

The Joy of Living

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"CLOSE CALL, PARTNER!"

SYNOPSIS.—Dusting the prospect of a month's visit to her austere aunt, Lady Erythea Lamb, at Jervaulx abbey, and her cousin, Alexander Lamb, and her vivacious daughter of the Very Reverend Viscount Scroope, wanders into the park, there encountering a strange youth, He laughingly introduces himself as "Billy," American. The two ride on his motorcycle, the "Flying Sphinx," and part. With Georgina, Alexander's cousin, Almee sets out for Jervaulx. She decides that Georgina shall impersonate her at Jervaulx, while she goes on a holiday. Georgina's horrified protest is unavailing. Almee again meets "Billy." He tells her his name is Spencer, and she gives her as Amy Snooks, at present "out of a job." Billy offers to take her into partnership in selling the Sphinx. In a spirit of madcap adventure, she accepts. The two proceed to the town of Stanhoe, taking separate lodgings in ivy cottages. That night Almee visits Georgina and learns that the deception has not been discovered. She compels Georgina to continue the subterfuge. On a trial spin, with Billy, Almee almost collides with a carriage in which are her aunt, Georgina and Alexander. The pair escape unrecognized. Georgina learns that Lord Scroope is coming to visit Lady Erythea and is in hopeless bewilderment. While Almee is secretly visiting Georgina at Jervaulx, the place is burglarized. Almee escapes.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

"But when I reached the open there was no one to be seen," pursued the butler, whose throat ached with the effort to make his mistress hear; "there was, however, a dim light, a mere glow, in one of the windows; I shouted, asking whose it was—"

"Which window?" asked Mr. Lamb sharply.

"I am unable to say for certain—either her ladyship's or Miss Scroope's, which is next to it. Perhaps, if we went out—"

Lady Erythea immediately led the way through the front entrance. "There is a light full on in one of the rooms now!" said Alexander. "It is Almee's room," said Lady Erythea. Like a thunderbolt she swept upstairs and beat upon the door of her niece.

"Almee! Open the door. Why is your light on?"

"I—I'm so frightened, aunt!" cried a trembling voice. "I dare not be in the dark—I dare not."

"I cannot hear you!" said Lady Erythea.

"Have they caught the thieves?" screamed the voice tragically.

"Caught them?" snorted Lady Erythea, shaking the doorhandle. "Is it



"There Was No One to Be Seen," Pursued the Butler.

likely a mob of mental deficients could catch anybody? No!"

"Thank heaven!" said Georgina with an explosive gasp.

Lady Erythea started.

"Er! What are you talking about! Will you open the door or not!"

"I'm frightened, aunt! I—I—I!" Georgina's voice rose to a shrill whoop.

CHAPTER IX

"Marvelous!"

Lady Erythea recoiled. There were, after all, enough hysterics in the house already. Evidently nothing was to be learned from her niece.

"Go back to your bed and don't be silly. There is no danger," snapped Lady Erythea. The sharp whirr of a motor on the drive below drew her attention, and she hastened downstairs.

The car drew up at the entrance with a jerk and ejected three policemen; a constable, a sergeant and Inspector Panke of Stanhoe, a man of enormous energy for his bulk, with thick black eyebrows and a singularly bitter expression. He ran up the steps, but before he could open his mouth Lady Erythea forestalled him.

"You are wasting your time here! Go at once in chase of a motorcycle that got away ten minutes ago by the Stanhoe road!"

spector almost joyously, as one who seems his theories confirmed. "Sergeant, get after them at once in the car—take Polson with you. As we didn't meet them they must have taken the branch line at the crossroads—away with you, man—quick!"

"I shall consider no reward too great, if my emeralds are recovered!" exclaimed Lady Erythea, as the car drove away.

"Do you think your men will be successful, Inspector? My butler allowed the malefactor to slip through his fingers in the most futuristic manner. Can you—"

"One moment!" interrupted the inspector. "The thieves were seen then, by your ladyship's servants! Was one of them a woman?"

"He had to bawl the question into Lady Erythea's ear-trumpet, which Alexander brought. When she understood, Lady Erythea's eyes flashed fiercely.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "a young woman. You suspected a woman then—before you came here?"

"I do more than suspect, my lady," said Inspector Panke grimly. "I know!"

"Who was this woman, Inspector, and when do you propose to apprehend her? We have a piece of the creature's skirt!"

"Hah! let me see it at once!" said the inspector, his eyes lighting up. It was brought to him and its capture explained. Inspector Panke examined the yard of cloth, tried its strength, rubbed it, held it up to the light, peered keenly at the torn edges.

"Good!" he said under his breath, and turned upon Mr. Lamb so sharply that that gentleman jumped. "Your telephone, sir—where is it?"

"Who is the abominable creature?" exclaimed Lady Erythea. "And why is she at large, a scourge upon the country, breaking into—"

"She won't scourge it much longer," said the inspector grimly. "I'll very soon give your ladyship news of her—I wait the telephone, quick!"

"This way," said Mr. Lamb, and led him to the call-room. Inspector Panke remained at the instrument a considerable time. He emerged triumphant.

"If they get away now—well, may I never handle another case," he said quietly to Mr. Lamb. "I can't answer questions at present, sir; I've got to get busy. If I might suggest that you induce her ladyship to retire, and come round with me yourself—it hampered me a bit, that ear-trumpet, and we've got to be quick—you can explain to her afterward."

Alexander was successful in persuading his aunt to retire from the field, though she went breathing threats of vengeance, and mourning aloud for the emeralds. Inspector Panke made a rapid examination of the safe, the wall beneath Lady Erythea's window, and the ground outside. He took a full description of the missing jewels, and briskly questioned the servants.

"I've only time to say this, sir, before I go," he said, turning to Mr. Lamb. "I recognize the work of Jack the Climber in this case, as plainly as if they'd left the name written on the wall! It was him and Calamity Kate. I thought for a moment it might be Bender Williams, who was released from Portland last month. But it's undoubtedly Jack's job. For some months past a series of daring burglaries have occurred at country houses in various parts of England, and, so far, I'm bound to say they've beaten us; no arrest has been made. The methods of the thieves are so similar in each case, that it is clear to an expert all these jobs were done by the same person—or, rather, two persons, a man and a woman. The man, besides being as smart a hand at cracking a safe as ever lived, seems to have the training of a steeplejack as well. He can climb anything that a fly could get a foothold on; in fact, he's known as the Climber.

"The woman, if anything, is more dangerous than the man. All that's known of them is that they're probably foreigners—some say Americans—and that they use a motorcycle when they're on the job.

"Briefly, what happened here is this: The man got in through Lady Erythea's window. There's the marks of him on the wall. He might have got in still easier by the next one, where the veranda is. But he went in through her ladyship's bedroom."

Mr. Lamb's eyes met those of the inspector; the same thought passed between them; whatever might be said of Jack the Climber's moral character, he was a brave man.

"And so to her anteroom, and opened the safe without waking her—of course, she's pretty deaf. The burglar-alarm didn't go till he'd done it, and for that matter all these precautions of her ladyship's are simply bunco; the house is an easy job for a cracksmen. Jack got away by the same road he came, and the only thing that puzzles me is why Kate had to bolt for it downstairs. It isn't usual for her to be in the house at all—we believe her job is helping her partner up and watch-keeping outside.

"However, there it is. And this bit of blue cloth, sir," concluded Inspector Panke, holding it up, "is going to put Calamity Kate in my hands."

He folded the torn fragment of cloth, put it in his pocket, and moved briskly to the door. "Goodnight, sir! Before very long I'll show you the rest of this skirt—and its owner!"

CHAPTER X

Action and More.

Billy Spencer, sitting in his austere furnished bedroom, looked unusually thoughtful. The night was still young, but his candle was not lit. The whole house, indeed, was in darkness.



There Were Five Little Shoe Prints Visible.

He sat on the window sill and stared out into the night. At last he wandered back to the bedside, his hands thrust in his pockets.

"The partner," he said pensively, "has got something on her mind. A fellow doesn't need any X-rays to see that."

His lips curled down at the corners. "I'd give a lot to know what it is. I hate to seem inquisitive. But I'd hate a lot worse to have anything happen to the partner. An' I can sure smell trouble coming. She doesn't fear man or devil. But that isn't always going to help a girl. There's times when it's more useful to call up a husky with big feet—like me.

"She'd sure be mad if she thought I was interfering. And she can get mad—the partner. Gee! but she's great! The dinkiest thing that ever happened. But I don't like the way things are framing."

He stood for a while, as if listening; then sighed and lay down on the bed, fully dressed. In twenty seconds he was asleep, breathing regularly and easily.

It was a doglike sleep, of which some men hold the faculty, and very doglike was the manner in which Billy roused himself some hours later. In a moment he was broad awake, and swinging his legs off the bed, sat listening with cocked ears. He moved swiftly to the window and peered out.

There was nothing to be seen. Billy remained where he was for some seconds, all his senses alert. Then, with a gesture of decision, he snatched up his cap, heaved himself out of the window, and climbed down the trellis.

He came silently under Almee's bedroom window, glanced up at the open casement, took a little nickel torch from his vest pocket, and bent down. Shading the glow with his hand, he examined the soft soil beneath the window. There were five unmistakable neat little shoe-prints visible; the first pair deep and pointing inwards to the wall, the others leading outwards.

Billy at once ran noiselessly round to the garden gate and peered up and down the lane. No one visible. He returned quickly, got a rake from the shed, and carefully raked over the footprints; also those beneath his own window. Then he made for the gate, and, after a moment's thought, unlocked the shed where the Flying Sphinx reposed. He wheeled the cycle out, freeing the engine, and tipped softly down the path with it.

Not till he was clear of the lane and well out on the high road did Billy start the Sphinx, and then only at a very gentle pace. At an easy seven miles an hour he ambled along the road, heading for Jervaulx abbey.

It would have surprised Almee Scroope considerably had she guessed for one moment how far Billy was abreast of affairs. The carefree, insouciant Billy, who seemed to live for nothing but the Sphinx, was infinitely more wide-awake than people gave him credit for. The cool blue eyes missed very little; the brain behind them was able to connect facts together shrewdly.

Almee had not the faintest suspicion that anybody at Ivy cottage knew she had made an unconventional exit by the window the night before. Billy, however, was perfectly well aware of the fact. Early that same morning, before setting off for Syderford, he had observed the footprints beneath her window, which, to a keen eye, told plainly that Almee had dropped from the trellis, and later on had regained her room by the same path.

Clearly the partner had made a midnight excursion for a very definite object; people do not roam the countryside in the small hours for nothing.

The incident of the carriage on the Stanhoe road puzzled Billy; he had mentioned the carriage casually to Mrs. Sunning—saying nothing about the collision—and learned that it could belong to none other than Lady Erythea of Jervaulx abbey. He was told a good deal about that establishment. It was easier to start Mrs. Sunning talking than to stop her.

Obviously, Amy had something to fear from Jervaulx; something that bound her to secrecy, and led her to run risks. It annoyed Billy that she should have anything to fear whatever.

"Sometimes," said Billy to himself, as the lodge gates of Jervaulx came in sight, "a bunch of filly with the spring blood in her will get doin' stunts an' gallies among the gopher holes. When they do that they're liable to fall an' break a cannon-bone. It's the same with her. If she doesn't want me, why she doesn't. But if she does, I'm going to be right there."

He dismounted some little distance short of the park entrance. The dark pile of the abbey was visible, a quarter of a mile across the grasslands.

Billy paused and reflected. The journey could be nothing more than a scouting expedition. He wished very much that he had been closer on Almee's tracks.

Just then he observed a light flash out in one of the abbey windows. Faint, tintinnabulatory sounds were borne to him upon the night breeze—the clanging of a bell.

He watched the house with alert and thoughtful eyes. In a few moments two dim figures became visible, moving swiftly. An imaginative on-looker might have thought them to be goblins, gambling across the sward. But they kept an uncommonly straight line, crossing the park and heading for a point a few hundred yards to Billy's right. Two people—running swiftly.

Billy followed them with his eyes. The foremost was long-limbed, scuffling along with giant strides. The other, close behind, moved no less swiftly, but it was a figure of vague outlines, apparently wearing a cloak or dust-coat. They vanished from sight against the park fence where the lane turned.

"If that ain't a hold-up," said Billy, starting away from the fence, "there never was one yet!"

He heard the cough and splutter of a starting motorcycle under tall trees far up the lane. For one moment he listened, then made a dash for the Sphinx.

"A get-away!" said Billy. "My job!" He threw his leg over the Sphinx and whirled off round the corner. He lifted his chin and gave a joyous laugh, like the bay of a hound. The lust of the hunter was in his blood.

The rider ahead, already aware that he was being chased, lost out his machine at breakneck speed. The ray from Billy's lamp showed him a man crouching low between the handle-bars, his arms spread like the wings of a bat. On the pillion behind crouched a small, muffled figure.

"Give up!" shouted Billy, as he overtook them. "You can't make it. I've got you!"

A hand stretched out from the figure on the pillion, and emitted a barking flash of fire. It dazzled Billy for the moment. Something zipped through his hair; automatically his left hand tightened on the valve-lifter and the Sphinx slowed, allowing the other cycle to shoot ahead.

Billy made a lurid remark, and at once increased speed again to close with the fugitives. Right ahead the lane forked on to the main road, and thither the driver of the other cycle was obviously heading. But the lights of a car were in sight, approaching rapidly on the road. The rider of the cycle had evidently no ambition to meet it; at the last moment he swerved left and continued along the narrow lane.

Billy laughed aloud.

"The guy's cornered himself!" he thought. "He's taken the blind alley. Me for him!"

The lane was very rutty and uneven. The cycle ahead had vanished round a bend; Billy, shutting off his engine, swung round it immediately afterward. As he did so he heard a crash. The driver of the other cycle, realizing too late that he was in a cul-de-sac, had swerved, braked violently, and came thoroughly to grief.

Billy sprang from the Sphinx, letting her fall on her side with the headlight still glowing. The other cycle lay prostrate; a small heap was huddled beside it on the grass.

The taller man, the driver, was just staggering to his feet when Billy ran at him. The cyclist whipped out a repeating pistol.

A gun, at night, and in the hands of a shaken man, is much less certain

than a fist with six feet of activity behind it. Billy's left dashed the pistol hand aside, the bullet spat impotently into the air, and his right came with a terrific upper-cut beneath the man's chin, lifting him off his feet to fall inert.

As he came down, something skipped and rolled away from him along the grass, in the ray of the Sphinx's headlight. With the swift instinct for loot Billy pounced upon it—a sumptuous looking little case of leather, with a clasp. Billy thrust it in his pocket and turned to the fallen man, who lay with closed eyes and his head moving faintly from side to side.

"Mighty slow with a gun," said Billy, stooping over him. "I'm going over you for the rest of the goods, Bud."

A moan from the other malefactor, lying by the fallen cycle, interrupted him. So pathetic and treble a moan was it that Billy started and jerked himself upright, staring.

"Lordy!" he gasped, with remorse and concern. "It's a woman!"

The discovery was disconcerting enough. But a thought shot through his brain that nearly paralyzed Billy. What woman was it?

He hurried to her side. She had already raised herself on one hand and seemed trying feebly to get up. Billy stooped over her.

"Much hurt?" he stammered. "Here—"

At that moment the fallen driver recovered and stirred. Billy turned his head toward him, with a quick instinct—the danger lay closer at hand.

The woman's hand was grasping a stone, and, as Billy turned, she brought her arm round with a sweep, swift as a striking snake. The chunk of rock crashed full on the side of Billy's head. He fell as an ox falls, and lay still.

The woman staggered to her feet and ran to her prostrate companion.

"He's got his!" she panted. "You hurt, Jake?"

She helped the man to rise. He stood dazedly for a moment; the spinal jar from a knock-out under the point of the chin is terrific, but evanescent.

"Look lively an' beat it!" gasped the woman, hauling the motorcycle upright with surprising ease. "See if the bulgine'll run—we'll have the cops here next!"

"Got to settle with him!" said the man thickly, glancing at the prostrate Billy.

"He's all in, I tell you. Get her going!"

The man wrenched the motorcycle round, and fumbled at the feed and controls with nervous fingers. While he did so the woman snatched up another stone, and, running to the Sphinx, hammered on the engine and the levers. She had dealt three or four lustrous strokes when the other motorcycle came spluttering and wobbling past her. The woman ran to it and swung herself up defly behind.

"Let her out. We'll clear yet!"

The motorcycle, coughing and missing fire badly, trundled back down the lane the way it had come. Jack the



He Fell as an Ox Falls.

Climber leaned to the handle-bars, Calamity Kate, her arms tight round him, settled herself on the pillion. Together they whirled away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XI

Confession.

It was very dark and very quiet at the lane's end when Billy at last stirred, and, after an interval of slowly returning consciousness, managed to raise himself dizzily to a sitting position.

He pressed his hands to the side of his head and remained for awhile motionless, conscious of a damp warmth under his left palm. His eyes dwelt on a white, chalky stone, as big as a doubled fist, that lay on the grass beside him. Events began to reconnect themselves in a brain that still buzzed faintly.

"A granite skull," murmured Billy, not without a touch of pride, "isn't altogether a disadvantage in an argument."

He looked about him thoughtfully. Not far away something gleamed in a rut—a small repeating pistol. His late opponents had evidently left in too much of a hurry to take an inventory of their effects.

"She must have dropped that when

the machine crashed," thought Billy. "She loosed it at me when I was riding up. Lucky for me she hadn't it just now. Some girl!"

He heaved himself to his feet unsteadily, made for a ditch where there was a glitter of water, and bathed the tender side of his head. The water revived him; save for a cut under his hair, no serious damage was done, though the blow might easily have cracked a weaker skull.

"I don't see that I shine much, over this job," said Billy despondently; "they sure handed it to me. Got right under my guard. Never thought of a woman sharing in a hold-up; an' yet I guess it's been done before."

He picked up the pistol, was about to pocket it, but altered his mind and flung it in the ditch. The other automatic was nowhere to be seen. Billy walked towards the Sphinx, the headlamp of which was now in darkness. His hand swung against a large lump projecting from the side of his coat. He halted and dragged out the leather case. Billy had forgotten its existence.

"Why, here's something saved from the wreck!" he exclaimed. "They couldn't have seen me get it!"

He dropped on one knee, opened the case, and switched the little electric torch over it.

Billy gave a stifled gasp. On a bed of cream silk velvet reposed a necklace of amethysts, ending in a loop of nine superb emeralds that shone with changing green fires under the torch's glow. Billy was not an expert in gems, but he guessed that these were such as a prince might be proud to own.

"This is the darndest game I ever was up against," he said dazedly, returning the case carefully to his pocket.

He made a rapid examination of the Sphinx, and at once became aware of Calamity Kate's handiwork. In spite of the best intentions, however, that enterprising lady had overestimated the vulnerability both of Billy's skull and his motorcycle. She had done some damage, but had missed the more vital parts of the Sphinx. After ten minutes' work Billy's capable hands restored the machine to fair running order, and he rode away down the lane. Both lamps were out of action.

Any further pursuit of the thieves he put aside as a useless proposition. He had a vague idea that they had gone hours ago; in fact, however, he had not been unconscious more than a few minutes.

"There's only one thing to do," said Billy, "an' that's—"

A disconcerting thought flashed through his mind. The bumping of the jewel-case against his side suggested it.

"Gee!" he murmured, "I'm Little Boy Blue, all right. But if I was to run against the cops now, it'd take a heap of explanation before they slugged me. My story'd look pretty thin. Jewel-case—motorbike—it only wants one item to complete the outfit!"

He turned on to the high road, rapidly resolving on a plan of action as he rode. It was a good plan, but a few moments later it was hopelessly upset again. He was, as it happened, nearer to Stanhoe than to Jervaulx abbey, and as he turned in the direction of the latter Billy became aware of someone running toward him along the road—a dark figure, with a peculiar moving gleam of whiteness about it. He stopped the Sphinx immediately and thrust out his feet to steady himself.

The dark figure checked in its stride, hesitated, and seemed about to bolt back again.

"Partner!" cried Billy in amazement. "Is that you?"

The reply was a wild gasp. Almee, breathless, muddy, with an appreciable breadth of white cambrie showing at the base of her skirt, rushed up to him and seized his arm.

"Billy! Oh, I'm so glad—I'm so glad!" she panted. "Billy, I—I'm in an awful mess! The absolute limit!"

"How! Why?"

"I was in a house—and it was burgled—gulped Almee, struggling for breath—"they thought it was me—and I scooted—they're chasing me."

It was not a vividly lucid explanation. But Billy's Intelligence department connected with it at once; it supplied the missing factors. Before he could answer, a pair of lights flashed into view far down the road, approaching at speed.

"Car!" exclaimed Almee, and with a note of panic—"Billy, suppose it's police? If so, they'll be looking for me!" She made a dash for the pillion of the Sphinx. "Get me out of this, Billy—start her quick!"

"Not on your life!" said Billy swiftly. "That's the last thing on earth for you now. Come with me."

He ran back fifty yards along the road to a field gate. In a few moments he had it open, thrust the Sphinx through, let her fall behind the hedge, and dragged Almee with him into the ditch. They had hardly gained that cover when the car swept by with a roar, showing a glimpse of police helmets scudding past the low rampart of thorn fence. The majesty of law and order, sweeping inexorably through the night. A rattle, a hoot and it was gone.

In the ditch there was painful silence. Billy mechanically felt his bulging pocket, glanced for a moment at the Sphinx, and then stared blankly at Almee.

"The idea is," continued Almee, "that I've lost my character."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)