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"Grass" Achieves Drama Without Benefit of Plot

Director of Unusual Film at the Criterion Traces Movement of
Central Asian Tribes That Contributed the Actors

WHY is it that "Grass" has drawn a new and enthusiastic audience to the Criterion?

Ernest B. Schoedsack, who together with Merian C. Cooper and Marguerite E. Harrison made the film in Persia, says that it is because it is not a travel picture—but a drama.

"It is hard for anyone who has not seen the picture, at least, to realize that grass, just common, ordinary grass, can be the reason for half a million people and a million animals having to make a terrific fight for existence. But grass means life—that explains it.

"We went across six thousand miles of sea and desert and forest to live with one of these wildest of the Persian tribes in order to make the story of "Grass." The Baktyari are the people we lived with.

"They number fifty thousand. They are feared all over Persia as robbers and raiding warriors. Come back with me to a day just a year ago in Persia and look at that group by the fire with us—strong, straight-featured men in black tunics, wearing cartridge belts and with rifles by their sides—Aryans, men of the same basic blood as ourselves. Handsome, unveiled women with locks of their long black hair brought forward and tied under their chins and everywhere in the circle of campfires are milling animals, horses, sheep, goats.

"Now there is one thing about this half million or so tribesmen who live along the border of this mountain country, and of whom the 50,000 Baktyari are a part, that we should remember. They are alike in just one thing. They all depend upon one thing for life—grass. Why? In all this part of the great tribal country there is practically no good agricultural land. It's all rough and bare grazing land—just a land which will grow some grass, that's all. Now these tribes have countless flocks and herds and the tribes live on these animals. They live principally off sour milk and mutton. Even their shelters come from the animals—their tents, made from goat hair.

"If the grass should die the animals will starve and die and if the animals die the people die. So the tribes must be where there's plenty of grass.

"And now what is happening over here on the western side of these great Persian mountains? There is noise and confusion in our camp to-night. And there's a reason. The grass is already withering. It's spring. All day for many days a hot sun has been blazing. Browner and browner grows the land about us. The tribes must move and they must move soon.

"Haidar, our Chief, says we must go—says at this time all the tribes must pack everything they own and fight their way through that unmapped stretch of giant mountains to reach grass.

"And we can't wait any longer. Scarcely any grass is left. The tents are down. There are only open campfires to-night. The people are sleeping to-night out under the stars. They are going to leave their tents behind. They are going to travel without tents, for tents would make the pack loads too heavy for scaling the mountains.

"Each family carries a few rugs, pots and pans, a sack or two of grain and rice and a crude wooden cradle, and in every cradle, strapped in by broad horse bands, you will see a baby. Maybe you have a baby in your house. You know what care you take to protect it. Well, these babies are going in cradles on their mothers' backs, and over the cradles are stretched only thin cotton cloths to protect them against the sun and wind and rain and bitter cold.

"Would you carry your baby that way? Well, you would if you lived among the tribes—these tribes with

whom we are now going to move, for it is go now or starve. For it's spring and the grass is drying up. It's spring and the camps are filled with baby life—babies in cradles, baby lambs, baby goats, calves, colts—and all these real babies and animal babies must be carried on into that unknown wilderness. They must go. That's the thing to remember. They have to go.

"Well, we're off; we of the Baktyari; and at the same time that we move, although not exactly the same day perhaps, all the other great mountain tribes are moving. Think of moving 50,000 people—that is, 50,000 of the Baktyari, not to speak of the Kurds and the Lurs to the north and the tribes to the south, hundreds of thousands of them, with all their goods and millions of animals—up and across a roadless mountain wilderness.

"And during this march there are no supplies to be obtained. The tribes must live on what they carry with them. The animals must live off the country through which they pass.

"The Baktyari move over the mountains in five main groups. Over our route, the hardest, go 5,000 people. As we press on, they come converging in from every direction. Our numbers grow every day. We must stick together because of danger from hostile tribes. Here they come—the endless procession of them. And it's a great show, too.

"Do you see them? The Khads, that's what their chiefs are called, riding ahead mounted on splendid Arabs. Then come the No. 1 wives also riding good horses. Now the blooded horses, and there are plenty of well armed riders to protect them. And here come the mass of people. Thousands of cows loaded with packs and here on one a little black goat is fastened upright; and there's another cow with a stolid little girl of three strapped astride with her chubby little legs almost at right angles. More cows, some with puppies on their backs, some with lambs. Here they come!

"And in the midst of it all are streams of donkeys. The No. 2 wives are driving them on; the No. 3 wives and also the women and daughters of the common people. We saw that the women of the chiefs had their babies balanced in front of them on their saddles but these women of the common people carry their babies in another way. They've got them on their backs in their wooden cradles. I never thought to see cows as pack animals, but that's nothing in comparison to these mothers plodding on with their babies strapped on in heavy cradles.

"Every hill, every valley, everywhere is movement. The whole country seems alive. Pack animals, dashing horses, flocks of sheep and goats—everything moving on toward the mountains. They must keep going. They cannot stay behind. And remember, when we see these people move that also a half million of people and millions of animals are moving.

"This is almost a nation on the march!

"And it was a nation on the march! For forty days they went on up over icy river torrents and mountains and still higher mountains, and then fought their way up a great snow mountain range, men, women, and children—barefoot in the snow!

"And when they reached the top of the snow mountains and looked down they saw far below them a great green plateau covered with luxuriant Grass.

"A happy ending to a tremendous natural fight—the fight of man for life.

"It was a drama—a natural drama. And that's why I think 'Grass' has succeeded. No travel picture can. A real drama always will. And 'Grass,' I hope, is a 'natural drama.'"