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DENNY BROOKS

A STORY OF COURAGE
By ELENORE MEHERIN.

CHAPTER XCV.

The Stranger.

A light winked in the cabin, pierced like a small golden eye through the encompassing blackness. Denny's face was cold; his heart felt cold and heavy with a terrible loneliness. "Katy's up—still up," he thought. He gave up trying to keep his lips from shaking. It was midnight. He had driven four hours, driven with a mad recklessness, the stinging in his eyes half-blinding him. Along the road the black trees stalked, giant and desolate like doomed ghosts. They fled as Denny swept past—seemed to flee in terror—for he drove in a hurricane with a hurricane beating about and through him.

Now he was coming out of it—chilled, shaking and suddenly weak—ready to sob at the thought of telling Katy.

He stepped softly to the door, but even that softly she had heard. "Is it you, Denny?"

"Open it, Katy."

Perhaps to hide his face, he put his arm about her and kissed her. "You're frozen, Denny. Your face is so cold. What kept you so long? Is it all right? Everything's all right?"

He walked over to the corner, hanging his coat carefully on a hook.

"Oh, all right enough. Why did you stay up, Katy? Were you frightened?"

"No—of course not. I wanted to see you. I've waited supper. The coffee is hot. Have a cup—you're shivering."

"It was a long ride," he answered vaguely, spreading his hands over the oil stove. Then he sat down at the table, toyed with a knife, took a piece of bread and broke it. Katy saw that his face, even his eyes, were a queer, pearl gray like the snow on the distant ridges.

He feels terrible over this, she thought. Poor Martin—three days ago laughing sheepishly as he carried away the pie, today they had buried him. What a brutal, incredible finality!

What could she say to Denny? "It was unbearable, was it? It's made you feel terrible?"

"Yes—yes—a thing like that's awful! Suddenly he hung the bread from him, went over and leaned against the shelf, pressing his fist against his mouth.

"Denny—oh, you didn't feel this way when you left. You can't help it. Drink the coffee—please."

He turned around and looked at her and turning his back said with a flat quiet that entered like a cold breath on her heart: "They blame me, Katy. They've put it on me."

"You! Not you, Denny. Oh, no!"

"I'm out, Katy. Thrown out." She lifted herself to her feet. "Denny—come here, Denny."

He didn't stir, but stood with his back to her, his face half hidden in his hand. If ever there was cruelty, Katy knew it, standing there bound and he in this utter despair. "Denny—please—come here."

She would reach him—she would! With both hands on her chair, she pushed herself.

"Don't, Kitty—don't." He came over then and with the utmost grace.

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teness pressed her back. She took his hands, folded her own under them, looking up with an infinite trust and tenderness. He could not meet the clear, sweet eyes, but turned from her to the sound that tore like a wound from his throat. "God, Katy—they put it on me. They threw me out."

Katy wished then to throw her arms around him, to cry and to cry, to rail against this terrible thing. But she leaned with all her might on his hands until she stood up again, facing him. With the red lips trembling she said softly: "They can't put it on you, Denny—no matter what they say. They can't. Don't take it so, Denny. You know you're not to blame. Everyone here knows that. You will make them know it."

"Know it!" She had never seen his young eyes grim before. The way he smiled sent a sharp pain through her. "They don't want to know it, Lord. Katy, you should have heard them."

"What did they do, Denny? When?"

He was suddenly standing before them again and they were storming the table, gasping the words, a sive air with a harsh, "Surrender it now! We've stood enough!"

"It means the job, Katy. It means everything."

He went over to the couch and pulled a suitcase from it, restlessness burning him. Still his eyes kept stinging and he kept saying to himself: "Damnably—damnably—God!"

"I want to get out quick, Katy. I can't stick around here."

Katy, knowing all this job meant to him, remembering every word of the fevered dreams that grew in him with each week in the mountains, watched him, shook the tears away from her eyes.

"Denny, come over and sit down and let's have a cup of coffee. I just think how long I've waited for you and how awful hungry I am. Oh, Denny."

"Never mind, Katy-kid. Well," he poured the coffee, pushed her to the table. But he sat, toying with a piece of cake. Finally he said, "You better go to bed, Katy. We want to pack up tomorrow."

She reached over and took his hand. "It's not right, Denny. It's terrible. We'll not care. But you will. Well, of course." And he could only answer, "Never mind. What of it?"

She tossed her head, the bright chestnut curls fell about her neck. "You can't let them put it on you, Denny. I'd fight! Yes—they won't dare blame you. After all you've done!"

This brought the ridges before him and the tunnel and the dam rising higher each day. He had conjured this work. It was like the blood in his veins—a part of him. He loved it—lived in it.

To turn from it—each time the realization that he was leaving entered his mind it did so with a hard blow. And he was goaded and the fight surged in him. All night he kept recurring to Melrose and the promise she had given. "I've not quit, and by God I won't quit. I'll find your man and let you have him."

He didn't sleep for the tossing fire in his brain. In the morning he went to see Jim Tucker and Bob Enright. "I'm leaving," he said. "They think I'm to blame. I'm leaving."

Tucker grasped his hand. "Are they mad? How are you to blame?"

"They've binned it on me, so I let them have the contract."

"You're crazy."

"I can't put the job over if they're all against me. Have an eye out for the thing, will you? I'd like to see it a success. It's meant a lot to me."

When Denny heard the engines chugging, the rush of concrete down the chutes, he wanted to run, to fling body and soul away from all remembrance, and he went to the postoffice and sent a wire to Joan!

"I'm leaving the job here. Arrive city Friday or Saturday. Bring up the Robinson contract. I'm through."

"DENNY."

The message went like a cold blade through Joan's mind. He was quitting—quitting the job!

Two days ago Katy's letter had told her of the latest tragedy, and she had written with a rush of warm, impetuous sympathy. Now there came this—

—he was leaving.

She thought of Petra; remembered she wanted him to quit when the dam broke. Was he doing this to satisfy her? Was he quitting now because he loved Petra and she wanted him to?

Joan sat puzzling and aching over the mystifying statement. She was deep in her thought, so that she looked up with a frightened start to a man with sharp, fanatical eyes, thick, black hair and a pointed chin, who was standing at her desk, staring at her.

"I want to see boss," he said in a rough, broken English. "Right now."

"He's not here," Joan answered, standing and putting the desk between her and the excited stranger.

He laughed mockingly. "Where is he? You say where?"

"He's up in the mountains."

"When he come?"

"The end of the week. Is there something I can do for you?"

The eyes lighted, roved about the room. "I see him!" He shook a long bony finger in her face: "Don't you say I come!"

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