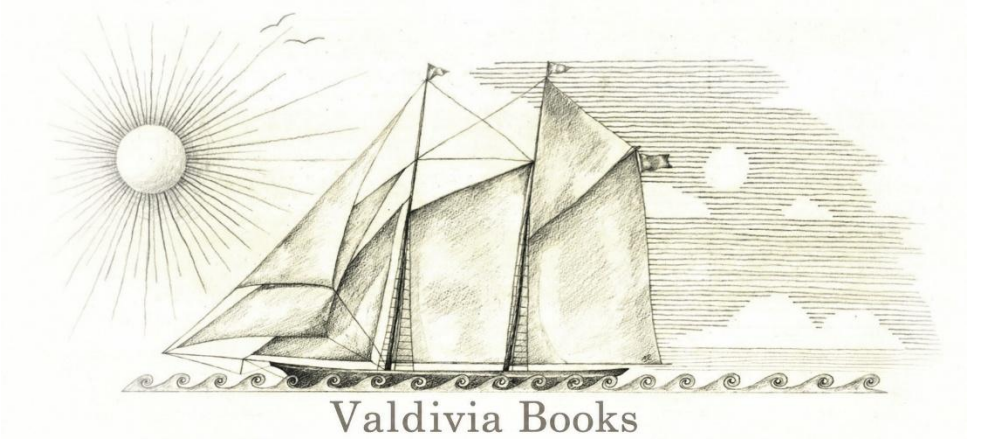


Memoirs of a 20th Century Gentleman

Reading Sample —

Part One: Innocence

by

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This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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Prologue

Sat, on one of the antique chairs pondering on all the things it must have seen over the years since the 19th Century, taking a little pause as I glanced slowly, deliberately, from one room to the next, I suddenly saw Charlie swinging around the corner of the end of the hall at a speed which defied physics; not that that there was much mass to take into account!

She managed to get to me before I had finished standing up; my God that girl was fast.

"Dad, Dad we're off to the lake so I'm telling you now…yeah? Love you…bye."

And she was gone again, as fast as she had appeared. Had I ever been like that, that fast, full of life and impetuous self-belief?

"Oh! I forgot…"

I jumped right out of my own soul; Charlie had, somehow, in that infinitesimal amount of time, come back through the French windows and down the hall, managing to run up behind me unnoticed. And worse still, while I had still been musing after her in the other direction.

God, I was old! 'JESUS CHRIST girl! What are you…?'

"I forgot something."

'What?'

“This!” She stood up on her tip-toes so she could pull me down in order to plant a little peck on my cheek. She was always like that, since a baby, everything on her terms.

“Play British BullDog with us later? Old School rules?”

‘More like geriatric!’

“Hey” Nudging me in the arm. “Know what would happen to someone talking about my Dad like that? Keep on going and I’ll show you.”

She displayed one of her many learnt opening positions which would, I can only grimace at to myself, lead to me prostrate, cheek pressed hard on the cold quarry tiled floor in seconds.

‘Okay, okay. I’ve got some work to do in the study but I’ll meet you on the lawn later?’

“You got it Pops!”

Another lightning kiss on the other cheek, all smiles, and with a flash of those crystal clear eyes she was gone. I could see the white curtains blowing as if a hurricane had passed by rather than a slip of a girl. I made my way to the study.

After about ten minutes spent tidying things which were already perfectly tidy, checking my different pens, paper, lining up the few books out on the side, I finally looked over at the laptop on my desk. With a sigh of resignation I took one look around the room.

I had achieved most of the goals which had remained with me down the years, but certainly never in the way I had imagined or planned; as is often the way with Life. After all, you have to admit that Life's sense of humour IS something to behold.

Very different to my visions of how I wanted my life to be over the years; from my first yearnings for a family, running a Tall Ship, to a library of our favourite books covering the panelled walls.

I opened up the laptop and began writing.

The final chapter.

An idea so hard, so impossible to comprehend for so long; yearned for during times of stress, strife and the never-ending struggle. Even that was funny now, how when I had first sent the submission pack to prospective literary agents and publishers, I had likened my reader experience to the boy from 'The Never-Ending Story'; sneaking off somewhere to be alone with the book.

… It didn't take long to write the chapter. After all, it wasn't long; and it was one of the first conceived…just in case, so I had thought when I kept passing out from Pneumonia, my third strike in as many years.

This next part, though, was a different fish altogether. The hardest thing to write of all, partly because of what it signified, but also because I hated making mistakes; not that I hadn't made enough over the years to qualify as an Olympic champion, if mistake-making was an officially recognised sport.

It had taken three long months of searching before I had finally realised that if I was to truly get the cover design I wanted then my beautiful, endlessly talented wife was the only person who could make my thoughts a reality.

So having found the perfect leather bound journal, I had watched in fascination as slowly and painstakingly the mermaid across the cover sitting under a radiant sun had come to life.

I unlocked and opened the desk drawer, and pulled out the package. It was wrapped in tissue paper, and as I gently opened each layer exposing one of the most treasured items in my life, or the first moments of my afterlife, I suddenly remembered something I had written years ago; what was it?

"Glistening like treasure of old" Yes, it felt like that as I opened it and beheld what it meant to me, to my daughter one day, the solemn purpose I was about to give it.

I should explain that I would never expect kids to follow anything but their own path. As I see it, my job as a father is simply to make sure they're strong enough, and ready for the World. After all, aim for the moon and when you miss you'll be among the stars!

To face their own fears and challenges, triumphs and disasters while each time standing tall and ready for the next one. Because if there's one thing I know, you have to get back up.

From the word go I instilled into my daughter the following:

"What do you do if you fall down?"

‘Get back up.’

“And then if you fall down again?”

‘Get back up again.’

“And what if someone comes along and pushes you down?”

‘Get back up.’

“But what if they then push you down again?”

‘I stand back up and go: “RAAAAAAAAGGGHHHH”!’

“That’s my girl xxx”

This was it, the final piece. Such a long time, and what a journey, all leading to this point in time and space; then I can rest, but always with the fear of what peace and rest might mean to my tired soul.

I hear my wife’s voice in my mind: “Just breathe…shhh, there you go, just breathe.”

As I do, I delve for anything to take my thoughts away from that unanswerable question which has tortured me for years; how do I function properly, let it all go. Simply live my life in peace, to be at one with everything; to make the darkness and happiness exist together.

I picked up the fountain pen I had purchased for the task. Even now I can’t help but smile as I remember the attitude the sales assistant had assumed on that unfortunate day, for her! The

look on her face as I had replied in a matter of fact manner to her impertinent question:

“To write a final farewell note to my young daughter before I die.”

I know I shouldn’t have, but it’s nice to mix things up every once in a while; to remind myself I’m still alive, still Me; whatever that is, or means.

I guess in the quantum universe I am all things: loved, hated, and feared. A lot of people are confused by me; but I like that, to shift the ground under someone’s feet to see how they react. I’ve often wondered if it’s arrogance or just an innocent way to pass the time when bored in public.

I took out the pen, filled it from a bottle of violet-blue ink, tested on the blotting pad and opened up the journal, beautifully bound in leather, the cover design, wrapping the book as one beautiful illustration, of the mermaid below her radiant sun.

Carefully I began writing on the first inside cover page, I had planned this meticulously over the last years, knew exactly which text I would cite; eventually, after much deliberation, I had decided to change the last line; this is the 21st Century after all, as everyone keeps reminding me.

I knew these words in my soul; of all else I have ever read, these are the words for Me; my personal philosophy, my Psalm.

Each time I read it, it makes my soul weep, as over each line, a chapter of these memoirs comes flooding back; and how, even

after all these years I still make the same mistakes, to fail only to have to get back up and carry on.

But what better to leave for all time for my daughter to ponder over, than what I have, as so many others did long before me, for so many years?

I steadied my hand and began:

Rudyard Kipling 1865-1936

"IF you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
' Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it;
And what's more, you'll be a hell of a Human little one!"

My Beautiful baby girl,

When you receive this I will be gone.

It was my time, don't be sad for me and don't wallow in self-pity; it's not our way.

Love your Mother, be kind to her and never ever forget she knows best.

Trust me on that one!

My story has run its course, and now the time has come for yours to take the lime light.

I know you'll do just fine; you have always been strong from your first day so small in my arms.

But, just in case I will never be far away, the whisper in the wind, a fleeting feeling; I will always be there with you, whenever you need me.

So now it's over to you. Your story now. It can be whatever you want it to be – but make it yours!

Never give up, never compromise your soul, and always listen to that voice inside – ignore it at your peril!

If it helps in any way, I leave here with only a warm feeling of contentment to take with me; my time with you only life fulfilling.

I love you beyond your greatest imaginings.

Forever your…

…Loving father xxxxx

Carefully, on the first main page I printed:
MY NAME IS CHARLIE AND THIS IS MY STORY…

As I wrapped the journal back up, and locked it back in the desk, ready for when the time came.

The clock chimed four o'clock, and, as if on cue came the fatal cry "Bulldogs, Bulldogs, came out or be found and shamed!"

But as I walked through the windows, the light so glaringly bright after the cool of the study, I remembered that first morning in Saudi Arabia. And as the light adjusted and settled in my eyes I saw Charlie running across the lawn, squealing being chased by her mother.

I thought:

'…whatever, whenever, however…I'm ready.'

'After all, I'm the luckiest man in the world!'

I smiled, and was happy.

THE END

Of course, that's not the end. But right now we don't know that. Right now we're at the beginning, and I wonder about You, Dear Reader, that's right – YOU!

Yes, I'm talking to You, directly through the pages in this book. Boo!

Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is James, and now we're together, like a Vulcan mind-meld, you'll never forget me.

In this moment, only You & I exist. It's essential that I have your mind and soul in my hands, to speak to every part of You, not only yourself right now, in your conscious day-in, day-out normal existence; but more importantly, to the true self inside, which everyone carries in them, your real and secret self. The 'self' that has the episodes and stories, the experiences you've never shared with anyone; You know exactly what I mean.

Together we're going to open them up, relive and rake over a few of those many experiences; You and I. I'll do you a deal: I'll retell my story with absolute honesty, however embarrassing, and You be honest with yours; after all, Your secrets will always be safe between the pages of these books.

Just remember: You can close these pages at any point, put me down or lock me in a cupboard for years, or even throw me into the sea like my ashes will be, or were.