

Beyond the Black Gobi

BY OWEN LATTIMORE

Through the unknown "Land of the Three Don't Cares" and into the snows of Dead Mongol Pass; the first explorer to make the westward crossing of Mongolia's most desolate desert

IN A station yard a train of empty freight cars was backing slowly toward a round-shouldered mountain of stacked bales of wool, and by the gleaming rails, unmindful of roaring engines and clanking trains, stood a line of tall, sullen camels, lean and weary at the end of their hundred marches from Chinese Turkestan. Outside the yard, a score of caravans were stirring the loose dust into a golden haze, through which filtered the weak sunlight of a late winter afternoon. Camels bringing their burdens for the last unloading, to be stacked like offerings before the long trains, shuffled past unladen camels being led away by slow-gaited men dressed in roughly-tanned sheepskins; men whose feet, in clumsy cloth shoes patched with camel hide, were guarded against the deadly Mongolian cold by bandages of knitted camel hair.

This was Kuei-hua, on the railway from Peking to China's Northwest Frontier; Kuei-hua, which the Mongols call Kuku-khoto, the Blue City, on the edge of the Mongolian Plateau, where freight trains and camel caravans exchange their wares. Among

the men of the caravans, a sullen breed half Mongol and half Chinese in their traditions, suspicious of strangers and only at home in the loneliness of the Mongolian caravan trails, I was searching for one to take me on the sixteen-hundred mile journey through Mongolia to Chinese Turkestan. Other men had gone into Mongolia on sporting or scientific expeditions, but I was bound on a different errand. My purpose was to follow up the caravan routes which lead into the furthestmost recesses of the Asiatic continent, to live the life and study the manners of the caravan traders, which have endured unchanged through countless centuries, but are doomed in time to vanish before the advance of railways and motor roads.

THE modern traveller, when he leaves the world he knows, takes with him an elaborate transport, sometimes including even automobiles, and always a multitude of servants; but I had set myself against carrying an atmosphere of my own civilization laboriously through Asia.

I tried instead to match the color and tone of the caravan life, eating the same food and talking the same language as the men about me, and sharing a small tent with my camel man and one Chinese servant.

A DAY'S march from the railway, the last trace of the civilization that railways bring is left behind; with the first pitching of the tent we entered on the nomad life. It is a hard life. The caravan men boast that they are "servants to camels, not to men," and the routine of their life follows the needs of their camels. For this reason a great deal of the travelling is done by night. Explorers like to travel by day, in order to see as much as possible, and therefore do not mind using up the strength of their camels. Merchants are above all anxious to get their heavy loads to the distant cities for which they are bound, without exhausting the camels, which represent their principal capital investment. They therefore let the camels graze during most of the day, when it is easy to see that they do not stray. Late in the afternoon the caravan starts, and marches at the slow camel-pace of two or two and a half miles an hour until late at night, often until after midnight. Then camp is made; the camels kneel in long lines, so that their loads can be parked in orderly rows, and are then brought to the front of the tent, where they kneel in close ranks for the rest of the night.

A fire is made in the tent and the men, after drinking a few bowls of tea, roll themselves in their sheepskin greatcoats to sleep. Before dawn they are stirring again; more tea is brewed and the men mix in it either parched millet, looking like canary seed, or

parched oat flour. Then, at the first hint of light, the camels are turned out to graze, under charge of two of the men. About noon a huge meal of coarse spaghetti is eaten, enlivened with sauce made of fermented mildewed bread, soya beans, bean curd, ginger, red peppers and minced mutton. This is the only meal of the day, except for the millet or oats which the men take with their tea. Late in the afternoon the camels are driven in and loaded, and the next march is begun.

FOR more than two hundred miles we travelled through wide pastures and rolling, grassy hills, where we were often in sight of Mongol encampments and of the sheep, camels, cattle and ponies of the nomads. Even the best land in Mongolia, however, is so thinly populated — there being less than one person to the square mile — that plenty of room is left for game. In the hills are wild sheep, much like the bighorn of the Rockies, and on the plains the antelope run frequently in herds of many hundreds. When wild animals are found in such large herds the Mongols will not shoot them. They believe that the soul of a saint must have migrated into the body of one of the animals, and that the presence of the saint has attracted the others. They are therefore afraid of shooting, for fear of killing the saint and bringing divine wrath down on their heads.

The country in this first part of the journey is comparatively well known, and parts of it have even been mapped, as it has been traversed by a number of travellers. Further to the West we entered a much more sandy, desert region, almost uninhabited and much of it totally unexplored, though

the trails are known to the Mongols. We were now following a route hitherto unknown to geographers and only used by the caravans during recent years. They use it now because the best known caravan road, known as the Great Road, goes further to the North, where the Mongol tribes have asserted their independence of Chinese rule and are hostile to Chinese traders. The trade of Northern or Outer Mongolia is now a monopoly of Soviet Russia, which also dominates the country politically.

TRAVELLING by the new road, we traversed for many days the sandy deserts of the Mongol Principality of Alashan. In these regions the only permanent buildings are the temples of the Lama priesthood. There are sometimes several hundred Lamas in one of these temples, doing no work whatever and supported entirely by the gifts of the pious and superstitious Mongols. The temples are centres where the Mongols gather for their religious festivals, and at these times the Chinese traders come from great distances to hold fairs and trade with the crowds. If the temple is at a junction of caravan routes, a permanent community of traders' posts may be built up about it, growing eventually to an important trading town like Urga, Uliassutai or Kobdo—the only cities in a land of nomads.

The greatest of the sand dune areas of Alashan is at the western edge of the Principality. It took us two days to work our way through the highest of these dunes, where the sand lay in long snaky hills, many of them a hundred feet high or more. The crossing of such dunes is much dreaded by the caravan men, because the strong

winds frequently wipe out in a few hours every trace of the trail.

LEAVING the dunes, we reached a curious river, the Edsin Gol, which marked roughly the half-way point of our journey. The river has its source in high, snow-capped mountains far to the South, in China. At certain seasons, when the water is being used by farmers in China to irrigate their fields, the river becomes nothing but a string of stagnant pools. At other times it is a quarter of a mile wide, with a strong current, and difficult to ford. The valley of the river is like a corridor running northward into the desert until it reaches a region of marshes and salt lakes. By this corridor the great conqueror Jenghis Khan made his first invasions of Western China, which resulted finally in the Mongol conquest of China and the establishment of a Mongol dynasty at Peking. The most famous Emperor of this dynasty was Kublai Khan, under whom Marco Polo took service as an important Imperial official, after succeeding in his great journey overland from Europe to China, in the Thirteenth Century. By the banks of the Edsin Gol there stood once the prosperous city of Etsina, which Marco Polo described. The ruins of the city, deserted for centuries, still stand in the desert as a witness of the former importance of the region in war and trade.

West of the Edsin Gol is the widest, most desolate and least known part of the great Gobi Desert. This central part of it is called the Khara or Black Gobi. The total breadth of it at this point, where it had never previously been crossed

from East to West by any explorer, is about 240 miles. In the central part there is a distance of nearly 100 miles between wells. It is called the Black Gobi because the hard, sandy clay of which the soil is composed is covered with flat, slaty pieces of black gravel, gleaming sombrely in the glaring desert sunlight, which give it an inexpressibly sinister and deathly appearance. In the ordinary way a caravan does about fifteen miles at a march, but the longest waterless stretch of the Black Gobi we covered in three stages of more than thirty miles, keeping on the march for twelve and thirteen hours at a time. Such forced marches, without water and with almost no grazing, are a severe trial to camels whose first freshness has already been taken off by six weeks or so of desert travel, and many a camel drops for the last time in the Black Gobi, watching the caravan pass by and leave him to his fate. There is hardly a furlong on these exhausting stages that is not marked by the bodies of camels.

ON EMERGING from the desert we entered a region of scattered grazing grounds. A Russian explorer who passed along the fringe of it nearly thirty years ago is responsible for its being marked on the maps as utterly desert; but it is in fact thinly inhabited. It is known to the caravan men as the Three Don't Cares, because the territory is not claimed either by the Mongols or by the adjacent Chinese Provinces of Kansu and Chinese Turkestan. The inhabitants are all Mongol renegades and outlaws, so that the region bears a bad name.

We were already salted in knowl-

edge of banditry. At the time, I remember, what impressed me was the way these fellows went ahead through the dangerous regions with what seemed to me, as a Westerner, too much fatalism, too unprotesting a readiness to accept whatever might befall. Looking back now, I admire their hardened lack of nerves. What could be done, we did. What arms we had, we kept ready. We closed up the order of march, especially at night, so that there should be no stragglers easy to cut off. There was really nothing else to be done. If we met a caravan that had word of troubles ahead, we went still more cannily, ready to turn off the trail at the slightest alarm. After that, destiny was no longer in our hands. If we met men in numbers great enough to master us, that would be our bad luck. If we met them in small numbers, we might get through. We could not turn away too far from the line on which wells were to be found; though more than once, when warned in time, we did turn aside to make a forced march past some place — usually near a well — where danger was reported.

THERE was hardly a caravan man who had not at some time fallen in with "meeters-by-the-road", as they call these raiders of the Gobi, while I had taken my first lessons earlier in the year, when camping with my wife in the border country near Kuei-hua. Then again, while dodging through one of the worst belts of the grassland country, I had had an encounter early in the dawn, among mists rising off the flanks of broken hills. My small caravan was alone at the time, and I was the only man armed. We ran

head on into a small band of mounted men, all armed with carbines, rifles and Mauser pistols.

EACH party checked its pace, and we drew slowly toward each other. Two of their men dismounted and took up careless attitudes — careless except that they unslung their carbines and kept them pointed nonchalantly toward us. Under my sheepskins I got my hand on my revolver, but that was all I could do. We began to parley at a discreet distance, both parties halting in an undecided way, our camels huddling together and their ponies reaching down to crop the spare grass. These men were not true Chinese, but Salars — bearded, reckless looking fellows, of a Turkish tribe from the western Province of Kansu. They were not out to rob, but were running a valuable cargo of opium, carried on pack-ponies. They might, in less troubled times, have been willing to “go over” us on the chance of pickings, but they were more anxious just then to get news of the road by which we had come, for they were afraid of meeting a stronger party than themselves, who might take their opium. In the end we exchanged news. They warned us of bad points in the country we were just entering, and we did as much for them. Then we sidled past each other, and the tension was over.

Here again, in the Three Don't Cares, the order of the day was to put our arms in evidence when strangers appeared. Any Mongols who approached our camps were careful to dismount at a distance and walk toward us, to show that they had no hostile intentions.

Passing warily and under arms

through this territory, we camped at last within sight of the snow-mantled mountains of Central Asia — the most easterly extension of the T'ien Shan or Heavenly Mountains. Later, when we had approached the range, we tried to cross it by a pass with the uninviting name of Dead Mongol Pass — so called, some say, because of the death of a party of Mongols; but as others say, because it is always cold enough to freeze Mongols; which means something fearsome in the way of weather.

MY OWN caravan numbered only eight camels — another having died on the way — but I had been travelling in company with two large trading caravans of about a hundred and fifty camels each. At the foot of the pass we joined a group of other caravans, which had been waiting for favorable weather. When we made our attempt on the pass there were over a thousand camels in single file. On entering the pass we found it to be a long trough, almost level, filled with snow. We went ahead without much trouble, as the trail had been packed hard, until we were well into the valley, when the leading camels blundered into soft snow, which had been blown down from the mountain sides in deep drifts. Men on horses and men on foot tried to find or force a way through it, but the attempt was hopeless and in the end we had to give it up. When it came to turning back, however, we found that we were in a trap. Turning a thousand camels in single file, in a narrow valley, was no easy matter. The snow on either side of the narrow, packed trail was deep and soft, and when the camels fell into it they had to be unloaded and got out

by digging and lifting. The temperature dropped steadily; in the glimmer of starlight on snow the little that could be seen was confusing. A sharp wind rasped over the snow, terrifying the men with the thought of an approaching storm, and there was nearly a panic. My camels were near the head of the line. It was nearly dawn before we got out to the mouth of the pass and camped. When it was light again I returned to the pass with a caravan man to try to rescue two camels which had been abandoned in the snow; but though they had been covered with felts, they were so numbed by the cold that it was hopeless.

Having failed to cross the range, we had to take another way, along the side of it. This led to my being captured by a border patrol. The frontiers of the Province of Chinese Turkestan are very strictly guarded, as the Governor wishes to keep clear of the civil wars which for a number of years have devastated the interior Provinces of China. The Governor just at that time was afraid that his own Province might be invaded by Feng Yu-hsiang, the "Christian" General, and I was suspected of being one of the Soviet Russian officers known to be in the army of Feng.

IT WAS a dreary place and a dreary arrest. We were camped in a shallow depression in the everlasting desert; a place where the concentrated rays of the sun kept the snow thin. In every direction an imperceptible ascent to the desert brought one into sight of black, sterile hills and sinister levels of wind-scoured snow. A tattered soldier rode out from the post to look us over, and rode away. Then he came

back, with the two officers of the garrison, and a patrol. One officer was a Mohammedan, and with little difficulty he was wheedled and bluffed to stand on my side as far as he dared. The other was a scamp, a typical frontier scavenger, shifty-eyed, treacherous as a cur and eaten up with the most ornate suspicions.

He wanted not only to halt me until my "case" could be referred to higher authorities, but to go over all my belongings, unpacking and pretending to list them, with the perfectly evident intention of confiscating, for his own sole benefit anything he dared to take. It was a nasty position. Too strong a bluff would lead to the wildest accusations before the provincial authorities, and too much weakness would lay me open to something unpleasantly like being plundered. It was touch and go at the first encounter, but I managed to stand off the hungry soldiers, keeping my loads unopened, and to insist that a dispatch be sent at once to the nearest high authority. Then I resigned myself to "diplomatic detention" in this hole in the Gobi. I was cut off from all communication. Everything depended on whether I could impress and puzzle my captors enough to make them afraid of sending too exaggerated accusations against me to higher quarters.

A FORTNIGHT passed, during which I was allowed to go about during the day, under guard, but was forced at night to sleep in filthy and uncomfortable quarters next to the Chinese officer commanding the post. Had I not been able to speak Chinese, I should have been in danger of worse treatment, but at length my creden-

tials were confirmed and I was allowed to proceed. At one time, when I had protested that I was not a Russian, I was accused of being a Japanese, and of having a forged passport. White men, other than a few Russians, are almost unknown in Chinese Turkestan and Japanese are quite unknown. The Japanese, however, have been heard of, because of rumors of anti-Japanese riots in the coastal provinces. I was frequently called a Japanese, simply because I said I was not a Russian, and because Americans had practically never been heard of except as a semi-fabulous people whose food was entirely made by machinery, living in a country where everything was made of gold.

AFTER my release, I had still over two hundred miles to travel in order to reach the city of Kucheng-tze, the end of the caravan route. As all the caravans had gone by, we had to complete the journey alone with our eight camels. It was now December, and the winter had set in with unusual severity. The scanty grazing was buried under snow, and the starved and frozen camels grew steadily weaker. We struggled for over twenty days through snow that grew deeper and deeper. The camels became so weak that several of them had to be lifted to their feet at the beginning of each march. We ourselves were often almost without fuel, and running short of provisions. We lived largely on the meat of antelopes which I shot. To make matters worse, the owner of my camels, an ex-bandit and a bad character generally, blamed the delay and his bad luck on me. He became at times half insane and threatened to murder me, so that my Chinese

servant and I had to keep a constant watch.

OVER this last stretch we found an appalling number of camels abandoned in the snow, having become too numb with the cold to follow the caravans. The caravan men will never kill a camel that they are forced to abandon. They are afraid that its angry soul would follow the caravan and do harm to the other camels. Camels have such an astounding vitality that even when weakened by starvation and left unsheltered in such bitter weather they may live for a number of days. We passed many which were so thickly plated with frozen snow blown against them by the fierce winds that they could not even turn their heads; they lay there in a torpor, gazing after us with terror in their dimming eyes.

At length, after struggling against constant high winds and increasing cold, we came in sight of the range at the foot of which stands Ku Cheng-tze, the first great city of Chinese Turkestan, the capital of the ancient caravan trade, and the gateway by which at last I attained to the most remote Province of China, in the very centre of the continent of Asia. On the second of January, 1927, filthy, weary, swaddled in sheepskins, stumping along in felt boots, indistinguishable from any camel-pulling caravan man except for my bristling beard, but triumphant in having carried the journey through, I led my camel under one of the towered gates of the city, on the hundred and thirty-seventh day after leaving Kuei-hua, sixteen hundred miles to the East, at the beginning of the unknown road.

Italy and the Peace of Europe

BY COUNT CARLO SFORZA

Does War lurk behind Mussolini's chronic Imperialism? His predecessor in charge of Foreign Affairs draws a striking parallel between Italy's future and Japan's

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I WAS Minister for Foreign Affairs in the post-war period, when Mr. Lloyd George had not yet dismissed his hope to create an artificial Greek Empire in the East. I strongly opposed the Lloyd Georgian projects. I thought — and I openly declared — that an Hellenic invasion of Turkey would be a grave mistake, and that if it were desirable to redouble the life of Turkish nationalism and militarism, that would certainly be the best way to ensure it.

During the Spa Conference, Mr. Venizelos, then, as now, Hellenic Premier, presented himself there and sought to have his way before the Supreme Council of the Allies. The Council was composed of Mr. Lloyd George for England, M. Millerand for France, and myself for Italy. Mr. Venizelos set forth his reasons: he was sure of success. Mr. Lloyd George looked happy for his fresh discovery of — he believed — the heroes of old Greece. I was the only one who replied, opposing Mr. Venizelos's arguments by showing the danger that Greece would run. I finished my reply with these

very words: "My only regret is, that the attitude of Italy should be attributed to want of sympathy or even distrust towards Greece. I feel myself, on the contrary, inspired by sentiments of deep concern for her true interests. Italy is strong enough to wish rich neighbors. We want prosperous and peaceful neighbors, for ideal reasons, but also for practical reasons. The Greeks, in gaining too much, risk losing everything. One may die of hunger; but also of indigestion. I am quite sure," I added, as Mr. Lloyd George looked much displeased, "that in this hall there is at least one person who feels the deep sincerity of my words, and that person is Mr. Venizelos."

WHEN I had finished speaking, I felt that rare pleasure that one never experiences from the applause of crowds and parliaments: I looked at Mr. Venizelos, and saw from the expression of his open and intelligent face — the only one Greek face with blue eyes — that he had appreciated the deep sincerity of my words, and that, if for only a moment, the impression had come upon him that