FEUDS DIE OUT BUT FEUD TALES PERSIST
Among Southern Mountain Folk
Many of the Old Rancors
Live Only in Memory

By JEAN THOMAS

RECENT tragedy in North Carolina, the slaying from ambush of a wealthy North Carolina mountain man by a mountaineer, has served to revive the perennial tales that represent our Southern mountain folk as a land of feuds and feudals. We are bloodstained and vengeance is the keynote. 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 meanness 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, "re- sentment 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 high lands 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 not of parallel to the Price case among the people with whom I have been associated, to call no betrayal of a benefactor; and I have never known a mountain man, woman or child who would accept a favor without reimbursement.

I am hard, and live 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?" asked Mr. Somewhere. "I was last employed in a hospital," I said. "I had a child," I added.

A Family of Mountaineers Around the Hearth.

Ben Martin knew what Ben Martin knew. Ben Martin was a man who had lived his life in the hills. He mingled with his fellow-mountaineers on the prairies as he had lived in the hills. He was a veteran of all old of life 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 neighbor 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 dropped handcrafts 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, homespun 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 assassination poured lead into his defenseless body. "And it was not Tollivers who fired the shots." Ben, looked to say. But being a mountain man he kept silent. He quit the farm that day and went his lonely way, seeking peace from bubbling tongues.

Today, returned to his beloved Trucskey 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 him. And I do not believe there is any 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 peonies and gay sunflowers. "Look at least ones yonder. The blood of Tollivers and Martin runs in their veins. But 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 sharp-shooter, though he will not tell you so—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 Emily 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 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 hide the idea of being scroched," 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 quite fences in up-to-date cities.

Even after the wilderness was laid out into counties, after courts of law were established and men voiced by open ballot, calling out the name of their choice and giving their own names and votes, differences continued and sometimes became quarrels. The Martin-Tolliver trouble by the way, grew out of a county election. So long as the mountain folk dealt with each other in friendly exchange, with understandings 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 Jones didn't need those fellows down at the county seat to tell him that Jones's dog should be settled 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 spent his money to buy 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 warned off?

An incident so simple caused bitterness among neighbors. In the untroubled life at the mountaintop there was no trespass or the loss of property before it was committed into an insult, a violation of independence. The mountaineer muffled it over in his heart. 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 loudly sided with kinfolk. Just as the clans of Scotland gained in numbers and ill will, so grew the mountain factions, descendants of those same Scotch highlanders.

In some such way, after a dispute over the ownership of a horse, rose the Hufffield-McCoy trouble at Tug River. I have lived at Tug River, my nearest neighbors the Hufffields. 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 friend of mine. It was the last of the railroad track. At the tunnel entrance stood a giant fellow with miner's cap on his head and pick on his shoulder, his face dark from coal dust. He was one of the Hufffields.

"You needn't be a mile far from to walk through the tunnel," he
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s in a soft, musical voice. "You-nder comes the woman (his wife). She's going to see sick folks 'tudder."

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." "You're inquired solicently, "Did you fetch a play-pretty for the sick child?"

"Her, the woman answered, "I did, for a fact—a pretty, taling, 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," fumblled in the bosom of his shirt and drew forth a paper bag.

"I loved you might forgit, and a lit-}

tile "un does crave sweetening, so I stopped at the commissary and brought the boy some candy." He dropped it in the basket.

"Bu the women whom roman, the flag of the United States, are they as human, as simple, as plain. I won't say I'm hatin' a feed as bitter as any of you. Too well they know what it means! They know what it means!" he kept the word from their lips. If she speak they must, they say, "the trouble," and the woman would brrel back in the beginning of the trouble, there had been loss of life, but the fire had been burning days and disposed of with perfect amabilty. "There was no shooting in the fourth room. There was something exciting neverthe- less, the star-stop was produced as original land grant from a king."

"The gratitude of mountain peo- ple is so much more character- istic of them than their race. 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 the hospital, and during one day, but able to use his hands a little, came upon him while he was working at a cluster of a dunny and a bunch."

"I'm making the doctor a girl pocket," he told me, and added sadly, "Jethro's Eph fettles me this hide to make hit of, and this here bunch."

Then he leaned closely and a flecks dancing in his dark eyes, "By Eph a-fettles these things, he was her to the respect of the wife and the respect of Jethro and 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 citizen paid a king's ransom to Lorenz. And Jamie's grandfather—who was her of her grandchildren, he was a man of white head."

For days Granny, though stowed wis' her, again and again, kept the same "seng digging" until she had a "great passel" of roots. "The doctor can away'em for cash money," she said.

"Nor was all that the grandmother could do. A poke of walnuts, mind you, bullied and washed clean as a hounds' tooth at the doctor's door, and this book threetimes."

"Because the doctor can't hide a good. But there's that's the Good Book a long year to finish the pill pocket while he was regaling the useless of the joints of his fingers. "My people is a proud race of peo- ple," he told his benefactor, "anu me and Granny, we ain't aimed to take without us can give."

I MET a neighbor of Jamie's, old Uncle Eli, 1970 and blind. He sowed hill of bailed and it me while I typed them, and I pres- ented him with a bound sheet of paper. "And the boys," he said without eyesight and not apt at any task, lant to take them ballet, and myself in my duties, tried to assure him that he was un- able to help. But he, in spite of what I ow- ned him a doctor for having kept the old songs alive and fresh in medicine, argued the case 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 everyarchin' for a song, boy, but I have a song. I have a song for you," he called with a fraying volume in his hand, "never mind that the Good Book my great-granddint forged across the briny deep. If you're satisfied to own, take hit and I'll be proud to have them ballet you write off for me." He placed in my hand a rare old copy of the Bible.

There was a bullet hole in the thick leather cover. "Hit saved my life once," Uncle Eli said dreamily.

"I was out of town and it hit me in the ankle. I was back a week before the doctors would have taken the Good Book and spread hit out wide over my chest under the window, so I could chucked at the memory. "The bullet shot your ankle, but I'll have 'er life for it. He paused a moment "I every thought a bullet would hit me, not one that kills me by me. But you take hit now, for them troubles is all past and forgot long."

MANY such tales I have met in the Kentucky mountains. To the world they may be feverous stories, but to these just people. There was Emmeline, who had lost her sight when a child and regained it in later life. Emmeline "craved to learn to write a love letter," but not until I had allowed her to sit in my lap would she consent to begin her "writ.""

Months afterward she confided to me, "Woman, do you appreciate. I'm ainin' to marry once in my life side! We've write a heap of letters to each other. Time were when Pap would 'a set him on hit, but now he owns that no more doubtful man can be a man of a nag or lifted axe to tree than Jason."

"There was something else."

"Woman, I'm wanting to take 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' to bear witness to our peace through alive and Jason's wedlock, with Elvirie by my side."

And there is Aunt Rinthime, whom I visited in her one-room cabin in a quiet hollow below a hilltop bury- ing ground where lay "Pap's moon falls from the sky."

His headstones still showed the names of three soldiers of the Civil War. He had put down below, close beside her garden, was another burial plot with a covered grave.

"My four boys," she said, "They died for their rights, same as Pap's folks died.

Her wrinkles were elapsed; her trembling lips formed the sounds words, "God forgive us."

I N the moonlight on the cabin step she told me briefly of "the troubles between right and wrong (the other side), troubles that had taken away what she loved best on earth. 'But it's all over', she says 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. "He used to sing it to the moon. He used to sing it when he was a little boy. He put't not my boys way off on- der on the hill. I wanted to keep it, but I couldn't."

"Thought me the least 'un, he'd be wantin' to hear his mummy sing it. But Elvirie, I don't want to take his ballet he loved so good."

Of Uncle Eli I have been, who has been fantastically described as the "flaky-eyed mother of four de- cendants."

Brave, siren Ben Martin and the Hatfields who was mindful of the "sick baby child"; Jamie, filled with a burning heart to be given grudge to be given; Uncle Eli, perfecting with har- dcovered Good Book; Emmeline with her "sister Elvirie, for her "writ," and Aunt Rinthime, sing- ing in the moonlight and feeling her way asleep under the ivy—all these, as I see them, are living signs of peace in the Southern mountains and signs that feuds are vanishing.