

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

An hour later Nixon brought Father Goulet. He was a little Frenchman with gentle manners and the face of a saint. Craig welcomed him warmly, and told him what he had done.

'That is good, my brother,' he said, with gentle courtesy, and, turning to the mother, 'your little one is safe.'

Behind Father Goulet came Nixon softly, and gazed down upon the little quiet face, beautiful with the magic of death. Slavin came quietly and stood beside him. Nixon turned and offered his hand. But Slavin said, moving slowly back—

'I did ye a wrong, Nixon, an' it's a sorry man I am this day for it.'

'Don't say a word, Slavin,' answered Nixon, hurriedly. 'I know how you feel. I've got a baby too. I want to see it again. That's why the break hurt me so.'

'As God's above,' replied Slavin earnestly, 'I'll hinder ye no more.' They shook hands, and we passed out.

We laid the baby under the pines, not far from Billy Breen, and the sweet spring wind blew through the Gap, and came softly down the valley, whispering to the pines and the grass and the hiding flowers of the New Life coming to the world. And the mother must have heard the whisper in her heart, for, as the priest was saying the words of the service, she stood with Mrs. Mavor's arms about her, and her eyes were looking far away beyond the purple mountain-tops, seeing what made her smile. And Slavin, too, looked different. His very features seemed finer. The coarseness was gone out of his face. What had come to him I could not tell.

But when the doctor came into Slavin's house that night it was the old Slavin I saw, but with a look of such deadly fury on his face that I tried to get the doctor out at once. But he was half drunk and after his manner was hideously humorous.

'How do, ladies! How do, gentleman!' was his loud-voiced salutation. 'Quite a professional gathering, clergy predominating. Lion and Lamb too, ha! ha! which is the lamb, eh? ha! ha! very good! awfully sorry to hear of your loss, Mrs. Slavin; did our best you know, can't help this sort of thing.'

Before any one could move, Craig was at his side, and saying in a clear, firm voice, 'One moment, doctor,' caught him by the arm and had him out of the room before he knew it. Slavin, who had been crouching in his chair with hands twitching and eyes glaring, rose and followed, still crouching as he walked. I hurried after him, calling him back. Turning at my voice, the doctor saw Slavin approaching. There was something so terrifying in his swift noiseless crouching motion, that the doctor, crying out in fear 'Keep him off,' fairly turned and fled. He was too late. Like a tiger Slavin leaped upon him and without waiting to strike, had him by the throat with both hands, and bearing him to the ground, worried him there as a dog might a cat.

Immediately Craig and I were upon him, but though we lifted him clear off the ground we could not loosen that two-handed strangling grip. As we were struggling there a light hand touched my shoulder. It was Father Goulet.

'Please let him go, and stand away from us,' he said, waving us back. We obeyed.

He leaned over Slavin and spoke a few words to him. Slavin started as if struck a heavy blow, looked up at the priest with fear in his face, but still keeping his grip.

'Let him go,' said the priest. Slavin hesitated. 'Let him go! quick!' said the priest again, and Slavin with a snarl let go his hold and stood sullenly facing the priest.

Father Goulet regarded him steadily for some seconds and then asked—

'What would you do?' His voice was gentle enough, even sweet, but there was something in it that chilled my marrow.

'What would you do?' he repeated.

'He murdered my child,' growled Slavin.

'Ah! how?'

'He was drunk and poisoned him.'

'Ah! who gave him drink? Who made him a drunkard two years ago? Who has wrecked his life?'

There was no answer, and the even-toned voice went relentlessly on—

'Who is the murderer of your child now?'

Slavin groaned and shuddered.

'Go!' and the voice grew stern. 'Repent of your sin and add not another.'

Slavin turned his eyes upon the motionless figure on the ground and then upon the priest. Father Goulet took one step towards him, and, stretching out his hand and pointing with his finger, said—

'Go!'

And Slavin slowly backed away and went into his house. It was an extraordinary scene, and it is often with me now; the dark figure on the ground, the slight erect form of the priest with outstretched arm and finger, and Slavin backing away, fear and fury struggling in his face.

It was a near thing for the doctor, however, and two minutes more of that grip would have done for him. As it was, we had the greatest difficulty in reviving him.

What the priest did with Slavin after getting him inside I know not; that has always been a mystery to me. But when we were passing the saloon that night after taking Mrs. Mavor home, we saw a light and heard strange sounds within. Entering, we found another whiskey raid in progress, Slavin himself being the raider. We stood some moments watching him knocking in the heads of casks and emptying bottles. I thought he had gone mad, and approached him cautiously.

'Hello, Slavin!' I called out; 'what does this mean?'

He paused in his strange work, and I saw that his face, though resolute, was quiet enough.

'It means I'm done wid the business, I am,' he said, in a determined voice. 'I'll help no more to kill any man, or,' in a lower tone, 'any man's baby.' The priest's words had struck home.

'Thank God, Slavin!' said Craig, offering his hand; 'you are much too good a man for the business.'

'Good or bad, I'm done wid it,' he replied, going on with his work.

'You are throwing away good money, Slavin,' I said, as the head of a cask crashed in.

'It's meself that knows it, for the price of whiskey has riz in town this week,' he answered, giving me a look out of the corner of his eye. 'Bedad! it was a rare clever job,' referring to our Black Rock Hotel affair.

'But won't you be sorry for this?' asked Craig.

'Beloike I will; an' that's why I'm doin'

it before I'm sorry for it,' he replied, with a delightful bull.

'Look here, Slavin,' said Craig earnestly; 'if I can be of use to you in any way, count on me.'

'It's good to me the both of yez have been, an' I'll not forget it to yez,' he replied, with like earnestness.

As we told Mrs. Mavor that night, for Craig thought it too good to keep, her eyes seemed to grow deeper and the light in them to glow more intense as she listened to Craig pouring out his tale. Then she gave him her hand and said—

'You have your man at last.'

'What man?'

'The man you have been waiting for.'

'Slavin!'

'Why not?'

'I never thought of it.'

'No more did he, nor any of us.' Then, after a pause, she added gently, 'He has been sent to us.'

'Do you know, I believe you are right,' Craig said slowly, and then added, 'But you always are.'

'I fear not,' she answered; but I thought she liked to hear his words.

The whole town was astounded next morning when Slavin went to work in the mines, and its astonishment only deepened as the days went on, and he stuck to his work. Before three weeks had gone the League had bought and remodelled the saloon and had secured Slavin as Resident Manager.

The evening of the re-opening of Slavin's saloon, as it was still called, was long remembered in Black Rock. It was the occasion of the first appearance of 'The League Minstrel and Dramatic Troupe,' in what was described as a 'hair-lifting' tragedy with appropriate musical selections. Then there was a grand supper and speeches and great enthusiasm, which reached its climax when Nixon rose to propose the toast of the evening—'Our Saloon.' His speech was simply a quiet, manly account of his long struggle with the deadly enemy. When he came to speak of his recent defeat he said—

'And while I am blaming no one but myself, I am glad to-night that this saloon is on our side, for my own sake and for the sake of those who have been waiting long to see me. But before I sit down I want to say that while I live I shall not forget that I owe my life to the man that took me that night to his own shack and put me in his own bed, and met me next morning with an open hand; for I tell you I had sworn to God that that morning would be my last.'

Geordie's speech was characteristic. After a brief reference to the 'mysterious ways o' Providence,' which he acknowledged he might sometimes fail to understand, he went on to express his unqualified approval of the new saloon.

'It's a cosy place, an' there's nae sulphur about. Besides a' that,' he went on enthusiastically, 'it'll be a terrible savin'. I've juist been coontin'.'

'You bet!' ejaculated a voice with great emphasis.

'I've juist been coontin', went on Geordie, ignoring the remark and the laugh which followed, 'an' it's an awfu'-like money ye pit ower wi' the whuskey. Ye see ye cannae dae wi' ane bit glass; ye maun hae twa or three at the verra least, for it's no verra forrit ye get wi' ane glass. But wi' yon coffee ye juist get a saxpence-worth an' ye want nae mair.'