

Little Women

by Louisa May Alcott

Beth, Meg, and Jo March are the daughters of Mrs. March. Their next-door neighbor is an elderly, rich man named Mr. Laurence, who is raising his grandson, Laurie. Beth is very shy and perceives Mr. Laurence to be a grumpy man.

Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful

5 But Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up¹ courage to go to the ‘Mansion of Bliss,’ as Meg called it. She went once with Jo, but the old gentleman, not being aware of her infirmity, stared at her so hard from under his heavy eyebrows, and said “Hey!” so loud, that he frightened her so much her ‘feet chattered on the floor,’ she never told her mother, and she ran away, declaring she would never go there any more, not even for the dear piano.

10 No persuasions or enticements could overcome her fear, till, the fact coming to Mr. Laurence’s ear in some mysterious way, he set about mending matters. During one of the brief calls he made, he artfully led the conversation to music, and talked away about great singers whom he had seen, fine organs he had heard, and told such charming anecdotes that Beth found it impossible to stay in her distant corner, but crept nearer and nearer, as if fascinated. At the back of his chair, she stopped and stood listening, with her great eyes wide open and her cheeks red with excitement of this unusual performance. Taking no more notice of her than if she had been a fly, Mr. Laurence talked on about Laurie’s lessons and teachers. And presently, as if the idea had just occurred to him, he said to Mrs. March:

15 “The boy neglects his music now, and I’m glad of it, for he was getting too fond of it. But the piano suffers for want of use. Wouldn’t some of your girls like to run over, and practice on it now and then, just to keep it in tune, you know, ma’am?”

20 Beth took a step forward, and pressed her hands tightly together to keep from clapping them, for this was an irresistible temptation, and the thought of practicing on that splendid instrument quite took her breath away. Before Mrs. March could reply, Mr. Laurence went on with an odd little nod and smile. “They needn’t see or speak to anyone, but run in at any time. For I’m shut up in my study at the other end of the house, Laurie is out a great deal, and the servants are never near the drawing room after nine o’clock.”

25 Here he rose, as if going, and Beth made up her mind to speak, for that last arrangement left nothing to be desired. “Please, tell the young ladies what I say, and if they don’t care to come, why, never mind.” Here a little hand slipped into his, and Beth looked up at him with a face full of gratitude, as she said, in her earnest yet timid way.

“Oh sir, they do care, very very much!”

30 “Are you the musical girl?” he asked, without any startling “Hey!” as he looked down at her very kindly.

"I'm Beth. I love it dearly, and I'll come, if you are quite sure nobody will hear me, and be disturbed," she added, fearing to be rude, and trembling at her own boldness as she spoke.

35 "Not a soul, my dear. The house is empty half the day, so come and drum away as much as you like, and I shall be obliged to you."

"How kind you are, sir!"

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¹ Pluck up: To gather up