

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK ROCK CHRISTMAS.

Many strange Christmas Days have I seen, but that wild Black Rock Christmas stands out strangest of all. While I was revelling in my delicious second morning sleep, just awake enough to enjoy it, Mr. Craig came abruptly, announcing breakfast and adding, 'Hope you are in good shape, for we have our work before us this day.'

'Hello!' I replied, still half asleep, and anxious to hide from the minister that I was trying to gain a few more moments of snoozing delight, 'what's abroad?'

'The devil,' he answered shortly, and with such emphasis that I sat bolt upright, looking anxiously about.

'Oh! no need for alarm. He's not after you particularly—at least not to-day,' said Craig, with a shadow of a smile. 'But he is going about in good style, I can tell you.'

By this time I was quite awake. 'Well, what particular style does His Majesty affect this morning?'

He pulled out a showbill. 'Peculiarly gaudy and effective, is it not?'

The items announced were sufficiently attractive. The 'Frisco Opera Company' were to produce the 'screaming farce,' 'The Gay and Giddy Dude'; after which there was to be a 'Grand Ball,' during which the 'Kalifornia Female Kickers' were to do some fancy figures; the whole to be followed by a 'big supper' with 'two free drinks to every man and one to the lady,' and all for the insignificant sum of two dollars.

'Can't you go one better?' I said.

He looked inquiringly and a little disgustedly at me.

'What can you do against free drinks and a dance, not to speak of the 'High Kickers'?' he groaned.

'No!' he continued; 'it's a clean beat for us to-day. The miners and lumbermen will have in their pockets ten thousand dollars, and every dollar burning a hole; and Slavin and his gang will get most of it. But,' he added, 'you must have breakfast. You'll find a tub in the kitchen; don't be afraid to splash. It is the best I have to offer you.'

The tub sounded inviting, and before many minutes had passed I was in a delightful glow, the effect of cold water and a rough towel, and that consciousness of virtue that comes to a man who has courage to face his cold bath on a winter morning.

The breakfast was laid with fine taste. A diminutive pine-tree, in a pot hung round with wintergreen, stood in the centre of the table.

'Well, now, this looks good; porridge, beefsteak, potatoes, toast, and marmalade.'

'I hope you will enjoy it all.'

There was not much talk over our meal. Mr. Craig was evidently preoccupied, and as blue as his politeness would allow him. Slavin's victory weighed upon his spirits. Finally he burst out, 'Look here! I can't, I won't stand it; something must be done. Last Christmas this town was for two weeks, as one of the miners said, "a little suburb of hell." It was something too awful. And at the end of it all one young fellow was found dead in his shack, and twenty or more crawled back to the camps, leaving their three months' pay with Slavin and his suckers.'

'I won't stand it, I say.' He turned fiercely on me. 'What's to be done?'

This rather took me aback, for I had troubled myself with nothing of this sort in my life before, being fully occupied in keeping myself out of difficulty, and allowing others the same privilege. So I ventured the consolation that he had done his part, and that a spree more or less would not make much difference to these men. But the next moment I wished I had been slower in speech, for he swiftly faced me, and his words came like a torrent.

'God forgive you that heartless word! Do you know—? But no; you don't know what you are saying. You don't know that these men have been clambering for dear life out of a fearful pit for three months past, and doing good climbing too, poor chaps. You don't think that some of them have wives, most of them mothers and sisters, in the east or across the sea, for whose sake they are slaving here; the miners hoping to save enough to bring their families to this homeless place, the rest to make enough to go back with credit. Why, there's Nixon, miner, splendid chap; has been here for two years, and drawing the highest pay. Twice he has been in sight of his heaven, for he can't speak of his wife and babies without breaking up, and twice that slick son of the devil—that's Scripture, mind you—Slavin, got him, and 'rolled' him, as the boys say. He went back to the mines broken in body and in heart. He says this is his third and last chance. If Slavin gets him, his wife and babies will never see him on earth or in heaven. There is Sandy, too, and the rest. And,' he added, in a lower tone, and with the curious little thrill of pathos in his voice, 'this is the day the Saviour came to the world.' He paused, and then with a little sad smile, 'But I don't want to abuse you.'

'Do, I enjoy it, I'm a beast, a selfish beast;' for somehow his intense, blazing earnestness made me feel uncomfortably small.

'What have we to offer?' I demanded.

'Wait till I have got these things cleared away, and my housekeeping done.'

I pressed my services upon him, somewhat feebly, I own, for I can't bear dish-water; but he rejected my offer.

'I don't like trusting my china to the hands of a tender foot.'

'Quite right, though your china would prove an excellent means of defence at long range.' It was delf, a quarter of an inch thick. So I smoked while he washed up, swept, dusted, and arranged the room.

After the room was ordered to his taste, we proceeded to hold council. He could offer dinner, magic lantern, music. 'We can fill in time for two hours, but,' he added gloomily, 'we can't beat the dance and the "High Kickers."'

'Have you nothing new or startling?'

He shook his head.

'No kind of show? Dog show? Snake charmer?'

'Slavin has a monopoly of the snakes.'

Then he added hesitatingly, 'There was an old Punch-and-Judy chap here last year, but he died. Whiskey again.'

'What happened to his show?'

'The Black Rock Hotel man took it for board and whiskey bill. He has it still, I suppose.'

I did not much relish the business; but I hated to see him beaten so I ventured, 'I have run a Punch and Judy in an amateur way at the 'Varsity.'

He sprang to his feet with a yell.

'You have! you mean to say it? We've got them! We've beaten them!' He had an extraordinary way of taking your help

for granted. 'The miner chaps, mostly English and Welsh, went mad over the poor old showman, and made him so wealthy that in sheer gratitude he drank himself to death.'

He walked up and down in high excitement and in such evident delight that I felt pledged to my best effort.

'Well,' I said, 'first the poster. We must beat them in that.'

He brought me large sheets of brown paper, and after two hours' hard work I had a dozen pictorial showbills done in gorgeous colors and striking designs. They were good, if I do say it myself.

The turkey, the magic lantern, the Punch and Judy show were all there, the last with a crowd before it in gaping delight. A few explanatory words were thrown in, emphasizing the highly artistic nature of the Punch and Judy entertainment.

Craig was delighted, and proceeded to perfect his plans. He had some half a dozen young men, four young ladies, and eight or ten matrons, upon whom he could depend for help. These he organized into a vigilance committee charged with the duty of preventing miners and lumbermen from getting away—to Slavin's. 'The critical moments will be immediately before and after dinner, and then again after the show is over,' he explained. 'The first two crises must be left to the care of Punch and Judy, and as for the last, I am not yet sure what shall be done'; but I saw he had something in his head, for he added, 'I shall see Mrs. Mavor.'

'Who is Mrs. Mavor?' I asked. But he made no reply. He was a born fighter, and he put the fighting spirit into us all. We were bound to win.

The sports were to begin at two o'clock. By lunch-time everything was in readiness. After lunch I was having a quiet smoke in Craig's shack when in he rushed, saying—

'The battle will be lost before it is fought. If we lose Quatre Bras, we shall never get to Waterloo.'

'What's up?'

'Slavin, just now. The miners are coming in, and he will have them in tow in half an hour.'

He looked at me appealingly. I knew what he wanted.

'All right; I suppose I must, but it is an awful bore that a man can't have a quiet smoke.'

'You're not half a bad fellow,' he replied, smiling. 'I shall get the ladies to furnish coffee inside the booth. You furnish them intellectual nourishment in front with dear old Punch and Judy.'

He sent a boy with a bell round the village announcing, 'Punch and Judy in front of the Christmas booth beside the church; and for three-quarters of an hour I shrieked and sweated in that awful little pen. But it was almost worth it to hear the shouts of approval and laughter that greeted my performance. It was cold work standing about, so that the crowd was quite ready to respond when Punch, after being duly hanged, came forward and invited all into the booth for the hot coffee which Judy had ordered.'

In they trooped, and Quatre Bras was won.

No sooner were the miners safely engaged with their coffee than I heard a great noise of bells and of men shouting; and on reaching the street I saw that the men from the lumber camp were coming in. Two immense sleighs, decorated with ribbons and spruce boughs, each drawn by