

THE RENAISSANCE

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The renaissance by Edith Sichel

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EDITH SICHEL

**THE
RENAISSANCE**

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BY

EDITH SICHEL

AUTHOR OF

“CATHERINE DE MEDICI,” “MEN AND WOMEN
OF THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE,” ETC.



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THE RENAISSANCE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

MICHAEL ANGELO'S great painting of the newly created Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel might be taken as a symbol of the Renaissance, of the time when man was, as it were, re-created more glorious than before, with a body naked and unashamed, and a strong arm, unimpaired by fasting, outstretched towards life and light. Definitions are generally misleading, and it is easier to represent the Renaissance by a symbol than to define it. It was a movement, a revival of man's powers, a reawakening of the consciousness of himself and of the universe—a movement which spread over Western Europe, and may be said to have lasted over two centuries. It was between 1400 and 1600 that it held full sway. Like

other movements it had forerunners, but, unlike other movements, it was circumscribed by no particular aim, and the fertilizing wave which passed over Italy, Germany, France, England and, in a much fainter degree, over Spain, to leave a fresh world behind it, seems more like a phenomenon of nature than a current of history—rather an atmosphere surrounding men than a distinct course before them. The new birth was the result of a universal impulse, and that impulse was preceded by something like a revelation, a revelation of intellect and of the possibilities in man. And like the Christian revelation in the spiritual world, so the Renaissance in the natural, meant a temper of mind, a fresh vision, a source of thoughts and works, rather than shaped results. When it crystallized into an æsthetic ritual, it fell into decadence and corruption.

But before that happened, its real task had been accomplished—a complex task, in which certain elements stand out. Two main things there were which the Renaissance of Western Europe signified: it signified Emancipation and Expression. The Renaissance is a loose term which has served to cover

many issues—the Revival of Learning, the regeneration of art, the revolt against the Schoolmen, the expansion of men's thought with the expansion of the world beyond the seas. And it has been ascribed to many external causes greater and less. The death of feudalism had given free play to the individual and had weakened authority. The famous taking of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, which put an end to the Greek Empire, had sent Greek scholars wandering over the world and shipped west into Italy a glorious cargo of looted manuscripts and sculptures. The discovery of printing, with the consequent circulation of books and of thought, produced a change that was immeasurable; while the discovery of America and the obvious effect that it produced upon trade profoundly modified the laws of wealth and the possibilities of transit. But all these outward events were only visible signs of a great motive power that grew from within; of the reassertion of Nature, and of her rights, against asceticism; of the disinterested desire for knowledge for its own sake—not the Schoolman's desire for logical results, or that of the alchemist who regarded science as a