

way changed to a feudal lord, fortifying his country villa, are of the many who were preparing the way for the final disintegration. Then one marks the Lady Petronilla, obsessed by religious ambition, the wretched Marcian, torn between the new fear of hell that had come into the world and the immemorial desire of the flesh; and Basil, setting aside the old Roman dignity, reviling the old training in rhetoric and letters and giving his mind to arms. All things, with an art of imperceptible touches, display a time when security had gone, while still the tradition of empire, of a wide law and government, the afterglow of the classical civilisation, haunted the broken bridges, the fresh-shattered aqueducts, the rutted, vacant ways. Even to the smallest details the picture is complete. Let the reader note the source of the lead for the coffin of Maximus, the prey on the cart of the passing lime-burner, the waterless uncleanness that heralded the pest. It needs some practice in the art of imaginative writing to gauge quite how skilfully this magnificent conception has been wrought, to detect the subtle insistence, touch by touch, that keeps its mellow and melancholy atmosphere true. The whole learning that was possible of this period lies behind this book, yet there is no heaviness, no impressive jabbering of strange terms, no hint of a claim to scholarship, none of the tricks that drive this sort of fact to recognition. Gissing carries his learning as a trained athlete carries his limbs, as it were, unwittingly, as a great artist saturated with the classical tradition might best desire to do. And he gains in permanence and beauty what he will lose in contemporary applause. Now at any rate he can bear to wait a little longer for the honour that will in the end be his in absolute security.

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