

piano. If only she knew us when we spoke to her! Worst of all, she keeps on calling out imploringly for Marmee.

**Meg** I can't help feeling that we ought to have sent for Mother, but Hannah has been so adamant about not worrying her or Father.

**Jo** (*trying to pull herself together*) How dark the days seem now, and the house seems even sadder and lonelier than ever!

**Meg** It's bitterly cold outside. I think we shall have snow later tonight. I mailed the letter to Mother, but I feel so guilty writing to her as if nothing were wrong and not mentioning Beth's illness.

*During the next speech Hannah descends the stairs slowly and moves into the room. Her face is troubled and there is something in her expression that immediately catches the girls' attention*

**Jo** Oh, Meg, it doesn't seem so long ago that we were complaining about every little hardship, and now here we are with so much that we hold dear hanging in the balance.

**Meg** (*rising*) Hannah! What is it?

**Hannah** (*fighting to keep her emotions in check*) The doctor . . . the doctor thinks your Ma should be sent for.

**Jo** (*with a quick look at Meg*) She isn't . . . ? She can't be . . .

**Hannah** The poor little lamb's about as ill as she can be. She seems to have taken a turn for the worse today. The doctor ain't sure just how things may go, but he says he reckons she'll reach a crisis within the next hour or so.

**Jo** (*with a desperate impatience*) We must do something . . . We can't just sit here and . . .

**Hannah** (*quietly*) I guess there ain't nothing we can do until that crisis comes. It's a kind of battle she has to fight all by herself. The doctor's given her some sort of powder, and wants to sit with her awhile until it takes effect. I've just come down for that telegram we wrote out ready to send to your Ma . . . if it was needed. (*She moves to the mantelpiece and picks up a folded paper*) The doctor's said he'll drop it into the telegraph office on his way home. (*She is very near to tears as she turns to leave the room*) He thought it would save us a journey on a cold night. (*At the archway she pauses and turns back to the others in a sudden moment of defeat*) I . . . I . . . I guess I was wrong . . . I'm sorry, my dears. We should have sent for your Ma awhile ago, when you wanted to, but I thought your Pa needed her nursing as long as possible, and . . . I thought . . . now maybe, I've left it too late . . . I . . . I don't know . . . I . . . (*The tears well up. She smothers her sobs in the hem of her apron*)

**Meg** (*moving to her*) Hannah, dear, don't. You did what you thought best. Come, let's go up and see if the doctor needs anything.

*They move to the stairs*

**Jo** If life is often as hard as this, I don't see how we shall ever get through it

*Hannah moves upstairs*

**Meg** (*turning in the archway*) I wish I hadn't a heart, mine aches too much

*She turns and follows Hannah*

**Jo** (*sinking onto the stool by the piano*) If God spares Beth I will never complain again—ever. I promise!

*The front door is heard to open*

*Laurie enters the parlour quietly, looking up the stairs at Meg and Hannah as they disappear*

**Laurie** Hallo, Jo. What's the news? I saw the doctor arrive earlier, but I couldn't wait any longer.

**Jo** The doctor's told us to send for Mother.

**Laurie** It's not as bad as that, is it?

**Jo** Yes, it is, Laurie. (*Tears start to fall*) She doesn't know us, she doesn't even look like my Beth any more—and there's nobody to help us bear it; Mother and Father aren't here, and God seems so far away that I can't find Him.

*As Jo reaches the end of her speech she breaks down completely, her hand stretching out helplessly as if groping in the dark. Tenderly Laurie takes it; for a moment he hesitates, then with a look of deep compassion, he folds her in his arms*

**Laurie** I'm here, Jo. Hold on to me.

*For a moment or two Jo sobs in his arms. Laurie strokes her hair gently, and rests his head against hers in an endeavour to comfort her. Jo pulls out her handkerchief*

**Jo** (*breaking away from him as she dries her eyes*) Thank you, Laurie. I'm—I'm better now. I don't feel so forlorn and I'll try to bear whatever comes.

**Laurie** Keep hoping for the best; that will help you, Jo. Poor girl, you're worn out. It isn't like you to be forlorn. (*A sudden idea occurs to him*) Stop a bit! I know just the thing to hearten you in a jiffy! (*He moves up to the bookcase, takes out a bottle of wine and two glasses and pours wine for them both*) A sip of wine will warm you up and cheer you up, and soon your mother will be here, and then everything will be all right!

**Jo** (*cheering up under Laurie's lively influence*) I am so glad that Father is better. Marmee won't feel so bad about leaving him, for he is not yet well enough to make the journey himself. Oh, me! It does seem as if all the troubles come in a heap. But to have Marmee home again will be wonderful!

**Laurie** (*bringing the glasses to her*) There you are! Now drink it up—it will help, I'm sure!

**Jo** Thank you. Let's drink health and a swift recovery to Beth.

**Jo** } (*together*) To Beth!

**Jo** You are a good doctor, Laurie, and *such* a comfortable friend.

**Laurie** (*with a note of suppressed excitement in his voice*) Thank you for those few kind words, but I haven't finished my treatment yet! I have