

The Sistine Chapel is a chapel of the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican built for Pope Sixtus IV, after whom it was named. In 1508 Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo Buonarroti to decorate its vault or ceiling, a task he completed in 1512.

Christmas Eve at the Sistine Chapel

The Christmas holidays are at hand, and on every side we hear the note ~ preparation. The shops are decorated with flowers, while the altars of the churches are arrayed in their most splendid ornaments. The images of the Virgin in particular are seen in their gayest dress, and all the jewelry which the treasury can furnish is brought out to give them an elegant and fashionable appearance.

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At this time, too, in addition to the varied population of the city - its priests, soldiers, and beggars, who together form the great proportion - a new accession is pouring in from the surrounding country. The peasants who live in the deserted tombs on the Campagna - the natives of the Alban mountains, fierce banditti-looking fellows, who gather their cloaks about them with a scowling air which would not be at all pleasant to encounter among their own hills -and the Trasteverini, in their picturesque costumes, boasting themselves to be the only true descendants of the ancient Romans, and as proud and haughty in their bearing as if they had also inherited the heroic virtues of their ancestors; - these are to be met roaming about every street, and in the churches, gazing in wonder at their magnificence. L v

The most singular, however, are the Calabrian minstrels, the pifferari. Their dress is wild and striking, consisting of a loose sheep-skin coat, with the wool left on it, and a high peaked cap, decked with gay ribbons and sprigs of heather, while the huge zampogne of goat-skin is formed like the bagpipes of Scotland, and resembles them, too, in its shrill music. These



One of the most significant functions of the Sistine Chapel is as a venue for the election of each successive pope in a conclave of the College of Cardinals. The 1492 papal conclave was the first to use the Sistine Chapel for this purpose.

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interesting characters arrive during the last days of Advent, and consider themselves the representatives of the shepherds of Judea, who were the first to announce the news of the Nativity. Their usual gathering-place is on the steps of the Piazza di Spagna, where they lounge and sleep in the warm sun. Little while a party sets out on a tour through the city, blowing away with the most desperate energy. At the next corner is one of the shrines of the Madonna, and this is their first stopping place, to salute the Mother and Child. Lady Morgan says, it is done" under the traditional notion of charming her labor-pains on the approaching Christmas." They turn down the Via Frattina, and a short distance farther come to a carpenter's shop, which must also be favored with a tune, " per politezza al messer San Giuseppe," - " out of compliment to St. Joseph." The owner hands them out a bajoccho, and they continue their march until the circuit is completed.

At sundown on Christmas eve, the cannon sounded from the castle of St. Angelo, to

give notice that the holy season had begun. We were advised to attend service in the Sistine Chapel, and accordingly at an early hour repaired to the Vatican, in which it is situated. Gentlemen are only admitted in full dress, and ladies also are compelled to appear in black, their heads covered only with a veil. The entrance was guarded by the pope's harlequin-looking guards, in the ridiculous uniform said to have been designed by Michael Angelo; and the company all gathered round them until the doors were opened, when they pushed in as best they could, jostling and being jostled. Half way up the chapel there is a grating, beyond which the ladies are not permitted to go, so that for once the gentlemen were best accommodated. At the upper end of the large area above is the altar, while on the sides are raised seats for the cardinals, and to these we struggled up, until all further advance was cut off by the halberts of the guards. Here we took our stands, and waited with the most exemplary patience for the service to begin.

Nearly an hour passed while the cardinals were collecting. One by one they came into the area, their long red trains supported by two priests in purple dresses, and after kneeling for a moment on the floor,

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facing the altar, ascended to their seats. Their brethren, already there, rose and greeted them with a stately bow, and the attendants placed themselves humbly at their feet. At length the music began, but I confess I was disappointed. It was too loud for the size of the chapel, and we missed the sweet sounds of the organ, which formed so noble an accompaniment at Vespers in St. Peter's. In the middle of the chapel stood a lectern, and to this at different parts of the service a priest would be escorted, who, after going through his portion in a kind of recitative manner, was again in form escorted back to the door. These modulations, we are told by Roman Catholic writers, were first introduced to raise and support the voice, to extend its reach and soften its cadences, because its common tones cannot adequately be heard when the service is performed in a large church. They vary, however, in number and solemnity in the different parts of the service. "In the lessons and epistles, the interrogations, exclamations, and periods only are marked by a corresponding rise or fall; the Gospel has its variations more numerous and more dignified; the preface is rich in full melodies and solemn swells, borrowed, as it is supposed, from the stately accents of Roman tragedy. The Psalms, or, to use an expression more appropriate, the anthems, that commence the service, precede the Gospel, usher in the offertory, and follow the communion, together with the Gloria in excelsis and Creed, were set to more complicated and more labored notes." The priests who officiated this evening seemed to have been selected for their voices, and we certainly never heard any thing superior to them in compass and richness of tone. As, with their faces turned to heaven, they sang from the large golden-clasped volumes, it seemed to be the very perfection of the human voice. There could, however, be no devotion except for those well acquainted with the service, and as there was great sameness in the singing, the audience evidently soon began to grow weary. For a time, therefore, I scrutinized the cardinals, some of whom have magnificent heads - keen, intellectual looking men, well worthy to be pillars of the Vatican. Then I tried to make out the frescoes on the ceiling, and the great painting of the Last Judgment by Michael Angelo, which occupies the end of the chapel, and is more than sixty feet high. But the paintings were too far off to be seen even by the brilliant lights around us, and the brightness of their colors has been sadly dimmed by the smoke of the candles and incense during the last two centuries.

The audience seemed to be almost entirely English, and I suppose were Protestants. Such at least is the complaint of the Italians, that they can never gain admittance to the services of their own church, but every place is occupied by foreigners. This formed the subject of one of the satirical witticisms of Pasquin. One night the question was affixed to his statue -- "How shall I, being a true son of the holy church, obtain admittance to her services?" The next night the answer which appeared was-- "Declare that you are an Englishman, and swear that you are a heretic." After a while, the rumor began to be spread round among the spectators, that the pope was not to be present this evening, and therefore there would be no high mass after Vespers. This news apparently made them more restless, and they began to thin out. One party after another passed down the line of guards as they stood like statues, and departed. Many went to the church of St. Maria Maggiore, to see at midnight the true cradle in which our Lord was rocked carried in procession. Having, however, little taste for such exhibitions, we did not join them. I found, indeed, from the account of a friend who witnessed it, that we did not lose much. After standing for some hours in a dense crowd listening to the singing of the choir, a procession of priests carried the holy relic across the church from the sacristy to the altar. It was enclosed in a splendid coffer of silver, with a canopy of gold cloth elevated over it. Banners waved the lighted tapers were held up - incense rose in

clouds about it - the guard of soldiers, and the crowd which filled the church dropped on their knees _ it passed - and the whole show was over.

Near midnight we took our course homeward, beneath as splendid a moon as ever shone, even through the transparency of an Italian sky. In the square before St. Peter's, the obelisk raised its tapering point up to heaven, and the fountain all each side flung high its waters, which fell in silver spray as they reflected back the clear light of the moon. We stood for a while on the Bridge of St. Angelo, looking at its beams playing upon the Tiber. That mighty fortress-Hadrian's massive tomb - was frowning darkly above us, and the statues which lined the bridge looked pale and wan ill the clear night, till they appeared like pallid phantoms, steadfastly watching the current of time, by which they could be influenced no more.

Christmas morning fulfilled in its beauty the promise of the night before. It is the great festival of the winter. The papal banners are displayed from the castle, and the streets are filled with crowds thronging up to St. Peter's. The guards in their strange white and red costumes were stationed around the body of the church, while at the lower end a body of troops was drawn up, who remained there on duty during the whole service. 'With the audience the same formality of dress was required as the evening before. At the upper end of the church was the magnificent throne of the pope, raised quite as high as the altar which it fronted, and decked out most splendidly with its cloth of crimson and gold, and the gilded miter suspended above. Next to it on the sides were the seats for the cardinals, then the boxes for ambassadors and their suites, and then high platforms covered with crimson cloth to afford seats for the ladies. The altar has no chancel around it, and the great area between its steps and the papal throne was left vacant for the performance of the services. As my stand happened to be close to the ambassadors' boxes, I had an excellent view of every thing which took place.

After waiting for at least an hour, suddenly there came a burst of music from the lower end of the church: it was a loud chant, which, softened by the distance, floated sweetly through the building. Every eye was strained towards the spot from which it proceeded, and there, raised high on the shoulders of men clothed in violet-colored robes, we beheld the pope borne above the heads of the kneeling multitude in his crimson chair, the falling drapery from which half concealed those who carried him. The gemmed tiara was on his head, and his robes sparkled with jewels. On each side of him were carried high fan-like banners of ostrich feathers, such as we see in pictures of the processions of an eastern rajah. Before him marched a guard of honor, consisting of some sixty Roman noblemen, who always form his escort on great festivals. Around him was his brilliant court - the cardinals-the bishops of the Greek, Armenian, and other Eastern Churches in their most gorgeous array - the heads of different religious brotherhoods in ash-colored garments - priests in purple and white, some bearing the great cross and lighted tapers, and some flinging in the air their golden censers; thus the procession came slowly on to the sound of anthems - the most gorgeous show which probably ever entered a Christian church. The pope passed within six feet of where I stood. His eyes were closed, his whole countenance seemed dull and lifeless, and the constant nodding of his head, as the bearers walked with unsteady step, gave him the appearance of a mere image splendidly decked out to form part of a pageant.

At length, amid his kneeling train, he was deposited on the pavement in front of the altar, and the' guard of nobles ranged themselves on each side Of the area up to the throne. He knelt for a few moments - parts of his dress were changed, the tiara

being put upon the altar and a miter substituted in its place; he joined in the psalms and prayers which precede the solemn service, and was escorted in state to his lofty seat, while the choir sang the Introitus, or Psalm of Entrance. Then one by one the cardinals swept across the church, their long scarlet trains borne up behind them as they walked, and spread out so as to cover a surface of yards in extent when they stopped, and ascending the steps they kissed the pontiff's hand and the hem of his garment.

The service of High Mass now began, in which he at times took part. He read the Collect - gave his benediction to the two deacons kneeling at his feet with the Book of the Gospels-commenced the Nicene Creed, which the choir continued in music - and returning to the altar, fumed it with incense from a golden censer, offered the usual oblations, and washed his hands in token of purity of mind. When the elements were consecrated two deacons brought the sacrament to the pope, who is seated. He first revered it on his knees, and then received it sitting.

But it would be impossible for me to describe the long and complicated service. A cardinal officiated at the altar-rich and solemn music swelled out from the choir, and filled the mighty building in which we were; sweet incense floated through the air, thousands and thousands were gathered under that golden dome, and no single thing was omitted which could add to the magnificence of the pageant. In this respect it is probably unequalled in the world. Yet to most that were present it could have been nothing but an empty show. The priests crossed and re-crossed- censers waved-candles were lighted and put out-dresses were changed and -re-changed-i--the cardinals walked back and forth, until the mind became utterly bewildered. All things about us indeed-the vastness of the edifice-the works of art-the rich dresses-the splendid music-contributed to heighten the effect; yet, with all this, the seriousness of devotion seemed to be wanting.

Had I known nothing of Christianity I should have supposed the pope to be the object of their worship. His throne was far more gorgeous than the altar; where they kneeled before the latter once, they kneeled before the former five times*; and the amount of incense offered before each was about in the same proportion. He was evidently the central point of attraction. The entrance of the old man, so gorgeously attired, among kneeling thousands, and the splendor of the whole service, showed more fully than ever before how far the Church of Rome had wandered from the simplicity of the faith, and how much of ceremony it had substituted for the pure worship of the early Christians. The day before I had gone over the service for Christmas with an ecclesiastic of the Romish Church, received from him every explanation, and I now followed it through with the missal in my hand. I wished to form an opinion for myself, and after investigating as far as possible the meaning of the many ceremonies we had witnessed, I could not but feel the truth of the remark I have somewhere seen, that "the Romanist has been the Pagan's heir." The most interesting part to me was to hear the Nicene (or rather Constan tinopolitan) Creed chanted in Greek immediately after it had been chanted in Latin. " It is to show the union of the two churches," a priest most gravely told me. I thought that whereas the Latin Church has for centuries anathematized the Greek, and the Greek in turn repudiated the Latin, this service had about as much meaning as the title " King of Jerusalem," which the king of Naples still uses.

At length the service ended. The Pope was once more raised on his lofty seat and carried down the church - the Roman nobles formed around his body-guards shouldered their halberds - the cardinals with their train-bearers fell into their places

- and the gay procession went as it came. While it passed down, the Pope gently waved his hand from side to side to dispense his blessing the immense multitude sunk upon their knees as he went by - until the train disappeared through the door, and the successor of St. Peter departed to his dwelling in the Vatican. The released ecclesiastics proceeded to pay their respects to the ladies - violet and scarlet stockings appeared in the crowd among the brilliant uniforms - "nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles" were visible on all sides- compliments in French and Italian mingled into one chaos of sound - and the whole broke up like a gay pleasure party.

For some time I lingered under the colonnades to see the immense multitude pour out and disperse. As they passed down the steps and by the massive pillars, they seemed pigmies in size. Before the church, the whole square was alive. The crimson and gold carriages of the cardinals, with their three liveried footmen hanging on behind, were dashing away - the troops were pouring out - military music was sounding - and I went home with scarcely a feeling to remind me that I had been at church.

From this gorgeous and unsatisfactory show I was glad, at a later hour of the day, to repair to the pure worship of our own Church, for I felt that thus far I had been doing nothing to keep the solemn Festival of the Nativity. The Papal power, which in our own land talks so loudly of toleration, here will not allow the worship of a Protestant within the bounds of" the Eternal City," and almost supported, as its people are by the money which the thousands of English scatter among them, it does not permit them even to erect a church in which to meet. Without the walls of the city, just beyond the Porta del Popolo, a large "upper room" has been fitted up for the British Chapel, and there on sufferance they gather each week. There is no organ - no singing - every thing is as plain and simple as possible. Yet never did I so much enjoy the services. of the Church as on this occasion. Never did I feel so grateful to the Reformers of the Church of England, that at the cost of their own lives they had bequeathed to us primitive purity. I thought of the time when eighteen centuries ago, while the magnificence of a heathen ritual was going on in old Rome, perhaps some little band of Christians had met beyond its walls, in seclusion to offer up their simple worship, How great must have been the contrast between the two scenes - the splendor of those forms and ceremonies with which thousands bowed around the altars of the Capitoline Jupiter, and the simplicity and purity with which the few disciples of Christ prayed to their crucified Master !

"Did you receive much spiritual benefit from the services at St. Peter's this morning?" said a friend to me as we were leaving the British Chapel. "Yes," I answered, "indirectly, I received much; for it taught me to realize the value of our own services as I never did before, and I trust therefore to use them for the rest of my life with greater benefit. It is the contrast between the Church in the days of Leo X. and in the time of Constantine."