

Alcott Louisa May

# May Flowers



Луиза Мэй Олкотт

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## Louisa May Alcott

### May Flowers

Being Boston girls, of course they got up a club for mental improvement, and, as they were all descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, they called it the May Flower Club. A very good name, and the six young girls who were members of it made a very pretty posy when they met together, once a week, to sew, and read well-chosen books. At the first meeting of the season, after being separated all summer, there was a good deal of gossip to be attended to before the question, "What shall we read?" came up for serious discussion.

Anna Winslow, as president, began by proposing "Happy Dodd;" but a chorus of "I've read it!" made her turn to her list for another title.

"'Prisoners of Poverty' is all about workingwomen, very true and very sad; but Mamma said it might do us good to know something of the hard times other girls have," said Anna, soberly; for she was a thoughtful creature, very anxious to do her duty in all ways.

"I'd rather not know about sad things, since I can't help to make them any better," answered Ella Carver, softly patting the apple blossoms she was embroidering on a bit of blue satin.

"But we might help if we really tried, I suppose; you know how much Happy Dodd did when she once began, and she was only a poor little girl without half the means of doing good which we have," said Anna, glad to discuss the matter, for she had a little plan in her head and wanted to prepare a way for proposing it.

"Yes, I'm always saying that I have more than my share of fun and comfort and pretty things, and that I ought and will share them with some one. But I don't do it; and now and then, when I hear about real poverty, or dreadful sickness, I feel *so* wicked it quite upsets me. If I knew *how* to begin, I really would. But dirty little children don't come in my way, nor tipsy women to be reformed, nor nice lame girls to sing and pray with, as it all happens in books," cried Marion Warren, with such a remorseful expression on her merry round face that her mates laughed with one accord.

"I know something that I *could* do if I only had the courage to begin it. But Papa would shake his head unbelievably, and Mamma worry about its being proper, and it would interfere with my music, and everything nice that I especially wanted to go to would be sure to come on whatever day I set for my good work, and I should get discouraged or ashamed, and not half do it, so I don't begin, but I know I ought." And Elizabeth Alden rolled her large eyes from one friend to another, as if appealing to them to goad her to this duty by counsel and encouragement of some sort.

"Well, I suppose it's right, but I do perfectly hate to go poking round among poor folks, smelling bad smells, seeing dreadful sights, hearing woful tales, and running the risk of catching fever, and diphtheria, and horrid things. I don't pretend to like charity, but say right out I'm a silly, selfish wretch, and want to enjoy every minute, and not worry about other people. Isn't it shameful?"

Maggie Bradford looked such a sweet little sinner as she boldly made this sad confession, that no one could scold her, though Ida Standish, her bosom friend, shook her head, and Anna said, with a sigh: "I'm afraid we all feel very much as Maggie does, though we don't own it so honestly. Last spring, when I was ill and thought I might die, I was so ashamed of my idle, frivolous winter, that I felt as if I'd give all I had to be able to live it over and do better. Much is not expected of a girl of eighteen, I know; but oh! there were heaps of kind little things I *might* have done if I hadn't thought only of myself. I resolved if I lived I'd try at least to be less selfish, and make some one happier for my being in the world. I tell you, girls, it's rather solemn when you lie expecting to die, and your sins come up before you, even though they are very small ones. I never shall forget it, and after my lovely summer I mean to be a better girl, and lead a better life if I can."

Anna was so much in earnest that her words, straight out of a very innocent and contrite heart, touched her hearers deeply, and put them into the right mood to embrace her proposition. No one spoke for a moment, then Maggie said quietly, —

"I know what it is. I felt very much so when the horses ran away, and for fifteen minutes I sat clinging to Mamma, expecting to be killed. Every unkind, undutiful word I'd ever said to her came back to me, and was worse to bear than the fear of sudden death. It scared a great deal of naughtiness out of me, and dear Mamma and I have been more to each other ever since."

"Let us begin with 'The Prisoners of Poverty,' and perhaps it will show us something to do," said Lizzie. "But I must say I never felt as if shop-girls needed much help; they generally seem so contented with themselves, and so pert or patronizing to us, that I don't pity them a bit, though it must be a hard life."

"I think we can't do *much* in that direction, except set an example of good manners when we go shopping. I wanted to propose that we each choose some small charity for this winter, and do it faithfully. That will teach us how to do more by and by, and we can help one another with our experiences, perhaps, or amuse with our failures. What do you say?" asked Anna, surveying her five friends with a persuasive smile.

"What *could* we do?"

"People will call us goody-goody."

"I haven't the least idea how to go to work."

"Don't believe Mamma will let me."

"We'd better change our names from May Flowers to sisters of charity, and wear meek black bonnets and flapping cloaks."

Anna received these replies with great composure, and waited for the meeting to come to order, well knowing that the girls would have their fun and outcry first, and then set to work in good earnest.

"I think it's a lovely idea, and I'll carry out my plan. But I won't tell what it is yet; you'd all shout, and say I couldn't do it, but if you were trying also, that would keep me up to the mark," said Lizzie, with a decided snap of her scissors, as she trimmed the edges of a plush case for her beloved music.

"Suppose we all keep our attempts secret, and not let our right hand know what the left hand does? It's such fun to mystify people, and then no one *can* laugh at us. If we fail, we can say nothing; if we succeed, we can tell of it and get our reward. I'd like that way, and will look round at once for some especially horrid boot-black, ungrateful old woman, or ugly child, and devote myself to him, her, or it with the patience of a saint," cried Maggie, caught by the idea of doing good in secret and being found out by accident.

The other girls agreed, after some discussion, and then Anna took the floor again.

"I propose that we each work in our own way till next May, then, at our last meeting, report what we have done, truly and honestly, and plan something better for next year. Is it a vote?"

It evidently was a unanimous vote, for five gold thimbles went up, and five blooming faces smiled as the five girlish voices cried, "Aye!"

"Very well, now let us decide what to read, and begin at once. I think the 'Prisoners' a good book, and we shall doubtless get some hints from it."

So they began, and for an hour one pleasant voice after the other read aloud those sad, true stories of workingwomen and their hard lives, showing these gay young creatures what their pretty clothes cost the real makers of them, and how much injustice, suffering, and wasted strength went into them. It was very sober reading, but most absorbing; for the crochet needles went slower and slower, the lace-work lay idle, and a great tear shone like a drop of dew on the apple blossoms as Ella listened to "Rose's Story." They skipped the statistics, and dipped here and there as each took her turn; but when the two hours were over, and it was time for the club to adjourn, all the members were deeply interested in that pathetic book, and more in earnest than before; for this glimpse into other lives showed them how much help was needed, and made them anxious to lend a hand.

"We can't do much, being 'only girls,'" said Anna; "but if each does one small chore somewhere it will pave the way for better work; so we will all try, at least, though it seems like so many ants trying to move a mountain."

"Well, ants build nests higher than a man's head in Africa; you remember the picture of them in our old geographies? And we can do as much, I'm sure, if each tugs her pebble or straw faithfully. I shall shoulder mine to-morrow if Mamma is willing," answered Lizzie, shutting up her work-bag as if she had her resolution inside and was afraid it might evaporate before she got home.

"I shall stand on the Common, and proclaim aloud, 'Here's a nice young missionary, in want of a job! Charity for sale cheap! Who'll buy? who'll buy?'" said Maggie, with a resigned expression, and a sanctimonious twang to her voice.

"I shall wait and see what comes to me, since I don't know what I'm fit for;" and Marion gazed out of the window as if expecting to see some interesting pauper waiting for her to appear.

"I shall ask Miss Bliss for advice; she knows all about the poor, and will give me a good start," added prudent Ida, who resolved to do nothing rashly lest she should fail.

"I shall probably have a class of dirty little girls, and teach them how to sew, as I can't do anything else. They won't learn much, but steal, and break, and mess, and be a dreadful trial, and I shall get laughed at and wish I hadn't done it. Still I shall try it, and sacrifice my fancy-work to the cause of virtue," said Ella, carefully putting away her satin glove-case with a fond glance at the delicate flowers she so loved to embroider.

"I have no plans, but want to do so much I shall have to wait till I discover what is best. After to-day we won't speak of our work, or it won't be a secret any longer. In May we will report. Good luck to all, and good-by till next Saturday."

With these farewell words from their president the girls departed, with great plans and new ideas simmering in their young heads and hearts.

It seemed a vast undertaking; but where there is a will there is always a way, and soon it was evident that each had found "a little chore" to do for sweet charity's sake. Not a word was said at the weekly meetings, but the artless faces betrayed all shades of hope, discouragement, pride, and doubt, as their various attempts seemed likely to succeed or fail. Much curiosity was felt, and a few accidental words, hints, or meetings in queer places, were very exciting, though nothing was discovered.

Marion was often seen in a North End car, and Lizzie in a South End car, with a bag of books and papers. Ella haunted a certain shop where fancy articles were sold, and Ida always brought plain sewing to the club. Maggie seemed very busy at home, and Anna was found writing industriously several times when one of her friends called. All seemed very happy, and rather important when outsiders questioned them about their affairs. But they had their pleasures as usual, and seemed to enjoy them with an added relish, as if they realized as never before how many blessings they possessed, and were grateful for them.

So the winter passed, and slowly something new and pleasant seemed to come into the lives of these young girls. The listless, discontented look some of them used to wear passed away; a sweet earnestness and a cheerful activity made them charming, though they did not know it, and wondered when people said, "That set of girls are growing up beautifully; they will make fine women by and by." The mayflowers were budding under the snow, and as spring came on the fresh perfume began to steal out, the rosy faces to brighten, and the last year's dead leaves to fall away, leaving the young plants green and strong.

On the 15th of May the club met for the last time that year, as some left town early, and all were full of spring work and summer plans. Every member was in her place at an unusually early hour that day, and each wore an air of mingled anxiety, expectation, and satisfaction, pleasant to behold. Anna called them to order with three raps of her thimble and a beaming smile.

"We need not choose a book for our reading to-day, as each of us is to contribute an original history of her winter's work. I know it will be very interesting, and I hope more instructive, than some of the novels we have read. Who shall begin?"

"You! you!" was the unanimous answer; for all loved and respected her very much, and felt that their presiding officer should open the ball.

Anna colored modestly, but surprised her friends by the composure with which she related her little story, quite as if used to public speaking.

"You know I told you last November that I should have to look about for something that I *could* do. I did look a long time, and was rather in despair, when my task came to me in the most unexpected way. Our winter work was being done, so I had a good deal of shopping on my hands, and found it less a bore than usual, because I liked to watch the shop girls, and wish I dared ask some of them if I could help them. I went often to get trimmings and buttons at Cotton's, and had a good deal to do with the two girls at that counter. They were very obliging and patient about matching some jet ornaments for Mamma, and I found out that their names were Mary and Maria Porter. I liked them, for they were very neat and plain in their dress, – not like some, who seem to think that if their waists are small, and their hair dressed in the fashion, it is no matter how soiled their collars are, nor how untidy their nails. Well, one day when I went for certain kinds of buttons which were to be made for us, Maria, the younger one, who took the order, was not there. I asked for her, and Mary said she was at home with a lame knee. I was so sorry, and ventured to put a few questions in a friendly way. Mary seemed glad to tell her troubles, and I found that 'Ria,' as she called her sister, had been suffering for a long time, but did not complain for fear of losing her place. No stools are allowed at Cotton's, so the poor girls stand nearly all day, or rest a minute now and then on a half-opened drawer. I'd seen Maria doing it, and wondered why some one did not make a stir about seats in this place, as they have in other stores and got stools for the shop women. I didn't dare to speak to the gentlemen, but I gave Mary the Jack roses I wore in my breast, and asked if I might take some books or flowers to poor Maria. It was lovely to see her sad face light up and hear her thank me when I went to see her, for she was very lonely without her sister, and discouraged about her place. She did not lose it entirely, but had to work at home, for her lame knee will be a long time in getting well. I begged Mamma and Mrs. Allingham to speak to Mr. Cotton for her; so she got the mending of the jet and bead work to do, and buttons to cover, and things of that sort. Mary takes them to and fro, and Maria feels so happy not to be idle. We also got stools for all the other girls in that shop. Mrs. Allingham is so rich and kind she can do anything, and now it's such a comfort to see those tired things resting when off duty that I often go in and enjoy the sight."

Anna paused as cries of "Good! good!" interrupted her tale; but she did not add the prettiest part of it, and tell how the faces of the young women behind the counters brightened when she came in, nor how gladly all served the young lady who showed them what a true gentlewoman was.

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