The Annunciation

## Chapter I

### Unconscious Preparation

I INTEND the opening chapters of this book to be something in the nature of a confession; I write “in the nature of” because I am very sensible of the difficulty of writing about one's self.

It was Heine who, when writing his “Confessions,” wrote, “It is an embarrassing, even an impossible task. I should be a conceited coxcomb to obtrude the good I might be able to say of myself, and I should be a great fool to proclaim to the whole world the defects of which I might also be conscious. And even with the most honest desire to be sincere, one cannot tell the truth about oneself.” What I have to say about myself will be set down here with one object in view, viz., to explain my state of mind when I made the momentous decision that led me to portray the Greatest Figure in the history of mankind for the cinematograph.

At a very early age, out of my multifarious reading, three writers impressed themselves very deeply on my youthful mind. They were Goethe, Carlyle, and Tolstoy. I read and re-read most of their writings; I acquainted myself with facts about their lives; and I knew their portraits.

Goethe taught me the great facts of life; Carlyle cleared vapours from my brain; and Tolstoy revealed to me a man struggling like Prometheus, and endeavouring to show mankind how Christianity, according to his fierce and stark understanding of it, should be interpreted in this world.

These three men had powerful intellects and arresting personalities, and had no reason to hide from their readers, yet I, a mere stripling, dared to judge them.


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Adoration of the Magi

In Goethe I recognised the supreme artist, but his pantheism left me cold; instinctively I felt it could only lead to indifferentism. There was light but no heat. Carlyle gave me a certain vision, but I came to the conclusion that his heady flights into the fogs of German metaphysics would land me, if I held too long to his coat-tails, into a miasma of despair; yet he gave me one sentence that has remained like a burr in my mind for over twenty-five years: "Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into conduct." Tolstoy! must I confess it? I loved him most. Here was a man who said: "I have found truth and I must go out into the highways and byways, and interpret it to my fellow-men even if it leads me into the Valley of Death !"

Imagine it! I had the temerity to lecture on Tolstoy at the age of twenty. I can see that audience in the little hall now. Some present were amazed at my enthusiasm; a few told me they were deeply stirred.

My enthusiasm for Tolstoy lasted for some time after my lecture, but somehow or other, the conviction was borne in upon me that he had set himself an impossible task, and that he was a dangerous guide. Although Tolstoy was treading the paths of greatness, I feared that his career might end in madness.

Nietzsche, whose writings I read at this time, impressed me greatly, but I dismissed him as a leader because he was eventually brought to madness. True greatness is not to madness too nearly allied. I still think my youthful test of greatness was sane and healthy.

Dr. Steiner, the eminent Theosophist, who wrote a treatise on the author of "Zarathustra," at the invitation of Madame Foerster-Nietzsche's sister-went to Naumburg, where he saw Nietzsche "lying on a couch in a comatose condition, inert, stupefied." He was so overcome by the melancholy sight, of such "a tragic

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instance of the ruin of a mighty intellect which madly destroys itself in breaking away from spiritual intelligence" that he withstood Madame Foerster's repeated offers to become the editor and commentator of her brother's works and took himself off altogether.

Mazzini once said: "History is not the biography of great men." He might have added "or of supermen."

In the writings of Ernst Haeckel, with which I wrestled later, I came to see something comical. It seemed to me that this dreadful iconoclast was in reality rather a timid person afraid of the devastation he was dealing out, and so fearful that if his ideas were generally accepted "man's inhumanity to man" would make the world such a dreadful place to live in that he babbled of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good -- but leading nowhere, if we needs must accept his premises and logic.

No, Haeckel did not wreck my idealism. I had been warned not to read Haeckel's "Riddle of the Universe" by a kind friend who thought it might upset my views. I read that book three times, and still dared to believe in more than he or I could prove.

Ruskin I could never accept very seriously, much as I admired his style, by reason of the fact that he suffered from repeated mental breakdowns. I feel that I shall have Blake flung at me, but I can only say that, much as I admired him, he was no use to me as a guide when I was looking for a star whereto I had hoped to do some hitching. I can hear some say: But what has all this to do with what these authors have set down in print? It's a man's job to take an author, and tear the heart out of his book -- to weigh and consider. Quite so; but I had a curious way of thinking that if an author's career ended in madness, or an author was brought to madness at repeated intervals, there was something wrong, and I could not "grapple him to my heart with hoops of steel."

Renan, Lamennais, Tissot, and Farrar interested me at this period, and Georg Brandes with his wonderful work, " The Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature," fascinated me, because I recognised in him one who was in the direct line with the great critics of the past, the Schlegel brothers, Lessing, and Winckelmann.


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I wrote a sonnet to Georg Brandes :

A strong apostle of fair liberty,
Thou lookest o'er the world for such as preach
That of all tasks the noblest is to reach
Where man puts on his godhead, being free.
Has not brave Poland cause to honour thee,
For words that did most solemnly impeach
The brutish fools which time has yet to teach
That truth by force can never conquered be?
A judge of judgment, thou with vision keen
Hast well appraised the written words of men
Who stirred the world, and took the ways of fame.
So many who in market place have been
The noisiest, have fallen 'neath thy pen,
And those that smothered were have burst to flame

.
I received the following letter from Copenhagen, dated Aug. 4, 1914.

"DEAR SIR,
"You have honoured me in writing a charming poem to me. -- I think, no one will print it in the times through which we pass. Now the individual loses all interest. What we shall see will be so grand in its horror that no one in the history of Europe has been witness to something equal.
"Yours sincerely,
"GEORG BRANDES."

This letter interested the editor of The Boston Transcript so much that he asked me for permission to reprint it in facsimile. It appeared in The Transcript beside one of my poems.

The Flight into Egypt

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**UNCONSCIOUS PREPARATION: Chapter I**

The books of Henry George, which so many politicians read diligently in their libraries, and never mentioned in public, had to be reckoned with and absorbed. Tribunes of the people like Lassalle and Gambetta always seemed to me so busy with promising "cakes and ale" to the masses that they lost sight of the spiritual kingdom. A little humbling of the spirit -- less pride in their powers and achievements might have served them well. Mazzini was nearer the truth than either of them.

For some time I devoted myself to the study of various religions as set forth in books on Theosophy, but growing dissatisfied with many of the dogmatic statements contained in certain of the books, I determined to write to Mrs. Annie Besant. I enclosed a list of the books on Theosophy which I had read to prove to her that I was no mere tyro in the study of the science of which she was the arch-priestess. Mrs. Besant honoured me with a reply in her own handwriting, which left me more dissatisfied than ever, and I dropped the actual study of Theosophy from that day, though I still read some of the famous authors, one of the most remarkable being Edouard Schure. His book, "The Great Initiates," is a most profound work, but I cannot subscribe to his view of the Christ. Curiously enough, my letter to Mrs. Besant dealt with the Theosophic view of the Christus. I could never think that there was value in a conviction which could not stand the assaults of arguments however powerful, hence my endeavour to read authors with ideas and convictions directly opposed to mine.

When quite a youth I made excursions into the realms of Spiritualism and attended a great many seances, without earning the label of a spiritualist, and although I am not prepared to deny that some of the phenomena impressed me, I gave it up because I saw so much humbug in it all. As to the visions of heaven as unfolded by a certain well-known clergyman, they are not nearly so illuminating as those unfolded by Swedenborg, whose doctrine of "Correspondences" influenced so many people, including the Brownings and Rossetti.

One of the reasons why Swedenborg has influenced so many men is, I think, because he wrote for so many years in a masterly manner on natural philosophy, and had his feet more firmly set on the earth than a mystic like Jakob Boehme, for instance.
Swedenborg was by no means a recluse, and once said: "In order that a man may receive the life of heaven, it is necessary that he should live in the world and engage in its business and its employments, and then by moral and civil life receive spiritual life."

I owe no small debt to Emerson, but he did not satisfy me, and the splendours of Plato satisfied me less. One day two books reached me from Oxford. They were two volumes of Walter Pater's "Marius, the Epicurean." Here was English prose at its height, and a wise philosopher splendidly equipped and adapted to guide and check the ardent mind of a youth avid of knowledge, and eagerly seeking the meaning of life.


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## UNCONSCIOUS PREPARATION: Chapter I

Pater supplied the warning to Tolstoy that I had already thought out in my mind but had not clothed in words.

When I published my first volume of verse in 1904, the following lines from Pater's "Marius, the Epicurean," appeared on the title page: "Surely, the aim of a true philosophy must lie not in futile efforts towards the complete accommodation of a man to the circumstances in which he chances to find himself, but in the maintenance of a candid discontent in the face of the very highest achievement."

ENDEAVOUR

In richest natures thought must ever wake
A sadness, and a hope of higher aims,
Though beautiful and lofty all result;
For surely none could stand and say in truth
"We reach the summit here-we touch the verge
Of uttermost endeavour, knowing all."

When I published my second volume of verse, entitled "Moods and Memories," in 1907, it contained a poem entitled "A Reply," which was an answer to the critic of The Morning Leader, who wrote of my first book: "Mr. Bland's poems show study of the poets and appreciation of poetry, but do not convince one that the author has himself any message for the world."

The first stanza in my poem entitled "A Reply," which did not appear till three years had elapsed, was as follows:-

Tis true my songs tell no new truths to men
Ah, who am I, that I as yet should dare
To give the world a message with my pen?
grope as others grope who seek the stair
Which leads to heights where Latmos shows less fair,
And grieve not finding Hope's great flag unfurled.
Let it suffice that I do not despair,
But steadfast do believe that all upcurled
Lies ultimate perfection sleeping in the world.

I am setting all this down to show that I was at this time deliberately trying to beat my music out. I have said nothing about the poets, "the unacknowledged legislators of mankind" as Shelley calls them.


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TO SHELLEY

What stricken lute could yield a note so sweet
As sung of thee.? What mind had fairer dreams?
Thine was the pain of yearning for extremes
In beauty, and in truth. How thou didst beat
About the unapparent ways with heat
And eager questioning, and yet no gleams
Of truth could save thee from the touch and screams
Of misery, where fools and wise must meet.

With wild exultance, and with grief thy days
Were passed, in scorn for confines of a creed :
Yet thou didst deem the spirit's noblest need
A hope to pierce with thought, in wide surveys,
The veil of things unknown. Surely the Spring
Were fairer now if thou wert here to sing?

The Carpenters Shop

But of course I owe a great deal to the poets. I must confess I was always more attracted to them when they had on their singing robes and were not too full of the urgency of their messages. But now I am going to venture on a message myself. I went into the war wishing to put things to the test. I wanted to test myself, and most of all I wanted to test my ideas about Christianity. None of these things were proclaimed by me, and I should not proclaim them now but for the fact that I am identified with the film “From Manger to Cross.”

A famous author in one of his recent articles said that men went into the late war to end war. I venture to think that the author in question was wrong in his surmise.

I never met a single man in the line who led me to believe that such an idea influenced him. I am convinced that most men -- I am speaking of the volunteers

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and not the conscripts -- went into the war because they thought that the country was threatened, and because they knew that the best of British manhood was fighting, suffering, and dying. Consciously or unconsciously men were obeying the urge of the spirit of self-giving which is manifested in the highest degree in the Christian faith; and although religion was not on their lips, their hearts were full of the great impulses that have swayed the world.

I have three letters by me from three men killed in the war. One from Arthur Scott-Craven, poet and actor; one from my own brother; and one from Alan Seeger, the poet. One writes to say that he has asked to be relieved of a staff appointment so as to enable him to come in contact with the real thing; another writes from hospital while recovering from a serious wound to say that he must get back to the "front" as soon as possible, because they are doing big things out there; and Alan Seeger speaks of the love he feels for the men with whom his lot is cast, and those men were men of the Foreign Legion.

Numbers of people have wondered why so many soldiers wrote poetry. I think I can supply an answer.

I was the first to see Alan Seeger's MSS. I met him in Paris in 1913, and after a long conversation I abruptly said, "You have written poetry." He blushed and replied, "Yes, but no one has seen any of it." I said, "You are going to let me see it." He brought to my hotel in the morning his poems set up and ready for publication.

I was immensely impressed with the poems, and tried to get a well-known publisher in London to print Seeger's book, but it was turned down.

After Seeger's death, Messrs. Constable published his poems with an introduction by William Archer, who refers to him as a very rare spirit, and adds that Shelley, Byron, and Keats "would not have disdained his gift of song." The book was received with enthusiasm, and the manager of Brentano's shop in Paris told me that it was the biggest seller of its year.

Well, before the war Seeger was ashamed to admit that he wrote poetry; when he was at the "front" he proclaimed his passion for that great art. Julian Grenfell, another rare spirit, did the same, and fell with a verse on his lips. Ridicule could not touch and wither the spirits of men who were fighting, and any charge of effeminacy passed them by.

> "Whoso can look on Death will start at no shadows."

Were not Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Dante soldiers? No! men who fought in the war did not fight to end war, but they might have hoped, as the survivors have hoped, that the tiresome old heaven known before the war might be broken up. Is it broken up? No. The same old gods are enthroned, and they smile benignly upon us and disarm us with the crumbs they drop.


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The theory of Malthus, that war is a necessity because "there is a tendency in populations to increase beyond the means of subsistence," is terrible in its cynicism and not true; and if it was true then we ought to devise better means of "thinning down redundant populations."

The war has taught me one thing in particular among many things, and that one thing is that idealism is going to save the world. Only two days ago I listened to someone lecturing on "The League of Nations," and the speaker said there were two roads to choose -- Law and Force, but he never once dwelt on the way of Love, the necessity for idealism.

I know it is the common cry that Christianity has failed; but has it failed? It was negation, lack of vision and of faith, that brought about the last war, and it will bring about another war unless disinterestedness prevails among our leaders and is through them communicated to the people.

Law and Force! Have we not too long relied on these broken reeds? They have failed us and will continue to fail us unless we can add a dominating partner -- Love. The great characters are the great lovers, and the greatest character-builder is the Christian faith. St. Francis of Assisi was a great lover. "The omnivorous biped that wears breeches; -- the forked radish" -- Man, was loved by him even when loathsome with disease and mean in character.

I am sure that this degree of love was known by Alan Seeger and many soldiers at the "front."

Dr. Arnold of Rugby, the great maker of men rather than of scholars, once said in reply to some praise lavished on one of his clever pupils by whom he was not impressed : "Mere intellectual acuteness divested, as it is in too many cases, of all that is great, comprehensive, and good seems to me the very spirit of Mephistopheles."

Our training generally leads us to be pickers and choosers; and our insistence on humour at all costs often leads us to wound where we should love. I have met people who divided society into two classes -- the washed and the unwashed. For such as have very sensitive olfactory nerves it certainly must be pleasanter to walk with the washed; but as I and many others have proved during the war, the olfactory nerve can be led to endure and treat of no account that which at one time would have been particularly nauseating, and almost unendurable. I am a believer in, and a lover of, the common man; but do not misunderstand me, and imagine that I accept the doctrines of Karl Marx as the only or the best weapons to be used in the fight for progress. "Freedom broadens slowly down from precedent to precedent." The common man has much to learn, and the privileged classes much to unlearn: and our common need is to learn to love one another.


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