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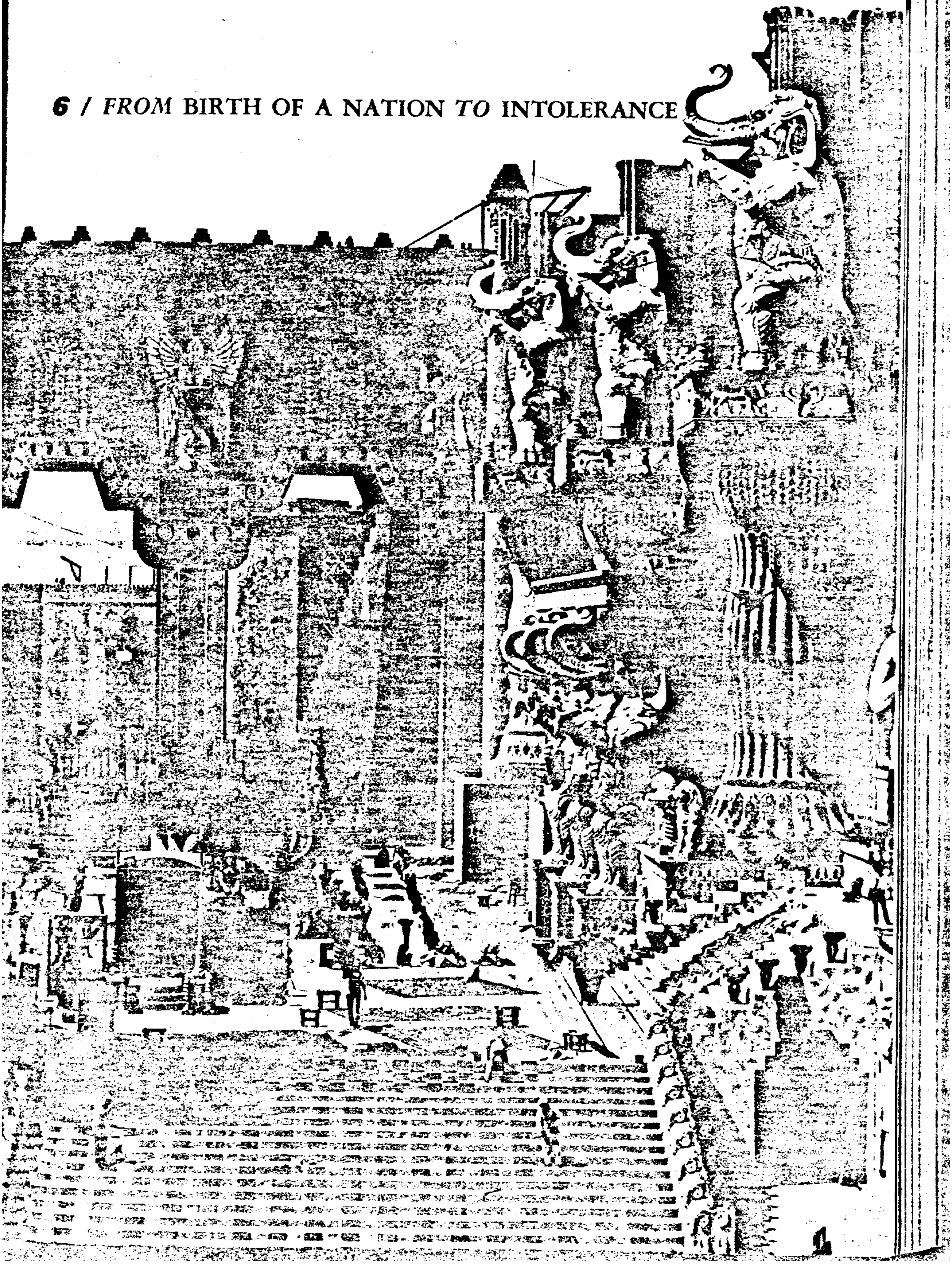
6 / *FROM* BIRTH OF A NATION *TO* INTOLERANCE



From the solid training of the D. W. Griffith studios spread the backbone of the American film industry. Like most great artists, Griffith was besieged by people eager to work with him and be taught by him. For a while it was enough to mention Griffith's name as a former employer to secure the best jobs in the business. Gradually the privilege became abused, and eventually something more was required than a day's extra work on a Griffith picture.

The directors, cameramen, and players who had been carefully nurtured and developed within the Griffith family carried his teaching with them when they joined other companies. The films of this period often show unmistakable signs of the Griffith influence. Erich von Stroheim, Sidney Franklin, Elmer Clifton, Donald Crisp, Raoul Walsh, Lloyd Ingraham, Paul Powell, Allan Dwan, Tod Browning, Edward Dillon, Joseph Henabery . . . these are a few of the directors whose careers were shaped by Griffith.

Joseph Henabery's career demonstrates clearly the benefits of working for this extraordinary man. As he points out, Griffith did not systematically instruct his employees in the art of making pictures. His influence was applied unconsciously. He demanded a great deal from those who worked with him, and his associates were forced to learn their job quickly—or lose it. These young men, initiated in the deep end, found the experience an immense advantage when they began to work on their own.

Joseph Henabery quickly became one of America's top directors. He worked with Douglas Fairbanks and made one of the best of his early pictures, *His Majesty the American.* He directed Mary Miles Minter, Roscoe Arbuckle, and Rudolph Valentino (*A Sainted Devil*), and he made Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.'s, first, *Stephen Steps Out.*

Even when he had slipped from his position among the premier directors, Henabery continued to demonstrate his artistic integrity and his visual flair. His *River Woman,* photographed by Ray June, was made for Gotham, a poverty-row company, in 1928. It achieved the miracle of transforming an ordinary story with no production or entertainment value into a work of fine observation, sensitive playing, and intricate camera movement.

Henabery played Abraham Lincoln in *The Birth of a Nation* and was an assistant director and actor on *Intolerance.* His description of the early days of the industry throw new light on a forgotten era.

JOSEPH HENABERY:[1] When I was seventeen, my family and I moved to southern California. I started work for a railroad—a link in a transcontinental system. This was in 1905. I worked for the railroad for eight years, starting in the correspondence-filing section. Here I handled a great deal of highly confidential information.

One day the man in charge of this section fell victim to a nervous breakdown and I was asked to dig out some urgently needed information. The correspondence interested me, and I could remember a lot of it. So I came up with what they wanted. After several weeks, the boss decided that nobody knew the work as well as I did and, despite the problem of my youth, he gave me the job—at eighty-five dollars per month! In 1907, that was tremendous, and it created quite a storm.

[1] *Interviewed in Hollywood, Dec. 1964.*

This pay hassle developed problems. I was promoted during the ensuing years, but they never allowed me the pay rise my new jobs merited. Finally the situation got under my skin. I began to wonder what to do next.

About this time, motion pictures were being shown in hole-in-the-wall movie houses. I often dropped in for half an hour at noontime. Most of the pictures were pretty bad. Comparing their quality with the plays I had seen in the legitimate theater, I found it hard to believe that the movies could really be considered entertainment.

By the time I was twenty-five, in 1913, I had seen about four hundred legitimate performances. Sometimes I got a kick out of suping [being a supernumerary] with a grand opera or a spectacle company. I enjoyed the backstage action and atmosphere, and the contact with theatrical people.

Another of my after-work activities was membership in clubs or groups for young people. Before there was any acceptable entertainment apart from the theater, many of these groups presented amateur plays. I was in a number of them, and I couldn't help comparing our mediocre things with professional shows. The club people accepted the old-fashioned declamatory methods directed by the coach, a professional actor of the old school. Finally I could take it no longer. An upheaval took place and the coach quit. Now the club had a date to fulfill, but no director. They asked me to take over. I continued to produce and direct amateur shows for some time afterward.

During my later days at the railroad, I bought a motion-picture trade journal, which had departments covering all phases of production. I studied the ads and got to be able to judge the size and importance of the various companies. At this time, they were all out East.

Then, in one issue, I was thrilled to read of a company moving out to California. It wasn't long before others followed. I started thinking about the movies as an occupation. But I could not figure, though, that it would be smart to give up my good job for an uncertain future.

Like most of the older residents of Hollywood, I was annoyed by the invasion of the movies. I remember coming home to Hollywood on vacation. I was walking down the street when I saw a crowd of people ahead of me. A fellow stuck out his arm and said, "Hold it. We're shooting."

It was a comedy outfit. The actors wore comic clothes and the make-up was very exaggerated—a vivid pink, much heavier than most stage make-ups I had seen.

I watched them work. The action was very broad—pratfalls—and the scenes were so short and unrelated that I couldn't make head nor tail of what was going on. I was not impressed.

These first, noisy, uninhibited movie people were soon joined by other picture companies. On the whole, these were quieter. They were also affluent. They rented some of the fine homes, they owned cars, they dressed well, and they spent money like water. And, quite obviously, they enjoyed their work.

The movies steadily improved in quality. Now there could be no doubt; they really were going to amount to something. Again I gave real thought to my problem. I balanced the value of a secure job against the haphazard life of the movies.

I said to myself that this was a developing business. "And it's here, right here in Hollywood. Now if I was back East, and the least bit adventurous, I'd probably

get on my bicycle and race off to Hollywood. But here it is on my doorstep—and on the doorstep of everyone else in southern California—yet we're doing nothing about it."

I resolved to give the movies a try.

When I announced that I was quitting, my boss at the railroad was amazed.

"What do you plan to do?" he asked.

I was too embarrassed to tell him. I simply said that I didn't know.

He gave me a puzzled look. "Why don't you think things over for a few days?"

"No," I said quickly. "My mind is made up." I knew that if I started to think things over, I would back out.

So, at twenty-six, I made the break. I went down and mingled with the extras at Universal's open lot on Gower and Sunset—these lots were called bullpens. I found out that as a rule the lot was empty by noon because the extra people they needed had been engaged earlier in the day. But I just had a feeling that eventually somebody might need someone in the afternoon . . .

And that's what happened. I was out there at noon, all by myself, and I saw a wide-eyed, frantic casting director stick his head out of his office door. There was nobody there but me. He started back into his office and I guess he had an afterthought.

"Hey you—have you got a dress suit?"

"I sure have."

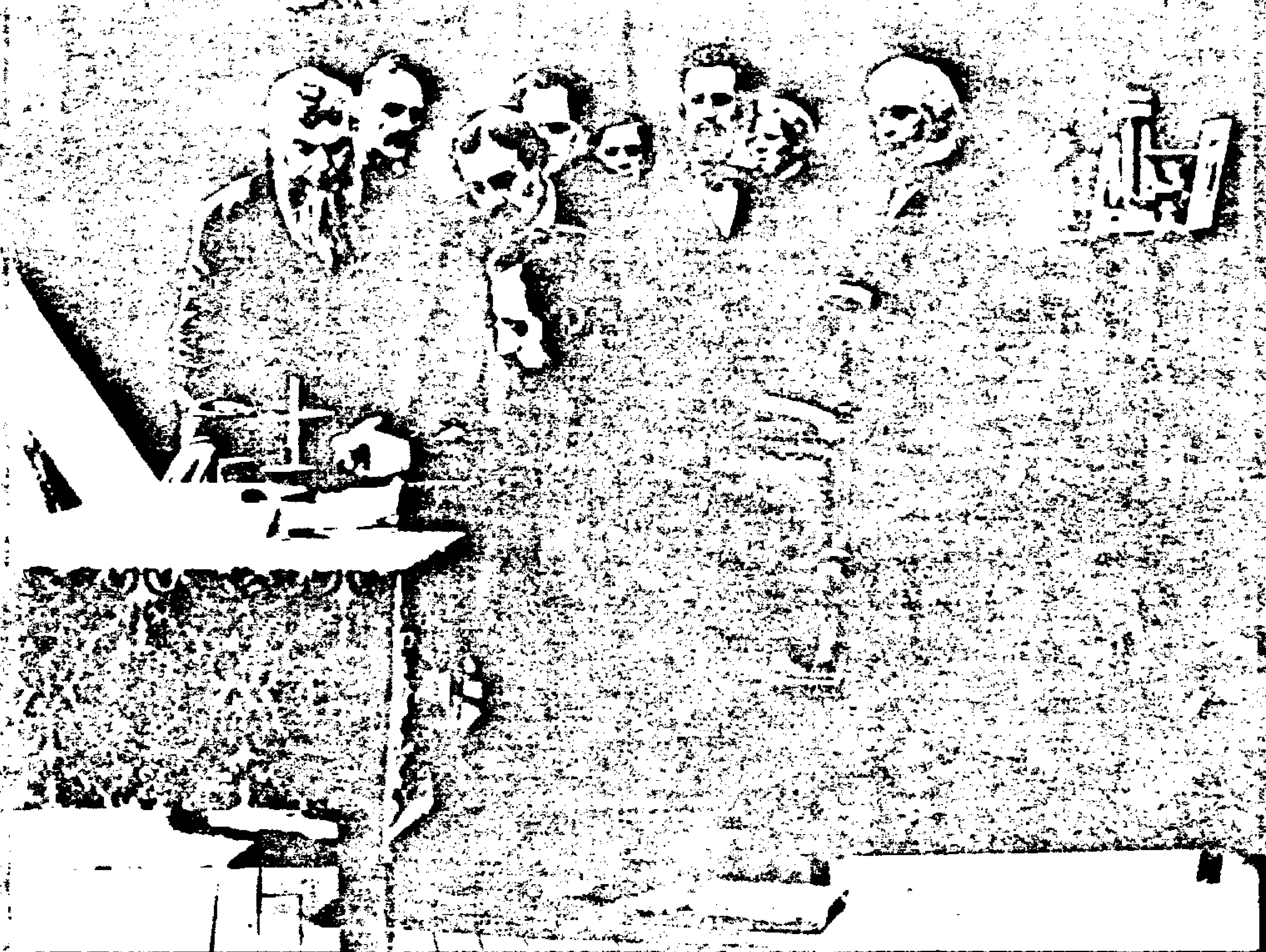
"How long would it take you to get it?"

"About fifteen minutes."

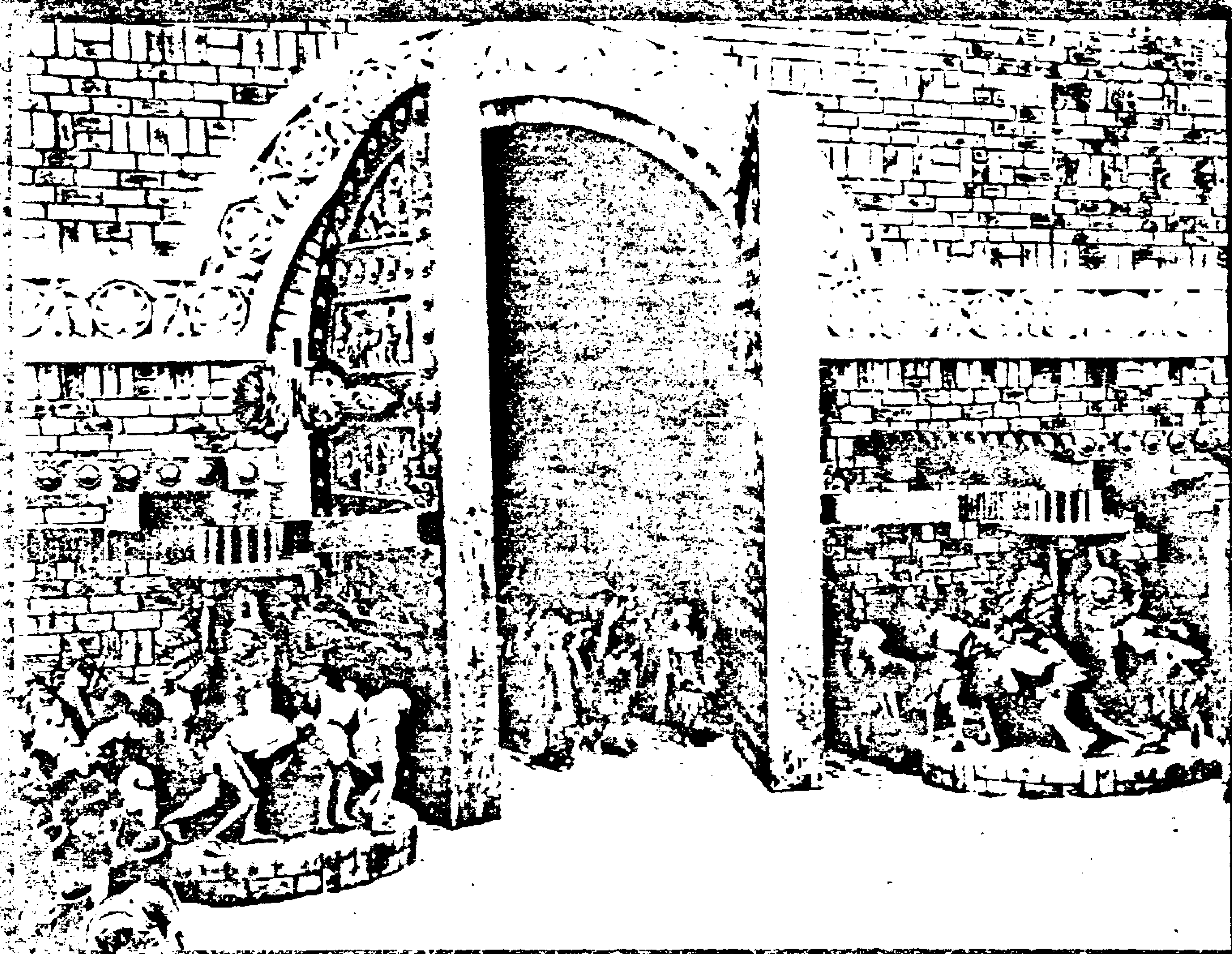
"Go get it."

I ran. I lived up the hill a ways, and I ran up there, got my dress clothes, and ran back. I had cracked the ice.

Joseph Henabery.



This rare still, showing Joseph Henabery as Lincoln, his face raised by planes, was rejected on photographic grounds from the publicity material of The Birth of a Nation.



Magnificent art direction with no art director: the gates of Babylon constructed by Huck Wortman for Intolerance.

A few days later, he came up to me again and said, "I can use you." I went along to a set where an old guy who was known as the Dean of Directors—Otis Turner—was working. At that time he was very badly crippled with arthritis. He was a little hunched-up guy, a short fellow, and he was directing a thing about Italian peasants.

In those days, around 1913, no one would tell you what you were doing. They just shoved some clothes at you and said, "Put these on." You were a piece of scenery, that was all. You didn't have to have any talent. All you had to be able to do was to move if you were asked to.

They gave me an Italian peasant's outfit. I had my make-up with me, so I thought I'd put on a big mustache like the Italian peasants I'd seen on the stage and in paintings. Strangely enough, this seemed to get over all right. As a matter of fact, I was pulled up from way in the back to way up front. I had no part to play, but I was in with all the principals, and I followed one of my fundamental rules: when anyone's talking, pay them a little attention. Follow the conversation around. And I had the satisfaction of hearing Otis Turner say to his assistant, "Who is that guy?"

After that, whenever Otis Turner started a picture, I was on the list. In those days, of course, a picture started every week, maybe more often than that. And everybody said, "You're in. This guy is the king bee of the lot."

One afternoon when I wasn't working, I went down to the city and saw a picture that D. W. Griffith had made—*The Avenging Conscience*. I had very little idea who Griffith was—but the picture knocked me right out of my seat. It was the most wonderful movie I had ever seen. Compared to all the pictures I had seen previously—and I'd seen many one- and two-reelers—I thought this was it.

When I was next at Universal, I was talking about this picture and its director. And one of the fellows said, "He's out in Hollywood now—just came out to start work here."

I went down the next afternoon to make sure, and there it was—the Griffith lot. I reasoned that if you use extras one place you use them another, so I went back to Universal to pick up the stuff I had at the studio. One of the fellows said, "Why, you're nuts. You've got a start here. You're in."

"I don't care," I said. "I'm interested in working for that studio."

About this time, Griffith was making preparations to shoot *The Clansman*—later *The Birth of a Nation*—and he had a lot of his stock people tied up in the picture. That meant that the other directors making one- and two-reelers on the lot had to kind of grope around to get their players.

So it was only two or three days after I'd been out there that a director came into the bullpen and said, "Hey you! Have you ever worked in pictures?"

I didn't tell him my whole life story. I said, "Yeah, sure."

"Whereabouts?"

"Universal."

"Come on in with me. I think we can use you."

I followed him to where the fellow in charge of production had his office. The director said, "He looks the type to me."

It turned out they thought I had an Irish grin—and they wanted me to play a young Irish policeman. And that was the lead in the picture!

The first fellow I worked for was Fred Kelsey. Then I did pictures for directors

like Eddie Dillon, Christy Cabanne, Frank Powell, and a man we called Sheriff Maclay, who always did the westerns—he'd played the sheriff with Broncho Billy.

If you'd had two or three years of motion pictures you were a pioneer, a veteran. You'd really been through the mill. You might have made a hundred and some pictures in that time—a one-reeler could be made in a day.

One day I saw a fellow going around the lot wearing a Lincoln make-up. I said to myself, "My, that is a *horrible* make-up."

Somebody said to me, "Griffith's looking for someone to play Abraham Lincoln in *The Clansman.*" I thought to myself, get him to look for me, too!

I had got to know the fellow in charge of production, Frank Woods, and I said, "Mr. Woods, I've seen some people going around here in Lincoln make-up. Is Mr. Griffith looking for someone to play the part? If so, I think I can put on a better make-up than any I've seen around here . . ."

He said that he'd speak to Mr. Griffith about it. In the meantime, I went down to the public library, looked up several books on Lincoln, and I studied his pictures. At home, I tried out a Lincoln make-up.

I heard nothing from Frank Woods, so I tackled him again. He'd forgotten—but he went in to see Griffith immediately, and then came out and called to me: "Come on over—I want him to see you."

Griffith had seen me at rehearsals, and he knew that I'd had some experience. He looked me over from head to foot. I was taller than average, thinner in those days than I am now, and I had a long face. Everybody seems to think that Lincoln had a very long face—which he hadn't. His cheekbones were very wide.

Griffith looked at me and said: "Have you ever made up for Lincoln?"[2]

I said: "Yes, sir." I didn't tell him I'd only made up in private! He called his assistant over. "Get the Lincoln outfit and let this fellow make up."

I worked most all of the afternoon, putting on the make-up. When I came out, people stared at me in amazement; it was the dead come to life. I went over to the open stage where Griffith was working, and got into a position where he could see me.

In those days, a stage was a large platform open to the sky. Overhead were muslin diffusers, which could be drawn across the set to soften the direct glare of the sun.

I just stood on this stage, waiting. Every so often, as Griffith worked with people, he would turn, study me in great detail, and then go back to his work. He did this four or five times. Meanwhile, I was standing there in the boiling hot sun, with heavy clothes and padding in certain places, with a wig, a false nose, spirit gum, hair—I was just roasting.

But he didn't say anything to me, so I thought he didn't care much about it and I left the stage and took off the make-up. Next day, I was out on the lot again and the assistant came up and said, "Where were you yesterday?"

"I was on the stage there."

"Mr. Griffith wanted to see you!"

"He saw me half a dozen times."

"Well, go and put that make-up on again."

I didn't mind; they were paying me five dollars every time I put it on. Once

[2] *Griffith had himself played the part on the stage.*

more I went down to where Griffith was working, and darn me if the same thing didn't happen *again*. I said to myself, "I don't understand this man. He looks at me and says nothing, and the day is almost gone." What could I do for him, just standing there? I decided I couldn't do anything so I left the stage and took the make-up off once more.

Oh, did I get a bawling out for that! Oh, boy. Well, he didn't ask me to put it on again. I didn't hear any more about it; I guessed I'd queered that one.

About two weeks later I heard they were erecting a set—the Ford's Theater scene. I felt kind of bad about it because I'd have very much liked to have done the part. I didn't know how much of a part it was going to be—I knew it wasn't very large, but it was an important part. When the set was finished an assistant came to me and said, "Put on the Lincoln make-up tomorrow morning and be ready at eight o'clock."

Oh, boy! That was great—but it meant murder, for one reason. In those days the dressing rooms were little sheds, with no protection against cold. At this time of year it was awful cold in the morning, and it was very difficult to work putty with ice-cold hands. I allowed myself plenty of time; I got there at five a.m.

You know the distorted mirrors they have in fairgrounds? Well, the only mirror in this little shed was like one of those. When you look at yourself one way, your nose is nice and straight. Go over this way, and the nose is crooked. Now which one is right?

But worst of all was the cold. I had a candle, and a spoon to heat the putty, but it still took a very long time to put the make-up on. Eight o'clock came and I wasn't anywhere near ready.

Assistants came bawling me out, but I said, "I can't help this—I've been working on it for hours." Finally, around eight thirty, Griffith himself appeared at the door of the shed.

"I thought," he said, "that you were to be ready at eight o'clock

"I'd like to have been," I said.

"You were supposed to be ready at eight o'clock," he repeated.

"Mr. Griffith," I said, "I got here at five o'clock. Feel my hands. Do you think you could melt putty with those hands?"

I was sore. I felt imposed upon. I didn't give a damn whether he told me to get off the lot or not. Griffith was surprised; he looked at me with a little understanding, and he said, "Make it as soon as you can."

So I came out onto the stage as soon as I could. The first scenes were not on the Ford's Theater set but in an office of the White House where I was to do a scene with Ralph Lewis, who played Senator Stoneman.

I had no instructions, no script, no idea what I was supposed to do. By this time I was full of the Lincoln story. I had read many books about him, and I knew his physical characteristics, his habits and everything else. And I sat in the chair on my tailbone, sort of hunchbacked. Griffith looked at me with a frown.

"Don't sit like that," he said.

Now at this time Griffith was such an outstanding figure in the motion-picture business that he was surrounded by a great many yes men. Everything he did, it was: "Yes Mr. Griffith, yes Mr. Griffith." No one was contradictory. By nature, I'm a little combative. I've a lot of Irish in me, and if I'm right I don't mind speaking my piece.

So I said, "Mr. Griffith, I'm sitting in the most frequently mentioned position that Abraham Lincoln sat in. They say that he sat down on his tailbone, with his knees up, like this . . ."

Now Griffith couldn't soak himself in details about every one of his characters, as I could with Lincoln. And he realized that I knew my facts.

"Get a board," he ordered. "Get a board and put it under his feet. Get two boards—make his knees come up high . . ."

He knew that you have to exaggerate sometimes in order to convey an idea.

His attitude changed. He began to relax. He looked a little happier. I think he felt maybe he hadn't picked as much of a lemon as he'd thought. Now he described a part of the scene in which I was supposed to sign some papers on the desk.

"May I say something, Mr. Griffith?" I said. "The books on Lincoln say that when he wrote, or read, it was customary for him to wear glasses."

"Well, have you got them?"

"Yes, sir." I'd dug up an old-fashioned pair of steel-rimmed specs. I showed them to him.

"Use them," he said.

So when the paper was put down I made it part of my business to fish around for my glasses, to take my time putting them on, and then to sign the paper.

Well, now he's happy. He realizes that I have studied the character, and that I know something about the period. When it came to the Ford's Theater scenes, he'd tell me what he was going to do in the long shots, and I'd tell him what I'd read that Lincoln would be doing.

Griffith's attitude was simple: "If somebody has made an effort to study his part, then I'm going to make use of what knowledge he has acquired."

When the Lincoln part was finished, I did thirteen bit parts. In one sequence I played in a group of renegade colored people, being pursued by white people—and I was in both groups, chasing myself through the whole sequence.

When the picture was finished, they put me in stock. That was a promotion. They didn't have much money in those days—they were darn near skidding along on their bottoms, that's what the truth of it was, until the big showing here. And you know the history of that.

I'll never forget that first big showing. It was here in Los Angeles, and the picture was still called *The Clansman*. The audience was made up largely of professional people and it was our first big showing—the whole industry's first big showing.

I have never heard at any exhibition—play, concert, or anything—an audience react at the finish as they did at the end of *The Clansman*. They literally tore the place apart. Why were they so wildly enthusiastic? Because they felt in their inner souls that something had really grown and developed—and this was a kind of fulfillment. From that time on the picture had tremendously long runs at high seat prices.

I shudder when I see bits of that film shown at twenty-four frames a second with people hopping around because they're fifty per cent overspeed.[3] It really shocks me. I admit some people are able to make adjustments in their mind, especially those in the business, but young audiences have no conception that there

[3] The Birth of a Nation *was shot at camera speeds ranging from twelve to eighteen frames a second.*

was ever a difference in film speed. They just think it's comic. They cannot conceive that the picture has any merit at all.

When Griffith came back from his big opening in New York, the whole plan for making feature pictures through the Triangle Corporation was in his mind. He started immediately setting up companies to make them.

I was rehearsing with Douglas Fairbanks at Fine Arts—the Griffith apex of Triangle—when I got word that Mr. Griffith wanted to see me. I went over, and he began talking about an idea for improving a picture that he'd made earlier as a sort of potboiler. It was called *The Mother and the Law* and it was a little, cheap, quickie picture.

One of his ideas for improvement was to incorporate a grand reception scene, such as our New York Four Hundred used to have. In those days the Four Hundred was made up of people of great wealth, such as railroad tycoons, and they spent enormous sums on their receptions. Griffith wanted one of these as a prologue to *The Mother and the Law*.

Knowing that I could dig in and find things, he wanted me to do some research on how to conduct an affair of this sort. He wanted a lot of footmen, powdered wigs, knee breeches, and all that sort of thing. I left the rehearsals and started trying to get the data—but found I'd hit a really tough snag.

I found out about the lavish expenditure, and about the clowns who attended these affairs. But I couldn't get much idea about how it was conducted. Then I had a brainwave. A lot of very wealthy people came out from New York to spend the winter in Pasadena, and many of them spent their time at one of the big hotels—the Green or the Maryland. I found a lady, the hostess at the Maryland, who had been a secretary for some of these people, and she gave me the most perfect outline.

"To start with," she said, "you're off on the wrong foot. They don't have flunkies in powdered wigs. They wear uniforms, knee breeches, and tails, maybe with some silver lace, but no fluffy frills—and their hair is trimmed."

I wrote down pages of notes for Mr. Griffith, and drew designs of the uniforms she'd described. We figured they would cost forty dollars apiece—that would be a hundred and fifty today. Griffith told me to order them and to find some boys that they'd fit. And that's how I started to do research for the film that was amplified into *Intolerance*.

No sooner had I returned to my rehearsals with Fairbanks than somebody came over and said: "You're not going to play in the Fairbanks picture—stay with Griffith." He wanted some more research.

One Sunday, some of Griffith's key people were called to the projection room, where he was to screen the old *Mother and the Law*. I'll never forget that day. He had about eight people there, including Frank Woods, head of the scenario department, George Siegmann, and George (later Andre) Beranger, who were both assistants. The projection room was a little flat-roofed place, and I remember the rain poured on the roof. Thank heaven we didn't have to worry about sound, because we'd never have heard anything the way it rained that day.

I'd never seen the picture before. Some of the others had. When it was finished, the usual thing: "Oh, Mr. Griffith, it's marvelous! It's wonderful!" It's this, it's that. Gradually, they left the place and went off in the rain. I sort of hung back, because I didn't want to air my feelings in front of all those people. It wouldn't

be a very nice thing to do, and it would only serve to make him resist an idea. Anyway, I didn't want to put myself in the humiliating position of trying to tell him something, because he knew so much more than I did that there was just no comparison.

When they'd all gone, he said, "Well? Now what about you?"

The Mother and the Law was a tearjerker. The principal characters were very appealing, but some of the settings were shoddy. I told him that there were four or five things that bothered me.

"To begin with, when Bobby Harron is taken to be executed, he is accompanied by a chaplain, and the outfit they've provided for him is not an outfit that any American priest ever wears. You have the tabs of a French curé. It would get a laugh from all the Catholics in the country."

He was startled. He didn't know the difference. "Do you think we could get the right outfit?" he asked.

I was lucky. In Los Angeles I found a Catholic priest who had been a chaplain at San Quentin. I told him the whole story.

"Why, I'd be glad to help you," he said. "I'll come out and I'll stand by and tell you how certain things are done. I'd like to see it done right. You can use my vestments if it would help."

I told Mr. Griffith and he was delighted. We brought the priest up and reshot all that part of the picture. And there were a few other details I mentioned, and he fixed those. So I felt I had played quite an important part. Most people in the studio were unaware of how these changes came about, and I wasn't likely to blab my mouth off—I'm waiting until this day and age to do that!

Griffith then began to enlarge his ideas. He began to get more and more grandiose notions. He got involved with the idea of Babylon and the St. Bartholomew Massacre and the Crucifixion. These eras provided a contrast between the activities of the rich and powerful, and the intolerance practiced on the poor and helpless. Finally, he asked me for material on each of these epochs.

You wouldn't think you could find as many books on Babylon and Assyria as I found. I ended up with a shelf about fifteen feet long, crammed with books. Griffith would ask me, "Now what kind of a chariot would we use for the year of Belshazzar's Feast?"

And I'd have to go through book after book and put stickers in. There were so many plates and illustrations and descriptions that I couldn't keep it straight. I decided to buy two more copies of each book, so that where there were pictures on both sides of a page, I would be able to cut them up and arrange them in a scrapbook. There would be sections for armor, chariots, cooking utensils, and so on.

But when the business manager of the studio found out that I was buying two more sets of books and spending all this money—oh, he blew his top.

"Listen," I said. "This is the cheapest way to do it. If I had those illustrations photographed, the cost would be a great deal higher."

He wasn't satisfied, and he went to Griffith about it. So I told Griffith the same thing—I told him it was the only way we could assemble the stuff in its proper order.

"Go ahead and get them," he said. "Don't pay any attention to him."

The scrapbook was a mammoth affair. At first, Griffith didn't think it was

too good, but as he began to ask for things I'd consult it and say: "You can make a choice on some of these things here." He'd flip through and say: "No—these pages here . . ." It got to the point where he was carrying the scrapbook around under his arm. I often wonder what happened to it. I would love to own that scrapbook now. . . .

I would contact anybody I thought would be able to help me. A rabbi who helped on the Jewish period was the father of Carmel Myers, who came out to Triangle as a result.

The greatest authority on the backgrounds and costumes of the Jewish period was a French artist called Tissot. He published a set of four beautiful books, in color, of paintings and drawings that he'd made in the Holy Land. We followed carefully the garments that he painted in his *Life of Christ*. I had many books relating to the period, and I couldn't find any equal to his. He went into details about what a phylactery looked like. He'd paint close-ups of it, and of all the things that were part of the Jewish faith. Strangely enough, this artist had been known in France as a great painter of the nude figure, until something happened in his life and he became religious, and the great authority on the life of Christ.

All the time the picture's being shot, I'm not only researching—I'm working as an assistant and playing Admiral Coligny in the French period, or one of the old Pharisees in the Jewish period. I was in the parts that were remade of *The Mother and the Law*. No one else worked with me on research until the last month, when I was working day and night, and a man by the name of R. Ellis Wales came in. I was on the set all the time and couldn't cope with the research any more. Most of the basic material was assembled, however.

As I saw what Griffith was shooting, I began to ask myself some questions: Where do we go from here? How can we make a picture with all this stuff we've been shooting? How are we going to fit all these sets we've built into the little *Mother and the Law*?

I couldn't see it. I thought it was a great waste of effort, talent, and money to try to squeeze everything into the one picture. I hinted to Griffith something about what was bothering me—and handed him several novels set in Babylon.

Well, he's a pretty wise guy. One Monday morning, with everyone ready for rehearsals in the special room built for rehearsing, he came in. "Well," he said, "I thought until yesterday that maybe Hanabery was right." He called me Hanabery. "But now I know he's all wrong."

That, I thought, is a nice way to tell me to shut my mouth. But that, in effect, was what he wanted me to do now—keep quiet. The others in the room had no idea what he meant—only I knew. He had a habit of speaking indirectly. This was his way of telling me he was going ahead with his ideas.

But I'll say this. When the picture was finished, and he was in the throes of cutting, he came out of the projection room one night. He had his old hat pulled down over his eyes. He said, "Well, I wish I'd made a Babylonian picture."

Frank "Huck" Wortman was our chief carpenter, set builder, and stage mechanic. He'd do something for forty cents that today would cost four million. I can remember the streets of Jerusalem, with the archways. Huck would take thin boards, put a rope on the scantlings and bend them down, then plasterers would get in and plaster it—and there you had your archway, beautifully shaped.

The backgrounds of *Intolerance* were probably the finest job of set building that has ever been done in motion pictures. But we had one problem. The boys we had could paint a set, but they couldn't age it or do anything to give it character.

So one day Griffith came up to me and said: "You know about the San Francisco Exposition?"

"Yes," I said. "I was up there."

"Do you remember the interior of the Doge's Palace in the Italian section?"

"Yes, I remember it very well."

"I want you to go up to San Francisco—see if you can find any of the people who worked on it. See if you can get them down here."

The exposition was long since over, and the people who worked on it had left. I noticed a number of plaster shops around town—shops which made art objects in plaster of Paris—and here I got most of my leads. The shops were run by Italians, and eventually I tracked down three of the craftsmen who had worked on the Italian section. I made a deal with them: "You're going to come to Hollywood," I said. "I'll pay you so much a week. I'll pay your fare, and I'll guarantee you so many months' work."

I brought down two sculptors and a painter. I was warned before I left that the painter was an awful lush—but, boy, what an artist! He was the man who had done some of the beautiful aging work that Griffith had noticed. He wasn't an Italian; he was actually a Frenchman and became known as Frenchie.

He was like a fine scene painter, except that he was working on a different canvas—a plaster wall. We built big scaffolds so that he could get up high and make the walls of Babylon looked aged. He was so proficient that some of the other painters, who had been around for years, used to sneak over to the lot, and I'd see them peeking through, watching this fellow. They had never realized what a man could do with a brush.

But I had quite a time with this character. Every so often he'd go off on a bat and wouldn't show up at all. When he finally appeared, I would tackle him. "Frenchie," I'd say, "you're putting me in one awful spot. They spent a great deal of money to send me up to San Francisco to bring you down here—and they want you to do the job. You're letting me down. They're blaming me for this . . ." They weren't, of course, but I had to lay it on pretty thick.

"Oh, Meester Joe," he'd say, "it no happen again. So sorry."

He'd go back up and do some marvelous work, but pretty soon he'd be off on a bender again. The reason he got drunk so often was because we paid him more than he was used to.

One of the other guys I brought down from San Francisco was put in charge of our plaster workshop. We didn't have a plaster shop when he arrived, but he developed one, and he developed lots of people to work in it. He was a wonderful sculptor, and he used to make models in clay to show Griffith what he had in mind. All those things in Babylon—the lions, the elephants, and all the other statuary—were the work of these men.

Griffith was very keen on those elephants. He wanted one on top of each of the eight pedestals in Belshazzar's palace. I searched through all my books. "I'm sorry," I said, "I can't find any excuse for elephants. I don't care what Doré or any other Biblical artist has drawn—I can find no reason for putting elephants

up there. To begin with, elephants were not native to this country. They may have known about them, but I can't find any references."

Finally, this fellow Wales found someplace a comment about the elephants on the walls of Babylon, and Griffith, delighted, just grabbed it. He very much wanted elephants up there!

An important part of research is logical deduction. Should you have great timbered halls in Babylon? No. Why not? Because there is no place in the area where such timbers could be found.

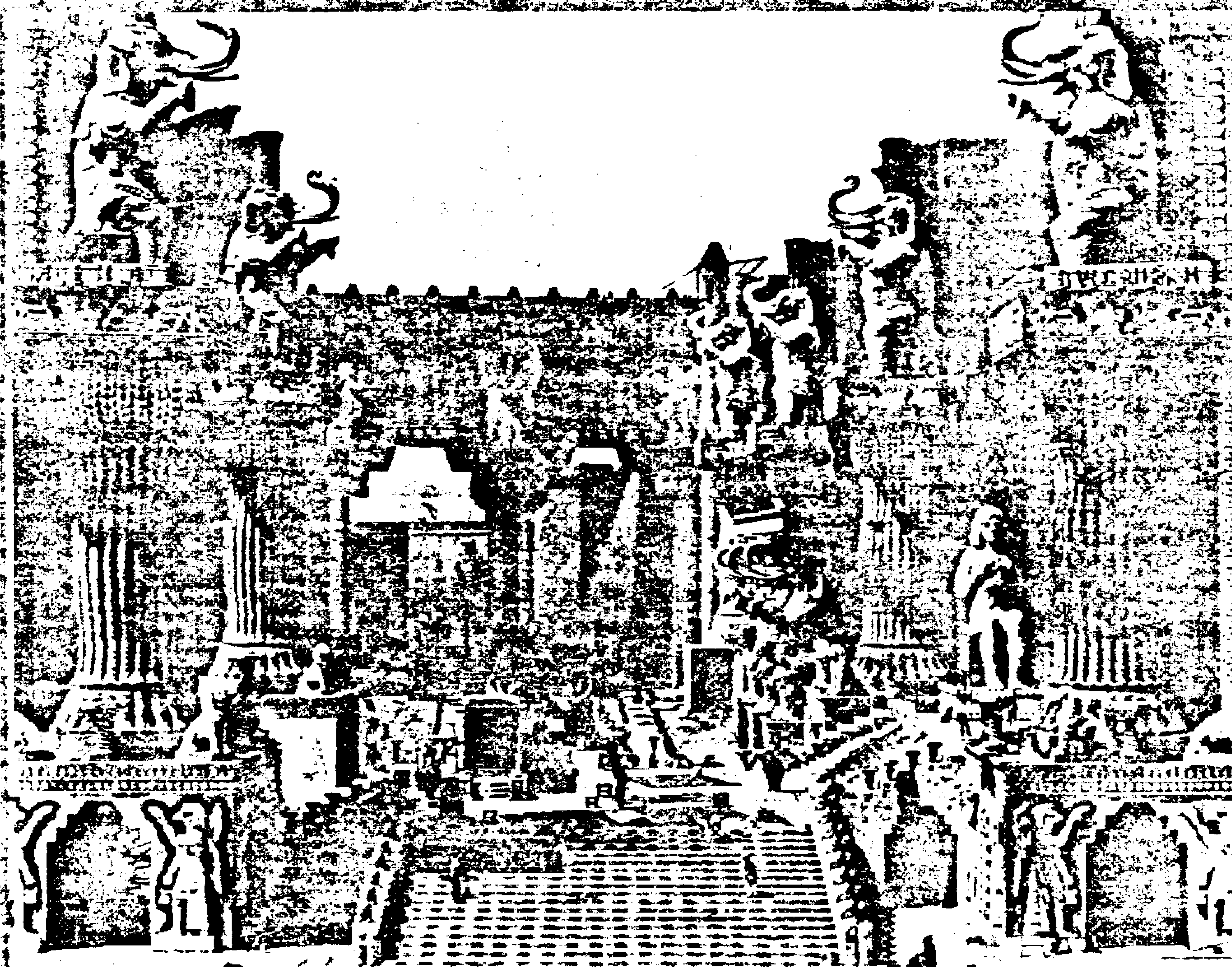
The only time I really got stuck was when Griffith asked me for a Babylonian beerhall. "I don't think I've ever seen an illustration of one," I said. "I've seen the equivalent of an Egyptian beerhall, but not a Babylonian one." I had to research into Egyptian history in order to correlate my facts—to see where something might have spread from one country to the other. Finally, I told Griffith I could make one that would be acceptable. "We'll cut up great palms, and they'll be the pedestals for the tables . . ."

"That'll be fine," he said. There was little authentic justification, but you might say it would have been appropriate.

One of the many things I admired about Griffith was his appreciation of realism. "Tomorrow," he used to say, "I want to shoot on such-and-such a set. See that they get it ready." So I'd go over and look at it, and try and make it look natural. I'd get the boys to plant weeds and vegetation in certain places, to make it look as though the building had been there for years.

It delighted me to have Griffith look with approval on it. He never said anything—but I could tell when he was satisfied. When anybody did something on their own initiative, he would really enjoy it.

D. W. Griffith directing the ballroom scene from Intolerance.



Carpenters sweep the floor before shooting starts on the massive Babylon set.

[illegible] Griffith's Judean episode of Intolerance: Howard Gaye as Christ, Bessie Love as the Bride of Cana and George Walsh as the Bridegroom [illegible].

I remember one time in the Babylonian episode I was playing a soldier. I was up in front of a judge of the Babylonian court because a man had charged me with molesting his wife. And so I was telling the judge, in pantomime, how I had been walking along the street when I heard a whistle; I looked around and here was this woman up at a window, and she gave me the wink . . . I was doing the little gestures all the time, improvising as I went along. And then I caught sight of Griffith. You'd think he'd lost his gut. He was *loving* it. So I kept building it up, elaborating it. Now I don't like to use the word "pantomime," because I don't care for classic pantomime. I prefer the subtler form of acting—the glance and the wink are much more effective than going overboard with a lot of hand stuff. And Griffith was a man who had a great appreciation of these details.

That's the reason Griffith was an inspiration to me. Not because of his innovations—but because he was the first man to realize that a good story depends upon characters who are well developed and interesting. Our early pictures were crude and elementary; two people would meet and you knew nothing whatsoever about them as people—where they came from, what they were, whether they liked Limburger cheese or ladyfingers. They were just impersonal puppets.

But Griffith made sure you knew his characters. He'd begin by saying, "Now what does a woman do who takes care of a home for a family?" And he might show her on the porch, and she'd be husking corn, and with little details he would get you to feel the character—"That's my mother," you'd think.

He had great insight, and a great feeling for contrasts. I can remember in *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch,* the scene where Mae Marsh is hidden from the Indians in a flour barrel. When that little comedy figure pops up and peeps over the top of the barrel, it acts as an amusing contrast to a tense and highly melodramatic situation.

In *The Birth of a Nation,* the Negro soldiers are about to break into the little log cabin where some of the refugee whites have hidden, and one faithful household servant stands at the window. As these fellows try to come through she biffs them, one at a time, with a rifle butt. Well, people were so tense by the time this developed that every time she struck one of them they'd go into roars of laughter. That wasn't laughter, really. It was a release. And you enjoyed it all the more because you became involved in the battle. You weren't just a by-stander, you were emotionally involved. That's our side getting along there!

This man Griffith worked without any of the aides we consider necessary today. Look at a present-day motion picture or TV show, for instance. Look at all the credits for the people involved. Griffith had a cameraman, a prop man, a stage carpenter, an assistant director, and someone on research. Most of these men had their own assistants, but Griffith had no art director, no character make-up men, no hairdressers, no special-effects department, no scriptwriter—no script!

He was a very appreciative man. He didn't come up, clap you on the back, and say: "Swell, boy, that was a swell job." But something would happen in your favor, and that's how he would show his appreciation.

Many times we would shoot at night. Electrical illumination was not in full use in California, so we used flares. In those days we had no loud-speakers to

direct crowds, some of which could be two blocks away, so we used megaphones. A great many people found their voices tiring after a few hours with one of these, but I learned to breathe differently. I guess it was like opera singing; I used my diaphragm. I would call out to people slowly—I didn't speak so fast the words were jumbled—and I'd be right there on the stand beside Mr. Griffith.

We had one of the grand shots of all time in *Intolerance*. We built a tower facing the Babylonian set, with an elevator in it, a studio-constructed elevator. The camera platform was mounted on top of this device. As it descended vertically, the tower moved forward on wheeled trucks which rode on railroad tracks. These trucks had cast-iron wheels, eighteen inches across; they were the kind of platform trucks used by railroad maintenance men.

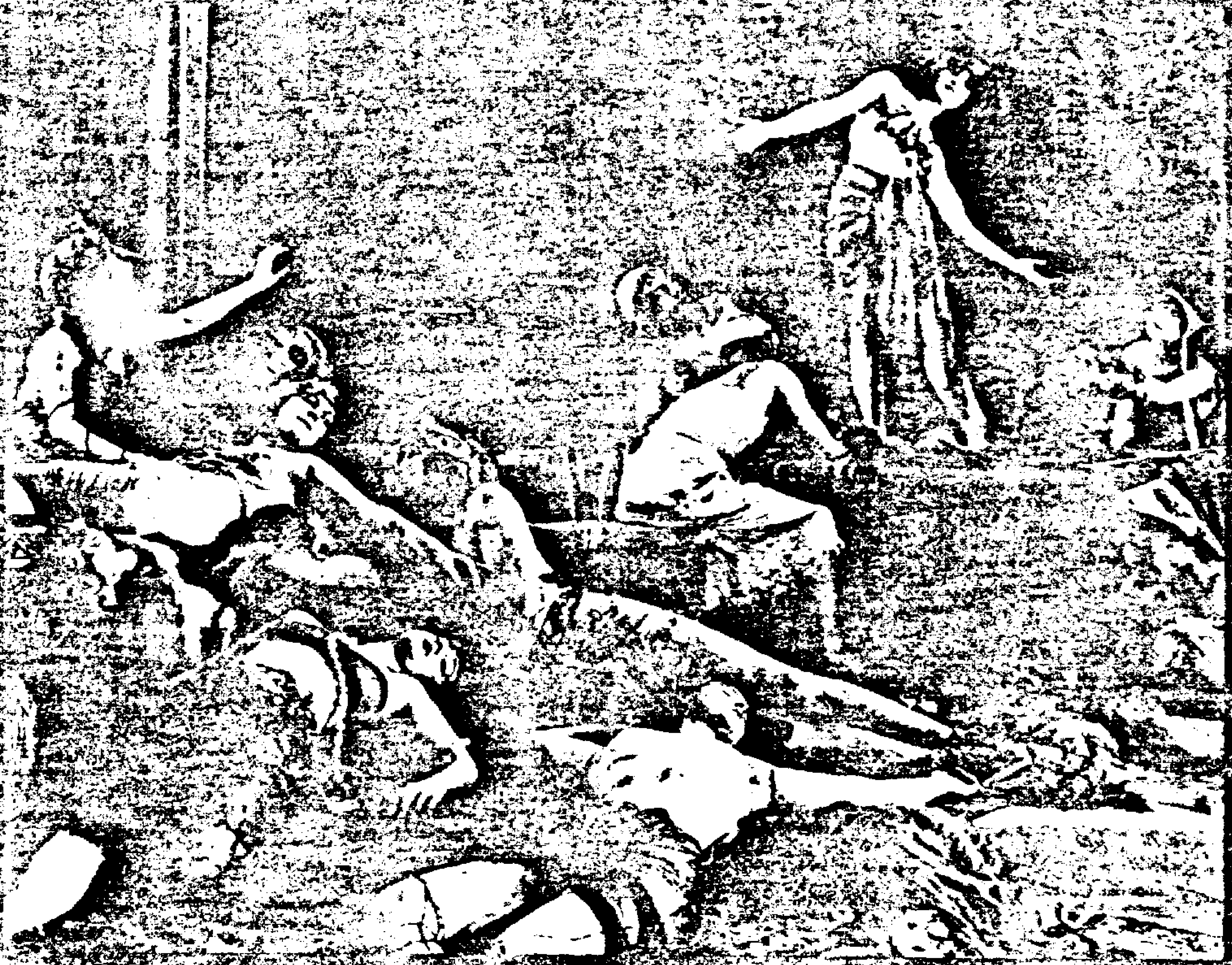
Four people rode on the camera platform: Griffith; Bitzer; Karl Brown, his assistant; and myself. The scene opened on a full, high setup of the palace with thousands of people in the scene. Without any cut or break, it gradually descended to a medium shot which included just the principals. The shot was repeated a number of times. During the rehearsal, Griffith would call attention to background action he wanted corrected. At the end of the rehearsal move, I would run back into the set and tell the group captains about the changes. Griffith made corrections to the foreground action himself. Then we would return to the camera platform and ride up to the top. We rehearsed for about one and a half hours. Now we had to begin shooting to catch the light at the proper angle. The scene itself was made three or four times. As I recall it, each shot appeared to be okay. However, as retakes would have cost a fortune, the shot was repeated for protection with some minor changes in exposure.

I never put a tape measure to the camera platform, but one figure is firmly fixed in my mind, a figure which can be used to scale most of the sets. The walls of Babylon were ninety feet high. The walls were about the same height as the columns on which the elephants were erected; it is safe to estimate the overall height at one hundred and forty feet. The camera platform was between a hundred and a hundred and fifteen feet; as I recall it, we were in a line horizontally with the elephant platforms, and the camera was slightly below them. At its widest point, the tower structure was forty feet.

Altogether we spent little more than a couple of hours on the scene. We had to shoot with the light. If we wanted the full effect of the settings, we had to take the scene when the lighting was appropriate. We couldn't take it in backlight, for instance. We'd have to take it in maybe a nice crosslight, or half-backlight. So we were limited to a period between ten a.m. and eleven a.m.

I found the locations for the battle scenes which were supposed to be along the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. They were shot a little below what we call the Baldwin Hills. Historically, it was about the same type of land. Acres and acres of swampy plain. I got permission from the heirs to the Dominguez Estate and arranged with the Pacific Electric Railroad to take special electric cars, hauling our extras, to within a short distance of where we wanted to work.

Assisting Griffith meant that I also had to cope with the mobs of people. Let's say we were going to have two thousand people; how do you get two thousand people costumed and ready, early in the morning, unless you break it down some way? I figured that I would give each man a card. This would indicate which booth he would get his costume from—and he would be one of, say, one



Joseph Henabery's orgy scene for Intolerance.

The army of Cyrus the Great

hundred and fifty people who would get their costume from that booth. I had the backs of the Babylon sets divided into booths, and labeled, and had the costumes placed as I wanted them, so they'd be orderly. And I had two thousand ready by eight a.m.

Technically speaking, George Siegmann was the principal assistant director. He was a grand fellow, but he didn't care too much about either organization or research, and lots of times he'd come to me when they were making a scene and say, "Which way should they go? Left or right?" But he did more for me than any human being would ever do for someone working in a similar capacity. He was a wonderful guy.[4]

Lunches were ordered the night before. I had to take a gamble on the weather. Many a time I've boiled in oil when the fog didn't break until way late, and we had a couple of thousand extras standing by.

A cafeteria in the city would work all night to prepare these lunches, and I was very strict about leftovers. I'd tell them to make up just the right number, and I insisted that the food be fresh because the lunches were a great psychological help. Extras got their carfare, their lunch, and a dollar and a quarter a day. They only got a dollar and ten cents a day when they worked on *Birth of a Nation;* this wasn't much of a raise, but it was more than other companies paid their mobs.

I could get two thousand boxed lunches on two trucks. And they were nice lunches. They cost thirty-five cents apiece, which in those days meant a darn good deal. I would arrange for them to be distributed from the same places that I had for the costumes, and I could feed the whole mob in no time at all. When

[4] *Siegmann and George (Andre) Beranger were also actors.*

***D. W. Griffith and G. W. Bitzer prepare a running shot for* Intolerance.**