five for a story, and four for a pile of sewing which she sat up all night to finish. She buys a crimson ribbon to trim a bonnet for May, the youngest sister, for whom the finery seems always reserved, a new gown for "good little Betty, who is wearing all the old gowns"; and for her father new neckties and some paper, so that "he can keep on with the beloved diaries though the heavens fall."

Thus passed the years of first youth—no gilded years for her, but full of "hard facts, irksome duties, many temptations, and the daily sacrifice of self," accepted at the time without bitterness or complaint, and, later on, as the schooling of the spirit which had taught her "the sweet uses of adversity, the value of honest work, the beautiful law of compensation, which gives more than it takes, and the real significance of life." Disdaining no service however humble which fell to her lot, she was gradually drifting towards her true vocation. She was now twenty-two, but from childhood she had written poems, stories, and plays of a melodramatic type, among them a "Bandit's Bride," and "The Captive of Castile; or, the Moorish Maiden's Vow." One of her stories had already been published, and now, under the title of "Flower Fables," she published a little collection of tales written by her at sixteen for Mr. Emerson's daughter Ellen. The book had quite a little success. The edition of sixteen hundred sold well, and she received \$32. From this time she was seldom without literary work of some kind. She wrote book-notices and poems for the papers, and planned stories, which she worked at when she could, in the intervals of school, sewing, and housework. Her winter's earnings are, school \$50, sewing \$50, stories \$20—"if I am ever paid," she adds. But evidently her spirits do not flag with all these exertions. She is again negotiating to have her play brought out, goes all over the great new theater, she says, and dances a jig on the immense stage. "In the eve I saw La Grange as *Norma*. . . . Quite stage-struck, and imagined myself in her place, with white robes and oak-leaf crown." Besides the excite-

ment of the theater, she enjoyed all the best lectures and readings that Boston then afforded—heard Emerson and Lowell, Thackeray, Dickens, and Mrs. Kemble. Theodore Parker befriended and encouraged her. She went to his Sunday evening receptions, where she had a glimpse of the celebrities of the day—Phillips, Garrison, Sumner, and the rest. She shyly sits in a corner and listens, but Mr. Parker comes up to her, and with a word and a warm hand-shake leaves her both proud and happy, “though I have my trials,” she says. “He is like a great fire where all can come and be warmed and comforted.” January, 1857, at the age of twenty-four, she chronicles her first new silk dress—a New Year’s gift, in which she felt very fine, going to two parties in it on New Year’s eve. In October of the same year Mr. Alcott decides to go back to Concord, in order to be near Mr. Emerson, “the one true friend,” says his daughter, “who loves and understands and helps him.” Throughout the volume nothing is more touching than the relation between Mr. Emerson and the Alcotts. On one occasion Louisa relates how her father had four talks at Mr. Emerson’s house, where he made \$30. “R. W. E. probably put in \$20,” she adds. “He has a sweet way of bestowing gifts on the table under a book, or behind a candlestick, when he thinks father wants a little money and no one will help him earn.” With some money of Mrs. Alcott’s a picturesque old house near the Emersons’ was bought, known as Orchard House, which became the permanent home of the Alcotts. While making it ready to occupy they hired part of a house in the village, and here in the following spring occurred the first break in the family, the death of the younger sister, Elizabeth, from the effects of scarlet fever caught two years before from some poor children whom her mother had nursed. Very pathetic is the record of that illness and passing away. The family all seem to draw together. Mr. Alcott returns from the West, where he has gone on another venture. Louisa gives up everything to devote herself to the sufferer. “Sad, quiet days in her room,” she says, “and strange nights keeping up the fire and watching the dear little shadow try to wile away the long, sleepless hours without troubling me. She sews, reads, sings softly, and lies looking at the fire—so sweet, and patient, and so worn, my heart is broken to see the change. . . . Dear little saint! I shall be better all my life for these sad hours with you. . . . March 14. My dear Beth died at three this morning after two years of patient pain. Last week she put her work away, saying the needle was ‘too heavy,’ and, having given us her few possessions, made ready for the parting

in her own simple, quiet way. For two days she suffered much, begging for ether, though its effect was gone. Tuesday she lay in father’s arms, and called us round her, smiling contentedly as she said, ‘All here!’ I think she bid us good-by then, as she held our hands and kissed us tenderly. Saturday she slept, and at midnight became unconscious, quietly breathing her life away till three; then with one last look of the beautiful eyes, she was gone. . . . On Monday Dr. Huntington read the chapel service, and we sang her favorite hymn. Mr. Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Sanborn, and John Pratt carried her out of the old home to the new one at Sleepy Hollow chosen by herself. So the first break comes, and I know what death means—a liberator for her, a teacher for us. . . . Death never seemed terrible to me, and now is beautiful; so I cannot fear it, but find it friendly and wonderful.”

Back to life again, however, with a greater rush than before. The elder sister Anna becomes engaged to Mr. Pratt. Louisa goes for a visit to Boston, where she “saw Charlotte Cushman, and had a stage-struck fit.” She had serious thoughts again of going on the stage, and even agreed to appear as “The Widow Pottle.” “The dress was a good disguise,” she says, “and I knew the part well. It was all a secret, and I had hopes of trying a new life; the old one being so changed now, I felt as if I must find interest in something absorbing.” But the manager broke his leg, and she had to give it up; “and when it was known,” she adds, not without a touch of mischief, “the dear, respectable relations were horrified at the idea. I’ll try again by-and-by, and see if I have the gift. Perhaps it is acting, not writing, I’m meant for. Nature must have a vent somehow.” But there is no mention of it again, and probably from this time all hopes of such a career were definitely abandoned. She returned to Concord and worked off her stage fever in writing a story called, “Only an Actress.” “I have plans simmering,” she says, “but must sweep, and dust, and wash my dishes a while longer, till I see my way.”

In July the family took possession of Orchard House, and, after seeing them comfortably installed, Louisa went off to Boston again in search of employment. And now we have hint of a dark hour—so dark, according to her biographer, that “as she walked over the mill-dam the running stream brought the thought of the River of Death, which would end all troubles.” But she conquered herself with the thought that there must be work for her somewhere, and that it was “cowardly to run away before the battle was over.” Mr. Parker’s words on Sunday again cheered and helped her. “Trust your fellow-beings,” he said, “and let

them help you. Don't be too proud to ask and accept the humblest work till you can find the task you want." So she took up life again, "teaching, writing, sewing, getting what I can from lectures, books, and good people. Life is my college," she says. "May I graduate well and earn some honors!"

A happy event in the spring is the marriage of her sister Anna, at Concord, of which she gives a bright account. "A lovely day; the house full of sunshine, flowers, friends, and happiness. . . . the old folks danced round the bridal pair on the lawn in the German fashion, making a pretty picture to remember, under our Revolutionary elm. . . . Mr. Emerson kissed her [the bride]; and I thought that honor would make even matrimony endurable, for he is the god of my idolatry and has been for years."

It would require no great penetration, even if she did not confess it herself, to discover that Miss Alcott was not disturbed by any sentimental proclivities or longings. Her heart was like a clear crystal well, reflecting the calm family affections, the free, active, and yet contained existence that is equal to its own needs and the needs of others. The supreme event of most women's lives, either as an ideal or a reality—marriage—had no hold upon her, and gave no color to her life or her imaginings. As she says herself, it is a boy's spirit that beats within her breast, and that leaps high now at a new and stirring call. Heroic times have come. The year 1861 brings the war; Miss Alcott says: "I like the stir in the air, and long for battle like a war-horse when he smells powder." "I've often longed to see a war," she says again, "and now I have my wish." As she can't fight she offers her services as a nurse, and starts off for the Union Hospital, Georgetown, in the December twilight, feeling as if she were the son of the house going to war. "A most interesting journey into a new world, full of stirring sights and sounds, new adventures, and an ever-growing sense of the great task I had undertaken. I said my prayers as I went rushing through the country white with tents, all alive with patriotism, and already red with blood. A solemn time, but I'm glad to live in it, and am sure it will do me good, whether I come out alive or dead." In January she writes: "I never began the year in a stranger place than this—five hundred miles from home, alone, among strangers, doing painful duties all day long, and leading a life of constant excitement in this great house, surrounded by three or four hundred men in all stages of suffering, disease, and death." She had evidently a talent for nursing, and loved it. Though often homesick and worn out, she found real pleasure in tending and cheering the poor souls who seemed so docile and grateful, and many

of them truly lovable and manly. She speaks especially of one,— "the prince of patients," she calls him,— a Virginia blacksmith, "about thirty, I think, tall and handsome, mortally wounded, and dying royally without reproach, repining, or remorse." After a while she took night-work, which she liked, as it gave her time for a morning run on the hills. "I trot up and down the streets in all directions," she says, "sometimes to the Heights, then half-way to Washington, again to the hill, over which the long trains of army wagons are constantly vanishing and ambulances appearing. That way the fighting lies, and I long to follow." But before the end of six weeks she was attacked with symptoms of typhoid pneumonia. She refused to give up at first, but finally, without her knowledge, her father was telegraphed for, and she was taken home, already in the delirium of fever. For three weeks she lay unconscious and at the point of death. When she recovered her senses she found herself quite another person. She did not know herself when she looked in the glass. Her beautiful hair, a yard and a half long, had to be cut off. When she tried to walk she cried because she found that her legs would n't go. She slowly convalesced in the spring, but never fully recovered her former health and strength. But the old life had to be taken up. Money was wanted, and she wrote hospital sketches, which, to her surprise, made a great hit, and showed her the vein in which she should excel. She also worked over her novel of "Moods," which, after careful revision and correction, was finally published, and attracted much notice. She was steadily growing into popularity, and her dreams seemed about to be fulfilled. But she was doomed to longer trials and struggles. The stories which were most in demand and paid best were sensational stories which she looked upon as "rubbish," but which were easily despatched, and kept the family comfortable. She could not always rise out of her depression, and writes with discouragement: "A dull, heavy month, grubbing in the kitchen, sewing, cleaning house, and trying to like my duty." Greatly feeling the need of change and relaxation, she took advantage of an opportunity which offered to go abroad, where she remained for a little over a year. On her return, she plunged into literary work more violently than ever, for the family were in arrears again. She agreed to write a fifty-dollar tale once a month, to do editorial work on a magazine, and furnish other stories, long and short, one of which, in twenty-four chapters, one hundred and eighty-five pages, she wrote in a fortnight, "besides work, sewing, nursing, and company."

Among other offers, the firm of Roberts Brothers made the request for a girls' book.

She meekly said she would try to write one, although she did not enjoy the task. "Never liked girls," she says, "or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it." This was the origin of "Little Women," which was published in October, 1868. Before the month was over the first edition was gone, and one called for in London. Says her biographer: "Already twenty-one years have passed, and another generation has come up since she published this book, yet it still commands a steady sale." Nor is its success confined to this country. It has been "translated into French, German, and Dutch, and has become familiarly known in England and on the Continent." Inspired by her success, Miss Alcott began at once the sequel to "Little Women," which she finished in two months—so full of her work, she says, that she could not stop to eat or sleep. "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life!" she indignantly exclaims. She receives notes asking for pictures, autograph, family history, and more books at once, for Louisa Alcott was now a celebrity. People came to stare at her. "Reporters haunt the place to look at the authoress, who dodges into the woods *à la* Hawthorne" to escape. But the stress has been too much for her, and her health gives way completely. "Headaches, cough, and weariness" keep her from working, as she once could, fourteen hours a day. She writes the conclusion to "The Old-Fashioned Girl," "with left hand in a sling, one foot up, head aching, and no voice." Such conditions as these could not endure, and another visit abroad was planned with her sister May, who was studying to be an artist. While in Rome they had news of the death of their brother-in-law, Mr. Pratt, which was a great shock to them both. Taking upon herself, as usual, the cares and responsibilities of the family, Miss Alcott began at once to write "Little Men," in order to provide support for her sister and the boys, "to whom I must be a father now," she says. The book was published the very day she arrived home some months later. A great red placard announcing it was pinned up in the carriage, and fifty thousand copies already sold. She proudly writes in her diary: "Twenty years ago I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose." And so she sets new tasks for herself, furnishing book after book in order to meet the eager demands of her publishers. Each of her volumes provides some added comfort or ease for her family. With \$1000 she sends May off to

London again to complete her art education. Another sum of \$4500 goes to buy a new home for her widowed sister and the boys. "So she has *her* wish," writes Louisa, "and is happy. When shall I have mine? Ought to be contented with knowing I help both sisters by my brains. But I'm selfish, and want to go away and rest in Europe. Never shall." On the contrary, more trials await her, and the shadow of a great sorrow had already fallen. Her mother's health, which had long been failing, began rapidly to decline. Louisa took charge of the nursing, fell desperately ill herself, and feared to go before her mother, "but pulled through, and got up slowly to help her die." November 25, 1877, Mrs. Alcott fell quietly asleep in her daughter's arms, looking up at her with a smile and calling her "mother." "I was so glad," says Louisa, "when the last weary breath was drawn, and silence came, with its rest and peace. . . . Quiet days afterward, resting in her rest. My duty is done, and now I shall be glad to follow her. . . . I never wish her back, but a great warmth seems gone out of my life, and there is no motive to go on now. . . . I think I shall soon follow her, and am quite ready to go now she no longer needs me." Very beautiful is her poem in memory of her mother.

TRANSFIGURATION.

MYSTERIOUS Death! who in a single hour
 Life's gold can so refine,
 And by thy art divine
 Change mortal weakness to immortal power!

Age, pain, and sorrow dropped the veils they wore,
 And showed the tender eyes
 Of angels in disguise,
 Whose discipline so patiently she bore.

Faith that withstood the shocks of toil and time;
 Hope that defied despair;
 Patience that conquered care;
 And loyalty, whose courage was sublime;

The Spartan spirit that made life so grand,
 Mating poor daily needs
 With high, heroic deeds,
 That wrested happiness from Fate's hard hand.

We thought to weep, but sing for joy instead,
 Full of the grateful peace
 That follows her release;
 For nothing but the weary dust lies dead.

O noble woman! never more a queen
 Than in the laying down
 Of scepter and of crown
 To win a greater kingdom, yet unseen;

Teaching us how to seek the highest goal,
 To earn the true success,—
 To live, to love, to bless,—
 And make Death proud to take a royal soul.



LOUISA MAY ALCOTT. (AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY NOTMAN, BOSTON.)

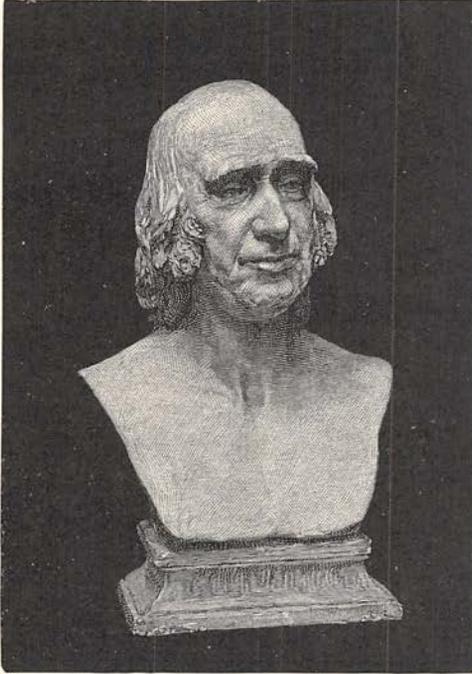
Close upon the death of the mother came the marriage of May in London to Ernest Nieriker, a young Swiss, cultivated and artistic. They settled in Paris, and May's happy letters give a glimpse of a charming home and "an ideal life with painting, music, love, and the world shut out." For the first time Louisa's own heart utters a cry: "How different our lives are just now! I so lonely, sad, and sick; she so happy, well, and blest." The year passes. "I dawdle about," she says, "and wait to see if I am to live or die. If I live, it is for some new work. I wonder what? . . . So ends 1878, a great contrast to last December. Then I thought I was done with life; now I can enjoy a good deal, and wait to see what I am spared to do. Thank God for both the sorrow and the joy." But a crushing blow was in store for her now. In November a little girl was born to May. All went well at first. Then came forebodings. "May not doing well. The weight on my heart is not all imagination. She was too happy to have it last, and I fear the end is coming. . . . Wednesday, December 31. A dark day for us. A telegram from Ernest to Mr. Emerson tells us May is dead. . . . I was alone when Mr. Emerson came. Ernest sent to him, knowing I was feeble, and hoping Mr. Emerson would soften the blow. I found him looking at May's portrait, pale and tearful, with the paper in his hand. 'My child, I wish I could prepare you; but alas, alas!' Then his voice failed, and he gave me the telegram. I was not surprised, and read the hard words as if I knew it all before. 'I am prepared,' I said, and thanked him. He was much moved

and very tender. I shall remember gratefully the look, the grasp, the tears he gave me; and I am sure that hard moment was made bearable by the presence of this our best and tenderest friend."

Of all the trials of her life, Miss Alcott says she found this the hardest to bear, perhaps on account of her feeble health; nor could she understand why May should be taken when life was richest, and she be left, who had done her task and could well be spared. Letters came, telling the whole sad story. May had prepared for death. "If I die when baby comes," she wrote, "remember I have been so unspeakably happy for a year that I ought to be content." Louisa was to have her baby and her pictures. "A very precious legacy! Rich payment for the little I could do for her!" The box arrived with pictures, clothes, vases, ornaments, a little work-basket, and a lock of May's pretty hair tied with blue ribbon—"all that is now left us of this bright soul but the baby, soon to come." In the autumn the baby arrived, and Miss Alcott took it to her heart as her very own, for through her whole life this was the relation that appealed to her most strongly. She was always the caretaker, the protector. To her own mother she had been the mother, to each of her sisters in turn, and even to her nephews, and now more than ever to this motherless child, who from the first nestled in her arms and looked up to her for a mother's love. Miss Alcott threw herself into her new charge with all the passionate devotion of which she was capable. "My life is absorbed in my baby," she writes. And again: "I often go at night to

see if she is really *here*, and the sight of the little head is like sunshine to me. . . . When I hold my Lulu I feel as if even death had its compensations. A new world for me."

April 27, 1882, occurred the death of Mr. Emerson. Louisa pays him her last tribute. "Our best and greatest American gone. The nearest and dearest friend father has ever had,



A. BRONSON ALCOTT. (AFTER A BUST BY D. C. FRENCH.)

and the man who has helped me most by his life, his books, his society. I can never tell all he has been to me—from the time I sang Mignon's song under his window (a little girl) and wrote letters *à la* Bettine to him, my Goethe at fifteen, up through my hard years, when his essays on Self-Reliance, Character, Compensation, Love, and Friendship, helped me to understand myself and life and God and Nature. Illustrious and beloved friend, good-by!"

In the autumn of the same year Mr. Alcott was stricken with paralysis, from which he only partly recovered to be tended and lovingly provided for by the ever-watchful Louisa. Enfeebled, indeed completely broken down, by overwork and exertion, she yet feels the need to write and respond to the calls made upon her. She has attacks of vertigo and sleepless nights, her head working like a steam-engine, planning "Jo's Boys" to the end. The doctor wisely agrees to let her write half an hour a day. "Rebellious brains want to be attended to," she says, "or trouble comes." The records in the Journal are more and more scant.

She chronicles the birthdays, her father's and her own, which fall on the same day: "Nov. 29. Father eighty-five. L. M. A. fifty-two."

July, 1886, closes the Journal. Unable to write or even to read, she busied herself for the most part with fancy work, making flowers and pen-wipers for her friends. Her father was also rapidly failing. She could not now be with him, but visited him when she was able. In March she drove to see him for the last time. Entering the carriage, she forgot to put on her fur wrap, and the following day was seized with violent pain in the head, which the doctor at once pronounced serious. The trouble increased, and "at 3.30 P. M., March 6, 1888, she passed quietly on to the rest which she so much needed," not knowing that her father had already preceded her. She had made all her preparations, meeting death as she had met life, with composure and self-possession—ready at any call, and "not wanting to live if she could not be of use." "The friends of the family," says Mrs. Cheney, "who gathered to pay their last tribute of respect and love to the aged father were met at the threshold by the startling intelligence, 'Louisa Alcott is dead,' and a deeper sadness fell upon every heart. The old patriarch had gone to his rest in the fullness of time, 'corn ripe for the sickle,' but few realized how entirely his daughter had worn out her earthly frame. . . . Her body was carried to Concord and placed in the beautiful cemetery of Sleepy Hollow, where her dearest ones were already laid to rest. 'Her boys' went beside her as a guard of honor, and stood around, as she was placed across the feet of father, mother, and sister, "that she might take care of them as she had done all her life."

"Faithful unto death" may be written of this devoted soul to whom the thought of self seems never to have occurred. In the presence of so admirable a life we must pause in silence and respect, and weigh well our words if we would even give a hint of what might seem like disparagement or criticism. But we can only do justice to so genuine and direct a character as Miss Alcott by directness and sincerity on our part as well. We can only truly measure the full worth and meaning of such a life by an earnest effort to understand and to explain its underlying principles, which may at the same time lay bare its limitations. So sturdy and practical a will, so firm a grasp on reality, so determined and even conscious a reaction against the exaggerations of idealism, made her the excellent, helpful woman that she was, but also, perhaps, prevented the higher flight, the "*elan*" which might have borne her still more aloft, within sight of illumined and infinite horizons. A greater power of imagination might have made her more restless, more sensitive

to the ruggedness of her lot, but at the same time it might have given wings to her feet and kindled that ardor and glow which make of self-sacrifice a beacon-light. Doubtless the fault lies greatly in ourselves, who are more slack of fiber, less drilled and less sustained than she was, that we are not more fired by her example, more stimulated by the story of her struggles and reward. But while we are necessarily aware of the deep spiritual life which was the source of so much energy and self-surrender, we are too persistently reminded of the material results — the money earned from her "brains," the comfort and freedom purchased for her family, rather than of the clearer insight gained, the indwelling satisfaction and repose, the vistas and heights whereto we also may aspire. Strangely enough, in her works, which are the counterpart of her life, her defect becomes a merit, and accounts for their phenomenal success. What was it in Miss Alcott's books that surprised and delighted the children of a score of years ago, and that still holds its charm for the childhood of to-day? Was it a new world that she discovered — a fairy-land of imagination and romance, peopled by heroes and enchanted beings? Far from it. It was the literal, homespun, child's world of to-day; the common air and skies, the common life of every New England boy and girl, such as she

knew it; the daily joys and cares, the games and romps and jolly companions — all the actuality and detail of familiar and accustomed things which children love. For children are born realists, who delight in the marvelous simply because for them the marvelous is no less real than the commonplace, and is accepted just as unconditionally. Miss Alcott met the children on their own plane, gravely discussed their problems, and adopted their point of view, drawing in no wise upon her invention or imagination, but upon the facts of her own memory and experience. Whether or not the picture, so true to the life, as she had lived it, will remain true and vital for all times cannot now be determined. For the literature of children, no less than for our own, a higher gift may be needed; more finish, and less of the "rough-and-ready" of every-day habit and existence; above all, perhaps, a larger generalization and suggestion, and the touch of things unseen as well as things familiar.

But whatever the fate of her books, Miss Alcott deserves the niche she has won, and the monument built for her in the record of a life which is a protest against the doubts of the age — the fear that duty may have lost its sway and character its foundation, and that happiness is the sole measure and rule of living.

Josephine Lazarus.



LOUISA MAY ALCOTT. (AFTER A BUST BY W. RICKERSON.)