

*The mark of a true professional is consistency, and few sf short story writers have been as consistent for as long a time as Robert F. Young, who is always polished and entertaining and surprising, as in this new chiller . . .*

## Down The Ladder

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Summer was when Jeff used to go down to the House the most. "Well," he'd say to his mother, "I guess I'll go down to the House," and she'd know right away what house he meant because he went there so many times.

His mother never had much use for the House, and she seldom went there herself. Even in those days it was old and run-down. People used to say it hadn't been painted since the Civil War, but of course they were exaggerating. It *was* badly in need of paint, though. The clapboards were almost bare, some of them were warped, and the lower ones were starting to mildew.

In the beginning, the House had consisted of a squarish two-story structure with a gable roof. Then a one-story wing, with a porch running its entire length, had been added. Over the years the secondary door that provided direct access to the wing superseded the front door, an eventuality that promoted the side yard to the rank of front yard. Completely carpeted with bluebells and shaded by a profusion of lilac trees, it was the most unusual front yard on Main Street.

There were several chairs on the porch, one of them a comfortable rocking chair. It was in this chair that Jeff's uncle used to sit and rock. He liked to sit and rock, Uncle George did. People used to say that that was all he ever did. More exaggeration. Nevertheless, Jeff seldom went down to the House in summer that he didn't find his uncle sitting on the porch, rocking. And sending, at evenly spaced intervals, a thin, brown stream of tobacco juice arcing over the porch railing.

Inside, the House was spotless, and as neat as a pin — if you discounted the boxes of obsolete household items piled in the corners. Jeff's grandmother, when she was alive, had never thrown anything away. The front hallway, the door to which was kept closed winter and summer and which, like the upstairs, was off-limits to visitors, had so many old newspapers piled along its walls you had to walk sideways to reach the stairway. In addition to the stacks of old newspapers, the hallway contained stacks and stacks of the magazines Jeff's grandmother used to subscribe to, such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Lady's Friend*, and there were whole boxfuls of the Victorian novels she used to read. Jeff found these things out by sneaking into the hallway when his uncle was out to the barn and his grandfather was dozing in his rocker by the living-room stove. Jeff's grandfather was still alive then. He was a well-to-do retired farmer who had married late in life and who owned property all over town. When he died he left everything to his older son (Jeff's uncle), except the big frame house on Elm Street, which he left to Jeff's father, who was already living there. The frame house on Elm Street was where Jeff was born.

Sometime Uncle George would go into the front hallway and bring back old-fashioned "funny papers" for Jeff to look at. One day he went all the way upstairs and returned with a toy that he said he'd come across in his closet that morning. It was the most fascinating toy Jeff had ever seen. There were two parts to it. One part was a yard-long strip of wood about two and a half inches wide and about three-quarters of an inch thick. It was painted bright red, and running up and down it, approximately two inches apart, were two parallel rows of two-penny nails. The nails were spaced vertically at even intervals. They had been driven only halfway into the strip and had been staggered so that those in the left row were approximately three-eighths of an inch lower than those in the right.

The other part of the toy was a little man that had been cut from a quarter-inch-thick sheet of wood. His arms were extended straight out on either side, and he had queer clothing painted on him. His sketched-in face was comical, and his little lips were turned up at the corners in a fixed smile. To get him to "climb" down the "ladder," you positioned him so that his arms rested across the two topmost nails, then you released him. First one arm would slide off a nail, then the other, and down he would go,

*clickety-click-click-click*, to the floor, his body swinging first one way, then the other.

All the while Jeff was playing with the toy, Uncle George seemed nervous. It was as though he'd had second thoughts about bringing it downstairs. In any case, when he took it back up he never brought it back down again. But Jeff never forgot it, and, years later during his grandfather's wake when everyone was too preoccupied to notice, he sneaked upstairs, got the toy out of Uncle George's closet, sneaked it out of the House and took it home. He played with it in his bedroom for hours, sending the manikin down the ladder so many times it was a wonder his arms didn't fall off. Finally, growing bored, Jeff held the ladder a few feet above the floor before letting the manikin go. After the manikin slipped off the bottom "rung" he turned a complete somersault in midair and landed squarely on his head. Delighted, Jeff held the ladder even higher before releasing him. This time when he struck the floor he broke into three pieces. Furious, Jeff broke the ladder in two and threw it, along with the remains of the little man, into the trash can. He was afraid that when Uncle George missed the toy he would accuse him of taking it. But Uncle George never said a word. He just gave him a funny look the next time he went down to the House.

Behind the House there was a large tract of land that extended all the way back to the creek. Jeff's grandfather (and later, his uncle) owned every square inch of it. After you went past the barn you came to a grassy lane that used to be a wagon road, then you walked down the lane between two rows of ramshackle sheds that housed desuetudinuous farm equipment. Presently you came to a long, shallow depression that once had been a millpond. A causeway bisected it, and after crossing the causeway you descended a gentle slope into a big apple orchard. The trees were unpruned even in those days, and walking through the orchard was like walking through a jungle. Beyond the orchard the ground dipped sharply. This was where the creek bank had been when the creek was much wider. Now, sycamores and willows and poplars grew where water once had flowed (and still did sometimes during spring thaws). After making your way among the sycamores and the willows and the poplars, you came at last to the creek. Jeff spent countless summer days wading in its shallow waters. Sometimes he took his homemade fishing pole along, but he seldom used it. Catching crayfish in his bare hands was more fun. He liked to tear their claws off and watch them writhe when he threw them back in the water. One time he saw a water snake. They told him afterward that he'd imagined it. "Hallucinated" was the word the doctor had used. But they'd been wrong. He saw the snake *before* he fell and laid open his knee — not afterward.

The tapping on the back door began again, and again Jeff got up from the living-room sofa where he was sitting, drinking beer and watching *Charlie's Angels*, and went out to the kitchen, opened the inside door and peered through the storm-door screen. He'd left the back-porch light on from the time before, but again he saw no one. He closed the inside door angrily, shivering a little in the clammy night air that had wafted into the room; then he returned to the living room and sat back down on the sofa. He knew he shouldn't let the tapping upset him. It was close to Halloween and it was only natural for the neighborhood kids to be out playing pranks and even more natural for them to be playing them on him. This was his first night in the New House, which made him a newcomer in the neighborhood and, *ex officio*, the most logical victim.

The New House stood on the site of the Old. It was Cape Cod, with an attached double garage. One side of the garage housed his old Biscayne, which as yet he hadn't been able to bring himself to part with; the other side housed his new El Dorado.

He picked up his bottle of beer from the coffee table, was about to raise it to his lips when he saw that it was empty. He went out to the kitchen, got another one out of the fridge and came back and resumed his seat. On the big TV screen across the room, Farrah Fawcett-Majors kneed one of the three musclemen who had just attacked her, karate-chopped the second and executed a spectacular flying mare on the third.

Jeff chug-a-lugged a third of the fresh bottle and set it down on the coffee table. He'd been drinking more than usual since his wife Dolores had got her divorce on the grounds of cruelty, and the casual observer might have concluded from this that he'd finally stepped across the line between social drinking and full-fledged lushhood that he'd been skirting most of his life. Nothing could have been farther from the

truth. He kept his drinking strictly under control, never touching a drop before 8:00 P.M. and never drinking anything but beer. And every morning at exactly 7:00 A.M. he showed up at his restaurant, nattily dressed and freshly shaven, and walked into the coffee shop and ordered ham and eggs and coffee.

His restaurant was his pride and joy. He'd always wanted to go into business for himself, but hard luck had dogged him all his life and defeated his every attempt — until his inheritance had come through. Now, finally, he had been able to realize his potential and to assume his rightful role in the business world.

His presence in the coffee shop at such an early hour was designed to keep his hired help on the ball, but it served other ends as well. The restaurant proper catered to throughway travelers (there was an exit less than a mile out of town), but the coffee shop was dependent upon local trade. Shopworkers mostly, and plumbers' helpers and minor municipal employees. His daily consumption of a workingman's breakfast, his presence on the public side of the counter, and his undeviating custom of greeting everyone who came in by his first name provided proof positive that despite his sudden elevation to a higher social echelon he didn't consider himself one whit better than anyone else, that he was still "just plain Jeff." It also enabled him to keep posted on the goings-on about town — on who was sleeping in whose bed, whose wife was stepping out, and whose husband. The coffee shop, since its incipience, had become an unofficial news center where you could get the low-down on everything and everybody.

The tapping on the back door started up again. This time Jeff decided to ignore it. It continued for a while, then died away.

He'd had the Old House razed not long after Uncle George died. Christ! — he'd had to. Remodeling it would have been tantamount to rebuilding it. It had been too damned old. Granted, many of the other houses on Main Street were old too, but they'd always been kept up, painted every three or four years. Recently some of them had been covered with aluminum siding and looked brand new. But the House had been too far gone to justify the expense such siding would have incurred. Razing had been the only answer. Even so, Jeff hadn't acted on the spur of the moment. He'd gone all through the House, checking the floor joists, examining the foundation, sounding the walls. Once, he'd stayed there overnight. Once had been enough. What with the rustlings and the scrapings and the clatterings that kept coming from the living room and the dining room and the kitchen and just about every place else, he'd hardly slept a wink. The damned place must have been infested with rats. How Uncle George had stood it, he would never know.

Anyway, he'd hired an auctioneer and got rid of everything the House contained — the furniture, the kitchen stove, the dishes, the pots and pans, the Victorian books, the old magazines, the old newspapers, the boxes of junk in the corners (people bought the stuff up like crazy and at fantastic prices; they even bought the old newspapers). Then he brought in a wrecking contractor and had the place demolished. No doubt Uncle George had turned over in his grave, but that couldn't be helped. The old man had never been in tune with the times anyway — never, in his whole shiftless life. Sitting on the porch, rocking, while the House moldered; letting the lilac trees in the front yard proliferate to a point where you couldn't see the porch from the sidewalk; letting the barn fall down and the sheds housing the farm equipment collapse; letting the millpond turn into a paradise for sumac trees; letting the apple orchard turn into a vast thicket; letting the forest by the creek turn into a sanctuary for crows and purple grackles ... Jeff fixed all that. After he had the House razed, he sold the farm equipment for junk and brought in a crew with bulldozers and chain saws and stump pulverizers and demolished the sheds and what was left of the barn and filled in the millpond and leveled the orchard and the forest, and afterward he had a little artificial lake put in and fairways laid out and greens and sandholes ... It was beautiful when he got done. Just beautiful!

The trouble with old memories is that once one gets in the door others keep crowding in behind it. Another trouble is that the bad ones sometimes elbow aside the good .... "Well," Jeff says to his mother, "I guess I'll go down to the House," and his mother says, "Don't stay too long now — I want you home in

time for supper," and he gets his fishing pole out of the shed and goes out into the summer day and walks down Elm Street to Main and across Main to the House. He walks up the path between the lilac trees and the carpets of blue-hells and steps onto the porch where Uncle George is sitting, rocking, and says, "Hi, Uncle George," and Uncle George says, "Hi, Jeff — goin' fishin', are ya?" and Jeff goes into the House and says hello to his grandfather, who is sitting by the stove (he sits by it both winter and summer), and his grandfather smiles at him in the warm way he reserves for his only grandson and says hello back, and Jeff walks happily through the House and down the back-porch steps and past the barn and down the lane between the ramshackle sheds and across the causeway and through the orchard and down the bank and through the sycamore-willow-poplar forest to the creek.

The creek in summer is shallow and in most places no more than a foot deep. He takes off his shoes and stockings and rolls his breeches well above his knees and wades into the water. He begins trying to snag minnows with the bent pin he uses for a hook, but it is a futile pastime, and presently he abandons it and starts looking for crayfish to pull the claws off of. He is startled when a long, rope-like object undulates past his feet. Then he is tremendously excited. A water snake! He follows it downstream, but it disappears before he has taken a dozen steps. Disgusted, he climbs back up on the bank. He decides to forget about crayfish and go exploring in the woods. He will be Daniel Boone; his fishing pole will be his rifle. He puts his stockings and shoes back on and enters the wilderness. He slips from tree to tree, alert for bears and wolves and wildcats. At length he comes to the old creek bank. It is steep at this point, but nearby there is a dump comprised of tin cans and broken bottles that forms a ragged ramp to the top. Gingerly he begins climbing up it, avoiding the sharp edges of the tin-can tops and the jagged shards of the broken bottles. He slips and falls just before he reaches the top, but he quickly rights himself and a moment later he is safe. But there is a queer tingling in his right knee. Looking down, he sees that his right stocking, where it covers the kneecap, has been cut diagonally, as though by a razor-sharp pair of scissors. He parts the fabric, recoils from the sight of two pink halves of flesh and an exposed area of gray bone—

"Uncle George!"

He starts moving through the orchard, dragging his right leg, putting as little weight on it as he can. "Uncle George!" He is screaming now, and tears of terror are trickling down his cheeks. "UNCLE GEORGE!" he cries again, even though he knows that Uncle George, faraway and rocking on the porch, cannot possibly hear him.

It begins to grow dark. This is preposterous. It is late afternoon, yes — but night is still a long way off. Mist accompanies the darkness, unfurls among the gnarled trees. He does not look at his knee again. He does not dare to. He knows that by now it must be bleeding copiously, that whole bucketfuls of blood must be gushing from the severed veins and arteries.

The darkness intensifies, the mist thickens. Suddenly weakness overwhelms him and he sinks sobbing to the ground. In the grass around him he hears mysterious rustlings; thin, piping voices. He knows they cannot possibly be real, that he must be imagining them. Presently they go away. The darkness descends with a vengeance. When next it is daylight again, he is being carried. Up the slope to the causeway and across the causeway and up the lane. Past the barn and the House and down Main Street in the direction of the doctor's office. Carried by Uncle George. Uncle George, who couldn't possibly have heard his screams but who somehow did. "Uncle George!" "Gosh, you're gettin' heavy, Jeff. Growin' up real fast, aren't ya?" "Uncle George, am I —" "Thought you was goin' fishin'. Where's your fishin' pole?" "I — I guess I dropped it, Uncle George. Uncle George, am I going to live?" "Course you're goin' t'live! Doc'll take a couple stitches in that knee, and you'll be good as new." "I love you, Uncle George." "Pshaw!"

The tapping on the back door begins again and, furious now, Jeff gets up and strides into the kitchen and jerks open the inside door and shouts, "I don't know who you are or who you think you are, but you'd better get the hell away from here fast or I'll fill your butts with birdshot!" He slams the door so hard the stainless-steel utensils hanging above the stove tremble on their chrome-plated hooks. While he's in the kitchen he gets a fresh bottle of beer out of the fridgie and twists off the cap on his way back to the sofa.

*Charlie's Angels* have flown away to return again another day, and the news has come on. Jeff half watches, half listens, sucking on his beer. He should be drinking Scotch now, not beer. Hell! Only workingmen drink beer. But he is still "just plain Jeff" and always will be. Besides, when you drink Scotch you run the risk of becoming a lush. Beer is the Moderage of Beveration. Right? Right! "What is it anyway, I got to drink Scotch because I live in a Cape Cod instead of a frame shack and drive a Caddy instead of a beat-up Biscayne?" First thing you know, they'll be telling him he should subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal* and stop reading *The National Enquirer*, *The National Examiner* and *Midnight*.

The frame "shack" was the house on Elm Street where he was born and which he fell heir to when his mother died (his father had predeceased her by five years). Jeff was already living in it anyway, with his wife Dolores (they'd never had any kids). He'd never really moved out of it, unless you counted the postwar years he'd served with the Army of Occupation in West Germany. When the old lady died he simply went right on living there, the only differences being that now he paid the taxes and the utility bills and that when he said, "Well, I guess I'll go down to the House," he said it just to Dolores.

Uncle George had been living in the House alone ever since his father died. He'd never got around to getting married, and it was certainly too late in the day to think about it now. He could cook passably well, and he kept the kitchen shipshape, and except for the piles of junk in the corners of the living and dining rooms and the trash piled in the hallway, the rest of the House was always neat and clean. In all the times Jeff went down there, though, he never once caught Uncle George washing a dish or wielding a broom. During the warm months he'd always find him sitting on the porch, rocking, and during the cold ones, sitting by the living-room stove in his father's old chair, rocking.

Uncle George's hair thinned out, gradually diminishing to a gray fringe on the back of his head, and he withered and shrank and shriveled. The process took years and years. He went way past the age at which his father had died, and he was well on his way to living twice as long as Jeff's mother.

One time in winter when Jeff went down to the House, he found Uncle George slumped in the rocker by the stove, for once in his life not rocking. At first Jeff thought he was dead, but it turned out that he was only dozing. His face was so pinched and tiny it looked like an elf's. His toothless mouth was a little hole in his face, and his neck was as thin as a chicken's and so weak it could hardly hold his head up. When he talked to you he had to lean back in the chair so he could look up high enough to see your face. "Jeff," he said, "as you prob'ly know, I'm goin' t' leave you the House and the Land, but I want you t'promise me somethin' first."

"Sure, Uncle George," Jeff said.

"I want you t'promise me you'll never tear the House down or sell it t'somebody who will. I know it needs fixin' bad, but you'll have plenty of money t'take care of that. What I don't want is for you t'tear it down. Will you promise me, Jeff? Will you give me your solemn word of honor not t'tear it down and t'see to it nobody else does?"

"Yes, Uncle George."

Of late, Uncle George's mind had developed a tendency to wander, and he sometimes forgot what he'd been talking about and started talking about something else. So Jeff wasn't particularly surprised (although he certainly was mystified) when the old man said, "Them critters is funny. Treat 'em right and they'll do anythin' for you. But it don't pay t'cross 'em. They've got powers, and they allus keep an ace up their sleeve just in case they don't get their way. Ma, she took 'em in. She never did have much likin' for doin' dishes, sweepin' and such — liked t' sit around all the time readin' them books and magazines of hers. Pa, he put up with 'em, and I did too. They're handy t'have around, and they don't eat much — just a nibble now and then. Lately, though, they've been gettin' too big for their britches. So I don't want you t'take any chances, Jeff."

"What critters, Uncle George?"

But apparently the old man's mind had wandered back from wherever it had wandered off to, for instead of answering Jeff's question he said again, "You'll promise not t'tear it down or sell it, won't you, Jeff?"

"Yes, Uncle George," Jeff said solemnly. "I promise."

"Think I'll catnap again. Glad you came down t'see me, Jeff. Come down again."

The thought had crossed Jeff's mind that perhaps he should get the old man to a hospital. He was obviously dying. But if he didn't die in the hospital, the next step would have been to put him in a rest or a nursing home, and either would have put too big a dent in the family fortune. Uncle George wouldn't have gone for the idea anyway. So Jeff said good-bye, and left. The next time he went down to the House he found the old man slumped in the rocker in the same manner as before. Only this time he really was dead.

The clown giving the weather report said rain tonight and patches of ground fog in the morning, with intervals of sunshine tomorrow afternoon. Probability of precipitation 60% tonight, 30 tomorrow. Relative humidity 82%. Low tonight 50°; high tomorrow 70; present temperature 59. Winds out of the southwest at 3-6 mph.

Jeff finished his bottle of beer and went out to the kitchen for a fresh one. He promised himself it would be the last: he had a house-warming party scheduled for tomorrow night, and he wanted to be in top form.

As he was reaching into the fridgie, the tapping began again on the back door. "Son of a bitch!" he said and strode across the room, staggering a little, and jerked open the inside door and flung wide the outer. This time he looked down instead of straight ahead.

"Greetings," the foremost of his callers piped. "Now that you have at last perceived us, we can get down to the business on hand. Whereas on the thirtieth of last March you did raze the domicile that for more than half a century had been our place of abode and whereas the chores we performed therein over that period of time entitled us to partial ownership of said domicile, we now, by virtue of those labors, claim partial title to the domicile erected upon its site—to wit, this one—and are forthwith moving in, pursuant to the agreement made with your grandmother and amended to read: 'The chores previously performed by the Parties of the First Part in Domicile Number One shall now be performed by the Parties of the First Part in Domicile Number Two, in return for which the Party of the Second Part promises to provide ample living-space, ample warmth and sufficient sustenance. Now, if you will kindly step aside—

"Get the hell off my property, you freeloading little bastards!" Jeff screamed and tried to close the door.

He didn't recognize the room right away because it was so huge. Then he saw that it was his boyhood bedroom. He was lying flat on his back on the floor, and towering above him, bright-red and terrifying, was the ladder. When the giant picked him up and positioned him so that his rigid outstretched arms rested across the two topmost nails, he tried to scream, but he couldn't, of course, being made of wood. All he could do was smile the silly smile that was painted on his face. He smiled it all the way down. *Clickety-click-click click!* He went right on smiling it throughout all his successive descents, still trying with all his might to scream, cringing inwardly from the malevolent expression on the giant's face.

At length the giant, becoming bored, held the ladder aloft before letting go of him. *Clickety-click-click!* He landed on his head so hard he saw stars. The malevolent expression on the giant's face intensified, became horrible to behold. He held the ladder higher yet. *Clickety-click-click-click!* It was Jeff's final descent.