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"THE GREAT HUNGRY DESERT."

"A vast, limitless waste, so flat and unbroken that it looked exactly like the sea. A quiet, as though of death, reigned over it, for not even the slightest sign of life broke the oppressive stillness of the scene. Neither the Karoo or the Kalahari deserts in South Africa ever produced on me an impression so weird and indescribable as did the first glimpse of the awful Gobi, 'The Great Hungry Desert.'"

So says Mr. Julius M. Price, the special artist of the *Illustrated London News* who last year commanded a special expedition across it.

This desert, as our readers are aware, is in the centre of Mongolia, that comparatively unknown country lying between Siberia on the north and the Great Wall of China on the south, and such recent word from it is of much interest.

The mere look of the dreary waste, he says, recalled all he had ever read of the horrors of a lingering death, by thirst or starvation, which has so often befallen travellers who have been unfortunate enough to lose themselves on its almost trackless surface. Nothing, in fact, was wanting to complete the gloomy picture. Even the faintly marked trail before us was rendered more easily discernible by the bleached bones of camels lying here and there on either side.

So uneventful was the journey that what would on any other occasion hardly call forth passing notice, was magnified into an important occurrence. On the afternoon of the fourth day out from the sacred city of Ourga, we met, he says, the caravan of the homeward-bound Russian mail, and, considering we had not seen a living soul, except each other, for more than forty-

eight hours, it may be imagined how pleasurable was the meeting. The two convoys halted for a time; our Cossacks exchanged news with the other Cossacks, and even the Mongols hobnobbed together; then, with many final shakes of the hand and friendly wishes, we were under way, and in a short time were once more alone on the boundless waste.

The next day we reached a range of rocky hills—great heaps of huge boulders lay piled around in picturesque confusion, and, altogether, the scene was a welcome

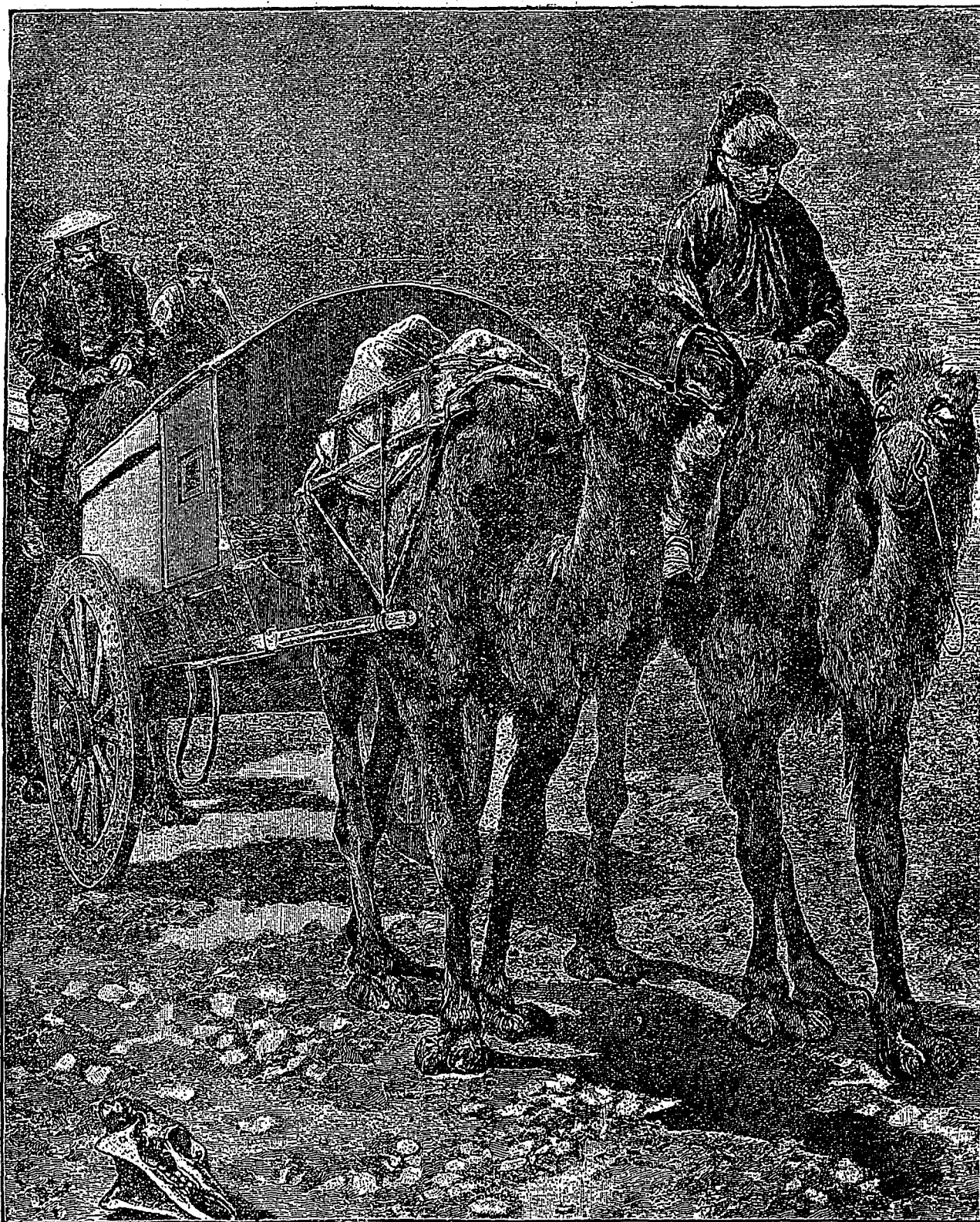
change after the flatness of the plains. Right in the very midst of these hills, nestling as it were under their shelter, to my surprise we came upon a miniature town, which I had never even heard of before. This, I learned, was Teho-Iyr, a Lama settlement, entirely inhabited by Mongols who are devoting their lives to religion.

It was a lovely day, the finest one we had had as yet, and in the still air and the eternal silence of the surroundings the effect was very impressive, for it was indeed

"asleep in the sunshine of the East," and "far from the busy haunts of men." I therefore persuaded Nicolaieff to halt the caravan for a short time, so that I could have a stroll around the quaint little place, with my sketch-book and camera; and very pleased was I afterwards that I had done so, for it was one of the prettiest spots I saw in Mongolia. On a nearer inspection it turned out to be larger than I had first taken it to be, and absolutely different from what I expected to find, for the quiet pervading the streets was quite in keeping

with the proximity to the vast desert—there was, in fact, quite the atmosphere of religious seclusion which one feels in a monastery. But what struck me most was the wonderful cleanliness I saw everywhere, and I don't think that, for its size, I ever saw its equal. Everything looked spick and span, as though it were cleaned carefully every day. There was also a striking absence of dogs, those pests of Mongolia. One could stroll about without being continually on the *qui vive*, as in Ourga. Instead of a conglomeration of dirty "yurts," there were trim, neatly built, whitewashed cottages, of absolutely the same outward appearance as English ones, not so large perhaps, but still strangely reminding one of far-away England. Curiously enough, I did not see anything at all similar to them anywhere else, either in Mongolia or in China; nor could I find out why this style of building was exclusively confined to the pretty little desert settlement.

My appearance naturally created quite an excitement, for I was probably the first Englishman that has ever visited the place, which is, I believe, out of the



THE HEAVY RUSSIAN MAIL CROSSING THE GOBI DESERT IN MONGOLIA.

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