

THE **BLIND BROTHER**



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Lost in the Mine	1
2.	The Burned Breaker	16
3.	The Unquiet Conscience	33
4.	The Trial	49
5.	The Verdict	63
6.	The Fall.	79
7.	The Shadow of Death	94
8.	The Father	102
9.	Out of Darkness	112

Chapter 1

LOST IN THE MINE

Many years ago there was no busier mine in the Pennsylvania coal fields than the Dryden Slope Mine. Two hundred thirty men and boys went by the slope into it every morning and came out from it every night. They were simple and unlearned, these men and boys, rugged and rude, rough and reckless at times, but they were also manly, heroic, and kindhearted.

At the time this story opens, workers at other mines in the area were on strike, and they wanted the Dryden miners to strike as well. But the Dryden miners had no cause of complaint against their employers; they earned good wages, and they were content. When persuasion did not work on the Dryden miners, they were threatened, waylaid, beaten, and sometimes killed.

So the men in the Dryden Mine yielded, and soon, down the chambers and along the headings, toward the foot of the slope, came little groups leaving the mine, with dinner pails and tools, discussing earnestly, often bitterly, the situation of their forced strike.

Fifteen or twenty departing miners were holding an especially animated conversation. They were all walking in single file along the route by which the mine cars went.

Where the route crossed from the airway to the heading, a door had been placed, to be opened whenever the cars approached and to be shut as soon as they had passed by.

That door was attended by a boy.

To this point the party had now come, and one by one they filed through the opening, while Bennie, the door boy, stood holding back the door to let them pass.

“Ho, Jack, take the door boy with you!” shouted someone in the rear.

The great, broad-shouldered, rough-bearded man who led the procession turned back to where Bennie, apparently lost in astonishment at this unusual occurrence, still stood with his hand on the door.

“Come along, lad!” he said. “Come along! You’ll have some playtime now.”

“I can’t leave the door, sir,” answered Bennie. “The cars will be coming soon.”

“You need not mind the cars. Come along with you, I say!”

“But I can’t go until Tom comes, anyway, you know.”

The man came a step closer. He had the frame of a giant. The others who passed by were like children beside him. Then one of the men who worked in the mine, and who knew Bennie, came through the doorway, the last in the group, and said, “Don’t hurt the boy; let him alone. His brother will take him out; he always does.”

All this time Bennie stood quite still, with his hand on the door, never turning his head.

It was a strange thing for a boy to stand motionless like that and to look neither to the right nor the left while an excited group of men passed by, one of whom had stopped and approached him as if he meant him harm. It roused the curiosity of “Jack the Giant,” as the miners called him, and plucking his lamp from his cap, he flashed the light of it up into Bennie’s face.

The boy did not stir; no muscle of his face moved; even his eyes remained open and fixed.

“Why, lad! Lad! What’s the matter with you?” There was tenderness in the giant’s voice as he spoke, and tenderness in his bearded face as Bennie answered, “Don’t you know? I’m blind.”

“Blind! And working in the mines?”

“Oh, a body doesn’t have to see to attend the door, you know. All I have to do is to open it when I hear the cars coming and to shut it when they get by.”

“That’s true, but you did not get here alone. Who helped you?”

Bennie’s face lighted up with pleasure as he answered, “Oh, that’s Tom! He helps me. I couldn’t get along without him; I couldn’t do anything without Tom.”

The man’s interest and compassion had grown as the conversation lengthened, and he was charmed by the voice of the child. He would hear more of it.

“Sit you, lad,” he said. “Sit you, and tell me about Tom, and about yourself, and all you can remember.”

Then they sat down on the rude bench together, with the roughly hewn pillar of coal at their backs, blind Bennie and

Jack Rennie, the giant. While one told the story of his blindness and his blessings and his hopes, the other listened with tender earnestness, almost with tears.

Bennie told first about Tom, his brother, who was fourteen years old, two years older than himself. Tom was so good to him, and Tom could see as well as anybody. “Why,” Bennie exclaimed, “Tom can see everything!”

Then Bennie told about his blindness—how he had been blind ever since he could remember. But there was a doctor, he said, who came up once from Philadelphia to visit Major Dryden before the major died, and he had chanced to see Tom and Bennie up by the mines, and the doctor had looked at Bennie’s eyes and said he thought, if the boy could go to Philadelphia and have treatment, that sight might be restored.

Tom asked how much it would cost, and the doctor said, “Oh, maybe a hundred dollars,” and then someone came and called the doctor away, and they had never seen him since.

But Tom resolved that Bennie should go to Philadelphia, if ever he could save money enough to send him.

Tom was a driver boy in Dryden Slope, and his meager earnings went mostly to buy food and clothing for the little

family. But he began now to lay aside for Bennie the dollar or two that he had been accustomed to spend each month for himself.

Bennie knew about it, of course, and rejoiced greatly at the prospect in store for him, but he expressed much discontent because he himself could not help to obtain the fund that was to cure him. Then Tom, with the aid of the kindhearted mine superintendent, found employment for his brother as a door boy in Dryden Slope, and Bennie was happy. It wasn't absolutely necessary that a door boy should see. If he had good hearing, he could get along very well.

So every morning Bennie went down the slope with Tom and climbed into an empty mine car, and Tom's mule drew them, rattling along the heading until they reached, almost a mile from the foot of the slope, the doorway where Bennie stayed.

Then Tom went on, with the empty cars, up to the new tier of chambers and brought the loaded cars back. Every day he passed through Bennie's doorway on three round trips in the morning and three round trips in the afternoon; and every day, when the noon hour came, he stopped on the down trip and sat with Bennie on the bench by the door, and both ate from one pail the dinner prepared for them by their mother.

When quitting time came and Tom went down to the foot of the slope with his last trip for the day, Bennie climbed to the top of a load and rode out, or else, with his hands on the last car of the trip, walked safely along behind.

“And Tom and me together have almost twenty dollars saved now!” said the boy exultingly. “And we’ve only got to get eighty dollars more, and then I can go and buy back the sight into my eyes; and then Tom and me, we’re going to work together all our lives. Tom, he’s going to get a chamber and be a miner, and I’m going to be Tom’s laborer until I learn how to mine, and then we’re going to take a contract together and hire laborers and get rich, and then—why, then Mommie won’t have to work anymore!”

It was like a glimpse of a better world to hear this boy talk. The most favored child of wealth who ever reveled seeing in the sunlight has had no hope, no courage, no sublimity of faith, that could compare with those of this blind son of poverty and toil. He had his high ambition, and that was to work. He had his sweet hope to be fulfilled, and that was to see. He had his earthly refuge, and that was where his mother sat. And he had his hero of heroes, and that was Tom.

There was no quality of human goodness or bravery or excellence of any kind that Bennie did not ascribe to Tom. He would sooner have disbelieved all of his four remaining senses than have believed that Tom would say an unkind word to Mommie or to him or be guilty of a mean act towards anyone.

Bennie's faith in Tom was fully justified. No nineteenth-century boy could have been more manly; no knight of old could have been more true and tender than was Tom to the two human beings whom he loved best upon all the earth.

"But the father, laddie," said Jack, still charmed and curious, "where's the father?"

"Dead," answered Bennie. "He came from the old country first, and then he sent for Mommie and us, and when we got here, he was dead."

"Ah, but that was awful sad for the mother! Took with the fever, was he?"

"No; killed in the mine. Top coal fell and struck him. That's the way they found him. We didn't see him, you know. That was two weeks before me and Tom and Mommie got here. I wasn't but four years old then, but I can remember how Mommie cried. She didn't have much time to cry, though, because she had to

work so hard. Mommie's always had to work so hard," added Bennie, reflectively.

The man began to move nervously on the bench. It was apparent that a strong emotion was taking hold of him. He lifted the lamp from his cap again and held it up close to Bennie's face.

"Killed, said you—in the mine—top coal fell?"

"Yes, and struck him on the head. They said he didn't ever know what killed him."

The brawny hand trembled so that the flame from the spout of the little lamp went up in tiny waves.

"Where—where did it happen—in what place—in what mine?"

"Up in Carbondale. No. 6 shaft, I think it was. Yes, No. 6."

Bennie spoke somewhat hesitatingly. His quick ear had caught the change in the man's voice, and he did not know what it could mean.

"His name, lad! Give me the father's name!"

The giant's huge hand dropped upon Bennie's little one and held it in a painful grasp. The boy started to his feet in fear.

"You won't hurt me, sir! Please don't hurt me; I can't see!"

"Not for the world, lad; not for the whole world. But I must have the father's name. Tell me the father's name, quick!"

“Thomas Taylor, sir,” said Bennie, as he sank back, trembling, on the bench.

The lamp dropped from Jack Rennie’s hand and lay smoking at his feet. His huge frame seemed to have shrunk by at least a quarter of its size, and for many minutes he sat, silent and motionless, seeing as little of the objects around him as did the blind boy at his side.

At last he roused himself, picked up his lamp, and rose to his feet.

“Well, lad, Bennie, I must be going. Goodbye to you. Will the brother come for you?”

“Oh, yes!” answered Bennie. “Tom always stops for me. He hasn’t come up from the foot yet, but he’ll come.”

The man turned away, then turned back again. “Where’s the lamp?” he asked. “Have you no light?”

“No, I don’t ever have any. It wouldn’t be any good to me, you know.”

Once more the man started down the heading, but after he had gone a short distance, a thought seemed to strike him, and he came back to where Bennie was still sitting.

“Lad, I thought to tell you, you shall go to the city with your

eyes. I have money to send you, and you shall go. I—I—knew—your father, lad.”

Before Bennie could express his surprise and gratitude, he felt a strong hand laid gently on his shoulder and a rough, bearded face pressed for a moment against his own, and then his strange visitor was gone.

Down the heading, the retreating footsteps echoed, their sound swallowed up at last in the distance, and up at Bennie’s doorway, silence reigned.

For a long time the boy sat pondering the meaning of the strange man’s words and conduct. But the more he thought about it, the less able was he to understand it. Perhaps Tom could explain it, though. Yes, he would tell Tom about it. Then it occurred to him that it was long past time for Tom to come up from the foot with his last trip for the day. It was strange, too, that the men should all go out together that way; he didn’t understand it. But if Tom would only come . . .

Bennie rose and walked down the heading a little way; then he turned and went up through the door and along the airway; then he came back to his bench again and sat down.

He was sure Tom would come. Tom had never disappointed

him yet, and he knew he would not disappoint him for the world if he could help it. He knew, too, that it was long after quitting time, and there hadn't been a sound that he could hear in the mine for an hour, though he had listened carefully.

After a while he began to grow nervous; the stillness became oppressive; he could not endure it. He determined to try to find the way out by himself. He had walked to the foot of the slope alone once, the day Tom was sick, and he thought he could do it again.

So he made sure that his door was tightly closed, then he took his dinner pail and started bravely down the heading, striking the rails of the mine car track on each side with his cane to guide him as he went along.

Sometimes he would stop and listen for a moment, if, perchance, he might hear Tom coming to meet him or, possibly, some belated laborer going out from another part of the mine. Then, hearing nothing, he would trudge on again.

After a long time spent thus, he thought he must be near the foot of the slope; he knew he had walked far enough to be there. He was tired, too, and sat down on the rail to rest. But he did not sit there long; he could not bear the silence—it was too

THE **BLIND BROTHER**

Fourteen-year-old Tom Taylor and his twelve-year-old brother Bennie work in a Pennsylvania coal mine, supporting their widowed mother and slowly saving money to pay for a treatment to restore Bennie's eyesight. When Tom witnesses a crime one night, a tale of danger, temptation, courage, and redemption is set into motion.

