

The Yellow Butterfly

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fore the dancing begins, for us all to crowd around the great fireplace, with no lights in the hall but that made by the blazing logs, and to listen while some one or other of us with a gift that way tells a ghost-story. Then, when we had all got into an agreeable state of fright, and dare scarcely look into the dark corners of the hall, lest we should see we knew not what, the lights and the minstrels in the gallery would both start up at once, and with our pretty partners we'd forget about the ghosts.

"On the night I am telling you about all had gone along in the ancient way. Dinner over, we were all grouped round the fire, the flames of the logs making a glowing circle of our faces, and flickering up and down the darkened hall, sometimes suddenly lighting up the great beams of the lofty ceiling, sometimes striking on the two knights in armor standing by the door, as though bringing them back to life for a moment, and then leaving them in darkness again.

"Your granduncle Henry had been chosen to tell the story that night, for he had a great knack that way, and how well I remember his fine, sensitive face, lit up in the firelight, as he cleverly led us from one suspense to another, till we were afraid to look around. But just as he was coming to his climax, and our hair was beginning to rise on our heads, several of us noticed something strange that had come into the hall out of the darkness at the far end and was making its way toward the fire.

"It was a tiny thing that flitted here and there, making a bright spot of gold, as it was caught by the beams from the fire, on the background of the darkness. Hither and thither it darted, coming nearer and nearer all the time to the fire.

"One after another we noticed it, and those who had not seen it were nudged by their neighbor, till presently all our faces were turned in its direction. Only your great-uncle Henry had not noticed it, for he was looking into the fire all the time he went on with his story.

"It's a butterfly!" at last whispered one of us, very low, so as not to interrupt the story.

"A butterfly!" ran the awed whisper from one to another.

"Now perhaps I need hardly tell you that a butterfly in the depth of a very cold winter is a very strange thing. It is impossible to imagine anything stranger.

"Your uncle Cuthbert, among the rest, had noticed it, and I caught his eye. A queer, half-frightened expression was on his face, but he, like all the rest of us, kept silence, and your great-uncle went on with his story, having as yet seen nothing.

"Nearer and nearer came the strange butterfly, darting here, darting there, but always coming closer to the fire. And now it was hovering right over us, a beautiful large yellow butterfly, made still more golden in the light of the fire. It was a lovely little fairy shape, a tiny glory of a thing, and as we watched it a great hush fell over us all, and we held our breath as if waiting for something to happen. It brushed quite close to some of our faces now, and beautiful as it was, it made us shudder. And then, all of a sudden, as if it had at last made up its mind, it darted straight across to your granduncle Henry, and alighted softly on his shoulder, opening and shutting its yellow wings, as though it were poised on a flower. At that we couldn't help it, but we all gave a startled cry, so that your granduncle was brought out of the dream of his story. He stopped and turned to us all.

"What is the matter?" he said.

"Then, seeing the direction of our eyes, he looked at his left shoulder and saw the butterfly—and, as he saw it, a strange, awestruck look came over his face. He looked at it a long time. It seemed a full minute.

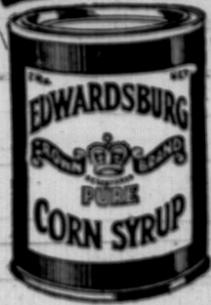
"Then your uncle Cuthbert cried out: 'Don't touch it, any of you!' And at that the butterfly, as if startled, rose up and zigzagged like a mounting

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