

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA]

[Number Five.]

Twain Enraptured--A City of Palaces--Trees, Sculpture and Paintings--Sharp Contrasts in Paris Sight-Seeing--The Emperor and the Sultan--French Railway Travelling.

PARIS, July 12th, 1867.

Versailles.

It is wonderfully beautiful! You gaze, and stare, and try to understand that it is real, that it is on the earth, that it is not the Garden of Eden—but your brain grows giddy, stupefied by the world of beauty around you, and you half believe you are the dupe of an exquisite dream. If I live a thousand years, I shall never see anything half so lovely. A noble palace, stretching its ornamented front block upon block away, till it seemed that it would never end; a grand promenade before it, whereon the armies of an empire might parade; all about it rainbows of flowers, and colossal statues that were almost numberless, and yet seemed only scattered over the ample space; broad flights of stone steps leading down from the promenade to lower grounds of the park—stairways that whole regiments might stand to arms upon and have room to spare; vast fountains whose great bronze effigies discharged rivers of sparkling water into the air and mingled a hundred curving jets together in forms of matchless beauty; wide grass-carpeted avenues that branched hither and thither in every direction and wandered to seemingly interminable distances, walled all the way on either side with compact ranks of leafy trees whose branches met above and formed arches as faultless and as symmetrical as ever were carved in stone; and here and there were glimpses of sylvan lakes with miniature ships glassed in their surfaces—and everywhere—on the palace steps, and the great promenade, around the fountains, among the trees, and far under the arches of the endless avenues—hundreds and hundreds of people in gay costumes walked or ran or danced, and gave to the fairy picture the life and animation which was all of perfection it could have lacked.

It was worth a pilgrimage to see. Everything is on so grand a scale. Nothing is small—nothing is cheap. The statues are all large; the promenade is vast; the palace is grand; the park covers a fair-sized county; the avenues are interminable. All the distances and all the dimensions about Versailles are vast. I used to think the pictures exaggerated these distances and these dimensions beyond all reason, and that they made Versailles more beautiful than it was possible for any place in the world to be. I know now that the pictures never came up to the subject in any respect, and that no painter could represent Versailles on canvas as beautiful as it is in reality. I used to abuse Louis XIV. for spending two hundred millions of dollars in creating this marvellous park, when bread was so scarce with some of his subjects; but I have forgiven him now. He took a tract of land sixty miles in circumference and set to work to make this park and build this palace and a road to it from Paris. He kept 35,000 men employed daily on it, and the work was so unhealthy that they used to die and be hauled off by cart-loads every night. The wife of a nobleman of the time speaks of this as an "inconvenience," but naively remarks that "it does not seem worthy of attention in the happy state of tranquility we now enjoy."

I could not help thinking ill of people at home, who trimmed their shrubbery into pyramids, and squares, and spires, and all manner of unnatural shapes, and when I saw the same thing being practiced in this great Park I began to feel angry. But I soon saw the idea of the thing and the wisdom of it. They are after the general effect. We distort a dozen sickly trees into unaccustomed shapes in a little yard no bigger than a dining-room, and Heaven knows they look absurd enough. But here they take two hundred thousand tall forest trees and set them in a double row; allow no sign of leaf or branch to grow on the trunk lower down than six feet from the ground; from that point the boughs begin to project, and very gradually they extend outward further and further till they meet overhead, and a faultless tunnel of foliage is formed. The arch is mathematically precise. The effect is then very fine. They make trees take fifty different shapes, and so these quaint effects are infinitely varied and picturesque. The trees in no two avenues are shaped alike, and consequently the eye is not fatigued with anything in the nature of monotonous uniformity. I will drop this subject now, leaving it to others to cipher out how these people manage to make endless ranks of lofty forest trees grow to just a certain thickness of trunk (say a foot and two-thirds); how they make them grow to precisely the same height for miles; how they make them grow so close together; how they compel one huge limb to spring from the same identical spot on each tree and form the main sweep of the arch; and how all these things are kept just precisely in the same condition, and in the same exquisite shapeliness and symmetry month after month and year after—for I have tried to reason out the problem, and have failed.

I loitered through the great hall of sculpture and the one hundred and fifty galleries of paintings in the palace of Versailles, and felt that to be in such a place was useless unless one had a whole year at his disposal. I loitered, also, through the Grand Trianon and the Petit Trianon, those monuments of royal prodigality, and with histories so mournful—full of souvenirs of Napoleon the First, and three Kings and as many Queens. In one gorgeous bed they had all slept in succession, but no one occupies it now. In a large dining-room stood the table at which Louis XIV. and his mistress, Madame Maintenon, and after them Louis XV., and Pompadour, had sat at their meals, naked and unattended—for the table stood upon a trap-door, which descended with it to regions below when it was necessary to replenish its dishes. In a room of the Petit Trianon stood the furniture, just as poor Marie Antoinette left it when the mob came and dragged her and the King to Paris, never to return. Near at hand, in the stables, were prodigious carriages that showed no color but gold—carriages used by former Kings of France on state occasions, and never used now save when a kingly head is to be crowned, or an imperial infant christened. And with them were some quaint sleighs, whose bodies were shaped like lions, swans, tigers, etc.—vehicles that had once been splendid with paint and fine workmanship, but were dusty and decaying now. They had their history. When Louis XIV. had finished the Grand Trianon, he told Maintenon he had created a Paradise for her, and asked if she could think of anything now to wish for. He said he wished the Trianon to be perfection—nothing less. She said she could think of but one thing—it was summer, and it was balmy France—yet she would like well to sleigh-ride in the leafy avenues of Versailles! The next morning found miles and miles of grassy avenues spread thick with snowy salt and sugar, and a procession of those quaint sleighs waiting to receive the boss concubine of the gayest and most unprincipled court that France has ever seen!

The Contrast.

From Imperial Versailles, with its palaces, its statues, its gardens and its fountains, I journeyed back to Paris and sought its antipodes—the Faubourg St. Antoine. Little, narrow streets; dirty children blockading them; greasy, slovenly women capturing and spanking them; filthy dens on first floors, with rag stores in them (the heaviest business in the Faubourg is the Chiffonier's); other filthy dens where whole suits of second and third-hand clothing are sold at prices that would ruin any proprietor who did not steal his stock; still other filthy dens where they sold groceries—sold them by the halfpenny-worth—five dollars would buy the man out, good-will and all. Up these little crooked streets they will murder a man for seven dollars and dump the body in the Seine. I saw one of their customers at the Morgue—a man who had been stabbed and then thrown into the river—a horrid looking corpse exposed there to be claimed, but nobody would be likely to want it perhaps. And up some other of these streets—most of them, I should say—live lorettes.

All through this Faubourg St. Antoine, misery, poverty, vice and crime go hand in hand, and the evidences of it stare one in the face from every side. Here the people live who start the revolutions. Whenever there is anything of that kind to be done, they are always in. They take as much genuine pleasure in building a barricade as they do in cutting a throat or shoving a friend into the Seine. It is these savage-looking ruffians who storm the splendid halls of the Tuileries, occasionally, and swarm into Versailles when a King is to be called to account.

A Lost Opportunity.

I never can have any luck. Something goes wrong every time a chance offers. We were driving in the Bois de Boulogne yesterday, along with some thirty thousand other parties, when a great body of gold-plastered men came dashing along on handsome horses, and the Frenchmen began to say *Vive l'Empereur*, gently. We stopped, and his Imperial Majesty Napoleon III, and his Serene Highness Abdul Aziz, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, passed within six feet of us, and very properly took off their hats. Here was a chance for world-wide notoriety, and, with my usual infernal luck, I had left my derringier at home.

The Emperor Napoleon looks vastly older than his portraits, and has a keen, cunning, scheming look out of his almost closed eyes, that one does not find in the pictures, I believe. In his own proper person he looks a great, a very great man, but you know his pictures make him almost a nobody. That he is the greatest man in the world to-day, I suppose there is no question. Bismarck may be shrewder in some things, but there his greatness stops, while there is no element of true greatness which Napoleon does not possess. He has augmented the commercial prosperity of France, in ten years, to such a degree that figures can hardly compute it. He has rebuilt Paris, and has partly rebuilt every city in the State, and at no expense to commonwealth or city. But above all things, he has taken the sole control of the Empire of France into his hands, and made it the freest country in the world—perhaps—for people who will not attempt to go too far in meddling with government affairs. No country offers greater security to life and property than France does, and one has all the freedom he wants, but no license—no license to interfere with anybody, or make any one uncomfortable.

As for the Sultan, he is a very dark and a very common looking moustached and whiskered Mahomedan. I could set a trap anywhere and catch a dozen abler men in a night.

French Cars.

French cars hold eight persons—four face four. They have no sleeping cars. At first, with your own party with you, you rather like them; but when you reflect that very disagreeable people might get in sometimes, and that you could never be permitted to change your car, and when you also recollect that there are no water-closets on the train and no place where you can get a drink, you soon begin to think less of them. There are plenty of water-closets at the stations, with signs on them, and this made trouble for Brown. He came to me and complained that there was a remarkable similarity between the names painted on all the French railway stations. Poor devil, he had them all down in his note-book: "*Cote des Hommes*."

MARK TWAIN.