HG WELLS HAS HIS REGRETS
Episode 16: Louisa May Alcott

INT. ORCHARD HOUSE - CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS

With a stutter, the recording begins.

JANE

Good morning! This is Jane Wells, Log Set S2, Log 16. I really do think I'm becoming rather used to making these. Today, I am visiting Massachusetts, in the United States of America, to meet the charming Miss Louisa May Alco-

Smashing as a dish is thrown!

LOUISA

(distance)

You're breaking in, now? Really? I have put up with the letters, I have even martyred myself to the ringing doorbell, but breaking into my house is a step too far -

THEME PLAYS

LOUISA

(in the middle of speaking)

- really so sorry - I'm absolutely mortified - are you sure you're alright? Should I run and get you some water?

JANE

I'm quite alright, I promise - look, it didn't even hit me...

JANE (CONT)
Herbert will be in an awful mood about the state of the time machine when I get home, though.

LOUISA
I hope it all comes off alright - it's only soup; it should be fine... Lord, you must think I'm mad!

JANE
No, no, not at all, Miss Alcott - I'm sure having a Time Machine materialise in your hallway must be startling, to say the least.

LOUISA
Call me Louisa, please - I can't help but feel that launching a soup tureen at someone's head forges an instant friendship, don't you?

Jane laughs.

JANE
In that case, please call me Jane. Really, I'm more impressed that you managed to throw it so *far*.

LOUISA
(dismissively)
Oh, I like to exercise. It's good for the heart, you know. Although mine's jumping around like a demon right now!

LOUISA (CONT.)
It wasn't the machine, so much, you know - although you will most definitely have to explain that bizarre contraption currently perched in my stairwell to me - but I'm afraid that I mistook you for an over-enthusiastic fan.

JANE
Oh, dear, what a confusion! I mean, I <u>am</u> a fan of yours, I must confess, but... you thought I had broken in?

LOUISA
Well, it hasn't happened yet, but I try to be on my guard. I've had people knocking on my door all the hours God sends. It's not that I don't <u>appreciate</u> my fans, you understand - they provide my income, after all - but I'll be the first to admit that the constant attention can be exhausting.

JANE
My husband says just the same. I can't count the number of times we've been out for a pleasant walk or a bicycle ride, and someone has approached us asking for Herbert to sign their books. Of course, I'm very proud of him and his achievements, but sometimes it can get a bit wearing.

LOUISA
Oh, you're married? Pity...

JANE

What?

LOUISA

(hastily)

Oh - nothing. I have no plans to marry, myself. I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe... I've never been much one for, er, men.

JANE

(blithely)

Oh, well, each to their own, I suppose. I often prefer to socialise with women whenever I can - I am so constantly surrounded by the male gender at home. It's truly a pleasure to get to visit and speak with you, Louisa.

LOUISA

Minus the soup, you mean.

JANE

Er, yes, minus the soup.

LOUISA

Well, I must say I agree: I much prefer female company to that of the male sex. These days I so rarely receive company that simply wants to talk - everyone wants <u>something</u> from me. Although, you did mention that you are a fan...?

JANE

Oh, yes, I simply adored *Little Women* growing up!

JANE (CONT.)
I love all the characters, of course, but my favourite - as I suspect is everyone's - is Jo.

LOUISA
I have to say that I'm flattered, Jane, for I based Jo on my childhood self.

JANE
Goodness, really?

LOUISA
Oh, yes - perhaps it makes me unimaginative, but I like to base almost all my characters off real-life people. I find that it makes them much more lifelike.

Take *Little Women*, for example. My older sister Anna is Meg, the eldest March daughter; dear Lizzie is Beth; and my youngest sister May is Amy.

There are several parallels between my own life and that of the March girls - Anna married off, I had a most bitter rivalry with May, and my poor, dear sister Lizzie eventually died due to her ill health, after catching scarlet fever from a household she was helping.

JANE
I'm so sorry to hear that.

LOUISA
Thank you. It was many years ago now, and the pain has lessened since.

Of course, unlike my fictional counterpart, I never married. Girls write to me, you know, and ask who the little women will marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life!

JANE
You know, I always wondered why you chose to have Jo marry at the end. It seemed so out of character.

LOUISA
Yes, I thought so, too. I originally intended to have Jo remain a literary spinster, like myself, but my publisher had other plans. A man, of course.

JANE
(tutting)
Of course.

LOUISA
Well, such is the way of things. In a world run by men, you can't have everything you want, after all.

JANE
How true. Sometimes it feels like every inch of the world has a man staking his claim upon it...

JANE (CONT.)
I used to study biology - that was where I met Herbert, he was my teacher at the time - and I felt constantly pushed out of the profession by the men in it. They felt that biology was far too complex a study for mere women - really, it was quite demeaning.

LOUISA
I can sympathise. For many years I was forced to use an ambiguous pen name to disguise my gender - many publishers thought my work too inappropriate for a woman to have written it. Never mind that one actually had!

JANE
You know, Jane Austen said something very similar.

LOUISA
Austen? The Jane Austen?

Jane realises she's put her foot in it.

JANE
I - oh, dear, I wasn't supposed to tell you that...

LOUISA
Why on earth not?

JANE
Herbert thinks that it might corrupt the timelines. He's awfully paranoid about it.

JANE (CONT.)
I can’t say I blame him - time is a finicky thing to play around with.

LOUISA
(muttering)
There’s the husband again...

JANE
What?

LOUISA
Er... nothing. Very well, I will stop pestering you about it. Although I am still intrigued. Go on, distract me from Jane Austen with another question!

JANE
Right, yes, of course! I was wondering... does all of your inspiration come from real life? What else drives your work?

LOUISA
(deadpan)
Well, poverty is a pretty strong motivator.

JANE
(realising she’s made a blunder)
Oh, I do apologise if I -

Louisa laughs - is that a flirtatious note in there...?

LOUISA
I’m sorry, Jane, I couldn’t resist the jab.

LOUISA (CONT.)
I grew up in abject poverty; I had to earn my keep in any way I could. That's what made me turn to selling my writing, in order to survive.

JANE
Did you begin by selling children's books?

LOUISA
(laughs)
Lord, no! I was a pulp writer. I wrote what the public wanted. Here, take a look at this.

She tosses a book onto Jane's lap.

JANE
(reading aloud)
"*Pauline's Passion and Punishment*"...
(in horror)
Oh, gracious... you *wrote* this?

LOUISA
It was quite popular. I wrote it under my pseudonym, A.M. Barnard. I think I have some more of those lying around, if you want one...

JANE
Um... I think I'll stick to *Little Women* if you don't mind.

LOUISA
You're sure? Suit yourself. I was quite proud of that one.

JANE

(desperately trying to get the interview back on track)
Er... What other roles did you take on, throughout your early life?

LOUISA

Let’s see... Well, when I was 30, I served as a nurse for six weeks at the Union Hospital during the Civil War. It was meant to be three months, but I contracted typhoid and became terribly ill.

JANE

Goodness, that must have been terrifying!

LOUISA

Oh, it was, it was - in fact, I nearly died - but throughout all of it I knew I was doing what was right. So long as I was changing the world, even in my own way, it was worth it, all of it.

JANE

I do admire your commitment to your cause.
(tentatively)
In my own time, I am involved in a political organisation called the Fabian Society - you won’t have heard of it, I don’t think it exists yet, here - and we strongly argue in favour of improving life for all, and introducing the principles of socialism into Britain’s modern era.

LOUISA

(teasing)
Jane, I didn't realise I was speaking to a fellow revolutionary!

JANE

(slightly embarrassed)
Well it's not quite as ground-breaking as your own efforts, but I like to believe we are making little differences, one step at a time.

LOUISA

Of course. I feel just the same way. Just as I supported the unionists in the Civil War, I was and always will be a firm believer in the abolition of slavery. The day we enshrined it into law in our country was a joyful one.

In fact, when I was a child, my family operated as Station Masters on the Underground Railroad.

JANE

Really? I didn't know that!

LOUISA

It's true - we hid a man escaping to Canada in our house for over a week, once. We never did find out what happened to the poor soul - for safety, you see, we couldn't risk passing on vital information to those wicked men who try to hunt ex-slaves down. I hope he managed to reunite with his family, eventually.

LOUISA (CONT.)
I feel that I have always had a strong opinion of what is fair and unfair, from a very young age. It has always seemed abhorrent to me that people should be allowed to own other people as their property - either as slaves or as that other beast of burden: wives.

JANE
You're a believer in women's equality, then?

LOUISA
Of course, we women must stick together! Are you?

JANE
Well, I - In my time, a new movement is just beginning: a fight for women's right to vote. I must admit that it sent a thrill of excitement down my spine. Perhaps one day it might even be possible.

LOUISA
My dear Jane - it already is!

JANE
What on earth do you mean?

LOUISA
(tremendously excited)
I thought you already knew - I assumed that was why you picked today, of all days, to visit me...

LOUISA (CONT.)
This year, the state of Massachusetts passed a law that allows women to vote in local elections on anything involving education and children. It's not really enough, of course - one day I hope that we will be able to vote on all issues, and state-wide too - but it's a start.

Anyway, yesterday morning, as soon as I was able, I went straight up to the town hall. All I had to do was sign some papers, and I officially became the first woman in Concord, Massachusetts to be registered to vote!

JANE
Gracious, Louisa, I had no idea! How exciting!

LOUISA
I must say that I feel particularly vindicated, as I spent many hours knocking on doors and writing in our local women's rights periodical, trying to change the minds of everyone I came across. I do try not to be too smug with my successes, Jane, but I have to admit that I have been frankly unbearable ever since.

JANE
I think you deserve to be proud of yourself. What an achievement! Will you have the chance to vote soon?

LOUISA

Perhaps in the new year. I anticipate that I will meet a lot of resistance, but I shall bring my army of fellow voters with me. I faced the bloody frontlines of the war - I am not afraid of a few cowardly old men!

It is often so frustrating to feel so ahead of my time, and yet with no means to propel everyone around me into the future. I wonder... I know you told me that you cannot give away too much, Jane, but just let me know this. Do you think, one day, that it will get better? You have a time machine - are you never tempted to go and see for yourself?

Jane hesitates.

JANE

Well... sometimes I do feel the same way. My husband writes constantly of the future, and I live in a time of great change, with new and exciting innovations around every corner... but sometimes it feels that while our mechanical inventions are advancing almost at the speed of light, our social development is taking a lot longer to improve.

I suppose it’s easy to change a metal mind. But changing human ones is a lot harder.

Poignant moment. It is then brutally interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Louisa makes a loud noise of frustration.

LOUISA
Oh, not <u>again</u>! Here, Jane, help me with this, won't you?

JANE
Er... with what?

LOUISA
My dress, could you -

Tightening noises.

LOUISA
Wonderful. Now the apron... and the cap...

Fabric rustles.

LOUISA
Into battle!

JANE
(to herself)
What on earth is going on...?

We hear Louisa get up and walk to the door. Away from the mic, the door opens.

FAN
Is Miss Alcott home?

LOUISA
My mistress is not home at the present.

FAN

Oh, please, I would love to speak with her - just for a minute - *Little Women* was one of the most wonderful books I ever read...

LOUISA

I'm afraid she's not home. Can I take a message?

FAN

Could you please ask her... why didn't Jo end up marrying Laurie...?

The door shuts. Louisa returns and flops down in her chair.

LOUISA

Right, what were we talking about?

JANE

Did you... just pretend to be a maid?

LOUISA

Yes.

JANE

And you pretended to be a maid while also pretending not to be home.

LOUISA

Yes.

JANE

Why???

LOUISA

Do you know how many visitors I get a day? Hundreds! I couldn't possibly speak to everyone who knocks on my door, I'd be here all hours of the day if I did!

JANE

Surely there's a better way than dressing up in a maid's uniform every five minutes?

LOUISA

I'm sure there is. But you see, this way is so much more fun.

JANE

Do you... always resort to that?

LOUISA

Oh, no. Sometimes, if I am accosted while out for my daily constitutional, I find it necessary to sprint until I'm out of sight.

(cheerfully)

I've always thought that running is terribly good for you.

JANE

(what is going on)

I... see. I do like to cycle, myself. It puts me in good spirits.

LOUISA

Yes, it - shows.

She edges slightly closer. This is getting a bit weird.

JANE

... Thank you. Um, Louisa, perhaps I ought to be going... My husband...

LOUISA

There it is, your husband again!

JANE

(affronted)

What's wrong with mentioning Herbert? I did marry him for a reason, you know!

LOUISA

I'm sure there's nothing wrong with him, but...

LOUISA (CONT.)

Don't you get tired of being shackled to a man, Jane? Just once, don't you wish to - to experience something different?

JANE

Like what???

LOUISA

(delicately)

I have always felt a... lack of connection with the male sex. I have never once found myself even half in love with a man, you see.

JANE

Well, not everyone finds someone -

LOUISA

I have, however, fallen in love with a hundred pretty girls.

JANE

Oh.

(realisation hits)

Oh!

LOUISA

Are things perhaps different in the future? I've never had cause to wonder. But - Jane, I know you are married, but who needs to know? Won't you...

(beat)

Stay a little longer...?

Long pause.

JANE

(MUST BE POLITE)

Er... thank you for the offer, Louisa, but I think I might have to pass, on this occasion.

LOUISA

(disappointed)

Oh. I mean, of course.

JANE

(hastily)

It's nothing against you, you understand.

LOUISA

Of course.

JANE

It's just, well, you know -

LOUISA

No, no, Jane, I entirely understand.

JANE

You do?

LOUISA

Yes. The embarrassment is all mine. I hope we can... still be friends?

JANE

I would love to remain friends, Louisa. I hope I can come back to visit you, one day.

LOUISA

As do I. Oh, hang on - before you go -

She rifles through a pile of books, picks one out and flips to the inside cover. We hear her scribble a signature inside.

LOUISA

Here. A souvenir from our time together.

JANE

(gradually becoming more excited as she speaks)
Is this a *signed, first-edition copy of Little Women????*

LOUISA

It's the least I can do.

JANE

Well, with that, I will sign off. My name is Jane Wells, this has been Louisa May Alcott -

LOUISA

Pleasure to have you!

JANE

- and I think it’s time I went home
and faced my own regret of leaving
Herbert alone with Arthur,
unsupervised, for more than an hour.

END RECORDING.

CREDITS

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Louisa May Alcott was voiced by Lindsay Zana
The Fan was voiced by Jenna Geiser

This podcast is fictitious, and all characters within are merely fictional interpretations of the people they're based on and are not to be taken as serious or accurate portrayals.

We'll end the episode with a quote from Louisa May Alcott's *The Abbot's Ghost, A Christmas Story:* "Human minds are more full of mysteries than any written book and more changeable than the cloud shapes in the air."

Thanks for listening.