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[Louisa May Alcott](#)

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## Chapter 17 - Among The Maids

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Although this story is about Jo's boys, her girls cannot be neglected, because they held a high place in this little republic, and especial care was taken to fit them to play their parts worthily in the great republic which offered them wider opportunities and more serious duties. To many the social influence was the better part of the training they received; for education is not confined to books, and the finest characters often graduate from no college, but make experience their master, and life their book. Others cared only for the mental culture, and were in danger of over-studying, under the delusion which pervades New England that learning must be had at all costs, forgetting that health and real wisdom are better. A third class of ambitious girls hardly knew what they wanted, but were hungry for whatever could fit them to face the world and earn a living, being driven by necessity, the urgency of some half-conscious talent, or the restlessness of strong young natures to break away from the narrow life which no longer satisfied.

At Plumfield all found something to help them; for the growing institution had not yet made its rules as fixed as the laws of the Medes and Persians, and believed so heartily in the right of all sexes, colours, creeds, and ranks to education, that there was room for everyone who knocked, and a welcome to the shabby youths from up country, the eager girls from the West, the awkward freedman or woman from the South, or the well-born student whose poverty made this college a possibility when other doors were barred. There still was prejudice, ridicule, neglect in high places, and prophecies of failure to contend against; but the Faculty was composed of cheerful, hopeful men and women who had seen greater reforms spring from smaller roots, and after stormy seasons blossom beautifully, to add prosperity and honour to the nation. So they worked on steadily and bided their time, full of increasing faith in their attempt as year after year their numbers grew, their plans succeeded, and the sense of usefulness in this most vital of all professions blessed them with its sweet rewards.

Among the various customs which had very naturally sprung up was one especially useful and interesting to 'the girls', as the young women liked to be called. It all grew out of the old sewing hour still kept up by the three sisters long after the little work-boxes had expanded into big baskets full of household mending. They were busy women, yet on Saturdays they tried to meet in one of the three sewing-rooms; for even classic Parnassus had its nook where Mrs Amy often sat among her servants, teaching them to make and mend, thereby giving them a respect for economy, since the rich lady did not scorn to darn her hose, and sew on buttons. In these household retreats, with books and work, and their daughters by them, they read and sewed and talked in the sweet privacy that domestic women love, and can make so helpful by a wise mixture of cooks and chemistry, table linen and theology, prosaic duties and good poetry.

Mrs Meg was the first to propose enlarging this little circle; for as she went her motherly rounds among the young women she found a sad lack of order, skill, and industry in this branch of education. Latin, Greek, the higher mathematics, and science of all sorts prospered finely; but the dust gathered on the work-baskets, frayed elbows went unheeded, and some of the blue stockings sadly needed mending. Anxious lest the usual sneer at learned women should apply to 'our girls', she gently lured two or three of the most untidy to her house, and made the hour so pleasant, the lesson so kindly, that they took the hint, were grateful for the favour, and asked to come again. Others soon begged to make the detested weekly duty lighter by joining the party, and soon it was a privilege so much desired that the old museum was refitted with sewing-machines, tables, rocking-chair, and a cheerful fireplace, so that, rain or shine, the needles might go on undisturbed.

Here Mrs Meg was in her glory, and stood wielding her big shears like a queen as she cut out white work, fitted dresses, and directed Daisy, her special aide, about the trimming of hats, and completing the lace and ribbon trifles which add grace to the simplest costume and save poor or busy girls so much money and time. Mrs Amy contributed taste, and decided the great question of colours and complexions; for few women, even the most learned, are without that desire to look well which makes many a plain face comely, as well as many a pretty one ugly for want of skill and knowledge of the fitness of things. She also took her turn to provide books for the readings, and as art was her forte she gave them selections from Ruskin, Hamerton, and Mrs Jameson, who is never old. Bess read these aloud as her contribution, and Josie took her turn at the romances, poetry, and plays her uncles recommended. Mrs Jo gave little lectures on health, religion, politics, and the various questions in which all should be interested, with copious extracts from Miss Cobbe's Duties of Women, Miss Brackett's Education of American Girls, Mrs Duffy's No Sex in Education, Mrs Woolson's Dress Reform, and many of the other excellent books wise women write for their sisters, now that they are waking up and asking: 'What shall we do?'

It was curious to see the prejudices melt away as ignorance was enlightened, indifference change to interest, and intelligent minds set thinking, while quick wits and lively tongues added spice to the discussions which inevitably followed. So the feet that wore the neatly mended hose carried wiser heads than before, the pretty gowns covered hearts warmed with higher purposes, and the hands that dropped the thimbles for pens, lexicons, and celestial globes, were better fitted for life's work, whether to rock cradles, tend the sick, or help on the great work of the world.

One day a brisk discussion arose concerning careers for women. Mrs Jo had read something on the subject and asked each of the dozen girls sitting about the room, what she intended to do on leaving college. The answers were as usual: 'I shall teach, help mother, study medicine, art,' etc.; but nearly all ended with:

'Till I marry.'

'But if you don't marry, what then?' asked Mrs Jo, feeling like a girl again as she listened to the answers, and watched the thoughtful, gay, or eager faces.

'Be old maids, I suppose. Horrid, but inevitable, since there are so many superfluous women,' answered a lively lass, too pretty to fear single blessedness unless she chose it.

'It is well to consider that fact, and fit yourselves to be useful, not superfluous women. That class, by the way, is largely made up of widows, I find; so don't consider it a slur on maidenhood.'

'That's a comfort! Old maids aren't sneered at half as much as they used to be, since some of them have grown famous and proved that woman isn't a half but a whole human being, and can stand alone.'

'Don't like it all the same. We can't all be like Miss Nightingale, Miss Phelps, and the rest.'

So what can we do but sit in a corner and look on? asked a plain girl with a dissatisfied expression.

'Cultivate cheerfulness and content, if nothing else. But there are so many little odd jobs waiting to be done that nobody need "sit idle and look on", unless she chooses,' said Mrs Meg, with a smile, laying on the girl's head the new hat she had just trimmed.

'Thank you very much. Yes, Mrs Brooke, I see; it's a little job, but it makes me neat and happy - and grateful,' she added, looking up with brighter eyes as she accepted the labour of love and the lesson as sweetly as they were given.

'One of the best and most beloved women I know has been doing odd jobs for the Lord for years, and will keep at it till her dear hands are folded in her coffin. All sorts of things she does - picks up neglected children and puts them in safe homes, saves lost girls, nurses poor women in trouble, sews, knits, trots, begs, works for the poor day after day with no reward but the thanks of the needy, the love and honour of the rich who make Saint Matilda their almoner. That's a life worth living; and I think that quiet little woman will get a higher seat in Heaven than many of those of whom the world has heard.'

'I know it's lovely, Mrs Bhaer; but it's dull for young folks. We do want a little fun before we buckle to,' said a Western girl with a wide-awake face.

'Have your fun, my dear; but if you must earn your bread, try to make it sweet with cheerfulness, not bitter with the daily regret that it isn't cake. I used to think mine was a very hard fate because I had to amuse a somewhat fretful old lady; but the books I read in that lonely library have been of immense use to me since, and the dear old soul bequeathed me Plumfield for my "cheerful service and affectionate care". I didn't deserve it, but I did use to try to be jolly and kind, and get as much honey out of duty as I could, thanks to my dear mother's help and advice.'

'Gracious! if I could earn a place like this, I'd sing all day and be an angel; but you have to take your chance, and get nothing for your pains, perhaps. I never do,' said the Westerner, who had a hard time with small means and large aspirations.

'Don't do it for the reward; but be sure it will come, though not in the shape you expect. I worked hard for fame and money one winter; but I got neither, and was much disappointed. A year afterwards I found I had earned two prizes: skill with my pen, and Professor Bhaer.'

Mrs Jo's laugh was echoed blithely by the girls, who liked to have these conversations enlivened by illustrations from life.

'You are a very lucky woman,' began the discontented damsel, whose soul soared above new hats, welcome as they were, but did not quite know where to steer.

'Yet her name used to be "Luckless Jo", and she never had what she wanted till she had given up hoping for it,' said Mrs Meg.

'I'll give up hoping, then, right away, and see if my wishes will come. I only want to help my folks, and get a good school.'

'Take this proverb for your guide: "Get the distaff ready, and the Lord will send the flax",' answered Mrs Jo.

'We'd better all do that, if we are to be spinsters,' said the pretty one, adding gaily, 'I think I should like it, on the whole - they are so independent. My Aunt Jenny can do just what she likes, and ask no one's leave; but Ma has to consult Pa about everything. Yes, I'll give you my chance, Sally, and be a "superfluum", as Mr Plock says.'

'You'll be one of the first to go into bondage, see if you aren't. Much obliged, all the same.'

'Well, I'll get my distaff ready, and take whatever flax the Fates send - single, or double-twisted, as the powers please.'

'That is the right spirit, Nelly. Keep it up, and see how happy life will be with a brave heart, a willing hand, and plenty to do.'

'No one objects to plenty of domestic work or fashionable pleasure, I find; but the minute we begin to study, people tell us we can't bear it, and warn us to be very careful. I've tried the other things, and got so tired I came to college; though my people predict nervous exhaustion and an early death. Do you think there is any danger?' asked a stately girl, with an anxious glance at the blooming face reflected in the mirror opposite.

'Are you stronger or weaker than when you came two years ago, Miss Winthrop?'

'Stronger in body, and much happier in mind. I think I was dying of ennui; but the doctors called it inherited delicacy of constitution. That is why mamma is so anxious, and I wish not to go too fast.'

'Don't worry, my dear; that active brain of yours was starving for good food; it has plenty now, and plain living suits you better than luxury and dissipation. It is all nonsense about girls not being able to study as well as boys. Neither can bear cramming; but with proper care both are better for it; so enjoy the life your instinct led you to, and we will prove that wise headwork is a better cure for that sort of delicacy than tonics, and novels on the sofa, where far too many of our girls go to wreck nowadays. They burn the candle at both ends; and when they break down they blame the books, not the balls.'

'Dr Nan was telling me about a patient of hers who thought she had heart-complaint, till Nan made her take off her corsets, stopped her coffee and dancing all night, and made her eat, sleep, walk, and live regularly for a time; and now she's a brilliant cure. Common sense versus custom, Nan said.'

'I've had no headaches since I came here, and can do twice as much studying as I did at home. It's the air, I think, and the fun of going ahead of the boys,' said another girl, tapping her big forehead with her thimble, as if the lively brain inside was in good working order and enjoyed the daily gymnastics she gave it.

'Quality, not quantity, wins the day, you know. Our brains may be smaller, but I don't see that they fall short of what is required of them; and if I'm not mistaken, the largest-headed man in our class is the dullest,' said Nelly, with a solemn air which produced a gale of merriment; for all knew that the young Goliath she mentioned had been metaphorically slain by this quick-witted David on many a battle-field, to the great disgust of himself and his mates.

'Mrs Brooke, do I gauge on the right or the wrong side?' asked the best Greek scholar of her class, eyeing a black silk apron with a lost expression.

'The right, Miss Pierson; and leave a space between the tucks; it looks prettier so.'

'I'll never make another; but it will save my dresses from ink-stains, so I'm glad I've got it'; and the erudite Miss Pierson laboured on, finding it a harder task than any Greek root she ever dug up.

'We paper-stainers must learn how to make shields, or we are lost. I'll give you a pattern of the pinafore I used to wear in my "blood-and-thunder days", as we call them,' said Mrs Jo, trying to remember what became of the old tin-kitchen which used to hold her works.

'Speaking of writers reminds me that my ambition is to be a George Eliot, and thrill the world! It must be so splendid to know that one has such power, and to hear people own that one possesses a "masculine intellect"! I don't care for most women's novels, but hers are immense; don't you think so, Mrs Bhaer?' asked the girl with the big forehead, and torn braid on her skirt.

'Yes; but they don't thrill me as little Charlotte Bronte's books do. The brain is there, but the heart seems left out. I admire, but I don't love, George Eliot; and her life is far sadder to me than Miss Bronte's, because, in spite of the genius, love, and fame, she missed the light without which no soul is truly great, good, or happy.'

'Yes'm, I know; but still it's so romantic and sort of new and mysterious, and she was great in one sense. Her nerves and dyspepsia do rather destroy the illusion; but I adore famous people and mean to go and see all I can scare up in London some day.'

'You will find some of the best of them busy about just the work I recommend to you; and if you want to see a great lady, I'll tell you that Mrs Laurence means to bring one here today. Lady Abercrombie is lurching with her, and after seeing the college is to call on us. She especially wanted to see our sewing-school, as she is interested in things of this sort, and gets them up at home.'

'Bless me! I always imagined lords and ladies did nothing but ride round in a coach and six, go to balls, and be presented to the Queen in cocked hats, and trains and feathers,' exclaimed an artless young person from the wilds of Maine, whither an illustrated paper occasionally wandered.

'Not at all; Lord Abercrombie is over here studying up our American prison system, and my lady is busy with the schools - both very high-born, but the simplest and most sensible people I've met this long time. They are neither of them young nor handsome, and dress plainly; so don't expect anything splendid. Mr Laurence was telling me last night about a friend of his who met my lord in the hall, and owing to a rough greatcoat and a red face, mistook him for a coachman, and said: "Now, my man, what do you want here?" Lord Abercrombie mildly mentioned who he was, and that he had come to dinner. And the poor host was much afflicted, saying afterward: "Why didn't he wear his stars and garters? then a fellow would know he was a lord."'

The girls laughed again, and a general rustle betrayed that each was prinking a bit before the titled guest arrived. Even Mrs Jo settled her collar, and Mrs Meg felt if her cap was right, while Bess shook out her curls and Josie boldly consulted the glass; for they were women, in spite of philosophy and philanthropy.

'Shall we all rise?' asked one girl, deeply impressed by the impending honour.

'It would be courteous.'

'Shall we shake hands?'

'No, I'll present you en masse, and your pleasant faces will be introduction enough.'

'I wish I'd worn my best dress. Ought to have told us,' whispered Sally.

'Won't my folks be surprised when I tell them we have had a real lady to call on us?' said another.

'Don't look as if you'd never seen a gentlewoman before, Milly. We are not all fresh from the wilderness,' added the stately damsel who, having Mayflower ancestors, felt that she was the equal of all the crowned heads of Europe.

'Hush, she's coming! Oh, my heart, what a bonnet!' cried the gay girl in a stage whisper; and every eye was demurely fixed upon the busy hands as the door opened to admit Mrs Laurence and her guest.

It was rather a shock to find, after the general introduction was over, that this daughter of a hundred earls was a stout lady in a plain gown, and a rather weather-beaten bonnet, with a bag of papers in one hand and a note-book in the other. But the face was full of benevolence, the sonorous voice very kind, the genial manners very winning, and about the whole person an indescribable air of high breeding which made beauty of no consequence, costume soon forgotten, and the moment memorable to the keen-eyed girls whom nothing escaped.

A little chat about the rise, growth, and success of this particular class, and then Mrs Jo led the conversation to the English lady's work, anxious to show her pupils how rank dignifies labour, and charity blesses wealth.

It was good for these girls to hear of the evening-schools supported and taught by women whom they knew and honoured; of Miss Cobbe's eloquent protest winning the protection of the law for abused wives; Mrs Butler saving the lost; Mrs Taylor, who devoted one room in her historic house to a library for the servants; Lord Shaftesbury, busy with his new tenement-houses in the slums of London; of prison reforms; and all the brave work being done in God's name by the rich and great for the humble and the poor. It impressed them more than many quiet home lectures would have done, and roused an ambition to help when their time should come, well knowing that even in glorious America there is still plenty to be done before she is what she should be - truly just, and free, and great. They were also quick to see that Lady Abercrombie treated all there as her equals, from stately Mrs Laurence, to little Josie, taking notes of everything and privately resolving to have some thick-soled English boots as soon as possible. No one would have guessed that she had a big house in London, a castle in Wales, and a grand country seat in Scotland, as she spoke of Parnassus with admiration, Plumfield as a 'dear old home', and the college as an honour to all concerned in it. At that, of course, every head went up a little, and when my lady left, every hand was ready for the hearty shake the noble Englishwoman gave them, with words they long remembered:

'I am very pleased to see this much-neglected branch of a woman's education so well conducted here, and I have to thank my friend Mrs Laurence for one of the most charming pictures I've seen in America - Penelope among her maids.'

A group of smiling faces watched the stout boots trudge away, respectful glances followed the shabby bonnet till it was out of sight, and the girls felt a truer respect for their titled guest than if she had come in the coach and six, with all her diamonds on.

'I feel better about the "odd jobs" now. I only wish I could do them as well as Lady Abercrombie does,' said one.

'I thanked my stars my buttonholes were nice, for she looked at them and said: "Quite workmanlike, upon my word,"' added another, feeling that her gingham gown had come to honour.

'Her manners were as sweet and kind as Mrs Brooke's. Not a bit stiff or condescending, as I expected. I see now what you meant, Mrs Bhaer, when you said once that well-bred people were the same all the world over.'

Mrs Meg bowed her thanks for the compliment, and Mrs Bhaer said:

'I know them when I see them, but never shall be a model of deportment myself. I'm glad you enjoyed the little visit. Now, if you young people don't want England to get ahead of us in many ways, you must bestir yourselves and keep abreast; for our sisters are in earnest, you see, and don't waste time worrying about their sphere, but make it wherever duty calls them.'

'We will do our best, ma'am,' answered the girls heartily, and trooped away with their work-baskets, feeling that though they might never be Harriet Martineaus, Elizabeth Brownings, or George Eliots, they might become noble, useful, and independent women, and earn for themselves some sweet title from the grateful lips of the poor, better than any a queen could bestow.