

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CAPTER VII.

THE FIRST 'BLACK ROCK' COMMUNION.

The gleam of the great fire through the windows of the great camp gave a kindly welcome as we drove into the clearing in which the shanties stood. Graeme was greatly touched at his enthusiastic welcome by the men. At the supper-table he made a little speech of thanks for their faithfulness during his absence, specially commending the care and efficiency of Mr. Nelson, who had had charge of the camp. The men cheered wildly, Baptiste's shrill voice leading all. Nelson being called upon, expressed in a few words his pleasure at seeing the Boss back, and thanked the men for their support while he had been in charge.

The men were for making a night of it; but fearing the effect upon Graeme, I spoke to Nelson, who passed the word, and in a short time the camp was quiet. As we sauntered from the grub-camp to the office where was our bed, we paused to take in the beauty of the night. The moon rode high over the peaks of the mountains, flooding the narrow valley with mellow light. Under her magic the rugged peaks softened their harsh lines and seemed to lean lovingly toward us. The dark pine masses stood silent as in breathless adoration; the dazzling snow lay like a garment over all the open spaces in soft waving folds, and crowned every stump with a quaintly shaped nightcap. Above the camps the smoke curled up from the camp-fires, standing like pillars of cloud that kept watch while men slept. And high over all the deep blue night sky, with its star jewels, sprang like the roof of a great cathedral from range to range, covering us in its kindly shelter. How homelike and safe seemed the valley with its mountain-sides, its sentinel trees and arching roof of jewelled sky! Even the night seemed kindly, and friendly the stars; and the lone cry of the wolf from the deep forest seemed like the voice of a comrade.

'How beautiful! too beautiful!' said Graeme, stretching out his arms. 'A night like this takes the heart out of me.'

I stood silent, drinking in at every sense the night with its wealth of loveliness.

'What is it I want?' he went on. 'Why does the night make my heart ache? There are things to see and things to hear just beyond me; I cannot get to them.' The gay, careless look was gone from his face, his dark eyes were wistful with yearning.

'I often wonder if life has nothing better for me,' he continued with his heartache voice.

I said no word, but put my arm within his. A light appeared in the stable. Glad of a diversion, I said, 'What is the light? Let us go and see.'

'Sandy, taking a last look at his team, like enough.'

We walked slowly toward the stable, speaking no word. As we neared the door we heard the sound of a voice in the monotone of one reading. I stepped forward and looked through a chink between the logs. Graeme was about to open the door, but I held up my hand and beckoned him to me. In a vacant stall, where was a pile of straw, a number of men were grouped. Sandy, leaning against the tying-post upon which the stable-lantern hung, was reading; Nelson was kneeling in front of

him and gazing into the gloom beyond; Baptiste lay upon his stomach, his chin in his hands and his upturned eyes fastened upon Sandy's face; Lachlan Campbell sat with his hands clasped about his knees, and two other men sat near him. Sandy was reading the undying story of the Prodigal, Nelson now and then stopping him to make a remark. It was a scene I have never been able to forget. To-day I pause in my tale, and see it as clearly as when I looked through the chink upon it years ago. The long, low stable, with log walls and upright hitching-poles; the dim outlines of the horses in the gloom of the back-ground, and the little group of rough, almost savage-looking men, with faces wondering and reverent, lit by the misty light of the stable-lantern.

After the reading, Sandy handed the book to Nelson, who put it in his pocket, saying, 'That's for us, boys, ain't it?'

'Ay,' said Lachlan; 'it is often that has been read in my hearing, but I am afraid it will not be for me whatever,' and he swayed himself slightly as he spoke, and his voice was full of pain.

'The minister said I might come,' said old Nelson, earnestly and hopefully.

'Ay, but you are not Lachlan Campbell, and you hef not had his privileges. My father was a godly elder in the Free Church of Scotland, and never a night or morning but we took the Books.'

'Yes, but He said "any man,"' persisted Nelson, putting his hand on Lachlan's knee. But Lachlan shook his head.

'Dat young feller,' said Baptiste; 'wha's hees nem, heh?'

'He has no name. It is just a parable,' explained Sandy.

'He's got no nem? He's just a paronible? Das no young feller?' asked Baptiste anxiously; 'das mean noting?'

Then Nelson took him in hand and explained to him the meaning, while Baptiste listened even more eagerly, ejaculating softly, 'ah, voila! bon! by gar!' When Nelson had finished he broke out, 'Dat young feller, his name Baptiste, heh? and de old Fadder he's le bon Dieu? Bon! das good story for me. How you go back? You go to de pries?'

'The book doesn't say priest or any one else,' said Nelson. 'You go back in yourself, you see?'

'Non; das so, sure nuff. Ah!'—as if a light broke in upon him—'you go in your own self. You make one leetle prayer. You say, "Le bon Fadder, oh! I want come back, I so tire, so hongree, so sorree"?' He say, "Come right 'long." Ah! das fuss-rate. Nelson, you make one leetle prayer for Sandy and me.'

And Nelson lifted up his face and said: 'Father, we're all gone far away; we have spent all, we are poor, we are tired of it all; we want to feel different, to be different; we want to come back. Jesus came to save us from our sins; and He said if we came He wouldn't cast us out, no matter how bad we were, if we only came to Him. Oh, Jesus Christ—and his old, iron face began to work, and two big tears slowly came from under his eyelids—we are a poor lot, and I'm the worst of the lot, and we are trying to find the way. Show us how to get back. Amen.'

'Bon!' said Baptiste. 'Das fetch him sure!'

Graeme pulled me away, and without a word we went into the office and drew up

to the little stove. Graeme was greatly moved.

'Did you ever see anything like that?' he asked. 'Old Nelson! the hardest, savagest, toughest old sinner in the camp, on his knees before a lot of men!'

'Before God,' I could not help saying, for the thing seemed very real to me. The old man evidently felt himself talking to some one.

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' said Graeme doubtfully; 'but there's a lot of stuff I can't swallow.'

'When you take medicine you don't swallow the bottle,' I replied, for his trouble was not mine.

'If I were sure of the medicine, I wouldn't mind the bottle, and yet it acts well enough,' he went on. 'I don't mind Lachlan; he's a Highland mystic, and has visions, and Sandy's almost as bad, and Baptiste is an impulsive little chap. Those don't count much. But old man Nelson is a cool-blooded, level-headed old fellow; has seen a lot of life, too. And then there's Craig he has a better head than I have, and is as hot-blooded, and yet he is living and slaving away in that hole, and really enjoys it. There must be something in it.'

'Oh, look here, Graeme,' I burst out impatiently; 'what's the use of your talking like that? Of course there's something in it. There's everything in it. The trouble with me is I can't face the music. It calls for a life where a fellow must go in for straight, steady work, self-denial, and that sort of thing; and I'm too Bohemian for that, and too lazy. But that fellow Craig makes one feel horribly uncomfortable.'

Graeme put his head on one side, and examined me curiously.

'I believe you're right about yourself. You always were a luxurious beggar. But that's not where it catches me.'

We sat and smoked and talked of other things for an hour, and then turned in. As I was dropping off I was roused by Graeme's voice—

'Are you going to the preparatory service on Friday night?'

'Don't know,' I replied rather sleepily.

'I say, do you remember the preparatory service at home? There was something in his voice that set me wide awake.'

'Yes. Rather terrific, wasn't it? But I always felt better after it,' I replied.

'To me—he was sitting up in bed now—to me it was like a call to arms, or rather like a call for a forlorn hope. None but volunteers wanted. Do you remember the thrill in the old governor's voice as he dared any but the right stuff to come on?'

'We'll go in on Friday night,' I said.

And so we did. Sandy took a load of men with his team, and Graeme and I drove in the light sleigh.

The meeting was in the church, and over a hundred men were present. There was some singing of familiar hymns at first, and then Mr. Craig read the same story as we had heard in the stable, that most perfect of all parables, the Prodigal Son. Baptiste nudged Sandy in delight, and whispered something, but Sandy held his face so absolutely expressionless that Graeme was moved to say—

'Look at Sandy! Did you ever see such a graven image? Something has hit him hard.'

The man was held fast by the story. The voice of the reader, low, earnest, and