

The Laurence Boy

by Louisa May Alcott *from Little Women*

Little Women is the story of four sisters; Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March; during the Civil War. While once the March family had a good deal of money, the family has fallen onto hard times. The wealthy Mr. Laurence and his grandson live next door to the March family. In this passage, Meg and Jo, both teenagers, have been invited to a very nice dinner party. Unable to afford a new dress, Jo must wear her old party dress which she has burned in the back by standing too close to a fireplace. While it has been mended, it still doesn't look very good. Meg has told Jo that she must keep her back to the wall.

Down they went, feeling a trifle timid, for they seldom went to parties, and informal as this little gathering was, it was an event to them. Mrs. Gardiner, a stately old lady, greeted them kindly and handed them over to the eldest of her six daughters. Meg knew Sallie and was at her ease very soon, but Jo, who didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood about, with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden. Half a dozen jovial lads were talking about skates in another part of the room, and she longed to go and join them, for skating was one of the joys of her life. She telegraphed her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows went up so alarmingly that she dared not stir. No one came to talk to her, and one by one the group dwindled away till she was left alone. She could not roam about and amuse herself, for the burned breadth would show, so she stared at people rather forlornly till the dancing began. Meg was asked at once, and the tight slippers tripped about so briskly that none would have guessed the pain their wearer suffered smilingly. Jo saw a big red headed youth approaching her corner, and fearing he meant to engage her, she slipped into a curtained recess, intending to peep and enjoy herself in peace. Unfortunately, another bashful person had chosen the same refuge, for, as the curtain fell behind her, she found herself face to face with the 'Laurence boy'.

"Dear me, I didn't know anyone was here!" stammered Jo, preparing to back out as speedily as she had bounced in.

But the boy laughed and said pleasantly, though he looked a little startled, "Don't mind me, stay if you like."

"Shan't I disturb you?"

"Not a bit. I only came here because I don't know many people and felt rather strange at first, you know."

"So did I. Don't go away, please, unless you'd rather."

The boy sat down again and looked at his pumps, till Jo said, trying to be polite and easy, "I think I've had the pleasure of seeing you before. You live near us, don't you?"

"Next door." And he looked up and laughed outright, for Jo's prim manner was rather funny when he remembered how they had chatted about cricket when he brought the cat home.

That put Jo at her ease and she laughed too, as she said, in her heartiest way, "We did have such a good time over your nice Christmas present."

"Grandpa sent it."

"But you put it into his head, didn't you, now?"

"How is your cat, Miss March?" asked the boy, trying to look sober while his black eyes shone with fun.

"Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo," returned the young lady.

"I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie."

"Laurie Laurence, what an odd name."

"My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead."

"I hate my name, too, so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?"

"I thrashed 'em."

"I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it." And Jo resigned herself with a sigh.

Questions

1. What does *startled* mean here: “he looked a little startled”?
2. Explain what this simile means: Jo “felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden.”
3. What does *forlornly* mean here: “she stared at people rather forlornly till the dancing began”?
4. What is something Jo and Laurie have in common?

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. Trifle
2. Stately
3. Jovial
4. Telegraphed
5. Forlornly
6. Refuge
7. Thrash

Context Clues

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

1. "Down they went, feeling a **trifle** timid, for they seldom went to parties, and informal as this little gathering was, it was an event to them."

- a. great amount b. little c. frequently d. unusually

2. "Mrs. Gardiner, a **stately** old lady, greeted them kindly and handed them over to the eldest of her six daughters."

- a. feeble b. unstable c. noble d. beautiful

3. "Half a dozen **jovial** lads were talking about skates in another part of the room, and she longed to go and join them, for skating was one of the joys of her life."

- a. mean b. jolly c. talented d. young

4. "She **telegraphed** her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows went up so alarmingly that she dared not stir."

- a. telephoned b. texted c. instant-messaged d. signaled

5. "She could not roam about and amuse herself, for the burned breadth would show, so she stared at people rather **forlornly** till the dancing began."

- a. happily b. hopefully c. hopelessly d. eagerly

6. "Unfortunately, another bashful person had chosen the same **refuge**, for, as the curtain fell behind her, she found herself face to face with the 'Laurence boy'."

- a. locker b. safe place c. spot d. dance floor

7. "I can't **thrash** Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it." And Jo resigned herself with a sigh."

- a. slam b. copy c. criticize d. tease

