

## *Christmas in Rome*

In no other church in Rome is Christmas kept with greater solemnity than in the Church of Ara Cœli, the venerable temple on the Campidoglio. Daily, from Christmas Day to the Epiphany, the great flight of steps—Rome's thank offering for delivery from the great pestilence—leading from the piazza below to the main entrance of the church, is thronged from sunrise to sunset with a constant stream of pilgrims eager to pay their homage before the Presepio, in which the world-famed Bambino is exposed to view. In its literal sense, the word presepio signifies a manger, but is commonly used to describe the customary Christmastide representation, with a scenery and figures of Christ's birth in the stable at Bethlehem. The first authentic presepio was that made by St. Francis at Assisi, whence the devotion spread in all parts of Europe.

Within the Church of Ara Cœli is treasured the Bambino (Infant), whose miracles have earned for it the significant title of "the best doctor in Rome." This Santo Bambino of Ara Cœli is a small, shapely wooden statue, some two and a half feet in height, of the Infant Saviour. According to the accepted legend, the figure was carved by a Franciscan lay brother in Jerusalem out of a log of olive wood grown on the Mount of Olives. Its features, now stained and worn by age, represent a baby of a few months old. During the Christmas season the Bambino is taken from the little chapel adjoining the sacristy, which serves as its home during the rest of the year, and placed in a large presepio fitted up in one of the side chapels of the church.

Along one side of the chapel a temporary stage is erected, and on it a pulpit; from which children every afternoon, deliver short sermons or recite snatches of verse or prose in honor of the Infant Jesus, and suggestive of the scene which lies depicted before them. These simple discourses attract immense crowds and it is no uncommon sight to find the steps leading up to the church