

BLACK ROCK

By RALPH CONNOR

CHAPTER I. CHRISTMAS EVE IN A LUMBER CAMP.

IT was due to a mysterious dispensation of Providence and a good deal to Leslie Graeme that I found myself in the heart of the Selkirk for my Christmas eve as the year 1882 was dying. It had been my plan to spend my Christmas far away in Toronto with such bohemian and boon companions as could be found in that cosmopolitan and kindly city. But Leslie Graeme changed all that, for, discovering me in the village of Black Rock, with my traps all packed, waiting for the stage to start for the Landing, thirty miles away, he bore down upon me with irresistible force, and I found myself recovering from my surprise only after we had gone in his lumber sleigh some six miles on our way to his camp up in the mountains. I was surprised and much delighted, though I would not allow him to think so, to find that his old time power over me was still there. He could always in the old varsity days—dear, wild days—make me do what he liked. He was so handsome and so reckless, brilliant in his class work and the prince of halfbacks on the Rugby field and with such power of fascination as would "extract the heart out of a wheelbarrow," as Barney Lundy used to say. And thus it was that I found myself just three weeks later—I was to have spent two or three days—on the afternoon of the 24th of December, standing in Graeme's Lumber Camp No. 2, wondering at myself. But I did not regret my changed plans, for in those three weeks I had raided a cinnamon bear's den and had wakened up a grizzly. But I shall let the grizzly finish the tale. He probably sees more humor in it than I.

The camp stood in a little clearing and consisted of a group of three long, low shanties, with smaller shacks near them, all built of heavy, unwhewn logs, with door and window in each. The grub camp, with cook shed attached, stood in the middle of the clearing; at a little distance was the sleeping camp with the office built against it, and about a hundred yards away on the other side of the clearing stood the stables and near them the siddy. The mountains rose grandly on every side, throwing up their great peaks into the sky. The clearing in which the camp stood was hewn out of a dense pine forest that filled the valley and rimmed half way up the mountain sides and then frayed out in scattered and stunted trees.

It was one of those wonderful Canadian winter days, bright and with a touch of sharpness in the air that did not chill, but warmed the blood like drafts of wine. The men were up in the woods, and the shrill scream of the big day flashing across the open, the impatient chatter of the red squirrel from the top of the grub camp and the perky chirp of the whistling jacks hopping about on the rubbish heap, with the long, lone cry of the wolf far down the valley, only made the silence felt the more.

As I stood drinking in with all my soul the glorious beauty and silence of mountain and forest, with the Christmas feeling stealing into me, Graeme came out from his office and, catching sight of me, called out, "Glorious Christmas weather, old chap!" and then, coming nearer, "Must you go to-morrow?"

"I fear so," I replied, knowing well that the Christmas feeling was on him too.

"I wish I were going with you," he said quietly.

I turned eagerly to persuade him, but at the look of suffering in his face the words died on my lips, for we both were thinking of the awful night of horror when all his bright, brilliant life crashed down about him in black ruin and shame. I could only throw my arm over his shoulder and stand silent beside him. A sudden jingle of bells roused him and, giving himself a little shake, he exclaimed:

"There are the boys coming home." Soon the camp was filled with men talking, laughing, chaffing, like light hearted boys.

"They are a little wild tonight," said Graeme, "and tomorrow they'll paint Black Rock red."

Ryan, when the fear of hell fire is on to you?"

The men stood amazed at Sandy's sudden anger and length of speech.

"Bon! Dat's good for you, my bully boy," said Baptiste, a wiry little French Canadian, Sandy's sworn ally and devoted admirer ever since the day when the big Scotsman, under great provocation, had knocked him clean off the dump into the river and then jumped in for him.

It was not till afterward I learned the cause of Sandy's sudden wrath which urged him to such unwonted length of speech. It was not simply that the Presbyterian blood carried with it reverence for the minister and contempt for papists and Fenians, but that he had a vivid remembrance of how, only a month ago, the minister had got him out of Mike Slavin's saloon and out of the clutches of Keefe and Slavin and their gang of blood-suckers.

Keefe started up with a curse. Baptiste sprang to Sandy's side, slapped him on the back and called out:

"You keel him! I'll hit (eat) him up, me."

It looked as if there might be a fight when a harsh voice said in a low, savage tone:

"Stop your row, you blank fools! Settle it, if you want to, somewhere else."

I turned and was amazed to see old man Nelson, who was very seldom moved to speech.

There was a look of scorn on his hard, iron gray face and of such settled fierceness as made me quite believe the tales I had heard of his deadly fights in the mines at the coast. Before any reply could be made the minister drove up and called out in a cheery voice:

"Merry Christmas, boys! Hello, Sandy! Comment ca va, Baptiste? How do you do, Mr. Graeme?"

"First rate. Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Connor, sometime medical student, now artist, hunter and tramp at large, but not a bad sort."

"A man to be envied," said the minister, smiling. "I am glad to know any friend of Mr. Graeme's."

I liked Mr. Craig from the first. He had good eyes that looked straight out at you, a clean cut, strong face, well set on his shoulders, and altogether an upstanding, manly bearing. He insisted on going with Sandy to the stables to see Dandy, his broncho, put up.

"Decent fellow," said Graeme; "but, though he is good enough to his broncho, it is Sandy that's in his mind now."

"Does he come out often? I mean are you part of his parish, so to speak?"

"I have no doubt he thinks so, and I'm blowed if he doesn't make the Presbyterians of us think so too." And he added, after a pause: "A dandy lot of parishioners we are for any man. There's Sandy, now. He would knock Keefe's head off as a kind of religious exercise, but tomorrow Keefe will be sober, and Sandy will be drunk as a lord, and the drunker he is the better Presbyterian he'll be, to the preacher's disgust." Then, after another pause, he added bitterly: "But it is not for me to throw rocks at Sandy. I am not the same kind of fool, but I am a fool of several other sorts."

Then the cook came out and beat a tattoo on the bottom of a dishpan. Baptiste answered with a yell; but, though keenly hungry, no man would demean himself to do other than walk with apparent reluctance to his place at the table. At the farther end of the camp was a big fireplace, and from the door to the fireplace extended the long board tables, covered with platters of turkey not too scientifically carved, dishes of potatoes, bowls of apple sauce, plates of butter, pies and smaller dishes distributed at regular intervals. Two lanterns hanging from the roof and a row of candles stuck into the wall on either side by means of slit sticks cast a dim, weird light over the scene.

There was a moment's silence, and, at a nod from Graeme, Mr. Craig rose and said:

"I don't know how you feel about it, men, but to me this looks good enough to be thankful for."

"Fire ahead, sir," called out a voice quite respectfully, and the minister bent his head and said:

"For Christ the Lord, who came to save us, for all the love and goodness we have known and for these thy gifts to us this Christmas night, our Father, make us thankful. Amen."

"Bon! Dat's fuss rate," said Baptiste; "seems lak dat's make me hit more better for sure."

And then no word was spoken for a quarter of an hour. The occasion was far too solemn and moments too precious for anything so empty as words, but when the white piles of bread and the brown piles of turkey had for a second time vanished and after the last pie had disappeared there came a pause and a hush of expectancy, when upon the cook and cookee, each bearing aloft a huge, blazing pudding, came forth.

"Hooray!" yelled Blaney. "Up wid ye!" And, grabbing the cook by the shoulders from behind, he faced him about.

and, seizing the cookee in the same way, called out:

"Squad, fall in! Quick march!" In a moment every man was in the procession.

"Strike up, Batches, ye little angel!" shouted Blaney, the appellation a concession to the minister's presence, and away went Baptiste in a rollicking French song with the English chorus:

"Then blow, ye winds, in the morning. Blow, ye winds, ay oh! Blow, ye winds, in the morning. Blow, blow, blow!"

And at each "blow" every boot came down with a thump on the plank floor that shook the solid roof. After the second round Mr. Craig jumped upon the bench and called out:

"Three cheers for Billy the cook!" In the silence following the cheers Baptiste was heard to say:

"Bon! Dat's mak me feel lak hit dat puddin' all hup meself, me."

"Hear till the little baste!" said Blaney in disgust.

"Batches," remonstrated Sandy gravely, "you've more stomach than manners."

"Fu sure, but de more stomach dat's more better for dis puddin'," replied the little Frenchman cheerfully.

After a time the tables were cleared and pushed back to the wall, and pipes were produced. In all attitudes suggestive of comfort the men disposed themselves in a wide circle about the fire, which now roared and crackled up the great wooden chimney hanging from the roof. The lumberman's hour of bliss had arrived. Even old man Nelson looked a shade less melancholy than usual as he sat alone, well away from the fire, smoking steadily and silently.

When the second pipes were well a-going, one of the men took down a violin from the wall and handed it to Lachlan Campbell. There were two brothers Campbell just out from Argyll, typical highlanders—Lachlan, dark, silent, melancholy, with the face of a mystic, and Angus, red haired, quick, impulsive and devoted to his brother, a devotion he thought proper to cover under biting, sarcastic speech.

Lachlan after much protestation, interspersed with gibes from his brother, took the violin and, in response to the call from all sides, struck up "Lord Macdonald's Reel." In a moment the floor was filled with dancers, whooping and cracking their fingers in the wildest manner. Then Baptiste did the "Red River Jig," a most intricate and difficult series of steps, the men keeping time to the music with hands and feet.

When the jig was finished, Sandy called for "Lochaber No More," but Campbell said:

"No, no; I cannot play that tonight. Mr. Craig will play."

Craig took the violin, and at the first note I knew he was no ordinary player. I did not recognize the music, but it was soft and thrilling and got in by the heart till every one was thinking his tenderest and saddest thoughts.

After he had played two or three exquisite bits he gave Campbell his violin, saying, "Now, 'Lochaber,' Lachlan."

Without a word Lachlan began, not "Lochaber"—he was not ready for that yet—but "The Flowers of the Forest" and from that wandered through "Auld Robin Gray" and "The Land of the Leal," and so got at last to that most soul subduing of Scottish laments, "Lochaber No More." At the first strain his brother, who had thrown himself on some blankets behind the fire, turned over on his face, feigning sleep. Sandy McNaughton took his pipe out of his mouth and sat up straight and stiff, staring into vacancy, and Graeme, beyond the fire, drew a short, sharp breath. We had often sat, Graeme and I, in our student days, in the drawing room at home, listening to his father wailing out "Lochaber" upon the pipes, and I well knew that the awful minor strains were now eating their way into his soul.

Over and over again the highlander played his lament. He had long since forgotten us and was seeing visions of the hills and lochs and glens of his far-away native land and making us, too, see strange things out of the dim past. I glanced at old man Nelson and was startled at the eager, almost piteous, look in his eyes, and I wished Campbell would stop. Mr. Craig caught my eye and, stepping over to Campbell, held out his hand for the violin. Lingeringly and lovingly the highlander drew out the last strain and silently gave the minister his instrument.

Without a moment's pause and while the spell of "Lochaber" was still upon us the minister, with exquisite skill, fell into the refrain of that simple and beautiful camp meeting hymn, "The Sweet By and By." After playing the verse through once he sang softly the refrain. After the first verse the men joined in the chorus, at first timidly, but by the time the third verse was reached they were shouting with throats full open, "We shall meet on that beautiful shore." When I looked at Nelson, the eager light had gone out of his eyes, and in its place was a kind of determined hopelessness, as if in this new music he had no part.

After the voices had ceased Mr. Craig played again the refrain, more and more softly and slowly. Then, laying the violin on Campbell's knees, he drew from his pocket his little Bible and said:

"Men, with Mr. Graeme's permission, I want to read you something this Christmas eve. You will all have heard it before, but you will like it none the less for that."

His voice was soft, but clear and penetrating as he read the eternal story of the angels and the shepherds and the Babe, and as he read a slight motion of the hand or a glance of an eye made us see, as he was seeing, that whole radiant drama. The wonder, the timid joy, the tenderness, the mystery of it all, were borne in upon us with overpowering effect. He closed the book and in the same low, clear voice went

on to tell us how, in his home years ago, he used to stand on Christmas eve listening in thrilling delight to his mother telling him the story, and how she used to make him see the shepherds and hear the sheep bleating near by, and how the sudden burst of glory used to make his heart jump.

"I used to be a little afraid of the angels, because a boy told me they were ghosts, but my mother told me better, and I didn't fear them any more. And the Babe, the dear little Babe—we all love a baby."

There was a quick, dry sob. It was from Nelson.

"I used to peek through under to see the little one in the straw and wonder what things swaddling clothes were. Oh, it was all so real and beautiful!"

He paused, and I could hear the men breathing.

"But one Christmas eve," he went on in a lower, sweeter tone, "there was no one to tell me the story, and I grew to forget it and went away to college and learned to think that it was only a child's tale and was not for me. Then bad days came to me, and worse, and I began to lose my grip of myself, of life, of hope, of goodness, till one black Christmas, in the alums of a far-away city, when I had given up all and the devil's arms were about me, I heard the story again, and as I listened, with a bitter ache in my heart, for I had put it all behind me, I suddenly found myself peering under the shepherd's arms with a child's wonder at the Babe in the straw. Then it came over me like great waves that his name was Jesus, because it was he that should save men from their sins. Save! Save! The waves kept beating upon my ears, and before I knew I had called out, 'Oh, can he save me?' It was in a little mission meeting on one of the side-streets, and they seemed to be used to that sort of thing there, for no one was surprised, and a young fellow leaned across the aisle to me and said, 'Why, you just bet he can!' His surprise that I should doubt, his bright face and confident tone, gave me hope that perhaps it might be so. I held to that hope with all my soul, and," stretching up his arms and with a quick glow in his face and a little break in his voice, "he hasn't failed me yet, not once, not once!"

He stopped short, and I felt a good deal like making a fool of myself, for in those days I had not made up my mind about these things. Graeme, poor old chap, was gazing at him with a sad yearning in his dark eyes; big Sandy was sitting very stiff and staring harder than ever into the fire; Baptiste was trembling with excitement; Blaney was openly wiping the tears away. But the face that held my eyes was that of old man Nelson. It was white, fierce, hungry looking, his sunken eyes burning, his lips parted as if to cry.

The minister went on. "I didn't mean to tell you this, men. It all came over me with a rush. But it is true, every word, and not a word will I take back. And, what's more, I can tell you this—what he did for me he can do for any man, and it doesn't make any difference what's behind him, and," leaning slightly forward and with a little thrill of pathos vibrating in his voice, "oh, boys, why don't you give him a chance at you? Without him you'll never be the men you want to be, and you'll never get the better of that that's keeping some of you now from going back home. You know you'll never go back till you're the men you want to be." Then, lifting up his face and throwing back his head, he said, as if to himself, "Jesus—he shall save his people from their sins," and then, "Let us pray."

Graeme leaned forward with his face in his hands; Baptiste and Blaney dropped on their knees; Sandy, the Campbells and some others stood up. Old man Nelson held his eyes steadily on the minister.

Only once before had I seen that look on a human face. A young fellow had broken through the ice on the river at home, and as the black water was dragging his fingers one by one from the slippery edges there came over his face that same look. I used to wake up for many a night after in a sweat of horror, seeing the white face with its parting lips and its piteous, dumb appeal and the black water slowly sucking it down.

Nelson's face brought it all back, but during the prayer the face changed and seemed to settle into resolve of some sort, stern, almost gloomy, as of a man with his last chance before him.

After the prayer Mr. Craig invited the men to a Christmas dinner next day in Black Rock. "And because you are an independent lot we'll charge you half a dollar for dinner and the evening show." Then, leaving a bundle of magazines and illustrated papers on the table, a godsend to the men, he said goodby and went out.

I was to go with the minister, so I jumped into the sleigh first and waited while he said goodby to Graeme, who had been hard hit by the whole service and seemed to want to say something. I heard Mr. Craig say cheerfully and confidently: "It's a true bill. Try him."

Sandy, who had been steadyding Dandy while that interesting broncho was attempting with great success to balance himself on his hind legs, came to say goodby.

"Come and see me first thing, Sandy." "Aye, I know. I'll see you, Mr. Craig," said Sandy earnestly as Dandy dashed off at a full gallop across the clearing and over the bridge, steadyding down when he reached the hill.

"Steady, you idiot!" This was to Dandy, who had taken a sudden side spring into the deep snow, almost upsetting us. A man stepped out from the shadow. It was old man Nelson. He came straight to the sleigh and, ignoring my presence completely, said:

"Mr. Craig, are you dead sure of this? Will it work?" "Do you mean," said Craig, taking him up promptly, "can Jesus Christ

save you from your sins and make a man of you?"

The old man nodded, keeping his hungry eyes on the other's face.

"Well, here's his message to you: 'The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost.'"

"To me? To me?" said the old man eagerly.

"Listen. This, too, is his word: 'Him that cometh unto me I will in nowise cast out.' That's for you, for here you are, coming."

"You don't know me, Mr. Craig. I left my baby fifteen years ago because—"

"Stop!" said the minister. "Don't tell me—at least not tonight, perhaps never. Tell him who knows it all now and who never betrays a secret. Have it out with him. Don't be afraid to trust him."

Nelson looked at him, with his face quivering, and said in a husky voice: "If this is no good, it's hell for me."

"If it's no good," replied Craig, almost sternly, "it's hell for all of us."

The old man straightened himself up, looked up at the stars, then back at Mr. Craig, then at me and, drawing a deep breath, said:

"I'll try him."

As he was turning away the minister touched him on the arm and said quietly:

"Keep an eye on Sandy tomorrow."

Nelson nodded, and we went on, but before we took the next turn I looked back and saw what brought a jump into my throat. It was old man Nelson on his knees in the snow, with his hands spread upward to the stars, and I wondered if there was any one above the stars and nearer than the stars who could see. And then the trees hid him from my sight.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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