

BILLY, LONE SCOUT

By NANCY M HAYES



The CAPTAIN SERIES

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BY
NANCY M. HAYES

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Billy, Lone Scout

I

BILLY TRAILS THE MYSTERY POACHER

The spring call to Adventure was in the air; the warm winds thrilled with it, the wood things leaped to it, the grasses rustled to its tune. It is the call that sends men out on the Long Lone Trail, that lures them over mountain and sea, that sets their axes gleaming in the fair virgin forests where no man before has ever trod.

Billy Greenwood closed her book so violently that it slipped from her hands and fell downwards right to the foot of the walnut tree. Then she looked out through the branches over the woods and hills.

“What’s the good of reading—reading?” she cried impatiently. “Oh, I wish I were a man! I’d be a prospector, an explorer, an Indian tracking through the forest, a Lone Scout on some dangerous frontier. I wish I were a boy, for they *do* have adventures, and they’re trained in all sorts of splendid ways to meet them. Being a girl is awful—when you’re just tingling to *do* things!”

She hunched up her knees and clasped her hands around them, her back against the tree trunk, feet on a high, thick bough.

“Billy” (Millicent) Greenwood had no brother and no sister; her father was dead, and her invalid mother liked to have Billy near under the care of a governess. The outcome was much loneliness for Billy, especially since, six months ago, they had made their home in Morthscoor, far from towns, or even villages. Now the clear country air was beginning to set Billy’s slow town blood running to the spring tune of the woodland. As she gazed longingly into the distance, up in the walnut tree, the Great Idea was born.

A new dancing light sparkled swift and suddenly in Billy’s eyes. Millicent Greenwood climbed the walnut tree that afternoon, but the girl who now

scrambled down and ran on flying feet of excitement into the house was Billy, Lone Scout.

A week later, as Dan Cobham, the gamekeeper, patrolled the estate next to the Greenwoods, he had one of the surprises of his life. The undergrowth of young wood and bramble rustled and then parted, and from its midst a strange figure crept with infinite caution. It wore a green hunting-shirt with cut fringe at the end of the sleeves and lower edge, laced in front and belted at the waist. Below, a brief serge skirt appeared, and on its feet (brown legs were bare) were a pair of sheepskin moccasins. A green band on its hair bore a crisp upstanding little cock's feather. And, of course, the figure was Billy.

Dan chuckled. "And what may be the meanin' of this, Miss Billy?"

Billy rose to her feet with an exclamation of disgust.

"Oh, bother! You'd have had me right off! I never even knew you were there!"

"I'm not shootin' nobbut rabbits to-day, thankee, miss," said Dan. "What new game be this?"

She and Dan were old friends now, and strictly preserved as the Heathcote estate might be, Billy was free to go where she would.

"It isn't a game, Dan," said Billy, somewhat severely. "These are moccasins"—she thrust one out. "I made them myself of sheepskin, but it was hard work, and I haven't had time yet to sew beads and things on them. They're so's you can go softly. And the hunting-shirt's magyar pattern. I made it as much as I could like that in the picture of Daniel Boone. He was a great Kentucky scout and back-woodsman, you know. Don't be surprised if you see me doing a lot of this sort of thing." She pointed to the bushes. "I've got to get into training *somehow*. I'll tell you, Dan—but it's a secret—that I'm a Lone Scout, like frontiersmen and people. My goodness, isn't it hard to get along without making a sound! But I've got to stalk animals, imitate birds, and all that kind of thing."

"If it's stalking ye're after," said Dan, with his dry smile, "I wish you'd maybe do a bit for me. And it's not animals, either, let me tell you, however. I found a trapful this mornin'."

"Oh, Dan, not another rabbit caught by the leg?" cried Billy. She had vague ideas of the rights of ownership, but she and Dan shared a common hatred of traps which broke their captives' limbs and held them in agony.

"The same," nodded Dan. "Me and my nevvv Tom we be here, there, and

everywhere, an' still it goes on. The master's took it so serious that I've me orders as Williams is to get notice from the cottage there come a fortnight if the work don't stop. This is a secret, as I've told nobbut you, Miss Billy."

"Oh, Dan, but you don't *know* that it's him!" Ben Williams, with his family of six and his thin wife and his smile, to be turned out into the world!

"It's him or Norrist—and he be nearer the Green End," said Dan, beginning to walk off. "Well, Miss Billy, you knows how to save him if he be innocent. If so be you wants trackin', here be your chance!" And he strode off again, chuckling.

Billy spent the next few days studying "lonecraft" books and also all the footprints and fragments of them she could find in the wood; but they all, on investigation, turned out to be those of Dan or his nephew Tom, a big loose-limbed boy of sixteen, who helped his uncle on the estate. This fact she elicited solely by observation of their boots, for she meant to let Dan know nothing of her progress until she had made some definite discovery and had bound him to secrecy. Perhaps the poacher was crafty and wore moccasins?

Billy was engrossed in this problem as she returned one afternoon from the village, three miles away—so engrossed, indeed, that her foot slipped in a puddle. Sandy Lane ran through a seam of red clay, and as Billy went on she turned to see a trail of red, wet footmarks. A sudden idea went winging to the Lone Scout's mind. Footsteps were easily lost in the wood, but supposing they were *red* footmarks? True, no poacher would be so obliging as *purposely* to dip his boots into red clay, but still—Billy stooped and filled her long-suffering pockets and her bag with dry, red clay.

She sought out Dan at once on her return.

"Yes; I found an empty trap to-day, what must have been set last night. No; it bean't taken away yet."

"Then, Dan," said Billy earnestly, "will you please set it just as it was before, and go away, and not come near the place till I say you may to-morrow?"

"Well, well, all right," said Dan, in a humouring kind of way.

The trap had been well concealed. It was set, of course, on a runway made by the rabbits. Billy scraped with a trowel a small circle round it, which any one must cross who touched the trap; it went amongst fronds of bracken, and so could not be more than about half an inch deep, and its width was that of a boot's length. She spread the red clay over, made it wet with water from the brook, and went home to bed.

That night it rained and rained. Billy, whom excitement woke up several times in the night, could have cried with disappointment. Her fears when, as soon as the rain ceased in the morning, she hurried to the wood were sadly confirmed. Every footstep, had there been any, had been washed away. And yet she could not help feeling sure—she had carefully observed the position of the trap—that it had been opened and reset. Some one in the rain had found a rabbit there. There was only one encouraging part about it. The clay was thin batter. It must have marked the boots of the poacher.

With thumping heart she hurried off to the Green End. On the way she exchanged good-mornings with Dan. Preoccupied with the subject of boots, Billy abstractedly observed Dan's. They were muddy with the dark mud of the woods.

But what was that? Billy almost started in her surprise, for upon the leather gaiters Dan wore above them were splashes of red clay.

In spite of his promise, Dan had been to look at the trap, to see what she had been doing! Slowly, and in hurt disappointment, she resumed her journey to the Green End.

Ben Williams was digging in his garden. He was so near the hedge, which was as high as her shoulders, that although Billy leaned forward she could not catch the least glimpse of his boots.

"Nice day after the rain, miss," remarked Ben Williams, touching his cap, with that good-natured weak smile which always made Billy feel rather sorry for him.

Billy turned to the gate. "I'm coming in to see the way you plant the cabbages, Ben," she said, and Ben, delighted, came forward.

Quickly Billy looked down, and then—her heart almost stood still with horror. For Ben Williams's boots were covered with red clay!

At the instant of discovery Billy felt an intense desire to burst into tears. She hardly knew what remarks she made about the cabbages, nor how she got out of the garden again and down the lane. So it was Ben, after all! And all her scouting was of no avail. Poor, weak Ben, his smile and his thin wife and the six children would all be turned out into the world. And Billy had meant to persuade her mother to do so much for them all!

A slouching, burly figure scrambled over a stile on her left and bumped into her, dropping its stick as it did so. It was Peter Norrist.

"Sorry, missie," he grunted crustily, as Billy gasped for breath. Even with

the breath out of her, however, she instinctively dropped her eyes to Peter's boots. But they had been newly and carefully rubbed with dubbin. If the dubbin had obliterated guilty marks of red clay—who could now tell? Baffled, she regarded Peter as he stooped to recover his stick. His coat swung forward. Something weighed down one of the great pockets. There was a bump there, too—curiously long and narrow. For the life of her, Billy could not take her eyes away—it looked so like the outline of a rabbit. As Peter rose, he caught her gaze fixed upon his pocket.

With a growl and a threatening glare of his narrow eyes, he swung away.

Billy, Lone Scout, stood with one hand to her bewildered head. Ben with red, guilty boots, Peter with clean ones—and a rabbit in his pocket! What could be the meaning of it? That clay—— And then suddenly her face brightened. Why, how could Ben possibly have so *completely* covered his boots with mud from the small circle in the Heathcote Wood? Could no one but herself go through Sandy Lane?

A load lifted from her mind, Billy hurried on. She was sorry for Peter, but how could one possibly like the gruff, surly creature as one did poor old Ben?

Ahead in the lane old Dan's nephew Tom was tramping along, and turned into the wood on the right. At Billy's call he halted in the midst of the bramble bushes and nettles, and Billy came dancing up.

"Oh, good-morning, Tom," she smiled. "I want you to tell me something. Did Ben Williams go to Huxstead yesterday, as far as you know?"

Tom answered her quite politely, but without any of Dan's friendliness. "Yes, he did, miss. I seen him a-goin' that way, and he said as he was off to buy some baccar at Bullock's."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Billy, clapping her hands. "How silly of me not to think of it! Tom, is your uncle a man of his word? I mean, does he keep promises and always do what he says he will?"

Tom's face darkened curiously. "Oh aye, you can lay on it nothing's goin' to turn uncle aside when he be set on it."

There was so much bitterness in his voice that Billy glanced at him curiously. She had never been able quite to understand Tom. However, what he said about his uncle made the broken promise about the trap seem all the more strange.

"Well," she said, "I won't keep you from your work, Tom." Tom, she saw, was longing to be away. A vicious-looking spray of bramble waved from a tree

near, and as Billy turned to go it seized on her hair and made all efforts to escape futile.

“Wait a minute, miss,” said Tom coldly. “I’ll set yer right.” He climbed out of the undergrowth and released her.

“Thank you,” said Billy. Mechanically she glanced at Tom’s boots. They were stained with dark wood mud—and *with splashes of red clay*.

After a pause, she said: “Tom, you didn’t go to Huxstead yesterday, did you?”

“Not been for a good week, miss,” answered Tom.

Billy’s brain was trying hard to work out something.

“Do you and Dan ever wear each other’s gaiters?”

Tom stared at her in amazement and with much impatience. “They be the same size, miss. We do sometimes get mixed up like.”

“Another thing, Tom—’scuse my worrying you—have you found a trap set in the wood to-day?”

“This is the first time I been in the wood to-day,” said Tom shortly. He had turned away, and his voice seemed to have altered. Billy felt herself turning white and then red. An extraordinary idea occurred to her.

“Tom,” she said, “last night I put a circle of red clay round a secret trap that Dan found in the woods—and there’s clay on your boots.”

The following silence was so long that she seemed to hear her heart beating. Then Tom swung round on her. His face was dark, bitter, angry, and ashamed. “So you be a-trackin’ of me, be yer?” he flashed fiercely. “That’s what all the talk meant. Well, you’d better be goin’ to me uncle, quick. He’ll be fine and pleased.”

In spite of the anger in his face, which made Billy feel quite frightened, she took a step nearer.

“Tom,” she said, “why *on earth* did you do it?”

“Why don’t he let me go to be a sailor?” flashed the boy. “I hates this life and the stillness and the woods. My fayther he wer a sailor, and his fayther before him. We ain’t land folk. But no; Uncle Dan ses I got to be a gamekeeper like him, and my folks is dead. So I took the rabbits. I slipped out at night, and I sold ’em, and I’ve near got the money to pay me fare and food to the coast. I knowed well if so be I tried to walk he’d have me back in no time.”

“Oh, Tom!” Billy’s head was whirling. “But Norrist—he was carrying a rabbit just now!”



Billy’s record in picture-writing of the adventures of the Mystery Poacher.

“I couldn’t get ’em away this week,” said Tom sullenly. “I begged him to sell ’em for me till Saturday, and then I meant to be off. He didn’t much like it. Now go and split on me!”

But Billy’s interview with Dan was not at all of the character he had imagined. It was a terrible one for Billy. She had not dreamed the old man so hard, unyielding, and wrathful. No one was more surprised than Billy when, quite suddenly, the battle was won. Old Dan capitulated. He carried the matter to the owner of the Heathcote estate, insisting on paying for the rabbits, and, through old friends of his brother’s, he found a good ship for Tom and paid his fare to the coast. What is more, he lived to be proud indeed of his sailor nephew.

A few weeks after these events, Tom came to say good-bye. His eyes shone, and his smile flashed out as he shook Billy’s hand.

“I can’t thank you, Miss Billy,” he said huskily. “But I won’t ever forget you.”

“Oh, Tom, I’m so glad it’s all happy for you!” cried Billy. “Heaps of good luck!”

“And, miss,” said Tom, fingering his cap and laughing awkwardly, “you did say as how you be wantin’ a name, like, to call yerself. I got a book at home all about a great scout and trapper. Blood brother to the Injuns, he was, and a great one for peace, and plucky, too, and the smartest hand at trackin’ as ever you saw. And, bein’ as he was small like, they called him ‘Little Black

Panther.’ ”

And so it came to pass, at the end of the day, that a happy Lone Scout sat down to make the first entry in picture-writing in her big white log-book and signed it “Little Black Panther.”

II

THE TENDERFOOT'S TEST

"There!" Billy stood back and viewed her handiwork with pardonable pride. The glow of achievement flushed her brown cheeks. "A tent—and I've made it myself! And it really *is* rather decent!"

The sun glinted down through the beech leaves and shone, twinkling, on the large and grubby stitches in the canvas, on the jaggedly-cut tent pegs, on the pricks and scratches which decorated Billy's fingers. A young robin, his speckly breast not yet turned to its lordly red, hopped down, chirping, near Billy's feet and cocked an appreciative eye.

"You sweet!" she murmured. "It *is* a jolly world, isn't it? And great fun being Lone Scouts!"

No sooner had the words left Billy's lips, however, than she became aware of a wistful feeling that the *loneness*, on such a very June-y day, was not, after all, the most delightful part of scouting. She wanted some one besides a robin to appreciate and criticize and sit inside her new abode.

The tent had been made with the help of one of Billy's "lonecraft" books. It consisted of a sheet of canvas, about seven feet square, bound round its edges, with a strong curtain ring fastened to each corner. This had been folded in half diagonally, and three points of it pegged to the ground. To the ring in the remaining corner a rope had been fastened and afterwards tied firmly, a few feet up, round the trunk of the beech tree. The result was a small, cosy, triangular shelter. At the side of it stood Billy's "totem pole," bearing a rough silhouette cut out in cardboard and coloured with black ink, to represent her sign of Little Black Panther.

"If I could only persuade mother to let me sleep here!" breathed Billy, as she turned homewards in response to the luncheon call within. One of the maids met her in the hall.

"Oh, Miss Billy, I thought you'd like to know that there's some visitors come to old Mrs. Green at Appletree Cottage. A boy and a girl they are—twins."

"Visitors!" Billy paused. "How jolly! Are they about my age, do you think?"

"Some years older, miss," returned Walters. "And a bit spoilt, I think. Mrs.

Green says she used to be nurse to them. They come a few weeks every year, and go fishing in the Torrent.”

Billy flew upstairs with a new sparkle in her eye. She was certain to meet the visitors—how gorgeous! Just when she was longing for company, too! No sooner was lunch over than she hurried out to her favourite nook at the side of the Torrent—a stream big enough to earn the name of river.

She did not proceed without caution, however, for Billy was trying to train herself to be always upon the alert. She wanted to learn all that could be discovered about the wood animals, and for that quest was needed “still tongue and silent paw.”

So that now, when she heard a rustle in the bushes ahead, she dropped swiftly to the ground in her tracks without a sound. As she crouched there motionless another rustle reached her ear, and Billy began to crawl slowly forward.

“Oh!” It was Billy’s cry which rang out a moment later as she jumped with fright. Something had leapt upon her, snarling and growling savagely, and Billy sprang to her feet to face a small rough-haired terrier, bristling with rage. Billy’s stealthy movements had evidently roused his suspicions. Billy was not ordinarily afraid of dogs, but there was no doubt about her danger now. As the dog drew back for another spring Billy gazed wildly around.

Her eye fell upon a coat which lay on the ground near, and snatching it up breathlessly she threw it with all her might at the advancing animal. At the same moment a loud shout and the crackling of boughs, as some one scrambled up the river bank, told that help was near.

The coat had struck the dog full in the face, baffling and checking his rush. Would it keep Billy’s enemy busy until the rescuer appeared? Billy shook with anxiety.

Just then, to her amazement, a terrific howl rent the air. The dog began to back away, still wrapped in the coat, and shaking his head from side to side. As Billy stared in astonishment a big handsome boy suddenly appeared at the top of the bank, and after one quick, furious glance at Billy sprang towards the tormented dog.

“Here—Nipper! Nipper! What’s the matter, old boy?” he cried. The dog still shook and tossed his head and struggled so desperately that his master had hard work to catch him. A sharp yelp marked the boy’s success, and then Billy turned with a start as an angry voice spoke at her side.

“What have you done to him? How *dare* you touch him!” The new-comer,

who had hurried up the bank after her brother, now regarded Billy wrathfully. She was a tall pretty girl of about sixteen, with dark hair and dark imperious eyes, which seemed just made for flashing angry glances.

Billy felt quite overwhelmed by this sudden onslaught upon her. "He—he came for me!" she stammered, "He t-t-tried to b-b-bite me!"

"Then you must have been doing something wrong," said the girl decidedly. "What's he howling for?"

"I don't know!" faltered poor Billy. "I only threw the coat at him!"

"Yes—with fish hooks in it!" This burst of anger came from the dog's master, who now looked up swiftly, having just discovered the cause of Nipper's excitement. "There's one right in his shoulder, poor beggar!"

"Oh, Keith!" The girl ran towards her brother in dismay. "Poor darling, no wonder he howled!"

Keith wasted no words. "Hold him like this, Peggy," he said. "I'll have a go at getting it out. Good boy, then, good old fellow! Soon be out, Nipper!"

Billy, standing there disregarded, watched with blinking eyes. She felt like a cruel and disgraced criminal. A few little yelps and whimpers from Nipper followed Keith's announcement, and then Keith stood up triumphantly with the fish hook in his hand, bearing its gaudy fly.

"There—that's over, Nipper darling!" cried Peggy, and Nipper responded by throwing himself upon his young mistress and licking her with wild joyous kisses.

"You know, Keith," Peggy added, "you oughtn't to stick those flies in your cuff—I've told you so before!"

"I must dry them *somewhere!*" returned her brother crossly. "And I'd only just that minute taken my coat off and chucked it down there. Who on earth would have thought——"

Suddenly reminded of the cause of all the commotion, they both turned coldly towards Billy.

"I'm—I'm awfully sorry," murmured poor Billy, on the brink of tears.

"Well, it might have been worse," said Peggy ungraciously, and Billy turned and walked away. As soon as she was out of sight, she flew to hide her head in the tent and persuade herself desperately that she was really a Lone Scout and not just a rather small girl who badly wanted to cry.

The Little Black Panther who took the trail next morning, through grass

heavy with dew, walked slowly and sadly. After her brief dream of companionship and fun the reality seemed too disappointing to be true. Why had it happened so?

Billy came within view of the beech tree, and at once a startled exclamation left her lips. The tent was gone!

She ran forward breathlessly. No—it had not vanished, but it lay there on the ground in a crumpled heap. Billy lifted it, soaking with dew. The rope still hung round the beech tree, but it had torn the ring and a large piece of canvas from the tent which had been Billy's pride.

Little Black Panther stared down at the jagged edges. In that moment she felt that everything—*everything* was wrong. It was enough to make one—Abruptly the Scout rule flashed into her mind: "A Scout smiles and whistles under all difficulties."

With a violent effort Billy caught at her disappearing courage and turned up the corners of her mouth into a wan smile. Then she began to whistle:

"A life on the ocean wave,
A home on the rolling deep——"

The sound of the whistle, however, was so doleful and pathetic that as it died away Billy broke into a real smile.

"What a grousy thing I am!" she said. "I can mend it, I suppose." And she turned away quite cheerfully to examine the totem. Its cardboard was decidedly wilted and flabby.

"I forgot all about the dew. I shall have to cut it out of wood somehow." She sat down upon a tree stump and tried to bend her totem back to its destined shape. When she heard a few minutes later voices that she recognized, Billy hoped sincerely that their owners would pass without seeing her.

"Hallo, isn't this the place where that wonderful tent was last night?" inquired Keith's sarcastic voice.

"Oh yes," returned his sister. "Belonging to that kid, I suppose. You know, Keith, after what Mrs. Green told us, I'm rather sorry we——"

"The whole show's on the ground," interrupted her brother. "Looks as though—yes, the rope's been torn off. Queer thing if it hadn't, if she left it like ——" He broke off, for both the new-comers had caught sight of Billy at the same moment. As for Billy, whose cheeks were red, she kept her head bent over the totem, and the others passed on.

Later, as she stood puzzling over the snapped canvas, some one stepped out of the trees behind her. It was Peggy Montaine.

"Thought I'd come and speak to you," she began in her imperious way. "Expect you thought we were very hard on you yesterday, child. But Keith's so awfully keen on Nipper, and so am I. I daresay you didn't mean any harm, and we did rather shout at you. Besides, Keith had no right to leave fish hooks about. What on earth's happened here?"

Billy stared at her open-eyed, too much taken aback to answer the first part of her remarks. "I don't know," she said helplessly. "It just—it just *went*."

"Yes, you duffer," said the elder girl, coming forward. "Because you never loosened the rope at night. Don't you know that canvas shrinks and grows tight when it's wet? And look at the dew we've had."

Peggy was lifting up the canvas. "And you ought to have made it double just here," she continued, as the jagged tear came into view. "With a patch here in the beginning it would have stood heaps more strain. And you should have tied it to the bough instead of to the trunk of the tree. Then the bough would have given a little and saved your smash-up."

"Oh, I see," returned Billy faintly. "Thank—thank you for telling me." In a rush of disappointment she added: "I seem to have done *everything* wrong!"

"Oh, well, you're only a Tenderfoot," replied the girl casually. "Expect you'll learn before long." Humming a tune, she walked off with a light tread. Billy turned and fished for an old tin box in a hollow tree near-by. From this she drew a piece of canvas, scissors, needles, and thread, and sat down determinedly to patch her devastated tent. As she sewed she struggled with the corners of her mouth.

"Only a Tenderfoot!" Of course, it was true, and it was tremendously kind and decent of Peggy to tell her all about tents and things. Only—where was the *fun* to come in? And did they think her really such a *terrible* duffer? After all her trying and——

"This won't do!" Little Black Panther sprang to her feet and addressed herself severely. "Come and have a swim—you'll feel better then." She trudged down to the Torrent, wherein she had found an ideal swimming spot. Her bathing-dress was always hidden near, and soon she was splashing gaily in the water, all her depression vanishing under its cooling, refreshing influence.

Since becoming a Lone Scout, Billy had worked hard at swimming. No one, she thought, could really "be prepared" who could not help to save a life from the river. Therefore she practised untiringly, and lately "Edward," a

wonderful big being of straw and rags, of her own creation, had been pressed into service. She rescued him day after day, wishing longingly for some one real to save. Now she began almost to wish that Keith or Peggy might fall into the Torrent, so that she might pull them out! Then perhaps they would be nice to her, and not think her such a duffer and a Tenderfoot.

But, alas for dreams! Billy soon discovered that both Keith and Peggy were expert swimmers. She found also that whatever time of the day she might choose for swimming, Keith was always sure to hit on that time for fishing, and he seemed invariably to come across her and scowl. For, once out of Keith's good graces, it was difficult to regain an entrance to them, as even his sister acknowledged.

Peggy herself, in her off-hand, superior way, talked now and then to Billy. Once she even invited Little Black Panther to share their picnic by the river. Unfortunately, however, Billy overheard Keith's reception of the news Peggy had hurried ahead to break.

"What!—you've asked that kid? Great snakes, Peggy, what on earth——"

And so, after all, the picnic sandwiches tasted to Billy like sand and ashes, and she was so silent and nervous that Keith thought her more of a duffer than ever. The corners of Billy's mouth slid down as she wandered away.

An hour later joyous shouts and splashings drew her to the river to look on wistfully. The Montaines had chosen a spot for bathing not far from where the Torrent tumbled down in quite a waterfall, and Billy thought to herself that they must be very sure of their own power as swimmers. Nipper ran along the bank (he had long ago buried his enmity against Billy) barking excitedly. Then came suddenly a great splash, and a cry rang through the air.

"Oh, Keith—Nipper's in!"

Billy hastened to the bank. The little dog had one lame leg, and was not allowed to swim in any but shallow, smooth water. She saw now that he had fallen in far ahead of Keith and Peggy, and was now making valiant attempts to swim.

"He'll be over the waterfall!" cried Peggy's panting voice.

"Not he!" returned Keith confidently. "I'll get him in no time."

"All right, Nip, old boy!" he shouted. "I'll have you all right."

The only answer was a snuffle and a splash. Nipper was fighting gamely, but the current was too strong for him.

“Hurry up!” cried Peggy anxiously, swimming hard after her brother. Billy watched breathlessly from the bank.

“Mind the waterfall!” she cried. It certainly seemed that Keith would find it easy to overtake the dog, but the racing swirl over those boulders looked dangerously near.

And then suddenly a *terrible* thing happened. Billy’s heart almost stopped with terror, for Keith threw up his arms with a cry and disappeared. The hurrying water gurgled on, but there was no dark head above its treacherous surface. Even as Billy’s face blanched with fear she knew what dread enemy had attacked him. Cramp!

Peggy, following closely behind, grasped the happening immediately. She dived at once to her brother’s rescue. Billy felt that she could scarcely bear the suspense when Peggy, too, vanished, but hardly a second had gone by when the girl reappeared, holding up the helpless Keith.

“Let me help! I’m coming!” shouted Billy, kicking off her shoes. But the elder girl ordered her back. “Stay—where—you are!” she panted. “Quite—able! Oh—*Nipper!*”

Billy hesitated wildly. Peggy had turned on her back, and without any great effort she was towing Keith to the bank. It was shallow there, and they could land easily. Billy’s help was not needed. Her eye flew to the little dog, now being borne helplessly down the stream. Little Nipper—poor little Nipper! Once carried over the fall on to the rocks below, and little Nipper would come back never more.

Billy began to run—racing along the side of the bank. She knew the risks of attempting rescue—knew how strong that smooth treacherous current became as it neared the fall. Once over—and what would there be to choose between her and Nipper? But she could think only of that little dark form being whirled on and on. With a violent effort she drew ahead of it. There was no time for hesitation.

Billy dived from the bank right in Nipper’s path. She clutched and clung desperately. There was no resistance from the little limp ball, and, holding Nipper firmly, Billy struck out with all her strength across the Torrent. She knew that it was of no use trying to face the stream. All that she hoped for was that she might cross it and reach that overhanging tree-trunk before she should be swept over the edge of the fall.

With set teeth she battled and gasped and fought. Dimly she heard Peggy’s voice in the distance.

“Billy! Billy! I’m coming!”

The water surged in Billy's ears. Still she kept her grip of Nipper; still she struggled on. Would she never reach that tree? It was just ahead. Would she be carried past? Would—— With a last wild effort Billy plunged for the trunk and clung on desperately.

She did not know that Peggy was tearing along the opposite bank, crossing the bridge below the waterfall, and hastening towards her. She only knew that some one had taken Nipper, that arms were seizing her and dragging her out of the water, that——

When she became conscious of events once more she was lying on the ground, while Keith and Peggy, an anxious pair, bent over her, and a reviving Nipper licked her hand feebly.

“Hurray! She’s coming round,” said Keith.



Billy's entry of this adventure in her log-book.

“Billy, you little trump! You’re a brick. We’ll never call you a Tenderfoot again!”

“And while we’re here,” said Peggy unsteadily, “you shall have the jolliest time you’ve ever had in your life!”

“Sure, you shall,” agreed Keith. “Plucky Little Black Panther!”

Faint as she was, Billy's lips curved up into a smile, for she was very, very happy.

III

HIDDEN AND UNKNOWN

The July sun sparkled into Billy's eyes as she gazed towards the open window. "It's quite time I had another adventure," she was thinking.

Mrs. Greenwood looked up from the newspaper with a worried look on her pale face. "Dear, dear! Another burglary! Really, it makes one feel quite nervous! The last was only ten miles away. We shall be the next victims!"

"Oh, if they only *would* come here!" cried Billy, clapping her hands. "How exciting it would be!"

Miss Hopton smiled in her calm fashion as she rose.

"No doubt, Millicent, you imagine you could capture several burglars single-handed, but it is hardly so simple a matter as you suppose!" Billy hated being laughed at, and so never told any of her plans to Miss Hopton; but as she went towards the window she kept keen ears open for the conversation about the burglars.

"In almost all the cases," continued Mrs. Greenwood, "the robbers appear to have had a confederate within the house to admit them at a safe moment. I am thankful that all *our* servants can be trusted. We have no new ones but Russell the maid and Smart the footman, and they have excellent references. Imagine it! The police have not caught any of the burglars, although there have been no less than four robberies around here. So that these desperate men must be at large somewhere in the neighbourhood. Dear, dear!"

"If one takes ordinary precautions——" was what Billy heard from Miss Hopton, as she hastened through the French window and perched herself in the apple tree till lesson time.

It was decidedly thrilling to think that even in such a quiet spot there were desperadoes—danger—perhaps adventures!

A few days later odd happenings began to take place in the house. Things acquired a habit of disappearing—quite small disconnected things.

Billy, on a holiday, in search of provender, wandered into Cook's region, ready with her most coaxing manner.

"Lunch out, Miss Billy?" said Cook, whose usually good-tempered face wore a cloud. "Well now, I had a fine apple turnover would have done you a

treat. But where it is now I know no more than the man in the moon. And a plum cake took wings to itself yesterday; and I'll guarantee there were eight loaves in the larder last night, and now there are but seven. Who on earth could have taken them? For never have I worked in a house where, down to the boot-boy, there was more to go round."

Billy ruffled up her hair. "Why, Cookie," she said, "what an extraordinary thing! And do you know that Higgins, the gardener, has missed a pair of boots out of the tool shed? They were a bit old, but plenty of life in them yet, he says. And this morning they were gone!"

One of the maids entered the kitchen at this point. She looked excited and a trifle scared.

"Oh, do you know what's happened now, Mrs. King?" She was bubbling over with the news. "Mrs. Porshott says there are two blankets missing. Such a state as she's in, you may be sure!"

Billy, perched on the kitchen table, swung her legs. "Cakes and loaves, boots, blankets. What a mixture!" She knitted her brows in deep thought. "Why, Mary, what on earth would any one *inside* the house want with such a collection?"

Cook lifted her hands. "The very thing as James says!" she exclaimed. "He's a notion, Miss Billy, that there's a tramp hanging round, though how he gets into the house, and why he doesn't take more——"

"Oh, law now!" cried Mary, in dismay. "Don't say such a thing, when we all know there's desperate characters about! Oh, I shan't sleep o' nights now, thinking of it!"

"Don't be silly, with Miss Billy here," said Cook warningly. "Burglars it *can't* be, for they says it's confederates inside lets them in. And there isn't a single one in this house we can't trust. Smart and Russell are both new, but I've taken to them right away."

"H'm!" said Mary, pursing her lips. "Well, Russell's queer, Mrs. King—she's queer!"

Cook, who had been busily cutting sandwiches, held out a little parcel to Billy, smiling at her favourite. "Here's a nice little lunch, Miss Billy. And don't you go getting nervous with all these tales. We hadn't ought to talk about such scares before you!"

Billy laughed as she thanked Cook and danced away. She was considering deeply as she entered the woods. After all, Little Black Panther had solved *one*

mystery. . . .

For the next few days the thief lay low, and then the whole thing began again. The household, with the knowledge that dangerous characters were in the neighbourhood, was becoming uneasy. Mrs. Greenwood took the matter very seriously. Billy racked her brains in vain for a solution. As a Lone Scout it was clearly her duty to protect the household. But how to begin?

Certainly there seemed nothing to direct suspicion to the new inmates. Smart was a stolid, unimpressive young man with sandy eyebrows. Russell was pale and thin, with quiet manners and nervous eyes, for whom Billy—she could not tell why—felt sorry.

“I shall have to put the matter in the hands of the police,” said Mrs. Greenwood at last. “Longmore, the butler, has a most startling theory. He believes the burglars are hiding somewhere near, and these things are taken to keep them comfortable until there is an opportunity of burgling this house. Oh dear, oh dear! But how could they get them? And who in this house would steal for them?”

One sunny afternoon Billy wandered on to the old quarries, her favourite “thinking place.” As she advanced, in accordance with her self-training as a Scout, she kept eye and ear open for signs. Otherwise she might not have noticed the four footprints in the floor of the quarry.

Billy stopped to examine them, as was her habit with new tracks. There were two big ones, two small. She peered more closely. As she did so an excited exclamation broke from the Lone Scout’s lips. Yes, the big prints were those of hobnailed boots, and the nails took the form of a moon and star!

The gardener’s words rang in her ears. “Yes, Miss Billy, I’d know them boots anywhere, for didn’t I knock the nails in them myself in the shape of a moon and star—for luck, like?”

Yes, there was no doubt that these were the tracks of the stolen boots! Now tense with excitement, Billy knelt down and turned her scrutiny on to the smaller prints. They were long and very narrow—evidently they marked the track of a woman. Whose could they be? Where had she noticed long narrow shoes to fit these prints? In a startling illumination the picture of Russell flashed before her—Russell, pausing on the stairs to tie up her shoelace. . . .

Billy’s face was pale as she rose to her feet. Russell! That nice, pale, sad-looking Russell really to be mixed up in robberies? Was there truly a robber hiding near, for whom Russell had taken the boots? The “sign” seemed to say that she had met him here in the quiet quarry far away from every one; was it

to give him the plans of the house and tell him how to break into it?

Billy sat down on a stone in stupefaction for a moment, and then rose and began to hunt about for other footprints.

There were none, however, to be found. The quarry in general was hard and rocky. The small depression by the bush, holding earth into which water had drained, was the only possible place to hold an impression. Indians, Billy supposed, would have been able to deduce all kinds of facts from crushed grass, bruised leaves—but Little Black Panther had to confess herself baffled.

Then a swift thought flashed through her mind, which seemed to give the silence of the quarry a menacing and uncanny meaning. Was not this the most likely spot in the vicinity in which a hunted man might hide? And, in that case, would not the robber be here *now*?

Even in the broad daylight Billy could not repress a little shiver, partly of scare, partly of excitement, as she glanced over her shoulder. But no one was to be seen.

At last, with her heart in her mouth, Billy began to search. But, seek as she might, no trace was to be found of a hiding-place, and at last she was compelled to give up in despair and go home.

Should she tell the story of her discovery of the footprints? Billy was still wondering what she should do next when she fell asleep that night.

She awoke with a start. Pitch darkness surrounded her and silence—yet in her mind's ear seemed to sound a faint echo of a strange noise which had awakened her. Holding her breath, Billy sat up in bed and listened.

Yes, there it came again—a faint rustle and scraping outside her window. Billy's heart began to pump rapidly. The noise now seemed to be creeping down the house. Was some animal there?

Gathering up all her courage, Little Black Panther crept from her bed and stole across the floor. The window was wide open at the bottom. She peered out.

A slim black form was just landing on the ground from the ivy. The clouds which covered the moon drifted suddenly away, and the light shone clearly upon the face of—Russell!

For an instant Billy stood spellbound, and then, as the maid glided away into the wood, Billy also, in her pyjamas, was climbing swiftly down the wall, clinging to the thick ivy which covered it.

Across the lawns in her bare feet she crept, taking cover behind bushes when Russell looked fearfully round, until they reached the woods. Russell plunged into the darkness, Billy followed.

And then the moon went in, and in a few more seconds Billy had lost Russell's track utterly. She lay still and listened, but not a sound of movement came through the dimness. Russell had turned some corner swiftly, and had been lost to view.

One hand against a tall beech tree, one against her thumping heart, Billy considered what she should do. In spite of her scanty attire, she was quite warm there amid the sheltering trees. Should she go on? But where to? *To the quarry!* For some instinct told her that *there*, where she had found the footprints, the secret was hidden.

Billy had never been out in a wood in the middle of the night in her life before. Her knees were trembling as, taking her resolution in both hands, she set out on the danger trail.

Billy knew the path so well that even in the darkness she had no difficulty in finding it. Drawing near, she moved almost without a sound, so well had she trained herself. At the entrance to the quarry she listened again. Silence!

Russell must have reached the place some time before. Billy advanced with caution. She crept round the quarry, with pauses for listening, meeting with no reward until suddenly, turning a corner, she stopped in her tracks, frozen with excitement.

The murmur of voices had broken the stillness—a faint, low murmur!

Some seconds passed before Billy could move. Then she crept forward, scarcely breathing, towards the quarter whence the voices had risen. Under the steepest wall of the quarry she was forced to halt. The voices floated from a spot a little way above.

In a flash Billy understood. Russell and the "some one" were hidden in one of the many little caves which honeycombed the quarry.

She was filled with a wild longing to look in. But dare she scramble up? She would almost certainly be heard. While she hesitated a faint light shone out through the branches above. She heard Russell's voice growing louder.

"Don't keep the candle on more than an hour. It's dangerous. Some one might see. You've enough bread there to last you a day. I'll come again to-morrow night. Good-night, my dear."

A murmur answered, and then, scarcely giving Billy time to hide, Russell

emerged from the cave and scrambled to the ground. She passed Billy so closely that she almost touched her, and then vanished again into the night.

The light was still burning overhead. Little Black Panther stood debating, her shaking knees urging her to go, her Lone Scouthood saying, "Now, Billy, is your chance to solve the mystery. *Buck up!*"

And at length Billy put out her hand and slowly, with infinite care and many pauses, began to climb the quarry side.

She reached the ledge outside the cave, she drew the curtain of the bushes, and——

Billy's foot slipped, and, with a scream, and clutching hands, she went slithering down the quarry side and lay for a moment, too stunned to move.

An answering scream had rung out from the cave, and now Billy saw the bushes parted, and down the wall, bearing the candle, slid a panting, eager figure, to bend over her anxiously.

"Oh, mother—mother darling!" it cried. "Are you—are you hurt?"

Billy's eyes looked up, amazed, into the face of a little girl, a few years younger than Billy.

For a moment the girls stared at each other blankly, and then the candle-bearer frowned in a frightened way at the intruder.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" she muttered.

Billy sat bolt upright. "Who are *you*? I'm Billy Greenwood, from the house," she gasped. "I just—just followed Russell. She is—is she——"

"She is my mother," said the girl unhesitatingly.

"Oh!" cried Billy. Then she recovered her wits. "I wish you'd tell me what it all means," she said. "Can I come back to the cave with you? I'm not your mother's enemy; I like her—only—only such *strange* things have been happening. Burglars—we thought——"

In silence the other girl led the way up, and Billy, stiff but unhurt, followed her. And there, in the dimness of the cave, lit by the flickering candle, Billy, when she had told her own tale, listened to a strange story.

"Daddy's in hospital," said the pale, thin girl. "And we've no money at all. So mother had to go to work again. She used to be in service long ago, and she had such good references that it was easy for her alone to find a place. But no one will have a maid with children, you know. Mother tried so hard to take me, but no one would hear of it. So when she asked for the place at your house she

never said she had a little girl at all. But mother and I are so awfully, *awfully* fond of each other—we couldn't bear to be parted. So we thought of this idea. Afterwards mother was going to tell your mother and see if I could come—but she hasn't dared to yet. And it's been pretty awful here at night—I was so frightened—but I'd bear anything to be near mother. And she couldn't get out to buy things for me, so she—she had to take them from your house. She meant to pay for them when it was all known. Poor mother—it's been awful!"

Billy was lost in amazement and pity. At last she said: "Those big boots? What——"

The pale child smiled. "They were all mother could get for me. Mine were all worn out. Oh, how uncomfortable they were! Mother thought the gardener never used them. Mostly, you see, I don't wear any." She thrust out a bare foot. Then she asked soberly: "What are you going to do now?"

Billy got to her feet. "I don't quite know," she said slowly. "I guess I must see your mother in the morning, and get her to come and tell mother all about it. Mother's *ever* so good, really. She will think of a way. Good-night, Truda." She took the girl's thin fingers.

"Good-bye—and thank you," said Truda, with tears in her eyes. She stood at the mouth of the cave, waving, as Billy scrambled down and ran through the wood as fast as her bare feet would carry her.

She reached the dark house standing silent amid the shadows. She hurried over the lawn past the dining-room windows, which were shut in by the big yew trees. And as she did so a startling and unexpected sight drew a gasp from her and rooted her to the spot. The big curtains had been only half drawn, and inside the room was to be seen a moving light. It was a queer light, which showed almost nothing of the person who held it—the light from a dark lantern!

Flattening her nose on the window, Billy gazed with horrified eyes. The doors of the sideboard were open—silver was being lifted out. As the lantern moved Billy could distinguish two dark figures, lifting, examining. . . .

Burglars!

Billy shivered. She grew hot, then cold. She tried to keep clear her brain, so that she could think what to do. And as she stood there, some one standing on guard in the darkness suddenly flung a startled arm round her mouth and crushed the scared and struggling Scout in a fierce grip.

Billy never quite knew what happened next, but as she gasped and fought wildly, the thought of the only ju-jitsu trick Dan had taught her flashed through

her mind. Her whole body went limp in the burglar's grasp, and then—two quick, lithe movements and the man let out a stifled exclamation, strove vainly to steady himself, and fell heavily to the ground. It was fortunate for the escaping Billy that his head struck a tree stump—he lay too stunned to follow.

Billy ran desperately, scrambling up the ivy to her bedroom; then, tiptoeing to the butler's room, gave the alarm.

A few minutes later she stood at the top of the stairs watching Longmore and James and Smart creeping down, armed with a revolver and two stout sticks. There was a tremendous commotion when they reached the dining-room, but, taken by surprise, the two robbers were soon secured.

And when the frightened women came hurrying out of their bedrooms, Billy was able to answer as calmly as shivers would let her:

"It's all r-r-right! It's only burglars!"

"*Only burglars!* Bless the child!" gasped Cook.



The Burglar Adventure.

And so that was the end of the burglaries. And as for poor Russell, Mrs. Greenwood, when she heard from Billy what mother and child had suffered, proved not only forgiving, but helpful. Soon, in the little lodge from which old Mr. and Mrs. Petram had retired, were to be seen a tall, pale-faced man, newly from hospital, a pale, quiet-mannered woman, and a little, smiling girl—all rapidly growing rosy with health and happiness.

As for Billy, for some time she was treated as a heroine, and on page 37 is her log record in picture-writing of the secret of the old quarry.

IV

A RIDE FOR LIFE

“They’re a rough lot, them Ollisters,” said Dan the gamekeeper. “There they live in the hills, and who can say how they gets their living or if it’s come by honest? And now they’ve a feud on against young George Davidson, their cousin, and his poor old father and mother.”

“What’s the feud about?” inquired Billy, pausing in her occupation of rope-splicing.

“Their granfeyther’s been and gone and died,” replied Dan, “and he’s left the Mallow Farm to George instead of to them, well knowin’ the wreck they’d make of it. And now I hear they go about threatening what they’ll do to young George and the farm if he don’t give it up.”

“They’re like sort of brigands, aren’t they?” said Billy, with interest. “Living up there all alone, and everybody more than a wee bit afraid of them! And that rough-looking one with the black hair tearing about at night on a motor-cycle instead of a horse like the old-fashioned kind of highwayman. You can just imagine him putting a pistol to somebody’s head and saying: ‘Up with your hands!’ I hope they won’t do any harm to the Davidsons, Dan?”

“Not they, Miss Billy; they’d be much too scared,” replied Dan, picking up his gun and departing.

The hills in whose fastnesses the five Ollister brothers lived alone had always exercised a fascination for Billy. She often wandered in their direction, hoping, yet half fearing to catch a glimpse of their strange inhabitants, who were seldom to be met in the daytime. Sometimes she would see two of them tramping along a narrow lane with thick sticks in their hands, not even deigning to throw her a glance from their fierce dark eyes as they swung by. Sometimes she would hear the sound of a motor-cycle in the distance, and down the winding mountain path would come humming the motor-cycle ridden by Andrew Ollister, the eldest brother, with the low, scowling brows, the heavy jaws, and the thin lips. At the sight of his speed down the rocky hill Billy would hold her breath, feeling that a fall was inevitable, but always the rider was out of sight before she could think again.

Now, when Dan the gamekeeper had disappeared, Billy rose thoughtfully and stowed the rope away in her tent. She would have another peep at the hills.

There were several hours before tea in which to wander. She took up her staff and set forth.

The sun shone down upon the grass and the heather sprang round her feet, and Little Black Panther jumped the streams and whistled a gay tune or two and felt that life was very good. Young Farmer Davidson's nice-looking face lit up with a pleasant smile as he met her by the brook.

"Isn't it topping, George!" cried Billy. "Where are you off to?"

George Davidson carried a halter in his hand. "I'm away to look for our brown colt, Miss Billy," said he. "He's been missing all day, and just now a little lad came to say he'd seen him off in the West Valley, cropping grass as contented as you please. So I must get him home before night comes."

"Wish you luck!" cried Billy. Then she added, after a moment's hesitation, as the young farmer turned to go: "Aren't you afraid, George, to go wandering about here alone? Dan says that those Ollisters are threatening all sorts of horrid things against you because of the farm. Don't you think you ought to be careful?"

George turned a laughing face. "Bless you," he returned, "there isn't long enough life to go wasting it bothering over the likes of the Ollisters. Cattle and horse thieves every one—and many other things don't come amiss to them. Thank you for your warning, Miss Billy, but they've no pluck for anything but threats!"

And with a wave of his hand George swung away over and was soon lost to sight.

Half an hour later the sound of a distant shot broke the afternoon silence and sent the echoes rolling among the hills.

"Some poor little rabbit!" thought Billy. It seemed sad that anything should be killed on such a day.

Even to one as accustomed to the hills as Billy, there were always fresh hills to be climbed, fresh paths to be explored, and she tramped on without thinking of time until a casual glance at her wrist-watch told her it was six o'clock.

"Six. Great Scott! No wonder I want my tea!" exclaimed Billy. "I shall have to just *fly* home!"

But getting home again, Billy soon discovered, was not to be so easy a matter. She retraced her steps down the side of one hill, only to find herself at a loss as to the next narrow little sheep-path to be followed.

"This must be it!" said Billy at last, as she chose one and hastened forward.

Before the end of an hour's fruitless wandering, however, she was forced to confess that she had now no idea of the right way. She judged roughly by the sun the points of the compass, and all that could be done was to continue to walk towards the quarter in which, far away, and seemingly unattainable, home lay.

But time went on and there was still no sign of the familiar farms and cottages. No fellow-wanderer appeared from whom she could seek guidance, no little hill hut to lighten the loneliness of tree and heather. Little Black Panther was footsore and weary. Hours had passed since six o'clock had startled her, and she knew her mother would be growing more and more anxious. Billy looked around her in despair.

Dusk was beginning to fall. When once the hills were covered in darkness there was no prospect for Billy but a night spent on the heather, tea-less and supper-less.

But the next moment a sound throbbing through the evening stillness sent a wave of relief through Billy's heart. A motor-cyclist was approaching. Now she would be able to ask the way and get back to the right path. A sober reflection flashed quickly on the heels of joy. The rider must be Andrew Ollister. Could she possibly summon up the courage to speak to him? And would he take any notice at all of her? Only sheer desperation nerved Billy to hurry her weary limbs in the direction of the sound.

She found herself confronted by a low hedge, over which she scrambled, to emerge upon a small rocky lane. Coming round the bend of this, farther up the hill, she saw the motor-cyclist appear. But as he drew nearer Billy started and stared in surprise.

For the rider was not Andrew Ollister at all, and even the gathering dusk could not disguise the very queer way in which he was riding. He hung low over the handlebars, his head drooping, while the cycle, which was travelling at great speed, pursued an erratic course, only escaping destruction by what seemed a miracle.

Billy stood staring, puzzled and fascinated, as the cyclist drew nearer, though instinct told her to jump back into the hedge to avoid this mad rider.

But as he approached nearer still, Billy let out an amazed exclamation: "George Davidson!"

The man on the cycle turned a desperate gaze in her direction; then, as though even that effort had been too much for him, swayed again over the

handlebars. His face turned white, the cycle suddenly slowed down, and rider and machine collapsed in a heap at Billy's feet.

Billy ran forward breathlessly. George Davidson lay with closed eyes, his face pallid; he seemed lifeless. Billy dragged the cycle away and bent over him anxiously. Then, for the first time, she saw with horror that a dark stain was soaking its way through his coat.

"Oh, speak! Can't you speak? What is the matter?" cried Billy. But George Davidson lay quite still. With shaking hands Billy opened his coat and shirt, and laid bare a small round wound in the shoulder, which had now ceased to bleed. She felt for her handkerchief and rose to go towards the little stream which trickled along by the side of the path. But as she moved the wounded man opened his eyes and clutched her arm with the sudden strength of desperation, seeming to recognize her at once without surprise.

"No, don't go! Don't go!" he muttered. "Listen! There's no time to waste!"

"But I want to bathe your shoulder, George," protested Billy. "It's awfully bad!"

"Can't stop for it," said George, dragging himself by a mighty effort to a sitting position. "What you've got to do is to help me upon the machine again. Hurry up; don't make any bones about it or they'll get there first after all!"

"Oh, but you *can't* ride again!" cried Billy. But his determination was so fixed and feverish that she was forced to give way, and at last she managed to help him to his feet. He stood there, swaying, with a hand to his shoulder, while she struggled with the motor-cycle. She contrived at last to raise it, and was able to relieve George by telling him that it seemed to be quite undamaged.

"Hold it whilst I get on!" muttered George, and advanced towards her. But the young farmer had only taken one step when all his strength seemed to desert him, and again he fell heavily to the ground.

As he tried to rise again Billy cried vehemently: "Oh, you *can't* go, George, you can't!"

"I must," said George, in a hoarse voice, setting his jaw. "The Ollisters! They've sworn to burn down the old farm to-night, and there's my old mother in it, bedridden, and my old father'd sleep till the whole place was in flames round him!"

Billy's eyes dilated with horror. Suddenly she remembered that shot echoing through the hill, and shivered at the blood on Davidson's coat. "The

Ollisters!" she gasped. "How terrible! But they shan't—they shan't! Only tell me the way home, George, and I'll run all the way and warn them!"

"Too late!" muttered George, falling back with a groan. "They're out now for it. That message about the horse was all a lie—it came from them! They got me up in the hills and they downed me. They shut me up in a shed there and told me what they were going to do to the farm. When they'd left me I managed to get out, and I got hold of Andrew's motor-bike and off I hummed. But they spied me at the last and sent another shot after me." He groaned again, and his face seemed to turn grey.

"Heavens! I'm done!" His eyes closed once more.

"But, George, you're miles ahead of them!" cried Billy. "If I run now!"

"They've cut across country by the Long Gully," said George helplessly. "I heard them shouting so to Tim Ollister. They'll wait by the Lone Wood. I'd have passed it in time, but you couldn't." Again he tried to rise, but without success.

There was a tense, nerve-racking silence, and then Billy spoke. Her announcement set George staring at her in amazed incredulity.

"George," said Billy, "I'm going to ride this bike and carry the warning."

"You!" gasped George.

"I can ride a motor-bike," said Billy resolutely. "My cousin let me try on his secretly when I was staying at auntie's. I can ride quite well, really. Anyway, I'm going to try! I mustn't stay! Good-bye, George! Is it straight ahead on this road?"

"Straight ahead," murmured George feebly. "But you mustn't—you *mustn't* try! They're armed!" But the excitement was too much for him. Before Billy could reply he had subsided altogether. His head fell forward. He had fainted.

Billy dared not stay to attend to him. She was in the act of mounting when a terrible thought flashed across her mind. If the Ollisters got to the wood in time to see her riding, then they would know that George was somewhere back there in the road. They would return to find him—unarmed, fainting. Billy shuddered. She wanted to think quickly. Every moment was precious, and yet she seemed helpless.

Then the plan came. They must think she was George; it would be easy to deceive them in the dim light.

She propped up the cycle and stepped quickly towards the unconscious George. Stripping off his coat and cap, she arrayed herself in them. Then she mounted the machine, and in the gathering darkness set forth upon her perilous errand.

The machine hummed and buzzed beneath her, and Billy strained every nerve to see ahead, to keep the course straight. She had indeed ridden often upon her cousin's cycle, but never at such a speed as she must use now. Her lips were set, her eyes glued to the road ahead.

On, on she sped down the uneven mountain road, meeting no one, feeling the evening air rush past her hot cheeks, conscious only of one thing: she must reach the farm in time to save the poor old man and woman whose lives hung upon her efforts—before the flames rose into the night sky.

Suddenly Billy's heart seemed to miss a beat and then went on racing madly. Ahead, on the left of the road, she had glimpsed a dark stretch of trees. They must be the Lone Wood.

What lay concealed in them? Billy's throat was dry. She knew the crucial moment had come. When she drew level with the wood she would know the worst. If the Ollisters had not succeeded in making their way through the Long Gully across country to intercept her, then all was well and George and the old people were saved.

But if they had——

It was better not to think of it. Could she put the thought away? For if they had succeeded, then they would be there hiding in the wood, waiting for the cycle to pass. They would hear the sound of it far away. They would shoot, dash out. . . .

Billy clenched her teeth and tightened her grip upon the handlebars. The engine was running smoothly, and by this time she seemed to have mastered the art of it, and they had, as it were, become part of each other. As they raced along together through the dark, Billy felt, besides a terrible fear that would not be denied, the exhilaration of speed and danger that made her eyes bright as they tried to pierce the gloom.

Only a few more yards and she would be level with the wood. Billy drew a deep breath and put on the last ounce of speed. The machine sprang forward like a live thing.

They passed into the shadow of the trees. All was still, save for the hum of the engine. They spun on; they were nearly out of the wood's shadow. Billy almost laughed in her exultation. They were safe!

But the laugh turned into an anguished cry. For at that very moment a shot rang out from the darkness of the trees, and through Billy's arm bit a sharp quick pain.

She gasped with the shock of it, and instinctively her head ducked downwards and forwards. In spite of the agony in her arm, she held on tightly. She knew that she was wounded, but the one dominant idea now in her mind was: "I *must* keep the bike straight! I must keep it straight!" She almost muttered the words as the motor raced on.

She heard shouts from the wood—angry, threatening cries.

Shots whistled past her. Billy had now no real hope of getting through. All she knew was that she must hang on—she must hang on.

The men in the wood were crashing through the trees, shouting and firing; but aiming was difficult in the uncertain light, and all the shots flew wide.

Nearly past the trees! Was she to win through after all? Billy did not know, but still on and on in the darkness she kept the wheel straight for the lives of the Davidsons. The agony in her arm was excruciating, but she never faltered.

And now the shots were dying away in the distance. What! had she escaped? It seemed too wonderful to be believed. But it was true—it was true! Billy dared not let herself think about it or relax the tension. She must keep going, or they would overtake her and the race be lost after all.

On they hummed through the night, and though now darkness had fallen in good earnest, she was on familiar ground and could ride without misgiving.

Some time later, as Farmer Heron, the Davidsons' nearest neighbour, went the rounds with his stable-man before locking up for the night, he was surprised to hear the humming of a motor-cycle coming down the lane and stopping suddenly outside his gate.

The next sound startled him even more, for it was Billy's voice, broken and panting, crying: "Help! Help!"

Snatching up the lantern he ran towards the gate, followed by his boy. And he turned the light upon the strange wild figure of Billy, dressed in Davidson's cap and the coat on which two stains now reddened.

"Why, why, what is it?" gasped the farmer.

"The Ollisters! Rouse the neighbours! Help! The Davidsons!"

Billy poured out her tale in breathless, painful haste. Quickly the farmer

took in the meaning of it, routed out his two big sons, and sent them tearing down to the farm with their guns.

In no time twenty volunteers were on the scene, and Billy, relieved of the motor-cycle, stood there to give directions for finding the wounded George. Every minute was precious, and she must not give in until her story was told.

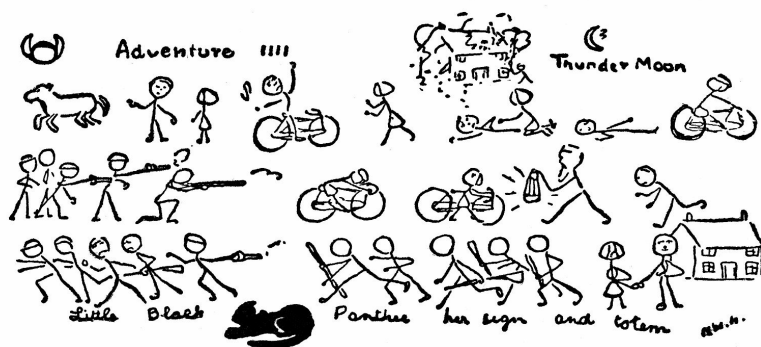
But as the men turned to go the end of endurance came. Everything around seemed to grow dim and far away. She vaguely saw Jim Heron, the farmer's boy, take a sudden startled step towards her. She heard Jim's voice: "Look out, father! She's going!"

And then the strong arms of the farmer closed about her as Billy fell forward unconscious.

She had won her race with death.

Billy's first question as she opened her eyes again—after what seemed years, but were only hours—was:

"Are they safe? Was I in time?"



Billy's record of her wild ride.

Good Mrs. Heron smoothed the pillow and her lip trembled.

"Bless the child, yes!" she answered cheerily. "And, what's more, you're safe too. They fairly caught them Ollisters. They're half-mad folks. And George Davidson, he's getting along fine. You've got some pluck, Miss Billy."

A few days later, her left arm in a sling, Billy sat up in bed and, with a hand still shaky, was entering the record in picture-writing in her log-book of her night ride from the hills as old Farmer Heron entered.

"Some more fruit for you from the Davidsons' farm," said he. "Ah, Miss

Billy, they'll have something to say of what they think of you when you're well enough. And I tell you it will be long before the village forgets how you rode for the Davidsons' lives—and won."

V

TROUBLE AT RIGMERE SCHOOL

"The child *must* go away," said the old country doctor sternly, and Billy turned her head away petulantly from his kindly, twinkling gaze. "Her arm has healed splendidly, but——"

"If it's the seaside with Miss Hopton, I don't want to go, and it won't do me a bit of good!" burst forth Billy. "There's *nothing* the matter with me—if only people would leave me alone!" Her pale lips trembled, and the fretful tone was new to Billy's cheery voice.

The old doctor spoke privately with Mrs. Greenwood. "She's been through a great amount of strain lately. And people *will* fuss about that Davidson affair—make a heroine of her. The child's been tremendously plucky, but now she ought to forget all about it—go right away for a complete change."

Billy drummed on the window-pane and felt absolutely, unutterably miserable. She did not know that convalescing after an illness often makes people feel that they will never be jolly and happy again, and she looked back upon her eager adventurous self of a few weeks ago as on another and strange being.

A few days later Mrs. Greenwood looked up from her letters with a pleased smile. "Mrs. Perry wants you to stay with them for a fortnight, Billy. You know, her husband is one of the house-masters at Rigmere School. They are staying there for the holidays this time, looking after six or seven boys there who cannot go home, for various reasons. They have a boy of their own—Donald—and a girl, Vivienne, just your age, who is coming home from her own school. She thinks it would be a good change for you to go there and have companions of your own age."

Billy's gloomy eyes brightened a trifle. She was feeling ashamed of giving way so much to depression.

"All right, mother," she said. "I'll go, then. Though I really am *quite* well, you know."

Mrs. Greenwood did not read out the conclusion of the letter: "Don't be afraid—we shall not make a heroine of the poor child. I shall not tell any of the children what she has done, so there will be no danger."

Three days later Billy was in the train, in charge of a motherly old lady

going in her direction. She had been startled to find her knees inclined to give way and her head strangely light as she climbed into the carriage.

Mrs. Perry was waiting at the station, and a taxi carried them off to the picturesque old school. A tall boy of Billy's age was waiting at the top of the steps to Maston House.

"This is Donald," said Mrs. Perry. "Vivienne will soon be home. I hope the three of you will have good times together."

Billy tried to think of something to say—but her head swam queerly. She held out her hand—dropped a magazine—stooped to pick it up and, as her foot slipped on the step, down she came, bumping her knee hard. The pain was nothing, but it gave the finishing touch to the queer sensation. Things began to whirr past, lights danced before her eyes, Mrs. Perry's voice became suddenly faint, alarmed, and far away.

"She's fainting! Quick, Donald—help me, dear!"

When Billy came to herself, she was lying on a couch in the drawing-room.

"I'm awfully sorry I made such an idiot of myself!" she murmured, feeling horribly ashamed and angry.

"Rubbish!" said Mrs. Perry briskly and kindly. "You couldn't help it. You've been——" She checked herself. Billy must not make her *début* as an invalid. "You had a nasty bump!"

Sitting up, Billy saw Donald standing stiffly by the window, looking the most alarmed and uncomfortable boy on earth. Donald happened to think all girls but his own sister quite useless and unnecessary, and being tremendously healthy himself, felt impatiently that every one could help being ill if they really tried.

"How stupid of me!" thought Billy, whose own ideal was to be fit and capable and cheerful, a worthy product of the free, open-air life she had been living. "What *will* he think of me?"

A maid was just entering with a yellow envelope, and Donald turned. "A telegram!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet that's to say Vivienne will be late! What a nuisance—we've a rag on to-night!"

Mrs. Perry tore it open, scanned it, and looked up in dismay. "Worse than that, old boy! She's not coming at all!"

"Not coming at all!" echoed the other two with one voice.

"The wire's very lucid, of course," said Mrs. Perry. "'Chickenpox can't

come isn't it awful Vivienne.' Poor child, she *will* be disappointed! I'm glad it's nothing serious, but of course she couldn't come to this school with anything catching. And so, unfortunately, Billy, you will be the only girl here. Never mind," she added cheerily, smiling at Billy's disconsolate face, "Donald will look after you and give you a good time; won't you, old man?"

Donald muttered something unintelligible and escaped from the room.

"Donald's not used to girls," said his mother comfortably. "But he'll look after you all right. Now I'm going to give you tea, and then you must go to bed quite early after your journey."

Billy went to bed, but not to sleep. Snatches of song and bursts of laughter floated in from some far quarter of the school, and she lay awake wondering what the "rag" was, what Vivienne would have been like, and thinking how different this was from anything to which she had looked forward.

Next morning the school was very quiet. Mrs. Perry explained that the boys and Mr. Perry had gone off for the day to see an old Indian colonel who lived some miles away. The expedition had been arranged long before. Billy was in bed before the boys came home, and not until then did she remember that she had left her log-book, in which she had been entering some "woodland lore," lying in the sitting-room.

"*I do* hope the boys won't see it!" she thought in alarm, though previously she had imagined the fun it would be to show it to Donald and Vivienne.

In the morning she was out of bed and dressed too early for breakfast. "I'll just explore the school a bit," thought Billy, interest in life awakening considerably with the summer sun. Finally, discovering a room full of books, she curled herself up on the window seat with a book by Thompson Seton, and was lost to the world.

Voices brought her back to earth with a jolt, floating through the open window. Donald's was the first voice.

"Well, it's no good grouching, Kennedy. We've got to do it, and it's a jolly sight worse for me than it is for you!"

Billy shrank back on the window seat, hoping the group would quickly pass. The thought of meeting six boys all at once made her feel shy.

"If she'd been a sport like Vivienne, now, it would be different," said another voice. "But how ghastly to have to lug round a kid who swoons off because she bumps her knee!"

"Oh—and I must tell you!" went on Donald. "I knocked a book of hers by

accident off the bureau last night, and it flew open. I didn't read the writing, but that girl had been amusing herself by making absolutely childish drawings like kids do on slates—people all arms and legs, and animals like nothing on earth. What *can* you do with a babyish sort of girl like that?"

Billy had turned pale from crimson, hands clenched, suddenly breathless. So Donald had seen her log-book and was just making fun of it before them all!

"Stupid creature—doesn't know it's picture-writing like Red Indians did!" she told herself, trying by scorning Donald violently to quench the wave of lonely misery which had swept over her. If only they would walk on! She did not want to listen; but if she moved to go, they would see her—know she had heard, and oh, she could *not* face them!

Then a new voice broke in. "Well, it's a good thing the kid *has* got something to amuse herself with: you chaps are not exactly going to make life gay for her. You talk about shutting up grousing, Donald, but you don't do it. She's here, so we may as well give her a good time."

The last speaker stood with his jolly, rather handsome, curly head flung back, hands in pockets, a queer defiant look about him as he flung his words at the others.

"Well, it won't bother *you*, because we don't want anything to do with you, Tarrant," said Donald coolly. "And as it isn't you who'll have to lug this wretched kid round, you can jolly well shut up!"

Something grew hot and big inside Billy like a fire-ball of pride and resentment. She sprang to her feet and leaned from the window. Her thin face was flaming.

"You needn't worry yourself, Donald Perry! 'The wretched kid' hasn't any idea of being lugged round by you, thanks! And she jolly well isn't going to be, so there!"

The picture held before her for a fleeting instant of six startled, dismayed boys' faces, and then Billy turned and dashed for her room.

Breakfast, as may be imagined, was a trying one for all the younger members of the party that morning. Even Mrs. Perry, used to the mysterious moods of boys and girls, was puzzled by the awkward silences and the extreme politeness with which the marmalade was passed.

"I'm going to leave Billy to you boys to-day, Donald," she said, when the meal was over. Donald nodded, but Billy did not say a word, her chin set

fiercely.

Donald was lingering in the courtyard when Billy emerged, determined to slip away with a book by herself. His face was red and his manner awkward.

"I say—er—Millicent," he stammered. "We're going off for a picnic. We'd like you to come. I'm awfully——" He paused. Donald had meant to make a full apology, say he was sorry about what had happened, and was going to try and give Billy a good time—for he was a decent lad at heart; but Billy's instant expression of scorn and disdain stung him sharply.

"Thanks extremely!" Billy burst out, "but I haven't the faintest *intention* of coming out with you!"

"Right-o!" returned Donald, as angry as she was, and, turning on his heel, walked away fuming.

An hour later Billy, considerably damped and dreary in spirits, sat in a deck-chair on the grass trying, in vain, to read. She looked up as a gentle cough fell on her ears, and saw the jolly, curly-haired boy who had been her champion. Her face brightened.

"I say—come and see the swimming pool?" suggested the new-comer. Billy jumped to her feet eagerly.

"I'd like to," she said. "But why aren't you with the others?"

The boy laughed with would-be carelessness. "Because—oh well, as it happens, I'm practically sent to Coventry. I'm a bold, dark villain—ha, ha!" He pretended to scowl villainously, and Billy stared in amazement.

"Why ever should they send you to Coventry?" she exclaimed. It was impossible to think of this jolly, honest-faced boy as guilty of some dreadful schoolboy crime.

Peter Tarrant leaned against the wall with hands in pockets. "Well, it's pretty queer. I'll tell you if you like. You see, what a lot of us happen to be fearfully keen on at present is photography—especially nature photography—you know—birds that are difficult to snap, and—oh, snail-races and things!"

He grinned, and Billy smiled back, thinking all the same that his jolliness was more than a little wistful.

"Next term, you see, a prize is to be given for the most unusual nature snap. I managed to get a pretty good one earlier in the year of a couple of nightjars out on the common, and every one thought I was sure of the prize. Well, the day before break-up, some of us went over to the quarry. Two of us

took kodaks—Holroyd and I. Donald and several other chaps were there. I'd used up the last film on my roll, and spoilt it by wobbling. Well, we were sleuthing along, when Donald, in front, held up his hand for caution. And there in front on the path was an adder, and—what do you think?—it had hold of a big toad by the leg!”

“Ugh!” Billy shuddered, and Peter went on. “It was far too big for the snake to tackle, really. Well, one of the chaps got up a stone to throw, but Holroyd said, ‘Stop a minute!’ and he whisked out his camera and took a snap of the two. He was awfully excited over it. Then Dobbs, who is a hasty chump, threw his stone, and, of course, didn’t do more than touch the thing. The odds were that it would have struck and bitten some one right away. But instead of that, it let the toad go, glared at us a minute like fury, and then off it went in the leaves. But the beauty of it was that Holroyd got another snap of it glaring, and then one of the toad puffing itself out at us. Then off went the old toad, limping a bit, but not seeming any the worse otherwise, and of course without a thank you to his brave rescuers!”

“I say—what topping pictures to get!” exclaimed Billy. “But how—I mean about Coventry—why——”

“This is a *serial* story,” returned Peter, raising his hand commandingly. “Kindly wait for next instalment.

“Well, every one knew Holroyd would get the prize now. My old nightjars were nix. That finished his roll of films, and he took them out of the camera and put them in a little waterproof tin tube—several of us have them; they’re jolly useful if you’re out in all weathers. I’d put my old roll in a tube, too, and reloaded the camera. By this time there was a big newspaper spread on the ground for a cloth, and Holroyd and I laid our tubes down on it when we emptied our pockets for our sandwiches. After lunch we all jumped up to look at something, and then I took up what I thought was my tube, wrapped it in my sandwich paper and shoved it into my pocket. Well, as it turned out, it wasn’t mine, but Holroyd’s—he had got an H scratched on it, only I didn’t stay to look then. And—well, the whole bother of it is that when I got back to school I hadn’t got the thing at all!”

“Oh!” Billy was hanging on every word eagerly. “What a pity! Where did you find it? Was it spoilt?”

“I didn’t find it,” answered Tarrant gloomily. “And as to what happened to it, I haven’t a notion in the world. I remember distinctly pushing my hand in my pocket as we got into the grounds and noticing it was all right. And yet no sooner was I inside the workroom—we were going to develop in the dark-

room—than I found it wasn't there. Old Holroyd had just got the other out, and found it wasn't the right one. And when he asked me for his—why, I hadn't got it!

"Of course he was awfully upset, and I was frantically sorry about it, because it was all my stupid fault. And then, unluckily, some one suggested that I'd got rid of it on purpose. Everybody knew that my nightjars hadn't the faintest chance against his toad and adder. Donald happened to be in a funny temper—he gets them sometimes—otherwise he's a decent chap—and he took it up. It didn't make the least bit of difference what I said. I don't think Holroyd really believed I'd be such a cad as to make away with his snaps, but of course he was feeling pretty sore. And the upshot of it was, there was a good old row and I got sent to Coventry."

"But surely—surely," cried Billy, "they wouldn't believe you would do a thing like that?"

Peter shrugged bitterly. "Well, there you are—Holroyd's were the only snaps likely to beat my nightjars—and I was the one who had made them disappear. Of course, we looked everywhere right away—searched all over the grounds where we'd been—but sorra a trace of them was to be found. I'm fairly new to Rigmere—only been here a term; but even then I shouldn't have thought they could have believed I'd be such a cad."

"I shouldn't believe it!" declared Billy firmly. Then she bent her brows thoughtfully and added, "But what a queer sort of mystery! Some one must have picked up the films, I suppose?"

Peter shook his head. "We asked about them everywhere, but no one had been along there between the time we came in and when we dashed back to look for them. It was the last day before term-break, and of course a bit fussy, but we couldn't have helped hearing if they'd been found."

"Mr. and Mrs. Perry don't believe you did it?" asked Billy.

"Why, of course, nobody's told them I'm under suspicion," returned Peter grimly. "You don't suppose we should blurb about it to the masters, do you? They only know the things are lost."

Suddenly Billy sprang to her feet, her eyes aglow. "I say, we're jolly well going to get to the bottom of this somehow. I love mysteries!"

"Well, if you can get to the bottom of this mystery, it will be good business for me," said Peter, but not very hopefully. "Meanwhile, and pending operations, so to speak, what about the swimming pool? I'm fed up with mysteries myself."

“Oh, don’t let’s go to the swimming pool!” cried Billy. “Take me straight to the place where you crossed when you lost the films.”

A few minutes later Billy was examining what Peter described as the scene of the tragedy. The boys had entered a wide gate at the side of the school grounds, crossed a court of pebbles, walked along a shrubby path, and then over a paved court and up the steps to the workroom.

“It must have been kicked aside into the shrubbery,” said Peter, “and trodden into the ground. The paper was brown; it would easily get mixed up with the leaves and earth—although we jolly well searched every inch of the ground.”

At the end of an hour’s solid scouring, Billy, too, was forced to confess that there seemed no trace of the missing tube. She pushed her hair back with an earth-stained hand.

“You’re quite sure, Peter, that no one came this way after you passed and before you got back again?”

“Not that we can discover,” returned Peter. “I have an idea that I took my handkerchief out of my pocket as I came along here, and that made me think I might have dropped the tube out then. But, really, I must have made a mistake when I thought I felt it in my pocket. It must have fallen on the way back from the quarry.”

He opened the gates, and Billy gazed out rather dismayed at the expanse of common and bushes with the woods beyond. “You see, it’s pretty hopeless expecting to find it there, though I’ve tried.”

“Well, let’s get lunch and go for an expedition to the quarry,” suggested Billy brightly. “After all, the tube can’t have vanished off the earth.”

However, the quarry yielded nothing but a jolly excursion and no news. The pair arrived back for tea firm friends, but no nearer the solution of the mystery of the missing treasure.

That night Billy forgot to remember that she was miserable, as she climbed into bed: in fact, she did not think about herself at all. She had found a fine chum and a mystery to be solved. The savour of life was good once more.

After that first collusion, the two parties separated by consent when out of sight of their elders. Donald, finding that Billy really was enjoying herself with Peter, lost an uncomfortable pricking of conscience, and all the children found pleasure in their holiday. Seeing this, Mrs. Perry, if she noticed that it was Peter rather than Donald who was looking after the visitor, forbore, wise

woman, to interfere. The party of seven would often start out together for an expedition, but out of sight, Peter-the-boycotted and Billy would form one party, and the others would follow their own way.

It was while the two of them were having a “mouch round” at the back of the school buildings one day that Billy noticed an empty kennel which stood not far from the kitchen quarters.

“I wish there were a dog here,” she said. “It would be fun to take him for walks.”

“Kimbo’s away for the holidays,” explained Peter. “He belongs to Mr. Rennet, one of the masters. Nice old bean he is, too—I mean Kimbo!”

Billy was pursing her lips thoughtfully. “Peter—suppose Kimbo had happened to get hold of that tube and run off with it?”

Peter shook his head ruefully. “No will do! Velly solly! But Kimbo was never allowed off his chain to wander round—always in the back here, except when he was taken for a run on the lead every day. And if he *had* managed to get hold of it, some one would have seen it lying around here—it’s so neat—and the kitchen garden too.”

“False trail,” agreed Billy sadly. She stooped down, peered into the kennel, made sure that it was empty. “You hear of jackdaws stealing things,” she remarked, straightening up. “I suppose there isn’t a jackdaw hereabouts?”

“He’d have to be a pretty strong specimen!” laughed Peter. “No—it’s lying somewhere on the common, that’s all. Don’t worry your head any more about it. Come on—if you really want to go to the quarry to-day we’d better vamoose.”

For Billy insisted on frequent expeditions to the quarry, always with her eyes open for the flutter of the brown sandwich-paper which should reveal the vanished films. “The Tracking Two” they had named themselves, and the others were “The Fearful Five.” Billy had shown her log-book to Peter, and he was very keen indeed on it, and had decided to keep one himself.

“What a topping lot of adventures you’ve had!” he exclaimed admiringly, though Billy made very little of her share in all of them. “I say—if those chaps had only known, they wouldn’t have made fun of the log-book!”

The Fearful Five had an annoying habit of making for Brook Island. It was annoying, because that was really one of the jolliest places near, and only in bounds for the holidays. It was a tiny island, made by the windings of a small stream, fairly shallow, and accounted safe to be crossed in the dilapidated punt

by boys who could swim.

There was nothing particularly thrilling about the little spot, but an island, of whatever size, is always attractive, and the Tracking Two were considerably chagrined when time after time they would hurry down, only to find the Fearful Five already in possession. After that, of course, there was nothing to do but to melt haughtily away.

The mystery, however, remained the greatest attraction of all to Billy. She examined the kennel the next time they passed it, and exclaimed, "I say, Peter, this chain is broken! When did Mr. Rennet take away Kimbo?"

"He went away with him the night before break-up," returned Peter. "Lives up North. But do, for any sake, leave off worrying about films and dogs! If the chain had been broken long, some one would have noticed the faithful hound was loose. And, anyway, what should a dog want to cart off a tin tube for?"

"The paper would smell of sandwiches," remarked Billy. "And the chain might have only broken the same day."

"Well, anyway, if Kimbo *could* get off—and I don't see how he could—we've hunted the place for the tube and can't find it," said Peter decisively. "So it's in the quarry, and fifty years on it will turn up—'Ancient British Remains'—what?"

"But suppose——" began Billy.

"Look here!" broke in Peter. "I've got a grand theory. Suppose an ostrich had escaped from a zoo somewhere near, and it hopped over the gate and saw that tube and swallowed it and——"

But Billy, with a grim look in her eye, was reaching for the gardener's broom, and a moment later was chasing a grinning boy round the kitchen garden.

It was on a gloriously sunny morning that the Tracking Two set off for an attempt upon Brook Island.

"I don't believe they went that way to-day," declared Billy, referring to the Fearful Five. "They were piled up with things—kodaks, butterfly-nets, a cricket bat, and a huge basket. I guess they've gone for a picnic in the quarry."

However, on drawing near the island, the pair stopped short in disgust and dismay.

"Voices!" hissed Peter. "Bother 'em! If they haven't gone and collared Brook Island again!"

Billy stamped her foot. "Aren't we *ever* going to have another chance at it? But they can't play cricket over there. P'r'aps they've gone for something and they're coming back. Let's lie low and see."

They lay low behind some trees, but the voices still went on. Suddenly Peter sprang to his feet. "I say—look at that! The punt's floated back to this side of the stream! The mooring rope must have broken!"

They hurried down to the water's edge, and both exclaimed together. Even as they watched, the swift little stream had whirled the punt against a willow tree. A big branch was thrust out over the water, and under this the punt was being forced at one end.

"My hat, it'll tip up in a minute!" burst out Peter in alarm. "And look—there are all their kodaks and stuff under the seat. And the water's just beginning to come in over the side!"

They stared for a moment spellbound, and then Billy exclaimed, "A jolly good job too! Let them all spoil! It will just serve them right for being so horrid to you. It's not deep, and they can fish them out again."

But Peter had recovered himself. "Come on, we've got to get it out of that somehow!" he cried.

There was no time to waste on shouting to the Fearful Five, and Billy, after that first outburst, flung herself into the salving of the punt.

"You crawl along the bough!" ordered Peter, and as Billy did so, he himself waded out into the stream, stirring up the mud and floundering on the stones.

They were only just in time. Peter seized hold of the punt and drew it back against the stream, while Billy eased it from above away from the bough, so that the lunch basket was not scraped over to ruin. In a moment it was free, and Peter, rope in hand, was scrambling up the bank, soaked through.

At this very instant an astonished shout broke out from the opposite shore. The Fearful Five had arrived just in time to witness the rescue.

"Hi!" cried Donald's amazed voice, and at the sudden sound Billy jerked backwards upon her unstable bough, overbalanced, and splash!—down she went into the depths of the stream!

"Oh!" Together they yelled with horror—the Fearful Five and Peter. Then they all made a dive for Billy. But Billy had already bobbed up to the surface, spluttering and gasping. It would not have been dangerous, even had she been no swimmer; but all the Fearful Five leaped into the stream from the other

side, and, with Peter, seized on Billy and dragged her to the shore.

Every one was soaking, but Billy the very wettest of all, as they deposited her on the grass, while Holroyd made a grab for the punt, which was just drifting off again.

Billy sat up, got her breath at last, and, shaking the water from her eyes, gazed around. And then, to the six boys' intense relief, Billy suddenly burst into a splutter of laughter.

Well, it *was* funny! The boys began to grin, Bennet Ree chuckled, and then in a minute they were all laughing themselves crimson. It had all been such a dash, and they were all so wet and looked so ridiculous—and there'd been no danger at all! It was impossible to keep up dignities and feuds when they were doubled up with laughter.

When at last they paused, breathless, and Holroyd, still giggling, tied up the punt, there was thought to spare for the gallant rescue of the treasures.

Donald's face sobered. "I say—you saved all our stuff. It was jolly decent of you!"

"I didn't want to at first," confessed Billy, struggling to her feet; but there was no animosity in her voice now. "I'm glad we did, though."

"Well, we'd better bunk now as hard as we can," said Donald, and Peter seized Billy by the hand.

"Come on, sprint for all you're worth!" he commanded. And, slipping and slopping, but thoroughly light-hearted, the Tracking Two fled for home, followed in the wet and muddy trail by the Fearful Five, late enemies.

It is terribly hard to keep up a feud against people one has laughed with, and so all the younger members of the dinner-party found. Mrs. Perry noticed that they seemed much jollier together than they had been since the holidays began, and told them that their cold bath had done them all good. "Though we'd prefer your taking it in the ordinary way next time!" she smiled. She made no comment on the fact that, in spite of her recent ducking, Billy was looking far stronger and browner and happier now than when she came.

After dinner there was a moment's hesitation, and then the parties separated as usual. But Billy, it seemed, had no use for Peter this afternoon. "I've an appointment," she announced mysteriously.

Peter looked blank. "Oh, I say, Billy—keeping it from a true pal! What is it? Got to get your bob waved?"

“Hoots!” rejoined Billy, and vanished at full speed out of the grounds, leaving Peter greatly to wonder and feel more than a trifle lonely. He and Billy had become great chums: he had never thought he could have liked a girl so much.

When Billy returned, she was leading on the chain a jolly, alert looking, little fox terrier.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Peter, meeting her at the gate. “What’s the latest? That’s old Myer’s dog, Larrimer, isn’t it? He been giving you a present?”

“Wait!” enjoined Billy. Her manner was excited, but anxious too. Peter was left to muse disconsolately alone.

But Billy was not to get through to her task unhindered. Donald and the other boys were lingering near the school-house, and the atmosphere, though constrained, was eager and friendly. Donald stepped forward.

“Billy,” he said, “will you wait a minute while we fetch Peter? We want to say——”

But Billy, too much absorbed in her own business to spare thought for the importance of theirs, broke through.

“Can’t stay now!” she cried, waving her hand. “See you in a few minutes!” And she disappeared towards the kitchen garden.

A quarter of an hour later a wildly thrilled Billy broke into the midst of a waiting group by the swimming pool. There was Peter, puzzled and red, and the Fearful Five, embarrassed, but determined. Enter to them Billy, shining of eye, hauling in an excited terrier.

“Boys! Peter! Donald! Holroyd! Everybody!” she began; but this time Donald, stepping forward, held up a resolute hand. “Look here, Billy,” he said firmly, “you’ve jolly well got to listen to what we’ve got to say. I don’t know what your news is, but if we don’t get our bit out now it will never be said. Listen! It’s to you and Peter!”

Billy, brought up in mid-air, was forced to attention by Donald’s impressive tone.

“We want to apologize,” said Donald. “We’re sorry about you—we ought to have given you a good time, and we were rotters. We hope you’ll let us have a chance now. And about Peter—we’ve been gradually kind of coming to the conclusion that we were wrong about Peter. Only it’s awkward wheeling right round when you’ve been so positive. We’ll be glad if Peter will come out of Coventry. We don’t believe now that he lost those films on purpose, and we

were rotters to say so!”

“Hear, hear!” came the ratification from the rest of the Fearful Five.

Billy’s eyes shone more brightly than ever. She and Peter were flushed with pleasure. But before Peter could speak, Billy burst out into strange words.

“Donald! I’m simply tremendously delighted. You’re *just* in time! Come just as quickly as you can!”

“Just in time!” echoed Donald, but Billy was beckoning them wildly and mysteriously. Then she turned and ran with all her might towards the back of the school, Larrimer at her side.

“What on earth——” gasped Holroyd. But with one consent the Fearful Five and Peter took to their heels and ran after Billy. She was in the courtyard now, past the empty kennel, speeding on down the path of the kitchen garden. Now she was dashing over celery beds, and the others, regardless of the probable wrath of gardeners, followed, wildly bewildered.

Billy passed a small hole scooped up in the soil and then—then she arrived at another hole and paused, panting, by its brim.

“There you are!” she cried triumphantly. And there before them in this little cache in the ground, smudged and earthy, reposed a tiny cube of tin, shining through torn brown paper.

“*The films!*” gasped Holroyd.

Billy snatched up the tube and pressed it into his hand. The others stood by spellbound. “Look at it!” she cried. “I do believe it’s just as good as when it was buried. It’s so perfectly watertight!”

“Buried!” cried Donald.

“Yes—*she* found it!” cried Billy, pointing to the excited terrier, who looked on the tube as her property. “You see, I kind of thought all the time that Kimbo had something to do with it. And I see now that he *did* break his chain, dashed off for a scamper without being noticed, and then, when he’d had his fun, he came and lay down quietly. So nobody knew his chain was broken till Mr. Rennet came to take him away—and then he dashed off to the North right away.”

“But I don’t see——” stammered Holroyd, though Peter, whose face was radiant, had now grasped the whole mystery.

“Why, you see, the first thing Kimbo did when he was free was to bury a bone from his kennel—you know what dogs are. Then he pranced off to look

for fresh mischief—dashed round the side of the school. He'd only be gone a minute—no one would notice. Well, he smelt the sandwich paper and grabbed the tin—thought it was some new kind of bone, I guess. And of course the bad thing went and buried that too. I guessed he might—but you can't dig all over the kitchen garden. Then I suddenly thought another dog would dig it up: you know how they always dig up one another's bones. So I borrowed Larrimer and—well, there you are!"

Billy threw back her head and laughed joyfully, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

There was a breathless silence, and then Donald said slowly, "Well, I'm just—just spifflicated!"

"And so am I!" laughed Peter. "I say, Holroyd—I'm so awfully glad you've got them back. I was a careless idiot!"

Holroyd shook hands silently.

"And we—we've been beasts," said Donald slowly.

Billy sprang forward and seized his arm. "Never mind that now!" she cried. "You spoke before it was proved—just in time. And that's why I was so awfully, awfully glad!"

Donald was holding out his hand to Peter, and the two boys shook also, red-faced and solemn.

The rest of that day was radiantly happy for Billy—and a happier day for all of them than they had known since the holidays began. Peter was cleared—and the films had come out splendidly in the developer, absolutely unspoiled by their strange experience. They were good photographs. Holroyd was safe for the prize.

"I'm sorry your nightjars won't get it, though," said Billy, as she and Peter parted that night, thoroughly tired out, but jubilant.

"I'm not!" declared Peter, with an exaggerated shudder. "Don't mention snaps to me ever again!"

On the last night of Billy's stay, a grand feast was held in the boys' sitting-room of Maston House. No grown-ups were allowed, but Mr. and Mrs. Perry were kindly permitted to add their contributions to the feast.

Billy was the fêted one, and as the jollifications went on, it seemed impossible to realize that a terrific feud had ever existed between the Tracking Two and the Fearful Five. "Every one is so jolly and chummy," thought Billy

to herself, in a rare pause. “They’re awfully nice boys now I know them—but Peter is the very best of them all.”

At the end of the evening Donald rose to give a toast in lemonade. “Miss Millicent Greenwood—otherwise Billy, Lone Scout!—and the topping time we’ve had since—er—in the last few days since we really knew each other!”

The meeting ended with three cheers, Billy smiling through shining eyes.

But what she always remembered most of the happenings at Rigmere School was the tight grip of the hand Peter gave her when they parted and the low, sincere words he spoke: “Billy, you’re a true brick and a pal, Lone Scout.”

Billy, arriving home tanned, alert, and gay, found a mother’s eye scanning her with great relief and gladness.

“Then you’re really well again, my dear? I’m so delighted.”

“Well?” cried Billy. “Why, Mumsy dear, I told you I never was ill. Oh, isn’t life perfectly splendid!”

VI

AT THE MERCY OF THE BOG

“What on earth is happening?” said Billy to herself, as her moccasined feet carried her swiftly and noiselessly over the ground. Chatter and laughter and the sound of singing were rising up through the wood and from the direction of the Torrent. Billy, now brown and strong once more, and longing for adventure, experienced a thrill of anticipation. Some one, then, was camping out here or picnicking.

She scouted slowly forward until, safely hidden behind an old oak, she could watch the intruders.

Yes, they were camping out in the wood clearing, and they were all girls, dressed lightly in green. They worked and joked and ran as though they were having the gayest time on earth. And they were putting up wigwams. Yes, *wigwams*—there was no doubt about it. There were lots of poles sticking out of the top, and the canvas was decorated in bright colours with the pictures of birds and beasts and animals and trees, just as in Billy’s “lonecraft” books. Now some one of about twenty years old came out of one of the wigwams. She was dressed in moccasins and a short fringed skirt of green trimmed with beads, and wore a band round her loose hair decorated with beads and signs. She was slim and tall, and her hair was dark and cloudy.

“How lovely she looks!” thought Little Black Panther, bending forward. “I wonder—oh!”

The wild exclamation was startled out of her as the breath left her body, for something big and smothering had descended plump upon her from the tree, and she and her assailant came to the ground in a heap together.

“Poof!” They puffed and struggled to disentangle themselves. Then they sat on the ground eyeing each other, and the intruder burst into laughter. “Oh, I’m frightfully sorry!” she panted. “What a clumsy thing I am! I just *fell*, you know!”

“So I noticed!” said Billy, with a rueful grin, rubbing her elbows. The new-comer had dark short curly hair and twinkling eyes and freckles and an irresistible laugh. Little Lone Panther liked her, as she expressed it later, “from the very first bump.”

“I didn’t notice any one was there,” said the girl, rising and dusting herself.

"I say, I do hope you are not hurt. No, *I'm* not, thanks. Why, you're one of us! We're the Camp-Fire Girls from Glenhill."

"I'm a Lone Scout," said Billy, staring at the green skirt and tunic the other wore.

"All in the same game," said the other, smiling. "Shake! My name's Betty King—otherwise Fleetfoot." She held out her left hand and the girls shook solemnly.

"Come on into camp," said Fleetfoot, and Billy went. She had read of camp-fire girls before and girl guides, and now she devoured eagerly all she saw going on. Twilight was the chief's name, and Billy was honoured with a smile from those dark eyes before being shown round by Fleetfoot. "How jolly and friendly they all are!" thought Billy.

"We all have Indian names when we've earned them," said her guide. "Like mine—Fleetfoot—because I carried an important message one day in good sort of time. There's a council, with the Pathfinder and the Firemaker and—oh, lots of us on it. Here's the Pathfinder—only she's just called Barbara Nuttall so far, because she hasn't earned her Indian name." They halted before a cold-looking girl, with lank hair, who eyed Billy in no very pleasant fashion.

Billy wondered, but it was not until later she discovered that Fleetfoot was Barbara's idol, and the worshipper bitterly resented any division of her favours. In all other ways she seemed rather a decent sort; but as the days went on and Billy and Fleetfoot chummed up more closely together, Little Lone Panther was soon made to feel in a thousand ways that Barbara was her enemy, though Fleetfoot was just as kind and jolly as before to her old admirer.

"Come to camp whenever you like," Twilight had said, and Billy took full advantage of the permission. It was glorious to meet all these girls with the same enjoyments and ideals and plans as she herself had been cherishing, with some loneliness, all the summer.

And most glorious of all, she had found a new friend, for Fleetfoot and she had sworn eternal friendship.

Little Black Panther was humming gaily as she tramped out of the woods one afternoon. She was passing by the edge of the Deepstone Bog, with her usual distasteful glance at its treacherous surface—for the danger of the terrible bog was well known—when she was surprised to see a figure step out across her path and stand there menacingly. It was that of Barbara Nuttall.

"I want to talk to you," said Barbara peremptorily.

Billy felt annoyed at her tone, but she answered good-temperedly enough: “Talk away, then! What is it?”

“It’s about Fleetfoot,” said Barbara, bending her dark brows on Billy. “You’ve just got to stop going about with her!”

“With Fleetfoot?” echoed Little Lone Panther. “Fleetfoot’s my friend, and it’s no business of yours what we do.”

Her words only added fuel to wrath.

“She was my friend first!” blazed Barbara. “We were always together. I adored her, and she let me do everything for her! She was fond of me—I know she was. And then you came poking round and took her right away from me. It’s always Billy, Billy, Billy—never Barbara now. I believe you’ve been telling her lies about me. You’re a beast, that’s what you are; an unsporting beast!”

Billy, in spite of her uncomfortable hatred of a scene, was sorry for Barbara, and had managed to keep her temper so far. But this last accusation was too much for her. Her face flushed crimson, and in her haste words escaped her that she had not the faintest intention of saying.

“Taken her away from you!” she exclaimed contemptuously. “Why, she never cared for you in the least—you did it all. Every one knows that she never was your friend as she is mine!”

The moment the taunt was out of her lips Billy regretted it.

Barbara’s face turned dead white. Then her teeth clenched and she made a quick step towards Little Black Panther. Her arms shot out.

The next instant Billy’s breath was nearly jarred out of her by a violent push. She gasped, swayed back, tried to keep her balance. Her hands clutched at the air, striving in vain to find a hold. With a cry Billy fell backwards from the bank into the Deepstone Bog.

The awful horror which flashed through Billy’s mind as she fell was worse than she had ever known in her life before. Her feet reached the bog first and sank in with a horrible squelching sound. Her arms were flung out at each side, and as her body struck the bog they served to support her upon its oily surface. Half of her body sank—only her shoulders and arms and head appeared.

After that first cry Billy’s instinct was to struggle wildly for freedom, to fight with all her might against this ghastly smothering enemy, but in an instant followed the steady thought:

“You’ve a chance yet if you only keep still!” Could she do it? Billy, keeping her arms stiffly outflung, heard the sickening gurgle of the bog, saw its oily surface below her. Slowly, surely, it was sucking her down into its cruel depths.

Barbara, upon the bank, was for an instant transfixed with shock and fear. Too late she realized what she had done. The white-hot rage which had prompted that wild push at Billy died away in icy horror. She stared at Billy’s white face, at the engulfing bog creeping, creeping up round the helpless girl, and wrung her hands impotently. What could she do? What could she do?

She glanced wildly around for help, but there was no one to be seen. The nearest cottage was a mile away. Before she could bring help and ropes Billy would have disappeared—for ever.

Barbara shuddered and moaned.

Billy’s eyes were wide open, fixed upon her in despair, but after that one cry the girl did not speak again.

Suddenly an inspiration flashed through Barbara’s mind.

“Keep up your courage!” she cried. “I’ll be back. I’ll get you out!” And with the last word she had turned on her heel and was running with breathless speed towards the neighbouring wood. She had remembered the felled trees which had lain there since the winter. Would she be able to stir them? Barbara reached the wood and lifted the end of one of the slim trunks. Thank heaven, she could lift it easily, for the sap had dried in it during the long summer! Trailing one end and gripping the other, Barbara set off back with the pole to the Deepstone Bog.

“Here, catch on to this!” she panted, as she pushed the pole out on to the bog towards Billy. But there was no answer save a strangled cry, and Barbara saw with a thrill of renewed horror that Billy’s hands were now engulfed in the morass. All her efforts to release them and grasp the tree were in vain. She was helpless.

The pole began to sink in the bog. Barbara tried to withdraw it, but the thirsty marsh had no intention of relinquishing its prey. Barbara and Billy shuddered as it was sucked under, and the same thought numbed the heart of each. *Billy would be the next to disappear!*

Barbara’s brain, however, was working quickly now. She noted the thin narrow ribbon-path of safety which, yards beyond Billy, ran out to cross the treacherous bog. Could she find a tree long enough to reach that from the shore—to bridge the gulf?

She sped back with desperate haste into the wood. But there was none of the right length. Seizing the longest, however, she placed a small pole at the end of it, overlapping a couple of feet, and lashed them firmly together with strips from her tunic. All this was performed in breathless haste, but as she hurried back she scarcely dared to look towards the spot where she had last seen Billy. Only her head and the top of her shoulders were now to be seen.

Barbara reared the pole up into the air and contrived to balance the swaying length of it. Then she let it fall as gently as she could towards the path. It avoided Billy by a foot only as it fell. Would it reach? A gasp of thankfulness left Barbara's lips as the pole came to rest, a good two feet of it lying over the path of safety.

And now came the perilous part of Barbara's task. She began to climb with infinite care along the pole. She shut her eyes, not daring to look at the black oozy bog so near and so menacing. On, on she crawled, holding her breath.

As for Little Black Panther, her eyes were closed. She was sure now that only death awaited her, and she was trying, with set lips and pallid face, to uphold the scout tradition. She meant to face death, if she could, without an outcry. And so she closed her eyes that she might not see that terrible black bog creeping, creeping. . . .

A voice sounding in her ears made her eyes open in amazement. Barbara, lying full length on the pole, was bending over her.

"I've got you; it's all right now," she was saying.

As in a dream, Billy felt a hand slipped under her arm. It gripped there and held on under the bog. If, however, Barbara had entertained a wild plan of dragging Billy out of the morass, she realized now that it was hopeless. The pull of the mud was too strong. All that she could possibly hope to do was to support Billy until help arrived. And how long would it be before any one came by this quiet spot? Before they arrived, both of them might be dragged under. Even now the pole was sagging.

Suddenly Barbara remembered the whistle slung round her shoulders. Raising her head she blew three short notes, three long, and then three short ones again. It was a signal in the Morse code.

"S.O.S.!"

The call for help shrilled through the silence. Then Barbara, clinging to the log with feet, knees, and body, reached down and with her other hand gripped Billy's other arm. After a while the strain grew almost unendurable. Neither of the girls could speak. Barbara felt her arms stiffen and they ached fiercely. But

still she hung on.

And it was thus that the tribe found them, as they ran out swiftly from camp to answer that call.

“Oh, oh!” cried Fleetfoot. “It’s Barbara and Billy!”

Then, without a pause, it was ropes and poles to the rescue. Almost unconscious, the two girls were dragged out from the clutches of the enemy, and the Deepstone Bog heaved sullenly as it gave up its prey.

Two days later Fleetfoot met Billy, now fully recovered from the strain. “Oh, Billy,” said she, “we had a council meeting last night, and we’ve decided to give Barbara her new name for her pluck in rescuing you when you fell in the bog, you clumsy old scout! We’re going to call her True-as-Steel, and she’s to have a special sign to wear. Can you come to the ceremony to-night, Billy?”

Billy’s head whirled. Barbara had not confessed that she had pushed Billy in! “Does Barbara know?” she asked slowly.

“Yes,” replied her friend. “We thought we’d better prepare her. She looks jolly rotten, Panther.”

Barbara was ready to take honours for pulling Billy out. “Of course, she knows *I* shan’t tell!” thought Billy scornfully. Her heart had gone out towards Barbara for her bravery, but now the old disgust filled her. “I’ll come,” said Billy suddenly.

The sound of the tom-tom filled the air that evening, and the tribe took its seats in a circle on the ground. Clear-as-Flame the Firemaker kindled the council fire. Its thin blue smoke curled up in the stillness, and then the chief, Twilight, rose and spoke. She glanced towards Barbara, who, pale and looking far from happy, had been set facing her.

“We are here,” said Twilight, “with an honour for one who has earned it by her courage. Let the Teller of Tales come forward and recite to us the story of her deed.”

Tongue-of-a-Bird, a tall, graceful girl, at once stepped forward and began the story of Barbara’s heroism. But, as the story went on, Billy saw, with some curling of the lip, that Barbara became more and more distressed. Suddenly the girl sprang to her feet.

“Stop!” she cried, with outflung hand. Her voice was so shrill and wavering that the Teller of Tales ceased abruptly, and every one stared in amazement at Barbara’s trembling lips and defiant eyes.

“Stop!” cried Barbara. “I was a coward and a liar. I said she fell in. But she didn’t. *I pushed her in!* I was angry then, and I didn’t care if she died. And then afterwards I daren’t confess, and have Fleetfoot—have every one hate me, so I told a lie. There! You see, I wasn’t brave at all! You can keep your name and do what you like with me!”

And Barbara sank down in her place and buried her face in her arms.

The effect of Barbara’s confession was electrical. Never had such a bombshell fallen in the camp of the Glenhill Tribe.

“Is this so, Black Panther?” asked the chief, in perplexity.

Billy was obliged to admit that the story was true. “But she didn’t have time to think,” she added quickly. Barbara’s confession had startled and moved her. “Don’t be hard on her,” she said. “I was in just as bad a temper, and said simply *bestly* things to her and made her furious. And afterwards she risked her life to get me out.”

After a pause the chief rose and beckoned towards her council. They rose and followed her into one of the wigwams.

“The whole tribe is to await our return,” was Twilight’s order.

And now began that time of waiting which seemed insufferable and unending to those in the silent circle. What would the decision of the council be?

Now the council was coming back.

“We have meditated,” said Twilight, her voice grave and quiet, “on the offence against camp-fire laws by one of our tribe. Had the cowardly act and the lie stood alone, Barbara Nuttall must have been expelled. But she has shown, besides, courage—physical bravery in rescuing Little Black Panther from the danger in which she had plunged her, and moral courage in owning up before the whole tribe. Also, Panther has pleaded for her. Therefore——”

Twilight paused, and breathless silence reigned. Barbara’s face was not more white with suspense than that of Billy.

“Therefore,” went on the chief, “the council has resolved that, while the office of Pathfinder shall be taken away from Barbara and she be debarred from holding any office or winning a new name for one year, at the end of that time she shall revert to all the honours and privileges of the Glenhill Tribe.”

The spell was broken. The stillness that had succeeded Twilight’s speech was dispelled by five beats upon the tom-tom, a signal that the council was

over. As the tribe sprang to their feet and dispersed, an excited hum of voices filled the wood. All were heartily glad that Barbara had been given another chance.

Fleetfoot and Billy looked round for her. But Barbara had disappeared.

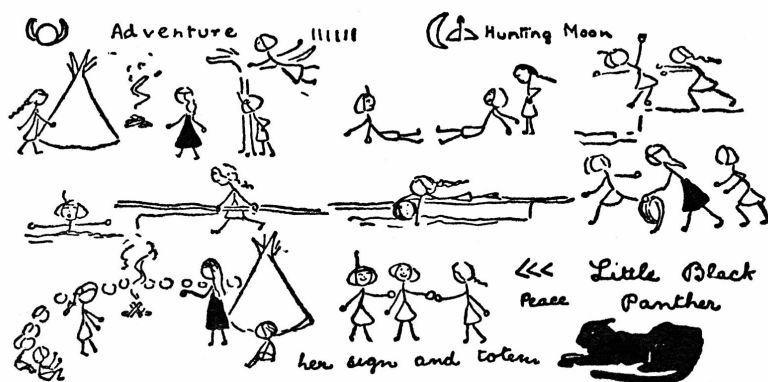
"Into the wood!" whispered Fleetfoot.

Barbara was lying face downwards in the heart of the wood, and her cheeks were wet with tears. They sprang partly from relief that the disgrace of expulsion was not to be hers, partly from shame and hopelessness. She could never face the girls for a whole year. She must leave the tribe. She sobbed at the thought.

"Barbara!"

At the sound of her own name Barbara raised her head with a start. Fleetfoot was bending over her, while Little Black Panther stood at her side.

"Cheer up, old girl," said Fleetfoot awkwardly, a hand on her arm. "It isn't so bad as all that. We've just come to wish you luck—I mean, we're jolly glad you're still in the tribe, and we mean to stand by you."



An adventure which brought peace from war.

Barbara scrambled to her feet, and her tear-stained eyes were full of amazement, which grew as Little Black Panther, too, held out her hand.

"I was an awful beast, Barbara," said Billy. "And what I said wasn't true; Fleetfoot wants you. Shall we both forget? Won't you shake and let's be friends?"

"We want to make a threesome," said Fleetfoot, with the affectionate note in her voice that Barbara had thought never to hear again. "I guess we should

be three jolly good chums.”

Barbara could not speak, but she held out a brown hand to each of them, and gravely, solemnly, the three “shook.”

Happily, at the end of the picture-writing in her log-book that night, Billy set the sign for Peace.

VII

A LONE SCOUT NO LONGER

“What are all those queer dots on the hills far away over there, Billy?” said Fleetfoot (otherwise Betty King), knitting her brows as she gazed out from her perch in the big beech tree. “I thought they were horses at first, but there are such heaps of them.”

“They *are* horses,” said Billy, following her gaze; “mountain ponies, you know, and pretty big ones, too. They are almost like wild things. They roam about in sort of herds until the time comes for a fair near, and then the men rope them in somehow and take them to be broken in.”

“It’s like the Wild West,” said her chum meditatively, accepting her fourth apple. “Do they stampede and rush thundering through the night and all that sort of thing, Billy? Galloping horses always give me the shivers. They make such a noise I feel they are sure to run me down, and then I should be pounded to jelly. I shouldn’t like to get in front of all these wild ponies if they galloped.”

“It is rather a sight when they start,” admitted Billy. “I saw a stampede once from a hill, and wasn’t I glad I was up there! A gorse bush set on fire in the sun, and all the horses, about sixty of them, simply snorted and galloped for their lives. It was fine to see them, but I don’t want a nearer view, though it might be rather an adventure.”

“Well, *I* don’t want an adventure like that, thanks,” remarked Fleetfoot, “and anyway, I shouldn’t get it. You’re the one for adventures. Your log-book is great, Billy.”

“It’s been a glorious summer,” said Billy dreamily. “And if you could only stay a little longer we could have some great adventures together—*not* lone ones.”

“Don’t I wish I could!” exclaimed Fleetfoot. “But it’s first of term the day after to-morrow. It was no end of a concession at home to be allowed to stay a week with you, when the rest of the Camp-Fire Girls struck camp. Holidays are spiffing—but it will be good to get back to school. If only—oh, Panther, I wish *you* were coming, too!”

“I can’t bear to think of it,” said Billy vehemently, as they scrambled down the tree. “I simply long for school, but mother will never, *never* let me go!”

"You could be in our form," went on Fleetfoot rapturously, "and Miss Forsyth—oh, she is an absolute angel! We call her 'The Angel.' She's a real sport, and so pretty and clever, too. She has bright brown hair and brown eyes, all sparkles, and the sweetest colour. And she's slim, and can run like a deer."

"Don't talk about it," said Billy sharply. They were entering the house now. "Oh, look, there's a letter for you!"

"From Winifred Knowles," said Fleetfoot, tearing it open, and a moment later an exclamation of joy was followed by one of deep despair. "Oh, Billy!" she cried. "Just think of it! Miss Forsyth is coming here to stay!"

"What?" gasped Billy, hardly believing her ears.

"Yes!" cried Fleetfoot, and then groaned. "She comes the day after I leave! Isn't it agonizing? She's had a breakdown, Winifred says—she doesn't know what's the matter—the Angel's generally so jolly and well—and she's got an aunt here and she's coming to stay for a fortnight. Winifred's heard because she lives near. Some one else is taking her form for a time. Oh, Billy!" Fleetfoot groaned once more, but Billy's cheeks were pink with excitement. Fleetfoot's Miss Forsyth in that very neighbourhood!

"You lucky thing!" wailed her friend. "You're sure to get to know her somehow. And I shall be slogging away at school. And we're only going to have her another year, because she's going to be married. Her sweetheart is coming home from India any day now."

"Perhaps if she's had a breakdown she won't want to see any one," said Billy, but her heart was singing. "It's jolly good that she's coming, though, for you don't know how miserable I shall be at parting from you!"

"Will you, dear old thing?" said Fleetfoot, blinking her eyes.

The next day Billy stood forlornly upon the station platform waving good-bye to her dearest chum. There was a last glimpse of a curly head and two honest eyes, and then only a tiny dab of handkerchief-white as the train hummed off into the distance.

On the morrow the Angel came. Billy knew it must be the Angel, or she would not have recognized the figure she had lingered to see emerge from Mrs. Knightley's that evening. Miss Forsyth's face was pale and thin, and not even a ghost of a sparkle abode in the brown eyes. Spring and gaiety were woefully lacking. Yet Billy knew at once that for her this was *the* Angel. She felt she would have given anything—*anything*—for just a look or a word from Fleetfoot's Miss Forsyth. She understood now why all the form, Fleetfoot said, would just lie down and let her walk over them.

Billy's hopes, however, of coming to know this wonderful stranger died a hopeless death in the days which followed. Mrs. Knightley told every one that her niece was there for her health, and must not see people at all. The niece went nowhere but to the woods and hills, and looked so white and sad that Billy wondered more and more what could have happened so to change her.

Unobtrusively Billy haunted the new-comer's tracks, hoping for some chance of doing her a service. But none came.

Once, indeed, Miss Forsyth dropped her handkerchief, and Billy raced after her in delight to restore it. She was too shy, however, to do anything save hold out the handkerchief without saying a word, and when Miss Forsyth had exclaimed: "Oh, thank you so much! I did not know I had dropped it," the incident had ended. But not before Billy had seen that face and those eyes light up into "the Angel's smile" just as lovely as Fleetfoot had described it.

The fortnight had almost run its course, and Little Black Panther was no nearer than before to knowing the Angel. With a sigh of desperation she set off into the hills to walk off her depression and disappointment.

She tramped along disconsolately, remembering that to-morrow Miss Forsyth was to go away for ever, and that, with the exception of those few golden words, Billy had won no treasure, even of memory, from her fortnight's neighbourhood with the school Angel. Little Black Panther's face was downcast. She eyed the hills gloomily once more. She pushed her way listlessly through the bracken, and then the quickened beating of her heart marked the recognition of a familiar figure on the next hill. It was Miss Forsyth. The form-mistress, Billy knew, loved to ramble there. The hill was a rough one for climbing, covered with huge boulders and having precipitous slopes of crumbling earth and gravel. Miss Forsyth climbed easily, and her slight form in its pretty dress showed up clearly in Billy's eyes as the mistress ascended the hill. Billy watched her, fascinated. If only something would happen to make the Angel speak to her! To-morrow she would be gone for ever, and Billy would never, never see her again.

On climbed the solitary figure, and then was lost to sight behind a projecting head of rock. Billy waited tensely for the sight of it continuing its journey upwards, but time went on and the slight figure did not reappear. The Angel must be sitting down there, reading or having tea or just looking sad and far away, thought Billy. At last a little twinge of anxiety shot through her. Was Miss Forsyth all right? So precipitous a resting-place was an odd one to choose. With an irresistible impulse Billy began to scramble down the hill. Quickly she covered the intervening ground and then commenced the ascent of the second hill. As she hurried, more and more certain she became that

something had happened to the Angel. Suddenly she had rounded the cape of rock, and the next second an exclamation escaped her lips.

On a shelf of jutting rock about ten feet from the ground lay the Angel, quite still and white. She was so still, indeed, that a great fear sprang up in Billy's heart.

"Miss Forsyth!" she called up in a trembling voice. There was no answer. Billy began to scramble up, making her way from the side. At last she reached the narrow ledge on which the Angel lay, and bent over the slim figure. The eyes that Fleetfoot had thought so sparkling were closed, and the blue veins showed upon the lids, the soft hair had been ruffled as she fell, and its damp tendrils clung to her forehead. The oval face was pale, and one arm was doubled under the body in an ominous fashion. But she breathed, and Billy drew a deep sigh of thankfulness. Then she looked around for water.

A little spring babbled down the hill not far away, and to this sped Billy, filling the Angel's hat with cool water. She bathed the unconscious girl's face and hands, and was relieved to see a flicker of life in the pale eyelids which opened in bewilderment. Then the Angel moved and a gasp of pain escaped her.

"Don't move," said Billy gently; "I'm afraid your arm's broken. I can do it up if you can stand it, but I'm awfully afraid it's going to hurt you."

Then realization came back into the Angel's eyes, and a faint smile to her lips. "Why, it's my scout girl," she said. "I fell off the rock up there. Go ahead, I'll try not to yell."

It did hurt badly, but the Angel never made a sound. The splints were improvised from the branches of trees, and were bound round with ribbon from the patient's hat. Finally the arm was hung comfortably in a sling with her scarf, and then the Angel, propped up against the rock, reached for the water which Billy handed her anxiously.

"All right," said the mistress, with another faint smile. "You are a first-class doctor, child. Now the question is, how to get down?"

"I can manage to help you down the way I came," said Billy shyly. Three words were ringing gloriously in her ears, in spite of her anxiety: "My scout girl!" The Angel had noticed her then, after all.

"I'm afraid I shall have to lean on you awfully hard," said Miss Forsyth, as the descent began. Billy's face glowed with pride, though before the journey was over her breath was coming fast and her lips were set with the strain of endurance. From rock to rock they clambered. Light though the Angel might

be, she had but one hand with which to hold, and much of her weight came on Billy, who strained and helped manfully. At last, however, the hill was vanquished, and they made their way haltingly around the side of the next.

“P'r'aps we'd better rest now,” panted Billy, seeing Miss Forsyth's face grow suddenly paler. “You sit down and I'll get you some more water.”

Too worn out to remonstrate, the mistress slipped to the ground, and the next moment she had again lost consciousness. Billy ran quickly to the stream for water. As she rose to her feet, the dripping hat in her hands, a faint sound in the distance set her brows knitting. It was an odd undefined sound, yet strangely familiar. What could it be? An unexplained feeling of impending danger set Billy listening with every nerve strained.

The sound was growing louder. Was it that of a gathering storm? No, it was too regular, too continuous. Suddenly it swelled into an ominous thunder that sent a sudden chill into Billy's heart, and she gasped with swift understanding.

A stampede! The ponies had run amuck! The mad gallop had broken out once more, and *they were heading this way!*

With one rapid glance Billy swept the surrounding hills and moors. There was nothing to be seen of the horses, but their approach from the west was heralded by the increasing roar of hoofs on turf and stone. They would come over the crest of the hill below which the Angel lay.

Turning, Billy ran like a hare towards the unconscious mistress. She splashed the water over her, shook her, cried in her ear: “Oh, wake up! Do try to wake! The horses are coming!” But all her efforts were in vain. Her hands clenched in desperation, Billy looked round for cover. But there was none on the bleak hill. Could she carry the Angel to the rocks opposite? She tried to raise her, to grip her with the “fireman's lift,” but that was impossible on the steep hill without overbalancing. She seized Miss Forsyth under the arms and tried to drag her down the hill, but the next moment her blood chilled with fear in her veins.

Over the crest of the hill, with a thunder and a roar, swept the maddened horses. By this time the cause of the stampede was forgotten; all they knew was that they must run till they dropped, and the foam spattered from their muzzles, their hoofs thudded on the turf, as they galloped like some terrific many-headed monster over the hill.

Billy gazed terror-stricken, with shaking limbs. Swift as lightning the knowledge flashed over her! *She could escape!* There was time for her to reach

the cover of the opposite rocks. But that was a thought she kept under as she gazed round desperately. How could she save the Angel?

She would set the turf on fire. Then she realized in despair that she had not a single match. She shouted wildly, but there was no pause in the oncoming avalanche. On swept the horses.

Billy's vision was filled with a picture of rearing horses, tossing manes, red rolling eyes of flame, her ears with thunder; in another moment the horses would be over them.

Suddenly Billy leaped up in the air, waving her arms, yelling madly like a demon. Her shrill cries rose above the thunder; the snorting horses swerved so that she was no longer the centre-point in their onrush, but nothing human could turn that mad charge. As it bore down upon them Billy gave a final cry and then threw herself upon the prostrate Angel, covering her, shielding her with her own body.

The next few minutes were like a horrible crowded nightmare of noise, while a mighty wind seemed to pass above her. She lay there holding the Angel closely to her, thinking in a strange detached fashion that all was over. They were going to die together, she and the Angel. What would Fleetfoot say when she knew? The pounding of hoofs, the maddened snortings of the horses sounded in her ears. Then a sickening pain shot through her leg and she knew no more.

She was roused at last by another spasm of pain. She opened her eyes and turned over, blinking at the sky. For a moment she could not remember what had happened or why she was there. Then the Angel stirred and memory came back. Billy shivered. Dragging herself to a sitting position, she gazed at the ground beside her. It was ploughed up by hoofs on one side, the other bore only a few widely separated prints.

"That last yell did it!" thought Billy, with a shaky laugh. The horses must have swerved once more. But they had left their mark on Billy. Her leg was crushed and bleeding. As she tried to move, a pang shot through it, and Billy could not repress a gasp. The Angel's brown eyes flickered, opened slowly, and fixed in perplexity on Billy's face. A moment later Miss Forsyth was sitting up and staring at her.

"What happened, child?" she said, in bewilderment. "What was that awful noise? And you fell on the top of me, didn't you? I seemed to know, but I couldn't manage to bring myself round at all."

"It was the horses," said Billy faintly, summoning up a smile. "We got in

front of a cavalry charge, that was all, Angel dear.” Then she became aware that she must have said something odd, for the Angel’s face seemed to be looking at her so queerly through a red mist.

Miss Forsyth’s voice had become suddenly very gentle.

“I think you have saved my life. I don’t understand yet, scout girl, but I’m going to get along to the Mackintyres’ cottage and bring help.”

Later, the Mackintyres’ rickety cart drove its two patients up to the door of Billy’s home, and the startled household hurried out to help them in and to exclaim over them.

“And, why, if it isn’t the young lady from Mrs. Knightley’s!” cried Mary. “The postman’s just brought our letters, and he was saying he had a telegram for Miss Forsyth and took it there, but as there wasn’t any one at home he couldn’t leave it.”

Miss Forsyth turned swiftly white. “A telegram?” she said in a strained voice. “Oh, where is he? Has he gone?”

“I’ll soon catch him, miss!” said Mary.

The Angel tore open the telegram with a shaky hand and read it swiftly. Then a look, a wild look of joy which Billy will never forget, flashed into her face.

“Read it!” she whispered to Billy, thrusting it into her hands. And Billy read:

“Report ship all hands lost untrue. Wrecked. Rescued. Coming to you all speed.—HARRY.”

And then, of course, Billy understood everything: the Angel’s illness and her sad eyes, and the joy now in her lovely face.

“Oh, I’m so glad!” whispered Billy. The next minute she was actually hugging the Angel and—the Angel had kissed her! . . .

A week later, when Billy had made the last lone scout entry in picture-writing in her log-book, she sat down to write to Fleetfoot.

“Oh, Fleetfoot,” she wrote, “the news is enough to make any one dance, and I know you’ll think so too. I am coming to school—*your* school! It is all the Angel’s doing—and she is a real Angel, isn’t she? She has persuaded Mother that it will be good for me. I shall be in your form, I do believe, and the

Angel will be both our mistresses. At least, you know what I mean, dear old thing. You can't expect me to write sense now. Oh, I can hardly believe it! You say you've heard from Winifred what Miss Forsyth wrote to her home about me. Oh, Fleetfoot, I didn't really do anything wonderful like that. My kicked leg is almost quite all right again. I have been looking through my log-book with all my adventures in. Such a lot has happened since the spring, when I started being Little Black Panther. But I think this adventure has ended most rippingly of all, don't you? Oh, Fleetfoot, how glad I am that I was a Lone Scout! With love, your tremendously excited chum, PANTHER."

Billy smiled affectionately as she patted her old log-book. "Being a scout has been glorious," she murmured, "but, oh, it will be fine not to be a *lone* one any more!"

THE END



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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected or standardised.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Norene Anderson have been omitted from this etext.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

[The end of *Billy, Lone Scout* by Annie Mabel Hayes (as Nancy M. Hayes)]