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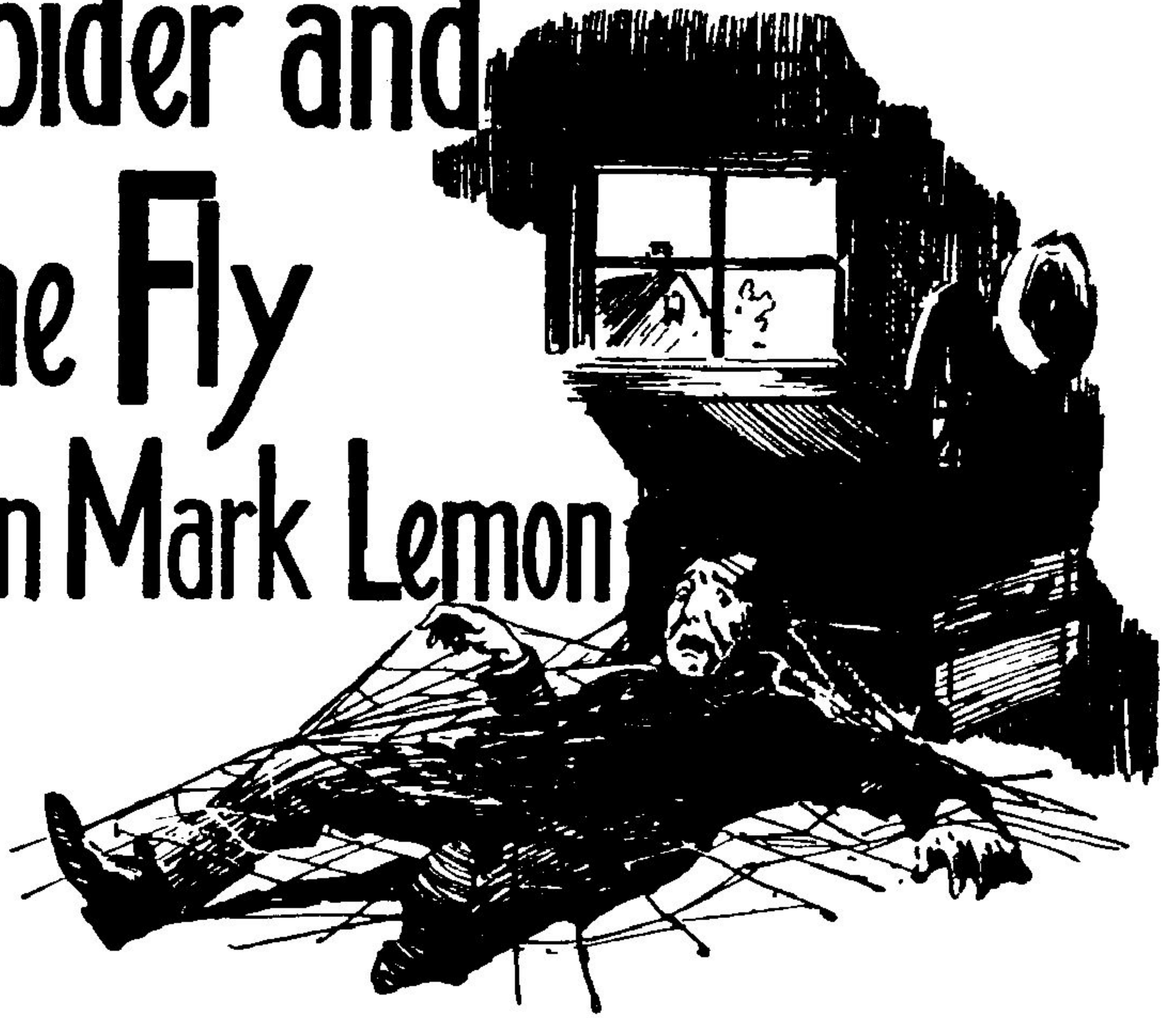
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The Spider and the Fly

By
Don Mark Lemon



A SLIGHT scream came from the adjoining room, and Robert Neil dropped the book that he was reading and hurried through the doorway. He found his wife with her eyes fixed in alarm upon her left hand, which she held out at some distance from her body.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I've been bitten!"

"Bitten, Julia! By what?"

"A dreadful black spider!"

Neil took his wife's hand in his and looked at it; there was a slight, angry spot upon the palm. He kissed the hand gently, then placed his arm about his wife. "Come, let's put it in hot water to scatter the inflammation, and you will be all right in five minutes."

"But, dear, it was such a horrid big black spider!" said the wife, after her injured hand had been held a while in hot water, then wrapped with a soft strip of linen.

"Nonsense, Julia! Only a common house spider."

"Anyway, dear," maintained the wife, "it wasn't a common spider, for just before it bit me I heard it singing on the wall."

"Singing!"

"Yes, singing."

"Nonsense, sweetheart!"

"But, dearie, it was singing—or making a kind of singing noise. At first I thought that it had caught a fly in its web, and the singing was caused by the fly beating its wings, but I soon found there was no fly in the web and it was the spider that was making the strange singing noise. Then the horrid thing leaped on my hand and bit me!"

Robert Neil took the injured hand in his own and covered the bandage with kisses, and either the kisses or his laughing assurance satisfied his wife, for she returned to her household duties and soon had forgotten the incident of the spider's bite.

But Neil searched along the wall of the room until he found a large black

spider sitting in the heart of its web, singing. He dispatched the creature, making a purple spot on the wall, which he partially erased with his handkerchief. He then burned the handkerchief.

A week passed and husband and wife had forgotten about the spider bite, when the incident was suddenly recalled to Robert Neil upon hearing his wife singing. It was a foreign song, yet that was no reason why the peculiar whistling-singing note of the black spider should again and again repeat itself in the voice of the sweet singer in the adjoining room.

Neil called himself a fool for his fancies, yet a moment later he entered his wife's chamber and begged her to sing him an English song. He didn't like the air that she had been performing. It failed to do justice to her voice.

The young wife complied, and stooping to kiss her hair, Neil discovered a large black spider crouching in the brilliant jet folds. Shudderingly, but without informing his wife of the fact, he managed to knock the hairy creature to the floor and tread upon it. Then he went about the house, from room to room and press to press, hunting for spiders. Large black spiders that sat in the heart of their webs, and sang. But he found none.

At least not for a week. Then a black spider appeared suddenly on the carpet and leaped along and ran up the dress of his wife, lodging itself in her dark hair. His wife was seated at the piano, singing.

Robert Neil understood. It was the note that had come into his wife's voice—that peculiar whistling-singing note—that had attracted the spider to her person. To the black, hairy creature his wife was one of its own kind.

The next morning, coming softly into the parlor, Neil found his wife seated by the window with her ear bent over a handkerchief that lay upon a

small music rack. She was intently listening to something. What could it be? He approached unobserved and looked over her shoulder. There was a fly trapped beneath the handkerchief and his wife was listening to the buzzing of its wings.

Robert Neil was a brave man, but as he crept from the room and stole away across the fields his knees shook under him like those of a sick child.

When he returned to his home an hour later he found his wife seated on the porch with a book in her lap and her face greatly animated. He looked into the sweet eyes that greeted him and called himself a fool and a coward. Heaven had not condemned this fair young spirit to any such horrible doom as he feared!

He kissed the lifted face and without looking into the folds of the heavy jet hair for something black and hideous, sat down beside his wife. Then she began to jest at him.

"Dearie," she said, "I wish you were fat. I like fat men."

"Why, Julia, you are growing quite material!"

"No, dearie! But I do wish you were fatter. Do you remember Harry Hall?"

Neil did, and now he recalled how his wife had once compared the man to a big bottlefly. The recollection brought him to his feet. Flies and spiders!

"Why, dearie, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

The man resumed his seat and, bracing himself in his chair, attempted to smile. "'Twas nothing, Julia. I thought I heard some one at the gate."

Julia Neil looked toward the gate and wondered that her husband should have fancied that some one was coming. Then, after a moment's brooding, she arose and placed her arm about her husband.

"Dearie, I want something."

"Well, Julia, what is it?"

"You won't laugh?"

"Laugh? Nonsense!"

"Well, dearie, I want a hammock."

"A hammock?"

"Yes, a hammock."

"Very well! Anything else?"

"No, that's all."

The next morning Neil returned from the village with a large hammock, which he swung on the porch in the cool shade of the trellised morning-glories that climbed the house wall. An hour later he discovered that the hammock was gone.

He immediately questioned the two servants, but they protested that they had not taken his purchase. He then thought to question his wife, but why should she have removed the hammock? No! some tramp had stolen it.

He soon returned from the village with a second hammock, which he also swung on the porch. Then he concealed himself behind the summer-house and watched.

In a few minutes his wife came out upon the porch and, discovering the second hammock, untied the ropes and took it into the house. Neil waited a little while, then hastened indoors. Whistling boisterously, he went from room to room, searching; but he could not find the hammock. Neither could he find his wife. He stopped whistling and reflected. The attic! Ah! his wife had gone up there. He would go up and help her hang the thing. He went to the head of the stairs but found the attic door locked. He listened. Some one was moving about within the attic room, busily engaged—and singing.

His wife was hanging up the hammock! The two hammocks! Ah! she was going to have a hammock party up there in the attic, and when everything was ready, she would send out invitations——

"Oh, God!" sobbed the man, and,

turning, he went down the stairs, out of the house into the wide fields.

It was night when he returned. The servants had left a lighted lamp in the sitting room and gone off to the village. He blew out the light and sat down in the dark, waiting for his wife to come to him.

Suddenly a sound reached his ears from somewhere above—a strange half-singing, half-whistling sound that momentarily grew louder. He tried to rise from his chair, but failed. Again he tried to rise, and this time succeeded. He took a step forward in the dark and not falling, took another. Then he rushed headlong through the doorway, up the attic flight of stairs, and burst into the attic room.

It was pitch dark up there and he could see nothing, and hear nothing now, for his sudden entry had disturbed the occupant of the room.

He stood very still and listened. Suddenly the weird singing was resumed, very softly at first, but growing louder and more distinct, seemed to charm him and leave him powerless to move.

Another sound now reached his ear—the sound of something running softly about him, that wound his rigid form in a thousand strands of some material substance, which, as it bound him closer and closer, adhered to his hands and clothing as if covered with glue.

His eyes had grown more accustomed to the dark and as this last sound ceased, the white blur about him resolved itself into a network of many glue-covered cords that bound him rigid and helpless, while crouching in a hammock swung in a far corner of the attic was a thing with two luminous eyes set in a woman's face, that watched him and waited, and now drew nearer and nearer, noiseless as a spider that approaches a fly caught fast in its web.