

CHAPTER XXXVIII

OBERAMMERGAU

By Grandmother

For twenty years Grandmother had longed to go to Oberammergau. Never, until you have builded air castles, have seen them totter and fall, have rebuilded and, at last after long years, have had success crown your efforts, will you know the emotion and excitement Grandmother felt as they motored into this quaint Bavarian village on the beautiful Saturday afternoon, August 2, 1930.

The streets were narrow and winding. The houses were gaily decorated and reminiscent of Switzerland, although having an individuality. All about this village, nestling in a beautiful valley, are the towering Alps. On beyond the village church, dominating the landscape, is that highest peak, surmounted by a slender cross which has become so familiar to us in pictures that one feels he has been here and has seen all this before.

We had no difficulty in finding our lodging place, the residence of a widow, Mrs. Kathe Rutz, 60 Rathaus Street. It was a large, rambling, very old house, gaily decorated on the outside and having boxes of bright blooming flowers on the outside of every window.

Inside everything was scrupulously neat and clean. The floors were scrubbed to perfection and the curtains white as snow. The furniture was evidently made there in the village and much of it, especially in Grace's room. and two huge wardrobes, gaily decorated.

As we entered our bedrooms and saw those inviting beds with their huge downy pillows and down "ticks" for coverings, they looked rather

tempting. But, no! napping could not be considered! The street scenes lured us, and we fared forth.

Most of the villagers are in the play and as they allow their hair to grow long and the men all wear beards, the throng on the streets is picturesque. Not only the people where you are domiciled, but all the natives, wherever you see them, smile at you. We never tired of just walking up and down the streets.

On arrival, we had been met at the door by a charming young lady, friend of the family, who lived in another Bavarian village and hence could not be in the play, and two sturdy, rosy-cheeked serving maids, who swung our baggage down from the top of the car as easily as if they were handling empty paper boxes.

We met Mrs. Rutz and her three daughters at dinner time. Anni was the Virgin Mary of the play. Mei and Gretchen were also in the play, in minor parts. They gave us a course dinner, as well prepared and served as one would find any place.

Mrs. Rutz keeps the candy shop of the village. At this time, another room of the house is given over to a souvenir shop. We spent a little time here and then went out on the streets again, visiting the home of Anton Lang, Alois Lang and many others.

It is so delightful to find these tiny shops in the homes of all the principal characters in the play and, in fact, in nearly every home. There is no attempt to use "salesmanship". Rather, it appears as if these tiny shops were provided to give tourists an opportunity to enter the homes and make friends with the occupants.

We just hated to "turn in" that night, but wishing to be fresh and rested for the morrow, we let reason prevail and were in bed fairly early.

When we awoke next morning the rain was pouring down. Anni did not help serve breakfast and we thought she was preparing for her arduous part in the play, but when we left the table we found Anni and her mother in the next room with friendly morning greetings and the assurance that they desired to make us as comfortable as possible.

They had heavy woolen blankets, rainy day supplies, cushions and opera glasses, which they rented at a very nominal price, with the air of hostesses solicitous for their guests and not in the least searching for added revenue.

There was a cessation of the storm just as we started for the theater, but it was cloudy, cold and damp. Mrs. Whipple had been there earlier in the season and when asked in Paris what advice she had for us, she suggested two things - first, wear your warmest clothing and rent blankets. To our great comfort, we did both these things!

We were barely seated in the theater when Ramsay McDonald, his younger daughter and a friend entered the royal box. The vast audience spied him at once, arose and gave him an ovation to which he most graciously responded. Again on Monday, as he came out of his hotel and superintended the disposal of baggage in his automobile, we had a good view of him and, as he discovered Grandfather taking his picture, he smiled and waved his hand to him in a most friendly fashion. We liked him a lot.

Now we are under the big steel roof, which looks very much like our own modern train sheds. At one end it is closed and the seats at that end are raised very high and slope sharply down to the other end, which is open. Across this open front, stretches a broad platform the entire width of the theater. This platform is open to the sky. On the farther edge of the platform in the center is the box-like stage. Here the

tableaux and whatever action takes place on this stage are under cover. At either side of the platform are represented the streets of Jerusalem, bounded on one side by the house of Annas, the High Priest, and on the other by the house of Pilate.

The splendid orchestra of fifty pieces has started the solemn but beautiful music composed by Dedler in the beginning of the 19th century. Ramsay McDonald, the vast crowd of 5,000 - everything is forgotten from that moment, but the passion of our Lord, as the magnificent chorus files in - twenty-four from each side - with Anton Lang, who had taken the part of the Christus for three decades, in the center.

They wore white robes with long capes over them, falling in classic folds. The color of these capes, as well as the drop curtain back of them, was an elusive shade of gray with just a hint of lavender or blue in it, something like the haze that often gathers over the mountains just after sunset. A touch of gold on the costumes was repeated on the drop curtain.

How this chorus could sing! Any Grand Opera company would be proud of such soloists and such chorus work! A score of times the chorus in slow dignified steps marches onto the platform. You might think this repetition would become monotonous, but not so. As the play progresses and you come to the scourging, buffeting and, at last, the crucifixion of Christ, you can scarcely wait for the chorus to come on. They are always on the side of Christ, and the beautiful music is such a comfort and does so much to relieve the tension.

Mrs. Whipple's second suggestion had been to have a copy of the text for each two people. We got a copy for each, with a German text for Grandmother. As she and Grace held their books side by side, it worked out very nicely.

As Grandfather wrote a very detailed account of the play in 1910, Grandmother will not take up the different acts, scenes and tableau, as the text is practically the same as then.

Looking at the two men, Anton Lang and Alois Lang, it was difficult to imagine that the former had ever taken the part as well as the latter did. As a matter of fact, Grandfather did like Alois better. Alfred Bierling, the youthful St. John, who Grandfather thought would eventually succeed to the part of the Christus, was Joseph of Arimathea. Anni Rutz portrayed the character of Mother of our Lord in a most perfect manner, it seemed to us.

In the parting at Bethany, every line of her body, every fold of her garments, spoke eloquently of sorrow and grief. When Mary, realizing at last what is to befall her beloved son, falls back into the arms of John and Mary Magdalene with that agonized cry of "Mein Sohn", the audience showed greater emotion than at any other time.

At the close of the day, it is hard to realize that you have sat through eight hours of this greatest drama of the ages. The actors have lived their parts, hence the audience, too, has lived the play. The same deep, sincere, childlike faith of the medieval peasant dwells today in the fine cultured inhabitants of this small village.

How, you say, can this be possible in our modern world? The answer is in their nine years of isolation. Girt round by their lofty mountains, they quietly pursue their arts of wood carving and sculpture. Here are none of the distractions, none of the nervous hurry and rush, none of the strenuous maddening struggle of our modern life.

Here a thought once conceived is not swept away by a flood of new ideas, but in quiet and calmness of soul is pondered on and

transmitted to posterity.

May this simple, childlike faith long continue to bear fruit that shall redound to the Glory of God and the inspiration of men.