

SNOWBOUND

Twelfth-night had come and gone, and life next morning seemed a trifle flat and purposeless. But yester-eve and the mummers were here! They had come striding into the old kitchen, powdering the red brick floor with snow from their barbaric bedizenments; and stamping, and crossing, and declaiming, till all was whirl and riot and shout. Harold was frankly afraid: unabashed, he buried himself in the cook's ample bosom. Edward feigned a manly superiority to illusion, and greeted these awful apparitions familiarly, as Dick and Harry and Joe. As for me, I was too big to run, too rapt to resist the magic and surprise. Whence came these outlanders, breaking in on us with song and ordered masque and a terrible clashing of wooden swords? And after these, what strange visitants might we not look for any quiet night, when the chestnuts popped in the ashes, and the old ghost stories drew the awe-stricken circle close? Old Merlin, perhaps, "all furred in black sheep-skins, and a russet gown, with a bow and arrows, and bearing wild geese in his hand!" Or stately Ogier the Dane, recalled from Faery, asking his way to the land that once had need of him! Or even, on some white night, the Snow-Queen herself, with a chime of sleigh-bells and the patter of reindeers' feet, with sudden halt at the door flung wide, while aloft the Northern Lights went shaking attendant spears among the quiet stars!

This morning, house-bound by the relentless, indefatigable snow, I was feeling the reaction Edward, on the contrary, being violently stage struck on this his first introduction to the real Drama, was striding up

and down the floor, proclaiming "Here be I, King Gearge the Third," in a strong Berkshire accent. Harold, accustomed, as the youngest, to lonely antics and to sports that asked no sympathy, was absorbed in "clubmen": a performance consisting in a measured progress round the room arm-in-arm with an imaginary companion of reverend years, with occasional halts at imaginary clubs, where--imaginary steps being leisurely ascended--imaginary papers were glanced at, imaginary scandal was discussed with elderly shakings of the head, and--regrettable to say--imaginary glasses were lifted lipwards. Heaven only knows how the germ of this dreary pastime first found way into his small-boyish being. It was his own invention, and he was proportionately proud of it. Meanwhile, Charlotte and I, crouched in the window-seat, watched, spell-stricken, the whirl and eddy and drive of the innumerable snow-flakes, wrapping our cheery little world in an uncanny uniform, ghastly in line and hue.

Charlotte was sadly out of spirits. Having "countered" Miss Smedley at breakfast, during some argument or other, by an apt quotation from her favourite classic (the Fairy Book) she had been gently but firmly informed that no such things as fairies ever really existed. "Do you mean to say it's all lies?" asked Charlotte, bluntly. Miss Smedley deprecated the use of any such unladylike words in any connection at all. "These stories had their origin, my dear," she explained, "in a mistaken anthropomorphism in the interpretation of nature. But though we are now too well informed to fall into similar errors, there are still many beautiful lessons to be learned from these myths--"

"But how can you learn anything," persisted Charlotte, "from what doesn't exist?" And she left the table defiant, howbeit depressed.

"Don't you mind HER," I said, consolingly; "how can she know anything about it? Why, she can't even throw a stone properly!"

"Edward says they're all rot, too," replied Charlotte, doubtfully.

"Edward says everything's rot," I explained, "now he thinks he's going into the Army. If a thing's in a book it MUST be true, so that settles it!"

Charlotte looked almost reassured. The room was quieter now, for Edward had got the dragon down and was boring holes in him with a purring sound Harold was ascending the steps of the Athenaeum with a jaunty air--suggestive rather of the Junior Carlton. Outside, the tall elm-tops were hardly to be seen through the feathery storm. "The sky's a-falling," quoted Charlotte, softly; "I must go and tell the king." The quotation suggested a fairy story, and I offered to read to her, reaching out for the book. But the Wee Folk were under a cloud; sceptical hints had embittered the chalice. So I was fain to fetch Arthur--second favourite with Charlotte for his dames riding errant, and an easy first with us boys for his spear-splintering crash of tourney and hurtle against hopeless odds. Here again, however, I proved unfortunate,--what ill-luck made the book open at the sorrowful history

of Balin and Balan? "And he vanished anon," I read: "and so he heard an horne blow, as it had been the death of a beast. 'That blast,' said Balin, 'is blowen for me, for I am the prize, and yet am I not dead.'" Charlotte began to cry: she knew the rest too well. I shut the book in despair. Harold emerged from behind the arm-chair. He was sucking his thumb (a thing which members of the Reform are seldom seen to do), and he stared wide-eyed at his tear stained sister. Edward put off his histrionics, and rushed up to her as the consoler--a new part for him.

"I know a jolly story," he began. "Aunt Eliza told it me. It was when she was somewhere over in that beastly abroad"--(he had once spent a black month of misery at Dinan)--"and there was a fellow there who had got two storks. And one stork died--it was the she-stork." ("What did it die of?" put in Harold.) "And the other stork was quite sorry, and moped, and went on, and got very miserable. So they looked about and found a duck, and introduced it to the stork. The duck was a drake, but the stork didn't mind, and they loved each other and were as jolly as could be. By and by another duck came along,--a real she-duck this time,--and when the drake saw her he fell in love, and left the stork, and went and proposed to the duck: for she was very beautiful. But the poor stork who was left, he said nothing at all to anybody, but just pined and pined and pined away, till one morning he was found quite dead! But the ducks lived happily ever afterwards!"

This was Edward's idea of a jolly story! Down again went the corners of poor Charlotte's mouth. Really Edward's stupid inability to see the real

point in anything was TOO annoying! It was always so. Years before, it being necessary to prepare his youthful mind for a domestic event that might lead to awkward questionings at a time when there was little leisure to invent appropriate answers, it was delicately inquired of him whether he would like to have a little brother, or perhaps a little sister? He considered the matter carefully in all its bearings, and finally declared for a Newfoundland pup. Any boy more "gleg at the uptak" would have met his parents half-way, and eased their burden. As it was, the matter had to be approached all over again from a fresh standpoint. And now, while Charlotte turned away sniffingly, with a hiccough that told of an overwrought soul, Edward, unconscious (like Sir Isaac's Diamond) of the mischief he had done, wheeled round on Harold with a shout.

"I want a live dragon," he announced: "you've got to be my dragon!"

"Leave me go, will you?" squealed Harold, struggling stoutly. "I'm playin' at something else. How can I be a dragon and belong to all the clubs?"

"But wouldn't you like to be a nice scaly dragon, all green," said Edward, trying persuasion, "with a curly tail and red eyes, and breathing real smoke and fire?"

Harold wavered an instant: Pall-Mall was still strong in him. The next he was grovelling on the floor. No saurian ever swung a tail so scaly

and so curly as his. Clubland was a thousand years away. With horrific pants he emitted smokiest smoke and fiercest fire.

"Now I want a Princess," cried Edward, clutching Charlotte ecstatically; "and YOU can be the doctor, and heal me from the dragon's deadly wound."

Of all professions I held the sacred art of healing in worst horror and contempt. Cataclysmal memories of purge and draught crowded thick on me, and with Charlotte--who courted no barren honours--I made a break for the door. Edward did likewise, and the hostile forces clashed together on the mat, and for a brief space things were mixed and chaotic and Arthurian. The silvery sound of the luncheon-bell restored an instant peace, even in the teeth of clenched antagonisms like ours. The Holy Grail itself, "sliding athwart a sunbeam," never so effectually stilled a riot of warring passions into sweet and quiet accord.

WHAT THEY TALKED ABOUT

Edward was standing ginger-beer like a gentleman, happening, as the one that had last passed under the dentist's hands, to be the capitalist of the flying hour. As in all well-regulated families, the usual tariff obtained in ours,--half-a-crown a tooth; one shilling only if the