* BUYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER VI.

BLACK ROCK RELIGION.

When I grow weary with the conventions of religion, and sick in my soul from feeding upon husks, that the churches too often offer me, in the shape of elaborate service and eloquent discourses, so that in my sickness I doubt and doubt, then I go back to the communion in Black Rock and the days preceding it, and the fever and the weariness leave me, and I grow humble and strong. The simplicity and rugged grandeur of the faith, the humble gratitude of the rough men I see about the table, and the calm radiance of one saintly face, rest and recall me.

Not its most enthusiastic apologist would call Black Rock a religious community, but it possessed in a marked degree that eminent Christian virtue of tolerance. All creeds, all shades of religious opinion, were allowed, and it was generally conceded that one was as good as another. It is fair to say, however, that Black Rock's catholicity was negative rather than positive. The only religion objectionable was that insisted upon as a necessity. It never occurred to any one to consider religion other than as a respectable, if not ornamental, addition to life in older lands.

During the weeks following the making of the League, however, this negative attitude towards things religious gave place to one of keen investigation and criticism. The indifference passed away, and with it, in a large measure, the tolerance. Mr. Craig was responsible for the former of these changes, but hardly, in fairness, could he be held responsible for the latter. any one, more than another, was to be blamed for the rise of intolerance in the village, that man was Geordie Crawford. He had his 'lines' from the Established Kirk of Scotland, and when Mr. Craig announced his intention of having the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper observed, Geordie produced his 'lines' and promptly handed them in. As no other man in the village was equipped with like spiritual credentials, Geordie constituted himself a kind of kirksession, charged with the double duty of guarding the entrance to the Lord's Table, and of keeping an eye upon the theological opinions of the community, and more particularly upon such members of it as gave evidence of possessing any opinions definite enough for statement.

It came to be Mr. Craig's habit to drop into the League-room, and toward the close of the evening to have a short Scripture lesson from the Gospels. Geordie's opportunity came after the meeting was over The men and Mr. Craig had gone away. would hang about and talk the lesson over, expressing opinions favorable or unfavorable as appeared to them good. Then it was that all sorts of views, religious and otherwise, were aired and examined. The originality of the ideas, the absolute disregard of the authority of church or creed. the frankness with which opinions were stated, and the forcefulness of the language in which they were expressed, combined to make the discussions altogether marvellous. The passage between Abe Baker, the stage driver, and Geordie was particularly rich. It followed upon a very telling lesson on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

The chief actors in that wonderful story were transferred to the Black Rock stage,

and were presented in miner's costume. Abe .was particularly well pleased with the scoring of the 'blanked old rooster who crowed so blanked high,' and somewhat incensed at the quiet remark interjected by Geordie, 'that it was nae credit till a man fae be a sinner'; and when Geordie went on to urge the importance of right conduct and respectability, Abe was led to pour forth vials of contemptuous wrath upon the Pharisees and hypocrites who thought themselves better than other people. But Geordie was quite unruffled, and lamented the ignorance of men who, brought up in 'Epeescopawlyun or Methody' churches, could hardly be expected to detect the Antinomian or Arminian heresies.

'Aunty Nomyun or Uncie Nomyun,' replied Abe, boiling hot, 'my mother was a Methodist, and I'll back any blanked Methodist against any blankety blank long-faced, lantern-jawed, skinflint Presbyterian,' and this he was eager to maintain to any man's satisfaction if he would step outside.

Geordie was quite unmoved, but hastened to assure Abe that he meant no disrespect to his mother, who he had 'nae doot was a clever enough buddie, tae judge by her son.' Abe was speedily appeased, and offered to set up the drinks all round. But Geordie, with evident reluctance, had to decline, saying, 'Na, na, lad, I'm a League man, ye ken,' and I was sure that Geordie at that moment felt that membership in the League had its drawbacks.

Nor was Geordie too sure of Craig's orthodoxy; while as to Mrs. Mavor, whose slave he was, he was in the habit of lamenting her doctrinal condition—

'She's a fine woman, nae doot; but, puir cratur, she's fair carried awa wi' the errors o' thae Epeescopawlyuns.'

It fell to Geordie, therefore, as a sacred duty, in view of the laxity of those who seemed to be the pillars of the Church, to be all the more watchful and unyielding. But he was delightfully inconsistent when confronted with particulars. In conversation with him one night after one of the meetings, when he had been specially hard upon the ignorant and godless, I innocently changed the subject to Billy Breen, whom Geordie had taken to his shack since the night of the League. He was very proud of Billy's success in the fight against whiskey, the credit of which he divided unevenly between Mrs. Mayor and himself.

'He's fair daft aboot her,' he explained to me, 'an' I'll no' deny but she's a great help, ay, a verra conseederable asseestance; but, man, she doesna ken the whusky, an' the inside o' a man that's wantin' it. Ay, puir buddie, she diz her pairt, an' when ye're a bit restless an' thrawn aifter yer day's wark, it's like a walk in a bonnie glen on a simmer eve, with the birds liltin' aboot, tae sit in you roomie and hear her sing; but when the night is on, an' ye canna sleep, but wauken wi' an' awfu' thrust and wi' dreams o' cosy firesides, and the bonnie sparklin' glosses, as it is wi' puir Billy, ay, it's then ye need a man wi' a guid grup beside ye.'

'What do you do then, Geordie?' I asked.

'Oo ay, I juist gang for a bit walk wi' the lad, and then pits the kettle on an'maks a cup o' tea or coffee, an' aff he gangs tae sleep like a bairn.'

'Poor Billy,' I said pityingly, 'there's no hope for him in the future, I fear.

'Hoot awa, man,' said Geordie quickly.
'Ye wadna keep oot a puir cratur frae creepin' in, that's daein' his best?'

'But, Geordie,' I remonstrated, 'he doesn't

know anything of the doctrines. I don't believe he could give us "The Chief End of Man."

'An' wha's tae blame for that?' said Geordie, with fine indignation. 'An' maybe you remember the prood Pharisee and the puir wumman that cam' creepin' in ahint the Maister.'

The mingled tenderness and indignation in Geordie's face were beautiful to see, so I meekly answered, 'Well, I hope Mr. Craig won't be too strict with the boys.'

Geordie shot a suspicious glance at me, but I kept my face like a summer morn, and he replied cautiously—

'Ay, he's no' that streect; but he maun exerceese discreemination.'

Geordie was none the less determined however, that Billy should 'come forrit'; but as to the manager, who was a member of the English Church, and some others who had been confirmed years ago, and had forgotten much and denied more, he was extremely doubtful, and expressed himself in very decided words to the minister—

'Ye'll no' be askin' forrit thae Epeescopawlyun buddies. They juist ken nacthing aya.'

But Mr. Craig looked at him for a moment and said, "'Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out," and Geordie was silent, though he continued doubtful.

With all these somewhat fantastic features, however, there was no mistaking. the earnest spirit of the men. The meetings grew larger every night, and the interest became more intense. The singing became different. The men no longer simply shouted, but as Mr. Craig would call attention to the sentiment of the hymn, the voices would attune themselves to the words. Instead of encouraging anything like emotional excitement, Mr. Craig seemed to fear it.

'These chaps are easily stirred up,' he would say, 'and I am anxious that they should know exactly what they are doing. It is far too serious a business to trifle with.'

Although Graeme did not go downstairs to the meetings, he could not but feel the throb of the emotion beating in the heart of the community. I used to detail for his benefit, and sometimes for his amusement, the incidents of each night. But I never felt quite easy in dwelling upon the humorous features in Mrs. Mavor's presence, although Craig did not appear to mind. His manner with Graeme was perfect. Openly anxious to win him to his side, he did not improve the occasion and vex him with exhortation. He would not take him at a disadvantage, though, as I afterwards found, this was not his sole reason for his method. Mrs. Mayor, too, showed herself in wise and tender light. She might have been his sister, so frank was she and so openly affectionate, laughing at his fretfulness and soothing his weari-

Never were better comrades than we four, and the bright days speeding so swiftly on drew us nearer to one another.

But the bright days came to an end; for Graeme, when once he was able to go about, became anxious to get back to the camp. And so the last day came, a day I remember well. It was a bright, crisp winter day.

The air was shimmering in the frosty, light. The mountains, with their shining heads piercing through light clouds into that wonderful blue of the western sky, and their feet pushed into the pine masses, gazed down upon Black Rock with calm, kindly looks on their old grey faces. How one grows to love them, steadfast old friends!