

More Spinned Against ... by John Wyndham

One of the things about her husband that displeased Lydia Charters more as the years went by was the shape of him; another was his hobby. There were other displeasures, of course, but it was these in particular that aroused her sense of failure.

True, he had been much the same shape when she had married him, but she had looked for improvement. She had envisioned the development, under her domestic influence, of a more handsome, suaver, better filled type. Yet after nearly twelve years of her care and feeding there was scarcely any demonstrable improvement. The torso, the main man, looked a little more solid, and the scales endorsed that it was so, but unfortunately this simply seemed to emphasize the knobby, gangling, loosely-hinged effect of the rest.

Once, in a mood of more than usual dissatisfaction, Lydia had taken a pair of his trousers and measured them carefully. Inert and empty, they seemed all right—long in the leg, naturally, but not abnormally so, and the usual width that people wore—but put to use, they immediately achieved the effect of being too narrow and full of knobs, just as his sleeves did. After the failure of several ideas to soften this appearance, she had realized that she would have to put up with it. Reluctantly, she had told herself: "Well, I suppose it can't be helped. It must be just one of those things—like horsy women getting to look more like horses, I mean," and thereby managed a dig at the hobby, as well.

Hobbies are convenient in the child, but an irritant in the adult; which is why women are careful never to have them, but simply to be interested in this or that. It is perfectly natural for a woman—and Lydia was a comely demonstration of the art of being one—to take an interest in semi-precious and, when she can afford them, precious stones: Edward's hobby, on the other hand, was not really natural to anyone.

Lydia had known about the hobby before they were married, of course. No one could know Edward for long without being aware of the way his eyes hopefully roved the corners of any room he chanced to be in, or how, when he was out of doors, his attention would be suddenly snatched away from any matter in hand by the sight of a pile of dead leaves, or a piece of loose bark. It had been irritating at times, but she had not allowed it to weigh too much with her, since it would naturally wither from neglect later. For Lydia held the not uncommon opinion that though, of course, a married man should spend a certain amount of his time assuring an income, beyond that there ought to be only one interest in his life—from which it followed that the existence of any other must be slightly insulting to his wife, since everybody knows that a hobby is really just a form of sublimation.

The withering, however, had not taken place.

Disappointing as this was in itself, it would have been a lot more tolerable if Edward's hobby had been the collection of objects of standing—say, old prints, or first editions, or oriental pottery. That kind of thing could not only be displayed for envy, it had value; and the collector himself had status. But no one achieved the status of being any more than a crank for having even a very extensive collection of spiders.

Even over butterflies or moths, Lydia felt without actually putting the matter to the test, one could perhaps have summoned up the appearance of some enthusiasm. There was a kind of

nature's-living-jewels line that one could take if they were nicely mounted. But for spiders—a lot of nasty, creepy-crawly, leggy horrors, all getting gradually more pallid in tubes of alcohol—she could find nothing to be said at all.

In the early days of their marriage Edward had tried to give her some of his own enthusiasm, and Lydia had listened as tactfully as possible to his explanations of the complicated lives, customs, and mating habits of spiders, most of which seemed either disgusting, or very short on morals, or frequently both, and to his expatiations on the beauties of coloration and marking which her eye lacked the affection to detect. Luckily, however, it had gradually become apparent from some of her comments and questions that Edward was not awakening the sympathetic understanding he had hoped for, and when the attempt lapsed Lydia had been able to retreat gratefully to her former viewpoint that all spiders were undesirable, and the dead only slightly less horrible than the living.

Realizing that frontal opposition to spiders would be poor tactics, she had attempted a quiet and painless weaning. It had taken her two or three years to appreciate that this was not going to work; after that, the spiders had settled down to being one of those bits of the rough that the wise take with the smooth and leave unmentioned except on those occasions of extreme provocation when the whole catalog of one's dissatisfactions is reviewed.

Lydia entered Edward's spider room about once a week, partly to tidy and dust it, and partly to enjoy detesting its inhabitants in a pleasantly masochistic fashion. This she could do on at least two levels. There was the kind of generalized satisfaction that anyone might feel, in looking along the rows of test tubes, that at any rate here were a whole lot of displeasing creepies that would creep no more. And then there was the more personal sense of compensation in the reflection that though they had to some extent succeeded in diverting a married man's attention from its only proper target, they had had to die to do it.

There was an astonishing number of test tubes ranged in the racks along the walls; so many that at one time she had hopefully inquired whether there could be many more kinds of spiders. His first answer of five hundred and sixty in the British Isles had been quite encouraging, but then he had gone on to speak of twenty thousand or so different kinds in the world, not to mention the allied orders, whatever they might be, in a way that was depressing.

There were other things in the room besides the test tubes: a shelf of reference books, a card index, a table holding his carefully hooded microscope. There was also a long bench against one wall supporting a variety of bottles, packets of slides, boxes of new test tubes, as well as a number of glass-topped boxes in which specimens were preserved for study alive before they went into the alcohol.

Lydia could never resist peeping into these condemned cells with a satisfaction which she would scarcely have cared to admit, or, indeed, even have felt in the case of other creatures, but somehow with spiders it just served them right for being spiders. As a rule there would be five or six of them in similar boxes, and it was with surprise one morning that she noticed a large bell jar ranged neatly in the line. After she had done the rest of the dusting, curiosity took her over to the bench. It should, of course, have been much easier to observe the occupant of the bell jar than those of the boxes, but in fact it was not, because the inside, for fully two-thirds of its height, was obscured by web. A web so thickly woven as to hide the occupant entirely from the sides. It hung in folds, almost like a drapery, and on examining it more closely, Lydia was impressed by the ingenuity of the work; it looked surprisingly like a set of Nottingham lace curtains—though reduced greatly in scale, of course, and perhaps not quite in the top flight of design. Lydia went closer to look over the top edge of the web, and down upon the occupant. "Good gracious!" she said.

The spider, squatting in the center of its web-screened circle, was quite the largest she had ever seen.

She stared at it. She recalled that Edward had been in a state of some excitement the previous evening, but she had paid little attention except to tell him, as on several previous occasions, that she was much too busy to go and look at a horrible spider: she also recalled that he had been somewhat hurt about her lack of interest. Now, seeing the spider, she could understand that: she could even understand for once how it was possible to talk of a beautifully colored spider, for there could be no doubt at all that this specimen deserved a place in the nature's-living-jewels class.

The ground color was a pale green with a darker stippling, which faded away toward the under side. Down the center of the back ran a pattern of blue arrowheads, bright in the center and merging almost into the green at the points. At either side of the abdomen were bracket-shaped squiggles of scarlet. Touches of the same scarlet showed at the joints of the green legs, and there were small markings of it, too, on the upper part of what Edward resoundingly called the cephalothorax, but which Lydia thought of as the part where the legs were fastened on.

Lydia leaned closer. Strangely, the spider had not frozen into immobility in the usual spiderish manner. Its attention seemed to be wholly taken up by something held out between its front pair of legs, something that flashed as it moved. Lydia thought that the object was an aquamarine, cut and polished. As she moved her head to make sure, her shadow fell across the bell jar. The spider stopped twiddling the stone, and froze. Presently a small, muffled voice said:

"Hullo! Who are you?" with a slight foreign accent.

Lydia looked round. The room was as empty as before.

"No. Here!" said the muffled voice.

She looked down again at the jar, and saw the spider pointing to itself with its number two leg on the right.

"My name," said the voice, sociably, "is Arachne. What's yours?"

"Er—Lydia," said Lydia, uncertainly.

"Oh, dear! Why?" asked the voice.

Lydia felt a trifle nettled. "What do you mean, why?" she asked.

"Well, as I recall it, Lydia was sent to hell as a punishment for doing very nasty things to her lover. I suppose you aren't given to—?"

"Certainly not," Lydia said, cutting the voice short.

"Oh," said the voice, doubtfully. "Still, they can't have given you the name for nothing. And, mind you, I never really blamed Lydia. Lovers, in my experience, usually deserve—" Lydia lost the rest as she looked around the room again, uncertainly.

"I don't understand," she said. "I mean, is it really—?"

"Oh, it's me, all right," said the spider. And to make sure, it indicated itself again, this time with the third leg on the left.

"But—but spiders can't—"

"Of course not. Not real spiders, but I'm Arachne—I told you that."

A hazy memory stirred at the back of Lydia's mind.

"You mean *the* Arachne?" she inquired.

"Did you ever hear of another?" the voice asked, coldly.

"I mean, the one who annoyed Athene—though I can't remember just how?" said Lydia.

"Certainly. I was technically a spinster, and Athene was jealous and—"

"I should have thought it would be the other way—oh, I see, you mean you spun?"

"That's what I said. I was *the* best spinner and weaver, and when I won the all-Greece open competition and beat Athene she couldn't take it; she was so furiously jealous that she turned me into a spider. It's very unfair to let gods and goddesses go in for competitions at all, I always say. They're spitefully bad losers, and then they go telling lies about you to justify the bad-tempered things they do in revenge. You've probably heard it differently?" the voice added, on a slightly challenging note.

"No, I think it was pretty much like that," Lydia told her, tactfully. "You must have been a spider a very long time now," she added.

"Yes, I suppose so, but you give up counting after a bit." The voice paused, then it went on: "I say, would you mind taking this glass thing off? It's stuffy in here; besides, I shouldn't have to shout."

Lydia hesitated.

"I never interfere with anything in this room. My husband gets so annoyed if I do."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid I shall run away. I'll give you my word on that, if you like."

But Lydia was still doubtful.

"You're in a pretty desperate position, you know," she said, with an involuntary glance at the alcohol bottle.

"Not really," said the voice in a tone that suggested a shrug. "I've often been caught before. Something always turns up—it *has* to. That's one of the few advantages of having a really permanent curse on you. It makes it impossible for anything really fatal to happen."

Lydia looked round. The window was shut, the door, too, and the fireplace was blocked up.

"Well, perhaps for a few minutes, if you promise," she allowed.

She lifted the jar, and put it down to one side. As she did so the curtains of web trailed out, and tore.

"Never mind about them. Phew! That's better," said the voice, still small, but now quite clear and distinct.

The spider did not move. It still held the aquamarine, catching the light and shining, between its front legs.

On a sudden thought, Lydia leaned down and looked at the stone more closely. She was relieved to see that it was not one of her own.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Arachne. "Not really my color, though. I rather kill it, I think. One of the emeralds would have been more suitable—even though they were smaller."

"Where did you get it?" Lydia asked.

"Oh, a house just near here. Next door but one, I think it was."

"Mrs. Ferris's—yes, of course, that would be one of hers."

"Possibly," agreed Arachne. "Anyway, it was in a cabinet with a lot of others, so I took it, and I was just coming through the hedge out of the garden, looking for a comfortable hole to enjoy it in, when I got caught. It was the stone shining that made him see me. A funny sort of man, rather like a spider himself, if he had had more legs."

Lydia said, somewhat coldly:

"He was smarter than you were."

"H'm," said Arachne, noncommittally.

She laid the stone down and started to move about, trailing several threads from her spinnerets. Lydia drew away a little. For a moment she watched Arachne, who appeared to be engaged in a kind of doodling, then her eyes returned to the aquamarine.

"I have a little collection of stones myself. Not as good as Mrs. Ferris's, of course, but one or two nice ones amongst them," she remarked.

"Oh," said Arachne, absent-minded as she worked out her pattern.

"I—I should rather like a nice aquamarine," said Lydia. "Suppose the door happened to have been left open just a little..."

"There!" said Arachne, with satisfaction. "Isn't that the prettiest doily you ever saw?"

She paused to admire her work.

Lydia looked at it, too. The pattern seemed to her to show a lack of subtlety, but she agreed tactfully. "It's delightful! Absolutely charming! I wish I could—I mean, I don't know how you do it."

"One has just a little talent, you know," said Arachne, with undeceiving modesty. "You were saying something?" she added.

Lydia repeated her earlier remark.

"Not really worth my while," said Arachne. "I told you something *has* to happen, so why should I

bother?"

She began to doodle again. Rapidly, though with a slightly abstracted air, she constructed another small lace mat suitable for the lower-income-bracket trade, and pondered over it for a moment. Presently she said:

"Of course, if it were to be made worth my while . . ."

"I couldn't afford very much—" began Lydia, with caution.

"Not money," said Arachne. "What on earth would I do with money? But I am a bit overdue for a holiday."

"Holiday?" Lydia repeated, blankly.

"There's a sort of alleviation clause," Arachne explained. "Lots of good curses have them. It's often something like being uncursed by a prince's kiss—you know, something so improbable that it's a real outside chance, but gets the god a reputation for not being such a Shylock after all. Mine is that I'm allowed twenty-four hours' holiday in the year—but I've scarcely ever had it." She paused, doodling an inch or two of lace edging. "You see," she added, "the difficult thing is to find someone willing to change places for twenty-four hours."

"Er—yes, I can see it would be," said Lydia, detachedly.

Arachne put out one foreleg and spun the aquamarine round so that it glittered.

"Someone willing to change places," she repeated.

"Well—er—I—er—I don't think—" Lydia tried.

"It's not at all difficult to get in and out of Mrs. Ferris's house—not when you're my size," Arachne observed.

Lydia looked at the aquamarine. It wasn't possible to stop having a mental picture of the other stones that were lying bedded on black velvet in Mrs. Ferris's cabinet.

"Suppose one got caught?" she suggested.

"One need not bother about that—except as an inconvenience. I should have to take over in twenty-four hours again, in any case," Arachne told her.

"Well—I don't know—" said Lydia, unwillingly.

Arachne spoke in a ruminative manner:

"I remember thinking how easy it would be to carry them out one by one, and hide them in a convenient hole," she said.

Lydia was never able to recall in detail the succeeding stages of the conversation, only that at some point where she was still intending to be tentative and hypothetical Arachne must have thought she was more definite. Anyway, one moment she was still standing beside the bench, and the next, it seemed, she was

on it, and the thing had happened.

She didn't really feel any different, either. Six eyes did not seem any more difficult to manage than two, though everything looked exceedingly large, and the opposite wall very far away. The eight legs seemed capable of managing themselves without getting tangled, too.

"How do you?—Oh, I see," she said.

"Steady on," said a voice from above. "That's more than enough for a pair of curtains you've wasted there. Take it gently, now. Always keep the word 'dainty' in mind. Yes, that's much better—a little finer still. That's it. You'll soon get the idea. Now all you have to do is walk over the edge, and let yourself down on it."

"Er—yes," said Lydia, dubiously. The edge of the bench seemed a long way from the floor.

The figure towering above turned as if to go, and then turned back on a thought that occurred to her.

"Oh, there's just one thing," she said. "About men."

"Men?" said Lydia.

"Well, male spiders. I mean, I don't want to come back and find that—"

"No, of course not," agreed Lydia. "I shall be pretty busy, I expect. And I don't—er—think I feel much interested in male spiders, as a matter of fact."

"Well, I don't know. There's this business of like calling to like."

"I think it sort of probably depends on how long you have been like," suggested Lydia.

"Good. Anyway, it's not very difficult. He'll only be about a sixteenth of your size, so you can easily brush him off. Or you can eat him, if you like."

"Eathim!" exclaimed Lydia. "Oh, yes, I remember my husband said something—no, I think I'll just brush him off, as you said."

"Just as you like. There's one thing about spiders, they're much better arranged to the female advantage. You don't have to go on being cumbered up with a useless male just because. You simply find a new one when you want him. It simplifies things a lot, really."

"I suppose so," said Lydia. "Still, in only twenty-four hours—"

"Quite," said Arachne. "Well, I'll be off. I mustn't waste my holiday. You'll find you'll be quite all right once you get the hang of it. Goodbye till tomorrow." And she went out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Lydia practiced her spinning a little more until she could be sure of keeping a fairly even thread. Then she went to the edge of the bench. After a slight hesitation she let herself over. It turned out to be quite easy, really.

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Indeed, the whole thing turned out to be far easier than she had expected. She found her way to Mrs. Ferris's drawing-room, where the door of the cabinet had been carelessly left unlatched, and selected a nice fire-opal. There was no difficulty in discovering a small hole on the road side of the front bank in which the booty could be deposited for collection later. On the next trip she chose a small ruby; and the next time an excellently cut square zircon, and the operation settled down to an industrious routine which was interrupted by nothing more than the advances of a couple of male spiders who were easily bowled over with a flip of the front leg, and became discouraged.

By the late afternoon Lydia had accumulated quite a nice little hoard in the hole in the bank. She was in the act of adding a small topaz, and wondering whether she would make just one more trip, when a shadow fell across her. She froze quite still, looking up at a tall gangling form with knobby joints, which really did look surprisingly spidery from that angle.

"Well, I'm damned," said Edward's voice, speaking to itself. "Another of them! Two in two days. Most extraordinary."

Then, before Lydia could make up her mind what to do, a sudden darkness descended over her, and presently she found herself being joggled along in a box.

A few minutes later she was under the bell jar that she had lifted off Arachne, with Edward bending over her, looking partly annoyed at finding that his specimen had escaped, and partly elated that he had recaptured it.

After that, there didn't seem to be much to do but doodle a few lace curtains for privacy, in the way Arachne had. It was a consoling thought that the stones were safely cached away, and that any time after the next twelve or thirteen hours she would be able to collect them at her leisure....

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No one came near the spider room during the evening. Lydia could distinguish various domestic sounds taking place in more or less their usual succession, and culminating in two pairs of footfalls ascending the stairs. And but for physical handicaps, she might have frowned slightly at this point. The ethics of the situation were somewhat obscure. Was Arachne really entitled? Oh, well, there was nothing one could do about it, anyway.

Presently the sound of movement ceased, and the house settled down for the night.

She had half expected that Edward would look in to assure himself of her safety before he went to work in the morning. She remembered that he had done so in the case of other and far less spectacular spiders, and she was a trifle piqued that when at last the door did open, it was simply to admit Arachne. She noticed, also, that Arachne had not succeeded in doing her hair with just that touch that suited Lydia's face.

Arachne gave a little yawn, and came across to the bench.

"Hullo," she said, lifting the jar, "had an interesting time?"

"Not this part of it," Lydia said. "Yesterday was very satisfactory, though. I hope you enjoyed your holiday."

"Yes," said Arachne. "Yes, I had a nice time—though it did somehow seem less of a change than I'd hoped." She looked at the watch on her wrist. "Well, time's nearly up. If I don't get back, I'll have that Athene on my tail. You ready?"

"Certainly," said Lydia, feeling more than ready.

"Well, here we are again," said Arachne's small voice. She stretched her legs in pairs, starting at the front and working astern. Then she doodled a capital A in a debased Gothic script to assure herself that her spinning faculties were unimpaired.

"You know," she said, "habit is a curious thing. I'm not sure that by now I'm not more comfortable like this, after all. Less inhibited, really."

She scuttered over to the side of the bench and let herself down, looking like a ball of brilliant feathers sinking to the floor. As she reached it, she unfolded her legs and ran across to the open door. On the threshold she paused.

"Well, goodbye, and thanks a lot," she said. "I'm sorry about your husband. I'm afraid I rather forgot myself for the moment."

Then she scooted away down the passage as if she were a ball of colored wools blowing away in the draught.

"Goodbye," said Lydia, by no means sorry to see her go.

The intention of Arachne's parting remark was lost on her: in fact, she forgot it altogether until she discovered the collection of extraordinarily knobby bones that someone had recently put in the dustbin.

The End

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