

COLLEGE FRIENDS

EDMONDO DE AMICIS

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BY

EDMONDO DE AMICIS

The Translation by Edith Wharton.

[Footnote: Although "College Friends" is rather a reverie than in any strict sense a story (something in the spirit of "The Reveries of a Bachelor," if an analogy may be sought in another literature), it has been thought best to include it here as one of the best-known of De Amicis' shorter writings. Indeed it is the leading piece in his chief volume of "Novelle," so that he has himself included it with his tales.]

I.

There are many who write down every evening what they have done during the day; some who keep a record of the plays they have seen, the books they have read, the cigars they have smoked but is there one man in a hundred, nay, in a thousand, who, at the end of the year, or even once in a lifetime, draws up a list of the people he has known? I don't mean his intimate friends, of course the few whom he sees, or with whom he corresponds; but the multitude of people met in the past, and perhaps never to be encountered again, of whom the recollection returns from time to time at longer and longer intervals as the years go by, until at length it wholly fades away. Which of us has not forgotten a hundred once familiar names, lost all trace of a hundred once familiar lives? And yet to my mind this forgetfulness implies such a loss in the way of experience, that if I could live my life over again I should devote at least half an hour a day to the tedious task of recording the names and histories of the people I met, however uninteresting they might appear.

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What strange and complex annals I should possess had I kept such a list of my earliest school–friends, supplementing it as time went on by any news of them that I could continue to obtain, and keeping track, as best I might, of the principal changes in their lives! As it is, of the two or three hundred lads that I knew there are but twenty or thirty whom I can recall, or with whose occupations and whereabouts I am acquainted of the others I know absolutely nothing. For a few years I kept them all vividly in mind; three hundred rosy faces smiled at me, three hundred schoolboy jackets testified more or less distinctly to the paternal standing, from the velvet coat of the mayor's son to the floury roundabout of the baker's offspring; I still heard all their different voices; I saw where each one sat in school; I recalled their words, their attitudes, their gestures. Gradually all the faces melted into a rosy blur, the jackets into a uniform neutral tint; the gestures were blent in a vague ripple of movement, and at last a thick mist enveloped all and the vision disappeared.

It grieves me that it should be so, and many a time I long to burst through the mist and evoke the hidden vision. But, alas! my comrades are all scattered; and were I to try to seek them out, one by one, how many devious twists and turns I should have to make, and to what strange places my search would lead me! From a sacristy I should pass to barracks, from barracks to a laboratory, thence to a lawyer's office; from the lawyer's office to a prison, from the prison to a theatre, from the theatre, alas! to a cemetery, and thence, perhaps, to a merchant vessel lying in some American or Eastern port. Who knows what adventures, what misfortunes, what domestic tragedies, what transformations in appearance, in habits, in life, would be found to have befallen that mere handful of humanity, within that short space of time!

And yet those are not the friends that I most long to see again. Indeed, if we analyze that sense of mournful yearning which makes us turn back to childhood, we shall be surprised to find how faint is the longing for our old comrades, nay, we may even discover that no such sentiment exists in us. And why should it, after all? We were often together, we were merry, we sought each other out, we desired each other's companionship; but there was no interchange between us of anything that draws together, that binds closer, that leaves its mark upon the soul. Our friendships were unmade as lightly as they were made. What we wanted was somebody to echo our laughter, to climb trees with us, and return the ball well; and as the pluckiest, liveliest, and most active boys were best fitted to meet these requirements, it was upon them that our choice usually fell. But did we feel kindly towards the weaklings? Did it ever occur to us, when a comrade looked sad, to ask: What ails you? or, if he answered that somebody lay dead at home, did we have any tears for his sorrow? Ah, we were not real friends!

It has probably happened to many of you to come across a companion of your primary–school days, after the lapse of fifteen years or so. You receive a letter in an unfamiliar hand, you glance at the signature, and you shout out: "What? Is HE alive?" On with your hat and off you rush to the hotel. Your heart thumps as you run, and you race upstairs to his door in hot haste, laughing, rejoicing, and thinking to yourself that you wouldn't have missed those few minutes for any amount of money. Well, those few minutes are the best. You bounce into the room, and find yourself embracing a strange man in whom, as you look at him more closely, you can just discern some faint resemblance to the lad you used to know; one of you exclaims, "How are you, old man?" the other plunges breathlessly into some old school reminiscence; and then... that's all.

You begin to say to yourself: "Who IS this strange man? what has he been doing all these years? what has been going on in his soul? is he good or bad, a believer or a sceptic? I have nothing in common with him, I don't know the man! He must be observed and studied first how can I call him a friend?"

What you think of him, he thinks of you, and conversation languishes. With your first words you may have discovered that you and he have followed opposite paths in life; he betrays his democratic tendencies, you, your monarchical leanings; you try him on literature, he retaliates with the culture of silk–worms. Before telling him that you are married, you take the precaution to ask if he has a wife; he answers, "What do you take me for?" and you take leave with a touch of the finger–tips and a smile that has died at its birth.

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The friends of infancy! Dear indeed above all others when the years of boyhood have been spent with them; mere phantoms otherwise! And childhood itself! I have never been able to understand why people long to return to it. Why mourn for years without toil, without suffering, without intelligent belief, without those outbursts of fierce and bitter sorrow that purify the soul and uplift the brow in a splendid renewal of hope and courage? Better a thousand times to suffer, to toil, to fight and weep, than to let life exhale itself in a ceaseless irresponsible gayety, causeless, objectless, and imperturbable! Better to stand bleeding on the breach than to lie dreaming among the flowers.

II.

I was seventeen years old when I made the acquaintance of my dearest friends, in a splendid palace which I see before me as clearly as though I had left it only yesterday. I see the great courtyard, the stately porticos, the saloons adorned with columns, statues and bas-reliefs; and, amidst these beautiful and magnificent objects, vestiges of the bygone splendors of the ducal residence, the long lines of bedsteads and school-benches, the hanging rows of uniforms, dirks and rifles. Five hundred youths are scattered about those courts and corridors and staircases; a dull murmur of voices, broken by loud shouts and sonorous laughter, reverberates through the most distant recesses of the huge edifice. What animation! What life! What varieties of type, of speech and gesture! Youths of athletic build, with great moustaches and stentorian voices; youths as slim and sweet as girls; the dusky skin and coal-black eyes of Sicily; the fair-haired, blue-eyed faces of the north; the excited gesticulation of Naples, the silvery Tuscan intonation, the rattling Venetian chatter, a hundred groups, a hundred dialects; on this side, songs and noisy talk, on that side running, jumping, and hand-clapping; men of every class, sons of dukes, senators, generals, shopkeepers, government employees; a strange assemblage, suggesting the university, the monastery, and the barracks: with talk of women, war, novels, the orders of the day; a life teeming with feminine meannesses and virile ambitions; a life of mortal ennui and frantic gayety, a medley of sentiments, actions, and incidents, absurd, tragic, or delightful, from which the pen of a great humorist could extract the materials for a masterpiece.

Such was the military college of Modena in the year 1865.

III.

I cannot recall the two years that I spent there without being beset by a throng of memories from which I can free myself only by passing them all in review, one after another, like pictures in a magic-lantern; now laughing, now sighing, now shaking my head, but feeling all the while that each episode is dear to me and will never be forgotten while I live.

How well I remember the first grief of my military life, a blow that befell me a few days after I had entered college all aglow with the poetry of war. It was the morning on which caps were distributed. Each new recruit of the company found one that fitted him, but all were too small for me, and the captain turned upon me furiously.

"Are you aware that the commissary stores will have to be reopened just for you?" And I heard him mutter after a pause, "What are you going to do with a head like that?"

Great God, what I underwent at that moment! What be a soldier? I thought. Never! Better beg my bread in the streets better die and have done with it!

Then I remember an officer, an old soldier, gruff but kindly, who had a way of smiling whenever he looked at me. How that smile used to exasperate me! I had made up my mind to demand an explanation, to let him know that I didn't propose to be any man's butt, when one evening he called me to him, and having given me

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to understand that he had heard something about me and that he wanted to know if it were really true (I was to speak frankly, for it would do me no harm), he finally, with many coughs and smiles and furtive glances, whispered in my ear: "Is it true that you write poetry?"

I recall, too, the insuperable difficulty of accomplishing the manual tasks imposed upon me, especially that of sewing on my buttons how every few seconds the needle would slip through my fingers, till the thread was tangled up in a veritable spider's web, while the button hung as loose as ever, to the derision of my companions and the disgust of the drill-sergeant, whose contemptuous "You may be a great hand at rhyming, but when it comes to sewing on buttons you're a hundred years behind the times," seemed to exile me to the depths of the eighteenth century.

I see the great refectory, where a battalion might have drilled; I see the long tables, the five hundred heads bent above the plates, the rapid motion of five hundred forks, of a thousand hands and sixteen thousand teeth; the swarm of servants running here and there, called to, scolded, hurried, on every side at once; I hear the clatter of dishes, the deafening noise, the voices choked with food crying out: "Bread bread!" and I feel once more the formidable appetite, the herculean strength of jaw, the exuberant life and spirits of those far-off days.

The scene changes, and I see myself locked in a narrow cell on the fifth floor, a jug of water at my side, a piece of black bread in my hand, with unkempt hair and unshorn chin, and the image of Silvio Pellico before me; condemned to ten days' imprisonment for having made an address of thanks to the professor of chemistry on the occasion of his closing lecture, thereby committing an infraction of article number so- and-so of the regulation forbidding any cadet to speak in public in the name of his companions. And to this day I can hear the Major saying: "Take my advice and never let your imagination run away with you;" citing the example of his old school-fellow, the poet Regaldi, who had got into just such a scrape, and concluding with the warning that "poetry always made men make asses of themselves."

Yes, I see it all as vividly as though I were reliving the very same life again the silent march of the companies at night down the long, faintly-lit corridors; the professors behind their desks, deafening us with their Gustavus-Adolphuses, their Fredericks the Great, and their Napoleons; the great lecture-rooms full of motionless faces; the huge, dim dormitories, resounding with the respirations of a hundred pairs of lungs; the garden, the piazza, the ramparts, the winding Modenese sheets, the cafis full of graduates devouring pastry, the picnics in the country, the excursions to neighboring villages, the intrigues, the studies, the rivalries, the sadnesses, the enmities, the friendships.

IV.

A few days before the graduating examinations we were given leave to study wherever we pleased. There were two hundred of us in the second class, and we dispersed ourselves all over the palace, in groups of five or six friends, each group in a separate room, and began the long, desperate grind, cramming away day and night, with only an occasional interruption to discuss the coming examination and our future prospects.

How cheerily we talked, and how bright our anticipations were! After two years of imprisonment, home, freedom, and epaulets were suddenly within our reach. Aside from the common satisfaction of being promoted to be an officer, each one of us had his own special reasons for rejoicing. With one of us it was the satisfaction of being able to say to the family that had pinched and denied itself to pay for his schooling, "Here I am, good people, nineteen years old and able to shift for myself;" with another, the fun of swaggering in full uniform, with clanking heels and rattling sword, into the quiet house where the old uncle who had been so generous sat waiting to welcome him home; with a third, the joy of mounting a familiar staircase, brevet in pocket, and knocking at a certain door, behind which a girlish voice would be heard exclaiming, "There he is!" the voice of the little cousin to whom he had said good-bye, two years before, in her parents' presence,

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reassured only by the non-committal phrase: "Well, well, go to college first and make a man of yourself; then we'll see."

Already we saw ourselves surrounded by children eager to finger our sabres, by girls who signed to us as we passed, by old men who clapped us on the shoulder, by mothers crying, "How splendidly he looks!" So that it was with the greatest difficulty that we shook off this importunate folk, saying to ourselves: "Presently, presently, all in good time; but just now, really, you must let us be!"

Then, each following the bent of his disposition, his habits, and his plans, we confided to one another the regiment, province, and city to which we hoped to be assigned. Some of us longed for the noise and merriment of the Milanese carnivals, and dreamed of theatres, balls and convivial suppers. One sighed for a sweet Tuscan village, perched on a hilltop, where, in command of his thirty men, he might spend the peaceful spring days in collecting songs and proverbs among the country-folk. Another longed to carry on his studies in the unbroken solitude of a lonely Alpine fortress, hemmed in by ravines and precipices. One of us craved a life of adventure in the Calabrian forests; another, the activities of some great seaboard city; a third, an island of the Tyrrhenian Sea. We divided up Italy among ourselves a hundred times a day, as though we had been staking off plots in a garden; and each of us detailed to the others the beauties of his chosen home, and all agreed that every one of the places selected would be beautiful and delightful to live in.

And then war! It was sure to come sooner or later. Hardly was the word mentioned when our books were hurled into a corner and we were all talking at once, our faces flushed, our voices loud and excited. War, to us, was a superhuman vision in which the spirit lost itself as in some strange intoxication; a far-off, rose-colored horizon, etched with the black profiles of gigantic mountains; legion after legion, with flying banners and the sound of music, endlessly ascending the mountain-side; and high up, on the topmost ridges, surrounded by the enemy, our own figures far in advance of the others, dashing forward with brandished swords; while down the farther slope a torrent of foot, horse, and artillery plunged wildly through darkness to an unknown abyss.

A medal for gallantry? Which one of us would not have won it? Lose the battle? But could Italians be defeated? Death but who feared to die? And did anybody ever die at nineteen? Who could tell what strange and marvellous adventures awaited us, what sights we should see! Perhaps some foreign expedition; a war in the East; was not the Eastern question still stirring? We wandered in imagination over seas and mountains, we saw the marshalling of fleets and armies, we glowed with impatience, we cried out within ourselves, "Only give us time to pass our examinations, and we'll be there too!"

And then the examinations took place, and on a beautiful July morning the doors of the ducal palace were thrown open and we were told to go forth and seek our destiny. And with a great cry we dashed out, and scattered ourselves like a flight of birds over the length and breadth of Italy.

V.

And now?

Six years have gone by, only six years, and what a long and strange and varied romance might be woven out of the lives of those two hundred college comrades! I have seen many of them since we graduated, and have had news of many others, and I have a way of passing them in review one after another, and questioning them mentally; and what I see and hear fills me with a wonder not unmingled with sadness. And here they all are.

The first that I see are a group of brown, broad-shouldered, bearded men, whom I do not recall just at first; but when they smile at me I recognize the slender fair boys who used to look so girlish.

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"Is it really you?" I exclaim, and they answer, "Yes," with a deep sonorous note so different from the boyish voices I had expected to hear, that I start back involuntarily.

And these others? Their features are not changed, to be sure, their figures are as robust and well set-up as ever, but the smile has vanished, there is no brightness in the eye.

"What has happened to you?" I ask; and they answer, "Nothing."

Ah, how much better that some misfortune should have befallen them than that the years alone, and only six short years, should have had the power so sadly to transform them!

Here are others. Good God! One, two, three, five of them; let me look again; yes gray-headed! What at twenty-seven! Tell me what happened? They shrug their shoulders and pass on.

Then I see a long file of my own friends, some of them the wildest of the class, one with a baby in his arms, one with a child by the hand, another leading two. What? So-and-so married? So-and-so a pere de famille? Who would have thought it?

Here come others; some, with bowed heads and reddened eyes, sign to me sadly in passing. There is crape upon their sleeves.

Others, with heads high and flashing eyes, point exultantly to their breasts. Our college dream, the military medal ah, lucky fellows!

And here are some, moving slowly, and so pale, so emaciated, that I hardly know them. Ah me! The surgeon's knife has probed those splendid statuesque limbs, once bared with such boyish pride on the banks of the Panaro; the surgeon's knife, seeking for German bullets, while the blood streamed and the amputated limbs dropped from the poor maimed trunks. Alas, poor friends! But at least they have remained with us, rewarded for their sacrifice by the love and gratitude of all.

But what's become of so-and-so?

He died on the march through Lombardy.

And so-and-so?

Killed by a mitrailleuse at Monte Croce.

And my friend so-and-so?

He died of a rifle-bullet, in the hospital at Verona.

And the fellow who sat next to me in class?

HE died of cholera in Sicily.

Enough enough!

So they all pass by, fading into the distance, while my fancy hastens back over the road they have travelled, seeking traces of their passage how many and what diverse traces!

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Here, books and papers scattered on the floor, half-finished projects of battles, an overturned table, a smoking candle—end, tokens of a studious vigil. There, broken chairs, fragments of glasses, the remains of a carouse. Farther on, an expanse of waste ground, two bloody swords, deep footprints, the impress of a fallen body. Here, a table covered with a torn green cloth and strewn with cards and dice; yonder, in the grass, a scented love-letter and a knot of faded violets. Over there a graveyard cross, with the inscription: To my Mother. And farther on more cards, cast-off uniforms, women's portraits, tailors' bills, bills of exchange, swords, flowers, blood. What a vast tapestry one can weave with those few broken and tangled threads! What loves, what griefs, what struggles, follies, and disasters one divines and comprehends! Many a high and generous impulse too; but how much more of squandered opportunity and effort!

And even if nothing had been squandered, if, in those six years, not a day, not an hour, had been stolen from our work, if we had not opened our hearts to any affections but those that exalt the mind and give serenity to life, a great and dear illusion must still have been lost to us; an illusion that in vanishing has taken with it much of our strength and hope; the illusion of that distant rose-colored horizon, edged with the black profiles of gigantic mountains, legion after legion hurling itself upon the enemy with flying banners and the sound of martial music!

A lost war.

And if we had not lost that illusion, would not some other have vanished in its place?

VI.

I think of myself and say: "How far it is from nineteen to twenty-five!"

Wherever I went, then, I was the youngest, since boys under nineteen don't mix on equal terms with men; and I knew that whoever I met envied me three things: my youth, my hopes, and my light-heartedness. And now, wherever I go, I meet young fellows who look at me and speak to me with the deference shown to an elder brother; and, as I talk to them, I am conscious of making an effort to appear as cheery as they, and even find myself wondering what stuff they are made of.

The other day, looking at a friend's child, a little girl of six, I said to him, half laughing, "Who knows?"

"Isn't there rather too much disparity of age?" he answered.

I was silent, half-startled; then, counting up the years on my fingers, I murmured sadly, "Yes."

At nineteen I could say of any little maid I met, that one day she might become my wife; the rising generation belonged to me; but now there is a part of humanity for which I am already too old!

And the future once an undefined bright background, on which fancy sketched all that was fairest and most desirable, without one warning from the voice of reason: now, clearly outlined and distinctly colored, it takes such precise shape that I can almost guess what it is to be, can see my path traced out for me, and the goal to which it leads. And so, marvels and glories, farewell!

And mankind? Well I never was mistrustful, nor inclined to see the bad rather than the good in human nature; indeed, I have a friend who is so exasperated by my persistent optimism that, when I enlarge upon my affection for my kind, he invariably answers, "Wait till your turn comes!"

And yet, how much is gone already of the naif abandonment of those boyish friendships, of that candid and ready admiration that, like a well-adjusted spring, leapt forth at a touch, even when I heard a stranger

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praised! Two or three disillusionments have sufficed to weaken that spring. Already I begin to question my own enthusiasm, and a rising doubt silences the warm, frank words of affection that once leapt involuntarily to my lips. I read with dry eyes many a book that I used to cry over; when I read poetry my voice trembles less often than it did; my laugh is no longer the sonorous irresistible peal that once echoed through every corner of the house. When I look in the glass is it fancy or reality? I perceive in my face something that was not there six years ago, an indescribable look about the eyes, the brow, the mouth, that is imperceptible to others, but that I see and am troubled by. And I remember Leopardi's words, AT TWENTY-FIVE THE FLOWER OF YOUTH BEGINS TO FADE. What? Am I beginning to fade? Am I on the downward slope? Have I travelled so far already? Why, thousands younger than I have graduated since my day from the college of Modena; I feel them pressing upon me, treading me down, urging me forward. The thought terrifies me. Stop a moment let me draw breath; why must one devour life at this rate? I mean to take my stand here, motionless, firm as a rock; back with you! But the ground is sloping and slippery, my feet slide, there is nothing to catch hold of. Comrades, friends of my youth, come, let us hold fast to each other; let us clasp each other tight; don't let them overthrow us; let us stand fast! Ah, curse it, I feel the earth slipping away under me!

VII.

Well, well—those are the mournful imaginings of rainy days. When the sun reappears, the soul grows clear like the sky, and there succeeds to my brief discouragement a state of mind in which it appears to me so foolish and so cowardly to fret because I see a change in my face, to mourn the careless light-heartedness of my youth, to rebel against the laws of nature in a burst of angry regret, that I am overcome with shame. I rouse myself, I scramble to my feet, I seize hold of my faith, my hopes, my intentions, I set to work again with a resolution full of joyful pride. At such moments I feel strong enough to face the approach of my thirtieth year, to await with serenity disillusionments, white hairs, sorrows, infirmities, and old age, my mind's eye fixed upon a far-off point of light that seems to grow larger as I advance. I march on with renewed courage; and to the noisy and drunken crew calling out to me to join them, I answer, No! and to the knights of the doleful countenance, who shake their heads and say, "What if it were not true?" I answer, without turning my eyes from that distant light, No! and to the grave, proud men who point to their books and writings, and say with a smile of pity and derision, "It is all a dream!" I answer, with my eyes still upon that far-off light, and the great cry of a man who sees a ghost in his path, No! Ah, at such moments, what matters it that I must grow old and die? I toil, I wait, I believe!

VIII.

Most of my classmates have undergone the same change. Their faces have grown older, or sadder, as Leopardi would have us say; but with the faces the souls have grown graver also. I have spoken of certain changes in my friends that saddened me; but there are others which make me glad. Now and then it has happened to me to come across some of the most careless, happy-go-lucky of my classmates, and to be filled with wonder when I hear them speak of their country, of their work, of the duties to be performed, of the future to be prepared for. Owing, perhaps, to the many and great events of these last years, their characters have been suddenly and completely transformed. Some ruling motive ambition, family cares, or the mere instinctive love of study has gathered together and focused their vague thoughts and scattered powers; has brought about the habit of reflection, and turned their thoughts towards the great problem of life; has given to all a purpose, and a path to travel, and left them no time to mourn the vanished past. We have all entered upon our second youth, with some disillusionments, with a little experience, and with the conviction that happiness what little of it is given to us on earth is not obtained by struggling, storming, and clamoring to heaven and earth WE MUST HAVE IT! but is slowly distilled from the inmost depths of the soul by the long persistence of quiet toil. Humble hopes have succeeded to our splendid visions; steady resolves, to our grand designs; and the dazzling vision of war, the goddess promising glory and delirium, has been replaced

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by the image of Italy, our mother, who promises only and it is enough the lofty consolation of having loved and served her.

IX.

Our souls have emerged fortified from the sorrow of the lost war.

One day, surely, Italy will re-echo from end to end with the great cry, "Come!" and we shall spring to our feet, pale and proud, with the answering shout, "We are ready!"

Then, in the streets of our cities, thronged with people, with soldiers, horses, and wagons, amidst the clashing of arms and the blare of trumpets, we classmates shall meet again. I shall see them once more, many of them, perhaps, only for that short hour, some only for a moment. At night, in the torchlit glare of a railway-station, we shall meet again, and greet each other in silence, hand in hand and eye to eye. No shouting, no songs, no joyous clamor, no vision of triumphal marches, no veiling of death's image in the light hopefulness of reunion; we shall say but one word to each other good-bye and that good-bye will be a promise, a vow; that good-bye will mean, "This time, there will be no descending from the mountains; you and I, lad, will be left lying on the summit."

And often, traversing a long expanse of time, I evoke the vision of distant battle-fields on which the lot of Italy is decided. My fancy hastens from valley to valley, from hill to hill; and at all the most difficult passages, at all the posts of danger, I see one of my old classmates, a gray-haired colonel or general, at the head of his regiment or of his brigade; and I love to picture him at the moment when, attacked by a heavy force of the enemy, he directs the defence.

The two sides have joined battle, and from a neighboring height, he observes the fighting below. Poor friend! At that moment, perhaps, life and honor hang in the balance; thirty years of study, of hopes, of sacrifices, are about to be crowned with glory or scattered like a handful of dust down that green slope at his feet it all hangs on a thread. Pale and motionless he stands there watching, the sabre trembling in his convulsive grasp. I am near him, my eye is upon his face, I feel and see and tremble with him, I live his life.

Courage, friend! Your spirit has passed into your men, the fight is theirs, never fear! That uncertain movement over there towards the right wing is but the momentary confusion caused by some inequality of the ground; they are not falling back, man. Listen, the shouts are louder, the firing grows heavier, the last battalion has been thrown into action, all your men are fighting. Ah! how his gaze hurries from one end of the line to the other, how pale he has grown; life seems suspended. What are those distant voices? What flame rushes to his face? What is this smile, this upward glance? Victory! but, by God, man, rein in your horse, look at me here I am, your old classmate who holds out his arms to you and now off, down to the battlefield among your soldiers and God be with you!

He has put his charger to the gallop and disappeared.

And who knows how many of my friends may find themselves some day, at some hour of their lives, face to face with such an ordeal? Who knows how many an act of patriotism will make their names illustrious, how dear to the people some of these names may become? What if some day I were to see the youth who sat next to me in the class-room or at table, or slept beside me in the dormitory, riding through the streets on a white horse, in a general's uniform, covered with flowers and surrounded by rejoicing crowds? And who knows may I not knock at the door of some other, and throw my arms about the pale, sad figure, grown ten years older in a few months; telling him that the popular verdict is unjust, that there are many who know that he is not to blame for the disaster, that sooner or later the excitement will subside, and the victims of the first rash judgment be restored to honor; that his name is still dear and respected, that he must not despond, that he

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must take heart and keep on hoping?

Ah, when I think of the fierce trials that life has in store for many of my classmates, of all that they may do to benefit their country, of all that their glory will cost them; when I, who have left the army, think of all this, I feel that, not to be outdone by my old school-fellows in paying the debt of gratitude that I owe my country, I ought to toil without ceasing, to spend my nights in study, to treasure my youth and strength as a means of sustaining my intellectual effort; that, in order to preach the beauty of goodness, I ought to lead a blameless life; that I ought to keep alive that glowing affection, a spark of which I may sometimes communicate to others; to study children, the people, and the poor, and to write for their benefit; to let no ignoble word fall from my pen, to sacrifice all my inclinations to the common welfare, never to lose heart, never to strive for approval, to hope for nothing and long for nothing but the day on which I may at last say to myself: I have done what I could, my life has not been useless, I am satisfied.

X.

And this is the thought that comes to me in closing: I should like to have before me a lad of seventeen, well-bred and kindly, but ignorant of the human heart, as we all are at that age; and putting a friendly hand on his shoulder, I should like to say to him:

"Do you want to make sure of a peaceful and untroubled future? Treat your friends as considerately as you would a woman, for, believe me, every harsh word or ill-mannered act (however excusable, however long-forgotten) will return some day to pain and trouble you. Recalling my friends after all these years, I remember a quarrel that I had with one of them, a sharp word exchanged with another, the resolve, maintained for many months, not to speak to a third. Puerilities, if you like, and yet how glad I should be not to have to reproach myself with them! And, though I feel sure that they have made no more impression upon others than upon myself, how much I wish for an opportunity of convincing myself of the fact, of dissipating any slight shadow that may have lingered in the minds of my friends!

"When one's youth is almost past, and one thinks of the years that have flown so quickly and of those that will fly faster yet, of the little good one has done and the little there is still time to accomplish, the pride that set one against one's friends seems so petty, ridiculous and contemptible a sentiment, that one longs for the power of returning to the past, of renewing the old discussions in a friendly tone, of extending a conciliatory hand in place of every angry shrug, of seeking out the friends one has offended, looking them in the face and saying, 'Shall by-gones be by-gones, old man?'"

XI.

Dear friends! If only because it was in your company that I first wandered over my country, how could my thoughts cease to seek you out, my heart to desire you?

When, from the ship's deck, I saw the gulf of Naples whiten in the distance, and clasping my hands, laughing and thinking of my mother, I cried out, It is a dream! when, from the summit of the Noviziate pass my gaze for the first time embraced Messina, the straits, the Appennines and the cape of Spartivento, and I said to myself, half-sadly, Here Italy ends; when, from the top of Monte Croce, beyond the vast plain swarming with German regiments, I first beheld the towers of Verona, and stretching out my arms, as though fearful of their vanishing, cried out to them, Wait! when, from the dike of Fusina, I saw Venice, far-off, azure, fantastic, and cried with wet eyes, Heavenly! when Rome, surrounded by the smoke of our batteries, first burst upon me from the height of Monterondo, and I shouted, She is ours! always, everywhere, one of you was beside me, to seize my arm and cry out: How beautiful is Italy! always one of you to mingle your tears, your laughter and your poetry with mine!

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There is not a spot of Italy, not a joyful occurrence, nor profound emotion, which is not associated in my mind with the clank of a sword saying, 'I am here!' and the hand-clasp of one of you, making me pause and wonder what has become of such an one, what he is doing and thinking, and whether he too remembers the good days we spent together.

It may fall to my lot to meet, in the future, many faithful, dear and generous friends, whose smiling images I already picture to myself; but beyond their throng I shall always see your plumes waving and the numbers glittering on your caps; I shall always hurry towards you, crying out: Let us talk of our college days, of our travels, of war, of soldiers, and of Italy!

XII.

We old classmates will many of us doubtless live to see the twentieth century. Strange thought! I know, of course, that the transition from nineteen hundred to nineteen hundred and one will seem as natural as that from ninety-nine to a hundred, or from this year to next. And yet it seems to me that to see the first dawn of the new century will be like reaching the summit of some high mountain, and looking out over new countries and new horizons. I feel as though, that morning, something unexpected and marvellous would be revealed to us; as though there would be a sense almost of terror in finding one's self face to face with it; a sense of having been hurled, by some unseen power, from brink to brink of a measureless abyss.

Idle fancies! I know well enough what we shall be like when that time comes. I see a sitting-room with a fireplace in the corner, or rather many sitting-rooms with many fireplaces, and many old men seated, chin in hand, in arm-chairs near the hearth. Near by stands a table with a lamp on it, surrounded by a circle of children, or of nephews and nieces, who nudge each other and point to their father or uncle, whispering, "Hush he's asleep;" and laughing at the grotesque expression that sleep has given to our wrinkled faces.

And then perhaps we shall wake, and the children will surround us, begging, as usual, for stories of "a long time ago," and asking with eager curiosity, "Uncle, did you ever see General Garibaldi?" "Father, were you ever close to King Victor Emmanuel?" "Grandpapa, did you ever hear Count Cavour speak?"

"Why, yes, child, many and many a time!"

"Oh, do tell us, what were they like? Did they look like their portraits? How did they talk?"

And we shall tell them everything, and gradually, as we talk, our voices will regain their old vigor, our cheeks will glow, and we shall watch with delight the brightening of those eager eyes, the proud uplifting of those innocent brows, and the impatient movement of the little hands, signing to us, at each pause, to go on with the story.

And what will have befallen the world by that time? Will a Victor Emmanuel III. rule over Italy? Will the Bersaglieri be at Trent? Will one of our old friends, attached to the Ministry of the Interior, have been made Governor of Tunis? Will France have passed through another series of empires, republics, communes, and monarchies? Will the threatened invasion of northern barbarians have taken place? Will England also have received her coup-de-grace? Shall we have experimented with a Commune? Will our great poet have been born? The Church have been reformed? Rome rebuilt? Will there be any armies in those days? And we what standing shall we have in our village or town? What shall we have done? How shall we have lived?

Ah, whatever has happened, whatever fate awaits us, if we have worked, and loved, and believed then, when we sit at sunset in the big arm-chair on the terrace, and think of our families, of our friends, of the mountains, of the carnivals, of the Tyrrhenian islands that we dreamed of in our college days, we shall be sad, indeed, at the thought of parting before long from such dear souls and from so beautiful a country; but our

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faces will brighten with a smile serene and quiet as the dawn of a new youth, and tempering the bitterness of farewell with the tacit pledge of reunion.