

We passed an inscription on the ground that had been made by scraping away the black gravel in the form of two-meter-high Chinese ideograms, gleaming brightly up from the underlying clay subsoil. Professor SIU interpreted the writing: »If we are united we receive help from the gods. This route is seldom used, but in order to avoid the revenue stations we must take it once more.»

As had so far been the case along the whole of this route, one saw white tufts of sheep's wool on the bushes nearest the road. These are left when the bales of wool borne by the camels scrape against the thorny bushes. They reveal one of the most important articles of commerce that are transported along these desolate roads. We passed four little newly born puppies, that had lain on their cold and stony bed for two or three days after being abandoned by the big Chinese caravan.

### CRITICAL DAYS IN THE DESERT

We pitched our tents in a stream-bed, whose steep, meter-high erosion terrace gave some protection against the icy south-east wind. We were all thoroughly chilled, and hastened to gather round the camp-fire.

During the day's march two camels had been left behind, while a third only just managed to make camp. We were beginning to wonder just how many of our camels would hold out the whole way to Hami. The caravan route we had followed had been murderously waste from every point of view. Of fifteen camping-sites only one had been good. With a continuation of the losses we had suffered on this day our situation would soon become critical.

Still following our south-westerly course next day we rode between dark hills. Then we swung aside to the south, entering a valley forty meters in breadth. It grew narrower and more winding, taking us farther and farther to the south-west and west, finally leading into a more open, arena-shaped valley surrounded by small, dark hill-tops. The ground here was now quite sterile, now covered with sparse tussocks. Here and there were large patches of snow. In a stream-bed we found a well, sixty centimeters deep and containing sweet water, frozen over. We chose this place for our camp the more willingly as the pasture was slightly better than usual.

The west wind forced us to rest awhile. On the morning of the last day in November the tussocks were white with hoar-frost. A condemned camel was slaughtered, as the Mongols and the dogs were in need of meat.

The minimum temperature during the night of December 1st was  $-24.7^{\circ}$  C. To the north, in lighter and lighter shades of blue, a succession of mountain-ranges met the eye. To the south we had only a low ridge at a little distance. The diminutive stream-beds were tiring. These beds were very shallow, as a rule no more than one or two decimeters in depth and one or two meters across; but they lay so