

THE PASSION PLAY

BY WILLIAM M. SLOANE

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IN 1633 the black death ravaged the Bavarian Alps. In token of deliverance and gratitude to God some villages instituted practices as a reminder to posterity and a memorial for all time. Of these institutions not all survive; two only come under the observation of the ordinary tourist. In Partenkirchen the church bell still rings of an afternoon at four o'clock; in Oberammergau the Passion Play is still given at intervals of ten years.

With few exceptions, the oldest families of western Europe are not those of royalty and aristocracy but of the peasantry. It is true that these last are farmers, but they are not in the least what that word denotes in Great Britain and America. Nor, on the other hand, are they mere agricultural Hodges: ditchers, plowers, mowers, and hewers of wood or drawers of water, as farm laborers are elsewhere in Europe. They are landowners, tillers of the soil, artisans, traders too, and frequently ecclesiastics. Between them and the intelligent, ambitious, educated, and often refined yeomanry of Anglo-Saxondom there is a wide chasm; as there is a sad contrast between their thrifty, smug comfort and the dissolute shiftiness of pauperism sloughed off by the community in the villages and countryside of America or England. Drunkenness there is among these Bavarian people, and tavern brawls delight many, but the seed of such indulgence falls on stony places and does not produce the awful harvest so regularly and richly reaped among English-speaking peoples. Peasant stock in upper Bavaria, therefore, is persistent, hardy, intense; within the narrow limits of its existence it is proud, self-sufficient, and tenacious.

Furthermore, it is pious. To many it seems densely superstitious and sadly priest-ridden. It is easy to invent and fling hard names; but it is also contemptible. There is no utterly irreligious man; the noisiest scoffing radical is merely unreligious in one sense—negatively religious as that adjective is generally used; but he is exhibiting to the left of the starting-

point in life exactly the same basic consciousness of the supernatural as the ultra-devout to the right of that starting-point. One abhors it, the other desires it; one denies it, the other asserts it; but for both alike the consciousness, the instinct, is existent and real. The Bavarian peasant is ultra-religious; if you like, he is Roman, he is ultramontane; but he is not the slave of psychics, or pseudo-science, or day terrors, or sorcery, or any of the animalistic insanities of avowed unbelief. He is devout to ecstasy, yes; he is simply credulous, yes; he loves pomp and ritual, yes; he shifts all his other-world responsibilities to the priesthood, yes; he is in awe of the Church and quakes before her menaces, yes. In other words, his environment has kept him in the same state of mind and under much the same social and economic conditions as those of the Middle Ages; and so, remaining a mediæval man, he clings to the mediæval Church.

These are some of the reasons why here, and only here, the Passion Play, so called, became an apparently permanent institution; at least, it has lasted two hundred and seventy-seven years. Perhaps a still more cogent reason is the innate, unconscious artistry of this peasant folk. To the limit of their education and intelligence they are musical and dramatic. The tinkle of the zither and its kindred string instruments may be heard in every hamlet, for the people do not live in separate farmsteads, but go forth in the morning to the labor of the fields, returning at night to a stirring social life in the alleys and taverns, at the doorways, and around the fountain.

It is a matter of course that many, probably the majority, play the violin and another musical instrument or two. Their dancing is graceful and daring to excess, the stout men swinging the buxom women breast high or higher into the air. But it is not lascivious, and while their merriment is often wild, they are in the main a virtuous people. Their passion for color is reminiscent of Italy, the influence of which is evident in many family names, in the lavish adornment of houses and uten-

sils with high-colored ornament and polychrome stencil, and in the abundance of glaring pictures and images.

But the highest achievement of their love for art is the peasant theater of the Bavarian uplands. The plays are written by clever professional dramatists, unfamiliar with towns and born to the country manner. The actors are amateur in the sense that they neglect neither trade nor vocation, and devote only their leisure to the stage. The scene is always field, forest, or village; the plot turns on the incidents of Alpine life: the hunt, the avalanche, the flood, the human primitive in passionate romance, in wild revenge, in blank despair; and often idyllic scenes are introduced in which the tuneful music of their song and their loved instruments, or the clog-dance and the waltz, the saraband and pavane, show forth the avocations of their leisure. In all this the performers are entirely themselves. There is much that is rude, very little that is vulgar, and still less that is wanton. It is mimic life, and life as they live it. The acting is amazingly vigorous and unsophisticated. The traditions of the stage are entirely apart from the conventions, the artifice, and the self-consciousness of the town and city theater as it has developed in the heat and excitement, the satiety and lust, of great capitals. The play is the thing; the form and substance are so blended that neither is remarked. Scene and people and words combine to produce sensations which are neither stupefying nor breathless, but simple and entertaining.

Within this peasant world there is the play of every human quality—ambition, self-control; efficiency, worthlessness; thrift, shiftlessness; virtue, vice; faith, skepticism; obedience, defiance; contentment, rebellion. Of course; they are but men and women of like passions with others. But their horizon is apparently fixed. They do have the longing to see the world, and they emigrate to distant lands; a favorite subject of their stage is the return of the native, all sophisticated by contact with baser civilizations. Yet the local patriotism, the devotion to the village, the valley, the encircling hills, the stream and wild-wood, to the birds, beasts, and flowers, to the life of the community—this somehow absorbs all that is strongest,

throws off only the freaks and the contaminated, surely and safely preserves legend, tradition, faith, and institutions. It is a social phenomenon of the highest interest and importance that in the Western world of unrest, of change, of progress, of unbelief, of agnosticism, unnumbered communities have survived in a contented equilibrium which reproduces the past in the present, scrutinizing with hostile eye all encroachment of the new and accepting only what is profitable to the stability of existing things. Yet this is almost accurately the fact relating to the peasant communities of western Europe, in particular to those of the Bavarian and Tyrolean mountain valleys, and especially in regard to the community of Oberammergau. Considerations of this kind afford what is of course a rapid and surface delineation of social character; but so much at least is essential to a comprehension of the Passion Play as given to-day. In all the elaborate performance there is as little self-consciousness, as little self-display, as little sophistication, as can be conceived to exist in human beings who are very superior and gifted in a way which is not the way of the great world.

Their economic conditions appear quite as self-contained as their social state. The shops, of course, display goods such as are elsewhere seen: manufactured articles, stuffs, foods, apparel, and ornaments which must be produced by modern industrial methods to be as cheap and good as they are. But, on the other hand, there is every form of cottage industry—spinning, weaving, dyeing, tailoring, tanning, shoemaking; all the trades are represented, and in the way of producing export wares the people are far advanced. They are expert wood-carvers, makers of violins, guitars, and zithers; workers in horn and leather, clockmakers, distillers, artificers in hair, pompons, and feathers. With women and children in the field, men and boys plying their trades in the village, with the old of both sexes occupied in household work, such a community is for much of the time a veritable ant-hill, a phylanstery, a closed economic unity, as far as self-sufficiency may go.

The preparations and arrangements for the Passion Play are extremely complex. There are at least three hundred performers, for all of whom there are dressers,

wardrobe-keepers, wig-makers, and barbers; there is an orchestra; there are ushers, ticket sellers and takers, firemen, police—all the paraphernalia of a vast house seating four thousand persons and of a stage which utterly surpasses all others in size and complexity. All this work, literally all, is done in the valley and by its inhabitants. They do all the incensation and designing; they cut, sew, and fit the costumes; they frame all the metal and tinsel work; they paint and move the curtains, scenery, and decorative plants; they inspect and assign the fifteen hundred beds in hundreds of lodgings; print the tickets, distribute them, collect and manage the funds; there is no help whatever from without. About six hundred persons, all told, are engaged in the completed work. What would seem miraculous, except for considerations already given, is this, moreover: that all the artistic training is done at home—absolutely all. This training is admirable and incredible except to eye-witnesses. There are style, finish, smoothness, and at times genius in the performance. Genius must have its environment, and the environment is produced by the hearty, unselfish co-operation of friends and neighbors under the strict rule of another friend and neighbor, who is relentless in his requirements.

The name of Ludwig Lang deserves special mention. Revered at home, it is hardly known abroad. Somewhat past middle life, he is a true elder-man, coming of a stock than which none in this old community is older. In the connection are Italian given names, so there may be Italian blood in his veins. During the premediaeval times and throughout them the great, and almost the only, frequented highway between the Italian and Germanic peoples was the gloomy, mysterious Berner Klause, the Brenner Pass, whose northern entrance at Innsbruck is less than fifty miles distant. Through it some Roman strain may have trickled over into the upper Gau or intervalle of the river Ammer. This possibility is, of course, remote, and may account, though suggestive, for nothing at all. Ludwig Lang has traveled little, probably not farther than Munich, two hours distant by rail, but he is the principal of the local industrial school and by avocation a careful student of

Italian art. A man of pith and native distinction, he is strong, gentle, beloved. The hidden spring of all movement in the Passion Play, his is the discipline of steel in a glove of velvet.

The pictures of long ago show the theater as a structure of boards with a stage and background destitute of all scenic effect, except the marvelous setting of the everlasting mountains, the Alpine slopes, the dark, mysterious forests. The seats were benches rising in tiers; all, like the stage, open to the sky. To-day the stage is a vast and solid platform about four times the width of the proscenium in an ordinary theater; at right and left are colonnades through which the chorus enter in two divisions to form a line across the broad front just above the orchestra, which is low and out of the line of vision. In the middle of the platform and back some thirty feet is a covered and gabled structure containing a well-appointed stage. In the pediment is a fresco in *grisaille* of the Saviour bidding little children to come unto him. The screen has a tripartite division, in each portion of which is a well-executed copy of Michael Angelo figures, Moses and the Prophets. This screen is moved by a mechanism which divides it crossways, dropping the lower and lifting the upper half, thus discovering a curtain that separates vertically and is drawn to both sides. Abutting the right colonnade is a classic staircase, balcony, and house, representing the palace of the high priest; similarly to the left is that of Pilate; between these respective structures and the stage proper are two broad city streets reaching to the back of the deep platform, which is represented as the various buildings of Jerusalem were supposed by the artist to look. Disposed artistically on either side the stage and over the mimic walls are palms, vines, and other decorative foliage plants. In the course of the performance all visible portions of this vast platform are used for entrances, exits, the grouping of masses, the harangues of dignitaries, the speeches of Pilate, the aimless passing of idlers—in short, for the environment of the main action. Except for the roof over the stage, employed cleverly with the side scenes for the production of artificial light effects, all else is open to the sky.

The spectators are under cover in a structure like a train-shed in modern railway stations. All the best seats up the middle tier, perhaps half, are numbered, reserved, and high-priced. Front, back, and side seats appear to be open to the first comers who have paid the small entrance fee. There are two regular performances weekly from June to September, but so vast is the throng which makes its pilgrimage to the scene that it is necessary to give a complete repetition on almost every following day, so that there are virtually four every week, and the weekly attendance, therefore, is not far from sixteen thousand persons; the total number attending this year was about a hundred thousand. The audiences are drawn, of course, from the ends of the earth, and there is a babel of tongues as they enter to take their seats at eight in the morning, and again after the dinner interval of two hours from twelve to two; when, at six, the end is reached, the interchange of talk and the expression of emotion is in itself an extraordinary experience, for all conventions are dissipated in the strange emotional exhaustion which supervenes. The place is easily reached, the great crowd as easily separates, returning to narrate throughout Christendom, and in heathen lands as well, with mingled feeling and inadequate word, the features of scenes rare and unique.

Like the representation, the text of the choruses and the spoken lines is a growth. Influences of every sort have been brought to bear upon it; as it stands it is singularly evangelical. Nothing but the harmony of the Evangelists has been introduced; the tale of the events antecedent and subsequent to the Passion, all the Old Testament scenes which foreshadow the one great exception to the course of nature, are set forth in a German which bears exactly the same relation to the nation and its life as does that of the King James version to those who speak English. The language is grave, sedate, pregnant, simple, and you seem to be listening to the recital of the Scriptures.

A wonderful priest, Joseph Alois Daisenberger, born in 1799, near by at Oberau, but chiefly active throughout his long life of eighty-four years at Oberammergau, where he died, is chiefly responsible for

all this. Weiss, an earlier monk, had secured the abolition of the rhymed and trivial interpolations which marred the story; the present form is due to this latest collaborator. Faithfully using the earlier texts, and being broad-minded and scholarly, he was yet profoundly versed in the Bible and Bible German. The fact is manifest throughout, and to a Protestant the language naturally sounds Lutheran. But it is in no sense directly so, and bigotry may well learn the lesson of Christian catholicity from such a fact.

The accompanying instrumental music was written about a hundred years since by Rochus Dedler, a village schoolmaster who was a genius inspired for his task, and is throughout a gentle accompaniment heightening the effect, never monopolizing the attention. Its emotional quality follows closely and broadens that of the text; it is consequently minor, tender, and for the most part low-pitched throughout. Yet it is never despairing, and at times the stupendous victory which is to be the climax is subtly indicated. The final bursts do not, of course, meet the demands of ecstatic expectancy, but they are gently triumphant.

Strictly speaking, the Passion Play is not a play at all, not even a religious drama; it is a series of pictures represented by living men, women, children, and animals, with all necessary accessories of costume and scenery. Some of these pictures have no action, but represent a painting or colored relief; in some the figures move and speak in such a way as to change the grouping, give effect to the representation, and renew the interest. The little action there is displays events so familiar that they are long anticipated before occurring, and hence all possible dramatic effect is eliminated. Even the pictures follow so closely the great paintings of the Renaissance that the mind is intent rather on the wonder of reproduction than on fidelity to life. The whole panorama moves sedately, with neither haste nor rest, and, long as the divisions are, there is a sense of quiet, almost holy, calm throughout; no one on the stage seems impatient for the end, no one displays excitement other than at times sad emotion. Simply, pervasively, persuasively, type and antetype, scene

after scene from the Testaments, Old and New, all the majesty of humility, the naturalness of peasant, fisher, and artisan grouped under a quiet, forceful leadership, the beauty of material rites that pass to be replaced by spiritual rites that endure, the falsehood of rotten institutions, the guilt of the Pharisee, the vacillation of the Roman, the condemnation and execution of the innocent, the sorrows of family and friends—one by one all these go forward so skillfully, so smoothly, so as a developed history, that the critical faculty is not once awakened. The chorus is deployed, chants the explanatory preface, breaks ranks, and marches off each time, to reappear again and again and again for the same plaint and evolution, and the onlooker has no sense of artificiality. The curtain rises and displays the wonderful complex picture of the antetype, one sometimes, sometimes two; it falls; from colonnade, porch, gallery, doors, streets, or alleys move persons of all ages in perfect costume, repeat their lines, perform their actions, while the low music rolls up from beneath, and then with dignified grace they all disappear, you scarcely know how or when, and the Scriptures have become real.

Of course it is quite impossible to assume the mental and spiritual attitude of utterly negative and unprejudiced observation at such a time. Hence there are many, very many, who cannot appreciate the Christ, amazing as is the dignity of Anton Lang; nor can they well endure the agonizing realistic scenes of imprisonment, scourging, torture, cross-bearing, and crucifixion; or the descent, or the entombment, both of which are managed with consummate art. The resurrection scene, the appearance to the women and the disciples, and the miraculous ending are wisely and skillfully made very brief, for any attempt to exhibit the supernatural must of course disappoint even the most disciplined expectation. Hence the final effect upon most, even the least emotional, is a sense of gladness that the message of the Passion has been once thus given and received; but there is also a feeling that never again, with the experience once had, would it be desirable to repeat that experience. There might be friction and jars in the soul, a preknowledge and

anticipation of worldly device and artifice, which would vitiate the pious impression as a whole—given, as intended to be given, with the style of the temple and the church, and not at all with that of the theater; reverently, and at times ecstatically.

Three considerations emerge from the aftermath of such emotions. The first is the simplicity, continuity, and humanity of the Gospel tale as there told and represented. Whatever view may be taken of Bible inspiration, there yet remains such concomity in the narratives of the evangel as to bring forth a story which convinces by internal evidence, profoundly moves the will to believe, and proves conclusively that the Passion narrative is either a miracle of falsehood or a miracle of grace, an exception utterly to natural law within finite knowledge—that is, of known limits. If it be a tissue or mosaic of lies, human powers have not elsewhere invented nor human ingenuity constructed such a masterpiece of deception. The representation carries the beholder out of the desert of pure reason, exhibits the pragmatism of the exception, and so combines sense, mind, and spirit perceptions that for a time the analytic is superseded by the synthetic procedure of the entire and conjoined man or woman.

Another consideration is the vanity of history as written even by inspired authors without something—puppet, actor, scene, imagined or designed, creative form and movement—wherewith to replace the times and the peoples that are gone. Alas! of all the past, the only reality which remains is the place. And even that, what is it now? Fields drained and tilled where once were swamps and forests; smiling harvests where once there were heaped corpses on a decisive battlefield; ruined keeps ivy-covered and bat-tenanted, where once were the hearthstones of a rising civilization. The years of adventure, of faith, of invention; the periods of social construction and statecraft; the ages of hope, the dreams of Utopias—all have marched away into the limbo—and with them the men and women who animated them. So here in Oberammergau, the place is reconstructed, boldly, rudely, but sufficiently, and man, woman, child, garbed in ways that stimulate the imagination, that suggest and make partly real the read or

spoken narrative, produce in eye and mind and heart a kind of reality which is very novel and very helpful. There is just enough. There are no wigs, nor rouge, nor facial make-up; just the plain people with their own hair grown long and the costume each wears so comfortably; no footlights, just the sky and cloud (and often rain), the natural foliage and surrounding air. In some scenes several hundred appear, so walking, talking, and grouping themselves that art is lost in nature. This is possibly the greatest achievement of the representation. Many remember when a German princelet emerged from obscurity and earned considerable renown by the mastery of half the number in mob, or legislative gathering, or procession, upon his grand-ducal stage.

Then there are certain parts the interpretation of which is most illuminating. Tradition, for example, has permeated Christendom with a concept of Judas which is so black that the processes of his fall have been utterly obscured and the lesson of the tale entirely lost. Johann Zwink gives us the whole sequence: the man he represents is a careful, anxious manager of the little sodality; shrewd to get and keep money in their purse; a careful student of income and expenditure. So anxious does he become that the purpose of his life, of the union among disciples, of his Master's mission, is lost in the consideration of ways and means. Finally avarice chokes every generous impulse and awakens doubt as to this wonderful but mysterious Jesus who might be the Messiah, as he, like his people, had imagined the Christ to be; yet, with every power at his disposal, the Master prefers poverty and humility. The incident of the precious ointment brings matters to a crisis; such a reception given by his leader to wild extravagance, and besides the vague suggestion of defeat and death! It is time to leave the sinking enterprise and look out for number one. The betrayal does not come with such an awful shock as has been expected. But the unexpected, the terrible consequences—martyrdom and death—produce remorse and despair and suicide. Somehow the lesson of hideous danger that lies in weakness, in the exaggeration of petty virtue into great vice, has

been brought home with awful solemnity, and every beholder realizes the embryo of Judas in himself.

Other remarkable instances of interpretation are the institution of the Lord's Supper; the demeanor, policy, and feebleness of Pilate; the deliberations of the Sanhedrim; and the smug self-sufficiency of the Pharisee. Interpretation, however, does not seem to come from the conscious effort of the cast, singly or collectively; it comes without observation by the force of events following each other in their order, and the events so fully elaborated suffice to carry their own meaning. That this is very high art no one could deny, but it is not artifice. Seeing these people in their homes, on the streets, before and after the performance, they are in no way distinguished from their fellow-townsmen except that the men appear strange by their long hair; and at the close of the season, in September, there is such a falling of that as furnishes much relief and some mirth. As yet the participants seem altogether unsophisticated, entirely unconscious of self, free from vainglory, and not desirous to shine.

There is much talk of the commercialism which many declare is insidiously creeping in. Tourist managers have possession of transportation and lodging, earning vast sums for themselves, stimulating profane curiosity throughout the Western world, and creating false ideas of value in modest homes. There is said to be a special contract for the repetitions in case the auditorium overflows in any one of the thirty days of regular performance, and these perfunctory repetitions are thought to injure the spontaneity of the real presentations by the weariness of the participants. Photography has run riot, and, by a monopoly, shop windows far and near in Europe are filled with the permanent and fixed and conscious expression of sentiment which should be momentary. It would be a climax if heed should be given by these very human mountaineers to the dazzling offers made by theatrical managers for production in foreign lands. As yet piety and sincerity hold the field; the community seems to understand that intelligent opinion would condemn any further commercialization as degradation, if not blasphemy.

A KINDLY JOURNEY

BY JACOB A. RIIS

THE very day before we sailed from home the mail brought me an inquiry from the Massachusetts official bird man as to the starling that gave an unexpected turn to our journey. For the starling, as readers of *The Outlook* know, is my friend, and in his query whether he is a desirable immigrant, or one to be barred out, I read a latent desire to find out something to his disadvantage. Possibly it was just scientific impartiality, but one's boyhood friendships are not to be intrusted to so cold a thing. So I registered a vow that my first business in Denmark, where no one dare raise his hands against the starling, save only from July 1 to August 19, when cherries are ripe, and then only in the gardens where they grow, should be to subpoena witnesses for him. And I did. I call as my star witness Mrs. Sofie Rostrup, who is the State's consulting authority on diseases of plants caused by the ravages of insects. This is her testimony: The gardener looks askance at the starling because of his liking for cherries and currants; the farmer hails him as one of his best friends because he likes grubs and bugs still better. To specify: the hideous long-legged mosquito that is five times as large as the one that stings, whatever may be its name—that one as a grub feeds on the roots of grasses, so that there will be no top for the cow to eat. Also that other bug which we as children caught and turned over on its back to see it spring into the air with a smart click and right itself—I found out the Latin name of that one, *Elater*. The grub of that is one of the Danish farmer's worst enemies, and, were it not for the starling, would eat him out of house and home. There are others. The starling is no crank. A grub is a grub to him, in Denmark or in America. Mrs. Rostrup's testimony is confirmed without reserve by Inspector Winge, of the Copenhagen Zoölogical Museum. Testimony for the starling poured in upon me from all sides. A farmer who each year houses hundreds of starlings wrote that in the plowing season they practically make an end of

the June-bug pest before it takes wing. "Grubs of all kinds they bring home," he wrote, "three or four on each trip, and, as they forage all day long while the young are in the nest and are rarely over three or four minutes away from the box, you can judge for yourself of the pestilent swarms they intercept in field and garden."

Think of a flock of starlings doing business with the seventeen-year locust when it emerges from its long sleep, as tempting as a soft-shell crab, and let the starling be hailed friend and brother in Massachusetts as in Denmark. There they build him houses, with a peg at his hole to sit and whistle on. For they like his jovial, neighborly ways, though he leaves them in winter; while with us he has apparently made up his mind to stay—our only singing bird in the long months of frost. But if one is so dead set on cherries that no bird song can make up for them, Mrs. Rostrup's advice is good: build him boxes in the field and meadow, hang them on the trees there, not in garden or on house. You will still hear his even-song in the tree-tops, when the setting sun gilds them. When you have listened to that till you understand, you will forget all about the cherries.

Was it giving an old friend a lift that lent a kindly touch to our goings and comings and doings abroad all summer? For what sowing is there in the world that grows a more bounteous crop than friendship? The Old Town received us with open arms. The best rooms in the inn were ours. I nearly wept when I saw them. To make room for the new wing they had torn down the classic home of Saxo's translator, Anders Sørensen Vedel, the sixteenth-century parson who on Good Friday rounded the children up in his study and, to give them a realizing sense of the bitterness of the Passion, thrashed them until their shrieks drowned the clangor of the church-bells across the way. The rooks in the tower seemed to mock their misery with reminiscent caws even then. Ah, well, the world moves after all, and not only in the realm of theology—Christianity, they called that in