

# On the MARCH With WILD TRIBES of PERSIA

By Merian C. Cooper

Three Americans Are the  
First Foreigners Ever to  
Join in the Migration of a  
Million Nomads

[Note—Merian C. Cooper, American explorer, newspaper and magazine writer, former Annapolis midshipman, captain in the American Army, lieutenant-colonel in the Polish Army and director of a foreign relief administration, together with Mrs. Harrison, author, and Ernest B. Schoedsack, photographer, were the first three foreigners ever to accompany or witness the great migration of the Persian tribes from Arabistan over Zardah Kuh to the Plateau of Isfakhan. This is the statement of Amir Jang, Prince of the Bakhtiari, and Haidar Khan, chief of the Baba Ahmedi, which was sworn to before the late Maj. Robert W. Imbrie, Vice-Consul of the United States, a few weeks before Maj. Imbrie's death at the hands of a riotous mob in Teheran.—Editor.]



In the midst of a terror-mad herd of animals.

Lynch Road (the horse route over the mountains.) They go very, very hard road—so hard not any my family now living ever been that way. No foreigners ever been. Big mountains, woods, big river, then big, big mountain with plenty snow. And my people there men call 'bears,' they live so wild and hard. They drink sour milk, eat acorns and mutton. Very, very bad road."

And so it was decided that we were to go with one of Amir Jang's tribes.

An hour after sunrise next day the camp was already astir. In the center of a semi-circle of men sat a hunched figure on a rug spread on the grass. One man, gesticulating vehemently, stood before this still listener.

"Yep," said Rahim, who came up just then and saw us looking at this group. "That's the way I spend most my day, too. Talk, talk. Too much talk with us Bakhtiari. But the Ilkhani, he must listen to more talk than any of us. He sits like that all day, every day. We have 250 tribes, and all give too much trouble. Poor old Ilkhani!"



Route of the Great Migration participated in by Mr. Cooper.

It seemed that the Ilkhani did work for his living.

"What is life to me here now?" asked the young prince, turning to us with a gesture half-sad and half-scornful. "Must I sit all day in a tent and say, 'Beat that man, or, 'The murderer must pay fifty sheep and a 1000-crown fine'?"

"These people want none of the things that I learned in your American school. What do they care for republics and votes and the equality of men? This life is their life, and they love it—to sleep on hard ground, to eat by camp fire, to fight with

princes a message announcing our visit. Rahim Khan was the answer to Capt. Peel's message and Rahim at once became a source of boundless delight to us. His knowledge of English came from the fact that he was educated in the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University of Beirut, where the curriculum apparently included American slang.

Riding to the camp next day under the escort of Rahim, as the sun was setting, we swung around an elbow in the foothills and beheld a lovely picture. Below the cliffs, where the bank of swift-flowing river was golden-green, was pitched a camp of fifty many-colored tents. The amber glow lay like a shimmering veil on the black and orange and white and brown of them; it tinted and dyed with its warm hue the black-cloaked figures, the steel of the rifle barrels of scores of horsemen, the flocks of grazing sheep. All were covered with this golden light.

Then, as darkness fell, we rode down into the camp and halted before a group of three tents—a reception tent and two sleeping tents. A camp bed was produced from somewhere for Mrs. Harrison. "Shorty" and I were given rugs on which to spread our bedding rolls.

A half-hour later Rahim came to say that his uncle, the Ilkhani (khan of the tribes,) and his cousin, the Ilbegi (master of the tribes,) were coming to call on us. We remained in our reception tent. Then in walked the Ilkhani, a hale old man—a tribal prince who had lived his life in camp among his people. The man who followed him was of the new generation—looking more like the city Persian than the chief of wild nomads. He, Amir Jang, the Ilbegi, was short and stout. His face was round as a moon. His little intelligent black eyes snapped from behind gold-rimmed glasses. He wore a huge solitaire diamond ring and a gold wrist watch.

"Salam aleikum!"—"Peace be with you!" said the two tribal princes. This is the greeting of all this part of the East—of Turkey, Persia, Arabia and the rest of Islam. "Aleikum salam!"—"With you, peace!" we returned.

THROUGH Rahim, after a long exchange of courtesies, we told the princes the reason for our visit. We had come to beg permission to migrate over the mountains with one of their tribes. We should like to travel with one tribe, eat what they ate, sleep as they slept, really live their life.

At this Amir Jang broke into hearty laughter. "All right," he chuckled, in broken English, as his little black mustache wagged above glistening white teeth, "you go with one my tribes. But they no go

THE grass dried up; and without grass the flocks and herds must die. Upon these animals depended both the shelter and food of the race—life itself.

So, seeking grass, this barbarian horde, carrying all its worldly goods, swept up out of the sun-baked plains of Arabistan toward a broad, swift and icy river, which must be swum, and toward week after week of struggles, higher and higher, across the grim, forbidding zacros ranges to come face to face with old Zardah Kuh, that gigantic, snow-clad monarch of the Persian mountains.

Then they were to be confronted with its almost perpendicular snow surface—men, women and children—as a tremendous barrier between them and the wondrous valleys of the Isfahan Plateau beyond, green and soft and rich with the grass of life.

Up over the hill and mountain, on through desert and forest, beaten by storm and rain, sweating under a burning sun, shivering in glacial snows—over a thousand miles of wilderness, the migratory tribes of Persia, more than a million of them, one-seventh of the people, were on the move.

Pressing on and on—to grass!

AT THE camp of the Khans, in Shushtar, at the end of March last year, arrived Mrs. Marguerite E. Harrison, the writer; Ernest B. ("Shorty") Schoedsack, photographer, and myself. There was also Mustaufi, a soft-speaking, soft-living, slow-moving Persian gentleman, our host. It was at his house in Shushtar, the capital of Arabistan, that we were guests when a striking figure, overflowing with energy, with sparkling eyes and gleaming white teeth, appeared before us. Five attendants followed him.

In clear, though somewhat broken English, he said: "I am Khan of the Bakhtiari. My uncle, the Ilkhani, has sent me to ask you to visit him. I am at your service."

This, then, was one of the princes of the Bakhtiari. Fifty thousand of his tribesmen we knew were camped in black tents along the 200-mile stretch of the foothills at the mountain range that dominated the eastern horizon, two days' ride from Mustaufi's door.

Capt. Peel, a British political officer in Ahwaz, fifty desert miles away, had sent the

other tribes. What they want with civilization?

"They want strong man, cruel man, hard man, man who says, 'You do this or I have you beaten until you die.' Me, I am Bakhtiari, also, but I learned too much in American school. Now I like to go live on Broadway—theaters, plenty pretty girls, dance. I change places with you. You come to boss of Bakhtiari; I go dance on Broadway." Rahim grinned.

So goes the world. To be honest, nothing would please me better than to run the Bakhtiari show or Rahim more than to "dance on Broadway."

The Ilkhani and Amir Jang visited our reception tent again a day or two later. I thought what a strange sight we must make—the princes in black robes and we three Americans—all sitting cross-legged in a deep mountain gorge of the camp with the rulers of the wildest nomad tribes of Persia. Jang said he was off to Teheran to try to settle the dispute between the government and his tribes. He invited us to go as far as Shushtar with him.

WE said good-bye, and, followed by nearly all the camp, the Ilkhani and Amir Jang, one on each side of us, walked down to the edge of the river. A dozen yards from shore floated a queer regal barge: A hundred goat skins blown up and fastened to the bottom of a light raft; this covered with rich rugs; over the rugs, on four posts, a satin-and-velvet canopy; silk-covered pillows strewn underneath. The raft had been built overnight to float Amir Jang down the swift Karun to Shushtar, twenty miles away.

When the barge, under paddles, had shot into midstream, for a moment, I thought we had stopped. No feeling of onward movement; no rush of water past the sides; the paddles rested idle; no dip nor roll nor turn.

I looked at the shore. Ho, it was flying, flying by! A white speck, up and down, up and down against a black mass on the shore—all we could see of the old Ilkhani's flowing white sleeves as he waved good-bye. And then that, too, was gone. The camp itself whisked round a turn and also disappeared. It was uncanny. All the world flashed by, but we stood still. It was magical. Thus it felt to ride on a barge of the skins of a hundred goats.

When we reached Shushtar, we drew up to the shore. Down galloped a cavalcade of horses. The Mayor had come running to bow to Jang.

And now we were back at Mustaufi's. In the evening we walked by lantern light through the dirty, rough streets and came at last to a crumbling doorway. We went down a long, dark, arched alleyway and, of a sudden, found ourselves in a great and lovely court. It seemed like another world after the filth and smells outside. The graceful oriental arches were now lighted, now shadowed by a line of candles gently touched by a soft, warm breeze, and overhead the diamond stars looked down to see their silver images in a wide, fresh pool.

By the pool, surrounded by his courtiers, sat Amir Jang. At his shoulder stood a powerful, heavy figure. Jang waved at him, saying: "This is the brother of my servant, Haidar, chief of the Baba Ahmedi tribe. He come to take you to live with my people. Everything all ready."

"All ready!" That was good. Then, somewhere over against the mountains were the black tents of these tribesmen. They

were the Baba Ahmedi, indeed, strongest and fiercest of all the Bakhtiari.

We set out for the camp of Haidar, but on the second day we learned that he was at the Ilkhani's camp, waiting for us.

Rahim came up to us when we had reached the latter point and at his heels stalked a man in a long brown coat, decorated with huge brass buttons. Under the bell-shaped hat, on the side of his head, hard eyes glared out of a heavy, lowering face. His jaw was powerful, his mouth brutal, his neck thick and brown and corded.

"HAIDAR KHAN," said Shorty. So this was the chief of the 500 "rifles" of the Baba Ahmedi. For thus the Bakhtiari count their strength: By "rifles" for men; by "tents," for families. And it was with him and his people that we were to go somewhere up through this roadless wilderness into the shadowy mountains beyond in the search for grass.

That night at dinner, which we ate with Rahim off a rug on the ground, Haidar sat just within the flap of the tent and regarded us from under his heavy black brows, wondering, I suppose, as much at us as we at him, and thinking, no doubt, what a devil of a lot of trouble his prince, Amir Jang, had forced on him by sending to his tribe these Christian strangers to eat his bread and salt for so many weeks.

Rahim was disconsolate. "My uncle has made me chief of this camp. I must see to the moving—everything. And more talk, talk than ever," he said.

Dinner over, Rahim and Haidar went away. Shorty and I threw our bedding rolls on the turf and under the stars and lay there talking with Mahommed, our interwas nearby. From it came the sound of a man pleading; then Rahim's voice, low, but shrill and penetrating. At that two guards burst out of the tent, dragging an elderly peasant. They threw him face downward on the ground. Whack! Screams! Whack! Then, before the stick could fall again, the prostrate man was shouting something over and over. The guard released him. The man knelt in front of Rahim, hands outspread, and then backed hastily away into the dark.

"What's all this, now?" Shorty asked Mahommed.

"That's the chief of a village," he replied. "Rahim Kahn told the chief

to supply grain for the camp. At first the man swore there was not a bagful in all his village. But now he says he will bring everything quick."

In a few minutes Rahim came over to say good-night. He smiled. "I hope the singing over at my tent just now didn't disturb you," he said.

At daybreak I awoke. I looked about and then rubbed my eyes to make sure I was seeing straight. The noisy camp of the night before had disappeared. Three tents only were standing. As I watched, two of these came down like lightning, a group of horsemen driving pack animals rode away, and where had been that little town of canvas stood only Mrs. Harrison's tent. Rahim had waited behind to say good-bye; then he, too, was gone. Of all the Ilkhani's camp there remained only Haidar, standing by his horse, and one of the Baba Ahmedi, whom he had given us for a camp attendant.

Three hours later we were riding into a long, narrow valley. A group of four black tents stood out on the floor at the bottom of the foothill. "Haidar Khan's camp," said Mahommed.

WHERE were the 500 "rifles" of the tribe Haidar was supposed to command? So I wondered, because of my ignorance of tribal life. Mohammed explained.

The tribes depend for existence on their herds. Accordingly every part of their life is regulated by the requirements of these herds. Since the cattle and sheep and horses must have large grazing-grounds, the families live well apart, to give them sufficient space. The Baba Ahmedi tribe, therefore, instead of being gathered into one big group, is scattered in family units for twenty miles down the narrow valleys.

I looked up Haidar's valley. Yes, there, a mile away, was another group of tents. I looked on to a point where the hills shadowed away into the horizon, and I knew that, if I could see the thousand miles northwest from Arabistan to the Black Sea, I should view all along the western side of these great mountain ranges identical little groups of black tents at almost regular intervals—hundreds of thousands of them, whole peoples living the ancient tribal life of our own Aryan forefathers.

The migration of these nomads is nature's affair. The trouble is that she makes the tribes dependent on grass for life, and then she doesn't grow grass in one part of

we were to be off, all of us—men, women, children, our beasts and all our household goods. Not many of these household goods—a few rugs, pots and pans, a sack or two of grain and rice, the water-pipes of the men, the tattered Korans to be kissed and pressed against the forehead and then packed carefully away, a crude wooden cradle for each family and in nearly every cradle a baby, strapped in by horsebands.

The Bakhtiari move light. Everything is sacrificed to the driving of the beasts. The cattle were all brought in from the far grazing grounds in the afternoon.

Of the Bakhtiari alone there were 80,000. They are called, as I have said, "mountain bears" by the Persian townfolk. They overran Persia in 1909. As nearly as I could find out, 50,000 of them would move over the mountains now by five routes. About 5000 were to go our way. Haidar's tribe, our Baba Ahmedi, which numbers several hundred, was among these 5000.

Besides the Bakhtiari, there are, of the Persian migratory tribes, the Lurs, Kurds, Kashkias, Kuzgelus, Baluchis, and others,

the way. There is a place on the river where it swings to a great perfect double S. When the current comes out through that S, it strikes the eastern shore with terrific force. But the current is a movable force striking an immovable object. The movable forces must give way. The current is thrown back from the rocks of the western shore, thrown back with a swing and a jerk, and sent shooting in a long, diagonal down-stream line, directly across to the other shore.

There's your way for the women and children! But you do not load 50,000 bulky animals on goat-skin rafts; not in a week nor a month; no, nor, in fact, ever! The herds must be swum over. And somebody must swim with them. That's the men's game.

BUT recall again that the river torrent is cold, snow-cold, ice-cold. I defy your strongest cross-channel swimmer to plunge into that stream, fight a steer by the horns and swim it across, then return and do it again and again, twenty or thirty times in a day.

But the Bakhtiari do it. And this is the way they do it. Every man takes a pair of goatskins, blows them up and fastens them together at each end. He flings his goatskin float into the water and throws himself upon it. He balances by putting one knee between the skins so that the lower part of his leg rests in the water. Thus both legs and arms are free for swimming and fighting with the herds, and at the same time his stomach is out of the water so that he does not succumb to cramps.

IT was a show, all right. For five days Shorty and I, rushing about with moving-picture cameras, watched the greatest piece of continuous action I have ever seen. Long before dawn it started. Sometimes it lasted, until late in the night; once it went on all night. Shouting women, squalling children, calves, colts, goats, lambs, saddle-bags, cradles, babies—all piled helter-skelter on the rafts. Out into the stream and off! Shouts! Howls!

For five days without ceasing thus the tribes fought, and for many a day more the tribes behind had to battle on. But we were over. The Baba Ahmedi had won through. But not without losses. Every day dozens of animals—principally sheep—had been drowned, and the last night the women of our camp were wailing in the tent of the mother of a young tribesman who was carried on down past the landing place into the pitiless rapids below.

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the country the year around. Here to the west of the mountains it is low and hot. Therefore, there is plenty of vegetation here in the winter; but that vegetation is withered up in the summer.

Now, on the other side of the mountains it is high and cool. Therefore, there is plenty of grass there in the summer; but that grass is killed by snow and ice in the winter. So there you are. Twice a year, spring and fall, year in and year out, through the centuries, nature has forced the tribes thus to fight their way back and forth across rivers and mountains and snow to reach the life-giving grass.

Amir Jang had lent us two tents. These I had the men pitch on a narrow shelf above, Haidar's camp. A reception tent had been put up for us, and there we dined with Haidar and his followers.

Haidar, I found, had nine brothers. "Aye," said he, "we ten are the strongest of all our people." They certainly were the biggest men and had the hardest faces of any tribesmen we had yet seen. Ali Agha, the eldest brother, with grizzled mustache and a smile, is chief. But he leaves the title and the work to Haidar. However, this does not change his actual power. Haidar, though carrying the name of chief, must obey him.

THE day before the start the tents were down and only camp fires burned that night among the crowded cattle. Tomorrow

1,000,000 in all, who migrate in search of grass.

The tribes were on the march!

The crossing of the Karun River, a week later, was a remarkable battle. I can't imagine a greater natural feat than the crossing of this river by the tribes.

Consider it! Here was a river a half-mile wide. Its waters were swelled to a rushing torrent by the melting snows of 100 mountain peaks. The river was icy cold. It was filled with whirlpools, cross-currents, rapids. It was tearing through mountain gorges with cliff-like jagged shores, and it was bridgeless and boatless. Now here was the problem. On one side of this river were 5000 people with all their worldly goods and perhaps 50,000 animals. There were women here, children, babies. It was spring and the herds and flocks had any number of baby animals. The people had no boats. But they must cross, and cross quickly, at that. There was little or no grazing for the animals on their side of the river. They must cross.

Well, this was how. Every tribe had in its saddle-bags quantities of goatskins. A score of skins were blown up, tied and then fastened to one side of rows of long sticks. A heavy carpet was laid on top. There was your raft. There was your boat for the women and children and baby animals. There were as many boats as you wanted. But of what use was a frail thing like this, unsteered and unsteerable, in that torrent river? It would seem to be swept down stream like a thistle, torn to pieces in the rapids, and every person aboard drowned in a minute.

TRUE enough. But some wise old khan, in times before the memory of the present tribes, riding along that river bank with his starving people and animals waiting for his wisdom to find a way to cross—be found