

The Mystery of Allegra

PETER FOREMAN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Allegra One

I met Allegra one night in April twelve years ago. I was sixteen years old and she was only five.

I remember that it rained a lot that night and we arrived late at the house. We were driving along a dark road when my mother saw a sign, which said in big letters: *Villa Henderson - Bed and Breakfast*.

‘It’s in English!’ my mother said. She was surprised because we were on holiday in Italy.

My father turned right and drove along an old road. When we arrived, we saw a big villa with tall black trees around it. There was a light in one of the windows, and on the wall above the door were the words *Villa Henderson*.

My father knocked at the door and a small woman opened it. She was about sixty and wore strange clothes.

‘Are you English?’ my father asked.

‘Yes, I am,’ she answered in a quiet voice.

‘We’re looking for rooms for the night. Can we stay here?’

‘Please come in.’

We went into a long, comfortable room. There was a bright fire in the old fire-place, which gave a beautiful, warm light.

‘The weather is very bad,’ said the woman. ‘It’s cold for April. I’ll make some tea for you.’

When she went out, we looked around the room. There were lots of English tables and chairs in dark wood, and the walls and floor were of stone. There were two big armchairs in front of the fire and a large black dog was sleeping in one of them.

‘I like this room,’ said my mother. ‘It looks comfortable, but it’s beautiful too.’

Just then the woman returned with the tea. Behind her came a woman in a long black dress.



Behind her came a woman in a long black dress.

‘My name is Margaret Henderson,’ said the old woman, ‘and this is my daughter Chiara. She has a daughter too, so I’m a grandmother.’

‘My daughter is in bed,’ smiled Chiara.

She was a tall woman, with long, fair hair and blue eyes. She was perhaps about thirty-five.

‘Have you come far today?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ my father replied. ‘We’re very tired.’

‘Your rooms are ready for you. I’ll take you up when you’ve had your tea.’

So, after tea, we went up some stairs and followed Chiara along a corridor. She stopped at a door and told my parents that it was their room. Then she looked at me.

‘Your room is round the corner. Come this way, please.’

We turned right and walked along another corridor. My room was at the end.

‘Good night and sleep well,’ said Chiara with a smile.

But I didn’t sleep well.

I locked the door and after five minutes I was in bed. The house was silent, but I could hear the rain on the window and the strong wind in the trees outside. I slept a little, woke up, then slept again. And then I woke up suddenly. The window shutters were making a loud noise against the wall. I could see that the window was open because the long white curtains were moving in the wind. I got up and closed both the shutters and the window. Now the room was very dark, so I walked with my hands out in front of me, to try and find the light on the table by the bed. My left hand touched the table - and then something took hold of my right arm.

It was a cold little hand. The hair on my neck stood up and my legs began to shake.

‘Who is it?’ I cried.

At the same time I found the light on the table and turned it on. A little girl in a long white nightdress stood in front of me near the bed. She was looking at me with big eyes, as blue as an Italian sky in summer. Her blond hair was as bright as sunlight round her pale face.

‘What a beautiful child!’ I thought.

‘Hallo. My name’s Allegra,’ she said.

Her voice was soft and sweet and she spoke English beautifully. But she couldn’t say the letter ‘r’.

‘Did you come in through the window?’ I asked.

But she answered me with a question. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Adrian.’

‘I’m five years and three months old,’ she said. ‘How old are you?’

‘Sixteen. How did you get in here?’

‘Don’t be angry with me, Adrian,’ she said.

‘I’m not angry with you. Don’t cry. Tell me your name again.’



'What a beautiful child!' I thought.

'Allegra. It means happy in Italian.'

'What are you doing here, Allegra? What do you want?'

'Will you take me to my Mamà?' she asked suddenly.

I looked at her in surprise. 'But you know where your mother is,' I said.

'Yes, but she's a long way from here.'

'No, she isn't, Allegra. She's in this house.'

'I want to see Mamà. Will you take me, please?'

'No, Allegra. She'll be angry with you because you aren't in bed.'

'Oh no, Mamà was never angry with me,' she said with a little smile. 'But sometimes Papà was angry and I was afraid of him.'

For a while I didn't speak, and I just looked at her. Why did she say 'was' and not 'is' when she spoke about her parents? She was a very strange little girl.

‘You must go back to bed now, Allegra,’ I said. ‘I’m not going to take you to your mother.’

She looked at me, and now her blue eyes were sad.

‘Will you take me to Mamà tomorrow then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, thank you!’ she cried happily.

‘Now, where is your room?’

‘It’s next to this one.’

‘Okay, let’s go.’

And I took her hand, her cold little hand. Just then the window opened again and the wind and rain came in. I went to the window to close it but the curtains flew up in my face and I couldn’t see anything. I closed the window. And when I turned round, Allegra wasn’t there.

For a minute I just stood still. Then I unlocked my door and went along the corridor. There was a door on the left. I opened it slowly. The room was dark but I could see that it was a child’s room. Somebody was sleeping in a bed near the window.

‘Good!’ I thought. ‘She’s in bed now.’ And I closed the door.

Next morning, after breakfast, we went into the garden. There were beautiful hills and woods around it. I walked round to the back of the house because I wanted to look at the windows of my room and Allegra’s room. There was a big tree between them near the wall of the house.



Someone was sleeping in a bed near the window.

‘Perhaps she got out of her window on to the tree, and then got in through my window,’ I thought. But it looked a difficult and dangerous thing to do. Possible for an adult perhaps, but not for a girl of five.

When I went back to the front garden, Allegra’s mother was there. She was talking to my parents.

‘Did your shutters open last night?’ she asked. ‘I heard a noise.’

‘No,’ replied my mother. ‘But we heard a noise too.’

‘It was the shutters in my room,’ I said.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ said Chiara. ‘Those shutters are very old. But I hope you slept well after you closed them.’

‘Shall I tell her?’ I thought. Then I said with a smile, ‘Yes, I slept well, thank you - but only after your daughter’s visit.’

‘Allegra?’ Chiara was very surprised.

‘Yes, she came to my room in the middle of the night.’

‘Did she? Well, I know she sometimes walks in her sleep.’

‘But ...’ I began. And I stopped. Again I thought: ‘Shall I tell her?’

But I decided not to say that the door was locked. I knew they wouldn’t believe me, and I thought that they would laugh at me. So I just said that Allegra was a beautiful child.

‘Yes, she is,’ Chiara answered. ‘But she isn’t a very happy girl.’

‘Doesn’t her name mean happy in Italian?’

‘Yes, but I’ve never met an Italian child called Allegra.’

‘Why did you call her Allegra?’ my mother asked.

‘I don’t know. The name came to me suddenly. Perhaps I wanted a happy child.’ And Chiara smiled sadly.

Then she turned to the house and called her daughter.

‘Allegra! Come downstairs, please!’

‘I’m coming!’ came a shout from the house.

We heard Allegra on the stairs; then she came out. I looked at her. I looked and looked. But I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Allegra Two

She was pale and beautiful, like the girl in my room. But this was a different girl. This Allegra had long black hair and her eyes were brown.

‘Hallo,’ she said.

Was it the same voice? It was soft and sweet but - I wasn’t sure!

‘This is Adrian,’ said Chiara. ‘He says that you went into his room last night, Allegra.’



This was a different girl.

The girl looked at me in surprise.

‘No, Mummy, I wasn’t in his room.’ She spoke English beautifully, but she couldn’t say the letter ‘r’!

‘You see, she doesn’t remember,’ Chiara said to me. ‘I think that she was walking in her sleep again.’

When I went to bed that night, I couldn’t sleep. I was waiting for the girl and I was afraid. But after about an hour my eyes closed and I slept. I woke up suddenly when a cold

little hand touched my face. The girl's voice spoke softly in my ear.

'Wake up, Adrian, wake up ...'

I turned on the light. She was there; but was she real? Her skin was like milk, her blond hair was like sunlight in the room. She was wearing the long, white nightdress.

'Is she real or is this a dream?' I thought.

And I touched her face. It was cold, very cold. But it was real.

'Will you take me to Mamà now?' she asked.

I looked at the window. It was closed. Then I went to the door. It was locked. I began to feel very afraid.

'How did you get in here?' I asked.

'You weren't here so I waited for you. I was sleeping behind that curtain.'

She showed me a curtain in a corner of the room. There was another, smaller bed for a child behind it. So she was in the room before I came! But where did she come from, and who was her mother?

'Okay, I'll take you to your mother,' I said. 'Where is she?'

Suddenly the girl began to speak in Italian. 'She's at Bagno a Ripoli, near Florence.'

'But we can't go to Florence tonight!' I said. I could understand Italian, but I spoke in English.

'You *must* take me!' Allegra said angrily, speaking in English again. 'I want to see my Mamà tonight. I want to see her before I die.' Then she began to cry.

Die! What did she mean?

'Why do you say that?' I said in surprise. 'You're not going to die.'

'Yes, I am. I know, I know! Papà didn't like Mamà and he took me away from her. I didn't see her for a long time. I wanted to see her and she wanted to see me too. Oh, I must see her before I die!'

Again I couldn't understand why she spoke in the past. I



'Papà is dead now.'

Next morning we said goodbye to the Hendersons. When I said goodbye to Allegra, I felt sad. She was sad too, and she gave me a kiss.

'I hope that one day you will see your Daddy,' I said to her. 'Then you'll be happy.'

'Oh no,' she answered in a strange voice. 'Papà is dead now. He was a famous lord and he took me away from my Mamà. But he's dead now.'

We were all very surprised.

'What are you saying, Allegra?' Chiara said. 'Your father isn't a lord and he isn't dead! What a strange fantasy!'

But Allegra only smiled; a sad smile. And that was the last time I saw her.

Allegra Three

In England I went back to school and my studies, but I didn't forget Allegra. I wrote letters to her and sent some small presents. She didn't answer my letters but I said to myself, 'Well, she's only five. Perhaps she can't write letters yet.' Then a year after our holiday in Italy a letter arrived from Margaret Henderson. First she thanked me for my letters and presents. Then she wrote:

I'm sorry that we didn't write to you, but it has been a very bad year for us. It is difficult for me to write now, but today is April 21st and I want to tell you that something terrible happened on the same day last year. Chiara and I are still very sad, and Chiara has been ill. She doesn't eat much and she doesn't want to speak to anybody. Now I'll tell you why. A week after your holiday our little Allegra got a fever. A few days later the fever was worse and we called the doctor. He said that he wasn't sure what the fever was. 'Perhaps she drank some bad water or ate food that was bad,' he told us. He gave her some medicine and she was better. But then the fever returned very quickly. We couldn't find the doctor and when he arrived, it was too late. Our dear little Allegra died on April 21st a year ago. Oh, it's like a terrible dream! Our darling child was only five years and three months old. Now she has gone and she will never come back to us!

When I read this, I was shocked. Allegra dead! I felt very sad and I began to cry. For a long time I just couldn't believe it. I remembered her face, her voice, and her child's talk. I remembered our games and our conversations. Allegra came back to me like a ghost and I was very unhappy.

When I was eighteen, I went to university to study Italian, but I often remembered Allegra and that strange week at the Villa Henderson. How could I forget it? And I often thought

about Allegra's strange words: 'I want to see my Daddy before I die.' How did she know that she was going to die? And then there was the ghost Allegra in my room, saying, 'I want to see my Mamà before I die.' What did it all mean? I wanted to find the answer to this mystery. But how?

In spring I went to Italy for my studies and I stayed in Florence with an Italian family. They had a little daughter. When they told me her name, I couldn't believe my ears.

'We wanted a different name,' the mother told me, 'a name that you don't often find in Italy. Allegra came to me suddenly. It's a beautiful name and we hoped that she would be a happy child. But she isn't happy. She's a strange girl.'

I looked at the child. She was tall; her face was pale and beautiful. She had long brown hair and brown eyes.

'How old is she?' I asked.

'She's five.'



'She isn't happy. She's a strange girl.'

'Five? Are you sure - I mean, is she?' I said, stupidly.

'Yes, five.' The mother looked at me strangely.

'Can I ask you when she was five? I mean, when is her birthday?'

The mother looked surprised. 'In January. Why?'

'But please tell me the exact day. You see, I'd like to buy her a present next year.'

Now the mother was smiling. 'She was born on January

21st.'

When I went to my room that night, I was afraid and I didn't go to bed. I was thinking about Allegra Henderson. She died on April 21st when she was five years and three months old. So she was born on January 21st too! Was it possible that this Italian Allegra had the same name, the same birthday, the same age? I couldn't sleep so I tried to read a book about some English poets in Italy. But I couldn't. I was waiting, waiting ...

She came at midnight. I looked at my watch and then she was there in a dark corner of the room. A beautiful, blond child, her skin like milk, her eyes like the blue of an Italian sky. She wore a long white nightdress. Allegra.

'Will you take me to my Mamà?' she asked in her beautiful English. 'She's at Bagno a Ripoli. It isn't far from here.'

I was very afraid now and I shouted, 'Go away! Go away!'

But she came and stood by my armchair.

'I want to see Mamà before I die. Take me!' she said angrily.

I ran out of that room very fast.

Next morning I decided to go to Bagno a Ripoli. I drove there in my small Fiat 500. There were only a few houses, and a small church called Santa Maria dell'Antella. I went into the church but there was nothing special about it. Then I walked around the small cemetery behind it. But I didn't see anything different so I decided to go back to Florence. When I was going out of the cemetery, I saw a tombstone with some English words on it. I stopped and read:

Here lies Claire Clairmont

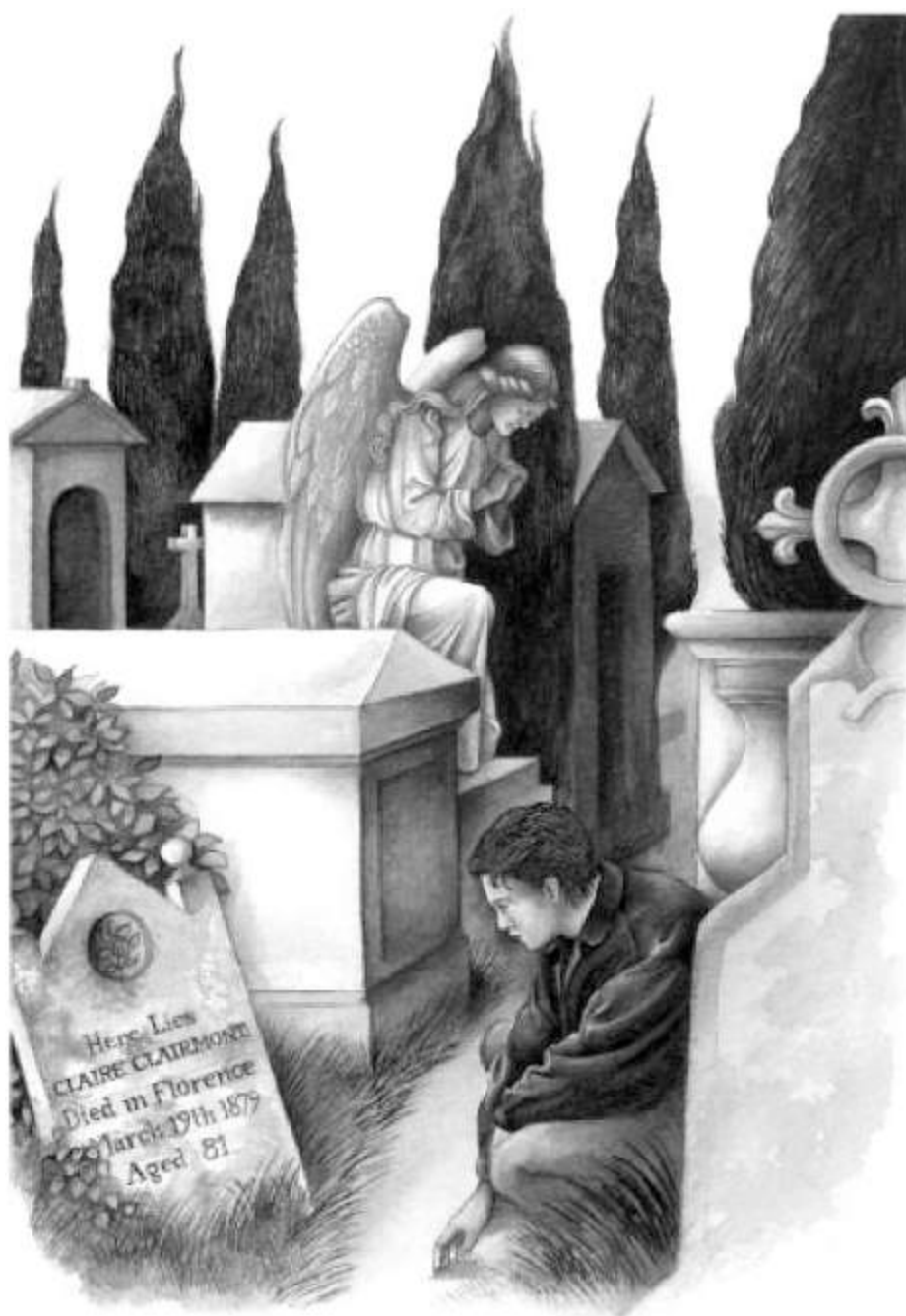
Died in Florence

March 19th 1879

Aged 81

The name Claire again! The name of the ghost Allegra's mother! I was very surprised but I still didn't understand anything.

In Florence that afternoon I decided to go to a bar and read the book about the English poets. And while I was reading about Byron and Shelley, I began to understand the mystery of Allegra.



I saw a tombstone with some English words on it.

4

Lord Byron's daughter

This is what I read:

On January 21st 1817 Claire Clairmont, nineteen years old, had a baby daughter in a town called Bath in England. The baby's father was the poet Lord Byron, but he was not Claire's husband. They were lovers for a while but then Byron went to Italy. He did not love Claire and he did not want to be with her. So Claire lived with Byron's friends - the poet Shelley, his wife Mary, and their two children. Claire and Mary were half-sisters; they had the same father but different mothers. Shelley liked children very much and he felt a strong love for Claire's baby. He hoped that his friend Byron would help Claire and her daughter. From Bath he wrote to him:

*Claire has a very beautiful girl. Her hair is fair and her eyes are blue ...
Claire calls her Alba.*

Byron wanted to see his baby daughter and he asked Shelley to bring her to Italy. Shelley wanted to live in Italy too, so he and his family, and Claire and her baby, all travelled there. The baby was a year old and now she was called Allegra because Byron liked the name.

In Italy Claire decided to give Allegra to Byron because she thought that the daughter of an English lord would have a good future. Shelley said to her: 'No, don't do it, Claire, or you will never see your daughter again.' But Byron was rich and Claire thought that Allegra would have a better life with him. Of course, she did not *want* to give Allegra to Byron, and when she sent the child to him in Venice, she was very unhappy. In a letter to a friend she wrote:

In the spring of 1818 I sent my little darling to her father. She was the only

white and cold, the rooms were empty, and sometimes she was cold because there was no fire. Every day she did the same things at the same time. This quiet life was very different from her life with Byron.

Claire was now very angry. She did not like convent schools, and she was sure that Allegra was always cold and lonely. She wrote an angry letter to Byron: 'My child must be with one of her parents,' she said. He did not answer the letter. He thought that the convent was good for Allegra, and he told the nuns that Claire must never visit the child. They must lock the doors to stop her. But he said that Shelley could see Allegra because he was his friend. So one day Shelley went to visit Allegra at the convent. He wrote in his diary:

She is tall and pale. But her eyes are very blue, and she has a lot of blond hair. She is beautiful and very different from the other children. I ran and played with her in the garden. She is very light and fast. I gave her some sweets and I asked her, 'What shall I say to your Mamà?' She answered in Italian, 'Tell her to send me a kiss and a beautiful dress.' Then I asked her, 'What shall I say to your Papà?' And she answered, 'Tell him to visit me and to bring Mamà with him.'

But Papà did not visit her and Mamà did not come.

On June 6th 1821 Claire dreamt that Allegra was ill. She thought that her daughter was going to die and she would never see her again. 'Take her away from the convent,' she wrote to Byron. But he said no. Of course, Claire wanted to go to the convent and take Allegra away, but this was very difficult. Byron was a rich and famous lord and the people in the convent did what he wanted. They locked the doors.



Shelley went to visit Allegra at the convent.

And then Allegra got a fever. The doctor came and gave her some medicine. For a while she was better and the nuns hoped that she would live. But she died on April 21st 1822. She was five years and three months old.

Shelley was afraid to tell Claire that Allegra was dead. He thought that she would try to kill herself. But one evening Shelley, Mary, and some friends were talking about Allegra when Claire came into the room. At once everybody stopped talking, and she knew.

'Allegra's dead, isn't she?' she said.

So Shelley told her the sad story. She was very unhappy and wanted to die. Shelley was also unhappy. He loved Allegra like a daughter and he could not forget her. Two weeks after Allegra died, he was with one of his friends on the balcony of a house by the sea. Suddenly he saw a child with long, fair hair and very blue eyes. She was coming out of the sea and she was smiling at him. In the moonlight he saw that she wanted to come to him.

'Look, there it is!' he said to his friend. 'Can you see her? Look - there!'

But his friend saw nothing. It was Allegra's ghost.

And fifty years after Allegra died, Claire wrote to a friend:

I can never forget my darling child. But did she really die? Byron and Shelley said that she died, but I have heard that she is alive. Some people say that they have seen her. I am sure that she is alive.

Claire died in 1879 when she was eighty-one years old. Her tombstone is in the cemetery of Santa Maria dell'Antella at Bagno a Ripoli.



Shelley told Claire the sad story.

Bagno a Ripoli

After I read this strange, sad story, I understood the mystery of Allegra. Was she still alive? No. But her ghost was still in the world. The little girl in my room was the ghost of Claire Clairmont's Allegra. She was unhappy and she couldn't rest because she wanted to be with her mother. But she couldn't find her. She knew that her mother was at Bagno a Ripoli, but she didn't know how to get there. So her unhappy ghost lived and waited in the body of Allegra Henderson, Chiara's daughter. At night it left Allegra's body and came to my room for help. Then poor Allegra died of fever, just like Claire's Allegra. But the ghost couldn't rest; it had to find another child's body.

'Who is the child?' I asked myself. 'Who is the next Allegra - Allegra Three?'

But I already knew the answer. My Italian family in Florence had a little daughter. Her name was Allegra, and she would be five years and three months on April 21st.

It was now the evening of April 20th.

I left the bar quickly and ran back to my family's house. When I arrived, the mother was crying.

'Allegra is in hospital,' she told me. 'She's got a bad fever and the doctors aren't sure what it is. Oh, I hope it isn't dangerous! I hope she'll get better soon!'

person who is ill to get better

nun a woman who lives to serve Jesus Christ

pale with very little colour in the face

poet a person who writes poems

sad not happy

shocked very surprised, by something bad or terrible

shutter a cover for a window on the wall outside a building

sign (n) (here) a piece of wood or metal by the road that gives you information about something

skin the thin covering on the outside of a body

tombstone a stone in a cemetery, with the name of the dead person on it

university a place where people go to study after they leave school

ACTIVITIES

Before Reading

1 Read the back cover. How much do you know now about *The Mystery of Allegra*? Tick one box for each sentence.

- | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 There are two girls called Allegra. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 The name 'Allegra' means 'happy'. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 The first Allegra is ten years old. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 She is never unhappy. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 She has a friend called Adrian. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 The second Allegra is there every morning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 She has cold hands and a cold face. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2 Read the story introduction on the first page of the book. What is going to happen in the story? Can you guess? Tick one box for each sentence.

- | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 A girl called Allegra will die. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Adrian will be in danger. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Adrian will help a girl called Allegra. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 A girl called Allegra will kill somebody. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 Adrian will find out that the second Allegra is not a real person. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 There will be four girls called Allegra in this story. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- 1 Why didn't Allegra answer Adrian's letters?
- 2 How old was Allegra when she died?
- 3 Why did Adrian go to Florence?
- 4 Who had the same name and birthday as Allegra Henderson?
- 5 Who came to Adrian's room at midnight?
- 6 Where did Adrian go the next morning?
- 7 When and where did Claire Clairmont die?

Before you read Chapter 4, what can you guess about the mystery of Allegra? Choose Y (Yes) or N (No) for each sentence.

- 1 Claire Clairmont had a daughter called Allegra. Y/N
- 2 Claire Clairmont's daughter died when she was five. Y/N
- 3 The first Allegra's father was an English poet. Y/N
- 4 Claire Clairmont didn't love her daughter. Y/N
- 5 Allegra was living with her father when she died. Y/N
- 6 Adrian was the only person who ever saw the ghost of Allegra. Y/N

Read Chapter 4 and check your guesses. Then answer these questions.

- 1 What was Allegra's father's name?
- 2 Who chose the name Allegra?
- 3 Why did Claire give Allegra to her father?
- 4 Where did Byron send Allegra when she was four?
- 5 Who went to visit Allegra?

Read Chapter 5. Who said this, and to whom?

- 1 'Allegra is in hospital.'

ACTIVITIES

After Reading

- 1 Match these halves of sentences to explain the mystery of Allegra. Use these words to join your sentences.**

and / and / because / but / but / but / when

1 Claire Clairmont's daughter, Allegra, died in 1822, ___

2 She was unhappy ___

3 She wanted to go to Bagno a Ripoli ___

4 So she came to Adrian's room at night ___

5 ___ Allegra Henderson died,

6 Then the third Allegra became ill too, ___

7 He took the ghost Allegra to Bagno a Ripoli ___

8 she wanted to be with her mother.

9 she found her mother there.

10 asked him for help.

11 the ghost went to live in the body of the Italian family's Allegra.

12 her ghost lived in the body of Allegra Henderson.

13 Adrian knew how to help her.

14 she couldn't get there alone.

- 2 Read this description of Allegra One. Then write similar descriptions of Allegra Two, Allegra Three,**

- 1 Who are the two people in the picture?
- 2 Where are they going?
- 3 Why?

Now write a caption for the illustration.



Caption: _____

- 5 Do you agree (A) or disagree (D) with these sentences? Explain why.
 - 1 Claire Clairmont was wrong to give Allegra to Byron.
 - 2 Byron was a very bad father.
 - 3 Chiara Henderson was wrong to take her daughter to Italy when her husband still lived in England.
 - 4 It was dangerous for Adrian to call his daughter Allegra.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Foreman has worked in English Language Teaching for twenty-five years, and has taught mostly in Italy, but also in Spain and Greece. He lived in Italy for many years, and has published two holiday books and several books of short fiction for students of English. He now lives and works near Bath, in the west of England. *The Mystery of Allegra* is his first story for the Oxford Bookworms Library.

The idea for this story came to him one weekend, when he was staying in a guest house in Tuscany. There were two English women there and one of their daughters was called Allegra. He remembered that this beautiful and unusual name was also the name of Byron's daughter, who died very young. He has never seen a ghost himself, but he began to imagine the ghost of Byron's Allegra, looking for her mother

...