

The Mexican Butterflies

They discovered the first one in the cupboard. It was a butterfly, as beautiful a butterfly as you could wish for. It had red wings with intricate green patterns all over them. Yet it was so large that its wings could span the cover of a dictionary. It sat perfectly still as they looked at it. However, it was drenched in vinegar from the wings to the feet.

At that moment I, James, came in from vacuuming the floor. When I saw them playing with a strange *thing* instead of dusting the furniture, I was greatly alarmed. "What have you done?" I asked. "Mr. Samuels won't excuse you for keeping a pet. He'll have you fired. Throw it away, I pray you!"

Next, Mr. Samuels came downstairs. His full name, of course, was Dr. Samuel Samuels, of whom I was a butler. He was a good master, but he insisted that everything be neat and in order.

Mrs. Potatoes, the cook, promptly slammed the cupboard shut as Mr. Samuels asked, "What are you doing?"

"Doing our duties, sir," replied Mrs. Potatoes.

"Is it your duty to be slamming cupboards closed and disturbing my Project?"

"N—no, sir," said Mrs. Potatoes.

"Well then, please do not do it, and good day."

Mr. Samuels tramped back up the stairs.

"Well, that was a close call!" I said when he was gone. "Mrs. Potatoes, we had better not do such a thing again."

Under the direction of the housekeeper, Mrs. Adams, we tended the butterfly in Mr. Samuels's absence. We wrapped it in one of his soft towels; this did not hurt the butterfly as it was so big. At mealtimes, we would take it to the conservatory, where it would feast on the nectar of Mr. Samuels's beautiful tulips. We kept it in the cupboard the rest of the time.

As before, we tried everything in our power to keep Mr. Samuels from knowing about the butterfly. Often he would come downstairs and Mrs. Potatoes would put it in the nearest drawer. Then Mrs. Potatoes would forget where she had put the butterfly and accidentally discover it while she was preparing dinner. Once, this nearly led to Mr. Samuels's knowing about it, and she just managed to conceal it.

Soon afterwards, however, the butterfly became part of our daily lives, and we never forgot where it was. It was almost a reflex to hide it—sometimes in my coat, sometimes in Mrs. Potatoes' apron, sometimes under the chauffeur's

cap, once even in an old watering-can. Mr. Samuels never knew about it for a long time.

But that did not prepare us to find a second butterfly in the piano, just as large and just as drenched as the other!

Immediately, we seized the butterfly and washed it off right away. It was very hard to have two butterflies to conceal. We had to hide them in different places every day and not take them out at all till night.

The next day, Mrs. Adams found three more butterflies. The day after, Mr. Johnson, the gardener, found four more. More and more butterflies were popping up, and it was all we could do to hide them. Soon we had butterflies hidden in our hats, in our clothes, in cupboards, in Mr. Samuels's big black limousine, in the fireplace, and in every other place we could think of.

It was also very hard to tend them. We dared not ask a veterinarian for fear that the veterinarian would tell Mr. Samuels, so we had to rely on Mr. Johnson. He did the best he could, but even he didn't know everything about butterflies. The poor creatures looked at us pleadingly, but they couldn't tell us how to care for them. How I wished animals could talk!

Soon, armored trucks entered our mystery. Almost every day, one of them drove to the mansion and gave Mr. Samuels a TOP SECRET crate.

The next day, Mr. Samuels went out. Mr. David (the chauffeur) was not feeling well, so I was obliged to drive. I took the wheel, and we were off.

Mr. Samuels's directions led me to a small dirt road in the forest. The limousine bounced and lurched. To this day I don't know how I managed to keep it upright until Mr. Samuels gave the signal to stop.

Another car was parked in front of me. It was blue and bore a white hexagonal mark on its door. Finding another car in this dark place intrigued me, so I followed Mr. Samuels. Making sure that he did not see me, I trailed him through the trees.

We came to a large clearing where I hid behind a few bushes. From my post, I saw a few TOP SECRET crates and several men carrying machine guns. Their uniforms bore the same hexagonal mark.

Mr. Samuels and the Hexagon Men had a long talk in a strange language. I knew none of it, but I supposed it was Spanish. Once, one of the Hexagon Men got angry and pointed his machine gun at Mr. Samuels, but the tall leader stopped it quickly.

When their talk was finally done, the Hexagon Leader took a butterfly from under his coat. He opened one of the crates and put the butterfly in it. I was so surprised to find one of the butterflies here that I lost track of where

my feet were, stepping on a twig.

Crack! it went. The Hexagon Men froze, listened, and quickly pointed their machine guns at the bushes where I was hiding.

I froze with fear as one of the Hexagon Men came behind the bush. He pointed his gun at me, and I had no choice but to come out. The man said a few strange words to the Hexagon Leader who then nodded.

All of a sudden Mr. Samuels realized who I was. "You, James!" he cried in English. "What have you done? This was TOP SECRET! We are ruined!"

The Hexagon Leader murmured a few words, and in an instant all of the Hexagons pointed their machine guns at me. I believe they would have shot me but for Mr. Samuels. Just in time, he seemed to remember something and whispered it in the Hexagon Leader's ear.

The Hexagon Leader nodded, and Mr. Samuels said, "James, we have decided what to do. You must promise never, ever to tell anyone what you have seen here. We will be watching you. If you ever breathe a word of this, we will have to kill you. Do you understand?"

I promised. We got back into the limousine and drove back to the mansion. I had no idea what would happen next.

The next day, Mr. Samuels went out again. We only went as far as his office. Once we had stopped, he motioned for me to come in with him.

I followed him into the building, where he sat down to go through his mail. I thought I would be of no more use, so I read a book and ate a sandwich to pass the time.

I had just finished my sandwich when *boom! crack!* loud sounds erupted from outside. Mr. Samuels got up and ran toward the door, with me hard on his heels.

The limousine was ruined. Pieces of the shattered windows lay all around, and stuffing showed through the torn upholstery. Even as we rushed to it, a hubcap clattered to the pavement.

Three security officers joined us as I deduced, "Mr. Samuels, I think the Hexagons did it. Even though I never told anyone, they're trying to kill me, and you too."

"This is getting dangerous, Mr. Samuels," said one of the security men. "I suggest you employ a personal bodyguard." "No!" refused Mr. Samuels. "It would only put me in greater danger. I will use no special protection!"

The security men exhorted him no further, but I was not so easily convinced. On the way home, I stopped at the general store and bought a small pistol for each of us.

At least I had one happy thing to think about: The butterflies back home were finally well, and it was Guy Fawkes' Day besides. Mr. Johnson proposed a party, and we heartily agreed. When Mr. Samuels was safely in bed, we took the butterflies out to the kitchen and brought in countless flowerpots. For the humans, Mrs. Potatoes baked a cake.

It was a grand party. Mr. David (finally well) made a speech, and we ate cake and nectar. The butterflies were the happiest of all, and fluttered about the kitchen.

Right in the middle of our merrymaking, the doorbell rang. I ran to get it, wondering who could be calling at this time of night. I never even stopped to look through the peephole. That was a mistake!

Six armed Hexagons marched in, with the Hexagon Leader himself at their head. They took their machine guns off their shoulders and aimed them at us.

In English (which surprised me very much), the Hexagon Leader commanded, "You will hand over every single one of those butterflies right here and right now!"

My worst fears were realized. I whipped out my pistol and pumped several shots in the direction of the Hexagons. They didn't hesitate to return fire; several tongues of flame swept Mr. David off his feet, and one actually hit me in the leg. I realized then that I had made a horrible mistake and turned the Hexagons against all of us.

As I tried to nurse my leg and fight the Hexagons at the same time, Mr. Samuels appeared at the bottom of the stairs with a clattering. I have no doubt that he saw the butterflies on the table, but he had other business. He seized an unconscious Hexagon's machine gun and waved it threateningly at the Hexagon Leader. Another Hexagon rushed forward, but Mr. Samuels stunned him with a quick blow.

The other Hexagons and the Hexagon Leader surrounded Mr. Samuels and aimed their guns at him. "Put down your weapon," commanded the Hexagon Leader. "You're outnumbered."

"Is he really?" responded a voice from the table. At that instant, all the butterflies rose up and attacked the Hexagons. Most of the butterflies held the Hexagons fast, while others bound their hands and feet with towels.

"Las mariposas! The butterflies!" shouted one Hexagon, firing desperately. However, the butterflies disarmed and bound him as they had all the others.

Not so the Hexagon Leader. He dropped his machine gun and ran toward the back door as fast as his legs could carry him—which was amazingly fast. He seized the handle of the back door, but it was locked. He rattled it, trying

to get it open.

“McPhae! He’s trying to escape!” came the strange voice, which I knew now to belong to one of the butterflies. The butterflies rushed toward the Hexagon Leader, but he wrenched the door open and tore out into the night.

Suddenly, the front door burst open and in rushed several policemen from Scotland Yard. They approached the Hexagons and bound them properly, with handcuffs. Another policeman picked up the scattered machine guns.

“Good job!” the sergeant complimented us. “Do you know who these are?” I shook my head as he responded, “Spies from Mexico!”

“We owe it to the butterflies,” Mr. Samuels acknowledged. “They bound the spies. If they weren’t there, we’d all have been dead men.”

“And women, too, don’t forget,” put in Mrs. Potatoes, causing us to laugh.

“No, we owe it to you,” responded the butterfly. “You saved us from the vinegar. You stopped these evil men from destroying the ancient race.”

“Ancient race?” muttered Mr. Samuels, for once as puzzled as we were.

I could bear my suspense no longer. All my questions came out at the same time: “Mr. Samuels, where are these butterflies from? What did the Hexagons do? What did the butterflies have to do with it? What—”

“One at a time, James!” Mr. Samuels said sternly. “It is a long story. If you be patient, I will tell it to you in full.”

As I sat down, he began. The Mexican government had sent the Hexagons to take over England. However, they had always feared the magical butterflies of Mexico, who would no doubt discover their plot and stop them.

The Hexagons had contracted Mr. Samuels to start his Project, which was to get rid of the butterflies. After performing several experiments, Mr. Samuels had discovered that the butterflies would lose their magical intelligence if soaked in white vinegar for three days. Mr. Samuels knew nothing of Mexico’s plot, thinking that the butterflies were merely agricultural pests.

Mr. Samuels, while working in the mansion, had hidden the soaked butterflies in different parts of the mansion so that we (his servants) would not discover them. That was a mistake! Being on the lookout for strange objects out of their place, we had discovered the butterflies’ hiding places.

All of us (except the captured Hexagons) applauded Mr. Samuels’s exciting story. Then, the police sergeant said, “It’s time to go. I congratulate you on your heroism and devotion to your country. Have a jolly good Guy Fawkes’ Day.”

We certainly did.