

Louisa May Alcott
LITTLE MEN

NAT

“Please, sir, is this Plumfield?” asked a ragged boy of the man who opened the gate.

“Yes. Who sent you?”

“Mr. Laurence. I have got a letter for the lady.”

“All right; go up to the house, and give it to her, little chap.”

The man spoke pleasantly, and the boy went on, feeling much cheered by the words. Nat saw a large square house before him, with an old-fashioned porch, wide steps, and lights shining in many windows. Then he heard young voices.

A rosy-faced servant-maid opened the door, and smiled as she took the letter which he silently offered. She pointed to a seat in the hall, and said, with a nod: “Sit there.”

The house was full of boys. There were boys everywhere, upstairs and downstairs; big boys, little boys, and middle-sized boys. Two large rooms on the right were evidently schoolrooms. An open fire burned on the hearth, and several indolent lads lay on their backs before it. A tall boy was practising

on the flute in one corner. Two or three others were jumping over the desks.

In the room on the left a long supper-table was seen, with great pitchers of new milk, piles of brown and white bread. A flavor of toast was in the air, also suggestions of baked apples.

The hall, however, was the most inviting prospect of all. One landing was devoted to marbles, the other to checkers, while the stairs were occupied by a boy reading, a girl singing a lullaby to her doll, two puppies, and a kitten.

One very lively boy came down so swiftly that he could not stop himself and fell off the banisters, with a crash. Nat ran up to the fallen rider. The boy, however, only winked rapidly and said, "Hello!"

"Hello!" returned Nat.

"What's your name?"

"Nat Blake."

"Mine's Tommy Bangs. Demi, here's a new one. Come here."

At his call, the boy reading on the stairs looked up with a pair of big brown eyes, and after an instant's pause, he put the book under his arm, and came soberly down to greet the newcomer.

"Have you seen Aunt Jo?" he asked.

"I haven't seen anybody yet but you boys; I'm waiting," answered Nat.

"Did Uncle Laurie send you?" proceeded Demi, politely, but gravely.

"Mr. Laurence did."

"He is Uncle Laurie; and he always sends nice boys."

Nat smiled. He did not know what to say next. A little girl came up with her doll in her arms. "This is my sister, Daisy," announced Demi.

The children nodded to one another; and the little girl's face dimpled with pleasure, as she said affably:

"I hope you'll stay. We have such good times here; don't we, Demi?"

"Of course, we do."

"It seems a very nice place indeed," observed Nat.

"It's the nicest place in the world, isn't it, Demi?" said Daisy.

"No, I think Greenland, where the icebergs and seals are, is more interesting. But I'm fond of Plum-field, and it is a very nice place as well," said Demi.

The servant returned and said,

"All right; you will stay here."

"I'm glad; now come to Aunt Jo," Daisy took him by the hand.

Demi returned to his beloved book, while his sister led the newcomer into a back room, where a stout gentleman was frolicking with two little boys on the sofa, and a thin lady was just finishing the letter.

"Here he is, aunty!" cried Daisy.

"So this is my new boy? I am glad to see you, my dear, and hope you'll be happy here," said the lady.

She was not at all handsome, but she was merry. She saw the little tremble of Nat's lips as she smoothed his hair, and her keen eyes grew softer.

"I am Mother Bhaer, that gentleman is Father Bhaer, and these are the two little Bhaers. Come here, boys, and see Nat."

The stout man, with a chubby child on each shoulder, came up to welcome the new boy. Rob and

Teddy merely grinned at him, but Mr. Bhaer said, in a cordial voice:

“There is a place for you, my son; sit down and dry thy wet feet.”

Mrs. Bhaer gave him warm slippers. He said “Thank you, ma’am”; and said it so gratefully that Mrs. Bhaer’s eyes grew soft, and she said something merry.

“There are Tommy Bangs’ slippers; but he never will remember to put them on in the house; so he won’t have them. They are too big; but that’s better; you can’t run away from us fast.”

“I don’t want to run away, ma’am.”

“That’s good! Now I am going to warm you, and try to get rid of that ugly cough. How long have you had it, dear?” asked Mrs. Bhaer.

“All winter. I got cold.”

“No wonder. He were living in that damp cellar on a rag!” said Mrs. Bhaer, **in a low tone**¹ to her husband, who was looking at the boy.

“Robin, go to Nursey, and tell her to give you the medicine and the liniment,” said Mr. Bhaer.

Nat looked a little anxious at the preparations, but forgot his fears in a hearty laugh, when Mrs. Bhaer whispered to him, with a droll look:

“The syrup I’m going to give you has honey in it; and Ted wants some.”

A bell rang, and a loud tramping through the hall announced supper. Bashful Nat quaked at the thought of meeting many boys, but Mrs. Bhaer held out her hand to him, and Rob said, patronizingly,

“Don’t be afraid; I’ll take care of you.”

¹ **in a low tone** — вполголоса

Twelve boys, **six on a side**¹, stood behind their chairs, while the tall flute-playing boy was trying to curb their ardor. But no one sat down till Mrs. Bhaer was in her place behind the teapot, with Teddy on her left, and Nat on her right.

"This is our new boy, Nat Blake."

As she spoke everyone stared at Nat. The boys did their best to obey. But there are times when hungry boys cannot be repressed without real cruelty, and Saturday evening, after a half-holiday, was one of those times.

"Let them have one day in which they can howl and racket and frolic. A holiday isn't a holiday without plenty of freedom and fun," Mrs. Bhaer used to say.

Nat sat with Tommy Bangs and Mrs. Bhaer.

"Who is that boy next the girl down at the other end?" whispered Nat to his young neighbor.

"That's Demi Brooke. Mr. Bhaer is his uncle. He knows much and reads a lot."

"Who is the fat one next him?"

"Oh, that's Stuffy Cole. His name is George, but we call him Stuffy because he eats so much. The little fellow next Father Bhaer is his boy Rob, and then there's big Franz his nephew; he teaches something."

"He plays the flute, doesn't he?" asked Nat.

Tommy nodded, and said,

"Yes. And we dance sometimes, and do gymnastics **to music**². I like a drum myself, and want to learn as soon as I can."

"I like a fiddle best; I can play one too," said Nat.

"Can you?" and Tommy. "Mr. Bhaer's got an old fiddle, and he'll let you play on it if you want to."

¹ **six on a side** — по шесть с каждой стороны

² **to music** — под музыку

“Oh, I would like it ever so much. You see, I used to go round fiddling with my father, and another man, till he died.”

“Wasn’t that fun?” cried Tommy, much impressed.

“No, it was horrid; so cold in winter, and hot in summer. And I got tired; and they were cross sometimes; and I didn’t get enough to eat. But I loved my little fiddle, and I miss it. Nicolo took it away when father died.”

“**You’ll belong to the band**¹ if you play good.”

“Do you have a band here?” Nat’s eyes sparkled.

“Yes we do; a jolly band, all boys; and they have concerts. You just see what happens tomorrow night.”

After this pleasantly exciting remark, Tommy returned to his supper.

Mrs. Bhaer heard all they said. She put **roly-poly**² Nat next to Tommy, because she wanted to get the key to the new boy’s character. In the letter which Mr. Laurence had sent with Nat, he had said:

“Dear Jo, this poor lad is an orphan now, sick and friendless. He has been a street-musician; and

I found him in a cellar, mourning for his dead father, and his lost violin. I think there is something in him. You will cure his body, Fritz will help his mind, and when he is ready I’ll see if he is a genius or only a boy with a talent which may earn his bread for him,

Teddy.”

¹ **You’ll belong to the band.** — Ты попадёшь в оркестр.

² **roly-poly** — бойкий

“Of course we will!” cried Mrs. Bhaer, as she read the letter.

When she saw Nat she felt at once that here was a lonely, sick boy who needed just what she loved to give, a home and motherly care. Both she and Mr. Bhaer observed him quietly; and in spite of ragged clothes, awkward manners, and a dirty face, they saw much about Nat that pleased them. He was a thin, pale boy, of twelve, with blue eyes, and a good forehead under the rough, neglected hair; an anxious, scared face and a sensitive mouth that trembled when a kind glance fell on him.

“He will fiddle all day long if he likes,” said Mrs. Bhaer to herself, as she saw the eager, happy expression on his face when Tommy talked of the band.

So, after supper, Mrs. Jo appeared with a violin in her hand, and went to Nat, who sat in a corner.

“Now, my lad, we want a violin in our band, and I think you will do it nicely.”

He seized the old fiddle at once, and handled it with care. Music was his passion.

“I’ll do the best I can, ma’am,” was all he said; and then drew the bow across the strings.

There was a great clatter in the room. Nat played softly to himself, forgetting everything in his delight. It was only a simple melody, such as street-musicians play, but it caught the ears of the boys at once, and silenced them. They stood listening with surprise and pleasure. Gradually they got nearer and nearer, and Mr. Bhaer came up to watch the boy. Nat’s eyes shone, his cheeks reddened, and his thin fingers flew.

A hearty round of applause rewarded him, when he stopped.

"You do that very well," cried Tommy, who considered Nat his protege.

"You will be the first fiddle in my band," added Franz, with an approving smile.

Mrs. Bhaer whispered to her husband:

"Teddy is right: there's something in the child."

Mr. Bhaer nodded his head emphatically, as he clapped Nat on the shoulder, saying, heartily:

"You play well, my son. Come now and play something which we can sing."

It was the proudest, happiest minute of the poor boy's life when he was led to the place by the piano, and the lads gathered round. They chose a song he knew; and soon violin, flute, and piano led a chorus of boyish voices. It was too much for Nat. As the final shout died away, he dropped the fiddle, and turning to the wall sobbed like a little child.

"My dear, what is it?" asked Mrs. Bhaer, who was singing.

"You are all so kind and it's so beautiful," sobbed Nat, coughing till he was breathless.

"Come with me, dear; you must go to bed and rest. This is too noisy a place for you," whispered Mrs. Bhaer; and took him away to her own parlor.

Then she asked him to tell her all his troubles, and listened to the little story with tears in her eyes.

"My child, you have got a father and a mother now, and this is home. Don't think of those sad times any more, but get well and happy. This place is made for all sorts of boys to have a good time in, and to learn how to be useful men, I hope. You will have as much music as you want. Now have a bath, and then go to bed."

Mrs. Bhaer led him up to a big room, where they found a stout German woman with a round and cheery face.

“This is Nursey Hummel, and she will give you a nice bath, and cut your hair. That’s the bathroom in there.”

By the time Nat was washed and done up in a blanket by the fire, while Nursey cut his hair, a new detachment of boys arrived.

Nursey gave Nat a flannel night-gown, and then tucked him into one of the three little beds standing in the room. Cleanliness in itself was a new and delightful sensation; flannel gowns were unknown comforts in his world; and the feeling that somebody cared for him made that room a sort of heaven to the homeless child.

A momentary lull was followed by the sudden appearance of pillows flying in all directions. The battle raged in several rooms, all down the upper hall, and even in the nursery. No one forbade it, or even looked surprised.

“Won’t they hurt them?” asked Nat.

“Oh dear, no! We always allow one pillow-fight Saturday night. I like it myself,” said Mrs. Bhaer.

“What a nice school this is!” observed Nat, in a burst of admiration.

“It’s an odd one,” laughed Mrs. Bhaer, “but you see we don’t want to make children miserable by too many rules, and too much study. I forbade night-gown parties at first; but it was of no use. So I made an agreement with them. I allow a fifteen-minute pillow-fight every Saturday night; and they promise to go properly to bed every other night. I tried it, and it

worked well. If they don't keep their word, no frolic. I let them rampage as much as they like."

"It's a beautiful plan," said Nat.

Mrs. Bhaer looked at her watch, and called out:

"Time is up, boys. Into bed, or pay the forfeit!"

"What is the forfeit?" asked Nat.

"Lose their fun next time," answered Mrs. Bhaer.

"I give them five minutes to settle down, then put out the lights, and expect order. They are honorable lads, and they keep their word."

SUNDAY

Nat flew out of bed, and dressed himself with great satisfaction in the suit of clothes he found on the chair. Suddenly Tommy appeared and escorted Nat down to breakfast.

The sun was shining into the dining-room on the well-spread table, and the flock of hungry, hearty lads who gathered round it. Everyone stood silently behind his chair while little Rob, standing beside his father at the head of the table, folded his hands, reverently bent his curly head, and softly repeated a prayer. Then they all sat down to enjoy the Sunday-morning breakfast. There was much pleasant talk while the knives and forks rattled briskly.

"Now, my lads, be ready for church when the bus comes round," said Father Bhaer.

Everyone had some little daily duty, and was expected to perform it faithfully. Some brought wood and water, brushed the steps, or ran errands for Mrs.

Bhaer. Others fed the pet animals, and did chores about the barn with Franz. Daisy washed the cups, and Demi wiped them, for the twins liked to work together. Even Baby Teddy trotted to and fro, putting napkins away, and pushing chairs into their places. For half an hour the lads buzzed about like a hive of bees. Then the bus drove round, Father Bhaer and Franz with the eight older boys piled in, and away they went for a three-mile drive to church in town.

Because of the troublesome cough Nat preferred to stay at home with the four small boys, and spent a happy morning in Mrs. Bhaer's room, listening to the stories she read them, and learning the hymns she taught them.

"This is my Sunday study," she said, showing him shelves filled with picture-books, paint-boxes, little diaries, and materials for letter-writing. "I want my boys to love Sunday, to find it a peaceful, pleasant day, when they can rest from common study and play, yet enjoy quiet pleasures, and learn lessons more important than any taught in school. Do you understand me?" she asked, watching Nat's attentive face.

"You mean to be good?" he said, after hesitating a minute.

"Yes; to be good, and to love to be good. It is hard work sometimes, I know very well; but we all help one another."

She took down a thick book and opened at a page on which there was one word at the top.

"Why, that's my name!" cried Nat, looking both surprised and interested.

"Yes; I have a page for each boy. I keep a little account of how he gets on through the week, and Sunday night I show him the record. If it is bad I