CHAPTER XVIII.

The Last Fight.

It was early in the morning, and Bill Dale had just sent for Ben Littleford. The billman hurried to the office, for he believed he knew what was in the air. He had already gone to work at the mine, and his thick beard, his face and his hands were black with the dust of coal.

"Sit down, Ben," said the general manager. "We're going to hold a council of war."

Littleford took a chair and crossed his legs.

"Is it the Ball outfit?" he drawled.

"Yes," answered the younger man, and forthwith he told the other of the news that By Heck had brought him a few days before; he had not given the matter really serious consideration until that morning. "Now," he finished, "I want to know whether you think there's any danger?"

Littleford tugged at his blackened beard and frowned.

"Bill," he said soberly, "do you rickollect what John Moreland told you oncet about them Balls? He told ye 'at you wasn't safe, and 'at he wasn't safe, ontel they was dead and buried, didn't he? I believe he did. By Heck says the's a whole big passel o' them Nawth Ca'liner Turners; he's shore them and the Balls'll outnumber us more'n two to one. Yes, the's danger, Bill, and 'specially to you. They think it was you killed Adam, and they don't think the law handed 'em a square deal at the trial."

"Then listen to this plan," said Dale.

"I'll keep By Heck up the river watching for them. He will have three sticks of dynamite tied together and capped and fitted with a fuse. If he sees them coming this way in anything like a force, he will fire off the dynamite as a signal to us. Our men will gather here in the upstairs of this building, and bar the doors—"

"Oh, Bill," moaned the old fighter, "you shorely don't think we'd ever let 'em git to the doors!"

"I hope they don't, certainly," smiled Dale. "Where are your rifles, Bill?"

"At the mine," said Littleford. "Ye see, Bill, we've been a-lookin' fo' trouble."

Dale went on: "At By Heck's signal, I'll get on my horse and ride to the lowlands for the Morelands. I can get them a lot quicker than I can get competent help from the law. What do you think of it?"

"It's a good plan, I reckon," growled Ben Littleford, "only I don't cotton very easy to the idee o' us a-runnin' from the mine to this here buildin'. I never did like to run from any man wo'th a durn, Bill."

"But that wouldn't be cowardly," Dale protested. "It would be purely a strategic move, and it would save lives for us. For, when the Balls and their kinsmen come, you'll have to deliver me into their hands or you'll have to fight like the very devil, that's sure; and, according to By Heck's figures, they outnumber you more than two to one."

"All right," Littleford replied, with a shrug of his huge shoulders. "Whatever you say, that same we'll do."

So By Heck was sent for, and shortly afterward he sneaked into the laurels and went off toward the settlement of the Balls. In the crook of his arm he carried his rifle, and inside his shirt he carried three pieces of dynamite all ready for the match—and he chose every step with great care for fear of jarring the explosive too much.

He had not been gone an hour when Bill Dale heard a dull, smothered roar from somewhere to the northward. Dale sprang up from his desk, ran to his ready and waiting horse, mounted and rode like a streak toward the lowland.

Dale arrived at John Moreland's big white farmhouse a little before the middle of the day, and halloed lustily at the gate. John Moreland and his two sons hurried out in response to the call. Dale waved aside all greetings and inquiries after his health, and told that which he had come to tell. The elder Moreland turned quickly to his two stalwart sons—

"Guns and hosses, boys! It'll be our last fight, and le's be at it and make it a good fight."

Less than five minutes later the three erstwhile mountaineers rode out of the barnyard gate with full belts of cartridges around their waists and with repeating rifles across the pommels of their saddles, and joined Dale. The four hastened to the homes of the other Morelands; and not long afterward the old clan, in full strength, rode toward the big, dim-blue hills with Bill Dale acting as its leader. It was to be the clan's last fight, and a fight for a good cause, and every man of it was eager for the fray. . . .

Bill Dale bore himself proudly, and he rode like a man born to the saddle. He found a queer joy—a joy that brightened his steel-grey eyes and flushed his sunburned cheeks, a joy that he didn't even attempt to understand—in the thought:

"For this one day I am a clan chief; I am leading my own people against a foe, in my own country—"

And so overwhelmingly did the idea take hold of him that he wished, even then, for the repeater that awaited him at his office back in the heart of the mountains. Once his conscience asked him a question—and he answered it with another question. Was he doing that which was right? Might not the Littlefords all be killed by those drunken cutthroats while he was waiting for the arrival of a company of militia from a city miles distant?

Anyway, the militia would fight. His clan would do no more than that. He satisfied his conscience quickly.

When they had reached the lower end of the cleared valley, there came to them the sounds of slow firing, the firing of snipers. Each man kicked his horse's flanks and rode faster.

When they came in sight of the besieged building, they saw puffs of powder-smoke rising lazily from the upper windows and from the mountain side above and to the right. Again they kicked the flanks of their horses and rode faster.

At John Moreland's old cabin they dismounted hastily and turned their horses into the drab meadow. With Dale still leading, they hurried on foot to the river's nearest bank and went rapidly, under cover of the thickly-standing sycamores, to a point within seventy yards of the office and supplies building. Then they made a dash across the open space, and Ben Littleford, with one arm bound up in a red-stained blue bandana, opened the door for them.

"Who else is hurt?" panted Dale.

"Little Tom," answered Littleford, "and Saul. Little Tom, he got a bullet onder the shoulder. Saul, he got one in might' nigh the same place. They've riddled the whole t'other side o' the house to splinters. They're a-callin' fo' you."

"They'll get all they want of me," Dale growled.

He turned and ran up the rough stairway, and Ben Littleford and the Morelands followed close upon his heels. At the front and side windows, behind anything they had been able to find that would stop a bullet, knelt Littlefords with rifles in their hands, patiently watching for a human target to appear on the mountainside above. Saul and Little Tom lay in a corner, where they were fairly safe from chance bullets. Hayes had bound up their wounds as well as he could with the material at hand. They were both white and helpless and suffering, but still full of the old Littleford fighting spirit.

Dale seized his Winchester and belt of cartridges from the hands of the man who had brought them to him, and turned to the others. A bullet crashed through the wall and struck the floor at his foot; he paid no attention to it.

"Listen to me, boys." Dale was buckling his cartridge-belt with rapid, steady fingers. "From where they are hiding, the Balls and Turners can hardly see the lower story of this building. We'll go downstairs, open the front door, and run to the edge of the laurels at the foot of the mountain. Then we'll turn to the right, make a wide detour, and get above the Ball outfit; we'll be fighting downhill instead of uphill. Get me? Are you all ready?"

To a man, they were ready.

They reached the thick undergrowth without being seen by the enemy. While the Balls and Turners fired more or less aimlessly at the building, drank white whisky and called drunkenly for the surrender to them of Bill Dale, Bill Dale and his men were making their way steadily in a wide half-circle up the side of David Moreland's mountain.

Half an hour after they had left the office building, Dale had stationed his men, deployed as a line of skirmishers, behind sheltering trees some two hundred feet above the Balls and their kinsmen.

John Moreland, Ben Littleford and Bill Dale were not far apart. "It's a shame to do it," said Dale. "I swear, we can't shoot men in the back like this!"

John Moreland, twisted his mouth into a queer smile of contempt, and so did Ben Littleford. They knew, far better than their leader, the ways of that people without a principle. The Balls and Turners wouldn't hesitate to shoot them in the back!

"Well," John Moreland replied, and it was almost a sneer, "ye might go down thar and give 'em some candy, and kiss 'em, and ax 'em won't they please surrender!"

Dale leaned around his tree, a great gnarled chestnut, and called boldly:

"You've got a chance to surrender now—and you'd certainly better take it quick!"

One of those below yelled surprisedly: "Who're you?" Then they all whipped to the other side of their sheltering timber.

The answer came at once: "I'm Bill Dale, and I'm peeved! You're at the mercy of the finest hill clan that ever looked along rifle barrels; will you surrender, or fight it out?"

"You said it—we'll fight it out!" cried a burly cousin of Black Adam Ball, deceased.

"You're on!" growled Bill Dale, slipping his rifle out beside the tree. "Give 'em h—l, boys!"

He was unused to this sort of thing, and he was incautious. He showed a little too much of himself—there was a sudden keen report from below, and a bullet hole appeared in the rim of his hat! John Moreland fired the next shot, and he broke the right arm of the man who had just fired at Bill Dale. This opened the battle in earnest.

Soon the thunder of the many rifles became almost a steady roar. The air was filled with the pungent odor of burning powder. Bill Dale emptied the magazine of his repeater, and sank behind the big chestnut to fill it again with cartridges from his belt. Bullets now whined on both sides of him; they cut greenish white furrows in the bark of both sides of the tree, and knocked up little spurts of black earth to his right and to his left; they cut off twigs within an arm's reach of him. A dozen Balls were now firing at him, seeking to avenge the death of their kinsman, the Goliath. John Moreland's strong voice came to him through the din and roar:

"Don't show no part o' yoreself now, Bill; ef ye do, ye'll shore be hit!"

Dale fired again, pumped a fresh cartridge into the chamber of his rifle and slipped another into the magazine, and arose behind the chestnut.

"Down, Bill!" cried John Moreland.

If Dale heard, he gave no sign of it. He fired four shots rapidly, and before the wind had carried away the blinding smoke he was behind another tree and shooting toward the Balls again. Soon there came a short, loud peal of laughter from his left; he turned his head and saw Ben Littleford taking a careful aim at a long angle toward the side of a boulder. Then Littleford fired, and a puff of stone dust showed that his bullet had gone true to its mark.

"What's that for?" demanded Dale. "We haven't any ammunition to throw away!"

"Why, Bill," replied Littleford, "didn't ye never bounce a bullet offen a rock and make it go toward a man ahind of a tree?"

It lasted hotly for two hours, but the casualties were comparatively few, because there was so much cover available. From the beginning the Balls and the Turners had the worst of it, which was due to uphill shooting, white whisky, and lack of the iron that makes really fighting men. The cartridges of those below were giving out; they had fired too many shots needlessly.

"It's about time to rush them," Dale said to John Moreland, who had crept up beside him.

"Jest give the word," Moreland nodded.

A few minutes later Bill Dale sent the wings of his line down the mountainside, forming a half-circle of his force once more; then the whole line rushed, surrounded the enemy and called for a surrender.

But the Balls and their kinsmen wouldn't give in yet. They left their cover and started to run, finding themselves facing Morelands and Littlefords in every direction, clubbed their rifles and fought. It was just a true courage that prompted them to offer resistance thus; it was utter desperation; they had never been givers of mercy, therefore they did not expect mercy. Dale's men forebore to fire upon them, which was at Dale's command, and met them with clubbed rifles. The woodland rang with the sound of wood and steel crashing against wood and steel. Everywhere there were groans and threats and curses from the losing side, victorious cries and further demands for a surrender from the winners.

Bill Dale, ever a lover of fair combat, threw down his repeater to grapple with a big North Carolinian whose clubbed weapon had been knocked from his hands. The two fell and rolled down the mountainside, locked in each other's arms.

And then one of the Balls struck Bill Dale across the head with the butt of his empty gun, and Bill Dale slackened his arms and lay as one dead.

* * * * * * *

He was lying under cover in a hand-carved black walnut fourposter, and it was night, when he opened his eyes again. Above him he saw the bearded faces of Ben Littleford and John Moreland, and they looked haggard and anxious in the oil lamp's yellow light. Suddenly Moreland spoke:

"Dead—nothin'!" jubilantly. "Look, Ben; he's done come to! Ye couldn't put him in a cannon and shoot him ag'inst a cliff and kill him, Ben! I hope ye're a-feelin' all right, Bill, shore."

Dale realized everything quite clearly. He put a hand to his head; there was a wet cloth lying over the swollen place.

"He shore give ye a buster of a lick," drawled a voice that Dale instantly recognized as that of his worshiper, By Heck. "Danged ef Cale Moreland didn't might' nigh it beat him to death, Bill!"

Many men crowded to the bedside and smiled at him, and he smiled back at them. Soon he asked:

"Did you capture the outfit?"

"Every durned one of 'em," answered John Moreland. "They're all shet up tight in the downstairs o' the office buildin', onder gyard. The' ain't but one of 'em plumb teetotally dead, fo' a wonder; but the's a whole passel of 'em hurt. I've done sent Luke to town on hossback, after a doctor fo' you and Saul and Little Tom; and he can 'tend to them crippled Balls, too, I reckon, ef you think it's best. What're we a-goin' to do with them fellers, Bill?"

"We're going to take them to the Cartersville jail," Dale answered promptly.

"I had a different plan 'an that planned out, John," said By Heck, winking at Ben Littleford. "I had it planned out to hang 'em all on a big green hemlock as a Christmas tree fo' Bill! Some devilish rough Christmas eve ye're a-havin', Bill, old boy, ain't it?"

"Rather," smiled Dale. He closed his eyes. His head ached, and he was somehow very tired.

Within the hour he went to sleep, and when he awoke it was daylight on Christmas morning. Ben Littleford, half dressed, was stirring the coals to life in the wide-mouthed stone fireplace. Dale felt better than he had expected to feel; he greeted Littleford with the compliments of the season, arose and dressed himself.

Littleford had just gone with a handful of kindling wood toward the kitchen, when there was a low light tapping at the outside door of Bill Dale's room. Dale arose from his sheepskin-lined rocker before the cheery log fire, went to the door and opened it. Before him stood a slim, barefoot boy in the poorest of rags; in the pitifully slender arms there was something wrapped rather loosely in crumpled brown paper. Dale did not remember having seen the lad before, but he knew it was no Littleford.

"Come in, son," he invited cordially—"come in and warm yourself. My goodness alive, it's too cold to go barefooted like that! Haven't you any shoes, son?"

"Shoes?" muttered the boy, queerly. "Shoes?"

He was shivering from the cold. His thin face looked pinched and blue, his eyes big and hollow. Dale stooped, picked him up bodily, carried him to the old rocker he had just vacated, and put him into it with hands as gentle as any woman's.

"H—l," began the boy, staring hard—"what—"

"Now stick your feet out and warm them, son—that's it," and Dale chafed the poor little, dirty, half-frozen feet and legs.

"Son," he went on after a moment, his heart throbbing out of sheer pity, "you go to the commissary clerk and tell him to dress you up like the crown prince of England, if he's got it, and charge the same to the account of Bill Dale. It will be my Christmas gift to you, little boy. What's your name?"

The lad turned his surprised black eyes upon the face of the big and sunbrowned man.

"Are you Bill Dale?"

"Yes."

That which the boy said next struck the big and sunbrowned man with all the force of a bullet.

"So you're Bill Dale. Well, D— my soul!"

"Don't, buddy, don't!"

The boy went on: "My name, it's Henery. I come here with a Christmas gif' fo' you." He pointed a dirty forefinger toward the bundle in his lap. "But you ain't a-goin' to git it now."

"Why?" Dale asked smilingly.

"Why! Shoes —'at's why. H—ll, did I ever have any shoes afore? Barefooted as a rabbit. That's me. Barefooted as a d—n' rabbit!"

"Son," protested Bill Dale, "you're entirely too small to swear. You mustn't do it, y'know."

"Yes," quickly, "I'm small. I'm small to my age. I'm done twelve year old. I've been measured fo' the go-backs."

"Measured for the go-backs," laughed Dale, "what's that?"

"Why," soberly, "when ye grow litler 'stid o' bigger, ye've got the go-backs. Maw, she measured me with a yarn string out o' a stocking which had been wore by a woman seventy-seven-year old, and 'en she wrapped the yarn string around the door-hinge. I'll 'gin to grow higher, or die, one or t'other, afore the string wears out on the hinge. Bound to."

Again Dale laughed. Mountain superstitions always amused him. Ben Littleford came into the room, and Dale arose and faced him.

"Do you know this boy, Ben?"

"It's Lyss Ball's boy," answered Littleford, puckering his brows. "What's he a-doin' here?"

"He brought a Christmas present for me," said Dale, "but he has decided that I shan't have it."

"The only Christmas present you could git from a Ball would be a bullet," frowned Ben Littleford.

He stepped to the rocker and took the bundle from the boy's lap; he took away the crumpled brown paper—and there in his hands was a loaded and cocked revolver!

"By George!" exclaimed Bill Dale.

"What'd I tell ye?" smiled Ben Littleford.

An hour later Dale and a score of Littlefords and Morelands entered the big downstairs room of the office and supplies building. The defeated Balls and Turners lounged here and there, sullen and silent, on the rough-board floor of their temporary prison.

Dale walked into their midst and addressed them quietly.

"You'll admit, won't you, that I've got what you fellows call 'the dead-wood' on you? And that it lies in my power to send every single one of you to the state penitentiary?"

"I reckon so," admitted Adam Ball's father. He was pretty well cowed, and so were the others.

"But I've decided not to do it," went on Bill Dale. "I can't forget that this is Christmas day. You may have your liberty as a present from the man you've tried so hard and so unjustly to kill. After the doctor gets through with Little Tom and Saul Littleford, he will come here to dress all your wounds; then our guards will give you back your rifles, and you may go home. I'm not asking you to promise me anything, you understand. I'm simply trusting the human heart, and I don't believe I'll be disappointed."

Dale turned to John Moreland. Moreland's rugged face wore a puzzled, displeased smile.

"If your brother David was here," Bill Dale demanded with a bare shade of anger in his voice, "what do you think he'd do about it? It's Christmas day, isn't it?"

The old Moreland chief's countenance softened; his grey eyes brightened. "Yes," he said, "it's Christmas day, Bill." He looked toward the Balls and Turners.

"Merry Christmas, gen'lemen!" he said.

Adam Ball's father immediately asked him for a chew of tobacco.

(Continued next week)

EMERSON

Lawrence Colbry and father made a business trip to Lansing, Wednesday.

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Mann are entertaining relatives from Ohio.

Miss Inez Presler returned to Belding, Monday after visiting here for some days with her parents.

Mrs. Minnie Wiley and two children, Dorthy and Maria, of St. Johns spent the week end at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ray Johnson. Sunday they visited for a few hours at Pleasant Valley.

Sam Carmon has purchased a threshing outfit and has started work with it.

Mr. and Mrs. Milton Presler were called to Detroit last week by the illness and death of their niece, Mrs. Wilma Duval Tucker. They returned home Saturday.

LEGAL NOTICES

STATE OF MICHIGAN—The Probate Court for the County of Gratiot.

At a session of said Court, held at the Probate Office in the village of Ithaca, in said county, on the 10th day of July, A. D. 1922.

Present: Hon. James G. Kress, Judge of Probate. In the matter of the estate of CHARLES H. CLARK, Deceased.

Wellington Hayward having filed his petition, praying that an instrument filed in said Court be admitted to Probate as the last will and testament of said deceased and that administration of said estate be granted to himself, as the executor named in said instrument, or some other suitable person.

It is ordered, that the 7th day of August, A. D. 1922, at ten o'clock in the forenoon, at said probate office, be and is hereby appointed for hearing said petition;

It is further ordered, that public notice thereof be given by publication of a copy of this order, once each week for three successive weeks previous to said day of hearing, in the Alma Record, a newspaper printed and circulated in said county.

(Signed) JAMES G. KRESS, Judge of Probate.
MILDRED E. TAFT, Register of Probate. 60-4w

STATE OF MICHIGAN, The Probate Court for the County of Gratiot.

At a session of said Court, held at the Probate Office in the Village of Ithaca in said county on the 15th day of July, A. D. 1922.

Present: Hon. James G. Kress, Judge of Probate.

In the matter of the estate of A. C. CHAPMAN, Deceased.

Edna Kelly, a creditor, having filed in said court her petition praying that the administration of said estate be granted to George Sharrar, or to some other suitable person.

It is ordered, that the 15th day of August, A. D. 1922 at ten o'clock in the forenoon at said probate office, be and is hereby appointed for hearing said petition;

It is further ordered, that public notice thereof be given by publication of a copy of this order, once each week for three successive weeks previous to said day of hearing, in the Alma Record a newspaper printed and circulated in said county.

A true copy.

(Signed) JAMES G. KRESS, Judge of Probate.
MILDRED E. TAFT, Register of Probate. 61-4w

LIEN SALE

Default having been made in the conditions of a certain decree of the Circuit Court for the County of Gratiot, State of Michigan, the same being dated July 19, 1916, and recorded in the register of deeds for the County of Gratiot, State of Michigan on the 12th day of February, 1917, in liber 134 on page 414 on which lein there is claimed to be due and unpaid the sum of one hundred dollars, and no proceedings at law have been instituted against the heirs or administrator to recover the said one hundred dollars or any part thereof.

Notice is hereby given that by virtue of the power of sale contained in said decree and the statute in such case made and provided, the said lein will be foreclosed by a sale of all of the premises therein described at public auction to the highest bidder at the north front door of the court house at the village of Ithaca in said County of Gratiot, on the 27th day of October, 1922, at one o'clock in the afternoon which said premises are described as follows: The Northwest ¼ of the Northeast ¼ of section number 23 township number 12 north of range 3 west, Michigan.

Dated, July 14, 1922.

ORA FRED COOLEY, Licnee.

ORA FRED COOLEY, in person,
Address: St. Louis, Michigan. 62-13w

STATE OF MICHIGAN—The Probate Court for the County of Gratiot.

At a session of said Court held at the Probate office in the Village of Ithaca in said county, on the 19th day of July, A. D. 1922.

Present: Hon. James G. Kress, Judge of Probate.

In the matter of the estate of Susie E. Church, Deceased.

Ida I. Huff, Administratrix, having filed in said court her petition, praying for license to sell the interest of said estate in certain real estate therein described.

It is ordered that the 21st day of August, A. D. 1922, at ten o'clock in the forenoon, at said probate office, be and is hereby appointed for hearing said petition, and that all persons interested in said estate appear before said court, at said time and place, to show cause why a license to sell the interest of said estate in said real estate should not be granted;

It is further ordered, that public notice thereof be given by publication of a copy of this order, for three successive weeks previous to said day of hearing, in the Alma Record, a newspaper printed and circulated in said county.

(Signed) JAMES G. KRESS, Judge of Probate.

A true copy.
MIDRED E. TAFT, Register of Probate. 62-4w

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