

A GREAT DAY

EDMONDO DE AMICIS

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A GREAT DAY

BY

EDMONDO DE AMICIS

The Translation by Edith Wharton.

The G's were living in the country, near Florence, when the Italian army began preparations to advance upon Rome. In the family the enterprise was regarded with disapproval. The father, the mother, and the two grown daughters, all ardent Catholics and temperate patriots, talked of moral measures.

"We don't profess to understand anything about politics," Signora G – would say to her friends; "I am especially ignorant; in fact, I am afraid I should find it rather difficult to explain WHY I think as I do. But I can't help it; I have a presentiment. There is something inside me that keeps saying: 'This is not the right way for them to go to Rome; they ought not to go, they must not go!' I remember how things were in forty-eight, and in fifty-nine and sixty; well, in those days I never was frightened, I never had the feeling of anxiety that I have now; I always thought that things would come right in the end. But now, you may say what you please, I see nothing but darkness ahead. You may laugh as much as you like... pray heaven we don't have to cry one of these days! I don't believe that day is so far off."

The only one of the household who thought differently was the son, a lad of twenty, just re-reading his Roman history, and boiling over with excitement. To mention Rome before him was to declare battle, and in one of these conflicts feeling had run so high that it had been unanimously decided not to touch upon the subject in future.

One evening, early in September, one of the official newspapers announced that the Italian troops had actually entered the Papal States. The son was bursting with joy. The father read the article, sat thinking awhile, and then, shaking his head, muttered: "No!" and again: "No!" and a third time: "No!"

"But I beg your pardon, father!" shouted the boy, all aflame.

"Don't let us begin again," the mother gently interposed; and that evening nothing more was said. But the next night something serious happened. The lad, just before going to bed, announced, without preamble, as though he were saying the most natural thing in the world, that he meant to go to Rome with the army.

There was a general outcry of surprise and indignation, followed by a storm of reproaches and threats. No

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decent person would willingly be present at such scenes as were about to be enacted; it was enough that, as Italians, they were all in a measure to blame for what had happened, without deliberately assuming the shame of being an eye-witness; there was nothing one could not forgive in a lad of good family, except (it was his mother who spoke) this craze to go and see A POOR OLD MAN BOMBARDED. A fine war! A glorious triumph, indeed!

When they had ended the lad set his teeth, tore in bits the paper clutched between his fingers, and, lighting a candle, flung out of the room, stamping his feet like an Italian actor representing an angry king.

Half an hour later he stole gently back to the dining-room. His father and mother sat there alone, sad and silent. He asked pardon of his father, who grumblingly shook hands; then he returned to his room, followed by his mother.

"Then we shall hear no more of these ideas?" she tenderly suggested, laying her hands on his shoulders.

He answered her with a kiss.

The next day he crossed the borders of the Papal States.

The discovery of his flight was received with tears, rage, and invectives. They would never consent to see him again; if he came back, they would not even rise from their seats to welcome him; they would not speak to him for a month; they would cut off his allowance; they had a hundred other plans for his discomfiture. With the mother it was only talk; but the father meant what he said. He was a good but hard man, averse to compromises, and violent in his anger; his son knew it and feared him. It was incomprehensible that the lad should have ventured upon such a step.

The news of the 20th of September only increased the resentment of his parents.

"He will see," they muttered. "Only let him try to come back!"

Their words, their gestures, the manner in which they were to receive him, were all thought out and agreed upon: he was to receive a memorable lesson.

On the morning of the 22d they were all seated in the dining-room, reading, when there was a great knock at the door, and the boy, flushed, panting, sunburnt, stood erect and motionless on the threshold.

No one moved.

"What!" cried the boy, extending his arms in amazement, "you haven't heard the news?"

No one answered.

"Hasn't any one told you? Has no one been out from Florence? Are you all in the dark still?"

No one breathed.

"We have heard," one of the girls at length faltered, after exchanging glances with her father, "that Rome was taken "

"What! Is THAT all?"

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"That is all."

"But what a victory! What a victory!" cried the son, with a shout that set them trembling. "So I am the one to tell you of it!"

They sprang up and surrounded him.

"But how is it possible?" he went on, with excited gestures "how is it possible that you haven't heard anything? Have there been no rumors about the neighborhood? Haven't the peasants held a meeting? What is the municipality about? Why, it's inconceivable! Just listen here, come close to me, so I'll tell you the whole story; my heart's going at such a rate that I can hardly speak..."

"But what has happened?"

"Wait! You shan't know yet. You must hear the whole story first, from beginning to end. I want to tell you the thing bit by bit, just as I saw it."

"But WHAT is it? the Roman festival?"

"The PLEBISCITE?"

"The King's arrival?"

"No, no, no! Something much more tremendous!"

"But tell us, tell us!"

"Sit down, lad!"

"But how is it that we haven't heard anything about it?"

"How can I tell? All I know is that bringing you the first news of it is the most glorious thing that's ever happened to me. I reached Florence this morning they knew all about it there, so I rushed straight out here. I fancied that perhaps you mightn't have heard yet I ... I'm all out of breath ..."

"But tell us, tell us quickly!" the mother and daughters cried, drawing their chairs around him. The father remained at a distance.

"You shall hear, mother SUCH things!" the boy began. "Here, come closer to me. Well, you know what happened on the morning of the twenty-first? The rest of the regiments entered; there were the same crowds, the same shouting and music as on the day before. But suddenly, about midday, the noise stopped as if by common consent, first in the Corso, then in the other principal streets, and so, little by little, all over the city. The troops of people began to break up into groups, talking to each other in low voices; then they scattered in all directions, taking leave of each other in a way that made one think they meant to meet again. It seemed as though the signal had been given to prepare for something tremendous. Men said a hasty word to each other in passing and then hurried on, each going his own way. The whole Corso was in movement; people were rushing in and out of the houses, calling out from the street and being answered from the windows; soldiers dashed about as though in answer to a summons; cavalry officers trotted by; men and boys passed with bundles of flags on their shoulders and in their arms, all breathless and hurried, as if the devil were after them. Not knowing a soul, and having no way of finding out what it all meant, I tried to guess what was up from the expression of their faces. They all looked cheerful enough, but not as frantically glad as they had

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been; there was a shade of doubt, of anxiety. One could see they were planning something. From the Corso I wandered on through some of the narrower streets, stopping now and then to watch one of the groups. Everywhere I saw the same thing crowds of people, all in a hurry, all coming and going, with the same air that I had already noticed in the Corso, of concealing from somebody what they were doing, although it was all being done in the open. Knots, bands, hundreds of men and women passed me in silence; they were all going in the same direction, as though to some appointed meeting—place."

"Where were they going?" the father and mother interrupted.

"Wait a minute. I went back to the Corso. As I approached it I heard a deep, continuous murmur of voices, growing louder and louder, like the noise of a great crowd. The Corso was full of people, all standing still and facing toward the Capitol, as though they expected something to come from that direction. From the Piazza del Popolo to the Piazza di Venezia they were jammed so tight that nobody could budge. I heard whispers flying about: 'Now they're coming!' 'They're coming from over there!' 'Who's coming?' 'The main column here's the main column!' 'Here it is!' 'No, it isn't!' 'Yes, it is!' All at once there was a stir in the crowd, and a big shout, 'Here they are!' and down the middle of the street a wide passageway seemed to open of itself, as though to make room for a procession. Every head was uncovered. I fought my way through from the outer edge of the crowd, to get a look at what was coming. I can feel the shiver down my back now! First, a lot of generals in full uniform, and gentlemen in civilian's dress, with the tri-colored scarf; in the midst of them, girls, women, and ragged, tattered men; workmen, peasants, women with babies, soldiers of all arms; smartly dressed ladies, students, whole families clutching hold of each other's hands, for fear of getting lost in the crowd; all jammed together, trampled upon, so that they could barely move; and with it all not a sound but a buzzing, monotonous murmur; silence on both sides of the street; silence in the windows. It was awfully solemn; half strange and half fearful. I felt as if I were in a trance."

"But where were they going to?" his parents and sisters interposed with growing impatience.

"Wait a bit!" he returned. "I fought my way into the thick of it, with the crowds on both sides of the street piling in on top of me. Lord, what a crush! They spread out like a torrent, pouring into every cranny, sweeping people on ahead of them, into shop—doors, into the court—yards of houses, wherever there was a yard of vacant space. As we went on, other streams of people kept surging into the Corso from all the side streets, which were just as closely packed; on we swept from the Capitol; and they said that there were thousands more in the Forum. Hordes kept pouring in from the Piazza di Spagna, from the Via del Babuino, from the Piazza del Popolo. Every one had something in his hand: a wreath of flowers, a branch of olive or laurel, a banner, a rag tied to a stick. Some carried holy images uplifted above their heads; inscriptions, emblems, pictures of the Pope, of the King, of the Princes, of Garibaldi; never under the sun was there such a medley and confusion of people and things! And all the while only that low murmur, and the great multitude moving on with a calmness, a dignity that seemed miraculous. I felt as though I were dreaming!"

They gathered close round him without a word. "Suddenly I noticed that the crowd had turned to the left. Round we all went; very slowly, with the greatest difficulty, shoved, trampled on, knocked about; with our arms pinned to our sides, and hardly able to breathe, we fought our way, street by street, to the little square by the bridge of St. Angelo. The bridge itself was crammed with people; beyond it, there were more crowds, which seemed to stretch all the way to St. Peter's. The right bank of the Tiber swarmed like an ant—hill. Crossing the bridge was a hard job; it took us over a quarter of an hour. The poor devils on each side, in their fear of being pushed over the edge, clutched the parapet madly, and shouted with terror; I believe there were several accidents.

"Well, at last we got across. All the streets leading to the Piazza of St. Peter were choked with human beings. When we reached the foot of one of the two streets that run straight to St. Peter's we heard a great roar, like the noise of the sea in a gale; it seemed to come to us in gusts, now near by, now a long way off. It was the

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noise of the crowd in the square before St. Peter's. We rushed ahead more madly than ever; climbing over each other, carried along, pushed, swept, and dragged, till at last we reached the square. God, if you could have seen it! What a spectacle! The whole huge square was jammed, black, swarming; no longer a square, but an ocean. All around the outer edge, between the four lines of columns, on the steps of the church, in the portico, on the great terraced roof, in the outer galleries of the dome, on the capitals of the columns, on the very pilasters; in the windows of the houses to the right of the square, on the balconies, on the leads, above, below, to the right and to the left, wherever a human being could find foothold, wherever there was some projection to cling to or to dangle from, everywhere there were heads, arms, legs, banners, shouts, gesticulations. The whole of Rome was there."

"Heavens! ... And the Vatican?" the women cried, in a tremble.

"All shut up. You know that a wing of the Vatican overlooks the square, and that the Pope's apartments are in that wing. Every window was closed; it looked like an abandoned palace; like a cold, rigid, impassive face, staring straight ahead with wide-open motionless eyes. The crowd looked up at it with a murmur.

"Over by the church steps I noticed a lot of officers and gentlemen moving about and giving orders, which seemed to be handed on through the crowd. The excitement was increasing. Every head in the square was uncovered; white heads of old men, brown heads of soldiers, fair heads of little children. The sun blazed down on it all. Thousands of shapes, colors, sounds, seemed to undulate and blend; banners, green boughs, fluttering rags, were tossed back and forth as though upon a dancing sea. The crowd seethed and quivered as if the ground underfoot were on fire.

"Suddenly there was a shout that swept over the whole square: 'The boys! The children! Let's have the children!'"

"Then, as if every one were following some concerted plan of action, all the children in the square were lifted up above the crowd, and the men and women who carried them fought a way through to the front of the Vatican. The bigger boys made their own way. Bands of ten and twenty of them, holding each other by the hand, wriggled between people's legs; hundreds of children, some on their own feet, some carried, some pushed, a whole world of little folk, hidden till then in the crowd, suddenly swarmed in one corner of the square; and how the women screamed! 'Take care! Make room! Look out for my child!'"

"Presently there was another shout: 'The women now! The women!' and another shuffling up and settling down of the crowd. Then a third shout, louder than any of the others: 'The army! The troops!' this time. Then came the most indescribable agitation, but underneath it all a sense of order and rapidity; none of the ordinary confusion and delay; every one helped, made way, co-operated; the whole immense multitude seemed to be under orders. Gradually the disturbance ceased, the noise diminished, the gesticulation subsided; and looking about one saw that all the soldiers, women, and children in the crowd had disappeared as if by magic.

"There they all stood, on the right side of the square, divided into three great battalions that extended from the door of St. Peter's to the centre of the colonnade, all facing the Vatican, packed together and motionless. The crowd burst into frantic applause."

"But the Vatican?" the whole family cried out for the third time.

"Shut up and silent as a convent; but wait. Suddenly the applause ceased, and every head turned backward, whispering: 'Silence!' The whisper travelled across the square and down the length of the two streets leading to it; gradually the sound died out, and the crowd became absolutely, incredibly silent: it was supernatural. All at once, in the midst of this silence, we heard a faint mysterious chirping; a vague, diffused sound of voices, that seemed to come from overhead. Gradually it grew louder, and there was an uncertain gathering of

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shrill, discordant tones, now close by, now far off, but growing steadier and more harmonious, until at length it was blent in a single tremulous silvery chant that soared above us like the singing of a choir of angels. Thousands of children were singing the hymn to Pius IX. the hymn of forty–seven."

"Oh, God oh, God!" cried the mother and daughters, with clasped hands.

"That song re–echoed in every heart; it touched something deep down and tender in every one of us. A thrill ran through the crowd; there was a wild waving of arms and hands, as though to take the place of speech; but the only sound was a confused murmur.

"Holy Father,' that murmur seemed to say, 'look at them, listen to them! They are our children, they are your little ones, who are looking for you, who are praying to you, who implore your blessing. Yield to their entreaty; give them your blessing; grant that our religion and our country may dwell together as one faith in our hearts. One word from you, Holy Father, one sign from you, one glance even, promising pardon and peace, and every man of us shall be with you and for you, now and for ever! Look these our children and your little ones!'

"Thousands of banners fluttered in the air, the song ceased, and a deep silence followed."

"Well?" they cried breathlessly.

"Still shut up," the lad answered. "Then the women began to sing. There was a deep thrill in the immense voice that rose; a something that throbs only in the breast of mothers; it seemed a cry rather than a hymn; it was sweet and solemn.

"At first the crowd was motionless; then a wave of excitement passed over it, and the hymn was drowned in a great clamor: 'These are our mothers, these are our wives and sisters; Holy Father, listen to them. They have never known hatred or anger; they have always loved and hoped; all they ask is that you should give them leave to couple your name with that of Italy on their children's lips. Holy Father, one word from you will spare them many cruel doubts and many bitter tears. Give them your blessing, Holy Father!'

The boy's listeners questioned him with look and gesture.

"Still closed," he answered; "still closed. But then a tremendous chant burst out, followed by a wild surging of the crowd: the soldiers were singing. 'These are our soldiers,' the people cried; 'they shall be yours, Holy Father. They come from the fields and the workshops; they will keep watch at your door, Holy Father, they will attend upon your steps. They were born under your rule, as children they heard your glorious cry for liberty, they fought the stranger in your name and in that of their king; in the hour of danger, you will find them close about your throne, ready to die for you. One word, Holy Father, and these swords, these breasts, this flesh and blood is yours! They ask your blessing on their country, Holy Father, they ask you to repeat your own glorious words!'

"A window in the Vatican opened. The song ceased, the shouts died out silence. There was not a soul in the window. For a few seconds the immense multitude seemed to stop breathing. It seemed as though something moved behind the window as though at the back of the room a shadow appeared and then vanished. Then we fancied that we caught a glimpse of people moving to and fro, and heard a vague sound. Every face was turned towards the window, every eye was fixed upon it. Suddenly, as if by inspiration, every arm in the multitude was stretched out towards the palace; mothers lifted their children above their heads, soldiers swung their caps on the points of their bayonets, every banner was shaken out, and a hundred thousand voices burst into one tremendous shout, 'Viva! Viva! Viva!' At the window of the Vatican something light–colored appeared, wavered, fluttered in the air. God in heaven!" cried the boy, with his arms about his mother's neck,

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"it was the flag of Italy!"

The delight, the joy, the enthusiasm which greeted his words are indescribable. The lad had spoken with so much warmth, had been so carried away by his imagination, that he had not perceived that, gradually, as the story proceeded, he had passed from fact to fiction; and his eyes were wet, his voice shook, with the spell of his hallucination. His words carried conviction, and not a doubt clouded the happiness of his listeners. They laughed and cried and kissed each other, feeling themselves suddenly released from all their doubts and scruples, from all the miserable conflicts of conscience that had tortured them as Italians and as Catholics! The reconciliation between Church and State! The dream of so many years! What peace it promised, what a future of love and harmony! What a sense of freedom and security!

"Thank God, thank God!" the mother cried, sinking into a chair, worn out by her emotions. And then, in a moment or two, they were all at the lad again, clamoring for fresh details.

"Is it really true?"

"Haven't you dreamed it?"

"Go on, tell us everything. Tell us about the Pope, about the crowd, about what happened next"...

"What happened next?" the boy began again, in a tired voice. "I hardly know. There was such an uproar, such confusion, such an outburst of frenzy, that the mere recollection of it makes my brain reel. All I saw was a vortex of arms and flags, and the breath was almost knocked out of me by a thundering blow on the chest. After a while, I got out of the thick of it, and plunged into one of the streets leading to the bridge of St. Angelo. People were still pouring into the piazza from Borgo Pio with frantic shouts. I heard afterwards that the crowd tried to break into the Vatican; the soldiers had to keep them back, first breast to breast, then with blows, and then with their bayonets. They say that some people were suffocated in the press. No one knows yet what happened inside the Vatican; there was a rumor that the Pope had given his blessing from the window but I didn't see him. I was almost dead when I got to the bridge. The news of what had taken place had already spread over the whole city, and from every direction crowds were still pouring towards the Vatican. Detachments of cavalry went by me at a trot; orderlies and aides-de-camps carrying orders dashed along the streets. Hearing their shouts, the people in the windows shouted back at them. Decrepit old men, sick people, women with babies in their arms, swarmed on the terraces, poured out of the houses, questioning, wondering, embracing one another... At last I got to the Corso. At that minute there was a tremendous report from the direction of the Pincio, another from Porta Pia, a third from San Pancrazio: all the batteries of the Italian army were saluting the Pope. Soon afterwards the bells of the Capitol began to ring; then, one after another, a hundred churches chimed in. The crowds of Borgo Pio surged frantically back towards the left bank of the Tiber, invading the streets, the squares, the houses, stripping the coverings from the papal escutcheons, carrying in triumph busts of Pius IX., portraits and banners. Thousands assembled with frantic cheers before the palaces of the Roman nobles who are known for their devotion to the Holy See. In answer to the cheers, the owners of the houses appeared on their balconies and unfurled the Italian flag.

"Wait a minute, I'm out of breath"...

As soon as he had recovered his breath he was assailed with fresh questions.

"Well, and what then? And the Vatican ? The Pope ?"

"I don't know. But Rome that night... how can I ever tell you how beautiful, how great, how marvellous it was! The night was perfectly clear, and I don't believe such an illumination was ever seen since the world began. The Corso was on fire; the churches were jammed with people, and there was preaching in every one

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of them. The streets were full of music, dancing, and singing; people harangued the crowds in the cafes and the theatres.

"I wanted to see St. Peter's again. There had been a rumor that His Holiness needed rest, and Borgo Pio was as still as it is on the stillest night. The piazza was full of moonlight. A silent throng was gathered about the two fountains and on the steps of the church. Many were sitting down, many stretched at full length on the ground; the greater number had fallen asleep, worn out by the fatigue and excitement of the day; women, soldiers, children, lay huddled together in a confused heap. Hundreds of others were on their knees, and sentinels of all the different corps moved about here and there, with little flags and crosses fastened to the barrels of their guns. The ground was strewn with flags, foliage, flowers, and hats lost in the crush; the windows of the Vatican were lit up; there was not a sound to be heard, the crowd seemed to be holding its breath.

"I turned away, beside myself with the thought of all that I had seen, of the effect that it would produce in Italy, and all over the world; of what you would all say to it, and you most of all, father! I found myself at the station without knowing how I had got there. It was full of noise and confusion. I jumped on to the train, we started, and here I am. The news reached Florence last night; they say the excitement was indescribable; the King has left for Rome; the news is all over the world by this time!"

He sank into a chair and sat silent, as though his breath had failed him. Then he sprang up and rushed out to intercept the papers, which usually reached the villa at eleven o'clock in the morning.

In this way he succeeded in maintaining the blissful delusion until evening. The dinner was full of gayety, the lad continued to pour out detail after detail, and his listeners to heap benediction upon benediction.

Suddenly a hurried step was heard on the stairs, and the bell rang violently. The door opened, and a tall, pale priest, with a drawn mouth, appeared on the threshold. He was a recent acquaintance of the family, who felt no great sympathy for him, but who received him courteously more out of respect for his cloth than out of regard for his merits.

As he entered, all but the son sprang up and surrounded him with excited exclamations.

"Well, have you heard the news? Thank God, it's all ended! The hand of God is in it! What do you think of it all? Tell us, let us hear your opinion!"

"But what news?" asked the priest, looking from one to the other with astonished eyes.

In wild haste, and all speaking at once, they poured out the story of the festival, the forgiveness, the reconciliation.

The priest stared at them, with the look of a man who finds himself unexpectedly surrounded by lunatics; then, with a withering glance at the boy, and a smile of malignant triumph

"Luckily," he said, "there is not a word of truth in it!"

"Not a word of truth in it?" they clamored, turning upon their informant.

The boy, unmoved by their agitation, returned the priest's look half– scornfully, half–sadly.

"Your reverence, don't say fortunately. Since you are an Italian, say rather, 'Alas, that it is not so!'"

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For a moment the others stood aghast; then, angered, as people will be, rather against those who undeceive them than against those who delude them, they turned towards the priest, involuntarily echoing the boy's words: "He's right, your reverence! Say rather, 'Alas, that it is not so!'"

The priest pointed to his own breast with a long knotty finger.

"I?" he exclaimed bitterly, "never!"

At these words, the boy's father, rudely roused from his mood of tender exaltation, and bursting, after his wont, into sudden fury, stretched his arm towards the priest, with a cry that rang through the room like a pistol-shot: "Out of my house this instant!"

The priest stalked out, slamming the door. The lad's arms were about his father's neck; and the old man, laying his hands on his son's head, said gently: "I forgive you."