

The Memorable Assassination

Mark Twain

Note.--The assassination of the Empress of Austria at Geneva, September 10, 1898, occurred during Mark Twain's Austrian residence. The news came to him at Kaltenleutgeben, a summer resort a little way out of Vienna. To his friend, the Rev. Jos. H. Twichell, he wrote:

"That good and unoffending lady, the Empress, is killed by a madman, and I am living in the midst of world-history again. The Queen's Jubilee last year, the invasion of the Reichsrath by the police, and now this murder, which will still be talked of and described and painted a thousand a thousand years from now. To have a personal friend of the wearer of two crowns burst in at the gate in the deep dusk of the evening and say, in a voice broken with tears, 'My God! the Empress is murdered,' and fly toward her home before we can utter a question--why, it brings the giant event home to you, makes you a part of it and personally interested; it is as if your neighbor, Antony, should come flying and say, 'Caesar is butchered--the head of the world is fallen!'

"Of course there is no talk but of this. The mourning is universal and genuine, the consternation is stupefying. The Austrian Empire is being draped with black. Vienna will be a spectacle to see by next Saturday, when the funeral cort'ège marches."

He was strongly moved by the tragedy, impelled to write concerning it. He prepared the article which follows, but did not offer it for publication, perhaps feeling that his own close association with the court circles at the moment prohibited this personal utterance. There appears no such reason for withholding its publication now.

A. B. P.

The more one thinks of the assassination, the more imposing and tremendous the event becomes. The destruction of a city is a large event, but it is one which repeats itself several times in a thousand years; the destruction of a third part of a nation by plague and famine is a large event, but it has happened several times in history; the murder of a king is a large event, but it has been frequent.

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The murder of an empress is the largest of all events. One must go back about two thousand years to find an instance to put with this one. The oldest family of unchallenged descent in Christendom lives in Rome and traces its line back seventeen hundred years, but no member of it has been present in the earth when an empress was murdered, until now. Many a time during these seventeen centuries members of that family have been startled with the news of extraordinary events--the destruction of cities, the fall of thrones, the murder of kings, the wreck of dynasties, the extinction of religions, the birth of new systems of government; and their descendants have been by to hear of it and talk about it when all these things were repeated once, twice, or a dozen times--but to even that family has come news at last which is not staled by use, has no duplicates in the long reach of its memory.

It is an event which confers a curious distinction upon every individual now living in the world: he has stood alive and breathing in the presence of an event such as has not fallen within the experience of any traceable or untraceable ancestor of his for twenty centuries, and it is not likely to fall within the experience of any descendant of his for twenty more.

Time has made some great changes since the Roman days. The murder of an empress then--even the assassination of Caesar himself--could not electrify the world as this murder has electrified it. For one reason, there was then not much of a world to electrify; it was a small world, as to known bulk, and it had rather a thin population, besides; and for another reason, the news traveled so slowly that its tremendous initial thrill wasted away, week by week and month by month, on the journey, and by the time it reached the remoter regions there was but little of it left. It was no longer a fresh event, it was a thing of the far past; it was not properly news, it was history. But the world is enormous now, and prodigiously populated--that is one change; and another is the lightning swiftness of the flight of tidings, good and bad. "The Empress is murdered!" When those amazing words struck upon my ear in this Austrian village last Saturday, three hours after the disaster, I knew that it was already old news in London, Paris, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Japan, China, Melbourne, Cape Town, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and that the entire globe with a single voice, was cursing the perpetrator of it. Since the telegraph first began to stretch itself wider and wider about the earth, larger and increasingly larger areas of the world have, as time went on, received simultaneously the shock of a great calamity; but this is the first time in history that the entire surface of the globe has been swept in a single instant with the thrill of so gigantic an event.

And who is the miracle-worker who has furnished to the world this spectacle? All the ironies are compacted in the answer. He is at the bottom of the human ladder, as the accepted estimates of degree and value go: a soiled and patched young loafer, without gifts, without talents, without education, without morals, without character, without any born charm or any acquired one that wins or beguiles or attracts; without a single grace of mind or heart or hand that any tramp or prostitute could envy him; an unfaithful private in the ranks, an incompetent stone-cutter, an inefficient lackey; in a word, a mangy, offensive, empty, unwashed, vulgar, gross, mephitic, timid, sneaking, human polecat. And it was within the privileges and powers of this sarcasm upon the human race to reach up--up--up--and strike from its far summit in the social skies the world's accepted ideal of Glory and Might and Splendor and Sacredness! It realizes to us what sorry shows and shadows we are. Without our clothes and our pedestals we are poor things and much of a size; our dignities are not real, our pomps are shams. At our best and stateliest we are not suns, as we pretended, and teach, and believe, but only candles; and any bumper can blow us out.

And now we get realized to us once more another thing which we often forget--or try to: that no man has a wholly undiseased mind; that in one way or another all men are mad. Many are mad for money. When this madness is in a mild form it is harmless and the man passes for sane; but when it develops powerfully and takes possession of the man, it can make him cheat, rob, and kill; and when he has got his fortune and lost it again it can land him in the asylum or the suicide's coffin. Love is a madness; if thwarted it develops fast; it can grow to a frenzy of despair and make an otherwise sane and highly gifted prince, like Rudolph, throw away the crown of an empire and snuff out his own life. All the whole list of desires, predilections, aversions, ambitions, passions, cares, griefs, regrets, remorse, are incipient madness, and ready to grow, spread, and consume, when the occasion comes. There are no healthy minds, and nothing saves any man but accident--the accident of not having his malady put to the supreme test.

One of the commonest forms of madness is the desire to be noticed, the pleasure derived from being noticed. Perhaps it is not merely common, but universal. In its mildest form it doubtless is universal. Every child is pleased at being noticed; many intolerable children put in their whole time in distressing and idiotic effort to attract the attention of visitors; boys are always "showing off"; apparently all men and women are glad and grateful when they find that they have done a thing which has lifted them for a moment out of obscurity and caused wondering

talk. This common madness can develop, by nurture, into a hunger for notoriety in one, for fame in another. It is this madness for being noticed and talked about which has invented kingship and the thousand other dignities, and tricked them out with pretty and showy fineries; it has made kings pick one another's pockets, scramble for one another's crowns and estates, slaughter one another's subjects; it has raised up prize-fighters, and poets, and villages mayors, and little and big politicians, and big and little charity-founders, and bicycle champions, and banditti chiefs, and frontier desperadoes, and Napoleons. Anything to get notoriety; anything to set the village, or the township, or the city, or the State, or the nation, or the planet shouting, "Look--there he goes--that is the man!" And in five minutes' time, at no cost of brain, or labor, or genius this mangy Italian tramp has beaten them all, transcended them all, outstripped them all, for in time their names will perish; but by the friendly help of the insane newspapers and courts and kings and historians, his is safe and live and thunder in the world all down the ages as long as human speech shall endure! Oh, if it were not so tragic how ludicrous it would be!

She was so blameless, the Empress; and so beautiful, in mind and heart, in person and spirit; and whether with a crown upon her head or without it and nameless, a grace to the human race, and almost a justification of its creation; WOULD be, indeed, but that the animal that struck her down re-establishes the doubt.

In her character was every quality that in woman invites and engages respect, esteem, affection, and homage. Her tastes, her instincts, and her aspirations were all high and fine and all her life her heart and brain were busy with activities of a noble sort. She had had bitter griefs, but they did not sour her spirit, and she had had the highest honors in the world's gift, but she went her simple way unspoiled. She knew all ranks, and won them all, and made them her friends. An English fisherman's wife said, "When a body was in trouble she didn't send her help, she brought it herself." Crowns have adorned others, but she adorned her crowns.

It was a swift celebrity the assassin achieved. And it is marked by some curious contrasts. At noon last, Saturday there was no one in the world who would have considered acquaintanceship with him a thing worth claiming or mentioning; no one would have been vain of such an acquaintanceship; the humblest honest boot-black would not have valued the fact that he had met him or seen him at some time or other; he was sunk in abysmal obscurity, he was away beneath the notice of the bottom grades of officialdom. Three hours later he was the one subject of conversation in the world, the gilded generals and admirals

and governors were discussing him, all the kings and queens and emperors had put aside their other interests to talk about him. And wherever there was a man, at the summit of the world or the bottom of it, who by chance had at some time or other come across that creature, he remembered it with a secret satisfaction, and MENTIONED it--for it was a distinction, now! It brings human dignity pretty low, and for a moment the thing is not quite realizable--but it is perfectly true. If there is a king who can remember, now, that he once saw that creature in a time past, he has let that fact out, in a more or less studiedly casual and indifferent way, some dozens of times during the past week. For a king is merely human; the inside of him is exactly like the inside of any other person; and it is human to find satisfaction in being in a kind of personal way connected with amazing events. We are all privately vain of such a thing; we are all alike; a king is a king by accident; the reason the rest of us are not kings is merely due to another accident; we are all made out of the same clay, and it is a sufficient poor quality.

Below the kings, these remarks are in the air these days; I know it well as if I were hearing them:

THE COMMANDER: "He was in my army."

THE GENERAL: "He was in my corps."

THE COLONEL: "He was in my regiment. A brute. I remember him well."

THE CAPTAIN: "He was in my company. A troublesome scoundrel. I remember him well."

THE SERGEANT: "Did I know him? As well as I know you. Why, every morning I used to--" etc., etc.; a glad, long story, told to devouring ears.

THE LANDLADY: "Many's the time he boarded with me. I can show you his very room, and the very bed he slept in. And the charcoal mark there on the wall--he made that. My little Johnny saw him do it with his own eyes. Didn't you, Johnny?"

It is easy to see, by the papers, that the magistrate and the constables and the jailer treasure up the assassin's daily remarks and doings as precious things, and as wallowing this week in seas of blissful distinction. The interviewer, too; he tried to let on that he is not vain of his privilege of contact with this man whom few others are allowed to gaze upon, but he is human, like the rest, and can no more keep his vanity corked in than could you or I.

Some think that this murder is a frenzied revolt against the criminal militarism which is impoverishing Europe and driving the starving poor mad. That has many crimes to answer for, but not this one, I think. One may not attribute to this man a generous indignation against the wrongs done the poor; one may not dignify him with a generous impulse of any kind. When he saw his photograph and said, "I shall be celebrated," he laid bare the impulse that prompted him. It was a mere hunger for notoriety. There is another confessed case of the kind which is as old as history--the burning of the temple of Ephesus.

Among the inadequate attempts to account for the assassination we must concede high rank to the many which have described it as a "peculiarly brutal crime" and then added that it was "ordained from above." I think this verdict will not be popular "above." If the deed was ordained from above, there is no rational way of making this prisoner even partially responsible for it, and the Genevan court cannot condemn him without manifestly committing a crime. Logic is logic, and by disregarding its laws even the most pious and showy theologian may be beguiled into preferring charges which should not be ventured upon except in the shelter of plenty of lightning-rods.

I witnessed the funeral procession, in company with friends, from the windows of the Krantz, Vienna's sumptuous new hotel. We came into town in the middle of the forenoon, and I went on foot from the station. Black flags hung down from all the houses; the aspects were Sunday-like; the crowds on the sidewalks were quiet and moved slowly; very few people were smoking; many ladies wore deep mourning, gentlemen were in black as a rule; carriages were speeding in all directions, with footmen and coachmen in black clothes and wearing black cocked hats; the shops were closed; in many windows were pictures of the Empress: as a beautiful young bride of seventeen; as a serene and majestic lady with added years; and finally in deep black and without ornaments--the costume she always wore after the tragic death of her son nine years ago, for her heart broke then, and life lost almost all its value for her. The people stood grouped before these pictures, and now and then one saw women and girls turn away wiping the tears from their eyes.

In front of the Krantz is an open square; over the way was the church where the funeral services would be held. It is small and old and severely plain, plastered outside and whitewashed or painted, and with no ornament but a statue of a monk in a niche over the door, and above that a small black flag. But in its crypt lie several of the great dead of the House of Habsburg, among them Maria Theresa and Napoleon's son, the Duke of Reichstadt.

Hereabouts was a Roman camp, once, and in it the Emperor Marcus Aurelius died a thousand years before the first Habsburg ruled in Vienna, which was six hundred years ago and more.

The little church is packed in among great modern stores and houses, and the windows of them were full of people. Behind the vast plate-glass windows of the upper floors of the house on the corner one glimpsed terraced masses of fine-clothed men and women, dim and shimmery, like people under water. Under us the square was noiseless, but it was full of citizens; officials in fine uniforms were flitting about on errands, and in a doorstep sat a figure in the uttermost raggedness of poverty, the feet bare, the head bent humbly down; a youth of eighteen or twenty, he was, and through the field-glass one could see that he was tearing apart and munching ruffraff that he had gathered somewhere. Blazing uniforms flashed by him, making a sparkling contrast with his drooping ruin of moldy rags, but he took not notice; he was not there to grieve for a nation's disaster; he had his own cares, and deeper. From two directions two long files of infantry came plowing through the pack and press in silence; there was a low, crisp order and the crowd vanished, the square save the sidewalks was empty, the private mourner was gone. Another order, the soldiers fell apart and enclosed the square in a double-ranked human fence. It was all so swift, noiseless, exact--like a beautifully ordered machine.

It was noon, now. Two hours of stillness and waiting followed. Then carriages began to flow past and deliver the two and three hundred court personages and high nobilities privileged to enter the church. Then the square filled up; not with civilians, but with army and navy officers in showy and beautiful uniforms. They filled it compactly, leaving only a narrow carriage path in front of the church, but there was no civilian among them. And it was better so; dull clothes would have marred the radiant spectacle. In the jam in front of the church, on its steps, and on the sidewalk was a bunch of uniforms which made a blazing splotch of color--intense red, gold, and white--which dimmed the brilliancies around them; and opposite them on the other side of the path was a bunch of cascaded bright-green plumes above pale-blue shoulders which made another splotch of splendor emphatic and conspicuous in its glowing surroundings. It was a sea of flashing color all about, but these two groups were the high notes. The green plumes were worn by forty or fifty Austrian generals, the group opposite them were chiefly Knights of Malta and knights of a German order. The mass of heads in the square were covered by gilt helmets and by military caps roofed with a mirror-like gaze, and the movements of the wearers caused these things to catch the sun-rays, and the effect was fine to see--the square was like a garden of richly colored

flowers with a multitude of blinding and flashing little suns distributed over it.

Think of it--it was by command of that Italian loafer yonder on his imperial throne in the Geneva prison that this splendid multitude was assembled there; and the kings and emperors that were entering the church from a side street were there by his will. It is so strange, so unrealizable.

At three o'clock the carriages were still streaming by in single file. At three-five a cardinal arrives with his attendants; later some bishops; then a number of archdeacons--all in striking colors that add to the show. At three-ten a procession of priests passed along, with crucifix. Another one, presently; after an interval, two more; at three-fifty another one--very long, with many crosses, gold-embroidered robes, and much white lace; also great pictured banners, at intervals, receding into the distance.

A hum of tolling bells makes itself heard, but not sharply. At three-fifty-eight a waiting interval. Presently a long procession of gentlemen in evening dress comes in sight and approaches until it is near to the square, then falls back against the wall of soldiers at the sidewalk, and the white shirt-fronts show like snowflakes and are very conspicuous where so much warm color is all about.

A waiting pause. At four-twelve the head of the funeral procession comes into view at last. First, a body of cavalry, four abreast, to widen the path. Next, a great body of lancers, in blue, with gilt helmets. Next, three six-horse mourning-coaches; outriders and coachmen in black, with cocked hats and white wigs. Next, troops in splendid uniforms, red, gold, and white, exceedingly showy.

Now the multitude uncover. The soldiers present arms; there is a low rumble of drums; the sumptuous great hearse approaches, drawn at a walk by eight black horses plumed with black bunches of nodding ostrich feathers; the coffin is borne into the church, the doors are closed.

The multitude cover their heads, and the rest of the procession moves by; first the Hungarian Guard in their indescribably brilliant and picturesque and beautiful uniform, inherited from the ages of barbaric splendor, and after them other mounted forces, a long and showy array.

Then the shining crown in the square crumbled apart, a wrecked rainbow, and melted away in radiant streams, and in the

turn of a wrist the three dirtiest and raggedest and cheerfulest little slum-girls in Austria were capering about in the spacious vacancy. It was a day of contrasts.

Twice the Empress entered Vienna in state. The first time was in 1854, when she was a bride of seventeen, and then she rode in measureless pomp and with blare of music through a fluttering world of gay flags and decorations, down streets walled on both hands with a press of shouting and welcoming subjects; and the second time was last Wednesday, when she entered the city in her coffin and moved down the same streets in the dead of the night under swaying black flags, between packed human walls again; but everywhere was a deep stillness, now--a stillness emphasized, rather than broken, by the muffled hoofbeats of the long cavalcade over pavements cushioned with sand, and the low sobbing of gray-headed women who had witnessed the first entry forty-four years before, when she and they were young--and unaware!

A character in Baron von Berger's recent fairy drama "Habsburg" tells about the first coming of the girlish Empress-Queen, and in his history draws a fine picture: I cannot make a close translation of it, but will try to convey the spirit of the verses:

I saw the stately pageant pass:
In her high place I saw the Empress-Queen:
I could not take my eyes away
From that fair vision, spirit-like and pure,
That rose serene, sublime, and figured to my sense
A noble Alp far lighted in the blue,
That in the flood of morning rends its veil of cloud
And stands a dream of glory to the gaze
Of them that in the Valley toil and plod.

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