

Wheeler Janet D.

**Billie Bradley and the School
Mystery: or, The Girl From
Oklahoma**



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Wheeler J.

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CHAPTER I AT LAKE MOLATA

“My, but it’s good to get back!”

The statement came from Billie Bradley. She gazed upon the ivy-covered towers of the boarding school with genuine affection.

Three Towers Hall was an impressive building, set amidst gracious, well-tended lawns on the borders of one of the prettiest and most picturesque lakes in that part of the country. From its gates students flocked in gay anticipation of vacation and good times at the end of the spring term, to return, more soberly, but with a refreshed and brightened outlook, to take up their studies at the beginning of the fall semester.

Such a time had come again to Billie Bradley and her two close chums, Violet Farrington and Laura Jordon. After a particularly interesting and adventure-filled summer, they had returned to their beloved seat of learning, eager for work and with renewed and heightened ideals.

Now they stood on the borders of the lake, looking toward Three Towers Hall through a lane of trees that made flickering shadows on the lawn. Idly, they speculated on the future.

“I’d feel better,” observed Vi, “if I hadn’t that condition in math to make up. It worries me.”

“It would,” agreed Laura. “I mean, it would have worried me so much that if it had been my condition, I’d have made it up during the summer instead of waiting until fall, when goodness knows the work is hard enough, anyway.”

“It’s easy enough for you to criticize,” said Vi, a shade resentfully. “You take all your studies at a run, while all I can do is to hobble.”

“Of course, not everyone can have a brain like mine,” murmured Laura, with a mischievous grin.

“Besides, what time have I had this summer for study?” Vi persisted. “Between treasure hunts and mysteries and such things, I’ve had my hands full.”

“You should have found time,” returned Laura, pursing her mouth primly in mischievous imitation of Miss Phelps, their new mathematics teacher. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Vi shrugged her shoulders petulantly.

“Well, if you are going to be so disagreeable – ” She left the sentence unfinished and turned toward the Hall.

Billie awoke from the reverie that had been occupying her secret thoughts; awoke in time to seize a fold of Vi’s abbreviated skirt and hold it firmly between thumb and forefinger.

“Laura’s insulting me,” said Vi, with a wavering smile. “I’ll not stay.”

“Don’t be foolish,” laughed Billie. “Laura insults everybody. It’s just her way. But she never means anything by it.”

“I’m going up to the house to study math,” persisted Vi.

“No you’re not,” said Billie. “You are going for a walk with Laura and me back of the lake and pick goldenrod. Miss Walters likes it in her office and it would be nice in the dorm. Come along.”

“But I must study math!” wailed Vi, beginning to weaken. “Honestly, Billie, you don’t know how it worries me. It has me scared stiff.”

“Well, we’ll go and pick goldenrod first and then I’ll help you with your math. How will that do?”

“Excellently, thanks,” said Vi, with a sigh of relief. When Billie helped with “math,” or anything else, she really helped, explaining each step and making everything as clear as day. Vi had wished, many a time, that she had Billie’s head for “math.”

The three girls took the footpath to the right of the lake, the path that climbed steadily until it came out on a high ridge of ground overlooking both Three Towers Hall and Boxtown Military Academy, the boys’ school directly across the lake from the Hall.

Billie Bradley and her chums knew that on this ridge grew goldenrod, flaming, golden patches of it. The sight of it always fascinated them. As Billie once had said, it seemed as though the sun had touched the earth and become entangled in the weeds.

“It was some time before it could untangle itself and get back in the heavens where it belonged,” Billie had concluded her whimsical fancy. “The result was – goldenrod!”

Now, as they made their way toward this higher ground, the girls continued to discuss the events of the past few days, the renewal of acquaintanceship with old school friends, the excitement and interest of meeting and “looking over” the newcomers to Three Towers Hall.

“The new girls seem a rather commonplace lot,” observed Laura. She paused by the wayside to pick a lace flower and stuck it jauntily over one ear revealed by a very short bob. “Just the usual smattering; some shy, some bold, all somewhat excited by finding themselves at boarding school.”

“Can you blame them? ’Member how we felt when we first came?” chuckled Vi.

“Sort of exalted and plumb scared to death,” interpreted Billie. “Those were the days of big fun, though.”

“And the big fights,” giggled Laura. “Remember how Amanda Peabody and that shadow of hers, Eliza Dilks, used to ride us to death?”

“Where do you get that stuff – used to?” demanded Vi slangily. “Why, I’ll tell you something. Just this morning Amanda tried to pick a quarrel with me.”

“Over what?” Billie was interested. Amanda Peabody was one of the most unpleasant girls at Three Towers Hall. She had money and had developed a sort of dashing good looks. Because of this some of the students – that smattering of toadies found among the girls of every boarding school – had rallied round her, forming a small, exclusive clique. Among the most conspicuous and faithful of Amanda’s following was a girl named Eliza Dilks, otherwise known as “The Shadow.”

“What did you and Amanda quarrel about?” Billie asked again.

“I didn’t quarrel about anything,” returned Vi virtuously. “It was Amanda who did the quarreling, and it was all about some silly little thing like a pencil that she accused me of taking from her desk in the study hall. Of course it was all nonsense. Why should I want her pencil when I have that beautiful silver one Uncle Dan gave me for Christmas?”

“What did you tell her?” Laura wanted to know.

“What would I tell her? I merely went by with my nose in the air and refused to answer her. She looked mad enough to bite nails,” with a reminiscent giggle.

Laura sighed.

“I suppose that girl will be a thorn in our side – ”

“Flesh,” corrected Billie with a giggle.

“I said ‘side’ and I meant it,” retorted Laura firmly. “Anyway, I suppose neither you nor Vi will deny that Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks are a thorny pair.”

“Two thorns, without the roses,” remarked Billie.

Vi began to chant in a soft, singsong:

“Oh, Amanda and her Shadow,
Amanda and her crony,

Went out to take the air one day,
Aridin' on a pony.

They thought they were the bees' headlight,
They thought they looked so tony.
But everyone they met called out,
'Go home! Your style is phony!'"

Billie and Laura applauded dutifully and Billie demanded to know how long Vi had been keeping this unsuspected talent a secret from her chums.

"You look romantic enough, Vi, goodness knows, but we never suspected you of being a poetess."

"Then don't now," urged Vi. "I wouldn't be guilty of such 'poetry.' It's Connie's."

"She should be shot at daybreak," remarked Laura. "I'll see to it myself."

"Oh, I don't know. It's a pretty good 'pome,'" chuckled Billie. "I've a notion to put it to music and adopt it as the new school song. Where is Connie, anyway? I thought she was coming with us for a hike?"

"She had to rewrite that composition on hitchhikers. Miss Johnson," – a teacher of English at Three Towers Hall – "said it was too flippant." Laura finished with a chuckle, for Connie had read that composition to Billie and her chums the evening before, sitting cross-legged, like a young Chinese idol, on Billie's bed. It had been flippant – like Connie – and full of fun. The girls had laughed uproariously.

"Miss Johnson is dried up and old, a hopeless spinster," was Vi's merciless indictment of the English teacher. "She can't be expected to recognize honest fun when she sees it."

"Shouldn't be surprised but what Connie's second theme would be more flippant than her first," giggled Laura. "Then what will poor Miss Johnson do?"

"In that case, I certainly feel sorry for Connie," laughed Billie.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe Miss Johnson would fall over in a fit and never come fully out of it. Then we'd all be freed from her. Me, I wish she would," declared Vi a bit vindictively.

The girls came out on the high promontory overlooking the lake, and halted in mute appreciation of the lovely view spread out before them. They had seen it many times before, but the fresh sight of it never failed to thrill them.

Boxton Military Academy stood high and proud on the crest of a hill, its parades and drill grounds marked out in patches of green velvet. From where they stood the girls could hear the beating of a drum and the fanfare of spirited music.

"No wonder the boys love it there," murmured Laura. "We should have a band at Three Towers. Might liven things up a bit."

"That would be lovely," laughed Vi. "I speak to play the big drum and you can take the bass horn, Laura. Billie, what's your choice? I suggest the trombone."

Billie chuckled.

"I'll speak to Miss Walters about it as soon as we get back," she promised. "Meanwhile, get busy, lazybones, and garner some of this goldenrod."

The yellow flame of the gorgeous weed covered the top of the promontory so that the girls were confronted by an embarrassment of riches. In a few moments their arms were filled with the golden blossoms.

"Aren't they the loveliest things you ever saw, girls?" cried Billie.

"Yes, they are. I adore this bright yellow, whether it's in flowers or dresses or hangings. It always makes me feel more cheerful."

“I wonder how anyone can have a favorite flower. It always seems to me that the flower I’m looking at at the moment is my favorite. Just now, of course, it’s goldenrod. To-morrow it may be roses, for instance.”

“Come on, let’s start back,” said Vi.

Laura and Vi had turned to go back when a sharp cry from Billie startled them. When they looked in the direction whence the cry had come, Billie Bradley was nowhere to be seen!

CHAPTER II

A DESPERATE FIX

Laura and Vi dashed through the field of goldenrod to the spot where they had last seen Billie Bradley. They called to her and received a faint answer from somewhere far below.

“She’s gone over the cliff!” gasped Vi.

“There are rocks down there, too,” muttered Laura. She parted the bushes and peered below. “Billie, Billie! Where are you?”

A voice responded gallantly, battling with fear:

“I’m down here. My dress is caught on something. I daren’t move, for fear it will tear. If you could reach me a stick or a rope, or something – ”

“Sounds easy!” Laura sprang to her feet and looked wildly about her. “But where are we going to find the stick or the rope long enough to reach – Vi, what have you got?”

Vi had dashed through the field of goldenrod to a wooded patch in the background. Now she returned, bearing a long, forked stick.

“Looks like an uprooted tree,” gasped Laura hysterically.

“So it is, I guess. If it’s only long enough to reach Billie!”

The two girls flung themselves face downward on the edge of the cliff. They were almost afraid to part the bushes and look below for fear Billie had already disappeared.

She was still there, clinging desperately to the rocky, moss-covered face of the cliff. One hand clutched a runner of tough vine, the other clawed helplessly at loose dirt. Her feet could find no hold whatever, but dangled, impotent and useless, over the glazed surface of a huge, flat rock.

The thing that had saved her from being dashed upon the pointed rocks at the foot of the cliff was the clump of dwarfed bushes growing between the rocks in which her stout linen dress had caught and held. The dress still held. But if it gave way, or if the clump of bushes should come loose from the rocks, what would happen to Billie Bradley?

This agonized thought found an echo in the hearts of Laura Jordon and Vi Farrington as they lay there on the edge of the cliff, staring downward.

Laura impatiently caught the long stick from Vi’s trembling hand.

“I’m stronger than you are. Let me try!”

At the spot where the two girls lay, Billie was almost directly beneath them. If the stick proved long enough, it would be an easy matter for her to grasp it with her one free hand. If it proved long enough —

Laura lowered the stick over the side of the cliff, hoping, praying, that it would reach Billie’s groping hand.

There! It was extended to the utmost and still came a good two feet short of the imperiled girl.

“Vi, hold my feet!” commanded Laura. “Hold me so I can’t go over myself. I’m going to try once more.”

With Vi clinging to her feet, Laura wriggled further over the edge of the cliff. Having progressed as far as she could and being herself in imminent danger of losing her balance and plunging head downward upon those sharp-pointed rocks, Laura clung there, stretching her muscles until they ached, striving to bring the stick within the grasp of Billie’s groping fingers.

The stick would not reach. Billie still hung there, at the mercy of the stout material in her dress, which might give way at any moment. What were they to do?

While the girls are striving desperately to find an answer to this question, a moment will be taken to introduce Billie Bradley and her chums to those who have not already made their acquaintance.

The three girls had been chums since those good old days when Billie Bradley had inherited the queer old house at Cherry Corners, as related in the first volume of this series, entitled, “Billie Bradley and Her Inheritance.” In the attic of the queer old house Billie and her chums had discovered a small fortune in rare old postage stamps and coins.

This lucky discovery later proved the open sesame to Three Towers Hall, the boarding school toward which Billie had long turned yearning, but none-too-hopeful, eyes.

Life at Three Towers had exceeded even Billie’s happy expectations. To be sure, there had been a few heartaches, a few defeats, but these were more than offset by the many victories, the many friends that Billie won for herself in her new environment. Laura Jordon and Violet Farrington, long friends and admirers of Billie Bradley, found their friendship cemented into a firm bond by the mutually shared experiences at Three Towers Hall.

Later, Billie and her chums spent an exciting and decidedly worthwhile summer at Lighthouse Island as the guests of Connie Danvers, whose father owned a summer bungalow there.

Back at Three Towers Hall again, the girls found themselves in the midst of a mystery, the solution of which brought undreamed-of happiness to a widow and her three children.

There had been other vacations which the chums had shared, prominent among them being that interesting and exciting summer spent at Twin Lakes. Another, more recent adventure was that which befell them at Treasure Cove where the three girls and their friends unearthed an old sea chest filled with rare silks, carved ivory, coins, and precious gems.

In the volume directly preceding this, entitled, “Billie Bradley at Sun Dial Lodge,” Billie and her chums met with a series of alarming but fascinating adventures which finally led to the solution of an astonishing mystery.

Billie, who had been christened Beatrice but was seldom called by the more formal name, was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, energetic young person, whose overflowing vitality constantly demanded action. She was the undoubted leader of her small group and it was a tribute to Billie’s personality that her friends not only deferred to her, but liked doing it.

Billie’s family was small, but suited her exactly. Martin Bradley, her father, was a real estate and insurance broker, at which he was moderately successful. Mrs. Bradley was a charming woman, loved by her friends and adored by her family. There was a son, Billie’s brother, Chetwood, commonly known as Chet. Between this brother and sister was a genuine regard and a similarity of tastes, a foundation for the best kind of comradeship.

Perhaps Billie’s very best chum was Laura Jordon. Laura was fair-haired and blue-eyed and somewhat spoiled by being able to do as she liked about almost everything. Teddy Jordon was fair-haired and blue-eyed like his sister, a fine lad who was popular with boys and girls alike. Raymond Jordon, the father of the likable pair, owned a controlling interest in the big jewelry factory at North Bend, thus providing his offspring with a bit more spending money than was strictly good for them.

Violet Farrington, another very good chum of Billie’s, was an only child but a very happy one, blessed with a pair of doting parents who made up to her whatever lack the girl might otherwise have felt in her brotherless and sisterless state.

Beside Chet Bradley and Teddy Jordon, there was a third lad often found in the company of Billie and her chums. His name was Ferd Stowing. Ferd was a likable, easy-going young fellow with a commendable knack for making other people comfortable.

These three boys attended Boxtton Military Academy, the school for boys on Lake Molata, directly across from Three Towers Hall. When at home the sextette of young people lived at North Bend, a thriving town of some twenty thousand inhabitants. Forty miles of railroad travel transported one from the heart of North Bend to the heart of New York City. It was a pleasant place to live, as the boys and girls agreed.

During their activities in and about North Bend and at Three Towers Hall, the girls had encountered many adventures, some thrilling, some sad, but all more or less spiced with danger. None, however, had found them in such desperate fix as the one in which they were now involved.

Billie hung over that precipitous drop to the rocks at the base of the cliff with only the stout cloth of her dress between her and almost certain death.

It was impossible to get her from above. The ground sloped abruptly and it was covered by flat rocks and moss so that it would be impossible to gain a foothold.

Laura sprang to her feet and looked about her desperately.

“If we could only reach her from below, Vi! There’s just a chance we might be able to climb up to her – ”

“There is a path to the lake,” said Vi, her teeth chattering with excitement. “But it’s all around Robin Hood’s barn. We haven’t time – ”

A faint cry reached them, tinged with desperation.

“Girls, do hurry! I can’t cling here much longer! The cloth is beginning to – tear!”

CHAPTER III

EDINA TO THE RESCUE

At Billie Bradley's desperate cry, Laura flung herself at the edge of the cliff.

"I'm coming, Billie!" she shouted. "I'll get to you some way, if I break my own neck."

Vi caught her and dragged her back.

"Wait!" she cried. "Someone is down there near the lake!"

Laura looked where Vi pointed and saw a small figure at the foot of the cliff. It looked terribly far off, standing there on the massed rocks bordering the lake. Moreover, judging from the clothes she wore, the stranger was only a girl like themselves. Laura and Vi felt that it would take a man's strength to rescue Billie from her fearful predicament.

The girl made a megaphone of her hands and shouted up to Billie.

"Hold fast a minute! I'll get up to you!"

Laura and Vi watched, fascinated, as the girl began to ascend the steep face of the cliff hand over hand like a monkey. She made amazingly swift progress; but each moment the onlooking girls expected, feared, that she would lose her grip, go hurtling over backward to a horrible fate on the sharp-pointed, massed rocks at the foot of the cliff.

Meanwhile, Billie Bradley was striving to keep up heart and courage as she pressed her body close against the rock of the cliff face, clinging to the stout vine with nerveless fingers, striving to find a foothold for her dangling feet.

Each time she moved, a wave of fear swept over her as the stout linen cloth of her frock threatened to give way. She dared not even try to help herself, for fear that one support would fail her!

Then the dress began to give beneath her weight, as she hung there, dangling over eternity. She heard the sibilant hiss of splitting cloth and braced herself for whatever fate might be in store for her.

It was then that she became aware that someone was approaching from below. At first she thought that it was either Laura or Vi and wondered how it was possible for them to have made their way around to the foot of the cliff in such a short time.

However, in another moment or two, the girl came within her range of vision and she saw that the newcomer was neither Laura nor Vi, but a person who was a stranger to her.

Another rip of tearing cloth sent a shudder through Billie. The stranger made amazingly swift progress up that dangerous ascent, but Billie knew she must come very quickly if she was going to be in time. Another few moments, and the rescuer would have arrived – too late!

Another ripping and tearing sound, and Billie's weight sagged. She clung desperately, with numbing fingers, to that clump of stout vine. She knew by the feel of it in her hand that it was breaking loose. In another minute or two the roots would be dislodged.

"Oh, hurry!" she called to the strange, gallant girl, who continued her steady upward progress. "I've only a few moments left –"

"Hold fast! Never give up the ship! I'll git up to that there shelf if it takes a leg!"

The stranger was gasping from her exertions but her voice was round and hearty, full of a vitality that Billie found tremendously reassuring.

The strange girl rapidly closed the distance between herself and Billie. She climbed to a narrow ledge of rock that had been invisible to Billie from where she hung and, across the space of three or four feet, the eyes of the two girls met and clung.

Then Billie turned her eyes away. What could the strange girl do, now that she was so near? She was in almost as precarious a position as Billie herself, and certainly she had nothing at hand with which to help except her own unaided hands and strength.

Suddenly Billie gasped and groped frantically at the cliff face. The clump of vine had come loose in her hands, the sound of rending cloth told her that the stout threads of her dress had parted at last! With wild panic at her heart, she felt herself falling!

Something slapped the cliff face close to her clawing hand. A voice said sharply:

“Grab that! Quick!”

Instinctively, Billie grabbed, clung.

The authoritative voice cried again:

“Now then! Help yourself if you can. This ledge makes purty good footin’, though slippery. Hang on now. I’ll pull you up!”

Billie clung to the leather belt flung her by the strange girl. In the interstices of the rock she managed to gain a toehold, and by a prodigious effort and with the help of the strange girl she managed to draw herself up to the ledge. There she clung, while an overpowering dizziness assailed her. She swayed weakly, feeling faint and dizzy, half expecting to plunge over the narrow ledge, but past caring very much whether she did or not.

A sharp, angry voice broke through her failing consciousness.

“Not going to faint on me, are you? After me taking all the trouble to save your life? Say! You make me good and tired!”

No shock of icy water could have reacted upon Billie Bradley with better effect. She made a desperate effort to collect her failing senses. She opened her eyes and stared vaguely at the hard young face thrust so close to her own. She was dimly aware that an equally hard, strong young arm had been thrust behind her shoulders, pressing her close to the face of the cliff.

“Well, are you a quitter or ain’t you?” the rude voice demanded. “I can’t get you down there all by myself. Chances are, if you faint, we’ll both go crashing down onto them pointed rocks. And they won’t make a soft bed, I promise you! Well, how about it? Are you going to faint – or ain’t you?”

By a supreme effort Billie regained control of her slipping senses. She stared coldly at the round, hard face of the young stranger.

“I’m not a quitter,” she said. “And I assure you, I have no intention of fainting.” After a moment she added, as though as an afterthought: “Thank you for saving my life!”

The strange girl grinned.

“Don’t mention it! Only I ain’t saved it yet. Reckon both of us have got to look sharp if we want to get out of this jam alive. It ain’t no easy going down this hill, let me tell you! Now then! Ready?”

Bitterly ashamed of her recent weakness, Billie assented. She would have died rather than admit, even to herself, that her head was still whirling and that she was forced to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering.

That descent to the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff was one long nightmare. If it had not been for the help and encouragement of the strange girl, interspersed with occasional merciless taunts from the same source, Billie knew she could never have made it.

As it was, she slipped and half fell, half slid the last fifteen or twenty feet, finally landing amid a shower of pebbles and dirt in a crevasse between two jagged rocks.

“Mercy!” she gasped.

“It is a mercy that you landed betwixt instead of on ’em.”

Billie looked up from her undignified position to find the strange girl grinning down at her. She frowned and tried to rise, but found herself wedged in so tightly that she could scarcely move.

“Like a sardine in a packed can,” remarked the strange girl unkindly.

Billie wanted to feel offended, but she could not. The comparison was too apt. She met the quizzical, smiling glance of the strange girl and suddenly laughed.

“You are a very frank person. But I do feel rather like a sardine. If you will give me a hand, I think I can manage, if I try hard enough, to get out of this ridiculous place.”

The pulling and tugging that ensued was a painful process for Billie. She discovered that there was scarcely a portion of her body that failed to boast either bruise or scratch.

“I’m pretty well disabled,” she admitted. “No tennis and no rowing for me for a few days to come at least.”

“’Twouldn’t be best to try, I guess,” remarked the girl.

Ruefully, Billie bent to examine her torn skirt. As she straightened up, a sharp exclamation escaped her.

“Hold on there! Where are you going?”

CHAPTER IV

BATTLE

Even as Billie Bradley spoke, the strange girl disappeared into the woods.

“Please don’t go! Please! You mustn’t until I’ve had a chance to thank you!”

At the urgent request, or command, the girl reappeared, but with obvious reluctance. She stood awkwardly, rubbing one foot over the other.

“Don’t want any thanks,” she muttered. “Didn’t do nothing, nohow. I guess – I guess – I’d better go now.”

Billie was nonplused by the strange behavior of this young person who had just saved her life. The manner of the girl had altered completely. From being dictatorial, “bossy,” and almost offensively sure of herself, she had become a shy and awkward country girl. Her eyes avoided Billie’s direct look, whether from shyness or sullenness, it was impossible to tell.

Billie, painfully conscious of all her cuts and bruises, went up to the girl and held out her hand.

“Whether you like it or not, I’m going to thank you. My life doesn’t mean a lot to you probably,” with a whimsical smile, “but it does to me and I am very properly grateful for it. How you can climb!” she added with genuine admiration. “If I could scale the side of a cliff like that, I wouldn’t care whether I could solve a problem in algebra or not.”

The girl flashed Billie a glance. There was both sullenness and shyness in it; which was odd, considering the dictatorial tone she had used to Billie a few moments earlier.

“Don’t be so nice to me,” she said, in a hard voice, “until you know who I am!”

Billie was given no opportunity to comment on this peculiar observation for at the moment Vi and Laura dashed in from the woods, rushed to Billie and flung their arms about her. They had come by the woods path “around Robin Hood’s barn” and had reached her as soon as possible.

“Oh-h, look out! Don’t hug so tightly, darlings. I’m – to put it mildly – sensitive. Yes, I’m alive – as you see. No there are no bones broken – I think. But I’ll have to soak in arnica to-night. Bruises – hundreds of ’em. But I’m not complaining. I know how lucky I am just to be alive!”

Animated by the same thought, Laura and Vi left off hugging Billie and turned to the strange girl.

“We don’t know how to thank you,” Vi began.

“If you knew how much I hate thanks you wouldn’t go to the bother,” responded the stranger ungraciously. “I don’t do such things for thanks. Well – good-by!” She turned abruptly and would have plunged into the woods had not Billie called her.

“I don’t know why you have taken such a sudden dislike to me – to us,” she said. “I am sorry if I have done or said anything to offend you. After saving my life, I don’t like you to go away angry.”

“I’m not mad,” muttered the girl. “And I don’t dislike you. I think you’re grand!”

Was ever such a contradictory, amazing creature? Billie stared at her in helpless bewilderment.

“Well, then!”

The girl suddenly flung up her head. Her round face was stern and her mouth was combative, but there were tears in her eyes!

“You won’t be so nice to me when you know who I am, I tell you,” she blurted. “You’ll be like all the rest of the sneerin’, titterin’ lot of ’em. I hate them, I hate every last one of them!”

This outburst amazed the three girls and roused their curiosity. What did the strange creature mean?

“It’s true I don’t know your name or where you come from,” said Billie. “But I am sure I shall like you just as much and be just as grateful to you for having saved my life, whoever you are.”

“Well, then, my name is Edina Tooker,” the girl threw out the information like a challenge. “And I’m livin’, just at present, at Three Towers Hall!”

The girls merely stared at her, doubting if they had heard aright. The self-styled Edina Tooker laughed harshly.

“You see! A crazy lookin’ jay like me couldn’t be goin’ to your select boarding school, could she? That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? Oh, you don’t need to answer me! I can see it in your faces!”

There was a world of bitterness behind the girl’s harsh tone.

“She has been hurt,” thought Billie. “Pretty badly hurt and her pride is up in arms.”

Before she could speak Laura said impulsively:

“Why, you can’t be a student at Three Towers Hall. I’ve never even seen you there!”

“I only come a few days ago,” the girl explained. “And after the first day I – I kep’ close to my own room.”

That explained it, thought Billie. She had heard of the new girl from the wild open spaces who dressed like a freak, talked worse, and kept to her dormitory as though it were a burrow from which she seldom emerged except to attend classes. Characteristically, these uncomplimentary rumors had come to her through Amanda Peabody. Billie had intended vaguely to look up the new girl to see if she could be of any help. Instead, the new girl had looked her up – and in a most dramatic fashion!

“I know who you are,” Billie said, friendly eyes on the sullen face of Edina Tooker. “I’m glad you introduced yourself. I was going to look you up, anyway.”

The sullen expression on Edina Tooker’s face did not lift. She regarded Billie suspiciously.

“What for?” she demanded. “So you could see what a freak I am and laugh at me behind my back?”

This accusation was almost too much for even Billie’s good nature. A sharp retort rose to her lips – but got no further. She realized in time how much this strange girl must have suffered to make her so bitter and resentful. She was showing tooth and claw because that was her only method of defense. Like some wild creature of the woods, she was backed up against a wall, unable to distinguish friend from foe, fighting valiantly and indiscriminately, fearing nothing but surrender.

Billie, holding a firm check upon her temper, replied gently:

“My main – in fact, my only idea in deciding to look you up was to see if I could help you.”

“Why should you think I needed help?” retorted Edina Tooker harshly. “I suppose you’d been hearin’ things about me – what a freak I am and all.”

“No one ever said you were a freak,” Billie pursued patiently. “But you were a new girl from a distant city and I thought you might be glad to have someone sort of – well, show you the ropes.”

The corners of Edina’s straight young mouth turned downward in a sneer.

“Sounds good, the way you tell it. But you can’t fool me. You’re all alike up to that school, with your highfallutin’ manners and uppity ways. You’d come to see me, yes, so that you could laugh at me and talk about me afterward. ‘Native,’ ‘barbarian,’ that’s a couple o’ the names I’ve heard your swell friends call me. Mebbe you could add some to the string.”

“If Billie can’t, I will!” cried Laura, with sudden fury. “You’re nothing but a heathen and an ungrateful wretch! You don’t know who Billie Bradley is, maybe, but I’ll teach you!”

“Hush, Laura, please! Come away!”

Laura would not be silenced. She brushed the interruption aside impatiently and rushed on, her words pouring forth in a torrent:

“Billie Bradley is the most popular girl at Three Towers Hall. She does almost everything better than anybody else and yet the girls love her just the same. Maybe you’ve got sense enough to know what that means. She’s a perfect peach and any girl she takes up may count herself in luck. You just think of that when you are all alone and try to realize what you’ve lost. Come on Billie, let’s get away from here!”

Laura turned away with one last, inimical look at Edina Tooker. Vi joined her, but Billie still lingered behind.

“I’m sorry you feel this way,” she said to the girl who had saved her life. “I owe you a debt and I’d like to be friends.” Billie paused but as Edina remained silent with sullenly averted face, Billie went on to join Laura and Vi.

She did not know that the strange girl looked after her with eyes suddenly blurred by tears.

CHAPTER V

A PUBLIC REBUKE

Laura Jordon's resentment against Edina Tooker and her attitude toward Billie did not abate at once. For the greater part of the return walk to Three Towers Hall she sputtered and fumed, mentioning dire forms of punishment that should be meted out to the girl from the West if she, Laura, could have her way.

"Never saw such an ungrateful wretch in my life. Talk about throwing pearls before swine! She never even knew what it meant to be taken up by Billie Bradley."

"I doubt if she knows now." Billie paused and said "ouch" as a stretched ligament protested sharply.

"Well, she will before she has been at Three Towers much longer," prophesied Vi. "Personally, I can't bear the girl and I hope she gets everything that's coming to her."

Billie frowned, partly with pain at her cuts and bruises, partly in disapproval of Vi's uncompromising attitude.

"I'm sure I can't feel that way about her. The girl saved my life and I owe her something for that."

"So do we," said Laura promptly. "But did you notice how she flung my thanks back in my face?"

"Appears to be a habit with her," remarked Vi flippantly.

"It looks to me as though the girl had been hurt past bearing by the persecution and ridicule of some of the girls at the Hall. She has pride and spirit and is ready to strike out at everybody."

"It seems to me I detect Amanda Peabody's fine hand in this," observed Laura. "Amanda would enjoy nothing better than a cat-and-mouse game with a girl like Edina Tooker."

"She seems to be poor –"

"I've heard differently," said Billie. "One of the girls told me her father was getting rich fast – struck oil on an Oklahoma ranch, or something of the sort."

"Well, she may be rich; but, if she looks it, I'm an Indian," returned Laura skeptically. "Never saw a girl dressed like that who was anything but poverty-stricken."

"She probably hasn't the slightest idea how to dress," observed Billie. "I can imagine Edina Tooker in riding breeches or middie and skirt doing a movie on some rocky mountain trail. In that sort of setting she would be very much a part of the picture. But transplant her to a fashionable girls' school and she – well, she just doesn't fit."

"A round peg in a very square hole," observed Vi.

"Exactly. I feel sorry for the poor girl. She's in for a hard time."

Toward the end of the tramp back to Three Towers, Billie found herself becoming very weary. She paused often to rest and was finally forced to accept the help of her chums. An arm about the shoulders of each of the girls, she hobbled on, acutely conscious of all her cuts and bruises and the strained and aching ligaments in her arms and legs.

They were on the last steep slope that ended at the boathouse in front of the Hall when they heard the deep-toned gong that announced supper in the dining hall.

Billie cried out in alarm and tried to hobble on more swiftly.

"I'll make you girls late and Debsy has charge of the dining hall this week." "Debsy" was the nickname for Miss Debbs, teacher of elocution. "You know what that means!"

"One whole afternoon of imprisonment in the dorm and a discredit mark besides," Vi interpreted. "Debsy sure is death on tardiness."

“You girls go ahead and leave me,” Billie begged. “You can make it even now if you run. I’ll get along all right.”

“Never!” said Laura dramatically. “I am with you to the death!”

“Don’t be silly!” cried Billie. “Please go on, girls. It won’t do me a bit of good for you all to get into trouble.”

“We will never leave you until death – or Debsy – do us part,” chuckled Vi. “You’d better save your breath, Billie. You will need it for this last wild dash up the hill.”

By the time they reached the Hall Billie was painfully out of breath and aching in every muscle.

“You go on – in,” she gasped. “I’ve got to – wash up a little – and change my dress. I’m a sight.”

“We’ll help you,” decided Laura.

Despite Billie’s protests, her two chums rushed her up the stairs to the dormitory. There Vi ran water into a bowl while Laura invaded the closet to get down a fresh frock.

“There! Stick your head in that, Billie. You do have a look of battle and sudden death about you. And your hair could stand a comb. So! Much, much better. Now you bear a slight resemblance to the Billie Bradley I have known and loved so faithfully.”

Over Billie’s freshened head Laura slipped a cool, peach-colored frock; then ran to the lavatory to wash her own hands. This service Vi also performed for herself. In less time than they had thought possible, the chums were ready to face the eagle eye of the dreaded Miss Debbs.

They made their way decorously to the dining hall, entered as unobtrusively as possible, and slipped quietly to their seats.

In spite of all their precautions, their entrance was observed by practically everybody in the room. Friends of the chums, who were in the majority, pretended not to see them. Their few enemies, led by Amanda Peabody and her shadow, Eliza Dilks, stared openly and tittered.

Billie did not raise her eyes from her plate as Connie Danvers, seated beside her, passed the cold meat and salad.

“Fill up your plate, quick,” whispered Connie. “Maybe Debsy didn’t notice you.”

“Such a chance!” returned Billie, scarcely moving her lips. “I can feel her eagle eye on me now!”

Through the steady murmur of voices and the clatter of plates and cutlery broke the deep, husky voice of the redoubtable Miss Debbs.

“Beatrice Bradley! Stand, if you please!”

Billie shot a sidelong glance at Connie Danvers.

“I’m in for it now!” she whispered, and got to her feet.

“Yes, Miss Debbs,” she said politely.

“You are aware that there is a strict rule against tardiness – especially at meals – are you not?” Miss Debbs could ask the simplest question in an highly histrionic manner, as though the weight of worlds depended on the answer.

Now Billie answered meekly:

“Yes, Miss Debbs.”

“Yet you deliberately enter this hall at five minutes past the hour?”

Billie raised her eyes to meet the boring glance of the elocution teacher.

“Not deliberately, Miss Debbs. We – I had an accident.”

Miss Debbs brushed the excuse aside with a dramatic sweep of the hand.

“Nevertheless, you admit that you were late?”

Billie could scarcely hope to deny it in the face of all the evidence against her. Nevertheless, she repeated, meekly:

“Yes, Miss Debbs.”

“You will report to me promptly at ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

With another queenly gesture Miss Debbs pantomimed permission for Billie to be seated, of which tacit permission Billie immediately availed herself.

Connie Danvers whispered viciously:

“It isn’t fair! Laura and Vi were just as late as you.”

“Debsy doesn’t like me,” whispered Billie, and her eyes twinkled. “She never has since the day I refused to use my hands when I recited ‘Lochinvar.’ I never could fling my hands about as she does. I’d feel a perfect fool.”

“She’ll give you a discredit, sure,” worried Connie. “And you can’t afford too many, Billie, or you’ll be barred from tennis and rowing.”

The words merely echoed the worry in Billie’s heart. To be barred from her beloved athletics was tragedy too dire to be considered. She knew, too, that a discredit beside her name so early in the term was enough to start her off “on the wrong foot.”

While she was considering the advisability of taking the matter to Miss Walters, the wise and well-loved head of Three Towers Hall, she glanced up and met the gloating eyes of Amanda Peabody.

“You think you’re smart,” the look seemed to say. “Yet here you are in bad at the very beginning of the term.”

Amanda bent over and whispered something to Eliza Dilks. The two girls tittered and glanced sneeringly at Billie. Their enjoyment of her predicament was obvious, yet Billie continued to eat roast beef and the very excellent salad without appearing disconcerted in the least. It was this ability of hers to disguise her feelings that often infuriated Amanda and her toadying shadow to the point of open and indiscreet betrayal of their enmity toward Billie and her chums.

One such occasion was this one. Amanda bent across the table toward Billie and said in a voice that was audible to every one:

“Dare you to tell where you went this afternoon!”

The gabble of voices settled into a momentary hush as the other girls regarded these ancient antagonists.

Billie looked up and met the sneering gaze of Amanda Peabody with a smile.

“I’ve not the slightest objection,” she answered calmly. “We went to gather goldenrod.”

“Goldenrod!” ejaculated Amanda, with a titter. “That’s a good one!”

“You might ask her where it is,” and Eliza Dilks nudged her crony with an oversharper elbow.

“Where what is?” asked Billie.

“The goldenrod. How much did you bring back with you?”

Before Billie could reply there came a disturbance at the door. Innumerable pairs of bright, curious eyes were turned upon the fantastic figure in the doorway.

Billie recognized the newcomer. It was Edina Tooker.

CHAPTER VI

BILLIE IS LOYAL

Edina Tooker faced the battery of curious, amused glances like a thoroughbred. Even when a ripple of laughter ruffled the serene atmosphere of the room, she did not flinch nor cower. If anything, her back was held more stiffly erect, her head was flung back with a defiant gesture. Billie was reminded of an unbroken colt who feels the flick of the whip for the first time and is hurt and enraged by the pain even while he fails to understand the reason for his punishment.

Billie was seized by an almost irresistible desire to go and range herself at this girl's side, to beat down the ridicule that surged toward the defenseless stranger in a merciless tide.

Edina Tooker wore a heavily pleated serge skirt, far too wide and too long to meet the demands of the prevailing fashion. Over this, accentuating her naturally bulky proportions, was a stiffly starched white shirtwaist, adorned by a flowing red tie.

Her hair was naturally very thick and of that peculiar black which seems to hide a bluish tinge in its depths; but it was drawn back ruthlessly from her broad brow and round red face, drawn back so harshly that it pulled her heavy straight brows upward, giving an odd, almost diabolical, expression to her face.

She wore "sensible" stockings that were very thick and durable and that served admirably to disguise the natural shapeliness of her limbs. On her feet were not shoes, but heavy boots that laced half-way up to her knees!

Even Billie, sensible as she was to this strange girl's suffering, resentful as she was of her friends' amusement, knew Edina Tooker to be a figure of fun as she stood there in that assemblage of carefully cared for, tastefully yet simply dressed young people.

"Why doesn't she sit down?" thought Billie, in exasperation. "Why does she stand there and take the limelight? It's idiotic!"

The ripple of amusement continuing, Miss Debbs looked up from absorption in her meal and met the defiant gaze of Edina Tooker. Miss Debbs' face grew red.

"Another tardy one!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean, Edina Tooker, by reporting here at this late hour?"

The girl's face grew sullen. She scraped one clumsy boot over the other.

"I couldn't help it, Miss Debbs," she said, in a voice scarcely audible. "I just come back."

"Came," corrected Miss Debbs in her deep, husky voice. "Try to speak grammatical English, at least! May I ask," she added sarcastically, "where you have been and why you have just come back?"

The ripple of amusement rose again, surging toward the girl in the outlandish garb. Edina's face was scarlet, her lip trembled in spite of a gallant effort at self-control.

"I – I went for a walk," she said.

"Ah!" declaimed Miss Debbs in her best elocutionary style. "You went for a walk! May I ask where you went for a walk at this time of the evening, neglecting to return to Three Towers Hall until ten minutes past the supper hour?"

Edina shifted from one foot to the other. Her scarlet face was pitiful to see. She tried to speak, but was apparently unable to bring forth a sound.

Billie Bradley could bear it no longer. She got to her feet and faced the teacher.

"If you please, Miss Debbs, I can tell you where Edina Tooker has been and why she was late for the supper hour!"

Here was drama! There was the sound of a concerted gasp as all eyes swerved to Billie. Edina Tooker put up a trembling hand to her shining black hair and also gazed at Billie.

Miss Debbs looked outraged, but interested.

“What do you mean, Beatrice Bradley? Explain!” she commanded.

Without hesitation, Billie told in a low, clear voice of the trip up to Goldenrod Point, as it was called by the students of Three Towers, of her fall over the cliff, a fall which had almost had disastrous consequences, of Edina Tooker’s brave and efficient help in a moment of extreme peril, and of her own eventual return to safety.

She ended boldly, carried away by her own eloquence:

“I think, instead of a discredit mark, Edina Tooker deserves a medal for heroism. I know if I had *my* way she should have it!”

Billie made a gesture toward the door and paused, feeling rather foolish. Edina Tooker had disappeared!

Many pairs of eyes followed Billie’s glance toward the door and a babble of excited voices arose.

“Where has she gone?”

“What did she have to do that for?”

“Just when we were all getting ready to give her three cheers – ”

“*And* a tiger!”

Through the commotion broke the voice of Miss Debbs.

“Silence, please! You will resume your seats and your supper. You will act, if you please, as though nothing had happened. While I am in charge this confusion must cease. Silence!”

When order had been partially restored, Miss Debbs turned her attention to Billie.

“I am obliged to you for your defense of this extraordinary girl. One wonders whether, if you had not spoken up for her, she would have said a word in her own behalf.”

“I doubt it, Miss Debbs,” said Billie earnestly. “She’s the sort who hates thanks and I think I embarrassed her by speaking out.”

“Unfortunately,” resumed Miss Debbs, proceeding with her discourse as though Billie, by answering her query, had been guilty of an impertinence, “this girl has committed another indiscretion by leaving this room before she was given permission to do so. She appears lamentably ignorant of the rules by which Three Towers Hall is governed.”

“I’ll go and call her back, Miss Debbs.” Billie rose eagerly in her place. “I don’t think she can have got very far.”

“Beatrice Bradley, you will stay where you are!” returned Miss Debbs severely. “You will not leave this room until I give you permission to do so.”

Billie sank back in her seat with a sigh of resignation. Miss Debbs was being dramatic, and when she was in that mood there was no arguing with her. Billie did not try, but finished her meal with what appetite she could.

There was floating island for dessert and home-made chocolate cake, an ideal combination and a prime favorite with Billie. But she could not enjoy it for thinking of Edina wandering off somewhere by herself, Edina, heartsore and lonely and desperately rebellious.

The meal at an end, there was a general exodus of girls into the halls and spacious grounds of Three Towers Hall. There they were permitted to wander until nine o’clock when the melodious gong called them indoors to the dormitories and “lights out.”

As usual, Billie Bradley found herself the center of a little court. About her gathered most of the worth-while girls of Three Towers Hall, students who had accomplished something in scholarship, in athletics, or both.

To-night she found herself more than ordinarily popular, because of the interest attached to her adventure of the afternoon and her contact with the girl who was already becoming a source of mystery and interested speculation to the students of Three Towers.

“You sure did champion that queer Edina Tooker, Billie,” drawled Rose Belser. Rose was tall and dark and unusually good-looking. Once an enemy of Billie, Rose was now one of her warmest, most loyal friends. “I’ve never known you to be so eloquent.”

“Even Debsy was impressed,” giggled Connie Danvers. “I think it was rather a shock to her, Billie, to discover that you had so much dramatic talent.”

“I was in earnest, and, you know, sincerity works wonders,” laughed Billie. “Besides,” more soberly, “I feel sorry for the girl. She doesn’t fit here and she knows it.”

“One wonders why she came,” murmured Rachael Carew. Rachael, more commonly known as “Ray” Carew, was the only daughter of the wealthy Carews of Boston. While a thorough “good fellow” with those she considered her equals, Ray could be a bit of a snob with those whose social position was not secure. “One wonders still more,” added Rachael, “how Miss Walters happened to admit a girl of that type to Three Towers Hall.”

For some reason which she could not quite fathom herself, indignation blazed up in Billie at Rachael’s patronizing tone.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘that type of girl’, Ray. She seems to me a thoroughly good sort – ”

“A diamond in the rough?” drawled Ray.

“Perhaps,” flashed Billie. “But I like her and she saved my life. I’d be worse than ungrateful if I consented to listen to unkind remarks about her.”

Before the girls realized her intention or could make a move to stop her, Billie had pushed through the little group and started toward the broad, lighted portal of the Hall.

“The little spitfire!” murmured Rachael Carew. “Who would expect her to fly out at me like that? Anyone would think that queer jay of a girl was her twin sister, to hear her talk.”

“You should know Billie well enough not to run down anyone who has done her a favor,” Laura remarked. “Loyalty is Billie’s dominating trait, you know.”

“Of course it is,” said Rose Belser. “That’s why we all love her – ”

“All except Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks,” remarked Connie Danvers and began to sing softly under her breath:

“Oh, Amanda and her Shadow,
Amanda and her crony,
Went out to take the air one day,
Aridin’ on a pony.”

A chorus of voices joined Connie in the second stanza of the verse:

“They thought they were the bees’ headlight,
They thought they looked so tony,
But every one they met called out,
‘Go home, your style is phony!’”

At the moment Amanda and Eliza and several of the younger girls passed close to the group and shot them a suspicious glance, which provoked a gale of mirth from the author of the “poem” and her friends.

“Let’s sing it again, louder this time,” proposed the irrepressible Connie, but Vi put a check on the hilarity.

“We have had plenty of trouble with those two girls and will probably have more in the future,” she said. “There’s no use going out of our way to look for it.”

Meanwhile Billie had gone in search of Edina Tooker.

She was not in the first year dormitory. There were several girls gathered there, reading or studying, but they unanimously denied any knowledge as to Edina's whereabouts.

"She is probably mooning down by the lake somewhere," said one of them. "She likes to get away by herself."

Before continuing her search, Billie went down the back stairs to the roomy kitchen where the gastronomic needs of several scores of healthy girls were catered to each day.

There was a new cook, a huge black woman with skin like polished ebony and an expansive smile that showed two rows of glistening white teeth. The negress rejoiced in the name of Clarice and she was already one of Billie's devoted slaves.

"I need some sandwiches, Clarice, and a big piece of that delicious cake. I don't know," with calculated flattery, "when I have ever tasted such scrumptious cake. I ate so much at supper, it's only a wonder I'm not sick."

"Well, then, Miss Billie, Ah sho hopes as you don't git no tummyache to-night. An' Ah'm telling you they ain't much o' that cake left, but you's welcome to what I got, yes'm."

"You certainly are good to us, Clarice, as well as being a scrumptious cook," said the girl gratefully.

Five minutes later Billie crept out of a side door and made her way by a circuitous route down toward the lake. She carried a basket over her arm.

CHAPTER VII

A TALE OF RICHES

It was some time later that Billie Bradley was directed to the person she sought by the sound of heart-broken sobbing.

Silently, she made her way through the underbrush until she descried a figure in rumpled shirtwaist and pleated skirt, lying face downward on the thick grass.

“Please don’t cry,” said Billie. “And don’t run away. I’ve brought you some supper.”

At the sound of Billie Bradley’s voice, Edina Tooker jumped to her feet and looked wildly about her. She dashed a hand across her eyes and then turned, as though about to dart off into the woods.

“Wait a minute!” cried Billie. “I’ve brought you some sandwiches and two luscious pieces of cake. If pressed,” she added lightly, “I might consent to eat some with you.”

As the girl paused and looked toward her, trying to pierce the darkness, Billie knew she had struck the right note. A friendly, offhand manner would win Edina Tooker more quickly than sympathy.

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