

Excerpt from *Who Is Jo March?*

From Chapter 10: "A New Stage"

(Jo March (now transformed into "Joseph May") and Theodore "Laurie" Laurence are attending a production of Hamlet in Washington's Columbia Theater; they are guests of Laurie's college friend Robert Lincoln and his mother Mary Todd Lincoln, First Lady of the land, and they are seated with them in the Presidential Box! Jo's awe of their august hosts, her suspicions about Laurie's flirtation with the actress playing Ophelia, and her anxiety about passing as "Joe" are eclipsed by the stage's enchantment.)

. . . I was glad to take my place in the shadows at the rear of the box, where no one could possibly notice me, and look over the ladies' bare shoulders to the action on the stage.

And as soon as the curtain rose I lost my worries over playing my new role, indeed any sense of my identity, and lived wholly within the troubled court of feudal Denmark that had been abracadabraed into being by gaslights, shouted words, and painted flats. . . . I forgot that I was Josephine March pretending to be Joseph May, forgot that fragile, shy Ophelia with sweet flowers in her hair was bold, iron-eyed Celia Devereaux, predicted poisonous to Laurie; forgot everything in the trance that enveloped me then, and envelopes me still whenever I watch, or enact, a play.

That such contrivances of word and vision, fantastic and artificial in almost every way, should be more vivid and more meaningful than most of the actual daily events of life—preposterous! Yet it was, and is, so.

A few scenes into *this* great play, when the action moved from the foggy battlements to the inside of the castle, the trance broke. At first I could not tell why. Hamlet was greeting his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But something had gone wrong. On stage there were silences, awkward pauses; in the audience shufflings, coughs, low murmurs, hints of uneasy laughter. I focused my attention on the actors. It seemed that a miasma of missed cues and faulty memories had overtaken the stage. Only Hamlet kept his *sang-froid*; he was cuing the others with urgent whispers and gestures that overrode murmurs from the prompt box. In contrast Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Player King and his Player klatch shuffled and blinked forlornly, as though they had suddenly awakened from a dream to find themselves exposed on a brightly-lit platform, with a thousand eyes critically numbering the stains on their baggy tights.

I leaned toward Laurie, who was frowning, and whispered, “It’s a good thing Hamlet knows the lines.”

He shook his head. “He knows them all right, but so do the others. Listen to what he’s saying.”

Remembering that Laurie knew the lines too—he had just played Hamlet in a college production—I did

listen. I tried to remember the speeches as Laurie had delivered them, and as they appeared on the pages of the big Shakespeare book at home. Suddenly I knew what was happening. Hamlet was giving the *wrong* cues to his fellow actors; and in his own speeches he was jumping ahead or behind so as to make impossible any coherent sense. He was coolly sabotaging the play, and doing it in such a way that he appeared to be the only intelligent man amongst dolts and bunglers.

Many in the auditorium were fooled, but surely no one on the stage was. I now noticed a commotion in the wings across from our box. There King Claudius himself stood, and by the way he pounded the ball of his scepter into the palm of his hand, he waxed exceedingly wroth. Though in the play Hamlet for all his qualms would overcome the King, I doubted that the scene would follow in real life.

Robert Lincoln was not fooled either; I heard him whisper to Laurie, "It's infamous! You should be up there!" Laurie's response puzzled me; he smiled and nodded vehemently, as though responding to a secret joke.

I thought I saw why a few scenes on, as the courtiers seated themselves to watch "The Mousetrap," when Hamlet said to Ophelia, "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" and with mock adoration leaned his head against her knee. Laurie smiled his secret smile once again. He was imagining himself in that same intimate relation to Miss Devereaux in

real life. There was a bitter taste in my mouth. Inconstancy, thy name is man!

During the interval the theatre buzzed with speculation and outrage over the actors' lapses.

"That was really too bad of Booth," said Robert. "I wonder what in the world could have possessed him."

"Oh, is that Edwin Booth?" I said.

"No; his brother John Wilkes Booth," said Laurie. "He's sacrificed his famous mustache to Denmark; that's why you missed him."

"It could never be *Edwin* Booth," said Mrs. Lincoln decidedly. "Edwin Booth is a gentleman. He saved my Robert once. Did you know that, Mr. May?"

"Saved him from what?" cried Miss Harlan, touching her hand to her throat. Robert grinned at Laurie. A small movement in the shadow of the box rail caught my eye; I saw that Bob Lincoln's gloved finger and thumb rubbed between them a fold of the edge of Miss Harlan's satin overskirt.

"Oh, dear me, it was dreadful." Mrs. Lincoln fanned herself nervously at the memory. "Robert was caught in a terrible crush at a train station, and he was so pushed that he fell down—horrors!—between the train and the platform. His arms were pinned somehow, and he was quite, quite helpless. And then the train began to move! Oh, that dreadful moment! I can't bear to think of it!" And,

closing her eyes, she leaned back in her chair, fanning furiously.

“Well, then, don’t, Mother!” said Bob, winking at Miss Harlan.

“And at the last providential moment, Mr. Booth, Mr. Edwin Booth, came along and *transported* my Bob up to safety. He absolutely *transported* him up.”

“It was more of a yank, actually,” said Mrs. Lincoln’s son mischievously.

“Hush, boy.” She rapped his head with her fan. “They’re starting.”

When Hamlet appeared in the second half of the play he was a good deal better behaved, though a trifle sulky around the edges. Someone had given him a good talking to. I wondered if it had been Ophelia or Claudius. The latter, the program told us, was Cyril Woodley, actor-manager of the Columbia.

The last scene’s amazing slaughters were enacted, and then the play was over. I was still in a Shakespearian daze as I stumbled down the stairs at the rear of our party, and was dimly surprised to witness the crowd parting to let us through, as if by magic. Of course their courtesy was deference to Mrs. Lincoln, not part of the generalized spell of the evening. Washington society had not welcomed Mary Lincoln initially, thinking her both provincial and pretentious, but now, as she emerged from mourning a year

and a half after Willie Lincoln's death from typhoid, public sympathy began to turn her way.

A carriage was waiting for the Presidential party. Robert must go back to Cambridge tomorrow for Law School, but he hurriedly engaged us for supper after Christmas, when he returned. Mrs. Lincoln kissed Laurie and pressed my hand; she would be happy to see us at the White House any time. The carriage clattered away before I could fully understand my success, if success it could be called; to be sure I had fooled everybody, but then everyone's eyes had been fixed on the stage, not on me.

Wordless with sudden fatigue, I turned toward the hotel, away from the crowd that now surged out the front doors.

Laurie's hand was on my shoulder. "Wait! You've forgotten my surprise."

I shook him off. "Oh, the surprise. Save it till tomorrow."

"Can't be done." He steered me around the corner of the theater building.

"Better yet, surprise Miss Devereaux," I said with sarcasm.

"Impossible." There was suppressed excitement in his voice. "Look sharp, Jo!" Laurie flung open a dingy door.

Suddenly everything was light and brilliance. Before me, miraculously revived to life, was the noble court of

ancient Denmark—smoking cigars, brewing tea, and reading newspapers. The alley door had opened into the green-room. Ophelia, leaning back on one chair with her bare feet up on another, plopped her wet flower-twisted topknot onto a plaster bust of Shakespeare; Hamlet preened his cravat at a mirror in the far corner; and King Claudius, beard dangling half off, extended a greasepaint-smear hand toward Laurie.

“My dear, you’ve come!” he drawled in plummy British tones. As he talked the beardless half of his jaw parted and met, parted and met, nutcracker style. “How dashing you look in evening clothes. I knew I was right about you. But as anyone here can bear witness, in matters of character I’m invariably right.”

Miss Devereaux sent Cyril Woodley one of her Looks. She picked up Shakespeare’s flower-wigged bust and made it shake its head.

“Pay her no mind, the poor darling; she really loves me madly but it’s her fate to act, act, act—she never lets the world see the true state of her heart. But wait!” Looking from one to the other of us, Mr. Woodley smote his forehead with the heel of his palm. “Can this, Mr. Laurence, can this be the fascinating young person you told me about?”

“Yes, Sir, this is Joseph May.”

I stepped forward. “How happy I am, Mr. Woodley, to have the opportunity to congratulate you on the play!” I

put out my hand. Mr. Woodley took it, but instead of shaking it, patted it and tucked it through his arm companionably.

“Ah—the play, the play—not one of our happier efforts, I fear.” He looked feelingly in the direction of the oblivious Hamlet, who continued his toilet in the corner. “But come, come,” he coaxed, and led me away from the company, through a dark passage, and, after a few stumbling steps, onto the stage. Though the house curtain was drawn, the gaslights still burned. The glare and heat were tremendous. Was this Laurie’s surprise?

With a reassuring pat Mr. Woodley disengaged himself from me and hopped up onto the papier-mâché hill, about the size of a sofa bolster, that had looked so commanding from our box. He folded his arms.

“All right,” he said. “I’m ready. Walk across the stage.”

“Walk, Sir?” I saw the joke now. Laurie, the devil, had cooked up some story for Woodley about my being in disguise, and challenged him to penetrate it. Teddy wanted to see if I could fool an actor, and was undoubtedly betting I couldn’t. Well, the joke would be on him.

“Yes, walk.” He waved his hand.

Shrugging, I walked, using Joe May’s best swagger. When I got to the far side I looked back at Mr. Woodley. He beckoned impatiently. I returned to the base of the hill. I waited.

With a little yelp, he ripped the second half of the beard from his face, exposing the whole nutcracker effect. “That’s much better,” he sighed, rubbing his jaw. “I always dread the shock so. Now, Mr. May, will you do something else for me?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. Just jump up and grab that rope and swing on it, won’t you?”

“Swing on it?”

“Please.”

I hung on and dragged back and forth a few times, feeling foolish. Then, catching some stage spirit from the heat of the gas, I put some back into the last three swings and dismounted with a cartwheel and a bow.

Mr. Woodley patted his fingertips together several times. “Applause, my dear, applause. You’ll do.”

“I’ll do?” I repeated stupidly.

“Yes, you’ll do. For utility boy.” I gawked. “Come now, aren’t you happy?” When I failed to respond he appealed to the top fringe of the curtain. “Ye gods, is the lad simple?” On inspecting my face, he once more smacked his head with his palm. “Or didn’t he tell you? Oh my!” Mr. Woodley covered a laugh. “That droll fellow! He *didn’t* tell you, did he?”

“No, I don’t think he did.”

“What a droll fellow!”

“Excuse me, Sir, but what is it he didn’t tell me?”

“That you’re hired, my dear boy, hired! To be utility boy, walking boy—you know—servant lad, soldier, young fellow to swing on ropes and fight, that sort of thing. Don’t look so downcast, Mr. May; though it be but the first step in our honorable profession, you’ll rise—and it’s twenty dollars a week!”

I grasped Mr. Woodley’s hand and pumped it vigorously. “Thank you, Sir, thank you!”

“Not at all, Mr. May, not at all.” Mr. Woodley was eyeing me closely now. “You really will do *very* well.”

We went back to join the others. Laurie and Miss Devereaux were talking quite intently, the heads bent close over a teapot. John Wilkes Booth, near the door, was flinging on a black cloak lined with a rich brown fur. Mr. Woodley raised his hand. “A moment, Mr. Booth, if you please.” Booth froze, mid-fling, and pointedly stared at Mr. Woodley, but the director turned his back on the actor and spoke to Laurie.

“Mr. Laurence, may I compliment you on your judgement. You were right about your friend. He compels the eye; yes, he compels the eye.”

Celia Devereaux leveled her gray gaze at me, then nodded. “Of course, Cyril, for Mr. Laurence informs me that he, too, is always right.” She lightly put out her hand to touch Laurie’s as she said this.

Mr. Woodley smiled. “Well, then, Mr. Laurence, we will have a pleasant association, for if we are both invariably right, it follows that we must, invariably, agree.”

John Booth spoke from the edge of our circle. “Sir, you wished to speak with me?” He rapped a smart riding whip against one leg. The room was abruptly silent.

“On, yes, Mr. Booth,” said Mr. Woodley absently. “I find I’m able to release you from your contract after all.”

A slow flush rose up Booth’s neck. “What?”

“You requested a release from your contract, my dear. I’m giving it to you. Now you can go play Antony, or Cassius, or whatever it is, with your brothers. You’re at liberty; you can leave tonight, if you’d like.”

Booth let out an angry-sounding laugh. “Tonight? It’s impossible! Who can you get to replace me?”

Mr. Woodley folded up the beard he was still holding and put it in his pocket. “Perhaps, Mr. Booth, you’re not so essential to a production as you fancied when you demanded top billing and twice as much money as anyone else. Then, when I didn’t give them to you, you imagined sabotaging a performance would change my mind. Perhaps you miscalculated a tad bit on those points.”

Now Booth’s voice was frankly angry. “Who will you get to play Hamlet?”

Mr. Woodley put his arm around Laurie’s shoulder. “I’ve engaged Mr. Theodore Laurence.” Laurie smiled, shrugged, and bowed.

Booth drew himself up to his full pomp. “Mr. Laurence, I don’t know you.”

“No, Sir, we haven’t had the pleasure of an introduction, I’m afraid.” Laurie half swallowed the line in his best Boston Brahmin manner.

“Mr. Laurence is one of our Harvard boys,” Mr. Woodley remarked conversationally. “He’s just essayed Hamlet in Cambridge, and he does a very creditable job. Very creditable indeed. He read for me this afternoon. And he has very kindly agreed to do us this small favor while he’s here on holiday.”

“You’re joking!” Booth glared. But no one laughed.

Adding a sneer to his glare, Booth snarled “‘an aery of children,’” then seemed to recover himself. His brow smoothed, the hot light in his eye was replaced by a cold one. Taking his time, he surveyed the group. “I’ll send my servant around tomorrow morning for my properties.”

“Very good,” said Cyril Woodley. “I’ll send my servant to watch him.”

Booth flushed again, but controlled himself and gave Woodley a stiff nod. Then he did a curious thing. He walked over to Celia Devereaux, and, doffing his hat and swirling his cloak to maximum effect, he made a very deep bow, an actor’s bow. At what seemed to be the very bottom of the bow he bent lower still, till he knelt before the actress, who raised her eyebrows but sat still. Finally with a heavy flourish Booth placed on the floor in front of

her chair his riding whip. Its black tail uncurled across her bare toes.

“Not that you need it,” he stage-whispered as he straightened. He bowed once, to Laurie, then made his exit.