



The Black Spider

A film treatment

**Adapted from the
Swiss-German classic
by Gotthelf**

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A small and peaceful village in a high Alpine valley ... a long long time ago.

A fairy tale landscape; green, wooded, and fertile, with a surrounding necklace of tall mountain peaks.

Springtime. The trees and flowers are in bloom, the streams are dancing with clear mountain water, and there are birds and large coloured butterflies in the air.

Credits

The village. A day of rejoicing. The Baker's family is having a christening.

An atmosphere of bustle and excitement. An awesome array of food being prepared. Men are roasting meat and fowl on the spit, and women are cooking vegetables and pies or skimming cream from the milk.

In the front room a lovely gentle looking girl in her late twenties is being elaborately robed and decorated in the traditional costume of a godmother. Her name is Christine.

A surprised shout from a woman in the larder. Anne, Christine's sister-in-law, has found maggots crawling about on the beef. They are a revolting sight. She throws the meat away.

Everyone is happy and excited.

The christening party is joined by the other villagers. Together they form a procession and wind slowly down a grassy path towards the church.

Inside the church: the screaming baby is lowered into the font by Christine, and baptized by Father Dominic the priest.

The party re-emerges into the sunlight. It finds the church surrounded by soldiers -- dirty, scarred and war-tired mercenaries. At the head of the column is a band of mounted horsemen led by a gross, cruel looking man with a face like winter. Beside him we notice a particularly striking young knight - Andrey.

The two groups stare at each other. The silence is so complete that we hear nothing but the wind and the distant sound of a bird song.

After gazing at them as if they were some unpleasant curiosity the knight touches his horse and the column moves slowly on.

The peasants return to the baker's house. Along the way we learn that the knight's name is Gotthelf. He is the new Lord of the valley to whom all the peasants will owe dues and rents. He has been away for ten years fighting in wars and crusades. Everyone is a little afraid of what the future may hold with such a hard looking master. Then the feasting begins. Their anxieties are forgotten.

Gotthelf's column rides on through the deserted village towards a castle perched on a crag of rock about a mile further down the valley.

It is a desolate, gloomy place, in complete disrepair after years of vacancy.

The riders enter the courtyard. Gotthelf surveys the dilapidated buildings with a look of disgust. Some of his companions laugh mockingly at him.

In the weeks that follow, Gotthelf begins to tax the peasants unmercifully. At the same time he press gangs every man in the village to work on repairing the castle. The road up the mountain becomes a river of dust, sweat, and confusion.

The women and children - Christine and Anne among them - try desperately to make up for the absent men. But there is too much work to be done -- especially in the fields, where the crops are ready for harvesting. The village falls into neglect.

But at last the work on the castle is complete. The magnificent new gates are fitted into place and the courtyard erupts with cheers of relief and accomplishment.

That evening the men are summoned to the castle hall. They leave in their finest clothes, each of them expecting some reward.

They are greeted by a scene of bacchanalian revelry, of drinking and feasting and whoring. But their expressions of meek anticipation change quickly to shock and dismay as Gotthelf delivers his message: To complete the renovation of the castle, the peasants must immediately begin on the creation of an avenue of trees to line the barren stretch of road leading to the castle gates ... a hundred full grown beech trees must be ready and standing within the time limit of three weeks. It is an impossible demand. The peasants are stunned.

Only the Baker dares to shout in protest. He is brutally struck down by a guard. The peasants are thrown out of the hall. The gates crash shut behind them.

A clearing on the forest road below the castle hill. A full moon casts gloomy shadows through the pine trees and over the dejected faces of the men.

Silence. An occasional suggestion of protest or resistance is raised, and quickly dismissed with a glance at the bloodied face of the Baker.

Views of the forest interiors: a rabbit huddled under a bush, an owl high in the branches of a tree, a light wind rustling through the leaves ... Over these images we hear the distant clip-clop of a horse's hooves ...

A tall mounted figure appears and disappears through the trees. Riding at a slow and gentle pace, the horseman reaches the peasants and halts in front of them.

The rider is a tall ageless-looking man dressed in a sweeping black cloak, a black hat, and a red feather. Long silky white hair flows thickly down to his shoulders. He has blue eyes, a tanned face, and an expression of frank concerned honesty. Yet there is also something about him which is strange and disquieting. We call him the Hunter.

The Hunter dismounts and questions the peasants. Slowly they start to explain their troubles, Gotthelf's cruelty, and the impossibility of his demands; how even if they could manage the transplanting of the beech trees their crops will spoil before they can harvest enough to feed them through the winter. Many of them will surely die.

After a long pause the Hunter quietly announces that if so happens he can help them. He has the horses and the equipment to accomplish the task. If, during the day, the peasants can simply transport three of the trees from the beech wood to the clearing where they are now, he will not only carry them up the hill and plant them every night, but even uproot new ones ready for them to collect in the mornings.

The only condition he makes is that no one must watch him work, and that the men and their families must remain indoors from nightfall to sunrise.

The villagers are incredulous. What, Rupert asks could they possibly give him in return?

"Oh something quite simple," the Hunter replies in his friendly musical voice. "You must give me the next baby born in the village, and you must give him to me unbaptized."

The men stare back in silent surprise. At first they can hardly believe the request, but then, just looking at the Hunter's face, it becomes clear that he is deadly serious and each man becomes afraid.

In the forest the wind rustles through the trees, and great flocks of birds wheel into the sky.

None of the men reply to the Hunter. Nodding and scraping as if in the presence of some hated dignitary, they slink nervously away and filter off into the darkness.

But over their flight the Hunter's musical voice follows them like the wind.

"Think about it men of Kraken ... ask your women and think it over ... for I shall be here again next sunset."

The voice dies away into laughter. The Hunter sits astride his horse, alone on the forest road. He gazes up at the birds wheeling and turning overhead, then picks up his reins and rides slowly on. Clip-clop ... clip-clop ...

Christine and Anne are aghast as their husbands, Rupert and Hans, describe Gotthelf's new demands. But only later, and almost parenthetically, does Hans also mention their meeting with the Hunter.

The village. Hans describes what happened.

Anne is appalled. But Christine listens calmly, her clear and lovely eyes quite unafraid. She asks what the Hunter looked like, and why the men ran like cowards from him as well as the Baron. There is no proper answer. Christine stares levelly at her husband, Rupert: "But then what can you do? Because there is no way that the trees can be planted." ... And again there is no answer.

Early the next morning, Hans, Rupert and ten other men begin work in a large copse of beech trees. But in the distance the lonely castle on its bare crag of rock is there to remind them -- if only they could look reality in the face -- of the futility of their attempt.

In the village Anne and Christine are cleaning and dusting the house. Occasionally Christine stops and looks out of the window; far away she can see the tree-laden carts hardly moving along the road.

At one point she notices a little spider next to the window post.

"You must dust behind this corner," she says to Anne. "It always gets so full of cobwebs. The spiders seem to love it."

By late afternoon the carts have still hardly moved. On one the wheel has broken, on another the harness has snapped. Only the third - Hans's - arrives at the bottom of the castle hill.

Meanwhile Anne has prepared some porridge for the men. Christine sets off to take it to them.

It is a quiet and beautiful evening. Her long hair blows softly in the wind. She stops sometimes to gaze in wonder at the landscape or to pick some bunches of wild Alpine flowers.

The pine forest. A dilapidated thatched cottage - the home of a wrinkled old crone, a kind of witch who collects insects and spiders and herbs.

Christine passes by. She stops and tells the old woman about the village problems. But the crone only laughs and strokes Christine's hair. Christine leaves her some food, the old woman begins eating voraciously.

The dejected group of men on the forest road. It is already sunset. Christine serves the food and inquires about the work. When she learns that not a single tree has yet been planted, and sees their despair, she sits down on a log beside them and begins to question their defeatism. A new approach must be found.

Suddenly a black gloved hand appears on Christine's shoulder, and the Hunter's musical voice says "Yes, young lady. You at least are someone who understands things."

Christine's back stiffens. But she does not turn round. The men however, including Hans, who only feebly tries to grab her hand, rush off in terror, spilling the porridge and plates. Christine remains.

Slowly the Hunter sits down beside her, talking pleasantly and paying her compliments. He had not seen such a handsome woman for a long time, he says, and takes her hand, and Christine still doesn't move. Especially one so brave, which he liked, for the men seemed all such cowards.

And gradually as the Hunter talks, Christine begins to see that he is not so awful or so frightening, and her usual calm and steady gaze returns.

The village: a slight wind has risen; a shutter on Anne's house starts banging. Anne comes out, looks up at the sky as if expecting a storm, and closes the shutters. There is a cobweb behind one of them . . .

Small clouds of dust are blowing up around her in the yard. She can hear the cows mooing in the barn and sees the barn doors flapping. The men are not yet back.

Inside the barn the cows move about restlessly. Anne comes and looks at them as if fearing that something might be wrong. But she is reassured and closes the barn doors behind her.

The forest: Christine and the Hunter. Why are people so afraid of him, he asks, when all he wants to do is to help?

But then why had he asked for an unbaptized child, says Christine, when he could have demanded other payment? After all a child was a human being . . .

"Because that is my payment to which I am accustomed" the Hunter replies. "And I shan't do the work for any other. In any case why should any notice be taken of such a child that nobody yet wants? It is when they are so young that you can give them away most easily. After all you have had neither pleasure nor trouble from them as yet. But the younger I can have them the more I can guide them, and certainly I don't need any christening."

A long silence. Night has fallen. The Hunter still holds Christine's hand.

"There will be no child born in the village for two months," Christine says, "but the trees must be planted within three weeks . . ."

The Hunter squirms with politeness. "I am not demanding the child in advance. I shall be quite satisfied with your promise."

Christine hesitates. She asks for time. The Hunter refuses. "I made an appointment for today, and now I want to know your answer."

"But if I agree, and the menfolk, later, are unwilling, I could do nothing about it," she says.

"Your promise is all I need. Your promise to do your best," the Hunter replies.

"And how will the agreement be made?"

The Hunter smiles and his eyes shine like a cat. Slowly he strokes Christine's hair and leans towards her face and softly his lips touch her cheek. She starts as if she had been badly stung. The Hunter lays his hand on her thigh.

Rain begins falling, first gently, then in a torrential down-pour. Christine and the Hunter mate together on the sodden grass. Not a word is spoken.

The village. The peasants are gathered in one of the larger houses. Their clothes are completely drenched. They huddle round the fire, their faces lit by the flickering flames.

Later. Christine, soaking and dishevelled, alone on the forest road. Slowly she rubs her cheek with some of the flowers she had collected.

The house. Kurt breaks the silence. Why had the men on the road not made more of an effort to talk to the Hunter? ... They could have helped the whole village ... Many of the others agree. Rupert even wonders whether the sacrifice of one child would not after all be better than the loss and suffering they all face if the trees are not planted.

The door opens. Christine enters. Her hair and clothes are soaked. Silence. Everyone watches her ...

She approaches the fire. She accuses the villagers of cowardice and superstition. She tells them about the Hunter and explains his demands.

Many, including Hans and the Baker, are afraid when they hear the agreement, but Christine argues that if the Hunter completes his part of the bargain without any guarantees from them, surely they can later avoid fulfilling theirs, for how can it be wrong to cheat evil?

Grudgingly everyone accepts Christine's argument. Only Anne remains profoundly disturbed. Christine notices her weeping silently at the back of the room. She goes over to her, kneels down and strokes her hair.

And Christine has told them all everything -- except about what happened before the Hunter left.

The storm continues outside.

Another clear crystal morning. In the beech wood Hans nervously

examines three gigantic trees which have been uprooted during the night as if by magic.

Other villagers arrive. They load the trees onto bullock carts and set off.

They approach the church along a flat road. But strangely, as they draw closer to the building, the bullocks find it harder and harder to pull the weight, as if their load were growing constantly heavier and they were dragging it uphill ...

The peasants are forced to whip the animals unmercifully until at last they draw clear of the building.

A dark and shadowy barn. Christine is milking a cow. Her skirt is pulled up over her bare legs. A pail of fresh milk stands between them.

Kurt appears in the doorway and watches her. Christine smiles as she becomes aware of his presence but continues milking.

"Aren't you helping with the trees, Kurt?" she asks.

"Oh yes," he replies in confusion. "I only came to fetch some ropes."

They talk for a little while, but Kurt is embarrassed and confused and leaves quickly.

Christine picks up the pail of milk and watches him walk away.

Kurt reaches the village and observes Veronica talking to one of Gotthelf's soldiers. Again he watches silently ...

The forest clearing. Early evening. Veronica passes by and sees the men unloading the trees.

The village. The men return. Every window is closed and shuttered. Every door is locked, just as the Hunter had instructed.

Later that night in the forest: An owl hooting, and then the distant sound of a horse. Clip-clop ... clip-clop ...

The treeless avenue. The castle. The lights in the window. Gradually they all go out. We hear the same clip-clop of the Hunter's horse, and another sound - the strange slow turning of cart wheels ...

Gotthelf's bedroom. Lit by a single candle. A knock at the door. Veronica enters and stands immobile. Gottheld beckons to her. Calmly she takes off her clothes and gets into bed.

Dawn breaks over the valley. Veronica leaves the castle gate. On the ramparts Gotthelf and his retinue gaze silently through the mist as Veronica, passes away between six freshly planted beech trees.

Gotthelf turns to one of his followers. He orders two guards to go out that night into the forest and find out how the work is being managed.

Night. Two guards leave the castle for the beech wood. They walk nervously through the undergrowth. Every small sound seems menacing ... a twig snapping, a bird flying up into the air ...

One of the guards reaches the grove from which the trees are being taken. He sits down beneath one of them ... A sudden sound ... "Who's that? ... Joseph? ... Is that you?"

There is no reply. Only the distant clip-clop of a horse. Or was it? And then another sound - a deep mysterious creaking ... "Joseph?" ... Silence. The guard leans back and looks up through the trees at the moon.

He blinks. Uncertain of what he sees. One of the trees is moving -- blocking out the moon. With a deep rumbling crash it falls towards him.

Sunday morning. A pack of yelping hounds. A band of gaily dressed hunters from the castle. One of the hounds discovers the dead body

of the guard. The corpse is hideously burnt. The dog whimpers and slinks slowly off. In the distance we can hear the sound of church bells.

Inside the church. Father Dominic mounts the pulpit. He stares at the faces of the congregation - at Anne, at Rupert, at Hans- but there is hardly an eye that meets his. He asks why it is that no one has been to confession all week, and why no one has taken the holy sacrament ...

There is no answer. In fact only two people look directly at him. Christine, and another girl called Esther. Her eyes are filled with tears ...

Montage: The peasants at work on the harvest, the dark and deserted forest at night. The avenue to the castle with more and more trees in place. And Gotthelf - increasingly disturbed by this mysterious progress.

Three weeks have passed. The villagers hold a feast in the fields to celebrate the completion of the avenue. Veronica and her new husband Heinrich make love behind a pile of hay. There is dancing, singing, brawling ...

Esther admits to Christine and Anne that she has long been pregnant. It will be the first birth since the agreement with the Hunter was reached. But Christine re-assures her. "The trees have all been planted. There is no longer any reason for us to give up any child. God is on our side."

But Anne is not so calm. She visits Father Dominic. She tells him everything. He is appalled and horrified. "You should have visited me first. There is nothing I can do now until the birth of the child."

Three months later. It is winter. The skies are grey, the fields fallow and the trees bare. The first snows begin falling over the valley.

A large smoky room. Esther lies on a wooden bed attended by Anne and the mid-wife. She is in labour. A large crowd waits expectantly downstairs.

Christine sits silently in a corner holding her hand to her cheek. She is ignored by the rest of the villagers as if there was something embarrassing about her presence.

In the forest the wind and snow have started to howl through the trees, and the birds are screeching and wheeling overhead.

Along the deserted forest road we hear the muffled clip-clop of the Hunter riding by. But we never see him -- only the passing shadow of his figure on the tree trunks.

The house. The child is about to be born. The door flies open. Father Dominic enters. He sprinkles holy water over everyone present and hurries upstairs.

Christine turns to an old woman beside her and asks her to look at her cheek. "It's nothing," the old woman says. "Just a spot ..."

The cry of a baby. Father Dominic appears on the landing with the screaming infant in his arms. He baptizes it in the presence of the whole community.

Christmas arrives -- the birth of Veronica's child approaches.

Christine's house. Christine is in terrible pain. She moves frenetically back and forth, rubbing butter into her now inflamed cheek. Rupert enters. She pleads with him to persuade the villagers to give up Veronica's baby. She can no longer endure the pain she has to suffer. It has become her only reality. But Rupert is disgusted and horrified. Christine tries to seduce him. If no one else will, she would sacrifice a baby. Rupert recoils from her and leaves. Christine is alone.

The village baths. A large wooden room filled with enormous tubs of hot and steaming water. The women are bathing. Esther and the Baker's wife discuss Veronica's impending delivery. They are confident that the Hunter can again be cheated.

Outside: Christine stops by at one of the sheds on the outskirts of the village. She is looking especially beautiful, though her face is half covered by a scarf.

In the shed she finds Kurt, the young man who had been shyly in love with her. Provocatively she tells him that she is going to milk the cows, and asks if he would like to help her.

Kurt is embarrassed and confused but follows her to the barn nonetheless ... Here, in the half dark she provokes him into making an advance towards her, and to his surprise, she responds passionately, beseeching him to make love to her. "I want a child," she tells him, "I want your child."

But as they embrace, the scarf which had been covering the left side of her face, falls loose, and Kurt pulls it away though Christine tries to stop him.

What he sees is no longer just an ugly blemish. Buried in the soft skin of her beautiful face, the black and swollen shape has become alive, a hideous parasite with two small moving eyes and legs like veins ... A black spider submerged in her own flesh ... a kind of parallel and appalling pregnancy ...

Kurt rushes from the barn ...

Veronica's house. She is now in labour, surrounded by the midwife and her family.

Outside in the snow. Christine, her face again veiled by the scarf - prowls like a hungry wolf. She tries to enter the house but she is kept out.

Heinrich, Veronica's husband, leaves to fetch the priest. Christine follows and calls to him. Heinrich starts to run. Christine is left behind.

Heinrich and Father Dominic. They hurry through the snow.

Christine - waiting to intercept them.

Veronica's house: Heinrich and Father Dominic arrive and rush indoors.

Christine under the trees. She realises they've evaded her. She rushes back.

Veronica's house: The new-born baby is baptized. The peasants rejoice. The Christmas decorations glitter. In the corner there is a small crib with the figures of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

But outside in the snow, tearing at her clothes and writhing in agony of another labour, lies Christine. And from between her legs, and from the welt on her cheek, there pours a multitude of small black spiders - a moving river spreading like a black stain across the snow.

Later: Christine, exhausted, wet, and half naked, manages to crawl into the house from a back door. The growth on her cheek has again become just a blemish, and she is no longer in pain. She falls asleep unnoticed by the side of the crib.

Then a strange bellowing is heard. The peasants ignore the sound. It grows louder. Heinrich opens the door. Outside everything seems normal -- except for the ominous bellowing from the cowsheds.

Heinrich, Rupert, and the Baker go to the barn. The dark interior resounds with the tormented bellowing of the animals. Heinrich lights a lantern. One of the cows lies dead at his feet. And all of them are covered by a seething mass of spiders... There are spiders everywhere. On the rafters, on the beams, in the troughs, in the hay...

No one moves. No one speaks. Then in front of their eyes, another cow keels slowly over on its side.

The next day: From every cowshed and pigsty and stable comes the sound of animals afraid and dying and in pain. And in each of these places, there are spiders - numerous, small, black and horrible.

Gotthelf receives news that his own herds and livestock have been attacked by the plague. At last he realises the nature of the pact which the peasants must have made. He sends messengers to the village to announce that he will force them to make up any losses that he suffers on their account.

A meeting is convened. The men summon Christine for questioning. Only now does she tell them about the kiss, the kiss from the Hunter. It brings the silence of fear to everyone present.

And then, as always, each of them starts to disavow their own responsibility for the situation, their own complicity in what had happened. They had never consented to Christine's action, they had never sealed any bargain. It is Christine alone who should suffer, she who should be punished, she who should be killed.

But Christine, laughs in their faces. Did they think the Hunter was interested in her? Did they think it was all so easy? No, the plague would not end until the Hunter had received his payment.

Then in tentative, fragmentary phrases, of the kind where nobody quite says everything, an agreement is reached. The next child to be born will be sacrificed. Everyone knows, of course, whose that will be. It will be Anne's, Christine's sister-in-law. But, as usual, nobody mentions the mother.

The next day the plague subsides and comparative peace returns to the valley.

The snows melt, the months pass, and spring turns to summer -- the hot rich idyllic summer of an Alpine valley.

A conspiracy of silence surrounds the prospective mother. Even her husband Hans, is strangely evasive.

Harvest time comes round again, and the birth is expected at any moment. But no one is prepared to stay with Anne. They all excuse themselves with their need to work in the fields.

When Anne's labour pains begin the village is deserted except for her two other children. Quickly she sends them off to fetch Hans and their old grandmother.

Hans is at work on the haystacks. He cannot actually bring himself to refuse his wife's call for help, but he delays, he vacillates. Finally, he returns to the house, and then sets off to fetch the priest. But his complicity in the collective plot is implicit in his endless delay -- or rather in his contradictory bursts of speed and then in his dawdling.

Meanwhile Christine quietly leaves the other harvesting peasants and makes for the village. Everyone pretends that they are too busy to notice or to know what she must be planning.

Alone in the house with the grandmother, Anne is now well into her labour, and tormented by the fear of what threatens her child.

Then from the window of her bedroom she sees Christine approaching slowly up the dusty, deserted street ...

The old grandmother begins to lock the room and to board up the door with the cupboard.

By now Hans has reached the church. A sudden shower of rain starts to fall and he suggests to the priest that they wait until it has passed.

However, instinctively aware of the impending tragedy, Father Dominic leaves on his own in the rain.

The house. Anne is tortured by the sound of Christine's shuffling footsteps outside her bedroom door. From out of her window she can also see some of the villagers slowly drifting towards the house. Yet she already knows that none of them will help her. In the distance she can hear the sounds of the summer storm.

The baby is born. At its first cry, which the grandmother tries futilely to smother, Christine, driven by the pain of the spider which has again swelled up on her cheek, bursts through the door and seizes the child.

Outside in the street, with Anne's appalling cries ringing down, Christine pauses amongst the villages. The spider is aflame in her cheek and the child is in her arms. The peasants stare at this apparition in mute but impotent horror. Christine passes through them and sets off down the road.

The beech trees: as Father Dominic approaches he can see the distant figure of a mounted horseman, the Hunter, still and waiting ... And then Christine moving swiftly towards him.

Father Dominic intercepts her. Christine draws back and hesitates. The priest flings his holy water over her and the baby ... In a few seconds, Christine decays into a wizened old hag. Then she shrinks and shrivels like quicklime in water, until nothing remains but the black ghastly spider in her face. Defiant and swollen to the size of a cat, it sits over the child, its disgusting eyes fixed on Father Dominic.

Again he hurls his holy water. But now it has no effect - merely hissing like ordinary water on a hot stone. And the spider grows larger, its black legs extending completely over the baby.

Finally Father Dominic grasps the spider with his own hand and flings it away. Then he picks up the baby and baptizes it in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

By the time he reaches the village, night has fallen and the baby has died. Its mother is only consoled by the thought that at least it had been baptized.

At the same time black painful blisters start to swell up on the priest's hand and arm.

Later, returning along the silent moonlit road to the church, he comes across Hans, lying dead on his back in the middle of the path, his face charred and black with burns.

When Father Dominic reaches the church he is already exhausted by pain.. He shuffles slowly towards the altar to reach the empty tabernacle. But before he can get there he pitches slowly forward on the steps and dies.

The next morning: another cloudless golden summer day. But the fields are all empty now. No one wants to be alone. The men gather in small groups, they whisper and plan and hide their fear.

And then in the middle of one such group there is a sudden terrible scream ... for the spider is there amongst them sitting on a man's foot.

The group scatters in terror. But the man is already crippled. A moment later his swollen lifeless body lies alone in the middle of the village square.

And so the second plague begins, a plague in which the same enormous spider is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It appears without warning and disappears without trace. It is unseen for days, and then is suddenly there again, sitting on the table during the mid-day meal, waiting on the pillow while two young lovers are in bed, crawling across a man's hand, a woman's breast. It is even crouching inside the tabernacle itself when some villagers futilely hope to find refuge in the church.

The castle alone is preserved from attack. But amongst its inhabitants there is an atmosphere of fear and siege.

Only one of Gotthelf's retinue -- Andrey, a young Polish knight -- seems undaunted. He taunts the others with their cowardice. Finally he decides to ride out and hunt the spider himself.

He rides to the forest and unleashes his falcon. Inexplicably, however, the bird leaps into the air and never returns. And his hounds also desert him -- running away through the undergrowth, their tails between their legs.

The knight is mystified. He rides towards the village to question the peasants. But -- as soon as he approaches -- even they start to flee ... Every living creature he meets runs away from him as if gripped by mortal fear ... For the knight cannot see that the spider which he is pursuing has been with him all the time, there on his own helmet, black, large, and poisonous.

Gripped by a terrible anger, yelling like a mad man and galloping out of control, the knight finally plunges over a cliff into a ravine.

When his body is found, the spider's feet are seen to have burnt through his helmet and into his brain.

His death renews the terror in the castle. The knights send for a second priest, a corrupt seller of relics, to come and protect them. They board themselves up as if they were besieged. The gates are closed, the doors bolted, the windows nailed up.

In the valley below the plague continues.

Desperate and uncomprehending, the peasants search for a scapegoat. Finally they decide to capture the old woman in the woods and to burn her as a witch.

Rupert, volunteers to fetch her from the forest. But when he reaches the house he finds that the thatch on her roof has turned to hair, long golden hair like Christine's. It has grown all the way down to the ground and almost strangled the house.

But the old woman is not in the house. Rupert finds her collecting mushrooms nearby. He drags her to the village. The stake is ready. The peasants are in a state of collective hysteria. The old woman is burnt.

But when the flames die down, and they can see through the smoke, there on the ashes sits the spider ...

The peasants flee from the square. The spider follows. It follows Rupert. Always there, always in front of him when he stops, always behind him when he looks round. And only when he gasps and stumbles and falls and can really go no further does it crawl slowly up to him ...

By now every house in the valley except Anne's has been attacked and lost at least a few of its inhabitants.

Anne realises at last that the castle itself must be burnt. The avenue of trees must be destroyed. Only then may peace return to the valley.

That night in the castle, feeling drunk and safe in their self-made prison, the knights are entertaining the new priest. There is shouting and singing -- and then sudden silence. It descends on the room like a vice. Only Gotthelf continues talking ...

Outside the castle walls, the peasants begin to chop down the great beech trees. One by one they crash to the ground ...

Some of the men use one of the trees as a battering ram against the gates. They break into the mysteriously deserted courtyard.

Quickly they move to the great hall. But the doors are closed. They seem strangely hard to open. The peasants press and heave against them. Slowly they begin to give way.

A hand falls out - lifeless, dead. Then an arm and a leg. For there is a pile of corpses on the other side, all of them caught in the panic of death.

Finally when the peasants enter they find not a single man alive. The room is strewn with bodies, many, as if centuries had passed, already skeletons. The castle has become a palace of death. Every corpse is covered in cobwebs ...

In the village Anne watches from her window, and in the distance she can see the castle in flames, its fierce red glow illuminating the night sky.

The village square is deserted and the scene is an almost exact repetition of the day Anne lay in labour and saw Christine

approaching. Intently she watches every shadow in the square ...

Slowly and silently the door behind her starts to open. We see the spider. Its eyes glint in the dark. It stands beside the beds of the two children ... It crawls slowly towards their faces ...

Anne turns round. She flings herself forward and seizes the disgusting animal with her hand.

At the same time, up on the mountain the last of the beech trees begins to crash to the ground ... And as it falls a terrible scream echoes through the valley.

Dawn. The peasants return to the village. They enter Anne's house. The children are still sleeping. Anne is sitting in a chair by the window. In her arms she is holding Christine. Both of them are dead.

END TITLES

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