

Nancy Drew Mystery Stories

THE CLUE OF THE TAPPING HEELS



By
CAROLYN
KEENE

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Clue of the Tapping Heels

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Carolyn Keene (probably Mildred Benson) (1905-2002)

Date first posted: Dec. 16, 2020

Date last updated: Dec. 16, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20201238

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES

THE CLUE OF
THE TAPPING HEELS

BY
CAROLYN KEENE

ILLUSTRATED BY
RUSSELL H. TANDY

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1939, by
GROSSET & DUNLAP, INC.



The Clue of the Tapping Heels Frontispiece (Page 194)
NANCY SIGNALLED FRANTICALLY FOR HELP.



Newer frontispiece.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I A CODE	1
II TROUBLE	12
III THE GUARDIAN	19
IV A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR	28
V OLD COSTUMES	36
VI AN INTERESTING CLUE	43
VII DISTURBING EVENTS	52
VIII THE FLIGHT	61
IX STRANGE SOUNDS	68
X A BOAT DISASTER	76
XI A SINISTER SAILOR	85
XII TEMPLE OF THE STARS	92
XIII OMAR'S SCHEME	101
XIV A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE	109
XV HIDDEN MONEY	117
XVI A THREATENING MESSAGE	124
XVII TRAVELERS	133
XVIII AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW	142
XIX THE CORNER TABLE	151
XX INFORMATION	159
XXI THE SEARCH	168
XXII THE SEAMAN'S SECRET	176
XXIII NANCY'S PREDICAMENT	187
XXIV THE TRIAD	197
XXV THE TAPPING HEELS	206

CHAPTER I

A CODE

“Land sakes, Nancy, there’s so much commotion in this house a body can’t even think!”

Hannah Gruen, housekeeper for Carson Drew and his daughter, paused in the doorway of the living room to regard the golden-haired girl who was tap dancing. The radio was on, and Nancy’s heels and toes were clicking a clever accompaniment to the gay music.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

“Dear me, I don’t see how you can make your feet fly so fast,” Hannah declared in awe. “I suppose you’re practicing for some entertainment.”

Nancy Drew laughed as she continued keeping time to the music. Her deep blue eyes sparkled with excitement and her golden curls shone.

“No, Mrs. Gruen,” she replied, “this is for my own entertainment. I’m trying to tap out words.”

“Words!”

“Just listen!” said the girl excitedly. She executed a little dance routine. “I’m tapping out a message. I said, ‘Beware, Mrs. Gruen,’ in taps and spaces. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” the housekeeper replied in bewilderment. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Well, neither have I,” Nancy admitted cheerfully. “The idea came to me as I was practicing a dance. Morse code is sent by means of dots and dashes, you know. So why not a code, using taps and spaces? For instance, to make an ‘A’ I’ll tap out just one quick tap. ‘B’ will be two taps.”

“It seems to me you’d be all worn out by the time you’d come to the last letter in the alphabet,” Mrs. Gruen observed dryly.

“Oh, it wouldn’t have to be twenty-six taps,” Nancy explained. “It could be something simple such as a tap, space, and two taps.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’ll think of next,” smiled the housekeeper.

“The best part is that one would never guess I was tapping out a code!”

The radio selection had come to an end. As the announcer gave the name of the station, Nancy and Hannah realized that someone was ringing the doorbell. Before either of them could answer it the screen door had opened and two girls, George Fayne and her cousin Bess Marvin, walked into the room.

“Don’t you ever answer doorbells?” teased Bess, a dignified looking girl, who always took joy in being well dressed.

“Oh, girls, I’m so glad you came over!” Nancy cried in delight. “I want to show you something.”

“That was a cute dance you were doing,” declared George. “I wish you’d teach us the steps.” Her straight brown bob and slightly turned-up nose gave her a decidedly boyish appearance. Her real name was George, and she delighted in watching the expression on the faces of people who could not understand this.

“I’ll be glad to teach you,” said Nancy, “but you’ll have to learn a code.”

“A code!” exclaimed Bess. “What do you mean?”

Her chum was only too willing to explain. Both George and Bess were intrigued at the idea of actually spelling out messages with tapping heels.

“Why Nancy, if we three knew a secret code we could send messages to one another without others suspecting!” Bess cried.

“That’s what I thought,” Nancy admitted. “We could have lots of fun. And perhaps some time the code might serve a really worth while purpose. One of us might be in danger and need help.”

“How would you tap out ‘I need help?’ ” George asked.

“You would do it like this,” Nancy said, giving a demonstration. “I’ll write the code on paper for you. Then we can try it together.”

The three girls began their dance. So furious was the pace they set that ornaments and pictures in the room began to rock and shake. Once Nancy almost upset a lamp, whereupon Mrs. Gruen told the chums they would have to do their practicing out of doors.

“I’m tired of tapping anyway,” declared the Drew girl. “Let’s go for a drive in the country.”

With Nancy at the wheel the girls soon were speeding along toward the town of Berryville, which was not far from River Heights. As they were discussing their new tap dance code with enthusiasm, Bess suddenly cried out a warning:

“Watch, Nancy! There’s something in the road!”

The driver slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid hitting a small animal which was limping across the highway.

“Did I strike it?” Nancy asked anxiously.

“No, you just missed,” Bess declared, turning to look back. “But the poor thing has been injured in some way. It’s crouching at the side of the highway.”

Nancy brought the car to a standstill and the girls alighted.

“Why, it’s a cat!” George exclaimed. “I believe it must be a Persian.”

“Persian cats are valuable,” Bess added. “Do you think it ran away from its owner?”

“That’s quite possible,” agreed Nancy, moving quietly toward the animal. “Perhaps we should take it with us.”

“You may get scratched for your trouble,” warned George.

The fuzzy little animal cringed away, but did not try to avoid Nancy’s grasp. Gently the girl stroked its soft fur, as she examined the injured leg.

“Why, it’s only a kitten,” she declared in surprise. “And I’m sure it’s valuable.”

“It’s half starved, too,” Bess observed. “Perhaps we can get some milk over at that Sandwich Shoppe.” She indicated a small tea room directly across the road.

The girls carried the kitten to Mrs. Pickwick’s spotlessly clean establishment, where they inquired if anyone there had lost the pet. The woman assured them that she had no idea who might own the animal. She added that she disliked cats or dogs to be in her place, so Nancy saw that it would be out of the question to leave the pet with her.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to take Fuzzy home with us,” she said to her chums. “I’d not like to turn the poor thing loose with that injured leg.”

The girls bought a small bottle of milk and Mrs. Pickwick gave them a dish. They fed the animal in the car. Then, leaving the kitten curled up on the seat, they went back to the Sandwich Shoppe for their own luncheon.

Early afternoon found the girls at the Drew home once more, proudly showing Hannah Gruen their new pet. The kindly housekeeper helped them bandage up the injured leg and

make a soft bed for the kitten.

Later that evening when Nancy's father came home from his law office, his daughter asked him to take a look at the pet. By that time Fuzzy was purring contentedly.

"It's a beautiful animal," he remarked. "I hope we can find the owner."

He thought no more about the cat until the following day, when he chanced to read an advertisement in the local paper.

"Nancy," he called, showing her the item, "here's something which may interest you. A certain person named A. B. Carter is offering a ten-dollar reward for the return of a lost Persian kitten to the owner's home in Berryville."

"Do you suppose that could be Fuzzy?" Nancy asked, studying the words. "Oh, dear, just when I'm getting attached to the little thing I suppose I'll have to give it up."

That very afternoon she set off for Berryville with her chums, George and Bess. From inquiries made along the road, Nancy concluded that the person who had inserted the advertisement was not a man, but a woman by the name of Annie Carter.

"It seems she is something of a character," Nancy reported to her chums. "She is a spinster who came to this section about three years ago. Very little is known about her, but all the neighbors are up in arms against her because she keeps about twenty-five cats at her place."

"Twenty-five!" gasped Bess. "Think of the milk bill!"

"That's the point," Nancy replied. "Apparently Miss Carter isn't very well-to-do and is unable to feed all her pets. As a result they roam about and howl."

"No wonder the neighbors complain," commented George, glancing down at the kitten on her lap. "I was hoping Fuzzy would get a good home."

"Let's stop at the next store and buy some canned fish," Nancy suggested. "We can see that the Carter cats get at least one square meal."

This was done, then the girls went on, presently drawing up in front of a large white house with many odd-shaped turrets. The dwelling was in need of paint and the yard was neglected, but brightly colored flowers bloomed along the porch.

As the girls went up the walk Bess stumbled over a yellow, gaunt looking cat which blocked her path. She would have fallen had not Nancy caught her friend's arm. Before the callers reached the porch they came across four other cats, each of which without exception was lean and hungry looking.

Nancy rang the bell. A tall, graceful woman past middle age appeared at the door. She had friendly eyes and a faded beauty which was highly attractive. The Drew girl quickly explained why they had come, and Fuzzy was claimed immediately by its owner.

"So many of my darling cats are straying away," Miss Carter explained with a sigh. "It is very distressing for I can't bear to lose a single one. Now let me see—about the reward——"

"Don't even mention it," Nancy said hurriedly. "We could not accept anything for what we have done."

"At least step inside and see some of my beautiful Persians," Miss Carter urged. "It is so kind of you to have come all the way here."

The girls followed the distinguished looking woman into the house. The living room was furnished in pieces of a by-gone age, beautiful but in need of repair. Every available chair was occupied by one of Miss Carter's pets. Out in the kitchen others were meowing and calling.

"They're not usually as noisy as this," Miss Carter apologized. "You see, it's past their feeding time and they're very hungry."

“Please let us help you give them some food,” Bess said quickly. “We have several cans of fish in our car. Would they eat that?”

“Oh, yes, they’d love it,” replied the woman with a smile.

The girls ran for the food and helped distribute it in dishes on the back porch. In an instant they were surrounded by frantic cats, each of them determined to get a large share of the food. In the midst of this commotion a man came up the walk briskly.

“Oh, that’s Jed Silbert,” Miss Carter murmured in an undertone. “I suppose he’s here to make trouble again. I did promise to mend the cage out back and keep my pets at home, but I haven’t got at it yet.”

The man kicked angrily at one of the animals which was unfortunate enough to get in his way. Then he looked defiantly at its owner.

“Miss Carter,” he said coldly, “I’m here to tell you for the last time that either you or your pets must go. I speak for my neighbors when I say that our patience is exhausted. Your cats have been running all over doing a great deal of damage.”

“I’ll not let one of them be taken from me,” the woman announced dramatically. “Not even one.”

“Then don’t be surprised if something happens to them,” the man threatened. “We’ve had enough trouble.”

“You’d dare to harm my pets!” Miss Carter cried in indignation. “Mr. Silbert, leave my premises at once. Go!”

Waving her arm in dismissal, the woman moved toward the man, failing to notice that she stood close to the edge of the porch. Before the girls could warn her she stumbled and fell forward down the steps. Mr. Silbert helped her to her feet, but as he turned away he said:

“Bear in mind what I’ve said. Either you get rid of the cats, or I’ll find a way to do it for you!”

“Such a horrible, cruel man,” Miss Carter moaned as Nancy and her chums assisted her into the house.

The woman had been stunned slightly by the fall and had several bruises on her arms. She walked with difficulty. The girls induced her to lie down, and to quiet her nerves they applied cold cloths to her head.

While they were working, Nancy heard voices in the garden. Moving to the window, she saw that Jed Silbert had returned with a group of neighbors. The men were talking excitedly among themselves.

“I’m afraid they’re here to make more trouble for Miss Carter,” Nancy whispered to George and Bess. “Let’s go out there and try to reason with them.”

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE

The group of irate men gathered by the porch. As Nancy and her chums came outside, Mr. Silbert stepped forward.

"Tell Miss Carter we want to talk to her," he said curtly.

"She's not able to see you just now," Nancy replied severely. "She injured herself when she fell down the porch steps."

"That was her fault for being so obstinate," Mr. Silbert declared without sympathy. "I tell you we can't tolerate these cats another day. It's up to you to do something about them or we'll take up the matter with the law."

"I can understand that so many cats might create a nuisance," Nancy said evenly. "I know Miss Carter is planning to have their big cage mended. I'll tell her what you say. Of course, my friends and I can't do anything about it ourselves."

"Aren't you her nieces?" Jed Silbert demanded bluntly.

Before Nancy or her chums could answer, a red-faced man with a slightly hooked nose broke into the conversation.

"We know Miss Carter really isn't hurt," he said. "She's too cowardly to face us."

"I am telling you the truth," Nancy said quietly. "Miss Carter is lying down."

"She's always making excuses about things," the man said irritably. "She won't ever answer questions. She's afraid to tell what became of Gus Woonton!"

"Gus Woonton?" Nancy asked. "Who is he?"

"A poor, simple-minded lad who disappeared mysteriously. Miss Carter pretended to take a deep interest in him."

"Well, that's your affair, Bunce," said Mr. Silbert. "It's high time Miss Carter clears up a number of things," he added, pushing forward. "Come on, men! If she insists upon hiding in the house I suppose we'll have to go inside to see her!"

Nancy, George, and Bess were pushed aside as the group crowded past them into the living room. Miss Carter, who was reclining on a sofa, painfully drew herself up to a sitting position.

"Will you explain the meaning of this intrusion?" she asked haughtily. "By what right do you enter my home uninvited?"

"Never mind the dramatics," the man named Bunce cut in unpleasantly. "Just tell us what you intend to do about the cats."

"I've already given you my answer. I shall keep every one of my pets."

"Then you compel us to go to law," Mr. Silbert told her. "And I warn you we may bring up Gus Woonton's case, too."

"What has he to do with this matter?" Miss Carter asked sharply.

"Fred Bunce tells us that you know what became of the boy."

"Certainly I do." Miss Carter's blue eyes flashed. "And so does Mr. Bunce!"

All the group looked toward the hooked-nosed man, who became somewhat confused. Before he needed to speak a uniformed messenger boy appeared at the door, announcing that he had a telegram for Miss Carter. Nancy carried the message to the woman, who signed for it.

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid to read the telegram,” she declared nervously. “I feel certain someone has died. Please open it for me.”

Nancy by nature was friendly and helpful, and this was not the first time that persons in trouble had appealed to her for assistance. In fact, her deep desire to be of aid to others sometimes involved the girl in perplexing situations.

At sixteen she had enjoyed an unusual career as an amateur detective. She was the only daughter of Carson Drew, a famous criminal lawyer who specialized in solving mystery cases. Since the death of her mother, she had been very close to her father. Resourceful and alert, she had aided him in tracking down elusive clues, and finally had launched forth on her own account by solving a case she called “The Secret of the Old Clock.”

Nancy’s detective ability soon became the talk and pride of River Heights, but achieving fame did not turn her head. She made a point of asking her chums, Bess Marvin and George Fayne, to share her adventures. The girls liked to recall visits to such interesting places as Red Gate Farm, Shadow Ranch, and Larkspur Lane.

Nancy enjoyed all types of games, particularly golf. In recent months her ability in this sport had resulted in the winning of a championship, and in addition had plunged her into a most absorbing mystery.

While searching for a lost golf ball she had chanced to visit the vicinity of the Haunted Bridge, and immediately determined to learn the true explanation for the ghostly figure which was said to frequent the locality. After an exciting meeting with the spectre Nancy did succeed in her purpose, and her efforts likewise solved a mystery and brought happiness to several people.

As the Drew girl now scanned the telegram to Miss Carter her one thought was to be of aid to the anxious woman. “Shall I read the message aloud?” she inquired doubtfully.

“Please do,” requested the spinster, her hands trembling.

“The telegram is signed by Superintendent Johnson of the Riverside Home,” Nancy revealed. “It says, ‘Gus Woonton died at ten today.’”

“Didn’t I tell you?” demanded Fred Bunce in a bitter tone. “She had the boy put away, and now, thanks to her, he’s dead.”

Miss Carter turned slowly toward the man and her gaze swept him scornfully.

“Mr. Bunce, you force me to expose you to your neighbors. The lad originally was under your care but you proved to be a cruel, heartless guardian. You neglected him shamefully, so he came to me begging for food. I admit that I was responsible for sending poor Gus to the institution. I have paid his board there, because I couldn’t bear to see him mistreated.”

“You’re responsible for hastening his death,” Mr. Bunce again accused the woman.

“I don’t see how you can say that,” Nancy said reprovingly. “It seems to me Miss Carter was very generous to pay for the boy’s care at the institution. I am sure you’d not find many neighbors so kind-hearted.”

The man paid no attention to the remark.

“Rest assured I’ll investigate the boy’s death,” he told Miss Carter angrily. “You’ll be called into court to give an accounting!”

“The Riverside Home is a highly recommended institution,” Miss Carter insisted, her voice breaking. “I feel very bad about the boy’s death, but it was in no way my fault. Gus was never in good health.”

Bess moved to the woman’s side protectingly. She and George both felt that Mr. Bunce had no right to upset the woman with such serious accusations. They correctly suspected that

he was merely trying to build up ill feeling toward her among the neighbors to cover up his own neglect of the boy. Nancy too had grown indignant, so that when Miss Carter began to weep she found it impossible not to sympathize with her.

“Don’t worry,” the girl said comfortingly. “I’m sure you’re in no way to blame. If you need legal advice my father will give it to you without any expense on your part.”

“Will you please keep out of this?” Mr. Bunce asked cuttingly. “Your help has not been requested.”

“I can’t expect anyone to fight my battles for me,” Miss Carter said tearfully. “It is good of you to offer assistance, you dear girl, and I appreciate it more than I can tell you. But it isn’t right to involve you in this affair.”

“I really wish to help you,” Nancy insisted. “I’m certain my father will feel the same way.”

“And who is this wonderful father of yours?” Mr. Bunce asked scornfully.

“His name is Carson Drew,” the lawyer’s daughter answered quietly.

The girl found it difficult not to smile, for Fred Bunce appeared stunned when he heard her words. Only too well did he know the reputation the attorney had earned throughout the state.

“Perhaps I spoke too hastily,” he said uneasily. “I—I think I shall go home now.”

“You mean that you withdraw your absurd charges against Miss Carter?” Nancy questioned.

CHAPTER III

THE GUARDIAN

“Yes, I withdraw the charges,” Fred Bunce muttered. “I guess that Gus Woonton’s death couldn’t have been helped.”

The man’s admission that he had been in the wrong came as a surprise to the group of neighbors. Many of the men began to feel that after all they may have judged Miss Carter too severely. When the woman politely asked them to leave, after promising she would do all she could to keep her pets from causing anyone further annoyance, they quietly departed.

Fred Bunce lingered until the door had closed upon the last intruder. Nancy and her chums thought that he meant to berate Miss Carter again for Gus Woonton’s death, but he seemed to have lost all his bluster. He said meekly enough:

“I feel very bad about the boy’s death. Of course, I stand ready to take care of all funeral expenses. I’ll attend to everything. The boy can be buried in the Woonton family plot.”

“Very well, Mr. Bunce,” Miss Carter replied.

“Then everything is settled,” the man said in relief. “Neither of us will have to worry about Gus Woonton any more.”

No one spoke until the man had left the house. Then Miss Carter said in a troubled voice:

“Somehow I cannot trust him. He has no feeling whatsoever for poor little Gus. I believe he’s actually relieved because the boy is dead, though he acts otherwise.”

“I think so too,” Nancy admitted quietly.

Bess glanced at a clock on the mantel and arose hurriedly.

“It’s getting late,” she observed. “Girls, how about our starting for home?”

“Yes, we really ought to be going,” Nancy agreed, though she gazed doubtfully at Miss Carter.

“Now don’t you worry about me,” the woman said quickly. “I’m quite myself now. I’ll have no trouble at all in getting around.”

To prove her words she arose from the couch and took a step forward. The girls saw her wince with pain. She pressed her hand against her back and sank down on the sofa again.

“You’re not really able to be up and about,” Nancy protested. “It seems to me the wisest thing you could do would be to remain in bed for a few days.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. I have my pets to feed and the house to keep in order.”

“Couldn’t you get someone to help you for a week or so?” suggested George.

“I hardly feel that I can spare the money for a maid,” Miss Carter returned in embarrassment.

The girls had taken a liking to the kind-hearted and attractive woman and really wanted to help her. During their brief visit they had observed that she was not a very efficient housekeeper, and surmised that she might be impractical in money matters as well.

It occurred to Nancy that Mrs. Bealing, who was a relative of Hannah Gruen, would be just the person to set the household to rights. The woman was economical and an excellent manager. The Drew girl was sure that she would work for a very small sum of money, and that a matter of twenty-five cats would not disturb her greatly.

“I know just the person for you, Miss Carter!” Nancy declared.

“But I really cannot afford a housekeeper.”

"I doubt that Mrs. Bealing will charge you very much," the girl replied. "She's a kind soul who loves to look after folks. If you'll consent to having her I'll ask her if she will come."

"You're very kind to me," Miss Carter said gratefully. "So few persons take any interest in my welfare."

After making the woman as comfortable as possible the girls sped back to River Heights. Through Hannah Gruen Nancy communicated with Mrs. Bealing, who promised that she would go to Berryville if transportation could be provided for her. Later that same day the lawyer and his daughter drove the woman to Miss Carter's home.

"I hope you'll not mind a few cats," Nancy laughed as she led the housekeeper up the walk. "The place is overrun with them."

"I don't much blame the neighbors for creating a disturbance," Carson Drew remarked. "Twenty-five cats is just about twenty-four too many."

Nancy had brought several quarts of milk for Miss Carter's pets. After introductions had been made she thought she would return to her car for the food. Before she could reach the door of the house she heard strange tapping sounds.

"Was that someone knocking?" she asked.

"I didn't hear anything," replied Carson Drew. He had been too engrossed in his conversation with Miss Carter to notice anything going on around him.

Nancy went to the door, but as no one was there she decided that probably she had been mistaken. She went to the car, and as she returned with the milk saw that the garden was deserted. Scarcely had she closed the door when she heard the tapping sound again. This time the others noticed it too.

"Perhaps a woodpecker is on the roof," Mr. Drew said carelessly. He continued his talk with Miss Carter. "Now, concerning your difficulty with the neighbors—you need not be annoyed by having them come to you with their demands. If you keep your cats on your own grounds I doubt that they can prove you are maintaining a nuisance."

"Dear me, how will I be able to keep my pussies happy in their cage?" Miss Carter asked.

"Have you ever considered giving away some of your pets?" asked the lawyer.

"Well, no——"

"You probably would wish to keep all your beautiful Persians," Mr. Drew went on, "but it must be difficult to feed and care for so many strays."

"Each week more of them come to my door begging for food," Miss Carter admitted. "My Persians are well trained but the others cause me endless worry. I'd not mind letting them go if I could find someone who would take them."

"I know a veterinary who might relieve you of their care," Mr. Drew replied instantly. "If you wish I'll arrange to have him come here tomorrow."

Miss Carter remained silent for so long that the lawyer expected her to refuse the offer. Finally she thanked him for his kindness and said that he might make any arrangements he considered wise.

"I'll hate to part with my cats," she told Nancy. "I wish you could be here when the man comes for them."

"I'll try to run over," the girl promised. "I'm sure you're making a wise decision, though."

"There is one thing I should like to ask," Miss Carter said, turning toward Mr. Drew again. "I am afraid you'll think that I am greedy when I bring up the matter——"

"No one would ever accuse you of such a thing," Carson Drew smiled. "What is your question?"

"I have paid out a fairly large sum of money to the Riverside Home for the care of Gus Wootton. I was very glad to have done it although rightfully the burden should have fallen upon Fred Bunce."

"The lad's guardian?"

"Yes. I am sure he had money in trust for the boy, but was unwilling to spend it on him. Several times he and his wife went away from home for a week at a time and left poor Gus to shift for himself."

"How could they!" remarked Nancy.

"What makes you believe that the man held money in trust for the boy?" inquired Mr. Drew.

"I have no proof, but for a long while I've been suspicious of Mr. Bunce. Then, when he was so eager to relieve me of paying the boy's funeral expenses, I thought again that Gus must have had means. Fred Bunce isn't the kind of a man to spend his money on someone else."

"I agree with you," Nancy nodded.

"Coming to the point," Miss Carter went on, "I should like to know if it would be possible for me to recover from Mr. Bunce any of the money which I advanced for the boy's care."

"That would depend upon the administrator of the estate," replied Mr. Drew. "No doubt Fred Bunce will try to secure the appointment."

"Then it's hopeless," the woman sighed. "Fred Bunce never would admit that Gus left a penny. And certainly if he did, he'd never give me any of it."

She spoke no more of the matter. In a few minutes Nancy and her father left the house, bidding the woman a cordial good-bye.

"Dad, why don't you have a talk with Mr. Bunce?" the girl suggested hopefully as the two walked toward their car. "He lives in this neighborhood."

"Miss Carter isn't a client of mine, Nancy."

"I realize that, Dad, but I know she cannot afford to engage a lawyer. She's too proud to come to you and ask you to help her."

"I'm not sure that I could do so if I wished. If the boy Gus left any money, Bunce probably will be clever enough to get every penny of it for himself."

"Not if he were to deal with you," Nancy said flatteringly. "Oh, Dad, I do wish you'd talk with that man and ask him a few questions. Miss Carter is deserving of help."

"Where is the Bunce place?" Mr. Drew asked, beginning to give in to his daughter's desires.

"See that white cottage?" Nancy pointed eagerly down the street. "It won't take us a minute to talk with the man."

She tugged at her father's arm and he allowed her to lead him down the street.

"This isn't to my liking," he declared, frowning. "I'm doing it just to please you, remember."

Nancy and her father approached the homestead, observing that the garden had not been well tended. The grass had been allowed to grow very long, and dense bushes which lined the walk were in need of trimming.

As the two turned in toward the house, Nancy suddenly stopped short. Carson Drew glanced at his daughter in astonishment.

"What do you see?" he asked, for her gaze had centered upon a group of bushes near the corner of the cottage.

“Someone was watching us from behind the foliage,” she said tensely. “As we came up the walk I distinctly saw a dark figure slip around behind the house!”

CHAPTER IV

A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR

Carson Drew moved quickly toward one corner of the house while Nancy went the other way. No one was in sight.

"Perhaps you were mistaken, Nancy," he said.

"I'm certain I saw someone, Dad. However, it might have been Mr. Bunce or even a neighbor's boy."

"Well, there's no one here now."

After glancing about again Mr. Drew rapped on the door of the Bunce home. Footsteps were heard, and in a moment a thin woman of middle age wearing a dirty gingham apron over her dark dress appeared in the doorway. She had a sharp, unpleasant face.

"What can I do for you?" she inquired brusquely.

"Is Mr. Bunce at home?" the lawyer asked.

"He stepped out for a minute. I'm looking for him to come back shortly."

"Then may we wait for him?" Mr. Drew requested when the woman did not extend them an invitation to enter.

"I was just getting supper for my husband—" Mrs. Bunce frowned. "But yes, come in if you like."

Nancy and her father could not fail to notice the appearance of the living room. The rug had not been swept in many days, the windows were splattered with dirt, and odds and ends were strewn about everywhere. A heavy screen of smoke hung in the air, revealing that Mrs. Bunce had burned some dish which she had been preparing in the kitchen.

"Just sit down and make yourselves comfortable," the woman said, dusting off a chair for Nancy.

"Do you mind if I open a window?" the girl requested.

"I suppose you object to the smoke," Mrs. Bunce said tartly. "I can't open a window because my husband didn't put up the screens."

"I thought it seemed a trifle close," Nancy replied quickly. "It really doesn't matter."

"You didn't tell me your business," the woman said, turning toward Carson Drew. "You're not a salesman?"

"No, Mrs. Bunce, I wish to talk with your husband about a boy who has been under his care."

"You mean Gus? He's not here any more."

"So I understand. The boy died at the Riverside Home, I believe?"

"Yes," Mrs. Bunce agreed, "but it was none of our doing that he was sent there. He had a good home with us."

"I'm sure he did," agreed Mr. Drew pleasantly.

"We took care of him for years until that old Miss Carter made so much trouble."

"I imagine you received pay for your work," the attorney suggested casually.

"Well, naturally we took board money from Gussie's inheritance," Mrs. Bunce admitted. "But I wish now we'd used more of it. Who had a better right to it?"

Before Mr. Drew could reply, a step was heard outside and Mr. Bunce came into the room. He glanced sharply at Nancy, then eyed the lawyer with guarded suspicion.

"These folks have come to ask about Gus," Mrs. Bunce said quickly.

"What is it you want to know?" the man questioned abruptly.

"I am here in the interests of Miss Carter," explained Carson Drew. "I understand that she advanced money for the boy's care at the institution, and would like to be repaid from his estate."

"That's a good laugh. Gus Wootton's estate! The boy didn't have enough to take care of the funeral expenses. I'll be out a good many dollars for his burial."

"I understood from your wife that Gus had a substantial inheritance."

Mr. Bunce glanced angrily at the woman.

"Molly always gets things mixed," he said irritably. "The boy had a small amount of money left him, but it's been gone some time."

"You are prepared to give an accounting of the funds, I assume?" Mr. Drew questioned.

"Of course. Do you mean to suggest that I've used the money myself?"

"Not at all, not at all," Mr. Drew returned, unruffled. "I merely was inquiring in the interests of Miss Carter. If the boy left no money, then naturally she cannot expect to be reimbursed."

"Well, that's the way it is," Mr. Bunce announced flatly. "In the first place, she had no right to send the boy to an institution. Tell her she can't get a penny."

"I'll deliver your message," Mr. Drew smiled. "Good afternoon."

During the ride back to River Heights Nancy asked her father if he believed that Mr. Bunce had been speaking the truth.

"The man acted as if he were telling an untruth, Nancy. I'd not be surprised if Gus did leave an estate, but to prove it is another matter."

"I wish we could do something to help Miss Carter."

"Yes, but we have no right to involve ourselves in the affair, Nancy. I don't feel like pressing the matter."

The girl realized that her father was taking a wise stand, yet she could not help but feel sorry for the attractive, kindly woman who seemed unable to fight her own battles. The following day, in company with George and Bess, she went again to Berryville, there to meet the veterinary who had agreed to take away several of Miss Carter's cats.

"I'm so glad you have come," Mrs. Bealing said to Nancy in an undertone as the girls entered the house. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Too many pussies?" Nancy laughed.

"Yes, and other things too. I've been hearing such strange tapping noises."

"When was this?" Nancy inquired alertly.

"Last night. My bedroom is directly over the kitchen. I could hear someone tapping below me and it seemed to come from the kitchen."

"Didn't you get up to investigate?"

"Yes, I did, but then the sounds ceased. It was all so strange. And that's not everything. Someone has been poisoning Miss Carter's pets! She's terribly upset about it."

"I should think so," agreed Bess. "Are you sure the cats were poisoned?"

"There's no question about it. Three died last night and two more this morning. I found food lying in the yard and I'm sure it was placed there deliberately."

"You don't think Fred Bunce would do a trick like that?" George suggested.

"He's just the person I'd suspect," Mrs. Bealing declared.

The girls went upstairs to see Miss Carter, and were sorry to find her in an excited state of mind.

“I am glad the veterinary is taking most of the other cats away,” the woman told them. “Anything is better than to have them poisoned. How could anyone be so heartless as to do such a thing?”

Nancy and her chums remained with Miss Carter for half an hour and were even more favorably impressed by her personality. The woman had a dramatic way of speaking which commanded attention even though her words carried no great significance. She punctuated her conversation with graceful gestures, a characteristic that convinced Nancy the spinster might have been on the stage at some time during her life.

“I should like to ask her if she were ever an actress,” the girl thought. “When I know her better perhaps I shall.”

Leaving George and Bess to chat with Miss Carter, Nancy went downstairs to ask Mrs. Bealing if she could be of any help. The housekeeper assured her that the day’s work had been done, so she turned to go back upstairs.

As she crossed the living room floor Nancy glanced out the window and saw that a fine car had drawn up in front of the house. A chauffeur opened the door so that an elderly gentleman might alight. He came toward the house, jauntily swinging a cane, then pressed the bell. After a brief interval the Drew girl opened the door.

“Good afternoon,” he said, bowing and smiling. “Will you be so kind as to tell Ladiviolette that Horace St. Will is calling?”

“Ladiviolette?” Nancy repeated in perplexity. “Oh, I’m afraid you have the wrong house. No one by that name lives here.”

“I was certain this was the place,” the man said, showing his disappointment. “I must have been given the wrong street number. A thousand pardons for having disturbed you.”

He bowed himself away and returned to the car. Nancy watched the automobile drive off, then dashed up the stairs to Miss Carter’s bedroom.

“Has the veterinary arrived yet?” the spinster inquired when she saw the girl. “I heard a car on the drive.”

“No, that was a stranger who came to the wrong house,” Nancy returned. “He was asking for someone by the name of Ladiviolette.”

Miss Carter painfully raised herself to a sitting position. Her voice was excited as she cried:

“Lady Violette! Why, that is my name! I am Lady Violette!”

CHAPTER V

OLD COSTUMES

"You are Lady Violette?" Nancy gasped. "Why, the gentleman pronounced the words so rapidly I thought it was all one name."

"Lady Violette was a character in one of my plays," Miss Carter explained, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I have been an actress, you know. Who can the man have been?"

"He gave his name as Horace St. Will."

"Oh, I was his leading lady years ago! Horace wanted me to marry him, but at that time I was very devoted to my own family. Then too, I was determined to have a career. How I should have enjoyed talking with him again."

"Perhaps I can bring him back," Nancy said hurriedly. "The car can't be very far away."

She started toward the door only to have the actress call after her, "Wait! I dread to have Horace see me now. I was beautiful when he knew me and I'd like to have him carry that picture with him to the end."

"You are lovely still," Bess declared warmly.

Miss Carter shook her head sadly.

"At fifty a woman may have character, dignity and poise, but no longer is she beautiful in the same fresh way. Horace would find me greatly changed if he were to see me now."

"You could fix yourself up a bit," George said coaxingly. "Haven't you any of the old costumes you used to wear in the days when you knew Mr. St. Will?"

"I still have the gorgeous gown I wore as Lady Violette! It was designed at Milburns'. I have treasured it all these years."

Nancy now was convinced that Miss Carter really did wish to see Horace St. Will.

"I shall try to overtake the car and bring the man back!" the girl cried. "I believe I can do it if I hurry."

Leaving Bess and George to assist Miss Carter to dress, Nancy ran down the stairs and jumped into her car. Fortunately she had noticed that the other automobile had turned south.

The road, quite deserted, ran fairly straight with but a few turns. Nancy drove rapidly and very shortly was elated to observe that she was overtaking another machine. Soon she drew near enough to recognize Mr. St. Will's limousine.

So intent was Nancy upon overtaking the car that she failed to notice another automobile approaching the main highway from a narrow side road. The driver, ignoring the stop sign, emerged unexpectedly beyond the screen of trees, swinging directly into the path of the oncoming machine.

Nancy slammed on her brakes but could not avoid a crash. She pulled as far to the right as possible but even so the fenders of the two cars came together. One glance assured the girl that the damage had been trifling. She would have hastened on in pursuit of the St. Will limousine had not the driver of the car started to berate her.

"See what you've done to my fender!" he cried indignantly. "You'll have to pay for the damage."

Nancy recognized Fred Bunce and regarded him coldly.

"You are the one who ran into me, Mr. Bunce," she accused. "According to law you must make a complete stop before driving out on the main highway. If there is any claim for

damages I shall be the one to make it!"

Without waiting to hear the man's reply she shifted gears and drove away rapidly. The St. Will automobile was now far down the road. Nancy gradually gained distance, and when the big car turned into a filling station she drew up beside it.

"Oh, Mr. St. Will," she said breathlessly. "I've been trying to overtake you ever since you left Berryville. I made a dreadful mistake in sending you away."

For a moment the man did not recognize the girl. Then he smiled broadly.

"When you inquired for Lady Violette I had no idea you meant Miss Carter," Nancy added.

"Then she does live in Berryville?" the elderly gentleman asked eagerly.

"Yes indeed, and she's eager to see you, Mr. St. Will."

"We'll turn back at once," the actor declared. "I was deeply disappointed because I had failed to locate my dear friend. I never could understand why she insisted upon hiding from the world."

He thanked Nancy most politely for having gone to so much trouble in his behalf. She chatted with him a moment longer, then turned her auto in order to lead the way back to Miss Carter's home.

With the aid of George and Bess the actress had managed to descend the stairs and establish herself in the living room. The change in the woman's appearance was amazing. During Nancy's absence the girls had gone to the storeroom and had found the Lady Violette costume. Bess had arranged Miss Carter's hair in becoming fashion while George assisted the actress with putting on her make-up.

"Lady Violette!" Mr. St. Will murmured as he moved forward to clasp her hand. "You are even lovelier than I remembered you."

"The years have been kind to you also, Horace," replied Miss Carter graciously. "How good it is to see you again."

"You could have seen me long ago had you not kept your address a dark mystery," Mr. St. Will said chidingly. "Why have you hidden away from all your old friends?"

"Well, it is a long and somewhat painful story, Horace. Need we go into it now?"

"No, we'll talk over old times instead," the actor responded, sensing Miss Carter's reluctance to tell of her misfortunes.

The girls politely started to leave the room, but the happy woman insisted that they stay. Before Nancy could protest, Mr. St. Will asked his leading lady:

"Do you remember that last play we were in together, called 'The Tapping Heels'?"

"It was our greatest hit," Miss Carter declared happily. "I wrote nearly all the conversation myself. I loved the part we did together."

Dramatically she quoted one of the speeches from memory, and Mr. St. Will responded with his own lines.

"Oh, I wish you would act out the entire scene!" Nancy cried in delight.

"We would need several other characters in order to do that," returned Miss Carter. "But I have all the costumes in the storeroom."

"Couldn't we act out the supporting rôles?" Bess pleaded.

"Yes, run up and get the costumes," Miss Carter laughed. "I will teach you the lines. I've not forgotten a single word of the entire drama."

For the next hour the girls thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They dressed up in the beautiful velvet costumes and spoke the lines which Miss Carter wrote down for them.

Horace St. Will and his leading lady seemed to forget the other actors, so absorbed were they in their own parts. They played to each other, and Nancy noticed that the love scene was depicted with great depth of feeling.

“They still care for each other,” she thought. “How nice it would be if Miss Carter would decide to marry Mr. St. Will. They have so much of mutual interest. Both of them would be so happy.”

Mrs. Bealing had listened to the play from the kitchen. When the final lines were spoken she appeared in the doorway with a tray of sandwiches and hot chocolate.

“Intermission time,” she laughed. “I declare, I was so interested I scarcely could do my work.”

While everyone was chatting gaily and enjoying the refreshments, Nancy heard the doorbell ring.

“I’ll answer it,” she said, jumping up from her chair.

Fred Bunce was standing on the front porch. The girl’s first thought was that he had come to make trouble for her about the smashed fender on his auto. However, the man said sullenly:

“I want to see Miss Carter.”

“She has a visitor now,” Nancy replied, for she knew that the woman would not care to be annoyed. “Will you come back later?”

“No, I won’t,” Mr. Bunce answered crossly. “I know Miss Carter isn’t busy, and I’ll talk with her right now.”

Before Nancy could stop him he had pushed open the screen door and walked boldly into the living room.

CHAPTER VI

AN INTERESTING CLUE

Mr. Bunce did not seem to be the least bit dismayed to discover that Miss Carter was entertaining a friend.

"I'd like to know what you mean by sending a lawyer to see me about Gus Woonton's estate," the man began angrily, addressing the spinster.

"Please, Mr. Bunce, I prefer not to discuss business just now. I have a visitor."

"Oh, all right," the neighbor said abruptly. "But understand, you can't expect to get one penny of that money back."

With a cold glance directed at Nancy the man left the house.

"I'm so sorry that dreadful person came here, Horace," Miss Carter declared regretfully. "He is so unreasonable and has caused me a great deal of worry."

"He spoke of someone named Gus Woonton," Mr. St. Will said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I befriended the poor lad. Mr. Bunce neglected the child shamefully. At my own expense I had Gus placed in the Riverside Home. Mr. Bunce was satisfied with what I did at the time, but now he seems bent upon making trouble."

"Woonton is a very familiar name," Mr. St. Will said slowly. "You may recall that Ralph Woonton was distantly related to me."

"Why, I never heard you speak of it," replied Miss Carter in surprise.

"I did not know Ralph well, for he and his wife traveled a great deal."

"Gussie's father was a man by the name of Ralph Woonton," Miss Carter declared. "Surely they couldn't have been the same person?"

"I wonder—" the elderly actor mused. "I don't recall that my relatives had a son named Gussie though it is possible they might have. I believe I still have all the letters Ralph wrote to me."

"Do you suppose you could find them?" Nancy interposed eagerly. "Perhaps they contain information which would be of use to Miss Carter."

"I have the letters packed away in a trunk somewhere. I'll find them tonight."

"Would it be too much to ask that if you should discover any interesting information you would get in touch with my father? His name is Carson Drew and he has offices in River Heights."

"Mr. Drew is a well known lawyer who has taken an interest in my case," Miss Carter added.

"Let me write down his address," said Mr. St. Will. "I'll telephone him as soon as I have read the letters."

It was late when Nancy and her chums bade good-bye to Miss Carter. They had a great deal to discuss on their way home, for the day had been an exciting one.

"I've suspected from the very first that Miss Carter was once an actress," Nancy declared. "She's a dear and so is Mr. St. Will."

She drove George and Bess to their homes, then went on to her own residence. Carson Drew, having returned from his office, was digging in the garden. Nancy sat down on a nearby bench. While she watched her father hoe the radish bed she told him of her meeting with Mr. St. Will.

“That’s interesting,” the lawyer replied. “You say the man is acquainted with the Woonton family?”

“Yes. He promised to look through some old letters and see if he can learn anything which may be of help to Miss Carter.”

“I see you’re bound to involve me in this case,” the lawyer smiled. “I am willing to do what I can to assist the woman, but I really doubt that she will be able to collect a cent. Very likely Mr. Bunce has already spent any money the boy may have inherited.”

“Then he certainly should be punished,” Nancy replied feelingly.

She did not expect to hear from Mr. St. Will for several days, so she was surprised when the actor telephoned by long distance that same evening.

“I have just finished reading the Woonton letters,” he told Nancy.

“Did you learn anything of interest?” the girl asked eagerly.

“Yes, I believe I’ve stumbled upon something rather amazing, Miss Drew. I should like very much to show the letters to your father.”

“I’ll make an appointment for you,” Nancy offered. “My father isn’t here now, but I am sure he’ll be able to see you at his office tomorrow at ten o’clock. If not, I’ll call you back later tonight.”

“Excellent. I shall be there, Miss Drew.”

Nancy was deeply excited. She sat up until her father came home from a meeting downtown and assured his daughter that he would be able to see Mr. St. Will at the appointed hour.

“May I be there too, Dad?” Nancy asked. “I’m just dying of curiosity to find out what Mr. St. Will discovered in those letters,” she added with a teasing look in her eyes.

“This is more your case than mine, my dear,” her father laughed. “By all means come to the conference.”

The next morning at ten o’clock the girl was eagerly awaiting the actor’s arrival at the law office. His limousine drove up exactly on time. A secretary escorted the man into the presence of Carson Drew and his daughter.

“I hope I haven’t kept you waiting,” Mr. St. Will said as he seated himself.

“Not at all,” responded the lawyer cordially.

“Here are the letters,” the actor continued, taking a package from his coat pocket. “I thought you might like to read them yourself.”

“You mentioned over the telephone that you had stumbled upon something important,” Nancy suggested eagerly. “Will it help Miss Carter’s case?”

“The letters reveal an amazing fact,” replied the actor. “Ralph Woonton and his wife had no son!”

“Then the Ralph Woonton you knew couldn’t have been the right person,” Nancy murmured in disappointment.

“On the contrary, I feel certain that he was the person claimed by Bunce to be the father of Gus.”

“Why do you think that?” asked Carson Drew.

“Because I have taken it upon myself to do a bit of investigating since yesterday,” the actor replied. “I spent half the evening on the long distance telephone, but I feel well repaid for my efforts.”

“What did you learn?” Nancy questioned eagerly.

“First, that my relative, Ralph Woonton, employed a secretary some years ago by the name of Fred Bunce. While the Woontons traveled, he usually remained at the family mansion to look after business affairs.”

“That’s certainly interesting,” Nancy commented, leaning forward in her chair.

“Yes. Upon learning this my suspicions were aroused. I made up my mind that probably Bunce was a schemer. My next act was to talk with the police.”

“Has the man a record?” asked Carson Drew.

“Apparently not,” replied Mr. St. Will, “but I learned Bunce had informed the authorities that the Woontons had a simple-minded son named Gus living at the mansion.”

“A deliberate falsehood!” Nancy exclaimed.

“These letters from my relative prove that no child existed. It was always the regret of Ralph and his wife that they were childless and they talked of adopting a baby.

“The Woontons died in South America without leaving any will, or if they did leave any, none ever was found. Fred Bunce then came forward, claiming the entire estate for the boy Gus.”

“I imagine he succeeded in having himself appointed guardian too,” Mr. Drew commented.

“Yes, no other person seemed to take any interest in the boy. Gus was sent away to a school, but in a few months he ran off and returned to live with Mr. and Mrs. Bunce. They kept the boy with them until he was entered at the Riverside Home.”

“All that time the Woonton estate gradually dwindled, I suppose,” remarked Nancy.

“Yes, it is my belief that Bunce managed to squander nearly all that was left.”

“This case has several very interesting angles,” Mr. Drew commented. “If the Woontons left no son of their own, then I wonder who this lad is who passed under the name of Gus?”

“I should like to know the truth, too,” the actor declared grimly. “That fact is a mystery in itself.”

Nancy was of the opinion that Fred Bunce deliberately had schemed to secure the Woonton fortune for himself. She was highly pleased when her father expressed a similar thought.

“I should like to have you take the case, Mr. Drew,” requested the actor. “I have an interest in seeing justice done, and Miss Carter is deserving of aid.”

“She has not asked me to represent her,” replied Mr. Drew thoughtfully.

“Miss Carter is very proud. I doubt that financially she is able to ask the services of a lawyer. I will guarantee you your fee, Mr. Drew.”

“I’m not worried on that score,” said the attorney, smiling broadly. “I just would like to be sure Miss Carter really wants me to do the work.”

“I wish you would take the case, Dad,” Nancy urged. “I’m certain Miss Carter would be grateful for any aid you might give her.”

The lawyer was silent for a moment, then he said:

“This case does interest me. I’ll keep these letters and read them tonight. In the meantime, Mr. St. Will, do not hint to Mr. Bunce that he is under suspicion. We’ll conduct a quiet investigation. When we have gathered all our facts, we’ll spring our trap.”

After promising to keep in close touch with the lawyer, the actor left the office. Presently Nancy went home.

During the next few days the girl became impatient for action. It seemed to her that her father was doing nothing at all about the case.

“You must learn to take matters more calmly, my dear,” the lawyer chided when she spoke to him about it. “It would be folly to act too hastily in this case. After all, our evidence is not very complete.”

“I don’t see that we’re learning anything by waiting,” Nancy complained. “I should think the thing to do would be to arrest Bunce and have the police question him.”

“He would deny everything, and our evidence might not stand up. We have no proof that the man stole any funds. Our case must be air-tight.”

Nancy said no more for she realized that her father was right. The day following this conversation, while she was downtown to buy curtain material for the sun room, she saw a familiar figure. She was just turning into one of the River Heights department stores, when her attention was drawn to the man who came hurriedly down the street.

“Why, that is Fred Bunce,” the girl observed. “I wonder where he is going in such a big hurry!”

She stepped into the entrance of the store so the man would not notice her as he went by. Nancy saw him cross the street and enter a large white stone building. Her curiosity was aroused for she knew that the offices were rented to firms in the stock market business.

“I’m going to follow him!” the girl decided impulsively. “Maybe that is where he squandered the Woonton money!”

CHAPTER VII

DISTURBING EVENTS

Nancy reached the building in time to see Mr. Bunce enter a brokerage office on the first floor. The girl peered through the open door.

The room was crowded with persons watching stock market quotations being chalked up by a clerk on a large blackboard. Some of the customers were buying, others were selling, and there was a general air of confusion everywhere.

Nancy caught sight of Mr. Bunce standing at one of the desks. She sauntered into the room, confident that she would not be noticed in such a crowd. Pretending to be studying the figures on the blackboard, she moved close enough to hear what the man was saying.

"Listen, I'm an old customer," Bunce protested to the manager. "I have a sure tip on this stock. If you'll carry my account for three days I'll be able to repay you and make a cleaning."

"Sorry, but we don't do business that way," replied the broker. "You've already lost a large sum of money here, and we're not encouraging your account. Take my advice and get out of the market while you still have a little money left."

Nancy did not hear Bunce's reply. She had learned everything she cared to know. Turning, she slipped from the room and emerged on the street.

She forgot all about buying the curtain material. Her one thought was to reach her father's office as quickly as she could. Carson Drew glanced up in surprise as his daughter burst into his private suite.

"Oh Dad!" Nancy cried. "I've just learned something which may help us win Miss Carter's case."

"And what is that, my dear?"

"I found out that Fred Bunce carries a brokerage account at the Howard, McClellan, and Farrar firm." Thereupon she related what she had overheard.

"You believe that Bunce has been squandering large sums of money?"

"I'm almost sure of it, Dad. And where would he get the money if not from Gussie's estate?"

"Now that we have a clue, it will be an easy matter to have his account with the firm examined," Carson Drew declared. "We can trace down to a penny the sum Fred Bunce has spent there."

"That's what I thought, Dad. Couldn't it be compared with the normal amount of his income to see if he had been using funds which didn't belong to him?"

"Yes," Mr. Drew nodded, "that's exactly what we'll do. If we find anything suspicious, we'll institute a law suit, calling upon him to give a complete accounting of Gussie's estate."

At this point in the conversation the lawyer's secretary entered to say that a client was waiting to see Mr. Drew. Reluctantly Nancy said good-bye to her father.

She looked forward to discussing the case more in detail that evening, so she was disappointed when Mr. Drew telephoned at five-thirty to say that he would be late in getting home. Hannah and Nancy dined alone. After the dishes had been dried the housekeeper busied herself with crocheting while Nancy tried to do a little reading.

"For some reason I feel uneasy," she complained to Hannah. "I can't keep my mind on my book."

“Why don’t you go up to bed?” suggested the housekeeper.

“Oh, it’s too early. I’ll take a little walk outside. Perhaps that will quiet my nerves.”

“Your nerves!” laughed Hannah. “You haven’t a bad one in your body. You’re merely restless for something to do.”

“Listen!” Nancy Drew commanded suddenly. “What was that?”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

The girl moved quickly to the window and looked outside.

“What do you see, Nancy?”

“Nothing, but I was sure I heard a tapping noise.”

“You must have imagined it.”

“No, I’m certain I didn’t.”

Before Hannah could protest, Nancy had opened the door and stepped outside. The garden appeared deserted, but to make doubly sure of this the girl circled the house. Turning a corner, she stopped short. A ladder leaned against the building. Directly above it the window to Carson Drew’s study had been pushed up.

“Some thief has climbed there to search Dad’s den!” Nancy thought in alarm.

Quick as a flash she darted forward and moved the ladder away from the window. Then she ran into the house to tell Hannah of her discovery.

“The thief must be hiding upstairs this very minute!” she whispered excitedly. “You guard the stairway while I call the police.”

Nancy hurried to the telephone, but when she held the receiver to her ear there was no sound. The phone seemed dead. She clicked the receiver several times. Still there was no answer.

“The wires have been cut!” Nancy thought.

She ran back to the stairway where Hannah stood grimly on guard. The housekeeper had armed herself with one of Carson Drew’s golf clubs.

“I can’t reach the police,” Nancy whispered.

Together the two tiptoed up the stairway, pausing on the landing to listen. They could hear no sound.

“I think he must be in the study,” Nancy decided. “At least that’s where he entered.”

Cautiously they moved down the hallway and peered into Carson Drew’s den. Nancy snapped on the light. The room was empty.

They saw at a glance that the lawyer’s desk had been examined, for papers were strewn over the floor. Nancy did not take time to see if anything were missing. Instead, she ran to the closet and jerked it open. No one was inside.

“The fellow must be somewhere in the house,” she insisted in bewilderment.

For the next few minutes Hannah and Nancy searched diligently, but they found no trace of the mysterious intruder.

“It beats all how he disappeared so quickly,” the housekeeper said. “I wonder—listen, isn’t that a car on the driveway?”

“I think it must be Dad coming home.”

Running to the window, Nancy looked down. She saw her father and a young man alight from the automobile. As the latter turned toward her she recognized Ned Nickerson, one of her special friends.

“Where are you, Nancy?” Carson Drew called, entering the house. “Ned is here to see you.”

The girl ran downstairs to greet the visitor, and lost no time in reporting the recent excitement.

“Dad, I’m afraid your desk has been ransacked. Papers are strewn about everywhere.”

“I can’t imagine what anyone would want there,” Mr. Drew said with a frown. “I keep nearly all my important papers at the office.”

He and Ned led the way upstairs after first satisfying themselves that no one was loitering about the premises. The lawyer went through his desk systematically.

“Anything missing?” Nancy asked anxiously.

“Yes, the package of letters given me by Horace St. Will.”

“That’s strange!” Nancy commented. “How would anyone know you had them?”

“That is what I wonder. But they’re certainly gone. Otherwise nothing else seems to have been taken.”

“Will you notify the police, Dad?”

“No, I think not. I prefer to handle this myself,” the lawyer replied with determination.

After Carson Drew had straightened and locked his desk he followed Nancy and Ned down to the living room where they spent an hour discussing the Woonton case. The attorney could not understand who would consider the packet of letters valuable enough to steal.

“Mr. Bunce might want them,” Nancy suggested.

“Yes, but I doubt that he knew they were in my possession.”

“Evidently someone is afraid we are learning too much or the house wouldn’t have been entered,” Nancy declared. “I’d like to know who that boy Gussie really is.”

“Hasn’t Miss Carter any information about him?” Ned inquired thoughtfully.

“I am sure she believes him to be Ralph Woonton’s son, but it would do no harm to question her again. I may drive over to Berryville tomorrow.”

“Miss Carter must be an interesting character,” Ned said suggestively. “I’d like to meet her myself.”

“Then come along with me,” Nancy invited. “Perhaps together we can gain some clues which will help to solve the case.”

The following afternoon found the young people in the living room of the actress’s home, chatting about various events. Nancy soon led the conversation to the topic which was of greatest interest to her at the moment.

“Miss Carter, did the boy Gussie ever mention anyone besides his mother and father?” she inquired. “Did he ever speak of any other relative?”

“I don’t recall Gussie even uttering the names of his parents,” the woman replied. “He did chatter some about ‘Aunt Pretty,’ but I thought at the time he must mean me. Now that I consider it, I’m not so sure.”

The actress could give no further information, so after talking a few minutes longer the young people left the house.

“If it wouldn’t be too boring for you, Ned, I’d like to call on Mrs. Bunce,” Nancy remarked, glancing toward the white cottage down the street. “She might give me some hint as to the real identity of ‘Aunt Pretty.’ ”

“It doesn’t look as if anyone were here,” young Nickerson remarked as they drew near the house.

He had noticed several newspapers lying on the front porch, and two bottles of milk had not been taken in.

“The place does look deserted,” Nancy admitted. “But the furniture is still here,” she added, as she glanced through a window.

She went to the door and pressed the bell. Just then a boy of about twelve years ran over to the hedge which bounded the Bunce property on one side.

“There’s nobody at home,” he reported in a shrill voice.

“Do you know where Mr. Bunce and his wife have gone?” Nancy asked.

“No, I don’t,” the boy replied. “They went off yesterday with big suitcases. I heard them say they were never coming back.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLIGHT

"Not coming back!" Nancy echoed in amazement. "Surely Mr. and Mrs. Bunce wouldn't go away and leave all their furniture."

"Oh, it doesn't belong to them," the boy returned. "They rented this place furnished. I heard the landlord say they had damaged a lot of stuff too."

As Nancy and Ned returned to the car, the girl remarked with a frown, "Well, this certainly throws a different light on the situation. Bunce must be guilty of something or he wouldn't have skipped out."

"Didn't you say your father was taking action against him?" Ned asked.

"Yes, I suspect the man ran away to avoid giving an accounting of Gussie's money. I must telephone Dad at once."

At a drug store Nancy made use of a public telephone.

"There's no question but that Bunce left Berryville to avoid trouble," Mr. Drew told his daughter after he had heard of the situation. "Papers were served on him last night."

"What will happen now, Dad?" Nancy inquired anxiously.

"We'll have to postpone everything until the man can be located."

"I doubt that he'll ever come back to Berryville."

"No, not unless we bring him forcibly. The thing to do is to put a detective on his trail. Stephan Keely is just the man for the case."

Nancy was well acquainted with the detective to whom her father referred, for he often did work for Mr. Drew. She felt that if anyone could trace Fred Bunce he would be the person who would be able to do it.

"Keely is in the office now," Mr. Drew continued. "I'll speak to him. Hold the wire, please."

There was a brief wait. Then the lawyer told Nancy that Keely had agreed to take the case. He would drive immediately to Berryville.

"I'd like to have you wait for him," Mr. Drew instructed his daughter. "Tell him everything you know about Fred Bunce and introduce him to Miss Carter, who may be able to give him helpful information."

"I'll wait at her home," Nancy promised her father.

She and Ned were watching the road when the detective's coupe drove up. Before escorting the man into the house they told him everything they knew about the case.

"I'll take you now to see Miss Carter," Nancy declared. "She is rather sensitive about her financial reverses and doesn't wish anyone to learn that she was once a well-known actress with a large income."

"I'll be careful in questioning her," the detective promised. "Her secret is perfectly safe with me."

"Miss Carter really is a dear, but so impractical," Nancy went on. "Mrs. Bealing told me that she is supporting a young actress named Beverly Barrett. She sends money to the girl to live in style while she herself hardly has the barest necessities of life."

"I should think the girl would be ashamed to take the money," Ned commented.

“Miss Carter has led Miss Barrett to believe that she is in comfortable circumstances. When the girl writes for money the woman is too proud to tell her the truth about how poor she really is.”

“It looks as if the charming Lady Violette is too kind-hearted for her own good,” Ned replied. “She needs someone to watch out for her interests.”

Miss Carter was expecting the detective. After Nancy had presented him, the woman answered his questions to the best of her ability. She really knew very little about Bunce or his wife, and had no idea where they might have gone. Stephan Keely finally left the house without gaining even one worth-while clue.

In company with Nancy and Ned, the man next visited the landlord of the vacated house. Again they met disappointment, for the owner could give them no definite information about his tenants who had left so unexpectedly.

“I’d like to find Fred Bunce myself,” he said irritably. “He ran off owing me rent for two weeks, and the interior of the house is a wreck. I’ll have to redecorate the whole place before I can offer it to another tenant.”

Detective Keely refused to be discouraged. “I’ll trace the man if it takes me a year,” he said cheerfully. “I’m only starting my work.”

It was growing late, so Nancy and Ned bade the detective good-bye, leaving him to interview other persons who had known Gussie’s guardian.

“I wish we had asked the landlord for permission to go into the vacant house,” Nancy remarked regretfully as the two drove to River Heights. “It’s possible we might find letters or something of the sort there which would reveal where Bunce went.”

“Yes, I should think it would be worth while to search the place,” Ned agreed. “Speaking of letters, your father never found those which were stolen, did he?”

Nancy shook her head.

“No, and that’s another reason why I’d like to prowl around in the house. I have an idea that Bunce may have been the thief.”

“If he did take the letters one would think he’d be smart enough to destroy them.”

“Yes, but remember that he and his wife left in a great hurry. In that case Bunce might have overlooked them, although I’ll admit that possibility is pretty slim.”

Nancy made up her mind that she would return to Berryville the following day and get permission to search the vacant house. Later that evening she telephoned Bess and George to ask if they would accompany her.

“Of course we’ll go,” George declared enthusiastically after hearing Nancy’s request. “We’ll do everything we can to help you. And it’ll be fun, besides. I love poking around for things.”

The next morning dawned dark and gloomy. Undismayed by a prospect of rain, the girls set off soon after breakfast. Before they reached the home of Bunce’s landlord it had started to drizzle.

“You girls wait here while I run in to get the key,” Nancy suggested when they arrived. “I hope the man will give it to me!”

She was back in a few minutes, smiling, and waving the desired article. “Success!” she laughed.

Inside the vacant house everything was in disorder and it was evident that the Bunces had departed in great haste. Papers were scattered on the floor. In the kitchen food remained on the shelves and some of it was spoiling.

“I don’t blame the landlord for being indignant,” Nancy said as she glanced around. “It will take a lot of work to put this place in livable condition again.”

The girls set themselves to the task of searching through desks, bookcases and buffet drawers. They found many old letters and papers, but nothing to give any clue as to where Fred Bunce might have fled.

“The man probably took pains to destroy every scrap of evidence,” Nancy remarked.

Suddenly, before Bess or George could find time to reply, the three girls were startled to hear a plaintive cry. It seemed to come from one of the upstairs rooms.

Bess clutched Nancy’s hand very nervously. “What was that?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” her chum admitted.

“It sounded almost like a baby,” George declared in awe.

“Yes, it did,” Nancy agreed. “But how could a baby get into the house? The place has been locked up ever since Bunce and his wife went away.”

“I don’t believe a baby could make such a wail as that,” Bess insisted. “Let’s get away from here.”

“No, wait,” Nancy pleaded.

The girls remained motionless, listening. In a moment the strange cry was repeated. This time they were certain it came from somewhere above them.

“I’m going up to investigate!” declared Nancy.

CHAPTER IX

STRANGE SOUNDS

Led by Nancy, the girls tiptoed up the stairway. They could hear the wailing sound still and felt certain it came from a room at the far end of the upper hall.

“What can it be?” Bess murmured nervously. “No baby would make a cry like that.”

“It sounds more like an animal in distress,” George whispered.

Nancy turned the knob and was astonished to discover that the room was locked.

“Maybe the door is only stuck,” Bess suggested. “Give it a hard jerk.”

“No, it’s locked, all right,” Nancy declared, after she had tried again. “Is anyone inside?” she called.

There was no answer, but in a moment the girls heard the wailing cry once more.

“We simply must get into the room,” Nancy said determinedly.

She tried the key which the landlord had given her but it would not fit.

“Listen!” George commanded suddenly in a startled whisper.

The stairway creaked. Someone was tiptoeing up the steps!

Hurriedly the girls moved into a nearby bedroom, but did not have time to close the door. A man, whose face they could not see, crept noiselessly down the hallway. Warned by some slight sound which Nancy and her chums were unaware they had made, he whirled toward them, whipping out a revolver.

“Hands up!” he ordered sharply.

The chums obeyed, then Nancy began to laugh.

“Detective Keely!” she exclaimed. “My, but you frightened us.”

“Well, how did you get here?” demanded the man in chagrin. “I thought I had captured Fred Bunce.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to search farther,” Nancy replied. “We got a key and came to see if we could find any clues.”

“No luck, I judge?”

“None yet,” Nancy admitted, “but this locked door has us puzzled.”

“What locked door?” the detective asked in surprise.

Nancy indicated the room. At the same time the wailing sound was heard again.

“That’s queer,” the detective commented.

He went down the corridor and boldly tried the door. Satisfied that it was locked, he took a ring of keys from his pocket and patiently tried them one by one. Finally he found one which would turn. He pushed open the door and the group stepped inside.

“The sound has ceased now,” Bess said in disappointment. “But I’m sure it came from this room.”

“It did,” the detective agreed. “I heard it myself.”

The girls looked about them with interest. The room evidently had been used for the storage of odds and ends. There were several pieces of broken furniture, a roll of carpet, and a bundle of faded curtains.

Nancy explored an overturned box containing old rags. With a cry of astonishment she reached down and picked up something soft and fluffy.

“A Persian kitten!” she cried. “And here is another!”

“That explains the whimpering sound, of course,” Bess laughed. “How do you suppose these poor pussies got locked up in this room?”

“Because Mr. and Mrs. Bunce left them here,” Nancy replied, her blue eyes flashing. “The kittens are half starved,” she added, cuddling one to her. “Probably they’ve had nothing to eat or drink since the house was closed.”

“How could anyone be so cruel?” Bess asked indignantly.

“I wonder where the Bunces got these kittens in the first place?” Nancy mused. “They look very much like Miss Carter’s Persians.”

“Yes, they do,” George agreed quickly. “I heard Mrs. Bealing say that her mistress had lost several of her most valuable kittens. She believed that they had run away.”

“I’ll venture to say Fred Bunce took them,” Nancy said, cradling the pets in her arms. “But it’s queer he left them here, for he could have sold them for a good sum of money.”

“He may have gone away in too big a hurry,” Detective Keely remarked. “Either that, or the kittens eluded him.”

“I think a man should be jailed who would leave helpless animals to starve,” Bess said feelingly. “Let’s take the poor things over to Miss Carter’s house right away and give them saucers of milk.”

“Just a minute,” Nancy replied, stooping to look into the box. “We want to be certain there are no others locked in here.”

She pulled the old rags out on the floor, satisfying herself that there were no additional kittens in the place. As she was stuffing the clothing back into the container, she saw a torn scrap of paper lying at her feet. It bore handwriting.

“Detective Keely!” she exclaimed. “This seems to be part of a note. It may have been written by Mr. Bunce!”

“Let me see it,” the detective requested.

Nancy smoothed out the torn message. All save two lines had been destroyed. The words which remained read:

“—got papers from ‘D’ home, hid in tool chest in——”

“Do you suppose the writer refers to our home?” the girl asked excitedly. “‘D’ would stand for Drew!”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” the detective nodded, his eyes on the paper. “If Bunce stole the papers from your father’s den, and is the author of this note, he has hidden them in some tool chest.”

“Let’s search the premises,” Nancy proposed, starting toward the door.

Taking the two Persian kittens with them, the girls followed Detective Keely downstairs. They made a thorough inspection of the basement and the garage but no tool box could be found.

“We have a large one at home in our own garage,” Nancy told the detective. “Do you suppose Bunce might have run in there immediately after the robbery and dropped the letters into Dad’s tool chest, intending to get them later?”

“That is a possibility. The man may have been afraid he would be caught with the papers in his possession.”

“As soon as I get home I’ll examine the tool box,” Nancy promised.

Detective Keely kept the torn note for more intensive study, but said that he would be appreciative if the girls would look after the Persian kittens. They promptly carried them over to Miss Carter’s house.

“Where did you find them?” the actress cried in delight. “Of course they belong to me. I lost them last week, and I’ve been fairly ill about it ever since. They are my most valuable kittens.”

Nancy revealed where the animals had been found.

“Then Fred Bunce must have taken them!” Miss Carter declared indignantly. “I recall now that my kittens disappeared following one of his visits.”

Nancy prepared food for the pets. They ate as though they were half starved. After they had satisfied themselves, they curled up close to the actress’s chair and went to sleep.

“I never liked Mr. Bunce,” the woman told the girls, “but I didn’t believe he could be so wicked. He should be punished for his cruelty.”

“Indeed he should,” Nancy agreed. “I believe he will be, too, if Detective Keely succeeds in tracing him.”

Miss Carter was silent a moment. Then she said in a low tone:

“Do you know, I sometimes wonder if he really did go away?”

“Why, what do you mean?” Nancy inquired in surprise. “He and his wife were seen leaving with suitcases.”

“It does seem logical that he left Berryville—and yet I wonder. Someone has been prowling about our house for the past two days and it occurred to me that it might be Bunce.”

“You’ve not seen anyone who resembles him?”

“Last night Mrs. Bealing and I thought we saw a face at the window—we couldn’t be sure.”

“You might have been mistaken,” Nancy suggested.

“Yes, that is true, but we haven’t imagined the tapping noises we heard.”

“Indeed not,” Mrs. Bealing broke into the conversation. “After the lights have been turned out it has been very disturbing. A body would think the house was haunted.”

“Haunted, indeed,” echoed Miss Carter nervously.

“Can’t you localize the sound?” Nancy inquired thoughtfully.

“Sometimes it comes from one place, and then again from another,” the actress declared.

“I searched the house from cellar to attic,” Mrs. Bealing added. “We can’t understand it at all.”

Nancy could offer no explanation, for she too was puzzled by the strange tapping noise. She made up her mind that when she was not so pressed for time she would return and try to solve the mystery. Meanwhile she had important work to do for Detective Keely.

“Don’t allow the sounds to disturb you,” she advised Miss Carter. “Perhaps the wind is rattling a shutter or some loose object.”

The actress smiled and made no reply. It was plain that she did not agree with Nancy. For that matter, the girls were rather inclined to believe that the tapping might have a sinister meaning, but they did not wish to alarm the two women.

“I’ll try to get back tomorrow or the next day,” Nancy promised as she said good-bye to Miss Carter. “Perhaps then we can make a thorough investigation of the house.”

CHAPTER X

A BOAT DISASTER

Nancy's first act upon reaching home was to search the garage for her father's tool chest. It was in its usual place on the shelf by the window. When she lifted the lid, she was surprised to see that it was empty; everything in the box had been removed.

"That's queer," she reflected. "The last time I used the rose shears everything was here."

Nancy went to the kitchen door and called to the housekeeper.

"Hannah," she asked, "do you know what became of the garden tools?"

"Aren't they in the garage?" inquired the woman, opening the door. "That's where your father always keeps them."

"The box is empty. I thought perhaps he took out the things and put them some other place."

"No, I'm sure he didn't, Nancy."

"Then I'm afraid someone has stolen the tools. Have you noticed anyone prowling about the garage, Hannah?"

"No, I haven't. Oh, wait, there was a fellow around here yesterday. He was a colored man looking for work."

"Did you see him near the garage?"

"I was just trying to think," the housekeeper answered slowly. "He talked with me a long time and I couldn't seem to discourage him. As I went into the house I do recall that he walked toward the garage."

"Can you describe the man, Hannah?"

"Well, no, I can't, except that he had freckles."

"A colored man with freckles?" Nancy asked. "I never heard of such a thing, Hannah."

"Well, perhaps not really freckles," the housekeeper corrected. "But he had light colored spots on his skin that made me think of freckles."

"I shouldn't be surprised if the man you saw ran off with our tools. I wonder if Mr. Bunce sent him here?"

"Mr. Bunce? Why should he send the colored fellow to steal, Nancy?"

"It's my guess that something was hidden in our tool chest, perhaps by Bunce himself, and he was afraid to return for it."

"I declare, you talk in riddles," Mrs. Gruen said impatiently. "What could be hidden in the tool box except tools?"

"The Wonton letters," replied Nancy. "Detective Keely believes as I do that the prowler who broke into our house may have secreted the papers somewhere in the garage."

"That seems far-fetched to me. Why wouldn't the thief keep the papers once he had them?"

"You remember you and I were conducting a rather intensive search for the man, Hannah. Dad drove up with Ned about that time. Probably the thief became frightened and did not wish to risk being caught with the letters in his possession."

"What makes you think he would hide them in the garage?"

"Because we found a torn note in Fred Bunce's house which suggested that the papers might be in our tool box. At least that's the way we interpreted the writing."

“And the tool box is empty?”

“Yes. I’m afraid Bunce sent this colored man here to get the papers. He decided to make off with the tools as well.”

“I wonder if anything else is missing,” Hannah said anxiously. “Your father will be annoyed to hear about this.”

The housekeeper went with Nancy to the garage. As they searched about diligently a young man appeared in the doorway.

“Hello,” said Ned Nickerson pleasantly.

“Oh, you startled me!” Nancy laughed, whirling around. “I half expected to see a colored man leering at me.”

“Well, that’s complimentary, I must say,” the youth returned with a grin. “I’m pretty sunburned but I didn’t know I looked as dark as that.”

Nancy told him about the missing tools and her theory that they had been taken by a colored person who had visited the house the previous day.

“Why, I met a darky on the street yesterday!” Ned exclaimed. “He stopped me and asked me how to find the Carson Drew home. He said he was looking for work.”

“Did the man have freckles on his face?” Hannah asked quickly.

“He was marked in some peculiar way. Yes, I guess you would say he had freckles.”

“Then he’s the same man!” the housekeeper cried. “Let’s call the police and tell them to arrest him.”

“We have no proof that the fellow stole the tools,” Nancy reminded the woman. “You didn’t actually see him enter the garage, did you?”

“No——”

“We haven’t enough evidence to ask for an arrest, then. But I’m satisfied that he is the thief.”

Ned helped Nancy and Mrs. Gruen search the garage. Save for the contents of the tool box nothing appeared to be missing.

“Will you be busy tomorrow afternoon?” Ned asked Nancy after the woman had gone back to the house.

“Well, I usually manage to find something to do,” the girl laughed.

“I was thinking you might like to go for a steamer ride on the river. Our college club has chartered the *Goodtime*. The cruise starts at four o’clock and we’ll have dinner aboard the boat.”

“Oh, I’d love it, Ned!”

Nancy looked forward to the outing and was glad that Ned came early for her, because upon reaching the *Goodtime* they were able to have their choice of deck chairs. Soon other young people began to crowd aboard and it was evident that the ship would be filled to capacity.

As the vessel glided smoothly away from the dock, the orchestra started playing. Ned claimed the first dance, and then generously presented his college friends to Nancy.

“I wish you’d be especially nice to Harlan Bailey,” he whispered to her. “He’s not a very good dancer and some of the girls give him the cold shoulder. But he’s a good scout.”

Nancy found Harlan to be a sad looking youth with a very serious face. She readily understood why he was not popular with the girls, for as they attempted to dance he kept stumbling over her feet. The young man apologized several times as his face flushed with embarrassment.

“We might sit out the remainder of the dance,” Nancy finally suggested as tactfully as she could. “It’s stuffy in such a crowded room.”

The Drew girl did not find it easy to talk to the youth until she discovered that he had traveled extensively. She encouraged him to tell of his adventures in foreign countries, and soon was ready to agree with Ned that he really was an interesting person.

“I like South America better than any other country,” Harlan declared. “After I’ve finished my law course I’m hoping to go back there and live.”

Nancy mentioned that her father was a lawyer and suggested that her companion might be interested in calling upon him some time.

“I’d be almost afraid to do it,” the young man confessed. “Your father is so famous and I’m just a student.”

“That wouldn’t make a bit of difference to Dad,” Nancy laughed. “He’ll be glad to give you all the help he can.”

The couple chatted for a time about South America. In the course of the conversation Nancy mentioned the name of Ralph Woonton.

“Why, I knew him when I was eight years old!” Harlan exclaimed. “He and his wife lived next door to me. I came back to the United States but they remained.”

“Tell me, did the Woontons have any children?” Nancy asked eagerly.

“No, they lived alone except for a funny colored man who worked for them. He had queer spots on his face.”

Nancy became excited at this bit of information, but before she could ask another question her attention was drawn toward a deck hand who seemed to be having difficulties with Captain Staff.

“Don’t let me catch you in that room again, Penello,” the officer said curtly. “Now get back to your quarters!”

“Yes, sir,” the swarthy man muttered, moving off.

The fellow turned away, but in a moment glanced back at Captain Staff, giving him a look of deep hatred.

“That man will make trouble if he has the chance,” Nancy thought. “I wonder what he was doing to deserve a reprimand?”

Captain Staff walked away toward the bridge while the deckhand Penello disappeared from view. Nancy and Harlan continued their conversation for a time, the former asking many questions about Mr. and Mrs. Woonton and the colored man who had worked for them in South America. Presently Ned came to claim the next dance.

“I hope Harlan didn’t prove to be too much of a bore,” he remarked as he swung her out on the dance floor.

“Quite the contrary, Ned. He told me lots of interesting——”

Nancy never finished the sentence, for without warning the vessel gave a sudden lurch, and she and the other passengers were flung sideways, some of them crashing against the wall.

“We’ve struck something!” Ned cried, trying to help Nancy who had been hurled into a chair.

The floor remained at a slant so that furniture slid to the starboard side of the boat. Several terrified girls began to scream. Others fought for the exits. In vain did Nancy and Ned try to calm the fears of those around them. In a moment the first mate came running to the doorway of the salon.

“We’ve struck another boat, but there is no danger!” he shouted. “Keep calm! The vessel is not sinking!”

The dancers paid no heed to the words. With one accord they rushed for the open deck, all crowding to the starboard side.

“Keep back!” ordered Captain Staff. “Don’t crowd the rail! Some of you get over to the other side.”

Nancy and Ned, realizing the danger, started to obey, but the other passengers were too frightened to heed the command. Suddenly the ship seemed to quiver and shake itself. The deck tilted.

“The boat is overweighted!” Nancy cried in terror. “We’re going over!”

CHAPTER XI

A SINISTER SAILOR

Nancy felt Ned grasp her hand, but the next instant they were separated as their bodies hurtled into the cold water. They were thrown clear of the vessel and came to the surface surrounded by other struggling passengers.

The Drew girl glanced about anxiously for Ned although she knew he was a good swimmer. She was relieved to see him aiding a middle-aged woman who had served as chaperon for the college group. A number of men and women were swimming toward shore which was close by, but many more were trying to aid those who could not keep afloat.

Nancy saw a girl entangled in a deck chair, her head under water. Swimming to the victim, she quickly aided her by showing her how to hold the floating chair so that it would support her until a small boat could pick her up.

Glancing at the *Goodtime*, Nancy was surprised to see that it had not completely turned turtle. Having relieved itself of the great weight, it had steadied and remained upright, although with a pronounced list. Captain Staff, determined to stay with the vessel to the last, could be seen on the bridge, still shouting orders.

Not far away Nancy saw the other river steamer which had been struck. It did not appear to be damaged much, and small boats were putting off from it to pick up the screaming victims.

Gazing back at the *Goodtime*, the girl was startled to see a sudden flash of fire which seemed to come from near the bridge. There was a loud explosion, followed a moment later by a lesser report. Captain Staff either jumped or was hurled overboard by the force of the blast.

The man's body struck the water only a short distance from Nancy, who was horrified to observe that he had dived head-first into the wooden arm of a floating deck chair. As the officer remained motionless, the girl swam to him, grasping his coat. She realized that he had been stunned by the blow he had received. His face was burned.

Nancy supported the body as she signaled for one of the boats to pick her up. However, she had a long, tiring wait before a craft came alongside. Once during the interval Captain Staff's lips moved. She heard him mutter:

"If you find my son—tell him—there's money for him."

Finally the captain was pulled into one of the boats. The craft was overcrowded with victims so that it rode low in the water. The Drew girl, fearing that it might sink under such a heavy weight, refused to climb aboard and swam to shore.

An ambulance rushed Captain Staff, whose condition was serious, to a nearby hospital. Doctors who had volunteered their services treated those with minor injuries at the scene of the accident, performing artificial resuscitation upon several who were taken from the water unconscious.

Nancy, well trained in first aid work, helped the doctors as best she could, going from one person to another. She heard many of them blaming Captain Staff for the accident.

"There was no excuse for two boats crashing into each other in broad daylight," affirmed one. "I hope they jail Captain Staff for his negligence."

Nancy overheard members of the crew commenting upon the accident. With the exception of the deckhand Penello, the men held that Captain Staff had been blameless.

“I was more at fault than the Cap’n,” said one of them. “At the time of the crash I was takin’ my trick at the wheel.”

“Didn’t you see the other boat?” asked his companion.

“Sure I did, and I tried to give her a good berth, but somethin’ was wrong with the steerin’ wheel. I tell you someone must have tampered with the mechanism.”

“Tell that one to the authorities!” jeered Penello. “The steering wheel was O.K.”

Nancy wondered how the man could be so certain of his statement. She noticed that he went from one member of the crew to another, talking bitterly against Captain Staff. There was an air of smug satisfaction about him as if he were rather pleased at the outcome of affairs.

“That fellow knows more about the accident than he lets on,” Nancy thought shrewdly.

The girl recalled the scene she had witnessed between Captain Staff and the deckhand. Had Penello not been caught in a room where he had no business to be? The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that he had tampered with the steering wheel mechanism.

Nancy determined to keep an eye upon the man, but for the time being she was occupied helping the victims of the accident. All were wet and cold and many were suffering from shock. Fortunately, so far as could be told by the first count, no lives had been lost.

As Nancy did not mind her own discomfort, she remained at the dock as long as she could be of aid. Then Ned took her home, where she changed into fresh clothing and then met two newspaper reporters who came to interview her.

The girl was very careful to say nothing which would implicate Captain Staff in any way. She was tempted to tell what she knew of Penello, but decided to remain silent until she had gained more evidence.

After a while the men went away but Nancy was not left alone for long. Friends and neighbors kept coming to see her or phoning to ask her for an account of the accident.

Among the latter was her chum George, who was very worried. When assured over the wire that Nancy was all right, she added:

“I had planned to ask you if I might stay over night with you. The folks will be away. But if you’re ill——”

“Never felt better,” Nancy laughed. “Only I’m tired of being interviewed, and I’d like to get away from the house for a little while. Suppose you meet me in front of the Santo movie. Hannah has to leave now—her cousin sent for her to take care of her baby until tomorrow—so it will be fun for you and me to have dinner downtown.”

After leaving a note for her father, who was not to arrive home until about ten, to call for her at the moving picture theatre, Nancy hurried to the business section of River Heights. She spied George waiting for her in front of the Santo. She also glimpsed someone else, and without waiting to explain anything to her chum, she grasped her by a hand and hurried down the street.

“Come quickly,” Nancy urged.

She had caught a glimpse of a man in a sailor’s uniform. He was the swarthy Penello! Intuition told Nancy that perhaps this would be her chance to find out more about this fellow whom she suspected of being responsible for the boat disaster.

“Wh-where are you taking me?” George gasped as Penello turned down a side street which led toward the river.

“I don’t know,” replied Nancy, who wondered herself. “If he goes down into the Front Street district, I guess we better not follow him.”

However, the man slowed down presently and stood in front of a flashily painted building which bore a sign, “Egyptian Temple of the Stars.” The girls, surmising that he intended to enter the place, could not figure out his delay in doing so. To avoid suspicion they were forced to cross the street and look into the window of a flower shop.

“Maybe he’s waiting for someone,” suggested George.

She was right. In a few minutes a man coming from the opposite direction joined him. Nancy was so startled she could hardly speak.

“He’s the freckle-faced colored man!” she gasped.

CHAPTER XII

TEMPLE OF THE STARS

The two men entered the Egyptian Temple of the Stars.

"I wonder what kind of a fortune-telling place it is," said Nancy to George. "I'd like to follow those two, but—"

"The place is all right," replied her chum. "I was talking the other day to a girl who had been there with her mother. I'd like to learn something of my own mysterious future. I'll go inside with you. Only it may cost a good bit."

"I have five dollars," Nancy told her. "That should be enough."

"I have some too," added George.

Eagerly Nancy led the way across the street. A small card tacked conspicuously on the door read:

"The public invited."

The Drew girl reached up and pressed the doorbell. Almost at once a young woman with painted lips and wearing an elaborate Egyptian costume let them in. She glanced at the pair haughtily, then requested them to follow her.

Nancy and George gazed about with interest at the room in which they presently found themselves. It was decorated richly with gold and silver hangings, but the draperies looked old. The air was close and heavy with incense.

The Egyptian maid led the girls to a table in one corner of the room. Then she disappeared into an alcove.

"What are we supposed to do now?" asked George in bewilderment.

"I imagine a meal of rice and dates will be served to us," Nancy replied with a suppressed giggle. She added in a whisper, "I'd like to know what became of Penello and that colored man."

"Now that we're alone, please tell me what you suspect," said George.

Before replying, Nancy took from her chum a newspaper the girl had been carrying. It was an extra edition with huge headlines and an article about the boat disaster. Nancy confirmed that no lives had been lost in the collision. Her own name was mentioned in the story as a courageous girl who had assisted in the rescue work, and also had saved the commander of the vessel from drowning.

In another column a brief notation said there would be an official inquiry into the cause of the accident within a few weeks. The general belief was that Captain Staff had been negligent.

"The blame probably will be laid on him," Nancy whispered to George, pointing to the paragraph in question. "I feel sorry for him, and I'm sure that the accident was not his fault."

In guarded tones she explained to George the unpleasant episode she had witnessed on the *Goodtime* between the captain and Penello.

"The man will bear watching," she concluded. "If he is in a talkative mood, he may reveal some damaging evidence. I wish I could find him. I wonder where he went. And the colored fellow, too."

"Do you believe the freckle-faced one is the same person who came to your house looking for work?" asked George.

Nancy dared say no more, for the haughty maid returned bearing a tray. She served the girls with a watery looking soup and disappeared again.

"I can't eat this," George said in a low tone after taking one spoonful. "I'm sorry for the Egyptians if they have to eat food like this!"

"I'm inclined to think that this place isn't as prosperous as it pretends to be," was Nancy's guess.

The next course was no better. With dessert of a few pieces of fruit covered with many leaves there came a bill for three dollars. The girls felt they had been overcharged, but Nancy paid the sum without protest.

"Now would you like to see the mystic shrine and the Fountain of Youth?" inquired the Egyptian maid.

"How much will that cost?" Nancy asked cautiously.

"Oh, there is no charge, Miss," the girl said in a mysterious voice.

She drew aside the velvet curtains from an alcove, revealing an imitation gold altar. Nancy and George pretended to be impressed with what they saw.

The Fountain of Youth consisted of a gold basin from which flowed a tiny stream of water. Nancy and George were told that if they would drink from these waters they would be assured of everlasting youth. They might have one sip for fifty cents.

"I think I'll wait," Nancy said. "I'd rather spend my money having my palm read."

"We do not tell fortunes that way here," replied the Egyptian girl with a slight sneer. "Our astrologer Omar might consent to read the stars for you if you pay him a suitable fee."

"Lead us to Omar," George said jokingly.

"You must wait," returned the maid aloofly. "He is busy now."

She waved Nancy and George into chairs, then disappeared again. Apparently the girl had gone to make a report to Omar.

"I'll venture to say the astrologer is busy with Penello or the colored man," Nancy whispered. "I wish we could find out what is going on here."

"We've discovered nothing so far, that's certain."

"Let's do a little investigating, George. If we're caught they won't do any more than put us out of the establishment."

Nancy, with her chum close beside her, tiptoed across the room, and parted the curtains which screened a long corridor. As no one was in sight, the girls moved stealthily down the hallway.

They could hear the low murmur of voices. Walking toward the sound, they came to another curtained alcove. Cautiously Nancy parted the draperies a tiny crack. The doorway was barred by an iron grillwork, but beyond she could see a dimly-lighted, heavily-draped room.

A dark-skinned man who wore a long robe and had a white turban on his head sat on a raised gold platform. He must be Omar! In low, monotonous tones he was speaking to a man who stood before him.

"That sailor is Bart Penello!" Nancy whispered excitedly to George.

In her eagerness to hear what was being said she squeezed through the bars, George following her. The girls were still hidden from view by a screen of tropical plants, but were close enough to catch every word which was spoken in the fortune telling room.

"This is a queer place," George murmured in an undertone. "The incense is so strong it's almost sickening!"

Everywhere about them the girls saw metal containers from which heavy smoke issued. They correctly guessed that powder was being burned which provided the incense odor for the entire Temple.

Nancy glanced carelessly at the smoking pots, then moved closer to the screen of tropical plants. She could hear Penello speaking.

"I have one more question to ask, Omar," the man was saying. "It's about the accident to the *Goodtime*. Is there any chance that the authorities will trace——"

George tugged at Nancy's sleeve.

"Let's get out of here," the girl pleaded. "I feel sick."

"In a minute," Nancy whispered impatiently. "I must hear what Penello is saying."

"Please, let's—go," George implored. "I feel—drugged."

She slumped down on the floor. Terrified, Nancy tried to rouse her chum. For the first time she realized that she too was feeling drowsy. If only she could get her friend out into the air

That thought was the last thing she remembered. Dropping over beside George, Nancy fell into a sound sleep. In the adjoining room Omar finished telling the sailor's fortune. Then he called the Egyptian maid.

"Where are those two girls who were waiting?" he asked her. "Bring them in."

"I'm afraid they became tired and left," the waitress told him. "I can't find them anywhere."

"It was your business to see that they waited!" Omar said angrily. "We need every dollar we can get."

"I'll say we do," the girl replied slangily. Had Nancy been conscious, she would have noted at once that the speaker was not an Egyptian at all, but a very ordinary native of River Heights. "The landlord was here again," the maid continued.

"What did you tell him?" asked the man uneasily.

"I said you'd have the rent money for him in a few days. He promised to give you until Friday. If you don't pay him three hundred dollars by then, out we go."

"We'll have to get the cash somehow," Omar muttered. "This racket is playing out. I must think up something new. How much did we take in today?"

"The money is all in the cash register. It won't amount to eighteen dollars."

"Worse and worse," Omar complained. "And then you let two of our customers get away."

"It wasn't my fault," the girl whined. "You blame me for everything. I don't know why I work for you because you never give me my pay. If I should tell the police what I know——"

"There, now, I was only joking," the man said hastily. "You're a good scout. Forget what I said to you. I didn't mean a word of it."

After the girl had gone, Omar stripped off his turban and ceremonial robes, and dressed himself in street clothes. He then counted the money taken in during the day, but looked disappointed in the amount, which was smaller by far than he was accustomed to receiving.

"By the time I've paid my expenses I'll have nothing left," he muttered to himself. "Incense costs a lot, and that worthless maid always forgets to smother the pots."

The man turned toward the incense room, aware that the odor from the burners was stronger than usual. As he stepped inside he stopped short. Two girls were lying face downward on the floor.

"Now what?" Omar exclaimed in dismay. "How did they get here?"

He hastily smothered the smoking pots and then tried to rouse the sleeping girls. Time after time he shook them. It was useless.

CHAPTER XIII

OMAR'S SCHEME

Carson Drew was disturbed over Nancy's absence. The lawyer had driven to the moving picture show to meet his daughter. Upon discovering that the performance was over, and the girl was not in sight, he felt certain that something had happened to her. As the minutes became an hour, he grew frantic and began a systematic search.

Unaware that her anxious parent was combing the town for her, Nancy had slept peacefully beside her chum in the Temple of the Stars. Omar, as soon as he had discovered them, opened the windows and let in the fresh air to clear the room. Presently the Drew girl stirred and sat up.

"Where am I?" she murmured, rubbing her eyes.

"You remember nothing?" the astrologer asked her in satisfaction. Then to himself he added, "Ah, that is good."

"Where am I?" Nancy mumbled again, peering at the expressionless face of Omar. "Oh, now I remember—The Temple of the Stars."

The Egyptian scowled, for he had hoped that the two girls would have no recollection of what had happened. But the next instant he smiled.

"You fell asleep here," he said. "We are closing up for the night now."

At Nancy's side George stirred and finally sat up.

"Oh, I have a splitting headache," she complained. "It must have been that dreadful incense."

"Impossible," returned Omar. "Our incense is harmless. You probably dropped off to sleep because you were weary."

Nancy and George both knew better, but they thought it wise not to argue with the Egyptian.

"What time is it?" the Drew girl inquired, raising herself to a standing position.

"A few minutes after midnight."

"Gracious!" George exclaimed. "What will your father think! He'll be worried half to death."

"We must get home at once," Nancy agreed.

"Where do you live?" Omar asked casually.

Nancy gave her address, mentioning her father's name.

"So you are the daughter of the famous lawyer?" Omar questioned, his eyes glistening. "No doubt he will become very alarmed if you do not return soon."

"Yes, of course. We must start at once."

Nancy did not notice that the astrologer was staring at her thoughtfully.

"I will drive you home in my car," he offered suddenly.

"That's very kind of you," Nancy replied, then hesitated. After all, she knew nothing of the man and there was a calculating look about him which she did not like.

"Perhaps we ought to call your father first," George suggested quickly.

"Yes, may we use your phone?" Nancy asked.

"This way, please," invited Omar after a slight pause.

He led the girls into the hall and showed them the telephone. Nancy gave the number of her home and waited for the connection to be made. Suddenly the wire seemed to go dead. She clicked the receiver several times but could not attract the attention of the operator.

“Something is wrong with the phone,” Nancy complained. “I can’t get anyone.”

“It hasn’t been working well of late,” Omar said suavely. “Our service is very poor.”

Undetected by either of the girls, he slipped a wire cutter into his pocket. At his feet lay the broken telephone cord.

“Will you excuse me just a moment?” he asked politely. “I wish to lock up the other doors.”

Nancy kept trying to attract the attention of the operator. “It’s certainly strange,” she commented. “The phone went dead just as if the wires had been cut.”

“Nancy, that’s exactly what has happened! Look!” George pointed to the broken cord lying on the floor.

“Then the Egyptian must have done it! George, we’re getting out of here before that man comes back!”

Thoroughly alarmed, the girls fled down the hallway to the restaurant. The place was dark, and the tables had been pushed back against the wall. Nancy stumbled into one of them as she tried to reach the door.

“Be careful,” her chum warned anxiously.

The noise had attracted Omar’s attention. It had been heard also by a policeman who chanced to be passing outside the building. He stepped to the window and peered inside. In the semi-darkness the officer could make out two shadowy figures moving about.

“Burglars!” he thought. “I’ll get Hogan and we’ll catch ’em both red-handed.”

Slipping quietly away, he went to the street corner intending to summon the policeman who covered the nearby district.

In the meantime Omar had hurried to the restaurant room. His mind now was firmly made up. He had decided to kidnap the girls and force their parents to pay a large sum of money for their safe return.

“I’ll have no trouble in carrying out my plan,” he told himself. “I’ll lead them to the incense room. When they are overpowered by the odor, I’ll lock them up somewhere. Afterward I’ll send a note to their parents.”

Nancy and George were groping about in the darkness searching for the exit when Omar entered.

“Hello, are you in here?” he called pleasantly.

The girls knew that they must make the best of an awkward situation.

“Yes, we decided we’d take a bus home,” Nancy answered after a long silence. “We can’t seem to find the door.”

“You’re searching in the wrong direction. Here, let me take your hand.”

“I wish you’d turn on the light for us,” George Fayne complained. “This place is dreadfully dark.”

“Just let me guide you.”

The girls felt Omar’s hands close upon their wrists. His grip was like steel.

“Right this way,” the wily fellow said in a purring voice.

“Isn’t this the corridor we came down?” Nancy asked uneasily. “I feel as if we’re retracing the same route.”

“It is so easy to become confused in the dark.”

“There must be a light switch,” George said a trifle sharply.

“I will find one in a moment. Just come with me,” was the suave reply from Omar.

He opened a door and stepped back for the girls to enter ahead of him. Nancy hesitated. She could see nothing, yet she sensed that she was walking into a trap.

“This is the exit?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yes, only a few steps and you will be on the street.”

George moved through the doorway and Nancy reluctantly followed. Scarcely had the two stepped over the threshold when the door slammed behind them.

“That was almost too easy!” Omar chuckled wickedly as he turned the key in the lock. “But I’ll make sure that they’ll not create a disturbance.”

From the incense room he brought one of the metal pots. Lighting it, he placed it so that the fumes would filter beneath the crack of the cloak room door.

“That will keep them quiet until morning,” Omar laughed. “Now I’ll write the ransom notes.”

After due consideration the crook decided that he would demand three thousand dollars from Carson Drew for a clue which would lead to the safe return of his daughter.

“When he sends me the money I’ll write that I must have another three thousand,” Omar chuckled. “The Stars will never talk for less!”

He composed the note and stamped an envelope. Deciding to mail the letter immediately, he picked up his hat and cane, ready to leave the building. As the self-satisfied man walked down the dark hallway a figure suddenly loomed up in front of him.

“Hands up!” ordered a voice.

When lights flashed on, Omar saw two policemen standing before him. He was gazing into the muzzle of Officer Flynn’s revolver.

For a moment the Egyptian was shaken out of his composure. Then he decided that no one could know about the two girls who were locked in the cloakroom.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he said, smiling blandly. “Why this intrusion?”

“It’s Omar himself,” declared Officer Flynn in disgust. “We thought someone was trying to break into the establishment.”

“Oh, no, I’m quite alone here. I worked late this evening.”

“Well, I guess I made a mistake,” the policeman admitted. “When I looked into the restaurant I thought I saw someone prowling about.”

“I was merely taking the money from the cash register. Come this way, officers, and I’ll show you that the room is quite empty.”

The policemen followed Omar down the hallway.

“What is that strange odor?” Officer Flynn questioned suspiciously.

“Incense. I burned more than usual this evening.”

Omar guided the two men to the restaurant and snapped on the light to show them that the room was empty.

“We may as well go out the front way,” he said pleasantly, opening the door in the adjoining hall.

“I guess that was a good joke on me,” Officer Flynn said ruefully.

He followed his companion from the building. With a sigh of relief Omar locked the door and sauntered down the street with the policemen.

CHAPTER XIV

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Confident that he had escaped detection, Omar chatted gaily with the two policemen. He talked glibly of the stars in an effort to keep the officers' attention distracted, saying he would tell their fortunes free of charge if they would come again to the Temple.

So sure of himself did the Egyptian become, that when they passed a corner mailbox he paused and dropped the letter to Carson Drew inside. The two policemen watched the envelope fall through the slot, little suspecting the nature of the message.

However, as the group continued on down the street Omar talked a bit too freely. Presently Officer Flynn decided to watch the man closely. He made up his mind that the fellow might be trying to conceal something.

At the next corner Omar parted company with the policemen. It was then that Officer Flynn did a little serious thinking.

"Maybe that fellow was trying to pull the wool over our eyes," he told his companion. "Come to think of it, I saw more than one figure in the Temple. I distinctly remember seeing *two*."

It occurred to the officer that Omar had appeared anxious to get him out of the establishment.

"I'll go back there and take another look," he decided. "A fellow can't be too careful in this district. Goodnight, O'Brien."

While Officer Flynn was walking toward the Temple, Nancy and George lay unconscious in the locked room. For a time the incense pot burned steadily and then it went out.

After a time Nancy stirred and tried to sit up. Recalling dully what had happened, she groped about in the darkness for her chum. When her hand touched the girl, she gave George a gentle shake.

"What is it?" the other mumbled. "Let me sleep."

"Wake up!" Nancy whispered, trying to give her friend a little push. "We—must—get—out—of here—somehow."

"Where—where are we? I don't—remember a thing."

"That awful man—shut us up—in this place," said Nancy with difficulty.

With an effort George roused herself. "The door—locked?" she asked.

"Yes."

The building was as silent as a tomb.

"We'll die," wailed George.

"Keep up your courage," said Nancy, who was making a supreme effort to do so herself by tapping on the floor. After a few moments she managed to say, "Let's break down the door."

"It's our only chance," agreed George in a strained voice.

"When I say 'now,' " suggested Nancy, "throw yourself against it with all your strength."

"I haven't much," George said listlessly. "I'm weak as a baby."

The girls arose and prepared to push against the locked door. Suddenly they were startled by a tapping sound. At first they could not localize it. Then Nancy decided it was coming from a room to their right.

"It sounds—like the tapping of heels," she whispered. "Some one must be near by."

“Let’s call for help,” George suggested.

They tried to scream, but actually their voices scarcely arose above a faint cry. The cloak room was so stifling and they were so weak, that their efforts to attract attention soon left the girls exhausted.

Nancy and George gave up all hope of a rescue. As they collapsed on the floor, they thought they heard footsteps in the hall. Arousing themselves, they pounded on the door as best they could.

Several moments elapsed before a key was pushed into the lock. The girls were lying against the door, and as it slowly opened they tumbled out into the hallway.

“Begorry!” exclaimed Officer Flynn. “Where did you come from?”

Nancy and George stood up but could not answer at once for their throats were parched. The policeman turned on a light and studied the girls in amazement.

“If you hadn’t knocked on the door I’d have gone off without finding you,” he said. “I’d just about made up my mind no one was here when I heard that tapping sound.”

Nancy glanced at him quickly as she leaned against the wall. “Then we didn’t imagine it!” she commented. “We did hear you.”

“I guess you girls made noises with your feet too,” the officer said with satisfaction.

“I did,” Nancy replied. “I tried to tap in code.” She regretted having spoken, for Officer Flynn regarded her with suspicion.

“There’s something mighty queer going on in this Temple,” he said grimly. “I reckon you’d best explain.”

“We don’t—know anything—about this strange place,” George declared dreamily, trying to keep her eyes open. “We were shut—in that room by Omar.”

“He drugged us with incense,” Nancy added. “Don’t you notice the odor?”

“I noticed something. Say, aren’t you the same two that I saw prowling around in the restaurant a little while ago?”

“We were trying to get out,” Nancy explained.

“Say, what’s the matter with you girls anyway?” the policeman demanded.

“We were drugged,” Nancy said patiently. “I’m terribly sleepy now.”

Officer Flynn stared doubtfully at the girls, unable to make up his mind whether or not they were telling the truth.

“I guess I’ll have to take you to the police station,” he said finally.

“We’ve done nothing!” Nancy cried indignantly, shaking off the drowsiness for a moment. “Omar is the one who should be arrested.”

“We’ll bring him in for questioning too. There’s funny doings here in this place and I mean to get at the bottom of them all.”

“Please let us go,” George pleaded. “Nancy’s father will be very worried.”

“You should have thought of that before you tried to break into the Temple.”

“*We didn’t break in!*” Nancy remonstrated.

The officer paid no heed to her words. Taking each girl by an arm, he escorted them from the building and called the patrol wagon. Nancy and George had no recollection of the humiliating ride, for once they were in the vehicle they curled up and fell asleep again.

“Maybe they were telling the truth after all,” Flynn reflected uneasily. “They do act as if they’ve been drugged.”

He became convinced of this when the wagon reached the police station. The girls were so groggy that they could not even give their names, so they were allowed to go to sleep without

questioning.

“We’ll find out everything in the morning,” said the desk sergeant. “In the meantime, Flynn, locate that fellow Omar and bring him here.”

For over two hours during the period when much was happening to Nancy, her father had continued his frantic search. With Hannah away and the Faynes not responding to his calls, he was unable to get any clues. The family of Bess Marvin could give no enlightenment on the disappearance, and Mr. Drew hesitated to disturb any of his daughter’s other friends at such a late hour of the night.

“Nancy has been kidnaped!” he decided at last. He suddenly felt ill and heartsick as a new thought occurred to him. “It must be the work of that man Fred Bunce! It’s all my fault, too, for I should have provided my daughter with a guard.”

Mr. Drew’s first impulse was to notify the police. Then he decided that perhaps Stephan Keely would accomplish results in less time. Driving at once to the detective’s home, he aroused the man from bed and told him what had happened.

“I’ll get busy,” Keely said crisply. “I agree it’s probably the work of Bunce. Nancy had learned too much about him.”

Mr. Drew returned home at about three o’clock, hoping against hope that he would find his daughter there. He paced the floor, got a snack from the ice-box, tried to read. Hour after hour went by with no news.

At seven o’clock Hannah Gruen returned. Upon hearing that Nancy had not reached home, the good woman burst into tears.

“I’ve always said that some day the poor dear would get into a scrape she couldn’t get out of,” the housekeeper wailed. “My poor Nancy, what with all this detective work, she’s bound to do herself harm.”

Realizing suddenly that she was making it hard for Mr. Drew, the woman tried to comfort him and coaxed him to eat some breakfast. Saying he was not hungry, he presently went outside and drove down the street.

“If Nancy has been kidnaped,” he thought, “a ransom letter may come in the morning mail.”

Since the delivery would not reach the residential district before ten o’clock, Mr. Drew decided to go early to the post office. After the lawyer had explained why he was so eager to receive his mail, a clerk obligingly went to considerable trouble to sort through the letters. He handed out several routine business communications, then came upon the ransom note from the Egyptian.

“Here’s a letter that might be the one you’re after,” he said, offering it to the attorney.

With a trembling hand Mr. Drew ripped open the envelope. A glance assured him that the note was a demand for money. Nancy had been kidnaped!

For a moment the lawyer felt old and beaten. Then he carefully folded the note, and with a brief word of thanks to the clerk he resolutely walked from the building.

CHAPTER XV

HIDDEN MONEY

Nancy and George awoke after a fairly restful sleep at Headquarters. The strange events of the night were now clear to them, and when Officer Flynn came to question the girls, they told a straightforward story which was impressive.

“So you are the daughter of Carson Drew,” the man grinned at Nancy. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” the lawyer’s daughter replied. “I should like to telephone to my father at once.”

“The chief says to take you out to the Heights and check on your story,” the man answered after he had consulted the desk sergeant. “If it’s as you claim, you’ll both be released right away.”

The chums bore the policeman no ill will, for they knew he was trying to act fairly. During the ride to the Drew home he chatted pleasantly with them, telling about his own two daughters, Hila and Lila, who were twins.

“This is the house,” Nancy indicated as they came near her own residence.

Hannah Gruen, hearing the police car on the gravel drive, ran out to greet the girls.

“Thank goodness, you’re back safe and sound!” she exclaimed joyfully. “Where in the world did you go last night? You’ve frightened us nearly out of our wits.”

“It’s a long story,” Nancy said quickly. “I’ll explain everything later. Just now I’d like to have you tell Officer Flynn that George and I aren’t criminals or anything of the sort.”

“Criminals!” cried the housekeeper indignantly. “Whoever heard of such a thing?”

“I can see that we’ve made a mistake,” the man admitted. “I didn’t know what to think last night, finding them in the Temple of the Stars. Omar, the Egyptian, pulled a fast one on the police all right. He’s the fellow we’re after now.”

“The man meant to kidnap us,” Nancy declared. “I made a mistake in telling him my name. Is Father here, Hannah?”

“He went away early this morning without even waiting for breakfast.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“I think probably he went to see Detective Keely,” the housekeeper replied. “Mr. Drew was so upset that I didn’t question him.”

Nancy wished to find him at once, so while Officer Flynn took George home she busied herself at the telephone. Her father was not at his office, nor could she arouse anyone at Detective Keely’s residence.

It did not occur to the girl that Mr. Drew might have gone to the bank. After leaving the post office the lawyer had dropped into an eating place. As he drank a cup of coffee he studied the ransom note again. It read as follows:

“Place three thousand dollars in unmarked bills under the triangular-shaped stone at the foot of a large oak tree in Prichard’s Lane on Road Twenty. If you do this within the next twelve hours you will receive a valuable clue regarding your daughter. If you fail, or if you notify the police, you will never see her again.”

The message was signed with three X’s instead of a signature.

“Obviously, this is the work of a rank amateur,” Carson Drew told himself. “An experienced crook never would have written such a note as this and he would have asked for more money. I’ll bait my trap and catch the fellow.”

The lawyer went to a telephone and held a lengthy conversation with Detective Keely. When he had finished speaking it was time for the banks to open, so Mr. Drew took out three thousand dollars from his account and placed the bills in an old wallet.

“Now to find Prichard’s Lane!” he told himself grimly.

A road map did not show the locality. After he had inquired at several filling stations he learned that the Lane was nearly thirty miles from River Heights in a wild, isolated district.

Nancy’s father overcame his desire to make all possible speed, and drove along at a leisurely pace. He did not wish to arrive too soon for that might ruin his entire plan.

Reaching Prichard’s Lane a few minutes after eleven o’clock, the lawyer left his car on the main highway and walked slowly up the narrow road. There was no sign of anyone in the vicinity, yet Nancy’s father believed that his movements very likely were being observed. The dense bushes on either side offered ample protection for anyone lurking there.

A short distance ahead Carson Drew saw a large oak tree. As he came up to it he noticed the triangular stone lying at its base. Without the slightest hesitation the lawyer stooped and placed the wallet under the marker. Then he turned, glanced neither to right nor to left, and walked back to the car.

“I hope Detective Keely follows my instructions in every detail,” he thought, as he drove away. “If he fails, it will mean a long, hard search to capture the culprit.”

Mr. Drew drove directly home, intending to get an hour’s rest before taking up the search again for his daughter. As his car rolled into the driveway, a girl came running out to meet him. For a moment the lawyer could not believe his eyes.

“Nancy!” he cried, springing from the car to clasp her in his arms.

“Were you much worried about me, Dad?” she cried.

“Worried? Nancy, I’ve been half frantic. After I received the ransom note I was sure you had been kidnaped.”

“Dad, you haven’t paid any money!” Nancy gasped.

“Three thousand dollars. I left the bills under a stone in Prichard’s Lane.”

“Jump in your car and hurry right back there before the crook finds it!” the girl urged anxiously. “You don’t want to lose three thousand dollars!”

Mr. Drew smiled.

“I don’t expect to, Nancy.”

“The money may be picked up at any moment. Let’s go out there now and get it.”

The lawyer shook his head. “That would ruin my entire plan, Nancy dear. I mean to catch the fellow when he takes the money.”

“How can you capture him when you aren’t even on the scene?”

“Detective Keely has hidden himself in a tree near the entrance to the Lane. He has a pair of field glasses, so he will be able to see anyone who comes near the site of the triangular-shaped stone.”

“He might not reach the Lane in time,” Nancy said nervously.

“He is there all right,” Carson Drew replied confidently. “As I passed beneath the tree he dropped three pebbles as a signal.”

“I’d feel a lot better if you had the money,” Nancy sighed. “Anyway, Detective Keely’s time will be wasted, for I already know who sent you the ransom note.”

“Tell me everything that happened last night,” the lawyer requested.

Nancy revealed her unpleasant experiences at the Temple of the Stars and gave a fairly good description of Omar, the astrologer.

“He’s probably the one who sent the note,” Mr. Drew nodded. “The thing for us to do will be to have him arrested before he discovers that you and George managed to escape.”

“Yes, if he learns that we’re gone he’ll more than likely skip out.”

“Jump into the car, Nancy,” the lawyer urged. “We’ll go straight to the police station.”

This time the girl found a very different reception awaiting her. She and her father were ushered into a private room, and the Chief himself apologized for the suspicion cast upon Nancy.

“It doesn’t matter at all,” the girl said pleasantly. “Officer Flynn was trying to do his duty and I bear him no grudge.”

“The important thing now is to arrest this man who calls himself Omar,” Carson Drew broke in impatiently.

“It shall be done at once,” the Chief promised. “In fact, Sergeant Flynn went down to the Temple nearly an hour ago with orders to bring Omar here for questioning.”

“I’ll wait for him then,” the lawyer replied. “I’d like to talk with the fellow myself.”

“I think that can be arranged, Mr. Drew. Sergeant Flynn should be back any minute now. Just make yourself comfortable.”

Carson Drew and his daughter did not have long to wait. Scarcely fifteen minutes had elapsed when the door opened to admit Flynn. He smiled at Nancy, who introduced him to her father.

“Did you take your man into custody?” the lawyer questioned without preliminaries.

“I’m sorry to report that I didn’t, sir,” the sergeant answered regretfully. “I guess Omar got wind of the fact that we were after him. Anyway, the Temple is deserted.”

CHAPTER XVI

A THREATENING MESSAGE

Nancy and her father left the police station rather disheartened by Officer Flynn's failure to arrest Omar.

"The fellow may have gone to Prichard's Lane to collect the three thousand dollars," Mr. Drew commented, "though I'm inclined to think he became alarmed and fled the city."

"You've not heard from Detective Keely since you posted him at the entrance to the Lane?" Nancy inquired thoughtfully.

"No, he had orders to communicate with me just as soon as anyone should come for the money. It's fairly evident that no one appeared there. Let's drive out now and talk with him."

Nancy and her father reached Prichard's Lane in half an hour and parked the car by the main road. There was no sign of anyone in the vicinity, but as they came to the large oak tree the lawyer whistled softly. They heard an answering signal followed by a great rustle of leaves overhead. Detective Keely slid down from his hiding place. As he looked at Nancy a smile broke over his face.

"I'm glad to see you safe and sound, Miss Drew," he declared heartily.

"I'm happy to be here, too," Nancy replied. "I'm afraid you've had a long, hard vigil in that tree."

"I'm stiff in every joint," the detective admitted. "I feel as if I'd been up there for a year."

"Did anyone come for the money?" Carson Drew inquired.

"I've kept watch every minute, but no one has entered the Lane."

"The fellow must have lost his nerve, or else he was warned that the police were after him. We may as well get the wallet ourselves."

The three walked down the Lane, Nancy telling the detective of her strange experiences in the Temple of the Stars. Coming to the triangular stone, Carson Drew raised it and found the three thousand dollars lying there untouched.

"We may as well take it with us," he decided. "It's very unlikely that Omar will show up here now."

Pocketing the money, he led the way back to the automobile.

"What's our next move, Mr. Drew?" asked the detective. "Am I to keep on trying to locate Bunce or do you want me to pick up this fortune teller's trail?"

"For the time being we'll concentrate on the latter," the lawyer replied.

"We may discover Fred Bunce has some connection with Omar," said Nancy.

"What makes you think that?" Mr. Drew asked quickly.

"Everyone assumes that Omar is an Egyptian because he advertises himself as such and dresses in ceremonial robes. As I watched him in the Temple I had a feeling that he might be a Negro."

"Egyptians are dark-skinned, Nancy."

"I realize that, but somehow Omar doesn't look like an Egyptian. His features are not sharp enough. He closely resembles another freckle-faced colored man who entered the Temple. And that man I suspect as the one who stole the papers from your den to give to Bunce."

"That's wonderful reasoning," complimented Keely.

“Indeed it is,” added the girl’s father, smiling at his daughter. “That’s interesting information, too, about the two dark-skinned men. Omar may be an impostor. Possibly he’s closely related to the freckle-faced colored man.”

“They look almost like brothers,” Nancy maintained.

“I’m not satisfied with Officer Flynn’s investigation of the Temple,” Mr. Drew declared. “Let’s go there ourselves and see if we can learn anything which will support Nancy’s theory.”

The three went directly to the place, only to find the establishment locked and deserted. Mr. Drew located the landlord. Upon showing the man the detective’s badge the group was admitted to the quarters formerly occupied by Omar.

Nancy led her father and the detective through the rooms, showing them the place where she and George had been overcome by the incense fumes. The landlord lingered in the background until Mr. Drew turned to question him.

“How long has Omar rented this place?” he inquired.

“About six months now, sir,” responded the man. “I swear I didn’t know anything wrong was going on here. The fellow kept to himself and I thought he was running a respectable place.”

“I doubt that the police will blame you, providing you cooperate with them in trying to find the fellow.”

“I’d like to find him myself, sir. The scoundrel took his bags and skipped out, owing me three months back rent. He’s heavily in debt at several stores in the neighborhood, too.”

“Did you ever see a freckle-faced colored man come here?”

“Oh yes, he was Omar’s best customer. I think he came nearly every day. Sometimes he stayed all night.”

Nancy and her father exchanged quick glances. This information tended to confirm the girl’s belief that Omar and the colored man might be related.

“Did they ever leave the Temple together?”

“Not that I ever noticed, sir.”

“Omar probably would be too cautious for that,” Mr. Drew remarked reflectively. “Well, thank you very much. Your information should prove valuable.”

The landlord let them out of the building, carefully locking the door afterward.

“I wish you would keep a close watch for Omar and the colored man,” Mr. Drew instructed him. “If either of them should return here, notify the police at once.”

“I’ll do that,” promised the man.

Mr. Drew and Detective Keely wished to stop at the police station, so Nancy went home alone. After changing into fresh clothing, she decided that she would pay Captain Staff a visit at the hospital.

“You manage to keep on the go every minute,” Hannah Gruen protested with a sigh. “I declare, I don’t see how you find the energy.”

“I’ve had plenty of sleep since yesterday,” Nancy laughed. “I feel I should visit Captain Staff. Since the accident all his friends have deserted him, I hear.”

At the hospital the girl was told that she should walk up to Room 305. Through the open door she saw that the patient was alone. His head was bandaged so that only his eyes, nose, and mouth were visible.

“I don’t believe you remember me,” Nancy said quietly, pausing by the bedside.

“You are the girl who pulled me out of the water,” the man said dully, staring at her. “Why didn’t you let me drown?”

“Why, Captain Staff! Surely you have a great deal for which to live.”

The man shook his head.

“I am dishonored by the disaster to my ship. Everyone blames me, although it was not my fault. Insurance claims pour in from every side. Very likely my papers will be taken from me and I’ll not be allowed to sail a ship again.”

“Surely you’re taking the most gloomy outlook, Captain Staff. Even if you should retire you could have a happy life.”

“I have no friends or relatives and a ship has always been my home. It was different before my son was lost—now I have no real reason for living.”

Before Nancy could say anything cheering a nurse entered and indicated that the girl must leave.

“How is Captain Staff’s condition?” Nancy asked when they were alone in the hallway.

“He will recover,” the nurse replied, “at least from his physical difficulties. But he is distressed mentally and for that reason the doctor does not allow him to have many visitors. Yesterday newspaper men managed to get to him, and they upset him with their accusations.”

“The papers have abused the man shamefully,” Nancy said soberly. “I feel very sorry for him.”

She left the hospital, reflecting that someone should take it upon himself to defend the man.

“If only I had proof that Penello tampered with the ship’s mechanism!” she thought. “However, it would be very unwise of me to suggest such a thing unless I could offer evidence to support my theory.”

Later that day Ned Nickerson came to the Drew home, bringing along his friend, Harlan Bailey. The conversation naturally centered about the boat disaster.

“Harlan, do you remember overhearing an argument between Captain Staff and a sailor?” Nancy asked the young man. “We were sitting on deck at the time when the captain warned the fellow not to go near a certain room again.”

“Now that you speak of it, I do.”

“Would you be willing to swear in court to such a statement?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then I’m going to tell the insurance claim agents what I know of the case,” Nancy said with decision. “If we both say that the sailor Penello had been caught where he had no business to be, they’ll question him. More of the truth may come out.”

“It looks like the square thing to do, Nancy,” Ned approved. “Captain Staff can’t say a word in his own defense.”

“I’ll go with you to the insurance office right now if you say the word,” Harlan declared. “I was strongly drawn to Captain Staff, and I’d like to help him.”

The three friends lost no time in visiting the insurance company where they talked with several of the officials. They were asked to make sworn statements regarding the conversation between Captain Staff and the sailor Penello.

“We’ll have our special investigators work on this new angle of the case,” Nancy was told. “Something interesting may develop within the next twenty-four hours. Thank you very much for coming to us. We appreciate your help.”

As far as the girl was concerned, something interesting did develop as a result of the conversation. When she opened a newspaper the following morning, she saw her own name in

large type, accompanied by the statement she had made to the insurance company. The officials were demanding a complete investigation of the *Goodtime's* steering mechanism.

"I've certainly stirred up a hornet's nest," Nancy thought uneasily. "I only hope something comes out of this which will be of help to Captain Staff."

She read the newspaper story over again and had just put it away when Hannah came to tell her that she was wanted on the telephone.

"It's a man," the housekeeper reported, "and he wouldn't give his name."

The girl picked up the receiver.

"Is this Nancy Drew?" a gruff voice demanded.

"Yes," the girl responded. "Who is speaking, please?"

"Never mind who I am. Listen! Pipe off to the newspapers just once more and it will be the worse for you! Get me?"

Nancy was certain she recognized the voice, so she decided upon a daring move.

"No, I don't understand you at all, Mr. Penello," she said distinctly. "Why not come to my house and we'll talk over this matter."

CHAPTER XVII

TRAVELERS

"I don't know who you think I am," the man on the telephone replied to Nancy. "My name ain't Penello."

"Then who are you?" asked the girl.

"I'm not tellin' my name. But get this straight! Don't be runnin' to the newspapers or the police with your rattle-brained ideas, or you'll find yourself in real trouble!"

"I'm not the least bit afraid of your threats," Nancy replied coldly. "And I'm quite certain your name is Penello. For that matter, I have seen you during the past twenty-four hours at the Temple of the Stars. You are friendly with the man who tried to kidnap me."

"That's a lie," muttered the voice on the wire.

Then the receiver clicked and Nancy knew that the man had hung up.

"It was Penello all right," she thought. "I succeeded in frightening him, too. I don't believe he'll dare make any trouble for me."

Carson Drew did not share his daughter's confidence. Returning home that evening he was alarmed to hear of the threat.

"Nancy, I wish you would go away for a week or two until this matter dies down," he said anxiously. "I feel that you're not very safe here in River Heights."

"Oh, Dad, I'll be careful," his daughter protested. "Besides, I'm not afraid of a man like Penello."

"You don't know what he will do if he thinks you are trying to put him in jail. He may be closely connected with Omar."

The Drew girl considered her father's advice several moments before replying.

"Please don't ask me to go away just now," Nancy pleaded. "I promise to be very watchful and careful."

Carson Drew said no more for the time being. He considered hiring a bodyguard but gave up the idea, realizing that it would be very unpleasant for Nancy, who loved freedom.

The next day the girl went to Berryville to visit Miss Carter who had sent a sympathetic little note upon reading of the boat disaster. Arriving at the home, Nancy learned that the woman was asleep, so she lingered in the kitchen for a time to chat with Mrs. Bealing.

"How have things been going here?" she asked the housekeeper.

"Oh, fairly well," Mrs. Bealing responded after a slight hesitation.

"You don't sound entirely satisfied."

"It's not that, Nancy. I adore Miss Carter but she's so impractical. I'm sure she'll be destitute before the end of a year."

"Is she careless with her money?"

"She doesn't spend a nickel on herself. It's that girl in New York—Beverly Barrett. Every few days she writes for more money and Miss Carter always sends it to her. Beverly has to have music and French lessons, besides instruction in voice culture."

"Why is Miss Carter so devoted to her?"

"I'm sure I don't know, except that she believes the girl will make a wonderful actress. Someone should tell Beverly Barrett the truth!"

"It does seem a pity that the young woman squanders so much money when Miss Carter is almost in poverty," Nancy said thoughtfully.

"Some folks are selfish and grasping. I have no patience with them myself. I'm almost tempted to go to New York and tell that girl a thing or two!"

"She probably doesn't understand the situation, Mrs. Bealing. Miss Carter may have led her to believe she has plenty of money."

"Yes, I suppose it's unfair to blame the girl entirely. I know for a fact that Miss Carter has never given her a hint of her true financial state."

"Has anything else gone wrong?" Nancy asked after a moment. She had observed that Mrs. Bealing appeared more nervous than usual.

"We've been annoyed by that tapping sound again," the housekeeper revealed. "It bothers me more than it does Miss Carter."

"I thought surely the cause would be discovered before this time," Nancy said, frowning. "It must be the wind rattling something loose."

"That might be true if the tapping sound would always come from the same place in the house but it doesn't. Last night I heard it very plainly in the basement."

"Let's look down there now," Nancy suggested.

"It's of absolutely no use. I've been down in the cellar a dozen times. This morning I heard the noise again and it seemed to come from the attic. It's enough to drive a body wild."

"I don't wonder you're nervous, Mrs. Bealing."

"I've never really believed in ghosts or the like, but now I'm beginning to wonder if maybe this old house isn't haunted after all."

"You'll discover the explanation one of these days," Nancy laughed. "Of course the place isn't haunted."

She lowered her voice as a step was heard on the stairway. Miss Carter, awake by this time, was coming slowly down to the living room. She greeted Nancy warmly, chiding the housekeeper for not having called her.

"I've been here only a minute," Nancy told the actress. "We'll still have time for a long chat."

First the woman asked to be told everything about the steamship disaster and the attempted kidnaping. When those subjects had been exhausted she led Nancy to the shed to show her a new litter of Persian kittens.

"They were born two days ago," Miss Carter said proudly.

She reached down and picked up one of the pets.

"I'd like to have you accept this little fellow, Nancy, as soon as he's old enough to be taken away," she urged. "You've done so much for me."

"I'd love to keep the kitten!" Nancy cried in delight. "He's such a fluffy little darling."

It was growing late, so in a few minutes she said good-bye to Miss Carter. Before leaving the house she quietly asked Mrs. Bealing for the New York address of the actress Beverly Barrett.

"You don't intend to visit her, surely?" the housekeeper inquired in surprise.

"I might take a trip to New York," Nancy admitted. "Dad wants me to leave River Heights for a few days."

That very evening at the dinner table her father again broached the subject saying he would prefer having his daughter go away. He declared he thought it an excellent plan for her to spend several days in the city.

“Why not take George and Bess with you?” he suggested. “You girls could do a little shopping, see a few good plays, and have a nice time.”

“We could manage to keep busy all right.”

“By the time you get back here the case may be settled.”

“I hope it won’t be entirely cleared up,” Nancy said ruefully. “I’d like to help with it a little bit.”

“Until that fellow Omar is captured I consider it dangerous for both you and George to remain in River Heights.”

“I don’t mind going to New York for a few days, but I can’t agree to stay away longer than a week.”

“Even a week will be of help,” Mr. Drew smiled. “If George and Bess are able to go with you I’ll make reservations for you on the morning train.”

Both the Marvins and the Faynes agreed that their daughters might make the journey. The girls packed their luggage and were waiting at the station the next morning when the heavy train pulled in.

Nancy and her chums bade good-bye to their parents and took their seats in the car. They glanced about curiously, for it was the first time they had traveled on one of the newer and faster electric trains.

“There is Mr. St. Will!” Nancy exclaimed suddenly as she noticed a passenger farther down the aisle.

The handsome gentleman, seeing the girls at the same moment, came to speak to them.

“Well, well, it is a pleasure to meet you again,” he said cordially. “Are you traveling far?”

“We’re on our way to New York,” Nancy answered.

“That is my destination also,” the actor smiled. “A certain producer has called me there for consultation.”

“Are you planning to return to the stage?” Nancy asked with interest.

“I think not. What I hope to do is interest a producer in a revival of ‘The Tapping Heels.’”

“That is Miss Carter’s play!” Nancy exclaimed with pleasure.

“Quite so. It is an excellent piece of character writing. I know just the actress to take the leading part.”

“If the play should be revived Miss Carter would draw a royalty again, wouldn’t she?” Nancy asked reflectively.

“Yes, she undoubtedly would profit well.”

Nancy studied Mr. St. Will curiously. She felt certain that the actor’s chief reason in recommending the drama was to aid his old friend. Of course it would be useless to ask him if this were true, for he would deny his generous motives. Perhaps the man read the girl’s thoughts, for he said quickly:

“‘The Tapping Heels’ never received the recognition that it deserved. It is a fine piece of writing. Otherwise I should never have suggested that it be revived on the stage.”

“I wish Miss Carter could take the leading rôle herself,” the romantic Bess remarked.

Mr. St. Will shook his head.

“It must be played by a young person.”

“You mentioned that you had someone in mind,” Nancy remarked by way of suggestion.

“Yes, I am acquainted with a talented young actress in New York who could handle the part very well. She is not as experienced as some, it is true, but she has great talent. Beverly Barrett’s only fault is that she is too temperamental.”

“Beverly Barrett!” gasped Bess, startled by the familiar name.

Nancy sent her chum a quick, warning glance. She did not wish Mr. St. Will to know that they were aware of Miss Carter’s connection with the rising young actress.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW

“Are you acquainted with Beverly Barrett?” Mr. St. Will inquired, turning to Bess.

“Oh, no,” the girl stammered, “but I’ve heard her name mentioned.”

“Her pictures are lovely,” added George.

Nancy wondered if the actor might be going to New York on a mission similar to their own. Surely he must have learned that Miss Carter was supporting the young woman.

Apparently the topic of conversation seemed a dangerous one to Mr. St. Will, for he quickly changed it. After talking with the girls for half an hour he went back to the observation car.

Nancy and her chums, weary of riding by the time they reached New York, were glad to arrive at their destination. According to a prearranged plan, Bess’s Aunt Helen Miller was to meet the girls in the station. They glanced about eagerly as they followed their red-capped porters to the gate.

“There she is!” Bess cried suddenly, indicating a plump, jolly looking woman in a gray suit. “See! She’s waving to us!”

Mrs. Miller gave her niece an enthusiastic kiss and had a warm handclasp for Nancy and George.

“Did you have a nice trip?” she asked, escorting them to a taxi cab.

“Yes, very pleasant,” Bess assured her. “We met a friend, and time passed quickly.”

The girls looked about the station but did not see Mr. St. Will. Evidently he had taken his time in leaving the train. They were sorry they had not learned where he expected to stay while in the city.

“This is where I live,” said Mrs. Miller presently as the taxi drew up in front of a tall brick apartment building overlooking a park.

An elevator took the group to the third floor where their hostess led the way to Suite 23. The girls exclaimed with admiration as they entered the living room for it had been decorated very attractively. Mrs. Miller, talented as an artist, had painted the walls herself in woodland scenes.

“Such a lovely apartment!” Nancy murmured.

“It isn’t quiet enough to suit me,” Mrs. Miller responded, closing the door. “My neighbors in the rooms above are inclined to be noisy at times.”

In a few minutes the girls understood why she felt annoyed, for a radio was turned on in the apartment above them. It blared forth loudly and at the same time someone began to tap dance, bringing her heels down on the floor so vigorously that the lamps began to shake.

“There’s no excuse for such dancing,” Mrs. Miller declared. “I don’t object to the tenant practicing her steps but it seems to me she could tap her heels lightly.”

“You should see Nancy do it,” Bess said proudly. “She’s as light as a fairy!”

“Hardly!” laughed Nancy.

“We have a little dance we do together,” George went on enthusiastically. “It’s all in code.”

“Isn’t that something new?” inquired Mrs. Miller.

“It’s original with us anyway,” Bess chuckled. “We spell out messages with our tapping.”

"I don't understand," her aunt said in perplexity. "You must give me a demonstration."

To the tune of the radio music from above the girls executed a clever little dance, explaining the code which they used.

"That certainly is clever," Mrs. Miller declared. "You girls dance well enough to be on the stage."

During the evening friends dropped into the apartment, so that it was late before the girls retired. They did not breakfast until after nine o'clock the following morning.

"Would you like to go to the theatre this afternoon?" Mrs. Miller asked as she poured coffee. "I've not bought tickets yet for I thought you might prefer to see some particular play."

"If you don't mind, Aunt Helen, we'd rather go visiting today," Bess said quickly. "Nancy is eager to interview a Beverly Barrett, and George and I thought we'd tag along."

"Beverly Barrett, the actress?" Mrs. Miller inquired in surprise.

"Yes. We don't know her but are well acquainted with a lady who befriended her and started her upward in the world."

"You girls are to feel perfectly free to do what you wish," Mrs. Miller assured them. "Just make my apartment your headquarters. Come and go as you please."

After luncheon Nancy, George and Bess took a taxi to Miss Barrett's address. The apartment building was situated in an exclusive section of the city.

"If Miss Carter is paying for all this," Nancy remarked as they took the elevator upward, "it just isn't fair."

"I wonder how Miss Barrett will receive us?" George murmured uneasily.

"If she's the right sort she should be glad to learn the truth," Nancy replied.

The girls paused in front of Suite 16, noticing that the door was slightly ajar. George lifted the brass knocker and let it fall.

"Come in," called a voice.

After a slight hesitation Nancy pushed open the door and entered the apartment. The three found themselves in a luxuriously furnished living room. They had no opportunity to look about, for the beautiful young woman who lay upon the divan arose to face them just as they came inside. Upon each girl she bestowed a critical, haughty glance.

"You will not do at all!" she said coldly before anyone could speak. "You are all too young and have no dignity. I am looking for an experienced maid——"

Nancy and her chums glanced at one another in amazement and irritation. To be mistaken for a housemaid was not at all flattering.

"We're not looking for positions," Nancy told the young woman quietly.

"Then why are you here?"

"We happen to be friends of Miss Carter who lives in Berryville."

Beverly Barrett's face underwent a sudden change, but her cold, haughty manner remained.

"Oh, so my dear friend sent you here? I suppose she wishes me to test you out to see if you have talent. Obviously you are all too young for the stage. My advice to you is to return to your studies. Even though Miss Carter is very wealthy it would be a waste of her time to try to launch you on careers now."

"We are not interested in becoming actresses," Nancy answered evenly. "And you have made another mistake. Miss Carter is not wealthy."

"Not wealthy!" Miss Barrett's voice rose to an unpleasant pitch. "How ridiculous! She has always had a great deal of money."

“Miss Carter is living at Berryville practically in poverty,” Nancy insisted. “She is very proud and does not wish anyone to learn of her true financial condition.”

“You can’t expect me to believe such a story. Why, Miss Carter writes to me every week and she’s never even hinted that she was short of funds.”

Before Nancy could reply there came a knock at the door.

“Package for Miss Barrett,” called out a delivery boy.

The young woman went to the door and accepted the parcel.

“Oh, yes, my new evening gown!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been looking for it. Wait just a minute until I make certain there is no mistake.”

As the actress tore off the wrapping, the girls caught a glimpse of a gorgeous blue chiffon dinner dress. The price tag dropped to the floor. When Miss Barrett picked it up Nancy saw that the garment had cost one hundred and eighty-nine dollars.

Before the young woman could dismiss the delivery boy a second caller paused at the door. She was a gray-haired old lady in a frayed black dress. Her hands were rough and coarse from hard work.

“I have guests,” said Miss Barrett quickly. “You can’t come in now. I’ve asked you so many times not to come here at all.”

“I don’t mean to embarrass you, Beverly,” sighed the old lady, “truly I don’t. I wouldn’t have come, only I haven’t a penny left and I’ve been sick.”

“Here, take this,” the actress said, removing a dollar bill from her purse. “It’s all I have to give you.”

“Thank you, Beverly,” the old lady murmured in a subdued voice. “I know you hate to be bothered by an old, useless grandmother.”

“It’s not that,” Miss Barrett replied. “I haven’t the money.”

“This won’t go very far when I have to buy medicine, but I’ll do the best I can with it.”

The old lady turned and slowly walked down the hall. The actress curtly dismissed the delivery boy, then faced Nancy Drew and her chums.

“I must ask you to leave now,” she said haughtily. “It is late, and I have to dress for dinner. I am dining with the famous actor, Horace St. Will.”

Bess, goaded beyond endurance by the young woman’s insolent manner, could not resist saying shortly:

“We all know Mr. St. Will very well indeed.” Then, indicating her chum she added, “Nancy’s father, Carson Drew, is working with him on a law case at the moment.”

Miss Barrett stared at Bess, then her eyes wandered to Nancy. For the first time it dawned upon her that the girls really had been telling the truth. If they were well acquainted with both Mr. St. Will and Miss Carter they might make reports which would lead to awkward complications.

“Why didn’t you tell me that at first!” she stammered.

“You didn’t give us an opportunity to say much of anything,” Bess returned coldly. “Come on, girls, we may as well leave.”

“Yes, it’s time to go!” added George.

By this time Miss Barrett was pathetically eager to detain her young visitors.

“Please, let me explain——” she pleaded.

The callers had no wish to continue an unpleasant interview. Nancy opened the door into the hallway. She stopped short, finding herself face to face with a gentleman who had been studying the number of the suite. He was the expected guest, Horace St. Will.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CORNER TABLE

"Well, well, this is indeed a pleasure," the elderly actor said heartily as he bowed to the girls. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"We were just leaving," Bess murmured, slightly embarrassed.

"Please don't go on my account," the man declared. "My business with Miss Barrett isn't of a private nature. We'll all have a pleasant chat together."

The girls did not know just what to reply, for they felt certain that Beverly Barrett did not wish them to remain. However, the actor guided them back into the living room.

"You seem upset about something, Miss Barrett," he observed in surprise as he saw the young woman's face.

"These girls have told me the most distressing thing. Really, I can't believe it. Please, Mr. St. Will, tell me that it isn't true."

"Tell you that what isn't true, my dear young lady?"

"These girls claim that Miss Carter is living in poverty, so she cannot possibly afford to back me further for a theatrical career."

"Has Miss Carter been helping you financially?" Mr. St. Will inquired in astonishment.

"Why yes, I've accepted money from her."

"She did not tell me that," the actor murmured. "I suspected that she had lost much of her fortune, but I never dreamed that she is in dire need. Can this be true?"

He turned to Nancy and her chums, and his look of distress made them regret that so much had been revealed to him.

"Miss Carter has been too proud to let anyone learn of her situation," Nancy told him.

"I'm sure I don't know what I'll do if she's not able to send me any money," Miss Barrett declared. "Such a dilemma! Mr. St. Will, you'll have to advise me."

At the moment the actor was far more concerned with Miss Carter's predicament than he was with that of the spoiled young actress. He scarcely heard her plea as he turned to question Nancy.

"I wish you had told me this before I left River Heights," he said. "It is unthinkable that a woman of Miss Carter's talent should be in want."

"She has given generously of her money to others," Nancy revealed. "If she could be relieved of the financial burden I imagine that she would have enough for herself."

"I suppose you refer to me," Miss Barrett said with a toss of her head. "I took only what Miss Carter was willing to give. How could I know that she is in poverty?"

"You might have visited her once in a while," Mr. St. Will remarked accusingly. He picked up his hat and cane as if to depart.

"You're not going?" the young woman cried in alarm. "You promised a part in a play for me, and said we were to dine at the Ritz."

"I don't feel exactly in the mood for dinner," the man said reluctantly. "Perhaps some other time——"

"No, it must be tonight. Why, I bought a new gown especially for the occasion."

"In that case I couldn't possibly disappoint you," the actor replied politely.

Nancy and her chums, feeling that they had no reason for remaining longer, hastily said good-bye and left the apartment. Before they had taken a dozen steps down the hall Mr. St. Will came hurrying after them.

“Just a minute,” he called. “I mustn’t let you get away without learning your address.”

“We’re staying with my aunt,” Bess told him. “I’ll write the apartment number on a card for you.”

“I’ll call tomorrow morning if it will be convenient,” the actor suggested. “I should like to hear more about Miss Carter’s difficulties. Perhaps among ourselves we can work out something in her behalf.”

“By all means come,” Nancy invited, as her chum gave the man the address. “We must help all we can.”

After leaving the apartment building the girls dropped into a moving picture show. When they left the theatre it was almost six o’clock.

“We have an appointment to meet Aunt Helen at the Black Cat Restaurant to have dinner,” Bess reminded her chums, glancing at her wrist watch. “We must step lively or we’ll keep her waiting.”

When the girls reached the place they were relieved to find that Mrs. Miller had not arrived yet. In five minutes the woman came hurrying toward them with several packages.

“I’ve been shopping all afternoon and I’m tired and hungry,” she laughed. “The food at this place is so delicious,” she said enthusiastically, “that many people come here. It’s always crowded. I hope we can get a table.”

The head waiter remembered her, so with a smile and a bow he led the party to seats near a window. As soon as Nancy had given her order she gazed about the filled room.

“Tell me how you amused yourselves today,” Mrs. Miller requested.

“We called on Miss Barrett, but I can’t say that we had a very pleasant time,” Bess replied with a grimace. “She created a scene. First she took us to be maids, then told us we weren’t the type to become actresses!”

“Miss Barrett is very self-centered,” George added. “She seems to feel that it is her right to be supported.”

Nancy had not been listening closely to the conversation.

“Girls,” she said in a low voice. “I wish you’d glance across the room at that table in the corner.”

“Is someone we know—” Bess started to say, then finished quickly, “Fred Bunce and his wife!”

“They probably feel safe here in New York!” George exclaimed. “Will you call the police, Nancy?”

“I think I’ll just watch them for a little while,” her chum returned. “We may be able to learn more that way.”

“I wish we could hear their conversation,” Bess said eagerly.

“There are no empty tables near them,” Nancy pointed out. “Even if we could change our seats, Mr. Bunce would see us. That would ruin our chances.”

Without appearing to do so, Mrs. Miller and the girls kept watch of the couple. They ate their own dinners rapidly so that they could finish by the time the Bunces were ready to leave. When the pair arose Nancy and her party quietly followed them.

The man summoned a cab. Mrs. Miller, realizing the importance of maintaining the contact, promptly hailed another. The driver had no difficulty in keeping the vehicle in sight,

for apparently the two ahead had no suspicion that they were being followed. The chase took them to the offices of a steamship company.

“Mr. Bunce has not seen you,” Nancy said to Mrs. Miller. “Would you mind going inside the building to learn what he is doing there while we girls wait out here in the cab?”

“Yes, he’d be sure to recognize us,” Bess and George agreed.

Mrs. Miller was gone only a few minutes. When she returned her eyes were dancing with excitement.

“I do believe I’d make a good detective,” she laughed, sinking back into the seat.

“Tell us what you learned, Aunt Helen,” Bess pleaded.

“Mr. Bunce inquired about steamship tickets to South America.”

“South America!” Nancy exclaimed. “That means he intends to leave this country before the police strike his trail. Perhaps I should notify the authorities right away.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Bunce won’t embark immediately,” Mrs. Miller revealed. “They bought tickets for the *Tasmania* which doesn’t sail until Thursday.”

“That gives us time to accomplish a lot,” Nancy said thoughtfully.

At that moment the couple came out of the steamship offices. They were so busy talking that neither of them glanced toward the waiting cab. They stepped into their own vehicle and drove away.

“Follow that taxi,” Nancy directed their driver. “Be sure to keep it in sight.”

The two cabs threaded their ways through the dense traffic, presently drawing up in front of the Windham Hotel. Mr. and Mrs. Bunce disappeared inside.

Nancy waited a few minutes. Then, following them, she examined the register. She learned that the couple were occupying Room Number 208 on the second floor.

“I’ve found out everything I need to know,” she reported to Mrs. Miller and her chums. “The Bunces probably will stay at this hotel until they sail for South America.”

“Then it should be an easy matter to have them arrested,” Bess said in satisfaction. “Will you go to the police now, Nancy?”

“I was just thinking—” the girl replied slowly. “It seems to me our best move would be to telephone Detective Keely for instructions. After all, this is his case and he has been assigned to capture Fred Bunce.”

“We’ll find a long distance telephone at once,” Mrs. Miller nodded.

She gave an order to the driver and the cab rolled away swiftly.

CHAPTER XX

INFORMATION

The taxi stopped at a nearby store where there was a public telephone. Nancy went in and placed a call to the Keely home in River Heights. The detective's wife answered, saying her husband was not in the city.

"Where shall I be able to reach him?" Nancy inquired anxiously. "It is very important."

"Dear me, I don't know how you'll get him now," Mrs. Keely returned. "Stephan took the late train for New York. He received a tip that Mr. Fred Bunce was on his way there and set out to catch him."

"Fred Bunce *is* here in New York," Nancy revealed. "I have located his address and that is why it is so important that I contact your husband."

"He'll reach New York early tomorrow morning—I think the train arrives about seven o'clock but I'm not sure. You might be able to catch him at the station."

"I'll try that," Nancy declared. "Thank you, Mrs. Keely."

Nancy hung up the receiver and hurried back to the waiting taxi to report the conversation.

"Next I'd like to verify the time of arrival of Mr. Keely's train," she told Mrs. Miller. "Would it be out of the way to drive past the railroad station?"

"Not at all. It's right on our route home."

Nancy was told that the train was due to arrive in New York at exactly seven-twenty-two the next morning.

"That means we must get up with the birds," Bess said ruefully.

"We have to make it on time," Nancy declared. "But there's no reason for you or George to miss your sleep. I can go to the station alone."

"Oh, it will do us good to get up early," George laughed. "We'll retire just as soon as we reach the apartment."

Nancy did not sleep well that night. She kept tossing on her pillow, thinking over the entire Bunce episode. She was so restless that she arose before five o'clock, dressed in her favorite blue suit, and had breakfast waiting before it was time to awaken her chums.

"Aren't you rushing things a bit?" Bess complained good-naturedly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "It's only six o'clock now and the train isn't due for over an hour!"

"I started breakfast before I realized it was so early," Nancy apologized. Then with a laugh she added, "I didn't want to waste the food so I thought I ought to get you girls up!"

"That was very considerate of you, I must say," George grumbled, but she grinned as she bounded from bed.

The girls moved about the house quietly so as not to disturb Mrs. Miller, who was sleeping. George and Bess noticed that Nancy seemed unusually animated as she sat down at the breakfast table.

"You act as if you had an important secret," Bess remarked, "but I'm sure you couldn't have learned anything new about the Bunce case since last night."

"How can you be sure?" Nancy teased, her blue eyes dancing.

"Because you've been in the house all night."

"I have a surprise for you just the same. I did learn something about Fred Bunce, something which will amaze you."

“But you’ve not been away from the apartment,” George protested. “Or have you?”

Nancy shook her head.

“I couldn’t sleep last night so I did a little heavy thinking. Early this morning I telephoned the Riverside Home.”

“The place where poor little Gus Woonton died?” Bess inquired quickly.

“I succeeded in reaching Superintendent Johnson. You remember his name was signed to the telegram Miss Carter received.”

“Yes,” George nodded.

“Well, Mr. Johnson never sent the wire at all.”

“*What!*” exclaimed Bess Marvin, a shocked look in her eyes. “You don’t mean to tell me that Gus Woonton is still alive!”

“Mr. Johnson believes that he is, though he has no idea where the boy can be found at the present time.”

“You’re talking in riddles, Nancy,” George said impatiently. “What became of the lad?”

“Mr. Bunce, or at least someone who gave that name, came one day to the institution. He told Superintendent Johnson that as the legal guardian of the boy he intended to take him away.”

“And they allowed him to do it?” Bess demanded in amazement.

“Not just then. But it seems that Mr. Johnson was called out of the city for a few days. During his absence Gussie disappeared and it was believed that he had gone with his guardian.”

“Who sent such a dreadful telegram then?” asked Bess in awe.

“I believe Bunce did. He was fearful that they might investigate the Woonton affairs.”

“No wonder he was so willing to take charge of the funeral arrangements!” George commented dryly, recalling his conversation at Miss Carter’s home.

“It’s all a mix-up,” Nancy said thoughtfully, “and I don’t pretend to understand what is going on. But it’s perfectly obvious that Fred Bunce is more of a rascal than anyone suspected.”

“I wonder what he has done with the boy?” Bess mused.

“That is what I should like to learn myself,” said Nancy. “There is a pathetic angle to Gussie’s disappearance. Superintendent Johnson told me the institution doctors were of the opinion that a very delicate and expensive operation would restore the boy’s mind to normalcy.”

“You may be sure Mr. Bunce will never spend a cent for medical care!” George said feelingly.

“No, he means to use the boy for his own ends, probably keeping him hidden in some garret. If only we could find Gussie and give him a chance in the world!”

“Perhaps we can,” Bess said with determination. “Detective Keely should be able to bring about Mr. Bunce’s arrest.”

“Even so, that may not produce Gussie,” Nancy replied, looking worried.

It was growing late so the girls hastily stacked their dishes in the sink and prepared to leave the apartment. Reaching the railroad station ten minutes before train time, they walked about the big waiting room. Presently they took up their positions at one of the gates.

“We can’t possibly miss Mr. Keely if he is on the train,” Bess declared confidently. “He’ll have to pass this way.”

In a few minutes passengers began to stream through the gate. Eagerly the girls scanned each person but could see no one who resembled the detective.

"Nearly all the people are off the train," Nancy observed in dismay. "Oh, I'm afraid he didn't come."

"Now what shall we do?" Bess murmured.

At that moment a tall man with shell-rimmed glasses and wearing a brown felt hat pulled low over his eyes walked toward the girls. Not until he smiled and spoke did Nancy or her chums recognize him.

"Are you looking for someone?" he inquired, a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Detective Keely!" Nancy exclaimed. "No wonder we didn't recognize you!"

"I take it that my disguise is a fairly good one," laughed the man. "I'll put it on so that if Fred Bunce were on the train he wouldn't recognize me."

"It's a wonder we didn't miss you," Nancy said. "If you hadn't introduced yourself I'm sure none of us would have known you."

"My wife sent me a telegram aboard the train, saying that you want to see me."

"Yes, we've learned some important facts," Nancy returned. "Let's go to a quiet place where we can talk."

"I thought I had a good tip that would lead to Bunce's capture," the detective remarked as he led the girls to a vacant corner of the station. "I had every reason to believe that he would be on this train, but it didn't turn out that way. The fellow gave me the slip somehow."

"Part of your information was correct," Nancy told him eagerly. "Fred Bunce is here in New York, but he must have taken an earlier train to the city."

"You've seen him here?" Mr. Keely questioned.

"Yes, at a restaurant. We followed him to the Windham Hotel where he is staying with Mrs. Bunce. They plan to sail for South America early next week."

"That's splendid work," complimented Mr. Keely. Then he tapped an inner coat pocket. "This time I am armed with a warrant for the man's arrest," he announced grimly. "I have the papers right here."

"You should be able to catch him at the Windham Hotel," Nancy said. "I think he doesn't suspect that his address is known."

"You've done a neat bit of detective work," Mr. Keely praised again. "Bunce is more of a scoundrel than anyone believed."

"Have you learned anything new about him?" Nancy questioned.

"I've been digging up facts for days. The authorities are after him for smuggling in aliens from South America. There are several other charges too, all of them serious."

"I can add another to the list," Nancy declared. "We've just found out that Gussie Woonton probably isn't dead. Probably Bunce went to the Riverside Home and took the boy away."

The detective whistled softly.

"That adds a new angle to the case. That man is a sly one, all right."

Mr. Keely asked the girls a number of questions and commended them again for their sleuthing ability.

"I must be getting over to the Windham Hotel," he said hurriedly. "From now on I intend to trail Fred Bunce like a bloodhound. I'll notify you as soon as I make the arrest."

Nancy gave the detective her address, and they parted company.

"Where shall we go now?" George asked, glancing at a wall clock.

“I’d like to buy a new hat,” Bess ventured hopefully. “My old one is as limp as a rag.”

Nancy glanced at her chums in surprise. “The stores aren’t open yet. Anyway we’ll have no time for shopping this morning,” she declared. “Don’t you remember Mr. St. Will said he would call at the apartment?”

CHAPTER XXI

THE SEARCH

When the actor arrived at Mrs. Miller's apartment, Nancy explained why the girls had gone to the railroad station, likewise reporting her telephone conversation with the Superintendent of the Riverside Home.

"The mystery seems to deepen," Mr. St. Will commented. "We know that the Woontons had no son, so who is this boy called Gussie?"

"Bunce is probably the only person who can answer that question," Nancy replied. "Detective Keely is on his way to the Windham Hotel to arrest the man. I look for important developments any minute now."

"I trust that when this matter is settled Miss Carter will receive just compensation for the money she spent on the boy," the man declared in a sober voice. "Until yesterday I had no idea that she was in dire need."

"I am afraid I offended Miss Barrett deeply," Nancy said. "I felt that she should know the truth, though."

"You did the right thing in telling her. Last evening I had a long, fatherly talk with Miss Barrett. I am afraid she didn't like my remarks, but I know I gave her some excellent advice."

"How does she feel about accepting Miss Carter's money, now that she understands the situation?" Nancy inquired.

"At heart Miss Barrett isn't a bad sort, though she is inclined to be selfish and considers her career before anything else. She really has a deep affection for Miss Carter. She agreed with me that she could not expect support from her under the present circumstances."

"Has she made any plans?" Nancy asked hopefully.

"The girl has no money of her own. She has tried to obtain a leading part in a play but so far has been forced to accept minor rôles."

"Do you agree with Miss Carter that the girl really has talent?" Bess questioned curiously.

"Yes, I do. Miss Barrett has been well trained. I believe she will get along fine on the stage."

"I'm sorry to be the person to have punctured her little air castle," Nancy said with honest regret. "I wish something could be worked out so that she might go on with her career."

"Last evening I broached a little plan to Miss Barrett. I have in mind purchasing the rights to 'The Tapping Heels,' paying a sum which will grant Miss Carter security. I intend to give the leading part to Miss Barrett, and if the play proves successful she will be assured of many years' work in excellent rôles."

"That would work out like magic!" Nancy cried enthusiastically. "There's only one catch in the whole thing."

"What is that?"

"Don't you think Miss Carter may suspect that you are trying to help her?"

"It will be an easy matter for me to have an agent purchase the play," Mr. St. Will smiled. "I realize as well as you do that the woman is proud. I would not offend her for anything in the world."

At that moment the telephone rang. Mrs. Miller, thinking that it must be for her, excused herself to answer it. She returned to say that the call was for Nancy.

"I've given our number to no one save Detective Keely," the girl remarked as she hurried away. "Probably he has arrested Fred Bunce!"

She was not mistaken in believing the message to be from the detective but he was not telephoning to report success in his mission.

"The Bunces have cleared out, bag and baggage," he said. "The clerk tells me they left about fifteen minutes before I reached here."

Nancy was dismayed by this news, for it had not occurred to her that the couple would leave the hotel until they were ready to sail for South America. She blamed herself for losing contact with them for it would have been easy for her to have notified the police of their presence the previous evening.

"I suppose they are too clever to have let anyone know where they are going," she said slowly.

"Yes, the clerk asked them for a forwarding address but they told him they expected no mail. They called a taxi and disappeared."

"There's still a chance we can catch them at the boat when it sails Thursday."

"Yes," the detective agreed, "unless Bunce should change his mind about leaving on that particular day."

"It does appear that he's somewhat suspicious," Nancy admitted.

"If you're not busy I'll drive over to your apartment and we'll discuss the situation," the detective proposed. "Maybe between us we can think of some way to get on his trail again."

"By all means come over," Nancy invited "but I'm afraid I'll not be able to offer any helpful suggestions."

She returned to the living room to report the discouraging news.

"Oh, isn't that too bad!" Bess said in disappointment. "And we thought we had the case practically solved, too."

Nancy turned toward Mrs. Miller. "When you followed Mr. and Mrs. Bunce into the steamship office do you think either of them noticed you?" she asked the woman.

"I'm sure they didn't," Mrs. Miller answered promptly. "Even if they had they couldn't have known of my connection with you."

"Do you suppose Bunce could have bought the tickets for another couple?" Nancy reflected.

"I never thought of such a thing at the time," Bess's aunt replied. "Mrs. Bunce insisted upon an outside stateroom and was rather disagreeable because most of the accommodations were sold."

"It's queer, their leaving the Windham Hotel in such a hurry," Nancy said, frowning thoughtfully. "I have a feeling they know they're being followed and are doing everything possible to throw us off their trail."

Detective Keely voiced a similar opinion when he reached the apartment a short time later. He had found no trace of the couple although he had telephoned nearly every hotel in the city.

"Either the man has registered under another name or he's gone into hiding in a private rooming house," the man declared. "It will be a real job to find him now."

"I should have notified the police last night."

"It wasn't your fault," Mr. Keely returned. "I'd have made the same mistake myself. We're dealing with a very foxy fellow."

After discussing the case for several minutes the detective arose to leave. He had taken down the address of the Black Cat Restaurant and intended to keep watch of the place in

addition to maintaining a plainclothesman at the docks to watch the travelers on all outgoing steamers.

Shortly after Mr. Keely had gone away Horace St. Will said that he too must leave. "I have a little packing to do before my train departs," he remarked.

"You're not leaving New York so soon?" questioned Nancy in surprise.

"Yes, my business here is finished. I shall return to Berryville, probably on the midnight train."

"We thought we'd start home today too," laughed Bess, "although we hadn't made up our minds which train we'd take."

"Your visit hasn't been half long enough," Mrs. Miller protested. "Why, you've not even seen the city."

"We'll have time for that this afternoon, Aunt Helen. Our parents are looking for us back home."

Nancy was sorry that she had not made arrangements to remain longer in New York for she wished to be on hand when the *Tasmania* should sail on Thursday. She rather thought that her father would be glad if she were to stay longer, but that would mean Bess and George would have to go back without her. Their parents had been firm in specifying the time they must be back in River Heights.

"After all, there's nothing more I can do here," she reflected. "Detective Keely will handle everything efficiently. If anyone is capable of capturing Fred Bunce he will be the one."

Mr. St. Will remarked that he hoped the girls would decide to take the midnight train. He then bowed politely to Mrs. Miller and took his leave.

"Dear me, I didn't suppose you were serious about returning home so soon," Aunt Helen protested. "If you're determined to go, we must try to see everything we can this afternoon."

Nancy, Bess, and George had not believed that so much could be crowded into the remaining hours. They visited Chinatown, the Battery, the museum of art and many other places of absorbing interest. Wherever the girls went they kept an alert watch for the Bunces, though more for the fun of it than anything else, as they really did not expect to encounter the couple.

Mrs. Miller took her visitors to dinner at a downtown hotel, and later they all went to the theater. At the conclusion of the performance they rushed back to the apartment for their suitcases, then rode by taxi to the station.

"We've had a glorious time, Mrs. Miller," Nancy declared with shining eyes.

"Yes indeed," George echoed gratefully.

Bess did not add her tribute just then, for the group had entered the waiting room, where she caught sight of Mr. St. Will.

"Well, well," the actor said heartily as the girls came toward him, "I had just made up my mind that you were taking another train."

"We had such an exciting time seeing the city that we nearly missed this one," Nancy laughed.

"Oh, you have plenty of time," the actor assured her. "The train is in but there's no hurry."

He walked leisurely along with Mrs. Miller while the girls followed at a little distance. Suddenly Nancy stopped short.

"Look over there!" she said tensely, nodding her head toward one of the gates. "That man is Fred Bunce, and he's talking with two colored men!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE SEAMAN'S SECRET

"One of those men is Omar, the Egyptian!" George gasped, turning to stare at the trio. "He looks just like any other colored man when he isn't dressed in his robes."

"Omar *is* a colored man, I'm sure of that now," Nancy said grimly. "He's only pretending to be an Egyptian. I suspect that the one with the freckles is a relative of his—perhaps a brother."

"Why do you suppose they are meeting Fred Bunce?" Bess murmured. "Are they all working together in some scheme?"

"That's what we must try to learn," Nancy declared.

"It's nearly time to leave," Mr. St. Will warned, waiting for the girls. "You have just ten minutes."

"Stay over until tomorrow," Mrs. Miller invited instantly. "Capturing Fred Bunce is important."

"Yes, it is," Nancy agreed.

A glance at Bess and George assured her that they too would miss the train willingly if by doing so they might accomplish their purpose.

"Let me assist you with this," Mr. St. Will offered quickly. "It doesn't matter if I don't get back to Berryville for a day or two."

By this time Bunce and his two companions had started to walk away.

"If we all try to follow them they'll see us and become suspicious," Nancy said anxiously. "We'll have to split up."

"Suppose you and I take up the chase," the actor proposed excitedly. "Mrs. Miller and your friends might wait here and look after the luggage."

"While you're gone, we'll telephone to Detective Keely and tell him to be ready for action," Bess added. "Hurry, Nancy, or you'll lose sight of those men."

Mr. St. Will and Nancy moved away quickly, catching a glimpse of Fred Bunce and the two colored men as they started for the ramp which led down to the taxi-cab stands. However, the trio did not pause there but crossed the street.

The Drew girl and her companion followed at some distance. After ten minutes the men came to a small park where they sat down on a bench near a clump of bushes.

Approaching as close as they dared, and taking care to keep themselves screened from view by the shrubs, the two who were following finally got directly behind the three. They could hear Fred Bunce talking.

"The plan sounds dangerous to me," he said. "The police are on my trail now and I've got to be careful if I don't want to land in the jug."

"There's no risk to this," the man known as Omar replied scoffingly. "I tell you I have the dope straight. Captain Staff is an easy mark. We can ring him down for several thousand at least."

"How did you get your information?"

"This fellow Penello—he's a stupid lout—often came to my Temple for advice. My brother Sam here got him for me. The sailor told me he had a grudge against Captain Staff,

and from a word dropped here and a word there I gathered that he had something to do with the disappearance of the old man's son."

"That was years ago?" Bunce asked with interest.

"Naturally. If I have it straight, Captain Staff's wife died and the son was placed in a boarding house. The boy vanished."

"And you say Penello knew all about it?"

"I'm not saying he made off with the kid, but he knows what became of him. Captain Staff would pay well to find his son again. It's a cinch to collect that money."

"You're sure Penello knows what became of the boy?"

"He claims the son is alive and well and that he can produce him at any time. But he'll never do it unless Captain Staff pays him and pays heavily."

"What sort of a cut will Penello expect?"

"I can handle him," Omar said with an unpleasant laugh. "I know a few more facts about him—things the police would like to hear—and if he makes trouble, a threat or two will bring him around."

"This sounds pretty good to me," Bunce declared after a moment's thought. "Count me in on the deal."

Nancy and Mr. St. Will had heard every word of the conversation. The actor whispered that he would steal away and telephone Detective Keely.

"Even if you reach him, perhaps you better bring the police," Nancy urged. "I'll stay here and keep watch."

Noiselessly the actor stole away, darting across the street toward a telephone. Nancy once more turned her attention toward the three men.

"There's one thing I must know before we go into this," she heard Fred Bunce say. "Who is Captain Staff's son?"

"A young college student by the name of Harlan Bailey."

Nancy was stunned by this bit of information. Almost expecting to hear the name of Gussie Woonton, she could hardly believe her ears. Harlan Bailey! Ned's friend. Now that she thought of it, the young man did bear a slight resemblance to Captain Staff, but until this moment it had never occurred to Nancy that he was anyone's long-lost son.

So excited was the girl over the news that she became less cautious. Without realizing that she could be detected, she moved slightly so that the bushes no longer gave her complete protection.

Unfortunately for her, a dog came running through the park just then. It darted straight toward the three men. In alarm they whirled about. So unexpected was their move that Nancy had no chance to drop down out of sight. Fred Bunce, looking straight toward the bushes, caught a glimpse of her blue dress.

"What's this?" he demanded harshly.

He tore the shrubs apart, exposing the Drew girl to the view of his companions.

"So it's you!" he exclaimed harshly. "Spying again!"

He caught Nancy's arm and jerked her roughly from her hiding place. Omar leered unpleasantly, giving her a cruel pinch.

"How long have you been there?" Bunce asked sharply.

"Why, just a little while," Nancy replied.

"She probably heard everything we said," Omar stated gruffly. "We'll have to get rid of her or she'll squeal everything to the police."

Nancy's eyes roved toward the store across the street. It could be seen through the trees. If only Mr. St. Will would return!

At this hour the park was dark and fairly well deserted. No one was in sight so it would be useless for her to scream. Her only hope was to try to keep the men talking until the actor should come with the police.

"Yes, I did hear everything," Nancy said boldly. "I have enough evidence to put you all behind bars!"

"But you'll never be able to do it!" Fred Bunce cried furiously.

Glancing toward an automobile at the edge of the park, he started to pull Nancy. She fought, kicked and screamed, but Omar clapped his hand roughly over the girl's mouth. His brother caught her by the feet. Together he and Fred Bunce carried her to the car.

Omar had taken a handkerchief from his pocket and now stuffed it into Nancy's mouth. Sam tied her hands with stout twine. Then she was thrown down into the bottom of the automobile.

"There, I guess that will hold you!" Fred Bunce said with a laugh.

He started the motor while the two colored men sprang in beside him. The car rolled away from the park.

Scarcely had the automobile disappeared around a corner when Mr. St. Will came running across the street with two policemen. He had telephoned Detective Keely, then gone farther down the block to bring the officers. Reaching the clump of bushes, he looked about in vain for Nancy.

"She was here a minute ago," he said anxiously. "Those men have disappeared too."

"There's been a struggle," observed one of the policemen, flashing his light about the ground. "See, it looks as if someone had been dragged across the grass."

"Nancy has been kidnaped!" Mr. St. Will exclaimed in alarm. "But I was gone only a few minutes. Those scoundrels can't have a very big start!"

The policemen were able to tell that Nancy had been dragged to the curb. As they were looking about, a tall man in a gray suit came rushing up.

"Officer!" he said excitedly. "My car has been stolen. I went into the drug store to get a pint of ice cream. When I came back my machine was gone!"

"Where did you park your auto?" the policeman asked.

"Right here where we're standing."

"It was stolen, all right," replied the officer. "And by the same gang that kidnaped the girl."

"What was your license number?" the other policeman questioned tersely.

"36009."

"Call Headquarters, Bill, and tell the cruisers to be on the lookout for a car with that license number," one of the policemen advised his companion. "I'll commandeer another auto and take up the chase."

As he glanced up and down the street for a car Detective Keely sped up in a taxi. The policeman and Horace St. Will sprang in, briefly telling him what had occurred.

"It's hard to guess in which direction they went," the detective stated grimly. "All we can do is to take a chance on following them."

He told the driver to head toward certain docks. As it happened, the car bearing Nancy was speeding in the opposite direction. Lying helpless in the bottom of the automobile, and unable to make an outcry, the girl could hear her captors discussing her fate.

“Carson Drew will pay plenty to get her back,” Omar advised his companions.

“Yes, but he’ll comb the city searching for her,” Bunce replied uneasily. “That guy isn’t like an ordinary dick. I’m afraid to get in a mix-up with him.”

“Didn’t you say you were sailing for South America? Take her with you. I’ll stay here and handle the ransom deal.”

“Maybe it could be done,” Bunce said slowly. “But it will be dangerous getting her aboard. Of course, Chief Officer Murray will cooperate with us.”

“Sure, he’s helped you out plenty of other times,” Omar replied confidently. “The girl can be taken aboard in a trunk if necessary.”

“I’m not worried about that part. It’s getting her off the boat when it docks that’s the hitch.”

“You’ll have no trouble with Murray helping you. He’ll know how to fool the authorities.”

“I’ll chance it,” Bunce decided at last. “We’ll drive around to my rooming house where I’ll telephone Murray. If he says it’s O.K. we’ll take her aboard.”

Presently the car stopped before a red brick house. Bunce went inside, returning fifteen minutes later with his wife. They deposited hand luggage in the back seat.

“Everything is fixed up,” he told the colored men. “Murray will be watching for us.”

The automobile soon halted at the wharf. Nancy was allowed to sit up and the gag was removed from her mouth. She lost all desire to scream for help when Fred Bunce made a few threatening remarks.

“One squeak out of you and it will be your last!” he warned. “Now walk up that gangplank between Mrs. Bunce and me.”

Nancy dared not disobey for the couple crowded close against her, holding fast to her elbows. No one was in sight as the trio approached the gangplank of the ocean-going liner. Suddenly a dark figure emerged at the railing. For an instant Nancy’s heart leaped high with hope. But she might have known that the man would prove to be Chief Officer Murray!

“Good evening, Mr. Bunce,” the man said pleasantly, glancing sharply at the girl. “I hope you, your wife and your daughter will have a very pleasant cruise. I’ll show you personally to your usual cabin.”

He led the trio down a dimly lighted corridor to the very end, where he opened the door of Suite 15.

“You will find this one to your liking, I believe,” he said in the same casual tone. “The adjoining cabins are unoccupied.”

“Thank you, Murray,” Bunce replied with a wink. “We’ll get along fine.”

He closed the door and locked it. Then he took the gag from his pocket and stuffed it into Nancy’s mouth so that she could not cry for aid.

“Oughtn’t we to tie her up too?” asked Mrs. Bunce anxiously.

“Just her hands,” answered Mr. Bunce carelessly. “With the door locked she can’t get away. We won’t dare truss her up too well or she won’t be able to walk when we take her off the boat.”

He bound the cord about Nancy’s wrists. Then he and his wife went away, carefully locking the door behind them.

CHAPTER XXIII

NANCY'S PREDICAMENT

Left at the railroad station, Mrs. Miller, Bess and George immediately telephoned Detective Keely, telling him that Nancy and Mr. St. Will were trailing Fred Bunce and his two colored companions.

"I'll stay here at my hotel until I hear from them," the detective promised. "As soon as I have any news I'll communicate with you at the apartment."

"We may as well go back there at once," Mrs. Miller declared. "The girls have missed their train and can't possibly leave for River Heights until morning."

Back at the apartment again, George and Bess waited anxiously for some word from Nancy and the actor. Two hours elapsed. They were beginning to wonder if the couple had returned to the railroad station when Detective Keely arrived to tell them all that had happened.

"Your friend has been kidnaped," he reported. "I'd have come sooner only I've been helping Mr. St. Will and the police search for her. So far we've found no clue except that we know she was carried off by Fred Bunce in a stolen car."

"Nancy kidnaped!" Bess cried. "Oh, I was afraid she'd get into serious trouble when she started out after that man."

"We never should have allowed her to go," Mrs. Miller added anxiously. "But I thought she would be safe with Mr. St. Will. Please tell us exactly what happened."

Mr. Keely revealed how the girl had been spirited away while the man was trying to telephone for help.

"I must send a wire to Nancy's father at once," Mrs. Miller said. "How I dread to do it. He let his daughter come here believing that she would be safe. I've failed in my trust."

"We'll find Miss Drew," Mr. Keely promised. "I'll keep on this case night and day."

It was not until after the detective had left that it occurred to George to wonder if the police were keeping watch of the *Tasmania*.

"There's a chance that Nancy might have been smuggled aboard," she told Bess.

Quickly she ran to the telephone and tried to reach Detective Keely, but he had not returned to his hotel yet. With Nancy missing, sleep was out of the question for the two girls. They persuaded Mrs. Miller to go to bed while they sat up and waited for news. As time dragged by and no encouraging word was received, Bess and George became increasingly uneasy.

"Bess, we simply must do something!" George declared at last. "Anything would be better than this inactivity."

"What can we do?"

"Let's go down to the wharf and talk with the captain of the *Tasmania*. I'm afraid the police may have overlooked that clue, which I feel is an important one."

"All right," Bess agreed promptly. "We'll leave a note for Mrs. Miller."

The girls stole quietly from the apartment building and hailed a taxi. The first streak of dawn was showing in the east as they rode toward the docks.

Distinguishing the *Tasmania* from the other vessels which were tied to the wharves, Bess and George stood for some minutes staring at the deserted decks. There was no activity aboard

save that created by the men who were moving cargo into the hold.

“Let’s go on the ship,” Bess proposed. “We’ll learn nothing here.”

Watching until the coast was clear, they hurried up the gangplank unobserved by any officer of the ship. As no one was there to stop them, they made their way to the captain’s quarters, boldly rapping on the cabin door. It was opened by a white-haired man of fifty. He frowned as he saw the girls.

“How did you get aboard?” he asked. “No visitors are allowed at this hour.”

“We’re not visitors,” George said quickly. “A friend of ours has been kidnaped and we have reason to believe she’s been smuggled into this vessel.”

“What’s this?” inquired the captain, looking puzzled. “Someone smuggled aboard the *Tasmania*?”

George plunged into the story of Nancy’s kidnaping. The captain listened in amazement. From the expression on his face the girls knew that he thought they must have imagined most of the tale.

“I’m sure there’s no girl aboard the *Tasmania*,” he told them, “but if it will set your minds at ease I’ll have the vessel searched.”

“We’ll be very grateful,” Bess declared. “When does the ship sail?”

“At twelve o’clock. Not many passengers are on board yet. Wait a few minutes and I’ll turn you over to Chief Officer Murray.”

The captain disappeared into his cabin but reappeared in a few minutes. As he led the girls across the deck, a sailor came toward them followed by Detective Keely and two policemen.

“Captain Wallford, these men ask permission to search the boat,” the sailor reported.

Keely glanced in astonishment at Bess and George. Then, shifting his gaze to the captain, he said:

“We have reason to believe that a girl has been smuggled aboard by one of your passengers—a fellow named Bunce. May we look around?”

“Certainly,” agreed the captain courteously, “but you’ll find everything in order. We have no passenger aboard listed by the name of Bunce.”

“He may have used an assumed name.”

“You may examine the list if you wish. I’ll call Chief Officer Murray who will show you over the vessel.”

He summoned the man and ordered him to make a careful search of the steamer. Having other duties to perform, the captain went back to his cabin.

“Bess and I wouldn’t have come here,” George explained to Detective Keely, “only we were unable to reach you by telephone. We remembered that Mr. Bunce had bought tickets for this vessel and we thought he might have tried to smuggle Nancy aboard.”

“A very good hunch,” Detective Keely nodded. “We found the stolen automobile abandoned only a few blocks from here.”

Murray, cleverly concealing his uneasiness, stepped forward.

“Come with me, gentlemen,” he invited politely. “I’ll show you over the vessel, but I can assure you that it will be a waste of time.”

He led them down a companionway, opening doors of vacant rooms, but taking care that the policemen were not taken near the stateroom where Nancy had been hidden. The vessel was a large one and the searchers were soon confused, having no idea where they were being escorted.

“Well, are you quite satisfied?” Officer Murray asked at last. “We’ve been everywhere.”

“It seems Miss Drew isn’t here,” the detective admitted reluctantly. “Thank you for your trouble.”

Bess and George were bitterly disappointed, for it seemed to them that their last hope of finding Nancy was gone. In company with Mr. Keely and the policemen they left the ship. As they stepped from the gangplank, Bess noticed that Officer Murray seemed to relax from a certain tension he had been under. She was positive she saw him smile.

“Perhaps you imagined it, Bess,” George said later as they were discussing the matter alone. “Why should he be so eager to get rid of us?”

“That’s just what I was wondering, George. When you stop to think of it, Officer Murray was almost too obliging. He insisted upon taking the policemen everywhere himself, never once giving them a chance to look around independently.”

“That’s true.”

“I’m not satisfied that Nancy isn’t aboard the vessel. I’d like to go back there and look around when I’m not being escorted.”

“Then let’s do it,” George proposed. “Time is getting short but we still have half an hour before the boat sails.”

The girls hastened to the *Tasmania*. Watching their chance, they succeeded in boarding the vessel without being recognized either by the captain or Officer Murray. In fact, at the moment they walked up the gangplank the latter was being severely lectured by an old lady whose cabin was located not far from the room where Nancy was imprisoned.

“I am very dissatisfied with my quarters,” she told him sternly. “All morning I’ve been annoyed by a strange tapping sound. It’s enough to drive a person crazy, and I’ll not tolerate it. I’ve paid my money and——”

“I’ll see that you have other quarters just as soon as the ship sails,” the man promised impatiently. “Talk with me later.”

He walked away, but the old lady, not at all satisfied, hailed a stewardess who chanced to be passing, and told her troubles again.

“I’m sure I don’t know what the noise can be,” the attendant said in perplexity. “Did it seem to come from one of the cabins?”

“Yes, from the one at the end of the hall,” the old lady declared. “I think the passenger who occupies it must be a tap dancer.”

“The room at the end of the hall is used mostly for storage,” replied the stewardess. “It is unoccupied.”

“Then some mechanical device is making the noise. I insist that something be done about it.”

The stewardess hesitated, for she had important duties and felt that the old lady was being unnecessarily troublesome. However, Bess and George had overheard part of the conversation and the reference to “tapping noises” had aroused their interest.

Could it be possible that Nancy, imprisoned somewhere on the ship, had been tapping out code in an attempt to attract attention to her plight? Stepping forward, they introduced themselves, urging the stewardess to make an immediate investigation.

“I’ll show you the cabin,” said the old lady eagerly, leading the group down the hall.

As they reached the end of the corridor, the mysterious noises could be heard plainly.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

“That’s odd,” declared the attendant. “I didn’t notice anything like that before.”

Bess and George were listening intently to the sounds. No longer could there be the slightest doubt as to who was making them. The tapping heels were spelling out the message "H E L P ." Over and over it was being repeated.

"Nancy is in that room!" cried George.

"She's signaling for help! Open the door quickly!"

The stewardess inserted her skeleton key into the lock. The door pushed hard because Nancy's feet had been against it. The girl rolled aside and the group came into the room.

"A stowaway!" gasped the woman.

"This girl is not a stowaway!" George exclaimed indignantly. "She's tied up and gagged!"

Quickly the girls set Nancy free and assisted their chum to her feet.

"I thought help would never come," the girl gasped. "I've been tapping on that door for hours."

"I don't know how you came to be here," said the stewardess, "but you'll have to explain everything to Chief Officer Murray."

"He's the one who must do the explaining!" Nancy cried. "That man helped Mr. and Mrs. Bunce smuggle me aboard."

"You are making a dangerous accusation," said the stewardess quietly.

The girl gazed steadily at the woman.

"That's exactly what I mean to do——" Nancy began, and then her voice trailed off.

In the doorway of the cabin stood Chief Officer Murray.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRIAL

“What seems to be wrong here?” demanded the ship’s officer.

“I found this girl tied up in a cabin, sir,” the stewardess replied uneasily. “She accuses you of having helped to smuggle her aboard.”

“Preposterous!” snapped the man. “Of course she is a stowaway.”

“That’s not true!” cried Nancy indignantly. “I demand to be taken to the captain.”

“He has no time to talk with you,” Murray answered coldly. “It is too near the sailing hour. Now, if you’ll all leave the ship without making any more trouble I’ll permit you to go.”

“You’d like to get rid of us, I know,” Nancy insisted stubbornly, “but we’ll not leave until we’ve talked to the captain.”

Murray attempted to force the girls out of the cabin and up the hallway. During the commotion no one noticed that the stewardess had left the scene. Having decided she had better summon the captain, the attendant had hurried away. Soon she returned with the elderly man.

“Mr. Murray, what are you trying to do?” Captain Wallford asked sharply as he saw Nancy being pushed along.

“I’ve found a stowaway aboard, sir.”

Nancy immediately denied the charge, while Bess and George defended her. The captain recognized the cousins, and when the stewardess supported their story, telling how their chum had been found gagged and tied, he sided against the officer.

“I shall call the police,” he said curtly, “and we’ll sift this matter to the bottom.”

In a short time Detective Keely arrived in company with three officers of the law. Nancy was identified and completely exonerated while her accusations against Murray took on new weight.

“I’m satisfied that the man is guilty,” Captain Wallford acknowledged when he had heard the entire story. “I shall not try to protect him from arrest.”

Keely and the policemen asked permission to go over the passenger list, but they could find no one on board by the name of Bunce; nor did a search reveal anyone remotely resembling the man or his wife.

“The couple may come on the ship at the very last minute,” Nancy ventured hopefully.

At this suggestion Keely took up his post near the gangplank but the policemen kept out of sight, knowing that their uniforms would serve as a warning to the Bunces. Nancy, Bess and George likewise stationed themselves some distance away.

The minutes elapsed, and still there was no sign of the couple. Finally the deep-throated whistle announced that the boat was ready to sail. Sailors were making preparations to lift the gangplank.

“I’m afraid you folks will have to go ashore,” said Captain Wallford regretfully. “Evidently your man isn’t coming aboard.”

“Looks that way,” admitted Detective Keely.

As he turned to signal the policemen, an elderly couple came hurrying up the gangplank. The woman leaned heavily upon her husband’s arm while he used his cane for support. Despite their apparent infirmities they both walked with a surprisingly light step.

Nancy glanced sharply at the pair for there was something about them which was strangely familiar to her. She could not see the lady's face, which was veiled. The man had white hair and thick glasses that made his eyes appear to bulge.

Suddenly Nancy stepped forward and spoke in a low tone to Detective Keely. The man nodded. A moment later he placed a detaining hand on the arm of the old man.

"A very clever disguise, Mr. Bunce," he said pleasantly.

"My name is not Bunce," the other replied in a quavering voice. "You have mistaken me for someone——"

He did not finish the sentence, for Keely reached up and jerked a white wig from the man's head.

"You're under arrest, Bunce," he said shortly. "Come along without making any trouble."

As the officers closed in, the man saw that he could not hope to escape. With a shrug he gave up.

"You win this round," he acknowledged, "but I will have my innings when the case comes to court. You have no real evidence against me."

After the couple had been taken away, Keely accompanied the girls to Mrs. Miller's apartment. As he was about to take leave of them an important telephone call came in from Mr. St. Will. After expressing his delight that Nancy had been found, he said:

"I've trailed Omar Washington and his brother to a rooming house. If your detective will taxi over here at once he'll be able to catch them both."

Keely took down the address and started immediately for the place. An hour later Mr. St. Will came alone to the apartment to tell the girls that both men had been captured.

"How did you manage to trace them?" Nancy questioned.

"When you couldn't be found, I decided to make a systematic canvass of all the rooming places, hoping to locate the one to which Bunce had taken you. Quite by luck I ran into this house where Omar and his brother were staying."

The following day the girls were accompanied to River Heights by the actor. In due course of time Fred Bunce and the two colored men were brought there for trial. As had been expected, the trio engaged a clever but disreputable lawyer. However, Carson Drew had prepared his own case well, with Nancy as the star witness against the men.

In a packed courtroom she calmly testified against Bunce. Dramatically she revealed all details of the conversation she had overheard to the effect that Harlan Bailey was the lost son of Captain Staff.

"That's a lie!" shouted Fred Bunce.

The judge rapped for order and warned the man against another outburst.

After Nancy had told her story, Carson Drew called Mrs. Bunce to the stand. He began with a few preliminary questions regarding her guardianship of Gus Woonton. Suddenly with no warning he asked:

"Why did you deny that Gussie was your own son? Was it because you were ashamed of him?"

Mrs. Bunce looked helplessly at her husband and began to cry. "Don't ask me about Gussie," she murmured brokenly.

The opposing lawyer was on his feet in an instant, shouting "Your Honor, I object——"

The judge overruled him and indicated that Carson Drew was to go on.

"You must answer my question, Mrs. Bunce," the lawyer said in a gentle voice. "Isn't it true that Gussie is your son?"

“Yes,” the woman admitted in a tone so low that it scarcely could be heard.

“Why did you claim that he was the child of the Woontons?”

“It was Fred’s idea, not mine. He was ashamed of Gussie because of his condition and didn’t like to have folks know about him. So when the Woontons died he thought we could tell people that they had left him in our care.”

“I see,” said Carson Drew. “And what has been done with the inheritance money your husband claimed in Gussie’s name?”

“Fred spent some of it, but most of it is in a bank in New York.”

“One more question, Mrs. Bunce. Where is your boy now?”

“I don’t know,” the woman answered miserably. “Fred took him away from the Riverside Home and boarded him at a private farm. But he ran off and now we can’t find him.”

Mr. Drew allowed Mrs. Bunce to leave the stand. He next called her husband, who denied everything his wife had said. The lawyer caused him to become so badly confused that there could be no doubt in the minds of the jurors as to which of them had spoken the truth.

The verdict was a foregone conclusion. No one was surprised when Fred Bunce was sentenced to a long term for his fraudulent activities.

The trial of Omar and Sam Washington came a few weeks later, and again Nancy gave pertinent testimony. Both men were found guilty; one of them for participating in a kidnaping, the other for robbery in connection with papers from Mr. Drew’s den, as well as other offenses. They were sent to keep company with the unfortunate Bunce.

Mr. Drew succeeded in tracing the hidden Woonton money. After a lengthy investigation it was proved that Mr. St. Will was the only living relative, and as such was entitled to the entire estate save the amount allowed Miss Carter to compensate her for Gussie’s care.

“I feel very grateful to you for having obtained this money,” the actor said, thanking Nancy’s father. “But I really have no need for it. I wish that it all could go to Miss Carter instead.”

“Perhaps we’ll find a way to help her,” suggested the lawyer.

“I have a plan now,” Mr. St. Will declared. “Through an agent I’ve arranged to buy ‘The Tapping Heels’ from her for a very good price, plus a royalty if the play is well received. If it is, she’ll be wealthy.”

“When will the show open?” Mr. Drew inquired.

“We’re not certain of the date, but we plan to have the initial performance in River Heights. After the actors are seasoned we’ll take them to New York.”

“I believe you’re wise to open the show here,” Nancy’s father declared. “The publicity will be tremendous.”

“Yes, I counted upon that,” replied the other with a wise smile.

A few days later Nancy and her chums motored to Berryville, fully expecting to find Miss Carter in the best of spirits. It was true the lady was delighted over her recent good fortune, but she was far from being in a happy frame of mind.

“I think I shall have to leave this dreadful house,” she told the girls. “I’ve come to the conclusion that it is haunted.”

“You’ve not heard any more of those tapping sounds, have you?” Nancy asked in surprise.

“I hear them nearly every day. I can’t bear it much longer. And today Mrs. Bealing gave me notice. She’s afraid to stay here.”

“When do you usually hear the sounds?” Nancy asked thoughtfully.

“More frequently after I’ve fed the cats than at any other time. Often, though, the noise keeps us awake at night.”

“I see,” Nancy commented. “You mentioned once that the tapping sounds seem to come from the basement.”

“Yes, but Mrs. Bealing and I have searched there many times and found nothing.”

The girls thought that the two women, who were naturally timid, might not have conducted a thorough inspection of the cellar. However, when they made a search of their own, it revealed little.

“This is certainly queer,” Nancy declared. “There must be an explanation for that tapping noise and I mean to discover it.”

“Just how are you going to do it?” George asked with a laugh.

“I know what I’ll do!” her chum announced firmly. “Tonight I’ll hide in the cellar and see for myself exactly what goes on there!”

CHAPTER XXV

THE TAPPING HEELS

That evening while Bess and George remained upstairs with Miss Carter, Nancy hid herself in the cellar. For an hour nothing happened. Now and then a cat would meow or make a slight sound as it prowled about in the dark, but there were no tapping noises.

Several times the girl was tempted to give up her vigil, for she was growing weary. Yet she remained at her post, hoping to solve the mystery of the strange sounds.

At nine o'clock the door at the head of the stairs opened and Mrs. Bealing set down a pan of meat for the cats. The instant the door closed Nancy saw a dark form move past her. Then she heard the tapping of heels on the stairway.

Darting from her hiding place she was in time to see a boy snatch scraps of food from the pan. He ate ravenously, as if he were starved.

Nancy caught the lad by an arm, holding firmly to him when he tried to break away.

"Don't be frightened," she said soothingly. "I'll not harm you."

Mrs. Bealing had heard the girl's voice, so she opened the door again. A beam of light fell upon the boy, revealing a wild, unkempt creature whose gaze was like that of a hunted animal.

"Mercy upon us!" exclaimed the housekeeper.

"I've solved the mystery of the tapping noises," Nancy said quietly. "Mrs. Bealing, this boy is half starved. He's been climbing into the cellar through the window and living on scraps of food intended for the cats."

"I'll find him some decent nourishment this minute," the woman declared. "Bring him right up into the kitchen."

Miss Carter, supported on either side by Bess and George, hobbled out to look at the boy.

"Why, it's poor Gussie!" she cried.

"Gussie come back to nice Miss Carter," the boy babbled, grinning at the woman in a childish way. "No one else likes Gussie."

"You have many good friends," the actress told him gently. "From now on they will look after you. You'll never be abused again."

While Mrs. Bealing gave food to the unfortunate lad, the others went into the living room to discuss what should be done with him.

"I recall that Superintendent Johnson told me Gussie might be restored to normal by an operation," Nancy remarked thoughtfully.

"Operations cost money," Bess replied, "and since the boy is Fred Bunce's son, he has no inheritance."

"I'd be only too happy to pay for the surgical treatment if I had the money," Miss Carter said quickly. "I have sold my play, 'The Tapping Heels,' but it may be months before any royalties come in. Then, if the show succeeds, Miss Barrett has promised that she will repay me the amount of money I have advanced to her. If all this comes to pass I'll surely try to help the lad."

"You're far too generous for your own good," Nancy said kindly. "You've done quite enough to help people. This time I'm sure someone other than yourself will look after Gussie."

She intended to speak to Mr. St. Will about the boy, feeling certain that he would be glad to donate some of the Woonton money for the purpose of restoring Gussie to mental and physical health. In this thought Nancy was quite correct. Weeks later the operation was performed by a skilled surgeon, with the result that after many months in a hospital, Gussie was sufficiently restored to be able to take his place with others of his age.

For the time being, however, it was decided that the lad should remain with Miss Carter. He seemed delighted and said over and over to her, "My Aunt Pretty, Aunt Pretty."

"Now that our 'ghost' has been discovered there's no reason why I can't go on living here with my cats," the actress declared happily. "If my play is a success I'll have enough money to keep me all my days."

"I'm sure the play will be all you wish it to be," Nancy said confidently. "The newspapers are giving it wonderful write-ups."

"Yes, everyone has been more than kind," Miss Carter said, tears coming into her eyes. "I feel so grateful about everything, and that's why I shall reveal an important secret."

"A secret?" asked the girls in surprise.

"Yes," the actress smiled. "Nancy, run up to my bedroom. Open the lower bureau drawer and bring me a blue cardboard box."

The girl did as she was told. She could not imagine what the box might contain for it was not heavy.

Returning to the living room she placed the container in Miss Carter's hands. The actress opened the box and lifted out two curious objects. For a moment the chums could not figure out what they could be.

"I can see that you are rather disappointed," laughed Miss Carter. "These objects are nothing more than the heels from a pair of dancing shoes—but what a pair of dancing shoes!"

"Is there any particular story about them?" Nancy asked doubtfully.

"Not a story, my dear. These are magic heels. Each one is equipped with a mechanical device so that it will tap by itself."

"And you once wore them on the stage?" Nancy inquired, beginning to understand what the actress meant.

"Yes. In my play, a long, winding staircase of stone was built which led to a tower. In white I flitted down the steps, attempting to escape from my arrogant pursuer. I kicked off the tapping shoes which continued to click on the stone, thus giving myself an opportunity to throw the man off my trail by the ruse."

"It must have been very mysterious," decided her listener.

"Naturally the echoing was spirit-like. The scene grew very dark and foreboding."

Suddenly the Drew girl had an idea. "Oh, Miss Carter!" she cried. "If only Beverly Barrett could borrow your tapping heels! They would assure the success of your play."

"I shall lend them to her," the actress smiled happily.

During the next few weeks Nancy and her chums could think of little else save the forthcoming performance. They were permitted to attend rehearsals, where they particularly enjoyed watching Beverly Barrett portray her part. They often commented upon the change in the young woman's attitude. She paid frequent visits to Miss Carter, and in many ways tried to show her the appreciation she felt for all the woman had done for her.

At length came the night of the grand opening at the local theatre. The girls arrived early and Nancy went back-stage to wish the members of the cast luck. "Every seat is sold," she reported to Miss Barrett. "The play is certain to be a success."

“One can never be sure,” the actress replied uneasily. “Everything depends upon the big scene in the first act.”

“The mechanical tapping heels will carry the mystery along,” said Nancy. “The spirit dance is everything. The audience will be so intrigued by the echoing, it cannot fail.”

“I had the heels built into new silver dancing slippers,” the actress declared. “Would you like to see them?”

She looked about the cluttered dressing room but could not find the shoes.

“They’re gone!” she cried in distress. “Someone has taken my slippers!”

Nancy helped the young woman search for the mechanical heels, but they could not be found anywhere.

“Oh, what shall I do?” Miss Barrett wailed. “It’s nearly curtain time and I can’t attempt the scene without those shoes!”

“I don’t understand who would want to steal them,” Nancy said in perplexity. “I’ll look outside the dressing room.”

As she stepped into the corridor almost the first person she saw was Miss Carter, who had come to offer Beverly Barrett encouragement.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have done it,” she admitted to Nancy, “but I brought Gussie with me. I had no one with whom I could leave him.”

“Where is the boy now, Miss Carter?”

“He’s somewhere back stage. I’ll take him out front with me before the show starts.”

Unwittingly Miss Carter had given Nancy a clue to what might have become of the mechanical heels.

“Listen!” the girl commanded.

In a dressing room at the far end of the corridor they could hear a faint tapping sound. Without taking time to explain to the puzzled actress, Nancy darted down the hallway and opened the door. On the floor sat Gussie playing with the clicking shoes.

“Oh, Gussie!” Nancy chided, taking the heels from him, “you’ve caused no end of worry and excitement.”

She ran back with the slippers, arriving in the actress’s dressing room just as the buzzer warned her that the curtain would go up in three minutes.

“You’ve saved the show, Nancy!” Miss Barrett cried gratefully. “I’ll never forget it.”

The Drew girl barely had time to reach her reserved seat in the audience when the curtain went up. For a few minutes she sat tense and nervous. Then as she realized that everything was going well on the stage, she relaxed and thoroughly enjoyed herself.

“The play is a hit!” Bess whispered to her at the end of the first act. “Miss Barrett’s tapping was marvelous, especially the part where the sounds seemed to echo from the stone tower.”

The applause was tremendous. The three girls could not help but feel elated, for they realized that it was through a series of events in which they had played no small part, that the performance was a perfect one.

“Mr. St. Will is so wonderful, I believe Miss Carter will now marry him,” whispered the romantic Bess. “She just couldn’t refuse him again.” Later on Bess Marvin’s statement proved to be true.

Another bit of intuition, spoken aloud by her some little time later, was to become an important clue in another case when Nancy would be implicated in “The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk.”

“We’ll never forget our own tapping code,” said George to the other girls during intermission. “Perhaps we could incorporate it into a skit ourselves.”

“Perhaps,” laughed Nancy gaily, as the handclapping broke out anew. “But tonight is Miss Carter’s big night, and that makes me very happy!”

THE END

[The end of *The Clue of the Tapping Heels* by Carolyn Keene (probably Mildred Benson)]