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The Passion Play at Oberammergau

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that when they were beaten they were at liberty to run. But Don Juan soon put an end to this heretical excess, of private judgment. One morning, after some of his *besognies* had scampered out of a trench which was raked from end to end by some of Mountjoy's people firing on their flank out of furze bushes, Don Juan fastened the following wholesome proclamation in vernacular Spanish at all the gates:—

"No soldado on any pretence shall presume to leave his place, unless he be called off by his superior officer. Though his powder be spent and his piece broken, yet shall he make good his place with his sword until he be called off as aforesaid.

"Mark well any soldado who breaks this rule will be shot.

"DON JUAN DE AQUILA."

By such and other methods, Don Juan soon converted his *besognies* into as good soldiers as I have ever read of anywhere.

Whether, if Mountjoy had had the moral courage to act as commander-in-chief he would have shown energy and military skill I cannot say. As a fact, he allowed himself to be ruled by his council, and as a consequence the siege went all awry. Mountjoy and his advisers were here for some time in the midst of their great army before they could hit upon any plan of campaign at all. They had a fine park of culverins, enough to blast as big a hole as was needful for storming purposes in the walls of Kinsale, which were weak mediæval walls, and, moreover, dominated by the slopes of Knockrobin. One would think that at least some attempt should be made on Kinsale, seeing that the Northern lords, with the unconquered army of Ulster, were now on the road, and marching to Don Juan's assistance. Against the method of battery and storm Mountjoy and his council entertained an invincible repugnance, and the blockading of such an army as Don Juan's seemed out of the question. Something, nevertheless, had to be done, and accordingly the little parliament of judges, officials, and officers turned their attention to those two outlying forts, which seemed to command the mouth of the harbour. Now, these forts, Rincorran and Castlepark, really only seemed to command the harbour's mouth. They were not armed with heavy guns, and were, in fact, quite innocuous for passing ships. Before the arrival of the Queen's fleet, Captain Button, in the Queen's man-of-war, the *Moon*, sailed between them into harbour. Even if they did obstruct the Queen's fleet, which they did not, we shall presently find that the Queen's fleet was of no earthly service when it did enter the harbour. The reduction of these forts was of no advantage to the besiegers, and was prompted by no other motive than that of showing the world in general that the Queen's people, though they feared to storm Kinsale, were yet not altogether idle. So although the great Northern insurgent army was on the march the reduction of those ports was resolved upon, and occupied the Royalist army for many weeks.

(To be continued).

To J. M.—Perhaps, as you say, I do give too much space to correspondence. But many people have told me that they like it, and one of the cleverest men in Ireland told me that he always went first for the correspondence column. He "wanted to see how people's minds were affected by the things appearing in the "Review." Probably you are right; I shall reconsider.—Ed.

THE PASSION PLAY AT OBERAMMERGAU.

A toy village in a shallow valley between high hills; a rushing mountain stream swirling through it; a quaint little whitewashed church with a Turkish minaret where one expects to see a steeple; and for a background a tall and barren rock crowned with an iron cross, whose slender arms, shapely defined against the pinky grey evening sky, seem stretched in blessing over the living world at its feet. This is Oberammergau, as one first sees it on leaving the railway station—that glaring anachronism round the corner.

At that station one's head whirls with the Babel of cosmopolitan voices shouting in all keys, from the forlornly pathetic to the indignantly voluble. Round the corner, whispers and subdued tones as if the owners felt themselves in church. Only the cheery Ammergauers themselves—the men in their picturesque costume: bare knees, embroidered knickerbockers and coats, and soft green hats with the cock's plume at the back, the women, alas! in the garments of the rest of the world—speak out loud in friendly welcome, as they pilot their visitors to the lodgings assigned to them. Such attractive lodgings! the floors scoured as white as elbow grease can make them; a bouquet of artificial flowers hung in sign of festival over the mirror; an engraving or picture of some sacred subject over the bed; in the glass cabinet by the window the bridal chaplet of orange blossom of the landlady, the silvermounted cups our landlord has won in bygone friendly contests, a taper and rosary memorials of some great holiday or pilgrimage: the whole life history of the pair in the little room.

We saunter forth again, the stains of travel removed, to seek the "Pension" where our meals are to be taken; and then out into the streets among the moving and still subdued crowd, a veritable panorama of all nationalities, races, and creeds. It is almost dark already, up here where the mountains shut out the sun early; and you can barely distinguish the Biblical subjects painted on the house fronts, the curious carvings of their eaves and gables. A sudden gunshot reverberates across the hills: the band for to-morrow's performance has collected at the conductor's door on the outskirts of the village; and, at the signal, starts in procession and marches, playing the traditional airs solemnly through the streets down to the theatre, there to arrange instruments and notes in readiness for next morning. Men of all ages compose the band, with four little drummer boys, in Lincoln green and grey, and with faces like Raphael's child-angels, in their midst. Another interval—the inevitable feeding interval; then, darkness veiling all, another gunshot; and half way up the cliff a fiery cross bursts into light against the mountain side, burning itself silently out long after every one has retired to rest in preparation for the early rise of the morrow.

It is an early rise with a vengeance. As the church clock chimes five the hidden cannon gives tongue again; trumpets blare, whips crack, the whole village seems astir as if it had never gone to bed. The startled traveller is calmed down by the smiling landlady, who explains in her best German, as she brings the hot water she has by now learnt to be the natural adjunct of the "Englander," that the noise is an immemorial custom for waking every one in plenty of time to dress and hear Mass and have breakfast before eight o'clock when the Passion Play begins. So, as we are heretics, we have plenty

of time—and water—to make a comfortable toilette, and to enjoy our coffee and rolls and new laid eggs.

And now everyone files out into the streets again; and we all move leisurely and decorously, for we have still some twenty minutes to spare, towards the theatre, which is barely five minutes' walk off. It is a large building, shaped like a cube; the narrow side, which faces the village looks, with its three niches filled with statues, like a church front minus the door. As we reach the long side we find adown it at short intervals large doors numbered, and bearing over their lintels in huge lettering the numbers of the seats to which they lead. Hence no crowding and no crushing, for there is apparently a door to every two or three rows of seats; and so by seven fifty-five this audience of some four thousand people gathered from the four corners of the earth is seated under the arches formed by the plain iron spandrels which make the inside look still less like a theatre than the outside. It is literally only a shelter from the wind and rain, of iron painted deal colour, save where, at the back, the broad and solid supports of a kind of gallery for extra spectators have been painted in large and effective fresco to represent bits of local scenery. In front is the so-called stage: a deep platform as wide as the auditorium, but open to the sky; behind, at either extreme end, rise what purport to be the porticoes (I believe peristyle is the correct term) on the one side, of the house of Pilate, on the other of that of the High Priest. Against these, on each hand a wide arch beyond which the streets of Jerusalem appear to stretch till they are lost in green mountain and black fir that blend strangely with the Oriental architecture. Connecting the two arches stands the theatre proper: i.e., an enclosed space within which hangs the traditional curtain; while over all spreads the grey sky and the restless clouds that flit like smoke incessantly by. The orchestra is invisible; but as church clock and cannon simultaneously announce the hour it bursts into voice, a solemn music like that of the old masters of sacred harmonies.

The Passion Play has begun. The chorus, as it is curiously styled, composed of men and women in white robes and coloured mantles embroidered in gold and ranging in artistic sequence through the colours of the rainbow, with golden circlets round their heads, and their leader all in white, emerges in two streams from the two peristyles, spreading right across the stage, and alternately recites and chants, now one alone, now all together. This chorus forms the division between the acts—the Play has but one real entr'acte, the midday rest from eleven forty-five till one—each act consisting of two tableaux, and a scene with words and action. The tableaux are represented on what I have called the theatre proper, or inner stage, whose columns and architrave form a frame for them; sometimes, as in that of the Murder of Cain, consisting but of two figures; in others, such as the Brazen Serpent in the Wilderness, the crowd must have been made up of at least three or four hundred persons, men, women, and children—these last of a most beautiful type—immovable during the couple of minutes (some Philistine, I am told, timed one to have lasted two minutes and a half) the curtain remained raised.

The Chorus, meanwhile, dividing in the centre, ranges itself on either side, and chants an explanation of the subject of the picture and its relation to the Play. For the tableaux are scenes from the Old

Testament chosen as types and prophecies of the New. Hence their order is far from chronological, and, till he has grasped the intention of this seeming confusion, the spectator requires this explanation from the singer.

When, however, it is the turn of the scene of the Play itself, the Chorus disappears whence it came. The scene over, there is a just perceptible pause, of perhaps thirty seconds, before the Chorus comes in again. A strangely affecting pause: not a sound has been audible in that vast auditorium, not a cough, not even a rustle; but in that half minute one can hear throughout the theatre the sudden deep breath of relief of all those souls whose tension has momentarily been relaxed. Scarcely a word here and there is whispered; but that feeling of relief seems palpable, tangible. Over and over again this repeats itself till, at eleven forty-five, another gunshot announces the one actual break, and an hour and a half is allowed alike to performer and spectator for rest and refreshment. The audience is expected to take its mid-day meal—a flippant gourmet suggested, but he was only capable of the suggestion next day, off a Biblical cow out of the Ark christened for the benefit of the exacting Britisher “biftek a l'anglaise.” But it does not much matter what is put before us; we don't feel inclined for anything, and “only eat because we must.” We only want to be allowed to hurry back to our hard and narrow seats in the theatre.

It is all over. The curtain has fallen for the last time. We are all on our feet, slowly moving towards the door. Some fools have attempted to clap, but have promptly been suppressed by an indignant “hush” from the rest of us; and we are out in the every-day world once more, and have to pull ourselves abruptly together to reach the special train that is to take us away immediately: our room—and rooms—required for the company that is already arriving for to-morrow's performance.

That is the one thing one does not want to remember: that it has been a “performance,” and is “to be repeated.” It is not possible that these scenes we have just assisted at are not real life; that that wonderful central figure with its severe and serene dignity is only an actor who, to-morrow, will move with that same grace and grandeur through these same scenes. How is it, that here in this lonely spot, too highly perched for most wheel traffic, and which is this year for the first time linked by a railroad to the outer world, has been evolved as it were out of its inner consciousness so marvellous a conception of the Might-have-been? Look on it as you will, from the fervently religious point of view to the dispassionately artistic, the stirring effect is the same. It appeals to all that is deepest and most hidden in the heart through the intense sincerity and simplicity of its belief: not the habit that accepts because it is taught; not the enthusiasm that blinds itself with the blaze of its own fires; but the Faith that believes because it knows, and is unhesitatingly ready to let you see and know what it knows.

What might be considered the “imperfections” of the performance enhance this atmosphere. The strange and un-Jewish ways and customs; the very Western grouping and even conception of some of the living pictures; the curiously thin and ineffective voices of the women, who could not fill the open air stage and the vast building behind it, even were they chosen for their histrionic gifts instead of

solely in accordance with their moral worthiness. A Mary of nineteen weeping at the Foot of the Cross sounds as if it must look incongruous; it does not. This is no historic picture; it is a something that is neither of time nor place, and as much beyond criticism as it is above the plane of every day humanity.

The Passion Play was invented in early mediæval times: there is no exact record of the date when it first came to Oberammergau; but in the beginning of the seventeenth century the plague broke out in that mountain district; and the villagers vowed, if the scourge were stayed, to commemorate their escape by a decennial performance of "The Passion Play." Since then it has been uninterruptedly acted every tenth year, save in 1870, when the Franco-German war prevented it, most of the performers having to join the ranks of the Bavarian army; but it was given instead in the following year. Of course it is no longer exactly as the survivors of the plague saw it; in those days much that appealed to the spectator would now seem coarse and grotesque. But the alterations have been almost exclusively acts of omission. Some fifty years ago the Roman Curia with that wonderful insight which so often characterises its appointments, sent a native as a Parish Priest to Oberammergau, who devoted nearly half a century—he had been dead but little more than a twelvemonth—to the perfecting of the Passion Plays, remodelling the text and the dresses, and, as I said before, eliminating everything that could jar on the most refined or exalted taste. He is at rest from his labours now; but the spirit in which he wrought and which he formed and cultivated among his flock survives and inspires the performers now as then.

Will it survive the closer contact with the outside world which the railway must inevitably bring about? We will see in 1910, at least, any of us that are alive and care to repeat this pilgrimage. Many have already visited Oberammergau several times; and yet, for myself—

The Passion Play is not of the weapons that convert; it appeals to the heart, not the head. It is like an ideal Haschisch, that Arabian opium that makes the partaker see visions and dream dreams; but from which he should wake better, not worse. Take a second dose, knowing exactly what is coming—and I cannot imagine anyone forgetting even the smallest detail thereof—familiarity might rend the mystic veil, and that strange, inexplicable touch of the superhuman might vanish with the spell of the unknown. As it is, I carry away with me from Oberammergau (and I fancy it is the same with most others who have been there) a memory, unique and unapproachable, of the most marvellous realization of those marvellous scenes that eighteen hundred years ago lighted the beacon that is still revolutionizing the world.

E. D.

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THREE QUOTATIONS.

[Slievenaman Series.]

Till quite lately the antique literature of this country was buried as if under mountains of oblivion. It was denied that we possessed such a thing as literature at all. No one paid any attention to Irish history, save at the points where it was in vital touch with English history, as at the date of the Union, and when Cromwell at the head of Puritan England came into this country. In Trinity College there is not to-day a Chair for the teaching of Irish History. In Trinity College there is not to-day a Chair for the teaching of the Celtic languages. There is a Celtic Chair in Oxford, and in Cambridge, and in all the great universities of the whole world. Of Celtic languages Irish is the chief, and it is the opinion of all the eminent linguistic scholars of Great Britain and Europe, that Irish stands very high indeed in the hierarchy of great languages. This is high praise, though it has reference only to the language, and not to the literature; for the literature is rude—rude, but great in its rudeness—and with a grandeur which we sometimes think is superior to the beauty of the finished, perfected, and refined masterpieces of other literatures. Let us give an example of what we mean. An Irish writer telling one of the innumerable stories having reference to Finn, pauses a moment, and casually drops this memorable passage. "For it was a characteristic of Finn that if he had a difference with any man he never cast up against him any former benefits which he might have received at his (Finn's) hands." No more, but it is enough. As in a flash we perceive the presence of a great character, of one who was truly a man. We suspect that amongst those who habitually sneer at our remote Irish ancestors as mere savages, there are not a great many who ever rise to this height of magnanimity and exalted self-respect. And the literature teems with things of this kind, and of examples of action and of conduct attuned to this heroic note. And this literature is our own, ours as are our mountains and rivers; grown here; offspring of the deep soul of the Celt, and a great prophesy for the comfort of those who, observing the poor actualities that surround us, and the poor results of historic time might otherwise despair and regard this land and nation as doomed beyond the hope of recovery. What follows is another instance of the sounding of that proud heroic note whose presence, whether sounding or silent, seems to pervade the whole of this strange literature. "How came it to pass, O Caelta," enquired Patrick, "that you, the Fianna of Finn, flourished so greatly when you had not the knowledge of the true God?" "O, Cleric, it was because we had courage in our hearts, strengthen in our hands, and the truth upon our tongues."

We shall breed men again of that mould in Ireland—Christian this time not Pagan. Perhaps they are being born as we write. We conclude with a third and more familiar quotation, for we have seen it printed more than once before:—

"We, the Fianna of Erin never lied;
Falsehood was not found amongst us;
By courage and the strength of our hands
We used to come out of every difficulty."

To P. H.—Thanks for your excellent letter on "A.E. and Fiona MacLeod," which I have not printed, thinking controversy on that subject had best cease.—Ed.