

STEW

As Camel Drivers Make It

BY RODNEY GILBERT

ONE bitter cold night a few months ago, my wife asked me what kind of a dinner I'd like. I said that I wasn't ravenously hungry, but that the weather called for something filling and substantial; and with that I stepped out to sniff the gale.

It was blowing hard from the northwest. The thermometer said that it was just below zero. The stars sparkled appropriately; and the coons, "booping" to one another dolefully from hill to hill, made me think of the yipping of wolves on other cold nights on the other side of the world. I wasn't long getting back into the house, and I then remarked that, if it weren't for the big trees all around me, I'd think that I was out in the Mongol grasslands on a winter night.

"Now I know what we'll have for dinner," said my wife. "We'll have camel drivers' stew."

There are books available now from which one can learn how to prepare, after a fashion, almost any dish that is served in a good Chinese restaurant, or in a prosperous Chinese household. But camel drivers' stew is one dish that is not to be found in the books, is not prepared in the best Chinese households and is not to be encountered in Chinese restaurants. It is nevertheless the one dish on which many thousands of the hardiest of all Chinese live through about seven months of the year — seven months of sub-zero weather during which they are almost never under a roof. And, what is more, I can guarantee that if any reader of



these lines is ever foolish enough or luckless enough to find himself where this dish is prepared, and is handed a bowl of it, he will pronounce it the most delectable provender that ever passed his lips.

The environment in which one eats this stew is all-important to an appreciation of it, of course. From personal experience I can testify that this is almost anywhere in Mongol country, sometimes desert, sometimes gravelly waste, sometimes prairie, north of the Chinese border — almost anywhere between the plateau above Peking and the heart of Chinese Turkestan. It must be mid-winter. The time should be in that period before the dawn when it is traditionally darkest, for Bactrian camels travel at night only. That is the time when one usually arrives at a camp site where there is some alkaline water available, and starts thinking very seriously indeed of food. The temperature should be at least 40 degrees below zero. I won't say that there *should* be a northwest gale blowing, because there *would* be. That's something that the Mongol border country never fails to provide; and that's the cocktail that really goes to work on one's appetite.

CAMEL MEN must travel in bevvies. Usually they start out from some railhead in China as five or six fellows leading strings that total something like seventy beasts. Out in the wilderness they run into

others; and before long one can see a single-file parade of maybe 150 camels stepping sedately along in amazingly brilliant moonlight, over dunes and hummocks, at their deceptively leisurely pace. It keeps a man moving at a very brisk walk — better than four miles an hour.

Then, when you come to the waterhole, what happens? String after string is led in and parked in parallel lines, all with their noses to the wind; for if you tried to turn a camel's silly little tail to the wind and he felt the gale getting under his coat, he would be on his feet protesting in ten seconds. Up go the tents. Two or three men take charge of this. The rest are all out with bags and baskets collecting dried dung for fuel. Horse is light kindling; cow is a better starter; but camel and sheep supply the hot fire.

By the time the first collector is in with his pickings, the chow tent is up and there is a shallow iron boiler, maybe 15 inches in diameter, on iron stakes that have been driven into the frozen ground. Others have drawn some water, and a few quarts are already in the boiler, together with a few chunks of brick tea. It takes no time to start a fire. Someone always has a little dry grass or a few tamarisk twigs for kindling, and dry dung burns fiercely. By the time the tea has boiled, a dozen gentle souls with the faces of pirates, clad in sheepskin coats, are in a crowded circle around the fire and are soon noisily inhaling boiling hot

tea with great relish. Then preparation of that pre-dawn meal begins.

While the mob is drinking tea, two things are going on. One fellow is kneading dough, and another is cutting up meat and vegetables. The worthy who kneads the dough has probably been as busy as others picking up dried dung. So he must wash his hands. Water is scarce. He pours ten drops into one palm, goes through the motions of a thorough wash and wipes his hands on his sheepskin coat.

The man who cuts up the meat and vegetables may not take quite so much trouble. What the latter has to cut up is mutton frozen as hard as rock. For this he has a substantial cleaver. When the last of the tea has been scooped out of the boiler, he throws into it all the fat that he has been able to chop or slice off the mutton and then proceeds to chop the lean meat into chunks as big as the end of his thumb. His vegetables give him little trouble, though they are frozen just as hard as his meat, because he has few of them. He may have some carrots and potatoes, but he is sure to have onions — in scallion form.

THEN here comes the stew. The mutton fat in the boiler sizzles and melts. When this is in a molten state, in go several pounds of the little chunks of frozen mutton, the onions and whatever else there is, plus salt and soy, if any. As these fry and as the gale rocks the tent,

and the camels outside snort and squeal about nothing at all, and the dogs bark because the wolves are edging in, the aroma that rises from that frying mess in the boiler is maddening. But then, just as everyone is ready to shout that he will eat the stuff as it is, somebody pours a couple of gallons of cold water into the boiler at a signal from the cook. Clouds of hot steam envelop the grimy company; and about this time the operator on the dough (made of good wheat flour with more "middlings" in it than we now get) starts passing out balls of his mixture to each fellow.

Each takes his allotment and rolls it between his palms until it is about six inches long and the thickness of his thumb. This he then squeezes flat between his thumbs and forefingers. By this time the pot is boiling. So all around it the hungry fellows start tearing bits off their strips of dough and flicking them into the pot, after which they sit back and give the whole thing very little time indeed to cook. Then they dip in, and in no time they are scraping the bottom of the big boiler.

My wife and I devised our own domestic approximation of the great dish, and we like it on a cold night; but to get the real thing and go wild about it, you've just gotta go there. You've got to rock along on a camel in the dark for ten hours, or trudge at the head of a string, under that hellish northwest wind, at 40 below zero — and then get a chance to eat.

The Man in the



LEATHER SUIT

By Charles E. Booth

ONE SUNNY MORNING in early June, a farmer's wife in a rural New York town heard a loud knock upon her kitchen door. Opening it, she faced a strange-looking traveler. He was attired from head to toe in ragged brown leather and from his hunched shoulders hung a battered brown leather bag. His face, wrinkled and weather-beaten, had not felt the touch of a razor in years.

The traveler spoke not a word, but instead made motions signifying that he would like something to eat. The farmer's wife understood the signals well, for to her he was a semiannual visitor. A cup of hot coffee and a steaming plate of good home-cooked food were offered him immediately and he accepted them with a peculiar nod of his head.

As soon as he had finished the last crumb of food and had tasted the last drop of coffee, the strange old man departed without another gesture. But his hostess, thoroughly accustomed to his habits, knew that he would return again in the fall. Known throughout Connecticut and eastern New York State, this story-like character was well known as the famed "Leatherman," who, for some twenty-odd years, traveled a

certain route by foot through the two states, visiting various farm-houses along the way. During his many years of such traveling, he wore the same leather jacket, suit and boots, all made from old assorted leather scraps.

The Leatherman set out as a traveler in 1860 from a cave in Harwinton, Connecticut. From there, he traveled a route covering a distance of over 260 miles. He chose a route which wound around several towns and villages along the Connecticut River. His travels took him to Saybrook and other Connecticut shore towns, and then westward to the lower part of New York State. His return trips brought him back again to his cave at Harwinton.

The Leatherman lived a lonely and monotonous life. Never once in twenty years was he known to change his route nor interrupt his daily routine. He spoke to no one whom he chanced to meet along the highways.

To many people, the Leatherman was simply a character who had probably at one time or another had a sad experience with life and had chosen a dreary existence out of sheer spite. To others, he repre-