

Literature.org:

[Authors](#)  
[Contact](#)

[Jo's Boys](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#)

## Chapter 13 - Nat's New Year

---

'I don't expect to hear from Emil yet, and Nat writes regularly, but where is Dan? Only two or three postals since he went. Such an energetic fellow as he is could buy up all the farms in Kansas by this time,' said Mrs Jo one morning when the mail came in and no card or envelope bore Dan's dashing hand.

'He never writes often, you know, but does his work and then comes home. Months and years seem to mean little to him, and he is probably prospecting in the wilderness, forgetful of time,' answered Mr Bhaer, deep in one of Nat's long letters from Leipzig.

'But he promised he would let me know how he got on, and Dan keeps his word if he can. I'm afraid something has happened to him'; and Mrs Jo comforted herself by patting Don's head, as he came at the sound of his master's name to look at her with eyes almost human in their wistful intelligence.

'Don't worry, Mum dear, nothing ever happens to the old fellow. He'll turn up all right, and come stalking in some day with a gold-mine in one pocket and a prairie in the other, as jolly as a grig,' said Ted, who was in no haste to deliver Octoo to her rightful owner.

'Perhaps he has gone to Montana and given up the farm plan. He seemed to like Indians best, I thought'; and Rob went to help his mother with her pile of letters and his cheerful suggestions.

'I hope so, it would suit him best. But I am sure he would have told us his change of plan and sent for some money to work with. No, I feel in my prophetic bones that something is wrong,' said Mrs Jo, looking as solemn as Fate in a breakfast-cap.

'Then we shall hear; ill news always travels fast. Don't borrow trouble, Jo, but hear how well Nat is getting on. I'd no idea the boy would care for anything but music. My good friend Baumgarten has launched him well, and it will do him good if he lose not his head. A good lad, but new to the world, and Leipzig is full of snares for the unwary. Gott be with him!'

The Professor read Nat's enthusiastic account of certain literary and musical parties he had been to, the splendours of the opera, the kindness of his new friends, the delight of studying under such a master as Bergmann, his hopes of rapid gain, and his great gratitude to those who had opened this enchanted world to him.

'That, now, is satisfactory and comfortable. I felt that Nat had unsuspected power in him before he went away; he was so manly and full of excellent plans,' said Mrs Jo, in a satisfied tone.

'We shall see. He will doubtless get his lesson and be the better for it. That comes to us all in our young days. I hope it will not be too hard for our good Jungling,' answered the Professor, with a wise smile, remembering his own student life in Germany.

He was right; and Nat was already getting his lesson in life with a rapidity which would have astonished his friends at home. The manliness over which Mrs Jo rejoiced was developing in unexpected ways, and quiet Nat had plunged into the more harmless dissipations of the gay city with all the ardour of an inexperienced youth taking his first sip of pleasure. The entire freedom and sense of independence was delicious, for many benefits began to burden him, and he longed to stand on his own legs and make his own way. No one knew his past here; and with a well-stocked wardrobe, a handsome sum at his banker's, and the best teacher in Leipzig, he made his debut as a musical young gentleman, presented by the much-respected Professor Bhaer and the wealthy Mr Laurence, who had many friends glad to throw open their houses to his protegee. Thanks to these introductions, his fluent German, modest manners, and undeniable talent, the stranger was cordially welcomed, and launched at once into a circle which many an ambitious young man strove in vain to enter.

All this rather turned Nat's head; and as he sat in the brilliant opera-house, chatted among the ladies at some select coffee-party, or whisked an eminent professor's amiable daughter down the room, trying to imagine she was Daisy, he often asked himself if this gay fellow could be the poor homeless little Street musician who once stood waiting in the rain at the gates of Plumfield. His heart was true, his impulses good, and his ambitions high; but the weak side of his nature came uppermost here; vanity led him astray, pleasure intoxicated him, and for a time he forgot everything but the delights of this new and charming life. Without meaning to deceive, he allowed people to imagine him a youth of good family and prospects; he boasted a little of Mr Laurie's wealth and influence, of Professor Bhaer's eminence, and the flourishing college at which he himself had been educated. Mrs Jo was introduced to the sentimental Frauleins who read her books, and the charms and virtues of his own dear Madchen confided to sympathetic mammas. All these boyish boastings and innocent vanities were duly circulated among the gossips, and his importance much increased thereby, to his surprise and gratification, as well as some shame.

But they bore fruit that was bitter in the end; for, finding that he was considered one of the upper class, it very soon became impossible for him to live in the humble quarters he had chosen, or to lead the studious, quiet life planned for him. He met other students, young officers, and gay fellows of all sorts, and was flattered at being welcomed among them; though it was a costly pleasure, and often left a thorn of regret to vex his honest conscience. He was tempted to take better rooms in a more fashionable street, leaving good Frau Tetzl to lament his loss, and his artist neighbour, Fraulein Vogelstein, to shake her grey ringlets and predict his return, a sadder and a wiser man.

The sum placed at his disposal for expenses and such simple pleasures as his busy life could command seemed a fortune to Nat, though it was smaller than generous Mr Laurie first proposed. Professor Bhaer wisely counselled prudence, as Nat was unused to the care of money, and the good man knew the temptations that a well-filled purse makes possible at this pleasure-loving age. So Nat enjoyed his handsome little apartment immensely, and insensibly let many unaccustomed luxuries creep in. He loved his music and never missed a lesson; but the hours he should have spent in patient practice were too often wasted at theatre, ball, beer-garden, or club - doing no harm beyond that waste of precious time, and money not his own; for he had no vices, and took his recreation like a gentleman, so far. But slowly a change for the worse was beginning to show itself, and he felt it. These first steps along the flowery road were downward, not upward; and the constant sense of disloyalty which soon began to haunt him made Nat feel, in the few quiet hours he gave himself, that all was not well with him, spite of the happy whirl in which he lived.

'Another month, and then I will be steady,' he said more than once, trying to excuse the delay by the fact that all was new to him, that his friends at home wished him to be happy, and that society was giving him the polish he needed. But as each month slipped away it grew harder to escape; he was inevitably drawn on, and it was so easy to drift with the tide that he deferred the evil day as long as possible. Winter festivities followed the more wholesome summer pleasures, and Nat found them more costly;

for the hospitable ladies expected some return from the stranger; and bouquets, theatre tickets, and all the little man cannot escape at such times, told heavily on the purse which seemed bottomless at first. Taking Mr Laurie for his model, Nat became quite a gallant, and was universally liked; for through all the newly acquired airs and graces the genuine honesty and simplicity of his character plainly shone, winning confidence and affection from all who knew him.

Among these was a certain amiable old lady with a musical daughter - well-born but poor, and very anxious to marry the aforesaid daughter to some wealthy man. Nat's little fictions concerning his prospects and friends charmed the gnadige Frau as much as his music and devoted manners did the sentimental Minna. Their quiet parlour seemed homelike and restful to Nat, when tired of gayer scenes; and the motherly interest of the elder lady was sweet and comfortable to him; while the tender blue eyes of the pretty girl were always so full of welcome when he came, of regret when he left, and of admiration when he played to her, that he found it impossible to keep away from this attractive spot. He meant no harm, and feared no danger, having confided to the Frau Mamma that he was betrothed; so he continued to call, little dreaming what ambitious hopes the old lady cherished, nor the peril there was in receiving the adoration of a romantic German girl, till it was too late to spare her pain and himself great regret.

Of course some inkling of these new and agreeable experiences got into the voluminous letters he never was too gay, too busy, or too tired to write each week; and while Daisy rejoiced over his happiness and success, and the boys laughed at the idea of 'old Chirper coming out as a society man', the elders looked sober, and said among themselves:

'He is going too fast; he must have a word of warning, or trouble may come.'

But Mr Laurie said: 'Oh, let him have his fling; he's been dependent and repressed long enough. He can't go far with the money he has, and I've no fear of his getting into debt. He's too timid and too honest to be reckless. It is his first taste of freedom; let him enjoy it, and he'll work the better by and by; I know - and I'm sure I'm right.'

So the warnings were very gentle, and the good people waited anxiously to hear more of hard study, and less of 'splendid times'. Daisy sometimes wondered, with a pang of her faithful heart, if one of the charming Minnas, Hildegardes, and Lottchens mentioned were not stealing her Nat away from her; but she never asked, always wrote calmly and cheerfully, and looked in vain for any hint of change in the letters that were worn out with much reading.

Month after month slipped away, till the holidays came with gifts, good wishes, and brilliant festivities. Nat expected to enjoy himself very much, and did at first; for a German Christmas is a spectacle worth seeing. But he paid dearly for the abandon with which he threw himself into the gaities of that memorable week; and on New Year's Day the reckoning came. It seemed as if some malicious fairy had prepared the surprises that arrived, so unwelcome were they, so magical the change they wrought, turning his happy world into a scene of desolation and despair as suddenly as a transformation at the pantomime.

The first came in the morning when, duly armed with costly bouquets and bon-bons, he went to thank Minna and her mother for the braces embroidered with forget-me-nots and the silk socks knit by the old lady's nimble fingers, which he had found upon his table that day. The Frau Mamma received him graciously; but when he asked for the daughter the good lady frankly demanded what his intentions were, adding that certain gossip which had reached her ear made it necessary for him to declare himself or come no more, as Minna's peace must not be compromised.

A more panic-stricken youth was seldom seen than Nat as he received this unexpected demand. He saw too late that his American style of gallantry had deceived the artless girl, and might be used with terrible effect by the artful mother, if she chose to do it. Nothing but the truth could save him, and he had the honour and honesty to tell it faithfully. A sad scene followed; for Nat was obliged to strip off his fictitious splendour, confess himself only a poor student, and humbly ask pardon for the thoughtless freedom with which he had enjoyed their too confiding hospitality. If he had any doubts of Frau Schomburg's motives and desires, they were speedily set at rest by the frankness with which she showed her disappointment, the vigour with which she scolded him, and the scorn with which she cast him off when her splendid castles in the air collapsed.

The sincerity of Nat's penitence softened her a little and she consented to a farewell word with Minna, who had listened at the keyhole, and was produced drenched in tears, to fall on Nat's bosom, crying: 'Ah, thou dear one, never can I forget thee, though my heart is broken!'

This was worse than the scolding; for the stout lady also wept, and it was only after much German gush and twaddle that he escaped, feeling like another Werther; while the deserted Lotte consoled herself with the bonbons, her mother with the more valuable gifts.

The second surprise arrived as he dined with Professor Baumgarten. His appetite had been effectually taken away by the scene of the morning, and his spirits received another damper when a fellow student cheerfully informed him that he was about to go to America, and should make it his agreeable duty to call on the 'lieber Herr Professor Bhaer', to tell him how gaily his protege was disporting himself at Leipzig. Nat's heart died within him as he imagined the effect these glowing tales would have at Plumfield - not that he had wilfully deceived them, but in his letters many things were left untold; and when Carlsen added, with a friendly wink, that he would merely hint at the coming betrothal of the fair Minna and his 'heart's friend', Nat found himself devoutly hoping that this other inconvenient heart's friend might go to the bottom of the sea before he reached Plumfield to blast all his hopes by these tales of a mis-spent winter. Collecting his wits, he cautioned Carlsen with what he flattered himself was Mephistophelian art, and gave him such confused directions that it would be a miracle if he ever found Professor Bhaer. But the dinner was spoilt for Nat, and he got away as soon as possible, to wander disconsolately about the streets, with no heart for the theatre or the supper he was to share with some gay comrades afterwards. He comforted himself a little by giving alms to sundry beggars, making two children happy with gilded gingerbread, and drinking a lonely glass of beer, in which he toasted his Daisy and wished himself a better year than the last had been.

Going home at length, he found a third surprise awaiting him in the shower of bills which had descended upon him like a snowstorm, burying him in an avalanche of remorse, despair, and self-disgust. These bills were so many and so large that he was startled and dismayed; for, as Mr Bhaer wisely predicted, he knew little about the value of money. It would take every dollar at the bankers to pay them all at once, and leave him penniless for the next six months, unless he wrote home for more. He would rather starve than do that; and his first impulse was to seek help at the gaming-table, whither his new friends had often tempted him. But he had promised Mr Bhaer to resist what then had seemed an impossible temptation; and now he would not add another fault to the list already so long. Borrow he would not, nor beg. What could he do? For these appalling bills must be paid, and the lessons go on; or his journey was an ignominious failure. But he must live meantime. And how? Bowed down with remorse for the folly of these months, he saw too late whither he was drifting, and for hours paced up and down his pretty rooms, floundering in a Slough of Despond, with no helping hand to pull him out - at least he thought so till letters were brought in, and among fresh bills lay one well-worn envelope with an American stamp in the corner.

Ah, how welcome it was! how eagerly he read the long pages full of affectionate wishes from all at home! For everyone had sent a line, and as each familiar name appeared, his eyes grew dimmer and dimmer till, as he read the last - 'God bless my boy! Mother Bhaer' - he broke down; and laying his head on his arms, blistered the paper with a rain of tears that eased his heart and washed away the boyish sins that now lay so heavy on his conscience.

'Dear people, how they love and trust me! And how bitterly they would be disappointed if they knew what a fool I've been! I'll fiddle in the streets again before I'll ask for help from them!' cried Nat, brushing away the tears of which he was ashamed, although he felt the good they had done.

Now he seemed to see more clearly what to do; for the helping hand had been stretched across the sea, and Love, the dear Evangelist, had lifted him out of the slough and shown him the narrow gate, beyond which deliverance lay. When the letter had been reread, and one corner where a daisy was painted, passionately kissed, Nat felt strong enough to face the worst and conquer it. Every bill should be paid, every salable thing of his own sold, these costly rooms given up; and once back with thrifty Frau Tetzl, he would find work of some sort by which to support himself, as many another student did. He must give up the new friends, turn his back on the gay life, cease to

be a butterfly, and take his place among the grubs. It was the only honest thing to do, but very hard for the poor fellow to crush his little vanities, renounce the delights so dear to the young, own his folly, and step down from his pedestal to be pitied, laughed at, and forgotten.

It took all Nat's pride and courage to do this, for his was a sensitive nature; esteem was very precious to him, failure very bitter, and nothing but the inborn contempt for meanness and deceit kept him from asking help or trying to hide his need by some dishonest device. As he sat alone that night, Mr Bhaer's words came back to him with curious clearness, and he saw himself a boy again at Plumfield, punishing his teacher as a lesson to himself, when timidity had made him lie.

'He shall not suffer for me again, and I won't be a sneak if I am a fool. I'll go and tell Professor Baumgarten all about it and ask his advice. I'd rather face a loaded cannon; but it must be done. Then I'll sell out, pay my debts, and go back where I belong. Better be an honest pauper than a jackdaw among peacocks'; and Nat smiled in the midst of his trouble, as he looked about him at the little elegancies of his room, remembering what he came from.

He kept his word manfully, and was much comforted to find that his experience was an old story to the professor, who approved his plan, thinking wisely that the discipline would be good for him, and was very kind in offering help and promising to keep the secret of his folly from his friend Bhaer till Nat had redeemed himself.

The first week of the new year was spent by our prodigal in carrying out his plan with penitent dispatch, and his birthday found him alone in the little room high up at Frau Tetzels, with nothing of his former splendour, but sundry unsalable keepsakes from the buxom maidens, who mourned his absence deeply. His male friends had ridiculed, pitied, and soon left him alone, with one or two exceptions, who offered their purses generously and promised to stand by him. He was lonely and heavy-hearted, and sat brooding over his small fire as he remembered the last New Year's Day at Plumfield, when at this hour he was dancing with his Daisy.

A tap at the door roused him, and with a careless 'Herein', he waited to see who had climbed so far for his sake. It was the good Frau proudly bearing a tray, on which stood a bottle of wine and an astonishing cake bedecked with sugar-plums of every hue, and crowned with candles. Fraulein Vogelstein followed, embracing a blooming rose-tree, above which her grey curls waved and her friendly face beamed joyfully as she cried:

'Dear Herr Blak, we bring you greetings and a little gift or two in honour of this ever-to-be-remembered day. Best wishes! and may the new year bloom for you as beautifully as we your heart-warm friends desire.'

'Yes, yes, in truth we do, dear Herr,' added Frau Tetzels. 'Eat of this with-joy-made Kuchen, and drink to the health of the far-away beloved ones in the good wine.'

Amused, yet touched by the kindness of the good souls, Nat thanked them both, and made them stay to enjoy the humble feast with him. This they gladly did, being motherly women full of pity for the dear youth, whose straits they knew, and having substantial help to offer, as well as kind words and creature comforts.

Frau Tetzels, with some hesitation, mentioned a friend of hers who, forced by illness to leave his place in the orchestra of a second-rate theatre, would gladly offer it to Nat, if he could accept so humble a position. Blushing and toying with the roses like a shy girl, good old Vogelstein asked if in his leisure moments he could give English lessons in the young ladies' school where she taught painting, adding that a small but certain salary would be paid him.

Gratefully Nat accepted both offers, finding it less humiliating to be helped by women than by friends of his own sex. This work would support him in a frugal way, and certain musical drudgery promised by his master assured his own teaching. Delighted with the success of their little plot, these friendly neighbours left him with cheery words, warm hand-grasps, and faces beaming with feminine satisfaction at the hearty kiss Nat put on each faded cheek, as the only return he could make for all their helpful kindness.

It was strange how much brighter the world looked after that; for hope was a better cordial than the wine, and good resolutions bloomed as freshly as the little rose-tree that filled the room with fragrance, as Nat woke the echoes with the dear old airs, finding now as always his best comforter in music, to whom henceforth he swore to be a more loyal subject.