The JOY of LIVING

By SIDNEY GOWING

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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Billy delivered this with a beautiful fluency into the ear-trumpet.

"I just ran in on them," pursued Billy, "for I didn't have to stop an' figure it out that an outfit traveling that way with lights out at one in the morning was up to any good. They were just picking themselves up when I arrived, and they went for me—"

"Was it a man and a woman?" exclaimed Mr. Lambe.

"You've hit it, sir."

"My dear aunt!" cried Alexander, "the inspector told me, after you retired, that he suspected a man and a woman, on a motorcycle, of being the thieves! They can be no other than those people who ran into us yesterday on the Syderford road—"

"Hold your tongue, Alexander," interrupted Lady Erythea impatiently, "and allow this amazing young man to continue!"

"There was some scrap," said Billy diffidently, "maybe if there'd been two men I'd have done better, but the lady hampered me, and somehow I took the count. They knocked me out, and got away. But they left this behind them," he pointed to the case of emeralds, "and it looks like they never knew they'd lost it. I don't know, madam, if there was anything else of yours they got. If so, I'm very sorry I didn't attach it, and rope the two thieves for you as well. But, with the pair of them, it was rather a roughhouse. I did my best."

There was a flush of admiration on Lady Erythea's high cheek-bones.

"Yes, there were other jewels stolen," she said, "but their value is the merest trifle compared to what you have restored to me. These emeralds are my most priceless family possession. They are historic—nothing could have recompensed me for the loss of them. Your conduct has been not only intelligent, but extraordinarily gallant. May I ask your name?"

"Spencer. William Spencer."

"Mr. Spencer, it is impossible for me to express my gratitude in words. I thank you most heartily for what you have done; it is fortunate for me the emeralds fell into such good hands. Let me say that I was about to offer a reward for information leading to the recovery of the jewels; a reward of—" Lady Erythea hesitated, and achieved an inward struggle—"one hundred pounds. But I must really ask you to accept a hundred and fifty."

Lady Erythea unlocked a desk, and produced a check-book. Billy flushed red.

"Madam," he said quietly, "the service I did you cost me nothing. I'm glad you have your jewels back. I'm a man who earns his living, but I don't accept gratuities. And people very scarcely ever offer them to me."

Lady Erythea turned somewhat pink in her turn. She slid the check-book aside.

"I beg your pardon," she said, with some embarrassment, mingled with relief and a touch almost of annoyance. "It was the least I could do. You will accept no recompense?"

"None, madam. Anyway not in money."

"You are not English, are you?"

"American. And a Westerner, at that."

"Ah! You have done me a great service. Is there nothing I can do for you?"

Before Billy could reply, Mr. Tarbeaux opened the door.

"M'lady, Inspector Panke—"

Mr. Tarbeaux's gaze fell on the emeralds. He was very human for a butler, and it took him a fraction of a second to recover himself.

"Inspector Panke urgently desires to see your ladyship at once."

"Show him in here," said Lady Erythea grimly.

Billy did not move an eyelid. It seemed to him that Mr. Lambe's solemn eyes were watching him rather intently. Inspector Panke appeared. It was a great day in the Lambe emeralds' history. The inspector was the fifth person in whom they caused intense emotion.

"Well, have you caught the thieves?" inquired Lady Erythea, acidly.

"No-no, my lady," stammered Inspector Panke, gazing at the necklace.

"Perhaps you had better enlist the services of Mr. Spencer," said her ladyship, with a wave of her hand toward Billy. "This young man has already found the emeralds and restored them to me."

"Then," said Panke, with a searching glance at Billy, "I should like a full account, at once, of how you came by the jewels."

"Sure," said Billy genially.

Mr. Lambe set chairs for them both. All four seated themselves; Lady Erythea, with an avid determination to keep abreast of affairs, held her ear-trumpet close to Billy and the policeman.

Billy repeated his tale with fuller detail this time, and described, not without a twinge of embarrassment, his downfall at the hands of Calamity Kate. Lady Erythea's lips tightened grimly, the description did not surprise her. The inspector had his book before him and made careful notes. At the conclusion he regarded Billy pensively, and with a touch of envy.

"It's a pity you didn't hang on to them, when you'd got them in hand," said Panke. "But, of course, we know what Calamity Kate is."

"Who?" echoed Billy.

Panke described briefly the popular names of the two thieves, and what little was known of them.

"And now, Mr. Spencer, I have some questions to put to you—for the information of the police. This happened between one and two o'clock. It is now seven. What became of you in the meantime?"

Billy turned to the light and allowed Panke to inspect the wound on the side of his head, only partially concealed by his hair.

"If you'd had that," said Billy, "I guess you'd be lyin' on the grass yonder now."

"A severe cut," said the inspector, impressed.

"And you lay unconscious there till daybreak?" exclaimed Lady Erythea, with intense sympathy.

"It might have been a week, for all I knew when I woke up. When I'd got my senses back, an' made up my mind what to do," said Billy calmly, "I came along here."

"Didn't it occur to you," said Panke, "that the right thing to do was to go to the police?"

"No. It occurred to me the first thing to do was to get the stuff straight back to its owner."

"And perfectly right, too!" said Lady Erythea sharply.

"How did you know," persisted Panke, "that the necklace belonged here?"

Billy turned over the necklace and pointed to the little gold-enamel pendant that bore the Lambe arms in a lozenge.



"A Severe Cut," Said the Inspector, Impressed.

"Those three sheepskins—" he began.

"Fleeces — fleeces, argent," murmured Mr. Lambe.

"—are the same brand as those on the shields over the lodge gates here, which I noticed as I came by. And the thieves were coming from this direction when I struck them."

"Mr. Spencer, not being a policeman, uses his common sense," interposed Lady Erythea with extreme aridity. "Are you suggesting that he stole emeralds worth a fortune, for the pleasure of returning them with thanks—besides wounding himself on the head?"

Mr. Panke heaved a heavy sigh.

"No, my lady, I am endeavoring to collect facts that may help in the tracing of the thieves." The inspector ran through his notes, detailing the information Billy had given him during the first part of the story. "Full name, William Spencer, on your way from Beechwell to Stanhoe railway station, intending to catch the 2:15 a. m. mail train to London, when you encountered the thieves about 1:30 a. m. Is that correct?"

"Precisely," said Billy, annealing the statements into his memory. It would not do to forget any of them. The thought of the work he was giving the Recording Angel caused him not a tremor. He was thinking only of Aimee, hiding in her cave behind the bramble bush. "Do you want me to come to the station house?"

"Not necessary," said the inspector, after a moment's hesitation, "but I want to know where you can be found immediately in case anything further transpires—and your testimony will be wanted if we apprehend the thieves." He avoided Lady Erythea's eye.

"Overseas club, London, will find me. I've quarters there."

The inspector made a note.

"What is your occupation?"

"Motor engineer."

"Engineer?" queried the inspector, glancing at his hands.

"Well, say motor mechanic," said Billy grinning, "and proud of it."

"Are you employed with any firm?"

"I am on my own at present."

Inspector Panke closed his note-book with a snap.

"I must return to my duties, your ladyship. I congratulate you on recovering the emeralds." He bowed gloomily to Mr. Lambe and darted at Billy a parting glance that said: "Young man, however little you desire to see me again, I shall find you when I want you. I am Inspector Panke."

The door closed behind him.

"It is a pleasure," said Lady Erythea grimly, "to reduce the self-esteem of that very fatuous person." She turned to Billy with increased interest. "You are, it seems, a motor mechanic. And out of employment. Would you care for a situation as chauffeur? I can offer you," said Lady Erythea, "four pounds a week, and all found."

Billy was submerged by two waves of emotion. The first was a strangled desire for laughter. The second, an instant determination to clutch at the offer, with its amazing possibilities and advantages that opened before him. Thought was a very fluid thing with Billy.

"Done!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Alexander Lambe coughed.

"Say, 'yes, my lady,'" he murmured.

"Yes, my lady!" announced Billy, into the ear-trumpet.

"Very good," said Lady Erythea with satisfaction. "I engage you. I must warn you," she added with sudden caution, "that I had to discharge my last chauffeur for dishonesty—an offense that in your case is obviously impossible—and also for one still more revolting; I found him philandering most indecorously with one of my maid-servants." She fixed Billy with her eye. "I trust you have no such propensity as that."

"I should," said Billy indignantly, "as soon think of drinking a gallon of petrol."

"Precisely," said Lady Erythea with approval. "Then I should like you to enter upon your duties today. Say this afternoon. There are quarters for you over the garage, and the uniforms of the man I discharged. You will only be required to go out once this evening. At five-thirty—" Lady Erythea checked herself. "But I forgot. You will require a day or two's rest. You have had a strenuous night, your head is injured—"

"That doesn't amount to a skeeter-bite, my lady," said Billy quickly. "My head's all right. I can be ready by this afternoon."

"Very well, if you are sure. It will be convenient. My coachman is away for the day. I believe the two motors are in order. Take the smaller one, the Panhard luggage-car, and meet the 5:30 train at Stanhoe. There will be a young woman on the train. She is coming here as parlor maid. Bring her and her boxes. You understand?"

"Sure—very good, my lady," said Billy. "What's her name?"

"The name is immaterial. She is for Jervaulx. It is curious," added Lady Erythea impatiently, "how my memory fails me. I forget the woman's name. Alexander, you remember I spoke to you of this matter? The girl from Scroope, that I engaged on the recommendation of your uncle—she was in his service. The daughter of one of his keepers—Lord Scroope gave her an exemplary character, she is coming on a fortnight's trial."

"Snooks was the name you told me," said Mr. Lambe.

"To be sure. The young person's name is Snooks," said Lady Erythea to Billy. "That will preclude all possibility of mistake. I regret, Spencer, that you would not allow me to recompense you, but I have no doubt that I have acquired an excellent chauffeur. And now—you will be glad of a bath and a meal."

She rang for the butler, and gave him an order. Mr. Tarbeaux and Billy departed in each other's company.

Alexander Lambe breathed heavily.

"My dear aunt," he said, "you are a law unto yourself, and I have known you do some remarkable things. But is it wise to engage as servant a man of whom you know nothing, without character or references?"

"Alexander," said his aunt, "you almost betray imbecility. What better references could I have than the restoration of the Lambe emeralds and the refusal of a reward, when the man could have made a fortune for himself without any risk of detection?"

Mr. Lambe was dumb.

"That abominable creature Boxall," said Lady Erythea, "had unexceptionable references, and was chauffeur eighteen months to the bishop of Latchester. You know what his record was here." She turned upon Alexander. "Do you, a shepherd of men, pretend to say that you think that young man anything but absolutely honest?"

"I observed him, and I am certain he is honest," said Alexander after a pause. "But—er—his manner is very peculiar."

"We must make allowances," proclaimed Lady Erythea, "for the independence of the American. In theory I have always believed it detestable. Actually I find it not unattractive."

CHAPTER XIV

The New Parlor Maid.

Aimee, sitting in the morning sunlight near the mouth of her burrow, heard a rustling among the bushes and at once dived back into shelter. Presently there was a soft whistle, which she answered. Mr. William Spencer parted the brambles very quietly and entered the cave.

"Billy!"

He clicked his heels together and touched his cap.

"Anything I can do for you, miss?" he said grinning. "Got a new job. Chauffeur to her ladyship. Four a week and all found."

"What!"

Billy sat down beside her and made his report. Aimee heard it, at first, with the air of Desdemona listening to Othello. Then she rolled on the sand in helpless spasms of laughter.

"How absolutely gorgeous," she panted, sitting up and wiping her eyes. "You've done splendidly. I wish I'd been there to hear you bluff the fat policeman. But—what's the good of the chauffeur's job, Billy? That will hamper you."

"Not a bit! It's great. I just jumped at it. You see, I've got a sure berth now, right close here, where I want to be. I'm your aunt's man. And she's some old girl, too—she isn't taking anything from anyone. You should have heard her handing it to the policeman. I'm solid—so far. And," added Billy, gleefully, "I've two automobiles in my charge. Not bad ones either. We can't use the Sphinx. But, if we want to shift you quick an' lively, you've the call on those two cars."

"I never thought of that! You're right, Billy."

"Of course there's danger still. It wasn't any good my giving a false name. That would have been fatal in the end. But there's the trouble that they knew me as Spencer, in Stanhoe. I'm going off right now to try an' put that straight," said Billy. "I can see a light. Yes, I believe I can get away with it. That inspector will be a nuisance, I'm afraid. But he's a fool, anyway."

Aimee looked at him admiringly.

"What a lot of whoppers you must have told, Billy. Did you mind?"

Billy put a twig between his white teeth and bit it in half thoughtfully.

"Where I come from, we hate a liar," he said. "But there's just one time when a man can lie, an' it's up to him to do it. Mind? I—I enjoyed it."

"But I don't see how you can do it so well, if you've had no practice."

"It's wonderful how you fall into it, when there's something worth doin' it for," said Billy simply. "Well. I must get back. I've got till the evenin, when I fetch a hired girl from the station. She's from down your way. Name," he added, grinning, "of Snooks. What d'you think of that, partner?"

"What?" cried Aimee. "It must be Amy Snooks—daughter of Dad's second keeper, who was killed in the war. I know her as well as I know—myself. I gave you her name when you asked me mine—it was the first I could think of. You say Aunt has engaged her!"

"Yes. On your father's recommendation."

"How beastly awkward! Directly she sees Georgie the game's up!"

"That's rotten," said Billy seriously; "we've got enough on our hands as it is. If she wasn't a woman, I'd spill the car and put her out of action for quite awhile, so she couldn't give you away. As it is, seems to me the only thing is for me to get hold of your cousin Georgina an' show her how to keep the Snooks girl quiet. I think it can be done, if Georgina has any sense."

"Yes, that might do. I don't think we need worry much about Amy Snooks, after all. I wish I could get a word with Amy myself. She'd do any blessed thing I told her—even if it was to throw herself into a furnace. I can manage Amy. You'll just have to do your best, though. But look here, Billy," said Aimee earnestly, "you haven't told me yet how you're going to pull me out of it all. It's getting a worse tangle every hour. What's the plan?"

"I'll be back here about seven this evening," said Billy seriously, "and by then I'll bring you good news—you trust me. Gee! why didn't you remind me?" he exclaimed with self-reproach, dragging a paper parcel from his pocket; "you must be starving."

"I had some chocolate from the Sphinx's pannier."

"Well, try this." Billy exposed some rashers of bacon between slices of bread, and a lukewarm sausage. "I wish it was something better. They gave me a meal at the abbey, and I pinched these for you. And here's your blue dust-cloak from Ivy cottage. Put that on. It'll cover the tear in your dress, in case anyone came across you. I'll try an' raise a new skirt for you. An' now I've got to slide out and get to work."

He rose quickly, and was gone before she could say a word. Aimee went to the cave's mouth and watched him out of sight.

(To be Continued)

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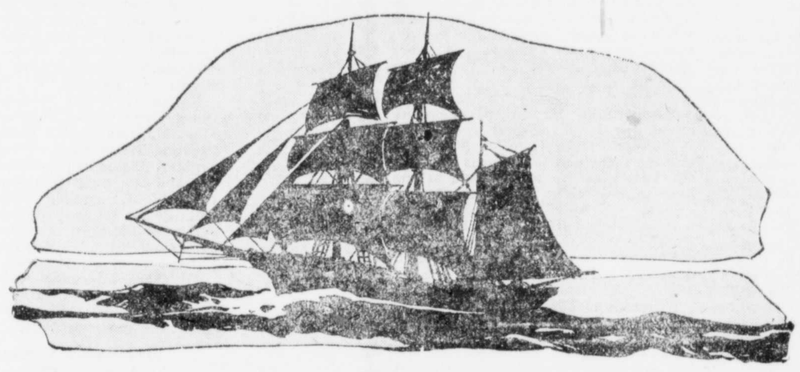
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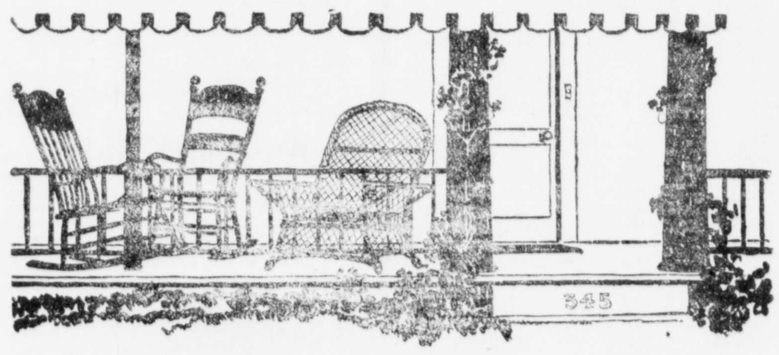


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