

IV. FROM THE EDSEN-GOL TO HAMI

On the morning of January 18th we were off for the Gobi again. On the left bank of the Mören-gol we drove up to a customs-house, where four of the trade-stranglers stepped out and showed us the way. No doubt they would have liked to levy duties on our baggage, but they dared not say a word. They were not armed and we outnumbered them. They have their representatives scattered among the different Chinese firms in the Edsen-gol district. The inland customs is a public nuisance in China. Both Kansu and Ning-hsia had their sharks on the Edsen-gol, who robbed and plundered traders and caravans. The right of exacting duties is farmed out to the highest bidder; he takes what he can get, pays his principal, and keeps the surplus for himself.

We had hardly left this vipers' nest when we were up on the barren *gobi* and driving past a large wooden obo, set up to mark the road for caravans in sandstorms or blizzards. The road was excellent, and stood out like a pale stripe on a dark background. The desert was absolutely bleak. This is the beginning of what the Mongols call Khara-gobi or The Black Desert. The country is level, and one only occasionally noticed the undulations of the ground when the cars ahead disappeared from view. In places, the caravan-route was like a bundle of narrow foot-tracks. This is the great road which old Marshall YANG in Urumchi opened up to traffic when he established direct communications between Sinkiang and the coast, avoiding both the Kansu province and Outer Mongolian territory.

In a short time we reached a curious place. Saxaules and a few poplars grew among rather high, solitary dunes; and a bit farther on there was a branch customs-house and a temple called Kuan-yü-miao. For the erection of the customs-house four years earlier wood had been stolen from an obo close to the temple, and one of the thieves had fallen seriously ill in consequence.

Close by was the Reed Well, Lu-ts'ao-ching, around which reeds grew fairly thickly. Leaving the temple was like putting out into a desolate sea. For miles and miles there was no change in the scenery. Only at rare intervals did we pass a belt of tussocks on low cones; and even more rarely tamarisks.

The hills we had sighted for some time ahead of us were rather low yellow and