

Wheeler Janet D.

**Billie Bradley and Her
Classmates: or, The Secret
of the Locked Tower**



Janet Wheeler

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CHAPTER I – THIN ICE

Click! click! click! went three pairs of skates as three snugly-dressed girls fairly flew along the frozen surface of the lake.

“Isn’t it glorious?” cried the laughing, brown-eyed one, who was no other than Billie Bradley, as she threw back her head and sniffed the crisp, cold air. “Who ever heard of the lake freezing over in the middle of November? And the ice is pretty solid, too.”

“In spots,” added Violet Farrington, a slender, dark girl with black hair and dark eyes.

“What do you mean – ‘in spots’?” asked the third of the trio, Laura Jordon. Laura was as fair as Violet was dark, and now her blue eyes darted an anxious glance at her chum. “Do you think we shall find any thin ice?”

“I don’t know, of course,” Violet answered quickly. “But you notice Miss Walters told us to stay close to the shore, and that certainly looks as if she weren’t any too certain about the ice.”

Miss Walters was the much-loved principal of Three Towers Hall, the boarding school which the girls were attending, and to the three chums, Miss Walters’ word was law.

As Billie Bradley had said, Lake Molata, upon which Three Towers Hall was situated, had frozen over unusually early this year. Though it was not quite the middle of November, there had been several rather heavy snowfalls. The thermometer had fallen lower and lower till it had dropped below the freezing point, and after a few days of this falling weather a thin glaze of ice had begun to form over the still surface of the lake.

At first the girls had not been too joyful, fearing that the ice was too fragile to last and that one good thaw would do away with it entirely.

But the thaw had not come, and as day after day the prematurely cold weather continued, the girls at the Hall had grown more and more excited. Finally they could stand it no longer and dispatched a committee of three to Miss Walters – among whom had been Billie – asking for the unique privilege of skating over the frozen surface of Lake Molata in the middle of November.

The petition had been granted, with the reservation, as Vi had said, that the girls should stay close to shore and not venture out into the uncertain center of the lake.

When the jubilant committee of three had brought back the glad news to the eagerly waiting girls the dormitories had been the scene of wild but noiseless fancy dancing in celebration of the great event.

Soon after was heard the clinking of skates and the babble of excited girls’ voices as those of the students who were lucky enough to have prepared their lessons for the next day, and so had the afternoon free, made ready for the fun.

Then, down the sloping lawn of Three Towers Hall, the hard, crusted snow crackling merrily under their feet, down to the edge of the lake where skates were put on, mufflers tightened and woolly caps pulled well down to protect ears that already were feeling the nip of the cold, rushed the crowd of excited, happy girls.

Fun! Any one who has tasted the joy of skating over freshly-frozen ice on a crisp winter day when the sun, pouring down, seems only to make the air more chill, any one who has tasted that joy, knows that there is no other sport like it.

So, singly, in groups of two or three, in parties of four, the girls spread out over the lake, their gayly hued caps and sweaters making vivid patches of color on the surface.

Although they had started out with the rest of the girls, Billie and Laura and Vi had become separated from them some way or other, and they now found themselves skimming merrily along with not another person in sight. This did not worry them, however, because they had learned by experience that whenever the three of them were together they were always sure of having a good time.

"A week from now," Billie cried, strands of hair escaping from under her tam-o'-shanter and whipping about her glowing face, "the lake will probably look as though we had dragged a farmer's plow across it."

"A week from now we may not have any ice at all," added Vi pessimistically.

Laura, who was skating between them, let go their hands for a moment to fasten her sweater still more closely about her throat. The wind had stung her face to a vivid red.

"I must say you both sound cheerful," she said reproachfully, adding with a gay little toss of her head: "From the way this wind feels, I'd say we were going to have ice all winter."

"Don't wake her up, she is dreaming," sang Billie mockingly, adding, as Laura gave her a push that would have unbalanced a less skillful skater: "Who ever heard of Lake Molata being frozen over all winter?"

"Well, who ever heard of its being frozen over in the middle of November?" Laura retorted, adding with a grin as Billie looked nonplussed: "I guess that will hold you for a while."

"Laura Jordon," said Vi, folding her mittened hands and trying to look very prim and teacher-like, "report to Miss Walters immediately. That is the third time you have used slang this morning."

The girls giggled, and this time it was Vi who got the push.

"Go long with you," said Billie gayly. "You can't imitate the Dill Pickles in a red sweater and a green cap."

The Dill Pickles, as my old readers will remember, were two teachers, Miss Ada and Miss Cora Dill, who had recently lived at the Hall. The two had done their best to make the girls' lives miserable and had finally, after the students had revolted and marched out of the school, been sent away by Miss Walters.

The vacancies had been filled by teachers who were as different from the Miss Dills in every way as they could be, and since then life at Three Towers Hall had been one happy round of study and fun for the girls.

"Thank goodness the Dills have gone forever," said Vi, in response to Billie's observation.

"Yes," agreed Laura, reminiscently. "It was a lot of trouble, getting rid of them, but it was worth it."

"There are only nice teachers up at the Hall now," said Billie, contentedly. "Especially Miss Arbuckle."

"Isn't she ducky?" said Laura, enthusiastically, if disrespectfully. "I was afraid she might change her mind and take up her old job of governess to those two kiddies."

"I wouldn't have blamed her much, if she had," Vi said, with a chuckle. "She might make the little children behave, while with us –"

"She hasn't a chance," giggled Billie.

"Just the same," put in Laura, with unusual gravity, "you notice that we all do what Miss Arbuckle says. She isn't stern like Miss Race, either, nor nasty like the Dill Pickles used to be. I guess we just obey her because we all like her," she finished simply.

"That's right, and –" Billie was saying when suddenly the ice cracked under her skates and with a cry she lunged forward. Luckily her feet struck on solid ice beyond the cracked part, and with difficulty she regained her balance.

"The ice!" she gasped, as Laura and Vi stared at her. "I struck a thin spot, I guess. Goodness, that scared me!"

“I should say so,” agreed Laura, with a little whistle of astonishment as she edged over to the treacherous place in the ice which was crisscrossed over with long cracks. “Look here, girls. I could almost push this ice through with my finger.”

“Well, don’t try it,” advised Vi, backing away anxiously from the dangerous spot. “I wonder if there any more places like it.”

“S’pose there are – lots of them,” said Billie, who had recovered from her fright and was disposed to treat the whole thing as a joke. “The thing for us to do is to keep out of their way, that’s all.”

“Sounds easy,” grumbled Vi as they joined hands again and skated on more slowly over the frozen surface. “But how are we going to know where the thin places are unless we step on ’em – and fall through, maybe?”

“P’r’aps we’d better go back if – ” Billie was beginning uneasily when a sudden, terrified scream cut her short. It was a child’s scream and it was followed by another, and yet another.

“Oh!” cried Laura wildly, “somebody’s getting killed.”

CHAPTER II – NEARLY FROZEN

The screams for help seemed to be quite near the girls, but whoever was in trouble was hidden from them by a sharp bend in the lake shore.

Without further thought of danger to themselves, the chums skated forward swiftly, the long fringed ends of their scarfs flying out behind them and their bodies thrown eagerly forward.

“Maybe somebody is drowning!”

“It’s some great peril, you may be sure of that – otherwise they wouldn’t scream so.”

“They are children!”

“Yes, and little ones at that, if I am any judge of voices.”

Thus talking excitedly the girls skated forward along the lake shore. Then came a sudden scream from Vi. She had skated too close to an overhanging tree and a branch caught in her hair as she tried to sweep past.

“Wait! wait!” she cried. “Don’t leave me behind!”

“What’s the trouble?” came simultaneously from the others.

“I’m caught – my hair is fast in the tree.”

“Pull yourself loose,” cried Billie. “Hurry, do! Oh, just listen to those cries!” she added, as scream after scream rent the wintry air.

In frantic haste poor Vi tried to do as bidden. But the tree was a thorny one, and she had considerable trouble to liberate herself.

Then came fresh trouble as Billie’s left skate became loosened.

“I’ve got to fasten it,” she said, and bent down to do so. Then the classmates swept forward as before.

They rounded the bend in the lake a minute later and then drew up suddenly as they came upon a singular scene.

Three small children, a boy and two girls, were standing up to their waists in the icy water. Evidently they had ventured out upon the lake in a spirit of mischief, and had stepped upon thin ice which had given way beneath even their slight weight. Luckily they had not got far from the shore, for if the ice had broken through in a deeper part of the lake they must surely have been drowned. As it was, they were three very badly frightened children who were beginning to feel numb with the cold.

At sight of the girls they began to wail afresh and held out their little arms imploringly.

The sight was too much for Billie, and she began to edge her way cautiously along the thin ice, calling to the girls to follow her example.

“Be careful,” she warned. “If we went through, too, it would be hard to get out, and while we were trying it the kiddies would probably freeze to death. Look out!” she exclaimed, as the ice cracked treacherously under her weight. “It is paper-thin right here.”

And while the girls are busy at their work of rescue we will take a few minutes to tell those who are meeting Billie Bradley and her chums for the first time something of the good times the girls have had in other volumes of the series.

In the first book, called “Billie Bradley and Her Inheritance,” the girls had many and varied adventures, some of which were thrilling and others only funny. Just when Billie was wondering how to raise one hundred dollars to pay for a statue which she had accidentally broken, a queer old aunt of hers, Beatrice Powerson by name, died and left to her an inheritance which had at first seemed a doubtful blessing, namely a rambling gloomy old homestead at a place called Cherry Corners.

The house dated back to Revolutionary times and had many weird and romantic legends attached to it. The girls, anxious to see the old place for themselves, had decided to spend their vacation there, and a little later some boys had joined them.

They had an unusual and exciting time of it and the climax of the whole outing was the finding of a shabby old trunk which was hidden away in the attic. This trunk contained five thousand dollars' worth of rare old coins and queer postage stamps, and this small fortune enabled Billie not only to replace the statue she had broken but gave her more than enough to send herself to Three Towers Hall and her brother Chet to Boxtown Military Academy.

But we forgot entirely to introduce the boys! And they at least considered themselves by far the most important part of the story. Here they are then – First of all comes Chetwood Bradley, Billie's brother, whom his friends called Chet for short. Chet was a lovable boy, good-looking, quiet, reserved and devoted to Billie – whose real name, by the way, was Beatrice.

Then there was Ferd Stowing, an all-around good-natured boy who always added a great deal to whatever fun was at hand. And last, but not least, Laura's brother Teddy. Teddy was fifteen, as were the other boys, but, unlike them, he looked quite a good deal older than he was. He was tall, with wavy hair and handsome gray eyes and an athletic build which was the envy of most of the boys at North Bend, where the young folks lived. Teddy had always liked Billie a lot because, as he told his sister, Laura, Billie was the nearest like a boy of all the girls he knew. She liked sports almost as well as he did and so as a matter of course they played tennis and hiked and skated a good deal together.

Returning from their vacation in the old homestead at Cherry Corners, the girls went straight to Three Towers Hall, the boarding school to which their parents were sending them, partly because the young folks wanted to go and partly because the high school at North Bend was hopelessly inefficient and unsatisfactory.

At the same time, the boys departed for Boxtown Military Academy which was only a little over a mile from the boarding school and which was also situated close to Lake Molata.

The good times the young folks had at school are told in the second volume of the series entitled, "Billie Bradley at Three Towers Hall." The most startling thing that happened during the year was the capture of the man whom the boys and girls had named the "Codfish" on account of his peculiarly fish-like mouth. The latter had once attempted to steal Billie's precious trunk, and had later on been suspected of planning and carrying out a robbery at Boxtown Military Academy. Later, he had robbed Miss Race, one of the teachers at the Hall.

The girls had made new friends – and enemies also, – at Three Towers Hall. Chief among the enemies were Amanda Peabody and her chum, Eliza Dilks. The girls were both sneaks and tattletales, and the former, being jealous of Billie and her chums, had done her best to make life unbearable for them at Three Towers. That the disagreeable girls had not succeeded, was not in the least their fault.

Another enemy of Billie's had been Rose Belser, a pretty, black-haired, very vain girl who was also jealous of Billie because of her unusual and immediate popularity with the girls. However, even Rose was won over to Billie's side in the end and became sincerely repentant for her mean behavior.

Connie Danvers, a pretty, fluffy-haired girl, became a staunch friend of the chums at once, and it was she who had invited Billie and Laura and Vi to spend their vacation at Lighthouse Island where her parents had a summer bungalow. Connie's Uncle John, an interesting, bluff character, lived at the lighthouse on the island.

The girls had become very much interested in a mystery surrounding Miss Arbuckle, one of the very nice new teachers who had come to Three Towers to replace the disagreeable "Dill Pickles." They had also met a queer looking man one day when they were lost in the woods, and they had wondered about him a great deal.

It seems Miss Arbuckle had been very greatly disturbed over the loss of an album, and when Billie, accidentally stumbling upon the book, had returned it to the teacher, the latter had wept with joy. Turning over the pages of the album until she came to the pictures of three beautiful children she had cried out: "Oh my precious children. I couldn't lose your pictures after losing you."

Of course this exclamation, together with Miss Arbuckle's strange conduct, considerably puzzled the girls, and they wondered about it all during the vacation at Lighthouse Island. Then

one day a terrible storm came up and a ship was wrecked on one of the treacherous shoals which surrounded the island. The girls, helping in the work of rescue, discovered three children lashed to a rude raft, and after releasing the little victims, the girls had carried them to the Lighthouse to be cared for.

Later, Billie saw a marked resemblance in the three children to the pictures of the children she had seen in Miss Arbuckle's album, and what strange discovery this led to is told in the third volume of this series entitled "Billie Bradley on Lighthouse Island."

And now the girls were all back at Three Towers again in search of further education, likewise, they hoped, much fun and adventure.

"Don't come any farther," Billie said to Laura and Vi, as she stretched herself out at full length on the ice and reached out to grasp one of the children in the water. "Lie down on the thick ice, both of you, and hold on to me just as hard as you can. When I say pull – pull!"

Obediently Laura and Vi flopped down on the ice, each grasping one of Billie's feet and holding on stoutly.

"I'd like to see you get away from us now," said Laura.

Leaning over, Billie grasped the nearest child under the arms and tugged with all her strength.

"Pull!" she gasped to the girls, "I'm slipping."

The girls pulled and dragged her, child and all, out on the more solid ice. They set the child on his poor shivering little feet and then went back for the next one. A moment more and all three of the little things were standing huddled together on the ice, shivering and crying miserably.

"I wanna do home!" wailed the little boy. "I wanna do home."

CHAPTER III – POLLY HADDON

“Where do you live?” asked Billie, turning to the oldest of the three children. “Tell us quick, so we can get you there.”

“We live wiv our muvver, Polly Haddon,” said the little one quaintly, pointing with a shivering finger out across the lake. “We runned away dis mornin’.”

“So we see,” said Laura, adding, as she turned to Billie: “I think I know where they live. Teddy pointed the house out to me one day when we were taking a hike through the woods. Said he and the boys had stopped there one day and had bought some waffles and real maple syrup from Mrs. Haddon. Of course, I don’t know whether it is the same one or not – ”

“Well, come on – we’ll find out,” said Billie, lifting the largest of the three children in her strong arms. “You and Vi can manage the other two kiddies, I guess. You lead the way, Laura, if you know where the house is.”

“But hadn’t we better take our skates off and walk around?” suggested Vi.

“We can make it quicker on skates,” said Billie impatiently, “because we can cut across the lake – ”

“But the ice!” Laura objected. “It may not be solid – ”

“We’ll have to take a chance on that,” Billie returned, adding with an exasperated stamp of her foot, “if you don’t hurry and show us the way, Laura, I’ll do it myself.”

So Laura, knowing that nothing could change Billie’s mind when it was once made up, caught the little boy in her arms and started off across the lake, Billie and Vi following close behind her.

Luckily the children were not heavy, being thin almost to emaciation, or the girls could never have made their goal. As it was, they had to stop several times and set the children down on the ice to rest.

And more than once the treacherous ice cracked under their feet, frightening them horribly. They made it at last, however, and with a sigh of relief set the children on the ground while they fumbled with numbed fingers at their skate straps.

“Is this where you live?” asked Billie of the elder of the two little girls. Billie had undone the last strap buckle and was peering off through the woods in search of some sort of habitation.

“Yes,” answered the little girl through chattering teeth. “Our house is just a little way off, along that path.”

She pointed to a narrow foot path, or rather, to the place where a foot path had once been. For now it was obliterated by snow and was indicated only very faintly by footprints recently made.

Billie, seeing that the other girls were ready, caught up the little girl again, holding her close for warmth and started down the snow-covered path, Laura and Vi following.

The snow was hard, which made the going a little easier, and in a minute or two they came in sight of a shabby cabin set in the heart of a small clearing.

If the place had been a mansion, the girls could not have greeted the sight of it any more joyfully. They stumbled forward recklessly at the imminent risk of dropping the poor little children in the snow.

Before they could reach the cottage the door of it opened and a woman stood on the threshold, hatless and coatless and staring at them anxiously.

When she recognized the children she gave a gesture of relief and backed into the house, motioning to the girls to follow her.

This the girls were not in the least reluctant to do, for they were chilled through, and the warmth of Mrs. Haddon’s kitchen was wonderfully comforting.

They set the children on the floor, and the little ones ran straight to their mother. Polly Haddon dropped to her knees and put her arms around the three of them, cuddling them hungrily.

“My precious little lambs, you frightened mother so!” she said. “She thought you were lost – but you are wet – or you have been!” She rose to her feet and faced the girls while the children clung to her skirts.

“Where did you find my little ones?” she asked abruptly, looking anxiously from one to the other of them.

“We found them up to their waists in icy water,” Billie explained, knowing that no time was to be lost if the children were to be saved from a bad cold. “They fell through the ice on the lake.”

“Fell through the ice!” the woman repeated dumbly, then, seeming suddenly to realize the full seriousness of the situation, she roused herself to action.

With a quick motion she swept the children nearer to the warmth of the coal stove, then started for a door at the opposite end of the room. Then as if she realized that something was due the girls, she paused and looked back at them.

“Draw up chairs close to the fire and warm yourselves,” she directed. “You must be nearly frozen.”

The girls managed to find three rather rickety old chairs, and these they drew as close to the stove as they could without scorching their clothes. They tried to draw the children into their laps, but the children were either too miserable to want to be touched by strangers or they had become a little shy. At any rate, they drew away so sharply that one of them nearly fell on the stove. This frightened them all and they began to cry dismally.

The girls were glad when Mrs. Haddon returned with three shabby but warm little bath robes which she hung close to the stove. Then she undressed the children quickly, rubbed their little bodies till they were in a glow, then slipped them into the snug robes.

And all the time she was doing it she kept up a running fire of conversation with the girls.

“Thank goodness,” she said, “I only missed the children a little while ago. They have always been so good to play close to the house, and I was so busy I didn’t look out as usual. And to think that they ran away and fell into the lake! Well, it’s only one more trouble, that’s all. It’s funny how a person can become used to trouble after a while.”

“But it would have been so much worse,” Billie suggested, gently, “if the kiddies had fallen through into deeper water.”

“Eh?” said Mrs. Haddon, looking up at Billie quickly, then down again. “Yes, I suppose that would have been worse.” Then she added, with a bitterness the girls did not understand: “It isn’t often that the worst doesn’t happen to me.”

Puzzled, the girls looked at each other, then around the bare, specklessly clean little kitchen.

That Mrs. Haddon was very poor, there could be no doubt. The shabbiness of the place, her dress, and the children’s clothes all showed that. But could poverty alone account for the sadness in her voice?

Mrs. Haddon had once been a very pretty woman, and she was sweet looking yet, in spite of the lines of worry about her mouth. She had lovely hair, black as night and thick, but she had arranged it carelessly, and long strands of it had pulled loose from the pins and straggled down over her forehead. At this moment, as though she felt the eyes of the girls upon her, she flung the untidy hair back with an impatient movement.

“How old are the kiddies?” asked Laura, feeling that the silence was becoming awkward. “They look almost the same age.”

“There isn’t more than a year’s difference between Mary and Peter here,” indicating the taller of the two little girls and the boy. “And Isabel is thirteen months younger than Peter. Mary is nine years old,” she added as a sort of afterthought.

“Nine years old!” cried Vi, in surprise. “Why, that would make Peter eight and the little girl seven. I thought they were much younger than that.”

“Yes,” added Laura, thoughtlessly, “they are very tiny for their age.”

As though the innocent words had been a deadly insult, the woman rose from her knees and shot the girls so black a glance from her dark eyes that they were frightened.

“My children are tiny – yes,” she said in a hard voice, repeating what Laura had said. “And no wonder they are small, when for years they have been half starved.”

Then she turned quickly and herded the three frightened little ones out of the room.

“You go to bed,” she said to them as they disappeared through the door.

Left to themselves, the girls looked blankly at one another.

“Billie, did you hear what I heard?” asked Laura, anxiously. “Did she really mean that the kiddies are so little because they don’t get enough to eat?”

“Sounds that way,” said Billie pityingly. “Poor little things!”

“We must find some way to help them,” Vi was beginning when Mrs. Haddon herself came into the room.

She seemed to be sorry for what she had said, and she told them so. She drew up the only chair that was left in the bare little room and sat down, facing the chums.

“You must have thought it very strange for me to speak as I did,” she began, and went on hurriedly as the girls seemed about to protest. “But I have had so much trouble for years that sometimes I don’t know just what I’m doing.”

“Have you lived alone here for very long?” asked Billie, gently.

“Ever since my husband died,” answered Polly Haddon, leaning back in her chair as though she were tired and smoothing her heavy hair back from her forehead. “He was an inventor,” she went on, encouraged by the girls’ friendly interest, to tell of her troubles. “For years he made hardly enough to keep us alive, and after the children came we had a harder pull of it than ever. Then suddenly,” she straightened up in her chair and into her black eyes came a strange gleam, “suddenly, my husband found the one little thing that was wrong with the invention he had been working on for so long – just some little thing it was, that a child could almost see, yet that he had overlooked – and we were fairly crazy with happiness. We thought we had at last realized our dream of a fortune.”

She paused a moment, evidently living over that time in her mind, and the girls, fired by her excitement, waited impatiently for her to go on.

“What happened then?” asked Vi.

“Then,” said the woman, the light dying out of her eyes, leaving them tired and listless again, “the invention was stolen.”

“Stolen!” they echoed, breathlessly.

The woman nodded wearily. She had evidently lost all interest in her story.

“My husband suspected a Philadelphia knitting company, whom he had told of his invention and who were very enthusiastic over it, of having some hand in the robbery. But when he accused them of it they denied it and offered a reward of twenty thousand dollars for the recovery of the models of the machinery.”

“Twenty thousand dollars!” repeated Billie in an awed tone. “I guess they must have liked your husband’s invention pretty well to offer all that money for it.”

The woman nodded, drearily, while two big tears rolled slowly down her face.

“Yes, I think they would have accepted it and paid my husband almost anything he would have asked for it,” she answered.

“But haven’t you ever found out who stole it?” asked Vi, eagerly. “I should think that the thief, whoever he is, would have brought the invention back because of the twenty thousand dollars.”

The woman nodded again.

“Yes, that was the queer thing about it,” she said. “When the knitting company first told us of the reward we were jubilant, my husband and I. We thought surely we would recover the precious invention then. But as the weeks went by and we heard nothing, the strain was too much. Poor Frank,

after all those years of struggle, with victory snatched away at the last minute, when he had every right to think it in his grasp – my poor husband could fight no longer. He died.”

With these words the poor woman bowed her head upon her hands and sobbed brokenly. The girls, feeling heartily sorry for her trouble but helpless to comfort her, rose awkwardly to their feet and picked up their skates from the floor where they had thrown them.

Billie went over to the sobbing woman and patted her shyly on the shoulder.

“I – I wish I could help you,” she ventured. “I – we are dreadfully sorry for you.”

Then as the woman neither moved nor made an answer, Billie motioned to Laura and Vi and they stepped quietly from the room into the chill of the open, closing the door softly behind them.

CHAPTER IV – GENEROUS PLANS

The girls talked a great deal of Mrs. Haddon and her trouble as they put on their skates and slowly skated back to the Hall.

“It must be dreadful,” Laura was saying thoughtfully just as the three towers of the school loomed up before them, “not to have enough to eat. Just think of it, girls, to be hungry – and not have enough to eat!”

No wonder this condition of affairs seemed unusually horrible, in fact almost impossible to luxury-loving Laura, whose father was one of the richest and most influential men in rich and influential North Bend. To Laura it seemed incredible that every one should not have enough and to spare of the good things that, rightly used, go to make happiness in this strange old world. She had never known what it was to have a wish that was not gratified almost on the instant.

“Yes, it must be awful,” Billie answered soberly, in response to Laura’s exclamation. “And I’m sure,” she added decidedly, “that I won’t be able to enjoy another good meal until I know that those three poor little kiddies and Mrs. Haddon have had all they could possibly eat – for once, at least.”

“What do you mean?” they asked, wonderingly.

“We’ll pack a basket,” planned Billie, growing excited over the great idea which had just that minute occurred to her. “We’ll put everything in it that we can possibly think of, chicken sandwiches and a bottle of current jelly, a thermos bottle of hot coffee and another of milk for the children – ”

“Say wake up, wake up,” begged Laura, irreverently. “Where do you suppose we are going to get all this stuff anyway? It’s too late to go to town – ”

“Who said anything about going to town?” Billie interrupted impatiently. “I’m going straight to Miss Walters and tell her all about the Haddon family and ask her to let us raid the kitchen and make up the basket ourselves. We can pay for the things,” she added, as an afterthought.

“It’s a bright idea – but it takes nerve,” said Laura slangily. “Miss Walters may not like the idea of feeding the countryside.”

“I’m not asking her to feed the countryside,” Billie retorted, adding comfortably as a picture of Miss Walters, white-haired, blue-eyed and sweet, rose before her: “I’m sure she will let us do it just this once.”

For Miss Walters, strict though she was at maintaining discipline in the school, was nevertheless generosity and kindness itself to every one about her.

“But,” said Laura, uttering one last protest, “I don’t believe Mrs. Haddon would accept anything that looked like charity. She’s too proud.”

“We won’t take any chances on her being too proud to accept it,” said Billie decidedly, adding with a chuckle: “We’ll do the way the boys used to do on Hallowe’en, ring the bell and run.”

They had no other chance to talk, for in a minute they were surrounded by about a dozen of their classmates who all began scolding them at once about running away and demanded to know where they had been, so that plans for the Haddons were pushed temporarily into the background.

Laughing and shouting to each other the girls took off their skates and scrambled up the long terraced hill that led to Three Towers.

If the Hall and its surroundings were beautiful in the summer time, it was even more attractive in the winter. The ivy that covered the green-gray stone of the building was now frosted white with snow and ice, and this, catching the ruddy gleam of the afternoon sun, gave the Hall the appearance of a great, sparkling jewel.

The three towers which gave the school its name made the place seem like some castle of old, and the surrounding trees and shrubbery, heavily coated with snow and icicles, gave to the old building just the air of mystery that it needed.

The beauty of the familiar place struck Billie afresh, and she stopped short suddenly and gazed up at it with loving eyes.

“Isn’t it lovely to have a place like this to come home to?” she said, as the girls looked at her inquiringly, “when you are tired and cold and – ”

“Hungry,” finished Laura, giving her a shove. “Giddap, Billie, you’re slowing down the works.”

“Slang again,” sighed Vi, plaintively, as Billie obligingly “giddaped.” “If I should tell Miss Walters – ”

“You would never live to tell another tale,” prophesied Laura, amid a gale of laughter from the girls. “Two sneaks and tattletales are enough,” she added significantly, as she caught sight of Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks walking a little ahead of them.

“I wonder where Connie and Nellie have kept themselves,” said Billie, as she with the other girls crowded through the wide door of the Hall.

“They were up in the dorm, cramming for the exams when I saw them last,” said a tall girl at Billie’s elbow. She had evidently not been with the girls on the lake, for she wore no coat or hat and she carried a book under each arm as though she also had been studying.

“Oh, hello, Carol!” greeted Billie, putting an arm about the tall girl and sweeping her toward the stairs. “So you’ve been grinding away as usual when you ought to have been out getting some good fresh air. My, you look as pale as a ghost.”

For the tall girl, so studiously inclined, was none other than Caroline Brant, who had been such a good friend to Billie upon her arrival at Three Towers Hall the year before. The girls were all fond of Caroline, in spite of the undeniable fact that she was one of those usually despised students commonly known as “grinds.”

“You know I don’t skate,” Caroline said in response to Billie’s accusation. “And I never could see why people prefer freezing their toes and noses to staying comfortably indoors.”

“You’re an old lamb,” said Billie with a squeeze. “But there are lots of things that you never will see!”

As Caroline had predicted, the chums found Connie Danvers and Nellie Bane in the dormitory, curled up uncomfortably on the bed, heads bent disconsolately over two thick and bulky history books.

When the door burst open and the chums swung into the room, skates slung over shoulders, eyes bright and cheeks glowing from exercise, the two on the bed flung away their books and looked despairingly at the newcomers.

“Great heavens, here they are back already,” cried Connie, running her hands wildly through her fluffy hair. “And I haven’t learned more than five dates so I can say them straight.”

“And that’s just five more than I have learned,” cried Billie gayly, dropping her skates in a corner and flinging herself on the edge of the bed. “Come closer, girls,” she added, lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper while Nellie and Connie wriggled over to her. “I would whisper in thine ear. We have met with an adventure!”

CHAPTER V – BEARDING THE LION

The one word “adventure” was enough to make the girls all interest at once. Caroline Brant wedged herself into a square inch of space on the bed between Connie and the bedpost, and as Rose Belser came in at that moment the girls motioned her to join them.

“What’s up?” asked Rose, flinging off her cap and scarf as she came. “Billie been getting into mischief again? Or is it only trouble this time?”

“Trouble, I guess,” said Billie, and then she told them the astonishing tale of what had happened that afternoon. But instead of being interested as she had expected them to be, the girls actually seemed disappointed.

“Well, was that all you had to tell us?” asked Connie, when she had finished. “I’m surprised at you, Billie. I thought you had really done something exciting.”

“Yes,” added Rose, in her aggravating little drawl, as she rose to get ready for dinner, “it was awfully good of you to rescue those three annoying little brats and return them to their distracted mother and all that. But I don’t see anything dreadfully hair-raising about it.”

Rose read books that were too old for her and ran with girls who were too old for her and so she herself contrived to seem much older than she was. And sometimes Billie found this manner extremely irritating, in spite of the fact that she and Rose were friends – now.

“I suppose it doesn’t seem very exciting to you,” she said, as she pulled off her cap and unwound the muffler from about her neck. “But I presume you would be a little bit more interested if it was *you* who didn’t have enough to eat.”

“Don’t be mad at us, Billie,” Connie begged, patting Billie’s hand soothingly. “Of course we all feel sorry for the poor little kiddies and their mother and we want to help them all we can. But you can’t blame us for being disappointed when you said you had had an adventure.”

“I wonder if you would call it an adventure,” mused Billie, more to herself than to them, “if one of us should find that stolen invention and claim the twenty thousand dollars reward for it!”

Her classmates stopped what they were doing and stared at her.

“Wh – what did you say?” demanded Connie.

“You heard me,” said Billie, with a grin.

“But, Billie, you know that’s absurd,” said Rose, in her best drawl. “How could we possibly hope to find a thing that has been missing for a couple of years?”

“It may be absurd,” said Billie good-naturedly, pulling the ribbon from her curls and brushing them vigorously. “I think it sounds foolish myself. But while there’s life, there’s hope. Hand me that comb, will you, Vi?”

A few minutes later the big gong sounded through the halls, announcing gratefully to the hungry girls that dinner was ready. And now that the vinegary Misses Dill had gone, delight reigned supreme in the dining hall.

The girls had all they could possibly eat of good satisfying food and they were allowed to chatter as much as they would as long as they did not become too noisy.

But although they had chicken for dinner and cranberry sauce and creamed cauliflower, things all of which she especially liked, Billie enjoyed it less than any meal she had ever eaten.

Again and again before her eyes arose the reproachful images of the three little Haddons, undersized, undernourished, half-starved.

She could hardly wait until dessert had been served, and then, with a murmured word to Laura and Vi, she excused herself from the table and went in search of Miss Walters.

She found that lady in the act of drinking her after-dinner coffee in the privacy of her own little domain.

Miss Walters had a suite of three rooms all to herself: a bedroom, a dressing-room and a sitting-room, and all three of the rooms were fitted up in a manner that befitted a queen.

The sitting-room was done in mahogany and blue. An exquisite Persian rug of dull blue covered the floor and the rich mahogany furniture was all upholstered in blue velour. The curtain draperies were all of this same rich blue over cream-colored lace. In the center of the room was a huge mahogany library table upon which stood a handsome reading lamp with a blue silk shade.

Billie, who had never been in this sanctum before and who had seen Miss Walters only in her office, was amazed when, in reply to her timid knock, the principal invited her to enter.

For a moment she stood dumbly staring, while Miss Walters set down her cup and looked up with a smile. The smile changed to a look of surprise and then to annoyance as the principal saw who the intruder was.

"It must be something very important to bring you here at this hour, Beatrice," said Miss Walters, while poor Billie began to wish herself back in the security of dormitory C. She was too frightened to explain her presence, and yet she knew that Miss Walters expected an explanation. "What is it you wish?" asked the latter, impatiently.

"I – I'm sorry," said Billie at last, backing away toward the door. "I shouldn't have come – but I thought – that is, I thought it was important." She was half through the door by this time, and Miss Walters, her annoyance changing to amusement, took pity on her.

"What was important?" she asked, adding, as Billie still continued to back away: "Come in here, Billie Bradley, and shut that door. There's a draft in the hall."

Relieved at the use of the familiar name Billie, the girl obeyed, shutting the door softly, then turned imploringly to the teacher.

"Sit down," commanded the latter, pointing to one of the blue velour armchairs near by. "Now tell me the 'important thing' you came about while I finish my coffee."

Billie made poor work of her story at first, for she was still wondering how she had ever had the courage to approach Miss Walters in the privacy of her sanctum sanctorum, but as she went on she became less self-conscious and was encouraged by Miss Walters' unfeigned interest.

And when, at the end of the recital, Miss Walters reached over and patted her hand and told her she had been quite right in coming to her as she had, Billie was in the seventh heaven of delight.

"With poverty behind them, fortune and comfort ahead, and then again, desolation!" Miss Walters mused, talking more to herself than Billie. "How the human mind can stand up under the strain is a mystery to me. Poor, starving little mites and pitiful, noble mother, fighting for her young with the only weapons she has. Lucky mother to have come to the notice of a girl like you, Billie Bradley," she added, turning upon Billie so warm and bright a smile that the girl's heart swelled with pride and adoration.

"Then you will let us help the Haddons?" she asked breathlessly.

"More than that," smiled Miss Walters. "I will *help* you to help them. I think it is too late to follow out your plan of taking them something to-night." But she added as she saw Billie's bright face fall: "But we will pack a basket full to the brim with good things early to-morrow morning and you and Laura and Violet may take them to the cottage after breakfast. Only, you must walk around the lake. I could not take the chance of your skating after what happened this afternoon."

Billie stammered out some incoherent words of thanks, Miss Walters patted her cheek, and in another moment she found herself standing outside in the hall in a sort of happy daze.

A girl passed her, eyed her curiously, went on a few steps and then came back. It was Eliza Dilks.

"In Miss Walters' room at night," said the sneering voice that Billie knew only too well. "No wonder you get away with everything – teacher's pet."

Billie started to retort angrily, but knowing that silence was the very worst punishment one could inflict upon Eliza she merely shrugged her shoulders, turned up her straight little nose as far as it would go and walked off, leaving Eliza fuming helplessly.

When Billie reached the dormitory she found the girls waiting for her in an agitated group. There was not one of them who would have dared to approach Miss Walters after school hours unless it had been about a matter of life and death importance, and they had more than half expected that Billie would be carried back on a stretcher.

When they found out what had really happened they welcomed Billie as a hero should be welcomed. They lifted her on their shoulders and carried her round the dormitory, chanting school songs till a warning hiss from one of the girls near the door sent them scuttling. By the time Miss Arbuckle reached the dormitory, they were bent decorously over their text-books, seeking what knowledge they might discover!

Next morning, true to her word, Miss Walters herself superintended the packing of an immense basket with all the dainties at her command. There were chicken and roast beef sandwiches, half of a leg of lamb, two or three different kinds of jelly, some rice pudding left over from the night before, a big slab of cake, two quarts of fresh milk, and some beef tea made especially for the Haddons.

And the girls, feeling more important than they had ever felt before in their lives, marched off after breakfast, during school hours – Miss Walters having personally excused them from class – joyfully bent upon playing the good Samaritan.

“I never knew,” said Laura, as if she were making a great discovery, “that it could make you so happy to be kind to somebody else!”

CHAPTER VI – TROUBLE

It was the girls' intention at first to leave the hamper of good things before the Haddons' door so that Mrs. Haddon would have no chance of refusing the gift through pride.

But when they came to the little cottage after half an hour of steady walking, they found to their dismay that Fate had taken a hand and spoiled all their plans.

For Mrs. Haddon herself, a shawl over her head and looking even more worried and anxious than she had when they had seen her before, rounded the corner of the house and met them just as they reached the door.

For a moment the girls had a panicky impulse to drop the basket and run, but on second thought they decided that that would be just about the worst thing they could possibly do. And while they were trying to think up something to say, Mrs. Haddon took the whole situation entirely out of their hands.

At first she did not seem to recognize them, but the next instant her face lighted up with relief and she opened the door of the cottage, beckoning them to enter.

"Just stay here in the kitchen a minute where it's warm," she directed them in a strained tone, and before the girls had time to draw their breath she had disappeared from the room, leaving the classmates alone.

"Now we've gone and spilled the beans," whispered slangy Laura, eyeing the blameless hamper disapprovingly as she warmed her chilled hands before the stove. "I don't suppose she will touch a thing now, and after we went and walked all this way, and everything, too –"

"Sh-h," cautioned Billie, a hand to her lips. "She's coming back."

At that moment Mrs. Haddon did indeed come back into the kitchen. She closed the door very gently behind her and then came quickly toward the girls.

"Listen," she said breathlessly. "I don't know who sent you, just now. Maybe it was God." She caught her breath on the words and the girls regarded her wonderingly and a little fearfully. For goodness' sake! *what* was she talking about?

"Anyway, you've come," went on the woman, swiftly. "And if you want to, you can do me a great favor."

"What is it?" they asked together.

"Run for the nearest doctor, one of you – or all of you," said the woman, her words stumbling over one another in her agitation. "Peter, my little boy, is sick. If I don't have a doctor very soon, he may die."

"Oh, where is the nearest doctor?" asked Billie, breathlessly, her eyes big with sympathy. "Tell me and I'll go."

"Half a mile down the road!" said the woman. "Dr. Ramsey! In the big white house! These are his office hours. He should be at home. I just went to a neighbor's, but she was not at home and I could not go myself. Peter would have been alone –"

"I'll go, and I'll have him back here in half an hour," promised Billie, running to the door as she spoke. But Laura grabbed her skirt and held on to it.

"No, you stay here. I'll go," she said, thinking desperately of the food hamper and fearing that if Billie went for the doctor she would probably have to explain their mission.

"I'll go with you," volunteered Vi, with the same thought in mind, and before Billie could do more than blink, her two chums had flashed through the door, closing it with a sharp little click behind them. Then it opened again for an instant and Laura put her pretty head inside.

"You always could explain things so much better than the rest of us, Billie," she said, by way of excuse, it is to be supposed – and then the door closed again.

It was good for Billie at that moment that she had been blessed with a sense of humor. Otherwise, she might have been a little put out.

As it was, she took it as a joke on her and turned back resignedly to her task of telling why they had come to proud Polly Haddon.

The latter was pacing the floor anxiously. Then, as a little moan came from the next room, she flew to the patient, leaving Billie entirely alone.

The latter regarded the hamper uncertainly for a moment, then, with a sigh, she lifted it from the floor to the rickety kitchen table.

"I'll let her see all the good things first," she decided wisely, as she removed the cover from the basket, exposing to view its inviting contents. "Then maybe she'll be too busy looking at them to be angry."

So busy was she that she did not hear Mrs. Haddon reënter the room. Neither did she know that the latter was staring unbelievably over her shoulder till a slight exclamation of wonder made her start and whirl round suddenly.

"Where did you get all that?" asked the woman, her eyes still fixed on the contents of the basket. "And what is it for?"

"It's – it's for you – if you will take it, please," stammered Billie, in her surprise and confusion saying what came first to her mind. "We – we thought maybe – maybe the kiddies would like the beef tea and milk and – and – things – " she finished weakly, thinking resentfully that the girls, or one of them anyway, might have stayed and helped her out.

But after all, she need not have worried. For an instant the look that Billie had expected and dreaded flared into Polly Haddon's eyes – a look of outraged pride. But then the woman thought of the children – and she had no pride.

"You said you brought some beef tea?" she repeated, bending eagerly over the basket. "And milk?"

"Two quarts of milk," cried Billie, joyfully, the relief she felt singing in her voice. "And we made the beef tea fresh this morning. Why – why – what's the matter?"

For Polly Haddon's black eyes had filled with tears and she had turned away impatiently to hide them. Beneath the worn old shawl, her thin shoulders shook in an effort to suppress her hysterical sobs.

Then Billie ran to her and put her young arms around her and Polly Haddon, who had struggled so long and so bravely alone, clung to the girl hungrily while she fought for self-control.

"It's so long!" she said huskily, "so long since any one did anything for us – for my babies – " Her voice broke, and for a minute she just clung to Billie and let tears wash some of the bitterness from her heart. Then she straightened up suddenly, wiped the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief that Billie had slipped into her hand, and holding the girl off at arm's length regarded her intently.

"It seems," said the woman softly, while Billie looked up at her out of clear, grave eyes, "that when things get as bad as they can be the Lord sends somebody to help. This time he sent you. Hark! What's that?"

It was only the restless turning of a feverish little body in bed, but the mother was instantly alert.

"The beef tea!" she directed, and Billie quickly handed her one of the bottles. "He has had hardly any real nourishment since day before yesterday," Polly Haddon went on as she poured the liquid into one of the pans on the stove and sniffed of it hungrily. "Strong beef tea is just what the little fellow needs."

Billie wondered while she watched Mrs. Haddon with pitying eyes. No nourishment for almost two days! Why, if they had not come the children might have starved to death!

"Where are the two little girls?" she asked, remembering suddenly that she had seen no sign of them.

Mrs. Haddon said nothing for so long that Billie began to think she had not heard her question. Then the woman turned and faced the girl, holding a steaming cup of beef broth in her hand.

"I've kept them in bed, too," she said. "I was afraid they had caught cold, and then, too – one feels less hungry if one doesn't move about."

Then abruptly she turned and once more left the room. Billie would have followed, but the thought that perhaps Polly Haddon would not wish her to hold her back. The woman had accepted the food for her children's sake, because they were practically starving. But in spite of that she was very proud. Perhaps she would not wish to have Billie see the poverty-stricken bareness of the rooms beyond. So Billie stayed in the kitchen and waited.

Her eyes strayed nervously to an alarm clock that ticked away on a shelf over the sink. She wished the girls would come with the doctor. If little Peter was as sick as his mother thought he was, every minute might be precious. And besides that, they must get back to school.

Then she heard the girls' voices mingled with the gruff tones of a man – the doctor, of course – and her heart jumped with relief. The next moment the door was flung open and Laura and Vi came in, followed by an immense man who seemed to completely fill the narrow doorway. Then Polly Haddon appeared in the doorway between the two rooms, an empty cup in her hand. At sight of the doctor she set down the cup and motioned him eagerly into the other room.

The latter glanced curiously at Billie, flung his hat on the kitchen table in passing, and disappeared with Mrs. Haddon into the sick room.

"Just luck that we happened to catch the doctor on his way out," panted Laura, for the big man had hustled the girls back to the cottage on a run. "Say, Billie," she added, her eyes lighting on the opened hamper, "I see you did the trick. Any bones broken?"

"Tell us about it," begged Vi.

"I'll tell you on the way home," said Billie, her eye once more on the clock. "Miss Walters told us not to stay long, you know. We were to come right back."

"Gracious, look at the time!" cried Laura, in consternation, following Billie's eyes to the clock. "Miss Walters will think we have eloped."

"I wish we could wait and see what the doctor says," protested Vi, hanging back, and just then Billie raised a warning finger.

"Listen," she said.

The doctor had raised his voice for a moment and his words came clearly to the girls where they stood near the door.

"The boy is very sick, Mrs. Haddon," he said. "It will take good nursing to pull him through and plenty of nourishing food." He lowered his voice again and the rest of what he said was lost in a meaningless murmur.

In the kitchen the girls stared at each other.

"Plenty of nourishing food," whispered Billie. "Where is he going to get it?"

"I guess," said Laura, as she opened the door, "it is up to us!"

CHAPTER VII – SETTLING A SCORE

The girls walked back to school in a rather thoughtful frame of mind. They were sorry for poor Mrs. Haddon, and they were worried about little Peter.

“The sandwiches and milk and things that we brought this morning will last them a little while,” Billie said. “But I don’t suppose Miss Walters would want us to take them food every morning.”

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