

FEUDS DIE OUT BUT FEUD TALES PERSIST

Among Southern Mountain Folk Many of the Old Rancors Live Only in Memory

By JEAN THOMAS

A RECENT tragedy in North Carolina, the slaying from ambush of a wealthy Northerner by a mountaineer, has served to revive the perennial tales that represent our Southern mountains as a land of feuds and feudists, of blood-hatred and vengeance. The truth is that mountain feuds are dying out faster than the tales about them.

Certainly, the slaying of Thomas Price was not a typical answer of mountain people to such benevolence as he had bestowed upon his humble hill-folk neighbors. He had provided them with medical care at his estate, maintained a circulating library among them, contributed to their schools and churches. It was more in keeping with their nature that, as the dispatches said, "resentment ran high among them" against the slayer. It has been my experience among the mountaineers that they never forget a kindness.

I do not claim acquaintance with all the people of the Southern highlands who have been unfortunate enough to have trouble with their neighbors. Yet my years of court reporting and ballad hunting in the hills of Eastern Kentucky have afforded me an opportunity to know mountain life. Across the years I know of no parallel to the Price case among the people with whom I have been associated. I can recall no betrayal of a benefactor, and I have never known a mountain man, woman or child who would accept a favor without returning one.

It is hard, and takes a long time, for a region to live down a bad name. Once in New York I looked for employment as a stenographer. "Where were you last employed?" a prospective employer asked me. "In Rowan County, Kentucky," I answered. He fairly pounced upon the words. "Rowan County, dark Rowan, where the Martin-Tolliver feud was fought? Of course you went armed? They tell me those hill-billies are still killing one another off down there. They say a stranger isn't safe." I didn't get that job, for then and there I turned on my heel and walked out.

I knew how Ben Martin, son of the first Martin to die in the troubles with the Tollivers, felt when he had left home to get away from strife and worked as a farm hand out West. Ben Martin is a true mountain man, so when he mingled with his fellow-harvesters on the prairies he had little to say. Least of all did he ever speak of the circumstances that had caused him to leave home, mother, brothers and sisters to suffer homesickness out in the "level land."

One day in the wheat fields at the noon hour (Ben Martin himself told me this story as he and his wife and I sat on the porch of his cottage) a harvester spoke of Rowan County, "where the Martin-Tolliver feud is still raging." The feud had been ended for years, but the speaker went on: "They say the feudists clapped handcuffs on John Martin and then riddled him with bullets. Well, live by the sword, die by the sword—I guess he got what was coming to him."

Ben Martin, quiet, homesick lad, gripped his hands about his knees and kept silent—Ben, who as a little boy had knelt beside his dying father whose hands were bound while the guns of assassins poured lead into his defenseless body. "And it was not Tollivers who fired the shots," Ben longed to say. But being a mountain man he kept silent. He quit the farm that day and went his lonely way, seeking peace from babbling tongues.

Today, returned to his beloved Kentucky hills, Ben Martin lives in quiet. "It was outsiders," he told me, "that started the troubles and kept them alive. The man who filled more graves than any other man in Rowan County never himself fired a bullet. There was no feeling between us and the Tollivers, and there is none now." To prove his statement, Ben added in a gentle voice, "My own blood

cousin married a Tolliver—and look yonder."

A bevy of school children went happily down the road past his cottage with its hollyhocks and petunias and gay sunflowers. "Look at the least ones yonder. The blood of Tollivers and Martins runs in their veins. Bless you, look at them with their arms around each other. Do they look like they're carrying malice in their hearts?"

Ben Martin has given more than a quarter of a century to the service of his country. He saw battle in what he calls "the Spanish-American skirmish" and in the World War. He was a great sharpshooter, though he will not tell you so—to learn of his war record you will have to ask his wife. Now for peace and contentment he has come back to his Kentucky hills. "There is no other place like them in the world," he says. "Here I aim to spend the rest of my days with enmity in my heart against no man."

It is easy to understand how

strife crept into the rugged lives of the hill folk. They came early into their mountain fastnesses, seeking freedom from Old-World tyranny. Before the days of surveyed boundaries and law courts they knew only the pioneer's defense, the gun. Even as they held safe the crude log cabin against the Red Coats and the Indians, as time went on, they defended their rights, real or fancied, against invasion by one of their own.

"I can't bide the idee of bein' scrouged," I heard a mountain man argue recently, when timber prospectors sought to buy the virgin forest that surrounded his windowless cabin. He refused a fortune for his timber rather than let a sawmill invade his little realm. But this trait of human nature is not peculiar to mountaineers. There are spite fences in up-to-date cities.

Even after the wilderness was laid out into counties, after courts of law were established and men

voted by open ballot, calling out the name of their choice and giving their own names as voters, differences continued and sometimes became quarrels. The Martin-Tolliver trouble, by the way, grew out of a county election. So long had mountain folk dwelt in isolation, settling misunderstandings and grievances in their own fashion, it was not easy for them to fall into a new way of doing things.

A judge, what of him? Why call a jury to settle how Neighbor Jones's sheep-killing dog should be dealt with? Neighbor Brown didn't need those fellows down at the county seat to tell him that Jones's dog should be settled with at once. He reached for the old flintlock gun over the fireplace and finished the sheep-killing dog without ado. It made Jones angry as a hornet, of course. But hadn't it made Brown's blood boil to see his helpless sheep mutilated, especially after he had warned Jones to tie up the dog? Why journey thirty miles over the creek-bed road to the court house and go through a lot of "gyrations" to get Jones warranted?

An incident so simple caused bitterness among neighbors. In the uneventful life of the mountains a trespass or the loss of property became magnified into an insult, a violation of independence. The mountaineer mulled it over in his mind. He talked it over with his family in his cabin. The children were there and heard. There was no other room for them. Kinfolk joined in and loyally sided with kinfolk. Just as the clans of Scotland gained in numbers and ill will, so grew the mountain factions, descendants often of those same Scottish highlanders.

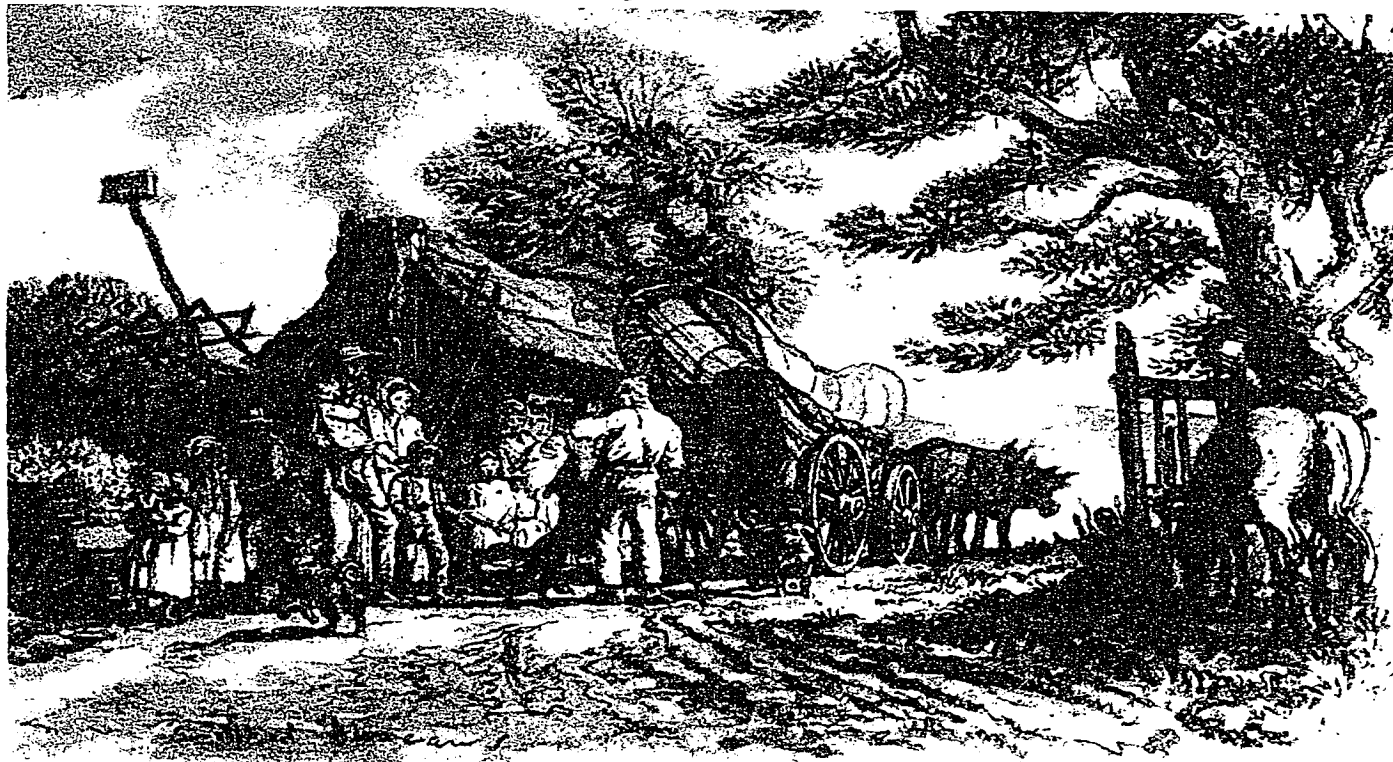
In some such way, after a dispute over the ownership of a hog, rose the Hatfield-McCoy trouble at Tug River. I have lived at Tug River, my nearest neighbors the Hatfields. There were no locks on doors or windows in the little shack I occupied in their midst. One day when I was still a stranger there I set out to visit a sick child living at the opposite end of the railroad tunnel. At the tunnel entrance stood a giant fellow with miner's cap on his head and pick on his shoulder, his face dark with coal dust. He was one of the Hatfields.

"You needn't be a mite afraid to walk through the tunnel," he

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A Family of Mountaineers Around the Hearth.



Drawings by M. J. Duncan & Harper & Brothers.

The Visitor May Always Be Sure of a Hospitable Welcome.

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Among the Southern Mountain People, Used to a Rugged Life and Jealous of Their Rights, Many Old Rancors Live Only in Memory

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said in a soft, musical voice. "Yonder comes the woman (his wife). She's going to see sick folks t'other side." He bowed to me as graciously as a knight to a queen. The woman, basket on arm, gave me a friendly smile and said, "I'm proud to make your acquaintance." Her man inquired solicitously, "Did you fetch a play-pretty for the sick baby-child?" The woman answered, "I did, for a fact—a poppet," taking, as she spoke, a cornshuck doll from her basket, "and I fetched a jar of honey, too."

The stalwart son of the Hatfields, "own blood kin of Devil Anse," fumbled in the bosom of his shirt and drew forth a paper bag. "I 'lowed you might forgit, and a lit-

tle 'un does crave sweetening, so I stopped at the commissary and got a poke of stick candy." He dropped it in the basket.

Such are the people whom romantic outsiders picture as feudists. They are as human, as simple, as kindly as you and I, and they hate a feud as bitterly as any of us. Too well they know what it means! Incidentally, I have never heard the word from their lips. If speak they must, they say "the trouble," or "the war," never "the feud." And the enemy is always, in their words, "t'other side."

I recall a "war" in the mountains over a dividing line. The litigants called it a "line-fight case." Far back in the beginning of the trouble there had been loss of life, but the case was revised in court in my reporting days and disposed of with perfect amiability. There was no shooting in the court room. There was something exciting nevertheless. The star witness produced an original land grant from a king.

THE gratitude of mountain people is so much more characteristic of them than their rancor. There was Jamie, a helpless cripple until his fourteenth year, when the doctor unlocked his twisted joints with bloodless surgery and restored him. One day when he was still in casts from the hips down but able to use his hands a little, I came upon him working with a scrap of leather and a punch.

"I'm making the doctor a pill pocket," he told me, and added eagerly, "Old Jethro's Eph fotched me this hide to make hit of, and this here punch." Then he leaned closer, glad flecks dancing in his dark eyes, "By Eph a-fotching these things, hit's the sign of peace betwixt old Jethro's people and mine!"

The pill pocket was all Jamie had to give in return for the doctor's services—for the like of which an American millionaire's family paid a king's ransom to Lorenz. And Jamie's grandmother—what of her gratitude for the boy made whole? For days Granny, though stooped with age and rheumatism, kept at "seng digging" until she had a "great passel" of roots. "The doctor can swap 'em for cash money," she said.

Nor was that all the grandmother carried to the doctor. "A poke of walnuts, mind you, hulled and washed clean as a hound's tooth at the creek." She had scoured them "because the doctor can't bide a grain of dirt or gorm." It took Jamie a long year to finish the pill pocket while he was regaining the use of the joints of his fingers. "My people is a proud race of people," he told his benefactor, "and me and Granny, we ain't aimin' to take withouten we can give."

I MET a neighbor of Jamie's, old Uncle Eli, past 70 and blind. He sang scores of hill ballads to me while I typed them, and I presented him with a bound sheaf of them. "But, woman," he said, "me without eyesight and not apt at ary task, I dast to take them ballets and put myself in your debt." I tried to assure him that he was under no obligation; that the world owed him a debt for having kept the old songs alive and fresh in memory. My argument was lost on Uncle Eli. He pondered, then made his slow way into the house and fumbled in a hide-covered trunk in the chimney corner.

"They say you are everly sarchin' for old curiosities," he said, returning with a frayed volume in his hand. "Well, thar's the Good Book my great-grandstr fotched across the briny deep. Iffen you're satisfied to swap, take hit and I'll be proud to have them ballets you writ off for me." He placed in my hands a rare old copy of the Bible. There was a bullet hole in the

thick leather cover. "Hit saved my life oncet," Uncle Eli said dreamily. "T'other side showed fight, long time ago. They fired pint-blank through yon door. But I were fixed for 'em; I were expectin' 'em. I taken the Good Book and spread hit out wide over my chest under my linsay-woolsey shirt." He chuckled at the memory. "The Good Book ketched the bullet, and my life were spared." He paused a moment. "I everly thought a heap of hit, hit's done a good part by me. But you take hit now, for them troubles is all past and forgot long, long ago."

MANY such people I have met in the Kentucky mountains. To the world they may be "feudists" still, but to me they are just people. There was Emmeline, who had lost her sight when a child and regained it in her teens. Emmeline "craved to larn to write a love letter," but not until I had allowed her to teach me to knit would she consent to begin her "larnin'."

Months afterward she confided to me, "Woman, do you appreciate, I'm aimin' to marry one of t'other side! We've writ a heap of letters to each other. Time were when Pap would ha' set his foot down on hit, but now he owns that no more doughty man ever backed a nag or lifted axe to tree than Jason." There was something else. "Woman, I'm wanting you to be my waiter along with his sister Elvirie."

I protested that I had never been a bridesmaid. "Couldn't she have Elvirie alone? But Emmeline said, "Don't you appreciate that Elvirie, his sister, being my waiter, is our sign of peace? I'm wantin' you to bear witness to our peace through mine and Jason's wedlock, with Elvirie by my side."

And there is Aunt Rimithe, whom I visited in her one-room cabin in a quiet hollow below a hilltop burying ground where lay "Pap's men folks that fit the Red Coats." The headstones still showed the names of three soldiers of the Revolution. But down below, close beside her garden, was another burial plot with four ivy-covered graves.

"My four boys," she said. "They died for their rights, same as Pap's folks died." Her wrinkled hands were clasped; her trembling lips formed the soundless words, "God forgive us."

IN the moonlight on the cabin step she told me briefly of "the troubles betwixt my people and t'other side," troubles that had taken away what she loved best on earth. "But hit's all passed away now," she said reverently, "We've all got peace here."

Presently she was singing an old Scottish ballad, the nearest to a lullaby that I have ever heard from a mountain woman.

"That were my baby boy's favorite song ballet," she said wistfully. "He were just turned 12 the day he and my three others were tuck. I couldn't put my boys way off yonder on the hill. I wanted to keep 'em close by, here by my posies. Mought be the least 'un, he'd be wantin' to hear his mammy singin' of a evenin' time that there favorite ballet he loved so good."

That is Aunt Rimithe today, who has been fantastically described as "the fiery-eyed mother of four desperate feudists."

Brave, silent Ben Martin and the Hatfield who was mindful of the "sick baby child"; Jamie, filled with gratitude to his beloved doctor; Uncle Eli, parting with his treasured Good Book; Emmeline with "his sister Elvirie" for her "waiter," and Aunt Rimithe, singing in the moonlight to her boy asleep under the ivy—all these, as I see them, are living signs of peace in the Southern mountain land; signs that feuds are vanishing.