

the surface, which was 1.04 m under ground-level, the water was 1.24 m. in depth. Round about lay bound dunes; from one of them I made a sketch of the view to the north, which was magnificent in its endless desolation and vast extent. The sand region was yellow-grey, with a hint of red, but the »sea» to the north was blue-black, with lightening tones towards the distant northern horizon. In all its hopeless loneliness and indigence this landscape is one of the most grandiose one can imagine. It is full of defiance and pride. With its stiffened features it looks in contemptuous defiance at us ephemeral little creatures, that have dared to intrude in its paralysing, murderous barrenness. We gazed at its magnificence and might and its vast dimensions with respect.

Our course next day was now due west. We journeyed over hard, salt-impregnated dust soil, having to the south the high, sterile sand, which fell towards the level, sand-free ground in pyramidal and dolphin-shaped dunes.

Just to the west of Dengin-khuduk we passed a great camp, where bales of goods stood pairwise in long rows. About two hundred camels lay waiting for their loads. It was a Chinese merchant caravan from Ku-ch'eng-tze on the way to Kuei-hua.

The landscape scarcely altered for several days: to the south the high drift-sand, to the north the level, endless desert of gravel.

The route, one of the slender threads by which Sinkiang is connected up to China proper, was little more than a path, flanked on either side by numberless camel tracks. Over this path the caravan bells clanked their ancient melody, the camel-pullers hummed their songs and the silent, pattering steps of the camels contributed their faintly rustling accompaniment. And the milestones were, as usual, the skeletons of fallen camels.

OLON-TOROI, A FRIENDLY OASIS

For a couple of hours we had held a course towards two short dark lines near the western horizon. Gradually one was able to make them out as trees in two clumps. We scarcely believed our eyes. Trees in this limitless desert. Was it a mirage or a dream? But the grove to the left comprised fifty trees, that to the right about one hundred and fifty. On the edge of the latter our tents were pitched in the fresh and cooling shade.

This little oasis, where several wells offer a supply of potable water, bears the name Olon-toroi or »Many Poplars». The trees were *Populus diversifolia*, on the current year's shoots of which grow narrow lancet-shaped leaves, while the older boughs have heart-shaped leaves with serrated edges. The two groves were sharply demarcated and formed a real little island in the desert sea. All the trees were old. There was not a single young tree to be found. It seemed hope-