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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. 178



**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**



"Ay, he is cursed!" she shrieked.  
"From Heaven and Hell he is cursed!"

# Witch's Hair

By MEARLE PROUT

*An outré story of a gipsy curse, and the strangling hair of a young gipsy mother—a tale of stark tragedy*

AS THE drama fades into the background, the memories attendant upon it grow less poignant. Yet it is only at this late date that I can set down, in orderly sequence, the things as it occurred. Although my reasons, or excuses, for so writing are numerous, my friends will readily understand that my chief purpose is to clear the name of my unfortunate wife, and if possible to

obtain her release from the state hospital where she is now held.

The story which I told so falteringly in the courtroom will be set down here, not in the order of events as I became acquainted with them, but in their actual chronological order. For many of the things mentioned here were unknown to me until after the trial, and the event which really begins the story was learned last of all.

I ask my readers' patience with certain gaps which will occur in the telling. For, even now, there are parts of the story which are not clear. And, at best, only the barest outline of the drama can be presented.

AS OUR curtain rises, the first scene is that of the fourteenth of February, nearly two years ago. Dusk is deepening over a blizzard which has raged for three days, howling through the deserted streets of the town, and piling deeper the huge drifts of snow around the great house on the hill. It is bitterly cold.

At once our attention is directed to a deserted shack a quarter-mile below the house. Here old man Benedict had lived with his family before his steel mill brought him wealth, and before the harshness of his rule had driven the last of his children from him.

But tonight the old house is not deserted. A great fire roars within, and through the lighted windows are heard merry voices and laughter. The stables are crowded with sleek, well-fed horses, and in the yard, half buried in snow, four gaudy carriages proclaim the identity of those within. It is a gipsy band.

There are perhaps twenty of them, men and women, around the stove in the center of the room. One of the number appears ill.

She is on a makeshift cot behind the stove, swathed against the cold beneath a thick pile of blankets. With alert, merry

eyes she watches the festivities, but her face is lined with pain.

Her hair is of that peculiar lustrous black which is characteristic of the gipsy tribe. Loosened now for greater comfort, it flows in black cascades over the edge of the bed and hangs toward the floor. And beside her, idly combing the black locks, is an old crone whose shrunken and wrinkled face well proclaims her seventy years.

"Your hair is beautiful, child," she says. "It is just like mine, when I was your age."

The girl looks up at her, smiling slightly.

"Before morning, you think, mother!"

"Yes, child, before morning, I am sure."

There is a sudden knock, harsh, insistent. A silence falls over the group, but no one moves. Again the knock; this time louder still, and more compelling. With a warning glance around the room the leader rises and opens the door.

The sudden lamplight reveals a squat but powerful figure, limned in belligerent attitude in the very doorway. His clean-shaven but deeply lined face is distorted now with rage. For a moment he is apparently unable to speak. Then:

"What are you? What right have you to be here?"

The gipsy chief laughs easily, as one would humor a child.

"The right of any man, my friend, to save himself and his people from freezing. Come in, and warm yourself."

But the invitation appears only to incense the old man beyond all reason.

"Come in, he says, to my own house! Get out! I'll have the law——"

For the first time a doubt shadows the swarthy face of the gipsy chief.

"But there is my Anna. She is ill. Before morning there will be a child——"

"Not in my house! Not while——"

He pauses a moment as if to collect himself, then goes on more clearly.

"I'll give you just fifteen minutes to get out. At the end of that time, if you're still here, I'll call the law. And I guess you know what that means."

Before anyone answers he turns back into the storm. The door swings closed behind him.

**A**N HOUR later we see the little caravan again. It is halted in the bed of a dry creek by the roadside, where the high banks and overhanging trees offer some measure of protection against the storm. Only the east, the side toward the town, is open; and through the snow-filled air the dim radiance of the city lights is seen.

Around a dimly flickering fire the gypsies are standing. But they are not warming themselves now. They stand at a distance, fearfully, waiting.

On a pile of blankets by the fire Anna stirs weakly.

"Mother, I am—so cold."

"Ay, 'tis cold," answers the old woman.

"They'll be bringing more wood soon, if they can find it. Then, maybe, we can have hot water, too."

She peers intently at the girl's closed eyes, and at the silken hair, darker and more glistening than ever in the unsteady glow of the fire. Again the girl stirs weakly.

"Mother, I'm—I think I'm dying."

"Ay, child, I know."

The snow thins. The old woman lifts her eyes to the house on the hill, silhouetted faintly now against the aura of lights cast by the town. Anna sees it too, and suddenly her pale face is suffused with color. She struggles upright.

"Curse him!" she cries. "Let me hear you curse him before I die!"

At the command the old crone rises from her seat, and her white hair streams long in the lurid firelight.

"Ay, he is cursed!" she shrills. "From Heaven and Hell he is cursed! May he live in fear and die a death of horror upon a night of fire!"

Stooping, she runs her fingers through her daughter's hair, and holds it up as if for him to see.

"By every hair of her head is he cursed! For every hair of the one he has brought to death may he suffer a night of torture. May its black coils be in his thoughts in the day, and may it haunt him in the darkness. And may it choke the life from him at last! Ay, he is cursed!"

And the girl, still sitting upright, with the same mad gleam in her eyes, shrieks after her:

"Ay, he is cursed!"

The hatred flaming in her face dies suddenly. She falls back weakly upon the pillow. Her eyes close, and a cold which is not the cold of the storm settles upon her brow.

**I**T WAS in April of that year that I happened into my favorite pawn-shop on Center Street. I have a pawn-shop complex, and though I usually enter to browse around with no intention of buying, seldom do I escape without some object or other. This time it was a magnificent artificial hair-dress which attracted my interest. It was made of smooth black coils, of a luster which is rarely surpassed even in live hair. At once I wished to possess it. Simultaneously, I recalled that my wife had asked me to be on the watch for artificial hair for her amateur theatricals. And the net result of these two urges was that when I left the shop I was carrying it, carefully wrapped beneath my arm.

Once home, I presented it to my wife, who admired it immensely. Strangely, even as she was complimenting me for buying it, I began to regret my action. The very luster which had at first attracted my attention now began to affect me unfavor-

ably. It was *too* glistening. I am sensitive to such things, and, try as I might, I could not relieve myself of the vaguely disquieting impression that it was alive. I handled it again, but the feeling was not dispelled. I could almost feel it stir in my fingers. And though I did not mention it to Elise, who is a thoroughly practical woman, I hoped fervently that she would never wear it.

I was doomed to early disappointment. At that time it was the temporary fashion in our town for women to wear gorgeous hair-dresses. To those who had worn their hair short this was a temporary hardship, and many wore artificial hair at social gatherings. This my wife resolved to do. Against the idea I brought to bear every possible argument, except the real reason for my disapproval. She pronounced them all foolish, which they were. But——

On the evening of the following Sunday we were preparing to go to church. Having finished dressing first, I was waiting for her in the living-room when she came in.

I had known that she was going to wear the hair, and was in a measure prepared for what I was to see. But when she came in I only rose and stared, so striking was her appearance. She was regal, queen-like. The luxuriant black hair accentuated her height and stood out in marked contrast to the whiteness of her complexion. It touched with a becoming shadow of gloom her already serious features.

She mistook the cause of my stare and smiled, pleased.

"Are you going to stand there all night, John? We'd better go."

On the way to the church I watched her closely. She seemed to be changed in some indefinable way. It was not only that her beauty was heightened. She was more reserved, almost somber in repose. In some manner she recalled to my mind the evan-

gelist Mary Morton—the "woman with a mission."

At the church she acknowledged the compliments paid to her hair with an indifferent nod. She grew increasingly restless throughout the services. Toward the last I noticed that her face was flushed—dangerously so, I thought. I leaned toward her.

"Ill, darling?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

"Except that I have a headache. It must be stuffy in here. This hair feels strange, too, John."

I suppose I looked my apprehension.

"Oh, nothing so serious," she said. "It just feels heavy, is all."

I was glad when the services drew to a close.

"Tonight," the pastor was saying, "I will ask Mr. Benedict to dismiss us."

"That hypocrite!" my wife murmured.

I was more than mildly surprised. A number of people near by had heard her. As we stood for the benediction I noticed her hands resting on the back of the pew. The knuckles were white and drawn.

Once home, she put away the hair with a sigh of relief.

"I doubt if I'll ever wear it again," she commented.

"Whatever made you say that about old man Benedict tonight?" I asked.

"I don't know. But it's true, John—we know it. Him with his steel mills, gouging his tenants and pinching the pennies. He is, all right."

"I know. But I wish you hadn't said it. I noticed him on the street a week ago. He doesn't look well."

**T**HE weeks moved through April and into May. My wife was in poor health, and my growing concern over her for a time supplanted my worries about the black hair, which she had not worn since the first night.

And indeed her condition was serious. All visible symptoms pointed to pernicious anemia, yet the blood-tests were negative. I was deeply troubled as I watched her growing pallor, and saw the increasing lassitude creep over her until now she did little more than sit at her window; especially so, as medical science seemed able to offer no relief.

"John," she confided one day, "I can't help feeling that this whole trouble is mental."

I had feared as much myself, but was not pleased to hear her say it.

"How so?" I queried.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I get the strangest impression of something left undone; but when I try to locate it, it's not there. Did you ever find yourself craving some one food, but unable to tell just what it was you wanted? It's like that."

Later in the evening, restless, I chanced to look in the bureau drawer where I knew she had placed the hair. It was gone! Just why I should be upset, or even surprised, I did not know. Yet I was.

"Darling," I said in considerable agitation, "you remember that hair I bought a few weeks back? Where is it?"

"Oh, that? It's in my room, with the rest of my cast-off things." She spoke with a rising inflection.

"You never wear it, then?"

"No. You know that. Except—once in a while in the afternoon I try it on, just to get the effect."

"You do? Well—I wish you wouldn't."

"Why? I never wear it outside the house. But in the afternoon—well, I do most everything to help pass the time."

It was true. Her afternoons were long now. And, pitying her, I did not press the point.

It has been said that much of the world's misery is caused, not alone by carelessness, but by kindness as well. Anxious to spare the feelings of our friend, we refuse to

tell him things which might be of real value. In at least one sense, the truest friends we have are our enemies.

So in this situation. If I had refused to be set aside, if I had been a little harsher, much suffering might have been avoided. But, realizing my almost ridiculous position, and the weakness of my arguments, I yielded. I contented myself with examining the hair, even to sniffing it for some drug which I imagined might be present, and then returned it to her.

That night I was wakened by the moon shining through my window. I lay there for some time, drowsing, before I realized that my wife was gone. She had been sleeping in my room since her illness, but I had not yet become so used to her as to miss her from force of habit. Once realizing, though, I started up, fully awake.

A hasty glance around the moonlit room showed no trace of her. Without waiting even to put on my shoes I ran to her room. She was not there. The bed was undisturbed. I snapped on the hall light and ran down the stairs, three steps at a time. I burst into the darkened living-room. My unprotected foot met a chair, and I shouted aloud.

"What's the matter, John?" Her voice sounded flat, and listless. "You almost frightened me."

I saw her then, sitting, a shapeless splotch of dark, in her chair at the window. I switched on the light. Something akin to dismay came over me as I saw the hair, black and glistening, coiled in lustrous bands around her head.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just looking. The moonlight is pretty. See how it lights the hill?"

I looked. The great house on the hill dominated the scene as the moon dominated the sky. In the silver light it was white and somber, set in sharp relief against the darker background of the horizon.

"But what's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"No, I can't sleep. There's something I must do, John—something I should have done long ago. Can you think what it is?"

"No."

"I wish I could. I think if I only knew, I could sleep——"

The May night was chill. In my thin pajamas I was shivering.

"But why are you wearing that hair?"

"It—it seems to soothe me, John. Sometimes I get to wanting to wear it—I don't know why—and unless I do I get nervous, and ill."

I lifted the black coils off her head.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I'm going to burn this—every last strand. I don't know how, but I feel this is mixed up with your being ill. We'll get rid of it."

"No——"

"Yes!"

**T**HE next morning, leaving her still asleep, I went to where I had left the hair, firmly resolved to carry out my threat. It was gone!

Agitated, I woke her.

"That hair," I said; "where is it?"

Her eyes looked up at me out of the depths of sleep. She passed her hand over her forehead as if only half comprehending.

"I—don't know. Funny—I remember getting up in the night and hiding it—so you wouldn't burn it, you know? But—now I can't remember where I put it."

I went away much worried, but more resolved than ever to search the house over when I returned. I left the office early that evening with that purpose in mind.

She was sitting at the window again when I came in.

"How are you tonight, Elise?" I asked her.

"I don't know. But—you know what's been worrying me? I know what it is I

have to do now. It came to me quite suddenly this afternoon."

"What is it?"

"I—I can't think now. But I did know; and I felt much better for a while. Then I forgot again. But it was something up there——"

She pointed out of the window.

"On the hill?"

"Yes."

"Was it something about the house?"

"I—I don't know, now. Let me be, John."

Something about her eyes gave me my cue. I went directly to my room and to the telephone.

"Doctor Brewer?" I said when I had got my party. "This is John Wainright. Can you come up right away? . . . Yes, I think so. . . . No, it seems to be her mind that is affected. . . . Not until morning? . . . I see. Thank you, Doctor."

Then, with my room as a starting-point, I searched the entire house, intent upon finding that damnable hair. But it was hidden too well. Nor could Elise help me. Although she remembered wearing it a short while before I came home, she could not recall where she had left it.

**I** WENT to bed that night only when I saw her safely in before me. And I intended, if possible, to stay awake until the specialist came the following morning.

Yet I must have dozed off, for when I awoke later her place beside me was vacant.

In haste I switched on the light. She was gone. A rising tumult in the street finally forced itself upon my consciousness. I ran to the window and looked out, to see a wavering red glow suffusing the atmosphere and reflecting from the houses. Even as I watched, a train of fire-engines raced past, their shrill sirens blasting through the night above the shouts of excited people.

Thoroughly frightened now, I rushed out of the house to locate the fire. Nor was I long in finding it. The house on the hill was a single blazing pile, topped by long, slow flames which were seemingly magnified by the height of their source. I recalled the words:

"Something I must do—something up on the hill, John"—and cursed myself for my negligence.

No need to re-enter the house to look for her now. I knew where she was. Madly, I wheeled the car into the street and whirled it around. At top speed I raced up the still crowded street. In two minutes I was at the scene of the fire.

An immense crowd was there before me. Police had drawn a cordon at a safe distance, and behind it the crowd milled in wild excitement.

With scant courtesy I forced my way to the front.

"What do you want?" asked a policeman roughly as I attempted to push by.

"I'm looking for—I want——" I dared not speak my suspicion. "Nothing," I muttered, and quickly lost myself in the crowd.

Someone cried, "There she is—with the sheriff."

There was a quick rustle as people turned from the fire to the new interest. Fingers pointed.

"She did it, huh?"

"One of his tenants, probably—poor woman! Just what he deserved, too."

I looked, though there was no need. Then I forced my way through the throng to—my wife.

She looked at me with a slow smile.

"Darling," I said, "was it you?"

"Yes, John."

"But why? Why——"

"I don't know. Maybe it *was* the hair, after all. It—it gave me queer ideas, sometimes."

"Then why did you wear it?"

"I—couldn't stop wearing it. It fright-

ened me — but sometimes, when I was alone, I couldn't help putting it on——"

"But you're ill——"

She shook her head.

"No—not now. It was this that made me ill, John. This job. Even before I knew it was my job. I had to do it, John."

"But you poor dear—don't you know what they'll do to you?"

She nodded soberly.

"I know. But I had to, you see. It wasn't my fault. Don't you understand?"

I wasn't sure then that I did. But when the sheriff led her away I remained behind. There was something here, where she had been, that I wanted to see.

The fire was conquered only after the house was two-thirds burned. An hour later, when the hottest embers had been cooled, the police entered the ruins, and I with them.

In a blackened cell that had been a room on the second floor we found the old man's body.

His knees were on the floor, but his head and arms rested across the charred frame of a chair, as if he had died while kneeling. The body was burned almost beyond recognition, but—and here was a peculiar circumstance—around his neck was wound, tightly, a thick black rope of lustrous hair, which was entirely unburned.

"Damn!" said the sergeant. "Who'd have supposed the old boy had a heart? It must be his dead wife's hair."

I said nothing. What was the use of pointing out that he had quite plainly been strangled by it before he even felt the fire? Why ask how, even yet, it could remain so tightly coiled around his neck? Yet there was more. Even as we watched, the black stuff seemed to loosen, to uncoil gently. Softly it slid from his shoulders, and dropped at last in a loose heap on the floor. I stooped and held it up to the lantern.

"Funny," said the sergeant, "that the stuff didn't burn."



"Yes," I agreed, "but it will burn now; I'm sure of it."

Holding it from me, I lighted a match and touched it with the flame. Then, as it flared to instant life, I stepped to the window and dropped the burning mass to the wet ground below.

**O**F THE trial there is little to be said. Elise never had to defend herself against a charge of murder; fortunately that much was spared her. But at the sanity hearing she was bitterly attacked. I told my story, and she corroborated it in every detail. Yet who is to be particularly blamed that it was not believed?

And yet there is injustice. For more

than a year my wife has been held in the state hospital for the criminal insane. Barring the slight hope of release, she will remain there throughout her life. She, who is as normal as you or I. . . .

There remains but one infinitesimal bit of evidence which I can add. Shortly after the conclusion of these unfortunate events I made it a point to visit the pawn-broker from whom I had obtained the hair; and I asked him how he had happened to buy such an apparently unmarketable thing. This is what he said:

"I remember the incident, because I bought it at a low price from an old lady who so obviously needed the money. I believe—yes, I am sure—she was a gipsy."