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THE BRIDGWATER PAGEANT.
SOMERSET HISTORY AND ACCENT.
(FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.)
BRIDGWATER, JUNE 21.

The Bridgwater Pageant, produced tonight, is heralded by an appeal to "all West Country folk to come and see the history of your own people in dramatic scenes with a blaze of colour and music." Two of the time episodes are described in this invitation as Admiral Blake in his native town and King Monmouth and the Battle of Sedgemoor.

There is little fault to find with such a summing-up of the nature and significance of the pageant except that, no doubt from modesty, it leaves out a signal quality. Possibly a stickler for accuracy might object that the colour is too delicate and prettily combined, and the music too nicely modulated, to justify any mention of a blaze: but this is nothing compared with the omission of any reference to the tremendous spirit with which the pageant is conducted from first to last. Here and there among the thousand performers very close observation may single out a little stiffness or crudity. The general effect, however, is of masses of men and woman, boys and girls, with a number of small children, working with disciplined will to body forth a story of which they are proud and which moves them to joy. They are players and revellers rather than actors in the narrower sense, with the result that, having thrown off self-consciousness, they leave an illusion on the spectator which the professional historian merely doing his job is sometimes unable to produce by the exercise of talent and experience.

From what one can gather, this spirit in the performers is but a reflection of the zeal with which all classes of the townspeople have been throwing themselves into the preparation of the pageant for months past. Led by the Mayor and Mayoress, a varied company has been engaged on innumerable details, from the writing of the "book" to the making of the dresses, with almost a disdain for outside help: and it is pleasant to hear that the family note has been further struck in messages of good will to the mother-town from Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and Bridgewater, New York.

The honorary Master of the Pageant, Major M. F. Cely Trevilian, has had a large share in its devising. Among his fellow librettists are local clergymen, archaeologists, and school teachers, while other literary assistance has come from that diviner of Somerset character, Mr. Walter Raymond. The dialogue and verses evolved by the several combined brains are excellent of their kind: so much above the ordinary, indeed, that the occasional overflow of language is easily pardoned, especially as the speakers (either by their own skill or owing to some conformation in the pageant ground at Sydenham Manor) contrive to make themselves clearly heard. Not only was this the happy case with the schoolmaster who played Blake as though he really were Blake, and the lady who so gracefully embodied the Spirit of the Bridge, but even the rustic personalities allowed us without straining of ears to take delight in the genuine Somerset accents.

THE SPIRIT OF THE BRIDGE.

It is the Spirit of the Bridge who introduces each episode and holds the pageant together. In the opening masque, where the strife of sea and river is symbolized by girl dancers in delicate blues and greens, she tells what is to come:—

Now will we act. to make you understand
How our forefathers strove each in his day
Adding a stone here and a custom there ;

John and the Charter of this ancient town.
Mummers and mourners of the Middle Ages,
Rollicking sailors of Elizabeth.
Monmouth and the mighty Blake, and all the rest,
Each in his habit as he walked these streets,
Building Bridgwater as we know her now.

And, lest ye pass from here convinced may be
Of glories in the past, but fearful lest
In these prosaic times Romance be dead.
We dare to hint the future heritage
Of all whose hearts are open to the call
Of the great age unrolling in our midst
Airmen from Zoyland, Chedzoy messengers
Circling the world to distant Austral shores...

And, in fact, members of the Royal Air Force from the local station contribute their share to the pageant. One plays a stalwart part in the Blake episode, and others represent both aviation and wireless to the final scene where Bridgwater crafts and trades, past and present, are shown on horse-drawn wagons amid & general assembly of the performers, who join in singing " O God, our help in ages past " to Dr. Croft's setting, with descant to certain of the verses.

Sedgemoor is not far from Bridgwater, and Monmouth's defeat and flight were enacted as though the performers had at one time or another been spiritual participants in the battle. But, terrifying as was the entry of Kirke's Lambs, with gunpowder explosions and thick smoke rolling across the scene, it was not, and could hardly be, so wholly satisfactory as the rendering of St. Matthew's Fair in 1588. This episode was conceived and given by teachers and children from the elementary schools of Bridgwater ; they presented a magnificent medley, vivid in colour and movement, of Elizabethan merrymakers—pedlars, jugglers, dancers, wrestlers, clowns, a bear-ward, a hobby-horse, boisterous lads, civic , officers, townfolk, countryfolk, with a glimpse of the drawbacks of such roustering in practical demonstration of the purpose the stocks. Just after a folk dance (by members of the local Folk Dancing Society), when the ballad-monger has lost customers to the superior attraction of a wrestling match and before the wrestlers have had time to get warm, a shout comes from the distance, and everybody the wrestlers among the first — rushes to welcome Bridgwater sailors home from the defeat of the Armada, where "the Bess of Bridgwater, my masters, played her part as well as any great ship o' the Queen."

The last scene but one of this eventful history comes from September, 1780.Parliament has been dissolved amid growing discontent, and Charles James Fox, who might have stood for Bridgwater, has preferred Westminster and left the field to local candidates. Bands play raucously against each other before the hustings ; smock-frocks whirl in derisive dance about the green; and the candidates vainly bawl their conventional appeals—a riotous scene of high amusement for all, whether players or spectators ; but some of us regretted Mr. Fox's absence, being anxious to see whether the Bridgwater librettists and actors would treat him with the sardonic truthfulness they had extended to King John, Monmouth, and even the Bridgwater citizens of Blake's earlier day

The pageant is to be played every evening this week, save that to-morrow the performance will be given in the afternoon for the benefit of civic visitors from other parts of the county and representatives of Bristol University.