

## The Sheik

Thursday 15 April, 9pm

USA 1921

Director: George Melford

Production: Famous Players-Lasky Corporation

66 min

Credits: Assistant Director Rudolf Bylek, Based on the novel by Edith Maude Hull, Screenplay Monte M. Katterjohn

### Cast:

Rudolf Valentino – Sheik Achmed ben Hassan

Agnes Ayres – Diana Mayo

Adolphe Menjou – Raoul de saint Hubert

F.R. Butler – Sir Aubrey Mayo

Walter Long – Omair

George Waggner – Gaston

Patsy Ruth Miller - Youssef

### Synopsis

Based on the steamy 1919 bodice-ripper by E.M Hull, this tale of passion between an aristocratic English woman and an Arab Sheik is the film that brought Valentino to prominence. He exudes a brooding, muscular sexuality which has lost none of its potency today and watching this film 90 years after its release, it is easy to see why his premature death drove women to despair and suicide.

### The Writer: E.M. Hull

The pseudonym of Edith Maude Winstanley, author of *The Sheik* (1919), which was filmed in 1921 with Rudolph Valentino in the title role, and went on to outsell all other novels of the 1920s put together. *The Sheik* is the erotic and sado-masochistic story of the abduction and repeated rape of Diana Mayo, a boyish and free-spirited English aristocrat, by the cruel but charismatic Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan.

The novel dwells continuously on the sexual responses of the heroine:

She writhed in his arms as he crushed her to him....the close union with his warm, strong body robbed her of her strength, of all power of resistance.....'Oh, you brute! You brute!' she wailed, until his kisses silenced her.



*The Sheik* was derided by literary critics, and was memorably described by Q.D.Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) as 'a typist's day dream'. It was condemned in the press as lurid pornography, the reason for the outrage (as well as the source of the novel's interest for feminists today) being that *The Sheik* is a rare instance of pornography written for women by a woman.

Today, both the anti-feminist narrative and racial stereotypes make the novel problematic, to say the least. The regressive sexual ideology at work in *The Sheik* is interpreted by David Ayers (1999) as a reaction to the unbalancing of traditional gender roles in the interwar period. The reinstatement of the masterful patriarch and the humiliation of the independent woman are accomplished in Diana's final submission to the Sheik: 'He was a brute but she loved him for his very brutality and superb animal strength.' The novel also squares up the then socially unacceptable idea of interracial sex by revealing in the last chapter that Ahmed is in fact the son of an English lord and is therefore, as Nicola Beauman (1983) puts it, a 'decent English chap'

after all. E.M Hull's follow up to *The Sheik* was *The Shadow of the East* (1921), in which Barry Craven, the brooding hero, strives to conceal from his young wife his unintentional crime of incest committed many years ago, and exercises a sexual restraint that is in direct contrast to the priapic Sheik. In 1925, Hull returned to the desert romance genre with the sequel *Sons of the Sheik*, also filmed as *Son of the Sheik* (1926). *Camping in the Sahara*, a travel book appeared in 1926 and is based on her tour of Morocco taken in the company of a female friend.

In all, Hull wrote eight novels, ending with *Jungle Captive* (1939), after which she fell silent. Almost nothing is known about her, apart from the fact that she was married to a Derbyshire gentleman pig farmer, and even the dates of her birth and death are uncertain. Unlike 'superstars' of twenties popular fiction such as Elinor Glyn, Hull never became a public figure and no photograph of her survives. It is assumed that she wrote under a pseudonym to avoid bringing shame on her family.

Kathy Hopewell (from *Encyclopedia of British Women's Writing*, 1900-1950: Palgrave)

## Reviews

*American Film Institute Catalog 1921*

Here is romance Red-Hot. If you read the story you will go to see the filmization. If you haven't, you will go anyway. This is popular entertainment –that and nothing more. But that is enough. The best-selling story by E M Hull, scoffed at by the higher-browed critics, but read and re-read by two-thirds of the women in this country, has been made into a very exciting, very old-fashioned photo play.

It's the old-time adventure much more artistically presented than formerly, but still just a glorified movie. The exquisite Agnes Ayres as Diana, the English heroine, and Rudolph Valentino in the title role, perform their parts splendidly. George Melford's direction is, as usual, competent but not unusual. You should see this if you aren't too weary to imagine that you might have been Diana and the Sheik living their desert romance.

*Kinematograph weekly January 26<sup>th</sup> 1922*

Points of appeal – Scenes of the Arab life are picturesque and appealing, and the desert realist. The riding is worthy of real Arabs.

Richly barbaric settings in scenes depicting the Arab marriage mart and the interior of Omair's harem will also appeal too many. There are good lighting effects in the night attack on the bandit's stronghold, and the fights are well stage managed.

Having said this one has exhausted the virtues of the production. No serious attempt had been made to express the psychology of the leading characters, although the unusual relations in which they are laced offer unusual opportunities to the producer for the portrayal of the gradual awakening of love in place of hate in the girl's heart. As if it just happens. If one inference is more plausible than another it is that the girl's spirit is broken by fear – which is exactly the opposite to that desire to be conveyed. Essentially the film is a screen novelette disguised by an eastern binding.

Production – Mechanically of the very best, dramatically the producer's work is on a very low level. This was perhaps inevitable with a story which is frankly an insult to the intelligent public, but it is difficult to know why the absurdities of the novel have been so faithfully reproduced in the scenario.

Having such a scenario, Geo Melford has obviously contented himself with spectacle and left the characters as puppets whose actions are never fully explained and are often quite unexplainable.

The result is that the film will chiefly appeal to audiences with taste for splendour much in excess of their critical faculty.

Acting - The essential artificiality of the characters is demonstrated by the poor show which two such competent artists as Agnes Ayres and Rudolph Valentino make as Diana and the Sheik.

When one considers that the first has to travel in the desert with beggars, full of fine evening gowns and that the latter is asked to duplicate the characteristics of an untamed Arab chief and of a Parisian with a taste for singing the Indian Love Lyrics in and out of season, they can be excused their lack of enthusiasm.

Photography - Excellent in every detail, with many fine lighting effects, both of day and night.

Suitability – It is probable that, to a very large section of the public, the virtues of “The Sheik” as a spectacle and its air of romance, spurious though it be, will outweigh its absurdities as a story. The more critical will regret that so much good workmanship has been lavished on such trivial material.

as the English girl. The picture should be popular everywhere for the novel it strikes, and it is undoubtedly, a very sound box-office attraction.

*The Bioscope January 26<sup>th</sup> 1922*  
(Warning: Plot Spoilers)

A beautiful English girl is kidnapped by an Arab and taken to the desert, where she is stolen by a rival Arab. Having fallen in love with her first master, she is relieved to learn he is half English half Spanish.

The romantic Eastern atmosphere of Amy Woodford Einden’s songs, which have penetrated so many homes, is admirably materialised in picture form by this ambitious Arabian producer. Here passion is accentuated by becoming flowing robes, glittering teeth, swarthy skins flashing eyes and silken tents, which shelter lovers from sand storms in the heart of the desert.

The lovers who entertain us in such a novel setting are Agnes Ayres as Diana, a High spirited English girl, and Rudolph Valentino who although regarded as an Arabian chief, is really the son of an English father and a Spanish mother, befriended by the former Sheik. This man meets Diana in an unusual manner. The beautiful spoiled girl learns there is a native party to which no white men or women is may go so, dressing as an Arabian dancer, she boldly attends as a guest. She is discovered by the sheik, who is in love with her beauty, and the next day he sings “Pale Hand” under her window, and kidnaps her in the desert. Diana is taken to the sheik’s tent home where she is made to wear Eastern dress. When a French writer visits her captor (who had been educated in Paris) the girl’s humiliation is complete and she tries to escape. She is captures by brigands, who force her into a harem, but the Sheik risked his life to follow her and, as he lies half dying, she confesses her love. The Frenchman is able to prove that there is nothing shocking in Diana loving a man whose father and mother were English and Spanish respectively.

The story if founded upon the novel by E M Hull, and is very elaborately produced with numbers of Arabian horsemen and vast stretches of sand as a background. Rudolph valentine is excellent as the Arab lover, and Ayres gives a spirited performance