

MÜHLENWEG'S ADVENTURES

MÜHLENWEG's report announced that he and his two companions, after all sorts of difficulties, had travelled so far south as to pass one of HEMPEL-HAUDE-HASLUND's camping-sites. On the 9th of December they passed a ruin by the wayside, near which were a crowd of strange men. LAO CHANG assured the others that these armed men were soldiers, but BANCHE had his doubts. The leader of the group ostentatiously loaded his rifle and demanded to see MÜHLENWEG's passport.

»Let's see your own first!« retorted MÜHLENWEG.

»I do not need any passport, but here is the visiting-card of my superior.«

»Well, here are my passport and my license to bear arms.«

»If you intend to proceed westwards you must hand over your weapons to us; otherwise you must turn round and go back the way you came.«

By this time the whole band had mounted and surrounded the speakers.

»We are bound for Sinkiang, and we don't mean to let ourselves be held up,« said MÜHLENWEG.

»Very well; but then you must first hand over your weapons.«

When this had been done, the whole company moved off westwards, pitching camp late that evening. In reply to the question as to whether any other Europeans had passed by in that tract the leader answered: »Yes, first one and then five men, who have now all been taken prisoner.«

The next day they followed the Hami road for a while, but left it to strike off in another direction. MÜHLENWEG and his men found the situation uncomfortable. The soldiers were not wearing proper uniforms and looked more like a band of ruffians.

That evening a halt was called in the darkness before a grotto near a spring. The chief of the band, who was supposed to live here, was, however, not at home. He had evidently set out for Hsing-hsing-hsia on the Anhsi road, explained the men; and MÜHLENWEG must now follow them thither. But he obstinately refused to travel in any other direction than towards Hami. The fellows then declared their willingness to send a messenger after their chief, and pending his arrival both MÜHLENWEG and his two servants were to consider themselves as prisoners at the grotto, at the mouth of which they were given permission to set up their tent.

Inside the grotto MÜHLENWEG saw only riding-saddles, and he therefore doubted that his mysterious hosts were robbers. BANCHE insisted fearfully that they had fallen into the clutches of bandits, but LAO CHANG was convinced that they were really soldiers. That night MÜHLENWEG woke up suddenly to find BANCHE on his knees, gabbling lamaistic prayers. When asked what was the matter, the Mongol answered that they were in the hands of a band of robbers and would certainly lose their lives. The man who had been despatched to fetch their chief had returned alone after half an hour, showing this manoeuvre to have been merely a piece of shadow-fencing. The robbers wished only to entice MÜHLENWEG and his