

Playing Pilgrims

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

“We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,” said Beth contentedly from her corner.

The four young faces brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, “We haven’t got Father and shall not have him for a long time.” Each girl silently added “perhaps never,” thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said, “Mother thinks we ought not to spend money for presents, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can’t do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don’t,” said Meg regretfully, as she thought of all the pretty things she wanted.

“But I don’t think the dollar we’ve each got to spend would do the army much good. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy *Undine and Sintram*¹ for myself. I’ve wanted it so long,” said Jo, who was a bookworm.

“I planned to spend mine in new music,” said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard.

Where has Father gone? Why are the girls worried that they will not see him again?

¹ *Undine and Sintram*. Popular romance novel by German author Frederick de la Motte Fouque (1777–1843)

Vocabulary in Place

contentedly, *adv.* With a calm, quiet feeling of comfort or satisfaction

“I was going to buy a nice box of drawing pencils; I really need them,” said Amy decidedly.

“Mother won’t wish us to give up everything. Let’s each buy what we want and have a little fun; I’m sure we work hard enough to earn it,” cried Jo.

“I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day,” began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

“You don’t have half such a hard time as I do,” said Jo. “How would you like to be shut up for hours with a fussy old lady, who is never satisfied and worries you till you’re ready to fly out the window?”

“It’s naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. My hands get so stiff, I can’t practice well at all.” Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that any one could hear that time.

“I don’t believe any of you suffer as I do,” cried Amy, “for you don’t have to go to school with girls who laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn’t rich, and insult you when your nose isn’t nice.”

“If you mean **libel**, then say so, and don’t talk about labels, as if Papa was a pickle bottle,” advised Jo, laughing.

“You needn’t be *statirical*² about it. It’s proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabulary*,” returned Amy, with dignity.

“Don’t peck at one another, children. Don’t you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! How happy we’d be!” said Meg, who could remember better times.

“You said, the other day, you thought we were a good deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money.”

“So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are. For though we do have to work, we are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say.”

Why does Jo laugh?

²**statirical.** Amy meant to say *satirical*, or *sarcastic*, because she thought Jo was making fun of her. (See also Vocabulary in Place, page 77.)

Vocabulary in Place

libel, v. To make a false written or spoken statement that damages someone’s reputation

“Jo does use such slang words!” observed Amy, with a **reproving** look at the long figure stretched on the rug.

Jo immediately sat up and began to whistle.

“Don’t, Jo. It’s so boyish!”

“That’s why I do it.”

“I detest rude, unladylike girls!”

“I hate **affected**, niminy-piminy chits!”³

“Birds in their little nests agree,” sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh.

“Really, girls, you are both to be blamed,” said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion. Margaret, the oldest of the four sisters, was sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather **vain**.

“You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, Josephine. It didn’t matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair; you should remember that you are a young lady.”

“I’m not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I’ll wear it in two tails till I’m twenty,” cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane.

Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for her long limbs were very much in her way. She had a decided⁴ mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. She had big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn’t like it.

³ **niminy-piminy chit.** Bad-mannered child

⁴ **decided.** Well-defined

Vocabulary in Place

reproving, *adj.* Disapproving

affected, *adj.* Speaking or acting in an artificial way in order to make an impression

vain, *adj.* Excessively proud of one’s appearance or accomplishments

Who is squabbling here, and what are they arguing about?

Why is Jo knitting
a blue army sock?
What would she
rather be doing?

“I hate to think I’ve got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look prim! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners! And it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like an old woman!” And Jo shook the blue army sock she was knitting till the needles rattled like castanets,⁵ and her ball bounded across the room.

“Poor Jo! It’s too bad, but it can’t be helped. So you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls,” said Beth, stroking the rough head with a hand that all the dish washing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch.

Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen. She had a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her “Little Miss **Tranquility**,” and the name suited her excellently, for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved.

“As for you, Amy,” continued Meg, “you are altogether too particular and prim. You’ll grow up an affected little goose, if you don’t take care. I like your nice manners and **refined** ways of speaking, but your absurd words are as bad as Jo’s slang.”

Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, she always carried herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.

“If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?” asked Beth, ready to share the lecture.

⁵ **castanets**. A small hand-held instrument that makes a clapping sound

Vocabulary in Place

tranquility, *n.* A state of being calm, peaceful, and unruffled; not easily disturbed

refined, *adj.* Smooth and polished; improved through hard work and effort