

Among Our Contributors

ROSEL G. BROWN —

one of the most interesting newcomers in the field, has appeared in this magazine previously and had a story in Fredrik Pohl's STAR SCIENCE FICTION NO. 5.

AUGUST DERLETH —

equally prominent in the mystery field as the creator of the inimitable Solar Pons pastiches, is of course the author of some superb material in the Lovecraft tradition.

GORDON R. DICKSON —

appears only once in Don Day's monumental Index to the SF magazines 1926-'50. Since then, he has appeared in every magazine in the field and is the author of several novels.

JOHN BRUNNER —

prominent British SF and fantasy writer and novelist, makes one of his rare appearances in this haunting story about the adventures of Gerald Howson, Psi.D., Curative Telepath First Class, W.H.O. The sequel will appear next month.

LESTER DEL REY —

needs no introduction to any reader of SF and fantasy.

WENZELL BROWN —

author of more than twenty novels about contemporary matters makes, we believe, a first appearance in the field with this article.

Dr. LESLIE R. SHEPHERD —

distinguished British physicist and space-travel authority, writes on SPACE PHYSICS in an article published here through the courtesy of Mr. Sam Moskowitz, former editor of SCIENCE FICTION PLUS.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL —

also needs no introduction to any reader of science fiction.

BELLE C. DIETZ —

President of the Eastern Science Fiction Association of Newark, is active in New York fan activities.

Y. IBN AHARON —

a frequent contributor to James Moseley's *Saucer News*, is Editor of the *Journal of Correlative Philosophy*, published by the Advaitan Buddhist Theosophical Society.

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HENRY SCHARF
Publisher

SHELDON WAX
Editorial Director

HANS STEFAN SANTESSON
Editor

J. WILLIAM LUSZCZ
Art Director

PETER M. VELTRE
Advertising Director

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A MANY LEGGED THING

by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

HE JOINED the family uninvited. He was short on looks but long on charm and had the fixed idea that love is a many-legged thing.

The first we saw of him was one evening when he strolled from behind a big roll-top desk and my wife greeted him with a cry of, "For heaven's sake, just look at that horrible spider!" She snatched a duster and made for him, intent on mayhem. Promptly he bolted behind the desk and defied all efforts to find him.

Half an hour later he crept forth, sneaked cautiously along the edge of the carpet while keeping a wary eye upon us. My wife bided her time until she thought he had gone too far to retreat. But she reckoned without his amazing turn of speed. She pounced, he put up a superfast sprint and again found sanctuary.

This petty warfare continued for several evenings while victory continued to elude us. Evidently the intruder was of nocturnal habits for we

saw nothing of him daytimes. All his appearances were made after fall of darkness. During the ensuing battles he suffered several narrow escapes, being saved only by his alertness and remarkable agility.

One evening the wife sat reading and came across an article by a well-known naturalist. It was about spiders in general and our sample in particular. According to this authority the new boarder was an expert huntsman and an asset to any decent household. Indeed, he said, the woman who found herself adopted by one could consider herself lucky because "this spider shares one thing in common with housewives—they both hate flies."

After some discussion we decided that the unbeautiful newcomer was welcome and would not be harmed. No action would be taken against him so long as he behaved himself. We named him Alfred because he looked more like an Alfred than a Hippolyte

or a Mortimer. What followed our talk makes me wonder whether some life-forms can detect friendship like sniffing a sweet smell.

At his usual time of 10:30 p.m. Alfred appeared from behind the desk. He did not creep furtively along the edge of the carpet in his customary manner of one striving not to be noticed. Instead he stood quite still and contemplated us for about ten minutes. Then slowly and uneasily he came halfway across the room toward where we were sitting either side of the fire. He stopped, surveyed us again as though doubtful about the reality of a strange but pleasant truth. We kept quiet and watched with interest.

Encouraged by our silence he ventured nearer. Still no move on our part. He advanced another yard, waited for hostile action that did not come. Finally he plucked up courage, scuttled forward and came to rest between us. This was the crucial test. Either of us could have rammed down a foot and squashed him. We didn't.

From that moment Alfred was a changed man, or rather a changed arachnid. He made it plain that he considered himself one of the family and expected to be treated as such. Every evening at the same hour he joined us by the fireside and enjoyed the warmth for twenty minutes before commencing his nightly hunt. His patrols were conducted with such regular precision that if given enough time he would have worn little spider-tracks across the carpet.

Gradually we learned more about him. Like the robin, he had a well-developed sense of property rights. The ground floor of the house belonged to him and no other. Any similar spider who tried to jump his claim was given the bum's rush. Although quite capable of climbing the stairs he never mounted more than three steps, perhaps because he imagined that the higher floor had been confiscated by

another leggy character whose claim must be respected.

Amusingly enough, Alfred could never get it into his head that two curtains could hang from the same rail. He would climb one curtain, search the shadowed pelmet for roosting flies, descend to the floor, scramble up the other curtain and repeat the search.

As the weeks rolled by he developed a definite affection for my wife. We checked by simple tests and proved conclusively that he could recognise her. If we moved into another room he would traipse after us within the next half hour. If only I went out, he remained with my wife. If she departed, he left me and followed her. When we went upstairs he'd amble as far as the third step. The only times he condescended to favor me with his company was when the wife was not in the house and we two were alone. Whenever she was present I was ignored.

Alfred's courtship was not in vain. He grew rapidly in my wife's esteem because of his many virtues. He was methodical, painstaking and worked hard to earn his keep. The home had never been so pleasantly free of insect pests. He was scrupulously clean, made no annoying webs and was content with a silken cylinder with hinged door built behind my desk. This neat contraption was his own abode in which his privacy was respected.

He never touched exposed food. Once we spent an entertaining hour watching him hunting trespassers in a larger larder. Carefully he scoured every crack and cranny, walking around instead of over food and avoiding so much as putting a foot in the butter. We got the eerie feeling that had he stepped by accident upon a piece of cheese he would have apoloogised.

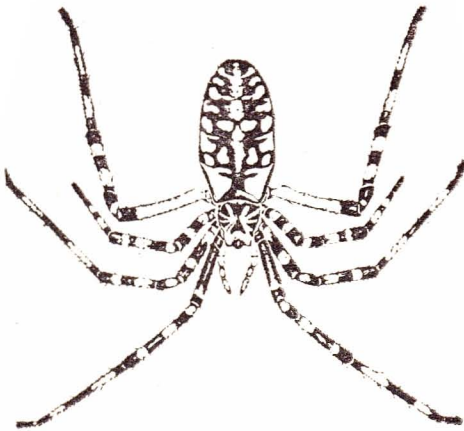
After most of a year Alfred had grown to twice the size he'd been on arrival. He stood quite still and

raised no objections when I measured him with a ruler. Body length $\frac{3}{4}$ ", leg-span $2\frac{1}{2}$ "—and that's quite a lot of spider. Though presumably full grown he did not seem interested in romance. No girl friend had appeared upon the scene and there was no horde of tiny Alfreds to make us think that Things Are Going Too Far.

By this time his tameness had become a continual embarrassment. Evenings we had to walk around with gaze fixed firmly on the floor like meditative monks parading through the cloisters. Strangers found this most disconcerting, especially when we raised a foot to step over something they had not noticed and were far from overjoyed to meet.

Often when working at my desk I would hear loud complaints from the kitchen. "Oh, Alfred, for goodness sakes stop playing around my feet. I can't keep watch on you *all* the time!" Then in louder tones to me, "He doesn't seem to realize that I can't see him as easily as he can see me."

We had never thought of spiders as fun-loving creatures but Alfred certainly had amusement. Once in a while, after his preliminary warm by the fire, he would run races with himself under the kitchen table. The first time he did this we thought he was in hot pursuit of a gnat or midge,



looked to see and found there was nothing whatever for him to chase.

On rarer occasions he enlisted one of us for a game called Miss Muffet and the Spider. He played Miss Muffet and the other played the spider. One of us sat on a chair while Miss Alfred Muffet waited expectantly nearby. The former then yelled, "Boo!" and Alfred raced madly away—only to stroll back to the original spot and await the next, "Boo!"

For some reason that defeats understanding he developed an immense curiosity about the telephone. It really fascinated him. He would be mooching around the back room when the phone shrilled by the front door. My wife would go to answer it. He'd scuttle along behind her, clamber up three steps of the stairs to get a better view and remain apparently engrossed in the conversation until the call ended.

He did this times without number. One evening I called my wife long distance, exchanged news, jocularly asked her if she were lonely and got the reply, "Oh, no, Alfred is keeping me company. He's here in the stairs right now, listening-in as usual."

It was always a pleasure to watch the reactions of visitors to a family consisting of human beings plus a thing resembling a vest-pocket Martian. As evening drew nigh we'd warn them of his coming appearance and that would be accepted as proof that we were slightly crazy. My daughter, who liked Alfred only at a distance, would be shown the sympathy given to one who is afflicted with lunatic parents.

Later, the men would wear expressions of grim tolerance while the ladies shuddered and drew their feet off the floor. But after a convincing demonstration of Alfred's good manners in giving a wide berth to those who found him distasteful, walking around instead of over our shoes, and strictly minding his own business, the legs came down, uneasiness died away

and deep interest took its place. If it so happened that Alfred went to help answer the phone, revulsion switched right over to envy.

One egghead who'd been stupefied by education saw fit to opine that in all probability Alfred was a widow who had eaten her husband and that he or she was less interested in my wife than in her bright crimson slippers. We rejected this thesis with scorn and contumely. Alfred was so obviously a lonely bachelor longing for companionship and ready to pay for it with love.

He had the shy affection of a creature willing to disregard the horrible hugeness of human beings. Alfred had never been given the cold shudders by my wife's comparatively enormous bulk, her tremendous feet, her grotesque two-leggedness. No matter how outlandish her appearance, he thought she was beautiful. His tiny mind held the essence of tolerance.

For fifteen months he had been

living with us when I came home late one evening to find a sadness in the house. I asked what was the matter.

"Poor Alfred. I found him dead. He'd been trodden upon." My wife was genuinely upset. "I'm sure I'm to blame. He was hanging around me in the kitchen earlier on. I couldn't help it, really I couldn't. I did my very best to watch out for him but my eyes can't be everywhere."

"He was far too tame," I offered.

"Poor Alfred," she said.

I don't know what I. Q. entomologists assign to the solitary hunting-spider and I don't much care. My wife and I have learned at first hand that the humblest creatures often have a lot more sense than given credit for, that they can and do respond to friendship with their own peculiar warmth. Unlike us, they are not impressed by superficial appearances and, I am sure, they knew before ever it was written that 'beauty lies in the eye that beholdeth.'