

**IMPRESSIONS OF
THE AMMERGAU
PASSION-PLAY**

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Impressions of the Ammergau Passion-play by An Oxonian & Henry Scott Holland

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AN OXONIAN & HENRY SCOTT HOLLAND

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THE AMMERGAU PASSION-PLAY.

BY AN OXONIAN.

1870.

Henry Scott Holland



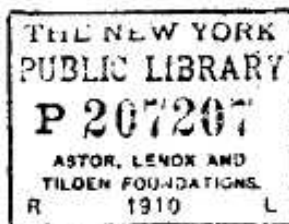
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IMPRESSIONS OF

THE AMMERGAU PASSION-PLAY.

I must make two apologies for this essay; first, for having ventured to write on a subject which the papers have already, it may be thought, worked to death; and, secondly, for my almost total ignorance of the language in which the Play is written. With regard to the first, I would plead that the numerous popular accounts are just what enable me to omit a good deal of dry description and explanation, and to give the impressions produced, and the reflections excited, by the performance, without appearing to wander too much from the subject, or failing to take the reader along with me; and though this impressional view has been given before this by the ablest hands, it has yet been so lightly and briefly touched upon, or so hampered by the wish to soothe and smooth down prejudices against the Play, that it seems to me that there is still room for an attempt, however humble and weak, to give something of the fuller force of the mountain-drama.

And this attitude of mind in writing will, I trust, extenuate my second failing; for opera-goers will, I think, understand how that the impressions received, though they may not be in literal and accurate accordance with the letter of the dialogue, will yet come to one with a purer and clearer intensity from the mere effect of the action and the sound than when one is haggling over the meaning of the words.

Of course, the *spirit* of the Ammergau Play was evident enough, owing to its loyal fidelity to the Bible story; moreover, whenever I did recognise the words, it was on the utterance of some familiar text, which gained in the subtle power of joyful recognition without losing the strong pleasure of

novelty, and, above all, had none of the flavour of vulgarity which I cannot but think must have clung to my own tongue if heard in such a rare atmosphere from the lips of British peasantry.

And if the following reflections sound too poor and commonplace and ordinary for such a strange and marvellous scene, I would ask you to remember that, at exciting and intent moments of life, it is often not the originality of the idea that produces the impression, but rather the overpowering vividness, the vehement realization, in the very eyes and heart, of threadbare opinions and thoughts as old as the hills.

I may mention, in case I be thought too partial, that I got to the Play an hour late, had almost nothing to eat the whole day, had to stand the greater part of the time close by a door where I was disturbed by every spectator that came in or went out; and to crown all, that it poured with rain during four hours of the performance, on Chorus and on the Jews in their beautiful robes, as well as on more than half the audience; and if any one dared to adopt the selfish but convenient device of raising an umbrella, an enthusiastic playgoer from behind battered it in with a stout mountain-club till it was put down often with its wires making most uncomfortable angles through the rents. Altogether, these, it will be allowed, were not the most favourable circumstances possible for such a spectacle.

AMMERGAU lies close by the gate of the hills, just where the first clump of Alps lifts its everlasting head suddenly and sturdily from the undulating Bavarian plains. The imagination is ever on the *qui-vive* as it first catches sight of those blue heights towering in royal might far above the quiet woods and lakes of the everyday world; but its attention is heightened and quickened when it knows that there, in the bosom of those great hills, is preserved, not a dead relic, but a living manifestation of the Faith which animated the hearts and homes of England in "the days before the Flood;" the Faith of which Shakespeare wrote; the Faith which has left us, in every English village and town, the carven capitals, the crisp and twisted tracery, the grotesque headstones and grinning gurgoyles, under which we, in these latter and more

grimy days, still delight to live and pray. For the familiarity with sacred things which that Faith fostered is the same, whether it flings itself into the moulded stones of our old Churches, or associates without offence the mock pageantry of the stage with the most solemn and mysterious realities of religion. It is a familiarity which breeds no contempt, but from which we, with the unhealthy sensitiveness of an over-wrought self-consciousness, seem to take an effeminate pride in shrinking, confusing the familiarity of an unquestioning and innocent faith with the audacity of irreverent unbelief. The mediæval artist felt no qualms at introducing himself or his friend into the midst of Apostles and Prophets; he saw no reason why the Madonna should not appear with his family at her side; he let all the play of his fancy loose in carving hideous demons writhing in the nooks and corners of the holy places. All his life was spent in the bodily presence, as it were, of spiritual Beings; wooden Christs, painted Saints, greeted him at every turn of the road, on every wall, under every tree. His daily life could not possibly be looked on as one thing and his religious life another; he did not always have to speak of the latter with solemn face and bated breath. Rather both were "inveterately convolved," the one inseparable from the other, with the actions of both in complete harmony.

It is this same spirit which you see in activity as you drive from Munich to the scene of the Passion-Play; every image and picture recall it; and it is only by realizing the existence and force of such a spirit as this that the full meaning of Ammergau can be understood. All the refinement of these peasants' lives takes a religious tinge. The child, when it first tries its hand with a pencil, instead of scribbling a pig or a cow, probably scrawls a Madonna. The man who attempts to give any beauty to his works and ways, covers his cottage-walls with Holy Families. Ammergau itself is full of wood-carvers; and carving means crucifixes. Thus it is that the Play does not stand out, in sharp isolation, from a background of dreary and inharmonious common-place; rather it is the culmination of all that the years, and days, and hours bring round to every one, whether of the actors or the audience; it is in heartiest sympathy with their daily

thoughts ; it is far from being loosely associated with their highest act of worship into which we must remember how largely symbolic action enters, how strongly the fact is clung to, as the true core of reality ; it is itself almost a religious service ; there is but one step from the seats in the Church to the benches in the Theatre ; there is no Dichotomy, no dualism ; all is mingled, intertwined ; no secularism stands over against religious thought ; to them the Word of Life is, as far as can be, that " which their ears have heard, which their eyes have seen, which they have looked upon, and their hands have handled."

These are the reflections with which the sober tourist turns off the main road from Munich at Oberau, to find himself in the midst of a stream of walkers who are following their emptied vans up a tremendously steep gorge, hung with woods and over-awed by rocky peaks, to a high and hidden valley, along which he rattles, past the great deserted monastery of Ettal, which his historical instinct may lead him to conclude had something to do with elevating the tone of the villagers and their Play, into the crowded Ammergau, now choked with peasants, a fair number of respectable citizens from Munich, etc., and here and there the familiar forms and faces of his own unmistakeable race. He will, if possible, secure a bed ; if very lucky, he may pick up a mouthful of food in the village inns, where shouting mountaineers are consuming the most appalling amount of Bavarian beer ; and he will perhaps wonder how much of that beer, excellent as it is, may be calculated to be compatible with the reverence which he hopes to witness on the morrow. Our Anglican friend is probably worked up into rather an artificial state of tension, and is not altogether prepared for the thorough-going holiday-spirit which surges and bubbles around him.

But let him go to bed happy ; for he will find, when Sunday comes, that for eight hours, those noisy tongues will hardly utter a word ; and that 5000 of these people will be kept in absolute control by a few doorkeepers of their own rank and position ; that those outside the Theatre will creep about on tiptoe and talk in whispers for fear of disturbing those within. There will be no want of reverence, he may

be assured ; and it will be more marked, I think, in the men than in the women.

The Play forms a complete whole, made up of about fifteen parts, each of which parts is complete in itself. Each part consists of three elements, Chorus, Tableaux, and Dialogue. These three are welded into unity by the spirit of the Part which they form : this spirit expresses its single meaning in the way appropriate to each element. Thus the Chorus explains how the Tableaux illustrate what is represented in the Dialogue, and points to the moral of both. It is kept more distinctly as a medium between the audience and the acting than was the Greek Chorus. It takes no part whatever in the action itself, but confines itself entirely to its work of preparation and application. Thus its warnings and advice, while they derive from the Tableaux all the impressive vividness with which the eye can aid the ear, (an impressiveness which is heightened by the fixed, intent character of these picturesque scenes,) still do not intrude themselves on those solemn words and acts when their presence would seem impertinent, but leave you with both your imagination and your moral will strung to the requisite pitch and temper, waiting with earnest expectation for the truth, in all its reality, to be revealed ; ready, like the white Cloth of S. Veronica, to receive the impress of your Saviour's face.

Nothing can be more artistic than this triple arrangement. It gives room for an infinite play of balanced and interwoven thoughts and meanings and types. The appropriateness of it is evident : for the Old Testament is used with such effect in the Tableaux that not only is the unity of the Bible strongly enforced, but the audience brings to the representation of the Gospel History just that attitude of mind which S. Paul ascribed to the Patriarchs and to the old Gentile world. It is travailling for the fulfilment of the promise.

Again, this arrangement is based on the true dramatic ideal in which the character of representation is never stretched so as to border on deceit. There is no miserable attempt to conceal the fact that everybody knows : no clap-trap appeal to the delight of momentary self-deception : no tickling of the eye and ear into forgetfulness of the rational standpoint of histrionic imitation : no confused mixing of