

The Oberammergau Passion Play of 1910

In writing on the Passion Play of Oberammergau I write as a convert. I did not care to go. It seemed to me that all this talk of simple village folk keeping a centuries old vow and so devoting themselves to the production of their decennial play that they had created one of the wonders of the world, had been a trifle overdone. They composed the play, we were told; they wrote the music, they planned and made the costumes, they trained themselves, and they entertained the visitors in their village homes. I thought I knew just how it would be—a very crude amateur performance with makeshift costumes, either ludicrous or pathetic, as your mood was some stolen music, a presentation which might be 'very good for mountain villagers,' but very bad, judged by any other standard a straw bed in a swept-out haymow, and a seat at a peasant's frugal table.

Let me say at once that the costuming and the stage grouping could not be beaten on Broadway; that the music was written by a real native village genius long ago, and takes rank as a classic even under the shadow of Munich; that the theatre is a splendid building, which holds 4,000 people without giving one a really bad seat; and that the accommodation is astonishingly good. You do not sit at the peasant's frugal table—you are treated as a hotel guest, and the peasant's wife cooks for you, and his daughters, or a neighbor's, wait on you quite in hotel style.

The first impression created on me as we walked out of the railway station and up the main street was—a World's Fair. It is customary to paint pictures on the facades of Tyrolean houses, and the village of Oberammergau is always fully repainted for the Passion Play year. This gives the German fronts of the houses a temporary appearance and makes the whole street look like a plaster sham produced for a "midway". The illusion is helped out by the numerous booths for the sale of fruit that line the sides of the street, and the motley mob of tourists from every nation under the sun which crowds it from end to end. One of the "sights" of Oberammergau is undoubtedly the people who go there to see the play. Germans and Americans predominate; the Germans in mountaineering costume, because Oberammergau is in the mountains and the Americans in Atlantic City "boardwalk" dress, because going to Europe is a holiday.

We stayed at "Oberammergau, No. 2". The houses of Oberammergau are numbered as if they were all on one street which they are not by a considerable majority as visitors find out when they try to discover where they have been billeted. "No. 2" is right opposite the front of the theatre so we were exceedingly lucky for the noon-tide rest. Our host did not take part in the play, but we had "Judas" for our next-door neighbor. "Judas" has a fine house, and took a lot of boarders, most of them seeming to be English Clergymen. "Judas" daughter played "Maria" so the character of the house was well balanced.

Many people are very anxious to stay with Anton Lang, who plays the "Christus" but they get little more than the satisfaction of sleeping under his roof, for they do not dine at the family table. Still, even the smallest share of his hospitality is great coveted. I know two ladies who had written Frau Lang away back in the winter and had succeeded back in the winter, and had succeeded in getting the promise of a meal or two at his house, and they were quite set up over it. Anyway, I bought postal cards at his store and he put his autograph on them for four or five cents extra. Autograph-hunting is a very fierce occupation at Oberammergau. Ladies chase up Judas, Peter, John and the rest of them with two-cent picture cards to get autographed. I was standing in the post-office the evening after the play when a long-haired youth came to mail a letter. Long hair usually means that the wearer is in the cast as wigs are not allowed. An American lady scribbling a card home at one of the desks caught sight of him hurrying up to him, she said, "You were in the play today?" After she had repeated this several

times, with a few German words inserted, he understood her.

"Yah, yah," he admitted phlegmatically.

"I thought so. I saw you. You were in the chorus. Yes, let me see—the third from the middle—no, the fifth—"

He, understanding nothing, grinned amiably.

"Yes," she went on, "now write your name here," and she thrust out one of her cards before him.

He understood this. He had met her kind before. "So he wrote his name, and thus created another invaluable souvenir of Oberammergau."

But all this has nothing to do with the Passion Play. The villagers are not to blame for the sort of people the magnificent spectacle attracts. Whatever may have been one's impression before reaching Oberammergau, his respect for these people rises hourly while he is among them. For instance, his notion as to their possible mercenary spirit under goes a great change. In Munich when confronted with a charge of four or five dollars a day for peasant board and the fact that he could not get tickets at all unless he took two days of this board he may have entertained cynical thoughts. But when he gets on Oberammergau he realizes that this plan of dividing the "tickets" up among the villagers to be sold along with their living accommodation, is the only way they could have been kept out of the hands of speculators. Then the tickets are cheap, and the price is never raised, as it might easily be, no matter how great the demand. These peasants could often get twice or three times the face value for their tickets, but there is not an instance on record of their doing so. As for the board, it dear under the circumstances.

The stage is uncovered to the heavens, though there is a sort of stage within the stage which is covered in this "chamber"—as it were—the tableaux were posed, the Last Supper was eaten, the Hebrew Council met, and other interior scenes took place. Before it, and disappearing toward the background on each side of it, were streets down which, for example, Christ made his first entry into Jerusalem and his last tragic journey under the Cross. Then on the outer sides of these streets were two houses—one of the house of Pilate and the other the house of Ananias.

Most of the audience were seated before 8 o'clock at which hour promptly the chorus filed on to the stage from the two wings. They made a splendid spectacle in their flowing robes of gold and blue and crimson, and constantly reminded me through out the day of the most gorgeous scenes in the Champlain pageant at Quebec two summers before. It was their business to sing the majestic hymns that preluded each act, and one of them recited the explanatory verses that accompanied every tableau. The tableaux were as I presume you know, chosen from Old Testament scenes, and were intended to foreshadow the New Testament action which immediately followed. Even if regarded solely from a coldly artistic point of view, these tableaux were superb. Nothing has been spared in the way of costuming; the poses were perfect; and every figure stood as rigid as marble during the frequently long periods required for the recitation of the verses.

Judas has the reputation of being the best doctor. It would be truer to say that Judas has the part which demands the greatest histrionic effort. The other parts are comparatively plain and straightforward. Judas dresses in yellow and leaves his hair unkempt and generally looks the villain. No sane "Twelve" would ever have trusted such a Judas with the purse. Yet he makes a deep impression on the audience. His sinister yellow figure outlined against the grey city of Jerusalem in the background as he communes with himself after he has made his bargain with the rulers will not soon be forgotten by any who saw it.

Anton Lang is a much better Christ than any of us have any right to expect. It is a tremendous role for a village potter to essay. His neighbors say that he lives it as far as he may. He refused a very large offer to come to America and play "The Servant in the House" and I think

that you may disregard any rumors that the Oberammergau people will reproduce their spectacle in any place in the world outside of their mountain village. All who play, we are told must live good lives and they all take communion at their little village church in the early morning before each representation of the Passion. Anton Lang looks not unlike the mediaeval pictures of Christ though he is a little too full in the face. Still it is "a good face"—to quote the universal verdict—and his voice is sympathetic and appealing.

Undoubtedly he is most effective during the visit to Bethany. His farewell to his mother and to Mary and Martha left many of the audience in tears. Every man showed a suspicious tendency to blow his nose. During the last tragic acts he says so little and is so passive in the hands of his captors that he seems more like an automaton. This softens the poignancy of the crucifixion scene, though the ghastly realism of the piercing of the side startles and horrifies the entire audience. That is one point at which an artist would prune the play; but, unfortunately the villagers appear to be quite proud of the mechanical trick by which it is done.

Upon none of the other occupants is much burden in the way of acting thrown. They are all adequate; but little play of the emotions is required of them. In fact it impressed me more as a spectacle than as a play. Something of this was due to the fact that it is written in German; but I had the German and English texts before me in parallel columns, and, so slow was the action, I followed it without difficulty. But as a series of stage pictures it is beyond praise. The eye is constantly delighted with the groupings, the colors, the graceful movements the impressive processions. It would tell the mighty story in vivid tones to a deaf man.

The effect on the audience is, perhaps, the highest praise the performance can receive. Every last man stayed through the entire eight hours of constant action; and some of them looked like men who might have forgotten how the story was going to end. The comment "before and after taking" was even more striking. Before, there was lots of chaff and jocose self-condemnation for "following the crowd" and coming to see this "freak" performance; after there was one universal note of admiration and self-congratulation.

The effect on the villagers has certainly been to vastly increase their self-respect and to raise their educational standard. Every child grows up hoping to find a place in the great village achievement and seeks to fit himself for it. Among other attainments he must convince his neighbors that he lives such a life as will not bring scandal to the play. Whether the marvellous popularity of the play of late will be good for these "simple villagers" remains to be seen. Flowing gold is a mighty corrupter. But there is said to be little for the individual participants, much going for the enormous expenses and a third of the profits for village purposes. However, even if the play banishes poverty from the upper meadows of the Ammer, who dares say that this will be a bad thing?

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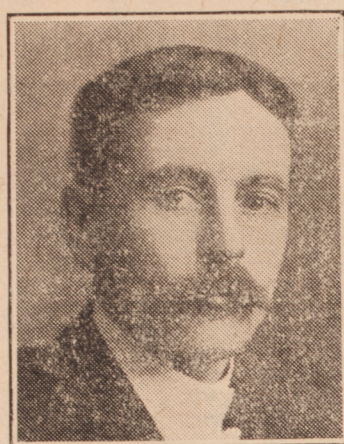
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Holliday was acting as gate keeper and was endeavoring to collect fifteen cents, the price of admission from Wiggins. Wiggins fled and is today being pursued by a posse with bloodhounds.

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Hudson, N. Y., Sept. 13.—Day by day a tragedy is being enacted in the City Hospital here, where, encased in bags of sand so that she cannot move her body, lies Miss Maud Fritts of Hudson, whose engagement to marry was announced last June.

Miss Fritts' neck is broken and she is unable to speak; for weeks she could not move a muscle and yet the doctors have decided that she is conscious and able to understand all that is said to her.

The accident to Miss Fritts happened early in July. She had driven with a party of friends to a cottage on Lake Charlotte. When the time came to start for home Miss Fritts and two others of the party climbed into a big three seated wagon. Without warning the horses started and all but Miss Fritts jumped out and escaped unhurt. She clung to the seat. The entire party started in pursuit, but the horses ran nearly half a mile before being stopped.

Miss Fritts was found by the road side where she had been thrown. She was unconscious, and from that moment has never spoken a word. The second vertebra of her neck was broken and she was completely paralyzed. She continued in this condition for a month, all nourishment being given artificially and her death being expected at any time.

Despite the doctors' prophecy that she would die, Miss Fritts maintains her strength, and is now able to lift one arm and partially open one eye. Her case is not unlike that of Naval Cadet Wilson, who was hurt in a football match and who withstood an operation, but died at the end of nine months. In Miss Fritts' case the doctors think an operation would mean instant death.

THE SMILE REMINISCENT.—"I see you are smiling at my jokes," said the waiting contributor hopefully.

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No. 327—Suburban for Gibson and Marysville, 18.40.
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No. 306—Suburban from Marysville 7.45.
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No. 308—Suburban from Marysville 13.30.
No. 304—Mixed from Loggieville and Chatham Junction, 16.00.
No. 310—Suburban from Marysville 19.15.
No. 316—Suburban from Marysville 21.55.

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7.50 p.m.—Express from St. John, and points east.
9.05 p.m.—Mixed from Woodstock, and points North.
10.50 p.m.—Express from Boston, Portland, Woodstock, St. Stephen, etc.

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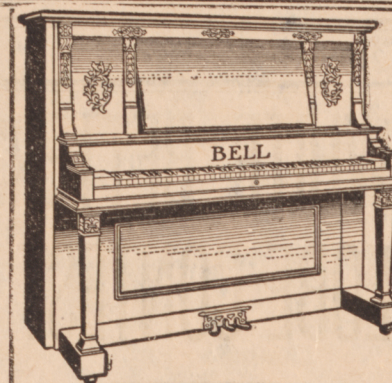
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