

Meantime, WALZ had paid a lightning visit to the scene of the accident and now came back with news.

»Things look simply awful,» he said; »everything flung pell-mell on the ground and over a hundred camels missing.»

»Well, what does LARSON say?»

»He says he wants a couple of butts of water and considers that the caravan should be reorganized at the new camp.»

WALZ's riding-camel stood among the others, tied to a sack of rice, not by the nose-rope but by a halter. For some obscure reason the animal shied, and plunged right into the midst of the other camels, bucking furiously and swinging the sack of rice hither and thither as if it had been filled with feathers. He rushed in among the tents that had not yet been struck, creating a regular riot wherever he went, finally plunging back among the tethered camels and infecting them with his own madness. At last he was captured and firmly anchored.

Accompanied by HUMMEL, I betook myself on foot to the scene of LARSON's accident. The distance thither was only 4 kilometers.

Long before we reached the spot we found the steppe strewn with pack-saddle felts — singly, in heaped disorder or tangled in ropes. (A Mongolian pack-saddle consists of six oblong pieces of felt, which are placed on the sides of, before and behind the humps, being held hard together by two lateral shafts whose ends are roped together.) At longer or shorter distances from our path lay chests and sacks, boxes, tent-poles, bedding and other bundles — all strewn about in fearful confusion. But the new camping-place, where the panic had broken loose, put the cap on all we had seen.

About fifty camels stood already tethered by their nose-ropes, surrounded by a perfect pell-mell of chests. Comparatively few of these were broken, but some of them bore traces of blood. LARSON came to meet me, calm and collected, but none the less dashed. He muttered something about the destruction of Jerusalem, Poltava and Waterloo, finally epitomizing his pent-up emotion in a simple:

»I'm so frightfully thirsty!»

»Wait a minute, then, here come's water!»

The camel was made to lie down, the cask was set on the ground and LARSON proceeded to quench his thirst. I don't know how many mugs he drank, and he was joined by HUMMEL and myself. Water is a lovely drink, especially in these dry, summer-hot tracts.

And now LARSON commenced his tale! From the first moment he had noticed that the camels were seething with unrest. They were nervy, they looked towards the horizon and made hasty movements with their heads. The caravan progressed slowly. Frequent halts were made to see that the loads were properly adjusted. The three columns kept at a certain distance from one another till they had journeyed three kilometers from the camp, when they divided up into five sections.