

The Magician's House

The Door in the Tree

William Corlett

*Random House Children's Books*

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## About the Book

It is spring and William, Mary and Alice Constant have returned to Golden House for the Easter holidays, anxious to see if the magic will work again. When they are drawn to the Magician's hideout, through a door in a tree, they learn that the secret to magic is believing; and through believing they can enter the magic and continue their great task.

# The Door in the Tree

Being the Second Book of The  
Magician's House

William Corlett

**RED FOX**

*For Alice*

# 1

## Hide and Seek

ALICE RAN AS fast as she could up the hill, away from the stump where Mary was counting aloud, with her hands covering her eyes. William, meanwhile, scrambled into the undergrowth along the side of the forest track and, at a distance from him, a flash of white marked where Spot was bounding away from the block, his tail wagging as he tried not to bark with excitement.

It was a bright spring day with a breeze blowing. It shook the branches of the trees and made them sway and move above Alice's head, clattering and swishing. Reaching the cover of a clump of gorse bushes, she paused, gasping for breath, and looked around her. The first green buds had opened along the hedgerows and primroses, wild daffodils and violets pushed up through the moss and dead leaves that covered the bank on which she crouched.

Across the valley, through a gap in the forest, she could just see the top of the dovecote in the kitchen garden and beyond it, the roof and chimneys of Golden House. The familiarity of the view made her feel at home. Although this was only her second visit to the place, she already knew the lie of the land. There was something comforting about recognizing landmarks, she thought. It meant that you couldn't get lost. William was so pompous about having the compass, but really all you needed was to use your eyes.

Down below, Mary's voice rose in volume as she neared 'a hundred'. Alice pulled back behind the gorse bushes and crouched lower, waiting, with her heart pounding. She hadn't actually wanted to play hide and seek, in fact she thought it a complete waste of time, but now that they'd started, she couldn't help getting caught up in the game.

It was the first day of the Easter holidays, or rather, it was the first day of their visit to Golden House. All three children had spent Easter weekend with friends in London and then come on by train, via Bristol, the day before.

Phoebe had been waiting for them at the station and they'd driven back through the early evening haze, reaching the house as the last light finally drained from the sky and darkness settled over the valley.

Jack had been in the kitchen washing his hands at the sink when they'd come in and Spot had appeared from nowhere, rushing towards them, barking and licking and jumping with such enthusiasm that he'd knocked Alice off her feet and then landed on top of her, covering her face with his wet tongue while she happily screamed and protested.

Stephanie, who'd been sleeping in her cot, had been woken by all this commotion and joined in with a strong bellowing so that the whole house, which a moment before had been silent, echoed and reverberated with noise.

'Oh, Lord!' Jack had yelled, covering his ears and laughing. 'You're back! I'd forgotten how noisy you brats can be!' and he'd pushed Spot off Alice and yanked her up on to her feet and given her a hug.

Later he'd gone with them up to their rooms at the top of the spiral staircase above the great hall and he'd sat on Mary's bed and talked while they unpacked. He was full of all the work he'd been doing on the house and all the surprises he'd found; 'The cellars and the attics and bits of old junk and goodness knows what else', he'd told them excitedly. But they hadn't really been listening to him. They'd wanted to be on their own, to savour the pleasure of



being back. They hadn't even wanted to share the moment between themselves. They'd each wished that they were entirely alone so that they could hug themselves and run to the window and look out or lie on the bed and stare up at the steeply pitched ceilings of their rooms, with the dark wooden beams and cobwebs and white, flaking plasterwork.

Then Phoebe had called them down and they'd had supper round the kitchen table and everyone had started to talk at the same time about what had been happening to them since they were last together. They'd eaten thick bean soup, followed by vegetable stew and jacket potatoes stuffed with cheese. After that there was a treacle tart for dessert and Alice had had a second helping and thought for a moment that she was going to burst, but the others ignored her alarm and so she'd eaten an apple as well. Finally all the excitement of the day and the travelling had got the better of them and the children had crawled back up the stairs to their rooms once more and were tucked up in bed and fast asleep before the clock in the hall chimed nine.

Now, as Alice crouched in hiding, she thought it had been a bit of a disappointment, really. All through the spring term she'd dreamed of Golden House and of the magic and particularly of Spot. There had been no one she could share the memories with. Mary was in senior school now and she never saw her, William was away in Yorkshire, and of course, they'd made a Solemn Vow on the last day of the Christmas holiday not to speak about anything that had happened to them while they were at Golden House to anyone but each other.

So the term had come to an end but then, when they were staying with their friends in London, they'd had no chance to talk at all. She'd expected the subject at least to be mentioned when they were on the train yesterday, but the other two had read books and wouldn't be drawn into any conversation about their previous visit to Uncle Jack's house. In fact when Alice had mentioned the Magician, Mary

had kicked her on the shin under the table and William had hissed at her to shut up, because people might be listening.

So Alice had sat with her hands under her thighs and swung her legs and hummed a tuneless little song and stared glumly out of the window until they reached Bristol.

While they'd waited for their connection she'd been too busy eating sausages in the station buffet for any conversation. The stockpiling of the sausages was a sensible precaution against Phoebe's vegetarian cooking and she'd planned it well in advance. She thought it was probably the sort of preparation a camel would undertake before making a long journey across the desert - only she hadn't got a hump and half way through the third jumbo sausage she had felt a bit sick and left the rest of it on the paper plate.

The little train had been crowded with people so they hadn't even managed to sit together. Alice had got a window seat and stared out at the passing scene. The sausages were stuck like a lump in her stomach and the central heating in the carriage was turned up high. She'd felt hot and a bit depressed. She'd been looking forward to it all so much, but William and Mary seemed to have forgotten everything, which was typical of them and exceedingly boring.

Phoebe had been waiting for them at Druce Coven Halt and once they were in the Land-Rover there had been again no possibility of private conversation. Finally, when they'd reached the house, they'd been with Uncle Jack the whole time until they went up to their rooms. Then Mary did at one point say, almost grudgingly Alice thought, that they should have a conference after supper; but when that time came, they couldn't any of them keep their eyes open and were almost asleep before they'd each staggered into their beds. Consequently it wasn't until the following morning that they had had any time to themselves.

Soon after breakfast Mary had suggested going out to explore the forest.

‘Don’t go too far,’ Jack had warned them. ‘The paths are pretty obvious, but it can get a bit confusing after a while.’

‘We won’t get lost,’ William had assured him. ‘I’ve been doing orienteering at school. Have you got a large scale map, Uncle Jack?’

But Jack had shaken his head and said he’d been meaning to get one, but hadn’t so far got round to it. There was an ordinary map but it wasn’t a big enough scale to be useful in the forest. ‘You need one that marks the footpaths and tracks,’ he told them.

Phoebe said she’d try to get one when she went into town, later in the morning.

‘A map really is needed,’ William had said, ‘if we’re going to explore properly. With a map and a compass you can never get lost.’

Alice had sighed at this and bit back a catty remark. William was at his most pompous and she loathed him when he got into one of those moods, but she’d thought it best not to have a row with him straight away; not so soon after they’d arrived.

Phoebe had suggested they might like to go with her when she went shopping.

‘The town’s quite nice really. There’s a castle of sorts. Well, it’s more of a tower really. Built by the English to suppress the Welsh. Or maybe it was built by the Welsh to threaten the English. My history is hopeless.’

Mary perked up at this, because history was her favourite subject. But this had been the final straw for Alice.

‘If Mary’s going to start giving a history lesson,’ she’d announced, unable to contain her irritation a moment longer, ‘I’m definitely going out,’ and she’d run to the back door to put on her shoes.

William had agreed with Alice – once Mary started on history it could last for hours – but he didn’t say so. Instead he followed her to the door.

‘If you get us a map, Phoebe,’ he’d said, ‘it’d be really good. You can’t orienteer properly without one.’

But he took his compass anyway and, when they’d all put on shoes, he’d set off in the lead in a rather bossy way, which infuriated Alice even more and made Mary lag behind as though she was ‘not being with them’ in a rather pointed way.

They’d gone through the kitchen garden, passing the dovecote, and out through a gate in the back wall, which Jack had told them led to where the forest track skirted the back of the estate. Once there, William had paused, deciding which direction to take, and Alice had caught him up, followed shortly after by Mary.

‘I don’t believe you two,’ Alice had said, trying not to sound disappointed and sounding cross instead.

‘Now what’s the matter?’ William had asked, concentrating on the compass.

‘William!’ Alice had exploded, shaking with exasperation. ‘Surely you haven’t forgotten?’

But William had only stared more closely at the compass and Mary had crossed away from them to lean against a fence, with her back to them both.

‘I’ve waited all term for this . . .’ Alice started again, but now she’d been interrupted by the sound of Spot barking at a distance, and a moment later he appeared from the direction of the kitchen garden, tail wagging.

‘Oh, Spot,’ Alice had cried, flinging her arms round the dog’s neck. ‘You remember, don’t you? You remember how the Magician made it possible for me to be in you and see through your eyes and smell through your nose? You remember how we raced together across the, snow. . . . Please tell me you do, Spot. You know you can. You can talk in my head, can’t you? That’s what happened. We did, didn’t we? Please say we did . . .’

But Spot had only gazed up at her with pleading eyes and had put his head on one side as though he was trying

desperately to understand her words.

This had been more than Alice could bear. If Spot didn't remember, then no one would. That meant no one in the world remembered . . . except her.

'What is going on?' she'd said to herself and she'd frowned and sat on her haunches and scratched her cheek, always a sign that she was thinking deeply.

But William had turned slowly and looked at her.

'Of course I remember,' he'd said in a low doubting voice, then he'd quickly looked away again, concentrating once more on his compass.

'You do?' Alice had cried out, relieved. 'I thought I was going crazy. Oh, Will - why won't you talk about it then?'

'I've thought a lot about it. But . . . it couldn't have happened,' William had said quietly. 'I mean . . . it isn't possible.'

'It did, though,' Mary then joined in. 'Somehow it did.'

'But, of course it did!' Alice had exclaimed. 'What's wrong with you both? Why are you behaving so strangely?' And she knelt on the ground, looking up at them with desperate eyes.

'I'm not,' William had replied. 'I can't explain. It's just . . . well, it isn't possible - magic, I mean. So . . . if it isn't possible . . . it didn't happen.'

'But we all know it did happen - all of it.' Alice could have hit him, she felt he was being so stupid. 'What will you say if it happens now? That you're dreaming it? I'd like to know how we could all three of us have had the same dream then. That seems most odd to me.'

'Well, if it does happen again . . .' William had answered, sounding far from comfortable, 'then maybe I'll have to believe it - at least while I'm here. But when I was away - at school - it just seemed . . . so unlikely. Surely you felt that? I couldn't go on thinking about it, because . . . I didn't believe in it.'

‘Was it because you were frightened of it?’ Mary had asked him.

‘No!’ he’d replied, sounding irritable.

‘I was, last term,’ Mary had said. ‘I had to stop remembering it all because it scared me so much. Like . . .’ she’d paused, taking a deep breath, and when she’d next spoken her voice was no more than a whisper, ‘. . . when I flew with the owl . . .’

‘But – wasn’t it wonderful, Mary? You must remember that?’ Alice had insisted.

‘It was the most frightening thing that’s ever happened to me,’ Mary had whispered, and she’d shivered and shaken her head. ‘Let’s play hide and seek,’ she’d said, changing the subject, and no matter how Alice tried, she couldn’t get either of them to talk any more about it.

‘I think you’ve been magicked,’ she’d told them crossly. ‘I think a spell has been cast on you so that you behave like this . . .’

‘Oh, Alice!’ William had wailed, putting his compass into his pocket, ‘there are no such things as spells,’ and before Alice had had a chance to protest he’d held up a hand. ‘I agree with Mary,’ he’d said, ‘let’s play hide and seek!’

‘Kee! Kee!’

‘NINETY EIGHT, NINETY NINE, ONE HUNDRED!’ Mary’s voice rose to a crescendo. ‘I’m coming!’

By moving her head a little, Alice could just see her sister standing at the bottom of the hill on the narrow forest track. She saw Mary slowly turn and scan her surroundings, with her eyes shaded by her hands against the glare of the sun which came and went as clouds chased across it, carried on the spring breeze.

The object of the game was for the hidiers to get home to the tree stump and touch it, shouting ‘block, one, two, three!’ as they did so. Mary’s job, as the seeker, was to stop them. She had first to discover their hiding place. Then, once they were seen, she had to intercept them before they could get to the home block and then she had to stop them, by touching them, like in tag. It should have been quite easy. All she had to do was to stay by the block until someone approached and then chase them. But, as soon as she chased one person, she would have to leave the block unguarded. This was the best time for another player to creep in, unobserved. The best strategy for a hider, therefore, was to get as close to the block as possible without being seen and then to make a dash for it while the seeker’s attention was distracted.

Alice decided at once that she had hidden herself too far away from the block. But to go back to the lower track by

the way she had come was impossible now that Mary had finished counting. The hillside up which she had scrambled was covered by grasses, ferns, young bracken, huge clumps of brambles and spiky wild roses with only a few stunted bushes to hide behind. If she tried to return that way, Mary would be sure to see her. She looked round for an alternative route. What she needed was some cover.

A narrow track, no more than a muddy indentation in the grass, led away from her, winding behind the gorse bushes, then across a bit of open land, before entering the deeper woods that crowded in on either side of the clearing in which she was crouching. If she could reach the protection of the trees, she reckoned, she'd easily be able to work her way down to the bottom of the bank without being seen. The only problem would be crossing the open ground.

Glancing back down the hill she could see Mary walking slowly along the track in the direction that William had taken and was now hiding. From Alice's vantage point she could see him standing behind a tree, just off the track. He obviously couldn't see Mary because, once, he moved slowly round the trunk to get a better look, then pulled back quickly, apparently surprised by how close she was to his hiding place.

Then, just as Mary might have discovered him, a movement on the other side of the track made her swing round.

'Spot!' she yelled. 'I can see you!' and the dog, hearing his name being called, came bounding out of the undergrowth, barking and jumping round her. Taking advantage of this distraction, William broke his cover, making a dash back along the track towards the block.

'William!' Mary yelled. 'I can see you!'

'You've got to tag me, Mary!' her brother shouted, without looking back, as he ran for the block.

Spot, seeing William racing away, thought this was a much better game and ran after him, jumping round his



feet, slowing him up and forcing him off the track once more, back in amongst the trees.

‘Spot!’ William yelled, laughing. ‘You’re not supposed to do this. You’re not on Mary’s side . . .’

Mary was charging at William now, her arms flung out as she tried to touch him. All the time Spot wound between them, barking and jumping, his tail wagging and his paws reaching out to them both.

While Mary was distracted, Alice turned and sprinted along the path, crouching low behind the gorse bushes and then even lower as she passed out of their protection on to the bare hillside, in full sight of the path below. But Mary and William and Spot had now all tumbled together into a heaving, kicking, laughing and barking heap and were completely unaware of her.

In front of her a line of fir trees blocked the way. They had been planted so closely together that, at first, she thought she wouldn’t be able to squeeze between them. But the path she was on wound round a first tree – its graceful boughs, covered in dark green needles, reaching almost to the ground – and then passed through a gap between two other trunks that until then had been invisible.

At once she was in the gloomy interior of the forest. After the bright, blowy, day outside, it was like entering another world. Here the light was filtered, brown and dim, through a thick web of needle-less branches. The only sign of life on the trees was right at the top, where their green tips stretched for a sky that could only be guessed at from below. The ground was covered with years and years of dropped needles and dry cones. Scarcely any plants grew on the sour earth and those that did were thin and rank; a few ferns, a straggle of ivy, long thorny tendrils of bramble and, in one place, some almost-black and evil looking toadstools. But it was the stillness that Alice noticed most. The breeze, which outside had been fresh and invigorating, was reduced to a dull, distant roar as it forced its way through the mesh

of interwoven branches and twigs. There were no birds singing. Even Spot's barking and William and Mary's laughing voices disappeared at once, as though they had ceased to exist. The air, which had smelt clean and sparkling, was here thick and dank with decay.

The path became more difficult to follow. The ground was strewn with rotting branches and some whole, fallen trees - jammed in and balanced crazily amongst the rows of upright trunks. There were occasional mounds of loose stones, covered with moss and dull lichen and sudden ridges of rough, dark rock jutting up out of the earth.

Rounding one of these outcrops, she was surprised to find that the ground fell away from her, almost sheer, down into a gloomy hollow where the trees were packed so tightly together that they appeared like a solid wall of trunks, too close even for her to slip between.

Alice turned back and started to retrace her steps to the side of the forest from which she had entered. She didn't at all like this dead, half-world that she'd strayed into, she decided, and would be glad to be back on the outside. But now the way looked completely unfamiliar; or rather, the very sameness of the view ahead made her unsure of precisely which route she had taken. She followed a narrow, beaten track - made, she supposed, by an animal - which led her more gradually uphill until, in front of her through the gloom, she could just make out some green shrubs and a sudden shaft of sunlight cutting through the trees. She hurried forward, hoping that she might have reached the side of the forest, and the open ground beyond, but when she reached the light, she found only a clump of holly bushes and a carpet of long, thin grasses where a few trees had been chopped down many years before. She could see the trunks piled in a mouldering heap at the side of the glade. All around her, the dark and silent forest pressed in, stifling her with its presence.

She turned slowly in a full circle, searching for any familiar object that would tell her which way to go. But there was none. Wherever she looked, the same ranks of trees stretched away from her into the gloom. She had no idea now from which direction she had started out; she had no idea in which direction to continue.

Alice was lost.

'William!' she called, fighting back the panic that she could feel welling up from her stomach, making her heart beat faster and a lump of tears form in the back of her throat.

'William? Mary?' she shouted, louder this time. Then she paused, waiting, without much hope, for an answering call.

The silence that surrounded her was almost throbbing. It seemed solid, like the great circle of trees that hemmed her in. She shouted again, but her voice sounded unfamiliar. It was like shouting into a pillow; muffled and lifeless.

'William!' she yelled. And, 'Mary!'

She made the words as long and as loud as she could. But no answering call came back to her; only an awful stillness and a terrible, booming nothing.

At last Alice sat down on the pile of logs and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her anorak. She tried to calm herself and work out the direction in which she had come. She thought of William bragging about his compass but realized that even if she had one it wouldn't be much use because she didn't know which way she should be heading. She thought that if she retraced her steps back into the forest to the outcrop of rock then she might, perhaps, find her original path but now, with a gasp of fear, she realized that she wasn't even sure which way she had entered the clearing in which she was sitting.

'Oh, help!' she whispered and she looked up to where a patch of clear sky glittered with light above her head. There the tops of the firs tossed and swayed in the breeze and

clouds raced across the blue. It was like looking through a keyhole from a dark cupboard at the bright world outside.

Alice took a deep breath and pursed her lips. It occurred to her that the easiest and most obvious way out of her predicament would be to fly. But of course that wasn't possible. Unless;

'If only the Magician would come,' she thought. 'He could help me.'

A faint speck on the blue sky wheeled round and round above her head, gradually forming into a bird as it flew closer to the surface of the trees.

Alice felt, in some peculiar way, that it was looking at her. Or, at least, as it was the only sign of life, she hoped that it could see her. She stretched out her hand to it, willing the bird not to fly away out of her sight. She saw it stretch its wings, like a swimmer treads water, and hover on the invisible air. She heard it cry out; a long, plaintive 'Kee kee' sound. Then it reached its claws downwards and dropped like a stone, to land, with a great flapping of wings, on one of the highest branches of a fir. There it settled and slowly arched its neck, peering down at her.

For a moment neither of them moved.

The eyes of the bird were like pinpricks of light. They seemed to hold Alice in their piercing gaze so that she was transfixed. But she didn't feel afraid. It wasn't an unfriendly stare, but cool and interested; the enquiring look of a scientist through a microscope or of an artist seeing his subject.

'Please,' Alice whispered, 'I'm a bit lost.'

'Kee kee!' the bird called. The sound had a dying fall. It reminded her of high moors and lonely landscapes. A cold sound. It made her shiver. She dug her hands deeper into her pockets and bit her lower lip.

'I was with my brother and sister,' she continued, feeling that one of them had to make some attempt at conversation. 'We were playing hide and seek . . .'

'Kee! Kee!' the bird called.

'You're not by any chance connected to the Magician, are you?' Alice said.

The bird darted its head forward then turned it sharply to the side, as though it was listening.

Alice, released from its stare, turned quickly to look in the same direction and, as she did so, she heard Spot barking.

'Spot!' she shouted, jumping up off the log and running in the direction of the sound. 'Spot! I'm here. Spot!'

As the excited barking grew closer, Alice glanced up at the tree once more. The bird stretched its wings and launched itself into the air.

'I'll be all right now,' Alice called. 'That's my friend, Spot, you can hear. He'll show me the way.'

'Kee! Kee!' the bird called and then slowly it circled the sky above the clearing and a moment later disappeared from view.

## The Two Paths

IT WAS SPOT who first noticed that Alice was missing. William and Mary were sitting on the side of the track, gasping for breath after all the exertion of fighting, when he suddenly raised his head, his nostrils twitching, and raked the distant high ground behind them with his eyes.

‘What, Spot?’ Mary asked. ‘Did you see Alice?’ and she sprang to her feet, turning at the same time, and calling out: ‘Come on out, Alice. We can all see you.’

‘You liar, Mary!’ William said, also rising. ‘You can’t see her at all.’ Then he frowned. ‘I wonder where she is.’

‘Still hiding,’ Mary answered, searching the tree line with her eyes. ‘You know Alice. She never gives in.’

‘But she’s had masses of chances to get to the block – while we were fighting,’ William said and, as he spoke, he started to run after Spot, who was already half way up the bank, his nose to the ground, following Alice’s scent.

Spot soon reached the place behind the gorse bush, where Alice had crouched. He could smell her strongly here. He wagged his tail, yelping and barking as he searched the ground with his nose. Then he lifted his head, one front paw raised off the ground, and looked towards the distant trees. As he did so, his tail went down between his legs and he started to whine pitifully.

‘What is it, Spot? What’s the matter?’ William asked, catching him up and putting a comforting hand on the back

of his neck. Then he also looked towards the bank of firs, rising like a rampart in front of them.

‘What’s up?’ Mary asked, panting as she ran up the hill to join them.

‘I don’t know,’ William said. ‘It’s Spot. Something’s upsetting him.’

As he spoke, Spot whined, turning round and round, as though he was reluctant to proceed.

‘There’s something wrong, Mare,’ William whispered, and he knelt down on the ground in front of the dog. ‘What is it, boy?’ he asked, his voice sounding gentle. ‘Is it Alice? Is she in danger?’

Spot’s whining turned to yelping and he jumped up and down, then turned and started to walk, with obvious reluctance, towards the trees.

‘He doesn’t want to go in there,’ Mary said, in a puzzled voice. Then she added, ‘Oh, Will! I wish the magic would start.’

‘I thought you were afraid of it,’ William mumbled, as though still not wanting to admit to the possibility.

‘If the magic would start – Spot could talk to us. That’s all I meant,’ Mary replied.

‘You think it really happened, then?’ William asked.

‘I know it did,’ Mary answered him. ‘And so do you, really. You do, don’t you?’

William sighed.

‘Yes,’ he answered her. ‘But not like Alice does; I’m not sure, like she is. I find it easier to believe now we’re here, I suppose. But, at school, it all seemed so . . . improbable.’

He looked at the dog. Spot was lying on the ground again, with his front paws stretched out in front of him, staring at the trees.

‘You don’t want to go in there, do you?’ William said to him gently, scratching him behind an ear. The dog looked up sideways at him and whimpered.