

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## Black Rock.

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

### THE BREAKING OF THE LEAGUE.

There is no doubt in my mind that nature designed me for a great painter. A railway director interfered with that design of nature, as he has with many others of hers, and by the transmission of an order for mountain pieces by the dozen, together with a cheque so large that I feared there was some mistake, he determined me to be an illustrator and designer for railway and like publications. I do not like these people ordering 'by the dozen.' Why should they not consider an artist's finer feelings? Perhaps they cannot understand them; but they understand my pictures, and I understand their cheques, and there we are quits. But so it came that I remained in Black Rock long enough to witness the breaking of the League.

Looking back upon the events of that night from the midst of gentle and decent surroundings, they now seem strangely unreal, but to me then they appeared only natural.

It was the Good Friday ball that wrecked the League. For the fact that the promoters of the ball determined that it should be a ball rather than a dance was taken by the League men as a concession to the new public opinion in favor of respectability created by the League. And when the manager's patronage had been secured (they failed to get Mrs. Mavor's), and it was further announced that, though held in the Black Rock Hotel ballroom—indeed, there was no other place—refreshments suited to the peculiar tastes of League men would be provided, it was felt to be almost a necessity that the League should approve, should indeed welcome, this concession to the public opinion in favor of respectability created by the League.

There were extreme men on both sides, of course. 'Idaho' Jack, professional gambler, for instance, frankly considered that the whole town was going to unmentionable depths of propriety. The organization of the League was regarded by him, and by many others, as a sad retrograde towards the bondage of the ancient and dying East; and that he could not get drunk when and where he pleased, 'Idaho,' as he was called, regarded as a personal grievance.

But Idaho was never enamoured of the social ways of Black Rock. He was shocked and disgusted when he discovered that a 'gun' was decreed by British law to be an unnecessary adornment of a card-table. The manner of his discovery must have been interesting to behold.

It is said that Idaho was industriously pursuing his avocation in Slavin's, with his 'gun' lying upon the card-table convenient to his hand, when in walked policeman Jackson, her Majesty's sole representative in the Black Rock district. Jackson, 'Stonewall' Jackson, or 'Stonewall,' as he was called for obvious reasons, after watching the game for a few moments, gently tapped the pistol and asked what he used this for.

'I'll show you in two holy minutes if you don't light out,' said Idaho, hardly looking up, but very angrily, for the luck was against him. But Jackson tapped upon the table and said sweetly—

'You're a stranger here. You ought to get a guide-book and post yourself. Now, the boys know I don't interfere with an innocent little game, but there is a regulation against playing it with guns; so,' he added even more sweetly, but fastening Idaho with a look from his steel-grey eyes, 'I'll just take charge of this,' picking up the revolver; 'it might go off.'

Idaho's rage, great as it was, was quite swallowed up in his amazed disgust at the state of society that would permit such an outrage upon personal liberty. He was quite unable to play any more that evening, and took several drinks all round to restore him to articulate speech. The rest of the night was spent in retelling for his instruction stories of the ways of Stonewall Jackson.

Idaho bought a new 'gun,' but he wore it 'in his clothes,' and used it chiefly in the pastime of shooting out the lights or in picking off the heels from the boys' boots while a stage dance was in progress in Slavin's. But in Stonewall's presence Idaho was a most correct citizen. Stonewall he could understand and appreciate. He was six feet three, and had an eye of unpleasant penetration. But this new feeling in the community for respectability he could neither understand nor endure. The League became the object of his indignant aversion, and the League men of his contempt. He had many sympathisers, and frequent were the assaults upon the newly-born sobriety of Billy Breen and others of the League. But Geordie's watchful care and Mrs. Mavor's steady influence, together with the loyal co-operation of the League men, kept Billy safe so far. Nixon, too, was a marked man. It may be that he carried himself with unnecessary jauntiness toward Slavin and Idaho, saluting the former with, 'Awful dry weather! eh, Slavin?' and the latter with, 'Hello, old sport! how's times?' causing them to swear deeply; and, as it turned out, to do more than swear.

But on the whole the anti-League men were in favor of a respectable ball, and most of the League men determined to show their appreciation of the concession of the committee to the principles of the League in the important matter of refreshments by attending in force.

Nixon would not go. However jauntily he might talk, he could not trust himself, as he said, where whiskey was flowing, for it got into his nose 'like a fish-hook into a salmon.' He was from Nova Scotia. For like reason, Vernon Winton, the young Oxford fellow, would not go. When they chaffed, his lips grew a little thinner, and the color deepened in his handsome face, but he went on his way. Geordie despised the 'hale hypothick' as a 'daft ploy,' and the spending of five dollars upon a ticket he considered a 'sinfu' waste o' guid siller'; and he warned Billy against 'contenancin' ony sic redeeklus nonsense.'

But no one expected Billy to go; although the last two months he had done wonders for his personal appearance, and for his position in the social scale as well. They all knew what a fight he was making, and esteemed him accordingly. How well I remember the pleased pride in his face when he told me in the afternoon of the committee's urgent request that he should join the orchestra with his 'cello! It was not simply that his 'cello was his joy and pride, but he felt it to be a recognition of his return to respectability.

I have often wondered how things combine at times to a man's destruction.

Had Mr. Craig not been away at the Landing that week, had Geordie not been on the night-shift, had Mrs. Mavor not been so occupied with the care of her sick child, it may be Billy might have been saved his fall.

The anticipation of the ball stirred Black Rock and the camps with a thrill of expectant delight. Nowadays, when I find myself forced to leave my quiet smoke in my studio after dinner at the call of some social engagement which I have failed to elude, I groan at my hard lot, and I wonder as I look back and remember the pleasurable anticipation with which I viewed the approaching ball. But I do not wonder now any more than I did then at the eager delight of the men who for seven days in the week swung their picks up in the dark breasts of the mines, or who chopped and sawed among the solitary silences of the great forests. Any break in the long and weary monotony was welcome; what mattered the cost or consequence! To the rudest and least cultured of them the sameness of the life must have been hard to bear; but what it was to men who had seen life in its most cultured and attractive forms I fail to imagine. From the mine, black and foul, to the shack, bare, cheerless, and sometimes hideously repulsive, life swung in heart-grinding monotony till the longing for a 'big drink' or some other 'big break' became too great to bear.

It was well towards evening when Sandy's four-horse team, with a load of men from the woods, came swinging round the curves of the mountain-road and down the street. A gay crowd they were with their bright, brown faces and hearty voices; and in ten minutes the whole street seemed alive with lumbermen—they had a faculty of spreading themselves so. After night fell the miners came down 'done up slick,' for this was a great occasion, and they must be up to it. The manager appeared in evening dress; but this was voted 'too giddy' by the majority.

As Graeme and I passed up to the Black Rock Hotel, in the large store-room of which the ball was to be held, we met old man Nelson looking very grave.

'Going, Nelson, aren't you?' I said.

'Yes,' he answered slowly; 'I'll drop in, though I don't like the look of things much.'

'What's the matter, Nelson?' asked Graeme cheerily. 'There's no funeral on.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Nelson, 'but I wish Mr. Craig were home.' And then he added, 'There's Idaho and Slavin together, and you may bet the devil isn't far off.'

But Graeme laughed at his suspicion, and we passed on. The orchestra was tuning up. There were two violins, a concertina, and the 'cello. Billy Breen was lovingly fingering his instrument, now and then indulging himself in a little snatch of some air that came to him out of his happier past. He looked perfectly delighted, and as I paused to listen he gave me a proud glance out of his deep, little, blue eyes, and went on playing softly to himself. Presently Shaw came along.

'That's good, Billy,' he called out. 'You've got the trick yet, I see.'

But Billy only nodded and went on playing.

'Where's Nixon?' I asked.

'Gone to bed,' said Shaw, 'and I am glad of it. He finds that the safest place on