

and—in her opinion at least—the most important, is putting the finishing touches to the Christmas tree

Amy puts the last silver star in place and regards her handiwork with great satisfaction

Amy There, that's done!

Beth It looks lovely, Amy. Now we're all ready for Christmas!

Jo (*moodily*) Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents. And, even worse, Father's away at the war and won't be able to get home.

Meg (*gently*) We don't really have the money to spend on presents this year, Jo, but we do have each other and Mother to look after us.

Beth And dear old Hannah.

Meg Yes, we've lots to be thankful for.

Jo (*turning a page, unconvinced*) Humph!

Amy puts the Christmas decoration box away

Amy (*a little self-righteously*) Marmee says it's going to be a hard winter for everyone, and she thinks that we ought not to spend money for pleasure when our men in the army are suffering so. She says it's our way of making some sort of sacrifice, and we ought to do it gladly . . . (*pausing briefly as she faces reality*) but I'm afraid I don't.

Jo I can't see that the little we should spend would do any good. (*Sitting up*) Look, we've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Marmee or you, but there is a book I've wanted to buy for ages.

Amy Oh, you and your old books! You never think of anything else! I was going to get some drawing pencils with my dollar; I really need them.

Beth (*rather ashamed of admitting it*) And I'd planned to spend mine on some new piano music.

Pause. Four consciences take a step backward

Meg (*a little uncertainly*) Well, I don't suppose Mother would want us to give up everything . . .

Jo (*decisively*) Let's each buy what we want and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it.

Meg I know I do—teaching those tiresome children of Mrs King's all day!

Jo Being a governess isn't half as bad as being shut up for hours on end as a companion to Aunt March! There never was such a tiresome old fuss-pot!

Beth I don't know how you cope with her, Jo. She just frightens me to death. I'm glad I have only to stay at home and help.

Jo Oh, she keeps me on the trot, I can tell you, and she's never satisfied. Then, every day I have to read to her—and what do I have to read? It's always the same—those odious essays of Mr Belsham. When I think of all the wonderful books Aunt March could buy with all the money she has. But, no! We just read, read and re-read Mr Belsham's boring old book!

Beth It's wrong to grumble, I know, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things clean and tidy home here is just the worst work in the world. My hands get so stiff that I can't practise well at the piano at all.

Amy I don't believe any of you suffer as I do for you don't have to go to school. It's such a *deggerregration* to have to mix with impertinent girls who laugh at your dresses because they're not new, and insult you when your nose isn't nice, and *label* your father because he isn't rich.

Jo If you mean *libel*, I'd say so, and not talk about *labels* as if Father was a jar of pickles.

Amy I know what I mean, and you needn't be *statirical* about it. It's proper to use words, and improve your *vocabulary*. Anyway I don't use slang words like you.

Jo starts to whistle

And I don't whistle either. It's so boyish.

Jo That's why I do it.

Amy I detest rude, unladylike girls!

Jo And I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!

Meg Jo! Amy! Don't peck at one another! Josephine, you are old enough to leave off boyish tricks and behave better. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are older and turn up your hair you should remember that you are a young lady.

Jo I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one then I'll wear it in two tails till I'm thirty! (*She pulls off her hair net and shakes her hair out*) I hate to think I've got to grow up and be "Miss March". It's bad enough to be a girl anyway. (*She collects her knitting from a workbasket on the table*) I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now. I'm dying to go and fight with Father, but I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman! (*She flops into a chair and starts to knit*)

Beth (*going to Jo*) Poor Jo! It's too bad, but it can't be helped, so you must try to be content with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls.

Meg As for you, Amy, you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now; but you'll grow up an affected goose if you don't take care. It is good to cultivate nice manners and a refined way of speaking, but your absurd words are quite as bad as Jo's slang.

Beth (*trying to brighten the situation*) If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I?

Meg You're a dear and nothing else.

The clock on the mantelpiece begins to strike six

Six o'clock! Mother will be here at any minute and nothing ready for her—oh, dear, what a self-pitying, bickery lot we are! Come along, let's put things to rights and have everything ready for her when she comes in.

There is a good-natured bustle as the girls tidy the room for their mother's return. Jo adjusts the chair in which Meg has been sitting. Meg packs up the knitting. Beth fetches an extra cushion

Amy fetches her mother's slippers to warm them by the fire

Amy These slippers of Marmee's are quite worn out. She needs a new pair badly.