

Calls

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

The March sisters in Little Women are growing up during the middle of the 1800s. At that time, there were no phones, email, or Internet. In order to keep up with friends, women made "calls," or visits to each other's houses. In this passage, younger sister Amy has convinced her older sister Jo to go calling on friends with her. Jo doesn't really want to, but she finally agrees. However, Amy also starts telling her older sister how to behave on these calls.

"Now, Jo dear, the Chesters consider themselves very elegant people, so I want you to put on your best deportment. Don't make any of your abrupt remarks, or do anything odd, will you? Just be calm, cool, and quiet,—that's safe and ladylike; and you can easily do it for fifteen minutes," said Amy, as they approached the first place, having borrowed the white parasol and been inspected by Meg, with a baby on each arm.

"Let me see. 'Calm, cool, and quiet,'—yes, I think I can promise that. I've played the part of a prim young lady on the stage, and I'll try it off. My powers are great, as you shall see; so be easy in your mind, my child."

Amy looked relieved, but naughty Jo took her at her word; for, during the first call, she sat with every limb gracefully composed, every fold correctly draped, calm as a summer sea, cool as a snowbank, and as silent as a sphinx. In vain Mrs. Chester alluded to her "charming novel," and the Misses Chester introduced parties, picnics, the opera, and the fashions; each and all were answered by a smile, a bow, and a demure "Yes" or "No," with the chill on. In vain Amy telegraphed the word "Talk," tried to draw her out, and administered covert pokes with her foot. Jo sat as if blandly unconscious of it all, with deportment like Maud's face, "icily regular, splendidly null."

"What a haughty, uninteresting creature that oldest Miss March is!" was the unfortunately audible remark of one of the ladies, as the door closed upon their guests. Jo laughed noiselessly all through the hall, but Amy looked disgusted at the failure of her instructions, and very naturally laid the blame upon Jo.

Questions

1. How does Amy want Jo to act?
2. How does Jo act?
3. What does *in vain* mean here: "In vain Amy telegraphed the word 'Talk'"?
4. Should Amy have told Jo how to act? Why or why not?

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. elegant
2. abrupt
3. demure
4. covert
5. audible
6. noiselessly
7. prim

Context Clues

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

1) "Now, Jo dear, the Chesters consider themselves very **elegant** people, so I want you to put on your best deportment.

a. important b. poor c. fancy d. nice

2) "Don't make any of your **abrupt** remarks, or do anything odd, will you?"

a. annoying b. rude c. loud d. sudden

3) "Misses Chester introduced parties, picnics, the opera, and the fashions; each and all were answered by a smile, a bow, and a **demure** "Yes" or "No,"

a. quick b. shy c. clear d. confusing

4) "In vain Amy telegraphed the word "Talk," tried to draw her out, and administered **covert** pokes with her foot."

a. hidden b. strong c. sharp d. obvious

5) "What a haughty, uninteresting creature that oldest Miss March is!" was the unfortunately **audible** remark of one of the ladies, as the door closed upon their guests. "

a. loud b. rough c. piercing d. quiet

6) "Jo laughed **noiselessly** all through the hall..."

a. loudly b. quietly c. obnoxiously d. repeatedly

7) "I've played the part of a **prim** young lady on the stage..."

a. beautiful b. refined c. lonely d. scary