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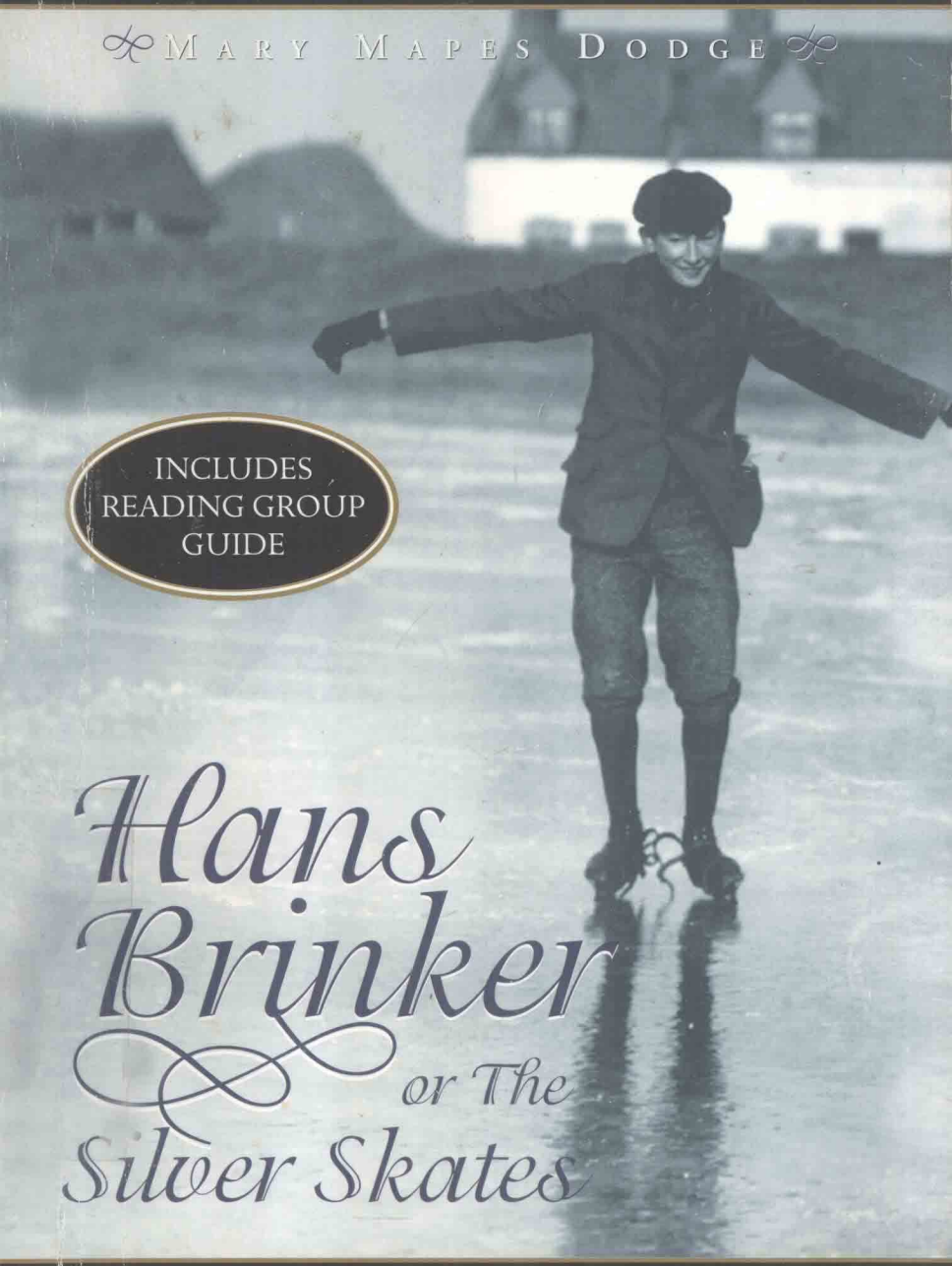
MARY MAPES DODGE



INCLUDES READING GROUP GUIDE

Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates

With a foreword by Newbery Honor author Patricia Lauber

MARY MAPES DODGE

Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates

ALADDIN CLASSICS
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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FOREWORD

It's a wintry afternoon, the day after my eleventh birthday. I am curled up in the big wing chair, holding my favorite kind of present—a new book. It's called *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates.* The book has a dark blue cloth cover, and on the front is pasted a full-color picture of a windmill, a house, and a blond boy on skates. This is a delicious moment—I am just about to open the book and start reading. But first I study the picture.

The boy, who is surely Hans, looks about six to my eyes, and I am unpleasantly surprised. (This turns out to be the illustrator's error. Hans is really fifteen.) His cheeks are red with cold, but he does not look warmly dressed. (He is poor, I will discover.) I skate on a pond, but Hans is on what looks like a river. (It is really a canal.) And his skates are different from mine. My father has bought me the kind of skates that hockey players wear, with a pointed blade. The front tips of Hans's blades turn up and curve back, like a capital *C.* Unlike me, Hans does not have skates that come

attached to boots. He wears his everyday shoes and straps his skates onto his feet, as do all skaters of the middle 1800s.

Done with the picture, I open the book and start to read. I meet Hans and his sister, Gretel, who are on the ice. I learn that they are very poor and that something is certainly wrong with their father, who, for no apparent reason, has thrown Gretel's new shoes into the fire. Their mother calls them home, and I am on the verge of learning more about this family when suddenly the story stops. The author is insisting that I take a "rocking-chair trip" with her to Holland.

Did I do it? I don't remember. I was a fast reader, but I also loved a story. I suspect that I simply turned the pages of the chapter called "Holland" until I saw near its end that the author was getting back to the story—actually to the stories, for there are several interwoven plots in this book.

There's the Brinker family and its problems making a living with a father who injured his head and can no longer work. Will he ever recover? Will the famous Dr. Boekman agree to help Raff Brinker—and can he? Will the Brinkers ever find their missing money, or was it stolen? Who is the mysterious stranger who left his watch with Raff? And what becomes of Dr. Boekman's son and only child?

Then there's the band of boys and girls that Hans and Gretel know from school. The boys set out on a

long skating trip, lose the money they need for meals and a place to sleep, get it back, and almost lose it again to a thief. Both boys and girls are eagerly awaiting the skating race, with its prize of silver skates. To enter, Hans and Gretel need skates of steel, not the ones that Hans has carved from wood. Will they somehow find the money to get their skates? Who will win the races?

With so much story to tell, why didn't the author just get on with the telling, instead of stopping to describe Holland? I think there are probably two reasons.

One is that she was writing in the 1860s. At that time there were no movies, no television, no radio, no computers, no telephones. A new book was a truly big treat. Readers didn't mind if it started slowly, because that made the treat last longer—like licking an ice-cream cone very slowly.

The second is that the author wanted to make sure readers understood Holland, the setting for her story, for it is an odd country, unlike any other. When the Dutch wanted more land, they did not attack their neighbors. They attacked the North Sea. They built dikes to hold back the sea and pumped out the water behind the dikes, making new land out of sea bottom. On the far side of the dikes, the sea was—and is—higher than the land.

The Dutch take great care of their dikes. Even so, there have been times during fierce storms when a dike gave way, the sea rushed in, and land vanished. When the

storm ended, the water did not go away. Orange-tiled roofs poked out of the gray waters, the only sign that people once lived and farmed there. But the Dutch doggedly repaired the dike and again pumped out the water.

This low-lying land must be constantly drained, if it is to be usable. Water is carried off through the canals and moved along by pumps; until modern times, windmills powered the pumps.

For many years, the quickest way to get around Holland in winter was to skate. A network of canals linked cities, towns, and villages. People of all ages took to the ice to go wherever they were going, as well as for sport. And that is why a large part of *Hans Brinker* takes place on the frozen canals.

The author of this book, Mary Mapes Dodge, was an American, born in New York City in 1831. Her grasp of Holland—its geography, history, customs, and people—was so good that it's a little surprising to learn that she never saw Holland until some years after she had written *Hans Brinker.* She may have learned some things from one of her grandmothers, who was Dutch, but she must also have read some very good books and been fascinated by what they had to say.

Dodge grew up in a well-to-do family, with a father who encouraged her love of books. When she was twenty, she married a man of thirty-five, who also encouraged her to read. But after seven years of marriage Dodge suddenly found herself a widow with two small

sons to support. What was she to do? As daughter, wife, and mother, she had never been trained to earn a living, never acquired any particular skills. To make matters worse, at that time—1858—not many professions were open to women.

One thing women were allowed to do was to write. And so this life-long lover of books decided to become a writer. She began with articles for women's magazines. Finding in herself a sturdy streak of independence, she was fond of writing about women like Revolutionary War heroine Molly Pitcher—strong women, women of courage, whom she considered role models for girls. It was a good time for such articles. Women were beginning to speak out and campaign for their rights, such as the right to own property. In the North, many worked with those who would abolish slavery. For the first time it was possible for a woman to go to college. A number of women were winning names for themselves as writers, among them Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott.

Dodge's articles reflected what she had learned by experience: Hard work, high hopes, and courage would lead to happiness and success. These qualities are also found in the Brinker family, most particularly in Hans.

Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates was published in 1865 and was an immediate success. It has been in print ever since, going through countless editions and being translated into foreign languages.

The book's success, however, did not mean that Mary Mapes Dodge could sit back and relax. She continued to work as hard as ever, now as an editor with Harriet Beecher Stowe on *Hearth and Home* magazine.

By 1873 she finally had enough money to do what she had always longed to do—go to Holland. Leaving her job, she set sail. The end of July found her in Amsterdam, seeing with her own eyes the dikes and canals and windmills and people she had written about with accuracy and feeling.

On her return home, Dodge took up a new challenge. She became editor of *St. Nicholas,* one of the finest magazines ever published for children. She set her standards high and attracted as contributors many of the most famous writers of the day, among them Louise May Alcott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, and Rudyard Kipling.

Mary Mapes Dodge died in 1905, but her book lives on. It lives in new editions and also in the minds of those who have read it. A number of years ago I visited Holland to do research for a book of my own. I was at first puzzled because the country and its people seemed so familiar, though I had never been there before. Then I realized, not so. I *had* been there before, years earlier, curled up in the wing chair with my new book, *Hans Brinker, or The Silver Skates.*

—Patricia Lauber

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Hans and Gretel

On a bright December morning long ago, two thinly clad children were kneeling upon the bank of a frozen canal in Holland.

The sun had not yet appeared, but the gray sky was parted near the horizon, and its edges shone crimson with the coming day. Most of the good Hollanders were enjoying a placid morning nap; even Mynheer van Stoppelnoze, that worthy old Dutchman, was still slumbering "in beautiful repose."

Now and then some peasant woman, poising a well-filled basket upon her head, came skimming over the glassy surface of the canal; or a lusty boy, skating to his day's work in the town, cast a good-natured grimace toward the shivering pair as he flew along.

Meanwhile, with many a vigorous puff and pull, the brother and sister, for such they were, seemed to be fastening something upon their feet—not skates, certainly, but clumsy pieces of wood narrowed and smoothed at their lower edge, and pierced with holes,

through which were threaded strings of rawhide.

These queer-looking affairs had been made by the boy Hans. His mother was a poor peasant woman, too poor even to think of such a thing as buying skates for her little ones. Rough as these were, they had afforded the children many a happy hour upon the ice; and now, as with cold, red fingers our young Hollanders tugged at the strings—their solemn faces bending closely over their knees—no vision of impossible iron runners came to dull the satisfaction glowing within.

In a moment the boy arose, and with a pompous swing of the arms, and a careless "Come on, Gretel," glided easily across the canal.

"Ah, Hans," called his sister plaintively, "this foot is not well yet. The strings hurt me on last market-day; and now I cannot bear them tied in the same place."

"Tie them higher up, then," answered Hans, as without looking at her he performed a wonderful cat's-cradle step on the ice.

"How can I? The string is too short."

Giving vent to a good-natured Dutch whistle, the English of which was that girls were troublesome creatures, he steered toward her.

"You are foolish to wear such shoes, Gretel, when you have a stout leather pair. Your clogs would be better than these."

"Why, Hans! Do you forget? Father threw my beautiful new shoes in the fire. Before I knew what he

had done they were all curled up in the midst of the burning peat. I can skate with these, but not with my wooden ones. Be careful now—"

Hans had taken a string from his pocket. Humming a tune as he knelt beside her, he proceeded to fasten Gretel's skate with all the force of his strong young arm.

"Oh! oh!" she cried in real pain.

With an impatient jerk Hans unwound the string. He would have cast it upon the ground in true big-brother style, had he not just then spied a tear trickling down his sister's cheek.

"I'll fix it—never fear," he said, with sudden tenderness; "but we must be quick; mother will need us soon."

Then he glanced inquiringly about him, first at the ground, next at some bare willow branches above his head, and finally at the sky, now gorgeous with streaks of blue, crimson, and gold.

Finding nothing in any of these localities to meet his need, his eye suddenly brightened as, with the air of a fellow who knew what he was about, he took off his cap, and removing the tattered lining, adjusted it in a smooth pad over the top of Gretel's worn-out shoe.

"Now," he cried triumphantly, at the same time arranging the strings as briskly as his benumbed fingers would allow, "can you bear some pulling?"

Gretel drew up her lips as if to say, "Hurt away," but made no further response.

In another moment they were laughing together, as hand in hand they flew along the canal, never thinking whether the ice would bear or not, for in Holland ice is generally an all-winter affair. It settles itself upon the water in a determined kind of way, and so far from growing thin and uncertain every time the sun is a little severe upon it, it gathers its forces day by day, and flashes defiance to every beam.

Presently, squeak! squeak! sounded something beneath Hans's feet. Next his strokes grew shorter, ending oft-times with a jerk, and finally, he lay sprawling upon the ice, kicking against the air with many a fantastic flourish.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Gretel. "That was a fine tumble!" But a tender heart was beating under her coarse blue jacket, and, even as she laughed, she came, with a graceful sweep, close to her prostrate brother.

"Are you hurt, Hans? Oh, you are laughing! Catch me now"— and she darted away, shivering no longer, but with cheeks all aglow, and eyes sparkling with fun.

Hans sprang to his feet and started in brisk pursuit, but it was no easy thing to catch Gretel. Before she had traveled very far, her skates too began to squeak.

Believing that discretion was the better part of valor, she turned suddenly and skated into her pursuer's arms.

"Ha! ha! I've caught you!" cried Hans.