

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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Contents for May, 1923

Nineteen Thrilling Short Stories *Two Complete Novelettes*
Two Two-Part Stories *Interesting, Odd and Weird Happenings*

THE MOON TERROR.....	A. G. BIRCH	5
	<i>A Remarkable Novel</i>	
THE SECRET FEAR.....	BY KENNETH DUANE WHIPPLE	22
	<i>A "Creepy" Detective Story</i>	
JUNGLE BEASTS.....	WILLIAM P. BARRON	23
	<i>A Complete Novelette</i>	
THE GOLDEN CAVERNS.....	JULIAN KILMAN	30
	<i>A Condensed Novel</i>	
VIALS OF INSECTS.....	PAUL ELLSWORTH TRIEM	39
	<i>Short Story</i>	
AN EYE FOR AN EYE.....	G. W. CRANE	49
	<i>Short Story</i>	
THE FLOOR ABOVE.....	M. HUMPHREYS	52
	<i>A Short Story with a Horrifying Climax</i>	
PENELOPE.....	VINCENT STARRETT	57
	<i>A Fantastic Tale</i>	
THE PURPLE HEART.....	HERMAN SISK	61
	<i>The Story of a Haunted Cabin</i>	
FELINE.....	BRUCE GRANT	62
	<i>A Whimsical Storyette</i>	
TWO HOURS OF DEATH.....	E. THAYLES EMMONS	64
	<i>A Ghost Story</i>	
MIDNIGHT BLACK.....	HAMILTON CRAIGIE	67
	<i>Short Story</i>	
THE HAUNTED AND THE HAUNTERS.....	BULWER LYTTON	70
	<i>An Old Masterpiece</i>	
THE WHISPERING THING.....	LAURIE McCLINTOCK AND CULPEPER CHUNN	78
	<i>The Conclusion of a Frightful Mystery Novel</i>	
THE DEATH CELL.....	F. K. MOSS	85
	<i>A Weird Short Story</i>	
THE DEVIL PLANT.....	LYLE WILSON HOLDEN	89
	<i>A Story of Ghastly Retribution</i>	
THE THUNDER VOICE.....	F. WALTER WILSON	92
	<i>The Story of a Hairy Monster</i>	
CASE NO. 27.....	MOLLIE FRANK ELLIS	96
	<i>A Few Minutes in a Madhouse</i>	
THE FINALE.....	WILLIAM MERRIT	99
	<i>A Short Story</i>	
THE CLOSED CABINET.....		101
	<i>A Story of the Eighteenth Century</i>	
THE EYRIE.....	BY THE EDITOR	113

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CASE No. 27

A Few Minutes in a Madhouse

By MOLLIE FRANK ELLIS

DOCTOR MAYNARD paused midway of the long hospital corridor and waved an inclusive hand toward its twin rows of iron-barred cells.

"This, Wayne," he said, "is the Psychopathic Ward. We have some unusual cases here. Take, for instance,

Number Twenty-Seven. I'm sure you will be interested in Number Twenty-Seven. Step this way."

I obeyed with reluctance. I was concerned with Maynard, not his psychopathic cases. We had not seen each



other since our college days, twenty years before, and I had hoped for a return of our old intimacy during these few hours together, which chance had thrown in my way.

I had knocked about the world, acquiring the kaleidoscopic knowledge of life accorded the globe-trotter. Maynard had stayed at home, tinkering with the mental workings of the human machinery until his name stood for the accom-

plishment of amazing things in the realm of psychopathy. Each had run true to form: Maynard's passion was to make the wheels go round; mine to wonder why they went.

"This is Number 'Twenty-Seven,'" Maynard continued, as he stopped before a cell door. "I'll let her tell her own story. . . . Good morning, Mrs. Howard. How are you this morning?"

At his words, a woman slowly rose from a bench against the far wall of the cell. Then, abruptly, she made a sudden rush that ended in a frantic shaking of the iron bars of the cell door where we stood.

"Doctor Maynard! You're a-goin' to let me out, ain't you? You're a-goin' to let me go home an' rub Jim's head so's he can sleep? Jim cain't sleep unless I rub his head for him. You know he cain't, Doctor! I've told you so, often."

"Yes, yes. You've told me often, Mrs. Howard." Maynard gave me a significant glance. "But tell me again, please. Maybe I will understand better this time and let you go."

The woman strained her gaunt body against the cell door. She seemed in a torture of anxiety, obsessed by a vital current of emotion in sharp contrast to the pitiful meagerness of her personality.

She wore a cheap cotton dress; her hair was plain about her sharp face; and there was written upon her countenance that look of repression, of negation of all right to exist as an individual, which marks the poorer type of rural woman.

It seemed for a moment as if she would break into a torrent of words; then abruptly she fell back, silent, and the heartbreak in her eyes were succeeded by a slow-growing horror. Yet her tragedy, whatever it might be, brought with it a certain dignity which she had hitherto lacked. Her attenuated homeliness forbade distinction, yet when she made pitiful apology to Maynard, a certain nobility of soul shone from her eyes.

"I'd forgot for a minute, Doctor Maynard, that I'd killed Jim. I'd forgot that I hated him. I was thinkin' he was alive and that I loved him like I used to before the children was killed. I'm a wicked woman—the wickedest woman that ever lived; but I wouldn't be in this penitentiary if Jim could a-slept without havin' to have his head rubbed."

Maynard touched my foot at the word "penitentiary."

"That's all right, Mrs. Howard." His voice seemed unnecessarily loud and cheerful against the thin anguish of her

tones. "Tell me about the children. How were they killed?"

"THEY was run over, Doctor."

No words can describe the deadness of her voice, as of a fierce pain burnt out for lack of fuel for further endurance.

"It was the poultry truck that goes by the farm every morning. Milly was too little to know not to git in the road, an' Jacky run out to grab her back an' he fell, Jacky did. 'Twasn't nobody's fault, Doctor. The man that drives the truck, he always waved at the children as he passed, and he most went crazy when it happened. An' Milly was too little to know better; an' Jackie done the best he could—only six years old.

"But afterwards me an' Jim couldn't sleep. At first we did, a night or two, 'cause we was all wore out with the funeral and such; but after the kinfolks was gone we couldn't. We could see their faces—Milly's and Jacky's.

"Then, after a while, Jim got so's he didn't see 'em so bad, an' he said he could 'a'slept, only for me. He said I ought to be a-gittin' 'over it some; an' I reckon I should 'a' been. I tried to, but it didn't do no good. Mebby 'twas because they was just the two of 'em an' both goin' at once.

"Jim got right fretful at me. He said a man couldn't work on a farm an' not sleep. He was right, too. Jim always was sensible.

"One night after I had worritted him considerable, a-cryin', I found out that I could put him to sleep by rubbin' his forehead, slow an' firm; an' so I done it right along every night after that an' he slept fine. I was glad, 'cause Jim was a hard worker an' a good provider; an' a man can't work on a farm an' not sleep.

"But somehow, after Jim had got to sleep of nights, things seemed a heap lonesomer. Mebby if we'd lived nearer to the neighbors 'twould 'a' helped some. 'Twas so awful still, nights, out where we lived; an' the moon come in at the winder so white an' all . . .

"Times, just before dawn, I'd git to wonderin' if it would 'a' happened if I'd 'a' been out in the front yard, a-watchin' out for the children, instead of washin' back in the kitchen. And I'd git to shakin' all over an' couldn't stop. Once I waked Jim up and begged him to talk to me; but he said it wouldn't help none for two of us to be losin' our sleep, so I never done it any more. Jim always was sensible.

"At last I got so the work 'round the house dragged on me until I was afraid I couldn't git things done. I told Jim

about it and he was sorry. But he said a woman's work didn't matter so much—it could be let go—but a man had to make the livin'.

"Even with the work and all, I never wanted night to come. I'd git all scared when it come on dusk. Jim didn't like it. He said it wasn't no way to welcome a man home after a hard day's work; an' it wasn't. I done my best, but somehow I couldn't laugh much or be lovin'; so Jim took to drivin' to town after supper was over. He hadn't never done that before the children was killed.

"Some times he'd stay real late. Me not bein' used to bein' left alone made it worse, too. Sometimes I'd git so tired waitin' up for him I'd feel like I could go to sleep right then. But of course I couldn't, account of havin' to rub his head. You see, he'd got to dependin' on it, an', as he said, a man had to have his sleep or he couldn't work.

"All this time, Doctor, I was lovin' Jim an' tryin' to git along the best I could. I knowed I'd been lucky to git Jim. He was a good man. He never took tantrums like Pa. We'd never dared cross Pa at home 'cause he was excitable-like; an' finally he went crazy. They would a-took him to the asylum, I reckon, only he died.

"Mebby I'd 'a' got so's I could a-slept after a while, only 'bout this time it come on to October, when the fall winds begin to blow, an' the house would creak of nights—kind of little breakin' noises like babies whisperin' . . . An' the shadows of the leaves on our big tree outside the winder kept twistin' about on the walls like little hands a-pushin' against coffin lids, a-tryin' to git out an' go back an' find their mammy's breasts."

SHE stopped abruptly and stood in tense stillness—as if she were back in that hushed house of sorrow, with its sharp noises and its tiny, mother-seeking shadow-hands upon the walls—listening to the silence, the unendurable silence, of the waning hours.

Doctor Maynard made a restless movement. With a start, the woman came back to realities and turned to us once more.

"I didn't git to hatin' Jim, Doctor, until after I took to usin' them pills they gave Ma when she was on her death-bed. She died, leavin' a bottle of 'em on the kitchen shelf—morphine, they call 'em. One night, when I just couldn't stand it no longer, I thought of them an' I got one an' it helped a lot."

She paused, apparently musing upon how much it had helped. Then she went on:

"'Twas along about then that I got to hatin' Jim, lookin' at him sleepin' so hard, his face all red an' his mouth open. 'Twasn't that so much, though, Doctor, 'cause I always thought Jim was nice-lookin' even though he was coarse complected. But he got to havin' restless spells, wakin' up along of cock-crowin' time, 'bout when I'd got my pill an' had kind of quit shakin' over the shadows an' things. Then I'd have to rouse up to 'em again an' rub him to sleep once more. I got to wonderin' if he'd die right off, without it's hurtin' him none, if I'd press down hard on them soft spots in his temples. Seem like havin' to do it any more would be more'n I could bear—"

She stopped again as if re-living her torture; perhaps slipping once more like a white wraith from bedroom to kitchen shelf and back again, to stand looking down upon her husband's sprawled figure, battling against the up-surge of desire to crush out the life beneath her hands and be forever free from her hideous task!

" . . . I didn't kill Jim, though, Doctor, until them pills give out. I reckon mebbe I wouldn't never have done it if they hadn't give out. But after that . . . sometime after that I killed Jim. I pressed down—down . . ."

Maynard waited until he was sure she had finished; then he spoke in a commanding tone.

"Mrs. Howard!"

Startled, she stared at us as if seeing us for the first time. She grasped the cell door and shook it in a frenzy of anxiety.

"Doctor Maynard! You're a-goin' to let me out, ain't you? You're a-goin' to let me go home an' rub Jim's head for him so's he can sleep? Jim cain't

sleep unless I rub his head! I've told you so often, Doctor . . ."

MAYNARD drew me away; but that pleading voice followed us down the length of the corridor, thin, anguished—

I hurried.

When we had closed the door of the Psychopathic Ward behind us, Maynard said:

"Now that's the interesting part of it—that last—to a psychologist. Did you note that she still loves him, whenever she comes out from under her obsession about killing him?"

"Didn't she kill him?" I asked.

"Not at all. You see, when she could get no more of the drug, her grief and her loss of sleep 'turnd her brain,' as you laymen would say. Remember what she said about 'Pa'."

I battled with my bewilderment at this unexpected turn of the affair.

"But I don't understand!" I stammered.

"Probably not. I shall try to explain it, as simply as possible and without using scientific terms. You see, she had *wanted* to kill him for so long—had gone over the manner of it so often in her silent vigils—that when at last her conscious mind became unbalanced the resisted desire took its revenge by becoming a subconscious obsession, which announced itself an accomplished fact. It is an interesting sidelight on psychopathy, don't you think?"

I did not. I changed the subject.

"What became of the man—her husband? How did he take it?"

"Well. Very well, indeed. Level-headed fellow. Of course, he was upset at first over her condition; but when we made it clear to him that she was incurable he calmed down. He went home and slept on it for a night or two—"

"How do you suppose," I broke in (I really could not resist asking it)—
"How do you suppose he got to sleep without—"

" . . . And then he applied for a divorce," continued Maynard, ignoring my childish rudeness. "He wants to marry again, but, of course, our laws—"

"Marry!"

Maynard frowned. "One can see his point of view."

"Yes; to be sure. And our laws . . . quite unsympathetic—"

Maynard dismissed the matter with a magnanimous gesture. Also, his kindling eye bespoke a concentration of interest which ignored the trivial. He peered at me eagerly.

"What would you think, Wayne—I am studying the case, and I ask for information—would you be led to believe that her reason for wanting to kill him was a subconscious sensing of that trait in him, that eagerness to be rid of whatever irked him, regardless of his responsibilities? Or, on the other hand, would you think it a flair of sex antagonism—resentment that he, unlike herself, could resume a normal existence so soon after an emotional cataclysm?"

I fumbled my hat and turned toward the door. I wanted to get away.

"My time is up, Maynard," I said hastily. "Sorry, but I must go. Glad to have had this visit with you. Awfully proud to have been the classmate of a celebrity, you know, and all that. But I really cannot follow your scientific subtleties. If you mean do I think his cruelty drove her mad—"

Maynard threw up his hands. "Oh you laymen!" he laughed. "But come in again, Wayne. Any time you're passing through town. Glad to see you always. We have some very interesting cases here."