

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

(A tale of the Selkirks, by Ralph Connor.)

CHAPTER IX.

THE LEAGUE'S REVENGE.

As we stood outside of Craig's shack in the dim starlight, we could not hide from ourselves that we were beaten. It was not so much grief as a blind fury that filled my heart, and looking at the faces of the men about me I read the same feeling there. But what could we do? The yells of carousing miners down at Slavin's told us that nothing could be done with them that night. To be so utterly beaten, and unfairly, and with no chance of revenge, was maddening.

'I'd like to get back at 'em,' said Abe, carefully repressing himself.

'I've got it, men,' said Graeme suddenly. 'This town does not require all the whiskey there is in it'; and he unfolded his plan. It was to gain possession of Slavin's saloon and the bar of the Black Rock Hotel, and clear out all the liquor to be found in both these places. I did not much like the idea; and Geordie said, 'I'm ga'en aifter the lad; I'll hae naethin' tae dae wi' yon. It's no' that easy, an' it's a sinfu' waste.'

But Abe was wild to try it, and Shaw was quite willing, while old Nelson sternly approved.

'Nelson, you and Shaw get a couple of our men and attend to the saloon. Slavin and the whole gang are up at the Black Rock, so you won't have much trouble; but come to us as soon as you can.'

And so we went our ways.

Then followed a scene the like of which I can never hope to see again, and it was worth a man's seeing. But there were times that night when I wished I had not agreed to follow Graeme in his plot.

As we went up to the hotel, I asked Graeme, 'What about the law of this?'

'Law!' he replied indignantly. 'They haven't troubled much about law in the whiskey business here. They get a keg of high wines and some drugs and begin operations. No!' he went on; 'if we can get the crowd out, and ourselves in, we'll make them break the law in getting us out. The law won't trouble us over smuggled whiskey. It will be a great lark, and they won't crow too loud over the League.'

I did not like the undertaking at first; but as I thought of the whole wretched illegal business flourishing upon the weakness of the men in the mines and camps, whom I had learned to regard as brothers, and especially as I thought of the cowards that did for Nixon, I let my scruples go, and determined, with Abe, 'to get back at 'em.'

We had no difficulty getting them out. Abe began to yell. Some men rushed out to learn the cause. He seized the foremost man, making a hideous uproar all the while, and in three minutes had every man out of the hotel and a lively row going on.

In two minutes more Graeme and I had the door to the ball-room locked and barricaded with empty casks. We then closed the door of the bar-room leading to the outside. The bar-room was a strongly built log-shack, with a heavy door secured, after the manner of the early cabins, with two strong oak bars, so that we felt safe from attack from that quarter.

The ball-room we could not hold long, for the door was slight and entrance was

possible through the windows. But as only a few casks of liquor were left there, our main work would be in the bar, so that the fight would be to hold the passage-way. This we barricaded with casks and tables. But by this time the crowd had begun to realize what had happened, and were wildly yelling at door and windows. With an axe which Graeme had brought with him the casks were soon stove in, and left to empty themselves.

As I was about to empty the last cask, Graeme stopped me, saying, 'Let that stand here. It will help us.' And so it did. 'Now skip for the barricade,' yelled Graeme, as a man came crashing through the window. Before he could regain his feet, however, Graeme had seized him and flung him out upon the heads of the crowd outside. But through the other windows men were coming in, and Graeme rushed for the barricade, followed by two of the enemy, the foremost of whom I received at the top and hurled back upon the others.

'Now, be quick!' said Graeme; 'I'll hold this. Don't break any bottles on the floor—throw them out there,' pointing to a little window high up in the wall.

I made all haste. The casks did not take much time, and soon the whiskey and beer were flowing over the floor. It made me think of Geordie's regret over the 'sinfu' waste.' The bottles took longer, and glancing up now and then I saw that Graeme was being hard pressed. Men would leap, two and three at a time, upon the barricade, and Graeme's arms would shoot out, and over they would topple upon the heads of those nearest. It was a great sight to see him standing alone with a smile on his face and the light of battle in his eye, coolly meeting his assailants with those terrific, lightning-like blows. In fifteen minutes my work was done.

'What next?' I asked. 'How do we get out?'

'How is the door?' he replied.

I looked through the port-hole and said, 'A crowd of men waiting.'

'We'll have to make a dash for it, I fancy,' he replied cheerfully, though his face was covered with blood and his breath was coming in short gasps.

'Get down the bars and be ready.' But even as he spoke a chair hurled from below caught him on the arm, and before he could recover, a man had cleared the barricade and was upon him like a tiger. It was Idaho Jack.

'Hold the barricade,' Graeme called out, as they both went down.

I sprang to his place, but I had not much hope of holding it long. I had the heavy oak bar of the door in my hands, and swinging it round my head I made the crowd give back for a few moments.

Meantime Graeme had shaken off his enemy, who was circling about him upon his tip-toes, with a long knife in his hand, waiting for a chance to spring.

'I have been waiting for this for some time, Mr. Graeme,' he said smiling.

'Yes,' replied Graeme, 'ever since I spoiled your cut-throat game in 'Frisco. How is the little one?' he added sarcastically.

Idaho's face lost its smile and became distorted with fury as he replied, spitting out his words, 'She is—where you will be before I am done with you.'

'Ah! you murdered her too! You'll hang some beautiful day, Idaho,' said Graeme, as Idaho sprang upon him.

Graeme dodged his blow and caught his forearm with his left hand and held up high the murderous knife. Back and forward they swayed over the floor, slippery with whiskey, the knife held high in the air. I wondered why Graeme did not strike, and then I saw his right hand hung limp from the wrist. The men were crowding upon the barricade. I was in despair. Graeme's strength was going fast. With a yell of exultant fury Idaho threw himself with all his weight upon Graeme, who could only cling to him. They swayed together towards me, but as they fell I brought down my bar upon the upraised hand and sent the knife flying across the room. Idaho's howl of rage and pain was mingled with a shout from below, and there, dashing the crowd to right and left, came old Nelson, followed by Abe, Sandy, Baptiste, Shaw, and others. As they reached the barricade it crashed down and, carrying me with it, pinned me fast.

Looking out between the barrels, I saw what froze my heart with horror. In the fall Graeme had wound his arms about his enemy and held him in a grip so deadly that he could not strike; but Graeme's strength was failing, and when I looked I saw that Idaho was slowly dragging both across the slippery floor to where the knife lay. Nearer and nearer his outstretched fingers came to the knife. In vain I yelled and struggled. My voice was lost in the awful din, and the barricade held me fast. Above me, standing on a barrel-head, was Baptiste, yelling like a demon. In vain I called to him. My fingers could just reach his foot, and he heeded not at all my touch. Slowly Idaho was dragging his almost unconscious victim toward the knife. His fingers were touching the blade point, when, under a sudden inspiration, I pulled out my penknife, opened it with my teeth, and drove the blade into Baptiste's foot. With a blood-curdling yell he sprang down and began dancing round in his rage, peering among the barrels.

'Look! look!' I was calling in agony, and pointing; 'for heaven's sake, look! Baptiste!'

The fingers had closed upon the knife, the knife was already high in the air, when, with a shriek, Baptiste cleared the room at a bound, and, before the knife could fall, the little Frenchman's boot had caught the uplifted wrist, and sent the knife flying to the wall.

Then there was a great rushing sound as of wind through the forest, and the lights went out. When I awoke, I found myself lying with my head on Graeme's knees, and Baptiste sprinkling snow on my face. As I looked up Graeme leaned over me, and, smiling down into my eyes, he said—

'Good boy! It was a great fight, and we put it up well'; and then he whispered, 'I owe you my life, my boy.'

His words thrilled my heart through and through, for I loved him as only men can love men; but I only answered—

'I could not keep them back.'

'It was well done,' he said; and I felt proud.

I confess I was thankful to be so well out of it, for Graeme got off with a bone in his wrist broken, and I with a couple of ribs cracked; but had it not been for the open barrel of whiskey which kept them occupied for a time, offering too good a chance to be lost, and for the timely arrival of Nelson, neither of us had ever seen the light again.

(To be continued.)