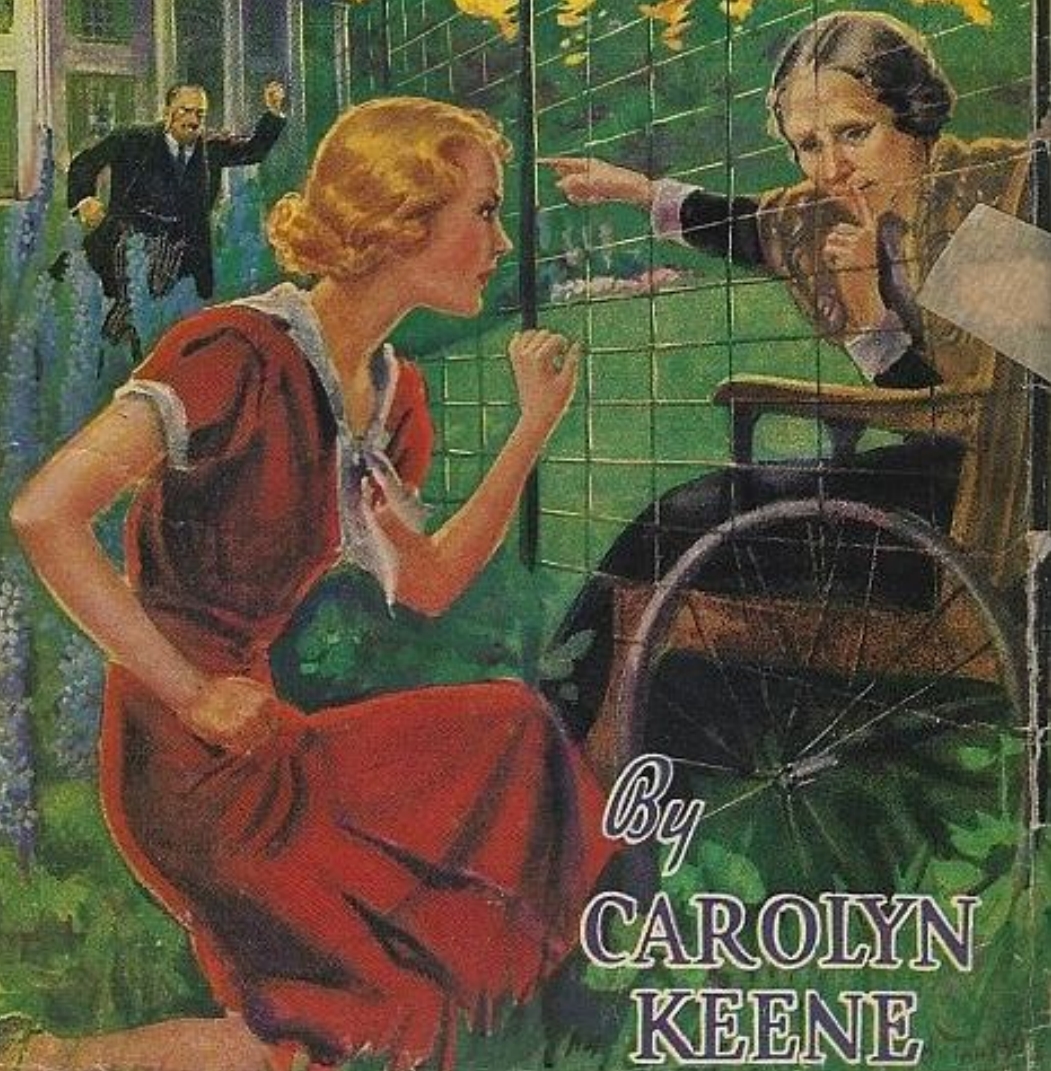


Mammy Drew Mystery Stories

THE PASSWORD TO LARKSPUR LANE



By
**CAROLYN
KEENE**

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NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES

THE PASSWORD TO
LARKSPUR LANE

BY
CAROLYN KEENE

ILLUSTRATED BY
RUSSELL H. TANDY

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The Password to Larkspur Lane Frontispiece (Page [179](#))

“IT IS I, NANCY DREW,” SHE WHISPERED REMOVING THE BONNET AND VEIL.

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CHAPTER I

SINGING HORSES

“If this were two thousand years ago——!”

Nancy Drew, walking slowly along the broadly spaced flagstones of her garden path, paused before a border of hardy larkspur. Scores of plants of many shapes and sizes waved their blue plumes, as if saying:

“Choose me! Choose me!”

She turned to speak to a middle-aged woman who was following her, a flower basket in her hand.

“I must select the very best ones for the floral exhibition, Hannah,” the attractive, blond-haired girl said.

“Yes,” agreed the woman, who was the housekeeper at the Drew home. “You’re going to use just the larkspur, I believe, for your bouquet.”

Snip! Nancy’s scissors cut spears of the beautiful blue blooms. Picking carefully to obtain the fullest stalks, she soon had an armful of lovely flowers.

“If this were two thousand years ago,” she mused again, “I should be picking this bouquet with other thoughts in mind than winning a blue ribbon.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hannah.

“If I had lived two thousand years ago, I should have been a Grecian maiden,” replied Nancy. “And right now I should be praying at the temple of Apollo in Delphi.”

“What would you be asking for?” interrupted the housekeeper.

“That my father’s olive grove would bear extra well, that his vines would be loaded with grapes, and that his nets would be heavy with fish every morning.”

Hannah laughed aloud at the thought of her employer, Carson Drew, the keen lawyer, picking olives or hauling in a net filled with fishes.

“These larkspurs are also called ‘delphinium’ because they were the sacred flower of the temple at Delphi,” Nancy explained. “I believe they have other names, too.”

The gorgeous bouquet which had been selected was to be in reality Nancy’s entry at the annual midsummer flower show held for charity each year at the estate of some wealthy River Heights resident. Their arms laden with blooms, Nancy and Mrs. Hannah Gruen went into the Drew home. The girl immediately wrapped her bouquet in waxed paper to preserve its freshness, and then selected a tall, simple vase of a creamy hue in which she intended to display her entry.

“My, but those blossoms are lovely,” said the admiring housekeeper. “They match your eyes.”

Gathering up the vase and flowers, Nancy danced out of the kitchen, passed through the long, cool hall to the shaded porch, and out to her maroon roadster parked at the curb. Hannah followed. As she was about to step into the machine, she noticed that an airplane was flying very low, and side-slipping as if about to make a forced landing.

“Hannah! Oh, look!” she called as she laid down the flowers.

The housekeeper gasped. Together Nancy and Mrs. Gruen hurried to the garden to get a better view.

“There is no safe place nearby to come down,” Nancy exclaimed.

“The fellow will be killed,” moaned Hannah.

The plane, a light, twin-motored ship, was painted in aluminum gray. One of the engines seemed to have gone dead. Nancy noted a curious design painted in black on the under side of the wings. She was not certain what the picture was intended to portray, though it appeared to be an animal of some kind.

While following the wabbling craft with wide eyes, she suddenly saw a flash of white and blue dart straight into the path of the airplane.

“A pigeon!” Nancy exclaimed. “It will be hurt!”

The plane had passed overhead now. It lurched, and then suddenly the drooping wing came up with a snap as the idling motor once more roared into life and urged the aircraft speedily on a straight course.

That maneuver had cost the poor bird dearly. Struck by the plane’s wing, the pigeon came tumbling to the ground, flapping its own wings desperately. The bird fell almost at Nancy’s feet, fluttered feebly for a moment, then flopped on its side.

“You poor thing,” Nancy cried, tenderly picking up the battered, panting creature. “Are your wings broken?”

With gentle hands she examined it for injuries. As her fingers probed about, they encountered something round and hard beneath one wing.

“Why, it’s a carrier pigeon!” she exclaimed to Hannah. She unlooped the band that held a small metal tube to the bird’s breast.

“Isn’t it wonderful how smart a dumb bird can be!” Hannah exclaimed. “How in the world can they be trained to carry messages to places?”

“They don’t exactly do that. Wherever they are released, they fly back to the place where they are always fed,” Nancy replied, opening the stopper of the bottle-like tube and extracting the thin piece of paper it contained. “Perhaps this will give us a clue to its owner.”

Her eyes scanned the penciled message, and opened wide in amazement.

“What does it say?” asked Hannah.

“‘Trouble here. Blue bells are now singing horses,’ ” Nancy read aloud.

“What in the world does that mean?” came from the housekeeper.

“The message ends with ‘Come at once,’ ” went on Nancy. “Whatever it means, it must be important.”

“I never was good at solving mysteries,” Hannah announced. “What will you do about it, Nancy?”

“I have a plan!” Nancy cried. “I’ll telegraph the number stamped on the ring the bird has on its leg to the American Pigeon Club!”

“How will they help you?” asked the perplexed woman.

“They’ll know who the owner is, because they have records of carrier pigeons by their numbers.”

“Well, I’ll get a box to put the poor thing in,” offered Hannah.

As she went off to do this, Nancy hastened to the telephone and called the telegraph office.

“I think there is a society in New York called the American Pigeon Club,” she said. “If that is not the correct name, will you please find it for me and send this telegram? ‘Pigeon carrying message and ring number 2-21-12-12 fell wounded here.’ ”

She returned to Hannah and helped place the bird in a cardboard box.

“No bones are broken,” she announced. “I am glad, for otherwise the little messenger would probably die.”

"I wonder how fast they can fly," mused the older woman.

"I read about some carrier pigeons that raced from Mexico City to New York," replied the girl. "They averaged a mile a minute."

Nancy found it hard to compose her mind while waiting for an answer to her telegram. Thoughtfully she drove with her handsome larkspur to the Blenheim estate, where the flower show was to be held. There she was joined by a throng of young ladies who were busy arranging bouquets in the spacious solarium. Out on the broad, tree-shadowed lawn women were directing gardeners how to build model rockeries, or artificial flower beds.

Nancy arranged her entry and placed it on the bench allotted to her. After inspecting other displays, she decided to return home, eagerly anticipating an answer to her telegram to the Pigeon Association.

As she drove along, Nancy pondered the events of the afternoon. Not quite halfway to her goal, her alert eyes took in a sight which awakened her from her thoughts, although she gave no outward sign of her excited interest.

A touring car was parked by the roadside, drawn so far to its edge that the dusty leaves of the persimmon hedge which bordered the pastures beyond sprawled over the top of the automobile. Nancy's curiosity was aroused by the fact that the curtains of the parked car had been put up as if in anticipation of a rainstorm.

"Strange thing to do on a clear day," she mused.

As soon as Nancy had passed the vehicle, her eyes shifted to the rear-view mirror of her own roadster. She noticed that the parked car was from another state, and at once memorized the numbers on the license plate. She could not have told why she did this almost automatically, with that sixth sense that had made her see through many a mystery which had baffled older minds.

She had not been able to peer into the car, so dark was the interior. There had been a man at the wheel; of that she was certain. But his windshield had been dusty, and she could not tell how he was dressed nor what he looked like.

A moment later Nancy noted a car approaching at high speed, and instinctively she pulled over farther to the right. As the oncoming automobile flashed by, Nancy saw a hand raised in salutation.

"Dr. Spires!" she said, as the autoist sped on his way.

The man at the wheel was a friend of the Drew family, and a famous bone specialist. Nancy wondered where he was going in such haste. She followed the course of his vehicle, and was surprised to see it swerve to the side of the road and come to a stop in front of the mysterious touring car.

Nancy disengaged the gears of her own automobile, letting it roll to a halt while she watched Dr. Spires leave his machine and approach the parked car. A rear door opened, and she could see the surgeon, one foot on the running board, put head and shoulders into the tonneau. Then he abruptly vanished into the auto, and at once it sped away.

"Queer doings," Nancy observed. "Did he jump into the car, or was he pulled in?"

She shifted into reverse and drove backward up the road, guiding the car skillfully with one hand as she looked over her shoulder. Beside the physician's coupé she pulled on her brake and leaped out.

"Car is locked and keys gone," she noted. "I guess the doctor expected to leave his machine here. Everything must be all right, but it seems very strange."

As she drove homeward, Nancy thought over the happenings of the afternoon, which had certainly been mysterious. She was totally unaware, however, of a greater surprise that awaited her. She was met at the door of the Drew home by the housekeeper, who handed her a telegram from the Pigeon Club. Its contents startled Nancy.

LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE WILL CALL BIRD NOT REGISTERED
SOMETHING WRONG KEEP MESSAGE SECRET

CHAPTER II

BLUE BELLS AGAIN

Nancy wrote out the message, for she felt that sooner or later it would be of vast importance. Beside it she put down the license number of the car in which Dr. Spires had departed so unceremoniously and mysteriously.

Then she smoothed out the message the pigeon had carried, and tried to ferret a meaning from the ludicrous words.

“Could it be a code?” Nancy wondered. She tried to choose alternate letters, starting at various places in the sentence, but none of the methods she knew produced any results. She determined that this was no cipher, but that the words had a special meaning apparent only to those who held the secret contained therein.

“This is a real mystery,” muttered the girl, puzzling over the message. Suddenly she heard a faint moaning.

“Help! Help——”

She leaped to her feet, straining her ears.

There was no clue as to where the wailing might be coming from. The girl, now worried, ran to the kitchen, but found it to be empty. So were the living room, the dining room, and the library.

As she stood in the hallway she could hear the moaning again, and this time she detected her name being called.

She thought that it came from the floor below, and ran back into the kitchen and then to the cellarway. The switch for the basement light was turned on. She threw open the door and saw a huddled form at the foot of the stairs.

“Hannah!” she cried in alarm, a catch in her throat. “Are you badly hurt?”

The words were spoken as she raced down the steps to the side of the housekeeper.

“I dropped a potato out of the pan and slipped on it,” Hannah moaned. “My back hurts terribly.”

“Can you stand up if I help you?” Nancy asked, putting her arms around Mrs. Gruen. The woman, leaning heavily on the girl, struggled to her feet, groaning and moaning all the while, her face white with pain.

“Now see if you can climb the stairs with my help,” Nancy urged. “Then we’ll get into my car, run around to Dr. Spires and have him examine you.”

“Oh, no, the dinner,” Hannah protested, “Your father——”

“We’ll leave him a note,” Nancy said, as the top stair was reached. “Never mind your dress—come along!”

Pausing to scribble a line of explanation and to leave it in a conspicuous place, Nancy assisted Mrs. Gruen to her roadster and drove off to Dr. Spires’s home. Although Nancy was extremely solicitous about Hannah’s injury, she could not help anticipating a meeting with the physician in the hope that his strange departure in the closed machine might be explained.

To her disappointment, Dr. Spires was not at home.

“But do come in and bring Mrs. Gruen into the office,” Mrs. Spires urged. “We can make a place on a lounge for her to rest, and I am sure the doctor will be here very soon.”

Hannah was made as comfortable as possible on the couch in the doctor's waiting room. Nancy decided to remain with her while Mrs. Spires excused herself to finish preparations for her dinner. Nancy chatted with Mrs. Gruen to keep up her spirits, and read jokes to her from a magazine she found on a table. Ten minutes passed in that way. Suddenly the telephone rang.

"It may be Father," Nancy said eagerly, lifting the receiver from the hook and speaking the usual "Hello!" into the mouthpiece of the instrument.

It was a strange voice that inquired if Dr. Spires had returned as yet. When Nancy replied in the negative, the voice at the other end of the wire spoke with someone in a muffled tone, directing her to take a message which he would dictate.

Nancy found a pencil, and while writing down the words which were slowly given to her Hannah noted a strange expression creeping over the girl's face. It was a mixture of unbelief, joy, and keen alertness. Hannah had seen that look before and knew that her beloved mistress was scenting a new mystery.

Mysteries were the delight of Nancy's existence. Many a problem which had baffled professional mystery-solvers had been cleared up by her keen mind, coupled with what Nancy herself called "a sort of sixth sense, probably inherited from Father."

Carson Drew had always been close to his only daughter, whose mother had died many years before, and often discussed his legal work with her. At first he did so just for the sake of reasoning aloud. Then, as Nancy Drew grew into her teens he learned that her advice was often very valuable, regardless of how involved the cases were.

It was not long before Nancy began to establish a reputation of her own by finding out what came to be known to her friends as "The Secret of the Old Clock," the title of the first volume of this series. Before long—after "The Hidden Staircase" had delivered up its secret to Nancy and "The Bungalow Mystery" had been solved—it seemed as if persons had more faith in Nancy's genius than they had in the skill of professional detectives, and not without reason. A long list of thrilling adventures proved this.

"Nancy's Mysterious Letter," for instance, won her the appreciation of the United States Government itself once the mystery was unraveled. What she learned at "The Sign of the Twisted Candles," the adventure which gave the title to the volume preceding this one, brought great wealth to a poor girl who had been brought up as a kitchen drudge.

Hannah had long since ceased worrying over Nancy's various encounters, convinced that her beloved young mistress was the match for anyone's wits. Nevertheless, she regarded the present expression on the girl's face with dismay, for Nancy was in the habit of forgetting about food and rest when on the trail of a mystery. To Hannah it was almost a crime to let a good dinner grow cold!

"What is it, Nancy—certainly not from your father, is it?" Hannah asked weakly.

"No," Nancy replied, "it wasn't. But just the same I'm glad I was here to take the message. It explains something, yet makes everything more mysterious, if you know what I mean."

"I certainly don't," Hannah Gruen retorted a little tartly. "Anything that explains something but makes it more mysterious is beyond me. What was it?"

At this juncture a brisk step was heard outside the door, and Dr. Spires strode into the room.

"Well, well," he cried. "What is the matter now? Are you the patient, Mrs. Gruen? It can't be Nancy, for I never saw a more perfect picture of health."

"Hannah fell down the cellar stairs and hurt her back," Nancy explained rapidly. "I hurried her over here, for fear her spine might be injured."

"We'll soon find out," the doctor said, as he donned a white jacket and washed his hands vigorously with antiseptic. Swiftly he examined the injured woman.

"Who put this bandage on her?" he asked.

"I did, Doctor," Nancy replied. "I hope I didn't make her worse. I thought she might need support——"

"A perfect job," Dr. Spires said warmly. "No hospital interne could have done better in an emergency. I see that it is a good linen tablecloth, however, so you had better take it back."

Nancy, snatching up the first thing at hand, had taken the tablecloth that Hannah was about to lay for dinner, and, making a triangle of it, had knotted the linen to support the housekeeper's back against any shock from the journey to the doctor's office.

"A bad sprain is the sum and substance of what is wrong with you, Mrs. Gruen," the surgeon said. "Rest it a day in bed, with compresses of this liniment I will give you, and in a few weeks you won't know anything happened."

Hannah was able to move by herself, once she heard that no bones were broken. Nancy offered her arm to the housekeeper, and as she left the office she told the doctor she would return for a moment as soon as she had made Hannah comfortable in the roadster.

"There, are you quite all right?" asked Nancy presently.

"Thank you—yes," responded Mrs. Gruen.

"I wish to speak to the doctor for a minute."

"Oh, yes," answered the housekeeper. "You failed to give him his message."

Quickly Nancy went back to the surgeon, who was seated at his desk smoking a cigar and gazing thoughtfully into the blue vapors which curled around his head.

"Did you forget something?" he asked.

"No, I didn't forget. I haven't had a chance to tell you something," explained the girl.

"Well," smiled the surgeon, "what is it?"

"I took down a message for you over the telephone," she responded.

"What was the call, Nancy?" he asked. "I hope it does not mean I must go out again tonight. I have had an unusual afternoon."

"This is what was dictated to me," Nancy explained, opening the paper she had carried folded in her hand.

The doctor took it, wrinkling his brow as he looked at the penciled words. Then he read them aloud, pronouncing each one slowly.

"If you say blue bells, you will get into trouble, for they are no longer used here."

He looked up to encounter Nancy's dancing eyes.

"It doesn't make sense to you, does it?" the doctor sighed.

"No, but——" Nancy began, hesitating as the doctor suddenly stood up and strode across the room, his head bent and his hands clasped behind his back.

"Queer," muttered the medical man.

"Rather," said the young woman.

"Nancy," Dr. Spires said suddenly, "you have a wonderful mind, and a talent which I respect very highly. Above all, you have common sense—which is far from being a common thing at all."

He stopped and faced the girl.

"I need some help in solving a strange mystery, Nancy Drew," the surgeon said. "I know of nobody with whom I should rather discuss it than you and your father. Will you help me?"

"Of course," Nancy replied quickly and firmly.

The doctor smiled warmly.

"I'm eager to get started on it," the girl said, a merry light shining in her blue eyes.

"I had a queer experience this afternoon."

"Yes," responded Nancy breathlessly.

"Very queer, indeed."

"While you were out calling?"

"Yes, while I was out."

The sound of ice being cracked made the doctor and Nancy realize he was delaying the evening meal. Mrs. Spires was prompt with the surgeon's repasts, so that his office appointments following them could be promptly met.

"I guess I cannot go into detail just now," he decided, "for evidently supper is ready."

"I'll be glad at any time to hear the story of your mysterious adventure, Doctor, and so will my father."

"Great!" said the bone specialist, shaking hands with affection. "You are a splendid detective."

"Together we should be able to assist you," said the girl modestly, allowing the compliment to slip by unnoticed.

"Then will you come back here this evening with him? I shall be counting upon you."

"We certainly will," Nancy declared warmly, "and if Father cannot come, I will come alone."

CHAPTER III

SHADOWED!

Nancy had heard many a strange and thrilling story in her career, but none to surpass the adventure related by Dr. Spires that night in his study. Then she was to find herself suddenly caught up in a chain of swiftly moving events which might have caused a girl with a heart less stout to seek refuge far from home.

Hannah, made comfortable for the night, had assured Nancy she was not the least bit afraid of being left alone in the house, and thereupon the girl had left for the surgeon's home with her distinguished father. Carson Drew, you may believe, was no less keen to hear the doctor's side of the mysterious automobile ride. At their impromptu supper Nancy had of course told her relative about the closed car into which Dr. Spires had vanished, the pigeon's message, and the queer reference to "blue bells" repeated in the telephoned warning.

"Gracious, Nancy, you seem to attract mystery as a magnet attracts iron," Carson Drew had laughed at the end of the recital, but he was secretly flattered that Dr. Spires should have asked his daughter's assistance.

Nancy and her father parked their roadster and entered the specialist's home.

"You will excuse my wife's absence," the surgeon said, as he seated his guests in his study. "I did not want to worry her, and she agreed to go to the theater with a friend when I suggested it, not knowing that I had asked you here."

"We understand, of course," Mr. Drew said, his eyebrows raised significantly as he heard that the nature of the evening's discussion was sufficiently grave to cause worry. Nancy, of course, was thrilled at the suggestion of mystery and danger.

"This afternoon," began Dr. Spires, "I received a telephone call. At the time I merely thought of it as an emergency message, and responded without second thought."

He was silent for a moment, his finger tips pressed together, and Nancy took advantage of the pause.

"Did the message call you out north of town?" she queried.

"Yes, north of town."

"You entered a touring car with the curtains down?" she pursued.

Dr. Spires started from his seat.

"By Jove, Nancy, I passed you just a short way from my mysterious appointment, didn't I? I remember now, but how did you know I entered the other machine? I am sure you drove on."

"Yes, but slowly, and I kept watch in my mirror," Nancy said. "I thought there was something queer about that car when I passed it."

"If all persons had your powers of observation, it would be a safer world for us all to live in," Dr. Spires commented. "However, I'll proceed with the strange story."

Mr. Drew leaned back comfortably in his chair, but Nancy sat forward in her seat, intent on every word the medical man uttered.

"The telephone message asked me to drive out on North Main Street. The speaker, a man whose voice I could not recognize, said that Mrs. Manning Smith—a patient of mine—had been in a minor accident but was demanding that I attend her.

"The speaker further said that Mrs. Smith had stepped out into the road from a meadow where she had been gathering wild flowers, and into the path of an automobile which had

grazed her and knocked her down. He said that Mrs. Smith had explained she was already under treatment for a leg injury and did not want to be moved until I had examined her.

“That sounded perfectly plausible to me,” Dr. Spires continued. “Mrs. Smith is actually under my care for periosteal——”

Mr. Drew interrupted with a broad smile. “Never mind the technical terms, unless it has something to do with the case.”

“Which it hasn’t,” Nancy said musingly. “Mrs. Smith was not there at all.”

Dr. Spires shot the girl a puzzled look.

“You had sharper eyes than I when you passed that car, for I couldn’t see who was in it until the door was opened,” he said.

“I didn’t see; it was just a guess,” Nancy replied. “I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“Well, to shorten a long story,” the surgeon went on, “I came to the car, stopped—as you witnessed, Nancy—and as I walked back to it, the door of the other machine was opened. I stooped to look inside and suddenly my shoulders were seized, and I was snatched into the rear compartment. A hood-like cloth was pulled over my head, and a bandage fastened across it to seal my mouth. Then, while a man on each side held me firmly, the car sped off on a long ride.”

Mr. Drew sat forward in his chair at this revelation.

“How long did you ride?” Nancy asked. “It may be important.”

“About an hour, for I looked at my watch after I attended my patient. Yes, there was a patient in a great rambling house evidently far out in the country.

“It proved to be a woman suffering from a dislocated shoulder which had been ineffectually treated, so there was considerable swelling and exudation of lymph, especially around—but excuse me, those details are not important. In addition, she was practically in a coma from a heart attack.”

“She might have died,” muttered Nancy sympathetically.

“Yes,” agreed her father. “This involves many points.”

“I treated her at once,” continued the physician. “Then I set the dislocation and left directions how it was to be nursed. The woman was quite elderly, and needed good care. The man who had escorted me to the room blindfolded me again, and I was driven back to my car.”

Dr. Spires leaned back in his chair and wiped his forehead, while the Drews waited expectantly for the rest of his story.

“I was paid,” the surgeon said with a shrug. “A fifty-dollar bill was tucked into my pocket. I returned to find Nancy here with Mrs. Gruen, and asked her to come over with you, Carson. Now what do you make of it all?”

“I should like to hear your own theory first,” Mr. Drew returned.

“Well, I believe that the old woman I treated is being held against her will,” snapped Dr. Spires.

“Illegally confined,” said Mr. Drew.

“I was not allowed to question her at all, nor was I given a moment with her alone. Her name was refused to me.”

“What a shame!” exclaimed Nancy. “We must help her!”

“This rather involves you in what is certainly a criminal enterprise!” surmised Carson Drew thoughtfully.

“Have you no clues at all to any part of the trip, the patient, or the persons who took you there?” Nancy asked.

“I certainly have,” Dr. Spires cried triumphantly. “While I was taking the woman’s pulse, I slipped this bracelet from her arm.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a heavy, old-fashioned band of gold, which he handed to Nancy.

“A stolen clue! Hurrah!” exclaimed the girl excitedly.

“It was stealing, but justifiable, I guess,” he smiled. “It looks like an heirloom.”

“It has a coat of arms,” Nancy cried. “I am sure we can trace its ownership!”

“Now, then,” Dr. Spires continued, “I think I learned the password to the place, for as we turned into a driveway—I could tell by the creak of gates—the driver of the car said ‘Blue Bells,’ to someone on guard. The message you took over the phone, though, Nancy, indicates that it has been changed.”

“Never mind. I think I know the new countersign,” Nancy replied, and once again the surgeon stared at her in doubt.

She told the doctor the story of the wounded pigeon, the airplane, and the telegrams.

“And now,” Carson Drew declared, “I think we ought to report the whole business to the police. With your permission, Richard, I am going to tell your story to the head of the Detective Bureau. Nancy will drive me there tonight.”

Nancy and the doctor both thought it was wisest to lay the facts before the authorities, yet the girl secretly determined that she would solve the mystery on her own account.

After some refreshments Carson Drew and his daughter bade the worried physician good night and walked out the front door. As Nancy stepped onto the wide porch, she sensed that a shadowy figure suddenly passed silently toward a side street.

“Were we being watched?” wondered the girl as she waited for her father to shake hands with his physician friend. “I must be on my guard. Perhaps the doctor is more involved than we think, and by helping him we shall be in danger ourselves.”

Nancy drove downtown, as prearranged, to the River Heights Police Headquarters, saying nothing, however, to her father of the silent, slinking figure.

Suddenly she noticed twin headlights being reflected in her windshield, the right one slightly dimmer than the left. As she turned in and out through the streets it was evident that the car behind took the same route as she did, maintaining the exact speed of the Drew roadster.

Nancy became suspicious. Mr. Drew, apparently deep in thought, paid no attention to the occurrence, so Nancy refrained from calling it to his attention. However, she kept watch.

She slowed down at Police Headquarters.

“No place to park here,” she observed. “Hop out, Father, and start telling your story. I’ll join you as soon as I find a parking space.”

She observed a spot in which she could maneuver her roadster. Unfortunately, it was in a place between street lights, and hence the darkest location on the block. As she switched on her parking lights and locked her car, Nancy was startled by a strange voice.

“Say, Miss, who is that man you were driving?” was the question.

Nancy peered at the speaker. She saw heavy brows over beady eyes, and a wide, cruel mouth. The girl shuddered. She did not like the man’s looks nor his manner.

“I do not know you,” Nancy said shortly.

“Now don’t get mad,” said the stranger in honeyed tones. “But do tell me what the man is doing at Police Headquarters.”

Nancy, now very distrustful of this inquisitive and harsh-appearing individual, made no answer. She assumed he was the person who had been following them in the car.

“Won’t tell me, eh? All right. But I’m going to find out who your passenger was and his business.”

The girl, now suspecting that this man might have some connection with Dr. Spires’s kidnapers and have been sent as a spy to get information, said to him:

“Why do you want to know who we are?”

“Never mind that,” the stranger replied, “but it’s important that I should know.”

Abruptly Nancy turned on her heel. Then she came face to face with a young friend who was sauntering down the street.

“Well, Nancy Drew!” cried the girl. “What are you doing here?”

Nancy bade her good evening, berating her own bad luck in being thus identified. To make matters worse, the strange man chuckled diabolically.

“Aha, Nancy Drew, hey? Then it was your illustrious father, Carson Drew, who was with you, and who went to the police station!”

With that remark he stepped behind a parked car and disappeared on the opposite side of the street, leaving Nancy standing with a new anxiety in her heart. Was her beloved father also threatened with trouble?

CHAPTER IV

LINKING THE EVIDENCE

Nancy was directed to the Detective Bureau, where she found her father conferring with a stout, red-faced man who was introduced as Inspector Mulligan.

“Sure, and we know all about ye, Miss Drew,” the officer said, bowing gallantly. “I’d be honored if ye’d make up your mind to join the force, so I would. ’Tis a strange story your father brings me, but with your brains and my muscle, I guess we’ll get at the bottom of it.”

He leaned back in his chair, laughing at his own joke. Nancy smiled politely, but to herself she vowed that the mystery should be solved without the brawn of the Inspector.

“Here is one clue,” she said, taking the bracelet from her handbag and putting it on the detective’s desk. The man picked it up in his huge hand and examined it closely.

“Hm,” said Mulligan. “An inscription: ‘To my darling Mary from Joe,’ but no last names and no dates. The thing is old. It may be that Mary and Joe are both dead these fifty years. It’s a clue but a mighty slim one.”

He tossed the bracelet across the desk, and Nancy quickly pocketed it. If it did not mean much to the detective, it meant a great deal to her.

“Well, we must get busy,” the inspector said. “I have my doubts, though. The operations seem to be carried on outside the city limits where we have no authority.”

“You might watch out for this license number,” Nancy remarked coolly, passing over the figures she had copied from the kidnaper’s car that she had seen.

“Ha, this is worth a million bracelets to us,” Mulligan snorted. “Thanks, Miss Drew. Well, we will keep you posted, and I’ll have a man interview the doctor tomorrow. There may be some things that you’ve overlooked in his story that would be mighty important information to a real detective.”

The inspector escorted Nancy and her father to the door, where the Drews bade him good night.

“Nancy, it seems to me that Mr. Mulligan gave you a direct challenge,” the lawyer laughed as they reached the street. “Talking about ‘real detectives’ shows what he thinks of the abilities of the Drew family.”

Nancy was too busy extricating her car from the close ranks of parked automobiles to reply. As she turned toward home, a pair of headlights suddenly danced into view in her mirror, and she saw that the right one was dim. The trail had been taken up again!

“We are being followed,” she observed to her father quietly. “Don’t look around. We’ll lead the man a chase.”

Gradually Nancy increased the speed of her car, directing it into the quieter streets of the old residential section of the city. She knew every nook and corner of River Heights, and as usual had a very definite plan in mind.

She shot abruptly into a narrow, slumbering thoroughfare, and noted with delight that the pursuing car followed closely behind. At the next intersection a “dummy policeman,” which was merely a concrete post with a light on top of it, blinked monotonously. Around this beacon Nancy suddenly turned, her tires squealing on the asphalt. In an instant she was facing her pursuer, who had jammed on his brakes in utter consternation.

“Clever work, Nancy,” Mr. Drew observed. “That will teach him not to— Oh!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Quick! Turn around!” Mr. Drew commanded. “We mustn’t lose sight of that man.”

“Who is he?” she asked, bringing the car to an abrupt halt.

Almost before her father could answer, she had deftly turned and headed the machine in the opposite direction. In another moment she was pursuing the other car.

“He’s Adam Thorne—a scoundrel if there ever was one,” fumed Mr. Drew. “He’s wanted by the police. He’s a slick lawyer, but he was disbarred a couple of years ago.”

“What for?” asked Nancy, now putting on all the speed she dared.

The tail-light of the car they were pursuing was barely visible ahead. It suddenly vanished as the driver turned a corner. Nancy followed his direction.

“He was disbarred for overstepping his rights with a client,” said Mr. Drew. “Look out, Nancy. Be careful of that sign ahead,” he warned, as the girl abruptly put on her brakes to turn another corner.

“Why do the police want him?” asked Nancy, her breath coming fast.

“He was indicted for embezzling the assets of an estate,” was the reply. “He stole the entire fortune of a client who died and left him in charge.”

By this time Nancy had turned around two more corners in her pursuit, but her quarry had eluded her. Despite inquiry from a passerby, the Drews were unable to trace Adam Thorne.

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Nancy at last. “I wish we hadn’t lost him, for I recognized him, too.”

“You!” exclaimed Mr. Drew. “Surely you don’t know that scoundrel!”

“No, but while you were in the police station, he spoke to me,” she replied. “Wanted to know who you were and what you were doing.”

“So!” exclaimed the lawyer. “He knows me, all right, but he wanted to be sure.”

“I know he is connected with the kidnapers,” announced Nancy.

“What!”

“Yes. I recognized the car and the license number as the one in which Dr. Spires was taken away.”

“Fine detective work, Nancy!” Mr. Drew complimented. “We must locate that man.”

“It will probably be a risky thing to do,” Nancy said, turning toward home. “He might lead us into a trap. I think that we should be cautious until we can learn just what this is all about.”

“What theories have you?” Mr. Drew asked.

“None. At least nothing clear,” Nancy replied as she turned into the Drew driveway. “Of course, Dr. Spires’s house is being watched. That is why we were followed. Our trip to Headquarters made Thorne and his helpers suspicious.”

“You are probably right. But what about the background of it all—the woman with the dislocated shoulder, and the mysterious password?”

After Mr. Drew had locked the garage, Nancy tucked her hand into her father’s arm.

“That’s what we have to find out,” she said, puckering her brow as if lost in deep thought at the prospect of solving the meaning of the strange messages, which evidently held the secret password.

Next morning Nancy was up early to prepare breakfast for her father and Hannah. Mr. Drew left for his office after cautioning his daughter to be on her guard.

“I don’t want you to be kidnaped,” he said.

“Maybe that wouldn’t be a bad idea, though,” Nancy laughed back. “It would be a quick way of finding out what Thorne’s business is.”

After tidying the kitchen Nancy set out for the home of Hannah's sister to call for the housekeeper's niece Effie, who would assist with the household duties until her aunt should be able to assume charge again.

"Effie's a good girl but a little flighty," Hannah had said. "She's strong and a willing worker if she's told what to do."

Effie's home proved to be a small frame cottage in a row of identical houses close to the factory district. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman who resembled Hannah Gruen so closely that Nancy recognized her immediately as the housekeeper's sister.

"Mrs. Schneider? I am Nancy Drew."

"Won't you come right in, Miss Drew?" Mrs. Schneider said. "I'm afraid you'll find the house a little upset, it being my wash day and— Oh, has anything happened to Hannah, Miss Drew?"

"She had a fall but is not seriously hurt," Nancy said soothingly, as the woman clutched her gingham apron in distress. "Please don't worry. Hannah suggested that Effie might help us out."

"If you find her worth it," Mrs. Schneider said rather grimly. "I declare, when I was her age, I didn't sit around mooning about movie actors all the time. Effie! O-oh, Effie!"

"Here I am, Ma," a high-pitched voice giggled, and the daughter stepped into the room.

Effie was about seventeen, a thin, wispy sort of girl. She had blond hair, but a cheap permanent wave had made her bobbed locks stand out around her head in a startling manner. She was dressed in a pink gown of the latest cut, while pink silk stockings, somewhat wrinkled, showed above her high-heeled white kid pumps.

Altogether, Effie did not look as if she would be of much assistance. However, remembering Hannah's declaration that she was strong and willing, if flighty, Nancy completed arrangements to have the girl stay at the Drew home for a week.

"Oh, I think that will be simply grand," Effie giggled. "And, Miss Drew, would you mind if my boy friend came to see me?"

"No-o, I think not," Nancy replied, a trifle puzzled. "After your work is done—you are free to do as you like."

"How perfectly gorgeous! Gee, I bet you have lots of boy friends, Miss Drew. Is that your own car? Aunt Hannah said you had a car."

Nancy frowned a little, but her good humor came to her rescue.

"Suppose you pack what things you want to bring, and we will leave at once," she suggested.

The drive home was filled with unceasing chatter by Effie, for the most part about "the fellows" she knew, all of whom, she let it appear, were "just crazy" about her. Nancy thought it might prove a nerve-racking week with Effie in the house, but a change came over the girl the moment the Drew dwelling was entered. Probably the sensible Hannah Gruen exercised a steadying influence over her niece, for after an interview with the bedridden housekeeper, Effie reported to Nancy in a neat black dress and white apron, ready to be assigned to her duties.

"I can cook pretty good," she said. "Just order what you want, and what I don't know Aunt Hannah will teach me."

Nancy had decided to give Effie the responsibility of preparing a meal at once so as to give her confidence, and was surprised at the dainty luncheon which was placed before her. As she ate, Nancy pondered the problem of the pigeon's message, the doctor's adventure, and

the pursuit of the previous night. As she was fitting the incidents together the doorbell rang, and Effie hastened to answer it.

“It’s a Mr. Jordan,” she reported. “A good-looking fellow, too, with the nicest curly eyelashes. Is he——?”

“I don’t know him,” Nancy interrupted. “Show him into the living room.”

As she went in to meet Mr. Jordan, Nancy wondered if he might be one of the kidnaping band. She soon decided otherwise, as he was a pleasant-looking young man of about twenty-five years old. It did not take him long to state his business.

“I am the Secretary of the State Branch of the Pigeon Association,” he introduced himself. “Now, in connection with the wounded bird which I was told you reported——”

“I am so glad you came,” Nancy said. “Please sit down, and I will bring the bird and the message.”

Ever on guard against a possible trap, Nancy kept an eye on the room from the hall, and summoned Effie to bring the pigeon from its box on the kitchen porch.

She took the bird to Mr. Jordan, who examined it closely, noting especially the number-stamped band of its leg. He shook his head. Then he read over the pigeon’s message which Nancy now showed him.

“This is a link in the chain of evidence for which we have been told to watch,” the young man announced. “The Hopkins Detective Agency warned us that it was becoming the practice of criminals, who are afraid to send messages by telephone, telegraph or letter, to employ carrier pigeons. This registration number is not official. It has some secret significance.”

Nancy mentally agreed that it had.

“Thank you very much, Miss Drew, for your trouble,” the young man continued. “Now I’ll take the pigeon——”

“Oh, no!” Nancy exclaimed.

CHAPTER V

THE MISSING BRACELET

"Please don't take the pigeon away," Nancy begged.

"But—but—I mean, you surely don't want to be bothered with a sick bird," the man replied. "We will give it good care."

Nancy had her own reasons for wishing to keep the pigeon until it was well, but did not care to divulge them. At last she persuaded the representative of the association to be content with a copy of the message and of the numerals on the bird's leg band.

"I guess you might as well keep this pigeon," Jordan said with a shrug. "And it will save me the trouble of nursing a bird that probably won't be any good for real flights, even if it does get well."

Nancy called Effie.

"Here," she said, placing the feathered creature in her care, "take it outside again."

"Yes, Miss Drew."

"And be sure the lid of its box is securely fastened."

Nancy was not yet wholly certain that Jordan was not representing the owner of the bird. So cleverly had Dr. Spires been hoaxed that she was convinced her opponents were men capable of getting with ease almost any information they desired.

Finally Jordan left, and Nancy spent the remainder of the afternoon planning a course of action.

First, she thought, there was the bracelet to be traced. Secondly, there was the known identity of the man who had pursued her, and the all but certain indication that he was a leader of the gang that had Dr. Spires's patient locked up somewhere. If he could be followed——

Nancy hummed a little tune.

"Then there is the pigeon! As soon as the bird is able to fly, it will lead me to the headquarters of the crooks."

That was her best and most certain maneuver. Nancy smiled happily, little dreaming of the strange adventures which lay ahead of her in this mystery in which the disbarred lawyer, Adam Thorne, was to play a prominent part.

Next morning Nancy drove to the biggest jewelry store in River Heights, the firm of Argent, Cutter, and Stone, and asked for Mr. Stone, the active partner and general manager. He recognized Nancy from the occasional purchases and watch repairs that had brought her there, and greeted her cordially.

"Well, Miss Drew, what can we do for you this morning?" he asked. "We have some nice diamond-studded detective badges, solid gold. Or how about a pearl-handled machine gun to ward off desperadoes?"

"I'd like a suit of armor to fit me," Nancy laughed. "Something plain and sensible, bulletproof, of course, in the latest style."

"Now, I'm sorry we are just out of your size," joked Mr. Stone. "However, if I had my way, this firm would be making you the biggest silver loving cup in the state, as a token of our regard for the splendid work you did recently in clearing Ira Dixon's name."

Mr. Stone was referring, of course, to the thrilling adventures which Nancy encountered in solving the puzzle set forth in the volume called "Nancy's Mysterious Letter."

“Putting all jokes aside,” Nancy said, “is there any way you can trace the ownership of a piece of jewelry with a crest?”

“Of course there is.”

“I’m so glad to get your cooperation. I’ll show you what I have.”

“Step down here, Miss Drew, please.”

The jeweler led the way to a less conspicuous counter in the spacious store. Nancy felt pleased with this consideration, and smiling she opened her leather purse. Then she produced the gold bracelet which Mr. Stone took from her with a professional air.

“Another mystery, Miss Drew?” he asked. “I should be happy if I might help you. From the workmanship I should say this bracelet is about fifty years old, possibly sixty. Notice the heavy, Victorian style. I doubt if it was made around here. Inscription—Hm, means nothing to me.”

“But isn’t that a coat of arms, entwined with the engraved design there?” Nancy asked.

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Stone said. “Very attractive. Three mullets dexter and a Maltese cross sinister; crest, a falcon’s head embattled, with the motto ‘Esse quam videre.’ Every authentic coat of arms is a matter of record. It will take time, but we will be able to trace the family. Do you wish to leave the bracelet here?”

“It does not belong to me,” Nancy said hesitatingly. “If you could make a copy——?”

“In a moment,” Mr. Stone assured her, and excused himself while that business was attended to. In five minutes he was back, and the bracelet was once more safe in Nancy’s pocketbook.

She left the shop, well satisfied that if it were possible to trace the significance of the engraving on the bracelet, Mr. Stone would accomplish it for her. She felt a great wave of sympathy toward the unfortunate elderly lady who was the owner of the bracelet. Briskly she stepped toward her car. Suddenly a tug at her arm almost made her fall.

“Oh—oh—,” gasped the startled Nancy, straightening up. “What do you mean by pushing me?”

No one answered, yet a figure in blue had been very near her.

“My pocketbook,” thought Nancy instantly. “Where is it?”

Her handbag had been wrenched from her!

The leather strap of the purse had been broken with the force of the seizure!

“It is stolen!” Nancy gasped. “The bracelet!”

It took but a moment for Nancy to recover her composure. A woman was dashing across the street much faster than the scant traffic warranted. Surmising that she was the purse snatcher, Nancy raced after her.

“Stop! Stop!” cried the girl, running.

The woman hastened through the revolving doors of a department store before Nancy could reach the opposite curb, and the girl’s heart sank at the thought of the hundreds of opportunities for escape which the large place afforded.

“I must not lose her,” Nancy murmured courageously. Yet that seemed to be the possibility.

Once inside the store, however, Nancy caught a flash of light blue of the shade in which the pickpocket was garbed, on the opposite side of the shop. She hurried to the spot where the elevators were, just in time to see one speed upward.

“Did a woman in a blue dress just enter that elevator?” she asked the colored starter.

“Yas, Miss,” the man replied, touching his cap. “Lady in a powerful big hurry. Reckon she tryin’ to get to de bargain sale of——”

Nancy did not wait to hear the man’s conjectures for the woman’s haste. She knew why the person was in a hurry, and so raced the few steps to the escalator. Up the traveling stairs Nancy leaped, three steps at a time, to the second floor, reaching there just in time to see the elevator vanishing up the shaft.

“Did that elevator stop at this floor?” Nancy demanded of a bewildered clerk who could only shake her head mutely.

So up to the second flight of moving stairs darted Nancy, arriving breathlessly on the third floor just as the elevator door clanged shut. One quick glance convinced her that the woman in blue was not aboard, so obviously she must have stepped out.

“Anything in a sports’ frock, Miss? May I show you our latest printed silks, very——”

“No, no,” Nancy panted. “I’m after a thief! I’m looking for a woman——”

“A lady?” gasped the startled salesgirl. “What did she take?”

“A valuable bracelet and my purse! I must find her!”

CHAPTER VI

AN UNSUCCESSFUL CHASE

Where could the purse snatcher have gone with the precious bracelet? Nancy looked about her in dismay. Not many customers were in this section, which was devoted to women's clothing. Racks of dresses and frocks, rows and rows of full-length mirrors, all combined to provide scores of hiding places for the pickpocket.

"The dressing rooms!" decided Nancy.

Of course. The perfect hiding place! About twenty of the little wooden cubicles, with curtained doorways, stretched along one wall of the department. Nancy hastened toward them and pulled the curtain of the first one aside. It was empty. So was the second. In the third a stout woman was struggling to get a tight silk dress over her head, presenting a spectacle which made Nancy smile to herself despite her predicament. Before the woman could utter a word Nancy was continuing her search.

The fifth dressing room contained her quarry! The pickpocket was leaning against the wall, panting, her hair mussed and her hat awry. She had Nancy's open purse in her hands!

"Drop that!"

Nancy snapped out the command as she leaped toward the thief, who now had the bracelet in her fingers. The woman paled, and glanced wildly about her for a means of escape.

As Nancy was about to seize the woman's arm, the pickpocket hurled the purse into the girl's face. Nancy ducked. Coins, compact, papers and keys scattered over the floor about her. Then Nancy grabbed the wrist of the hand that was holding the precious bracelet, and twined her fingers around the hoop of gold, crying at the top of her voice:

"Help! Thief!"

At that the woman in blue dropped the bracelet, wrenched herself free, and shoving the girl over, fled. In a moment the door was blocked by several saleswomen.



“What is the trouble?” they chorused.

“A woman in a blue dress—a dark-haired woman—snatched my purse,” Nancy gasped, as she pushed past the clerks and started running in the direction of the elevators, the bracelet in her hand.

She was too late! Before she was halfway to her goal, she saw the pickpocket enter a car. The door clanged shut, and the operator started for the lower floors.

The quick-witted girl was not yet giving up hope, however, for she felt sure the woman in blue was no ordinary pickpocket, but had deliberately tried to steal the crested bracelet. Grabbing up a desk telephone, she said:

“Emergency! Ring the phone nearest the store entrance!”

She waited a moment, two moments, a full minute, growing impatient because no one answered. Finally a voice said:

“Silverware Department.”

“Are you near the front door? Yes? Then listen carefully. A woman in a light blue dress and hat will probably come rushing toward the door. Stop her! She’s a thief. I’ll be right down!”

As Nancy was about to step into a waiting elevator, she was detained by one of the saleswomen who hurriedly handed her the broken purse.

“Your bag, Miss. Everything’s in it.”

“Thank you. Oh, thank you very much,” said Nancy, hustling into the car.

When she reached the silverware department, she did not see the woman in blue. Inquiry of the clerk who had answered the phone brought forth a disappointing answer.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” the girl said, “but the woman you were looking for stepped into a taxi just as you called me.”

Nancy was nettled at herself for letting the woman escape, as she felt certain the pickpocket was an important clue in the mystery. She was undoubtedly a member of the group which had intimidated Dr. Spires. Had the purse snatcher been captured, it might have proved easy for the police to round up her accomplices.

Nancy left the shop feeling a trifle ashamed of herself. Slowly she retraced her steps to her car. As she stepped upon the running board, someone grabbed her by the arm, while a girl’s voice exclaimed:

“Nancy Drew!”

Nancy turned to confront the speaker, and the look of worry on her pretty face gave place to an expression of delight.

“Helen Corning! I’m glad to see you! When did you get back?”

“Two days ago. Oh, I had a splendid time, but it is so good to be home again.”

Helen Corning was an old chum of Nancy Drew and had shared some of her adventures. She had gone to Europe in the spring. Being a notoriously poor letter writer she had not announced her return to Nancy.

“How is everybody?” Helen asked. “Are George and Bess around town?”

The reference was to Bess Marvin and George Fayne, who were cousins and, despite the name of the latter, were girls of about Helen’s and Nancy’s age.

“Yes, they’re at home.”

“What are your plans? Are you going away?” Helen inquired.

“I’m undecided as yet,” Nancy replied. “I really haven’t made any plans.”

“Then come with me to Sylvan Lake, Nancy,” Helen cried. “My family has a cottage there for the summer.”

“Thank you. It would be nice, but just now I’m very busy. Come to my house to luncheon,” Nancy suggested. “We can talk things over, and afterward I’d like you to take a ride with me. Will you?”

“I must finish some shopping first,” Helen said. “You can’t imagine the world of things I need. I bought some lovely frocks in Paris, but there isn’t a thing for me to wear in camp. I have my car. Let’s see. Suppose I come to your house at twelve-thirty. Then we can talk as much as we like.”

Nancy accordingly drove home, yet not without many a backward glance to make sure she was not being trailed again. She helped Effie to plan and prepare luncheon for her chum.

Helen arrived, overflowing with talk about Paris, Berlin, and London. Of Rouen, where she had stood on the spot where Joan of Arc had been burned at the stake, and of Heidelberg, where the German students wore funny round caps and sang in the streets.

“By the way, how is Ned Nickerson?” asked Helen with a twinkle in her eye.

If Nancy flushed a trifle at the direct question, she must be excused. Ned Nickerson, football hero of the big Thanksgiving game which Helen and Nancy had seen together, was a person about whom she was often teased.

“Ned is helping out as counselor at a boys’ camp on Sylvan Lake,” Nancy said. “A chum of his who is regularly in charge was taken ill, so Ned is substituting for him for a few weeks.”

“Sylvan Lake? And you never told me!” Helen cried. “We’ll see him if you visit me.”

After some reminiscences of their adventures together, Helen wished to know if her friend was on the trail of any more mysteries.

“Sort of,” Nancy smiled enigmatically. “That is why I want to go driving this afternoon. I think, from some things I have heard, that an old lady is being held somewhere in this vicinity against her will. I’m going to look around the countryside to see if I can locate her and help her. I have a hunch I’m going to find her!”

CHAPTER VII

NANCY'S HUNCH

For three hours Nancy's maroon roadster wove in and out of country lanes and back roads without passing any spot to excite the girl's sixth sense of mystery detecting. Although Nancy was disappointed, Helen was highly enthusiastic.

"I had a grand ride," she said, when they reached the Drew home. "You certainly know the country around here. I was lost a dozen times. Had you suddenly deserted me, I don't know what I should have done."

Mr. Drew returned shortly after Helen had left, and asked Nancy if the day had brought forth any unusual developments. When she told him of the purse snatching, he looked grave.

"Perhaps it would be the wisest course if you would let the matter drop now," he said at the dinner table. "If Dr. Spires does not meddle in the affair any further, and you and I wash our hands of the whole thing, I am sure that the persons who wish their secret to be kept will be satisfied that we are not combating them. After watching us a while, they will mind their own business if we mind ours."

"Why, Father!" Nancy exclaimed. "And leave that poor woman in the clutches of those unscrupulous rascals?"

"That is all very well," Mr. Drew said. "My first concern is for your safety. It is more important to me that you are free from harm than that all the mysterious old women in the world should have their freedom!"

Nancy did not argue further, fearing that her father might convince himself, in answering her, that the hunt must be dropped. He might flatly forbid any further delving into the mystery. Instead, after dinner was over she suggested a walk in the garden.

Mr. Drew agreed. Father and daughter strolled up and down the flagstone paths, admiring the blossoms. Phlox and painted daisies, snapdragon and calendula, petunias and verbenas made a gay patchwork of rose and red, yellow, violet, blue—all the colors of the spectrum. At a turn of the walk, they entered the beds where the perennial flowers bloomed. Towering above all the rest were the delphiniums.

"I like to call them larkspurs," murmured Nancy. "This is the place where the pigeon fell, Father."

"Hm. And how is the unfortunate bird of ill omen?" Carson Drew inquired.

"It is in its box in the garage, doing very well, but is still unable to fly," Nancy replied. "Would you like to see it? Sit here by the sundial and I will get it."

When Nancy rejoined her father with the wounded bird, she found Tommy, a small boy of the neighborhood, paying an informal call. The lad's face was liberally smeared with chocolate, and he was stretching his tongue to unbelievable lengths trying to lick his face and talk at the same time.

"Oh, you have a pigeon!" he hailed Nancy.

"Yes, Tommy, but the poor bird is hurt. It was brushed by an airplane and fell in the garden here."

"Isn't he pretty! What's his name?"

"Icarus, I think," Mr. Drew said. "You know, Tommy, Icarus was a man who lived in Greece a long, long time ago. He would not listen to the gods and made himself wings, which

he fastened on with wax. When he flew up into the sky in defiance of the rulers, the sun melted the wax and down he tumbled to his death. Now man has seized the sky with airplanes, and the birds who dispute it with him must take the consequences.”

“Who was this Ike Harris, anyhow, Mr. Drew?” Tommy demanded. “He must have been dumb. Why didn’t he get himself an airplane?”

Nancy joined her father in joyful laughter at Tommy’s unconscious humor, which left the little fellow very much bewildered indeed.

Mr. Drew stroked the bird, while Nancy playfully addressed the pigeon.

“Well, Ike Harris,” she said, chuckling, “I hope you will be able to fly soon, so you can lead me to the scene of the mystery.”

Mr. Drew made no comment, merely ruffling the plumage on the bird’s head.

“What pretty blue feathers he has,” Tommy said. “Just the color of those big blue flowers over there. What are they called?”

“Tommy, you ask enough questions to be a lawyer,” Mr. Drew laughed. “Those are larkspurs.”

“Why do they call them larkspurs?” Tommy demanded.

“I don’t know, I must admit,” Mr. Drew replied. “Nancy is the gardener. Perhaps she can tell you.”

“Why, I don’t know either,” Nancy exclaimed. “They are also called delphiniums, and I know why that is their name. They were the favorite flowers used by the Greeks to decorate the altar of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Larkspur is a quaint name, but I can’t figure out why it was given the flowers.”

Tommy waited patiently for the end of the explanation. Then he asked:

“May I have a cookie?”

“Oh, Tommy, run along home,” Nancy laughed. “From larkspur to cookies! How your mind jumps. I’m sorry, but you can’t have any. Your mother told Hannah that you were not to have any sweets away from home.”

“I’ll go home and eat it,” Tommy suggested hopefully.

“To tell you the truth,” Nancy said, “we haven’t a cookie in the house. Hannah is ill in bed and can’t bake any.”

“All right, then,” Tommy said philosophically, “I guess I’ll go home.”

“Wait and take a bunch of flowers to your mother,” Nancy suggested.

Suiting the action to the word, she gathered a great spray of delphiniums and roses, to which she added some dainty baby’s breath.

“There you are,” she said. “Red, white, and blue; three cheers for you!”

“Thank you,” said Tommy politely, “If I were a bee I’d like these flowers, but I like cookies better because I am a big boy.”

He paused expectantly.

“Well, I guess you really haven’t any cookies,” he concluded, and trudged away toward his own home, clutching the bouquet.

Shortly thereafter Mr. Drew and his daughter retired to their residence. There Nancy pored over encyclopedia and botany books for a clue to the name “Larkspur,” but without success.

“I believe I’ll go to bed,” she said at last, kissing her father good night.

“Good night, Nancy—and don’t dream too much about larkspur,” Mr. Drew cautioned.

That, however, was what Nancy proceeded to do while still awake. She could not tolerate a question without an answer, and was dissatisfied until she had either learned or reasoned out

the why and wherefore of every problem that presented itself to her.

“Larkspur—larkspur,” she mused, clasping her hands behind her head as she stretched out at full length on her comfortable bed. “Maybe the little points on the blossoms resemble spurs. But why the lark? Why not sparrowspur, or cockspur, or ostrichspur?”

“Spurs are for horses, and horses don’t resemble larks, and larks don’t suggest anything that wears spurs. Larks sing and—oh!”

Nancy sat bolt upright.

“There’s a hunch, Nancy Drew, if ever you had one,” she said aloud. “I must tell Father!”

CHAPTER VIII

A THREAT

Nancy quickly donned a dressing gown and slippers and ran to the stairway to find Mr. Drew. As she descended the steps, she became aware of voices at the front door.

"Father has a caller," was her first thought as she paused in the shadows. "I wonder who it can be?"

It was soon evident to Nancy that whoever the visitor was, he was not a friend of theirs. His voice had an unmistakably angry ring, and the response that Mr. Drew made caused Nancy to creep down a few more steps.

"Clear out of here!" Carson Drew was saying. "Your threats mean nothing to me. If you had the courage to show yourself instead of skulking in the shadows, I should have more respect for your loud boasting. I even suspect you are Adam Thorne."

"Never mind who I am," Nancy heard the stranger reply. "I am just promising you that if Dr. Spires and the celebrated Drews don't lay off trying to find out things that don't concern them, they will end up in trouble themselves. Dr. Spires got his fee. He has no right to meddle further in another physician's case."

Mr. Drew strode into the hallway, slammed the screen door behind him, marched over to the telephone and called Police Headquarters.

"Hello. Inspector Mulligan? Carson Drew speaking. In connection with the matter we discussed the other night. My daughter was attacked on the street this morning. Tonight a man came to my house and made threats, and grossly insulted me. No, I don't know who he is. He stayed in the shadows. What? You know what to do about it better than I do. No, I don't want a bodyguard. Thank you. Yes, that will be excellent. Thank you, Inspector."

Mr. Drew put down the receiver and turned to find Nancy at his elbow.

"The Inspector will have a special policeman detailed to watch this house," he said. "That is very good of him and relieves me a great deal. A long distance telephone message came just after you went upstairs. I shall have to leave day after tomorrow for St. Louis and shall be gone two or three days. I can't let you stay here unprotected."

"Father, I am no coward," Nancy pleaded. "You know by this time that I can take good care of myself."

"I know," Mr. Drew replied. "Just the same, I am more convinced than ever that you had better drop all inquiry into Dr. Spires's mystery."

"I promise you I will take no risks and that I will not go out alone."

"All right, then," her father was persuaded. "For a while have some of your friends or Effie to accompany you whenever you leave the house."

At that moment a deafening crash of thunder interrupted the conversation, while a gale of wind heralded the approach of a heavy summer storm. Nancy smiled.

"That settles the spy," she said. "The rain will drive him away if you think he is still lurking around. That gives me a new worry, though. Suppose he sneaks into the garage?"

"Both cars are locked," Mr. Drew said. "He can't steal them."

"He might take the pigeon," Nancy said. "That would spoil everything."

"It certainly would," Mr. Drew agreed. "No, don't go out dressed like that. It has started to rain. I will get the bird myself."

As her father ran through the first pelting drops, illuminated by the almost continuous lightning, Nancy thought to herself that in his heart Mr. Drew was as determined as anyone to have the mystery solved. “Otherwise,” she thought, “why would he agree that the theft of the pigeon would spoil everything?”

“This bird is the best guide we could possibly get to lead us to the group’s hide-away,” said Mr. Drew, when he returned with the bird. “Your idea on that score is a splendid one.”

“Then you won’t forbid me to follow up the case?” Nancy asked.

“The only thing that vexes me is my absence from the city,” Mr. Drew said.

“Perhaps we shall have solved the mystery before you leave,” Nancy said.

“I hope so,” Mr. Drew replied. “In the meantime let us make some lemonade. I can’t sleep with all this thunder crashing.”

Nancy ran to the kitchen, returning in a few minutes with two tall glasses and a pitcher of lemonade.

“I brought some crackers and cheese, too,” she said. Nancy, despite her remarkable deductive powers, was a normal, healthy girl, and a bedtime lunch appealed to her as much as it does to any young person.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she cried, as she spread a cracker, “what I came down to tell you. I had a hunch, a beautiful hunch.”

“It can’t be such a very good one if you forgot all about it,” Mr. Drew observed with a smile. “My gracious, listen to that rain coming down!”

“Father, do be serious,” Nancy pleaded. “You remember that the note on the pigeon said, ‘Blue bells are singing horses now,’ don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed I do,” Mr. Drew replied. “A little more lemonade, please.”

“Doesn’t that mean anything to you when you study it out?” Nancy asked, pouring the refreshment into her father’s glass.

“It doesn’t mean anymore than a headache,” the lawyer smiled. “If blue bells are singing horses, now or at any other time, I should call it the most amazing botanical marvel of the age. Wouldn’t you?”

“Well, I think there is a clue in it,” Nancy insisted. “You know Tommy asked how larkspurs got their name.”

“Yes,” chuckled Mr. Drew. “It was quite a sight to see you stumped by a six-year-old boy’s question.”

“I’ll find the answer after this mystery is solved,” Nancy promised. “At any rate, I was pondering in bed why the flowers are called larkspurs. I read heaps about them before going upstairs, you know, and I learned that they are called by various popular names. Blue bells, for instance. Now do you catch on?”

“Not even by a finger tip,” Mr. Drew said gravely. “Blue bells are larkspurs and also singing horses. Why, it makes matters that much worse, if you want my opinion.”

“Then I’ll tell you,” Nancy chuckled. “Larks sing, don’t they? And spurs are used for horses. Well, then, if ‘blue bells’ used to be the password, and it was changed to ‘singing horses’—remember the message on the pigeon’s wing and the telephone message to Dr. Spires—certainly delphinium or larkspur must be a clue to the whole mystery.”

“I begin to see a little light,” Mr. Drew said. “You believe that for some reason the scoundrels are centering their code about delphiniums, or larkspurs, or blue bells, as they may be called. Yes, ‘singing horses’ would suggest itself as a readily remembered password that still had some mental connection with larkspurs. Well, how does that help you?”

“I am going to tour this countryside until I find a place—whether it be a house, a street, or something else—that has larkspur as its most conspicuous feature,” Nancy announced. “That will keep us from wasting time while the pigeon is getting well.

“The crooks must never again kidnap Dr. Spires. And if they are holding a defenseless old lady against her wishes—I am determined to start searching tomorrow to find her!”

CHAPTER IX

THE MESSENGER ESCAPES

Early the next morning, true to her plan to press the investigation rapidly in an attempt to solve the mystery before her father should leave for St. Louis, Nancy telephoned first to Bess and then to George. To her dismay the girls were leaving after luncheon for a vacation, but promised to hurry over to the Drew home right away to help her out. As Nancy usually called for them, they were intrigued to know why she wanted them in such a hurry.

"You are to be my bodyguard while I go downtown," she told them when they arrived, "and I'm sorry you aren't going to be in town longer to help me solve a new mystery."

"Gracious, Nancy," exclaimed the plump Bess. "What's it all about?"

"I feel very important," added George. "Nancy Drew, the great detective, asking *me* to act as a policeman."

"Now stop teasing," pleaded Nancy, "and I'll tell you something. I've promised Dad not to go out alone, because a certain man has been following me lately."

"How exciting!" giggled Bess. "Is he tall and handsome?"

"No, short and ugly."

"Is he a bandit with a flowing mustache and brass earrings?" inquired George with a twinkle in her eye.

Nancy joined in a laugh, and then told the cousins of her determination to help an elderly lady whom she suspected might be in trouble. She refrained from mentioning Dr. Spires's connection with the case, or speaking of the password.

"Who is the woman?" Bess asked.

"I don't know."

"Where does she live?" inquired George.

"I don't know."

"Goodness, Nancy, you're more mysterious than the mystery," sighed Bess. "However, you always manage to find out the secrets of criminals, like you did at Red Gate Farm. So you'll probably soon guess this one."

"Where do we go first?" George wanted to know.

"To the jeweler's," replied Nancy.

The three chums hurried off in Nancy's car, and presently stopped at the building where the firm of Argent, Cutter, and Stone was located.

"You girls don't mind waiting a few minutes, do you?" asked Nancy, as she got out of the roadster.

"Is your bodyguard supposed to watch you or the car?" came from George with mock severity.

Smiling at the joker, Nancy hurried off to see Mr. Stone, the jeweler. That worthy gentleman had barely hung up his hat when she entered the establishment.

"Well, well, Miss Drew, do you work all night?" he asked his visitor. "I sent a tracing of the coat of arms to a genealogical expert, and it may be that there is a reply in the morning's mail. I shall find out."

He pressed a button, and his secretary entered the room with a wire basket heaped with letters.

“Is there anything from Abelard de Gotha, Miss Kane?” the jeweler asked. The secretary leafed over the opened letters and selected one which she placed in Mr. Stone’s hands. He beckoned Nancy to read the epistle with him.

“DEAR MR. STONE:

“I am glad to be able to be so prompt in replying to your inquiry. It so happens that the armorial bearings described in your letter belong to a very old family and are recorded in the genealogical records of the English founders of New York State. The arms are those of the Eldridge family, the crest dating back to Henry IV, and the quartering on the shield marking the union of the Eldridge house with the Gerret’s in 1604.

“At the time of the Louisiana Purchase the New York Branch, consisting of Isaiah Eldridge, his wife Prudence and two children, received a large grant of land in what is now Missouri, and I presume their descendants still live in or near St. Louis, although I have no records to prove that.

“Very truly yours,
“ABELARD DE GOTHA.”

“Does that help you in any way?” Mr. Stone asked.

“Indeed it does, yet it serves to widen the search,” Nancy answered. “I will see what can be done by inquiry through the St. Louis newspapers.”

The transaction having been completed, Nancy bade the jeweler good-by.

“We didn’t see anyone watching you,” Bess said as Nancy returned to the car and started the motor.

When the girls reached the Drew home, Nancy decided to show her friends the bracelet, which she had clasped around her arm under the sleeve of her frock as the safest means of carrying it to Mr. Stone.

“How handsome!” exclaimed Bess.

“Does this belong to the old lady?” inquired George.

“Yes,” replied Nancy, “and I want to return it. Just now, though, I’m going to put it away.”

She placed the piece of jewelry in a wall safe in her father’s study, and then said good-by to the cousins, who insisted they must hurry home. Next she went to the kitchen where she found Effie seated at a table looking at a magazine.

“I’ve just read the most thrilling story,” the maid said. “All about how movie actresses have to live on nothing but asparagus and grapefruit to keep thin. Gee, Miss Nancy, you would make a swell movie actress. I was telling my boy friend—did you know I have a new boy friend? He drives an ice wagon, and he said some day he would try to borrow a couple of saddles, and we would go out on horseback along the river bridle path on the ice wagon horses. Isn’t that romantic?”

“Very,” Nancy said, trying to keep a straight face. “Now, I want you to listen to me carefully. I have something important to tell you.”

“I’m listening,” said Effie.

“Do not let any strangers into this house,” adjured Nancy. “If anyone comes, keep him waiting on the porch.”

Nancy turned away, but the maid followed.

“Oh, I meant to tell you,” Effie went on. “I put that pigeon of yours out in the sun so it would get well quicker. I put a rock on the lid of his box, so he couldn’t get out. Are you going to raise pigeons, Miss Drew? I don’t fancy them myself because they can’t sing, but my boy friend, not the ice man but another one, oh, the nicest fellow, Miss Nancy, he works in a garage and when he tries out cars after they have been fixed he takes me riding—well, he said that pigeons——”

“Where did you put the pigeon?” Nancy interrupted. “I want you to watch it very carefully, for it is an important clue to a mystery that I am trying to solve.”

“Why, it is in the middle of the back yard,” Effie said. “If you will look out this window, you can see it. I’ll keep an eye on it, all right. A boy I knew once said he never knew a girl for seeing everything that goes on the way I do.”

Nancy stepped to the window indicated by Effie and looked out. In the middle of a stretch of lawn she saw the pigeon’s box. Standing there, and very much engrossed over it, was little Tommy.

“Tommy!” Nancy cried fearfully. “Don’t touch the box, please.”

“Ike Harris wants to get out,” the boy called back.

“No, it does not,” Nancy retorted. “When it wants to, I will let it free.”

“I bet you he wants to go,” Tommy cried. “He flaps his wings like anything. Look!”

“That boy is taking the lid off the box,” Nancy exclaimed. “Stop that, Tommy! Effie, come with me quickly! He must not let the pigeon out!”

“You little snoop,” Effie shouted to the lad. “I’ll put you in a box, I will.”

The two girls darted from the kitchen and through the rear entry to the back steps, which they reached just as Tommy succeeded in lifting the lid from the pigeon’s cage. The frightened and bewildered bird hopped to the edge of the box and sat there, balancing and stretching its beautiful blue wings for a moment, and peering to left and to right.

“Don’t move, Tommy!” Nancy cried. “Don’t frighten it!”

“He isn’t scared of me,” Tommy answered confidently. “He likes me.”

As swiftly as caution permitted, Nancy advanced toward the liberated bird, while Effie tiptoed at her heels, muttering terrible threats at Tommy all the while.

“I’ll fix that little busybody,” she was saying.

“Easy now,” Nancy warned. “Just a few steps more, and we’ll have it.”

“Let me grab it,” Effie suggested.

“I’ll get it myself,” Nancy replied.

She crept up behind the bird, her hands extended to seize it.

“I heard what you said,” Tommy bawled out suddenly. “You want to hurt me!”

With that he threw down the lid of the box and darted off toward his own home. The pigeon, alarmed at the sudden movement, flapped its wings and rose awkwardly into the air, soaring high over Nancy’s head as she made a vain leap to catch it.

“Oh, oh, there it goes,” Effie mourned. “I’ll try to hit it with a rock.”

“Don’t you do it,” Nancy said sharply. “See, it is settling on the garage. Oh, I wish one of your boy friends were here now so he could climb up there and catch the bird. Wait, I’ll do it myself. Keep your eyes on the pigeon while I get the stepladder.”

Nancy had scarcely turned on her heels, however, when Effie shouted, “It’s off again!”

Wheeling about, Nancy saw with sinking heart that the pigeon had taken to the air. It flew very slowly and uncertainly, flapping about in a great circle as if trying to get its bearings as well as to exercise its bruised wing.

“Watch it, Effie,” Nancy commanded. “If it flies off, tell me what direction it takes.”

“What are you going to do?” the maid asked, her eyes glued upon the bird.

“I am going to follow it in my car,” Nancy called over her shoulder as she raced to the front of the house where her roadster was parked.

She started the motor, and then drove slowly along the curb to where she could see Effie, still gazing skyward, and craning her neck in all directions to keep the bird in sight.

Suddenly the girl’s gaze became fixed, and she lifted a hand to shield her eyes.

“Has it flown away?” Nancy called to her.

“Yes, it is going southeast,” Effie replied. “Flying very low and not fast at all.”

“Hurry! Climb in, and don’t lose sight of it,” Nancy directed. “It will fly to its owner.”

Effie obeyed at once, running across the lawn and getting into the car. “It went that way,” she said, pointing. “I can’t see it now on account of the trees.”

“We mustn’t lose it,” Nancy gasped. “It’s an important clue to those scoundrels. Effie, try to locate the pigeon,” she cried out, as she zigzagged through the streets trying to keep in a southeast direction.

“But I can’t see it, Miss Nancy. Truly I can’t.”

“Oh, Effie, I’ve taken such good care of that bird, and now to have it disappear just when it was leading us to its owner is a tragedy!”

Effie gulped. “I could cry.”

“Don’t!” commanded Nancy. “It’s my best clue, and we must find it.”

CHAPTER X

A STRANGE RACE

As River Heights was a long, narrow community built up on the banks of the river in a north and south direction, it was no time at all before Nancy's car was out in the open country. The tall trees which lined the streets of the city now gave way to only an occasional sycamore or locust, while farm and pasture land stretched out on either side.

"There's the pigeon!" Effie cried, bouncing up and down on her seat with excitement. "We are catching up!"

Nancy glanced upward and saw the bird, almost the color of the grayish-blue sky, flapping doggedly along its course, and striving with the instinct, which makes the carrier pigeon so valuable, to reach its home cote.

"My neck is getting stiff from watching," Effie complained. "And I am getting spots before my eyes. Don't you think I ought to drive a little while?"

"Have you a driver's license?" Nancy asked, believing Effie's suggestion to be a good one if she were capable of carrying it out.

"No-o, but my boy friend who works in a garage lets me drive often when we get out where there isn't any traffic," Effie said. "Once I drove a great big straight eight, and we got it up to seventy-five miles an hour. Oh, that was the grandest fun. There was a turn in the road, and we reached it so quickly I steered wrong, and we almost went through a fence. But my boy friend grabbed the wheel, and we just skinned by!"

"I think you had better not drive now," Nancy said. "Do you still see the bird?"

"Yes—n-no! Why, it's gone. I was watching the wrong one, I guess."

"Effie Schneider! Why in the world can't you keep your eyes as busy as your mouth?" Nancy cried in despair, bringing the car to a halt. "If we lose track of that pigeon, it means that I shall never be able to find the——"

"Find what?"

"Never mind just now," Nancy said, thinking wisely that the less Effie knew about the mystery the better it would be, considering the girl's propensity for talking.

"It is very important to the happiness and maybe the lives of several persons that we find out where that pigeon comes from," Nancy added. "Now, where is it?"

Chastened, Effie turned her gaze skyward, and the two girls again scanned the blue heavens for the bird. From northeast to south Nancy let her eyes roam, her heart skipping a beat whenever she saw a flash of wings, only to be disappointed when the bird's flight identified it as a swallow or a starling.

Effie buried her face in her hands and began to sniffle.

"Oh, I'm so sorry I lost track of the pigeon," she wept. "I do want to please you so much, and it made me so happy when you said I was doing my work well, and now it is all spoiled."

"Weeping won't help," Nancy said, still vexed at the girl's carelessness. "Stop crying."

"Will you forgive me?" Effie cried dramatically. "If not, I'll get out right here and never, never bother you again."

"Indeed you won't get out," Nancy replied, "I need help on this mystery. If—oh, Effie, look!"

"Where? What is it?" the maid cried.

“The pigeon—we went too fast for it,” Nancy laughed in relief and exultation. “See, here it comes, just overhead and flying low. It hasn’t found its home yet.”

She started her motor again as the weary and wounded bird flapped slowly above them.

“You can’t mistake any other bird for it now,” Nancy told Effie. “Don’t take your eyes off it for an instant.”

The chase was resumed in earnest. Nancy idled her car along when the road paralleled the pigeon’s flight, then sped up when the sandy highway veered in another direction. Sometimes they had to find a byway which would enable them to keep close to the bird.

Effie giggled once again. “I’m so excited!”

“Watch the bird!” Nancy commanded. “I have all I can do to keep to the road.”

“I haven’t even batted both eyes at once,” Effie replied, a touch of wounded dignity in her voice. “I wink one eye at a time. I was just laughing to think what a funny race this is, a bird and an automobile. I bet there never was a race like this before. I think it is too thrilling for words.”

“Can you still see the pigeon?” Nancy asked eagerly.

“Oh, yes, it is just off to the left of us now,” Effie replied. “We are following just fine. It is even lower than before.”

Nancy halted the car beside a stone wall over which honeysuckle and scarlet trumpet-vine tumbled in a fragrant and showy bouquet. Then she turned in her seat to watch the progress of the homing pigeon which was flying lower, and with much difficulty.

“Something is the matter with it,” announced Effie. “I guess it’s tired.”

To Nancy’s consternation the weary bird glided down in a long slant toward a stubby field. With an upward flip of its wings it dropped to the ground, where it squatted for a moment, then rolled halfway over on its side.

“Goodness! It looks to be dying,” Nancy cried, realizing that if this were the truth her trip would be fruitless. She waded through the creepers and scrambled over the decrepit fence, heading straight for the exhausted pigeon. *She must find out!*

The bird saw her coming, however, and took a few steps in a half circle away from her. As she made a rush for the pigeon, it flapped its wings noisily, and once again soared into the air.

Back to the roadster Nancy dashed. She leaped into the seat behind the wheel and was off in pursuit again, while Effie clapped her hands and giggled louder than before.

“Look! It’s going faster—and higher, too,” the maid exclaimed.

“Perhaps it is nearing its home,” Nancy observed. “It is still going on a bee line from the house. It hasn’t turned aside even a fraction of an inch. Let me see—we have come twenty miles already. Oh, Effie, if you lose sight of it just as we are almost at the end of the chase, I shall never forgive you.”

“I’m watching, I’m watching,” Effie cried. “I hope the road doesn’t turn, because the pigeon has got far ahead of us now. Oh, look, it’s coming back.”

“Is it really coming back?” Nancy asked, slowing down and searching the sky for the bird. Her keen eyes picked out the pigeon in the act of completing a circle around a grove of trees that towered above the flat fields.

“No, it is going round and round,” Effie replied. “I think it is dizzy.”

“Nonsense. That is where it lives,” Nancy cried, her voice quivering with excitement. “I see buildings through the trees. At last we are making progress.”

“I’m getting so hungry. Will we go home soon?” Effie asked. “It is way past lunch time.”

“We are going to stick to this job,” Nancy announced with determination. “That grove is quite a distance back from the road. If the driveway is not barred—no, I see it isn’t. That’s luck. Listen, Effie, I am going in there, and remember you are not to say a word about our having followed the pigeon or of our having kept it at the house. Especially the latter.”

“I can keep a secret,” Effie assured her.

It was with a slight feeling of trepidation that Nancy turned in on the wide and well-kept gravel drive that swept in a great curve from the sandy, little-used road toward the grove. Behind the trees could be seen a long, rambling white house, while to one side there was a row of outbuildings, evidently comprising a barn, stables, and coops.

“Oh, I’m scared,” Effie chattered. “The place is so far away from anywhere. Please, Miss Drew, I guess I don’t want to go with you. I’m afraid of kidnapers.”

Nancy, who had been driving up the long entrance at a crawl, took advantage of the shelter provided by a towering clump of syringa bushes to halt her car.

“Quick, then, jump out and get into the rumble seat!” she commanded Effie. “Pull the cover back over you, and no one will ever see you.”

“What I’m afraid of is that nobody will ever see me again anywhere,” Effie whimpered as she hastened to obey orders.

While waiting for the girl to conceal herself, Nancy formulated plans for her unannounced arrival at the place which she confidently expected to be the criminals’ hide-out. A muffled “Ready” from Effie, and Nancy started toward the house. The driveway was nearly a quarter of a mile in length, and she regretted the depth of the gravel spread over it, for the crunching of her car wheels on the stones heralded her approach as plainly as if she were sounding her horn.

The path dipped under the trees, and Nancy saw now that the house was a veritable mansion. Whoever occupied it must be very wealthy. White columns supported the overhanging roof of a porte-cochère, but Nancy did not stop. She headed toward the outbuildings, in accordance with the scheme she had in mind to explain her presence. Directly opposite a gate, near a large open shed, she halted.

Stepping from the car, she stood still, surveying the vast estate. Her sweeping glance took in a flying cage where a number of homing pigeons fluttered about.

Suddenly she was startled by a noise which sounded to her like a pistol shot. Wheeling about, Nancy faced a man in riding habit standing in the doorway of a shed. There was an evil grin on his dark features. Viciously he cracked a whip with a long, knotted leather lash.

This man stepped forward to question Nancy Drew as to the reason for her intrusion.

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN WITH THE WHIP

“Oh, good afternoon,” Nancy said to the evil-looking man with the whip.

“How’s yourself?” the rider replied, grinning maliciously.

“Is the owner at home?” Nancy asked.

“Naw, the whole family is gone for the summer,” the keeper replied. “What about it?”

“I’m sorry to intrude,” Nancy apologized. “I am interested in carrier pigeons, and I thought I just saw one land here. I notice you have quite a collection of them.”

“Yep, we have quite a few, quite a few,” the man leered. “And so you like pigeons, huh?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, I am very fond of them,” Nancy answered.

“How many ya got? Maybe we can trade a few to get a new strain.”

“I haven’t any just now,” Nancy replied.

“Well, I’m glad you come in, girlie,” the man grinned, advancing toward Nancy. “We don’t get callers very often away out here, and they don’t come as nice lookin’ as you.”

“This is not a social call,” Nancy exclaimed, retreating toward her car. “I’ll get my purse and then we can talk business, if you want to sell a pair of pigeons.”

“Listen, girlie, I’ll give you a pair of pigeons,” the man smirked.

“I don’t accept gifts from strangers,” Nancy retorted. “If you are not in the mood to talk business, I’ll drive on.”

She seated herself behind the wheel and stepped on the starter. The motor whirred into life, and Nancy let it idle for a while. The man dropped his smirking look, appearing to assume a businesslike attitude.

“All right,” he said. “I just wanted to be friendly, that’s all, but if you are the stand-offish kind, it’s all right. Now, what did you have in mind? A pair of pigeons to breed? Want to raise ’em yourself?”

“Yes,” Nancy said. “How much are they?”

“Different prices, of course, according to size and pedigree,” the man replied, putting one foot on the running board of the car. “Some are half a dollar, which is for runts. Then, we’ve got tested homers that have been raced—good, husky mature birds for as high as ten dollars. Don’t you want to see them?”

“Yes, I should like to see a good pair, but they do not have to be champion stock,” Nancy said. “Something around five dollars.”

“Come this way, then,” the man said, without moving. “Climb out and I’ll take you into the coops.”

“Oh, I think I’ll stay here,” Nancy replied. “Just pick me out a pair with nice even markings, and bring them to me in a box.”

“That’s a funny way to buy pigeons.”

“I’ll take a chance on your honesty,” Nancy cajoled the man. “You don’t look as if you would cheat.”

“I wouldn’t,” the man assured her. “But I’d like for you to see the coops, and how nice they are built. It will give you an idea how to keep your own pigeons, too. Come on, girlie.”

“No, I will not,” Nancy said firmly.

“Yes, you will,” the man snarled, his friendly air vanishing in an instant. With one hand he seized Nancy’s arm above the elbow. Dropping the whip in his other hand, he reached for the ignition switch of the car to shut off the motor.

Before Nancy could free herself or utter a word, the weirdest possible sound broke out from the rear of the car. Even Nancy had to think twice before guessing that it had come from the hidden Effie, and that the girl was having a hysterical attack of the giggles.

“Wha—what’s that?” cried the pigeon fancier, releasing Nancy and peering over his shoulder. “That noise——”

Without waiting to satisfy his curiosity, Nancy shifted the gear lever, stepped on the gas pedal, and with a spurt of gravel shot down the drive. The man, whose foot had still been on the running board of the car, was hurled backward, and as Nancy sped toward the highway she could see him just picking himself up.

Reaching the road, Nancy saw an automobile approaching from the direction of River Heights. Rather than risk another encounter with any tenants of the estate, she steered in the opposite direction. A glance in the mirror showed her that the car behind had actually turned into the driveway. Fearing pursuit, she drove around curves and over hills with all the speed she dared.

In this manner she soon put five miles behind her. With considerable relief she saw that she was entering a small settlement. A sign at the outskirts of the village announced that “West Granby Welcomes You.” Inasmuch as she knew Granby well, she was sure she could find her way home without retracing the route over which she had come.

West Granby consisted of only one main street, but on that street was an old-fashioned hotel. Nancy turned up the roadway beside the wooden structure, and drove into the old unused carriage shed in the rear.

“All right, Effie, it’s safe to come out now,” she said, raising the lid of the rumble seat, and assisting the badly jarred and very much disheveled-looking girl to the ground.

“You may not know it, but you saved me from a very unpleasant experience when you had a fit of the giggles back there,” Nancy continued. “I saw nothing to laugh at, but I am glad that you did.”

“I wasn’t feeling funny,” Effie sniffed. “I was scared stiff. I wanted to cry, that’s what, and then I remembered Pearl Peachy in the movie ‘The Lure of the Leopard.’ That was a swell picture. Pearl got trapped by the Leopard and was shut up in the cellar of a burning house, with the cellar being flooded, and the man offered to let her go if she would tell him where the diamonds were, but she just laughed in his face.

“I remembered how Pearl laughed in the Leopard’s face, so I thought if I was captured I would do the same, and I tried to practice her way of laughing. Then you started off in the car and the jolt almost knocked the breath out of me.”

“Never mind the rest of Pearl’s adventures,” Nancy said. “Let us get some lunch.”

Although she did not relish the thought of having to listen to Effie’s chatter during a whole meal, Nancy intended to keep her promise to her father of having either a friend or Effie with her all the time while there was a possibility of her being followed.

Over a substantial meal of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and peas, Nancy told the maid of the things that had happened on the estate beyond her sight and hearing.

“Ooh, I wouldn’t be as brave as you are for anything,” Effie shuddered. “If I was, think of the places I’d have to go and the bad people I would have to meet. I’d be scared to death.”

While paying for the meal, Nancy asked the hotel proprietor about the occupants of the house where she had had her unpleasant experience.

“Oh, them’s the Tookers,” the countryman said. “They keep pretty much to themselves, the Tookers, but they buy a fair lot of stuff in West Granby, here.”

“They seem to have a number of pigeons,” Nancy observed carelessly.

“Some. Yes, they do have some pigeons,” the proprietor replied. “Their man comes in and buys feed over at Hoskin’s hay, grain, and feed place. Cracked corn and millet and oyster shells. Cash customers, too.”

“It is a lovely place, set back among the trees,” Nancy said, putting her change into her purse and pretending to be ready to leave. “Are they farmers or so-called ‘gentlemen’ farmers?”

“I gather Tooker is a retired professional man,” the hotel keeper said. “Seems to have a lot of money, and been all around the world. He came out here, so folks say, because he wanted peace and quiet—a place where he wouldn’t be disturbed.”

“He couldn’t have picked a better spot,” Nancy smiled.

“Well, ma’am, folks around here think he could have picked a better one so far as they are concerned. There’s something mysterious about them Tookers. Lots goes on there nights, with big cars speedin’ through the village and stoppin’ there at all hours.” The hotel keeper plainly did not approve of the Tookers.

“Mysterious?” Nancy pricked up her ears. “In what way mysterious?”

“They don’t come to church, or don’t subscribe to the local paper,” the man replied. “Just stand-offish and unfriendly. Very free with their money, though. Never bargain or question the price of a thing.”

“Oh, well,” Nancy observed, “that is no fault. I should think you could overlook their other irregularities as long as they pay their bills.”

“We can overlook almost anything except that pesky airplane,” the hotel man said with a shake of his head.

“Airplane?” Nancy asked quickly. “Have they one?”

“Yes,” was the answer. “Now, I don’t want you to think we are backwoods folks that is skeered of modern contraptions. Fact is, Job Green’s boy flew an airplane in the war and come back alive to tell about it. Now, he’s an air-mail pilot. Howsomever, for a man what’s retired and wants to be quiet and secluded, an airplane in the back yard a-roaring and a-hopping every day is either just plain crazy, or else there is some mystery about him.”

That seemed to be about all that the hotel man knew or thought of his strange neighbors. Accordingly, after complimenting him on the meal, Nancy walked back to where her car was parked, and there joined Effie. Skillfully she backed out of the narrow path and headed toward Granby, a drive of three miles. This would bring her to the highway leading directly to River Heights, a total distance of about thirty miles.

As the snappy little maroon roadster passed the last house in the village, its occupants could hear the drone of an airplane engine overhead. Nancy looked up and saw a machine gliding down on a long slant, evidently headed for the Tooker place.

“It looks like the plane that hit the pigeon, but I can’t be sure,” she murmured. “Wouldn’t it be strange if the pigeon and the plane that wounded it came from the same place?”

Stranger facts than this, however, were destined to be revealed to Nancy before the mystery of the carrier pigeon and its strange message was to be cleared up.

CHAPTER XII

THE ENEMY GROWS BOLD

As Nancy and Effie drove up to the Drew home they were surprised to find Hannah at the door to greet them.

"Is anything the matter?" Nancy asked quickly. "Father——"

"Don't be alarmed," replied the housekeeper. "Nothing is the matter. I just couldn't stay in bed any longer."

"Hannah, are you sure you are able to be up?" Nancy asked solicitously. "You should take no chances."

"Oh, thank you, I'll be all right. I'm just wondering how Effie has been making out."

"I think she has done remarkably well," Nancy replied. "And she was a great help to me today."

Nancy had been doing some rapid thinking while speaking with the housekeeper. She wanted to talk to Dr. Spires, but knew that his house was probably being watched. She accordingly hesitated to make the trip without some obvious excuse. Now the housekeeper served this purpose.

"Hannah," she said, "I won't feel right about your being up until we have the doctor's permission. He must examine you at once to see if you have recovered entirely."

"I'm feeling fine," Hannah objected.

Nancy insisted that they go, however. Secretly pleased with the girl's solicitude the woman put on her hat and accompanied her mistress to Dr. Spires's home. From long acquaintance with the physician Nancy knew he would be at home by five o'clock in the afternoon unless called out on some emergency case.

The doctor was in his office and unoccupied. He carefully checked up on Mrs. Gruen's condition, declaring her to be fully recovered. He cautioned her, however, against being overactive.

"Will you wait here, Hannah, while I talk over some other matters with the doctor?" Nancy requested. She followed Dr. Spires through the consulting room to his study, where he offered her a chair.

"What I have to say can be told quickly," Nancy began. "The wounded pigeon was let free today by a neighbor's boy, and I followed it in my car. It was still lame and flew slowly, so I had no trouble in locating its home. It came down at a beautiful big estate near West Granby, about twenty-five miles from here by back roads."

Nancy described the Tooker mansion, and without mentioning the coarse man's attempt to force her from the car, told the surgeon all she had learned, both at the estate itself and from the hotel keeper. She concluded her recital with the fact that no old lady had been visible.

"Now, then," Nancy said, "do you think that is the place to which you were taken?"

Dr. Spires looked at the girl with surprise, then some amusement.

"How in the world could I tell, Nancy?" he laughed. "I was blindfolded, you remember."

It was Nancy's turn to look astonished. She often forgot that few people were gifted with her sense of observation and deduction.

"Why—why Dr. Spires," she exclaimed in genuine surprise. "Couldn't you tell from the tires on the road whether the car was traveling over asphalt or concrete or gravel?"

"We did go on a gravel driveway, as I recall," Dr. Spires replied.

"You mentioned the driver giving the password 'blue bells' at a gate," Nancy said. "Did you reach that place before or after you went over the gravel?"

"Dear me, Nancy! We came to the gate first, I am fairly sure, though not quite certain, because I did not make special mental notes."

"What about the drive out?" Nancy asked next. "The distance is about correct. Did you sway in your seat as if the car made many turns along a crooked road, or was most of it smooth riding?"

"Nancy, I wish I could answer you, but I can only guess at it," the doctor replied.

"Please try to remember," Nancy urged. "I am sure that blue bells or larkspurs play a big part in this mystery, but I saw no such flowers at the Tookers. Probably we have discovered only one of the two headquarters of the crooks."

"What makes you think there are two?"

"If they are using pigeons," Nancy explained, "they must have two headquarters, for a homing pigeon will return only to its mate.

"Then, too, there is the airplane. That means distance to be covered. I feel confident that the place I found today is not the one to which you were taken, but I think I know where the other location is."

"Nancy, you're a clever girl," Dr. Spires complimented. "You sound like a character out of a book, instead of a healthy young girl in her 'teens who was playing with dolls only a little while back. Please tell me why you believe that you know where the other hide-out is."

"It is really quite simple, Dr. Spires, and if you were not so occupied with other people's troubles, you could puzzle it out quicker than I," Nancy said modestly. "Let us take River Heights as a center for a circle about twenty-five miles in diameter. Here, on the southeast rim, is the Tooker place. To reach it both the pigeon and the airplane fly over River Heights. So we judge that the other headquarters is in the northwest, on a fairly straight line from the southeast point on the circle."

"I understand it now," Dr. Spires cried. "Wonderful! Nancy, it would have taken me a long time to figure that out by myself."

"You are very complimentary," Nancy laughed. "I am so eager to test my theory that I should like nothing better than to start out at once. My goal is some hidden house about twenty-five miles northwest of here, whose surroundings suggest blue bells. I think I shall find it."

"And that will solve everything!" Dr. Spires cried. "Wonderful!"

"I am afraid not," Nancy contradicted gently. "That will be only the beginning. We must discover who——"

"There goes the telephone," Dr. Spires interrupted. "Excuse me, Nancy."

He stepped into his office, and in less than a minute was back, his face grave.

"It is your maid Effie," he said slowly. "I fear something must be wrong."

"Oh, I hope nothing has happened to Father," Nancy exclaimed, darting into the other room and seizing the telephone. "Hello, Effie. What is it?"

"Miss Nancy, please come home. There was a most dreadful man here. I thought he was nice at first. He said he thought I was you. And he asked about the pigeon. He tried to force his way in——"

"I'll be there at once," Nancy cried. "Don't let a soul in. Lock every door until I get there."

Dr. Spires was at Nancy's elbow, listening gravely to what she was saying.

“You give orders like a general, Nancy,” he said. “I admire your decision. Tell me, is there anything seriously wrong?”

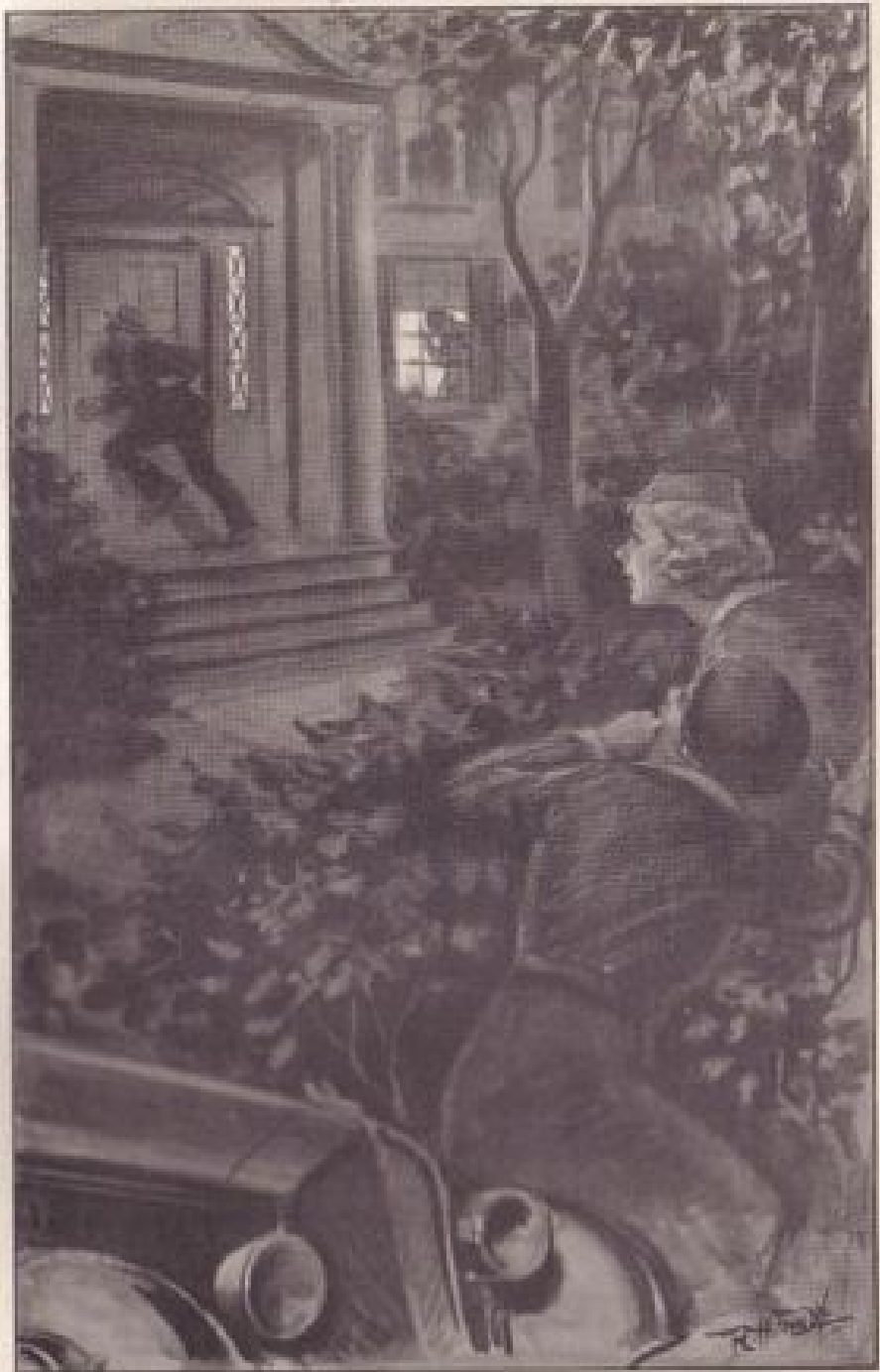
“The enemy is getting bolder,” Nancy announced. “A man tried to force his way into the house and wheedle information out of Effie about the pigeon. I must go back at once.”

“Shall I go with you?” Dr. Spires asked. “It may be dangerous for you to return alone.”

“That would make my visit here look suspicious, for I am certain now our house is being watched, as well as yours,” Nancy said rapidly. “Besides, Father is due home any minute now and will probably be there by the time I arrive.”

Helping Hannah to the car, Nancy drove home quickly. Her heart leaped when in the gathering dusk she saw a man thrusting his shoulder against the front door of the Drew home, and rattling violently at the door knob.

“Great land o’ Goshen,” Mrs. Gruen exclaimed. “He’s trying to break down the door!”



“HE’S TRYING TO BREAK DOWN THE DOOR!” MRS. GRUEN EXCLAIMED.

Nancy halted the car in front of the house.

“What do you want?” she cried, dashing up the front steps. As the man turned suddenly to face her, the girl’s knees gave way and she sank to the top stair, her shoulders shaking.

“Father, I thought we were being attacked in full force,” she laughed. “Oh, I am so relieved. I did not recognize you. You have on a new suit and hat.”

“Yes, but why is the house barricaded? Where is Effie?” Mr. Drew demanded. “I rang and knocked, but no one appeared, so I used my latchkey. I can unlock the door but can’t push it open.”

“I’ll explain when we get indoors,” Nancy said.

Raising her voice, she called upon Effie to let them in. Presently there was a sound of something heavy being dragged over the floor. The maid, pale and trembling, opened the door.

“I put the couch from the living room against the entrance,” she said. “And then I lifted the big rocker on top of the couch.”

“Why the fortification?” Mr. Drew asked, more mystified than ever.

“Effie will tell us,” Nancy said. “Someone tried to get in while I was at Dr. Spires’s with Hannah.”

“I’m awfully sorry,” Effie began. “It was this way: I had the door locked and the screen door latched, when this man rang the bell. I opened the door but not the screen, because you told me to be very careful about letting anyone in.

“Well, the man said he heard you were very much interested in pigeons—that he was from some pigeon club. Miss Nancy, I heard you talking with a man from the pigeon club the first day I was here. This wasn’t the same man, though.

“He asked me if you had any pigeons, and before I thought I said not any more at this time. ‘Oh,’ said he, ‘did she let that one go?’ So I thought he knew all about the bird we had, don’t you see?”

“Yes,” Nancy answered dolefully. “It was just a lucky guess on his part.”

“So I told the man that the pigeon had got loose and that we had found out where it lived, and that you had tried to buy a pair but changed your mind,” Effie continued.

“What’s all this about the pigeon getting loose?” Mr. Drew demanded. “It’s news to me. Tell me about it.”

“Tommy let it go,” Nancy said. “With Effie’s help I traced it to its home. I will tell you all about that presently. Go on, Effie.”

“The man said he would like to come in and wait for you,” the girl went on. “I said I was sorry, but I had orders to let no strangers in. I said he could sit on the porch and wait for you. There were chairs and magazines there. With that he took out five dollars and showed it to me. He said he would give it to me if I would let him in, so right away I knew he wasn’t honest.”

“What did you do then?” Mr. Drew asked.

“I slammed the door shut, of course,” Effie said. “That made him mad, so he yanked at the screen so hard that the hook came out, and he jerked at the front door, too. I ran and locked the back door and slammed shut the windows on the porch, and called Miss Nancy at the doctor’s office. She said I was not to let anybody in at all until she came home, so I piled the furniture against the door and hid in the cellar until I heard Miss Nancy call. But I nearly died when I heard you stamping and pulling around, Mr. Drew.”

“I couldn’t imagine why I was locked out,” Carson Drew said. “However, you are forgiven, Effie. Run along now and give Hannah some help with dinner.”

When Effie had left the room, Mr. Drew turned to his daughter.

“Now tell me about the pigeon.”

This Nancy did in great detail, including her visit to Dr. Spires and the deductions she had made there as to the whereabouts of the mysterious building where the surgeon had been taken to treat the owner of the bracelet.

“And we know more about that bit of jewelry, too,” Nancy concluded. “It belongs to someone named Eldridge.”

Thereupon she described her trip to the jeweler, and told what she had learned from his investigation.

“As I figure out this mystery,” Nancy said later as she and Mr. Drew sat at their evening meal, “the man at Tookers’ place reported our visit on the heels of the pigeon’s arrival. Someone must have surmised that the bird, arriving a couple of days late, had been held captive. Because they suspect us of being involved in the case, they attempted to find out our connection with the mystery. Effie unwittingly gave them the information they wanted.”

When the maid entered the room with the dessert, Nancy queried her about the appearance of the person who had tried to gain admittance to the house. Effie, who always had her eyes wide open where men were concerned, gave a very complete picture of the person.

“It isn’t Adam Thorne,” Mr. Drew said, when he had heard the story. “I think, too, that whoever it was, I frightened him away.”

“And it isn’t the man with the whip,” Nancy decided. “There must be several of the crooks.”

“Let’s discuss the matter further upstairs,” Mr. Drew suggested. “I must leave in the morning for St. Louis. You will help me pack, won’t you, Daughter?”

“Gladly,” Nancy cried, linking her arm into that of her father. “I hope you win your case without having to stay away too long. I want you to be around when this mystery is solved, and to get your share of the credit.”

“You seem very confident,” Mr. Drew smiled, as they entered his rooms.

He took two big suitcases from a closet, and began to pile clothing on the bed. With deft fingers Nancy started to pack the bags.

“We seem to be dealing with a group of peculiarly vicious characters who evidently are taking great risks to conceal their actions,” commented Mr. Drew. “And I beseech you, Nancy, to be careful.”

“The more of them there are the greater the chance of their making a mistake,” Nancy laughed. “I don’t expect to come to actual combat with the criminals.”

“I hope not,” said Mr. Drew. “If I thought there was any such possibility, I should forbid you having anything more to do with the mystery.”

“This will be a battle of wits, Father, and I intend to win. Besides, I am sure that after today’s encounter with Effie and your warning to them last night, they know we are on our guard.”

“Perhaps they will keep away from the house,” Mr. Drew concluded. “Perhaps, also, the—goodness, what is that?”

A piercing scream came from below. Then a crash. A police whistle shrilled sharply.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO SURPRISES

Nancy was the first to reach the ground floor, but her father was only a step behind. In the hall they found Effie cowering against the front door, through the glass of which a flashlight was sweeping the room.

“What is it? What happened?” they cried in one breath.

Effie could only draw deep, heaving sobs and shake her head in terror. For once in her life she could not say a word.

“Who is that at the door?” Mr. Drew demanded, lifting the maid to her feet and throwing the door open wide.

A policeman confronted them, adding his “What’s the matter?” to the general cry.

“Oh, the man, the man,” Effie shuddered. “He—he scared me so!” She was able to talk now, though her voice trembled as she spoke.

“What man? Where was he?”

“In the bushes,” Effie said. “In the bushes outside the dining room window!”

“He *is*, is he?” growled the policeman, dashing out of doors and flashing his light all over the yard. “Come out of there! I got ye covered.”

“The man is probably out of sight by now,” Mr. Drew said. “Try to calm yourself, Effie, and tell us just what happened. Remember you are safe, and no harm is going to befall you.”

“I opened the dining room screen to shake out the tablecloth,” Effie said. “A spoon I hadn’t seen fell into the bushes, so I went out to get it. I couldn’t tell from the outside just where it had gone, so I reached into the shrubbery and—ooh! I thought I would die!”

“Yes, yes. What happened?” Nancy urged.

“I—I touched a man’s face,” Effie whispered, her eyes growing large.

“How did you know it was a man’s face?” Mr. Drew asked.

“I guess I ought to know,” Effie said indignantly. “I stuck my arm away into the bushes and put my fingers into his mouth and he bit me. That’s why I yelled.”

“And then you ran up the porch and into the house,” Nancy said. “Did you see what the man did after that?”

“No, but I heard a thrashing in the bushes as if he was in a hurry to get out,” Effie said. “May—may I g-go upstairs now?”

As soon as the girl had left the hall, Mr. Drew turned to his daughter, a grave look on his face.

“That settles the sleuthing business for you, Nancy,” he said decisively. “You shall not remain in this house while I am gone. You must come with me.”

“Oh, Father, I don’t want to do that,” responded Nancy. “Suppose I accept Helen Corning’s invitation and go out to Sylvan Lake with her? You know how much I like Helen, and she wants me to spend some time at her home.”

Mr. Drew looked thoughtful.

“It seems to me that you have fallen into plenty of adventures while in Helen’s company, too,” he observed. “Will Mr. and Mrs. Corning be there?”

“Yes, they are not at their old camp but have taken a good-sized cottage this year, Helen told me,” Nancy replied. “Besides, Ned Nickerson is at the same lake just now,” she added,

laughing.

Mr. Drew smiled for the first time since Effie's alarm. He understood now that Ned's presence might prove to be an added inducement.

"I think you would be safe at Sylvan Lake, then," he said. "All right, if that's what you'd rather do."

"Let's go tonight!" Nancy cried. "I'll telephone to Helen at once to see if it will be convenient for her mother and father."

"You must not go out to the lake alone," Mr. Drew reminded his daughter. "If you go, I go. So ask the Cornings if I may stay, too. I can start from there in the morning."

Nancy hurried to the telephone, and in a few minutes was talking to her chum. Needless to say, Helen was thrilled over the plan, and her parents were delighted to have the Drews as their guests.

"I'll pack right away," Nancy called to her father, as she put the instrument down.

"Come here, dear, I wish to talk something over with you," Mr. Drew requested. "I've been thinking about this mystery very seriously, and I have concluded that I had better leave a watchman at this house. I'm going to get in touch with the janitor of my office building and ask him to sleep here."

In a few moments he had made satisfactory arrangements with Jim Durkin, the law office building superintendent. Then Mr. Drew asked Nancy from the telephone chair where he was sitting why she was frowning.

"Don't you like my scheme, dear?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, Father," replied his daughter. "I am worrying about how we are going to get away from here safely. If Adam Thorne's spies are watching the house, they'll surely follow us, and may even try to attack us."

"That's quite true, Nancy. What would you propose?"

"I think it would be better to leave here in some other car than one of ours. Do you suppose it would be possible for us to borrow or rent an automobile?" she suggested. "Perhaps one of our friends——"

"I know the very thing," chuckled the lawyer, slapping his knee. "I have planned a surprise for you. Guess I'll not wait until your birthday to present my gift. As long as it is imperative that you leave here, we must do something at once. I'll give you my present tonight."

"What is it?" Nancy cried, going over to her father and laying her hands on his shoulders.

"I have signed an order for a new car for you, Nancy."

"Oh, Father, how wonderful!" she said, kissing him soundly. "And you can have it delivered right away?"

"I don't know," Carson Drew responded. "It's a pretty late hour to get hold of the salesman, but I'll try."

"Where is the car?"

"Down at the Packlin Motor Car showroom."

"I can hardly wait to see it," said Nancy joyously, dancing about the room. "But we must keep our minds on the mystery," she said, pausing by a table.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we're trying to elude the enemy, not go on a pleasure trip!"

"How would it be," asked Nancy, puckering her brows, "if the man should bring the new car to the street back of our house? Then we could go out that way, and leave before anyone might suspect our plans."

“Don’t forget there’s a garden wall,” laughed her father. “Are you still as good at climbing fences as you were a few years ago? I remember how we used to have to keep close watch over you for fear you’d try to climb over, and then fall and break an arm or foot.”

Nancy laughed as she recalled those days.

“Yes, indeed, Father. I’m probably a better climber now, especially if I happen to be running away from a villain!”

Mr. Drew called a number on the telephone and asked for a Mr. French.

“Hello. French? Drew talking, Carson Drew—yes, that is what I am talking about. I’ve changed my mind. Oh, no, I still want it, but if it is possible I want it tonight—as soon as possible—half an hour? Good! Now listen carefully. I want it brought to the street at the rear of our house. Directly back of here. I don’t want you to be seen within two blocks of my home for a very special reason. My daughter and I will meet you there.”

Just as he finished speaking, the doorbell rang. Effie answered it timorously, recalling her experience of not so long ago. To her fright and amazement she found standing there a policeman and a tall, muscular young man of about thirty years of age.

“Oh, hello, Durkin,” said Mr. Drew.

“Do you know this man, Mr. Drew?” inquired the officer. “All right, then.”

“He’s going to stay here at night,” announced the lawyer, “so don’t stop him from coming and going. Did you find any trace of the spy in the garden?”

“No, sir, I’m sorry,” said the policeman, crestfallen. Mr. Drew was well known as a famous lawyer, and all the officers did their best to serve him satisfactorily.

While this conversation was taking place, Nancy noticed Effie retreating from the hall, much more slowly than was necessary.

“I suppose she is delighted,” Nancy mused with a smile, “to have a young man in the house. She’ll probably be bragging about him as one of her new boy friends!”

Nancy hastened to the second floor to pack her own bag, and in fifteen minutes had neatly folded sport clothes, afternoon dresses, and two dainty evening frocks. Her father, coming in to find out if she were ready, remarked:

“I believe we ought to try to fool any of Thorne’s bunch who may be watching around here. I shouldn’t be surprised if he had spies planted here and there in this vicinity. We’ll have to try to figure out a way of eluding them.”

“Yes, Father, I have the same feeling. It seems that wherever one sees a bush or shrub, one sees a sinister face. It may be only my imagination, and again it may not.”

“Suppose you bring your car around to the front door, Nancy.”

“Just as if I were going to leave that way?”

“Exactly. Do you get my trend of thought? It seems that our minds work very harmoniously along detective lines, anyway,” and Mr. Drew’s eyes twinkled as he looked at his daughter.

Nancy suppressed a smile, then said as sedately as she possibly could, though she felt more like laughing:

“What do you think of our having Jim Durkin carry out a suitcase? An old one with nothing in it. Have him handle it as if it were full and heavy.”

“Fine,” agreed the lawyer. “While the watchman is doing that, we’ll go quietly out the back way.”

“I’m ready any time,” Nancy announced, with a thrill in her voice. “Now for a bag of some kind. Oh, I have it! Here’s a valise I never use,” and she brought a worn suitcase from

the back of her closet. "I'll go out and get my car right away."

"I've another idea," said Mr. Drew. "We'll turn on the porch light and make the front of the house as conspicuous as possible. Down we go!"

In a few moments Nancy had been to the garage and driven her automobile out the driveway and up to the curb, right by the front walk. As she stepped out, she felt a little pang of regret when she realized that she was no longer to be the owner of the old maroon roadster.

"This little car and I have had many good times together," she mused. "It's been my companion, and a very faithful one, on many an exciting and hazardous adventure. If it hadn't been for this little machine, I never should have been able to have gone through with several of my encounters. I hate parting from it as I would from a dear friend. And we've solved mysteries together, too!"

As she hurried into the house, she thought of the new car she had not yet seen. After all, it was an exciting idea, becoming the possessor of such a gift. What could it be like? Would she be satisfied with the style and color of it? All these thoughts came into her mind, one after the other.

"Oh, thank you, Jim," she said aloud, as the watchman came out with the old suitcase, carrying it in such a way that it appeared to be very heavy indeed. "Put it in the rumble seat, please."

Hurrying through the hallway, Nancy met her father in the unlighted kitchen. Mr. Drew had a suitcase in each hand. They whispered their good-bys to Hannah Gruen and Effie, the latter still a bit unnerved after her harrowing experience. Then Nancy and her father stepped cautiously out.

Fortunately, there was no moon; in fact, the atmosphere hinted rain. A muggy stillness hung over everything, and as the two fleeing figures tiptoed across the grass, there were no shadows.

"Luck is with us so far," Nancy thought to herself. "Now to get over the wall without being seen."

She was the first to reach the rear of the garden, and very quietly began to pull herself up the ivy which grew in profusion along the high brick fence. In a moment she was at the top and spoke softly to her father.

"Hand the bags up to me!"

Mr. Drew did so, and Nancy held the suitcases there until the lawyer had climbed up. She could hear a commotion at the front of the house, and wondered if there were trouble there.

"I hope not," she thought. "Probably our interested employees are throwing any intruders off our trail."

Nancy now jumped down from the wall, dropping lightly on her toes, so that there was only the faintest audible thud.

"All right, Father."

Once more the two suitcases were given to the girl. In a second Mr. Drew stood on the ground, and together father and daughter hastened with light steps out to the street.

Would the new car be waiting? Had they eluded their pursuers?

CHAPTER XIV

HONORS FOR NANCY

A long, shadowy bulk in the darkness, with the gleam of polished metal visible here and there by reflected light, was all that Nancy could see. Altogether, it was the most exciting way in the world to become owner of a new automobile.

“Mr. French?” asked Mr. Drew in subdued tones.

“Yes,” was the reply. “What are your plans?”

“My daughter’s other car is at our front door. Will you go around to the house and take it with you?” the lawyer requested. “Here are the keys. If anyone there stops you, tell him who you are. I’ve arranged so that you won’t be interfered with.”

“This sounds like a mystery,” commented the man as he stepped from the car. “But knowing your daughter’s reputation as a solver of mysteries, I’m not surprised to——”

“We must hurry,” broke in Mr. Drew. “I’m sorry I can’t explain things to you now. Nancy, may I present Mr. French?”

Nancy acknowledged the introduction, and immediately slid into the driver’s seat.

“Have you any directions about the running of this automobile?” she asked. “Anything different from my other car?”

“There are many improvements and new gadgets,” the salesman announced, “but nothing different in the actual driving.”

“Then we’re off, Father!” cried the excited girl.

Mr. Drew had put the suitcases into the rumble seat and now jumped in beside his daughter. He was not a moment too soon, for just then a flashlight gleamed at the top of the garden wall. Was someone going to delay their stealthy departure after all?

“Oh!” exclaimed Nancy, as the light vanished and she could dimly make out a man’s form climbing over the fence.

Hastily she felt for the pedals, and in a moment the motor responded. Then the car moved quickly down the street. Mr. Drew, looking back, saw a running figure, but by this time it was so far back he was sure their pursuer could not read their license number nor recognize the make of the new automobile.

“I think we’re safe,” he said. “Would you rather have me take the wheel?”

“Oh, Father, let me drive a bit,” Nancy begged. “The car is a beauty. You’re just the grandest Dad in all the world. This machine handles marvelously,” she added, pushing down the accelerator and listening to the quiet and steady purr of the engine, yet sensing the power within it.

“Father, please look back. Is anyone following us?”

Mr. Drew craned his neck.

“If Adam Thorne is sneaking up, I’ll lead him a merry chase with my new automobile.”

“I see no one,” announced the lawyer.

“We’ve eluded our pursuers at last,” Nancy exulted. “After all, it may have been Jim Durkin or the patrolman coming over the garden wall to speak to us. It doesn’t matter. Now, I’m going to enjoy this drive.”

Thrilled to the finger tips, Nancy guided the car toward Sylvan Lake, and in half an hour was at the gate of that exclusive resort, asking the guard to telephone to the Corning cottage.

Directions were given how to reach it, and after a few minutes' drive along a winding road beneath great pines that edged the water, the Drews reached the gayly illuminated summer home of Nancy's chum.

Helen was highly excited at her friend's arrival. Mr. Drew quickly explained to her parents the reasons for their unusual intrusion.

"This is rather an abrupt way of accepting an invitation," he said, telling them of the need for Nancy's hasty departure from the town of River Heights.

Mr. and Mrs. Corning insisted that they were only too delighted to have Nancy, and Mr. Drew for overnight as well. The attorney, however, said he had changed his mind about staying, and felt that if a car were available, he would leave at once. Mr. Corning volunteered his own, which Mr. Drew refused with thanks, and soon a limousine from the colony garage was at the door. Nancy bade her father a fond farewell.

"If there is any news," she said, "I'll telephone to you at once."

"All right, dear, but above all be careful," Mr. Drew warned.

"I'll watch her," Helen laughed.

The girls returned to the house, and before retiring enjoyed some sandwiches and ginger ale. Then, tired but happy, they went to bed.

Morning dawned clear and cool. Nancy should have liked to have taken her new car and gone off at once in pursuit of her mystery. However, she courteously deferred to her hostess's wishes, and instead went for a swim.

Luck was with Nancy!

Tons of ocean sand had been brought overland to make a beach for the group of cottages in which the Corning summer home stood. A float was moored a few rods from shore with a tower and springboard for those who liked high diving. Nancy, in a very becoming blue and white bathing suit, and Helen in a red one, swam out to the float on which a dozen young people were frolicking. Helen introduced Nancy to her friends.

One girl, a tall brunette two or three years older than Nancy, narrowed her eyes as the young men at once flocked around the newcomer. She had been introduced as Nina Shaw, "the amateur swimming champion."

Intent on attracting some attention to herself, Nina suddenly asked, "What about a little diving?"

With that she climbed slowly up to the tower, posing every step of the way. On the platform, fifteen feet above the water, the girl struck a theatrical attitude, and then launched herself into the air in a clean dive that scarcely rippled the surface of the lake.

"Come on, everybody," a young man called. "Let's follow the leader!"

Everyone trooped up the ladder. One after the other they dived. At each round Nina made the feat more difficult—swan dive, jackknife, somersault—until most of the young folks dropped laughingly out of the competition.

The contest had attracted the attention of most of the campers, who thronged the shore, or put out in canoes and rowboats to the float.

At last only Nina, Nancy, and a brawny young man remained to climb to the diving platform. Nina paused a moment, and then lay at full length on the springboard, her head over the edge. She put her hands over her shoulders, grasped the edge of the board, and raised her legs and body until she was standing on her shoulders. With a thrust forward she turned a backward somersault and, revolving in the air, hit the water. She had miscalculated, however,

and landed in a sitting position, sending a column of foam high into the air. Laughingly she was dragged onto the float, lame from the impact.

“That’s too much for me,” the young man said. “Do you want to try it, Miss Drew?”

Nancy was never one to cry quits. Although the dive was one which she had never before performed, she carefully followed the preparations Miss Shaw had made. Exerting every muscle, she balanced upside down on the edge of the board for a breath-taking moment, then thrust herself off. Her body revolved in the air, and straightened out so that her pointed toes cleaved the water like a knife. Down, down, down into the green waters of the lake she plunged, then bobbed up to the surface to hear the cheers of the throng.

Panting, she climbed back onto the float, and as she threw herself down in the sun to rest, Nina Shaw came to Nancy, rubbing herself ruefully.

“That was well done,” she said, with a trace of condescension in her voice, yet with a gallant effort to be generous. “I didn’t time myself right, but you dived like a champion.”

“It was just luck,” Nancy insisted. “I probably couldn’t do it again.”

She basked in the sun awhile, her eyes closed. Suddenly she was aroused by Helen vigorously shaking her shoulder. Nancy sat up to see a war canoe laden with small boys sweeping toward the float. Two bronzed young men, one in the bow and one in the stern, guided the craft, and the youth in front was Ned Nickerson.

“Hello, there, Nancy!” he cried. “What a jolly surprise. Hello, Helen! When did you get here and how long are you staying?”

“Just arrived, and we’ll be here for a long time,” Helen replied.

“Great! Then perhaps you haven’t had time to be asked to the dance tonight?” Ned said eagerly. “Will you girls be my guests at the Yacht Club? I’ll bring some of the other boys.”

“I’d love to go,” Nancy said, while Helen told Ned that she had already accepted an invitation.

“You know Buck Rodman?” she asked. “We’ll all go together.”

“See you later, then,” Ned called, backing water. “Got to return my young charges to camp.”

The girls waved good-bye and sat down to relax. Just then a curly-haired little tot of about five suddenly stumbled over Helen and landed with a thump on Nancy’s right arm.

“Oh,” exclaimed Nancy, and “ooh!” mimicked the little girl.

“Marie Eldridge!” a woman’s voice called from a canoe moored to the float. “Look where you are walking, dear. Tell the lady you are sorry.”

“I’m aw’fy sorry,” the little child said sincerely.

Nancy, however, was so startled at hearing the name Eldridge that she immediately forgot all about the annoyance of the incident.

“Hello, Marie,” she said. “Do you live near here?”

“I live in St. Louis,” the little girl said, overcome with shyness. She backed away, her fingers to her lips.

“Look out!” Nancy cried.

It was too late, however. The tot had stepped too far and tumbled backward over the edge of the float into deep water.

“Oh, the speedboat!” Helen screamed. “Marie will be run down!”

CHAPTER XV

NEW CLUES

Nancy looked up, horrified. A forty-foot mahogany launch which plied the lake was rushing in toward the float, its engine cut off, its deck thronged with persons who had been gay and laughing a moment before, but who now stood transfixed with terror as they saw little Marie's curly head bobbing in the path of the boat.

Without rising, Nancy rolled off the float into the water. She saw the bow of the speedboat looming overhead as her hands found Marie. Then, with a powerful thrust of her limbs, she plunged.

Down, down, down—the little girl squirmed in Nancy's grasp, kicking convulsively and beating the water with her hands. Nancy turned, and looked up through the green water to see the black keel of the speedboat slipping past in a froth of bubbles a few feet overhead.

She kicked downward vigorously, and shot toward the surface. Her lungs were at the bursting point, for she had not had time to take a deep breath before her plunge.

A terrible roaring sounded in her ears, and she feared her eardrums had burst from the pressure before she realized that it was the sound of a hundred persons cheering her in a frenzy of enthusiasm. As the blond heads of Nancy and Marie appeared on the surface, a score of canoes shot toward them, and rescuer and rescued were hauled aboard.

"How—how is the little girl?" Nancy gasped, dashing the water from her eyes.

"Fit as a fiddle," a deep voice assured her. "Just as soon as she gets some of the water out of her system, she will be none the worse for the experience."

Nancy sat up, and looked at the canoe where little Marie was slowly recovering from her excitement. In a second the two canoes grated against the beach, and Marie was carried to her sobbing mother and frantic nurse.

Helen was swimming from the float to the shore. Upon reaching land she elbowed her way through the cheering throng to Nancy's side.

"You darling," she exclaimed. "That was the quickest thinking anybody ever did!"

"Let's get to the house," Nancy whispered.

"Let Miss Drew pass, please," Helen cried, and the two girls scampered from the watchers and over to the Corning cottage. There Nancy flung herself on the roomy, waterproofed porch glider, and relaxed.

"That was wonderful, Nancy," Helen declared. "You ought to get a medal for it. You——"

"Oh, Helen, I was the person closest to little Marie and am really to blame for the little girl's accident," Nancy said. "Please don't talk about it."

The matter was not to be dismissed, however, for the child's mother suddenly appeared on the Corning porch.

"Where is the young lady who—oh, there you are! How can I ever thank you?" and the woman seized both Nancy's hands. "You saved my baby's life, and anything in the world I can do for you will not be enough," she wept.

Nancy was overcome with embarrassment.

"Please don't thank me," she insisted. "Besides, there is something I particularly want to ask you, Mrs. Eldridge."

“You know my name?” the woman asked. “Perhaps I should know you—we are strangers here. Please excuse me for not having introduced myself, but I was so upset——”

Regaining some of her composure, the little girl’s mother seated herself in a rocking-chair. Helen excused herself and left the porch before Nancy could stop her, leaving Mrs. Eldridge and her chum alone.

“What was it you wished to ask me?” she inquired. “Anything that I can do for you within my power shall be done.” Her voice quavered with emotion, and it seemed that the shock of her child’s near-drowning had unnerved her considerably.

“I heard little Marie’s name called. She told me she lived in St. Louis,” Nancy explained. “I am interested to know if you are a member of the Eldridge family that settled in Missouri years ago, coming there from New York.”

“Yes. That is, my husband, John Eldridge, is,” the child’s mother said, a puzzled look coming over her face. “The family is a very old one. My husband could tell you more about its history, but he is not here. He is—engaged in some family matters. Much of his time is taken up that way.”

“I wonder if it—well, never mind now,” Nancy said. “Under rather unusual circumstances I came into possession of an old-fashioned gold bracelet with a coat of arms which I traced to the Eldridges.”

“A gold bracelet?” the woman asked in amazement, her eyes brightening and her cheeks flushing. “Was there any inscription on it?”

“Yes,” Nancy said. “It is inscribed inside, ‘To my darling Mary from Joe.’”

Mrs. John Eldridge suddenly turned pale. She clutched at her throat and gasped.

“Where is this bracelet now?” she asked breathlessly.

“In a safe in my home in River Heights,” Nancy replied in reassuring tones, attempting to compose the excited woman.

“It must be Aunt Mary’s,” Marie’s mother cried, clasping her hands. “Oh, how did you get it?”

Nancy thought things over in her mind before answering the question, a steady look in her fine blue eyes.

“A surgeon who is a friend of my father was called to treat a patient,” she said. “He was blindfolded and taken to a house to set a dislocated arm for an elderly lady who seemed to be in a semiconscious condition from causes other than the fracture. The doctor was refused information as to the identity of either the invalid or those who had engaged him, so he slipped this bracelet from her arm, convinced that she was being held captive, and hoping it might prove to be a clue by which she would be released. Nobody knows where the house is, although the police have been searching for it for days. It is a most mysterious situation.”

Mrs. John Eldridge listened intently.

“I shall telegraph my husband at once,” she said. “He can reach here by tomorrow noon if he is still in Richmond, where he is searching for a clue as to the whereabouts of Aunt Mary. She has been missing since early spring. She is a very wealthy woman, rather eccentric at times. She disappeared suddenly from her home, leaving only a letter saying she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and was going to a sanatorium for a long rest, and wanted no one to disturb her or even try to look for her.”

“She is not far from here,” Nancy said. “It looks as if she had been made the dupe of some unscrupulous fortune-hunting crook.”

"I always suspected that to be the case," Marie's mother said. "It has been our amazing good fortune to meet you at Sylvan Lake. You have been our great benefactor twice today—and I do not yet know your name. It's strange how one forgets mere formalities when big issues are at stake, isn't it?"

"My name is Nancy Drew," the girl replied simply. "My father is Carson Drew."

"The name is familiar, but I can't exactly place it," Mrs. Eldridge said, rising. "I must hurry and telegraph Mr. Eldridge. Oh, about the bracelet. I believe Aunt Mary has had it on her arm since the day her fiancé clasped it there more than sixty years ago. She has a necklace to match it which she always wears. I shall see you soon again, Miss Drew."

After bidding Mrs. Eldridge good-by, Nancy entered the house, where she found Helen dressing.

"Heigh-ho," her chum said heartily. "We have the whole house to ourselves, except for the cook. Mother and Dad have gone over to the club to help decorate it for the dance. Cook is a peach, and anything we might want to eat, she'll prepare it for us. You should taste her lemon meringue pies!"

"I'm glad she is here, because I'm hungry as the three bears put together," Nancy laughed. "And I shouldn't want just porridge, either. By the way, is there a telegraph office nearby, Helen?"

"Down in the village, next to the post office," Helen replied. "I'll show you the way." Although she was naturally a bit curious about Nancy's interest in a telegraph office, she did not question her friend about this new angle, knowing that her chum always had a definite and worth-while purpose in every maneuver she made.

"I can hardly wait to drive my new car again," Nancy said happily. "We'll go down right after luncheon. I surely do like the hum of the motor. Its rhythm is perfect."

She took five whole minutes to walk around the powerful black and green roadster when the girls were ready to leave, admiring its sleek lines and mirror-like finish. Then, settling back in the luxurious leather cushions with Helen beside her, she drove off.

It was less than half a mile to the village of Sylvan Lake. Arriving there, Nancy sent a long telegram to Mr. Jordan of the Pigeon Association, telling him exactly how to find the Tooker estate where the birds with the fraudulent registration numbers were employed to carry code messages. Then she telephoned to Dr. Spires, telling him of her conversation with Mrs. John Eldridge.

"Do you know of any sanatorium around here?" she asked him. "It may be that the aged lady is mentally unbalanced, which may explain the secrecy, although I doubt it. Personally, I believe that she is at the mercy of some crooks who are trying to inveigle her into turning over her money to them."

"There is no private sanatorium within thirty miles of here," Dr. Spires replied thoughtfully, "and I know the location of every one in the state. They must be licensed by law, you know. If there is such a place, it is not registered, and hence is illegal and will bear investigating."

"Then I am off on the trail to locate just such a place," Nancy announced determinedly. So, with the doctor's "Good luck to you, my dear" ringing in her ears, she rejoined Helen.

That young lady was sitting in the car blissfully enjoying the sensation of occupying the luxurious vehicle even while it was motionless. Helen loved comfort, and Nancy's car was the very acme of that particular quality.

“By the way, Helen, do you feel like taking a long ride?” Nancy asked her chum suddenly the light of adventure in her eyes. When Helen found Nancy smiling that way, she always knew that excitement of some sort was brewing.

“A long ride? There is no second guess,” Helen responded. “Make it just as long as you wish. I feel like Cinderella in her gilded coach after riding around in my little four-cylinder runabout. All we need now are some footmen in gold and white uniforms, with satin capes to throw upon the ground as we enter and leave. Oh, Nancy, sometimes I feel that I’m filled to the brim with adventure, and could just drive to the ends of the earth, stopping only five minutes at each town.”

After this romantic speech Helen sank even deeper into the cushions, a far-away look in her eyes.

Nancy smiled. “We are going exploring,” she said, adding mysteriously, “We are on the hunt for a place where the owners use singing horses—as a password, I mean!”

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE TRAIL

As the powerful motor hummed almost noiselessly along, Nancy explained her quest to Helen, who was thrilled beyond words to be associated once more with her clever chum in unraveling a mystery.

Nancy also told her why she believed the sanatorium, in which Mrs. Mary Eldridge was believed to be a prisoner, was located northwest of the Drew home.

"The Tooker estate, whatever its connection with the scheme of things, lies southeast of River Heights, and the pigeon and airplane both flew over our house. Therefore, the location of the other headquarters must be at a point of the compass opposite the southeast," she explained.

In accordance with that scheme, Nancy now chose roads which led north of River Heights. After about an hour's drive they came out onto a highway where the Blenheim homestead was located. The girls could see the lawns crowded with visitors, while in a meadow scores of automobiles were parked.

"What's going on there?" Helen asked.

"The annual charity flower show," Nancy replied. "I should like to see how my exhibit is taking—but I guess our search is more important."

Resolutely she headed the car in the opposite direction, and after driving about fifteen miles reached a section where the road narrowed and habitation ceased. The countryside was generously sprinkled with patches of woodland, with here and there open fields too stony to be tilled. After another three miles Nancy pulled the car up to the side of the road and stopped.

"As I figure it out," she said, "we are now on the enemy's border. I wish we had an airplane to get a bird's-eye view of the territory, but we shall have to do the best we can by poking around back roads."

"How could anyone live in such a place—even a crook!" exclaimed Helen. "One couldn't grow a thing to eat, and it's so far from any cities!"

"People who are dishonest always manage such things," said Nancy wisely. "This kind of woodland would be an ideal place in which to conceal someone."

She started the car again, and for an hour explored every side road. Most of these were merely lumber trails which ended a short distance from the highway. At other times she would find a cabin and inquire of the inhabitants whether there was a sanatorium in the neighborhood. The answer was always "No," and again Nancy would go on with the search.

"It is ten minutes past five," she observed presently, looking at the clock on the dashboard.

Both girls were tired out from the quest, their nerves tense with the strain of being constantly on the alert. Time and again a patch of blue in a distant garden raised their hopes that here was the clue of the larkspur. Yet on every occasion the house attached was so obviously the summer home of respectable people that the girls did not trouble themselves to make any inquiries in the neighborhood.

"The establishment we're looking for is well hidden," Nancy sighed, as the car came to the end of another narrow road. "Home we must go, Helen, to try again another day."

She turned the auto about, retraced her route to the main highway, and started in the direction where the Corning cottage was located. Helen leaned back and allowed the breeze to

sweep through her hair.

“It was a good start, though, Nancy,” the latter girl remarked. “Probably next time we hunt you’ll be able—oh!”

Nancy had pressed her right foot down hard upon the brake. The powerful hydraulic clamps had gripped the wheels so forcibly that the automobile had stopped in its tracks.

“Sorry to bump you,” Nancy said, “but we just passed a sign that I didn’t see when we drove past here before.”

She backed the car expertly a dozen feet, and brought it to a halt opposite a very narrow dirt road.

“This looks like all the rest of the trails,” Helen remarked. “You aren’t going to try it, are you?”

“Look at the sign,” Nancy pointed out.

Helen saw a crude, hand-lettered board nailed to a tree, which proclaimed, “L. S. Lane.”

“What about it?” Helen asked. “Evidently this leads to the cabin of a lumberman named Lane—L. S. Lane.”

“And on the other hand, perhaps this was put here to mean Larkspur Lane,” Nancy announced. “It is worth investigating, anyhow.”

With that she turned the auto into the narrow roadway. The lane proved to be wide enough for only one car, but as she drove on she found places where the side bank had been cut into to allow a vehicle to park while another passed it. Proceeding cautiously over the ruts and bumps, Nancy presently pulled into one of the wider places, stopping the machine close to the trees. The car was concealed from view except to someone who might be within twenty-five feet of it on the lane.

“If this is the right place, we had better not make our entrance in too obvious a manner,” she announced.

“What do you intend to do?” Helen asked.

“To walk from here—for a distance, at any rate.”

Pocketing the keys to the car, Nancy led the way through the trees paralleling the road. Helen followed silently. For nearly a quarter of a mile they trudged through the underbrush without seeing or hearing anything more than the crackle of broken twigs and the hum of disturbed insects. Suddenly Nancy halted.

“Look!” she cried. “It’s the place! I’m sure of it!”

Helen followed Nancy’s outthrust finger. A dozen yards ahead the trees ended at a high mesh fence. A small brown lodge stood at the entrance next to a barred gate. Inside the fence the ground rose steeply, with woods on one side and a large field on the other. A gravel roadway led to the top of the hill, where the roof of a large dwelling was barely visible.

“Why, the whole hillside is a mass of flowers,” Helen whispered. “How beautiful!”

“And the flowers are larkspurs!” Nancy said, a note of triumph in her voice. “Let us get a closer view.”

Cautiously as stalking Indians the girls advanced, taking advantage of every tree trunk and bush for concealment. They worked their way to the edge of the woods, where they crouched behind a clump of sumac and studied the scene.

There was no sign of any living thing. If any person were within the gatehouse, he was not to be seen at the moment.

Then suddenly there appeared for an instant in the distance near the brow of the hill a flash of white. Nancy grabbed Helen’s hand.

“Did you see it?” she whispered tensely. “I’m sure it was a nurse’s costume.”

“This *is* the place you have been looking for,” Helen answered excitedly. “Oh, isn’t this thrilling! Now what shall we do, Nancy?”

“I was just wondering,” her chum answered thoughtfully. “It’s dangerous business, I know. Listen! Do you hear an airplane?”

“Yes, plainly now,” Helen agreed. “Is it coming here?”

“Let’s wait a minute and find out.”

The aircraft was approaching from behind them. Several minutes passed before it became visible. Then it shot overhead, flying low.

“It is the same type of plane that wounded the bird,” she whispered quickly. “And it is like the one that flew into the Tooker estate, I am pretty sure,” she added. “Yes, there is that funny design on the side—an animal of some sort.”

“He is going past the place, though,” Helen said. “Now he is turning round—perhaps we aren’t at the right house after all.”

“I think he is heading into the wind to make a landing,” Nancy explained. “Sure enough. Down he goes. The landing field must be behind the house.”

The plane dipped low, side-slipped to lose altitude rapidly, and then vanished behind the roof of the mansion.

“Now what shall we do?” Helen asked.

“There is only one thing left for us to do,” Nancy observed.

“And that—?” inquired Helen.

“We must get inside somehow!”

CHAPTER XVII

RECESS

Nancy was aglow with concern. She believed she had at last found the place where Dr. Spires had been taken.

"I must find an excuse for entering this place."

"But Nancy, what could we find out at this hour?"

"I am sure we could learn plenty if we could only get in."

"And maybe never get out, like that poor Mrs. Eldridge," suggested Helen nervously, shaking her head. "No, Nancy," she concluded, "not this time. Let's come again."

"Oh, Helen," cried Nancy in dismay, "you wouldn't want to desert me now, would you?"

"Desert you!" gasped Helen, seizing her chum's hand affectionately.

"Well, it rather sounded as if you had that in mind," retorted her chum.

"No, I won't leave you, but neither will I let you stay."

"But Helen," sighed Nancy, "I have thought so much about finding out about this place, I just can't leave at the very beginning of a lot of important work."

"Of course you can," smiled Helen. "Tomorrow we shall have the whole day before us. Besides, we have promised to attend the big dance tonight. We'll keep everyone waiting if we don't start for my home at once."

Nancy wavered. She stared at her wrist watch. "It is late," she murmured softly.

Without further argument she turned back toward her hidden roadster, deep in thoughts of the search she planned for the morrow. Together the girls retraced their steps through the woods, noting their surroundings carefully.

Making sure that the narrow road was clear, Nancy turned her automobile into it and then sped toward the highway. Carefully she turned into the main road, and had gone only about a hundred yards, when suddenly a car appeared racing toward them. Nancy instinctively slackened her speed and lifted her left elbow to the window ledge, covering most of her face with her hand.

To the driver of the approaching car it appeared as if the two girls in the expensive new roadster were driving aimlessly at a mere twenty-five miles an hour. He gave them a sharp glance, however, as he whizzed by. Nancy's heart skipped a beat.

"That is one of the scoundrels!" she said to Helen. "Don't look back."

"Goodness gracious!" Helen cried. "How do you know?"

"He is the man who followed me in my other car, and threatened us after Dr. Spires had told us about his strange ride," Nancy explained. "My father knows him. He is Adam Thorne, a disbarred lawyer. He ran away after he was accused of stealing all the assets of an estate put under his care. I know the car, too, although the license plates have been changed and the top lowered. That is the automobile in which Dr. Spires was taken blindfolded for his ride."

Nancy followed the touring car with her eye. The lawyer reached the narrow road which led to Larkspur Lane and turned in without hesitation.

"That definitely connects him with this place," cried Nancy triumphantly. "The net is being drawn closer."

"It also means he knows the password," added Helen.

The remainder of the ride to Sylvan Lake was without further adventure, and at seven o'clock the girls, tired and dusty, mounted the steps of the Corning home, ravenously hungry.

"You are late," Mrs. Corning said. "We are having dinner early on account of the dance."

"Then we will just wash our faces and hands and dress up later," Helen replied.

Nancy, apologizing to her hostess for having delayed the meal, hurriedly brushed her hair.

As soon as dinner was over, the girls dashed into their rooms to dress. Nancy bathed while Helen curled her hair.

"You are lucky to have such a nice, natural wave," the latter said, admiring her chum.

Nancy laughed. "I doubt if Adam Thorne likes anything about it."

"I just hated the looks of that man. Let's think about something pleasant."

The girls accordingly enjoyed themselves by admiring each other's dainty lingerie, choosing the stockings which would best match slippers and frocks, and so for a time forgot the mystery. Helen was in ecstasies over Nancy's powder blue evening gown, which made her look like a quaint little princess. Nancy was as sincerely complimentary of Helen's rose-colored frock with its deep yoke and bertha of hand-made lace.

"In other words, we are going to be the belles of the ball," Helen laughed.

Mrs. Corning knocked at the door to announce the arrival of the girls' escorts. Ned Nickerson and Buck Rodman, deeply tanned, were dapper in their white flannels and blue coats.

"My, you surely look beautiful," Buck gulped as the girls appeared arm in arm.

"I see where we get cut in on half a minute after each dance begins," Ned groaned.

"Nancy, promise me at least two whole dances."

"I promise," she laughed.

The four friends started for the Yacht Club a few hundred yards distant, its gayly lighted porch and lawn visible through the pines. It was a gay scene which the quartet approached.

"Doesn't it look attractive?" asked Ned.

"It certainly does," agreed Nancy.

"I feel just like dancing," announced Buck, doing a few fancy steps.

Helen laughed at his capers. "I hope you don't trip," she teased.

"Nothing like that, young lady. There is a time and a place for a trip, but that is not here. I've come to stay!"

An orchestra of college youths was doing its best with violins, banjos, drums, and saxophones.

As Ned had prophesied, he and Nancy had scarcely encircled the floor before two young men made a dash for the couple. The winner of the race tapped Ned on the shoulder.

"May I cut in, please?"

"You pirate," Ned snorted. Then, recovering himself, he said graciously: "Nancy, may I present Mr. Hopkins?"

He then withdrew to the side lines with the purpose of recapturing Nancy at the first opportunity.

The night was cool, the music was beautiful, and Nancy enjoyed herself thoroughly. At eleven o'clock the orchestra struck up a march, and the couples lined up for supper, which was served on several of the members' yachts moored to the club dock. The boats' masts were strung with pennants and Chinese lanterns. As the craft rocked at their moorings, the gay throng swarmed over deck and through cabin, looking for places where they might sit down.

Ned led Nancy to the bow of the flagship, where they might have some measure of privacy while enjoying the food.

"It's a grand night," Nancy said, gazing at the stars.

"You bet," agreed Ned. "I guess it will be clear tomorrow."

Nancy was thinking of her plan for the next day. Driving out to Larkspur Lane required pleasant weather.

"Some affair," continued Ned, counting the lanterns between bites of cake.

"It is a gloriously successful party," Nancy remarked. "The music is unusually good."

"Pretty good considering," Ned grinned. "The tenor saxophone and the trap drummer are from State and the rest of the bunch from Emerson, so it won't surprise me if there might be some discord before the evening is over."

Ned was very much interested in what Nancy was doing these days, and she told him a few points about the mystery which was engaging her attention. Before the evening was over, she went into some detail over the discovery of the house among the larkspurs that afternoon, concluding her story with her announced determination of exploring the grounds.

"Oh, Nancy, please be careful," Ned pleaded. "You don't know what risks you are taking. The gang is so desperately determined to keep its hide-outs and communications secret, that it proves the men will stop at nothing to prevent exposure."

"Ned, you know very well I can take excellent care of myself," Nancy chided. "I don't say, though, that I can do it all single-handed. I may have to call on you for help. I certainly shall not let all that I have learned about the criminals go to waste."

"Let me go with you when you explore the grounds of this floral den," Ned urged. "I can get away from the camp easily enough."

"You may be of greater help in the reserve line of attack, as they say in the army," Nancy replied.

"Anything you ask me to do shall be done, you know that," Ned assured her earnestly. "Only take good care of yourself. If anything were to happen to you——"

The youth clenched his hands and looked stern. As Nancy regarded his splendid physique, she mentally pitied anyone who challenged Ned Nickerson to a fight.

A Paul Jones was just then announced from the porch of the club. From that time until the band played "Home, Sweet Home," there was a continuous round of merriment.

"Having a good time?" called Buck to Nancy on one occasion.

"I certainly am."

"I am going to have the clocks turned back," declared Buck.

There was a general laugh at this remark.

"I believe Buck would dance all night," exclaimed Helen.

Later, good nights were exchanged. Nancy and Helen, tired but happy, tumbled into their beds, to fall instantly asleep after a most enjoyable evening.

They awoke next morning to find the sun high in the sky, long past the normal breakfast hour.

"I had a weird dream last night, Helen," laughed Nancy.

"Too much party?"

"Well, I dreamed I had to solve the secret of a strange password in order to get into a private dance at a lunatic asylum."

"Nancy Drew, what a dream!" laughed her chum.

Just then the cook appeared.

“Miss Helen, de missus done tole me to let you gals sleep,” she grinned. “She an’ de master, dey done gone fo’ de day. Dey say dey be back after supper, but on no ’count to break yo’ slumbers, c’ase yo’ wore out yo’ shoes last night.”

The luxury of breakfast in bed was accorded Helen and Nancy by the genial black cook, and over cocoa, rolls, and fluffy scrambled eggs, Nancy pondered over what use to make of the day. She had a plan in her mind which she hoped to work out. Mr. and Mrs. Corning were not there to be consulted. Would her hosts object to it?

Perhaps—perhaps not. However——

“Helen,” Nancy asked, “are you ready for a real adventure?”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MATCHING NECKLACE

“Real adventure?” Helen echoed. “Say, that’s second nature with me.”

She threw back the covers of the bed and began dressing rapidly.

“Hurry up, Nancy,” she cried gayly. “Lead me to this adventure. What are we to do? Advance in full force on the enemy?”

“Exactly,” Nancy replied, pulling on her stockings. “Rough and ready hiking clothes, Captain Corning. We are going to use strategy, but not charm, so put that frilly frock away.”

Keenly excited, the girls scampered down to the garage and climbed into Nancy’s car. They drove to the village gasoline station to have the tank filled and the oil and water checked, then pointed the nose of the machine north by west.

“On your guard, Larkspurs,” Nancy cried.

Knowing her destination in advance, Nancy was able to make good time to the spot where the sign “L. S. Lane” marked the establishment of the battle lines.

“From now on,” she told her companion, “caution must be *our* password. We must see as much as possible without being seen.”

Not venturing to enter the lane for fear of being detected and watched, Nancy drove past the half-concealed road and into a woods, Helen assisting by letting down the bars of an old-fashioned fence around the grounds. Nancy concealed the automobile as best she could by driving it close to the thickest part of the forest where a tangle of creeper and bittersweet covered it.

“No one will notice it here,” she said. “Now let’s strike across this place to the woods ahead and see how close we can come to the house without using the lane.”

Cautiously the girls worked their way over bramble and bush until the roof of the gatehouse came into view. They were on the opposite side of the road from their vantage point of the day before, and had a better view of the lodge which guarded the entrance to the grounds. A high wire mesh gate blocked the way. Tilted back in a chair against the gatepost was a man who Nancy assumed was the keeper. At his feet was a brindled Great Dane dog, its tongue lolling and its eyes alert.

“Let us hope he doesn’t scent us,” Nancy whispered. “I guess there is no getting by in that direction.”

She led the way to the right, still well within the trees, always keeping the tall fence in view. After about a quarter of a mile of rough going the inclosure turned at right angles and continued in a straight line. No path or road followed the fence line here. Tall trees were on all sides.

“Ugh, it’s rough traveling,” Helen shuddered. “I’m afraid of snakes.”

“You wait here for me,” Nancy said. “I shall be back, regardless of whether or not I find a way over inside the grounds, and report to you.”

“I certainly will not stay here without someone else,” Helen retorted. “In the first place, I shouldn’t think of letting you go on alone, and in the second place I should be scared to death by myself.”

Swallowing her fears, Helen followed Nancy through tangled undergrowth as she went along the property line over the hill. At one point they came to a place where a particularly

heavy clump of trees concealed the house and grounds. Nancy called a halt for rest and consultation, so the two girls sat down.

“This would not be a good spot to climb the fence,” Helen observed, leaning back on her elbows. “You’d rip your skirt on that barb wire.”

Nancy looked at Helen in surprise.

“Don’t you see?” she asked, pointing to the top of the inclosure.

“I see a fence and two strands of barb wire on the outside, near the top,” Helen replied. “Is there anything else?”

“Notice how the wire is fastened.”

“Surely, on little china knobs. What has that to do with it?” Helen inquired.

“Those china knobs are insulators. That means that the top wire is charged with electricity,” Nancy informed her. “If you touch one wire, it will probably set off an alarm, and if you press two at once—and you could not avoid doing that in climbing over—you would probably be killed by an electric shock.”

Helen gave a low whistle.

“It’s a regular fort, isn’t it?” she commented. “Yet how peaceful it all looks.”

Through the meshes of the wire the girls could see the flower-covered hillside, occasional clumps of trees, and a view of the rear of the gatehouse. It was truly a lovely spot, and had it not been for the sinister strands of charged wire, would have been a welcoming garden.

“Rested?” Nancy asked. “Let’s go.”

Since they were now approaching the house, the girls moved even more warily. Grass seed and pollen powdered their hair and faces. Bees and wasps grumbled with mock menace at the intruders. Helen stepped gingerly, afraid of putting her foot down on a snake.

“It would be just like those people to let a couple of thousand rattlesnakes and copperheads loose around here,” she shuddered. “Ugh, I think I stepped on something alive,” she cried suddenly, trying to choke back her exclamation of horror.

She side-stepped, then fell to the ground, her hands pressed to her mouth to throttle a scream of pain and terror.

“Helen, what happened?” Nancy whispered excitedly, turning back to her chum.

It flashed through her mind that steel traps might have been scattered through the grass. However, her worst fears had not been realized, though the situation was bad enough.

“I stepped into a hole, and I think—I think my ankle is sprained,” Helen said, her face white.

Nancy’s heart sank. If either of them should become helplessly injured, detection would certainly follow.

She knelt beside her companion, and with expert fingers felt the injured ankle, wishing that Dr. Spires might be with them now. A decided lump appeared on Helen’s instep, and the girl winced when Nancy touched it.

“Lie back and I’ll take off your shoe and stocking,” Nancy directed under her breath, striving to be as businesslike as the bone specialist. She quickly bared Helen’s foot, and probed around the injury again.

“Nothing broken,” she announced. “In my opinion it isn’t even a sprain. Probably you danced so much last night that you stretched a ligament which has jumped out of place. I think I can fix it. It is going to hurt, Helen, but after the first jolt I am sure the pain will go.”

Nancy took Helen’s heel firmly in one hand and her toes in the other. Then she bent the girl’s foot as if striving to make toes and heel touch. A moan escaped Helen’s lips, and a pang

of pity went through Nancy at the thought of the pain to which she was subjecting her friend. Resolutely, however, she continued with her operation.

The foot bent until the straining tendons showed under the delicate skin. Nancy suddenly wrenched the fore part abruptly to left and right. With a tiny audible snap the misplaced tendon jumped into place, and the girl released her hold on Helen's foot.

"That—that feels better," Helen said, sitting up and rubbing her injured member. "I didn't know you had added doctoring to your other accomplishments, though. Is there anything you don't know something about, Nancy?"

"Why, this is just simple first aid I learned at camp when I was a child," Nancy replied. "I had the same thing happen to me once, so I got a first-hand demonstration of the remedy. Try standing on the foot."

Helen did so, and reported that, except for "a queer sort of rubbing feeling," she experienced no bad sensation.

"I thought for a moment you had been bitten by a rattlesnake, Helen."

"Dear me, that would have been awful."

"Pretty bad," agreed her chum, "especially way out here in this lonely place."

"I guess we can't be too careful."

The girls resumed their cautious advance over the brow of the hill, Helen's ankle now feeling very much better. They had a full view of that part of the grounds that had before been hidden from them.

Sloping from the front and rear of the house was a wide lawn with gravel walks and flower beds, making another charming picture of rural beauty. The house was set in the center and had a broad veranda shaded by tall trees. At the foot of the lawn, and at the rear, was a wide, grassy space which Nancy surmised was used as a landing field for the airplane. At this time the aircraft was not in sight.

Trees of every description surrounded the place. The lonesomeness of it all was appalling. The charged wire fence made it more private than ever.

"They don't want strangers to come here, that's plain," grumbled Helen, surveying the scene.

Just below the brow of the hill, and connected with the house by a long arbor, was a group of outbuildings, a carriage shed evidently converted into a garage, a good-sized barn, and a chicken yard.

"Listen," Nancy said, raising a finger.

The cooing of pigeons came distinctly to the ears of the girls.

"Pigeons!" exclaimed Helen.

Nancy resumed the advance until they were behind the garage, which was windowless on their side. Here they rested in the shade until aroused by the sound of a voice and a fluttering of wings.

"Come here, you," the listeners heard through the wooden walls. "I guess you are able to work again."

There was a frightened "coo-coo-oo." Then the voice spoke again.

"Now then, let's see if you can get to the Chief's place this time without taking a couple of days to do it, and arriving there lame at that," the unseen man said. "Remember, you are going to Tookers' and not to Drews', you half-witted barnyard goose, you."

A door closed. Nancy strained her eyes upward, watching patiently. What she expected soon came to view—a pigeon that soared in wide circles and then headed in a bee line south

by east!

“There goes my feathered friend the pigeon,” she whispered to Helen.

“Did you hear what that man said?” Helen asked with a catch in her voice. “He mentioned your name!”

“Yes, thanks to Effie’s gullibility they learned I had their pigeon captive,” Nancy said. “If Tommy had not let the bird loose, I should have put the message back under its wing. These birds fly between here and the Tooker place with secret messages, I believe.”

The girls’ progress was continued. Once past the outbuildings, they saw what had been concealed from view by the barn and garage—a grassy court around a lichen-covered sundial in which stood a number of wheel chairs, each occupied by a white-haired old lady. A glance at the veranda, now visible in its entirety, showed steamer chairs and a couple of cots in the shade. Some of them were occupied.

A woman in a nurse’s uniform had her back to the girls. She seemed to be administering to one of the elderly women.

“It looks like a sanatorium, sure enough,” Helen observed cautiously. “It can’t be a deception, Nancy. Perhaps your suspicions are all wrong.”

Nancy put her fingers to her lips. The nurse turned and walked toward the fence, revealing to the hidden observers a full view of her face.

“Helen, look!” whispered Nancy. “That nurse is the same woman that stole my purse!”

“The one who took the bracelet?”

“Yes, the very same pickpocket.”

“But she is apparently a nurse up here,” advised Helen, noting the woman’s stiffly starched uniform.

“She is in league with the lawyer and Tooker, I feel sure.”

“Nancy, you are the cleverest girl there ever was,” said Helen admiringly.

“I believe Mrs. Eldridge is one of those old ladies over there,” went on Nancy.

The girls ceased whispering, and tensely watched the nurse pass from one patient to another. Finally she walked from the porch to a corner of the grounds near the fence. She stooped to regard a woman reclining in a chair close to the wire barrier. For a moment she watched the dozing patient closely, then sat down on a steamer rug spread on the lawn. Presently she opened a book and began to read.

“What shall we do next, Nancy?” asked Helen nervously.

“I wish I could see better.”

“Oh! It is so risky to move.”

“I know, but——”

“Suppose we were trapped. I’d die,” whispered Helen tremulously.

“I *must* see that old lady.”

“Oh, Nancy, please don’t—do anything you——”

“Sh,” murmured the determined girl. “I must move forward.”

Boldly Nancy crept close to that section of the fence where the sleeping woman sat, and almost gasped aloud as she saw that the elderly lady wore a heavy necklace which exactly matched the strange bracelet.

Could this be Mrs. Eldridge?

CHAPTER XIX

THE CAPTIVES

Nancy wriggled back through the weeds and reported her findings to Helen, who became highly excited.

“We must find a way to talk to the old lady,” Nancy said emphatically, as she sprawled at full length, face downward, in the dusty grass, her chin on her clasped hands.

“I know how,” Helen suggested. “I’ll go back there in the woods and scream. The nurse will probably run out to see what the trouble is and you can talk to Mrs. Eldridge—if it is she.”

Nancy shook her head.

“In the first place, the risk is too great,” she said. “You would be caught, and they probably would not stop short of torturing you to find out what you were doing screaming in the woods. In the second place, they will very likely rush the old ladies into the house at the first alarm.”

“I give up, then,” Helen said. “I see that you are right, but I haven’t any other suggestion to offer.”

“Sh-sh, something is happening,” Nancy whispered, edging cautiously toward the fence.

The old lady had awakened, and for a moment sat up straight, looking eagerly about her.

“Oh, dear,” she called out, “I thought—I guess I dreamed I was——”

Her withered chin twitched, and she leaned back with closed eyes. Tears crept from under her lids. Nancy could see with a tug at her own heart that the old woman was crying bitterly, though fighting all the while to control herself.

As a sob escaped the elderly patient, the nurse looked up from her book.

“Come, come now, stop that weeping,” she commanded sharply.

The lady in the wheel chair only shook her head weakly, pressing her lips tightly together. The tears continued to ooze from under her closed eyes, trickling down her white and wrinkled cheeks and falling on the knitted jacket which she wore.

“If you act like a baby, you will have to be treated like one,” the nurse said unkindly. “Stop that bawling, now! I’m warning you.”

“Oh, please——”

The old lady lifted a fragile, blue-veined hand in protest, but let it drop limply into her lap again.

“Very well, then, you shall sit with your face away from the house, and I will report to the doctor that you were stubborn again,” the nurse announced.

She arose, moved the wheel chair around with a jerk, and pushed it straight in Nancy’s direction. The foot rest banged against the fence. Nancy cowered to the ground, praying that she would not be detected. However, the nurse was so absorbed in bullying her patient that she saw nothing.

“Now, Mistress Contrary, you may sit there for half an hour,” she snapped. “Lucky for you I am tender-hearted, or I would take some of your privileges away from you.”

The old lady sat with closed eyes, facing the two girls, while the nurse seated herself on the lawn and again resumed her reading.

“Isn’t this provoking?” Nancy whispered to Helen. “Here we can practically touch the old lady, yet we might as well be a hundred miles away from her for all the good it does.”

“I wonder why all these patients are in here,” Helen murmured. “It makes my flesh creep. Are they prisoners? They really seem to be hypnotized, they sit so quietly.”

Suddenly a flash of blue appeared across the lawn, and a young woman in a striped gingham dress and white apron, such as student nurses wear, appeared.

“Miss Tyson,” she said in a respectful tone to the attendant who was reading, “will you step into the office a moment?”

The nurse looked up and shut her book with a snap.

“Very well,” she replied. “I will be there right away.”

As the young woman left, Miss Tyson turned to the patient in the wheel chair, shaking her roughly by the shoulder.

“See here, you, I must go away for a few minutes,” she said. “Don’t you dare move, or you will have another heart attack, do you hear? We know what is best for you. You sit quietly, and no more attempts to hide in the grounds, or else——”

She left the threat unfinished, and strode briskly toward the house.

“Now is our chance,” Nancy breathed.

Worming her way to the edge of the woods she called in a low tone:

“Mrs. Eldridge! Are you Mrs. Eldridge?”

The old lady’s eyes snapped open and she looked wildly about her.

“Here I am on the other side of the fence, behind the trees,” Nancy said. “Listen closely to what I say. If you are in trouble, I will bring you help.”

“How do you know my name? Who are you? I I can’t see very well,” Mrs. Eldridge whispered.

Nancy became braver and stepped out.

“We recognized you by the necklace which matches your bracelet,” Nancy said hurriedly. “I have your bracelet. I am Nancy Drew of River Heights and my chum, Helen Corning, is with me. We came to give you assistance, but we must stay hidden. Your nephew is nearby, searching for you. Little Marie is eager to see you.”

Mrs. Eldridge clasped her thin hands, then raised them tremblingly into the air.

“Heaven bless you,” she quavered, “but I am afraid you can do nothing. The fence is charged with electricity, the grounds are guarded by dogs and armed men, and I am lost—lost.”

Then suddenly a steely glint came into her brave old eyes, and she demanded to know if this were a trick.

“No one wants to help me,” she said with spirit. “Everyone is trying to drive me insane, to kill me, to steal my money. How did you get my bracelet? It was taken from me inside these grounds.”

“You hurt yourself badly, and a friend of mine who is a doctor was brought here blindfolded to cure you,” Nancy whispered rapidly. “He took the bracelet and we traced your name through the coat of arms on it.”

“I hope you are speaking the truth. Surely you would not deceive an old woman who has not long to live,” Mrs. Eldridge sighed. “How can you help me? I can suggest nothing, for I am trapped.”

“We can, though,” said Nancy, speaking with more confidence than she felt. “We will land in an airplane.”

“Don’t, don’t,” Mrs. Eldridge moaned. “We have been warned that if strangers enter here, we will be shut up underground and left there.”

“How brutal!” Nancy exclaimed. “We will find a way, nevertheless. Be brave. I have a plan.”

Suddenly a man, striding from the sanatorium porch, came directly toward the old lady.

“Hush, here comes Dr. Bull,” Mrs. Eldridge warned. “If he finds you, he will torture us all to find out why you are here.”

The girls withdrew to a safe distance. Through the wire fence they could see a tall man of about forty-five approaching Mrs. Eldridge. He was very distinguished looking in a frock coat and striped trousers, white spats, and eyeglasses on a black ribbon. He was almost bald, and wore a pointed beard and heavy brown mustache.

He spoke soothingly to the old woman, in tones that were honeyed to the point of being repellent.

“Well, well, what has upset our dear patient?” he asked, bending over Mrs. Eldridge and gallantly kissing her hand. “I am afraid you fret too much. However, I must tell Miss Tyson to be less strict with our favorite guest. I am afraid she is too professional in her manner. Shall I call Luther and have him wheel you through the garden later?”

“No, just let me alone,” Mrs. Eldridge sighed. “Please go away.”

“Yes, that is what you need—rest and quiet,” Dr. Bull agreed.

Nancy and Helen were puzzled at the man’s acquiescence. He seemed genuinely trying to please the old lady.

“However,” Dr. Bull went on, “we must talk business, Mrs. Eldridge. You realize how poor the state of your health is. Shall we get over that little matter of signing the transfer papers now? Then your mind will be at ease, and you can enjoy your stay here.”

“Your proposition is nothing short of robbery, and I will not consent,” Mrs. Eldridge replied, sitting bolt upright, her cheeks taking on a flush of pink.

“Dear me, how harsh you are,” Dr. Bull said soothingly. “When you came here, you had every confidence in me, did you not? You know you entered this place of your own accord. You did not give your relatives any idea as to where you were going. Didn’t you agree to that as part of your treatment?”

“Fool that I was, yes,” snapped Mrs. Eldridge. “I am willing to pay you a reasonable amount for board and medicine for the time I have spent here, and I demand that you let me leave after that.”

“We can’t do that,” Dr. Bull said. “It would cast discredit on our sanatorium to have a person leave in a poor state of health. Come now, Mrs. Eldridge; I have your signed declaration that you are a patient here of your own accord, and that you agree to remain here as long as I think necessary. It is my opinion, after having studied your case, that it would be fatal for you to move ten miles away from here. The slightest overexertion will mean your death. You have no cares or worries here, but are getting good food, luxurious quarters, and personal attention. Isn’t it only fair, then, that you do as I ask?”

Mrs. Eldridge glanced quickly toward the woods where Nancy and Helen lay concealed in the heavy undergrowth behind the rocks. Nancy was now certain that “Dr. Bull” was a smooth sort of villain, all the more sinister because of his polished and suave manner. She caught the searching glance Mrs. Eldridge threw in her direction, and surmised that the woman’s next words would be uttered for her benefit.

“Dr. Bull,” Mrs. Eldridge said in a clear, loud voice, “you wish me to sign over to you many thousands of dollars, in addition to the three thousand I have paid you, in exchange for lifetime care here, do you not?”

“Don’t speak so loudly,” Dr. Bull said irritably, forgetting his assumed manner. “There are other women here whom I have charged more,” he added in a gentler tone. “That is why I do not wish us to be overheard.”

“Well, I suppose that once the papers are signed, I won’t live very long,” the old lady said meaningfully.

“You may live twenty years, with proper care,” Dr. Bull replied. “Then you will have the satisfaction of having lived like a queen for less than one thousand dollars a year.”

“I’d rather live like a rag picker and be out of here,” Mrs. Eldridge said, closing her eyes. “I won’t sign a thing. If you should kill me, you won’t get a cent. That’s all I have to say. I wish you would go, as I am very tired.”

Nancy saw the doctor’s face turn red. His beard seemed to bristle, and his eyes snapped with rage.

“You’ll sing a different tune if you don’t do as I say,” he fumed. “I’ve wasted enough time on you. You’ll do my bidding if you know what is best for you. Look at these old ladies around you. They are docile and quiet, aren’t they? They seem to be satisfied, don’t they? Well, you will be, too. Some of them didn’t agree at first with my plans for them. Look at them now, Mrs. Eldridge!

“Listen carefully. I will give you until six o’clock tonight to come to your senses. I am not the sole owner of this establishment. I have partners who are heavily involved financially, and they are not as soft-hearted as I am. They want cash. Six o’clock, do you hear?”

“Oh, somebody please save me from this brute,” Mrs. Eldridge cried. “If only some good angel would come to my little room in the south corner on the third floor and rescue me!”

“Say, what are you talking about?” Dr. Bull asked, looking about him suspiciously. “Do you think any angel or fairy is listening to your careful directions?”

Nancy suppressed a smile.

He turned and shouted, “Luther!” A man in a white uniform appeared in response to his call.

“Take Mrs. Eldridge to the porch!” the doctor snapped. “Any word about the new patient?”

“A message arrived by X that she will be here about six,” the attendant said with a wink, as he wheeled Mrs. Eldridge away.

As he turned Mrs. Eldridge about, she leaned a trifle from her chair.

“Oh, wait,” she begged.

Nancy believed she was trying to signal to them.

“What’s the matter?” asked the white-jacketed attendant, pausing.

“I dropped my handkerchief.” This was true. Luther bent over to pick up the lost article.

In that split second Mrs. Eldridge waved to the girls hidden behind the rocks. It was such a pathetic gesture that it made tears come to the watchers’ eyes. Nancy was the first to recover herself. Helen wept silently and unashamed.

“We must save that dear old lady, and we shall have to move quickly to do it,” Nancy, drying her eyes, whispered to her chum. “And Mrs. Eldridge certainly gave us a good clue when she mentioned the location of her room!”

CHAPTER XX

THE PASSWORD

Helen followed Nancy along the route they had taken to the hiding place, her heart thumping madly with excitement. She did not venture to question her chum, whose face was set in determined lines. Not until the girls were once more safe in the car did she ask her chum about her plans.

"I'm still making them," Nancy answered. "I don't know just what to do, but we must get that poor old lady out of the clutches of that unscrupulous villain before he takes advantage of her any more. It is just a scheme to wheedle unsuspecting old souls by a group of heartless scoundrels. If I can do it, I will free all those other poor women, too."

"It sounds like a big order," Helen sighed. "But Nancy, you are so brave and capable."

Nancy made no reply.

Helen noticed her friend turn in the opposite direction from home, and exclaimed:

"You are going the wrong way! We'll get lost!"

"No, I am not," Nancy said tensely. "Helen, you certainly spoke the truth when you said this was a big order to fill. That establishment seems to be guarded against any kind of an attack. I believe the doctor is capable of thrusting the old women into underground cells if the place were entered by the police. They are prepared for everything in there—except strategy."

Helen wisely left Nancy to her own thoughts, waiting meekly in the car when her friend stopped in a little village and entered a drug store. She remained there for nearly twenty minutes, while Helen fidgeted, wondering why her companion did not return, and fearing that something might have happened to her.

Finally Nancy appeared, and walked over to Helen's side of the car.

"I telephoned my home, Helen, but Father is not there yet, so then I called the camp and told Ned Nickerson something of what I had in mind," Nancy smiled. "He didn't agree with my plan at all, yet what can he do about changing it? Now, I'll need your assistance more than I can possibly tell you."

Glad to be active once more, Helen climbed out of the car with alacrity.

"What can I do?" she asked, walking beside her friend, who was striding toward a country department store. Nancy was so engrossed in her plans that she did not answer, so Helen resigned herself to silence.

Entering the store, Nancy asked to be directed to the shoe department, and walked quickly to the rear of the establishment.

"And now, what can I do for you?" inquired the saleswoman. "It's a warm day, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," said both girls, though their thoughts were not upon the weather.

"I'd like to see some high kid shoes with round toes," Nancy said. "My size."

"All we have are black, just for old ladies," the clerk said timidly.

"That is what I want," Nancy said briskly. "My size is 4A. And I'm in a hurry."

When the shoes were produced, Helen thought she had never before seen a more unattractive pair. Nevertheless, they fitted Nancy, so she asked to have them wrapped up. She next went over to the millinery department.

"I want a small black hat with a heavy veil—a widow's bonnet," she told the clerk, who seemed astounded at such a strange order for one of Nancy's age. "Have you them in stock?"

“Yes, we have a very complete line of millinery, just like you would find in a big department store,” the saleswoman said with pride. “Are you buying something for your grandmother?”

“No,” Nancy replied without explaining her strange mission to the inquisitive saleswoman. “Here, this hat will do. Now, I want an inexpensive long black coat.”

Presently Nancy was slipping into a full-length wrap of black linen, which was much too big for her, but which she said she would buy.

Helen was growing more mystified as each purchase was made. What could her chum be up to now? What new move was she contemplating making?

“Well,” said Helen to herself, “Nancy always knows what is best, anyway, so I’ll just try my hardest to help her in whatever way I can to see this plan work out.”

Nancy’s next remark caused her to catch her breath.

“Have you nurses’ uniforms?”

“Yes, miss, I’ll get some. To fit you?”

“No, to fit this young lady,” indicating Helen.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” was all Helen could say, then checked herself. “Nancy knows what she is about,” was her inward thought.

“About a size sixteen? Just a minute.”

As the woman went to another section of the store, Helen turned to Nancy.

“I can’t keep quiet another second,” she burst out. “Why on earth are you buying all these crazy things? You in those funny high shoes, and a hat with a veil—and I in a nurse’s uniform?”

Both girls relaxed and allowed themselves to indulge in a hearty laugh. Then Nancy put her arm around Helen and hugged her impulsively.

“You have been a good sport to bear with my whims so patiently,” she said. “Now I am going to ask you to do something that will take a lot of courage.”

“You asked me this morning if I was ready for a real adventure, and I said I was,” Helen vouchsafed, returning the hug. “Now, I want you to tell me the whole story.”

“I am going to dress up like an old lady, and you as a nurse.”

“What for?” cried Helen excitedly.

“We are going to try to get inside the gates of the fraudulent sanatorium!” Nancy announced.

“But they’ll stop us! They’ll never let us in there!”

“Do you recall that Dr. Bull said a new patient would arrive about six o’clock? I shall pretend I’m that patient!”

Helen was aghast at the bold plan, but her exclamations were silenced by the arrival of the saleswoman with several uniforms. Nancy helped Helen select a typical nurse’s costume, similar to the one worn by the attendants at Larkspur Lane.

“How much will it be?” she asked. “Don’t bother wrapping the things.”

“It comes to—let me see now—nineteen dollars and ninety-eight cents,” the woman replied. Nancy took a twenty-dollar bill from her purse and gathered up the purchases.

Back in the car once more, she noted that it was close to five-thirty. The sun had set behind the bluffs in the west. Although there would be another full hour of twilight, she was thankful for the added protection the dusk would afford.

Once again she drove to the spot where the car had stood concealed and told Helen to don the uniform. Her chum obediently discarded her skirt and blouse and put on the starched white

raiment, while Nancy swathed herself in gloomy black.

"You asked me if I wanted a real adventure," Helen said. "Well, I guess I'm going to get it."

"You know I always try to keep a promise," said Nancy, laughing.

"You look just like an old daguerreotype," Helen exclaimed, after Nancy had put on the clothes meant for an elderly woman. "Let me tuck up your hair in the back. I shouldn't know you from somebody's grandmother! What are we to do next?"

"Now comes the test," Nancy announced somewhat grimly. "We are going to drive up to the gatehouse and give the *password*."

It was a hazardous scheme, but the girls felt that no time should be lost if they were to carry it out as successfully as they hoped.

"You are to do the driving," Nancy continued. "You will give the password and drive on through. Then you will wait with the car at the back of the house. I shall find Mrs. Eldridge, get her to change clothes with me, and bring her to the car."

"But I'll be left alone," Helen exclaimed, almost on the verge of tears. "I'm afraid, and I don't want you to go alone into that place either," she sobbed. "If the owners discover you there, Nancy, they will kill you!"

"Don't worry about me," Nancy urged. "I shall take good care of myself. Helen, this is our only chance. Please say you will do it."

"It's so lonely here, and spooky——"

"Now, it isn't a bit spooky," chided Nancy. "You only think so, when in reality it is a most beautiful and attractively kept up place."

"Well, I bet it is when it is dark."

"Nonsense."

"I wish I had phoned to Buck to meet us."

"Oh, do brace up. We must do this thing for Mrs. Eldridge!"

Helen could not refrain from weeping a little, as the mingled emotions of trying to please her chum and at the same time save her from harm strained her nerves almost to the breaking point. The plan seemed foolhardy to her, and she did not hesitate to say so.

"Very well," Nancy said, drooping with disappointment, and sitting heavily on the running board of the car. "Think of what will become of Mrs. Eldridge and all the other old ladies that are counting on us to release them, and bring them back to their people and homes again. Helen, put yourself in the place of one of them!"

Immediately Helen changed her mind, and with a brave smile and a tilt of her chin, she cried:

"I'll do it!"

A sudden rush of pity for the hypnotized old women surged over her, and again she reiterated:

"I'll do it, Nancy!"

"Oh, Helen!" her chum cried, leaping to her feet. "I knew you wouldn't fail me. Hop in behind the wheel, and we'll drive up in style. Don't forget to give the password 'Singing Horses' when the guard stops us at the gate. That's all—not another word need be said. If he questions you, say to him that you were told to give that countersign and to discuss nothing further in the presence of the patient."

Helen heaved a sigh.

"All right, I'll do my best, but don't scold me if I fail."

“You won’t fail,” exclaimed Nancy confidently. “*Fail!* Why, nothing is going to stop *us!*”

At these encouraging words Helen brightened up considerably.

“Now let’s go on,” continued Nancy.

Thereupon she huddled herself in the seat, her chin on her chest, her hands clasped together. Helen drove up the narrow road, muttering to herself “Singing Horses,” the password to Larkspur Lane.

“Here we are!” she exclaimed nervously, as the gatehouse came into view, an electric lamp burning over the closed entrance. “I hope I can go through with everything!”

“Courage, Helen. Speak the password bravely,” whispered Nancy, as they moved forward.

As she halted the car in front of the gates, the watchman appeared and chained his Great Dane securely.

“Quiet, Tiger! Down!” he roared.

The monstrous dog strained at his leash and barked furiously. His master advanced toward the girls, peering intently at them.

“Would he permit them to enter? Did they really know the password?” wondered Nancy fearfully.

“What’s the good word?” demanded the watchman hoarsely, stepping closer.

“Singing Horses,” Helen whispered, inwardly quaking. “Singing Horses!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE SECRET ENTRANCE

“Singing Horses,” repeated the guard. “Right ye are.”

Striding up to the gates, he opened them wide. Helen guided the car between the posts and then the portals clanged shut.

The password had permitted them to enter!

Both girls heaved deep sighs of relief as they sped up the flower-bordered lane. Halfway up the gravel drive, Nancy spoke.

“Stop!” she whispered. “No one can see us from the house yet, and the lodge is concealed by those shrubs.”

Helen brought the car to a halt, awaiting her chum’s next orders.

“What shall I do now?” she asked timidly.

Nancy scanned the scene about her.

“I’m glad Father gave me a dark-colored car, not a bright yellow one,” she mused. “It will be much easier to conceal.”

“Oh, Nancy, you do think of the greatest details,” exclaimed her chum, “especially when you are running down clues.”

“I have to, Helen.”

“Wouldn’t it be dreadful if those scoundrels should seize this handsome car, and turn it to their own use?”

The two girls remained silent, each one considering several possibilities. There was danger on all sides, and they were not unaware of it.

“We’ll have to take a chance on that,” Nancy muttered finally. “Back the car off the drive to that clump of trees, Helen. Good! It’s a double row. Get in as far as you can. Keep on backing—farther. Splendid! Now, you wait here. Don’t let anything happen to yourself or the car.”

“Oh, Nancy, I am so frightened,” Helen quavered. “What are you going to do?”

“Just carry out all my plans,” Nancy announced. “First, I am going to find Mrs. Eldridge’s room on the third floor, and somehow or other bring her here.”

Helen kissed her chum. “Good luck!” she whispered.

Nancy squeezed her friend’s hands and, with far less confidence than she displayed, picked her way through the flower beds to the house.

“I wish that dog would stop growling,” she said to herself, as the menacing sounds came to her ears.

The lights were turned on inside the sanatorium. For this Nancy was thankful. She knew it was impossible to look out of an illuminated window into the twilight and discern what was going on out of doors. Yet she had to be cautious, lest any person on the grounds detect her.

“I must be on my guard, and very closely,” she whispered to herself.

However, the brave girl reached the walls of the old mansion without being seen. Carefully she made her way to a door. Before opening it she listened for sounds from inside, and there came to her the hum of voices, which was broken by a ringing laugh.

“This is not the place,” Nancy concluded. “No ‘patient’ here is happy enough to laugh like that.”

She went farther, staying in the shadows until another door was reached. This one was open, an unlatched screen filling the space. Nancy peered cautiously inside. She glimpsed a wide hallway with stairs ascending to her left, and guessed that this was a back door to the main corridor, as advantageous a place to enter as any.

“Now for a trip inside,” she murmured. “I hope my new shoes don’t squeak.”

Quietly she drew aside the screen and crept inside. The hall was only dimly lit. Half a dozen wheel chairs, two or three of them occupied, stood about. There was no other sign of life.

Nancy moved on tiptoe toward the broad stairway, and had just reached the steps when she heard the tread of feet on the oaken floor. Like a flash the quick-witted girl darted to an unoccupied wheel chair, and muffled herself in the light woolen blanket left in it by its last occupant.

“I’ll try to look wan and feeble,” she said under her breath, letting her jaw sag and partially closing her eyes.

Not a moment too soon! The young woman in the gingham uniform, who had appeared in the garden some time earlier to summon Miss Tyson to the office, entered the hall. Nancy watched her apprehensively, fearing that the hat and veil would excite some comment. The nurse’s helper, however, marched by humming to herself, giving none of the occupants of the chairs a second glance.

“Thank goodness!” exulted Nancy. “I’m free again!”

She leaped up and flashed toward the stairs. A withered head was poked up from the nearest chair, and a cracked voice cried:

“Hi there, my dear. The doctor seems to have more than cured you. Why, you are young again!”

Nancy did not pause, but with hammering heart raced up the steps to the second floor. A quick glance around, and she started the climb to the top story.

“It can’t be much farther,” she reasoned.

Once the uppermost floor was reached she halted to get her bearings.

“‘The south corner room,’ Mrs. Eldridge said. That would be to my right.”

With that Nancy tiptoed quickly down the hall and stopped before the last door. She bent down and tried to look through the keyhole, but could see nothing. Then she turned the knob.

The door was locked!

Nancy racked her brains to think of a way to open it.

“If I only had a tool of some kind,” she thought.

As she pondered the situation, she heard footsteps on the stairs. There was no time to lose; not a moment to spare. Perhaps some of the other rooms were unlocked.

With Nancy, to think was to act. She darted across the hall and tried the handle of the opposite door. It turned in her hand, and the girl stumbled into total darkness. It was not a room, but a small broom closet which she had entered.

“My, but this is a tight squeeze,” she thought. “Oh, dear, I can hardly breathe in here.”

Nancy did not dare move, for the brief glimpse she had had of the interior in the moment the door was opened revealed the floor to be littered with scrub pails, while the walls were stacked with mops and brooms which a touch would send clattering to the floor.

With her ear to the door, Nancy waited. The footsteps approached, coming her way. The courageous girl’s heart seemed to stop beating as the sound paused opposite her hiding place.

There was the rattle of a key in a lock, and the clink of china on a tray. Nancy guessed that Mrs. Eldridge's supper was being brought to her.

With infinite caution she opened the door to look out. She saw a white skirt vanish into Mrs. Eldridge's room, and heard a voice which she knew to be that of Miss Tyson, the hard-hearted pickpocket.

"Wake up, wake up, Mrs. Eldridge," the nurse said. "Here is your supper, and if you don't do as the doctor says, it will be the last good meal you will taste for a long time."

The occupant of the room groaned faintly, and the attendant spoke on.

"I have some nice tomato bouillon, a broiled lamb chop with fresh peas and mashed potatoes, and ice cream for dessert. Doesn't that make your mouth water? Smell it, and find out how good it is. Taste it, and remember that tomorrow there will be only stale bread and warm water for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if you don't obey our dear good Dr. Bull, who is so kind to you."

"If she is going to make a speech and wheedle Mrs. Eldridge, I'll have some time to act," Nancy decided before Miss Tyson was halfway through her harangue. Slipping cautiously out of the closet Nancy tiptoed to the opposite door, which was partly ajar.

"I have an idea, if only it will work before someone discovers my invention for keeping that lock open," Nancy murmured.

Tearing a strip from her veil, the quick-witted girl plugged the slot in the door frame into which the bolt of the spring lock fitted, and then darted back to her hiding place.

"Oh, dear, if I ever knock over a broom, I'll never rescue the poor woman. The noise would bring the whole cruel crowd down on me."

Miss Tyson remained to threaten Mrs. Eldridge a few minutes more, then left the room, slamming the door behind her. Nancy listened with high hopes for the nurse to go downstairs, then flew to the door across the hall. Her trick had worked! The latch had failed to close! Nancy pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

"Mrs. Eldridge," said Nancy softly.

The old lady was propped up on her bed, with two pillows behind her back, contemplating a tray of savory food. Nancy saw the elderly woman thrust the soup aside as she entered the chamber.

"Mrs. Eldridge," she whispered again, coming closer to the elderly woman.

The patient looked up and saw a figure swathed in black, with veiled face, standing at the foot of her bed. Unnerved from the trying experiences she had been through, she did not know what to make of this sudden appearance, and with a sharp cry fell back upon her pillows.

Nancy flew to her side.

"It is I, Nancy Drew, the girl who spoke to you through the fence," she whispered, quickly removing the bonnet and veil. "I have come to save you. Mrs. Eldridge, everything is going to be all right."

"I—I—I am so nervous," the old woman gasped. "They have tried their best to frighten me so often. How in the world did you get in here?"

"Don't worry about that. The thing to do now is to get you out of here," Nancy whispered. "I hope no one heard you scream. Oh, someone did! Where can I hide?"

Through the walls Nancy could hear footsteps rushing up the stairs, and the sound of voices from below.

"I heard Mrs. Eldridge scream," came from Miss Tyson.

"What of it?" said a second speaker.

“I suppose I’ll have to chase up to her room again,” went on the nurse.

“I wouldn’t bother,” came another voice.

“But I can’t let anything happen to her,” reiterated Miss Tyson.

“She hasn’t signed yet?”

“No.”

Nancy looked around the room. There was not even a clothes closet in the chamber. There seemed to be no suitable place for the girl to withdraw so as to escape detection.

“Oh, dear,” groaned Mrs. Eldridge, sensing her rescuer’s predicament. “I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Don’t worry,” comforted Nancy.

Steps clattered along the hallway toward the room, and without a second thought Nancy dived under the bed. It was very dusty there, and the bed spring sagged so in the middle that she was literally squeezed in between it and the floor.

However, it was the only concealment the room afforded, and she had not reached it a moment too soon. Nancy lay practically motionless, almost afraid to breathe.

She could see a pair of white canvas-shod feet march into the room and pause at the foot of the bed, a few inches from her nose.

“You screamed!” Miss Tyson demanded. “Why, Mrs. Eldridge?”

CHAPTER XXII

TRAPPED!

“Oh, did I scream?” Mrs. Eldridge asked in a weak voice. “I am sorry.”

“Whether you are sorry or not makes no difference,” Miss Tyson snapped. “There are other patients in the house whom you upset by carrying on that way. Why did you scream?”

“I am really very sorry,” Mrs. Eldridge said, trying to find some plausible excuse for her outcry. “It won’t happen again.”

“Answer my question!” cried the nurse, stamping her foot and raising a cloud of dust which made Nancy fear she would sneeze. She pressed her black veil against her face.

“The—the soup is very hot,” Mrs. Eldridge said. “Tomato bouillon can be very, very hot, Miss Tyson.”

“A likely story,” the nurse sniffed. “The soup is not as hot as all that after having been carried up from the kitchen. No, that is not the truth, Mrs. Eldridge, and I intend to find out your real reason.”

“Oh, Miss Tyson,” begged the patient, “don’t scold me.”

“I had to make a special trip up here on your account.”

“That’s too bad. I’m sorry.”

“Well, why did you scream? What have you been doing?” rasped the nurse.

“Nothing,” replied the poor old lady.

“I think I’ll take a look around here,” said Miss Tyson menacingly.

Nancy stiffened at the nurse’s announcement. Did Miss Tyson suspect something? If the attendant were to search the room, she would certainly trap the girl in the narrow space under the bed.

“I think you screamed just to make trouble,” snapped the nurse, glancing carelessly toward the window, “because you know another patient is due here, and you want to give the place a bad reputation. Well, spare yourself the trouble. The new patient’s nurse just telephoned that she will not arrive today.”

Nancy, beneath the bed, heard the remark. This was a new turn of events, since she herself was masquerading as the newcomer. It rather upset her plans.

“Suppose someone here should question the gatekeeper,” she thought. “I am getting in deeper and deeper trouble. If only that nurse would leave me free to get Mrs. Eldridge out of here!”

“Any more hysterics from you, and you will be put where your screams will bother no one,” continued the nurse gruffly. “Remember that!”

“Yes, Miss Tyson,” Mrs. Eldridge said meekly. “I hope I shall not trouble you any more.”

“Hurry up and eat, for it will be dark soon, and you are too nervous to have lights. You will have to sleep,” and the woman stamped out of the room.

Nancy waited until the sound of the attendant’s footsteps had died away before she crept out of her hiding-place. Hastily she brushed the gray dust from her black clothing.

“We’ll have to work fast and quietly,” she whispered. “Evidently the people here are always alert. Listen carefully, Mrs. Eldridge. I have a car concealed on the grounds. Never mind asking me how I got in. You will learn everything later. Can you walk?”

“Yes.”

“That is the best thing I have heard yet,” smiled Nancy.

“Although they keep us confined to wheel chairs to weaken us,” the old lady said, “I am still pretty spry. I walk up and down this room for a little exercise. Once I tried to climb out of the window, but the vines pulled loose and I fell and dislocated my shoulder.”

“Is that how it all happened?” Nancy marveled, amazed at the woman’s gameness despite her great age.

“A strange man was called to attend me,” explained Mrs. Eldridge.

Nancy nodded understandingly. “The doctor who was brought here to treat you started the chain of events which brought me here.

“This is my plan: I will guide you to the car, but we shall have to take the utmost care lest we be detected. You are to put on this bonnet and veil, this coat and these shoes, and let me have something to wear over my clothes. Once in the car, my chum Helen will get you out of the grounds to safety. Will you go through with it?”

Mrs. Eldridge pondered the bold scheme.

“How do I know this is not a trap to kidnap me again?” she said. “Perhaps you are just one of Dr. Bull’s accomplices, trying to do away with me so that you can get my fortune. Perhaps you are from a group who are trying to get me as a hostage for ransom.”

Nancy’s eyes flashed.

“You will have to take the chance,” she said curtly. “I have come here at the peril of my own life and that of my chum. If you do not care to take the risk, I will go.”

“Said with spunk,” chuckled the old woman “I never really doubted you, Nancy—that is your name, is it not? I have no coat, no hat, no shoes to exchange for yours. Most of my belongings were taken away from me.”

“Never mind,” said Nancy, quickly helping Mrs. Eldridge into the black coat. “Now adjust this bonnet yourself.”

As she did so, the excited old lady looked at the supper tray.

“That food is cooked with drugs to weaken my will and to make me doze all the time,” she said, preparing to leave. “I eat as little of it as possible.”

They stole to the door, Nancy assisting Mrs. Eldridge.

“Getting downstairs undetected will be the big job,” the girl whispered.

“Don’t take the main stairs,” Mrs. Eldridge whispered. “There is a service flight at the far end of the hall.”

“Are you sure we are right?” murmured Nancy.

“Yes, for I explored this place in the dark until they took to locking me in at night. That is another thing I cannot understand—how you could open my door.”

“I’ll tell you later,” smiled Nancy.

The service stairway was enclosed. It was a narrow, steep flight of steps which Mrs. Eldridge had to descend sideways, one at a time. Lights were reflected under the door on the second floor past which the two fleeing figures, so widely separated by years, yet so closely united in their determination, hurried breathlessly.

Near the ground floor the stairs divided. Mrs. Eldridge indicated that the left division should be taken.

“The other leads into the kitchen. This one takes you to the cellar landing and the entrance into the garden,” she whispered.

Presently Nancy opened the door which led into the open air. She was surprised to see how dark it had grown. Was Helen still waiting?

As fast as Mrs. Eldridge could hobble in the bedroom slippers she wore—Nancy’s shoes were too small for her; that had been determined at once—the two hastened to the rendezvous in the trees. Nancy’s heart leaped with joy when she saw the car bulking large and black, a shadow among the shadows.

“Now let me help you in,” she cried almost gleefully, assisting Mrs. Eldridge into the automobile. Helen choked back tears of joy and relief.

“Hush. Don’t say a word. There are ears everywhere.”

The final test was at hand.

“If you should have trouble getting out, you must be courageous, Helen. Just indicate to the gatekeeper your need for haste.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” cried Helen aghast.

“No, I have other plans,” Nancy said firmly.

“Oh, Nancy, please!”

“I hope,” said Nancy, “that before you get to Sylvan Lake, Dr. Bull and Adam Thorne will be in custody and all their victims freed. To do that necessitates my staying here. But do not worry. I have succeeded thus far, and I shall be able to keep out of the clutches of the scoundrels. I’ll find plenty of hiding places. Please go, Helen.”

“I—I—” began Helen, but Nancy leaned in and choked her off with a kiss. “Please hurry,” she urged. “Everything depends on speed.”

“I’ll come back for you—I won’t leave you here alone.”

“Good-by, Mrs. Eldridge. You will soon see little Marie.”

The car moved noiselessly out of the shadows to the driveway. Nancy followed to see if there was to be any trouble at the gates. From a safe vantage point she observed the watchman peering into the car.

“Oh, dear, I hope there is no obstacle.”

The guard talked energetically for a moment; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he opened the gates. The car shot through, and Nancy sank to the ground in sheer relief.

“I’ve won,” she said to herself. “Now, if all goes well, I can have these unscrupulous people locked up for treating helpless patients so cruelly. Their relatives will have them released. I must not fail now,” and Nancy moved cautiously toward the house again.

The further plans which she had in mind were somewhat upset when she found the building a blaze of lights, with figures darting back and forth across the illumined windows. A bright light above the stable door shed a radiant glow over the grounds.

“Something is going to happen,” Nancy said to herself. “Or else something *has* happened.”

She concealed herself in the shrubbery along the foundation of the house. A window above her was suddenly flung open, and Dr. Bull’s voice could be heard, raised in anger.

“Emily, your carelessness is uncalled for and inexcusable!” he thundered. “I am not afraid of the old crone’s escaping, but she will give us a pretty hour’s work searching the grounds.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Suppose she falls and breaks her neck—we’d all be in a fine mess.”

“Listen, Simon, I can’t be everywhere at one and the same time,” Miss Tyson’s voice replied. “Anyhow, you have taken in enough money on these old women. Why don’t you quit this business? Then we could leave for South America as you promised.”

“Not with several thousand dollars still to be had,” the doctor snarled.

“Well, of course——”

“See that every shrub and bush in this place is combed for Mrs. Eldridge, and when you find her, bring her to me.”

“All right.”

“We will wring this money out of her tonight!”

“Believe me, I’ll do all I can to help.”

Nancy peered upward. She could see Dr. Bull’s pointed beard thrust from the window as he surveyed the outside. She trembled with fear lest he look down and detect her. However, after a few moments he withdrew his head.

“So they are searching the grounds?” Nancy mused. “In that case, Mrs. Eldridge’s room would be the safest place for me. Very likely they will not look for her there.”

The Great Dane growled menacingly at the gateway.

“I’ll hide beneath the bed again,” she decided quickly.

Softly she edged along the building to the exit by which she and the elderly woman had left the sanatorium. Up the steep, dark stairs she crept, and past the threatening door on the second floor.

When she was halfway up to the third story the door below her was thrown open, and a voice asked:

“Has anyone looked in here?”

Light streamed into the stairway, and without ado Nancy scampered up the remaining steps to the top. Below her she could hear somebody say:

“You go down and I’ll go up.”

Softly the girl turned the knob and stepped into the upper hall.

“Oh—oh—help—goodness—help!”

A startled scream followed, and a crash of dropped crockery froze Nancy in her tracks. The attendant, she of the blue gingham frock, was in the hallway, staring at Nancy open-mouthed, a broken basin at her feet.

“Let me pass!” cried the escaping girl, pushing the student nurse aside.

Nancy dashed forward and ran down the main stairs, while behind her she heard the attendant calling to someone coming up the back steps that she had “seen her sister’s ghost.”

A chorus of excited voices came from the second floor.

“What’s the matter?”

“What fell?”

“Is anyone killed?”

Light was streaming into the hall from a dozen open doors. Evidently all the attendants were busy trying to quiet the patients.

Nancy reached the ground floor without being seen. She flew past the deserted wheel chairs to the porch, ran along its entire length, and jumped into the shrubbery, panting.

She paused a moment to recover her breath. Then, making sure that the coast was clear, she darted across the open lawn to a clump of bushes.

To her dismay she discovered that her surmised had been incorrect. Scarcely had she settled herself before she heard a dog sniffing. Then the animal broke into a frantic bark. Presently someone with a heavy tread raced up, and a searchlight revealed Nancy’s hiding place.

“Here she is!” a deep voice shouted exultantly. “Down, Tiger, down! I got her, Chief!”



“HERE SHE IS!” A DEEP VOICE SHOUTED EXULTANTLY.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE UNDERGROUND CELL

A burly man held the flashlight in one hand and the Great Dane's leash in the other. Several persons came running from the big building, clustering around the bushes as if they had cornered a desperate criminal.

"Come out!" someone commanded.

Realizing that there was no use resisting, Nancy crept out from under the densely matted leaves and branches, and rose to her feet to confront her captors.

"It isn't Mrs. Eldridge!" Miss Tyson exclaimed. "It's a young girl! Have I seen you before?"

"I know who she is," rasped a masculine voice.

Nancy experienced a feeling of dismay as Adam Thorne strode forward.

"Humph! How did you get here?"

Planting his feet firmly apart, his arms akimbo, the disbarred lawyer sneered at the girl. Nancy regarded him coolly.

"You are Nancy Drew," he said, shaking his finger in her face.

"Yes, I am Nancy Drew," the girl replied, her chin held high as she gazed steadily into the beady black eyes of the man.

He lowered his finger as Nancy stepped toward him.

"You are Adam Thorne—are you not?" she inquired.

The former attorney's glance wavered, and he dropped his eyes.

"Lock her up somewhere," he mumbled. "She is dangerous—a meddler and a snoop."

"I don't have to listen to your insulting remarks," answered the trapped girl bravely. "I'll go."

"No, you won't!"

"Why should I stay?" asked Nancy, turning toward the direction of the entrance.

"Hey, there," yelled the infuriated Thorne.

Nancy paid no attention to him.

"Go after her, Miss Tyson. She's a slick one," he shouted.

The nurse seized one of Nancy's arms, while a white-jacketed attendant, the man called Luther, grabbed the other. Nancy shook herself free, however, her eyes blazing.

"Don't any of you dare touch me!" she said. "I will go with you, but you shall not drag me along like a thief!"

Abashed at the girl's display of spirit, no one made any further attempt to lay hands on her. Miss Tyson turned to Thorne and suggested that it would be best to bring her before "The Chief" before locking her up.

"Very well. Follow me, then," Thorne snapped.

With the ex-lawyer in the lead, flanked by the nurse and the attendant and guarded in the rear by the watchman and his huge dog, Nancy felt that she must be considered a very dangerous person indeed to be given such an escort.

She was marched up to the sanatorium, where Dr. Bull, still in his shirt sleeves, was waiting.

"We have a surprise for you," shouted Thorne with a chuckle.

The doctor's mouth dropped when he saw that a girl was being conducted to him.

"Who is this?" he demanded. "Where is Mrs. Eldridge?"

"We haven't found the old fox yet," Thorne answered.

"Why not?"

"Wait a minute until I explain. We've trapped someone just as valuable, though. This is the Drew girl I warned you about—the one I trailed and whose house I watched. She it was who intercepted the pigeon."

"You haven't found Mrs. Eldridge yet!" shouted the infuriated doctor. Then, turning to Nancy he asked: "What do you mean by trespassing on private property?"

"I meant no harm," Nancy replied in her straightforward way.

"Bah, don't believe her," Thorne laughed scornfully. "She has been spying. I know she got the story from Dr. Spires and has been busy tracking us down ever since. You remember, Bull, I told you not to try that fool stunt of bringing Spires here. If the old woman's shoulder was dislocated, you should have let it stay that way."

"She is the girl who had the bracelet," whispered Miss Tyson. "You should never have permitted Spires in this place. He is a friend of the Drews."

"Quiet!" Dr. Bull shouted. "You fools! That's no way to talk. Miss Drew, I am shocked to find a young woman of your type eavesdropping like an ordinary person. Don't you know that this is a sanatorium for extreme nervous cases and mental ailments, and that it is barred from visitors and friends just for the protection of the patients?"

"I know nothing of your rules," Nancy replied stoutly. "If I am where I should not be, I should be grateful if you would direct me to the road and let me go."

"Don't do it, Bull," Thorne cried excitedly. "She is a smooth one, I'm warning you. It would not surprise me if she knows everything. I'll bet she spirited Mrs. Eldridge away!"

"I'd like to know how she got in here in the first place," Miss Tyson put in. "You had better call Smith at the gate."

"Luther, bring the gatekeeper quickly!" Bull ordered. "Just how did you get in, Miss Drew?"

"I came in at the entrance," Nancy replied. "The larkspur is beautiful——"

"I'm not interested in flowers. I think——" Bull checked himself.

He turned to converse with Adam Thorne in an undertone, but Nancy, straining her ears, caught the words "password to Larkspur Lane" before their voices became hushed.

The attendant appeared with the guard at the lodge in a few moments.

"Smith, have you ever seen this young woman?" Bull demanded, glaring at the man standing before him.

"I? No, sir," the guard declared truthfully, looking at Nancy dressed in her own garments.

Miss Tyson gasped audibly.

"Did anybody come in by the gate tonight?" continued the physician.

"I'll bet she was in a disguise," insisted the coarse nurse.

"Answer me," he said to the guard. Then, turning to Miss Tyson, he rasped, "Shut up, Emily!"

The guard instantly saw that he had made a grave error, through no fault of his own, in admitting a dark-colored coupé with the strange nurse, and in permitting it to depart again. For some reason he could not help associating Nancy's presence with that episode. So, to keep his position, he cleverly evaded the question.

"Well, go back to the gate," Bull ordered.

“Yes, sir. My Tiger shouldn’t be left alone, you know, sir.”

Then turning to Thorne, Bull said, “Let’s continue this in my office.”

“All right,” agreed Thorne.

“Bring the girl,” the doctor ordered as he strode on ahead, entirely pleased with himself. Miss Tyson grinned maliciously as she prodded Nancy along.

Dr. Bull’s office was a luxuriously appointed place. A thick green carpet covered the floor. His desk was large and of expensive mahogany. The walls, paneled in maple, were hung with costly oil paintings. It was an impressive room.

“Shut the door, Luther,” ordered the physician.

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor seated himself behind the desk, motioning Nancy to stand opposite him. Miss Tyson and Thorne seated themselves in deep upholstered chairs. There was a tense silence for a moment, until Dr. Bull broke it by reaching for a desk telephone.

“I am going to call the police, Miss Drew, and turn you over to them on a charge of trespassing, breaking, and entering with attempt to steal,” he said solemnly.

“Oh, will you, please?” Nancy cried. “I wish you would call the police—if it is possible over that dummy telephone.”

“Didn’t I tell you she was a sharp-eyed little fox?” Thorne cackled. “You can’t fool her. Follow my advice and put her away. This parleying is all a waste of time.”

“What do you mean? You wish to have me summon the police?” Dr. Bull blustered. “Why do you call this a dummy telephone?”

“Because, in answer to your first question, I should be happy to be escorted from here under police protection,” Nancy retorted. “I know the telephone is a dummy because no wires _____”

She checked herself abruptly. Had she given herself away by proving her powers of observation?

“See here, Nancy Drew,” the physician said, leveling a finger at her. “Stop all this talk and tell me how you entered the grounds—and why. I know all about you. River Heights is a long distance from here, and you did not walk.”

“There are various ways of traveling.”

“Bull, I’m telling you it’s just foolishness to try to match wits with this girl,” Thorne sighed. “I know a way to make her talk—and it may be we can get her illustrious father to do business in terms of money to get his precious daughter back, too.”

“A slick idea, Thorne,” congratulated the cruel doctor. “What would you suggest that we do first?”

“Put her in the cistern,” snickered Thorne with a jerk of his thumb over one shoulder. “I guess a couple of days without food or drink, down in the dark and cold, with the rats and spiders, will make Miss Drew promise to answer any questions we may ask.”

Miss Tyson laughed harshly, looking straight at Nancy to see if she winced at the prospect.

“That will take some of the snap out of her,” she said.

Nancy, however, held her head high, apparently unmoved by the threats that were being directed toward her.

“In the meantime, I don’t doubt but that we can persuade Carson Drew to give a handsome reward in exchange for information about his mysteriously missing Nancy,” exulted the lawyer.

Dr. Bull cast aside all pretense before the girl.

“That’s a swell idea, Thorne,” he said. “What do you say, Miss Drew? Will you tell us why you came here, and promise never to divulge to a soul a word about this place?”

“I promise nothing,” Nancy declared.

“What!” the men ejaculated in astonishment.

“I think this is a very unusual adventure as well as extraordinary treatment,” Nancy said. “The story is too good to keep from my friends.”

“I’ll teach you to taunt me!” Dr. Bull shouted. “Take her away! Put her in the cistern! And leave her there until I tell you to fetch her!”

Miss Tyson leaped up and grabbed Nancy’s elbows, while Thorne ranged himself alongside, ready to help overcome the girl if she should put up a fight.

“Rats and spiders are wonderful companions,” chided the nurse.

Nancy knew she was in a hopeless predicament, and submitted to being led away. More was to be gained by strategy, she reasoned, than by any desperate attempt to break loose. As she was marched out of the room, she heard Thorne ask Dr. Bull if he were flying back that night.

“Flying back,” mused Nancy, straining her ears to catch what they were saying.

“I don’t know. This disappearance of the Eldridge woman and the Drew girl showing up have upset me so I can’t think,” was the reply. “Maybe we had better lie low and let Adolf handle this. It is dynamite. I doubt if Adolf is suspected.”

“Who is blabbing now?” Thorne demanded.

“Go on and put the girl away!” Bull shouted.

Nancy, her arms held behind her back, was shoved out upon the porch and toward the stables. Just outside the stalls Thorne stooped and jerked at an iron ring in the ground, which was attached to a round steel lid covering an opening about three feet in diameter.

“This is a fine hole in which to pass a night,” he taunted.

“Plenty of time to spend in reflection,” jeered Miss Tyson.

“You can think up a bunch of lies down there,” snorted the man, “but it won’t do any good.”

“I don’t lie,” Nancy replied.

“Well, you haven’t given any explanation of why you are here,” said Miss Tyson.

“There is nothing to say.”

“I suppose I’ll have to chase all over the place looking for old lady Eldridge just because you won’t talk,” sneered the nurse.

“Well, down you go, Nancy Drew,” laughed Thorne harshly as the hole was revealed. “And it’ll be a long time before you hear, ‘Up you come.’ Ha, ha, ha!”

Nancy looked around her desperately. There was no escape. As the nurse pushed her, she was forced to start down a swaying, flimsy ladder into the dark, damp hole. Down, down, ten or twelve feet she went, until she could feel the slimy bottom under her feet.

“This is worse than I bargained for,” she muttered.

Suddenly the ladder was jerked up, breaking into pieces from the dampness, as it was pulled to the surface. The lid clanged over the opening, cutting short the triumphant laugh of Adam Thorne and the deriding sneer of Miss Tyson.

CHAPTER XXIV

S. O. S.

Nancy swayed on her feet in the inky darkness. Pinwheels of fire seemed to be playing in front of her eyes, even though she shut them tight. She stretched out her arms, yet could feel nothing. Dampness oozed through the shoddy soles of her cheap, high black shoes.

"This is about my worst experience in running down a mystery," she said to herself. "I don't like this place."

As Nancy's eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the darkness, she noticed a few small chinks through which light struggled dimly overhead. The apertures were not directly above her, but considerably to one side, so she rejected her first guess that the lid to the cistern had not been fastened firmly.

"Perhaps it is a phosphorescent glow from some fungus or decaying thing," she shuddered.

However, Nancy never guessed at anything. She was going to find out, as she always did, the meaning and explanation of that which she did not understand. Balancing herself with outstretched arms to counteract the slipperiness under foot, Nancy cautiously walked closer to the light.

The floor was uneven, and she stepped ankle-deep into icy water. Her outstretched fingers brushed against the cold, moist stone wall of the cistern. A chill ran through her. What a place!

"Brace up, Nancy. This is no time to be squeamish," she admonished herself.

It was clear to her now that the lights came from openings to the surface. Perhaps the covering of the cistern had fallen away at that point. However, mere guesswork was fruitless; how to reach the openings was the problem.

The girl thought of Helen. "I wonder if Mrs. Eldridge is happy in the welcoming arms of her family. When will Helen start back to the sanatorium? I'll depend on nobody—I must work myself out of this place," were the problems that ran through her mind.

The ladder had been pulled up. Yet it might save her after all, Nancy told herself, even though it had been withdrawn. She remembered that some of the rotted rungs had fallen out as Thorne jerked it to the surface. Bravely putting aside all sense of disgust, Nancy ran her hand over the slippery floor in search of the wooden fragments. She found three rounded stakes, sound save for the ends where dampness had caused them to crumble.

"Now then," she said, speaking aloud, "maybe this will work, and maybe it won't."

To her horror her voice, echoing hollowly from the walls, was answered by what seemed to be a throaty chuckle, followed by a broken moan. Such a noise in the almost total darkness, and after the nerve-racking experiences which Nancy had been through, would have shattered the self-control of many a brave man.

Nancy let the sticks fall from her hands as the sound was repeated. It came from overhead—from the chinks where the light shone feebly.

"Kek-ek-koo-oo-oo."

The sound died away. What sort of creature could it be who was peering down through the openings and mocking the captive? Nancy shivered, then braced her shoulders and took a deep breath.

"Kek-kek-koo-oo."

Suddenly a louder sound made the cistern walls ring. It was Nancy herself, laughing heartily. The mysterious chuckles and groans were—pigeons!

“Pigeons,” she said to herself. “It was that kind of bird which started me on this hunt.”

She snatched up the wooden stakes. Then, with renewed courage and higher hopes she attacked the walls of her temporary prison.

Nancy’s fingers had told her that the cistern was built of blocks of stone, mortared together. It was old, and had not been used in a long time. Nancy hoped that the mortar had deteriorated.

She felt for the plastered space between two stones, digging in vigorously with her stick. At first the rotted wood chipped off in her hands. Then, as the sound heart of the hickory was reached, it hit into the crumbly cement. She worked away feverishly, and in a few minutes had dug away enough of the mortar to give her one toe hold.

A little farther above she dug again, repeating this operation at intervals of a foot until she could reach no higher. Sometimes the plaster was hard in spots and resisted her attack, necessitating her beginning all over again at another spot. The task grew more difficult as Nancy progressed higher. Finally she was forced to cling to the damp wall, her toes and the fingers of one hand dug into the niches she had scooped out, while with her free hand she scraped a higher grip for herself.

Thus, foot by foot, Nancy literally dug herself upward until at last her fingers found the opening through which the light filtered. She could feel loose bricks under her hand—then the lights went out and she was in total darkness!

Clinging thus, six feet or so above the hard, wet floor, unable to see even the little that the tiny reflected gleam had allowed before, Nancy was indeed in a precarious position. Her arms were weary from the exertion she had been through, and her strength was failing her rapidly. She had had nothing to eat for many hours.

Gritting her teeth, the girl exerted herself even more forcibly to move the stones overhead. Dirt and rubbish cascaded down upon her. At last, to her immeasurable joy and relief, she managed to make an opening big enough, she estimated, to allow her to thrust her head through. Carefully she released her hold on the wall and raised her arms until both hands gripped the edge of the cistern. Then, straining every muscle in her body, she wormed her way to freedom.

For a moment Nancy fell back exhausted and closed her eyes. When she regained her strength, she opened them and discovered that she was in a glass-fronted shed. A fluttering sound and a sleepy cooing overhead told her that she was in the pigeon coop.

“Thank you, Mr. Thorne,” Nancy chuckled.

She reached into the front of her dress where she had secreted a small memorandum pad and a stub of a pencil. It had been her intention to reach the carrier pigeons somehow when she remained on the grounds after Helen had left, yet she certainly had had no idea she would enter the coop by the route she had taken.

Catching one of the birds, she felt under its wing for the harness to which messages are attached. The flat elastic band and the receptacle for the “cartridge,” as the tube is called, were there. Into the latter she stuffed a scrap of paper on which she had written “S. O. S.”

She picked her way to the door and opened it wide enough to release the bird. Then she caught another pigeon, then a third, releasing all with identical messages.

“Now,” Nancy said, “if Dr. Bull has not yet taken Thorne’s advice to go away and let ‘Adolf’—whoever he is—handle this case, I’ll make sure he will stay awhile.”

Surveying the grounds through the doorway, Nancy made certain no one was visible. The light over the entrance to the stable had been extinguished. Probably, she thought to herself, it had been that gleam which had guided her to the loose bricks and freedom.

“Oh, how happy I am to be above ground again!” Nancy said thankfully.

She slipped outside, eager to fill her lungs once more with dry, fresh air. Slowly and carefully she made her way to the stable. The small door, leading once upon a time into a harness room, was unlocked.

“I’ll peek in,” she whispered to herself.

Two automobiles stood in the stable, one of them the car that had abducted Dr. Spires.

“These scoundrels shall not get away. I’ll detain them until help arrives!”

So saying, Nancy raised the hood of the car nearest her and felt for the cylinder of the gasoline filter. She unscrewed the butterfly bolt which held it in place, and as the glass came off in her hand, gasoline gushed over her fingers.

“They will not rush away in this car,” she mused.

In the same manner she disabled the second vehicle, and with the removed parts in her hand she crept out of the stable.

“That much is taken care of,” Nancy said to herself. “These people will have a surprise if they try to drive away. The main thing, though, is the airplane. I wonder where it is kept? If the landing field is on that level stretch, the plane must be down there. They could not taxi it up this hill. I’ll steal down and make a search.”

Dodging from shadow to shadow, Nancy made her way past the outbuildings. Lights were still burning in the big house, and she guessed that hurried preparations were being made there for departure.

“If only Tiger doesn’t scent me!” she thought.

Safe beneath the slope of the hill, she raced with no attempt at concealment, for time was pressing. Where could the hangar be? She saw no building. Only a stretch of tall trees extended as far as her eye could reach.

Glancing toward the far end of a flat, cleared place, she saw, standing unsheltered, the airplane itself. On winged feet Nancy dashed over to the machine. The motors and propellers were swathed in canvas.

“Oh, dear, this is something I don’t know much about,” the girl said in vexation. “How does one go about crippling an airplane motor?”

Up on the hill the Great Dane barked, and Nancy thought she saw a flashlight gleam momentarily.

“Is Dr. Bull on his way to his aircraft?” she questioned fearfully.

If that were the case, she would have no time in which to experiment with the plane’s motors. She accordingly ran to the rear of the machine, where the broad fins of the rudder drooped.

“I wish I could pilot it. I’d make a fine getaway.” She chuckled at the idea of the consternation of Miss Tyson should she find her captive gone.

Nancy, however, knew enough about flying to realize that in taking off into the air those drooping fins had to be manipulated. She tugged at the taut wires, certain now that she could hear voices approaching.

She felt a stone under her foot. It was a good-sized one with jagged edges. With this in her hand she slashed and pounded away at the guide wires. One, two, three, then a fourth snapped under her attack, each with a resounding “ping” that made her heart jump with alarm.

For good measure she twisted a metal pipe projecting from the body of the plane. What its use was she did not know, yet she felt confident that in disabling it she was making it impossible for Dr. Bull and his accomplices to make any escape by air.

The gleam of a torchlight danced on the grass.

“I must run for dear life,” said Nancy under her breath.

She gathered her flimsy dress tightly about her, and though her high black shoes were not as comfortable as her own trim ties, she raced as she had never raced before. Dashing past beds of larkspurs, she headed toward the thickest and nearest clump of trees. She glanced back once more. Three men were carrying lights. Would she make the grove unseen?

CHAPTER XXV

RESCUE ON WINGS

Nancy dodged behind the first tree trunk, then peered in the direction of the plane. The glow of the flashlight bobbed closer, down the hill and across the level spot. Dimly she made out three men, their identity hidden by distance and darkness. Yet she felt certain, by the sound of their voices, that one was Dr. Bull, another, Adam Thorne.

There was a mumbled conversation, and Nancy saw the tarpaulin unlashd from the twin engines. The three men climbed aboard, and for a moment all was silence.

The motors coughed, and the propellers began to revolve with a clacking sound. The pilot permitted them to turn at low speed until the engines warmed up. For fully five minutes this process continued.

"I hope they discover what I have done to their plane before they leave the ground. I shouldn't want them to be killed."

Nancy began to worry. Had she really gone too far in detaining these crooks?

She was tense with excitement as she waited for the fateful moment of the take-off. Then her heart leaped. The pipe she had twisted out of shape had been one of the exhausts, and the sparks and hot gases shooting from the left motor had set the fabric of the fuselage on fire!

"Fire!" gasped the stricken girl. "Oh, I never expected the plane to burn up. If they ever catch me now!"

The occupants of the craft saw the flames and jumped out of the ship. They seemed stunned at the suddenness of the catastrophe.

"This is terrible!" one cried aloud.

"Awful! What happened?" asked a second one whom Nancy recognized as Dr. Bull. "Did someone light a match?"

"Oh, I hope the men won't find me yet," Nancy whispered to herself. "They are in a rage now."

As the brilliant glare of the conflagration lit up the surrounding territory, she could see the three men stagger away from the blazing plane, evidently much confused.

A moment later the gasoline tanks exploded with a reverberating roar, sending a column of flame fifty feet into the air. The sudden report knocked two of the men off their feet. The last outbreak apparently rendered one of them unconscious, for Nancy saw his companions kneel beside him.

Down the hill there raced a column of persons, both men and women, who were the guards, nurses, and attendants from the sanatorium. Each individual was made distinctly visible to the girl behind the trees by the blaze.

"What happened?" cried Miss Tyson, who was in the lead.

"Ain't it awful!" groaned Luther, standing beside her and wringing his hands.

"Why don't you do something?" snapped the nurse. "I'll bet it was set on fire by that Drew girl."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, I do. Go search the grounds!"

Nancy saw the injured man lifted by the shoulders and knees, while the thunderstruck attendants gesticulated their amazement at the accident.

Nancy began to worry anew as she heard the command:

“Search the grounds!”

Suddenly she looked up into the sky. Some of the nurses scattered, racing up the hill, while others stood open-mouthed, staring overhead. Nancy heard another roaring sound above the noise of the consuming flames. Glancing upward, she saw another airplane swoop down upon the level field.

Was it—could it be—the rescue party? Had sufficient time elapsed? Had the pigeon delivered its message?

Nancy’s doubts were soon removed. The machine roared and bumped across the grass and swerved to a halt. Man after man leaped from the cabin, and as Nancy raced toward the new arrivals, she heard the crack of a pistol. The sound which added speed to her feet had just the opposite effect on everyone else present, for the people from the sanatorium stood stock-still, while a score of hands shot up in gesture of surrender.

Panting and almost falling, Nancy reached the group.

“Ned!” she cried. “And Father! Oh, how glad I am!”

She stumbled, and fell into Carson Drew’s outstretched arms.

“Nancy, dear Nancy,” he said. “Are you hurt? You are covered with dirt.”

“Never mind that, Father.” She hugged him, assuring him that she was unharmed, although practically exhausted. Supported on his arm, she stepped into the circle of light from the airplane’s powerful landing beams. The prisoners were being marshaled into line by six policemen, two men in flying clothes, and Ned. The latter dropped his pistol and hastened to Nancy’s side.

“You see, I didn’t fail you,” he exclaimed. “I knew my protests would not stop you, so I went to the Tooker place with the police.”

“Oh, thanks, Ned,” cried Nancy. “I needed help so badly.”

“We nabbed the man at the pigeon coop on Mr. Jordan’s charges, and also a Japanese butler and a slick-haired fellow,” Ned explained quickly. “The police say he is an international society crook with a long record and a dozen warrants out against him.”

“Holy mackerel!” burst from one of the group of prisoners.

It was Adam Thorne who was pointing at Nancy. Dr. Bull, sitting on the ground nursing a burned leg, looked up.

“The Drew girl,” he roared. “I told you to put her in the cistern!”

“I did!” Thorne yelled, his voice rising almost to a shout. “She must be a witch. How did you get out?”

“Climbed out,” Nancy said directly. “I got into the pigeon coop. That enabled me to free several pigeons with messages which my friends intercepted at the Tooker place—and here they are.”

“I bet you gummed up our airplane too,” Bull raged savagely.

“I did my best,” Nancy said. “I am sorry if it caused you serious injury.”

“Sorry—bah!” hissed Dr. Bull. “To think of being foiled by a mere slip of a girl!”

“I told you so,” cackled Thorne. “I told you she was dangerous, but you were too conceited to believe a girl could fool you.”

“Oh, take me away and lock me up,” Bull groaned. “Lock me up in a lunatic asylum. Put me in a strait-jacket—anything! Do something, do something—I’m beat out!”

“You will have to wait until arrangements are made,” a police officer said dryly.

“Arrangements?” The doctor looked puzzled.

“Yeh, we’re interested in the kind of an illegal outfit you have been maintaining here.”

The doctor’s jaw sagged and he turned a sickly hue.

“Guess we’ll have plenty against you after we look around,” continued the officer.

Nancy noted the men’s uniforms and recognized them as state troopers. Somehow she felt glad that the pompous Inspector Mulligan had not shared in the capture.

Leaving the police to guard the captives, Ned and Nancy, Mr. Drew and the two pilots—friends of Ned whom he had pressed into service at Nancy’s telephoned direction—climbed into the airplane and in fifteen minutes came to a big field near the shores of Sylvan Lake. There Nancy thanked the aviators, promising to give them a complete account of the adventure at a later date. Then she and her father piled into Ned’s car and were whisked away to the Corning cottage.

Helen leaped down the porch steps as the car came to a halt, and threw her arms around Nancy. “I’ve been scared stiff,” she confessed. “Oh, we got here all right, and I was just getting ready to come back for you. Mrs. Eldridge is inside with her nephew and niece.”

You can imagine the triumphal entry that was accorded Nancy as she entered the brilliantly illuminated living room, covered though she was with mud and dirt. Begging to be allowed to clean up before telling her story, Nancy hastened to bathe and change her clothing. When she reappeared, the cheers were raised anew, and Mrs. Corning brought the girl, who suddenly realized she was famished, a tray of tempting food.

As Nancy ate she related her adventures, everybody hanging breathlessly on each word. When she had concluded, she was showered with praise.

“Helen deserves as much credit as I do, and so does Ned,” Nancy insisted. “Without the aid of both of them I should have been helpless.”

Nancy insisted on hearing Ned’s experience at the capture of the Tooker estate, as well as Helen’s story. Mr. Drew had arrived by airplane from St. Louis in his anxiety to be sure that Nancy was safe, and it was then that Ned had encountered him just as he and his aviator friends were about to take off.

Old Mrs. Eldridge, seemingly ten years younger since gaining her freedom, told what she had learned about Dr. Bull’s sanatorium. The doctor, who had been blackballed from his profession years ago even as Adam Thorne had been barred from practicing law, had joined with the ex-lawyer and one Adolf von Hopwitz, an international sharper, to cheat wealthy old women. Von Hopwitz was using the name Tooker.

Von Hopwitz, having ingratiated himself into various social circles, would introduce Dr. Bull to old ladies who complained of ill health, and between them the unscrupulous pair would persuade the women to go to the sanatorium.

There, by the use of drugs and hypnotism, Dr. Bull would prevail upon the patients to sign away large parts of their wealth to him. Here Thorne’s knowledge of legal matters would be utilized. Despite his bad reputation and removal from practice, the man knew all the tricks of the law, and the contracts he drew for the women to sign could not be changed in any detail, should the patients’ relatives try to break them.

Mrs. Eldridge, keener-witted and with more strength than most of the patients, had defied the crooks, thus helping to contribute to their downfall.

“After all, Fate gets the most credit,” Nancy observed. “Or call it Nemesis. If Dr. Bull’s own airplane had not injured one of his pigeons over my larkspur bed, we should not have learned the password.”

“And that reminds me,” Mrs. Corning exclaimed, jumping to her feet and leaving the room. She returned with a big box which she presented to the girl.

“What can this be?” Nancy wondered, undoing the wrappings. From the receptacle she drew forth a silver loving cup—first prize for her beautiful larkspur blooms.

“I shall see to it that that is not the only prize you will have won today,” Mrs. Eldridge said significantly.

“I am happy to have been of service,” smiled Nancy. “I expect no reward.”

“Nancy’s best reward would be to hand her another mystery to solve,” said Ned.

Nancy blushed becomingly, and murmured: “Have you any that need solving, Ned?”

“No, but by morning I’ll dig one up, and I’ll telephone you at five o’clock.”

It was not to be Ned after all who was to bring *The Clue of the Broken Locket* to the girl. Indeed, it was not to be that simple. But just now she was in a joking mood.

“I’ll be ready,” said Nancy calmly, but with a twinkle in her eye. “Make it very, very complicated and original.”

THE END

[The end of *The Password to Larkspur Lane* by Carolyn Keene (probably Walter Karig)]