

Hair Raiser

by **Graham Masterton**

She thought she heard a knocking, bumping sound in the basement, although she couldn't be sure. She immediately went over to the CD system and switched it off, and listened, but she didn't hear it again. There was no chance that she was going to open the basement door to see if there was anything down there - not until Ned came, anyway.

She had been down there only twice today, to get rid of rubbish, and both times she had run back up the stairs as fast as she could. But she hadn't heard anything. No rustlings, no whisprings, no hideous dragging noises.

She was still listening when the doorbell shrilled, and made her jump. She went to the back door and opened it, and there to her relief was Ned, wearing a brown leather jacket and a wide smile.

'Hey, how are you?' he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. 'I got here as quick as I could; but you know what the traffic's like, this time of night. Murder!'

He took hold of Kelly's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. 'Are you OK?' he asked her. 'You're looking a bit pale, if you don't mind my saying so.'

'I'm all right now that you're here.'

Ned walked into the salon and took a look around. 'Nice bright place to work,' he remarked. 'Except for *that*,' said Kelly, nodding toward the basement door.

Ned approached it and turned the handle.

'I locked it. I don't know if there's anybody down there or not, but I wasn't going to take any chances. Not while I was alone.' She told him what Miss Paleforth had said to her about the devil's hair.

'For goodness' sake, I wouldn't worry about *her*. She sounds like some nutty woman trying to put the fear of God into you, that's all.'

'She scared me, though. She really, really scared me.'

Ned saw the upside-down cross on top of the door, and touched it with his fingertips. 'This is weird, isn't it? You wouldn't normally expect to see something like this in a hairdresser's salon. It's an *ankh*.'

'What's that?'

'It's an Egyptian good-luck charm. I know that because my sister wears one. She's still a bit of a hippie, you know. Peace and love and incense, that sort of thing. But this *ankh* is upside down, isn't it? What do you think that means?'

'*Bad* luck?' Kelly suggested.

'Let's hope not. Anyway ... let's take a look down at this basement of yours. If there's anybody here, we'll find them.'

Kelly caught hold of his hand. 'Ned - perhaps we shouldn't do this.'

'Of course we should. You should always face up to the things that you frighten you the most. And what could this be, down in the basement, when you think about it logically? At the very worst, it's some poor old squatter who can't find anywhere else to go.'

'Well, all right, then,' said Kelly, and she turned the key in the basement door. 'The light's on the right ... that's it, a little bit higher.'

Ned switched on the light. He peered into the basement and made a show of cupping his hand around his ear, listening. 'I don't see anything, and I don't hear anything, either.' He sniffed. 'It smells a bit musty, that's all.'

He went down the stairs, with Kelly reluctantly following him. 'Hallo?' he called out. 'Is there anybody here? If there is, we're not going to hurt you. We just want to talk.'

Nobody answered. All they could hear was the muffled traffic outside, and the sound of footsteps, and the constant dripping from the leaky pipe.

Ned prodded one of the bags of hair with his foot. 'This is where you keep all the sweepings from the salon?'

'Yes, until the dustmen call on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. We can't leave the bags outside because Mrs Marshall's cats tear them open and there's hair all over the place. It's a health risk.'

Ned approached the bags of hair and gently prodded at one of them with his finger. 'When you came down here, one of these burst, right? And this whole basement was filled up with a storm of hair?'

'That's right,' Kelly nodded. 'I almost suffocated.'

Ned strained his eyes to see into the darkness beyond the alcove. 'You don't think that anybody's hiding in there, do you?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'I mean, there's no smell of food; no old newspapers; no garbage. If somebody were living down here, we'd be able to smell them.'

Ned took out a Swiss penknife and cut open one of the bags that had been recently stacked on top of the pile. A glittering cascade of hair fell out, of every conceivable colour. Ned sifted his hand through it, and let it fall from his fingers. 'There...' he said. 'Look at it ... that was somebody's crowning glory. But that's all.'

Kelly wrinkled her nose up. 'I can't stand it. By the time I get home in the evening I feel that my lungs must be full of it.'

'Oh, come on with you, it's only hair,' said Ned. He prodded another bag, and another. They listened, but there was no whispering, no frightening innuendos, no filthy French gobbledygook.

Ned climbed over the bags, his feet slipping, until he had to crawl on his hands and knees. He made his way right to the back of the basement, to the darkened alcove, and stuck his head into it, and looked around, Kelly waited on the bottom stair, anxiously clutching the rail.

'There's nothing here as far as I can make out,' Ned called back. 'A couple of broken chairs and some old-fashioned hair-dryers. That's all. There's nobody living here, and that's for sure.'

He clambered back again. 'I don't know what it is you thought you heard here, Kelly; or what you thought you saw, but it certainly isn't here now.'

'I didn't imagine it,' Kelly protested. 'There was something here. *Somebody* here. I heard them whispering and laughing - and you only have to look at my wrist.'

'I know that, sweetheart,' said Ned. 'But sometimes - you know - your mind can play tricks on you. It really can. In winter, when I had to walk back home from school in the dark, I was always sure that this shadowy monster was following me. I used to walk faster and faster and then I used to start running and by the time I reached home I was in a total panic, and my ma never understood why. But I did. To me, that shadowy monster was completely real, and I was always sure that it was going to catch up with me one day, and carry me off.'

'You're not making me feel any better,' said Kelly, still looking nervously around the basement.

'I'm sorry. But I don't think there's anything here. I really don't.'

Kelly started to climb back up the stairs. As she did so, she heard a very soft rustling sound. She turned back, and saw that the hair from the bag which Ned had split open was sliding down the bags below it, on to the floor. But it wasn't just a cascade of loose hair. It had twined itself together somehow, and formed a long snakelike shape - an almost-endless python of shining, glistening hair.

'*Ned*,' she whispered. 'Look at that.'

The hair continued to pour down on to the floor. It even seemed to have a rearing head of its own, exactly like a snake; and when it reached the concrete it started to flow swiftly across it, straight towards the stairs. Even as its head twined itself around the banister post, the rest of its body was still pouring out of the broken bag. It must have been ten metres long, and it was still growing, and it was still coming after them.

They stared at it for one horrified split second; and even in that one split second the hair-snake had managed to flow up another two stairs. It made a soft, relentless hissing sound, like steam escaping.

Kelly screamed, '*What is it? Ned - what is it?*'

But Ned didn't answer. He pushed her forcefully up the stairs until they had reached the salon door. It was only then that he shouted, '*Go! Get out of here! Quick!*'

She stumbled into the salon. Ned followed her out of the door and turned around to shut it. But as he did so, the hair-snake came rearing up the staircase and lunged at him. It even had a thin, predatory mouth, and fangs formed out of human hair, all bonded together so that they

shone as sharp and as venomous as a real snake's teeth. Kelly pushed Ned's shoulder and the hair-snake missed him by less than three centimetres. Instantly, it arched itself back up again, in the middle of the doorway, ready for a second strike.

Kelly snatched up the broom which was leaning against Simon's station, and wildly struck out at the hair-snake, hitting it one way, and then the other. It felt as strong and wiry as a real snake, and each time she hit it, it grew more and more furious, lashing out at her with its forked tongue flickering.

'Kelly!' shouted Ned. '*Hit it again! Now!*'

She hit it, but the hair-snake was so powerful that it knocked the broom out of her hands and sent it clattering across the floor.

'Don't move!' Ned warned her. 'Don't make a sound!'

'What?' panted Kelly. The hair-snake was slowly lifting its head right up into the air, right over her. It swayed from side to side, as if it were blindly trying to decide where she was. She stood as still as she could, and tried to suppress her breathing. The hair-snake's head swung dangerously close to her face, and she couldn't help shrinking back from it, but Ned waved his hand to her to tell her not to move a muscle.

Seconds crawled past, although they felt like hours. Then - without warning - the hair-snake lashed its head wildly from side to side. Kelly screamed and stepped backwards, tripping over Simon's chair. The hair-snake immediately stiffened, and whipped its head back, all ready to strike.

'Ned!' Kelly screamed, trying to disentangle herself from Simon's chair. The hair-snake lunged at her, but as it did so, Ned threw himself forward like a rugby player and collided with the open cellar door, slamming it shut. Instantly, the hair-snake's head was chopped off; and it dropped on to the salon floor as nothing more than a few clumps of mixed human hair.

Kelly slowly climbed to her feet, and she was shaking. Ned came over and put his arm around her and held her tight. 'It's all right, now,' he reassured her. 'It's dead, whatever it is.'

All the same, they approached the hair with the utmost caution. Kelly had a horrible dread that the scattered hair would suddenly reassemble itself into the shape of a snake's head, and take a bite at her. But Ned gave it a contemptuous kick, so that it was thrown in all directions.

'Did you see that?' he asked Kelly. 'It was a snake, wasn't it? You and I, we both saw it, didn't we? But it's just hair, that's all. Nothing but hair.'

'I can't believe it. It came after us so quickly. And it was so *strong!*'

Ned ran his hand through his hair. 'I don't know. I don't understand it. I've never seen anything like that in my life.'

'What about the rest of it, I wonder?' asked Kelly. 'Do you think it's still there, behind the door? I hope it's not like one of those worms - you know, when you cut them in half the two halves still go wriggling off on their own.'

'Well, there's only one way to find out,' said Ned. He let go of her, and put his hand on the doorknob and started to turn it. 'Don't,' said Kelly. 'Please don't. I'm scared.'

Ned said, 'Listen, Kelly. Something's happening here at Sissuz that's frightening the life out of you. What are you going to do? Run away from it? Give up your job?'

'You saw that snake as clearly as I did.'

'Of course I did. But there must be some kind of explanation. I don't believe in ghosts and werewolves, and I don't believe in snakes made out of hair. Well, I do. But maybe it's some kind of a trick, you know, like the Indian rope-trick.'

Kelly stared at the door handle and anxiously bit her lip. 'All right, then,' she said. 'But I'm going to stand over here by the basins.'

'Fair enough,' said Ned. Very slowly, he opened the door. Only an inch at first, in case the rest of the hair-snake was waiting to lunge at them. Then - when nothing happened - he opened it a little wider, and then a little more. Finally, he swung it right back.

There was nothing there. Only the stairs, without a single hair on them. The hair-snake had vanished as quickly as it had first appeared. Ned shaded his eyes against the naked light bulb and peered down the stairs. He gave Kelly the thumb's-up. 'It's gone,' he told her. 'And by the look of it, the hair's all back in the bag.'

Kelly came across and took a look for herself. The hair-snake had completely gone. No wonder Simon had thought that she swept up so well the other night. The hair had a life of its own, it was *alive*, and it could slide back into its bags whenever it wanted to.

'What do we do now?' she asked Ned.

'Go and have a drink,' said Ned, emphatically.

'But we have to tell somebody! We have to tell Simon, or even the police! We could have been killed!'

'What are we going to tell the police? They'll only think that we're pulling their legs. I mean, would *you* believe anybody who said they'd been chased by a huge great snake made out of people's hair-clippings?'

'I suppose not. But what about Simon?'

'I don't know. I think we'd be wiser not to tell anybody anything - not until we find out what's really happening here. We don't want to be making complete fools of ourselves, do we?'

'But I'm sure Simon would help.'

'I expect you're probably right. But just ask yourself this: who painted that *ankh* over the door there, and why?'

'I don't know, but--'

Ned put his fingers to his lips. 'Let's just keep this quiet for a while. As my old grandfather used to say, "A second's silence can save you a lifetime of trouble."' "

'What does that mean?'

'I'm not entirely sure. But I think we'd be doing ourselves a favour if we kept this snake to ourselves.'

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