

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER XV.—COMING TO THEIR OWN.

A man with a conscience is often provoking, sometimes impossible. Persuasion is lost upon him. He will not get angry, and he looks at one with such a far-away expression in his face that in striving to persuade him one feels earthly and even fiendish. At least this was my experience with Craig. He spent a week with me just before he sailed for the Old Land, for the purpose, as he said, of getting some of the coal dust and other grime out of him.

He made me angry the last night of his stay, and all the more that he remained quite sweetly unmoved. It was a strategic mistake of mine to tell him how Nelson came home to us, and how Graeme stood up before the 'Varsity chaps at my supper and made his confession and confused Rattray's easy-stepping profanity, and started his own five-year league. For all this stirred in Craig the hero, and he was ready for all sorts of heroic nonsense, as I called it. We talked of everything but the one thing, and about that we said not a word till, bending low to poke my fire and to hide my face, I plunged—

'You will see her, of course?'

He made no pretence of not understanding, but answered—

'Of course.'

'There's really no sense in her staying over there,' I suggested.

'And yet she is a wise woman,' he said, as if carefully considering the question.

'Heaps of landlords never see their tenants, and they are none the worse.'

'The landlords?'

'No, the tenants.'

'Probably, having such landlords.'

'And as for the old lady, there must be some one in the connection to whom it would be a Godsend to care for her.'

'Now, Connor,' he said quietly, 'don't. We have gone over all there is to be said. Nothing new has come. Don't turn it all up again.'

Then I played the heathen and raged, as Graeme would have said, till Craig smiled a little wearily and said—

'You exhaust yourself, old chap. Have a pipe, do;' and after a pause he added in his own way, 'What would you have? The path lies straight from my feet. Should I quit it? I could not so disappoint you—and all of them.'

And I knew he was thinking of Graeme and the lads in the mountains he had taught to be true men. It did not help my rage, but it checked my speech; so I smoked in silence till he was moved to say—

'And after all, you know, old chap, there are great compensations for all losses; but for the loss of a good conscience towards God, what can make up?'

But, all the same, I hoped for some better result from his visit to Britain. It seemed to me that something must turn up to change such an unbearable situation.

The year passed, however, and when I looked into Craig's face again I knew that nothing had been changed, and that he had come back to take up again his life alone, more resolutely hopeful than ever.

But the year had left its mark upon him too. He was a broader and deeper man. He had been living and thinking with men of larger ideas and richer culture, and he was far too quick in sympathy with life to remain untouched by his surroundings. He

was more tolerant of opinions other than his own, but more unrelenting in his fidelity to conscience and more impatient of half-heartedness and self-indulgence. He was full of reverence for the great scholars and the great leaders of men he had come to know.

'Great, noble fellows they are, and extraordinarily modest,' he said—'that is, the really great are modest. There are plenty of the other sort, neither great nor modest. And the books to be read! I am quite hopeless about my reading. It gave me a queer sensation to shake hands with a man who had written a great book. To hear him make commonplace remarks, to witness a faltering in knowledge—one expects these men to know everything—and to experience respectful kindness at his hands!'

'What of the younger men?' I asked.

'Bright, keen, generous fellows. In things theoretical, omniscient; but in things practical, quite helpless. They toss about great ideas as the miners lumps of coal. They can call them by their book names easily enough, but I often wondered whether they could put them into English. Some of them I coveted for the mountains. Men with clear heads and big hearts, and built after Sandy McNaughton's model. It does seem a sinful waste of God's good human stuff to see these fellows potter away their lives among theories living and dead, and end up by producing a book! They are all either making or going to make a book. A good thing we haven't to read them. But here and there among them is some quiet chap who will make a book that men will tumble over each other to read.'

Then we paused and looked at each other.

'Well?' I said. He understood me.

'Yes!' he answered slowly, 'doing great work. Every one worships her just as we do, and she is making them all do something worth while, as she used to make us.' He spoke cheerfully and readily as if he were repeating a lesson well learned, but he could not humble me. I felt the heart-ache in the cheerful tone.

'Tell me about her,' I said, for I knew that if he would talk it would do him good. And talk he did, often forgetting me, till, as I listened, I found myself looking again into the fathomless eyes, and hearing again the heart-searching voice. I saw her go in and out of the little red-tiled cottages and down the narrow back lanes of the village; I heard her voice in a sweet, low song by the bed of a dying child, or pouring forth floods of music in the great new hall of the factory town near by. But I could not see, though he tried to show me, the stately gracious lady receiving the country folk in her home. He did not linger over that scene, but went back again to the gate-cottage where she had taken him one day to see Billy Breen's mother.

'I found the old woman knew all about me,' he said, simply enough; 'but there were many things about Billy she had never heard, and I was glad to put her right on some points, though Mrs. Mavor would not hear it.'

He sat silent for a little, looking into the coals; then went on in a soft, quiet voice—

'It brought back the mountains and the old days to hear again Billy's tones in his mother's voice, and to see her sitting there in the very dress she wore the night of the League, you remember—some soft stuff with black lace about it—and to hear her sing as she did for Billy—ah! ah! His voice unexpectedly broke, but in a moment he was master of himself and begged me to for-

give his weakness. I am afraid I said words that should not be said—a thing I never do, except when suddenly and utterly upset.

'I am getting selfish and weak,' he said; 'I must get to work. I am glad to get to work. There is much to do, and it is worth while, if only to keep one from getting useless and lazy.'

'Useless and lazy!' I said to myself, thinking of my life beside his, and trying to get command of my voice, so as not to make quite a fool of myself. And for many a day those words goaded me to work and to the exercise of some mild self-denial. But more than all else, after Craig had gone back to the mountains, Graeme's letters from the railway construction camp stirred one to do unpleasant duty long postponed, and rendered uncomfortable my hours of most luxurious ease. Many of the old gang were with him, both of lumbermen and miners, and Craig was their minister. And the letters told of how he labored by day and by night along the line of construction, carrying his tent and kit with him, preaching straight sermons, watching by sick men, writing their letters, and winning their hearts, making strong their lives, and helping them to die well when their hour came. One day these letters proved too much for me, and I packed away my paints and brushes, and made my vow unto the Lord that I would be 'useless and lazy' no longer, but would do something with myself. In consequence, I found myself within three weeks walking the London hospitals, finishing my course, that I might join that band of men who were doing something with life, or, if throwing it away, were not losing it for nothing. I had finished being a fool, I hoped, at least a fool of the useless and luxurious kind. The letter that came from Graeme, in reply to my request for a position on his staff, was characteristic of the man, both new and old, full of gayest humor and of most earnest welcome to the work.

Mrs. Mavor's reply was like herself—

'I knew you would not long be content with the making of pictures, which the world does not really need, and would join your friends in the dear West, making lives that the world needs so sorely.'

But her last words touched me strangely—

'But be sure to be thankful every day for your privilege. . . . It will be good to think of you all, with the glorious mountains about you, and Christ's own work in your hands. . . . Ah! how we would like to choose our work, and the place in which to do it!'

The longing did not appear in the words, but I needed no words to tell how deep and how constant it was. And I take some credit to myself, that in my reply I gave her no bidding to join our band, but rather praised the work she was doing in her place, telling her how I had heard of it from Craig.

(To be Continued.)

Fairy Footsteps,

(By Ethel Hatton.)

See the white violets,
Glistening here and there;
Like a broken string of pearls
They are scattered everywhere.

Don't you think the fairies,
Trapesing through the snow,
Have left their dainty slippers
Amid the ferns to grow?