

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER V.

THE MAKING OF THE LEAGUE.

Thursday morning found Craig anxious, even gloomy, but with fight in every line of his face. I tried to cheer him in my clumsy way by chaffing him about his League. But he did not blaze up as he has often did. It was a thing too near his heart for that. He only shrank a little from my stupid chaff and said—

'Don't, old chap; this is a good deal to me. I've tried for two years to get this, and if it falls through now, I shall find it hard to bear.'

Then I repented my light words and said, 'Why! the thing will go sure enough; after that scene in the church they won't go back.'

'Poor fellows!' he said as if to himself; 'whiskey is about the only excitement they have, and they find it pretty tough to give it up; and a lot of the men are against the total abstinence idea. It seems rot to them.'

'It is pretty steep,' I said. 'Can't you do without it?'

'No; I fear not. There is nothing else for it. Some of them talk of compromise. They want to quit the saloon and drink quietly in their shacks. The moderate drinker may have his place in other countries, though I can't see it. I haven't thought that out, but here the only safe man is the man who quits it dead and fights it straight; anything else is sheerest humbug and nonsense.'

I had not gone in much for total abstinence to this time, chiefly because its advocates seemed for the most part to be somewhat ill-balanced; but as I listened to Craig, I began to feel that perhaps there was a total abstinence side to the temperance question; and as to Black Rock, I could see how it must be one thing or the other.

We found Mrs. Mavor brave and bright. She shared Mr. Craig's anxiety but not his gloom. Her courage was of that serene kind that refuses to believe defeat possible, and lifts the spirit into the triumph of final victory. Through the past week she had been carefully disposing her forces and winning recruits. And yet she never seemed to urge or persuade the men; but as evening after evening the miners dropped into the cosy room downstairs, with her talk and her songs she charmed them till they were wholly hers. She took for granted their loyalty, trusted them utterly, and so made it difficult for them to be other than true men.

That night Mrs. Mavor's large store-room, which had been fitted up with seats, was crowded with miners when Mr. Craig and I entered.

After a glance over the crowd, Craig said, 'There's the manager; that means war.' And I saw a tall man, very fair, whose chin fell away to the vanishing point, and whose hair was parted in the middle, talking to Mrs. Mavor. She was dressed in some rich soft stuff that became her well. She was looking beautiful as ever, but there was something quite new in her manner. Her air of good-fellowship was gone, and she was the high-bred lady, whose gentle dignity and sweet grace, while very winning, made familiarity impossible.

The manager was doing his best, and appeared to be well pleased with himself. 'She'll get him if any one can. I failed,' said Craig.

I stood looking at the men, and a fine lot of fellows they were. Free, easy, bold in their bearing, they gave no sign of rudeness; and, from their frequent glances toward Mrs. Mavor, I could see they were always conscious of her presence. No men are so truly gentle as are the Westerners in the presence of a good woman. They were evidently of all classes and ranks originally, but now, and in this country of real measurements, they ranked simply according to the 'man' in them. 'See that handsome young chap of dissipated appearance?' said Craig; 'that's Vernon Winton, an Oxford graduate, blue blood, awfully plucky, but quite gone. When he gets repentant, instead of shooting himself, he comes to Mrs. Mavor. Fact, 'From Oxford University to Black Rock mining camp is something of a step,' I replied.

'That queer-looking little chap in the corner is Billy Breen. How in the world has he got here?' went on Mr. Craig. Queer-looking he was. A little man, with a small head set on heavy square shoulders, long arms, and huge hands that sprawled all over his body; altogether a most ungainly specimen of humanity.

By this time Mrs. Mavor had finished with the manager, and was in the centre of a group of miners. Her grand air was all gone, and she was their comrade, their friend, one of themselves. Nor did she assume the role of entertainer, but rather did she, with half-shy air, cast herself upon their chivalry, and they were too truly gentlemen to fail her. It is hard to make Western men, and especially old-timers, talk. But this gift was hers, and it stirred my admiration to see her draw on a grizzled veteran to tell how, twenty years ago, he had crossed the Great Divide, and had seen and done what no longer fell to me to see or do in these new days. And so she won the old-timer. But it was beautiful to see the innocent guile with which she caught Billy Breen, and drew him to her corner near the organ. What she was saying I knew not, but poor Billy was protesting, waving his big hands.

The meeting came to order, with Shaw in the chair, and the handsome young Oxford man secretary. Shaw stated the object of the meeting in a few halting words; but when he came to speak of the pleasure he and all felt in being together in that room, his words flowed in a stream, warm and full. Then there was a pause, and Mr. Craig was called. But he knew better than to speak at that point. Finally Nixon rose hesitatingly; but, as he caught a bright smile from Mrs. Mavor, he straightened himself as if for a fight.

'I ain't no good at makin' speeches,' he began; 'but it ain't speeches we want. We've got somethin' to do, and what we want to know is how to do it. And to be right plain, we want to know how to drive this cursed whiskey out of Black Rock. You all know what it's doing for us—at least for some of us. And it's time to stop it now, or for some of us it'll mighty soon be too late. And the only way to stop its work is to quit drinkin' it and help others to quit. I hear some talk of a League, and what I say is, if it's a League out and out against whiskey, a Total Abstinence right to the ground, then I'm with it—that's my talk—I move we make that kind of League.'

Nixon sat down amid cheers and a chorus of remarks, 'Good man!' 'That's the talk!' 'Stay with it!' but he waited for the smile and the glance that came to him from the beautiful face in the corner, and with that he seemed content.

Again there was silence. Then the secretary rose with a slight flush upon his handsome, delicate face, and seconded the motion. If they would pardon a personal reference he would give them his reasons. He had come to this country to make his fortune; now he was anxious to make enough to enable him to go home with some degree of honor. His home held everything that was dear to him. Between him and that home, between him and all that was good and beautiful and honorable, stood whiskey. 'I am ashamed to confess,' and the flush deepened on his cheek, and his lips grew thinner, 'that I feel the need of some such league.' His handsome face, his perfect style of address, learned possibly in the 'Union,' but, more than all, his show of nerve—for these men knew how to value that—made a strong impression on his audience; but there were following cheers.

Mr. Craig appeared hopeful; but on Mrs. Mavor's face there was a look of wistful, tender pity, for she knew how much the words had cost the lad.

Then up rose a sturdy, hard-featured man, with a burr in his voice that proclaimed his birth. His name was George Crawford, I afterwards learned, but every one called him Geordie. He was a character in his way, fond of his glass; but though he was never known to refuse a drink, he was never known to be drunk. He took his drink, for the most part, with bread and cheese in his own shack, or with a friend or two in a sober, respectable way, but never could be induced to join the wild carousals in Slavin's saloon. He made the highest wages, but was far too true a Scot to spend his money recklessly. Every one waited eagerly to hear Geordie's mind. He spoke solemnly, as befitted a Scotsman expressing a deliberate opinion, and carefully, as if choosing his best English, for when Geordie became excited no one in Black Rock could understand him.

'Maister Chairman,' said Geordie, 'I'm aye for temperance in a' things.' There was a shout of laughter, at which Geordie gazed round in pained surprise. 'I'll no deny,' he went on in an explanatory tone, 'that I tak ma mornin', an' maybe a nip at noon, an' a wee drap aifter wark in the evenin', n' whiles a sip o' toddy wi' a freen thae cauld nights. But I'm no' a guzzler, an' I dinna gang in wi' thae loons flingin' aboot guid money.'

'And that's thure for you, me bye,' interrupted a rich Irish brogue, to the delight of the crowd and the amazement of Geordie, who went calmly on—

'Ah, I canna bide yon saloon whaur they sell sic awfu'-like stuff—it's mair like lye nor guid whiskey,—and whaur ye're never sure o' yer richt change. It's an awful-like place; man!—and Geordie began to warm up—'ye can juist smell the sulphur when ye gang in. But I dinna care aboot thae Temperance Socceities, wi' their pledges an' havers; an' I canna see what hairm can come till a man by takin' a bottle o' guid Glenlivet hame wi' him. I canna bide thae teetotal buddies.'

Geordie's speech was followed by loud applause, partly appreciative of Geordie himself, but largely sympathetic with his position.

Two or three men followed in the same strain, advocating a league for mutual improvement and social purposes, but without the teetotal pledge; they were against the saloon, but didn't see why they should not take a drink now and then.

Finally, the manager rose to support his friend, Mistah—ah—Cwafoad,' ridiculing