

**THE MAKERS  
OF  
MODERN ROME**

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THE MAKERS OF MODERN ROME

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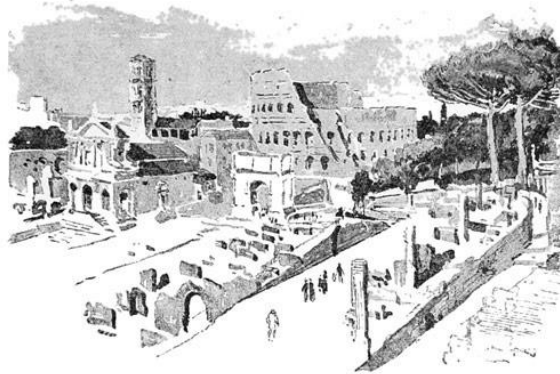
**POPE GREGORY.**  
*Frontispiece.*

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## PREFACE.

Nobody will expect in this book, or from me, the results of original research, or a settlement—if any settlement is ever possible—of vexed questions which have occupied the gravest students. An individual glance at the aspect of these questions which most clearly presents itself to a mind a little exercised in the aspects of humanity, but not trained in the ways of learning, is all I attempt or desire. This humble endeavour has been conscientious at least. The work has been much interrupted by sorrow and suffering, on which account, for any slips of hers, the writer asks the indulgence of her unknown friends.

BOOK I.  
HONOURABLE WOMEN NOT A  
FEW.



THE COLOSSEUM.

**BOOK I.**  
**HONOURABLE WOMEN NOT A**  
**FEW.**



## CHAPTER I.

### ROME IN THE FOURTH CENTURY.

There is no place in the world of which it is less necessary to attempt description (or of which so many descriptions have been attempted) than the once capital of that world, the supreme and eternal city, the seat of empire, the home of the conqueror, the greatest human centre of power and influence which our race has ever known. Its history is unique and its position. Twice over in circumstances and by means as different as can be imagined it has conquered and held subject the world. All that was known to man in their age gave tribute and acknowledgment to the Cæsars; and an ever-widening circle, taking in countries and races unknown to the Cæsars, have looked to the spiritual sovereigns who succeeded them as to the first and highest of authorities on earth. The reader knows, or at least is assisted on all hands to have some idea and conception of the classical city—to be citizens of which was the aim of the whole world's ambition, and whose institutions and laws, and even its architecture and domestic customs, were the only rule of civilisation—with its noble and grandiose edifices, its splendid streets, the magnificence and largeness of its life; while on the other hand most people are able to form some idea of what was the Rome of the Popes, the superb yet squalid mediæval city with its great palaces and its dens of poverty, and that conjunction of exuberance and want which does not strike the eye while the bulk of a population remains in a state of slavery. But there is a period between, which has not attracted much attention from English writers, and which the reader passes by as a time in which there is little desirable to dwell upon, though it is in reality the moment of

transition when the old is about to be replaced by the new, and when already the energy and enthusiasm of a new influence is making its appearance among the tragic dregs and abysses of the past. An ancient civilisation dying in the impotence of luxury and wealth from which all active power or influence over the world had departed, and a new and profound internal revolt, breaking up its false calm from within, before the raging forces of another rising power had yet begun to thunder at its gates without—form however a spectacle full of interest, especially when the scene of so many conflicts is traversed and lighted up by the most lifelike figures, and has left its record, both of good and evil, in authentic and detailed chronicles, full of individual character and life, in which the men and women of the age stand before us, occupied and surrounded by circumstances which are very different from our own, yet linked to us by that unfailing unity of human life and feeling which makes the farthest off foreigner a brother, and the most distant of our primeval predecessors like a neighbour of to-day.

The circumstances of Rome in the middle and end of the fourth century were singular in every point of view. With all its prestige and all its memories, it was a city from which power and the dominant forces of life had faded. The body was there, the great town with its high places made to give law and judgment to the world, even the officials and executors of the codes which had dispensed justice throughout the universe; but the spirit of dominion and empire had passed away. A great aristocracy, accustomed to the first place everywhere, full of wealth, full of leisure, remained; but with nothing to do to justify this greatness, nothing but luxury, the prize and accompaniment of it, now turned into its sole object and meaning. The patrician class had grown by

use, by the high capability to fill every post and lead every expedition which they had constantly shown, which was their original cause and the reason of their existence, into a position of unusual superiority and splendour. But that reason had died away, the empire had departed from them, the world had a new centre: and the sons of the men who had conducted all the immense enterprises of Rome were left behind with the burden of their great names, and the weight of their great wealth, and nothing to do but to enjoy and amuse themselves: no vocations to fulfil, no important public functions to occupy their time and their powers. Such a position is perhaps the most dreadful that can come to any class in the history of a nation. Great and irresponsible wealth, the supremacy of high place, without those bonds of practical affairs which, in the case of all rulers—even of estates or of factories—preserve the equilibrium of humanity, are instruments of degradation rather than of elevation. To have something to do for it, something to do with it, is the condition which alone makes boundless wealth wholesome. And this had altogether failed in the imperial city. Pleasure and display had taken the place of work and duty. Rome had no longer any imperial affairs in hand. Her day was over: the absence of a court and all its intrigues might have been little loss to any community—but that those threads of universal dominion which had hitherto occupied them had been transferred to other hands, and that all the struggles, the great questions, the causes, the pleas, the ordinances of the world were now decided and given forth at Constantinople, was ruin to the once masters of the world. It was worse than destruction, a more dreadful overthrow than anything that the Goths and barbarians could bring—not death which brings a satisfaction of all necessities in making an end of them—but that death in life which fills men's blood with cold.

The pictures left us of this condition of affairs do indeed chill the blood. It is natural that there should be a certain amount of exaggeration in them. We read daily in our own contemporary annals, records of society of which we are perfectly competent to judge, that though true to fact in many points, they give a picture too dark in all its shadows, too garish in its lights, to afford a just view of the state of any existing condition of things. Contemporaries know how much to receive and how much to reject, and are apt to smile at the possibility of any permanent impression upon the face of history being made by lights and darks beyond the habit of nature. But yet when every allowance has been made, the contemporary pictures of Rome at this unhappy period leave an impression on the mind which is not contradicted but supported and enforced by the incidents of the time and the course of history. The populace, which had for ages been fed and nourished upon the bread of public doles and those entertainments of ferocious gaiety which deadened every higher sense, had sunk into complete debasement. Honest work and honest purpose, or any hope of improving their own position, elevating themselves or training their children, do not seem to have existed among them. A half-ludicrous detail, which reminds us that the true Roman had always a trifle of pedantry in his pride, is noted with disgust and disdain even by serious writers—which is that the common people bore no longer their proper names, but were known among each other by nicknames, such as those of Cabbage-eaters, Sausage-mongers, and other coarse familiar vulgarisms. This might be pardoned to the crowd which spent its idle days at the circus or spectacle, and its nights on the benches in the Colosseum or in the porch of a palace; but it is difficult to exaggerate the debasement of a populace which lived for amusement alone, picking up the miserable morsels which kept it alive from any chance or tainted

source, without work to do or hope of amelioration. They formed the shouting, hoarse accompaniment of every pageant, they swarmed on the lower seats of every amphitheatre, howling much criticism as well as boisterous applause, and keeping in fear, and disgusted yet forced compliance with their coarse exactions, the players and showmen who supplied their lives with an object. According to all the representations that have reached us, nothing more degraded than this populace—encumbering every portico and marble stair, swarming over the benches of the Colosseum, basking in filth and idleness in the brilliant sun of Rome, or seeking, among the empty glories of a triumphal age gone by, a lazy shelter from it—has ever been known.

The higher classes suffered in their way as profoundly, and with a deeper consciousness, from the same debasing influences of stagnation. The descriptions of their useless life of luxury are almost too extravagant to quote. "A loose silken robe," says the critic and historian of the time, Ammianus Marcellinus, speaking of a Roman noble,— "for a toga of the lightest tissue would have been too heavy for him—linen so transparent that the air blew through it, fans and parasols to protect him from the light, a troop of eunuchs always round him." This was the appearance and costume of a son of the great and famous senators of Rome. "When he was not at the bath, or at the circus to maintain the cause of some charioteer, or to inspect some new horses, he lay half asleep upon a luxurious couch in great rooms paved with marble, panelled with mosaic." The luxurious heat implied, which makes the freshness of the marble, the thinness of the linen, so desirable, as in a picture of Mr. Alma Tadema's, bids us at the same time pause in receiving the whole of this description as unquestionable; for Rome has its seasons in which vast chambers paved with marble

are no longer agreeable, though the manners and utterances of the race still tend to a complete ignoring of this other side of the picture: but yet no doubt its general features are true.

When this Sybarite went out it was upon a lofty chariot, where he reclined negligently, showing off himself, his curled and perfumed locks, his robes, with their wonderful embroideries and tissues of silk and gold, to the admiration of the world; his horses' harness were covered with ornaments of gold, his coachman armed with a golden wand instead of a whip, and the whole equipage followed by a procession of attendants, slaves, freedmen, eunuchs, down to the knaves of the kitchen, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, to give importance to the retinue, which pushed along through the streets with all the brutality which is the reverse side of senseless display, pushing citizens and passers-by out of the way. The dinner parties of the evening were equally childish in their extravagance: the tables covered with strange dishes, monsters of the sea and of the mountains, fishes and birds of unknown kinds and unequalled size. The latter seems to have been a special subject of pride, for we are told of the servants bringing scales to weigh them, and notaries crowding round with their tablets and styles to record the weight. After the feast came a "hydraulic organ," and other instruments of corresponding magnitude, to fill the great hall with resounding music, and pantomimical plays and dances to enliven the dulness of the luxurious spectators on their couches—"women with long hair, who might have married and given subjects to the state," were thus employed, to the indignation of the critic.

This chronicler of folly and bad manners would not be human if he omitted the noble woman of Rome from his picture. Her rooms full of obsequious attendants, slaves, and eunuchs, half of her time was

occupied by the monstrous toilette which annulled all natural charms to give to the Society beauty a fictitious and artificial display of red and white, of painted eyelids, tortured hair, and extravagant dress. An authority still more trenchant than the heathen historian, Jerome, describes even one of the noble ladies who headed the Christian society of Rome as spending most of the day before the mirror. Like the ladies of Venice in a later age, these women, laden with ornaments, attired in cloth of gold, and with shoes that crackled under their feet with the stiffness of metallic decorations, were almost incapacitated from walking, even with the support of their attendants; and a life so accoutred was naturally spent in the display of the charms and wealth thus painfully set forth.

The fairer side of the picture, the revolt of the higher nature from such a life, brings us into the very heart of this society: and nothing can be more curious than the gradual penetration of a different and indeed sharply contrary sentiment, the impulse of asceticism and the rudest personal self-deprivation, amid a community spoilt by such a training, yet not incapable of disgust and impatience with the very luxury which had seemed essential to its being. The picturesqueness and attraction of the picture lies here, as in so many cases, chiefly on the women's side.

It is necessary to note, however, the curious mixture which existed in this Roman society, where Christianity as a system was already strong, and the high officials of the Church were beginning to take gradually and by slow degrees the places abandoned by the functionaries of the empire. Though the hierarchy was already established, and the Bishop of Rome had assumed a special importance in the Church, Paganism still held in the high places that sway of the old economy giving place to the new, which is at

once so desperate and so nerveless—impotence and bitterness mingling with the false tolerance of cynicism. The worship of the gods had dropped into a survival of certain habits of mind and life, to which some clung with the angry revulsion of terror against a new revolutionary power at first despised: and some held with the loose grasp of an imaginative and poetical system, and some with a sense of the intellectual superiority of art and philosophy over the arguments and motives that moved the crowd. Life had ebbed away from these religions of the past. The fictitious attempt of Julian to re-establish the worship of the gods, and bring new blood into the exhausted veins of the mythological system, had in reality given the last proof of its extinction as a power in the world: but still it remained lingering out its last, holding a place, sometimes dignified by a gleam of noble manners and the graces of intellectual life—and often, it must be allowed, justified by the failure of the Church to embody that purity and elevation which its doctrines, but scarcely its morals or life, professed. Thus the faith in Christ, often real, but very faulty—and the faith in Apollo, almost always fictitious, but sometimes dignified and superior—existed side by side. The father might hold the latter with a superb indifference to its rites, and a contemptuous tolerance for its opponents, while the mother held the first with occasional hot impulses of devotion, and performances of penance for the pardon of those worldly amusements and dissipations to which she returned with all the more zest when her vigils and prayers were over.

This conjunction of two systems so opposite in every impulse, proceeding from foundations so absolutely contrary to each other, could not fail to have an extraordinary effect upon the minds of the generations moved by it, and affords, I think, an explanation of



some events very difficult to explain on ordinary principles, and particularly the abandonment of what would appear the most unquestionable duties, by some of the personages, especially the women whose histories and manners fill this chapter of the great records of Rome. Some of them deserted their children to bury themselves in the deserts, to withdraw to the mountains, placing leagues of land and sea between themselves and their dearest duties—why? the reader asks. At the bidding of a priest, at the selfish impulse of that desire to save their own souls, which in our own day at least has come to mean a degrading motive—is the general answer. It would not be difficult, however, to paint on the other side a picture of the struggle with the authorities of her family for the training of a son, for the marriage of a daughter, from which a woman might shrink with a sense of impotence, knowing the prestige of the noble guardian against whom she would have to contend, and all the forces of family pride, of tradition and use and wont, that would be arrayed against her. Better perhaps, the mother might think, to abandon that warfare, to leave the conflict for which she was not strong enough, than to lose the love of her child as well, and become to him the emblem of an opposing faction attempting to turn him from those delights of youth which the hereditary authority of his house encouraged instead of opposing. It is difficult perhaps for the historians to take such motives into consideration, but I think the student of human nature may feel them to be worth a thought, and receive them as some justification, or at least apology, for the actions of some of the Roman women who fill the story of the time.

Unfortunately it is not possible to leave out the Church in Rome when we collect the details of depravity and folly in Society. One cannot but feel how robust is the faith which goes back to these

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