



Foreboding of the Cross

Chapter II

The Call

ON April 26, 1912, I was rung up on the telephone and asked if I was prepared to accept an engagement to go to Jerusalem; that was surprising enough, but when, on inquiring what I was expected to do there, I was told that I was to portray the Central Figure in a series of pictures dealing with the life of Christ to be made in the actual environment of the immortal story, I was astounded and appalled. I immediately determined to refuse such an offer, but on second thoughts consented to meet the producer to enable me to learn more of the project. I hurried to Blackmore's well-known offices in Garrick Street, and there I was introduced to Sidney Olcott, a Canadian who had spent many years in America. Sidney Olcott, who made the film "From Manger to Cross," impressed and interested me immediately. His earnestness and thoroughness appealed to me, and when I saw some of the photographs of "The Flight into Egypt," scenes of which had already been filmed, I realised that no ordinary man was handling this tremendous enterprise. Olcott was one of a band of keen men who had graduated in the Bioscope Studio, New York, and when he left to join the Kalem Company D. W. Griffith got his first chance. Olcott showed me a letter from the Department of Foreign Affairs at The White House, Washington, to the Governor of Palestine asking him to afford the company every assistance in his power, and he talked to me a long time about what he intended to do, and talked with infectious

THE CALL: Chapter II

enthusiasm. I remembered old Isaac Disraeli's words: "Solitude is the nurse of enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is the nurse of genius," and I caught myself wondering if this man had the genius to make a great film of this colossal subject. I decided that he had.

I had to make a swift decision because Olcott was returning to Jerusalem within forty-eight hours. I consulted my wife and we both came to the conclusion that if this enterprise was carried through by a man of great earnestness, ability, and imagination it might have very far-reaching results and do incalculable good. I decided to accept. The question of salary did not trouble me. Contrary to many preconceived ideas about my being tempted by a large sum of money to undertake this grave responsibility, I portrayed my part for a nominal sum, despite the fact that twenty thousand pounds was spent on the production. If I had thought for one moment that the film "From Manger to Cross" would not ultimately make for good, no monetary consideration would have reconciled me to the task. I thought that I was afforded the highest privilege ever afforded to an actor, and I think the same to-day. Through letters, conversations, and articles in the Press I have evidence more than sufficient to convince me that this particular film has made and is making all over the world a great appeal to the best instincts in human nature. I signed a contract with a mental reservation. I had determined that, if matters were not conducted in a seemly spirit when making the film, I would return to London, and risk any action that the Kalem Company might take against me. That my fears were entirely groundless will be proved by what I set down later.

Before leaving London I got together every photograph that I could secure of the paintings representing the Christ, many of which I had seen in different galleries in Europe. Fortunately for me, I was very conversant with many authors who have dealt with the historical Jesus, and rightly or wrongly I dared to have definite opinions of my own. I had talked with men in many parts of the world and had come to the conclusion that the majority of men were deterred from interesting themselves in Christianity because artists, many of the clergy, and numbers of professed Christians emphasised the gentle side of Jesus to such an extent that the character bordered on the effeminate. When I agreed to accept the *rôle* I determined I would endeavour to bring out the force of His personality, His keen intellectuality, rather than dwell exclusively on His tenderness and humility. I meant to try to present Jesus as the *Lion of Judah* rather than as the gentle shepherd. Jesus often rebuked his disciples and feared not the face of any man. Effeminate men do not indulge in rebukes; they go with the tide and smile acquiescence often when they disapprove. Needless to say, I intended to portray the character of Jesus with real tenderness in the scenes demanding it, for what so natural as the tenderness of the strong?

THE CALL: Chapter II



"Wist Ye Not --"

At no time in the history of the world were there so many men and women anxious to devote themselves to the service of humanity, and at no time was religion at a greater discount. A large number of serious minded men and women to-day refuse to identify themselves with any religious body because they think religion namby-pamby. And who can deny that there is some truth in the charge? Only a few weeks ago I met a man I know, on a Sunday evening, and he told me that he had been to church for the first time for ten years, and added : "It was your film that did it." I inquired if he liked the service and he replied: "No; I couldn't stick the sermon. It meant nothing to me." Wild horses will not drag from me the name of the church to which he referred.

Olcott knew that I had had no experience in front of a camera, but this did not trouble him in the least. He told me that he was not looking for an experienced cinema actor; he could have got anyone he wanted in that direction. He was looking for the man with what he thought was the right mentality. What made him think that I had this mentality is a mystery to me to this day. I only talked with him for a short time, mainly about the project in hand, and Blackmore's knew absolutely nothing about my inner history; even my family and friends knew very little, because a curious reticence has always governed me. Anyhow, he never saw anyone else, and well within the forty-eight hours mentioned by Olcott as the time for my departure to the East I set out on my strange pilgrimage. What a task to undertake! At times I must confess that I felt overwhelmed and shrank from the responsibility. Had it not been for the understanding and sympathy extended to me by Olcott I could never have completed the film; but there is little doubt in my own mind that I was prepared for the task by an unconscious initiation. I had known the travail of the spirit as experienced by Newman, and expressed by him in his "Apologia." For months on end I lived

THE CALL: Chapter II

a solitary life, devoting eight hours a day to reading and five hours to writing. So strong was the feeling upon me in my early years that I should be called upon to do some definite task that I deliberately trained my will and kept myself in good physical condition.

In my poem "A Reply" from which I have already quoted, I have a stanza, part of which is as follows:-

To all lone souls aspiring I would say,
Strengthen the will through little acts though slight;
Impose some task that is fulfilled each day,
And then when God imposes one thou canst obey.

When I embarked on my work in Palestine I was under the deep impression that the task was imposed upon me, and so unreservedly did I yield myself to certain influences that when I had finished the work I was in a wretched state of health and felt as if the physical envelope, my body, had been thrown aside like a thing that had fulfilled its purpose.