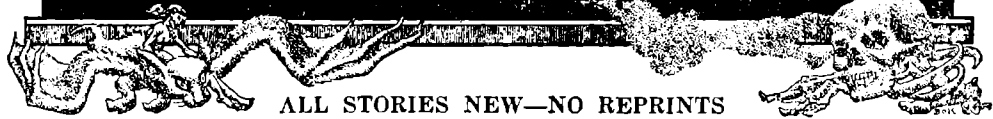


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1942

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

"Kill her, sonny—kill her!"

"I can't! I can't!"



Parasite Mansion

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Youth is catapulted into the midst of horror generations old!

THERE was nothing about the aspect of that little stretch of Alabama road to warn the girl of disaster. Driving along at a careful forty, the wheels of her battered roadster sunk in deep clay ruts, Marcia Trent had no

premonition of evil lurking in that pine coppice just ahead. She was young, modern, red-headed, and furiously angry. Her blue eyes snapped as she drove, alone, through Blue Ridge foothills that shivered under the first touch of winter.

The realization that this mad dash was foolish and dangerous — four hundred miles to Birmingham, when everyone believed she was safe at a girls' school in Carolina—pricked at her conscience now and then; but she thrust it aside angrily. The last train and the last bus had gone when, blinking the tears from her eyes, locked in her dormitory room, she had made up her mind.

And now—the blue eyes flashed—she was two-thirds of the way home . . . to break up her sister's marriage to a man whose engagement solitaire winked up at her from her own left hand!

Marcia compressed her lips and shifted gears, plowing through mud as she rounded a sharp curve.

At that moment something like an angry hornet struck through the windshield of the roadster. It smacked into the leather seat a scant two inches from her shoulder, and a rayed hole glittered in the glass.

The girl screamed, ducked. This time, clearly, she had heard a muffled shout—the crack of a rifle. And that second hole in her windshield was no accident.

Someone was sniping at her from that dark coppice to the left!

Marcia slid low in the car seat, peering over the dashboard and gripping the wheel. Terror was like a hand clutching her throat. She stepped hard on the gas, and skidded around the curve.

And abruptly there was no road stretching before her eyeline. Space yawned as the car skidded and plunged downward. With a crash it slid sidewise over a low embankment. Marcia clawed at the door, tried to jump clear, but pain wrenched at her ankle. Then something hard and solid struck her head, and darkness fell like a black velvet curtain.

She fought to retain consciousness. Distorted visions swam before her eyes. Once a dirty bearded face bent over her, and she gasped at the stench of stale corn liquor.

Voices drifted to her ears, faint and disjointed:

A man's voice, gruff and slurred with drink: "You little fool! . . . not to touch that rifle again . . . take us *all* away if you've—"

And a child's voice, frightened and defiant: "I don't care! I don't care! They'll never take Lollie away to that place—I'll kill them! . . . kill everybody who comes here—"

And the man's voice again: ". . . your fault if they do! . . . not dead, just a slight concussion. Oh, hell! Nothing we can do but—"

The car door was jerked open. Weakness and nausea overwhelmed the girl as a dirty hand reached in, tugged at her, lifted her out. Marcia half opened her eyes once, aware of being carried like a baby in strong arms. A chill drizzle of rain wet her face, and the muffled *squisb-squosh* of heavy boots in mud kept time with the swaying of the arms that cradled her. She tried to cry out, to squirm from their grasp. But the black curtain fell once more, and the faint sobbing of a child trailed her into oblivion.

WHEN she opened her eyes again, Marcia thought she must be going mad.

There was no wrecked car, no bleak red-clay hills, no dark pine coppice hugging a lonely mountain road. She lay, warm and quiet, in a huge four-poster bed, in a high-ceiled Colonial-type room that would have delighted the heart of an antique dealer. A lighted oil lamp, held close above her, knifed at her aching head; she blinked painfully, trying to see just beyond its radiance.

And then, swiftly, she shut her eyes, trying not to see. —

Three faces were bending over her: a small tow-headed boy's—tear-stained, sensitive and violent; a man's face—bearded,

lined by suffering, with somber eyes that held no friendliness. But the third face, Marcia thought wildly, could only be that of a mummy. That wrinkled mask with its hook nose, wispy gray hair and bright shoe-button eyes leered down at her intently. A claw-like hand poked at her hair.

"Pretty! Ay, she's pretty! Eh? Eh, Victor?" a thin voice quavered, taunting with its acid humor. "That why you didn't leave her to die in the car? Eh? Answer me, Victor! Because you're lonesome and sick of hiding out here. Eh? And what happens when you're done with her? You can't send her back."

Marcia shut her eyes tight. She lay stiff and still, praying that her lids would not quiver.

"Don't be a fool, Gran," the man's voice lashed out, thick with drunkenness. "Renny shot at her, made her crack up her car. The Mason family," his tone was bitter, "owes her something for that. Besides," he added callously, "there are bullet holes in the upholstery. If someone noticed them when they found her, they'd be sure to come snooping around here. . . . Oh, damn you, Renny!" he burst out wearily. "Why did you do a crazy thing like that? I told you not to touch that rifle."

"But, Vic, sh-she was slowing down!" the boy's voice whimpered. "They sent her here to get Lollie! I know they did! She can't take her . . . I'll kill her! I'll kill her!" the voice rose to a screech of hysteria.

And Marcia's eyes flew open in terror as two strong little hands fastened about her throat.

Fecbly she fought them off, staring up into the white contorted face of the boy. He could not have been over eleven or twelve years old—but for a second time he was trying to kill her!

The bearded man moved swiftly, however. He seized the boy by the hair, shoved him toward the door with gentle

force. Sobbing, screaming, the child ran out of the room. Marcia could hear his bare feet running down a long flight of stairs, followed by the distant slam of a door.

There was nothing for it now but to look up at the other two faces, with what false courage she could muster.

"Where . . . where am I?" Marcia forced a stiff smile and sat up. Instantly she fell back as pain knifed at her ankle. "Ooh . . . it's broken!"

The bearded man looked down at her, with no sympathy in his somber eyes. "No," he said crisply. "Just a bad sprain. I strapped it up, and also took a few stitches in your scalp."

Marcia blinked at him. "*You* . . . took—?"

Her head was clearing now. The shabby splendor of the room amazed her, dulled, even though it was, by dust and cobwebs. The bed in which she lay was beautifully made and very old, with pineapple knobs on the posts; but the frayed quilt that covered her was its only bedding. The period furniture was priceless. But rain blew unchecked through a broken pane of the window, drenching an old carved highboy across the room. A rusty blind creaked in the wind and banged against the house. The old place was like a beggar-king, arrogant still in silken rags and a tarnished crown.

The man who stood looking down at her, Marcia thought, was an even greater contradiction. Dirty, half drunk, bearded and unkempt, he yet had the voice and manner of a gentleman. And his hands, washed clean now, were graceful and quick—hands that, he had informed her, had strapped up her sprain and skilfully taken stitches in a scalp cut.

"You're . . . a doctor, then?" Marcia faltered.

The man gave a short laugh. Beside him, the old crone emitted a high squeal

of mirth and squinted up at him, head to one side like an evil bird.

"Doctor! Heh-heh! Are you a doctor, she says, Victor!" One button-eye winked at Marcia, and a scrawny thumb jerked at the man. "Him, a doctor? Not any more, dearie! He's not fit to tend a sick horse—him with his drinkin' and hidin' out here in the hills like a murderer, because o' the black fear that's in him!"

"Shut up, Gran," the man snapped in a tired voice.

SOMETHING like a shadow had crept into his deep-set eyes at the old woman's words. He glared at her briefly, twisting together hands that had begun to tremble. Then he glowered down at Marcia, eyes cold and unfriendly.

"Listen to me," he rapped out. "Those bullets fired into your car were accidental, but I don't expect you to believe that. A . . . a sick child. My little brother, Renfield. He . . . wasn't responsible, but of course it was outrageous. However, the facts are these: I could have left you there with a slight concussion and a sprained ankle. You were off the highway detour, you know. Cars don't take our road once a week; so you'd have had a long crawl to the next farm. As it is, I carried you here and gave you medical attention, free of charge."

He paused, scowling down at Marcia, at her scared blue eyes turned up to him. A slight quiver in her lower lip must have caught his attention, for the harsh voice softened.

"I'm sorry. You're frightened, of course. Don't be; you're quite safe here. I can get your car in running order, and you can be on your way early tomorrow morning. Tonight you'll have to accept—" his mouth twisted again—"such hospitality as we can offer. Tomorrow . . . I'm requesting only that you leave without asking questions about . . . anything you may see

or hear in this house. Forget us as though we never existed. Isn't that fair enough?"

"Y-yes. Oh, yes. Anything you say." Marcia nodded terrified agreement. Of course the man was merely trying to fool her, to calm her fears until . . . She bit her lip, determined not to cry with those two hostile faces glaring down at her. "Thank you for . . . helping me," she said brightly. "I'm sure the shooting was . . . accidental. And you've been kind, and I won't say a thing! All I w-want is to get on to Birmingham before they m-miss me at home and at the school I l-left."

The man called Victor, towering over her, gave a grunt of disdain.

"College girl, eh?" he snorted. "What are you doing, driving across country alone—Carolina to Alabama, judging by your license plate?"

Marcia set her teeth with an effort. "Not a college girl," she said with dignity. "I'm twenty-six—an assistant professor of Abnormal Psychology. I . . . I'm studying to be a psychiatrist."

The man laughed aloud, and rubbed his bearded chin.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said bluntly. "A dumb little fluff like you? Now I've seen everything!" The dark eyes narrowed as he spoke. They flicked a glance at the old crone, grinning beside him, then bored into Marcia. "All right," he snapped. "So you're a student-professor of psychiatry. Well . . . let me warn you, don't go practising any of your damned scientific rot around here! . . . Science!" Once more that shadow came into his haunted, deep-set eyes, and his mouth twitched. "Logic! It's fine, it's perfect until we come up against a blank wall. Then all we can do is pretend it's not there. Fantasy! Superstition! Science has hidden behind those words too often, when something that can't be explained—"

He broke off short, aware of the girl's intent gaze on his face. Once more his

eyes went cold, menacing, and a long forefinger jabbed out.

"Just mind your own business while you are here," he warned, "and nothing will happen to you. Stay in this room; don't go prowling—not that you can do very much on that ankle. And if you hear or see things that don't make sense . . . forget 'em! Is that clear?"

With a caught breath, Marcia nodded rapidly. The man grunted, then strode toward the door. On the threshold he paused to scowl back at the old woman.

"Gran," he called harshly, "none of your idle chatter, you hear? Or I'll break your scrawny neck!"

The aged mummy flapped a hand at him, cackling nasally and winking one bird-like eye at Marcia. "Go on with ye, Victor! Out! Go get ye another jug of corn, and come home sotty drunk as usual! Heh-heh! I'd not be tellin' a stranger the Mason family secret, would I? Would I now?"

The man cursed audibly and stalked out, slamming the door hard.

MARCIA relaxed with a sigh of relief. For now, perhaps, she could bribe this senile old woman to let her go before . . . Her eyes strayed to a window, its broken pane stuffed with yellowed newspaper. It was almost dusk. The sky was a dirty smear of clouds, as though a witch had swept it with her sooty broom. Rain slanted against the panes with a faint hiss of sleet. The wind had risen, whining under the eaves like a leprous beggar. Out there, the girl saw with a sinking heart, it would be a long cold hobble on her sprained ankle to the next farm.

But here—in this eery old house, with a bearded derelict, a grinning mummy, and a murderous child — she most assuredly must not wait for night to fall. Gathering her courage, she turned a bright smile on the old hag.

"Look here," her voice was confidential and persuasive, "there's fifty dollars in my purse, in the glove compartment of my wrecked car. If you'll help me get away from here before he . . . he comes back, you can have it."

"Have it? Heh-heh! I got it a'ready!" old Gran cackled with evil mirth. "Renny fetched it to me whilst Victor was fussin' over your hurt. A good boy, that Renny," she crooned. Then the beady eyes narrowed. "If you tell Victor, I'll put the lad onto ye again! He'll do for ye this time, sure enough. Quick and strong, Renny is—if a bad shot. Now, if I was to give him a knife, let's say—"

She squinted at the girl slyly, rubbing bony hands together. But Marcia sat up in bed, oddly steadied rather than frightened by the heavy tone of threat.

"I don't think he wants to hurt me," she said calmly, "except in defense of this . . . Lollie. His sister? I'm beginning to understand a little of this crazy business. Someone has threatened to come and take her away; is that it? Her brother shot at me, thinking I was from . . . the police? No, hardly. Or the county hospital, perhaps? Is Lollie tubercular or something?"

The old crone burst out in another shriek of mirth at that. For a full minute she rocked with nasal laughter, flapping thin arms. Then, without a word, she scuttled from the room, leaving the door ajar on a wide dusty hall.

Marcia, frowning after her, marveled anew at the unkept splendor of the old house, once undoubtedly the pride of an old Southern family. Places like this, she knew, were not uncommon in the Deep South. Impoverished during Reconstruction days, many a family of decadent aristocrats still lived on in old homes like this one. Stubbornly they clung to the furnishings and traditions of a bygone era, though poverty had worked its will on the people themselves. Hope and ambition had

dried up at the spring. Only the stolid will to live kept them alive, bitter and weary and uncaring, in a decaying old mansion that had once rung with music and laughter and the voices of Negro slaves.

But . . . Marcia shook her head. These people, she mused, were not the quitting kind. There was fire and fight in the eyes of that boy Renny, and a savage defiance behind the haunted look of Victor Mason. Poverty and lack of ambition, she felt, were not the cause of their disintegration. Gingerly her hand went to her bandaged scalp, and felt of the strapped ankle. Skilled hands had done that work, not those of a drunken idler. Something else had weakened the spines of these Masons. Some shadow. Nameless and forbidding, hung over this old house into which fate had dumped her on a rainy afternoon. "The Mason family secret," the old hag had called mockingly as Victor went out. What secret?

Quite clearly Marcia knew all at once that Victor Mason, ex-doctor, was horribly afraid of something, as was his nervous violent little brother Renny. Fear like an obscene fungus sprouted from the very walls of this old house. Marcia shivered, hunched down in the huge bed—and her imagination groped with a trembling hand through darkness for what the answer might be. . . .

A slight sound made her glance up, heart pounding.

The half-open door was swinging slowly wider. Marcia stopped breathing. And then her breath came out in a *whoosh* of relief.

A young girl of perhaps sixteen stood in the doorway. Barefoot, dirty, her frail body clad only in a sleeveless one-piece dress of cheap cotton, there was yet an exquisite faery quality about her that made Marcia's heart turn over. Uncombed blond hair fell shoulder-length, framing a thin sensitive face with the dreamy startled eyes

of a fawn. Tensed, like a wild thing poised for flight, the girl took a step into the room—and another, and another until she stood a few feet from the bed. She stared at Marcia, lips parted in child-like wonder, hands clasped at her breast.

"Oh, you're pretty!" Her voice was a timid whisper. "You didn't really come to take me away. Did you? And let them lock me up?"

Marcia stared back at her, caught by the girl's delicate beauty. "No, dear," she murmured gently. "Of course not. You're Lollie, aren't you? Renny's sister, and Victor's? Come closer; I won't hurt you. Why should anyone want to hurt you?"

The fawn-eyes flickered toward the door warily, and came back to Marcia, round and trusting. One finger stole out suddenly, timidly, indicating a brilliant brooch at Marcia's throat.

"What's that?" she asked with wonder. "Precious jewels! Are you a princess, like in the picture book?" The soft eyes regarded Marcia with admiration. "You *are* a princess, in disguise! I can tell! And you wouldn't take me away to that place." she asserted with a quick smile of trust. "Renny said you were a mean lady. But he's wrong. You're like the princess in the story—'both beautiful and kind,' it said. I can tell," the blond head nodded solemnly. "I can tell by your eyes and the way you talk. . . . Oh, the pretty jewels!" she clapped her hands. "Red and blue and green and yellow, like a rainbow!"

MARCIA bit her lip, blinking back tears of pity for this lovely young girl with the mind of a child. On impulse, her hands went swiftly to the brooch at her neck, and unfastened it. She did not hold it out; merely laid it on the edge of the bare mattress.

"There, dear," she whispered. "You like it? You can have it. But don't tell anybody—it's our secret!"

The fawn-eyes widened with delight. "Ooh! For me? Now I'm sure you're a princess! Only a really, truly princess would . . . it's mine? To keep?"

One delicate hand stole out toward the ornament; almost touched it. And then an incredible thing happened.

Like a live creature, the brooch leaped suddenly into the air some three feet above the bed. It poised there for a fractional moment, then sailed across the room to crash against the far wall.

The girl Lollie emitted a sharp wail of pain. She jerked back her arm, and then cringed, gripping her right wrist. Marcia stared, stunned.

She herself had not moved. There was no other living creature in the shadowy room. And the nails of the girl's own left hand were broken or bitten off to the quick.

But, nevertheless, four deep scratches were slowly reddening in angry welts on Lollie's forearm. As Marcia looked, blood oozed from them. It ran down the slender wrist and dripped to the dusty carpet.

Lollie stifled a sob. One piteous glance she cast at Marcia. Her lips moved as though she were trying to speak, to explain, but no sounds issued from them. Another sob racked her frail body. Then, with a longing look at the brooch, gleaming where it had fallen in the distant corner, she wheeled and ran from the room.

Marcia huddled in the big bed, wide-eyed and still. Her stunned gaze was fastened on the empty doorway through which the girl had vanished . . . and caught a glimpse of straggly gray hair. Old Gran was peering at her around the jamb. Now, discovered, she popped out, breaking into another of her senile cachinnations and flapping bony hands against her thighs.

"Heh-heh-heh! Scared out'n a year's growth, ain't ye? They all are, them that's ever seen it!"

She scuttled over to the corner, pounced

on the brooch, and held it to catch the fading light, bead-eyes glittering brighter than the jeweled ornament. It looked grotesque in that wrinkled mummy-hand.

"My, ain't that fancy! Too fancy for a child—and a crazed one, at that!" she tittered, thrusting the brooch into a pocket of her gray shawl. "And ye'll not tell Victor about this, either!" she added, glaring. "Ye hear? If ye do, he'll beat Lollie for comin' up here to see ye when he told her not. Ye wouldn't want to cause her hurt, now would ye, dearie? Besides, if Vic knows ye saw her, he might not let ye leave here . . . so ye won't be tellin' him, will ye, dearie?" she asked slyly.

Marcia gulped, and shook her head like one dazed by a blow. The weird events of the past few minutes had bewildered her. But rapidly her logic and common sense were coming to the rescue, thrusting out in every direction for a spark of sanity in this mad household.

She glanced down at the ring on her finger, and her lip quivered uncontrollably. Jim, her Jim, and Alice were marching up the church aisle about now, to the strains of *Lohengrin*. And back at the school, no one would miss her until Monday classes. Here in this old house in the mountains she could be swallowed up, and no one would ever know what had become of her and her battered little roadster. Perhaps, before Lollie's visit, she had had a chance to escape alive. But now, apparently, she had seen too much. When Victor Mason came home! Someone would tell him; he would know. . . .

Miserably she sought for a possible means of escape. Why would they want to keep her here? To insure her silence, of course—silence about some secret this old house held. Those scratches on the girl's arm, the fear in all their eyes, and the antics of that jumping brooch: it all added up, she was certain, to a weird mystery that smacked of the supernatural.

Something here, something no more tangible than a shadow, had changed a skilled young doctor into a drunken hermit, a healthy intelligent little boy into a nervous killer, and this fine old home into a haunted hovel. That appealing girl-child called Lollie—the mystery centered about her, Marcia was sure. And as long as it remained a mystery, for a stranger like herself to chatter about when she left, she would never get out of this old house alive.

She sat up in bed, blue eyes snapping with sudden purpose.

Here before her was a riddle—which, solved, might mean her freedom. And no young woman who dared study the science of psychiatry could look herself in the face again if she was too terrified even to attempt its solution!

Marcia looked at Gran. The old hag was squinting at her again; she had just spied the diamond solitaire, and was staring at it greedily.

"I want that, too!" she rasped, jabbing out a bony finger at the ring. "Give it to me, quick—or ye'll not leave this house alive. I'll set Renny onto ye! I'll give him a knife."

Marcia tensed. All her senses were alert now, wrestling with her problem. There was also a burning desire to help that dryad of a girl, Lollie—and a barb of curiosity — to stiffen her spine and sharpen her wits.

Now, obediently, she tugged at the ring to pacify this absurd old woman. "I can't get it off," she lied. "You'll have to get me soap and water, or a file. Tell me about Lollie, won't you . . . er . . . Gran? Isn't that what they call you? Your grandchildren?"

The old hag spat with surprising venom. "Victor and them? Ha! Them spineless Masons! A pack of fools, the lot of 'em . . . and they're no kin of mine, except by marriage. 'Twas Aubrey Mason I mar-

ried, their great-uncle and the biggest fool of the lot. A smart woman could wrap him around her finger. Which I did!" she cackled. "Which I did! His fine women-folks yelped and fumed their heads off, but he married me—right off the streets, in Mobile! Not good enough for 'em, I wasn't. And now," she tittered with shrill secret mirth, "now they're not good enough for me! They've rotted away at the root, these high-and-mighty Masons . . . and it's fear that's rotted 'em! Fear!"

She stopped short, glaring suspiciously at Marcia as though apprehensive that she had said too much. Wrinkled lips writhed back from toothless gums.

"It's no business of yours!" she snarled. "What are you questionin' me for? Get that ring off! Give it to me, quick, before—"

SHE broke off again, cocking her head sidewise in a listening attitude. Then, muttering, she scuttled from the room.

A moment later a tall saturnine man, clean-shaven and dressed in a cheap dark suit, strode in from the hall. At Marcia's expression, he smiled wryly and rubbed his chin.

"Yes, Miss . . . Trent, by your driver's license," Victor Mason drawled. "You're thinking I look almost human without the beard, eh? Thank you. First time I've dressed and shaved in six months. You should be honored!"

Marcia looked up at him, caught a gleam of sardonic humor in the dark eyes, and smiled. It was a bright intimate smile. Many a young male had assured her it was irresistible. But Victor Mason snorted.

"Trying feminine wiles on me now, are you?" he laughed shortly. "Hoping to cajole me into not keeping you here? Please don't bother!" he snapped coldly. "I have no intention of detaining you, Miss Trent, any longer than I can possibly help. Your

car wasn't damaged much. Just a blow-out, a bent axle and a crumpled fender. I have a man working on it now—one who'll overlook the bullet holes."

"Oh! Thank you! I—" Marcia began in a rush of relief.

"Just now, though," Mason continued coldly, "I'm worried. It's Renny. He seems determined to finish what he started, the minute he gets a chance. He's hiding somewhere around the house now. Until I find him and lock him up in the woodshed, I suppose I'll have to act as your bodyguard. Damned nuisance!"

Marcia shrugged, hiding her worried look, and continued to smile. She patted her hair, straightened her collar. If only he did not learn about Lollie's visit!

"You know," she said coolly, "I believe you're the rudest man I ever met, Doctor Mason. At first I was afraid of you. But now, since I've discovered that *you* are horribly afraid, too . . . of something . . . I'm not frightened any more. Your little brother? Neurotic. That's why he tried to shoot me, and—"

She stopped with a gasp of dismay. Victor Mason's eyes, which had drifted from her face, were suddenly riveted on the dusty carpet. Two bright drops of blood glistened there. The man's head jerked up, eyes narrowed, glowering at Marcia.

"Lollie!" he burst out. "She's been in here, hasn't she? The little idiot, I warned her! I'll—"

"You'll beat her?" Marcia flashed, indignant. "You'd punish that poor sick child?"

The man frowned. "Beat Lollie? Whatever gave you that idea? I'd break anybody in half," he grated, "who tried to lay a hand on her! I wouldn't hesitate to . . . kill you in cold blood, Miss Trent, if I thought you were going to make her unhappy, intentionally or otherwise." He shrugged, laughed wearily. "There, you see? I love my sister quite as much as

Renny. "I've devoted my life to helping her—but I've failed miserably. There's nothing a man, a blundering scientist, can do . . . against—"

HE BROKE off, that shadow of horror darkening the deep-set eyes. His mouth twitched, and the graceful surgeon's-hands twisted together in anguish. Abruptly he whirled on Marcia.

"What did you see?" he rasped. "How much do you know? Oh hell! I knew if I brought you here . . . Now," he stated flatly, "you can never be permitted to leave. That's that. Your promise of silence isn't enough. You'd break it—and I can't take that chance for Lollie."

Marcia nodded gently. "I understand," she said. "If her case were reported to the authorities, the child would be committed to . . . an institution for the insane. I've read of such cases," she whispered, awed. "It's . . . demoniacal possession, isn't it? When her . . . seizures recur, she's affected with . . . Dr. Mason, I've heard of stigmata, but I never thought I'd see a case so remarkable. It occurs most often in religious fanatics, so I've read. There was a case in Vavaria only last week. The woman, upset by war news, broke out with wounds similar to those of Christ on the Cross. Medical records tell of dozens of other cases.

"There was also a little Rumanian girl who broke out with 'bites' and 'scratches' like those inflicted by a large cat. *Dermographism*, that's the medical term. And when it is accompanied by *hyperemia*, the stigmatic wounds actually bleed. Extreme hysteria causes the skin to react to imaginary blows, and cuts and weals will appear as though the victim has actually been struck.

"Your sister, Lollie . . . I saw her arm break out with such wounds that bled. The attack was accompanied by temporary *aphonia*, too—hysterical loss of speech.

Oh, the poor darling! If only there were something we could do to help her!"

Victor's savage look faded. Curiously he peered at Marcia, undecided for a moment. Then, as if driven by a surge of despair, he took one stride and sat down on the edge of the great bed.

"I've misjudged you," he blurted. "You are kind . . . and you also seem to be a level-headed young woman, Miss Trent. I . . . I . . . you've studied psychiatry. Tell me, frankly, does Lollie seem to be a mental case?"

Marcia met his eye thoughtfully, and shook her head.

"No, Doctor Mason. She seems a rather bright child, though undeveloped. Too sheltered, naturally. She must be extremely nervous, to be afflicted with stigmata. But . . . no; I wouldn't say she was insane. Just badly frightened—like the rest of you! What is it you're afraid of, here in this house?"

The man's eyes darkened. His mouth twitched; he steadied it with an effort.

"We're afraid of . . . *It*," he said flatly. "The . . . the Thing that scratches her. Oh, yes, Miss Trent," he gestured bitterly, "talk about stigmata till you're black in the face! I've studied it. I can quote you case histories you never heard of. At least two more, anyhow," he muttered. "My Aunt Silvia, and my great-aunt, Anne. You see, we Masons have lived with this Thing for three generations. It's been handed down, always affecting the youngest, most high-strung daughter. That's the hideous thing. It isn't new. It's been with us so long . . . and yet we've never been able to get to it or do a thing toward . . . destroying it."

HIS voice trailed off dully. Marcia opened her mouth, shut it with a snap.

"Doctor Mason," she exploded, "you're not hinting that you believe there actually is something that . . . that scratches Lollie!

Of all the silly superstitious rot! Why, an intelligent medical man like yourself—"

Victor Mason snorted. "Superstitious!" he laughed harshly. "That's what we've been hearing all our lives! Stigmata! Nervous hysteria. Listen, Miss Trent—it isn't only those welts on Lollie's flesh that make me believe the unbelievable. There are other phenomena. Inanimate objects move and go flying through the air, in a room where Lollie is. Small objects that a . . . a creature about the size of a monkey might pick up and throw."

Marcia stiffened. She was remembering that flying brooch. But a recoiling spring in the mattress, logic told her, could easily have catapulted the ornament across the room. Only her disturbed fancy had made it seem to move so slowly, to hang there in midair for a moment. For the thing could not have flown across the room by itself—nor could any ghostly hand have thrown it. The idea was ridiculous.

But a look at Victor Mason's haunted eyes sent a chill down her spine.

"I've tried so hard and so long," he was saying wearily. "I gave up my internship in a New York hospital and came home when . . . when Lollie . . . I was twenty-two then. She was nine. For seven years I've worked on her here, studied, tried everything under the sun. I . . . I've even hired a professional ghost-breaker to try and exorcise the thing. But it's no use."

"Why don't you send her to a good private sanitarium?" Marcia demanded. "I should think—" She broke off.

Victor Mason stood up with a jerk, and glared down at her. "There!" he snarled. "I knew you'd say that! They all do. Send her away, lock her up in a padded cell for observation by a lot of crackpot neurologists! Miss Trent, my great-aunt Anne died in an asylum. Aunt Silvia killed herself rather than be sent back to one. Poor little Lollie lives in terror that she'll be

dragged away from us and locked up like an animal . . . for nothing! Your damned scientists can't do a thing for her; they never did anything for Anne or Silvia! Because, you see, it's not a nervous hallucination. The Thing is real."

Marcia shook her head, exasperated. "You actually believe that?"

Mason nodded. "I do. In adolescence, this . . . this demon attached itself to Anne, then to Silvia when Anne died. It got Lollie sooner because she was always a nervous child. It's like an invisible parasite! It will live, attached to her, until she dies—just as it lived with Anne and Silvia Mason.

"That case in Rumania that you mentioned: a young girl, possessed or haunted by a sort of 'familiar spirit.' They called it a *poltergeist*—a mean, prankish spirit, not really dangerous, just annoying and nerve-racking like a bad-tempered monkey. That," he intoned, "is what we Masons have been living with for three generations. We've had the choice of believing we were either haunted or insane—with everyone we knew blandly telling us the Thing simply doesn't exist. That's made us rather anti-social," Mason drawled bitterly, "trying to live a normal life outside and a madman's existence within our home. Gradually it's sapped our strength and ambition until we're—" His mouth twisted. "Well, you see, Miss Trent. Poor-white trash; that's what we've become. We have no friends, and . . . frankly, our only income is from the bootleg corn that I distill and sell. We've shut ourselves off from the world, with only one thought: to make Lollie's life as bearable as possible under the circumstances. So now you know," he added flatly, "why I can't take the chance of your leaving here and talking. Sensation-mongers would overrun us tomorrow if Lollie's case were made public. Then some officious busybody would insist on her being sent to the state asylum for 'med-

ical aid' . . . and she'd kill herself, or die of sheer terror."

The ex-doctor passed a hand over his bloodshot eyes. Marcia, her heart sinking, stared at him. But the man's face was cold, determined.

"I don't know what to do. Murder," he drawled, doesn't appeal to me. But if you attempt to leave here now, I'm afraid it's my only alternative, Miss Trent."

Marcia shivered, then steadied herself with an effort.

"I can keep my mouth shut," she said. "But I see you don't believe that. All right, Doctor Mason: My only chance then is to . . . break this ghost that's been breaking you all these years; is that it? I don't believe in goblins. I can't believe that poor child is haunted by an invisible being that scratches her and throws things. There's a scientific explanation for the stigmata; you admit that much. Well, then—there must be a reason for those objects sailing through the air.

"It sounds like the supernatural, I know. But so did television, to people of Shakespeare's time. If a parachute jumper had dropped from a plane in a Twelfth-Century village, he'd have been burned at the stake. But the witchcraft of today is the science of tomorrow, Doctor Mason. Look here. Will you let me be around that poor child, Lollie, tonight? I have reason to believe she likes and trusts me, and I may be able to help her. May I try? Not," she burst out sincerely, "just to get myself out of this jam, but because I feel desperately sorry for Lollie, for all of you, and want to help you—believe it or not!"

The shadow-ridden eyes of Victor Mason bored into her face, troubled and uncertain. But Marcia's blue ones did not waver; and a half-smile twisted the bitter mouth. Mason thrust out his hand.

"You're a good sport," he sighed. "Of course, there's nothing you can do. I . . . wish I dared trust your silence. But Renny

and I live for Lollie, you understand. We can't let any other emotion conflict with our efforts to help her."

MARCIA nodded. "I understand. But you'll send her to me, so I can—?"

The former doctor frowned thoughtfully. Then, on sudden impulse, he flipped back the quilt and lowered Marcia's feet to the floor.

"I'll do better than that," he shrugged. "You're going to be here from now on, so you might as well get a quick dose of what it's like. Dinner was nearly ready when I came up. I planned to send you up a tray, but . . . well, with Renny on the loose, you'd better eat with us. Think you can hobble downstairs?"

Leaning on the man's proffered arm, Marcia stood up painfully. "I think I can make it," she grimaced. "But—maybe your grandmother—or great-aunt, I believe she said—maybe she won't like my dining with the family. I don't think," she added carefully, "that she likes me much."

"Who, Gran?" Mason laughed, and shrugged. "Oh, Gran doesn't like anybody. She's the black sheep of our family. Married a weak-willed ancestor of ours, after a rather lurid past, and the family never received her. She's lived in the house here, though, hating us like hell because marrying Great-uncle Aubrey didn't automatically make her a lady! But . . . she's watched us deteriorate, and likes to rub it in. Gran's the only one of us, I suppose, who hasn't let this business get her down. She just calls a ghost a ghost, and lets it go at that!"

"I see," Marcia murmured. "Yes, she's quite a character!"

She glanced up at the weary sardonic profile beside her. Leaning on Mason's arm, she managed to limp down a long, curved staircase, deep in dust and cobwebs like every other part of the big house. Down a long hall they went, and across

a rotting screened porch to the isolated kitchen in the rear.

"We live in the kitchen and keep the rest of the house closed," her host explained as he shoved open the door.

Marcia hobbled in. The kitchen was huge, cluttered but fairly clean. On the side opposite a big wood stove an unpainted table was set—for five. Then Marcia thought, the old woman had expected her after all.

But, as they entered now, Gran turned from the stove and peered at her in surprise. She leered at Mason.

"Well, Victor!" she quavered. "Have ye lost your mind? Want her to see everything, eh? Want her to blabber about Lollie all over the state? Eh? Eh?"

Victor Mason dismissed her with a look. "She's not leaving," he snapped. "Miss Trent is staying with us . . . indefinitely; and I suspect you, Gran, of sending Lollie up there to see her. Set another plate—the damage is done, and she'll just have to stay."

He helped Marcia into a straight-backed kitchen chair, on his right at the head of the table. A dingy frayed cloth that had once been fine damask covered the unpainted boards. The dishes, Marcia noted, were a strange mixture of exquisite china and ten-cent-store crockery. The knives and forks were of cheap steel, but the spoons—of thin silver, with an "M" monogram—hinted of the lost splendor of a by-gone era.

Now, in spite of that fifth place already laid, the old crone planked down another plate in front of Marcia. Sidling to the door, she called out, like a screech of rusty hinges:

"Renny! Lollie! Come and eat!"

There was a sound like bare feet running. Marcia braced herself as the boy Renny burst in, spied her, and stopped short, glaring. But apparently hunger overrode his hostility for the moment, for he

slid into the chair on Victor's left. Gran sat at the foot of the table. . . .

They waited. And presently, stealing in with a fawn-like hesitancy, the girl Lollie came. Across from the vacant place she slid into her chair and sat, wide-eyed, staring at Marcia with child-like admiration.

"She's not a mean lady—she's a golden-haired princess, isn't she, Vic?" she burst out in delight, then turned wistfully to Marcia. "What happened to the jewel? I wanted it so! It was so pretty, all rainbow colors. It . . . ooh!"

The cry was wrung from her, and a hand flew to her face. Already an angry welt was appearing along her cheek—inflicted by no means that Marcia could see.

Tears welled up in the wide brown eyes. Lollie huddled, silent, in her chair. For a moment she sat there, gulping back tears. Then forlornly she took a piece of cornpone, a spoonful of rutabaga turnips, and began to eat with quick nervous gestures.

In the table's center was a lone brandied peach in a compote. Now, spying it, the girl put out an eager hand for the morsel, turning to her older brother.

"Could I . . . have that?" her lips formed.

Victor nodded, smiled tenderly, and then shoved the compote toward her. Beaming again, child-like, Lollie took the peach on her plate. But, as Marcia watched, she carefully cut off a tiny piece. This fragment she popped into her mouth with relish.

Then, reaching across the table to that vacant place, the girl laid the larger piece on the empty plate. Her brown eyes regarded it longingly for an instant. But, with a faint sigh, she went back to her turnips and corn-pone.

Marcia turned to her host, the question plain in her eyes. His reply was a bitter smile, and a shrug.

"But," Marcia whispered, "surely you don't actually set a place at the table for . . . for the—?"

HER words were cut short, for at that moment pandemonium broke loose.

A salt-and-pepper set on the table began to dance madly. Without warning they rose two feet above the tablecloth and dangled there in midair for a split second. Then, with vicious force, they flew at Lollie's head.

The girl ducked as from long practise. But at once a veritable barrage of silverware flew at her. Cups and plates danced, now at one end of the table, now at the other. The compote turned over, spilling peach juice all over the cloth. Then something rattled in the nearby cupboard, and from that direction another barrage of silverware flew at the cowering Lollie.

Marcia stared, unable to move. Victor and Renny sat like stone images, while Lollie cringed and whimpered in her chair, shielding her head from the weird onslaught. Only old Gran rocked and yelled with mirth, as if the Thing were a puppet show staged for her express enjoyment.

"He's mad! Ye've angered him again, Lollie—he wanted all of the peach!" she cackled, poking a finger at the morsel on the plate. "Ay, he's a mean one, that *poltergeist* of yours. Ye'd best give him his own way!"

Sobbing, speechless, the girl slid from her chair and ran out into the rainy dusk. A silver spoon flew against the screen door, seconds behind her—propelled, from beside Marcia's plate, by no more visible force than the air about her.

Victor Mason pushed back his chair and stood up, his face bleak. The haunted eyes were fixed on Marcia's white face grimly.

"Well?" he snapped. "You saw it, Miss Trent. That's the shadow in our house. For three generations we've lived like this, plagued by . . . something that science declares non-existent. We've had to stand by and watch three young girls of our family tormented by it every day, unable to help them. I daresay if I should marry,

the Thing would attach itself to my daughter after Lollie's death. The same with Renny. So . . . normal life is impossible to us, as you see.

"We'll just have to go on living like this, shut off from everyone, for my sister's sake; seeing her suffer, defenseless against its rages and selfish whims . . . God!" he groaned through clenched teeth. "Do you imagine *you* can help her, when I've given my every waking thought to it?"

The boy Renny stared at them; Marcia could feel his intent eyes on her face. Old Gran had snatched the fragment of peach and was eating it, tittering to herself the while. And outside, like a voice suddenly given this mysterious Thing they had seen at work, the wind rose with a sound like mocking laughter.

Marcia laid down her piece of corn bread, her appetite gone. She leaned back in her chair, looking up at Mason.

"First Anne, then Silvia, now Lollie!" he was muttering. "The hell they went through, locked up in the asylum, with a lot of fool doctors picking at them eternally! Then they'd 'get better.' Those fools! Yapping about stigmata and hallucinations! You see, few strangers have ever seen the *poltergeist* perform, as it did tonight, Miss Trent. So the psychiatrists at the institution insisted it was only a hallucination, accompanied by stigmatic neuropathy. We could never convince them there was more to it than just the stigmata. So they'd send our girls home again—'cured'! And the *poltergeist* would start all over again. You see," he gestured wearily, "it's just a choice of Lollie's being miserable, locked in a cell, or fairly contented living here with us . . . and it. There's no cure . . . because it's not a disease, Miss Trent. It's a . . . a living demon."

Sleet hissed against the panes. Marcia shivered, but her eyes were narrowed with thought. Suddenly they gave Mason a keen look.

"Tell me," she demanded. "Were any of your women ancestors haunted by a *poltergeist* before your great-aunt Anne?"

VICTOR MASON shook his head. "No, it started with Anne—Grandpa's and Great-uncle Aubrey's young sister. Then there was Dad's sister, Silvia. And now it's Lollie. I know now that it will never leave us, so long as there's a young girl with Mason blood in her veins."

Marcia shoved back her chair and stood up with an effort. A faint, grim smile lit her blue eyes. They were bright with purpose.

"Not if we destroy it," she drawled. "Doctor Mason, I have a hunch that your Mason *poltergeist* will leave tonight . . . and never come back. You see," she stated calmly, "I believe I know what makes him tick. I . . . won't tell you now, but in the morning, just before I leave," she added mildly. "Perhaps you can trust me not to tell your secret then, because there won't be any."

Deliberately she looked at the glowering boy Renny, at the smirking old woman, at the ex-doctor.

Victor Mason stared at her. Then, bitterly, he snorted. "Grandstanding, eh?" he snapped. "Well, that won't win you your freedom either. Let me warn you, it's twelve miles to the next farm . . . and they are friends of mine! I was right about you the first time!" he flared. "You're a selfish, featherbrained little fool! You don't care what happens to us or to my sister, so long as you get away from here unharmed! But get that out of your head, Miss Trent. You're not going to leave this place, and that's final."

Marcia's courage wavered. But her chin jerked up again, blue eyes flashing. "Take me to my room now, please," she said coldly. "I'm not bluffing, though: I've cornered your pet ghost—and he knows it!"

MOUNTING the dusty staircase again, however, her heart sank. The old house was so big and still! From the ceiling a spider dangled unexpectedly in front of her face. And as they reached the upper hall, a lean gray rat slithered into the shadows. Marcia gasped and clung to Victor Mason's arm, but his smile was derisive.

"You'll get used to it here," he drawled. "And you'll cease to fight after awhile, as we all have."

He shoved open the door of her room and helped her to the big bed. Darkness was falling, so he lit a smoky oil lamp standing on the highboy. With a shiver Marcia sank down on the bed, sat looking up at Mason's sardonic face. He misunderstood her expression of fear, and snorted.

"If you're worried about my . . . bothering you," he muttered, "please don't. From now on, you're just another sister of mine, held prisoner in this house by something none of us can help. I—"

Marcia laughed aloud, nervously. "Oh, it's not you I'm worried about, Doctor Mason. I can see you consider me just a nuisance, an unfortunate accident.

The tall man smiled wryly. For a moment his haunted eyes held a wistful expression. "Do I?" he murmured. Then, crisply: "Of course," he snapped. "Then what are you afraid of?"

Marcia took a deep breath. "I'm afraid for my life," she blurted. "You see, I . . . I deliberately put myself on the spot down there when I said I knew the secret of your *poltergeist*. I think I do know *what* causes it . . . but we must have proof. So . . . Doctor Mason, will you take that room across the hall and . . . and come at once if I scream for help? I have a feeling there'll be an attempt to murder me tonight!"

Victor Mason squinted at her, and then emitted a short laugh. "Renny, you mean? I rather thought Lollie's attitude toward you at dinner changed his opinion . . . but of

course," he jeered, "if you're afraid of the boy, I'll play sentry. That is," he laughed callously, "if I don't fall asleep. Night watchmen shouldn't tank up on mountain corn, as I've been doing these seven years!"

With a twisted smile, he strode out, closing the bedroom door behind him. Marcia huddled in the big bed, wrapped in the single quilt, and sat listening tensely for a long time. The storm had subsided, but rain dripping from the eaves had the sound of stealthy footfalls. Her nerves crisped at every creak of old walls and the skittering of rats in the attic.

Then exhaustion bore down on her. Her eyes closed, jerked open, closed again. . . .

She awoke with a sick feeling of not knowing where she was. The big room was gloomy and full of shadows that writhed and danced when a gust of wind reached the oil lamp. Marcia blinked, rubbed her eyes . . . and her breath caught in her throat as the tiny sound that had waked her came again.

The doorknob was turning slowly. Now, as she stared, the door swung softly open. Renny Mason, his boyish face contorted, sidled into the room. And the lamplight gleamed on something gripped in his childish fist . . . a long-bladed cane-knife.

LYING on her back, Marcia steeled herself not to move, but lay watching with half-closed eyes. She bunched her muscles for a leap as the boy tiptoed nearer and nearer the bed. Now he stood glaring down at her, knife poised. . . .

But the ugly weapon did not strike. Renny's chin quivered suddenly. His arm lowered. With a sob of defiance he faced the door. In the hallway a shadow moved, hissed urgently.

"I can't! I can't!" the boy whimpered. "She d-doesn't look like a mean lady! She—"

The door swung wider. Marcia almost cried out as the old crone, Gran, scuttled

into the room. Her wizened face was a mask of hate and cruelty.

"Kill her! Cut her throat, you coward!" she rasped. "You want her to tell everyone and have them come for Lollie? Eh? Where she'll be locked in a dark cell, and never see daylight? Where they'll torture her and starve her? Kill that spying little fool, then, and shut her mouth! Kill her, sonny!"

The boy hesitated, turned back to the bed, knife raised. Then, with a dry sob, he flung the weapon to the carpet and cowered against the bed.

"I won't! I won't kill her!" he gulped, trembling. "She wouldn't hurt Lollie! I . . . I like her. And she gave Lollie a pretty jewel, only the *poltergeist* took it and gave it to you. . . . I won't kill her! I'm sorry I tried to shoot her!"

Marcia lay, frozen, watching the old woman. The mummy face was hideous now, quivering with fury.

"Disobey me, will ye?" she snarled. "All right, young mister! Ye'll be sorry for it, that ye will!"

Suddenly the beady eyes seemed to glow like live coals. The old hag tensed—staring, Marcia saw, not at Renny but at the fallen knife. . . .

Without warning, the weapon rose into the air, as though caught by a gust of wind. Up it went, with the old woman's eyes fixed on it. Ceiling-high, it poised, dangling above Marcia's unprotected body on the bed.

The knife fell—with a swifter motion than was natural to any law of gravity. But at the same instant, Marcia screamed and threw her body sidewise. The pain that it caused her sprained ankle was excruciating, but it saved her life.

Hilt-deep, the cane knife stuck up in the mattress where her stomach had been the instant before.

And Victor Mason, blinking bloodshot eyes, stumbled into the room.

"Wh-what's going on?" he muttered sleepily, and spied the knife. His eyes widened. Renny! Boy, you didn't . . . you couldn't!"

MARCIA steadied herself with great effort, swung her feet to the floor, grimacing with pain. "No, Doctor Mason," she managed. "He . . . didn't do it. The knife was dropped from the ceiling, by no visible hand. The *poltergeist* again. But . . . where's your sister?"

"Why," Mason blurted, "she's locked in her room downstairs. We always lock her in at night. Seems to make her feel safer. But . . . the *poltergeist*? It's never thrown things before without Lollie in the room."

Marcia shook her head, bewildered. Her eyes traveled from Doctor Mason to the sobbing Renny. They flickered to old Gran, crouched by the door, mouthing obscenities.

"Then it . . . isn't Lollie who causes it," the girl whispered. "It isn't you, Doctor Mason—or you, Renny. So . . . it must be . . . it's got to be—"

She broke off with a gasp of certainty, for the old hag had recoiled as though she had been struck. The wrinkled lips writhed. The mummy hands lifted with a jerk, claw-like fingers pointing at Marcia in the manner of a hypnotist.

And a dozen small objects abruptly hurtled through the air—a comb from the dresser, a bud vase from the table, Marcia's compact.

From all over the room, as though blown by an unfelt wind, the very missiles flew straight at Marcia's head. She cowered, trying to shield her face. A small Godey's print, wrenched from the wall, struck her forehead, and she cried out. Gran shrieked with laughter.

"You! I'll fix ye, good and proper! Ye meddlin' little fool!" the old woman snarled. "See that? There's precious few can do it! See? See?"

From where they had fallen, the small objects flew at Marcia again.

As suddenly they dropped. Gran choked, eyes bulging. She sagged against the door, clutching at her heart. Then, buoyed up by a last spurt of venom, she jeered at the staring trio.

"Ay!" she gasped. "It was me! It's always been me and no other! '*Poltergeist!*' Heh-heh-heh! All these years I've made them believe in it and feel it and almost see it—Anne, and Silvia, and Lollie, all as though they was better than me! Fools—"

Marcia gaped at her, sickened by the cruelty in that old face.

"I see!" she whispered. "I understand now! Oh, it's diabolical, Doctor Mason! You said she married into your family by trickery; and she was furious at being snubbed by your womenfolk. She hated all you Masons as a symbol of what she wanted to be but never could. Hate was like poison in her veins. So she set out to break you, to destroy you little by little.

"Your Great-aunt Anne must have been a sensitive, high-strung young girl, easily bullied and frightened by something she could not understand. And Gran here had a peculiar talent to scare her with! It's bestowed on very few people at birth. Certain wizards of ancient times could do what she did just now; also a few professional mediums of today. It's called the power to 'levitate.' Some kind of electrical wave in the body of the subject can be directed at small objects with such force as to move, lift or throw them a short distance. I happened to read an article about it, okayed by the Society of Psychic Research. Science knows very little about the phenomenon; but then, we have much to learn about telepathy and hypnotism. In the next century we may know as much about the electrical powers of the human body as we have learned about radio in this century."

Victor Mason gaped at her, then at the mouthing old woman. "I don't under-

stand," he mumbled. "You mean, there's no—?"

"No *poltergeist*, and there never was any," Marcia nodded. "But this fiendish old woman has created such a strong illusion of one that you've all believed it. She must have levitated objects around Anne Mason until she frightened the girl into believing she was haunted by a demon. By subtle suggestion that the Thing might scratch her, she got the girl into such a hysterical state that stigmata appeared. When you told me the *poltergeist* didn't throw things where strangers could watch, Doctor Mason, I suspected what it was. I guessed *who*, too, when you said there had been no 'haunted' Mason before Gran's advent. Genuine psychic phenomena can be witnessed by anyone.

"But your great-aunt here was too clever to risk detection. She confined her performances to your terrified family, or to those few whom she thought too stupid to suspect anything. At the asylum, of course, the *poltergeist* never did perform—because Gran wasn't around. So the doctors concluded that that part was only a hysterical hallucination of Anne's, or Silvia's.

"Their stigmata, however, kept on even when not accompanied by the other Thing, the levitating. Naturally the girls were still hysterical, even under treatment. Without the flying objects to scare them, they gradually got better and were sent home 'cured.' What the psychiatrists couldn't know, of course, was that the *poltergeist*—in the form of your great-aunt—was waiting to begin its reign of terror all over again. You see?"

The ex-doctor leaned weakly against the bed, his arm around his little brother's shoulder. They stared, stunned, from the girl to the old hag.

"It's so inhuman," Marcia shuddered, "I can hardly believe it myself! Those innocent high-strung young girls, thinking, they

were haunted by a demon . . . when they were only being tortured by a wicked sadistic old woman with—well, call it a supernatural power to levitate small objects.

Some day, perhaps, the general public will understand and control the same power.

"Your great-aunt used it to good advantage! She's frightened and bullied all you Masons, using the *poltergeist* to enforce her selfish whims . . . like that brandied peach tonight, that Lollie wanted so badly. And the jeweled brooch she stole from me, after I tried to give it to your sister. And the way she tormented Lollie by 'throwing' things at her, to make you and Renny suffer from your inability to protect the child. . . . Oh! You diabolical old witch! Three helpless young girls—"

She whirled on the old woman, sick with indignation.

GRAN cowered against the door, tittering. Her beady eyes flickered from the girl to Renny, to Victor's stunned face. And she broke out in a wild cackle of mirth.

"Ay, it's true!" she shrilled. "A pack of fools, the lot of ye! I've had my way in this house, for all your hoity-toity manners! *Poltergeist!* 'Demon!' Heh-heh-heh! . . ."

The beady eyes bulged suddenly, and Gran clawed at her throat, panting. With a strangled sound she slid to the floor in an ugly heap. Victor Mason, moving like one hypnotized, strode to her, knelt, and felt her pulse. He stood up, shaking his head.

"She's dead," he whispered. "Heart attack. But . . . I can't believe it!" He turned to Marcia, bewildered. "That stupid old woman! All these years!"

With a gesture of repugnance he covered Gran's evil face with her shawl and did not look at her again.

Marcia shrugged. "She wasn't stupid; she was fiendishly clever. Oh, those poor girls! And Lollie! If only someone had guessed!"

She broke off as Renny, who had slipped from the room unnoticed, came back at that moment, leading his fawn-eyed sister by the hand. In his other hand was Marcia's purse. His boyish face puckered, fighting tears, as he thrust it out to her. Smiling gently, she took out the brooch and slipped it into Lollie's hand.

Lollie gasped in delight. "For me? I can have them now? Oh, look, Vic! Look, Renny! The pretty jewels—they're mine too . . . ooh!"

Pain flashed across her face, and she jerked back her hand. Four angry weals were appearing along her forearm again. Renny and Victor Mason stared at them fearfully. But Marcia smiled, and put a protective arm about the girl, shaking her head.

"Don't be afraid, dear," she soothed. "The *poltergeist* is dead. It can't hurt you. . . . Just the stigmata," she whispered to Mason. "A nervous reflex, and nothing more. Poor child.

"It will be a long time before you can get the child back to normal. But . . . you must do it, Doctor Mason. It's your incentive to start life over again. Now you'll stop drinking, perhaps build yourself a country practise. And Renny must go to school; Lollie too when she's better. You have no shadow to hide now in this lovely old house."

Victor Mason raised his head. The despair in his dark eyes had given way to a clear alert look, full of hope and a deep gratitude . . . and something else. Marcia saw it and lowered her eyes hastily to Lollie's upturned face. But she heard the tall doctor chuckle softly, like a man with a purpose—like a man awakened in a sunlit room from a long and horrible nightmare.