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**ХОРОШИЕ
ЖЁНЫ**

Louisa May Alcott
GOOD WIVES

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Текст романа адаптирован для продолжающих изучать английский язык средней ступени (уровень 3 — Intermediate) и сопровождается комментариями и словарем для помощи читателю. В конце книги даны упражнения на понимание прочитанного.

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Gossip

The war is over. Mr. March was safely at home, busy with his books and the small parish. Poverty and the strict integrity **shut him out from**¹ the more worldly successes, but attracted to him many admirable persons, as naturally as sweet herbs draw bees. Earnest young men found the gray-headed scholar as young at heart as they. Sinners told their sins to the pure-hearted old man and were both rebuked and saved.

Five energetic women ruled the house, but the quiet scholar was the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor, and comforter. Mrs. March is as brisk and cheery. John Brooke did his duty manfully for a year, got wounded, was sent home, and not allowed to return. He received **no stars or bars**², but he deserved them. He was preparing for business, and earning a home for Meg. With the good sense and sturdy independence that characterized him, he accepted the place of bookkeeper.

Now we can talk about four March sisters. Margaret "Meg" March, the oldest sister, was growing

¹ **shut him out from** — закрыли ему путь к

² **no stars or bars** — ни чинов, ни наград

womanly in character, wise in housewifely arts. She had her girlish ambitions and hopes. Ned Moffat married Sallie Gardiner, and Meg was contrasting their fine house and carriage, many gifts, and splendid outfit with her own. She was secretly wishing to have the same.

What about other girls? Amy Curtis March, the youngest sister, gave her mornings to duty, her afternoons to pleasure, and prospered finely.

Josephine "Jo" March meantime devoted herself to literature and Beth, who remained delicate after the fever. As long as "**The Spread Eagle**¹" paid Jo a dollar a column for her 'rubbish', as she called it, Jo felt herself **a woman of means**².

Elizabeth "Beth" March is kind, gentle, sweet, shy, quiet, honest and musical. She is the shyest March sister and the pianist of the family. Moreover, she is the peacemaker of the family and gently scolds her sisters when they argue.

We will mention Laurie as well. Laurie went to college to please his grandfather, and now was trying to please himself. Of course he frolicked and flirted, was dandified, aquatic, sentimental, or gymnastic, as college fashions ordained, talked slang. But he always managed to save himself by frank confession, honorable atonement, or the irresistible power of persuasion which he possessed.

Now we can talk about the 'Dovecote'. That was the name of the little brown house. Mr. Brooke prepared it for Meg's first home. It was a tiny house, with a little garden behind and a lawn. Here Meg meant to have a fountain, shrubbery, and a profusion

¹ **The Spread Eagle** — «Парящий орёл»

² **a woman of means** — женщина со средствами

of lovely flowers. There were no marble tables, long mirrors, or lace curtains in the little parlor.

“Are you satisfied? Does it seem like home? Will you be happy here?” asked Mrs. March, as she and her daughter went through the new kingdom.

“Yes, Mother, perfectly satisfied, thanks to you all, and so happy that I can’t talk about it,” answered Meg.

“What about a servant or two?” asked Amy. She went out of the parlor.

“Mother and I talked about that. There will be little work here,” answered Meg tranquilly.

“Sallie Moffat has four servants,” began Amy.

“If Meg has four, the house won’t hold them,” said Jo.

“Sallie isn’t a poor man’s wife. Meg and John begin humbly,” said Mrs. March.

“Yes, Mother. Do you know I like this room most of all in my baby house,” added Meg, a minute after, as they went upstairs and she looked into her well-stored **linen closet**¹.

Beth was there. She was laying the snowy piles smoothly on the shelves.

“This is a setout that will last me all my days.” Meg looked quite contented.

A tall, broad-shouldered young fellow came down the road, walked over the low fence. It was Laurie.

“Here I am, Mother! This is for Mrs. John Brooke, with congratulations and compliments. Bless you, Beth! What a spectacle you are, Jo. Amy, you are too handsome for a single lady.”

As Laurie spoke, he delivered a brown paper parcel to Meg, pulled Beth’s hair ribbon, and stared at Jo’s big pinafore. Everyone began to talk.

¹ **linen closet** — бельевая

“Where is John?” asked Meg anxiously.

“Stopped to get the license¹ for tomorrow, ma’am.”

“Who won the last match, Teddy?” inquired Jo.

“We won, of course.”

“How is the lovely Miss Randal?” asked Amy with a significant smile.

“More cruel than ever.”

“Undo the bundle, Meg,” said Beth.

“It’s a useful thing in case of fire or thieves,” observed Laurie, as a **watchman’s rattle**² appeared, amid the laughter of the girls.

“When will you grow up, Laurie?” asked Meg in a matronly tone.

“I’m doing my best, ma’am,” responded the young gentleman, whose head was about level with the little chandelier. “Listen, Jo, you’ll marry next.”

The First Wedding

The June roses over the porch were awake bright and early on that morning, like friendly little neighbors. Meg looked very like a rose herself, with a charm more beautiful than beauty. So she made her wedding gown herself. Her sisters braided up her pretty hair, and the only ornaments she wore were the lilies of the valley, which ‘her John’ liked best of all the flowers that grew.

“You look just like our own dear Meg. And you are very sweet and lovely! I want to hug, but I’m afraid to crumple your dress,” cried Amy.

¹ имеется в виду лицензия на венчание без церковного оглашения

² **watchman’s rattle** — трещотка сторожа

“Then I am satisfied. But please hug and kiss me, everyone, and don’t mind my dress,” and Meg opened her arms to her sisters. “Now I’m going to tie John’s cravat for him, and then to stay a few minutes with Father quietly in the study.”

Meg ran down to perform these little ceremonies. As the younger girls stand together, and give the last touches to their simple toilet, we’ll discuss the news.

Over the three years, Jo’s angles are much softened, she has learned to carry herself with ease, if not grace. Her hair grew long. There was a fresh color in her brown cheeks, a soft shine in her eyes, and only gentle words fall from her sharp tongue today.

Beth has grown slender, pale, and more quiet than ever. Amy was considered ‘the flower of the family’. At sixteen she has the air and bearing of a full-grown woman, not beautiful, but possessed with grace. All three wore suits of thin silver gray (their best gowns for the summer), with blush roses in hair and bosom, and all three looked just what they were, fresh-faced, happy-hearted girls.

There will be no ceremonious performances, everything will be as natural and homelike as possible. When Aunt March arrived, she was shocked to see the bride and the bridegroom. The bride herself was running to welcome and lead her in. And the bridegroom himself was fastening up a garland.

“**Upon my word, here’s a state of things!**” cried the old lady. She took the seat of honor prepared for her. “Nobody is allowed to see you till the last minute, child.”

“I’m not a show, Aunty, and no one is coming to stare at me, to criticize my dress, or count the

¹ **here’s a state of things!** — что же это такое!

cost of my luncheon. I'm too happy to think about what anyone says or thinks. I'm going to have my little wedding just as I like it. John, dear, here's your hammer."

And Meg went away to help 'that man' in his highly improper employment.

Mr. Brooke didn't even say, "Thank you," but as he stooped for the unromantic tool, he kissed his little bride behind the folding door.

There was no bridal procession, but a sudden silence fell upon the room as Mr. March and the young couple took their places under the green arch. Mother and sisters gathered close. The fatherly voice broke more than once, which only seemed to make the service more beautiful and solemn. The bridegroom's hand trembled visibly, and no one heard his replies. But Meg looked straight up in her husband's eyes, and said, "I will!" with such tender trust in her own face and voice that her mother's heart rejoiced and Aunt March sniffed audibly.

Jo did not cry, though she was very near it once. She was only saved from a demonstration by the consciousness that Laurie was staring fixedly at her, with a comical mixture of merriment and emotion in his wicked black eyes. Beth's face was hidden on her mother's shoulder. Amy stood like a graceful statue.

No one said anything, till Laurie, who insisted on serving the bride, appeared before her, with a loaded salver in his hand and a puzzled expression on his face.

"Has Jo smashed all the bottles by accident?" he whispered.

"No, your grandfather kindly offered us his best wine. Aunt March actually sent some. But Father put away a little for Beth, and dispatched the rest to the

Soldier's Home. You know he thinks that wine must be used only in illness."

Meg spoke seriously and expected to see Laurie frown or laugh. But he did not do it, for after a quick look at her, he said,

"I like that! For I've seen enough harm from wine. Let other women think as you do."

"You are not wise because of your experience, I hope?" and there was an anxious accent in Meg's voice.

"No. I give you my word for it. Don't think too well of me, either."

"Come, Laurie, promise, and give me one more reason to call this the happiest day of my life."

A demand so sudden and so serious made the young man hesitate a moment. He gave her his hand, saying heartily,

"I promise, Mrs. Brooke!"

"I thank you, very, very much."

"And I drink 'long life to your resolution', Teddy," cried Jo.

After lunch, people strolled about through the house and garden. They were enjoying the sunshine. Meg and John were standing together in the middle of the grass plot. Laurie was seized with an inspiration which put the finishing touch to this unfashionable wedding.

"All the married people take hands and dance round the new husband and wife, as the Germans do!" cried Laurie, promenading down the path with Amy.

Mr. and Mrs. March, Aunt and Uncle Carrol began to dance, others joined in, and soon everyone was dancing. Eventually, want of breath closed the impromptu dancing, and then people began to go.

"I wish you well, my dear, I heartily wish you well. But I think you'll be sorry for it," said Aunt

March to Meg. Then she added to the bridegroom, as he led her to the carriage, "You've got a treasure, young man, see that you deserve it."

The little house was not far away. The only Meg's bridal journey was the quiet walk with John from the old home to the new. When she came down, they all gathered about her to say 'good-by'.

They were watching her, with faces full of love and hope and tender pride as she walked away, leaning on her husband's arm. Her hands were full of flowers and the June sunshine brightening her happy face — and so Meg's married life began.

Artistic Attempts¹

People need a long time to learn the difference between talent and genius, especially ambitious young men and women. Amy was learning this distinction. She attempted every branch of art. For a long time, she devoted herself to the finest **pen-and-ink drawing**². Here she showed such taste and skill that her graceful handwork proved both pleasant and profitable. But over-strained eyes caused her to put the pen and ink aside for a bold and to study **poker-sketching**³. She then transitioned from fire to oil and fell to painting. Then came charcoal portraits.

Softened into crayon sketches, they did better, for the likenesses were good, and Amy's hair, Jo's nose, Meg's mouth, and Laurie's eyes were pronounced 'wonderfully fine'. A return to clay and plaster followed, and ghostly casts of her acquaintances haunted

¹ **Artistic Attempts** — творческие изыскания

² **pen-and-ink drawing** — рисунки тушью и пером

³ **poker-sketching** — выжигание по дереву

corners of the house, or tumbled off closet shelves onto people's heads.

After this Amy subsided, till a mania for sketching from nature set her to haunting river, field, and wood, for picturesque studies. She caught endless colds sitting on damp grass. She sacrificed her complexion floating on the river in the midsummer sun to study light and shade. She got a wrinkle over her nose trying after 'points of sight'.

If 'genius is eternal patience', as Michelangelo affirms, Amy had some claim to the **divine attribute**¹. She persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements. She is firmly believing that in time she will do something worthy to be called 'high art'.

"I want to ask a favor of you, Mamma," Amy said, coming in with an important air one day.

"Well, little girl, what is it?" replied her mother.

"Our drawing class breaks up next week. Before the girls separate for the summer, I want to ask them out here for a day. They are wild to see the river, sketch the broken bridge, and copy some of the things they admire in my book. They have been very kind to me in many ways. I am grateful, for they are all rich and I know I am poor, yet they never made any difference. I want to ask the girls out to lunch next week, to take them for a drive to the places they want to see, a row on the river, perhaps."

"That looks feasible. What do you want for lunch? Cake, sandwiches, fruit, and coffee will be all that is necessary, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, no! We must have cold tongue and chicken, French chocolate and ice cream, besides. The girls like such things, and I want my lunch to be proper and elegant."

¹ **divine attribute** — божественное свойство

"How many young ladies are there?" asked her mother. She began to look sober.

"Twelve or fourteen in the class, but I dare say they won't all come."

"Bless me, child."

"Why, not more than six or eight will probably come, so I shall hire a beach wagon and borrow Mr. Laurence's **cherry-bounce**¹."

"All of this will be expensive, Amy."

"Not very. I've calculated the cost, and I'll pay for it myself."

"Don't you think, dear, that as these girls like such things, and the best we can do will be nothing new, that some simpler plan would be pleasanter to them?"

"If I can't have it as I like, I don't care to have it at all. I know that I can carry it out perfectly well, if you and the girls will help a little. I don't see why I can't if I'm willing to pay for it," said Amy.

Mrs. March knew that experience was an excellent teacher.

"Very well, Amy, if you want it, I'll say no more. Talk it over with the girls, and whichever way you decide, I'll do my best to help you."

"Thanks, Mother, you are always so kind."

And away went Amy to lay her plan before her sisters. Meg agreed at once, and promised her aid. But Jo frowned upon the whole project. She wanted to do nothing at first.

"Why do you want to spend your money, worry your family, and turn the house upside down for some girls who don't care a sixpence for you?" said Jo.

"I don't truckle, and I hate the situation when someone patronizes as much as you do!" returned

¹ **cherry-bounce** — шарабан

Amy. "The girls care for me, and I for them. There's a great deal of kindness and sense and talent among them, in spite of what you call fashionable nonsense. You don't care to make people like you — I do, and I mean to make the most of every chance that comes."

The invitations were sent, nearly all accepted. The following Monday was set apart for the grand event. If not on Monday, the young ladies will come on Tuesday. This arrangement aggravated Jo and Hannah (the March family maid and cook, their only servant) to the last degree.

The lunch looked charming. Amy surveyed it. It will taste well. Amy will borrow glass, china, and silver, and after the event, everything will get safely home again. The carriages were promised. Meg and Mother were all ready to do the honors. Beth was able to help Hannah behind the scenes. Jo was trying to be as lively and amiable as possible. Amy cheered herself with anticipations of the happy moment when, after the lunch is safely over, she will drive away with her friends for an afternoon of artistic delights.

At eleven nobody came, and at two the exhausted family sat down in a blaze of sunshine to consume the perishable portions of the feast.

"No doubt about the weather today, they will certainly come. So we must be ready for them,"

said Amy, as the sun woke her next morning.

"I can't get any lobsters, so you won't have any salad today," said Mr. March, coming in half an hour later, with an expression of placid despair.

"Use the chicken then, the toughness won't matter in a salad," advised his wife.

"Hannah left it on the kitchen table a minute, and the kittens got at it. I'm very sorry, Amy," added Beth.