



CHRIST IN THE GARDEN OF GETHESEMANE.

IT was John Augustus O'Shea, perhaps best known as the *Standard* war correspondent during the Franco-German war, who in 1860, by his brilliant descriptive letters contributed to that paper, called the attention of England to that extraordinary representation, the Passion Play, which this year is again being performed at the small but picturesque village of Oberammergau, in the Bavarian Alps.

Since then the increase of visitors has been simply marvellous, and if the national crisis does not seriously interfere, it is expected that the present year's influx will outdo any of the previous ones, at least so far as Great Britain's contribution is concerned.

It is true there was in 1890 a controversy carried on in our press for some time as to whether the whole Play was not in reality a profanation of a sacred subject. I hope to be able to show that the very spirit which prompts the performance precludes any such idea. I quote the great German actor, Edward Devrient, who visited the Play just half a century ago: "One thing has become with me a settled conviction. If I have entertained a doubt as to the propriety of representing sacred subjects upon the stage, all such hesitation has vanished from this hour. Here nothing can be considered a

THE PASSION PLAY AT OBER- AMMERGAU.

By A. DE BURGH.*

profanation of our ideal of the Redeemer. On the contrary, the picture which I had hitherto endeavoured to represent to my mental vision of the Son of God taking a visible form and acting His part on the theatre of the world, in the midst of His friends and opponents—this picture reappeared at Ammergau and, deprived of its drama-like vagueness, assumed all the vigour of life and reality. I beheld for the first time the God-Man as a pilgrim on the earth. In His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, when the multitude hailed Him with shouts of Hosanna! I read on His brow that His thoughts were turned far from the present scene of jubilation in order to contemplate the completion of His sacrifice on Calvary. Knowing that the torments and the ignominy of the Cross were a necessary part of His



THE VIRGIN MARY.

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Heavenly Father's scheme of salvation, He kept aloof from the sentiments of the excited multitude, and was no more allured by their songs of triumph than He was afterwards daunted by their persecution, abuse, and blasphemy. He knew that He must be betrayed, denied, abandoned by all, mocked, scourged, crowned with thorns, and crucified. It was by means of the village tragedy that I confronted these great truths of revelation. I then felt how deep is the



"HAIL, KING OF THE JEWS!"

wound which has been inflicted by humanity against its Ideal. The tragedy was more powerful than word or painting."

I quote Mr. Devrient so fully because I have so frequently heard words to the same effect as the outcome of the impressions received by those who have seen the Play, and I therefore take it for granted that in the judgment of the great majority the performance is in no way profane.

The people of the village who comprise

the actors and actresses look upon this performance as a religious service, a labour of love, and their great training-school has always been the Church, with its impressive Catholic ceremonial, its processions, its music and song. The chief manager is the village priest, and every performance begins with prayer, when the whole company may be seen kneeling behind the drop-curtain. Before the great work commences the players partake most solemnly of the Holy Communion, and prepare themselves in this wise for their difficult task.

Although the Passion Play is performed but once in ten years, the people nevertheless rehearse to a certain extent their parts during the annual festivals of their Church; thus, for instance, the procession which takes place on every Palm Sunday equals as a dramatic scene Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem when performed at the Play.

The Passion Play of Oberammergau dates as far back as 1634, having been performed ever since in consequence of a solemn vow made by the community under the following circumstances: In 1633 a terrible pestilence broke out in the district; a neighbouring village suffered so much that only two married couples were left. Although the strictest precautions were exercised, the plague was introduced into Oberammergau and spread with such fearful rapidity that eighty-four persons succumbed within a month. Then the villagers assembled and vowed that, if the pestilence would disappear, they would perform the Passion Tragedy in thanksgiving every tenth year. From that time,

the legend tells us, not one more died of the plague. In 1634 the Play was performed according to the vow, and since 1630 it has been repeated with a few exceptions every tenth year.

This was the origin of the Oberammergau performance, but the Play is of a much older date, and in the neighbouring Tyrol it has been given as far back as the thirteenth century.

I have had a chance, rarely granted to

anyone outside the Church, to glance over the oldest existing text-book, dated 1662, which refers to a still older book. From this most interesting document I could see that the Play has undergone very great changes and improvements. In the olden times the Devil was

allotted an important part in the tragedy, and was ever on the stage; for instance, he used to dance about Judas, and when the betrayer hanged himself, a host of imps would rush upon the suicide. All this is now entirely banished from the Oberammergau stage.

During the last forty years the Play and its stage have been greatly improved and perfected, which is partly due to the interest the late King Ludwig II. of Bavaria took therein. The performances of 1870 were suddenly ended by the

outbreak of the Franco-German war, when no less than forty of the men and youths of Ammergau had to join the colours, among them being several of the actors. Joseph Mayer, who had taken the part of Christ, was one of those who had to go to fulfil their military duty. Of those who marched out of the village to fight for their country six never returned, two fell in battle and four died in hospital; among the victims was Alois Lang, who had undertaken a principal part in the Passion Play. When the war was ended, a repetition of the Play was given in 1871, as the villagers' method of thanking God for victory and peace.

Originally the performance took place on Sundays and *fête* days only, and the cemetery



ST. THOMAS



ST. PETER.



CHRIST'S FAREWELL BEFORE JOURNEYING TO JERUSALEM.

surrounding the church formed both the stage and auditorium. To-day there is a large stage, and this year for the first time visitors will find a covered auditorium, which has been constructed at a cost of £10,000 in order to protect the audience from the inclemency of the weather. It is a gigantic but severely simple hall, sixty feet high, and consists of six iron arches with a span of nearly one hundred and thirty feet. It will comfortably hold four thousand people.

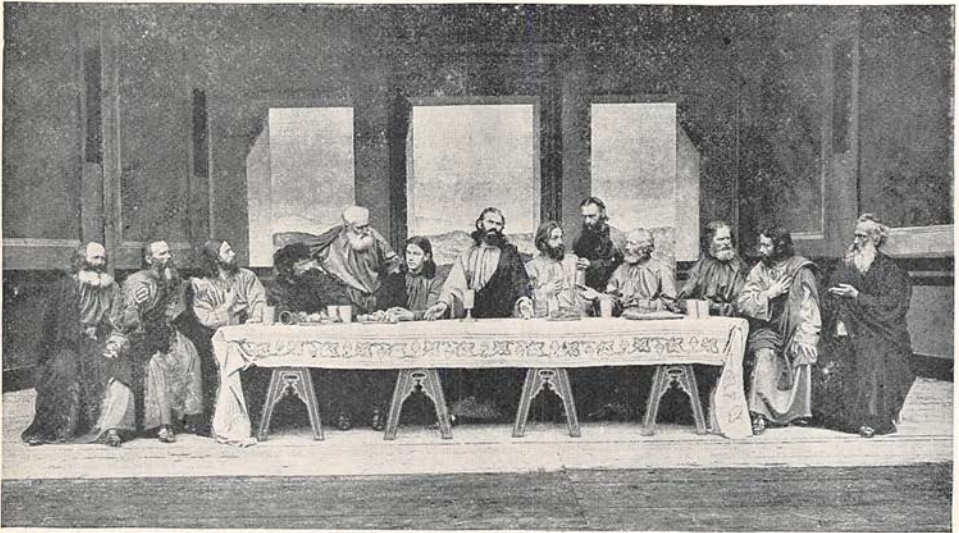
While thus the auditorium is completely under shelter, the stage and proscenium remain, as hitherto, quite open, and valley, mountain, and sky still form the background to the solemn drama.

As regards the Play itself, it appears that the year 1850 saw the dawn of a new epoch.

week of December of the year preceding the Play. There are about two hundred and sixty parts, including minor rôles, and at some scenes nearly five hundred persons appear on the stage.

Naturally the most important part is that of Christ, and few men have the bodily strength to meet the physical requirements of the part. Joseph Mayer, who fulfilled this rôle in 1880 and 1890, is six feet in height and of splendid physique; nevertheless he often fainted when suspended on the cross. He is now fifty-two years of age, but although he is in admirable health he feels he has not strength to go through the ordeal again, much as he would love to do so.

Photographs of the players are never allowed to be taken before the performances



THE LAST SUPPER.

The village priest, the Rev. Daisenberger, a great enthusiast, undertook the important charge of educating his parishioners up to the level of their dramatic vocation (in ordinary life the inhabitants of Oberammergau are farmers and wood-carvers). He organised rehearsals, invited the actors to his house, where they had first to read their parts and then recite them, and he taught them to act. His work was crowned with success. Ever since that period the Passion Play has enjoyed uninterrupted prosperity.

The selection of those who take the various parts in the Play is a task of great importance. It is carried out by a committee of forty-five householders, under the presidency of the priest. The election day is in the last

begin, but as the costumes remain always the same, we reproduce three of the principal figures of the Play of 1890—among them, Joseph Mayer, as Christ; Rosa Lang, as the Virgin Mother; Rundle, as Pilate; and others of the devout participants in former representations of the World's Tragedy, many of whom are to undertake the same rôles this year.

The progress made in the Passion Play of Oberammergau was due to a great extent to the monks of the neighbouring monastery of Ettal, who took it early under their protection. The monastery, as such, is no more, the monks have disappeared, but the church and building are among the many beautiful relics that have been handed down to us



"CHRIST OR BARABBAS?"

from the Benedictine fraternity. I found, in looking through the archives of Rothenbuch, another monastery in the neighbourhood, that Oberammergau in the seventeenth century stood under its pastoral charge, and therefore the village is doubtless indebted for the origin of the Play to the monks of the latter. My impression, founded on various indications, is that to Rothenbuch must be given the credit of having first prepared the text and introduced the religious drama

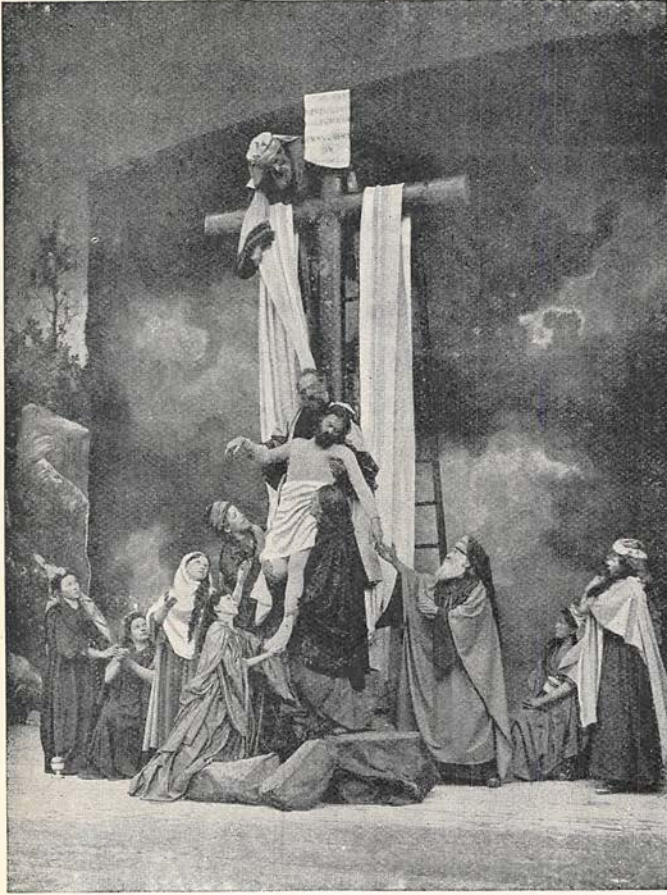
into Oberammergau, and that Ettal took, later, the guidance of any existing dramatic elements into its own hands. When in 1803 the property of the suppressed Bavarian monasteries was put up at auction, costumes used in the religious plays were sold, and the community of Oberammergau purchased from Ettal a number of dresses, some of which are still in use.

When the public theatre is taken down at the end of the great decennial season, the



THE CRUCIFIXION.

After the celebrated painting by Raphael.



THE DESCENT FROM THE CROSS.

stage itself still remains, and preparations are made for a number of other dramatic subjects, partly secular, partly religious, which the villagers perform.

I cannot strongly enough contradict some statements I have met with in the press to the effect that the Passion Play is simply a money-making affair. It is utterly untrue. The villagers treasure the Play as a precious heirloom, and its performance is a labour of love. They have over and over refused the most tempting offers to perform in England, America, Germany, and Austria. The bulk of the money gained is devoted to charities and municipal expenses, and individually the actors lose in neglected work more than they are paid for their participation in the Play. Not one of the players receives more than £20 for the whole time he is acting.

I shall now endeavour to give a short sketch of the great Passion Play itself, not an easy task when considering the wide scope

and the many ingredients which make up the whole. The Play, which this year will be performed twenty-seven times—namely, May 24th and 27th, June 4th, 10th, 16th, 17th, 24th, and 29th, July 1st, 8th, 15th, 18th, 22nd, and 29th, August 5th, 8th, 12th, 15th, 19th, 25th, and 26th, and September 2nd, 8th, 9th, 16th, 23rd, and 30th—begins each day at 8 a.m. and lasts until 5.30 p.m., with an interval of one and a half hours for lunch.

Every day on which the Play is performed (usually Sundays and Church festival days) is announced to the thousands of visitors in the following solemn manner. Precisely at seven o'clock on the preceding evening the musicians assemble at the end of the village, and, headed by the fire brigade in uniform, they strike up a stirring march and parade the village. On the day of the Play the visitor is awakened at five in the morning by the booming of cannon, followed at seven by the band marching through the village streets.

The stage has been so frequently described that I do not intend to enter into details, more especially as the photograph which we reproduce gives a good idea of its general appearance. The manager and inventor of all the wonderful sceneries in the Munich Opera House is the architect. Where twenty years ago one saw but crude form and colour, the eye now meets with artistic outlines and tones which are in full harmony with the surroundings.

The full depth of the house is about two hundred and twenty feet, the width one hundred and twenty-five feet, the stage proper is about fifty feet deep, and the proscenium is twenty-four feet deep.

The stage is divided into five distinct places of action for the players: first, the proscenium, for the chorus, for processions and the like; second, the central stage, for the *tableaux vivants* and the usual dramatic scenes; third, the palace of Pilate; fourth,



CHRIST LEAVING THE TOMB.



ST. MARY MAGDALENE.



ST. JOHN.



ANNAS.

the palace of Annas; and fifth, the streets of Jerusalem.

Each of the eighteen acts or divisions, containing a series of dramatic scenes complete in itself, is prefaced with one or more *tableaux vivants* of prophetic Old Testament types, and an explanatory discourse in song of what is going to happen during the coming act. To my mind the *tableaux* are the gem of the performance, and I am glad to be able to give my readers three photographs representative of the best—namely: “Christ’s Farewell Before Journeying to Jerusalem,” “The Crucifixion” (after Raphael), and “Christ Leaving the Tomb.” In order more fully to understand the Play, I quote a remark made by the village priest, who was the manager in 1890. He said: “Our main object is to represent the story of Christ’s Passion, not by a mere statement of facts, but in its connection with the types and figures and prophecies of the Old Testament. . . . Many of the incidents in the lives of the ancient fathers bear a striking and obvious resemblance to various parts in the life of Christ, and set forth the sufferings, and death, and resurrection so minutely that the Evangelists continually mention some prophecy which was fulfilled.”

The chorus of the Guardian Angels

(Schutzgeister) is a simple adaptation of the corresponding part of the classic theatre to modern use. The chorus at Oberammergau consists of eighteen Genii, with a leader who is styled the Prologue or Choragus. They wear dresses of various colours, over which a white tunic and a coloured mantle are worn. They advance from the recesses on either side of the proscenium and take up their position across the whole extent of the theatre, forming a slightly concave line. The Choragus recites an opening address which introduces each act; this is taken up by the chorus, who sing till the curtain is raised and the *tableau vivant* is shown. At that moment the chorus divides and its members stand to the right and left of the central stage.

An English lady gives her memories of the chorus in the following words: “And whilst they sang our hearts were strangely touched, and our eyes wandered away from those singular peasant angels and their peasant audience up to the deep, cloudless sky; we heard the rustle of the trees and



CAIAPHAS.

caught glimpses of the mountains, and all seemed a strange, poetical dream."

The space at my disposal is quite inadequate to give even a brief recital of the action as it proceeds during the Play, and I will come at once to the climax. On all previous occasions the chorus have appeared clad in their many-coloured robes. In the sixteenth act, however, they have donned the garb of mourning. The Choragus addresses his verses to the spectators, accompanied by soft, sad music.

During the singing of the Chorus-Angels



PILATE.

heavy hammer blows are heard behind the scenes. The executioners are nailing Christ to the cross. Then the curtain slowly ascends. Before the awestricken audience there is revealed the scene on Calvary, the most intense and most realistic picture of the whole performance. On the ground, with the head slightly raised, is a larger cross than the two already erected on which hang the malefactors. On this Christ is nailed. A soldier takes the inscription and nails it to the cross above Christ's head, and then he



HEROD.

calls his companions, who raise the cross to an upright position. The actors in the scene take up their positions at either side of the crosses, while Christ's friends are seen in the distant background. The impression created is intensely affecting. Of course the whole story as related in the Gospel is now acted, Christ remaining in this position for quite twenty minutes. After the death-scene the earth quakes, the thunder rolls, and darkness spreads over all the stage, the conclusion being the descent from the cross.

Before taking leave of my readers I shall say a few words as to the routes by which Oberammergau may be reached. One is from Munich to Oberan by railway and hence by carriage; the other, which certainly is by far the most beautiful and picturesque



JUDAS ISCARIOT.

route, is from Innsbruck, the well-known capital of Tyrol, so charming and pleasant in summer and winter, so healthy and so well provided with splendid, comfortable, and reasonable hotels. For

many years Innsbruck has been a favourite resort of English tourists, and when looking over the books of the Hôtel Tyrol, one of the finest and best conducted hosteleries in South Germany, I was not surprised to find registered the names of many people well known in

England. The tour, which can be made by carriage, on horseback or cycle, occupies not quite twelve hours, and the traveller passes through scenery unsurpassed for beauty and wildness. The way leads through Zirl, Seefeld, Mittenwald, Partenkirchen, and from there to Oberan, from which place a visit to the magnificent castles of the late King Ludwig II. of Bavaria, Neu Schwanstein and Linderhof, may easily be paid. To mention but a few of the many interesting spots the traveller passes on this



JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA.



NATHANIEL.

route: there is the pass near the now ruined Castle of Fernstein, called the Fernpass, a favourite spot of the late Ludwig II.; and, in addition to this, one should not miss the very picturesque villages of Mittenwald and Lermos, comfortably nestling between high mountains.



THE ASCENSION.