



**Filming "From The Manger To The Cross"
The First Moving Picture of the Life of Christ Made in the Land
Where he Lived and Died**

By Gene Gauntier

(Condensed from a 1927 reminiscence by a major player and scenarist of the film)

It was late spring in 1912 when our director Sidney Olcott returned from London with the additional actors needed for the production, including Helen Lindroth of the southern Kalem Company who was to play various female roles; eight experienced young English players; Sidney-Baber, who was cast for the role of Jesus at twelve and last but not most important, Mr. R. Henderson Bland, who would interpret the mature Christ.

The choice of Mr. Bland was most fortunate. Formerly leading man with Beerbohm Tree, he was an actor of fine quality, possessing a spirituality which eminently fitted him for the difficult role. I have never seen another man who could sustain the exaltation required for the role through days and weeks. When not engaged on a scene he did not mingle with the company, but prowled alone among the quaint corners of the old city, absorbing its colors, history and glamour. And once he donned the robes of the Man of Sorrow, he kept rigorously apart, rarely speaking, seemingly solitary and alone. To great extent this may be said of all the players in this drama. The tranquility and beauty, the new spiritual quality which entered into their work was most impressive to those who watched them.

And their work was not easy, for barring Mr. Bland, the boy Jesus, and me who played Mary the Mother, every actor played a number of roles and had to make a careful study of make-ups and costuming.

We started with the driving of the money-changers from the temple, a critical moment, for here, Mr. Bland made his first appearance before a moving-picture camera. We fairly held our breath as we watched him, but he had the good sense to forget that he was a popular London actor and to put himself unreservedly into the hands of the director.

So unchanged is the East, and especially Jerusalem, that when it came time for the rehearsals Ameen Zaroun, our faithful guide, went down to the Jaffa Gate and brought back half a dozen money-changers with their small square glass-covered tables containing their money, and installed them in the setting without change of make-up or props. They were as they had always been.

Those first scenes were made quickly – The Annunciation, the visits of the shepherds and the wise men, the appearance of the latter before Herod, and all scenes in the temple. Next we went to Bethlehem to take the arrival of Mary and Joseph at the inn, then out on the hills beyond Jerusalem to show the wise men on their way, the shepherds with their flocks. This brought us on the journey to the Sea of Galilee, and Nazareth where we were to make the first scene of the production, Mary as a girl, taken at "Mary's Well," which is still used by the women of Nazareth; the return to Nazareth from Egypt with Jesus, a lad of twelve.

Five scenes were made in Nazareth, three on the shores of Galilee, and for these eight scenes we traveled two hundred and forty miles over tortuous roads, under broiling sun, making the grueling trip in five days and breaking all previous records. I made the entire trip on horseback in twenty-one hours of actual riding time.



For this trip we took with us only our director, photographer, Ameen, Mr. Bland, the boy Jesus and five men to play the necessary roles. Our equipment consisted of two three-seated covered wagons, drawn by three shaggy ponies hitched abreast, and three riding horses, one for me, one for Ameen, and one used in turn by the other men when the crowded conditions in the wagons became unbearable. To the intolerable heat of the sun was added the misery of a strong east wind. But not even this daunted the spirit in the weird beauty of the journey and historic ground.

Back in Jerusalem we worked hard and fast to finish the production before the heat became unendurable. Swiftly, scene followed scene, the marriage at Cana, the miracles such as healing the lepers and the blind man, the stoning of the Magdalene, Mary, Martha, the Master of Bethany, and the Last Supper, those last fatal hours leading up to the betrayal. Then came the greatest event of all, the filming of that fateful journey to Calvary.

The day of the nerve-wracking work on the Via Dolorosa dawned clear and hot. The soldiers detailed by the Governor of Jerusalem were out early, and the streets of this main thoroughfare were roped off. High up in their windows out of the range of the camera or on the stone arches which joined the narrow walls, crowds of natives looked down curiously on the strange procession, the centurions on horseback, the men carrying ladders and the big inscription, the shouting insulting rabble, the three Marys and John the best beloved, and the tragic mournful figure in his royal robe of purple staggering beneath the cross.

The nuns of the Convent of St. Veronica, watched this scene from an arch above the passage, threw themselves to the floor weeping and sobbing. Their cries pierced the tumult of the crowd below, and as we rested for a moment while the camera was being set up farther down the street, the Mother Superior came out with a flask of wine which she insisted on Mr. Bland's drinking. We gratefully accepted her invitation to step within the convent walls and rest, and there in life-size figures was a replica of the scene we had just been enacting. On the day of the Crucifixion we sent a carriage for her, and she stayed near me all day, sitting with her arms about me, crooning to me, insisting that during my brief rests I lie with my head in her lap. To her I was Mary.

I take up Mr. Bland's striking record of his impression: "All Jerusalem had come out to the Hill of Travail, and never shall I forget the awful cries and moaning that greeted me as in the midst of the Roman soldiery I stepped into the eyes and hearts of the waiting multitude.

"Swiftly my hands were lashed and fastened to the cross. The legs were placed so that the ankles rested one above the other, the right foot and leg being straight down upon the timber, with the left leg bent and fastened about it. Ropes were bound tightly 'round my chest.

"Suddenly the sharp voice of the centurion stabbed my ears. As he spoke, the man commenced to pull and the cross, awkwardly, like a thing with no sense of direction, began to rear itself, and then suddenly with a crash the great symbol which was to carry the message of mercy throughout the ages dropped into the socket provided for it."

It was a terrible day for others than Mr. Bland. Mr. Olcott was a wreck physically and emotionally, and we all felt a terrific reaction from the strain.



The close of our stay in Jerusalem was fast approaching. Our passage out of Asia had been engaged and there remained but two more scenes to be taken in that city, the procession on the Mount of Olives and the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We accomplished the scene on the mountain with the crowds singing hosannas and waving palm branches as they followed the ass bearing Jesus, with the foal running beside, to the Golden City.

When they arrived, the picture makers found that anarchy had broken loose. A mob of angry Arabs and Turks awaited them, muttering threats and demanding *baksheesh* (presents of money). They had learned that this was a last scene and an important one, and their hold-up had been well timed. Mr. Olcott was not to be bluffed and gave them back in anger what they sent, but they pressed closer and knives flashed.

It was a dangerous moment, for Ameen, Sid and George [Hollister, the cameraman] faced them alone within the gate while the rest of our boys were with the procession some distance away on the outside. Here were a hundred or more avaricious and murderous Mohammedans who would dare to do anything. George grabbed his camera, and he, Sid and Ameen backed against the Wall of Jerusalem, covering the threatening mob with the revolvers they always carried. Ameen whispered to his native kavass who slipped through the crowd to the Governor. That worthy gentleman immediately caused soldiers to be sent to the rescue, the angry, muttering crowd was dispersed and our people were conducted to their hotel. The Governor strongly advised us to attempt no further work and to leave Jerusalem as quickly as possible. He feared that a religious revolt was imminent and that in a few days he might not be able to control the people.

Reluctantly, Olcott acceded. The missing scene was not worth bloodshed and mutiny. So we packed hurriedly for flight, leaving the most of our effects as they were. Quietly and unobtrusively we shook the dust of Jerusalem from our feet and a few hours later were in Jaffa. From Jaffa we sailed for Alexandria where we changed to a steamship for Trieste. I was to sail alone for New York on the *Mauretania*, June 21st, so we settled down in London for a few days, and here I wrote several scenarios for the Kalem players to produce during my six weeks absence in America.

Then came long days in the projection room of the Kalem offices in New York where FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS was run-off dozens of times. A cutting man sat at my elbow taking notes and nearby were Mr. Long and Mr. Marion who paid fitting tribute to George Hollister for the beautiful photographic results. Not only was Hollister's work admirable, but not a single retake had been necessary, and we now had a cut only a few thousand feet to the five-reel picture. I felt that quotations from the Bible were both simple and adequate for titles, preserving the spirit of the picture. I searched the Scriptures diligently for the most effective verses.

Somehow, in the brief interlude spent in the Kalem projection room I sensed that all was not right with the Kalem officials. I have often wondered whether this grew out of the high-handed manner in which we had gone ahead taking the religious picture with the Man of God portrayed in the flesh instead of as a light or a shadow as ordered by Mr. Marion.

Whatever the cause of the cold disapproval which greeted us, after the first public showing of our work in the auditorium of the John Wanamaker store in New York City, which occurred early in November, 1912, we heaped coals of fire on their heads, for FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS held the record as a moneymaker for many years; in fact, I doubt



if any picture even to this time has yielded such a profit on the amount invested, for at a low estimate it has drawn thirty times the cost of production.

And the paltry cost was somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand dollars. The good management and economy of our director Mr. Olcott and our photographer Mr. Hollister were largely responsible for this low production cost, but I must not forget the hard work, the loyalty of the players who contributed carpentry, painting, decorating, and costume-making. The picture was a heavy factor in making millionaires of the Kalem officials, and even now as I write fifteen years after it was made, it is still in demand by churches and religious societies.

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