

# A Telegram

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

*Louisa May Alcott published Little Women in 1868-1869. It tells the story of the March family: Father, Marmee, and their four daughters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. They live in Massachusetts during the Civil War. Father, a once wealthy man, has lost his fortune. His family tries to manage while he is serving in the Union Army. In this passage, Marmee has just received a telegram to come to Washington, D.C. because Father is very sick. The family races to find money and complete errands for Marmee's trip. As they come together in the evening, Jo has not returned. Laurie, the boy who lives next door, is with them.*

-----

They began to get anxious, and Laurie went off to find her, for no one knew what freak Jo might take into her head. He missed her, however, and she came walking in with a very queer expression of countenance, for there was a mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family as much as did the roll of bills she laid before her mother, saying with a little choke in her voice, "That's my contribution toward making Father comfortable and bringing him home!"

"My dear, where did you get it? Twenty-five dollars! Jo, I hope you haven't done anything rash?"

"No, it's mine honestly. I didn't beg, borrow, or steal it. I earned it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own."

As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general outcry arose, for all her abundant hair was cut short.

"Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty." "My dear girl, there was no need of this." "She doesn't look like my Jo any more, but I love her dearly for it!"

As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the cropped head tenderly, Jo assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a particle, and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked it, "It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth. It will be good for my vanity, I was getting too proud of my wig. It will do my brains good to have that mop taken off. My head feels deliciously light and cool, and the barber said I could soon have a curly crop, which will be boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order. I'm satisfied, so please take the money and let's have supper."

"Tell me all about it, Jo. I am not quite satisfied, but I can't blame you, for I know how willingly you sacrificed your vanity, as you call it, to your love. But, my dear, it was not necessary, and I'm afraid you will regret it one of these days," said Mrs. March.

"No, I won't!" returned Jo stoutly, feeling much relieved that her prank was not entirely condemned.

“What made you do it?” asked Amy, who would as soon have thought of cutting off her head as her pretty hair.

“Well, I was wild to do something for Father,” replied Jo, as they gathered about the table, for healthy young people can eat even in the midst of trouble. “I hate to borrow as much as Mother does, and I knew Aunt March would croak, she always does, if you ask for a ninepence. Meg gave all her quarterly salary toward the rent, and I only got some clothes with mine, so I felt wicked, and was bound to have some money, if I sold the nose off my face to get it.”

**Questions**

1. How did Jo get the money?
2. Who cut Jo's hair?
3. What is a ninepence?
4. How did Meg spend her quarterly salary?

---

**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. anxious
2. countenance
3. choke
4. rash
5. outcry
6. abundant
7. cropped
8. indifferent
9. particle
10. vanity
11. satisfied
12. stoutly
13. condemned
14. wild
15. midst
16. ninepence
17. bound

## Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. "As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general outcry arose, for all her **abundant** hair was cut short."

- a. brown    b. long and wavy    c. large quantity    d. braided

2. "They began to get **anxious**, and Laurie went off to find her, for no one knew what freak Jo might take into her head.

- a. angry    b. worried    c. curious    d. hungry

3. "Meg gave all her quarterly salary toward the rent, and I only got some clothes with mine, so I felt wicked, and was **bound** to have some money, if I sold the nose off my face to get it."

- a. determined    b. expecting    c. happy    d. stealing

4. "He missed her, however, and she came walking in with a very queer expression of countenance, for there was a mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family as much as did the roll of bills she laid before her mother, saying with a little **choke** in her voice, 'That's my contribution toward making Father comfortable and bringing him home!'"

- a. joyful squeak    b. laughter    c. jealousy or envy    d. sob or tearfulness

5. "'No, I won't!' returned Jo stoutly, feeling much relieved that her prank was not entirely **condemned**."

- a. unsuccessful    b. criticized; found lacking    c. done; completed    d. unusual

6. "He missed her, however, and she came walking in with a very queer expression of **countenance**, for there was a mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family as much as did the roll of bills she laid before her mother, saying with a little choke in her voice, "That's my contribution toward making Father comfortable and bringing him home!"

- a. attitude    b. tiredness; exhaustion    c. importance    d. limping

7. "As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the **cropped** head tenderly, Jo assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a particle, and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked it, 'It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth.'"

- a. bowed    b. weeping    c. cut short    d. bouncy

8. "As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the cropped head tenderly, Jo assumed an **indifferent** air, which did not deceive anyone a particle, and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked it, 'It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth.'"

- a. changeable    b. joyful    c. quiet    d. uncaring

9. "'Well, I was wild to do something for Father,' replied Jo, as they gathered about the table, for healthy

young people can eat even in the **midst** of trouble."

- a. middle   b. end   c. beginning   d. water spray

10. "As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general **outcry** arose, for all her abundant hair was cut short."

- a. cheer   b. noisy protest   c. hearty laughter   d. silence

11. "As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the cropped head tenderly, Jo assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a **particle**, and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked it, 'It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth.'"

- a. tiny bit   b. in particular   c. in the room   d. for a long time

12. "'Jo, I hope you haven't done anything **rash**?'"

- a. mean; unkind   b. today   c. reckless; hasty   d. illegal

13. "'No, I won't!' returned Jo **stoutly**, feeling much relieved that her prank was not entirely condemned."

- a. loudly   b. happily   c. quietly   d. firmly

14. "'It will be good for my **vanity**, I was getting too proud of my wig.'"

- a. bedroom furniture   b. health   c. pride; conceit   d. job; occupation

15. "'Well, I was **wild** to do something for Father,' replied Jo, as they gathered about the table, for healthy young people can eat even in the midst of trouble."

- a. without ideas   b. eager; yearning   c. asking permission   d. not thinking