

MING-SHUI AND ITS RUIN

Early in the afternoon we halted by the ruins of the 2,000 year-old fort and watch-towers that still mark the outermost defences to the north-west of the great Han emperors against the threatening empire of the Huns.

We jumped out; and while the tents were being pitched we inspected the blocks — still solid and defiant in decay. A few gaping holes underneath seemed to betray the presence of subterranean rooms, to which one could trace foxes' tracks in the snow. EFFE crept in with a gun, and the dog Bao was sent to reconnoitre. But all remained silent; there was no-one at home.

These fortifications of sun-dried brick had stood for two thousand years in the middle of the arena-shaped valley, defying countless sandstorms and blizzards, and still time had not been able to obliterate them. Seven solid towers remained; and it would certainly require further centuries to level them with the ground and blot out their last traces. But a day must come at last when the archaeologists would no longer be able to identify the place, and the foxes would have to dig their earths elsewhere. One could tell by the state of the ruins that the north-westerly winds had been stronger than the south-easterly ones during the past two thousand years; for the southern sides and the blocks standing there were fairly straight, whereas those facing north-west were rounded and severely weathered by the winds.

We were to stop for a few nights at Ming-shui, »Clear Water«, to give CHEN an opportunity of establishing a second astronomical point between the Edsen-gol and Hami (the first had been our camp at Yeh-ma-ching).

On the ridge we had just left behind us, where we had ascertained the altitude to be 2,130 m, we had passed what according to our altimeter readings was the highest point on the whole of this route to Sinkiang.

As we approached Ming-shui we wondered if any Khalkha Mongols or robber bands would receive us at this place, where water, grazing and fuel were all to be had. Perhaps General MA CHUNG-YING had patrols or frontier horsemen there to guard the entrance to the province he intended to conquer. But there was not a trace of men or horses, and apart from a few antelopes grazing on the plain we could discover no sign of life.

On January 30th we woke to find an insignificant little north-wester in progress. It was not blowing really hard, only 7 m a second; and the thermometer had not been below -17.5° C. Still, it was cold and unpleasant; the sky was overcast and the morning half dark and gloomy. We were reluctant to get up, and lamented that the day looked so unpromising for CHEN's observations. Now there had come a break in the long series of beautiful, clear, light days we had enjoyed since the winter began.

At 6 p. m. it commenced to snow; at 10 p. m. it was still snowing, and the