

DOWN A SALT MINE.

HOMER had sung the praises of salt long before Plato made a speech in honour of its virtue; the Romans compared the utility of salt even to that of the sun; in every language, whether ancient or modern, we meet with proverbs testifying to the importance of this wonderful mineral. In all known times and in all known places (with the fewest possible exceptions) salt has been duly appreciated.

There was a time when the Wieliczka salt mine—the greatest salt mine in the world—was of great repute as one of the grandest sights of the country. Wieliczka, however, does not lie on the beaten track of the regular tourist, and therefore is less spoken of now than it used to be. People in these days seldom take the trouble of going out of their way for the sake of anything worth seeing.

Nevertheless, Wieliczka is not without its visitors; a good many people still go to see the works in the course of the year. Few travellers will pass by the spot without halting to see the mine; and besides these chance guests and stray foreign visitors, a number of invalids resort to the place for the sake of its salt springs, sulphur and malt baths.

The small town of Wieliczka in the Podgorze district ("Podgorze" means below the hills) in Galizia—not Spanish *Galicia*, but Galizia, that part of Poland which belongs to Austria—is situated in a pleasant valley, open to the north, and surrounded by lovely hills to the south, which enclose the place in a semicircle. Part of the houses—mostly of wooden architecture—stand in the hollow, others on terraces ascending the gentle hills.

Looking from some eminence over the pastoral neighbourhood, we can, without a great stretch of imagination, go back a few centuries, and, blotting the small town out of the picture, fancy that we see nothing but the vast and lonely extent of pasture ground; lonely but for the white dots, representing shepherds and their flocks, which here and there break the monotony of the aspect.

To-day, entering the town, we notice that it is a quiet, cleanly-looking, nice little place, with a large market-square, an old castle in its centre, and a certain air of contentment about it. The inhabitants are good-looking, well-conducted, polite people, speaking the soft, rather drawling Mazur dialect of the elegant Polish tongue.

Very far from the unhealthy, squalid, pinched, melancholy figures you are wont to meet in other mining districts, the Wieliczka miners exhibit perfect ease and contentment in their handsome features, in the whole bearing of their well-proportioned limbs. They are

passionately fond of their mine, and proud of it in proportion; they can understand life in and for their mine only. They have good public schools for their boys and girls, and other popular institutions, some of which you would scarcely expect to find in an insignificant place of seven or eight thousand inhabitants. Then there are the baths already mentioned, which are of some repute in the neighbourhood.

Having pointed out the insignificance of the town above ground,



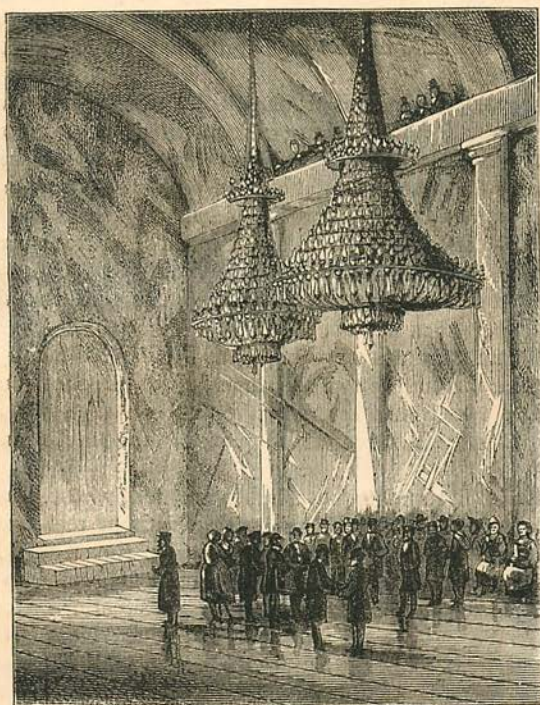
IN THE SALT MINE.

let us at once introduce you to the far more extensive subterranean city of Wieliczka, taking you down by one of the two chief entrances to the mine. Whether we descend the four hundred and seventy steps of the spiral staircase, the "Franciszek," constructed in the year 1744, during the reign of August, Elector of Saxony, or whether we are conveyed down by means of ropes at the "Danielowicz," the second entrance, we land at a convenient point for our expedition.

We cannot take you over the whole of the salt city. It is a labyrinth of lanes, streets, squares, passages, caves, bridges suspended across precipices, steps leading into black gulfs or up crystal mounds, ferries over sheets of water, and so on. Some one has made

the precise calculation that a walk from Cracow to Vienna would last as long and be more easily accomplished than passing through all the corridors and chambers of the mine of Wieliczka. We must, therefore, limit our examination to the chief points of interest in this strange land.

While walking or driving down, we are informed that the ground into which we penetrate is of manifold composition. The salt is found unmixed with earth, pure, clear, and hard, in immense rock-like



THE BALL ROOM.

masses. It is worked with the miner's hammer or axe, like any other hard mineral; sometimes, but rarely, it is blasted with powder. Large blocks of salt are separated from the salt-rock, divided into smaller ones of perfectly square shape—the salt crystallises in cubic form, and the immense formless rocks are easily cleft into cubes—and conveyed to the upper world, looking either exactly like frozen water, or with a slight greyish green hue in the colour.

Through the long and lofty western gallery we pass into one of the largest caves of the place—the Chamber of St. Ursula. We look with astonishment at the walls, supporters, lofty vaulted roof of what at first sight we can only take for rock-crystal, all shining and glitter-

ing with the reflection of the light of many torches, and we begin to experience that sort of dreamy sensation which would undoubtedly accompany us in an expedition through fairyland. We feel as if we were standing upon the threshold of the mysterious kingdom of mountain-goblins, an impression which is increased on our beholding a shining crenelled wall, looking like the wall of an old fortress, with an archway in the middle invitingly opened to admit us. A bridge, loftily reposing upon the bold arch, leads to some higher region, but we are bound downwards, and accordingly we pass through the archway, down a hundred and twenty salt steps, and straight into the largest room, the *salle de fête* or ball-room of the mine—the Michalowicz Chamber.

It is lit up for our special benefit by numberless wax lights in lustre chandeliers of the same description as those seen in every ball-room, with the only difference that here the crystal prisms of the lustres are of the same material as the walls, the roof, the supporters of the gallery, and the gallery itself; namely, of salt. Our little party forms a dark, uncongenial speck in those lustrous surroundings. Involuntarily we look round for the fairy-party that lit these lights for the purpose of a dancing-night, and suppose that the light-footed company dispersed at our approach.

In very remote times this hall had witnessed many a brilliant festival, when human, not elfish element, was predominant; but for a century or two it has seldom, if ever, been used for its original purpose. To-day it is a show part of the mine and nothing more.

An empty ball-room "whose lights are fled, whose glory's dead," is of melancholy aspect, and we leave it without regret in order to descend another flight of steps and to enter the Kloski Room, the most beautiful of all; a gem, whose ornaments, cut into the solid salt-walls by the hand of real artists, are of superior conception and execution. We pass on over a wooden bridge; looking down from it right and left, we gaze into utter darkness; a fire-brand flung from the parapet of the bridge into the black gulf makes us realize the unsuspected depth of the precipice beneath our feet. Our way now leads us through another cave, to the fourth storey below.

Vast excavations, dimly lighted, lie before us; we have some difficulty in imagining that human hands have hewn out, bit by bit, this immense space. We step boldly forward in the twilight to explore this unknown region, but are soon arrested in our progress. We stand on the brink of a lake. This sheet of water, surrounded by salt rocks of fantastic shapes, is the largest of the sixteen lakes of this strange subterranean country. It is the reservoir in which all the waters of the mine mingle their floods. Rowing boats invite us to cross over to the other side. Almost involuntarily, as if drawn to it by magic, we step into one of them. Can any one of us at this moment fail to remember the mysterious River Styx and Charon the

old boatman? Ah, that some of us could sip but the tiniest drop of Lethe out of these greenish-grey salt-floods!

As we row forward the scene is suddenly illumined by a soft white light, streaming from the heights of some grand crystal rocks which throw their deep shadows on our course. The utter stillness is broken only by the splash of our oars, or a softly murmured word now and then. In front of us the shining crystal rocks narrow until there is merely a sort of porch left for us to pass through into another immense expanse of water. The tops of the two nearest rocks, forming this entrance, are united by an ornamental arch bearing in large transparent letters the miner's greeting: "Gluck auf," the "All hail!" of the German miners in any subterranean part of the world.

Our progress is a slow one, but as we have no hurricane to encounter on this still lake, we land safely at some convenient steps belonging to a parapet of salt, at the foot of a salt statue of the saint whose image Roman Catholics are so fond of placing at the water-side.

Thence we pass through the Steinhauser Chamber and some crystal-vaulted corridors, up a well staircase, and into the chapel of St. Anthony, the larger one of the two consecrated chapels of the mine, both of them being worked into the salt rock. The entrance arches, the walls and roofs, the columns, the altar, crucifix, candlesticks, and lamps; the pulpit, which is of excellent workmanship; the statues—all are of salt.

The salt in this place is not perfectly white, but of a greenish-grey hue, which, far from marring it, increases its beauty.

This chapel was hewn out of the living salt-rock about the year 1690, during the reign of the noble and gallant king Jan Sobieski.

The salt mine of Wieliczka holds its yearly festival on the third of July; on that day mass is read in this chapel. The ordinary services are held in the smaller and less ornamented chapel, also cut out of salt, as well as all its interior fittings. No miner would be missing from church on the third of July—they assemble in full number to attend at the service and glorify God with beautiful harmonious hymns, sung with sonorous voices, and with the utmost devotion. It is an imposing ceremony. Piety is a chief feature of the character of the Poles in general, and these quiet, sincere, simple-hearted mining-people of Wieliczka possess a great share of the national treasure.

On the afternoon of the third of July the mine is grandly illumined in all its different parts, and is visited by a great number of people; this offers the best opportunity for strangers to inspect the salt-city.

When we have visited the chief parts of the mine, we wish to see a little more of it—a little of what not everybody can see. Our request is granted, and we wander again upstairs and down, through shining, glittering, glistening, vaulted corridors; we pass under crystal arches, and over bridges where the dark salt river runs at our feet

with a dull sound ; we stop at a long vaulted cave roughly hewn out in the salt, without pretence to architectural beauty and brilliancy, and we find ourselves actually in the—stables. There are several establishments of the kind in the mine. More than a hundred horses are actively employed at the works, and seem to live comfortably and without any visible detriment to their health in these underground parts without seeing the open air and daylight for many years. All the caves we have seen are perfectly dry—else the objects, walls, &c., of salt would not have kept so well during long centuries. The prevailing temperature throughout all the mine is of an icy coldness.

Then we have a peep at the new excavations and the work going on there—for until now we have wandered through regions where the mainer's hammer has not been heard for centuries.

We see the process previously described, and then, in order to avoid going back all the way to the chief entrances, we are conveyed in the wake of some shining, white, brilliant salt-cubes to the upper world by the simple rope system. Our excursion is at an end.

The shepherd Wielicz, says the legend, discovered the salt-mine about the year 1250.

Passing in the course of centuries through many ownerships, it returned, after the treaty of peace at Paris, in 1814, into the undisputed possession of Austria. It is now thoroughly well managed and yields a sufficiently good income to the crown, besides providing a good number of officials with a comfortable living, and giving regular employment to the mining population of the town, without mentioning the many strangers who have found in Wieliczka a haven—not of rest, but what is much better here on earth—of honest work.

Several new mines, especially those at Strassfurth, in Germany, have endeavoured to compete with Wieliczka, but have not as yet been able to reach its standard. Wieliczka is still the greatest known salt-mine in the world, and by its ornamental antiquities the most curious and interesting.

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