

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## Black Rock.

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

### CHAPTER I.

#### CHRISTMAS EVE IN A LUMBER CAMP.

It was due to a mysterious dispensation of Providence, and a good deal to Leslie Graeme, that I found myself in the heart of the Selkirks for my Christmas Eve as the year 1882 was dying. It had been my plan to spend my Christmas far away in Toronto, with such Bohemian and boon companions as could be found in that cosmopolitan and kindly city. But Leslie Graeme changed all that, for, discovering me in the village of Black Rock, with my traps all packed, waiting for the stage to start for the Landing, thirty miles away, he bore down upon me with resistless force, and I found myself recovering from my surprise only after we had gone in his lumber sleigh some six miles on our way to his camp up in the mountains. I was surprised and much delighted, though I would not allow him to think so, to find that his old-time power over me was still there. He could always in the old 'Varsity days—dear, wild days—make me do what he liked. He was so handsome and so reckless, brilliant in his class-work, and the prince of half-backs on the Rugby field, and with such power of fascination as would 'extract the heart out of a wheelbarrow,' as Barney Lundy used to say. And thus it was that I found myself just three weeks later—I was to have spent two or three days,—on the afternoon of the 24th of December, standing in Graeme's Lumber Camp No. 2, wondering at myself. But I did not regret my changed plans, for in those three weeks I had raided a cinnamon bear's den and had wakened up a grizzly— But I shall let the grizzly finish the tale; he probably sees more humor in it than I.

The camp stood in a little clearing, and consisted of a group of three long, low shanties with smaller shacks near them, all built of heavy, unhewn logs, with door and window in each. The grub camp, with cook-shed attached, stood in the middle of the clearing; at a little distance was the sleeping-camp with the office built against it, and about a hundred yards away on the other side of the clearing stood the stables, and near them the smiddy. The mountains rose grandly on every side, throwing up their great peaks into the sky. The clearing in which the camp stood was hewn out of a dense pine forest that filled the valley and climbed half way up the mountainsides, and then frayed out in scattered and stunted trees.

It was one of those wonderful Canadian winter days, bright, and with a touch of sharpness in the air that did not chill, but warmed the blood like draughts of wine. The men were up in the woods, and the shrill scream of the blue jay flashing across the open, the impudent chatter of the red squirrel from the top of the grub camp, and the pert chirp of the whisky-jack, hopping about on the rubbish-heap, with the long, lone cry of the wolf far down the valley, only made the silence felt the more.

As I stood drinking in with all my soul the glorious beauty and the silence of mountain and forest, with the Christmas feeling stealing into me, Graeme came out from his office, and, catching sight of me, called out, 'Glorious Christmas weather, old chap!' And then, coming nearer, 'Must you go to-morrow?'

'I fear so,' I replied, knowing well that the Christmas feeling was on him too.

'I wish I were going with you,' he said quietly.

I turned eagerly to persuade him, but at the look of suffering in his face the words died at my lips, for we both were thinking of the awful night of horror when all his bright, brilliant life crashed down about him in black ruin and shame. I could only throw my arm over his shoulder and stand silent beside him. A sudden jingle of bells roused him, and, giving himself a little shake, he exclaimed, 'There are the boys coming home.'

Soon the camp was filled with men talking, laughing, chaffing, like light-hearted boys.

'They are a little wild to-night,' said Graeme; 'and to-morrow they'll paint Black Rock red.'

Before many minutes had gone, the last teamster was 'washed up,' and all were standing about waiting impatiently for the cook's signal—the supper to-night was to be 'something of a feed'—when the sound of bells drew their attention to a light sleigh, drawn by a buckskin broncho coming down the hillside at a great pace.

'The preacher, I'll bet, by his driving,' said one of the men.

'Bedad, and it's him has the foine nose for turkey!' said Blaney, a good-natured, jovial Irishman.

'Yes, or for pay-day, more like,' said Keefe, a black-browed, villainous fellow-countryman of Blaney's, and, strange to say, his great friend.

Big Sandy McNaughton, a Canadian Highlander from Glengarry, rose up in wrath. 'Bill Keefe,' said he, with deliberate emphasis, 'you'll just keep your dirty tongue off the minister; and as for your pay, it's little he sees of it, or any one else, except Mike Slavin, when you're too dry to wait for some one to treat you, or perhaps Father Ryan, when the fear of hell-fire is on to you.'

The men stood amazed at Sandy's sudden anger and length of speech.

'Bon; dat's good for you, my bully boy,' said Baptiste, a wiry little French-Canadian, Sandy's sworn ally and devoted admirer ever since the day when the big Scotsman, under great provocation, had knocked him clean off the dump into the river and then jumped in for him.

It was not till afterwards I learned the cause of Sandy's sudden wrath which urged him to such unwonted length of speech. It was not simply that the Presbyterian blood carried with it reverence for the minister and contempt for Baptists and Fenians, but that he had a vivid remembrance of how, only a month ago, the minister had got him out of Mike Slavin's saloon and out of the clutches of Keefe and Slavin and their gang of bloodsuckers.

Keefe started up with a curse. Baptiste sprang to Sandy's side, slapped him on the back, and called out, 'You keel him, I'll hit (eat) him up, me.'

It looked as if there might be a fight, when a harsh voice said in a low, savage tone, 'Stop your row, you blank fools; settle it, if you want to, somewhere else.' I turned, and was amazed to see old man Nelson, who was very seldom moved to speech.

There was a look of scorn on his hard, iron grey face, and of such settled fierceness as made me quite believe the tales I had heard of his deadly fights in the mines at the coast. Before any reply could be made, the minister drove up and called out in a cheery voice, 'Merry Christmas, boys!

Hello, Sandy! Comment ca va, Baptiste? How do you do, Mr. Graeme?'

'First rate. Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Connor, sometime medical student, now artist, hunter, and tramp at large, but not a bad sort.'

'A man to be envied,' said the minister, smiling. 'I am glad to know any friend of Mr. Graeme's.'

I liked Mr. Craig from the first. He had good eyes that looked straight out at you, a clean-cut, strong face well set on his shoulders, and altogether an upstanding, manly bearing. He insisted on going with Sandy to the stables to see Dandy, his broncho, put up.

'Decent fellow,' said Graeme; 'but though he is good enough to his broncho, it is Sandy that's in his mind now.'

'Does he come out often? I mean, are you part of his parish, so to speak?'

'I have no doubt he thinks so; and I'm blowed if he doesn't make the Presbyterians of us think so too.' And he added after a pause, 'A dandy lot of parishioners we are for any man. There's Sandy, now, he would knock Keefe's head off as a kind of religious exercise; but to-morrow Keefe will be sober, and Sandy will be drunk as a lord, and the drunker he is the better Presbyterian he'll be, to the preacher's disgust.' Then after another pause he added bitterly, 'But it is not for me to throw rocks at Sandy; I am not the same kind of fool, but I am a fool of several other sorts.'

Then the cook came out and beat a tattoo on the bottom of a dish-pan. Baptist answered with a yell: but though keenly hungry, no man would demean himself to do other than walk with apparent reluctance to his place at the table. At the further end of the camp was a big fireplace, and from the door to the fireplace extended the long board tables, covered with platters of turkey not too scientifically carved, dishes of potatoes, bowls of apple sauce, plates of butter, pies, and smaller dishes distributed at regular intervals. The lanterns hanging from the roof, and a row of candles stuck into the wall on either side by means of slit sticks, cast a dim, weird light over the scene.

There was a moment's silence, and at a nod from Graeme Mr. Craig rose and said, 'I don't know how you feel about it, men, but to me this looks good enough to be thankful for.'

'Fire ahead, sir,' called out a voice quite respectfully, and the minister bent his head and said—

'For Christ the Lord who came to save us, for all the love and goodness we have known, and for these Thy gifts to us this Christmas night, our Father, make us thankful. Amen.'

'Bon, dat's fuss rate,' said Baptiste. 'Seems lak dat's make me hit (eat) more better for sure,' and then no word was spoken for a quarter of an hour. The occasion was far too solemn and moments too precious for anything so empty as words. But when the white piles of bread and the brown piles of turkey had for a second time vanished, and after the last pie had disappeared, there came a pause and hush of expectancy, whereupon the cook and cookee, each bearing aloft a huge, blazing pudding, came forth.

'Hooray!' yelled Blaney, 'up wid yez!' and grabbing the cook by the shoulders from behind, he faced him about.

Mr. Craig was the first to respond, and seizing the cookee in the same way, called out, 'Squad, fall in! quick march!' In a moment every man was in the procession.