

THE KHEF-SOURI, DESCENDANTS OF THE CRUSADERS SHUT OUT BY SNOW FOR SEVEN MONTHS

(John Gunther in New York Sun.)

Tiflis, Georgia, U. S. S. R.—For seven months of the year the Khef-Souri, who claim to be descendants of the Crusaders, are shut off from the world by snow. In mid-September the tribesmen were hurrying to finish their work in the fields, to store their produce for the long isolated winter.

Those eight hours on horseback up the steepest hills I've ever seen gave us a pretty good idea of the kind of people we would see. There is a good deal of God in the atmosphere of Georgia. St. George did not work in vain here. I felt as if he had picked up some immense dome of rock, some prodigious meteor, held it poised on high, and then smashed it into 1,000,000 fragments against the mountains, scattering the broken stones through all the valley.

The valley of the Black Aravga, it is called. Black indeed!

The crops are planted precariously on the steep hillside. We saw peasants reaping grain at an angle of 45 degrees. Our guide was born in this district; yet he did not know the language of one group of peasants whom we passed. The villages are built of slabs of black stone set into the hillsides at dizzy levels.

Some of the Tribes.

The road was a road part of the way. Then it became a torrent. We followed the river bed and the quick milky water warned us that in another fortnight, perhaps sooner, the snow would come and shut the Khef-Souri in a closed world again. We crossed the Aravga perhaps twenty times, the horses picking their way from stone to stone through the knee-deep swirling water.

Our guides told us of some of the tribes of this region. If we went two days further we would come to Svanetia, where people live in towers. Tall towers line the hills, built roundly of black stone; the cattle are on the first floor, then the women, then the men on top. These Svanetians still use bows and arrows. And atop their towers are queer machines for rotating stones in cataquilt pockets; when enemies came in the old days these whirling prospectors sprinkled rocks in a wide circular stream around the towers.

Still further, our guide told us, were men who could not speak. They had no language. The sounds they made were purely animal. Still further, on the Dagestan side of the range, we might find (he told us) a well known Caucasian tribe of patriarchs. In half a dozen villages the women ran everything. A woman was chief of the tribe, and children take their mother's name. The men are serfs, working out on the fields.

The Family's Size.

"But this is not true with my people," the guide explained. "With the Khef-Souri it is not the women who have everything to say."

Still, we found to what an extraordinary extent the sanctity of womanhood was respected among the Khef-Souri; it is true that the woman is practically a beast of burden, but in many ways the husband must respect her. Every woman may decide for instance, how many children she will have, and in our Khef-Souri village the number was strictly limited to four.

Atop the last hill the Khef-Souri villages began. A few children spilled into the rocky path—then ran back into the houses. Dogs set up an inferno of barking, from the saddles, and walked stiffly toward the first house.

A sharp voice called the dogs back. "Enter," said the guide.

The first thing we saw was the armor—hanging on a post just inside the door. Long, cross-handled swords, shirts made of fine steel mesh, helmets with hanging napes of chain mail—here it all was!

We had found our men in armor.

How They Live.

A bright blond child, wearing a beaded crown, showed us through the village. The houses—we thought first—had just one room. The room was long, broad, with a very low ceiling, and so dark that at first we could see nothing. The only window was perhaps two feet square and was ob-

scured by hangings. In the middle of the room were two rough beds, for husbands and wife; I could not find where the children slept. Behind a partition was the place for the cattle and sheep.

Our host was Gighia Pitzhel-Aouri, chief of the tribe. He gave us water and offered us sour milk for food. We explored the single, low, dark room. Then Gighia pointed, lifted what seemed a board on the floor—and disappeared.

Underneath this upper room was a cellar of similar size. It was not quite a cellar, because a door opens from it lower into the hillside. I thought the first room as dark and primitive as anything I had ever seen. The cellar went it one better. We could not see. There was no window. The only thing there was—a stench. Gighia lit a lamp—a tiny tin can with a wick projecting. Greasy black smoke streamed furiously upward.

"Upstairs we live in summer," the guide translated for us. "In winter—here."

At one end was the stove. This was contrived of two slabs of stone over a hole in the floor. There was no place for the smoke to go—except to fill the room.

From the rafters food hung. This was mostly in the form of tails of fat-tailed sheep; they are smoked and good, our guide assured us, for twenty years. To one side we saw immense earthenware jugs to hold wine, butter, cheese. We listened. The moaning of the cattle behind the partition was like a song.

We were shown the implements used by the Khef-Souri. The scythes were obviously beaten out of swords. The rake was made of wooden pegs. We saw a loom blackened by smoke, and Gighia ordered one of the children to show us the criss-cross blankets woven by the women.

Then we went out again. That air! I breathed.

Cross on Left Breast.

The men wore a dark brown shirt cut without sleeves and hanging loose till it is tucked in by a belt over the

trousers. The shirts were elaborately embroidered and on many, over the left breast, an intricate cross was designed. The women wore wedge-shaped skirts in bright (but faded) colors, the pattern being a diminishing series of bound squares. The kids—tousled youngsters with yellow hair—were bright with beads. These were sewn in various designs on their smocks and caps.

We did not see any of the Khef-Souri women for the first hour or so. They were working in the fields. At sundown they came in, trudging, bent double, carrying on their backs such a load of grain as would break the back (I thought) of any ordinary man.

"This armor!" We were still marveling at it. "Where did you get it? How long have you had it. Where did it come from?"

The Khef-Souri didn't know. It had been in the village as long as the oldest man could remember. Before that—as long as his oldest predecessor could remember.

The swords were sharp as razors. The edges glittered, polished with sand hundreds of times. We handled

them, and two or three of the men put on their armor.

"And these swords—you use them?" Perhaps this was an impolite question. There was a little silence. "Yes." Gighia answered, "sometimes."

The Religious Side.

We learned later what they were used for. Blood feuds.

"And you consider yourselves descendants of the old Crusaders?"

"We prefer to think so. Scientists say we are not. Perhaps they know best. Perhaps we do."

Crusaders or not, the Khef-Souri are dying out fast. In this village there are thirty-six houses—perhaps 180 people. In all the district, we were told, there were perhaps 3,500 others of the same stock—no more.

The Khef-Souri do not naturally wear their armor when they are at work in the field. But it is invariably donned at the numerous feast days with which they celebrate christenings and weddings. Yet the armor is more than merely a ceremonial costume. The men always wear it for instance, when leaving their villages and sometimes as far away as Passanaoor they may be

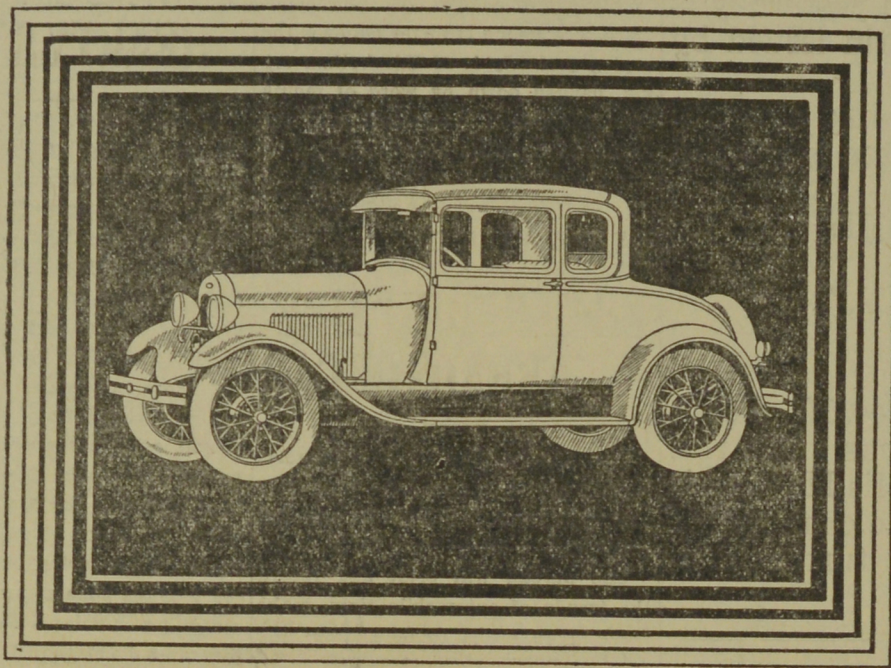
seen watching with curious eyes the traffic along the Georgian military road.

A whole cycle of anthropological rites centres on marriage. Fidelity is absolute. Divorce is unknown. A great feast is held when two young people of the tribe marry—it lasts for a week and is celebrated by many gallons of samagon. (Samagon is home made vodka.)

Husband and wife must have different beds, and the husband is supposed to ask permission to visit his wife. At childbirth the women must retire to a lonely hut—we saw it just off the main road—and there await her child absolutely alone. Female relative may bring food once a day to the threshold. Otherwise the mother is untended.

The Khef-Souri are seminary worshippers, but call themselves Christian. They have no churches, however, and no priests. Near the village is a grove of tall cypresses; this is known as the scared grove, and somewhere within it is concealed a very large cross. Here the tribesmen worship. There is no stated ritual.

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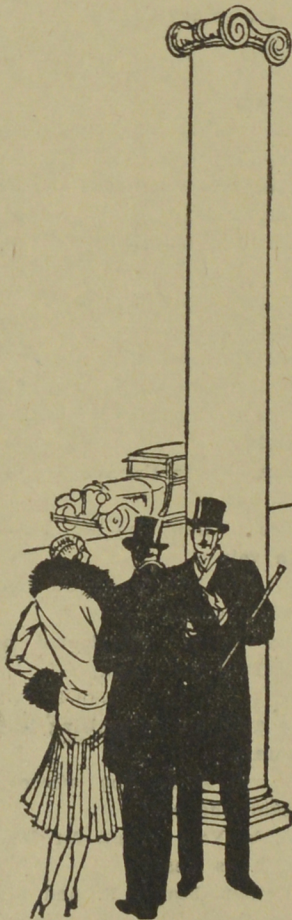


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