

BOYS AND GIRLS

Black Rock.

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

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

She had very soon need of all her courage, for at the week's end her baby fell dangerously ill. Slavin's anxiety and fear were not relieved much by the reports the men brought him from time to time of Geordie's ominous forebodings; for Geordie had no doubt but that the Avenger of Blood was hot upon Slavin's trail; and as the sickness grew, he became confirmed in this conviction. While he could not be said to find satisfaction in Slavin's impending affliction, he could hardly hide his complacency in the promptness of Providence in vindicating his theory of retribution.

But Geordie's complacency was somewhat rudely shocked by Mr. Craig's answer to his theory one day.

'You read your Bible to little profit, it seems to me, Geordie; or, perhaps, you have never read the Master's teaching about the Tower of Siloam. Better read that and take that warning to yourself.'

Geordie gazed after Mr. Craig as he turned away, and muttered—

'The toor o' Siloam, is it? Ay, a' ken fine about the toor o' Siloam, and about the toor o' Babel as well; an' a've read, too, about the blasphemious Herod, an' sic like. Man, but he's a hot-headed laddie, and lacks discreemenation.'

'What about Herod, Geordie?' I asked.

'About Herod?' with a strong tinge of contempt in his tone. 'About Herod? Man, hae ye no' read in the Scriptures about Herod an' the wur-r-ms in the wame o' him?'

'Oh, yes, I see,' I hastened to answer.

'Ay, a fule can see what's flapped in his face,' with which bit of proverbial philosophy he suddenly left me. But Geordie thenceforth contented himself, in Mr. Craig's presence at least, with ominous head-shakings, equally aggravating, and impossible to answer.

That same night, however, Geordie showed that with all his theories he had a man's true heart, for he came in haste to Mrs. Mavor to say:

'Ye'll be needed ower yonder? Have you been in?'

'Na, na,' replied Geordie cautiously, 'a'll no gang where a'm no wanted. But you puir thing, ye can hear ootside weepin' and moanin'.'

'She'll maybe need ye tac,' he went on dubiously to me. 'Ye're a kind o' doctor, a' hear,' not committing himself to any opinion as to my professional value. But Slavin would have none of me, having got the doctor sober enough to prescribe.

The interest of the camp in Slavin was greatly increased by the illness of his baby, which was to him as the apple of his eye. There were a few who, impressed by Geordie's profound convictions upon the matter, were inclined to favor the retribution theory, and connect the baby's illness with the vengeance of the Almighty. Among these few was Slavin himself, and goaded by his remorseful terrors he sought relief in drink. But this brought him only deeper and fiercer gloom; so that between her suffering child and her savagely despairing husband, the poor mother was desperate with terror and grief.

'Ah! madame,' she sobbed to Mrs. Mavor, 'my heart is broke for him. He's heet noting for three days, but jis dreenk, dreenk, dreenk.'

The next day a man came for me in haste. The baby was dying and the doctor was drunk. I found the little one in a convulsion lying across Mrs. Mavor's knees, the mother kneeling beside it, wringing her hands in a dumb agony, and Slavin standing near, silent and suffering. I glanced at the bottle of medicine upon the table and asked Mrs. Mavor the dose, and found the baby had been poisoned. My look of horror told Slavin something was wrong, and striding to me he caught my arm and asked—

'What is it? Is the medicine wrong?'

I tried to put him off, but his grip tightened till his fingers seemed to reach the bone.

'The dose is certainly too large; but let me go, I must do something.'

He let me go at once, saying in a voice that made my heart sore for him, 'He has killed my baby; he has killed my baby.' And then he cursed the doctor with awful curses, and with a look of such murderous fury on his face that I was glad the doctor was too drunk to appear.

His wife hearing his curses, and understanding the cause, broke out into wailing hard to bear.

'Ah! mon petit ange! It is dat wheeskey dat's keel mon baby. Ah! mon cheri, mon amour. Ah! mon Dieu! Ah, Michel, how often I say that wheeskey he's no good ting.'

It was more than Slavin could bear, and with awful curses he passed out. Mrs. Mavor laid the baby in its crib, for the convulsion had passed away; and putting her arms about the wailing little Frenchwoman, comforted and soothed her as a mother might her child.

'And you must help your husband,' I heard her say. 'He will need you more than ever. Think of him.'

'Ah! oui! I weel,' was the quick reply, and from that moment there was no more wailing.

It seemed no more than a minute till Slavin came in again, sober, quiet, and steady; the passion was all gone from his face, and only the grief remained.

As we stood leaning over the sleeping child the little thing opened its eyes, saw its father, and smiled. It was too much for him. The big man dropped on his knees with a dry sob.

'Is there no chance at all, at all?' he whispered, but I could give him no hope. He immediately rose, and pulling himself together, stood perfectly quiet.

A new terror seized upon the mother.

'My baby is not—what you call it?' going through the form of baptism. 'An' he will not come to la sainte Vierge,' she said, crossing herself.

'Do not fear for your little one,' said Mrs. Mavor, still with her arms about her. 'The good Saviour will take your darling into His own arms.'

But the mother would not be comforted by this. And Slavin too, was uneasy.

'Where is Father Goulet?' he asked.

'Ah! you were not good to the holy pere de las tam, Michael,' she replied sadly.

'The saints are not please for you.'

'Where is the priest?' he demanded.

'I know not for sure. At de Landin', dat's lak.'

'I'll go for him,' he said. But his wife clung to him, beseeching him not to leave her, and indeed he was loth to leave his little one.

I found Craig and told him the difficulty.

With his usual promptness, he was ready with a solution.

'Nixon has a team. He will go.' Then he added, 'I wonder if they would not like me to baptize their little one. Father Goulet and I have exchanged offices before now. I remember how he came to one of my people in my absence, when she was dying, read with her, prayed with her, comforted her, and helped her across the river. He is a good soul, and has no nonsense about him. Send for me if you think there is need. It will make no difference to the baby, but it will comfort the mother.'

Nixon was willing enough to go; but when he came to the door Mrs. Mavor saw the hard look in his face. He had not forgotten his wrong, for day by day he was still fighting the devil within that Slavin had called to life. But Mrs. Mavor, under cover of getting him instructions, drew him into the room. While listening to her, his eyes wandered from one to the other of the group till they rested upon the little white face in the crib. She noticed the change in his face.

'They fear the little one will never see the Saviour if it is not baptized,' she said, in a low tone.

He was eager to go.

'I'll do my best to get the priest,' he said, and was gone on his sixty miles' race with death.

The long afternoon wore on, but before it was half gone I saw Nixon could not win, and that the priest would be too late, so I sent for Mr. Craig. From the moment he entered the room he took command of us all. He was so simple, so manly, so tender, the hearts of the parents instinctively turned to him.

As he was about to proceed with the baptism, the mother whispered to Mrs. Mavor, who hesitatingly asked Mr. Craig if he would object to using holy water.

'To me it is the same as any other,' he replied gravely.

'An' will he make the good sign?' asked the mother timidly.

And so the child was baptized by the Presbyterian minister with holy water and with the sign of the cross. I don't suppose it was orthodox, and it rendered chaotic some of my religious notions, but I thought more of Craig that moment than ever before. He was more man than minister, or perhaps he was so good a minister that day because so much a man. As he read about the Saviour and the children and the disciples who tried to get in between them, and as he told us the story in his own simple and beautiful way, and then went on to picture the home of the little children, and the same Saviour in the midst of them, I felt my heart grow warm, and I could easily understand the cry of the mother—

'Oh, mon Jesu, prenez moi aussi, take me wiz mon mignon.'

The cry wakened Slavin's heart, and he said huskily—

'Oh! Annette! Annette!'

'Ah, oui! an' Michael too!' Then to Mr. Craig—

'You tink He's tak me some day? Eh?'

'All who love Him,' he replied.

'An' Michael too?' she asked, her eyes searching his face. 'An' Michael too?'

But Craig only replied: 'All who love Him.'

'Ah, Michael, you must pray le bon Jesu. He's garde notre mignon.' And then she bent over the babe, whispering—