The Clan Call

By Hapsburg Liebe

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CHAPTER XVII.

Bill Dale Laughs.

Bill Dale and thinking of what he had done there in the Big Pine country. From the stone-and-clay chimneys of the cabins of the Littlefords on the other side of the river the bawling of loud, mouthed arrays of blue wood hounds. The Moretands had gone to farmers' picnics, and Bill Dale was not invited, on each of which occasions the first payment had been made. Her borrowed capital was to remain borrowed for another year. The Moretands were already losing their outlandishness and growing into universal respect. David Moreland's dream was at last being realized.

Then Dale frowned heavily. If only he could do as much for Dale's people! But he couldn't. The men of the Littlefords still worked the coal mine, and Dale knew that twice the contents of wages, but even that wouldn't buy them farms and make them independent.

Under his eyes lay two unanswered letters from his parents. He found little pleasure in answering their letters, for he was still somewhat bitter toward them—toward his father because of his father's ill treatment of David Moreland and David Moreland's people; toward his mother because she had let him go hungry for mother's love as a baby, as a child, as a boy, and as a man, toward them both because he had been reared a do-nothing.

Dale's door opened suddenly, and Bill Dale came stamping in with a gun at his shoulder. He had on his hip boots, one hand the mail satchel, in the other he was his ever-present rifle. After throwing the satchel to the floor at Dale's feet, he turned to the glowing wood stove.

"I'm dong nigh frit, Bill," he chattered. "If I don't, I couldn't be so much afr'id I was of I'd be' chin' the hawch pain worked. Say, Bill, why'n't ye burn coal 'stid o' wood? Ignel, it's hotter!"

"Coal is worth money. Wood isn't." Dale looked through the mail hastily. He threw aside a letter from the Aiken, under Chamberlain, Hawkins & Co., and took the entire output of the mine at an extraordinary figure, and picked up a letter which bore the postmark of his home city.

It was from Rube Littleford. Since he paid so little attention to the letters of his parents, they had requested Rube to write to him—they wanted him to come home for Christmas dinner. Wouldn't he come?

He arose and paced the office floor for two or three minutes, then he sat down at the table and tossed off a letter. He first ventured only several words, but by Heck he looked them over, and watched his pen with thoughtful eyes. He understood, he believed. How any woman on earth could care for such a man like Bill Dale was utterly beyond him. By Heck was a great deal like a good-natured dog.

If Bill would only laugh, it would be good for him. It had been so long since he had heard Bill laugh. By Heck decided that he would make Bill Dale laugh.

"Hol' ho!"

"Hello!"

"Do ye want me to tell ye a funny tale?" drawled Herk. He barely heard the answer:

"I guess I don't mind, By."

Herk's sympathy made him evil. But he swallowed the lump that came up in his throat and began bravely:

"One time 'tha' was a feller named Smith. Odd name, ain't it? Well, by Sy' Smith, they called him, 'cause it was so odd, he could easy shoot a dime nearly often a hour and never bother to look at the sights on his rifle. Sa-a-ay, one time Hoss Powell, he was a-tryin' to git appointed the p'stmaster over at Littleton, and he got up in the middle of the meet'n', and he hollered out and says:

"'Feller citizens,' he says, 'I want to be the permanent chairman! I am a-goin' to act in the cap-acity of a p'stmaster, and I want to git a man that do—do-fairly stand by me!'

"His old money, Eli Wright, he puts back and says sheet like: 'Set down that, Hoss-ley,' says Hoss-ley, 'you don't need you don't know the difference between temp'rary and permanent!'

"Well, they knowed Eli had a interested in him right then, and they let Hoss-ley be. Hoss-ley, he addressed the whole meetin', and this here is what Hoss-ley says:

"'Feller citizens,' says he, 'I want to tell you that been I don't know the difference between temp'rary and permanent, I am a-goin' to tell you. Now, Eli Wright that been I don't know the difference. Eli Wright says I'm drunk. I am. That's true. But Eli Wright is a pole-cussed liar! I'm permanent!'"

Herk finished with a lazy laugh. "Haw, haw, haw! How-how, how-how, how-how!" Dale said wearily. "Has been told on dozens of politicians. It has become a part of the history of this state."

"Well, my gosh!" moaned Herk. He thought deeply for a moment, decided that Bill Dale couldn't laugh at the story if he had heard it, and then he had drunk all of a gallon of pop—which certainly did take away one's sleep in the self-same pail—and went on.

"Here's one, by Jake. If 'tha' been not on dozens of politics been, and sorry word of it be the subject, why, I'm switch-bed truth, too.

"One time I was out in the mountains a-huntin', a-gittin' along slow and a-movin' a-quiet-like, when all of a sudden I hears a shoot' some right close by. I stops and listens. I hears it ag'in. Just like that. I stops. I stays still. I listens hard. I hears it ag'in. I hears a rattlin' and a shakin' of bresh. I hears a rattlin' ag'in. That stands a big old six-hoser with her teeth a-showin', and two crosseyed rabs'. Then I hears a whiner in my left. I looks keen. That stands a she-grizzler as big as a house, with her eyes just a-blazin'! Then I hears a spittin' sound and I says right. I looks keen. That was seven full-grown wild cats! I says all of 'em had been bit by a mad dog-ol'. Some fix to be in! Yeah; I says.

"Well, I thinks to myself. If I shoves the rattlers, I thinks to myself I hear and the grizzler, and I'm a-goin' to catch git out. And if I shoves the bear, the panther and the wildcat and the rattlers'll git me. And if I shoves the panther, the wildcat and the rattlers and the bear'll git me. And if I shoves the wildcat, the rattlers and the bear and the panther'll git me. And if I don't shoot none of 'em I'll git me! Some ungodly fix to be in! Yeah; I says. Yeah; I says. Yeah; I says.

Bill Dale only smiled. "I can't imagine, By," he said.

"I can't imagine, neither," grinned Herk. "But anyhow, I says, I says. Well, now that 'ye're in a good humor one time more. I'll tell ye some more. I hated to ruffle ye up like a yeller a-dog a-bitin' hawch-ankle, whilst ye was in reason, dinged bliss. Bill, old boy, I says I'll tell ye three-score funnier'n