

The Joy of Living

By SIDNEY GOWING

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CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

—11—

"But," said Jake with devilish ferocity, "I've got you, too." He raised one knee, and rested his pistol hand on it. "If I give up to you, there's somethin' I'm goin' to have you do first. You'll take my terms an' do what I ask—or I'll drop you, right there and now."

There was not the faintest doubt but that he meant what he said. A glance into his eyes told the listener that.

"Nothing doing," said Billy quietly. "I don't take orders from a malefactor. Least of all at the point of a gun."

"Then," said Jake thickly, "you're cold meat. I guess it's the best way. It gives me a chance yet."

"They don't electrocute, in this country," said Billy, "they hang. But they do it very efficiently. You can shoot me in the back though, if you want to. I'm going to see about your exit."

He turned deliberately and walked to the mouth of the cave. Jake's finger trembled on the trigger.

"Come back!" he said hoarsely.

There was something so broken and piteous in the tone, that Billy turned his head. Jake flung the pistol toward him; it fell on the sand at Billy's feet, and he picked it up.

"I can't get you with a gun," gasped Jake, "but listen to what I got to say, if you're a man! For God's sake, listen!"

And Billy listened.

Some minutes later Billy stepped out of the cave into the sunlight. He was looking unusually grave, his lips were tight set; his eyes were positively horrified. He walked a few steps, muttering to himself. He started as a voice called him excitedly by name, and he was aware of Monsieur de Jussac running toward him.

"Spencer!" he cried. "I have been looking for you everywhere. Where the devil have you been? The police have inquired for you at the abbey, and I think they are not far behind. I thought it well to come and warn you."

"The police?"

Bertrand turned round sharply. He permitted himself a military expression that would not pass the censor. "And here they are!" he said, with a gesture of despair.

The helmet of Constable Polson appeared on the brink of the opposite cliff, about the same time as Panke's peaked cap obtruded itself over the one behind them, and the felt hat of Inspector Arkwright hovered in sight among the bramble bushes below. In a very short time all three men were in the pit, closing strategically upon Billy and Bertrand.

"I don't think," murmured Billy, "that I ever knew policemen arrive so—what's the word?"

"A propos," said the Vicomte grimly, twisting his mustache.

"Thanks. That's it."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Thanks again, but I think not. We'll see how they play the hand."

"That's him—the young one!" exclaimed Panke, as the three approached. Inspector Arkwright walked up to Billy, and addressed him by name.

"William Spencer?"

"That same bird," replied Billy pleasantly.

"And an admirable chauffeur," murmured de Jussac. "He drives like the Angel of Death."

Arkwright's cold gray eye swiveled upon the speaker.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"The Vicomte de Jussac, at your service. A guest at the abbey. Knowing Spencer was here, I came to inform him he was wanted."

"Oh, all right, sir. He's certainly wanted." The inspector turned to Billy. "Come along, my lad. We are overdue at Stanhoe police station."

"Does that mean I'm arrested?"

The inspector looked at him searchingly.

"That will depend on circumstances. Have you any objection to accompanying me?"

"I've no objection to anything. This is my afternoon off. But may I take it you are looking for the enterprising fellow who burgled the abbey?"

"I include that among my activities," said Arkwright sardonically.

"Then this is your lucky day. He's in the cave there."

"In the cave?" said Arkwright, staring.

"If you'll step this way," said Billy, "I'll show you."

He turned toward the bushes. Arkwright, after a moment's hesitation, accompanied him, and motioned to Inspector Panke to follow. Bertrand brought up the rear. Billy led them into the cave.

Jake, prostrate on his couch of bracken, greeted them with a sullen stare. Inspector Arkwright looked at him—the bandaged leg, the stubble-covered face, and deep-set eyes. The handkerchief with the broken food was no longer visible.

"That's your man," said Billy,

"known to the popular press as Jack the Climber; but I gather he prefers to be called Jake—I think we ought to humor him so far. His motorcycle is in the clay pit up the slope. His leg is rather badly hurt."

"See if he's shamming," said Arkwright briefly to Panke.

"Do I look as if I was shamming, you gazaboo!" growled Jake.

He certainly did not. Inspector Arkwright put a question to him, which Jake did not answer; nor did he look at the inspector—his eyes were fixed on Billy. Not a word of reply would the captive vouchsafe to any of Arkwright's queries. Billy took the Vicomte by the arm, led him outside, and drew a long breath.

"Got a cigarette?" he said anxiously. "I gave my list one to Jake."

Bertrand produced his case.

"But what a triumph!" he said with a dazed air.

"It's not the sort I enjoy," replied Billy, "but I had to see it through."

The two inspectors emerged.

"Panke," said Arkwright, "there's a gate in the field-fence just up there, I think. Will you and Polson lift it

dumbly. Arkwright was not a man of ungenerous instincts.

"I call that a very remarkable piece of work for an amateur," he said ungrudgingly.

"I suppose I've set your mind at rest, that I'd nothing to do with the burglary myself? You're not aching to haul me off to the station house any more? Or are you?"

Inspector Arkwright regarded Billy thoughtfully.

"No," he replied quietly, "but there are one or two points that have to be cleared up yet."

Billy took some papers from a pocketbook, and handed them to Arkwright.

"If you want information as to my identity," he said, "you might look through those."

The inspector did so. His usually immobile face gave a twitch of surprise.

"Thank you. I'll keep these for the present," he said, with a change of manner. "I will have a word with you at the abbey, Mr. Spencer, when this business is off my hands."

"I'll be there," said Billy, with an inward twinge of anxiety.

Panke and the constable arrived, carrying a gate between them, which was taken into the cave. The prostrate Jake was lifted onto it, and borne out into the open.

"Wait! Set him down," said Arkwright suddenly. "He's safe, anyhow. We've got to get the other one."

He turned to Billy. "You've seen nothing of her—the woman?"

Billy gave him a stare of undisguised amazement.

"The woman?" he exclaimed.

Jake threw away the stub of his cigarette.

"Yes—Calamity Kate!" said Arkwright impatiently. "Good Lord, man, can't you see she must be somewhere here, too? She's been bringing him food and water, and tending his leg—how else could he have lived there six days when he can't move?"

"Great Christopher!" said Billy. "I suppose you're right."

"The prisoner refuses any information. But I'll have the pair of them," said Arkwright grimly. "—"

"I suggest," broke in Panke, who was chafing at being thrust into a subordinate part, "that we get this man away as soon as possible, and that two of us wait in the cave. The woman probably visits it only at night, and the next time she comes with supplies, we shall get her."

"The weak point about that," replied Arkwright patronizingly, "is that it's not certain she only comes at night; this is a lonely place, and it won't surprise me if she is close by. She may have observed us already. We'll search these pits thoroughly first. There are half a dozen of these caves, and we'll go through them all. Mr. Spencer, I'll trouble you to remain by the prisoner. Panke, you and the constable try that cave opposite, and I'll take this side."

Inspector Arkwright strode forward with stern determination.

"The bag is not complete!" he said grimly, "fill I've got that woman!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"Sisters Under Their Skins."

Almee came as near to sheer panic as she had ever been yet when, after overhearing from her cogen of vantage in the second floor window the questions of the police, she saw them start for the crag pits.

The only bright feature of the situation, though not dazzlingly bright, was that de Jussac was already on his way, in the same direction. She had seen him go, and guessed his errand. Bertrand, at least, was an ally.

"I'd rather they got me than Billy!" she said with a little sob.

The one obvious and reasonable thing for Almee to do, was to remain where she was. To lie low, like Brer Rabbit, and take no part in the coming crisis. As a natural consequence, it was precisely the thing which her mind refused to entertain. If Billy was going to meet trouble, she determined to be on the spot. There was no knowing to what lengths he might go, in his passion for self-sacrifice.

Ten minutes later Almee was in the bushy dip of ground leading into the crag pits. The police were well ahead of her, converging round the far end. Almee had taken some trouble to avoid being seen by them. At the moment she could not see them at all, and took it for granted they could not see her either.

Bending low and running between the bushes, Almee made for the entrance of the Sphinx's cave. It seemed to her that she must be where Billy had gone. On arriving at the mouth, however, she discovered her mistake. Through a gap in the brushwood she caught sight of Billy's considerable distance farther along the pits. And with him was de Jussac.

The police arrived almost immediately afterward. Almee, crouching behind the bushes, watched the meeting.

Her throat felt dry and hot, her hands opened and shut nervously. She hesitated, uncertain what to do. Would Billy "get away with it?" A

gleam of hope and confidence returned. Billy had a wonderful knack of getting away with things.

She saw the party disappear into the cave nearest them; she witnessed the emergence of Billy, and was aware of a certain relief of tension when the police returned and spoke with him. Finally, wondering as she watched, Almee observed the arrival of the gate—saw the prostrate body of Jake carried into the open. The distance was considerable. But the significance of that pathetic figure on the gate came home to her. Almee was not slow of comprehension. She began to realize the meaning of it all. The police had what they wanted. The captive could be no other than Jack the Climber himself. Billy had "got away with it" with a vengeance.

Almee was staring dumbly at the group, when she heard a faint animal-like noise close beside her. She turned sharply, to find that she was not alone.

A woman, in a stained and ragged dust-cloak, was crouching behind the screen of brambles a few yards away. She was young, and not ill-looking, save for the deathly pallor of her face and the disorder of her hair. Indeed, there was a wild gipsyish beauty about her, that survived even the hunted expression in her eyes.

She was staring through the bushes at the distant group.

"They got him!" she said in a strangled whisper. She huddled herself together trembling.

"An' they'll get me, too. Let 'em. No good my runnin' for it."

"I dunno who you are!" she muttered. "What you doin' here? Are you goin' to gimme away?"

Almee did not move. Her heart beat fast. But there was no menace in the woman's eyes; only an expression so broken and piteous that somehow a lump came into Almee's throat. She had not the faintest doubt who this hunted woman was.

"You know who I am," the woman said thickly; "I can see it in your face." She came a step nearer. "Are you goin' to call out?"

Almee did not answer that question. "Is he much hurt?" she said quietly, looking towards the distant group round the man on the gate.

"Hurt?" said Calamity Kate. "He smashed himself days ago, it was." She had subsided on the sand, and embraced her knees with her arms, staring before her with unseeing eyes. "I got him down here. Tried to help him along—couldn't walk. Then I had to carry him."

"You!" said Almee, looking wonderingly at the girl's slight figure.

"Yes, me. It took me—hours. Carried him—on me back—somehow. When it came daylight, I found the cave. Got him in. I ripped up me skirt to bandage him. I stole food for him, nights. In two or three days more I guess he'd have been able to get away. Now they've got him, an' they'll have me."

She rocked herself gently to and fro.

"It'll be h—I for Jake!" she said thickly. "To know they've got me!" She looked at Almee. "If I could go with him—if they'd put us both in the same jug—I wouldn't care. But they don't do that."

She gave a great sob.

"I'd give me life to get him out of it. But he's done, and he'll know they've got me. It'll be h—I for him. My man!"

An unreasonable flood of tears came into Almee's eyes. She looked once

more at the group. The police were spreading out across the pits, moving in her direction.

"My man!" sobbed Kate.

"You love him?" said Almee haltingly.

"He's my husband!" said the woman. She flung herself face downwards on the sand, and wept.

Suddenly Almee stooped and caught her by the shoulder.

"Come with me!" she said swiftly, and, turning, crept in through the screen of brambles, into the cave.

Kate looked up comprehendingly. Then, with the instinct of the hunted animal she dived through the bushes and went to ground. The girls found themselves together in the cool gloom of the cave.

Kate stared at Almee with wondering eyes.

"I'm sorry for you!" said Almee unsteadily.

"I never thought," said Kate, "to find any woman sorry for me."

She glanced round the walls of the cave.

"They'll find me here—just the same."

"They may not," Almee, very pale, looked at the fugitive. "Don't you think," she said, "that if you got clear this time, you might—drop it all? Try—something different?"

"I might," said Kate slowly. "But—they'll get me."

She caught sight of the Flying Sphinx, standing in the dim light at the cave's end.

"What's that?" she exclaimed, and moved swiftly to the machine. Almee watched her.

"You couldn't ride it," said Almee, "not even if the way was clear."

"I can ride anything with an engine to it!" said Kate desperately. There was a gleam of hope in the hunted eyes; already her hands were busy with the levers; searching, examining. But she stopped, baffled. The controls of the Sphinx were too much for her. The next moment Almee was beside her.

"That's the throttle!" said Almee swiftly. "Here's the starter—this changes the gear—you have to be careful with the intake. On the second speed she goes over the roughest ground like a bird—on the level road she'll do eighty. If you could get her out clear of the bushes—but you'd never get away with it—"

The woman turned to her, gasping.

"Will you let me try—?" she exclaimed.

It was then that a shock of revulsion came over Almee. This was the female rattlesnake who had nearly killed Billy, and caused all the trouble. Why should Almee feel pity? The broken man in the hands of the police—

A rustle among the bushes at the cave's mouth made the two women turn quickly. De Jussac, stepping inside, halted and stared blankly at them both.

"Ten thousand devils!" exclaimed Bertrand, momentarily startled out of politeness.

"You needn't be frightened for me," said Almee quickly. "She'll do me no harm."

Bertrand's active brain took in the situation briefly.

"No harm!" he said. "Name of a name! If the police found you here with that!"

Almee turned very white. That aspect of the case had not even occurred to her. In the stress of new emotions, the realization of danger to herself had been crowded out. If she had to explain to the police—

"Yes," said Almee quietly. "If they come here—I'm done for."

The strident voice of Inspector Arkwright was heard, very close at hand.

Monsieur de Jussac pushed his way out through the brambles and regained the open air. The three policemen together were converging towards the spot.

"Another cave there!" cried Inspector Arkwright. "I thought so. This way, Panke!"

De Jussac halted before the entrance, and, selecting a cigarette from his case, lit it deliberately.

"You may save yourself the trouble, Inspector," he said amiably. "There is nothing here."

Arkwright hesitated.

"Are you certain?" he said, coming forward again.

"I have proved it," said Bertrand, "at much expense to my skin. Curse these briars!"

"All right," said Arkwright, turning away; "push on and search the other end, Panke. No use wasting time here. I think we're on a fool's errand after all."

The three police passed out of sight round the bend of the pits. There was a long pause. Almee's face peered cautiously through the brambles.

"What a fearful liar you are, Vicomte!" she said with mingled remorse and admiration.

Bertrand, without turning, bowed gravely.

"I do my best," he murmured, "in defense of a lady with such a genius for getting into difficulties. But let me beg of you to remain where you are."

"Are the police out of sight?" said Almee eagerly.

"For the present, yes. They are away round the corner—all three. But they may come back."

A moment's silence followed the warning. Then the brambles parted, and the Flying Sphinx came thrusting through. Kate was beside it, her hands gripping the bars, her face white and strained, her teeth tight set. She gave a swift glance to either side, and began to run the machine down the slope.

De Jussac, with an amazed exclamation, turned to intercept her. He found a hand detaining him; Almee had gripped him by the arm.

"Let her go!" said Almee breathlessly. "Let her go!"

"Name of a name!" said Bertrand blankly. But he obeyed. There was little choice. Already Calamity Kate was well down the slope, running beside the free-wheeling Sphinx that gathered more and more impetus by its own weight. The deftness with which the woman steered it between the clumps of bushes was astounding.

"She hasn't a dog's chance," said Almee with a gulp, "but what chance there is—let her take it."

"A nation of sportsmen—quol!" murmured Bertrand with a paralyzed air. He glanced to the left, where the police had disappeared round the shoulder of the bluff. There was still no sign of them. Kate, reaching the trodden path at the bottom, turned sharp to the right and swung herself into the saddle.

"It is one's duty to stop her," said Bertrand, twisting his mustache in

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