



the need for ecstatic dancing to return each year. The dancers were called "tarantati" — those bitten by the tarantula. Needless to say, wild dancing, or any kind of strenuous movement, would be the very last thing to do in case of a really poisonous bite, whether by a spider or a snake. There is no question that mass hysteria or ecstasy really occurred, but certainly not on account of a spider.

In any event, the worldwide list of spider symbolism of one kind or another is long and varied, as befits a class whose members range in size from pinhead to dinner plate, and in manner of catching their food from running the prey down like wolves to fishing for it like diving birds, snaring it in elaborately prepared traps like some Indian deer hunters, or even hurling a weighted line at it like the gauchos of Argentina.

Spiders are very ancient creatures. They were among the first land animals in the distant Paleozoic and some, like the hairy tarantula, have barely changed in form or habit in the hundreds of millions of years since. But like so-called primitive human hunting

and collecting societies which still survive in parts of the world, the primitiveness of certain spiders is a mark not of backwardness but rather of enviable ecological success. They are so well-designed by evolution and so well-adapted to their environment that they had no need for radical change. This applies also to sharks and cockroaches, to mention but two of nature's most successful early forms.

The magnificent symmetrical cartwheel webs of the orb spiders have long served as symbols of natural beauty as well as industriousness. For the Dakota Sioux the orb web was the symbol of the universe itself, with the four anchor lines representing the four sacred cardinal points. Spiders employ their marvellous capacity to manufacture an almost limitless supply of "silk" within their bodies in a variety of ways — to travel enormous distances when very young, to protect their egg sacs, to make their homes above ground and below, and of course to trap their prey. Spiderlings have been known to "balloon" hundreds of miles across open sea from their place of birth, wafting through the air on invisible

strands. As for spider nests, there are vertical shaft or slanting tunnel webs like those of the trapdoor spiders, closed off with ingenious, well-camouflaged hinged doors which could have served as a natural prototype for the earliest hinged doors in human habitations; funnel webs like that of the common *Agelena*, the so-called grass spider; sheet webs like the tarantula's as well as other less impressive species; long slender tube webs with radiating outside lines like those constructed by the primitive six-eyed hunting spider called *Ariadna*; the black widow's aesthetically unappealing but highly effective tangled webs, and many others. All are spun of a complex albuminoid protein which hardens upon exposure to air, as fine as one-millionth of an inch in some species and in others twenty times as thick and yet so fine and of such strength that it can hardly be duplicated even by the most modern technical means.

In many respects the most fascinating of all is a small dun-colored Eurasian spider called *Argyroneta*. *Argyroneta* is nothing much to look at, either in terms of size, distinguishing charac-