

Strange STORIES

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Spider Woman

By MARIA MORAVSKY

Author of "Ten Thousand Dollar Sleep," "The Castle of Tamara," etc.



She advanced toward him, her arms outstretched

*Dread Are the Ways of Vengeance, but None More
So Than the Evil Schemings of Madam Remizova!*

THEY were weird spiders, no two alike. Madam Remizova supplied them to the studios. "Hm-m—twenty-seven assorted spiders for *Dracula Returns*."

She read and re-read the order, frowning. Her eyebrows were like twisted leeches.

She looked around the cavelike spiderery. Those two blotched, monstrous ones—they would look well on a web spun across an unused doorway. Inaudibly, she murmured their names in Russian. Then she went on a tour of inspection, surveying the insects through her lorgnette.

Every detail seemed obnoxiously clear. The velvetlike bodies, the queer markings, the hoary multiple legs.

"*Horosho*," she congratulated herself for the work well done.

She took her work in dead earnest, and was never irritated when the moving picture people called her, grinning, the "embalmer of spiders" or simply "that spider woman."

"Pick up those twenty-four in a row," Madam Remizova ordered Dunia, her Russian menial, the bland-faced halfwit with pale eyes set as widely as that of a hare. "I'll have to produce an especially big one for the headliner."

She always included in her orders two or three spectacular giants. Big fat spiders with protuberant eyes and long legs, unusual either in shape or color, like that dotted monster found on the protruding tongue of the hanged in Evers' book, or the Calvary spider with dull cross on its back, the poisonous insect feared so by the Poles.

Somehow, the movie actors, most superstitious folk in the professional world, believed that Madam Remizova could change the shapes of her "props" at will.

They spoke of selective breeding, of clever faking, but the unspoken opinion about her spiders made them avoid Madam Remizova's estate. An estate surrounded by unnaturally tall eucalyptus trees, with artificial spider caves and pools inhabited by giant, loudly croaking frogs.

"Those fantastic Hollywood thrill-makers delight in the bizarre," the spider woman sighed, sending her imagination along the tortuous, forbidden paths.

If she could give them a spider fit for *Dracula Returns*, matching a certain foreign actor's sinister ability in the rôle, the movie people might see fit to give the repulsive insert a close-up shot.

"Spiders by Madam Remizova"—what a good advertisement that would be!

The spider woman savored the possible credit. Yes, she must produce an unusual spider, even if she had to resort to those practices which at times

took the place of her deft fingers.

She put on her widow's weeds, which she had worn constantly for years, except in her laboratory. Here, rumor had it, she always entered unclothed, or wearing a black mesh of silk-net underwear. She looked very decorous in her tight dress of misty black foulard, with a yellowed brooch in the shape of a lopsided cross, as she walked now toward the general store in the Hollywood suburb. A store theatrically called "The Horn of Plenty."

Ironic customers had shortened the name to "Horn," and called the store owner "The Hornet." He had never been popular, in spite of his everlasting smile and the free cigars he dispensed on election days.

Loud rumors linked him constantly with loan sharks.

"Here comes the spider woman!" The man's barefooted houseboy ran from the dusty yard and hid himself behind the counter.

A heavy grunt greeted the boy's action.

"I told you, Ryan, not to employ child labor," the village sheriff spoke up, half in earnest, half in rebuke. He was buying a plug of tobacco and indulging in a chiding argument with the owner, as usual.

"That 'fraid cat boy gives even me the creeps, with the tales he spreads about some of your customers!"

RYAN, a portly and purple-faced man of uncertain age, bloated from too many drinks, went reluctantly to meet Madam Remizova.

"What can I do for you, lady?" he asked with his customary smirk.

The Russian woman looked at him quizzically.

"I would like a few words with you, in private. No hurry! I'll wait until the sheriff leaves. Do attend to your customer, please."

All the while the woman's slightly slanted bright eyes darted up and down his body, acting as a mental yardstick. Those looks disturbed even Ryan's rhinocerosous consciousness.

"She looks at me as if measuring me for a coffin," he thought uneasily, and a creepy feeling crawled up his

spine. But, always the business man, he pointed obligingly to a cubicle where he kept his safe.

"In that corner. Do sit down, Madam. Sheriff Corcoran is gone. Don't you hear his motorcycle roaring?"

Ryan pointed to the road which had swallowed his caustic customer in a cloud of dust.

"So close to Hollywood, and we still suffer from dust in Happy Valley," he muttered. "Now, if they elected me, we would have all the main roads oiled by now— Well, what is it you wanted to see me about?"

"It's about a loan." The spider woman talked rapidly, as if repeating a story learned by heart. "I know you charge twenty per cent—"

"Who told you? I—I never—"

"Never mind who. People here owe you money. They sent me and told me to keep it secret. I won't tell a living soul that you are a usurer, Mr. Ryan."

She said the last few words with relish. Frank contempt shone in her eyes.

"Sh! Sh!" he said nervously. "What security can you offer?"

"My Spider Farm, of course. You know it's free and clear."

After a few minutes of haggling over the details, she signed some innocently worded document. She waited discreetly at the counter while Ryan manipulated the heavy old-fashioned safe.

A few more minutes, and the money was in her bag.

"Remember, the payment falls due June thirteenth!" he admonished her.

"I'll pay you in full before that. But—you must come and collect it in person. I cannot be bothered walking down to your store all the way from the Sierras. My house is a good mile from here, and so is the post office; and my car is in hock—held by an insect like yourself!" She fairly spat the last words.

The usurer cringed, parted with her without a word. If he had to collect, he would, of course, do it personally. His business could not bear investigation.

Madam Remizova returned home, drank a glass of weak Russian tea with lemon and *varenie*, took a shower,

and sent her menial to the telegraph office with this message:

ATLAS STUDIOS.

WILL SEND SPIDERS PARCEL
POST JUNE THIRTEENTH.

MADAME REMIZOVA.

ON THE thirteenth of June a queer assortment of props was being chloroformed and packed into one of those small black coffinlike boxes which Madam Remizova made especially for her wares. One of her insects, big, succulent, with legs unusually long and thick for a spider, purple in color and repulsive in form, could not fit into the package. Without hesitation, she grabbed a pair of shears and snipped the end off its legs.

Blood spurted forth, real red blood unlike the fluid which circulates in spiders' bodies. The Russian menial looked on with awed face.

"Bring me the wax, quick!" her mistress ordered.

She dabbed at the spider's legs with a piece of waste which she immediately burned, then carried the insect to her laboratory desk. The servant was there already, melting the wax. When it was of the right consistency, Madam Remizova kneaded it as a sculptor would knead clay, and attached two lumps of it to the spider's mutilated extremities. Waving the insect to and fro, she waited for the wax to harden.

"Why, I thought he was quite dead—" she muttered to herself.

To make sure, she applied more chloroform to the spider's head. It twitched once and grew still.

"Serves you right!" the woman said placidly, then felt of the wax.

It was semi-hard now. She sculptured a semblance of spider's claws. Then, using tiny, almost invisible wire, she reinforced the waxy feet to the shortened legs.

The spider looked now even more grotesque than before.

"Here! Stop grimacing at me," Madam Remizova said to the menial, packing her handiwork with the other spiders. "Better look down the road and tell me who is coming!"

The girl ran out noiselessly and re-

turned, gasping. She made a few signs with her mobile hands.

"Hm-m— So soon," Madam Remizova muttered to herself, in answer to the mute girl's sign language.

Unperturbed except for the slight twitching of her sensuous mouth, the spider woman addressed the package. As she handed it to the still frightened girl, instructing her to take it to the village post office, a tall, leathery-faced man chugged up and dismounted from his motorcycle.

"Oh, Mr. Corcoran, delighted to see you!" Madam Remizova said with gushing, exaggerated cordiality.

"Sorry, lady, this is no social visit." Corcoran frowned at her outstretched hand. "Today I represent the law. Mr. Ryan has disappeared. I wonder if you—"

The spider woman's eyebrows twisted spasmodically, like disturbed leeches. Then her face cleared.

"Oh, you have nothing to worry about! He was here a short time ago, collecting—hm-m—something I borrowed from him. He is probably at the corner saloon."

THE sheriff shook his head. "No, he is not there. His wife saw him coming in this direction. His daughter followed him secretly right down here. He was seen entering your place, but never came out. Sorry, Mrs. Remizova, but you are under suspicion."

The Russian woman shrugged her frail, narrow shoulders.

"You may search the premises," she said placidly.

The search revealed nothing suspicious. Back in her reception room, Corcoran questioned her with skillfully veiled threats.

"No, you can't arrest me," Madam Remizova said. "I know your foxy tactics! You can't cook up any technical charge against me."

"And why not?" the sheriff asked, playing with the handcuffs at his belt.

"Better stop questioning me and go home," she said evasively. "Or you may overstay— Well, to be perfectly frank, this place is not healthy for your breed."

"So now you threaten me."

"No, I'm just warning you. Look out!"

The spider woman pointed to a small dark object at his elbow.

Corcoran started at first, then laughed grimly.

"One of your props! Why, that spider is dead."

"Don't be too sure, Sheriff."

Madam Remizova narrowed her eyes. Their look bored into his. Corcoran tried to avert his face, but his head grew dizzy. Things began to move around him, inanimate things. The desk grew into two desks, then three.

And on each desk there lay an inch-long dark spider.

"It's the dreaded black widow spider. Extremely poisonous," Madam Remizova said coolly.

As she said it, the spiders began to move. At first they crawled slowly, like half-drowned flies; then began to sprint, their long legs carrying them closer and closer to the sheriff's startled eyes.

"Call off your pests, you witch!" Corcoran cried, whipping out his gun. "Or else—"

Madam Remizova knew when she was defeated.

"I'll tell you where to look for Ryan. On the set of *Dracula Returns*. You may find him there tomorrow."

Sheriff Corcoran rushed at once to the blatantly new set. Carpenters were finishing it, stagehands spreading enormous artificial webs in the family tomb of Draculas. His deputies poked at the sawdust methodically, looked in all the corners, then shamefacedly reported failure to their chief.

"She said—tomorrow," Corcoran mused. "Hm-m—I must send some men to watch her property."

The shrubbery was alive that night with armed, crouching men. Madam Remizova serenely walked in her garden, whistling *Dark Eyes*, and eating small spiders cunningly made of chocolate.

Next day the police invaded the Atlas movie studio again. This time they did not need to search for long. In the far corner, by Dracula's coffin, there lay the horribly mutilated body of Ryan. Both his feet were cut off,

and the blood obviously stopped by hardened wax.

AS SHERIFF'S deputies carried the body out, they broke the clever artificial web spread over the main entrance. Its maker, a small, wiry man, cried out indignantly:

"Hey, can't you carry that spider out the side entrance? You're ruining my work!"

"You shouldn't call him names!" someone reproached him. "Don't you see the man is dead?"

"And good riddance! What was he if not a blood-sucking spider? Everybody knew him for a money lender—at twenty percent. He bled me, too."

"Oh, so that's how the land lies! You'd better come along with us!"

The frightened little man pleaded his innocence. He produced an iron-clad alibi.

As soon as they let him go, he cranked his prehistoric car and rushed over to Madam Remizova's.

"You overplayed your hand this time," he told her without any preliminaries.

"Josef, calm yourself. Sit down and have some tea."

The spider woman led him into her living room, dominated by a life-sized portrait in oils.

"Who is that?" the web-maker asked.

His hostess looked at the handsome, ineffectual face with large, somewhat puzzled eyes and round, unaggressive chin. The eyes seemed to follow her, a simple painter's trick.

"He was my husband. Money lenders ruined him," she sighed.

"I might have known," said her visitor.

For a long while neither of them said a word. The tea kettle began to whistle, as the water came to a boil.

"Reminds me of a samovar," Madam Remizova said reminiscently.

"You sold your silver one to the movies?"

"Yes. They wanted it for a Russian scene. But I really don't mind. It's lots of bother to prepare a samovar in real Russian style. Would you believe it—in the picture, the maid just pours boiling water into it!"

They both smiled at American ignorance in the matter of samovars and continued to converse about matters of long ago. Neither of them mentioned Ryan's corpse.

At the end of the visit, the little man stretched his right hand toward Madam Remizova, palm up.

"No, Josef! I won't pay you for your silence. You kept it for so long, you may keep it a while longer. Whatever made you—"

The two seemed to read each other's minds, conversing in their interrupted sentences and sighs.

"They cut my pay at the studios. Times are hard. I must have some additional income."

"And so you resort to blackmail."

Madam Remizova got up from her fake renaissance chair with dragon heads and clawing eagles carved in relief on its uncomfortable back. She quivered with rage, so that all the stylized beasts decorating that throne-like chair seemed angrily alive in the trembling aura of her fury.

"I guessed it the moment you came! Not only usurers are spiders."

SHE advanced toward him, her hands outstretched. Those plump hands grew thinner and darker every moment, changing their human shape.

"No!" the little man screamed, retreating with his mouth open in stark awe. "You can't do that to me!"

"Yes. You drank my tea. You have looked into my eyes. Look again!"

Against his will, the suddenly subdued man looked into a myriad of eyes which multiplied as quickly as ripples in stone-stirred water. After awhile, his hands and legs started changing, too, to bear an amazing resemblance to Madam Remizova's stage props.

When her servant came in, the half-wit saw a whirling cloud of dark dust, slowly settling down and resolving itself into a new spider web. The web weaved itself over the side entrance door. And in the middle of it there hung a small, thin, long-legged spider.

"Well, Dunia, don't stare as if you have never seen me at work!" her mistress snapped at her, then threw back her slightly disheveled head and laughed musically.

"And in his own web, too! *Smieshno!*"

The girl understood only the last word in Russian, and a glimpse of dull rebellion crossed her stolid face. She shook her head negatively, without a smile.

"So she doesn't think it funny," Madam Remizova mused. "It means I'll have to change her, too. Or it may be too late—"

It was too late. That night the menial servant girl made a secret trip to the village. She could not convey much to the sheriff by her grotesque signs, but the result of her visit was that the untiring pack of law officers, led by Sheriff Corcoran, rode over to Madam Remizova's estate again, raising dust down the country road.

This time there was the *corpus delicti*, and they gathered from Dunia's signs that there might be another. The first one was found where Madam Remizova herself said they would find it. That alone was enough evidence to arrest her.

Again they found nothing suspicious at Spider Farm, but there were people who testified that the web-maker was last seen entering his countrywoman's house. They had also heard muffled screams. All that finally put the spider woman behind the bars.

During the trial she sat, unmoved, on the hard bench in the Hall of Crimes, answering most of the questions with a curt "yes" or "no." Never once did she contradict herself.

"How did you know where we would find Ryan's body?" the prosecutor asked her.

"I had a dream. I often have clairvoyant dreams," she repeated again and again, fingering the dull white cross pinned to the black velvet bodice of her old-fashioned dress.

It was the doctor's statement which helped her. He opined with utmost assurance:

"The defendant is too frail to drag Ryan's body any distance. The examination shows that Ryan was dead some hours before he was found on the Dracula set. There is nothing to indicate that she put him there."

The jurors argued for hours. In spite of the lack of evidence, all

of them felt that Madam Remizova was guilty. They did not really debate her guilt. They just discussed the circumstances.

Much as they disliked the defendant, they could not render a decision free of reasonable doubt. When they filed out, the spider woman did not even look at their faces. She acted as if she already knew the verdict.

"Not guilty," the foreman said.

After it was all over and she had walked out of the gloomy hall into the fierce California sunshine, once more a free woman, Madam Remizova glanced suspiciously behind her. Yes, that youngest juror whose face looked so puzzled during the trial was following her.

"If you must spy after me," she addressed him amiably, "let's walk together. Do you hope to unearth some new evidence?"

HE blushed, embarrassed. It was grotesque to see that rough-faced six-footer blush like a girl.

"I'm Tom McGrath, Ryan's former cowhand," he confessed frankly. "But they did not know it when they called me to serve on the jury. He—I mean, the deceased, used to rustle cattle."

"He also used to lend money at twenty percent," Madam Remizova stated with a grim smile.

"Let me shake hands with you." The young man offered his calloused right palm.

They shook hands like conspirators.

"Would you like to see my spidery?" Madam Remizova asked cordially.

"I don't mind if I do," he said bashfully.

They walked in silence, the man trying to adjust his broad stride to her mincing steps. In spite of her outdoor activities, Madam Remizova still wore high French heels which dated her as much as her high coiffure.

"I'm dying to see how you do it," the man ventured at last.

"I don't understand what you mean," she said perfunctorily.

"Oh, yes, you do. Old money lender Crombie disappeared under similar circumstances. Then that pawnbroker from Happy Valley; I forget his name. And now—Ryan."

"Are you sorry for them?" Madam Remizova demanded.

"Well, no—" he said dubiously.

"Then don't ask foolish questions!" she snapped at him. Then her voice grew mollified. "Well, here we are at last."

She held open the garden gate for him. It was thickly entwined with passion vine, the purple flowers shedding pungent fragrance which seemed to conceal some other odor, as that of decay.

"All right, if you are so curious, come into my spiderery. We may have tea sent there."

"Oh, no, not there!" young McGrath said, almost in a panic.

"Why? I'm too old to—to flirt with you?" the spider woman said coyly.

"Madam, please, excuse me. I would rather not see your laboratory. I—I heard about it. Just tell me what you can."

"Curiosity killed the cat," she stated playfully. "But you seem to be a nice boy. You resemble somewhat my late husband."

PIOUSLY Madam Remizova made the sign of the three-cornered orthodox cross over her dark-clad bosom.

"I wouldn't think of harming you. Come into my library, instead, and I'll show you something."

The library held only a few Russian books which rested on home-made shelves and an enormous, tattered Dahl dictionary. She moistened her fingers and rustled its pages until she came to a certain word. The boy could not read it as it was spelled in Russianized Greek characters. But he understood the pictures she showed him.

A woman in black held in her hands a wax figurine, apparently molding it. On the stone slab in front of her lay a daguerreotype of a man with a repulsive, narrow-mouthed face. The woman was molding a spider in his likeness.

The next picture was even more enlightening. There was now a spider's web spun over the frame. And in the middle of that web hung a dead, dried-out spider.

Without a word, Madam Remizova

shut the book. The dust, raised from it, made her visitor sneeze.

"Shall we have our tea now?" she asked conversationally.

As they drank the fragrant tea, the young man was silent, his tanned forehead creased by a frown, debating with himself. He was at a loss what to do. He did not really pity the mysteriously murdered money lender. Yet all his religious upbringing made him protest against condoning the silence about the crime.

"Two *kopecks* for your thoughts," Madam Remizova tried to be playful.

"I really must tell the authorities what I saw here." The young man's rigid honesty asserted itself. He rose and started to go.

"Brought up as a Puritan, eh? I understand. But don't go yet," she fawned on him, her smile fearful to behold.

"I must," he said flatly.

"But—you can't!" The spider woman's slightly protruding eyes were focused on his, rendering him speechless with nameless dread.

"There is still another way of doing it." Young McGrath knew that she suggested the murderous transformation.

"A more pleasant way," Madam Remizova went on. "You were curious how I do it? Wouldn't you like to know more about my methods? When one works with spiders, one involuntarily takes on some of their characteristics."

The boy rushed forward, almost collided with the woman's face, because now she was as tall as he. No, taller! She seemed to tower above him, her upper lip covered with sparse, black hairs which looked repulsive, yet attractive to him, against his will. He felt a curious tingling sensation, as when a limb goes asleep.

He felt—*shrinking!* Not from the woman's suddenly multiplied hands, but actually shrinking. Only his eyes seemed to bulge, then split into myriads of smaller eyes, each one seeing with terrifying clarity the amorous muzzle of a giant black spider.

Dim recollection of his childhood hobby came to young McGrath's mind. At eleven, he used to collect insects.

Among butterflies, doodle bugs and dragon-flies, he saw, in his memory, the insect with the tell-tale red marks, the poisonous black spider called—
Now, what was its name?"

"Black Widow!" he suddenly remembered.

YOUNG Tom McGrath was now a puny little spider himself. He tried to wrench himself from the terrible embrace of his domineering mate, but she held him close. So close that he was suffocating, while her black hairy mouth pressed closer and closer. A maddening memory seared his brain. "Female spiders devour their mates!"

Faintly, as from the dim distance, came Remizova's reassuring voice.

"I don't. I just suck their blood and use the dried out carcass for spider forms. Perfectly simple and—just. All the spiders I ever supplied to the studios were money lenders. This is a departure from the usual procedure."

"What? What does she mean?" McGrath's terrified unuttered thought was answered in a hissing whisper.

"Curiosity—killed—the rooster—"

With a desperate effort he tried to strike her. Even as his hand closed, forming a fist, he saw with the corner of one of his innumerable eyes that it was no longer a human fist, but a curiously shaped deformity of a paw!

With all his puny might, Tom McGrath struck. Whitish liquid spurted from the spider woman and trickled down his hairy extremity. He realized that he had hurt Madam Remizova. He must have hit her where he aimed—between the eyes.

Those eyes now closed, and he was no longer aware of their multiple mesmerizing look. His body, a moment ago, taut like a wire, began to relax by degrees. He grew larger; he could feel his legs thickening, lightening. His head no longer swam.

The dread black widow spider, which a moment ago held him in threatening embrace, grew smaller in proportion to his gradually enlarging body. A moment more, and it was just an inch-long insect, lying motionless on the table,

"You—you hypnotized me into imagining things, you wicked woman!" young McGrath shouted at his hostess, but heard no response. She was nowhere in the room.

He got up from the chair, his legs still shaky, his eyes still seeing double. Gradually his faculties returned to him, as he tried valiantly to concentrate on his search. Where was that woman?

The mute Russian servant girl came in and cleaned the table, carrying away the cups. Then she returned from the kitchen, a crumb brush in her hands. While sweeping crumbs from the table, she glanced at the large spider lying near the teapot.

Her pasty face grew still whiter, her eyes distended with mute horror. A weird sound, half a sob, half laughter, was forming in her throat. Choking with it, she threw herself on the floor and noiselessly beat her bare feet against the rug's thick, checkered surface.

When Tom McGrath recovered his composure sufficiently to summon the sheriff, his deputies searched in vain for Madam Remizova. Sheriff Corcoran came across a box of chocolate bon-bons shaped like spiders, and had to laugh.

"You must have imagined all the story you told us, McGrath. That Russian woman was a great practical joker. I must admit she scared even me once," he threw out his chest, "with one of these."

He picked up a battered black spider lying near the box, and dropped it as if it were a piece a hot coal.

"What's that? That was no chocolate candy. That's—why, it's real! A black widow spider. Good God, it's dead!"

He took out a large handkerchief and started to wipe his half-bald head. As he did so, a misty form resembling a black widow, only lighter, ran out of its folds and disappeared into the spidery.

The sheriff shivered, in spite of the hot summer afternoon.

"By golly, if I were superstitious, I would think it was her wicked soul!" he said, throwing away the sweat-dampened cotton square.