

I myself was to ride a quiet old she-camel, eighteen years old. One could pat her over the eyes without any unpleasant consequences. If one tried any such manoeuvre with the others they would spit, and before one knew where one was one had a greenish yellow soup, in appearance not unlike stewed gooseberries, all over one's face and clothes. And this soup was not exactly fragrant.

DELAYED START

»The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley.» After conferring with LARSON I had fixed upon July 20th as the date for our start. From early on the morning of the 19th the whole camp was taken up with packing. By lunch-time I had already finished mine. LARSON, who had a minimum of baggage, had finished in a quarter of an hour. The Mongols had been busy since dawn, fixing the pack-saddles on the hundred liveliest and therefore most dangerous of the camels.

But the sky was covered with thick clouds; it was raw and windy. Soon after lunch it began to rain. I had never guessed that we might be held up in these tracts by *rain*. Formerly we had complained of the drought. What would happen to the summer grass if the soil got no moisture? We had been longing for rain just for the sake of the camel pasture. And now we had our wish. Although it came down pretty hard, some time nevertheless elapsed before the dry ground became so wet that one's shoes began to squelch when one went out. In the afternoon it was raining more heavily still. All the heavy baggage, provisions and a thousand and one other things stood in pairs with ropes round the boxes, waiting only to be lifted up on the camels' backs. There was danger of flour, sugar and other perishable goods being altogether spoiled. All the provision chests were therefore covered with canvas.

The hours passed. The ground was now soaked. There were puddles of water in every hollow and wherever one went the earth gurgled its repletion.

The hundred camels lay patiently in the wet and chewed the cud. LARSON came and reported that it would be impossible to start on the 20th, for the felts and ropes of the pack-saddles were drenched with water. By the evening of the 20th it was obvious that we should not be able to start before the 22nd. The pack-saddles had not had time to dry more than superficially and were still sour inside.

THE START FROM KHUJIRTU-GOL

The morning of the 22nd July dawned at last. At five o'clock I was roused by LARSON. Day had just begun to break, but in my tent it was still so dark that I could scarcely manage without a light. I got dressed quicker than usual, for I had been longing for this day. I felt that it was going to be a day that we should all remember.