PENGUIN BOOKS

THE WOMAN OF ROME

ALBERTO MORAVIA

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THE WOMAN OF ROME

A NOVEL BY

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Some readers of *La Romana* may bring forward the objection that a simple and uneducated woman of the people would be incapable of telling her own story in the first person in the correct literary style I have lent her. This, in fact, was the problem that faced me from the outset. Two ways were open to me in relating the imaginary autobiography of the character I had chosen to portray – I could either adopt a realistic, photographic, spoken style of language, typical of a woman of Adriana's class and profession, a clumsy, poor dialect, incapable of expressing more than a limited number of feelings and incidents; or I could make my characters speak in my customary style, as I have in all my other books. I chose the second course for two reasons: firstly, I did not see any necessity to change my style because I had changed my characters, and, secondly, the language of literature is always truer and more poetically expressive than the spoken language. I cannot deny that women like Adriana do not usually speak as Adriana does, nor do they express the feelings and ideas she expresses. Nevertheless, I have attributed to her only those feelings and ideas which women like Adriana would express if they had the verbal and mental power to do so. In other words, although not all men possess the same intellectual capacity and the same knowledge, they all, even the most wretched, have their own moral world in its entirety. All I have tried to do is to represent Adriana's moral world, by doing her the same service the public letter-writers perform when they interpret and commit to paper on the street corners the unformulated sentiments of illiterate servant-maids.

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

AT sixteen years of age I was a real beauty. I had a perfectly oval face, narrow at the temples and widening out a little below; my eyes were large, gentle and elongated; my nose formed one straight line with my forehead; my mouth was large, with beautiful full red lips, and when I laughed I showed very white regular teeth. Mother used to say I looked like a Madonna. It struck me that I resembled a certain film-star who was very popular at the time and I began to do my hair as she did. Mother said that although my face was beautiful, my figure was a hundred times more beautiful; she said there was not a figure like mine in all Rome. In those days I did not trouble about my figure, I thought a beautiful face was all that mattered; but today I must admit mother was right. I had firm, straight legs, curving hips, a long back, narrow waist and broad shoulders. My abdomen was rather prominent, as it always has been, and my navel was so deeply hollowed in my flesh that it almost disappeared; but mother said this was an additional beauty, because a woman's abdomen ought to be rather prominent and not flat as is the fashion today. My bosom, too, was well-developed, but firm and resilient, so that I did not have to wear a bust-bodice; but when I used to complain that it was over-developed, mother said it was really beautiful and that women's bosoms nowadays were non-existent. When I was naked I seemed tall and well-proportioned, modelled like a statue, they told me later on; but when fully clothed I looked like a slim young girl, and no one could have guessed that I was built as I was. This was due to the proportion between the various parts of my body, I was told by the artist for whom I first began to pose.

Mother discovered this painter for me. Before she married and became a shirtmaker, she had been a model; one day an

artist gave her some shirts to make and, remembering her old profession, she suggested I should pose for him. The first time I went to his studio mother insisted on coming with me, although I protested that I could easily go alone. I felt ashamed, not so much at having to undress in front of a man for the first time in my life, as at the things I guessed mother would say to persuade him to employ me. And in fact, after she had helped me to slip my clothes over my head and had made me stand naked in the middle of the room, she began to talk enthusiastically to the artist. 'Just look, what a bosom! What hips! Look at her legs! Where else will you find legs and hips and a bosom like these?' As she said these things, she kept on prodding me, just like they prod animals to persuade people to buy them in the market. The painter was laughing and I grew ashamed and, since it was winter, I felt very cold. But I realized mother was not talking in this way out of spite and that she was proud of my beauty because she was my mother, and if I was beautiful I owed it all to her. The artist, too, seemed to understand her feelings and laughed from no ulterior motive but with genuine friendliness, so that I felt reassured and, overcoming my shyness, walked on tiptoe to the stove to warm myself. This artist must have been about forty and was a stout man with a cheerful, easy-going manner. I felt that he looked at me without desiring me, as he would an object, and this reassured me. Later on, when he knew me better, he always treated me with kindness and respect, as a human being and no longer as a mere object. I was attracted to him immediately, and I might even have fallen in love with him out of sheer gratitude, just because he was kindly and affectionate towards me. But he never let himself go with me; he always behaved like an artist and not like a man, and our relationship remained as correct and distant the whole time as it was on the first day I posed for him.

When mother had come to an end of my praises, the painter, without saying a word, went over to a heap of papers piled up on a chair and after having looked through them he pulled out a coloured print and showed it to mother. 'There's your daughter,' he said in an undertone. I moved over from the stove to look at the print. It showed a naked woman lying on a bed

covered with magnificent stuffs. A velvet curtain hung behind the bed and two winged cherubs, like two little angels, floated in the air in the folds of the curtain. The woman really did resemble me; only, although she was naked, the stuffs and the rings she was wearing on her fingers showed clearly that she must have been a queen or someone important, whereas I was only a common girl. At first mother did not understand and stared in consternation at the print. Then she suddenly seemed to see the resemblance. 'She's exactly like that! It's Adriana! You see how right I was? Who is this woman?' she exclaimed excitedly.

'It's Danae,' replied the artist with a smile.

'Danae who?'

'Danae – a pagan goddess."

Mother, who had expected to hear the name of a real person, was rather disconcerted, and in order to hide her embarrassment began to explain to me that I had to do what the artist wanted; lie like the figure in the print, for instance, or stand, or sit, and keep still all the time he was working. He said laughingly that mother knew more about it than he did; and mother immediately began to talk of when she was a model and was known all over Rome as one of the handsomest models, and the harm she had done herself by marrying and giving up being a model. Meanwhile the artist had made me lie down on a sofa at the end of the studio and take up a pose, arranging my arms and legs in the position he required. But he did it with an abstracted, thoughtful gentleness, hardly touching me, as if he had already seen me in the attitude in which he wanted to paint me. Then, although mother continued to chatter, he began to sketch in the preliminary outlines on a white canvas standing on an easel. Mother noticed he was no longer listening to her, since he was absorbed in drawing me.

'How much will you give this daughter of mine an hour?' she asked.

Without lifting his eyes from the canvas the painter named a sum. Mother picked up the clothes I had arranged on a chair and threw them at me.

'Come on! Get your clothes on – we'd better be going,' she said to me.

'Now what's the matter?' asked the painter in astonishment, stopping his work.

'Nothing,' answered mother, pretending to be in a great hurry. 'Come on, Adriana – we've got such a lot to do.'

'But, look here,' said the painter, 'if you want to come to terms, make an offer – what's the meaning of all this?'

Then mother began to make a dreadful scene, shouting at the top of her voice that he was mad if he thought he could get away with paying me so little; that I was not one of those old models nobody wants; that I was sixteen and was posing for the first time. When mother wants something she always starts shouting and pretends she is furiously angry. But she is not really angry at all and I, who know her through and through, know that she is as calm as oil underneath. But she shouts like the women in the market when a purchaser offers too little for their goods. She shouts most of all at well-mannered people because she knows their manners will always make them yield to her.

And in fact even the artist gave way in the end. While mother was making a scene, he kept on smiling and making a gesture from time to time with one hand as if he wished to say something, At last mother stopped to get her breath and he asked her again how much she wanted. But she wouldn't say straight out. 'I'd like to know just how much the painter who did that picture you showed me gave his model!' she shouted unexpectedly.

The artist began to laugh. 'What's that got to do with it? Those were other days – he probably gave her a bottle of wine or a pair of gloves.'

Mother seemed as much put out as she had been when he told her the print represented Danae. The artist was having a little quiet fun at her expense, without any malice, of course, but she did not realize it. She started shouting again, calling him mean and boasting about my beauty. Then she suddenly pretended to calm down and told him how much she wanted. The artist argued the point for a while and at last they agreed on a sum that was only a little less than mother had asked. The artist walked over to a table, opened a drawer and paid her. She took the money, looking highly delighted, gave me a few

more hints and left. The artist shut the door and then, returning to his easel, spoke to me.

'Does your mother always shout?'

'Mother loves me,' I replied.

'I got the impression that she loves money more than anything else in the world,' he said quietly, as he proceeded with his drawing.

'No, no, that's not true,' I retorted eagerly, 'she loves me best of all; but she's sorry I was born poor and she wants me to earn a good living.'

I've related this matter of the artist in detail, first of all because this was the day when I began work, although later on I chose another profession, and then because mother's behaviour on this occasion explains her character and the nature of her affection for me.

When my hour's sitting was over, I went to meet mother in a milk-bar where she had told me to pick her up. She asked me how it had gone and made me tell her every detail of the conversation which the artist, who was rather a silent fellow, had carried on with me during the sitting. In the end she told me I would have to be very careful, perhaps this artist had no dishonourable intentions, but many of them employed models with the idea of making them their mistresses. I was to repel their advances at all costs. 'They are all penniless,' she explained, 'and you can't expect to get anything out of them. With your looks you can aim much higher, much higher.'

This was the first time mother had ever spoken to me in this way. But she spoke decisively, like someone saying things they have been meditating for some time.

'What do you mean?' I asked her in astonishment.

'Those people have plenty of talk but no money. A lovely girl like you ought to go with gentlemen,' she answered rather vaguely.

'What gentlemen? I don't know any gentlemen!'

She looked at me. 'You can be a model for the time being,' she said even more vaguely, 'then we'll see – one thing leads to another.' But the reflective, grasping look on her face alarmed me. I asked her nothing more on that occasion.

But in any case mother's advice was unnecessary, because I

was very serious even for my extreme youth. After this artist, I met others and soon became well enough known among the artists. I must say that they were usually tactful and respectful, although more than one showed me what his feelings were towards me. But I repelled them all so harshly that I soon had the reputation of being unapproachably virtuous. I have already said that most of the artists were nearly always respectful; this was probably due to the fact that their aim was not to make love to me but to draw and paint me, and all the time they were drawing and painting they saw me, not with the eyes of a man, but of an artist, as if I were a chair or any other object. They were accustomed to models, and my naked body, although it was young and fully developed, made as little impression upon them as upon a doctor. But the artists' friends often embarrassed me. They used to come in and begin to chat with the artist. But I soon noticed that, although they did their utmost to appear indifferent, they were unable to keep their eyes off me. Some were quite shameless and used to begin wandering around the studio so that they could examine me from every angle. These glances, as well as mother's veiled allusions, roused my sense of coquetry and made me conscious both of my beauty and of the advantages I might draw from it. At last I not only became accustomed to their tactlessness, but after a while, I could not help feeling delighted when I saw how excited the visitors became and disappointed when they were indifferent to me. And so my vanity led me unawares to think that whenever I chose to I could improve my situation by making use of my looks, just as mother had said.

My chief thought at that time, however, was to get married. My senses were still dormant and the men who watched me while I was posing aroused no other emotion in me but vanity. I used to give mother all the money I earned and, when I was not posing, I stayed at home with her and helped her cut and sew shirts, our only means of livelihood since my father, who had been a railwayman, had died. We lived in a small flat on the second floor of a long, low building, erected specially for the railwaymen fifty years earlier. The house was situated on one of the suburban avenues, pleasantly shaded with plane-trees. On one side was a row of houses similar to ours, all alike,

with two floors, brick façades without any stucco, twelve windows, six to each storey, and a central door; on the other side, the city walls extended from tower to tower, intact at that point and smothered in greenery. There was a gate in the city walls not far from our house. Near this gate, running along inside the walls, stretched the enclosed site of an amusement park, Luna Park, whose illuminations and music enlivened the summer months. If I looked out sideways from my window I could see the festoons of coloured lamps, the beflagged roofs of the various booths and the crowd packed round the entrance under the branches of the plane-trees. I could hear the music quite clearly and I often stayed awake at night listening to it and half-dreaming, with my eyes wide open. It seemed to come from a world out of reach, at least for me, and this feeling was heightened by the darkness and narrowness of my room. The whole population of the city seemed to have come together at Luna Park and I was the only one left out. I longed to get out of bed and join them, but I did not move, and the music, which kept up an uninterrupted jangle of sound the whole night through, made me conscious of a definite loss, due to some sin I did not even know I had committed. Sometimes while listening to this music I even began to cry, so bitter was it to be left out. I was very sentimental at this time and any little thing – a friend's snub, a reproach from mother, a touching scene at the cinema – made tears well up in my eyes. Perhaps I would not have been conscious of a forbidden, happy world if mother had not forbidden me to go near Luna Park or have any other amusement when I was a child. But her widowhood, her poverty, and above all her hostility to all those distractions fate had denied her, made her refuse to let me go to Luna Park or any other place of entertainment, except much later, when I was fully grown up and my character was already formed. I owe to this, in all probability, the suspicion that has remained with me all my life through of somehow being shut out from the gay, brilliant world of happiness, a suspicion I am unable to shake off, even when I know for certain that I am happy.

I have already said that at this time I thought only of getting married and I can also say how it was that this thought occurred

to me. The suburban avenue where our house stood led a little further on to a more prosperous district. Instead of the long, low railwaymen's houses, that looked like so many dusty, worn-out old carriages, there were a number of little houses surrounded by gardens. They were not luxurious – clerks and small shopkeepers lived in them – but in comparison with our sordid dwelling they gave an impression of a gayer and easier life. First of all, each house was different; then, they were not all cracked and stained, with the plaster peeling off, an appearance which made our house and others like it seem as though their inhabitants had long neglected them through sheer indifference; and finally, the narrow, blossoming gardens which surrounded them created an impression of jealous intimacy, remote from the confusion and promiscuity of the street. In the building where I lived, on the contrary, the street penetrated everywhere: into the huge hall that was like a warehouse, into the wide, bare, dirty staircase, even into the rooms, where the rickety, casual furniture was reminiscent of junk-shops, where the same sort of pieces are exhibited for sale on the pavements.

One summer evening, when I was out walking with mother, I saw a family scene through a window in one of those villas; it impressed me deeply and seemed to tally in every respect with the idea I had of a normal, decent life. It was a clean little room, with flowered wallpaper, a sideboard and a central lamp hanging over a table laid ready for a meal. Around the table sat five or six people, among them three children between the ages of eight and ten, I suppose. A soup-tureen stood in the middle of the table, and the mother was standing up to serve the soup. It may seem strange, but what struck me most of all was the central lamp, or rather, the extraordinarily peaceful and normal look everything had in that light. As I turned the scene over in my mind later on, I told myself positively that I ought to make it my aim in life to live one day in a house like that, have a family like that, and live in that same light, which seemed to reveal the presence of innumerable firm and constant affections. Perhaps many people will think my ambitions very modest. But my situation at that time must be taken into account. That little house had the same effect on me, born in the railwaymen's houses, as the grander, wealthier dwellings in the luxury

districts of the city had on the inhabitants of the little villa themselves. One man's Paradise is another's Hell.

But mother had made elaborate plans for my future; I soon realized they were plans that put entirely out of the question any such arrangements as the one I had most at heart. What she imagined was that with my beauty I might aim at any kind of success, but not at becoming a married woman with a family, like everyone else. We were extremely poor and my beauty seemed to her our only available capital, and, as such, it was not mine only but hers too, if for no other reason than that she it was who had given me birth, as I have said before. I was to draw on this capital as she decreed, without any consideration for appearances, in order to improve our situation. Probably the whole scheme was due chiefly to a lack of imagination. In a situation like ours, the idea of capitalizing my beauty was the first to occur to her. Mother stopped short at this idea and did not bother to look beyond it.

At that time I had a very imperfect understanding of what mother's plans were. But even later, when they were quite clear to me, I never dared to ask her why, with such ideas, she had been reduced to such poverty, she, the wife of a railwayman. I understood from various hints that I myself was the cause of mother's failure, since she had had me so unwillingly and unexpectedly. In other words, I was conceived by accident; and mother, who did not dare to prevent my birth (as she ought to have done, she said), had been obliged to marry my father and accept all the consequences of such a marriage. When she referred to my birth she often used to say: 'You were the ruin of me,' a phrase that at one time hurt me and was obscure, but whose meaning I understood fully later on. The phrase meant: 'If it had not been for you, I would not have married that man, and by now I'd have had my own car.' Obviously, as she pondered over her own life in this way, she did not want her daughter, who was so much more handsome, to make the same mistakes and incur the same fate. Today, seeing things from a certain distance, I really cannot bring myself to say she was wrong. A family for mother had meant poverty, slavery, and a few rare pleasures which came to an abrupt end with the death of her husband. Naturally she considered a decent family life

as a great misfortune, and was ever on the lookout for me not to be attracted by the same mirages which had led to her own downfall.

In her own way mother was very fond of me. As soon as I began to go the rounds of the studios, for instance, she made me a couple of dresses, a two-piece skirt and jacket, and a frock. As a matter of fact, I would have preferred some underwear, because every time I had to undress I was ashamed of the coarse, threadbare, often soiled lingerie I displayed, but mother said it did not matter if I wore rags underneath, what was important was to look presentable. She chose two cheap pieces of cloth, with striking colours and patterns, and cut out the dresses herself. But since she was a shirtmaker and had never made dresses before, she made them both up wrongly. The frock, I remember, pouched in front so that my breasts showed and I always had to pin it up. The jacket of the two-piece was too short and too tight; it pulled across my bosom and hips, and the sleeves did not cover my wrists; the skirt, on the other hand, was too wide and made creases in front. But I thought they were splendid because until then I had been dressed even worse, in jumpers, short little skirts showing my thighs, and skimpy little scarves. Mother bought me two pairs of silk stockings as well: I had always worn short socks and had bare knees before. These presents filled me with joy and pride; I never grew tired of looking at them and thinking about them, and used to walk self-consciously along the streets, holding myself upright, as if I were wearing a priceless dress made by some fashionable dressmaker, and not those poor rags.

Mother was always thinking about my future and before long she began to be dissatisfied with my profession as a model. According to her my earnings were too small; then the artists and their friends were poor and there was little hope of making useful acquaintances in their studios. Mother suddenly conceived the idea that I might become a dancer. She was always full of ambitious schemes, while I thought of nothing but a peaceful life with a husband and children. She got hold of this idea of dancing when the promoter of a variety company, who put on turns between films, ordered some shirts from her. She did not think the profession of a dancer would prove very