We are indebted to R. Bretnor for calling our attention to the following very human tale of the inhuman . . .

POLTERGEIST

by C. D. Heriot

The road curved suddenly, but from where she sat on the gate Jess could see the dogcart approaching nearly a mile away. Strangers, she was sure, who would be visiting or perhaps staying at one of the farms farther up the valley. By screwing up her eyes she could just make out the driver, a woman and two smaller figures. Now the horse slackened to a walk up the steep, rough road. In a few minutes they would be passing her.

She hastily adjusted the crown of daisies, fluffed out as best she could her skimpy pink cotton frock, and began to sing. She bent her head so that the morning sun beat upon her copper curls. One hand rested negligently upon the grey wood, the other lay between her knees. Her feet, bare except for sandals, were crossed at the ankles and hung by their heels from the crossbar, half demure, half dancing. Her gaze was turned away from the valley and sought the northern horizon in what she hoped was an interesting abstraction.

They will come past slowly, she thought. The lady would see her first. 'Who is that pretty little thing?' she would say. 'Why, she is singing! How charming.' And then perhaps she will recognize the air. 'Just fancy hearing Sur le pont d'Avignon in a place like this!' By this time she would have had time to turn her head—one couldn't go on being rapt and not notice the noise of hooves and wheels. She would break off and smile shyly.

The lady would smile back.

'What is your name?'

'Fiona MacIntyre.'

'How pretty!'

But the cart must have stopped. So the lady must have said to Cameron (she could see it was Cameron driving, now): 'Who is
that pretty little thing?” and he would, of course, answer: ‘Jessie MacIntyre,’ which wouldn’t be as good—but it might, after all, because the lady would say, ‘How does she know French?’ and Cameron would say, ‘I don’t know,’ or perhaps not answer at all, and then the lady would catch his arm and say: ‘Do please stop. I must speak to her.’ And Cameron would stop the horse and look straight ahead with a resigned expression and the lady would say, ‘Come here, little girl’ (she wouldn’t remember the Jessie), and she would say, ‘Who are you and where do you come from?’ And they would talk until the lady would suddenly say, ‘Goodness, we can’t stand here all day! Come to tea to-morrow.’ Or even, ‘Jump up. Wouldn’t you like to be my little girl?’ And she’d go just as she was, and it would all come right, and there’d be lots of sweets and lovely dresses, and she’d sing better than all the other girls at parties and everyone would say how lovely she was.

But the other children. She could see the other children looking at her over the edge of the dogcart. They would have to be—she urged that they would be—several years younger than she was. How she would love them! How they would respond! She could hear them whispering, with tight, thin little arms around her neck, ‘We do love you, Fiona.’ And what fun it would be when they said, ‘This is our eldest sister Fiona—only she’s not really,’ and people would look at her with surprise and interest. ‘She must be a remarkable little girl to have been adopted by that nice woman.’

The cart passed stolidly by.

She stopped singing and turned to look. The woman was dressed in greyish brown with a black hat. She had a flat, uninterested face. Two little boys with freckles and tartan mufflers stared at her. Cameron nodded without smiling. She watched them grow indistinguishable in the distance.

Then she got down from the gate and began to walk towards the valley. There was a man, quite old, on a bicycle. He saw her dancing alone by the roadside—no, in a field. ‘What grace the child has!’ he thought. And he was a doctor from England, not like old Dr. Pusey, but with a clean silvery beard, and he said: ‘My dear Mr. MacIntyre, the child ought to have dancing lessons.’ And she bowed and smiled and a little page brought her the hugest bunch of tulips and all the other girls clapped and weren’t jealous at all.

At the bottom of the valley was the farm, her home. It lay in a pocket of the hills. Ash trees surrounded it and concealed the buildings at the back, so that it appeared smaller than it was. Its whitewashed face with its slate roof shone coldly through the grey-green leaves.
Her mother was brushing the best-room carpet.

Jess looked at the fluffy grey heaps of tea-leaves and hastily put away the thought that they had a smell, a terrible smell. All day she toiled with broom and dust-pan, hating the smell, and everyone said how good she was, looking after her father and the children, just like a little mother—and so thorough! But her mother was alive and shining a little and asking her to go and see if there were any eggs, and to hurry before the rest of them got back from school.

She went into the stack-yard a little delicately because she remembered that she hadn’t been to school for nearly half a term. Dr. Pusey said that she wasn’t strong. How glad she had been at the envy of the others, and yet how sorry that she would miss the precious hours of French with darling Miss Young. School Inspectors might have stopped her and demanded why she wasn’t in class. She would have been able to tell them the reason, or offer to lead them to her father or mother if they didn’t believe her, and they would have been ashamed. ‘Poor little thing,’ they would have said, patting her head.

But of course she was better now. Convalescent. Only the dreams persisted, and those not every night. Jess’s face tightened and for a moment she looked older than her eleven years. She ran round the cliffs of golden straw and began to search in the little gullies at the bottom where she knew the hens were fond of laying. After a few minutes she returned to the house with fourteen eggs carried carefully in her skirt. In the dairy she placed them precisely in a row on the stone shelf, touching each other, and then bowled the last from a few inches away so that the one at the other end tottered to the edge and smashed on the floor.

After tea her mother found out and there was a row.

Jess was sent to bed early for punishment. Her mother did not know that solitary confinement was no punishment. Jess lay flat on her back staring up at the cracks in the ceiling and the rocking shadows from the branches outside the window.

There was a face on the ceiling that looked away. It would be awful if it suddenly turned and grimaced at her. She would be brave. She would say: ‘Who are you?’ in a steady, level voice. But supposing the face said: ‘I’m the Devil.’ She would pray out loud and the face would have to go. An angel would appear, maybe, with a fiery sword—or, of course, they would hear her praying downstairs and come running up to see what was the matter. Was she ill? And she was ill—dying—and everyone was so sorry. And Miss Young cried when they gave her
the little shell box with the green beads and the Indian silver bangles inside. 'Poor little Jess,' she said. Miss Young made even Jess sound sweet. But she wasn’t really dying, of course. Not for years and years and years—until she was so old and beautiful, with a thin, delicate face and lovely white hair, and everyone said, ‘Don’t you know—that’s the famous Miss MacIntyre!’ Her singing made huge crowds clap their hands and shout. She stood, far above them, bowing just a little and smoothing back her skirts modestly until they stopped. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, my next song will be Sur le pont d’Avignon, in French.’ She had only to raise her finger and they were silent. She was strong. She was powerful. She could do anything. People said to her, ‘Of course, you—can do anything.’

If she screwed up her eyes very hard and thought and thought, simply anything would happen. She could fly. She could make the ceiling fall down. If she stared for a long time at the cracks, it would happen.

She gazed upwards. The face blurred and changed. The clotted leaf-shadows fanned jerkily to and fro. It was like water running over the ceiling, or water circling round her—round and round, droning faintly in her ears. She was floating in it. Her body had no weight. Only her head rested on the surface with the rest of her rippling gently like seaweed in the current. There was a pain between her eyes—not a pain, really, but an excitement. And somewhere inside her head was a flame, coiling and twisting. She looked inside her head at the flame. It flickered slowly, and at the bottom, in the transparent part, was a face, a familiar face, the face of her dream, the face of the crack. She was not afraid of it now. She could do anything. Deliberately, inside her head, she leaned forward and blew out the flame.

There was a noise like a mouse and a triangular piece of plaster, about six inches long, fell from the ceiling onto her bed.

Jess screamed, but it was a thin, almost silent scream. It had happened! She had thought about the ceiling falling down and it had fallen down. She was panting and exhausted and afraid of feeling triumphant. What would her mother say? Of course she couldn’t tell her mother what had happened. But there was the plaster on the eiderdown. That was real. She would have to say, ‘The ceiling fell down,’ and nothing more. The rest must be a secret between her and—who else? The face was spoiled now. It didn’t look like a face any more. And that was funny because, of course, the Devil couldn’t look down at her any more if he hadn’t got a face to look with.

Jess went to sleep.
The dreams came again, but they were not so frightening. Instead of coiling horrors dragging her down, a swaying presence leaned round her, strengthening her in the void. There was a feeling of support, of alliance. Formless, featureless as was her visitor, she would recognize and welcome him on his return.

A few days later she was again in disgrace. Miss Young, darling Miss Young, had come to see her—to see her favorite, her loving beloved. And in the parlour with her mother she had sat, talking away and almost not noticing the poor little invalid until the poor little invalid stood on one foot and pressed affectionately against her. Miss Young had said: 'Go and play somewhere else, dear, while I talk to your mother.' And Jess had hung around and around until her mother had said sharply: 'For goodness' sake, child, do as you're told!' Miss Young gave her a reproachful look and Jess had gone out, dragging her feet and banging the door.

She went into the kitchen slowly, without any definite plan, but the cat was taking no chances and slid out with an insulting glance. On the range-side was the huge iron saucepan with the supper porridge simmering, blowing little craters whose steam puffed at the feathery dried tidemark where some had been poured out. Right in the middle of it, trembling in the chimney draught, was a flake of soot, a tiny black signal to Jess.

It seemed amusing at the time to scrape the chimney with a poker so that more flakes drifted down, light as negative snow, to join the first. After that it became a game, so to regulate the downfall that it covered, evenly and completely, the entire surface. Thicker and thicker, blacker and blacker. It was no longer a game, it was a rite. This action of hers would compensate for the affront to the importance of Jess, and at the same time would teach the grown-ups that she was important. Jess's face was rigid and set, like that of a priestess. Suddenly she stopped and gasped and ran to get a spoon to stir the mess madly, guiltily. The porridge darkened and made no attempt to hide her secret. She stopped stirring and stood for a moment, then quickly washed the spoon and put it away. Next she leaned over the fire, reached up and gathered a double handful of soot, sprinkled it on the porridge and washed her hands. Her heart was beating fast. Her cheeks were hot, and she panted. She was wildly excited and, in spite of fear, triumphant.

They thought it was an accident until her mother saw the poker-scrawls in the chimney and Jess's soot-smelling, soot-ingrained hands. This time she was beaten.

And when the blue china plate was found in pieces on the par-
lour hearth next morning she was beaten again. The punishment was held over until her father came back from market in the evening.

Hiccoughing with sobs she went upstairs to bed, conscious of the apprehensive awe with which her brothers and sisters gaped at her. She tried to stop crying in front of them, but it was no use, and when she was at last alone she gave way to her anger and grief, smothering her howls in the quilt.

At the back of her mind a train of ideas was, however, passing, detached from all this emotion. It had not been all her fault: well, then, she would show them! She had not touched the plate. She had not touched the plate—but she was a person who could make the ceiling fall, if she liked—and she would show them. With that cold stream of determination trickling through her mind she went to sleep.

Her mother and father had been in bed and asleep for perhaps an hour when they were awakened by the first stone. It went hurtling along the uncarpeted passage outside their room and rattled down the back stairs. They both woke with a start. There was dead silence for a few minutes and then a second stone bounced past their door. Mr. MacIntyre grunted ominously as he lit a candle and got out of bed. The passage was empty except for a chest of drawers midway between the bedroom door and the head of the stairs. On the other side was a door leading to the room which belonged to the three eldest children. At the end was a window and a narrow stairway to the attics where Jess, her young sister and the maid slept.

Mr. MacIntyre opened the door with caution. The candle shone upon a silent, empty passage. The other bedroom door was closed. He tiptoed to the end and halfway up the attic stairs. He could hear the maid’s snores and sensed a rhythm that persuaded him the two girls were asleep. On the way back to his room he opened the other door. There was no doubt of it: his whole family was sleeping.

As he turned into his own room he heard a stone drop down two or three of the stairs to the ground floor. He found it—or what he assumed must be it—on the sixth step, a rough grey pebble, rather smaller than a walnut. He went down and through all the lower rooms, but the shutters were drawn and the door locked as usual. There was obviously no unauthorized person in the house—the dogs would surely have barked—and he and his wife were the only ones awake in it. He went back to bed, puzzled but not alarmed. It must have been a rat.

There was no other disturbance that night.

In the morning Jess was late for breakfast. Her eyes were red and
gummy and she looked tired and cross. She fiddled with her breakfast until her mother, who would have been glad to ignore the events of the previous day, pointed out that if she continued to be naughty more violent measures might have to be taken. At which Jess began to cry so quietly that it was assumed she must be ill. Everyone remembered with a jerk that Jess was still convalescent. Her mother broke all rules by taking her on her knee, even before the table was cleared, and petting her back to normal.

The next few days showed signs of approaching climax. Jess slept heavily, without dreams, but with the feeling of having travelled far. And not alone. Her travelling companion was faceless and featureless, but familiar.

And at night, while she slept, there were noises. Two more plates were broken in the kitchen, no one knew how. Mr. MacIntyre had been up several times in unsuccessful search for the cause of the disturbances, and he was now more than puzzled—even a little frightened, although he explained everything to his wife as the work of rats. One night, pretending that he had the monthly accounts to do, he waited up with a shot-gun.

The fire was a red glow, ash-covered, before he left the warm lamplight of the kitchen and tiptoed up to the bedroom passage. He placed a small lamp on the floor and squatted beside it. The whole passage was faintly illuminated except at the end where the staircase to the attics ended in shadow. He heard the wag-at-the-wa-licking quietly below. A board creaked, and after a long time an owl cried outside. He leaned his head against the wall and heard the dry caked paper rustle and a tiny patter of dried plaster fall behind. There was no other sound except the accepted, unheard snores of the maid and the dim, sleep-breathing in the rooms about him. He was tired and a little cold. Everything was normal. He would wait five minutes longer and then go to bed.

He blinked, and during the blink was aware of a disturbance in the shadowy air at the foot of the attic staircase. A bedroom slipper—Jess’s slipper—slid round the corner into the passage. It moved like a little boat several feet towards him and then stopped. He rose to his feet and, as he moved, something light and metallic bounced down the lower stairs, followed by a crash that caused the floorboards to vibrate. The shoe lay where it was, looking innocent. He kicked it aside with the revulsion one might feel about toadstools, and hurried down the lower stairs. Five steps down he found a brass cogged wheel from a clock, an alarm clock, perhaps, but he did not wait to pick it up. Downstairs the kitchen meditated peace-
fully. Nothing was disturbed. The front room smelt chill and stuffy as it always did, when he unlocked the door. Even the grasses on the mantelpiece retained their usual bloom of dust.

In a passion of frightened anger he roared up the stairs again. The pale faces of his family stared at him as he ascended. Almost unconsciously he counted them: John, Robert, Ronnie, his wife: they were all there. Upstairs the maid was sitting up in bed with young Alice standing by her. Only Jess was still asleep, still so soundly asleep that he had to shake her half-awake. Her eyes, unseeing, met his in a stare whose pin-pupils dilated suddenly in fear. She yelped like a small animal, and then began to wail ordinarily, like a little girl. For a moment she had seen the companion of her dreams, and the dissolving of his features into those of her father had added an extra horror. The more she thought about it, the more horrible it seemed, until she was gasping with hysterical sobs that had the effect of focusing for the time being all attention and alarm upon herself.

The next half-hour was an anti-climax of cups of warm milk, dressing-gowns and nervous giggles: Mr. MacIntyre’s hastily constructed and almost apologetic story about rats was accepted by everyone. Even Jess, who gave him a sharp tear-stained glance from her mother’s lap, was glad to believe it. And having made up her mind to do so, she was eventually able to sleep again and to wake late for breakfast, subdued and tremulous.

All that day she remained at home. Usually responsive to the slightest attention, she did not even notice her mother’s watchfulness. Wandering about the farm buildings wrapped in a meditation so deep that she looked like a miniature adult, she was unaware of the constant, casual presence of her mother, whose placid face had the planes of its brows and the tension of its eyes tightened by worry into an expression almost predatory. Nothing was said, however. The family, back from school, made no remark. Jess’s moods were nothing new, and for them her mother presented her usual exterior of amiable supervision.

Only at bedtime was the normal routine of the household interrupted. Jess was ordered to bed at an earlier hour than usual. She obeyed without any opposition. The family was mildly surprised to see Mrs. MacIntyre visiting her daughter’s room as soon as she was in bed.

Jess eyed her mother as she approached. Neither spoke. For a moment a gush of apprehension contracted her heart, then she sat up and clung despairingly to her mother. She made no sound but
sprawled tensely across her mother's lap, her face buried in a comforting woollen shoulder, her arms wrapped tightly round a warm, solidly upholstered bulk that in turn embraced and surrounded her with a soothing physical protectiveness. Gradually she relaxed. Gradually she became conscious of the little ridge of cloth-covered buttons at the back of her mother's dress, of the tiny wisp of hair that tickled her ear, of the individual pressure of fingers against her own back. She twisted round and met her mother's gaze, benevolent but blank. For a moment the thought that comprehension lay behind those eyes caused her own to widen. But reassurance returned. She couldn't possibly know or guess. And as she gazed back she was aware of a warmth and understanding in her mother's eyes. Not understanding of the thing that obsessed Jess at the moment, but a wide, cherishing, protective and supporting general understanding. For the first time in her short life Jess was actively aware of being loved, and in that same moment was herself flooded with loving. She smiled and clung to her mother again, her entire body aching with goodwill. Images of her brothers and sisters, of that hitherto impersonal shape, her father, of darling Miss Young, rose in her mind. How she would love them all! How kind she would be to everyone—how good! An excitement, an urgency to begin to love now, this very moment, possessed her. And then, cutting through the shafts of golden emotional light like a sword-blade, a grey statement, detached as a radio announcement: 'This is Jess being loving. Jess playing the part of—what was the name? Fiona—Fiona being loving. She is doing it very well.' Tears of humiliation and weakness ran down her face. She felt cold. It was all too difficult. Being Jess was too hard. Why should it be so hard to prevent all those other Jesses and Fionas from rushing in, when all one intended was to be the Jess one was—the ordinary (yes, ordinary) little girl?

Her mother had gently disengaged herself, was dabbing at the sodden eyes with a cool, clean handkerchief, and was replacing her between the sheets. 'There, now, dearie,' she murmured, 'get off to sleep now and never mind. You'll be feeling better in the morning, don't fret.' Their eyes met again and Jess felt reassured. An apathetic decision to leave all her difficulties until the daylight was her last conscious thought before she fell asleep.

Then it began all over again. Hastening movement, coiling darkness, a vortex down which she swung, a sense of liquid resistance. She was swimming in a waste of blackness, and beside her, slightly behind her, swam her
companion. He it was, surely, who supported her, who bore her down the long corridors, past the whispering that swelled and died and swelled louder again as it caught up with her. She saw it clearly—with the face (now so familiar) in its base. It burned brightly, far too brightly ever to be blown out by an effort of her own will. The face knew that and smiled at her. An intolerable irritation overcame her. It was the smile and the whispering. She felt that everyone was laughing at her. But she had power after all. It was wrong to use that power—she knew that perfectly well—but she was angry. Anger excused, justified the use of power. But not yet. She would give them all one more chance. She would make a great effort and move away from them. She would forbid them to follow. She drew back from the flame, out of herself into the blackness above. She felt sick and giddy, but the face was no longer visible. Only the whispering, grown faint and remote, still sounded in her ears. It was very cold. There were steps down. Draughts swooped at her through an open door and then it was warmer and she was standing still. There was a dim light somewhere and she instinctively moved towards it. She felt calmer. It was very still—so still that she looked again inside her hollow skull to see if the flame was still there. It was brighter than ever, and, as she gazed, a blanket of cold descended. Silence and the burning flame and the dead weight of coldness. She felt herself sagging under it. No one could continue to live in that coldness. She felt afraid. She, Jess, must live. She had power. She would command heat.

She concentrated. The flame lengthened and went out. There was a moment of absolute darkness. Voices rushed past her. She opened her eyes and recognized, as the walls and ceiling stopped swaying, that she was in the kitchen.

A lamp, turned low, burned on the table. In a basket near the range lay the cat. It stared at her with watchful benevolence. Its distended pupils drew her attention before she heard the needle-thin mewings. She knew then that the cat must have had kittens during the night. Cat and child exchanged a long glance. The cat turned its head first. Then it sat up quickly and leaped out of the basket, clumsily, as if it were exhausted. Jess moved her head to look at the half-dead fire.

On the rag rug smouldered two glowing cinders. As she watched three more fell, slowly, in a curve that cleared the fender. She smelt the burning cloth.

She knew, quite calmly and certainly, that she was responsible. The thing was happening because she had wished it. She it was who had the power. She had com-
manded and her companion had obeyed. She knew that it was a power they shared. She had gifted him with power. But for her he could not have done this. She now knew also that it was he who had been responsible for the breakages, for the noises, for the fear and misery of the last few weeks. It was as if he had grown like a horrible plant from the seed of anger and self-importance within her own breast. Now he was strong. His power was equal, possibly superior, to hers.

For an appalling instant Jess felt utterly alone with her companion. Nothing else existed in a grey, freezing abyss. There was no help. Every living thing had turned its back and receded to infinite distance. She was entranced, turned to stone by the coldness, the loneliness, the distance whence life had vanished.

The cat had made no further move. It stood with legs half bent, its tail out, its spine drooping under the weight of its body. The kittens had become a shapeless huddle of grey fur in the middle of the basket. They had stopped meowing. Abruptly the cat got back into the basket and sat upright, its eyes fixed on Jess. It ignored the kittens squirming blindly round its paws and stomach. It ignored the burning rug.

Jess stood where she was. Her only movement had been to turn her head from the basket to the fire. There was a drumming in her brain, a sense of compression, as if something would presently crack and she would hear clearly again. It came. It was as if she was awake, fully awake, for the first time. A tiny smoky flame contorted the edge of a rag, twisting it and transforming it into sparkling, metallic tinder. She was aware of that and at the same time she was aware of the cat’s protracted stare. Here was life—new life, as well—which accepted, quite unemotionally, its dependence on her. Nothing so personal as trust, yet not so blind as instinct: it was a tacit understanding that she would deal with the situation. The cat had gone back to its kittens in the basket. It was waiting—not confidently, since that implied an element of faith, but with a total certainty—for her to act.

An explosion of warmth took place within her. A stream of love, focused but not possessive, flowed from her to the separate warmth that belonged to a life utterly outside, yet parallel with her own. The cat was a mother, but not like hers; the kittens were its children, but not as she was a child. She could love in the knowledge that nothing could be given in return. She could love and be happy that there could be no recompense.

Jess remembered to lick her fingers before she lifted the cinders and flung them back into the grate. But they had dried before she be-
gan beating the rug with her hands. She did not feel the pain until she stood once more in the silence under the lamplight and the observation of the once-more-recumbent cat. With the sting from her scorched hands came further comprehension. Though she would never be able to explain, she understood just where and in what dark shadow she had been walking. The knowledge shrivelled her self-possession. Her one gasping cry brought her parents hurrying downstairs. They found her kneeling beside the basket. She was not touching the kittens, but she was caressing them with her eyes. The cat was approving but preoccupied with washing her family.

Caught up to her mother’s breast, a drowsiness overcame Jess. She was dimly conscious of bustle and confusion, of her father struggling into his coat to fetch the doctor, of the fire being replenished, of saucepans and shawls; but she was enjoying the warmth of a clear, placid certainty within that what had happened was over and done with, that there would be no more unexplained happenings, that the flame was out and the power dispersed. She was tired as if she had struggled against something and overcome it; but what it was or whether there had only been one struggle and against only one adversary, she did not know. It was not important now. She would be glad to get to sleep. And surely the kittens’ eyes would be open before long.

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