

## Chapter VI

### The Task

AFTER luncheon we set out for Nazareth and drove for miles through fields of wheat, which is much more bearded than ours. Fringing the road, which was one of the most execrable I have ever been over, were large numbers of mustard plants, which interested me very much. We reached Nazareth on the evening of May 13. Is it not curious that in the Bible, in the Talmud, and in the writing of Josephus we come across no records of this sacred place?

Nazareth is a lovely village, and even to-day seems to be pervaded by a spirit of peace. The little houses seem to hang on the hill-side, and the slopes are lined and planted like the sides of mountains in the Alpes Maritimes.

#### THE MULE-PATH TO GORBIO, IN THE ALPES-MARITIMES

O the mule-path up the mountain,  
With the olive trees wherethrough  
The sun poured from its fountain  
Beams kissing me, and you  
And the little plots whereon  
A peasant labouring paused to smile,  
And greet us with an orison  
As we went by the while,  
Is a path to tread for ever  
In the mind's untrodden ways;  
And one that we shall never  
Forget in all our days.  
'Twas like a path of Dante seen;  
Like one his exiled feet had trod,  
Which led him with his vision keen  
Up to the very face of God.

On the lower ground were fields of barley and wheat, and gardens with low stone walls (reminiscent of the fields in Yorkshire and Lancashire), in which figs, citrons, and pomegranates were ripening in the sun.

At the fountain where Jesus as a boy often drew water was enacted the first scene shown in the film "Mary at the Fountain." Later in the day the boy Jesus, beautifully portrayed by Master Percy Dyer, was shown going up to Jerusalem with his parents.

It was quite usual to see as many as twenty women standing round a spring gossiping, and drawing water. The habit of carrying heavy pitchers filled with water on their heads certainly has the effect of giving the Syrian women a remarkable carriage.

After taking scenes in Nazareth, we left for Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, which Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, intended for a Syrian Syracuse. In its day

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Tiberias was one of the most beautiful cities in Palestine, for he inherited from his father, Herod the Great, a love of magnificence in architecture. It was before this Herod, the husband of Herodias, visiting Jerusalem at the Passover, that Jesus was sent for examination by Pilate. He it was who had sent one of his officers to find out Jesus and invite Him to the Golden House in Tiberias when he was haunted with fears after the assassination of John the Baptist: but Jesus did not obey the call.



**The Bethany Home**

Although Jesus lived within sight of Tiberias, there is no evidence to prove that He ever set foot within its walls. His avoidance of this new city is not easily explained, because He brought salvation to Jew and Gentile. There are many reasons why an austere Jew should look with disfavour on this city of pleasure with its Golden House ruled over by a man who had taken his brother's wife as a consort; but we must look for other reasons where the Saviour of all men is concerned.

Tiberias in the days of Herod must have been a singularly beautiful city, with its Roman forum, stadium, and magnificent water-front. On the Golden House Herod Antipas had lavished his wealth and care. Its roof of gold gleaming in that tropic sun must have been visible for miles round. He brought artists and craftsmen from all parts and encouraged people of all sects and nations to settle in the city, which soon became so famous that it gave its name to the sea on which it stood. From a mint in the city were issued coins that are a delight to the collectors of to-day.

What surprised me very much was the deserted appearance of the Sea of Galilee; it looks like an unknown lake. There is hardly a felucca to be seen, and there are but few houses to be found on its shores.

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The morning after our arrival at Tiberias we set off at six o'clock in huge boats, each oared by six men, to a distant part of the sea-shore; the journey taking us an hour and a half. It was here that I started my work in the scenes depicting "The Calling of the Disciples." Here John the Baptist with his shaggy locks through which no comb had passed, clothed in an abba of camel's-hair, is preaching with fiery eloquence when suddenly he sees Jesus in the distance coming down the hillside to the sea, and turning with a gesture, John exclaims: "Behold the Lamb of God."



Blind Bartimaeus

In the next scene, Andrew and Peter are seen casting their nets into the sea. The two actors playing these parts had practised throwing these nets during the morning. The net is in the form of a huge bag with lead sinkers at the bottom. It is laid on the right arm and then cast. It opens out and sinks and closes as it is drawn up. I come upon them and tell them that if they will follow me I will make them fishers of men.

By this time the various members had settled down to their parts, whilst for me, the modern Englishman had passed away, and for the time the centuries had rolled back. In more than a mere histrionic sense we "lived our parts." St. Paul's words had been with me more and more the nearer I got to my work and each scene burned their meaning deeper into my consciousness: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." In the simplest scenes, alien thoughts were banished and vagrant moods controlled. I knew that wrong thoughts would reveal themselves in the most casual gesture. Rightly to portray Jesus without gross offence to the holiest instincts and feelings of millions, it was not sufficient that one should control facial muscles and bodily movement -- it meant such a surrender of soul, a submerging of personality, as to make my normal life seem strange to me and my immediate memories alien. I think all true Christians will understand me

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when I say that there can be few more searching and cleansing spiritual exercises than thus to body forth in one's own actions and bearing one's conception of Jesus of Nazareth. Even in this narrative I find it difficult sometimes merely to record and not to speak from the standpoint of complete identification. My sole aim is reverently to enable the reader to walk the way I had to go.



*"And He Beheld the City"*

Later I called "James and John," who were quietly mending their nets in a boat. Here I had to do something more than just speak to them, so after arresting their attention I made a gesture of appealing invitation, and wonderingly they came to me. Simple as these scenes were they made me realise the difficulties before me, and I prayed for inspiration. That every attitude, gesture, and movement of Jesus would be, noted and criticised, I knew only too well. I also realised that no mere acting would save me: it was question of mood, of getting under the right influence. So much did Olcott realise this that he did not rehearse me in my scenes although he spent a long time in preparing the other scenes. After rehearsing a scene Olcott would send for me and I would walk into it and play it almost as if I was in a dream. Of course I had studied and meditated on the scene during the night. I cannot remember where the camera was situated; I forgot when playing scenes that such a thing existed.

After taking the scenes on the shores of the Sea of Galilee we returned to Tiberias, had luncheon, and set out on our return journey, arriving at Djenin at eight o'clock. We spent the night in this little town and at seven o'clock next morning set out for Nablus, where we arrived at nine. At seven the following morning we set out for Jerusalem, arriving at half-past six in the evening. Our dragoman assured me that we had established a record; anyhow it was a record for Olcott, whose energy was simply amazing.

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From the time of our return to Jerusalem until the film was finished a spirit of exaltation took possession of me. Earthly things seemed to slip away. It would be blasphemous on my part were I to try to set down all that I felt. I did not communicate to any of the company, or even to Olcott, the strange impressions that were crowding upon me. Somehow I think the company guessed that I was undergoing strange experiences, because they treated me with a curious courtesy. When I was in the character of Jesus they never smoked in my presence, and never made jokes of any description, although neither Olcott nor myself ever suggested anything to them. It was a spontaneous tribute of reverence to the Character that has moved the world. It is well at all times for a man to examine his soul, but it is a dreadful and a harrowing thing, though yet ennobling, to try, even for a little space, to take to yourself the soul of the God of Love.



“Behold He Cometh!”

I have never participated in anything that impressed me more, and Heaven knows some of the incidents in France were impressive enough. I was filled with a sense of man's unworthiness and deep need, and with a profound realisation of the wonderful sacrifice and redemptive suffering of the great Captain of our Salvation.

After my return to Jerusalem I had a few days to myself because Olcott was busy on some scenes in which I did not appear.

The caravan scene was made at this time, and more than forty camels and a greater number of donkeys were employed. Olcott had a lot of trouble with this scene and was on it for a whole day. To manœuvre forty camels is no light thing. I have seen thirteen camels in a string get hopelessly tangled in the

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middle of a street because they were alarmed at the noise of an approaching cart. Twenty minutes was spent in disentangling them.

The scene with The Wise Men was completed at this period. It was an imaginative touch of Olcott's to have them arriving from different points of the compass.

A beautiful scene, "The Shepherds with their Flocks," was photographed at Bethlehem on the ground that tradition points out as the spot where the great tidings were communicated to them. It will be noticed that they do not carry crooks. The shepherds in the East carry stout sticks to beat off any marauding animals at night, and a crook is never seen. I never carried anything in my hands when engaged on scenes in the film. Their method of carrying sheep is peculiar. They put them round their necks as a woman might wear a stole.