THE LAST PASSION PLAY

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MARY CATHERINE SMELTZLEY

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Foreword

The following ideas are partly the result of a visit to Oberammergau in 1910 and partly the result of reading Mrs. Louise Parks-Richards' "Oberammergau: Its Passion Play and Players", Monsignore Joseph Schroeder's "Oberammergau and Its Passion Play", and Frau Hermine Diemer's "Oberammergau and Its Passion Play." Often I have quoted from these authors because their quaint mediaeval style so beautifully portrayed the spirit of the people among whom they had so long lived. Since I was eager to interpret the spirit of the people I am glad to acknowledge my indebtedness to them.

Since the great Passion Play at Oberammergau is the only modern survival of the mediaeval religious drama, it is my intention to call to the minds of lovers of the play its decennial in 1920.

Mary Catherine Smeltzley

The Last Passion Play

At last we are ready for the journey to Oberammergau, the center of interest on the Continent during the summer of 1910. Leaving Munich at nine o'clock on Tuesday morning, the second of August, we find at the railway station a great crowd of people of all ranks and countries, principally Americans. Our attention is particularly attracted by the peculiar ear-rings, head-dresses, and aprons which many of the peasants wear.

Soon after leaving Munich, the train winds amongst the hills, through green valleys and along the borders of Lake Starnberg. After passing through a pine wood, we wind gradually up the mountain side. Here and there we pass a wayside shrine or statue of the Virgin, interesting to us by reason of the legend that such images are invisible to the unregenerate, as heavy as lead to the impenitent sinner, but as light as a feather to every one who has a contrite heart. After passing Weilheim we traverse pasture lands, corn fields, and orchards. From Murnau, the little village terminal of the new electric road, the way lies through an open country, studded with scattered

hamlets. Presently we see the Bavarian Alps towering one above the other in dark cloud-like masses.

After skirting the heights of Saulgrub, we have before us a picture of surprising loveliness—the long, narrow valley of the Ammer, closed in on all sides by mountains; below us the village of Allenau, farther on in the center of the valley Unterammergau, and in the distance Oberammergau, our destination. To the right and left are mountains of moderate altitude: Bürschling, Zahn and Kofel on the one side; Hörnle and Aufacker on the other. In front, in the center, rises the Laber, the mountains of Oberau forming the background. As we climb up to this narrow plateau, where the village lies almost surrounded by its mountain walls, a strange and solemn sight confronts us—upon the summit of the Kofel, one of the highest peaks, outlined against the sky and flashing in the sunlight, stands a cross, the emblem of the Passion.

At about one o'clock we arrive at the station of Oberammergau. Here we are still further impressed with the strangeness ot the environment, for standing in groups about the station waiting to conduct guests to their respective homes we find the dienstmen of Oberammergau; men whose long flowing hair, falling over their shoulders, suggests pictures seen in churches and in old Bible illustrations; men whose pictur-

esque costumes make one recall the Galilean fishermen of old; men whose friendly and obliging manners portray the true High German wherever he is found.

Then the narrow, winding streets and the tastefully painted houses attract our attention as we betake ourselves to the home of Herr Joseph Wolf, where we are to be domiciled while in the village; for Oberammergau is a village without plan or point of compass. And excepting the one long street that intersects the town with a single oblique turn, there is no street running in any direction even for a short distance only without bending or sharply turning to end against the corner of a house or the side of a cow stable. During our stay we have ample opportunity to realize that the location of Herr Wolf's house is no exception to the rule, for from the barn directly in front of us come strange and discordant noises.

After we are comfortably settled in a large two-story house under the same roof with three Jersey cows, we take a survey of the village. We learn that Oberammergau is 2523 feet above the sea level, that it contains about 400 families with a population of about 1600 people, most of whom are Catholics. We find that the people, a mixture of two pure Teutonic races—Bavarians and Suabians—are more like Swiss than Germans. We learn that isolation begot their independence and that the little community,

secure amidst its rocky ramparts against the intermeddling autocracy of distant governments, evolved the simplest and the soundest system of democracy. The administrative head of the community is the bürgermeister, elected by the householders of the village, nearly every one of whom is a landholder—the poorest with three acres and the richest having about sixty. We realize that it has been a mistake for us to think that these people are mere peasants and that they do not go beyond the narrow views of country folk in general, for many of them are educated and refined with manners quite on a par with those of the cosmopolitan. Many of the younger men and women speak English as well as we.

We find that the most conspicuous public buildings are the parish church, the new Passion Play theater, the new school of carving, the hospital, the theatre for rehearsals, a school, and the town hall. The houses with their clean white walls and green window-shutters are irregularly grouped around the church, which, with its mosque-like minaret, forms the living center of the place. It is a spacious and appropriate House of God, handsomely decorated with fine stained-glass windows, and containing a beautiful communion rail and a chime of seven bells. The ceiling is adorned with an interesting fresco by Gindter. One scene in particular, that over the organ, represents the taber-