

RECOLLECTIONS OF CHRISTMAS IN ITALY.

BY MISS M. E. A.

My memories of Christmas in Italy are all dyed in the colours of the South. My first Christmas there came almost unnoticed, while the overawing spectacle of an eruption of Vesuvius was upon us. During all the latter half of November, a nightly column of lurid smoke lit up the sky, and a pall of blackness obscured the morning sun, giving to the air a chillness resembling that of an eclipse. The terrors of many timid strangers who wished themselves away, and of the poor peasants, who called frantically upon Saint Antonio and the Madonna, as they saw their vineyards and houses scorched by the burning lava, and themselves only snatched by the soldiers from its coiling embrace, were the all-engrossing topics. The morning paper was caught up to read the daily bulletins issued by Prof. Palmieri, a true priest of the mountain; and not till these became reassuring did things return into their ordinary channel.

I had just finished reading "The Last Days of Pompeii," and had gone out upon the balcony to look for the hundredth time at the ruddy canopy of smoke which still hovered over Vesuvius, and to listen to the seething of the waves as they were driven in upon the shore by a sirocco wind, which had brought a thunder storm on its wings. I was trying to imagine the scene of the destruction of the cities which now lay so still in the darkness, except when a flash of lightning showed where they were, and how Pliny had been baffled as he struggled to bring his ship up among those seething waves, close enough to rescue some of the bewildered and terrified fugitives from the storm of ashes that was being rained upon them. Suddenly a bomb burst near me and the sound mingled with the thunder. It was one of the heralds of Christmas, and announced that the Novena* had begun.

Next morning the sirocco had cleared away, and in a few days the thin trail of smoke hardly delayed the warm and comforting sunshine. The light-hearted people had forgotten their fears.

* The Novena is a nine-days' devotion preceding Christmas.