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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Up Under the Roof

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A tale of fear

WHEN I was twelve years old I lived in a shabby old two-story house, built square below and double-gabled above. The four gables contained an upstairs room apiece, each facing a different direction and the entire four making a cross, with a hall and stairwell at the center. The front and side rooms were ceiled and plastered and kalsomined, for bedrooms, but the unfinished rear one held only trunks, boxes and broken furniture. This part of the house was hot and dusty, and open right up to the peak of its gable. Directly above its doorway to the central hall gaped an empty dark triangle, leading into the slant-sided cave above the bedroom ceilings. This lumber-room was called the garret, though it was not a real garret. The real garret was that dark space, up under the roof.

I was the youngest person in the house by more than a decade, and my youth offended everyone bitterly. I was constantly reminded of my childish stupidity and inexperience. Nobody felt that years would mend me, and in time I grew to share that opinion. I tried never to make a statement or venture an opinion that had not been voiced previously by one of my elders. Even at that, I came in for plenty of snubs and corrections, and learned to withdraw into myself. The downstairs parlor was full of books, and I read in them a great deal, including nearly all of an old *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This taste for reading attracted some curious attention on the part of my guardians; occasionally one of them

would suggest to the others that I might be trained for the law or the ministry. Never was I consulted as to my own ambition, which would have shocked the household. I wanted to be a deep-sea diver.

The summer was a hot one, and my room—in the gable on the right or northern side—had only one window. The sun's rays fell directly on the sloping walls, which were only the gable's pitches plastered in, affording little insulation. I slept poorly, bothered by strange and vivid dreams. Sometimes I started awake, itching nervously at armpits and groins, hearing every rustle of the cottonwoods outside and the creakings of the house timbers.

After a while, I am not sure exactly when, I began to hear something else.

Awareness of that sound grew upon me, first slowly and faintly, then with terrifying clarity, over a number of hot, wakeful nights. It was something up above, between the roof-peak and the ceiling, something big and clumsy and stealthy. I remember telling myself once that it was a rat, but the moment the thought came into my head I knew it for a silly lie. Rats skip and scamper, they are light and sure. This was huge and weighty, of a bulk that I judged was far more than my own; and it moved, I say, with a slow, unsure stealth that had sustained rhythm of a sort. It did not drag or walk, but it moved. Years afterward I saw through a microscope the plodding of an ameba. The thing up under the roof sounded as an ameba looks—a mass

stretching out a thin, loose portion of itself, then rolling and flowing all of its substance into that portion, and so creeping along. Only it must have been many, many thousands of times larger than an ameba.

Before long I was hearing the noise every night. I would wait for it, lying awake until it humped itself across the ceiling above me. Always with it came fear, fear that did not diminish with time. I would stare in the dark, my tongue would dry up between my teeth, and my fingertips would tingle as though they had been rubbed sore. On my back would sprout and fan and winnow little involuntary wings of chill, making my spine shrink and quiver as though ice mingled with the marrow. The ceiling, I knew, would descend some night upon me like a great millstone, then crumble about my bed. Something huge and soft would wriggle free of the broken bits and sprawl upon me.

There could be no talking about the business, I well knew. Long before, I had learned that nobody would listen or care. As I have said, I was resented by the other dwellers in that house. Once, when a neighbor boy of fifteen gave me a terrible beating in the front yard, everyone watched from our front windows, but none stirred to help me, not even when I thought I would fall dead at my enemy's scornful feet. When, tired of pulping my face with his knuckles, he turned away at last, I dragged myself in and was tongue-lashed on all sides for an hour. Today I cannot remember exactly what was urged against me, but the tears I had not shed for pain welled forth under the scolding. Things like that made me hesitate about asking for help. One morning I did inquire at breakfast if the others had heard anything strange; but I was only reprimanded for interrupting a discussion of local politics.

THAT night the noise was louder and more terrifying than ever. It began above some other room, and then it trundled along my ceiling, slower and still slower until it paused just over my bed. It seemed to me at that moment that the lath and plaster were no tighter or stronger than a spider-web, and that the entity was incalculably more awful than the prince and father of all spiders. It crouched there, almost within reach of me, gloating and hungering, turning over in its dark mind the problem of when and how to take hold of me.

I could not have stirred from my bed, could not have cried out even.

The thing and its fear were with me always, night after night and week after week, until a day past the middle of the summer, a dark and rainy day when it did not wait for nightfall.

I was alone in the house, tired of hearing the rain and the swish of wet leaves outside. I had exhausted the books in the parlor, and remembered a stack of illustrated magazines, very old, in the lumber-room. I climbed the stairs. The lumber-room was unthinkably ugly and close, with a sort of brown light reflected by the unpainted joists and the insides of the shingles. I found the magazines and began to paw through them.

All had been silent, except for the rain outside. But, in the midst of my searchings, there came a *bump-bump* from overhead, from the opening that led above the ceilings. Something sly and heavy was there, looking down upon me.

But in one scrambling moment I had fled downstairs and to the front door.

It was no swelling of courage that made me pause before rushing out—only a sensible, if hopeless, consideration of what must follow. I could leave the house and mope in the rainy street until someone came back. Then I would have to

come back, too, and in time I would have to go to bed. Then the creature that made the noise would come down; it would wait no longer, for it had seen me and my tortured terror. It would flow to the floor, through my door and creep into bed with me. I would know how it looked, what color it was, and what it wanted with me.

A cold determination came, I know not whence, stiffening my limbs and neck like new sawdust poured into an empty doll. I walked slowly back through the house to the foot of the stairs. There I paused, trying to lift myself to the bottom step. I could not, and turned and walked to the back porch. There, upon the wood-box, lay a hand-ax. It was dull and rusty, and wobbled upon its helve, but I took it and this time I mounted the steps—slowly—one after another, with long, tight breaths between. The old boards creaked under my feet, as if aghast at my foolish daring. I reached the upper hall, and went back into the lumber-room.

It had turned darker than when I had first come to find the magazines. I made myself look up at the triangular opening, and that took a mustering of all my will-power, but there was nothing to see. I stuck the handle of the ax into the waist-band of my knickerbockers, and dragged a heavy, dust-laden old bureau over against the wall by the door. On that I placed a broken chair; then a candle-box, precariously on end. At last I climbed up on the bureau, up on the chair, up on the box. My chin came level with the threshold of the black cavern. It was like gazing into a pool of ink. I got hold of a cross-timber and drew myself slowly up. The candle-box tipped over and fell from beneath my feet, striking the floor of the

lumber-room with a crash like an explosion. But next moment I had dragged myself up inside the loft. The roof-peak was so low above my head that I could barely rise to my knees.

I pulled out the ax and tried to hold it in my mouth, like a pirate's dirk. But it was too big and heavy, so I kept it in my right hand. Then, on my knees and my left hand, I went forward on top of the rafters. Every inch took me deeper into darkness, and when I reached and crept past a big rough chimney I might as well have been in a coal mine.

First I went straight to the front of the house. I felt all along the wall, and into the corners. Then I dragged myself around. I could see the light at the far end, partly obstructed by the chimney. Crawling back, I explored gropingly the space above the south bedroom. Last of all I drove myself into the chamber above my own room, where I had always heard the sounds.

I found nothing.

I always finished with those three words when, grown up enough to be listened to, I told this story in after years. But I knew then, and I know now, that there was something, or that there had been something. Until I drove myself to face it, that something had been a mortal peril. Had I done anything else, it would have come looking for me. What would have followed, I am sure nobody can think.

But from that time forward there was not the slightest murmur of noise up under the roof. I grew to sleep so soundly that I had to be shaken in the mornings. Nor did I ever know fear again, not even in the war.

