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Tarantula

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Extract

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I

The Spider

1

Richard Lafargue paced slowly along the graveled walk. It led to a little pond set amidst the trees alongside the wall surrounding the property. It was a clear night, an evening in July, and a shining rain of milky stars frecked the sky.

Camouflaged by a group of water lilies, a pair of swans slept serenely, their necks folded beneath their wings, the slender female snuggled tenderly against the more imposing body of her mate.

Lafargue plucked a rose, briefly inhaled its sweetish, almost cloying perfume, then retraced his steps. Beyond the alley of lindens stood the house, a compact, squat, graceless mass. On the ground floor were the servants' quarters, where Lise, the maid, would be taking her meal. To the right, a pool of light and a muffled purr signaled the garage, where Roger, the chauffeur, had the engine of the Mercedes running. And then there was the main drawing room, whose dark curtains allowed but a few thin streaks of light to escape.

Lafargue looked up to the floor above and let his gaze linger on the windows of Eve's rooms. There was a delicate glow, and through a half-open shutter came a timid sound of music, the first bars of "The Man I Love"…

Lafargue repressed a gesture of irritation and, striding briskly, went into the house, slamming the front door behind him, almost running to the staircase, and holding his breath as he bounded up the stairs. Once on the second floor, he

raised his fist, but then held back and resigned himself to knocking gently with the knuckle of a curled index finger.

He slid back the three bolts that, from the outside, barred the door to the set of rooms inhabited by the woman who was so determinedly turning a deaf ear to his calls.

Without making a sound, he closed the door and proceeded into the dressing room. It was plunged in obscurity, the only light a glimmer from a shade-covered desk lamp standing on the piano. At the far end of the adjoining bedroom, brutal neon from the bathroom threw a bright white slash on the farthest wall of the flat.

In the half-shadows, he made his way to the stereo and turned the volume down, interrupting the first notes of whatever tune followed "The Man I Love" on the record.

He controlled his anger, then murmured, in a neutral tone quite devoid of reproach, a nonetheless biting comment about the length of time reasonably needed to make up her face, pick out a dress, and select jewelry appropriate for the kind of evening affair to which he and Eve were invited.

He went on into the bathroom, stifling a curse when he saw the young woman luxuriating in a thick cocoon of bluish foam. He sighed. His eyes met Eve's for a moment; the defiance he thought he read there caused him to snigger. He shook his head in feigned amusement at her childishness and left the flat.

Back in the main drawing room on the ground floor, he fixed himself a scotch at a bar set up near the fireplace and downed it in one swallow. The spirit burned his stomach and tic-like movements worked in his face. Going over to the interphone connected to Eve's rooms, he pressed the button, then cleared his throat before pressing his mouth against the plastic mouthpiece and bellowing:

"For God's sake, hurry up, you piece of shit!"

Eve started violently as the two 300-watt speakers set into the dressing room walls blasted out Richard's yell.

She shivered, then unhurriedly got out of the vast circular bathtub and slipped into a black flannel robe. She went and sat at the dressing table and began to apply makeup, wielding the mascara brush with lively little gestures.

With Roger at the wheel, the Mercedes left the house in Le Vésinet and headed for Saint Germain. Richard observed Eve, indolent beside him. She was smoking nonchalantly, bringing her ivory cigarette holder to her elegant lips at regular intervals. The lights of the city penetrated the car's interior in intermittent flashes, streaking her black silk sheath dress with fugitive dashes of brilliance.

Eve held her head way back, and Richard glimpsed her face only when her cigarette glowed briefly red.

They did not intend to linger at a garden party put on by a cheap wheeler-dealer bent on signaling his existence to the landed gentry of the region. They meandered among the guests, with Eve on Richard's arm, to the accompaniment of soft music from a band set up on the grounds. People clustered around buffet tables arranged at intervals along the tree-lined walks.

There was no way of avoiding the odd social bloodsucker. They had no choice but to raise glasses of champagne in honor of the master of the house. Lafargue ran into several colleagues, including a member of the Medical Council. He allowed himself to be complimented on his most recent article in *The Practitioner.* He even agreed, during a lull in the conversation, to take part in a panel discussion on reconstructive breast surgery at the forthcoming round-

table conference at Bichat. Later, he felt like kicking himself for accepting the invitation instead of politely refusing.

Eve kept her distance; she seemed to be in the clouds. But she relished the lustful glances that a few of the guests cast her way and took pleasure in responding with a barely perceptible pout of contempt.

She left Richard long enough to go over to the band and request "The Man I Love." By the time the song's soft and languid opening bars were struck up, she was back at Lafargue's side. A mocking smile came to her lips when pain registered on the doctor's face. He took her gently by the waist and drew her aside. But when the saxophonist began a plaintive solo it was all he could do not to slap his companion.

It was nearly midnight by the time they at last took leave of their host and returned to the house in Le Vésinet. Richard accompanied Eve as far as her bedroom. Sitting on the sofa, he watched her undress, at first mechanically, then more sensually—facing him, staring him down with an ironic smile.

Once naked, Eve planted herself directly in front of Richard, her legs apart and the thicket of her pubic hair level with his face. He shrugged, got up, and went to get a small pearly white box from its place on one of the book shelves. Eve stretched out on a mat laid on the floor. He came and sat cross-legged beside her, opening the box and withdrawing the long pipe, aluminum foil, and small waxy balls that it contained.

He delicately filled the pipe and held a flaring match beneath the bowl before passing it to Eve. She took long deep puffs. The sickly sweet odor filled the room. She turned on her side and curled up, staring at Richard.

Before long her gaze lost its sharpness as her eyes glazed over. Richard was already getting another pipe ready.

An hour later he left her, making sure to turn the knob twice on all three bolts. Back in his own bedroom, he undressed, too, then scrutinized his graying countenance in the mirror at some length. He smiled at his reflection, at his white hair and the many deep wrinkles that scored his features. He raised his open hands before him, and feigned ripping apart some imaginary object. In bed at last, he tossed and turned for hours before falling asleep at first light.