

OUR ROMAN LETTER

(By "SCOTTUS.")

Not long ago an archaeological discovery of the highest importance very opportunely came to turn one's thoughts from the turmoil and horror of the present to the memories and memorials of those who in days long past lived and labored and suffered and died in Rome that Christianity might grow and spread and flourish throughout the vast Empire ruled from the City of the Caesars during the first three or four centuries of our era.

By a curious irony of fate these memorials owe not only their existence but even their preservation to the very institutions of that pagan Rome which tried its best to crush the new Christian power that had come to transform by precept and example the crude and cruel social fabric built up and imposed on practically the whole world by half a dozen centuries of political success.

The lust of conquest burned fiercely in the veins of the ancient Romans; but conquest for conquest's sake he neither understood nor practised. Rivals had indeed to be crushed, nationalities small and great to be absorbed, new outlets for commerce won from the Irish Sea to the Black Sea. But if Rome took away much, she was always ready to offer something, if not many things, in return—civilisation, as she understood it, community of interest, fellow-citizenship, a share in the secular glories that time and fortune and the red right hand of the conqueror had so well known how to focus on the banks of the Tiber.

To effect her object, a net-work of roads connecting the city with every corner of the Empire was essential. As the Empire spread out to north and south and east and west, new highways, converging from the centre of the city, led out towards all the points of the compass, each highway linked with a name or names that had been made great by the very fact of having laid it down, and each untiringly improved and embellished as something to be proud of, from generation to generation, until pride in the great highways leading to and from the city grew into a devotion linking the living with the dead and handing down to the yet unborn children of Rome lasting memorials of the rise and growth and gathering greatness of their native city. The chief mode of embellishment was practical if peculiar.

One of the earliest laws providing for the welfare of the city, was that forbidding burials within its boundaries. On the other hand cemeteries, as we understand them, were never very fashionable. In course of events it had grown into a sacred custom with the Romans to lay their dead to rest along the great roads that connected the heart of the Empire with its dependencies in many lands; and thus the first sight the stranger had of the glories of the capital, was that of an almost unbroken series of stately tombs lining each highway for a distance of nearly twenty miles from the city, each monument being regarded by law and custom as something sacred, inviolable, and venerable. The rich man had a sepulchre built for the interment of himself, his household and descendants; and the poorer man carefully subscribed the customary coin from year to year to the burial club which would see that when his bones had to be gathered to rest they would find a fitting place in as

stately a sepulchre as that of the millionaire hard by.

Cremation was the custom. The body being burnt, the ashes were then collected and placed in a small urn which was then laid in the sepulchral monument known as the *columbarium adovece*, so called because containing a number of little niches or nests, like so many pigeon-holes, erected all round the walls within, as the last resting-place of the members of the family or club, one such columbarium being known to have contained the ashes of as many as 6000 human beings.

To the Christian mind there was always something repellent in the idea of cremating a body that should one day rise from the dead to join the soul in the kingdoms of the blessed; and accordingly, it was always a matter of Christian practice that the mortal remains of the dead should be laid to rest with reverence and respect in the breast of mother earth, just as the dead body of the Master had been deposited in the fresh-made grave by the loving hands of the faithful few.

Wealthy Christians were not many, and burial plots were costly. To meet the difficulty, the early Christians freely adopted the system of burial clubs that had been long in vogue in Rome. But with a difference. Cremation was not to be thought of, and separate graves dug on the surface were unattainable by men whose means were scant, and whose standing was often simply that of a slave. Monuments above ground, then, were clearly out of the question, and surface burial was impossible for want of space. Another plan was found. The subsoil round Rome is of peculiar formation, something half and half between rock and sand, sufficiently hard not to crumble away, and sufficiently soft to be worked without much difficulty. The surface of the burial plot was left untouched; but at a depth of some feet an underground gallery three or four feet wide and eight or ten high was cut through the centre of the plot from end to end, and off this a number of cross galleries running at right angles were cut as required, till the whole extent was a network of narrow galleries, dimly lighted from above by a skylight here and there. When the first series of galleries, the first storey or floor, so to say, was used up, a second storey was excavated in a similar way some half a dozen feet below the first, and this was followed as occasion served by a third, fourth, and even fifth series of galleries, the last at a depth of 50 or more feet below the surface, each connected with those above by sets of suitable stairs.

A series of niches or shelves, each the length of the average man, was cut into the side walls of the galleries, to the number of four or five, one above the other, each niche forming a grave. In a shelf thus prepared, the dead body was laid to rest, the niche was then closed with slab and mortar, and the dead troubled the living no more.

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Famous beyond all others was the Appian Way, the Queen of Roman roads, "because of the grander scale on which it was constructed, the greater magnificence of the buildings and sepulchres which adorned it, the greater variety of conquered nations which used it, and the number and celebrity of events connected with it. The history of Christian Rome gives to this same road titles of glory incomparably more solid, just, and indisputable." For it soon became the favor-

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