

The Catastrophe

by Louisa May Alcott from *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*

Louisa May Alcott wrote Jack and Jill: A Village Story in 1880. It's the story of Jack and his good friend Janey. Everyone calls Janey "Jill" because of the nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill." In this passage from the start of the story, Jack and Jill are sledding down hills with other children from their town. A grumpy boy named Joe has dared Jill to go down a more dangerous hill. Jack has agreed to take her on his sled.

Jack's smile was gone now, and he waited without a word while Jill tucked herself up, then took his place in front, and off they went on the brief, breathless trip straight into the drift by the fence below.

"I don't see anything very awful in that. Come up and have another. Joe is watching us, and I'd like to show him that we aren't afraid of anything," said Jill, with a defiant glance at a distant boy, who had paused to watch the descent.

"It is a regular 'go-bang,' if that is what you like," answered Jack, as they plowed their way up again.

"It is. You boys think girls like little mean coasts without any fun or danger in them, as if we couldn't be brave and strong as well as you. Give me three go-bangs and then we'll stop. My tumble doesn't count, so give me two more and then I'll be good."

Jill took her seat as she spoke, and looked up with such a rosy, pleading face that Jack gave in at once, and down they went again, raising a cloud of glittering snow-dust as they reined up in fine style with their feet on the fence.

"It's just splendid! Now, one more!" cried Jill, excited by the cheers of a sleighing party passing below.

Proud of his skill, Jack marched back, resolved to make the third "go" the crowning achievement of the afternoon, while Jill pranced after him as lightly as if the big boots were the famous seven-leagued ones, and chattering about the candy-scrape and whether there would be nuts or not.

So full were they of this important question, that they piled on hap-hazard, and started off still talking so busily that Jill forgot to hold tight and Jack to steer carefully. Alas, for the candy-scrape that never was to be! Alas, for poor "Thunderbolt" blindly setting forth on the last trip he ever made! And oh, alas, for Jack and Jill, who willfully chose the wrong road and ended their fun for the winter! No one knew how it happened, but instead of landing in the drift, or at the fence, there was a great crash against the bars, a dreadful plunge off the steep bank, a sudden scattering of girl, boy, sled, fence, earth, and snow, all about the road, two cries, and then silence.

Questions

1. Why did Jill want to go down the hill again?
2. What do you think “go-bang” means?
3. How many “go-bangs” did Jack and Jill do?
4. What happened on the last run?