DENNY BROOKS

A STORY OF COURAGE

By ELENORE MEHERIN.

CHAPTER CXVII.

The Challenge.

Denny went away from Jerome Cummings, an utter quiet stealing in and through him . . . . his mind destitute of thought.

As he neared the office of the Independent he swung himself together saying with a grin: "Fine sport I am—damn fine sport—made the bargain—well."

This bargain his spirit had not before ratified. In his hope had always been the moment of escape; the thrilling moment of vindication. But he was conquered now.

He worked all afternoon with the thought of Katy lying like her slim, white hand on his mind. Specialists—but she looked fine—gay—ready to laugh—gee whiz—

With the intention of rushing to the doctor he left the office a little early. As he came toward the curb, Petra in a new blue suit, a white frill and a little hat with an odd, long feather that nodded jauntily when she talked, sauntered toward him.

"Will you have a little ride today, Mr. Brooks? It's given away real cheap."

Sweet in her. He told her so. But he had to see the doctor.

"Oh, wait till after dinner, Diddle. Let's have this hour."

"Oh, it's about Katy, Petra. I can't wait."

He accosted the doctor with an impetuous, "I want to know how my sister is. You're alarmed?"

"No, not alarmed, but hers is a serious condition. She won't be well for a long time." He went into details.

Denny spoke the hope uppermost in his mind. "She'll be able to walk? There's still this chance?"

But no amount of cross-questioning could get a positive assurance from the doctor. He couldn't say. And it would be months before Katy could undergo another operation.

"It may be six months or longer, Diddle?" Petra asked when he told her.

"Yes—think of it, Petra—and she'll be in a cast a long while. Gee whiz—"

"And then it may be a year more after the second operation before she can walk?"

"A long time—"

Petra grew white. She leaned a little forward, her hands clasped. "Are we to wait this long, Dendiddle?"

"What—what did you say, Petra?" The abrupt transition shocked him. Petra answered quietly.

"I asked if you meant to wait a year and a half more."

"I wasn't thinking about that at all, Petra."

"No, you don't think about it, Diddle. But I do. It's not exactly fair to me."

"Listen, Petra—I've tried to tell you. How can I think of marriage now when Katy needs me more than ever?"

"But if it's going to be a year and a half or maybe two or three you may still say that. It doesn't seem sensible to me, Diddle. You can't wait for ever. Katy wouldn't expect it."

"Well, Petra—Katy's never going to be alone. I thought you understood that. You might as well understand it now." He added, gently, "If you'd come and see her, Petra, you'd love her. Everyone does. She wants to see you."

He had asked this before: Petra had promised and then failed. Now she said agreeably: "Why I'd love to see Katy, Dendiddle. Haven't I asked you about her? I'd love to go. Any time you say."

The meeting accomplished the very thing Denny hoped to avoid.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

Petra's Visit.

"Do you want to see Petra, Katy?"

"If I thought you wanted me to see her, Denny. Do you?"

"Yes—and she wants to see you, Katy-kid."

The nurse brought in a letter. Katy closed her eyes, pressing her fingers against the temples. It was from Stephen.

"Good Lord, Kate—hear, beautiful old angel, Kate—what's this mean, contemptible trick you've pulled rushing off to a hospital to have your heart cut up and me not there to help with the patching? Lord, Kate, it's taken an awful twist out of me. I'm shaking like an old-fashioned leaf. Been way off in the mountains surveying. Just got Dan's letters. Thank God and all the saints you're coming out of it like a prince and a lady and if you didn't, you mean little thing, I'd be up there to jump like blazes on your grave.

"I wouldn't slip a trick like this over on you, not much! If they were to take a nick out of a rib of mine I'd want beautiful Kate around to see they did it right and to feed me jelly doughnuts.

"I'll be up pretty soon, Kate—as soon as ever I can. What a funny old kitchen without pies and cookies in the tins, but I'll hold up a delicatessen and we'll have the feast same as ever, Kate. Get well, quick—and all the pains you can't bear, give to me. I'd take them in a jiff, angel Kate, if that would help you any and the Lord Den would take the rest. And you've got the two old slaves yet—and you know it—got them bound head and heart. Don't take the light out of our eyes, Kate, by suffering too much.

Longest letter Steve had ever written. He loved her—just the way he always did—just as much as ever—wasn't that enough?

Katy wouldn't have tears in her eyes and Golden Petra coming. She drew them swiftly back. None too soon—the door opening—Denny and a tall bright thing like a long, gay rose.

Pretty—oh, wonderful—Katy was a little astonished. How fine they looked together. Not as fine as Joan, though—Joan, a little taller, walking with a prouder grace—nobler—noble like Denny was. But that was mean to think, and Petra coming over with her hand out and Denny saying, "All dolled up, Stupe!"

"In the most best of all, Denny, and it's lovely in you to come, Petra, for I've just wanted so to see you."

"Have you, Katy? Why, I'm glad to come. Dendiddle has told me all about you and the rubbish you made. I'm glad you're getting better."

"I suppose you get very tired in the hospital all alone, Katy?" Petra asked. "I'd just be bored to death. You don't really have to stay, now that you can sit up a little, do you?"

"Oh, it's not so bad, Petra. Violet comes and Joan and old lady Traynor, and today there's you. I think you're most lovely, Golden Petra." The sweetness shone like a light on Katy's face.

"Do you? Denny told me about Mrs. Traynor. You lived with her didn't you? You're fond of her?"

"Why, we love her. She has a beautiful old garden, and Mr. Traynor has birds. It's just most happy there."

"Why doesn't Diddle have you go out there instead of being poked here alone all day? You could have the nurse with you."

"I thought about going home, later on. We have a view that's a poem from our window. I get lonesome for the hills and the bay and the tall, white campanile. We see all that. And then with me there Denny wouldn't be so lonesome. This is hard for him."

"Oh, it's just killing him, isn't it, Katy, he's so fond of you. But he doesn't need to go into that empty house every night. I want him to come and stay with us. I should think that would be better, because you'd be alone there the same as here. It's a much better plan to go to Old Lady Traynor, I should think."

Petra took out her vanity case and with little caressing touches smoothed powder on her nose. "I should think that would be ideal, Katy, with a lovely garden, and as long as you love her so and are going to live there later on, anyway—"

Katy felt a knocking in her throat. "What do you mean when you say 'later on'?"

Petra looked gently at Katy and blushed. "Oh, don't you know, Katy dear? Of course we aren't making any plans just now. Diddle wouldn't dream of getting married till you're better. We had intended announcing our engagement; we have the cards ready, but Denny wanted to make sure you'll be happy first."

Katy clasped her hands, then quietly, tearing the words from a proud, mighty hurt, "You don't need to wait for me, Petra. Not at all. I'm as well now as I'm ever going to be. The worst thing Denny can do to me is to sacrifice his own happiness. And Denny knows that. And why, Old Lady Traynor would be most glad to have me, and I would be most glad to go."

"I know you feel that way, Katy. Naturally. And I think you're right. Diddle has had a hard fight. And I suppose we are rather senseless postponing it so indefinitely. But then, are your sure you'd be happy with Old Mrs. Traynor?"

Katy was having a bitter time with her lips and her teary old eyes. She made them flash. Then she laughed. "Oh, Petra, it's not where you are that makes you happy. It's what you think. And, you see, I think most anything I please. So nobody ever need to worry for me."

Oh, It was good when Petra stood up—when she said in her easy, sauntering way: "You're just a darling, Katy. I'll run in again, if you like." And never was a sound happier than the closing of the door.

Katy tapped her fingers against her lips—then she tried to hum, but all her heart was melting in her throat and it wouldn't let the song come. She lay back on her pillows. At least she could shut her eyes—she could make them stay dry.

Stephen's letter was under her pillow. On a little table near the bed was a packet of telegrams and letters. These were from Clay Andrews.

After an hour or so Katy reached for them, drew out one—the first. It began "Oh, Katy, you promised to let me knew when this was to happen. If only you would write and say you want me. Do you? If only there would come a moment when you might need me—even for a moment, I live in the wild hope that this may be."

Katy ground the letter between her palms. "Oh, it wouldn't be right, dear Clay—for there isn't anything left of me now."

Before the day was over she wrote: "You think you want a star, Clay, and you say that star is me. Do you want it when all its lights are out? I wonder, because I think that's me now. Oh, I'm so sorry for you, dear Clay, and so glad just now for all you've said and all the mighty things you've written. And come, Clay—now—if you want. But it's true what I say, and this is a star that's mostly out."

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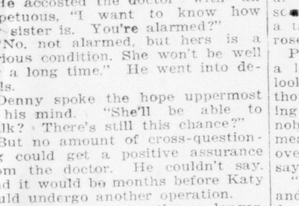

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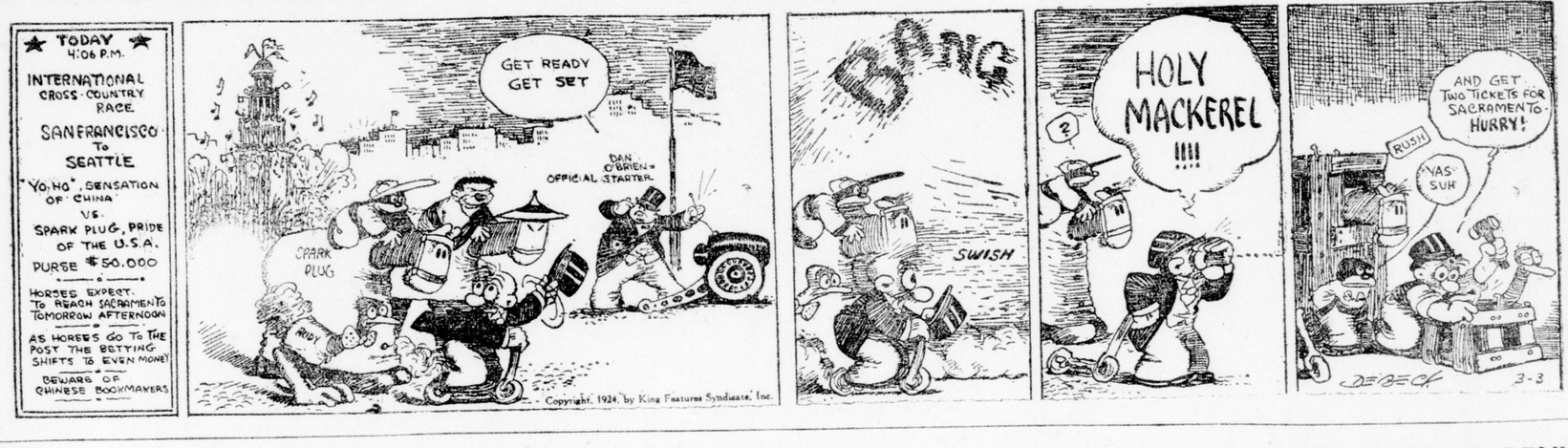

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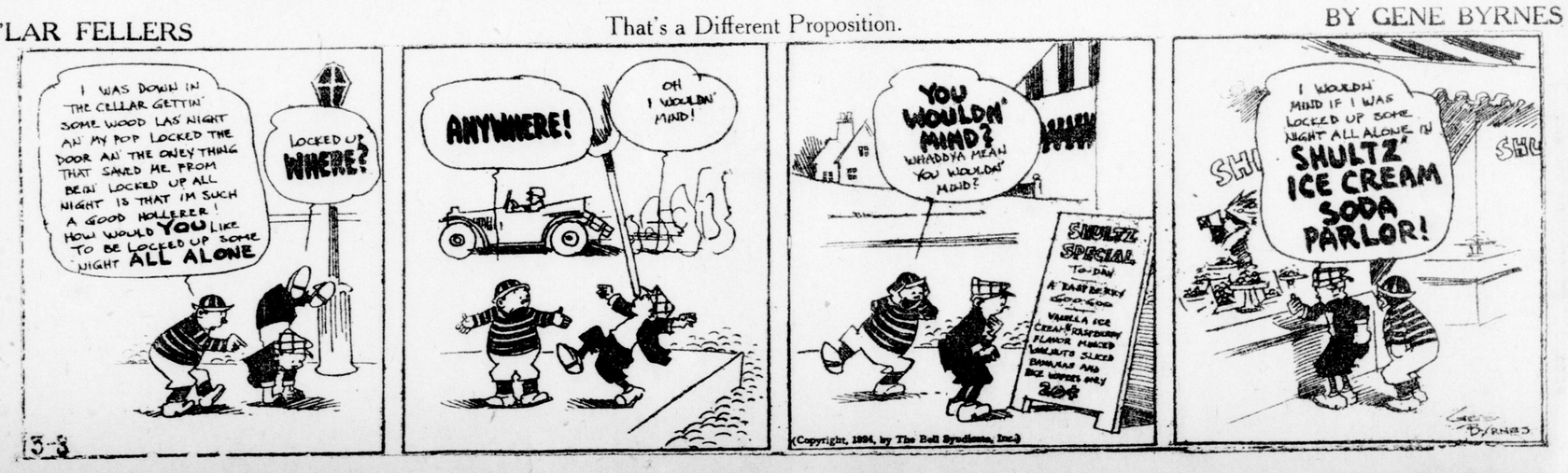
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