

**ГЕНРИ
ДЖЕЙМС**

THE DIARY OF
A MAN OF
FIFTY

Генри Джеймс

The Diary of a Man of Fifty

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Henry James

The Diary of a Man of Fifty

THE DIARY OF A MAN OF FIFTY

by Henry James

Florence, *April 5th*, 1874.—They told me I should find Italy greatly changed; and in seven-and-twenty years there is room for changes. But to me everything is so perfectly the same that I seem to be living my youth over again; all the forgotten impressions of that enchanting time come back to me. At the moment they were powerful enough; but they afterwards faded away. What in the world became of them? Whatever becomes of such things, in the long intervals of consciousness?

Where do they hide themselves away? in what unvisited cupboards and crannies of our being do they preserve themselves? They are like the lines of a letter written in sympathetic ink; hold the letter to the fire for a while and the grateful warmth brings out the invisible words. It is the warmth of this yellow sun of Florence that has been restoring the text of my own young romance; the thing has been lying before me today as a clear, fresh page. There have been moments during the last ten years when I have felt so portentously old, so fagged and finished, that I should have taken as a very bad joke any intimation that this present sense of juvenility was still in store for me. It won't last, at any rate; so I had better make the best of it. But I confess it surprises me. I have led too serious a life; but that perhaps, after all, preserves one's youth. At all events, I have travelled too far, I have worked too hard, I have lived in brutal climates and associated with tiresome people. When a man has reached his fifty-second year without being, materially, the worse for wear—when he has fair health, a fair fortune, a tidy conscience and a complete exemption from embarrassing relatives—I suppose he is bound, in delicacy, to write himself happy. But I confess I shirk this obligation. I have not been miserable; I won't go so far as to say that—or at least as to write it. But happiness—positive happiness—would have been something different. I don't know that it would have been better, by all measurements—that it would have left me better off at the present time. But it certainly would have made this difference—that I should not have been reduced, in pursuit of pleasant images, to disinter a buried episode of more than a quarter of a century ago. I should have found entertainment more—what shall I call it?—more contemporaneous. I should have had a wife and children, and I should not be in the way of making, as the French say, infidelities to the present. Of course it's a great gain to have had an escape, not to have committed an act of thumping folly; and I suppose that, whatever serious step one might have taken at twenty-five, after a struggle, and with a violent effort, and however one's conduct might appear to be justified by events, there would always remain a certain element of regret; a certain sense of loss lurking in the sense of gain; a tendency to wonder, rather wishfully, what *might* have been. What might have been, in this case, would, without doubt, have been very sad, and what has been has been very cheerful and comfortable; but there are nevertheless two or three questions I might ask myself. Why, for instance, have I never married—why have I never been able to care for any woman as I cared for that one? Ah, why are the mountains blue and why is the sunshine warm? Happiness mitigated by impertinent conjectures—that's about my ticket.

6th.—I knew it wouldn't last; it's already passing away. But I have spent a delightful day; I have been strolling all over the place. Everything reminds me of something else, and yet of itself at the same time; my imagination makes a great circuit and comes back to the starting-point. There is that well-remembered odour of spring in the air, and the flowers, as they used to be, are gathered into great sheaves and stacks, all along the rugged base of the Strozzi Palace. I wandered for an hour in the Boboli Gardens; we went there several times together. I remember all those days individually;

they seem to me as yesterday. I found the corner where she always chose to sit—the bench of sun-warmed marble, in front of the screen of ilex, with that exuberant statue of Pomona just beside it.

The place is exactly the same, except that poor Pomona has lost one of her tapering fingers. I sat there for half an hour, and it was strange how near to me she seemed. The place was perfectly empty—that is, it was filled with *her*. I closed my eyes and listened; I could almost hear the rustle of her dress on the gravel. Why do we make such an ado about death? What is it, after all, but a sort of refinement of life? She died ten years ago, and yet, as I sat there in the sunny stillness, she was a palpable, audible presence. I went afterwards into the gallery of the palace, and wandered for an hour from room to room. The same great pictures hung in the same places, and the same dark frescoes arched above them. Twice, of old, I went there with her; she had a great understanding of art. She understood all sorts of things. Before the Madonna of the Chair I stood a long time. The face is not a particle like hers, and yet it reminded me of her. But everything does that. We stood and looked at it together once for half an hour; I remember perfectly what she said.

8th.—Yesterday I felt blue—blue and bored; and when I got up this morning I had half a mind to leave Florence. But I went out into the street, beside the Arno, and looked up and down—looked at the yellow river and the violet hills, and then decided to remain—or rather, I decided nothing. I simply stood gazing at the beauty of Florence, and before I had gazed my fill I was in good-humour again, and it was too late to start for Rome. I strolled along the quay, where something presently happened that rewarded me for staying. I stopped in front of a little jeweller's shop, where a great many objects in mosaic were exposed in the window; I stood there for some minutes—I don't know why, for I have no taste for mosaic. In a moment a little girl came and stood beside me—a little girl with a frowsy Italian head, carrying a basket. I turned away, but, as I turned, my eyes happened to fall on her basket. It was covered with a napkin, and on the napkin was pinned a piece of paper, inscribed with an address. This address caught my glance—there was a name on it I knew. It was very legibly written—evidently by a scribe who had made up in zeal what was lacking in skill. *Contessa Salvi-Scarabelli, Via Ghibellina*—so ran the superscription; I looked at it for some moments; it caused me a sudden emotion. Presently the little girl, becoming aware of my attention, glanced up at me, wondering, with a pair of timid brown eyes.

“Are you carrying your basket to the Countess Salvi?” I asked.

The child stared at me. “To the Countess Scarabelli.”

“Do you know the Countess?”

“Know her?” murmured the child, with an air of small dismay.

“I mean, have you seen her?”

“Yes, I have seen her.” And then, in a moment, with a sudden soft smile—“*E bella!*” said the little girl. She was beautiful herself as she said it.

“Precisely; and is she fair or dark?”

The child kept gazing at me. “*Bionda—bionda,*” she answered, looking about into the golden sunshine for a comparison.

“And is she young?”

“She is not young—like me. But she is not old like—like—”

“Like me, eh? And is she married?”

The little girl began to look wise. “I have never seen the Signor Conte.”

“And she lives in Via Ghibellina?”

“*Sicuro.* In a beautiful palace.”

I had one more question to ask, and I pointed it with certain copper coins. “Tell me a little—is she good?”

The child inspected a moment the contents of her little brown fist. “It's you who are good,” she answered.

“Ah, but the Countess?” I repeated.

My informant lowered her big brown eyes, with an air of conscientious meditation that was inexpressibly quaint. “To me she appears so,” she said at last, looking up.

“Ah, then, she must be so,” I said, “because, for your age, you are very intelligent.” And having delivered myself of this compliment I walked away and left the little girl counting her *soldi*.

I walked back to the hotel, wondering how I could learn something about the Contessa Salvi-Scarabelli. In the doorway I found the innkeeper, and near him stood a young man whom I immediately perceived to be a compatriot, and with whom, apparently, he had been in conversation.

“I wonder whether you can give me a piece of information,” I said to the landlord. “Do you know anything about the Count Salvi-Scarabelli?”

The landlord looked down at his boots, then slowly raised his shoulders, with a melancholy smile. “I have many regrets, dear sir—”

“You don’t know the name?”

“I know the name, assuredly. But I don’t know the gentleman.”

I saw that my question had attracted the attention of the young Englishman, who looked at me with a good deal of earnestness. He was apparently satisfied with what he saw, for he presently decided to speak.

“The Count Scarabelli is dead,” he said, very gravely.

I looked at him a moment; he was a pleasing young fellow. “And his widow lives,” I observed, “in Via Ghibellina?”

“I daresay that is the name of the street.” He was a handsome young Englishman, but he was also an awkward one; he wondered who I was and what I wanted, and he did me the honour to perceive that, as regards these points, my appearance was reassuring. But he hesitated, very properly, to talk with a perfect stranger about a lady whom he knew, and he had not the art to conceal his hesitation.

I instantly felt it to be singular that though he regarded me as a perfect stranger, I had not the same feeling about him. Whether it was that I had seen him before, or simply that I was struck with his agreeable young face—at any rate, I felt myself, as they say here, in sympathy with him. If I have seen him before I don’t remember the occasion, and neither, apparently, does he; I suppose it’s only a part of the feeling I have had the last three days about everything. It was this feeling that made me suddenly act as if I had known him a long time.

“Do you know the Countess Salvi?” I asked.

He looked at me a little, and then, without resenting the freedom of my question—“The Countess Scarabelli, you mean,” he said.

“Yes,” I answered; “she’s the daughter.”

“The daughter is a little girl.”

“She must be grown up now. She must be—let me see—close upon thirty.”

My young Englishman began to smile. “Of whom are you speaking?”

“I was speaking of the daughter,” I said, understanding his smile. “But I was thinking of the mother.”

“Of the mother?”

“Of a person I knew twenty-seven years ago—the most charming woman I have ever known.

She was the Countess Salvi—she lived in a wonderful old house in Via Ghibellina.”

“A wonderful old house!” my young Englishman repeated.

“She had a little girl,” I went on; “and the little girl was very fair, like her mother; and the mother and daughter had the same name—Bianca.” I stopped and looked at my companion, and he blushed a little. “And Bianca Salvi,” I continued, “was the most charming woman in the world.” He blushed a little more, and I laid my hand on his shoulder. “Do you know why I tell you this? Because you remind me of what I was when I knew her—when I loved her.” My poor young Englishman gazed at me with a sort of embarrassed and fascinated stare, and still I went on. “I say that’s the reason I told you this—but you’ll think it a strange reason. You remind me of my younger self. You

needn't resent that—I was a charming young fellow. The Countess Salvi thought so. Her daughter thinks the same of you.”

Instantly, instinctively, he raised his hand to my arm. “Truly?”

“Ah, you are wonderfully like me!” I said, laughing. “That was just my state of mind. I wanted tremendously to please her.” He dropped his hand and looked away, smiling, but with an air of ingenuous confusion which quickened my interest in him. “You don't know what to make of me,” I pursued. “You don't know why a stranger should suddenly address you in this way and pretend to read your thoughts. Doubtless you think me a little cracked. Perhaps I am eccentric; but it's not so bad as that. I have lived about the world a great deal, following my profession, which is that of a soldier. I have been in India, in Africa, in Canada, and I have lived a good deal alone. That inclines people, I think, to sudden bursts of confidence. A week ago I came into Italy, where I spent six months when I was your age. I came straight to Florence—I was eager to see it again, on account of associations. They have been crowding upon me ever so thickly. I have taken the liberty of giving you a hint of them.” The young man inclined himself a little, in silence, as if he had been struck with a sudden respect. He stood and looked away for a moment at the river and the mountains. “It's very beautiful,” I said.

“Oh, it's enchanting,” he murmured.

“That's the way I used to talk. But that's nothing to you.”

He glanced at me again. “On the contrary, I like to hear.”

“Well, then, let us take a walk. If you too are staying at this inn, we are fellow-travellers. We will walk down the Arno to the Cascine. There are several things I should like to ask of you.”

My young Englishman assented with an air of almost filial confidence, and we strolled for an hour beside the river and through the shady alleys of that lovely wilderness. We had a great deal of talk: it's not only myself, it's my whole situation over again.

“Are you very fond of Italy?” I asked.

He hesitated a moment. “One can't express that.”

“Just so; I couldn't express it. I used to try—I used to write verses. On the subject of Italy I was very ridiculous.”

“So am I ridiculous,” said my companion.

“No, my dear boy,” I answered, “we are not ridiculous; we are two very reasonable, superior people.”

“The first time one comes—as I have done—it's a revelation.”

“Oh, I remember well; one never forgets it. It's an introduction to beauty.”

“And it must be a great pleasure,” said my young friend, “to come back.”

“Yes, fortunately the beauty is always here. What form of it,” I asked, “do you prefer?”

My companion looked a little mystified; and at last he said, “I am very fond of the pictures.”

“So was I. And among the pictures, which do you like best?”

“Oh, a great many.”

“So did I; but I had certain favourites.”

Again the young man hesitated a little, and then he confessed that the group of painters he preferred, on the whole, to all others, was that of the early Florentines.

I was so struck with this that I stopped short. “That was exactly my taste!” And then I passed my hand into his arm and we went our way again.

We sat down on an old stone bench in the Cascine, and a solemn blank-eyed Hermes, with wrinkles accentuated by the dust of ages, stood above us and listened to our talk.

“The Countess Salvi died ten years ago,” I said.

My companion admitted that he had heard her daughter say so.

“After I knew her she married again,” I added. “The Count Salvi died before I knew her—a couple of years after their marriage.”

“Yes, I have heard that.”

“And what else have you heard?”

My companion stared at me; he had evidently heard nothing.

“She was a very interesting woman—there are a great many things to be said about her. Later, perhaps, I will tell you. Has the daughter the same charm?”

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