

The Green Spider

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I find from my notes that Professor Brayme-Skepley's great lecture which was to revolutionize modern medicine should have been delivered upon the fifteenth of March, and many of Europe's leading scientists were during the preceding week to be seen daily in the quaint old streets of Barminster—for the entire world of medical science was waiting agog for the revelation of the Brayme-Skepley treatment.

Many people wondered that Brayme-Skepley should deliver a lecture so vastly important in old-world Barminster rather than in London; but he was not a man to be coerced—so the savants, perforce, came to Barminster.

At twelve, midnight, as nearly as can be ascertained, on the fourteenth of March the porter in charge of the North Gate—by which direct admission can be gained to the quadrangle—was aroused by a loud ringing of his bell.

Hurrying to the door of his little lodge, he was surprised to find at the gate the gaunt figure of Professor Brayme-Skepley, enveloped in a huge fur coat. He hastened to unlock the wicket and admit the great scientist.

'I am sorry to trouble you at so late an hour, Jamieson,' said the Professor, 'but there are some little preparations which I must make for tomorrow's lecture. I shall probably be engaged in the bacteriological laboratory for a couple of hours. You will not mind turning out with the key?'

He slipped a sovereign into the porter's hand as he spoke, and Jamieson only too gladly acquiesced.

The fire in the little sitting-room of the lodge was almost extinct, but the man revived it, and, putting on a shovelful of coal, lighted his pipe, and sat smoking for about an hour. At one o'clock he stepped outside, and glanced across the quadrangle.

The Professor was still working, and, finding the night air chilly,

Jamieson was about to turn in again when a light suddenly appeared in the top window of one of those ancient houses in Spindle Lane. The house was the last of the row, and overlooked the bacteriological laboratory.

'That's old Kragg's house,' muttered the porter; 'but I didn't know anybody lived there since the old man died.'

The light was a vague and flickering one, almost like that of a match; and, as he watched, it disappeared again. There was something uncanny about this solitary light in a house which he believed to be uninhabited, so, with a slight shudder, Jamieson returned to the comforts of his fireside.

Curiously enough, I had been reading upon this particular night in Harborne's rooms; and at something like twenty minutes past two I knocked the ashes from my pipe, and was about to depart—when there came a sudden scuffling on the stairs. We both turned just as the door was flung open, and Jamieson, white-faced and wild-eyed, stumbled, breathless, into the room.

'Thank Heaven I've found somebody up!' he gasped. 'Yours was the only window with a light!'

'Where's the brandy?' I said, for the man seemed inclined to faint upon the sofa.

A stiff glass of cognac pulled him together somewhat, and, with a little colour returning to his face, but still wild of eye, he burst out:

'Professor Brayme-Skepley has been murdered!'

'Murdered!' echoed Harborne.

'And no mortal hand has done the thing, sir!' continued the frightened man. 'Heaven grant I never see the like again!'

'You're raving!' I said with an assumption of severity, for Jamieson's condition verged closely upon that of hysteria. 'Try to talk sense. Where is the Professor?'

'In the bacteriological laboratory, sir.'

'How long has he been there?'

'Since twelve o'clock!'

I glanced at Harborne in surprise.

'What was he doing there?' enquired the latter.

'He said he had some preparations to make for his lecture.'

'Well, get on! Here, have another pull at the brandy. How do you know he's dead?'

'I went to ask him how much longer he was going to be.'

‘Well?’

‘He didn’t answer to my knocking, although there was a light burning. The door was locked from the inside, so I got on to the dust-box, and just managed to reach a window-ledge. I pulled myself up far enough to look inside; and then—I dropped down again!’

‘But what did you see, man? What did you see?’

‘I saw Professor Brayme-Skepley lying dead on the floor among broken jars by an overturned table. There were only two lamps on—those over the table—and his head came just in the circle of light. His body was in shadow.’

‘What else?’

‘Blood! His hair all matted!’

‘Come on, Harborne!’ I cried, seizing my hat. ‘You too, Jamieson!’

‘For the love of Heaven, gentlemen,’ gasped the man, grasping us each by an arm, ‘I couldn’t! You haven’t heard all!’

‘Then get on with it!’ said Harborne. ‘Every second is of importance.’

‘I ran for the window ladder, gentlemen; and when I came back with it the electric lamps were out!’

‘Out?’

‘I ran up the ladder, and looked in at the window; and saw—how can I tell you what I saw?’

‘Don’t maunder!’ shouted Harborne. ‘What was it?’

‘It was a thing, sir, like a kind of green spider—only with a body twice the size of that football!’

Harborne and I looked at one another significantly.

‘You’re a trifle overwrought, Jamieson,’ I said, laying my hand upon his shoulder. ‘Stay here until we come back.’

The man stared at me.

‘You don’t believe it,’ he said tensely; ‘and you’ll go into that place unprepared. But I’ll swear on the Book that there was some awful thing not of this earth creeping in the corner of the laboratory!’

Harborne, with his hand on the doorknob, turned undecidedly.

‘Which corner, Jamieson?’ he enquired.

‘The north-west, sir. I just caught one glimpse of it through the opening in the partition.’

‘How could you see it, since all the lights were out?’ Harborne asked.

The porter looked surprised. ‘That never occurred to me before,

sir,' he said; 'but I think it must have shone—something like the bottles of phosphorus, sir!'

'Come on!' said my friend. And without further ado we ran down-stairs into the Square.

A cheerful beam of light from the door of the lodge cut the black shadows of the archway as we approached, and served to show that the panic-stricken porter had left the wicket open. As we hurried through and sprinted across the quadrangle we were met by a cold, damp wind from the direction of the river. The night was intensely dark, and the bacteriological laboratory showed against the driving masses of inky cloud merely as a square patch of blackness.

'Here's the ladder,' said Harborne suddenly; and we both paused, undecided how to act.

'Try the door,' I suggested.

We rattled the handle of the door, but it was evidently locked, so that for a moment we were in a quandary. Harborne mounted the ladder and peered into the impenetrable shadows of the laboratory, but reported that there was nothing to be seen.

'We must burst the door in,' I said; 'it hasn't a very heavy lock.'

We accordingly applied our shoulders to the door, and gave a vigorous push. The lock yielded perceptibly. I then crashed my heel against the woodwork just over the keyhole, and the door flew open. We immediately detected a most peculiar odour.

'It's the broken bottles,' muttered Harborne. 'The switch is over against the wall by the bookcase; we must go straight for that.'

Cautiously we stepped into the darkness, and at the third or fourth step there was a crackling of glass underfoot. My boot slipped where some sticky substance lay, and I gave an involuntary shudder. A moment later I heard an exclamation of disgust.

'The wall is all wet!' said Harborne.

Then he found the electric buttons, and turned on the lights in rapid succession.

Heavens! How can I describe the picture revealed! Never have I witnessed such a scene of chaos, fearsome in its indications of an incredible struggle.

At first glance the place gave an impression of having been wantonly wrecked by a madman. Scarcely a jar or bottle remained upon the shelves, all being strewn in fragments upon the floor, which was simply swimming in the spilled spirits and preservatives. The

door of the case that had contained the specimens of bacilli was wide open, and the glass completely smashed. The priceless contents were presumably to be sought among the hundred and one objects lying in the liquid on the floor.

Most of the books from the shelf were distributed about the place as though they had been employed as missiles, and one huge volume was wedged up under the frosted glass of the skylight in the centre of the roof. In the wood of the partition a lancet was stuck, and a horribly suggestive streak linked it with a red pool upon the floor. A table was overturned, and the two lamps immediately above it were broken. Of Professor Brayme-Skepley there was no sign, but his hat and fur coat hung upon a hook where he had evidently placed them on entering.

For some time we surveyed the scene in silence. Then Harborne spoke.

‘What are these marks on the wall?’ he said. ‘They are still wet. And where is the Professor?’

The marks alluded to were a series of impressions in the shape of irregular rings passing from the pool on the floor to the four walls and up the walls to where the shadows of the lamp shades rendered it impossible to follow them. I pulled down a lamp, and turned the shade upwards, whereupon was revealed a thing that caused me a sudden nausea.

The marks extended right to the top of the wall, and could furthermore be distinguished upon the ceiling; and on the framework of the skylight was the reddish-brown impression of a human hand!

‘Drop it!’ said Harborne huskily. ‘If we stay here much longer we shall have no pluck left for looking behind the partition.’

The northern end of the laboratory is partitioned off to form a narrow apartment, which runs from side to side of the building, but is only some six feet in width. It is lined with shelves whereon are stored the greater part of the materials used in experiments, and is lighted by a square window at the Spindle Lane end, beneath which is a sink. The partition does not run flush up to the western wall, but only to within three feet of it, leaving an opening connecting the storeroom with the laboratory proper. There are two electric lamps in the place, one over the sink, and the other in the centre; but they cannot be turned on from the laboratory, the switch being behind the partition. Consequently the storeroom was in darkness, and, ignorant

of what awful thing might be lurking there, we yet, in justice to the missing man, had no alternative but to enter.

Harborne, whose pallor can have been no greater than my own, strode quickly up the laboratory, and passed through the opening in the partition. I following closely behind. I heard the click of the electric switch; but only one lamp became lighted. That over the sink was broken.

We were both, I think, anticipating some gruesome sight; but, singular to relate, the only abnormal circumstance that at first came under our notice was that of the broken lamp. A sudden draught of air, damp and cold, that set the other shade swinging drew our attention to the fact that the window had been pulled right away from its fastenings and lay flat down against the wall. Then Harborne detected the gruesome tracks right along the centre of the floor; and under the window we made a further discovery.

The wall all round the casement was smeared with blood, and the marks of a clutching hand showed in all directions.

‘Good heavens!’ I muttered; ‘this is horrible! It looks as though he had been dragged——’

There was a queer catch in Harborne’s voice as he answered: ‘We must get out a party to scour the marshes.’

‘Hark!’ I said. ‘Jamieson has been knocking some of them up. Here they come across the quad.’

A moment later an excited group was surveying the strange scene in the laboratory.

‘Clear out and get lanterns, you fellows!’ shouted Harborne. ‘His body has been dragged through the window!’

‘What’s this about a green spider?’ called several men.

‘Don’t ask me!’ said my friend. ‘I am inclined to agree with Jamieson that this is not the doing of a man. We must spread out and examine Spindle Lane and the surrounding country until we find the Professor’s body.’

During the remainder of that never-to-be-forgotten night a party which grew in number as the hours wore on to dawn scoured the entire countryside for miles round. Towards five o’clock the rain suddenly broke over the marshes, and drenched us all to the skin, so that it was a sorry gathering that returned at daybreak to Barminster. The local police had taken charge of the laboratory, and urgent messages had been sent off to Scotland Yard; but when the London

experts arrived on the scene we had nothing more to tell them than has already been recounted. Harborne, Doctor Davidson, and myself had devoted the whole of our attention to Spindle Lane and the immediate vicinity of the mysterious crime; but our exertions were not rewarded by the smallest discovery.

Such, then, were the extraordinary but inadequate data which were placed in the hands of the London investigators, and upon which they very naturally based a wholly erroneous theory.

This was the condition of affairs upon the night of the 16th, when Harborne suddenly marched into my rooms, and unceremoniously deposited a dripping leather case, bearing the initials J. B. S., in my fender.

‘Any news?’ I cried, springing up.

‘Not likely to be!’ he answered. ‘You might almost think these detectives have assumed all along that they are dealing with a case of the supernatural, and have, in consequence, overlooked certain clues which, had the circumstances been less bizarre, they would have instantly followed up.’

‘You have some theory, then? What is in this bag?’

There was that in Harborne’s manner which I could not altogether fathom as he evasively replied:

‘Leaving the bag for a moment, let me just place the facts before you as they really are, and not as they appear to be. I must confess that, last night, I was more than half inclined to agree with the detectives; and it is eminently probable that but for one thing I should now be in complete agreement with the other investigators—who believe that some huge and unknown insect entered the laboratory and bore away the Professor! When I left you and Doctor Davidson yesterday morning I immediately went in search of Jamieson, and found him—three-parts intoxicated. As you have probably heard, he has since become wholly so, and the detectives have utterly failed to extract a sane word from him. In this respect, therefore, I was first in the field; and from him I obtained the one additional clue needed. About one a.m.—an hour after Brayme-Skepley had entered the laboratory—Jamieson came to the door of his lodge, and saw a light in the end house of Spindle Lane.’

‘But surely the police have questioned all the tenants in Spindle Lane?’

'The end house is empty.'

'Have they examined it?'

'Certainly. But they merely did so as a matter of form: they had no *particular* reason for doing so. As a result they found nothing. What there was to find I had found before their arrival on the scene.'

'I am afraid I don't altogether follow.'

'Wait a minute. When I extracted from the porter the fact that he had seen a light in this house the entire affair immediately assumed a different aspect. The key to the mystery was in my hands. I went round into Spindle Lane, and surveyed the end house from the front. It was evidently empty, for the ground-floor windows were almost without glass.

'As I did not want to take anyone into my confidence at this stage of the proceedings it was impracticable to apply for the key, but upon passing round to the north I found that there was a back door with three stone steps leading up from the water's edge. I looked about for some means of gaining these steps—for I did not wish to excite attention by getting out a college boat. In the end I jumped for it. I got off badly from the muddy ground, for the rain was coming down in torrents, but, nevertheless, I landed on the bottom step—off which I promptly shot into the river!

'As I was already drenched to the skin this mattered little, and, notwithstanding my condition, a thrill of gratification warmed me on finding the door to be merely latched. Just as a party of six which had been scouring the east valley appeared upon the opposite bank I entered, and shut the door behind me.'

'Well—what then?'

'I went up to the room overlooking the laboratory—for, although no one seems to have attached any particular importance to the circumstance, from the window of this room you could, if the laboratory window were bigger, easily spring through.'

'And what did you find there?'

'The origin of the mysterious light.'

'Which was?'

'A match! Now, you will agree with me that green spiders do not use matches. Inference: That some human being had been in the room on the night of the murder, and had struck a match, which had been observed by Jamieson. There were also certain marks which considerably mystified me at first. On the thick grime of the window-

ledge—inside—it was evident that a board had rested. That is to say, a board had been, for some reason, placed across the room. The mortar had fallen off the wall in one corner, and here I found on the floor an impression as though a box had stood on end there—evidently to support the other extremity of the board. My next discovery was even more interesting. I found traces of finger marks—which, by the way, I removed before leaving—on the sill and around the inside of the window-frame. Someone had come in by the window!

‘But I remembered that, until I opened it to investigate, the window had been closed. Therefore the mysterious visitor had closed it behind him. Since his bloodstained finger marks testified to the state of his hands on entering, how had he opened the window from outside—a somewhat difficult operation—and yet left no traces upon the sash? for there were none. I assumed, by way of argument, that he had opened the window from the inside.

‘I had now constructed a hypothetical assassin who had got into the end house in Spindle Lane, entered the bacteriological laboratory, murdered the Professor, returned through the window, and struck a match—for there were traces of blood upon it. Why had he come back to the room, and by what means had he reached the window of the laboratory? It was upon subsequently examining the laboratory (for the local officer in charge, being an acquaintance, raised no objection to my doing so) that two points became clear. First: That the window could never have been opened from outside. Second: The probability that a plank had been placed across—the same plank that had been used for some other mysterious purpose!

‘Working, then, upon this theory, it immediately became evident that a plank could only have been placed in position from one of the windows. Here I had an enlightening inspiration. My assassin must have entered the house from the riverside, as I had done! How had he conveyed the plank into the place? A boat! You will mark that this was all pure supposition. Nevertheless, I determined, for the moment, to assume that a plank had been used.

‘It was with this idea before me that I made my examination of the laboratory, and the various facts, viewed in this new light, began to assume their proper places. The horrible marks, suggestive of an incredible assailant, which so horrified us when we first observed them, were less inexplicable when regarded as *intentional* and not

accidental! To consider the handmark upon the ceiling, for example, as incidental to a struggle for life, pointed to an opponent possessing attributes usually associated with insects; but it was the easiest thing in the world for a tall man, standing upon a table, to imprint such a mark! This startling revelation, taken in conjunction with the locked door and the impossibility of anyone entering the place from the quadrangle, brought me face to face with a plausible solution of the mystery.

'The elaborate nature of the affair pointed to premeditation, and the fact that the missing man had locked the door was most significant. Who could have known that he would be there upon this particular night, and why had he failed to unlock the door? For you will remember that the key was in the lock. Then, again, how did it come about that his cries for assistance did not arouse the people living in Spindle Lane?

'These ideas carried me to the second stage of my theory, and I assumed that a plank had been placed in position for the purpose of exit from, and not of entrance to, the laboratory! My final conclusion was as follows:

'Professor Brayme-Skepley entered the end house in Spindle Lane from a boat—which he obtained at Long's boathouse—bearing a plank and some kind of box or case. The plank he placed from window to window, the case upon the floor of the house in the Lane. He then returned to his boat, and landed beside the house. Entering the quadrangle, as we know, he went into the laboratory, and locked the door. His next proceeding was to smash everything breakable, wrench the window from its fastenings, and imprint the weird tracks and marks which proved so misleading. The book beneath the skylight and the lancet in the woodwork were the artistic touches of a man of genius. By this time it was close upon one o'clock, and, desirous of ascertaining whether his apparatus for bringing about the spider illusion was ready for instant use, he crawled from window to window. It was his match that Jamieson saw from the lodge door, and had Jamieson been a man of mettle the whole plot must have failed.

'He then, probably, grew very impatient whilst awaiting the coming of Jamieson, but he heard him ultimately, and lay in the light of the lamps as we have heard. All fell out as he had planned. Jamieson climbed on to the dust-box and looked into the laboratory; then he ran for the window ladder, as a reasoning mind would have easily

foreseen he would do. The Professor, during his absence, broke the lamps, climbed along his plank, and pulled it after him.'

I had listened with breathless interest so far, but I now broke in: 'How about the spider?'

'Perfectly simple!' answered Harborne. 'Allow me.'

He reached down for the leather case and unstrapped it. From within he took . . . a magic lantern!

'What!' I exclaimed. 'A magic lantern?'

'With cinematograph attachment! Here, you see, is the film—now improved by having been in the river. Some kind of South American spider, is it not?—beautifully coloured and on a black ground. The plank, supported upon the window-ledge and the upturned case, did duty for a table, and as Jamieson went up the ladder, and surveyed the place from the south-east, this was directed from the window of the end house across the few intervening yards of Spindle Lane and through the open laboratory window on to the north-west corner of the wall.

'The beam from the lens would be hidden by the partition and only the weird image visible from the porter's point of view—though had he mounted further up the ladder and glanced over the wall he must have observed the ray of light across the lane. The familiar illuminated circle, usually associated with such demonstrations, was ingeniously eliminated by having a *transparent* photograph on an *opaque* ground. The Professor then retreated to the back door and hauled up his boat by the painter—which he would, of course, have attached there. He pulled upstream to return his boat and to sink his apparatus. He was probably already disguised—his fur coat would have concealed this from Jamieson.'

I stared at Harborne in very considerable amazement.

'You are apparently surprised,' he said with a smile; 'but there is really nothing very remarkable in it all. I have not bored you with all the little details that led to the conclusion, nor related how I suffered a second ducking in leaving the end house; but my solution was no more than a plausible hypothesis until a happy inspiration, born of nothing more palpable than my own imaginings, led me to search for and find the cinematograph. You are about to ask where I found it: I answer, in the deep hole above Long's boat-house where Jimmy Baker made his big catch last summer. Brayme-Skepley, being a man of very high reasoning powers, would, I argued, deposit it *up* and not

downstream, knowing that the river would be dragged. He would furthermore put it in the hole, so that the current should not carry it below college.

‘There are, however, still one or two points that need clearing up. As to the blood, that offered no insurmountable difficulty to a physiologist; and, by Jove!’ . . . He suddenly plunged his hand into the case. . . . ‘This rubber ring from a soda-water bottle, ingeniously mounted upon a cane handle, accounts for the mysterious tracks. The point to which I particularly allude is the object of the Professor’s disappearance.’

‘I think,’ I said, ‘that I can offer a suggestion. He found, too late to withdraw, that his famous theory had a flaw in it, and could devise no less elaborate means of hiding the fact and at the same time of so destroying his apparatus as to leave no trace whereby his great reputation could be marred.’

‘That is my own idea,’ agreed Harborne. ‘For which reason I have carefully covered such very few tracks as he left, and have decided that this handsome case, with its tell-tale inscription—J. B. S.—must be destroyed. My conclusions are not for the world, which is at perfect liberty to believe that Professor Brayme-Skepley was carried off by an unclassified aptera!’

And so, somewhere or other, Professor Brayme-Skepley is pursuing his distinguished career under a new name, while Harborne allows the world to persist in its opinion.