

## ENCOUNTER IN THE GOBI

Just before sunset a young Russian, ALEXANDER SERGEEV, entered my tent. On June 6th he had left Urumchi with a merchant caravan of four hundred camels, belonging to a Tungan transport company in Kuei-hua. When they reached the Edsen-gol, four Tungans had decided to make a forced march to Kuei-hua, and they asked SERGEEV if he would like to accompany them. He told me that they rode eighteen or nineteen hours a day, sleeping only between 11 and 4 o'clock. His riding camel went at the rate of one hundred and twenty paces a minute; mine went only 80—84. It seemed scarcely credible that they had covered the distance from the Edsen-gol in four days, making at least one hundred and fifty li a day. SERGEEV, who had lived for two years in Urumchi and four years in Kulja, was on his way to Tientsin and Australia, where he had a brother. He was a smith, and quite uneducated, and he had only the vaguest notions of the country he had traversed. But he talked entertainingly about the life in the capital of Sinkiang, and said that we were expected there. Then, suddenly, he sprang up like a steel spring and bade us farewell. »Greet all the girls in Urumchi!« he called out as he rode off with his company on flying camels. He was like the wind — one does not quite know where it comes from nor where it goes. It just rushes past.

The sky on September 8th was covered with thick clouds and the south wind blew with unusual force. On our left was a chain of small hills. Crossing a pass with an obo on either side of the route we came in among dunes, and the sand flew in our eyes. This road must be hopeless in winter, with driving snow. The cairns that had been erected here and there were often a boon, whether they had been set up for the sake of travellers or of spirits.

We rode past one of LARSON'S camels. He had fallen and died in the middle of the road, and lay in the usual position with all four legs outstretched and head bent back till it touched the front hump. He seemed quite fresh and untouched; the poor beast had expired only the previous day. But three large vultures were keeping watch over him. The dogs made a dash for them, and they lifted themselves unhurriedly beyond reach. My camel shyed at his fallen comrade, and I cast a melancholy glance at him. He was a friend, a fellow-traveller, one of our company. He had only done his duty but had not the strength to go farther.

Three antelopes flew northwards, and the dogs gave chase — in vain. The soil was very sand-bound, and there were dunes in plenty. Among them were numbers of dry saxaules. For this reason the salty well besides which we camped is called Khara-dzagh (Khardjagh) or The Black, *i. e.* Dead, Saxaule.

The wind veered round to the west and increased to half a gale. In a short time it had developed into a first-class sandstorm. As the various sections of the caravan arrived they emerged from the flying sand and whirling dust like phantoms. It was like looking at them through muddy water; sometimes one could