

Kipling's "Kim" to Come to Life on the Screen

Robert Flaherty, the film producer who made the prize-winning "Man of Aran," is now on his way to India to make a film version of Rudyard Kipling's "Kim." In the interview printed below he talked to C.A.L. of "The Observer" (London) a fortnight before he set sail—and it shows the painstaking care which Mr. Flaherty intends to give this picture.

IN a fortnight's time a little party of six, headed by Robert Flaherty, the film chronicler of "Man of Aran," "Tabu," "Moana," and "Nanook," will sail for India to make a film of the jungle for London Film Productions, the story to be tentatively named "Elephant Boy."

Bob Flaherty is very happy. Bustling from place to place in last-minute preparations, buying equipment, fixing details of his Indian headquarters, his mind is already in that creative fever that accompanies all his best work. Flaherty is big, broad, heavy, with ice-white hair, and the frosty blue eyes of a sailor in a ruddy face. When you shake hands with him, yours is lost. His loose, pale tweeds smell faintly of peat and heather. I don't suppose there is a better boon companion in the cinema, nor another director whose enthusiasms are so infectious, generous and free.

He is so enthusiastic to-day about the Indian picture that his phrases tumble over one another in their eagerness. "I have always," he says, "wanted to make a picture with a young boy for a hero, ever since I talked over plans for Kim, many years ago in America with Maude Adams, who held the stage rights. There will only be three main characters in this story, a boy, a keeper, and an elephant. It's quite a simple story, about a little native boy—a kind of Kim, or Mowgli, or Toomai, or whatever you like to call him—who wants passionately to be an elephant keeper. Just as an English boy might want to be a jockey, and hangs round the racing stables watching the horses, this lad longs to ride the maharajah's elephants, and hangs round the compound, trying to ingratiate himself with the old keeper. At last he manages to stamp out an outbreak of fire, and in return the keeper gives him his chance to ride the elephants, until presently the most dangerous of them all, a magnificent wild creature, only just captured, lifts the boy up with his trunk and sets him on his back."

"And then—?"

"And then a great friendship develops between the boy and this elephant—I'm told it is quite incredible the friendship and affection that can exist between elephants and their keepers—until one day a man-eating tiger gets loose in the compound and the elephant breaks away and escapes to the jungle."

"What does the boy do?"

"He follows, all alone. And then we have the little boy lost in the jungle at night, among the wild birds and the wild animals—we must have all the jungle sounds and mysterious silences—until he comes on the trail of his elephant—he knows it by the dragging mark of its broken chain."

He paused.

"What's bothering me now," he said, ruminating, "is how to get the effect of fireflies in the jungle at night." He looked up, beaming.

"But that's only one of a host of problems. There's the problem of the elephant colour. Will it photograph

well? Will it be too grey and matt? You never can tell with colours. We had a red setter dog in Ireland, on 'Man of Aran,' that we hoped would photograph splendidly, but in the prints the coat had no life—no colour at all. We shall have to experiment a lot with still photography before we start the actual shooting. We always do a great deal of preliminary work with still photography, in any case, to choose our types for the cast."

"How do you set about that? Have you any ideas about your players before you go out?" I asked.

"None at all. I only know that I want a native boy of about fourteen who has personality and character in his face—probably a lad who has worked with elephants and understands them. What we do is to go wherever there's a gathering of natives of any kind, and watch their faces, taking still photographs of any that seem interesting. Then we ask them, through an interpreter, if they would be willing to come and make tests. Sometimes we have to test several hundred before we get the one we want."

"And what will you do about the elephant? Must he have personality, too?"

"Certainly he must. We shall want a prince among elephants—an old hero of a beast. I want to find an equivalent among elephants to the great bull of Mexico, who fought so well in the bullring that he was given a State pardon, and exempt from taking part in the arena for the rest of his life. There's a statue to him, crowned with flowers, that you can see in Mexico to this day."

"Why don't you make that story into a film," I asked.

"I meant to," said Flaherty. "There is something splendid and dramatic about the legend, I've always thought. But I wasn't sure if the bull could ever be made into a really sympathetic figure on the screen, so I transferred the idea to India, and started working on the same sort of story with an elephant."

"But you didn't finish the story. Does your elephant fight?"

"Yes. When the boy finally comes up with him in the jungle he is fighting the leader of a multitude of wild elephants to become king of the herd. At first he doesn't recognise the boy. He has gone wild again, you see. But in the end—yes, in the end, the little boy is lifted on to his back and rides him home."

"What a story," I said, "for the children in the audience."

Flaherty nodded and beamed, looking like a benevolent Father Christmas.

"That's what I want," he cried, "a picture that will make every child in the world feel nostalgic for the jungle. When I was a youngster I wanted to drive a locomotive. My wife wanted to be a trapeze artist. If I can make every boy in the audience want to grow up to be an elephant driver I shall feel satisfied that I have made a pretty good film."