

Mamertine Prison

(See frontispiece)

THIS prison which dates back to the Roman Empire is composed of two parts.

The lower which can only be entered through an opening in the roof, is twenty-five feet underground and only six feet high ; a regular dungeon without doors or windows, wherein criminals and captured kings were incarcerated, in which Jugurtha, Vercingétorix and many other prisoners of war suffered life long tortures.

By order of Nero, St. Peter and St. Paul were also imprisoned in this dark vault for nine months. But even in irons those generous champions of the True God continued to preach the doctrine of Christ. St. Peter converted his guards. Even to this day, near the stone pillar to which their chains were attached, pilgrims can drink from miraculous stream, which, at the prayer of the Chief of the Apostle's sprang up at his feet and allowed him to baptise his converted guards and their forty-nine companions.

Our Frontispiece deals principally with this scene. Near the fountain stands an altar for the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. Before arriving at the end of the prison the guide points out a small cavity in the stone wall which pilgrims respectfully kiss and which according to the inscription underneath was probably caused by St. Peter's head.

This dismal prison has now become a venerable sanctuary, the most ancient in Christian Rome. Pilgrims never fail to visit and pray at this hallowed spot immortalized by the first Pope of the Church and the first Apostle of the Gentiles : St. Peter and St. Paul.