

BAREFOOT NATION MIGRATES THROUGH SNOW TO FIND FOOD

Three Americans, One a Woman, Take Part in Annual Trek of 30,000 Persian Tribesmen—Even the Children Did Not Falter

By MERIAN C. COOPER.

THIRTY thousand people of all ages and both sexes struggling for eight days across a blizzard-swept mountain range in their bare feet—a great national migration fighting for its human existence against the forces of nature—this dramatic feat I have just seen and, indeed, taken part in. That statement, I fear, sounds like the careful exaggeration of a circus press agent. But in the case of this pilgrimage of the entire nation of the nomad Baktiari of South Persia the most egregious of the press-agent tribe (could he have been there) would have realized the futility of trying to exaggerate the simple facts.

In their migration the children of Israel at least trod on sand, their soles, if bare, did not encounter numbing snow and cutting ice. And our own hardy fathers in their westward search for new homes had the shelter of their covered wagons between them and the sky. But these thousands of savage nomads and their families were almost as unprotected against sun, wind and hail as the wild animals they hunt.

Two American companions also saw this migration. As a motion picture camera man, Ernest Beaumont Schoedsack has had his share of thrills. And few women of her age have been through more exciting experiences than Mrs. Marguerite E. Harrison, author and traveler, who, by the way, is a sister-in-law of Governor Ritchie of Maryland.

Guests of Wild Robbers.

Both declare that not even their most lurid days among the Bolsheviks equaled in vividness the six weeks that the three of us spent with the robber-hunter nomads of the Baktiari tribes. For the eight days' battle with the drifted crags of the heretofore unexplored Zaardar Ku mountain range was only the climax of a long trek in which our share was made possible by a mandate of protection from the ruling khans of this wild country. Before we fell upon the rude hospitality of these fierce tribes the three of us had lired on dried balls of camels' milk with a caravan crossing the Anatolian desert, had hunted wild goats in the snow mountains of the Taurus, and with the camel corps of Arabia had hunted down freebooting Bedouins.

Dried camels' milk and flour made of the kneaded wings and hind legs of locusts were palatable fare, however, compared to the bitter sheep's butter-milk and cast-iron pancakes which became our diet when we joined the Baktiari. In her first attack on Baktiari bread Mrs. Harrison cracked a tooth. She was our linguist (she speaks ten languages), and it wouldn't do to have her doing that. So at every meal Schoedsack undertook to break her bread with the butt of his revolver. After three or four days of such hammering that weapon showed unmistakable signs of disintegration, and thenceforth "Shorty" used the butt of his rifle. Verily, for bread they had given us stones.

Likewise we missed the black goats-hair tents of the desert corsairs when we joined this mountain migration. Mrs. Harrison had her own tiny tent, but Schoedsack and I slept out in wind, rain and snow with the protection of only one blanket apiece.

However, few of our nomad hosts had any coverings except what they wore on their backs. Yet there was no flu, not even a cold, and the single fatality during the long trek was that of a man swept away when we were fording a river.

Migration an Annual Affair.

This great migration of the Baktiari is an annual affair, although no "white man" had ever taken part in it before. These tribesmen spend their Winters on the shores of the Persian Gulf, where their sheep, goats, cows, asses, horses and a few camels find good grazing in the cool months. To the simple standard of living of these people their herds are what all our complex industry and agriculture are to us. Not robbery or even hunting can be depended on entirely to support a whole nation, so when the terrible heat of Spring on the Persian Gulf kills the sustenance of their grazing animals the Baktiari chiefs give word to strike camp for the high cool plateau of the interior.

At once all ordinary occupations are stopped. The hunters come in from the surrounding plains. Miles away could be seen the cloud of dust that rose over us as the roving shepherds and cowboys of the Near East rounded up the kicking, bleating, braying and neighing communal wealth—very close to a quarter of a million animals.

Imagine 30,000 people with no formal discipline trying to form themselves and nearly 250,000 animals into some sort of semi-orderly procession! For the first three days we Americans felt as we might have felt if we had been attending a crowded rodeo in Madison Square Garden when an alarm of fire set men, women, children and animals into a mad, roaring, shouldering hurly-burly. The authority of the Khans and other native chiefs is shadowy at best, and there was nothing that by the greatest stretch of the imagination could be called military discipline. But gradually one realized that through all this pattern of confusion there ran a thread of voluntary discipline. It was a dim social sense of the necessity of being a part of the whole rather than an independent unit, a tacit instinct for co-operation doubtless bred by centuries of nomad fighting which had shown that a small body in cooperation could defeat a large body in disorder. There was no red tape, no saluting or salaaming, but even the animals seemed to feel that the good of the herd was the good of the individual, and it needed mighty little shepherding to keep them together on the march.

We Americans selected the Baba Achmadi tribe of the Baktiari as our immediate companions, and the chief of this division was fascinated by Mrs. Harrison's accoutrements. When she gave him a box of women's gold-tipped cigarettes the Baba Achmadi delegation was ours till the end of the convention. This was a great triumph for our countrywoman, who never carries a revolver, contending that tact is a greater protection than even T N T. Next time, however, she will take a revolver—to break bread with.

Most of the inhabitants of Persia had no family names until three or four years ago, when an edict forced them to name themselves. Proud of his ani-

mal wealth, this chief had taken for himself a cognomen which our linguist rendered literally into English as Multitudinous Ass. A pair of European shoes, much too large for him, was the most conspicuous part of the attire of Multitudinous Ass. Their size didn't matter much, for he wore the right shoe on the left foot and vice versa.

The outstanding feature of the Persian plains is described by our word khaki, adopted from the Persian vocabulary, in which it means dust. When the Baktiari hordes were on the march, the dust was unbelievable for thickness and dryness. We tied handkerchiefs over our mouths and noses, we even drank water through handkerchiefs, for the dust got into everything, even the goatskin water bags slung under the bellies of the horses or on the backs of

to whimper with the ache of the glacial snow around their scrawny ankles.

The women dismounted with the men, and proved how little were they like the upper-class women of Persian cities, who ride in cages resembling hencoops strapped to the back of camel or mule. These daughters of the mountains carried their latest born in heavy wooden cradles lashed to their backs below the rifles swinging from the brawny shoulders. They were magnificent, these nomad women. Whenever I hear a feminist discussion hereafter I shall think of them.

We Americans could not believe it possible for these thousands of burden-bearing human beings and animals to scale that hard white wall of mountain. However, the Khans knew their business. Against that snowy barrier they launched a picked body of tribesmen. With their bare brown feet these tireless fellows stamped a zigzag passage up the frowning face of it.

Next came the laden cows and asses, driven by the indefatigable women. I saw one woman slip in the treacherous snow and slide into a drift that momentarily buried the wailing mite in the cradle on her back.

"She's just had a baby and is still a little weak," said her sister to us apologetically. We saw no one else slip, not even one of the children of toddling age



The Three Adventurers—Left to Right: Merian C. Cooper, Mrs. Marguerite E. Harrison, and Ernest B. Schoedsack.

the donkeys. The latter animals, by the way, had had their nostrils slit in the common fashion of that country, to make it less difficult for them to breathe the atmosphere of Persian trails.

One morning we broke camp with the immediate prospect of fording a river. We Americans had lost most of our clothes in the overland hike from Constantinople, and in his linen suit Schoedsack was cool. He sneezed. Multitudinous Ass glared at him.

"Sneeze twice," ordered Mrs. Harrison.

Propitiating the Gods.

Schoedsack forced another sneeze. Multitudinous Ass smiled with relief. It seems that to sneeze when embarking on any undertaking is an omen of failure in Persia, and two sneezes mean that the gods are propitious again.

The tribesmen made rafts of goatskin for such goods as wouldn't be hurt by water. More precious stuff they carried in their arms while their horses or mules swam under them. Downstream the herds of pack animals and food animals lashed the water into white ribbons in their haste to be across.

We were now out of the flat country. For nearly a month we threaded narrow valleys and picked our way over mountains. At last there loomed ahead the chief barrier to be surmounted—the famous Zaardar Ku Range of the Baktiari Mountains. How high we were I don't know, for these mountains never have been surveyed, or even explored. But the air was thin and dry and the snow underfoot creaked when we trod on it. The footing was too uncertain now for the animals to be ridden, and the barefoot children, with the true courage of their hardy race, tried not

who followed their mothers. Perhaps we were too busy picking ourselves out of the drifts to observe the others adequately. I had laughed heartlessly at Schoedsack in that Palm Beach suit—his one and only costume. Now it was his turn to enjoy my plight in dancing pumps, my one and only outfit of footgear that had not succumbed to the sharp stones of hill and desert.

Behind us and the women came the older and less able men driving the valuable herds of horses. When we reached the top at last we paused and watched the crawling cable of men and animals behind us. It was a scene that evoked as much awe as admiration, as much pathos as wonder. A scene stupendous, primitive, smacking of the crude, fierce drama of the Old Testament. Man, nearly naked man, pitted against naked nature.

It was a week before the last donkey was through the pass. Then we were still some distance from the destination of our nomadic friends, but the worst was over. For us the rest of the trek passed like a dream, for we were yet under the spell of the tremendous drama we had seen.

Outwardly we have little to show for what we have been through except an affidavit made by Emir Jang, Prince of the Baktiari, before Major Robert Imbrie, lately murdered American Consul at Teheran. This testifies that we were the first foreigners ever to make the great migration through the snowy mountains with the barefoot Baktiari.

But inwardly we shall never be quite the same. For now we are rare among civilized men and women in knowing how all important to primitive man are the forces of nature, and how sweet to him in danger is the friendship of his own kind.