

Amy's Valley Of Humiliation

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

The novel Little Women is about the March sisters growing up during the Civil War. This passage is about Amy, the youngest sister. At Amy's school, the latest fad, or popular thing, is a treat called pickled limes. The girls in the class often share this treat with their friends. The March family doesn't have much money, but Amy has persuaded one of her sisters to give her money to buy some so she can share with her friends. As the passage starts, Jenny Snow, one of Amy's enemies, has told their teacher, Mr. Davis, that Amy has pickled limes in her desk. Mr. Davis has a rule against having these in the classroom.

It was a most unfortunate moment for denouncing Amy, and Jenny knew it. Mr. Davis had evidently taken his coffee too strong that morning, there was an east wind, which always affected his neuralgia, and his pupils had not done him the credit which he felt he deserved. Therefore, to use the expressive, if not elegant, language of a schoolgirl, "He was as nervous as a witch and as cross as a bear." The word 'limes' was like fire to powder, his yellow face flushed, and he rapped on his desk with an energy which made Jenny skip to her seat with unusual rapidity.

"Young ladies, attention, if you please!"

At the stern order the buzz ceased, and fifty pairs of blue, black, gray, and brown eyes were obediently fixed upon his awful countenance.

"Miss March, come to the desk."

Amy rose to comply with outward composure, but a secret fear oppressed her, for the limes weighed upon her conscience.

"Bring with you the limes you have in your desk," was the unexpected command which arrested her before she got out of her seat.

"Don't take all." whispered her neighbor, a young lady of great presence of mind.

Amy hastily shook out half a dozen and laid the rest down before Mr. Davis, feeling that any man possessing a human heart would relent when that delicious perfume met his nose. Unfortunately, Mr. Davis particularly detested the odor of the fashionable pickle, and disgust added to his wrath.

"Is that all?"

"Not quite," stammered Amy.

"Bring the rest immediately."

With a despairing glance at her set, she obeyed.

"You are sure there are no more?"

"I never lie, sir."

"So I see. Now take these disgusting things two by two, and throw them out of the window."

There was a simultaneous sigh, which created quite a little gust, as the last hope fled, and the treat was ravished from their longing lips. Scarlet with shame and anger, Amy went to and fro six dreadful times, and as each doomed couple, looking oh, so plump and juicy, fell from her reluctant hands, a shout from the street completed the anguish of the girls, for it told them that their feast was being exulted over by the little Irish children, who were their sworn foes. This—this was too much. All flashed indignant or appealing glances at the inexorable Davis, and one passionate lime lover burst into tears.

As Amy returned from her last trip, Mr. Davis gave a portentous "Hem!" and said, in his most impressive manner...

"Young ladies, you remember what I said to you a week ago. I am sorry this has happened, but I never allow my rules to be infringed, and I never break my word. Miss March, hold out your hand."

Amy started, and put both hands behind her, turning on him an imploring look which pleaded for her better than the words she could not utter. She was rather a favorite with 'old Davis', as, of course, he was called, and it's my private belief that he would have broken his word if the indignation of one irrepressible young lady had not found vent in a hiss. That hiss, faint as it was, irritated the irascible gentleman, and sealed the culprit's fate.

"Your hand, Miss March!" was the only answer her mute appeal received, and too proud to cry or beseech, Amy set her teeth, threw back her head defiantly, and bore without flinching several tingling blows on her little palm. They were neither many nor heavy, but that made no difference to her. For the first time in her life she had been struck, and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down.

"You will now stand on the platform till recess," said Mr. Davis, resolved to do the thing thoroughly, since he had begun.

That was dreadful. It would have been bad enough to go to her seat, and see the pitying faces of her friends, or the satisfied ones of her few enemies, but to face the whole school, with that shame fresh upon her, seemed impossible, and for a second she felt as if she could only drop down where she stood, and break her heart with crying. A bitter sense of wrong and the thought of Jenny Snow helped her to bear it, and, taking the ignominious place, she fixed her eyes on the stove funnel above what now seemed a sea of faces, and stood there, so motionless and white that the girls found it hard to study with that pathetic figure before them.

During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. To others it might seem a ludicrous or trivial affair, but to her it was a hard experience, for during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before. The smart of her hand and the ache of her heart were forgotten in the sting of the thought, "I shall have to tell at home, and they will be so disappointed in me!"

Questions

1. What do you think “He was as nervous as a witch and as cross as a bear” means?
2. What does *infringed* mean in this: “but I never allow my rules to be infringed”?
3. What three things did the teacher do to punish Amy?
4. How well do you think Amy accepted her punishment? Explain your answer.

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. Denouncing
2. Countenance
3. Detested
4. Indignant
5. Irascible
6. Ludicrous
7. Governed

Context Clues

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

1. "It was a most unfortunate moment for **denouncing** Amy, and Jenny knew it."

- a. criticizing b. praising c. teasing d. showing

2. "At the stern order the buzz ceased, and fifty pairs of blue, black, gray, and brown eyes were obediently fixed upon his awful **countenance**."

- a. comment b. expression c. behavior d. stance

3. "Unfortunately, Mr. Davis particularly **detested** the odor of the fashionable pickle, and disgust added to his wrath."

- a. liked b. disliked c. hated d. appreciated

4. "All flashed **indignant** or appealing glances at the inexorable Davis, and one passionate lime lover burst into tears."

- a. shameful b. condescending c. angry d. confused

5. "That hiss, faint as it was, irritated the **irascible** gentleman, and sealed the culprit's fate."

- a. ugly b. handsome c. careless d. hot-headed

6. "To others it might seem a **ludicrous** or trivial affair, but to her it was a hard experience..."

- a. small b. ridiculous c. curious d. confusing

7. "...for during the twelve years of her life she had been **governed** by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before."

- a. ruled b. trapped c. organized d. blocked