

The Magician's House

The Steps up
the Chimney

William Corlett

Random House Children's Books

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About the Book

This is where the magic of Golden House begins. William, Mary and Alice Constant have come to spend Christmas with their uncle. But little by little, they discover that things in this remote old house are not quite what they seem. There are powerful forces at work, calling to the children from across the centuries; forces that pull them up the hidden steps in the chimney to the secret room where the Magician lives.

The Steps up the Chimney

Being the First Book of
The Magician's House

William Corlett

RED FOX

For Bryn and The Dysons

At Druce Coven Halt

THE STATION AT Druce Coven was a lonely place. The line that served it was for most of its length a single track that wound through the bleak and lovely countryside of the Welsh and English borders from Manchester in the north to Bristol in the south. It meandered through desolate villages and deserted halts where sometimes only a thin strip of platform and a green painted hut indicated that here was indeed a stopping place.

William, who had taken the train from Manchester, was the first to arrive at Druce Coven. His sisters, Mary and Alice, coming from London, would change at Bristol and their train was expected ten minutes later. It had been arranged that Uncle Jack would meet them and drive them back to Golden House, a journey of some twenty miles. But when William alighted from the train, dragging his heavy suitcase after him, and slamming the door, he was surprised to find that he was alone on the platform. Uncle Jack hadn't arrived and no other passengers got off the train with him. There wasn't even a guard on the platform, nor a ticket office, because the train was more like a bus and fares were paid to the conductor on board. For a moment he wondered if he was in fact in the right place. Leaving his case he walked towards the fence, where a gate swung and creaked in the wind. Beside the gate, a long sign with white letters painted on peeling green proclaimed that this was DRUCE

COVEN HALT. That was where he had been told to expect his uncle. At least, he thought, I'm here first. Mary and Alice wouldn't have liked it, being younger. And, he had to admit, it was a lonely place even for him. He shivered and looked round apprehensively.

It was a cold, dull December afternoon. The rain that had been threatening all day pressed heavily on the swollen clouds. A thin wind moaned through the struts of the fence and tugged at a loose board on the roof of the seat shelter. The halt was situated in a deep cutting, so that it wasn't possible to see the country that surrounded it. A bridge crossed the cutting. Ahead of him, towards Bristol, the line disappeared into a dark tunnel.

William stuffed his hands into the pockets of his anorak and kicked a stone. It skidded and clattered against the opposite side of the track, where the steep bank was overgrown with weeds and stunted shrubs and trees. He walked a few steps along the platform, then turned and walked the same number back. Then he looked at his watch. The Bristol train was due in eight minutes. He retraced his steps to his suitcase and sat down.

At the top of the bank opposite to him, a thick belt of trees crowded up to a solid wooden fence. As he looked at them, a fox suddenly broke cover and stood, with one front paw raised, looking down into the cutting. The brilliant red of its coat seemed almost to flash with light against the dull surroundings. William leaned forward, surprised and excited by its unexpected appearance. As he did so, the animal turned its head and stared at him. It seemed to William as if the fox's eyes were in a direct line with his own; as though for a moment, they were both of them held by some invisible string.

'Hello there!' a voice called, breaking the unnatural stillness in the narrow cutting.

So surprising and unexpected was the voice that it seemed almost as if it had been the fox who had spoken, but William knew that was ridiculous. Still it remained staring at him for a moment longer then, as silently and stealthily as it had arrived, it disappeared once more into the undergrowth.

William shivered and blinked. He felt cold and disappointed. He had liked the fox. It had been almost a friend on the desolate platform. Now that it was gone, he missed its company.

'You boy. Hello!' the voice called again, bringing William back to the present. Turning, he saw a man leaning over the bridge, looking down at him. Once again eyes searched out his own; once again the invisible string seemed to connect William to the man who was now looking at him. The eyes of the man, like the eyes of the fox, seemed to probe into William's mind, as though they were searching his thoughts. He tried to look away but he was unable to do so, so powerful seemed the gaze.

'Lost your tongue, boy?' the man called.

'No,' William replied, his voice coming out almost defiantly, but, as he spoke, he stood up. He felt a surge of panic, and glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if searching for somewhere to hide.

'I'm sorry,' the man said more gently. 'I startled you. But, surely - aren't you expecting someone to meet you here?'

'My uncle,' William replied.

'Ah, yes. That's right. But - you're alone?'

'My sisters are coming from London. They'll be on the next train.' Although the man asked such direct questions and although his eyes continued to stare so deeply into William's, he didn't seem altogether unfriendly.

'Stay there,' he now said, and a moment later William saw him walking down the short, steep track to the gate in the fence and out on to the platform in front of him.

'What's your name, boy?' the man asked.

‘William. William Constant.’

‘William Constant,’ the man repeated quietly, and then he smiled and was silent. He was tall and thin, with a high forehead and receding hair. His eyes were very pale; blue-grey and flecked with gold that seemed almost to sparkle. His hair, what was left of it, was wispy and long; the wind blew it in a haze of red round his head, like a cloud. He was wearing a long black mac, buttoned to the chin.

‘Well, William Constant,’ he said at last, ‘you’re the oldest, are you?’

‘Yes. I’m thirteen.’

‘And the others? Your sisters?’

‘Mary is eleven and Alice is eight.’

The man nodded, a slow, deliberate movement of the head.

‘And you’re going to stay at the Golden House, am I right?’

‘My uncle lives there. D’you know him?’

‘I’ve seen him, yes. And his wife. It is his wife, is it?’

‘Phoebe. That’s her name.’

‘His wife?’

‘Sort of,’ William replied reluctantly. He did feel a bit nervous under the penetrating gaze and, although he didn’t at all like this cross-examination, he found it difficult not to answer the man’s questions.

‘There’s no need to be afraid, William. I mean you no harm,’ the man told him, and reaching out, he put a hand lightly on William’s shoulder.

‘I’m not afraid,’ William protested defiantly, but really he wished that he wasn’t all alone with this man who stared so searchingly into his eyes as the fox had done.

‘Is it the first fox you’ve seen?’ the man asked, seeming to read his thoughts.

‘Well, I’ve seen them on television of course. But I’ve never seen one in the wild before.’

'There are badgers at the Golden House and otters in the river. You'll see them, as well, I dare say.'

'Do you live near here then?'

'I know the area,' the man replied quietly and as he did so, his face looked sad.

'We're staying there for the Christmas holidays. Our parents are working abroad. They're both doctors. They're out in Ethiopia, working in a hospital. Well, it's more of a camp really' William knew that he was suddenly speaking too much and too fast, but the man's sad expression made him want to fill in the silences.

The man's hand was still resting on his shoulder. It felt heavy and now it gripped at William's anorak, so that he was pulled towards him.

Distantly, behind him, William heard the long, plaintive whistle of an approaching train.

'Here's the train,' he said, without looking round. 'You'll be able to meet Mary and Alice. What's your name, by the way? So that I can introduce you?'

The man clung to his shoulder, staring into his eyes.

'My name is Stephen Tyler, William. Will you remember that?'

Much nearer now the whistle sounded again. William turned and saw the diesel train come out of the gloom of the tunnel towards him. With a hiss and a shudder it came to a halt. For a moment nothing happened, then one of the windows opened and a girl with short brown hair stuck her head out.

'William,' she called, 'can you help? The door's stuck.'

William hurried along the short platform and opened the door for her. The girl climbed out and turned back to drag down her suitcase.

'Here, Mary, I'll do that,' William said, trying to push past her.

'I can manage,' his sister retorted, pulling at the heavy case.

‘Will. Help me instead,’ Alice, his younger sister called, appearing at the open doorway. ‘Only hurry, or the train’ll start again.’

As William lifted Alice’s suitcase down on to the platform he glanced back to where Mr Tyler was still standing, watching the arrival. Then William swung round and taking Alice’s hands, he helped her to jump down on to the platform.

As soon as he slammed the door, the train started to move off. Alice held on to William’s hands for an instant, then jumped up and gave him a kiss.

‘Don’t be soppy, Alice,’ he protested. Then he remembered Mr Tyler. ‘This man knows Golden House quite well,’ he said and he turned to introduce his sisters.

‘What man?’ Mary demanded.

The platform was empty.

‘How funny. There was a man here . . . You must have seen him. I was standing with him, when you called to me from the train. Where’s he gone?’

‘I didn’t see anyone,’ Mary said, bending to pick up her suitcase.

‘But he was here.’

‘Well he isn’t here now, is he?’

‘But – where did he go?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mary said, with an unhelpful shrug. ‘Oh, this suitcase weighs a ton.’

‘Maybe he got on the train, Will,’ Alice said as she also picked up her case.

‘I suppose so,’ William said, still puzzled by the man’s sudden disappearance.

‘There’s Uncle Jack,’ Alice squealed and, dropping her case once more, she ran along the platform to where a man wearing jeans and a sweater was hurrying down the track towards the gate.

‘Sorry I’m late!’ he was calling. ‘I got held up by some sheep.’

The Journey to Golden House

JACK'S ANCIENT LAND-ROVER was parked at the top of the track on the narrow lane that crossed the railway by the bridge and then disappeared in amongst trees in both directions.

'It's all part of an ancient forest,' Jack explained as he carried the girls' cases and put them in the back of the motor. 'At one time it stretched as far as the Forest of Dean in the south. But of course, over the centuries, much of it has been felled.'

'The Royal Forest of Dean,' Mary corrected him. 'That's where Nelson got all the oak for his ships from. We did it in history.'

'Oh, Mary!' her sister said, climbing up on to the front seat, beside the driver. 'The last thing we want to hear is one of your history lessons. They're so boring.'

'Alice! I want to sit in the front,' William said, putting his case in the back and walking round to stand beside her.

'No. I got here first.'

'They're always squabbling,' Mary confided to Jack. 'And that's really boring.'

'William, get off me!' Alice yelled, as her brother sat firmly on top of her.

'Get off her, William. You can both sit in the back,' Jack told them.

'I want to sit in the front beside you,' Alice wailed.

'Well, you can't. Go on, Mary, you sit in front,' Jack said, climbing into the driver's seat.

'But why?' Alice protested.

'Because she waited,' Jack told her.

After some more arguing William and Alice climbed into the back and Mary sat beside Jack. As she did so, she glanced at him and smiled. Then she ran her hand through her hair.

'I'm growing my hair. It used to be quite short. Do you like it?'

'Ugh! Stop flirting, Mary,' Alice said. 'Be careful, Uncle Jack. She's man mad!' and she started to giggle.

'Honestly, you're such a baby, Alice,' Mary said and she looked out of the window to hide the fact that she was blushing.

'You're blushing,' Alice sang the words. 'Mary's blushing.'

'Shut up, Alice!' Mary said, sounding really cross.

'Yes! Shut up, Alice,' Jack rejoined. But he looked over his shoulder and smiled at her as he spoke.

Alice shrugged and pouted. She was outnumbered and it wasn't fair. She swung her legs and looked at the floor. An uneasy silence followed.

'D'you know what, Uncle Jack, I saw a fox. When I was waiting at the station,' William said, remembering again the sharp, enquiring eyes.

'There are a lot of them round here. We have one at the house. It comes into the garden at night. You don't often see them during the day though.'

'And there are badgers, aren't there? And otters in the river,' William continued, enthusiastically.

'Who told you all that?'

'The man.'

'What man?' his uncle asked, glancing at William in the driving mirror.

'Will has a mysterious man, who wasn't there,' Mary volunteered, tucking her legs up under her and swinging

round on the seat so that she was resting her hands on the back of it.

‘He got on the train, Mary. We worked that out,’ Alice told her, spitefully.

‘He was there,’ William protested. ‘I spent ages talking to him. His name was Stephen Tyler.’

Jack glanced at his nephew again in the driving mirror.

‘Stephen who?’ he asked.

‘No, Doctor Who!’ Alice corrected and giggled again.

‘Tyler,’ William repeated. ‘He said I was to remember the name.’

‘Well, it isn’t a very difficult one, is it?’ Mary said. ‘Not like Alicia Borodevski.’

‘Alicia . . . who?’ Jack laughed.

‘Borodevski,’ Mary repeated, pleased with the effect she had made. ‘She’s a girl in our class. Her great-grandfather was a white Russian.’

‘Aren’t they all white?’ Alice asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Mary retorted. ‘But she’s one. Her family can never go back to Moscow in case they get put in prison. That’s what she said, anyway. They were all friends of the Tsar. And they ran away with jewels sewed into their linings . . .’

‘That’s the story of that film with that bald actor,’ William said, scathingly. ‘Honestly, Mare, you’d believe anything. Anyway, Mr Tyler said there were otters and badgers at Golden House.’

‘Well, I’ve never seen any otters. I think there are badgers. How did this man know so much about Golden House anyway?’

‘Maybe he used to live there,’ Mary said.

‘No. It’s been empty for years. And the last owner was an old lady called Miss Crawden and she’d lived there for ages with her family and then on her own, I think.’

‘Anyway, he didn’t live there,’ William cut in. ‘He just said that he knew the area.’

‘We haven’t got to know anyone yet,’ Jack said. ‘I expect there are lots of cottages tucked away in the hills.’

The conversation in the van came to an end and the children stared out of the windows at the moving scene. The light was beginning to fade and a fine rain was falling. The road wound through the forest and then suddenly out into rural countryside, with hedgerows in place of the dense overgrowth of the trees. They were in a narrow valley, the fields rising sharply on either side of the lane which climbed steeply ahead of them. Reaching the top of this hill, Jack stopped driving for a moment so that they could look at the view. In front of them, pale and grey against the darkening sky, a long range of rolling moorland was revealed, with the peaks of higher mountains beyond.

‘That’s Wales, over there. Welsh Wales, they call it. And this is English Wales, I suppose. We’re nearly home,’ Jack told them and a little later, he turned the Land-Rover off the road into an even narrower track that wound ahead of them up over the side of the valley. The hedgerows disappeared and they were soon on the side of an open moor.

‘This road’ll get pretty bad, come the snow,’ Jack said, almost as if he was talking to himself. ‘If it closes, we’ll be cut off.’

‘I hope it happens while we’re here,’ Alice told him, ‘then we wouldn’t have to go back to school.’

‘I thought you liked school,’ Jack said, concentrating on the road ahead.

‘I do,’ Alice replied and lapsed into silence once more.

The light was fading fast and had reached that uncomfortable gloaming where nothing is quite distinguishable. Jack switched on the headlights. As he did so, a bright streak of red dashed across the road ahead of them, making him brake suddenly.

‘Did you see that?’ he asked, with surprise. ‘A fox. I nearly ran into it.’

‘I saw it,’ Mary cried.

'And I did,' Alice added excitedly. 'Did you, Will? Did you see it?'

But William remained silent, staring out into the thin light, transfixed by the two bright eyes that stared at him from the secret depths of the ditch at the road's side. And, as the motor started up once more and the Land-Rover moved forward, so he swivelled round until he was looking out of the back window, unable to break the invisible string that seemed to attach him to them.

'Are we nearly there?' Alice asked later, breaking the renewed silence. 'I'm starving.'

'Not much further. The road drops down again and then we turn into Golden Valley.'

It was already dark when they reached the valley. The rain had stopped and a wind was rattling the branches of the trees. The road was climbing steeply again and there was the sound of running water.

'The brook follows the track all along here,' Jack explained. 'It's a pity it's dark. But you'll see it all tomorrow. Listen,' and an owl hooted somewhere near by.

'Why is it called Golden Valley, Uncle Jack?' Mary asked.

'I haven't a clue,' he replied. 'There's another Golden Valley over towards Hereford as well. Maybe ours was named after the house - or was the house named after the valley? I don't know.'

'Maybe they dug for gold here,' Alice suggested, excited by the idea. But Jack told her he thought it unlikely.

'Is all this your land?' Mary asked, staring out of the window.

'No. It probably was once. But now it belongs to the local landlord. We just have two acres.'

'Will we be allowed to explore it, seeing it doesn't belong to you?' she asked.

'I expect so. There are lots of footpaths. I've got an Ordnance Survey map at the house. Just don't go causing any trouble, though. I want to keep in with the natives!

We're here,' and, as he spoke, ahead of them a light glimmered distantly through the trees. He slowed the motor once more in front of a gate. 'William, can you hop out and open the gate, please?'

The night air was cold after the enclosed atmosphere. William walked in the light of the headlamps towards the wooden gate and swung it open. As he waited for the Land-Rover to drive through he looked round at the dense trees that reared up on either side of the valley. The wind was loud in the branches and the sound of the brook was overpowering. Then another sound, a soft panting, snuffling, breathing sort of sound, made him look behind him, searching in the darkness for its source. Although he couldn't see anything, he had a strange and eerie sense that he was being watched.

'Go away,' he whispered and he noticed that his voice was shaking with fear.

'Hey - William! Hurry up!' Jack called and William swung the gate closed and scrambled back into the safety of the Land-Rover.

'Brrrh!' Jack said, driving on. 'It's cold enough for snow.'

By the time they arrived at the house the night was completely dark and it was impossible to see anything except the vaguest outline. A light was burning in the porch and there was an impression of a sprawling building with many darkened windows.

'Welcome to Golden House,' Jack said and a moment later, as the motor came to a halt, the front door opened and a young woman appeared, her silhouette framed in the light from the hall behind her. Her pale-blond hair hung in a sheet down her back and stirred in the breeze as she moved. She was wearing a long, loose-fitting garment which failed to hide an enlarged stomach.

'Uncle Jack!' Mary exclaimed before she could stop herself. 'Phoebe's pregnant!'

'Yes,' he replied, 'didn't I tell you?' and then the figure ran out of the door towards them, her arms extended in greeting.

'Here you are,' she said. 'Supper's all ready. You must be starving.' As she spoke she put her arms round Jack's neck and kissed him on the cheek.

'Everything OK?' he asked her. She nodded and smiled.

'I'm not used to being on my own here yet,' she explained shyly to the children. 'But, all the same, he worries too much. Now, let me see you. Goodness! You've all grown so much. Come inside, quickly. It's freezing out here,' and she hurried them into the house leaving Jack to bring the cases.

'I'll help you, Uncle Jack,' William said, turning at the doorway and going back to where he was struggling with all three cases at the same time.

'Thanks. You all right?'

'Yes,' William replied, avoiding his uncle's eyes.

'You seemed a bit quiet on the journey.'

'I'm all right, honestly I am,' the boy said and taking one of the cases he went into the house.

As Jack followed him in and closed the front door, the moon came out from behind the clouds and cast pale shadows amongst the trees and across the rough grass that skirted the drive. An owl hooted at a distance and, nearer, a strange staccato barking indicated the whereabouts of the fox.

The First Night at Golden House

JACK AND PHOEBE had only been at Golden House for a few months and most of the building was still in a terrible state of disrepair. They had, however, made comfortable a section of the centre, around the main hall, and it was here that they intended to live while Jack gradually renovated the rest. The idea was that eventually they would open the house as a hotel.

The hall that the children entered was the oldest part of the building and dated back to the Middle Ages. It had a stone-flagged floor and a huge fireplace that had been put in during Tudor times, Jack explained to them.

‘Before that there would just have been a hole in the roof,’ he said.

A staircase rose from the hall to a gallery that ran round three sides, with doors leading into the various upper rooms. One was Jack and Phoebe’s bedroom, a second was a huge and antiquated bathroom. All the others were in varying states of chaos. Building materials and paints in one, furniture piled high in another, cobwebs and fallen plaster and the grime and dust of the years in the others.

A second staircase, narrow and spiralling, behind a door in one corner of the gallery led up to three smaller, low-ceilinged attics, with exposed beams that crossed the rooms like horizontal bars in a gymnasium. Two of these rooms had been prepared for the children. Mary and Alice were to share