

Literature.org:

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

[Jo's Boys](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

This Book:

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

## Chapter 20 - Life For Life

---

The summer days that followed were full of rest and pleasure for young and old, as they did the honours of Plumfield to their happy guests. While Franz and Emil were busy with the affairs of Uncle Hermann and Captain Hardy, Mary and Ludmilla made friends everywhere; for, though very unlike, both were excellent and charming girls. Mrs Meg and Daisy found the German bride a Hausfrau after their own hearts, and had delightful times learning new dishes, hearing about the semi-yearly washes and the splendid linen-room at Hamburg, or discussing domestic life in all its branches. Ludmilla not only taught, but learned, many things, and went home with many new and useful ideas in her blonde head.

Mary had seen so much of the world that she was unusually lively for an English girl; while her various accomplishments made her a most agreeable companion. Much good sense gave her ballast; and the late experiences of danger and happiness added a sweet gravity at times, which contrasted well with her natural gaiety. Mrs Jo was quite satisfied with Emil's choice, and felt sure this true and tender pilot would bring him safe to port through fair or stormy weather. She had feared that Franz would settle down into a comfortable, moneymaking burgher, and be content with that; but she soon saw that his love of music and his placid Ludmilla put much poetry into his busy life, and kept it from being too prosaic. So she felt at rest about these boys, and enjoyed their visit with real, maternal satisfaction; parting with them in September most regretfully, yet hopefully, as they sailed away to the new life that lay before them.

Demi's engagement was confided to the immediate family only, as both were pronounced too young to do anything but love and wait. They were so happy that time seemed to stand still for them, and after a blissful week they parted bravely - Alice to home duties, with a hope that sustained and cheered her through many trials; and John to his business, full of a new ardour which made all things possible when such a reward was offered.

Daisy rejoiced over them, and was never tired of hearing her brother's plans for the future. Her own hope soon made her what she used to be - a cheery, busy creature, with a smile, kind word, and helping hand for all; and as she went singing about the house again, her mother felt that the right remedy for past sadness had been found. The dear Pelican still had doubts and fears, but kept them wisely to herself, preparing sundry searching tests to be applied when Nat came home, and keeping a sharp eye on the letters from London; for some mysterious hint had flown across the sea, and Daisy's content seemed reflected in Nat's present cheerful state of mind.

Having passed through the Werther period, and tried a little Faust - of which experience he spoke to his Marguerite as if it had included an acquaintance with Mephistopheles, Blocksburg, and Auerbach's wine-cellar - he now felt that he was a Wilhelm Meister, serving his apprenticeship to the great masters of life. As she knew the truth of his small sins and honest repentance, Daisy only smiled at the mixture of love and philosophy he sent her, knowing that it was impossible for a young man to live in Germany without catching the German spirit.

'His heart is all right; and his head will soon grow clear when he gets out of the fog of tobacco, beer, and metaphysics he's been living in. England will wake up his common sense, and good salt air blow his little follies all away,' said Mrs Jo, much pleased with the good prospects of her violinist - whose return was delayed till spring, to his private regret, but professional advancement.

Josie had a month with Miss Cameron at the seaside, and threw herself so heartily into the lesson given her that her energy, promise, and patience laid the foundation of a friendship which was of infinite value to her in the busy, brilliant years to come; for little Jo's instincts were right; and the dramatic talent of the Marches was to blossom by and by into an actress, virtuous, and beloved.

Tom and his Dora were peacefully ambling altar-ward; for Bangs senior was so afraid his son would change his mind again and try a third profession, that he gladly consented to an early marriage, as a sort of anchor to hold the mercurial Thomas fast. Aforesaid Thomas could not complain of cold shoulders now; for Dora was a most devoted and adoring little mate, and made life so pleasant to him that his gift for getting into scrapes seemed lost, and he bade fair to become a thriving man, with undeniable talent for the business he had chosen.

'We shall be married in the autumn, and live with my father for a while. The governor is getting on, you know, and my wife and I must look after him. Later we shall have an establishment of our own,' was a favourite speech of his about this time, and usually received with smiles; for the idea of Tommy Bangs at the head of an 'establishment' was irresistibly funny to all who knew him.

Things were in this flourishing condition, and Mrs Jo was beginning to think her trials were over for that year, when a new excitement came. Several postal cards had arrived at long intervals from Dan, who gave them 'Care of M. Mason, etc.', as his address. By this means he was able to gratify his longing for home news, and to send brief messages to quiet their surprise at his delay in settling. The last one, which came in September, was dated 'Montana', and simply said:

Here at last, trying mining again; but not going to stay long. All sorts of luck. Gave up the farm idea. Tell plans soon. Well, busy, and very happy. D. K.

If they had known what the heavy dash under 'happy' meant, that postal would have been a very eloquent bit of pasteboard; for Dan was free, and had gone straight away to the liberty he panted for. Meeting an old friend by accident, he obliged him at a pinch by acting as overseer for a time, finding the society even of rough miners very sweet, and something in the muscular work wonderfully pleasant, after being cooped up in the brush-shop so long. He loved to take a pick and wrestle with rock and earth till he was weary - which was very soon; for that year of captivity had told upon his splendid physique. He longed to go home, but waited week after week to get the prison taint off him and the haggard look out of his face. Meanwhile he made friends of masters and men; and as no one knew his story, he took his place again in the world gratefully and gladly - with little pride now, and no plans but to do some good somewhere, and efface the past.

Mrs Jo was having a grand clearing-out of her desk one October day, while the rain poured outside, and peace reigned in her mansion. Coming across the postals, she pondered over them, and then put them carefully away in the drawer labelled 'Boys' Letters', saying to herself, as she bundled eleven requests for autographs into the waste-paper basket:

'It is quite time for another card, unless he is coming to tell his plans. I'm really curious to know what he has been about all this year, and how he's getting on now.'

That last wish was granted within an hour; for Ted came rushing in, with a newspaper in one hand, a collapsed umbrella in the other, and a face full of excitement, announcing, all in one breathless jumble:

'Mine caved in - twenty men shut up - no way out - wives crying - water rising - Dan knew the old shaft - risked his life - got 'em out - most killed - papers full of it - I knew he'd be a hero - hurra for old Dan!'

'What? Where? When? Who? Stop roaring, and let me read!' commanded his mother, entirely bewildered.

Relinquishing the paper, Ted allowed her to read for herself, with frequent interruptions from him - and Rob, who soon followed, eager for the tale. It was nothing new; but courage and devotion always stir generous hearts, and win admiration; so the account was both graphic and enthusiastic; and the name of Daniel Kean, the brave man who saved the lives of others at the risk of his own, was on many lips that day. Very proud were the faces of these friends as they read how their Dan was the only one who, in the first panic of the accident, remembered the old shaft that led into the mine - walled up, but the only hope of escape, if the men could be got out before the rising water drowned them; how he was lowered down alone, telling the others to keep back till he saw if it was safe; how he heard the poor fellows picking desperately for their lives on the other side, and by knocks and calls guided them to the right spot; then headed the rescue party, and working like a hero, got the men out in time. On being drawn up last of all, the worn rope broke, and he had a terrible fall, being much hurt, but was still alive. How the grateful women kissed his blackened face and bloody hands, as the men bore him away in triumph, and the owners of the mine promised a handsome reward, if he lived to receive it!

'He must live; he shall, and come home to be nursed as soon as he can stir, if I go and bring him myself! I always knew he'd do something fine and brave, if he didn't get shot or hung for some wild prank instead,' cried Mrs Jo, much excited.

'Do go, and take me with you, Mum. I ought to be the one, Dan's so fond of me and I of him,' began Ted, feeling that this would be an expedition after his own heart.

Before his mother could reply, Mr Laurie came in, with almost as much noise and flurry as Teddy the second, exclaiming as he waved the evening paper:

'Seen the news, Jo? What do you think? Shall I go off at once, and see after that brave boy?'

'I wish you would. But the thing may not be all true - rumour lies so. Perhaps a few hours will bring an entirely new version of the story.'

'I've telephoned to Demi for all he can find out; and if it's true, I'll go at once. Should like the trip. If he's able, I'll bring him home; if not, I'll stay and see to him. He'll pull through. Dan will never die of a fall on his head. He's got nine lives, and not lost half of them yet.'

'If you go, uncle, mayn't I go with you? I'm just spoiling for a journey; and it would be such larks to go out there with you, and see the mines and Dan, and hear all about it, and help. I can nurse. Can't I, Rob?' cried Teddy, in his most wheedlesome tones.

'Pretty well. But if mother can't spare you, I'm ready if uncle needs anyone,' answered Rob, in his quiet way, looking much fitter for the trip than excitable Ted.

'I can't spare either of you. My boys get into trouble, unless I keep them close at home. I've no right to hold the others; but I won't let you out of my sight, or something will happen. Never saw such a year, with wrecks and weddings and floods and engagements, and every sort of catastrophe!' exclaimed Mrs Jo.

'If you deal in girls and boys, you must expect this sort of thing, ma'am. The worst is over, I hope, till these lads begin to go off. Then I'll stand by you; for you'll need every kind of support and comfort, specially if Ted bolts early,' laughed Mr Laurie, enjoying her lamentations.

'I don't think anything can surprise me now; but I am anxious about Dan, and feel that someone had better go to him. It's a rough place out there, and he may need careful nursing. Poor lad, he seems to get a good many hard knocks! But perhaps he needs them as "a mellerin' process", as Hannah used to say.'

'We shall hear from Demi before long, and then I'll be off.' With which cheerful promise Mr Laurie departed; and Ted, finding his mother firm, soon followed, to coax his uncle to take him.

Further inquiry confirmed and added interest to the news. Mr Laurie was off at once; and Ted went into town with him, still vainly imploring to be taken to his Dan. He was absent all day; but his mother said, calmly:

'Only a fit of the sulks because he is thwarted. He's safe with Tom or Demi, and will come home hungry and meek at night. I know him.'

But she soon found that she could still be surprised; for evening brought no Ted, and no one had seen him. Mr Bhaer was just setting off to find his lost son, when a telegram arrived, dated at one of the way-stations on Mr Laurie's route:

Found Ted in the cars. Take him along. Write tomorrow.

T. LAURENCE

'Ted bolted sooner than you expected, mother. Never mind - uncle will take good care of him, and Dan be very glad to see him,' said Rob, as Mrs Jo sat, trying to realize that her youngest was actually on his way to the wild West.

'Disobedient boy! He shall be severely punished, if I ever get him again. Laurie winked at this prank; I know he did. Just like him. Won't the two rascals have a splendid time? Wish I was with them! Don't believe that crazy boy took even a night-gown with him, or an overcoat. Well, there will be two patients for us to nurse when they get back, if they ever do. Those reckless express trains always go down precipices, and burn up, or telescope. Oh! my Ted, my precious boy, how can I let him go so far away from me?'

And mother-like, Mrs Jo forgot the threatened chastisement in tender lamentations over the happy scapegrace, now whizzing across the continent in high feather at the success of his first revolt. Mr Laurie was much amused at his insisting that those words, 'when Ted bolts', put the idea into his head; and therefore the responsibility rested upon his shoulders. He assumed it kindly from the moment he came upon the runaway asleep in a car, with no visible luggage but a bottle of wine for Dan and a blacking-brush for himself; and as Mrs Jo suspected, the 'two rascals' did have a splendid time. Penitent letters arrived in due season, and the irate parents soon forgot to chide in their anxiety about Dan, who was very ill, and did not know his friends for several days. Then he began to mend; and everyone forgave the bad boy when he proudly reported that the first conscious words Dan said were: 'Hallo, Ted!' with a smile of pleasure at seeing a familiar face bent over him.

'Glad he went, and I won't scold any more. Now, what shall we put in the box for Dan?' And Mrs Jo worked off her impatience to get hold of the invalid by sending comforts enough for a hospital.

Cheering accounts soon began to come, and at length Dan was pronounced able to travel, but seemed in no haste to go home, though never tired of hearing his nurses talk of it.

'Dan is strangely altered,' wrote Laurie to Jo; 'not by this illness alone, but by something which has evidently gone before. I don't know what, and leave you to ask; but from

his ravings when delirious I fear he has been in some serious trouble the past year. He seems ten years older, but improved, quieter, and so grateful to us. It is pathetic to see the hunger in his eyes as they rest on Ted, as if he couldn't see enough of him. He says Kansas was a failure, but can't talk much; so I bide my time. The people here love him very much, and he cares for that sort of thing now; used to scorn any show of emotion, you know; now he wants everyone to think well of him, and can't do enough to win affection and respect. I may be all wrong. You will soon find out. Ted is in clover, and the trip has done him a world of good. Let me take him to Europe when we go? Apron-strings don't agree with him any better than they did with me when I proposed to run away to Washington with you some century ago. Aren't you sorry you didn't?

This private letter set Mrs Jo's lively fancy in a ferment, and she imagined every known crime, affliction, and complication which could possibly have befallen Dan. He was too feeble to be worried with questions now, but she promised herself most interesting revelations when she got him safe at home; for the 'firebrand' was her most interesting boy. She begged him to come, and spent more time in composing a letter that should bring him, than she did over the most thrilling episodes in her 'works'.

No one but Dan saw the letter; but it did bring him, and one November day Mr Laurie helped a feeble man out of a carriage at the door of Plumfield, and Mother Bhaer received the wanderer like a recovered son; while Ted, in a disreputable-looking hat and an astonishing pair of boots, performed a sort of war-dance round the interesting group.

'Right upstairs and rest; I'm nurse now, and this ghost must eat before he talks to anyone,' commanded Mrs Jo, trying not to show how shocked she was at this shorn and shaven, gaunt and pallid shadow of the stalwart man she parted with.

He was quite content to obey, and lay on the long lounge in the room prepared for him, looking about as tranquilly as a sick child restored to its own nursery and mother's arms, while his new nurse fed and refreshed him, bravely controlling the questions that burned upon her tongue. Being weak and weary, he soon fell asleep; and then she stole away to enjoy the society of the 'rascals', whom she scolded and petted, pumped and praised, to her heart's content.

'Jo, I think Dan has committed some crime and suffered for it,' said Mr Laurie, when Ted had departed to show his boots and tell glowing tales of the dangers and delights of the miners' life to his mates. 'Some terrible experience has come to the lad, and broken his spirit. He was quite out of his head when we arrived, and I took the watching, so I heard more of those sad wanderings than anyone else. He talked of the "warden", some trail, a dead man, and Blair and Mason, and would keep offering me his hand, asking me if I would take it and forgive him. Once, when he was very wild, I held his arms, and he quieted in a moment, imploring me not to "put the handcuffs on". I declare, it was quite awful sometimes to hear him in the night talk of old Plum and you, and beg to be let out and go home to die.'

'He isn't going to die, but live to repent of anything he may have done; so don't harrow me up with these dark hints, Teddy. I don't care if he's broken the Ten Commandments, I'll stand by him, and so will you, and we'll set him on his feet and make a good man of him yet. I know he's not spoilt, by the look in his poor face. Don't say a word to anyone, and I'll have the truth before long,' answered Mrs Jo, still loyal to her bad boy, though much afflicted by what she had heard.

For some days Dan rested, and saw few people; then good care, cheerful surroundings, and the comfort of being at home began to tell, and he seemed more like himself, though still very silent as to his late experiences, pleading the doctor's orders not to talk much. Everyone wanted to see him; but he shrank from any but old friends, and 'wouldn't lionize worth a cent', Ted said, much disappointed that he could not show off his brave Dan.

'Wasn't a man there who wouldn't have done the same, so why make a row over me?' asked the hero, feeling more ashamed than proud of the broken arm, which looked so interesting in a sling.

'But isn't it pleasant to think that you saved twenty lives, Dan, and gave husbands, sons, and fathers back to the women who loved them?' asked Mrs Jo one evening as they were alone together after several callers had been sent away.

'Pleasant! it's all that kept me alive, I do believe; yes, I'd rather have done it than be made president or any other big bug in the world. No one knows what a comfort it is to think I've saved twenty men to more than pay for - ' There Dan stopped short, having evidently spoken out of some strong emotion to which his hearer had no key.

'I thought you'd feel so. It is a splendid thing to save life at the risk of one's own, as you did, and nearly lose it,' began Mrs Jo, wishing he had gone on with that impulsive speech which was so like his old manner.

"He that loseth his life shall gain it",' muttered Dan, staring at the cheerful fire which lighted the room, and shone on his thin face with a ruddy glow.

Mrs Jo was so startled at hearing such words from his lips that she exclaimed joyfully:

'Then you did read the little book I gave you, and kept your promise?'

'I read it a good deal after a while. I don't know much yet, but I'm ready to learn; and that's something.'

'It's everything. Oh, my dear, tell me about it! I know something lies heavy on your heart; let me help you bear it, and so make the burden lighter.'

'I know it would; I want to tell; but some things even you couldn't forgive; and if you let go of me, I'm afraid I can't keep afloat.'

'Mothers can forgive anything! Tell me all, and be sure that I will never let you go, though the whole world should turn from you.'

Mrs Jo took one of the big wasted hands in both of hers and held it fast, waiting silently till that sustaining touch warmed poor Dan's heart, and gave him courage to speak. Sitting in his old attitude, with his head in his hands, he slowly told it all, never once looking up till the last words left his lips.

'Now you know; can you forgive a murderer, and keep a jail-bird in your house?'

Her only answer was to put her arms about him, and lay the shorn head on her breast, with eyes so full of tears they could but dimly see the hope and fear that made his own so tragical.

That was better than any words; and poor Dan clung to her in speechless gratitude, feeling the blessedness of mother love - that divine gift which comforts, purifies, and strengthens all who seek it. Two or three great, bitter drops were hidden in the little woollen shawl where Dan's cheek rested, and no one ever knew how soft and comfortable it felt to him after the hard pillows he had known so long. Suffering of both mind and body had broken will and pride, and the lifted burden brought such a sense of relief that he paused a moment to enjoy it in dumb delight.

'My poor boy, how you have suffered all this year, when we thought you free as air! Why didn't you tell us, Dan, and let us help you? Did you doubt your friends?' asked Mrs Jo, forgetting all other emotions in sympathy, as she lifted up the hidden face, and looked reproachfully into the great hollow eyes that met her own frankly now.

'I was ashamed. I tried to bear it alone rather than shock and disappoint you, as I know I have, though you try not to show it. Don't mind; I must get used to it'; and Dan's eyes dropped again as if they could not bear to see the trouble and dismay his confession painted on his best friend's face.

'I am shocked and disappointed by the sin, but I am also very glad and proud and grateful that my sinner has repented, atoned, and is ready to profit by the bitter lesson. No one but Fritz and Laurie need ever know the truth; we owe it to them, and they will feel as I do,' answered Mrs Jo, wisely thinking that entire frankness would be a better tonic than too much sympathy.

'No, they won't; men never forgive like women. But it's right. Please tell 'em for me, and get it over. Mr Laurence knows it, I guess. I blabbed when my wits were gone; but he was very kind all the same. I can bear their knowing; but oh, not Ted and the girls!' Dan clutched her arm with such an imploring face that she hastened to assure him no one should know except the two old friends, and he calmed down as if ashamed of his sudden panic.

'It wasn't murder, mind you, it was in self-defence; he drew first, and I had to hit him. Didn't mean to kill him; but it doesn't worry me as much as it ought, I'm afraid. I've more than paid for it, and such a rascal is better out of the world than in it, showing boys the way to hell. Yes, I know you think that's awful in me; but I can't help it. I hate a scamp as I do a skulking coyote, and always want to get a shot at 'em. Perhaps it would have been better if he had killed me; my life is spoilt.'

All the old prison gloom seemed to settle like a black cloud on Dan's face as he spoke, and Mrs Jo was frightened at the glimpse it gave her of the fire through which he had passed to come out alive, but scarred for life. Hoping to turn his mind to happier things, she said cheerfully:

'No, it isn't; you have learned to value it more and use it better for this trial. It is not a lost year, but one that may prove the most helpful of any you ever know. Try to think so, and begin again; we will help, and have all the more confidence in you for this failure. We all do the same and struggle on.'

'I never can be what I was. I feel about sixty, and don't care for anything now I've got here. Let me stay till I'm on my legs, then I'll clear out and never trouble you any more,' said Dan despondently.

'You are weak and low in your mind; that will pass, and by and by you will go to your missionary work among the Indians with all the old energy and the new patience, self-control, and knowledge you have gained. Tell me more about that good chaplain and Mary Mason and the lady whose chance word helped you so much. I want to know all about the trials of my poor boy.'

Won by her tender interest, Dan brightened up and talked on till he had poured out all the story of that bitter year, and felt better for the load he lifted off.

If he had known how it weighed upon his hearer's heart, he would have held his peace; but she hid her sorrow till she had sent him to bed, comforted and calm; then she cried her heart out, to the great dismay of Fritz and Laurie, till they heard the tale and could mourn with her; after which they all cheered up and took counsel together how best to help this worst of all the 'catastrophes' the year had brought them.