

- Marmee** But Jo tells me that you always sleep soundly for an hour or so every day after dinner.
- Aunt March** (*annoyed at being caught out*) Nonsense! I am only resting my eyes from the light while she reads to me. I have never really slept for over thirty years—I just lose myself for a little while, that's all.
- Jo** (*with studied innocence*) But you never find yourself again very soon, do you, Aunt?
- Marmee** Jo, don't be impertinent. It must be very trying for you, Aunt March.
- Aunt March** (*after a baleful glare at Jo*) How's that husband of yours? My nephew?
- Marmee** He is well, thank you, and seems to find the rigours of camp life not too difficult to bear.
- Aunt March** Beyond me what he wanted to go gallivanting off to the war for at all at his age. Why couldn't he stay at home and be a chaplain?
- Marmee** (*quietly*) He did what he knew to be the right thing, and, though I miss him dearly, I would not have it otherwise. The men need him, and he feels that he is doing good work among them.
- Aunt March** That's questionable! Can't say that his judgement is always unerring. Look how he lost all his money helping that good-for-nothing friend of his a few years ago. I told him, I said to him at the time . . .
- Marmee** Aunt March. Whatever my husband did he did as a Christian gentleman to help a dear friend in misfortune; that everything was lost in the transaction is no reflection on either of them. I am sorry, but I cannot sit here in his own house and hear you speak ill of him when . . .
- Aunt March** Highty-tighty, then! Highty-tighty! Didn't I do what I could to help? Didn't I offer to adopt one of the girls and bring her up?
- Marmee** We told you then that we couldn't give up one of our girls, not for a fortune. Rich or poor we will keep together and be happy in one another.
- Aunt March** Mighty independent, I must say. Well, you know your own business best, I suppose. Though it seems a pity that you didn't take up my offer.
- Marmee** We are, of course, most grateful to you for having Jo as a help and companion.
- Aunt March** Wouldn't have her if she didn't suit me! I took a fancy to her and I am always right in these matters. She does well enough—though I think sometimes that she takes more interest in her late Uncle March's library than in attending to my wants.
- Jo** Oh, but Aunt March, I . . .
- Aunt March** That is enough, Miss! You know as well as I do that you spend every spare minute you can find in among those books.
- Marmee** I am afraid that Jo has a great weakness for reading, but she should not neglect her duties to indulge her pleasures.
- Aunt March** Oh! Her duties! They are light enough in all conscience—wind yarn, wash the poodle, feed Polly, my sweet parrot, fetch and carry, and read aloud *Belsham's Essays* (*with a look at Jo*) of which I, at least, never tire.

- Marmee** Am I to understand then, Aunt March, that you are here this evening to complain of Jo's behaviour?
- Aunt March** (*astounded*) Complain! Complain? Whatever gave you the idea that I would ever complain about anything?
- Marmee** (*at a loss*) Oh, I see—then may I ask the reason for your visit?
- Aunt March** Reason! Mercy on us! That should be plain enough, I should think! Why should an invalid like myself, racked with pain, turn out on a cold winter's night? For no reason other than to wish you a happy Christmas, of course, what else?
- Marmee** I—oh—er—thank you, Aunt March, I . . .
- Aunt March** (*cutting in*) And with my nephew away playing at soldiers, I have no doubt that things will not be so plentiful here at home this year. Josephine, run to the carriage, girl, and fetch the parcels from the coachman.
- Jo exits UL*
- (*Turning to Marmee*) Nothing much, you know, just a small gift for each girl—a trifle of lace, a little brooch, some ribbons, and so on. Oh, yes, and there is a basket with a ham and butter and cakes and things. Good, wholesome produce—I do not think rich food is good for young people. At any rate, it will keep all of you from starving.
- Jo reappears laden with a basket of food, and a number of packages*
- Ah! Put them down, girl, before you drop them! (*She turns to go*) Now, I must go, there are a great many things requiring my attention, and I have not the time to stay here listening to your gossip. (*She pauses at the archway*) And, remember—none of the parcels may be opened until Christmas morning!
- With a brisk tug at her gloves Aunt March exits before either Marmee or Jo can reply*
- For a moment they are speechless with surprise*
- Jo** Marmee!
- Marmee** (*amid mutual laughter*) Well, Jo, I really don't know what to say, and to think that after we refused to let her adopt one of you, she wouldn't speak to us for a whole year!
- Jo** After Christmas I'll be extra good, I promise, and do all she asks me with a smile—even to reading the boring . . . I mean, *brilliant* essays of Mr Belsham!
- Marmee** Now, you run upstairs, dear, and tell the others that the ordeal is over and I'll pack all these good things away (*imitating Aunt March*) "for Christmas morning"!
- Jo** Marmee, may we have some time to rehearse our play upstairs, please? There is still quite a lot to do for it.
- Marmee** Why, yes, of course, I have several things to do down here and will call you when I am done—but, Jo dear, try not to make too much noise!