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KEEP YOUR BLOOD CLEAN

Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK ROCK CHRISTMAS.

ANY strange Christmas days have I seen, but that wild Black Rock Christmas stands out strangest of all. While I was reveling in my delicious second morning sleep, just awake enough to enjoy it, Mr. Craig came abruptly, announcing breakfast and adding:

"Hope you are in good shape, for we have our work before us this day."

"Hello!" I replied, still half asleep and anxious to hide from the minister that I was trying to gain a few more moments of snoozing delight. "What's abroad?"

"The devil," he answered shortly and with such emphasis that I sat bolt upright, looking anxiously about.

"Oh, no need for alarm! He's not after you particularly—at least not today," said Craig, with a shadow of a smile. "But he is going about in good style, I can tell you."

By this time I was quite awake. "Well, what particular style does his majesty affect this morning?"

He pulled out a showbill. "Peculiarly gaudy and effective, is it not?"

The items announced were sufficiently attractive. The Frisco Opera company was to produce the "screaming farce," "The Gay and Giddy Dude," after which there was to be a grand ball during which the "Killer Time Show" were to do see why

sea; the whole to be followed by a "big supper," with "two free drinks to every man and one to the lady," and all for the insignificant sum of \$2.

"Can't you go one better?" I said.

He looked inquiringly and a little disgustedly at me.

"What can you do against free drinks and a dance, not to speak of the high kickers?" he groaned. "No," he continued. "It's a clean beat for us today. The miners and lumbermen will have in their pockets \$10,000 and every dollar burning a hole, and Slavin and his gang will get most of it. But," he added, "you must have breakfast. You'll find a tub in the kitchen. Don't be afraid to splash. It is the best I have to offer you."

The tub sounded inviting, and before many minutes had passed I was in a delightful glow, the effect of cold water and a rough towel and that consciousness of virtue that comes to a man who has had courage to face his cold bath on a winter-morning.

The breakfast was laid with fine taste. A diminutive pine tree in a pot hung round with wintergreen stood in the center of the table.

"Well, now, this looks good—porridge, beefsteak, potatoes, toast and marmalade."

"I hope you will enjoy it all."

There was not much talk over our meal. Mr. Craig was evidently preoccupied and as blue as his politeness would allow him. Slavin's victory weighed upon his spirits. Finally he burst out: "Look here! I can't—I won't stand it! Something must be done. Last Christmas this town was

for two weeks, as one of the miners said, 'a little suburb of hell.' It was something too awful. And at the end of it all one young fellow was found dead in his shack, and twenty or more crawled back to the camps, leaving their three months' pay with Slavin and his suckers. I won't stand it, I say!" He turned fiercely on me. "What's to be done?"

This rather took me aback, for I had troubled myself with nothing of this sort in my life before, being fully occupied in keeping myself out of difficulty and allowing others the same privilege. So I ventured the consolation that he had done his part and that a spree more or less would not make much difference to these men. But the next moment I wished I had been slower in speech, for he swiftly faced me, and his words came like a torrent:

"God forgive you that heartless word!

Do you know? But, no; you don't know what you are saying. You don't know that these men have been clamoring for dear life out of a fearful pit for three months past and doing good climbing, too, poor chaps. You don't think that some of them have wives, most of them mothers and sisters, in

the east or across the sea, for whose sake they are slaving here, the miners hoping to save enough to bring their families to this homeless place, the rest to make enough to go back with credit. Why, there's Nixon, miner, splendid chap, who has been here for two years and drawing the highest pay. Twice he has been in sight of his heaven, for he can't speak of his wife and babies without breaking up, and twice that slick son of the devil—that's Scripture, mind you—Slavin, got him and "roiled" him as the boys say. He went back to the mines broken in body and in heart. He says this is his third and last chance. If Slavin gets him, his wife and babies will never see him on earth or in heaven. There are Sandy and the rest too. And," he added in a lower tone and with the curious little thrill of pathos in his voice, "this is the day the Saviour came to the world."

He paused, and then with a little, sad smile, "But I don't want to abuse you."

"Do. I enjoy it. I'm a beast, a selfish beast!" For somehow his intense, blazing earnestness made me feel uncomfortably small.

"What have we to offer?" I demanded.

"Wait till I have got these things cleared away and my housekeeping done."

I pressed my services upon him, somewhat feebly, I own, for I can't bear dishwater, but he rejected my offer.

"I don't like trusting my china to the hands of tenderfoot."

"Quite right, though your china would prove an excellent means of defense at long range."

It was delft a quarter of an inch thick, so I smoked while he washed up, swept, dusted and arranged the room.

After the room was ordered to his taste we proceeded to hold counsel. He could offer dinner, magic lantern, music. "We can fill in time for two hours, but," he added gloomily, "we can't beat the dance and the high kickers."

"Have you nothing new or startling?" He shook his head.

"No kind of show—dog show, snake stripping off the harness."

"Slavin has a monopoly of the snakes."

Then he added hesitatingly: "There was an old Punch and Judy chap here last year, but he died. Whisky again."

"What happened to his show?"

"The Black Rock hotel man took it for board and whisky bill. He has it still, I suppose."

I don't much relish the business, but I hated to see him beaten, so I ventured, "I have run a Punch and Judy in an amateur way at the variety."

He sprang to his feet with a yell.

"You have! You mean to say it?" We've got them! We've beaten them!" He had an extraordinary way of taking your help for granted. "The miners," he said, "mostly English and Welsh, went mad over the poor old showman and made him so wealthy that in sheer gratitude he drank himself to death."

He walked up and down in high excitement and in such evident delight that I felt pledged to my best effort.

"Well," I said, "first the poster. We must beat them in that."

He brought me large sheets of brown paper, and after two hours' hard work I had half a dozen pictorial showbills done in gorgeous colors and striking designs. They were good, if I do say it myself.

The turkey, the magic lantern, the Punch and Judy show, were all there, the last with a crowd before it in gaping delight. A few explanatory words were thrown in, emphasizing the highly artistic nature of the Punch and Judy entertainment.

Craig was delighted and proceeded to perfect his plans. He had some half a dozen young men, four young ladies and eight or ten matrons upon whom he could depend for help. These he organized into a vigilance committee charged with the duty of preventing miners and lumbermen from getting away to Slavin's.

"The critical moments will be immediately before and after dinner and again after the show is over," he explained. "The first two crises must be left to the care of Punch and Judy, and as for the last, I am not yet sure what shall be done." But I saw he had something in his head, for he added, "See Mrs. Mavor."

"Who is Mrs. Mavor?" I asked.

But he made no reply. He was a born fighter, and he put the fighting spirit into us all. We were bound to win.

The sports were to begin at 2 o'clock.

By luncheon everything was in readiness. After lunch I was having a quiet smoke in Craig's shack when he rushed, saying:

"The battle will be lost before it is fought. If we lose Quatre Bras, we shall never get to Waterloo."

"What's up?"

"Slavin, just now. The miners are coming in, and he will have them in town in half an hour."

He looked at me appealingly. I knew what he wanted.

"All right. I suppose I must, but it is an awful bore that a man can't have a quiet smoke."

"You're not half a bad fellow," he replied, smiling. "I shall get the ladies to furnish coffee inside the booth. You furnish them intellectual nourishment in front with dear old Punch and Judy."

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know that these men have been clamoring for dear life out of a fearful pit for three months past and doing good climbing, too, poor chaps. You don't

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"You're not half a bad fellow," he replied, smiling. "I shall get the ladies to furnish coffee inside the booth. You furnish them intellectual nourishment in front with dear old Punch and Judy."

"I am not so sure. Do you think you could get him?"

I laughed. "You are a good one."

"Well," he replied half defiantly, "is not this your fight too?"

"You make me think so, though I am bound to say I hardly recognize myself today. But here goes." And before I knew it I was describing our plans to Graeme, growing more and more enthusiastic as he sat in his sleigh, listening with a quizzical smile.

"He's got you, too," he said. "I fear so."

"Well," I laughed, "perhaps so. But I want to lick that man Slavin. I've just seen him, and he's just what Craig said him, 'a slick son of the devil.' Don't be shocked. He says it is Scripture."

"Revised version," said Graeme, while Craig looked a little abashed.

"What is assigned me, Mr. Craig? For I know that this man is simply your agent."

I repudiated the idea, while Mr. Craig said nothing.

"What's my part?" demanded Graeme.

"Well," said Mr. Craig hesitatingly, "of course I would do nothing till I had consulted you, but I want a man to take my place at the sports. I am referee."

"That's all right," said Graeme, with an air of relief. "I expected something."

"And then I thought you would not mind presiding at the dinner. I want it to go off well."

"Did you notice that?" said Graeme to me. "Not a bad touch, eh?"

"That's nothing to the way he touched me. Wait and learn," I answered, while Craig looked quite distressed.

"He'll do it, Mr. Craig, never fear," I said, "and any other little duty."