

# SUPER-SCIENCE

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# THE HORROR IN THE ATTIC

by ALEX MERRIMAN

*illustrated by EMSH*

It was a horrible moment for the unsuspecting young couple when that hideous THING came down the stairs, thump, thump, thump on its gruesome errand of death

THEY had been driving for two hours, and the rain was getting worse all the time. It poured down in practically solid sheets from the leaden skies, crashing against the windshield and washing spumes of mud down from the road shoulders across the rutted old road. It was almost impossible to see more than ten feet ahead.

The girl in the car felt snug and warm, despite the miserable weather. She snuggled up against the driver, telling herself over and over again that finally she and Ed were on

their way out of Tompkins Corners, that there would be no more interfering parents and snoopy neighbors to come between them. As soon as they reached the nearest good-sized city, Harmon, they could get married and legally do all the things they had up till now been able to do only furtively and in dark corners.

Married! Yet, perhaps tonight, perhaps in a couple of days, depending on the regulations, Lina thought. But the justices of the peace in Harmon would ask no embarrassing



questions about their ages. No one would have to know that Ed was only eighteen, she not quite sixteen. And so they would be married. Lina felt as though they were married already, and out for a drive in the country with the family car.

Ed said darkly, "Damn! That's the tenth time I almost ran off the road. I can't see a thing in this rain, you know, Lina?"

"It's really pouring down," she agreed.

"And this goddam new car, with all these yards of windshield in front, and I still can't look far enough ahead to see the road. We could get ourselves killed if this keeps up."

"It may rain all night."

"Don't I know it?"

"Can't we just pull up by the side of the road and spend the night in the car?" Lina suggested. It was a big, roomy car, property of Ed's uncle. Ed planned to give it back once they were legally married so no one could interfere.

Ed shook his head. "Uh-uh. Too risky. A state trooper comes along, finds us, wants to

see our marriage license or something, and we're cooked. He'll guess we're eloping and we'll be back in Tompkins Corners with a police escort in a hurry."

"A motel, then—"

"Just as bad," Ed said. "They may get suspicious and ask us to prove things. And then they phone Tompkins Corners and we go home."

"Well, if we can't park by the road, and we can't stop by a motel, and it's raining so hard you can't see to drive, what *are* we going to do, then?" Lina wanted to know.

Ed patted her with the hand that wasn't holding the steering wheel. "We'll stop at a farmhouse and ask to be put up for the night, that's what. Around here farm people are pretty courteous that way. And they won't ask for proof we're married, or any crap like that. We can spend the night there and drive on to Harmon in the morning when the storm's over."

**L**INA felt her pulse start to race at the idea. Yes, it would be wonderful, she

thought! Farm people would ask no questions. And it was only common courtesy to allow a couple of strangers to stay out a storm like this. Lina smiled to herself. They would tell the farmers they were Mr. and Mrs. Ed Donaldson—it was only a small lie, after all, because that would soon be their name—and they would be given a bed and they could sleep together all night long.

It would be wonderful to sleep in the same bed with Ed, after all these months of frantically making love in the back seat of his old jalopy or in the woods or in his basement.

And to think they would have a whole lifetime of love together—!

Ed said, "Keep your eyes peeled. Look on both sides of the road for something promising. I got to keep looking ahead to see where I'm going."

Lina peered through the grey sheets of rain for some sign of a place where they could stop. The car crawled along at fifteen miles an hour, Ed hugging the road with care. It was raining so hard now it was practically impossible to see the

white line that divided the east-bound lane from the west-bound, and he didn't want to wander into the wrong lane himself. And he had to be on guard in case someone else suddenly came into sight in *his* lane.

Lina looked. But the rain made vision almost impossible. Ten minutes passed silently as she squinted out over the rain-soaked fields, hoping that she was not missing anything worthwhile out there.

And then, finally, a place came into view.

Lina cried, "Oh, Ed, look there!"

"Where?"

"Over to the left."

He slowed the car even further and turned his head in the direction she was pointing. "I don't see anything," he said.

"It's a big old farmhouse, a hundred or a hundred fifty yards back from the road. I'm sure I saw it. It's kind of grayish-looking."

Ed stared into the rain. After a long moment he nodded and said, "You've got sharp eyes, honeylamb. I see it now. You're okay, kid."

"You like me?" Lina asked, pleased.

"Love you."

"Me too," she murmured.

Ed began to turn the car. It was a risky business; with the rain so fierce, it wasn't safe to make a left turn across the other lane, because there was no way of knowing if a car was approaching in that lane. But they had to chance it. Ed looked to try to see if the coast was clear, and then bore down hard on the steering wheel and swung the car across the road.

"Okay, we made it," he said. "Now let's find the road up to that farmhouse."

Ed drove slowly along the shoulder of the road until the gate appeared, a big wooden one fastened by a single throw-bolt. Ed popped out of the car, opened the gate and swung the door back, and got back in behind the wheel. In just a minute or two outside, he was soaked completely through.

The road up to the farmhouse was a pretty steep grade, and since it was unpaved and mostly mud by now Ed had a difficult time of it. But the car kept going, inch by treacherous

inch, and as they ascended the hill the farmhouse became more clearly visible, a gaunt gray building several stories high.

Not until they had practically reached the front porch of the farmhouse, though, and Ed was honking the horn to rouse any dwellers, did they notice one significant fact:

The farmhouse was deserted.

Many of the windows were broken. The front door hung open, half off its hinges. The entire place had the run-down, unpainted look of a house that had long since been abandoned by its inhabitants.

Lina glanced at Ed. "It looks like a haunted house."

He laughed sharply. "You don't believe in crap like that, do you?"

"Of course not. But—do you want to stay in a place like this, Ed?"

"Where else can we go? I don't even think I could find my way back down that hill in this storm. And it's getting on toward evening."

Lina frowned uneasily. "But I wouldn't want to stay in a spooky place like this—"

"Why not? We'll have the whole place to ourselves. Nobody to snoop or bother us. If there's nothing to sleep on we can take the seats out of the car and make a bed out of them. Imagine, baby—you and me with the whole night together, and nobody to bother us!"

LINA had to admit to herself that that was a tempting idea. Complete privacy—yes, that would be wonderful. And this could be a sort of wedding night for them. Sure, they had made love before, but never had they spent an entire night side by side under the same roof. And here they could nestle up in each other's arms, listening to the patter of the rain outside—

"All right," she said. "Let's go inside and see what it's like."

They made a helter-skelter dash for the porch, getting there dripping wet even though they had parked quite nearby. The boards of the porch groaned under their weight, as if no one had trod here in decades.

Since the door was partly open, there was no sense in knocking. Ed stepped inside, Lina close behind him. The place had the musty smell of a tomb.

Ed cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, "Hello, there! Anybody home? Anybody home?"

He paused, waiting for some reply. None came, only the echoes of his own voice bouncing around. "Guess it's empty, all right," he said, shrugging. "Let's see what sort of place it is. Where'd I put my matches—"

He fished the matchbook from his pocket and struck a match. By the feeble, sputtering glare they looked around. They were in a big room, with a few ramshackle pieces of furniture covered by cobwebs. There was a staircase to the left, and a doorway at the right that led to the other rooms on the first floor. There was a big fireplace right in front of them, and the last inhabitants had left a substantial woodpile, shrouded now with the cobwebbed silk of years.

The match went out.

Ed said, "This place'll look a lot better once we get that fire going. I'm going to go out to the car to get some newspaper to start it up with."

"You want me to come with you?" Lina asked.

"No use both of us getting drenched," Ed said. "You wait here. The spooks won't get you while I'm out front, baby."

He darted out into the rain, leaving Lina alone. She stood near the door, glancing uneasily around the dark big room while the rain rattled overhead. She wished there were someplace else they could have stayed. Even with a fire going, the place was bound to be cold and drafty because of all those broken windows, and—

What was that?

Creaking upstairs? It sounded like that—like someone was moving around up there. Maybe someone lived in this place after all, Lina thought. No, that was impossible. No one would live in a ramshackle old heap like this. The creaking, she told herself, was simply the swaying of the old house in the storm.

ED entered, wet, his hair plastered to his face by the rain. Under his jacket he had brought newspapers from the car, and he rapidly shredded them and tossed them into the fireplace. Then, efficiently arranging the logs above them in such a way as to provide ventilation, he tossed in a match.

The dry wood caught fire almost immediately. Flames licked upward in the fireplace, as the wood crackled and burned.

"There. That should hold us for a while. And there's plenty of more wood to last us until we go to bed. If we run out, we can always break up this old furniture and toss it in," Ed said.

"What—what are we going to do now?"

Ed shrugged. "Let's explore the place. See if there's anyplace we can sleep."

"How can we find our way around in the dark?"

"With torches, silly. Just be careful not to burn anything."

Selecting two thinnish logs from the woodpile, Ed thrust them about a quarter of their length into the fireplace and



held them there until their ends began to glow mellowly.

He drew them out and handed one to Lina. "There. That'll give you light and keep you warm, too, as we go around the house."

"Okay," Lina said with a bravery she did not feel. She still heard creaking sounds from above. She tried to tell herself it was all just a girl's imagination, that she was tense and worked-up because she and Ed had eloped and stolen his uncle's car and had driven off in the rain, and that ghosts and ghouls came out of the story-books and didn't really infest every deserted house in the country. But still, the nagging fear remained.

Clutching her torch, she followed Ed as they wandered around the house. It was an old-fashioned farmhouse, with a lot of rooms. The house was probably nearly a hundred fifty years old—many of the farms in the neighborhood went back to the Revolutionary War—and it looked as though it hadn't been lived in for at least twenty or thirty years.

Most of the rooms on the

ground floor were empty, or else had a stick or two of decrepit furniture in them. In one room they found an old bed, a four-poster, covered with a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. Ed leaned on it experimentally and it buckled and crashed.

"Pretty brittle," he said.

"We'll get the seats out of the car and sleep on them," Lina said. "Right by the fire, where it'll be nice and warm. I wouldn't want to sleep on this old filthy broken-down bed anyway."

"Maybe there's a better bed upstairs," Ed suggested. "That's where the master bedrooms usually are. We could get the dust off pretty well, and—"

"No. Let's not go poking around this place any more, Ed. It gives me the creeps. What time is it?"

"Half past seven."

"It's dark enough to be later than that. Let's go get the car seats, and we can go to bed." She smiled coyly at him by the light of the flickering torches. "We can be warm and cozy all night—and if we get to bed

early, we can be up by dawn and on our way to Harmon. And tomorrow we'll get married."

Ed nodded. "That sounds good enough. But I want to take a look upstairs anyway. You never can tell what you find in these old houses. Every year or so there's a story in the paper about kids who find forgotten caches of gold coins or paper money—"

"No, Ed," Lina said uneasily. "Let's not go upstairs. Nobody left any money up there."

"But I want to see—"

She pressed up against him, slipping her arms around his shoulders, thrusting her breasts against his body. "We're all alone here, you and me—why waste time poking around in dusty rooms? This is the first real chance we've had to be together a whole night."

"Sure."

"So let's get set up for the night. We'll haul the seats out of the car, and the blanket from the trunk, and we'll get undressed and settle down on the floor near the fire, and—"

There was a particularly loud creak from upstairs. Lina

stopped in mid-sentence. She felt her skin growing cold, and Ed was looking at her queerly.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Didn't you hear it? The creaking sound coming from upstairs?"

Chuckling, Ed said, "You hearing ghosts, doll?"

"Don't make fun of me. I'm—scared, Ed. I been hearing those sounds since we came in. Listen: it's like something moving around up there."

Ed cocked one ear toward the ceiling. After a moment he grinned. "Those are the walls creaking in the wind you been hearing."

"Well, I don't like them."

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Ed's face. "I get it. That's why you didn't want to go upstairs! You think there's something haunting around up there!"

"I never said—"

"Sure. You're afraid of the bogey man up there!" Ed laughed. "Well, come right on up there with me now and let's meet him face to face. I want you to see that there's nothing up there, 'cause otherwise you'll stay up half the night

worrying, and every time you toss and turn you'll wake me up."

"Ed, no. I don't want to go up there."

"Don't be silly!"

"Maybe I *am* still a little girl," she said. "But I want to stay down here."

Ed shrugged. "At least let *me* go upstairs, then. I'll have a look around and prove to you that everything's okay here."

"No, don't do it, Ed. You might—"

She stopped. She realized she was acting ridiculously. Her face reddened.

"There's nothing to be scared of, baby," Ed told her gently. "You wait by the fire. I'll go upstairs and take me a look-see."

**L**INA rested her torch by the edge of the fireplace and stood with her arms huddled round herself, while Ed mounted the stairs. They groaned and creaked under his weight as he climbed upward.

Lina wished he had not gone up. It was silly of her, but she was afraid. And she wanted him with her, his arms round

her, his strong body tight against hers, his big hands caressing her as he murmured words of love in her ear.

Mrs. Ed Donaldson. She liked the sound of that.

It was too bad her parents and Ed's had insisted on making them wait. "You aren't old enough," they said over and over. "Wait two years. Then you'll be eighteen and Ed will be twenty. If you still want to get married then, you can go ahead and do it. But we won't give you permission now."

Lina wondered if the police were out looking for them yet. Probably not; she had told her parents she would not be back until late, and it was only early evening now.

Maybe it would take a while for them to guess what had happened, when both she and Ed failed to show up at home, and with Ed's uncle's brand new car missing. Ed's own car, the jalopy, had been smashed up in an accident a couple of weeks back.

Lina shrugged. Even if they guessed about the elopement, there wasn't much anyone could do about finding them

until morning, when the storm had blown over. And by morning she and Ed would be in Harmon, looking for a justice of the peace—

Ed called from upstairs, "Nothing on this whole floor, baby. All the rooms are empty."

"I told you so. Come on down!"

"Not yet. I want to go up to the attic and have a look around up there. Maybe there's an old trunk full of money, or something!"

Despite her annoyance, Lina smiled. Ed and his dreams of finding a trunk of money! Well, there was no use calling him down. She chuckled at her foolishness in supposing there were all sorts of monsters up in the higher floors of the house. Maybe her parents were right, and she *was* too young to marry, if she still feared things like that.

But there were plenty of older people who would be nervous inside an old house like this, with a raging storm outside, and wind blowing through the broken windows.

While she waited for him to

return from the attic, Lina glanced around the room. There was a closet door she had not noticed before, in the far corner. Lina nodded to herself: perhaps there would be something interesting in the closet. It was worth investigating. It would be funny if she came across the treasure-trove Ed hoped to find, she thought. Right down here on the ground floor, while he poked around upstairs.

Lina picked up her torch, which still had not burned more than half its length, and crossed the room to the closet.

She opened it. The ancient hinges protested squeakily as the door was opened.

Lina stared in. She gasped in dumbstruck horror.

The closet was full of bones.

Human bones? It looked that way. They were heaped in chaotic disarray, legs and arms and ribs all jumbled into disorder, and here and there a skull grinning evilly up at her. The bones were yellowing, and clean of flesh except for occasional fragments of muscle or tissue that clung to them.

Lina stared at the grisly

bonepile for a long moment while her brain registered the fact of what she was seeing. Her reaction time was slow.

She began to scream hysterically.

"Ed! Ed, come down here! There are bones in the closet!"

Her scream died away.

And, suddenly, terrifyingly, she heard Ed's answering scream from the attic.

**L**INA was paralyzed a moment. The bones were terrifying enough—but Ed had screamed the way she had never heard him scream before: wordlessly, a howling outburst of sheer mind-wrenching terror.

*What on Earth—?* Lina thought. She was almost frantic with fright. On numb legs she hurried toward the stairs, holding her torch high, not daring to think of whatever ghastly discovery had wrung that scream from her lover upstairs.

Ed screamed again. Then she heard him rapidly running down the stairs, scrambling pell-mell out of the attic, screaming as he ran.

Rooted, Lina watched. She saw him come into view on the

second-floor landing. He looked back over his shoulder—then, clutching his chest suddenly, he toppled and fell the rest of the way, bumping down step over step, rolling like a sack of laundry toward the foot of the stairs, coming to rest in a dismal little heap only inches from where Lina stood.

She knelt over him.

"Good God, Ed, what happened? What did you see up there?"

He did not answer. His eyes were open, and they stared glassily forward; his mouth lolled open too, giving his face an idiot's grotesque expression. His skin was chalk-white and terrible to look at. It was bleached of blood—even the roots of his hair seemed pale.

Lina shook his shoulder. "Ed—Ed, are you okay? Wake up, Ed!"

She touched his cheek. It was cold.

The grim realization began to dawn on her slowly. It was impossible, it was beyond belief, it challenged all reality. But it was true.

She put her hand to his nos-

trils. There was no sign of breath.

She touched his eyeball gingerly. It did not flicker in response.

She put her ear to his chest. All was silent.

"Oh, no—Ed—!"

Dead? A strapping six-footer in perfect health, a robust eighteen-year-old dead, she wondered? Frightened to death? A heart attack brought on by whatever he had seen in the attic—

*Thump.*

Chilled, Lina looked up. What had that sound been?

*Thump.*

Again!

Her mind swayed, nearly gave way. Ed a lifeless corpse at her feet, picked human bones stacked casually in the closet, and—

*Thump.*

Louder, now. Closer.

Lina opened her mouth to scream, but no sound could pass her lips.

*Thump.*

She lowered Ed's body to the floor, stood up, lifted the torch, peered into the darkness above

the landing on the stairs.

*Thump.*

She saw it now. Something was descending the stairs, slowly, one step at a time.

*Thump.*

Something—monstrous.

TORCH in hand, Lina backed away from the staircase. The creature was in plain view now, no more than five or six steps from the foot of the stairs, advancing with ponderous stride.

It was unbelievably repulsive to look upon.

Lina's fear-widened eyes stared at it. It looked like a man, but it was immense, perhaps as much as seven feet tall. It was naked to the waist, wearing only ragged strips of cloth that might once have been trousers but which long since had rotted to fragments.

The creature's skin was brownish and so wrinkled it looked incredibly antique, almost a walking mummy. White hair and a white beard flowed wildly. Out of the swirl of hair two blazing eyes glared.

And—weirdest of all—the

creature was covered with *cobwebs*—as though he had slept for years, while the spiders patiently toiled.

The creature reached the foot of the stairs and carefully stepped over Ed's prostrate body. Lina backed away, gripping the torch tightly. She longed to run, to burst through the door and out, but she was afraid: in order to reach the front door, she would have to pass practically in front of the monster.

And what would she do outside, in the rain, in the darkness? The keys to the car were in Ed's pocket. And they would do her little good in any event, since she did not know how to drive.

"Keep away from me," she said in a thin, terrified voice. "Whoever—whatever you are—keep back! Don't touch me!"

"For long years I sleep," the being said. Its voice was deep and rumbling, and sounded like the swinging of a rusty gate. "And then—strangers come—disturb my sleep—and I feed!"

"No—no—" Lina gasped.

The monster chuckled rum-

blingly. With one swipe of its paw-like hand it swept the cobwebs from its face. Lina noticed that the creature's fingernails were tremendously long, practically curling about each other in their length.

"What—year is this? Tell me, little one."

"1959," Lina heard her own voice answer.

"Nineteen—fifty—nine," the monster mused. "So it is twelve years. Or is it thirteen? I sleep so long, each time. And when I wake, I am so hungry....so hungry, terribly hungry...."

"What *are* you?"

"What am I? My relatives wondered that, too, a hundred years ago. They left me here—dead, they thought, but I was only asleep—and I wake, when I am disturbed, and then I must eat—"

LINA stared at the nightmare creature in horror. No wonder Ed had had a heart attack. Probably the monster had appeared suddenly, without warning.

And what was it? Terribly old, huge in size, it evidently slumbered here for decades at

a time, awakening only when travellers trespassed on the deserted property. And then it fed. Lina shivered, thinking of the pile of bones in the closet.

The monster laughed. "Come to me, pretty one. And you *are* a pretty one. It will be your turn first, for you look tender and juicy—and afterwards, if my appetite remains, it will be the turn of your unfortunate companion here."

"No," Lina whispered. "You'll—eat us?"

"Of course."

The monster took a lumbering step forward toward her. It was immense, all right—seven feet tall, at least.

Lina brandished the glowing torch like a spear. She wondered whether she could succeed in ramming the torch into the creature's face and running past him, out into the night, into the dark—

It was her only hope. As the creature came toward her she tightened her grip on the torch and thrust it forward, between the outstretched hands, into the loathsome cobweb-covered face. But the monster batted the torch away almost immedi-

ately. There was the smell of burning flesh in the room, and Lina knew she had singed him. But not seriously.

And now the torch was gone.

She started to run. An enormous hand reached out, grabbing her in like a fish on a hook.

"No!" she screamed. "Let go of me! Help! Help, somebody!"

She shrieked until her voice gave out. There was no one who could hear her for miles around. And Ed, Ed whom she had loved, Ed who was to have been her husband, Ed lay dead on the floor.

Ed was lucky, she thought. He had died quickly. Her own death, she realized with numbing terror, would be slower and infinitely more painful.

She kicked and scratched, but it was useless. The creature held her tightly. With one massive paw it ripped away her clothing, tossing the tattered garments to the floor, exposing her firm white breasts, her soft woman's body. Close up, she could see the creature's teeth—hideous yellow fangs that looked like a wolf's teeth, not a human being's.



*Why don't I go mad?* she wondered.

The monster cradled her in its arms. It smelled foul, the smell of death.

"So tender," it crooned. "So juicy...my best feast in years..."

Lina screamed.

Ed was lucky, she thought again. She writhed and twisted. The enormous mouth was opening.

"My best feast in years..."

Lina screamed again. She screamed until she could scream no more, until the final moment when the yellow fangs met in the soft flesh of her throat, and she felt the hot spurt of her own blood against her breasts, and she began to discover just what it was like to be devoured alive....

THE END