

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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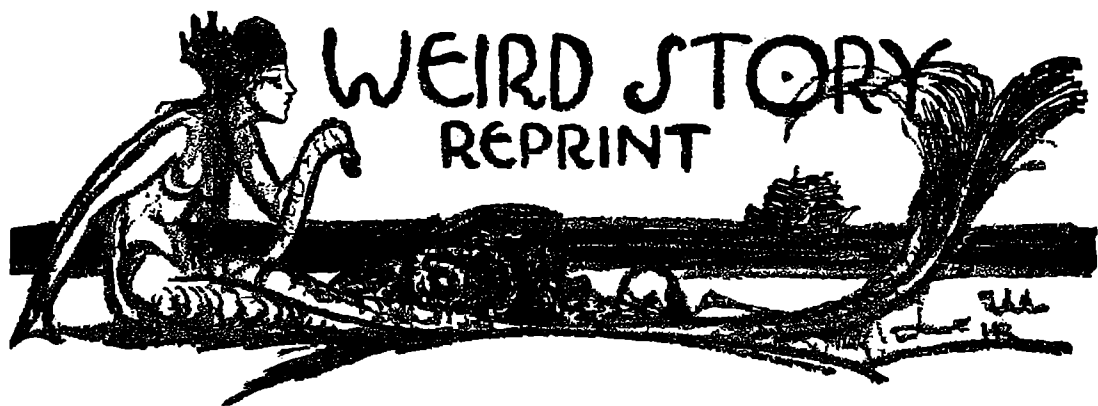
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



## A Witch's Curse\*

By PAUL ERNST

**T**HIS is a strange tale, of ancient beliefs—or misbeliefs if you will—projected into a Twentieth Century setting; of bizarre happenings with never a tangible foundation of fact on which to rest the bewildered mind of the observer; of events that, it seems, could never occur outside the covers of those old hand-illuminated volumes dealing with "Black Magycke."

You may believe it or not. Frankly, the newspapers did not. There was in their uninspired columns no hint of anything beyond the realm of everyday happenings. Mrs. Boyd Barringer, wife of the last of that family of Barringers who had packed their Puritanical belongings and landed in New England long before the tea party—had suddenly and completely disappeared! Simple enough, the newspapers implied. A husband who was not too attentive, a secret admirer—and flight to parts unknown.

But in this implication the newspapers were wrong—or at least only half right. Mrs. Barringer, granted, had departed for parts unknown. But it was not because of a too indifferent husband; nor was it

due to one of those unfortunate love affairs that occasionally upset the most solidly established homes. There was a different reason from either of these behind her sudden disappearance—a reason that goes back two hundred and thirty years to the mysterious labor of an elderly woman who lived, and died with suddenness and violence, in Salem, Massachusetts.

To begin with, Boyd Barringer was not an indifferent husband. There never lived a man who loved more profoundly, nor who was more kindly attentive than he was to Clara Barringer, his wife. And she in her turn adored him too completely to gaze at another man with more than the casual glance of a stranger.

Their very marriage is proof of this love of theirs. For Clara, apprehensive of the curse that she felt was laid upon her, did not want to inflict sorrow on Boyd; and for months she held out against his urgent pleading that she be his wife. That he continued so to plead until he had won her in spite of her loving fears, and that she consented at last to his pleading in spite of every obstacle her harassed mind could set forth, indicates

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more than any other circumstance the depth of their affection for each other.

The scene in which Boyd had finally won over her unwillingness to risk bringing him harm was a stormy one in some respects.

"Clara," said Boyd, his hands closing over her round, firm arms rather cruelly and his eyes searching into hers, "Clara, is there someone else? Do you refuse me because there is another man before me in your heart?"

Clara hesitated before answering that question. Her eyes took in every detail of the man before her with a painful accuracy; for she firmly intended that they should never meet again, and she wanted a last mental picture of him to carry with her.

Boyd was rather tall, but his inclination toward heaviness took away from his height. Wide, thick shoulders sloped into a powerful neck. His features were purposeful, almost grim. A typical man of the business world, one would say, successful and commanding, with not too much sentiment or dreamy nonsense to hinder his path among the material things of life. But his eyes contradicted the rest of his appearance. Deep blue, they were, almost like a woman's in their tenderness and understanding. His eyes lent a softness to his firm mouth, and took away some of the harshness of his chin. A man of action with the eyes of a lover. It is small wonder that Clara should find it hard to utter the lie that was intended to drive him away.

Nevertheless, driving her rebellious tongue with her head instead of with her pleading heart, lie she did.

"You have guessed it," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "I love another man. That is why I can never marry you."

But Boyd had not been fooled. He had looked back into her own eyes—those odd eyes of hers with the spindle-

shaped, feline pupils—and he had smiled.

"You aren't telling me the truth, Clara. That's not the reason why you won't marry me. Are you still letting yourself think about that fantastic curse that's supposed to crop out in your family tree sometime? Would you actually let such an insane legend keep us apart when we want each other so badly?"

"It's not an insane legend!" Clara cried, a break in her words. "Look at me! Just look at me! Can't you see the seeds of fulfilment of that old prophecy in my eyes, in my head, in the very way I walk?" She began to weep, wildly, her shoulders shaking with incipient hysteria.

Boyd attempted to calm her, to humor her.

"Come now," he suggested, "let's assume that this two-hundred-year-old fable has some truth in it. Let us do it the honor of investigating it thoroughly so that our reason may kill it for ever. You are too intelligent to believe in such a fantastic old wife's tale without proof of some kind. Show me the proof, then, and tell me the whole history. And if, after I have heard it all, I still want you to marry me, you will, won't you? Say you will, dear."

"How can I answer?" whispered Clara. "Surely no one was ever in such a position before. But I will tell you the whole story now instead of the hints and snatches of it that I have allowed you to hear. Wait just a moment while I go up to the attic—there is an old trunk there with the documents and pictures relating to my family history."

"I'll go with you. There is a light up there? Good." And Boyd followed her up the flights of steps that ended under the gables of the old stone house—and in a discovery astounding enough, though of course utterly unbelievable.

THE place in which a story is related has much to do with the impression made by that story. In the full light of day, in some prosaic spot, Boyd would have laughed at the crazy tale, proof or no proof—as, indeed, he did next morning. But up there under the roof, in the dim light of a single small electric globe, he must have spent a most uncomfortable hour listening to Clara's incredible history of a feud that had endured for seven generations.

The big attic had been floored but never finished off further. Like square-hewn ribs the beams depended overhead, festooned with cobwebs, vague and uncertain in the illumination of the unshaded, dust-crusting light bulb. The place was cluttered with old chairs and tables with legs like tentacles in the shadowy darkness. An eery spot, certainly, and almost too well fitted for Clara's words.

Several very old chests were in a far corner; and one of these Boyd dragged out under the light at Clara's request. After a struggle with the rusty catches this was opened, revealing a miscellany of ancient garments, pictures, and yellowed papers.

"In 1692," Clara began dully, "a solitary old woman lived in a shack on the edge of Salem, Massachusetts. She was supposed to have a son somewhere, but no one knew for sure, and he never came to visit her. She kept herself alive by raising vegetables and selling them or trading them to the neighboring townspeople.

"She must have been rather a repulsive-looking creature—very old and wrinkled, with a long chin and a long nose that almost met like pincers, due to her lack of teeth. She was not very clean, and her mind was a bit unhinged. But she did no one harm and was not herself molested; at least at the time my story begins.

"My mother's ancestors also lived in Salem—the Manfred Jones clan. There was, among other children of this family, a brooding, dark-haired little girl by the name of Emily—my own ancestress. Here is a picture of her as a small child."

Clara handed Boyd a miniature, rather dimmed by age, but cleverly done and quite legible. It was the picture of a girl of about eleven years; though the eyes, dark and intense, looked older. Boyd gazed at the picture with interest, then handed it back silently.

"The old woman I spoke of had often brought her vegetables to the Jones home, and she met Emily. She seemed immensely attracted to the little girl. But Emily, possibly because she was afraid, would never make up to her. So it was that one day when the old crone passed her hand longingly over Emily's fine dark hair, the girl squirmed out of her grasp, kicked and clawed at her like a little animal, and ran away. Then from a safe distance she proceeded to make faces at her and taunt her with her bent ugliness of age. It was a very regrettable thing, but, after all, it was natural in a child so young.

"From that one scene grew the shadow that has clung to my mother's family ever since. For the old woman hated the child from then on. And that hatred was mutual. Emily Jones went out of her way to invent pranks to play on the woman, and incited all her little friends to do the same. This, too, was regrettable, but it was something any child might do.

"It was in the early spring of that year that queer tales began to get around concerning the old lady. Farmers complained that cattle sickened when she looked in their direction. A neighbor of hers said that she had the Evil Eye. In short, all the stock tales of a witch's persecution were told on her. She began to be known as the Witch of Salem town.

Everyone avoided her. No one bought or traded for her vegetables, and she was near to starving to death.

"The vague rumors concerning her might never have amounted to much. The most rabid period of the witch craze lasted only a year or so, you know. And she might have weathered the storm of the neighborhood's disapproval and fear very easily—but for little Emily Jones.

"With an intelligence older than her eleven years, Emily took in all the talk concerning the old woman she hated with the petulance of childhood. And as she listened she remembered a sentence that the crone had flung after her when she was particularly annoyed at some prank the little girl had played on her:

"I'll turn you into a cat, Emily Jones! I'll turn you into a cat if you don't stop your nuisance! Folks say I'm a witch. Well—a witch can turn little girls into cats. And that's just what I'll do to you, Emily Jones!"

"That threat rankled in the girl's mind, and it ripened and grew until a thought flashed on her one day: Suppose she pretended that the witch really was turning her into a cat! What a joke that would be! How it would plague her! ♪

"Old enough and intelligent enough to reason thus far, Emily was yet unable to go farther and realize the extreme gravity of her plan. She was too young, of course, to understand the strength of the feeling that was gathering against the old hag.

"So the child put her scheme in motion. . . .

"She began, one evening, to crawl cat-like under the tables and chairs, mewing and scratching with imaginary claws at her brothers and sisters. She licked her arms with her tongue and glared blankly about, imitating a cat with all the monkey cleverness a child has for imitations.

"Naturally the father, Manfred Jones, was astounded. More, he was as badly frightened as a grown man can be.

"Emily! Emily!" he cried, "What in heaven's name possesses you? You act as though you were bewitched!"

"I am!" was the solemn answer. "The old witch said she would turn me into a cat. And I can feel her doing it now!"

Manfred Jones was an influential man. Also, in common with a great many other normally intelligent men, he believed in witchcraft. He took his little daughter's statement at face value and proceeded against the so-called witch with all the power at his command.

"In April of the year 1692 he urged action against the old lady in a public hearing presided over by six magistrates and four ministers of the gospel. So violent were his charges and so high was feeling running against the old woman that she was promptly 'cried out,' or accused formally of being a witch. Without further ceremony she was thrown into the crude town jail.

"And now the girl Emily was terrified at the consequences of her thoughtless prank. She told of the trick she had played. She pleaded that the old woman be released, swearing that she had made up the whole thing. But no one believed her. Solemnly it was judged that Emily's denials were a further proof of the witch's guilt: She had sent a demon to the child which impelled her to withdraw her charges!

"The jailer, an ignorant and superstitious man, furthered the misfortune of the unhappy woman. He accused her of bewitching his stomach so that it was seized with violent cramps. And this absurd, utterly insane charge was the last straw. The people of Salem were now so frightened and angry that they visited the magistrates in a body and demanded that the witch be put to death.

"The magistrates obeyed the people's wish. They decreed that the witch be hanged.

"By some odd telepathy the crone had a premonition of her fate. At the moment when the death decree was signed, according to the jailer, she cried out and sank in a senseless heap to the floor of the cell. And then comes the strangest part of all. . . .

"When she regained consciousness she began to pace her cell like a maniac, shrieking and shaking her fists. 'They're going to hang me!' she shouted in her high, shrill voice. 'They're going to kill me! And it's the Jones brat that's the cause! She told them I said I'd change her into a cat. So they're going to hang me!'

"And it was at this point, the jailer said in his later account, that she stopped dead-still and raised her joined hands as though she were praying.

"'They're killing me on the word of a child!' she said harshly. 'Very well—I'll be quit with the child! By all the devils in hell, by the stars in heaven's floor, by all the ghostly guards of that witchcraft of which I am accused, I'll do as the child charged. I *will* change her into a cat!'

"And there in that dimly lit cell the desperate old hag squatted on the dirt floor and closed her eyes and mumbled and whined to herself. And back in the Jones home, Emily, half sick with terror at the things she'd done, began to change under the very eyes of her amazed family! With every syllable the condemned witch uttered half a mile away, the girl jerked convulsively as though she had been struck.

"The pupils of her eyes quivered and shook, and finally became slitted and cat-like. She began to crawl around the floor in dead earnest now, mewling and spitting. Actually a fine, almost impercep-

tible growth of hair, like fur, showed on her arms and the backs of her hands!

"We'll never know what dread thing would have happened—for action was swift in Massachusetts in 1692. The mob poured down to the jail with the death decree, burst open the doors and proceeded to hang the witch from a beam in her own cell.

"Just before the final moment she laughed, a high, empty, awful laugh. 'You've got me now,' she screamed. 'But I'll have my revenge! If I must wait till the seventh generation, I'll have revenge!'

"And then the end. She died with a curse on her lips against the family that had been the cause of her execution."

CLARA shuddered and covered her face with her hands. And Boyd, his own face ashen and his lips white and dry, drew her close to him.

"A mad, dangerous legend to let live," he whispered. "But, Clara—my heavens! Surely you aren't believing such a monstrous thing!"

"Our ancestors in Salem were strong, firm-minded, material men, Boyd. If so many of such men believed in witchcraft—were so desperately afraid of it that they took human life to protect themselves—it would indicate that there is actually something in the Black Art, wouldn't it?"

"Impossible!" said Boyd. But there was a shadow on his face that contradicted the spoken word.

"Anyway, there are proofs," said Clara drearily. "Awful proofs! Here are the records of the public hearing where the witch was cried out. And here is the death warrant. And here is the document of Manfred Jones." She handed him a packet of yellow papers, documents. "But here, Boyd, is the most conclusive proof of all—a picture of Emily Jones when

she was a woman, years after the witch's curse."

Boyd was conscious of a shudder as he looked into the miniature that showed the girl Emily grown up.

With uncanny intuition the artist had caught at secret, hidden things in the sad face. The eyes, with their spindle-shaped, ominously slitted pupils; the odd set of the head; the hint of unnatural hair in the shading of the delicate upper lip; all breathed of unbelievable metamorphosis. Boyd suddenly covered the picture with his hand to shut out the queer eyes that seemed to live and stare at him.

"And my eyes, too, Boyd," Clara murmured, reading his thought. "They are the same. And I—am the seventh generation! The witch, with her last breath, said distinctly the seventh generation. And I am the seventh!"

"Clara, compose yourself, dear." Boyd's face was white but steady. "What you deduce, the thing you fear, is not possible. Let us laugh at this silly tale as it deserves, and forget it forever. Clara—will you marry me?"

"In spite of—of——"

"In spite of the legend? Of course. All the fairy-stories in the world couldn't change my love for you. Please!"

He held out his arms, and Clara, doubting and wondering still but tired to the death of bearing her heavy burden alone, crept close to him and gave her promise.

"Just one thing more," Boyd called out as he was leaving, "what was the name of that old witch of yours? I'd like to look her up and see from the records whether her son was mythical or a real being who left a family. It might help make our minds easy if I gather all the facts in the case."

"I'm not sure of her name," said Clara slowly. "The records I have are contradictory there. The death decree named

her Joan Byfield. But in the minutes of the public hearing she was written down as Joan Basfield. I don't know which is correct."

"Basfield!" cried Boyd, startled. "Basfield! Clara, tell me—is that spelled with one 's' or two?"

"Spelled with one 's,'" said Clara, wondering at his excitement. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh—nothing. If it is spelled with one 's,' or if it was Byfield, it couldn't be the same. But—the devil! It couldn't be the same in any event. The very idea is preposterous!"

"What are you talking of, Boyd?"

"Nothing, dear," said Boyd, refusing to meet her puzzled eyes. "Nothing. A foolish passing thought of mine, not worth mentioning."

Slowly he descended the steps, his head bent, his thoughts far away.

**L**IFE flowed smoothly for Boyd and Clara Barringer.

Realizing that setting is half the trouble of any chronic mind disorder, Boyd insisted on selling Clara's old stone house, putting the proceeds in trust for her, and shortly afterward they moved down to New York.

The apprehension gradually faded from Clara's eyes—those eyes with the odd, slitted pupils—and she was a normal, loving wife. Boyd was content to believe that the fantasy that had festered in her brain since she was a girl, had faded from her consciousness forever. The aged documents treating with one Joan Basfield, or Byfield, witch, who went about transforming little girls into cats, had been burned in the furnace with all the ceremony the rite demanded; and the uncanny miniature of Emily Jones had accompanied the records into the fire.

Clara moved contentedly and prosaically about the handsome house Boyd

had bought in New York. And, after two years, during which no shadow of her delusion had obtruded, Boyd felt that it was safe to make a request—a request he would certainly have made sooner had he not felt that trouble might result from a certain similarity of names.

"Clara," he said casually one evening, "we have plenty of room here. I wonder if you would mind very much if I had my Aunt Jane up for a long visit? She's quite old and helpless, alone in the world. Do you care if I invite her?"

Clara smiled. That Boyd was fond of his mother's sister she knew well. Quite often he had mentioned her. An old woman now, but still almost dismayingly clever, she lived alone with few friends and few interests in life. She was devoted to her favorite nephew, Boyd. Clara wondered idly why he had never asked to have her visit them before; and she found herself eager to meet the woman who commanded her man's admiring respect and affection.

"I'll be glad to have her come for as long as she wants, dear," she assured him. "It's a pity for an old person to be alone as she is. Too bad she hasn't a nice old husband to share her life."

Boyd grinned. "I'm afraid the young men of her day and acquaintance were too much in awe of her to propose. She had rather a sharp tongue, I've been told, in addition to too many brains for the proper wife. And her temper was notorious. Even now she's a terror when anything angers or upsets her. Anyway, she never married."

"Well, I'll write and ask her at once, Boyd. What is her full name and address? If you've ever called her anything but just Aunt Jane I can't remember it."

This, under the circumstances, was a disturbing question, and Boyd had dreaded it in spite of two years of peace which

had done so much to erase the childish bogy of the witch's curse from Clara's mind. As he answered he was very careful to seem carelessly offhand.

"Her name," he said lightly, "is Jane Evers Bassfield. The address is—why, Clara!"

He caught her as she swayed and seemed about to faint.

But Clara's surrender to old fears was over in a few moments.

"The names are so much alike," she explained later in the evening. "Joan Basfield the witch—and Jane Bassfield, your aunt. For an instant I was rather startled. I'm sorry to be such a fool, Boyd."

"I was afraid the name would bother you," Boyd confessed, "or I would have asked her here long ago. But now that you have cleared this last hurdle I think we can safely say that you are cured of your superstition—if you don't mind my calling a spade a spade."

**W**HEN Jane Bassfield arrived in answer to her invitation, Clara was further reassured. Obviously she was a strong-minded, prideful old lady with her firm, projecting chin and arrogant nose. And her eyes were that cool gray that can be glacial in moments of anger. But her manner was warm and charming in the extreme.

"I've been perishing to meet Boyd's wife for two years. But I couldn't very well come without being invited, and I was afraid you didn't want to be bothered with doddering old age. Show me the room you've picked for me, my dear, and come along and tell me how Boyd is treating you. If he's a cruel husband I'll set the spirits on him!"

Boyd hastened to answer the perturbed question that instantly rose in Clara's eyes. "She means that she'll disturb my



morning coffee by ghostly rappings on the breakfast table," he laughed. "Aunt Jane is supposed to be psychic and everything."

"Are you—really?" asked Clara, gazing wide-eyed at the vigorous old woman, and with that in her voice that made Boyd wince in alarm.

Jane Bassfield shrugged, the gesture seeming almost masculine.

"Who can say?" she evaded. "Everyone assures me so often that psychic phenomena are all faked that I'm beginning to believe it myself. But long ago I found that I could defend myself from ignorant and undesirable people by claiming that I was psychic. It became, and still is, a favorite threat of mine to 'set the spirits on' anyone who tries to cross me. Heavens, child, don't look at me like that! I won't bite you!"

She put her hand in a kindly way over Clara's cold fingers, seeming not to notice when the younger woman quickly drew away from her. "Come and show me your new house. You must be fearfully successful, Boyd, to buy such a tidy little mansion."

**T**wo days after Jane Bassfield arrived, Clara's maid, Agnes, left the Barringer employ. She left in a panic at 11 o'clock at night, announcing her change of heart, packing her belongings, and fleeing out the front gate all within one short half-hour.

To Clara she gave no explanation at all. To her good friend Beulah, the cook, she gave a reason of sorts, but it was so vague and unconvincing that it was worse than no reason.

"I don't see anything wrong with old Miss Bassfield," Beulah had said in answer to Agnes' statement that she was leaving because of Mr. Barringer's aunt. "She's awful strong-minded and kind of

particular. But aside from that she's all right."

"Oh, Beulah, you should have seen what I saw just a few minutes ago. You'd march right down and say you were going to quit too!"

"What'd you see?"

"Well, you know I've been waiting on the old woman, kind of, since she got here. And Mrs. Barringer said it would be nice if I took her up a glass of hot milk. That was at half-past 10, just a few minutes ago. Well, I heated some milk—you saw me—and took it up to her.

"I knocked on her door and didn't get an answer, so I just went in, thinking the old lady was asleep and that I'd put the milk on the stand near the bed for her when she woke up. But she wasn't asleep.

"I slipped in quiet and she didn't hear me, I guess. She was sitting straight up in bed with a night-cap on and just that little night-light going. And then—what I saw!"

"Well, what'd you see?" asked Beulah impatiently.

"Shadows!" said Agnes with a tenseness that would have been absurd had it not been for the pallor of her face.

"What about the shadows?" Beulah urged her.

"She was sitting so the night-light threw a big shadow of her against the wall. And such a shadow! The end of her nose and the end of her chin almost came together. The night-cap looked like a—a—I can't tell you just what, Beulah. All I can say is—she looked like an old witch!"

"Go on!" scoffed Beulah. "You a grown woman, saying such things!"

"But that wasn't the worst," said Agnes, unheeding the jeer. "There were other shadows sort of swimming around

hers on the wall. They looked like shadows of nightmare animals all bowing and dancing around the shadow of her head with the nose and chin almost coming together. But when I looked at her and not at her shadow I couldn't see any shapes of animals around her. It was only the shadows I could see." Agnes stopped for breath.

"Then what?" prompted Beulah.

"Isn't that enough? The old lady saw me standing there all of a sudden, and she glared like she was going to jump at me. Her eyes were all whites, and she said, 'Get out, you!' And I got out. And I'm going to keep right on getting out, Beulah. I won't live in a place with anyone like that. Honest, I think she *is* a witch!"

Which met with the scorn it deserved. Beulah was a realistic soul, and she treated Agnes' raving with amused indifference. But she was, nevertheless, unable to persuade Agnes to change her mind and stay under the Barringer roof.

IT WAS soon after this that Clara Barringer began to be troubled with insomnia. It was not the ordinary affair of being unable to go to sleep—it was a matter of being afraid to let herself sink into slumber: her dreams were so hideous! Just what these nightmares were she couldn't have said herself. She never remembered any of them. All she knew was they were utterly horrible and left her weak and shaken in the morning.

Boyd was more familiar with her nightmares than she herself was—he heard her mumbled, feverish whispering during the night only too often. And piecing the broken snatches of her sleep talk together, and viewing with alarm the delirious pattern the words produced, he went one day to a famous mind specialist. To him he told the story of the fantastic curse that

haunted his wife, and he recounted the bits of sentences and phrases that voiced her terror in the nightmare-ridden night.

At the conclusion of the account the specialist pronounced the same opinion that Boyd himself had formed: his aunt, Jane Bassfield, must leave their home at once!

"For there is no doubt, my dear man, that the presence of your aunt and the odd coincidence of names have wrought up the feelings of your wife to a dangerous pitch. Really, I couldn't answer for her sanity if the disturbing element, Miss Bassfield, is not removed at once!"

"And you think she'll be herself again as soon as my aunt leaves?" Boyd's voice was shaken. To the doctor this was a most interesting and intriguing case, but to Boyd it was the anguish of his beloved wife.

"I'm sure she'll be all right when your aunt leaves, Mr. Barringer."

Boyd hesitated an instant before putting his next question. He felt like a fool, but for the life of him he couldn't restrain it.

"Then there is no danger of—of this thing coming true? There is no chance that——?" He colored with embarrassment.

"No danger that the lady will turn your wife into a cat?" The specialist's voice was as heavy with scorn as he dared make it, what with the size of the fee he had in mind as suitable for the Barringer purse. "Hardly, my dear fellow! That is a metamorphosis rather incompatible with the best customs of biology!"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," Boyd confessed. "But if you had seen my wife's eyes last night? Her eyes were always queerly cat-like, and last night they were enormous, with glints of green and yellow——"

"Mr. Barringer, you will be my patient too if you don't watch your step. Use your reason, man! Just go out into the street here, and watch the motors and trolley cars go by, and to the accompaniment of that friendly din say to yourself a dozen times—I am afraid my aunt is going to change my wife into a cat! If that doesn't make you roar with cleansing laughter in about three seconds—you'd better come back here and take a few treatments yourself."

JANE BASSFIELD took Boyd's awkward attempts at mollifying explanation better than he had hoped she would. Indeed, she seemed almost to have suspected some such condition.

"I was afraid that Clara didn't like me," she sighed. "I have tried hard to be friends, but she seems almost to fear me. I'll go immediately, of course."

With Clara she seemed deeply sympathetic.

"I'm so sorry you haven't been feeling as well as usual. And I'm so sorry I have to leave you—some business matters at home that I must tend to at once."

But for one instant, just before train time, she and Clara were alone. And if Boyd could have heard and seen he would not have been so sure that the mere withdrawal of his aunt's presence would leave his wife as she had been before the visit.

With her eyes gleaming like cold fires, the grim old woman whispered one sentence to Clara. The words wiped the color from the younger woman's face and sent the thick blood rushing to her brain. It confirmed her every dazed suspicion; and, indicating only one possible explanation to her mind, this sentence can be pointed to as the final seal of her fate.

"Distance won't stop me, Clara Jones, and you know it—you who also know the history of Joan Basfield!"

Boyd was vastly disappointed that day. He had hoped to the last that he could reconcile his wife to the old lady; so it was most unfortunate that Clara had suddenly become too ill to accompany them to the train. . . .

CLARA BARRINGER's illness, mentioned by the later newspaper accounts of her curious disappearance, persisted from this time on. In the course of the next month Boyd called often at the office of the specialist in mind disorders.

"Can it be that there is something physically wrong with her brain—tumor or bone pressure or something?" he asked the doctor once.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because she is suffering from the most frightful headaches. Her eyes have been tested and found excellent, so that this could not be the cause."

"What does Mrs. Barringer say about her headaches?" the doctor probed.

"She says they are due to—but what she says is so fanciful that it wouldn't help you any to know."

"Nevertheless, tell me what she says is the cause, please."

"Well then," answered Boyd, his eyes averted, "she says that it is due to the changing of the shape of her head. She says that her skull is gradually growing rounder and flatter—like a cat's!"

The doctor shook his head.

"I've never heard nor seen before so persistent a delusion," he mused. "But I'm afraid there is nothing we can do. Power of mind over matter, you know. She will probably continue to suffer from these headaches until we can cure her. If I could only see her!"

But this Boyd would not consent to.

"She becomes terribly angry if I even mention you," he confessed. "She simply

would not see you or admit for one instant the chance that her mind is not quite right."

However, he was soon forced to accede and obey the doctor's request that he see his patient personally.

"Clara," he asked anxiously one day, "why do you walk so queerly, with your arms hung so? You are getting very round-shouldered."

Her voice was more disturbing in the hopeless calm of its answer than any wild hysteria would have been, and her words sent him rushing once again to the specialist's office.

"You know why, Boyd," she said. Just that and nothing more; no attempt to explain or to answer his words of protest.

"You must come and see for yourself, doctor," he pleaded later. "The time has arrived when we must do something drastic. This must stop!"

"Describe to me the way she walks, please."

"It is very hard to describe. About all I can say is that she walks almost like—like an animal! Her arms hang straight down before her, and are drawn close together as though they were—were fore-legs. She bends far over from the waist so that her hands are nearly on a level with her knees. And her stride itself has changed so that, while she seems to rise and fall as though on pads, she is yet more awkward."

"Quite in order with the cat delusion," pronounced the doctor. "I'll come this evening as a personal friend. Don't hint to her that I'm calling in a professional capacity."

The call was not productive. After talking with Clara Barringer and sounding her as deeply as he dared, the specialist admitted that he was rather undecided as to what to do next. And, as it is the

custom to do in such cases, he advised consulting another specialist.

Writing a name and address on his card, he handed it to Boyd.

"Go and see this man," he suggested. "Your wife's case has passed beyond the confines of the mind and into the purely physical. A physician should see her at once, and this man is of the best. He is particularly well informed concerning bone ailments—and I think he will need all his knowledge to diagnose the trouble that has bent your wife's shoulders and rounded them so decidedly."

So another great specialist called at the Barringer home and examined Clara with microscopic care. This time the identity was admitted. Boyd did not attempt to pass the doctor off as a friend. Specimen blood was taken, and the specialist left in a noncommittal fog of silence to take his problem to the laboratory and pronounce sentence accordingly.

"Poor Boyd!" said Clara softly. "It's no use, dear. You might as well save us both grief and wasted time. No doctor can help me—unless he can go back two hundred years and save old Joan Basfield from a witch's death!"

"Clara, for God's sake——" At the look in her eyes, Boyd stopped helplessly.

The findings of the second specialist threw no scientific light on the subject of the malformation of Clara's back and shoulders.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with Mrs. Barringer that I can lay my finger on with definite knowledge," he said. "Yet there is something decidedly wrong with the set of her shoulders and the curve of her spine."

Boyd eyed the doctor intently, sensing evasion.

"You are quite sure your laboratory tests revealed no unusual circumstance?" he insisted.

The doctor stroked his bearded chin.

"There was one perplexing discovery," he said uneasily. "However, I can only think it was the fault of the microscope. I have sent the instrument out to be inspected for lens flaws, and have submitted the slide I was studying to a professional laboratory for their opinion. But of course the error must lie in my microscope. There could actually be no such blood corpuscles as the glass revealed."

"What was the matter?" Boyd's voice was strained.

"There were present, in the blood specimen I obtained, some corpuscles that were—I hardly know how to say it——"

"Not human?" Boyd suggested, biting his lips for self-control.

"Yes," said the doctor, staring, "exactly."

"Like a cat's?" Boyd's voice was unrecognizable.

"How in the world did you guess that, man?" cried the doctor.

Boyd told haltingly of the delusions from which Clara suffered.

"But she is mad!" said the doctor. "Utterly mad! She needs more than a physician, my friend. Forgive me for saying it, but she should be given the expert care of an institution for the mentally deranged."

"Your microscopic findings?" Boyd said dully. "They prove——"

"They prove no such crack-brained thing as you suggest," interrupted the doctor. "In these days of highly artificial civilization humanity is rapidly succumbing to new diseases. Assuming my microscope is correct, I have merely been fortunate enough, from my standpoint at least, to be in a position to tabulate and announce a new medical discovery: that is all."

But it was not quite all. The worthy

doctor was offered another profound scientific puzzle before a week had passed.

A fine, downy growth of hair was appearing on Clara Barringer's arms and body!

With detached excitement the doctor took several specimens and hastened to his microscope, which had been returned to him marked mechanically perfect. He examined the specimen intently. Then he phoned Boyd and asked him to come to his office at once.

"It is like no hair that I have ever seen before," he concluded. "It is not like hair at all. It is like—*fur!*"

Boyd was utterly beyond words. He merely nodded, with his eyes closed and his lips compressed. Still without a word he left the doctor's office and went directly to the railroad station. . . .

**B**OYD's interview with his aunt, a hundred miles away, was not very satisfactory.

"Boyd, you are entirely insane! Clara's family history is correct. There was a Joan Basfield who was hanged for witchcraft in Salem in the year 1692. I will go further and admit that I am a direct descendant of that unfortunate woman—her son changed the name to Bassfield, with a double 's,' for reasons that are now unknown. But as for the preposterous bewitchment you are talking of——"

"So you are of the blood of Joan Basfield, the witch!" Boyd flung at her. "And this is the seventh generation! The seventh generation!" Then he leaned back, ashamed of his violence.

"You poor boy!" murmured Jane Bassfield without reproach. "Go back to Clara. She needs you. And give her my sincerest love and sympathy."

On the train that bore him back, Boyd

tried not to think of the shadow of a cold, unearthly smile that had seemed to tighten the corners of the old woman's lips. He had, of course, imagined this. He was imagining many things of late. . . .

At the door of his home he hesitated before admitting himself. He was imagining things again. It seemed to him as though a palpable aura of loathsome shadows hung over that house of his. But he was not left to stand long. Mary—the maid who had replaced Agnes—flung open the door and beckoned him in before he could insert his key in the lock. She had, it appeared, waited there for him, and her relief at his return was almost hysterical.

"Oh, Mr. Barringer, Mr. Barringer, something's the matter with your missus! Something's the matter—something——"

Boyd shook the girl roughly as her voice rose from key to key in overstrung distress. His hands, clutching at her arms more savagely than he knew, jerked her back to some control of herself.

"What is wrong?" he urged. "Tell me!"

"I don't know what it is. Something. She's in her room and won't let anyone come in. She's locked the door!"

"Why did she lock herself in?" Boyd was white-faced with a foreboding he would not admit even to himself. "Was she ill?"

"No, not exactly. I can't say she was sick, hardly. Worse than that!" Mary wept noisily, fearfully.

"What was the matter, then? Tell me how she looked!"

"She looked awful, Mr. Barringer. I can hardly tell you. But less than an hour after you left she began to *change*. The hair on her arms and body that you went to see the doctor about got longer and thicker like it was growing under your

very eyes. And she got—smaller!"

"Smaller? What are you talking about, Mary!"

"That's just what!" repeated Mary, her voice rising shrilly again. "She sort of shriveled up. She sat down in the big chair in the library, and she fell asleep. I looked in at her when she was just dozing off, and again when she just woke up. And I saw all the change in her. And I say she was littler! She was a foot shorter when she got up than when she had sat down!"

"Mary—think what you're saying!" Boyd shook her again. "You don't mean to say such a thing. You were mistaken!"

"No I wasn't, either. She was really smaller. Her clothes hung loose all over her. And she was stooped more than I ever saw her before!"

"Then what?" prompted Boyd, licking his dry lips.

"Then's when she went to her room. All of a sudden she woke up. I was watching her. And she gave one look at herself in the big mirror in the hall. She screamed out like someone had stabbed her. And before I could say a word she turned and scuttled up the stairs. She didn't run, Mr. Barringer—she *scuttled*! As she went her hands hung so low that they touched the stairs, and she seemed to help herself along with them, too, like an animal! And her eyes——"

Boyd waited to hear no more. Releasing the girl from his clutch so suddenly that she nearly fell, he turned and raced up the stairway to Clara's room. He did not stop to turn on the lights but ran down the dark hall with the certainty of long familiarity.

"Clara," he called, tapping on the panels of her door. No light showed from the slit under the door. Her room was in pitch darkness; and there was no answer to his call.

"Clara—it's Boyd. Open the door." Still there was no answer, no sound from the darkened room. He twisted at the knob, but the door was locked.

"Clara, can you hear me?" He pounded on the panels till the skin was knocked from his knuckles, though he did not feel the pain.

"I will have to break the door down," he said, speaking aloud and entirely unaware that he had so spoken.

There was a stir in the darkened room, a voice that he could hardly recognize as Clara's.

"Go away! Oh, please go away!"

"I must get in, Clara."

"No! No! Go away!" The voice was high and keen, almost metallic. It sounded more like a violin string that had been plucked too harshly than like a human voice.

"But, darling," soothed Boyd, "don't you see—if you're not well I'll have to call the doctor. You can't stay on in there by yourself. You must have some kind of attention."

"Boyd, no!"

"Won't you let me send Mary in to you if you don't want me?"

"No!"

"Clara, dear—please."

"No, Boyd, no! Oh, go away!"

Boyd called upon his will for a last effort.

"I'll break in if you don't unlock the door!"

"Boyd, you mustn't——"

**W**ITH his shoulder aching and tingling from the shock, Boyd stepped through the splintered doorway and into the darkness of the room. The shades were tightly drawn, and this in addition to the natural gloom of a moonless night made the room like a pocket. He tried to penetrate the blackness with his eyes but could see nothing.

His hand groped along the wall for the light switch. The movement was arrested by the voice—the voice that was like and yet not like Clara's. At the sound of that voice his searching fingers seemed to coil in on themselves as though they had touched ice.

"Don't light the light! Oh, don't light the light! Whatever you do you mustn't touch the light!"

Boyd held his breath till his chest ached. The voice had come from low down—from almost the level of the floor!

What sight would meet his eyes if he flooded that room with light? What machination of Joan Basfield, dead two hundred and thirty years, would reveal itself? Better never to enter this room again, better never to look on his wife's face again, than stun his brain with the spectacle that intuition told him would confront his eyes!

But this was nonsense! Such things could not be! He would light the light so that he could go to Clara and soothe her out of her fears. Then—after she was well again—they would smile together at their fantastic terrors. His fingers sought along the wall for the switch.

"Don't! Don't!" the voice pleaded.

Out of the whirlpool of his mind Boyd clutched at one perplexing straw. It was a small thing, it seemed, to take up his thoughts at such a moment, but the wonder of it grew and grew.

"How—how do you know what I am doing?" he whispered at last. "It is too dark for you to see me. I can't see you."

"I see every move you make," said the voice. "I can see as well in this room as you can in daylight."

"But how? It is pitch-dark in here! How can you see?"

"Oh, Boyd," moaned the voice, "you

know why I can see in the dark as well as in the light! You know!"

"I won't believe it," said Boyd hoarsely. "I tell you I won't believe it! I won't! I won't!"

Again his questing fingers fumbled for the light switch. "I'm going to turn on this light!"

"You mustn't, I say! You *must not*——"

There was a click and the room was flooded with light.

For a dozen eternities Boyd stood there in the doorway, staring with frightful eyes at a small, furry body that shuddered and huddled in the corner.

There was a soft patter of frantic paws. The supple, feline body flashed by him and out of the door with a scream that was almost human.