

THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE

by
**CAROLYN
KEENE**

An illustration of Nancy Drew, a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved blouse and a blue skirt. She is holding a flashlight in her right hand, shining a bright yellow beam of light onto a stone wall. The scene is dark and atmospheric, suggesting a hidden staircase or a secret passage. The background is mostly black, with some greenish-grey tones on the wall and floor.

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The Hidden Staircase

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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The Hidden Staircase



Both girls fraze in their tracks

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CHAPTER I

The Haunted House

NANCY DREW began peeling off her garden gloves as she ran up the porch steps and into the hall to answer the ringing telephone. She picked it up and said, "Hello!"

"Hi, Nancy! This is Helen." Although Helen Corning was nearly three years older than Nancy, the two girls were close friends.

"Are you tied up on a case?" Helen asked.

"No. What's up? A mystery?"

"Yes—a haunted house."

Nancy sat down on the chair by the telephone. "Tell me more!" the eighteen-year-old detective begged excitedly.

"You've heard me speak of my Aunt Rosemary," Helen began. "Since becoming a widow, she has lived with her mother at Twin Elms, the old family mansion out in Cliffwood. Well, I went to see them yesterday. They said that many strange,

mysterious things have been happening there recently. I told them how good you are at solving mysteries, and they'd like you to come out to Twin Elms and help them." Helen paused, out of breath.

"It certainly sounds intriguing," Nancy replied, her eyes dancing.

"If you're not busy, Aunt Rosemary and I would like to come over in about an hour and talk to you about the ghost."

"I can't wait."

After Nancy had put down the phone, she sat lost in thought for several minutes. Since solving *The Secret of the Old Clock*, she had longed for another case. Here was her chance!

Attractive, blond-haired Nancy was brought out of her daydreaming by the sound of the doorbell. At the same moment the Drews' housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, came down the front stairs,

"I'll answer it," she offered.

Mrs. Gruen had lived with the Drews since Nancy was three years old. At that time Mrs. Drew had passed away and Hannah had become like a second mother to Nancy. There was a deep affection between the two, and Nancy confided all her secrets to the understanding housekeeper.

Mrs. Gruen opened the door and instantly a man stepped into the hall. He was short, thin, and rather stooped. Nancy guessed his age to be about forty.

"Is Mr. Drew at home?" he asked brusquely. "My name is Gomber—Nathan Gomber."

"No, he's not here just now," the housekeeper replied.

The caller looked over Hannah Gruen's shoulder and stared at Nancy. "Are you Nancy Drew?"

"Yes, I am. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The man's shifty gaze moved from Nancy to Hannah. "I've come out of the goodness of my heart to warn you and your father," he said pompously.

"Warn us? About what?" Nancy asked quickly.

Nathan Gomber straightened up importantly and said, "Your father is in great danger, Miss Drew!"

Both Nancy and Hannah Gruen gasped. "You mean this very minute?" the housekeeper questioned.

"All the time," was the startling answer. "I understand you're a pretty bright girl, Miss Drew—that you even solve mysteries. Well, right now I advise you to stick close to your father. Don't leave him for a minute."

Hannah Gruen looked as if she were ready to collapse and suggested that they all go into the living room, sit down, and talk the matter over. When they were seated, Nancy asked Nathan Gomber to explain further.

"The story in a nutshell is this," he began. "You know that your father was brought in to do legal

work for the railroad when it was buying property for the new bridge here."

As Nancy nodded, he continued, "Well, a lot of the folks who sold their property think they were gypped."

Nancy's face reddened. "I understood from my father that everyone was well paid."

"That's not true," said Gomber. "Besides, the railroad is in a real mess now. One of the property owners, whose deed and signature they claim to have, says that he never signed the contract of sale."

"What's his name?" Nancy asked.

"Willie Wharton."

Nancy had not heard her father mention this name. She asked Gomber to go on with his story.

"I'm acting as agent for Willie Wharton and several of the land owners who were his neighbors," he said, "and they can make it pretty tough for the railroad. Willie Wharton's signature was never witnessed and the attached certificate of acknowledgment was not notarized. That's good proof the signature was a forgery. Well, if the railroad thinks they're going to get away with this, they're not!"

Nancy frowned. Such a procedure on the part of the property owners meant trouble for her father! She said evenly, "But all Willie Wharton has to do is swear before a notary that he did sign the contract of sale."

Gomber chuckled. "It's not that easy, Miss Drew. Willie Wharton is not available. Some of us have a good idea where he is and we'll produce him at the right time. But that time won't be until the railroad promises to give the sellers more money. Then he'll sign. You see, Willie is a real kind man and he wants to help his friends out whenever he can. Now he's got a chance."

Nancy had taken an instant dislike to Gomber and now it was quadrupled. She judged him to be the kind of person who stays within the boundaries of the law but whose ethics are questionable. This was indeed a tough problem for Mr. Drew!

"Who are the people who are apt to harm my father?" she asked.

"I'm not saying who they are," Nathan Gomber retorted. "You don't seem very appreciative of my coming here to warn you. Fine kind of a daughter you are. You don't care what happens to your father!"

Annoyed by the man's insolence, both Nancy and Mrs. Gruen angrily stood up. The housekeeper, pointing toward the front door, said, "Good day, Mr. Gomber!"

The caller shrugged as he too arose. "Have it your own way, but don't say I didn't warn you!"

He walked to the front door, opened it, and as he went outside, closed it with a tremendous bang.

"Well, of all the insulting people!" Hannah snorted.

Nancy nodded. "But that's not the worst of it, Hannah darling. I think there's more to Gomer's warning than he is telling. It seems to me to imply a threat. And he almost has me convinced. Maybe I should stay close to Dad until he and the other lawyers have straightened out this railroad tangle."

She said this would mean giving up a case she had been asked to take. Hastily Nancy gave Hannah the highlights of her conversation with Helen about the haunted mansion. "Helen and her aunt will be here in a little while to tell us the whole story."

"Oh, maybe things aren't so serious for your father as that horrible man made out," Hannah said encouragingly. "If I were you I'd listen to the details about the haunted house and then decide what you want to do about the mystery."

In a short time a sports car pulled into the winding, tree-shaded driveway of the Drew home. The large brick house was set some distance back from the street.

Helen was at the wheel and stopped just beyond the front entrance. She helped her aunt from the car and they came up the steps together. Mrs. Rosemary Hayes was tall and slender and had graying hair. Her face had a gentle expression but she looked tired.

Helen introduced her aunt to Nancy and to Hannah, and the group went into the living room

to sit down. Hannah offered to prepare tea and left the room.

"Oh, Nancy," said Helen, "I do hope you can take Aunt Rosemary and Miss Flora's case." Quickly she explained that Miss Flora was her aunt's mother. "Aunt Rosemary is really my great-aunt and Miss Flora is my great-grandmother. From the time she was a little girl everybody has called her Miss Flora."

"The name may seem odd to people the first time they hear it," Mrs. Hayes remarked, "but we're all so used to it, we never think anything about it."

"Please tell me more about your house," Nancy requested, smiling.

"Mother and I are almost nervous wrecks," Mrs. Hayes replied. "I have urged her to leave Twin Elms, but she won't. You see, Mother has lived there ever since she married my father, Everett Turnbull."

Mrs. Hayes went on to say that all kinds of strange happenings had occurred during the past couple of weeks. They had heard untraceable music, thumps and creaking noises at night, and had seen eerie, indescribable shadows on walls.

"Have you notified the police?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Hayes answered. "But after talking with my mother, they came to the conclusion that most of what she saw and heard could be explained by natural causes. The rest, they said,

probably was imagination on her part. You see, she's over eighty years old, and while I know her mind is sound and alert, I'm afraid that the police don't think so."

After a pause Mrs. Hayes went on, "I had almost talked myself into thinking the ghostly noises could be attributed to natural causes, when something else happened."

"What was that?" Nancy questioned eagerly.

"We were robbed! During the night several pieces of old jewelry were taken. I did telephone the police about this and they came to the house for a description of the pieces. But they still would not admit that a 'ghost' visitor had taken them."

Nancy was thoughtful for several seconds before making a comment. Then she said, "Do the police have any idea who the thief might be?"

Aunt Rosemary shook her head. "No. And I'm afraid we might have more burglaries."

Many ideas were running through Nancy's head. One was that the thief apparently had no intention of harming anyone—that his only motive had been burglary. Was he or was he not the person who was "haunting" the house? Or could the strange happenings have some natural explanations, as the police had suggested?

At this moment Hannah returned with a large silver tray on which was a tea service and some dainty sandwiches. She set the tray on a table and

asked Nancy to pour the tea. She herself passed the cups of tea and sandwiches to the callers.

As they ate, Helen said, "Aunt Rosemary hasn't told you half the things that have happened. Once Miss Flora thought she saw someone sliding out of a fireplace at midnight, and another time a chair moved from one side of the room to the other while her back was turned. But no one was there!"

"How extraordinary!" Hannah Gruen exclaimed. "I've often read about such things, but I never thought I'd meet anyone who lived in a haunted house."

Helen turned to Nancy and gazed pleadingly at her friend. "You see how much you're needed at Twin Elms? Won't you please go out there with me and solve the mystery of the ghost?"

CHAPTER II

The Mysterious Mishap

SIPPING their tea, Helen Corning and her aunt waited for Nancy's decision. The young sleuth was in a dilemma. She wanted to start at once solving the mystery of the "ghost" of Twin Elms. But Nathan Gomber's warning still rang in her ears and she felt that her first duty was to stay with her father.

At last she spoke. "Mrs. Hayes—" she began.

"Please call me Aunt Rosemary," the caller requested. "All Helen's friends do."

Nancy smiled. "I'd love to. Aunt Rosemary, may I please let you know tonight or tomorrow? I really must speak to my father about the case. And something else came up just this afternoon which may keep me at home for a while at least."

"I understand," Mrs. Hayes answered, trying to conceal her disappointment.

Helen Corning did not take Nancy's announce-