

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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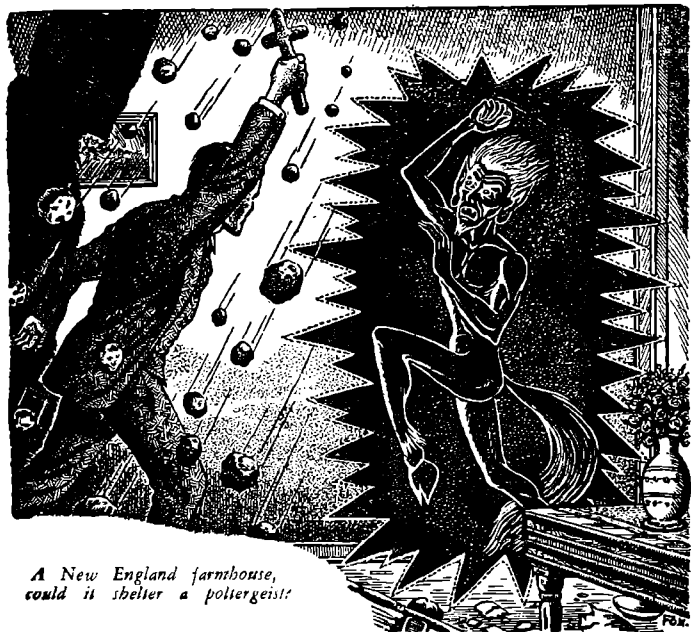
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Mr. Hyde— and Seek

BY

MALCOLM M. FERGUSON



*A New England farmhouse,
could it shelter a poltergeist?*

“FROM the way you describe it, doctor, the Orne Place does indeed sound as if it had a poltergeist bouncing around inside it,” Thomas Chadwick reflected, turning the nutmeg grounds about in the tumbler in his gaunt, weatherstained hand. “Which is, of course

more readily said than settled. For how does one cope with such a critter? Assuming that Eliza Blaine is host—or hostess, rather—for this manifestation, should she and it be treated according to the concepts which the psychologists use when they so gingerly deal with such a phenomenon, or

Heading by Matt Fox

in terms of the specialists in psychic affairs?"

"For my part, sir, if I were more deeply involved, I'd try neither, but record any phenomena in simple terms and try to settle in my own mind enough of their nature to warrant an attempt to break them up."

"Good. Good. Now can we start from the beginning, with some idea what the term 'poltergeist' means to you?"

"Yes. Sometimes strange supernatural happenings occur in the vicinity of an adolescent which come to be attributed to the operation of an alien power, directing agent, elemental force, or what you will, upon his victim's personality. The picture is that of a hermit crab in the shell of a periwinkle—only here the same skull quarters are shared simultaneously by an alternately dominant and dormant power and victim. The psychologist is on a spot, since this set-up would be duck soup for a Freudian explanation if it weren't for the recorded hell-raising outside of the subject's accomplishments—such unaccountable but recurrent pranks as a deluge of stones, strange peltings which explain the German name poltergeist—pelting ghost—and a variety of caprices worthy of a Puck or a Kobold."

I refilled Chadwick's glass and my own, taking the hot water with which to dilute the rum from a kettle in a chimney niche built a century back for this purpose.

"But the hell of it is, the symptoms are external to the subject," Chadwick argued. "And the creditability of such evidence must be tested before we can establish a satisfactory attitude regarding the poltergeist."

I was just agreeing with my elderly friend when a car's headlights swept Chadwick's window.

"That's probably Oliver Orne now," I commented, going to the door.

Orne was a strong, wiry man in his late forties. He greeted Chadwick and explained that he had learned of my whereabouts from the switchboard operator, who habitually rerouted the calls of my practice at my request.

"Mr. Chadwick and I were just talking about your ward's case. He has lived and

worked in many parts of the world, and exercised common sense on plenty of problems which would stump a young country doctor like myself."

Chadwick cut my eulogy with an epithet of mock contempt, and turned inquiringly to Orne.

"Well, what I came for is this. Eliza went up to bed about nine, while my wife and I sat in the kitchen listening to the radio. Just after Eliza went upstairs the radio began to static badly, so I turned it off. I went on reading the newspaper, but noticed that everything was real quiet; the sounds Eliza made getting ready for bed sounding miles away. Suddenly she screamed. Then we heard scraping noises ending in a loud crash. I ran upstairs as fast as I could, and found the kid fainted across her bed, with all the furniture drawn in a heap around her—the dresser, chairs, the heavy linen chest. I don't see how it happened."

We sat quietly for a minute or so, then he turned to me.

"Dr. Huntley, I want you to come stay with us until we can find some way to stop these goings-on."

"Why, I'd be glad to, only I don't know about such things. Doctors don't—Perhaps we can find some psychologist——" I stammered.

"No. I don't want an outsider," Orne replied. "Maybe we can cook up some arrangement for you to stay at the house without arousing any suspicion. That would be best."

After some discussion I agreed to this arrangement, with the excuse that repairs to my house made boarding out easier for me. As I could promise no results, I made my fee low, and only chargeable if something favorable were achieved. So that evening I started a case daybook, carefully avoiding technical terms which would influence diagnosis. I give you herewith an abridged version of this case history, day by day:

DISTURBANCE AT THE ORNE PLACE

June 3, 1949—The homestead is a two-and-a-half story frame building, with an

ell—a typical New England farmhouse. Built a century and a half ago, it appears to be in sound condition. The hand-hewn timbers, tenon and mortice and trunnel-fitted, the pine panelling throughout downstairs acknowledge this antiquity, and conceivably help provide whatever susceptibility may be needed for psychic manifestations. It is neither extremely isolated or otherwise, though it would appear so to a city-dweller, for seventy-five yards separate it from the nearest neighbors. The location on the edge of Whittaker Intervale, against the wooded slopes of Dawn Mountain would be agreeable, though lonely in winter when the sun goes down early in the afternoon.

Anne Orne, Oliver's wife, is a small, energetic woman who does a great deal of work, though with all the stir of a wren in a dust-bath. Oliver also is a worker, running his own extensive farm and hiring out with his tractor and other farm and lumbering machinery. Eliza Blaine is an attractive, well-bred girl of fifteen, with large brown eyes and brown hair. Judging by her voice and manners she would appear to be of an even, genial disposition, without perceptible neurotic tendencies surely. She had been adopted the summer before, following the death of her father, a distant relative of Mrs. Orne. Before coming to Whittaker Intervale she had lived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where her father had given her a number of benefits in education and upbringing.

The first occurrence prior to my arrival at the Orne Place, was in April. Eliza had just bidden her foster parents good night at the door leading from the kitchen which shuts off the back stairs and prevents drafts from dispelling the heat in winter. Oliver saw the door shut, and heard the girl's footsteps ascending the stairs. Then, half a beat behind them another footstep started up. Eliza was nearly at the top of the stairs before Oliver gathered his wits and opened the door. She was alone there, turning to look down at him beneath the bare light bulb. Her face wore a strange, devilish smile, compounded of mockery, yet fearfully, terribly alien.

Oliver stood dumbfounded, turning over in his mind whether Eliza had somehow prankishly skipped upstairs, but was unable to fit this devilry with her character. So he ended up, staring gape-jawed until she turned, snapping off the light and proceeding in the dark to the next light switch just inside her room. When Oliver turned back into the kitchen, his wife looked up, nonplussed, from her darning. Their discussion made no headway with the matter, partly perhaps since Oliver somehow omitted telling his wife of Eliza's strange expression. They concluded that this might have been a freak of sound involving the wood frame of the old house, and called to mind reports of similar happenings.

IN THE latter part of May on a rainy afternoon, the minister, Mr. Brainerd, came to call. Mrs. Orne was in the kitchen frying doughnuts, while Eliza was washing clothes, using set-tubs and a washing machine in the ell, also connected to the kitchen by a door. Mrs. Orne naturally exclaimed regarding the condition of the house, her hair and dress while Mr. Brainerd climbed from his car. Nevertheless, after shedding these fluttering preliminaries of a parishesial call, she had settled Mr. Brainerd, a young, easygoing fellow, over coffee, fresh doughnuts and discreet gossip. He sat facing the open ell door, where Eliza was continuing her work. His coffee cup was halfway to his lips, which were pursed with intent to retract if the liquid proved too hot, when a cake of soap floated through the air coming from the ell and swinging in a near ninety degree arc, to settle in the soap dish by the kitchen sink. That was one cup of coffee Mr. Brainerd did not drink.

Several minutes later, when Mr. Brainerd and Anne Orne looked into the ell they found Eliza caught by nervous laughter, badly convulsed, apparently from the effort of her performance. Indeed the two mystified witnesses had to put her on the front room couch and minister to her with damp cloths, smelling salts, or whatever they thought best. There was no trace of the diabolical about her expression then. On

recovering she claimed she knew nothing of the episode, being quite unable to explain her attack of hysteria.

With this episode the story took form and spread through the community. I was called in, though my examination brought nothing positive to light. For the record, the story that the doughnuts in the bowl on the kitchen table flew onto the coat hangers against the kitchen wall is the invention and whole cloth embroidery of some absent party—a village loafer, probably,—for both Mr. Brainerd and Anne Orne deny any such occurrence.

June 6, 1949—In return for a couple of weeks with a limited practice, I had to put in more time at the hospital. Evenings were more apt to be free, and so far I have managed to be on hand most evenings, though nothing has yet happened during my stay. This evening the four of us were seated at the kitchen table reading—or in Eliza's case, writing a letter to a Portsmouth chum.

A mouse had been scampering in the walls, though I had not been particularly conscious of it until I happened to notice Eliza reflecting a moment over her letter. I could almost see her attention caught by the creature's slight scuttlings and squeakings. Perhaps a sudden muffling of the atmosphere was responsible, as if a focus of attention of some sort were being established. Then all at once Eliza's face changed, taking on the wholly tense preoccupied expression of a cat about to spring. A full, taut minute thus, and then she gave a slight forward thrust, just the shadow of a lunge I would call it. From the wall a shrill, agonized mouse-cry piped. The Ornes looked up in surprise at the blank wall, and its hidden, strangely-racked victim. Neither Eliza nor I turned a heeding head; I of course being concerned with her reaction. While she—well, I think I must yield my medical judgment and say she acted as one possessed, as if the "person within her personality" were supplanted, her mind being temporarily tenanted by a diabolical force. No, this poltergeist is no mere prankster's connivance.

A moment following the mouse's last cry, soon reached in rapid *diminuendo*,

Eliza thrust the very tip of her tongue briefly between her teeth, and in doing so seemed to be released to herself and regain her own personality. Seeing the three of us watching her (rather than the blank wall behind which was a still mouse) she shook her head slightly.

"Gosh, I must have dozed off. I feel awfully tired. I didn't snore, did I?"

I assured her that she hadn't, that we were merely looking up because we thought we had heard a mouse in the wall.

"Yes, I guess I must have heard him scampering around. Funny, you hear a noise like that and hardly realize it."

Shortly after that she retired for the night.

JUNE 7, 1949—I've been thinking a good deal today about the human brain as an organ. Now the heart is fairly plainly a pump—one can comprehend its function upon inspecting it, as in dissection. And so on with all the other organs, their functions can be readily comprehended upon examination. But the mass of gray matter which comprises the brain cannot be thus comprehended as the source of thought process. One cannot see where or how this visceral-like mass permits one to pilot an airplane and carry on a conversation at the same time, or to cope with a novel problem such as the present one of conjecture concerning poltergeists. Since we cannot yet look into the brain and get very far by induction, all we know about it is what we feel and experience ourselves, or what we observe in others. Therefore, I conclude, if phenomenal accomplishments are directed by the brain, of which the brain's possessor is wholly unaware, the fact that these functions were directed by the brain would defy detection.

Thus, for example, the recent experiments at Duke University with cards, regarding "mental telegraphy," or the age-old business of making a divining rod indicate the subterranean presence of water—these in the human brain—or the homing instinct in the pigeon's brain, suggest that certain functions of the brain may exceed anything we have yet ascertained.

Putting it another way, if we say, "I think, therefore I am," the "I am" cannot directly challenge or enlarge upon the "I think." And if an unaccounted relationship between forces of the mind and external objects, and conjecturably *forces* in the environment exists, there's simply no telling of it.

June 11, 1949—Whatever it is, it's getting stronger, growing like a malignant tumor. Each successful exercise of dominance over Eliza's mind increases the power of the next manifestation, which may be less capricious, and not content with a mouse for a victim. That Eliza is possessed by a malevolent entity or grotesque preternatural schism of split personality—or whatever in hell it can be called, for it is surely spawned of hell,—is apparent to me, whether my terms fit the textbooks or not.

Eliza and I started the evening with a game of checkers. This would prove diverting while keeping me posted on her mental state. She sat in the chair Rev. Brainerd had occupied, facing the ell, the kitchen sink (this is from the chair occupant's left to right) a window into the area of front yard which might be called the ell courtyard. We played across a corner of the full-sized table in order to reach the board readily. Her game was undistinguished, and free from devious tricks or wild gambles. My own is orthodox, too; I'm merely noting the less artful nature of this girl of half my age.

Her chance came in the third game to force me to sacrifice—if she could be reasonably sure of her calculations. As she concentrated on the alternative moves I watched her, though in a moment she screened her brow with her hand, and I could no longer see her face.

Suddenly the air became heavy, a stillness that almost seemed sound ensued, as if silent black wings beat down upon the air. The telephone went "ting"—not ringing, but ticking as these country lines do in a thunderstorm. I looked up at the windows, wondering if a storm were coming, but could see only darkness. Then I saw a face pressed against the ell courtyard win-

dow, a white face, wide-eyed in terror. It was the face of Eliza Blaine! Breaking my gaze from this onlooker's, I turned in amazement to the girl across the checkerboard. Her face was utterly alien, an abominable satyr's mask, looking in cool, sardonic amusement at its counterpart's features pressed so fearfully against the windowpane.

I think that I did the right thing at last. I ran to the outer ell door and threw it open upon the courtyard. Switching on the outdoor light, I saw the courtyard was empty and the impress of no footprints were in the garden plot under the window. I turned back at once to find Oliver Orne just catching the fainting Eliza.

I think I did right, I say, because if I had turned and slapped the face or shaken the shoulders of the creature across the checkerboard from me, there'd be danger of psychic trauma for Eliza, with negative results as far as the poltergeist went.

June 12, 1949—This morning I visited Chadwick, telling him what appears here. His advice to me was:

"Your best bet is to find some action which will fit all the various theories about poltergeists, since you are concerned with sure counteraction rather than theorizing. You must apply this action when the poltergeist is dominant, and in such a way that Eliza is done neither bodily nor mental harm. You must surprise the poltergeist, confronting him as strongly as possible at the moment of his greatest aggression. And you must do so with something as opposite in all respects as possible."

I agreed and we concocted, rejected and sorted over a number of possible plans. Finally we hit upon two or three schemes which seem more substantial, if they can be worked out.

I DO not propose to report on them now, as they may never be tested. Since one of them involved the services of a skilled dental technician friend, I spent the rest of the day with him in the hospital laboratory.

June 15, 1949—Fortunately no manifes-

tations took place while I was completing a variety of preparations, to cover as many contingencies as I could. Today I brought back the acrylic plastic candlestick which my dental technician had produced (using his false teeth manufacture thus divertedly). It was a curious piece, anything but artistic, with shapeless, topheavy bulges. Remarking upon its amateurish appearance and saying that I could do better with more practice, I put the object on the mantel with my tobacco jar and smoking apparatus. Since it seemed highly improbable that the poltergeist would appear in the presence of any object which it knew to be inimical, I hoped that this candlestick would not appear so.

It had been a hot day, with thunder-showers likely to break the oppressively muggy air. Shortly after supper I was standing up, filling my pipe, as is my custom. I was reaching for a wooden match from the wall receptacle and idly looking into the mirror in front of me. My gaze rested on the image of Eliza, or what displaced it. The face was turned as she talked to Mrs. Orne. But the mirror reflected the abhorrent satyr's head, self-confident with the myriad abominations of hell itself.

As I watched, Eliza—or this horror—saw me staring at the mirror, and broke into a Sardonian smile. I turned from the mirror to Eliza. Her features were nearly normal, though the alterations were even now taking place, as if challenging me for my looking-glass view.

I was not idle either, for the time had come. And yet my mind continued turning over the matter of mirrors, the lore of the speculum of Mage Merlin, the Devil's Looking Glass of Dr. Lee, of katoptromancy and vampirism. I had picked up the candlestick and advanced slowly, with a show of irresolution, to the stove. Doctors and acrobats, bull-fighters and actors must have a sense of timing; it is often extremely important. Here the poltergeist must think me uncertain, or bent upon hurting Eliza—at which misdirected aim he could laugh, exult and grow stronger. So I advanced to the stove as the transfor-

mation, unabated, reached its completion.

Mr. and Mrs. Orne sat still, as I lifted the lid of the hot kettle. I had to trust them to heed my injunction not to stir.

Then the lights went out. The electricity in this part of the country sometimes does cut out when there are thunderstorms. But this was too opportune to be chance.

From Eliza's figure sprouted mushroom blobs of static light like St. Elmo's Fires, shining yet not igniting, forming at the hem of her skirt, her waist, the nape of her neck, swamp fire of the fiend's finding. With the room thus weirdly illumined, the poltergeist held both hands aloft with palms taut and fingers radiating, outstretched to the area above my head. Shrilly Eliza's strained vocal cords emitted the fiend's curses and evocations.

All around me stones fell, yet I was unhurt. I drew from the kettle the acrylic plastic figure. The action of the boiling water had fulfilled our anticipations by invoking the peculiar properties of the candlestick's substances, reshaping it into the form of a crucifix.

As I walked forward with the talisman upraised, the demoniac creature emitted a hell-rending cry as if a bottomless pit gaped beneath him. His hands lowered spasmodically to clutch idiotically about his face. His features withered and writhed, revealed as the electricity came on again when, presumably, the fiend's will power dissolved its damning block. In a moment the struggle was over. Eliza, released, collapsed into her chair, and but for my free hand would have fallen to the floor.

June 15, 1949—Chadwick explains the matter by calling the poltergeist a virulent mass and the crucifix an all-healing antibiotic which is an interesting way of putting it. Since the crucifix was dormant in the plastic (the acrylic being peculiar in that once fixed—in the form of a crucifix—it could be provisionally altered to the rough shape of a candlestick, until its "memory" was stirred by the boiling water, when it reverted to its fixed shape it could form a perfect opposite to the poltergeist.
