

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

We found Craig sound asleep upon his couch. His consternation on waking to see us torn, bruised, and bloody was laughable; but he hastened to find us warm water and bandages, and we soon felt comfortable.

Baptiste was radiant with pride and delight over the fight, and hovered about Graeme and me giving vent to his feelings in admiring French and English expletives. But Abe was disgusted because of the failure at Slavin's; for when Nelson looked in, he saw Slavin's French-Canadian wife in charge with her baby on her lap, and he came back to Shaw and said, 'Come away, we can't touch this'; and Shaw, after looking in, agreed that nothing could be done. A baby held the fort.

As Craig listened to the account of the fight, he tried hard not to approve, but he could not keep the gleam out of his eyes; and as I pictured Graeme dashing back the crowd thronging the barricade till he was brought down by the chair, Craig laughed gently, and put his hand on Graeme's knee. And as I went on to describe my agony while Idaho's fingers were gradually nearing the knife, his face grew pale and his eyes grew wide with horror.

'Baptiste here did the business,' I said, and the little Frenchman nodded complacently and said—

'Dat's me for sure.'

'By the way, how is your foot?' asked Graeme.

'He's fuss-rate. Dat's what you call—one bite of—of—dat leel bees, he's dere, you put your finger dere, he's not dere!—what you call him?'

'Flea!' I suggested.

'Oui!' cried Baptiste. 'Dat's one bite of flea.'

'I was thankful I was under the barrels,' I replied, smiling.

'Oui! Dat's mak' me ver mad. I jump an' swear mos' awful bad. Dat's pardon me, M'sieu Craig, heh?'

But Craig only smiled at him rather sadly. 'It was awfully risky,' he said to Graeme, 'and it was hardly worth it. They'll get more whisky, and anyway the League is gone.'

'Well,' said Graeme with a sigh of satisfaction, 'it is not quite such a one-sided affair as it was.'

And we could say nothing in reply, for we could hear Nixon snoring in the next room, and no one had heard of Billy, and there were others of the League that we knew were even now down at Slavin's. It was thought best that all should remain in Mr. Craig's shack, not knowing what might happen; and so we lay where we could and we needed none to sing us to sleep.

When I awoke, stiff and sore, it was to find breakfast ready and old man Nelson in charge. As we were seated, Craig came in, and I saw that he was not the man of the night before. His courage had come back, his face was quiet and his eye clear; he was his own man again.

'Geordie has been out all night, but has failed to find Billy,' he announced quietly.

We did not talk much; Graeme and I worried with our broken bones, and the others suffered from a general morning depression. But, after breakfast, as the men were beginning to move, Craig took down his Bible, and saying—

'Wait a few minutes, men!' he read slowly, in his beautiful clear voice, that psalm for all fighters—

'God is our refuge and strength,'

and so on to the noble words—

'The Lord of Hosts is with us;

The God of Jacob is our refuge.'

How the mighty words pulled us together, lifted us till we grew ashamed of our ignoble rage and of our ignoble depression!

And then Craig prayed in simple, straight-going words. There was acknowledgment of failure, but I knew he was thinking chiefly of himself; and there was gratitude, and that was for the men about him, and I felt my face burn with shame; and there was petition for help, and we all thought of Nixon, and Billy, and the men wakening from their debauch at Slavin's this pure, bright morning. And then he asked that we might be made faithful and worthy of God, whose battle it was. Then we all stood up and shook hands with him in silence, and every man knew a covenant was being made. But none saw his meeting with Nixon. He sent us all away before that.

Nothing was heard of the destruction of the hotel stock-in-trade. Unpleasant questions would certainly be asked, and the proprietor decided to let bad alone. On the point of respectability the success of the ball was not conspicuous, but the anti-League men were content, if not jubilant.

Billy Breen was found by Geordie late in the afternoon in his own old and deserted shack, breathing heavily, covered up in his filthy, mouldering bed-clothes, with a half-empty bottle of whiskey at his side. Geordie's grief and rage were beyond even his Scotch control. He spoke few words, but these were of such concentrated vehemence that no one felt the need of Abe's assistance in vocabulary.

Poor Billy! We carried him to Mrs. Mavor's home; put him in a warm bath, rolled him in blankets, and gave him little sips of hot water, then of hot milk and coffee; as I had seen a clever doctor in the hospital treat a similar case of nerve and heart depression. But the already weakened system could not recover from the awful shock of the exposure following the debauch; and on Sunday afternoon we saw that his heart was failing fast. All day the miners had been dropping in to inquire after him, for Billy had been a great favorite in other days, and the attention of the town had been admiringly centred upon his fight of these last weeks. It was with no ordinary sorrow that the news of his condition was received. As Mrs. Mavor sang to him, his large coarse hands moved in time to the music, but he did not open his eyes till he heard Mr. Craig's voice in the next room; then he spoke his name, and Mr. Craig was kneeling beside him in a moment. The words came slowly—

'Oi tried—to fight it hout—but—oi got beaten. Hit 'urts to think 'E's hashamed o' me. Oi'd like t'a done better—oi would.'

'Ashamed of you, Billy!' said Craig, in a voice that broke. 'Not He.'

'An'—ye hall—elped me so!' he went on. 'Oi wish oi'd 'a done better—oi do,' and his eyes sought Geordie, and then rested on Mrs. Mavor, who smiled back at him with a world of love in her eyes.

'You hain't hashamed o' me—yore heyes saigh so,' he said looking at her.

'No, Billy,' she said, and I wondered at her steady voice, 'not a bit. Why, Billy, I am proud of you.'

He gazed up at her with wonder and ineffable love in his little eyes, then lifted his hand slightly toward her. She knelt quickly and took it in both of hers, stroking it and kissing it.

'Oi haught t'a done better. Oi'm hawful sorry oi went back on 'Im. Hit was the lemonsade. The boys didn't mean no 'arm—but hit started the 'ell hinside.'

Geordie hurled out some bitter words.

'Don't be 'ard on 'em, Geordie; they didn't mean no 'arm,' he said, and his eyes kept waiting till Geordie said hurriedly—

'Na! na! lad—a'll juist leave them till the Almichty.'

Then Mrs. Mavor sang softly, smoothing his hand, 'Just as I am,' and Billy dozed quietly for half an hour.

When he awoke again his eyes turned to Mr. Craig, and they were troubled and anxious.

'Oi tried 'ard. Oi wanted to win,' he struggled to say. By this time Craig was master of himself, and he answered in a clear, distinct voice—

'Listen, Billy! You made a great fight, and you are going to win yet. And besides, do you remember the shrep that got lost over the mountains?'—this parable was Billy's special delight—'He didn't beat it when He got it, did He? He took it in His arms and carried it home. And so He will you.'

And Billy, keeping his eyes fastened on Mr. Craig, simply said—

'Will 'E?'

'Sure!' said Craig.

'Will 'E?' he repeated, turning his eyes upon Mrs. Mavor.

'Why, yes, Billy,' she answered cheerily, though the tears were streaming from her eyes. 'I would, and He loves you far more.'

He looked at her, smiled, and closed his eyes. I put my hand on his heart; it was fluttering feebly. Again a troubled look passed over his face.

'My—poor—hold—mother,' he whispered, 'she's—hin—the—wukus.'

'I shall take care of her, Billy,' said Mrs. Mavor, in a clear voice, and again Billy smiled. Then he turned his eyes to Mr. Craig, and from him to Geordie, and at last to Mrs. Mavor, where they rested. She bent over and kissed him twice on the forehead.

'Tell 'er,' he said, with difficulty, 'E's took me 'ome.'

'Yes, Billy!' she cried, gazing into his glazing eyes. He tried to lift her hand. She kissed him again. He drew one deep breath and lay quite still.

'Thank the blessed Saviour!' said Mr. Craig, reverently. 'He has taken him home.'

But Mrs. Mavor held the dead hand tight and sobbed out passionately, 'Oh, Billy, Billy! you helped me once when I needed help! I cannot forget!'

And Geordie, groaning, 'Ay, laddie, laddie,' passed out into the fading light of the early evening.

Next day no one went to work, for to all it seemed a sacred day. They carried him into the little church, and there Mr. Craig spoke of his long, hard fight, and of his final victory; for he died without a fear, and with love to the men who, not knowing, had been his death. And there was no