

THE SPIDER BESIDE HER
By Susan Gee Heino

*Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet
Eating of curds and whey.
There came a great spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.*

London, England May 1817

“Oh, pardon me, Lizzie. I didn’t see you there!”

Miss Lizzie Muffet pulled her feet back under the little stool she was sitting on and struggled to hide a grimace. Her toe throbbed where her sister had just trod fully on it. Of course, Lizzie would never let her misery be seen, so she set aside the bowl of curds she’d been eating and blinked back the sting. She gave her sister a smile.

“No worry, Helene. You had no idea I was here.” Even though she had been sitting in that same spot for nearly half of an hour while Helene paraded around, examining herself in the mirror to select the perfect attire for this evening’s ball. It made sense she’d not been noticed, though. With Helene’s glorious reflection so close at hand, why would anyone even see Lizzie?

She gingerly wiggled her aching toe. “It isn’t as if I will need all my digits for dancing at tonight’s ball.”

Helene frowned on her. “You certainly aren’t going to use my clumsiness as an excuse! You know how people talk when you refuse everyone who asks and prefer to sit and do nothing.”

Lizzie wrinkled her nose. She did have a dreadful habit of refusing to dance. But what was she to do? Being in public, speaking with strangers, surrounded by music and lights and the cacophony of dance... it was all too much for her. She never knew what to say, and she made a complete cake of herself trying to remember the figures of a dance. Just the thought of it now fairly sent her into panic! Her sister knew this, yet she pushed her.

“I’m sorry, Lizzie,” Helene went on. “But you have wasted too many perfectly good soirées just sitting against the wall.”

“And you are the only one who has ever noticed,” Lizzie pointed out. “I abhor these social events; I’m nothing like you, Helene. You know I am not!”

Indeed, it was true. Where the younger Muffet sister was bright and bold, Lizzie was dull and drab. Where Helene was tall and statuesque, Lizzie was small and insignificant. Where Helene was friendly and charming, Lizzie was shy and impossibly awkward. Where Helene attracted every gentleman in the room, Lizzie was... well, Lizzie was invisible to gentlemen.

“If you would not be so aloof, you might enjoy these events,” Helene chided. “You might even decide that you *like* dancing with gentlemen.”

“As if there are any gentlemen who would like dancing with *me!*”

“You could have danced with Mr. Paisley just two days ago. He asked you at the Pennington’s ball.”

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “He only asked me so that when I refused you would feel obligated to accept!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Helene insisted. “He could never be so scheming. Mr. Paisley is not nearly so intelligent.”

“Well, he shed no tears when I declined and his speed at turning to ask you was quite remarkable. You felt sorry for him so you accepted, did you not?”

“I suppose I did; it’s hard to remember. I danced with too many gentlemen that night.”

“I daresay you remember Mr. Snyder,” Lizzie said with a knowing glance.

“Mr. Snyder? Oh... yes, I think I vaguely recall him.”

Lizzie had to laugh. No woman on the planet could encounter Mr. Snyder and only vaguely recall it! The man was remarkable; tall, elegant, and his eyes were a green so bright as to be like crystal. The way he carried himself demanded respect and confidence surrounded him like a shining halo. And his use of language! That above all had struck Lizzie. The man had wit, intellect, and a hint of sensitivity, too. In the endless stream of men who tossed themselves at Helene’s feet, Mr. Snyder outshone every one. Lizzie was glad to see that her sister, at last, had found someone nearly worthy of her.

Just at that moment, they heard the sounds of a carriage rattling to a stop in front of their house. The window was open and Helene was nearby it, so she pulled back the curtain to peer out. Instantly her expression changed. She turned back to Lizzie with a flustered whisper.

“It is him! Mr. Snyder!”

“Mr. Snyder? He is *here*?”

“Yes! Good heavens, he’s come to call and I simply can’t go to meet him like this! This is the gown for the ball tonight; no one can see me in it before then.”

It was pointless to argue with Helene about clothes, so Lizzie stayed silent on her stool as her sister ran frantically around the room, gathering up pieces of costume more suitable for entertaining a daytime guest. She called for their girl, Ellie, who came rushing and joined in the chaos.

“I should wear my blue gown! No, yellow is best, with these slippers. Or those! And don’t muss my hair, Ellie. Oh, why is no one getting the door?”

Everything came to a halt as they simultaneously realized the man was still knocking at the front door.

Ellie froze, halfway between poking pins into a cushion and extracting Helene from her evening gown. “There’s no one to answer the door! Your parents are out and Mrs. Clyde has gone to her sister’s for the day.”

A look of horror swept over Helene’s face so Lizzie finally dislodged herself from the stool. “I will answer the door. You continue dressing and I will attend Mr. Snyder.”

The flurry of activity began again and Lizzie was happy to leave it. She hurried down the stairs and quickly pulled open the door. Mr. Snyder was there, just as tall and elegant as ever, and his surprise at finding her in the doorway was evident.

“Ah, Miss Muffet!” he said.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Snyder. Won’t you come in?”

He did, and even the simple business of entering their home and removing his hat was done with astonishing elegance. Lizzie—in her usual awkwardness—would have felt like a complete clod if his smile hadn’t been so utterly disarming. The light in his eyes and the perfection of the little wrinkles at the corners of his lips set her so off guard she couldn’t even think to be self-conscious.

“I’m glad to see you are well today,” he said as she ushered him into the good drawing room Mamma reserved for visitors. “I recall there was rain after the Pennington ball. You were not caught in it, were you?”

“No, thankfully, but how thoughtful of you to ask. Our coachman took care to collect us

before the worst of it hit.”

“That is good.”

She knew he was not here for banal conversation with her; he was here to see Helene. There was no point for Lizzie to make herself comfortable, so she pointed him to a chair, yet remained standing herself. Of course, as long as she stood awkwardly in the doorway, the gentleman was obligated to remain standing as well. So she pretended to be very much at ease and sat in her favorite chair. He politely sat himself in the chair beside her.

She tried desperately to think of something clever or gracious or even insipid to say, but her tongue was frozen. What did one say to one’s sister’s most exquisite caller? She had no idea.

He did not suffer from her loss of words. Quickly his eyes caught on the stack of books on the table at his elbow.

“Someone is a reader,” he said, taking the top book to inspect it and reading the title aloud. “*Travels through Eastern Lands*. Indeed, that would be a fascinating account. And what’s this?”

Lizzie cringed as he reached for the next book and opened the cover. It was a recent novel by a scandalized lady of society. Thinly veiled references to well-known persons scathingly implicated them in all sorts of reprehensible behaviors. Not surprisingly, the novel had been hugely popular and Lizzie had found it delightfully entertaining. As no one else in the household paid any mind to her books, she hadn’t bothered to share the content with them. Mr. Snyder, however, clearly recognized it.

His eyebrows went upward. “*Glenarvon*, Miss Muffet?”

“What? Oh, is it? I, er, I never read such things.”

“Of course not. I daresay you could write one yourself, though.”

“I beg your pardon?” For half a moment she was mildly insulted, until his laughter confirmed that he was teasing her.

“Indeed, you know enough to ruin all of us. Heaven save us should you ever take to pen!”

“What folly. London would likely die from boredom were I ever to write a book.”

“Oh, but Miss Muffet, don’t think that I haven’t noticed! You sit quietly in the corner at every event, demurely avoiding engagement but observing with a sharp eye. Tell me this is not so.”

His grin was infectious and she was happy to play along. “I will most strenuously deny it, sir.”

“I would hope so! There is nothing quite so confirming as a strenuous denial.”

“Then I must warn you: if I *were* to write such a book, you’d have an entire chapter in it.”

“Only one? I must certainly do more to make my mark, then. Tell me, Miss Muffet, what can I do to fill many more pages?”

“I suppose that would depend on the sort of mark you wish to make.”

“Indelible, of course,” he replied.

She made the mistake of meeting his eyes. Oh, but the vibrant depths there! How could a man have such lovely eyes? He was sitting far too close for her comfort. She wished she could move her chair away without appearing rude, but there was no way. She was trapped by his gaze and captivated by everything about him. The excitement and intimacy of this brief exchange set her nerves on edge.

What was this feeling? Anxiety? Fear? It was almost as if she were falling over an edge, tumbling into unknown space. She didn’t like it one bit. Instinct told her to run away, but that also would appear impolite. Her only way through this, it seemed, was to sit in her chair, keep her eyes forward, and pray Helene made her appearance soon.

Mr. Snyder seemed to have no idea of her discomfort and continued the conversation. He spoke of books, and they discovered they had read several in common. Before long, Lizzie forgot to be shy and was quite eagerly discussing things of interest to them both.

Mr. Snyder mentioned a recent trip he had taken to the coast and Lizzie listened enrapt as he answered every question she had about what he had seen there. Were the cliffs as white and as daunting as she had read about? Where the ships in the harbor as masterful as depicted in paintings? Had he been bold enough to actually go into the water and bathe in the sea? For a wonderful half an hour she carried on conversation as lively and fresh as even Helene might have done.

But recalling her sister seemed to break the spell Lizzie was under. She took a deep breath and ripped her gaze from Mr. Snyder. She must remember why he was here! He had come for *Helene*. There was no need for Lizzie to further this cheerful banter—she could retreat to the safety of silence once Helene joined them. Any minute now.

“I... I don’t know what is taking my sister so long,” she blurted. “She will be very happy to see you, I’m sure.”

He leaned back in his chair, the added space between them a wonderful reprieve for Lizzie’s uneasiness.

“You are quite devoted to your sister, aren’t you, Miss Muffet?”

“Of course! You’ve met her. How could I not be devoted to her?”

He seemed to ponder the question before answering. “I hope she returns your devotion. Too often one sees a measure of jealousy and competition between siblings.”

At this Lizzie had to laugh. “It would be pointless for either of us to feel such things for the other! Truly, Mr. Snyder, I recognize that my sister and I are very different types. I have no delusions about who and what I am in comparison to her.”

“None? I think perhaps you have a flawed perception of the differences between you.”

“My eyes are perfect, sir.”

“Indeed they are, and your vision seems fine when viewing things from afar. But I wonder, Miss Muffet... how well can you see yourself?”

“Well I... that is...”

Thankfully she was rescued by Helene. Her beautiful sister swept into the room in a swirl of yellow muslin, golden curls swaying beneath a prim cap, and her rosy cheeks filling the room with their warm glow. At last, Lizzie could sink back into the safety of invisibility.

“Mr. Snyder! What a wonderful surprise! Pray do forgive me for keeping you waiting,” Helene trilled as she floated over to greet her admirer.

Mr. Snyder rose and gave her a deep bow. “How do you do, Miss Helene? Your sister has been a most gracious hostess. In such a short time, we’ve already discussed the weather, popular literature, geography and travel, and her absolute certainty of not needing spectacles.”

Helene frowned at such an odd list and gave Lizzie a quick, scolding look before turning back to fawn over her guest. “Well, I am here now so perhaps we can find a more engaging topic. Tonight’s ball given by Mr. and Mrs. Carothers, perhaps. May I assume you will attend?”

“I have been considering it,” he replied. “If I know that you and Miss Muffet will be there, my decision will be much easier.”

“Of course we will be there!” Helene assured him with the hint of a blush at his obvious flattery. “Although I’m sure there will be so many more beautiful ladies that you will scarcely take note of us.”

It was a thinly veiled plea for more praise, but Mr. Snyder’s response was as swift and as

genuine as could have been hoped for. "I will certainly take note, Miss Helene. There could be a thousand other ladies and I daresay none would outshine the Muffet sisters."

Helene giggled and took the chair at his other side. "Oh, Mr. Snyder, but you do tease. No matter, I have decided to forgive you. I worry, though, that I will not be able to see you at the ball tonight. It is a masquerade, after all. How will I know you?"

"I cannot tell you what I will wear, Miss Helene; it's to be a secret. That's the fun of a masquerade"

Helene pouted. "But I don't like to keep secrets! Very well, though. We will sort you out from the crowd. Let us see if you are clever enough to detect us in our fancy dress."

He smiled at her challenge and was even gracious enough to recall that Lizzie was still present. "I will be up to the task, I assure you both."

His kindness was refreshing, but Lizzie felt a bit guilty for enjoying it. He had come to call on Helene and it was unfair that he should have to divide his attentions between the two ladies. She would leave them to enjoy each other's company.

"I am very much looking forward to tonight's festivities, so I'm sure you'll both understand if I excuse myself to go continue with preparations."

Lizzie rose to her feet and Mr. Snyder was quick to abandon his chair, as well. "Must you go, Miss Muffet?"

"I must. I'll see if our housekeeper has returned and have her bring some tea in for you."

He made one more obligatory protestation, but Lizzie waved him away and made her departure. Helene had done well, attracting such an attentive and doting gentleman. Lizzie almost felt sorry for any other man who might have hopes of dancing with Helene tonight—clearly she would have eyes only for Mr. Snyder.

As promised, Lizzie made her way into the kitchen, searching for Mrs. Clyde, their housekeeper. There was no sign of her so Lizzie put the kettle on and went to the pantry to hunt for any cakes or similar treat that might be left over from breakfast. Helene should have thought to send Ellie down to get tea for them, but there was no sign of her. Lizzie didn't mind managing things, though. Mr. Snyder was worth the effort, so she gathered the items needed to present an adequate tea.

The water had finally boiled and Lizzie found a few treats to put on a plate. The tea tray was stocked with necessary implements and she was just wondering how to carry it all out to the drawing room when Ellie dashed in.

"Oh, here you are, miss. Your sister was calling for you."

Lizzie was suddenly worried. "She was? Does Mr. Snyder need something?"

Ellie wrinkled her brow. "Mr. Snyder? No, he's gone off already. It's Mr. Gentry now. He's just arrived and Helene is calling for tea."

"Mr. Gentry? No, it was Mr. Snyder in the drawing room with Helene."

"But he is gone now, and Mr. Gentry has arrived," Ellie insisted. "Look how nicely you've prepared things! Here, let me take the heavy tray and you bring the cakes, miss."

Lizzie could hardly make sense of Ellie's announcement. Mr. Snyder had gone and Mr. Gentry was here? How could all of that happen in just ten minutes? And why on earth had Mr. Snyder gone? He seemed so comfortable with Helene. Lizzie wracked her mind, wondering what she might have done that would have interrupted her sister's cozy tête-à-tête but could come up with nothing.

Ellie was taking the tray so all Lizzie could do was gather up the cakes and follow. She only hoped Mr. Snyder hadn't been called away on bad news or some sort of trouble. The poor man,

what dreadful thing could have happened to take him from Helene? It was all Lizzie could do to hold her plate steady as her mind raced with worrisome possibilities.

They entered the drawing room and it was just as Ellie had said; Mr. Snyder was gone and in his place sat a rosy-cheeked Mr. Gentry. His young face beamed and he rose to stand as the two women entered with tea.

“Ah, here you are, Lizzie,” Helene said. “Thank you, Ellie. You can put the tray here; I’ll pour for Mr. Gentry.”

Ellie deposited her burden and helped Lizzie find a place for the cakes. When Helene assured the girl they had no further use for her, Ellie curtsied and left them alone. Lizzie slowly took her seat, still unsure how such a drastic change in their company could have occurred, and how Helene could show so little distress over it.

“How good to see you today, Miss Muffet,” Mr. Gentry said, finally returning to his seat once Lizzie was settled.

“Thank you, Mr. Gentry. What brings you to our home today?” After all, he had been here yesterday, and the day before, as well. It wasn’t as if they were lacking for time spent with Mr. Gentry. But why did Mr. Snyder go?

“What other reason would I need than the two loveliest ladies in London?” Mr. Gentry said in his usual flattering way.

Lizzie tried not to roll her eyes, but Helene tittered with laughter. “Oh, Mr. Gentry, you must not say such pretty things. Lizzie and I will become very full of ourselves and then who could stand to be around us?”

“I will never abandon you, my dear,” Mr. Gentry declared. “Unlike some others might do.”

Helene tsked loudly. “Indeed, wasn’t that quite rude of the man?”

“What man?” Lizzie asked. “Who was rude to you?”

Helene leaned toward her and her eyes gleamed as she went on in scandalized tones. “Mr. Snyder, of course!”

“Mr. Snyder was rude to you? Heavens! What on earth did he do?”

“He took his leave, of course. For no good reason! I was barely here to entertain him, and suddenly he was off, leaving me alone in my own home.”

Before Lizzie could ask for clarification, Mr. Gentry chimed in.

“Indeed, it is quite so. I saw the man myself, leaving just as I was coming up.”

Lizzie was puzzled. “But... did he say anything? Did he just march out the door with no good-bye or good day?”

“He said he had another engagement, of course,” Helene said with a careless wave of her hand. “He wished me well and asked that I give his regards to you also, but nothing more gracious than that.”

“Er, that sounds gracious enough. What did he say that was so very rude?”

“Nothing to me, of course. It is what he said to Mr. Gentry on the street!”

Lizzie turned to their newer guest. “He spoke to you on the street?”

Mr. Gentry nodded with great flourish. “Indeed he did! He saw that I was approaching your door, so he addressed me and tipped his hat.”

“Do you know the man?” Lizzie asked.

“Oh, somewhat. We’ve met a time or two here or there.”

“Then I can’t see why his address to you could be considered so rude.”

“Ah, but it is what the man said! Truly, I should probably not have mentioned it to Miss Helene, but I was amazed at his cheek. Since he had been here, I thought it my duty to make the

household aware of just what sort of person he is.”

“What sort of person is he?” Lizzie asked.

Helene took the opportunity to answer for Mr. Gentry. “He is the sort of person who would... oh, I can’t say it.”

“No, you mustn’t say it,” Mr. Gentry advised, laying his hand gently on her arm. “Perhaps we have said too much already.”

“I think she should know, so she can avoid the man in the future,” Helene replied.

“What should I know? What did he say?” Lizzie entreated, although her heart pounded in her chest.

Helene made a sad whimpering noise and Mr. Gentry cleared his throat before pronouncing the man’s crime. “He said that he had been here and was glad to be taking his leave. He said—and truly, it is beyond the pale—he had come at the behest of a friend who promised he’d find beauty and wit with the Muffet sisters, but after his time with them today—and truly, I despise myself for repeating such words—he felt nothing but disappointment on both counts.”

“He did not say such a thing!” Lizzie gasped.

Helene tried to comfort her from the shock of such insult. “No one could have believed it of him; Mr. Snyder seems so pleasant and proper.”

Mr. Gentry was quick to elaborate. “Oh yes, it is his way among society. He is sweetness and charm when he is in public, but among his own set the man is someone else entirely!”

“I would have never thought such a thing of him,” Lizzie said. “Are you sure that you heard him correctly?”

Mr. Gentry and Helene shared sad, knowing glances. Helene shook her head and Mr. Gentry went on softly.

“Did he flatter you? Pray purge his words from your mind, Miss Muffet. The man is a master at manipulation. I hate to add to your discomfort, but his parting words to me were the cruelest.”

“He was cruel to you?” Lizzie was glad to be seated as the shocking news seemed to be unending.

“Not to me,” Mr. Gentry replied. “To *you*. The man had the sheer gall to advise me—as if I should welcome assistance from him—that if I wanted to gain the affections of the beautiful Miss Helene, I must take care to also win the, er, older sister. Then he—no, I won’t tell you. It is too harsh.”

Lizzie’s lungs would scarcely allow air, yet she had to know the whole. “Tell me, Mr. Gentry. I will hear what the man says about me!”

“Very well. He assured me that snaring you in his web of deception would be as easy as snapping his fingers.”

“His web of deception! What nerve the man has.”

Fury rose within Lizzie and she could barely contain it. How could she have been so blind to the truth about Mr. Snyder? He seemed nothing like the man Mr. Gentry was describing, yet why would their young friend lie to them? Lizzie felt misused and betrayed. If ever she should see Mr. Snyder again, she would certainly have a few things to say to him!

“I’m so sorry, Lizzie,” Helene said. “I certainly saw nothing of this in the man, and even when he took his leave rather suddenly, he gave no indication of his true opinion of us. I suppose we should be grateful that he showed himself to Mr. Gentry so we could be warned.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Lizzie muttered between clenched teeth. “Thank you, Mr. Gentry. Without you, we would not know that Mr. Snyder is... well, he should really be called Mr. *Spider!*”

Mr. Gentry laughed a hearty laugh. “Ah, that is clever, Miss Muffet! A spider, indeed. That is exactly what the man is... Mr. Spider spinning dangerous webs.”

“Webs that are made of nothing more than the dust of lies and a thread of false flattery,” Lizzie added. “Yes, the man is a spider and if I ever see him again I will take great joy in stomping him.”

Mr. Gentry seemed quite uncomfortable with her outburst. “Do not! Oh, I hope you have no intentions of seeing him again, Miss Muffet. Not even to tell him what he is! Surely you would have no reason to see him, would you?”

At this Helene chimed in. “But there is a ball tonight! He made great effort to ascertain that we were going—I think he believes I might even dance with him.”

Mr. Gentry shook his head vehemently. “But you cannot do that! No indeed, Miss Helene. You and your sister must both cut him. Cut him completely! Please, promise me that you will not so much as speak to the man if he approaches you at the ball tonight.”

“Of course I will promise!” Helene assured him. “He’s not at all the sort of person I would have anything to do with.”

“I’m very happy to hear this,” Mr. Gentry said. “Mr. Snyder deserves nothing but disdain from you.”

“And that’s all he shall get,” Helene said with a harrumph. “Isn’t that right, Lizzie? As far as we are concerned, Mr. Snyder has ceased to exist.”

“Er, quite so,” Lizzie replied.

She worried, though. No matter how he had slighted them, Mr. Snyder most certainly *did* exist. All it would take was one momentary glimpse of him and every part of her would be painfully, tantalizingly reminded of that fact.

• • •

By all accounts, the ball was a raging success. People had arrived in various disguises, enjoying the freedom of a London masquerade. Mr. Peter Snyder wore his black domino—a long cloak that covered him fully and swirled behind him as he swept into the room. Scanning the crowd, his eye caught on his goal. There, across the room, he detected the Muffet sisters.

Miss Helene wore a grand Egyptian-style gown, her hair elaborately arranged under a Pharaoh-like crown. She was visible amongst all of the guests and, not surprisingly, she was surrounded by a throng of admirers. Her sister, on the other hand, stood demurely nearby.

In stark contrast to Miss Helene, Miss Muffet wore a simple white gown, draped around her in Grecian style. Her hair was swept into a loose knot and adorned with one simple wreath of leaves. A few strands of vine entwined her form and made her all but disappear into the nearby potted plants. With her sister commanding attention, Miss Muffet seemed perfectly content to remain two steps behind, quietly observing and hardly observed.

Snyder couldn’t help but smile. She was the perfect nymph, hidden in her element, unseen by the mere mortals cavorting around her. He motioned to her slightly, hoping to catch her notice.

For a moment he thought that he had, but she turned her head so quickly and looked away that he must have been wrong. He would have liked to see a smile, to know that she was glad to see him, but apparently he’d have to present himself to her for that. With such festive music around them and everyone in a fine mood, Snyder had no reason to expect anything other than a pleasant evening.

He began negotiating the crowd, edging his way toward Miss Muffet. The crush of revelers

made progress slow, and try as he might, he could not get Miss Muffet to notice him from a distance. Pressing onward, he began to detect yet another annoyance. Instead of being greeted by friends as he encountered them on his way, he found backs turned to him and suspicious eyes avoiding his own.

He tried to ignore it, to convince himself he was imagining such treatment. Surely it was ridiculous to suppose he was being mistreated—he'd done nothing to garner any censure. Perhaps his friends simply hadn't recognized him, despite the fact that he wore no mask.

Then he heard the whispers.

Snyder the Spider! The words seemed to float through the crowd, accompanied by muffled laughter, scandalized murmurs, and sidelong glances. What the devil was it all about? He caught sight of Mr. Carothers, his host for the evening, conversing with friends against the opposite wall. The man was easy to spot, dressed ridiculously as the puppet character Punch.

Flipping his cloak, Snyder abandoned his quest for Miss Muffet and stalked toward his host, hoping for an explanation. He put the question to him directly. Why should everyone in the room be viewing him as pariah?

"I haven't the foggiest!" Mr. Carothers said with an exaggerated shrug and a look that indicated he did indeed have a foggy. "But here is my wife. Talk to her about it."

He gestured feverishly toward his wife who was several yards away. Her eyes grew wide when she saw Snyder, but there was no way she could escape. She flounced over to the men in her garish Judy costume, brandishing a poker in mock threat toward her husband and laughing nervously. Mr. Carothers winced—only partly in jest, Snyder thought—and then asked his wife what she knew about all the whispers. When he specifically mentioned the "spider" business, she grew quite abashed.

"Surely it is all in jest, Mr. Snyder, but..."

The couple exchanged glances and it was clear they knew things that Snyder did not. He tried not to let his frustration show.

"But what, Mrs. Carothers? If it is a jest, I would love to laugh along with the rest of you."

"Well... you must realize I only know what I have heard, but..."

"Yes?"

The woman seemed truly uncomfortable, but Snyder's gaze was unrelenting so she continued. "I have heard from Sally James that she heard from Miss Delling who learned of it from the mother of one of her friends who heard it from Mr. Gentry himself."

"You've heard what, exactly?"

"Your new nickname, of course. It seems... well, they are calling you *Snyder the Spider*."

"It's clever, to be sure, but *why*, Mrs. Carothers? Why have I suddenly earned such a name?"

His hostess seemed especially flustered. "I'm sure I don't know, sir! Perhaps... perhaps Mr. Gentry could tell you. Yes, you should go ask him. He is the one who said he heard it from..."

Clearly the lady was hesitant to relay her source, and it was obvious Mr. Carothers knew nothing useful. He shook his head furiously and deferred to his wife. Snyder was forced to turn back to her and eye the woman sternly, demanding to be told.

"What did he hear and from whom did he hear it?"

Now Mrs. Carothers stiffened her spine and turned up her nose. "You should know yourself, sir. After all, you spoke to Mr. Gentry and told him the whole thing. It is only fitting that Miss Muffet gave you that nickname!"

Snyder was taken aback. "Miss Muffet? Miss *Elizabeth* Muffet?"

"Indeed! And well... you cannot really blame her, can you? After such awful things you said

about the girl.”

“I said awful things? What on earth do you mean?”

Finally Mr. Carothers involved himself in the conversation again. “Now see here, Spider—I mean Snyder—don’t go speaking harshly to my wife. She can’t help it if the whole world knows what sort of person you are.”

“Then I wish the whole world would inform me! Just what sort of person am I supposed to be?”

“The sort who would insult a lady!” Mrs. Carothers snapped. “And impugn her reputation, along with her sister’s.”

Snyder was appalled to hear such accusations. “*What?* I never—“

“And you are the sort who would make veiled threats against a rival,” Mr. Carothers interrupted. “Apparently you didn’t think Mr. Gentry would tell anyone what you said to him today.”

Snyder screwed his brow and tried to recall his brief meeting with Mr. Gentry earlier in the day. What had he said to the man? Honestly, all he could recall was passing him on the street and wishing him good day. How could Gentry possibly have gotten anything more out of that exchange?

“I spoke two words to the man,” Snyder insisted. “I can’t imagine what you are talking about.”

“Well, he is certainly saying there were more than two words exchanged! And quite clearly at the expense of Miss Muffet,” Mr. Carothers explained. “And after you made her think you were her friend. Well, it is no wonder she calls you Snyder the Spider, a man who spins webs to entrap young ladies.”

“A spider, am I? That’s ridiculous!”

Mrs. Carothers clucked her tongue. “It’s what I would have called you! Treating her with affection just so that you could be closer to her sister... for shame, Mr. Snyder. And then you bragged to Mr. Gentry about it, saying Miss Muffet was hopelessly drab and that the only reason for any man to speak to her would be to get into the good graces of her more tolerable sister.”

“Of course I never said that! I wouldn’t. Miss Muffet is anything but drab or hopeless. Why on earth should Gentry say...”

But even as Snyder spoke the words he understood. His eye caught on Mr. Gentry, standing near the Muffet party, clearly sulking as Miss Helene divided her attentions among multiple admirers. It was obvious that Mr. Gentry did not like to share. Poor boy. The foolish sap must have seen Snyder leave the Muffet house and assumed that he was another of Miss Helene’s beaux. No wonder the insecure young man made up such horrible lies. He thought it would help his chances.

Well, it wouldn’t. Snyder would see to that! He decided to have a chat with young Mr. Gentry. It was one thing for him to malign Snyder’s character, but to involve the young ladies? That was beyond the pale. For their sake—particularly Miss Muffet’s—Mr. Gentry must be called to account.

“What will you do?” Mr. Carothers asked nervously when Snyder took his leave.

“Fear not, I won’t cause an uproar and spoil your soirée,” Snyder assured him.

Mrs. Carothers grumbled a bit, but Snyder paid her no mind. If they had not listened to idle gossip in the first place, they would not be worried now over what he might do. Clearly *he* was not the one they should be concerned about. Mr. Gentry was the one who had proven himself rude and troublesome.

Snyder was merely going to confront him about it right now.

• • •

Lizzie watched. It was something she was very good at, but just now she rather wished she were not. Mr. Snyder was stalking their way. The black domino blustered behind him, as a gathering storm cloud or dark, churning sea. His tall, elegant form exuded righteous fury yet he seemed perfectly in control. Lizzie's heart pounded as he grew nearer.

But he did not interrupt their group. Instead, he stopped short. His hand shot out from the darkness of his cloak and she saw him catch Mr. Gentry by the elbow and pull him off to the side. Terror washed over the younger man's face as he was prevented from making a hasty exit.

Oddly enough, it seemed few others took note of the tense situation unfolding. Helene had her back to them, so her laughter continued as she basked in the swarm of devotees around her. They could see nothing beyond her, apparently.

Lizzie tucked herself more deeply into the stand of greenery that had been placed in this corner of the room. She wished she could disappear altogether. It had been bad enough to realize that everyone knew of the terrible things Mr. Snyder had said about her, but it was dreadful to see him about to chastise Mr. Gentry for making his words public. The poor young man looked positively terrorized.

Yet Mr. Snyder remained calm. They were only a few yards away, but he kept his voice low and Lizzie could not hear a word. Whatever he was saying, however, had a profound effect on Mr. Gentry. The terror slowly drained from his face and seemed to be replaced by something that looked much more like shame. In fact, as Mr. Snyder spoke, Mr. Gentry nodded slowly and hung his head.

Why should Mr. Gentry be shamed? Mr. Snyder was clearly the one who had behaved badly, all those hurtful, reprehensible things he had said about Lizzie and Helene. If he had not come to argue with Mr. Gentry and threaten him into recanting, what could he be saying?

Then suddenly Lizzie realized what would cause Mr. Gentry's reaction. He was not being bullied for speaking the truth, but in fact he was showing the sort of guilt one might expect when lies are exposed! Oh heavens, could it be? Had they been lies?

Lizzie was dumbfounded by realization. How had she not thought of this before? Mr. Gentry had lied to them! It was blatantly obvious now. Why, it explained everything—Mr. Gentry's pouting, his trailing after Helene, his petty accusations against Mr. Snyder. He invented lies out of jealousy! And Lizzie had believed him.

Not only believed him, but encouraged and helped him to share his story! She repeated it to all their friends, become a party to rumors and libel without one moment of thought that Mr. Snyder could be innocent of the charges. Oh, if this were the case how wretched she would feel!

As she watched Mr. Snyder now, she saw a man who was not capable of the mistreatment she had assigned to him. He was calm in the face of public scorn, he did not rail or rant at Mr. Gentry, and he made no show of violence. His whole demeanor indicated a clear conscience and Lizzie felt the stab of guilt in her own. She had judged him badly! Mr. Snyder was very much the man she first thought him: elegant, graceful, intelligent, kind, and thoughtful. How could she for one moment have thought him otherwise?

Because she had been hurt, of course. Because she cared more for him than she had been willing to admit to herself. Her heart had broken to think his attentions were only a ruse to court her more beautiful sister. Yes, she'd been cut by Mr. Gentry's words because her own foolish jealousy blinded her to the truth. Vanity and fear had led her to lash out at Mr. Snyder.

Mr. Spider.

Oh, that dratted nickname! Surely he had heard it, and surely he had been told she invented it. Helene had been bragging about it to everyone—how clever Lizzie was to think of such a thing. To her shame, Lizzie had enjoyed all the praise!

But it was wholly undeserved. No, she was not clever. She was foolish and cruel. What must Mr. Snyder think of her?

Very little, no doubt. If he had ever felt any affection for her it would surely be erased after this. Even *she* didn't like herself very much just now.

How could she ever make this right? She couldn't, of course. She might as well just disappear and hide herself from society for the rest of her life.

If only she could do that! She slunk back even farther from the crowd of happy faces. The branches of nearby greenery snagged against her shoulder. She brushed them aside, then realized that the potted plants had been placed here to block what appeared to be a doorway. She glanced around to see that she was not being watched, then carefully peered inside the plant.

Yes, there was a doorway. It probably opened into a servants' access and the host did not want guests roaming about. But how wonderful it would be to get away from the noise, away from the jumble of voices and eyes and guilty reminders of Lizzie's mistake! What harm could it do to escape into that doorway for just a few moments?

One more glance around convinced her no one was watching, so she tucked herself between the branches. Slipping easily through, she pressed the half-open door just enough to allow herself access past it. The sounds of the ballroom instantly faded away and she was glad to find herself not in a dark, vacant corridor, but inside a well-appointed drawing room. The broad window at the back wall allowed moonlight to fill the room and Lizzie soaked up the instant solitude.

In relief, she dropped down to sit on a silk-cushioned bench near the window. Ah, her lungs could take in air again and she could relax. The walls were no longer closing in on her.

She leaned back to rest herself against the heavy woodwork of the window frame. Shutting her eyes, she was able to push away the feelings of guilt and misery that had swamped her in the ballroom. Her conversation with Mr. Snyder played itself in her mind again and again. She smiled at the recollection. He had been friendly and kind, while she repaid him with suspicion and insult. How would she ever forgive herself for such behavior?

Alone in the silence, she shut out everything that reminded her of her great blunder. She tried to let her mind wander to a happier time—yet that was no easy task. Try as she might to avoid the topic, every thought path seemed to lead straight to Mr. Snyder! She could see his elegant form, hear the mirth and compassion in his voice, feel warmth and intelligence in his green eyes. It was most unnerving, so she popped her eyes open.

And still she saw the man! It took more than a moment for her to realize this vision was real. Mr. Snyder was here, inside the moonlit drawing room with her, the black domino draped ominously around him and his bright eyes piercing her guilty soul.

"I'm sorry to startle you, Miss Muffet," he said, standing so close she wondered how on earth she had not heard him come in.

"What... how did you find me in here?"

"I was watching you and I followed," he said simply. "Are you well? Your color is not good, I'm afraid."

"I just needed to be away from things, to sit for a while."

"The noise and the lights can be a bit wearing. Do you need me to bring you a drink?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine."

He nodded. She tore her eyes from his and stared at her hands folded on her lap. How could he treat her with kindness? Had he not heard what she had done, the role she had played in the rumors that were flying about?

The music and chatter from the room next door was not nearly enough to drown out the pounding of her heart. She wished she had something to say, but could think of nothing. Mr. Snyder was silent for what seemed like ages before finally speaking again.

“Do you mind my presence here with you, Miss Muffet?” he asked. “If you prefer, I will go.”

She could not bring herself to face him, but didn’t have the heart to send him away. He deserved to hear her apology—for all the good it would do—and she would somehow have to drum up the courage to give it to him.

“No, you may stay, Mr. Snyder.”

To her surprise, he sat on the soft bench beside her. She tensed at his nearness, yet everything about him was calm and at ease. Was it possible that he did not know what she had done? Was he still unaware how she had wronged him?

He spoke and wiped away her faint hope. “So it is Snyder again and not Spider?”

She slumped. “I was afraid you had heard about that.”

Instead of berating her as she might have expected, the man laughed. It was not a cruel laugh, but one of genuine amusement. “Yes, I have. At length, I must say. It seems everyone in London has heard of it, too.”

Finally she forced herself to look at him, to meet his questioning gaze. “It must seem like too little, sir, but please accept my apology. I’m very sorry and I truly, truly regret having had any part in the horrible things that have been said about you!”

“And what part have you had, Miss Muffet?”

“Well... I called you a spider!”

“And because you said it that makes it true? I have suddenly sprouted six more legs and a dozen more eyes?”

“No, of course not! You are not a spider at all, and I am ashamed for having said so.”

“I accept your apology, of course, but I think you have very little to be sorry for. I’m well aware that your estimation of me has been based on reports you received from an untrustworthy source.”

“I saw you speaking to him,” she said, nervous. “You did not call him out, or anything?”

“Heavens no! Mr. Gentry is just a foolish young pup who thought that by slandering me he could enhance himself in your sister’s eyes. He deserves a thrashing for the way he abused you in the process, but it appears that your sister’s neglect is punishment enough for him.”

“I’m sure that once Helene learns the truth about you, she will disregard everything Mr. Gentry told us and be perfectly happy to entertain you again.”

“I hope she will adjust her perception and see me as a friend, but I have no intention of calling on your sister at any time in the future.”

Lizzie was deflated. It was as she feared—Mr. Snyder was gracious enough to accept her apology, but he would not be continuing their acquaintance. Probably Helene would not be upset about this, but Lizzie felt as if something inside her was dying.

“I understand, Mr. Snyder. We could hardly expect you to be comfortable in our home after I have treated you so shabbily.”

“Oh, but I hope I am still welcome there, Miss Muffet. I don’t wish to call on your sister, but I should be extremely saddened if I could not call upon *you*.”

“On me?”

“Of course! When I called on you earlier today, did we not get along well?”

“But you... you called on *me* today?”

“Yes, I distinctly remember going to your house, being invited in, and passing a delightful time in amiable conversation. That was *you* today, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was me, but I thought you had come to see Helene!”

He seemed honestly confused. “Your sister? Why should I have come to see her? It was you that I conversed with at the last ball we attended.”

“But only because you were waiting for Helene to be available to dance with you there. Everyone talks to me while they wait for Helene.”

“Do they? Then it is no wonder she has such a throng waiting for her! But truly, Miss Muffet, you are the one I have been waiting for.”

“But sir... I’m not charming or graceful like Helene! I’m shy and withdrawn. Mr. Gentry was right when he said I am drab. People hardly even notice me.”

“I notice you, Miss Muffet. Every time you’re around, I notice you.”

“You do?”

“Indeed! You sit against the wall watching others, but I have been watching you. I’ve seen you are smart, insightful, gentle, and loyal. You are patient with fools and unmoved by flatterers. You have a smile that brightens the room and your quiet beauty grows and grows each time that I look at you.”

She was astonished. How could he say such things? The poor man must be confused. She had to set him straight. “No, that is not me. You must be speaking of Helene.”

“Your sister is indeed bright, Miss Muffet, but you are not in her shadow. Don’t you know? You are the light that shines on her. That, my dear, is what I have noticed.”

“But... she is the one who... and Mr. Gentry said... Oh, but I was so foolish and cruel toward you! Mr. Snyder, people are out there in that ballroom right now saying terrible things about you because of *me*! How can I ever make amends?”

“Dance with me.”

He took her hand and held it tenderly. She blinked at him, waiting for his words to make sense. Her brain was a whirl and she could hardly comprehend the look in his eyes.

“*Dance* with you?”

“Of course! It is the best way to show people that I am not what they say. The demure and proper Miss Muffet would run away from a spider, not stand up to *dance* with him.”

“That is all I have to do to convince them? Dance with you?”

“Of course! And if that doesn’t convince them, then surely when I take you driving tomorrow, or sit with you in church on Sunday...”

She could hardly contain a giggle. “Indeed, that might be nearly enough to assure them.”

“And if not that, then certainly when you accept my proposal of marriage they will realize my intentions have been honorable all along.”

“Marriage! Mr. Snyder... really...”

“Very well, Miss Muffet. We will talk only of dancing tonight. Will you?”

He stood, still holding her hand and waiting patiently for her to decide whether to join him or not. She was giddy with excitement, and terrified. If she walked back out there with Mr. Snyder they would be the focus of everyone’s attention. *Miss Muffet and the Spider!* Gossip would swirl like a raging flood. There would be nowhere to hide from every pair of eyes. It was her worst nightmare! She was nearly frightened away.

Then again, she had Mr. Snyder at her side. He wanted to dance with her, to be seen with her

by everyone in the room. He wanted her, not any other lady. It was a dream come true. How could she be afraid?

She squeezed his hand and rose to stand beside him.

“I will, Mr. Snider. Let’s go out there and untangle that web.”

The End

© *Copyright 2018 Susan Gee Heino*