

HARRY DICKSON VS. THE SPIDER

I. A Strange Young Woman

For a while, things had been quiet in London, and, indeed, in England as a whole. It wasn't as if the Underworld had brokered a truce with the police, but no new sensational crime had made the newspapers headlines. Of course, there were the usual petty crimes, murders and burglaries, but the police were easily able to apprehend the culprits.

Yet, this was merely a period of calm which preceded the storm, as demonstrated by the terrible affair we'll now relate.

There was one person in London for whom this calm was anything but illusory: Harry Dickson, the great detective of Baker street.

If anyone had asked an inspector of Scotland Yard about Dickson, the policeman would have likely responded: "Right now, the man is totally idle; he might as well retire to Sussex to keep bees. He has virtually put all the worst criminals in the Kingdom under lock and key. There is no one left for him to arrest."

Alas, nothing could have been further from the truth!

Yes, it was correct that Dickson was not actively pursuing any specific villain, but his face was nevertheless somber, and a worried light burned in his dark eyes.

At least ten times a day, his loyal assistant, Tom Wills, had caught him with his eyes staring bleakly in the distance, a frown on his face, looking for all the world as if he was in a state of utter despair.

"It's mad," he muttered, "insane... It's as if I were a puppet, a toy, a mindless object that can be manipulated at will or played with recklessly."

For the umpteenth time, Tom heard this lament that was both disappointing and incomprehensible when uttered by a man like his "Guv."

The young man put his newspaper down on the coffee table, preparing to ask a question. But the great detective snickered and said:

"Yes, Tom, cover it so I don't have to look at it anymore! It's the tenth!"

"The tenth *what*, Guv?"

Then the young man looked at the table, lifted the newspaper and, with sadness tinged with fear, saw a small object that glowed under a beam of sunlight. It was a mere trinket that didn't look as if it could cause such fear: a life-sized reproduction of a small spider cast in silver. The sort of item that a woman might have worn as a brooch had she not been repelled by its arachnid shape.

"Ah," said Tom, with awe.

For Dickson owned nine other silver spiders, all identical in size and shape.

What a terrifying mystery it was! Every morning for the last nine days, the great detective had found a silver spider on his desk, without being able to discern how it had appeared or who had left it.

For the first four days of the phenomenon, Dickson thought it was a harmless, yet puzzling, practical joke. On the fourth night, he had carefully locked all the doors, keeping all sets of keys on his person, bolted the windows, and taken every possible precaution to bar the way to any unwanted nighttime visitor.

And yet, on the morning of the fifth day, a silver spider was waiting for him on his desk!

That night, he decided to stand watch inside his office, facing the desk. As dawn approached, his eyes grew tired and he yielded to a few minutes of sleep—and when he awoke, the silver spider was there, on the desk!

Dickson was furious at himself and, the following night, he made sure to drink several strong cups of coffee so as not to succumb to sleep. All night long, he kept his eyes fixed on the desk. And yet, at dawn, miraculously, the silver spider appeared at the opposite end of the desk.

This time, Dickson was certain he had not slept a wink; the door and every window had been triple-bolted; no one had entered the room!

The same process was repeated on the eighth and ninth nights. Dickson felt he was falling prey to madness. Someone was intent on proving that he, or she, was better, smarter and more resourceful than he. Someone who, for the time being, chose to lurk in the shadows, but—the detective was certain of it!—would soon step out into daylight and commit a monstrous crime.

Dickson could do nothing but wait for that formidable and mysterious opponent to reveal itself.

The previous night—the tenth—Dickson was very briefly able to observe a strange phenomenon: for a second, no longer, a small patch of light had appeared and disappeared on a corner of the desk. He was sure he would have missed it had he blinked at that precise moment.

And, as anticipated, the silver spider was there!

That was why his mood was so bleak on the that morning Tom Wills asked his question. In fact, the great detective had barely touched his breakfast when there were three knocks on the door.

“Who could that be?” said Dickson. “I specifically instructed Mrs. Crown to admit no one today. I need peace and quiet to think.”

“It can’t be Mrs. Crown,” said Tom. “She usually only knocks once.”

“If it’s a stranger, I don’t want to see them... But how could it be? I didn’t hear the doorbell ring downstairs...”

“I don’t usually bother with bells,” said the thin, sharp voice of a woman, causing the two men to jump to their feet and turn to look at the speaker.

A young woman stood on the threshold, the door slightly ajar behind her.

“You... didn’t... ring?” said Tom, puzzled.

“Why should I? I come and go as I please,” she replied.

Harry Dickson scrutinized her and focused all his mental powers. He had immediately felt that there was more here than met the eye. Something strange, mysterious, and almost dreadful, emanated from the young woman.

Without saying another word, she stepped into the room and sat in an armchair facing the detective.

“And who might you be?” asked Dickson, gruffly.

“Will you be any the wiser if I tell you that my name is Georgette Cuvelier, Mr. Dickson? Still, you may call me by that name, now and in the future.”

“In the future? Are you implying that we shall see more of each other?”

“Of course we will, Mr. Dickson! Cheer up!”

Again, the great detective felt ill at ease watching Georgette; and yet, nothing about her mundane looks called attention to herself.

She was tall and thin, with a well-proportioned head, but had rather ordinary features, grey eyes and a small mouth. Her hair was brown, but without luster. She seemed lean and strong, but her posture was slightly hunched, like that of a scholar who has spent too much time poring over books.

Her clothes were equally ordinary: a bottle-green ensemble that had probably been purchased off the rack from a high street store, and a well-worn beige raincoat. Her stockings were not silk, her gloves were slightly tattered and her handbag had seen better days.

Yet, despite all this, a strange, nefarious aura emanated from her.

“Since we’re done with the introductions,” she continued in her sharp, little voice, “I think we can come to the business at hand...”

Dickson’s face remained impassible, but his heart was thumping faster inside his chest. Yes, faced with this girl, barely out of school, the great detective himself felt apprehensive, waiting for momentous and terrible revelations. Therefore, he was not surprised when he heard her say:

“Ten spiders should be enough, don’t you think? Besides, the last one almost missed its target.”

“The Devil!” shouted Tom Wills, who took a threatening step towards the young woman.

She did not even acknowledge his presence and continued to stare at Dickson. The detective made a sign to Tom to not interrupt the strange conversation.

“May I inquire how you managed to successfully have those spiders deposited on my desk for ten nights in a row in such a mystifying fashion?” asked the detective with exaggerated politeness.

“Goodness gracious, I’ll tell you one day... Like most tricks, it’s fairly simple, but as you know, magicians aren’t supposed to reveal their secrets. Still, I’ll do it for you—when it pleases me.”¹

“When it pleases you...” repeated Dickson, frowning.

“Wouldn’t it be more productive for you to ask *why* I sent you the spiders?” Georgette suggested.

“And why did you, Miss?”

“Can’t you guess?”

“Oh, I have!”

“Really?”

Her face was set in an intense concentration and Dickson noticed that her normally grey irises had suddenly acquired yellow flecks, which only made her look more frightening.

“Yes,” explained the detective. “By sending me those trinkets in such a fashion, you wanted me to know that you are the kind of person who is both powerful and not afraid to use her powers against those who don’t do as you wish.”

“Quite right, Mr. Dickson,” she said, nodding her head. “I’m glad you understood so quickly; it’ll save us both a great deal of time. To tell the truth, I’m not surprised, considering your reputation. And if you hadn’t, it would have meant that you’re not as smart as you claim to be, in which case, I’d be sorry to have wasted my time.”

“Let’s get to the point, Miss Cuvelier. Tell me candidly what might please, or displease, you?”

The young woman opened her handbag, pulled out a small powder box and quickly fixed her makeup. Then she stated:

“It’s very simple. I want a guarantee from you that you will not interfere either in my business, or that of my associates. You will excuse me for jumping the gun a little, for, in truth, my business hasn’t begun yet, but I’m the kind of person who prefers to prevent problems before they occur. With some confederates, I have started what I call the ‘Spider Society.’ Our goal is simple: we wish to acquire wealth by taking it from those who have too much of it. You might call it ‘stealing,’ but I think of it merely as ‘redistribution.’ I should add that we have also sworn an oath to get rid of anyone who would refuse to share their wealth or would stand in our way. I suppose you would call that ‘murder?’ I like to think that our society has one advantage over every other similar enterprise: we are virtually beyond the reach of any police force in Europe or in America. That, I think, is the strength that we intend to exploit to achieve our objectives.”

“I understand,” said Dickson, calmly. “But may I ask you why, if you believe yourselves to be beyond the reach of the Law, you are concerned about my potential interference in your business?”

“A fair point. We can certainly succeed with or without your involvement, Mr. Dickson, but I will concede that you might be able to slow us down somewhat, and that will decrease our profits. After all, time is money!”

“I see. Well, then, why don’t you take steps to get rid of me?”

“We thought about it. Make no mistake, we will—if you cross our path. But that, too, would require time and energy, which we would rather devote to making money, do you see?”

“Guv! What are you waiting for? Let’s arrest her and take her to Scotland Yard!” shouted Tom Wills, who could no longer contain his anger.

“And accuse me of what? Of crimes I haven’t yet committed, you silly boy?” replied Georgette with a sarcastic smile.

“Crimes can be prevented,” shouted Tom angrily.

“With great difficulty if you don’t know what they’ll be,” said Georgette, seriously. “Listen, boy, why don’t you go read the funny papers something, and leave the discussion to the grownups?”

Tom jumped to his feet, roaring.

¹ The author never actually bothered to make up an explanation for this trick, so the reader never finds out how Georgette managed to do this. (*Note from the translators*)

“I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Oh, do be a good boy and keep quiet!” replied Georgette in a surprisingly commanding voice. “If you are, I’ll give you a lollipop at the end of class.”

Enraged, Tom was ready to grab the young woman, but Dickson stopped him in his tracks with a single glance and gesture of his hand. Then, he turned back to Georgette and said:

“Stop! You have masterfully succeeded in mystifying me for ten days. It’s quite a feat. I have solved many formidable enigmas in far less time...”

“And my little spiders still remain one, don’t they?” interrupted the young woman. “It’s embarrassing for someone of your caliber. But don’t worry, you’ll find the answer. In fact, I’m certain you will. It’s as simple as pie. But what you couldn’t solve in ten days will take Scotland Yard ten years to figure out. So, in a way, I feel reassured. The Spider Society can begin its operations under the best auspices. Will you leave us to operate in peace, Mr. Dickson?”

Harry Dickson took another long look at the thin, bold young woman who sat in front of him and replied:

“I believe every word you’ve said, Miss Cuvelier. I also believe that you will soon become the most fearsome adversary I have ever had the dubious honor of fighting, and I’m including Count Dragomin in that list.”²

“Dragomin? Pfft! He was nothing but a scarecrow,” said Georgette contemptuously.

“You’re mad!” hissed Tom Wills.

“You flatter me, Mr. Dickson. After all, I haven’t even started yet.”

“True, but I can sense the dark aura of evil that surrounds you, Miss Cuvelier—although it is not yet entirely there. It seems to me there may still be hope for you. I’d like to help...”

“You must be joking!”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life. I’d like to help you to stay on the path of Good. You could become a powerful force for helping mankind...”

She looked at him gravely and the yellow flecks briefly reappeared in her eyes.

“That cannot happen,” she said in a low voice, obviously moved by some powerful emotion. “It just cannot, Mr. Dickson. *Someday, I will tell you why*, but not today. Someday, when we meet again—probably, only a few minutes before your death; because I can see you won’t agree to not interfere with us, so I won’t have any choice but to kill you.”

Harry Dickson sighed.

“Unless I arrest you and the Hangman gets you first.”

She nodded matter-of-factly.

“That is indeed your only hope, Mr. Dickson. But all probabilities indicate you will fail.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” muttered Tom.

This time, the detective lost his cool.

“Enough, Tom! This has been one of most difficult conversations I’ve ever had. I told you to stay quiet. Since you obviously are incapable of that, go out and fetch me the latest editions of the daily papers.”

“While you’re out, get some jelly babies, too,” added Georgette, sarcastically.

Angry, Tom put on his jacket and hat and left, slamming the door behind him.

The young woman turned back towards the detective and in her most serious tone continued:

“I shall kill you without a moment’s hesitation, Mr. Dickson.”

The detective ignored the threat.

“I could have you locked up at Bedlam,” he said, taking his pipe and stuffing it. “But you’re not clinically insane and I refuse to be the one to commit the first crime. Besides, I don’t think that even Bedlam’s walls could keep you contained for long. So the initiative, for the moment, is yours.”

“That is correct, Mr. Dickson. I think we have said everything we needed to say to each other, don’t you agree?” Her eyes glanced around the room. “Oh, my dear friend, the complete works of Dickens! I

² See *The Heir of Dracula*.

love his books too, although I confess that, despite his apparent simplicity, I seem to not understand a number of things about him...”

“His kindness, probably,” said Dickson, sadly.

“You must be right. When I analyze myself, I feel as if I am incomplete... a psychological amputee, if you will. There is something missing in my heart. The true meaning of the word ‘good’ escapes me utterly. I’ve heard that people afflicted with daltonism can’t see certain colors. In my case, I can’t see inside the deep recess of the soul where kindness lies. Instead, all I see is a dark, fathomless abyss...”

At that moment, Tom returned with the newspapers, which he slapped down on the desk.

Georgette stood up.

“Good-bye, Mr. Dickson.”

“Till we meet again, Miss Cuvelier.”

“That’s what I meant,” she said.

Then, with a swift and supple step, she left.

What Georgette Cuvelier did not suspect was that Dickson’s angry order to Tom to fetch the newspapers had been but a prearranged signal between them for him to organize the tailing of the young woman.

As soon as she stepped out of the detective’s lodgings on Baker Street, she was followed by the small army of newsboys and other street urchins in Dickson’s employ, determined to keep her in their sights.

Two hours later, they reported to Dickson, who found the information quite disappointing.

The young woman had taken public transportation to Borough Road. There, she had stopped in a confectionery store to buy some chocolates. She then had strolled to Trinity Street, where she had gone inside a Christian Home for Young Ladies ran by two sisters, the Midgetts.

Dickson picked up the telephone and called the Home, asking to speak to the owner, Miss Catharina Midgett.

After a long conversation, he was more puzzled than ever.

He had learned that Georgette Cuvelier was a good student, with good grades, intelligent, serious and dedicated. She had been entrusted to the care of the Midgett sisters five years ago by a woman who claimed to be her aunt, but who had never visited her once since. Their fees, however, were paid every month like clockwork, including generous pocket money for the young woman, by a solicitor.

Mrs. Midgett believed Georgette was of French origin, although she had always expressed herself in perfect English since her arrival. They knew nothing of her past, and it wasn’t in the Midgetts’ habits to inquire.

She never received any visitors, mail, or calls. She only left the Home on infrequent occasions, to do some shopping, for brief periods of time.

After hearing this, Tom made up his mind:

“I told you, Guv: she’s mad as a hatter!”

“No, Tom,” replied Dickson, somber. “I am never wrong about these things. We’re facing a terrifying human mystery. There are gifted people whose extraordinary innate talents bloom in the very flower of youth. This young woman is the genius of crime incarnate. I fear we’re about to witness unimaginable, monstrous crimes!”

Sadly, the great detective was again correct in his assessment, and events were to soon prove him right.

Such is the story of the first encounter between Harry Dickson and one of the greatest criminal geniuses of all times: Georgette Cuvelier, whom the great detective later came to call “the dreaded Miss Cuvelier.”