

UNBROKEN

powers that goes beyond time and beyond frailty. You might think it only another legend, better rounded than most, if Oberammergau to-day did not bear the tangible witness to its truth.

The little village has not changed much with the years, although a hard, modern road over the mountains carries tens of thousands of visitors every decade to watch the Passion Play.

Snug in its mountain hollow, with the quiet river still wandering through its fields, this is a place where man has worked side by side with nature in the patterning of beauty. The fine old trees along the twisted streets of the village are no more beautiful than the paintings on the white stone walls of the houses. For these people are artists, and they take delight in picturing Scriptural scenes of perfect form and exquisite colouring.

Stark against the skyline of a splendid peak that is visible throughout the valley stands a tall cross, symbol for the life that passes beneath it.

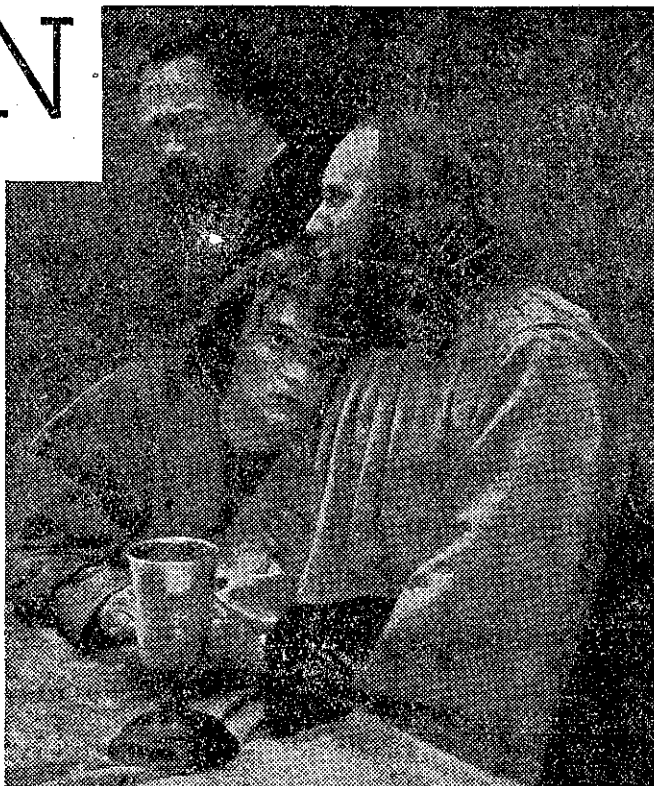
Side By Side With Nature

BUT the focus of the village itself is the theatre of the Passion Play, built beside the river, with a long, rounded roof that covers the auditorium but leaves the enormous stage open to the air. Through the exit on either side, one can glimpse the village streets, with the mountains rising behind them. The house of Pilate is in the left wing, Annas' house on the right, and in the centre of the main stage is a smaller set used for the tableaux which intersperse the performance.

The play deals with the life of Christ from the time when he was a young man to the Ascension, and is really the Bible dramatised and adapted. The lovely words of the Scriptures are there, and all the main incidents of the life. Even those among the audience who cannot understand the German language in which the characters speak can easily follow their action. The deep spirituality of the players—their appearance of actually living in their parts—carries the watchers into another world where the eight hours of the play's run pass by unheeded, almost unnoticed.

Unheeded by the hundreds of players, too. They live in the Bible story with a sort of timeless reverence.

The Passion Play is performed twice and sometimes three times a week for four months. During that time the principal characters live in almost monastic seclusion and meditation. They are chosen in the first place not so much for their ability to act as for their **worthiness**. The noblest man of all is given the role of Christ—highest



THE LAST SUPPER.

crown of honour in the ambition of these peasants—and Maria Dolorosa must in real life be a woman of surpassing virtue. Small wonder, then, that when the time for the play comes—after eight months of rehearsing in which every other interest must be forgone—the players are beyond acting. They have become different people.

YET in a way it is futile to attempt to describe the Passion Play. To read about it gives at best only the barest glimpse of its reality. Those who have seen it carry an imperishable memory that can never be adequately translated into words.

Miss E. M. Hind, of Wellington, is one of the fortunate. She went to Oberammergau in 1922 to see the first performance after the war—perhaps one of the finest of all time because the peasants of Oberammergau fervently hoped their Passion Play might heal the bitter scars of conflict.

When Miss Hind saw the play, the theatre was full—5000 people seated and perhaps another thousand standing. Each visitor was permitted to stay only a day or two, then he must go to make room for the streams of others waiting to come. For little Oberammergau, with its 600 or so inhabitants, cannot accommodate much more than 100 times its population.

The Peace That Passes

THE visitors stayed in the peasants' homes for a small charge, and saw the play for even less. It cost Miss Hind about one shilling in English money for those eight unforgettable hours! The mark was crashing in those days, so that after the play was over Oberammergau was almost bankrupt.

Did I hear someone say these peasant-players are bad business men?

And so they are. In all the years of its fame, the Oberammergau Passion Play has never made money: often it has been a heavy burden for its producers. Some think the peasants are blindly stupid to remain true to a pledge that is nearly 300 years old.

Maybe they are, maybe not. For in that tiny mountain fastness is a Shangri-La not built on dreams but on solid earth—an age-old witness that man can still find the peace that passes our modern understanding.



ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES.