



## *The Last Joke of Joker Joe* *by Hapsburg Liebe*

IT WASN'T that he didn't care for Annie Belle as he should have cared for her, for he did; he held her in a light that was little less than idolatrous. He played pranks at her expense just as he played pranks at the expense of everybody else.

Some of those who knew him best said that it was a family trait and called to mind the fact that all the Seavers of Bay Horse Mountain were jokers and had been since the oldest inhabitant could remember. Others who knew him just as well were reasonably sure that it was a birthmark.

"Joker Joe" Seaver was big, strong and good-looking enough, and he had a way that caught with women; that is why, no doubt, Annie Belle Hanson of the Bay Horse Mountain Hansons married him. Joe had a good job as fireman of a battery of three big boilers in the great sawmill in the valley below, a job that had employed two men before his advent, and he made good money.

He had, when he married Annie Belle, a cozy cabin all furnished nicely, with everything paid for. Annie Belle soon made a home of the little house of logs; she washed and scrubbed and tidied, arranged and rearranged until Joe himself hardly knew the place when he came home from his second day's work as a married man. Joe told people

about it, and they wondered whether he would ever dare to play jokes on his very magnificent young wife. In point of fact, they wondered so hard that they laid bets on the matter.

The affirmatives said that, as Joe had played pranks with his mother and his sisters as victims, he would play them with his wife for a victim after he had come to know her better. He couldn't help it, they said, any more than an ordinary man could help breathing. And this was the side that won.

Joker Joe Seaver hadn't been double for two weeks before he had put salt in the sugar-bowl, sugar in the salt-shaker, vanilla in the coffee and a baby rabbit in the flour-bin; also he scared Annie with an artificial mouse once. At the first, Annie Belle pretended that she enjoyed it and perhaps she really did; but it soon became tiresome. The young woman had wisely realized that there was something far more serious in life than the mere foolish playing of pranks.

She told Joe over and over that it was silly. But Joe only laughed. Joe was a great laugher. Then he played the joke that should have been his last, and wasn't. But it was the next to the last.

Now Seaver was a good actor, a splendid actor, as are nearly all really

proficient jokers. He had what people in certain circles describe more or less picturesquely as a “poker face;” which is to say, of course, that you couldn’t possibly tell by his countenance anything about what was going on in the inside of him.

Joker Joe strode solemnly and frowningly into the lean-to kitchen of his cabin one evening early in June and deliberately placed on the top of the home made cupboard a hickory withe five feet long; it was of the kind that is used in the whipping of horses. Then he turned that grave poker face of his toward Annie Belle, who was frying bacon for supper.

“What’s that big switch for, Joe?” Annie asked smilingly.

“The fust time my breakfas’ is late,” said Joe, his voice a bearish growl, “ye’ll find out what it’s for.”

There are times when, as anybody knows, people whose moral and physical stamina is ordinarily of the best find their nerves on edge and taut. Annie Belle’s nerves were on edge and taut. All that day she had been lonesome for the home she had left and for her father and mother and her brothers and sisters. She did not, therefore, quite catch the spirit of fun, of the moment. Her face went a little pale, and the fork fell clattering to the floor. Joker Joe tried to laugh then, but it was somehow a sorry thing. The joke had fallen short.

“Do ye mean, Joe—” came the low, unsteady voice of his wife— “do ye mean—”

“I don’t mean nothin’!” cried Joe and his smile was as poor as his laugh of a moment before. “I was jest a-foolin’ ye, Annie Belle! Haw-haw-haw! But ye shore looked like as ef ye’d seed a ghost. Haw-haw-haw!”

Annie Belle stood stock-still and stared hard. Apparently she was rather inclined toward believing that her prank-playing young husband had been in earnest in the matter of

the hickory withe. Joe tried to take her into his arms, but the look she gave him was enough to cause him to relinquish that intention.

“Fo’give me, honey,” he pleaded somewhat sheepishly. “I was only jest a foolin’.”

Annie Belle continued to stare at him.

“Don’t ye never,” she admonished soberly, “try to play another joke on me.”

She suffered him to kiss her on the forehead. Joe laughed a laugh that could have made a horse blush. The spell was broken and he was again happy.

IT WAS on the following morning that Joker Joe Seaver played his last joke. It was a very little thing—at first. He got a grin out of it, and that was all—just then. Annie Belle smiled; it was the kind of smile one gives when one can do no better.

Seaver went down to the big mill in the valley and relieved the watchman of the charge of the three powerful boilers. At once he began to heave slabs into the roaring furnaces. The whistle blew, and the great steel band-saw on the second floor of the mill began its daily work of slashing monster logs into boards.

An hour afterward Seaver made a round of the steam-gages and water-gages, saw that everything was going smoothly and turned to the doorway for a breath of fresh air. He noted that the mill foreman stood there eying him solemnly.

“What’s the matter, Joker?” said Brinkley, advancing a step.

“Matter?” grinned Seaver. “Nothin’! Why?”

“Ye don’t look jest right. Ain’t sick, are ye?”

“Sick!” laughed Seaver. “Me? Never felt better in my life. Over where I’m from they haf to kill a man to start a graveyard. What made ye think it, Brinkley?”

“All the same,” Brinkley muttered,

turning toward a balky sawdust-conveyor, “ye don’t look jest right. Ye’re sort o’ green around the eyes.”

“Haw-haw-haw!” Seaver roared. “Green around the eyes! Haw-haw-haw!”

He turned his attention once more to the furnaces.

Ten minutes later the mill’s roustabout came in. He drew up short before the big fireman and eyed him stolidly.

“What’s wrong wi’ ye, Joker?” he asked, his voice grave.

“Me?” Joker Joe shrugged his shoulders. “Haw-haw-haw! Nothin’ ever was wrong wi’ me, Hilton. Why?”

“I dunno,” said Hilton, turning away. “But ye’re a little pale around the gills, seems to me.”

When the roustabout had gone, Joker Joe folded his arms and muttered to himself:

“Green around the eyes! Pale around the gills! I wonder ef I am?”

Seaver had just finished filling the three furnaces again when the engineer entered the boiler-room. The engineer caught Seaver by a shoulder and turned his sweat-beaded face to the light of the doorway. He gave Joker Joe, a searching look and shook his head half tragically.

“Go and set down, Joker,” said he. “Ye don’t haf to work when ye’re sick, o’ course.”

Seaver straightened. He threw out his giant chest.

“Sick ——!” he bellowed.

“What’s the matter wi’ ye, Watson? W’y, I never was sick for a single, lonesome minute in my life!”

“When a man’s well,” Watson replied easily, “he ain’t got no call to be as pyore white as a new dinner plate. The right thing to do would be to send for the doctor, Joker.”

“Send for [the doctor?” echoed Joker Joe.

“I shore said it. Send for the doctor. A man can be found to take yore place at the

b’ilers, Joker. Want me to bring Doc Hoskins?”

Hoskins was the company’s doctor. Seaver had played a hundred pranks on the huge, flat-footed physician, and Hoskins was fairly pining to settle the score.

“Dang Doc Hoskins!” exploded Seaver.

“I don’t need Doc Hoskins. I don’t need nothin’. What’s gone wrong wi’ you, Wat — you and Brinkley and Hilton? Why, I—I cain’t be sick. It ain’t in me to be sick. I never was sick for a minute in my life, Wat!”

Watson shook his head, gave Seaver a glance that seemed both pitying and sympathetic and went back to the engine-room. Seaver bit his lips, one after the other. Then he felt of his forehead and he felt of his pulse. His pulse was, he had to admit, decidedly too fast, while his forehead was somehow clammy.

“Green around the eyes,” he drawled to himself. “Pale around the gills. As white as a new dinner plate. I wisht—I had a lookin’-glass here for jest a minute. I wisht——”

A MASCULINE voice, booming, cut short his soliloquy. He jumped as if somebody had stabbed him with a horse-nettle. There before him stood strapping “Dink” Hanson, his wife’s youngest and favorite brother.

“Glad to see ye, Joker, shore!” Hanson said. “I riz afore daylight and got here about a hour ago. Wanted to see how you and Annie was a-makin’ it. Brung ye a hick’ry-cyored ham and a middlin’. I— say, Joker, what in the name o’ ‘Big Bill’ Butler’s busted baseball bat is the matter wi’ you?”

Joker Joe took a step backward. He felt dizzy now. There was a sort of farewell-forever feeling at the pit of his stomach. His hands felt all trembly, and his knees seemed weak. Something kept coming up in his throat and had to be swallowed back.

“Dink,” he muttered, “Dink, do I—do I

reelly look bad?"

"Look bad!" echoed Dink Hanson. "Joker, ef ye'd been buried for two weeks and 'en dug up, ye'd look no wuss 'an ye look now. Looky here—hadn't I better go for Doc Hoskins and for Annie Belle? Or—or could ye make out to walk home, Joker? Ef I'd he'p ye along, eh?"

"The doctor—Annie Belle—walk ho-ho-home—" stuttered the now almost wholly overcome Joker Joe. "Say, D-Dink, how—how do I look bad?"

"Green around the eyes, pale around the throat and as white as a sheet. That's how. Say, Joe, you got to do somethin' for yeself! I ain't a-goin' to have my sister a widder throwed on the goodness o' the people afore she's been married a month, jest on 'count o' the pyore cussedness o' you! I'm a goin' right now for the doctor, and you got to go home and go to bed, and that's gawspel!"

Joker Joe sank to the boiler-room door-sill, put his elbows on his knees and bent his face, which now seemed clammier than ever, to his hands. Dink Hanson had not taken a dozen steps when he bumped squarely into Hoskins. Hoskins was coming around a corner of the boiler-room.

"Huh!" said Hoskins. "What's the matter, Dinkie, hey?"

"Joker's shore sick!" cried Dink Hanson.

Another half minute and the company's doctor was on his knees before Joe Seaver, who was still sitting in the doorway.

"My heavens!" exclaimed Hoskins as Seaver lifted his troubled face. "It's the same thing that's the matter with Annie Belle! I've just left your house, Joe; I was on my way here to tell you, when I butted slam-bang into Dinkie. It seems that——"

Seaver shot to his feet with all the suddenness of a jack-in-a-box. Hoskins and young Hanson forced him to sit down again.

"You listen to me, Joe," went on

Hoskins.

"If I save you, I've got to go at it in an intelligent way. I think Annie's out o' danger now, though I can't perzactly tell; but you—my heavens, Dinkie, did ever you see a man look like that before, hey?"

"I shore never!" Hanson answered promptly. "I——"

Joker Joe interrupted;

"Have ye done all ye could do for Annie, Doc—why don't ye talk—what're a standin' there that away for, anyhow? Have ye done all ye could do for Annie, Doc?"

"Sssh!" Hoskins lifted a hand. "Sssh! Let's get at the bottom of the trouble, Joe. The cause, that's it. Joe, did you empty a pepper-shaker before breakfast this morning and fill it with something out of a small pasteboard box?"

"Ground cloves, yeuh," Joker Joe tremulously admitted.

Hoskins nodded.

"Ground cloves; that's what was printed on the outside o' the box, but on the inside—really, I reckon Annie Belle ought o' told you, Joe, about putting rat-pizen in that ground cloves box——"

"Rat-pizen! Rat-pizen!" yelled Joker Joe. Again he leaped to his feet. "Why, I et some of it, Doc, and it shore tasted jest like ground cloves. Did ye say rat-pizen, Doc?"

"I most certainly did, Joe."

The combined strength of Hoskins and Dink Hanson was finally sufficient to bring Seaver to a sitting posture once more.

"Ca'm yourself now, Joe. We're intelligently at the bottom of the whole unforchunit matter at last. Wait until I shoot this hypodermic into your arm, Joe, and you'll maybe feel a little better. It tasted like ground cloves, Joe, because it had been in a ground cloves box. Don't you see?"

Joker Joe stiffened. His eyes were desperate and yet piteous. Remorse shook the foundations of his soul.

“But Annie!” he said smotheredly, half-brokenly. “Are ye shore Annie’11 make it, Doc? Ef only she won’t die, I don’t keer a dang ef I haf to die twicet——”

“Oh, yes, yes—the chances are that she’ll make it, Joe, though maybe she won’t.” Hoskins was busy with his little syringe. “But she certainly must not be alarmed or worried. We’ll have to keep it from her about your being sick too, of course. When I’ve shot you with this hypo, Joe, you’d better lie down in the sawdust back there in a corner. You’ll go to sleep and if you wake up, you’ll be all right.”

“And if I don’t——”

“You won’t be all right, If you don’t wake up,” Hoskins was forced to admit. “But you ain’t the man to die until you’re dead, Joe.”

Seaver took the injection of morphia and then declared his intention of going to Annie Belle or die on the way. Dink Hanson and the doctor offered serious objections and backed them up with four strong hands. Shortly afterward Hoskins and Annie Belle’s brother half dragged and half carried the figure of the prank-player to a pile of sawdust in a corner of the boiler-room and soon he sank into the soothing arms of the poppy-god.

WHEN Joker Joe Seaver came to himself again, the long mountain twilight had set in—was mostly over, in fact. The boiler-room was deserted, and steam was down. He sat up, went uncertainly to his feet and walked to the doorway. Not a man was to be seen anywhere; the big mill and its ribbons and disks of steel were silent. Seaver then tried to remember and at last he succeeded. The very second it all came back to him, he hurried toward his small, new cabin on the mountainside above.

When he reached the new split-paling gate, he was well nigh breathless, and his hat was gone. He saw that two men sat on the doorstep, their eyes on the ground at their feet,

their countenances rather drawn. He banged the gate open and rushed to them.

“Dink, Doc,” he began apprehensively, “how’s Annie?”

No answer. The two still stared at the ground at their feet.

“Didn’t ye hear me?” Seaver thundered. He seized them, each by a shoulder, and shook them roughly. “How’s Annie Belle?”

Doc Hoskins rose. He spat, pinched the end of his nose, pinched his lower lip and then stretched an arm toward the mountain’s crest.

“You’ll find her up there, Joe,” he said sadly. “Poor little Annie!”

Seaver thought he understood, and it was maddening. He ran like a buck to the top of the mountain, a distance of half a mile. When he arrived at the split-paling fence that ran around the little and old, neighborhood cemetery, he vaulted it and began to look for a new mound. Soon he found one. Flowers only slightly wilted were strewn over it. Joker Joe Seaver sank to his knees beside it, there in the gathering dusk, and in a shaken voice cried out for forgiveness for his sin.

And then the erstwhile joker became aware that somebody was approaching him slowly from behind. He sprang erect, expecting to see either Dink Hanson or the company’s doctor, and saw instead— his Annie Belle.

“Annie, is it you?” he cried. “Is it you, Annie?”

“Shorely, Joe,” smiled his wife. “Shorely. One o’ the Shady Creek Morelands was buried here today, Joe, and I walked a little piece with ’em as they went back.”

She caught his hand in hers and went on:

“I told Dink about yore jokin’ wi’ me, and axed him and Doc Hoskins to give you a dose o’ yore own medicine, but I told them not to hurt ye in any way; did they? Ef they

hurt ye, honey, I'll never even speak to 'em any more."

Joker Joe's two arms reached for her and they got her.

"No, Annie Belle," he answered, and

with deep conviction, "they never done anything that I didn't deserve. They was plum nice about it. They never treated me bad in any way."

