

VERSAILLES, PRISONS, AND THE POOR

Philip Thicknesse (1719–1792)

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I shall now give you some account of Versailles, where I have been two or three times. I had a great desire to see the King, and it was gratified in the fullest manner; for I not only stood very near him while he dressed, but very near him while he prayed also. After he was dressed, he went through a large range of apartments to the chapel, where high mass was performed under a most noble band of vocal and instrumental music. Nothing can be conceived more becoming the dignity of a great king offering up his prayers to the King of kings than this heavenly choir inspires, which the King of France does in the most solemn manner; and at the elevation of the host, strikes his breast, and frequently crosses himself. Exclusive of considering Louis XV as a king, he is certainly a remarkable handsome man; I have seen none of his subjects more so, and few so well; he is above attending to that great nicety of head dress that so universally prevails here; the love of his subjects, and his own goodly countenance, plainly discover that he is a humane and generous prince. He would fain have saved the life of the assassin Damien, but in this instance only, his parliament and subjects would not permit him to use his own despotic power; in which, however, they, perhaps, showed more loyalty than humanity; for Damien was certainly a poor fanatic, without any accomplice, and actuated by his own blind zeal and ignorance. However, such an extraordinary and daring attempt after all, even made upon the person of a private man, requires, at least, capital punishment; and though I think he ought not to have lived, I cannot think of the manner in which he suffered without horror.

Now I am upon this subject, I cannot forbear telling you of an execution that I believe will give you some pleasure; I own it did me. During the late war, an officer of high rank was going post from Paris, to take upon him the command of the French fleet at Toulon, his servants, baggage, and most of his retinue were gone before him, and he traveled in his cap and great coat in a very private manner. At the gates of one of the towns he passed through, the officers of the customs were rather rude in examining his baggage, etc., and this delay occasioned his speaking to them with some degree of severity; this the officers so resented that they as wickedly as privately put into his portmanteau a pound or two of tobacco, and some other things that were contraband; and when he had proceeded ten or twenty miles farther on his journey, they pursued and overtook him, and there insisted on a re-examination of his baggage, and found the snuff, etc. which they alone knew to be there. Upon this he was stopped, and taken before the proper officer of the next town, to be dealt with according to the laws of the country. He in vain pleaded his own innocence and the guilt of these villains before a magistrate, who seemed determined to detain and punish him, when the general, unable to conceal his rank or stifle his resentment any longer, instantly threw back his great coat and discovered his cordon bleu, and declared who and what he was, and upon what service he was going; and at the same time assured the two accusers, and the magistrate who had hitherto sided with them, that he would not leave that town till he had seen them all three hanged; and he was in some measure as good as his word, for the two principals were executed before he did. Had you or I been so served, or any man of less rank, he might have been sent to the galleys for life; and the principal magistrate was either a fool or a rogue to hearken to such an accusation; the very pursuit of these fellows to make a second search was a proof of their wicked conduct at the first.

But to have done with melancholy subjects, and a little laugh; for I am determined to live free, and laugh at the variety of folly and wickedness of men that living long and seeing much bring before me; I will therefore tell you a story. During the war in forty-five, a poor Scotch gentleman at Paris was taken up and put into the Bastille under a suspicion of being a spy or, in some other shape, an enemy to the state. Though the man was innocent, yet he was greatly alarmed and terrified upon being so confined; but finding himself lodged in handsome apartments, and every necessary of life provided for him at the King's expence (for he was a royal prisoner) besides an excellent dinner, the Scotchman became not only content, but perfectly happy. The poor man, it seems, was a gentleman in distress, without fortune or friends; and the person from whom I had this story assured me that the Scotchman declared to him that when the officer of the Bastille told him he was soon to be dismissed, he thought he should have become daft with sorrow, for he knew not where to go nor how to live; and would have thought himself much obliged to the state had they sentenced him to perpetual imprisonment in the Bastille. The aged countenance of this castle, its high towers, and the idea that no person is scarce ever admitted into it but against their inclination (the poor Scotchman above excepted), and standing as it were to overlook and keep in awe a whole city, renders it an object of great curiosity and, according to my idea, the outside is much the handsomest part of it.

After all (next to our own laws) the laws of France are the best of any other kingdom in Europe. They keep the poor very poor, and they are very wise in so doing. The industrious poor do not want; and if poor do not want, I do not pity their poverty. I should rejoice to see the poor in England kept in the same medium, they will not then be above

tilling the land and doing the most servile offices of life, which is not the case among us; we have thousands of poor that ought to do it, but they have been taught to read and write and therefore will rather rob, forge, whore, or pilfer than set themselves down to labour or any act of industry. I quite agree with Mandeville that charity-schools educate a great number of thieves and whores who would have been honest and useful, if they had been unlearned.

The great number of crosses, crucifixes, saints, etc. that are to be seen in every corner of the towns in France, and upon the public highways, are a continual memento to the poor, and a check to their committing violence to travelers. I am far from laughing at these objects, as is too commonly done by Protestants who travel here, not considering that they contribute to their own preservation. I wish the commonalty of our poor had some kind of check that would prove as powerful. The common beggars, indeed, are more numerous than with us; but common beggars have very little title to compassion, are of no use to society, and, as General Hurst used to say to them, when they said they were starving: “Die! Die! The sooner you are dead the better.”

Philip Thicknesse *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation* (1766):48–54.