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the
man
who
had
spiders

by . . . Roger Dee

There is probably more than one way of curing a tragic addiction to alcohol. But Adrian's way was as shuddery as a smiling Medusa.

WHEN Mr. Marcus, who had sold novelties to novelty shops for forty years and so had lost the capacity for astonishment at human unpredictability, returned to Maysville on the 8:04 train for his regular April week of selling, he went at once to Mrs. Ponder's boarding house and found Kitty playing Delibes on the living-room piano.

It was almost like coming home, Mr. Marcus thought with an uncharacteristic twinge of nostalgia. He paused for a moment in the doorway, suitcase and sample bag and his inevitable parcel of books in hand, to listen.

Tender was the word for Kitty, with her cool, sure touch on the Delibes theme and her clear blind eyes and her nestling of fair hair that just brushed her shoulders. And wasted, Mr. Marcus thought, with all the beauty and the talent of her shunted to obscurity in the dingy gentility of her mother's menage.

If he were thirty years younger—
Mr. Marcus cut the thought dead.
If you were thirty years younger,
Marcus, he told himself with dry

All too modestly, we feel, has Roger Dee tried to shrug off his undoubted kinship to Saki—that master of whimsical fantasy supreme—in this ebulliently breathtaking excursion into a realm as darkly mysterious as it is irresistibly enchanting. Adrian's spiders may make your flesh crawl. But we predict you'll like Adrian himself quite as much as did Mr. Marcus, and rejoice in his triumph.

cynicism, *you'd travel and sell novelties. Just as you did thirty years ago.*

Kitty sensed his presence with the near-tactile acuity of the blind and let the Delibes theme trail off in a random tinkle.

"It's only I, Miss Kitty," Mr. Marcus said. "The old man who sells loaded cigars to idiots."

She turned on the piano bench, pleased at his coming but nevertheless disappointed. "Oh, Mr. Marcus. I thought at first you were Adrian."

"Adrian?"

She laughed, a sound as light and clear as the vanished music. "Adrian Hall, our new boarder. He's only been with us a week."

A week. Seven days, Mr. Marcus thought, and her face could light up so at the sound of his step?

When Kitty smiled it was impossible to think that her eyes could not see him. "You're thinking that my interest is unusual, and you're quite right. But Adrian is an unusual man, Mr. Marcus."

"I'm sure he is," Mr. Marcus said cautiously. "I'll have to meet him."

The prospect pleased her. "You were always nice to me and Jay Kirby because I'm blind and Jay has fits, but you never noticed anyone else. You'll notice Adrian. You'll like him."

"I'm sure I shall," Mr. Marcus said. Her eagerness made him feel old and tired and somehow resentful. The books and bags grew

heavy in his hands. "I was just going upstairs to see if my room—"

Kitty's face lighted up. "Please wait," she begged. "I hear Adrian coming down now. We're going out for a drive, but I'd like you to meet him first."

The new boarder was perhaps thirty, hardly older than Kitty, and totally unremarkable. Shaking hands, Mr. Marcus cast back through the dry files of his memory and exhausted them without turning up a more ordinary face or figure. Moderately tall, he catalogued: average build, plain face, neutral hair, good teeth and mild blue eyes. The man's only distinction seemed to be a round, black mole on the left side of his neck, half hidden by his shirt collar. Politely, Mr. Marcus did not look at it twice.

It rather startled him to discover that Kitty had been right. He *did* like Adrian Hall, at first sight and without reservation.

Mr. Marcus was never quite sure what was said during the shaking of hands. He was too absorbed in trying to justify such uncharacteristic regard to do more than nod when Adrian excused himself to hold Kitty's light coat for her. He did retain a bizarre impression when the two of them went out, however, that the new boarder's mole had shifted from the side to the back of his neck and was watching him with an air of amiable curiosity.

The conviction left Mr. Marcus

more annoyed than disturbed. He'd have to see an oculist and have his lenses changed again, he told himself resignedly, as he climbed the stairs to his room.

Jay Kirby was waiting there for him, crouched against the farther wall like a fearful puppy hiding from the adult pack.

No other boarder in Mrs. Ponder's house would have dared violate Mr. Marcus' privacy, but Jay enjoyed the privilege of handicap and exercised it. Mr. Marcus sighed when he saw that Jay was suffering, or had just suffered, another of his periodic attacks. His corn-colored hair was wildly tousled, his blue eyes had fallen two octaves darker with stress and there was a wide smear of grime across one sweating cheek.

Jay was far too badly shaken to bother with greetings. "You got to do something about this Adrian Hall," he blurted. "Mr. Marcus, he's got *spiders*."

Mr. Marcus found the proposition as repellent as it was improbable. Still, the turn of Jay's latest fantasy intrigued him. Large spiders or small, he wondered, gray or black, poisonous or innocuous, caged or—

"Spiders?" He put his books and bags on the bed. "In his room, you mean?"

Jay denied it violently. "On *bim*."

Mr. Marcus wondered with some bitterness if nations would ever outgrow their penchant for expe-

dient wars that left men broken as Jay Kirby was broken. Left alone Jay would have been a pleasant young man and a first-rate musician, but with the spirit of him maimed and trembling like a frightened child's at the edge of nightmare—

Mr. Marcus opened his suitcase. "I brought you a record, Jay—something just released. A New Orleans stomp, the music-shop man said, with an alto sax that—"

Jay came across the room and clutched his arm, towering over him. "I didn't shuck my wig this time, Mr. Marcus, honest. I really saw this. The guy had his clothes off, and he was all over spiders."

Mr. Marcus felt a touch of chill. Jay had been committed twice before coming to rest at Mrs. Ponder's; if he were sent away again, it might be for good.

"Sit down," Mr. Marcus said. He sat down himself, on the room's one chair. "Tell me about it, Jay, and from the beginning."

Jay sat on the bed, and rose, and sat again. "It'd be all right if he'd keep them to himself," he said. "I wouldn't mind that because I *like* him. It's Miss Kitty I'm worried about."

"Miss Kitty?"

"Everybody likes Adrian, Mr. Marcus, but Miss Kitty's in love with him. How'll she feel when she finds out he's got spiders?"

Mr. Marcus nodded gravely. "I can understand your concern. But Miss Kitty is blind, Jay. How can she find out?"

"I thought you'd see that right off," Jay said, disappointed. "She'll know when they get married, won't she? She'll *have* to know."

Mr. Marcus permitted himself a small shudder. Jay had outdone himself this time.

"You saw these spiders, you said," he reminded. "Where, and when?"

Jay got up and paced restlessly, limping. "Half an hour ago, when Adrian went up to shower and dress for his date with Miss Kitty. I was out on the porch roof, tightening a loose bathroom shutter I'd promised to fix for Mrs. Ponder, and—"

"You spied on him, Jay? In the *bathroom*?"

"I didn't mean to," Jay said defensively. "But I couldn't look away after I saw the spiders. Could you?" He turned a stricken face to Mr. Marcus. "Mr. Marcus, he was all covered with them until he stepped into the shower. Then he held up a towel and they jumped on it to keep dry."

"I see," Mr. Marcus said. "And when he came out?"

"He dried himself off," Jay said. "And they jumped on again." He began to tremble with the violence of imminent seizure. "What am I going to do, Mr. Marcus? I like Adrian, but I like Miss Kitty, too. I can't let him—"

Mr. Marcus rose hastily and led him to his room down the hall. "You won't have to do anything," he promised before he left Jay to

have his fit in privacy. "Trust me, Jay. I'll take care of it."

It was not until later, when he had settled himself in his own room to a volume of Saki's inhumanly perfect short stories, that he remembered the new boarder's peregrinating mole.

"Can't happen outside fiction," he assured himself. "Tricks of the eyes, or else the fellow has two moles."

But his eyesight was disturbingly good when he went down to breakfast next morning at seven and found himself seated beside Adrian Hall. Adrian was neatly dressed for work. He was a newspaper reporter, it developed, and was thinking seriously of launching a weekly of his own in Maysville—and he was every whit as likeable as he had been on the night before.

But not as unremarkable. This morning, he had no moles at all.

FORTY YEARS of selling novelties and reading books had not prepared Mr. Marcus for the role of detective that was thrust upon him, but it had given him a certain resourcefulness. Between stock-taking calls at local shops during the day he made discreet inquiries, and by nightfall had amassed a considerable *array* of fact and opinion.

The opinion was unfailingly enthusiastic. Never, Mr. Marcus thought, had a man been so instantly and universally liked in a town as small and insular as Maysville. Adrian Hall could have bor-

rowed money from any bank, had any job or married any girl in the community.

What could make so plain a man so prepossessing Mr. Marcus could not imagine. He was certain only that he liked Mrs. Ponder's new boarder more than he had ever liked anyone in his life, and that he felt not only uncomfortable but downright guilty in spying out his personal affairs.

Actual fact was harder to arrive at. Adrian Hall had come from Kansas City, some two hundred miles distant. He was a good newspaperman and Gus Willis, who operated the Maysville *Bugler*, had liked him well enough—as who hadn't?—to hire him on sight. He was sober, industrious, efficient and considerate.

No one but Jay Kirby and Mr. Marcus seemed to suspect that he harbored spiders under his shirt. And Mr. Marcus, returning from his first day of selling and inquiry to find Adrian singing *The Rose of Tralee* with Kitty at the piano, found that repellent idea hard to believe.

Until, at supper again, he happened to look up quickly from his plate and discovered that the new boarder's elusive mole had returned. Mr. Marcus blinked and—he was quite positive, this time—it blinked genially back at him.

The conviction so unnerved him that he closed his eyes to defend his composure. When he opened them again the mole had gone,

together with Mr. Marcus' lost appetite.

Mr. Marcus excused himself from table and went upstairs to his room. As he had expected, Jay Kirby was waiting for him again.

"Did you tell him?" Jay demanded.

Mr. Marcus blinked, remembered the mole that had just blinked back at him, and shuddered. "Did I tell what to whom?"

"Adrian," Jay said. "Didn't you tell him yet to get lost? How're we going to keep him away from Miss Kitty unless we threaten to expose him?"

"I couldn't do that," Mr. Marcus said. "I like him too well."

"So do I," Jay said. "Damn him."

Mr. Marcus went over the possibilities again and found nothing of promise.

"No one would believe us even if we tried to expose him," he concluded. "We wouldn't believe in his spiders ourselves if we hadn't seen them."

Jay began to sweat. "What are we going to do, Mr. Marcus? We can't brace Adrian because we like him too much, and we can't tell Miss Kitty what's wrong with him. How are we going to keep them from getting married?"

It was a formidable question. Mr. Marcus evaded it by posing one of his own.

"How do you know they'll be married, Jay? Has any announcement been made?"

"Not yet," Jay said. "But there will be."

Mr. Marcus sighed. "Then I'm afraid we're stumped. I wish we knew more about him."

A new avenue of approach occurred to him then, but Jay anticipated the inspiration. "You could find out something about him in Kansas City," Jay said. "He was a newspaper reporter there once, wasn't he?"

Mr. Marcus could not drop his selling—he had only two days left now before he must move downstate toward St. Louis—and go to Kansas City, but he could pursue his investigation by proxy. Providentially, he had a friend on the staff of the Kansas City *Star* who might do his leg work for him.

"It seems our last hope," Mr. Marcus said. "I'll make the call now."

He preferred not to use the house telephone because of its several extensions, and the nearest booth stood in a corner of the neighborhood drugstore. Mr. Marcus went out and made his call, received his Kansas City friend's promise to do what he could, and returned to Mrs. Ponder's boarding house.

He found a small party in progress, with a beaming Mrs. Ponder and an assorted handful of her boarders gathered round Adrian Hall and Kitty. Lemonade flowed freely and an air of rejoicing prevailed.

"Congratulate me, Mr. Marcus,"

Kitty cried. "Adrian and I are going to be married."

Mr. Marcus congratulated them both with deepest sincerity. His scalp prickled only once during his well-wishings, when one of Adrian's—moles?—crept out of its shirt-collar, just below the Adam's apple this time, and peered at him complacently.

"God bless you both," Mr. Marcus finished, and fled upstairs.

But his room, for once, was not sanctuary.

For the first time in his life his books failed to sustain him and he felt truly alone and impotent, caught vicariously in exactly the sort of emotional muddle he had avoided so religiously. There was not even Jay Kirby to lean on in his extremity. Jay had heard the news of Kitty's engagement during Mr. Marcus' brief absence and had given way under the strain, suffering another of his fits in his own room.

Mrs. Ponder's tapping brought Mr. Marcus out of his funk, if briefly. "Telephone call for you," she said. "From Kansas City."

Mr. Marcus, knowing that Mrs. Ponder would eavesdrop if he used the upper hallway extension, took the call downstairs. It was his friend of the *Star*.

"Got the dirt you wanted right here in the office," his friend said cheerfully. "A question here, a phone call there, and it's wrapped up."

He gave his information tersely.

"The guy's a bum, Marcus. He's been thrown off every paper in town for drinking—even Alcoholics Anonymous finally wrote him off as a lost cause."

Mr. Marcus said nothing. There were no words for what he felt.

"Wasn't ever vicious," his friend said. "He was just one of those poor fish with a twist, an uncontrollable drinker. Sponged hand-outs and probably stole a little on his bad days, but never robbed any banks. What's he doing up there—more of the usual?"

Mr. Marcus found his voice. "Not at all. This must be a different Adrian Hall altogether."

But it wasn't. Mr. Marcus discovered that when he went upstairs again and found Adrian waiting for him by the upper hallway extension.

"I came up and listened in," Adrian said. "I had an idea that you were checking on me, Mr. Marcus. When Mrs. Ponder told us you had a call from Kansas City, I was sure of it."

"I had to do it," Mr. Marcus said. "Once Jay had told me about your spiders, I had no choice."

Adrian took Mr. Marcus' arm and led him away down the hall. Mr. Marcus went along unprotestingly, numb with disbelief at his own composure. It was downright frightening, he thought, to find himself so unfrightened.

Adrian's room was much like Mr. Marcus' own, or like any other in the Ponder house. Adrian seated

Mr. Marcus on his one chair and himself on the bed, and they measured each other equably over the flimsy expanse of Adrian's writing-table.

In any decent piece of fiction, Mr. Marcus thought, there must be some element of suspense; in fiction running to such a situation as this, even of outright horror. But somehow, being dragged to the very lair of the monster he had set out to scotch brought him no touch of uneasiness. He felt sympathetic rather than fearful, and he liked Adrian Hall more, if that were possible, than ever.

"I'm really glad you unmasked me," Adrian said. "I need help, Mr. Marcus. I need help more than I ever needed it in my life."

"I'll do anything within my power," Mr. Marcus promised. "But I'm equally interested in helping Kitty, else I wouldn't have bothered with your past at all . . . Your problem is that you can't keep your spiders and marry Kitty too, isn't it?"

Adrian nodded. "It wouldn't work. Not because Kitty might object to them, for she wouldn't—they're not really offensive, and it's no fault of their own that they're here—but because a honeymoon without privacy is no honeymoon at all. My friends are quite intelligent, not to mention inquisitive, and keeping them wouldn't be fair to either Kitty or myself."

"You could get rid of them."

"That wouldn't be fair to *them*,"

Adrian said. "And since I'm responsible for their being here, and they're responsible for my reformation—"

He broke off apologetically. "It would be better if I told you about it from the beginning, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Mr. Marcus agreed, and settled himself to listen.

"First," Adrian said, "what your friend of the *Star* told you is perfectly true. I drank and scrounged quarters on the street and slept in gutters, not because I liked it but because I couldn't stop doing it any more than poor Jay Kirby can stop having fits. Until I got help, that is.

"I used to have the shakes regularly, like any other confirmed alcoholic. The d.t.'s can be pretty awful, you know, and my personal cross was to wake up from a binge and imagine myself all covered with spiders. It happened so many times that I lost count, and usually it meant several days in a hospital ward before I recovered.

"But one particular morning I woke up with spiders that wouldn't go away. They were real, though they weren't spiders at all, and they were anything but the horrors I'd dreamed of. They were such incredibly pleasant creatures—whatever they were, and are—that just being associated so closely with them made a new man of me overnight. I was perfectly happy until I came here and met Kitty."

"I can see they're not common or garden variety Arachnida," Mr.

Marcus said. He could with justification, for two of them had perched on the rim of Adrian's collar and were observing him with a bland good-nature impossible to doubt. "You've no idea what they really are?"

"Not the faintest," Adrian said. "I'm not going to quote *Hamlet*, but a great many things happen every day in the world that no one understands. Personally, I think they were drawn here from some other plane or dimension by the strength of my obsession. I can't be sure of that because I can't talk to them, but I do feel that I'm responsible for them. And they've done so much for me that I can't just brush them off. It would be inhuman."

"You're right, of course," Mr. Marcus agreed. "But on the other hand, neither can you brush off Kitty. You're in the position of the man who couldn't go but couldn't stay."

Adrian nodded unhappily. "There you have it. Mr. Marcus, what am I going to do?"

But Mr. Marcus, unlike the Saki he had been reading, had no instant and adequate answer.

And, since the next day was his last in Maysville for the season and he could not linger on in unemployment at Mrs. Ponder's even to help the couple who had become his dearest friends, he was forced to take the 8:04 to St. Louis without having discovered any solution to Adrian's problem.

It was a shame, Mr. Marcus thought when he was somewhere in the neighborhood of Hannibal, Missouri, that such things never seem to work out in everyday life as conveniently as they do in fiction. It was entirely possible that he might never learn the outcome of Adrian's problem, and at best he had a year to wait.

MR. MARCUS, at the end of his forty-first year of selling novelties to novelty shops, returned again to Maysville. But not immediately to Mrs. Ponder's boarding house.

A prosperously-dressed Adrian met him at the station with a conservative but handsome new station wagon. With Adrian was Kitty, still blind but lovelier than ever, and in Kitty's arms gurgled their firstborn, a boy named Marcus Jay Hall.

On their way to Mrs. Ponder's they passed first the offices of the Maysville *Bugler*, of which Adrian was now owner, and then the Hall's newly-financed home. A little later Adrian slowed the car to give Mr. Marcus a close look at a neighborhood billboard advertising the ex-

cellence of Maysville's own dance band, a five-piece combo of which Jay Kirby seemed to be both originator and conductor. Jay's face, smiling and assured and with no trace of its old crippling tension, took up a large part of the poster. And a handsome face it was.

"Jay is the most popular man in Maysville nowadays," Adrian explained. "He could be mayor if he liked, but he'd rather play the saxophone."

A year had dulled Mr. Marcus' perception not at all. "You mean?" he said.

"Just so," Adrian agreed. "It worked out very well, after all. The worst of problems have a way of settling themselves without too much help, have you noticed? It was only a couple of nights after you left that Jay had another of his attacks and woke up with the conviction that he was covered with spiders. And he was, and everyone has been quite happy since."

It was a fair enough ending, Mr. Marcus granted, but his private opinion was that it lacked imagination. Saki, he felt sure, would have handled it better.

