

CHAPTER V.

ACROSS THE GOBI DESERT.

“ But here—above, around, below,
On mountain or on glen,
Nor tree, nor shrub, nor plant, nor flower,
The weary eye may ken.”

SCOTT.

THE auspicious day, April 26, having at length arrived, I had reluctantly to say good-bye to my kind and hospitable friends—the last of my countrymen I should see for many a month to come—and take my plunge into the Gobi and the far unknown beyond. It was like going for a voyage; all supplies were taken, and everything made snug and ready. Ours was a compact little party—the camel-man, who acted as guide, a Mongol assistant, my Chinese “boy,” eight camels, and myself. Chang-san, the interpreter, had gone back to Peking, feeling himself unable to face the journey before us, and so I was left to get on as best I could, in half-English, half-Chinese, with the boy, Liu-san. The guide was a doubled-up little man, whose eyes were not generally visible, though they sometimes beamed out from behind his wrinkles and pierced one like a gimlet. He was a wonderful man, and possessed a memory worthy of a student of Stokes. The way in which he remembered where the wells were, at each march in the desert, was simply marvellous. He would be fast asleep on the back of a camel, leaning right over with his head either resting on the camel’s hump, or dangling about beside it, when he would suddenly wake up, look first at the stars, by which he could tell the time to a