

The Magician's House

The Tunnel Behind the Waterfall

William Corlett

Random House Children's Books

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Also by William Corlett

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About the Book

It is summer and the long holidays at Golden House stretch before William, Mary and Alice Constant. Hot lazy days of swimming and picnics . . . until a new and terrible shadow steals over the valley and the children are plunged into a desperate adventure to save it from greedy developers. Once more they are pulled into the Magician's world and his eternal battle between good and evil. But without the Magician's trust and with evil Morden's powers now stronger than ever, they have a huge task on their hands.

The Tunnel Behind the Waterfall

Being the Third Book of the Magician's
House

William Corlett

RED FOX

For William

Goldenwater

WILLIAM PUSHED FORWARD with his hands and, spreading his arms, glided through the tingling, ice-cold water. As he did so, the distant trees came a fraction closer, rising in a thin heat-haze above the lake. Sunlight sparkled all around him and a soft breeze wrinkled the surface of the water into a shimmering pattern, like silk.

'William!' he heard a distant voice calling. It was his youngest sister, Alice. Turning his head he could see her standing in the shallow water on the edge of the lake.

'Come on!' he yelled. 'It's OK once you're in.'

'It's freezing!' Alice complained.

William turned his head once more and, taking a gulp of air, dipped his face into the soft water. Then, with strong strokes, he struck out towards the centre of the lake.

'Mary,' Alice complained, watching William's receding outline and the thin wake of foam made by his feet. 'He's going miles out.'

'He'll be all right. He's a strong swimmer,' a dozy voice murmured behind her.

Mary lay stretched out on her back in the hot sunlight. As she spoke, the sounds of the summer day faded once more to the edge of her consciousness. The hot sun burned deep into her body, ironing out her muscles and flattening her against the dry turf. A bee buzzed close beside her. A few birds sang in the branches of the trees that she could just

see through her half-opened eyes and, somewhere, a woodpecker was drumming against a trunk. Mary sighed contentedly, stretched her arms, put her hands behind her head and sank back into semi-sleep.

‘Oh, honestly!’ Alice murmured in a grumpy voice. ‘I might just as well be here on my own.’ Then she shouted, ‘You’re so boring, Mary!’ and, taking another tentative step away from the shore, she slipped on a submerged boulder and toppled over, falling into the icy water with a splash, followed by a shout.

‘Oh! It’s agony!’ Alice gasped, struggling up and immediately toppling back in again, with another splash and a scream.

‘Alice?’ Mary called, sitting up and squinting into the sunlight. ‘What happened?’

‘I fell in, didn’t I?’ Alice replied, irritably.

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Not much.’ Then she shrugged and giggled. ‘Oh, well. I’m in now,’ she said and, lowering herself once more into the lake, she made a few nervous strokes with her hands, her teeth chattering and her head sticking straight up, because she hated getting water into her eyes.

‘It’s quite nice really,’ she gasped, calling to her sister. ‘Mary, come in. Please, Mary,’ her voice coaxed. ‘It’s more fun swimming with other people.’

‘You’re a little coward, Alice!’ Mary murmured. ‘I’m not coming in just to make you feel safe. Besides, I don’t want to get wet. I’d rather lie here in the sun.’

Typical! Alice thought, then standing gingerly on another submerged rock, she stared down into the water that surrounded her.

‘William!’ she squealed. ‘Come and look! There are tiny fish all round my legs . . .’

But William was now some distance from her, with his head below the water and he didn’t hear her.

Alice crouched down, scooping water in the cupped palms of her hands and letting it trickle back into the lake.

'D'you think you can drink it?' she asked. But neither of the other two answered her. She sighed again and, shading her eyes with her hands, she looked slowly round at the view.

The lake was surrounded by forest, with only a narrow band of pebbles and mossy ground between the water and the trees. The distant bank was covered by dark conifers, ranged in regimental ranks, which spread up the steep hillside and disappeared from view over the top of a long ridge. On the near side, behind Alice and where Mary now lay dozing amongst the remains of their picnic, the vegetation was lighter and leafier; broad oaks, birches, chestnuts and other woodland trees and bushes crowded down to the water's edge. Here the sunlight danced and glittered through the branches, casting shadows and making an ever-changing scene of light and shade. In contrast, the top of the lake was marked by a flat area of marshy ground, backed by a steep cliff, covered with bushes and young sapling trees. Amongst their branches a mountain stream could be glimpsed as it cascaded down from the heights in a series of falls. Distantly beyond this cliff, the peaks of higher mountains were just visible through the milky afternoon light. At the other end of the lake, the land rose gently towards a solitary stone which stood as high as a person, leaning sideways against a holly bush. Behind this stone the branches of a massive yew tree were just visible, marking the edge of the escarpment which formed one side of Golden Valley, where the children were staying with their Uncle Jack. It was in this yew that the children had discovered a secret room, now hidden by the thick branches of the tree, during the previous holidays.

'Let's go and see Meg,' Alice said, wading back towards the shore and picking up her towel from the ground near the pile of clothes.

'You out already?' Mary murmured, her eyes closed. 'I thought you said you were going swimming.'

'I have swum,' her sister replied as, drying her back, she turned once more to watch William out on the lake. 'He's nearly in the middle now.' Then, a moment later, she let out such a shout of surprise that Mary sat bolt upright, very wide awake.

'Alice! What is it? What's happened?' she asked.

'It's William!' Alice cried. 'He's disappeared.'

Mary rose quickly to her feet, shading her eyes and scanning the lake. The flat, rippling surface lapped gently to her feet. There was no sign of William.

Mary started to run along the shore, shouting desperately.

'What happened? Did you see him struggle?'

'Oh, Mary! Where are you going?' Alice pleaded with her as she splashed out into the water. 'He must be drowning. Come quickly.'

'No! Alice! You can't go after him. You're not a strong enough swimmer,' Mary yelled, changing direction and dashing down into the water in pursuit of her younger sister.

'But we've got to *do* something,' Alice whimpered.

Just as Mary caught hold of her and started pulling her back towards the shore, the surface of the lake in front of them parted and William appeared from its depths, rising up out of the water like a dolphin at play. The girls both stared, open-mouthed with surprise and relief. As if in slow motion they saw drops of water falling away from his body, sparkling in the sunlight like shreds of gold.

'William!' Mary yelled, angrily. 'You scared us half to death!'

'Why?' he shouted, swimming towards them with strong strokes.

'We thought you'd drowned,' Alice said.

'I just went under water,' William protested.

'A place where a human being doesn't naturally belong,' a voice behind them said sternly.

The sound was so completely unexpected and seemed to come from somewhere near to the girls. They swung round in astonishment.

Stephen Tyler, the Magician, was sitting on the ground, under an oak tree, a short distance from where they were standing.

'Mr Tyler!' Alice gasped.

The Magician stared at them silently. His thin red hair circled his head like a cloud and his eyes flashed gold in the sunlight. He was dressed in his long black coat and leaned forward, holding on to his silver cane with the twining dragons at the top. His other arm was supported in a sling made of rough material. He sat so still that he seemed more a part of the trunk of the tree than a separate being, but he glared at them so fiercely that they felt his presence almost more than they saw him.

'Is he really there?' Mary whispered.

'Speak up, child!' the Magician snapped and, as he did so, his body came into sharper focus - like the image through a pair of binoculars which becomes clearer as you adjust the lens. Slowly he rose to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. 'And you, boy,' he called to William, who had reached shallower water and was wading towards the shore, 'come to land at once!'

'You gave us such a shock,' Mary said, taking a step towards him.

'I have been here for some time,' the old man told her.

'Where?' Alice asked.

The Magician shrugged.

'Half here. I am finding the concentration is becoming more and more difficult. *Tempus fugit!* "Time flies"!' Then he sighed and said, irritably, 'You're always popping backwards and forwards. Never here when I need you. Shall you be staying long, this time?'

'Ages and ages,' Alice said, excitedly. 'It's the summer holidays.'

‘Then we must put them to good use.’

William was drying himself vigorously with his towel. Now that he was out of the water, he felt cold and was having difficulty stopping his teeth from chattering.

‘So, my fish,’ the Magician said, looking at him, ‘you have been exploring Goldenwater. And what do you make of my lake?’

‘Your lake?’ Mary asked him, surprised.

‘Of course,’ the Magician answered. ‘All this land belongs to Golden House. It is part of the estate.’

‘Well, it isn’t in our time,’ William said, fixing his towel round his waist and struggling into his pants and shorts. ‘I remember Uncle Jack telling us when we first arrived here that he only owned two acres. I remember thinking that sounded quite a lot. Our house in London only has a back garden.’

‘Two acres?’ Stephen Tyler exclaimed. ‘Two acres? What has he done with it all? He must get it back at once. Goldenwater is essential to my plan; as is Goldenspring and the twin view points. Two acres? How can one hope to balance the universe on the head of a pin?’ Then he shrugged and nodded thoughtfully. ‘It might be possible,’ he said. ‘The universe is beyond comprehension and as such is open to infinite possibilities. But if Jack Green does not own Goldenwater, who does?’

‘I don’t know,’ William replied.

‘You remembered Uncle Jack’s name!’ Alice exclaimed. ‘You don’t usually remember things like that.’

‘Don’t be impertinent, child!’ the Magician snapped.

‘But it’s true. We’re always having to remind you of that sort of thing. I bet you don’t remember my name.’

‘I only remember important matters,’ the Magician told her, in a withering voice. Then he added, ‘Your name is Minimus.’

‘No it isn’t!’ Alice said, indignantly. ‘It’s Alice.’

'Well, you're Minimus to me,' the Magician retorted and he walked slowly away from them along the shore, tapping pebbles with his cane. 'At least we know the next step now,' he said, thoughtfully. 'You must find out about this land ownership - and get it back.'

'Is it so important?' William asked. 'It sounds rather boring to me.'

'What would you rather be doing?' the old man enquired, not sounding too stern.

'Going in animals,' Alice exclaimed.

'Flying,' William cried.

'And you, girl,' the Magician said, turning to Mary, 'what do you hope for?'

Mary shrugged and blushed.

'She's in love with Uncle Jack's builder,' Alice told the old man in a confidential voice.

'I beg your pardon?' the Magician asked, mystified.

'I am not, Alice,' Mary whispered, furiously. She could feel more and more blood rushing to her cheeks until they were burning.

'He's called Dan,' Alice said, 'and she worships him.'

'My Mary,' the old man said, gently, putting his good arm lightly round her shoulders. 'Don't be in such a hurry. *Tempus fugit.*'

'What has happened to your other arm?' Mary asked, desperate to change the subject.

'I had a nasty encounter with a wild dog,' Stephen Tyler replied.

'D'you mean at the badger meet? When we were last here? When you had to fight that foul Fang?' Alice said, breathlessly.

'Ah, I had forgotten you were here then,' the old man said.

'But that was ages ago,' William protested.

'It still has not healed.'

'Have you had some penicillin?' Mary asked.

'What is this stuff?'

'After your time, I'm afraid,' William sighed. 'Don't ask, it'll be so difficult to explain.'

'But you must try.'

'Well, it's . . . medicine. I think it comes from mould - or something like that. It kills germs.'

'From mould?' Stephen Tyler pondered the thought. 'Fascinating! We use much the same technique. Cobwebs are very effective.'

'Cobwebs?' William repeated, doubtfully.

'I must go. I have to conserve my strength. This period is going to be intensely productive. Oh, a word of warning. Morden, my assistant, is very close to time travelling. Be on your guard!'

'How would we know him?' Mary asked.

'How would you know Morden?' the old man snapped, as though it was an absurd question. 'Why by his aura, of course. Morden is the dark to my light. Wherever there is evil - look for Morden!'

'What's an aura?' Mary asked.

'No time now,' the Magician answered, raising his hand to silence them. 'I must away.' And he walked back towards the trees, saying, 'Find out about that land!'

'But - where will we see you?' Alice called.

'I'll be about,' the old man replied, without turning his head, and he disappeared from their sight into his own time from the middle of a patch of sunlight.

Meg Lewis Gets a Letter

AS THE CHILDREN walked back to the house, the afternoon was gradually fading into evening. Although it was still very warm, the sun had lost its fierce intensity and smouldered through the trees behind them, as it slipped slowly out of sight into the west.

They entered the walled kitchen garden through the back gate and strolled down one of the paths between the rows of fruit trees with the sadly neglected beds beyond. As they passed the dovecote at the centre of the garden, Spot came bounding towards them from under a clump of tall mint, in which shade he had dozed the afternoon away.

'Where've you been?' he barked, his tail wagging as he jumped up at Alice, licking her face.

'We looked for you everywhere,' Alice protested, squatting down and fighting off his enthusiastic tongue. 'Stop it, Spot! You're soaking me!'

'Serves you right for leaving me behind,' the dog told her.

'You could have found us,' Mary protested. 'You could have followed our scent.'

'What? All the way up the side of the valley?' Spot said, grinning. 'Too hot for that!'

'Honestly, Spot. You'll get fat, you're so lazy!' Alice told him, rubbing his tummy. 'Besides, you could have come swimming. That'd have made you cool again.'

‘Come on,’ the dog said, rolling over and jumping to his feet. ‘There’s something going on. Meg’s here!’ and, barking and jumping, he led the way towards the yard gate.

The kitchen was cool after the heat outside and was filled with the smell of newly baked bread. Meg Lewis was seated at the table with Phoebe and Jack, and Stephanie was asleep in her cot, beside the range. In front of Phoebe was a teapot and a sponge cake, from which a large wedge had been removed. As the children entered, the three grown-ups looked towards them.

‘Oh good! Cake!’ Alice exclaimed, dropping her wet costume and towel on the floor and hurrying to her seat at the table. ‘Can I have a piece, Phoebe? I’m starving! Swimming always makes me hungry.’

‘Swimming, Alice? You only did three strokes!’ Mary said. ‘Hello, Meg!’ she added, giving the old lady a warm smile.

‘Hello, dear,’ Meg responded, her voice sounding sad.

‘Get yourselves cups and plates,’ Phoebe told them, rising and putting more boiling water into the teapot from the kettle which sat permanently on top of the range. ‘Mary, cut some slices of cake, will you? And you may as well make them big slices. Supper will be late tonight.’

‘Oh, why?’ Alice wailed. ‘I’m starving, Phoebe.’

‘I can’t help it. You’ll have to wait. Jack’s going into town with Meg,’ Phoebe told her.

‘You hardly ever go to town, Meg,’ William said, in a surprised voice as he sank his teeth into the slab of cake which Mary had just cut for him.

‘No, dear,’ Meg replied, miserably. ‘Well, I don’t very often get letters, either.’

As she spoke the children all noticed the letter lying open on the table in front of Jack. It looked official, on headed notepaper and covered in typing.

‘What’s it about, Uncle Jack?’ William said with his mouth still full of cake.

‘You must ask Meg that,’ Jack replied. ‘She may not want to discuss it with you.’

‘Of course I do. You’re my closest friends – after the badgers – and my badgers owe you their lives. Go on, dear, you can read it if you want to.’

William picked up the letter and stared at it.

‘Read it out loud, Will,’ Mary said, nervously. She had an awful feeling that whatever it was, it wasn’t going to be good news.

“‘Dear Miss Lewis,’” William began, “‘I am instructed by my clients, Playco” . . . Playco?’ William exclaimed, ‘what a funny name!’

‘Yes, dear,’ Meg said, ‘but I doubt that they’re funny people. Go on reading, dear.’

“‘I am instructed by my clients, Playco UK,’” William continued, “‘that the land adjacent to your smallholding is about to be developed, subject to planning consent, and would ask you to call at my offices at the soonest possible opportunity to discuss certain matters which would seem to be of mutual benefit to both yourself and to the directors of Playco UK. If you would like to contact my secretary to arrange a meeting, I will look forward to seeing you then. Yours sincerely, Martin Marsh, solicitor.’”

William lowered the letter and looked at the silent faces round the table.

‘What does it mean?’ Alice asked, in a whisper. ‘What does “developed” mean?’

‘Buildings, dear. It means buildings,’ Meg replied in a shocked voice.

‘At Goldenwater?’ Alice cried, horrified that the beautiful peaceful place that they had so recently left should be changed in any way. ‘What sort of buildings?’

Jack shrugged. ‘We don’t know,’ he said. ‘We know no more than you do.’

‘But any buildings at Goldenwater would be horrible . . .’ Phoebe said. ‘I mean . . . who could possibly think of

building up there? They can't mean houses. It's miles from anywhere.'

'People do extraordinary things, dear, if there's money in it for them,' Meg said quietly.

'Who owns the land, Meg?' Jack asked.

As he did so, William gasped and looked quickly at Alice and Mary.

'What's the matter, William?' Phoebe asked.

'Nothing,' William mumbled, 'it's just that . . . well, we were told to find that out, just this afternoon.'

'Told to? By whom?' Phoebe asked, looking at him suspiciously.

'What I mean is . . . we were wondering who owned it . . . that's all,' William said, lowering his eyes, avoiding her questioning gaze.

'When old Miss Crawden died,' Meg said, 'the estate went to Sir Henry Crawden, her nephew.'

'Yes, that's right. It was through Sir Henry's solicitor that our sale was negotiated,' Jack said.

'A real Sir?' Alice asked. It sounded very impressive.

'He is now,' Meg answered quietly. 'He was plain Henry Crawden when I knew him.'

'You knew him, Meg?' Mary said.

'Oh, yes dear. I knew Henry Crawden. But that was years ago. In another lifetime.'

'Are you really saying that all the land round here used to belong to Golden House?' Phoebe asked in amazement. 'Including Goldenwater? And the yew tree with the secret house?'

'Yes, dear. That's how my grandad was able to stay at Four Fields when he was turned out of this house. Otherwise there'd have been nowhere for them to go. They were penniless, you see. The house went to pay off the debts, but they got no money for it.'

'Who owns the land on the other side of your fields, Meg?' Jack asked.

'The Jenkins did, originally. They owned both sides, but they sold it to the Forestry Commission, dear. Short of cash. That was some time ago. I was worried at first. Government people owning the land . . . But they leave me to myself, look after the woodland pretty well and of course, as luck would have it, they've left the broadleaf trees, and not replaced them with those miserable firs, as they did the other side of the water. All in all, it's been quite satisfactory, really.'

'So what land is being referred to in this letter, then?' Jack asked her.

'Between my fields and Goldenwater, dear. The whole area round the lake is still supposed to be owned by the Crawdens. Acres of land, from Goldenspring in the west all along the side of the bridle path, round the Standing Stone and spreading as far as the yew tree and the edge of Golden Valley. Or that's what's always been said.' She frowned for a moment, then shook her head, as if dismissing a thought. 'There are always rumours, you know. And anyway, it's never mattered who owned the land. It's not suitable for farming. It may look pretty, but farmers see land in terms of productivity, not beauty.'

'What about the valley?' William asked.

'Well dear, I couldn't say. I'd have thought the steps up behind the house here still belonged to you.'

'I don't think so,' Jack said, shaking his head. 'My deeds only show me owning two acres here round the house, in the valley bottom.'

'Strange, dear,' Meg murmured. 'It wasn't always so.'

'You should check, Jack,' Phoebe said.

'I will, don't worry. It'd make a huge difference if the valley sides belonged to us. Not that I think anyone could build anything on them; they're too steep . . . but, even so . . .'

'You can never be sure of anything, dear,' Meg said, glumly.

‘Just let me get this right,’ Jack continued, thoughtfully, ‘what you’re saying, Meg, is that the only way through from the Forest Road to Goldenwater is on the track that leads to your farm?’

‘That’s right, dear. I dare say you could put a track through Mr Jenkins’ land, but I don’t think he’d let you. He keeps that land for pheasants. Breeds them for the sport. Sport? Shooting the poor creatures. Funny idea of sport if you ask me.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ Jack said, thoughtfully, ‘to think that all that land was once part of our estate.’

‘And so it should have remained, dear. It should never have been sold. But, as I explained to you once before, my grandad was a terrible gambler and eventually, as must always happen, his debts caught him up and found him out and he died a ruined man – as did my father after him.’ Meg shivered and rubbed her hands.

At this moment, Stephanie started to cry and Phoebe went and lifted her out of the cot, rocking her gently and soothing her.

‘You’d better be going, Jack,’ she said, over her shoulder. ‘Or else you’ll be late for Meg’s appointment.’

‘What appointment?’ William asked.

‘I telephoned this solicitor who’s written to me. He said for me to go in this evening. He seems in a great hurry to see me. I can’t figure it out.’

‘Come back with Jack and have supper with us, Meg,’ Phoebe said, still gently rocking the baby as she spoke.

‘Oh yes,’ Mary said eagerly. ‘Then we can find out what happens.’

‘And we can run you home later,’ Jack offered.

‘Thank you, dear. That would be kind. But no need to run me home. I can walk back and check on the sett on my way. I did the milking before I came down here, so there’s nothing to worry about. What can it mean?’ she mused, following Jack to the back door. ‘Mutual benefit? I don’t like

the sound of it at all . . .' and, still talking, she disappeared out into the yard.

After she had gone, the children told Phoebe they'd go up to their rooms at the top of the house. William challenged Alice to a game of Spite and Malice, their favourite card game, and Mary said she was going to write a letter to their parents.

This could have been the truth. The children's mother and father had recently been moved from the hospital in Ethiopia, where they were both working as doctors with the Red Cross, to one of the refugee camps. The children only heard from them occasionally, because letters didn't always make it in either direction. But Mary still liked to write every week, because it made her feel in touch with them. However, as soon as they left the kitchen the children decided to go up to the secret room instead and made for the huge inglenook fireplace on the other side of the hall. Once there, they glanced back over their shoulders, to make sure that Phoebe hadn't followed them and then, moving quickly, they climbed up the protruding stones on the left of the hearth to the ledge and squeezed their way round the corner at the back to where the concealed steps commenced their spiralling ascent up the inside of the chimney.

As they disappeared from view Spot nosed his way out through the kitchen door and stood, tail wagging slowly and head tilted sideways in an enquiring position, scanning the hall. He looked up the staircase to the landing and then, nose twitching as he caught a whiff of the children's scent, he padded across the hall into the fireplace and followed them up into the dark.

An Unexpected Visitor

TO THEIR SURPRISE the Magician was waiting for them when they reached the secret room. He was standing looking out of the back window and didn't even turn as they appeared in the doorway behind him.

'Come in,' he said, 'I was expecting you.'

The children moved into the empty room, their feet ringing hollowly on the bare boards of the floor. The light was dim, for the front window was closed and shuttered and the candle sconces had not been lit. A thin veil of dust moved on the evening air and a spider darted for a fly in a cobweb beside the old man's head, as he continued to gaze at the scene outside the window. The sun was setting in a riot of pink and gold. The colours streaked the sky above the valley side, staining the clouds purple and suffusing the woods with soft honeyed light.

Spot had followed the children in from the stairs, his tongue hanging out as he panted. He sat down in the doorway and scratched his stomach with one of his hind legs, then he licked a paw, yawned and, with a sigh, flopped down on the floor and watched what was going on through hooded eyes.

Not that there was much to watch. The scene within the room remained peculiarly static; the Magician staring out of the window at the darkening sky and the children standing

behind him, as if they had been summoned to his presence, without knowing why, and were awaiting his instructions.

Then somewhere, distantly outside the window, an owl hooted. Still the Magician remained motionless. He seemed not to have heard the sound, but Mary took a step towards the window, expectantly.

‘Jasper!’ she cried.

Stephen Tyler held up a hand, silencing her, and, a moment later, the great owl descended out of the bowl of inky sky on to the rim of the window with a fluttering of wings. Once safely perched, he blinked, preened his feathers, turned his head, as if on a pivot, and glared at the Magician.

‘What have you discovered, my bird?’ Stephen Tyler said and, as he spoke, he raised his hand and stroked the owl’s neck feathers with the back of his fingers.

‘The fox, Cinnabar, and the otter, Lutra, have seen men up at the Water with measuring sticks and plans.’

‘Plans?’ the Magician said, sounding immediately cross. ‘What are these plans?’

‘Rolls of paper, Master, over which they ponder and upon which they write innumerable notes.’

‘Impertinence!’ the old man exclaimed, crossly. ‘Children, we have a most serious situation here.’ And, as he spoke, he turned away from the window, and walked towards the centre of the room. ‘It is essential that you act swiftly to put a stop to this outrage. Otherwise all my endeavours – a lifetime’s work – will be reduced to nothing.’ He shook his head and rapped the floor with his silver cane, angrily. ‘The greed of men! It will be my undoing. You, boy, you are the oldest. What have you discovered for me? Who has taken my land?’

William cleared his throat and repeated, as well as he could remember, all that Meg had told them down in the kitchen. During this the Magician listened closely, sometimes nodding as if he half remembered. Then, as the

account was drawing to an end, he raised his good arm, holding the silver cane above his head, stopping William in mid-sentence.

‘Good,’ he said, speaking more kindly and with less anger now. ‘You have done well.’ Then he turned and looked at the owl. ‘Crawden?’ he continued. ‘The name Crawden is familiar. What do I know about this Crawden, Jasper?’

The owl had been listening silently from his perch on the window opening. Now, being addressed, he flew into the room, his wings moving the air so that it swirled the dust and struck cold on their faces. Reaching with his claws, he landed on one of the candle sconces and stared down at them.

‘It was a Crawden who took the house from Jonas Lewis,’ he trilled, sternly.

‘Jonas Lewis,’ the old man repeated thoughtfully.

‘He got into debt,’ William said, not wishing to be outdone by the owl. ‘He had been experimenting with alchemy. I think you’d been helping him . . .’

‘Jonas?’ the Magician said the name again, broodingly. ‘Yes, I remember Jonas. He was a good pupil. But he misused his powers. What did he do?’ He fired the question at the children, as though it was part of an examination.

‘He made gold,’ Mary replied, nervously.

‘That is correct. He made gold.’ His words were like a drum roll. ‘Gold,’ he repeated the word with contempt. Then, after a moment’s silence, another thought occurred to him. ‘What do you know about this?’

‘Only what you’ve told us,’ Alice said.

‘But we first read about it in a book that Uncle Jack borrowed from a lady in the town, last Christmas,’ William reminded them. ‘A sort of diary, written by Jonas Lewis himself.’

‘Meg knows something about it, as well,’ Mary added. ‘She’s Jonas Lewis’s granddaughter, you see . . .’