


63-034 **A Paperback**  **Library Gothic 60¢**

# *The* **Tormented** **Dorothy Daniels**

Can Sharon defend herself against  
an unseen terror that  
howls at her from beyond the grave?



## CAN SHARON LEARN THE SECRET OF THE GHOST WHO HAUNTS 'THE PILLARS'?

Sharon Aldrich, forced to sell her old family home, The Pillars, after the death of her parents, moves to New Orleans. Two years later she finds herself back at the The Pillars as governess to the young daughter of the new owner, Craig Beaumont.

Sharon soon learns that the Beaumonts wanted her services for another reason; The Pillars is haunted—by the ghost of Sharon's mother! And the Beaumonts believe that Sharon is the only one who can appease the restless spirit.

Can Sharon reach her mother's spirit—and end the unearthly visitations? Or will the horror that has gripped the lovely old house destroy it?

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# ***The Tormented***

by Dorothy Daniels

PAPERBACK LIBRARY

New York



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## ONE

The stage from New Orleans rattled along at a good speed, but too fast for me, once we came to the bayou country. Because this was where I had my roots, and after a period of two years, I was returning. My emotions were mixed, for the circumstances which were bringing me back were strange indeed, though just how strange I was still blissfully unaware. My father's plantation house had been called The Pillars. Both the house and grounds were enchanting and, as I visualized it, my eyes filmed at the happy memories which crowded my mind. My growing years had been ones of sheer joy, for my parents had been gay and loving and the house continually rang with the sounds of good times and laughter.

My parents had placed me in Miss Claybourne's Finishing School for my education. It was very expensive and was located in New Orleans, close by. They wanted me to be able to come home whenever I wished and I took full advantage of that, for I loved being with them.

My mother had been a frail person, plagued with illnesses most of her life, but her spirits were always high, for she had a keen sense of humor, and I know she was up and about many times when she should have been resting. But the day came when she could no longer ignore her poor health and she was forced to take to her bed. In the spring of 1882, after a long illness that not only sapped all of Papa's finances, but broke *his* health as well, she died. Afterward, he took no interest in anything and so was no match for a mild epidemic of the fever which struck the area. He died six months after she did, and I was alone.

It was then that I discovered how much money he had spent in trying to cure Mama, and how the many, many hours he devoted to her had caused the plantation to fail.

When the estate was settled, there'd been little left, even after The Pillars and all it contained had been auctioned off.

I never did learn who bought it, nor did I want to know. I couldn't even stand thinking about anyone else living in that wonderful house. I'd gone to New Orleans, taken a room, and found work—playing the piano in a store that sold sheet music. Certainly, though not dignified, it was respectable and I was grateful to be hired. There weren't many commercial openings for a girl of twenty who could speak French well, grace a formal ball, select proper clothing, one who knew all the little details that make her a lady, well-trained to supervise a fine home and a family, yet who had not the faintest idea of how to make her way in the business world.

And I soon learned what a crass world it was for a young, unmarried girl. There had been more than one occasion when I'd been forced to summon the manager to send a vulgarian on his way. Though I was not a prude, I had set very high standards of behavior for myself and when a member of the opposite sex came into the store, pretending an interest in sheet music, and making a general nuisance of himself, I gave him short shrift. However, because the occasions when I was subjected to the attentions of a masher became more and more frequent, I sought other employment, and I was now on my way to another position which would place me in a far more favorable environment.

The stage rocked along the road beside the bayou that flowed not far from The Pillars. The oaks were garlanded with gray Spanish moss and lined the banks in stately and somber style. To my active mind, they seemed like benevolent gods with long gray beards, welcoming me back and bestowing a blessing. An idle, foolish thought, but one which appealed to me. We passed several large mansions, owned by people who had been friends of my family for years. There were still other houses which had been abandoned during the war and had never been restored or occupied again because their owners either had not survived the conflict or, disillusioned by post-war conditions, had moved away. Then there were a few whose owners no longer had sufficient money to keep them up

and so they were allowed to fall into decay, for there was still little money in the South to purchase these great, many-roomed houses.

Oddly, I wasn't even certain of where I was going, except that I'd be met at the little, isolated platform which was a regular stage stop. It wasn't far from there to The Pillars, though I had no desire to ride past my former home. It still caused a nostalgic pain around my heart to even think of the place. At the stage stop, a Mr. Craig Beaumont, whoever he was, would be awaiting me.

When I'd entered my application in the employment agency for the position of governess and tutor, I hardly expected an early reply, but in three days I had been offered a position by this Mr. Beaumont. I was to care for his nine-year-old daughter, and I found myself eagerly looking forward to my new situation. The thought of having the companionship of a child greatly cheered me. Somehow, I thought of her as I had been. And as for Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont, I gave them the image of my parents—young, gay, loving and warmhearted.

I was even more curious about where they lived. Possibly they'd purchased one of the homes which had been abandoned, and had restored it. However, I decided not to let my imagination roam on that score, for I'd soon enough find out.

I suddenly realized the stage was slowing and we'd reached my destination. I was the sole occupant, so I had no hesitancy in taking a small mirror from my reticule and observing my features to see if any travel dirt had soiled my face. I could feel my heartbeat quicken, for I admit I was nervous, fearful I might not please the Beaumonts. However, my modest dress, of slate gray, made me look properly dignified and my pale green straw hat, trimmed with wheatears and fir cones and fastened with a green satin bow beneath my chin, was in good taste.

The stage stopped and the driver assisted me to the platform and placed my luggage beside me. I felt a slight panic as the stage started on its way, leaving me alone and enveloped in a cloud of dust. I moved into the shed to see if someone might be awaiting me there, but the benches were empty. I went outside and noticed, at the far end of the platform, a shiny black carriage with a Negro



coachman on the seat. His chin rested on his chest, for he was fast asleep. I didn't wonder, for the day was hot and the carriage was unprotected from the sun which was beating down.

After several minutes of pacing the platform, I began to wonder if Mr. Beaumont had changed his mind. The agency had assured me they were fine people, but perhaps they'd become reluctant to hire a complete stranger. Or, it might be Mr. Beaumont wasn't very reliable. I wondered what I'd do if no one came. I knew I had not erred as to the date or the arrival time of the stage. That had all been carefully arranged. There'd be no stage back to New Orleans until tomorrow and I wasn't tempted by the eleven-mile walk back to the city. Of course I knew people hereabouts and I could get shelter, but I was possessed of a rather large and painful sense of pride. I was beginning to feel as if I'd been made a fool of.

In desperation, I approached the carriage. Perhaps the coachman would know where I was bound. It was even possible, I suddenly thought, that he might have been sent for me, although it had been my understanding that Mr. Craig Beaumont would come for me in person.

"Please," I said in a loud voice. "Wake up, please."

The old man's head moved slowly. It was then I realized there was something familiar about him and I peered more closely. A smile touched my face as I reached into the carriage and shook him.

"Marshal. . . Marshal, wake up, you old sleepyhead."

The nodding head came erect with a jerk and the large round eyes grew even wider in amazement. "Miss Sharon?" he asked, as if he didn't believe it. "'Tis Miss Sharon come back?"

"Of course it is, Marshal. I'm so glad to see you again."

"Yes'm," he grinned broadly now. "Sure is good to have you back. You visitin'?"

"I'm going to work here," I told him, and when his jaw went slack in surprise, I went on quickly. "Things have changed, Marshal. I need work and I'm going to be the governess to a little girl. . . ."

"Sure enough, you goin' to work for Mr. Beaumont, Miss Sharon?"

"You were sent for me!" I exclaimed in sudden

awareness. "Mr. Craig Beaumont is the man who bought The Pillars?"

"Yes ma'am."

I shook my head sorrowfully. "I couldn't go back there. It would mean I'd be an employee in the house where I was born and where I lived most of my life. It's too filled with memories. I couldn't do it, Marshal."

"'Spect it won't be easy," he agreed. "But, Miss Sharon, there's a pretty little girl sure enough needs somebody like you to take care of her."

"I don't understand."

"'Course you don't 'cause you grew up with love. This little girl ain't abused, no ma'am, but she sure ain't much loved. Her mama ain't the kind who can show any love for anybody, I reckon. Her papa's a good man though. Yes ma'am, Mr. Craig Beaumont's a fine man."

"You . . . just went with the place when it was bought?"

"I had my say to stay or go, and Mr. Craig Beaumont said he needed me real bad and gave me a nice pay raise too, so I stayed on. Been mighty hard for me to just go off. Lived there most of my life. Couldn't live nowhere else."

I nodded. "I'm glad you stayed. How are your grandchildren? And how many have you now?"

"Ten," he said, with a gleam of pride. "All growin' fast. I get a day off to go see 'em. Like I said, Mr. Craig Beaumont treats me real fine."

Marshal placed my luggage in back and assisted me into the carriage. He got back in, clucked at the horse and we started the fifteen-minute ride to the house where I'd been born and where I would now be employed as a governess to a little girl who did not, apparently, have the happy time I had as a child.

What strange turn of fate had brought me back, I wondered, and would I be able to stay? I hoped so. Marshal seemed to think I was needed there. For the little girl's sake. How horrible, I thought, to be a child and unloved. It was tragic to think of an orphan unloved, but when a child had parents, and especially a mother who had no love to give her own flesh and blood, that was shocking.

I turned my thoughts back to what awaited me and felt grateful Marshal had met me instead of Mr. Beaumont. I



could question Marshal, for he was like a member of my own family.

"Are there any occupants other than Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont and their daughter?" I asked.

"Well, there's Mrs. Beaumont's sister, name of Sarah Hadfield. She ain't never married an' when she gives an order, I jump. Kind of ornery. Mr. Craig's brother lives there too when he's home, which sure ain't often. I drive him to and from New Orleans many a time."

"Does he work there?"

The black face spread in a grin. "If you call gamblin' work, I reckon he does."

"Oh," I said, in full understanding. New Orleans, especially the *Vieux Carré* section, was a haven for gamblers and dandies with money. I expected that Mr. Beaumont's brother would be among the latter type.

Then we came into view of The Pillars and my heart began to pound furiously. The house had been very well cared for, on the outside at least, for which I was most grateful. The same giant oak stood majestically to one side of the house and under it was a maze of boxwood. The little summerhouse, created of wrought iron and set on a raised red-brick foundation, was still there. Many an afternoon my dolls and I had had our tea parties in the coolness it offered.

The house itself was imposing inside and out. The main house was two stories high, with a large front porch reached by wide stairs. It derived its name from the four thick Doric pillars holding up the porch. Their pedestals reached below the porch to the ground. Above this wrought-iron railed veranda was the second-floor porch, also railed in wrought iron, in the manner of the French Quarter in New Orleans.

On either side of the main house were one-story wings with a beautiful arrangement of huge bay windows in front. The house had seventeen rooms and five baths. There was a center hall that led right through the house, from front door to back. On the south side of this hall were two drawing rooms, the library, the conservatory and a spacious ballroom. To the north were the sitting room, the dining room, breakfast room and kitchen. To me it was a charming abode and I should have been enthralled

with the idea of living here once again. Yet I felt a vague uneasiness as the carriage drew to a stop before the porch steps.

Almost at once, the door opened and a tall, dark-haired man crossed the porch and ran down the steps to greet me. I knew this must be Mr. Craig Beaumont. I observed that the dark hair at his temples was beginning to gray, but this seemed only to enhance his good looks. He was a man of regular features, with blue eyes that were bright and a mouth that seemed to smile readily. I liked him immediately and felt my nervousness start to abate.

"Miss Aldrich," he spoke as his hand extended to assist me down, "we're honored that you consented to come. Welcome to The Pillars."

His words almost unnerved me, for the only other person I'd heard express that exact sentiment was my father, and I barely restrained the tears that threatened to overwhelm me.

"You're most gracious, sir," I said, in a none-too-steady voice, though he apparently didn't notice it. "I feel I'm the one to express my gratitude. You have complimented me greatly by taking me into your home."

"Your charm is exceeded only by your comeliness," he said, and I could take no offense, for his manner had become quite somber. "Mrs. Beaumont is waiting to receive you as is our daughter. I hope you and Cassie will get along well. You may find her a little strange, but she's really a good child."

I smiled to reassure him, yet I wondered why I felt it necessary. "I'm looking forward to meeting her."

He extended his arm in formal fashion and I placed my hand on it, and in this manner we ascended the stairs.

"Oh, I must tell you that Mrs. Beaumont's sister, Miss Sarah Hadfield, lives with us. You'll meet her also."

I nodded but said no more, for we were at the door. As Mr. Beaumont pushed it wide, he bowed slightly and I preceded him into the house. I didn't look about, for I had no wish to become enveloped in nostalgia. The happy times I knew here were long gone, and I had returned only in the capacity of governess.

Yet the scant glance I did give to the entrance hall and the drawing room, into which I now walked, gave small

evidence of change, except for its two occupants, each of whom sat in one of the two sofas which flanked the fireplace.

It was difficult for me to decide which of them was Mrs. Beaumont, for they bore a close resemblance to one another. Both seemed to be in their early thirties. They were sharp-featured, with dark brown hair center-parted and drawn back to be gathered up into a chignon. Their dresses were of silk and of the latest fashion. Their eyes, small and deep-set, regarded me as impersonally as if I were a footstool.

I curtsied, for I was not proud, and I wished to make a good impression. One of the ladies was working on some fine needlework and, after giving me a brief glance, continued her task.

Mr. Beaumont walked to one of the women who, I now noticed, wore a wedding ring. "My dear, this is Miss Sharon Aldrich."

Mrs. Beaumont nodded. "I must say you're very young."

"I'm twenty, Mrs. Beaumont," I replied. "I hope you will find me satisfactory."

The sister let her needlework rest in her lap. Her eyes regarded me somewhat coldly as she spoke. "May I inquire as to your experience, Miss Aldrich? My name is Miss Sarah Hadfield. I'm Mrs. Beaumont's sister."

"This is my first position as governess," I said, unable to prevent the color from flooding my face. She was taking pains to let me know my position would be restricted to that of an employee in this household.

Sarah Hadfield gave an audible snort. "No experience whatsoever?"

"I'm a graduate of Miss Claybourne's Finishing School in New Orleans. No doubt you've heard of it."

"That is an excellent recommendation," Mrs. Beaumont granted. "It not only has very high standards of education, but is quite expensive, is it not?"

"I believe it is, ma'am," I said.

"What makes you think you can handle the position?" Sarah Hadfield persisted.

"My education," I replied with an outward calmness I was far from feeling. "Also, I like children."



"Sarah," Craig Beaumont remonstrated mildly, "give the girl a chance. . . ."

"My concern is for my niece," she replied caustically. "I'm not at all sure it's wise to allow a stranger to be placed in a position of confidence where your daughter is concerned."

"Miss Hadfield, you no doubt are aware of my former place of employment and what my position was."

"We are," she broke in, her smile bitter. "We also wish to know why you wished a change of employment."

Color flooded my face. "I feel that's in my favor. I was raised as a lady and expect to be so treated. There were instances when I was not. That is why I am here. It also happens I was born and brought up in this very house. The people working on the plantation I know well, and those living in the homes around here are my friends. I could have gone to live with any of them, for they were also dear friends of my parents, but I preferred to earn my living. I can give you the names of several families who will be only too happy to write letters of recommendation concerning my character and my ability. I am not, as you say, a stranger."

Mr. Beaumont snapped his fingers. "Of course," he exclaimed. "I thought the name was familiar. Welcome home, Miss Aldrich. What a rare stroke of good fortune for us."

"Thank you, Mr. Beaumont," I replied, perhaps a little too primly. "But your approval is not enough. I must be assured I will be accepted, in good grace, by each member of the family."

"Be assured, you shall be," Mrs. Beaumont said quietly, though there was no warmth in her voice. "Isn't that so, Sarah?"

Sarah shrugged. "Cassie is your daughter. If you're agreeable, why should I object?" She picked up her needlework and, once again, gave her full attention to it. It was as if I'd been dismissed.

I turned to Mr. Beaumont. "I must also have the approval of your daughter, sir. It would be pointless of me to remain should she take a dislike to me."

His smile was meant to reassure me. "I have a feeling that Cassie will like you on sight."

I bowed my head slightly. "In that case I would like to meet her."

"Come along then. She's been waiting impatiently for your arrival. You know, children are far more eager to meet strangers than adults are. I suppose that's because they've not yet learned what a hostile place the world is."

We'd already left the room, gone up the stairs and were walking along the gallery when I was suddenly overwhelmed by memories. I half expected to hear Papa's gay voice and Mama adding her soft, warm one. I hastily brushed away tears which flooded my eyes, but not before Mr. Beaumont had noticed.

He gripped my elbow lightly and brought me to a stop. "I know how painful this must be for you. I just hope you'll be able to endure it, for my daughter needs someone gentle and understanding, as I feel you are."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, getting a grip on myself. "I hope I can stay here. I love the house and the grounds. My one concern is that your daughter will like me."

"I think you need have no fear of that. You may find her a little strange. It's lonely here for a child. But I'm sure you'll be sympathetic and you'll win her over in no time. Do you feel up to it now, or would you prefer a little privacy first? I can well imagine it was quite a shock for you to be brought back to your former home."

"It was, momentarily, but I think I've quite recovered."

"Good." He took my arm and led me to the room I'd formerly occupied. When he opened the door, Cassie was curled up in a chair, reading a book. But at the sight of him, she dropped it, jumped up and rushed into her father's arms.

She was a pretty little girl, a mite too thin and her hair, which hung loosely to her waist, needed a good brushing. When she turned large blue eyes in my direction, I knew what Marshal meant, for they were somber eyes, lonely eyes. She clung to her father's hand and regarded me with the open curiosity of a child.

I said, "Hello, Cassie. I'm Miss Sharon Aldrich, your new governess."

She curtsied as she said, "How do you do? How long will you stay with me?"

I couldn't help but laugh at her seriousness and grown-

up manner. "I hope until you've quite grown up. You see, I once lived in this house, so I feel quite at home here."

"I don't believe you."

"Cassie," her father remonstrated, "you're being rude."

"I'm sorry, Papa." She spoke without taking her eyes from my face. "Did you like it here?"

"I loved it. My papa once owned this house and your room was once mine. I grew up in this room."

"You're just saying that."

"No," I contradicted. I was puzzled by her stubbornness and I had a sudden thought which I hoped would convince her I was speaking the truth. "In that closet," I pointed to a closed door at one side of the room, "a chest of drawers was built at the far end. They're very deep and I used to keep my dolls and their clothes in it. It's painted a bright blue—or was."

Her face brightened. "You're not lying. I keep my books there now. But I don't have very many."

"Have you ever been in the attic?" I asked her.

"No . . . no. Mama said I'm not to go there."

"We haven't really explored the attic," Mr. Beaumont explained. "It's probably quite dusty up there."

"Quite likely, but if nothing has been touched, we'll find many books packed away, and also a small desk we can use in our classroom. I'm sure you'll like that, Cassie."

"I will," she said with a smile. "I know I will. Papa, I like her. Can she stay?"

"We're hoping very much that she'll stay a long time," Mr. Beaumont said. "Now I'll leave you two to get acquainted. You have full run of this house, Miss Aldrich. Please consider it, as you once did, as your own."

"I'm very grateful for your kindness," I said. "May I have your permission to go to the attic for those books?"

"Of course, any time you wish. Oh, your room is next door. If you require anything, let me know."

He closed the door on his way out. I dropped to my knees before the child. "Cassie, we're going to have great fun, you and I. We'll study hard, of course, but even that will be fun."

"I like you," she said.

"I like you too, Cassie."



"When may I go to the attic with you?" she asked, after I'd taken my hat and placed it on the dresser temporarily.

"Let me go alone first to see what it's like and if the ladder-stairway is safe. Then we'll both go, perhaps tomorrow. It's wonderful up there when it's raining."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because the rain sounds like a thousand little boys beating a thousand small drums. That's what I used to think. Tell me, did your other governesses teach you arithmetic and geography and reading?"

"Yes, but they didn't stay very long." She sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I had two lady teachers, but they left after a couple of days. Then Papa got a man to teach me, but he got scared even faster than they did."

"Scared?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of what, Cassie? What in this house could frighten anyone?"

"She does."

I was sorely puzzled. "Who is she? What do you mean?"

"Sometimes she touches me, but I don't mind. She's not trying to frighten me."

"Who is she? I didn't think anyone else lived in this house . . ."

"Oh," she spoke with the nonchalance of a child, "you can't see her, but she comes and looks at me and touches me sometimes."

I felt a chill of apprehension flit up and down my spine. This child was apparently so lonely she lived in a dream world, and not a very pleasant one.

I smiled. "She's a make-believe person. Someone who lies only in your mind."

"She's make-believe maybe, because I can't see her, but she touches me."

"Tell me all about her," I suggested, hoping I could convince her it was all in her mind.

"Nobody ever sees her. When she's with me, she's very nice, but downstairs, she breaks things and screams, and the wind blows very hard. . . ."

"Oh, Cassie," I said, smiling, "you're making that up."

She shook her head stubbornly. "No, I'm not. You'll see. Mama says it's a ghost."

I laughed. "Cassie, there are no ghosts. There never were. So if they don't exist, they certainly can't frighten you, can they?"

"She doesn't frighten me, but the dogs do." In childlike fashion, she switched the subject abruptly.

"What dogs?" This child was overburdened with wild ideas.

"The ones that ate up Janelle."

I shook my head reprovingly. "Cassie, I must say you have a very active imagination. You've been alone too much. That will all be changed now."

"You ask Papa. It's the truth."

I meant to ask him, and to consult with her mother as well. I knew children indulged in fantasy, especially lonely ones, but this was something that had to be driven out of her mind at once, yet it must be done tactfully.

"I'll go fetch the books and see what condition the attic is in. Will you stay here and wait for me?"

"I stay here most of the time."

I could well believe it and it probably accounted for her living in a dream world. I hurried out of the room and down to the end of the corridor, where there was a small door. I opened this and stepped into a utility closet. A large one. Above me a length of rope still hung. It was by this means that the stairway to the attic could be pulled down. I gave it a tug and it came down noiselessly.

I climbed the steps and stepped into the huge, sprawling attic, filled with possessions Papa and Mama had stored there and which had never even been touched. There was dust over everything and not much light. There were but two windows, both fan-shaped, and set with stained glass. They were at opposite ends of the attic. I used to love watching the morning and evening sun filter through them, for they flooded a portion of the attic with wonderful colored light.

The books were exactly where I knew they'd be, a score of them neatly stacked. I bent to pick one up and blew the dust off it.

"Sharon," the voice said. It seemed to come from far

away and was vibrant with love and warmth.

I looked around, startled. "Yes? Who is it, please?"

"Sharon." The voice came again.

I went to the trap opening and looked down into the utility closet. I couldn't see anyone. Suddenly I felt the first pangs of apprehension.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Where are you?"

There was a long pause and then my name, a third time, as if wafted on a gentle breeze. "Sharon. . . . ."

I seized as many of the books as I could carry and rushed to the ladder. I climbed down the stairway as fast as I could. Perhaps I'd doubted too soon! Could it be Cassie had been speaking the truth? If there was no human to call my name, then who—or what—had done so?

I was frightened, but not to the point of panic. I thrust the foolish thought from my mind and told myself there was an explanation for this, but even so, the warm quality of the voice itself was enough to restore confidence. I knew that if I were to hear it again, I would not be frightened. At least, that was what I told myself.

## TWO

Naturally, I made no mention of the strange voice to Cassie, for she was already too filled with her phantasms. I read to her and she listened attentively, breaking in only to ask questions pertinent to the story. When it was time for her nap, she didn't demur, even letting me place the coverlet over her. I smoothed her hair back from her brow and, impulsively, she caught my hand between both of hers, and held it tightly against her cheek for a moment. I was deeply touched by the gesture and wanted to bend and kiss her cheek lightly, but I felt I should wait a little. I sat by her side until she drifted into quiet sleep, then I tiptoed from the room.

I went down the hall and entered the room I was to occupy. Marshal had already placed my luggage there and so I busied myself unpacking. Then I removed my dress and went into a small anteroom where there was a stand that held towels, soap, a pitcher full of water and a bowl. There I cleansed myself and felt somewhat refreshed. I chose a pink summer dress with a cascade of lace down the front. The elbow sleeves were ruffled as was the edge of the skirt. A loose scarf encircled my neck. It was a dainty, feminine frock and I hoped Cassie would like it. I wanted to please her and to help her escape her dream world, if indeed that was what it was. My own experience in the attic kept returning to plague my mind and I decided what I needed was a walk on the grounds, to calm and refresh me. I picked up my pink, ruffled parasol and left the room.

Downstairs, I glanced into the drawing room as I passed. The two women were there, Mrs. Beaumont now immersed in a magazine and her sister still engaged in her



sewing. Neither looked up as I passed, though they couldn't have helped but hear me, for the stairs were uncarpeted.

I walked to the rear of the house and entered the kitchen. There, a squat, buxom woman, brown-skinned and attractive for all her weight, busied herself at the big black stove.

I said, "Aren't you Flo Crawford?"

"I sure am, Miss Sharon," she said, beaming. "Marshal told me you'd come home again. I'm sure glad to see you here and, please God, you stay here forever."

"Thank you," I said, embracing her. "Seeing you here makes me feel at home. Do I know any of the other servants?"

"Not likely," she said with a grin. "Seein' there ain't any."

"Only you—the cook? But I don't understand."

"Can't get 'em to stay. They're all afraid of the spook."

"Oh, no," I chided her. "Cassie's been telling me a ghost story, but you, Flo . . . Surely you don't believe such nonsense."

"Sure is somethin' here," Flo said somberly. "I don't know what, and I ain't aimin' to inquire, but nobody stays more'n a day or two."

"Why aren't you afraid?"

"I don't stay here nights. No, ma'am. Soon's my dishes are done, my husband comes to fetch me."

"There's probably some explanation for whatever has frightened the servants. I'm going out to look at Mama and Papa's graves. I've never come back before, not since the day I left The Pillars."

"They were nice folks, Miss Sharon. We surely miss 'em."

"Thank you, Flo. So do I."

I left the kitchen and soon found the narrow little path to the family graveyard well behind the house. It was small, fenced in with wrought iron that was painted white. Theirs were the only two graves in the cemetery.

I opened the gate and discovered it had been oiled, for it operated noiselessly. The grass had been recently mowed and there were flowers near the graves. But to my amazement, there were now three of them—one set well

apart from those of Mama and Papa. I was curious about it, but, before I investigated, I stood between the graves of my father and mother and with closed eyes whispered my brief, earnest little prayer.

As I finished, I felt something brush my cheek. My eyes flashed open and I raised my hand to touch my face, thinking perhaps an insect or a butterfly's wing had skirted my cheek. Yet it was more like a light caress, even a fleeting kiss. I told myself my mind was behaving in the same ridiculous fashion as Cassie's, and even Flo's and the other servants who would no longer work here. Being superstitious people, they probably thought my parents haunted the place, and they had implanted the idea in Cassie's mind. Convinced I'd solved that mystery, I moved over to the other grave.

The headstone read:

JANNELLE HADFIELD

1865 - 1883

I gaped at the stone. There really had been someone named Janelle, someone who had died! Eaten by dogs, Cassie had said. That was impossible, but I would inquire of Mr. Beaumont concerning the nature of her death so that I might put such an idea out of Cassie's mind. I would also speak to her father regarding her overly-vivid imagination and what must be done to curb it.

I turned to leave the cemetery and when I passed Mama's grave again, I felt myself straining to hear her voice call to me, as she so often had. And then I did hear it. Ever so softly, but I stopped and whirled suddenly to face the grave. Strangely, I wasn't afraid, even though I knew now that the voice I'd heard earlier, in the attic, had also been that of my mother.

Then reason returned and I knew I couldn't have heard it. I'd wanted to so terribly that I believed I had. I looked around quickly, for fear someone might have seen my strange behavior. But I was alone and, reassured, I slowly retraced my steps to the house.

I looked in on Cassie, but she was still asleep, so I went to my own room where I sat down and thought again about what the child had told me. She had said the ghost



sometimes screamed and broke things. I found it still hard to believe. I also wondered about the girl named Janelle who was buried in the graveyard. She must have died soon after this family moved into the house. I suddenly got a daring idea. I was now sure the voice I believed I heard in the attic had been that of my mother.

I said, "Mama? Mama, are you here?"

I felt my face color with embarrassment for asking such a silly question aloud. I felt even sillier when there was no reply, as, of course, there couldn't be. .

Presently, I returned to Cassie's room. I found her awake, so I bathed her face and brushed her hair until it gleamed. I questioned her in regard to her education and learned that she'd had a series of governesses. Yet, in spite of her erratic tutoring, I found her answers to my questions bright and interested.

"There used to be a small room at the end of the gallery, where I was taught," I told her. "It looked just like a schoolroom."

"It's still there," she informed me. "I use it when I have a governess."

"I'm glad. Let's go there so I may see it again."

She was as eager as I and the sight of the slate wall, with chalk and erasers set on a small table nearby, filled me with nostalgia.

I learned from Cassie that breakfast was any time after Flo arrived, brought by her husband, and that this was usually very early. Dinner was at two and supper at eight. Eight o'clock seemed to me quite late for a child's supper, but I discovered a tray was sent up for her at six.

Sarah brought it, the dishes covered with a white cloth. "See that she gets to bed right after she eats," Sarah said. Not one word to the child, not even a trace of a smile. She closed the door firmly behind her. I glanced at Cassie, but she didn't seem to mind. She was likely so accustomed to being ignored that it may have seemed perfectly normal to her.

I removed the cloth and set the tray on a small table; then I brought over a chair for her and another for myself. It was an extremely nourishing meal. There was a slice of chicken breast, potatoes, bright green peas, a light gravy,

some biscuits which looked as if they could float and, finally, a serving of white frosted cake.

"It looks delicious," I said. "Smells heavenly too. Better start eating or I might. . . ."

She giggled, picked up her fork, but merely picked at her food, eating little. She needed twice as much food as she had consumed at this meal. I knew I was going to have a problem there, but I thought I could manage. What Cassie needed more than anything else in this world was love. I intended to see that she got it.

I helped her prepare for bed, though she was quite competent, brushing her teeth with salt, scrubbing her face and then saying her prayers. I tucked her in and provided her with a picture book that had enchanted me as a child. I arranged the lamp close to the bed, but where it would be out of her reach if she began thrashing about in her sleep.

"I may read . . . all by myself?" she asked, as if this was the first time it had ever happened.

"Of course. And when your eyelids get very tired, then let them close and go to sleep."

"But the lamp . . . I always have to sleep in the dark."

"Not anymore. Unless the light hurts your eyes."

"Oh no . . . no . . . please . . . I'd rather go to sleep with the lamp lit. The dark scares me."

"Cassie," I said, "there's nothing to be afraid of in the dark, but I always liked falling asleep with the lamp burning. It just seems nicer."

"I like it. Thank you. May I call you Sharon?"

"Please do, my dear. I'm already very fond of you."

"I guess you know I like you," she said, her smile shy.

"Thank you." This time I did bend down and touch my cheek to hers. "Now don't read too long. I'll look in after supper and again before I go to bed. If you want anything, just come to me. All right now?"

She nodded happily and plunged into the world of the unusual and colorful birds which inhabited that book. I picked up the tray and placed it on a table in the gallery for Flo to pick up. Then I closed the door gently and went downstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont and her sister were in the drawing room. They were enjoying a glass of wine and

Mr. Beaumont asked if I wished to join them.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm a little tired and it might make me drowsy."

"I hope Cassie didn't exhaust you," Mr. Beaumont said, his manner properly sympathetic.

"On the contrary. I find her a most engaging child. Quite imaginative too."

Mr. Beaumont set down his glass. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go upstairs and bid her good night."

I sat down in a chair near the center of the room and turned my attention to Mrs. Beaumont and her sister. I was surprised that Mrs. Beaumont didn't join her husband, but then, I shouldn't have been, for Marshal had prepared me. She was a strange woman—and a cold one.

"I went up to the attic this afternoon," I said, after a few moments of embarrassing silence, "and got some books I enjoyed as a child. I'm sure Cassie will like them too. I've begun to read one to her."

"It wasn't necessary," Mrs. Beaumont replied somberly. "Mr. Beaumont is a very wealthy man and he will supply our daughter with whatever she needs. You need but make out a list."

"Oh, I know," I replied, attempting a smile. "I didn't mean to be presumptuous, or to insinuate your daughter was lacking in anything. It's just that the books were such a source of pleasure to me, I felt certain Cassie would like them also."

"I shall go to her room tomorrow, make a list of them and when the new ones arrive, you may return your old ones to the attic," Sarah Hadfield said, her eyes regarding me in cold disapproval.

"As you wish," I said, nodding.

"I suppose you have some old clothes in the trunks in that attic also," she went on.

"No doubt there are some of my effects stored there," I said, trying to keep discouragement from my voice, for I now knew my task here would not be an easy one and were I to remain, it would be for the sake of the child.

"In that case, keep them there. Don't you agree, sister?"

Mrs. Beaumont took a sip from her glass before replying. "I fear I do. Cassie has no need of charity."



Sudden anger flooded me and I leaned forward in my chair. "I assure you I had no such. . . ."

Mrs. Beaumont held up a hand. "Please. Mr. Beaumont is coming down the stairs. Let us spare him any unpleasantness. I'm sorry if I offended you."

I sighed audibly and sat back in my chair. I could readily see why no governess had found this a desirable house in which to work. The place didn't need specters to frighten them away. The two flesh and blood females—if, indeed, it was blood flowing through their veins—were quite sufficient.

Emily Beaumont was escorted into the dining room by her husband, and I walked behind Sarah. I made no further attempt at conversation during dinner, except to thank Mr. Beaumont when he stated that Cassie had taken quite a liking to me. But when coffee was served, I gathered up my courage and asked the question uppermost in my mind.

"Who," I addressed Mr. Beaumont, "was Janelle?"

Mrs. Beaumont's hand went to her throat, her husband looked perturbed and Sarah eyed me boldly.

"None of your business," she said curtly.

"I apologize for my sister-in-law's rudeness," Mr. Beaumont said.

"Miss Hadfield," I replied, "*it is* my business, for the simple reason that when this property was sold, there was a provision in the deed specifically stating that the graveyard in back of the house was to remain the private property of my family. I have discovered there is someone named Janelle Hadfield buried there. As the name is the same as yours, I presume she is a relative. . . ."

"You know, Craig, I feel you made a big mistake in hiring this . . ." Sarah began heatedly.

"Now wait," Mr. Beaumont broke in. "Miss Aldrich is right. I apologize to you for having used the graveyard. Miss Hadfield died soon after we arrived here and I gave no thought to that provision and, I must confess, until this moment, it never occurred to me. I hope we can make some satisfactory settlement about it. If not, I'll have the body removed."

I said, "Mr. Beaumont, I have absolutely no intention of making any trouble about this and compensation is the



furthest thing from my mind. I asked because I was curious."

"And rightfully so," he granted.

Sarah Hadfield said, "I suppose now now you want to know how she died."

"I've already heard about it. Though Cassie's story is a rather fantastic. . . ."

Sarah broke in rudely. "Her story happens to be the truth. Janelle was our niece—Emily's and mine. She was killed by a pack of wild dogs."

I said, "I'm very sorry. I'm also astounded, for I was not aware that there were wild dogs roaming about."

"Ever since we moved here," Craig Beaumont explained, "we've been plagued by these dogs. The pack dwindled off for a time. You see, a number of families who returned to the farms and plantations discovered they couldn't afford to keep them up and they simply moved away. They left the dogs to fend for themselves. We now have a pack of fierce and highly dangerous animals to contend with."

"Have you done nothing about them?"

"We've tried, but we don't know where their lair is."

"Could they have been here before I . . . lost the house?"

"I expect so, but they didn't come as close as they do now," he said. "Perhaps your papa didn't want to frighten you with the stories about them. At any rate, don't go walking by night, for that is when they prowl. They're as vicious as any wild animal."

"I give you my word if I do walk by night, I'll remain close to the house, Mr. Beaumont. Now, may I ask about another story Cassie tells?"

"So she told you about the ghost," Mrs. Beaumont remarked, her tone one of disgust.

"Yes," I said. "I was inclined to disbelieve it as merely a part of a child's imagination, but since what she told me about Janelle has turned out to be true. . . ."

"We'll take coffee in the front drawing room," Mr. Beaumont said. "I'll give you the details there, Miss Aldrich. You're entitled to know them for you'll. . . ."

Sarah broke in rudely. "Not before I give her the details

regarding Janelle. I was with her when she was killed. I will tell Miss Aldrich exactly what happened. Since she's going to be here, she may as well know about it."

"Miss Hadfield," I said, "I am not morbidly curious. It is probably too painful to talk about. . . ."

"If it is painful, that is a small part of it. Janelle and I were walking near the bayou, some distance from the house, when suddenly the dogs came. We knew about them and began to run, but it was too late. Janelle tripped and fell. The dogs were upon her instantly. There was nothing I could do. I screamed at them, threw stones, but they paid me no heed. I . . . ran for help. By the time Mr. Beaumont reached Janelle, she was dead and the dogs had gone."

"How horrible!" I exclaimed.

Flo had appeared from the kitchen as Sarah finished. Craig Beaumont nodded to her. "We'll have coffee in the front drawing room, please."

"Yes, sir. I was just goin' to ask 'cause my husband is here. We're goin' to church services tonight. I'll finish my cleanin' up in the mornin'."

We repaired to the drawing room, where the two women sat on the twin settees. I was soon to learn just how much time they spent there. Mr. Beaumont stood by the fireplace; he lit a thin, light-colored cigar, watching its tip glow for a moment. Flo brought in the tray and placed it on the low table before Mrs. Beaumont, who poured. Flo served each of us, then left the room.

Mr. Beaumont placed his cup on the low table and sat down beside his wife. To my amazement, she moved to the far end of the settee, as if to place as much space between them as possible. If Mr. Beaumont noticed, he gave no outward evidence of it.

"Miss Aldrich," he said, "I'm going to tell you a story you may or may not believe. I surely would not. However, I fear before too long you'll be presented with the truth of it. When that happens, you may wish to leave. If so, I will understand."

"Thank you," I said.

"This house is inhabited by a ghost," he went on. "You're probably laughing inwardly and thinking there

are no such things. I never believed there were, but take my word for it, we've had ample proof. Ample and horrible."

"In other words," Sarah Hadfield said tersely, "we expect you will flee from this house at the first manifestation."

"I cannot say I'd blame Miss Aldrich," Mrs. Beaumont remarked. She made a face as her hand fanned the air to dispel the cigar smoke which was wafted her way.

I said, "I came here to teach Cassie, and I do not intend to be driven away by spirits. If there are any."

"You won't be so glib after it happens," Sarah said spitefully. "We've seen the manifestations."

"Have you actually seen this ghost?" I asked.

"No. At least, not so far. But when she comes, there's no question of her presence. No question whatsoever," Mr. Beaumont said emphatically.

"Why do you say 'she'? If you've never seen the ghost, how do you know it's a woman?"

"Because of the voice. It's a woman's. She calls and calls. . . ."

"For whom?" I asked, beginning to feel the first wave of panic struck at me.

"She calls for Sharon," Miss Hadfield said bluntly.

My eyes widened in astonishment. So others had heard my name called, just as I had in the attic this afternoon, and at the cemetery.

"She's your mother—the ghost of your mother come back to haunt us because she doesn't want us living in this house," she blurted out resentfully.

"That's nonsense." I placed my cup and saucer on the table alongside me, fearful I might spill it. "I'm beginning to understand. You . . . brought me here purposely . . . because you think my mother's ghost is here. Mr. Beaumont . . . why didn't you tell me? Why weren't you honest with me?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I realize I should have been. In all truth, I searched for you a long time. In the course of the search, I came upon the listing of governess applications. Believe me, we were looking for a new one. Your name was there, I investigated and learned you were in-



deed the Sharon Aldrich who was born here. So I hired you without an interview."

"Don't you believe that, under the circumstances, I deserved one?"

"Yes . . . yes, indeed. But I was afraid you . . . might not come."

"We hoped you'd like Cassie so much you'd remain even after you heard about the ghost," Mrs. Beaumont said, and for the first time she allowed the trace of a smile to cross her lips. It was wistful and helpless.

"This afternoon," I told them, "when I was in the attic, I will tell you now, I distinctly heard my name called, at least three times. I thought I heard it called again when I visited my mother's grave. It's a soft, gentle voice. . . ."

"Then you didn't hear our ghost," Miss Hadfield said. "Ours screams your name and tries to destroy the house. She will, too, I warrant, when she is ready for that."

"My mother, in life or in spirit form, would never do such a thing," I said stoutly. "She was gentle and lovely and warmhearted. . . ."

"Well, she may have been so in life," Miss Hadfield conceded, "but as a ghost, she's a terror."

"I'm still confused, and, I must confess, deeply hurt by your subterfuge," I said. "You searched for me and then got me here under the pretense of needing a governess for your daughter, when you really wanted me because you believe, so long as I'm present, the ghost of my mother will stop haunting you."

"Or, at least, be tender," Emily Beaumont said matter-of-factly.

"We've committed a grave injustice on you," Mr. Beaumont said, rising. "I'll have Marshal harness the carriage and take you back to New Orleans immediately. I shall also see that you are reimbursed sufficiently until you find another situation. When you do, I suggest you interview your employer first, so that you will not meet again with a situation of this kind."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness," I replied quietly. "As for reimbursing me, that is not necessary. I have not touched the sum of money which I acquired through the sale of this estate."



"It was very little," Mr. Beaumont said. "I happen to know that most of what I paid for this property went to settle your father's debts."

"I still want nothing from you, sir," I replied, my manner as cold as that of his wife and sister-in-law.

"You're a coward," Sarah said, her mouth curled contemptuously. "The ghost here is that of your mother. If anyone could put her to rest, it's you and you have a bounden duty to do so. You yourself said you heard your mother's voice call to you."

"I refuse to allow myself to believe it," I said. "I was carried away by memories. Happy ones. This house, to me, meant love and gaiety and yes, serenity."

"There is none of that here," Mrs. Beaumont said quietly, though she did not deign to look at me. "Not since my husband purchased this abode has there been anything approaching serenity."

"Then why don't you leave?" I demanded.

No one answered. It was as if they could not. Even Mr. Beaumont sat stiffly, seemingly unaware that the ash of his cigar was about ready to drop onto the rug. It was as if they expected something to happen. I was ashamed of the feeling of contempt which filled me. Contempt for the three of them. I'd completely forgotten about the little girl upstairs, but I thought of her now. A little girl, lonely and filled with ideas of specters. Or of one specter who was kind to her, and unkind to the adults.

And then, something happened which sent terror through my being. Slowly, the lamps went out. Not just one, but every lamp flame within sight, and not as if a sudden burst of wind through the house had extinguished them. It was as if the flame slowly faded, as if it was actually withdrawn into the wicks until the room seemed filled with flickering shadows, ominous shadows. Even the air seemed hushed, as if fearful of what was about to take place.

"What is it?" I cried out. "What is happening?"

"Oh, dear God." I recognized Mrs. Beaumont's voice, anguished and filled with terror.

"My dear, let me hold you." Mr. Beaumont spoke softly and I heard his movements, as if he were trying to comfort his wife, take her in his arms.

Next came the clatter of a cup and saucer as they smashed against the marble floor of the fireplace.

"Don't touch me." The voice was filled with loathing and it was Mrs. Beaumont who spoke.

But I didn't dwell on it, for suddenly I felt a chill, and I knew the room was growing cold. Not the iciness of a northern winter, but a degree of clammy coldness that penetrated deeply into the marrow, and seemed to hold me in a vise.

Hardly had this occurred when the room became alive with wind. Not from any door or window, because none were open. Even if they had been, the evening was calm. This blast of air seemed to originate in the middle of the drawing room and spread to its four walls. At the same time that the wind howled and whined, I heard a shrill voice scream my name over and over again. It grew so loud it hurt my ears. Over and over! My name! At least it sounded like "Sharon," but the rage in that screech severely distorted it and so I could not be sure.

Then the ghost made itself apparent by seizing a large glass vase from one of the tables and hurling it at the mantel, where it crashed. I saw a fern, which grew in a pot placed within a big brass urn, lifted into the air. It poised there momentarily and then hurled itself at the mantel with blinding speed. The brass urn fell away with a clatter, the pot broke and earth spilled all over the floor, while the plant itself landed in the fireplace.

I sat through this with both hands gripping the arms of my chair, too stunned and terrified to speak or move a muscle. The others were equally as speechless, equally as terrified.

Suddenly the howling ceased, the screeching, screaming voice faded, the cold dissipated and the lamplight came back as slowly as it had been withdrawn. The ensuing silence was almost as terrifying and brutal as the noise. To me, it seemed like a bad dream, but there was evidence that it had indeed happened—the pieces of the broken vase and the extremely heavy fern lying half in and half out of the fireplace with the earth that had held it spilled over the floor.

I thought that Sarah Hadfield looked the most terrified. Her eyes bulged, her face was perfectly white. Her lips

moved with no sound coming from them and her hands, tightly clasped in her lap, shook violently.

Mr. Beaumont recovered first. "I'm sorry you were subjected to this, Miss Aldrich. But, at least you know we spoke the truth. As did our daughter, whatever she told you. I'll see the carriage is made ready."

"Must you go?" Mrs. Beaumont asked. "We had hoped you might, in some manner, talk to the ghost of your mother so she would understand that we mean no harm. We love the house too."

"Let . . . her . . . go," her sister shouted, finding her voice at last. "Let her go, for she is likely as bewitched as her mother. This is not a spirit haunting us. This is witchcraft. I have never believed it was the work of a ghost; it is inspired and carried out by human hatred for us. Let her go! She likely arranged to come here and make it seem we had sought her out. She will destroy us."

"Sarah, be quiet," Mrs. Beaumont ordered.

"Yes, please, Sarah," Mr. Beaumont said. "I suggest you leave also. These manifestations completely unnerve you."

"No," she retorted. "I will not leave my sister here to the mercy of that evil specter. It's she who should be forced to stay in this house alone." Her arm extended and she pointed an accusing finger at me.

"I'm as upset about what just happened here as you, Miss Hadfield," I said, trying to keep out of my voice the inner trembling I still felt. "I don't pretend to understand it except to say that it could not be the spirit of my dead mother. She was gentle and soft and kind."

"It can be no other," she cried out. "You know it and you dare not stay."

"If it is my mother, then her spirit is in great turmoil. Perhaps she is calling to me. Perhaps I can help. And so I'll remain."

The three of them seemed astounded.

"I'm very grateful," Mrs. Beaumont spoke first. "I shall sleep better tonight, knowing you are in the house, hoping your presence will quiet this tortured spirit. I prefer to believe she is, as you say, in great turmoil."

"Thank you, Miss Aldrich." Mr. Beaumont's eyes revealed his gratitude. "We don't deserve such kindness on

your part. Not after having practiced such deceit in getting you here. This may work out well, after all."

I didn't feel at all certain my presence would solve anything. And then I thought of Cassie and jumped up suddenly, calling out her name.

"She'll be all right," Sarah Hadfield said flatly. "The ghost has never bothered her."

Nonetheless, I ran from the room and up the stairs. I had to reassure myself.



### THREE

The room was in darkness and I presumed Mr. Beaumont had extinguished the lamp. I whispered Cassie's name, not wishing to disturb her if she was sleeping and when I received no answer, I closed the door as soundlessly as I had opened it. I felt relieved that she had slept peacefully all through the ghostly chaos that had gone on downstairs, for I had no wish to have her see me at this moment. I was still greatly perturbed by what had happened.

I went to my room, sat down in a rocking chair and tried to restore my wits to a form of normalcy. What I had just experienced was quite beyond my ability to either rationalize or believe in, yet it had all happened. It was an actual event. The strange wind, the chill, the screeching of my name as if by a mad woman, the manifestations of objects hurling themselves to destruction. All in contrast to the gentle, soft and wonderful voice that came to me before. Though I'd undeniably heard and seen manifestations, every whit of common sense I possessed told me this could not be. It was 1885, not 1650 when such things had been easy to believe, when superstitions had been prevalent, when people were being summarily convicted and executed for practicing witchcraft.

Besides all these doubts and conflicts, I was terrorized. No one could sit through what I had observed and felt and heard, without growing panic-stricken. My hands still trembled, my throat was still dry. I was still possessed by the urge to get out of here at once, yet I'd given my word I'd remain.

And I would, for certainly Cassie had need of me. She was lonely, as was I. And while I knew her father loved her, certainly her mother had given no evidence of love for

the child. A strange woman she was and, I believed, dominated by her sister who was, perhaps, her senior by a few years. Why, I wondered, did Mrs. Beaumont allow her sister to do this? Did she no longer love her husband? Certainly she'd given not the slightest token, at least in my presence, of love for him either. I recalled how, when the lights darkened, he had endeavored to comfort her and she had repulsed him. I also remembered that she moved away from him when he took a place beside her on the settee and that she found the smoke from his cigar so distasteful, she'd made a face and fanned the smoke away from her. What was wrong here, I wondered. Could it be that my mother really was unhappy that the house was now occupied by two women who seemed completely devoid of warmth? That her spirit wished to rid the house of them?

The thought troubled me and a growing belief that the ghost of my mother roamed this dwelling and plantation filled my mind. I had heard her voice. I didn't question it, but what puzzled me was how the ghost of a serene, loving woman could be gentle one moment and a howling, destructive specter the next. I also wondered what she wanted of me. Obviously she was calling my name with each spectral appearance. Mr. Beaumont believed she wished something of me, as did Emily and Sarah.

I pondered the idea, as well, that if The Pillars was haunted, and if this family was driven out by the manifestations, then no one else would ever care to—or even dare to—reside here. That meant the lovely place would stand idle until it rotted and was finally disposed of by burning down or being torn down. I loved this house so much I felt I could never bear that.

Therefore, I made up my mind that I must remain. I must, somehow, learn the secret of the house and find a way to satisfy the ghost so that she would go away to her own form of peace, and allow the family now in possession of this house to live without fear.

Once this determination was made, I felt better and started to prepare for bed. I was brushing my hair the allotted number of strokes when a soft knock sounded on my door. I opened it to find Mrs. Beaumont standing there.

"Please come in," I invited, stepping back.

"Thank you, but it's too late, Sharon," she replied. "That is . . . if I may take the liberty of calling you by your first name."

"Please do," I said, surprised by her friendly manner.

"And I'd like you to call me Emily and my sister . . . Sarah."

"I'm grateful, Mrs. Beaumont . . . Emily. But have you consulted your sister?"

She nodded. "We both behaved badly downstairs. We wish your forgiveness. You see, what happened a short time ago has been a quite frequent occurrence. As a result, both my sister and I are a bundle of nerves."

"That's understandable. I'm still unnerved by it myself."

Her smile was one of relief. "Then you forgive us?"

"Under the circumstances, there is nothing to forgive. I'm pleased we'll be friends."

"Good night then, my dear. Sleep well."

I closed the door, not at all certain I could. I extinguished the lamps, save the one beside the bed, which I turned up full because I planned to read myself to sleep. I believed, rather firmly, that if I tried to find sleep before my eyelids were too heavy to hold up, I would lie there in the darkness, let my imagination take possession and wait for the ghost to visit me on the heels of the howling wind and the eerie chill.

I was ready to get into bed when I felt goosebumps arise on my skin. I could hear someone crying, but it seemed to come from a distance. I was sure it did not originate in my room, for it was too faint. I cautiously opened the door to the hall, but no sound came from that direction, yet as I closed it, the sound of the sobbing was renewed and my concern grew.

I stepped to the window to look out upon the front of the estate. The sound seemed a little closer. I raised the window and it became more definite. Then I realized that it was Cassie and the cries were drifting through her open window. I slipped into my wrapper and slippers, hurried to her room and went in. Her face was pressed against her pillow, yet the sound of her crying had reached me.

The room was still in darkness and as I had no wish to



alarm her, I called her name softly as I closed the door behind me. I moved toward her in the pitch dark, knowing every inch of the way, for I'd crossed this room literally thousands of times. I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I heard you crying, Cassie," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No," she said in a voice smothered by the blanket she'd pulled over her head.

I gently raised it and placed my cheek against her tear-stained one. "Darling, there's no need to cry. If you're afraid, I'm here now and I'll stay."

"I'm not afraid. Not very much. It was awful downstairs tonight, wasn't it? Can we have a lamp lit, please?"

"Of course," I said. I lit the bedside lamp and then resumed sitting on the bed at her side. "I didn't know you heard the noise. I opened your door and called to you."

"I couldn't hear you. I was under the covers and was holding my hands over my ears. I was trying to shut out the awful noises."

"Did your papa put out the lamp?"

"No. It went out just before the noises started, but it didn't come back on. The lady was terribly angry tonight."

"Do you really think it's the nice lady who does it?"

"Yes," Cassie replied, without hesitation. "But she won't hurt me. She's always nice when she comes."

"How do you know it's the same one?"

"I know."

"I'm glad you're not afraid."

"I'm afraid of the noises." Cassie sat up and eyed me seriously. "I heard Mama knock on your door. Are you going away?"

I smiled. "No. I'm staying. I'm not afraid in this house. I grew up in it and I love it here. Also, I like being with you."

"Thank you. Did the lady get angry when you lived here?"

"There was no lady."

"Not even a nice one like the one who touches my cheek?"

"Only my mother," I told her. "She loved me very much."



"Mine doesn't," Cassie said.

"Of course she does," I retorted, chiding her mildly with my eyes. "She's upset, Cassie."

"No. She didn't love me before we lived here and neither did my Aunt Sarah. Do you like my Aunt Sarah?"

The questions came in typical childlike fashion and I had the feeling she was asking them, not so much to keep me with her because she was frightened, but rather because she was a very lonely little girl and was hungry for companionship.

"I don't really know your Aunt Sarah yet, but when we become better acquainted, I'm sure I will."

"Do you like Mama?" she continued her prodding.

"She's been very kind to me."

"She's kind to me too, but she doesn't love me."

"Cassie, your mother and father are worried. About you, and the house, and everything. Grown people have many worries a little girl never knows about. If they sometimes neglect to say good night to you, it's only because they're so busy with their problems they forget. Besides, I'm here to say their good nights for them. Do you want me to say good night now?"

"Please, no. I *am* scared. I heard all the noise. Sharon, if the ghost makes so much noise and does bad things, why can't we see her?"

"Because there are no ghosts," I said. "I don't know what makes all that noise, but your papa is going to find out soon."

"Why did Mama knock on your door?"

"What a lot of questions you ask," I said, smiling. "But that's an easy one to answer. She asked me to call her Emily and I'm to call your aunt by her first name also."

"And will you call my papa Craig? That's his name."

"No, dear. That wouldn't be proper."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't." I fluffed her pillow as I spoke. "Now settle down and get some sleep."

"Will you call my Uncle Bart by his first name?"

"I doubt it. I'm going to put out the light now."

"Please, don't go."

"I'll lie down beside you until you go to sleep. But first the light goes out."

She smiled brightly as she settled back on her pillow and I thought about how wonderful it was to be wanted, needed. Why was Emily so blind where her daughter was concerned? I'd known this child a matter of hours and she was already firmly entrenched in my heart. When I grew to know Emily better, I would speak to her about her daughter's need for affection. Perhaps half an hour went by. The house was silent, not even creaking a little. Cassie breathed slowly and evenly. I thought she was sound asleep.

"She just touched me," Cassie whispered drowsily in my ear.

"Who?" I asked, coming out of my half-wakeful, half-asleep condition.

"She! You know!"

I said, "Oh . . . she's here then?"

At that moment, I felt the lightest sense of someone touching my brow. It was a comforting feeling, yet I was puzzled too. My arm reaching out, seeking a human form, but I knew no one would be there.

"Sharon?" the voice whispered. "Sharon?"

It had to be my mother's voice. I whispered, "I'm back, Mother. Is there something you want of me?"

There was no answer, no sound. I relaxed. Cassie was fast asleep, as if she'd been waiting for the touch of the unseen. After several more minutes I eased myself off the bed and tiptoed to the door.

When I lived here, Papa used to keep a small lamp burning in the corridor all night, but Mr. Beaumont apparently didn't believe in this. I felt surrounded and actually gripped by the darkness. All doors were closed, the hall ended in blank wall and so no starlight could get in.

Suddenly an arm went around my waist and a hand pressed lightly against my lips. I was too stunned to struggle at first, but then I began to tear myself free.

"Easy now, girl," a man said. "I mean no harm. I'm Bart Beaumont."

I stopped trying to get free of him and he promptly let go.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he said, sounding amused. "But I wanted to talk to you. If I'd spoken you'd have screamed and awakened everyone."

"Well, I must admit you have a unique way of introducing yourself, Mr. Beaumont," I said indignantly. "I can't say I approve of it."

"I've got an idea you make a fine cup of coffee. Will you come down to the kitchen with me? I hate being alone."

"If you will be so kind as to light a lamp I'll make a cup of coffee for you. But I don't intend to walk through the house in darkness."

He struck a match and put its flame to the wick of a lamp which stood on the hall table. I was weary, but the thought of a cup of coffee held definite appeal.

He held the lamp close to my face making me blink. "Ah . . . you're lovely."

"You may dispense with the compliments. I'm really not disposed toward your company, sir, so please lead the way before I change my mind."

He nodded and I noted his smile was like that of his brother and the facial resemblance was there also. But in the few moments I'd been speaking with him, I was struck by his lightheartedness. It was a welcome change and I wondered how he could endure living here, for certainly he was a *bon vivant*.

He held the lamp so that I could navigate the stairs with ease and we went down to the kitchen. Curiously, I felt completely at ease with him. A slow fire was burning in the stove, a kettle of hot water was set back. I spooned coffee into the pot, added the water and stirred the fire a little. Bart, in the bright lamplight—for he'd lit two more lamps in the kitchen—was prowling through the ice box looking for a snack. I had my first real look at the man. He was about five years younger than his brother, I judged, with the same black hair and dark brown eyes. The faint cleft in the chin must be a family mark because Craig Beaumont had it too. Bart possessed a ready smile, a wholesome wit and I thought him more animated than Craig, though I doubted he assumed the obligations Craig did. And, perhaps, if Craig's life held a little more cheer, he too would be gay.

"How did you get along with Cassie?" he asked.

"Wonderfully well," I said.



He found some cold chicken, carried it to the table and peered at me with a disconcerting frankness. "You see, I was right. You are beautiful. I like eyes that are bluish-gray and hair almost auburn. I approve of a pert nose and a round face and the way your brows arch. You're a rare beauty, Sharon. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if I fell in love with you."

I sat down while the coffee boiled. "You're a flatterer and a charmer, sir. You're so patently a fake that I find I like you. I hope we will be friends, but no more."

"I'm desolate," he said with a wide grin. "Sarah doesn't like you, does she?"

"I hadn't noticed." I was fencing with him now, not certain just how to take him.

"You will. Sarah's in love with me. She doesn't want me around anyone whose charms are superior to hers."

I laughed and got up to fetch the coffee and pour it. "You are an egoist, sir."

"Sure I am. But it's true . . . about Sarah. Can you imagine me falling in love with her? She'd sour the cream I'm pouring into this deliciously smelling coffee you made. Imagine that—so beautiful, and she makes a good cup of coffee as well! Do I bore you, Sharon?"

I spooned sugar into my cup. "Anything but that, Mr. Beaumont. Tell me, do you always come home as late as this?"

"Often much later. Tonight I went broke quickly. If I'm winning, I sometimes don't come home at all. You see, I'm a gambler. Therefore, a bad marriage risk."

"I'll be sure to keep it in mind. I'm glad of the opportunity to talk to you, however. I received something of a shock tonight, as you might guess if you went into the front drawing room."

"The plant? Little old ghostie did that, eh?"

"I don't know who did it. All I know is, I saw the plant, urn, pot and all, rise up by itself, fly across the room as if it had been hurled, and smash against the mantel."

"And did you hear our friend, the ghost, screeching your name?"

"I heard something. I'm not sure what it was. Not while I was in the drawing room."



He slowly lowered the cup which had almost reached his lips. For the first time, he grew serious. "You . . . heard something else?"

"Yes . . . in the attic . . . and just now in Cassie's room. My name, spoken clearly and softly."

"Oh, my heaven, then it must be true," he said. For a moment I thought I saw the light of near-panic in his eyes, but it was quickly gone. "I've been trying to figure out how someone could be smashing things and making it look as if we have a ghost, but I never believed it *was* the work of a haunt."

"I heard it. Cassie tells me someone touches her occasionally, someone she can't see."

"Childish imaginings, of course."

"I'm not so sure. That same hand touched me—twice since I've been here—and I could see no one."

"What I need," he said, "is four or five dollops of brandy in this coffee, but I'd better not. Sharon, what's it all about? Is a ghost trying to make us get out of here? You lived here before. Did you ever experience anything like it?"

"Never. I can't explain it. I wish I could. One moment the voice is gentle and kind, and then it becomes a screech and the ghost, or whatever it is, becomes destructive. Is there an explanation, do you think? One which may sound plausible?"

"How do I know?" he said, almost curtly. "Craig thought if he got you here, the ghost would be satisfied, but if she shows her appreciation by throwing the fern at the fireplace, I'd hate very much to try to please her even more. How could your mother do such a thing to us?"

"My mother is dead," I replied coldly. "I can't believe she's an angry spirit. I have no answers to your question, Mr. Beaumont. Until now, I didn't believe in ghosts and I could still readily doubt them. Tell me, since we're being so frank with one another, why is it Cassie is given so little love in this house?"

"Observant, aren't you?"

"One would not need to be observant. Even Cassie is aware of it."

"Craig loves her. I'm fond of her, though I pay her little attention. I do know Emily never wanted a child. You

couldn't have known—you were too young—but she was a New Orleans belle in demand at every social affair because she was considered to be so beautiful, as indeed she was. She claims being married to Craig, being compelled to live out here in bayou country and the birth of Cassie have made a hag out of her. She exaggerates, of course, and never considers the fact that she has grown a bit older. But things like that have strained the relationship between her and Craig."

"A pity she's made the child aware of her indifference."

"Don't come to me with it. I didn't marry her, thank heaven. Oh, they don't actually fight. It's just this air of restraint between them. I also think she's jealous of the attention Craig used to pay to Cassie, and that's the main reason why he doesn't spend as much time with his daughter as he'd like to. He loved Emily. Whether he still does I have no idea, beyond the fact that he's still trying to make a success of his marriage. I think he should conserve his energy. Marriage can't be one-sided."

"Thank you for explaining the situation," I said. "I know Cassie loves her father. I believe he loves her, but with a child that's not enough. He has to seek her out, make her understand how much he cares for her. You also might stay home long enough to acknowledge her."

"Cassie and I used to have a lot of fun," he said. "Lately, pressure of business has kept me away. That's gambler's fancy talk to describe a long run of bad luck."

"Tell me about Janelle," I said, to change the subject.

He arose to warm the coffee in my cup and refill his. He sat down at the table and regarded me with a serious expression. "You've touched a sore point, Sharon. Janelle was Emily's niece, and beauty must have run to her side of the family because Janelle was beautiful. She was like me too—gay and happy, looking for laughter and finding it where she could. She didn't deserve the horrible death she met."

"I'm sorry I brought it up," I said. "I had no idea you were in love with her."

"Perhaps she didn't even know it. I'm not sure. We did have fun. I would have asked her to marry me one day. She was only nineteen; I felt we could wait. She wasn't a flirt and she would have made a fine wife, but I wasn't

quite ready to settle down. Those damn dogs!" His fist slammed the table with such force the dishes rattled.

"I never heard of wild dog packs in this area," I said.

"They're around. After the war, many people came back to their farms and stayed a few years, but they couldn't make them profitable so they moved to the cities. They simply abandoned the dogs and the dogs formed packs, roaming about killing sheep and calves, getting bolder and bolder. Craig and I tried to hunt them down. No one else seems to take an interest. They . . . tore Janelle to pieces."

"I know, and I'm sorry, Mr. Beaumont."

"Then prove it by calling me Bart. I hate formality. It's too cold—like this house."

"The house isn't cold—or it wouldn't be, if there was love in it."

"I take it you had a happy childhood."

"Oh, yes. Mama and Papa were deeply in love and shared that love with me. This house knew nothing but contentment and happiness."

His smile was cynical. "Quite a change you've come back to. Does it hurt?"

"Not in the least," I replied honestly. "Not in the sense that I am here only in the capacity of governess, and I believe that is what you are referring to."

"It is," he said bluntly. "Were you shocked by what happened tonight?"

"I was, indeed. Frightened too, I'll be frank to admit."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"I can do nothing. Can you?"

He thought a moment. "I'm not sure. I meet a lot of strange and unusual characters. I know of one who lives in New Orleans . . . in the heart of the *Vieux Carré* . . . a medium. A man who can summon the dead—or so he claims. What if he were to come here and do . . . that? Some say he can materialize a spirit so it can be seen."

"You're suggesting he come here and attempt to summon my mother."

"Exactly. Would you object?"

"The idea scarcely has appeal, but if it would, in any way, resolve the horror that has gripped this house, I could endure it."



"Of course, my brother would have to be consulted."

"Naturally."

"I would like you to suggest it to him."

"I?" I asked, appalled at the idea. "I scarcely know him. It would be most presumptuous of me."

"In this case, I think presumption has little to do with it."

"Then why don't *you* ask him?"

His shoulders shrugged. "I doubt he'd listen to me. You're closer to it."

"I beg to differ," I said heatedly. "I wasn't even aware of what was going on here until this evening. Had I known, I'd never have come."

"Then what's keeping you here?"

I sighed. "You're being difficult. I don't know really. Or—yes, I do. Your niece and—yes, I may as well admit it, the memories of my mother."

"You mean her ghost, don't you?"

"No," I said firmly. "I'll not admit to the existence of that—not yet."

"You said she touched you."

"I felt something," I admitted. "It's quite likely I imagined it."

"I don't think so."

"You're beginning to irritate me."

He smiled. "I'm pleased. It proves you're becoming interested in me."

"Not in the sense you mean, Mr. Beaumont."

"You're calling me Bart, remember?"

"I shan't if you don't stop talking nonsense."

"I'll be good. I just wish you would speak to Craig."

"I make no promise," I said. "But suppose I did and he consented, what about his wife and her sister?"

"I believe Emily would go along with the idea. As for Sarah, she'll probably be difficult. She enjoys being difficult."

"She was the most terrified of any of us tonight. I can't see her consenting to such a thing."

"She'll have no say in the matter if Craig and Emily are willing. Anyway, if she puts up too big a fuss, I'll talk her into it. She's rather susceptible to me."

"Modesty is certainly not one of your virtues," I said.

"To me, it's a doubtful one. Where does it get you?"

"We seem to be getting nowhere with this conversation. And I, for one, am very tired," I said.

"I'm sure you must be. It's been quite a day. Do you know what to do with the stove?"

"All it needs is banking and I'm quite capable."

On my way to the stove a sudden thought occurred to me and I turned to face him. "I will make a deal with you, Mr. Beaumont."

"I have a feeling it's a favor you wish. If so, you'll have to call me Bart."

"Bart, then," I replied patiently. Fatigue was fast overcoming me and I was in no mood for his flirtatious manner. "And I would like to think that what I ask is something you will do with a good grace."

He regarded me seriously for the first time since we met. "I *am* sorry, Sharon. I can see how tired you really are. I have an admitted failing—a tendency not to take anything or anyone seriously. But be assured, you now have an attentive audience."

"Thank you. I think I'm asking very little. It concerns your niece Cassie. Please look in on her tomorrow. I can tell she's quite fond of you. And the next time you go to New Orleans, bring her back a little gift to let her know you have thought of her. It wouldn't have to be much. Just some trinket or a stuffed doll or animal."

"I promise."

I managed a smile. "Thank you. She'll love you for it. I'm glad we had this opportunity of talking, even if you did scare me half to death with your unconventional manner of introducing yourself."

I banked the stove and Bart put out the lamps, with the exception of the one he used to light our way.

"Did you really see what happened in the drawing room tonight?" I asked.

"Yes. I've been home awhile," he informed me. "I'd just put out the lamps down here when I heard your footsteps move along the floor to Cassie's room. I waited outside her door for you to come out. I knew you were to arrive today and I wanted to see what you looked like. Are you angry?"

"No. Though I believe it was a thoughtless thing to do

in a house where such strange events occur. Especially since you knew I'd been subjected to a frightening session this evening."

"It was stupid of me and I apologize. But I'm afraid that, as you get to know me better, you'll find I don't conform. Craig is the staid, thoughtful one in this family."

"Yet he tricked me into coming here."

"Were you angry when you found out?"

"Yes. I felt it was a cheap trick. But now I'm angry at what is happening here. I love this house."

"I'm glad someone does," he said wryly. "But the fact that you're willing to stay proves to me, beyond any doubt, you didn't sell the house under false pretenses."

"You mean you believed I got rid of this place because of what you call—the ghost?" I asked in amazement.

"For want of a better name, yes."

"You're ridiculous."

"And you're beautiful."

We were already up the stairs and had reached my door. I opened it, turning to bid him good night.

Before I could speak, he said, "Good night, enchantress."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Good night, you foolish man."

I leaned against the door for a few moments after I'd closed it. The smile still curved my lips and I knew I was glad that Bart Beaumont was a part of the household. Other than Cassie, he was the only light touch I'd encountered. However, Emily's brief visit to extend the hand of friendship had also helped lift my spirits. Perhaps, with the cooperation of every adult member of the family, we would solve the terrible mystery of what was happening in this house and to it.



## FOUR

When I awakened, I was astounded at the lateness of the hour, though I knew my late sleeping was due to exhaustion caused by the journey and also because I'd retired so late. But that decision had been wise, for I'd fallen asleep immediately, when I'd been certain I'd toss restlessly, my mind filled with the horror of what had happened that evening. In the bright morning sunlight which now flooded my room, it seemed that it had been naught but a bad dream. And how I wished it *had* been only that.

I dressed hastily and went, at once, to Cassie's room. Much to my amazement, her bed had already been made up and she was nowhere in sight. Downstairs, Flo was awaiting me in the dining room, where a place was set for me.

Since no one was about, I was able to question her as I ate, and I wanted to know, first of all, of Cassie's whereabouts. When Flo told me she had gone riding with Sarah, I felt relieved that the child wasn't alone, though I had thought I would be allowed to supervise her morning hours, for that was the best time for school work.

Then I asked Flo where the other members of the household were.

"I bring Miss Emily her breakfast and she never comes downstairs until early afternoon. Now Miss Sarah, she gets up early 'cause she likes riding," Flo informed me.

"Isn't she afraid of the wild dogs? At least, I've been told they're wild."

"They're wild all right, but she ain't scared none. Leastwise, not that I know about. Anyways, I don't think they're around much in daylight."

"How about Mr. Bart?"

Flo grinned. "You met him yet, honey?"

"Last night," I informed her.

"He's a scallywag, that one," she said, chuckling softly.

"He is, indeed," I agreed. "Though he's a friendly person."

"Quite a ladies' man, so don't take him seriously," she said, sobering.

"I shan't," I replied. "My time will be quite taken up with Cassie."

"I'm glad you're stayin'," she said. "The child needs someone. Her papa—he's good to her—but he don't see her enough."

"She needs her mother too," I said.

Flo nodded. "Her mama plays sick most of the time."

"Perhaps she is."

Flo sniffed. "No more'n you or me. I think what she wants is to get out of this place, but Mr. Craig . . . he put a lot of money in it an' he ain't likely to leave. He got the land all cultivated and hired a lot of people who needed the work real bad."

"I'm glad. I know Papa lost interest during Mama's illness."

"He couldn't help it, child. He loved your mama so. This house was a happy place, then."

"I know."

"I cleaned up the mess in the fireplace. Somethin' happened last night, didn't it?"

"Yes. It was very frightening."

"Had a feelin' it would. That's why I got outta here real early."

"Why did you think it would?"

"'Cause you were here. The haunt aimed to scare you too. Maybe it doesn't want you to stay."

I smiled. "Then it's doomed to disappointment, for it shan't frighten me away. Not so long as the Beaumonts want me here."

"Good. Guess I'll stay too—so long as it's daytime. Nothin' will keep me here at night—after dark. I think Mr. Bart goes to New Orleans every night so he'll be away when things happen. From what I hear, don't seem to happen after the folks go to bed."

"He goes to New Orleans every night?"

"He sure does. He's a gamblin' man."

"I have a few questions I would like to ask Mr. Craig," I said. "Do you happen to know where he is?"

"He's not in the house," Flo said. "And if he isn't supervisin' the men, he might be in the summerhouse. He calls it his thinkin' place."

"Thank you, Flo. I'll find him."

I took a final sip of coffee, touched the napkin to my lips and arose. I was glad of the opportunity to go outside. The air was perfumed with the sweetness of early summer, the grass was a soft carpeting under my feet and I had the sudden urge to run across it. It was only with difficulty that I restrained myself.

I saw Mr. Beaumont in the summerhouse. He sat there smoking one of his thin cheroots. In fact, it was the aroma of the cigar smoke that made me look in that direction. I walked slowly toward the summerhouse and when he saw me, he arose instantly.

"Good morning, Miss Aldrich," he said. "Won't you join me?"

"Thank you," I replied, smiling. "I would like a few minutes of your time, sir. I have some questions to ask."

"By all means." He motioned me to the bench and he resumed his seat, opposite me. "Did you sleep well?"

"I overslept," I said, with an abashed smile. "I was with Cassie for a while last night to calm her."

"It's a terrible ordeal for a child to have to go through," he admitted. "I've wanted to send her away—to a boarding school, so she can escape this terror we're being subjected to. But her mother objects."

"In heaven's name, why?" I asked, astounded.

"She doesn't approve of them."

"I went to one. And certainly, when you've had difficulty in keeping a governess here. . . ."

"I hope you're not leaving us?" He spoke it as a question, his eyes reflecting his concern.

"No," I replied. "I'm curious to know what's causing this haunting or whatever one could call it."

"So am I."

"Then why don't you let your brother bring the medium he knows, to conduct a seance?"



"So you've met Bart," he said, making no attempt to answer my question.

"Last night—I was coming out of Cassie's room. He frightened me half to death."

"I can imagine."

"I joined him for coffee in the kitchen. I will say that, after I recovered from my fright, his gay, lighthearted manner did much to dispel the depression that filled me after the ordeal in the drawing room."

"I can well believe it, but Bart's carefree manner is merely a facade. He's a heartbroken man, in love with a memory. He was very much in love with Janelle."

"So that's the answer," I replied thoughtfully. "I sensed that something about him wasn't quite in keeping with his seeming gaiety."

"He's very bitter."

"It's understandable, in view of her horrible death."

"She was a lovely girl. Much like you. She loved Cassie."

"I'm glad," I said boldly. "The child is lonely—not only for companionship, but for love."

He frowned. "I sense your disapproval, and I admit my guilt."

"I didn't mean to be rude, but I find it puzzling that neither you nor your wife find time to be with her."

"I have been neglectful," he admitted. "The plantation takes so much of my time. Then there's been the ghost. I shall try to do better."

"And your wife?"

"My wife," he repeated. "She has little motherly instinct, I fear. I can promise nothing."

"Well, certainly what goes on in that house is not good for a child's peace of mind. Cassie was very distraught last night. I was appalled to hear her crying, for I'd thought she was asleep. Doesn't Emily ever go to her?"

"No."

"Nor Sarah?"

A bitter smile twisted his mouth. "Nor Sarah. I doubt she'd have Cassie out this morning, except she did it to annoy you."

"Is she that vicious?" I asked in amazement.

"I'll be kind and say she's rather a scheming person. Likes to cause trouble. She has been quite successful at interfering in my marriage."

"Then why don't you order her to leave the house?"

He laughed. "My wife might leave too. She is under the complete influence of Sarah. And if Emily left, she'd take Cassie. I couldn't bear that, for, whether or not you believe it, I love my daughter."

"I believe you, sir. And I think you should carry out your brother's suggestion and bring that medium here."

"Did Bart suggest that you ask me?"

"Yes."

"He's already asked me himself, you know."

"And you refused," I said, my smile chagrined. "I'd never have suggested it had I known."

"It's perfectly all right, and I did not refuse. My wife did."

"I see." I looked around me, at the trees, shrubs and flowers. At the shadowy pictures on the grass, painted by the sun slanting through the branches. "It's difficult even to believe in ghosts, amidst all this beauty. But I think if there is anything remotely capable of putting an end to this mischief and terror, it should be tried."

"This could be the shade of your own mother we deal with, Miss Aldrich."

"I'm quite aware of it, sir."

"In that case, if you don't object, I shan't. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just one question. Have you any idea of what this ghost might be after—even a remote reason for its destructive anger?"

"None, Mr. Beaumont."

"If I believed it was all being done to get me out of this house, I'd leave, much as I'd hate to. Yet I can't accept that, because if it were so, why were we not haunted when we first moved in? For months there were no manifestations. Even Emily was delighted with the house, and I felt as if I'd finally discovered what I'd sought all my life—a place I could love and care for."

"Why should a ghost—even my mother's—resent

someone like you?" I asked. "I'm very happy you're here, Mr. Beaumont. I love the house too and it deserves someone as . . . as . . . well, conscientious as you."

"Thank you for saying so, Miss Aldrich. I've enjoyed our little talk. We shall surely have more of them. Don't hesitate to consult me whenever you have a problem."

"Thank you," I said. "I'd best go now and get things ready for Cassie when she returns. May I ask Sarah not to take Cassie away again unless she confers with me first? I'd like to teach Cassie her school lessons in the morning."

"You may ask her," Mr. Beaumont said with a laugh, "but she'll do as she damned pleases anyway. Good luck, Miss Aldrich."

I walked away, strolled about the gardens for a bit. Twice I saw the draperies at the windows of Emily's room move aside slightly. I wasn't surprised. I had no idea that she was spying on Mr. Craig. No doubt she knew very well that he and I had been in the summerhouse together. So it seemed I would also have to contend with jealousy, foolish though it was. I hoped not, for I felt, after her nocturnal visit to my room, we could be friends.

Half an hour later, Cassie came skipping into the room where I'd planned to teach her. I'd brought down the little desk from the attic, secured a bookcase, well-filled, and the first lesson in history was already outlined.

"You're quite late, young lady," I said.

"I wanted to come back sooner, but Aunt Sarah said it was too nice a day to go to school."

"School is for every day except Sunday," I said. "There can be very few exceptions to that rule. You learn by study and classroom work. It must be constant, without distractions. Now, shall we begin?"

She was very clever and absorbed things quickly. She was going to be a good student, and I wondered how any mother could treat a child as lovely as Cassie with such neglect. I thrust the thought out of my mind and turned my attention back to Cassie.

Dinner was the principal meal and it was served at two. This time the entire family was at the table. Bart made a substantial fuss over the child until Emily sharply told him to stop his foolishness. I wished she hadn't, for he was



seated next to me and he began paying me an undue amount of attention. I knew why. He was tantalizing Sarah, who all but openly fumed.

This was all very well for the fun-loving Bart, but I would be the one who'd have to take Sarah's anger, not he. Yet there was nothing I could do about it except be as cool and civil as possible, which only made him that much more eager with his attentions.

At my suggestion, Cassie recited some of the history I'd taught her, which made her father nod in approval. Emily said nothing and Sarah looked bored.

I felt like commenting that it was a strange ghost indeed who would haunt people such as they. Bart would have relished it, perhaps his brother would have too, secretly; but Emily and Sarah would not have, so I wisely held my tongue. It was rather strenuous, fending off Bart's foolishness, and I was glad when the meal ended and he immediately excused himself. He had an appointment in New Orleans, he said.

"An appointment with gamblers," Sarah said, her still-young face contorted with anger. "You should be ashamed."

"Sarah," he said, "if I lose, I will be. Good day, everyone. Happy hauntings."

"What a shocking thing to say," she retorted, though her words were partially drowned out by his fading laughter.

Shortly afterward, we heard him ride his spirited black stallion down the drive to the road. The house seemed to miss him and fell back to its drab silences. Mr. Craig didn't remain long, but excused himself and went to do some work in his study. The two women lingered in silence over their coffee. I took Cassie's hand and led her upstairs.

The child and I spent the rest of the afternoon investigating the attic, where we became happily covered with dust as we rummaged through everything. Some of the old trunks brought back memories, once happy, but now shadowed by death. Mama's gowns, the large hats that had been so becoming to her, intimate garments kept in lavender that filled the attic with the scent after we opened the trunks. So much had been left in the house by the careless auctioneer. One trunk revealed a child's

hoopskirted dress. It had been made for me for a dress-up party and worn but once. Cassie was entranced by it.

The light through the stained-glass fan windows was growing dim when we left the attic and went to her room, where we washed off the attic dust. I brushed Cassie's hair until it glistened, and I let her put on some of my cologne. I lit the lamps, for the day was growing dim, and I began to dread the night.

Without the presence of Bart, supper was a quiet meal. Craig did his best to keep the conversation going, but no one was in much of a mood for it. Our coffee was served in the front drawing room, just as it had been the previous evening.

I was pleased to notice Craig was paying more attention to Cassie and she doted on this. Her approaches to her mother were not as successful. Emily was coolly gentle and polite, but Cassie responded only to genuine warmth and she soon gave up trying. There was an innovation, however, in that Cassie was not sent to her room to have a tray brought there at six. She was allowed to stay up until nine, which I thought was sufficient. Merely allowing her to join us made a great difference in the child. She romped and laughed and made no protest when I took her hand and marched her upstairs to bed.

She settled down happily, far more tired than usual, which was of considerable benefit in this household where one never knew what was going to happen.

"Did you enjoy your day?" I asked her.

"Oh yes. Very much. I hope you never leave me, Sharon."

"I won't," I promised. "Not until you grow up and get married."

"Do you think I'll get married?" she asked, giggling.

"Of course. All young girls grow up to marry, become mothers and have little girls and boys."

"Aunt Sarah isn't married, but she'd marry Uncle Bart if he'd have her. He won't though."

"That's because he isn't in love with her."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I have never met anyone I wanted to marry,"

I replied. "One has to fall in love first, you know."

"Do you think my mama and papa are in love?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, hating to have to lie to the child.

"They never kiss," she said thoughtfully. "When you're in love, you kiss. Uncle Bart and Janelle kissed a lot."

"Little girls aren't supposed to spy on lovers. Now lie down and be quiet or I shan't read to you."

She giggled again, settled down at once and fell asleep while I sat there reading to her. I left one lamp burning, with the wick well turned down. I could see little value in forcing the child to find herself in jet blackness if she happened to waken. Now she'd see the familiar things in her room and feel safe.

I went downstairs. Emily was reading her magazine, Sarah was at work on her everlasting sewing, while Craig was still in his study. I sat down, but my presence wasn't acknowledged and it occurred to me that neither Emily nor her sister cared one whit that I was here. It was an opportunity to become better acquainted with Emily and her sister, but before I could summon my courage to start a conversation, Craig entered the room.

"Well," he said, "this seems to be a quiet gathering."

"It's not easy to make conversation," Emily replied, "when violence may erupt at any second. I'm silent because I'm too worried and frightened to speak."

"But, my dear, whatever it is causing this violence, none of it has been directed toward our persons. We can be thankful for that."

"So far," Sarah observed cynically. "But we're still not safe. At least, I don't believe we are."

Craig said, "If any of these manifestations, or whatever they are, endanger any of us, I shall instantly take all of you away and close the house."

"Why not burn it?" Emily asked, and her cool eyes watched me. I was shocked to my heels at the very idea of burning The Pillars, but I hoped I didn't let it show. I felt Emily said it deliberately to hurt me, yet why? And, as suddenly, I remembered seeing the curtains of her room pulled a bit aside as I walked in the garden this morning.

"I think not," Craig said forcefully.

"Fire is a great purifier," Emily went on. "I'm tired of



waiting for a ghost. I'm going to my room." She left us with uncomplimentary abruptness.

Sarah didn't comment, pretending to be wholly engrossed in her needlework, yet I sensed she felt a personal triumph in Emily's behavior. Craig gave a great sigh and arose. He went into the second drawing room where it was dark, but I heard him strike a match and, a moment later, I observed illumination coming from the next room. I didn't blame him for leaving the presence of one as bitter as Sarah. I had no further desire to remain near her.

I excused myself and went upstairs. I attempted to read but found it impossible to concentrate on the printed page and set it aside. I paced the room restlessly, like a caged animal, for I felt the house beginning to press in on me. When I could stand it no longer, I got a light, crocheted shawl from the closet and, moving down the stairs silently, I left the house.

There was enough moonlight to comfortably light my way and I moved along the drive, enjoying the perfume from the magnolia trees mingled with that of the gardenia blossoms. Craig had certainly spent a great deal of money, bringing the estate back to its former beauty and I knew it would have pleased my parents, could they but know. Without being aware of it, I was moving farther and farther away from the house. Yet I felt no fear, because there was no unfriendly presence in the open.

I had no idea how long I'd been out when I heard my name called, but this time there was no ghostly quality to the voice. It was Craig and I realized then that I had begun thinking of him in terms of his first name. But then, it would be far easier for me to address him thus, than it would be to call Emily and Sarah by their Christian names, even though Emily had made such a request. Apparently they'd forgotten, for they'd given no evidence of friendliness today.

I stopped and turned. His voice, calling to me and asking my whereabouts, came again.

"Mr. Beaumont," I replied, raising my voice slightly. "Mr. Beaumont," I called again.

I heard his running footsteps, and a moment later he appeared. Obviously, he'd been running and his hair had become unruly. His hand brushed it back from his face.

"What are you doing out here alone?" he asked, almost in irritation. "Weren't you warned not to leave the house in darkness? Did you forget about the dogs?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but I'm not afraid. In fact, I feel far more at ease here than in the house."

"I know. Neither Sarah nor Emily have shown you any kindness since you arrived."

"I thought they would be friendly because, last night, Emily paid me a brief visit, asking forgiveness and requesting I address her and her sister by their first names."

"I didn't know about that."

"I'm glad. It just occurred to me you might have requested it of them."

"I give you my word I had nothing to do with it."

I thought a moment, then, daringly, I asked the question. "Mr. Beaumont, is your wife jealous of you?"

"She has no cause to be." His reply was gruff and I could understand his resentment.

"I quite agree, so far as both of us are concerned and I apologize for asking such a personal question, but I have a feeling she resents me. You see, I saw her observing me from her window after our talk in the summerhouse."

"No need to apologize. My wife is a most unhappy woman and, in answer to your question, yes, she's jealous."

"Then perhaps I should leave. There is enough turmoil here, without my presence adding to it."

"I beg of you not to," he pleaded. "I realize this is not a happy place for you. But you can help us."

"Only with Cassie."

"Isn't that enough?"

"I'm not sure."

"Perhaps you will remain if I tell you I am going to follow Bart's suggestion and have the medium come here."

"I'm glad. I believe it's well worth a try."

"Then you'll stay?"

"Yes."

"I'm relieved. And now you must get back to the house. Did you know you've been gone more than a half-hour? I heard the door close, but I'd become engrossed in a book. I went upstairs finally and knocked on your door to tell

you I was going to have the medium come. That's when I learned from Sarah that you had left the house."

"Do Emily and Sarah approve of the medium?"

"No, but I became quite adamant about it."

I was glad to hear him say that. His firmness might do more to bring his wife to her senses than anything else could.

We walked in silence for a time. Then I had an idea, a rather bold one for an employee to bring up, but I thought the peculiar circumstances of my having been born in this house warranted it.

"Mr. Beaumont . . . may I offer a suggestion? You may think it presumptuous, but it might help."

"Any suggestion that can dispel the gloom over this house and family will be welcome," he said fervently.

"When Papa and Mama lived, they often gave formal balls, during which the house was crowded, and laughter could be heard clear down to the bayou."

"You're suggesting that we give one? In this house?"

"It's not as preposterous as it sounds."

"I wonder." He seemed doubtful.

"Speaking as a woman, I feel that your wife misses the social affairs in New Orleans, but she's too proud to admit it. She likely misses her friends as well."

"No—she never had too many friends. Not close ones. Not the kind who would journey here just to attend a ball she gave."

"We have little need of them," I said.

"But who would come? We know no one hereabouts."

"There are many fine families living within ten miles of The Pillars. They were the ones who came when we gave a ball and my parents went to those they gave. Perhaps the excitement of preparing for such an event would make your wife forget her boredom."

"Perhaps." He was regarding the idea thoughtfully, I could see. "It's not a bad idea—if she agrees. She can hardly refuse, for she's been badgering me constantly for months about the fact that we have no social life. Yet—these people who came to the balls your parents had don't know us."

"They know me," I said.

"Of course, but . . . now . . . I'm beginning to see. . . ."



"If Emily consents, it will be my function to write the invitations, for I know how to reach these people. I'll add a few personal lines, asking them to come—and they will. Emily need not know of this. She will believe only that they came as neighbors and because they wished to be friends. As they will be, I assure you. There is a considerable social season among the plantations' owners. She would not be lonely again."

"You would do that for us? After the way I tricked you into coming here? After the coolness my wife has displayed to you and the plain coldness her sister bestows upon anyone?"

"This used to be a happy household. I wish it to be that once more. Besides, this may be why Mama's spirit haunts the house—if such it is. In life, she could not bear bickering or sorrow, nor indifference, and especially coldness."

"Let me hint about a formal ball to Emily. Perhaps she will seize upon the idea. I might even prevail upon her to ask you to help, since you know these people."

I laughed lightly, already excited by the idea. "Please do. It may be all she needs to restore her happiness. We'll even let Cassie attend."

"Sarah will be dead against it."

"For once, don't let her attitude change what you wish to do. The house itself is yearning for happiness and music and laughter and lights. The ballroom is so well suited for the purpose . . . there's room for a great number of people."

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll ask her tonight, if she hasn't retired. It will come as a suggestion. We'll let it be her idea."

"By all means. Tell her you're lonely too and that you know those people to be invited are well-bred and very important socially in New Orleans."

"I think you may have found a solution to one of our problems. Bless you for thinking so kindly of us that you too, wish to rid this house of horror."

We walked back then in comparative silence, for I was already planning the ball and I suspected Craig too was formulating a scheme as to how best to broach the subject to his wife. Bart, I knew, would be a help. As for Sarah,

she'd be troublesome, but I'd not allow myself to be disturbed by her. And Cassie would be thrilled.

"Sarah has too great an influence upon Emily," Craig said. "Sarah lives a life of anger and frustration and she gives vent to it by hurting people whenever she can. Without being hurt herself, of course, which means she accomplishes her purposes through the words and actions of others, inspired by her. I know the woman well, but she is Emily's sister and it's impossible for me to be rid of her without jeopardizing the relationship which, to a degree, still exists between Emily and myself. I hope you understand."

"I do, but please disregard Sarah's objections if Emily likes the idea of the ball."

"I promise you I will."

I could well see that Cassie's warm nature was inherited from her father. A pity such a fine man had to be such a lonely one. He was wealthy, he was master of this fine home, he had a lovely daughter and a successful plantation. He should have been happy, and deserved to be, but Emily and, particularly, Sarah prevented it. I hoped a formal ball would at least break the barrier between him and his wife.

"What are you thinking of?" His question broke in on my thoughts with a suddenness that was startling.

My smile was embarrassed as I said, "It was rather a hope that the ball will help bring about a new understanding between you and your wife."

"Thank you, Miss Aldrich," he replied. "I'm very grateful. Also, I don't wonder that when you've had an awareness of the ghost, she's been gentle."

"Oh, that's just been when I was alone or with Cassie. She certainly wasn't gentle last night."

"Indeed she was not," he said in agreement. "I've known her to come only on that wild wind, the icy cold and the shrieking voice, accompanied by destruction of some kind."

"It's very puzzling, for my mother was such a loving woman. Never a well one, but she chose to ignore her sickness until she could no longer do so, for her one wish was to make my father happy."

"I can well imagine she succeeded."

"So much so that he had no desire to live, once she had departed this earth."

"Not even for you?"

"No. I was hurt at first, for I tried desperately to take Mama's place, but, of course, I couldn't. That is why I wish, whenever possible, you would shower love and attention on your daughter."

"I'll remember. It's to your credit you felt no bitterness," he observed. "Oh—what was that?" His hand raised to touch his cheek.

We'd reached the steps, but I paused to look up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Something brushed my cheek. Really touched me." He smiled and shook his head. "I guess we'd better get inside. I think I've got a touch of moon madness."

We went up the stairs and entered the house. Sarah stood in the entrance hall, her face stern with disapproval.

"I hope you enjoyed your walk," she said, eying me disdainfully.

"I did," I said quietly. Then, more boldly, "I found the night much more friendly than you."

"Was your stroll prearranged?" she asked.

"You know it wasn't," Craig broke in, his voice angry. "It was you who told me Miss Aldrich had gone for a walk. You should have informed me the moment she left the house, or at least, yourself prevented her from leaving."

"Why should I? If she's such a fool as to risk her neck, let her. I'm not paid to supervise her."

"You're not paid to cause trouble in this household either, yet you seem to dote on doing it," he retorted. "It's gone much too far. I suggest, from now on, you behave or leave the premises."

"Please, Mr. Beaumont," I pleaded, sick inside at the scene, "Sarah is right. It isn't up to her to tell me what or what not to do. It was foolish of me. I'll say goodnight now."

"Good night, Sharon," he replied. "I apologize again for Sarah's bad manners."

"So it's Sharon now," Sarah said, her smile ugly. "Your



friendship in the moonlight did progress. Emily will be pleased to hear of it."

"She'll hear of it from me—now," Craig said sternly. "Perhaps this time you've overstepped yourself."

I'd heard all I could bear. I turned and ran up the stairs, not pausing until I'd gained the privacy of my room.

## FIVE

I waited until I heard Sarah's and Craig's footsteps pass my door before I looked in on Cassie. I blew out her lamp, for she was sleeping peacefully. Then I closed the door and went back down the corridor to my room. I sank wearily into a chair, certainly in no mood to go to bed, though the hour was getting late.

I moved over to the black marble fireplace and sat in the rocker placed before it. I rested my head against the rocker's high back, closed my eyes and moved slowly back and forth. My insides were still trembling from the ugliness of the scene I'd just been a part of. I was still shocked by the vehemence and hatred of the words which spewed forth from Sarah, and I felt a deep embarrassment at the ugliness of what her mind had construed.

I saw the plans I'd started to make for the ball go awry and I wondered why I didn't pack and get out of this house of horror and hate. But, as quickly, I knew why. I wanted to learn what was causing these frightening manifestations. I couldn't leave Cassie alone. I knew now that Craig loved her; I also knew that between the requirements of the plantation and his efforts to please his wife, he had little time left for his daughter. I respected him for attempting to save his marriage. Perhaps, if he managed that, all would be well here. It could be that Emily's nerves, so on edge because of the destructive influence which had taken over in this house, blinded her to any awareness of Sarah's mastery over her.

I only hoped she'd listen to Craig's explanation of his reason for going outside tonight and I chided myself for my carelessness. Then I thought of the ball, and utter defeat enveloped me. Sarah would put an end to that, I was

certain. A pity, since it might be the one thing that would bring Emily to her senses. I was hoping she'd become so engrossed in the plans for it, that she would forget the wild, shrieking, troubled spirit that prowled this house and sent terror into the minds of everyone.

I could brood no longer on it. It would solve nothing and I needed my rest so that I could arise early and begin a regular pattern of teaching for Cassie. I undressed, performed my ablutions and was thoughtfully brushing my hair, for, try as I might, my brain would not stop trying to figure out the answer to what was happening here. A sudden, daring thought occurred to me. I was alone. No one could hear me beseech my mother, plead with her to reveal herself, if, indeed, it was she who had taken possession of this house for the purpose of terrifying its occupants.

"Mama," I whispered, "if it is you who called my name and touched me, tell me now. If it is you who touched Craig tonight and caused him to think it was a touch of moon madness, tell me, I beseech you, for I am in great need of assistance. Tell me why you show this violence toward the people who live here now. It isn't like you. The torment in this house is becoming too much for any human to endure. What is it you wish? How can I be of help to you? Tell me, please."

I opened my eyes and quietly waited. Nothing happened. There was no light, comforting touch, no voice, no whisper that seemed to ride on wings of air. There was nothing but silence.

"Mama?" I tried again. "Please, if you can hear me, I implore you to speak."

Nothing answered. The silence was ear-splitting. I began to wonder if I'd ever heard that voice, felt that gentle touch of an unseen hand and sensed the presence of one I need never be afraid of.

I resumed brushing my hair, hopeful that the action would soothe the despair that now filled me. Soon the energy I put into this commonplace task did serve to quiet my throbbing nerves. I decided I must be patient and do my best to learn the answers to my questions myself. Whatever they were, they'd be dependent on time. Time and circumstance. I had to wait, be patient, restrain



myself and remain here as Cassie's governess.

I would be courteous to both Emily and Sarah, as gracious as they'd allow me to be, do my work with as great perfection as possible and help Cassie, not only with her studies, but in the molding of her character as well. If she grew to womanhood as an educated, charming and warmhearted person, I would feel a tremendous measure of contentment and satisfaction. I hoped it would not take that long, though, to learn the dread secret of the house.

I had just drawn my bedclothes when I heard the crash. It sounded as if some large and fragile object had been destroyed and the sound reverberated throughout the silent house. My first thought was that Craig had returned downstairs in darkness and had bumped into and upset a piece of furniture. I slipped into my wrapper and left my room at a run. No one else was in the hallway yet, though I was sure that nobody in this house had been able to sleep through that crash.

I reached the head of the stairs. Below me was darkness. I called out, but no one answered and I knew then that the restless spirit from beyond the grave was again making itself evident. Though I felt fear, I started down the stairs, moving cautiously. I was determined to find out who, or what, was causing this.

Suddenly there appeared before me a gray mist that began to whirl and gyrate like a living thing. It moved up and down as its form took on more solid proportions. The mist was contracting, but not into anything recognizable as earthbound. It was a tight cloud of a fragile gray substance, whirling and spinning without making a sound, but it blocked my way and when I took a backward step, it moved up the stairs in unison with me.

I didn't scream in terror simply because I wasn't able to. I just stood there, both hands clutching at my throat, my breathing coming between stiffened lips from a throat gone dry in fear.

The gray shape or figure, or whatever it was, moved down the stairs slightly, as if trying to draw me into following. I went down two steps and the gray, swirling mass of nothing tangible began to spin faster than ever, as if in a signal to indicate that was far enough.

I had no knowledge of how much time had elapsed. It

seemed like many minutes as I stood there, confronted by this apparition, as I now took it to be. Actually, it was about fifteen seconds, I learned later.

The mass began to rise slowly, as if to release me so I might descend the steps, but when I attempted to do so, the mass descended again. I had a feeling that I could have moved right through it, but I didn't make the attempt. I began to understand that it was trying to tell me something. I could move down the stairs, apparently, but I must be careful. That was what it was trying to say. I began to back up.

"What is it?" Craig called out from the top of the stairs. "Oh, my God . . . what is that? Don't move, Sharon . . . !"

"I won't," I called back. "I don't know what it is."

I heard someone scream. It could have been either Sarah or Emily. On the heels of the scream, the whirling mass began to grow larger, to spread out and finally to vanish in a thousand wisps of a smokelike substance.

"Bring a lamp, please," I said.

Craig lit a match and went to get the lamp which rested on the table near my bedroom door. When he returned, he had to elbow aside Emily who stood at the top of the stairs, peering down at me. She was joined by Sarah, looking sleepily annoyed.

Now, light painted the stairs and I saw the small, round objects littering four or five of the steps. I moved on down with Craig right behind me. I bent and picked up several little stones. They were smooth and resembled a child's marbles.

Craig drew in a long breath before he spoke. "If you'd stepped on those, you'd have lost your balance and fallen down the whole flight."

"I know," I said.

He turned around. "Who did that? Who put those stones there?" he asked, but his eyes fastened on Sarah.

"Whoever made that crashing sound," Sarah said angrily. "Are you a fool, Craig? Don't you see what this is?"

"I see it's an attempt to kill Sharon," he said. "That much is evident." He lifted the lamp higher so some of the light reached the bottom of the steps. From where I stood, I could see the fragments of a huge green vase which had

stood on a table at the head of the stairs.

I bent and gathered up the stones. Craig, wearing a robe with large pockets, stowed them away as I handed them to him. Finally, the stairs were clear and the four of us descended, somewhat gingerly, because some of the stones were quite small and might have escaped our attention. To step on only one might result in a fall which could prove crippling.

I brushed aside some of the debris from the broken vase and I could see the dent in the floor made by it as it struck the polished wood. I was trying to puzzle it out when a key was inserted in the front door lock. It opened and Bart came in, as suave and gay as ever. He regarded us in dismay.

"Good evening, but I assure you I had no idea I'd be received by the household clad in night clothing." He saw the pieces of vase. "Another moment of violence, eh? Is that all she smashed this time?"

"Sharon was nearly killed," Craig said.

"What happened?" he asked, his light manner gone.

"We don't know." Emily spoke quickly before anyone else could talk. Then, turning to Craig, she added, "What makes you believe it was an attempt on Sharon's life? Why not on the life of any of us? Sharon just happened to be the first to leave her room."

"That is," Sarah added, "if she wasn't here all the time."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked in amazement.

"You could have placed those stones on the steps as you backed up them."

"Don't be idiotic," Craig said sharply. "Why would she do that?"

"Possibly to bring one of us to her side in a state of excitement, so that person would go running down the steps and fall."

"What are you talking about?" Bart asked. "What stones?"

Craig gave him a handful of them. Bart held them below one of the many lamps which had now been lit. "I've seen these before," he said. "Don't any of you recognize them?"



"They look like pebbles to me, just ordinary small stones," Emily said.

"That's what they are—but they came from the graveyard. I put these around Janelle's grave to outline it as a decoration. I brought them from New Orleans. They'd been gathered on some beach."

"From . . . Janelle's grave?" Sarah asked in a hushed voice. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I put them there, Sarah," Bart said. "Now, what happened?"

"Someone spread a number of the round stones on the stairs," Craig said. "The big green vase on the landing was knocked off the table so it would shatter and make enough noise to waken all of us. Whoever rushed down the stairway would step on those stones, be thrown off balance and quite likely break his neck in the fall."

"Was Sharon the first to go down?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I wasn't in bed when the crash came, so I got there first."

"But what stopped you? Why didn't you fall?"

I looked about me. "I wish I could answer that. I had taken two steps down when this cloud . . . or whatever it was . . . appeared out of nowhere and began to spin like a whirling dervish. As it spun, it seemed to take on a vague form, a human form, but only in rough outline. When I tried to go on down, it blocked my passage. When I went back up the steps, it followed me. I realized it was trying to tell me something."

"This girl is mad," Sarah cried out.

"Be quiet," Craig said. "I saw that shape of mist too. Go on, Sharon."

"It began to move down once more, urging me on. Then it stopped again. That's when I guessed there was something on the stairs that meant danger, so I asked Craig to fetch a lamp."

"What happened to that . . . whatever it was?" Bart asked.

"It just vanished," I said. "Who knows what happened to it? All I'm sure of is the fact that it saved my life."

Craig led the way into the front drawing room. He set the lamp on a table and moved over to stand beside the

fireplace. The rest of us sat down. He spoke directly to Sarah first.

"You mentioned that you believed Sharon had placed those stones. What made you say that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Sarah asked bluntly.

"Make yourself more explicit," he ordered.

"The girl came here to take back this house and the only way to do it is to frighten Emily—and me—so we'll move away."

I brought both my hands to my face and burst into tears. I was ashamed of myself for displaying such weakness, but I'd endured too much this night.

Craig said, in a voice like ice, "Sarah, you may be my wife's sister, but you are also a guest in this house. A fact you seem to have forgotten and I believe it's time it was brought to your attention. Your sister needs no protector hovering about. I want you to understand this—if you make any further accusations against Miss Aldrich, I will order you to leave the premises."

Sarah gave a harsh laugh. "I'm not afraid of you. This house belongs to your wife as much as it does you. And she does need a protector—before she is murdered to clear the way for . . . this . . . this . . . witch. This wicked witch and the spirit of her wicked mother."

"Sarah, stop it," Emily said. "I don't pretend to know what happened here tonight. What you surmise isn't very reasonable, for this reason. Sharon certainly could not know which of us would go flying down the steps first."

"That is of no consequence," Sarah retorted. "The death of any one of us would frighten the rest away."

I dried my tears. There were no more, because now anger had taken precedence over my fears.

"Miss Hadfield, what you have said is without foundation. You are a vicious person who dotes on making others unhappy."

"If you're innocent, why didn't you continue down the stairs?" Sarah demanded.

"I told you I was stopped by that . . . wraith."

"Do you think I believe that?" she demanded haughtily.

"I saw it too," Craig stated flatly.

"So did I," Emily said. "I screamed in terror."

Sarah moaned. "What's the matter with you, sister?"

There are no ghosts! Do you understand that? No ghosts! What's happened here has a human element behind it. I don't know how it's done, but it's all a trick to get us to run like mad people from this house and never return. So then our precious Miss Aldrich can have it back. As I said before, it's witchcraft."

I sighed. "Miss Hadfield, if I'd had the means to live here, I'd never have left The Pillars. And have you forgotten that Mr. Beaumont employed me because he thought my presence might satisfy the ghost, or whatever it is, that causes this violence? It was his hope and yours too, I believe, that my living here would solve the mystery. I didn't seek out employment from Mr. Beaumont and, should you find it necessary to vacate this abode, it will be necessary for me to seek other employment. Perhaps I should do so, in any case."

"I beg of you, do not." It was Emily who spoke and there was no doubting the sincerity of her entreaty. "What you have said is the truth—about my husband's reason for employing you. We want you to stay. I entreat you to do so and I apologize for doubting anything you told us in regard to the stones on the stairway."

"Thank you, Emily," I said, smiling in spite of myself. For there was little to smile about, but though it might sound foolish, I was warmed by her words.

I turned to address Sarah. "You accuse me of indulging in witchcraft. I am innocent of such a foolish charge. However, in all truth, I don't know what you would call the gathering of the mist I saw."

"You're trying to frighten us," she retorted, "and so is Craig. Perhaps you both want us out of here so you can have the place to yourselves."

"Oh, no." So ugly was the charge that my voice was no more than a whisper. I saw Craig give a despairing shake of his head.

"Sarah, did it ever occur to you," Bart said, "that if you could arouse a little warmth in that body of yours, enough to drive out the bitterness, you might find yourself enjoying life? And, in doing so, you might give a little pleasure to others."

"You hate me, don't you?" she asked, and for the first time, to my amazement, I saw her eyes glisten with tears.



"Of course I don't hate you," Bart replied. "Hatred is a stupid, foolish emotion. It destroys one. A pity you've never realized it."

"I've not had an easy life," she replied. "And since we came here, it's been a life filled with terror."

"I won't argue that," Bart said. "I think the house is cursed myself."

"It's what she wants us to think," Sarah cried, pointing an accusing finger at me. "She's trying to frighten us. I repeat, there are no ghosts. I'll no longer believe in them. The dead are dead and bring no harm to us. It's she who is doing this. I swear it."

I don't know why I expected it, but I did. With the utterance of Sarah's last word, a deep, nerve-shaking silence seemed to come over the house and then, out of that silence, came the beginnings of a wail that grew and grew until it seemed to rock the room and assault the ear. It was wild. Whether it was a screech of empty sound, or a lament, I couldn't say, but it made me tingle with fear rendered me speechless.

On a table in the center of the room stood a glass case containing reeds from the banks of the Nile in Egypt. I'd been told that Craig had brought them home when he returned from a trip to that country. It was now the missile the ghost chose to hurl—straight at Sarah. It struck her in the face and made her cry out in pain. An ormolu clock on the mantel lifted itself into the air and went hurtling at Sarah. She fended this off with a forearm. A chair flew in her direction but fell short and then another was thrown by the unseen, raging spirit manifesting itself in violence.

There was a heavy brass screen before the fireplace. This was hurled to one side. A huge piece of blackened, sooty firewood—actually a large portion of a partly burned log—lifted itself out of the fireplace and floated toward Sarah. She screamed.

Bart acted first. He leaped forward, grasped Sarah by the arm and literally pulled her out of the chair and sent her reeling across the room. She tripped and sprawled on the floor. The burned log landed on the rug. He was already rushing toward her. Behind him, another stiff-backed cane chair was raised aloft. As it came down, he

threw himself over Sarah. The chair struck him in the back, and the impact shattered the chair. Because the chair had been of light weight, he was soon back on his feet, but bowed over slightly from the pain of the blow.

No more articles were thrown, but from the very center of the room a whirlpool of sound and wind seemed to be forming. It funneled out until my carefully brushed hair stood out behind me and my wrapper must have been clinging skintight to my body, as Emily's was to hers.

Sarah, trying to get to her feet, was swept back by the wind. It gave one tremendous shriek and then it was abruptly cut off. It took us a moment to regain our senses. The silence actually seemed painful.

"Is . . . everyone all right?" Craig was the first to speak.

"I feel as if I'm going to faint." Emily tried to arise but collapsed in a chair. Craig went to her, but she brushed aside his offer to help. Bart bent to help Sarah up and assisted her to a chair.

"I'm lucky," he said. "If that had been a heavy chair, I'd have had my back broken."

"Why was I the object of all the violence?" Sarah sobbed hysterically. "What have I done?"

"I think you know," I said. "You were daring that apparition to return. Oh, I don't blame you for having doubted. If I'd not seen it, I'd have considered you mad if you'd told me what happened under this roof these last two days and nights. But it's true. The house is haunted and not by a gentle spirit, but one so angered that it resorts to harmful and terrible things."

"Why me? Why me?" Sarah kept moaning.

"Emily," Craig said, "take your sister upstairs. Bart, I'd like a hand in cleaning up this mess. . . ."

"I'll help," I said.

"As you wish," Craig said. "At least let's do something more than sit here and make accusations. The manifestation is over. . . ."

"Wait," Bart said in an oddly hushed voice. "Listen!"

As if from a distance, we could hear the sound of someone sobbing bitterly. It didn't frighten me because it had a purely human sound. Then I cried out and rushed into the hallway to see Cassie seated halfway up the stairs, crying her heart out.

"Oh, Cassie," I said, as I hurried to her, "you poor darling. Don't be frightened. Everything's all right now."

I reached out to take her in my arms and she struck at me, wildly and without hitting me. "Don't touch me! You're bad! You're evil! Don't touch me!"

She fled down the steps and I followed her, astounded by her strange words. She stopped in the center of the drawing room and looked about.

"What is it, daughter?" Craig asked, stooping to pick her up in his arms.

"Stay away from me, Papa. I hate you! I hate you!"

She turned to her mother. To my surprise, Emily's arms opened to receive her and the child threw herself into them. "What is it, Cassie? Tell Mama why you said such a thing to your papa?"

But the child was too hysterical to answer.

"Do you know?" Emily turned to me. "Do you know?"

"I can't imagine," I replied, certain my astonishment was as great as Craig's.

"Perhaps I can reveal the reason for her heartache," Sarah said.

"Then, in heaven's name, do so," Emily said. "We can't have the child like this."

"I agree," Craig said tersely. "Say what is on your mind."

"I looked in on Cassie tonight," Sarah said. Her terror had now left her and she was in complete possession of her faculties. "She asked for Sharon. I had to tell the child her governess was out strolling on the grounds with her father."

"Didn't you tell her why I went out?" Craig asked, his eyes cold with anger and disgust. "Didn't you, Sarah?"

Cassie struggled free of her mother's arms and turned to face her father. Her sobs caused her words to come jerkily, but it wasn't difficult to understand what she said.

"Aunt Sarah told me you want us to get out of here so you and Sharon can have the house," she cried. "I hate you, Papa. I hate you and I hate Sharon and I want her to get out of this house and let us alone. Aunt Sarah says she's making all these bad things happen."

"The bad things happened before Sharon came here," Bart reminded Cassie, but his words fell on deaf ears.



"Sharon made them happen before she came here," Cassie said and it was easy to see her mind had been thoroughly poisoned by her aunt.

Emily arose. "Come, child. We're going upstairs."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning," I said, standing up to face her. "I can no longer endure it here."

Emily's hand went to her throat. "No. No, you must not."

"I must and I will," I said adamantly.

"She's right, Emily," Craig spoke, but he was careful not to approach her or the child. "I marvel she remained as long as she did, in view of what we've put her through. I'm referring specifically to your sister, who poisoned our daughter's mind. I consider your sister a very evil woman."

"She's not evil, she's not," Cassie cried out. "You are, Papa. You are."

"Come upstairs, child," Emily said. "You too, Sarah. I must speak with both of you."

Sarah's eyes widened in surprise. She'd never heard Emily address her in a manner that would brook no refusal. She followed reluctantly.

The two men and I stood in silence until we heard the distant closing of Cassie's door.

Bart sat down heavily. "If somebody will be so kind as to offer me a big drink of brandy, I'll be most grateful. I'd get it myself, but my back hurts too much."

Craig nodded. "I could do with some too. I'll get it."

"No," I said. "Please let me. I can't go upstairs quite yet and I'm better off doing something."

I brought glasses and a decanter of brandy from the dining room, setting it down on a table beside Bart. I poured a substantial amount into two glasses and handed one to Bart, the other to Craig.

"Won't you join us?" Bart asked.

"No, thank you. I doubt the spirits would sit well. My insides are fluttering like a butterfly's wings."

"Apparently, it's been quite an evening. I'm glad I missed most of it."

I smiled in spite of myself. "I'll be a witness to no more of it and I can't say I'm sorry."

"I don't blame you for leaving us," Craig said. "You've

been treated cruelly here. It seems as if I'm forever apologizing for Sarah's behavior. She seems bent on creating trouble. I've overlooked a lot because of Emily, but now that she's started poisoning my daughter's mind, I believe it's time to take action."

"I agree," Bart said. "You should have done so long ago. I think your marriage started to disintegrate the day Sarah came to live in your home."

Craig nodded. "She must go."

"Cool off first," Bart suggested. "Emily is quite attached to her. It may cause further friction."

"I'm thinking of Cassie."

"So am I," Bart argued. "She's all you have left of your marriage. You saw how Sarah twisted the child's mind tonight. Don't do anything rash that will allow her complete charge over the child. She might turn her into the vindictive person she is."

"God forbid," Craig said.

To which I added a silent "Amen."

"Nevertheless, I must go," I said. "So far as Cassie and I are concerned, the damage can never be repaired. With you, Mr. Beaumont, her anger will dissipate. I believe Emily will see to that."

"Thank you, Sharon," Craig said. "I'm heartsick about the whole thing. Heartsick and ashamed."

"You needn't be. You did nothing to cause it."

"Nor did you," he said gently.

In spite of the tension with which the room was still filled, I was warmed by his words and though I could think of nothing to say, my eyes expressed my gratitude.

"I also wish to say this," he added, as I turned to leave the room. "I've already informed my wife about our walk in the garden tonight. I feel certain she knows it is the truth."

I was relieved to hear that and, though it was too late to save me from Cassie's scorn, I hoped that one day she would believe the truth.

"Sharon," Bart stood up. "Try not to let tonight's ugly episode torture you. I'm referring, of course, to Sarah's poisoning Cassie's mind about you. And I wish you wouldn't leave, for I believe you're a protecting element in this house."

Now I *was* astounded. "Whatever prompts you to make such a statement?"

"This—whatever it is that haunts the house—made no attempt to harm you."

"By heaven, I believe you have something, Bart," Craig exclaimed. "There was also the incident of the stones on the stairs which strengthens your reasoning. If Sharon had stepped on them, it might have resulted in her suffering a painful fall—even a fatal one. Instead, the weird, swirling mist prevented her from continuing on down the stairs."

I passed a hand across my brow. "I wonder. I really wonder. Could it have been my mother's spirit? So much has happened and, after tonight, I'm about ready to believe anything. Certainly, I know she would protect me from harm if it were possible for her spirit to do so. But I'm just as certain she wouldn't do it by heaping destruction on this house or performing acts of violence upon the person of Sarah or you, Bart. My mother would never do that. I've already told you the kind of person she was. There's no need for me to repeat it."

A faint, somewhat raucous laugh came from somewhere and nowhere. For an instant, the swirling wind formed and howled and then died. Was that my mother ridiculing me? I shuddered at the thought.

Bart moved to my side. "Let me escort you upstairs. You've had enough for one night."

"Enough for the rest of her life." Craig spoke, after draining his glass.



## SIX

When I opened my door, the lamp by my bedside was lit as was the one on the mantel. A little cry escaped me and Bart drew me back into the hall and pushed open the door. Emily was standing by the window, apparently looking out, though with the illumination in the room, it was impossible for her to see anything.

"What are you doing here?" Bart demanded.

"Please." She extended an arm in entreaty. "I wish to speak with Sharon."

"Don't you think you've put her through enough?"

"Yes. But I have no intention of being unkind. Please, Sharon, I know you must be exhausted, for I am also, but what I have to say won't wait until tomorrow."

I walked slowly into the room, addressing Bart, but my eyes never left Emily. "It's all right. I believe Emily and I should have a little talk before I leave. I've been wanting to, but never found the opportunity." I didn't add that I was never presented with one.

"As you say, Sharon," Bart spoke quietly. He withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"Won't you sit down?" I motioned to the rocker.

"Thank you, but I'm too unnerved. I hope it won't make you nervous for me to move about as I speak."

"No," I replied, sitting down, "and I hope it won't disturb you if I take advantage of this rocker. I find its gentle motion quite comforting."

Emily moved about for a few moments before she started to speak. "I'm here about Cassie. I'm very sorry Sarah told her such a lie. I'm also grateful Craig had already revealed to me that he went out in search of you, fearful the wild dogs might attack you."

"Why didn't you say so downstairs?"

"The child was too hysterical. She had to be quieted first."

"You're right," I agreed. "It was stupid of me to forget about the dogs," I said. "But they were never around when I lived here so I gave no thought to the danger."

"In that case, it's understandable," she said. "Of course, I will also say this. Rarely do they come close to the house. After Janelle's horrible death, Craig and Bart tried to find their lair, but they were unsuccessful."

"I know. Mr. Beaumont, your husband, told me."

"I scolded Sarah in front of Cassie for lying to her," Emily said. "I have no wish for the child's mind to be turned against her father."

"I'm sure you haven't," I replied, knowing she was speaking the truth. "I told Mr. Beaumont I was certain Cassie would get over her hurt in regard to him. She loves him."

"They have a strong attachment for one another. Cassie has an affectionate nature. She is easily hurt."

I nodded. "Yes. I was hurt too, for I've grown fond of the child."

"And she of you. When I told her the truth, she asked me if you would forgive her. She said she didn't really hate you."

"I'm glad to hear it. It will make my leaving easier."

"Oh, no. You must not go." Emily's voice was a plea. She moved over to stand before me, her arms outstretched in a beseeching manner. "I beg of you. We need you here. Cassie needs you."

"Cassie needs *you*. In time, she'll forget me. And no one else in this house has need of me."

"You're wrong. Everyone in this house needs you. You're our only salvation."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Oh, I'm not, I'm not. I believe so long as you remain, the ghost whose presence has violated this house by its demented raging will not harm us."

"I'm not so sure," I replied calmly. "Certainly, it attempted violence on the person of Sarah and also Bart tonight."

"But they both escaped harm." Her voice rose, edging

on hysteria, as she disputed my statement. She got down on her knees and her hands grasped the arms of the chair I sat in. I felt like her prisoner, for I could not get up if I wished, and I found her manner both pitiful and embarrassing. "Sharon, my dear, you must not, you cannot leave us. If you have any feeling in your heart for Cassie—and I believe you do—you will stay. Forgive my sister. She's lonely, embittered. I know she's been rude to you, even heartless—but you're so young and beautiful and, in you, she sees herself as she once was—as I once was. Both of us envy you, my dear. But we don't hate you. We don't want you out of here. We need you."

She was appealing to my emotions and I was finding it difficult to refuse. Yet I was vaguely suspicious, for I knew how cold she could be, and so I knew I must not give in too readily, if I would, indeed, give in at all.

"I make you no promise," I said firmly. "I will see Cassie in the morning. Whether or not I stay will depend entirely on her."

She arose quickly and I detected a look of triumph in her eyes. "Then you will stay, for the child wishes you to."

"We shall see." I stood up then, for I knew she felt she had won.

"Good night, my dear. Sleep well," she said. "If you think you'll have difficulty, I'll give you a sleeping draught. After what happened, I have need of one."

"No, thank you. I'll be all right. I'm quite exhausted."

She moved to the door, her step and manner once more that of the mistress of the house.

"One question, Emily," I said.

She turned in surprise. "Yes?"

"Did you really come here to plead for your daughter or for yourself and your sister?"

"I don't think that's a very kind question."

"Perhaps not. But I'd like the answer. It doesn't matter too much. If Cassie wants me to stay, I'll stay, but I would like to know."

"Then I shall be honest. I'm terrified of what is going on in this house. I fear we are all in danger, but I think that, so long as you are here, the peril is not as great."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Then suppose I should be flattered."



"I'm not certain I care for your sense of humor—not in a case of this kind."

"I didn't mean it to be funny. I guess I'm just tired. Forgive me, Emily. And if I should not stay, give your daughter more of your time. She's a very lonely child and hungers for a mother's love."

Emily regarded me coldly, but she made no answer. I know she considered me impudent, but I was glad I'd spoken. I hoped she'd take heed.

I slept badly that night and shortly after dawn I was up and dressed. I went downstairs only to find the silence oppressive. The debris from the ghost's mischief had been cleaned up by Bart and Craig, though there was a large black stain on the rug from the wood ashes where the half-burned log had fallen. I had no appetite, so I didn't go to the kitchen. I doubted Flo had arrived yet anyway, so I went outside.

The sunlight was warm and comforting. I found myself ambling slowly toward the back of the house and my destination was the little cemetery where Papa and Mama lay buried.

It was a fenced-in area, not very large, surrounded by tall oaks. Ivy grew along the wrought-iron fence but was kept trimmed back from the gate. I raised the latch and walked into the little cemetery. I stopped between the graves of the two people I had loved and missed so much. At that moment, I had no thought of an apparition emanating from that grave. I believed only that my parents were at peace.

Then I moved over to the grave of Janelle. As Bart said, it was outlined with those small stones from the sea. Obviously, her grave was very well tended, as were Mama's and Papa's. I resolved to thank Bart and Craig for that.

I couldn't even hazard a guess about the identity of the person who could have littered the stairway with those smooth stones. Certainly not the ghost of my mother. I'd never believe that. I could, however, understand why the perpetually suspicious Sarah Hadfield would think I had done it in an attempt to drive everyone from the house in a panic of terror.

I wanted to stay the The Pillars until we had settled this

strange business, but when a child's mind had been poisoned against me, it was time to go. I wasn't at all certain Cassie was able any longer to believe the truth. But soon now, I would know.

I walked back to the house. Cassie would be awake, so I might as well learn what the child's attitude toward me was. Whatever my decision, I knew Craig would understand. I remembered the look of horror and anguish on his face last night when Cassie screamed her hatred and fled into the arms of her mother, whom she barely knew in the maternal role. The role did not befit Emily, and I feared it would not last long. Soon, Cassie would be more in need of love than ever before, but I'd be unable to help her. I hoped her father would find the time for her.

I walked into the house to find everyone except Cassie at the breakfast table and they were dining quietly and calmly. When I entered the dining room, Bart and Craig stood up. Craig helped me into my chair and Bart served me from the platter of sausages and eggs. Sarah, to my amazement, passed me the hot biscuits and even Emily gave me a wisp of a smile.

I still had no appetite, but were I to refuse breakfast, it would seem as if I were being difficult. Needless to say I was baffled to see the whole family gathered at the table for breakfast.

Bart explained. "We're here in the hope that we can change your mind about leaving us. We'll beg you, if need be."

"As I told Emily last night," I said, "Cassie's attitude toward me will decide that."

"I assure you she wants you to stay," Emily said.

"I confessed to the child that I told a lie," Sarah said, her manner impersonal. "She bears you no further ill will."

"I hope not," I said. "Since I did nothing to warrant it."

Craig spoke for the first time. "Whatever decision Sharon makes, we will abide by it. Should you wish to return to New Orleans—after you see Cassie—tell me. I'll have Marshal drive you there as soon as you're packed."

"Thank you, Mr. Beaumont," I replied. I buttered a hot roll and bit into it. Despite my apparent lack of appetite, I

found it tempting, so I picked up my fork and tackled my breakfast with relish.

"I don't suppose the fact that I'm going to New Orleans today to arrange to bring back Mr. John Macy would influence you to stay," Bart said hopefully.

"He must be that medium you spoke of," I said.

"He is, and a noted one."

"It's tempting," I admitted, "but my answer is still no."

"Well," Bart replied, "I'll not leave until after you've seen my niece."

"I'll see her now." I took a final sip of coffee, arose and left the room.

Cassie was not in her room upstairs, so I checked mine. That, too, was empty. There was just one other possible place and that was the classroom. When I entered, she was diligently at work on her geography. However, she set the book aside and stood up.

"I'm sorry I was so bad last night, Sharon," she said soberly. "Aunt Sarah told me a lie."

"Did your mother ask you to apologize?" I walked over to the child and stood looking down at her.

"Yes, but she didn't need to. I was wrong. I said I hated you and I said I hated my papa and I don't hate him. I love him. He's good to me."

"He loves you," I told her. "He would never do anything to hurt you."

"I know. And I know you wouldn't."

"Thank you, Cassie. That's the kindest thing you could say to me. I've become very fond of you and the thought of not seeing you again made me feel very unhappy. Just as unhappy as when you said you hated me."

"I don't hate you, Sharon. I don't. I feel awfully ashamed."

"You needn't." I knelt and took her in my arms.

"Are you angry at me?" she asked.

"No." I smiled to reassure her, though I felt more like crying, so great was my relief that the child had renewed her trust in me.

"Will you stay?" she asked.

"If you want me to," I replied.

"I do, oh I do," she said solemnly. "I don't want you ever to leave me. Not ever."



"In that case, I shan't." I kissed her cheek lightly as her arms went around my neck and the moisture of her tears dampened my face.

"And now, my dear, I shall wash your face and we will get to work, for you have a great deal to learn. But first of all, I must go downstairs and tell your family you want me to stay."

I must confess I was pleased with the looks of relief on the faces of everyone—including Sarah—when I told them the result of my visit with Cassie. I was delighted also. The child was already so firmly entrenched in my heart. It was foolish of me to have allowed such a thing to happen, for one day we would be parted, and I would suffer a great ache. But I couldn't help it. I loved her. Another reason I wanted to stay was to solve the enigma of this house. Could it be my mother who was responsible, and would Mr. Macy, the medium, be able to summon her? I hoped so. Anything to end the reign of great fear which the family—and the child—were being subjected to.

For her age she was very clever and eager and a joy to work with. Gradually, the self-consciousness and feeling of guilt left her and she was as impish and fun-loving as ever. Thank heaven, a child's mind does not retain heart-ache for long.

I kept myself so busy for the remainder of the day that I had no time to think. Cassie and I went down to dinner in a gay frame of mind, only to discover that we would be dining alone. Flo told us that Emily and Sarah were having trays in their rooms, Bart had left for New Orleans, and Craig was working somewhere on the plantation, a considerable distance behind the mansion. Cassie and I had the large table to ourselves.

Cassie told Flo about the visitation of the night before. "I was standing on the stairs and I saw Aunt Sarah get knocked across the room."

Flo was a wise woman, with a large family of her own, and she well understood that any talk of the strange things that happened in this house was bound to upset Cassie, so she made a joke of it.

"I'd like to see a spook come trying to tickle me in the ribs," she said. "Or trying to knock me over. Now

wouldn't that spook be some surprised?"

As she weighed better than two hundred pounds, most of it solid, chunky flesh, Cassie laughed delightedly at the absurd idea of a ghost trying to overpower Flo. The meal was excellent, as usual. Flo set the mood and Cassie and I became hilarious, talking nonsense half the time, making plans for tomorrow. I told her amusing stories of my childhood and we got on famously. Last night might never have happened, as far as she was concerned, for she'd completely forgotten it.

For my part, I was glad I'd agreed to stay, because leaving here and returning to the loneliness of a room in New Orleans would have been awful to endure. Then all of my idle moments would have been filled with the agony of wondering if I'd abandoned my mother. That would have been unbearable.

Cassie and I took a long walk. Once we heard, in the distance, the furious barking of several dogs and at the sound, Cassie seized my hand and held it tightly.

"We'd better get back to the house," I said, letting none of the alarm I felt creep into my voice.

"They're bad dogs. They bit Janelle."

"They aren't close by," I said. "Besides, it's very likely they are not the wild dogs and would do no one any harm."

"I just hope they don't come any closer, Sharon."

"I'm sure they won't, but we should start back anyway."

When we returned, there was still plenty of time before supper, so I read her three of the short stories in *Godey's Ladies' Book* and one from *Ladies' Home Journal*. She was easily able to understand these adult stories and she enjoyed them.

Supper started as a rather dull meal. Bart wasn't present. I guessed, correctly as I learned later, that his absence was because he didn't want to bring the medium to the house until Cassie was asleep. The meal was even served a bit early, though she didn't notice. She was still too pleased at being allowed to eat with the family.

She dutifully kissed her mother and aunt good night, but neither responded. It was easy to see that Emily's sympathy and love for her daughter had been all too brief

and that she had already lost interest. I doubted that Sarah had ever softened toward the child. Craig, however, made a fuss over her, teasing her and mussing her hair. I could see why she doted on him and why she'd been so hurt by the story Sarah told her.

I tucked the child in bed and sat with her, talking for a while, then reading a fairy tale to her until she began to grow drowsy. When she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, I turned the lamp far down, but I remained there by her side until I knew she was fast asleep. Then I tiptoed from the room, closing the door quietly behind me. I could hear muted voices downstairs as I moved toward the stairway.



## SEVEN

When I entered the front drawing room, there was a stranger seated in one of the chairs. Bart introduced him as John Macy, the man who supposed to have the power to materialize ghosts. He arose, bowed in a perfunctory manner and after I seated myself, resumed his chair.

He was a short, plump little man with heavy jowls and a most retiring manner for one who claimed he could summon the dead. Emily and Sarah occupied their usual places facing each other on the twin settees. Craig rested his head against a tall-backed, well-upholstered chair. Bart sat close to Mr. Macy, and I occupied a chair which gave me a good view of the room and its occupants.

"We're all here," Bart said. "No sense postponing it. All right, Mr. Macy, what are you going to do and how can we be of help?"

"Mind now, it ain't easy, this work of fetching souls from beyond," he said. "Sometimes I find I can't do it. Everything has to be just right."

"Please explain that," Sarah ordered crisply. She sat on the settee, her hands folded primly in her lap. She'd even dressed all in black for the occasion.

"Those from beyond have to want to come back. They have to have something to say, or do, or someone close they wish to comfort."

"Can you make them appear?"

"So it's been said," Macy replied.

"What do you mean, it's been said? Weren't you there?" Sarah kept prodding him.

"I was there in person, ma'am. In my body, but my spirit was somewhere else, so there'd be room inside me for whoever wished to return."

"Sounds like a lot of fiddle-faddle to me," Sarah said, with her usual tact.

"Did you think being attacked last night was fiddle-faddle?" Bart asked.

That question mollified her, for she made no reply.

Macy asked, "What happened last night? Mr. Bart Beaumont told me there had been a manifestation, but he didn't go into detail."

"This ghost, or whatever it is, threw articles about and hurled a clock at Miss Hadfield and a chair at me, among other things," Bart said.

Macy made a hopeless gesture with his hands. "My friends, what you have here is a poltergeist, an unusual kind of spirit. A mischief maker, a restless soul who wanders about making trouble. I cannot summon such a one. It's beyond what little power I have."

"Sometimes though," I said, "the spirit is quiet and kindly."

Macy shook his head, jowls flapping. I had an idea he didn't want to go through with this, for some reason known only to him. "I have never heard of a spirit with two kinds of character, ma'am. They're either gentle or violent, but never both."

Bart said, "Stop thinking up excuses, Macy, and begin this seance or I swear I'll insist on cashing in every IOU of yours that I have. Give us a respectable demonstration and I'll give them back to you before you leave this house."

Macy groaned and settled back in his chair. "There are those who work with trumpets and tambourines, rattles and whistles. I do not. Some insist all those present sit around a table holding hands in the dark. That is not for me. A man who is forced to use any of those trappings is a fake."

"Very well," Craig said. "What must we do?"

"Remain seated and quiet. Say nothing. Don't ask any questions unless I ask you to. The lights may stay on, though perhaps it's best if you leave only one lit. It's easier for me because I sometimes sit there unblinking for minutes at a time and too much light makes my eyes hurt."

Bart went around putting out all but one Tiffany table

lamp in the far corner of the room. Mr. Macy found that quite satisfactory. He explained further for our benefit.

"I become quite unconscious, and, while so, the spirit enters my body and speaks through my voice. Sometimes the voice changes, sometimes not. If there are too many unbelievers present, often nothing happens. You must believe."

"I'd say we do," Bart murmured with a harsh laugh.

"Be not a man who jokes about them, Mr. Beaumont. Ghosts have been accepted by many well-known scientists, physicists, astronomers, men of pure science who come upon strange happenings in the course of their work. The facts baffle explanation and even common sense, and that is why so many of these eminent people never comment or try to go deeper into the phenomenon. They know no one will believe them and their stature as important men will diminish. It is entirely impossible to explain a ghost scientifically."

"You just produce one," Bart said. "The right one. The one who has been creating all this mischief around here."

"I shall do my utmost, but do not expect much," Macy warned. "If there is only a poltergeist here, it will be useless. One of these has never been summoned. So now, everyone will please be very quiet. Do not talk or get up. Try not to move hands or legs. It takes little to frighten a spirit away."

"Frighten her away," Bart commented with a grunt of sarcasm. "I wish we could, but we're the ones being frightened. What's a ghost got to be afraid of?"

"Please," Mr. Macy warned, "if you treat the subject with such levity, I shall never be able to summon anyone."

"Very well," Bart said. "I'll say no more, but please get on with it."

Mr. Macy let his head go back as far as the chair would allow. He folded his arms across his chest, closed his eyes tightly and did nothing else. Five minutes crawled by; it seemed like an hour. There wasn't a sound in the house. I could actually hear our breathing. Now and then, Mr. Macy would moan a little and shift his weight slightly; so far, the attempt seemed a waste of time.

Five more minutes went by—or was it longer? I felt



inordinately sleepy and I thought of Cassie, curled up in her bed, wholly oblivious to what was going on, and for that I gave thanks.

Mr. Macy gave a rather explosive groan and his head, which so far had been resting limply on the back of the chair, came forward and seemed as rigid as if it were held by a photographer's head-holding device. His lips began to move and his feet shuffled about on the rug. Then he commenced swaying from side to side, like a man in severe agony.

All at once, there were a dozen loud raps on the wall behind the medium. This stopped, only to be replaced by steady scratching, as if long fingernails were being pulled across the wall—or the ceiling. It was impossible to tell exactly where the sounds came from.

I sat as rigid as the medium and I felt honest, soul-searing terror. I felt that something was about to happen with the force of an explosion. The room seemed to have become cold. Not the kind of chill that comes from an open door or window on a cool evening, but as if I'd entered an icehouse, and I was surrounded by a wet, bone-chilling cold.

I braced myself for more of the wild, hurricane-like wind that generated within the house and roared through the room. Except for the raps and the scratching, there'd been no other sound.

I looked about me. Sarah sat there with a sneer of derision on her face. Emily was on the edge of her chair, apparently as affected by this weird atmosphere as any of us. Craig sat back in a large chair; his eyes never left the medium. Bart, too, watched closely, looking as if he were studiously searching for any signs of trickery.

Suddenly, Mr. Macy's legs stretched out and he slowly slumped lower and lower in the chair, almost to the point of sliding completely out of it. He acted like one whose muscles had suddenly grown so weak that they could not support him.

His mouth opened and a moan issued from it. Then came a blast of that cold wind and the single lamp went out. After that, there was a long moment of the most intense silence.

The wind began again. It started from the middle of the

room, and it was as if we faced the vortex of a cyclone, though we could see nothing. The whirling sound began to spread and the wind lashed at us. Something toppled over behind me. I was too terrified to look. My hands gripped the arms of my chair with all my strength. Several times I had an overwhelming urge to leap to my feet and rush out of this house and never return.

I heard the sound of a hard slap and Sarah screamed and then moaned in pain. I couldn't see her now, but the sounds came from her direction and I knew it was she who had been struck by an invisible hand. Close by my feet a footstool rose from the floor and hurried itself toward the fireplace, which seemed to be a favorite target of the ghost. Probably because things smashed well when they struck the bricks or the edge of the mantel.

A book came winging its way through the air to drop to the floor with a thud. Above us, a chandelier began to sway and then it swung so hard I wondered why it didn't break loose from its moorings in the ceiling.

I heard the sound of violent contortions from the spot where the medium sat, but I couldn't see him and I didn't know what was happening.

There was a film of perspiration on my forehead and my jaws were so tightly clamped together that my teeth began to ache. I opened my mouth slightly, but it took considerable effort. In a few more seconds I would have leaped to my feet, screaming in my terror, for I had reached the limit of my endurance, but just then the wildness suddenly died away.

Slowly, I became aware that I could see the medium. He was now on the floor, hugging himself tightly, and he looked like a huge, ungainly ball. Sarah was no longer deriding and doubtful. Her eyes were as roundly huge as her sister's, her mouth hung agape in fear and she was trembling badly. Emily seemed frozen in terror. Bart had one arm held before his face, as if he expected to be struck. I remembered the sound of the slap, but it hadn't come from Bart's direction. I looked back at Sarah. One side of her face was flaming red, suffused with the blood that had rushed to it as the result of the heavy, stinging blow. Craig seemed the calmest of all, but he was too rigid of posture not to have been strongly affected.

I wondered how it was possible that I could see these people, for a moment ago the light in this room had been a murky gray. Craig's head was tilted back slightly and he seemed to be looking up. I followed the direction of his gaze and then I sat entranced at the candle flame high above us. There was no candle holder, no candle, only the single flame. It was no larger than any ordinary candle flame, yet it seemed to throw ten times as much light, and in a softness that did not blind.

The flame moved. It was making a small circle directly above the medium. It was close to the ceiling that I knew was eleven feet high. No human hand could have held a candle up that high; in any event, this flame had no candle beneath it. It floated free, a light from the world of the dead!

"Sharon! Sharon!"

The voice came from everywhere. It was gentle and soft.

"Yes," I managed to say, though I had difficulty finding my own voice.

"Sharon . . . Sharon . . . there is danger . . . evil . . . I am trying . . . to help . . . my dear . . . my dear . . ."

The free-floating flame suddenly went out. The wind returned, drowning out the words that were comforting me. I could hear the voice, but faintly; and the words were indistinguishable, while the wildness screamed and moaned all around us.

A chair was tipped over; a table, so heavy that two people would be required to lift it, rose and dropped back with a crash that shook the house. I couldn't see this, but I knew from the location of the noise what was going on.

Then the wind seemed to whirl itself into a voice. It screeched my name—or something like it—over and over again, rising and falling like some swift tide of sound. Piercingly loud, thunderously roaring, always raucous and nerve-shattering.

It kept rising in pitch. There was a human scream this time and it brought me to my feet in alarm. It had been a man's voice. As I arose, the light on the small table behind me suddenly came back to life, and at the same time, the howling wind and the screeching voice stopped so abruptly that it must have been cut off by some remarkable force.



I stood there. No one else had arisen. I looked about me fearful of what I would see. First, at Craig. He was not hurt—he slowly began to rise. Bart, too, was all right. Sarah had her feet tucked under her, she was pressed as far back in the settee as she could get, and her fingers were actually hooked into the fabric. Later I discovered she had clawed holes in the material. The medium was slowly uncurling himself. Emily, her face dead white, sat limp in a faint.

I rushed to her side, fearful that her waxen pallor was that of death, but she lived and I rubbed her hands and wrists, trying to bring her out of the swoon. Sarah was uttering gibberish from lips that did not move. She was incapable of anything except the most grotesque expression of her terror.

Craig and Bart, who had now recovered, rushed forward, Craig to take over the care of Emily, while Bart helped the struggling Mr. Macy to stretch his limbs from their cramped position. Finally, Bart got him back in his chair.

"What happened?" the medium asked. "I felt as if I were being torn to pieces."

"Don't you know what happened?" Bart asked.

"I never have any awareness of the seance. I wake up feeling weak and sometimes sick to my stomach, but tonight it was different. I never want to go through that again! Did I bring a spirit back to earth?"

"You brought a demon here," Bart said. He turned to me. "That voice, when it called your name quietly . . . was it familiar?"

"It was the voice of my mother, Bart. I haven't the slightest doubt of it."

Emily began to moan and opened her eyes. I went to her side and helped Craig arrange her limbs into more comfortable positions.

"I'd better get her to bed," he said. "How is Sarah?"

"I think she's just paralyzed with fear," Bart said. "I don't think she'll sneer at the ghostly doings again."

I went to Sarah and stood before her. "Can you get up? Are you all right?"

She looked up at me in sudden anger. "I was struck. I was hit a blow so hard my ears still ring from it, and I

shall probably be bruised in the morning. What manner of mother did you have? A fiend?"

"I think you can manage to reach your room without help," I said, and turned away from her in disgust. Craig swept Emily into his arms and carried her upstairs. Sarah tottered after them, intent on not letting them out of her sight if possible, such was her sustained fear.

I took another look at Mr. Macy and sped to the dining room sideboard for a tray, glasses, and the brandy decanter. I returned with them and poured him a stiff portion which he downed in two fast gulps that made him cough and brought tears to his eyes. Bart drank his more slowly and with evident satisfaction. Then he poured some into a third glass and handed it to me. I sipped it gratefully.

"What in the world do you suppose happened?" I asked.

"Your mother got through to you, apparently, but something made her turn into a banshee," Bart said. "I thought we were going to be killed. Well, Mr. Macy, now that you seem to have some color back, I think we should hear from you. As an expert, that is."

"Not as an expert in this awful business." Mr. Macy held out his empty glass and I refilled it. "I sat there thinking that nothing was going to happen and then everything started whirling inside of me. I thought I was being turned inside out. I heard the rapping on the wall and the scratching. That was all right. I'd heard it many times before. Usually a spirit will announce the fact that he or she is close by and wishes me to go into a trance so that he or she can speak through me. When that happened tonight, I closed my eyes and tried to fall into a trance. All of a sudden I felt like a tennis ball. That's the best description I can give you. Back and forth, back and forth, every time being hit . . . and hit . . . and hit. . . ! Then I felt myself going under and the craziness left. That's all I remember—nothing more. I'm glad I was able to help, but I tell you, Mr. Beaumont, if you gave me back the IOU's and double the money they represent, I wouldn't go through this again. Never!"

"Let the brandy catch hold," Bart said, "and you'll be all right. Maybe these will help too."

He gave Mr. Macy several small pieces of paper which

Mr. Macy promptly tore into shreds with much satisfaction, stowing the remnants into his pocket. He arose, a bit unsteadily, I thought. Whether it was from the experience he'd just undergone or the effects of brandy drunk too fast, I didn't know.

"Good night," he said. "I'm going to say one more thing. I've been in this business a long time, ever since I found out I could go into a trance. But this is the first time I was ever frightened. Right now, I'm afraid to go out and drive my buggy back to the city in the dark. I have to do it, but that horse better have wings and be as scared as I am."

He bowed low for my benefit, shook hands with Bart, asked him to extend his regards to the others for whom he would not wait to say his farewells. He left quickly and gratefully. Bart and I sat down to await Craig.

I thought about Cassie, and I was on my way to see if she was safe when Craig came down the stairs. He led me back to the drawing room.



## EIGHT

"Cassie's all right," he said. "She must have slept right through it. For which I thank God."

"After this last session," Bart said with a sigh, "I think each of us should give thanks for being alive. How is Emily?"

"Shaken badly. I gave her a sleeping draught and she fell asleep almost at once. I looked in on Sarah also. She's in a state of shock, I fear. She's lying on her bed, still dressed, and staring at the ceiling, while constantly rubbing her cheek."

"It's not surprising. That was no ghostly smack," Bart said. He eyed us. "Did either of you slip up in the dark and give her what she so richly deserves?"

"Not I," Craig said.

"Nor I," I told them. "I'm afraid it was no human hand that struck her."

"I can assure you of one thing," Bart said. "I've attended my first and last seance. They're for stronger people than I. Well, have we learned anything by all this?"

"I have," I said, without the slightest hesitation. "My mother seems able to return to me. I know it was her voice. I do not believe for a moment that it was anyone imitating her. First of all, I doubt that anyone present ever heard her speak. Certainly Mr. Macy did not."

"But what forces her into such violence?" Craig asked. "When she first came, the room seemed warmer and calm . . . serene is the word. It was as if some very comforting presence had made itself felt, for she spoke gently and kindly. Then, without reason, she summoned that horrible windstorm again and began hurling things."

"And wasn't that candlelight something!" Bart mar-

veled. "It was no trick. At first I thought so, but it wasn't. No, sir . . . I'll swear to it. John Macy had nothing to do with that."

"I agree," Craig said.

Bart regarded us solemnly for a moment. "I find myself quite exhausted. I'm going to bed. Something I haven't done at this hour since I was ten and learned a jack beats a tenspot. Good night. Don't either of you dare to say 'pleasant dreams'."

I arose to leave also and set my glass on the tray.

"Please don't go just yet, Sharon," Craig said. "Unless you feel the need for rest."

I smiled. "I think I would rather not go upstairs immediately. At least not if you are certain Cassie didn't awaken."

"I give you my word, she was asleep."

"In that case," I said, sitting down again, "I'll remain, for I wish to speak with you about what just occurred."

Craig returned the smile. "That is my reason for asking you to stay."

"You're refering, of course . . . to my mother's spirit," I said, sobering.

"I am," he replied firmly. "Have you any idea what it is she seeks in this house?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you think she wishes us to depart? That our presence causes her anguish or, more probably, anger, for some reason we'll never fathom?"

"No."

I could see the swiftness and definiteness of my reply startled him. He frowned, as if seeking the answer himself. "Could it be," he asked, "that your mother wishes you to be mistress of The Pillars once again?"

"That's foolishness."

"Then, in heaven's name, tell me."

"I will, if you'll stop asking questions."

"Forgive me. After this last session, I feel as if I am about to lose my reason. Tell me what you believe."

"My mother was a very happy woman. Very much in love with my father and he with her. It was one of those rare, perfect unions between a man and a woman. They never quarreled, were never jealous, always found some-

thing to laugh at and, to share their joy in life, were forever giving socials and balls."

"What are you getting at?" he asked.

"First of all, I must beg your indulgence for what I am about to say and hope you will forgive my boldness in saying it."

"In heaven's name, girl, get on with it."

"It's not easy, sir. I don't wish to offend you."

"I give you my word, whatever you say will not offend me."

"Very well. I believe my mother's spirit cannot stand the unhappiness that fills this house. Except for the love you bear your daughter, this dwelling is cold and unfeeling."

His lips compressed tightly and slow color suffused his face. I had angered him and, murmuring an apology, I jumped up and would have run from the room except that he moved quickly to intercept me. Before I knew what he was about, his hands gripped my arms so tightly that I compressed my lips to keep from crying out.

"Don't you suppose I know that?" he demanded. "Do you think I need you to tell me that my wife cannot bear me near her? Cannot even endure my touch? Can't you imagine what it is doing to me? I'm a man. I need love. I have Cassie's, yes, and I adore her. But I need a woman's love too. I thought, when I married Emily, she loved me as I did her. But she didn't. She never did. I was a blind fool."

"Please . . . please, Mr. Beaumont, don't tell me these things. I don't want to know them. They're not for my ears."

"I've got to speak and you've got to listen." There was a wildness in him that I'd never seen before. It was as if he had temporarily lost his reason. As if what he'd been through this last hour had unsettled his mind. "I want you to know I've tried."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." I said the word over and over and kept struggling, trying to free myself from his grasp, but it was useless.

"She had an important family name, great beauty, but no money. I had a plentiful amount of the last, and very cleverly, she used every flirtatious manner at her com-



mand and I, like a fool, succumbed to her charms. After two years of marriage, I insisted on her bearing a child. I wanted an heir. I also wanted love which I got precious little of, from my wife—unless there was something special she wanted. If I couldn't have the love of the woman I married, then perhaps that of a child would help me. A child who would think I was something special, who would be proud of Craig Beaumont. Well, I got that child, but I lost my wife completely the day Cassie was born."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Beaumont. I truly am." My hands were still pressed against his chest in an effort to free myself and I could feel the wild beating of his heart.

"I don't want your pity, girl. Damned if I do."

The next moment his mouth was pressed against mine, his arms had enclosed my waist and held me tight against him. It came with such suddenness that I was caught unaware, and a sob escaped my throat. As quickly, he released me and thrust me from him. I turned, nearly falling in my haste to get away from him and I half ran, half staggered to the stairs. As I stumbled up them, I was aware of someone in the hall who regarded me with stunned amazement. It wasn't until I had gained the privacy of my room and, for the first time since I entered the house, turned the key that I realized the person who had seen Craig Beaumont kiss me was his brother.

I threw myself on the bed and I trembled in shock. It had been so unexpected that my mind was a jumble of thoughts. I sought to excuse him, even though the kiss was savage. It had meant nothing to him except that he'd not held a woman in his arms for so long, he'd lost all control.

He was not to blame, any more than I. I'd been frightened by the vehemence of his words and the act, yet I'd not been revolted. Nor did I pity him. He had too strong a character to need pity from anyone. He wanted to save his marriage, he was trying desperately to do so, yet he was frustrated by his wife, no matter what steps he took. And now he had the horror of the house to contend with.

I don't know how long I lay there, but I was suddenly aware of a quiet knock on my door. I remained silent, believing it to be Craig, but the voice which called my name was that of Bart.

"Please, Sharon, I must speak with you."

I got up reluctantly, turned the key and opened the door.

"Please come downstairs. It's important."

I was too spent for argument and I knew the hour was late and sounds would carry, so I stepped from my room and quietly closed the door.

Bart escorted me in silence to the kitchen where he had placed a pot of coffee on the stove. "I think we could both use some."

"I didn't think you knew how to make it," I replied, attempting a lightness I didn't feel.

"I watched you when you prepared it. I only hope it's turned out well."

"It smells appetizing."

"Good," he replied. "Sit down and I'll do the honors."

I obeyed willingly, for my limbs seemed made of jelly. He poured the coffee, set the cream and sugar in front of me. I was touched by his efforts to please and remained silent until he took a chair opposite me.

"Now suppose you tell me why you brought me down here at this hour," I said. I took a sip of coffee and made a face.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" he asked, looking forlorn.

"On the contrary, it's quite good. But it's too hot."

"We've time to let it cool. And that will give me the opportunity of asking you to forgive my brother. You know he didn't mean to cheapen you by doing what he did."

"I know he lost his head," I replied quietly. "It's understandable. I'm partly to blame. I should never have been so outspoken."

"He lost his head all right," Bart agreed. "But not just because of what happened tonight. And not just because he was holding a beautiful woman in his arms."

"What are you trying to say?"

Bart eyed me carefully, as if weighing the wisdom of what he was about to say. "Craig has fallen in love with you."

"You're mad."

"No. And I hope you won't turn into a prim maiden and run upstairs and pack your bag."

"If what you say is true, it leaves me no alternative," I replied quietly.

"Even if he doesn't realize it? Or maybe he does, now that he's kissed you, held you close," Bart reasoned. "But he's my brother and he's good and decent and he'll never do anything about it." He paused, then continued slowly, "If you never knew it before, I think you know it now. He needs you as much as Cassie does."

"You don't make sense," I retorted.

"I'm trying to. I'm trying very hard, but I've not had much experience at this sort of thing. What I mean is, Emily has no use for him. I heard every word he said to you, but I knew it long before he did and dreaded the day he'd find out. It's good to have you in the house. Despite what we've been subjected to, you're a good influence here. I think you can do a great deal in helping Craig retain his sanity. I believe his wife is trying to drive him out of his mind."

"You're not saying she has anything to do with these manifestations," I exclaimed.

"How do I know?" he asked. "How do I know if anyone in the house is responsible? I don't see how anyone could be."

"Nor I."

"In that case, forgive my brother. Can't you pretend it never happened?"

"I don't know," I said slowly, watching the steam still coming from the golden liquid in my cup. "I don't know."

"He's suffering too, you know. Right now, he's in the library and I think he's on the verge of shooting himself. Believe me, he has never done anything like that before and you did tell me, in so many words, that had you not been so outspoken, it might not have happened."

I nodded and lifted the cup to my lips. I took a sip of coffee and found it had cooled sufficiently to drink.

"What do you wish me to do?" I asked.

"Go to him. Talk with him. Assure him he's not the beast he believes he is."

My cup clattered as I set it in the saucer. "I don't see how I can."

"You can and I believe you will." Bart toasted me with



his cup, then swallowed half its contents.

"Very well. If you will light my way."

"You take the lamp and knock on the door. I imagine, at this moment, he visualizes you packed and fully dressed, waiting only for daylight when Marshal will drive you back to New Orleans."

I smiled, despite myself. I arose, filled a fresh cup with the steaming liquid and added cream to it. "I'll carry the lamp and the coffee. You come to knock on the door, then return here and wash out the pot."

"Good girl." He took my hand, raised it and touched it to his lips. "Don't leave us, Sharon. Cassie, Craig and I need you terribly. I'm certain my brother will never repeat what he did tonight."

Bart moved stealthily alongside me until we reached the library which was on the opposite side of the entrance hall. He tapped lightly on the door, then retreated hastily to the kitchen. I was shocked at the harried look on Craig's face as he opened the door.

"I brought you some coffee," I said, offering it.

He took it, then stepped aside and motioned me into the room, careful to leave the door open.

"May I sit down?" I asked. "I wanted to talk about the ball I mentioned before."

"Y-yes, please. Please do." I sat down in a large leather chair which was placed in front of the desk. He moved around behind it, set his cup on the desk and sat down. His eyes never seemed to leave my face and I felt slow color rise from my neck to my brow. "I don't quite know what to say." He attempted a smile and as quickly sobered.

"There's nothing to say," I assured him. "We were both overwrought by what happened."

"I made a fool of myself," he replied. "And frightened you half to death. I suppose Bart sent you here."

My eyes widened in surprise. "I fear you know your brother far better than he thinks."

This time Craig did smile and, despite the gray at his temples, he looked quite boyish. "Yes, I know Bart. And I'm grateful to him. But I can't impose on you. You won't want to stay here now."

"Yes, I do. I promised Cassie I would."

"Thank you. Thank you, my dear. I shall be ever grateful."

"No need to be. I need Cassie even more than she needs me. Loneliness is not a stranger to me either."

He regarded me with new awareness. "Of course. How stupid of me. You have no one, have you?"

"Not even a third cousin," I replied with a smile.

"Then perhaps you can understand. Some devilish impulse took hold of me. I assure you it will never happen again."

"I know it won't. And I suggest we both forget it. Now suppose we discuss the ball. Did you mention it to Emily?"

"Yes. I did and, surprisingly, she likes the idea."

"Splendid. This house needs music and jollity and lots of people in it."

"I told her you knew several people hereabouts. She wondered if you would write the invitations. She said she'd take care of the entertainment, the orchestra and also the refreshments. She seems quite excited about it."

"So am I," I replied, "now that she has agreed. When shall you give it?"

"As quickly as possible," he said. "As you say, this house needs to reverberate with the sounds of merriment. I'll speak to Emily about it in the morning and she can discuss it with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Beaumont. Perhaps this will solve the enigma that besets this house."

"I pray God it will."

I arose and picked up the lamp which I'd set on the desk. He accompanied me to the door. As I went up the stairs, I found myself smiling, without knowing why.

Bart, standing at the landing, beamed deep approval. "Thank you, enchantress," he said.

"Thank you, foolish man," I replied. "I'm glad I saw your brother. It wasn't difficult. I'm staying, you know."

He nodded and started down the stairs, to join his brother, I supposed. I looked in on Cassie, but the child was sleeping soundly, so I continued on to my room. Instead of going to bed, I sat in the rocker awhile, my thoughts of Craig Beaumont, my admiration for him

growing. How, I wondered, could Emily be so cruel as to shut him out of her heart? He was everything any woman would want. And, as quickly, I forced the thought from my mind. It was both foolish and dangerous.

And then, a sound pierced my mind, like that of quiet weeping, yet I could not place whence it came. Remembering the night I'd heard Cassie weeping, I sped to her room, but she was sound asleep, and I could hear nothing but her quiet breathing. Yet when I returned to my own room and closed the door, it was there, just as if it had never stopped.



## NINE

In the morning, memory came back with a rush and it filled me with foreboding. But I quickly brushed the feeling aside, for the day was beautiful and I had much to do. First of all, Cassie's lessons. Then, during her nap, I'd get to work on the invitations. That is, if Emily were still amenable to the idea of a ball.

Much to my chagrin, my only companion at the breakfast table was Sarah. Nevertheless, I greeted her courteously, though her reply was less than civil.

"My sister still feels I owe you an apology," she said.

"I don't mind what you did to me nearly as much as what you did to Cassie. Why are you trying to drive me out of this house?"

"Who said I was?" she asked defiantly.

"I'm not a fool," I told her. "You've disliked me from the moment I came, yet I can think of nothing I've done to cause you to view me with such disfavor."

"I think you're responsible for what is happening here. I feel you've brought evil into this house."

"When I lived here before, there were no manifestations such as I've witnessed since my return."

"I believe that. It's what makes me say you're causing these things to happen."

I sighed patiently. "Must I remind you again that they were happening before I came back? The presence of the ghost, in fact, was the reason I was hired. Had I known about it, I'd never have accepted the position. Believe me, my stay here has been anything but pleasant."

"Then why don't you go?" she demanded.

"Your sister pleaded with me not to," I replied, still managing a calmness I was far from feeling. "But I'll be

honest with you. My reasons for remaining here concern Cassie and my mother's restless spirit."

"Then you admit she haunts the place."

"I admit only that something very strange is happening in this house. I don't like it. It frightens me as much as it does you. But if such manifestations are being caused by my mother, I seek to know the reason why she is doing it."

"And I suppose you think, as a governess, you could not be replaced."

"I think no such thing. It's just that I'm fond of Cassie."

"Craig had hoped that, with your presence here, the manifestations would cease. They haven't. You've served no purpose, solved nothing. Therefore, I think my sister should replace you with someone who doesn't think she is still mistress of The Pillars."

"Then I suggest you consult her. As for me, I'm famished." I brightened with relief as Flo entered with my breakfast. I greeted her, adding, "Your smile is as sunny as the day."

"So is yours," she said. "Sure is nice to have one woman who smiles around here." She eyed Sarah meaningfully as she set the platter of bacon and eggs before me.

"Will you have some?" I asked Sarah.

"I've already eaten," she replied. "And I think I should speak to my sister about getting servants who have better manners."

"I'll quit any time," Flo said. "If you want me to get out, just say so."

"Humph." Sarah pushed back her chair, arose and stomped from the room.

Flo shook her head wonderingly. "That woman is just plain mean and her sister ain't much better."

"Hush, Flo," I said, though scarcely restraining a smile. "They've been through a lot here."

"That's for sure, but if I ever quit, I don't know who they'll get to work here. Not with the haunts in this house. Word's got around all right, an' the Beaumonts ain't popular. Not even with the plantation owners."

"You mean Mr. Beaumont and his brother are disliked?"

"No. But Mr. Craig's wife and her sister are."

"For goodness sake, why?"

"They're too uppity. They think they're too good for the plantation owners. They ain't friendly at all."

"I didn't know."

"Yes, ma'am. I don't know how you stay here."

I creamed my coffee and stirred it thoughtfully. "Two reasons, Flo. Cassie, and to find out what's going on in this house."

"If you ask me, I'd say the house is poisoned with meanness."

I had to smile. "You have a point."

"And another thing, Miss Sharon. Nobody'll come to work here an' I got this great big house to take care of, besides cook. And them two women sure do want waitin' on. I'm gettin' tired of it."

"Oh, please don't leave now, Flo." It was my turn to plead. "You're needed here as much as I. Even more."

She nodded agreement. "Don't I know it? I'm just talkin'." She sighed, adding, "But it's sure not a happy place to work."

"Things may change."

"Couldn't be for the worse." She spoke as she busied herself clearing Sarah's dishes from the table and putting fresh ones in their place. "Mr. Bart ain't come down yet. Mr. Craig, he made his own breakfast in the kitchen before I got here. He's the only one in the family who does anything. A real nice man too, besides bein' a lonely one." She picked up the tray of dishes and started to the kitchen, then paused in sudden surprise. "What do you mean about things changin' around here?"

"Please keep it a secret because I doubt Miss Sarah knows of it yet, but I believe Miss Emily is going to give a ball."

Flo's eyes widened in amazement. "That sure is news. Good news too, but who's comin'?"

"The families around here," I said.

"No, they ain't, child," she said firmly.

"Hush, Flo," I cautioned. "You're not supposed to know it yet, and they'll come."

"Who's givin' the ball—you or Miss Emily?" she asked wisely.



"Miss Emily, of course. And I'm sure Mama and Papa's friends will come."

"If they know you're here, they will," she said flatly. "But they sure won't for them two women. I hear talk. I hear plenty of talk from friends of mine who work in those houses."

"Don't say anything about it to anyone."

"Not a word, child. Not a word. Sure gotta stay now though, to see what happens. Don't worry about me quit-ting. I sure will be lookin' forward to it."

She went on out to the kitchen and I finished my breakfast, downing my coffee hastily, for I wanted to go outside for a breath of air before I went upstairs to Cassie.

Much to my surprise, she was dressed and awaiting me, informing me she'd had her breakfast with her papa downstairs much earlier. She was in excellent spirits, bright and cheerful. Obviously, she'd slept all night, undisturbed by the violence and shrieking downstairs. During the hour we devoted to the study of grammar, she wrote a brief composition for me. While she was so employed, I pretended to be studying a book, but my mind was busy, and puzzled, about the quiet sobbing I'd heard in my room before I drifted off to sleep. It had been the torment of a soul in anguish. What did it mean?

While I was futilely struggling for an answer, Emily paid us a surprise visit. Cassie looked up from her task, as amazed as I, her little face beaming with pleasure.

"Good morning, Mama," she said. "Would you like to read my composition? It's about the pilgrims."

"Not now, dear," Emily replied, her smile polite. "I have more important things to talk about with Sharon."

The child's face clouded with disappointment which I sought to dispel by informing her mother of the excellent work she was doing.

"Suppose you tell me about it some other time," Emily said. "I know Cassie learns easily. I came to tell you I've decided to give a ball. We've never entertained here and I think it's about time we met the people who live in the surrounding area."

I could see that Craig had broached the subject tactfully. "What an excellent idea," I said. "If I can help in any way, I'll be most happy to."

"You can, Sharon, since you know most of the families," she replied. "But first of all, how soon do you suppose we could manage it? I think the quicker we fill this house with the sound of merriment, the better."

"I agree," I told her. "Do you suppose the arrangements could be made in a week's time?"

"If you could get the invitations out today, I will see to the rest of it," she said, her manner precise. "I was thinking that if, perhaps, you added a little note to the invitations to the effect that you are now residing at The Pillars, and it would be a sort of reunion as well as a housewarming. . . ."

"How very kind of you, Emily," I said, pretending surprise. "It will be a joy for me to see everyone again. It's been three years."

Craig's tact was a wonder; Emily was speaking as if it were all her own idea.

"May I help, Mama? May I?" Cassie jumped up and ran to her mother, grasping her skirts tightly.

"A ball is not for children, Cassie," Emily admonished, attempting to free herself from her daughter. "And please let me go. You're wrinkling my dress."

"I'm sorry, Mama." Cassie stepped back, her features woebegone.

"When I was a little girl and there was a social event here," I said, keeping my tone light, "Mama used to let me get dressed up and go down and see how beautiful the ladies looked. Perhaps Cassie could do that. I'd be glad to take her."

"If you wish," Emily said, her smile indifferent. "I'll speak with Craig about hiring an orchestra and extra servants. It will be necessary, of course, to open the ballroom. It will need a thorough cleaning and airing. Flo can supervise. It might well be the solution we have been seeking."

"It might well be," I agreed. "I'll get to work on the invitations this afternoon and Marshal can deliver them."

"Splendid. I'm sure we'll receive immediate replies."

"Replies of acceptance, I'm certain."

She actually looked pleased as she left the room, but Cassie had been hurt by her indifference. I couldn't bear it and my mind sought quickly a way to cheer her.

"Oh, dear," I said, pretending chagrin, "I couldn't possibly get those invitations out myself. Not by this afternoon."

"Mama will be angry if you don't," the child said somberly.

"Will you help me, dear?" I asked.

"I don't have a nice handwriting like you," she said, walking listlessly back to her desk.

"You write very well for a child your age, but I can manage the writing of them. It's closing the envelopes and placing your papa's wax seal on them. You could do that."

"I'll do it, Sharon," she exclaimed, pleased she could be of assistance. "I'll do it."

"Wonderful," I replied.

Her face beamed with happiness as she left her desk and ran to embrace me. "Oh, Sharon, I'm so glad you're here. We'll have a lot of fun together."

"Of course we will and I suggest we start right now by taking a little walk. No more lessons for today. After our fresh air we have to get those invitations out."

Outside, mindful of Craig's warning about the wild dogs, we were careful not to stroll too far from the house. We walked in the garden, admiring flowers and bushes, trying to make friends with a squirrel who would have none of it. We chattered away on any subject that came to mind.

We reached the bank of the muddy bayou where the undergrowth seemed thicker than anywhere else. It was pleasant enough here, but I realized that Cassie had grown very quiet and sought to hold my hand in a grip a bit too tight. She was afraid of something.

I came to a stop. "What is it, dear?"

"I don't like it here," she said.

"But it's so quiet and pretty. . . ."

"This is where the dogs bit Janelle." Her small arm raised, her finger pointed at a section of the bayou bank. "Right . . . there!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know. We'll turn around now. But, Cassie, just because such a dreadful thing happened there doesn't mean it's no longer safe. This is just a place and the evil doesn't remain."



"I don't like it," she insisted. I didn't much blame her, so we walked away and gradually her tight grip on my fingers relaxed.

"I'm glad you're going to stay," she said. Then, peering up at me with an impish grin, she broke away, running along the bank of the bayou. I pursued her, laughing, able to forget the agony of terror created by the weird happenings in the house. My heart didn't grow heavy again until we walked up the sloping approaches and the house stood there majestically calm, outwardly inviting. I shuddered slightly as we went inside.

I sent Cassie upstairs while I went into the kitchen to prepare a tray for both of us. We'd have an early dinner in the classroom and then I'd immediately get to the invitations. However, Flo insisted on setting out our meal, so I went to the library to seek a leather-covered notebook which I knew listed the names of my parents' friends. I would make out the list first and offer it to Emily for her approval. Even though she didn't know them, it would be the courteous thing to do.

But when I came to the door of the room, I became aware that Craig was there, working at his desk. "Excuse me," I said, backing out, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Please come in," he called, rising.

I did so, telling him my reason for being there.

"I've not seen it," he said, "but then, I've not looked over all these books."

"It used to be in that cabinet below the shelves on the far side of the room."

"By all means, check."

"I'll make out a list of guests for your wife," I said.

"That won't be necessary. She's already told me to tell you to invite whomever you wish, with no more than one hundred guests."

"That's a goodly number."

I squatted down and peered into the dark cabinet. There were several notebooks, but the one I sought had sheets edged with gold. Even in the dark recess they shone and I joyously reached in for it.

"Bart will see to hiring the orchestra and also the catering. I'd consider it a favor if you'd speak to Flo about getting help for the cleaning."

"I'll be glad to," I replied, rising. "But Emily said she'd attend to that."

His smile was embarrassed. "I fear she didn't do it tactfully. Flo says she'll have nothing to do with it."

"I'll talk with her now," I promised, suppressing a sigh. "If anyone can get people to help here, she can. Certainly, there will be need for it."

"I agree. I haven't looked in the ballroom since I bought the house."

"I hope you won't be disappointed."

"If you can get Flo to cooperate, I'm sure I won't be."

"And, Sharon," he added, as I started to leave the room, "thank you."

"I'm as excited about this as Emily," I assured him, smiling. "So is Cassie. She's going to help me with the invitations. Which reminds me. May I have some sealing wax and your initialed seal and a candle?"

"Of course." He provided what I requested, adding, "I appreciate what you're doing for the child."

"I'm enjoying it."

I returned to the kitchen, pleased that we were both so at ease with one another. It was as if the incident last night had never happened. But it had and, deep inside, I still had an awareness of it.

In the kitchen, Flo had the tray ready. "Miss Emily spoke about the ball. She needs extra servants to help. When she started to tell me about it, I had to tell her I ain't sure anyone will come here. She got real mad about it and told me I better get them if I wanted to stay here. I told her I didn't have to stay here. I could get work in plenty of other places and you know I can, child. She made me real mad."

"Mr. Craig just told me," I replied. "He was hopeful you would help."

"How'm I gonna do that? Just tell me how." Her hands rested on her ample hips in a defiant manner. "The haunts is bad enough, and the wild dogs is worse."

"No dogs will come where there are a lot of people and noise and music. Neither will ghosts."

"Never thought of that." Her mouth pursed thoughtfully. "You want me to get help here?"

"Please, Flo. It's going to be one week from today. The

ballroom needs cleaning. The floor needs waxing, the prisms on the chandeliers must sparkle."

She gave a determined nod of her head. "I'll do it, but I'm doin' it for you, honey. Not for her. Or her sister. Bet she doesn't know about it yet."

"If not, she will soon."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Wish I could see her face when she hears. Bet it'll shrivel up like a prune."

I smiled, but my eyes chided her as I picked up the tray on which I'd placed the notebook, the sealing wax and the other equipment. Cassie was impatiently awaiting me and we sat by the open window and attacked our meal with relish. We were both famished, for the walk in the air had stimulated our appetites.

We worked together on the invitations all afternoon. Cassie worked seriously and steadily. She held the stick of wax to the flame of the lighted candle on her desk and applied its melted substance to the back of each envelope. Then she placed her father's initialed seal on the soft substance.

Finally, our task was finished. My hand was badly cramped from the constant writing and Cassie's eyes drooped. She's missed her nap, but I didn't consider it would do her harm. On the contrary, it would be better, for, should there be strange occurrences in the house, tonight she'd certainly sleep through them, and that would be a blessing.

It was seven o'clock when Cassie and I came downstairs. I brought the envelopes to the kitchen and asked Flo to give them to Marshal. He could set about delivering them immediately. She went directly to the carriage house with them, and a short time later I heard him drive off.

We went into the drawing room, expecting to find Emily and Sarah there, but the room was empty. When Flo returned, she informed us they were both upstairs and had asked that trays be brought to their rooms.

"Guess Miss Sarah knows about the ball and don't approve," Flo spoke in an undertone, her grin mischievous. Aloud, she said, "You two'll have to eat by yourselves. Mr. Bart, he's gone to New Orleans to see about the ball



and Mr. Craig, he's out on the plantation. Somethin's gone wrong, I guess, 'cause he said he won't be back until later."

While the child and I ate, she talked about what she'd like to wear to the ball.

"I'm sure your mama will want to get you a new dress," I told her.

"I don't want a new dress," she replied thoughtfully. "I'd like to wear that dress with the hoopskirt that your mama had made for you for a party when you were a little girl. The one that's in a trunk in the attic."

"Are you sure, Cassie?" I asked, pleased. "I wore that to a masquerade ball for adults. Hoopskirts were not in fashion even when I was a little girl."

"It's so pretty. Please let me wear it," she pleaded.

"I'll be delighted to," I said. "It really belongs to you anyway. When I sold the house, whatever was left here went to the new owner and that happens to be your papa."

"He'll like me in it," she spoke with childlike assurance.

"Everyone will," I said, smiling.

After supper, she was quite willing to up upstairs. And, once in bed, she was asleep in minutes. I set down the book I'd been going to read to her, lowered the flame of the lamp and closed the door behind me quietly.

## TEN

The sounds of a piano being played, gaily but poorly, drifted up the stairwell. I was curious to see who was playing. The melody came from the back drawing room and when I entered it, I saw, to my surprise, that it was Bart. He waved a greeting. There were only two lamps lit and, since the room was large, the light was faint. But I noticed Emily and Sarah were present, as was Craig. He was holding a brandy glass in his hand and was standing near a window.

Bart lifted his hands from the keyboard in the middle of a composition. "I was about to play *The Battle of Trenton*. Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

"It's certainly a lively number." I sat down where I would have a clear view of the keyboard. "Please, let us hear it."

"With pleasure." He bowed in mock solemnity, flexed his fingers, held his hands above the keys and brought them down in an unbearably loud introduction to *The Battle of Trenton*. He was not content to merely bang out the music, but he described each sequence—Attack, Cannonading, Flight of the Hessians, General Confusion, Trumpets of Victory, and Articles of Capitulation Signed.

It was all one roar of sound, badly played but most amusing, thanks to Bart's antics. He finished with the flourish the number demanded and bowed again.

"They used to ask me to play that in the store where I worked," I admitted, "and some of the customers were terribly impressed. They got a trifle confused though, because whenever I hit a bass chord anywhere in the piece,

they thought the cannons were going again and they wondered why, near the end, when the Articles of Capitulation were being signed."

Bart and Craig roared with laughter. "You must have had some amusing experiences," Bart said.

"One in particular," I admitted. "I was playing the Barcarolle from *Tales of Hoffman*."

"I know it," he said. "Lovely music."

"There was a group listening and one very aristocratic lady stormed up to the piano and told me, in no uncertain terms, to stop playing it because the number was too passionate."

Bart and Craig were again amused, but Emily and Sarah remained straight-faced. Bart arose and asked me to play a number.

I chose the *Maple Leaf Rag*. I loved ragtime. It was still a new form of music and very spirited. He and Craig applauded loudly when I finished.

I arose then and resumed my seat. Craig went about touching a flame to the other lamps and soon there was a comfortable glow in the room.

Bart, once again at the piano, spoke as his fingers drifted lightly over the keys. "We're going to have two orchestras for the ball. One will be ragtime for listening and the other will be a string orchestra for dancing. I hope that will please everybody."

"So long as Sharon is pleased, I'm sure the ball will be a success." I should have known Sarah would pass up no opportunity to inflict her venomous tongue on me.

Emily smiled, seemingly not at all affected by her sister's words. "I'm looking forward to it. I didn't realize how much I wanted something like this."

"I suppose it was Sharon's idea," Sarah said, her smile vindictive.

"No, sister, if you must know," Emily said, smiling at Craig, "it was my husband's."

"Rather sudden on his part, wasn't it?" Sarah continued her goading. "I mean—getting the clever thought of having a ball. Filling the house with music and jollity to chase out the evil spirits."

"A damned fine idea on Craig's part," Bart said.

"Who is it that keeps talking about what a happy house



this was—filled with gaiety and laughter and good times? Certainly not your husband. Rather, the governess your husband hired. The lowly governess who wishes, once again, to be mistress of The Pillars.”

I could see that the possibility of my having planted the idea in Craig’s mind had never occurred to Emily and she was startled to hear it voiced. Her eyes flicked from me to her husband. I sought desperately to think of something to say—something that would allay the suspicion now agitating her.

“It would be presumptuous of me to suggest such a thing,” I said, keeping my voice calm, my smile serene.

“It would, indeed,” Sarah retorted.

Craig arose. “You’ve said enough, Sarah. You know as well as I—and Emily—that, in desperation, we’ve been trying to think of some way to rid this house of the demons that seem to have taken possession of it. I believe the idea of a ball is an excellent one. A violent spirit is sure to avoid it. Of course, we have to do our part also. Try to do yours, Sarah, by stilling your malignant tongue. And now, please excuse me. I have a great deal of book work to do.”

He arose and left the room with an abruptness that betrayed an inner anger, one he’d had difficulty in suppressing. Bart spun halfway around on the stool.

“Sarah, you owe Sharon an apology.”

“It seems as if I’m forever apologizing to her.”

“If so,” he rebutted, “I’ve never heard you.”

“I believe I’ll go upstairs,” Emily said quietly. “I have a headache.”

“Brought on, no doubt, by your dear sister, who can’t bear anyone enjoying the slightest degree of happiness when she is so miserable.”

“I should slap your face,” Sarah said, rising to her full height.

“If that would serve to get any of the poison out of your system, please do so,” Bart replied, rising slowly and moving over to face her.

For a moment she looked as if she would, but then she turned abruptly and left the room.

Emily arose and faced me. “I apologize for her, Sharon. That is, I do if she is wrong. If she isn’t, God help

you if you are scheming something." She too left the room.

I felt a desperate weariness, not so much physical as mental. When both women's footsteps had faded and we heard the sounds of doors closing, Bart moved to my side. His hands lightly grasped my shoulders.

"I don't know what to say to soften what they've already said," he commented. "Only don't look like that. Don't let what they say torture you."

"I did suggest it," I said quietly. "That's why I feel so terrible."

"You really did Emily a favor. I hadn't seen her look so nearly vivacious in a long time as I did tonight before you entered and Sarah started another tirade against you."

"Her excitement was quite evident today when she talked to me about the ball," I said, with a half smile. "I was hoping this might bring her and Craig together again."

"Sarah would never permit that and, in truth, I don't believe Emily cares. Don't forget, the idea was that the liveliness of the ball and people about might chase the evil spirits away, not regenerate a marriage."

"The odds against happiness in this house seem overwhelming," I observed. "Even for Cassie."

"Not as long as you're here," Bart said. "There's a package in the hall I brought back for her from New Orleans."

"Oh, thank you, Bart," I exclaimed, "for making this ugliness end on a bright note. She'll be so happy."

"It's not much, but at least it's a start." He bent forward and lightly kissed my brow. "You are an enchantress, you know. A beautiful one."

A sudden gasp made us both turn, but no one was in sight. However, we did hear hurrying footsteps, followed quickly by the stairs being traversed hastily and, finally, the slamming of a door.

"Who was it?" Bart asked.

"I don't know. Either Sarah—or Emily."

"If it was Sarah, beware. In fact, perhaps we'd both better be on guard. If Emily, I'd still say, be watchful."

"It could have been your brother."

"Yes," he agreed. "It could very well have been."

"I'm going upstairs. I'm quite fatigued."

"I think you'd be safer there. Better lock your door."

And I did go upstairs, and I did lock my door, but I paced my room restlessly. Sleep was out of the question. I was nervous, frightened, concerned. Over Emily and Sarah? I wondered. Or was it Craig who'd seen us? Would he read something into Bart's gesture that was not there? And what if he did? He was a married man—Emily's husband. He'd have no right to bear the slightest resentment. Or did I want him to? My hand pressed against my mouth in utter shock as sudden realization came to me and my heartbeat quickened at the thought.

I loved Craig Beaumont! A man who was not mine to love. As if I weren't beset by enough problems, I now had another to plague me. Pray God, neither Sarah nor Emily ever learned of it. And what if it had been either of the women who'd observed Bart place a casual kiss on my brow? Would that present such a problem? I didn't think so. Certainly Emily wouldn't care. Sarah was older than Bart by a few years. I doubted she really had any romantic inclinations toward him.

I had to stop thinking and calm myself. The idea of a glass of milk was refreshing, so I went downstairs to the kitchen. The door to the library was closed, but I couldn't see if light drifted from beneath it, for the hall was well-lighted. Even the kitchen had two lamps glowing. My eyes were attracted by a dish of delicious-looking chocolate and vanilla cookies which sat on the center table. I transferred some of them to a plate, poured a glass of milk, and then made my lonely way upstairs to my room. Outside Cassie's door, there sat a small package. A gift from Bart which I'd let her find tomorrow.

I sat near the window looking out over the estate. There wasn't much to be seen by night, but strangely, I felt calmer. Perhaps the intense quiet was responsible.

I nibbled one of the cookies. It had a strange, flat taste. They were certainly not up to Flo's regular baking. Hers were lighter, better flavored and baked to a tasty crispness. These were slightly soggy. I had eaten but half a one and I left the rest. I drank my milk, arose to get my brush, resumed my window chair and took down my hair. I began to apply the brush, when suddenly my stomach felt as if it were about to boil over. I had a strange,



metallic taste in my mouth and, two minutes later, I was sick. Once my stomach was empty, I felt a little better. I drank copious amounts of water because I was exceptionally thirsty. I wondered what in the world could have happened and I laid the blame upon my ever-increasing nervousness and worry. I'd certainly been having more than my share of it and now, with Bart's casual kiss, things were even worse.

As soon as I felt able, I brought the plate of cookies and the empty glass to the kitchen. Lamps still burned downstairs and tonight I felt no fear. I put my untouched cookies back with the others, washed and dried the plate and glass, put them away and went back to my room. It was late and I was now tired.

I entered Cassie's room and blew out the lamp. She slept well. The doors to Sarah's and Emily's rooms were tightly closed and no light shown beneath them. I re-entered my room, went to bed and though I lay wide-eyed for a time, I finally drifted off to sleep.

## ELEVEN

I awoke early, and immediately the problems of the night before came to mind. My common sense told me to pack and get out of here. Whereas before only Sarah had shown any outward enmity toward me, now I had Emily's as well. That is, I would have if she believed what Sarah had implanted in her mind—that the ball had been my idea and not Craig's.

I wondered if he had remained downstairs late so as not to have a confrontation with his wife. I would have liked mightily to know, yet I could think of no way of finding out. I could only let matters take their course. That would be wisest and once I'd decided to do that, I cleared my mind of the troublesome thoughts.

There was no one in the dining room when I entered it, but I called out a greeting to Flo. A moment later, she brought in a warm plate of eggs, bacon and fried potatoes.

"Mr. Craig left early for plantation work," she told me. "Mr. Bart, he's sleeping. Miss Sarah and Miss Emily sent for trays. Sometimes I feel that I'm as much a maid as I am a cook."

"They sent for trays?" I asked, puzzled. "Whom do they have to send? Mr. Craig?"

"No, ma'am. Cassie came down and I gave her her breakfast."

"That child rises early."

"The reason for that is she likes to see her papa. About the only chance she gets to see him alone."

"I suppose she does the same thing I used to do."

Flo smiled, but shook her head negatively. "You always woke up your mama and papa when you were little. But they lived like married folks are supposed to, sharing the

same bedroom. Miss Emily has her own room."

"I didn't know," I said in sudden surprise. I could more easily now understand Craig's indecorous behavior of two nights ago. I switched the subject quickly.

"Thank you for the cookies," I said.

"What cookies?" she asked quickly.

"The plate of them you left on the kitchen table."

"I made no cookies yesterday. I left none."

"But there was a plate of chocolate and vanilla sugar cookies, Flo. I not only saw them, I helped myself. I left the rest on the table."

"Well, they weren't on the table when I came to work, or anyplace else for that matter, 'cause I been cleanin' the pantry. I sure can't explain the cookies."

Nor could I, so I dismissed them from my mind with the passing thought that perhaps Sarah or Emily had made them as a gesture of goodwill and then, finding that I'd but nibbled on one, threw the rest of them out in sheer pique. That could very well be what happened. No wonder they didn't taste like anything Flo made.

Cassie awaited me in the classroom and we started our lessons immediately.

"Cassie," I asked, "if your papa was working on the plantation, where would he likely be?"

"I guess he'd be down fighting the weevils. This is the month they get bad. I used to go down and pick them off, but he won't let me anymore. Not alone."

"Let's go there," I suggested. I had to know if Emily was angry with me. "If it's not too far for you."

"I can walk it easily," she said. "I'd like to."

So we crossed the expanse of the estate and continued on down a dirt service road along which our shoes became red with the dust from this rich Louisiana soil. Presently, we could look down at the long rows of cotton. Papa used to grow more than this, but I saw that Craig had put many of the acres in tobacco, which I knew was a rapidly-growing industry and would likely be profitable to the farmer.

A swarm of men and women were at work in the fields. Besides a small shed, which Papa once used as a paying office, Craig's horse was grazing.

Craig stood up as we entered, his serious features



breaking into a smile of welcome. "Good afternoon. How nice of you both to pay me a visit." He squatted down, his arms opening to Cassie. "Come here and give me a kiss."

She rushed to him and he held her fondly. "You look very pretty today," he said, leaning back to regard her.

"That's because I'm excited about the ball we're going to have," she replied. "Sharon's going to let me wear one of her dresses."

"Don't you think you're a little small?" he asked, laughingly.

"Oh, Papa, not one of her grownup dresses," she said, regarding him tolerantly. "She has a dress in the attic. It has a big hoopskirt and she wore it to a party when she was a little girl. She said I can wear it."

"It's yours, dear. Remember me telling you when your papa bought the house, everything in it belonged to him."

"It's still very nice of you," Craig said, rising.

"I think it's even nicer of Cassie to want to wear it," I replied. "It makes me very happy."

"Papa, may I go pick some weevils?"

"Yes, but only for a few minutes. It's about time for your nap, isn't it?"

"I didn't have one yesterday," she said. "But I had to help Sharon with the invitations."

He nodded approval. "Good girl."

We watched her run down to a row of plants and start inspecting each one carefully.

"Have you received any replies to the invitations yet?" Craig asked.

"Truly I don't know. I haven't seen anyone."

"I'm sorry about last night," he said. "You may find this difficult to believe, but I live in fear of your leaving."

His remark surprised me and it obviously showed, for he added quickly, "Mostly for Cassie's sake. She's become very attached to you. You've made her feel important."

"Thank you," I said. "Children should feel that way and for a very good reason: they are. Also, giving them responsibilities helps them acquire confidence."

"She told me this morning how you let her use the seal on the envelopes. It was thoughtful on your part, particularly since it wasn't at all necessary."

"It made Cassie feel a part of what's going on."

"I know why you did it. Cassie told me everything that was said in the classroom yesterday when her mother came to speak to you about the ball."

"Did you tell Emily it was my idea?"

"No. I talked with her last night and commented that life would be a lot happier here if Sarah could control her tongue, and not let her imagination run away with her."

"Then your wife doesn't suspect I suggested it."

"I don't think so," he said with a smile meant to reassure me. "In any case, don't worry about it."

A sudden thought occurred to me. "I just remembered something. Bart brought Cassie a gift from New Orleans yesterday. She didn't mention it to me."

"That's strange. She's always very grateful for any attention shown her. I suppose you suggested it to him."

By way of answer, I said, "Bart loves the child."

"He's good to her," Craig agreed. "But I know you're responsible. You've brought a new sense of value to The Pillars since we came here. I only wish some of it would rub off on Sarah and my wife."

"I fear Emily is too much under the influence of her sister."

"Perhaps," he said, though he sounded dubious. "It's a topic I find dangerous to discuss without sounding disloyal."

"I know," I said quietly. "And now I must get Cassie. I've taken up enough of your time."

"Oh, that reminds me, I don't believe you know that Cassie saw Janelle, after the dogs. . . ."

My eyes widened in horror. "No, I didn't. What a shock that must have been for the child."

"Yes. In the excitement, everyone forgot about her and she came out of the house while we were gathered around Janelle's torn body. Cassie had nightmares for weeks afterward."

"She's still affected by it," I said, remembering her tight grip on my hand yesterday. "I'll be careful to keep her away from that area."

"Sharon, if you can endure what you've been forced to go through here, please don't leave us. I keep praying things will straighten out. When they do and you should wish to leave then, I'll understand. But now, I don't

believe we could get anyone whom Cassie would take to as she has to you."

"Thank you, Mr. Beaumont." I lowered my eyes, for I was pleased and warmed by his words. "And now I must bring Cassie back to the house for her nap."

I left the hut and called to her. She came willingly and we returned to the house.

"Did you find a package outside your door this morning?" I asked.

"No. What kind of package?"

"It was a gift from your uncle. He brought it from New Orleans. He placed it there last night."

She frowned thoughtfully, then brightened. "Maybe Papa took it."

"No. I just spoke to him about it."

"Maybe Uncle Bart took it back."

"Ridiculous," I said, laughing. "Indeed, he didn't. He was the one who told me about it. We'll go back to the house and find it."

"Was it a big package?"

"No."

"Maybe Flo thought it was just old paper to be thrown out."

"I'm sure she didn't. It was nicely wrapped with paper that had green and violet stripes."

"Then what could have happened to it?" she asked, perturbed.

"We'll find out when we return."

And we did, for I believed I knew who, in all likelihood, had taken it. I told Cassie to slip out of her dress and I went directly to Sarah's room. I knocked quietly and the door opened almost immediately.

"What do you wish?"

"Bart brought a gift from New Orleans for Cassie and left it outside her door. She says it wasn't there this morning. Do you know anything about it?"

For a moment I thought she was going to deny any knowledge of it, but then she turned and walked across the room to the fireplace. The package had been thrown in there. I was so angry that I almost snatched it from her when she handed it to me.

"I thought it was something the child had thrown out."



"You thought no such thing," I retorted, taking no pains to hide my anger. "You did that deliberately. Not even a child is safe from your hatefulness."

"I don't think any man is safe from yours," she paused and then added, maliciously, "enchantress."

The door slammed in my face. It was as well, for I can well imagine my astonishment was something to behold. It was Sarah who had seen Bart and me last night. To eavesdrop? If Craig had been there, perhaps. But Bart, no. Then I remembered she'd left the room in a high state of anger and the needlework, with which she constantly busied her hands, was still in her chair. That was what she had returned for. A shudder passed through me as I recalled two nights ago when Craig had lost his head, taken me in his arms and kissed me. If she had ever seen that . . . I dared not think of what might have happened.

I returned to Cassie's room. She was sitting expectantly by the window. She jumped up and ran to me, a cry of glee escaping her at sight of the nicely-beribboned box. She removed the ribbons carefully, slipped off the wrapping and opened the box. Inside was a skipping rope, with colorful wooden handles.

"A skipping rope," I exclaimed. "How nice."

"I never had one before," she replied, and immediately tried using it. The rope caught around one ankle and she almost fell.

"I think you'd better try it in the hall downstairs where there's more room," I suggested. "And after your nap."

"You're right, Sharon," she said, setting it down on the table alongside her bed. "And I'll thank Uncle Bart when I see him. That's the first time he's brought me back a gift."

"I suppose he decided you are growing up now and it's about time started getting them."

She laughed, jumped into bed and let me place the coverlet over her. "What are you going to do?"

"Go downstairs and talk with Flo about the ball. She was to get extra help. I want to know if she did."

"Will the ladies and gentlemen come?"

"I'm sure they will. And some of them have little girls your age. You'll meet them soon."

"I hope so. It's lonely here. At least, it was until you came."

"You need friends your own age and I'm going to see that you have them."

"Will Mama let me?"

"Of course. Once she meets their parents." I knew I was speaking recklessly, for I had no idea if Emily would allow other children here. Or if she consented, Sarah would probably raise a fuss and make things so disagreeable for the youngsters, they'd not wish to return.

After a few more questions, Cassie settled down and I left the room. Downstairs, I sought out Flo who appeared in a high state of excitement.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, Miss Sharon. Everything's right. Carriages been comin' up the drive since you and Miss Cassie went out. Everybody's comin' and I'm sure it's 'cause you're here."

"Fiddlesticks," I scoffed. "They're curious to meet the Beaumonts. I'm glad. Does Miss Emily know yet?"

Flo nodded. "I brought the letters up to her. She's real pleased."

"I'm sure she is. Now for something just as serious. Were you able to persuade anyone to come here to help you with the work?"

"I had a time, but I finally ended up with six."

"That ought to do it. Will some of them come the night of the ball to help serve refreshments?"

"I tended to that too, so don't you worry none. This is goin' to be a real grand affair if Miss Sarah minds her own business."

"I think Miss Emily will see to that because I believe she really wants to have a housewarming and what more splendid way to have it than with music and dancing and liveliness."

"Might even take the curse off the place," Flo observed.

"There's no curse on the place," I said flatly.

"Somethin's not right here."

"Well, let's not dwell on it. When will the people come to help?"

"Startin' tomorrow mornin'. There'll be lots of activity in the house. But you won't have to worry about it. I'll

supervise the servants, just like Mr. Craig supervises the plantation. That is, if Miss Emily will let me and I think she will. She had a real nice talk with me a little while ago. Sure gonna have a lot of food and drink here."

"Which means there'll be plenty for you and your friends too," I remarked, laughing.

"And don't think we won't enjoy it," she replied, her laughter joining mine.

I was on my way to my room when I met Emily in the hall. In her hand was a tall stack of envelopes. "I'm so pleased, Sharon. So far, not one refusal."

"I'm not surprised," I replied, hoping I sounded convincing.

"I am," she said quietly. "We were quite inhospitable when we first moved here. Perhaps now it will be different."

"I hope so. Once your husband sees how lively and gay the house is with people in it, he'll probably want to entertain more often."

"Oh," she shrugged indifferently, "I wasn't thinking of my husband. He's busy enough. But my life is too idle. Of course, my sister is a very retiring person and I have her to think about."

"A wise wife never lets her sister come before her husband," I said daringly.

"Sharon, I know you're fond of Cassie and you believe I'm not a very good mother. You may be right. However, though I don't mind in the least your taking Cassie in hand—in fact, I'm quite relieved—don't try to make me over—or my husband."

"I'm sorry, Emily," I apologized. "I had no thought of being impudent. It's just that . . . I think you could be happier . . . if Sarah. . . ."

"Please," she raised a restraining hand, "keep my sister out of it. She's a lonely person. That's why I overlook a lot of what she says. You don't know what it's like to be her age and never have received a marriage proposal."

"I suppose not," I said quietly. "But I hope that if I remain a maiden lady, I will not become embittered."

"I doubt, for you, that day will come," she said casually. "I don't mean you're a flirt. So far as I am con-



cerned, your behavior here has been quite decorous. I'm sure it will continue to be. And now, you must excuse me. I have to speak with Flo. Oh, yes—one thing more—please keep Cassie out of the way for the rest of the week."

"I will," I promised, smiling politely, but underneath I felt quiet anger. If I'd never known before, I was quite aware now that her child meant nothing to her. Never had and, quite likely, never would.

I went up to my room, lowered the window shades to darken it and lay down. I felt quite spent, emotionally. Perhaps because so much of everything I felt had to be kept bottled up inside me. How long I lay there I had no idea, but gradually a drowsiness came over me and I gave way to it.

## TWELVE

When I awoke, it was dark and, for a moment, I was confused. Then I recalled drawing the shades and lying down. As my eyes adjusted themselves, I could see traces of daylight evident around the window frame. I didn't recall when I'd done such a thing as nap in the afternoon. I'd never felt the need of it, but I was glad I had, for it had refreshed me and I couldn't arouse a pang of guilt. Not even where Cassie was concerned.

And, as was usual when I was alone, my mind turned to the mystery of this house. I wondered why there'd been no further manifestations of the ghost. Many hours had passed since the seance and we had been, so far, unmolested. It could well be the shade was satisfied with the havoc it had wrought here. I certainly hoped so.

I arose, bathed my face and went to Cassie's room. She was already in bed when I entered and she looked drowsy, but she managed a giggle.

"You fell asleep, Sharon," she told me, sounding pleased. "Mama said not to waken you because you must have been tired. I told her we were both tired on account of all the invitations we'd written yesterday."

"That must have been it," I said agreeably.

"You'd better have your supper. We've eaten already."

"Wouldn't you like me to read to you?"

"Not tonight. I'm very tired. I've been practicing jump rope. Papa said I'm doing very well. I thanked Uncle Bart."

"I'll see how well you do tomorrow." I lit the lamp, turned the wick down, kissed the child good night and went downstairs.

Flo was in the kitchen and the spicy fragrance of a ham

she'd cooked still lingered in the air. "You're gettin' just like the others," she complained good-naturedly. "Go sit down and I'll bring your supper to you."

"I fell asleep," I admitted. "But I'm not hungry, Flo. I'll fix myself something later. Just now, I'd like to get a little air."

"Don't you go too far from the house," she warned. "Remember them dogs."

"I'll be careful."

The night air was warm and pleasant, so I walked only to the summerhouse and sat there for a few moments. I heard Flo's husband come for her in his wagon. That meant the kitchen was now clear. I could fend for myself and that was what I wished. It was almost dark when I returned to the house. There was no one about and I proceeded to the kitchen. I found the ham in the ice box so I made a generous sandwich, ate it with a glass of milk and felt quite satisfied.

I returned to my room and there I found a tray on the bureau. A spotless napkin covered it. I supposed Flo couldn't, in all good conscience, leave without providing me with my supper. Despite her querulousness, she saw to it that no one in the house went hungry.

I raised the napkin and saw generous slices of the same ham, covered with a sauce containing raisins and nuts. It still smelled delicious. There was a compote, a baked potato split and buttered, some green beans, bread and butter. A tasty, delicious supper, but I was quite unable to eat any of it. I left the tray there and went back downstairs. Perhaps, later on, I might enjoy the compote. Then I'd bring the tray down to the kitchen and wash the dishes.

I still felt refreshed so I went to the drawing room, lit the lamps and picked up the latest issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*. I soon became immersed in a story and it wasn't until I finished that I realized the house was as silent as a tomb. I wondered where everyone could be, but then I supposed Emily must be quite exhausted. She was completely engrossed in making plans for the ball which would take place in five more days. I wondered how many more acceptances had been received by the day's end.

I found myself listening for rappings or scratchings, or



the sound of sobbing, or even my name called sweetly and gently. Then I thought of the wild wind and objects hurtling through the air and crashing to the floor and I prayed that none of it would occur.

An hour must have gone by. Then I did hear something, but not inside the house. It was a sharp yapping sound, like that made by a dog. I went to the window and peered out. There was a half moon and visibility was quite good. At first I saw nothing, but then there was a movement in some brush not far from the house. If that was a wild dog, I wanted to know it, for if they were coming this close, Craig should be told of it.

I opened the door and stepped onto the porch. Half a dozen dogs came out of the shadows, without seeing me, and slunk across the front lawn. They proceeded in a straight line, as if they followed a leader. I couldn't tell what breed they were, but they were certainly big animals. Without turning, I started to move inside when the last one in line swung around and saw me. He gave a particularly nasty snarl and, unless I imagined it, bared his teeth at me. I hastily stepped into the hall and closed the door.

I'd tell Craig tomorrow—or tonight if I heard him about. He'd certainly do something about it, for those dogs presented a distinct hazard to everybody around here. The horses would have to be locked away too and any other animals protected. The dogs must be getting hungry to come foraging this close.

In my room, I looked out of the window again and saw them moving about, boldly. One of them even raised his head and bayed at the moon, as if defying it and every living thing. On inspiration, I raised the window, held the platter of ham far enough out so the contents would land on the ground. I tipped the platter and let the meat slide off.

The dogs may not have heard this, but they certainly smelled the ham because they came toward it in a snarling, yapping pack. There were ten or more of the vicious animals and they were soon fighting among themselves for the tidbits on the ground.

Finally it was over, and they trotted off. I hoped they'd be satisfied for the night, though how that much ham

could have fed all of them was beyond me.

I carried the tray to the kitchen, where I emptied the remaining food into the garbage pail, washed and wiped the china and silver, put them away and decided there was little use in waiting for Craig. He was undoubtedly out and, very likely, would return so late I'd not be awake.

I took the magazine to my room and read for the better part of another two hours. Then I looked in on Cassie. The child was asleep, so I put out the lamp and returned to my room.

Though I'd kept half an ear open for any sounds in the house, I'd heard nothing, and rather than leave the few lamps I'd lit burn all night, I went downstairs to blow them out. I used the lamp on the upstairs hall table to light my way and, before I extinguished it, I glanced down the corridor to see if even a slight ray of illumination glowed beneath Emily's or Sarah's door. All was in darkness.

Back in my room, I undressed, brushed my hair and performed my ablutions. Once in bed, surrounded by darkness, I found myself listening again for sounds of manifestations, or of my name being called. It was a blessed relief to lie there in silence and feel myself drifting off to sleep.

The sun had scarcely touched the horizon when I awoke. I dressed quickly, caught up my hair in a chignon and looked in on Cassie. She was still asleep, so I went downstairs and prepared my breakfast. By the time I'd finished, daylight filled the sky and birds were chirping and trilling merrily.

I went outside to enjoy it more thoroughly, my heart lifting at the sounds. I found myself wishing Cassie were awake so she, too, could observe and enjoy the sight of a humming bird, seemingly motionless in midair, while it partook of the nectar from the heart of a gardenia.

I moved along, almost wanting to break into a run so lighthearted did I feel. Then I came to a sudden standstill, for not fifty yards from the rear of the house I saw a dog. It was a mouse-colored animal, very large and lean looking—and very dead.

I threw a small stone at it, then drew closer and finally I nudged it with my foot. The body was stiff and cold. I

shivered and went on. A second one was lying under a bush which had been ravaged by teeth and claws as if the animal bit and fought in its dying agony. A third lay curled up just off the path and a fourth looked as if it had simply dropped in its tracks.

I couldn't understand this. Four dead dogs in one night? There wasn't a mark on them, so no one could have lain in wait to thin out or destroy the pack. They'd simply died. But how and why had they met their deaths?

I went on to the cemetery, though I should not have, for I felt a growing nervousness. Nevertheless, I said a prayer for Papa and Mama and added another for poor Janelle whom I had never known and who had died under the fangs and claws of the wild dogs.

Then I gave a sharp little cry as sudden realization came to me. Last night I'd thrown the contents of my plate to the ground for the dogs to eat. The food must have been poisoned.

I remembered the cookies, which Flo said she hadn't made or left for me. I'd paid little heed to that unexplained event, but this made it take on a measure of significance. The cookie, even the small amount I ate, had made me quite ill. And then I knew.

Someone was trying to poison me! It had reached that stage, but I had to be absolutely sure of it. I fled back to the house, running as fast as I could. Flo had arrived by now and was tying on her apron. She greeted me brightly.

"You had your breakfast already?"

"Yes," I replied breathlessly. "Tell me, Flo, did you bring a tray of food to my room last night?"

"Now whatever for, when you were out gallivanting in the night? Food don't stay hot. My cooking ain't meant to be served cold."

"Someone else must have prepared it and carried it upstairs for me."

My observation apparently satisfied her. "Sure wasn't me. This is gonna be a busy day. The help'll all be here in about an hour."

"Good," I approved. "Has Mr. Craig come down?"

"No, ma'am. Which means he probably stayed at the hut all night. He does that often when he's busy. Might as well. He sure enough won't be missed here."



"I must see him. If Cassie comes down, tell her I'll be back shortly. And don't let her outside the house."

"Something happen? Somebody hurt?" she asked in quick alarm.

"Nobody's hurt," I replied, not certain she should know what had happened. I didn't want either her or her friends frightened away from here. Not with the work which had to be done in the house.

I found Craig in the shack. He was in need of a shave and was drinking coffee from a mug, but he jumped up in surprise at sight of me, his face displaying concern.

"What's wrong, Sharon?" he asked. "Don't tell me something happened in the house last night."

"Something was meant to happen; but fortunately for me, unfortunately for the murderer, nothing did."

"Murderer!" He moved around his desk, took my arm and guided me to his swivel chair. "Sit down! You're quite unnerved."

I nodded. "I have every right to be. The dogs. . . ."

"They attacked you?"

"No. And I'd better begin with the night before last when I found a plate of cookies on the kitchen table. I was tempted by them and took some to my room. I took a bite of one of them, but it had an unpleasant taste. I ate no more of it, though I drank the glass of milk. I was quite ill afterward. Yesterday morning, I asked Flo about them, but she told me she didn't make any and knew nothing about them."

"What makes you think they were poisoned?"

"Hear me out, please. I lay down yesterday afternoon and fell asleep."

"I know. I missed you at supper."

"Flo was still in the house when I wakened, but I told her I wasn't hungry. I took a stroll outside and came in later, to make a sandwich for myself. When I went upstairs I found a tray of food in my room. Naturally, I wasn't hungry so I left it there, figuring to partake of only the compote later. I went back downstairs and read awhile. I heard sounds and saw the dogs, though they didn't attack me. Nonetheless, I preferred the privacy of my room so I retired for the night. But when I looked out of my window, they were still about and I threw the ham

out to them, hoping it would satisfy them and they'd go away. I went outside just now to get some fresh air and to visit the cemetery. On my way, I found four wild dogs—all dead. Obviously poisoned, because there were no marks on them."

"Good heavens," he cried out. "Show me where they are. Move, girl. This is serious."

We walked rapidly to the house. I led him to the four dead animals and he quickly examined them.

"Poisoned all right," he said. "The insides of their mouths are black. Have you any idea who did this?"

"None, I swear it."

"Someone is trying to kill you," he said. "And this is the third attempt?"

"The third?" I frowned in puzzlement.

"Have you forgotten the stones on the stairs?"

I nodded. "I believe I'm far more terrified by the attempts on my life made by some human, than I am of any of the ghostly manifestations of violence that I've witnessed."

"But who?" he asked in desperation. "Who wants to kill you?"

"The only one I can think of is Sarah, though I've done nothing to cause her to hate me."

"I doubt she would need a reason." Bitterness edged his voice.

"Could a ghost do such a thing as poison a live person?"

"It sounds ridiculous, but I believe anything could happen here."

"Place a lethal drug on food and leave it for me to consume?" I shook my head in disbelief. "I can't accept that."

"You've seen articles lifted and hurled about in this house, Sharon," he argued.

"You're suggesting my mother," I said resentfully.

"Who else?" he asked.

"Why not someone pretending to be my mother? I'll grant that the sounds I heard seemed as if it was she, but cannot a spirit assume any voice that pleases it? Can this ghost not caress me with a warm touch, whisper my name in an endearing fashion in order to trap me somehow?"

You know how the ghost acts when angry."

"I suppose anything is possible for those restless spirits," he said.

"I cannot, and I never have, believed the ghost which is so destructive is that of my mother. Nor will I believe it now. She was gentle and kind, without a trace of viciousness or temper. Even death couldn't have altered her character. So we must be faced with another who hides under the identity of my mother somehow."

Craig said, "The only suggestion I have is that you go away. Far away from this house and the being which haunts it. If this keeps on, I shall burn it to the ground. This presence which we fear is dangerous, perhaps to others as well as you."

"No," I said slowly and firmly. "I will not be driven away. Where could I go that a vengeful ghost can't find me? What I must determine is why this ghost seeks vengeance, for I have done nothing to offend anyone, living or dead."

"Tell me this, why should a ghost seek vengeance against you? Search your mind and memory. Can you think of any reason, however vague?"

"No, of course not," I replied promptly.

"Then why do you assume the ghost is trying to kill you? I am of the opinion it's the other way around. Some human wishes you dead and the ghost is using what means is available to prevent this."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know. *I just don't know*. There has to be a reason, one you're likely not aware of. Nor I, but it exists and we must find it. First of all, I'm going to take the four dead dogs to the city and see if a doctor friend of mine can tell me what sort of poison killed them. Then I'll try to discover if such a poison was sold to anyone who lives in this house."

"At least we have something definite to follow," I said.

"Please be most careful. I'll try not to be gone long. Perhaps it would be best if you and Cassie remained in your room. With the door locked."

"That might frighten Cassie, and she's been through enough. We mustn't alarm her further."

"Very well. Perhaps, if you carry on as if nothing hap-



pened, no one will suspect we know about the attempted murder. I have to shave and dress first, but I'll be on my way as soon as possible and be back by the middle of the afternoon, I'm sure."

"It would be wise to get the carcasses of the animals out of sight before the help comes. If they learn of the poisoning, they'll turn back."

"I know," Craig agreed. "Did you tell Flo?"

"No, though I doubt it would influence her to leave. Nor do I think she would tell the others."

"I agree. She's very loyal, but I don't think she'd stay here if you left."

"I gave you my word I'd do no such thing."

"I'm grateful, Sharon. Very grateful."

Our eyes met for a brief moment, and there was a warmth in his I'd never seen before. It sent a glow of excitement through me which I quickly stifled. I must not misinterpret gratitude for a stronger emotion. I also reminded myself I'd been hired for the position of governess.

I managed to speak in a normal tone. "Good luck, Mr. Beaumont. I doubt Cassie is up yet, so I'll go to my room and rest awhile. I must say finding those four dead dogs was quite a shock, especially after I realized what must have happened to them." Shaken by the thought, I crossed the lawn and entered the house.

However, I had no intention of trying to rest in terms of lying down. Rather, I wanted to concentrate on this latest evidence of something being very wrong in the household. Since someone was trying to poison me, I'd be stupid not to attempt to figure out who it was. I believed in the saying that forewarned is forearmed.

I thought of Sarah and recalled going to her room yesterday to question her about Cassie's gift which the child had not found. I'd not only retrieved the gift, but Sarah had practically sneered at me when she addressed me as "enchantress," the name Bart had called me twice—both times in fun. But she'd seen no humor in it. It obviously had irritated her. Could it be that she regarded him with serious intent? That she had formed an emotional attachment for him? I could scarcely believe such a thing, but if it was the case, she would certainly not wish

me well. However, would she go so far as to poison me, thinking I was competition for her? I didn't know and thus could make no accusation. But I would keep my eyes open.

Then there was Emily. She seemed to have changed since the idea of a ball had been broached to her and she'd busied herself making plans for it. She'd been cool toward me, but never mean and hateful, as her sister had been.

Thinking back, I recalled the statement she'd made to me when Sarah guessed I'd been the one who'd suggested the idea of the ball to Craig. Emily had apologized for Sarah's rudeness, then added a warning that if she did learn I ever deceived her, I would need God's help. Was she referring to the ball, or could she have meant I'd better not cast covetous eyes on her husband? I shuddered at the thought. I had not and I would not, but what if she learned about that night when, losing all control, he'd taken me in his arms and kissed me savagely? I wondered if she had found out about it in some way. If so, my life could well be in danger, for I knew, though she cared little about him, she'd never let him go.

I prayed that the mystery of this house would be soon cleared up. When I was certain of it, I'd take my leave. That might actually be soon, for certainly there'd been no further hauntings. But there was the ball and I wanted to be present for that. Once Emily met the fine people who lived hereabouts, she might well change. Mostly though, my concern was for Cassie, who needed playmates her own age. There were many living close by and I would see to it that their parents would at least catch a glimpse of the child the night of the ball. I knew they'd be as enchanted with her as I was.

Then I thought once again of the spectral happenings which had taken place here. I knew so little about such things and had always scoffed at the very idea of their existence. Even now, after all that had happened, I still found myself with doubts, weak ones—yes—but I was looking for some sort of trick to make it seem there was a ghost in this house, when all along, the destructive and vindictive actions were those of a human.

It must be a human, I assured myself, and the thought calmed me, filling me with a sort of serenity. Yet I knew

well that it boded ill for me, made my danger greater. Nonetheless, I closed my eyes and rocked slowly. It was as if some gentle presence was near and would prevent any harm from coming to me. Foolish reasoning, perhaps, but I liked the feeling it gave me.

"Mama," I said. "Mama . . . is it you? Isn't there some way you can tell me? Please . . . I'm so bewildered and uneasy most of the time. It's only when I feel the nearness of you that I find rest, and I can't even be sure it is you."

Very, very gently, it seemed to me, fingers lightly touched my brow. Or were they lips? Mama often used to kiss me that way, her manner of expressing approval of some little task I'd performed.

"You *are* here," I said. "Moments ago, I found myself doubting you, but how can I, when I feel your presence? Mama, I'm in great danger. I need your help. Is there some way . . . ?"

"Sharon . . . Sharon. . . ." The voice was barely audible. I sat upright. "Yes . . . yes, you can speak. . . ."

The voice had faded, the strange warmth I'd felt was gone, all the uncertainty and the inward terror were back, just as if nothing had happened, as if no voice had come to me. I arose and flung myself down across the bed.

But I was practical enough to realize that I couldn't spend my life being frightened, nor sorrowing over matters beyond my control. I was here mainly to teach Cassie and it was now time to begin the day's work. I washed my face, scrubbing it well to bring the blood to my cheeks and color the paleness in them. I opened my door and proceeded to the classroom at the end of the corridor. Cassie was already there. Her features brightened at sight of me.



## THIRTEEN

It was early afternoon, Cassie was taking her nap and I was in the summerhouse, mending a small tear in my white tulle ball dress. It wasn't new, but it had been worn only once, just before my mother's final illness, and I'd kept it wrapped in black tissue paper to prevent it from yellowing. The gown had youthful lines, a low satin bodice and a tulle bertha ornamented with a spray of wild roses.

Emily and Sarah had both left for New Orleans in the early morning and would be with the seamstresses the entire day. They'd selected patterns from *Godey's Ladies' Book*. Emily's dress was to be made of pink satin embroidered with pearls. Sarah would wear a canary yellow *crepe de chine* gown. The day was serene and the house bustled with activity. Emily had allowed Flo to supervise the help and the cleaning was proceeding very well. I hadn't gone to the ballroom to look at it, as I wished to wait until it was all ready.

I glanced up from my sewing to see Bart standing at the foot of the stairs. A smile touched his mouth as our eyes met. I'd been so preoccupied with my work that I'd had no awareness of his presence. Also, the grass had muffled his approaching steps.

"A fellow can't sleep in that house with all the racket," he complained good-naturedly.

"It's too beautiful a day to sleep it away," I told him.

"You're right, but I didn't return home until just before dawn."

"Then you'd better change your habits until the ball, for I fear you'll not have much quiet until after that."

"I shall endure the inconvenience with great fortitude," he intoned, with mock solemnity.

I folded the dress carefully in the large box at my feet. "Seriously, Bart, I'm glad you came out. I have something to tell you."

"Nothing unpleasant, I hope," he said, taking a seat beside me.

"I'm afraid it is. Craig left for the city with the carcasses of four dogs which appeared to have been poisoned."

"A good way to get rid of the beasts, provided no tame animal gets the poison."

"I believe the poison was meant for me."

He sobered quickly as I launched into the story.

"You know," he said when I'd completed my tale, "that strikes a familiar note. I believe this isn't the first time such a thing has happened."

"You mean someone was killed by poison?" I asked incredulously.

"Not a human, but now I'm wondering if it wasn't meant for a person rather than an animal."

"Please tell me about it."

"Janelle found a fawn—very young and badly injured. She brought it to the house and she and Cassie fell in love with it. They bandaged the animal, spent a great deal of time with it, fed it and finally restored it to health. Of course, the fawn became very tame and practically a member of the family. Let me think now, it goes back . . . one forgets the details. . . ."

"How was poison connected with the fawn?" I prodded him.

"I'm thinking . . . Oh, yes . . . well, they finally had the animal running about like a pet. One day, Cassie . . . she gave the fawn a glass of milk Janelle had brought her. The fawn . . . died."

"Are you trying to tell me that Cassie poisoned the animal?"

"I really don't know what I'm trying to tell you. I never thought about this until now. As I heard it, Janelle gave Cassie the glass of milk. Cassie poured it into a dish which the fawn drank out of. It liked milk very much. In twenty minutes the fawn was dead and Cassie carried on very badly. She refused to eat or talk to anyone and she kept going out to the spot where we buried the animal."

I said, "Bart, I will not believe that Cassie found poison and deliberately killed the fawn. At that age she wouldn't know what was poisonous and what wasn't."

"I agree. I also know Janelle wasn't capable of it. She loved animals and nature and she wept as much as Cassie over the loss of the fawn. At the time we did consider poison, but the animal ate nothing except what was fed to him. I know it never occurred to anyone that the milk he drank could have contained poison. Yet it must have."

"How horrible. But who . . . and why? Was the animal examined for poison?"

"No," Bart admitted. "We thought his death was a result of his wounds. Perhaps his internal organs had been damaged. Yet, now that I think of it—he died so suddenly—like the dogs."

"If only Janelle were alive. Perhaps she could help. . . ." I covered my mouth with my hand.

"It's all right, Sharon," Bart said, but his eyes revealed the pain he still felt at mention of her name.

"Does it hurt to talk of her?"

"No. I still miss her terribly. I always will. You know, in a way you're much like her. Beautiful, warmhearted, gracious, a sense of humor."

"A pity she died before you could marry so you'd have had a little time together."

He nodded. "I never amounted to much before I met her. My sole interest was gambling and living the life of a *bon vivant*. She came here with Sarah. I fell in love with Janelle immediately, though I realized I was a sort of ne'er-do-well. So I had a man-to-man talk with Craig. He was pleased that, at last, I was interested in doing something worthwhile and he planted more acres which I set about supervising. I wanted Janelle to be proud of me. Then she was killed and, embittered, I went back to my gambling."

"It could be that her death is what has embittered Sarah."

"Sarah has always been perverse. Janelle was spirited. She had a fiery temper and would brook no interference from her aunts when either of them opposed her and she knew she was right. Sarah was very harsh with Janelle at times." He chuckled as he reminisced further. "Also, she



was a great one for imitating others and she could imitate her aunts and would, whenever they became unpleasant with her. I think her rebellious, uninhibited quality held great appeal for me because I'm like that myself."

"Her aunts must have felt quite miserable when she died."

"I suppose they did. I was so wrapped up in my own grief, I had no thought of others."

"Did it ever occur to you that you cannot run away from either your grief or memories?"

He nodded. "I'll never get over Janelle, now will I ever forget her. And now I must be off." He arose, started to leave and turned suddenly. "Why do you stay here?"

"For Cassie and, to a lesser degree, the ghost. It's supposed to be my mother. I can't believe it, but I'd like to find out."

"It wasn't a ghost who tried to poison you, you know."

"I know. Or if it was, it certainly wasn't my mother."

He nodded agreement, turned and headed for the rear of the house where he'd have to saddle a horse, for I knew Emily and Sarah had not yet returned with Marshal and the carriage.

I brought my gown back to the house, placed it in my room and looked in on Cassie. She was still sleeping, so I went downstairs again, deciding on a walk about the estate. My mind was filled with the problems of this house and I could more easily think about them while walking about.

I moved along, in leisurely fashion, still seeking answers. They were beginning to take on vague form, but I was far from real solutions. Bart's statements about his lost love had generated one idea in my mind, but it was still elusive.

I noticed a piece of decayed meat at the foot of the boxwood tree, but while this was certainly unusual, I didn't pay much attention to it until I noticed two other pieces of meat placed about. Not close to the house, but close enough to draw the dogs. Someone was placing meat out for them. I no longer wondered why they prowled about, nor why they were losing their fear of the humans the house contained. Could the meat be poisoned? I doubted it. But what a dangerous thing to do. I went to the stables, found some discarded newspapers and placed the meat on

it, careful not to touch it. I rolled the meat in the paper and put it on a table in the carriage house. Craig would certainly do something about it when I told him.

I heard the sound of a horse coming up the drive and wondered if it was Craig, or Emily and her sister. Fortunately, it was Craig and I told him about the meat as he unharnessed the animal. He frowned. I asked him about the dead dogs.

"The dogs were poisoned," he said. "The doctor did certain tests to ascertain the cause of their deaths and it's a fairly common poison obtainable from any apothecary. In large doses, it kills very quickly. Small amounts only make one ill and if the stomach is emptied in time, there is not likely to be a lethal effect. That's what saved you when you ate a small amount of the cookie."

"Bart told me about the fawn who died."

Craig frowned. "I'd forgotten that. Though I'd never voiced the thought, I suspected Janelle had given the fawn poison rather than have it turned free as I demanded. She always said it wouldn't be able to exist as a wild thing after having been brought up like a baby, and she'd rather see it dead than have it be slain in the forest."

"Bart knew nothing of that."

"Would you have told him under the circumstances? Janelle was killed only a few days later."

I said, "From what Bart told me, Janelle brought a glass of milk to Cassie, who was outside with the fawn."

"I know. I thought that was when Janelle administered the poison, knowing very well Cassie meant the milk for the fawn and not for herself."

"What if someone else put the poison in the milk, in the belief that Janelle meant it for herself and would drink it?"

"Everyone was at home that day. Sarah, Emily, Bart, Cassie, myself and Janelle. There was no friction in the household. Who of us would you believe guilty of such an act?"

"I don't know," I said wearily. "I can't imagine."

The next day, Craig returned to town with the meat. There was no toxic substance on it—at least, none that could be determined. He and Bart both maintained silence about the attempts on my life by poison. It was as I

wanted it, for the excitement of the ball permeated the household.

Cassie was ecstatic about her hoopskirt dress and I must admit, she looked a vision in it. It had row on row of beribboned ruffles, which fluttered with each step she took, and when she turned, she cried out with delight, for the ruffles winged out, seeming almost to take on life.

The ballroom was beautiful, the mirrored wall reflecting the prisms of the chandeliers. The gold chairs lining one wall glistened, as did the polished floor. I complimented Flo on it and she beamed.

"Like old times, when your mama and papa were alive," she kept saying over and over.

Emily fairly glowed and even Sarah seemed pleased by the excitement which filled the house. The caterers came early and the delicious fragrances of food filled the air, even drifting outside.

Cassie bubbled incessantly as the day grew closer, and kept jumping up and down, shouting, "Everybody's coming. Everybody's coming," until I finally had to quiet her.

But I was as pleased as she, for in response to the fifty invitations I had written, there were only two letters of regret. One was due to illness; the other, because the family would be away. The servants Flo had found for us sang softly as they went about, placing vases of flowers on tables, dusting furniture which already gleamed from assiduous polishing. One would never suspect that an aura of horror had hung over the abode, yet each night, when I lay quietly in my bed, I found myself listening for sounds, sighs, soft crying, a light touch, or even my name called. But I heard nothing, felt nothing. Perhaps, I thought, the shade had departed when the house started to come alive with preparations for the ball. There was no longer room for sadness, fear or violence.



## FOURTEEN

Finally, the day Cassie thought would never arrive was here. I gave her a bath that afternoon before she napped. Then I enjoyed the luxury of one myself. I didn't think the child would close an eye, but the soothing warm water, coupled with the exhaustion she felt because of the excitement attendant on all the preparations had its effect, and she slept until almost six that evening.

I dressed my hair very high, placing small, jeweled butterflies here and there in it. The constant activity and commotion which held the house in its grip all week had finally affected me. My hands trembled as I slipped into my gown and I noted, as I appraised myself in the full length mirror which stood in one corner of the room, that my cheeks were a vivid pink and my eyes sparkled.

I was just about to go into Cassie's room when I recognized Flo's soft knock on my door. The moment I opened it and saw her solemn features, I knew something was wrong.

"Miss Emily wants to see you in the front drawing room," she said. "Shoulda known it was too good to last. You look beautiful, too beautiful. They're gonna hate you for sure."

"What's happened?" I asked, moving along with her to the stairway.

"Don't ask me, child, but I got a feelin' it ain't good."

I had a similar feeling, but didn't voice it. Not only was Emily in the drawing room, but Sarah was as well and I knew that portended trouble. Craig stood beside Emily, an empty brandy glass in his hand, his mouth grim, his eyes angry.

"We've decided Cassie is not to come downstairs,"

Emily stated, the moment I'd entered the room.

"Surely you're not serious." My eyes darted from her to Sarah. The smug expression on her face assured me they were indeed. "This is your doing," I said to Sarah. "Everything has been going along so beautifully, you couldn't bear it. Cassie has been looking forward to this night. How can either of you wish to deny her?" I turned to Craig. "Surely, Mr. Beaumont, you're not in agreement."

"I am not," he said tersely.

"Then insist your daughter comes downstairs to view the ladies in their gowns and let them see what an adorable child she is."

"You talk as if she's yours," Sarah said, her eyes contemptuous.

"I love her as much as if she were," I said defiantly. "And she's coming down. You may dismiss me tomorrow if you wish, but tonight I am bringing Cassie downstairs. I couldn't bear making her so miserable."

"She dares to defy you, Emily," Sarah said.

"Yes, I do," I retorted. "And if Emily loves Cassie, she will defy you."

"How dare you question my affection for my daughter?" Emily exclaimed.

"We lost a niece," Sarah said. "Now, I suppose, you will lose your daughter to this—this enchantress."

"Are you saying she is attempting to replace me in my husband's affections?"

"Please, Emily," Craig broke in. "This is difficult enough without our playing games."

"She's a flirt and a schemer," Sarah said. "I saw her and Bart embrace. I heard him call her an enchantress."

"We did not embrace," I retorted.

"Do you deny he kissed you?" Sarah said, her voice rising. "Do you deny he called you an enchantress?"

"No," I retorted. "But it was not the way you make it sound."

Obviously, from the way Craig regarded me, this was the first he knew of it.

"I know how it looked," Sarah said. "And it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you hadn't practiced your wiles on my sister's husband."

"That's a lie. A horrible lie." I was close to tears, but I'd not give either woman the satisfaction of seeing how deeply they'd hurt me. "I've behaved like a lady in this house, as I have done everywhere all my life. You both know it and so does Mr. Beaumont. When Bart kissed me that night, it was nothing but a kiss of compassion because I'd been on the receiving end of Sarah's vitriolic tongue."

Emily stiffened. "You're to get out of this house immediately. I believe my sister spoke the truth when she said the ball was your idea. Was it, Craig? Tell me at once."

"It was," he admitted with a sigh. "But she was thinking of you and Cassie and of the way this house used to be."

"And the way she wants it to be again, with her as its mistress," Sarah's voice rose dramatically.

"Be quiet," Craig ordered. "The servants will hear you."

"I don't care," she retorted. "This hussy wants to marry Bart, but she'll never get him. He still loves Janelle."

"I know that," I replied. "He's told me."

"So now you want my husband." Emily's voice bespoke her scorn. "You'll never get him. Not even through our daughter."

"It's time for the guests to arrive," Craig said. "I want no more words. Sharon is to bring Cassie downstairs. After the child has been a part of the festivities, Sharon will bring her upstairs again. When she returns to the ball . . ."

"Sharon will not return to the ball. We don't need her," Emily stated.

"Do you think these people would have . . . ?" Craig began.

"Please, Mr. Beaumont." I raised an entreating hand. I knew he was about to tell his wife that they'd not have come if I hadn't been here, but that was of no importance. "I'll bring Cassie down. I want her to be seen. When I bring her upstairs, I shan't return."

"You must," Craig said. "My brother wishes to be your escort."

My eyes widened in surprise. "It's not necessary."

"It is," Craig contradicted. "And I insist on it. So does he."



"My daughter will not come down here with that woman," Emily asserted.

"Then let her come with you," I replied. "I shan't even put in an appearance, but I want Cassie to be a part of it—for just a little while."

Emily's smile was hateful. "How touching."

"I can see how you find it strange Sharon has formed such an attachment for the child," Craig said. "Particularly since you never had any heart for her."

"I never wanted her," Emily said spitefully. "You had to have an heir. Well, I gave you a daughter. I paid in full for my wedding ring. But remember this: I'll never give you your freedom, even though I cannot bear the sight of you and never could. You gullible fool!"

I closed my eyes in the hope of shutting out this ugly scene, but I would never shut out the stunned look which came over Craig's face, as Emily spewed forth her venom.

"May I be excused?" I asked.

"I beg of you, Sharon," Craig said, as I turned to go, "bring Cassie downstairs. There will be no words. Now or later. However, we will have an accounting tomorrow."

"We will, indeed," Emily said, her manner unrelenting. "You may bring my daughter downstairs, Miss Aldrich. Afterward, please do not monopolize my brother-in-law. His duty is to my sister."

"He doesn't wish to be with your sister," Craig said. "I can't imagine any man who would, but certainly not Bart. He's fun-loving, gay, warmhearted—everything Sarah is not."

"You've been against my presence since the day I set foot in this house," Sarah exclaimed.

"Do you wonder?" Craig demanded. "Besides, all you can think of is Bart marrying you. You're in love with him. Don't be such a fool. He's still in love with the memory of a young girl who captured his heart the moment she set foot in this house. He never had eyes for you."

I forgot my anger and hurt in the sudden astonishment of Craig's revelation. Sarah, for once, was at a loss for words. Emily's arm reached out to encircle her sister's waist.

"You've said enough," was Emily's only comment.

"The three of us have said too much," he replied wearily. "We can't take any of it back, but we'll do our best to forget it for the remainder of the evening."

I turned and fled upstairs to the sanctuary of my room. I had to calm myself before I faced Cassie. I only hoped she hadn't wandered out of her room to hear the harsh words drifting up to her. Her door was closed; I took time only to bathe my eyes in cool water, dry my face and touch it with rice powder. Certainly, there was enough color in my cheeks. The evening which I'd been looking forward to with such eagerness had suddenly turned into an ugly nightmare, except it wasn't a nightmare. It was real.

I forced all thought of that out of my mind and went to Cassie's room. "I thought you'd never come, Sharon," she chided. "I want to go down and see the people."

"We'll be on time," I said, managing a smile. "Nobody's there yet."

"You look beautiful," she said. "But kind of scared. Are you scared, Sharon? I mean, all the people coming."

I was scared, but not for that reason. I had a portentous feeling of disaster.

Then the strains of the music drifted up to us.

"Oh, goody, goody, goody, it's started," she said, clapping her hands.

I sighed in mock despair. "Be quiet or we'll never get there. I'm trying to fasten the back of your dress."

We were walking to the door when someone knocked briskly. Cassie ran to open it. It was Craig.

"Oh, Papa, Papa, look at my dress." She pirouetted around twice for his approval.

He scooped her up and held her at arm's length. "You look like a lovely princess."

"Sharon looks like a lovely princess too, doesn't she, Papa?"

He nodded. "A very charming, beautiful lady."

"And a princess, Papa."

"Of course, a princess. There will be two princesses at the ball." He set Cassie down, kissed her and chucked her under the chin. "Remember, my dear, you can't stay downstairs too long. Your uncle wants to dance with Sharon."

"Will you dance with Sharon too, Papa?"

"If she will allow me," he replied.

I bowed my head and said, "Of course, Mr. Beaumont."

"We'd better go down now," he said. "The guests are arriving. I'll escort both of you."

Emily and Sarah and Bart were standing in the reception hall, greeting the guests who were now arriving in a steady stream. Craig, Emily glanced up and her eyes went cold. I took Cassie's hand and started down. Craig was on the other side of his daughter.

Just then, Mr. and Mrs. Osborne entered. She was a buxom, kindly but voluble lady. She spotted me and called out, "Sharon, dear. How good to see you. And what a charming picture the three of you make, descending the stairs."

I managed a smile but fear clutched at my heart, for I knew Emily had heard.

The guests drifted to the ballroom where they talked with one another, clustered about in groups. Craig had now joined Emily, and I brought Cassie around, introducing her and, at the same time, renewing acquaintances. Cassie would curtsy prettily each time she acknowledged an introduction.

When all the guests had arrived, Craig escorted Emily to the ballroom. There he signaled the orchestra and he took Emily in his arms. The dancing started. Bart did dance with Sarah and the look on her face was ecstatic. At least she had him for the first dance and I hoped he'd remain with her for a while, but I rather had an idea he'd head for either the punch bowl or the champagne. The large table in the dining room had food and beverages to satisfy everybody.

Cassie soon tired and I returned her upstairs, remaining with her until she fell asleep. It took awhile, for she was still excited, but she'd loved every moment and I knew it was a night she would long cherish.

Finally, I left her room and was going to my own when Bart happened along. "You don't think you're going to retire without dancing with me."

"I'd rather not go down."

"I insist you do."

Before I could protest further, he had a firm grip on my



arm and we were headed for the stairs. He was an excellent dancer and led me in a waltz, a polka, a mazurka and a quadrille. Then, someone cut in and I looked up into the eyes of Craig.

Immediately, my heart started pounding. I told myself it was because I feared Emily's wrath.

"It's so long since I've been on a dance floor, it was quite impudent of me to impose myself on you," he said quietly.

"I like your dancing, sir. Everyone seems to be having a good time." I had to steer the conversation away from us.

"Everyone except the members of the household," he said, smiling. "Don't look so somber. Pretend you're having a good time too. That's what I've been doing, though at the moment, I don't have to pretend. But it isn't going to be for long. Here comes Bart to claim you. At least I got you to smile."

"Oh, Mr. Beaumont, Sarah will be angry if Bart dances with me again."

"You don't have to please Sarah. Just Bart—and me."

I know I must have looked startled and, to my amazement, he burst into laughter. It was good to hear, because it was such a rare thing in this house, and particularly from him. But Bart took over then and monopolized me the remainder of the evening. Sarah remained sitting in a chair against the wall, her back ramrod straight, her expression dour. Emily mingled with the guests somewhat, though she didn't look happy.

Finally, the evening was over and the last guests had departed. I breathed a sigh of relief and made for the stairs.

## FIFTEEN

The guests were gone, the servants had returned to the city, brought back by Marshal. I sat quietly in my room, too numb and exhausted to feel hurt or anger. I wanted to pack so that I might depart the house in the early morning before anyone had arisen, but I was even too spent for that.

I closed my eyes. "Mother . . . if ever I needed your help. . . ."

There was a single rap. Where it came from I couldn't be sure.

"I know you are here," I said. "All this time you've been calling me. There is something you wish, or something you must tell me. There's not much time left."

There were two distinct raps. I sat there waiting for what would happen next. My hands were clasped hard enough to pain me. My heart pounded so that I heard every beat.

"The secret lies with Bart," a soft voice whispered. "With Bart. . . ."

The words were perfectly clear, the voice was that of my mother, long dead.

"Vengeance is the evil," she said. "Take care . . . Bart is the secret."

When I opened my eyes, the proper answer came to me. I felt the sensation of warmth, like that felt upon emerging from a cool glade into a ray of sunlight. But it was as if the warmth passed by close to me and was then gone, to be quickly replaced with a feeling of foreboding that frightened me.

I heard the door behind me open. A voice said, "Stand up. You're going downstairs."

I arose slowly and turned around. Sarah held a large revolver in her hand. It was pointed at me.

"You're the one responsible for the ghostly violence," I said quietly.

"I'm not," she retorted. "You are. But I'm going to put an end to it."

"By shooting me?" I asked, marveling at my calm when my heart was beating madly in fear.

"I won't need to. The dogs will see to that."

She stepped back to give me room to pass. I moved slowly, trying to think of some way to distract her. "So it was you who attempted to poison me, just as you poisoned the fawn."

"Yes. You were trying to take Bart from me."

"How could I, when he didn't love you?"

"He would have. In time, he would have."

And then the answer came. "You tried to poison Janelle. Instead, Cassie fed the milk to the fawn."

"Go downstairs," she said tersely. "I'm sick of the sound of your voice."

I walked into the hall, moving slowly, still seeking desperately for a way to disarm her. "What do you intend to do with me?"

There was no need for her to answer, for I heard the wild baying of the dogs and I knew. I turned, but she remained a safe distance behind me. I started down the stairs. At least, I thought, the house wasn't in darkness. Perhaps someone was still about and would thwart this mad woman. But all was silence.

"You put food outside after everyone left, to draw the dogs," I reasoned.

"Go to the door. Open it," she commanded.

I spun around. "Sarah, please don't. I'm leaving tomorrow. I mean you no harm. Bart doesn't love me, but if you believe I'm in your way, shoot me. I'd rather a bullet than to be torn apart by wild dogs."

"Janelle was torn apart," Sarah said and I could see madness in her eyes. "I lured her outside. When I heard the dogs coming, I struck her. She fell and I ran into the house."

I closed my eyes and turned away as if, by doing so, I could shut out her mad laughter.

"The gun is not loaded." Emily spoke from the top of the stairs. "You may go back to your room, Miss Aldrich. Be out of this house before midday."

The animals were now on the porch and the sounds of



their claws scratching the door, mingled with their cries, were fearsome to hear. I was about to run for the safety of my room when a coldness descended on the room, the lamps went out and the wild screeching of the ghost assaulted our ears with the force of a cannonade. It seemed to pierce the eardrums and directly assail the brain. The name was repeated over and over again in this same wild screech.

Sarah's paralyzed hand dropped the revolver to the floor. It was scooped up by an invisible being and hurled at her, barely missing her. She fell back into a chair. A vase was suddenly floating in the air. Its velocity increased until it streaked at Sarah like a bullet. She screamed and somehow avoided the missile.

From all four walls, and from the ceiling as well, there was a series of hard raps as if a hundred ghosts were clamoring for admittance. And the voice kept screaming the name.

"Stop it!" Emily shouted. "Stop it, Janelle! Sarah did kill you! If she will not confess so that you may leave us and rest in peace, I will. She told me, long ago. She had to tell someone. She said when the dogs came, she struck you so that you fell and were easy prey to them. You were going to marry Bart and her jealousy was that of an insane person."

The shrieking wind was cut off, the lights glowed once more, and now, in a far quieter voice, the word came more plainly. The ghost of Janelle did not call 'Sharon . . . Sharon', but 'Sarah . . . Sarah!' In the wildness of the outburst accompanying the advent of the ghost, and her shrieks, the name had not been at all plain and I had assumed it was a cry for me.

At that moment, Craig and Bart ran into the hall. They'd heard the dogs and each held a shotgun. They were both still dressed and their faces displayed amazement at the scene before them.

"What, in God's name, is going on?" Craig asked, regarding the gun which Sarah had scooped up and held pointed at me.

"Sarah," I said, disregarding the men, "why don't you answer Janelle? She calls you, not me. She will never permit you to rest until you admit you murdered her. Until

you confess that you tried to murder me. Janelle will come back again and again until you are either killed in this maelstrom of terror or you go mad. You can't be far from it now. You caused Janelle's death. That is all she wishes—a confession of your guilt. So that Bart will know."

"I killed her, and I will kill you," Sarah said in a monotone. "You can't escape from me, and I'm not afraid of ghosts. I wish I had dared remain close and watch the dogs kill her. I will be close when you die, Sharon. No one will have Bart except me. I'd rather have him dead than lose him. I'd far rather Craig was dead too, so that my sister can know peace."

"Poor, poor Sarah," Emily said. "Forgive her."

"Forgive her for murder?" Bart roared in his wrath. "She killed the girl who meant my life to me. She killed her in a foul and terrible way. Then, not content, she has tried to kill another girl whom I looked at, yet never with amorous eyes."

Sarah cried out, "Bart, I'm in love with you! I've been patient, waiting until you knew you loved me."

"I despise you," Bart shouted at her. "Of all the despicable creatures, none can rival you."

There was no time for further talk or accusations, for a rasping sound drew our attention and our eyes fastened on the door. The heavy bolt was being slowly pulled back. Yet there was no one near the door. No visible hand pulled the bolt and no visible hand would open the door, but the dogs would be admitted and I had no doubt they'd come rushing inside. They were afraid of little, and tonight the pack was big enough to give them even more courage.

Suddenly the house was filled with wild laughter, the bolt clicked all the way open and the door came ajar. With a scream, Sarah crouched down on a stair and Emily screamed as loudly as her sister.

The door was slowly opening to its full, while Bart, Craig and I stood there helplessly. Somehow, we knew that any attempt to slam the door closed would not be successful.

Two of the dogs bounded in and charged Craig. The crashing report of a shotgun filled the house, followed by another. The dogs dropped. Two more ran in. Bart's gun exploded and one animal was blown far back. The other,

exposed to the same hail of pellets, streaked out of the house. Craig fired again and the remaining dogs went hurtling out into the night. None had succeeded in getting up the stairs or running through the house.

Craig said, "We're going outside to make sure there are none lingering about. Stay here or go to your rooms."

None of us moved. We were too weak from the horror of what we'd witnessed. The men dragged the carcasses through the open door and dropped them on the porch. They closed the door and I heard their footsteps descending the steps. I was alone with Sarah and Emily, but I no longer feared them. They were the frightened ones.

Then the wildness came again and the shrieks and the sound of Sarah's name being called. The lights dimmed and an indistinct form seemed to float aimlessly about the hall for a moment, then hovered over Sarah. The house seemed to shudder. I heard, rather than saw, Emily descend the stairs.

Sarah screamed and ran for the door. I attempted to intercept her, to keep her from going outside. The dogs could still be about. She fought me, striking hard at the side of my head. I lost my footing and fell, hitting my head on the stair. I was conscious, but dizzy and unable to get to my feet.

Sarah got the door open and ran into the night, in the direction of the bayou. Emily followed, calling to her, but Sarah's screams drowned out her name.

I crawled on hands and knees, through the door and across the porch. Reaching one of the pillars, I used it to help me gain my feet, but my limbs scarcely supported me.

I could see Sarah at the spot which Cassie had pointed out as the place where Janelle had been killed by the dogs. Sarah gave a hard, loud scream. The strange substance was beside her and she shied away from it, getting closer and closer to the water's edge.

Emily still ran after her sister. I called to Emily to come back. Sarah was paying for her sins. This was why the ghost had come back, to taunt her into terror and lure her outside. I saw her lurch violently as if given a terrific push. She hit the water with a splash. The specter swarmed down as Sarah's head bobbed up for a second. She went under again.



Emily, without pausing in her stride, leaped into the bayou. That was when Craig and Bart appeared. I pointed to the bayou. The two men raced there and without hesitation jumped in. The specter hovered above the bayou for another few seconds and then it seemed to begin spinning like a small tornado. It vanished gradually, and, as it did, so the howling wind ceased and the warmth of the summer evening returned. I finally managed to reach the spot.

Bart came out of the water first. Craig came next, carrying Emily. I saw the ugly gash on her forehead. Bart knelt, listened for a heartbeat, shrugged his shoulders in helpless resignation.

"She must have struck her head when she tried to save her sister," Craig said.

"I'll get Sarah's body out of the water," Bart told us. "She somehow became entangled with a clump of roots. . . . There's nothing here for either of you."

We walked slowly back to the house. When we entered, we encountered a delicate odor of flowers. There was no warm, soft touch on my face, but I seemed to be enveloped completely by this strange warmth that was more comforting than anything I had ever experienced in my life.

Craig said, "She's here . . . your mother is here. I can sense her presence."

"Yes," I said. "I know. All this while, she's been doing what she could to protect me. There were two ghosts, Craig."

He nodded. "I'm sure that now there's but one, and she's at peace, and so is Janelle."

There was a necessary explanation for the authorities which we all agreed upon. Even Bart declared how useless it would have been to reveal the murder of Janelle. None would be benefited by the revelation; no one could be punished, for the punishment had been inflicted by powers greater than the law.

The story we told Cassie and the authorities was to the effect that the pack of wild dogs roamed the night and frightened Sarah into falling into the bayou. Emily had leaped in to save her and struck her head, to die almost instantly. In Cassie's eyes, her mother was a heroic

woman and it was far better this way. Better, too, that Emily never knew that Craig and Bart were still up that night only because they were discussing Craig's future.

We have agreed, Bart, Craig and I, that Cassie will never be told the truth, that our lips are forever sealed. Her life had been close to being blighted and we are determined to protect her.

The law was satisfied with the explanation. They saw the carcasses of the dogs Craig and Bart had killed and the men of the area returned in large numbers to hunt down the rest of the pack and destroy it forever.

I remained Cassie's governess for a year afterward, during which time, at Craig's suggestion, I took the child abroad. When I returned, he courted me briefly. There was no doubting our love for one another and we were soon married. Cassie is a happy, well-adjusted child and now has a baby sister. The plantation has prospered and a serenity has settled over The Pillars.

Bart has not changed. Once he got over the considerable shock of realizing that Janelle had been murdered, he went his customary way. He is in New Orleans most of the time, losing, winning, not caring much, I'm afraid. He finds a refuge in The Pillars and sometimes spends days at a time here, teaching Cassie how to ride well, helping with the plantation work, but then that restlessness overcomes him and he goes off again.

There never was another manifestation and, as the weeks went by, I almost grew convinced that much of what had happened had been in our imaginations. It was almost as if some power was helping me forget. Bart never refers to it, Craig only seldom.

I would like to think that Mama is still near me. I know now how desperately she tried to help me, but Janelle's great yearning for vengeance was too strong to be denied. All Mother could do was comfort me, lend me some measure of reassurance and try to keep me from being harmed.

Now and then, especially when I'm alone in the house and everything is beautifully quiet, I feel a delicious warmth near me and, perhaps, the lightest caress. I am not sure. I discount it, but I look forward to it.



## *( I was petrified )*

Slowly, by themselves, the lamps went out and the room was filled with flickering, ominous shadows. Even the air was hushed. It grew cold—a clammy coldness that held me in a vise.

The room suddenly became alive with an icy wind. Each cold blast seemed to originate in the middle of the room and spread to the four walls. As the wind screamed I heard a shrill voice howl my name over and over again.

As if in answer a glass vase lifted from a table and hurled itself toward the mantle and crashed.