

Beth Finds The Palace Beautiful

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

Little Women is the story of the four March sisters growing up during the U.S. Civil War. Meg, Jo, and Amy are outgoing; Beth is quiet and shy, but she loves music. In this passage, the girls have become friends with Laurie, the boy who lives next door. Laurie lives with his wealthy grandfather, Mr. Laurence.

All sorts of pleasant things happened about that time, for the new friendship flourished like grass in spring. Every one liked Laurie, and he privately informed his tutor that "the Marches were regularly splendid girls." With the delightful enthusiasm of youth, they took the solitary boy into their midst and made much of him, and he found something very charming in the innocent companionship of these simple-hearted girls. Never having known mother or sisters, he was quick to feel the influences they brought about him, and their busy, lively ways made him ashamed of the indolent life he led. He was tired of books, and found people so interesting now that Mr. Brooke was obliged to make very unsatisfactory reports, for Laurie was always playing truant and running over to the Marches'.

"Never mind, let him take a holiday, and make it up afterward," said the old gentleman. "The good lady next door says he is studying too hard and needs young society, amusement, and exercise. I suspect she is right, and that I've been coddling the fellow as if I'd been his grandmother. Let him do what he likes, as long as he is happy. He can't get into mischief in that little nunnery over there, and Mrs. March is doing more for him than we can."

What good times they had, to be sure. Such plays and tableaux, such sleigh rides and skating frolics, such pleasant evenings in the old parlor, and now and then such gay little parties at the great house. Meg could walk in the conservatory whenever she liked and revel in bouquets, Jo browsed over the new library voraciously, and convulsed the old gentleman with her criticisms, Amy copied pictures and enjoyed beauty to her heart's content, and Laurie played 'lord of the manor' in the most delightful style.

But Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up courage to go to the 'Mansion of Bliss', as Meg called it. She went once with Jo, but the old gentleman, not being aware of her infirmity, stared at her so hard from under his heavy eyebrows, and said "Hey!" so loud, that he frightened her so much her 'feet chattered on the floor', she never told her mother, and she ran away, declaring she would never go there any more, not even for the dear piano. No persuasions or enticements could overcome her fear, till, the fact coming to Mr. Laurence's ear in some mysterious way, he set about mending matters. During one of the brief calls he made, he artfully led the conversation to music, and talked away about great singers whom he had seen, fine organs he had heard, and told such charming anecdotes that Beth found it impossible to stay in her distant corner, but crept nearer and nearer, as if fascinated. At the back of his chair she stopped and stood listening, with her great eyes wide open and her cheeks red with excitement of this unusual performance. Taking no more notice of her than if she had been a fly, Mr. Laurence talked on

about Laurie's lessons and teachers. And presently, as if the idea had just occurred to him, he said to Mrs. March...

"The boy neglects his music now, and I'm glad of it, for he was getting too fond of it. But the piano suffers for want of use. Wouldn't some of your girls like to run over, and practice on it now and then, just to keep it in tune, you know, ma'am?"

Beth took a step forward, and pressed her hands tightly together to keep from clapping them, for this was an irresistible temptation, and the thought of practicing on that splendid instrument quite took her breath away. Before Mrs. March could reply, Mr. Laurence went on with an odd little nod and smile...

"They needn't see or speak to anyone, but run in at any time. For I'm shut up in my study at the other end of the house, Laurie is out a great deal, and the servants are never near the drawing room after nine o'clock."

Here he rose, as if going, and Beth made up her mind to speak, for that last arrangement left nothing to be desired. "Please, tell the young ladies what I say, and if they don't care to come, why, never mind." Here a little hand slipped into his, and Beth looked up at him with a face full of gratitude, as she said, in her earnest yet timid way...

"Oh sir, they do care, very very much!"

"Are you the musical girl?" he asked, without any startling "Hey!" as he looked down at her very kindly.

"I'm Beth. I love it dearly, and I'll come, if you are quite sure nobody will hear me, and be disturbed," she added, fearing to be rude, and trembling at her own boldness as she spoke.

"Not a soul, my dear. The house is empty half the day, so come and drum away as much as you like, and I shall be obliged to you."

"How kind you are, sir!"

Beth blushed like a rose under the friendly look he wore, but she was not frightened now, and gave the hand a grateful squeeze because she had no words to thank him for the precious gift he had given her. The old gentleman softly stroked the hair off her forehead, and, stooping down, he kissed her, saying, in a tone few people ever heard...

"I had a little girl once, with eyes like these. God bless you, my dear! Good day, madam." And away he went, in a great hurry.

Questions

1. Why do you think Mr. Laurence told Mrs. March, "They needn't see or speak to anyone, but run in at any time"?
2. What does pluck up mean here: "Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up courage to go"?
3. What does enticements mean here: "No persuasions or enticements could overcome her fear"?
4. What does this mean: "Taking no more notice of her than if she had been a fly, Mr. Laurence talked on about Laurie's lessons and teachers"?

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. Pleasant
2. Indolent
3. Voraciously
4. Irresistible
5. Timid
6. Startling
7. Precious

Context Clues

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

1. "All sorts of **pleasant** things happened about that time, for the new friendship flourished like grass in spring."
a. unfortunate b. unusual c. nice d. surprising

2. "Never having known mother or sisters, he was quick to feel the influences they brought about him, and their busy, lively ways made him ashamed of the **indolent** life he led."
a. quiet b. lazy c. angry d. dirty

3. "Meg could walk in the conservatory whenever she liked and revel in bouquets, Jo browsed over the new library **voraciously**..."
a. carefully b. slowly c. eagerly d. awkwardly

4. "Beth took a step forward, and pressed her hands tightly together to keep from clapping them, for this was an **irresistible** temptation..."
a. unstoppable b. unruly c. arguable d. insincere

5. "Here a little hand slipped into his, and Beth looked up at him with a face full of gratitude, as she said, in her earnest yet **timid** way..."
a. strong b. hesitant c. shy d. confused

6. "Are you the musical girl?" he asked, without any **startling** "Hey!" as he looked down at her very kindly."
a. casual b. loud c. shocking d. abrupt

7. "... because she had no words to thank him for the **precious** gift he had given her."
a. pretty b. unexpected c. unusual d. treasured

