

Burdens

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

Written right after the American Civil War, Little Women tells the story of the four March sisters. Margaret, know as Meg, is the oldest. Josephine, or Jo, is next, followed by the younger Beth and Amy. Once wealthy, the girls' father lost his money. Aunt March is the girls' great-aunt.

When Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend, the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least. Believing that they could not begin too early to cultivate energy, industry, and independence, their parents consented, and both fell to work with the hearty good will which in spite of all obstacles is sure to succeed at last.

Margaret found a place as nursery governess and felt rich with her small salary. As she said, she was 'fond of luxury', and her chief trouble was poverty. She found it harder to bear than the others because she could remember a time when home was beautiful, life full of ease and pleasure, and want of any kind unknown. She tried not to be envious or discontented, but it was very natural that the young girl should long for pretty things, gay friends, accomplishments, and a happy life. At the Kings' she daily saw all she wanted, for the children's older sisters were just out, and Meg caught frequent glimpses of dainty ball dresses and bouquets, heard lively gossip about theaters, concerts, sleighing parties, and merrymakings of all kinds, and saw money lavished on trifles which would have been so precious to her. Poor Meg seldom complained, but a sense of injustice made her feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy.

Jo happened to suit Aunt March, who was lame and needed an active person to wait upon her. The childless old lady had offered to adopt one of the girls when the troubles came, and was much offended because her offer was declined. Other friends told the Marches that they had lost all chance of being remembered in the rich old lady's will, but the unworldly Marches only said...

"We can't give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another."

The old lady wouldn't speak to them for a time, but happening to meet Jo at a friend's, something in her comical face and blunt manners struck the old lady's fancy, and she proposed to take her for a companion. This did not suit Jo at all, but she accepted the place since nothing better appeared and, to every one's surprise, got on remarkably well with her irascible relative. There was an occasional tempest, and once Jo marched home, declaring she couldn't bear it longer, but Aunt March always cleared up quickly, and sent for her to come back again with such urgency that she could not refuse, for in her heart she rather liked the peppery old lady.

I suspect that the real attraction was a large library of fine books, which was left to dust and spiders since Uncle March died. Jo remembered the kind old gentleman, who used to let her build railroads and bridges with his big dictionaries, tell her stories about queer pictures in his Latin books, and buy her cards of gingerbread whenever he met her in the street. The dim, dusty room, with the busts staring down from the tall bookcases, the cozy chairs, the globes, and best of all, the wilderness of books in which she could wander where she liked, made the library a region of bliss to her.

The moment Aunt March took her nap, or was busy with company, Jo hurried to this quiet place, and curling herself up in the easy chair, devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures like a regular bookworm. But, like all happiness, it did not last long, for as sure as she had just reached the heart of the story, the sweetest verse of a song, or the most perilous adventure of her traveler, a shrill voice called, "Josy-phine! Josy-phine!" and she had to leave her paradise to wind yarn, wash the poodle, or read "Belsham's Essays" by the hour together.

Questions

1. What does *cultivate* mean?
2. Why does Meg find it hard to work for the King family?
3. Why does Jo find it hard to work for Aunt March?
4. Who do you think had the better job, Meg or Jo? Why?

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. Unfortunate
2. Cultivate
3. Injustice
4. Lamé
5. Bliss
6. Devoured
7. Perilous

Context Clues

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

1. "When Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an **unfortunate** friend, the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least."

- a. underprivileged b. unkind c. unfair d. unruly

2. "Believing that they could not begin too early to **cultivate** energy, industry, and independence..."

- a. share b. open c. grow d. purchase

3. "Poor Meg seldom complained, but a sense of **injustice** made her feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy."

- a. unkindness b. unfairness c. unfriendliness d. impolite

4. "Jo happened to suit Aunt March, who was **lame** and needed an active person to wait upon her."

- a. annoying b. deaf c. blind d. disabled

5. "...the wilderness of books in which she could wander where she liked, made the library a region of **bliss** to her."

- a. happiness b. calm c. beauty d. wealth

6. "...Jo hurried to this quiet place, and curling herself up in the easy chair, **devoured** poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures like a regular bookworm."

- a. consumed b. ate c. destroyed d. critiqued

7. "...for as sure as she had just reached the heart of the story, the sweetest verse of a song, or the most **perilous** adventure of her traveler..."

- a. lengthy b. dangerous c. miraculous d. pleasant

