

Killer's Joke

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

For nine years Hite Gregg planned this vengeful murder—to be accompanied by a cruel joke which only mountaineers could understand

HE was a big man, hawk-eyed, with a hard, straight line for a mouth, and he wore clothing that was very good. Mercilessly he drove the weary horse beneath him along the stony mountain trail. The sun was down when he reached the thickly-wooded valley that lay between Ripshin Bald and Smoky Thunder. Soon an ancient log cabin loomed up ahead, and in the doorway a little and lone, scraggly-bearded old man stood watching.

"Howdy," he said as the horse stopped within two rods of him.

The newcomer did not return the greeting. He dismounted and tossed the rein over a gateless gatepost. "Got anything to eat?"

"Nary a bite," said the oldster. "I air mighty pore, and they air times when I haf to go withouten a meal. Like now."

He backed into the single small room as the other advanced. Each dropped into a crude chair. The younger man—in his early thirties, he was—studied his host through slitted eyelids. The host squirmed uneasily as he noted the butt of a revolver under the newcomer's coat.

"I—I air Jim Lippert," he stammered. "Folks calls me 'Old Fuzzy.'"

"Old Fuzzy; eh?" absent-mindedly. The hawk eyes were boring. "Do you know anybody named Gregg hereabouts?"

Lippert blinked. "I did, yeuh. Knowed 'em all. Plum' daredevils, the men of 'em war. Every one of 'em had kilt somebody, and didn't do hit in any ord'nary way,



nuther. Fer instance, Sam Gregg plugged Ab Davy's gun up with lead, and let Ab blow his own head off when he shot at a squirrel. And Stringer Gregg put rock salt in with the buckshot when he cut down on Jaydee Mullins, so's it would hurt wuss, and 'en told him jokes whilst he died. Sam and Stringer war both hung at Maysville. Ain't but one Gregg a-livin' now. His name air Hite. He—"

"And where is Hite?"

"Went to the penitency fer life, nine year ago," Lippert answered. "One man stuck the jury, or he'd 'a' been hung too. He—"

"About my build, wasn't he?" the visitor interrupted.

"No. Hite war tall and skinny, young beard and mustache; not broad like you, and not smooth-faced like you, and he talked mountain talk like me. Mebbe he wouldn't been ketched, wasn't fer a lumber-jack—woods boss now—named Hoss Creek Bill Elmore. Not Bays Mountain Bill Elmore. Hoss Creek Bill. Hite jumped him for his pay-day money, and Bill grabbed him and helt him fer the sheriff. They'd allus hated each other. And 'en, both of 'em had wanted Beezie Anson, purtiest gyurl anywhar. And so, when the sheriff tuck Hite off, Hite swore by his mammy's grave he'd come back some day and kill Hoss Creek Bill."

"Elmore marry the girl?"

Lippert nodded billygoat fashion. "Yeuh, they married. Live at the old Tom Elmore place on Bad Axe Creek, 'bouten a mile from here."

"Don't lie to me, old man. Are you any kin o' the Greggs?"

Promptly Lippert confessed: "Blood cousin, yeuh. Why?"

The other rose laughing a flinty laugh. "Well, I passed the test in fine shape. If my own kin didn't know me, other people won't. I'm Hite Gregg, Cousin Fuzzy. It took me nine years to think up a way to get out of prison so that I could come back here and kill Bill Elmore!"

The little old mountaineer was thunder-struck. But he needn't have been. Hite

Gregg wore no young beard and mustache now, and he wasn't sunburned, and he had taken on more than thirty pounds weight, and in prison he'd learned to speak fair English. This notwithstanding, he was still a killer Gregg.

"You're blood kin of mine," he went on, "and you can't do anything, or tell anything, against me."

The oldest law of the mountains, that was, and a law that may not be broken. Old Fuzzy Lippert nodded. He said then: "Whar'd you git them good clo'es at, Hite, and that gun you air a-totin', and the saddled hoss out thar?"

Hite's grin was as hard as his laughter of a minute or so before.

"Oh, I picked 'em up on the way back here. Well, Cousin Fuzzy, I'd better be going, or I won't be in time for supper at Horse Creek Bill's. You see, I've just decided to go Sam and Stringer one better. Horse Creek and Beezie won't know me, if you didn't, and I'll eat with 'em before I shoot!"

Lippert had known the Ripshin Mountain Greggs very well, indeed, but he was aghast at this. He liked the two Elmores. They'd been kind to him. He cursed the old blood law under his breath.

"Wait—" he began, as his cousin stepped through the doorway and into the twilight. "Ef I war you, i-god, I—I wouldn't do that!"

There was no response. The beat of weary hoofs filled his ears, died away. The last of the killer Greggs was gone.

WHEN Hite hallooed at the gate before the rambling old hewn-log house that was home to Elmore and his wife, dusk was falling. Horse Creek Bill came to the door.

"Good evening," very glibly said Hite. "My name is Jones, A. P. Jones. I'm on my way to Maysville, and I've got sort of mixed up in the trails. Could you—er—give me supper, and then set me on the right road?"

Bill Elmore—tall and lean and bronzed—hurried down to the gate.

"Why, shore, Mr. Jones," he drawled. "We never turn a stranger away. Better spend the night with us though, and go on to town tomorr'. We got a comp'ny bedroom. Tie yore hoss to one o' them palin's, and come on in. We was jest ready to set down to supper. After we've e't, we'll put the hoss up and feed him. I'm Bill Elmore. Not Bays Mountain Bill, Hoss Creek Bill."

"Certainly glad to meet you." Gregg was on the ground now. "I've been looking through the mountains for coal prospects, Mr. Elmore."

Together they moved toward the house. "Don't think you'll find any coal, Mr. Jones," Elmore said. "All timber country, this is. Oak and poplar, mostly."

Evidently he had just come in from the lumber camp a mile distant, for he still had on his broad black hat. As he entered the lighted dining room he took it off. Gregg likewise removed his headgear. She who had been Beezie Anson was thirty now, half buxom, and pretty as of yore. She stood at the head of the dining table, hospitably beaming. Hite Gregg was conscious of a tightening of the organ in his chest that served as a heart. Proudly Horse Creek introduced his wife. The two men then sat down on opposite sides of the table. Their hats they had dropped to the floor near their chairs, mountaineer fashion.

"Ef we had only knowed you was a-comin', Mr. Jones," Beezie said, "we'd 'a' killed a couple young chickens."

"Why, you've got plenty, Mrs. Elmore, plenty," Gregg said. Inwardly he rejoiced. What a perfect hell of a joke this was! It would be going Sam and Stringer one better, surely. "I don't—er—see any children. You haven't any children?"

"Two," answered Horse Creek. "A boy and a girl. Little Beezie and Little Bill. Old Grandsir Anson, my wife's pappy, he's so crazy about 'em that he keeps 'em at his house half o' the time! Beezie, honey, you don't need to wait on the table. Set right down and eat with us. They's lots o' room."

"No, Bill, I reckon I'd better—"

She broke off short as she noted that the

visitor was staring hard toward the doorway that led into the unlighted living room. Standing there was a tall and grizzled man in blue serge, with his right hand on the butt of a holstered Colt Police .38 revolver.

"Why, hello, Sheriff!" smilingly cried Horse Creek Bill. "You're jest in time for supper. Meet Mr. Jones here—city man prospectin' for coal. Sheriff John Ford, Mr. Jones. Set down here aside o' me, John. Beezie, fix him a plate, honey; won't you?"

He wondered at Ford's stealing in like that. At once the officer explained. "The horse at the gate, I couldn't figure out whose it was. Well, I've got some news for you that might be bad, Horse Creek. Hite Gregg escaped the pen, and it's likely he headed back here. I reckon you understand."

"Who is Hite Gregg?" casually inquired Hite Gregg.

Ford had stepped quickly to the dining-room window and drawn the shade all the way down. He sank, his hat in his lap, into a chair beside Elmore's.

"Gregg, Mr. Jones," he answered, "is the last of a bunch of mountain men who were born to kill. It was in them exactly as poison is in a rattlesnake. Beezie, I brought along sandwiches from town, and all I want is coffee."

"I certainly hope you get your man, Sheriff," Gregg said.

INWARDLY he winked at himself, so to speak. This really was a perfect hell of a joke. The presence of the sheriff—not the one who had arrested him nine years before—only made the joke greater. He wished that Sam and Stringer could know! When he was ready for the climax, he would shoot Elmore with one hand, knock the lamp off the table with the other, and be gone before the officer could collect his wits.

Ford took his coffee black, nodded thanks to the woman, and sipped the hot liquid with gusto. Gregg, who had been inordinately hungry, was bolting his food now. On his wife's account, Elmore steered

the conversation into pleasant channels. The lumber company, he said, was to make him a camp superintendent within a month or so; hundred and sixty a month; he meant to repair the old house, get Beezie some nice new furniture, buy toys for Little Bill and a big doll for Little Beezie.

Suddenly he put down his knife and fork, and reached sidewise to the floor for his broad hat. "We-ell, I reckon I've had enough supper; and mebbe I better go out and look after them hosses."

Gregg, also, had finished. His eyes were filled with the old murder lust. His right hand was stealing under his coat.

"I want you to know who's doing this, Horse Creek, I'm—"

There was a shattering roar, acrid powder smoke, the sickening thump of a man's body on the floor. Beezie cried out. A strong arm encircled her waist, swept her into the living room darkness. The sheriff was on his feet, staring. It had been a matter of instinct for him to snap a hand to his holster. He almost shouted: "What did you shoot Jones for, Horse Creek?"

"Jones—" Elmore's lips seemed stiff—"it's Hite Gregg. See the gun there in his hand? Dead, but still hangin' on to it!"

He caught up the gun, went on: "John,

he fooled all o' us but my wife. I seen her go death white. She said words to me using her lips without any sound. '*That's Hite Gregg!*' she said to me. Beezie—stay where you are—how did you know it was him, Beezie?"

From the living room darkness came the woman's shaken voice: "I'd been wonderin' about one thing. The city men which has been here, they never dropped their hats on the floor by their chairs when they set down to eat; always hung 'em somewhere, or held 'em in their laps. I kept thinkin' about him, s'posed to be a city man, and talkin' like one, puttin' his hat on the floor like you. And then—right at the last—I seen cave-black killer hate in his eyes, and it—it come to me like lightnin', who he was."

"God love you, honey," Elmore said. "Here, Sheriff, is yore gun. I snuck it out o' yore holster when I bent down for my hat. I'm shore Hite would 'a' seen the gun and beat me to the trigger, ef I hadn't—"

"I get you," Ford cut in. "You shot through your hat! He meant to eat with you, and then kill you. Devil of a joke—on Gregg. Take hold there, Horse Creek, and let's carry this dead rattlesnake out of the house."

THE END

Geographical Oddities in the Americas

IF someone asked you whether Reno or Los Angeles was farther west, you would probably say, "Why, Los Angeles is surely farther west than Reno, Nevada!" But it isn't. Look again at the atlas and note the sweeping incurve of the California coast. Reno is about a hundred miles closer to Asia than is Los Angeles.

And then again—Find Cleveland, Ohio, on the map. Would you believe it is seven miles farther east than Jacksonville, Florida? Yet it is.

To reach the nearest part of Canada, from Detroit, Michigan, one must travel due south! A bend in the Detroit River accounts for this peculiarity.

Of course you know that the sun rises in the Pacific and sinks in the Atlantic, down in the Canal Zone; and ships travel from west to east when passing from the Atlantic to the Pacific!

At Arica, in Chile, the Pacific shore line lies *almost as far east* as Portland, Maine! Thus the Pacific Ocean is east of New York in one spot upon the Western Hemisphere.

—Betty Wood McNabb.