

Beth's Secret

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

The four March sisters are the central characters of Little Women. The reader has watched them grow up in the mid-1800s, and they are now young women. Beth, the third sister, has never been very healthy. Lately, she has become weaker. Her sister Jo has noticed Beth's decline and has taken her to the beach in hopes of improving her health. Jo is very afraid that Beth is "drifting away." One day on the beach, Beth tells Jo that she believes she may be dying.

A peep is another name for a sandpiper which is a shorebird.

"I don't know how to express myself, and shouldn't try, to any one but you, because I can't speak out, except to my Jo. I only mean to say that I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up; I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away, and the hard part now is the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven."

Jo could not speak; and for several minutes there was no sound but the sigh of the wind and the lapping of the tide. A white-winged gull flew by, with the flash of sunshine on its silvery breast; Beth watched it till it vanished, and her eyes were full of sadness. A little gray-coated sand-bird came tripping over the beach, "peeping" softly to itself, as if enjoying the sun and sea; it came quite close to Beth, looked at her with a friendly eye, and sat upon a warm stone, dressing its wet feathers, quite at home. Beth smiled, and felt comforted, for the tiny thing seemed to offer its small friendship, and remind her that a pleasant world was still to be enjoyed.

"Dear little bird! See, Jo, how tame it is. I like peeps better than the gulls: they are not so wild and handsome, but they seem happy, confiding little things. I used to call them my birds, last summer; and mother said they reminded her of me,—busy, quaker-colored creatures, always near the shore, and always chirping that contented little song of theirs. You are the gull, Jo, strong and wild, fond of the storm and the wind, flying far out to sea, and happy all alone. Meg is the turtle-dove, and Amy is like the lark she writes about, trying to get up among the clouds, but always dropping down into its nest again. Dear little girl! she's so ambitious, but her heart is good and tender; and no matter how high she flies, she never will forget home. I hope I shall see her again, but she seems so far away."

Questions

1. What does *express* mean here: "I don't know how to express myself"?
2. How is Beth like the bird?
3. What bird does Beth compare each March sister to?
4. What is Beth's secret?