

It is impossible to describe the delight a first sight of this collection affords an admirer of Turner; and much more impossible to give any idea of the beauty and mystery in some of the sketches here shown. But I am sure the satisfaction would be far greater if the visitor was allowed even one peep inside the great tin cases with heavy padlocks standing in a corner, and made all the more fascinating because one is told that they contain most valuable unmounted sketches.

Even much silver blandly insinuated into the deaf keeper's hand has no effect, and one can only hope that, before long, Mr. Ruskin will have these studies put into some form accessible to those who now—after the east cabinet is shut, the last key turned—go away more than ever impressed by the untiring industry of Turner, and grateful (if a foreigner) at not having left London without taking advantage of the opportunity, offered by this collection, for studying the methods used by this great colorist.

MAY ALCOTT.
London, August 3

A.5 May Alcott, "London Bridges," published under Louisa May Alcott's name in *The Youth's Companion*, July 23, 1874.

[transcription from: *The Sketches of Louisa May Alcott*, 2001, 244–49]

I have often said to friends on their return from England, "Well, did you try the penny boats going up and down the Thames all day, and so get fine views of St. Paul's, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey and the Bell Tower?"

"No, we didn't know that strangers did that."

"Did you ever take a drive on one of the coaches, and so have gone dashing off to Sunbridge, Wells, or Dorking for the pleasure of viewing the country from the top of one of these once famous mail coaches?"

"No, we never tried it."

"Did you see the immense wine vaults, where the visitor wanders for miles, apparently, candle in hand, as if among the Catacombs?"

"Never thought of such a thing."

"Nor bought hot roasted potatoes from the ovens kept by sleepy women at street corners in the night?"

"Bless me, no!"

"Nor gone to the Zoo to hunt up the wombat and see if he really were 'hairy and obtuse,' as Christina Rossetti says in one of her poems; and being there, ride on camels and disport yourselves like children among the animals?"

"We went, of course, but a man showed us round."

"I won't harrow up your feelings any further, but end my questioning by the triumphant assertion, I *know* you didn't see London bridges by moonlight."

"You are right, it did not occur to us."

"Then it seems to me you have missed some of the best sights of London, and have only followed in the beaten track laid down by Murray, and made very dull and dusty by the feet of many travellers like yourselves."

Some would have thought it quite impossible for a lone woman, even an enterprising American, to have done these things, and perhaps I *should* have found it so had not a kindred spirit of the opposite sex, but an American, been raised up to me.

My grandson, as he respectfully calls himself, being my junior by some years, is a youth of an inquiring turn, an adventurous soul, a persuasive tongue, and makes a capital guide, guard, comrade, and friend.

A delightful unexpectedness attends our trips and gives them zest, so we always keep in light marching order, and never are surprised at any suggestion from the other.

On the evening of the Fourth of July, as we sat on the balcony enjoying the lovely moonlight that glorified all London, I was suddenly seized with a desire to do something revolutionary and independent in honor of the day. So instead of sitting decorously in an easy-chair and taking my moonlight like a well-conducted young woman, I rose up, and pointing vaguely to the horizon in general, I said, "Let us go somewhere."

"We will," promptly responded my ever-ready grandson, and in a moment we were walking forth into time and space with the delicious sense of freedom so dear to the Yankee soul.

"Where shall we go?" said I, as we came out of the quiet square.

Now most men would have suggested a concert, call, or a romantic stroll in the park; but C. knew better, and gave me something far finer than any of these.

"Come and see the bridges by moonlight," he answered, like an inspiration.

Away we clattered in a cab to the Thames embankment, that wonderful piece of work which turned the river bank, with its tumble-down houses, old wharves, and dangerous dens, into a magnificent drive, with the city on one hand and the busy river on the other.

We alighted at Blackfriars Bridge, and here standing in one of the niches built in a half-circle over each abutment, we took a long survey, for it was a view which no one should lose.

Behind us rose St. Paul's, its great white dome thrown out in strong relief against the soft haze of the sky beyond. Nearer the water were the enormous breweries which seem to line the Thames, almost always surrounded by a stone lion or some other device, which in that magical light made them look more like palaces than establishments for satisfying what seems to an American the unquenchable thirst of the British nation.

Still nearer to us were many Dutch vessels with their uncouth hulks, queer rigging and the bright-colored sails that so enliven the river by day, now lost in black shadows or closely reefed, for no large craft are allowed to ply up or down after dark.

While expressing my wish that John Bull would change some of his laws to suit my private taste and let the penny-boats run by night, we strolled across the bridge, meeting crowds of the common people out for refreshment like ourselves.

Each niche had its pair of lovers, and I had just said how happy they seemed, when in a smaller nook I caught sight of the crouching figure of a woman so suggestive in attitude and figure of "one more unfortunate," that I involuntarily moved towards her, remembering the other lines:

Alas for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun.

But C. drew me away, saying sagely, "Don't waste your sympathy, these people are usually humbugs, and this is not the bridge where the real tragedies happen."

Feeling rather crushed I went on; but when we returned, the dark, despairing figure was still there, and it haunted me all that night.

On Waterloo Bridge such sights are common, for the poor souls who are in earnest pay a half penny toll and thus escaping the idlers so thick on the free bridges, drown themselves as privately as possible.

My mind was so full of these sorrowful images that I followed my guide silently up the long flight of stone steps leading to the iron turn-stile. Here, while C. paid our toll, the policeman who keeps guard there turned the light of the little lantern fastened to his belt full upon my face, for I dare say its solemn expression raised a doubt in his mind as to my intentions.

But there never was less reason for anxiety, for life was wonderfully attractive to me that lovely night, and there were few happier mortals than I, when, a little later, I sat in a lightboat and we went swiftly with the tide along that line of moonshine which always seems like a silvery path to heaven.

Many small sail-boats were out, and we found much amusement in hearing the comments of the strollers on both banks concerning our rowing. I took an oar and we went down in gallant style, but coming back was hard work, for round the piers of the bridges the current ran swift and strong, and we had a famous pull before we landed at Westminster pier and crossed to the Lambeth side.

Here the embankment (which, by the way, cost three million pounds) runs before the fine Lambeth Hospital, built on the new plan of having the contagious diseases in separate buildings connected by handsome arcades. These command such charming views up and down the river, with the turrets and spires of the Houses of Parliament opposite and Lambeth Palace not far off, that I almost wished myself a convalescent patient able to enjoy it every day.

On we went to the Suspension or Lambeth Bridge, and standing between this and the Vauxhall above, I was perplexed to decide which was most beautiful, each was so fine in its way.

In spite of Ruskin's sneers at Blackfriars, it is charming to me, with its different-colored stones. The long arches of old Westminster are the most perfect, and the airiness of Lambeth is very striking. Hungerford adds the charm of variety, and the one which spans the curve of the river at Greenwich is a delight to look upon.

Being warned by the deep tones of Big Ben from the clock tower that it was getting late, I proposed turning homewards, but C. would not hear of it till I had admired Lambeth Palace, which is most interesting, with its square gray towers, deep gateway, portcullis and high walls, all looking particularly impressive just then with the dark figure of a sentinel passing to and fro behind the barred entrance.

All the way back to Westminster the moon shone brightly on the venerable abbey. St. Paul's gloamed in the purple shadows of the distance; the dark bridge and massive stone work of the hospital rose upon the right, and on the left were the brightly lighted Houses of Parliament, dropping countless yellow reflections on the water below, where the superb eight-oared club-boats rose and fell with the tide.

It was a very happy walk home, for I refused to drive, being bound to enjoy my midsummer night's dream to the uttermost. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step, and we took it when leaving the more crowded and brilliant streets behind us, we turned into a quiet quarter and nearly fell over a queer black object, like an oddly-shaped wheelbarrow in mourning; while a sleeping woman sat on the curb-stone folded in a dark shawl.

The whole thing looked mysterious, and I could not pass without stopping to investigate. C. satisfied my curiosity by giving the shrouded sleeper a gentle poke and demanding two hot potatoes. Up rose the woman, open flew a little door, disclosing an oven, and out came two immense potatoes baked to a turn. Producing a pepper-pot with salt in it, the now wide-awake lady obligingly offered to break the skins and add the necessary savor. But we preferred to bear our warm purchases home, there to feast royally on them, with bread, butter and sardines added.

Not a romantic termination of our moonlight ramble, but very acceptable and more wholesome, as we morally decided, than ices and cake at a restaurant, or a heavy tea at some social board. Our walk and our row made us delightfully tired, and in our dreams we saw again more wonderful and bright than ever the famous bridges we had visited "in the glimpses of the moon."

A.6 May Alcott, Unpublished letter to *The Boston Evening Transcript*, Paris, November 25, 1876 (Louisa May Alcott Additional Papers, 1845-1944, MS Am1817(60).

Dear Transcript,

In these days when all the world travels perhaps a word through your hospitable columns concerning a new art school in Paris may not prove uninteresting particularly to those making plans for foreign study. It had always been possible to find good painters here who for a sound sum, would admit a few pupils to their atelier & who are generous enough to criticize the work of a stranger, if asked to do so. But to any woman too poor to afford the first, and too proud to accept the last, it has been difficult to find just the advantages one —st?

The fine life schools so generally considered the best in the world (p. 2) & from which most of the celebrated French painters have graduated after long years of study, are open all day, at an exceedingly small cost. (twenty five francs a month) but are *exclusively* for *men*. True there is one class for women under Monsieur Julien, but it offers very inferior advantages at more than *double the cost* charged the men, & in this as in so many other ways the injustice toward women who are trying to help themselves is very apparent. But as the number of female students has increased year by year, in Paris, the necessity of a good school for them has been so decidedly felt that at last Monsieur Ed[uoard] Krug has opened one, under the finest auspices. Already fourteen or more of us, principally Americans & English are at work in his well lighted, well ventilated atelier [p. 3] where the best models which the city affords, are always in readiness(?). These are three séances per day, the morning being given to drawing the ensemble, the afternoon to painting or chalk drawing from the *head* only, & the evening to the figure again.

This drawing from life is considered of the first importance & many students give years to its practice in chinks before touching color. It is hard for most Americans to give the time thought necessary for this thorough grounding but its value is shown in the splendid results seen at every Salon. Perhaps the color of other schools may be better, but the perfect drawing of the French is unsurpassed!"

[p. 4] And in this particular, Mons Krug has exerted himself, to secure a concours of celebrated professors, & members of the Institute, as critics of the

May Alcott Nieriker,
Author and Advocate

Travel Writing and Transformation
in the Late Nineteenth Century

Julia Dabbs



2022