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LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Eleven.]

Resting at Ischia—Annunciation and the Annunciators—A Town of Beggars—A Shameful Spectacle—The St. Januarius Miracle—Hair-Growing Extraordinary—An Insatiate Hackman—Ascent of Mount Vesuvius.

Ascent of Mount Vesuvius.

NAPLES, August 1867.

EDITORS ALTA: I shall remember our trip to Vesuvius for many a day—partly because of its sight-seeing experiences, but chiefly on account of the fatigue of the journey. Two or three of us had been resting ourselves among the tranquil and beautiful scenery of the island of Ischia, eighteen miles out in the harbor, for two days; we called it "resting," but I do not remember now what the resting consisted of, for when we got back to Naples we had not slept for forty-eight hours, and all the pleasant memories we had of Ischia were that it was a place where there were no antiquities seventeen thousand years old, and no paintings by the old masters.

Never mind what the trouble was.

[I am not aware that I know what I am trying to write about; this is the first time I have been on board the ship for six weeks, and this morning I was pluming myself upon the quiet day I was going to have, but now I have only written a dozen lines here in the cabin and already all those anticipations of quiet are blighted; there is one party of Italian thieves fiddling and singing for pennies on one side of the ship, and a bagpiper, who only knows one tune, on the other; I am expecting to go crazy every minute, and if I do, I hope I will be driven to massacre those parties before I come to my senses again.] Very well; we came back from Ischia and were just about to go to bed early in the evening, and catch up on some of the sleep we had lost, when we heard of this Vesuvius expedition. There were to be eight of us in the party, and were to leave Naples at midnight. One more night and one more day without sleep—pleasant prospect. However, we laid in some provisions for the trip, engaged carriages to take us to Annunciation, and then poked about the city to keep awake till 12. We got away punctually, and in the course of an hour and a half arrived at that town of Annunciation. This Annunciation is the very last place under the sun. In other towns in Italy they lay around quietly and wait for you to ask them a question or do some overt act that can be charged for—but in Annunciation they have lost even that fragment of delicacy; they seize a lady's shawl from a chair and hand it to her and charge a penny; they open a carriage door, and charge for it—shut it when you get out, and charge for it; they help you take off a duster—two cents; brush your clothes and make them worse than they were before—two cents; smile upon you—two cents; bow, with a lick-spittle smirk, hat in hand—two cents; they volunteer all information, such as that the mules will arrive presently—two cents—warm day, sir—two cents—take you four hours to make the ascent—two cents. And so they go. They crowd you—infest you—swarm about you, and sweat and stink, and lie, and look sneaking, and mean, and obsequious—the concentrated essence of the soulless, dust-licking scum of the earth the lower classes of the whole nation are! There is no office too degrading or too disgusting for them to perform, for money. I have had no chance to find out anything about the upper classes by my own observation, but from what I hear said about them I judge that what they lack in one or two of the vile traits the *comatelle* have, they make up in one or two others that are infinitely meaner. How the people beg!—many of them very well dressed, too.

But I said I knew nothing against the upper classes by personal observation. I recall it! I had forgotten. What I saw their bravest and their fairest do last night, the lowest and meanest multitude that could be scraped up out of the purlieus of Christendom would blush to do, I think. They assembled by hundreds, and even thousands, in the great Theatre of San Carlo, to do—what? Why, simply, to make fun of an old woman—to deride, to hiss, to jeer at an actress they once worshipped, but whose beauty is faded now and whose voice has lost its former richness. Everybody spoke of the rare sport there was going to be. They said the theatre would be crammed, because Fressolini was going to sing. It was said she could not sing well, now, but then the people liked to see her, *anyhow*. And so we went. And every time the woman sang they hissed and laughed—the whole magnificent house—and as soon as she left the stage they called her on again with applause. Once or twice she was encored five and six times in succession, and received with hisses when she appeared, and discharged with hisses and laughter when she had finished—then instantly encored and insulted again! And how the brutal, high-born knaves enjoyed it! White-kidded gentlemen and ladies laughed till the tears came, and clapped their hands in very ecstasy when that unhappy old woman would come meekly out for the sixth time, with uncomplaining patience, to meet a storm of hisses! It was the cruellest exhibition I ever looked upon—the most wanton, the most heartless, the most unfeeling. The singer would have conquered an audience of American rowdies by her brave, unflinching tranquility (for she answered encore after encore, and smiled and bowed pleasantly, and sang the best she possibly could, and went bowing off, through all the jeers and hisses, without ever losing countenance or temper;) and surely in any other land than Italy her sex and her helplessness must have been an ample protection to her—she could have needed no other. Think what a multitude of small souls were crowded into that theatre last night—and a fair sample of Neapolitan souls they must have been, too. If the manager could have filled his theatre with Neapolitan souls alone, without the bodies, he could not have cleared less than ninety millions of dollars. What traits of character does a man have to have to enable him to help three thousand brutes to hiss, and jeer, and laugh at one friendless old woman, and shamefully humiliate her? He has to be heartless, soulless, groveling, mean-spirited, cruel and cowardly. My observation teaches me (I do not like to venture beyond my own personal observation,) that the upper classes of Naples possess those traits of character. Otherwise, they may be very good people; I cannot say.

Ascent of Vesuvius—Continued.

And while I am about it, now, confound them, I will mention that in this city of Naples, they believe in and support one of the wretchedest of all the wretched religious humbugs you can find in Italy—the miraculous liquification of the blood of St. Januarius. Twice a year the priests corral all the people at the Cathedral, and get out this old vial of clotted blood and let them see it slowly dissolve and become liquid—and every day for eight days, this dismal farce is repeated, while the priests browse around among the crowd of staring asses and collect toll for the exhibition. The first day, the blood liquifies in forty-seven minutes—the church is crammed, then, and time must be allowed the cash-collectors to get around; after that it liquifies a little quicker and a little quicker, every day, as the houses grow smaller, till on the eighth day, with only a few dozens present to see the miraculous swindle, it liquifies in four minutes.

And here, also, they used to have a grand procession, of priests, citizens, soldiers, sailors, and the high dignitaries of the City Government, once a year, to shave the head of a made-up Holy Virgin—a stuffed and painted thing, you know, like a milliner's dummy—whose hair miraculously grew and restored itself every twelve months. They were in the habit of running this shaving procession as late as four or five years ago. It was a source of great profit to the church that possessed the remarkable dummy, and the ceremony of the public barbering of her was always carried out with the greatest possible eclat and display—the more the better, because the more tom-foolery there was about it the bigger the crowds it drew and the better the circus paid—but at last a day came when the Pope and his servants were unpopular in Naples, and the City Government stopped the Virgin's annual show. They intimated that if her hair must and would grow, and if it was so uncomfortable that she could not wear it after it did grow, she must get some friend to cut it in private, or else go to the barber-shop like anybody else. She couldn't have her head shingled in the public streets any more—that was a settled thing. But there you have two specimens of these Neapolitans—two of the silliest possible church swindles, which half the population religiously and faithfully believed, and the other half either believed also or else said nothing about, and thus lent themselves to the support of the swindle. I am willing to think the whole population believed in these poor, cheap miracles—a people who want two cents every time they bow to you, and who abuse a woman in public, are capable of anything, I think.

Ascent of Vesuvius—Continued.

These Neapolitans are a bad lot. There is no question in my mind about that. They cheat everybody they can, and they always are expecting to get cheated themselves. They always ask four times as much money as they intend to take, but if you give them what they first demand, they feel ashamed of themselves for aiming so low, and immediately ask more. When money is to be paid and received, there is always and invariably a lot of vehement jawing and gesticulating. You cannot buy and pay for two cents worth of claims without trouble and a quarrel. One "course," in a two-horse carriage, costs a franc—that is law—but the hackman always demands more, on some pretence or other, and if you give it he makes a new demand. A friend of mine took a one-horse carriage for a course—tariff, half a franc. He gave the man five francs, by way of experiment. He demanded more, and received another franc. Again he demanded more, and got a franc—demanded more, and it was refused. He grew vehement—was again refused, and got noisy. The man said, "Well, give me the seven francs again, and I will see what I can do"—and when he got them, he handed the hackman half a franc, and he immediately asked for two cents to buy a drink with.

Ascent of Vesuvius—Continued.

Well, as I was saying, we got our mules and horses, after an hour and a half of bargaining with the mangy population of Annunciation, and started sleepily up the mountain, with a scoundrel at each mule's tail who pretended to be driving the brute along, but was really holding on and getting himself dragged up instead. I made slow headway at first, but I began to get mad at the idea of paying my minion five francs to hold my mule back by the tail and keep him from going up the hill, and so I discharged him. I got along faster then.

We had one magnificent picture of Naples from a high point on the mountain side. We saw nothing but the gas lamps, of course—two-thirds of a circle, skirting the great Bay—a necklace of diamonds glinting up through the darkness from the remote distance—less brilliant than the stars overhead, but more softly, richly beautiful—and over all the great city the lights crossed and recrossed each other in many and many a sparkling line and curve. And back of the town, far around and abroad over the miles of level campagna, were scattered rows, and circles, and clusters of lights, all glowing like so many gems, and marking where a hundred villages were sleeping. About this time, the fellow who was hanging on to the tail of the horse in front of me and practising all sorts of unnecessary cruelty upon the animal, got kicked some fourteen rods, and this incident, together with the fairy spectacle of the lights far away in the distance made me perfectly happy, and I was glad I started to Vesuvius.

Ascent of Mount Vesuvius.

This subject will be excellent matter for a paragraph, and to-morrow or next day I think I will write it.

MARK TWAIN.