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BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER CLASSMATES

OR

THE SECRET OF THE LOCKED TOWER

BY

JANET D. WHEELER

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

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They marched through crying "Way for the Queen."

Contents

[CHAPTER I—THIN ICE](#)
[CHAPTER II—NEARLY FROZEN](#)
[CHAPTER III—POLLY HADDON](#)
[CHAPTER IV—GENEROUS PLANS](#)
[CHAPTER V—BEARDING THE LION](#)
[CHAPTER VI—TROUBLE](#)
[CHAPTER VII—SETTLING A SCORE](#)
[CHAPTER VIII—JUST LIKE BILLIE!](#)
[CHAPTER IX—INTO SPACE](#)
[CHAPTER X—THE CAVE](#)
[CHAPTER XI—THE SIMPLETON](#)
[CHAPTER XII—THE ACCUSATION](#)
[CHAPTER XIII—BILLIE IS CHOSEN](#)
[CHAPTER XIV—A BLOOD-STAINED HANDKERCHIEF](#)
[CHAPTER XV—A DISCOVERY](#)
[CHAPTER XVI—CHRISTMAS CHEER](#)
[CHAPTER XVII—BILLIE ON GUARD](#)
[CHAPTER XVIII—AMANDA'S REVENGE](#)
[CHAPTER XIX—THE TOWER ROOM](#)
[CHAPTER XX—STOLEN](#)
[CHAPTER XXI—MORE MYSTERY](#)
[CHAPTER XXII—FIRST PRIZE](#)
[CHAPTER XXIII—DISGRACED](#)
[CHAPTER XXIV—TRIUMPH](#)
[CHAPTER XXV—PRETTY FROCKS](#)

CHAPTER I—THIN ICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

good time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh!" cried Laura wildly, "somebody's getting killed."

CHAPTER II—NEARLY FROZEN

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

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

"Maybe somebody is drowning!"

"It's some great peril, you may be sure of that—otherwise they wouldn't scream so."

"They are children!"

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

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

"Wait! wait!" she cried. "Don't leave me behind!"

"What's the trouble?" came simultaneously from the others.

"I'm caught—my hair is fast in the tree."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

quiet, reserved and devoted to Billie—whose real name, by the way, was Beatrice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course this exclamation, together with Miss Arbuckle's strange conduct, considerably puzzled the girls, and they wondered about it all during the vacation at Lighthouse Island. Then one day a terrible storm came up and a ship was wrecked on one of the treacherous shoals which surrounded the island. The girls, helping in the work of rescue, discovered three children lashed to a rude raft, and after releasing the little victims, the girls had carried them to the Lighthouse to be cared for.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III—POLLY HADDON

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

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

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

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

"But hadn't we better take our skates off and walk around?" suggested Vi.

"We can make it quicker on skates," said Billie impatiently, "because we can cut across the lake——"

"But the ice!" Laura objected. "It may not be solid——"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before they could reach the cottage the door of it opened and a woman stood on the

threshold, hatless and coatless and staring at them anxiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened then?" asked Vi.

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

"Stolen!" they echoed, breathlessly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman nodded again.

"Yes, that was the queer thing about it," she said. "When the knitting company first told us of the reward we were jubilant, my husband and I. We thought surely we would recover the precious invention then. But as the weeks went by and we heard nothing, the strain was too much. Poor Frank, after all those years of struggle, with victory snatched away at the last minute, when he had every right to think it in his grasp—my poor husband could fight no longer. He died."

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

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

"I—I wish I could help you," she ventured. "I—we are dreadfully sorry for you."

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

CHAPTER IV—GENEROUS PLANS

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?" they asked, wonderingly.

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

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

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

"It's a bright idea—but it takes nerve," said Laura slangily. "Miss Walters may not like the idea of feeding the countryside."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hungry," finished Laura, giving her a shove. "Giddap, Billie, you're slowing down the works."

"Slang again," sighed Vi, plaintively, as Billie obligingly "giddaped." "If I should tell Miss

Walters——”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V—BEARDING THE LION

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose it doesn’t seem very exciting to you,” she said, as she pulled off her cap and

unwound the muffler from about her neck. "But I presume you would be a little bit more interested if it was *you* who didn't have enough to eat."

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

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

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

"Wh—what did you say?" demanded Connie.

"You heard me," said Billie, with a grin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"With poverty behind them, fortune and comfort ahead, and then again, desolation!" Miss

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI—TROUBLE

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

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

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

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

entirely out of their hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it?" they asked together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

milk?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell us about it," begged Vi.

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

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

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

"Listen," she said.

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

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

In the kitchen the girls stared at each other.

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

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

CHAPTER VII—SETTLING A SCORE

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

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

"Oh, and that reminds me!" cried Laura. "You haven't told us yet what happened after we ran for the doctor and left you alone with Mrs. Haddon."

"There isn't very much to tell," said Billie. "She didn't want to touch the basket at first, but when she thought of the kiddies she changed her mind. She said that the children hadn't had any real nourishing food since the day before yesterday."

The girls were silent for a moment, letting this last remark of Billie's sink in. Then it was Billie who broke the silence.

"I wonder," she said, "how they have ever managed to get along up to this time. They must have had something to live on."

"Why," said Vi, wrinkling her forehead thoughtfully, "the doctor said something about Mrs. Haddon having to give up her work because of ill health. Didn't he, Laura?"

"Yes," said Laura, stuffing her hands deeper into her pockets. "He seems dreadfully sorry about poor little Peter. I heard him mumble something about troubles always coming in a heap."

"Oh," said Billie, with a big long sigh, "if somebody could only stumble across those inventions someday or other! Then we could all be happy again."

For a moment her classmates stared at Billie blankly. They had all but forgotten about the invention. Somehow, Mrs. Haddon's tale of a nearly won fortune had seemed unreal and vague to them—almost like a fairy story. And now here was Billie bringing it all up again and even talking about finding that knitting machine model!

"If it doesn't always take you to think up impossible things, Billie Bradley," said Vi.

"Just the same," Laura spoke up unexpectedly, "you must admit that lots of times Billie has done what we would think was impossible to do."

"Goodness, have you got 'em, too?" asked Vi, with a giggle. "We all know Billie's a wonder, but I don't think she is going to find an invention that has been missing for a long time. Probably it wouldn't be any good, anyway. All rusted and everything."

"That wouldn't make any difference," Billie pointed out promptly. "As long as they had the model to copy from they could make any number of new machines just like it."

"All right, rave on, Macduff!" cried Laura, who was just beginning to read Shakespeare and who annoyed the other girls by insisting upon quoting him—incorrectly—upon all occasions. "If you can find this old thing and get a fortune out of it for Mrs. Haddon and the kiddies and twenty thousand nice little dollars for yourself, honey, nobody'll be gladder than me."

"I," corrected Violet sternly. "Don't you know me is bad grammar?"

"Well, me's a bad girl," said Laura irrepressibly, and the girls giggled.

A few minutes later they came within sight of the school and found to their dismay that it was lunch hour.

"Do you mean to say we have been gone all morning?" cried Laura, stopping short at the familiar sight of the girls pouring out on the campus for a breath of air before their studies should commence again. "Goodness, Miss Walters will murder us."

"Oh, come on," cried Billie, hurrying the girls along. "Haven't we been on an errand of mercy—and everything? She can't kill us for that, even if we were a long time about it."

Greetings and laughing gibes were flung at the girls as they hurried across the snow-covered campus, but they did not stop to answer. They wanted to see Miss Walters, explain why they were so late, and get a bite of something to eat before the afternoon classes began.

They had almost reached the door when a voice called to Billie from overhead. She looked up unsuspectingly and received an avalanche of snow right in the face, almost blinding her and sending her staggering back against her chums.

Sputtering and choking, she dashed the snow from her eyes and looked up to see who had done such a mean thing. There at a window just over her head was the grinning face of Amanda Peabody. In a flash Billie realized that it had been Amanda who had pushed the snow from the window ledge upon her.

"Want some more?" asked that disagreeable person in response to Billie's stare. "There's just a little bit left," and she made a gesture as if to push the rest of the snow from the windowsill down upon Billie's upturned face.

But Billie did not wait to see whether she would really have done it. With a cry she made for the door of the school, pushing through a group of the girls who had gathered at the first sign of a fracas. Laura and Vi followed, fuming.

As usual, instead of staying and facing the consequences of her own deeds, Amanda tried to get away. But Billie was too quick for her. The former reached the door of the room just as Amanda darted through it, bent upon escape.

Her eyes blazing, Billie seized the girl's arm and hurried her through the hall, Laura and Vi assisting, and a delighted crowd following close behind.

"You let me go—you big cowards, you!" spluttered Amanda, almost crying with rage and fright. "You let me go, Billie Bradley! I'll tell Miss Walters."

"Go ahead and tell Miss Walters, you miserable sneak!" cried Billie, giving the girl a contemptuous shake. "But you won't tell her till I'm through with you."

"What are you going to do?" whined Amanda, too scared now even to bluster. "I won't do it again, honest I won't. Only let me go."

"Don't you do it, Billie," cried one of the girls in the following crowd. "Don't let her off so easy."

But Billie had no intention of letting her enemy off easily. Having now reached the outside door, she shoved it open, at the same time motioning to Vi and Laura to let go of Amanda.

Then she dragged the whimpering, whining girl over to a spot where the wind had formed the snow into a small drift. Into this she flung the protesting girl, and the next instant was upon her, washing her face with the snow, and it is safe to say that no girl ever had her face so thoroughly washed before. And the crowd of girls behind Billie cheered her on gleefully.

There is no telling just how long Billie might have kept it up, for she was enjoying herself immensely, if Laura had not brought her to her senses. The latter leaned down, took a firm grip of the belt on Billie's coat and jerked her to her feet.

"Better let her go," she warned. "We will have Miss Walters or one of the teachers out here in a minute. Come on, Billie. She's had enough."

So Billie reluctantly stepped back while Amanda picked herself out of the snow, wiped her red and dripping face on her sleeve, and pushed through the laughing, mocking crowd of girls toward the school.

She stopped just before she reached the door, however, and faced her tormentors, her face distorted with rage.

"You think you're smart, all of you!" she cried furiously, then added, as her eyes fell on Billie, who had drawn a handkerchief from her pocket and was wiping her hands carefully. "And you, Billie Bradley, standing there grinning! Some day I'll make you grin out of the other side of your mouth. Just wait!"

"Would you like your face washed again?" Billie demanded, darting forward threateningly. "Come on, let's get it over with——"

But Amanda did not wait for the threat to be carried out. She scuttled precipitately into the Hall amid delighted giggles from the girls.

Amanda, fairly choking with rage at the laughter, stopped and shook her fist in the direction of it. Then, with all sorts of plans in her heart for "getting even," she went on toward the dormitory.

CHAPTER VIII—JUST LIKE BILLIE!

Several days followed during which the girls settled down earnestly to their studies. For scholarship was held very high at Three Towers Hall, and any one who did not stand well in class was apt to find herself not only in ill favor with the teachers but with the students as well.

The girls had reported to Miss Walters the result of their visit to Polly Haddon, and the principal had seemed unusually interested and sympathetic.

"Now that you girls have taken the Haddon family under your wing," she had said, smiling at the chums, "I think we shall have to see the thing through—at least until the mother is strong enough to begin work again. But in the meantime," she had added, with a nod of the head that meant dismissal, "I don't want interest in the Haddon family to make my girls neglect their studies. I expect great things of you this year."

And so the girls, "feeling warm all over," as they always did after a talk with Miss Walters, went back to their work, confident in the thought that the Haddons would not be left to starve, at least.

"Saturday we will go over ourselves and see how little Peter is," said Billie, as, pencil in hand, she prepared to wade into a geometry problem. "Listen, Laura," she added, looking up at her friend hopefully, "if you will help me with this geometry I'll coach you in history. Is it a go?"

Laura declared it was a "go," and so they settled down to work. But no amount of work could keep their thoughts from straying time and again to the Haddon family and the mystery of the stolen invention.

As the girls who have read the former adventures of Billie Bradley already know, Billie and her chums had been admitted to the "Ghost Club," a secret society to which only the most popular girls and those who stood highest in their studies were admitted.

The membership had never exceeded fifteen, for the girls knew that to have too large a membership would only cheapen the club. Rose Belser was the president of it, and Connie Danvers and several other of the girls' good friends were members. Caroline Brant had been asked to join long before, but had refused because she thought it would take too much time from her studies.

Last year's Commencement had taken two of the club's members, so that now the girls were watching the freshmen for good material. They were very careful in choosing, however, for it was far easier to get members into the club than it was to get them out.

The club was to have its first real meeting in two weeks, and it was at that meeting that the names of prospective members were to be tentatively submitted to the president. After that, a period of close watching, and then—the fun of initiations.

But first came news that ran through the Hall like wildfire. Some of the boys from Boxton Military Academy were coming over to the big hill behind the Three Towers Hall for the first real sledding of the year, and they had invited as many of the girls as they knew—and their friends—to meet them there.

Chet and Teddy and Ferd were coming over, of course, and as the day approached, anticipation grew accordingly until the girls could think and talk of nothing but the fun they were going to have.

"I wonder if Teddy will bring Paul Martinson with him," said Vi, after trying vainly for half an hour to fix her mind on an essay she must hand in the next morning. "He's ever so much fun, don't you think?"

It was in Paul Martinson's motor boat, which he had named the *Shelling* in honor of Captain Shelling, who was master of the Military Academy, that the boys had visited the girls on Lighthouse Island the summer before.

Paul Martinson was a splendid-looking, fine boy whom all the girls liked—Rose Belser, in particular—but who, himself, seemed to prefer Billie. Like Teddy, Paul thought that Billie was the "very best sport" he knew, and declared that "a fellow can have more fun with her any day than he can with another boy."

Of course Teddy did not like this a bit. Having known Billie practically all his life, he naturally felt that he should have first right to her. And so there was a good-natured rivalry between the boys that amused Billie and Vi and Laura and rather piqued Rose Belser and Connie Danvers and some of the other girls at the school, who thought that Billie had more than her share.

"For," as Connie declared once to a sympathetic group of girls, "it's ever so much more fun to

be paddled around in a canoe by a boy than to have to paddle yourself, and it's lots of fun to skate with them because they fairly haul you along. And here when we haven't nearly enough to go around, Billie goes and takes two of the nicest ones. She's a darling, of course, but I think she might be content with one!"

And so when Vi had happened to mention innocently that Paul was ever so much fun, Rose Belser, who was preparing for a botany quiz at the other end of the room, looked up and made a face at her.

"How do we know whether he's any fun or not?" she said. "You had better ask Billie."

But Billie was too busy studying so that she might be free for the next day's fun to hear, and Rose's shot was lost.

As though autumn had regretted giving way to winter so soon, it had been unexpectedly warm that day and the girls had worried for fear a thaw might spoil their sledding. But a cold wind rose in the night and the morning dawned clear and cold enough to suit even them.

As soon as breakfast was over the coasters donned sweaters and caps and mufflers and ran down into the storeroom next the gymnasium to get their sleds. Then up once more and out into the bright morning sunshine, their cheeks glowing with health and their eyes sparkling with anticipation of the fun ahead of them!

There were twenty-five of them in all, but as they filed out of the side door of the school they looked like a small army.

"Isn't it funny," giggled Laura to Billie, "how many more of the girls turn out when they know the boys are going to be there?"

"It's sad but true," admitted Billie, with an answering chuckle. "After that first heavy snowfall when we said something about an all-girls' sledding party, they didn't seem awfully anxious about it. Said it was too early in the season and they hated dragging sleds up the hill."

"Now I suppose they will expect the boys to do the dragging," laughed Vi.

When they had climbed almost to the top of the hill that made such a fine toboggan they heard the sound of boys' voices.

"Goodness, they must have started before breakfast," said Connie Danvers, who was puffing with the effort to get her plump little body and her heavy sled up the steep incline. "Say, give me a lift, will you, Billie? This hill is so slippery."

"You mean that you're getting too fat," said Laura wickedly, as she reached over and grabbed Connie's line. "I told you you were eating too much candy."

Billie reached the top of the hill first and with dancing eyes she looked down at the long, steep, ice-covered incline. The slight thaw of the day before had been the one thing needed to perfect the sledding. For the surface of the snow had melted, then frozen over again, forming a solid coat of ice.

As she took this all in gleefully, the first of the boys emerged from the trees at the foot of the hill and an impish impulse seized her.

With a shout of warning she pulled up her sled, flung herself upon it, gave a little push, and was off! Down the hill she hurtled at a terrific rate of speed, the glaze of ice forming almost no resistance to her flight.

Taken by surprise, the boys had no more than time to get out of the way before she literally dropped among them.

She swung off to the right, where an abrupt rise of ice-covered ground checked her speed, and, after almost reaching the top of this small hill, the back runners of the sled were caught in the ice and she was tumbled head over heels, to land in an undignified heap at the boys' feet.

Then she sat up, rubbed her head and smiled at them gleefully.

"I went some that time, didn't I?" she said.

"Yes, and you might have broken your neck, too," said Teddy, in an awfully gruff voice, as he took both her hands and pulled her to her feet. The other boys were looking on in admiration at Billie's feat. "Don't you know you should never have taken that turn to the right? That hill's too steep."

"I know it is—*now*," said Billie ruefully, feeling, for the first time the horrible suspicion that she had skinned her knee.

"You should have taken one of these paths," spoke up Chet, pushing his way through the crowd of boys and regarding Billie sternly, as an older brother should. "I thought you knew that."

"Of course I know that," returned Billie, mimicking Chet's tone to perfection. "But will you please tell me how I could take either one of the paths when both of them were chock full of boys?"

The paths about which they spoke branched off from the foot of the hill. One had been an old wagon road which had become overgrown with bushes and stubble and the other was only a foot path. Nevertheless, either one was wide enough to permit easily a sled to pass through and the ground was level for a long enough distance to allow the sleds to come to an easy standstill.

From the top of the hill the girls had been watching Billie's escapade, and now as she started with the boys up the long slope they looked at one another, smiling.

"Goodness, there she goes again!" sighed Connie plaintively. "She isn't satisfied with two of the boys any more. Now she has the whole crowd of them!"

CHAPTER IX—INTO SPACE

For a glorious hour the girls and boys enjoyed what was to them the best sledding of their lives. They coasted down the hill and dragged their sleds up again, shouting and calling to each other while their cheeks and, it must be admitted, sometimes their noses, too, glowed with the sting of the sharp wind and they had to stamp hard on the frozen ground to keep their toes from freezing.

"The best sport ever!" cried Paul.

"All to the merry," came from Chet. "What do you say, girls?" and he turned to Billie and her classmates.

What did they say? All shouted at once that such fine sport couldn't possibly be beaten.

"Can't be beat!" sang out Chet gaily. "Just like old Ma Jackson's rag carpet."

"Ma Jackson's rag carpet? What do you mean?" asked Laura.

"She couldn't beat it for fear it would fall apart," was the sly reply. And then the merry lad had to dodge a hard chunk of snow Laura threw at him.

"Burr-r! isn't it cold?" cried Billie, taking a mitten from one of her hands and blowing on her numbed fingers. "I'd never know what it was to feel cold if it weren't for my fingers and toes. Teddy! Stop your pushing! What do you want now?"

For Teddy had seized her by the shoulders and had sat her firmly down upon his big bobsled.

"You've let Paul Martinson take you down three times to my once," he accused her, while he settled himself comfortably behind her on the sled. "And now it's my turn. Hey, look out there, you fellows—we're off!"

And before the astonished Billie could do more than utter a giggling protest, they were indeed "off," flying down the ice-glazed hill at a rate that took her breath away.

"Some speed, eh?" chortled Teddy in her ear. "This old boat of mine has got 'em all beat. I bet we could race them all to a standstill."

"Why don't we try?" Billie yelled back at him. "It would be lots of fun. Oh, Teddy, look out!" she shrieked, for they had reached the foot of the hill and Teddy had skimmed so close to the trunk of a tree that Billie afterward declared they had scraped off a piece of bark.

"Don't worry," Teddy said, reassuringly. "Nothing's going to happen to you when you're with your uncle Ted."

At which remark Billie could not help giggling to herself. "Boys did think they were so awfully much!" Then suddenly she cried out:

"Teddy, that's the wrong path! We have never been down it before."

"That's why I'm trying it," said Teddy recklessly, as he swung down the strange path that ran at right angles to the one they were on. "The ground slopes, too, so we ought to have some more fun."

Billie said nothing. She would not for the life of her have Teddy guess that she was afraid. They had never been down that path before, because never before had a sled had momentum enough to carry it that far.

And the ground was sloping more and more and the sled was going faster and faster with each second. The path was by no means straight, either, and if Teddy had not been pretty good at keeping his head they would most surely have run into something and have had a nasty spill.

"Oh, Teddy, can't we stop?" asked Billie at last, unable to keep her fright all to herself. "We

don't know where this leads to. Can't you stop, Teddy?"

"Not very well," answered the boy uneasily. "We will surely run on to level ground in a minute. Don't worry."

But even as he spoke he jerked the sled around a sudden turn in the path and they came, apparently, to the end of the world. With a nasty little scraping sound the sled dived off into nothingness!

It all happened so suddenly that Billie did not have even time enough to scream. She had a sickening feeling of falling through space, and then she struck something—something that yielded, luckily, under her weight, and she sank, down, down, down, coming to rest at last in a world where everything was white and slippery and cold—oh, *so* cold.

She must have lost consciousness for a minute, for when she came to herself again in this strange new world she heard somebody calling her name wildly and a moment later Santa Claus poked his head over a snowbank and peered down at her.

At least, she thought at first it was Santa Claus, because his face was so very red and the snow was clinging to his fuzzy cap in such a funny manner.

But in a moment more she realized her mistake, for the red face and the funny hat disappeared and in their place were shoved two legs that she was very sure belonged to Teddy. And in a moment more Teddy himself slid down beside her.

"Hello," she greeted him with a smile. "I thought you were Santa Claus. Why weren't you?"

Teddy stared at her for a minute, anxiously.

"I say," he cried, taking one of her hands and rubbing it gently. "I guess that loop the loop of ours knocked you silly."

"I'm always silly," was Billie's amazing reply, as she sat up and began feeling herself all over carefully. "But it certainly did knock me!"

"Are you all right?" demanded Teddy, watching her as she stretched out first one leg and then the other. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

"Nothing but my dignity," she answered, with a giggle that brought an answering grin from the boy. "Teddy," she demanded, turning to him suddenly, "what did happen, anyway?"

"I'm sure I don't know, except that we came to the end of that path and jumped off," answered Teddy, feeling gingerly of his forehead on which Billie could see that a large purple lump was beginning to swell. "If I had had a chance to see what was coming I could have rolled off the sled and pulled you with me. But that turn in the road brought us right on top of it. It's a sort of precipice, I guess," he went on to explain, while Billie eyed with sympathy the swelling lump on his forehead. "It's about fifteen feet high, I think, and if there hadn't been snow on the ground we surely would have got hurt."

"If there hadn't been snow on the ground, we wouldn't have been sledding," Billie pointed out, adding, so unexpectedly as to make Teddy jump: "Who hit you?"

"Wh—what?" he gasped. Then seeing that her eyes were fixed on the bump that he was still fingering gingerly, Teddy's face grew redder than it already was, if such a thing were possible, and his hand fell quickly to his side. "Oh, that!" he said, loftily, as if it were nothing at all. "I guess the runner of the sled gave me a whack just as we dumped over. It doesn't hurt, though. Not a bit."

"I bet it does, too," said Billie, as the boy pulled his cap down tight over the tell-tale spot. "Where is the sled, Teddy?" she added.

"Out there, somewhere, sticking in a drift," answered the boy. "I didn't have time to pull it out because I thought you had been killed or something and I had to come to look for you."

"Thanks," she laughed at him. Then her face became suddenly serious, and she struggled to her feet, trying to brush off the snow that seemed to cover her from head to foot. "How are we going to get out of this, Teddy?" she asked, looking at him seriously.

"Ask me an easy one," he returned, his good-looking face extremely anxious and puzzled. "The snow is awfully deep, and I don't believe we could ever get up to that path again. It would take us a couple of hours to go around, and besides, I'm not sure just how to go."

"In other words," said Billie, trying her best to speak gayly while her heart sank at this unusually long speech of Teddy's, "we're lost, aren't we?"

"I guess it amounts to that," Teddy answered soberly, and for a long minute they just stood staring at each other.

Then Billie gave herself an impatient little shake.

"Help me out of this," she said, as she tried to push through the heavy snow that seemed to press in upon her from every side. "I'd like to have a look around, anyway."

She found that even with Teddy's help it was no easy task to clamber out of the snowdrift that she had fallen into, and both she and the boy were panting with exertion when they had finally managed to get out into the open.

Even there they stood up to their waists in the clinging snow, and Billie, looking desolately out over the white expanse, began to realize that she was very, very cold.

"There's the sled," said Teddy, pointing to two runners sticking out of the snow and marking the spot where the sled had struck. "Wait here and I'll get it."

Billie watched him as he struggled through the drifts, and suddenly she was aware of an overwhelming desire to sit down where she was and cry.

"But that wouldn't do any good," she told herself sharply, "even if this place does look more lonely than a desert. If we don't get where it's warm pretty soon we'll turn into icicles ourselves, I guess."

The wind had become stronger and more biting, and Billie's teeth had begun to chatter. She was glad when Teddy floundered back to her, the rope of his sled looped over one arm. He slipped the other arm through hers protectingly.

"We'll find a way out of this soon," he said, comfortingly. "You just watch your uncle Teddy."

Billie tried to laugh but she could not, her teeth were chattering so.

"You said that before," she told him hysterically. "And we—we—went over the cliff!"

CHAPTER X—THE CAVE

The next minute Billie was sorry for what she had said. Teddy's face clouded over and he looked at her unhappily.

"You ought to know that I didn't get you into this on purpose," he muttered.

"Oh, Teddy, d-dear, I didn't mean it, you know I d-didn't," she stammered, trying hard to control the chattering of her teeth. "I'm a bad, mean, horrid girl. T-truly I didn't mean it," and she put her cold little hand penitently over his great big one.

"I know you didn't," said Teddy, his face clearing instantly. "You're cold and tired and all upset. Poor little kid, I wish I could do all the *feeling*."

"Well, I'm glad you can't," said Billie, snuggling up close to him for warmth. "For you have troubles enough of your own. Teddy!" She drew up suddenly and stared at an object that caught her eye. "What is that thing over there that looks like a tangle of twigs and leaves? No, not that way. Over there—to the left."

Teddy followed the direction of her pointing finger and his face lighted up with excitement. The "tangle of twigs and branches," as Billie had described it, was close to the side of the fifteen-foot "precipice" over which he and Billie had plunged a little while before.

The fact that the branches were not covered with snow certainly looked as if they had been put there rather recently in a crude effort to hide the entrance to something—perhaps a cave.

"That's worth having a look at," he said, jerking the sled up to him and tightening his hold on Billie's arm. "Can you make it, Billie? The snow seems to be deeper over this way."

"Oh, I can make it all right," answered Billie, stoutly, as she clenched her teeth and shut her eyes and floundered on through the clinging snow. "I guess I've got to make it!" she added, to herself.

They had almost reached their goal when suddenly they stepped into a hole hidden by the snow and sank down in the icy whiteness until Billie was almost up to her neck.

"Gosh," cried Teddy, as he struggled out to higher ground, pulling his thoroughly frightened companion after him, "I hope there aren't many more places like that around here. We'll make it all right, Billie. Say! you're not crying, are you?" he broke off, with a boy's utter terror of tears, as Billie dug two mittened and numbed hands into her smarting eyes.

"No, I'm not crying," she answered, giving him a rather watery smile. "I'm laughing. Can't you see I am?"

"Poor little kid," said Teddy for the second time that afternoon, and the sympathy in his voice

pretty nearly did send Billie into a downpour of tears. She was so thoroughly miserable that it was all she could do to keep from wailing her grief aloud. But Teddy had put one big protecting arm around her now and was half carrying her over to that strange object that looked so dark against the gleaming bank of snow.

Then he let Billie go, and while she shivered by herself he laid hold of the branches and pulled with all his might.

"Ooh, look out!" called Billie. "There might be a bomb or something at the other end. Oh-h!" The queer doorway gave so easily before the boy's strength that he was sent staggering back against the snowdrift and sat down in it most uncomfortably.

The next minute he was up again, had swept the branches and twigs aside, and was examining the exposed opening with all a boy's eager curiosity. Billie peered eagerly over his shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked, breathlessly.

"It's what I thought it was—a cave," answered Teddy, joyfully. "Come inside, Billie. It will get you out of the wind anyway, and give you a chance to warm up." He had put an arm about her again and was pushing her forward with his usual impetuosity, but Billie hung back.

"We don't know what's in there," she protested, but Teddy refused to listen to her.

"We don't know and we don't care," he informed her, masterfully, adding as she still hung back: "We'll freeze to death out there, anyway."

"But, Ted, suppose some wild animal should be in there? You know that bears hide in hollow trees and caves——"

"Bears sleep most of the winter. Besides, I don't think there are any bears around here."

"But there might be a—a fox, or a wildcat."

"I'll take a chance on that. You must remember, the average wild beast will get out of your way if you give it half a chance. Come on. As I said before, if you stay out here, in this icy wind, you'll surely freeze to death."

This argument appealed to her, and, with a shivering look over her shoulder at the desert of whiteness behind, she stepped gingerly into the blackness of the cave.

Then with a little nervous giggle she ran back again, got behind Teddy and pushed him before her.

"Gentlemen first!" she said. "Anyway you're bigger than I am, Ted."

So Teddy, feeling as important as a boy always feels when he is protecting a girl that he likes, walked boldly into the cave, stretching a hand behind him for Billie to cling to.

"Come on, it's all right," he assured her. "You'll get used to the darkness in a minute. The snow blinds you. Ouch! What was that?"

Billie gave a little choked scream and would have run out into the open again, had not Teddy's grip on her hand prevented.

"Don't get scared," the boy said, and bent over to examine whatever it was he had stubbed his toe against. "I didn't mean to yell like that, but, gosh, that thing did give my toe an awful wallop! I say, look at this!" and he held up an object that shone wanly white against the blackness of the cave.

Billie, whose eyes had become a little accustomed to the darkness, saw that what Teddy held looked like an old, broken water pitcher.

"A pitcher," she said, adding disgustedly: "And that was what I was afraid of."

At the entrance, this queer hole in the mountain had been so low that the two had been forced to stoop down to avoid knocking their heads on the roof of it. But now, as they felt their way cautiously, they found to their surprise that they could stand upright. The walls also seemed to have widened out and they realized with a thrill of excitement that they were in a real cave, dug into the side of the mountain.

In here it was darker than it had been at the entrance, and they had to feel their way about cautiously to avoid colliding with each other or the walls of the cave.

It was surprisingly warm and snug in there also, for the thick snow wrapped them in the warmest and fleeci-est of blankets, and the only place for old Jack Frost to come in was the narrow entrance of the cave.

And once assured that the owner of the cave, whether man or animal, was at that moment not at home, Billie began to feel a sense of exquisite comfort. Her teeth had ceased to chatter, they were safe from the bitter north wind, and she had Teddy to take care of her. What more could any girl want?

As for Teddy, he had evidently found something over in one corner of the cave that interested

him immensely. He had stumbled by accident over what seemed to be a pile of old junk, and now he was down on his hands and knees trying to satisfy his curiosity by the sense of touch.

"Now aren't I the idiot!" he exclaimed suddenly, and Billie started at the sudden sound of his voice in the darkness. "Here I go feeling around like a blind man when I have some perfectly good matches in my pocket. Come on over, Billie, and see what I've found."

Guided by the flare of a match, Billie made her way across the cave and knelt down beside the boy. Then they both stared in utter amazement at what they saw.

Heaped up carelessly in the corner was a mass of so many and such queerly assorted articles that it is no wonder the boy and girl were puzzled.

There was an old alarm clock, rusty with age and disuse, a mirror, several gaudy articles of jewelry that looked as if they might have been found in ten-cent prize packages, a telephone receiver, a broken fishing rod that stood lamely against the wall as though ashamed of its own decrepit state, a sawdust doll, an empty tin can that evidently had once contained bait, a talcum powder box full of scented violet talc—Billie smelled it—and—but it would take too long to name all the strange things that Billie and Teddy found there in the corner of the funny little cave.

"Teddy," murmured Billie as the boy's match burnt out and he struck another one, "what do you think these things are for? Who do you suppose owns them?"

"How should I know?" asked Teddy, getting to his feet and looking eagerly about the place, illumined fitfully by the flare of the match. "Somebody comes here often, that's a sure thing. And judging by those things," he waved toward the conglomeration of junk in the corner, "he must be pretty simple."

"Oh, Teddy!" breathed Billie, moving closer to him. "Suppose he should come and find us here?"

Teddy looked down at her with a grin.

"Why worry?" he asked. "Haven't you got your Uncle Ted?"

He had scarcely spoken when there came a terrifying sound. It was a snarl of rage, half-animal, half-human.

The half-burned match dropped from Teddy's fingers. They were in the dark.

CHAPTER XI—THE SIMPLETON

Billie did not cry out. She was either too frightened or too brave. But the next minute Teddy's arm had reached out and caught her to him reassuringly.

"It's all right," he whispered in her ear. "Just hold tight and keep still. I'll do the talking."

Cautiously he drew her to the back of the cave, and there they turned and waited for whatever was to happen. They did not have to wait long.

Some one or something was coming into the cave. There was a growling and muttering in the tunnel-like entrance and the sounds increased as the intruder came slowly nearer.

Then there came a stumbling sound, followed by a coarse oath that made Billie clap her hands to her ears.

"It's a man, anyway," Teddy whispered, adding maliciously: "Stubbed his toe on that old pitcher, I guess. Glad of it."

"Oh, Teddy, hush," whispered Billie frantically. "He'll hear you."

Evidently the intruder had heard them. He stopped short as though listening. Billie and Teddy could distinctly hear his heavy breathing while they held their own.

Then a hoarse, strident voice challenged them.

"Who are ye?" it cried, menacingly. "Whoever y'are ye've got to git out. I'll teach ye to go breakin' into my cave and meddlin' with my things. Come out o'thet, will ye?"

For answer, Teddy lighted a match, holding it high above his head while he studied the intruder. The latter, evidently startled by the sudden light, staggered back a little and flung his hand before his eyes.

The advantage was all Teddy's, and for a moment it looked as though he would fling himself

upon the little man who stood cowering there. But he hesitated, and while he hesitated the match burned out in his fingers and they were left in the dark once more.

"Light another match, Teddy—quick," whispered Billie, and he did.

This time the man lowered his hands from before his eyes and stood blinking at them foolishly. He was so small and so slight and so puny looking in every way that the gruff voice with which he had greeted them in the beginning seemed little short of ridiculous.

And while they stared at the little man and the little man stared at them, Teddy's third match went out.

"Gosh," said he, groping in his pocket for another. "I only hope they hold out, that's all. I'd hate to be left in the dark."

He found a match and lit it rather shakily, for the whole thing was beginning to get on his nerves. And as the uncertain light flared out once more he saw that their queer new friend was holding something out to him.

"Don't touch it," whispered Billie at his elbow. "It might be——"

"But it's only a candle, Billie, and——" Teddy was beginning when the little fellow himself interrupted impatiently.

"Light it, light it," he commanded, glancing nervously over his shoulder into the spooky corners of the cave. "Your match will be burnt out and we will be left in the dark. The dark. I'm afraid of the dark. Hurry, hurry!"

To Teddy and Billie at the same instant came the startling thought that the man was a lunatic. His looks, his voice, his manner, were all proof of it.

And while Teddy lighted the candle with his one remaining match, Billie began to shiver wretchedly. If only they had not found the old cave everything would have been all right. They might even have been home by this time. For the moment she had forgotten how cold it was outside and that neither she nor Teddy knew the way home.

While Teddy glanced about for some place to set the lighted candle, she furtively studied the simpleton, into whose hiding-place they had been unlucky enough to stumble.

He was about twenty-one, she guessed, scarcely more than a boy. His features were as small as his body, his eyes little and red-rimmed and shifty, with an expression of vacancy that made Billie's blood run cold. His hair, as nearly as she could tell in the flickering light, was red.

And while Billie watched him, he watched Teddy, and she was surprised to see his vacant eyes suddenly fill with terror. Then, when Teddy turned back, after setting the candle on a projecting piece of rock, the simpleton came close to him, holding out shaking, imploring hands.

"Have you come to take me away? Have you?" he asked wildly, and then as Teddy still continued to stare at him, he fell to the ground, groveling in the dirt at the boy's feet.

It was not a pretty sight, and with a little exclamation of disgust, Teddy reached down, gripped the fellow's collar and jerked him to his feet.

"For heaven's sake, get up," he cried. "What's the matter with you, anyway? I'm not going to hurt you."

"You haven't come to take me away? You won't put me in prison?" whined the simpleton, shaking and trembling there before them till Billie put her hands before her eyes to shut out the sight of him. "I haven't done anything! Truly I haven't! Don't put me in prison. Oh, I'm afraid of the dark. I'm afraid of the dark!"

There is no telling how much longer he might have gone on in that manner had not Teddy put a hand over his mouth and shaken him into silence. Billie, cowering back against the wall, had begun to cry.

"Now," growled Teddy, giving one extra shake to the whining wretch, "suppose you keep still for a minute and try to understand what I am going to tell you. We didn't come into your cave to get you, and we're not going to hurt you if you will do what we tell you. We're lost, and we want to get back to Three Towers Hall. Do you suppose you can tell us how?"

The simpleton, relieved of his suspicion that they had come to do him harm, became suddenly sullen. Teddy had to repeat his question before the fellow answered.

"I can," he said then, "if I want to."

Teddy was about to answer angrily, but he remembered that he had heard somewhere that the only way you can get anything out of a weak-minded person is to humor him.

So he controlled his temper and said that he hoped very much that the fellow would want to—and the sooner the better, or words to that effect.

"What's your name?" asked Billie suddenly. It was the first time she had spoken, and both Teddy and the simpleton started. The latter stared at her a moment open-mouthed, and then his

manner underwent a bewildering change—became softer, more normal. Evidently he had not noticed before that she was a girl, for she had been nearly hidden behind Teddy.

“What’s your name?” asked Billie again.

“Nick Budd, ma’am,” answered the fellow, never taking his eyes from Billie’s pretty face. “Son of Tim Budd, the gardener up at Three Towers Hall.”

“Oh!” cried Billie delightedly, while Teddy himself felt immensely relieved. “Then you will show us the way home, won’t you? We’ll be ever so much obliged to you.”

“Yes’m,” said the poor simpleton, shuffling his feet as though embarrassed. “I’ll show you right away. But there’s a powerful lot o’ snow between us and the Hall,” he added, as he turned to leave the cave.

Teddy started to take the candle to light them out, but the simpleton, as though he had eyes in the back of his head, turned upon Teddy furiously.

“You let that candle be,” he cried to the astonished boy, while Billie shrank back in fresh alarm. “You let that candle be, I tell you! It’s my candle, ain’t it?”

“Whew!” whistled Teddy, feeling a wild desire to shout, yet afraid to do it for fear of angering still more this poor idiot. “Yes, it’s your candle, old man. Be sure you take good care of it. It’s very precious.”

The simpleton stared at him suspiciously for a moment, then turned his back and led the way out of the cave.

“Oh, Teddy, I’m scared to death,” whispered Billie, as the boy grabbed tight hold of her hand and started to follow Nick Budd.

“You needn’t be,” he whispered back to her. “I could clean up that little shrimp with one finger.” Which observation, though extremely slangy, was very comforting to Billie.

They found the sled outside where Teddy had dropped it when they entered the cave, and then there began a long, hard struggle with the snow and the wind that the boy and girl were to remember long afterward.

They did not talk much, for they were too busy trying to keep up with Nick Budd as he floundered through the snow, and breath was precious. However, Billie did find a chance to ask the question that had been looming bigger and bigger with each second.

“Teddy, what do you suppose the boys and girls will think of our disappearing like that?” she asked him.

“I suppose they’ll think we went off in an aeroplane or something,” he answered, trying to be funny and not succeeding very well.

“Well,” sighed Billie, “I only hope they won’t go and say anything about it at school—not till we get back and have a chance to explain, anyway.”

Teddy glanced at her quickly.

“Nobody would be mean enough to do that,” he said, decidedly.

“No-o, I guess not,” agreed Billie, but in her heart she was not at all sure. She was thinking of Amanda Peabody.

CHAPTER XII—THE ACCUSATION

Nick Budd, plunging on in the snow ahead of the young folks, hardly once turned his head to look back. Evidently he had made this trip often and was used to wading through snow half-way to his waist, for he went so swiftly that Teddy was winded and Billie pretty nearly worn out when they at last reached the road.

Oh, but what a relief it was to step out on its hard, crusty firmness after the yielding depth of the snow in the field!

Then Nick Budd turned and addressed them for the first time since they had left the cave behind them.

“This here is the road that leads to Three Towers,” he told them, evidently in a sullen mood again. “Jest foller straight and ye’ll git thar.” And before either Teddy or Billie had a chance to

thank him he turned back without another word and started to retrace his steps through the heavy snow, leaving the two standing in the middle of the road staring after him.

Then Billie turned wonderingly to the boy.

"Teddy, isn't he the queerest thing?" she breathed.

Teddy nodded.

"He sure is," he said, soberly, adding slowly: "I'm just wondering what made him so afraid that we were going to put him in prison. He was scared almost to death until we told him why we had come."

"But he's a simpleton," Billie pointed out. "Poor thing, I don't suppose you could count on anything he says or does. People who aren't 'all there' have moods, don't they?"

"Is that why you act so funny sometimes?" asked Teddy with a grin, and Billie pouted most becomingly.

"I think you're horrid," she said, while Teddy's grin became still wider. "Come on, let's get back. I'm freezing to death. Don't stand there grinning like an ape," she commanded, with an impatient stamp of her foot. "You look silly."

"Like Nick Budd?" asked Teddy good-naturedly, and Billie had to smile. "Look here," he added, jerking the sled toward him and motioning to Billie to sit on it. "We can get back much more quickly if you let me pull you. Get aboard, Miss Billie, and I'll give you a regular sleighride."

"Oh fine!" cried Billie, as she settled herself comfortably on the big sled. "Only I'm 'fraid its rather a long pull, Teddy. You may get tired."

"Just watch me!" cried the boy, and galloped off at a great rate, the sled, with Billie clinging wildly to it, bumping and swaying over the hard and rough road.

Meantime the other boys and girls had been considerably alarmed by Teddy's and Billie's abrupt disappearance. At first they had supposed that the two were simply playing a trick on them and would appear when they got good and ready.

But as time passed and nothing happened they became worried, and even began to talk about a search party.

"Though how they could have got lost, I don't know," Laura had said to an agitated group. "They certainly know their way about here well enough."

"Perhaps they got lost on purpose," said a nasal voice, and Billie's chums turned indignantly to face the speaker. It was Amanda, of course, and beside her, so close as to have earned her the title of Amanda's "Shadow," stood her friend and crony, Eliza Dilks.

Laura was about to retort furiously when Billie's brother Chet pushed her aside and faced Amanda.

"If you were a boy, I'd know what to do to you for saying a thing like that," cried the boy, such fury in his face that Amanda was frightened. "But since you're a girl I'll just tell you to lay off that line of talk. Billie Bradley is my sister." As Chet said the last words proudly there was many a girl present who would have been glad to own a brother as loyal as Chet Bradley.

As Amanda muttered something to herself and turned away angrily the boys and girls returned to the discussion of Billie's and Teddy's mysterious absence.

"I think," suggested Paul Martinson, his face looking extremely worried, "that we had better search through the woods thoroughly in case they are lost. Something must have happened to them to keep them away this long."

He had no sooner made the suggestion than it was carried into effect, and the girls and boys scattered through the woods in search of the two who had disappeared.

They returned in a little while, however, dispirited and more anxious than ever. There was an attempt to go on with the fun in the hope that Teddy and Billie would return in a little while to laugh at their fears, but it was no use. The fun lagged, and finally the girls broke up the party altogether by declaring their intention of going back to the school.

"Billie may be at the Hall now for all we know," Connie said hopefully, as they started back along the road. "She may have been cold or something and asked Teddy to take her home."

"Humph," sniffed Laura, "that sounds a lot like Billie."

Nevertheless they did hope that, foolish as it sounded, Billie had returned to the Hall before them. But when they reached there and found no sign of either her or Teddy they were puzzled and more worried than ever.

The boys had gone on toward the Academy, and there was not one of them who was not disturbed in his mind. Teddy was as popular at the Academy as Billie was at the Hall, and, besides, Billie was a general favorite with all the lads.

"I'll wait a little while after I get back," Chet told them as they tramped back silently, their

sleds skidding along behind them, "and then I'll call up the Hall. If Billie isn't back by then we'll have to notify the police—or something."

And at the Hall her classmates had decided to wait a little while also before they reported Billie's disappearance to Miss Walters.

Probably nothing serious had happened, they argued, and if Miss Walters were notified Billie might have a lot of explaining to do that otherwise she would be saved.

But as the minutes sped by and still no sign of Billie, they fidgeted and squirmed and could set their minds to nothing.

Then suddenly Connie Danvers rushed into the dormitory, her eyes blazing with wrath.

"What do you suppose?" she cried, while the girls gathered round her. "I met Caroline Brant in the hall just now and she said that Amanda and the 'Shadow' were spreading the report that Billie and Teddy ran away on purpose."

"Oh, the sneak! The wretched little sneak!" cried Laura, making a dash for the door. But she stopped suddenly and ran back to Connie. "Has she gone to Miss Walters with that report?" she asked, her hands working as though she longed to get hold of Amanda.

"I don't think so," replied Connie. "She hasn't had time yet—Laura! where are you going?" for Laura had started for the door again.

"To find Amanda, of course," Laura cried over her shoulder, as she flung out of the room. "I'll see that she doesn't get to Miss Walters with that report."

"She has the right idea, girls," said Vi excitedly. "We mustn't let Amanda say such things about Billie. Why, if Miss Walters heard it, it would be dreadful."

"Come on then," said Connie, adding recklessly: "We'll see that Amanda doesn't squeal if we have to gag her."

They found Amanda and her "Shadow" haranguing a group of the younger girls at the end of the hall on the first floor. Billie's champions, coming upon the group suddenly, overheard the last of Amanda's speech.

"Of course her friends say that she didn't do it on purpose," the girl was saying. "But I know she did, and I'm going straight to Miss Walters and tell her about it."

Laura started toward the sneak, but she drew back so suddenly as nearly to lose her balance and had to be steadied by the girls behind her.

For a familiar figure, hidden until that moment by the shadows about the great entrance door, suddenly swung into the light and faced Amanda.

"Now, what you have said behind my back," rang out a clear voice, "you can tell me to my face!"

"It's Billie," gasped Laura, in joyful relief. "Say, but she looks good to me."

"Come on. I have a notion she may need a little help," said Connie, as she made her way to Billie's side, causing the freshmen who had been Amanda's audience to scatter in panic. Laura and Vi and several others followed, but Billie did not seem to notice them.

Her eyes were still upon Amanda. The latter, taken by surprise, at first looked about her for some means of escape. Then, seeing that she was cornered, she straightened up defiantly and the usual sneer overspread her mean features.

"Oh, all right," she said. "I'm not afraid to tell the truth if *you are*. Did you and Teddy Jordon have a good time when you ran away to-day?"

"It's false!" cried Billie furiously. "And I'll make you take it back!"

"What's this? What's this?" interrupted a cool voice behind them, and Billie turned with tears of rage in her eyes to face Miss Arbuckle.

"Miss Arbuckle," she pleaded tensely, "make her take it back—what she said about me. It isn't true! Oh, it isn't true!"

CHAPTER XIII—BILLIE IS CHOSEN

Miss Arbuckle laid a kindly hand on Billie's shoulder and looked at Amanda inquiringly. The latter

was smiling triumphantly. Billie had done what she had hoped she would do. She, Amanda, would tell what in her mean little mind she really thought was the truth, and get Billie in bad with the powers-that-be.

"What is this that you are telling about Beatrice, Amanda?" asked Miss Arbuckle, adding, impatient of Amanda's grin: "Be quick about it."

"She and Teddy Jordon ran off together to-day and were gone for about three hours," she said triumphantly. "Billie just came in."

Billie's eyes, black in her white, set face, looked up at Miss Arbuckle steadily.

"I didn't do it, Miss Arbuckle," she said, her lip quivering. "I—I couldn't."

"I know you couldn't, Billie Bradley," said Miss Arbuckle, so unexpectedly that Amanda's mouth dropped open from sheer surprise. "There must be some mistake."

"But they were away together for three hours," Amanda repeated, angry at having this tempting morsel of revenge snatched away from her at the last minute. "I know it."

"That will do, Amanda," said Miss Arbuckle sternly. "You have been guilty several times of starting stories about the girls that have had absolutely no foundation in truth. And I warn you that if you are caught again in this mischief it may mean serious trouble for you.

"You say," she added turning soberly to Billie, "that you and Teddy Jordon did *not* leave the other boys and girls this morning?"

"Oh, yes, we did," said Billie, so eager to explain that her words tripped all over themselves. "Only we didn't do it on purpose."

Miss Arbuckle looked grave and Amanda's triumphant leer returned.

"Please let me explain——" began poor Billie, but the teacher interrupted her.

"Yes, I want you to," she said. "Only not just now. Come to me to-morrow morning at nine, Billie. And I want you to be there also, Amanda. In the meantime," she added to the latter, "you will make no mention of this affair in any way. Do you understand?"

Amanda nodded sullenly and at Miss Arbuckle's command the small group of girls that had gathered dispersed to their various dormitories, talking excitedly of what had happened.

Billie was too tired and cold and worn out with conflicting emotions to talk much at first. But under the tireless cross-questioning of the girls she gradually began to give them the story of her remarkable adventure.

They were very much excited about Nick Budd and the cave, and declared that they must visit it and Billie must show them the way.

But Billie, who was comfortably stretched out on her bed with Vi rubbing one half-frozen hand and Laura the other, absolutely denied that she would do anything of the sort.

"It sounds very interesting now," she said. "But I tell you I was scared to death while it lasted. I wouldn't go back to that place for a million dollars. Oh, girls," she added, stretching luxuriously, "you don't know how heavenly it feels just to be where it's warm."

"Didn't Teddy keep you warm?" asked Rose Belser, wickedly, but just then the door opened and Amanda came into the room. Needless to say, Billie did not answer the question.

Promptly at nine o'clock the next morning Billie went to Miss Arbuckle and told her the story of the yesterday's adventure just as it had happened, and Miss Arbuckle, to Amanda's immense disgust, believed her. A little talk by the teacher on the wisdom of taking fewer chances in the future ended the interview to which Billie had been looking forward with not a little dread. And Amanda found herself once more facing the problem of how "to get even with Billie Bradley."

The girls talked and wondered about the queer little cave and simple Nick Budd, but as the days went on and they were whirled into a veritable maelstrom of quizzes and examinations, they gradually forgot the incident.

It seemed that the school work was to be unusually interesting that year. There were the usual number of essays to be written, and for one Miss Walters had offered a prize to the girl turning in the best work.

The title of the essay was "The World's Greatest Generals," and any girl in the school was entitled to try for it. There were other prizes offered, too, but Billie, whose mark in English was usually the highest in her class, thought that she would try for the composition prize.

Laura and Connie and Rose Belser were going to enter the lists with her, but Vi and Nellie Bane decided to try for the highest mark in geometry.

"Working for a prize makes the work seem more like a game," said Connie as she happily looked up her "greatest generals." "I'm as excited as if I were going to a party."

"Well, you'd better not get too excited," advised Vi, pulling a lock of her hair absently in order to solve a particularly steep problem in her beloved geometry. "Billie is sure to come off

with the essay prize.”

“Oh, she is, is she?” spoke up Rose, who had set her heart on the essay prize herself and who could never quite stifle her former jealousy of Billie. “Well, maybe she is, but I’m going to give her a run for her money just the same.”

“Good!” cried Billie, looking up from her book and smiling sunnily at Rose. “That’s the kind of game I like to play.”

“And how about us?” said Laura, smiling ruefully over at fluffy-haired Connie. “We don’t seem to be in this at all.”

Besides their studies, the girls had the Ghost Club to think about and the importance of initiating new members. They had decided upon two of the freshmen for the honor, one, a fair-haired intelligent girl named Ann Fleming and the second a laughing imp of a girl with red hair and red-brown eyes who bore the name of Ada Slope.

Both girls stood well in their studies and showed a remarkable popularity among their classmates considering the short time they had been at the Hall.

And of course they were overwhelmed with joy when Billie drew them aside one day and ordered them to be in the gymnasium at not later than nine o’clock that night.

They were there before nine, shivering in the darkness of the big gymnasium and wishing that this fearful business of being initiated were over and done with.

A few minutes later the “ghosts” arrived and put the girls through a series of trials that tested their courage and endurance to the limit.

They were made to “walk the plank” blindfolded; they were prepared for “branding with a red-hot poker” and then touched with a lump of ice that made them cry out in imagined pain; they were handed all sorts of slimy things, harmless in themselves but terrifying to the overstrained nerves of the girls.

But they came out of the test with flying colors, and the members of the club were well satisfied with their choice.

“And now,” said Rose Belser—who was still president of the club—as the handkerchiefs were removed from the eyes of the new members, “we are about to put to the test a new rule suggested by a fellow ghost.”

The girls held their breath, for the announcement was a surprise to all but Billie, who had herself made the suggestion.

“It occurred to this fellow-member of our illustrious club,” Rose went on in a deep voice, looking very weird and ghostly in her long white ceremonial robe, with only slits cut in it for the eyes and nose and mouth, “that it is only fair to the new members who have stood the test, to suggest some difficult feat for one of the old members to perform—this person to be chosen by the new members of the club.”

The girls were silent for a moment, sitting there like so many actual ghosts in their white robes, and they thrilled with excitement as they realized the possibilities of the new rule if it should be accepted.

It was fair, for it would give the girls who had gone through the hazing a chance to “get even,” and it would also be lots of fun for themselves. So when Rose called in a sepulchral voice for a vote, there was a unanimous cry of “aye.”

Billie smiled under her white mask gleefully. She had known that the girls would be good sports.

“The suggestion has been unanimously accepted,” Rose rumbled on in the deep voice she adopted for such occasions. “Fellow ghosts, we will now withdraw and give our fellow members a chance to consult upon this important topic.”

“You don’t have to withdraw,” cried red-haired Ada Slope, with a giggle that she could not entirely suppress, despite the “seriousness of the occasion.” “I’ll give a nickel to any girl who will climb up into tower number three with only a candle to see by.”

“And I’ll give a dime,” said Ann Fleming decidedly.

A ripple of very human laughter ran through the ghosts, and Rose had to demand order three times before she was obeyed.

“Very well,” she said then. “Our new members have decided. It now remains for them to select one among our number to do this mighty deed. Advance, new members of the Ghost Club! Choose!”

Ann Fleming put out her hand and touched one white-robed figure.

“I choose this one,” she said.

“’Tis done!” cried Ada Slope, dramatically.

CHAPTER XIV—A BLOOD-STAINED HANDKERCHIEF

The next problem was to find the candle for the “ghost” to carry up to the gloomy heights of tower number three. Ada Slope, little minx that she was, had chosen this particular one of the three towers for which the Hall was named, because of a legend among the girls, starting from goodness knows where, that this tower was haunted.

Now Billie was not by any means a coward, and she had proved by her behavior in the spooky old mansion at Cherry Corners that she was not inclined to belief in or fear of ghosts.

Yet when Ada Slope ran hastily up to her room and returned bearing a tiny Christmas candle, which was all that Billie was to have to accompany her on her perilous journey, it must be admitted that her heart began to beat a little faster and she was guilty for a moment of wishing that Ada Slope had picked on any other girl but herself.

However, she acted so perfectly that there was not one of her chums but who thought that she was delighted at the chance to explore the gloomy old tower—with one little candle for company!

“Suppose—” she thought to herself as Laura lighted the candle for her—or at least she thought it was Laura; they all looked pretty much alike in their ghostly robes—“suppose it should go out when I reach the top of the tower and I should have to find my way back in the dark!”

“Courage,” Rose Belser cried, as she pushed Billie toward the door, the candle flickering in her hand. “There are those who say that tower number three is haunted. But let me remind you, friend, that a ghost is never afraid of a ghost. Farewell!”

This was not a very encouraging speech, though Billie could not help giggling about it as she climbed the back stairs to the first floor.

The house was as still as death, for it was after ten o’clock now, and everybody, even Miss Walters, seemed to be in bed.

Billie almost ran up the second and third flights, stumbling over her white robe and shielding the flickering candle with her hand for fear it would go out.

When she reached the fourth floor, which was really the attic, she went more slowly, for the place was dark and “spooky”—so she said—and the noise of her footsteps frightened her. The tiny light of her candle seemed to make the shadowy corners of the place all the more startlingly black.

Once she thought she heard a noise and stopped short, her heart beating suffocatingly in her throat. But it was only the wind sighing drearily around the place, and she went on again, more slowly now, starting at every real or imaginary sound.

The stairway that led to the third tower was at the very end of the long attic, and as she came near to it Billie’s courage almost failed her. It seemed to her that something sinister and terrible was closing in around her, and she pressed her hand against her mouth to keep from screaming.

She could see the dim outline of the stairway right before her, but she was afraid to go forward—and she dared not go back.

What would the girls say if she went back to them and confessed that she had been too cowardly to stand the test? She would be disgraced forever in the eyes of her chums, her reputation for daring and bravery would be gone, she might even be asked to resign from the Ghost Club.

For a long minute she stood there, fighting the desire to rush back to friends and human companionship. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, she forced herself to approach the stairs.

With every step she stopped and listened, glancing about her fearfully. But nothing save the sound of her own rapid breathing broke the musty, heavy silence of the place.

“I must go on, I must go on!” she kept telling herself over and over again. “To the very top of the tower—to the top of the tower——”

What was that?

A rattling, a scurrying, a scratching of tiny feet across the floor. Billie screamed, but stifled the sound half way by stuffing a handkerchief into her mouth. Her eyes were wide with terror, her hair began to stand on end, and with a little moan she made a rush for the stairs up which she had come a minute before.

She had almost reached them when by the light of her candle she saw something running across the floor. It was a mouse. Weakly she leaned against the wall, trying to summon what remained of her courage.

"They're only mice, silly—they can't hurt you," she told herself, while her hand shook so that she could scarcely hold the candle. Then a sudden thought made her start back for the tower stairs almost on a run. The candle was burning low. She must hurry or she would be left in the dark. Just a quick dive up the stairs to the tower room and the deed would be done. She could go back then, to friends and lights and adulation. For she would be able to tell them proudly that she had done what no other girl had dared to do—climbed to the top of tower three.

With such thoughts she bolstered up her courage and ran swiftly up the stairs. But the "swish" of her garments in that silent place frightened her and she stopped before she had quite reached the top. She listened intently.

Was it imagination, or had she really heard that eerie whisper in her ear, felt the soft brushing of a dress against hers? Of course it was only imagination. She mustn't think such things or she could never climb to the top of those hateful stairs. She must go on and on—to the top—the very top—Again that scurrying and squealing as she disturbed another nest of mice. She grasped the banister frantically to steady herself.

She must go up—up—Finally she had reached the top of the stairs, and for one joyful minute she thought that she had climbed to the top of the tower. She could go back again to the girls—she had turned toward the stairs when her eye fell on an object that made her breath catch in her throat.

Revealed by the uncertain flare of the candle was a ladder, leading apparently to some room above. Of course, that must be the tower room. Then she still had some climbing to do before her task was finished.

Billie's heart sank as she approached the ladder, stumbling over bits of junk and rubbish that littered the floor. She must hurry, too, for the candle was burning down and she must not be left in the dark in that place. She would go crazy—or something.

Outside the wind was rising, and it wailed around the corners of the old building with an unspeakably weird and mournful sound that filled Billie with a dreadful premonition of evil.

She really felt, as she hesitated at the foot of the ladder, that she must get back to the girls or she would go mad. Her knees were trembling so that she was afraid she could never climb the ladder to the top.

But she must do it or go back to the girls disgraced.

One hand grasped the rung above her head while the other held aloft the flickering candle and she began the difficult climb, hampered by the long white robe that clung like something alive about her ankles and by the necessity of holding the candle.

Four rungs, five rungs, six rungs—was the ladder a mile long? she wondered, while the wind wailed still more dismally about the house.

Then at last she reached the top. Her candle showed a small door not more than four feet high—the door to the tower room.

Her hand felt for the knob. She grasped it. The door was locked. To make sure, Billie gave the door a vigorous shake, and as it did so something white and soft fluttered to her feet and fell on the top rung of the ladder.

For a minute Billie felt faint and dizzy, and she had to cling to the ladder desperately to keep from falling.

The next moment she saw that what had frightened her was only a handkerchief, and she stooped to pick it up. It was old and stained. What was that stain upon it?

She brought the little square of linen closer to her eyes and then with a stifled scream she flung it from her while the candle fell from her nerveless fingers and went out, leaving her in the dark.

The stain on the handkerchief was *blood!*

Billie never remembers to this day how she got out of that awful place. Someway she half fell, half scrambled down the ladder, stumbled and fell and stumbled again in her mad rush across the pitch-black attic to the head of the stairs.

Then down, down, down, a countless number of stairs that came up and hit her in the face—

down, down to the gymnasium where thousands of ghostly figures rushed at her—

"Oh, what could have happened to have frightened her so?" she heard a voice saying from a long, long distance, and she opened her eyes to find Laura's white face bending anxiously over her while other white-faced girls stared at her pityingly.

She struggled to her feet, but her knees wavered so that she sat down again quite suddenly.

"What's the matter with you all?" she asked, then as the memory of what had happened came back to her in a flood she shuddered and instinctively she looked down at her hands to see if they still held that piece of linen with the stains upon it.

"Oh, I remember," she murmured, as though talking to herself. The girls were watching her anxiously. "I threw it away."

"What, honey?" asked Laura gently.

"The blood-stained handkerchief!"

CHAPTER XV—A DISCOVERY

It took the other girls some time to get the whole story from Billie, but when she had stammered it out to them they broke into a babel of excited exclamations that threatened to bring one of the teachers to their hiding place.

It was Billie herself who thought of this danger and who finally managed to calm them down a little.

"Not so loud," she entreated, still feeling faint and shaky from her experience. "You know what will happen if somebody finds us here."

"But Billie," protested Laura, though her voice sank to a more cautious whisper, "we've got to do something about it, you know. There may have been a murder or something up there."

"Perhaps we'd better all go back with Billie and try to get into that little room at the head of the ladder," suggested one of the girls, but the mere idea made Billie shudder.

"You can go," she said decidedly. "But I'm through for to-night."

"Oh, well, if you won't go," said the girl dejectedly, "it's all off, of course. We need a guide —"

"I don't see why," protested Billie. "Nobody gave me a guide."

"No. And it was a shame to send you away up there all alone," said Vi, putting a protecting arm about her. "It's a wonder you didn't die of fright."

"I suppose," said Ann Fleming, thoughtfully, "we might tell one of the teachers about it—or Miss Walters, perhaps—and she could go with us up to the tower—"

"Say," interrupted Rose Belser with her most pronounced drawl, as she looked contemptuously upon the freshman who had proposed so foolish a thing, "it's easy to see you haven't been at Three Towers long, Ann. Now just what do you suppose would happen if we told Miss Walters that we were up after hours initiating and doing stunts?"

"I—I didn't think of that," stammered Ann, completely crushed.

"I thought you didn't," answered Rose dryly.

For some time afterward the girls discussed in awed whispers the startling thing that had happened, and then somebody suddenly conceived the idea that it would not be a bad thing to go to bed.

Billie was looking very white and shaky after her ordeal. Then, too, it was getting late, and there was always the chance of discovery by some "over-curious teacher."

"But I'll never, never, sleep a wink," said Vi, as they filed ghost-like out of the gymnasium. "I know I'll be dreaming of blood-stained handkerchiefs all night long."

"And I don't think it's fair," pouted Connie, "for Billie to have all the adventures. First she gets lost with Teddy and discovers a perfectly good cave, and then she unearths a thrilling mystery, like this. Too much good luck for one person."

"Good luck!" repeated Billie ruefully. "Well, if you call *that* good luck, I certainly would hate to be the one to find out what bad luck is."

"Hush," ordered Rose, once more assuming the deep voice of the head of the ghosts. "Some one may hear you and we'll all be shot at sunrise."

"I never get up that early," giggled Laura.

Many and varied were the plans the girls made for a storming of tower number three in the hope of solving the mystery of that little locked door and the blood-stained handkerchief. However, there seemed to be so many obstacles in the way of carrying out these plans that they reluctantly decided to give up the idea, at least for the time being.

"And, anyway," Laura had said in one of their discussions, "the blood stains on that handkerchief might not have meant anything mysterious at all. Maybe somebody had a nose-bleed."

"How romantic!" drawled Rose while the other girls giggled at the idea.

Their studies and the race for prizes absorbed the classmates in the days that followed and gradually the mystery, if indeed it was a mystery, faded from their minds.

Billie worked hard, and thought she was getting along finely. She commenced to grow a trifle pale, and at this Vi and Laura shook their heads.

"Don't overdo it, Billie," said Vi.

"No kind of prize is worth one's health," added Laura.

"Don't worry about me," declared Billie, with a smile. "I know what you want to do—make me let up so you can pass me."

"Oh, you know better than that!" cried Laura.

"Of course she does," came from Vi. "Now remember, don't study so hard that you get sick."

"No danger," retorted Billie airily.

It was nearly a week later when Billie suddenly realized that there was another thing they had almost forgotten, and that was Polly Haddon and her unhappy little family.

"And poor little Peter!" said Vi penitently, when Billie spoke to her about it. "He must be either better or dead by this time."

"Suppose we go over to-morrow"—the next day being Saturday—Laura suggested. "We can walk to town first. Or maybe we can get Tim Budd to drive us over in the wagon. We can get some good canned stuff, soups and things, and take them over to the Haddons when we go."

The next day the girls sought out Tim Budd, who was the gardener at the Hall and who was also, alas! the father of poor, simple Nick Budd with whom Teddy and Billie had had so queer an experience. After a great deal of coaxing, they succeeded in getting the gardener to take them to town in the carryall. From this it may be seen that Tim acted as chauffeur also upon occasion.

They were in hilarious spirits all the way to the town and back again, and it was not until they had almost reached Three Towers that Vi made a suggestion that somehow clouded their faces.

"Suppose she won't accept these things?" she said, giving the well-stocked basket at her feet a little shove. "You said yourself she was awfully proud, Billie."

Billie looked sober for a moment, but Laura, as ever, found something to laugh at.

"Why worry about that?" said the incorrigible one, gaily. "If she doesn't want 'em we'll have a midnight feast and use them ourselves."

Tim Budd let them out at the Hall and they walked the rest of the way to the little cottage. Mrs. Haddon herself opened the door, but she looked so pale and wan that they hardly recognized her.

The woman welcomed the girls absently, as if her mind were a great way off, but when her eyes fell on the basket a resigned little smile played about her lips.

"More charity," she muttered, as though to herself. "Well, I will take it because I must. But I'll pay it back." She turned proudly upon the girls and her fine eyes flashed. "No one can say of Polly Haddon that she left her debts unpaid."

Taken aback by this unexpected declaration, the girls said nothing, but shifted their feet uneasily, wishing fervently that Polly Haddon would turn the fire of her black eyes on something else.

But almost instantly the woman's mood became softer, and, seeing the girls' embarrassment, she tried to put them at their ease.

"Thank you so much," she said. "Won't you sit down? The basket is heavy and you have come a long way."

The girls, not knowing what else to do, sat down on the three spindly chairs awkwardly enough, and Laura and Vi sent distress signals Billie-wards. For Billie was always their spokesman.

So Billie, who had been as much abashed as any of them at their rather queer reception,

found her tongue with difficulty and asked Mrs. Haddon how Peter was.

"He is dreadfully low," Mrs. Haddon answered softly. Her head drooped wearily and her hands were crossed listlessly in front of her. "The doctor says it is not even an even chance whether he lives or dies."

The girls murmured their very real sympathy, and Billie started to ask another question when the door at the other end of the room opened and the two little girls, Mary and Isabel, entered.

At sight of the visitors they looked startled and started to retreat, but their mother called to them.

"Come here," she said, and the children sidled slowly up to her where they stood, their large eyes fixed shyly on the girls. "Don't you know these young ladies?" asked the mother, putting an arm about each of the poor little thin things caressingly and drawing them up close to her. "They are the ones who brought you home that day that you were naughty and ran away, and they have been very kind to us since."

There was a slight sound from the room beyond where poor little Peter lay so desperately ill, and Mrs. Haddon rose suddenly, leaving the two little girls and the three big girls together.

It would have been hard to tell at first who was the most embarrassed. But as no children had ever known to resist Billie for very long, the two little Haddons were soon won over and chatted to the three big girls in careless, innocent child fashion.

"We get good things to eat now," said Isabel, confidentially, speaking of the thing that loomed biggest and most important in her starved little life. "A man comes almost every night with a basket—just like this," and she eyed the basket which the girls had brought with hungry eyes.

"Yes, an' he's a funny little man, too," added Mary, her big eyes round with eagerness. "He has whiskers and he stoops—dreadful."

A glance of understanding passed between the chums.

"That description——" Vi began.

"Suits Tim Budd——" added Laura.

"To a T," finished Billie.

CHAPTER XVI—CHRISTMAS CHEER

So Miss Walters was seeing to it that Polly Haddon received food regularly—"almost every night!" Of course Miss Walters had promised to look out for the family, but the girls had hardly expected her to be so generous.

And while they were still turning the revelation over wonderingly in their minds, Polly Haddon called to them softly from the other room.

It was a bare little room into which they stepped—barer and poorer than even they had imagined. And in the midst of a little iron bed lay Peter, so pathetically white and emaciated that it tore their hearts to look at him.

"Is he very bad?" asked Billie, turning to weary-eyed Polly Haddon.

"The doctor says he almost surely will die," answered the latter in a toneless voice. "He has just one chance out of a hundred."

And as though speaking the doctor's name had brought him there, the big man himself entered at that moment and the girls took that opportunity to say good-bye.

"Poor little Peter," sighed Billie, as they walked slowly homeward. "I suppose if he dies poor Mrs. Haddon will nearly die too."

"I wish there was something we could do," said Vi, frowning.

"I don't know what more we could do than we have done," said Laura gloomily.

"Except," said Billie thoughtfully, her eyes fixed on the far horizon, "find that invention of hers. I imagine that would make her so happy that she might even persuade poor little Peter to live."

"Good gracious!" cried Laura, throwing up her hands in a despairing gesture. "She's raving

again, girls, she's raving again!"

Billie laughed, but her eyes were still very thoughtful.

But the holiday season was upon them and it was impossible for the girls to be gloomy or unhappy for very long. They wished with all their hearts that Polly Haddon and her pathetic little brood might be made happy and prosperous once more, but even while they were wishing they could not shake off the exultant thought that Christmas was coming. And Christmas to most of them meant home and family and turkeys and cranberry sauce and presents—oh, oodles of presents!

"No holiday quite as good as good old Christmas," observed Laura, gaily, as she danced around with a package she had just been doing up in a red ribbon.

"I'm with you on that," declared Billie. "Oh, do you know, sometimes I can hardly wait until Christmas comes!"

"But you'll wait just the same," drawled Vi. "We all will."

"It's waiting that makes it worth while," declared Billie. "It's like the small boy and the circus. Tell him in the morning that you will take him in the afternoon and it doesn't amount to much. But tell him a month ahead and he'll get a whole month's fun out of it before it comes off."

"All right, Billie, I'll tell you a secret," whispered Vi, with a twinkle in her eyes. "About a year from now we'll have another Christmas. Now is your time to start thinking about it." And then there were giggles all around.

"I'll wait for one Christmas to be over before I think of the next," declared Billie.

Billie had asked Connie Danvers to come home with her for over the holidays, but Connie, after, writing eagerly home for permission, had had to refuse the invitation. Mrs. Danvers thanked Mrs. Bradley and Billie, but there was to be a big reunion of the Danvers family that Christmas and they had all counted on having Connie with them. If Billie could come home with Connie for Christmas—but here Billie shook her head decidedly, though the invitation was an enticing one. She knew that her mother would certainly want her at home for the most wonderful day in all the year.

And so when the time came, the classmates went their several ways after many fond embraces had been exchanged—to say nothing of various mysterious little green- and red-ribboned parcels.

The Christmas spirit is a wonderful thing, intangible, yet so real that even the most hardened old reprobate will thrill to the magic of it. And as these girls were neither hardened nor reprobates, they were kept in a continual state of excitement and joyful anticipation for two whole weeks before the great day arrived.

Ever since the opening of Three Towers Hall in the fall, the girls had used their spare moments to sew on little mysterious things which were immediately hidden upon the arrival of any of their fellow students, and now these same pieces of needlework began to blossom forth in gay be-ribboned boxes that passed between the girls in a continual stream.

Sometimes one would be found between the sheets of a girl's bed when she jumped in at night and the touch of it would elicit a muffled shriek, to be followed by hysterical giggles when the gift was pulled from its hiding place and disclosed in all its glory to be admired and exclaimed over by the girls who had not been lucky enough to bark their shins on gifts of their own.

And sometimes another be-ribboned parcel would find its way into the stocking of a lucky maiden while she slept or be discovered in an out-of-the-way corner of her desk, nearly covered by books and papers.

And as the time drew still nearer, even interest in their studies flagged, and the teachers, wisely forbearing to force them, entered into the fun themselves, knowing that one could not study much while the Christmas cheer was in the air.

The girls had fondly hoped that Teddy and Chet and Ferd would be able to make the return trip with them, but as Boxtton Academy did not close for the holidays until the day after the official closing of Three Towers, the girls were forced to give up the idea.

"Oh, well," Billie said resignedly, "as long as they get there for Christmas it will be time enough."

The day of release came at last and found the three North Bend girls doing a two-step of impatience on the station platform, waiting for the train, which was already half an hour late.

"Goodness, but your bag looks stuffed, Billie," remarked Laura, stopping before Billie's big suitcase whose bulging sides did look as though they might burst at any moment and disgorge the contents.

"It has twenty presents in it," confided Billie, surveying her fat property with a loving eye. "I

only hope it holds out till we get home, that's all!"

Then the train puffed around the bend and slowed up to the station. And several hours later three very much flushed, very much excited, and very pretty young girls popped off the train at North Bend and straight into the arms of their doting families.

"Merry Christmas!" they cried to every one in general and no one in particular. "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Oh, isn't it glorious to be at home!"

The boys arrived the next day, and they all had a great reunion at Billie's home, where they exchanged presents and talked in hushed tones of what they hoped that Santa Claus would bring them—to-morrow! For this was Christmas Eve!

But the party broke up soon, and they all went to bed early so that they could get up at six o'clock the next morning—at the very latest.

Oh, the fun of anticipating and the joy of Christmas Day. First of all, the bulging stocking with its lumps of coal and pieces of carefully wrapped sugar with really pretty things stuck in between.

Then the mad rush for the Christmas tree and the admiring exclamations over its glittering beauty. And then—the opening of the gay, be-ribboned boxes. The laughter, the joy, the tears, as each little parcel disclosed something prettier or funnier or dearer than the last. It was all so wonderful that it was a pity it could not have lasted forever.

Then, after Christmas, one glorious, ecstatic week of fun that passed like a day. There were dances and parties and sleighrides and so many other festivities that there was hardly a minute of the day that was not accounted for.

It was not till the week was almost over that the girls thought penitently of the Haddons.

"I wonder," said Billie, as she turned over and over in her fingers a ten dollar gold piece that had been a gift from an aunt, "what kind of Christmas poor little Peter has had."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Billie!" Laura replied a little impatiently, "what is the use of spoiling all our fun by bringing up the unhappiness of some one else? We can't help it if the Haddons haven't had as nice a Christmas as we have. We certainly have done all we could."

But Vi had been eyeing Billie's gold piece, and suddenly she had a bright idea all her own.

"Listen," she said, pulling out her pocket book and fumbling in it eagerly. She brought out a glistening five dollar gold piece. "We all got a little money in gold this Christmas. Suppose we do it up in a box and leave it at the Haddons' door when we get back. We have enough money to get along with for the rest of the term, anyway."

For a moment Laura looked a little undecided, but Billie jumped up, ran over to Vi and hugged her.

"You're a perfect angel!" she cried. "That's just exactly what I was thinking myself. Only I wasn't going to ask you girls. I was just going to leave mine and say nothing about it."

"Oh, well," grumbled Laura, taking her own bright coin from its hiding place and handing it over reluctantly. "If you girls are going to be foolish I suppose I've got to be too. Only it's no joke," she added, in a plaintive tone that made the girls giggle, "when you think of all the sodas and candy it would buy!"

At last the long anticipated holidays were at an end and after a few days of readjustment at the school, the classmates settled down to work in earnest. For the rest of the semester was crowded with work and the prizes were held out as a glittering bait to spur them on to fresh endeavor.

Only once, after their return to the Hall, the girls found time to run over to see the Haddons, hoping to be able to hide the generous gift they had decided to make in some inconspicuous place where it would not be discovered until they had had time to make their escape.

Polly Haddon seemed very glad indeed to see them, but she had no good news to report of Peter. He was still very low, but the doctor, great man that he was, was bending every energy to bring him through.

"But he will die," said the mother, despairingly. "There is so little left of him now that I wonder that every breath he draws is not his last. Oh, my little boy! My poor little boy! I'll not let him be taken from me!"

They comforted her as best they could, and then Billie, to the astonishment of her chums, began asking questions about the knitting machinery model, the disappearance of which had so changed life for this distracted woman.

"Was the model large or was it small, so that it could easily be stolen and hidden away?" she asked, while Polly Haddon looked up at her with something like surprise in her black eyes.

"It was large," she answered. "And rather heavy. It could not be easily stolen, and neither

could it have been hidden away in any small place. That is why we wondered. But why do you ask?"

"I don't know," answered Billie honestly. "Perhaps it is just because I would like to help you so much."

The woman reached over and patted her hand gently, but her eyes had become listless again.

"You—everybody—have been so good to me," she said, tonelessly. "I don't know why you have been so good—no one ever was before. But there is one thing you can not do for me. You can not restore my poor husband's invention, the loss of which caused his death. That would be a miracle. And in these days no one is working miracles."

Mrs. Haddon left the room for a moment, and in that moment Billie slipped the little box containing their three precious gold pieces behind the alarm clock that stood on a shelf over the sink.

The woman returned before Billie had quite finished, but she was too worried and anxious and unhappy to notice anything unusual. And the little box was still safe in its hiding place when the girls took their leave a few minutes later.

"Won't she be surprised when she finds it?" crowed Vi delightedly. "I feel like Santa Claus."

"Well, you don't look like it," returned Laura, "Your face isn't red enough."

CHAPTER XVII—BILLIE ON GUARD

From this remark of Laura's it may be easily seen that she was still a little grouchy about having to give up five dollars' worth of sodas and candy. But away down in her heart she derived more real pleasure from the thought of what her gold piece would buy for the Haddons than she would out of a great deal more than five dollars' worth of pleasure for herself.

"Billie," spoke up Vi suddenly after they had walked some little way in silence, "what did you ask Mrs. Haddon about that lost invention for?"

"Yes, it sounded as if you really knew something about it," Laura took her up eagerly. "You don't, do you?"

"Not a thing in the world," Billie replied quickly. "Only," she added slowly, the same thoughtful look in her eyes that had been there before, "so many queer things have happened to me lately that I'm getting sort of queer myself, I guess. I can't help thinking about that cave Teddy and I found."

"Well, I don't blame you for thinking of it," said Laura, looking curiously at her chum. "I think of it myself—quite often. But what has that to do with the stolen machinery models?"

"Nothing, of course," said Billie, adding as the three towers of the grand old Hall loomed into view. "But I would like to have a look at the inside of that cave again. Maybe the models were taken there and broken up. The cave was full of junk."

Laura, really curious by this time, was about to put a question when she saw Amanda and the "Shadow" approaching, and the question died in her throat.

The three classmates, who never deliberately "cut" anybody, nodded to the two girls in a friendly enough manner, but the latter looked straight at them and never so much as winked an eye.

"Whew!" whistled Laura, softly, as the chums stopped and looked back after the unmannerly girls. "Cut, by jinks!"

"And by Amanda, of all people!" added Vi, in the same tone.

"Well, come on," said Billie, and she turned and led the way up the steps. "There's no use standing there and looking after them like a lot of wooden Indians. I'd like—" she added, her temper getting the better of her for the moment, "I would like to wring that girl's neck."

"Do you know," said Vi a few minutes later when they were washing themselves in the dormitory, "that Amanda has entered for the composition prize?"

The girls looked at her unbelievably.

"Amanda!" cried Billie, laughing at the absurdity of the thing. "Why, Amanda can hardly

write her own name. You know that."

"Of course I know it," agreed Vi, scrubbing her face vigorously. "That's why it seems so silly. Unless she has something up her sleeve," she added meaningfully.

"How did you find out?" asked Laura, curling up on the bed and regarding her chum severely. "Did she tell you?"

"Tell me!" repeated Vi with a chuckle. "That *is* a good one. No, I just happened to overhear her telling Eliza that she had entered for the composition prize and that she was going to give Billie Bradley the surprise of her life."

"She surely does love me," sighed Billie, as she pulled her pretty curls into place. "I don't see why she doesn't pick on somebody else for a change."

"Well, you'd better look out, that's all," said Vi, wrinkling her forehead seriously. "I'm almost sure she is planning some crooked work, and it's up to us to double cross her."

"Hear, hear!" cried Laura delightedly. "And Vi is the one who is always calling me down for using slang. Fine for a beginner, Vi darling. Keep it up."

The result of this revelation of Vi's was to make the girls watch Amanda and the "Shadow" more carefully than ever before. And if it had not been for just this watchfulness there is no telling what might have happened to Billie Bradley, and through her, to her classmates.

And this was the way it happened.

Luckily for the three North Bend chums, Amanda and her "Shadow" shared the dormitory with them and Rose Belser. And so it was that Billie, coming in unexpectedly one day heard the very end of a sentence spoken in a loud whisper by Amanda. And though it was only the end of the sentence, it told a great deal to Billie, whose suspicions had already been aroused.

"—at ten to-night, in Miss Race's room," were the words she caught. The fact that Amanda stopped speaking at sight of her and grew an unsightly brick red, gave Billie further proof that the girl was plotting mischief. Very probably the scapegoat was to be—herself.

She gave no sign that she had heard anything out of the ordinary, but when she had found the book she had come for and was out in the hall once more, her heart was pounding heavily and her face was hot.

Ever since they had come to Three Towers Amanda had done her best to discredit Billie. She had not succeeded so far, but some time she might. Was this the time? thought Billie, a dull rage taking possession of her.

No! She would not let Amanda get the better of her. She would outwit her, now that she had been warned. Then a dreadful thought came to her.

Suppose Amanda, thinking she had given her secret away, postponed her miserable plot, whatever it was, until another time? No wonder Billie answered questions queerly that afternoon, so queerly, in fact, that one teacher asked her if she were ill and would like to be excused!

But Billie did not want to be excused—that would mean more time to herself to think. And so she blundered through the miserable afternoon and her heart jumped with relief when the last gong sounded that meant liberty.

Connie and Laura overtook her in the hall on the way to the dormitory and Laura looked actually anxious.

"What was the matter with you this afternoon?" she asked. "Why, you answered 'no' three times when it should have been 'yes,' and it sounded so silly I'd have had to laugh if I hadn't been scared to death!"

"What is it, Billie?" added Connie, putting an arm about her friend. "You look dreadfully white. Aren't you feeling well?"

Then, pulling them into a secluded corner of the dormitory, Billie told them what she had heard, and as Vi came in just as she had finished, she had to tell it all over again, just for her benefit.

Of course the girls were all angry, and Laura wanted to go and have it out with Amanda at once, but Billie, who had had all the afternoon to think out the best thing to do, commanded her to say nothing about it to any one.

"Listen," she said, tensely. "Somebody's apt to come in at any minute, and then I can't say it. This is what we will do to-night.

"We'll pull our nighties on over our clothes, get into bed and pretend to go to sleep. Then we'll wait till Amanda starts whatever she's going to do, and we'll follow her and see what she's up to."

"And then," said Laura, driven to more forceful slang by the necessity for emphasis, "we'll just about *settle* her!"

True to their plans, they retired to the dormitory that night before Amanda or the "Shadow" or Rose Belser arrived there, and they hurriedly slipped their nightgowns over their clothes and got into bed.

"Poor Connie's wailing her heart out," chuckled Laura, "because she's in another dorm and can't be in at the death. I say, Vi, push the collar of your dress down. It shows outside your nightie."

"Sh-h," warned Billie. "I hear somebody coming——"

The somebody proved to be no other than Amanda and Eliza, and when they entered they found Billie and Laura and Vi sleeping peacefully with a cherubic expression of utter innocence on their faces.

It seemed to the girls that they had never lived through an hour so long as that between nine o'clock and ten that night. And it was with more than relief that they heard a slight stir at last and saw a shadowy figure slip out of bed and make noiselessly for the door. And while they held their breath for fear their breathing might betray them, they saw a second shadow flit after the first one. "The Shadow," in fact!

They waited till the conspirators had had time to get well down the hall, then they too slipped quietly out of bed, pulled their nightgowns off, and started in pursuit.

"Sh," whispered Billie. "Take your time. We want to let them do it before we catch them at it."

When they reached Miss Race's door they were surprised to see a light in the room. Was it possible Amanda had been brazen enough to turn on the light herself?

Cautiously Billie peeped into the room and saw that Amanda and Eliza were busily at work doing something to the teacher's desk at the other end of the room. They were alone, so it must have been Amanda who had switched on the light. The girl was bold with the courage of stupidity.

Laura uttered a stifled exclamation, and would have pushed past Billie but the latter held her back. For still another minute she hesitated, then called to the girls softly.

"Now," she said, and ran swiftly into the room, Laura and Vi beside her. So quickly and silently did they come that they were almost upon the two girls before either of them looked up. Then——

"Amanda Peabody!" cried Billie, her voice choked with anger. "We've caught you this time! Now let's see what you were doing!"

CHAPTER XVIII—AMANDA'S REVENGE

Amanda's jaw dropped and she sprang back while Eliza cowered behind her. The former held an ink bottle which she had been about to turn upside down in Miss Race's desk.

With a quick movement Laura snatched it from the girl's hand and held it aloft triumphantly.

"Look, Billie," she said in a loud whisper. "Amanda was going to spill this in the desk and then blame it on you."

Amanda made a quick dart for the door, but Billie ran after her and pulled her back.

"Not yet," she said, grimly. "You'll wait till we're through with you or I'll go to Miss Walters and report the whole thing. You had better not try to get funny."

Amanda started to bluster, but on second thoughts decided not to. Billie and her chums had the argument all on their side this time, and the thought made her fume inwardly.

As for the "Shadow," her homely face was pale with fright, and she stood motionless and scared on the spot where the girls had first discovered her.

The plan of the two conspirators had evidently been to upset the teacher's desk and then blame the whole thing on Billie. But how could Amanda hope to prove that Billie had done it all?

Thus thought the girls as they rummaged through the desk in search of some further trick. And then, they found it.

"Look at this!" cried Billie, holding aloft a little square of linen at sight of which Amanda

grew more sullen and Eliza quaked. "It's my handkerchief with my initials and my laundry mark on it. Those—those—girls—were going to leave it here after spilling the ink, and when Miss Race found it she would of course think that I was the guilty one. Oh—what shall we do to them?"

She glared at the tricksters while Amanda tossed her head defiantly and Eliza shrank still farther back into the corner.

"But that would have been so silly," cried Laura, who had snatched the handkerchief from Billie and was examining it eagerly. Vi, in her turn was trying to pull it from her. "Miss Race would know that you would have sense enough not to give yourself away by leaving your handkerchief. Their heads sure are made of bone," and she favored the girls with a contemptuous glance that was harder to bear than Billie's anger.

"I wouldn't leave my handkerchief on purpose of course," Billie pointed out. "I might have dropped it by accident, though."

"But how did they get the hanky," wondered Vi, wide-eyed at this example of depravity.

"Probably stole it out of my pocket when I wasn't looking," said Billie contemptuously, and at that Amanda made a show of defense.

"You needn't call me a thief, Billie Bradley!" she exclaimed, but Laura cut her short with a flippant observation.

"Would you rather she would call Miss Walters?" she asked, which effectively closed the girl's mouth.

"Let's make 'em clean up," suggested Billie. "I'd call Miss Walters, only they're not worth spoiling her sleep for. Come on over here, you two, and get busy."

"We won't do it," said Amanda, but as Billie started toward her she quite suddenly changed her mind.

"Oh, all right," she said angrily, as she flounced over to the desk, pulling the limp "Shadow" after her. "We'll do it this time. But you just look out, Billie Bradley. I'll make you pay for this."

Laura struck a dramatic attitude.

"Look out," she cried. "The worm is turning. Let us nip it in the bud!"

It was all right for them to laugh at Amanda's discomfiture then and treat the whole thing as a joke, but in the morning they were not quite sure that they had done the right thing.

"I think we ought to have reported her to Miss Walters," worried Vi. "Then she and the Shadow would have been expelled, or suspended at least, and we would have had no more trouble with them. As it is——"

"Oh, don't be an old gloom hound," commanded Billie, seizing her chum round the waist and whirling her about the room in a fantastic dance. "They've never been able to do anything to us yet, so what's the use of worrying?"

"Sure," agreed Laura, busy marking passages in her "Life of Washington." "That's what I say. We're too many for 'em."

But in spite of their optimism, in their hearts the girls decided to watch Amanda and her cowardly "Shadow" more closely than ever in the future.

And the girls would have been put even more on their guard if they could have peeped into the library one afternoon and overheard the curious conversation that took place between two girls seated in a far corner of the big room.

"I've got it at last!" gloated one of the girls, who was no other than the plotting Amanda herself. Eliza, of course, was her inevitable companion.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the latter rather snappishly. For, since the fiasco in Miss Race's room, she had not entered into Amanda's schemes quite so whole-heartedly as she had before. "I don't see why you should be so pleased about finding a musty old book."

"Of course you don't see," said Amanda, patronizingly. "That's what I'm going to explain to you."

She paused a moment, regarding the "musty old book" in her hand lovingly. Eliza moved impatiently in the seat beside her and Amanda grinned at her.

"You remember I told you I was going to try for the composition prize?"

"Yes," said Eliza crossly, adding with a frankness that might have been disconcerting to anybody but Amanda: "And I thought you were crazy even to think of it. You haven't a chance in the world beside Billie Bradley or Rose Belser or any of those girls."

"I know I wouldn't as a rule," admitted Amanda, her small eyes gleaming with triumph. "But with this book," she caressed the little volume fondly, "*they* won't have a chance against *me*!"

"And still I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," snapped Eliza. "I wish you'd stop grinning to yourself and get to the point—if there is one," she added under her breath.

"All right," said Amanda, too delighted with her own cleverness to notice her shadow's bad temper. "Listen then, and I'll tell you just how I came to think about it.

"I was rummaging through some books on the top shelf one day, trying to find one I needed, when down behind the rest of them I happened to come across this little old book of biographies of the great generals of the world. It was covered with dust, and so old and shabby-looking that I was sure it hadn't been touched in an age."

"Yes," said Eliza impatiently, as Amanda paused for breath.

"Of course that was before the composition prize was offered, so I put the book back where I found it and forgot all about it. But now——" she paused and the "Shadow" saw a gleam of light.

"And now," Eliza finished, "you think you are going to get material enough out of this musty little old book to take the prize away from Billie Bradley. I see."

"Oh no, you don't see." It was Amanda's turn to be impatient. "I'm not going to try to write an original composition at all. Listen," she lowered her voice to a whisper although they two were the only ones in the large room. "I'm going to copy it from this book—word for word!"

For a moment Eliza stared at the grinning girl, pop-eyed. Then as the daring of the thing sank into her muddled brain she sank back in her chair and shook her head slowly.

"Don't do it," she said. "If they should find out——"

"But nobody's going to find out," cried Amanda, as gleeful as though the coveted prize were already in her hands. "This is an old book, and probably nobody in this place has even heard of it. Say, won't that Bradley girl's eyes stick out when she sees me walking off with the prize? Oh my, oh my! This is the time I'm going to settle *her!*"

It was just about this time that a furor was caused in the school by the disappearance of articles belonging to the students.

The articles were small and seldom valuable—so insignificant were some of them, in fact, that the owners never missed them until the report of numerous other losses spread through the school and woke them to the realization that they, too, were victims of the petty thief—whoever she was.

For that the guilty one was one of their schoolmates there seemed to be little doubt. For what outsider would care for such things as pencils and erasers and old jackknives?

It was true that one or two of the losses were valuable. A gold-mounted fountain pen for instance, which had been a Christmas present to one of the girls, who lamented her loss with "loud wailings and gnashings of teeth," as Laura described it.

It was when the excitement over this strange series of events was at its height that Billie drew Laura and Vi aside one day and whispered a startling decision in their ears.

"Girls," she said, "I've dreamed of that locked room in tower three two nights in succession, and I've found an old bunch of keys and one of them may fit. Are you willing to come with me? Or have I got to go alone?"

CHAPTER XIX—THE TOWER ROOM

For a moment the girls looked as though they thought Billie had gone mad. The proposal had been made to them so suddenly that it took their breath away.

"But, Billie, aren't you afraid—after finding that blood-stained handkerchief and everything?" demanded Vi, round-eyed.

"Of course I'm afraid! But I'm going just the same," said Billie stoutly. "I've wondered and wondered about what might be in that locked room till I'm nearly crazy. And if you won't go with me, I'm going alone," she repeated.

"Don't be foolish," commanded Laura. "If you go, of course we'll go. But suppose none of your keys will fit?" she added, glancing at a half dozen rusty keys on a still more rusty key ring which Billie was jingling nervously. Billie had found the key ring on a nail in a dark corner of her locker the day before. She had been about to deliver it to the lost and found office when the inspiration had come to her. She would try the keys first to see if by any chance one of them

could be used to unlock the little door in tower three. It would be time enough afterward to report her discovery.

Now at Laura's question she looked somewhat provoked.

"Don't you s'pose I've thought of that?" she said, adding, with a twinkling smile: "Somebody is always taking the joy out of life!"

"We can try 'em, anyway," said Laura doubtfully, still speaking of the keys. "But they don't look very promising."

"But, girls," Vi protested weakly, "suppose we should find something horrible up there—a skeleton or something?"

"Well, the poor old skeleton couldn't hurt us," returned Laura, adding with a giggle: "Probably it would be glad to see us after being up there alone so long."

"But the blood-stained handkerchief"—Vi whispered.

"Oh, that!" said Laura, with a lofty wave of her hand. "That's nothing. I told you before that probably somebody had a nose-bleed."

Which made even Vi giggle and had the effect of stilling her fears for the time being, at least.

They had hard work getting away from their classmates without arousing their suspicion, but they succeeded at last. The three girls ran lightly up the three flights of stairs that led to the musty old attic.

Now that the moment was at hand they were more excited than nervous, and their hearts beat high with the hope that they might really find a mystery hidden behind that locked door. But what could it be?

The queer sounds and heavy musty smell of the attic that had seemed so dreadful to Billie on that never-to-be-forgotten night seemed natural and even funny in the revealing daylight.

The shadowy corners that had seemed so sinister when lighted only by one tiny flickering candle were only corners now, cobwebbed and dusty, to be sure, but harmless.

Mice scuttled across the floor squeaking angrily at being disturbed, but although Vi screamed and Laura side-stepped nervously, Billie only laughed. To-day they were only little mice more afraid of her than she was of them. That night they had been monsters waiting to devour her.

But just the same, some measure of her nervousness returned when they reached the stairway down which she had nearly tumbled in her wild flight.

Laura and Vi seemed to share her uneasiness, for they stopped at the foot of the stairs and held back a little.

"Who goes up first to meet the skeleton?" asked Laura, with an attempt at a laugh that sounded strained even to herself.

"You do," said Vi, adding maliciously: "You were the one who said he wouldn't hurt us."

Seeing that Laura was about to argue the point, Billie pushed impatiently past them both and ran defiantly up the stairs. Laura, thus challenged, took the stairs two at a time after her and Vi followed reluctantly.

"Look! There's the handkerchief," said Billie, kicking the tiny square of blood-stained linen over toward Laura, who jumped nervously out of the way.

"Well, you needn't wish it on me," she said resentfully, picking up the handkerchief by the very tip of a corner and presenting it to Billie with a low bow. "Here, take back your gold——"

"What are you two whispering about?" demanded Vi, petulantly, for by this time she was beginning to wish she had not come.

At her question Laura whirled suddenly about and poked the blood-stained handkerchief directly beneath Vi's startled nose.

"There," she said. "Want it?"

Vi gave one look, screamed, and fled down the stairs. She had gone only halfway, however, when Laura overtook her and dragged her back.

"None of that," she cried. "You can't back out now. Besides, we're only beginning to have some fun."

"Fun!" groaned Vi, keeping a wary eye on the handkerchief that Laura still held. "Well, I'm glad I know what to call it."

"Come on," said Billie, jingling her rusty keys and starting up the ladder. "Now we'll see whether one of these keys will fit."

"I hope it doesn't," said Vi, under her breath, but Laura caught her up sharply.

"What did you say?" she demanded.

"Oh—nothing," said Vi.

By this time Billie was on the top rung of the ladder and her fingers trembled as she tried to

fit the first of the keys into the lock. She had more courage than Vi, yet almost she echoed the other girl's wish—that she would not be able to find a key to fit.

She wanted to see what was on the other side of that locked door, yet for some reason—perhaps the blood-stained handkerchief—she was afraid to find out.

She had tried every key till she came to the next to the last, while Laura and Vi fidgeted at the foot of the ladder.

“Won't they fit?” asked Laura, impatiently and in a high-strung tone.

“Yes,” said Billie unexpectedly, as the key slipped into the lock and turned easily under the pressure of her fingers. She hesitated and looked down at the two girls before swinging the door wide.

“Aren't you coming?” she asked, and she could not, for the life of her, keep a little scared quality out of her voice.

“Of course,” cried Laura, recovering from her surprise—for she had really not expected that any of Billie's keys would fit—and ascending the ladder hand over hand. “Lead on, Macduff, to victory or to death!”

Vi groaned again and gingerly put a foot on the ladder. She did not know which was worse, to remain there by herself or to follow the girls to—goodness-knew-what. But the squeak of a mouse behind her made her decide in favor of company, and she scurried in a panic up the ladder.

Meanwhile Billie and Laura were experiencing rather severe pangs of something—they could not have told whether it was disappointment or relief.

They had braced themselves to find something horrible—or at least interesting—in the tower room, and they were rather taken aback at finding themselves confronted with a large amount of nothing at all.

There seemed to be a great deal of junk scattered about, but in the gloom of the place they could not even make that out very clearly.

There were windows all about the tiny room, but they were so encrusted with ancient dirt and cobwebs that the bright sunlight of the out-of-doors was reduced to a weird and spooky twilight, which seemed somehow to correspond to the forlorn aspect of the place.

“Well,” said Laura, drawing a deep breath, “we come up here expecting to find something interesting and we get—stung!”

“It does look that way,” admitted Billie ruefully. “Seems as if we might at least have met a good live ghost or two.”

“Live ghost!” sniffed Laura crossly, for she was really feeling very much injured. “All the ghosts that I ever heard about were as dead as a doornail.”

“For goodness' sake, stop talking about dead people,” said Vi querulously from the doorway. “If there isn't anything in here—and thank goodness there isn't—let's go back.”

“Not yet,” said Billie. Her eyes, become more accustomed to the dim light, had lighted upon something interesting among the junk. What had caught her attention was a large, clumsy-looking thing like a queerly shaped wooden box. The girls watched her curiously as she bent over to examine it.

“You haven't found your ghost, have you?” asked Vi, in a voice that was meant to be sarcastic.

“No,” said Billie, a thrill of wonder and excitement creeping into her voice. “But I may have found something! Girls, come here and have a look at this!”

The girls picked their way over the rubbish that littered the floor. What had seemed like a peculiarly shaped box proved on closer inspection to be some cunningly fashioned wooden machinery.

The girls looked at each other in awed silence. To them all in an instant had come the same thrilling thought.

“The lost invention!” murmured Billie. “And we thought there was nothing here!”

CHAPTER XX—STOLEN

"Oh, but how do we know?" protested Laura. "It looks like machinery of some kind, but we have no way of proving that it is the stolen invention." "No," said Billie, still in a kind of daze. "It may be just some old worthless thing that has been put up here because it is of no use to anybody. But then again——"

"Oh, I think Laura's right," put in Vi, to whom this new find of Billie's was not very interesting. It seemed absurd to put any value on that queer-looking thing. And besides, she was anxious to get out of that musty, ill-smelling place. "I thought of Mrs. Haddon at first too, but ——"

"Hello! I wonder what this is," Laura interrupted her. There had been some blue prints lying on the floor near the wooden machinery. In the poor light they had remained unnoticed until Laura had stumbled upon them quite by accident.

In her eagerness, Billie forgot to be polite. She snatched the papers from her chum and made her way to the nearest dust-begrimed window.

She scanned the prints eagerly and finally came to the thing she had so wildly hoped to find. It was only a name, but it told a great deal.

The blue prints were evidently the design of some sort of machinery, and down at the foot of one page the designer had put his name—Henry Haddon.

"Girls, girls, look!" cried Billie, almost beside herself with excitement at her discovery. "Now maybe you'll dare to say I'm crazy and I don't know what I'm talking about. I dreamed of it two nights in succession, and now my dream has come true——"

"Well, for goodness' sake, stop waving that thing around and tell us what you're raving about," commanded Laura, snatching the blue print from Billie in her turn, while Vi crowded close, looking curiously over her shoulder.

"Here! At the bottom of this page!" crowed Billie, pointing out the name. "See it? Henry Haddon!"

"Henry Haddon!" repeated Laura excitedly. "Then it looks as if that really were his invention."

"It is the knitting machinery model!" cried Vi, forgetting that a moment ago she had scoffed at the idea.

"Of course it is, you geeses—I mean you geese," cried Billie, incoherent in her happiness. "I told you so right along, didn't I? Next time maybe you'll believe your Uncle Billie."

"I—guess—yes!" said Laura, still staring at the blue prints as though she could not believe they were real. "You surely did have the right idea that time, Billie."

"Of course I did!" cried Billie impishly, bubbling over with excitement. "And now I've got an idea that's righter yet. Let's go to Mrs. Haddon and tell her about it."

"Agreed!" cried Laura. Then she glanced uncertainly at the blue prints. "Shall we take these along?" she asked.

Billie hesitated, then shook her head.

"No," she said, "I think we had better leave everything just as we found it."

So Laura put the important papers back on the spot where she had found them, or as near to it as she could remember.

She then backed out of the room and felt her way down the ladder. Vi followed, treading on her fingers, so that she let go and very nearly tumbled to the floor.

Billie came last, for she was to lock the door.

But a strange thing happened. Either excitement had made Billie's fingers clumsy or something had really happened to the rusty lock. At any rate, she could not get the door locked again and after a few minutes of nervous fumbling, interspersed with remarks from the girls that were anything but encouraging, she gave up the attempt.

"Oh, well, we'll be back in a little while, anyway," she said, as she came down swiftly hand over hand and dropped to the floor beside the girls. "Come on now, let's hurry and find Mrs. Haddon."

They scurried down the stairs and were hurrying to their dormitory to get on coats and hats when a voice hailed them and they stopped impatiently to find Rose Belser hurrying toward them.

"Have you heard the latest, girls?" asked the dark-haired girl excitedly, for once forgetting her sleepy drawl.

"No," said Billie, trying not to sound as impatient as she felt, while Laura and Vi frowned openly.

"It's up on the bulletin board," Rose told them, too full of her own news to notice their annoyance. "Connie Danvers has lost a gold wrist watch and Miss Walters is very much upset

about it. She says that the thief, whoever it is, must be found. And she has ordered that no girl leave the Hall until to-morrow morning."

The girls looked at each other and groaned.

"Till to-morrow morning!" said Billie, her face as long as though a death sentence had just been pronounced upon her. "Oh, why couldn't Connie have held on to her old watch!"

Rose's look of surprise was so genuine that it put Billie instantly on her guard. The chums were not ready yet to take anybody into their confidence about the new discovery.

And so she covered her slip as well as she could, and they went on together to the dormitory, exclaiming sympathetically over Connie's loss.

The next morning came at last, however, and as it was Sunday, the girls were free to go as soon as the morning chapel hour was over. But as Miss Walters would not allow any girl to leave the building without special permission from her, the classmates were forced to go to her and tell her about their invasion of the tower room and their discovery.

She was displeased that they had not asked her consent before taking such a step. But she was also very much interested in their story, and readily gave them her permission to go to Polly Haddon.

"Bring her back with you, if you can," she said, "and we will all go together to the tower room."

"Now for the fun!" cried Laura, as a few minutes later they stepped out into the crisp air. "Whew! I think we got off lots better than we expected. I thought Miss Walters would be awfully mad."

"Probably she would have been if she hadn't had so many other things to worry about," said Vi.

"Poor Connie!" said Billie. "It surely is too bad about her watch. It was a beauty, and she was so proud of it."

"I hope Miss Walters finds the thief pretty soon," said Laura, frowning. "Everybody thinks it is one of the girls, and I'm even beginning to feel guilty myself."

"Do you think——" Vi began, then flushed as the girls looked at her and stopped.

"What?" asked Laura adding, as Vi still hesitated. "Come on—we won't eat you."

"Nothing—only—I was wondering if the thief might not be Amanda."

"Oh, no," cried Billie quickly. "I'm sure it couldn't be, Vi."

The suggestion from Vi startled her, and it troubled her too, for the very reason that the same idea had been in her own mind.

And suddenly Laura spoke up in support of Vi.

"I shouldn't wonder if Vi is right," she said. "Amanda is mean enough for anything."

Billie had no answer for that, and so she said nothing. But she was more than ever troubled.

As they neared the little white cottage that had seen so much trouble, they forgot Amanda in anticipation of Polly Haddon's joy at the good news they were bringing her.

They knocked on the door, and the moment it was opened pushed eagerly inside and turned to face the astonished widow.

Billie started to speak, but Laura, with her usual impulsiveness, was before her.

"We've got good news, Mrs. Haddon," she blurted out. "We've found your lost invention."

Billie gasped with dismay as Mrs. Haddon turned deathly white and grasped the back of a chair for support.

"Oh, Laura, you shouldn't!" cried Billie, as she put an arm about the woman and helped her into a chair. "Get some water, quick! There's a glass in the sink."

But Mrs. Haddon brushed her impatiently aside.

"I'm not going to faint," she said brusquely. "Tell me why you said that. Hurry!"

But Laura thought she had done enough speechmaking for one day, and it was Billie who answered the woman's questions.

"It must be ours," said the latter, at last. "I will go with you and make sure. Peter? Yes, he will be all right till I get back. He is much better. I will be ready in a moment."

She returned in less than a minute, a hat perched carelessly on her head and a shawl around her shoulders. Her eyes burned bright in her thin face.

No one spoke on the way back. Mrs. Haddon, her lips set and her eyes fixed straight ahead, said not a word, and the girls were too awed by her emotion to break the silence.

Miss Walters met them in the hall, said a few words to Mrs. Haddon, then, seeing that the woman was keyed to the breaking point, led the way straight to the tower room.

The girls ran up the ladder ahead of the two older women. The latter followed more slowly.

Billie pushed open the little door and entered the room.

Then she started, gasped, rubbed her hand across her eyes to make sure she was not dreaming. For the spot where the queer wooden machinery had stood was empty. The invention was gone; and the blue prints were gone, too!

CHAPTER XXI—MORE MYSTERY

Billie Bradley turned cold all over. To have brought Polly Haddon here—to have practically promised her a fortune—and then to find—nothing!

“Billie! They’re gone!” said a voice at her elbow, and she turned sharply to find Laura and Vi peering inquisitively over her shoulder.

“I know they’re gone,” she cried, almost sobbing in her rage and disappointment “Oh, girls, what, can we do? We can’t tell Mrs. Haddon—”

“What’s this you can’t tell me?” asked Polly Haddon herself, and Billie looked at the woman miserably.

“The model,” she said, her voice almost inaudible. “It was here yesterday, and now it’s gone.”

“*Gone!*” cried Miss Walters sharply. “How can that be? Is it possible that somebody else is in the habit of visiting this tower?”

But Mrs. Haddon pushed her aside.

“Do you mean that the model is gone—again—after bringing me here?” she cried wildly. “Oh, you could not be so cruel, you could not!” The last word caught in a sob, and Miss Walters put an arm about her compassionately.

“Listen to me a moment,” she said, in a gentle voice of authority. “If the girls are certain that the machinery and the blueprints were here as late as yesterday—”

“Oh, we are, we are!” cried Billie eagerly.

“Then whoever has taken them since could not have got very far away with them in this short time,” she went on reassuringly. “Your husband’s invention—if indeed it was his model the girls found here—must still be in this neighborhood, perhaps in this very building. Though who,” she added thoughtfully, “in this place could wish to steal such a thing is indeed a mystery.”

“Oh, Miss Walters!” cried Billie eagerly, “I’m sure nobody here in the Hall has stolen the invention. Nobody would have any use for it, and besides, it isn’t a thing that could be hidden very easily.”

Suddenly Laura had what she thought was a bright idea.

“Maybe somebody stole it who had a grudge against Mrs. Haddon,” she suggested.

Miss Walters looked inquiringly at the woman who had drawn away from her embrace and was wiping her eyes resignedly.

“Is there any one you know of who might hold a grudge against your family?” Miss Walters asked.

Mrs. Haddon went over to one of the dust-begrimed windows and stood there for a moment looking out, her fingers tapping a restless tattoo on the windowpane. Then she slowly shook her head.

“No, I can’t think of any one,” she said, adding bitterly: “We were too poor and unimportant to make enemies of any one. But what does it matter?” She turned quickly from the window with one of her fierce changes of mood. “The invention is gone. I was a fool to think that any good fortune would ever come to me. Let me go home.”

She brushed fiercely past Miss Walters, but the latter put out a gentle hand and detained her.

“Wait a little,” she begged. Her heart ached for the other woman’s suffering. “Come into my office with me while I make inquiries and find out if any suspicious person has been seen about here lately. I am confident,” she added with an assurance that reached the other woman, “that before long we shall be able to recover your property. Will you trust me and believe that I want to help you?”

“Yes,” said Polly Haddon, faint hope once more stirring in her heart. “You are more than kind

to me.”

With what different emotions the classmates left the tower room from those with which they had entered it so hopefully only a few minutes before.

The girls supposed that now that Miss Walters had taken charge of Mrs. Haddon’s affairs, they would have no further interest in the matter. But, to their surprise and gratification, Miss Walters motioned them into her office also.

Then she summoned the teachers to her one after another and questioned them carefully as to whom, if anybody, had been seen around Three Towers since the afternoon before.

Through it all Mrs. Haddon sat with an expression of utter hopelessness on her face. Evidently the faint hope that Miss Walters had for the moment revived had died away again.

It seemed that none of the teachers had seen anything that might arouse suspicion, and even the girls were beginning to despair when they were at last given a clue to work on.

It was Miss Arbuckle who gave it to them.

She showed considerable surprise at first at being questioned. But after wrinkling her forehead thoughtfully for a few minutes she remembered having seen somebody loitering about the building late on the preceding afternoon.

“Could you identify the person?” asked Miss Walters quickly, alert at once.

“No,” said Miss Arbuckle, hesitantly, “I couldn’t be at all certain because it was dusk and I saw him only from the window. But it looked like that simple son of Tim Budd, the gardener.”

“Nick Budd!” cried the three girls together, and at the name Polly Haddon also roused from her reverie.

“You could not say certainly that it was Nick Budd?” said Miss Walters, questioningly.

“No, I couldn’t,” returned Miss Arbuckle. “But I remember thinking at the time that the fellow was acting in a rather peculiar manner, and I even thought of reporting him. I was called away by some duties then, however, and when I looked from the window again he was gone.”

“Nick Budd!” cried Polly Haddon, in an agitated tone, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap. “You asked a while ago if there was anybody who might bear a grudge against my family, and I said there was no one. But I had forgotten poor foolish Nick Budd!”

“Yes, Mrs. Haddon?” prompted Miss Walters, while the girls exchanged excited glances.

“At one time my husband employed him as a handy man about the place,” the woman hurried on. “But after a while we noticed that things began to disappear—things that were worthless to any one else, but dear to us because of their associations.”

The girls and Miss Walters were intensely interested now. They were thinking of the numerous petty thefts that had taken place in the Hall during the past few weeks. Could there be any connection between that and Polly Haddon’s story?

“My husband charged the simpleton with taking the things,” the woman went on. “He did it gently enough, too, for he was sorry for the poor fellow, but Nick fell into one of his rages and slammed out of the house, muttering to himself. He never came back, and we never saw him again.”

“Then this boy did have some reason for wishing to get even with your husband,” said Miss Walters, all interest. “It begins to look as if he were the one who stole your invention in the first place. And if this was really Nick Budd whom Miss Arbuckle saw loitering about the school yesterday, it is probable he had something to do with its second disappearance——” she broke off suddenly, for Polly Haddon had risen to her feet.

The girls thought they had never seen such a picture of concentrated fury. She stood clutching the back of a chair fiercely and her eyes flashed fire.

“If it is proved that Nick Budd did this thing,” she said in a low, tense voice, “I think I shall——”

“But you must remember that he is a simpleton and not accountable as sane people are,” put in Miss Walters hastily; but apparently the woman did not hear her.

“We must catch Nick Budd and make him confess,” she said impatiently: “Then perhaps we shall find out where he has hidden my property.”

“Miss Walters!” cried Billie excitedly, jumping up, and walking over to the principal, “I think I know where we can find everything that Nick Budd has ever stolen.”

“What do you mean?” asked Miss Walters. “Speak quickly, Billie.”

“In Nick Budd’s cave!” cried Billie, triumphantly.

CHAPTER XXII—FIRST PRIZE

"Billie, you're a wonder! Come on, let's go!" cried Laura, then clapped her hand over her mouth and turned a panicky red as she caught Miss Walters' eye upon her.

But Miss Walters was looking through and beyond Laura, and her gaze came quickly back to Billie. Polly Haddon's eyes were fixed on the girl, too, with passionate intensity.

"Tell us what you mean, Billie," commanded Miss Walters. "Quickly!"

Billie, remembering suddenly that Miss Arbuckle was the only one of the faculty who knew of her adventure with Teddy, was embarrassed for a moment. But she plunged bravely in and told them the whole story from beginning to end, sparing no details.

Miss Walters was intensely interested, and when she had finished even Polly Haddon looked encouraged. The latter wished to set forth at once in search of the cave, but Miss Walters proposed a plan that appealed to everybody, especially the hungry girls.

"Wait and have lunch with me in my rooms," she said to Mrs. Haddon. "For it is almost lunch time now. Then we can start to hunt for the cave as soon as we have finished."

Mrs. Haddon looked tempted, but she shook her head.

"There are the children," she said. "And little Peter. There is no one with them."

But Miss Arbuckle settled this objection by offering to go over and stay with the children and see that they were well taken care of during their mother's absence.

"I was a governess and sort of children's nurse combined, at one time, you know," and she smiled graciously upon the mother. "And I assure you that I know how to care for children."

Almost upon her words the lunch gong rang, and Miss Walters thereupon dismissed the girls to the dining-hall.

"Remember, we will start directly after lunch," she said to them as they fled.

"Billy, it's just like a story book or a movie!" cried Vi joyfully, as they took their places at the table among the noisy, chattering girls.

"Are you certain you can find the cave again, Billie?" asked Laura, as she attacked her heaped-up plate of good things ravenously.

Before Billie could answer Rose Belser leaned across the table and asked with a drawl where they had been keeping themselves all morning.

"We've made a snowman," she chuckled. "But we needed Billie's artistic touch to make the face. I can't get the nose to look right."

Instinctively the girls glanced out the window and saw that it was snowing. And they had never noticed it!

"Why, it's snowing, girls!" remarked Vi brilliantly. "It looks almost like a blizzard."

"Are you just waking up?" asked Connie Danvers, a little crossly. Connie was cross because it was the first time in her intimate friendship with the girls that they had had a secret from her. "Now I know you're crazy."

Billie guessed at Connie's grievance and, reaching over, she pressed the hand of her classmate under the table.

"We'll tell you all about everything to-night," she promised, and Connie's face brightened miraculously.

The snowstorm did indeed look like the beginning of a blizzard, and as the girls went to get their wraps they worried not a little for fear this new development might put an end to their adventure.

However, Miss Walters decided that they would try it, at least, and Mrs. Haddon was eagerly anxious to be off.

"We'll try anything once," whispered Laura to Billie, as they went out into the already ankle-deep snow, the wind lashing bitingly against their faces. "Thank goodness, we can die but once!"

"Die but once is right," said Billie grumpily. She was worried for fear she would not be able to find the path leading to the cave.

It would have been hard enough if the ground had been clear, but with the snow rapidly obliterating every landmark, it was well-nigh impossible.

"I wish Teddy were here," she said, half to herself, and her voice was very wistful.

"Don't you though!" echoed Laura, heartily. "It seems an age since we've seen any of the boys."

"Say, Billie," broke in Vi, who was shivering in the bitter cold despite her warm furs, "are you

sure you are going right? It wouldn't be any fun to be lost in these lonely woods with maybe a blizzard coming on."

At this observation Billie stopped and turned to Miss Walters and Polly Haddon, who were following close behind.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up at Miss Walters appealingly. "If it weren't snowing I might be able to find the way, but as it is I'm afraid I would only get you all lost. I'm lost myself now."

"All right, honey. Don't look so distressed about it," said Miss Walters, patting her kindly on the shoulder. "You would have to know the way pretty well to be able to find it in this storm. We shall have to give it up to-day, and try again as soon as we can."

"Yes, that will be best," said Polly Haddon, through chattering teeth. Her thin shawl formed scarcely any protection against the freezing weather. "Thank you all so much for bothering with my affairs. Now I must get back to the children. Good-bye."

Before they had fairly realized she was going, she was gone, and the girls and Miss Walters turned back to the Hall.

"Bother the old snow," said Laura crossly. "I always liked it before, but now I hate it."

They were all glad when the warmth of Three Towers Hall closed in about them again. Miss Walters said a few words to them about saying nothing of this affair to any one. Then she dismissed them to the dormitory while she herself hurried off to do a little work that she had neglected all day. For around examination time, Miss Walters was not always free, even on Sunday.

Some of the girls had seen Billie and Laura and Vi come in with Miss Walters, and they demanded to know what "all the excitement was about." And the fact that the girls would not talk made their classmates all the more curious.

Connie was the only one to whom they would tell the story, for they knew that they could trust her as they trusted themselves.

"And it's still snowing," mourned Billie, as she cleared a space on the misted window and looked out at the snow-covered world. "It looks as if we shouldn't get out of here for weeks!"

Billie's gloomy prophecy was fulfilled. The storm developed into one of the worst blizzards that part of the country had ever known, and for almost two weeks the occupants of Three Towers were practically house-bound.

It was good that the school boasted a well-stocked larder. Otherwise the girls might actually have gone hungry. And they wondered a great deal about Polly Haddon and her little brood.

"Suppose she hasn't enough in the house to eat?" worried Vi. "Why, they may starve!"

"Maybe she used the gold pieces we left her to stock up when she saw the blizzard coming on," suggested Billie, and the suggestion comforted them a great deal.

The day was approaching when those competing for the composition prize were to hand in their essays. Billie and Laura and Connie and Rose Belser and the half dozen other girls who had entered the lists were writing like mad—and biting their pens to bits—in an effort to get their essays in on time.

And in the heart of each was the fervent hope that she would be the winner. Only Amanda had no need to hope. She was sure! The prize was hers!

She had carried out her intention of copying her essay straight from the little musty book. So sure was she that her ruse would not be detected that she had not bothered to alter a word. And while the others worked, she smiled.

At last came the day when the finished essays were to be handed in, and all day long Miss Walters was closeted in her office with Miss Race and one or two of the other teachers, reading and tabulating the manuscripts as they came to her.

So busy had Billie been in rewriting a phrase here, changing a word there, that she handed in her essay the very last of all—just a scant half hour before the time was up. But she was happy, because she knew that she had given her best effort.

"I imagine we shall enjoy reading this," Miss Walters remarked to her associates, tapping Billie's manuscript with a thoughtful finger. "Billie Bradley has real literary talent."

The result of the contest was to be announced the next morning in the auditorium and the prizes to be awarded to the winners.

When the longed-for, yet dreaded, moment arrived, the girls filed into the auditorium, the contestants near the front, and almost the entire school occupying the seats behind them.

Billie's heart was hammering so loudly that she glanced about her to see if anybody else seemed to notice it. But the majority of the girls were babbling away too excitedly to hear anything but themselves.

Billie was surprised to see that even the girls who were expecting to hear their fate within the next few moments were talking—chattering away excitedly, to be sure—but still talking. As for herself, she was sure she could not have uttered a word just then if her life had depended upon it. She did want that prize so dreadfully!

“Cheer up, Billie,” whispered Vi, slipping a loyal hand into hers. “You’re not afraid of missing the prize, are you? Why, you couldn’t miss it if you tried.”

Billie did not say anything, but she gripped Vi’s hand hard. And she was still holding on to it when Miss Walters ascended the platform and a deep hush spread over the room.

“As you all know,” came the clear, sweet voice of the head of Three Towers Hall, “I have come here this morning to announce the winners of the composition prize.

“I and my associates have had difficulty in choosing the winning essays, for the reason that they are all so excellent. We are only sorry that we have not a prize to attach to each.”

A buzz broke out in the audience, but when Miss Walters raised her hand it instantly died down again.

“And now,” she said, “not to keep you any longer in suspense, we will announce the winners.”

Billie’s grip on Vi’s hand tightened till it hurt.

Then into the tense silence Miss Walters threw the bomb of her announcement.

“The first prize goes to Amanda Peabody,” she said. “Will she please step up upon the platform?”

CHAPTER XXIII—DISGRACED

For a moment there was intense silence while Amanda rose triumphantly and flounced up to the platform.

Then an amazed, angry buzz rose from the audience of indignant girls. Amanda, who was proverbially stupid, to have taken the prize from some of the brightest girls in the school! It was impossible—incredible! And yet it was only too true!

Miss Walters, with a few words of congratulation, handed the prize—a fine set of books—to Amanda, and the latter swept haughtily back to her seat, triumph in every line of her figure as she passed the other pupils.

She had beaten Billie Bradley at last! And her revenge was sweeter than even she had dreamed it would be.

But Billie, tears of anger and disappointment stinging her eyes, felt sure that she had not been beaten fairly. Amanda had played a trick on her, on the rest of the contestants for the prize, on Miss Walters herself. But, in Teddy’s vocabulary, Amanda had “gotten away with it.” The prize was in her possession.

“It’s a shame,” she heard in angry protest all about her.

“She never did it honestly.”

“Somebody ought to tell Miss Walters. She doesn’t know Amanda as well as we do.”

But Miss Walters had raised her hand for silence, and in a few seconds the angry murmurs died down again.

“I have the pleasure of awarding the second prize,” the principal announced, “to Beatrice Bradley. Will you step up on the platform, Billie?”

The second prize! She didn’t want the second prize, Billie told herself, when Amanda had come in first. To march up there on the platform with that girl’s gloating eyes upon her—

But Vi and Laura were pulling her out of her seat, pushing her out into the aisle—and while Billie hesitated Miss Walters had impatiently repeated her summons.

Someway Billie found her way to the platform, thanked Miss Walters incoherently for the fine volume of poetry which was the second prize, and stumbled back to happy oblivion among her schoolmates.

“It’s a shame, honey,” Laura whispered in her ear, generously forgetting her own disappointment in Billie’s. “But never mind, you got the second prize anyway—which was more

than the rest of us did," she added, with a little stab of regret at her own failure.

"And you would have won the first prize if it hadn't been for that cat," added Vi fiercely.

Billie pressed their hands gratefully and glanced for the first time at her prize.

"I'd like to throw it away!" she cried fiercely.

"Sh-h," whispered Vi, for Miss Walters was making an interesting announcement.

"The winning compositions will now be read," she said. "Miss Arbuckle has volunteered to give us that pleasure."

There was a great clapping of hands as Miss Arbuckle stepped on the platform and smiled down at them. For the little teacher was a great favorite with the girls.

"We will read Amanda's composition first," she said, "as it has had the distinction of winning the first prize."

Again there was tense silence in the Hall. The girls were agog with curiosity to hear this wonderful composition which had been written by one of the notoriously stupid girls of the school.

As for Amanda, she had not foreseen this event. She had not expected to hear her stolen composition read aloud, and before all this assembly of stern young critics. The prospect made her a trifle nervous, but her smile was as proudly triumphant as ever.

Her chief concern was with Eliza. For the girl was so white and scared that she threatened to give the deception away.

Amanda gave her a sharp nudge with her elbow.

"Cheer up, will you?" she muttered fiercely. "You're not at a funeral."

Miss Arbuckle began to read, and as she read the well-rounded phrases, the telling metaphors, the girls became more than ever stupefied with astonishment.

"Could it be," they asked themselves incredulously, "that Amanda had remarkable literary ability that they had never suspected? Could she really have written a thing like that?"

The same thought seemed to be in Miss Arbuckle's mind, for as she read on her brow became clouded and she paused now and then as though she were trying to recollect something.

Finally she stopped altogether, looked across at Amanda for a thoughtful moment, then laid the manuscript down and turned to Miss Walters. She said something that the girls could not catch, then hurried from the room.

This was something no one had counted upon. Amanda, her triumphant smile gone at last, quaked as she heard again the excited buzz of the girls about her.

Miss Walters' voice rose over the murmur, clear and very grave.

"Miss Arbuckle thinks she has made a discovery," she said. "She will be back in a moment, and until then I must ask that there be absolute silence in the room."

Miss Sara Walters possessed that rare gift of authority that needed no raising of the voice or undue emphasis to command obedience.

Instantly the murmuring stopped and the girls waited in breathless silence for Miss Arbuckle's return.

They did not have to wait long. A moment later the teacher reentered the room, holding a book in her hand, the sight of which made Amanda's craven heart sink in consternation.

The book looked like an exact copy of the one from which she had copied her "original" prize composition!

"Miss Walters," said Miss Arbuckle in a voice which indignation made vibrant, "I am sorry to have to admit that one of the students of Three Towers Hall has been guilty of so disgraceful an act. But the composition that I have just read, the essay that was handed in as original by Amanda Peabody, has been copied word for word from this book.

"It is an old book that has been in my possession for years—was my father's before it was mine—and doubtless the girl thought herself perfectly safe in copying from it. Here is the passage." She had been marking a place with her finger, and now she opened the book at the place and handed it to Miss Walters to read.

What a hideous minute for Amanda! If she had been awaiting a death sentence she could hardly have felt more terrified.

To be publicly disgraced, to have all the girls laughing at her, gloating over her—

With intense gravity Miss Walters closed the book and laid it on the table. Amanda knew that her moment had come.

"Amanda," said Miss Walters sternly, "will you please stand up in your place?"

Amanda stood up, conscious of a score of curious and contemptuous glances focused upon her. Her heart was beating suffocatingly, her hands were clenched tight at her side.

"You have been guilty to-day," Miss Walters' clear voice pronounced sentence, "of blackening the good name of Three Towers Hall by a most disgraceful act. But by your wretched duplicity you have injured yourself far more than you have injured any one else. You will go to my office. I will see you there."

There was intense silence while Amanda, her head hanging, walked from the room. Then the eager murmur rose once more, but again Miss Walters lifted her hand for silence.

"I am sorry," she said. "More sorry than I can express that such a thing could have happened here. Of course the first prize will now go to Beatrice Bradley and I will decide later to whom the second prize belongs. That is all." With a little gesture she dismissed them and she herself walked quickly from the room.

Then the riot that had been suppressed so long broke loose and the girls formed into little groups talking excitedly and all at once about the dramatic turn events had taken.

Billie, the center of a little group of her own, was fairly overwhelmed with congratulations.

"We knew all along that you should have been the winner!"

"To think that Amanda should try to get away with a thing like that!" said Laura, disgustedly.

"She might have, just the same," Connie reminded her. "It was just luck that Miss Arbuckle happened to have that book."

"My, but I bet you're happy, Billie Bradley!" sighed Vi. "I shouldn't let anybody speak to me if I were in your place."

"What's the matter, honey?" asked Laura, regarding Billie's sober face curiously. "I say, cheer up, old dear. What have *you* got to gloom about?"

"I was just thinking about Amanda," said Billie, with all her sweet sympathy for the unfortunate. "I was wondering how it would feel to be in her shoes now."

"Out, out upon such doleful thoughts," Laura sang out airily. But Billie, who had turned toward the window, suddenly clutched her by the arm.

"Look!" she said, excitedly. "There's Nick Budd!"

CHAPTER XXIV—TRIUMPH

Before her classmates knew what she was about or had fairly taken in what she had said, Billie had darted from the room and was flying toward the dormitory.

"She's crazy again," cried Vi. "Come on," and she and Laura and Connie flew after her, overtaking her as she reached the stairs.

"What's the big idea?" gasped Laura, as they ran together down the hall toward the dormitory. "What do you expect to do to poor Nick—sandbag him?"

"Something like that," returned Billie, slipping hurriedly into her coat and hat and motioning impatiently for the girls to do the same. "If we can only get hold of him we may be able to frighten him into telling us where the machinery is."

"Oh, and maybe I'll be able to get my watch back!" added Connie, pulling a dark cap down over her fluffy hair and carefully adjusting it at the right angle.

"We won't get anything if you don't hurry," said Billie, regarding her impatiently. "What do you think you're going to, anyway? A party?"

"You had better put on your leggings," suggested Vi, looking doubtfully at the rubbers Billie had pulled on over her shoes. "The snow's awfully deep."

"Haven't time," cried Billie, adding distractedly: "For mercy sake, hurry! While you girls are dolling up for a party, Nick Budd will be gone."

At this dreadful thought the girls stopped fussing and followed Billie hurriedly down the stairs. They slowed down in the lower hall, however, for there they were apt to meet a teacher, and undue haste might be thought suspicious by one of these "unreasonable beings."

At sight of Nick Budd, a plan had come to Billie. She remembered how terrified he had seemed when he had found Teddy and her in the cave that day and thought in his crazy mind that they had come to arrest him.

So she was going to take a chance of so frightening him with a threat of arrest that he would confess, and perhaps even be prevailed upon to lead them to the cave.

In case this plan should fail, she had not an idea in the world what she would do next. But the plan did not fail. It worked more perfectly than she had dared to hope.

They caught up to the simpleton just as he was sneaking around to the janitor's entrance of the school, and the fellow shrank from them like a frightened animal.

"Wh-what do you want?" he stammered, his hands out as though to ward them off. "I haven't done nothin'. Ye can't arrest me. I haven't done nothin', I tell you." His terror was pitiful, but Billie followed up her advantage ruthlessly while the girls stood by in admiring silence.

"You *have* done something," she told him sternly, while he cowered still further back from her. "You've stolen things—lots of things. And we *will* have you arrested——"

"Oh no—oh no," he cried out, fairly gibbering in his terror and slinking further back against the wall. "Ye're tryin' to scare me. I haven't done nothin', I tell ye."

But Billie took him by the sleeve and shook him as she would a bad child.

"I tell you I *know*," she cried, conviction in her tone that carried even to the poor muddled brain of the simpleton. "And I know where they are, too. They are in your cave, hidden away. Every-last-one-of-them!"

Of course Billie was taking a big chance, but the shot went home.

The simpleton stared at her for a moment out of his blood-shot eyes while his big mouth dropped open. Then he began to cry, great tears that ran down his grimy face and made crooked streaks upon it.

It was an indescribably terrible and pitiful sight, the poor silly fellow in his abject terror, and ordinarily Billie would have felt sorry for him. But she thought of Polly Haddon, and the thought gave her courage. Polly Haddon had suffered, and now if it was this poor simpleton's turn, it was no more than he deserved, after all.

"Listen to me carefully," she said, pulling at his sleeve again and speaking very distinctly. "If you will take us to the cave and promise to give back everything you have stolen to the people you have stolen from, we will try to keep you from being arrested."

"You won't put me in jail?" jabbered the simpleton. "You won't let the policemen get me?"

Billie shook her head, adding quickly: "But you must take us to the cave right away and help us bring back the things you have stolen. Otherwise we will have you arrested to-night."

They were hardly prepared for his sudden acceptance of the ultimatum. He turned, with the swiftness that had surprised Billie and Teddy before, and strode off through the heavy snow, the girls, after a minute of indecision, following.

"What do you suppose Miss Walters will say?" Laura whispered in Billie's ear. "Do you suppose she will mind our running away like this?"

"I don't know," answered Billie, adding with a hint of premature triumph in her voice: "I don't imagine she will say anything though if we come home with the knitting machinery models, the blue prints, and an armful of stolen things besides."

"Oh, if I can only get back my watch, I'll be happy," sighed Connie, as she plodded along beside Vi.

"If' is right," said Laura, ruefully. "We haven't got anything yet, you know."

"Now who's the wet blanket?" cried Billie gayly. She was feeling amazingly happy and confident all of a sudden. For had not she just won the first prize for the best composition? After that she felt that she could accomplish anything.

It was no easy task to make their way through the woods. Nick Budd trudged along sturdily, hardly looking at the girls.

"He may be simple-minded, but he is as strong as a horse—at least, when it comes to walking," remarked Laura in a whisper.

"Many simple-minded folks are strong," answered Billie. "Why, some lunatics are noted for their strength—I once heard my father say so."

They had to pass over an exceedingly rough rise of ground and then down through a hollow where the bushes grew close together. Here the walking was very uneven and Connie gave a sudden cry of pain.

"What's the matter?" demanded Billie quickly, and came to a halt beside her classmate.

"I slipped into a hole and I—I guess I wrenched my ankle," and Connie made a wry face.

"Can't you go on?" questioned Vi.

"I—I guess so, but I'll do a little limping," was Connie's reply.

"We'll have to be careful," warned Billie. "We don't want to hurt ourselves if we can help it."

After an hour of trudging through the snow they came at last to the twig-entwined entrance to Nick's cave. Luckily the simpleton had beaten a sort of path through the snow from Three Towers to the cave—a fact which showed that he had made frequent visits to the school—or the girls almost surely could not have made the trip.

Nick pulled aside the twigs that concealed the entrance and dived inside, leaving the girls to follow as best they could.

But the girls did not follow—immediately. They were no cowards, but the sight of that yawning dark mouth was enough to make them hesitate. And besides, there was a simpleton at the other end of that dark passage, a simpleton who might be mad enough by this time to do any desperate thing.

"You go first, Billie," Vi urged nervously. "He is afraid of you—"

But at that moment a dancing light flickered down the dark passage and immediately Nick Budd himself appeared, carrying a lighted candle which he carefully shielded from the wind.

The terror had not left his face, and he looked at Billie abjectly, like a beaten dog.

"Will ye come in?" he asked in a barely audible voice. "Or shall I bring the things out here?"

But as the latter course would give the simpleton an excellent chance to retain some of his loot, Billie replied firmly that they would come in and see for themselves.

Vi made a noise that sounded something like a groan, and Connie echoed it pathetically. But they joined the queer little procession just the same, following Nick Budd down the dark passage to the still darker cave, guided only by the flaring light of his one candle.

It was a dangerous thing for the girls to do. The simpleton, with the cunning of the mentally-deficient, might have decided to attack them all there in the darkness of the cave. And he would have had a good chance of doing it, too.

But the gods that favor the daring watched over the girls that day and brought them safely through their adventure.

Billie had evidently thoroughly cowed the simpleton, and his one thought was to get rid of his stolen goods as quickly as possible and thus evade the dreadful prison that loomed more horrible to him than death.

There in a corner of the cave the girls found the knitting machinery model and the precious blue prints, besides a great pile of small trinkets that comprised pretty nearly everything that had been stolen from the girls during the last few weeks.

They were no more eager to linger in the cave than Nick Budd was to have them. So they eagerly pocketed as many of the trinkets as they could—Connie snapping the precious recovered wrist watch about her wrist with as much joy as though it had been three times as valuable as it really was—and Billie, taking the candle from Nick Budd's fingers, ordered him to carry the wooden machinery. She herself took charge of the blue prints.

When they had reached the outside world once more, Billie blew out the candle, threw it into the cave, and readjusted the twigs at the entrance as best she could.

Then she ordered Nick Budd to lead the way back to the Hall. This the simpleton did, although he sometimes staggered under the weight he carried and several times had to put his burden down.

But in spite of the delays and the cold, the return journey seemed short to the girls, for they were triumphantly happy and chattered like magpies all the way back.

"I've got my wrist watch! I've got my wrist watch!" crowed Connie over and over again till the girls got tired of hearing her and Laura asked her if she would mind changing her tune.

"And won't the girls be surprised when we tell them what sleuths we are," added Vi.

"Humph," sniffed Laura. "Billie is the real detective. We're only—what do you call 'em?—'also rans.' We come in at the end and clap noisily."

"Nonsense," laughed Billie. "I couldn't have done a thing without you girls. Look out," she cried sharply, as Nick Budd stumbled and almost dropped his load. "If you should break that thing, Nick Budd, I'd murder you." But this last was delivered in an undertone. The poor simpleton had troubles enough without being threatened.

"Oh," giggled Laura, incorrigibly, "ain't she the vicious thing?"

One would have thought that the girls had had about enough excitement that day, but it seemed that fate still held a little more in store for them.

They were coming up the winding path that led to the Hall when they saw a black-clad figure that looked strangely familiar hurrying on before them.

"Isn't that Polly Haddon?" asked Vi, eagerly. "Yes, it is. Oh, what luck!"

She was about to call out, but Billie stopped her.

"We'll want to break it to her gently," she warned, but her warning came too late. Polly Haddon had heard their voices and had glanced back indifferently.

Then, recognizing the girls, she turned and came hurrying toward them. At sight of her, Nick Budd dropped his burden in the snow and ran for all he was worth back the way he had come.

Billie tried to put herself between Polly Haddon and that bulky object in the snow, but once more she was too late. For the woman had seen.

With a little cry, Polly Haddon crumpled suddenly and lay out in the snow, as inert as a bundle of old clothes.

"Good gracious!" cried Laura frantically. "Now just when everything is beautiful and lovely, she's gone and died!"

CHAPTER XXV—PRETTY FROCKS

But Polly Haddon had not died. One very seldom does—of happiness. Some way the girls managed to get her inside the Hall and administer hot drinks and hot food and in a surprisingly short time she was herself again.

Not quite herself, for she was beautified and transfigured with happiness into a very different Polly Haddon from the one the girls had known.

Miss Walters was summoned and made her come into her own private rooms. Of course the girls went also, and while Mrs. Haddon was stretched luxuriously on a couch in Miss Walters' sitting-room, Billie told how she had frightened the simpleton into confessing his guilt and restoring the stolen goods.

Billie was so modest about her leading part in the affair that Laura was forced to interrupt occasionally, and, disregarding Billie's frowns, add a bit of explanation here and there that enabled her audience to visualize the thing just as it had happened.

The machinery model had been brought inside and deposited in one of the study halls, and now Miss Walters asked Mrs. Haddon what she wished done with it.

"We can keep it here for you, in the big school safe," she suggested, "or we can have it carried over to your house, just as you wish."

"Oh no, leave it here," said Polly Haddon quickly. "I will notify that Philadelphia knitting company that the invention has been recovered, and if they still wish to buy it, it probably will not remain here long. Oh, how can I thank you all——" her voice broke, and for a little while all of them felt a bit uncomfortable while Polly Haddon sobbed out her happiness and gratitude.

It was over at last, however, and the girls were free to go back to their dormitory and the curiosity of their friends.

Here, perched on the bed with Connie and Vi, Laura gave a graphic account of everything just as it had happened to a sympathetic audience of some twenty girls.

She rang Billie's praises to such an extent that the poor girl tried to hide herself in an inconspicuous corner, only to be dragged forth into the limelight again by a couple of laughing and heartless maidens.

"You get up there where you belong," cried one of them, shoving Billie up into the center of the bed which was already over-crowded with giggling girls. "Don't you know that you're a real, honest-to-goodness heroine?"

"And for the second time to-day," drawled Rose Belser, her eyes fixed a little enviously upon Billie's pretty, flushed face. "Wasn't it enough to win the prize, without going and getting yourself in the limelight *again*?"

Laura and Vi flushed angrily, for there was a little malice under the question. But Billie took it all good-naturedly.

"Well, I didn't do it on purpose—not the last part, anyway," she said.

"We know you didn't, honey," said Connie, ruffling Billie's dark curls fondly. "You're just naturally talented."

"By the way," asked Laura, after an interval of skylarking, "does anybody know what

happened to Amanda?"

"She was suspended," replied one of the girls.

"And I thought it was a pity she wasn't expelled," spoke up another.

"Poor Eliza!" drawled Rose. "I wonder what she will do without her master."

"Does anybody know who won the second prize?" asked Laura carelessly.

"What a queer question to ask," said Caroline Brant, who had been dreaming about the thesis she was going to write and had hardly heard a word of the conversation. "*You* did, of course!"

It took a little time for this to sink in, for Laura had long ago given up hope of winning a prize for herself. But when it did finally beat its way into her mind she straightway proceeded to turn the place upside down in her hilarity.

She found Billie's sewing basket, dumped out its contents, and turned it upside down on her head for a crown.

Then she draped a bedspread about her shoulders, queen fashion, and two of her classmates caught up the dangling ends that formed a train.

Then they marched through the halls crying, "Way for the queen!" and gathering a crowd of giggling girls as they went.

"What's it all about?"

"Queen indeed! Just look at her with that workbasket on her head!"

"They are having the sport because Laura took the second prize in that composition contest."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, I'm glad they showed up Amanda—and Billie Bradley certainly deserved the first prize."

The merriment grew louder, and presently the crowd made Laura mount a stand and deliver what they called "an oration."

"Tell us about making linen dusters for the Laplanders," suggested one girl.

"Or overcoats for the heathens in Africa," suggested another.

"Or how to make sponge cake from live sponges."

"Or why Washington didn't use submarines when his army crossed the Delaware."

"I can talk but I can't make a speech," declared Laura. "In other words, I could say something if I could only frame my speech, properly—that is——"

"If she could only get her tongue to working," broke in Vi, and at this the assembled girls roared.

It was only when rumor said that Miss Walters was coming their way that the hilarious party broke up and scurried for home and safety.

"Take off that ridiculous thing," cried Billie, jerking at the bedspread, herself weak from laughing. "And give me back my work basket, woman, before Miss Walters catches you and sends you after Amanda."

"Goodness," said Laura, meekly handing Billie her property, "do you think she would? It may suit Amanda fine to be suspended, but I'm more comfortable the way I am."

And so the time wore on with studies and lessons and fun until the girls woke up one day to find that the summer holidays were almost upon them.

Mrs. Haddon had sold the knitting machinery model to the Philadelphia concern at a price that was a fortune to her.

The little white cottage had been remodeled and furnished prettily, and Polly Haddon had grown prosperous and handsome and oh, so happy.

But the most remarkable thing to the girls was the change in Mary and Isabel and Peter Haddon. The children, who had been such sorry little waifs in their poverty, had grown almost beautiful in the days of their prosperity. Polly Haddon's pride in them and their pretty clothes was almost pathetic.

The North Bend girls and Connie were often visitors at the little cottage, and sometimes the boys went with them on their visits and were treated to a dinner of waffles and maple syrup that, to quote Chet, "would make an Indian's hair curl."

And now, as the girls realized how fast the time was flying, they conceived the idea of giving a party. Not a small party, but a real one with cake and ice-cream and snappers and everything.

"I wonder," breathed Vi daringly, "if Miss Walters would mind if we should ask a few of the boys—just a very few, you know."

"There would have to be enough to go around," interposed Billie.

"I should say so!" said Connie with emphasis. "Especially as Billie is sure to have at least two of them. I want to dance with Teddy and Paul Martinson once or twice myself, my dear," she said, eyeing the laughing Billie sternly.

"And I'm quite sure dear Rose will, too—especially Teddy," murmured Laura, maliciously.

They found that Miss Walters was quite willing to let them have the party and the boys, too—provided the latter did not stay too late—and then the plans began in earnest.

They sent invitations to about twenty of the boys at the Academy and the invitations were accepted promptly and eagerly.

About two days before the great event, the girls decorated the two big sitting-rooms on the ground floor which Miss Walters had said they could use, and when they had finished no ballroom ever looked prettier—even the girls said so.

Then at last came the morning of the great day, then the afternoon and then—the evening—and time for the girls to dress.

They had brought out their best party frocks for the occasion and the closest chums had compared colors carefully so that they would be sure not to "clash." Billie was to wear pale green net with a touch of pink, Laura light blue, Connie had chosen a lovely rose pink that went well with her fluffy fairness, and Vi had decided on golden yellow that made her look like a queen. Rose Belser was dressed in an expensive black frock that was far too old for her but that set off her dark prettiness admirably.

There was Nellie Bane in white, and a number of other girls were in pretty frocks of varied hues. All were flushed and laughing and excited, and their happiness made every one of them pretty.

"Oh, aren't I beautiful?" cried Laura with engaging frankness as she pirouetted before the mirror. Then she turned to Billie and hugged her rapturously. "And you're gorgeous, honey," she cried. "I see where we don't get even a boy apiece to-night."

The boys arrived early. It was lucky that Billie could dance with only one boy at a time—or there might not have been "enough to go around."

"I say, Billie," Teddy cried once, waltzing her over into a corner and gazing at her wonderingly, "I never knew you could look like that. What is it, anyway? This green and pink thing?" lifting a piece of filmy net gingerly between his thumb and finger.

Billie looked up impishly in his face while one foot kept time with the music.

"Don't ask *me*," she said. "It's because I'm so happy, I guess. Oh, come on, Teddy, let's dance!"

It was some time later that the three classmates happened to find themselves together and alone.

"Desoited!" cried Laura dramatically. "Where's yours, Billie?"

"Gone to get me some ice-cream," said Billie.

"Wonderful," cried Laura. "So has mine!"

"And mine!" added Vi.

They giggled happily for a minute and then Billie reached out and put an arm about each of her chums. She hugged them close, regardless of pretty frocks.

"Girls," she said contentedly, "I think I'm the very happiest girl in the world."

"Except me," said Laura.

"And me!" echoed Vi. "And to think——" she added, after they had contentedly watched the happy crowd for a few moments. "To think that in a few short weeks vacation will be here."

"Well," said Laura decidedly, "if we have any more fun this summer than we've had this winter, we'll have to go *some*!"

"We shall indeed," said Billie, happily.

THE END.

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