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The JOY of LIVING

By SIDNEY GOWING

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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"You Were Also in This Conspiracy."

"—n't go, Vicomte!" exclaimed Aimee. "Anyone who's a friend of mine is welcome here. You may as well be in at the death."

"If I can be of any service—" said Bertrand. He bowed courteously to Aimee's father. "Lord Scroope, I presume."

"You," said Lady Erythea to Bertrand, trembling with wrath, "were also in this conspiracy! You appear to know the whole story!"

"Oh, of course he knows it," said Aimee, wildly, "just as Billy knew it, and Georgina, and Diana, too. They all did their best for me—right from the beginning. I wasn't worth it—but they did."

"It seems," said Lady Erythea, gripping the back of a chair, "that everyone in my household knew all about this—except myself and my nephew! Who, through his position and his innocence, now finds himself—"

"I beg your pardon, Aunt," said Alexander, pallid but calm, "I, also, knew everything that was to be known—from the moment Aimee entered this house. I knew that Georgina—was Georgina. I am as culpable as any."

Lady Erythea stared at her nephew blankly. A curious expression came into her eyes. At last she seemed to detect in Alexander the one thing she had believed was lacking—the touch of the original Adam. But Lord Scroope's face hardened.

"You!" he said grimly. "You also knew the truth? The action of the others, I can understand. But—a Churchman cannot lend himself to such a conspiracy as this."

"Under correction, Lord Scroope," said de Jussac gently; "a gentleman cannot betray a woman's confidence without her consent."

Lord Scroope winced perceptibly. He turned to de Jussac and bowed.

"Am I receiving instruction from a layman?" he inquired.

"It is the last thing I would dare," replied Bertrand humbly. "It is I who seek instruction. Does not the Church respect the seal of the confessional?"

"I make no claim, and no excuses!" said Alexander suddenly. "I have only this to say. I loved Georgina Berners from the day I saw her. When I learned the real position I loved her more. Her loyalty and devotion only increased my esteem. She is the only woman living that I care for; I require you to remember that she is my promised wife. And nobody in this room," said Alexander hotly, "shall address one word of reproach to her!"

"Well done!" cried Aimee. "Alexander, you're a man. I'm proud of you, cousin!"

"Thank you, Aimee," said Alexander. "It is for me," said Lord Scroope sternly, "to apportion the blame. Georgina Berners is here under—"

He was interrupted by the volcanic arrival of Billy through the window, panting and eager, the tuft of hair on top of his head erect like the crest of a cockatoo.

"I've been looking for you everywhere!" he cried. "You—"

"Go out!" said Lady Erythea fiercely.

"Pardon me," said Billy, advancing, "but I guess my place is here. Whatever blame is, I take it. Lord Scroope, I know that what I've done is past apology, but—"

"Shut up, Billy!" exclaimed Aimee. "I've told them everything—I've said all there is to say. And," she added, under her breath, "for once I think I've made a better hand of it than you could."

Before anyone could reply, Georgina ...se, sobbing, and made a dive for the ...or.

"Let me go!" she said brokenly. "I ... to go away. I want to go—"

... glancing quickly from her to ... and Lord Scroope, turned and ...ut again through the window. ...oticed him. All eyes were on

... intervened—but it was ...a who, with an extraordi- ...ined movement, overtook ...ssing a supporting arm ... waist, she turned and ...ed company.

... you all," said Lady ...ice that compelled ... that is in danger I am mistress ...ve listened with an unexampled patience. Hold your tongue, Anthony! I have welcomed the alliance of Georgina with this family, and Alexander will have such a wife as I myself would have chosen for him. Georgina, your only fault is your devotion to the mad creature there, and for that I give you absolution. I require direction from no one—your marriage with my nephew shall take place as soon as possible."

"Aunt!" exclaimed Mr. Lambe, joyously, "I—"

"Do not interrupt me, Alexander!" said his aunt. She turned to Aimee.

"As for you," continued Lady Erythea, icily, "I really find myself in your debt. I can never be sufficiently thankful that you did not come here as my guest, and that Alexander was spared your authorized companionship! One shudders to reflect on the possibilities.

"You appear to have enlisted the services of everyone but me to shield your disreputable escapade, and to have enrolled many simple-minded persons in your defense. You may have deluded these men," said Lady Erythea, with a scornful wave of her hand towards the company, "but you do not delude me! I find in you no qualities but selfishness and deceit—and I am glad that your sojourn in my house has been confined to the servants' hall, though I dread to think what your influence may have been on my domestics, from whom I require honesty and decency."

Aimee, very white, suddenly broke into a flood of tears. The next moment Lord Scroope had his arm around her and held her to him.

"Not another word, Erythea!" he said sternly. "You have had provocation—but you have said enough and much more than enough. Gentlemen, I thank you for what you have done on my daughter's behalf. And you, too, Georgina. Come, Aimee, little girl. Let us go home."

He led her away; Aimee clung to her father, sobbing as she went. Before they reached the door it was opened quickly, admitting Billy, who closed it again. Over his arm was a long hooded driving cloak of Lady Erythea's, ravished from the lobby.

"Put this on!" he said to Aimee.

"Billy," she gulped, darting at it, "you think of everything."

In a moment the cloak covered the parlor maid's dress and the hood was drawn over her cap. Lord Scroope stared in surprise at Billy.

"I've told your chauffeur, sir," said Billy, "to bring the auto round to this side—I thought you would like to avoid the front and the servants."

As he spoke the big motor slid to a standstill on the drive opposite the windows.

"Mr. Spencer," said Lord Scroope,



Billy Stood to Attention.

looking at him judgingly, "I include you in my thanks."

Mr. Spencer bowed and passed out quickly through the window. He was holding the door of the car open when Aimee and her father got in. He snapped the door to, and, stepping to the front, spoke in an undertone to the chauffeur.

"Keep right away through the park here to the north gates," said Billy, pointing, "and drive like h—ll."

The bishop's chauffeur ... a slight start, and let in the clutch.

"Billy!" gasped Aimee, turning toward him as the motor slid by.

Billy stood to attention and gravely touched the peak of his cap. He watched the automobile disappear at a most unepiscopal pace down the back drive.

When it was out of sight, Billy walked very slowly to his quarters over the garage.

CHAPTER XXVII

Who's Who.

"We won't scold her any more today, Tony dear," said Lady Scroope, with the daintiest note of pleading in her voice, "will we?. This extremely naughty child. She has had a rough time."

"Yes," said Lord Scroope, heavily, "that is what I feel, Delicia. We—we must temper justice with mercy."

Aimee sat between her two stern parents on the lounge in the library at Scroope Towers. A night's rest had not restored the color to her cheeks. Her eyelashes were slightly wet. She smiled faintly.

"You dear people," said Aimee, stealing a hand into her mother's, while the other clasped the long white fingers of her sire, "you haven't scolded me at all. What you ought to do is to beat me. It's no use my trying to tell you how sorry I am. There aren't any words for it."

"Aimee dear," said Lady Scroope, stroking her hair, "try and look a little less tragic. This isn't like you. It's all over now."

"Is it?" said Aimee wistfully. "I am glad, mummie. I've told you both the story, all over and over. I've tried to make it clear. It's a fearful tangle, I know. You have both been so sweet about it."

"It is finished," said Lord Scroope gently. "I am so devoutly thankful, Aimee, to find you have come safely through the dangers which beset you at Jervaulx—what might have happened appals me to think of—that it is impossible to be harsh. And—and it distresses me to see you looking so unhappy. For the first time in your life. I can never remember to have seen you in such a mood."

Aimee stood up.

"The thing I want to know," she said, piteously, "is, what about Billy? You won't answer me. Mummie, you, I know, will understand. If I lose Billy, I don't care whether I live or die. That is all."

Lord Scroope passed his fingers through his snowy hair. Aimee's mother put an arm round her and led her out of the room.

"Go upstairs and rest for awhile, Baby," said Lady Scroope, gently. "You are very tired, and there has been talk enough."

In a few minutes Lady Scroope returned.

"This," said her husband, sadly, "is the most distressing aspect of the whole affair."

"I had a long talk with Aimee this morning," said Lady Scroope, "and it isn't a thing we can dismiss lightly, Tony. I know the child better than you do." She reflected. "This Bil—this Mr. Spencer appears to be rather remarkable."

"If we can trust Aimee's account," said Lord Scroope gloomily, "But—a young man picked up by the wayside," he added with a bewildered air, "My dear Delicia—!"

"He is not English, is he?"

"American, I understand. It seems curious," said Lord Scroope, pensively, "but I believe he is the first American I have met."

His wife laid a small white hand on his shoulder.

"Tony, darling," she said laughing, "you know very little of the world, but one thing at least you know. You saw this man. Is he—a gentleman?"

Lord Scroope paused.

"Whatever else he may not be, he is that."

"I rather gathered it from what I heard of him."

"But Delicia—"

The butler entered with a card on a tray. Lord Scroope inspected the card. It bore the name "Hiram B. Rivington," which conveyed nothing to Lord Scroope. Under it, in pencil, were the words, "About Mr. William Spencer."

"Is the bearer of this below?" asked Lord Scroope.

"Yes, m' lord. He wishes to see your lordship urgently."

Lady Scroope glanced at the card, and suppressed her curiosity nobly.

"I shall leave you to receive this visitor, Tony," she said. "I do not think Aimee ought to be left alone just now."

She retired. A very large, clean-shaven man with a rectangular jaw and thin, humorous lips, was ushered into the library. He was attired in roomy gray tweeds, his eye twinkled faintly, and there was something compelling about his presence.

"Lord Scroope?" he inquired, bowing courteously. "It's very good of you to receive a stranger. I thought that my nephew, William Spencer, would be here. He promised me to arrive about now. I guess it's something big that's delayed him."

"Is Mr. Spencer your nephew?" said Lord Scroope guardedly.

"That is so. You know him, I think."

"It is hardly the word. I know less than nothing of him, Mr. Rivington."

"Correct. He feels, and so do I, that a proper explanation is due to you, Lord Scroope. I don't know the whole story, but circumstances have impelled William, by no choice of his own, to break into the society of Eastshire county in a way that would probably be called unusual down here. He came to London and consulted me last night. He was very much distressed—which isn't usual with him. It's only fair to William that his credentials should be presented, and I think I'm the man to do it. I should like, Lord Scroope, to tell about Billy."

Lord Scroope stiffened. But there was an uncommon dignity in Mr. Rivington; there was also something remarkably likable about him. He appeared to have very strongly the Spencer gift of attraction.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Rivington. I will give my attention to what you have to say."

Mr. Rivington twinkled again, then became grave.

"I should have thought," he said, subsiding gently into an old bergere chair, "that it was enough for anyone to meet William to size him up. However, he is the son of my only sister, and of the late Lindon Spencer of Denver. Who was, on the whole, the finest man I ever knew in the course of a life that has been described as varied and comprehensive. And Billy is as good as his father. I wish you had met Lindon."

"I appreciate what you say," replied Lord Scroope. "I do not gather, however, what Mr. Spencer's occupation is."

"He has developed himself as a motor engineer."

"I know so little of mechanics—" began Lord Scroope.

"Mechanics," said Mr. Rivington, smiling, "are, of course, a matter of taste. They have an interest for me."

A light dawned suddenly on Lord Scroope.

"Is it possible," he said, "that you are the—the author as it were—of the Rivington motorcar?"

"That among other things," said the visitor pleasantly.

Lord Scroope looked bewildered. It was not possible, however ignorant one might be of mechanics, not to have heard of the Rivington automobile. Nor, however casual a reader of the secular press, could one avoid the echoes of the fame of that solid manipulator of millions, that human comet of progress, Hiram B. Rivington. The name on the pasteboard had not till now connected with Lord Scroope's mind.

He contemplated Mr. Rivington with wondering interest.

"Mr. Spencer," he said, "is indeed fortunate in his uncle."

"I would rather say that I'm fortunate in my nephew," replied Rivington. "Billy doesn't need an uncle. In my country we haven't much use for a young man whose only assets are his relatives. Billy has made good by his own efforts, sir. He is the inventor and proprietor of the Flying Sphinx motorcycle."

"An experimental machine, I understand. I hope, for Mr. Spencer's sake," said Lord Scroope, politely, "that it may prove—ah—successful."

Mr. Rivington smiled.

"The present model of the Sphinx ... though ... advance on the others, is past ... mental stage. Of the first ... models, a quarter of a million ... en sold in the States. The plant for the latest, on mass production, is now being laid down. In the company that's being floated I hold a third control—and I'm very thankful that I have. Billy stands to clean up three hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the deal—hard earnings."

"I have not a very good head for figures, Mr. Rivington. Could you translate that into terms of English currency?"

"About seventy thousand pounds."

Lord Scroope sat perfectly silent, gazing at Mr. Rivington.

"But the youngster himself is what I'm concerned with—not what he's got. However," continued Rivington, looking out of the window as a faint whirring noise was heard below, "I see he's arrived, so I needn't say any more. But I'm very glad to have had this chance to speak for him. Billy isn't good at praising himself."

Billy's card came up, and Billy shortly followed it. He looked at Lord Scroope diffidently.

"I shall be glad to have a few words with you, Mr. Spencer," said Lord Scroope with his most amiable air, "there was a staccato quality about our first meeting, that rendered a mutual understanding difficult."

"The first duty of an uncle," said Mr. Rivington, 'is to realize when he's in the way. With your permission, Lord Scroope, I'll go below."

He retired, leaving the two together, and drifted into the sunny morning room overlooking the lawn. In a few moments Lady Scroope came in. Mr. Rivington made himself known to her. In a very short time Lady Scroope had skillfully elicited from Mr. Rivington all the information he had given to her husband, and a good deal more. She bubbled with amusement and sympathy as the enthusiastic Rivington expounded Billy's qualities.

"I had a few words with your nephew, Mr. Rivington, before he went upstairs," she said laughing, "a most magnetic and alluring young man. I tremble to think what his influence may be on my simple-minded husband."

Mr. Rivington, coloring with pleasure, looked admiringly at the little lady, wondering how she came to have a daughter as old as Aimee—who at that moment entered the room. Lady Scroope introduced her guest.

"Well!" murmured Mr. Rivington, holding Aimee's hand after shaking it and regarding her vivid beauty with the most intense appreciation, "I can understand Billy's anxiety now."

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed Aimee, "that Billy is here?"

"He is at present with your father in the library, dear," replied her mother.

Aimee departed hastily.

"Aimee," her mother called after her, "you are on no account to interrupt them."

"I'm going to be there when they come out!" said Aimee over her shoulder as she disappeared.

The two elder people looked at each other, and both of them laughed. Mr. Rivington was charmed. Lady Scroope was wholly unlike his preconceived notions of an English peeress. They resumed their conversation and drifted out through the windows to the lawn near the entrance, where stood the Sphinx. The original Sphinx, with pillion-seat de luxe attached.

Ten minutes later Lord Scroope, with a countenance that was positively animated, came toward them across the grass.

"My dear Delicia!" he exclaimed, "I have no objection to saying, even before Mr. Rivington, that William Spencer is a most remarkable young man. Not only has his conduct all through the affair been admirable, but his character appeals to me very greatly. There is more innate honesty, more of the very essence of religion, in that young fellow, than I have yet encountered in anyone of his age."

Mr. Rivington, coloring still more deeply, looked at his lordship with appreciative eyes. Lady Scroope smiled.

"Tony, dear, I have seldom heard you express yourself so warmly; and as a judge of character you have taught me to regard you as infallible. Certainly, from the rather brief interview I had with Mr. Spencer I formed a similar opinion. But do I understand that you have—?"

"Hem," said Lord Scroope, with some slight confusion, "we appear to be moving rather—ah—rapidly. I feel—"

He broke off, apparently at a loss, as Billy and Aimee came towards them across the lawn, side by side. There was something Olympian in Billy's aspect and the splendor of his smile. Aimee was radiant and glowing. Lord Scroope scarcely recognized in her the pallid and distressed young woman who had returned from Jervaulx. It was as though an errant descendant of the gods had restored his daughter to him.

"Dad!" said Aimee. "You've been splendid, dear. And I want to say all the nice things to Billy's uncle, that I haven't had a chance to, yet."

* * * * * * *

"I hope," said Lord Scroope, wrinkling his brow in perplexity as he and his wife stood in the library some hours later, after the departure of the visitors, "that I have not been too precipitate. Have I committed myself too far, Delicia?"

Lady Scroope pushed her husband gently into an armchair and perched herself on the arm of it.

"If you mean, dear," she said, stroking his hair, "did you definitely accept Billy Spencer as a prospective son-in-law—you certainly did. And a very good thing, too."

"Did I really?" murmured her husband. "I hardly recognize myself today, Delicia. It seems very precipitate. There are so many things to consider—to verify—"

"I haven't the slightest doubt that will be all right. Two of the soundest people I ever came across."

"But what—"

"What I like about Americans," said Lady Scroope, "when a proposition—that's what they call it, I think—when a proposition is clear, they don't waste time. I like people who don't waste time—it makes life so much less complicated."

"I am certainly conscious of a great access of happiness."

"Yes. Because Aimee is so happy. And Aimee's happiness ... a very infectious quality. Still ... worried and anx... Why—"

"The one rift in the lute," said Lord Scroope regretfully, "is this break with the Jervaulx household. Family quarrels are always petty and undignified. I fear the affair has alienated Erythea. I hope I did not convey the impression that I disapproved of Alexander's marriage. Really it is an excellent thing for Georgina, and he will have a most worthy wife."

"I," said Lady Scroope, kissing the top of his head, "will make the peace with Erythea. Although she disapproves of my moral character, I am the only person she really listens to. I will go over tomorrow and pave the way. I've already talked that over with Mr. William Spencer," she added, twinkling, "and he will accompany me. I am persuaded he has great influence there. I suggest a double wedding here at Scroope. It will suit Erythea much better than at Jervaulx—as things are! Have no fear, Tony. It shall be arranged."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"All's Well—"

"What," said Aimee, with a little touch of scorn, "are you looking so frightened about, Georgie dear?"

"I'm n-not frightened," said Georgina faintly, smoothing her white silk sleeve with a tremulous hand and glancing at the spray of orange-blossoms on the boudoir table. "I'm supremely happy. But—one ought to feel a little frightened, surely? Are not you?"

"Not a bit."

Georgina regarded her cousin with a faintly shocked expression, that changed slowly into a gaze of admiration.

"How perfectly lovely you look, Aimee!"

"Yes, don't I," returned Aimee simply, inspecting herself in the long mirror. "Isn't Billy lucky!" She suddenly encircled Georgina's waist with her arm. "I'm so glad you're happy, Georgie dear. Everybody's got to be happy today; even Aunt Erythea. In half an hour you and Alexander will stand at the altar. Don't tremble like that. I and Billy will be close to you. Dad will marry all four of us with splendid composure and dignity. There's nothing to be afraid of. Dad is at his best in emergencies like that."

"I do love dignity," said Georgina gratefully.

"Don't say nasty things to me on my wedding day. You'll get all the dignity you want. When you emerge after the wedding breakfast, the carriage with the two fat horses will be waiting for you; it will convey you to the train, and then away for—where did you say you were going?"

"Closeminster," said Georgina rapturously. "Alexander is to be inducted as assistant to the prebendary in six weeks time. I was so glad when he suggested we should go at once to the place where later his duties will lie. There, under the shadow of that glorious old cathedral—"

"You'll spend an idyllic, sedate honeymoon," said Aimee. "How perfect, dear. Aren't you grateful to me? If it hadn't been for my stunt, you might have missed a whole life's happiness. But Billy and I—"



'Isn't Billy Lucky?"

"You're going through to Harwich on the car, aren't you, dear? Alexander told me—"

"There's Aunt Erythea!" said Aimee. "I'm glad mummie induced the old terror to come."

"Who is that with her?"

"My new uncle-in-law, Mr. Rivington. He's a peach! Aunt seems to be getting on with him splendidly. Look at her back! Who's the funny little man that seems half asleep, over by the cedar?"

"My Uncle Joseph," murmured Georgina. "He didn't realize till after we left Jervaulx, that I ought to have been at home with him all the time. I don't think he really grasps the position, even now."

"I don't wonder. These professors never do grasp anything," chuckled Aimee. "We've beaten Diana and Bertrand. They're to be married in London next week."

"Isn't all this delightful to think of," sighed Georgina, "after the horrors we went through! Did you ever hear what became of that woman you told me about—the wife of the burglar?"

"Never heard a word more of her; I think she got away."

"It all seems like some fearful nightmare now," shuddered her cousin.

"As the wife of a future bishop, you'll wipe it off your memory, Georgie, dear. But I never shall! The greatest time I ever had in my life. The joy of living, Georgie!" Lady Scroope suddenly entered the room.

"Children," she said gravely, "in five minutes we start for the chapel."

Aimee bolted into her room, followed by her mother.

* * * * * * *

"Do you see 'em yet?" whispered an apple-cheeked woman eagerly. The red poppies in her bonnet quivered as she raised herself on tiptoe. The staff of the Scroope Towers household was grouped on either side of the great porch, behind the assembled guests. ... apple-cheeked woman was Mrs. ... July envoy from the Jervaulx district. Her eyes sparkled, she clutched grimly to her breast a large bag of rice, a barbarous custom still permitted at Scroope.

Aimee and Billy suddenly emerged from the porch at speed, followed closely by Alexander and Georgina, amid cheers, flower-petals and confetti. Mrs. Sunning, with a shrill cry, opened her batteries.

Alexander and Georgina, swerving to the right, climbed into the waiting carriage. Billy, escaping through the shower of rice, shot past to the car.

"Beat it!" he cried to the chauffeur, and caught Aimee by the hand. Together they scudded on foot down the drive.

The guests paused in astonishment. Lady Scroope, her eyelashes sparkling, laughed gently. Aunt Erythea jutted an inquiring nose round the pillars.

The bride and bridegroom, having made good speed for two hundred yards, turned into a clump of laurels that efficiently hid the Flying Sphinx. Billy snatched up a blue cloak that lay athwart the saddle.

"On with it!" cried Billy, glowing.

In a twinkling Aimee donned the wrap; as Billy bestrode the saddle she threw herself upon the pillion and her arms about his waist.

"Ready—partner!" Billy said.

"Let her rip!" panted Aimee joyously.

The Sphinx hummed swiftly along the park road and swung left onto the highway.

"Hold tight!"

The Sphinx breasted the long rise at sixty miles an hour. The wind screamed past them.

Aimee laughed aloud. Leaning forward from the pillion, she pressed the smallest, soft round kiss on the back of Billy's neck, as they disappeared in a cloud of sunlit dust.

[THE END]

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