

PEASANTS' PLEDGE



ANTON LANG PLAYED CHRIST.
The Noblest Man Among Them.

AUTUMN came unwillingly to the little Bavarian village between the mountains—creeping down with the snow upon the high peaks as though it almost feared this work of slow death it was to do upon the trees and the green fields and the flowers.

The people felt the chill in the air and saw the shadows grow longer across the streets. But they had no fear of autumn or winter. The change of seasons was familiar and dear to them, marking the slow rhythm of their lives and assuring them of nature's anchorage in a world where there seemed no longer either stability or peace. Not nature but man was the enemy of these villagers—man who made war against his neighbour and fought for no reason, whose violent hands had spread sorrow and disease among the nations for a century past.

Even now in the valley of Ammer over the mountains, plague was striking down man and child—mercilessly, without care for justice or for kindness. The little village of Oberammergau had escaped only because the encircling mountains made it possible to stop the coming and going of friends from the plague-ridden areas.

Indeed, but the Lord had been kind to the people of Oberammergau. They thanked Him in their prayers and went on with their tasks, outwardly calm as the surface of the little river that wandered down their valley. In this autumn of 1663 they were as happy as man can be when his body has good work to do and his mind is at rest.

BUT one man of Oberammergau was not happy. Caspar Schiessler had left his home in the early summer and gone to do field work in Eschenlohe in the Ammer Valley. Now the plague had come, and he was marooned among a people he did not know. Caspar wondered how long he would have to stay with them. Perhaps all the winter, perhaps longer than that even, so that he might not see his own folk for a whole, weary year of longing. Maybe, if the plague took him, he would never see them.

300-Year-Old Story of Oberammergau Is Not Ended In The Fastnesses Of A Modern Shangri-la.

That thought was intolerable. Caspar felt it twist in his stomach and his mouth was dry. He **MUST** go home, if only for a day, just to know that his family was safe and happy, just to see the smiles on their welcoming faces. He had had no news of them. The time was growing into months.

Soon would be the feast of the Consecration of the Church in his house and all his people would be gathered there. Caspar made a desperate resolve. He would steal out of Eschenlohe where no one cared about him, and climb over the mountains to spend the feast time in Oberammergau. The Lord would forgive him because it was His holy day.

How the Plague Came

SO Caspar felt happy for the first time in many days, and next morning he began his journey.

He was staggering a little and his body was drenched in a cold, weakening sweat as he came at last within sight of his home. But the cries of his family were music in his ears, drowning the throbbing pain of his head, and the warmth of their arms made him forget everything in this long-dreamed joy of re-union. He laughed aloud and held them close and kissed them again.

Caspar Schiessler did not know it, but that moment was his last happy moment on earth. Next day he was dead

... and plague had come at last to Oberammergau. Within three weeks mass was said for the souls of 84 villagers. Terror such as had never been felt before in the peaceful river town now went openly through the streets and forced its way into every man's home.

In their grief, the villagers turned with blind faith to the God who had protected their forefathers for unremembered generations. They knelt down together in desperate entreaty and the twelve

elders pledged them before Heaven:

"Lord, if you will take this scourge from our midst, we will worship you always, and to show our gratitude we will every ten years represent the Passion of the World's Saviour, so that our people may remember what you have done and all men know of your mercy. . ."

AFTER that, there were no more deaths in Oberammergau, and those who already lay ill with the plague slowly recovered their health. In the following year the villagers enacted the Passion of Christ in the tiny churchyard, as they had promised.

And every ten years since 1680, despite all sorts of difficulty and misfortune, they and their descendants have remained faithful to that old, solemn, desperate vow.

SUCH is the story of Oberammergau—strange, hair-incredible, beautiful story of a gratitude to unseen

Beginnings of the Great
Passion Play
Told by
SYLVIA MUNROE