

Scene One

[MUSIC is heard. The house LIGHTS dim out. Only Josephine is left in light]

JOSEPHINE. If I had to pick a moment in time when I began this journey, it would be the Christmas of 1863. We lived in a town not unlike this one, in a New England that was far away from a raging war.

[The LIGHTS rise on the March house. BETH sits at the piano playing. Some of the keys don't work properly but she plays on valiantly. MEG and AMY are in the attic, huddled over a box]

JOSEPHINE. Father had lost a great deal of money in a bad business venture some years before, so the March family was not so grand as it had once been. But we were able to keep our house and we made ends meet as best we could. When the war came, father was too old to go as a soldier so he joined Mr. Lincoln's army as a chaplain. He had left for Virginia the spring before and money matters were more difficult than ever. But still it was Christmas Eve and the March family was nothing if not spirited.

~~*[MEG and AMY come down the steps with the box and go into the sitting room]*~~

MEG. Beth, look what we found in the attic!

AMY. They're not really tree decorations but they'll do well enough.

BETH. Let me see...

MEG. This old banner from Jo's play last summer might make a suitable garland.

BETH. Oh, look at this!

AMY. Our star for the top of the tree!

BETH. This is pretty...

AMY. Oh, Beth, let me have it! I can make a new hair ribbon out of that, don't you think?

MEG. We'll get this sad old tree looking magical before Marmee gets home. If only there were dozens of presents to put under it.

AMY. Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.

MEG. Oh, it's so dreadful to be poor!

AMY. I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all!

BETH. We've got father and mother and each other...

AMY. But we haven't got father, not at home we don't. And who's to say how long it will be before we see him again.

MEG. You know the reason mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it's going to be a hard winter for everyone. And money ought not be spent for pleasure when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices and ought to do it gladly. *[A beat]* I just wish I felt more...glad about it. *[The three GIRLS work on the tree silently as JOSEPHINE continues]*

JOSEPHINE. That's Meg, the oldest and the most practical of the March girls. We all looked up to Meg because she always seemed so responsible.

AMY. I wouldn't mind being so poor and not having nice things if I didn't have to go to that horrible school with those impudent girls who laugh at your dresses and label your father if he isn't rich. I wish we were as wealthy as the Laurences; I'd thumb my nose at those girls and teach them a thing or two about manners. *[AMY and MEG continue with the tree as BETH returns to the piano]*

JOSEPHINE. That is Amy, the youngest and, as she likes to remind us, the prettiest.

BETH. *[Stops playing]* Oh, dear. That key is sticking again.

MEG. Oh, don't stop, Beth.

AMY. We love it when you play!

BETH. I only wish I played better. Then this old piano wouldn't sound so bad. *[Resumes playing]* I know it sounds so funny to say, but in some ways I'm glad we're not rich.

AMY. Whatever for!

MEG. What do you mean, Beth?

BETH. Well...didn't you say just the other day, Meg, that the Watson children you have to tend to are always fighting and freighting all the time, in spite of their money?

MEG. Well, yes—

BETH. And that we were a great deal happier than they were? Well, I think we are. For, though we do have to work and do without things, we make fun for ourselves and I wouldn't want it any other way. *[AMY and MEG look at her affectionately]*

JOSEPHINE. And that's our Beth...so sweet, so kind and gentle. But also so shy that she was content never to leave her house and her piano

if she didn't need to. We all adored Beth but her frail health and timid manner were a concern to all the family.

[A loud and boisterous VOICE is heard offstage. It is JO]

JO. Hellooooo! "Don Pedro, where are ye, thou snivelling swine of a villainous wretch!"

JOSEPHINE. But most troubling of the March sisters was undoubtedly...myself.

JO. [Enters from the hall, throwing her coat down and rushing to the warm fire] Hello, dears!

BETH. Jo!

MEG. You're home early.

JO. Yes, I escaped! Aunt March dozed off in the middle of chapter seven of St. Augustine's *Confessions* so I tiptoed out with her being none the wiser. Christopher Columbus! Look at that tree!

AMY. Do you like it?

MEG. Jo, don't use such slang, please.

JO. Like it? It's miraculous! Maybe we'll have a bit of Christmas around here after all! [She whistles and struts about the room with her hands in her pockets]

MEG. Don't, Jo. It's so...boyish.

JO. That's why I do it. How's my Beth today?

BETH. Fine, Jo.

AMY. Jo, look at your dress!

JO. What's the matter with it?

MEG. [Lifting the hem of Jo's dress] Jo, have you been sitting too near the fireplace again?

JO. Oh, just singed it a little. It gave Aunt March quite a start, I must admit! [Laughs]

AMY. Oh, how I detest rude, unlady-like girls!

JO. And I hate affected little nimity-pimnies!

MEG. Stop it, both of you. Really, you both are to blame. You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl. But you are a lady now.

JO. Oh, I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March and wear long gowns and look as prim as a China doll. It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners. I can't get over

my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with father. But I can only stay at home and knit, like a pokey old woman!

BETH. Poor Jo. It's too bad but it can't be helped. You must try to be contented with making your name boyish and playing brother to us girls.

AMY. Or playing those silly men in those silly plays of yours.

MEG. As for you, Amy, you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now but you will grow up an affected little goose if you don't take care.

JO. Honk! Honk! [AMY shrieks]

BETH. That's enough, Jo.

JO. Of course, my dearest. Peace on Christmas Eve, I say. Speaking of those silly old plays of mine, Amy, we better rehearse. We've got to be ready for tomorrow night. Come here and let's do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that.

AMY. I can't help it. I never saw anyone faint and I don't choose to make myself all black and blue tumbling flat as you do.

JO. Come and give it a try. You're the only one who can play Zaza; you're the only one small enough to be carried off shrieking by Don Pedro. Beth, will you give us some music?

BETH. Yes, Jo. [AMY and JO station themselves in the archway, their stage. BETH plays some dramatic music]

JO. Meg, have you got your cue?

MEG. I think so.

JO. Good. We'll start with Don Pedro's entrance. I'll use this comb for a pistol. [Goes outside the arch then re-enters in character] "There you are! So the hour of my revenge approaches. Listen carefully, my sweet, and you will hear my hounds as they track down your beloved Rodrigo!"

MEG. [As the hounds] Arroooo! Arroooo!

AMY. "It cannot be so! Rodrigo! Save me! Save me!"

JO. [Drops character] No, no, no. Do it this way. [Demonstrates] Clasp your hands so and stagger across the room, crying frantically, "Rodrigo! Save me! Save me!" [She staggers and then does a sensational faint onto the floor; then she sits up again] You see? [BETH and MEG applaud] Try it again.

AMY. Oh, dear...

MEG. Arroooo! Arroooo!

AMY. "It cannot be so. Roderigo! Save me! Save me!" *[She cautiously moves across the room and faints delicately onto a settee]*

JO. It's no use! Do the best you can when the time comes and if the audience laughs don't blame me.

BETH. I don't see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You're a regular Shakespeare!

JO. Not quite. But I do think *The Witch's Curse, an Operatic Tragedy* is rather a nice thing. I'd rather like to try *Macbeth* if only we had a trap door for Banquo. *[In character]* "Is this a dagger I see before me?"

MEG. No, it's that horrid hurricane lamp Aunt March gave us two Christmases ago!

[ALL FOUR laugh and MARMEE appears in the archway in her coat and hat]

MARMEE. Glad to find my girls so merry.

GIRLS. Marmee! *[They rush to her and silently greet her, help her off with her coat, and seat her as Josephine continues]*

JOSEPHINE. We had always called our mother Marmee as far back as I could remember. She was the most unselfish woman I have ever known. Everyone in town admired her and we thought she was the most splendid mother in the world.

MARMEE. Well, dears, how have you got on today? How is your cold, Beth? Meg, you look so tired. Were those Watson children in bad sorts today? Was school all right, Amy? Jo, how did you find Aunt March today?

MEG. She found her well enough but left her sleeping! *[They all laugh]*

MARMEE. I've got a treat for you. *[Holds up a letter]*

GIRLS. A letter!

JO. Three cheers for father!

MARMEE. A nice long one. He is well and thinks they shall get through the winter better than he feared. He sends all sorts of loving wishes for Christmas and a special message to you girls. I'll read that part to you. Here it is... "Give them all my dear love..."

[MR. MARCH, in uniform, is seen at the side and takes over from MARMEE, who continues to mime reading]

MR. MARCH.my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them, pray for them and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them but remind them that while we wait we may all work so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder...

MARMEE. "...I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

[MR. MARCH exits. Silence. MARMEE quietly refolds the letter]

AMY. *[Crying]* Meg is right. I am a selfish little goose!

JO. I'll try not to be so rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be someplace else! *[MARMEE hugs her girls as HANNAH enters]*

JOSEPHINE. That's Hannah. Our housekeeper, our cook, our Rock of Gibraltar. She had been with us since Meg was a baby.

HANNAH. Good evening, Mrs. March.

MARMEE. Hannah....Merry Christmas.

HANNAH. I'd best be telling you that a carriage has just pulled up to the walk and I don't have to make you guess who it might be. *[She gathers Marmee's and Jo's coats and exits]*

MARMEE. Aunt March.

JO. Oh, oh...

MARMEE. Whatever can she want?

AMY. Aunt March never goes out!

MEG. Especially in winter.

MARMEE. Jo, do you know anything about this?

JO. Well...

[AUNT MARCH enters boldly. She is of undetermined old age and never smiles but always barks]

AUNT. Josy-phine!

JO. Yes, Aunt March...?

AUNT. It seems you neglected to relay your Christmas wishes to your aunt before leaving today.

JO. I am sorry, Aunt March. [*Goes to her*] Merry Christmas, Auntie. [*Kisses her on the cheek*]

MARMEE. Girls, please offer your best wishes as well. [*Each GIRL goes up to Aunt March and kisses her as Josephine continues*]

JOSEPHINE. Aunt March was my father's aunt and was extremely rich and extremely unpleasant. She was widowed and childless and rarely left her big house on the hill because of her many ailments. Aunt March did hire me as a companion when father left for the war and it was my job to read to her and be at her beck and call.

AUNT. Josyphine left today before I had a chance to give her these. [*Hands four envelopes to Marmee*] One for each of the girls. One dollar each.

GIRLS. Thank you, Aunt March.

AUNT. You can thank me by spending it wisely and not in the foolish manner that young girls are accustomed to these days.

GIRLS. Yes, Aunt March.

MARMEE. Thank you, Aunt March. Won't you stay for some tea?

AUNT. Nothing of the kind. I must get back home before I catch my death from the cold. [*Looks at Jo*] It was not a trip I anticipated taking.

MARMEE. I understand. You will be glad to hear, Aunt March, that I received a letter today from Mr. March. He is quite well, thank God, and speaks optimistically of the winter ahead.

AUNT. Foolish nephew. To run off and join the army at his age! Where does he get off doing such a thing? And to leave a family behind for others to take care of, no less.

JO. We take care of ourselves—!

MARMEE. Jo... Thank you for coming, Aunt March. And please accept my warmest Christmas wishes.

AUNT. Yes... Good day to you all. [*She exits*]

JO. Christopher Columbus!

AMY. A whole dollar!

MEG. We shall have Christmas after all!

MARMEE. [*Giving each an envelope*] Here you are, girls.

JO. Do you believe what she said about father!

AMY. I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils. I really need them.

MEG. I'm going to buy that blue and yellow bonnet. You know, Jo, the one we saw at Mason's.

JO. Nothing like that for me. I've had my eye on those volumes of *Undine* and *Sintram* for the longest time and now I can get them.

MARMEE. What about you, Beth? What will you do with your dollar?

BETH. Do you think it would be all right if I bought some new sheet music? They have so many wonderful songs at Mason's.

AMY. Maybe I should get some new hair ribbons instead. What do you think, Meg?

MEG. Why not buy only a few pencils, then you might have enough for some ribbon as well?

[*HANNAH enters with a letter*]

HANNAH. Mrs. March, this has just come. That little German boy brought it round to the back door. [*Hands it to Marmee*] I told him to wait.

MARMEE. [*Reading the note*] It's the Hummels. Oh, dear, I think Mrs. Hummel's baby is coming soon. Hannah, please fetch my cloak.

HANNAH. But you haven't had your tea—

MARMEE. Hurry. There's no time to lose. [*Puts on her hat. HANNAH exits*]

AMY. But who are the Hummels?

BETH. The German family that lives by the warehouses.

MARMEE. Mr. Hummel was killed in Virginia and there's no one to care for Mrs. Hummel and her four children. Soon it will be five children.

[*HANNAH enters and she takes coat from her*] Thank you, Hannah. Girls, you are not to wait up for me. Jo, I put you in charge of the household tonight. Beth, be sure to take your medicine. Good night, my dears.

GIRLS. Good night, Marmee.

MARMEE. That poor poor woman... [*MARMEE exits through the hall as HANNAH returns to the kitchen*]

AMY. I don't see why these Hummels have to ruin our Christmas Eve.

MEG. The Hummels have bigger problems than deciding whether to buy pencils or hair ribbons.

JO. Dear, dear Marmee...

BETH. Somehow wishing for some new sheet music seems so selfish of me. The old music is perfectly fine.

MEG. Look... Marmee's slippers. See how worn they are.