

being then covered and tucked up in the big sheepskin rug. Together with all accessories, this improvised stretcher must have weighed at least as much as myself. A good forty kilograms pressed upon each supporting shoulder.

The first team of bearers, HEYDER, HUMMEL, NORIN and MASSENBACH, lifted up the bier and marched off. They kept a steady, even pace. I found myself swaying with a comfortable rhythm, and I should soon have been rocked asleep if my situation had not been so unusual and exciting. We arranged that two teams should take turn and turn about every seven minutes. I had my watch within reach and called a halt for change of bearers as soon as the seven minutes were up. Meantime, I made my notes in a scribbling block as usual.

On either side extended the endless plains, here and there interrupted by low ridges and hog's backs. Tussocks and tamarisks grew but sparsely, as usual, and the ground was almost even.

It was a vast expanse of the earth's crust that extended to either side of our route during this month. An arid desert where no human being could find a refuge. We had not seen a single sign of life, let alone a nomad yurt. How different from the journey to the Edsen-gol, where at first we had passed the houses of little settlements, and later the tents of the nomads. But here there was no living thing besides ourselves and the camels. The resistance of our animals was sorely tried in these desolate wastes, for the desert did not afford them sufficient nourishment. If they could not hold out, our situation would be more than critical. By now, the tension in our caravan was increasing with each succeeding day, for it was not difficult to realize that we were headed straight for a decisive crisis.

Another half hour passed, and now, darkly silhouetted against the setting sun, a vivid and brush-tempting group of riders made their appearance. They proved to be of our Mongols and Chinese, who had been sent from Sebestei to meet us. We halted. They dismounted, and four of them immediately stepped under the bier. They were fresh, and started off at a smart pace. Their steps were short, but they went at a half-run, and the hills on either side slid behind me more rapidly than before. They did not keep step — it was like rowing in a choppy sea.

The sun set and twilight fell. We all longed to reach Sebestei's spring before nightfall. It was chill, and the cold penetrated my furs. At last we saw a fire flickering ahead. NORIN's, BERGMAN's and MARSCHALL's tent was the first we reached, and I called a halt, though LARSON had set up our own camp three hundred meters farther on. However, I could stand no more, I had had enough. The bier was deposited in the opening of the tent and the doctor tucked me up snugly inside while my yurt was being erected. What a pleasure to come from the increasing chill of evening into a warm tent! So, in strange circumstances, we had arrived at camp LXXV, the most fateful one of our journey.