

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

WHAT CAME TO SLAVIN.

Billy Breen's legacy to the Black Rock mining camp was a new League, which was more than the old League re-made. The League was new in its spirit and in its methods. The impression made upon the camp by Billy Breen's death was very remarkable, and I have never been quite able to account for it. The mood of the community at the time was peculiarly susceptible. Billy was one of the oldest of the old-timers. His decline and fall had been a long process, and his struggle for life and manhood was striking enough to arrest the attention and awaken the sympathy of the whole camp. We instinctively side with a man in his struggle for freedom; for we feel that freedom is native to him and to us. The sudden collapse of the struggle stirred the men with a deep pity for the beaten man, and a deep contempt for those who had tricked him to his doom. But though the pity and the contempt remained, the gloom was relieved and the sense of defeat removed from the men's minds by the transforming glory of Billy's last hour. Mr. Craig, reading of the tragedy of Billy's death, transfigured defeat into victory, and this was generally accepted by the men as the true reading, though to them it was full of mystery. But they could all understand and appreciate at full value the spirit that breathed through the words of the dying man: 'Don't be 'ard on 'em, they didn't mean no 'arm.' And this was the new spirit of the League.

It was this spirit that surprised Slavin into sudden tears at the grave's side. He had come braced for curses and vengeance, for all knew it was he who had doctored Billy's lemonade, and instead of vengeance the message from the dead that echoed through the voice of the living was one of pity and forgiveness.

But the days of the League's negative, defensive warfare were over. The fight was to the death, and now the war was to be carried into the enemy's country. The League men proposed a thoroughly equipped and well-conducted coffee-room, reading-room, and hall, to parallel the enemy's lines of operation, and defeat them with their own weapons upon their own ground. The main outlines of the scheme were clearly defined and were easily seen, but the perfecting of the details called for all Craig's tact and good sense. When, for instance, Vernon Winton, who had charge of the entertainment department, came for Craig's opinion as to a minstrel troupe and private theatricals, Craig was prompt with his answer—

'Anything clean goes.'

'A nigger show?' asked Winton.

'Depends upon the niggers,' replied Craig with a gravely comic look, shrewdly adding, 'ask Mrs. Mavor,' and so the League Minstrel and Dramatic Company became an established fact, and proved, as Craig afterwards told me, 'a great means of grace to the camp.'

Shaw had charge of the social department, whose special care it was to see that the men were made welcome to the cosy, cheerful reading room, where they might chat, smoke, read, write, or play games, according to fancy.

But Craig felt that the success or failure of the scheme would largely depend upon the character of the Resident Manager, who,

while caring for reading-room and hall, would control and operate the important department represented by the coffee-room.

'At this point the whole business may come to grief,' he said to Mrs. Mavor, without whose counsel nothing was done.

'Why come to grief?' she asked brightly.

'Because if we don't get the right man, that's what will happen,' he replied in a tone that spoke of anxious worry.

'But we shall get the right man, never fear.' Her serene courage never faltered. 'He will come to us.'

Craig turned and gazed at her in frank admiration and said—

'If I only had your courage!'

'Courage!' she answered quickly. 'It is not for you to say that,' and at his answering look the red came into her cheek and the depths in her eyes glowed, and I marvelled and wondered, looking at Craig's cool face, whether his blood were running evenly through his veins. But his voice was quiet, a shade too quiet I thought, as he gravely replied—

'I would often be a coward but for the shame of it.'

And so the League waited for the man to come, who was to be Resident Manager and make the new enterprise a success. And come he did; but the manner of his coming was so extraordinary, that I have believed in the doctrine of a special providence ever since; for as Craig said, 'If he had come straight from Heaven I could not have been more surprised.'

While the League was thus waiting, its interest centred upon Slavin, chiefly because he represented more than any other the forces of the enemy; and though Billy Breen stood between him and the vengeance of the angry men who would have made short work of him and his saloon, nothing could save him from himself, and after the funeral Slavin went to his bar and drank whiskey as he had never drunk before. But the more he drank the fiercer and gloomier he became, and when the men drinking with him chaffed him, he swore deeply and with such threats that they left him alone.

It did not help Slavin either to have Nixon stride in through the crowd drinking at his bar and give him words of warning.

'It is not your fault, Slavin,' he said in slow, cool voice, 'that you and your precious crew din't send me to my death, too. You've won your bet, but I want to say that next time, though you are seven to one, or ten times that, when any of you boys offer me a drink I'll take you to mean fight, and I'll not disappoint you, and some one will be killed,' and so saying he strode out again, leaving a mean-looking crowd of men behind him. All who had not been concerned in the business at Nixon's shack expressed approval of his position, and hoped he would 'see it through.'

But the impression of Nixon's words upon Slavin was as nothing compared with that made by Geordie Crawford. It was not what he said so much as the manner of awful solemnity he carried. Geordie was struggling conscientiously to keep his promise to 'not be 'ard on the boys,' and found considerable relief in remembering that he had agreed 'to leave them tae the Almichty.' But the manner of leaving them was so solemnly awful, that I could not wonder that Slavin's superstitious Irish nature supplanted him with supernatural terrors. It was the second day after the funeral that Geordie and I were walking

towards Slavin's. There was a great shout of laughter as we drew near.

Geordie stopped short, and saying, 'We'll juist gang in a meenute,' passed through the crowd and up to the bar.

'Michael Slavin,' began Geordie, and the men stared in dead silence, with their glasses in their hands. 'Michael Slavin, a' promised the lad a'd bear ye nae ill wull, but juist leave ye tae the Almichty; an' I want tae tell ye that a'm keepin' ma wur-r-d. But—and here he raised his hand, and his voice became preternaturally solemn—'his bluid is upon yer han's. Do ye no' see it?'

His voice rose sharply, and as he pointed, Slavin instinctively glanced at his hands, and Geordie added—

'Ay, and the Lord will require it o' you and yer hoose.'

They told me that Slavin shivered as if taken with ague after Geordie went out, and though he laughed and swore, he did not stop drinking till he sank into a drunken stupor and had to be carried to bed. His little French-Canadian wife could not understand the change that had come over her husband.

'He's like one bear,' she confided to Mrs. Mavor, to whom she was showing her baby of a year old. 'He's not kees me one tam dis day. He's mos awful bad, he's not even look at de baby.' And this seemed sufficient proof that something was seriously wrong; for she went on to say—

'He's tink more for dat leel baby dan for de whole worl'; he's tink more for dat baby dan for me,' but she shrugged her pretty little shoulders in deprecation of her speech.

'You must pray for him,' said Mrs. Mavor, 'and all will come right.'

'Ah! madame!' she replied earnestly, 'every day, every day, I pray la sainte Vierge et tous les saints for him.'

'You must pray to your Father in heaven for him.'

'Ah! oui! I weel pray,' and Mrs. Mavor sent her away bright with smiles, and with new hope and courage in her heart.

(To be Continued.)

The Coming Man.

A pair of very chubby legs,
Incased in scarlet hose;
A pair of little stubby boots,
With rather doubtful toes;
A little kilt, a little coat—
Cut as a mother can—
And lo! before us stands in state
The future's 'coming man.'

His eyes, perchance, will read the stars,
And search their unknown ways;
Perchance the human heart and soul
Will open to their gaze;
Perchance their keen and flashing glance
Will be a nation's light—
Those eyes that now are wistful bent
On some 'big fellow's kite.'

Those hands—those little busy hands—
So sticky, small and brown;
Those hands, whose only mission seems
To pull all order down;
Who knows what hidden strength may
lie
Within their tiny clasp,
Though now 'tis but a taffy stick
In sturdy hold they grasp?

Ah, blessing on those little hands,
Whose work is yet undone;
And blessing on those little feet,
Whose race is yet unrun!
And blessings on the little brain
That has not learned to plan!
Whate'er the future holds in store,
God bless the 'coming man.'
—'Twentieth Century.'