

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

molar were a loose one. This one, unfortunately--in spite of Edward's interested affectation of agony--had been shaky undisguised; but the event was good enough to run to ginger-beer. As financier, however, Edward had claimed exemption from any servile duties of procurement, and had swaggered about the garden while I fetched from the village post-office, and Harold stole a tumbler from the pantry. Our preparations complete, we were sprawling on the lawn; the staidest and most self respecting of the rabbits had been let loose to grace the feast, and was lopping demurely about the grass, selecting the juiciest plantains; while Selina, as the eldest lady present, was toying, in her affected feminine way, with the first full tumbler, daintily fishing for bits of broken cork.

"Hurry up, can't you?" growled our host; "what are you girls always so beastly particular for?"

"Martha says," explained Harold (thirsty too, but still just), "that if you swallow a bit of cork, it swells, and it swells, and it swells inside you, till you--"

"O bosh!" said Edward, draining the glass with a fine pretence of indifference to consequences, but all the same (as I noticed) dodging the floating cork-fragments with skill and judgment.

"O, it's all very well to say bosh," replied Harold, nettled; "but every one knows it's true but you. Why, when Uncle Thomas was here last, and

they got up a bottle of wine for him, he took just one tiny sip out of his glass, and then he said, 'Poo, my goodness, that's corked!' And he wouldn't touch it. And they had to get a fresh bottle up. The funny part was, though, I looked in his glass afterwards, when it was brought out into the passage, and there wasn't any cork in it at all! So I drank it all off, and it was very good!"

"You'd better be careful, young man!" said his elder brother, regarding him severely. "D' you remember that night when the Mummers were here, and they had mulled port, and you went round and emptied all the glasses after they had gone away?"

"Ow! I did feel funny that night," chuckled Harold. "Thought the house was comin' down, it jumped about so; and Martha had to carry me up to bed, 'cos the stairs was goin' all waggity!"

We gazed searchingly at our graceless junior; but it was clear that he viewed the matter in the light of a phenomenon rather than of a delinquency.

A third bottle was by this time circling; and Selina, who had evidently waited for it to reach her, took a most unfairly long pull, and then jumping up and shaking out her frock, announced that she was going for a walk. Then she fled like a hare; for it was the custom of our Family to meet with physical coercion any independence of action in individuals.

"She's off with those Vicarage girls again," said Edward, regarding Selina's long black legs twinkling down the path. "She goes out with them every day now; and as soon as ever they start, all their heads go together and they chatter, chatter, chatter the whole blessed time! I can't make out what they find to talk about. They never stop; it's gabble, gabble, gabble right along, like a nest of young rooks!"

"P'raps they talk about birds'-eggs," I suggested sleepily (the sun was hot, the turf soft, the ginger-beer potent); "and about ships, and buffaloes, and desert islands; and why rabbits have white tails; and whether they'd sooner have a schooner or a cutter; and what they'll be when they're men--at least, I mean there's lots of things to talk about, if you WANT to talk."

"Yes; but they don't talk about those sort of things at all," persisted Edward. "How CAN they? They don't KNOW anything; they can't DO anything--except play the piano, and nobody would want to talk about THAT; and they don't care about anything--anything sensible, I mean. So what DO they talk about?"

"I asked Martha once," put in Harold; "and she said, 'Never YOU mind; young ladies has lots of things to talk about that young gentlemen can't understand.'"

"I don't believe it," Edward growled.

"Well, that's what she SAID, anyway," rejoined Harold, indifferently. The subject did not seem to him of first-class importance, and it was hindering the circulation of the ginger-beer.

We heard the click of the front-gate. Through a gap in the hedge we could see the party setting off down the road. Selina was in the middle: a Vicarage girl had her by either arm; their heads were together, as Edward had described; and the clack of their tongues came down the breeze like the busy pipe of starlings on a bright March morning.

"What DO they talk about, Charlotte?" I inquired, wishing to pacify Edward. "You go out with them sometimes."

"I don't know," said poor Charlotte, dolefully. "They make me walk behind, 'cos they say I'm too little, and mustn't hear. And I DO want to so," she added.

"When any lady comes to see Aunt Eliza," said Harold, "they both talk at once all the time. And yet each of 'em seems to hear what the other one's saying. I can't make out how they do it. Grown-up people are so clever!"

"The Curate's the funniest man," I remarked. "He's always saying things that have no sense in them at all, and then laughing at them as if they were jokes. Yesterday, when they asked him if he'd have some more tea he said 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,' and

then sniggered all over. I didn't see anything funny in that. And then somebody asked him about his button-hole and he said "'Tis but a little faded flower,' and exploded again. I thought it very stupid."

"O HIM," said Edward contemptuously: "he can't help it, you know; it's a sort of way he's got. But it's these girls I can't make out. If they've anything really sensible to talk about, how is it nobody knows what it is? And if they haven't--and we know they CAN'T have, naturally--why don't they shut up their jaw? This old rabbit here--HE doesn't want to talk. He's got something better to do." And Edward aimed a ginger-beer cork at the unruffled beast, who never budged.

"O but rabbits DO talk," interposed Harold. "I've watched them often in their hutch. They put their heads together and their noses go up and down, just like Selina's and the Vicarage girls'. Only of course I can't hear what they're saying."

"Well, if they do," said Edward, unwillingly, "I'll bet they don't talk such rot as those girls do!"--which was ungenerous, as well as unfair; for it had not yet transpired--nor has it to this day--WHAT Selina and her friends talked about.