

THE GHOSTS



1950-1952

AT NIGHT THE GHOSTS floated like milkweed pod in the white meadows. Far off you could see their lantern eyes aglow, and a fitful flaring of fire when they knocked together, as if someone had shaken a brazier down and live coals were cascading from the jolt in a little fiery shower. They came under our windows, I remember well, every midsummer night for three weeks each year. And each year Papa would seal up our south windows and herd us children like small puppies into another room around north where we would spend our nights hoping the ghosts would change their direction and entertain us on our new meadow slope below. But no. The south meadow was theirs.

"They must be from Mabsbury," said Father, his voice drifting up the hall stairs to where we three lay in bed. "But when I run out with my gun, by George, they're gone!"

We heard Mother's voice reply, "Well, put your gun away. You wouldn't shoot them anyhow."

It was Father who told us girls that the ghosts *were* ghosts. He nodded gravely and looked us in the eye. The ghosts were *indecent*, he said. For they laughed and pressed their shapes into the meadow grass. You could see where they had lain the night before, one a man, one a woman. Always laughing softly. We children woke and bent out our windows to let the wind flutter our dandelion hair, listening.

Each year we tried to shield the coming of the ghosts from Mother and Father. Sometimes we succeeded for as much as a week. Along about July 8, however, Father would begin to get nervous. He would pry at us and handle us and peer through our curtains as he asked, "Laura, Ann, Henrietta—have you—that is, at night—in the last week or so—have you *noticed* anything?"

"Anything, Papa?"

"Ghosts, I mean."

"*Ghosts*, Papa?"

"You know, like last summer and the summer before."

"I haven't seen anything, have you, Henrietta?"

"I haven't, have you, Ann?"

"No, have you, Laura?"

"Stop it, *stop* it!" cried Father. "Answer a simple question. Have you heard anything?"

"I heard a rabbit."

"I saw a dog."

"There was a cat—"

"Well, you must tell me if the ghosts return," he said, earnestly, and edged away, blushing.

"Why doesn't he want us to see the ghosts?" whispered Henrietta. "After all, Papa's the one who said they *were* ghosts."

"I *like* ghosts," said Ann. "They're *different*."

That was true. For three small girls, ghosts were rare and wonderful. Our tutors drove to see us every day and kept us strictly laced. There were birthday parties, now and then, but mostly our lives were plain as pound cake. We longed for adventure. The ghosts saved us, supplying us with enough goose pimples to last the season through and over until next year.

"What brings the ghosts here?" wondered Ann.

We did not know.

Father seemed to know. We heard his voice floating up the stairwell again one night. "The quality of the moss," he said to Mama.

"You make too much of it," she said.

"I think they've come back."

"The girls haven't said."

"The girls are a bit too sly. I think we'd better change their room tonight."

"Oh dear." Mama sighed. "Let's wait until we're sure. You know how the girls are when they change rooms. They don't

sleep well for a week and are grumpy all day. Think of *me*, Edward."

"All right," said Father, but his voice was clever and planning.

The next morning we three girls raced down to breakfast, playing tag. "You're it!" we cried, and stopped and stared at Papa. "Papa, what's wrong?"

For there was Papa, his hands thick with yellow ointments and white bandages. His neck and face looked red and irritated.

"Nothing," he said, gazing deep into his cereal, stirring it darkly.

"But what happened?" We gathered about him.

"Come away, children," said Mother, trying not to smile. "Father has poison ivy."

"Poison ivy?"

"How did *that* happen, Papa?"

"Sit down, children," warned Mother, for Father was quietly grinding his teeth.

"How *did* he get poisoned?" I asked.

Papa stamped from the room. We said nothing else.



THE NEXT NIGHT, the ghosts were gone.

"Oh, heck," said Ann.

In our beds, like mice, we waited for midnight.

"Hear anything?" I whispered. I saw Henrietta's doll eyes at the window, looking down.

"No," she said.

"What time is it?" I hissed, later.

"Two o'clock."

"I guess they're not coming," I said, sadly.

"Guess they're not," said my sisters.

We listened to our small breathing in the room. The night was silent all through until dawn.



"TEA FOR TWO and two for tea," sang Father, pouring his breakfast drink. He chuckled and patted himself on the back.

"Ha ha ha," he said.

"Papa's happy," said Ann to Mama.

"Yes, dear."

"Even in spite of his poison ivy."

"In spite of it," Papa said, laughing. "I'm a magician. An exorcist!"

"A *what*, Papa?"

"E-x-o-r-c-i-s-t." He spelled. "Tea, Mama?"

Henrietta and I ran to our library while Ann was out playing. "*Ex-or-cist*," I read. "Here it *is*!" I underlined it. "One who exorcises ghosts.' "

"Run them around the block?" wondered Henrietta.

"No. *Exorcise*, silly. 'To eliminate, to do away with.' "

"Kill?" wailed Henrietta.

We both stared, shocked, at the book.

"Has Papa killed our ghosts?" asked Henrietta, eyes filling with tears.

"He wouldn't be *that* mean."

We sat, stunned, for half an hour, getting cold and empty. At last Ann walked into the house, scratching her arms. "I found where Papa got poison ivy," she announced. "Anyone want to hear?"

"Where?" we asked, at last.

"On the slope under our window," said Ann. "All kinds of poison ivy there that was never there before!"

I closed the book, slowly. "Let's go see."

We stood on the slope, and there was the poison ivy, all loose and not rooted. Someone had found it in the forest and carried huge baskets of it here to the slope to spread about.

"Oh," gasped Henrietta.

We all thought of Father's swollen face and hands.

"The ghosts," I murmured. "Can *poison ivy* exorcise ghosts?"

"Look what it did to Papa."

We all nodded.

"Shh," I said, finger to my mouth. "Everyone get gloves. After dark, we'll carry it all away. We'll exorcise the exorcise."

"Hurray!" said everyone.



THE LIGHTS WERE OUT and the summer night was calm and sweet with flower scent. We waited in our beds, eyes gleaming like foxes in a cave.

"Nine o'clock," whispered Ann.

"Nine-thirty," she said, later.

"I hope they come," said Henrietta. "After all our work."

"Shh, listen!"

We sat up.

There in the moonlit meadows below came a whispering and a rustling as of a midsummer wind stirring all the grasses and the stars of the sky. There was a crackling sound and a gentle laughter, and as we ran on soft padding feet to our windows, to gather and freeze ourselves in expectant horror, there was a shower of demonic sparks on the grassy slope, and two misty forms moved through the shielding cover of bushes.

"Oh," we cried, and hugged one another, trembling. "They came back, they came *back*!"

"If Father knew!"

"But he doesn't. Shh!"

The night murmured and laughed and the grasses blew. We stood for a long while, and then Ann said, "I'm going down."

"What?"

"I want to know." Ann pulled away from us.

"But they might kill you!"

"I'm going."

"But ghosts, Ann!"

We heard her feet whisking down the stairs, the quiet opening of the front door. We pressed to the window screen. Ann, in her nightgown, like a velvety moth, fluttered across the yard. "God, take care of her," I prayed. For there she was, sneaking in darkness near the ghosts.

"Ah!" Ann screamed.

There were several more screams. Henrietta and I gasped. Ann raced across the yard but didn't slam the door. The ghosts blew off, as in a wind, over the hill, gone in an instant.

"Now look what you did!" cried Henrietta when Ann entered our room.

"Don't talk to me!" snapped Ann. "Oh, it's awful!" She marched to the window, started to yank it down. I stopped her.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"The ghosts," she sobbed, half angry, half sad. "They're gone forever. Daddy scared them away. Now, tonight, you know what was down there? You *know*?"

"What?"

"Two *people*," shouted Ann, tears rolling down her cheeks. "A nasty man and woman!"

"Oh," we wailed.

"No more ghosts ever again," said Ann. "Oh, I *hate* Papa!"

And the rest of that summer, on moonlit evenings when the wind was right and white forms moved in the half-light in the meadow, we three girls did just what we did that last evening. We got up from our beds and walked quietly across the room and slammed the window so we couldn't hear those nasty people, and went back to bed and shut our eyes and dreamed of the days when the ghosts had drifted over, in those happy times before Daddy ruined everything.