

UKH-TOKHOI

We rode over frightfully barren ground. On a black hill sat a raven, clucking and cawing. In the north-west rose a striking mass of rock, with four precipitous peaks, giving the appearance of a king's crown and dominating everything else. Its name was said to be Shugum-khairkhan. The desolation on all sides was terrific. One felt like an intruder on the moon. It is almost oppressive to ride along in a hard wind and falling dusk in such a God-forsaken and hopelessly desolate part of the earth.

Arrived at the well we found the surroundings here just as bleak. It was almost midnight before we heard the others calling in the distance. This desert camp was pitched in the middle of the night, and then it was not long before all was silent. Men and camels fell into dreamless sleep, earth itself slumbered, and only the moon was wakeful, shedding a bluish white silver gleam on one of the bleakest tracts in the Gobi desert.

When I came out of my tent the next morning I could scarcely believe that the landscape that surrounded me was the same as that I had seen the night before in the moonlight. Then, one had the impression of riding between high mountain chains at quite a long distance from the route; and now it appeared that with the exception of the mighty »four-peaker» the »mountains» were only quite low hills flanking a narrow valley. Moonlight is deceptive, like Night herself, when all colours vanish and distances are difficult to estimate. It was now also apparent that we had pitched camp among saxaules and drift sand. High, sterile dunes crept up the sides of the basalt hills, even covering them in parts, and filling all cracks with fine yellow sand. Here, too, was a light green, brittle and crumbling argillaceous slate, with an incline of 25° to W. S. W., the main layer of which formed sharply marked edges recurring in all contours. The whole landscape formed a bizarre and curious blend of mountain ridges and sand dunes, dead and living saxaules. But the surroundings were picturesque, and it is always pleasant to camp in and sleep on sand, and to have a plentiful supply of fuel.

So I set off with MENTU ahead. The sky was overcast and the usual heat of the day was not felt. We rode through a narrow defile between sand-covered basalt hills, every now and then passing an obo of dry wood in the shape of a stack of arms. Nothing but hills and dunes and saxaules, the latter growing to as much as five meters in height. We had also to traverse a barrier of dunes in the valley, on the other side of which my camel stumbled and stood on his head, but without casting me. The scenery was constantly changing — it was not like travelling over the great steppes, where one may ride for days without anything to relieve the monotony. Some stretches were absolutely sterile, others enlivened with beautiful saxaules and tamarisks. To the right we left the well Shara-khulustei behind, and farther on a bed with stagnant salt-water.