The CLAN CALL

By Hapsburg Liebe

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Young Carlyle Wilburton Dale, or "Bill Dale," as he elects to be known, son of a wealthy coal operator, John K. Dale, arrives at the Halfway Switch, in eastern Tennessee, abandoning a life of idle ease—and incidentally a bride, Patricia Clavering, at the altar—determined to make his own way in life. He meets "Babe" Littleford, typical mountaineer girl. "By" Heck, a character of the hills, takes him to John Moreland's home. Moreland is chief of his "clan," which has an old feud with the Littlefords. He tells Dale of the killing of his brother, David Moreland, years ago, owner of rich coal deposits, by a man named Carlyle. Moreland's description of "Carlyle" causes Dale to believe the man was his father.

CHAPTER II.—Dale arranges to make his home with the Moreland family, for whom he entertains a deep respect.

CHAPTER III.—Talking with "Babe" Littleford next day, Dale is ordered by "Black Adam" Ball, bully of the district, to leave "his girl" alone. Dale replies spiritedly, and they fight. Dale whips the bully, though badly used up. He arranges with John Moreland to develop David's coal deposits. Ben Littleford sends a challenge to John Moreland to meet him with his followers next day, in battle. Moreland agrees.

CHAPTER IV.—During the night all the guns belonging to the Littlefords and the Morelands mysteriously disappear.

CHAPTER V.—Dale arranges to go to Cincinnati to secure money for the mining of the coal. The two clans find their weapons, which the women had hidden, and line up for battle. "Babe," in an effort to stop the fighting, crosses to the Moreland side of the river, and is accidentally shot by her father and seriously wounded.

CHAPTER VI.—To get proper surgical aid, John Moreland, Ben Littleford and Dale convey "Babe," unconscious, to the city. Doctors assure them she is not seriously hurt. Dale meets an old friend, Bobby McLaurin, who had married Patricia Clavering. Telling his father of David Moreland's coal, the old gentleman's actions convince his son of his father's guilt in the killing of Moreland.

CHAPTER VII.

Lonesome.

When John Moreland and Ben Littleford had finished their breakfast there in the dining room of the Blaisdell, they drank the water from their fingerbowls, threatened with sudden death the waiter who snickered, and found the way to the lobby.

To Littleford the minutes dragged soddenly. Finally he told Moreland, in a sentence filled with double negatives, that he could bear the suspense no longer, and proposed that they set out at once for Doctor Braemer's hospital. The hotel manager overheard some of the one-sided conversation; he 'phoned the surgeon and learned that the young woman was resting easily, which information he passed on to the mountain men.

Ben Littleford was quiet for five minutes, more or less. Then he again proposed to John Moreland that they go to the hospital to see Babe. Moreland refused flatly, and accompanied his refusal with an unmistakable look of contempt.

"You're as restless as a dawg in a flea town," he told his old-enemy, and with that he walked away.

A few minutes later Ben Littleford stole out unnoticed by his neighbor from the Big Pine, and went at a brisk gait up the street. Moreland found it out shortly afterward; he followed the Littleford chief hotfoot, and overtook him. Trust your hill dweller to note landmarks when he goes into unknown territory — Littleford was headed straight for the hospital.

They walked for two blocks in silence. Moreland had assumed the attitude of one who has had the guardianship of an irresponsible person thrust upon him. But soon he softened somewhat.

"I shore cain't onderstand, Ben," he drawled, "how Bill Dale ever could bear it to live here."

"I wonder," Littleford said absentmindedly, as though he had not heard, "whar Bill Dale is at? It's mighty durned lonesome without him, ain't it? That was good ham we had for breakfus', John."

"It wasn't ham. It was beef."

"It was ham."

"It was beef."

"It was ha—"

"Don't ye reckon," flared John Moreland, "that I know a dang cow's meat when I see it? It was beef!"

They had halted in the middle of a stream of pedestrians. A policeman crowded his way to them.

"Move on!" he growled.

* * * * * * *

Bill Dale was at that moment entering the lobby of the Blaisdell with Robert McLaurin at his side. Dale had just told McLaurin that he meant to go to Cincinnati to borrow money from his wealthy friend Harris. Then McLaurin told Dale something that saved him the journey to Cincinnati.

"You haven't heard about Harris, Bill? I'm sorry, because he would have accommodated you. He went broke a few days ago in the cotton smash. He was here yesterday, and left last night for Cincy."

Dale did not try to conceal his surprise and disappointment. Harris, for all his youth, had been a business marvel.

"I'll have to try somebody here, I guess. But I won't take it from father—mother wouldn't permit it, anyway, if she knew—and there are several other reasons. Queer how a fellow's mother would turn him down like this! Usually, y'know, it's a fellow's mother that sticks by him the longest. . . .

"I wonder where I could find old Newton Wheatley, of the Luther-Wheatley Iron company? I know him, all right. He always liked me, Bobby."

"You'll find him at home," McLaurin answered. "He's out of business, and here all the time now. He might take a shot at coal. Why not 'phone him from here?"

"I'll do that," Dale decided. "Look up my two friends for me, Bobby, will you?"

He was soon speaking to Newton Wheatley. He was brief in stating his wishes. To the question as to why he did not go to his father for funds—well, he had his reasons, and it was rather a private matter. Wheatley, of course, remembered the near-wedding.

The old iron man was silent for what seemed to Dale a very long time. Then his voice came over the wire with an almost ominous calm:

"Who besides you has seen this vein, Carlyle? Anybody that knows coal?"

"Yes, my father," Dale answered quickly. "He went over it years ago. Ask him about the coal in David Moreland's mountain. 'Phone him, and then 'phone me. I'm waiting at the Blaisdell."

Wheatley agreed a little reluctantly.

Dale waited patiently for fifteen minutes. Then the clerk called him to the 'phone. He took up the receiver with boyish eagerness.

Wheatley began cordially: "Your father tells me it is a good proposition, Carlyle, so I'll let you have all the money you'll need. And if you want a good mining man, I know where you can lay your hands on one; also I can furnish you, at half the original cost, all the necessary machinery and accessories. You didn't know the old Luther-Wheatley company dickered in coal as well as iron; eh? Well, it did. Let me see you at three o'clock this afternoon—"

Dale was jubilant. Here was a rare stroke of good fortune. He went to McLaurin—who had not yet found John Moreland and Ben Littleford—and told him about it. McLaurin was almost as happy as Dale over it. A bellboy appeared like a jack-in-the-box in the center of the floor. "Mistoh Cahlyle Dale! Mistoh Cahlyle Dale!"

Dale wheeled. "Well?"

"Wanted immejitly at Doctoh Braemeh's hospittle, suh!"

Dale shook hands with McLaurin and hurried toward the street.

A few minutes later Doctor Braemer met him in the reception room.

"What's wrong, doctor?"

The surgeon beckoned. "Come with me."

He turned and led the way through a long corridor and to a sunny white room where Babe Littleford lay with a bandage about her temples. Ben Littleford was on his knees at his daughter's bedside; he was slowly wringing his big, rough hands and begging piteously to be forgiven.

Babe stared at him a trifle coldly. She had not yet seen the two men who stood in the doorway. Then she interrupted her father:

"You hush, pap, and go away. I'd told ye a hunderd times about fightin' a-bein' murder, and 'specially to us womenfolks, and you never would pay any 'tention to me. You hush, pap, and go away. Ef I die, I'll jest haf to die. And ef I die, I shore do want to die in peace. Go way, pap."

"But ye must live, Babe, honey!" Ben Littleford moaned. "Ef you was to die, what'd I do?"

"I don't know what ye'd do, pap," Babe said weakly. "You ought to thought o' that afore, pap. It may be too late now. I want ye to go on off and le' me alone. Ef I die, I want to die in peace. The Lord knows I never got to live in peace!"

There was a worried look in her wonderful brown eyes, and the doctor saw it. He strode forward decisively and helped Littleford to his feet. The hillman wiped away a tear with his faded blue bandana, and hung his head. He had been made a broken man in one day.

"Go out to your friend Moreland," smiled the doctor, "and wait there for a little while."

Babe's father walked unsteadily out of the room. Dale went to Doctor Braemer and whispered, "Isn't she going to make it?" anxiously.

"Certainly she's going to make it," Braemer assured him. "Go on; she wants to see you."

Dale drew a chair up close to the white bed and sat down. Babe's eyes lighted at once, and she put a hand uncertainly out toward him. Dale took the hand in his. He saw that it was a little pale under its delicate sunburn.

"Glad to see you, Babe," he told her softly. "Why do you think you're going to die, Babe?"

She smiled at him. "Why, I don't think I'm a-goin' to die," she said. "I know I'm a-goin' to live, Bill Dale. I feel like I could walk fifty miles right now!"

"But I heard you tell your father—"

"I was a-tryin' to skeer him out o' fightin' any more," she interrupted.

"I Was a-Tryin' to Skeer Him Out o' Fightin' Any More," She Interrupted.

"And I believe I 'bout done it, don't you?"

Dale was relieved. "I do. Is there anything you want, Babe? If there is, I'll get it for you if it's in the universe."

"The universe?" she repeated inquiringly. "What's the universe, Bill Dale? Somethin' to eat?"

"The world, the sun, the moon, and the stars."

She smiled at him again. "No," she said, "the' ain't nothin' I want, and ain't nothin' ye can do fo' me, I reckon."

"But I thought, as they sent for me—"

Babe Littleford's fingers held tightly to his. "It was me that sent fo' you."

She turned her face the other way. "I was so lonesome, Bill Dale!"

Robert McLaurin's wife, Patricia, visited Babe twice daily, and a friendship that was none the less warm for being unique sprang up quickly between them. Patricia declared to her husband that she was going to keep Babe—whom she was already calling by her proper name, the same being Elizabeth—and educate her. There was room in the bungalow, Patricia said; and she really needed company, because Bobby was away so much.

Babe accepted little Mrs. McLaurin's offer as soon as Bill Dale convinced her that she wouldn't be merely an object of charity. The hill pride's first law is that dub must pay for what he gets—and it's probably the first law God laid down for old Adam in Eden. Ben Littleford seemed bewildered and blue when they told him of the arrangement, but he voiced no objection. Dale pressed upon him a loan of a hundred dollars, and ordered him to give it to his daughter, which he did. Elizabeth Littleford, of course, would need new clothing.

"I ain't even got any dresses at home," she whispered to Patricia, "but two."

Bill Dale was sure now that he loved Babe, and he was almost sure that she cared for him. But he was quite properly in no haste to come to an understanding. He had known all along that Babe would have to be educated! and a woman's tastes, he reasoned, might change with education. And he wanted her to have the opportunity of knowing other men of his class. If she couldn't love him with a lasting love, he didn't want her to love him at all.

Oddly or not, he never thought of Jimmy Fayne.

CHAPTER VIII.

Major Bradley and Henderson Goff.

When Bill Dale, the expert mining man Hayes and the two mountaineers stepped from a short passenger train at the Halfway switch, they were approached by the moonshiner, Heck, and a man whom Dale had never seen before. He was tall, and his bearing was erect and soldierlike, though he was every day of sixty years old. His eyes were blue and twinkling with everlasting good humor; his gray mustaches and imperial were exceedingly well cared for; his teeth were his own, and as white as a schoolgirl's, and they bore out his general air of neatness. He was, plainly, a Southerner of the old type.

"Who's that?" whispered Dale to John Moreland.

But Moreland didn't hear. He ran forward with his right hand outstretched, and so did Ben Littleford. Men could not have greeted a brother with more gladness, Dale thought.

"Hi, thar, Major Bradley!" the hillman cried. "And how d'ye come on today?"

"I am very well, gentlemen, thank you," said the major, smiling.

He shook their hands heartily. "The trainmen gave us your message yesterday," he went on, still smiling, "and we were delighted to learn that the young woman was out of danger. I trust you are all in good health, gentlemen."

They assured him that they were. Moreland turned to introduce Bill Dale and the mining man. From the moment that Major Bradley gripped Dale's hand they were friends.

"Mighty glad to know you, sir!" exclaimed the old lawyer. "I've been hearing a great deal about you, sir, over in the valley of the Doe. They seem to think there's nobody just like Bill Dale! It was Bill Dale this, and Bill Dale that; it was 'Here's where Bill Dale whipped Black Adam,' or, 'Here's where Bill Dale was standing when such-and-such happened,' or, 'Here's where Bill Dale crossed the fence!'"

"Hah-hah-hah!" sluggishly laughed By Heck, who stood leaning on the muzzle of his rifle. "Bill Dale is all right, major; ye've shore got my word fo' that."

The others laughed. Then John Moreland said they'd better be moving, or they'd be late for dinner.

When they had put a hundred yards of David Moreland's mountain behind them, the old Southerner tugged slyly at Dale's sleeve and whispered:

"Let us fall behind a little, if you please. I want to speak with you privately."

They began to lag, and soon there was a distance of several rods between them and the others.

"I heard through Addie Moreland," began Bradley, his friendly hand on the younger man's arm, "about you and what you're planning to do for the Morelands. I tell you, sir, I thanked heaven for your coming, and you may count on me to help in any way I can. The Morelands are quite friendly to me now, though up to the middle of last summer they didn't like me any too well because I made Ben Littleford's cabin my home when out here.

"It was a simple thing that brought us together. John Moreland's little nephew was lost in the woods and his mother was frantic. There are panthers, you know, and wildcats, rattlers, and copperheads. I was fortunate enough to find the boy, and carried him home. That was all. They're a fine people, my boy, and so are the Littlefords. Good old English blood that somehow wandered off. There's no purer, cleaner blood in America, sir.

"And now—how are you getting along with your plans for the operation of the coal mine?"

"Excellently," answered Dale. "We have the necessary finance; a geared locomotive and cars and light steel rails have been bargained for."

"Good!" Bradley gave Dale a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"There's something else I wanted to say, Mr. Dale," he continued, his voice grave. "You're nearly certain to have a barrel of trouble with a shyster coal man named Henderson Goff. He's a villain, sir, if ever there was one! And he's quite the smoothest article I've ever seen. He can make you believe black is white, if only you'll listen to him long enough."

"Is he—has he been here recently?" Dale wanted to know.

"He's here now," answered the major. "He's been here for three days, and he's been working devilment fast. He was up here last summer, trying to buy the Moreland coal for a song; he knows all the people, you see. As soon as he landed here on this present trip, he found out about your intentions. Then, at night, he freed Adam Ball from his tobacco barn prison, and went home with him.

"Well, By Heck followed them and did some eavesdropping—poor By has his strong points!" the major went on. "Goff learned that Adam Ball's father knew about the coal vein long before David Moreland discovered it and got lawful possession of the mountain. Then Goff made the Balls believe that they were due a big share of the proceeds of the Moreland coal! It wasn't very hard to do, I guess. The Balls, this set, at least, were originally lowlanders; they took to the mountains, I understand, to keep from being forced to fight during the Civil war."

"Goff's idea," muttered Dale, "is to get the Balls to scare me into selling instead of developing, eh?"

"Exactly," nodded old Bradley. "Then he would settle with the Balls by giving them a dollar or two a day for digging coal; perhaps he would put them off until the mine was worked out for half of that, and then skip. Anyway, Goff would come out at the big end."

"I see," said Dale.

"If there's anything that I can do, at any time, you won't hesitate to let me know?" said the major.

"You may consider yourself attorney and legal adviser for the Moreland Coal company, of which I have the honor to be general manager," smiled Dale, "if you will."

Major Bradley's voice came happily, "My dear boy, I am glad to accept! And there shall be no charge for any service that I may render."

They were not long in reaching the green valley, which lay very beautiful and very peaceful in the warm light of the early July sun. The soft murmuring of the crystal river and the low, slow tinkling of the cowbells made music that was sweet and pleasing.

Suddenly John Moreland stopped, uttered a swearword under his breath, turned and went back to Dale.

"The's a man a-waitin' on us ahead thar, Bill," he drawled, "'at ye shore want to watch like a hawk to keep him from a-stealin' the eyeteeth out o' yore head. His name is Henderson Goff, and he wants coal."

They went on. Soon they met a man who, in clothing and manner, made Dale think of stories he had heard and read of Mississippi river steamboat gamblers of the long ago. His eyes were black, and as keen as a pair of spear-points; his mustaches, too, were black, and they had sharp, upturned ends like those of a Mephisto. The major had said that he was a smooth article; he certainly looked it.

He met John Moreland with an oily smile and thrust out his hand But Moreland wouldn't see the hand.

"Anything ye've got to say about coal," he growled, "ye can say to Bill Dale thar," pointing with a calloused thumb. "Bill he's the high light o' the whole business; and when he opens his mouth, ye can cock yore head to one side and listen fo' gawspel."

Goff was delighted to meet Mr. Dale, of whom he had already heard. Dale had nothing whatever to say. They walked on toward the cabin of the Moreland chief, with Goff keeping up a running fire of talk concerning the scenery, the climate—anything but coal.

At John Moreland's gate, Goff nudged Dale with an elbow and whispered:

"Meet me at one o'clock down there where the big sycamore lies across the river. I've got something to tell you that will interest you."

He didn't wait for a reply, but turned away with By Heck. He went to the home of the Hecks ostensibly to have his fortune told—really, to get his dinner. The old woman didn't like him, but her inborn spirit of hospitality wouldn't permit her to refuse him a meal. She felt that she was almost even with him when, after shuffling and reading the cards, she told him that it would be wise for him to look out for a big, tall, grey-eyed young man with an oak tree in one hand and a couple of cliffs in the other.

* * * * * * *

Dale told Major Bradley and John Moreland of that which Goff had said to him at the gate. The major suggested forthwith that he go to meet the man; it couldn't possibly do any harm, and there was a chance that he would learn something of Goff's intentions.

So Dale went.

Goff was already there, waiting. He was sitting on a stone on the Moreland side of the river, whittling idly. When he saw Dale approaching, he smiled and nodded, rose and pocketed his knife.

"I want to make you an offer for that coal," he said at once.

"All right," Dale replied. "If your offer is big enough, it will be considered. But no shyster price is going to get that coal, Goff."

Goff frowned uneasily.

"You don't know coal, Mr. Dale. You don't know the business of mining—or I've got you sized up wrong. Thousands of men have gone busted trying to do things they weren't used to doing. There's a big chance, too, that the coal isn't what it looks to be on the surface. You'd better take a sure thing, and avoid a possibility of loss. I'll give you five thousand, spot cash, for that coal."

Dale shook his head. "You'll have to come heavier than that, y'know, if you get the Moreland coal."

"And an extra thousand for yourself!"

Dale laughed a low, queer laugh. "You amuse me, Goff," said he. "Seems to me you've missed your calling in life. What a peach of a kingvillain you'd make in melodrama! You wouldn't have to act, either; you'd have to be just your natural self. And you make me mad, too, Goff. Because I'm on the square with the Morelands and everybody else—now, get that!"

The corners of the shyster coal man's mouth came down.

"Oh, bosh—don't pass me that virtue stuff. Every man has his price, high or low. You've got yours, and I've got mine. I'll give you five thousand, spot cash, if you'll persuade John Moreland to sell to me for five thousand, and nobody'll ever know you got a rakedown from me. It's all the coal is worth, that ten thousand. Well, yes?"

Dale was of the type that goes pale with anger, and he was pale now. He clenched his hands.

"You can't insult me like that and get away with it, Goff," he clipped. "We're going to fight, Goff, and I'm going to put a licking on you that fifteen horses can't pull off. Get me?"

He threw aside his coat and rolled his sleeves to his elbows. Henderson Goff ran his right hand quickly to a rear trouser pocket and brought back a stub-nosed automatic pistol, which he turned threateningly toward Bill Dale.

"Go easy, friend," Goff said very complacently. "There's no use in getting sore. I want the coal, that's all. If I can't get it by fair means, I'll get it in another way. Oh, I don't mind telling you; one man's oath is as good in court as another man's. If you don't take me up at ten thousand, I'll give you so much trouble that you'll be glad to sell it to me later for half that amount. The Balls think they own a big interest in that coal! There's a lot of them, too, and they can keep you from working the mine. Well, I can't waste time in dickering with you. What do you say?"

"I say," and Dale smiled an odd little smile, "that your plan appears to be perfect, except that you've overlooked one or two important details. For instance, there's the law, y'know."

"The law—now don't go and fool yourself!" exclaimed Goff. "The state couldn't afford to keep a hundred men here, month in and month out, just to protect your little mine. My patience is about gone, Dale—for the last time, what do you say?"

"I say that I'll beat you at any game you put up against me," very quietly. "Furthermore, I say that you are a coward and a scoundrel, and that you haven't got the insides in you to fight me a fair man's fight. If you'll only pocket that thing you've got in your hand, I'll mow down half an acre of meadow bush with your body."

The other turned red, then white, then red again. Bill Dale's words had lashed him keenly. His eyes became like hard black beads, and he began to raise the wicked-looking pistol as though he meant to fire.

Then there was the sound of a breaking twig behind him, and a voice drawled out:

"Drap it, Mister—drap the funny little gun, or the middle o' Tarment is yore po'tion right now!"

It was the moonshiner, By Heck, and his rifle was leveled. Goff dropped the pistol. Heck grinned, advanced slowly, took up the weapon that the hillfolk call a "coward's gun" and tossed it into the river.

"Now git—cut the mustard—light a rag away from here," he ordered, "afore I let Bill Dale loose on ye!"

Goff went away rapidly.

"I wonder if you heard him say anything that would make you valuable as a witness," muttered Dale, "in the event we want to have him arrested?"

"I heerd you tell him 'at he was afeard to fight ye a fair man's fight, and 'at ef he'd pocket that thing he held in his hand ye'd mow down twenty acres o' meadow bush with his lowdown body—that'd be vallyable in co'te wouldn't it?"

Dale smiled. Then he frowned.

(Continued Next Week).

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