IN company with a professor from St. Petersburg, we left Cracow in the morning, crossed
the Vistula, and drove eastward through a low, undulating country, covered with fields of
rye, oats, and potatoes. The village of Wieliczka occupies a charming situation on the
northern slope of a long, wood-crowned hill. The large storehouses for the salt, the
government of offices, and the residences of the superintendents, on a slight eminence
near the foot, first strike the eye. After procuring a permit from the proper official, we
presented ourselves at the office, over the mouth of the mine, in company with five
Prussian travelers, two of them ladies, and a wandering German mechanic, who had
tramped out from Cracow in the hope of seeing the place. We were all enveloped in long,
course blouses of white linen, and having bespoken a supply of Bengal lights, a door was
opened, and we commenced descending into the bowels of the earth by an easy staircase,
in a square shaft. Six boys, carrying flaming lamps were distributed among our party, and
one of the superintendents assumed the office of conductor.

After descending 210 feet, we saw the first veins of rock salt, in a bed of clay and
crumbled sandstones. Thirty feet more, and we were in a world of salt. Level galleries
branched off from the foot of the staircase; overhead, ceiling of solid salt, under foot a
floor of salt, and on either side dark gray walls of salt, sparkling here and there with
minute crystals. Lights glimmered ahead, and on turning a corner we came upon a gang
of workmen, some hacking away at the solid floor, others trundling wheelbarrows full of
the precious cubes. Here was the chapel of St. Anthony, the oldest in the mines—a
Byzantine excavation, supported by columns with altar, crucifix, and life-size statues of
saints, apparently in black marble, but all as salt as Lot's wife, as I discovered by putting
my tongue to the nose of John the Baptist. The humid air of this upper story of the mines
has damaged some of the saints: Francis, especially, is running away like a dip candle,
and all of his head is gone except his chin. The limbs of Joseph are dropping off as if he
had the Norwegian leprosy, and Lawrence has deeper scars than his gridiron could have
made, running up and down his back. A Bengal light, burnt at the altar, brought into
sudden life this strange temple, which presently vanished into utter darkness, as if it had
never been.

I cannot follow, step by step, our journey of two hours through the labyrinths of this
wonderful mine. It is a bewildering maze of galleries, grand halls, staircases, and vaulted
chambers, where one soon loses all sense of distance or direction, and drifts along blindly
in the wake of his conductor. Everything was solid salt except where great piers of hewn
logs had been built up to support some threatening roof, or vast chasm, left in quarrying,
had been bridged across. As we descended to lower regions, the air became more dry and
agreeable, and the saline wall more pure and brilliant. One hall, 108 feet in height,
resembled a Greek theater, the traces of blocks taken out in regular layers representing
the seats for the spectators. Out of this single hall 1,000,000 hundredweight of salt had been taken, or enough to supply the 40,000,000 inhabitants of Austria for one year.

Two obelisks of salt commemorated the visit of Francis I and his empress in another spacious, irregular vault, through which we passed by means of a wooden bridge resting on piers of the crystalline rock. After we had descended to the bottom of this chamber, a boy ran along the bridge above with a burning Bengal light, throwing flashes of blue luster on the obelisks, on the scarred walls, vast arches, the entrances to deeper halls, and the far roof fretted with the picks of the workmen. The effect was magical, wonderful. Even the old Prussian, who had the face of an exchange broker, exclaimed, as he pointed upward: "It is like a sky full of cloud lambkins." Presently we entered another and loftier chamber, yawning downwards like the mouth of hell, with cavernous tunnels opening out of the farther end. In these tunnels the workmen, half-naked, with torches in their hands, wild cries, fireworks, and the firing of guns (which here so reverberates in the imprisoned air that one can feel every wave of sound), give a rough representation of the infernal regions, for the benefit of the crowned heads who visit the mines. The effect must be, indeed, diabolical. Even we, unexceptionable characters as we were, looked truly uncanny in our ghostly garments, amid the livid glare of the fireworks.

A little farther we struck upon a lake four fathoms deep, upon which we embarked in a heavy square boat and entered a gloomy tunnel, over the entrance of which was inscribed (in salt letters), "Good luck to you!" In such a place the motto seemed ironical. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," would have been more appropriate. Midway in the tunnel, the halls at either end were suddenly illuminated, and a crash, as of a hundred cannon, bellowing through the hollow vaults, shook the air and water in such wise that our boat had not ceased trembling when we landed in the farther hall.

Read Tasso,---
"Treman le spaziose atre caverne,
E'l aer cieco in quel rumor rimbomba,"---

if you want to hear the sound of it. A tablet inscribed "Heartily welcome!" saluted us in landing. Finally, at the depth of 450 feet, our journey ceased, although we were but halfway to the bottom. The remainder is a wilderness of shafts, galleries, and smaller chambers, the extent of which we could only conjecture. We then returned through scores of tortuous passages to some vaults where a lot of gnomes, naked to the hips, were busy with pick, mallet, and wedge, blocking out and separating the solid pavement. The process is quite primitive, scarcely differing from that of the ancient Egyptians in quarrying granite. The blocks are first marked out on the surface by a series of grooves. One side is then deepened to the required thickness, and wedges being inserted under the block, it is soon split off. It is then split transversely into pieces of one hundred-weight each, in which form it is ready for sale. Those intended for Russia are rounded on the edges and corners until they acquire the shape of large cocoons, for the convenience of transportation into the interior of the country.

The number of workmen employed in the mines is 1500, all of whom belong to the
"upper crust"---that is, they live on the outside of the world. They are divided into gangs, and relieve each other every six hours. Each gang quarries out, on an average, a little more than 1000 hundredweight of salt in that space of time, making the annual yield 1,500,000 hundredweight! The men we saw were fine, muscular, healthy-looking fellows, and the officer, in answer to my questions, stated that their sanitary condition was quite equal to that of field laborers. Scurvy does not occur among them, and the equality of the temperature of the mines---which stands at 54° of Fahrenheit all the year round---has a favorable effect upon such as are predisposed to diseases of the lungs. He was not aware of any peculiar form of disease induced by the substance in which they work, notwithstanding where the air is humid salt-crystals form upon the woodwork. The wood, I may here remark never rots, and where untouched, retains its quality for centuries. The officer explicitly denied the story of men having been born in these mines, and having gone through life without ever mounting to the upper world. So there goes another interesting fiction of our youth.

It requires a stretch of imagination to conceive the extent of this salt bed. As far as explored, its length is two and a half English miles, its breadth a little over half a mile, and its solid depth 690 feet! It commences about 200 feet below the surface, and is then uninterrupted to the bottom, where it rests on a bed of compact sandstone such as forms the peaks of the Carpathian Mountains. Below this, there is no probability that it again reappears. The general direction is east and west, dipping rapidly at its western extremity, so that it may no doubt be pushed much farther in that direction. Notwithstanding the immense amount already quarried,---and it will be better understood when I state that the aggregate length of the shafts and galleries amounts to 420 miles,---it is estimated that, at the present rate of exploitation, the known supply cannot be exhausted under 300 years. The tripartite treaty, on the partition of Poland, limits Austria to the production of the present amount,---1,500,000 hundred-weight annually,---of which she is bound to furnish 300,000 hundredweight to Prussia, and 800,000 to Russia, leaving 400,000 for herself. This sum yields her a net revenue from the mines of two millions of florins ($1,000,000) annually.

It is not known how this wonderful deposit---more precious than gold itself---was originally discovered. We know that it was worked in the twelfth century, and perhaps much earlier. The popular faith has invented several miracles to account for it, giving the merit to favorite saints. One, which is gravely published in "The History of Cracow," states that a Polish king, who wooed a Princess Elizabeth of Hungary (not the saint of the Wartburg) in the tenth century, asked what she would choose as a bridal gift from him. To which she replied: Something that would most benefit his people. The marriage ceremony was performed in a chapel in one of the salt-mines of Transylvania. Soon after being transferred to Cracow, Elizabeth went out to Wieliczka, surveyed the ground, and, after choosing a spot, commanded the people to dig. In the course of a few days they found a salt-crystal, which the queen caused to be set in her wedding ring, and wore until the day of her death. She must have been a wonderful geologist for those days. The bed actually follows the Carpathians, appearing at intervals in small deposits, into Transylvania, where there are extensive mines. It is believed, also, that it stretches northward into Russian Poland. Some years ago the Bank of Warsaw expended large
sums in boring for salt near the Austrian frontier. There was much excitement and speculation for a time; but, although the mineral was found, the cost of quarrying it was too great, and the enterprise was dropped.

On our return we visited Francis Joseph's hall, a large salt ballroom, with well-executed statues of Vulcan and Neptune. Six large chandeliers, apparently of cut-glass, but really of salt, illuminate it on festive occasions, and hundreds of dancers perspire themselves into a pretty pickle. When we had reached the upper galleries, we decided to ascend to daylight by means of the windlass. The Prussian party went first, and the ladies were not a little alarmed at finding themselves seated in rope slings, only supported by a band under the arms. All five swung together in a heap; the ladies screamed and would have loosened themselves, but that moment the windlass began to move, and up they went, dangling, towards the little star of daylight, two hundred feet above. Under them hung one of the boys, to steady the whirling mass, and the little scamp amused himself; by swinging his lamp, cracking his heels together, and rattling his stick along the sides of the shaft. When our turn came, I found, in spite of myself, that such pastime was not calculated to steady my nerves. The sound of the stick was very much like that of snapping ropes, and my brain swam a little at finding my feet dangling over what seemed a bottomless abyss of darkness.

The arrival at the top was like a douche of lightning. It was just noon, and the hot, white, blinding day poured full upon us, stinging our eyes like needles, and almost taking away our breath. We were at once beset with a crowd of beggars and salt-venders. The latter proffered a multitude of small articles,---crosses, stars, images, books, cups, dishes, etc.,---cut from the native crystal, and not distinguishable from glass in appearance. I purchased a salt-cellar, which has the property of furnishing salt when it is empty. But it seemed to me that I should not need to use it for some days. I felt myself so thoroughly impregnated with salt, that I conceived the idea of seasoning my soup by stirring it with my fingers, and half-expected that the fresh roast would turn to corned beef in my mouth.

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