

in the desert—camel pack-saddles, water-casks, sacks for provisions, ropes, and all the odds and ends which have to be taken. Apart from their general sunburnt and weather-beaten appearance, there is an unmistakable look about these caravan-men by which they can always be distinguished. They invariably have a peculiar slouch, a bend-over from the hips, and a stoop about the shoulders, acquired from riding night after night during those long dreary desert marches, bent over on the back of a camel, or trudging along by their side in the listless, half-sleepy way one cannot help indulging in on those monotonous plains.

The retail trade of Kwei-hwa-cheng seems to be almost entirely in articles required by travellers and by the Mongols. Good coal is obtainable within two days.

Preparations for crossing the Gobi desert to Hami had now to be made. Kwei-hwa-cheng was the last town in this direction, and the starting-point of caravans for Eastern Turkestan. Carts, or rather the mules or ponies which drew them, could go no further, so I had to discharge them and look out for camels. Sallying forth to the town on the day after my arrival, I went with Mr. Clarke to visit the establishment of one of the great firms which trade with Turkestan. Here in the yards we saw rows of neatly bound loads of merchandise, brick tea, cotton goods, silk, china, and ironmongery, all being made up ready for a caravan which was about to start for Guchen, a town some seven marches beyond Hami in the direction of Kulja. Full information about the route was now at last forthcoming, and I looked with the profoundest interest on men who had actually been to these mist-like towns of Central Asia. It appeared that there was a recognized route across the desert, and that during the winter months a caravan would start about once a month. But Guchen was the place to which the caravans ordinarily went, and Hami was only occasionally visited by them. The road to the latter place branched off at about ten