



*The  
Haunting  
of Charity  
Delafield*

IAN BECK

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About the Author

Also by Ian Beck

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## About the Book

Flame-haired Charity Delafield leads a lonely existence.

Growing up in a vast, isolated mansion with her fiercely strict father, she is forbidden from exploring the house, from speaking to strangers, from stepping a foot beyond the tall, iron gates - even from reading fairy tales. Told that she suffers from a mysterious 'condition', Charity must never do a thing to over-excite herself - or her imagination.

But Charity has a secret. All her life, she has been visited by the same dream - a dream of a dark corridor, and a locked door, hidden somewhere within the house. One snowy day, she stumbles across the door - and with the help of chimney sweep, Silas, and a very unusual diary, Charity begins to unravel the strange, magical story of her family's past.

*The  
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The Bodley Head

**For Daisy and Laurence Howarth**

From the *County Mercury*  
December 16th 1903

## COUNTY MERCURY

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### **LOCAL MYSTERY STILL UNSOLVED; POLICE CLOSE THE CASE**

Twelve years ago, almost to the day, Mrs Ariella Delafield, wife of prominent local landowner Mr Charles Delafield of Stone Green Hall, disappeared without a trace. Despite the best efforts of the local police force, household staff, friends and family, no explanation of how or why she disappeared has ever been found; nor has there been any sign of her in the intervening years, in spite of extensive searches of the house, the garden and the local forest.

Mrs Delafield has never since contacted her husband, or her young daughter, Miss Charity Delafield, who was only six months old at the time of her mother's disappearance. Mr Delafield has retreated from public life since the tragic occurrence, keeping his young daughter under strict and safe supervision. The mysterious case, which has baffled the police and the public for these last twelve years, was finally declared closed today by local police chief Commander Bartholomew.

Mr Delafield was unavailable for comment.



## Chapter One

THE CORRIDOR STRETCHED out in front of Charity. It seemed to be getting longer, and the door at the end seemed to get further away as she walked through the flickering darkness. She held the candle in its holder very carefully. She was mindful that it might start a fire, and that would not please her father. The windows along the corridor appeared to be open - not very wide, but enough to let in the night wind, which stirred the long white curtains so that they blew inwards like sails as she walked past. She shielded the candle with her hand. It would only need one edge of the fine muslin and lace to catch on the naked flame . . .

Shadows flickered and moved all around her. She caught the movements out of the corner of her eye. Looming shapes curled darkly up the walls and flitted across the ceiling - partly Charity's own shadow as it moved along the corridor, and partly the shadows of the shrouded marble busts and statues that lined the way. There was a gentle slope upwards, a gradual tilt to the floor, and the further she walked, the more effort it took, as if she were suddenly climbing a steep hill. The ceiling seemed to be getting lower too. If she went much further, she would have to crouch down.

Charity saw Mr Tompkins ahead of her - a black shape in the shadowed darkness. 'Where are you going?' she shouted to him.

'You know,' he called back. 'Come on, nearly there.'

She dropped the candle and heard it roll across the floor. The flame went out at once. All she could see was the tiny red dot of failing heat at the end of the wick. She could smell the spatters of hot wax too, and the drifting curls of candle smoke, which seemed to be spelling something out, making letters in the air. She was left bending over under the low ceiling in complete darkness, trying to read them.

Suddenly she felt the tap of something warm on her face.

'Now,' she said out loud, her eyes shut tight.

'Now,' she said into the cold emptiness of her bedroom.

Mr Tompkins was there, sitting on her pillow. He patted Charity's face a second time with his soft, midnight-black paw, and then she sat up in bed.

It had been the dream again.

It was always the same dream - when she remembered it, that is. Sometimes she did remember it after she woke up, but during the dream itself, while it was actually happening, she never realized that she had had it before. It seemed new and freshly minted every time. The long walk along the dark corridor was always accompanied by a feeling of anticipation, the expectation of a secret delight to come.

Charity sometimes asked herself why she had never told Rose or anyone else in the house about the recurring dream. She knew the answer instinctively, although she couldn't explain it. She was sure that she dreamed it over and over again for a reason, and that the reason was hers alone. She simply knew that she just shouldn't mention it to anyone. It was her own little bit of secret knowledge, and one day she was sure she would come to understand it.

It was morning now, and she sighed to herself and stretched her arms up.

'Hello old pusscat, Mr Tompkins,' she said, and ruffled his ears. The cat rubbed against her and purred. 'If Rose

finds you in here she'll put you out, and I'll be in trouble again,' she added, lifting him down onto the floor. He looked up at her with his mysterious green eyes. She could always talk to Mr Tompkins, and he understood everything she said. At least, he seemed to.

'Shoo,' she said, and clapped her hands lightly, but Mr Tompkins just sat and looked up at her, opened his mouth and gave a silent *Meow*.

'In a minute, then,' she told him.

She knew that at any moment, as regular as clockwork, Rose would come in and light the fire, as she did every morning, and another day would start, just like all the others.



## Chapter Two

CHARITY LIVED IN a big dark house called Stone Green Hall. It had sharp pointed gables and tall windows and high, wide chimneys. It stood all on its own, shadowing the rise of the hill. It had two wings projecting out on either side, to the west and to the east. The old house was surrounded by a starkly formal garden, which was the size of a park. High, closely spaced iron railings surrounded the house and garden. Beyond them was a road, and beyond the road was the tangle of dark trees that made up an ancient forest.

The house had miles of long corridors, some of which looked like the insides of old sailing ships with their curved and darkly varnished wooden ceilings. Many of the rooms down these corridors were locked. Their dark doors were the colour of the conkers that Charity might find in the park around the house in the autumn. They stood to attention, mute, one after the other. They were off limits and forbidden to everyone, including Charity. They had been like that for as long as anyone could remember.

'You don't need to go into those rooms, and that is my last word on the subject,' her father had said when she had first asked about them.

There were deep, dark corners and shrouded shapes all over the house. There were pictures on walls, marble busts on columns and full-length statues, and they were all covered up with white dustsheets. They were often piled together in the darkest areas, so that at bedtime they seemed to lurk together in packs, as if specially designed to

frighten her. She couldn't understand why they were treated like that, neglected, as if they were unwanted.

There were trophies too: all sorts of dusty, sad animal heads mounted on boards - deer with their fine proud antlers, badgers' masks, and rows of fox heads, with landscapes and suggestions of skies painted behind them. They were spread all along the corridors in glass-fronted boxes, and there were even some in the main drawing room too. It would seem that the house had once belonged to a hunter. Charity's father did not hunt now, as far as she knew, although he was often away on something called 'business' - whatever that meant.

The main rooms downstairs were kept to a high standard by the small number of staff, but in other places, like the high attics, or the long corridor that led to the bathroom on the nursery floor, not much was done in the way of maintenance.

Charity got out of bed. She shivered and pulled back the curtains. A surprise waited for her: the inside of the window was partly frosted over, and outside, snowflakes were falling. Snow was an event, and Charity's quiet and strictly ordered life had almost no events in it at all. She rubbed the traces of frost away from the glass and then picked up Mr Tompkins.

'Look,' she said. 'It's snowing.'

Mr Tompkins gave a soft *Meow*.

The snow fell slowly, and the flakes twisted around one another in the air as they fell, so that they almost seemed to be dancing together. 'The snow is settling, covering everything,' Charity whispered in the cat's ear. It was true. From her high window she watched it fall, gently transforming the ordinary. She watched the snow cover her day-to-day world with white, flake by flake, like a slow magic trick.

It reminded her of something from when she was much younger - from a time long ago, before she thought she

could remember anything. She put Mr Tompkins down, went over to the cupboard and rummaged about for a moment. There at the back, among her piled-up boots and shoes, was an old spinning top, with clear panels of thick glass on the sides. She took it out and balanced it on the floor. She pressed the little plunger up and down a few times, and then she let the top spin. As it spun it made a sweet sound, a suspended chord of music, and tiny snowflakes spun and fell behind the glass; and there, as if somehow in the distance, a tiny white unicorn reared up and down with the movement of the top. Watching and listening to it made her feel odd and dreamy and very small again.

Mr Tompkins reached out a paw to the spinning top, but Charity gently took it away again. 'Let it play,' she said. 'Let it gallop.' As she stroked Mr Tompkins's head she watched the little dancing snowflakes float past the unicorn while the top spun, and the music almost seemed to slow down time itself.

All at once Charity remembered that there was another event to look forward to. She had been given eight small squares of forbidden chocolate. They had been smuggled to her by Edward, the young footman. He had hidden them for Charity inside the saddle bag of her old rocking horse. She was excited about unwrapping the gold foil - somehow, somewhere - and eating the sweet squares.

It was then that Rose came in, carrying a bucket of fresh coals. 'Good morning,' she said brightly. 'Up already?'

'It's snowing,' Charity said excitedly, turning from the window with the rarest of things across her pale face: a broad smile.

'Miss Manners is not up yet, then, I see . . .' Rose said drily.

'Sorry, Rose,' said Charity, and she gave a little curtsy. 'Good morning. But look - it really is snowing.'

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ Rose said. ‘Who do you think had to walk through it to break the ice on the bird bath first thing this morning, before breakfast?’ She shook her head, then saw Mr Tompkins. ‘Out you go now, you awful old mog.’ She held the door open, and Mr Tompkins slipped silently out.

Rose looked down at the spinning top. ‘Whatever made you get that old toy out, Miss Charity?’ she asked. ‘As far as I remember you’ll be thirteen next birthday, not three.’

‘I know,’ said Charity. ‘I was remembering the sound it made and the little scene inside, that was all. The snow made me think of it.’

‘Well, I wonder if you might put it away now, please,’ Rose said, ‘because knowing my luck I’ll trip over it.’

Rose lit the fire and, once Charity was dressed, persuaded her to sit down in front of the looking glass. She smiled briskly at Charity’s reflection, but Charity did not smile back at her.

It was time for Rose to brush Charity’s hair.

Charity’s hair was fine and easily tangled, and depending on the light, sometimes it was the colour of bright gold, and sometimes it was the colour of flames.

‘Hold still, now, and it won’t hurt you,’ said Rose, as she always did. But it hurt, whether you held still, or wriggled, and writhed, and screamed, and kicked your feet against the skirting board under the dressing table, as Charity used to.

Charity frowned at herself and Rose in the silver-edged glass.

It hurt.

Charity’s hair was curly and knotted, and the brush pulled hard in swift, deadly strokes down her head with a static crackle.

‘Ow!’ murmured the girl, who would not cry now – who would certainly not let Rose see her cry again. ‘Ow!’

'There, all done, and such a fuss,' said Rose, who had been counting carefully as she brushed. 'Seventy-five strokes, morning and night. That's the rule - that's the way Mr Delafield likes it.' She nodded, as if to remind herself of the strict routine.

She carefully picked all Charity's loose hairs free from the brush. She rolled the fine golden strands into a ball and put them straight into the fire, watching as the sparks of burning hair twisted and leaped up the dark chimney. Then Rose put down the brush with a satisfied nod. She spun Charity round by the shoulders, away from the looking glass, and said, 'Time for something special this morning: first, breakfast with your father, and then we are to take a walk.'

'Breakfast with Father?' said Charity. 'Oh.' Her face fell a little and her eyes betrayed her worry at the thought.

'He asked especially to see you this morning,' Rose said, patting her on the arm. 'Then we'll have a nice walk out in the snow,' she added.

'Yes, a walk.' Charity turned back to the window and the dancing snow. Her eyes widened and the smile returned to her lips. 'Outside in the snow.'

'Yes, it's that time again. Time for a walk outside,' said Rose, pleased to have sprung a surprise - or at least a change to Charity's strict routine. 'I'll fetch your outdoor coat from the wardrobe.'

Charity quickly took the squares of chocolate out of the saddle bag on her old rocking horse and tucked them into her pinafore-dress pocket. She loved her old rocking horse. If Rose hadn't been coming back so soon, she would have climbed on and rocked dreamily for a while. She set it going with her hand anyway.

Rose returned with Charity's bright red wool coat with its rows of black buttons, and her black hat and muff. Charity could feel the happy weight of the squares of chocolate in their foil wrapping while she stood at the

window, watching the long avenue and the falling, skipping,  
dancing flakes of snow.