

**THE PASSION PLAY AT
OBER-AMMERG AU, IN
THE SUMMER OF 1871**

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GERALD MOLLOY

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THE
PASSION PLAY

AT

OBER-AMMERGAU,

IN THE SUMMER OF 1871.

BY THE REV.

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" I will bear that play;
" For never anything can be surler
" When simpleness and duty tender it."

Midsummer Night's Dream.

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THE PASSION PLAY

AT

OBER-AMMERGAU.



PART I.

INTRODUCTORY.



CHAPTER I.

ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE PLAY.

IN a pleasant valley of the Highlands of Bavaria is a picturesque village, situated on the banks of the River Ammer, just where it issues from a deep and narrow gorge. The inhabitants, who are simple and primitive in their ways, depend for their livelihood chiefly on the

art of wood carving, to which they are greatly devoted, and in which they have attained a high degree of perfection. This little village, which, from its position, is called Ober-Ammergau, is the last resting-place in Germany, and, I may almost say, in Europe, of a kind of religious drama that was common enough in times gone by.

It happened, in the year 1633, that a fearful pestilence swept over the districts of Southern Bavaria. For some weeks the secluded valley of the Ammer was free from its deadly breath. All ingress and egress was rigorously forbidden by the local authorities, and every pass was carefully guarded, to shut out the dreaded contagion. At length, however, a native of the place, who had been working in a neighbouring district, wishing to return to his family, eluded the vigilance of the sentries, entered the valley by a secret path, and unconsciously carried the infection with him. In two days he was a corpse. The contagion

spread: and, before the end of three weeks, eighty-four of the villagers, about one-fourth of the whole community, had been laid in their graves.

The terrified survivors, having lost all hope in human aid, met together and bound themselves by a solemn promise to God, if He would stay the plague, to give a representation every ten years of the Passion and Death of Christ. From that moment, as the tradition goes, the pestilence was arrested in its course; and they who were already infected quickly recovered. Faithful to their vow, the grateful villagers gave the first representation in the following year 1634; and, ever since, as each ten years have gone round, the Passion Play has been repeated, with constantly increasing taste and skill, and without any diminution of that reverent religious spirit in which it first began.

But the Passion Play at Ober-Ammergau has not been without its vicissitudes. More than once

its very existence was threatened; and for its preservation we are chiefly indebted to the pious zeal of the inhabitants. The history of this matter is well deserving of notice.

There are many reasons why the religious drama of the middle ages should be found ill suited to the condition of modern society. First of all, it is scarcely reverent to expose the most sacred things to the ridicule, or even to the indifferent criticism, of free-thinkers; and we all know there will be many free-thinkers, at the present day, amongst a large audience in a public theatre. Besides, many of these religious plays were mixed up with profane and grotesque associations; and, though they may have been looked upon with reverence in ruder times, they would be more likely now to excite feelings of repugnance and disgust. Again, there is the danger of such representations being turned to account, by ingenious speculators, as a means of making money. And, lastly, there is

the temptation to intemperance and riot which is always present when large, promiscuous crowds of people are assembled together.

Influenced by these, and other such considerations, the Archbishop of Salzburg, in the year 1772, issued a manifesto with a view to the general suppression of religious plays. The civil power lent its aid; and, during the next ten years, vigorous measures were taken for their extinction in the various towns and villages of Southern Germany. But the people of Ober-Ammergau urged the religious obligation of their vow. They represented, too, that their Play, which had been conducted under the enlightened guidance of the Benedictine monks attached to the neighbouring monastery at Ettal, was free from the abuses that existed elsewhere. Their prayer was heard, and a special exception was made in their favour.

In the year 1810 the Passion Play seemed once again on the point of extinction. The monastery