

LONG LIVE THE KING! HE WAS LUCKY IF HE DID

BY ROBERT C. BENCHLEY

YOUR committee has the honor to report herewith on its investigation of the premises above specified:

"There was found to be no adequate system of plumbing or ventilation, rendering the sanitary conditions of the worst possible kind. In cases of sickness, which are extremely common and of the most revolting nature, the medical care is unscientific and, in most instances, criminally bungling. The nature of the surrounding land is such as to be a constant menace to the health of the inhabitants, owing to its swampy, malarial condition. The hours of working of those living on the premises are of inhuman duration, some of the residents being kept constantly on their feet during hours of work, regardless of their physical health, and at certain seasons scarcely ever seeing the light of day.

IT READS LIKE AN INDICTMENT OF AN EAST SIDE TENEMENT, BUT READ ON; IT ISN'T.

"Facilities for bathing are primitive and seldom made use of. There are no provisions for dental work. The residents are for the most part illiterate and have no knowledge of the proper care and feeding of infants, to say nothing of their own well-being. In winter the heating system is practically useless and there is constant suffering from the cold and danger of serious illness.

"On the whole, considering the above-mentioned conditions, your committee would advise that the premises be closed and further residence there be prohibited until the owners have made improvements which shall bring the property up to the elementary standards set by the Board of Health."

The above is not the report of a District Nurse Visitor upon an East Side tenement. It is what any modern committee would have to report had it made an investigation of the Palace of the Sun King, Louis XIV, at Versailles at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Sometimes when you come home at night and smell cabbage cooking, or find the resident manager of your household directing an upheaval of house-cleaning, you may look up at the steel-engraving entitled "The Golden Age" and yearn for the days when courtiers slipped along over polished floors from one golden salon to another, with nothing to do but toss gold legal tender into plashing fountains, and dip into a platinum dish of Ottar of Roses *aux croustons* for lunch. If you haven't yearned for this, make believe that you have, for otherwise there is no sense in going on with this story. It is a perfectly legitimate thing to yearn for, anyway.

But your yearning for the delicate days of lace and gold and nectar are nothing to the yearnings that would have stirred the heart of the King of France himself could he have seen a



Illustrations by Rodney Thomson

picture of the tiled bathroom in your flat, with its shower and electric light, its tooth-powder and medicine closet, its running hot and cold water. The life of Louis XIV and his courtiers started a revolution among the proletariat who were excluded from it. It would start a revolution among the proletariat to-day if they were forced to live it.

AN AGENT WHO TRIED TO RENT THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES WOULD HAVE HIS TROUBLES.

For in the palace at Versailles, where the Sun King held his court, there were not the first conveniences demanded by the lower-middle class of apartment-hunters to-day. Imagine what chance an agent would have of letting an apartment if he had to give the following answers to questions:

"How about the water supply?"

"Well, now, let me tell you about the water supply. To be frank with you, there isn't any to speak of. That is, no running water. But you can get all the water you'll want to use by having a boy bring in a dipper full every day from the fountains."

"What kind of heating system is there? Hot water or steam?"

"Heating system? . . . Oh, yes. Heating system, you said. Why-er, each fifty square yards of floor space has a cosey little wood-fire grate. You have a small family. You could all keep warm easily by sitting directly in front of the grate."

"What is the neighborhood like?"

"Now you're talking. This house has

the finest neighborhood of any on our lists. Ab-so-lutely restricted. All the ground has been made over and fountains installed, and magnificent gardens planted. It is a bit swampy, to be sure, and on a damp night it isn't well to have the windows open, as malaria will creep in—you know how malaria is."

"Is there a good doctor within easy access?"

"The best in the country, and he lives in the same house. He is recognized as the most efficient bleeder of any of his profession. No matter what the trouble with you is, typhoid, hay fever or toothache, just call him in and he'll take a quart of blood out of you in no time, and if you die it won't be because you've got too much blood in you; that's one sure thing."

THEY NEVER SAW A PORCELAIN TUB; THEY NEVER HOPED TO SEE ONE.

"Is there a newsdealer near by; so that I can get my morning paper before I leave for work?"

"Well, yes and no. There isn't exactly a newsdealer, but I have known people living here to get news, such as the report of a big battle, for instance, six days after the battle was fought, and it had to come all the way from Flanders, too."

Would you, easy to suit as you are, rent a place like that?

And yet it is only a slight indication of what the gay courtiers had to put up with. They probably didn't mind the lack of porcelain tubs, because they had never dreamed of such things; they weren't irritated when their news was six days late, because that was the meaning of news then; they probably knew that something was wrong with their teeth when they dropped out, just as we know that something is wrong with our hair when it drops out, but, aside from the toothache, they probably didn't lose much sleep over their trouble.

WHEN IT WAS COLD, COURTIERS WRAPPED THEIR KNUCKLES IN LACE AND SMILED.

They did, however, have sufficient perception of what is what to know that when the wine froze in the glasses something ought to be done. And many a time the wine, the most expensive wine in the world, did freeze in the glasses or come tinkling out of the decanter in little crystals over the King's plate. The King himself caught cold one time during a zero spell simply by changing from one weight of wig to another. Such an act was as foolhardy as changing from balbriggans to the Athlete's Delight weave would be in mid-winter now. There was no doubt a certain grandeur in having dinner in a marble room the size of an armory, but it had its drawbacks when you tried to heat it with a half-dozen red-oak saplings burning over in the farther corner. Madame de Maintenon, the King's amanuensis, solved the problem

by having a chair constructed along the lines of a sentry-box, into which she crawled after breakfast and spent the day safe from draughts. But the courtiers had no such refuge and had to wrap their knuckles up in their lace cuffs and smile when the King went by.

To-day we complain when we have to stand up for half an hour in the Subway. The care-free political barnacle of the French Court had to stand up all day and most of the night. It was bad form, of course, to sit while the King was standing, and it was equally bad form to sit while the King was sitting. Consequently those nearest the King spent most of their time shifting from one foot to another during the day, and tripping as light and fantastic a toe as they could until the early hours of the morning. The most abused department store clerk of our busiest Christmas season spends less time on her feet than did the Countess d'Haricot-Vert. And the Countess wasn't blind to the fact that she was uncomfortable, either. She often said so in so many words—to some other Countess. Sometimes she even went to the length of fainting. At which display of weakness the King would show no little pique.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER IF THEY HAD TAKEN A LITTLE PLACE IN THE BRONX.

And just as soon as she had been brought round and tidied up a little, she and all the rest of her set were billed for a dance that evening which would last until eight the next morning. During one of the gay seasons, St. Simon writes that he and his wife did not see daylight once. And although they got their board free, when one figures out that it cost Mr. St. Simon 20,000 francs per change of disguise for Mrs. St. Simon and himself, they would have come out better in the end to have rented a little place up in the Bronx and boarded themselves.

In the matter of board there was also a certain undesirableness. So far as can be learned, the boarders had no complaint as to the quality of the food, or the way in which it was cooked and served. In this respect they probably had a great deal on the shopgirl of today. But there is such a thing as too much. Louis XIV, while niggardly in some respects, certainly did like to see his retainers eat. He would take them out on parties in the gardens just on purpose to unwrap a bundle of pastry and meat-pies and apportion rations to each member of the party, and then comment on the way in which they made away with it. Personally, the King never ate between meals. Consequently, when they came in from an orgy such as this, he would be in fairly good form for dinner, and would expect every one else to be likewise. A courtier who had just eaten one pigeon-pie, half a dozen assorted and very French pastries, an individual filet of beef and a pound and a quarter of extra-fine figs could not, under ordinary

conditions, be expected to show much emotion over a ten dollar table d'hote dinner; but woe to the weakling who passed up a course at the King's table. The jolly monarch couldn't see why it wasn't possible for a man to eat a meal and then eat another, and when the jolly monarch couldn't see why a thing wasn't possible, it just *was* possible.

WHEN ANYBODY PASSED OUT IT WAS USUALLY THE RESULT OF ROYAL GORGING.

This probably explains why so many of those connected with the court died from over-eating. There were no polite complications to this fatal malady—it was just plain, brobdingnagian gorging, and coupled with the equally colossal ignorance of the doctors in charge, it resulted in the death of many a maker of history. The King's own son died in terrible agony from "an apoplexy" resulting from a double-header dinner, in an attempt to alleviate which the court physician took about half of the patient's available blood supply. Most of the maladies from which the society leaders of the court died would be treated to-day with a tub of warm water, a soda-mint tablet and a sleeping porch with plenty of sleep in it.

The sleeping quarters of the King himself were, according to St. Simon, "dull, close, stuffy and inconvenient." The whole territory on which the palace was built was swampy and of shifting sands, which made it as dangerous to open one's windows at night as it was to keep them closed. But the condition of one's sleeping room was fairly unimportant, as it was used so little

for sleeping. Apparently, when a man wanted to go out in public at Versailles he retired to his sleeping room. His entrance into what should have been a retreat was the signal for every one in court to crowd into the room and stand about while he took off his clothes. Only the unimportant members of the fraternity were allowed to go to bed or to get up in private. One of the pleasantest affairs of an already brilliant season at Versailles was when a party of some sixty guests entered the bedroom of the Princesse d'Harcourt, a matron of perhaps fifty winters, while she was trying to snatch a bit of sleep, and made very merry throwing large chunks of snow at her until she nearly died of the cold. Here is the historical justification for the Keystone Comedy Films.

THROWING SNOW AT OLD LADIES WAS CONSIDERED WITTY STUFF IN THOSE GOLDEN DAYS.

Except for a few times when Molière came out at the King's behest and gave a few recitations of his own stuff, the level of entertainment in the court seldom rose above the throwing-snow-at-old-ladies school. And this is hardly to be wondered at when one remembers that King Louis XIV himself barely knew how to read and write and was ignorant of the most common events of history. It didn't leave much leeway for an intellectual orgy when the leading light and life of the party couldn't have passed an examination for a third-class postal clerkship in the United States. Often at dinner, when there were twenty or thirty of the wits of the court present, hardly a word would be spoken during the entire meal. Such repression was probably a great relief to those few who had mentalities of adults. How much worse it must have been when everybody was talking!

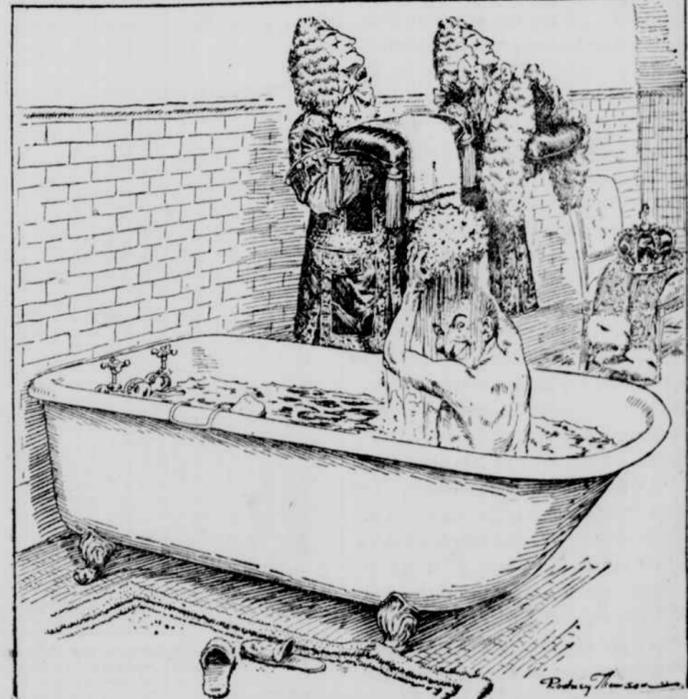
Owing doubtless to this rudimentary mental training, the King was often seized with fits of efficiency, during which he resolved to cut down expenses by cutting down on the essentials and letting the unessentials glide along as usual. When the King wanted to economize he ordered the courtiers to do without pillows, and then ordered up a round of special Siberian champagne for all hands. Thus the courtiers helped placate the uneasy citizens of Paris, who were beginning to voice their suspicions that this was not a strictly business administration.

A SUSPICION, WHICH BECAME A CERTAINTY, THAT ALL WAS NOT AS IT SHOULD BE.

And it was this suspicion that finally found such forceful expression that Versailles was transformed into a museum for tourists and the court was given a much needed vacation. But if a party of the French citizens who were responsible for the Revolution could have heard the inside story of life at Versailles from one of the courtiers, it is possible that they would have gone back to their own homes and said to their respective wives: "We might be worse off," and let it go at that. In which case there would have been no Revolution and a great many courtiers would have been disappointed.



VERSAILLES WAS NEVER LIKE THIS.



OR THIS.