



# ALL FLESH IS GRASS

(From a talk by G. H. HOLFORD, introducing the "Good Earth" Winter Course series on Monday evenings from 2YA)



"IF a plague wiped out the grasses—most of the human race would die." This grim forecast, made by Professor J. B. S. Haldane, is the central theme of my remarks, but I hope to discuss more pleasant topics as well.

Wartime conditions force people to think of many things, which, in peacetime, are taken for granted. A few years ago some countries were embarrassed with food surpluses. To-day millions are starving—millions have already starved. This has directed the thoughts of great masses of the world's population to more fundamental thinking about their main source of food—namely, the Good Earth. It is my privilege this evening to open a series of talks which will consider how man over the centuries has co-operated with Nature in satisfying his bodily needs.

His food and clothing have come mainly from a thin crust of the earth's surface—the soil. They have been secured, too, by man, largely through the utilisation of one family of plants, namely, grass, probably the world's most important living thing. Perhaps you consider my estimate of grass, as the world's most important living thing—apart from humans—an overestimate. Yet, if by some evil stroke, all grass were destroyed, and mankind awoke one morning to look out on a grassless world, on an earth naked except for trees, shrubs, and plants of families, other than grass, then, scientists tell us, the majority of mankind would be dead within a year.

## "Our Blood Is Green"

I wonder if we in this "God's Own Country" as it has been called, are fully cognisant of the fact that our life-blood is not red, but green—green grass. At present, New Zealand's prosperity is chiefly derived from two kinds of vegetation; grass and clover, and they have built up for the Dominion the highest export trade per head in the world. Our annual grass production, which has been estimated by A. H. Cockayne, our leading grassland authority, at 80 million tons, has, in some years, been worth as much as £1 per ton (£80,000,000 sterling), and that production is still capable of tremendous expansion. Grass supplies the great bulk of the feed for 33 million sheep, 4½ million cattle, and other stock, and yet, only a century ago, most of New Zealand was a forested wilderness, with a few isolated farms dotted here and there on the coastline.

New Zealand's grassland acreage is 34 millions and there are not two million acres in all other crops. After comparing notes with representatives from close on 40 different countries, at the world's Grassland Conference held in Britain in 1937, I came to the conclusion that New Zealand depended on grass, and could depend on it, to a greater extent, than any other country on earth.

Then take Britain. Although she is so highly industrialised, farming is her largest single industry, and animal products based primarily on grassland con-

tribute over two-thirds of the value of all British farm products.

## A Very Important Family

I should here point out that cereals—wheat, rye, corn, barley, also maize, rice, and sugar cane—all important human foods, are members of the grass family. This fact will give point to a further statement by Professor J. B. S. Haldane, that "one of the oddest facts about man is his dependence on a quite small group of plants. There are over 300 different families of flowering plants, but one family—the gramineae or grass family—is of more importance than all the others put together. "If we eat bread we live on grasses—since wheat is a form of grass—at first hand; if we drink milk or eat cheese, butter, beef or mutton, we live on them at second hand, by consuming the animals that live on pastures."

In fact in one form or another, grass has taken unto herself the task of clothing most areas of the naked earth. Her mantle protects the earth from erosion by wind and water—only under the sod (or forest) will the soil lie still. Should a cataclysm destroy man-made cities, grass in due time would cover this desolation with a green shroud. You've heard the remark, "If grass does not grow in our fields, it will in our streets."

Grass also made possible the evolution of man. To quote Dr. Watt, a noted British geologist: "It is not too much to say that the magnificent outburst of energy put out by the earth in the erection of the Alps, the Andes, and the Himalayas at one geological period, was trivial in its influence for man's advent and his successful occupation of the earth, in comparison with the gentle but insidious growth of mere unconquerable grass and its green carpet of turf, which in some form or other clothes by far the greater part of the globe. Grass brought about the evolution of sluggish mammoths, which lived by tree-browsing, into grass-eating animals. These latter were the forerunners of the animal types which man has domesticated, and which have served him so well, i.e., cattle, sheep, horses and swine. Catching the swifter grass-eating animals tended to develop the brain of primitive man. While he still hunted his food, or gathered it from wild plants, he learnt to gain part of it by sowing seeds and harvesting the product. Thus he learnt something of the art of tillage and so became a farmer instead of just a food gatherer."

No longer forced to be a Nomad, primitive man had time on his hands. He then turned to arts and crafts, pottery, weaving and so on, and thus began his first steps in what we call civilisation.

## "The Forgiveness of Nature"

I will conclude with an extract from a famous American tribute to grass. It is by an American writer, J. J. Ingalls: "Next in importance to the Divine profusion of water, light, and air, those three great factors which render existence possible, may be reckoned the universal beneficence of grass. . . . Our earliest recollections are of grass, and, when the fitful fever is ended, and the foolish wrangle of the market and forum is closed, grass heals over the scar which our descent into the bosom of the earth

has made, and the carpet of the infant becomes the blanket of the dead.

"Grass is thus the forgiveness of Nature—her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and carnage is forgotten. Streets abandoned by traffic become grass-grown, like rural lanes, and are obliterated. Forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal."

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