CHRISTMAS EVE IN ROME.

AN INCIDENT.

"A MELANCHOLY Christmas we shall have this year, thanks to that firebrand Garibaldi and his crew." So writes my cousin Charles from Rome. He is a "pervenç," and one of the Papists; and rather delights in giving a sly hit at my sympathy with Young Italy in general, and Garibaldi in particular.

But though we spar upon political ground, my cousin and I are good friends, and are at any rate simpatico, as the Italians say, upon one point—namely, love of Rome, the city of remembrance and of hope.

I have cause to love Rome, however, that cousin Charles was not of, and the mention of Christmas, with which he begins his last letter, and I my story, brings with it such a crowd of associations, clustering round Christmas-tide and Rome both, that I lay down his letter, and let my thoughts wander back to my first Christmas in Rome, six years ago.

My father, my dear Aunt Lucy, my dear dead mother’s eldest sister, and I, had been staying a month or two in Florence. We intended to return thither in spring, and had planned to leave for Rome early in November. But one attraction and another, the glorious picture-galleries, a circle of friends, art-loving and kindly, the disinclination to move from pleasant quarters, all combined to keep us in Florence until the 23rd of December.

Christmas Eve we had always meant to spend in Rome, and to go together to the Pastorale Service at St. Peter’s; so the 23rd was the latest day that could possibly be fixed for leaving Florence.

The morning found the city of flowers wrapped in a thick white fog, and I think the chilly aspect of the place, as we drove to the station, tended to lessen our regret at leaving it.

A few miles out of Florence the fog cleared away, and by the time we reached Leghorn a true Italian sunshine glowed over the harbor. After the usual difficulties at the Messagerie, with officials, and on the quay with importunate facchinetti and extortionate boatmen, we and our luggage were stowed away in a boat, and rowed to the steamer. Two hours elapsed before the start, during which the sun went down rosily into the dark green water, and I watched him near the horizon, and listened dreamily to the young lad singing to guitar accompaniment from his boat, that rocked under lee of the steamer just below me.

We had a pleasant voyage; that is, all of us who were good sailors. The sea was so calm as to make any malaise a disgrace. Nevertheless, my father declared himself uncomfortable, and left aunt Lucy and me pacing the deck under the moonlight before ten o’clock, which we found very stupid and prosaic of him.

By that time the deck was strewed with recumbent forms, or rather formless masses of wrappers and rugs, the only human sign about which consisted in occasional snorts and grunts, or a restless movement, that showed the owner of the rugs was dreaming uneasily of his recent struggles with the Leghorn bootmen, or the rush he made to secure a place at the first dinner with the passengers from Genoa.

At last aunt Lucy and I had to succumb to tired eyes and weary limbs, and went below, to sleep on our respective shelves in the ladies’ cabin. We were both very excited at the prospect of seeing Rome the next day, for the first time, and my head was so full of schemes and imaginings, that I slept very little. There was a small round window close to my shelf, and as I lay I could see the heaving line of water, and the moon. She grew large and red, and sank below the horizon, just as I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

A golden morning, cold and clear, found us at Civita Vecchia, and somewhat consolded us for the weary time of waiting whilst our luggage, after it had been with difficulty got out of the hold and recognized, was sent on shore and examined at the Customs-house. My aunt and I stayed in the dreary coffee-room of the dreary hotel, while my father had his patience and temper tried at the Bureau. Our own trials seemed light, however, compared with the fate of a lady fellow-passenger, who was waiting in equal weariness for the return of her husband. Her meditations, poor thing! were rudely broken by the appearance of an official, dragging in his arms a ball-dress belonging to her, which had just been decreed seditionist and suspicious by the authorities at the Customs-house, because, forsooth, it was white, trimmed with red fuchsias and green leaves and ribbons,—a conjunction of the Italian tri-color very culpable, and highly suggestive of treason and Garibaldi!

Poor lady! We left her lamenting over the ravaged dress, despoiled of its ornaments, and otherwise decorated with dust from the streets of Civita Vecchia, through which it had been ignominiously borne!

The transit from Civita Vecchia is slow, and the country uninteresting and sad. We were full of anticipation, however, and I grew breathless with excitement as each mile brought us nearer to Rome.

The entrance, at last, was rather damping, certainly, and the drive from the pen-like station gave one no favourable impression of the grand old city.

We had secured lodgings in the Piazza di Spagna, through the good offices of my cousin Charles, who was then, as now, resident in Rome. He had written to tell us of them, and to regret that he should be so
occupied with the services of his church as to be unable to meet us at our lodgings, but would "call the next day, Christmas Day, at half-past nine, to take us to St. Peter's;" he supposed we "had no thought of the Pastoral, or Christmas Eve Vigil?" "As if it wasn't the very thing we have thought of!" I exclaimed; while my father passed over this passage, as he coned the letter en route to our lodgings.

The coachman pulled up at a high-arched door, in the Piazza di Spagna, and, on entering, we found ourselves in semi-darkness.

"What a hole!" said my father, who, though a traveller in his young days, had been a stay-at-home for many years, and had English notions as to what constituted "respectable lodgings." "Run up, child," he continued to me, "and see if you can find your way to the second floor through this darkness. What Charles can have meant—" but the rest was lost upon me, for, feeling for a hand-rail, I ran up the stone staircase. A grated window, innocent of glass, revealed the first landing, sizable enough, with four doors, two with visiting-cards nailed on them, ranged round it. The next flight of steps seemed to bring finer air, and more light; and through a window I caught a glimpse of evening sky, against which a tier of picturesque roofs glowed golden and red-brown. I pulled the tinkling bell at a door on this second landing, and a comely Italian dame made her appearance. Even in my hurry, the grand head, crowned with plaits, struck me as in strange contrast to the poor dirty dress she wore. I grew used to such discrepancy in Roman women in a very few days. By this time my father and aunt Lucy had joined me, and made known who we were, and what we wanted. The woman was in distress. She had understood from the English Signor that the excellent family would not arrive till the 27th, and this was the 24th, and she had that very day let another English Signor have a portion of the apartment. He was out now, and when he would return she did not know. Half the apartment was at our disposal, certainly, a saloon and two bed-rooms; at least, the Signorina could have a bed put up in the ante-chamber, &c., &c. She rattled on volubly, with a thousand gesticulations of hands, shoulders, head, till my father's Italian and patience were almost exhausted. We were standing in the ante-chamber, which she so kindly allotted as my sleeping apartment, and were in high flow of dispute, when a steady step sounded on the stairs, and paused just outside the door. A clear, rather low, but distinct voice called on "Signora Bruna." Out rushed the padrona, exclamining, "Eccolo, eccolo! ecco il Signore." So we went out too, and saw the tall figure of a gentleman, standing with his back to the staircase-window. He took off his wide-awake hat as we came out, and the light shone upon waves of brown hair, that seemed to shine like a halo in the gloom. In a very quiet way he elicited the state of affairs, and courteously offered to remove himself and his effects from the apartment. He could easily find room elsewhere, he said; indeed, he knew he could be accommodated on the primo piano. The quiet voice made a stillness in the turmoil, and my heart seemed to leap up to meet it.

In a very short space of time the stranger collected his properties together, had his boxes pushed into the ante-room, and settled his bill with Signora Bruna. I was occupied in seeing to the bestowal of our own luggage, for my father had complained of a sudden attack of giddiness, and aunt Lucy was in attendance upon him; yet I could not but notice the silent celerity of the stranger, who never lifted his eyes to observe upon our movements, and seemed absorbed in the one effort to remove himself out of our way as soon as possible.

I was standing on the landing-place, seeing to the disposal of our last box, as he passed out. It was dark, and I involuntarily raised the candle I held in my hand to light him as he came out. The flame shone upon both our faces as he looked up; two earnest eyes gazed fixedly into mine, and then over the grave face broke a sudden and very brilliant smile. "Good night!" he said, and was gone. "Nothing remarkable in 'good night' from a polite stranger," I chided myself, impatiently, as I turned back into the rooms. But it was no use to chide; the voice and the smile haunted me. I found my father faint, and evidently unwell. So aunt Lucy and I coaxed him to lie quietly on the sofa, while we settled matters generally. Signora Bruna undertook to supply dinner from a neighbouring restaurant, and in every arrangement showed the quickness and bonhomie of an Italian.

The evening wore on; dinner had been dispatched, and the padrona had come in to inquire what she could next do for us. Was there anything we wanted? Yes, there was, said my father. She was to order a comfortable carriage to take two ladies to St. Peter's to the midnight service, wait for them, and bring them back.

Aunt Lucy and I broke in with exclamations. "We don't want to go." "We won't go without you." "We can't go alone; it would be dreadful; in a strange place, too," and so forth.

But my father silenced us with invincible arguments. We had come to Rome that day on purpose, he said. He was very sorry he was too ill to go with us, but there could be no impropriety in ladies going to church alone; and as to difficulties, did we expect to be run away with, by the Pope's orders, or what? The Signora confirming, and my father persistent, we ladies yielded with a good grace; our only suggestion of sending a message to Charles, or to friends whose addresses we had, being stifled in the bud with, "it's too late for that!"

The carriage was ordered at half-past two, and we agreed to go early to bed to obtain what sleep we might before starting. So at ten we wished each other good-night. My father's parting injunction, as he lifted the striped curtain and opened his bedroom-door, was, "Mind to keep together to-night. Lucy, I depend on you for restraining that
made up girl if she proposes to leave you." "Papa!" I remonstrated; but with a warning shake of the finger my father dropped the curtain, and disappeared.

At half past one aunt Lucy roused me from a dream that I was on board the steamer again, watching the sun rise; and, as I watched, the sun seemed to move and come straight across the sea to me; and as it came, it quivered and changed, and changed and quivered, till it grew like the face of the stranger Englishman. And it came nearer and nearer, till it almost touched me, and then suddenly it was like the Pope's head, with a triple crown on it. Another minute, and I woke to find aunt Lucy's face looking into mine, and saying, "Get up, Michael! What were you dreaming of?" she added, as I drowsily slipped out of bed. "You looked so happy, and ejaculated 'Good night!' in quite a sentimental voice." I blushed an answer, and felt rather conscience-stricken!

By half past two we had dressed, drank some coffee, and, rather shivering with the cold air and excitement together, stepped into the carriage and drove off, leaving the padrona standing at the door, with a flickering candle lighting her face, and bringing her scarlet kerchief head into magnificent relief against the black archway.

A flood of moonlight filled St. Peter's Piazza as we drove through it. A clear and yet mysterious radiance revealed the long colonnades, the fountains splashing and shimmering, the grand flight of steps, and the presence of the dome, while the grand bell sounded over all like the solemn voice of the almost unearthly beauty of the scene.

One can see St. Peter's but once as we saw it that night.

We ascended the steps, lifted by great effort the heavy curtain-door, and passed up into the church—darkness and space, a dimly-shining pavement, gliding figures, and distant chanting.

We walked on slowly. The chanting grew more distinct, and across the darkness lay a band of bright light that streamed from a chapel on the left. We tracked the light and the sound, and found ourselves among the crowd in the choir chapel, where the service was then going on.

I could not have then described what we heard or saw, nor can I do so now. I moved as in a dream, and saw everything as a vision. Rows of venerable ecclesiastics, installed in carved niches, robed in purple, with suggestions of white and scarlet; here and there an olive-complexioned face, clear-cut features, and black eyes that flashed upon the crowd as it swayed to and fro at the entrance to the chapel; a blaze of light at the altar, fronting the gate; priests in gorgeous robes; incense; a picture of the Nativity, for the shepherds of the Campagna to look at, and remember how the shepherds bowed before the Child-Saviour in the poor manger, and found therein a presence more awful than even the angelic vision that yet burned upon their eyes: all this I dimly saw.

In the crowd were, indeed, veritable shepherds. Wild wondering eyes gazed into the light and the incense; uncouth forms, clothed in sheep skins, shouldered through the iron gates of the chapel and stood immovable, transfixed. And the strange singing went on, rather uncouth, too, to a sensitive ear, but with strange fascination in it, heightened by the weird tones of the soprano voices.

Aunt Lucy and I looked and listened together. The chapel was full when we arrived, and we found the crowd rather rough to stand amongst. Now, a brown-robed monk pushed his way through, or an English gentleman made forcible egress for wife or daughter, or a shaggy shepherd planted himself, as on a post of observation, just in front of us, and swayed to and fro in bewildered amazement, uncomfortably unconscious of his neighbours!

I was looking intently at an old canon, who had fallen asleep in his niche, and was being recalled to his duties by a sharp-visaged ecclesiastic next him, when there was a sudden movement in the crowd; a lady had fainted, and was being supported out of the chapel. There was a rush and tumult, and I was forced away from aunt Lucy's side and impelled out into the church. The instant I could, I went back to the place where I had left her; she was gone! In vain I pushed my way from one point to another; I could see her face nowhere. I wandered out into the church, and sought for her familiar figure in the shadowy aisles, and up and down the great nave. I felt frightened and confused. Everything had lost its charm. The strange crowd horrified me, and I thought every one stared at me; I was afraid of the light, and still more of the darkness. I wandered up to the shrine under the great dome, and the vastness of the dim height was a terror to me.

Some one passed and looked, came back quickly, and said, in a low, clear voice, "Pardon me; but if I can give you assistance, will you allow me?" It was the "stranger Englishman" of the morning. His voice was such a comfort to me, I believe I uttered a little cry of joy; and, as if he had been a friend, I told him my troubles. It never seemed to occur to me that he was a nameless stranger. He had seen my face in the chapel, he said, and had noticed I was with another lady, which must be his excuse for speaking to me when he saw me afterwards alone: he had thought it likely I had lost my companion. "It was such a comfort to hear your voice," I said simply, just as we were crossing the stream of light from the choir chapel. He turned his face and looked at me, and that brilliant smile shone out again with a flash that made my head drop, I knew not why. He led me out of the church, which seemed grand and beautiful again now, and we came out upon the broad steps, and found daylight breaking, gray and cold and chill, over the Piazza. I remembered the name of our coachman, but we inquired vainly for him and his carriage. At last a sleepy driver of a "legno" said he thought Giorgio Petri had driven off the Piazza as
he drove on, and there was a lady in the carriage—yes, certainly, now he remembered, there was a lady.

So aunt Lucy was safe; that was delightful. A coachman was found willing to keep his party waiting whilst he earned an extra fare from us, and we drove quickly, while the dawn lightened into day, back to the Piazza di Spagna. As our carriage stopped at the arched door, a beggar, coiled up just inside, uncoiled, and came out and shook himself. As we went up the staircase, the lamp, which all Romans must burn at the entrance to lodging-houses, flickered and went out. My companion laughed, and drawing a coil of taper out of his pocket, lit it with a match. “We must not come in like thieves,” he said. It is strange how I remember every incident of that night still. The knock at the second story brought aunt Lucy’s white face to the door. She almost screamed for joy at seeing me, and listened breathless to my companion’s quiet narration of what had occurred. Aunt Lucy overwhelmed him with gratitude, and said that my father would call upon him and thank him for his courteous kindness the next day, if he would give us his name, i.e. The stranger smiled. “I think,” he said, “that Mr. Hope will scarcely find me wholly unknown. I did not hear this morning who he was; but Miss Hope has incidentally mentioned the name, and by a coincidence I find that my father’s old friend, Mr. Hope, about whose arrival he wrote to me last week, is the gentleman whose lodgings I vacated this morning. My name is Leslie.” Then ensued mutual congratulations between Mr. Leslie and aunt Lucy. Aunt Lucy gave an account of how she had lost me in St. Peter’s, and after a vain search had thought it best to drive back. She had only returned a quarter of an hour, and was deliberating what to do, and whether to rouse my father, when we came in. Then she pressed Mr. Leslie to have some breakfast, but he declined, and bided himself out with a promise to call next day. “Would you mind holding the taper?” he said, as I accompanied him to the door. I took it, a little amused, and held it high to light him on the staircase. He turned, as his foot touched the second step, and looked back at me a moment or two.

“I saw you first, holding the light so,” he said, quietly. “I thought you were Saint Filomena to me. Good night; no, it is good morning now.”

But my story is finished, for Christmas Eve is over, and Christmas morning begun. Mr. Leslie came to see my father next day, who was much better, and delighted to make acquaintance with the son of his old friend, Colonel Leslie, of the—th. I was much laughed at for losing myself on my first visit to St. Peter’s, but I never could see why I was more foolish than aunt Lucy! Perhaps it was because of the sequel that my father used to say, I lost myself “on purpose to be found,” he believed!

He says so more than ever now, though really the joke is very old, for Mr. Leslie and I have been married more than five years.

SHAVING THE PONIES’ TAILS.

TOD did it. He made me hold the light, and he fastened them up to the manger, one at a time; and with Gruff Blossom’s scissors, that were bigger than shears, he set to work. I had never been so frightened in my life before. Old Hetley was in-doors, Blossom was about somewhere, and there was no knowing which of them might come in upon us. Tod— But I had better begin at the beginning.

He lived at Dyke Manor, and his name was Todhetley. I mean the old Pater, not Tod; and, if you please, we must go back a few years, or you may not be able to understand it.

Old Todhetley was very rich; the farmers and people round about called him the Squire. He had no wife; she died when young Tod was a baby. Tod’s proper name was the same as his father’s, Joseph. We lived at the Court, three miles off, and I had no mother, any more than Tod had, for she was dead too. My father was William Ludlow; he was well off, but not so rich as Squire Todhetley, and they were good friends. I was John; and they called me Johnny.

One morning, when I was four years old, the servants told me I had a new mamma. I can see her now as she looked when she came home. We had a high post with a lamp upon it, outside the gate, and she was as tall and thin and upright as that; she had a pinched nose and flat, light curls on her forehead. Hannah said she was thirty-five—she was talking to Eliza while she dressed me—and they both agreed that she looked like a Tartar. She was a Miss Marks, who used to play the organ in church, and teach music; and Eliza said the master might have chosen better. I understood that they meant papa, and asked why he might have chosen better; upon which they both shook me, and said that they had not been speaking about my papa at all, but of the old blacksmith round the corner.

Papa died that year. At the end of another, Mrs. Ludlow married Mr. Todhetley, and we went to live at Dyke Manor; she, I, and Hannah. Tod did not like it. His father mostly called him Joe, the servants Master Joseph; but at school—to which we both went together—with the boys he was always “Tod,” and I fell into the same habit. In contradistinction, I suppose, we got into the way of calling the Squire Old Hetley behind his back, and Pater to his face. Tod had been regularly spoilt by his father, awfully indulged; and naturally he did not like the invasion. As time went on, things grew uncomfortable. Tod and his step-mother waged mutual war in the holidays; the Pater resented it on Tod, and Tod resented it on both.