

Miller's Court

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In a high forgotten corner of number 13, Miller's Court, a spider is spinning. Every day a fresh web; every day — if she is lucky — a fresh fly. Every day the crawling and launching, the tacking and anchoring, the circling and criss-crossing, until the job is done. Then the squatting and waiting, still as something already dead, for hours, for a tick and tremble along the silken wires; for the telegraphic transmission of the only message predator will ever understand from prey: *Here I am — come and get me.*

Not every day rewards her patient efforts with a victim, but enough do that she has grown slowly and steadily larger since spring brought her forth. But it is November now, blue-cold as her own blood, and food is no longer plentiful. The flies that do struggle upwards to her angle of the ceiling — beyond the reach of even a stretched duster, not that one has ever been brandished in this dank and dingy single room — are poor specimens, limp and dazed, half-starving themselves.

The spider, whose consciousness has a span no wider than her own web, does not know how long she has been resident at Miller's Court, but by sheer chance it is the same period as the woman who lives beneath her. The woman — and, till lately, her man — has paced out the days on the unswept floor between the seeping walls, just as the spider patrols the ceiling, for eight months, now; since March of this year of their Lord, 1888.

The plump, plentiful flies of summer sustained the spider; but now the erratic, infrequent catches of winter threaten to undo her. It is the same for the woman below, though the spider knows nothing of that and cares less. Flies are all she cares for. Let the Brobdingnagian affairs of the human world resolve themselves: she is hungry. That is all.

As she finishes spinning and clambers wearily back to a corner of her trap to sit and wait, the woman beneath is making her own preparations. A splash of stale water from the cracked green jug, more often used for gin or beer, goes onto a rag; the rag is wiped roughly under the arms and around the back of the neck. The petticoats, the under-layers little more than rags themselves, are

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hauled on and the balding black velvet bodice buttoned up. These clothes once were fine and now are not: no matter. It isn't quality of costume that will attract men to the woman, but the fresh fullness of the flesh beneath.

She lifts and resettles her breasts higher on the sloping shelf of the bodice, watching herself with listless indifference in the gloomy window-glass. It's late already: she slept too long. She always does, if she can. For the bare shoulders a shawl; for the waist a clean white apron — the only clean thing in the room. Her trademark. No bonnet. Unlike the older ones, the ones he goes for, she doesn't need the shadow of a hat to obscure coarsened, sagging features. It will be hard enough in any case catching a fellow's eye this dark afternoon, though she's young and pretty yet, this one, despite everything.

Above her the spider sits, patient as love or death.

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Hours pass. The spider does not move in all this time, though a scrawny fly or two veers teasingly near her web, then away. When the woman returns the waft of wine comes in before she does. It gusts through the broken pane beside the door when she shoves aside the wadded shirt plugging the gap, and fumbles a hand in to open it. She and the man lost the key weeks ago. They'd been drunk, or one of them had, anyway. Never mind — he doesn't need a key any more, and she can just use the gap in the window. She'd been drunk, too, when she smashed that last month: fighting with him over money, what else?

She snatches back her hand with a hiss: a sharp red scratch is scrawled across the palm. She stares at it, then licks the wound like a cat. Hardly bleeding. Nothing to fuss about.

Flies don't like fresh blood as much as they do old, and they don't like either as much as the sweet curdled whiff of putrefaction, but for the spider high above, the tang of it on the air is a start. It will do for now.

The woman gropes the rusty latch up and bangs the door open, letting in a skirl of cold wind. Business tonight being slow, she's been drinking in the Bells with her friend Lizzie, but found herself too hungry to stay out without a bite, and too poor to buy anything on the street. Lizzie'd stood a couple of rounds like

a good pal, but there's a limit and she won't test it. She's sure there's a heel of bread wrapped in an old napkin on the table, maybe a dry rind of cheese somewhere too. She rummages clumsily across the littered surface and finds a chewable crust, half a smoked sausage swaddled up with it, but no cheese. It will do for now.

Crouched above this frugal feast, the spider shifts and taps one delicate leg on a supporting strand, testing the air currents. This web is empty: should she build another? There is the effort, the risk, the expenditure of energy — but then there is also the possible reward. Another try could see her survive one more day; could put food in her jaws.

The bled-out sunset light has been ebbing from the room for a while, and it's full dark now. The woman lurches up from the room's only chair and scrapes about for matches to light her last, half-burnt candle. Looking about in vain for a holder, she spies a broken wine-glass perched on the windowsill and drips a pool of wax into the bottom of it, planting the candle in its own warm mess before it can harden.

The new, yellow light is no kinder than the old. What enchantment can be cast over a narrow iron bed, a cupboard, a washstand and a table, all cheap and shoddy even before they were third-hand? What glow can flatter a pile of soiled clothes slumped in the corner, the legacy of a drunken laundress the woman put up a week ago, so she didn't have to sleep on the streets and risk the fiend? The laundress's left-behind brown coat, not fit to be seen in, still hangs before the broken window as a makeshift curtain. It stirs in the night draught, a ghostly scarecrow. No wonder the woman sighs, wipes her mouth, hoists her breasts again, and makes to leave.

But now there is someone at the door; tapping like a stranger, not knocking and calling her name like a friend. She starts and peers, then cracks the door warily. It is the man. Once, he lived here too. His eyes are red and his face pallid and wrung-out, as he shuffles in out of the drizzling chill. He wants to live here again, but she needs to make the rent: six weeks behind, twenty-nine shillings *he* doesn't have, does he? No! How is she to bring a gent back with him hanging about? And how's she to earn the rent if she can't bring anyone back?

He'll get a job, he will — Then he should come back when he's got one, and not before!

As their voices rise the spider weaves, indifferent. She has made her choice and cannot be distracted or diverted. She would weave even if the world was ending, because how would she know? When the man smacks the table in anger she is buffeted by the sound, but not deterred from spinning her new web. What business is it of a spider's what the people beneath do? Only let them bring flies in with them, and her needs are complete. She does not notice when the man goes, when the woman's sobs slow, then still; nor when the woman wearily gets to her feet, bites her lips and pinches her wet cheeks, then leaves for a second time.

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The quarter to midnight has just chimed when she returns again, happy with gin, and bangs on her neighbour's door to warn she's going to have song. A sweet voice and true, hers, once: the life has weathered it a little, but like crazed varnish on an old oil-painting, that only adds charm, she tells herself. Her visitor seems appreciative, at least.

She fusses him into the chair, then stands, swaying only a little, before the room's sole decoration, a print of *The Fisherman's Widow* tacked to the wall. As behind her the painted wife sobs into her mother-in-law's aproned lap, the woman's soaked voice swells with sentiment – which is a different thing from feeling, though she couldn't quite say how.

Scenes of my childhood arise before my gaze

Bringing recollections of bygone happy days ...

The song is a ballad that haunted the penny-gaffs seven years ago: *A Violet Plucked from my Mother's Grave When a Boy*. Who knows whose choice it was, the woman's or her guest's? Not the spider, and nor does she care. She spins up in the ceiling, and down below the floor spins a little, or so it seems to the woman, but isn't that how you know you're having a good time? They call it tipsy for a reason.

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Besides, she loves to sing; and watching herself in the black mirror of the unbroken window, in the dwindling light of the single candle that creeps over her swelling bosom like a lover's touch, caressing her hair and her cheeks, she feels beautiful. Flush too; for she asked double her usual rate and he didn't flinch.

And then he rises elegantly and takes her hand like the gentleman he is, and spins her around till she really might fall, then catches her in strong arms, sturdy as oak, though not as strong as — (no, enough of that, he came and he went and he's gone and good riddance). Holds her at the waist and sways with her, with the song, his warm breath on her neck, his large hands resting on her velvet hips. She expects to feel his swelling hardness nudge her buttocks through her skirts, but not the stiff length of steel that's stuffed awkwardly in his trouser pocket. She taps it lightly, frowns, then laughs.

"What's that, a slide-rule?"

Above her, eight legs dance in a dazzle of wet silk, darting and weaving like a Flanders laceworker. The man's rising musk is sweat and tobacco, with a hint of what flies like underneath. Good. Perhaps the spider will catch something after all.

"Well then," the woman says, "let's get comfortable, eh?" She reclines on the rumpled greyed sheets of the bed. "Take that thing out and come over here."

He does.

There's a bubble and a spatter, like bacon frying in too much fat, and the rich stench of iron rises to where the spider spins. Flies don't like fresh blood as much as they do old, but like innocence, blood spoils swiftly.

And besides, as the woman's visitor gets to work, more tangy smells begin to fill the little Whitechapel room — of salt and piss, shit and offal. The spider can feel the change in the air as the drowsy flies rise, circle, begin to take an interest. It's only a matter of time now. She can wait.

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