

# Barefoot Thousands in Mountain Snow

By  
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Illustrated by H. S. BARBOUR



"On came the horde—thousands upon thousands—as the biting wind tears through their cotton dresses."

**NOTE:** Having been permitted, as the first foreigners, to join in the great migration of the nomadic tribes of Persia over the mountains in search of grass, Mr. Cooper and his two companions, Mrs. Harrison, the writer, and Ernest E. Schoedsack ("Shorty"), the photographer, had been assigned to the Baba Ahmedli, the fiercest tribe of all the Bakhtiari, under the leadership of the iron chieftain, Haidar Khan.

With this tribe they had witnessed the extraordinary feat of crossing the Karun River, in which the women and children had been sent over on rafts made of goat skins. These shot across on the swift diagonal current to the opposite shore. The immense, panic-stricken herds of cattle even swam through the ice-cold water, driven by the men on a species of goatskin waterwings.

**F**OR many days the tribes had been climbing higher and higher through gorgeous wild mountain country. Before dawn each day we took the trail. We marched only in the cool hours of the morning in order to save the cattle, camping before noon, at night sleeping in the open under single blankets on rocky ground.

Restful that rocky ground because daily my body grew cleaner of city poisons, lost those tissues of flabby fat accumulated in city Bagdad and town Shushtar. Sweet sleep thus from sunset through the night; then before dawn the trail again, always eastward, always higher, skirting, cliffs climbing mountains, over fords, eastward, eastward, through the steep-walled snow-ane, on to grass.

We had been marching with these people for more than two weeks, and it had been one of Shorty's chief amusements at first to spread along the route a peculiarly inelegant expression for the Bakhtiari ladies to use when they drove the animals. "Ya Ali! Ali!" a Bakhtiari woman near us would call as she pushed the end of a stick with great vigor into the side of some reluctant beast. "Knock 'em for a goal!" Shorty would answer in the same rising inflection as the tribeswoman, but using American words.

**T**HERE would come laughter from every side, and to our surprise any number of women and men and boys, too, picked up the American slang. Seeing this, Shorty

In both directions the trail was swarming with a continuous stream of tribespeople. On the safest of three parallel trails were climbing the horses and cows, men and women. On the lower, precarious and slanting, jumped the sure-footed goats and sheep, while the boys and girls who drove them seemingly clung by their toe-nails. Thousands of feet of straight drop lay below.

For the thirteenth camp of the migration we arrived at the famous Shimbar, the gathering-place of the tribes, and the tribes were indeed gathering. Down the steep hillsides of the Shimbar Valley at night camp-fires gleamed almost as thickly as the stars. Here all the tribes were to come together; the animals were rested for the attack on the second mountain range; the khans settled tribal disputes or started new ones; the young bloods got practice at horse and gun-stealing; the women danced. It reminded me of nothing so much as a division pulled out of the first line for a breathing-spell before being shoved back in for a big push. There was laughter and there was fighting, and spirits mounted high.

On our second morning here, some of the younger men went down to the stream that flowed with a rush through the marsh below. As they flashed by on their goatskin

boats, hardening the young horses for swimming in the icy water, they called to me with merry shouts. I joined them, stripped, and plunged in.

Young Amir Hosain Khan had long challenged me, and we swam a race. The luck was in my favor. Five of his companions joined our second contest. Once more fortune favored me, though I am by no standards a fast swimmer. Only I had to bless the glorious Rye day when D. P. (a fish in the water) taught me the stroke that now enabled me to beat far stronger swimmers than I.

Now, apparently Haidar had been watching this performance; so, when I emerged from the last race, I found him naked except for a loin-cloth. He had come down to uphold the honor of the tribe.

The current swept torrent-like along. We plunged in neck and neck; neck and neck we fought through a narrow passage, around a curve. Then this man, my elder by many years, out-endured me; he drew away and left me gurgling in his wake.

As I came panting out, I cursed cigars, silly days with silly books in houses, gasoline-laden air. When I'm his age, they'll probably be pushing me about in a wheeled chair. I was reared in civilization; Haidar, as men were meant to live, in the open. After the race it was good to come back to dip my hand into the rice-bowl, stuff myself full and afterward puff lazily on the kalfan, or water-pipe, as it went around the circle of the khans, and to vow that my body should grow as hard as Haidar's.

**A**FTER two days of heavy rain, we left Shimbar early in May and pressed on over the mountains. At last we climbed another high range. This was crowned by a sheer, fifteen-hundred-foot cliff, over the top of which the horses were dragged by ropes. From its summit we saw far away, blocking our trail and stretching north and south to the ends of the horizon, the snow-capped sides of the giant enemy of the tribes, Zardeh Kuh, "The Yellow Mountain."

A week later the tribes camped some ten miles away from it, in a glorious, high, wooded country. They made no immediate effort to cross it.

Our people were "stalling" for position with the Bawadi tribes, whose riflemen were expected to attack us because we were protecting, through some tribal custom, the Beldarwand tribe. The Beldarwand raided the Bawadi during the migration last year, killed a number of their men and swept them clean, carrying off horses, herds, tents, rugs, everything. This year the Bawadi were going to try to retaliate.

Nobody seemed to mind this halt very much, since there was fairly good grazing here, except the Raki—the "thief tribe"—to whom this land belonged. Our animals were devouring their grass at a great rate, and they were raving angry. First they tried to make good their loss by collecting a toll. Our tribes had to

cross a rough foot-bridge of stones and logs over a mountain stream. I rode up somewhat ahead of the Beldarwand column and climbed a slope overlooking the stream. On the farther side of the bridge were grouped some fifty of the Raki men, armed with rifles and swords and long, heavy sticks.

Slowly a long line of Beldarwand families and cattle came down toward the stream and, without halting for a second to consider the hostile group, began to go over the bridge. No sooner was the first family across than two of the "thief tribe" men grabbed a donkey and were about to make off with it.

I've never seen a "free-for-all" start faster. Across that bridge the Beldarwand men came running, waving their long, heavy sticks. The fight was on! Not a shot was fired—both sides knew that a killing here meant a blood-feud to the death—but every man grasped his staff with both hands and, swinging it with full force, cracked the nearest enemy in sight.

Shouts! Howls! Screams! A man directly below me was bowled over and lay still. At that a tall, full-bosomed young woman in a red headkerchief leaped to his side, grasped his stick and, despite the fact that she had a cradle with a baby in it strapped on her shoulders, tore into the melee, shrieking with rage and striking out like a mad thing.

A man behind her swung up his club and brought it down full across the side of her head. She was knocked clean off her feet and rolled over twice, the cradle (with the baby in it) spinning under her. She went over and around and around, like a football-player on a ball, and then rolled to her feet, still running, and leaped back into the fray. More women joined in. And over the bridge came running more and more of the Beldarwand. The Raki broke and fled. There was no toll paid that morning!

I was at a conference the next day when the Raki chiefs in a solemn group came to hold council with our khans. First we feasted; then the kalfan went from mouth to mouth. Finally the gray-bearded Raki leader, despite the defeat of his young men on the previous day, made an oration to the effect that the Baba Ahmedli and Beldarwand tribes must go on or pay for the stay. At this, Ali Agha and Haidar and all the stalwart Baba Ahmedli chiefs rocked with derisive laughter.

"You say we must move on or pay?" asked Ali Agha.

"Yes."

Ali Agha sneered, "Go tell your people we have another choice—this!" and he tapped his rifle.

Yes, might is most certainly right among the tribes.

Upon learning that the Bawadi were already moving over the mountains, at a place forty miles north of here, our tribes knew that they had a chance to go on with-

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"It seemed that nothing in this world could save her."

and I with great gusto would sing by the hour, "Yes, we have no bananas." After a few days scarcely a half-hour would pass on the trail without our coming on some one who could sing a snatch of that Broadway dit-

And so, one evening, jammed against this ever-rising cliff, we opened up our chorus. We stopped, listened. There, in the depths of the Persian mountains, in this trail untrodden by foreigners, out of the blackness of the night, rang out along the line several of the voices of one of the wildest migratory tribes in Persia:

"Yes we have no bananas, We have no bananas today." Dawn crept slowly down the mountain; then the sun rose. Snow peaks glistened about us. We were near the summit.

out the risk of being shot from ambush. But we were now face to face with a crueler and stronger enemy than hostile human beings. Directly above our camp towered grim and gigantic Zardeh Kuh—black rock and snow and more snow, rising straight up until the peaks were lost in the clouds. Five thousand cotton-clad people and half a hundred thousand animals were going to cross that snow mountain.

Haidar and a chosen body of volunteers had made the crossing possible. For three days they had climbed up Zardeh Kuh. On the first day Shorty and I went with them. For a mile they followed the course of a mountain torrent; then they came to the place where this torrent poured out from the glacial snow of a deep gorge. Here they halted, put down the poles and picks and shovels they were carrying and all sat down.

THEN each man began calmly to take off his shoes. It was a moment before the full significance of that act struck me. Their cotton slippers would of course be ruined after an hour in the snow. I remembered that the tribes people had always taken their shoes off when fording streams or walking on muddy ground after a rain; for the soles were made of patched rags and were rendered utterly useless by a wetting. And now Haidar and his men were taking their shoes off here and were going up into the snow. Barefoot in the snow!

Forward went Haidar and his score of volunteers. Down the gorge barefoot they went, Haidar leading. Every minute or so he would stop and the men would spread out and with pick and shovel test the snow for holes; for the trail must be made around them. I peered into one of these crevices. I stared down to its black depths. Far below I could hear the rush of the mountain torrent. It was all up with man or beast that fell there.

Now, we went on for a mile to a point where the gorge came to an abrupt end against a half-circle of mountain—this mountain of rock and snow, which rose straight above us and disappeared into the clouds. We halted. Where was the pass? There was no pass. The only way was up and over!

To the right and in front of us the mountain was unscalable. To the left it first rose in a rock shape and then went on up into the snow, growing steeper and steeper until, far above, the last thousand feet or so appeared almost vertical. But here to the left was the place of crossing. Toward it turned Haidar and his volunteers. For an hour they climbed until they came once more to the snow edge.

Here Haidar stopped and for a long five minutes studied the terrain. After a little, digging in the snow with his pole, he worked his way out, and only very slightly up, across the slope for above forty yards. Then he shouted an order. With a whoop and a yell two men drove their picks through the hard snow crust. Shovel men followed. As they dug a diagonal trail in Haidar's direction, other men came after, widening and deepening it. When the workers reached Haidar, he turned them around, and they carried the deep snow path back in a diagonal to the first line and slightly above it.

Thus the tribes were to climb, encased by snow walls. So protected against the otherwise sure fall to death, they were to mount little by little in zigzags across the face of the mountain until they reached the summit, far above.



Hour after hour Haidar and his men dug on. I often had felt inclined to sneer a little at these tribesmen for the swagger with which they carried their guns and for the little they knew about caring for them or using them, but this attack I had to admire.

It was cold up there. The wind blew steadily. These men had no coats of fur, no coats of any kind; they were tribesmen of warm valleys; they were clad in thin cotton garments; they worked with their bare legs and feet buried deep in soft snow.

Hour after hour they labored. They cheered and whooped and howled. They worked in shifts and sections and sometimes all together. The trail went on—up and up. There was little or no grass at the foot of Zardeh Kuh, and the grass now being used was brought from the Raki land below. Yes, that trail had to be dug. On the fourth day, the last bit was finished, and the stage set for the crossing of the tribes.

“GO HANG yourself, Crillon! We fought at Arques and you were not there.” That is what I found myself crying mentally at half a dozen men on the night after three unforgettable days. What wouldn't they have given to be with us! Shorty and I were camped half-way up Zardeh Kuh. It was blowing like the devil and cold. Our muleteers had gone Bolshevik; even Mahommed was ready to quit. We were completely out of grub. We'd had nothing to eat but a little native bread once a day for two days; and we were going to sleep a bit chilly here that night, almost at the top of Persia. Shorty was dressed only in a light suit. His lips were cracked and bleeding.

But both of us were at the peak of happiness. We had done it. There was no doubt about it. We had seen as great a struggle for existence as there is; and we had it for the screen. Somewhere, somehow, there may be a battle of man against nature that equals this for epic sweep and dramatic intensity, but I don't believe it.

This is what had happened:

Three afternoons before, when Shorty and I had been down bathing in the snow stream that ran by our camp and, feeling like young fighting-cocks, were running up toward the trail, we saw that it was lined with people, who were moving straight for the snow gorge. What was this? No one had told us that the tribes would move that day. In an hour it would be dark! It wasn't possible that any one would try to climb Zardeh Kuh in the night. We hurried back; we ran.

In our camp all was commotion. Haidar had been raging like a crazy man, Mrs. Harrison said, cursing his brothers for dogs and sons of dogs, because they had sent ahead their Number Two wives, with most of their effects, to make camp along the sides of the gorge itself. Thus they would climb the mountain first on the morrow and miss the struggling mob in the trail. This method of avoiding the dangers of the ascent was an infringement of Haidar's rights. He had led the trail-diggers, and he should be first over Zardeh Kuh. Burning with anger he now started off Mrs. Haidar Number Two, with most of his camp.

Seeing them set out was enough for Shorty and me. We gathered together our men and mules and followed. Darkness had come on by the time we struck the glacial ice and moved out into the snow gorge. Carefully we picked our way along, every man alert for those deep holes that meant “good night” for ever. We could not afford to lose any animals in that way. We worked slowly up the gorge, near the end of which we saw little campfires burning. Here we found our people and, throwing our blankets on the rocks just above the snow, we slept . . .

We were off before dawn, leaving our mules and mule-man behind and taking only a camera-donkey. On foot we climbed higher and higher up Zardeh Kuh, zig-zagging through the snow trails. Three-quarters of the way up we unslung the camera equipment. It was impossible to operate the camera on the trail itself because there was only room for a single person to pass between the snow walls; so we climbed gingerly out on the surface of the slope.

IT WAS still early morning, and the snow crust was as hard and smooth as glass. The angle was terrifically steep. I hesitate to venture a guess on how steep it really was. On the off side, where we crawled, if anybody slipped, there was nothing to stop him from rolling breathless thousands of feet to the very foot of the mountain. Mahommed and I perched quite safely on the edge of the trail, hanging our feet down into it, but Shorty had to set up his motion-picture camera well outside the trail.

He started out, thrusting the ends of his tripod deep into the snow for support. Once he began to slide, and I thought it was all over except the shouting. But the very weight of the heavy apparatus saved him. The steel points of the legs of the tripod dug deep into the snow and gave him the necessary second to get his balance and hold on.

Now came the horde. Like a great twisting snake, black against the white snow surface, up it came! Closer! And now the head of the column was directly beneath us—men, women, children, barefoot in the snow!

It will be long before I forget the sight. Close-ups of it now come flashing across my mind like great dramatic paintings; an old gray-bearded man with a child of three perched on his shoulders, and both he and the child crying with pain and cold as he stumbles on, leaning heavily on two sticks; a sick boy, his face drawn so that his teeth seem almost to stick out through his upper lip, fastened sprawling across the back of a donkey; an old, old woman, her gray hair straggling about her wrinkled face, beating a line of loaded cows; a little girl carrying on her back a calf almost as big as herself; Mrs. Harrison struggling courageously on despite her recent fever, a white woman here among the tribes, escorted by Haidar and his son; women, women, old and young, nearly all carrying babies and shivering as the biting wind tears through their cotton dresses and at their feet and legs and throats. On came the horde! Thousands upon thousands! And so slowly they climbed!

On account of a shoulder of rock the snow trail, at one place just above us, was only a few inches high. A scream behind me made me pause and look back at this spot. I saw a heavily loaded donkey stumbling just outside the trail. For one precarious second it stood balanced above eternity. Then it began to slide. It lost its footing and fell. Rolling over and over, gathering speed as it went, it spun downward. Now it was going with the swiftness of an airplane in a nose-dive, falling, falling, falling, until far below it became only a tiny black dot.

The woman in charge of it shrieked and, tearing her face with her nails, hysterically leaped outside the snow lane. There was a mighty howl all down the line of climbers as she squatted on her bare feet and began to slide. It seemed that nothing in this world could save her.

When she had shot along fifty yards with gathering speed, however, she struck the outside end of a turn in the trail below. Here she went shooting in to safety between its high snow walls.

But the howls below kept up; for, when the woman had jumped outside the path, she had dislodged a few small pieces of the rock, which now fell faster and faster. Bullets could be no more dangerous. Everyone threw himself low to escape the falling stones.

From them came one of the dangers of the climb. Every year many were injured or killed by dislodged rock despite rigid attempts at protection. One must stay in the trail, or, if one went outside it, one must keep well clear, as did Shorty, of the climbers' line of march.

On and on mounted the endless black, twisting line of the tribes. As the sun grew hotter, it began to soften the snow. Soon the dogs were leaping safely outside the limits of the trail, though often causing great excitement by dislodging stones. Shorty, too, now worked with more ease. And ever the thousands came on. When the sun began to sink behind the mountain line, the trail was still full of the advancing horde . . .

FOR three days thus the tribes were crossing. Every morning we climbed to a new place on the mountain for pictures. Every evening we camped somewhere down near its foot. But on the third night we found ourselves lying under the stars on a rock high up in the snow itself; and were done with our work on this side of Zardeh Kuh. The next day for the summit!

We were off at dawn. We thought the show would be over by the time we reached the mountain top; but when, at last, we arrived there, we found it in full swing.

Down the mountainside steeply and yet more steeply swept a natural winding road of deep glacial snow. And upon the stern rock walls that loomed above it thousands of delicate purple flowers had been scattered by some old pagan god. Down this sheer snow lane, with its flower-decked walls, as far as the eye could see, moved a continuous line of black dots.

We rode down along the crowd. Here, there, animals lay dead in the snow. The old, the young and the weak were strapped backward on donkeys and cows. And whooping and laughing, crying and weeping, stumbling and falling, with bleeding legs and feet, with pain-racked bodies, the cotton-clad horde swept on down . . . down the mountainside.

We went with them, went downward mile after mile, almost knee-deep in the soft snow. We came around a high rock point and there below—far below—snow and mountain ended. Out to the horizon stretched green valleys, through which, in the golden sunshine, rippled silver streams feeding the luxuriant young grass.

Here was the prize of the gallant fight. Here was the land of plenty. Grass! Grass and life!

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