

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

March, 1944

Cover by John Giunta

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# The Marmot

By ALLISON V. HARDING

I HAVE never admired my brother. Edward Allis was a vain, selfish blusterer. He had no use for hard work, for ethics, and not much use for me. After a small family inheritance was divided between us, I didn't see much of him. I invested my share in a small business while Edward preferred to jog off for some exotic alien soil. Good riddance!

Still he was my brother, and when I got that agonized telegram, "Jim come quick. Need you. Desperate," I reacted the way any man would, I guess.

I hadn't seen Edward for quite some time, and the tone of the wire from my usually confident, self-sufficient kin puzzled and upset me. The address was in a city not more than a few hours distant and I was able to get there by the evening of that same day.

I remember the shock of surprise that hit me when I saw Edward. True, it had been two and a half years since I'd laid eyes on him, but a normal man shouldn't change as much as Edward had. He greeted me almost hysterically.

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

*Such a harmless looking tiny creature—but animals possess strange abilities well beyond our ken!*

"My God, I'm glad you're here, Jim." His palm was moist with sweat as we shook hands.

"Well, Edward, what's this all about? You look done in!"

I noted that his rooms were comfortable, in an apartment of good taste. Without speaking, he motioned me absently to a chair. I sat down and looked up at my brother pacing in front of me. His small pig eyes that I had disliked in the old days, their furtiveness always a signal of some devilment, were dilated with fear now. I kept quiet, waiting for him to break the silence. His quick, nervous little movements stopped all of a sudden and he stood in front of me.

"Jim, the doctors tell me I'm, well, mad. They tell me I'm insane. They want me to go away somewhere to be treated."

I controlled my surprise and he made no comment. Edward went on.

"But it's outrageous!"

"It's not as simple as all that. I wish I could make you believe me."

"Start at the beginning," I suggested. "You and your affairs are strange to me after all this time."

EDWARD forced himself into a chair at my side. He had lost weight, I noted, and his once round, pouting face had thinned unbelievably.

"Look, Jim. I want you to go to see Dr. Jeffries. He's the man who's taking care of me. Oh, I've been to a lot of others, but he's supposed to be tops. You and I haven't always gotten along but you know I'm not crazy. You know that's absurd!"

"I don't understand. . . ." I started.

Edward hurried on, "You see I do have kind of an affliction, but it's a physical thing. It isn't mental. I know it isn't. I *know* it isn't!"

I cleared my throat. "What this boils down to, Ed, is that you want me to go to

Dr. Jeffries and vouch for your sanity. Isn't that a little silly? I mean, what weight would my opinions have? I haven't laid eyes on you for, well, what's it been? Thirty months?"

Edward got up and came over to me. He gripped my arm in a nervous spasm. "Jim, at least go with me. Go with me to Dr. Jeffries tomorrow morning. We've never asked much of each other. This you've got to do for me."

I nodded wearily. "All right, Ed. Can you put me up here for the night?"

He smiled and patted me. "Sure, sure. I'm so glad you're staying."

I bedded down in the spare room next to Edward's room. I had brought some order blanks along and decided to study them after I got into bed. My business was still young, and I had a consuming interest in it.

I guess my concentration on these personal matters was so great that the noises from the next room grew into full-throated cries before I heard them. Without waiting to slipper my feet, I padded across the cold floor to the door leading into the adjoining room. It was unlocked and I burst into my brother's room. He was on top of his bed doubled over in agony. A strange, horrible whistling cry came from him. I reached him in a split second.

"For God's sake, Ed, what's wrong?"

I thought fleetingly of an acute appendicitis attack but then I saw he was gripping the upper part of his right leg. As I laid my hands on him, the paroxysms of pain seemed to pass. He shuddered beneath my grip and straightened from his jackknife posture, though still clutching his thigh. I stood helplessly alongside.

"You see! This is what they've been telling me is mental," he said in a voice weakened by his ordeal. "Mental! Get that, Jim? They tell me I'm imagining this thing."

"What thing?"

"This pain. This hideous something in my leg."

"In heaven's name, man, tell me what you mean."

Edward turned a look of horror and hopelessness toward me. He prodded his thigh.

"There's something in there, Jim. Something alive. Something that means to kill me!"

**WE SAW** Dr. Jeffries at 10 o'clock the next morning. The psychiatrist, for that is what he turned out to be, was an elderly man whose forceful personality could be felt the minute one stepped into his consultation room.

Edward immediately launched into a minute description concerning his attack of the previous night. He turned to me for corroboration. I nodded slowly. "Yes, I saw it, Doctor. Obviously my brother was in great pain."

Dr. Jeffries smiled kindly. "Of course, of course. He *is* in great pain, Mr. Allis, but the cause of that pain," he tapped his forehead significantly, "*is here.*"

Edward's reaction to this announcement was immediate.

"It's impossible, impossible I tell you. I know what I feel. It *is* there! There's something there in my leg. I'll go elsewhere. I'll try another doctor."

Dr. Jeffries shook his head. "Do as you wish."

He looked directly at Edward. "Now I wonder if you'd mind if I had a few words with your brother."

Edward went ungracefully out of the room. After the door was shut again the physician turned to me.

"It's good that you're here to take care of him, Mr. Allis. Your brother is a very sick man."

"Won't you tell me the situation, Doctor? I know so little. I saw him last

night for the first time in two and a half years. He's been away. Out of the country for a great deal of that time, I believe. I knew he traveled, but we never kept in touch."

"Then I probably know more about him, Mr. Allis, than you do. It's an interesting case. He doesn't make things easy for us. He should be under constant treatment."

I leaned forward. "I don't question your judgment on the case, Dr. Jeffries. However, as I said before, I saw this attack last night. I will swear that my brother was suffering hellish torture. Actual physical pain. He clutched his leg in agony and told me that there was something—that's what he said—something there that would destroy him."

"Precisely. That has been his story all along, Mr. Allis. Originally he went to general practitioners and made a fool of himself demanding X-rays and undergoing other clinical procedures. You know, the mind does many strange things. It can deceive us into believing that one part or another of our anatomy is the site of excruciating pain."

"You mean then that he really is insane?"

Dr. Jeffries tut-tutted. "Insane? What does that word mean? That is a loose ineffectual term at best. Perhaps all of us are a bit what the layman calls 'insane'. Let's say simply that your brother is in desperate need of care. He is distinctly a mental case."

"Well, what do we do, Doctor?"

Jeffries fiddled with the blotter on his desk. "Simple. He must be sent away somewhere where he can be under supervision. I recommend that you get Edward's consent so that we can send him to Harwood Home. He'll get excellent care there. If there is any hope of bringing him out of this condition, it lies in following such a course."

I CONSIDERED a few moments. "What you say seems to make good sense. Of course, I feel in fairness to my brother that I should get another opinion."

Jeffries smiled. "By all means, Mr. Allis. Edward has been to several other psychiatrists here in town. I am sure you will find they concur in my diagnosis. I have discussed his problem with them."

"Well, I guess that's good enough," I said after a moment's thought. "Tell me something else. Edward's phraseology was so strange last night. I was tired and the shock of being startled by his cries was terrific, but I found myself morbidly fascinated by his insistence that there was something in his leg. Doctor, he used the term 'something alive'."

"Oh, that's very simple, Mr. Allis. As a matter of fact, I found the key to that when I psychoanalyzed your brother some time ago. Under a sedative, hypnosis revealed a rather grisly little episode that took place during his travels abroad. I say 'grisly' advisedly, for frankly it is not complimentary to Edward's character. He's never even hinted at this story except, as I say, when under hypnotic influence."

"Go on," I urged eagerly.

"Well," started Dr. Jeffries. "You know that your brother liked to move around a lot. He was an adventurous greedy man, fond of collecting valuable curios and women's hearts, if he could. This is nothing new to you?"

I shook my head. "Edward has done many things I have disapproved of, Doctor. I know his shortcomings."

"You knew he went to Serbia?"

"Well, I knew vaguely he was going to that part of Europe."

"Well, in Serbia, Edward, pursuing his usual selfish objectives, had a most unfortunate experience with a Eurasian household of some standing and power in the community. Moreover, the episode must have made an abnormally powerful im-

pression on his mind, for the details he revealed to me were minute.

"It seems that he became enamoured with the woman of a Eurasian. He courted her and apparently quite won her. One time, though, despite her cautions, he followed her home."

Dr. Jeffries shuffled some papers on his desk. "I took a very complete record of this impression. I have it here with Edward's case history."

He looked down. "Yes. Aside from beauty, this woman represented wealth. Edward, a little the worse for wear I believe, trailed her home one evening and broke into the Eurasian's house. Once inside, he stated to the ancient Eurasian master of the house that the woman must be his. Further, he began to help himself to any objects around the house that struck his fancy. The aged man, although a cripple, defied him and Edward struck him brutally. At this, the Eurasian began to pronounce certain unintelligible syllables that infuriated Edward even more.

"But Edward refused to retreat and instead laughed and poked fun at the old Eurasian calling him crazy and finally striking him again. At this point Edward became aware of a small animal. From his description I would say a tiny marmot. This creature was crouched at the ancient Eurasian's side. The Eurasian called to Edward that he would never have his woman or his valuables and that he, Edward, would be the one to go crazy. And of all he had, he was giving only his marmot to stay with Edward until he should lose his reason.

"At this, according to Edward's story, the marmot sprang at him and bit him severely in the thigh and then magically disappeared before Edward could kill the little creature. The pain of this knifed through Edward's drunkenness and he lurched out of the house with the Eurasian cackling in glee behind.

"He never returned to this place again. Apparently the whole episode filled him with a morbid superstitious dread so that he immediately left the country."

Jeffries raised his eyes from the case-history papers.

"Sounds like a good fiction story," I offered.

"A man of your brother's calibre could easily get into a scrape like that. He has fastened on that experience. He has a sense of guilt and superstitious fear about it."

"Well," I pushed, "what about this thing in his leg?"

"Don't you see?" said Dr. Jeffries. "He thinks the marmot's in his leg!"

I gasped. "It's strange," I mused after a minute. "The Eurasian's curse or whatever you want to call it seems to have come true. Edward *has* gone crazy."

Jeffries pursed his lips. "All that's nonsense. Your brother, because of the sort of life he's lived, and probably because of certain inherent qualities, is susceptible to the sort of nagging ill-suggestion that this constituted. You know, it's often been said and proved that the power of the voodoo curse lies in the morbid beliefs of the victims."

I saw his point. Jeffries went on.

"That's why he keeps insisting on physical examinations and X-rays. He even has suggested to me that we do an exploratory operation on his leg. Although he hasn't admitted it consciously, he's looking for the marmot."

"All right, Doctor. I guess I must agree with you. We've got to put him somewhere he'll be cared for, wherever you think."

Three of the hardest days of my life I spent trying to convince Edward of the necessity of going to Harwood Home. Finally, I succeeded, but only because Dr. Jeffries and I conceived the brilliant idea of suggesting that it might very well be advisable to open up the leg for an inves-

tigation, and this of course would require hospitalization.

Edward signed the necessary papers then without much difficulty. I saw him to the Home and satisfied myself that he would receive every care. Dr. Jeffries was still in charge and was to visit him several times a week. I intended to come over once in a while from my home.

It was three weeks later that I received Dr. Jeffries' summons. It was cryptic, bidding me come to Harwood Home as soon as possible.

When I arrived, Jeffries sent for me and explained at once the reason for his wire.

"It's not for a moment that I doubt our original diagnosis, Mr. Allis, but I thought you ought to know. Your brother is a very sick man physically now as well as mentally. These paroxysms of pain occur more often. He hardly ever eats. We keep him under sedatives as much as is possible. I thought I ought to explain to you before you see him. His appearance may be something of a shock to you."

I was glad he warned me, for I was braced lest I reveal to my brother any inkling of my surprise at his appearance. For he had wasted away to almost nothingness. His face had a pointed, hunted look, his nose seemed to have lengthened and sharpened, his ears and lips had a pinched bluish tinge. His eyes were bright with fever or eagerness to see me, I did not know which.

"Well, old man," I said with an attempt at heartiness. "Dr. Jeffries tells me you're not being such a good patient."

"Jim," he said. "It's been hell. Every day it's been worse." He frowned at the nurse fixing his water decanter until she left the room.

"Look. Look at this," and with a convulsive movement he pulled the blankets and sheet from his legs. I looked at his right thigh beneath the rolled-up pajama leg. This time with all my control, I

could not contain myself from starting. For his leg was swollen. It was purplish in color and swollen at the top.

"Don't you see?" he cried. "They're neglecting me. There's something horrible, I tell you. It's crawling right up my leg and they won't do anything about it. It's eating me from within!"

HIS voice rose in hysteria and a nurse hustled in from outside. I patted his shoulder and went out into the hall. Indignantly I demanded to see Dr. Jeffries and finally cornered him on a downstairs floor.

"What's the meaning of his leg?" I demanded. "Doctor, it's swollen. It looks wrong to me."

Jeffries frowned. "So you saw it. We're all aware of that, Mr. Allis. You know the mind does strange . . ."

"Mind be damned!" I said. "That's not imagination. He has a swelling there and that leg looks like there's poison in it."

"Hear me out, Mr. Allis. I must stick to my original diagnosis. Do you know, sir, that your brother spends almost the entire day prodding and kneading and poking that leg? He's obsessed with the idea that his leg is being eaten away. We have even allowed him the concession of another series of X-ray pictures here at the Home. They show no pathology, yet he insists there's something in his thigh. It's the marmot he's looking for, of course."

I was silent. Jeffries spoke again:

"Can you arrange to stay for a few days? It might be beneficial for Edward."

I agreed.

But it wasn't to be for a few days, for that night my brother died. I was at his bedside as was Dr. Jeffries when he passed away. So frenzied had been his convulsions, so fanatic his obsession that with his own hands he had torn cruelly at his already swollen leg, drawing blood. In his weakened, near-starved state, the anguish and agony of those last few moments were too much for him. I remember my disgust as I sat at his bedside. The loosely hanging bed clothes were wet with blood from his final throes. My brother had been a stark mad man the last few minutes of his life. I got up finally with Dr. Jeffries to leave the room.

We were alone then for a minute, and we walked toward the door, his hand on my shoulder.

"Maybe it's better this way, Mr. Allis."

I opened my mouth to speak when my eye caught a slight movement in the dark far corner of the room. I moved closer, Jeffries still at my side. I looked, and a feeling of chill liquid horror stole through me until my scalp crawled with an unearthly dampness. For there, crouched in the corner was a tiny yet stout-bodied, short-legged little creature, its coarse fur matted with blood from small ears to short bushy tail. It just sat there silently observing us.

I gasped then and reeled into the hall. I felt rather than saw Jeffries still beside me. Outside I turned and looked at him. His face was green-gray with pallor. But neither of us spoke. Thinking it over afterward, that fact doesn't seem strange, for God knows I value my sanity above everything else in the world!

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