

Later, however, the route grew better. In the winding valley into which we now drove, the road was level, though the soil was loose. On either side rose black mountains, higher than those we had hitherto seen. Our valley grew narrower, and at last there was hardly room for a pack-camel to pass. We had to back, turn round, and look for another route. In a wider part of the valley the soil was so sandy that two of the lorries got stuck. We were still trying to free them when the sun sank; so we pitched camp and lighted a fire. As our store of ice was not yet exhausted, we did not have to look for water.

On leaving camp next morning we soon came to a pass, whence there was a superb view over an endless landscape to the west. On the other side there was a rather sharp descent through deep sand, that whirled up in clouds behind the spinning wheels.

Presently we were driving over flat, sandy ground, among saxaules living and dead. To the south rose a range of fair-sized hills. Steering south-west, we soon reached harder ground, with small and scanty tufts of vegetation. In one place the saxaules were regular trees.

The road ran along a shallow gully between red, rounded terraces. These gave place to low, red hillocks. At intervals, this lifeless caravan-route was marked by an obo; and in sheltered spots one saw patches of snow, probably the remains of a local fall. As the valley grew narrower and more picturesque these patches of snow became more frequent. We drove on through a dense scrub, between wild rocks. At last the mountains came to an end, and open country spread out before us. Sloping away very slowly to the north-west, the ground gradually merged into what seemed to be a limitless plain. Only to the north and south were mountains visible.

Round hillocks, not much more than three meters in height, were scattered singly or in rows, resembling ancient barrows. Although the desert was entirely barren, one nevertheless saw a few antelopes. A chain of hills receded to the south in a lovely, subdued shade of blue. Paradoxical as it may sound, the only sign of life in this kingdom of death, apart from the occasional antelopes, was the skeletons of dead camels. One was often deceived as to the distance of objects. Sometimes it would take hours to reach a mountain that seemed fairly near; at other times one would take a nearby hill for a distant mountain.

On the following day the tufts of vegetation began to grow more frequent. We passed a few old caravan-camps and camels' skeletons. We were in the middle of a wide depression, whose sediment of yellow clay showed that it had once been the bottom of a lake. The mountains in the south are called the Ma-tsung-shan, »Horse's Mane Mountains«, and this name appeared to apply to the whole district. On this grey-violet range there are streaks of snow that may possibly suggest a horse's mane.