

75 Years of Mystery Unfolds, Part III: Where in the World is Helen Corning?

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Every daring sleuth needs a fabulous foil friend. Helen Corning was the perfect foil for Nancy Drew throughout their short term sleuthing relationship. Helen offered some support, but did what a foil does best and made Nancy look good. Helen was introduced to readers in the first volume of the series, *The Secret of the Old Clock*. Throughout the next three volumes, readers discovered that as Nancy's school chum, Helen was not the best swimmer, was a natural born gossip and was not one that Nancy felt she could trust to spill the clues while solving mysteries.

As independent as ever, Nancy preferred to work alone in those first four volumes. Helen provided the means for Nancy to stumble upon a clue or a ruse to get out of town. In *Old Clock*, Nancy uses the charity tickets that Helen is trying to sell to gain entrance to the Topham "fortress." Later on, she takes Helen up on her invitation to have fun at Moon Lake in order to do some sleuthing at the Topham's bungalow. A stark contrast, Helen's world revolved around having fun and hanging out with the girls while Nancy's world revolved around solving mysteries. When Nancy arrived to Moon Lake, Helen chimed to the other girls, "Now the fun will start!" (p. 108) Little did Helen know that Nancy's idea of fun would soon involve getting locked in a closet, "left to starve."

Where can a sleuth get some decent help trying to juggle villains and clues? Enter Bess Marvin and George Fayne, cousins who were opposites, introduced in volume 5, *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*. With the cousins' sudden appearance, readers may have been pondering, "Where in the world is Helen Corning?" Rest assured, Helen resurfaced in volume 8, *Nancy's Mysterious Letter* at Emerson college during the big football weekend when Bess and George were left back in River Heights. Helen was dating Ned Nickerson's roommate, Buck Rodman—a "sturdy, curly-haired chap." Again, Helen proved to be more interested in the festivities than in Nancy's sleuthing.

By volume 10, *The Password to Larkspur Lane*, Helen appears again, having just returned from a spring season spent in Europe, and invites Nancy to spend some time with her on Sylvan Lake. While Bess and George are left home once again, Nancy heads off to Sylvan Lake for some fun. Escorted by a deeply-tanned dapper Buck Rodman to lake festivities, Helen enjoys the time spent at the lake but also has gone through a transformation. Helen is much more involved in Nancy's sleuthing and is extremely thrilled to be a part of their adventures. When asked by Nancy if she is ready for real adventure, Helen cheerfully replies, "Real adventure? Say, that's second nature with me." (p. 141).

Second nature indeed, Helen disappears again until volume 20, *The Clue in the Jewel Box*. Back again from Europe where apparently foil friends vacation, Helen has brought a friend home with her that involves Nancy in some fashion modeling and provides some clues to the mystery at hand. Never to be without escort Buck Rodman, Helen throws a picnic for everyone and proves to be much less adventuresome than she was in *Larkspur Lane*. She is but an afterthought in a token appearance in volume

21, *The Secret in the Old Attic*, when she happens to be walking down the Drew's street and is spotted by Nancy.

Many volumes later or in Nancy's world about a season passes, and Helen Corning Archer pops up in volume 46, *The Invisible Intruder*. Helen Corning Archer? By 1969, when *Invisible Intruder* was published, the originals had begun to be revised. Revised Helen Corning soon became Helen Corning Archer. The revisions created a new Helen—one who was somewhat clumsy but more capable and certainly not spoken of as the town gossip. The revising process allowed the Syndicate to write Helen off more easily to make way for Bess and George. Helen was described as being three years older than Nancy and by the revision of volume 2, *The Hidden Staircase*, she was engaged to Jim Archer. She was written out of the revision of *Mysterious Letter* and by the revision of *Larkspur Lane*, she is married to Jim. Her roles in *Larkspur Lane* and *Jewel Box* are somewhat less important in the revisions and her token appearance in *Old Attic* was left out of that revision.

By marrying off Helen, the Syndicate was able to redirect the focus to Bess and George—who were by far the favored foil friends for Nancy. Being married would be reason enough for Helen not to be gallivanting off with Nancy in search of adventure—a role that Bess and George filled quite nicely. It seems for one last major adventure, Helen did join in the fun in *Invisible Intruder*. She and Jim planned a ghost hunting adventure and invited Nancy and the gang in on the excitement.

Mysterious Mannequin was Helen's last brief appearance in the series. George suggested a tennis match with Nancy's old school friend who "had helped Nancy solve a few mysteries." (p. 76) After a round of tennis, Helen provided a clue in the search for the mannequin and then waved goodbye to Nancy wishing her luck in the search. Symbolically, Helen also waved goodbye to readers, who for years were not quite sure what to make of her disappearing act.

Now, 25 years later, Helen will reappear in somewhat mysterious circumstances in the new *Nancy Drew: Girl Detective* series in volume 12, *Stop the Clock*. Perhaps readers will learn what she has been up to during the last "season" since Nancy found that mysterious mannequin. For all the haphazard appearances of Helen in the classic series and her soon to be resurfacing, one might just ponder cheekily, "Where in the world is sturdy *Buck Rodman*?"

(*75 Years of Mystery Unfolds* is a continuing series of articles dedicated to the 75 year history of the Nancy Drew series, running during 2005 in *The Sleuth* (www.nancydrewsleuth.com/thesleuth.html) and *The Whispered Watchword*. Part I was published in the December 2004 issue of *The Sleuth*. Look for part II in the February 2005 issue of *The Whispered Watchword*, part IV in the upcoming March 2005 issue of *The Whispered Watchword* and part V in the April issue of *The Sleuth*.)