

## THE CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST.

There has not, so far as we are aware, (says the Huddersfield Examiner,) been any attempt made to produce in this country anything like the Passion Play at Oberammergau, but the Rev. James F. Downes, of St. Patrick's Church, Bradford, and formerly of St. Patrick's, Huddersfield, has written a medieval mystery play with the above title, the music to which he has also composed. As the circular forwarded states, it is "built much upon the lines of the Oberammergau Passion Play, although far from equalling that famous mystery play in the length of time condensed in the performance or in the number of persons employed." The play consists of six short acts, with a grand tableau at the conclusion, illustrating the kingship of the Infant Christ; and most of the acts are preceded by a procession of choristers, supposed to represent the men of Carmel. All the characters in the play are taken by persons, we should say, under twenty years of age, as their innocence best accords with the sacred personages portrayed. The characters represented are, among others: Our Blessed Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saints Joseph, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, Angel of Annunciation, the Kings of the East, Holy Simeon, High Priest, Anna, the Prophets; Shepherds, Elders in the Temple; Robbers, including Titus (impenitent thief), Desnias (penitent thief), Angels, attendants, and others. The dialogue is written in a style so plain and simple that almost the youngest may understand, and it embraces the leading incidents in the infant life of Christ, up to the point of His disputing with the Doctors in the Temple, and His Kingship in the tableau at the conclusion. The hymns which are sung by the chorus of Carmelites are taken from various sources, and these and some other portions of the play have received a musical setting in Father Downes's best vein. The finale chorus, which is in the nature of a song of triumph, is particularly meritorious. The music is written for two piano-fortes and harmonium.

With the view of aiding in an effort to reduce the debt on the splendid new schools erected in Rebecca street, off St. Thomas' road, West-gate, Bradford, known as the Scranton Memorial Schools, a series of performances were arranged to be given in the large room of the schools. It is a large and handsome room, and at one end of it a large stage—the largest in the town after the theatres. The fittings have been done by a first class stage manager; and the room is so arranged that, when not required for other purposes, the stage part can be screened off and utilized as a class-room. The room is excellently adapted for a performance of stage plays, except that it has not a sloping floor, and with the present styles of headgear in force it is difficult for everyone to see clearly what is transporting on the stage.

The first performance was given last week, in the large room, before a fairly large audience, which will doubtless increase when the merits of the play and the performance are fully known. Precisely at eight o'clock the two pianists, the Rev. John Downes and Mr. Echersley, and the harmonium player, Miss Davey, one of the teachers in the school, commenced playing the light music with which the score starts, while the chorus of Carmelites emerge from both sides of the stage, and, having taken up a position in front of the curtain, sing a four verse hymn commencing, "Hark! a joyful voice is telling." The second verse, which commences, "Christ is coming! from thy bed Earth-bound soul awake and spring," is taken as a solo. The third verse is taken as a semi-chorus, and the last as a full chorus. When the curtain rises, the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, appear in a "cloud scene," in glorious apparel, conversing in the mystery of the Incarnation; and when they leave the stage the cloud scene cloth lifts, displaying a slope of the hills near Bethlehem, with a particular bright star shining in the firmament over the city. There are shepherds in the fields, and suddenly there is a great commotion among them as the multitude of the heavenly host appears, and all join in singing "Glory to God in the Highest," to a very fine setting. The Carmelites enter again and sing another hymn, descriptive of the birth of Christ in the manger, one verse sung as a solo, and when the curtain lifts there is displayed the interior of a stable,

in which are seated Mary and Joseph, with the infant Christ in a receptacle for hay. Then the shepherds, guided to the spot by the Venus-like star, arrive, and pay their adoration, and the Kings of the East, with their attendants, follow, and present their gifts, while the shepherds sing their song of praise, unaccompanied. The Carmelites again reappear, and sing two verses of an eight-line hymn, in one part of which a duet is sung by two of the choristers, and the rest of the hymn as a chorus, full of descriptive music.

Scene then represents the vestibule of the Temple in which the presentation of the Infant Jesus is made to the High Priest, Holy Simeon. The fourth hymn, which opens in the minor key, but at the middle changes into the major, describes the flight into Egypt, and prepares the audience for the robbers' cave, in which are assembled the members of a band, and in which it is said that Joseph and Mary with the Infant Christ, took refuge on the way to Egypt. Titus, the impenitent thief, would rob them of all that they have, but Desnias, the penitent one, is struck by the beauty of the Virgin and Child, and through his entreaties the holy party are allowed to go on their way. In this scene the robbers, each of whom carries a sort of spear or lance, execute a dance to the intense amusement of the audience. Then the Carmelites introduce another song descriptive of their grief at the loss of the Child Jesus, and the curtain rises on the vestibule of the Temple, showing Mary looking for her Child, and without any break another curtain rises and shows the interior of the Temple, with the Child Christ seated on a throne, and on each side in semi-circles the Doctors and learned men with whom he is arguing. In the midst of it Mary and Joseph arrive to claim the Child, who gently chides her for being so anxious about Him, and then caresses her. Then follows the final chorus:

"All hail to Thee, O Infant King,  
Thou art the Lord of earth and sky,  
Thy sweetness we forever sing,  
Thy grace and matchless majesty."

There are three verses with a chorus, and while the Carmelites are singing this song of triumph the curtain again rises and displays a grand tableau, showing the kingship of the Infant Christ. High up is the boy Christ, crowned and sceptered—Mary on one side and Joseph on the other, and behind, but raised so as to bring them into strong relief, the three Archangels—Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. At the feet of Christ is a group of angels dressed in white, and on each side are the characters of the play, who join in singing the hymn of triumph as the clouds veil Him from the spectators gaze.

Such is the general outline of the play. We have no names of the children who took part beyond two, namely, those who took the characters of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The former was represented by a little girl named Gertrude Murran, not yet six years of age, and everyone must have been struck, as we ourselves were, by the marvellously intelligent way in which the child-part was taken. Miss Murran, who possesses a beautiful face, not only recited her lines well, but was equally clever in the matter of gesture and emphasis in following out the argument with the doctors on the mystery of the Godhead; there was a loud outburst of applause when the curtain fell, marking the intense appreciation of the audience. The part of the Virgin Mary was taken very devoutly and naturally by Miss Corry, a young lady who was very successful throughout, both in the recital of her part and in her general acting. The dialogue generally was very clearly given by all the children, and certainly it was a source of very great pleasure to the audience, quite apart from the spectacular display to which it was accompanied. The "dressing" of the characters was in every respect worthy of the play, and great taste was displayed as regards colour. Indeed everything was of the best, and the final scene of all was exceedingly effective, especially the grouping of the characters. Messrs. Riley Brothers worked the "light" arrangements. The only diversion in the whole of the play is the grotesque dance by the robbers in the cave referred to.

Among those present at the performance were Dr. Gordon, the Bishop of Leeds; Canons Motler, Simpson and Pissant; together with a number of the Fathers of the Church at Bradford and other places.

At the conclusion of the play the au-

dience seemed desirous of having the last chorus repeated, but the curtain was merely raised to show the group. The Rev. Father Downes was warmly called for, but he merely came to the front of the stage and bowed his acknowledgments. We ought to say that Father Downes has painted most of the scenery, with the aid of the Brothers Oates, who have rendered him great assistance.



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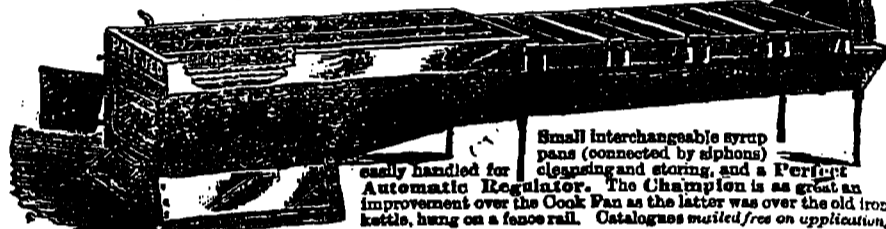
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