

Akhun, too, had to be left behind at the prayer of his aged mother. So deprived of the services of these two excellent Loplik followers, I was doubly pleased when faithful and energetic Ibrahim Beg, my old Keriya Darogha, who had so far accompanied me only on a kind of 'deputation' from his district chief, came of his own accord and asked leave to share my fortunes wherever work would take me among the distant 'Khitai.' Yet, a *rara avis* among Turkestan followers, he never once raised the question of his pay. Of course, it meant throwing up for a couple of years all chances of a new Begship in his district. But Chiang-ssü-yeh's brush was at hand to indite an elegant epistle to young Ho Ta-lao-ye, the Amban, and with polite compliments to explain away Ibrahim's preference for my own service.

At last on February 21st I was able to set out with my caravan for the long desert journey. It had taken us a little longer to get ready than the travellers of old of whom Marco Polo, in a passage already referred to, tells us: "Now, such persons as propose to cross the Desert take a week's rest in this town [of Lop] to refresh themselves and their cattle; and then they make ready for the journey, taking with them a month's supply for man and beast." But then it is true, Abdal was not a town, nor had Marco's travellers gone through the preliminary of an archaeological campaign in the wintry desert. The distribution and loading of the baggage took long hours in the morning, and it was ten o'clock before I could get the whole column, including close on forty donkeys, to move off. The settling of final accounts and claims kept me back for another three hours. But at last I, too, could ride off, after giving much-prized little European presents to the women-folk and children of my host. Chiang-ssü-yeh during his long stay in December had made himself a great favourite with the little ones and was visibly affected by the parting. The Beg himself escorted me across the marshy ground to the south-east up to a point where the reed huts of his chief settlement showed up merely as a low line above the flat horizon.

It was our last glimpse of Turkestan habitations for a