

# Also by Rebecca Caudill

Barrie and Daughter
Tree of Freedom (Newberry Honor)
Saturday Cousins
House of the Fifers
Susan Cornish
Time for Lissa
Higgins and the Great Big Scare
The Best-Loved Doll
The Far-Off Land
A Pocketful of Cricket (Caldecott Honor)
A Certain Small Shepherd
Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charley?
Contrary Jenkins (with husband, James Ayars)
Somebody Go and Bang a Drum





# by REBECCA CAUDILL

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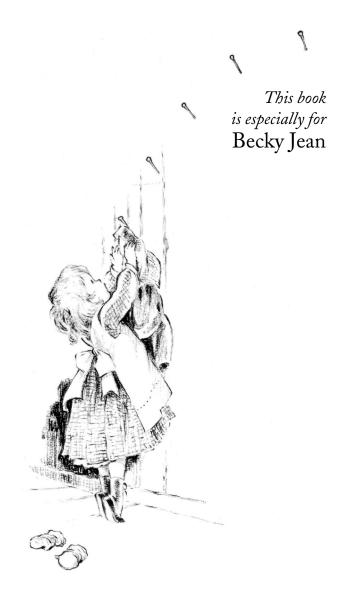
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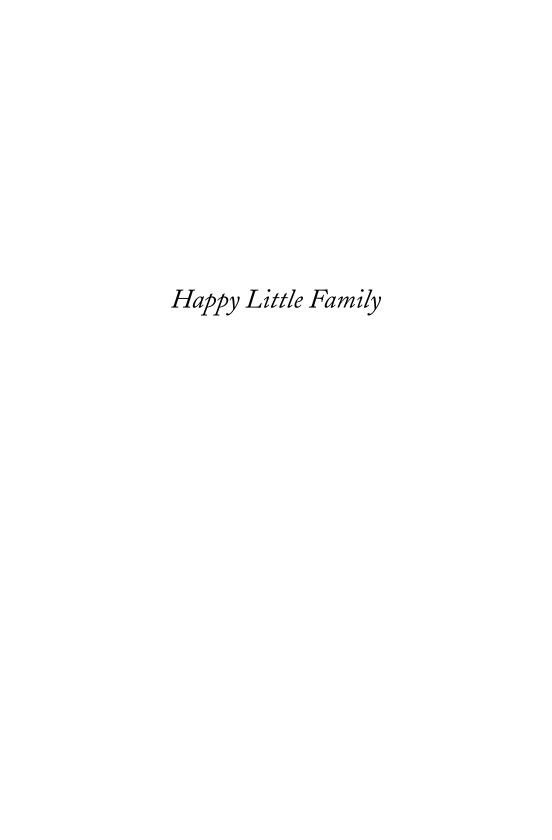
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# 1. Crack-the-Whip

It was January, and the morning was very cold. Icicles hung from the porch roof in a stiff ruffle. Sparrows sat hunched in the bare branches of the cherry tree, saying nothing. Only the wind made a noise. It howled down the mountain and whistled through the valley. It moaned in the pine trees and roared at the kitchen door. And everywhere it blew, it swept snowflakes before it and left them in deep white drifts.

That was outdoors. Indoors the morning was warm and cheery. A big fire burned in the fireplace of the log house and made a roaring noise up the chimney to scare the wind away.

Bonnie stood in front of the fire. First she stood facing the fire and held out her hands to warm them. Then she turned herself around and stood with her back to the fire, and held her hands behind her. Around and around she turned, warming herself.

At one side of the hearth stretched Rover, a yellow and white collie, fast asleep. He snored softly as he slept. The snoring made a cozy sound.



Curled up in Mother's hickory rocking chair lay Whiskers, a big black cat. As Bonnie turned herself the ninth time, Whiskers opened his eyes a slit and looked at her. Then he shut them again and went on sleeping. He purred gently as he slept. The purring made a cozy sound.

Whenever her back was turned to the fire, Bonnie looked out the window. Beyond the road, along the edge of the mountains, wound the river. It was frozen solid, as it was always frozen in January, and people were sliding on the ice. Debby was there, and Emmy. Chris and Althy were there, and Father. Four of the Sawyers were there, three of the Huffs, and all five of the Watterson boys and girls. They made deep scars in the ice with their heavy hobnailed shoes as they slid back and forth, back and forth.

Bonnie blinked her eyes as she watched them. She could have been sliding on the ice too, instead of warming herself by the fire if only Debby and Emmy, Chris and Althy hadn't given her grown-up advice as they buttoned their coats and pulled on their warm mittens.



"Oh, Bonnie, sugar, you can't go," said Debby when she saw Bonnie going for her coat. Debby was six. She was pulling her bright red toboggan cap low over her ears all the while she was talking. "You're too little, Bonnie," said Debby. "You were four only the day before yesterday."

"You'd freeze your toes right off, honey," Emmy told her.

Emmy was Bonnie's favorite sister. Emmy was eight, and twice as big as Bonnie. She could climb

to the top of the sycamore tree in the barn lot. She could catch a ball with one hand as easily as Chris, who was ten, and she wasn't afraid of the dark, like Debby. Sometimes Emmy shared her treasures with Bonnie, half and half — the chestnuts she found on her way home from school, her snail shells, the rag dolls she made. But sliding on the ice was a thing Emmy wouldn't share.

"Shucks, Bonnie, you've got no idea how cold it is out there!" warned Chris.

"You'd just get in the way," said Althy. Althy was twelve.

Even Father, who always walked hand in hand with Bonnie when they went to the mountains looking for wintergreen or sweet wild strawberries, seemed to understand no better than the others that she was now four, and big enough to go sliding on the ice.

Father, pulling on big brown mittens, smiled down at Bonnie and said nothing at all.

So Bonnie stayed home by the fire, warming herself. All the while she listened wistfully to the merry shouting that came from the river and did not once

notice how softly Rover snored as he slept, nor how gently Whiskers purred as he lay curled up in Mother's rocking chair.

As Bonnie turned herself the tenth time, Mother came in from the kitchen.

"Br-r-r-r-r" said Mother, making a noise like the wind. She held her hands out to the fire to warm them. "It must be cold out there on the river," she said.

"Emmy won't freeze her toes off, will she?" asked Bonnie.

"Oh, no," said Mother. "Emmy runs too fast."

"Will Debby?" asked Bonnie.

"Oh, no," said Mother. "Debby runs faster than Emmy."

"I wouldn't freeze my toes if I went skating on the ice, either," said Bonnie. "Would I?"

"I don't believe you would," said Mother.

"May I go skating then, Mother?" begged Bonnie.
"I'm big enough. I'm four now."

Mother put her hand under Bonnie's chin. She tilted Bonnie's round face up and looked at it.

"Why, bless me, Bonnie!" she said. "You *are* four. I hadn't realized what a big girl you are. Run and get your coat."

Bonnie trotted to the kitchen, her coppertoed shoes thudding softly across the bright rag carpet of the living room, clicking across the bare floor of the kitchen.



Hammered into the wall behind the kitchen stove, in a pattern like stair steps, were five nails. The farthest one belonged to Althy, because she was the oldest and could reach the highest. The next one belonged to Chris. The one in the middle belonged to Emmy. The next to the lowest nail belonged to Debby. The lowest of all was Bonnie's.

All the nails were empty except Bonnie's. On her nail hung a blue worsted coat made from an old coat of Father's, and a pair of new mittens, as red as ripe cherries. After Mother had knitted the mittens, she made a special loop on them to hang them by.

Bonnie stood looking at the nails. She might as well try to reach the kitchen ceiling, or the stove pipe, as Althy's nail, she thought. Althy's nail was very high. Chris's nail was high too, and Emmy's. She moved a step farther behind the stove and stood in front of Debby's nail. Being four the day before yesterday, and going on five, she thought she might be able to reach Debby's nail.

She raised herself on the copper toes of her shoes. She stretched as far as her finger tips could reach on

the wall. She grunted, and that helped her stretch farther still. But she could not quite reach Debby's nail.

"I'm getting bigger now, and soon I can reach it," she said to herself.

"I'll tie my fascinator around your head to keep your ears warm," Mother told her when she brought her coat and mittens from the kitchen.

"When may I have a toboggan cap, Mother?" asked Bonnie. "A red toboggan, like Debby's, with a white tassel?"

"When you're bigger I'll knit you one," promised Mother.

Crossing the ends of the big blue fascinator under Bonnie's chin, Mother tied them in a bow in the back. "Run along, now," she said.

At the edge of the river Bonnie stopped to watch the others sliding. They were running races on the ice and playing tag. They were whizzing along as

fast as the wind. They were laughing and shouting to one another—Althy and Chris, Emmy and Debby,



the four Sawyers, the three Huffs, the five Wattersons and Father.

Far up the river Bonnie saw Debby in her red coat. Debby took a long run on the ice, planted her feet firmly, one a little in front of the other, spread her arms wide and skimmed along like a red autumn leaf flying in the wind.

Out on the ice walked Bonnie. Being four, and going on five, she was sure she could skate as well as Debby. She took one step. Two steps. Half a dozen steps. Then she planted her feet just as she had seen Debby do, one a little in front of the other. Nothing happened at all.

Once more she watched as Debby came skimming along on the ice. Once more she tried. Three steps. Four steps. Five steps. Not quite running steps like Debby's, but hurrying steps, in between running and walking. Six steps. Seven steps. Then a push to set herself going.

Plop! Both feet flew from under her. Both copper toes shot into the air.

Bonnie lay very still a moment, wanting to cry;