

The Clan Cain

By
Hapsburg
Liebe

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A FEUD OF THE TENNESSEE MOUNTAINS

From somewhere on a nearby mountainside a rifle's keen report split the air; a bullet whined like a mad hornet; Dale's hat jumped a little on his head.

The awakening was exceedingly rude. Dale wheeled, his gray eyes ablaze, and saw only a tiny cloud of smoke mist rising from the laurels more than fifty feet away.

"Come out, you coward!" he roared. "Come out and let me see you," curiously taking the place of anger in his voice. "I've always wanted to know just what a real highwayman was like!"

The muffled sound of a twig breaking a short distance off to his left next claimed his attention. He was being closely watched by a pair of the finest, clearest brown eyes he had ever seen. He saw her eyes first; he never forgot that.

She was standing on a low cliff beyond the sparkling creek that flowed beside the railroad, and she was partially hidden by a clump of blooming laurel. But Dale could see that she was about twenty; that every line of her rounded, graceful figure whispered of a dainty strength; that she was as straight as a young pine; that her chestnut-brown hair caught the sunlight, and that her face was oval-shaped and handsome—rather than pretty—in spite of its tan.

Dale took off his hat. There was a bullet hole in the very top, of its high-peaked crown.

"Who's the robber?" he frowned.

The girl blushed.

"Maybe he ain't a robber," she said. "Maybe he thought you was somebody else. Anyhow, you ain't had hurt, are ye?"

Dale smiled. "Oh, not seriously?"

"You ain't likely to be, ef ye behave yerself."

And that's how the hero and heroine of "The Clan Cain" meet. Out of the ordinary rather. But then they meet in an extraordinary part of the United States of America where live "the purest-blooded of all Americans, whom other and educated Americans left in the darkness of ignorance in order that they might send missionaries and educators to foreign countries—the greatest mistake of church and society since the Civil war."

But it's a fascinating country and a fascinating people. And this is a fascinating story of it and them. Of course it's a feud story. The hero is a city man, with an out-of-doors mind; the heroine a girl of the mountains. A feud interests between them, but love laughs at feuds, as it does at locksmiths.

Hapsburg (Charles Haven) Liebe is the man of all men to tell this story. Native of the Tennessee mountains, soldier, lumberjack, saw-fitter, patriot and self-made literary craftsman, he knows the land and the people. And his story is a labor of love.

CHAPTER I.

David Moreland's Mountain. Carlyle Wilburton Dale—known to himself and a few close friends as Bill Dale—had laid out a course of action almost before the northbound train had left the outskirts of the state capital; but other men had faced big odds and won out, and what others had done he could do. Indeed, he had already done several things of the kind, and one of them was leaving a bride, not figuratively but literally, at the altar in a fashionable church. But he knew Patricia hadn't wanted to marry him any more than he had wanted to marry her.

It was only natural for him to think of coal, now that he had cut loose for all time from the "set" in which he had always been a colossal misfit, now that he must pull his own ears out of his ears, or he would perish. He had heard coal talked since the day of his birth; to him coal and business meant exactly the same.

One of his father's associates had often spoken of fine veins in the mountains of eastern Tennessee—had often tried to persuade his father to look into it, to no avail. Young Dale remembered that this vein lay not far from a picture of the state capital, the Highway Station, in the vicinity of Big River mountain. The owners were mountain folk of English descent, his father's associate had said. Decidedly strange, thought Dale, and he'd better have never cared to investigate it.

The cinders little train reached the long siding about the middle of a fine spring morning. Dale took off his bag, fastened out, and soon found himself standing alone in the heart of an extremely wild section of country.

When the noises of the little train and the fast mail it had just met had died away, there came the juicy chattering of boomer-squirrels and the clatter of rattling of birds. Dale caught the joyous spirit. He could have fairly shouted out of the fullness of his very human heart. Here all was unspoiled and unapproached, and something whispered within him: "Save here—make this your own country!"

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disappeared among the blooming laurels.

The man By Heck, wore the poor clothing of a poor hillman. His hat, which had once been black, was all brim and yet all crown; his suspenders, which had been bought with his 'coonhide, were redder than his face; his run-down cowhide boots seemed ridiculously short because of the great length of his slender legs.

When he had reached a point some three yards from Dale, he halted, placed the butt of his rifle carefully between his toes, and leaned on his muzzle; but he deliberately began to take eye measurements of the newcomer.

Dale didn't like the stare—to him it was impudent.

"Well, what's the verdict?" he asked sharply.

"Spoke like a man," drawled By Heck. "I reckon you must be up here a-lookin' for coal."

"How did you reach such a conclusion as that?"

"Just plain horse sense." The drooping mustache muffled the words somewhat. "The ain't but three things 'at can bring a city man here, mister."

He drawled on, "and them's moonshine stills, bad health, and coal. You shore ain't got bad health, and you ain't got the cut of a renegade, though a few minutes ago I thought maybe ye was."

"And you shot at me?" said Dale.

"No," objected Heck. "I shot at yore hat. I stills hits at what I shoots at, mister. I wanted ye to turn yore face, so I could see it, and ye did. As for that coal—"

"The Morelands, they owns the coal in David Moreland's mountain, and they won't sell it for no 'mount of money." They lives over in the settlement, them, and the Littlefords. They're every dang one time folks I'm agoin' over there now. Want to go home? Say—dang my pleasure if I didn't got to as what might be yore name, mister."

"Bill Dale," came quickly. "Bill Dale, Settlement?"

"Sure!" drawled By Heck. "Whos the young woman I was talking with when you came up?"

"Who? Her? That's old Ben Littleford's girl. Her name's Babe. That's what they call her. She's got another name; but it ain't been used for so long."

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other, but they don't hardly ever fight; they all strap on big men, and they fight as danged hard it don't pay. My gosh, Bill, every man of 'em can shoot a ga's eyelash off at four hundred yards—I wish I may drop dead if they catch me! Do ye see that big cabin right plumb in the middle of the high half of the settlement, Bill? Well, the boss of the Morelands he lives there—John Moreland. That's what ye want to go, Bill, sense ye've got a reasonable case of the disease I've got on coal-on-the-brain. But I can tell ye aforehand, you ain't got enough money to buy that coal, don't matter how much money ye've got."

Dale was not looking toward John Moreland's home now. If a gaze had wandered to the other side of the river, By Heck would have said "a mile" for a reply to his speech, then spoke again:

"The gurl, or the coal—is that what's a-botherin' ye?"

Dale's eyes twinkled. "Must I choose between them?" he asked.

"By Heck," By Heck was on a smiling. "Shore!" The Morelands and Littlefords hates each other wuss nor a blue-tailed hawk hates a crow. The gurl, or the coal, Bill?"

"Well, got to go on to John Moreland's," announced Dale.

"The mountaineer took up his rifle. 'Let me give ye a word or two o' warnin'," he continued seriously. "Don't you offer to pay John Moreland for coal, nor for chawin' his tobacco. Ef ye do, yore goss will shore be cooked with John Moreland. But ef ye want to brag on the vittles a little, John's head and a chimney of stone and clay rose at either end."

John Moreland himself sat on the front porch, and beside him lay a repeating rifle, two young squirrels, and a few neatly shot through the head and a weary black-and-tan bound. He was an uncommon big man, and about forty-seven; his eyes were gray and keen; his thick hair and full beard were rich brown, with only a few threads of white. There was a certain English fineness about the man. One felt that he could trust John Moreland.

As the moonshiner and his companion reached the gate at David's head and pushed his hat back from his forehead.

"Hi, John!" grinned Heck. "This here fellow wants to stay with ye a few days, John. Needs to be all right."

"Come right in," invited the chief of the Morelands. He indicated the home-made chair he had just vacated. "See that this fellow's a stranger. I'll be back in a minute or so."

He hastened into the cabin, carrying the squirrels with him.

"He's went to tell his wife to hatch up a extra good dinner. Bill, this here fellow's a stranger. I'll be back in a minute or so."

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