

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES

The Hidden Staircase



CAROLYN
KEENE

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THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE

BY
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CHAPTER I

A RUDE VISITOR

"I DECLARE, I don't know what makes me so nervous this afternoon! I have the strangest feeling—just as though something were about to happen."

As Nancy Drew expressed the thought aloud, she tossed aside a book she had been trying to read and restlessly crossed the living room to glance out of the window. She was alone in the big house, for her father, Carson Drew, had been called out of the city on an important law case and Hannah Gruen, the housekeeper, had taken her day off.

Usually, Nancy enjoyed a book, but on this particular afternoon she had been unable to interest herself in anything. For no apparent reason she felt nervous and uneasy.

As she stood at the window, her eyes rested for a moment upon an old-fashioned mantel clock above the fireplace. The timepiece aroused pleasant memories, for it had been given to her as a reward for her service in solving a baffling mystery. Nancy smiled.

"I know what's the matter with me," she told herself. "I'm aching for another adventure. That's all the good it will do me, too!"

With a sigh of resignation, she again settled herself in a comfortable chair and took up her book. She had read scarcely a page when her attention was attracted by the sound of a heavy step on the front veranda.

The doorbell rang sharply. There was an electric something about the ring which was arresting, startling. Before Nancy could get up from the chair, the bell rang a second time.

She dropped her book and hurried to the door. Opening it, she stood face to face with a man she had never seen before.

He was unusually tall and thin with spindling legs which gave him the appearance of a towering scarecrow. The illusion was heightened by his clothing, which was ill-fitting and several seasons out of style. Nancy could not help but notice several grease spots on his coat. However, it was not the man's clothing or miserly appearance which repulsed her, but rather his unpleasant face. He had sharp,

piercing eyes which seemed to bore into her.

Nancy was permitted but an instant to appraise her visitor, for as she opened the door he stepped inside without waiting for an invitation. This rude action somewhat nonplused her, but she was too polite to show her displeasure.

"I am Nathan Gombet of Cliffwood," the man told her bluntly. "I want to see Carson Drew."

"My father isn't here now," Nancy explained quietly.

"Where is he?"

Nancy did not like the brusque way Nathan Gombet had of asking questions, but she answered him politely.

"Out of town on business."

"But I must see him."

"I'm very sorry," Nancy returned patiently, "but it is impossible. He won't be back until late this evening. If you will come back to-morrow——"

"To-morrow won't do. I want to see him now," he demanded.

"Can't you understand that my father is out of town?" Nancy asked a trifle tartly, for she was beginning to be irritated. "If you want to leave a message, I'll give it to him as soon as he comes in."

"I don't want to leave a message. I came

after those papers. Did your father leave them for me?"

"I don't know what papers you mean."

"Oh, you don't, eh? Well, your father knows all right. Just ask him about Nathan Gombet's property rights on the river and he'll tell you all about the nasty deal he and his friends tried to slip over on me!"

"What are you talking about?" Nancy demanded sharply. "Have you lost your senses?"

"I've just come to 'em, that's what I've done. Maybe you don't know about it, but I own some property down along the river. Your father induced me to sell a piece of it at a ridiculously low figure. The land is worth several times what he paid me for it. I'm not going to let anyone put over a raw deal like that. I want the deed back or my price, and Carson Drew is going to give it to me, too!"

"You don't know what you are saying," Nancy said icily. "My father wouldn't cheat anyone out of a cent."

"Oh, no!" Nathan exclaimed sarcastically. "I suppose he's in business for his health!"

"He's not in the business of taking what doesn't belong to him—that's certain!" Nancy retorted hotly. "If you have anything coming to you I'm sure it will be turned over to you just as soon as my father returns."

"Just as soon as he returns—that's good," Nathan sneered. "Like as not he's hiding somewhere in the house this very minute."

"How dare you insinuate such a thing?" Nancy cried angrily. "I'm alone in the house."

The instant she had divulged the information, she could have bitten her tongue.

"Alone, eh? Well, maybe I was mistaken about your father being here, but it's the truth I've been telling you about those papers. He cheated me out of a pile of money."

"It isn't the truth, and you know it! I've listened to you just as long as I intend to. You ought to be ashamed to come here and say such insulting things about my father. Now I wish you'd go!"

"I'll not stir until I get my papers!"

"I've told you I don't know a thing about your old papers."

"They're here some place. I know they're in the house."

"Will you kindly leave?"

"Just try to put me out if you think you can!" Nathan Gombet said, with an unpleasant leer. "You know more about those papers than you let on."

"You're crazy!" Nancy snapped. She was so exasperated that she could not keep her temper in check.

Nathan Gombet's eyes narrowed to mere slits and a cruel look came over his face.

"Get those papers for me!" he commanded harshly.

Nancy was aware that her father sometimes kept valuable papers in his desk, but she had no intention of handing over any of them to this man. She had never heard her father mention the documents in question, but she had no doubt that Gombet was trying to get something which did not belong to him. Although frightened at the man's strange conduct, she faced him boldly.

"I'll not give you anything! Now get out of here!"

"All right, if you'll not hand over the papers, I'll just have a look around for myself."

A crafty look had come into the man's eyes. As he spoke, he moved toward the study which adjoined the living room. From where he had been standing, Carson Drew's desk was in plain sight.

"Don't you dare go in there!" Nancy cried indignantly.

"Oh, so that's where the papers are? I thought as much!"

A half dozen long strides took Nathan Gombet across the room and into the study. Reaching the desk he jerked open a drawer and began pawing through it.

"Stop that!" Angrily, Nancy grasped the man by the coat and pulled him away from the desk. "You get out of here or I'll call the police!"

With one vicious jerk, Nathan Gombet freed himself and wheeled upon her. His face was convulsed with rage and Nancy saw that he was desperate.

Instinctively, she threw up her hands to ward off a blow.

CHAPTER II

A WARNING OF TROUBLE

NATHAN GOMBET did not strike Nancy Drew, although for an instant it appeared that he intended to do so. He remained motionless, regarding her with a hatred he made no effort to conceal. His face was distorted and he stood in a half-crouched position, like an animal about to pounce upon its prey.

Nancy knew that she must act quickly, for she saw the man was beside himself with rage. Unless she handed over the papers he demanded, she did not doubt but that he would attempt to do her bodily injury. She must depend upon her own wits to save her, for there was no one within calling distance. If only she could reach the telephone!

As the thought came to her, her eyes rested for a moment on the instrument. Nathan Gombet saw the look and understood that she intended to carry out her threat to telephone the authorities. His lips parted in an ugly snarl.

"Call the police, will you? Oh, no, my little lady, you won't do that!"

He made a vicious lunge for her, but she was too quick for him. As he reached out to grab her, she stepped to one side and, neatly eluding his clawlike hands, placed the table between them. She caught up the telephone receiver.

Gombet saw that Nancy Drew was not to be bluffed and instantly a change came over him. The look of anger on his face changed to one of genuine fear.

"Don't telephone," he begged almost childishly. "I'll go."

Nancy hesitated, undecided in her course. She had no wish to start a scandal in River Heights by calling the attention of the police to the threats the man had made, for she realized that the resulting publicity might not do her father any good. Yet she wondered if she could trust the man to keep his word.

"All right, then, go," she said curtly, without relinquishing her hold on the telephone. "I'll give you twenty seconds to get out of here! If I see you hanging around the house I'll call the police!"

Hastily, Nathan Gombet picked up his hat and with a last glance toward Carson Drew's desk, turned to leave. Nancy followed him from the study, watching him closely lest he try to work a trick upon her.

In the doorway, the man paused and looked back.

"I'll have my rights before I get through," he muttered. "Your father ain't seen the last o' this, not by a jugful!"

Slamming the door behind him, he tramped across the porch and was gone. From the living room window Nancy watched him until he disappeared beyond the corner.

"I almost wish I'd called the police," she thought. "The idea of saying the things he did about Dad! He thought he could scare me into giving him those papers!"

The encounter had disturbed her considerably, for she realized that in Nathan Gombet her father could have a troublesome enemy. She was convinced that the man was without scruples. Unquestionably, his accusations were entirely false, but if he spread his story about River Heights, undiscerning persons might accept it as fact.

As former district attorney at River Heights, a city in the Middle West, Carson Drew had built up an enviable reputation for himself, but the character of his work was such that he had made enemies as well as staunch friends. Those whom he had antagonized were ever on the lookout for an opportunity to undermine the reputation he had made for himself. So far, Carson Drew had more than held his own

against unscrupulous persons, for he was known as a "fighter."

Nancy was Carson Drew's only child, but, though she had been indulged, she had never been spoiled. She was an unusually pretty girl, fair of skin with friendly blue eyes and golden curly hair. Her friends declared that she was as clever as she was attractive.

Since the death of her mother a number of years before, Nancy had found it necessary to be resourceful and efficient. Not only had she assumed the management of the Drew household, but she took a keen interest in her father's law cases, especially those which smacked of mystery. She had been present at a number of interviews with noted detectives, and her father declared she had a natural talent for digging into interesting cases.

Only the summer before, she had taken it upon her own slender shoulders to solve a mystery which had baffled capable lawyers. When no one could locate Josiah Crowley's missing will, Nancy, in an effort to aid Abigail Rowen and Allie and Grace Horner, had taken over the task herself. Her thrilling adventures, which included an encounter with robbers, are told in that first volume of this series, entitled, "The Secret of the Old Clock."

Of late, Nancy Drew had longed for another exciting experience which would give her an

opportunity to use her wits, little dreaming of what was in store for her.

Yet, as she turned slowly away from the window after watching Nathan Gombet vanish down the street, she had a certain premonition of trouble ahead.

"If I hadn't threatened to call the police, that man would have injured me," she thought. "I do wish father were here. I want to tell him about Nathan Gombet and the threat he made. It wouldn't surprise me if he should try to make trouble."

Nancy was indeed disturbed. Never for an instant did she credit any of the statements the man had made, but from his appearance and actions, she was inclined to believe that he would stoop to anything in order to gain his end.

"He has some dishonest scheme up his sleeve," she assured herself. "Dad will explain everything when he comes home."

Try as she would, she could not forget the unpleasant interview. Her afternoon was completely ruined. In vain she tried to read. After a time she busied herself with some sewing, but had to rip nearly everything out.

"It's no use," she sighed. "I can't keep my mind on what I'm doing. I wish someone would come home. This house is getting on my nerves!"