

Domestic Experiences

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

Little Women is about the four March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. They grow up during the American Civil War in a happy, if rather poor, family. In this passage, Meg is grown and now married to John Brooke, the former tutor of the girls' next door neighbor. They have not been married long, and Meg is still learning about running a household. She has tried to make jelly and has made a total mess of it. At that moment, John comes home with a friend for dinner. Meg is cross he brought a guest home without telling her. John gets angry at Meg because she has always told him he could bring guests home anytime he wanted. He's also a little embarrassed in front of his guest. John and the guest leave to eat a small picnic. When he returns home, he's expecting Meg to apologize. Meg is expecting him to apologize. When neither of them does, they speak briefly, then settle into different activities.

A few other topics of general interest were introduced by Mr. Brooke, and wet-blanketed by Mrs. Brooke, and conversation languished. John went to one window, unfolded his paper, and wrapped himself in it, figuratively speaking. Meg went to the other window, and sewed as if new rosettes for her slippers were among the necessaries of life. Neither spoke; both looked quite "calm and firm," and both felt desperately uncomfortable.

"Oh dear," thought Meg, "married life is very trying, and does need infinite patience, as well as love, as mother says." The word "mother" suggested other maternal counsels, given long ago, and received with unbelieving protests.

"John is a good man, but he has his faults, and you must learn to see and bear with them, remembering your own. He is very decided, but never will be obstinate, if you reason kindly, not oppose impatiently. He is very accurate, and particular about the truth—a good trait, though you call him 'fussy.' Never deceive him by look or word, Meg, and he will give you the confidence you deserve, the support you need. He has a temper, not like ours,—one flash, and then all over,—but the white, still anger, that is seldom stirred, but once kindled, is hard to quench. Be careful, very careful, not to wake this anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err, and guard against the little piques, misunderstandings, and hasty words that often pave the way for bitter sorrow and regret."

These words came back to Meg, as she sat sewing in the sunset, especially the last. This was the first serious disagreement; her own hasty speeches sounded both silly and unkind, as she recalled them, her own anger looked childish now, and thoughts of poor John coming home to such a scene quite melted her heart. She glanced at him with tears in her eyes, but he did not see them; she put down her work and got up, thinking, "I will be the first to say, 'Forgive me,'" but he did not seem to hear her; she went very slowly across the room, for pride was hard to swallow, and stood by him, but he did not turn his head. For a

minute she felt as if she really couldn't do it; then came the thought, "This is the beginning, I'll do my part, and have nothing to reproach myself with," and stooping down, she softly kissed her husband on the forehead. Of course that settled it; the penitent kiss was better than a world of words, and John had her on his knee in a minute, saying tenderly,—

"It was too bad to laugh at the poor little jelly-pots. Forgive me, dear, I never will again!"

But he did, oh bless you, yes, hundreds of times, and so did Meg, both declaring that it was the sweetest jelly they ever made; for family peace was preserved in that little family jar.

Questions

1. In their first disagreement, how do John and Meg act?
2. What does *quench* mean here: "the white, still anger, that is seldom stirred, but once kindled, is hard to quench"?
3. What does "pride was hard to swallow" mean?
4. Who apologizes first?

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. languished
2. infinite
3. obstinate
4. hasty
5. penitent
6. tenderly
7. preserved

Context Clues

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

1) "A few other topics of general interest were introduced by Mr. Brooke, and wet-blanketed by Mrs. Brooke, and conversation **languished**."

- a. continued b. faded away c. became louder d. never ended

2) "Oh dear," thought Meg, "married life is very trying, and does need **infinite** patience, as well as love, as mother says."

- a. timely b. limited c. endless d. more

3) "He is very decided, but never will be **obstinate**, if you reason kindly, not oppose impatiently."

- a. stubborn b. rude c. harsh d. wrong

4) "This was the first serious disagreement; her own **hasty** speeches sounded both silly and unkind..."

- a. long b. wordy c. confusing d. quick

5) "Of course that settled it; the **penitent** kiss was better than a world of words..."

- a. gentle b. apologetic c. unforgiving d. meaningless

6) "...and John had her on his knee in a minute, saying **tenderly**..."

a. kindly b. loudly c. quickly d. defiantly

7) "...for family peace was **preserved** in that little family jar."

a. collected b. saved c. sealed d. ripened