

Stepping-Stones

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Men*

In the novel Little Men, Josephine “Jo” March has married Mr. Bhaer. They have a school for boys in their home called Plumfield. In this passage, Nat has joined the school. He is a poor boy whose parents died. Nat has been living on the street, playing music to make money.

When Nat went into school on Monday morning, he quaked inwardly, for now he thought he should have to display his ignorance before them all. But Mr. Bhaer gave him a seat in the deep window, where he could turn his back on the others, and Franz heard him say his lessons there, so no one could hear his blunders or see how he blotted his copybook. He was truly grateful for this, and toiled away so diligently that Mr. Bhaer said, smiling, when he saw his hot face and inky fingers:

“Don’t work so hard, my boy; you will tire yourself out, and there is time enough.”

“But I must work hard, or I can’t catch up with the others. They know heaps, and I don’t know anything,” said Nat, who had been reduced to a state of despair by hearing the boys recite their grammar, history, and geography with what he thought amazing ease and accuracy.

“You know a good many things which they don’t,” said Mr. Bhaer, sitting down beside him, while Franz led a class of small students through the intricacies of the multiplication table.

“Do I?” and Nat looked utterly incredulous.

“Yes; for one thing, you can keep your temper, and Jack, who is quick at numbers, cannot; that is an excellent lesson, and I think you have learned it well. Then, you can play the violin, and not one of the lads can, though they want to do it very much. But, best of all, Nat, you really care to learn something, and that is half the battle. It seems hard at first, and you will feel discouraged, but plod away, and things will get easier and easier as you go on.”

Nat’s face had brightened more and more as he listened, for, small as the list of his learning was, it cheered him immensely to feel that he had anything to fall back upon. “Yes, I can keep my temper — father’s beating taught me that; and I can fiddle, though I don’t know where the Bay of Biscay is,” he thought, with a sense of comfort impossible to express. Then he said aloud, and so earnestly that Demi heard him:

“I do want to learn, and I will try. I never went to school, but I couldn’t help it; and if the fellows don’t laugh at me, I guess I’ll get on first rate — you and the lady are so good to me.”

Questions

1. Why was Nat having problems at school?
2. What is something Nat does well?
3. What do you think *intricacies* means in “intricacies of the multiplication table”?
4. What is one thing that the boys are studying?