The Joy of Living

by Sidney Gowing

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Speed, thrills, love and laughs! Here is youth personified and romance on wheels—actually on wheels, for next to the human actors the most important thing is a motorcycle. The hero is a young American from Colorado. The heroine is an English girl. Scenes are laid in England and bring to the reader's view many of the charms of a British countryside.

Suppose you were a stranger in a strange land and all unexpectedly were forced to assume the guardianship of a madcap young lady, a titled daughter of the country, with a perfect genius for getting into trouble, yet the merriest, nerviest and altogether loveliest little creature you had ever met; suppose that one of her innocent larks had caused her to be suspected of a burglary which drew not only the local police, but the terrifying detectives from Scotland Yard upon her trail, you knew her to be incapable of wrong-doing, and it were up to you to save her; what would you do? You would be likely to split your head thinking, wouldn't you? Well, Billy Spencer got his scalp cracked by one of the real burglars, but it did not prevent his thinking and acting—quickly, efficiently and with real American genius and daring.

Sidney Gowing is a comparatively new novelist whose cleverness has attracted international attention. He has great gifts as a humorist and delights in mixing American and British characters and extracting a great amount of fun from both. He seems to lack the fondness of the average English novelist for plots involving marital infidelities. His "The Joy of Living" is clean in every respect, combines comedy and thrilling adventures, lives up to its title and is an antidote to a jaded appetite.

CHAPTER I

Sentenced.

"I can't go, dad," said Aimee desperately, "and I won't!"

"My answer, my dear Aimee," said Lord Scroope firmly yet benignantly, "is that you must go, and you shall!"

"A month of Aunt Erythea," said Aimee in stifled tones, "would kill me. Why are these things always piled on to me? I'm fed up!"

The Very Rev. Viscount Scroope, archdeacon and incumbent of the living of Scroope Magna, gazed dreamily over his daughter's head without appearing to hear her. A sunbeam filtered through the diamond panes, illumining his silver hair and finely cut features. It was as though the sunbeam said: "Behold a saint; here is one who hears and speaks no evil." A saint Lord Scroope undoubtedly was; calm, benign and immovable as granite.

"My dear child," he said gently, "let us admit the cold light of reason. You can have no genuine objection to your Aunt Erythea, for you have never set eyes on her since you were three years old. Jervaulx abbey is a well-appointed and strictly ordered house. It is an atmosphere which will correct, I hope, the influence of that deplorable school from which we have removed you. You must go. Aunt Erythea desires that you shall go. And that, as you will realize when you make her acquaintance, is final."

The Hon. Aimee Scroope's vividly lovely face became still more mutinous and desperate.

"And do not suppose that you will lack youthful society," added Lord Scroope, smiling. "Your cousin, Alexander Lambe, is at Jervaulx. A little older than yourself, doubtless, but an excellent companion for you. A young man wholly devoted to good work, and with unexceptionable connections, he will doubtless attain that eminence which his aunt would wish for him."

Aimee looked at her father with intense suspicion. Then she turned to the photograph of a young man in a clerical collar; the face was pleasant but somewhat serious, with large, frank, round eyes. The face that Aimee made at it was hideous.

"Go and tell your maid to pack, dear child," said Lord Scroope gently, patting her head. Aimee was twenty years of age, and stood five feet six, but her father contrived to have the air of patting somebody about three feet high.

Aimee said something inarticulate, and made a bee-line for a rose-pink boudoir where Lady Scroope, blonde, petite and wholly charming, was buttoning her gloves. Amid pink surroundings, Lady Scroope looked little older than her daughter.

"Mummy," said Aimee forcibly, "you'll have to throw me a rope. I have simply got to be rescued from this awful visit!" She expounded with extreme rapidity and terror her views on Jervaulx, Lady Erythea Lambe, and Alexander.

Lady Scroope twinkled, and was so exasperating as to laugh. She put her hands affectionately on her daughter's shoulders.

"Sorry, Aimee," she said; "there is, as you would say, nothing doing. You will have to go. I can't have your dear father worried any more. I don't think," she added pensively, "there's any cause for real alarm about Alexander Lambe."

"It's all very well for you," mourned Aimee, "but—"

"I'm really sorry, dear. I am going to the Milne-Temples and elsewhere for a few weeks, but when I come back I will make it up to you. These are the little crosses you have to bear."

She kissed her daughter, and hurried down to the car.

The car whirled her away, and Lord Scroope followed it with dreamily adoring eyes. Aimee, who had watched the pair with a sort of exasperated affection, turned into the morning room.

"What on earth," she murmured, "is one to do with people like that?"

She encountered her guest and cousin, Georgina Berners, twenty-three, plump and placid, dressed in a style that suggested enforced economy. Miss Berners was looking wistful.

"Why, Georgie," said Aimee, encircling her ample waist, "have you the hump, too? Let's be miserable together."

"It has been lovely here at Scroope," sighed Georgina, "and you are such a dear. I've nothing to go back to but Uncle Joseph, who doesn't think about anything but biology, and scarcely remembers I exist—though he is quite kind, of course. It will be awful after this."

"I've never met your Uncle Joseph," said Aimee, "but I'm certain he's nothing to my Aunt Erythea and Jervaulx."

She broke into a frenzied and vivid word-picture of all that awaited her.

"A place something between a cathedral and a barrack, and a fearful sort of Roman matron with a nose like the duke of Wellington's—I've never seen aunt's nose, but it's certainly like that—and to be drilled into flirting decorously with an owl-faced curate who, some day, they say, will probably be a bishop—"

Georgina was intensely shocked.

"Aimee, you really are extraordinary! Many people would be too glad to be in your shoes. A long visit to a charming old place—Jervaulx, they say, is even more old-world than Scroope—everything orderly, romantic, peaceful—"

"Moldy!" interrupted Aimee.

"And luxurious. Lady Erythea, everyone says, is a splendid manager. And your cousin—a nice, sensible young man. I've seen his photograph. His face—"

"It's the face," said Aimee fiercely, "of a cold boiled codfish! I've seen it—I've seen it! It made me feel as if my shoes were full of water!"

"Aimee!" said Georgina plaintively. "You appal me!"

"Good thing! Then you know how I feel!" retorted Aimee pertly. "The whole thing appals me. These curates! I'm fed up with them! Alexander is the limit!"

Aimee paused for breath.

"He's a frump!" she said, with extraordinary vehemence.

"He is good!" insisted Georgina. "That is a good man's face, if ever I saw one. And," added Georgina, with a rapt expression on her plump features, "he will fall in love with you, Aimee. I'm sure of it! And when that happens—"

"Oh, you make me sick!" said the frenzied Aimee. "It's a disease with you! Sentiment revolts me. This maundering about love—"

"Aimee," said Georgina almost tearfully, "your very name means 'Beloved'!"

"Oh, rats!" said Aimee furiously, and fled from the room.

CHAPTER II

Escape.

In the deepest depression, Aimee wandered down the park avenue towards the high road. She passed through the lodge gates and turned the corner of the road.

There Aimee halted, and considered the perversity of Fate. And close beside her barked a sharp explosion, with a flash of yellow flame and a whiff of pungent smoke. And a clear voice exclaimed:

"H—l!"

"Just what I was thinking!" said Aimee.

A young man, who was tinkering a motorcycle, whence came the explosion, looked up startled, and removed his cap.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" he said. "I didn't know there was anyone around."

They looked at each other, and both laughed. It was impossible to look at the stranger and fail to laugh. Not in derision, but joyously, spontaneously, as one laughs when the breeze heels the boat, or when a puppy dog falls head over tail.

When the motorcyclist grinned, his teeth were so white that they gave the effect of a flash. His fair and rather tousled hair caught the sun. His head looked as if it might be rammed through a door, without damaging anything except the door-panel. He was big built, and about twenty-five, but his bright blue eyes might have belonged to a boy of sixteen. He wore dusty blue overalls.

"That's better!" he said approvingly, as Aimee laughed again. "You were looking as if you felt pretty low."

"I was. Everybody has been appalling! Talking sentiment till I feel sticky all over."

The stranger's face fell.

"Gee! That's too bad! Sentiment, eh?" He made a gesture as if warding off invisible assailants. "Sentiment is poison ivy! It gives me that tired feeling. Madam, accept my sympathy."

In the space of a moment they felt as though they had known each other for years.

"Do you live anywhere about here?" said Aimee. "I seem to have seen—"

"Here? About seven thousand miles west-by-south of here!" said the stranger, laughing. "Cobalt. Arapahoe county. Citizen of the world—answer to the name of 'Billy.' And

They Looked at Each Other and Both Laughed.

I'm here in England," he added, laying a loving hand on the tank of the motorcycle—"to sell this."

"Weird-looking thing!" said Aimee, with interest, for the cycle's engine was of a remarkable shape. "Yours?"

"Mine!" said the stranger joyously. "Alone I did it. I hold the patent. It's a Sanakatowzer—the Flying Sphinx!"

"Ripping name. Can it fly?"

"Can it fly? It devours space like the sunbeams lick up the mists of the mornin'! And no more noise than a baby's whisper.

"Around the world in thirty winks
When once astride the Flying Sphinx!

"It's got Sinbad's Carpet an' the Seven-league Boots guessing." He threw a leg over the saddle. "Like a spin up the road? Jump up behind!"

Aimee immediately perched herself on the carrier. There was a whirlwind charm about the stranger that carried her away. The next moment the Flying Sphinx did the same. The wind whistled past Aimee's ears. To keep her seat she was obliged to grab Billy suddenly round the waist.

"Don't mind if I hold you?" she gasped.

"Shucks!" said Billy impatiently. "I don't care how you hold me, s'long's you don't hit the grit!"

They breasted the crest of the rise.

"Hang tight now!" he cried. "We'll let her out!"

The Sphinx went forward with the whirr of a shell. She peeled the roadway behind her like a running tape. Aimee felt the roar of the wind rise to a scream. Billy leaned lightly forward towards the handle-bars, cool, effortless, efficient.

Aimee was only conscious of being whirled gloriously through space, when the Sphinx, after a two-mile loop, slid back to the spot whence she had started. Aimee sprang from the carrier.

"Oh, thank you!" she gasped. "That was too good to be true!"

The cyclist, without dismounting, looked at her glowing face and frank eyes.

"I wish there were more like you," he said, laughing. "Tell 'em—whoever they are—to can the sentiment. S'long, an' good luck to you!"

He raised his cap, and next moment the Sphinx whirred him away in a cloud of golden dust. Aimee followed him with her eyes till he was round the bend, then she turned back into the park. It seemed to her that the sunlight had become less vivid and the sky paler.

Very slowly, Aimee made her way back to the portals of Scroope Towers, where the heavy family car, laden with luggage, stood waiting. Georgina was on the steps, abundantly wrapped up, and Lord Scroope stood beside her.

"Grundle," he said to the chauffeur, "you will drop Miss Berners at the station and take Miss Aimee on to Jervaulx, returning here direct."

The chauffeur, who was a middle-aged man with a singularly wooden expression, seemed to be making a mental effort. He saluted, staring straight before him.

"Goodby, Georgina! Bless you, my child; bless you! Drive on, Grundle. What are you waiting for?"

The car meandered out of Scroope park and turned northward along the main road. Georgina was in low spirits. Aimee throughout had been seething with an enormously increased sense of mutiny, and, as they neared the station, she exploded.

"I can't stand it, Georgie!"

"I wish I were you!" said Georgina mournfully.

"Eh?"

"I wish I were Aimee Scroope, and on my way to Jervaulx abbey. That's all."

Aimee started slightly. An extraordinary impish expression came into her eyes. Georgina, who knew the sign of old, looked at her nervously.

"You are!" said Aimee, in a voice of unlooked-for decision.

"What on earth do you mean?"

Aimee gripped her by the arm, and replied, in a low voice that bubbled with excitement.

"My dear, fat cousin, your full name, as I remember, is Georgina Amy Scroope Berners! Lop off the superfluous head and tail, and there you are—Amy Scroope. Near enough for anyone. You are going to Jervaulx instead of me! Aunt Erythea has never seen me, nor has Alexander Lambe. And neither of them know you from Adam—I mean Eve! You'll suit them down to the ground!"

Georgina looked at her with dawning terror.

"It is a gorgeous arrangement!" exclaimed Aimee, tightening her grip on her cousin's arm. "And nothing easier. Uncle Joseph will never miss you—leave me to fix that up. Grundle will deliver you at Jervaulx; he's a perfect super-idiot, and has probably forgotten which of us is to go there if we don't tell him. He never talks, either. As for me, I shall go to Seabridge, or on a walking tour—or anything I choose!"

"Aimee, are you mad?"

"It is one of the sanest moments of my life!" retorted Aimee; and, leaning over the back, she tore the tag-labels off her luggage and Georgina's, and scattered them on the road. "You can take my things with you!"

"If you think for a moment I'd have anything to do with such a business—"

A fiendish expression came over Aimee's features. She gripped her cousin's arms again.

"If you don't," she hissed, "I'll tell everybody about you and Aloysius Blunnerhasset getting lost at the ruridecanal picnic!"

At this monstrous accusation, Georgina blushed scarlet. The mildest peccadillo in a blameless life, the memory of the incident in question always filled her with alarm; Aimee had held it over her head before.

"I won't listen to another word!" she gasped.

"You needn't. It is the time for deeds!" Aimee seized a small square box from among the luggage and thumped the chauffeur on the back. "Grundle, stop here! I have only a bag, I'll walk up to the station approach. Take Miss Berners on to Jervaulx. And hurry—she is behind time already!"

A faintly bewildered expression passed over the chauffeur's face, as though he were trying to arrange his ideas. He rubbed his ear for a moment, then saluted and let in the clutch.

Georgina, who had risen with the intention of escaping from the car, lost her balance and collapsed in a slightly undignified manner on the seat.

She struggled up and turned a flushed face towards her cousin.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried, in an agonized voice. "Aimee—"

"Good-by, dear!" said Aimee, waving her handkerchief. "Don't get lost with Alexander!"

The car bore the speechless and gesticulating Georgina out of sight round the bend. Aimee sat down on her box, buried her face in her hands, and dissolved into such unfeeling laughter that a pair of thrushes and a chaffinch fled from the hedge in indignation and alarm.

* * * * * * *

Onward through the green lanes and over the county border the car carried a limp and nerveless Georgina. Consternation had given away to numb despair.

"What shall I do?" she thought. "What am I to say to Lady Erythea? There'll be a fearful row!"

Georgina racked her brains for a way out of the difficulty. There seemed to be none. She lay back exhausted. And so perverse is even the purest of human minds that a faint suggestion crept into Georgina's—a little whisper, as it were, in that blameless ear—that it would be peculiarly delightful if she could fill the role that Aimee had mapped out for her.

Georgina started, and thrust the idea from her with horrified self-reproach. Again she sought for an explanation—a true one—which would save Aimee's face. By the time she had considered and rejected half a dozen, finally deciding on one that she thought might do, the car had covered the thirty miles and was threading through the park road of Jervaulx.

Georgina stumbled out of the car at the main entrance and faced a gaunt and majestic lady in gray silk who came down the steps.

"And so, my dear Aimee," said Lady Erythea, in a large and informative voice, "you arrive at last. Welcome!"

Georgina faltered. Everything she had intended to say was driven out of her head. Aimee had been prophetic—Aunt Erythea was very like the duke of Wellington.

"Lady Erythea!" gasped Georgina, as two men-servants came to unload the luggage. "There is—there is a mistake! May I—"

"The modern tendency of the young to enunciate indistinctly," said Lady Erythea, producing an ear-trumpet, "always annoys me. Say what you have to say clearly."

Georgina had not realized that Lady Erythea was extremely deaf.

"There is something I have to explain," she bawled hoarsely into the ear-trumpet. "P-please, can I see you alone?"

"Ah!" said Lady Erythea vaguely. "I am pleased that you look forward so much to your visit. No, you need not fear being alone. Here is your

Georgina Faltered.

cousin," she added, as a young man in clerical collar came out upon the steps. "Alexander, your cousin, Aimee."

Georgina turned a pale and timid face to the stranger. The Rev. and Hon. Alexander Lambe bowed.

Alexander was large and well, though somewhat loosely, built. Aimee's epithet "owl-faced" was hardly fair. Certainly his clean-shaven face was a little serious, and his eyes large and round, but very kindly.

"Welcome to Jervaulx, Cousin Aimee," he said.

A sudden interest and sympathy quickened in the large eyes as they rested on Georgina's face. And the panic-stricken girl's fear died within her. Mr. Alexander Lambe looked so cool and protective and dependable.

"Escort your cousin to the morning room, Alexander," said Lady Erythea authoritatively, "and offer her refreshment after her drive."

They walked in together. And as they walked their backs seemed to suggest, in some subtle manner, that an understanding, a mutual sympathy, had dawned between them. Backs can be very expressive sometimes.

Lady Erythea regarded them with a look of commanding approval. She followed them majestically up the steps.

"This," proclaimed Lady Erythea's erect and overwhelming back, "is as I ordained it from the beginning."

CHAPTER III

Re-Enter Billy.

Aimee tramped along the broad highway, whistling. At Scroope, much more at Jervaulx, one was not allowed to whistle. Ever and anon she stopped whistling to laugh.

Aimee had dropped the square box into a quarry pit an hour before and continued on her way unburdened. The idea of finding lodgings at Seabridge appealed to her. She had funds enough. A month's pocket money was in her purse, and Lady Scroope had been liberal on her departure.

"What a row there'll be," chuckled Aimee, "if Georgie doesn't play up! I don't care. I gave them my ultimatum. They can't hang me. I've been very patient with them all. One must make a stand sometime or other. Who does my life belong to," demanded Aimee, never a purist in grammar, "if not to me?"

A faint sound was borne upon the breeze, a noise that attuned itself curiously to Aimee's thoughts. It was like the buzz of a homing bee. She looked up, and saw a motorcycle speeding along the road with a smear of following dust behind it like the tail of a comet. Aimee recognized the Flying Sphinx, and became aware of a laughing face looking up at hers, and a set of very white teeth.

"Why, it's Billy!" she cried spontaneously.

"Hello, old chap!" cried the cyclist.

Billy was bare-headed, his fair hair sticking up at the crown in a little tuft that blew about in the wind.

"Where were you making for?" he said.

"The unemployment bureau!" retorted Aimee flippantly.

Billy's face expressed concern.

"I suppose you're guying me. You don't mean you've lost your job?"

"Job?" Aimee bubbled with amusement. "Well, I had a job all ready for me this morning. But it's washed out. I've lost it. And now I'm adrift."

Billy was perplexed. He had been wholly unable to place Aimee. He wondered if she were a governess. A question was on his lips, but he checked himself for fear of giving offense.

"Lost it?" he exclaimed. "I guess it's just as well! You look a heap happier! What job d'you think of chasin'?"

"I—I don't know."

Billy looked at her eagerly. A sudden flash came into his eyes, as one who conceives a superb idea.

"Say! Let me find you one! I've a brain-wave!"

"What do you mean?"

"Go shares with me!"

"Shares?" echoed Aimee. She was conscious of a curious little thrill. "Share what?"

"See here!" said Billy, eyeing her keenly. "When we were doing fifty-five on the Sphinx, you never wilted—never turned a hair!"

"Of course not. It was gorgeous." He came nearer, intensely earnest.

"Know anything about motor engines?" he said quickly.

"I've often taken down the old 'bus at home, on a wet day, and reassembled it."

"Where was that?"

"At the place where I had a job," said Aimee.

"Great!" he cried. "You're the thing I've been looking for all these months. Now, listen to the brain-wave. I'm over here to sell the Sphinx. There's a big deal on in London. But what I want's a quiet spot where I can develop some of the gadgets with no crooks around to steal 'em. Get me?"

"Yes, go on," said Aimee, catching his enthusiasm.

"I'm heading now for a little town called Stanhoe, thirty miles south of here. Stanhoe's quiet as the tomb. I've struck it before. There's an old mill I b'lieve I can get hold of, and fit up as a garage and workshop—"

"Yes, I see!" said Aimee eagerly.

"Come on into it with me—come to Stanhoe!" said Billy explosively. "You'll catch on to the Flying Sphinx in a minute, an' then popularize her as a lady's mount! The finest mount for a girl ever put on the market. There isn't one yet. You can do it! You've got the nerve—an' the grit! I'll teach you to tend an' drive her. Will you come?"

"Will a duck swim!" cried Aimee. "Of course I'll come!"

"Fine!—partner!" cried Billy, flinging out a big brown hand.

Aimee took it, and received a shake that bruised her fingers.

"Take your perch, old chap!" said Billy, straddling the Sphinx. "Off for Stanhoe!"

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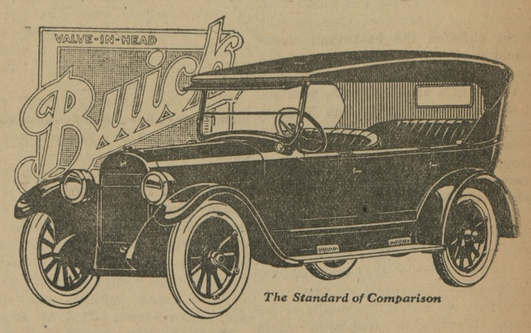

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