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SOMETHING in Emmet Proule's brain had finally made contact. All the cells were flashing frantically, like a switchboard in a disaster area. Every sense organ was clamoring to be recognized.

The eye signaled the brain that it was in a long barren room; with barred windows, rows of cot-beds and ambling gray-clad figures

The voice above him was cold and harsh. "Get the hell off my bed," it said.

Emmet peered through parted fingers. Before him was the waistband of a pair of coarse gray trousers. His eyes traveled up across an expanse of gray shirt and stopped on a flat gray face. "Get the hell off my bed." A drawn-

## THE IDIOT'S TALE

*Murder—every time Emmet Proule thought about the subject he became convulsed with the giggles.*

BY

LEO ELLIS

around. The ears; that there was an uproar of strident voices, while the nasal passages writhed against the body smells and strong disinfectant.

The brain—so suddenly overloaded—rebelled and spewed out only confusion. Emmet Proule, with one hundred and thirty-seven pounds of dead weight buckling his knees, stumbled over and sank down on a cot.

back fist was poised.

Emmet made noises like a small trapped animal. He drew back, but the blow never landed.

The gray figure disappeared and a brown hand, extending from a white shirt sleeve, reached out and slid under Emmet's arm. He struggled, but the hand was strong and it hoisted him to his feet.

"You're lost again, Mac." The voice was raspy, but it wasn't un-

kind, and Emmet clung to it like a lost puppy to a new master. "C'mon," the voice said, "I'll take you home."

Half supported, and only reaching to the voice's shoulder, Emmet shuffled along. His loose slippers made shushing sounds against the asphalt tile. They stopped and Emmet was pushed between two beds. He sank to one and looked up.

The voice had a face. It was a long, sad-horse, face. It had a hawk nose set between high cheek bones and a slit of a mouth beneath it. The skin was copper-brown, stretched tight over the bone frame of the skull.

"I'm sorry," Emmet muttered.

The hand shot out again. This time cupping under Emmet's chin, and snapped his head back. "Did you say something, Mac?"

"I didn't mean to do anything wrong." Emmet was trying to draw away.

"*You're talking!* Doc Bruton will want to know this."

Emmet watched the man go over and enter a cubicle at the end of the room. He saw the man point a forefinger at him. A tall nurse, with a black band across her cap, turned and looked through the glass at Emmet. There was no warmth in her gaze. No friendliness; then she turned back and wrote something in a black book on the desk.

Emmet threw himself face down across the bed. "Mother!" He

sobbed the word aloud. "Mother, help me." His mind was becoming organized enough to know that there was no mother. But there was Joyce, and more than anything else, he wanted his wife.

Emmet was still face down on the bed—and although the rubber soles made no noise on the floor—he felt someone standing over him. It was the hawk-nosed man again.

"I'm Chief," the man said, pulling his thin lips back over yellowed teeth in a grin. Maybe you don't know me, being you've been standing around not knowing *anything*. I've been taking care of you for six months.

Emmet stared at him, his hand going automatically to his forehead. He felt a hole in the flesh, and when he took his hand down, he saw there was clotted blood on his fingertips.

"We don't do that no more," Chief said, grasping Emmet's wrist and pulling it down. "We don't pick a hole in our head no more. We're better, see?" He leaned over. "C'mon, Doc Bruton wants to see you."

Emmet shank away.

Chief lifted Emmet to his feet. "Don't be scared. Chief's not going to let anybody hurt you."

Emmet followed close behind; waiting while Chief unlocked and then re-locked the doors as they came to them. Finally, in the doctor's office, Chief indicated a chair before the desk and left. Emmet

had a feeling of panic and tried to follow.

"Sit down, Mister Proule." The man behind the desk wore a broad expanse of white smock.

Cautiously, Emmet lowered himself into the chair; grasping the arms until his bony knuckles stood out.

"I'm Doctor Bruton," the figure said. "And you've been in here before. I understand that you are feeling better, so I think we should learn something about you. Tell me about yourself."

Obediently, Emmet spoke, and his own voice startled him with its thin mechanical tone. It was as though someone were playing a small phonograph. "I am Emmet Haywood Proule," it said. "I am forty-seven years of age. My mother is dead, God rest her soul, and I am married. I am employed at Fleshman's Department store." Emmet stopped, sat up and straightened his shoulders. "As head of the men's wear department."

"I see." The doctor tapped heavy rimmed spectacles on the desk. "Do you know where you are, Mister Proule?"

Emmet's body slumped. He shook his head fearfully.

"You are a patient in the Pinehurst State Mental Hospital."

Although he had known it, the words were a shock. *The nut house*—as a child he had imagined it filled with dungeons, like they

had in the castles he would read about in fairy tale books. The books that would frighten him so that he would run to his mother to be comforted.

"—you've been with us for six months now," the doctor was saying.

"But I'm all right now?" Emmet's tone was hopeful.

Doctor Bruton held his glasses up, peering through them toward the light fixture. "You must understand that the mind is a very delicate mechanism, Mister Proule. It must have taken considerable time to damage it, as yours has been damaged. It follows therefore that it is going to take time to heal."

Emmet was leaning forward, gripping the edge of the desk. "But I am not insane now, doctor. I know that."

"I am sure that you do, Mister Proule."

"*But I am sane*—can't I go home now, please?"

"No. You must stay here at Pinehurst for observation."

Emmet's voice was a choked sob. "For how long?"

"Until such time as you are adjudged officially sane, Mister Proule."

Emmet was on his feet, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I can't stay here—I'll die!"

The swivel chair squeaked as the doctor leaned back. "It seems that most of our patients feel that way, Mister Proule. But in spite of that,

you will find that our mortality rate here at Pinehurst is remarkably low."

"But I'm different, doctor. Mother always said that I couldn't stand what the other boys could. I'm—"

"You'll learn!" Doctor Bruton leaned over the desk. "And *how* you get along here at Pinehurst depends a great deal on you, Mister Proule."

"I can't stay! You can't make me." Emmet felt one of his dizzy spells. He was afraid he was going to collapse.

"You've had a trying day, Mister Proule." Doctor Bruton reached over and pressed a button on his desk. "That will be all for now."

Chief appeared at Emmet's side and took his arm. "C'mon, Mac," he said softly, "We're going home."

When they were half way down the hall, Chief stopped. "How'd it go in there?" he asked.

Emmet grabbed Chief's arm. Now, more than ever, he wanted to stay close to this man. "The doctor says I'll have to stay here."

"Sure," Chief said easily, "they all do. But most of them never get out." He gave a broad wink.

"You'll help me, Chief?" Emmet was tugging at the shirt sleeve.

"Not over the wall; that's no good, Mac. They hunt you down that way. You want to be declared sane and *walk* out of here, don't you?"

Emmet nodded, and Chief pried

his fingers loose. "Then you just take it easy and keep your nose clean."

From then on, Emmet placed all his trust in Chief. And Chief was Emmet's only hold on to the thin thread of his sanity. Knowing that Chief was always there, watching; knowing that he could always turn to Chief for comfort, was the only thing that kept Emmet from slipping back into the abyss of oblivion. Chief protected Emmet from the more violent patients in the ward. He brought him special food when Emmet was too sick with fear to eat; but best of all, he would talk to Emmet. The patients were taken out each day to a fenced-in compound for an airing, and Chief would sit with Emmet and they would talk.

There had been regular sessions with Doctor Bruton. The doctor had brought Emmet up through his fatherless childhood, with his deep attachment to his mother, to an insensitive probing of Emmet's early relationship with girls.

At first, Emmet had insisted that there had been no girls. But the doctor's insistence had brought out the name of Trilby.

"*Who was Trilby?*" Doctor Bruton asked.

"Just a girl. A girl I took to the high school prom."

"Were you in love with Trilby?"

"No!—no, I hated her."

Doctor Bruton polished his glasses. "I want to know all about Trilby," he said deliberately. "I want to know all about that prom."

Emmet lowered his head. He didn't want to show the bitterness that he knew would be in his eyes when he talked about Trilby. He had never mentioned the incident to anyone since it had happened, not even to himself. But he had known that the terrible hurt of it had always been close to the surface, haunting him.

"Trilby was the prettiest girl in the class," he said. "When I found that she had fought with her boy friend, I got up enough nerve to ask her to the dance, and she accepted."

Then he told of how at first, his mother had been angry. Then in a spirit of martyrdom, she had ordered a corsage and had sent it to Trilby. She had promised to wait up, and tearfully, she had sent Emmet to Trilby.

He told of how he had been proud when they had arrived. Then how Trilby had left him—how she had been gay and frivolous, dancing with all the other boys. How when he had protested, she had laughed at him. In front of all the others she had pointed at him and had called him "little mama's boy."

The others had laughed too, and Emmet realized that they had been laughing all along, because they had known that Trilby had been

using him. That she had played him for a fool.

Emmet had fled the building. At home, he had thrown himself down with his head in his mother's lap and had been hysterical. His mother, when she had understood what had happened, had been furious. "The bitch!" Her voice had been filled with passion. "She shouldn't be allowed to live, for what she has done to my baby! She should be struck dead!"

Later in the compound, Emmet told Chief about Trilby. Chief listened, and with his copper-brown features still immobile, said: "Your mother was right. The girl should die. A woman used me that way and then laughed at me. She should die."

Emmet was frightened. He looked away and was silent.

"I am half Indian." Chief went on talking, as though there was nobody around. "My wife knew what I was when we were married, but now she calls me a savage. Once, in front of people, she yelled at me. She called me a dirty halfbreed."

Fearfully, Emmet looked over. "What did you do?" he asked. Then for the first time, he saw that Chief's eyeballs were a smoky amber instead of white.

"Nothing," Chief said. "But she will find out that when a man has Indian blood in him, he can be patient for his revenge."

In his talks with Doctor Bruton, Emmet had explained that he had never asked another girl for a date. He and his mother had lived together in their old home, and he had advanced slowly until he was the head of the men's wear department at Fleshman's.

Then he told of his mother's rather sudden death, and his own inconsolable grief and helplessness at being left alone.

"You married after your mother's death then," Doctor Bruton said.

Emmet nodded. "About six months after. Joyce had come from a small town to work at the store—she didn't have any friends. We were married right away."

"You were forty-six when you were married." Doctor Bruton made it sound brutal. "How old was your wife?"

"Joyce was twenty." Then Emmet leaned forward, putting his hands on the desk. "But our ages didn't make any difference. Joyce was happy. She had a home, just the way mother left it. I had her quit her job. I gave her my pay check—" Emmet pulled his hands away and there were blobs of moisture left on the polished surface.

In talking about the marriage, Doctor Bruton would lead Emmet up to the point of the store party. There, they would strike a blank wall and Emmet would be unable to go on. Each time the doctor would sigh. "All right," he would

say, pressing the buzzer button, "we'll try again later."

For Emmet, the nights were the worst. The night-lights, set low in the wall behind him, would strike the pipe legs of his bed, and throw long spidery shadows up on the opposite wall. The shadows would take the shape of crooked fingers, reaching out to grab him, and Emmet would bury his head under his blanket in terror.

All the nights were long for Emmet at Pinehurst. He would close his eyes tightly to shut out the present, so that he could try and unravel the past. He tried to pick out the fancies from the facts. Some things, he knew, must be products of his diseased mind. These, he cast away, shutting them out. Others, he clung to. But he knew that if he was ever to be completely sane, he would have to know which was true, and which was hallucination.

He had been happy with Joyce. He had been, up until the doubts had started to sneak in. At first they had been doubts of his own adequacy—of his ability to hold a young wife. Then had come the headaches—skull splitting in their intensity—and the dizzy spells.

His mother had appeared to him. Sometimes dim, but at other times strong as she had been in life. Emmet felt that his mother hated Joyce because she had taken her

place. He realized now that his mother had been dead; that this was just one of the hallucinations that confused him so.

The store party was where the last vestige of his sanity remained. It was an annual affair and he had always taken his mother. But this year he was to take Joyce. He remembered the preparations, but from that point, there was only darkness beyond.

Emmet had been at Pinehurst for fourteen months—eight of them that he knew of—when Chief came to his bed. "Good news," he said, and for the first time Emmet saw Chief smile. "There's a staff meeting in the morning and your name is on the roster."

The enormity of it was too much for Emmet to comprehend. He sat staring, his mouth sagging open.

"The staff," Chief said impatiently. "They're bringing your case up for a hearing. They may declare you sane."

Emmet started to shake. For eight months he had been waiting for this moment. Now that it was here, he couldn't face it. "I can't go." Emmet was whimpering.

Chief's fingers bit into Emmet's shoulder. "You'll go," he said grimly.

"What will they do to me?"

"It will be a bunch of docs," Chief said, shaking him. "They'll ask you questions. You answer them real polite and don't get rattled."

"I'll get rattled."

Chief shook him again. "No you won't. Remember that."

"They'll turn me down."

"You're going through with it!"

"I'm afraid, Chief." Emmet was whimpering again.

Chief took his hand away. "You'll make it, Mac," he said. "*You've got to make it, Mac.*"

Emmet did not sleep that night. Tomorrow morning he would have to face a group of doctors. He would have to answer their questions to prove his sanity. But Emmet Proule had lived so long with insanity, that Emmet Proule wasn't sure he knew what sanity really was.

Frantically he reviewed things again, trying to fill in the holes. If the holes were filled, then he would be better able to answer the questions. He knew now that Joyce hadn't been really happy in their marriage. She couldn't have been; living with a man who was slowly going mad. Her life must have been a hell, but she had been uncomplaining. Emmet wanted only one thing now. He had to be released so that he could find Joyce and make it up to her. He was going to spend the rest of his life making her happy. He would forget his mother, because everything was to be for Joyce.

Chief came for him the next morning and took him to the ad-



ministration building. He sat on the bench with him, waiting, and when Emmet Proule's name was called, he stood and squeezed Emmet's arm. "Good luck, Mac," he said, giving Emmet a push toward the door.

Emmet Proule remembered little of what went on inside. It was a babble of voices; a confusion of faces around a table. There were questions that he answered, without knowing what he had said. Then he was outside again, with nothing having registered on his brain.

He was still in a daze when they were back in their own building. They stopped in the ante-room. There was a glass peep-hole in the locked door that led to the ward, and Chief pushed Emmet aside so they couldn't be observed. "Well," he said, "You made it, Mac."

"Did I?"

"Sure." Chief's thin lips were skinned back across his teeth. "That was the head doc that shook your hand. You're a free man, Mac."

The relief of it struck Emmet all at once. He let out a breath, realizing that he had been holding it bottled up in his chest. He started to giggle.

Chief was looking straight ahead. The amber eyeballs were glowing. The skin on the points of his cheekbones was taut. He reminded Emmet of a picture he had seen of an Indian on the warpath.

"I suppose you've been wondering why I've struck so close to you," Chief said. "I've been watching every move you've made, studying every word you've said, Mac. I've got a plan. I'm going to kill my wife, and I wanted to know how to act, so a sanity board would send me up here instead of to prison. I'll stay here until they finally say I'm cured. I'm part Indian, Mac. And an Indian's got patience."

Emmet was still giggling, leaning up against the wall for support.

"That's right, Mac," Chief said, "I'm going to kill my wife just like you did yours. And I'm going to beat the rap, just like you done."

Emmet heard Chief's voice. It sounded as if it were coming from a deep cavern, echoing and reverberating. But somehow, Emmet understood the words, and he knew what they meant.

Suddenly the holes; the empty spots that he had been struggling with, were filled in. They had always been there, but he had pushed them aside as something conjured up by his insanity. He had thought that it was something that hadn't really happened. *But now Emmet Proule knew that it had happened.*

The store party—once there, Joyce had become a filly. A young animal released in a field of clover. She had been gay with all the younger men; vigorously and vitally so; while Emmet had writhed

at what he saw. She had become Trilby before his eyes. He had known that the others were all laughing at him, and he had sucked in his wretchedness and he had swallowed it. It lay there, deep down inside of him, boiling and fermenting.

When they were home, and Joyce had gone to bed exhausted, Emmet's mother had come to him. She had been clear and bright this time, and Emmet had poured out his agony to her. She had answered him. Her words had been the same as they had been about Trilby: The bitch! She shouldn't be allowed to live, for what she has done to my baby. She should be struck dead!

This time, as an obedient son, Emmet Proule had gone into the

bedroom and had strangled the sleeping Joyce.

Chief was facing the door. He ran his fingers down the brass chain to the key on the end. "It's going to be tough," he said, "but I've got it down pat from watching you. You know, Mac. Sometimes I wasn't sure whether you was really crazy, or play acting."

Slowly, Chief turned and looked at Emmet.

Emmet Proule, after six months of sanity, was standing against the wall. His eyes were vacant as he stared at the floor. His hand was back up to his forehead, picking at an old sore. The blood was starting to trickle down toward his eyebrow, and his light frame, still convulsed with the giggles, jerked in a crazy war-dance.

