

A City of Salt.

BY JAMES WALTER SMITH.

Illustrations from Photographs specially taken by George Newnes, Ltd., with the permission and aid of the Austro-Hungarian Government.

LT would take at least three weeks to visit every portion of this marvellous city. Men have worked in its hollows for centuries, leaving it as a legacy to posterity. Horses have been brought to life and have died there, without seeing the light of day. It is silent

offering our readers something absolutely unique.

Here the wonders spoken of may be seen, as they have been seen by people for nearly a thousand years. During that time the skilled hand of the labourer in the Wieliczka salt mines has been at work turning the depths of darkness into a realm



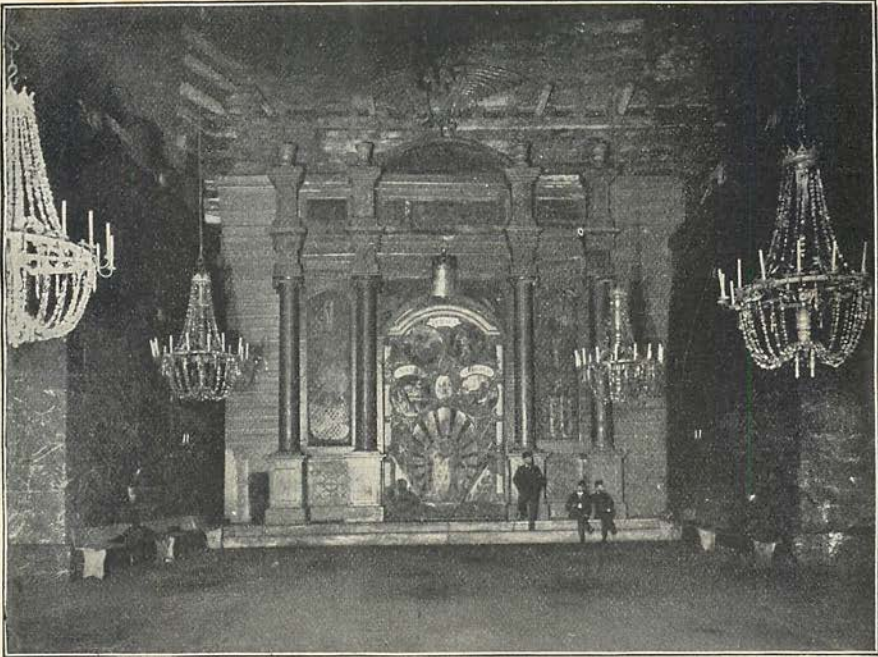
THE OFFICES OF THE GOVERNMENT SALT MINES AT WIELICZKA.

and dark, except when the voices of people echo through its countless, tortuous halls, and the candle of the guide or flash of the Roman light discovers its massive and glittering wonders. It is a city hewn in salt.

It will hardly be believed that such a place exists. To all who disbelieve, after a glance at the photographs in this article, we would recommend a trip to Wieliczka, a little municipality about six miles from Cracow, in Polish Austria, and the centre of the Galician salt industry. The mines are under the direct control of the Austro-Hungarian Minister of Finance, to whom, through the Austrian Embassy in London, we are indebted for the kindly official aid and constant attention given to our special commissioner and our photographer on their recent trips to Wieliczka. The photographs, we may add, are the first ever taken for publication in this country. The article, also, is the first full description of these wonderful mines ever published. In the following pages, therefore, we are

of beauty. It has created ball-rooms, chapels, altars, statues, restaurants, railways, chandeliers, staircases, pillars, and thrones in the bowels of the earth, and the grandeur of these has excited the admiration of the world.

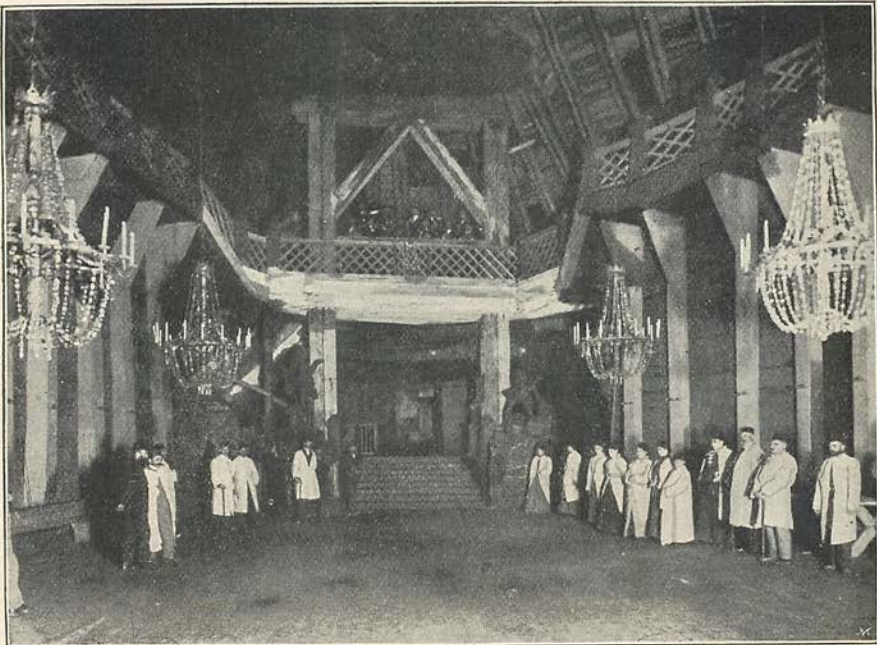
The mines date back to 1044, and now have a length of over $2\frac{3}{4}$ miles. Above stands a large, grey building, containing the offices of those in charge of the mining operations. We may note this building in the illustration shown here, and it is interesting principally because it contains a large number of caps and uniforms worn by various Royal persons, Austrian and otherwise, who have descended into this subterranean city. They are each labelled with the name of the visitor and the day of descent. In early times, this descent was made in a shaft worked by horse-power, but a hydraulic lift is now in use. Some visitors prefer, however, to descend on long, slanting stairways cut in the solid salt.



THE BEAUTIFUL LETOW BALL-ROOM.

Almost blinded by the darkness, and frightened by the eerie echo of his own footsteps, the visitor first enters some colossal chambers hollowed out by the labourer in the ordinary course of mining after a plan

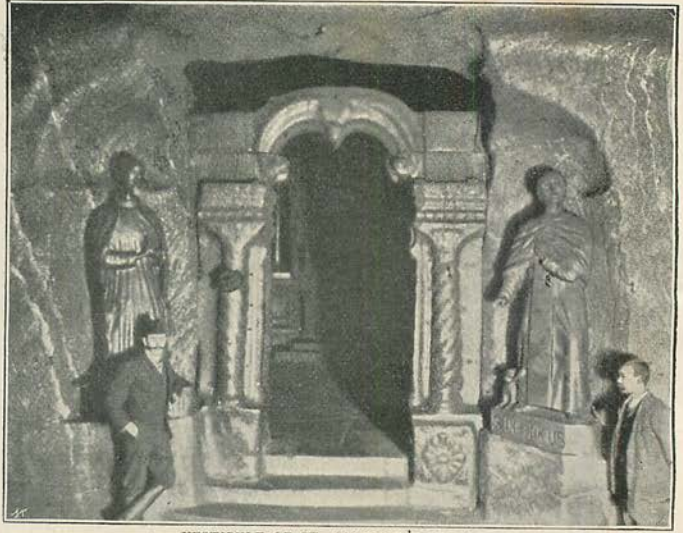
laid down by some master mind. He almost loses himself in the expanse of the Letow ball-room, which with its solid mural decoration, illuminated galleries, stalwart pillars, and shining chandeliers, is indeed a fit



ANOTHER VIEW OF THE BALL-ROOM.

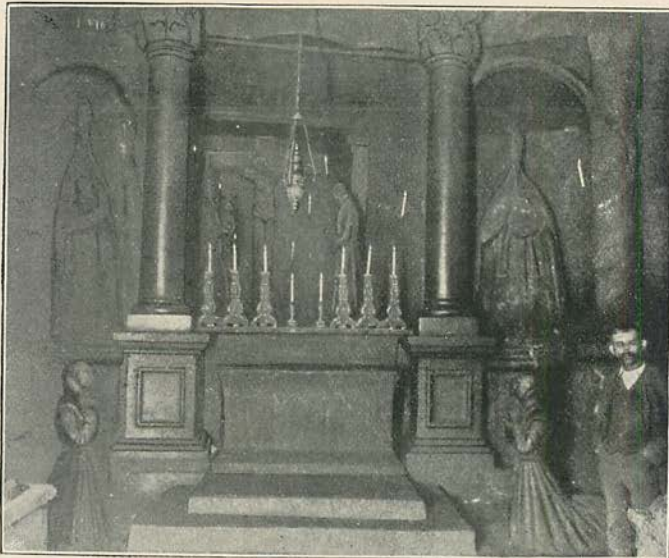
and welcome chamber for lovers of the dance. In its history, which dates back to 1750, when it was dedicated to Letowski, the chief of mines at that time, it has witnessed many remarkable gatherings. These have taken place on Royal visits, or for the entertainment of distinguished guests. One end of the room is adorned with a colossal Austrian eagle and with transparencies painted on slabs of salt. In an alcove at the other end of the room stands a throne of green, the crystals of which flash a green and ruby-red. It is on this that the Emperor sits when he comes to the mines.

The ball-room lies at a distance of 216ft. below the surface, being the first of seven stories in the mine. Three of these stories only are open to visitors, as they alone contain the marvels visitors go to see, and are called "Bono," "Kaiser Franz," and "Erzherzog



VESTIBULE OF ST. ANTHONY'S CHAPEL.

hewn in 1698. Both the vestibule to this chapel and its interior are shown on this page, the former containing a symmetrical archway, with figures at the sides. The interior is beautified by an altar showing the Crucifixion, and on the steps of the altar are



INTERIOR OF ST. ANTHONY'S CHAPEL.

Albrecht," respectively, the last two being named in honour of celebrated Austrians.

From the scene of gaiety and splendour it is but a step to the home of quietude and prayer. Here, off one of the main passages, is the noted St. Anthony's Chapel, the resort of thousands of the devout since it was

the forms of two kneeling monks. On the sides of the chapel may be seen smaller altars and statues of saints. Many times each year the priests of the district perform their pious duties in this simple chapel, not only in memory of St. Anthony himself, but as a tribute to the miner who, unaided



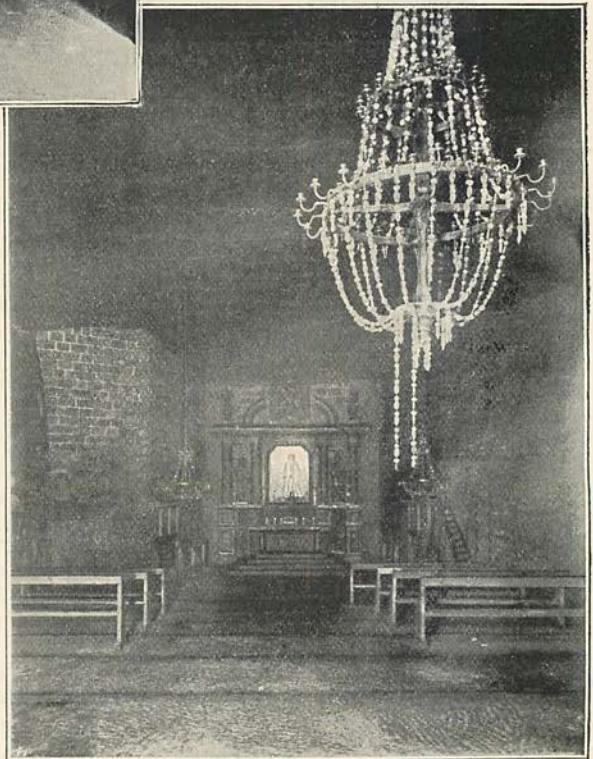
SHRINE AND ARCHWAY OF SALT.

and persevering, built the chapel as it stands to-day. The blocks of salt which he dug out have disappeared, but the life work of the nameless labourer may last till the end of time.

One mass in particular is annually celebrated on the 3rd of July with considerable pomp and earnest devotion. The priests in their picturesque robes descend the mine in state, bringing with them a large body of the devout from miles around. In the wake of these worshippers usually follows a crowd of sightseers, who make a point of coming to the mines on this particular day. The chants of the priests and the sweet voices of the singers are solemn and impressive, and the stately saints of salt look down upon the kneeling crowd with mute compassion. After the mass has been celebrated a breakfast is served, for which the material is taken down in

large quantities on the day before. No one who intends visiting the mines should neglect to be present on this day. The celebration may not approach in splendour that which takes place on August 18th, the birthday of the beloved Kaiser Franz Josef, but it exceeds the latter ceremony in point of genuine impressiveness. It would be hard, indeed, to exaggerate the grandeur of the music sung by the faithful, as it rolls in resonance through the long and winding corridors of salt.

It is not at all strange that the religious feeling of olden times should be reflected in the chambers and passages through which we are now in imagination passing. Hard by St. Anthony's Chapel the torch of the guide illuminates a magnificent shrine and archway hewn in one of the passages. Again, as we move along, we see figures of saints in attitude of prayer, and a few minor rooms which we pass hurriedly through bear the names of martyrs. The Queen's Chapel, with its magnificent altar, carved with expert skill in solid salt,

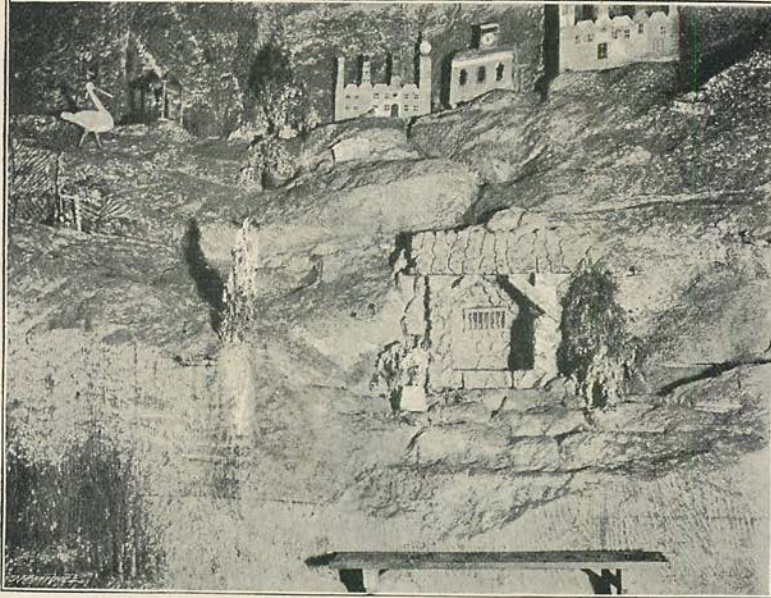


SALT CHANDELIER AND ALTAR IN THE QUEEN'S CHAPEL.

contains on one of its sides a view of Bethlehem. Tradition has it that one man spent many months of silent effort in this picturesque sculpture, now shown to every visitor as one of the lesser, but interesting, curiosities of the mines. As we turn from it

attendants in order that the general features of the chambers and chapels may be seen.

The descent from the first to the second story is made on a long series of steps of solid salt. At the foot of this remarkable staircase the sightseer is fascinated by a



BETHLEHEM, AS CARVED IN SALT ON THE SIDE OF THE QUEEN'S CHAPEL.

the beautiful chandelier in the chapel, which is shown in the illustration, catches our eye, and makes us marvel that such a delicate conception with so many pendant chains of white should have so long resisted the wear and tear of time. When illuminated, as it often is, this chandelier, with its myriad lights, is indeed beautiful to see.

The illumination of the mine, we may add parenthetically, is carried out by the authorities according to a regular tariff, the basis of which is the number of persons who may on certain days wish to visit the mine. A first-class illumination, which comprehends the lighting-up of the thousand and one candles and electric lamps scattered in all parts of the mines, costs 110 kroner (about £4 10s.) for any number of people up to twenty. For thirty to forty people the charge is 130 kroner (about £5 10s.). For this the mine becomes one blaze of light and seems an enchanted fairy-land. An illumination of the fourth class, to say nothing of the intermediate grades, costs 40 kroner for one-ten persons, and 60 kroner for twenty-thirty persons. These lesser charges include ordinary illumination by Bengal lights, fired by

beautiful sight. The giant chamber "Michal-owice" lies before him—vast, fearsome, and stupendous—finished in 1761, after forty years of daily labour. It measures 59ft. long, 92ft. broad, and 118ft. high, the roof being supported by a wooden framework to avoid disaster. In the interior, a salt chandelier of 300 lights gleams brilliantly on the rugged sides of this imposing room. When musicians play here the volume of sound rolls and reverberates with deafening effect against the solid confines of the chamber, and, rushing upwards, bursts with mighty power against the far-off dome.

Descending by another remarkable flight of steps, the visitor enters some smaller chambers, each dedicated to someone of high position, and each beautiful in itself. A turn in the passage brings one to a little bridge, in front of which loom up two massive pyramids of salt, silent guardians of this lonely spot. These monuments were erected in 1812 to the memory of Franz I. and Carolina, Emperor and Empress of Austria. Appropriate inscriptions have been carved on the face, and rows of electric lights, on the four edges of each shaft, cast reflec-

tion on the written words. Near the little bridge also stands another monument, erected in memory of a visit paid to the mine in 1887 by the Crown Prince Rudolf and the Princess Stephanie. Even in this far-off place, the memory of an unhappy heir to Imperial robes is honoured by the labourer's hand.

The third floor of this marvellous mine contains the railway station and restaurant, attracting the visitor by its long vista of latticed galleries and ponderous pillars, and its promise of refreshment after a long and weary tramp on unyielding floors. For here at this railway

station, where the twenty-five miles of railways from all parts of the mine join, a tempting buffet exists the summer through, and is well patronized by the thousands who come from Austria,

scene, with its busy waiting crowd, its converging rails, its twinkling lights, and the rumble of the train in the tunnel near by, recalls the impression which one gets while



MONUMENT OF SALT, ERECTED IN MEMORY OF THE CROWN PRINCE AND PRINCESS RUDOLF.

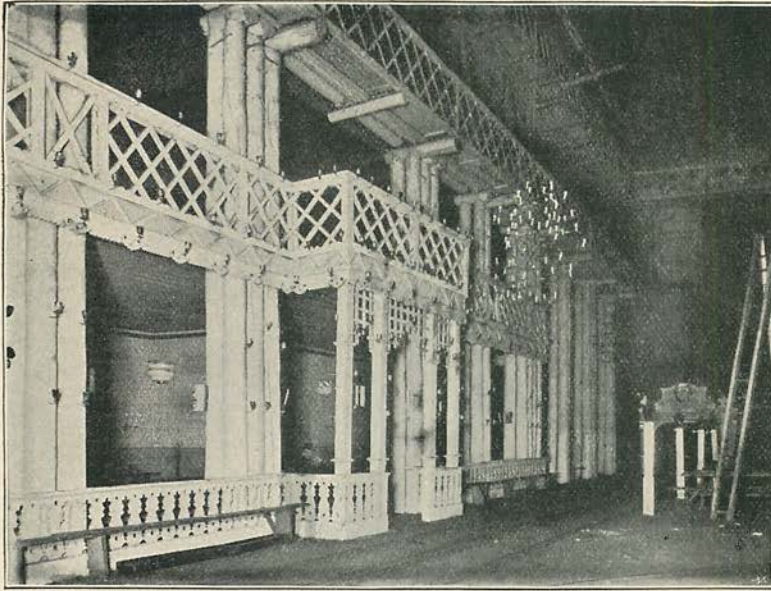
Russia, and Germany to view the wondrous works of salt.

Summer is a profitable time for the manager of this underground restaurant, for visitors never fail to patronize his wares. Five or six tables on one side of the line are often crowded with diners and drinkers of beer, who seem thoroughly to enjoy themselves under the hundred lights scattered over the front of the station. Several massive chandeliers of salt, as we may see in our illustration, try to outvie in brilliancy the glare of the illumination from these incandescent lights.

In some respects this



THE RAILWAY STATION ON THE THIRD FLOOR.



ANOTHER VIEW OF RAILWAY STATION.

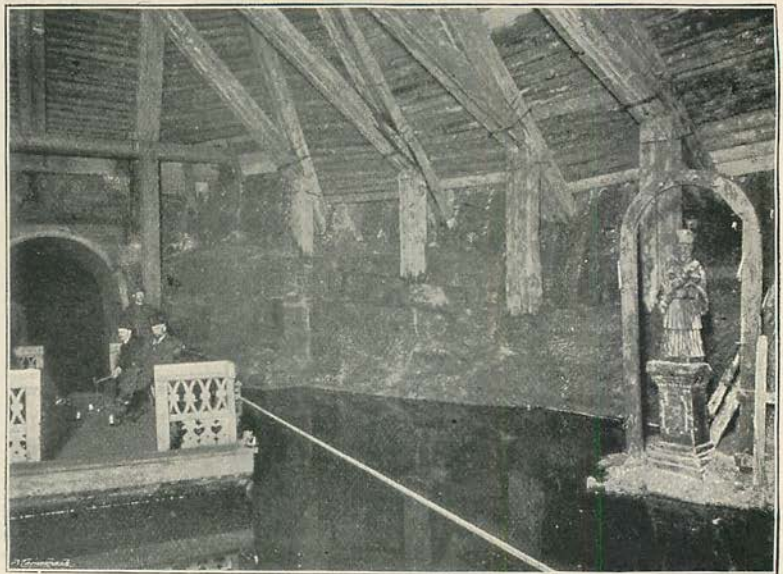
standing at an English railway station on a moonless, starless night.

The mine is, indeed, full of many marvels ; but the most marvellous of all—at least, the one which makes the most impression on the visitor—is the subterranean lake, lying 700ft. below the surface of the earth. The waters of the lake are dark, thick, and heavy, and as the boat glides over its face the spreading waters roll up against the sides of the grotto with a ghost-like swish. A ponderous solitude overweighs all. The Styx alone of all the death-like streams in legend could rival this in stillness. The boat, as we see in our illustration, is substantial, and carries many people. It is guided through the Stephanie and Rudolf Grottos by ropes running on pulleys along the sides of the boat, and the boatman, with his hands resting on the

stern of the curious craft, pushes it with his feet braced against the rope. There are sixteen of these lakes in different parts of the mine, but this is the only one upon which visitors are allowed to go. The trip across and back takes fifteen or twenty minutes, as the boat moves slowly through the sluggish brine. A gun shot off in the middle of the lake wakes a long and lingering echo, and the voice of the boat-

man, as he calls out that all is ready, seems like the voice of a giant from the depths of chaos.

We have already mentioned the fêtes which take place during the presence of Royalties. These are indeed events of no small importance. Music and illumination arranged in advance set the echoes of the old halls flying and the crystals of salt shimmer with light. When the Emperor



THE RUDOLF GROTTO.

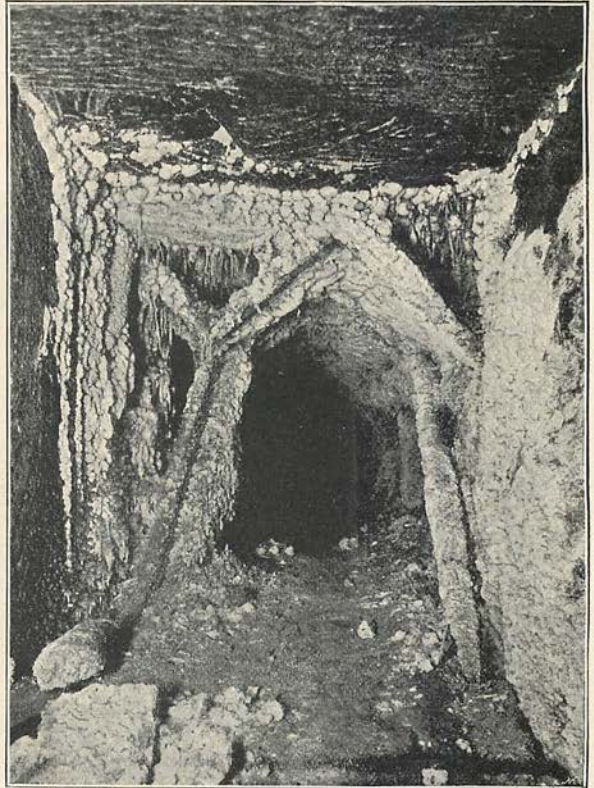


THE STEPHANIE GROTTA, WITH BOAT ON THE
SALT LAKE.

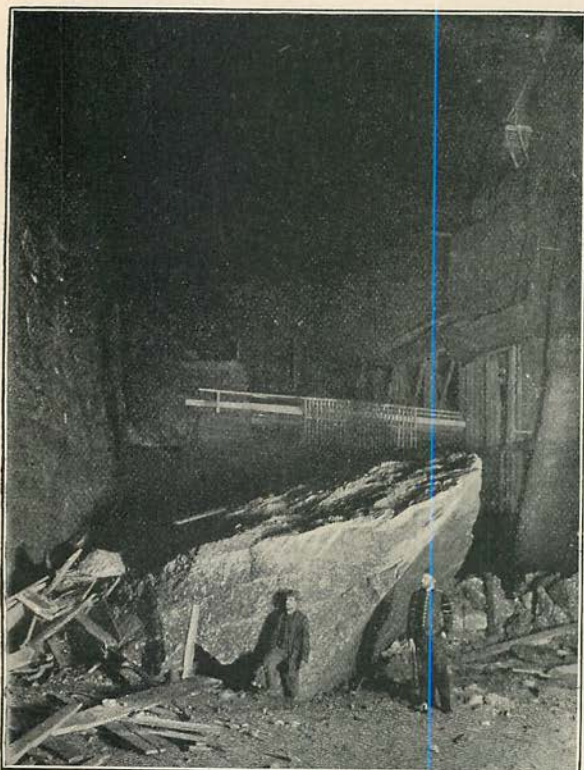
We may now turn from the handiwork of the dead to the labour of the living. The lower stories of the mine are occupied by over a thousand miners, who, working eight hours a day each, manage in the course of a year to produce sixty-five thousand tons of salt. They toil patiently, cutting their way through the solid salt, leaving beautiful passages heavily covered with a crust of sparkling white, as we may see in the accompanying illus-

comes the doorways, statues, and columns are covered with flowers and evergreens. Handfuls of multi-coloured salt are sprinkled over the floors, and the galleries are hidden in a lavishness of flags. Operatives and their families are invited by the Emperor to a festival in the Letow ball-room, at which 200 musicians have been known to play. The Emperor sits upon his salt throne surrounded by his courtiers and soldiers. Gaiety reigns supreme; and the strings of the musicians accompany the patter of footsteps in a wild Slavonic dance.

But these Royal visits have not always been moments of Imperial joy. The partition of Poland, and the acquisition of the mines by the Austrians, made the presence of the new rulers hateful in the extreme. At such moments the Emperor entered these depths at the risk of his life. The music and dance went on, but eyes were watchful, and fears were strong. The soldiers grouped about the throne of salt were there with hands upon their swords, and the glare from the magnificent chandeliers above fell on a face of white.



A PASSAGE THROUGH SOLID SALT.



MASS OF SALT WEIGHING 200 TONS WHICH FELL IN THE MINE.

Many people were smothered by the smoke. In 1644 another fire occurred, which lasted for over a year. All the people and horses who were in the mine at the time perished either through suffocation or by desperate jumps into the dreadful abysses of the mine. A considerable portion of the town fell in. The year 1815 witnessed the loss of several hundred lives by fire; and in 1868 the mines were flooded by the bursting of a large lake of liquid salt. Some years ago, a huge mass of rock salt, weighing 200 tons, fell from the roof of one of the chambers. Many minor catastrophes have taken place, but accidents are now practically unknown, owing to the strict care exercised by the officials. The lifts are in charge of officials, who see all the labourers come out of the mine, and then carefully lock the doors of the shafts. No one can go down a shaft until the key is again brought forth. The roofs of the chambers have at times collapsed, but such accidents are now avoided by careful shoring up with wooden props.

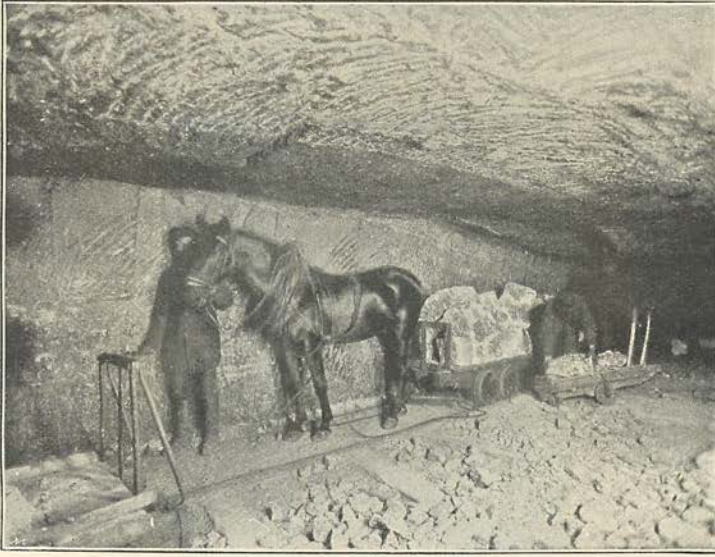
tration. Thus they move on and on, leaving their crystalline trail behind, pausing here and there for months or years to hew out a new chamber, which they honour by some well-known name. Deserted chambers are used as store-rooms, and here are piled up enormous masses ready for transport on the railway to the centre of the mines, thence to be raised and scattered throughout the world.

The history of the mines has at times been shadowed by grief. Two terrible catastrophes have occurred, the first in 1510, when an evil-minded labourer wilfully lit a fire.

All the work is done by the piece, and many miners make a respectable income on account of their skill in cutting out the largest lumps. They work lying down or



MINERS AT WORK.



THE HORSE-RAILWAY, WITH CAR FULL OF SALT.

standing up, as the case may be, and often may be noticed at the tops of tall ladders in positions of startling insecurity. An overseer stands by, and a horse with a truck goes to and fro with the lumps of salt delivered to the trucks from small and roughly-built wheelbarrows of wood. The air of the mines is dry and pure, and little illness among these labourers is known. The horses live their natural lives in superb health and vigour, and the colts born in this nether region of darkness frisk about with the irresponsible activity of their brothers above who scamper about in the light of the sun.

The end of the day at these wonderful mines is picturesque and busy. The visitors, travel-stained and tired, emerge from the lift, doff their clothes, sign their names in an enormous book, and

Vol. xvi.—85

disappear. The workmen ascend in the long straight shaft, and pass from the lift with little tin lamps in their grimy hands. The gate of the lift clicks behind them, and down goes the lift again for another load of labourers. Each man as he comes out of the mine is examined carefully for traces of

concealed salt. In early years so much salt was stolen by the miners that investigation became necessary, but owing to the moral improvement of the age the regulations of the mines no longer authorize such examination. The men themselves, however, demand it. An official stands by and perfunctorily slaps each leg of the miner as he lifts it up for examination. Then come a few pats on the sleeves, pockets, and back, and the examination is over. The lights of Wieliczka die out and another day is done.



SEARCHING A MINER FOR CONCEALED SALT.