

# The Spectre Spiders

By William J. Wintle

The fog hung thickly over London one morning in late autumn. It was not the dense compound of smoke and moisture, pea-souplike in color and pungent to eyes and nose, that is known as a “London peculiar”; but a fairly clean and white mist that arose from the river and lay about the streets and squares in great wisps and wreaths and banks.

The passing crowd shivered and thought of approaching winter; while a few optimistic souls looked upward to the invisible sky and predicted a warm day when the sun had grown in strength. A little child remarked to a companion that it smelled like washing day: and the comparison was not without its point. It was as if the motor machinery of the metropolis had blown off steam in preparation for a fresh start.

People passed one another in the mist like sheeted ghosts and did not speak. Friend failed to recognize friend; or, if he did, he took for granted that the other did not. Apart from the steady rumble of the traffic and the long deep note that the great city gives forth to hearing ears all the day long, the world seemed strangely silent and unfriendly.

Certainly this applied with truth to one member of the passing crowd whose business brought abroad that misty morning when home and the fireside gained an added attraction. Ephraim Goldstein was silent by nature and unfriendly by profession. For him language was an ingenious device for the concealment of thought; and when there was no special reason for such concealment, why should he trouble to speak?

It was not as if people were over desirous to hear him speak. He was naturally unattractive: and where nature had failed to complete her task, Ephraim had brought it to perfection. A habit of scowling had effectually removed any trace of amiability that might have survived the handicap of evil eyes and unpleasing features. When strangers saw Ephraim for the first time, they looked quickly around for a pleasant face to act by way of antidote.

We have said that he was unfriendly by profession. But the unwary and innocent would never have suspected this from his professional announcements in the personal column of the morning papers. The gentleman of fortune who was wishful, without security or inquiry, to advance goodly sums of money to his less fortunate fellow creatures on nominal terms and in the most delicate manner possible, was surely giving the best of all proofs of a soul entirely immersed in the milk of human kindness.

Yet those who had done business with Ephraim spoke of him in terms not usual in the drawing room: men of affairs who knew the world of finance called him a blood-sucking spider, and Scotland Yard had him noted down as emphatically a wrong ‘un. Ephraim was not popular with those who knew him. He had in fact only one point of character that could be commended. He had never changed his name to Edward Gordon or even to Edwin Goldsmith: he was born Ephraim Goldstein—and Ephraim Goldstein he was content to remain to the end. A rose by any other name smells just as sweet—but people did not express it quite like that when Ephraim was under discussion.

He had not always been a gentleman of fortune, nor had he always been wishful to share his fortune with others. People with inconveniently long memories recalled a youth of like name who got into trouble at Whitechapel for selling Kosher fowls judiciously weighted with sand:

and there was also a story about a young man who manipulated three thimbles and a pea on Epsom Downs.

But why drag in these scandals of the past? In the case of any man it is unfair to thus search the record of his youth for evidence against him; and in the case of Ephraim it was quite unnecessary. He was a perennial plant: however lurid the past, he blossomed forth afresh every year in renewed vigor and in equally glowing colors.

How fortune had come to him seemed to be known by no one save himself; but certainly it had come, for it is difficult to lend money if you do not possess it. And with its coming Ephraim had migrated from Whitechapel to Haggerston, then to Kilburn, and finally to Maida Vale, where he now had his abode. But it must not be supposed that he indulged in either ambition or luxury. He was content with very modest comfort, and lived a simple bachelor existence; but he found a detached villa with some garden behind it more convenient for his purposes than a house in a terrace with an inquisitive neighbor on either side. His visitors came on business and by no means for pleasure: and privacy was as congenial to them as it was to him.

The business that had brought him out on this foggy morning was of an unusual character in that it had nothing to do with money making. It in fact involved spending money to the extent of two guineas now, with a probability of further sums; and he did not at all relish it. Ephraim was on his way to Cavendish Square to consult a noted oculist.

For some weeks past, he had been troubled with a curious affliction of his sight. He was still on the sunny side of fifty, and hitherto he had been very sharp-sighted in more senses than one. But now something seemed to be going wrong. His vision was perfect during the day, and usually through the evening as well; but twice recently he had been bothered with a curious optical delusion. On each occasion he had been sitting quietly reading after dinner, when something had made him uneasy. It was the same sort of disquiet that he always felt if a cat came into the room. So strong had been this feeling that he had sprung out of his chair without quite knowing why he did it and each time had fancied that a number of shadows streamed forth from his chair and ran across the carpet to the walls, where they vanished. They were evidently nothing but shadows, for he could see the carpet through them; but they were fairly clear and distinct. They seemed to be about the size of a cricket ball. Though he attached no meaning to the coincidence, it was a little odd that on each occasion he had been reluctantly compelled during the day to insist upon his pound of flesh from a client. And when Ephraim insisted, he did not stick at a trifle. But obviously this could have nothing to do with a defect of vision.

The great specialist made a thorough examination of Ephraim's eyes, but could find nothing wrong with them. So he explored further and investigated the state of his patient's nervous and digestive systems; but found that these were perfectly sound.

Then he embarked upon more delicate matters, and sought to learn something of the habits of Ephraim. A bachelor in the forties may be addicted to the cup that cheers and occasionally inebriates as well: he may be fond of the pleasures of the table: he may be attracted by the excitement of gambling: in fact he may do a great many things that a man of his years should not do. The physician was a man of tact and diplomacy. He asked no injudicious questions; but he had the valuable gift of inducing conversation in others. Not for years had Ephraim talked so freely and frankly to any man. The result was that the doctor could find no reason for suggesting that the trouble was due to any kind of dietary or other indiscretion.

So he fell back on the last refuge of the baffled physician. "Rest, my dear Sir," he said; "that is the best prescription. I am happy to say that I find no serious lesion or even functional disturbance; but there is evidence of fatigue affecting the brain and the optic nerve. There is no

reason to anticipate any further or more serious trouble; but a wise man always takes precautions. My advice is that you drop all business for a few weeks and spend the time in golf or other out-of-door amusement—say at Cromer or on the Surrey Downs. In that case you may be pretty confident that no further disturbance of this kind will occur.”

Ephraim paid his two guineas with a rather wry face. He had the feeling that he was not getting much for his money; still it was reassuring to find that there was nothing the matter. Rest! Rubbish! He was not overworked. Surrey Downs indeed! Hampstead Heath was just as good and a great deal cheaper: he might take a turn there on Sunday mornings. Golf? You would not catch him making a fool of himself in tramping after a ridiculous ball! So he simply went on much the same as before, and hoped that all would be well.

Yet, somehow, things did not seem to be quite right with him. Business was prosperous, if you can speak of business in connection with the pleasant work of sharing your fortune with the less fortunate—always on the most reasonable terms possible. Ephraim would have told you that he lost terribly through the dishonesty of people who died or went abroad or whose expectations did not turn out as well as they should; and yet, in some mysterious way, he had more money to lend than ever. But he was worried.

One evening, after an unusually profitable day, he was sitting in his garden, smoking a cigar that had been given him by a grateful client who was under the mistaken impression that Ephraim's five per cent was to be reckoned per year, whereas it was really per week. It was a good cigar; and the smoker knew how to appreciate good tobacco. He was lying back in a hammock chair, and idly watching the rings of smoke as they rose on the quiet air and floated away.

Then he suddenly started and stared. The rings were behaving in a very odd fashion. They seemed to form themselves into globes of smoke; and from each of them protruded eight waving filaments that turned and bent like the legs of some uncanny creature, and it seemed as if these trailing limbs of smoke turned and reached toward him. It was curious and not altogether pleasant. But it was no case of an optical delusion. The evening light was good, and the thing was seen clearly enough. It must have been the result of some unusual state of the atmosphere at the time.

He was aroused by hearing conversation on the other side of the wall. The occupant of the next-door house was in his garden with a friend, and their talk was of matters horticultural. It did not interest Ephraim, who paid a jobbing gardener the smallest possible amount to keep the place tidy, and concerned himself no further about it. He did not want to hear of the respective virtues of different local seed vendors. But the talk was insistent, and he presently found himself listening against his will. They were talking about spiders; and his neighbor was saying that he had never known such a plague of them or such large-sized specimens. And he went on to say that they all seemed to come over the wall from Ephraim's side! The listener discovered that his cigar had gone out; and he went indoors in disgust.

It was only a few days later when the next thing happened. Ephraim had gone to bed rather earlier than usual, being somewhat tired, but was unable to sleep. For some hours he tossed about wearily and angrily—for he usually slept well—and then came a spell of disturbed and restless slumber. Dream after dream passed through his mind; and somehow they all seemed to have something to do with spiders. He thought that he fought his way through dense jungles of web; he walked on masses of soft and yielding bodies that crushed and squished beneath his tread; multitudinous hairy legs waved to and fro and clung to him; fanged jaws bit him with the sting of fiery fluids; and gleaming eyes were everywhere staring at him with a gaze of unutterable

malignancy. He fell, and the webs wrapped him round in an embrace of death; great woolly creatures flung themselves upon him and suffocated him with their foul stink; unspeakable things had him in their ghastly grip; he was sinking in an ocean of unimaginable horror.

He awoke screaming, and sprang out of bed. Something caught him in the face and clung round his head. He groped for the switch and turned on the light. Then he tore off the bandage that blinded him, and found that it was a mass of silky threads like the web that a giant spider might have spun. And, as he got it clear of his eyes, he saw great shadows run up the walls and vanish. They had grown since he saw them first on the carpet; they were now the size of footballs.

Ephraim was appalled by the horror of it. Unrestful sleep and persistent nightmare were bad enough; but here was something worse. The silky wisps that still clung about his head were not such stuff as dreams are made of. He wondered if he was going mad. Was the whole thing a hallucination? Could he pull himself together and shake it off? He tried; but the bits of web that waved from his fingers and face were real enough. No dream spider could have spun them; mere imagination could not have created them. Moreover, he was not a man of imagination. Quite the opposite. He dealt in realities: real estate was the security he preferred.

A stiff glass of brandy and soda pulled him together. He was not addicted to stimulants—it did not pay in his profession—but this was a case that called for special measures. He shook off the obsession, and thought there might be something in the golf suggestion after all. And when a client called during the morning to negotiate a little loan, Ephraim drove a shrewd bargain that surprised even himself.

The next incident that caused considerable disquiet to the gentleman of fortune seems to have occurred about a month later. He was no lover of animals, but he tolerated the presence of a Scots terrier in the house. It occasionally happened that he had large sums of money on the premises—not often, but sometimes it could not be helped—and the alert little dog was a good protection against the intrusive burglar. So he treated the animal as a sort of confidential servant, and was, after his fashion, attached to it. If he did not exactly love it, he at any rate appreciated and valued it. He did not even grudge the veterinarian charges when it was ill.

At night the terrier had the run of the house, but usually slept on a mat outside Ephraim's door. On this particular occasion Ephraim dreamed that he had fallen over the dog, and that it gave a loud yelp of pain. So vivid was the impression that it woke him, and the cry of the animal seemed to still linger on his ear. It was as if the terrier outside the door had really cried out. He listened, but all was quiet save for a curious clicking and sucking sound that he heard at intervals. It seemed to come from just outside the door; but that could not be, for the dog would have been roused and would have given the alarm if anything was wrong.

So he presently went to sleep again, and did not wake until his usual time for rising. As he dressed, it struck him as unusual that he heard nothing of the dog, which was accustomed to greet the first sounds of movement with a welcoming bark or two. When he opened his door, the terrier lay dead on the mat.

Ephraim was first shocked, then grieved, and next alarmed. He was shocked because it was simply natural to be shocked under the circumstances; he was grieved because it then dawned upon him that he was more fond of the animal than he could have believed possible; and he was alarmed because he knew that the mysterious death of a watch dog is often the preliminary to a burglary.

He hurried downstairs and made a hasty examination of the doors and windows, and particularly of a safe that was hidden in the wall behind what looked like a solid piece of

furniture. But everything was in good order, and there was no sign of any attempt on the premises. Then he went upstairs to remove the body of the dog, wondering the while if it would be worth the expense to have a postmortem. Ephraim disliked mysteries, especially when they happened in the house.

He picked up the dead terrier, and at once met with a bad shock. It was a mere featherweight, and collapsed in his hands! It was little more than a skeleton, rattling loose in a bag of skin. It had been simply sucked dry!

He dropped it in horror, and as he did so he found some silky threads clinging to his hands. And there were threads waving in the air, for one of them twined itself about his head and clung stickily to his face. And then something fell with a soft thud on the floor behind him, and he turned just in time to see a shadow dart to the wall and disappear. He had seen that shadow form before; but it somehow seemed to be less shadowy and more substantial now.

It seems to have been about this time that a rumor circulated in Maida Vale that a monkey had escaped from the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park and had been seen climbing on Ephraim's house.

It was first seen early in the morning by a milkman, who mentioned it to a policeman, and soon afterward by a housemaid who was cleaning the steps of a house opposite. It was a rather dark and misty morning, which doubtless accounts for a certain vagueness in the descriptions of the animal. But, so far as they went, all the descriptions agreed.

The monkey was described as a very fat specimen, almost like a football in size and rotundity, with very long arms. It was covered with thick, glossy, black hair, and was seen to climb up the front of the house and enter by an open window. The milkman, who was fond of reading, said that he thought it was a spider monkey; but his only reason for this seems to have been some fancied resemblance to a very large spider.

Later in the morning, the policeman called on Ephraim to mention the matter, and to ask if the monkey was still there. His reception was not polite; and he retired in disorder. Then he rang up the Zoological Gardens, but was informed that no monkeys were missing. The incident was duly recorded at the police station, and there it ended, for no more was ever heard of it.

But another occurrence in the following week gave rise to much more talk, especially among the ladies of the neighborhood. The empty skin of a valuable Persian cat was found in the shrubbery of the house next to Ephraim's—empty, that is, except for the bones of the animal. The skin was quite fresh; as it well might be, for the cat had been seen alive the evening before. The mystery formed a nine days' wonder, and was never solved until an even more shocking mystery came to keep it company. The cat's skin had been sucked dry and the local theory was that a stoat or other beast of prey had escaped from the zoo and done the dire deed. But it was proved that no such escape had occurred, and there the matter had to stop.

Although it seems to have no significance, it may be well to place on record a trifling incident that happened a week or two later. A collector for some charitable institution called upon Ephraim under the mistaken impression that he was a person who wanted to get rid of his money. He was speedily undeceived, and was only in the house for a few minutes. But he told his wife afterward that Mr. Goldstein was evidently a great cat fancier, for he had noticed several fine black Persians curled up asleep in the house. But it was curious that they were all in the darkest and most obscure corners, where they could not be seen very clearly. He had made some passing reference to them to Mr. Goldstein, who did not seem to understand him. Indeed he stared at him as if he thought him the worse for drink!

Another incident at this time was made the subject of remark among Ephraim's neighbors. For reasons best known to himself, he had long been in the habit of sleeping with a loaded revolver at his bedside; and one morning, about daybreak, the sound of a shot was heard. The police were quickly on the spot and insisted upon entering the house. Ephraim assured them that the weapon had been accidentally discharged through being dropped on the floor; and, after asking to see his gun licence, the police departed.

But what had really happened was much more interesting. Ephraim had woke up without apparent cause, but with a vague sense of danger; and was just in time to see a round black body, covered with a dense coat of hair, climb up the foot of his bed and make its way cautiously toward his face. It was a gigantic spider; and its eight gleaming eyes blazed with lambent green light like a cluster of sinister opals.

He was paralysed with horror; then, summoning all his force of will, he snatched up the revolver and fired. The flash and the noise of the report dazed him for a moment; and when he saw clearly again the spider was gone. He must have hit it, for he fired point blank; but it had left no sign. It was just as well, for otherwise his tale would not have passed muster with the police. But, later in the morning, he found a trail of silky threads running across the carpet from the bed to the wall.

But the end was now very near. Only a few days later, the police were again in the house. This time they had been called in by the gardener, who said that he could not make Mr. Goldstein hear when he knocked at his door, and that he thought he must be ill. The door was locked, and had to be forced.

What the police found had better not be described. At the funeral, the undertaker's men said that they had never carried a man who weighed so little for his size.