Name: _____ Date: _____

The Secret of the Old Clock

Reading level 13 · 2339 words

Nancy was sixteen, quick-witted and extremely curious, and she lived in the town of River Heights with her father, Carson Drew, a famous lawyer who solved baffling cases for a living and frequently discussed them with his daughter. One evening she announced that she could not bear the thought of old Josiah Crowley's fortune going to the Topham family, who had treated him like a servant while he lived in their house. Mr. Drew replied that a will is a will, and that Richard Topham, who had grown rich by gambling on the stock market, would certainly make sure that no second one was ever discovered. But Nancy had a strong feeling that something was missing, and she could not stop thinking about it.

At her urging, Mr. Drew invited an old friend, the lawyer Henry Rolsted, to luncheon, and Nancy listened with her whole attention. Mr. Rolsted confided that about a year earlier Crowley had visited his office and announced that he wished to write a new will, cutting out the Tophams entirely. The old man had intended to write it himself, and Mr. Rolsted had explained exactly how, but Crowley never returned. "Where there's a will, there's a way," Nancy told herself on the drive home, though privately she had to admit that she did not possess a single clue, and that finding a hidden paper in a whole county was likely to be extremely difficult.

A few days later her father asked her to deliver some legal papers to a judge in the town of Masonville, fifteen miles away. On her way home she chose the pleasant River Road beside the Muskoka River, although a great black cloud had been gathering in the west all afternoon. Before long the sun vanished, the trees began to whisper in the rising wind, and then the storm struck, with lightning, a roar of thunder, and rain so heavy that the road dissolved into mud. Nancy peered through the windshield and saw an old barn at the roadside with its doors wide open, and she drove straight in, just as a cold blast of wind rattled the rafters.

Inside the barn she found a girl of her own age, who laughed and said that she had arrived in the nick of time. The girl was Allie Horner, and she led Nancy across the muddy yard to a run-down farmhouse where her older sister Grace was baking a cake. The house was almost bare of furniture, but there were white curtains at every window, and the tea was served with as much poise as in any elegant drawing room. The sisters lived alone, they explained, because their parents were dead. Grace sewed dresses for customers in Masonville, and Allie raised chickens, although neither of them earned very much, and winter was approaching.

Over the teacups Nancy admired a picture on the wall. "Uncle Josiah gave it to us," said Allie, and Nancy started, for it was the same Josiah Crowley. He had lived next door, the girls told her, and they had loved him like an uncle until the Tophams persuaded him to move in with

them. The last time they saw him he had told them, "I have planned a big surprise for you girls. You will see it in my will." Then the Tophams had received everything. "We do not want anything that is not ours," said Grace, "but it does seem unfair." Nancy promised that she would speak to her father, and when the rain stopped, the sisters helped her put chains on her tires.

Mr. Drew listened to the whole story, and he invited the sisters to the house, where they recalled something new. Crowley had once chuckled that the Tophams would be fooled when they found out he had made another will, and that this time he would not trust it to a lawyer, but would put it in a safe place. Nancy had made enemies of the Topham sisters by defending a salesgirl whom Ada had wrongly blamed for a broken vase. Soon afterward, she crouched behind a bush in the park and overheard Ada and Isabel whispering about "the will." The two girls plainly did not know where it was either. That meant it had not been destroyed.

Nancy visited every relative who might know something, the two nephews on the River Road and two elderly cousins in Masonville. None of them could help, but the cousins mentioned old Abigail Rowen, who had once nursed Josiah through an illness. Abigail lived alone in a ramshackle cottage on the West Lake Road, and when Nancy knocked, she found her lying on a couch with a sprained ankle, hungry and in pain, because she could not afford a doctor. Nancy bought groceries and bandages with her own money, bound up the swollen ankle, made tea, and sat quietly with the old lady, until at last she began to talk.

Abigail remembered that Josiah had once shown her a piece of paper and said that he had written his own will. Beyond that her memory failed her, until the clock on the mantel struck three, and a strange look passed over her face. "The clock!" she whispered. "No, it was a notebook. He wrote down where he put it in a little notebook, and he said that I would find out all about it there." Josiah's own clock, a tall mantel clock with a crescent moon on top, had gone to the Tophams along with his other belongings. Nancy guessed at once that the notebook might be hidden inside it.

But how could she possibly examine the clock? A friend, Helen Corning, solved the problem by begging Nancy to sell some tickets for a charity dance. The next afternoon, Nancy rang the Tophams' doorbell. Mrs. Topham tried to refuse the tickets, but Mr. Topham bought them all, with a grand gesture, hoping that his generosity would be noticed in the newspaper. On her way out, Nancy remarked on the clock on the mantel, and asked whether it had been Mr. Crowley's. "Certainly not," snapped Mrs. Topham. "We sent that old-fashioned thing up to our bungalow at Moon Lake." Nancy thanked her politely, and walked down the path with a smile.

Helen happened to be spending two weeks at a girls' camp on that very lake, so Nancy used it as her excuse and drove there the next morning. She stopped at the Horner farm on the way, where the sisters were in tears because their chickens were dying, and she asked Grace to make her a dress, since they were too proud to accept money. At the camp, her friends

rushed her from tennis to swimming to long hikes, and whenever she tried to slip away to the bungalow, something prevented her. One day she borrowed the camp launch, but its old engine sputtered and died in the middle of the lake and left her drifting in the sun for eight long hours.

At last she told Helen that she had to go home, and instead she drove around the lake to the Topham bungalow, where she found everything in confusion. The front door stood wide open, the furniture and rugs were gone, and heavy boot prints and the tracks of a truck crossed the trampled lawn. Robbers had stripped the place of everything valuable. There was no sign of the caretaker, and no sign of the clock. She was about to leave when she saw a heavy-set man in a cap striding up the path, and she dashed into a bedroom closet and held her breath, while three men came in to carry out the last of the furniture.

She might have escaped notice, but the dust tickled her nose and she sneezed. The leader wrenched open the closet door and dragged her out. "Spying on us?" he snarled. Nancy told him boldly that he was a common thief and that she would hand him over to the police if she could, and he laughed, shoved her back inside, and bolted the door. "You can stay there for all I care," he said. The heavy truck rumbled away, and Nancy was alone in the dark and silent house, miles from the nearest neighbor, with nobody in the world knowing where she was. For a few moments she was too frightened to think.

She screamed and pounded on the oak door until her hands hurt, and then she made herself think. Feeling in the dark overhead, she found a long wooden rod meant for coat hangers, pulled it down, and wedged it into the crack beside the hinges as a lever. The door groaned, and one hinge tore loose, and just as a second began to give way she heard someone running into the bedroom. It was Jeff Tucker, the caretaker, whom a stranger had tricked into a long journey so that the robbers could work undisturbed. He had hurried home to find his employers' bungalow stripped, and now he found the key, turned it, and let Nancy out.

Nancy asked Jeff whether the old clock had been in the house, and he said that it had. She drove him straight to the nearest town, where the marshal listened to her story and agreed to follow her roadster in the police car. Reading the tire tracks that the van had left in the turf, she guessed that the robbers had taken the road toward the city of Garwin, but after a long chase the police lost her, and she lost them. Then she remembered a rough inn that she had passed on the way. She drove back, crept up to a dim window, and saw three men sitting around a table. They were the very men who had locked her in the closet.

While the marshal was still searching elsewhere, Nancy crept to the barn behind the inn and found the big van locked. She felt under the driver's seat, found a ring of keys, unlocked the doors, and climbed over chairs and rolled rugs by the light of her flashlight, until she found, under a blanket on a table, the old clock with a crescent moon on top. She tucked it under her arm and had barely jumped to the floor and locked the doors again when she heard the

robbers returning. She flung the keys on the ground, dived into an empty manger, and pulled the blanket over her head, holding her breath, while the three men quarreled and climbed into the van.

As soon as the van had rumbled away, Nancy ran to her roadster and, unable to wait, opened the clock. There was nothing inside, but when she shook it, something rattled. With a tool from under the seat she pried off the cardboard face, and there, hanging from a little hook, was a blue notebook with the words "The Property of Josiah Crowley" on its cover. Then she raced back to find the marshal and told him where the robbers were. The police forced the van into a ditch, and the three men were captured without any shooting. Nancy asked the marshal to leave her name out of it, because she did not want the Tophams to learn about the notebook.

It was nearly ten o'clock when she reached home. Finding the house quiet, she curled up in a chair and turned the yellowed pages of the notebook, past lists of stocks and bonds worth more than three hundred thousand dollars, until a line in Josiah's cramped writing made her sit up. His last will, it said, would be found in safe-deposit box number 148 at the Masonville National Bank, under the name Josiah Harkston. No wonder it had never been discovered, Nancy thought, for who would ever think of looking under a false name? When her father came home, she told him everything, and he said that she was a real detective.

The next morning Mr. Drew obtained an order from the judge, and father and daughter drove to Masonville. The bank, it turned out, had been trying to reach a Josiah Harkston, whose rent on the box was overdue, and the signature on the bank's record was Crowley's own handwriting. Crowley had even left a second key with the bank in a sealed envelope. In the vault they found a metal box, and in the box lay a will, witnessed by a doctor who had died a few days after Crowley, and by a man named Wackley. Mr. Drew glanced through it and smiled. "The Tophams are not mentioned," he said, "but the Horner girls are."

A few days later the Tophams arrived at the Drews' house, with their lawyer, and Mrs. Topham declared that the whole affair was a conspiracy. Mr. Drew read the will aloud. Allie and Grace Horner were to receive seventy-five thousand dollars each, and so was Abigail Rowen, and the nephews and cousins twenty thousand each, while the old man's furniture, which the Tophams had kept, was to go to the Horner girls, who politely refused it. Richard Topham turned white, for he had been counting on the fortune to pull him through some heavy losses. "We shall break the will!" cried Mrs. Topham. But her own lawyer quietly advised her that Mr. Drew was right.

The Tophams fought in court, claiming that the will was a forgery, but they lost, and within a few months their losses on the stock market forced them to leave their grand house for a small one. Abigail Rowen got a doctor and a nurse, and she soon felt better than she had in years. The Horner girls painted their farmhouse white, built new hen houses, and bought a flock of fine Leghorn chickens, and they begged Nancy to accept a reward. All she would take

was Josiah Crowley's old clock. She set it on her desk, as a reminder of her first real case, and she wondered whether it might also be a promise of more to come.

Questions

1. Why did Nancy think a second will might exist?

A. Mr. Rolsted had told her and her father the old man meant to write one
B. She found it in the Tophams' attic
C. The Horner girls showed it to her

2. What made Abigail Rowen remember the notebook?

A. The mantel clock striking three
B. A visit from the Tophams
C. A letter from Mr. Crowley

3. Where was the second will hidden?

A. Behind the face of the clock
B. In a box at a bank, under a false name
C. Under the barn floor

4. Why did Nancy ask the marshal to keep her name out of it?

A. She did not want the Tophams to learn about the notebook
B. She was embarrassed
C. She wanted a reward

5. What does the story suggest about the way Nancy solved the mystery?

A. Patience, kindness and cleverness together helped her find the truth
B. Luck alone did everything
C. Only grown-ups can solve mysteries

6. The Horner sisters were "too proud" to take Nancy's money. What does "proud" mean here?

A. Unwilling to accept help they had not earned
B. Happy about winning
C. Rude and snobbish

Words to know

will: paper naming heirs
luncheon: midday meal
notebook: book for notes
vault: locked strong room
marshal: town lawman

Answer key: The Secret of the Old Clock

1. A. Mr. Rolsted had told her and her father the old man meant to write one
2. A. The mantel clock striking three
3. B. In a box at a bank, under a false name
4. A. She did not want the Tophams to learn about the notebook
5. A. Patience, kindness and cleverness together helped her find the truth
6. A. Unwilling to accept help they had not earned