

for the spirits. The obo had perhaps been erected as a protection for the well and to keep its supply of water constant and fresh.

A young Mongol in a blue robe came riding by on a snow-white camel. Both were supple and well-grown; he sat between the humps as if he had grown there, following all the camel's movements with an effortless ease. He was a beautiful sight on the bare, grey steppe, and polite and friendly in his speech and manner. I should have liked to have taken him into my service — but he did not serve: he was proud, and looked like the son of a prince. He vanished as swiftly as he had appeared, his camel seeming to fly over the steppe.

An approaching caravan became visible in the distance. It came nearer, and seemed to grow larger: five Chinese were leading ten camels, doubtless loaded with opium. As they passed by each scrutinized the other curiously; such meetings are always a change. The usual greetings were exchanged. »All well? — Where do you come from? — From Kansu. — Where are you bound? — For Kuei-hua.» There was no time for further questions, for they had already gone by. These desert meetings remind one of passing ships that meet on the open sea and send each other a greeting over the waves.

Skeletons of fallen camels were so common that one ceased to think about them. In the space of two hours I counted as many as ten. Nearly all of them were from last winter and spring. They cannot for long resist the disintegrating effect of the atmosphere, cold, heat, rain and wind. Gradually they crumble and disappear. If they lay for decades the route would be literally paved with bones and skulls. Skeletons are the wrecks of desert ships. They are swallowed up by the endless desert sea. So it has been for thousands of years — the desert remains the same, but the living ships are renewed generation after generation. When they have served their turn they are wrecked and die on the path where others will see their bones whitening in the sun.

Presently we passed a *mai-mai* (as the trading stations of the Chinese merchants are called). Under the straw mats outside the tents are piled heaps of grain. This is where the opium caravans from Ning-hsia and Wang-yeh-fu stop to rest. They travel a hundred li a day, each day being divided into two stages, morning and evening. In order to be able to make such long marches they must look after their camels well, and feed them. The members of the caravan have rifles and Mauser pistols and can defend themselves against robbers.

At Deresun-khuduk (Grass-well) two Chinese were watering about seventy camels at a stone trough that was filled with a canvas bucket.

Continuing on our way, we soon came to a village consisting of seven yurts; and just beyond we could see LARSON's tent. The name of the place was Khara-tologoi, or, strictly speaking, to distinguish it from numberless other »Black Heads», Chendamen-khara-tologoi. Cheerful and genial as always, my splendid caravan leader came to meet me, and in a short time afternoon-tea was served.