

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWSTHE OBERAMMergau PASSION
PLAY.

By Ulster Pat.

When the Saviour hung upon the stake, about the space of three hours, the sun's light failed, and His sufferings were hidden from the sight of men. When He yielded up His spirit the earth did quake, and the rocks were rent.

"But in these latter days this awful tragedy is made a spectacle for the curious, and actually men think they do God service by turning it into a 'play.'" I have heard frequent references to, but have read no description of the Ober-Ammergau Passion Play until last week a page of the United States *Sunday School Times* was placed in my hands, and therein I found a description and commendation of the play, written by a Doctor of Divinity, and an endorsement thereof by the Editor. It is told that in the year 1633 the "black death" raged fearfully in all the region round about Ober-Ammergau. The community was appalled, and in their deep distress called upon the Lord to stay the plague—for Christ's sake? No; but in consideration of their vowing to "perform His passion every ten years" From that day—the day of Simon and Jude?—(why the reverend doctor omitted the S.S. which would indicate that these were specially canonised saints I am at a loss to conjecture. The omission is quite out of keeping with his tale, "no further death ensued." And from that day to this the honest peasants of Ober-Ammergau have faithfully carried out their part of the bargain. In other words, they have merited the blessing they then received, and no doubt those which have since been granted them—for do not "the preparation for the play make large demands upon their time?" "As early as the autumn preceding the decennial year, . . . no worldly entertainment, no dance, no secular concert, nor athletic games are allowed." Dr. Dickie evidently regards this as exceptional self denial. But to me it appears a worldly wise bargain. The Romanist observes Lent forty days in every year, and obtains little praise, doubtless because his abstinences come so frequently that the world has grown accustomed to them. Ten forties make four hundred days in the decade, to say nothing of the other fast days. These peasants abstain from worldly amusements say fifteen months, and then are it would seem, free to indulge during eight years and nine months. True, the Romanist may participate in athletic games during Lent, but he is debarred from the theatre and may not indulge in amateur plays even for the good of the church or "to the praise and glory of God's great name," while these peasants have the pleasure of either performing or witnessing this marvellous spectacle, and the presence of admiring crowds of profitable visitors, all through their Lent.

"The Passion Play acts as a great power making for righteousness. Sin a sin, stain your name, and you shut yourself out from taking part." I assume that this impenitibility continues only during the period of preparation for and performance of the play, for if dancing and other worldly entertainment is sinful then it can not surely be holy during the other years. That to play the part of Christ or John or Mary is an honour surpassing all worldly honours is, we are told, an idea inculcated in the home, emphasized in the school, hallowed in the teachings of the church, and sealed with the authority of the state, and we are given a description of the Christ-likeness of those who portray the Saviour and Mary, and "poor Judas," who is represented "not as a monster of iniquity, but as a man of like passions as we are." And who will wonder at this leniency in depicting him when

one reads that the Mary of the play is daughter of the man who takes the rôle of betrayer.

But enough—perchance more than enough—description. Let us return to the question, what is this spectacle by which the Christians are "edified and strengthened," by which the lukewarm receive the seeds of a better life, and "the Good Shepherd seeks and receives His lost sheep." It is a representation—an enactment of that tragedy of tragedies, the consummation of Satan's wrath against God and man. And as it was then, so now, those who are placed in or have assumed the position of teachers and shepherds—prove blind leaders, bringing destruction upon those whom they have promised to instruct and edify in the service of God. The Holy Spirit has given us four pen pictures of the Saviour from His birth to His ascension, including His passion, and yet a doctor of divinity can write and a Sunday School paper can print, the assertion that neither preacher nor commentary "ever set the Redeemer so worthily before me as did these peasants." At Golgotha the hearts of those who loved Christ were wrung by the spectacle; the pagan soldiers were impressed with awe at His majesty, but those who rejected Him mocked and were hardened. How could the reproduction of the tragedy by fallen men be more efficacious than was the real? At Golgotha men railed; at Ober-Ammergau, we are assured, "even the most irreligious must needs be dumb." The crucifixion was "an offence". At Ober-Ammergau "all offence was taken away, and one came into sympathy with it and was quite borne along." "The entire play was like going to church where the priest is not heard." Alas yes. It is Golgotha without the Victim of High Priest. But if He be not heard, what bring His followers there? Whenever they do not hear the Shepherd's voice the sheep should not stray.

If we are warranted in witnessing a rehearsal of the crucifixion of the Saviour as an elevating, spiritualizing agency, why object to moving pictures of prize-fights and murders? Why not, on the contrary, give exhibitions of hangings? They would be less blasphemous, and quite as "elevating", especially if the victims were represented as "meeting their fate like men." It would be easy to represent them as repentant, and the attending pastor could "make a prayer" calculated to convey lessons to the erring; or the victim might speak to the assembled multitude words of warning and instruction. And thereby many who cannot afford to cross the ocean might be reached. If not, why not?

JOHN RUSKIN'S BIBLES.

By SUE W. HETHERINGTON

Perhaps no one outside of the Christian ministry read his Bible more constantly and made better use of its truths than John Ruskin. His works bear traces on nearly every page that the phraseology, incidents, parables and imagery of the sacred Scriptures were wrought in the very tissue of his mental being. The last paragraph in "Queen's Gardens," the second lecture of the most popular of his books, *Sesame and Lilies*, is a perfect mosaic of Bible passages. The account given by himself in *Præterita* and *Fors Clavigera* of the way in which he gained this knowledge has been so often quoted that it is familiar to all.

Among the cherished treasures of this great writer, kept at Brantwood, his last home near Coniston Lake, is a collection of the Bibles he used at different times in his life.

One day in August, 1873, Ruskin, busy writing one of his letters to working men, opened his oldest Bible to verify

the wording of a passage he had just quoted. "It is," he says, "a small, closely but very neatly printed volume, yellow now with age; and flexible, but not unclean, with much use, except that the lower corners of the pages at eight of First Kings and thirty-second of Deuteronomy, are worn somewhat thin and dark, the learning of these two chapters having cost me much pain. My mother's list of the chapters with which she established my soul in life has just fallen out of it.

He then gives the list and thus comments upon the knowledge thus acquired: "Though I have picked up the elements of a little further knowledge and owe much to the teaching of other people, this property of chapters from the Bible placed in my mind by my mother, I count very confidently the most precious and on the whole, the one essential part of my education."

The other pages in this book, which still bear the marks of his little fingers, are those containing the 119th psalm, of which he thus writes in *Fors Clavigera* in 1875: "It is strange that of all the pieces of the Bible which my mother thus taught me that which cost me most to learn and which to my childish mind was most repulsive, has now become of all the most precious to me in its overflowing and glorious passion of love for the law of God. 'O, how I love thy law! it is my meditation all the day.'"

It was Ruskin's habit to write thoughts suggested by the passage on the margin of the Bible he was reading, and his father's Bible, used by John in later days, is thus annotated. The most valuable ancient manuscripts in his possession were not too sacred for these notes, and the margins of many precious ones are penciled with the overflows of his active mind as he read the sacred text.

A grand Old Testament in Greek M.S., the back lettered the tenth century, but with 1643 dimly seen printed off from the last leaf, Ruskin read and freely wrote upon its margins. He did the same with a Greek Psalter, and still more fully, and in ink, in his most valuable tenth-century Greek gospels.

How precious those notes become to the student who wishes to trace Ruskin's return from the agnostic attitude of his middle life to the firm faith and piety of his age. "For he who wants to get at Ruskin's mind," says his biographer, Collingwood, "will find it there. John 15. 9, was the help and life he found."

He was accustomed to read his Latin Bibles also. His library contained one in three volumes, purple morocco, printed in 1541. He owned, too, many thirteenth and fourteenth century Bibles and Psalters and Missals. The one he prized the most is known as King Hakon's Bible, from a reference on the fly leaf to King Hakon V of Norway.

When traveling he carried with him various little testaments. In his bed-room for reading on wakeful nights he had a Bible in six volumes, one, the Apocrypha, bearing marks of frequent notes and pencillings. At the close of his life he read a large-typed Bible, or had it read to him constantly, up to his death. Very few helps to Bible reading were in his library. The plain Bible text was the book he read and studied through his long life, and he knew it as few of this generation know it.

"Once in his rooms at Oxford," says Collingwood, "I remember getting into a difficulty about some passage. 'Haven't you a concordance?' I asked. 'I'm ashamed to say I have,' Ruskin replied. I did not quite understand him.

"Well," he explained, "you and I oughtn't to need a concordance."