

**SELECTIONS FROM THE
"GESTA ROMANORUM";
THE BREVIARY TREASURES**

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Selections from the "Gesta Romanorum"; The Breviary Treasures by Nathan Haskell Dole

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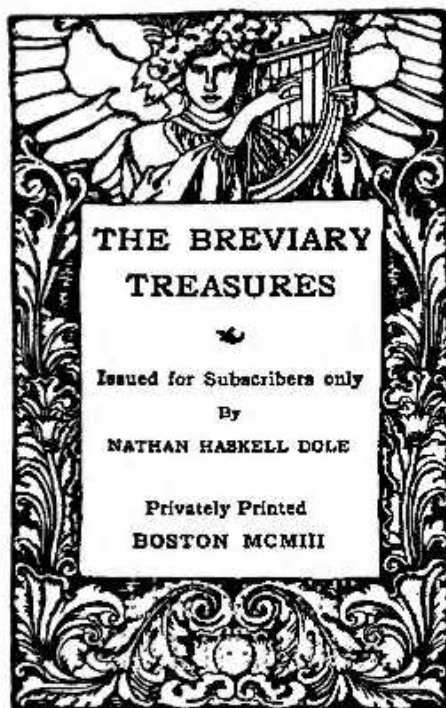
NATHAN HASKELL DOLE

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"GESTA ROMANORUM";
THE BREVIARY TREASURES**

SELECTIONS FROM THE
"GESTA ROMANORUM"



Selections from the Gesta Romanorum
tr. by Rev. Charles Swann



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TO THE
ASSOCIATION

HENRY MORSE STEPHENS

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INTRODUCTION

THE so-called *Gesta Romanorum*—the *Gests* or *Acts* of the Romans—consists of a collection of 181 stories, first printed in 1473. Their popularity in the Middle Ages is shown by the fact that numerous manuscripts, all varying in content and size, are found in various parts of Europe. Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton's apprentice, who flourished between 1491 and 1535, included among his four hundred printed books a small quarto, undated, which contained forty-three chapters or stories, translated into the quaint and stilted English of his day. There were other versions of the English manuscripts of not more than sixty chapters, but not until 1824 was any attempt made to give the complete work in modern style. The translation then

published in two volumes was by the Rev. Charles Swan, who prefixed a somewhat elaborate introduction, showing that a great deal of the "Romantic Fabling" of the Middle Ages was due to the Crusaders bringing back with them Oriental tales. The monks, desirous of impressing their illiterate hearers, employed stories of Eastern, classical, and legendary origin to illustrate their sermons. Characteristic of all the *Gesta Romanorum* is the often far-fetched and absurd "moralization" appended. There was no attempt to teach history or geography, or to avoid anachronisms. The perfect naïveté of the narration is delightful; marvels are included with all the solemnity of a mediæval Bestiary; countries and cities are jumbled together with an indeterminateness worthy of a candidate for a civil service position; royal titles are applied to the men of common clay, and the queerest standards of morals are inculcated.

Nevertheless, the stories are often of striking interest and vivacity. Who their original author or authors may have

been is wholly a matter of conjecture. But later writers have freely used this storehouse of suggestion for more carefully elaborated novels or more consistently dramatic works. Many of them were used by Shakespeare, and the inquisitive reader may like to compare the first and longest tale in the present selection with the tragedy of "Pericles, Prince of Tyre."

The chapters here printed are taken from the revised edition of Swan's translation. The morals are omitted.