

## **By Right of Salvage - A Christmas Story from S.R.Crockett**

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**T**he time, by chance, was Christmas Eve. But it was in the Scotland of thirty years ago, so the fact made no difference. The Scriptures had not declared it unto them. The minister was silent on the subject, or spoke only to fulminate against prelatric Englishers, and others who 'regarded times and seasons.'

But it was the field-night of the 'Choral Union,' and the little Whinnyliggate school-house had never been fuller. There was a light snow on the ground – a sprinkling only, for the frost of December had been long and black.

Many a man there had a back stiff with the slow lift and drive as he sent the channel-stone up the rink. But the 'Singing School' Concert – ah, that brought out all in the upper end of the parish who were neither deaf nor bedridden.

If you had gone up to the four little steps that led up to the steep schoolhouse brae, you would hardly have seen the light from the windows for the heads clustering without and within. The younger men, who had had to take care of the horses and see them safely stabled at the smithy or at the Gatehead farm, arrived late, and mostly found themselves without seats. But in revenge they stood about the windows, and even threw conversation lozenges in the direction of the half circle about the precentor, where the singers were fluttering the lace sleeves of their best gowns and shaking their ringlets, one on each side falling low on the shoulder, rebelliously, and tossed back with the prettiest shake of the head.

They were only awed by the waving baton of Robert Affleck of the Garioch, noble-hearted man and excellent musician, who only looked ridiculous when he began to sing. That is – to those who did not know him.

Those who did thought nothing of the strange screwing of the mouth, the twitching nostrils, or the rise and fall of the shaggy black eye-brows, as he twanged the tuning-fork and prepared to attack the fortress of 'Ring and Bell, Watchman!' or even the 'Watch by the Rhine.' For it was the time of the Franco-German war, and, in English versions, warlike songs ravaged the remotest country parishes, otherwise haunts of ancient peace.

Here and there a greybeard elder shook his head and confided to his brother in office: 'If they were to sing the Hunderdth Psalm it wad fit them better than a' that clinkum clankum! Hear to thae craitures. 'Ring, ring, ring!' Ye wad think it was a smiddly. I tell ye what, Drumglass, I'm no on wi' thae vain sacrifices.'

There's the harps,' suggested Drumglass in the speaker's ear. 'If you and me are on the road Up Yonder, we had better be getting' accustomed to the like o' that!'

But the Hallelujah Chorus, murdered wilfully, in the first degree and without extenuating circumstances, silence both office-bearers. They remained, critic and apologist, with dropped jaws till the final 'Amen' seemed to escape through a broken roof.

The little stove in the centre on its red sandstone foundation was growing ruddy when at last the benediction was said, then the door was opened, and those nearest it

fell out as turnips fall from an over-full cart when both pins are out and the back-board comes away with a clatter.

Mr Goodlison the minister was going from group to group, buzzing compliments. His wife was shaking her long side curls at him from the doorway as a signal to be done and come away home to his supper. She held ready in her hands the minister's white knitted comforter. Abraham was so sensitive to colds, so forgetful and careless, and withal so cunning that (will it be believed?) he would sometimes sneak into the soiled linen cupboard and get out a worn shirt and collar, which she had put away, alleging as an excuse (when taxed with the crime), that 'a stiff one choked the word of God in a man's throat.'

But the young people were all outside early arranging their affairs. Those who could walk home had generally their companions trusted long beforehand. The moon was at its full of course. Indeed Christmas Eve had been chosen for the festival entirely on this account.

Those living at greater distances drove. One or two well-to-do married farmers had their gigs. But such hurried homecomings by no means satisfied the young people. The longest farm carts had been covered with a thick felting of sacks along the shelving sides. The cart bottom was deep in straw, while all the rugs and coverlets in the house had been requisitioned for the homecoming.

There was much laughter. Invitations, audacious and mock tender, rang through the air. Young men who were to sit in the corner to drive, offered more quietly special accommodation by their sides, and promised to be 'douce.' There was but one of all the singers who stood aloof, showed no preference, accepted no invitation of all those laughingly or wistfully extended to her.

Alison Cairns called from her rebellious looks 'curly,' pouted disdainfully apart. Roy M'Farlane asked her, 'majorin' the worth of his turnout like an auctioneer. He retired snubbed. Andro Crossmyloof ventured in, was refused and fell back amid the muttered jeers of his comrades.

But the other girls, who envied Curly her good looks and her position as premier soloist, said loud enough for each other to hear,

'Oh, Will Arnott has gone home with Lizzie Baker.'

It was not true, but Alison Cairns turned her face away towards the sheeted hills that stood up white on the farther side of the loch.

She did not believe it of Will. Of course not. She knew why these girls said it, and she smiled pleasantly at the nearest, Bell Burns, ruddy even in the moonshine.

'I will wait,' she said, 'there's never a lad in this end of the parish worth the snap of a finger!'

'Come with us Ailie,' cried Jeannie Begbie, more tenderhearted than the others, reaching a hand to help her up.

'Let her bide if she's sae upsettin' the proud madam!' murmured the more jealous.

'Drive on Roy!'

Now there was enough of truth in all this to hurt, and Alison Cairns felt very angry indeed to be thus publicly shamed. Will Arnott had promised to be there

waiting for her, and – No, no, it was impossible. She knew Will. There must be some accident. She was sure there must be some accident. All the same a sudden resolve came to her. The little strongly shod feet stopped tapping the hard beaten snow on which the wheels of many gigs and carts had executed fantastic curves and circles in turning.

In another moment the minister and his wife came out. Mrs Goodlison was busy rectifying the set of the white comforter about her husband's neck, for well she knew that in Scotland at least, a minister's throat is his fortune.

'Bless me,' said the minister, 'is that not one of the maids I see going alone round the turn at the smithy?'

Well he knew that it was not good Whinnyliggate custom to permit anything of the kind. The young men ought to be ashamed of themselves. Now in his time –

'Should not I -?' he stammered. 'Should not *we*, Marion – that is, I do not like any of the young women returning home alone at this time of night.'

But Marion pulled him round sharply. The comforter was not yet entirely to her mind and she gave it an extra twitch because he was talking nonsense.

'We will do no such thing, Abraham,' she said. 'You will go doucely home with this old woman here present, and then you will take your milk-gruel while it is hot. Then to bed you will go like a decent man! As for the lassie, it will only be Jess Kelly from the Greystone, she has only the corner to turn at any rate. And yonder is Will Arnott with an empty gig following her up!

'Good night, Will,' the minister called out.

'Good night, sir,' said a voice from the gig, with an unusual strain in it.

'Why, what's the matter, Will?' cried the minister, stopping in spite of the forward tug of a wifely hand on his arm, 'what's that on your face? Blood?'

'Only a bit of a spill, sir,' said Will Arnott. 'Someone let fall a lantern in front of Bess as we drove out of the innyard, and before I could get her mastered she tumbled me out at the Well corner.'

'Come your ways into the Manse, Will,' said Mr Goodlison, 'it's well that these things should be seen to at once.'

'No thank you, sir,' said Will, 'it's nothing and – there's the mare – she's not to be trusted even yet – and -'

'What, Will?'

'Did you happen to see - ' (Will had a delicacy in mentioning names) – 'a young lady waiting?'

'Who was to go home with you, William?' said the minister's wife, who loved to get to the point in such matters.

'Ah, well – that is to say, I hoped, I expected Miss Alison Cairns,' the youth stammered, occupying himself with the mare's restlessness to hide his own growing confusion.

'Alison,' said Mrs Goodlison reassuringly, 'oh of a certainty she will have found a seat in one of the long waggons. I saw Roy M'Farlane speaking to her before she left the schoolroom.'

'Oh, thank you – no doubt,' said Will Arnott, as little reassured as possible. 'Good night, madam; good night, Mr Goodison!'

For Will had been at College and was accounted by far the most mannerly young man in the parish. He was a favourite also with the minister's wife, who thought him much too good for any of the village or even for the farmer's daughters.

But the minister, in spite of fifty years and a strict regime of comforters, had a warm spot in his heart for honest swains.

'I saw somebody that looked like Ailie Cairns,' he called out as Will drove off, 'going round the smithy turn a minute or two ago!'

'Nonsense – it was only the Kelly lass from the Greystane!' interrupted his wife. But Will had whipped up the mare, and by this time was rounding the turn himself.

'Oh, these young people,' said the minister's wife, 'they think of nothing else but lovemaking!' I wish they were more awake to their higher duties.

'Remember the Long Loaning, Marion!' said Mr Goodison, giving his wife's arm a quick squeeze under his.

'For shame, Abraham – think of your age and position.'

'I am thinking!' said Mr Goodison, and they walked all the way home, silent both of them.

Meanwhile Will Arnott was on the trail as hard as the mare could go, and indeed she laid herself well down to her work, as if she knew her master's heart. The corner came. They flashed round the quick turns about Greystane and up the long alley of beech and birch, their naked twigs winnowing in the moonlight. No Ailie was to be seen. The avenue to the bridge and beyond it as far as Willowbank, white on its hill, glimmered pearly pale, delicately pattered by the branch shadows, all the way to the knoll from which you look down on the loch.

Instinctively Will laid the whiplash along the mare's glistening side. Bess bounded forward, and, eager on his chase, Will let her go.

It seemed as if he reached the top of the Urioch brae in a dozen strides. As they topped the rise something moved behind a broom bush on the steep face from which in summer the children dig pignuts. Bess, quick to resent anything after the sting of the whiplash in the avenue of birches, laid back her vicious ears, set her head between her knees, and went down the steep hill at a gallop.

Now at the foot was the smallest sort of burn, twinkling and murmuring half-hidden in summer, but now, of course, frozen stiff. Then came three awkward turns, where already more than one man had found his end. A little beyond Bess swerved to the left, where was only a steepish rough bank, down which the wheels skidded. She struck the ice of the Bogle Thorn Pool, which broke beneath her weight. Then a black column of water rose churning in the frosty air. It was crested with white – the broken snow-covered ice of the pool. It sank, and all was still. To the watcher, behind the whin bushes on the brae only a little black patch broke the white uniformity of the lake, a blot irregularly shaped but, as it seemed, no bigger than a man's hand.

How Alison Cairns got out of her hiding place, how fast she crossed the crisp meadow-grass, hard as iron underneath, how she found herself standing on the verge of splintered ice, she never knew.

She saw a whiplash floating, that which had done all the mischief. The butt was still held down under the water. Something told her there was a chance. She dared not hesitate. Still less dared she pull. For she knew that the whip might be her only guide to the hand that held it.

Taking firm hold of the branch of a scraggy thorn which overhung the pool, Alison let herself down into the water. She did not feel the chill. She only felt herself sinking. The branch snapped and she swerved in the direction of the outer edge of the ice. She felt her feet entangled. Then suddenly they rested firm. Down the whip handle a hand had come as if by magic into hers. She pushed violently shorewards, striking what was beneath her feet to give her an impetus, and the face of Will Arnott had come up close to hers, starkly white and wet under the moon.

She laid her hand on the branch – a stronger branch, then on the roots of the whins. There was a long struggle, but Will was out on the snow – silent, cold, and it seemed dead, on the steep, rough bank.

Then quite suddenly Alison's courage deserted her. She threw her arms about his face, crushed it against her, crying out, 'Oh Will, Will, forgive me, do forgive me.'

At that moment she felt this horror was all her fault, and she wept over him, chafing his hands and wooing the life that would not come back into her sweetheart's body.

'I have killed him. I – I – who loved him!'

So busy was Ailie that she had not heard the jingle of horse-accoutrement on the road above. Two men slid down the embankment, leaving another in the waggon.

'What's this, what's this, Ailie?' said her father, standing tall and grave beside her.

'It's Will,' she sobbed, giving way completely now that all was over. 'I frightened the horse and drowned him!'

Her father was bending over Will Arnott. He was a quick, brusque man, and generally ordered everybody about, but he was gentle that night.

'Let us get him first to the mill,' he said, 'and then you, Rob, drive Alison home as fast as may be -'

'I shall stay with Will,' she cried. 'I must – I killed him. But I only meant to frighten him. He had made me wait at the school gate. Oh father, I am not wet – or cold! Indeed I am not!'

Her father sucked a little, low, comprehensive whistle between his lips.

'Whew-ew!' he murmured. 'So, Master Will!'

And in ten minutes all were safe in the millhouse – Will in bed and the miller's wife bustling about to find dry clothes for Ailie out of her daughter's store

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The next morning David Cairns strode into the room, flicking his high riding-boots free of snow. Alison sat with Will's hand in hers, and, strangely enough, did not seem in the least abashed.

'Now, young people,' said her father, 'be good enough to tell me the meaning of all this.'

With a faint smile and happy eyes Will referred him to his daughter.

'If it had not been for Ailie,' he said, 'I would have been lying beside Bess in the pool at the Bogle Thorn.'

'And then?' said Mr Cairns, turning to his daughter.

'Will is mine,' affirmed the young woman brazenly. 'I saved him and I meant to keep him! Besides, he needs someone to keep him from careering madly about the country.'

'And if it had not been for me,' said Mr Cairns, 'pray where would the pair of you have been?'

'*Dear father!*' said Ailie, laying her hand upon his arm with the treacherous and selfish affection common to daughters on such occasions.