

from the very outset. In the north we were leaving the little monastery Engger-sume and a couple of yurts behind. Here and there herds of cattle were grazing. Far ahead to the west were visible blue mountains. By the wayside an old man sat alone, twirling his spindle. On our left rose a lonely and striking mountain shaped like a sarcophagus, the flat top of which was crowned with a great obo; this was Khongkhor-obo.

At our last camp wild onions grew in profusion, and the whole countryside emitted their peculiar tang, especially after the last rain. The camels loved this plant, and their breath, never fragrant, is worse than usual after a generous meal of wild onions.

On the bank of the brook Khongkhorin-gol, in which there was running water, we made a halt after a short march.

On the morning of the 10th we awoke to the sound of pattering rain. The landscape here took on another character. The steppe was everywhere covered with innumerable hemispherical clumps of vegetation, half a meter in diameter. It is the roots of these small, spiny bushes that bind the earth and sand and give rise to this curious, knobby form of landscape.

Time and again we passed the skulls and skeletons of fallen camels — milestones that mark the path of caravans, and of life and death through Asia.

A little way to the side of the route appeared an obo, and near it a yurt and a tent. To the south-west the little white monastery Ded-shilin-sume glittered on the plain. Behind it rose bold mountain formations, the most striking we had so far seen.

Presently we passed two Chinese tents and a rope-maker, with work in full swing. We halted for a moment and were informed that it was a merchant caravan that had left Hsi-ning three months previously with fine Tibetan sheep's wool on the way to Pao-t'ou. From this spot there was a direct route to Pao-t'ou, passing to the south of Khongkhor-obo. To the right extended the endless steppe, with no mountains to obstruct the view. On a little hill a group of horses browsed lazily. They know from experience that they will not be tormented by flies on the wind-exposed hill-tops.

We pitched camp at the well Khashiatu, or, as the Chinese say, Hashatu.

On the still evening air was wafted the sound of caravan bells. The melodious and solemn clanking came nearer, with a suggestive and seductive charm that drew us down to the road as if by magic. One glimpsed the first camels, led by their puller on foot. New shapes appeared, now moon-lit, as they approached, now like black silhouettes, as one saw them against the moon. It was two caravans, travelling in company. The first came from Lama-gegen, a new and growing commercial centre in Outer Mongolia and situated about as far from Urga as from Uliasutai. It had been already twenty-six days on the way, and the leader complained that they had had to pay a thousand dollars in revenue for