

## *Entomology*

"Well, we're just going to have to go down to the school anyway, and that's final," said Dad, cleaning his very long feelers. "It's young Amy we're going to see Mrs Frobos about anyway, not ourselves. And she still looks normal." Dad paused, looking round. "Doesn't she?"

"Yes, Dad," groaned Amy, her head in her hands, collapsed on a cushion on the floor, "I'm still all right"

"Good, then that's settled. Now, Mum, let's have a look at you - oh yes, quite delightful. What spectacular wings, I must say - Mrs Frobos will be most impressed!"

Amy's Mum blushed. "Do you really think so, darling?" she simpered. From a distance of twelve feet, her thin tongue hurtled over and gave her husband a kiss on his shiny blue head.

Amy flinched and gritted her teeth. It was May the First again. As with every other Leap Year on this date, her Mum had turned into a huge red butterfly and her Dad into a shiny beetle. It wasn't normally too bad, they tended to keep out of sight for the day, certainly never went out to work or the shops. Apart from anything else, her Dad's beetly feet couldn't reach the pedals on his bike; driving the car was out of the question. And since it was usually windy down at the shops, her Mum with her huge wings wouldn't be able to stay on her feet. Anyway, the supermarket wouldn't let her in - she'd tried one year and they made some excuses about the size of the checkout alleys; but her Mum knew really that they just didn't want her knocking things off the shelves with her wings. So on the first day of May in every Leap Year, the only thing to do was to stay indoors.

This year was different. May the First this year was parents' evening at the school, and Amy's Mum and Dad had to go and see her teacher, Mrs Frobos. She had tried to tell them that there was no way she was going to let them do it - Mrs Frobos would never allow them in. And what about the parents of all the other girls and boys in her class? What would they say? She'd be the laughing-stock of the school the next day.

"Can't you just phone the school and say you're sick, Mum?" pleaded Amy. "And then you won't need to go?"

"Oh no, Amy, we take your education seriously. It is our responsibility to go and speak to Mrs Frobos and see how you've been doing in class." Amy's Mum was quite firm about it.

"But you could arrange to see her another day - tomorrow or next week! Any day except today! Please?"

"Listen," said Amy's Dad sternly, "We're going tonight and that's final. Now go and get me the shoe polish so that I can burnish up my legs and shell a bit. And a suede brush for my mandibles. Run along!" He stood looking in the mirror at her feelers, turning this way and that to admire the blue-black sheen of his head-piece.

Amy's Mum was standing at the window letting the late afternoon sunshine warm her huge wings. Vast they were, like a pair of shimmering blood-red curtains; very beautiful, too, it must be said. But not very practical for indoor use: every time she moved, a vase or a plant was swept to the ground. Half the ornaments had already disappeared from the mantelpiece. She hadn't yet been reminded of last year's trick where she began to climb up the walls using

her sticky feet - good thing too: she managed to dislodge large chunks of plaster from the ceiling that time.

As Amy left the living-room heading for the kitchen, she bumped into her brother Alexander who was standing in the hallway, his six green legs rocking him from side to side and his long feelers stretched up to the ceiling.

"I *hate* being a stick-insect!" muttered Alexander as his sister pushed past. "It's so *boring*. Nothing but privet-leaves all day long. And stop bumping into me - you know it makes me nervous!" He waved his front legs about in the air as if praying and snapped his jaws in his sister's direction.

Amy ignored him and went through to the kitchen. Which shoe-polish would her Dad want - black, neutral or dark-blue? Amy went for the dark-blue.

Just at that moment, her Mum shouted.

"Amy! Amy! Be a dear and bring me something to nibble - I'm feeling peckish."

"Me too!" shouted Dad, always on the look-out for food, like the beetle he was.

Amy sighed. What did butterflies and stag-beetles like to eat? She looked around the kitchen.

"What took you so long?" complained her Dad, who was now exercising his legs on the carpet, up and down, up and down. "How do I look, my ruby-red butterfly?" he asked his wife, not waiting for Amy's reply.

"Oh, magnificent, my beetling husband, quite breath-takingly handsome!" came the reply and again that long, long tongue flashed out across the room and pecked the beetle.

Amy groaned in disgust.

"I've brought you some things to eat - where should I put them?"

"Oh what a helpful child you are!" said her Mum, her antennae waving in gratitude. "Put the things down on the floor and we'll cope. Thank you, my sweet child!"

"Mustn't be late," said Amy's Dad, "It's half-past five already. Mrs Frobes is expecting us at six."

Amy had brought a pot of honey for her Mum and some toast and red-currant jam for her Dad. Her Mum did not have to move from her position by the window where she stood with her wings gently fluttering and filtering the sunlight: she simply shot out her tongue now and then, ten feet across the room, whack! straight into the jar, then whoosh! straight back out with a lump of honey attached and back into her Mum's mouth. Amy, despite himself, could only gape in admiration: wow! what a trick! Even if some of the honey did drip off on the way, it was still the most impressive thing he had ever seen her Mum do - at least, since last year when she had climbed the walls.

Her Dad was a bit clumsier: he bumbled across the carpet, his serrated feet catching in the tufts, and launched himself upon the toast and jam with no sophistication at all. Even Amy had to turn her head away in despair: this was no thing for an impressionable young lady to watch!

After about ten minutes of this, the living room was less clean than it had been. There were dribbles of honey all over the carpet, in a straight line between Mum and the honey-pot, and in a pool around the butterfly's feet. There was red jam all over the place, not least all over Amy's Dad, and half-way up the wall.

"Right, then, time to get cleaned up again and on our way," said Dad, reaching for the boot-polish to clean his shell.

"Oi! What's going on?" Dad found himself stuck, his feet sucked back to the ground by sticky jam, unable to move.

"Oh, what's happened, what's happened?" cried Mum anxiously, trying to move her feet out of the pool of honey about her. "I'm quite sure my feet weren't this sticky last year! Oh dear, I must be more careful!"

"Help, we're both stuck tight!" cried Dad in alarm. "Amy, get us out of here!" Amy looked at both of them in surprise and concern. And then she remembered that a good way of trapping flies and wasps and ants was to get them caught in jam or something equally sticky. A slow smile spread across her face.

"Oh dear, oh dear, whatever will we do?" she exclaimed in a voice of deep concern. "Don't worry - I'll get you unstuck. But I'm sure it will take me *most of the evening* to get you both out of this mess! What a shame, I suppose you won't be able to go down and see Mrs Frobes at all now?"