

## BY WAY OF OBERAMMERGAU

CLEAR as a picture the play stood out. Its divine and human pathos cut the September air. The immense crowd was hushed. It was strange, this stillness and awe in so vast and modern a throng. The reason was not far to seek. For, from the first solemn moment when the Greek chorus was seen slowly taking possession of the stage, and the grave and gentle figure of Anton Lang stood forward as Coryphaeus to address the audience priestlike, there was one all-pervading impression. It might not mean the same to all, yet it was a play which *concerned* those present. Not merely a great human drama, fit as those of Shakespeare or Greek or German to evoke the Catharsis and lose the rapt soul in a sea of beauty and wonder. Such plays are valued for their power, not for their essence, nor for any fact they pre-suppose. Here, all knew that something was portrayed which claimed the undying gratitude and the deepest reverence of each man and woman.

Impressions, no doubt, were of the vaguest. We would not care to answer for the number of those in the audience whose beliefs exactly coincided with those of the actors. Yet, though the logical conclusion and the gift of Faith might be lacking, there were, at least, many Pilates—(Pilate as he is portrayed in this play, lovable before, pitiable after his great weakness)—many who felt that here they had to do with One who was more than other men, One for whom the vague word 'divine' had been waiting through the dawn of history, to alight in the fulness of time upon this Elect of men.

Surely the atmosphere of drama was never so perfect. From the Greek the play takes its human pathos. its poise and serenity; from Christian fact that which

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lifts it into a higher realm. Everything is tense, though dignified. Everything is leading up to a great climax, and the conviction that this is so, is continually encouraged by the solemn appearances of the chorus, who point out in touching song each stage on the road to sacrifice.

For those of the Faith the occasion is made the more real by the morning Mass at the village Church. There the reality has been enacted swiftly and surely, as it is done amongst us. Now, those same men and women whom we saw worship with us will enact slowly, by successive stages, that which once happened in Jerusalem and which daily comes into our lives.

We are held spellbound by the chorus whilst the mighty prelude is evoked, and the theme is sung of man's first disobedience and of Love divine unspeakable.

Despite his now inferior part, there was something so striking about Anton Lang in the Prologue that one may almost speak of him as still the central figure of the play. And to those at least who saw him in the past, he will remain the Christus who was as ideal a bearer of the name as could be asked of mere man. From the eyes of this man shines out so striking and exceptionally Christlike a spirit, one which through years of this so vivid meditation has identified itself so closely with that of the Master, that to see and hear him is to experience something of the very personality, of the 'unspeakable glance' which John Inglesant caught in the hut and which is the reward and encouragement of the Christian. Indeed, Anton Lang was nobly inspired in his conception of his apostolate. To play the Christ, he says, is the highest human privilege to which a layman can aspire.

There is a need, surely, for more such living portraiture to-day. Not that we intend to sermonise, or to do more than refer to the foremost and most vital of

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such portraits of Christ, those living in His Church, Christ living in the Christian. But human nature requires, too, the purely pictorial stimulus of sense, the literal features and embodiment of the Saviour, brought down reverently even, on occasion, to the novel and the screen. This has been done already, and the subject is so delicate that we would not advocate its frequent repetition. But, since there have been recent appearances of Christ in such media, we would insist that, when it can reverently be done, the true Christ of Catholic tradition should appear, not, for instance, the Modernistic Christ, so beautiful up to a certain point, of Mr. Oxenham's 'Hidden Years.' For it is imperative that He be presented as Oberammergau presents Him, in the full clarity of Catholic tradition. The most truly human, the most sympathetic and winning of the sons of men has above all within Him the fire of the Divinity, the superhuman strength and majesty of the nature of God which He shares in the most literal sense with the Father. Only this sound blend will irresistibly and permanently touch the human heart and bring into ready allegiance the human mind,

*'Tibi se cor meum totum subjicit,  
quia te contemplans totum deficit.'*

That is the mightiest Christian apologetic, the Person of Christ, as His Church shows Him faithfully throughout the ages. And that is why 'other Christs' have failed, the 'gentle Jesus' of Revivalist hymns, the harsh Jansenistic caricature refusing to embrace the world, the Strong Man, emasculated of divinity, of Modernist fiction. No, it is the Christ of the Church, of Catholic fullness Who will draw all things to Himself, Who will attract to His Person the children of Light and multiply them. At Oberammergau the confession of divinity is wrung from us. It is the

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logical sequence for any who witness the play—if the Father draw them.

A glowing, harmonious picture of many colours, in which the Old Law is woven into the New, in which the ancient world meets the modern in Christ, where every detail of the Passion has its striking figure in the history of Israel—this it is that presents to the cosmopolitan crowd an unique challenge, that of God asking for man's interest, for his recognition, and that solely out of the purest goodness to man.

Often has it been remarked that this world of ours is like that which the Messiah knew. Never since then have there been so many vague wonderings about divinity, about gods and God, about the meaning of life. Many Pilates there are, complete with wives, who sense the divine, half in superstition, half in quest of a Truth they cannot even define. To such as these, placed in a less awkward position than Pilate, the most convincing proof is the fact of the God-Man Himself. 'Surely,' says unprejudiced common-sense, 'this man was the Son of God!'

What else could He have been? Of course, the word 'God' will be subjected to other interpretations . . . . Let us translate it into such tongues, without irreverence, and test the equations. 'The Son of a Life Force' . . . . a product of evolution. Then why, for heaven's sake, be so retrograde and point back to so inferior a Father, as Christ continually does? Or perhaps 'The Son of the Unknowable' . . . . Then why claim to make Him knowable? as again it was His foremost object to do. And so on. But the Gospels are too simple, the life of Christ too direct, to find room for such complications and twistings.

If Christ, indeed, is but the supreme manifestation of human perfection, what an unscientific, arrested development does He not argue for the race since His time! Why is it that well-nigh all the world, whatever

its views of His nature and claims, looks back wistfully at this Man as at the highest point that humanity has ever reached, as, at least, 'Our tainted nature's solitary boast?'

It is because He is something more. No wonder that those who are set on not accepting the conclusion have begun to give up the premiss, and to question the moral values on which rested the universal admiration of Jesus.

The play, then, at Oberammergau rests on Reality, not merely on fact, but on the supreme Reality. It discloses the full sense of life, where our other plays seek out partial aspects. Great, we know, are the comings and goings of men to see plays which probe ever more penetratingly into the entrails of life. Here, in a sweep, is outlined the whole meaning thereof. The mysteries of history and of human nature are lit by a ray from above, showing one clear thread running through them. The mystery of evil lies open, in its essence. That which brought 'sin into the world and all our woe' is met upon its own ground. It is not fantastically removed from the world, as *we* might have had the great Designer do; far more wondrous is the tale. Nature runs her course, Evil is faced boldly and its sting drawn out by the only One whom it could never treat as its plaything, though it mock Him and leer upon Him and break Him. 'What have we to do with thee, Jesus of Nazareth?' The cry is defiant, venomous and sulky. But the accent that predominates is that of distress and fear. Goodness made flesh has conquered. '*Noctem lux eliminat.*'

To-day the sad shadows of a lost Eden still lie long and sinister over the earth. Men are persuaded, against their will, that something is wrong with the world, with human nature, deeply and radically, that the beauty of life is veiled and saddened by something unknown and dark. Nowhere has a key been found

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to fit the lock except that proffered by the Catholic Church.

Man has sinned. Evil has stolen into God's creation. Nay, it was already there, the fruit of an earlier revolt against Him, hovering over the earth for a chance to seduce His other creatures. But, *o felix culpa!* the other side of the picture is beyond belief, and it is at such places as Oberammergau that it comes home with greatest force. Crushing and stupendous as are the first tender scenes of the divine drama, Bethlehem, Nazareth, that comely hidden youth and those three years of doing good, they pale before the climax. In the Cross is found the sum total of Christ, in His Passion alone is seen to the full the working out of the paradox, the fight against evil, the apparent utter failure, the deep-lying triumph; God hath reigned from the tree.

Over the stage at Oberammergau there roll scenes covering the entire field of human hopes and fears. The soft plastic stillness of figure and prophecy is broken of a sudden by the acclamations of Palm Sunday. A magnificent burst of praise and song brings the Messiah into His city. Then, in sharp contrast, the awful majesty of the cleansing of the Temple, the plottings of the priests, the parting at Bethany, the scene laid for the tragedy. Ever serene, yet tense with action, the chorus unfolds figure after figure before each step. A foretaste of the wonder in store is given by the Manna and the Grapes. At the Supper it dawns on the audience with what kind of love God loved the world. Then, after a hush of deepest recollection, the action rushes on, Evil takes the field.

Treachery and misery from the history of God's people are unfolded, the Saviour hastens to fulfil the types like a giant on his course. Something is left to the imagination. In the partially open stage the weirdness of that dreadful night is robbed of its darkness.

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But the lighting effects within the inner scene are excellent and something is conveyed of the atmosphere of those sunny and noisy spring streets on the morning of Good Friday.

The play succeeds in being natural. The throngs are alive, the actors are intensely real. Caiphas and Annas and Pilate are living men exceedingly varied and interesting in their psychology. They are not stiff, hieratic figures labelled bad or good, not wholly evil men, not even Judas, for what living man ever was? But they provide convincing lessons of what really does happen, of the human being, with his potentialities for good and evil, gradually yielding to the bad. Each taken in his weakest point, the High Priests in their pride and fanaticism, Pilate in his fear, Judas, in his avarice, they are all drawn into the scheme of the powers of darkness.

Beautifully juxtaposed are the despair of Judas and the sorrow of Peter, whose words might be used with profit as an act of contrition. So deep and true is this simple play, even in the English translation, that it might be used as an admirable aid to meditation on the Gospel narrative.

The shocking reality of what happened strikes you at Oberammergau as it never does in a book. Few will forget the realism, all the more gripping for its restraint, of the mockery before Herod, of the soldiers' dreadful fooling, of the way of the Cross.

When speculations and learned disquisitions are said and done, in this supreme tragedy and glory, as in all human life, the shock of Reality is what rings truest. One despairs of doing justice to such scenes. Join your thoughts on the Passion to some very painful element of reality in your own life, and you will grasp something of their meaning.

ALFONSO DE ZULUETA.