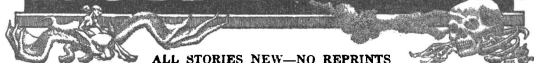


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1942

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Spider Mansion

By **FRITZ LEIBER**

What was the terrible, terrifying rustling that haunted the house? And why did naked Fear itself squat everywhere, in every corner?

A TREMENDOUS splash of lightning gave us our first glimpse of the pillared front of the Old Orne House—a pale Colonial mask framed by wildly whipping leaves. Then,

even before the lightning faded, it was blotted out by a solid sheet of muddy water sloshing up against the windshield.

"But I still don't like midgets," Helen said for the third time, "and besides—"



Close thunder, like thick metal ripping, drowned out the rest.

"It's gotten beyond a question of your or my personal taste in heights," I argued, squinting for a sight of the road between mud splashes. "Sure Malcolm Orne's a midget, but you don't know how slippery the road is ahead or how deep those Jersey salt marshes are on either side of it. And no garages or even houses for miles. Too risky, in this storm. Anyway, we figured all along we might visit him on the way. That's why we took this road."

"Yes, this lonely, god-forsaken road." Helen's voice was as strained and uneasy as her face, pallidly revealed by another lightning flash. "Oh, I know it's silly of me, but I still feel that—"

Again cracking thunder blanketed her words. Our coupé was progressing by heaves, as if through a gelatinous sea. I spotted the high white posts a little ahead, and swung out for the turn-in.

"Still really want to go on?" I asked.

Maybe it was the third blast of thunder, loudest of the lot, that decided her against further argument. She gave me a "You win" look, and even grinned a little, being a much better sport than I probably deserve for a wife.

The coupé slithered between the posts, lurched around squishily on a sharp slippery rise, made it on the last gasp, and lunged toward the house through a flail of lasting, untrimmed branches.

The windows in front were dark and those to the right were tightly shuttered, but light flickered faintly through the antique white fanlight above the six-paneled Colonial door. Helen hugged my arm tight as we ducked through the drenching rain up onto the huge porch, with its two-story pillars. I reached for the knocker.

Just at that moment there came one of those brief hushes in the storm. The lightning held off, and the wind stopped.

I felt Helen jump at the ugly rustling, scraping sound of a branch which, released from the wind's pressure, brushed against a pillar as it swung back into place. I remember noting that the paint was half-peeled away from the pillar.

Then things happened fast. Groping for the knocker, I felt the door give inward. There was a deafening blast from *inside* the house. A ragged semi-circle of wood disappeared from the jamb about a foot from the ground. Splinters flew from a point in the floor eight inches from my shoe. The door continued to swing slowly open from the first push I had given it, revealing a Negro with grizzled hair and fear-wide eyes, clad in the threadbare black of an out-dated servant's costume. Despite his slouching posture he still topped six feet. Smoke wreathed from the muzzle of the shotgun held loosely in his huge pink-palmed hands.

"Oh, Lordy," he breathed in quaking tones. "Dat rustlin' soun'—I t'ought it was—"

SOMETHING, then, checked my angry retort and the lunge I was about to make forward for the weapon. It was the appearance of another face—a white man's—over the Negro's shoulder. A saturnine face with aristocratic features and bulging forehead. Judging from the way he towered over the gigantic Negro, the second man could hardly be more than a few inches short of seven feet. But that wasn't what froze me dead in my tracks. It was that the face was unmistakably that of Malcolm Orne, the midget.

The Negro was grasped and swung aside as if he were a piece of furniture. The gun was lifted from his nerveless fingers as if it were a child's toy. Then the giant bowed low and said, "A thousand pardons! Welcome to Orne House!"

Helen's scream, long delayed, turned to hysterical laughter. Then the storm, re-

commencing with redoubled fury, shattered the hush and sent us hurrying into the hall.

The giant's teeth flashed in a smile. "One moment, please," he murmured to us, then turned and seized the cowering Negro by the slack of the coat, slapped his face twice, hard.

"You are never to touch that gun, Buford!" Again the Negro's head was buffeted by a solid blow. "You almost killed my guests. They would be well within their rights if they demanded your arrest."

But what caught my attention was the fact that the Negro hardly seemed to notice either the words or the stinging blows. His eyes were fixed in a peculiarly terrified way on the open door, seemingly staring at a point about a foot from the floor. Only when a back-draft slammed it shut, did he begin to grovel and whine.

The giant cut him short with a curt, "Send Milly to show my guests their room. Then stay in the kitchen." The Negro hurriedly shambled off without a backward glance.

The giant turned to us again. He looked very much in place in this darkly wainscoted hall. On the wall behind him were a pair of crossed sabers of Civil War vintage.

"Ah, Mrs. Egan, I am glad to see that you are taking this deplorable affair so calmly." His smile flashed at Helen. "And I am delighted to make your acquaintance, though just now you have every reason to be angry with me." He took her hand with a courtly gesture. His face grew grave. "Almost—a hideous accident occurred. I can explain, though not excuse it. Poor Buford lives in abnormal terror of a large mastiff I keep chained outside—an animal quite harmless to myself or my guests, I hasten to add. A little while ago it broke loose. Evidently Buford thought it was attempting to force its way in. His

fear is irrational and without bounds—though otherwise he is a perfect servant. I only hope you will let my hospitality serve as an apology."

He turned to me. "Your wife is charming," he said. "You're a very lucky man, Tom."

Then he seemed to become aware of my dumbfounded look, and the way my gaze was stupidly traveling up and down his tremendous though well-proportioned form. A note of secret amusement was added to his smile.

Helen broke the silence with a little laugh, puzzled but not displeased.

"But, excuse me, who are *you*?" she asked.

The wavering candlelight made queer highlights, emphasizing the massive forehead and the saturnine features.

"Malcolm Orne, Madam!" he answered with a little bow.

"But I thought," said Helen, "that Malcolm Orne was . . ." An involuntary expression of disgust crossed her face.

"A midget?" His voice was silky. "Ah, yes. I can understand your distaste." Then he turned slowly toward me. "I know what's bothering you, Tom," he said. "But *that* is a long and very strange story, which can best wait until after dinner. Milly will take you to your room. Your luggage will be brought up. Dinner in about three-quarters of an hour? Good!"

An impassive-faced Negress had appeared silently from the back of the hall, bearing in her ebon hands a branched candlestick. There were a dozen questions hammering at my brain, but instead of asking them I found myself following the Negress up the curving stairs, Helen at my side, watching the fantastic shadows cast by the candles.

AS SOON as we were alone, Helen bombarded me with a dozen incredulous questions of her own. I did my best

to convince her that the giant downstairs was really Malcolm Orne—there was the birthmark below his left ear and the curious thin scar on his forehead to back up the rest of the evidence—and that Malcolm Orne had been, when I last saw him, a midget who missed four feet by several inches.

I wasn't very successful and no wonder, since I could hardly believe it myself. Helen seemed to think I was mixing him up with someone else.

"You mentioned a brother—" she said.

I shook my head doggedly. "No possibility there," I told her. "Malcolm Orne did have an elder brother, but he died a year ago."

"And you're sure it's only a year and a half since you last saw Malcolm?" she persisted. "What was the brother like?"

"He was short, though no midget. About five feet. So don't go getting any wild theories of murder and impersonation. Marvin Orne was his name. A doctor. Made quite a reputation in New York, then came down here to start a country clinic in connection with research he was doing. Some of his work was supposed to be very important. Embryology. Cellular development. Hormones. Obscure vitamin factors. Growth processes."

There I stopped, suddenly realizing the implications of what I was saying. It was farfetched, of course, but—

"Go on, dear!" Helen prodded. "You've thought of something! Don't keep me in suspense." She looked interested and eager now, her uneasiness completely departed.

"I know it sounds awfully pseudo-scientific," I began cautiously, "but I suppose it's barely possible that, before his death, Marvin Orne discovered some serum or extract or whatever you call it, something to stimulate growth, and used it on—"

"Wonderful!" Helen interrupted, catching my idea. "That's the first sensible

thing you've said tonight. I could believe that."

"It's only a wild theory," I hedged quickly. "The kind I warned you against. Better wait. Remember he hinted he'd tell us all about it after dinner."

"Oh, but what a wonderful theory!" Helen cut in. "Just think what it would mean to a man to be changed from a pygmy into a giant almost overnight. The psychological implications— Why, it opens up all sorts of vistas. He seems to be a very charming man, you know."

The last remark had a trace of impishness in it. I nodded though I didn't quite agree.

When we went down to dinner, she was still flushed with excitement, and I realized for the thousandth time what a thoroughly charming woman I had married. As if in response to a challenge emanating from the high courtly halls and rich though dusty woodwork, she wore her formal black evening gown with silver trimmings. And of course she had wheedled me into putting on a somewhat travel-crumpled dinner jacket.

There was no one in the hall, so we waited at the bottom of the stairs. The storm had died away and it was very quiet. I tried the high double doors to what was surely the living room, but they were stuck or locked. A faint but sharply nauseous stench rose to my nostrils. I noticed that Helen wrinkled her nose, and I took the opportunity to whisper, "There are some drawbacks, it seems, to ancient grandeur. Ancient plumbing, for one."

Then we became aware of the Negro Buford standing uneasily at the very far end of the hall. As soon as he saw that we were looking at him, he bowed and motioned to us, then quickly turned and went out. We followed after. There was something very ridiculous about his long-distance courtesy. "I suppose he's embarrassed because of what happened,

and afraid we're still going to have him arrested," Helen speculated lightly. "The poor superstitious savage."

"Just the same, it was a narrow squeak," I reminded her. "But if Malcolm keeps the firearms safely locked up hereafter, I'll forgive the villain."

The dining room, where antique cut glass chandeliers glittered softly with candle-light, held another surprise.

"Tom . . . and Mrs. Egan," said our host, "I wish to present my wife, Cynthia."

SHE was literally one of the most lavishly beautiful women I have ever seen. Really creamy skin. Masses of warmly golden hair. A Classic face, but with the Classic angularity alluringly softened and the Classic strength missing. The strapless evening gown of red velvet emphasized a narrow waist, a richly modeled bosom and perfectly rounded, almost plump shoulders. Lavish was the only word for her. More like one of Titian's or Renoir's models than a modern or a Greek. She was Venus to Helen's slim Diana. There was a gleam of old gold from her hands and the pendant at her neck. Like a picture on exhibition.

She seemed a singularly reserved woman for one so gorgeous, acknowledging the introduction with a smile and a little nod. Helen too for some reason did not break into the lively if artificial feminine chatter one expects at dinner parties, and the meal began in silence, with Buford pouring the white wine and serving the seafood in crystal hemispheres set in silver. The seafood was not iced, however, and as the meal progressed other deficiencies became apparent. The grizzled Negro avoided looking at Helen or myself, as he moved softly around the table.

While the seafood was being replaced by a thick meaty soup, Malcolm Orne leaned back sipping his wine, and said to

me, "Quite a surprise to find that I was married? Well, there was a time when we too would have found it surprising, eh, dear?" The last remark was directed at his wife. She smiled and nodded quickly. I thought her throat moved as if she swallowed hard. His gaze lingered on her, his own smile becoming more expansive. "Yet things have a way of changing, or being changed, eh dear? But that's part of the mystery which must wait until coffee."

From then on conversation picked up, though one peculiar feature of it soon became obvious. Cynthia Orne did not join in at all, except for the most voiceless of polite murmurings—more gesture than word. Moreover, Malcolm Orne deliberately answered any questions directed at her. He did it with casual cleverness, but it was none the less apparent. For a while what was almost a verbal duel developed between Helen and him, she directing one remark after another at our hostess, he deftly or bluntly interposing. Helen was responding with mounting excitement to the atmosphere of mystery and tension.

After the soup the culinary pretensions of Buford and Milly rapidly collapsed. There followed a peppery stew, float—with fat, which sought to make up in quantity what it lacked in quality. It made a disagreeable contrast with the thick silver service and rich damask. And then I began to notice the other false notes: the great blotches of damp on the ceiling, the peeling wall-paper, the thumb-marks on the crystal, the not-quite-eradicated stains on the thick, hand-embroidered linen.

With the stew was served—inappropriately enough—a sugary port wine. Helen and I, our appetites satisfied, toyed with the meat. Cynthia Orne hardly touched a thing; she'd grow thin soon enough on this diet, I thought. But Malcolm ate enormously, voraciously, knife and fork

moving with a perfectly correct yet machinelike rapidity.

Gradually I found myself loathing the man. I think his attitude toward his wife was chiefly responsible, at first. He so obviously gloated in possessing her and dominating her, so that she dared not speak a word for herself. He was showing her off, drinking in our admiration. And he gloated in his mystification of us, too; his veiled references to coming revelations, his unwillingness to discuss even the lesser mystery of Buford and the mastiff. Oh, I was still devilishly curious to know the explanation of the baffling phenomenon with which we were faced—a phenomenon which had changed a midget into a giant—but my curiosity was dulled, and I felt that the solution would somehow be sickening. Again and again I studied his face, racking my memory for the exact appearance of Malcolm Orne the midget, comparing, contrasting. Even the head seemed larger, the forehead more swollen, though those features had been characteristic of the midget too. I tried hard to pretend that this was a different man—and I failed. The identity was too apparent. I went over in my mind the manner of Malcolm Orne the midget. Sardonic he had been, I recalled, and at times overly in love with his own cleverness.

A not very pleasant or kindly person. One expects such behavior in an individual seeking to compensate for marked physical deficiencies. Malcolm Orne the giant retained all these qualities, but there was added to them supreme self-satisfaction along with a wanton delight in exercising power. His sense of inferiority, which had been the balance wheel in his nature, was now gone, and the result was not very nice. And beyond all this I sensed something else—some unguessed, almost inhuman power or some equally unguessed, equally inhuman

striving. Unwholesome force emanated from him. I recalled Helen's words: ". . . changed from a pygmie into a giant almost overnight. The psychological implications. . . . Why it opens up all sorts of vistas." I did not like the look of those vistas.

BUFORD splashed stew, a great puddle of it, on the tablecloth. I looked at him. His face was muddy with fear. It was the sound from outside that was affecting him—an excited growling and yapping, growing louder every moment. Malcolm Orne, frowning, half rose. I expected him to strike Buford, but he did not. He was listening too.

"Sounds as if your mastiff's caught something," I remarked. Malcolm Orne impatiently motioned me to be silent.

Suddenly the sound changed in character, became a wail of terror, one vast horrid squeal that rose and fell without ever ceasing, like a siren. Moving with startling rapidity for so tall a man, Malcolm Orne darted toward the door. I rose to follow. He turned and rapped out a peremptory command, "None of you are to leave this room until I return." Then, seeing my angry look, he added with obvious effort. "If you please, Tom. I can best handle this alone." The door slammed behind him.

The wailing decreased in volume, though becoming more pitifully agonized. With a shrug I sat down. The Negress Milly had come in from the kitchen, and she and Buford were clinging together in abject terror, though he if anything seemed the more frightened.

"Caught another dog, I suppose—" ventured Helen. Her voice trailed off.

"Very likely," I replied. But I was thinking that if there were a second dog involved he had a very similar voice.

"Well, I'm sure your husband knows just how to handle him, Mrs. Orne,"

Helen remarked with an attempt at reassurance.

Mrs. Orne did not reply. I looked at her more closely. Her lips were moving wordlessly, as though she were seeking to reply and unable to. Beads of sweat stood out on her white forehead, and trickled from the line of her golden hair. Her whole body was trembling, so slightly that you hardly noticed it at first, but continuously. Gradually it was borne in on me that this was no mere anxiety for her husband. She was in the grip of ultimate panic.

The wailing sank to a coughing moan, then mercifully ceased. And now we heard the voice of Malcolm Orne, in sharp accents of command.

Again Mrs. Orne seemed to be attempting unsuccessfully to speak. Her eyes were fixed on Helen's beseechingly. Then, with rapid nervous movements, she spread out her tiny handkerchief on the tablecloth, and began to write something on it in lipstick with shaking hand. We watched her, fascinated. There came the sound of slamming doors, and then, during one moment of stillness, a rustling, so very faint that I could hardly be sure I had heard, yet it wrung from Bufort a pitiful groan of horror. I recalled the first words we had heard him speak, "Dat rustlin' soun'—" Hardly a noise that one would associate with a mastiff.

Another door slammed. There were footsteps in the hall. In frantic haste Mrs. Orne wadded up the handkerchief and held it out to Helen, who quickly tucked it in the bosom of her dress. Then the door opened, and Malcolm Orne stood regarding us. His shoes and trouser legs were muddied.

"A dangerous beast—to outsiders," he remarked, breathing a little heavily. "A stray hound wandered in, and he tore it to ribbons before I could interfere." He looked around, as if challenging us to say

that what we had heard hadn't sounded like a dog-fight.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to have such a brute around," said Helen rapidly.

He seemed about to reply when his gaze lighted on Bufort and Milly. "What do you mean coming in here?" he snarled at the Negress. "Get out! Bufort, we will take coffee now."

His urbane manner returned when he had settled himself again at the table. "Sorry I can't offer you coffee in the living room. But I've shut it up. It's a great barn of a place, two stories high, very hard to heat. Besides, before his death, my brother had begun to use it as a sort of laboratory, for his experiments." Again the gloating, secretive smile.

NIGHT-BLACK coffee, in fragile egg-shell china, was something I welcomed. Malcolm Orne drained his cup, refilled it and began abruptly to speak.

"I'm hardly the right one to tell this story, since I'm no scientist. But I'm the only one who knows it all. So bear with me if I fumble for words." His manner belied what he said. He was obviously supremely self-confident, savoring the dramatic quality of his introduction. "Well, you may have heard something of my brother's work on growth processes. His early investigations created quite a stir. But first I should try to explain something.

"Growth, as I understand it, is not a process that has any absolutely fixed stopping point. It may stop early in the 'teens, or continue on well into the twenties. It may seem to stop, and then start again. Moreover, there are well-authenticated cases of growth during middle age. Though usually in such cases the growth is of an unbalanced and localized sort, as in acromegaly, where the bones of the hands and jaw become abnormally enlarged. Factors of heredity, diet, and climate are all of importance. Scientists to-

day are of course able to exert some control over growth by influencing glandular secretions. If they knew enough, their control would become complete. They would know how to start growth when it had seemed to stop forever.

"Perhaps my being a midget turned my brother's mind to this problem. But once he had begun, he pursued it with a single-mindedness that crowded out all other interests. Not that he had a narrow range of thought—he was a genius!—but he saw in every phenomenon some aspect of the process of growth. His country clinic here was a part of it—he made extensive statistical studies of the sizes and growth rates of country and city people.

"Growth Factor One—that was what he called the thing he was looking for. The hormone or sub-vitamin that influenced all the others. The ultimate physiological catalyst. The master-switch to turn on or shut off the whole process of growth."

HELEN and I were leaning forward now, hanging on his words. He waited for a moment, relishing the suspense, then said lazily, "Well, that's about all there is to the story. Except that eventually he found it. Found Growth Factor One." He rolled the words on his tongue.

"What was it, you ask? That's something I'd like to know too, now. But I'm no scientist. It was . . . something that was injected. That much I know, since after the preliminary experiments on animals and insects, I insisted on being his first human subject. You can readily guess why."

His gloating smile and his air of utter superiority were fast becoming insufferable, but you just had to listen.

"Yes," he repeated. "I think you can all readily imagine why a midget should want to grow. No one loves a midget, eh dear?" His words caressed his wife cruelly, like a whip dragged slowly across naked

skin. "And a midget loves no one. Or at least that midget didn't."

He seemed then to become lost in reverie, but I felt sure he was only taking time to let his words sink in, and to absorb our unwilling interest. Helen gripped my hand under the table and I could feel her shivering.

Then, staring past us, he continued in a low dreamy voice, "An interesting thing, the way this Growth Factor One works. It doesn't merely increase the size of and number of body cells already existing. After the fashion of true growth, it develops new *kinds* of cells. I have, for example, in my brain, neurons of a sort that probably have never existed before. Very likely they have—new powers. The same holds for muscular cells. I could demonstrate. But it would be rather melodramatic, wouldn't it, if I crumpled this coffee urn in one hand? Incidentally, the growth process would work in the same way with animals. By careful use of Growth Factor One you might make an animal, as intelligent, almost, as a man."

He broke off and looked around at us, patronizingly. "Well, now you've heard it. A year ago my brother died. His work was turned over to a group of distinguished scientists. But his notes were inadequate and very confusing. I don't think they'll ever be able to learn much from them. I remain the sole product of his labors. The other creatures he experimented with were all destroyed."

HELEN gave a little squeal of fright and jerked away from the table. A tiny black spider was scuttling among the silverware. Malcolm Orne calmly reached out the gravy ladel left from the stew, and crashed it with a little thwack. Then, as Helen began to apologize for being so startled, we noticed that Cynthia Orne had fainted.

Her husband made no movement. For

a moment I stared at him, then hurried around and did what I could to revive her, chaffing her temples with a wet napkin, lowering her head to bring the blood back. Finally her lips twitched and her eyes shuddered open. Leaning over her, close to her face, I seemed to hear her murmur over and over again a peculiar phrase: "Not the web again. Not the web." Mechanically, almost inaudibly, but with an accent of extreme fear. Then she realized where she was and quickly sat up. She seemed embarrassed by my attempts to help her.

Malcolm Orne sipped the last of his coffee, and stood up. "It's time we were all in bed," he remarked. "Our guests must be tired from their trip. Come, dear."

She struggled to her feet, swaying a little, and took his arm. Helen and I followed silently, though angry words were on the tip of my tongue.

Right then and there I suppose I ought to have had it out with him, but after all it was his house, so I held myself in.

In the hall the unpleasant odor that I had ascribed to defective plumbing was more noticeable, and as we passed the high double doors of the living room I fancied I heard a faint sibilant rustling. Up the stairs we followed them, Cynthia Orne leaning heavily on her husband's arm. He did not look down at her. At the first door at the head of the stairs he paused. "Good night, dear. I'll be coming considerably later," he said. She unlinked her arm from his, nodded at us with the specter of a smile, and went in.

At the door to our bedroom he said good night, adding, "If you want anything, there's the bell-pull. Please don't consider stirring out of this room. The servants or I can attend to all your wants."

The door closed and his footsteps moved away. Helen drew out Cynthia Orne's handkerchief, spread it out on the

table. We read it together. The lipstick had smudged, and the printing was hurried, but there was no question as to what the words were.

"Get out. For your lives."

Half an hour later I was tiptoeing in my stockinged feet down the almost pitch-black hall toward Cynthia Orne's bedroom. I felt slightly ridiculous and not altogether sure of myself. Meddling with the affairs of a married couple is un-diplomatic to say the least. But Helen and I had decided there was nothing else we could do. Malcolm Orne certainly gave the impression of being vindictive, cruel, and dangerous. And the woman's warning to us implied that she herself was in danger. For her own sake as well as our own, it seemed imperative that one of us talk with her alone and find out what it was all about.

I had successfully negotiated the turn in the hall and was approaching the head of the stairs when the noise of talking from below brought me to a stop. It sounded like Malcolm Orne. After a few moments I inched forward past the bedroom door and peered over the ornately carved balustrade down the well of the stairs. There were no candles below, but the storm had blown over and moonlight shone through the fanlight—enough to illuminate vaguely the face of our host. An oblong of darkness showed me that the door to the living room was open, and there mounted to my nostrils that now-familiar stench, stronger than before. Somehow that odor, more than anything else, cut through my conscious mind to the hidden levels of fear below.

Orne was looking in that open doorway. At first I thought he was talking to someone, but afterward I became certain that he was conducting a wild moody monologue. At least, one does not expect a sane man to talk with the dead.

"You'll rot forever, eternally embalmed

in hell," were the first words I heard. He intoned them like a malign indignation. "Yes, dear brother, you're well taken care of. You who always felt so 'sorry' for me and wanted to make a 'real' man out of me, yet were so contemptuous of my intelligence that you treated me as a child. You with your babbling about 'humanity' and your moralizing lectures. Well, you succeeded all right. You made a man—or perhaps more than a man—out of me. But you found out too late what the consequences are. I wish you comfort, dear brother. I hope you like my wife's company. She's not been behaving well of late. Again good night, brother."

A MOCKING laugh ended this murderous confession. Then he whistled and snapped his fingers impatiently, as if calling a dog, and moved off toward the dining room.

It is not pleasant to confess that one has ever been literally paralyzed by fear, but what happened then did just that to me. I *saw* nothing. The moonlight struck too high to illuminate what issued from the living room and hurried down the hall after him. But there was a rustling, clicking sound—Merciful heavens, how I tried to convince myself a dog might make such a sound!—and it carried an indescribable impression of *swift* scurrying movement. With it came a sharp increase in the fetid stench.

I am not certain how long I crouched there with the cold sweat of terror breaking out from my forehead. Hardly a minute probably. Then my mind began to work again, returning automatically to the problem with which it had previously been engaged—the urgent need of conferring with Cynthia Orne.

Cautious rapping at her door brought no response. I tried it and found it locked. Then I risked a little louder rapping, and, with my lips close to the key-

hole, softly called her name. Still no response. Memory of Orne's fantastic words rose in my numbed mind, "I hope you like my wife's company." And with those words the chilling possibility of murder rose in my mind.

Then, as I stepped back from the door, I heard again that abominable rustling, but this time behind me, in the direction of our bedroom. And then I heard Helen scream. That stung me into instant action. But in my reckless haste I misjudged the turn in the corridor and crashed against the wall. Half stunned, I staggered onward and wrenched open the bedroom door. The flickering light from the branched candelabrum revealed an undisturbed and empty room. Helen was gone.

My first move was toward the open window. Below, rapidly crossing the moon-silvered unkempt lawn, I saw two figures. But they were not the ones I expected. Burdened with an ancient carpet-bag and several ragged bundles, Bufort and Milly were hurrying away from Orne House.

My next move, after quickly rummaging in my suitcase for the flashlight, was back toward the stair. I had remembered the crossed sabers on the wall in the hall below, and it seemed to me essential that I procure a weapon of some sort before I start my search. But I was stopped short at the head of the stairs, for again Malcolm Orne was standing at the library door. Only this time the front door was open too and this time his words were brief.

"After 'em boy. Get 'em, boy," he called, snapping his fingers and then pointing outside. There was a momentary pause. Then something scuttled like a shadow across the path of moonlight, moving with such rapidity that I could make out nothing of its shape except that it was squat but not small. Malcolm Orne gave a low laugh and followed it, closing the door

behind him. With a sickening heart I realized that the desperately fleeing figures I had seen crossing the lawn were to be hunted down.

But at least I was momentarily safe to pursue my search. I switched on the flashlight, hurried down the stairs and lifted one of the sabers from the wall. It was a heavy yet well-balanced weapon. Then I entered the living room.

The stench was nauseously thick here, the very air a sea of decay. My flashlight, directed at random, fell twice on moldering tapestries and then on something so incredible that I believed I must be going mad. Suspended in midair at the far end of the room, still clad in that red velvet evening gown, was the body of Cynthia Orne.

The head, its golden hair disarranged, lolled backward. The arms stretched taut to either side. Then I began to see the thin opalescently grayish strands that twined around her wrists and arms, and wrapped around her skirt, drawing it tight against her legs. The strands seemed to radiate off in all directions. My flashlight roved outward across the glimmering net-work. Horror and revulsion rooted me to the spot where I stood. The thing was a gigantic spider-web.

I saw that there were other victims. Here and there, thickest at the corners of the web, were forms suggestive of small animals, each wrapped in a shimmering cocoon. Shudderingly I recalled the eating habits of spiders, how they preserve their prey for the future. In the lower right-hand corner was the shape of a large dog, his silken wrappings only half completed. This, I told myself, must be the mastiff which had howled so horribly in the night.

AND then I saw the man. He was suspended close to the wall; a drab, fearfully emaciated thing whose shrunken face

awoke groping, incredulous thoughts in my mind.

Filled with a mad desire to destroy that loathsome web, I stepped forward with upraised sword.

And then my staggered senses reeled at another blow directed at the seat of sanity itself. For the man, whom I thought could be nothing else but dead, spoke. His voice was a thin cracked whisper, but it carried a note of terrible urgency.

"Back, for your life! One touch of these strands, and you would be trapped forever, like a fly. Your sword would be entangled by the very strands it cut. Get that can of heavy grease behind you. There, by the table! Smear your hands and sword-blade with it. And bring the hooked pole that stands in the corner, and those things that look like firetongs. Smear them with grease too."

I do not like to think of the next half hour. I have never done work one-tenth as ugly and revolting—and always behind me the threat of the creature's return. Choking on the fetid air and with that fiendish webwork often only a few inches from my body, I hooked and sliced, dodged the flicking ends of cut strands, like a damned soul performing some endless task in hell. I think it was the voice of the man that kept me sane, directing me, warning me, sometimes rambling off, but never ceasing, like the voice of a hypnotist.

"First cut the strands above her head—the inside of the hook is sharp as a sickle. That will bring her down a good three feet. Now the strands below, and then those to either side, one by one. Carefully, man! And watch that loose one swinging by your neck. Flip it to one side so it catches! That's right. Oh, I know how to do this thing backward. A dozen times I've watched him and the beast hang her up there and then hours later, take her down. It's his way of punishing her be-

cause she once laughed when Malcolm Orne the midget asked her to marry him. Her mistake was that she fell in love with him after he grew tall, and let him marry her. Through her, he seeks to revenge himself on all womankind. I tell you, to watch that man and beast work together is the most hideous sight in existence. He hasn't let it poison her yet. That distinction is reserved for me. A slight bite produces paralysis—you know the habits of spiders? How they preserve their prey? I was last bitten a month ago. The creature was loose for a while tonight, killed the dog. But he lets it range around pretty freely. Boasts of his power over it.

"Gently now! Mind those strands to the left. There, that's done it. Now pull her away from it. Don't try to lift her. Slowly. Slowly."

I turned to the task of releasing the man, his voice still directing me. But now it rambled more often on to sidetracks.

"It must be a year I've hung here. And all because I was fool enough to change him from a midget into a giant—and a devil. He's literally no longer human. His schemes are those of a mad malign god. Do you know what he wants to make me do, besides tell him the secret of growth? He wants to force me to search for a *Negative Growth Factor One*, a degenerative hormone something that will make living things *decrease* evenly in size so that he can infect all mankind with it, in order that he may ultimately rule over a race of pygmies. But I won't! I tell you I won't!" His voice rose in a thin scream of defiance. But his next words were sane again. "More grease on your sword. It's sticking. And now sever that strand to the left, so I swing away from the main web."

Finally I got him down. He tried to stand, but his wasted limbs would not support him, and with a groan he sank to his knees. I saw that Cynthia Orne had re-

covered consciousness, and was pushing herself up from the floor. My mind, gradually emerging from the half-hour nightmare of frantic action, was beginning to function under its own power. I realized the danger that remained, and I remembered that Helen was still to be found. Perhaps she had been confined somewhere at the back of the house. I started for the door.

But through that door strode the towering form of Malcolm Orne. In his right hand was a flickering candlelabrum. Slung effortlessly over his left arm like a bundle of cloth was a limp form—Helen's. Acting instinctively, I directed the flashlight at his face. It seemed hardly to startle him.

"SO THE last fly has obligingly walked into the spider's parlor," he murmured, with a laugh. "Most convenient. First the charming Mrs. Egan, who does not like midgets, brought to join my dear brother and wife. Then those black fools finished off for good. And last but not least my dear friend Tom, who used to pity me so much in the old days."

But now his eyes, despite the dazzling beam of the flashlight, perceived that something was wrong with the web. Helen slipped from his arm as he placed the candlelabrum on the table and called peremptorily, "Boy! Boy!"

In that instant I flung the tongs. They struck him full across the forehead, and he swayed like a great tree and crashed headlong to the floor. I snatched up the sword and directed the flashlight at the open door. Then, before I could move to close it, there came a rustling and scurrying, and the horror was upon us.

Big as the dog it had killed, it regarded us from the doorway, its eight reddish eyes glowing evilly. I could see the swollen black abdomen and the black poison-dripping chelicerae, fangs that projected inches forward from its ugly little mouth.

Then it struck with a rush, one spring sufficing to carry it across Helen's supine, silk-clad form. With instinctive cunning it had chosen me as the most active opponent and therefore the one first to dispose of. Blindly I thrust out my sword, and, as it swerved away from the point, slashed out toward it. The wound it received was only slight, but it scuttled away to the shadows.

Someone was standing beside me. It was Cynthia Orne. Without a word she took the flashlight from me. I never expected such courage from her, but during all that hideous duel she kept the light fixed on the creature, leaving me free to wield the sword alone. The beam never once wavered, nor did the creature manage to escape from the circle of light.

And then I noted that Marvin Orne, was painfully crawling straight toward his prostrate brother, unmindful of the scuttling monster. Death was in Marvin Orne's sere face!

When my sword found its black body for a second time, the spider changed its tactics, ran with incredible rapidity up the tapestry, and launched itself down at me. I sidestepped. It only missed my sword arm by an inch!

And now Malcolm Orne had risen dizzily to his knees, but simultaneously his brother was upon him, clawing at his throat. It was an unequal contest, but for a moment Marvin Orne had the advantage. They rolled against the table, knocking off the candlelabrum, whose flames began to lick at the bone-dry tapestry.

The glance I spared on this other conflict nearly cost me my life. A sticky strand whipped around the hilt of my sword, almost wrenching it from my hand.

I tore at the sword to free it. Malcolm Orne, I saw, had warded off his brother's feeble attack. And now for the first time

I realized the full strength of the giant. His fist rose and fell, again and again, smashing in the skull of Marvin Orne as if it were an eggshell. Flame was roaring up the tapestry now, and the whole room was illuminated by a wild reddish glow.

The monster swooped down at me like a nightmare. I threw myself down, thrusting upward with the sword. This time it went home, thick blood oozing from the wound. I scrambled to my feet, raising my weapon for a second blow. But the monster, badly hurt, was moving away from me now toward Malcolm Orne. What the giant saw in those eight evil eyes I do not know—perhaps some long-nurtured hate for its master—but he threw up his hands and screamed horribly. The dying monster ran up his body. I followed it thrusting again at the black abdomen. But the chelicerae had done their work. Malcolm Orne screamed once again, a tortured bellow of anguish. Then Cynthia Orne was pulling me backward, out of the path of the falling tapestries, which collapsed with a roar, wrapping the monster and its master—and the dead body of Marvin Orne—in a flaming shroud.

It missed Helen by inches. But before the flames could reach out across the carpet, I had dragged her aside. As I raised her in my arms I saw her eyes blinking wonderingly open, and felt her hand tighten on my shoulder.

Then, like lost souls escaping from some hell, we fled from that house of monstrous growth and forbidden secrets, lost to science. As I sent the coupé roaring down the drive, I spared time for one glance over my shoulder. Flames were already eating through the shutters below the pillared facade. Soon, I knew, the whole white mask of Orne House would be one roaring holocaust.
