

THE SPIDER

By ARTHUR EDWARDS CHAPMAN

"I TELL you, Ron, it was queer—uncanny!"

My friend, Ronald Titherington, laughed and weighed the little golden spider in his palm.

"You don't mean to suggest, do you," he replied, "that this little mass of gold and carbon is capable of exercising control over the human will? The thing is valuable, I'll grant you—those diamond eyes must be worth at least a couple of hundred apiece—but as for anything else—absurd!"

I got up and stood with my back to the fireplace, somewhat piqued at my companion's incredulity.

"You can believe it or not, Ron," I said, "but I do most certainly suggest that such a thing happened. What did I go to the sale for? Not to purchase

that comparatively insignificant ornament, you must agree. No, I went to secure for my collection those things that would make it the finest in the country—and I got them.

"But I tell you, Ron, that when that little spider was put up I felt a strange desire come over me, an overpowering determination to possess the thing. I don't know why it should have been so; I'm not going to try to explain it. Beside those other antiques it was as nothing, and yet I would willingly at that moment have exchanged them all for it. The diamond eyes of the thing were magnetic; they impelled me even against my mind's ruling. I say again it was uncanny!"

Titherington listened to my rather heated recital with a quiet smile on his

thin lips, and taking a cigarette from his case lit it thoughtfully.

"Let me see," he mused slowly as though speaking to himself. "Wasn't this same spider found by the body of the late Sir Nicholas Goldeby when he



was discovered dead under such mysterious circumstances some months ago?"

"Yes," I agreed. "He had brought it from the East and the police held it to be a sacred jewel, and that Sir Nicholas had met his death at the hands of some Hindu fanatics who sought to return it to the despoiled temple."

"Ah!" cried Titherington suddenly, seeming mightily pleased with himself. "So you remember all that, do you?"

"Of course," I said, surprised. "Why not, seeing that I had so great an interest in the dead man's collection?"

"Then don't you think," he said deliberately, "that it was the very happenings associated with the spider that caused you to act as you did? In other words, wasn't it a case of intensely heightened imagination?"

"You mean it was my vivid recollection of the facts connected with the case that made me desire to possess the thing, and that I attributed to the spider a power which really was the outcome of my own eagerness?" I shook my head unconvinced.

"Exactly. Look here, Alan, the facts fit together like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Didn't you say a dark foreign man bid against you very heavily for the jewel, and when you outbid him he implored you to let him have it? Well, what is more natural than that the guardians of the jewel, having failed to obtain it by force, should seek to take advantage of this opportunity to secure it? It seems to me, Alan, that you have need to watch against human rather than supernatural powers."

"Then you think that the foreigner might try to steal the spider from me?"

"Yes," Titherington replied, getting up and stretching himself. "Take my advice and keep your eye on the thing. . . . Well, I'm off to bed; it's eleven o'clock. Good-night, old man."

I bade him good-night, and after he had gone lit another cigarette and sat before the dying fire for a final smoke, casting my thoughts back over the strange events of the day.

FOR all my friend's reasoning I was not convinced. There was something strange about that golden spider, I was sure.

I gazed at it where it rested upon a little china-cabinet by the window, and tried to read some signs of hidden force in those great diamond eyes. But no, the thing was ordinary enough; simply a mass of gold and carbon as Titherington had said.

Throwing the stump of my cigarette into the fireplace I rose slowly and

switched off the light. Then I retired, feeling well pleased with myself and the world in general as the result of my day's work, and wishing nothing better than to yield myself to the goddess of Sleep.

But for once that deity, usually so quick to respond to my call, failed to smile favorably upon me, and I turned restlessly in my bed, listening to the faint rustling of leaves outside the window and the multitudinous other sounds that materialize in so mysterious a manner in the fancy of the wakeful.

In the hall below the great clock chimed the half of eleven, and I found myself counting its ponderous ticks and picturing the massive pendulum swinging, always swinging, slowly, monotonously in its glass prison. *Tick-lock, tick-tock*, it went, forcing itself on me with such insistence that presently I could no longer hear it through the very intensity of my listening.

Once more I turned on my left side and faced the window which was wide open, the night being a warm one. The moon had risen and a narrow beam of light shone between the curtains, painting a silvery path along the carpet to the door, so that I was able mentally to trace the grotesque forms of impossible flowers twining their way through Greek keys that failed to unlock the door of the Temple of Sleep.

Ding-dong — Ding-dong — Ding-dong chimed the never-sleeping sentinel, and as I listened to the knell of the quarter which had passed I became suddenly conscious of a new sound of which I had not been aware before and which I could not reconcile with any known cause. It was a strange muffled drumming—something like the ticking of a watch within a metal cylinder. . . .

Of course! It was the ticking of my own watch hung upon the bedrail which acted as a sounding-board for it! I smiled to myself as the utter simplicity of the explanation came to me and raised my head confidently to confirm my reasoning.

The watch had stopped at twenty-five minutes past eleven!

Strange. What could it have been? I listened as I propped myself upon my elbow, but now I could not hear it. It must have been fancy, I thought, and lay down again, but barely had my head touched the pillow than *thump!—thump!—thump!* came the noise with mechanical regularity. And then, with stunning force, the solution hurled itself at me as I pressed a hand against my breast.

It was the beating of my own heart!

A hot, clammy wave passed over my body at this realization; an unreasoning, nervous dread took possession of me and I knew that I was afraid, horribly afraid of something which had no tangible existence.

As I struggled with this strange feeling and called myself a fool for permitting fears of so childish a nature to overcome me, I saw something that caused my heart to give a great leap and my blood to chill in my veins.

Framed in the doorway, glaring at me from the impenetrable blackness of the corridor beyond, were two large unblinking eyes, shining in the reflected light like the head-lamps of a motor, *gleaming like a couple of immense diamonds*. Then, as I gazed in unbounded horror at the glittering eyes, a great hairy leg crept slowly, hesitatingly into the silver beam, feeling the ground before it in wavering uncertainty. Presently this was joined by another and yet a third, hovering in mid-air for a few seconds before they came to rest on the carpet.

I tried to turn my head away in fearful anticipation of what was to come, but I could not. There was something magnetic, uncanny about those diamond eyes that *impelled me even against my mind's ruling*. And as I sat helplessly, bound with fetters of unspeakable dread, the wavering legs were followed by a fearsome skull-like head armed with a pair of great pincer fangs that opened and closed continuously with a rasping, clicking sound which caused my very hair to bristle, and presently the thing stood revealed in its hideous, loathsome entirety.

There it was, ruddy-golden in the moonlight, evil, horrible, like some huge hairy bear.

Merciful heaven! It was the spider!

AND it was coming toward me with those hesitating, creeping steps, slowly, noiselessly. I tried to cry out, but my tongue refused to articulate; I would have leaped from the bed and fled before this nightmare, but I could not move. That sinister, magnetic eye held me motionless, and I groaned inwardly with indescribable anguish, while the hot perspiration stood in beads on my forehead.

Nearer and nearer it drew. Its outstretched legs felt the coverlet, they brushed my shrinking body. Horror! They enfolded me in an ever-tightening embrace.

I stared into those awful gleaming orbs that seemed to gloat over my helplessness, and for a tense moment the thing remained motionless.

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THE SPIDER

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Below the clock struck the hour of twelve.

There was a loud, painful buzzing in my head.

Then the spell seemed to fall from me, and as the great fangs of the thing groped for my throat I gave a loud cry and hurled myself with the blind madness of despair at the foul, hairy shape, falling to the carpeted floor locked in that relentless embrace.

I have but a hazy recollection of what occurred next—it seemed that I was mad. I struggled and kicked frantically in my futile efforts to avoid those fearsome fangs that were gripping my bared throat. Perhaps I screamed. . . .

I faintly remember my outstretched hand touching something that was cold—solid, and a sharp, thrilling sense of exultation passed through me as I rained wild blows, sickening, crunching blows, on the hideous, grinning head. . . . A loathsome, putrid mass oozed out. . . . the hairy legs slackened and grew rigid. . . . My madness spent, I rolled over on the floor. . . .

My stomach revolted. I was nauseated, sickened. . . . I swooned. . . .

They found me lying apparently lifeless on the floor, and firmly grasped in my hand a heavy iron poker.

Close by, its diamond eyes crushed to powder and battered almost beyond recognition lay the Golden Spider!

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