

ST. PETER'S BASILICA.

Written for the Nor'-Wester

To essay a descriptive narrative of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is indeed a hazardous task, for the human mind is incapable of comprehending the grandeur of that greatest of christian temples. So vast, so wonderful, so harmonizing are all the adjuncts of this lordly edifice, that one feels bewildered even in the contemplation of the most beautiful monument, which is forever the masterpiece of the genius of western nations. To appreciate the richness and beauty of St. Peter's, one must visit it, and revisit it, "breaking to piece-meal the great whole, and making them separate objects of contemplation," but to form any adequate idea of its immensity, it is necessary to betake oneself far from the maddening crowd, to some distant spot, where the eye, no longer discerning puny structures, will be free to embrace within its vision the gigantic whole.

The writer recalls with thrilling remembrance the glory, with which St. Peter's cupola burst in upon his view, when far out upon the bleak and deserted Campagna, whose now desolate plains were in former ages the glories of ancient Rome, whose fields are strewn with pieces of white marble, the shattered fragments of friezes, columns and tombs, like "bones bleached on the battle field," kneeling down in reverential fear before the towering cross, which surmounts the "vast and wonderful dome," he beheld for the first time that monarch of the wilderness. The feeling was akin to that which the mariner experiences on seeing land after a tempestuous voyage, or which fills the soul of the weary pilgrim from the east, who, journeying to Jerusalem, bows down before the city of the crucified Christ. There it stood, towering heavenward, resplendent in the golden rays of the setting sun, proclaiming to the universe the conquest of Christianity over paganism and idolatry.

With wonderful eyes the visitor approaches the grand piazza leading to St. Peter's. It is impossible to desire anything more majestic and imposing, and more calculated to throw the basilica into bold relief. Of oval shape, circumferenced by a superb portico, with four rows of massive Corinthian columns surmounted with statues larger than life, it forms a fitting entrance to the precincts of the church. In the centre of this space is placed one of the largest of Egyptian obelisks, at either side of which two fountains shoot their waters upwards in silver streams to a distance of some eighty feet, which, when returning in cascade form, produce a marvellous effect, exhibiting all the various tints of the rainbow. A gradual ascent is commenced about seventy five feet from the vestibule of the church. Here the massiveness begins; the mind seems already lost in the maze of architectural symmetry and rebels against crediting the surroundings with their just proportions. The Basilica is entered!

"Its grandeur overwhelms thee not,
"And why? It is not lessened, but thy mind,
"Expanded by the genius of the spot,
"Has grown colossal."

Six hundred and thirteen feet from the spot on which the visitor is now standing is the chair of St. Peter, some 225 feet of aisles and a nave are at either side of him, while raising his eyes he is dazzled with the glittering panels of the gilded roof, extended 150 feet high in air, to be carried to the still more wondrous altitude of 434 feet when immediately under the dome. This then is the immensity of St. Peter's, 613 feet long, 150 feet high in the nave and aisles, 434 feet under the dome, and 450 feet wide at the transept. The awe-stricken visitor seems paralyzed by the effect, and remaining motionless for some minutes, vainly endeavors to encompass within his weak intellect the immensity before him. Unconsciously he moves,

"But increasing with the advance,
Like climbing some great Alp, which still doth move,
Deceived by its gigantic elegance,
he beholds

"Vastness which grows, but grows to harmonize."
Betaking himself to the Baldachino, which surmounts the high altar, and beneath which are buried the Apostles, Saints Peter and Paul, a flood of light breaks in upon his soul, and looking aloft he views,

"The dome, the vast and wondrous dome
To which Diana's marvel was a cell,
Christ's mighty shrine above His Martyr's tomb"

It is impossible for the human mind to conceive the mighty grandeur of the dome of St. Peter's. Words fail to picture it. All description falls short of it. It is too colossal in its proportions, too gorgeous in its glittering mosaic work to be portrayed in narrative. A Pantheon lifted high in air, this is what St. Peter's dome is, this is what Michael Angelo intended it to be. One hundred and ninety-five feet in diameter, four hundred and thirty four feet in height, adorned with the richest mosaics, it forms a fitting canopy for the tombs of the holy apostles.

The interior decorations of this "outshining and overwhelming edifice" are in keeping with its immensity.

"Rich marbles, richer paintings, shines where flame
The lamps of gold."

all are centred in this grandest of Christian temples. It were useless to make a tour of the church, for the mind is unable to drink in at one draught such a beauteous grandeur. Twenty-nine altar pieces, each costing more than \$20,000; 135 statues, and twenty monuments, some of which cost \$30,000; 100 immense pillars, and a floor paved in variegated marbles, priceless mosaics, costly gems, all combined, make St. Peter's at Rome the grandest achievement of modern times. Truly doth Byron say in his "Childe Harold,"

"But thou of temples old or altars new
Standest alone, with nothing like to thee,
Worthiest of God the Holy and the true,
Power, glory, strength and beauty, all are united
In this eternal ark of worship undecayed."

It may be of interest to briefly mention the history of St. Peter's. The spot on which the Basilica is located was in the time of Nero given up to heathen superstitions; justly is it spoken of as "infamibus locis." The early Christians deposited the bodies of their martyred disciples in a grotto near to the imperial circus. The body of St. Peter was placed in this grotto, and Pope Anacletus erected an oratory, where for three centuries the faithful assembled to pray. Constantine resolved to change the oratory into a more noble temple. This work of the great emperor remained for eleven centuries. In 1450 Pope Nicholas V. began the reconstruction of the present edifice. At his death it was not raised more than five feet above the pavement. Paul II. continued the work after several modifications. Paul III. committed the completion to Michael Angelo, who altered the design to the form of a Greek cross. The cupola was finished under Sixtus V. by James Della Porta. Under Paul V., Carlo Maderno executed a Latin Cross, according to the original designs of Bramante. Pius VI. perfected the work and on November 18, 1626, Pope Urban VIII. consecrated the Basilica. Thus 176 years were spent in completing it, at a most fabulous expenditure.

There is probably no Christian edifice in existence to-day, not even excepting St. Paul's of London, which is noted for so many historical happenings as is St. Peter's. Four times did Charlemagne worship there; there the son of Pepin received the Imperial crown from Leo III.; Alfred, King of England, was crowned in it by Leo IV.; Charles the Bald by John VIII.; Otho I. by John XII., and St. Henry by Benedict VIII.

A large number of popes are interred within the church's walls, and the sculptured monuments over many of the tombs, would alone render St. Peter's a gem in an artistic point of

view. It is indeed difficult to realize the immense proportions of the building. The wonderful harmony which pervades everything makes the vastness incomprehensible, and only by surveying part by part can one at all arrive at any just idea of the whole. For instance, the dome is erected upon four large columns; where these merge into its encircling limits are placed four medallion mosaics, representing the four evangelists. On being viewed from the pavement below, those medallions appear not more than eighteen or twenty inches in diameter, yet the pen which St. Luke holds in his hand measures in actual length seven feet! One of the best and perhaps the only correct method of forming an estimate of the building is to take notice of some devout penitent kneeling in the church. Standing at the doorway and viewed from the high altar, a man seems but a speck on the floor. There are no pews or benches in St. Peter's. Any one of the side chapels can contain a thousand or more people, and the church itself would not seem crowded if 75,000 spectators assembled within its walls. It would be a pleasing task to conduct the reader to the summit of the dome on this occasion and to treat him to a panoramic view of the city of the Caesars. But for the present it were better that he remain within, for already his mind is opening to the grandeur before him and

"Growing with its growth he thus dilates
His spirits to the size of that he contemplates."
"LEA FAIL."



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