

Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

(Continued from First Page.)

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 to the thrilling 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, and I didn't fear them any more. And the baby, the dear little baby—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 men. Then had 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 slums 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 shepherds' arms with a child's wonder of the baby 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 gasp, his eyes big and staring, big Sandy was sitting very stiff and staring, big Sandy 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, 'It all came over me with a rush. But it is true, every word, 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 and his parting lips and his 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 a half a dollar for dinner and the evening show." Then, leaving a bundle of magazines and illustrated papers on the table, a good-bye to the men, he said good-bye and went out.

I was to go with the minister, so I jumped into the sleigh first and waited while he said good-bye 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 standing dandy while that interesting broncho was attempting with great success to balance himself on his hind legs, came to say good-bye.

"Come and see me first thing, Sandy."

"Age, 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, steadying down when he reached the hill.

stepped out from the shadow. It was old man Nelson. He came straight to the chair 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. He's not afraid to trust him."

Nelson looked at him, with his face gulping, and said in a husky voice:

"If it is no good, it's hell for me."

"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 lump in 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.

CHAPTER II.
THE BLACK ROCK CHRISTMAS.

MANY 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 snoring 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. "Tentatively gaudy and effective, is it not?"

The items announced were sufficient to attract. The Price Opera company was to produce the "Screaming Fanny." "The Gay and Giddy Dude," after which there was to be a grand ball, during which the "Kalifornia Female Kickers" were to do some fancy figures, 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 growled. "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 conscious sense of virtue that comes to a man who has had courage to face his cold bath on a winter morning.

and bathed without breaking up, and I was that sick and of the devil—that's what he said. Slavin got him and 'batted' 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 shrill 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."

"No," I replied. "I'm a beast, a selfish beast!" For somehow his intense, blazing earnestness made me feel uncomfortable by myself.

"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 a tenderfoot."

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

It was felt that 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 charmer?"

"Slavin has a monopoly of the snakes."

Then he added hesitatingly: "There was an old punch and a dandy 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 did not 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 haven't 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 chaps, 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 gazing 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 then 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 to do. But I saw he had something in his head, for he added, 'I shall see Mrs. Mayor.'"

"Who is Mrs. Mayor?" 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 lunchtime 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."

This rejecting of hospitality was perfectly understood by Slavin and by all. "Dat's too bad, he's," said Baptiste wickedly. "And, Sandy, he's got good money on his pocket for sure too."

The boys laughed, and Slavin, joining in, turned away with Keefe and Blaney, but by the look in his eye I knew he was playing Br'er Rabbit and lying low.

Mr. Craig just then came up.

"Hello, boys! Too late for punch and Judy, but just in time for hot coffee and doughnuts."

"Don't Dat's fine rate," said Baptiste heartily. "Where you keep him?"

"Up in the tent next the church there. The miners are all in."

"Ah! Dat's so? Dat's bad news for the shanty men, heh, Sandy?" said the little Frenchman dolefully.

"There were a clothesbasket full of doughnuts and a boiler of coffee left as I passed just now," said Craig encouragingly.

"Allons, mes garçons. Vite! Never say keel!" cried Baptiste excitedly, stripping off his harness.

But Sandy would not leave the horses till they were carefully rubbed down, blanketed and fed, for he was entered for the four horse race, and it behooved him to do his best to win. Besides, he seemed to enjoy himself for anything so unimportant as eating.

He considered hardly worthy even of Baptiste. Mr. Craig managed to get a word with him before he went off, and saw Sandy solemnly and sympathetically shake his head, saying, "Ah, we'll beat him this day!" And I gathered that he was added to the vigilance committee.

Old man Nelson was busy with his own team. He turned slowly at Mr. Craig's greeting. "How is it, Nelson?" And it was with a very gray voice he answered:

"I hardly know, sir, but I am not gone yet, though it seems little to hold to."

"All you want for a grip is what your hand can cover. What would you have? And, besides, do you know why you are not gone yet?"

The old man waited, looking at the minister gravely.

"Because he hasn't let go his grip of you."

"How do you know he's gripped me?"

"Now, look here, Nelson, do you want to quit this thing and give it all up?"

"No, no—for heaven's sake, no! Why, do you think I have lost it?" said Nelson almost piteously.

"Well, he's keener about it than you, and I'll bet you haven't thought it worth while to think him."

"To think him," he repeated almost stupidly, "for—"

"For keeping you where you are over night," said Mr. Craig almost sternly.

The old man gazed at the minister, a light glowing in his eyes.

"You're right! Thank God, you're right!"

And then he turned quickly away and went into the stable behind his team. It was a minute before he came out. Over his face there was a trembling joy.

"Can't I do anything for you today?" he asked humbly.

"Indeed you just can," said the minister, taking his hand and shaking it very warmly, and then he told him Slavin's programme and ours.

"Sandy is all right till after his race. After that is his time of danger," said the minister.

"I'll stay with him, sir," said old Nelson in the tone of a man taking a covenant and immediately set off for the coffee tent.

"Here comes another recruit for your corps," he said, pointing to Leslie Graeme, who was coming down the street at that moment in his light sleigh.

"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 I didn't quite like.

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

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

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

"What is assigned me, Mr. Craig?"

For I knew that the idea 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 hard."

"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."

"Now, that's too bad of you. That is all I want, honor bright," he replied, adding as he turned away: "You are just in time for a cup of coffee, Mr. Graeme. Now I must see Mrs. Mayor."

"Who is Mrs. Mayor?" I demanded of Graeme.

"Mrs. Mayor? The miners' guardian angel."

We put up the horses and set off for coffee. As we approached the booth Leslie Graeme caught sight of the punch and Judy show, stood still in amazement and exclaimed:

"Can the dead live?"

"Punch and Judy never die," I replied solemnly.

"But the old manipulator is dead enough, poor old beggar!"

"But he left his mantle, as you see," he looked at me a moment.

"What? Do you mean you?"

"Yes; that is what I do mean."

"He is a great man, that Craig fellow, a truly great man."

And then he leaned up against a tree

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