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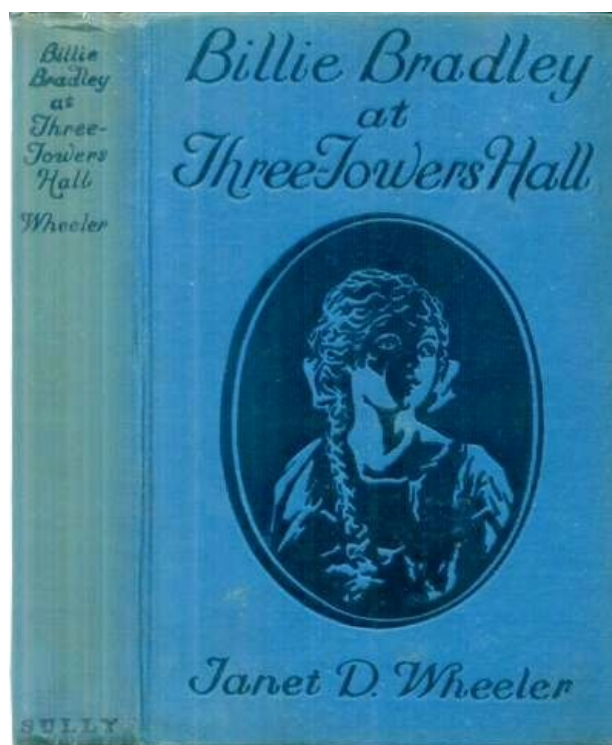
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**BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE TOWERS  
HALL**

**OR, LEADING A NEEDED REBELLION**

**BY JANET D. WHEELER**

**AUTHOR OF "BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE,"  
"BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND," ETC.**

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**The girls swept past them, and ran down the steps of the school.**

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# BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE TOWERS HALL

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## CHAPTER I

### ALMOST A FORTUNE

"Oh, Dad, I can't believe it's true!"

In the rather dim light of the gloomy old room the boys and girls looked queer—almost ghostly. They were gathered about a shabby old trunk, and beside this trunk a man was kneeling. As Billie Bradley spoke, the man, who was her father, rose to his feet and thoughtfully brushed the dust from his clothes. Then he stood looking down at the hundreds and hundreds of postage stamps and old coins that filled the queer old trunk.

"Is it really true, Dad?" Billie continued, shaking her father's arm impatiently while the other young folks looked eagerly up at him.

Mr. Bradley nodded slowly.

"Yes, you really have made a find this time, Billie," he said. "Of course I'm not an expert, but I'm sure the coins in that old trunk are worth three thousand dollars, and the postage stamps ought to bring at least two thousand more——"

"At least two thousand more!" broke in Chet Bradley, excitedly. "Does that mean that Billie may get more for the postage stamps?"

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Mr. Bradley, nodding his head. "However," he added, smiling round at the girls and boys, "you'd better not count on anything over five thousand."

"But five thousand dollars!" interrupted Laura Jordon, in an awed voice. "Just think of it, Billie! And because your Aunt Beatrice left you this house and everything in it, every last cent of that five thousand belongs to you."

"Yes," said Teddy Jordon, turning to Billie with a chuckle. "I suppose you won't look at any of us now you've got this money. How does it feel, Billie?"

"I—I don't know, yet," stammered Billie, still staring at the wonderful trunk. "You'll just have to give me time to get used to it, that's all."

As those readers who have read the first book of this series, entitled "Billie Bradley and Her Inheritance," will probably have gathered, the girls, Billie Bradley, Laura Jordon and Violet Farrington, and their boy relatives and chums, Chet Bradley, Ferd Stowing and Teddy Jordon, were still at the old homestead at Cherry Corners where so many weird and mysterious experiences had befallen them.

For the benefit of those who are meeting the girls and boys for the first time, what had happened up to the time of this story will be sketched over briefly.

The young folks had grown up in North Bend, a town of perhaps twenty thousand people, and about forty miles by rail from New York City. The girls had seen the great metropolis several times, though their visits had been all too short to satisfy their eager curiosity.

Billie Bradley was called the most popular girl in North Bend, and, indeed, after one had been with Billie five minutes, one would never again wonder where she got the title.

Whether it was her sparkling brown eyes with the imp of mischief always lurking in them, or her merry laugh that made every one want to laugh with her, or the adventurous spirit that made her eager to embark on any kind of lark, it would be hard to tell—perhaps her popularity arose from a combination of all of these. But the fact remains that everybody loved her and she had not an enemy, except, perhaps, Amanda Peabody—but more of *her* later!

Then there was Laura Jordon, Billie's best chum, blue-eyed and golden-haired, who, despite the fact that her father was very wealthy and owned the thriving jewelry factory in North Bend, was not the slightest bit spoiled or conceited. She adored Billie, and although the two would sometimes enter into rather heated discussions, it was usually Laura who gave in to Billie in the end.

The last of the trio, but decidedly not the least, was Violet Farrington, who, tall and dark and less hasty and impetuous than the other two, often found the doubtfully blessed office of peacemaker thrust upon her. And though her slowness and tendency to hang back sometimes exasperated her chums, they nevertheless were very fond of her—and showed it.

Chetwood Bradley, known as Chet to his friends, was Billie's brother—and very proud of it. He was a splendid, fine looking, rather thoughtful boy whom everybody liked.

Ferd Stowing was a comical, jolly, all-around good fellow, who, though he was not related to any of the girls, had been drawn into the group through his friendship for the boys, Chet and Teddy.

And—Teddy! Teddy, who was the handsomest and gayest of all the boys, had been Billie's friend and playmate ever since they could remember. Either of them would have felt lost without the friendship of the other. Teddy was Laura's brother and had starred in almost all the sports in which the lads of North Bend had taken part—a fact which did not make Billie like him any the less.

Just the summer before this story opens, Billie, going back with Violet and Laura to the grammar school from which they had just graduated, had, in a moment of thoughtless skylarking, broken a handsome and expensive statue that belonged to her English teacher—Miss Martha Beggs.

The accident was nothing short of a tragedy to Billie, for her father, Martin Bradley, a real estate and insurance agent in North Bend, having most of his capital tied up in property and being at the time engaged in fighting a rather losing fight with the high cost of living was in no position to pay a hundred dollars—which was what the statue was worth.

Billie's worry was deepened by the fact that she would not be able to go with Laura and Violet to Three Towers Hall, a boarding school to which she had wanted to go all her life. The high school in North Bend was notoriously poor and inefficient, and the girls had set their hearts on attending Three Towers in the fall. And now, because of the broken statue, Billie could not go.

Then had come news of Beatrice Powerson's death. Beatrice Powerson was an aunt of Billie's mother for whom Billie had been named. Then came the strange inheritance which the queer old lady, who had spent her life traveling, had left to Billie—the old homestead at Cherry Corners which dated back to revolutionary times and had been the scene of more than one Indian attack.

Readers of the first book of this series will remember how the girls and boys had decided to spend their vacation there, the many queer and spooky experiences they had had, and finally the shabby old trunk which Billie had found stowed away in a corner of the attic—a shabby old trunk that contained riches; at least, so it now seemed to the boys and girls. Five thousand dollars in the shape of old coins and postage stamps.

Billie had sent the wonderful news post-haste to her family, and Mr. Bradley had hurried out to the old house to see if Billie's discovery was really worth anything.

And now he had just given the result of his investigation to six pairs of ears. To be exact it had better be made seven, for Mrs. Maria Gilligan, Mrs. Jordon's housekeeper and the girls' chaperone on this expedition, was looking on with interest from the doorway.

Five thousand dollars, perhaps more. This almost certainly meant that not only could Billie go to Three Towers Hall, but Chet would be able to go with the other boys to a military academy which was only a little over a mile from Three Towers.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so glad you came!"

Billie squeezed her father's arm ecstatically.

"I'll say we are," said Ferd Stowing, staring down at the queer little trunk as though he already could see it full to the brim with shining new gold pieces from the mint instead of the old coins and rare postage stamps that were its present contents.

"How soon," he asked, turning to Mr. Bradley, "will you be able to get real money for these?"

"Probably almost as soon as we can get the trunk to North Bend," said Mr. Bradley. "The bank ——" But Billie would not let him finish.

"Oh, Daddy, let's hurry!" she cried; then as her chums stared at her in surprise she rushed over to the trunk and slammed the lid shut. "What are you waiting for?" she cried, stamping her foot impatiently as she turned to face them. "If *you* want to stand around looking foolish, all right. But *I'm* going home."

"Say! wait a minute," cried Teddy, stopping her as she started from the room. "Perhaps your father——"

"I was going to suggest," said Mr. Bradley, looking at his watch, "that we catch the eight o'clock train for North Bend. Is that at all possible, Mrs. Gilligan?" he asked, turning apologetically to Mrs. Gilligan.

However, before Mrs. Gilligan could reply, his daughter answered for her.

"Of course it is," she cried. "We girls were beginning to pack anyway. Come on, girls, what we need is action," and without giving them a chance to protest she fell upon the girls and dragged them from the room.

The boys looked after them with laughing eyes, and Mr. Bradley remarked with a smile: "My young daughter seems to be unusually happy about something."

"No wonder," said Chet, shaking his head ruefully. "I'd be happy, too, if anybody thought enough

of me to give me five thousand dollars."

The rest of that afternoon was one wild scramble for the girls and boys, but at the end they made their train with, as the train was late, a few minutes to spare.

The boy who had driven them and their luggage to town was the same who had taken the girls and their chaperone to the old homestead at Cherry Corners upon their arrival over a month before.

As he turned away and went back to his antiquated wagon, he shook his head soberly.

"Gosh," he said, "I do be sorry to see 'em go. When they first came it sure did turn my heart cold to see three girls an' a woman goin' into that there haunted house. At night it was, too! But it seems they've come out all right, after all. Guess they must 'a' scared the ghosts away. Well, you've sure got to hand it to 'em." And he shook his head sagely as the springs of the old wagon creaked under him. "Giddap, Napoleon!" And a few minutes later wagon and driver were enveloped in the gray mist of the evening.

"If we only get the train!" Such had been Billie's thought throughout the drive to the station. Her mind was on getting home and turning the precious old coins and postage stamps into real money. Then she could arrange about going to Three Towers Hall and about sending her brother to Boxton Military Academy.

Fortunately the train was only ten minutes late, and presently they were safely aboard and on the way to North Bend.

Half an hour passed. Boys and girls were chatting gaily, the others congratulating Billie over and over again on her good fortune.

"Just like a page out of the Arabian Nights——" Teddy was saying when his words were cut short most unexpectedly.

There was a jar and a crash, a shock and another crash, and then the lights in the car went out, leaving the passengers in darkness.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE WRECK

What followed was like a terrible nightmare. Shaken and jolted badly, but not seriously hurt, it took the girls a horrible minute or two to realize what had happened. There had been an accident—a terrible accident. Then hands went out in the blackness and the girls called to each other in strangled whispers that could not be heard above the din and uproar outside.

They heard Mr. Bradley shouting above the noise, asking if any one of them was hurt and reassuring them. Gradually they managed to grope their way to his side, guided by his voice, and with an agony of relief in his heart he gathered the three girls to him and heard the voices of Mrs. Gilligan and the boys at his elbow.

"Let's get out of this," he cried, and began feeling his way cautiously toward what had been the front of the car.

He soon found the aisle blocked by what appeared to be the wreck of the forward end of the car and was forced to turn back and feel his way toward the rear platform.

Fortunately the train had not been crowded. There had been only three or four passengers in that car besides themselves, and so there was little danger of being trampled in the dark.

Fearfully, holding on to one another, the girls followed Mr. Bradley and the boys, stepping gingerly over broken glass and other débris and shivering with fear and excitement.

"I wonder if anybody was hurt," Laura cried into Billie's ear.

"Oh, I hope not," said Billie, her voice almost lost in the uproar. "I guess it must have been the forward cars that caught the worst of it. We just escaped." She shuddered and clasped Laura's hand more tightly.

It seemed ages before they finally reached the platform of the car. However, even nightmares come to an end, and they were suddenly startled by having a red light flashed in their faces. And then a friendly Irish voice accosted them in unmistakable brogue.

"So it's here you are!" cried the voice, the speaker swinging the lantern high so as to get a good look at them. "And it's glad Oi am to be seein' ye. Be there any more in the car wid yez?"

"I don't think so," replied Mr. Bradley, surprised to find that his voice was trembling and that the hand he raised to wipe his forehead shook like a leaf. If it had been himself alone who had been in danger—but the young folks!

As they descended to the platform the girls looked about them with wide, frightened eyes, while

their hearts pounded suffocatingly.

The faces of the boys were white, but they plunged immediately into the work of rescue. Men came running from the farms about. All who could get lanterns had them, and the lights were seen swinging down the roadside or in the ruined cars, searching for any one who might be pinned under the wreckage.

Most of the passengers had already been accounted for, but there were one or two who must still be found. Mr. Bradley picked his way through the débris to the front of the train, while Mrs. Gilligan and the girls followed him slowly.

"I wonder how it happened," said Violet, and it was the first time she had spoken since the accident. "Oh, girls, I'm frightened to death!"

"I wonder if anybody was hurt," said Laura, her eyes dark with excitement.

"I don't think so," Billie answered. "The damage seems to be mostly at the front of the train. We may have run into another train. Oh, look!" she cried suddenly, pointing with trembling finger to the wreck of the car in front of them. "Fire, girls! The car's on fire!"

With horrified eyes the girls followed her pointing finger and saw a malignant tongue of flame shoot out—then another—and another.

"It's the baggage car!" screamed Laura, as men, attracted by the blaze, came running from all directions. "Billie, your trunk!"

"My trunk! my trunk!" wailed Billie distractedly. "Oh, it will be burnt up! All my money and everything!"

"Say, Chet, look! The baggage car's on fire!"

It was Teddy's voice, and Billie looked up to see him beside her staring unbelievably at the burning car.

"Oh, Teddy," she cried, clutching his arm desperately, "my trunk's burning up! Can't you do something—can't you?"

Teddy gave a low whistle and kept on staring while Chet and Ferd came rushing up and joined him.

"The trunk——" Chet began, but Teddy clutched his arm excitedly.

"Look!" he cried. "It's the front end of the car that's on fire. If we climbed through the side door we'd have a chance to——"

He never finished the sentence, for the boys had caught the idea and were racing headlong for the burning car. Mr. Bradley, meeting them half way, literally had to drag them back.

"Don't be idiots!" he shouted to them. "Do you want to get burned up?"

"Let go, Dad!" gasped Chet, struggling to free himself. "Billie's trunk!"

"Billie's trunk will have to take its chance," Mr. Bradley yelled back at him. Then he added in a changed voice that made the boys stop struggling for a moment and follow the direction of his gaze. "Here come the fire engines. Maybe we'll save that trunk after all."

With a yell the boys dashed off down the platform to meet the engines, whether with a vague idea of helping the horses pull or just on general principles, no one will ever know.

The fire department was a country one, and there was not enough force of water; in fact, there seemed not to be enough of anything.

They did at last succeed in putting out the fire, however, while the girls stood by in an agony of suspense, and finally some of the train hands were allowed to climb into the sodden train and find what luggage, if any, could be saved.

Wildly hoping that their own particular little trunk with its precious contents would be among the saved, the girls and boys would have followed, but a guard politely but firmly held them back.

"Claim your baggage at the next town, please," he said, and, his hard heart softened perhaps by the sight of Billie's anxious face, added by way of explanation: "All the baggage will be sent to the next town to be claimed in the morning."

"In the morning!" gasped Billie in consternation. "Have we got to wait all night?"

"There won't be another train through till to-morrow," the guard explained, still patiently. "And it will save confusion to wait until morning to identify the baggage."

"How far is it to the next town?" inquired Mr. Bradley, and the guard turned to him with an air of relief that said as plainly as words, "Thank heaven, here's a man to talk to."

"Three miles, sir," he said. "I reckon you'll have to walk it, as they haven't taxi service around here." He grinned, but Mr. Bradley's face was sober. He was wondering how he was going to get his charges to the next town.

However, even while he was wondering, the difficulty was being solved for him by some of the good-natured farmers who generously put their wagons at the disposal of the survivors of the wreck.

When they reached the village fate chose at last to smile upon them—a very little. They found a comfortable little cottage presided over by a comfortable little farmer's wife who first gave them supper and then led them to the best rooms in her house and tucked the girls in bed as if she had been their own mother.

Mrs. Jenkins, the farmer's wife, was as pretty and comely as a shining red apple—and just as neat. She said that her husband had gone to a neighboring town to sell some of their stock and would not be back for a week or two. She was so lonely that her guests were as welcome to her as she and her hospitality were welcome to them.

Yet in spite of comfortable beds and snowy sheets, the girls slept little. All night long they tossed and turned, and when occasionally, worn out, they would drop into an uncomfortable doze, they would always wake up with a start and a frightened cry.

Visions of crushed cars with flames shooting from the windows tormented them all night until at last, when it seemed they could stand it no longer, they opened their eyes upon the dawn.

"Oh, girls, it's morning!" cried Billie, jumping out of bed and beginning to drag her clothes on hastily.

"What are you going to do?" asked Violet, opening one sleepy eye.

"Do?" cried Billie, turning upon her like a little whirlwind. "What do you suppose I'm going to do? I'm going to find that trunk!"

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## CHAPTER III

### RECOVERED TREASURE

To her great surprise Billie found that not only her father but the boys were up and had for the past half hour been busily engaged in eating a breakfast prepared for them by the rosy and good-natured farmer's wife.

They greeted the unexpected apparition of Billie with enthusiasm, and their impromptu hostess turned cheerfully back to the frying pan to fry another egg for the new arrival.

"I bet I know why you got up," said Ferd, his mouth full of biscuit and jam. "Come on over, Billie, and after you've daintily pecked at some food we're all going to look for your trunk."

"But I'm not hungry," protested Billie, as Teddy dragged a chair up to the table for her. "Don't you think we'd better get started right away?"

"Not before you've had some breakfast," said her father, and so she hurriedly ate—it might be said "gobbled," if it were not so unladylike—the breakfast that Mrs. Jenkins placed before her.

If it had not been for the real cause of her excitement the boys might have found amusing her effort to gulp down her whole breakfast in the time one usually takes to drink a cup of coffee. As it was, they sympathized, and once when she choked and became painfully red in the face, Ferd gravely handed her a glass of water and Teddy gallantly offered to pat her on the back.

When, contrary to everybody's expectations, the meal came to an end without any further mishap, Billie crumpled her napkin into a ball and threw it on the table.

"I won't eat another bite for anybody," she said, adding, as she started for the hall: "I'll put on my hat and be right with you."

In the bedroom she found that Laura and Violet had turned over for a nap and she stood for half a minute looking down at them reflectively and a little scornfully.

"Go ahead—sleep," she said under her breath. "It isn't your five thousand dollars." This was hardly fair, seeing that that five thousand dollars meant almost as much to Laura and Violet as to Billie herself in the happiness it would bring.

With one last disgusted look she fled from the room and joined the boys and Mr. Bradley in the hall. Mrs. Jenkins had directed them to the station, and, anxious to waste no further time, they set off at once.

"Daddy, do you suppose we'll find it?" asked Billie, her breath coming fast. "There were a good many trunks destroyed in the baggage car, weren't there?"

"It was hard to tell the extent of the damage," said Mr. Bradley, anxious to reassure her, yet afraid to raise her hopes too high. "However," he said, quickening his step a little, "there's the station right before us, so we ought to find out before long."

Early as they were, there was already a line of people on the rickety station platform and Billie

was seized with a fresh spasm of dismay.

"Goodness! they couldn't possibly have saved trunks enough to go round," she cried, and Teddy, though he was feeling very anxious himself, laughed at her.

"There were two baggage cars, both loaded, you know," he reminded her. "And one of them wasn't touched by the fire. We'll hope yours was in that one."

"Oh, Teddy, you're such a comfort!" she cried, and squeezed his arm gratefully, at which Teddy flushed happily.

"Have we got to stand in line?" Billie whispered nervously to her father a minute later. "I know I can't stand still and behave myself, Daddy. Couldn't we go up and have a look around?"

"That wouldn't do any good," said her father, glancing at the piled-up baggage. "It would only make more confusion. And still——" He thought for a moment and then suddenly he strode off down the station and toward the guard who had been friendly the night before.

Billie could hear nothing, but she saw enough to make her heart beat faster. Mr. Bradley whispered a few words to the man who was at first inclined to be impatient and made a quick gesture as if to wave Mr. Bradley back to his place in the line.

However, Billie could see that whatever her father was saying was making an impression, for suddenly the guard straightened up and began to look interested.

"I wonder what Dad's handing him," said Chet slangily in her ear.

"Look!" cried Billie, clutching his arm. "They're going to look for something—probably our trunk. No, they're not. Look how excited he is! And Daddy, too! Oh, Chet, what in the world——" the last words were a wail, and Chet squeezed her hand warningly.

"Come on, let's find out," he said. "It looks as if something was up."

The four young people came within earshot just in time to hear the last part of Mr. Bradley's sentence.

"If it was only a few minutes ago, he hasn't had time to get far," her father was saying with a grim light in his eyes.

Billie could stand the suspense no longer, and she rushed forward, grasping her father's arm. The earnest conversation between the guard and Mr. Bradley and their evident excitement had already attracted the attention of the line of people, and now they watched Billie curiously.

"Daddy, what do you mean?" Billie cried in a voice tense with excitement. "Is the trunk safe? Have you found it?"

"Yes. But only to lose it again," said her father, and then went on hurriedly to explain. "The guard says he saw a trunk here only a little while ago that answers our description, but now it's gone. He remembers seeing a suspicious looking man hanging around, and it's barely possible that the man may have stolen it. He also remembers seeing this fellow drive off in a Ford car just a few minutes ago."

"O-oh!" cried Billie incredulously. "The trunk has been stolen!" Then she whirled around and faced the guard. "Are you sure it was our trunk? Could you describe it?"

"Yes," the guard answered, excited himself by this time. "I took special notice of it because it was so odd and shabby."

"That trunk was worth five thousand dollars!" wailed Billie, thereby causing another ripple of surprise among the onlookers. Then she turned pleadingly to her father.

"Daddy, we must find the trunk, we must!" she cried. "Just think what it means." She was on the verge of tears, and her father came suddenly to a decision. He turned quickly to the guard.

"Is it possible to get a machine around here—a fast one?" he asked.

"I don't know. But here's the man who keeps the livery stable."

Suddenly a well-dressed man, who had been watching the proceedings with lively interest, stepped forward and addressed Mr. Bradley courteously.

"I have my car here," he said, adding with a smile of pride: "And she's guaranteed to overtake anything that runs on four wheels. She's at your disposal, if you can run her. My man went on an errand."

"That's kind of you, sir," cried Mr. Bradley heartily. "If you will show me——"

"I'll say so," said the stranger boyishly, and led the way around the station to a car which, even in this minute of excitement, the boys eyed delightedly.

"I'll drive," announced Teddy; and before any one could have interfered if they had wanted to, he had jumped into the driver's seat and had thrown in the clutch. Teddy was young, but he knew all about cars.

Mr. Bradley took the seat beside him and the two boys and Billie scrambled into the tonneau. Mr.



Bradley motioned to the owner of the car.

"Will you come?" he asked, but the man shook his head.

"No, thanks," he answered, "I'd rather stay here and watch for some other missing baggage. Good luck!" and he waved to them as the big car glided forward under Teddy's touch and shot around a turn in the road.

The wind roared in Billie's ears and whipped little strands of hair across her eyes, but she pushed them back impatiently and fixed her eyes upon the flying ribbon of road ahead.

"Faster, Teddy, faster!" she kept urging until even that young scatterbrain began to wonder at her.

"Can't be done, Billie!" he yelled back finally. "We're going about sixty now, and if we meet anything on the road, we'll have a smash-up."

"Be careful, Teddy," cautioned Mr. Bradley. "We don't want an accident."

"Oh, but we've got to catch that thief!" wailed Billie, hoping each time they rounded a bend in the road to see their quarry just ahead. "He may have got too much of a start——"

"Don't worry," Teddy shouted back. "No start will help a flivver against a car like this. Say, but she's a beauty! Just listen to that engine!" But Billie was in no mood to listen to anything except the jingle of queer old coins in a shabby old trunk. Then suddenly there came a yell from Teddy and an exclamation from Mr. Bradley.

"There he is!" cried Teddy, leaning down over the wheel as though he would force even more speed out of the flying car. "See him, Billie? Didn't I tell you a flivver didn't have a chance?"

Even as Teddy spoke, the man in the machine ahead of them looked back. Then abruptly, and to the great surprise of Billie and the boys, he stopped his car and began groping wildly in the bottom of it for something.

Then, while every second brought them nearer, the man did an astonishing thing. He lifted a small object, which Billie excitedly recognized as the trunk, and with an effort succeeded in getting it over the side of the car.

Then he dropped it in the road and turned for a swift moment to look at his pursuers before he started his car again. It was only a moment, but those in the car behind were near enough to get a good look at his face.

It was a repulsive face topped with a mass of vivid red hair. But what the boys and Billie most noticed was his unusually wide, loose-lipped mouth.

So busy was Teddy in looking at the thief that, if it had not been for Billie, he would surely have run over the precious trunk in the road.

She stood up waving her arms excitedly.

"Teddy, look out! If you run over my trunk——" and Teddy swerved so suddenly that she was nearly thrown from the car. However, Chet caught her and put her safely back in the seat; and in another minute Teddy had brought the big car to a sliding standstill.

They tumbled to the roadside, and Billie, rushing over to the trunk, sank to her knees regardless of three inches of dust in the road, and encircled the shabby old thing with her arms.

And Teddy, watching her, said with a grin:

"Gosh! who wouldn't be a trunk?"

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## CHAPTER IV

### THE "CODFISH"

A few minutes later a very exultant crowd of young folks were starting back over the road they had just traveled so fast.

In the bottom of the tonneau,—Billie and the two boys were using it as a foot rest,—was safely stowed the shabby, but, oh! so precious old trunk, and on Billie's face was the "smile that wouldn't come off;" or at least that is what Ferd called it.

Teddy was the only member of the party who was not fully satisfied with the expedition.

"We should have followed and caught the thief," he was saying for the eleventh time—Billie had counted them. "It would have been like taking candy from a kid to have caught up with his old flivver, and then we could have landed him in jail, where he belongs."

"But we wouldn't have time, Teddy," Billie reminded him. "You know the train guard said there would be a train through about eleven o'clock. And we can't miss it. Besides," and she shifted her

feet happily on her five thousand dollar footstool, "what do we care about that old man now that we've got the trunk?"

"Isn't that just like a girl," cried Teddy, almost running them into a ditch in his indignation. "I suppose you would be willing to let all the thieves in the world go free if you could only get back what they stole."

"I certainly would if we had a train to catch," agreed Billie, and Ferd chuckled.

"Good for you, Billie!" he cried approvingly. "Stick to your guns. I don't see any use of following up that old chap now that we've got the goods."

"He wasn't very handsome, was he?" asked Billie, remembering that one glimpse she had had of him.

"Maybe that's why you didn't want to follow him," chuckled Ferd, and Teddy scowled blackly at the wind shield.

"But wasn't he ugly?" Billie persisted. "I don't think I ever saw such red hair. And his mouth—ugh!" She paused reflectively.

"Yes, it looked just like the mouth of a codfish," said Chet.

"The poor fish," remarked Ferd jocularly, but he it said to their credit that no one laughed at this feeble attempt at a joke. They only stared.

As the car swept into the village again Billie had a sudden and rather conscience-stricken memory of her chums. For the first time in her life she had forgotten them completely. But then one doesn't lose five thousand dollars and recover it every day!

As the car stopped at the station it was surrounded by an eager crowd of people, among whom was the owner of the car. But for his generosity they would never have been able to recover the trunk.

"Did you get it?"

"Did you bring back the thief?"

"Say, you must have done some speeding!"

These and other like remarks greeted the adventurers as they climbed from the car, and under cover of the confusion Billie made her escape.

Teddy, looking around for her a moment later, missed her and started in pursuit.

"You're always running away," he protested plaintively, when he overtook her just a little way from the cottage, the owner of which had shown them such generous hospitality.

Billie wrinkled up her nose in surprise.

"Running away?" she repeated wonderingly. "Why, Teddy, sometimes I almost think you're foolish."

"That's what Mother says, only she's sure of it," said Teddy, with a wry little grimace that made Billie laugh.

"Well, she ought to know better than I," she said demurely. "She's known you longer."

"Not very much," Teddy retorted, opening the gate of the little picket fence for her. "And, anyway, you haven't answered my question. What did you run away for?"

"I didn't run away. I escaped," she explained, making a face at the memory of the crowd. "I wonder what makes people so curious. I do believe all a person would have to do to collect a crowd would be to stand on a soap box and say, 'Isn't this beautiful weather?'"

"You bet. Especially if that person were you," said Teddy, and Billie looked at him reproachfully.

As the two entered the hall they met the girls just coming down stairs.

They all went to the kitchen, where they found Mrs. Jenkins just finishing a batch of golden brown crullers. She greeted the girls with a beaming smile and insisted that Laura and Violet sit down while she got them some breakfast.

"Why, you must be nearly starved," she said.

The girls protested that they were making her too much trouble, but she gave them a cruller—"to stop their mouths," she said—and then set cheerily to work to fry some more bacon and eggs, putting in a word now and then and listening with a smile to the girls' merry chatter.

"You mustn't scold me when you're hungry," Billie said, and the gladness in her voice made the girls look at her eagerly. "No, I'm not going to tell you a word," she said firmly as they started to ply her with questions. "Not till you've had some breakfast, anyway. Eat, pretty creatures, eat."

Billie looked up at pretty Mrs. Jenkins and invitingly patted the empty chair beside her.

"Sit down here, please," she coaxed. "I want you to hear this too."

"Now tell us," Laura commanded impatiently. "Why did you leave us asleep and go out? And, oh, Billie! have you found your trunk?"

So Billie told the story while the girls listened open-eyed and open-mouthed, completely forgetting their breakfast, which lay untouched before them.

Mrs. Jenkins seemed almost as excited as they did, and leaned over the table, one hand clutching the bread knife, while her rosy face fairly beamed. Here was adventure such as rarely came to the village.

Billie had just come to the part where the thief dropped the trunk in the road when Mr. Bradley and the two other boys burst in upon them with the news that the train was due in about fifteen minutes.

Laura and Violet left their almost untouched breakfast, mumbled an excuse to Mrs. Jenkins, and rushed with Billie up to the bedroom they had occupied the night before to gather up their things and put on their hats and coats.

"Laura, you have my comb," said Violet accusingly, as Laura was stuffing that article hastily into her hand bag.

"Well, take your old comb," replied Laura, throwing it over to her. "It isn't as good as mine, anyway. It has a tooth out."

"Somebody will have more than one tooth out if she doesn't hurry," threatened Billie. "Girls, we mustn't lose that train. Listen! There's the whistle."

Thereupon the girls forgot to quarrel and combined forces for a rush to the train.

They rushed down the stairs, falling over their suitcases and each other, and found Mrs. Jenkins waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs.

Mr. Bradley had insisted upon paying her for her hospitality, but she had stubbornly refused to take a cent.

"No, sir," she had said, shaking her head decidedly. "Do you think I'm going to let you pay me for having a good time? I love the girls and boys, bless 'em, and I hate to see 'em go. Pay me—well, I guess not!"

So Mr. Bradley had shaken her hand and thanked her heartily, which was the best that he could do.

And now the girls even risked missing the train to give her the only kind of pay she wanted. Billie dropped her bag and impulsively threw her arms about the comely woman.

"You've just been sweet to us," she said, "and we'll never, never, *never* forget how kind you've been. I—I'd like to kiss you, if you don't mind."

Shyly she kissed Mrs. Jenkins' rosy cheek, and Violet and Laura followed suit. The boys and Mr. Bradley shook hands with her heartily, and then they picked up their belongings and fairly ran down the steps and out at the little white gate.

They turned to wave to Mrs. Jenkins, and she waved back at them until they disappeared around the corner; and when she started to go into the house she was surprised to find that there were tears in her eyes.

"The precious lambs," she said. "The precious little lambs! They kissed me, too, bless 'em!" and she put her hand up gently to her face.

Meanwhile the train that was to carry the North Bend party back home had thundered into the station, and all the passengers who had been stranded in the place overnight were crowding on board.

As Billie was being hurried up the steps, she suddenly paused and looked back at her father.

"Where's the trunk?" she asked nervously.

"In the baggage car," Mr. Bradley assured her. "We'll get it safely to North Bend—unless we have another wreck."

As soon as he had made the speech he regretted it. Billie's face went white and Laura and Violet looked back at him with startled eyes, then went on more slowly into the car.

The luggage had been stowed away in the racks overhead and the girls were removing their hats when the train moved slowly from the station.

"You know, I'm terribly afraid," Violet confided in a whisper to Billie. "I—I won't feel safe for a minute until we reach North Bend."

Billie looked a little uncertain herself, but suddenly there floated across her vision a shabby, odd, little trunk, filled to the brim with old coins and postage stamps. Then she laughed.

"After this morning," she said, "I'm not afraid of anything. The luck's all on our side!"

## CHAPTER V

### AMANDA'S SURPRISE

Billie was right about their luck, for they reached home without further mishap. And it was with great relief the boys and girls later saw the precious trunk safely deposited in Billie's attic.

The next few days were mostly spent in telling wondering and interested home folks about the ghostly happenings at the old homestead that was Billie's inheritance and in recounting in detail the circumstances that led to the discovery of the treasure trunk.

And then one night Mr. Bradley came home with the wonderful news that he had sold most of the contents of the old trunk and had realized four thousand three hundred and fifty dollars—and every cent for Billie!

"Did you sell them all, Dad?" Billie inquired, her eyes shining.

"No, I kept out a few coins and stamps that were especially rare and I'll take them to another dealer. I think," and he looked at Billie thoughtfully, "they ought to bring in quite a little pile more."

"Oh, Daddy, it's like a fairy tale!" Billie cried, and then added, edging around to where her father stood and looking up at him appealingly: "You and Mother haven't really said it, Dad, but Chet and I will be able to go to boarding school, won't we?"

"I should think so—on four thousand dollars," her father answered dryly, and so Billie's cup of happiness was filled to the brim.

But Billie, young as she was, was beginning to learn that no matter how perfect a thing seems, there is almost sure to be a fly in the ointment somewhere; and it was not long before she discovered the fly in the present case.

It was one beautiful bright day, the kind that only early autumn knows, and the chums were walking down the main street of North Bend eagerly discussing plans and talking of the fun they would have at Three Towers Hall when suddenly Billie espied Miss Beggs, the English teacher whose statue she had broken, coming out of a drug store.

With a great wave of happiness that now she could pay for the statue, or at least replace the one she had broken, she hurried forward and spoke to the English teacher as she was about to enter another store.

"Why, how-do-you-do!" cried the latter, evidently surprised and very much pleased at the meeting. "I didn't know you were back yet."

"We left Cherry Corners on Monday," Billie replied, then added eagerly as Laura and Violet came hurrying up: "I'd like to tell you what happened to us there; that is, if you have time enough."

"Indeed I have," replied Miss Beggs heartily, and after she had greeted the other girls they all walked down the street together while Billie launched into the wonderful tale of her good fortune.

"Over four thousand dollars!" cried the teacher when Billie stopped for lack of breath. "Why, Billie, isn't that marvelous? It sounds like a story. What," she added, smiling down into the eager face, "do you intend to do with all that wealth?"

"Buy a statue for you, first of all," said Billie promptly, and Miss Beggs flushed.

"I had forgotten all about that statue," she said. "I told you it had already been broken, anyway."

"I know you did. But since you had mended it so it looked all right, it was almost as good as new, wasn't it? You mustn't say 'no,'" she added quickly, as she saw Miss Beggs was about to interrupt, "for it won't do the slightest bit of good. I'm not going to buy anything for myself till I replace that statue."

Miss Beggs gave a little helpless shrug of her shoulders.

"I can see that nobody has a chance to change your mind, Billie Bradley, when it's once made up," she said with a smile, then added as the girls turned toward home: "I know what I shall name my new statue. Her name shall be 'Billie.'"

"She's lovely, isn't she?" asked Violet, referring to Miss Beggs. "I wish she were going to be one of the instructors at Three Towers."

"I hope they're nice, for it's awful to live with people who aren't," sighed Laura.

"Well, we won't know very much about them till we get there."

"And then it may be too late," put in Violet dolefully.

"But Daddy says," Billie went on, "that Miss Walters, the head of the school, is just splendid."

"Well, that ought to help some," said Laura, adding with a quick change of tone that made the girls look up suddenly: "There's Amanda Peabody. Can't we hide or something?"

"I don't see where, and, besides, she won't bite you," said Billie.

Amanda Peabody was probably the most unpopular girl in North Bend. The girls disliked her as real girls always dislike a sneak and tattle-tale. Amanda was always spying around, minding everybody's business but her own, and making a general nuisance of herself.

And because Billie was so popular, Amanda seemed to have an especial grudge against her and was always trying to get her into trouble.

As Amanda came toward them on this beautiful afternoon she seemed more unpleasant than usual and there was a mean little smile at the corners of her thin-lipped mouth.

"Hello!" she accosted the girls, then turned to Billie with a more pronounced grin. "I've heard all about the money you found in that awful old house. You must feel like a regular Captain Kidd, don't you?"

"Since I never was sure how Captain Kidd felt, I don't know," said Billie coolly, although she could feel the blood slowly mounting into her face. Oh, if she could only do what she wanted to, Amanda Peabody wouldn't be smiling very long!

The girls made as if to go on, but with characteristic ill breeding, Amanda planted herself directly in front of Billie, still with that maddening grin on her face.

"I suppose now you'll be going to Three Towers Hall and your brother to Boxtton Academy."

Billie did not say anything—she just looked. But that look must have been enough, for suddenly with a flirt of her dress and a toss of her head and an insolent look Amanda flung past them.

"Just the same you needn't think you're the only pebble on the beach," she called back. "I'm going to Three Towers, too."

For a minute the chums could not believe their ears. Then they looked at each other with horror written on their faces.

"Did you hear what I heard?" gasped Billie, when she could find her voice.

"Yes, I heard," said Laura faintly. "Girls, do you think she could have been telling the truth?"

"I don't see why she should want to fib about it," said Vi, feeling rather bewildered. "She'd know we would soon find it out."

"Oh, but it's too awful!" burst out Billie suddenly. "Why, girls, it's apt to spoil our whole year! Just think of having that sneak around, prying into all our affairs and reporting every little thing we do."

"I guess the only way out of that is not to do anything she can report," said Violet ruefully, and Laura caught her up quickly.

"There you go taking all the fun out of it before we start," she said, and in spite of their consternation the girls had to laugh.

"Why, you actually sound as if you intended to break the rules," said Billie, drolly adding, with a prim little pucker of her mouth: "Laura, I'm surprised at you."

"Listen to the good little girl talking," giped Laura. "I never knew you to get into any mischief, Billie,—oh, no!"

"Well, I won't quarrel with you about it," said Billie, calmly adding with a little chuckle: "If we try to have any midnight feast at Three Towers with sweet Amanda wandering round loose we will have to appoint a guard to stand outside the door and warn us."

"I suppose that will be my job," said Violet plaintively. "It will be lots of fun standing out in a drafty hall looking for Amanda while you girls are having a feast."

"No, we'll fix it so it will be perfectly fair," said Billie soothingly. "We'll draw lots or something."

"But I don't know what good a guard would do anyway," said Laura dolefully. "There's something creepy about the way Amanda finds out things. You think she's miles away and the next day she tells you more about what you did than you know yourself."

"Maybe she has an accomplice," said Billie dramatically, and the girls giggled.

"Anybody'd think Amanda was a criminal or something," said Laura, but Billie shook her head decidedly.

"Uh-uh," she said. "I might like a good honest criminal but I'll be jiggered—scuse me, ladies—if I can like Amanda Peabody! She's too sly!"

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## CHAPTER VI

### OFF FOR THREE TOWERS HALL

It was just two weeks to the time when the girls were to leave for Three Towers Hall.

It seemed to them they would never get done all the things that they had to do, and they sewed and packed and planned until it seemed they must stop because of sheer exhaustion.

However, their parents sent them to bed early—and not without difficulty was this feat accomplished—on the night before the great day, and the morning found them refreshed and wildly eager for this new adventure.

As, in her own little room, Billie regarded her flushed reflection in the mirror it seemed impossible to make herself realize that she was really going to Three Towers Hall at last—Three Towers which had been the height of her ambition from the time she had entered the grammar school.

She was beginning to feel quite grown up—which was perhaps the reason she regarded her new and very pretty brown hat with a critical eye and smoothed down her new and very pretty brown dress with hands that trembled with excitement.

"Well, I think I'm all ready now," she said at last, and gave a little, half-frightened glance around the familiar room. She wondered how it would seem to sleep in a strange place with no mother or father near by.

Then she shook herself impatiently and picked up her bag—for was she not grown-up now?

However, she did not feel very grown-up when a moment later she met her mother in the hall and saw traces of tears on her face. For Mother had no new scenes to go to and the departure of her two noisy children would leave the house strangely quiet and subdued.

Billie flung herself upon her mother and hugged her tight.

"Mumsey, you've been crying!" she said to her accusingly. "And you know you mustn't."

Then to her great surprise she felt a peculiar lump in her own throat, and two tears forced themselves to her eyes.

She had never dreamt of crying, and for the first time she realized that leaving one's mother—even for Three Towers—was not easy, after all!

But it was Mrs. Bradley who came to the rescue and prevented a break down by asking:

"Isn't that Laura coming down the street? And the boy with her must be Teddy."

With a quick movement, Billie brushed her hand across her eyes, kissed her mother hard, and straightened the new brown hat.

"You're coming to the station, M—mother?" she asked, and Mrs. Bradley nodded.

After that Chet came in, wrestled with the same troublesome lump in his throat, told his mother, "Not to worry, Mumsey, he'd write every day, and she mustn't forget to write for he was going to miss her awfully," and then Mr. Bradley joined them and they all started for the station.

Mr. and Mrs. Jordon were with Teddy and Laura. Teddy said that Ferd was on his way, but had told them not to wait for him, he'd catch up to them later.

A little farther on they picked up Violet and Mr. and Mrs. Farrington, and after that there was no more time to think of being homesick.

There was something in the sunshine, the crisp air, the brilliant, changing colors of the leaves on the trees that went to Billie's head and made her feel as though she were walking on air.

"Do you suppose Ferd will catch up to us?" she asked of Teddy. Teddy was looking unusually handsome this morning—at least so Billie thought—and she was surprised to find that he was walking beside her. "It would be awful if he made us miss the train."

"You don't think we'd *wait* for him do you?" asked Teddy scornfully. "If Ferd's late he'll be the only one to miss the train!"

Both Teddy and Billie had always agreed that if you talked of an angel he or she was sure to turn up, and in this case their faith was justified.

For just as they reached the station platform a figure that looked very familiar turned the corner and came rushing down toward them as if bent on running a Marathon.

"There's Ferd—and here's the train," announced Teddy, as a shrill whistle made them jump and look eagerly down the track. "Not much time to waste at that."

The young folks were so taken up in the leave taking that they failed to notice two girls who got on the train just after them. Even if they had not been able to see the faces of these newcomers, an overheard sentence or two would have given them the clue to their identity.

"Isn't it just like them, the stuck up things," one of the girls said to the other, "to bring all their relations to see them off?"

"Never mind," said the other with a malicious grin. "I guess I gave them rather a jolt the other day when I told them I was going to Three Towers too. I guess they thought they owned the place and ought to have it all to themselves."

However, the boys and girls were perfectly unaware of this conversation concerning themselves; although it probably would not have bothered them very greatly if they had heard it.

They were still leaning out of the window, calling to those left on the platform and answering injunctions "not to get killed" from their mothers and to "please be careful and not get into any more scrapes than they could help" from their fathers, when the guard shouted a warning and the train started off.

They waved until the station and the people on it were out of sight, then settled back in their seats "to view the prospect o'er," Chet said.

For a moment they all felt a little lost and queer, though nothing in the world could have made them confess to the feeling. But the little wave of homesickness soon passed off, swallowed up by the vision of the amazing adventure ahead of them.

Before the little party had stowed away their baggage and taken off their wraps, several boys and girls they had known at school came over to greet them and talk things over, and Billie, leaning over to rescue a box of chocolates that had fallen at her feet, suddenly looked up and right into the beaming face of Nellie Bane.

Nellie was a friend of the chums who had rather expected to go to Three Towers Hall with them at first. But Mr. and Mrs. Bane had suddenly decided to go to Europe and take Nellie with them, which had rather upset Nellie's plans. And now here she was on the train with them.

"Why, Nellie!" Billie cried, almost dropping the chocolates again in her surprise and delight. "How did you get here——"

"Through the window," mocked Nellie, and dropped into a vacant seat beside Laura.

"But," stammered the latter, her eyes round and wide with wonder, "the last we heard of you you were going to England."

"Yes. But an aunt of Daddy's died and he decided we'd better postpone the voyage until next summer."

"Are you glad or sorry?" demanded Billie breathlessly.

"Glad," said Nellie without a moment's hesitation. "I want to go to Europe, of course. But I can go there any old time, and I was simply wild to go to Three Towers with you girls. You'll never know how jealous I was," she ended with a sigh.

"Isn't it funny?" marveled Violet. "And here we were envying you!"

They laughed, and thereupon entered into a spirited conversation that lasted until Ferd interrupted to inquire what they were keeping the chocolates to themselves for, anyway. Did they think they had a corner on the chocolate market? To this Billie answered by holding out the whole box, showing that they had been too busy talking even to open it.

This interruption led to others, however, and they found that nearly the whole car was occupied by girls and boys from North Bend who were going to Three Towers or the Boxton Military Academy.

At last, wearied with excitement and visiting, Billie sank into her own seat. A moment later Teddy came and sat down beside her.

"I see we have your friend with us," he said, handing over the candy box.

"My friend?" repeated Billie, bewildered.

"Amanda Peabody," he explained. "She is sitting with another girl who looks as if she might be a second edition of Amanda. There! Away at the end of the car! You surely missed a lot by not seeing them."

"Another girl," Billie repeated, looking worried. "Then there are two of them."

"Yes. But don't let it hurt your appetite. Have some more candy."

"Do you know her name—the other one?" asked Billie, ignoring the offered candy box.

"No, I didn't stop long enough to inquire. In fact," he chuckled and bit into a chocolate, "I gave them one look and beat it."

Billie dimpled, but the next moment her face was grave again.

"That's all right for you," she said. "But what would you do if you couldn't 'beat it'?"

It was Teddy's turn to be puzzled.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Only," said Billie, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that Amanda and most likely that other girl, whoever she is, are both going to Three Towers Hall with us."

Teddy emitted a long whistle and looked sympathetic.

"Say, I'm sorry. That's tough luck."

"It's worse than that," wailed Billie. "It's—it's ruinous! I just know that Amanda Peabody will do her best to spoil the term for us girls!"

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## CHAPTER VII

### MISS WALTERS

In spite of their eagerness to reach their destination, the ride seemed all too short to the boys and girls. They started when the guard called out, "Molata, next stop!"

Hardly knowing what she was doing, Billie found her hat and coat, put them on, and then sat on the very edge of her seat with her gladstone bag grasped tightly in one hand. Then she looked around at Laura who was sitting in the seat beside her.

It was then she got her surprise. For Laura was sitting in almost the same position as herself, perched on the edge of the seat, bag tightly gripped in one hand, pocketbook in the other and—this was the fact that made Billie chuckle—Laura's hat was very much over one eye.

Laura looked up at the sound of the chuckle and giggled as her eyes met Billie's.

"I'm so excited," she whispered in Billie's ear, "that my knees are trembling. I'm afraid I'll never be able to walk out."

"Well, you needn't expect me to carry you," said Billie, reaching up and putting Laura's hat on straight. "Because I'm going to have all I can do to manage myself. Goodness, what's that?"

It was merely the train stopping, but by the tone of Billie's voice one might have thought it was the end of the world.

"Say, are you girls all ready?" asked Ferd, leaning over the back of their seats.

The girls nodded nervously.

"Well, then let's go," Teddy chimed in, grabbing his suitcase and cap. "Come on, pick up your hats, girls, and don't forget your feet."

"Oh, isn't he funny?" giped Laura making a face at him. Then she grabbed wildly at her bag as one of the excited girls seemed bent upon carrying it off with her. "Say, come back with that," she cried. "Isn't one enough for you?"

However, they did succeed at last in getting themselves safely on the station platform. It was a pretty station, and this being their first glimpse of the place where they were going to spend so much time, they looked about them with interest.

Molata was the nearest town to Three Towers Hall and Boxtton Military Academy. Both of these schools were situated on Lake Molata, for which the town had been named. Most of the inhabitants of Molata were wealthy, and the estates in and about the town were magnificent. There was also a large hotel, filled during the summer season.

Even the station was in keeping with the general air of prosperity. In the minute the girls had to look about them, they saw a stone-built waiting room with a red-tiled roof. A beautiful green velvety lawn completely surrounded the station on three sides, while on one side a beautiful fountain sent its sparkling spray high into the clear air. And further back through the trees they caught glimpses of beautiful estates.

They found themselves being hustled toward the other end of the station where two conveyances, one from Three Towers Hall and the other from Boxtton Military Academy, were waiting to take the girls and boys to their destination.

Two attendants tended to the trunks and deposited the luggage inside the cabs, while the girls and boys said excited good-byes to each other on the platform.

"We'll be only a little over a mile away from you," Chet called out. "And when we get an afternoon off we'll row down the lake and get you girls."

"Oh, won't that be fun!" cried Vi, her eyes dancing. "I'm just crazy to get out on the lake."

"Goodness, we haven't even seen it yet," Laura reminded her.

"Yes, and if we're going to," Billie added, "I guess we'd better get started. Come on, girls. Everybody's in but us. Good-bye, Chet! Good-bye, Ferd and Teddy! Please be good and don't get



sent home the first week—we wouldn't have anybody to give us that row, you know. Good-bye—good-bye—"

Laura and Vi had already clambered into the long, car-like machine with *Three Towers Hall* painted in gold letters on the outside and were impatiently commanding Billie to follow them.

As soon as she was inside the boys rushed to the car with *Boxton Military Academy* painted in gold letters on the outside, and the good-byes were over.

As they left the station and swung into a wide smooth road on their way to Three Towers Hall the girls relaxed with a sigh of happiness.

"Isn't this a wonderful road?" said Billie, screwing her head around so that she could look out the window. The machine had two long seats on either side, running from the front to the back of it so that, in turning, Billie accidentally stuck her elbow into the girl next to her.

She had not noticed the girl, but now, when the latter spoke, Billie turned around quickly. The girl was Eliza Dilks, Amanda Peabody's chum, and beside her sat Amanda herself looking on with her usual sneering grin.

"Say, if you haven't got room enough," Eliza said in a thin high voice, "I can move over to the other side of the car."

For a minute Billie just stared, while several girls about them paused in their own conversations to listen. Vi was aghast and Laura was furious.

"Well," said Billie at last, letting her gaze travel from Eliza's mean face to her ill-fitting shoes—somewhere Billie had heard that people hate to have you look at their feet—"maybe you'd better move. There's lots more room on the other side."

The girls chuckled. Laura said: "Good for you, Billie," under her breath, and Eliza flushed angrily. She seemed about to speak, but as Billie was still gazing steadily at her feet she looked down at them herself and thereby lost the battle.

However, the incident had made them miss some of the prettiest scenery in Molata, and it was almost with a feeling of regret that the girls saw the majestic three towers of Three Towers Hall rise before them.

Their regret did not last long, however; and when the car started up the broad driveway the girls strained their eyes for a better view.

It was a beautiful place. The hall itself was built of rough, greenish-gray stone, and over the whole front of it, twining round the windows, hanging over the doors, grew clinging, bright green ivy.

A smooth velvety lawn sloped down straight to the water, and the girls cried out at this, their first glimpse of Lake Molata. Through the trees, the water of the lake glistened and shimmered and danced while the soft rippling sound of tiny wavelets lapping at the bank seemed to call to them invitingly.

"Oh, g-girls, it's lovelier even than we pictured it!" cried Laura, stammering in her eagerness. "Aren't you just c-crazy to get out on that water?"

"Yes. But look!" cried Billie, grasping her arm and pointing to the front door of Three Towers Hall. "There's the president, I suppose, waiting to welcome us."

For in the doorway was standing a slender figure in white, evidently waiting, as Billie had said, to welcome the girls to Three Towers Hall.

Other girls had noticed her, too, and as the attendant came around and opened the door, they all scrambled down in a flurry of excitement.

"It's Miss Walters," the whisper went around, and Billie felt a thrill of excitement.

"Miss Walters!" Always she had seemed to Billie a person to be looked up to—a sort of goddess set apart from ordinary mortals. For Miss Sara Walters had been head of Three Towers Hall for a number of years—always, it seemed to Billie. And now Billie was actually going to see her, talk to her, perhaps even make her take notice of her, Billie, above the others!

As she rather breathlessly ascended the steps to the entrance of Three Towers with the other girls she studied this slim, straight woman who had been the heroine of so many of her day dreams.

And what she saw satisfied even Billie.

Miss Walters was only thirty-five, but her hair was snow white and framed her face in thick wavy masses. Her complexion was pink and white, and her dark violet eyes looked almost black under their dark lashes. And her figure was that of a girl of twenty.

"Isn't she wonderful?" Vi whispered in her ear; but Billie squeezed her arm warningly.

"Sh-h," she said. "She might hear us."

"I wouldn't care if she did," said Violet with unusual spirit, and in her heart Billie could not blame

her.

A moment more and Miss Walters was speaking to them, saying a few words to each of them, welcoming them to Three Towers Hall.

Then she turned and led the way into the building, the girls crowding after her eagerly.

"And her voice," said Billie, adoringly in Laura's ear, "is the very sweetest part of her!"

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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE DILL PICKLES

Miss Walters took the girls into her office, looked up the cards she had made out for them—for of course their names had been sent in some time before as prospective students at Three Towers Hall—and then called in another teacher, Miss Ada Dill, who had part charge of the dormitories.

Miss Dill was tall and thin with sharp black eyes and white hair drawn severely back from her forehead. She smiled when Miss Walters introduced her to the girls, but her smile reminded Billie of the smile on the face of a Chinese idol which she and her chums had come upon among the antiques of the old homestead at Cherry Corners. It was merely a crack in her face and the beady black eyes remained unsmiling.

"Miss Dill," Miss Walters told the girls, "will show you your places in the dormitories and will give you the hours for meals and such other information as you will need at first. Lunch will be served in half an hour, and after that you may have the rest of the day to yourselves to become acquainted with Three Towers Hall."

Then she dismissed them, and Billie and the other new arrivals found themselves following the stiff back of Miss Dill through the corridor and up a broad flight of steps.

They met several girls on their way to the dormitory, and the latter looked at them curiously. The girls learned a little later that these students had spent the summer at Three Towers, although most of the girls had gone home to relatives and friends and would not be back until the next day.

It was a rule at Three Towers Hall that the new students should report the day before the year formally opened for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the rules and regulations of the school.

"Wasn't that a pretty girl?" Vi whispered to Billie, as Miss Ada Dill opened the dormitory door and a lovely girl with very pink cheeks and very black hair stopped for a word with the teacher and then hurried past the girls on her way downstairs. "I wonder who she is."

"If she's as nice as she is pretty," Billie whispered back, "she'll be all right."

Then they stepped into the long, many-windowed room and looked about them curiously. There were beds, beds, beds and more beds. Everywhere the girls looked they seemed to see nothing but beds. As a matter of fact there were only ten of them, but the girls could have sworn there were at least twice that number.

"We can put five of you girls in here," Miss Dill said in a crisp, dry tone, almost as if she resented having to say it at all. "Are there any of you who would particularly like to be together?"

Of course Billie spoke up for herself and Laura and Vi, and after regarding her severely through her glasses for a moment, Miss Dill finally assigned three beds at the further end of the room to the chums.

"Then there is room for two more," Miss Dill said, and to the horror of the chums Amanda Peabody came forward, holding Eliza Dilks by the hand.

Laura uttered a little exclamation and seemed about to protest when Billie pinched her arm and made her say "ouch" instead.

"There's no use in saying anything," Billie whispered fiercely. "It wouldn't do any good, and we'd only make more of an enemy of that—those girls."

They were relieved a little when they saw that "those girls" were assigned to beds half way down the room so there would at least be a few neutral girls in the beds between.

"So if the rest of you will come with me," said Miss Dill, "I will give you places in the other dormitories."

Then she and the other girls went out into the hall, the door was shut, and the chums were left alone in the big room with Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks.

The girls sank down upon their beds and looked about them curiously. There was a little wash basin and a towel rack beside each snowy white bed and on the towel rack hung several small towels with blue and white borders.

The beds were set at regular intervals down the long room, and the spaces in between them were fitted out in such a manner as almost to make a separate little room for each girl.

Beside the wash basins, there was a dresser set at the foot of each white bed and under each bed was a hamper for soiled clothes. Each girl had a little table with a chair to match.

The woodwork had been painted white and the walls were a grayish blue color with several pretty pictures scattered about them to break the bareness.

"Why, the room's all blue and white," Billie suddenly discovered delightedly. "Isn't that a lovely blue they've painted the wall? And the snowy white woodwork! Oh, it's delicious!"

"And just look at the view from this window!" cried Vi, beckoning to them eagerly. As the girls looked over her shoulder they fairly gasped with delight.

Below them stretched the velvety lawn dotted with the darker green of shrubbery, while away through the trees glimmered and gleamed the water of Lake Molata. The day was warm for autumn, and a gentle breeze played among the leaves of the great trees bordering the lake, coming to the girls in a soft, rustling whisper. The picture was almost too perfect to be true.

"And she said," Billie murmured at last with a sigh of content, "that we could have all the afternoon to become acquainted with Three Towers."

"Yes," said Laura, turning from the window, "but I guess she meant only the inside of Three Towers. I don't believe they will allow us off the grounds so soon."

At that moment the door opened and the pretty girl that had passed them in the hall entered and shut the door softly behind her. In the bright light of the room she seemed even prettier than she had in the hall, but there was something about her—Billie could hardly have told what, perhaps it was the expression of her mouth—that made Billie instinctively dislike her.

The strange girl's eyes rested on Amanda and Eliza where they sat in their corner, talking in whispers, and her lips curled disdainfully. Then she came over to where Billie and her friends were standing.

"Hello!" she said with a quick smile. "You're the new girls, I suppose, and we might as well get acquainted right away. My name is Rose Belser, and I'm from Brighting," mentioning a town several miles the other side of North Bend.

"We're awfully glad to know you," Billie answered, with her own particular friendly smile. "I'm Beatrice Bradley, and these are my two chums, Violet Farrington and Laura Jordon. We're from North Bend."

"Glad to know you," said Rose Belser with a quick little nod of her black head. Then she curled herself on the foot of Billie's bed and proceeded to make herself at home.

"I've been staying here for the summer," she told them. "It's an awful place to spend the summer, you know. First time I ever did it, and I never was so lonesome in my life."

"Why, I'd love to spend the summer here," said Vi, thinking of the beautiful country they had glimpsed and the lovely lake where one might row or canoe to his heart's content. "The country's so pretty, and you have the lake——"

"Oh, the lake!" the girl interrupted impatiently. "And the country! I'm tired to death of the lake and the country. I want to go to the city where you can wear pretty clothes and go to parties and things."

"But I should think you could wear pretty clothes here," said Billie, wondering. "And as to parties—I thought you always could have parties at boarding school——"

"Maybe you can at some boarding schools," the girl interrupted again with that same impatient toss of her head. "But those schools don't have Dill Pickles for guardian angels."

The girls looked at her as though she had gone crazy, and indeed for a moment they thought she had. But Rose Belser gave a short little laugh and went on to explain.

"The Dill Pickles are two old-maid sisters. One of them brought you up here——"

"Miss Dill!" cried Billie, beginning to see light. "Oh, has she a sister?"

"Yes. And the sister is worse," said the girl, with a little grimace. "They are Miss Ada and Miss Cora, and Miss Cora is the terror of the Hall. If it weren't for Miss Walters——But say, you'd better hurry," she interrupted herself suddenly and jumped to her feet. "It's almost time for the lunch gong to ring, and if you're late for lunch, Miss Cora will be furious. She has charge of the dining hall, you know. You'd better wash and straighten your hair. Miss Cora looks you through with a gimlet eye."

She ran over to her wash basin, which happened to be the next one to Billie's, and began to wash her hands vigorously.

"Oh, dear, we forgot all about lunch, and we must be a sight!" cried Vi, pulling off her hat and excitedly patting her hair. "Girls, we haven't any combs—our trunks haven't come up yet. Give me a comb, somebody! Oh, here's one in my grip."

"How strange," mocked Billie, dashing cold water on her face till it shone rosily. "It almost seems to me I have one in mine also."

"Well, you'd better get busy and use it," Violet retorted, drawing her own comb through her heavy hair, "or you'll get in bad the very first day. Oh, dear! there's the gong." She stopped with her comb in the air and gazed in horror at the girls. As for Billie and Laura, they stood as if they had suddenly become paralyzed.

"If you'd start in time you'd be ready in time," said a nasal voice from the other end of the room, and the girls glanced around quickly. They had been so absorbed in their new experience that for a time they had completely forgotten Amanda and Eliza. But now they turned just in time to see the two girls leaving the room. As she shut the door behind her Amanda gave it a defiant little slam.

"Say, who's your friend?" asked Rose Belser, looking in astonishment at the closed door. "She's pleasant, isn't she?"

"They're neither of them friends of ours," said Billie, jerking her hair angrily as though she wished it had been Amanda's hair instead. "They just happen to come from the same town, that's all."

"Never mind about Amanda, Billie," pleaded Violet, looking uneasily at the door. "We're late——"

"Oh, don't worry," interrupted Rose, giving a final pat to her black hair. "That was only the first gong. The second one rings five minutes later. There it goes now. Are you ready?"

The girls were ready, and with quickly beating hearts they stepped out into the corridor.

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## CHAPTER IX

### A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

"This way," said their new acquaintance, turning to the right and starting for the stairs. "Now for the second of the Dill Pickles. Long may she wave!" she added gaily.

It was a new experience for Billie Bradley and for Laura and Violet—that hour in the dining hall. The hall itself was an immense room and seemed at first glance to be made up almost entirely of windows. As Rose Belser afterward remarked to the girls, there was one thing that no one at Three Towers Hall had to complain of, and that was lack of light.

Three tables stretched almost the entire length of the hall, and although they all bore snowy cloths there was only one of them that was really "set for action," as Laura said.

Most of the girls had already assembled when the chums reached the dining hall. They were standing around in little groups of two or three, talking excitedly, and while the girls were hesitating which group to join Miss Cora Dill swept into the room.

"Now you'd better mind your Ps and Qs," Rose whispered to them, and the girls regarded with interest the second of the Dill twin sisters who had been called by the disrespectful name of the "Twin Dill Pickles."

Miss Cora Dill was indeed Miss Ada's counter-part. There was the same thin figure and straight back, the same black eyes and thin-lipped mouth, the only difference being that where Miss Ada's hair was white, Miss Cora's hair still retained some traces of its original brown color.

"Goodness, I'm glad there's some way we can tell them apart," said Billie to Laura in an undertone. "If they were just exactly alike we'd have to do with them the way they do with twin babies—tie a blue ribbon on one and a pink ribbon on the other."

The idea of tying a pink ribbon or any other kind of ribbon on the "Twin Dill Pickles" was so ridiculous that the girls giggled aloud, thereby causing Vi to nudge Billie sharply.

"Sh-h," she whispered. "Her Highness is about to speak."

Miss Cora carried some cards in her hands, and as the girls gathered about her she asked them to answer when she called out their names.

Although there were a hundred students in Three Towers Hall, there were only half a dozen who, like pretty Rose Belser, had spent the summer at the school.

The rest of the girls were almost all from North Bend and the other surrounding towns, although a few had come from a distance.

When the girls had all reported present, Miss Cora gave them their seats at the table and took her own place at the head of it.

At first the girls were not at all sure whether they were supposed to talk or not, for the presence of thin-lipped Miss Cora at the head of the table threw rather a damper on both their enthusiasm and their appetites.

However, when Rose Belser leaned across several girls to say something to Billie the rest of the girls took courage and a little murmur of conversation traveled around the table.

The lunch was a satisfying one, and the girls, beginning to recover from their excitement and being really hungry from the long train trip, ate heartily.

But every once in a while, when the talk and laughter about the table threatened to become too hilarious, the girls were conscious of Miss Cora's voice reminding them that the table was the "place for decorum—not for rioting."

Billie and her chums were half way down the table, a fact for which they were very thankful. Placed only two or three seats away from Miss Cora, at the head of the table, was Nellie Bane. Nellie seemed to have struck up a sudden friendship with one of the half dozen girls who had spent the summer at the school, and the two were evidently having an interesting conversation.

Billie, catching Nellie's eye, telegraphed to her by means of the sign language the wish to see her some time after lunch, and Nellie, in the same language, agreed.

At last lunch was over and the girls reluctantly left the table. But as they were about to leave the room Miss Cora called them together again, saying that she had something important to say to them.

"You will each find a set of rules on your dresser," she said. "And before you do anything else it will be well for each girl to become thoroughly acquainted with them and the penalties for breaking them. After to-day any departure from the rules will meet with the proper punishment."

"Anybody would think we were three years old," grumbled Laura, when they were on their way back to the dormitories. "Goodness, I wonder who ever let her in, anyway."

"Oh, you'll soon get used to her," Rose assured them. She seemed to have attached herself definitely to the girls, who, although they found her amusing and interesting, would rather have been left to themselves on this first day. "Everybody dislikes her at first—and Miss Ada, too—but they only laugh at them after awhile. You see," she finished as if the girls must understand, "we have Miss Walters."

"Well, all I have to say," said Laura, whose temper had been considerably ruffled by this second of the "Twin Dill Pickles," "is that it's lucky Miss Walters and not Miss Cora is at the head of things."

When the girls reached the dormitory they looked for the rules, found them, and sat down eagerly to read them over together. First of all they found that the dormitories, eleven in all, were lettered. The letter of their dormitory was "C."

There were the usual rules about late hours, going outside the grounds without leave, neglecting to wear rubbers in the rain, all with the usual penalties attached. But the one that most interested the girls was the punishment given for keeping lights on after hours.

"Three days without recreation and isolation in the dormitory for the duration of that period," read Billie indignantly. "Goodness! I wonder if all that happens to you if you keep your light on five minutes after hours."

"It does if Miss Cora or Miss Ada catches you," drawled Rose, from where she was curled up again on the foot of the bed watching the girls with lazy interest. "Some of the teachers are all right. There's Miss Harris, and Miss Race the math teacher. If they catch you just a few minutes over time they'll give you a lecture and let you off without reporting it to Miss Walters. But if it's any of the others—look out, that's all."

A few minutes later Nellie Bane came in, bringing her new friend with her, and for a little while the girls forgot all about rules and "Twin Dill Pickles" and everything else and just had a good time.

Nellie's new acquaintance was a small fluffy little blonde whom the girls liked right away. Her name was Constance Danvers, called "Connie" for short, and the name seemed to suit her exactly. Of course, she and Rose Belser, having spent the preceding year together, knew each other well, but Billie noticed that the two girls did not seem over friendly.

"I don't know," she thought to herself, "but I'm going to like Connie better than Rose."

A little while later Rose suggested that she and Connie show the girls about the Hall, to which the newcomers eagerly agreed.

"I wonder," said Vi suddenly, as they were about to leave the room, "what has become of Amanda and Eliza Dilks. They haven't been up here since lunch."

"Well, why should we care?" sang out Billie happily. "I only hope they stay away."

"Probably up to some mean tricks," said Laura gloomily.

Connie and Rose were eager to hear more of Eliza and her friend, but the chums could not be made to tell tales. The girls would have to find out what Amanda was for themselves.

"Only," thought Billie to herself, as they ran down the stairs, "I would like to know where those two sneaks are and why they didn't come back to the dormitory. I know they'll *try* to spoil all our

fun, even if they can't *do* it."

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## CHAPTER X

### LAKE MOLATA

How the girls did enjoy the rest of that afternoon! Connie and Rose showed them the classrooms and lecture rooms, told them little stories about the different teachers and recounted funny incidents of school life that made the girls bubble with laughter.

All the rooms were high-ceilinged, many-windowed and cheerful, but it was the lecture hall and gymnasium that the girls thought the most attractive of all.

The lecture room was on the third floor and was arranged in the shape of a Roman circus, the seats in tiers all around the room with the lecture platform in the center.

"My, I won't even mind being lectured to in a room like this," said Vi, in an awed little voice. "Do you have many lectures?"

"Too many," drawled Rose, sinking down in one of the seats and spreading out her ruffled dress carefully. The girls had been too excited to notice the dress before, but now they saw it was much more elaborate than any they had brought with them, except one or two apiece for party wear.

"I wonder if all the girls dress like that for every day," thought Billie in a sort of panic, looking down at the pretty little brown cloth dress she had thought so wonderful at home. She wondered if Vi and Laura felt the same way.

A little later they wandered downstairs to the gymnasium, and then all thought of clothes was put in the background.

Around the gymnasium were all sorts of swinging ladders and standing ladders. There were punching bags and medicine balls; in fact, everything calculated to make strong healthy women of the girls who came to Three Towers Hall.

There was a swimming pool, also, and over this the girls went into raptures. They had had scarcely any opportunity to learn to swim in North Bend, and although on their visits to New York they had never failed—that is, in the summer time—to take a dip, or several of them, in the Atlantic Ocean, they had never learned to swim more than a few strokes at a time.

"A swimming pool!" cried Billie. "I suppose we might have known we would have one here. Now we can really learn to swim. I wonder," and so interested had she been with her own affairs that this was the first time she had even given the boys a thought, "if Chet and Teddy and Ferd have a swimming pool at Boxtton Academy."

"Boxtton Academy?" Rose took her up quickly, suddenly looking interested. "Do you know any one who goes there?"

"I should say we do," put in Laura proudly. "Billie's——"

"Billie?" Connie interrupted, looking puzzled.

"I'm 'Billie,'" Billie explained, with a laugh. "They call me 'Billie' for short."

"Never mind about that," Rose put in impatiently. "What were you saying about the boys?"

The girls looked at pretty, black-haired, pink-cheeked Rose, and Billie realized suddenly why it was she had not altogether liked the girl.

"She'll be friendly to almost any girl if she happens to like her brother," she thought, and instinctively she glanced at Laura. The latter must have had almost the same thought, for she gave Billie a meaning glance.

"You said they were at Boxtton Academy," Rose insisted.

"Tell us about them," said Connie. She was interested, but in an entirely different sort of way.

"Well, there's Billie's brother and mine and a chum of theirs, Ferd Stowing. They came with us as far as Molata. Then they left us for the Academy and we came on here. And we were having such a good time we never thought about them," she finished penitently.

The girls were eager to look about the grounds of Three Towers after that, but Rose would not let them go till she had found out all about the boys and their "life history," as Billie resentfully said later. After that the girls noticed that she was even more friendly than she had been before.

"Oh, well," said Billie to herself, feeling strangely comforted by the thought, "she won't have much of a chance to see the boys, anyway, because we can only leave the grounds on special permission and they won't be able to get away from the Academy to come here very often. I suppose I'm an awful cat," she finished ruefully, "but I'm not going to let her meet any of our boys if I can help it."

A little later she forgot all about her irritation in the delight of walking about the beautifully kept grounds of Three Towers and examining the outside of the picturesque old building itself.

The latter was even more beautiful than they had thought in their first glimpse of it, with its rugged, ivy-grown walls and its three-battlemented towers rising above the trees.

"It looks almost like an old castle," cried Billie. "The kind you read about in 'The Days of Chivalry.' All it needs is a——"

"Moat," finished Laura excitedly. "I was just thinking that, Billie."

"Yes, a moat would make it just perfect," sighed Violet, adding, with a laugh: "Anyway, even if we haven't the moat, we have a lake."

"Yes, let's go down and look at it," proposed Connie. "We've had wonderful times on it all summer."

"Doing what?" asked Laura eagerly. "Do they let you row on it—all by yourselves?"

"I should say not," answered Rose, with a little toss of her head. "You have to learn to swim in the pool first so that if you upset your boat you won't get drowned. It's their great boast that no girl has ever been drowned at Three Towers."

"Well, we don't want to start anything," said Billie, with a little grimace, and the girls laughed.

"Then," Rose went on, "after you learn to swim you have to take an instructor out in the rowboat or canoe with you until she thinks you know how to handle it like an expert."

"What do you mean by an instructor?" asked Vi. "One of the teachers?"

"Sometimes it's a teacher," Connie spoke up. "But as a rule it's one of the older girls in the first grade who teaches the younger ones. Miss Walters said," and her fair face flushed with pleasure, "that perhaps next semester I shall be appointed as instructor."

"Oh, isn't that great?" cried Billie heartily, for she was beginning to like Connie Danvers with all her heart. Then, too, she had noticed with a feeling of relief that Connie was not dressed like Rose Belser. She had on a pretty cloth dress very much like Billie's own. "And she didn't seem crazy to know all about the boys," she added, with an added warmth around her heart.

"I wonder," she said aloud, "how long it will take us girls to learn to become instructors."

"Well, I don't know about the rest of us," spoke up Nellie Bane; "but I know it won't take you very long, Billie. You were always the very first to pick up anything."

As with most of the rest of Billie's friends, Nellie shared the conviction that Billie could do everything she tried to do just a little bit better than any one else.

"I should say so," Laura added loyally. "There's nothing that you can't do, Billie."

Billie flushed with pleasure and Rose Belser looked at her with new interest. For if Rose was not the most popular girl at Three Towers she certainly thought she was and the praise of Billie's friends started her thinking. Could it be possible that here was a rival? But she shook her dark head impatiently. If this Billie Bradley thought she could start anything, why, she, Rose, would show her, that was all!

And all the time Billie, who had no thought of what was going on in the other girl's mind, was having the time of her life.

"Look at all the canoes!" she cried. "And they actually have racks for them."

They had come down to a little dock that jutted out into the lake and had been hidden from their view, or at least partly so, by the trees. Now, as they came out upon it, they stood astonished and delighted by the sight that met their eyes.

There were half a dozen racks on the dock, each one constructed so as to contain three canoes, one above the other, and every rack was full.

The canoes were each neatly covered with a tarpaulin, but the tarpaulin, drawn tight, revealed the long graceful outline of each beautiful little boat, and the girls fairly ached to launch one of them upon the water.

"And there are rowboats, too," cried Vi, making another discovery. "Lots and lots of them! Look! Here they are—tied to the dock."

Sure enough, there were fully a dozen gaily painted rowboats swaying gently in the water on either side of the dock, sometimes straining a little at the ropes that held them.

"But who would row when they could canoe?" cried Billie, for in Billie was a passion for canoes which Chet had always declared must have come from her Indian ancestors. "I think rowboats are horribly clumsy."

"Hardly anybody really likes to row," Connie answered, "but we have to do it for the exercise, Miss Walters says there's no better exercise in the world than rowing."

"Yes," said Billie, with a little laugh. "And no harder work, either."

"Do you do much swimming in the lake?" asked Nellie, gazing down at her reflection in the still water.

"Oh, we can," Rose answered. "But no one likes it very much. They'd rather do their swimming in the swimming pool. There's a mud bottom to the lake, and the water, though it looks mighty nice, isn't good to drink."

While they were speaking two girls whom the chums remembered having seen in the dining hall but did not know came down to the dock, and, after waving to Rose and Connie, went to a rack and started to take down one of the canoes.

The girls watched rather wistfully while they slipped it from the rack, removed the cover, and slid it into the smooth water.

One girl with a skill born of experience jumped into the front seat of the canoe, lifted one of the paddles and waited while her companion settled herself in the stern seat. Then they glided from the dock softly, almost silently but for the dip of the paddles in the water, and drifted out toward the middle of the lake.

"Oh, if we could only do that," sighed Billie, "I think I'd die happy."

"Those girls are instructors," Connie explained. "They are in the first grade and expect to graduate in the spring."

"It's funny, I suppose," said Billie, dreamily gazing up at the blood red sun that was slowly sinking in the western sky, "but I'm really sorry for them."

"Why?" they asked, surprised.

"Because," said Billie soberly, "they have to graduate and leave Three Towers!"

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## CHAPTER XI

### LIGHTS OUT

The girls sat up till the very last minute that night, discussing the absorbing happenings of the day. Rose left them to talk to some of the other girls—a fact for which they were thankful—and Nellie and Connie Danvers went to their dormitory, leaving the three chums alone at last.

They had had supper, a meal not as good as lunch, for the meat had been too crisp, almost burned in fact, and then they had come up to the dormitory for a good time together.

They were rather disgruntled to find that Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks were there before them, but even that fact could not bother them much—not to-night!

"I tell you what let's do," said Billie, patting her brown curls into place before her mirror and noticing with surprise how flushed her face was and how her eyes sparkled. How could she know, being modest, that not only her friends, but almost all the girls that had seen them together, thought her even prettier than Rose Belser.

"What?" asked Vi, sinking down on the edge of her bed with a sigh of content. "I don't feel as if I wanted to do any more for years but just sit here and talk things over."

"Well, that's just what I was going to say," Billie answered, turning away from the mirror and flinging herself on the bed beside her. "Only I thought it would be more comfortable if we got into our nighties. It's been a pretty warm day—"

"Billie, you're a wonder," cried Laura, jumping up and fishing in her bag for her nightgown. "When it comes to thinking you have it all over us like a tent—as Teddy says," she added apologetically, and the girls laughed at her.

"Oh, but there are our trunks!" cried Billie, suddenly remembering. "Miss Walters said that we were to unpack our clothes and get everything in shape before to-morrow, don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, we remember," groaned Violet. "I don't think much of your idea this time, Billie. Oh, well, I suppose if we must we've got to."

So they opened the trunks, which had been brought up while they were out in the afternoon, and in a very short time had their clothes all hung up neatly in the wardrobes.

Then, with a sigh of mingled content and weariness, they brought out their nightgowns and began to undress, talking all the while.

"Isn't Miss Walters lovely?" asked Billie, when she was at last curled up happily on the foot of the bed with Vi at the head of it and Laura stretched out full length with a pillow tucked beneath her head.

"Yes, but aren't the 'Dill Pickles' horrid?" cried Laura. "It's lucky they aren't at the head of things



or I guess we'd have a mighty hard time of it."

"Well, maybe they aren't as bad as they look," said Violet.

"Who was that other teacher that Connie said the girls all loved so?" asked Billie. "I thought I'd remember her name. It was something like Pace——"

"Wasn't it Race?" asked Laura, and Billie clapped her hands.

"Yes, that's it. And Connie said the girls adored her next to Miss Walters."

"She's the math teacher, isn't she?" asked Violet, adding as the girls nodded: "It's lucky for me she's nice, because I'm so awful in math a mean one wouldn't have me in class more than a week."

"Oh, but it's all perfectly glorious," said Billie softly. "Just think, girls, if we hadn't found that darling old trunk we wouldn't have been here—at least I wouldn't."

"And if that man—What was it you and the boys called him?" Laura paused and looked inquiringly at Billie.

"The 'Codfish?'" asked Billie, guessing at what she meant.

"Yes. And if the 'Codfish' hadn't got scared and dropped the trunk in the middle of the road you would have lost it after all."

"Yes," sighed Vi, "and that would have been worse than not finding it at all."

"The only thing that bothers me," said Billie, with a little frown, "is that we didn't go after that man and get him. He may be a regular thief for all we know, and if he is he ought to be in prison where he belongs. Every once in a while," her voice lowered and she looked over her shoulder nervously, "I dream about him, and when I do he always has a mask or something over his eyes, but his codfish mouth is always there sort of grinning at me——"

"Billie!" cried Laura and Vi in the same voice, and Laura got up suddenly, sat on her pillow, and regarded Billie with startled eyes.

"But you never told us!" she said. "Have you—have you dreamed that often?"

"No, only once or twice," said Billie. "Just the same, I wish we could have caught him. I always have a sort of feeling that if he robs anybody else it will be our fault for not having had him arrested when we had the chance. Of course, he may not be a regular thief at all. But, oh, girls, he was an awful looking thing. And I feel sure some day I'll meet him again."

"You said he had red hair, didn't you?" asked Laura, a delicious little thrill running up and down her spine. "And little eyes and that broad codfishy mouth. Goodness! I wish I'd been with you when you chased him. It must have been no end of fun."

"Fun!" exclaimed Billie. "I should say it wasn't fun. Not when I was afraid I was going to lose the trunk and everything. I was just scared stiff."

"But do you really think you'd know the man again if you saw him?" Laura insisted.

"Why, of course I would," said Billie. "Didn't I tell you I've dreamed of him a couple of times—just as he is? I couldn't miss him."

"Wouldn't it be fun," cried Laura eagerly, "if he should try to rob the Hall or something and we caught him?"

"Laura!" they cried, and Billie added with a shiver: "It might be your idea of a good time, but it wouldn't be mine. I hope I'll never have to see his old codfish mouth again."

"Oh, I don't know," said Laura, putting the pillow under her head and lying down again. "Sometimes when I'm very brave I wish something really exciting would happen—you know, a burglary or something. I'd just like to see what I'd do."

"Well, I know what I'd do——" Vi was beginning, when the "lights-out" gong sounded through the hall and the girls scurried wildly for their beds.

Amanda and Eliza were already in theirs, and Rose, coming in at the last minute, fairly flew into her nightgown and then scurried over to put out the one remaining light.

The room had been in silence and darkness for nearly five minutes when suddenly Laura leaned over and whispered to Vi.

"What would you do if a burglar got in?" she asked.

"I'd just get under the covers," said Vi, "and die off fright!"

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## CHAPTER XII

## TOO MUCH TO EAT

If any one had told the three girls that the second day would hold more of excitement and pleasure than the first, they would not have believed it. But so it was.

Billie woke early that morning and found the sun shining gloriously through the window. It took her a minute or two to realize just where she was. Then she sat up in bed and looked across at her two sleeping chums.

Laura lay on her side, hugging her pillow, and Violet was flat on her back, blissfully unconscious of the ray of sunshine that fell across her face.

Billie's glance traveled from them to Rose Belser, who looked as pretty asleep as she did awake, and from her to Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks.

She made a little grimace as she looked at them, for their straight, stringy hair and pinched, freckled faces were a striking contrast to Rose's prettiness.

"Oh, I wish everybody'd get up," she thought. "It must be nearly seven o'clock."

Even as she spoke the first bell rang, and the sudden sharp noise through the still Hall made her start up in bed. It roused the other girls, and they yawned and stretched sleepily.

"Goodness, is it time to get up already?" asked Laura, glaring at Billie as if it were all her fault. "Why, I just this very minute got to sleep."

"You'd better stop talking and get up," Rose called to them, flinging back her black hair and jumping to her feet. "We have only half an hour to get ready for breakfast, and if you're late and haven't any excuse—well, don't expect any sympathy from Miss Cora, that's all."

The girls did not need any second hint to make them hurry, and full ten minutes before the breakfast gong rang they were ready and waiting.

There was great excitement in the dining hall, for this was the day when the old students of Three Towers Hall were expected, and the girls who had remained at the school for the summer vacation were eager to renew old friendships.

It was about ten o'clock when the girls began to pour in, and from then on excitement and confusion reigned.

"It makes you feel kind of lonesome," said Laura, with a sigh.

"And the older girls look awfully dressed up and—and—stuck up," said Vi, snuggling up to Billie as if for comfort. "Do you suppose they really are, Billie—stuck up, I mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Billie, feeling a little nervous herself. "For all we know," she added, with a chuckle, "we may look stuck up ourselves."

"Well, maybe we are," Laura giggled. "That's what Amanda is always calling us, you know."

"Oh, look," whispered Vi suddenly. "There's Rose Belser with one of the new girls. I wonder who she is."

The new girl in question was a nice looking, rather serious girl who wore glasses and looked to the girls—so they said later—as if she might really like to study. She was carrying a grip and had evidently just arrived.

While the girls watched, she and Rose turned and started in their direction. For a minute Billie could have sworn Rose did not mean to stop. However, she did stop, and rather reluctantly introduced the stranger to them.

"This is Caroline Brant," she said, adding as she turned to the strange girl with a queer little smile: "These are some of the new girls who are in our dorm, Caroline. Billie Bradley, Violet Farrington and Laura Jordon."

Caroline Brant shook hands and smiled a grave smile that seemed "just made to go with her glasses," Laura said afterward. When the girl had passed on with Rose toward the stairway, the chums had a queer sense of comfort—as though they had found at least one good friend at Three Towers Hall.

Lunch came and went, and so absorbed were the girls in the fun and excitement of meeting new girls and listening to stories of good times had during the summer that dinner caught them before they knew it and they found that the day was gone.

Everybody went to bed early that night, for Miss Walters had sent around an order that all lights should be out by nine o'clock sharp. The next day the real work of the term was to begin, and she wanted all her girls bright and fresh for the start.

The next week would have been perfect for the girls, but for one thing. They liked their classrooms, which occupied all the second and third floors, they liked their studies, and they loved most of their teachers—especially Miss Race, the mathematics teacher.

But they soon found that what Rose Belser and Connie Danvers had said about Miss Cora and

Miss Ada Dill—the "Twin Dill Pickles," when nobody was around—was terribly and awfully true.

The Dill twins never seemed to miss an opportunity to make the girls feel bad. They were sarcastic in class, and seemed to take real delight in hurting the feelings of their pupils whenever it was possible.

It was only a few days after the opening of the school year when Billie had her first little set-to with Miss Cora Dill. The latter had just finished calling the roll and had pushed the book from her. Then she looked sharply at Billie.

"Your name is Beatrice, is it not?" she asked in a tone as acid as her dill pickle nickname.

"Yes, Miss Dill," answered Billie, wondering nervously if there were anything wrong about her name and miserably conscious that the eyes of all the girls were upon her.

"But the girls call you 'Billie,' do they not?" asked Miss Cora.

"Yes," said Billie again.

"But 'Billie' is a boy's name," said Miss Cora tartly, boring Billie through with her black eyes. "And it is extremely unladylike for a girl to bear a boy's name. Extremely unladylike," she repeated, staring at poor Billie, who was as red as a beet and filled with a wild desire to run away and cry.

She might have done it, too, at least the crying part, but a titter from one of the girls in the back of the room saved her. She was no longer afraid, only angry—horribly angry.

So she just looked up in thin-lipped Miss Cora's face and said very quietly: "I never thought about my name being unladylike, Miss Cora, and I'm sure it hasn't made any difference with me. Mother says that it is the way one acts that counts."

"Well, see that you take care of your actions," retorted Miss Dill tartly, and turning to one of the other girls called upon her for a recitation.

But it was Billie who had won the day. The girls knew it and Miss Cora knew it, and this helped to make the latter feel in a still more unkindly mood toward the girl with the "unladylike name."

"I'll watch her," thought Miss Cora angrily. "She isn't the kind to be trusted."

Laura and Violet were furious, and when they returned to the dormitory to prepare for lunch began to hatch all sorts of wild plans by which they could "lay this one of the Dill Pickles low."

"What's the excitement?" asked Rose, and Laura began heatedly to describe what had happened in the schoolroom, while several of the other girls gathered around.

When she came to Billie's answer the girls looked pleased and one of them clapped her hands.

"Good for you, Billie Bradley!" cried a dark girl, joyfully. "You must have given the Dill Pickle the surprise of her life."

"She bearded the lion in his den, the Pickle in her Hall," quoted another of the girls. "You know, I'd have given anything to have been there."

"And you a new girl, too," said another, looking at Billie with admiring eyes.

From that time on Billie became a noted figure among the hundred girls at Three Towers Hall, and her fame and popularity grew in leaps and bounds.

Rose Belser viewed this new state of affairs calmly at first, then with alarm, and later with dismay. That a new girl should come to Three Towers and immediately begin to shoulder herself into the limelight was unthinkable, impossible, it couldn't be done. And yet Billie Bradley was doing it!

After a while she began to draw away from Billie, look indifferent when one of the girls spoke of her praisingly, slighted her in a hundred little ways that Billie herself could hardly put her finger on. And yet she felt it.

Billie had one other constant enemy at Three Towers, and that was Miss Cora. Miss Cora never missed a chance to humiliate her—or at least try to humiliate her. But Billie was so happy and having such a wonderful time that she never gave these attempts any more attention than she would so many mosquito bites, thereby fanning Miss Cora's dislike of her.

Meanwhile the two Miss Dills grew more and more sour and crabbed until the girls began to wonder "why they didn't die of it." Then one noon time Laura came running into the dormitory, her eyes big and round with excitement.

"What do you think?" she cried, while the girls gathered round her. "I heard Miss Cora and Miss Ada talking together. I was in the lab and they were in the hall and they didn't know I was anywhere around."

"Well?" asked the girls impatiently as she paused for breath.

"They were talking about our meals," Laura went on. "They said we got altogether too much to eat."

"Too much to eat!" echoed the girls, looking at one another wonderingly.

"Why, we don't get any more than we want," said Billie.

"What else did they say, Laura?" urged Vi.

"That was about all." Laura had gone over to the wash basin and was washing her hands hard as though to get some of her dislike of the "Dill Pickles" out of her system. "I was so surprised I couldn't help hearing a couple of sentences. Then I coughed and came out of the lab and they looked as if they'd like to kill me. 'The girls are getting altogether too much to eat,' said Miss Ada." Laura mimicked her to perfection. "'Yes,' said Miss Cora, 'we must give them less—a good deal less.'"

"Well, I'd just like to see them try it, that's all," said Billie, adding with a sigh: "Thank goodness, we still have Miss Walters, anyway. She won't let us quite starve to death!"

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## CHAPTER XIII

### FOUR ENEMIES

"Are we really going to have one, Billie Bradley? Oh, how wonderful!"

Several weeks had passed, and this afternoon the five of them, Laura Jordon, Vi, Nellie Bane, Connie Danvers and Billie, were sitting close together at the very farthest end of Billie's dormitory talking over some plans that made them feel delightfully like conspirators.

"A real feast!" said Violet Farrington eagerly. "With sandwiches and pickles and cake and—and—everything! Oh, Billie, who all are going to be in the party?"

"All the girls from Nellie's dorm, we four and Caroline Brant," Billie said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"But I don't think Caroline will come," said Laura doubtfully. "You know she would lots rather study than go to a party. That's her idea of a good time."

For although Caroline Brant had proved a good friend to the chums, especially to Billie, they had tried in vain to draw her into their little escapades. She was what the girls usually referred to scornfully as "a grind," yet, strange to say, they all loved her.

She willingly helped them with their lessons, had often coached some of the more backward of them for tests, passing them when otherwise they would have hopelessly flunked, and cheerfully helped them out of scrapes when they needed help.

So now it was not strange that Laura should expect her to refuse an invitation to this new escapade—the most forbidden of all forbidden escapades, the midnight feast.

"Well, I'm going to ask her, anyway," Billie said in answer to Laura's objection. "The worst she can do is to say she won't come."

"But you're going to ask Rose, aren't you?" Connie broke in, adding, as Billie frowned and looked doubtful: "She'd never in the world forgive you if you didn't."

"Yes, we'll ask Rose," said Billie, after a minute's hesitation. "Here she comes now," she added, as the door opened and Rose entered. "Come on over here," she called, "I want to ask you something."

She was just about to tell Rose the plans and invite her to the party when the door opened again and Amanda entered with Eliza Dilks. Amanda was never seen without Eliza trailing along in the background, and for this reason the girls had nicknamed the latter, "The Shadow."

By this time the girls at Three Towers Hall had learned to dislike the two sneaks as much as the girls of North Bend disliked Amanda.

Wherever anything was going on, especially of a secret nature, Amanda and "The Shadow" were sure to be prying about, saying mean little things, forcing the girls to move over to some other place where they could be private for a little while.

And now here they were again!

"What do you want?" asked Rose, not noticing the two who had come in after her. Rose's voice was not very pleasant, for she was beginning to show her growing dislike of Billie openly.

"Nothing just now," Billie answered, looking behind Rose to where Amanda and "The Shadow" stood, apparently talking together, yet listening to every word that was being said. "I'll tell you later."

Amanda looked up and her mean little eyes twinkled angrily.

"Don't mind us," she said. "If we're in the way, of course we'll get out. Come on, Eliza," and with

their noses in the air she and "The Shadow" sailed out of the room.

"Some day I'm going to kill 'em," said Laura, glaring ferociously at the closed door.

"Go on. What were you going to tell me?" drawled Rose, turning to the mirror and eyeing her pretty reflection with satisfaction.

"You'd better not say anything, Billie," Nellie Bane warned her. "They're probably listening at the keyhole or something."

"It must be horrid to hate everybody and have everybody hate you," mused Connie, smoothing back her pretty hair.

"But they seem to hate Billie most of all," said Vi. "I'm sure I don't know why. It's because she's so popular, I suppose."

Then to Rose, still fussing with her hair before the mirror, came the dawn of an idea. It would be hard to do anything to hurt Billie herself, for, whatever her faults, Rose was not a sneak. But she might make use of Amanda——

It was several days later—the day that had been set for the greatest of all adventures, a midnight feast in the dormitory.

It was Billie who had arranged it all, and although the feast itself was by no means a new idea, she had thought up something to make it a little more interesting and daring.

Each girl had been instructed to learn some little piece or poem which she was to recite on the great occasion. Some of the girls protested on the ground that they were poor at memorizing, but Billie had been firm.

"No recite, no eat," she had said; and so the girls, some joyfully, some reluctantly, had set to work to learn their pieces.

And Billie, full of energy and enthusiasm, had gone to work and got up a regular program with the names of the girls and the recitations they would give. Laura and Vi had helped her make duplicates of the program so that there was one for each girl.

And the strangest thing about the whole affair was that Caroline Brant, junior student and grind, had agreed to make one of the party.

Billie's chums called her a witch, for since Caroline Brant had come to Three Towers Hall she had never been known to take a hand in one adventure, no matter how harmless it may have been. And Rose, growing more and more resentful as she saw even her most faithful followers deserting her for Billie, became more sure that she would have to make use of Amanda and "The Shadow."

Neither Billie nor any of the other girls knew Caroline Brant's real reason for accepting Billie's invitation. The fact was that Caroline had fallen in love with Billie at first sight, perhaps because she was just the opposite of Caroline herself, and had since become as fond of her as if she had been her younger sister.

But all the time, while she had seemed to be engrossed in her studies, she had been keeping one eye on Billie, and with that one eye had seen pretty nearly everything that had happened.

She was as proud of Billie's growing popularity as if it had been herself, but she knew Rose would never stand for the taking of her place by any one. And that was what Billie was very surely doing.

She knew that Amanda and Eliza disliked Billie and would do almost anything to get her into trouble.

And then there was that fourth enemy of Billie's, Miss Cora Dill. Caroline knew that if Miss Cora were to catch Billie in any sort of scrape she would never in the world give her the benefit of the doubt.

And most of all, Caroline knew that Billie, with her imp of mischief, would be the very last to try to keep out of a scrape, and that sooner or later one of her four enemies would get just the proof she wanted to take to Miss Walters.

In that case, so great was her affection for Billie, Caroline had desperately decided that she would go to Miss Walters herself and plead for Billie.

And all this, nobody seeing Caroline, quiet, reserved, studying furiously for the mid-term examinations that were coming dangerously near, would have guessed at. Nor would they have guessed that Caroline was breaking her rule and going to Billie's party simply to keep Billie from harm.

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## CHAPTER XIV

## BILLIE SNORES SUCCESSFULLY

It was a wonder any of the girls could keep their minds on their lessons that morning. As a matter of fact, they recited so poorly for Miss Ada and Miss Cora that the two "Dill Pickles" turned sourer than ever and threatened to report them to Miss Walters.

But what did they care? The night was before them!

Seven o'clock came, then eight o'clock, and then nine. The gong rang for "lights out," and every girl was in bed and, apparently, sound asleep.

But underneath the bed of each and every girl who was to be in the party was a box or a basket filled to the brim with smuggled dainties.

These containers held cold meat and pickles from the delicatessen shop near by. There was jelly. Olives and biscuits and fancy cakes with foolish icing on top were there—everything in fact that goes to the making of a first class midnight feast.

Miss Ada Dill, making her evening round of the dormitories to see that all was well and every girl in her place, found nothing to arouse her suspicions until she came to Billie's dormitory. Then she paused, started to close the door, opened it again and stood still, intently listening.

And it was Billie who, in her eagerness not to be discovered, almost gave the thing away. For Billie was snoring, gently but decidedly snoring, and to Miss Ada's trained ear, the snore did not sound natural.

So in she came, and Billie, watching out of the corner of one eye, felt a panicky desire to pull the covers over her head and hide.

Suppose Miss Ada should discover that five of the girls in dormitory "C" were not undressed at all, but wore their nightgowns over their clothes?

Suppose—but this was too awful even to imagine—Miss Ada should discover those baskets under the beds. Billie shivered and almost gave the thing away a second time.

Miss Ada slowly made the rounds of the beds, scrutinizing each girl sharply and passing them by one by one reluctantly until she came to Billie's bed.

Billie was still snoring gallantly—she did not know what else to do. If she stopped now it would be a dead give away. And yet to keep on was almost impossible.

Poor little Billie! Afterward she could laugh at it, but at the time it seemed nothing short of a nightmare. She knew that Laura and Vi and Rose and Caroline were awake and waiting for the terrible moment when Miss Ada should discover the conspiracy.

If she could only keep on snoring for a minute longer! thought Billie desperately. And then the unbelievable thing happened. Instead of commanding her in no uncertain tones to get out of bed, Miss Ada turned—slowly but surely turned—and marched out of the room.

Not until the door was shut could Billie believe that she was really safe. And not until she heard Miss Ada's footsteps die off down the hall did she dare to stop snoring.

Then she drew a long breath and stretched out arms cramped by lying so long in the same position. And in the dark stillness of the dormitory she heard four more sighs—distinct and very plaintive.

For a full five minutes the girls lay still, hardly daring to breathe, afraid that Miss Ada would change her mind and come back again.

But as the minutes passed and nothing happened, their courage returned and Billie began to feel jubilant. She must be a good actress indeed to fool Miss Ada!

And then——

Five ghostly figures sat up in bed, pushed back the bed clothes, and slid silently to the floor. Once on their feet they shed their nightgowns and their dark dresses only made a blurr in the blackness of the room.

Still noiseless as mice, they drew out the precious baskets from under the beds and crept over to where Billie was waiting for them.

"Where do we go from here, girls?" said Laura in a hysterical whisper. "Goodness, but I'm scared to death."

"Keep quiet or you'll have something to be scared about," Billie directed in a fierce little whisper. "Come on—I think the road's clear."

They tiptoed to the door, and Billie opened it cautiously and peeped out. There was no one in sight, and she stepped out into the hall quickly, motioning to the girls to follow her.

Caroline, the last to leave the dormitory, stopped for a moment and looked about at the sleeping girls. Then, satisfied that they were really asleep and that none of them suspected the prank, she followed the other girls out into the hall and closed the door carefully behind her.

They found their fellow conspirators in dormitory "F" already up and stirring. The lights were lit, hampers were out on the table ready to be opened, and the real fun of the party was commencing when the five arrived.

They were greeted with subdued enthusiasm, for no one dared to speak above a whisper, and Connie demanded to know why Billie was late.

"We couldn't do a thing without you," she said. "You had the program and everything——"

"And besides," finished Nellie, "we'd promised not to start anything until you came."

"We thought you'd been caught," Connie added reproachfully.

"We were just about to put out the lights and get into bed ourselves," chimed in another girl, "because we thought if you were caught, Miss Ada would come over here and catch us too."

"But what made you late?" asked Connie again.

"If you'll stop talking and listen a minute," said Billie, her eyes shining with excitement, "I'll tell you what a narrow escape we had."

The girls gathered around eagerly while she told her story, and when she had finished they gazed at her with horrified eyes.

"Billie, what ever made you do such a thing?" cried Nellie. "Why, if you had just kept still she probably would never have suspected a thing."

"I know that now," said Billie ruefully. "It was a crazy thing to do, but when I'd once started it I didn't dare stop."

"Well, I think you deserve a gold medal," said Laura loyally. "If it had been me——" this wasn't correct English, but Laura was too excited to notice it—"I'd have giggled or something and given the whole thing away."

"Goodness! wouldn't Miss Ada be happy if she could really catch us at something," said Nellie, but the girls would not listen to her.

There wasn't a bit of danger. Weren't they going to have somebody at the door to mount guard and to warn them of the slightest noise downstairs?

They had decided to draw lots to see who should be chosen for this very disagreeable position of guard and now they set to work at once to "get the agony over with" as Rose Belser said.

Rose had been very quiet, for her, and there was a queer expression in her eyes when she looked at Billie that would have made the latter wonder if she had had time to notice it. However, there was one girl who did notice it, and that was Caroline Brant.

Strangely enough, it was Rose who drew the blank that made her "guardian of the portal" for the first twenty minutes. At the end of that time the girls would draw again and let another poor unfortunate take her place.

Rose was inclined to grumble at her hard luck at first, for she wanted to be in the fun as much as any of the girls. But suddenly there came to her an idea—a way that she might punish Billie for daring to become so popular at Three Towers Hall.

Of course, she could not hurt Billie without hurting all the rest of the girls but—her lips shut tight and her eyes narrowed to slits—goodness knew they deserved it. It was they who had helped to make Billie so popular.

The plan she had thought of was very easy. All she had to do was to slip from dormitory "F" into her own, leaving both doors open a little so that the light from one could shine into the other.

Then, as she passed Amanda Peabody's cot, just a little jostling to awaken her and the thing would be as good as done. Amanda, seeing the light, would be sure to investigate, and, while she was gone, she, Rose, could undress quickly, put on her gown, and slip into bed. Then when the discovery came—and Rose knew Amanda well enough to be sure there would be a discovery—she would be safe in bed and unsuspected. That is, unless the girls should tell.

She looked over her shoulder at the happy scene in dormitory "F," and for a minute she felt guilty. Then one of the girls came over and put an arm about Billie and her lips tightened again.

Of course if the girls knew that she had been the one to give them away, no one would have anything to do with her. She would probably have to leave Three Towers Hall.

But how would they know? She could tell them that she had slipped into dormitory "C" to get a handkerchief—or something else, she could think that up later—and while she was gone, Amanda had slipped out and given the alarm. It was all very simple.

She looked back into the room where the fun was in full swing and once more her heart forsook her. It would be a dreadful thing for the girls. They would probably be expelled from Three Towers.

But here was her chance, if she was going to do it—and it might be her only one. One of the girls was giving a whispered and funny recitation, and the girls were doubled up with laughter, fairly

holding on to themselves to keep from making a noise.

The look in Rose's eyes hardened. She forsook her post

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## CHAPTER XV

### A PLOT FAILS

Caroline Brant had been watching from behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, although nobody, not even Rose, could have told it.

She had seen Rose glance into the room, had noticed how queerly she had looked at Billie, and now, as Rose started across the corridor, Caroline was at her heels, quick as a cat.

It was not till Rose's hand was on the knob of the door across the hall that Caroline spoke.

All she said was, "Where are you going?" in a quiet little whisper, but Rose whirled upon her fiercely.

"You're following me," she cried, almost forgetting to whisper in her fury. "What do you mean?"

"You'd better not make so much noise," said Caroline calmly. "We'll have Miss Ada or Miss Cora down upon us if you're not careful."

"Miss Ada or Miss Cora," mimicked Rose, actually trembling with fear and rage at being caught. "What do I care for Miss Ada or Miss Cora!"

"Well, I care a lot, if you don't," retorted Caroline, urging the excited girl back toward the lighted dormitory. "I don't know what you're so mad about anyway," she added, as Rose glared at her. "Your time for playing guard was up, and when I came over to tell you about it I found you were gone."

Caroline was fibbing—or, at least, partly so—but Rose had no way of knowing that. What she did know was that she had made a goose of herself for nothing, and all at once she hated Caroline more than she hated Billie or any one else on earth.

But she did not dare show it. The only thing for her to do was to try to pass the thing off the best she could. So when they reached the door she looked up at Caroline with the best smile she could manage and tried hard to keep her voice steady.

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did," she said. "I was just going to slip into the dorm and get a bottle of olives that fell under the bed. And when you spoke to me so suddenly it frightened me—that's all."

"It seems a pretty big chance to take—for a bottle of olives," said Caroline gravely, and in spite of herself Rose flushed. Oh, how she hated "grinds" that wore horn-rimmed spectacles!

The two were greeted joyfully by the rest of the girls, who would never know just how near they had been to discovery.

"I guess the time's up for your watch, Rose," said Billie. "Come on, let's draw lots and see who's the next."

Laura made a dash for the glass bowl that served as a lottery but Caroline interrupted her.

"I'll stand watch for a while," she said, adding as the girls started to protest: "It's hot in here and it's cool in the hall, and I need cooling off. Will somebody hand me a sandwich once in a while?"

"I'll say we will," they cried, and immediately began plying her with so many sandwiches and pickles and biscuits that she laughingly protested.

"And don't make too much noise," she said, as she started for the door. "You know Miss Ada may be a little suspicious that there's something up and come snooping around again."

"Well, you know the signal," Billie whispered after her. "Scratch twice on the door."

Caroline nodded, glanced at Rose, and went out to her post, sandwiches, pickles, biscuits and all.

The rest of that evening was not very pleasant for either Caroline or Rose. Caroline was wondering whether she ought to tell Billie and the other girls that she had found Rose sneaking, yes, actually sneaking, into the room across the hall when she should have been at her post.

"Of course, I don't know that she was going to do anything wrong," she kept telling herself, yet in her heart she knew that Rose had been up to some mischief. "But it isn't fair to Billie not to say anything," she worried. "I know Rose, and she's sure to try to get even some time, and Billie ought to be told to look out." And all the time she was thinking, her ears were strained for the slightest noise below stairs.

As for Rose, she would have pleaded a headache, for by that time she really had one, and gone to bed, if she had not been afraid of being laughed at by the girls.



And so she stayed on and on, trying to act as if nothing were the matter, laughing and joking with the other girls, eating sandwiches and cake till she was sick of the very sight of them, while all the time she was wondering, wondering, what Caroline was going to do.

"She can't really tell anything," she worried, while her head ached harder and harder. "I didn't really *do* anything."

But all the time she knew that just leaving her post at the door when so much depended upon the girls not being discovered was a terrible thing and one that the girls would find it hard to forgive should they find her out.

"If only Caroline doesn't say anything," she thought, adding spitefully: "And now I suppose I've got to be nice to the old thing, whether I want to or not."

Meanwhile, the rest of the girls were having a gay time. Never had a forbidden feast gone off so beautifully before, and they were in hilarious spirits.

As the hour hand of the little clock on Nellie's dresser crept near to midnight the girls packed up the fragments of the feast, and, after they had pushed the baskets out of sight under the beds, drew their chairs together to form a semi-circle and began joyfully to tell the most blood-curdling ghost stories they knew.

Each girl had to tell some story she had read or heard, or if she was so unfortunate as never to have read or heard any, was forced to make one up "out of her own head."

The fun waxed fast and furious, each story being more hair-raising than the last until it came to Billie's turn.

"But I don't know any ghost stories, and I'm no good at making them up," she protested when the girls looked at her expectantly. "I like adventure stories about treasure hunting and robbers and murderers and things—"

"Well, that'll do," said Laura joyfully, while the other girls shivered delightedly and drew close together. "Tell us a murder story, Billie."

Billie was about to open her mouth in protest when Vi suddenly made a suggestion.

"I've got the very thing," she cried. "Tell the girls about the 'Codfish,' Billie."

"The codfish?" they repeated, looking puzzled, while Rose added with a little yawn: "Yes, do tell us about the codfish, Billie—it sounds so interesting."

The tone more than the words made Billie angry, but before she had time to retort the girls broke in, eagerly demanding the story of the "Codfish."

"We caught one one time on a family fishing trip," said one of the girls, taking it for granted that this particular codfish was of the swimming variety, "and we had fried codfish steaks for a week afterward."

Billie chuckled while Vi and Laura openly giggled.

"But this wasn't that kind of a fish," said Billie. "It was a man."

This was almost too much for the girls, who were beginning to think that Billie and Laura and Vi had suddenly gone crazy, but Billie hurried on to explain about the "Codfish," growing more and more interested in her story as she went on.

As for the girls, well, they simply hung on her words, and when she came to the part where the thief had dropped her precious trunk in the roadway they exclaimed so loudly that Caroline had to warn them to be quiet. By this time the guard at the door had been removed, as there was little danger of discovery at so late an hour.

"Well," sighed Connie Danvers, when Billie had finished her story, "I wish something like that would happen to me sometime. It sounds just like a story book."

"But you should have caught him," Nellie objected. Though Nellie had heard of Billie's wonderful good fortune in finding the old trunk, she had never heard the details of the part the "Codfish" had played in it until to-night. "It gives me the shivers to think that an awful thing like that, with red hair and a fishy mouth, should be wandering around loose."

"I'm sure I'll dream of him to-night," said one of the other girls plaintively.

"Speaking of dreams," said Billie, getting to her feet so quickly that she almost upset the girl beside her, "don't you all think we'd better get back to our dorm? It's after midnight, and—I'm awfully afraid of Miss Ada."

"Well, I'm not—not after to-night," said Laura. "You surely did fool the Pickle with your snoring, Billie."

"Yes. But next time somebody else will have to do the snoring," said Billie, with a rueful little smile.

There followed whispered good-nights interspersed with giggles, and finally the five girls from dormitory "C" tiptoed across the hall, and, silent as mice, crept into their own room.

Quickly they undressed and slipped into their white nightgowns, listening breathlessly every once in a while for some sound that might tell of discovery.

None came, however; the big house was as silent as a tomb and Billie was just about to slip into bed when she happened to look out of the window.

The moon was bright, bathing the smooth lawn of Three Towers in a light almost as bright as day, so that Billie could not have been mistaken in what she saw.

A man ran quickly, furtively, across the lawn and disappeared in the shadow of the trees bordering the lake. Billie's heart amazingly skipped a beat and then stood still.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### MYSTERY

For several minutes Billie Bradley stood at the window straining her eyes in the direction in which the man had disappeared, scarcely daring to breathe.

Then, when she was sure that whoever the fellow was he did not intend to come back, she turned from the window with a little sigh of mingled excitement and relief.

It was only a sigh, but it sounded so loud in the stillness of the room that it suddenly brought Billie to her senses.

Shivering a little, she crept into bed and drew the covers up under her chin. It would never do to be discovered by Miss Ada at this last minute, and she certainly could not do any good by standing there staring out of the window.

Whoever the man was, he had gone now and would not return. But could she be sure of that? Suppose he had been a thief—she shivered and drew the covers over her head. In that case she should have roused Miss Ada and told her the story.

But then, Miss Ada's first question was sure to be, "How did you happen to be standing by the window at twelve o'clock at night?"

Then would come suspicion, a search, perhaps, and discovery. No, she couldn't, she couldn't! But what had that man been doing?

For more than an hour she lay, too excited to sleep, shivering at any sudden sound, wondering—wondering. Toward morning she fell asleep, only to dream of picnics where one did nothing but catch codfish and eat them, of a strange man with a stooping figure, running across a lawn bathed in moonlight.

Luckily for the girls who had been at the party, there were other girls in dormitory "C" who had gone to bed at the usual respectable hour—Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks, for instance—and who, as usual, heard the rising bell. If it had not been for them and the noise they made Billie and the others of the five might have slept on till noon.

As it was, they rose resentfully, finding it hard to get their eyes open, looking for their clothes half-heartedly, grumbling at everything and everybody.

It was Billie, who had slept less than any of them, who whispered a warning to them. She had seen Eliza and Amanda eyeing them suspiciously. It would never do, after having managed the party so successfully, to let the cat out of the bag after the affair was over.

The argument appealed to the girls, and they woke up with a suddenness almost more suspicious than their former sleepiness had been.

It was not till noon that Billie found a chance to tell the girls what she had seen from the dormitory window after the rest of them were in bed.

By that time the last evidence of last night's party had been cleared away, and the girls were beginning to feel secure again.

One by one they had run back to the dormitories between classes, made the remnants of the feast into small paper bundles, and had smuggled them down to the cellar and deposited them in the big box where all the papers and other rubbish was kept until the man of all work about Three Towers carted it off into the woods to be burnt up.

So now, in hilarious spirits, they answered Billie's call and flung themselves in various characteristic and joyful attitudes upon her bed.

"Speak, woman, speak," Laura commanded her, stealing a chocolate from Vi's sweater pocket. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Yes, what do you mean by getting up such a disgraceful affair as happened here last night?" added Nellie Bane in such an exact imitation of Miss Ada's manner that the girls giggled delightedly.

"Look out," cried Connie Danvers, in a whisper, for Amanda and the "Shadow" had just come into the room. "If you are not careful our wicked plot will yet be discovered."

"What is it you wanted to say, Billie?" asked Caroline in her matter-of-fact tone. "If it's anything very private, I guess we'd better move."

Caroline had been thinking about Rose and the happening of the night before—thinking till her head ached—but she had not yet decided what to do about it. As for Rose—her head ached, too—she knew what she was going to do about it. Some way or other she was going to get even with Billie! And Caroline, too, big snooping, spectacled thing!

"It isn't a bit private," said Billie, looking so serious that the girls suddenly became serious too. "It was about something I saw last night after—" she was about to say "after the party," but as Amanda and her "Shadow" had come dangerously near and were listening with all their ears, she decided not to.

"Well, what was it you saw?" the girls demanded impatiently, as she hesitated.

Billie lowered her voice and spoke hurriedly.

"I saw him going across the lawn. He was running, and while I watched he disappeared among the trees near the lake."

"A man?" asked Vi while the others stared.

"Of course," Billie nodded impatiently. "What did you think it was—a grizzly bear?"

"It might have been from your description," Vi retorted, but right here the girls broke in with a running fire of questions and Billie was kept busy trying to answer them all at once.

"But, Billie, why didn't you tell somebody?" Vi asked, but Laura crushed her with a look.

"Tell somebody?" she repeated scornfully. "How could she and give the whole—"

But this time it was Laura who suddenly came to a standstill, the reason being a vicious little pinch from Billie in the fleshy part of her arm.

"Hush!" she whispered fiercely while all the girls looked alarmed. "Haven't you any sense at all?"

And Laura, feeling very sheepish, did not even answer back. For Amanda and the "Shadow" were still making excuses to hang around.

"But, Billie, what are we going to do about it?" asked Connie nervously.

"Yes, we don't want funny looking men wandering around our campus at night," said Rose, lazily straightening a ruffle on her dress.

"No, nor in the day time either," said Nellie, looking fierce.

"Well, you all needn't look at me as if it were my fault," said Billie plaintively. "I certainly didn't ask him to come and keep me awake all the rest of the night."

"But nobody's answered my question," Connie objected. "I want to know what we're going to do about it."

"Why, there's nothing to do about it," said Billie. "I suppose all we can do is to wait till we see him again—if we do—and then tell Miss Walters about it."

At that moment the gong rang and hands flew to straightening hair and belts and ruffles preparatory to starting the afternoon classes.

"Well, all I have to say is," said Nellie as they turned toward the door, "that I hope your strange man stays where he belongs, Billie, and doesn't come back here."

"So say we all of us," said Connie, adding with a shudder: "Ugh! Your story about the 'Codfish' last night, Billie—and now this! It's enough to scare a person to death."

"There you go blaming me again," said Billie plaintively.

In the weeks that followed the girls very nearly forgot about the unknown man, who certainly had no business roaming around Three Towers Hall after midnight.

The only thing the chums did not like about the boarding school was the Twin Dill Pickles. The latter were getting more and more miserly—insisting that the girls were getting too much to eat and that they should be allowed a great deal less liberty. In short, if the twin teachers had had their way Three Towers might have been a prison instead of a boarding school.

"However," said Billie one day, after Miss Cora Dill had been unusually unpleasant, "perhaps we need the Dill Pickles. If we didn't have them we might be too happy."

The girls from North Bend had now become fully settled at the school. They had made a number of other friends, but so far their enemies seemed to be confined to Amanda Peabody and her constant companion, Eliza Dilks. Except Billie, that is, who added Miss Cora Dill and Rose Belser to her enemy list. Amanda was becoming known as the sneak of the school, but for this she did not seem to care.

"I wouldn't want such a reputation as that," said Laura one day.

"Nor I, either," answered Billie.

The boys from Boxton Military Academy had been over to see the girls several times. Rules were very strict at Three Towers Hall, and if the lads had not been related the boys could probably never have been admitted at all. But Chet and Teddy could come in, and once or twice they managed to smuggle poor Ferd along.

"I wish we could go out for a row on the lake," remarked Billie one evening, as she gazed at the moonlight on the water.

Her wish was gratified the very next day. The boys invited them out, having first obtained Miss Walters' consent to let them go.

Rose Belser had looked and smiled her prettiest—and that was a good deal—the first time she happened to meet the boys and girls together. But as the boys were too much interested in the fun they were going to have to take much notice of her, she had merely tossed her pretty black head and sauntered off in the opposite direction.

"Somehow or other I can't get next to that girl Rose," remarked Chet to his sister, when the whole crowd was out on the lake.

"Well, Rose is rather peculiar in some respects," answered Billie, not caring to say too much.

"What do you say to a race?" cried Teddy, after they had been rowing around for a while.

"Don't upset!" exclaimed Vi warningly.

"No upsetting to-day, thank you," put in Ferd, who was in the crowd.

The girls were quite willing that the boys should race, and away they went up the lake for half a mile or more. Teddy was carrying Billie, and, of course, he exerted himself to the utmost to win the race.

"Here is where we put it all over you!" cried Chet, who was carrying Laura.

"This race belongs to me," panted Ferd, who had Vi as a passenger.

A number of the boys and girls on the lake shore were watching the contest, and wondering who would win. In the crowd, more out of curiosity than anything else, were Amanda and Eliza.

"Huh! I wouldn't care to be on the lake with those boys," snapped Amanda. "First thing they know they'll upset."

"They must be splashing water all over each other," was Eliza's comment.

At first it was almost an even race, but gradually Chet and Teddy drew ahead.

"Oh, I guess it's going to be a tie," murmured Billie.

"Not much!" gasped Teddy, and put on an extra spurt which soon sent him quite a distance ahead.

"Hurrah! We win!" shouted Billie triumphantly.

"All right, I guess you do!" flung out her brother. "I guess I ate too much for dinner. That's the reason I couldn't row so well," he explained lamely.

"Oh, dear! I wish we got as much as that to eat," sighed Laura.

The boat race had just come to a finish when those out on the lake heard a cry from the shore. There seemed to be a great commotion among the girls from Three Towers Hall.

"We'll go back and see what's up," shouted Ferd, and those in the rowboats lost no time in following the suggestion.

They were still a hundred feet or more from the lake shore when they saw what had happened. In their eagerness to see the finish of the race Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks had ventured out on a soft bank, holding to some low bushes for that purpose. Bushes and bank had given way suddenly, and both girls had gone floundering into the water and mud up to their waists. Now they had been pulled to safety, and their chums, seeing that they were not hurt, set up a shout of laughter.

"You are mean things, that's what you are!" cried Amanda, in vexation.

"The meanest ever was!" echoed Eliza.

And then the two dripping figures hurried for the friendly shelter of the boarding school.

"Gracious, what a happening!" was Vi's comment. And then she added quickly: "But they deserved it."

"They certainly did," responded Laura. "What a fine thing it would be if they would leave this school."

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE QUARREL

There was a secret club among the girls at Three Towers Hall, and only the students who stood first in their classes could be admitted to the chosen circle.

Also the girls who were lucky enough to be elected to the "Ghost Club," for that was what the society was called, must be popular among their fellow students. There was an unwritten law that membership in the club should not exceed fifteen.

Rose Belser was president of the club, while Connie Danvers and several of the other girls with whom Billie and her chums were on the best of terms, were fellow members. Caroline Brant had been asked to join but had refused on the ground that the club took too much time from her studies. It was a compliment to Caroline that, in spite of her refusal, the girls—all except Rose Belser—liked her just the same.

Billie and her chums had not been in Three Towers a week before they had heard of the secret club—no one but the members themselves even knew the name of it—and had realized how much all the girls longed to be members of it.

So when one day Connie came to Billie and whispered something in her ear, it was no wonder that Billie's heart beat a little faster.

But all Connie had really said was: "We want to see you and Laura and Vi outside near the old maple tree at ten to-night. It's very important. Don't keep us waiting!"

And Billie, in a voice she tried hard to keep natural, said that they would not keep her waiting. And when she imparted the mysterious message to Laura and Vi they gaped at her, then pulled her down on a bench—it was noon and they had come out for a bit of sunshine and fresh air before the afternoon lessons—and showered her with questions.

"But, Billie, didn't she say why she wanted to see us?" cried Laura.

"And who wanted to see us?" added Vi.

"I've told you just exactly what she said," Billie answered a little impatiently, while her eyes shone with excitement. "She said it was very important and not to keep them waiting."

"I bet I know what it is," said Laura, almost afraid to put her hope into words. "It's the secret society, Billie."

"The secret society!" Vi repeated in an awed voice, while two girls who were passing paused and looked at them curiously. "Oh, Laura, it couldn't be! Billie, do you think it is?" She looked eagerly at Billie. Then her gaze traveled on to the two curious girls who were still lingering within earshot, and she sat up so straight that Billie and Laura looked at her in surprise. As usual the loiterers were Amanda and her "Shadow" and as they saw Vi's eyes upon them they smiled unpleasantly.

"Hello," said Amanda coming over to the girls while the "Shadow" lingered behind. The latter was not quite as bold as Amanda—nor quite as mean. "I heard you say something about the secret society. Are you invited?" The last words were said with such a sneer and the grin on her face was so aggravating that the girls felt their blood begin to boil.

Billie jumped to her feet and faced Amanda, both hands clenched at her sides.

"We've stood just about as much as we're going to from you, Amanda," she said, her eyes blazing. "You've done nothing, you and Eliza, but spy upon us ever since we came to Three Towers, and I'll tell you right now we're tired of it."

"Oh, you are!" said Amanda, her grin a little wider, while Laura and Vi, alarmed at what they saw was going to be a real quarrel at last, got up and stood beside Billie. Other girls who had come out on the campus gathered around them curiously. "Well, what do you think you're going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet," said Billie, trembling with fury—for usually good-natured, fun-loving Billie had a whirlwind of a temper when it was roused. "But we'll make you stop your spying and mean tricks if we have to try your stunt and go to Miss Walters about it."

"What's this?" asked a cool pleasant voice behind them, and the girls turned quickly to find Miss Walters looking on gravely. "What is it you want to come to me about, Beatrice?"

But Billie turned all colors of the rainbow and stood as if stricken suddenly dumb. A minute before she had been furious. Now she was only ashamed.

How could she explain to Miss Walters without telling about Amanda? That would be telling tales, and, in spite of her threat, that was the very last thing Billie wanted or intended to do. Beneath Miss Walters' steady gaze she hung her head.

"Come, speak up, Beatrice," Miss Walters commanded, not unkindly, for, like almost every one in Three Towers Hall, she had come to love reckless, sweet-natured Billie, and even laughed at her pranks in secret. "I've asked you a question, and my girls are in the habit of answering me."

"Please," said poor Billie without looking up, "I want to answer you, Miss Walters, but I don't know how I can without t-telling tales."

"Was there a quarrel?" questioned Miss Walters, her face still grave, for she disliked that kind of thing. "If you can't tell me about it without telling tales," here the faintest of smiles flitted across her face, "I want you at least to tell me that you are no longer angry and that a scene of this kind will never happen again. Here, Beatrice, shake hands with Amanda and be friends again."

Billie looked more startled at this than at anything that had happened so far. Shake hands with Amanda? Pretend they were friends again? Why, they never had been friends! Instinctively she put her hands behind her back. Then she looked up at Miss Walters appealingly.

"Please, Miss Walters," she said, "won't it be enough, if I tell you I'm sorry I made a scene and that I'll never do it again? I won't, truly I won't."

"Yes, that will do," answered Miss Walters, her eyes really smiling now. She was thinking that if she had had a daughter she would have liked her to be like Billie. "Only remember, I have your word that it will never happen again. Come now, it is almost time for afternoon class," and she led the way back across the lawn.

The girls followed in groups of two and three while Amanda and the "Shadow" brought up the rear. There was a smile on Amanda's face, and for the first time since she had come to Three Towers she was exultant. She had succeeded in making Billie furious, had seen her called to account—gently of course, altogether too gently, for "Billie was Miss Walters' pet"—but called to account nevertheless and before a crowd of her classmates. That ought to hold her for a while!

As for Billie herself, and Laura and Vi, they were desperate.

"You ought to have told Miss Walters about Amanda, Billie," Laura said over and over again. "You shouldn't have let that little old sneak get away with it. Did you see her smile when Miss Walters turned away? Oh, if I could only give her what I want to give her!" Laura's hands clasped and unclasped nervously as she talked and her eyes snapped.

"Yes, that's just what she was waiting for," said Vi, hardly less furious than Laura. "If you only hadn't answered her, Billie. Had just looked at her with your nose in the air and turned away. That makes her mad enough to murder you."

"Oh, I know it, I know it," said Billie, still ashamed to look any one in the face. She had broken one of the rules and had been reprimanded for it by Miss Walters in public. There was no getting over that. If it had been one of the "Dill Pickles" she would not have minded so much. But Miss Walters!

"Never mind," Vi whispered in her ear. "Miss Walters doesn't like Amanda any more than we do, and she just scolded you because she had to. And I know she liked the way you refused to tell tales. I saw it in the way she looked at you."

At this Billie brightened and glanced up hopefully.

"Well, I'm glad if there's something she can like about me," she answered, and just then the gong echoing through the hall, sent them scurrying to their classes.

In the excitement of the scene with Amanda the girls had almost forgotten their mysterious engagement for ten o'clock that evening. But when they did think of it again it had the effect of making them forget everything else.

The afternoon dragged on, evening came with supper, and then at last they were in the dormitory, pretending to undress with the other girls, while they really left most of their clothing on.

When everything was dark and the whole place seemingly asleep, they got out of bed quietly, stole softly down the stairs, and finally came out into the moonlit night.

The old maple tree where they were to meet Connie was a magnificent old giant which the girls had always admired, set back a little way in the woods.

The place had probably been picked out because nobody, happening to look from the windows of Three Towers, would be able to see anything but shadows and waving branches.

When the girls, moving softly over twigs and branches, so as to make no noise, finally came to the meeting place they were surprised and a little alarmed to find no one there.

The woods were dark and silent, save for the soft murmuring of the wind among the trees.

"Nobody's here," said Vi, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

"Suppose nobody comes," whispered Laura. "Maybe it's all a joke."

"Well, if it is," said Billie with a rueful little smile, "the joke is on us."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE "CODFISH" AGAIN

It seemed an age while Billie and Laura and Vi stood under the maple tree before anything happened. It really was only about five minutes. Then a sound was heard through the darkness. It was the cracking of a twig.

The girls started, and Billie, drawing some bushes aside, peered out in the direction of the sound. What she saw made her draw in her breath sharply and Laura and Vi drew closer, looking over her shoulder.

Ten ghost-like figures were coming quickly toward them across the moonlight-flooded lawn that surrounded Three Towers Hall.

It looked as though each figure had draped itself from head to foot in a flowing sheet with places for the eyes and nose and mouth rudely cut out. The girls, watching in half-frightened silence, were reminded of the "Ku-Klux Klan" of post Civil War days, which they had seen once or twice in moving pictures.

"Do you suppose it's the girls dressed up like that?" Laura whispered, beginning to wish herself back in the security of her dormitory.

"Of course. Who else could it be?" said Billie, trying to make her voice sound natural when the skin on the back of her neck was beginning to crawl. "For goodness sake, don't let them think you're scared, whatever you do," she whispered fiercely, as the first of the white-draped figures reached the woods. "That's probably just what they're trying to do."

The leader of the "ghosts," as they had already dubbed them in their minds, came to a halt just a few feet in front of the chums, and her followers drew up behind her.

Then they stood there, motionless as the trees around them, looking at Billie and Laura and Vi through those ghastly white masks until the girls thought they must scream.

They afterward found out that this was the "silence test," that unless the girls passed this first test they were unworthy to belong to the "Ghost Club." And passing the test consisted of doing what the girls were doing now—although they did not know it—just standing still and waiting for the head "ghost" to speak.

And finally, when the girls felt that they could no longer stand it but must dash out of the dark woods and away from the ghostly, motionless figures, the "head ghost" spoke.

"We have come," it said, "to ask you a question."

There followed another silence, and Billie, not knowing just what was expected of her, but wishing to be polite, said, rather weakly: "Yes, ma'am."

For a minute it looked as if the meeting would be broken up, for who could be dignified and ghostly when addressed as "ma'am"? There was a giggle from among the ghosts, and one or two of them began to double up as if with silent laughter. But once again the head ghost lifted its hand, or what looked more like a wing, under the sheet and her followers straightened up.

"And that question is," said the head ghost in a voice not quite so solemn as before: "Do you believe in ghosts?"

This was a poser. The girls never had believed in ghosts, but how could they say so to this white-clad group. They had either to tell a fib or offend their visitors. Billie, acting as spokesman, chose the fib.

"We never used to," she said, and for the life of her she could not keep the laughter out of her voice, "but I think we shall after to-night."

"Ah," said the head ghost softly, and it seemed as if there were a little stir in the group behind her. "Then come closer for I would ask you yet one other question."

Obediently the chums came closer,—although they would much rather have stayed where they were—and the head ghost put her second question.

"Listen," she said solemnly, lowering her voice at least two degrees more. "Listen well, for it is a matter of great import. Would you be one of us?"

In the silence that followed the girls could almost hear their hearts beat. This was the secret society to which every girl in Three Towers longed to belong, and they, Billie, Laura, Vi, were being asked to join. The last question of the head ghost could mean nothing else.

They hesitated a moment, too dazed to answer, and the head ghost repeated its request.

"Would you be one of us?" it asked. "Answer quickly—yes or no?"

Billie took a chance on her chums and took the plunge.

"Yes!" she answered breathlessly.

"Ah, 'tis well," came in solemn tones from the white mask of the leader. Then she waved her arm toward the white-clad figures behind her and the latter moved up till they were close to her.

"You understand," said the leader then, "that one cannot change from a human to a ghost in a minute. There are different stages to be gone through. Spider!" She lifted her hand again and one of the girls separated herself from the group and came forward. As she faced the leader she shivered as if with a chill, raised her hands in the air, and, still shivering horribly, lowered them to her sides again.

The girls learned afterward that this was only a sort of salute which every member of the "Ghost Club" was supposed to give its leader.

But here at night, with the wind sighing through the trees, and weird shadows all about, the thing looked so uncanny that once more the girls had a wild desire to run away and hide.

"What is it, your Ghostship?" asked the one addressed as Spider, and although the voice was disguised the girls were sure it belonged to Connie Danvers. They began to feel more at home.

"Tell these humans," the head ghost ordered, "what they will have to go through to be initiated into the Ghost Club. Come forward, one at a time."

"But would it not be better to show them?" asked Spider, and this time the girls were sure it was Connie.

"Show them, by all means," said the head ghost, and then the girls knew they were in for it.

They had heard of initiations before and what ridiculous things the girls and boys who were lucky or unlucky enough to be initiated had to go through with. But in every case they had heard of the clubs and fraternities had been human ones. The initiation into a ghost club was sure to be much worse.

The leader of the ghost club raised her hand again, and three girls sprang forward from the group behind her. Before the girls knew what was happening to them they found their hands pinned behind them while huge sheets were flung over their heads.

The girls that were doing all this to them tied something that felt like ropes around their waists, pulled the sheets into shape and the girls found to their great relief that there were eye and nose and mouth holes similar to those in the strange robes worn by the ghosts themselves.

After that they went through strange and weird experiences that they remembered in their dreams for a long time afterward.

They were taught the "shiver salute," bandages were tied over their eyes, or rather eye holes, and queer, slimy crawly things were pressed into their hands.

They were forced to swallow things that felt like particularly fat and squirmy worms. It was no wonder that the stomachs of the girls threatened to turn inside out. Several times they were on the point of revolt, but always they choked back protests and did as they were told. For to have come so near being members of the secret society of Three Towers and then to lose out at the last minute because they had not nerve enough to go through with the initiation, would have been real tragedy. So they gritted their teeth and went ahead.

At last it was over, the bandages were taken off their eyes, and they were led before the head ghost to take the final oath of allegiance when a strange thing happened.

Billie, happening to glance through the trees to the bright patch of lawn beyond, uttered a startled cry. For across that bright patch of lawn a man was running, crouched and furtive.

"Girls!" she cried, forgetting the club, forgetting everything but this new and startling fact. "Look! Quick! Here, through the trees!"

They crowded behind her, stirred by the note of excitement in her voice, straining their eyes in the direction she had pointed out.

The man was just about to enter the shelter of the woods when the snapping of a twig under Laura's foot caused him to stop and look about him, startled.

In that brief second the moon shone full upon his face, and with a start of sheer amazement Billie recognized him.

"It's the 'Codfish'!" she cried. "Girls, it's the 'Codfish'!"

"The Codfish?" they repeated in excitement, and Laura shook her arm wildly.

"Billie, are you sure?" she asked, then gave a gasp of amazement and dismay.

For Billie, forgetting how ridiculous she must look in her ghostly garb, had started in pursuit.

"She's crazy!" cried the "head ghost," speaking this time in the voice of Rose Belser. "Some one go after her quick and get her back. Suppose one of the Pickles should see her from the house!"

But before she could finish Laura was racing like mad after her chum.



Billie had stopped at the edge of the woods and was listening for some sound that might tell her in what direction the man had disappeared.

Laura grasped the sheet that enfolded Billie and tugged at it wildly.

"Billie, come back, come back!" she cried. "We may be seen from the house any minute."

"But it was the 'Codfish,'" cried Billie wildly. "If I only had a—a gun, or something!"

"Yes, but you haven't, and he probably has." Laura was dancing with impatience, glancing now over her shoulder at the dark woods, now toward the house, standing out boldly in the moonlight. "Billie, for goodness sake, don't be so crazy. We can't do anything!"

So Billie at last allowed herself to be dragged away. They found the "ghosts" talking excitedly about what had happened. And every once in a while a girl would glance nervously over her shoulder into the dark shadows of the woods.

"Goodness, he must be a regular robber," Connie said in an excited whisper.

"And to think it's Billie's 'Codfish', the man who stole her trunk!" said another. "I'm scared to death!"

"D-don't you t-think we'd better go back?" asked Vi, her teeth chattering.

"I guess so," agreed Connie, looking fearfully about her. "He may be in the woods now. He may even be listening to what we say!"

This was enough for the girls. Without even a backward glance they scurried across the lawn like so many little white phantoms and in at the side door of Three Towers Hall.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### ROBBED!

For days the girls could think of little else than the initiation into the "Ghost Club" and their startling meeting with the "Codfish." Whenever they could get together between classes or at noon or before they went to bed, these were the topics of conversation. And of these, the "Codfish" held first place.

"He must be a real burglar," Connie said during one of these gatherings.

"Of course he was," said Rose, looking a little bored. "Respectable men don't sneak around places at all hours of the night."

"But what in the world did he want?" Laura asked wonderingly. "You wouldn't think he'd come out from the woods at all—especially when there's such a bright moon. He might be sure some one would see him."

"Oh, I don't know," said Billie thoughtfully. "He probably knows the rules of Three Towers and that the girls are all supposed to be in bed before ten o'clock, and I suppose he felt safe enough. We *should* have been in bed, you know," she added, dimpling mischievously.

"But I wonder what he was sneaking around Three Towers for," Laura went on, unwilling to change the subject. For to Laura, mysteries were the very breath of life.

"Maybe he's waiting for a chance to rob us," said Vi in an awed little voice, and the girls shuddered.

"Well, I hope he changes his mind," said Nellie Bane anxiously. "I never did like burglars very much."

But as the days went by and nothing further happened, the mystery of the "Codfish" was pushed a little into the background.

In the first place, the chums were having the time of their lives in the "Ghost Club," and proud as could be of having been chosen for membership.

The only one who was not particularly happy was Rose Belser. Of course she had not wanted the girls in the club at first. But the rest of the club did want them, and she was afraid that if she was the only one who voted against them it would make her unpopular with the rest.

Then, too, she reasoned with herself, if she hoped to get even with Billie, the only thing was to have her around until she saw her chance.

And all the time the "Twin Dill Pickles" were getting so obnoxious that more than once the girls were upon the point of revolt. From day to day it was only Miss Race, the mathematics teacher, who stood between them and open rebellion.

For Miss Race was a staunch friend of the girls, and in her heart disliked Miss Ada and Miss Cora as much as they did. Whenever things got a little bit too bad, Miss Race would have a secret

conversation with Miss Walters, who in her turn would have a little talk with the two Miss Dills. Then for the space of a day or two the girls would have comparative comfort.

However, in spite of all efforts on the part of Miss Race, conditions were steadily growing worse for the girls.

Things went on very much the same, without much change one way or another, while autumn merged into winter and the snow began to fly.

There was a good deal of snow the early part of that winter, and sledding parties became more and more frequent. There was a splendid hill for coasting near Three Towers, and here the girls gathered almost every afternoon after classes.

Sometimes, very often in fact, there were boys, too, brothers and friends of the girls, boys who attended Boxtton Military Academy. It was great sport, even more thrilling than rowing or canoeing had been, so that when Lake Molata froze over the girls were joyful at the prospect of more fun. There would be skating, and Billie Bradley and her two especial friends were splendid skaters.

Before long the lake was full of joyful, shouting boys and girls whenever the weather was fine. And as for Chet and Teddy and Ferd, they walked the mile from Boxtton Academy almost every afternoon.

"Let's have a race," Billie suggested one day, skating up to a group of her chums. Her cheeks were rosy with wind and exercise, and her brown hair had escaped in little curling strands about her ears.

Teddy, looking up at her, thought that she looked like the picture of a girl on a magazine cover that he had seen not so very long before.

"All right," he said, doing a fancy step on the ice that almost landed him on his nose. "Shall we take partners? Yes we shall. Billie, will you be mine?"

The rest of the girls giggled—all but Rose, who had taken a great liking to handsome Teddy and did not at all fancy the way he always singled out Billie, "the little cat"—and Billie made a face at Teddy.

"I'll think about it," she teased, then drew the boys and girls around her while she outlined the course of the race. "Now," she said, "we'll skate straight ahead till we come to where the lake takes that sudden bend. Then we'll double, and whoever passes the big maple tree first will win. Who's going in this race?"

It seemed that nearly everybody wanted to—everybody who could get a partner, that is—and in a minute or two a score of merry young figures were flying over the ice in a gallant effort to make the turn and get back to the old maple first.

It was a pretty scene, at least Caroline Brant thought so. But Rose Belser, sitting close beside her, scraping her skates along the ice until she made two ugly little ridges in it, did not agree with her.

There was Billie, taking the center of the stage again as usual, and there was Caroline looking after her with a smile. Well, Caroline could smile. She had never been the most popular girl at Three Towers, although most of the girls did like her, at that. Billie wasn't taking *her* place. And she dug still more viciously at the ice.

"Better not do that," said Caroline, bringing her eyes back from the flying figures and looking at the ugly ridges Rose had made. "Somebody's apt to tumble over them and get hurt."

"I wish they would," said Rose savagely, then added with a mean little smile that suddenly reminded Caroline of Amanda Peabody: "I suppose Billie would like to fall so that Teddy Jordon would have a chance to pick her up."

"Rose, stop saying such things!" Caroline said. But further speech was prevented when a girl's voice hailed them excitedly. They turned to see Nellie Bane running toward them at full speed.

"Girls, the most awful thing has happened!" she panted when she came within speaking distance. "Miss Race was coming home from town a few minutes ago, and suddenly a man stepped out from the bushes near the road and held her up."

"Held her up!" they gasped, and Caroline added sharply:

"Do you mean she was robbed?"

"Yes," answered Nellie, still panting and with eyes wide with excitement "And from what she said, I'm sure it was the 'Codfish.'"

At that minute the skaters sped down upon them, Teddy and Billie winning triumphantly by about a yard. Caroline skated over to them, calling her story as she went. It was a minute or two before she could make them understand.

"You say one of the teachers was robbed?" asked Ferd.

Then Caroline told the story all over again, while Nellie shouted to them from the shore—for

Nellie had on no skates and did not dare venture out on the ice without them. Before she had finished the boys were tearing wildly for the bank with the girls close behind them.

There they sat down and tore their skates off, asking questions all the while.

"Did you say it was just the other side of the gate?" Chet asked. "Say, if we hurry, fellows, we may have a chance to find him. Who would ever have thought of that old Codfish turning up again?"

"Don't talk—work," cried Teddy, getting rid of his skates and stamping his numbed feet to get the blood back into them. "We missed that fellow once before, and we're not going to miss him again if we can help it. Ready, fellows?"

"You bet!" Ferd and Chet cried, and the three were off on a run, the first of the boys to start. Behind them the girls were still fumbling with numbed fingers at their skates.

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## CHAPTER XX

### CHET PLAYS THE HERO

The boys stopped at the gate of Three Towers Hall, not knowing just what to do next. All they knew was that Miss Race had been held up and robbed only a few hundred feet from the gate and that the robber had disappeared in the bushes at the left-hand side of the road.

"We'll have to spread out," Teddy said in an excited voice. "Probably the fellow doesn't expect to be followed, because he thinks there are only women and girls around Three Towers and he's probably around near here somewhere counting over his loot.

"There are five of us," he went on quickly, noticing that two more boys had come up from the lake on a run. "And if we go in the woods one at a time and circle about we ought to find the thief."

"Don't you think we'd better get Miss Race?" asked Chet eagerly. "She'd be able to show us just where the fellow disappeared, and everything."

"But it will take too long," Ferd was objecting, when Miss Race herself, with two or three of the other teachers and Miss Walters, came hurrying toward them.

"What are you going to do, boys?" asked Miss Walters, looking worried.

The boys explained quickly, and Teddy, turning eagerly to Miss Race, asked her to go with them as far as the woods and point out the place where the thief had disappeared.

Miss Race was still white from her fright. But she was angry, too, for the pocketbook she had lost contained a good deal of money.

"Yes, I'll go," she said, then added, turning quickly to her principal: "That is, if you don't mind, Miss Walters."

Miss Walters still looked troubled, but she shook her head slowly.

"I think it will be all right," she said, adding as the boys started eagerly off: "Only be careful, boys, and don't get hurt. The man may be desperate if he finds himself cornered."

The girls started to follow the boys, but Miss Walters checked them.

"You can't help," she said when they looked at her reproachfully. "And since I'm responsible for you, you will stay right here."

Meanwhile, the boys and Miss Race were running down the road. Yes, even Miss Race, who was never *very* dignified, was running.

Suddenly they came to a trampled place in the road, showing that some struggle had taken place there.

"It was right here," said Miss Race, her eyes black with excitement. "And he ran across the road and disappeared in that thick mass of bushes. Then he covered me with his gun and told me to 'beat it while the beating was good.'"

"The rat!" cried Chet indignantly. "Come on, fellows! I want to get my hands on that rascal."

Eagerly the boys started for the woods, but Teddy turned back suddenly and called to Miss Race.

"You'd better go back now," he said, and Miss Race's eyes twinkled at his grown-up tone. "There isn't anything more you can do, and if there are any bullets flying around we don't want you to get them. Please," he added impatiently, as she did not move.

"No, I'm going to stay right here," she answered him firmly, and when Miss Race spoke in that tone everybody knew that she meant what she said. "Go along, but don't take too many risks. Remember the man is armed."

So Teddy disappeared after his comrades and Miss Race waited nervously in the road, expecting

she hardly knew what.

It seemed a long time that she stood there, dreading any moment to hear a shot, blaming herself for sending the boys on such a hunt.

"I'd rather lose a hundred pocketbooks," she scolded herself, "than have a finger of one of those boys hurt. I wish I hadn't said anything about it."

As for the boys, they were beginning to despair of ever finding the thief and were calling themselves all sorts of names for ever thinking they would, when suddenly Chet walked out of the woods and almost upon him.

It was so sudden that the boy almost yelled in his surprise, but all he really did was clap his hand over his mouth and stare. For he had come so softly that the man had not even heard him.

He was crouched over something that Chet could not see—probably the stolen pocketbook. His revolver lay beside him on the ground, close to his right hand.

With his heart in his mouth—for after all, with all his courage, he was only a boy and the robber was a man, and armed at that—Chet crept forward, fearful each second of stepping on a twig and giving his presence away.

Nearer and nearer he crept, hardly daring to breathe, until he was right behind the thief and the revolver was almost under his feet.

Then with a motion as quick as a cat's, he stooped and caught tip the revolver. The next moment he stepped quickly back and covered the thief with it.

"Hands up!" he cried. "Quick there, before I shoot!"

So sudden, so noiseless, had been his action that the thief was taken completely by surprise. With an exclamation he reached his hand out for his revolver, then, not finding it, stumbled to his feet.

"Hands up!" cried Chet sharply. "Quick, now. This blamed thing might go off."

The man's hands went up, but he still kept his back to Chet, his little furtive eyes glancing about for a means of escape.

"Turn around," Chet commanded, then as the man did not move he clicked the trigger meaningly. "Say, I think you want to taste the lead in this thing," he added, and there was something in his tone, boyish though it was, that made the man turn quickly.

Chet uttered a gasp of recognition.

"So it *is* you," he said. "I thought it was all the time, but I couldn't be sure till I'd seen the color of your eyes. So you're really the 'Codfish.' Please to meet you, old man."

"Say, cut that out," snarled the "Codfish," making as though to spring upon Chet, but the latter waved his pistol and the man evidently changed his mind, for he stood where he was, hands above his head, eyes glaring.

"And so there's the pocketbook and the nice fat roll of money you just stole from the Three Towers teacher," Chet went on, his glance shifting from the man to the pocketbook with the money stuffed hastily in it where the man had left it on the ground. "You thought it was easy, didn't you? Well, you didn't know you had me to reckon with." Chet was boy enough to want to strut a little. Never before had he had a chance to play the real hero. He probably never would have again, so he wanted to make the most of this.

"You little puppy!" the man spat out at him. "You think you can get the best of me, don't you? Let me tell you, no kid can do that."

He made a sudden lunge forward, and Chet, taken by surprise, stepped backward, caught his foot in a root and stumbled a little.

He recovered himself in a minute, but in that little space of time the "Codfish" had gone, disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him up.

Then Chet went mad. To have had the thief and then to lose him! He started off wildly into the woods, but his foot struck against something, and, looking down, he saw the pocketbook with the money still in it.

He picked it up, feeling that he had partly played the hero anyway, for if he had not caught the thief, he had at least recovered the money.

Then he started off on his hunt again, and this time almost stepped into the arms of Ferd and Teddy.

"Say, what's the row?" the former yelled at him. "We heard the talking, and thought we'd have a look—say, stop pointing that thing at me, will you?"

"Then get out of my way," yelled Chet, his mind on only one thing. He must catch the "Codfish." "I'm after the thief, I tell you! Get out of my way!"

"Say, has he gone crazy?" asked Teddy. Then his eyes fell on the pocketbook that Chet was still

holding tight in his hands.

"He got the money! Say, Ferd, he got the money! Chet you're some hero. Where's the thief?"

By this time Chet knew he had no chance of catching the "Codfish," who, now that he was discovered, was probably running into hiding as fast as he could, so he turned back with the boys and began excitedly to tell them what had happened.

"And you really had him and you let him go again!" cried Ferd in disgust. "Well, you poor old fish!"

"I got the money, anyway, didn't I?" Chet defended himself, adding in a superior tone: "It's more than any of you did, I guess."

"You're some boy, Chet," Teddy repeated heartily. "Come on and let's tell the good news to Miss Race. Make believe she won't be glad to see her wealth again."

"Where are the other fellows?" Chet asked, as they started back.

"Oh, they'll be along soon," said Ferd indifferently. "When they can't find old 'Codfish' they'll come wandering back again."

"I wonder if Miss Race has waited," said Teddy, adding as he came near the roadway: "Yes, there she is, looking pretty white and scared, too."

As they clumped through the heavy bushes Ferd looked at Chet gloomily.

"Say, make believe I don't envy you, you lucky dog," he said slangily. "Gosh, all the girls will be wanting to skate with you and everything now."

"Sure! Well be left out in the cold," added Teddy mournfully.

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## CHAPTER XXI

### RAIDING THE PANTRY

As a matter of fact, Teddy and Ferd and all the other boys, too, were left out in the cold more than even they had expected.

Miss Race greeted rapturously the return of her money. And as for the girls—well, they hung around Chet, showering him with questions and praise until it was really a wonder they did not spoil him entirely.

But when the first excitement was over, the boys had gone home, and everything was quiet again, they could not help feeling sorry that Chet had not kept the Codfish when he had him. And Miss Walters, though she said nothing to the girls, was more worried than any of them.

"Why, we'll be afraid to go out at all after dark," Billie said, wide-eyed and excited.

"And I'm sure I'll dream of him every night," Laura added with a shudder.

But as the days went by the girls found other things to worry about than the Codfish. They were having more and more trouble with Miss Ada and Miss Cora. Then one day there came news that brought the whole matter to a head.

Miss Walters had received a telegram calling her away suddenly and had no way of knowing just when she would be back.

And in the meantime—this part of the news the girls received in horror-stricken silence—Miss Ada Dill and Miss Cora Dill were to be left in entire charge of Three Towers Hall.

It was nothing less than tragedy to the girls, for they knew that now at last the "Dill Pickles" had their chance. And they knew, too, that Miss Ada and Miss Cora would make the most of it.

The day came when Miss Walters left, and the girls watched her go with puckered brows and stormy eyes.

"The meals have been bad enough, goodness knows," Laura grumbled, as they gathered up their books for the first class. "But now I suppose we won't get anything to eat."

"We'll just be prisoners, that's all," said Billie, her eyes rebellious. "I know Miss Cora's hated me from the very first, and now she'll be able to do just about what she pleases to me. But if she gets too funny, I'll—well, I don't know what I'll do," she ended rather helplessly.

And during the next week the girls' worst fears were realized. All the liberty that they had enjoyed under Miss Walters was taken away from them, and, as Billie had predicted, they were practically prisoners.

That they could have stood perhaps; at least until Miss Walters returned. But that was by no means the worst of it.

The two Miss Dills had always said that the girls could get along just as well on far less to eat. In fact, Miss Ada was positive they could study better if "they didn't cram themselves so full of food." And now they set to work to prove their theory.

The meals became skimpier and skimpier, until one day after the noon meal the girls left the table feeling positively hungry.

The afternoon seemed unbearably long, and for the life of them they could not keep their minds on their books. All they could think of was delicious juicy steaks, French-fried potatoes, chicken pie and strawberry short cake.

And when girl after girl failed in her recitations, Miss Cora and Miss Ada scolded them so harshly and said such sarcastic things that it brought the angry red to their faces. But, as the girls said later, they were "almost too hungry to fight back."

Two more days passed with conditions getting worse and worse until the girls were becoming weak from lack of food. Two of the younger girls became faint and sick.

"We can't stand this much longer," said Billie.

The girls were gathered in Billie's dormitory after supper, and one by one girls from the other dormitories joined them. It was fast becoming a mass meeting.

"We simply can't stand it," Billie went on, her little fists clenched angrily at her side. "It's all right if they want to take our liberty away. We can stand that for a little while, until Miss Walters comes back. But when they begin to starve us——"

"But what are we going to do?" asked one girl, helplessly.

"We could run 'em out, I suppose," said one of the older girls gloomily. "But I suppose we'd be run out ourselves as soon as Miss Walters got back."

"I don't see why Miss Walters left 'The Pickles' in charge, anyway," spoke up another of the girls fretfully. "She knew how horrid they were and how they've all the time been picking on us girls."

"Well, I don't see that it makes any difference why Miss Walters did it," Billie broke in, and there was something in her tone that made the girls stop talking and look at her expectantly. "The fact is, she has left the 'Dill Pickles' in charge and they're trying to starve us to death. Now what I want to know is this: Are we just going to stand around and let them do it? Or are we going to fight?"

"Fight!" they cried, their pale faces beginning to flush with hope.

"What do you want us to do, Billie?" asked Laura eagerly.

"Listen and I'll tell you." She leaned forward and one could almost have heard a pin drop in the room. "There's only one way I know of that we can get food that 'The Pickles' don't give to us."

"And that?"

"Is to raid the pantry and storeroom," said Billie, her eyes gleaming. "We'll probably find plenty of cooked things in the pantry, and if we don't, we'll go on into the storeroom and get canned sardines and vegetables and soup. I know I don't care what I eat, as long as I get enough of it."

The girls were silent a minute, staring at Billie half hopefully, half fearfully. To raid the pantry and storeroom? It had never been done in all the history of Three Towers. It would be open rebellion! And yet they were hungry—terribly hungry—two of them had been faint and sick from lack of food.

"Will you do it?" asked Billie, her eyes blazing at them.

"We will!" they almost shouted, and then rose such a pandemonium that Billie, trying to scream above the noise, found her voice drowned completely.

After a minute they quieted down a little—enough to listen to her, anyway.

"Please don't make so much noise," she begged. "We'll be likely to make our raid a great deal easier if we wait until the cooks are gone and the teachers are in bed. We don't care if we are caught, but we don't want to be caught until after we've had something to eat."

The girls realized the common sense in this, but it was all they could do to be patient and wait. The thought of something to eat—all they wanted to eat—after a week of starvation made them ravenous, furiously impatient of delay.

The time passed at last, however, and when the "lights out" gong sounded through the hall the girls were apparently in bed and fast asleep.

Hardly five minutes had passed before the doors of the different dormitories opened, and the girls crept singly or in twos and threes toward the farther end of the hall until all the hundred-odd girls of Three Towers were gathered there except two. Two of them had stayed behind, and so absorbed were the other girls that they never noticed the absence of Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks.

It may be that Rose noticed, for as she left the dormitory she looked over at them and smiled a

little. She had guessed at the truth.

For Amanda and Eliza disliked Billie so bitterly that they would even go hungry for the chance of getting even with her. Miss Ada and Miss Cora would be very glad to know who had been the ring-leader in the rebellion!

In the meantime the girls, satisfied that every one was present, had started softly down the back stairs which led them by the shortest way to the kitchen.

As Billie had said, they did not care if they were discovered, except that if they were caught they would probably have a harder time getting what they wanted.

Billie was in the lead with Vi and Laura close behind her. They hardly made any noise at all, and before they knew it they were facing the closed door that led to the kitchen.

Billie swung it open cautiously and looked inside. The kitchen was dark, but she knew where the electric switch was, and the next minute the room was flooded with light.

The sudden glare rather frightened the girls, and they hesitated for a moment—but only a moment. They were terribly hungry, and just across the kitchen was the pantry, and back of that, the storeroom.

"Come on, girls," Billie whispered. "Here's where we get the best of 'The Pickles.'"

They found cold ham in the refrigerator, they found bread and butter and crackers and jam. In the twinkling of an eye all these dainties had disappeared, and they were looking around for more.

Next they raided the storeroom. They found tiers upon tiers of canned goods, and Billie, because she was the first to find a can-opener, was pronounced "official can-opener," and opened cans till her arm ached.

But how good that stolen food tasted! They ate ravenously. They ate with knives and forks and spoons, and when these ran short, they even ate with their hands. And by and by the brightness came back to their eyes, the color to their cheeks, and they chattered like joyful magpies.

When they could eat no more, they filled their pockets with biscuits and crackers and started back the way they had come.

But they only started, for as Billie opened the door that led to the stairs she found herself face to face with Miss Cora, Miss Ada, Miss Race and several of the junior teachers.

In the background—triumphant smiles upon their faces—lurked Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### A CHALLENGE

The girls stood still, awaiting they did not know what, while Miss Ada and Miss Cora swept into the room followed by the other teachers, Amanda and the Shadow. The Misses Dill carried their noses high in the air, and there was a grim expression around their mouths. But as the girls glanced from them to Miss Race they saw that the latter looked troubled.

"Amanda and Eliza did it," Laura whispered fiercely in Billie's ear. "They waited behind and told on us—the sneaks! Oh, how I wish——"

"Silence!" cried Miss Cora Dill, glaring at Laura. "If there is any talking done in this place to-night, I expect to do it."

She paused a minute, sweeping the girls with an icy glance, then her eyes rested accusingly upon Billie.

"Three Towers," she said then, "has never before been the scene of such a disgraceful happening. It is preposterous, unthinkable! I shudder to think of what will happen when Miss Walters hears the truth.

"And of course," she added, her eyes still fixed upon Billie, "you girls would never have thought of such a thing if you hadn't been put up to it. Fortunately, I have been able to learn the name of the —person," the word held so much of contempt that Billie's face burned, "who started this disgraceful affair."

By one accord the girls turned accusing eyes upon Amanda and Eliza, but the latter only tossed their heads and looked defiant.

"Beatrice Bradley"—Miss Cora almost spit out the name—"step forward, if you please."

Poor Billie wanted desperately to run away somewhere and hide. But she held her head high, and her eyes met Miss Cora's squarely.

"I want you to tell the truth," said Miss Cora, angered by what she took to be the insolence of the girl. "Did you or did you not propose this outrageous affair?"

But this was more than the girls would stand for. Before Billie had a chance to answer there arose from different parts of the room a score of voices raised in protest.

"We all did it."

"Billie isn't any more to blame than the rest of us."

"It isn't fair."

"We were all in it together."

Billie had so many defenders that the noise they made completely drowned Miss Cora's voice and prevented her from speaking for several moments. This, of course, only served to make her angrier than before.

"I didn't ask you all to talk," she said, when at last she could make herself heard. "It seemed to me I was speaking to Beatrice Bradley. I will ask it once more," turning to Billie, who was rather white now. "Were you or were you not the ring-leader of this affair?"

There was absolute quiet in the room while the girls waited miserably for Billie's answer. They knew her well enough to know what it would be, even before she spoke.

Then Billie lifted her head and said quietly:

"Yes, Miss Dill, I was the one who started the trouble. I don't think any of the girls would have thought of it if it hadn't been for me."

A ripple of protest rose behind her, but Miss Dill waved it down angrily.

"Then by your own confession," she said, something of triumph gleaming in her eyes, "you have not only broken all the rules of Three Towers but you have incited the rest of the girls to do likewise. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"No, Miss Dill." Billie's voice was so low it could hardly be heard.

"You are not even sorry?" Miss Cora went on relentlessly.

"No," said Billie, lifting her head and looking Miss Cora straight in the eyes. "We have been nearly starved since Miss Walters left, and some of the girls have been sick from hunger." Her voice rose a little and the color came back to her face as she flung out a challenge like a flag of war. "I'm sorry, Miss Dill, but if I had to, I would do it all over again."

Miss Cora looked as if she doubted the evidence of her ears, while a murmur of applause went up from the girls. Oh, but they were proud of Billie!

"You have heard what she said," Miss Cora Dill turned to the teachers behind her. "Such insolence can only result in expulsion. Beatrice Bradley, come with me. The rest of you," she turned fiercely upon the other girls, "will go up to your dormitories. To-morrow I will deal with you."

As Billie, dread in her heart at that awful word "expulsion," started toward Miss Cora Dill, Caroline Brant caught her hand and whispered reassuringly in her ear.

"Don't worry," she said. "They won't dare expel you. When Miss Walters hears all about it she will be more than likely to expel them!"

Billie gave her a wan little smile, squeezed her hand gratefully, and was promptly taken into custody by Miss Cora. Then the teachers stood aside while the rest of the girls filed past them upstairs.

In the dormitories all was confusion. Sleep was out of the question, and the girls gathered in excited groups discussing the terrible thing that had happened to them, half wishing for Miss Walters, yet half afraid to have her come back. Suppose she should side with the "Dill Pickles"? Then all would indeed be lost.

But Billie was their chief worry.

"Why didn't she fib about it?" cried one girl, pacing up and down excitedly. "We would all have backed her up. She knew that."

"But Billie doesn't fib," said Vi proudly. "And besides, it wouldn't have done her any good. Amanda and the Shadow had already told, and they were right here in the dorm when we were planning the raid."

Fiercely the girls looked around for the sneaks; but they were nowhere to be seen.

"Probably 'The Pickles' are taking good care of the little darlings," sneered Laura. "Oh, how I'd like to get my hands on them!"

"What's the matter, Rose?" asked Caroline Brant suddenly. "Don't you feel good?"

For Rose was sitting on the edge of her bed, her head bowed on her clasped hands. At Caroline's



question she raised her head and looked around her miserably.

"No, I don't feel good. I—I have a headache," she said.

The girls regarded her curiously for a minute, and then forgot all about her. They had worse things than headaches to worry about.

Rose did indeed have a headache, but the headache was mostly caused by a heartache. She herself did not quite understand it.

Billie had at last been singled out from all the other girls for punishment, would perhaps be expelled from Three Towers Hall, and where she, Rose, should have been happy about it, she was only miserable.

Of course she had really had no hand in Billie's disgrace—this time. But she had planned and schemed for it before, and that made her almost as bad in her own eyes as those two wretched sneaks whom all the girls hated and despised. If they could only know what had been in her mind they would hate and despise her, too!

Her head felt hot and her lips were feverish. It was a terrible thing to despise oneself. The only way she could ever put things straight again was to find some way of getting Billie out of her scrape. She must think of a plan!

Suddenly she jumped to her feet, and the girls turned startled eyes upon her.

"I have it!" she cried. "We must get word to Miss Walters. If she could know what an awful fix we're in, she'd come right back. I'm sure she would."

The girls stared for a minute—then seized eagerly on the plan.

"But how can we get word to her if we haven't her address?" Connie Danvers asked. But Rose answered her impatiently.

"I've thought of that," she said, then went on to explain while the girls listened eagerly how she had taken some letters to the mail box for Miss Race, and, happening to glance down, had seen that the top one was addressed to Miss Walters.

Luckily she remembered the address, and now when one of the girls handed her a slip of paper she wrote it down feverishly.

"But how are we going to get word to her?" asked one of the girls, and they looked at each other helplessly. "'The Pickles' won't let anybody outside the Hall, and they'll look over all the mail."

They were still trying to think of a plan when a step in the hall—a step that sounded very much like Miss Ada Dill's firm tread—sent them scattering.

A little later silence settled like a cloud over the dormitories, but few of the girls slept. They were thinking—thinking—

By and by Laura leaned across and whispered to Vi.

"Asleep?" she asked.

"No, I can't sleep," said Vi miserably. "I keep thinking of Billie and where they've put her and—and—everything."

"Well, I've thought of a real plan," whispered Laura mysteriously.

"You have?" cried Vi, sitting up in her turn. "What is it?"

But in the darkness Laura shook her head.

"Not now," she said. "I'll tell you in the morning."

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### A PRISONER OF WAR

It was a bad night for all the girls, but for Billie Bradley it was a nightmare. Miss Cora Dill had thrust her into a little room just big enough to contain a couch, a table, and one or two chairs.

When Billie had asked for a light the door had been slammed in her face and she had heard the key turn in the lock.

So she was a prisoner—and in disgrace. All her dreams had come to that. Miss Cora had said she would be expelled from Three Towers Hall when Miss Walters heard what she had done.

But in her heart Billie did not believe that. The hope that when Miss Walters was told everything she would side with the girls was the only thing that kept her from being absolutely miserable. For Miss Walters was always fair.

Billie had never been afraid of the dark. She was not really afraid of it now. But as the hours crept by and the place became still with the stillness of midnight, she began to feel uneasy and very, very lonesome.

The silence was so deep that she was afraid to move for fear of breaking it, but at last, because her limbs were cramping and she was beginning to feel chilled, she rose from the couch where she had been sitting and began moving cautiously about the room.

She stubbed her toe against one chair and almost fell over the other, making so much noise that her heart stood still and she looked fearfully over her shoulder. Finally she came over to the couch again and sank down upon it, feeling that she must cry or die.

But she did not do either, just sat there thinking and thinking what she could do next. She would have to sleep, she supposed, although Miss Cora had not given her any nightgown and there were no bedclothes.

Then a happy thought struck her, and she turned down the cover of the couch and found, as she had hoped, that the couch was made up as a bed. There were several rooms like this in Three Towers—rooms used only when there was an overflow of students. Billie remembered having heard the girls speak of them as "cubby holes."

But Billie was tired and unhappy, and all of a sudden her only wish was to get within the protection of those covers. Perhaps it would not then seem so lonesome and she was cold.

After that she knew no more till morning.

It was a dark, dreary morning with a bite in the air that felt like snow. There was no sign of sunshine anywhere, either outside or inside of Three Towers Hall.

The girls rose reluctantly, and there was rebellion in their eyes. They were on the verge of revolt, and it needed only one more unfair act on the part of Miss Cora or Miss Ada Dill to start the ball rolling.

"Are we going down to breakfast?" asked Laura, as the breakfast gong rang.

"I suppose we'd better," answered Caroline Brant, her eyes looking tired and red-rimmed under the spectacles. "We have to eat, anyway. After we get through we can come up here and decide what we're going to do."

"Well, I know one thing we're going to do," said Laura fiercely. "If the Dill Pickles don't let Billie come back to us, or at least tell us where she is, I'm going to set the place on fire, that's all."

"That wouldn't help Billie any," said Rose, as they turned from the room.

Breakfast was gloomier than ever that morning. The girls were heavy-eyed and sullen, and Miss Cora, presiding grimly at the head of the table, looked, as one of the older girls said, "like a death's head at the feast."

"But where was the feast?" another girl retorted.

In fact this meal was scantier than any that had gone before, and if it had not been for the night's raid the girls would have been in a pretty bad way.

Amanda and the "Shadow" were there, and if looks could kill, they would have both died on the spot. But there was no sign of Billie. The girls had hardly thought there would be, but they had hoped.

A little while later there was another mass meeting held in dormitory "C," and it was Rose Belser this time who took the floor.

"We simply can't stand it any longer, girls," she told them, her black eyes snapping. "Wasn't that a wonderful breakfast we had this morning? It makes you sick to think of it. And we don't even know whether Billie got as much as we did. We've got to do something right away. We can try to get word to Miss Walters. I have her address, but I don't know how we're ever going to—"

She was interrupted by a familiar whistle from somewhere outside, and the girls ran over to the window. Sure enough, there were Chet and Teddy, looking, to the girls, like a couple of heaven-sent messengers, standing underneath the window, skates flung over their shoulders, looking up toward them expectantly.

"Wait a minute," Laura called down, "Don't dare go away from there. You're angels, and have come just when we wanted you most."

She turned a radiant face to the girls and began to speak hurriedly.

"I had it all figured out last night, girls," she said, while they listened eagerly. "When you told me you knew Miss Walters' address, Rose, I thought of the boys right away. There was just a chance that they might come over this morning or this afternoon. And now they're here."

"Well?" they asked, puzzled.

"Oh, don't you see?" Laura clapped her hands impatiently. "The 'Dill Pickles' won't let any of us send word to Miss Walters, but the boys can do it for us."

Before she had finished a dozen girls were scrambling for pencil and paper, Laura was pushed into a chair by the table and was commanded to write and write quickly.

And Laura obeyed while the girls fairly hung over her, offering suggestions, and all talking at once until it was a wonder she could write anything at all.

She told the boys briefly what had happened and begged them to send word to Miss Walters at once. Then they tied the precious piece of paper around an inkwell—who cared for the wreck of a mere inkwell at a time like this?—and threw it out of the window.

Teddy picked it up wonderingly and unwound the paper, while Chet peered over his shoulder and the girls watched breathlessly from above. When Teddy came to the part about Billie's capture he was all for storming the castle, meeting the "Lions in their den, the Pickles in their hall," and rescuing the heroine without delay. But Chet held him back.

After that they had what seemed to be a rather heated argument, but Chet finally got the best of it, and after a wave to the girls, who were fairly hanging out of the dormitory windows, the two boys started off and disappeared around the corner of the building.

The girls watched them out of sight, then turned to each other with shining eyes.

"That ought to bring Miss Walters back in a hurry," said Vi. "Then everything will be all right."

"Yes, but we may starve before she gets here," said one of the girls gloomily.

"And Billie! Oh, girls, we've just got to get her out!" added Laura. "Nobody knows where she is or what they're doing to her."

Without warning, the door opened and Billie herself flew in upon them.

"Girls," she cried breathlessly, "can't you hide me somewhere? I've—I've—escaped!"

"Escaped!" they cried, crowding around her, all asking questions at once, feeling her, to be sure that it was really she, until Billie made frantic signs for them to be quiet.

"Girls," she cried, "please stop talking and listen to me. Miss Cora will find that I'm gone in a minute, and she's sure to come right here for me."

"Well, she won't get you, that's one sure thing," cried Laura staunchly.

"But tell us about it," urged another girl. "Did they have you locked up?"

"Yes," said Billie, adding with a shiver: "And I had a terrible night. But this morning Miss Cora herself brought me some breakfast—I wish you could have seen it—and she was just saying some nice mean things to me when Miss Race called her away for something, said it was important. Miss Cora went out without locking the door. So I didn't stop for anything, I just ran. I had something I wanted to tell you."

"Good old Miss Race," Connie interrupted, her eyes shining. "I bet she just did it on purpose."

"But listen," Billie broke in hurriedly. "I thought of something while I was locked up, and I want to tell you about it before they catch me again. It's about getting news to Miss Walters. The boys will probably be around this morning, and if you could let them know——"

"But we've already done that," interrupted a score of eager voices, and Billie clapped her hands delightedly.

"Good!" she cried. Then her face sobered again and she looked nervously toward the door. "I suppose Miss Cora will be along in a minute, and she'll want to lock me up again. And I suppose she'll be so mad at my getting away that she won't give me anything to eat now."

But suddenly Rose jumped to her feet, face flushed, eyes shining. This was her chance to square herself with Billie and all the rest.

"Tell me something, girls," she cried. "Are we going to let Miss Cora have Billie? Are we?"

"We are not!" they cried lustily; and Billie suddenly saw them through a mist of tears.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE CAPTURE

The girls expected trouble and they had not long to wait for it. They had left Billie inside the dormitory, had gone into the hall, closed the door after them firmly and had defiantly placed themselves before it.

They rather welcomed the sight of Miss Cora, stiff-backed and stern-lipped, bearing down upon them like a tug of war. They had learned in their history, that in "union there is strength," and now they were about to test the truth of it. If one of them felt her courage slipping, all she had to do was to think of the breakfast they had had that morning and, presto, it was all back again.

Miss Cora stopped as she came to the foremost girls, and her eyes swept them coldly.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked, adding as the girls did not show any intention of moving: "Let me pass, at once."

Then Rose stepped forward a little and drawled, in the insolent tone that only Rose knew how to use.

"Where are you going, Miss Dill?"

Miss Cora looked as stunned as if she had been hit on the head with a hammer. That one of the girls should have the insolence—the absolute impertinence—to ask her, Miss Cora Dill, where she was going!

Then a hot wave of anger flowed over her, and she found her voice.

"Where I am going has nothing to do with it, whatever," she said, her voice icy. "I command you to stand away from that door."

Then it was Caroline Brant who spoke in her quiet, calm voice.

"We will be glad to do as you say, Miss Dill," she said, "if you will promise not to lock Billie Bradley up again."

"Promise—not to lock——?" gasped Miss Cora. Then she turned upon the girls with blazing eyes. "You are mad—all of you!" she said, her voice shaking with fury. "I will wire Miss Walters at once!" and she turned away down the hall, her hands so tightly clenched that her nails left little angry red marks where they had bit into the flesh.

The girls watched her go—then turned back into the dormitory with a sigh. They had won a victory, and yet they were not happy about it. Except that Billie was free, things were even worse than before.

"Now I don't know what we're going to do," said Vi, gazing drearily out of the window. The leaden sky had turned still darker and a flurry of snow had begun to fall.

The gong for classes rang out through the hall and the girls started and looked at each other questioningly. Several of them began to gather up their books, but Billie, who had been thinking deeply, suddenly sprang to her feet.

"Listen, girls," she said, and they looked at her questioningly. "It seems to me there's only one thing left for us to do. We can't go to classes, not after what we've just done, and we can't stay around here till Miss Walters comes. The Pickles will surely starve us to death."

She paused for a moment and they looked at her expectantly. Then she lowered her voice and spoke quickly.

"Let's go home," she said. "Or at least we can go to the hotel in town till Miss Walters gets back. What do you say?"

And not one of the girls but what hailed the idea joyfully. It would be rebellion, of course; and a few days before they would have hesitated. But not now.

They set about packing in feverish haste, fairly throwing their things into their suitcases. They were afraid of having their plans spoiled at the last minute. And in Molata they could get all they wanted to eat; that is, as long as their money held out.

At last they were ready. Hats and coats on, valises in hand, they gathered in the hall waiting for Billie to give the word to march.

Eyes were bright, color was high, for they had started on real adventure and they were beginning to enjoy it.

"Come on," said Billie, raising her hand smartly to the little brown hat in salute. "For-ward march!"

As they reached the lower hall they were met by Miss Ada Dill and Miss Cora, Miss Race and several of the other teachers. The latter had feared trouble when the girls failed to report at classes, and had started out to see what the matter was.

And now they saw! Before they could even gasp their amazement the girls swept past them, opened the front door, and ran down the steps to the drive. There were only about a hundred of them, but it seemed to the teachers who watched them go that there were easily twice that number.

"They've struck," said Miss Race, turning to the other teachers with consternation in her eyes, while they looked back at her soberly. "I wonder what Miss Walters will say."

"We'll very soon find out what she'll say," Miss Cora Dill spoke up grimly. "I sent a wire to Miss Walters this morning. She will surely be back in a day or two."

Meanwhile, out on the road, the girls were trudging gamely on toward town. The first thrill had gone from the adventure, and they were beginning to wonder what made their grips so heavy.

And the snow, which had begun in a light flurry, was coming down heavily now, covering the woods and the road before them with a white fleecy blanket.

The wind had risen, too, and they were forced to stop time and time again to straighten hats and shake the clinging snow from their skirts.

And because of the wind they did not hear the sound of voices. So that Chet and Teddy, coming back from their errand to town, were almost upon them before they knew it.

And then something happened that made the girls drop their bags and stare in stupid amazement.

Out from the bushes straight in front of them sprang the figure of a man. And at the same moment Chet and Teddy rounded the curve of the road.

The man straightened and looked wildly from one group to the other, and then made as though to double on his tracks and dive into the woods again.

"Stop that man!" shouted Teddy. "He robbed our Academy! That's right, girls—head him off!"

For Billie, with a gasp of astonishment, had recognized the Codfish, and seeing what he was about to do had darted forward straight in his path. A score of the other girls followed her example, and so quickly was the move made that the man found his escape cut off entirely.

Wildly he looked about him, started in the other direction, but found his path blocked there also.

With a snarl of rage he flung himself forward, resolved to break his way through by force, but Teddy and Chet were too quick for him.

Not for nothing had they won medals on the track team, and now, as the thief made his last attempt, his arms were caught in a strong grip and were twisted behind him so suddenly that he cried out with the pain of it.

It was Teddy who had caught him, and now as the man struggled to free himself he called out a sharp order to Chet.

"Give me your skate strap, quick," he cried. "This chap's as slippery as an eel. What are you doing?"

For Chet, seeing that the Codfish was struggling to get his imprisoned hands down to a suspicious bulge over his right hip, sprang forward and drew the hidden revolver from its holster.

"The game's up, old man," he crowed exultantly. Then, turning, he handed the pistol to Billie. "Keep him covered, old girl," he said, "till I get this strap loose and handcuff the gentleman. That's the girl! Steady, Mr. Codfish—we've got you now."

The Codfish made as though to spring upon Billie, revolver and all, but Billie kept her head. Several of the girls screamed, but she was not one of them.

She stepped back a few steps and waved the revolver threateningly. She was "horribly afraid of the old thing," but not for the world would she have let any one suspect it.

"If you don't stand still I'll shoot," she said, a quaver in her voice despite all her efforts to speak calmly. "I've got this thing aimed at just about where your heart is, I guess."

The Codfish glared at her wildly, hesitated just a minute, but that hesitation cost him his chance. Chet had at last got his skate strap loose, and had bound it tightly about the man's wrists, while Teddy still held his arms tight to prevent a sudden dash into the woods.

"Now I guess we've got you," cried Teddy jubilantly. "You will rob our Academy, will you, and expect to get away with it? Now I guess the next thing is to hand you over to the first policeman we meet. Come on now, forward march."

"But did he really rob your Academy?" asked Laura eagerly, as the girls picked up their grips where they had dropped them in the road and they all started on together.

"I'll say he did!" said Chet indignantly. "And he got away with a pretty haul, too. That's what we were going to tell you girls about this morning. But say—" he broke off and looked at them with a funny expression on his face, "we've been so busy catching the crook that we never thought! Say, where are you going with your suitcases and everything? And—and how did Billie get loose? The last we heard of her, she was locked up."

"Yes, what is it—a walkout?" asked Teddy, looking in bewilderment from Billie to the other girls. But suddenly Rose gave a sharp cry of warning.

"The Codfish," she cried. "Look out!"

For Teddy, in his bewilderment, had loosened his grip of the thief's arm, and the latter had taken this chance to make a dash for liberty.

With a kangaroo leap Teddy was upon him, and Chet, snatching the pistol from Billie's hand, pointed it threateningly.

"None of that, old chap!" he cried. "You'd better be a good little boy or you'll get a taste of

something worse than prison. Now, then, forward march, and mind your Ps and Qs."

The Codfish shot a glance at Chet that made the girls shiver, but he went ahead, nevertheless.

"We ought to meet the sheriff and his hick policemen pretty soon," said Chet, keeping his eyes and his pistol fixed unwaveringly on the captive's back, while Teddy gripped his arm with both hands and the girls crowded close behind. "He pulled off this stunt last night, and Captain Shelling, the owner of our school, sent us to town to notify the police."

"Oh," said Billie thoughtfully. "So that was where you were going this morning when you stopped at the Hall. What's that?" she added as the sound of voices, somewhat muffled by the storm, reached them.

"I hope it's the sheriff," said Teddy, hurrying his captive forward through the snow. "Say, I'm glad we caught this fellow now before he had a chance to make off with what he stole. We may have a chance of getting it back."

They turned a curve in the road and saw a party of half a dozen men coming toward them on a run.

"The sheriff!" yelled Teddy. "Here's some more luck."

But the sheriff's party seemed almost more surprised at sight of the hundred-odd girls from Three Towers Hall than they were delighted to see the boys and their captive.

They were more interested in the Codfish, however, and promptly took him into custody, exchanging real handcuffs for the strap the boys had used.

The boys eagerly told the story of his capture, giving the girls more credit for their part of it than they deserved, or so the latter protested, and the sheriff and his party listened with delighted grins.

"Pretty good work," said one of them approvingly. "You couldn't have done any better if you'd planned it. Well, good day to you, and thanks. We'll soon put this rascal where he won't do more stealing of other people's goods. Get up there, will you?" and he gave the sullen Codfish a push that sent him staggering up the road in front of them.

Before the party disappeared the sheriff turned once more to look back curiously at the girls and boys who were still standing in the road, staring after them.

"Well, I'll be jiggered, but that is curious," he said, shaking his head doubtfully. "Looks as if all of Three Towers Hall had turned out for an outing."

"Humph, funny kind of weather for an outing," replied another one. "They didn't have a teacher with 'em, either. Pretty queer, I call it."

"Well," said another, philosophically chewing a huge cud of tobacco, "I call it lucky. If those girls hadn't happened along just when they did we wouldn't have got hold of this bird so slick. And who am I, to be quarreling with fate?"

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## CHAPTER XXV

### HAPPY AGAIN

"Gee, that was some slick work!" crowed Teddy Jordon exultantly. "Who'd ever think we would catch the old Codfish. But say——" he broke off, his face growing sober as he looked at the girls. "You haven't told us yet just why you're taking this tramp in the snow. What's the idea—a health cure or something?"

"No, it isn't a health cure," explained Billie, a trifle wearily, for now that the excitement of catching the Codfish was over the girls were beginning to feel cold and hungry and rather forlorn. "We're just leaving Three Towers, that's all."

"Leaving Three Towers!" the boys repeated incredulously. And Teddy added, seeing in a flash the real state of affairs: "Now I get the idea. You're striking, aren't you?"

Billie nodded.

"Say, that reminds me," said Chet. "We sent a telegram to Miss Walters asking her to come back at once. We sent it for you even before we told the police about the Codfish."

The girls brightened, and Billie darted forward eagerly and caught Chet by the sleeve.

"Oh, Chet, what did you tell her?" she cried. "Did you ask her to come back right away?"

Chet nodded importantly. "I told her enough to bring her back on the run, I guess," he said, adding with a grin: "I made up the telegram and Teddy paid for it."

"Oh, you darling!" cried Billie, hugging both the boys to the great delight of Teddy, who made the

girls giggle by asking if there was not another telegram he could send.

"Come on, girls," cried Billie, forgetting, in the hope of seeing Miss Walters again before long, that she was tired and hungry. "If we hurry we can get to town before the snow gets too deep."

"But, say," cried Teddy, as the girls started on their way, "aren't you even going to say good-bye to us? That's gratitude for you!"

The girls stopped short and looked surprised.

"Aren't you going to the town with us?" asked Vi.

"You needn't think that because you're on strike that we are, too," said Chet reproachfully. "Captain Shelling didn't give us the whole day off, you know."

"You deserve it just the same," said Connie Danvers. "He'll probably give you a week off and a medal when he learns how you caught the thief."

"But we couldn't have caught him if you girls hadn't come along," protested Teddy modestly. "If we get a holiday we'll see that you get one, too."

"We're taking ours now," laughed Billie. "Good-bye, boys; and thanks awfully for sending the telegram."

Teddy and Chet stood watching the girls as they trudged through the clinging snow, and when they turned away their faces were unusually sober.

"That's a plucky thing to do," said Teddy admiringly. "But I bet they would never have had the nerve to do it if Billie hadn't set them up to it."

"Billie's some class, isn't she?" Chet took him up eagerly. "Just look how she jumped in front of the Codfish. She might have been shot, but she never even thought of it. Say," he added, his chest swelling visibly with pride, "I've always thought I'd like a brother; but Billie's as good as a brother, any day."

"She's a sight better," Teddy contradicted fervently.

Tired but hopeful, the girls trudged the remaining distance to town and started up the main street toward the one big hotel in Molata. They strung down the street in what seemed an endless line, and people passing stared wonderingly and turned around for another look when the girls had passed them.

People gathered at the windows and in the door-ways to look at the strange procession, but the girls were too tired and hungry to notice them.

When they filed into the big summer hotel lobby, how the clerk at the desk and the few men gathered about did stare! A hundred girls, all pretty and daintily dressed, but seeming, by their suitcases and their clothes which were powdered thick with clinging wet snow, to have walked a good distance, were sure to create a sensation.

The girls hung back, realizing for the first time how they must appear to strangers and not quite certain just what to do next. But, as usual, Billie took the lead.

She went toward the clerk with an uncertain, apologetic little smile that would have softened a much harder heart than his and said that she would like to engage rooms for herself and her friends.

Be it said to the credit of the clerk, who was rather a nice looking boy with sand colored hair and eyes to match, that he did not even smile.

Soberly he asked Billie how many rooms she would need, and Billie turned to the girls rather helplessly. Then it was Caroline Brant who came to her aid.

"We can sleep three in a room," she said, regarding the clerk gravely through her horn-rimmed spectacles. "So you can figure out just how many we'll need."

"If we could have cots put in the rooms," Billie ventured, "we could get more than three in one room."

"All right," the clerk answered, still unsmiling, while several people had gathered around and were looking on with interest. "If you don't mind cots I guess I can fix you up all right. It's lucky that it's winter," he added, a little twinkle creeping into his nice eyes, "and that the hotel isn't crowded, or we might have to turn somebody out."

He watched the girls go up the stairway to the rooms above—for they had decided they would rather walk than wait for the elevator—then turned to one of the men lounging near with a chuckle.

"Nice kids," he said, regarding the signatures in the big book before him written in unmistakably girlish hands. "If they weren't dressed so well, I'd say it was an orphan asylum out for an airing."

Meanwhile the girls had decided that they were more hungry than they were tired, and so merely stopped to drop their bags in their rooms and brush a little of the clinging snow from their clothing before setting forth in search of food.

They had decided to separate into groups and to eat in different places so as not to attract too much attention, and they were gathered on the sidewalk in front of the hotel wondering just what to do next when suddenly one of the girls gave a startled cry.

"Girls—no, it isn't—yes, it is!" she cried, clutching the girl beside her hysterically. "Look! There's Miss Walters!"

"Where?"

"Oh, it can't be!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, there she is! There she is!"

And Miss Walters—for it was indeed she—attracted by the hubbub as were some other passersby, looked at the girls first curiously, then in astounded amazement. To her startled vision it seemed as if all the girls in the world were gathered there on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. And they were her girls—the girls of Three Towers Hall!

She hurried forward, feeling that the next moment she must wake up and find it all a dream, and the girls surged around her in an eager flood.

They were so wildly surprised and joyful at the unexpected meeting that they were almost ready to get down on their knees and thank the fates who had sent her to them just when they needed her most.

They all started to talk at once, but Miss Walters, having recovered a little from her first surprise and seeing that a curious crowd was beginning to gather, spoke to them authoritatively.

"Come inside," she said. "I can't imagine what has brought you here like this, but we certainly can't talk about it in the street."

She led the way through the doorway and into the hotel lobby, which was fortunately deserted. Then she sank down upon a couch and the girls gathered eagerly around her.

"Now suppose one of you tell me the meaning of all this," said Miss Walters, her blue eyes a little hard and accusing. She had no idea what had happened, but she knew that if the girls were responsible for this unheard of proceeding it would go hard with them. Miss Walters was fair and just, and because she was just she could be sternness itself where any disobedience on the part of the girls was concerned.

As for the girls themselves, all their old fears of expulsion came back at this attitude of their president, and they looked rather helplessly at each other.

Then Connie Danvers nudged Billie and whispered something in her ear. And Billie bravely did as she was asked, although, as she afterward said, her knees were trembling under her.

"Miss Walters," she began hesitatingly, as Miss Walters turned a steady gaze upon her, "I can explain why we are here and everything that has happened since you left—if you will let me," she finished rather timidly.

"That is just what I want you to do," said Miss Walters gravely.

As Billie told her story Miss Walters' expression changed, became less stern, and she leaned forward in amazement.

"You say that some of the girls were faint and sick from lack of food?" she asked once incredulously. "Why, it's—it's incredible. But go on," she interrupted herself impatiently. "What happened then?"

When Billie told of the raid, her imprisonment in the little room, her escape, and finally the decision of the girls to leave Three Towers and come to the hotel until Miss Walters' return, the latter jumped to her feet, her face flushing angrily.

"I'm glad I came just when I did," she said. "I was tempted to stay longer, but something told me that I might be needed, and that something was right. Come, girls, we'll hire all the taxis in town if we have to, and private automobiles, too, and get back to Three Towers immediately."

"We'll have to get our baggage," Billie suggested timidly.

"Your baggage?" queried Miss Walters absently, her mind on what she would do when she reached Three Towers.

"Yes, we left our bags in our rooms upstairs."

"Your rooms?" Miss Walters asked, then added with a compassionate smile that made her seem more beautiful than ever to the adoring girls: "Why, of course, you poor children! I forgot that you expected to stay over night. All right, run up and get your bags while I see the room clerk and about getting us back to Three Towers."

The girls never forgot that triumphant ride back to Three Towers through the snow. Nor did they forget what happened afterward.



Miss Ada and Miss Cora Dill and the other teachers saw them coming, and Miss Cora's lips tightened grimly. She was the first to greet Miss Walters at the door.

"Go up to your dormitories, girls," said Miss Walters, hardly glancing at the teachers. "We will have lunch in half an hour—a real lunch. Just a minute," she called, as the girls started jubilantly off. "I'd like to speak to Beatrice Bradley in my private office immediately."

Billie came back, wondering just what was going to happen next, while Laura picked up the suitcase she had dropped and hurriedly followed the other girls.

Then Miss Walters turned to the teachers.

"Will you all come with me into my office?" she asked. "There is a very important matter which I must attend to before I do anything else."

She walked down the corridor to her office and opened the door. Then she motioned them inside, stepped in after them and closed the door decidedly.

"Sit down, please," she said, and when they were all seated she sat down at her desk and regarded them gravely. "As you know," she said, "an unheard-of thing happened this morning, and I must have the testimony of every one before I can decide one way or the other."

Then very quietly she told of her meeting with the girls that morning and repeated almost word for word the story of what had happened during her absence as told by Billie and supported by the other girls.

The faces of Miss Ada and Miss Cora had been growing redder and redder, and now as Miss Walters finished and looked about her Miss Cora burst out angrily.

"I hardly expected that you would listen to the girls' account of it, Miss Walters," she said. "What they have said is not true."

"Pardon me, Miss Walters," Miss Race broke in, and they all turned to her, "but I can testify that everything that Beatrice Bradley has told you is absolute fact. I don't think that Miss Cora will deny," she turned to Miss Cora, who was white with fury, "that I have time and time again remonstrated with her and Miss Ada for their treatment of the girls."

"Is that so, Miss Cora—and Miss Ada?" asked Miss Walters, turning to the sisters, whose anger was slowly beginning to change to fear.

"Yes, Miss Walters," said Miss Cora at last, "it is true that Miss Race was continually interfering in our government of the girls during your absence. But," she added, while her mouth set in a grim line, "I still maintain that we did nothing during your absence that you yourself would not have done."

There was deep silence in the room for a minute while Miss Walters' eyes wandered from one intent face to another and then dropped to the blotter on her desk.

Billie's heart was beating so hard she was afraid it could be heard in the room.

Then Miss Walters' voice came to them, cool, incisive.

"I'm sorry," she was saying, looking from Miss Ada to Miss Cora and back again, "but I can't agree with you. Surely while I have had charge of Three Towers the girls have not gone hungry or become faint and sick from lack of nourishment. Neither have they raided pantries and storerooms and deserted Three Towers *en masse*, Miss Cora." She paused, and one could have heard a pin drop in the room. "I am very sorry, but I think that after Monday Three Towers will have no further need of your services, nor of those of Miss Ada. That is all, I think."

She rose by way of dismissal, and the other teachers rose also. Billie, who was nearest the door, slipped out quietly and ran swiftly up the stairs toward her dormitory. Her head was in a whirl, and all she wanted to do was to get with the girls again and tell them the marvelous thing that had happened.

The other girls were waiting for her, and as she burst in upon them they carried her off, seated her royally on top of a dresser, and gathered around eagerly, all talking at once and demanding to know what had happened.

Somehow, she made them see the scene in Miss Walters' office as if they had been there themselves, the scene in which the girls had won the great victory and the "Dill Pickles" had been dismissed.

They were just at the height of their rejoicing when the bell rang for lunch, and with one accord they stampeded for the dining room.

And it was a real lunch, as Miss Walters had promised—a lunch that disappeared as if by magic, and when it was over the students of Three Towers were really comfortable for the first time in over a week.

And everybody was happy, except Miss Ada Dill and Miss Cora; and Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks, perhaps. However, even though her attempt had failed this time, Amanda was by no means discouraged. There would be other chances—and then she would get even with Billie Bradley!

Rose Belser was happier than she had been since she had first become jealous of Billie. She was happy because she had done her best to set Billie right again, and could look at her pretty reflection in the glass once more without feeling ashamed.

It was some time later, and Billie, Vi and Laura were stretched out in comfortable attitudes on Billie's bed in dormitory "C"—for Miss Walters had declared it a half holiday. And, indeed, after lunch was over there was scarcely any of the day left, anyway.

"I feel almost sorry for Miss Ada and Miss Cora," Billie was saying, when suddenly the door opened and Connie Danvers flew in upon them.

"Girls," she cried, plumping herself down between Laura and Vi on the bed, narrowly missing the latter's feet, "I've just got a letter—there are some for you girls down in the box, too—and what do you think the folks are going to do this summer?"

The girls said they could not possibly guess, and before any of them would have had a chance to, anyway, she rattled on again:

"Mother and Dad are going to open our cottage at Lighthouse Island again—we haven't been there for several summers. My old Uncle Tom runs the lighthouse there, and he's a perfect darling. But this is the real thing," she paused and regarded them with sparkling eyes. "Mother says there will be plenty of room in the cottage for two or three of my school chums if I'd like to have them. Think of that—if I'd like to have them!"

The girls sat up and regarded Connie doubtfully. "What do you mean?" stammered Billie.

"What do I mean, you little goose?" said Connie impatiently. "Don't you know I'm asking you and Laura and Vi to go with me?"

"A summer on an island with a lighthouse!" Billie murmured, while Laura and Vi looked as if they could not believe their ears. "Now I know I'm going to just die of it."

"What?" asked Connie curiously.

"Joy," said Billie.

And whether she did actually die of joy or not—somehow one is rather certain that she did not—will be told in the next book of Billie's adventures, entitled, "Billie Bradley on Lighthouse Island; or, The Mystery of the Wreck."

Lighthouse Island was certainly a queer spot, and the girls had any number of unusual adventures there.

"We mustn't forget our own letters!" cried Billie suddenly, and then there was a rush to get the epistles. And here let us say good-bye to the girls of Three Towers Hall.

THE END

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