

if the war between MA CHUNG-YING and SHENG SHIH-TS'AI was still raging, or if peace had been concluded. It was thus not without an understandable excitement that we scanned the hills to the west with our glasses.

Half an hour later the *mazar* was clearly visible. We approached the little frozen brook of the oasis, with its reed-beds and wild rose-bushes. To the left, at the foot of a projecting cliff, we had seen six years before a Chinese temple in a grove of tall trees. This temple had now disappeared.

It was one o'clock when we reached the village itself. We could see at once that the tide of war had swept over this little outpost. None of the houses had roofs, and the clay walls were left standing bare. During a quarter of an hour's rest we went in and looked round. There was not a sign of life anywhere.

Driving out through the gateway in the rocks we remembered so well, we found ourselves once more faced with the endless plain. The road was good, and the three »elephants» rushed westward in clouds of dust as though hunted by furies. We passed huge beds of reeds; and tracks of cart-wheels, sunk as much as a foot into the ground, with between them a shallower depression trampled by the draught animals' hooves, bore witness to busy traffic in the past.

That night we pitched camp, no. 33, by a solitary poplar and an open fresh-water spring. We did not know the name of the place; but we were not very far from the village of Huang-lu-kang, »Yellow Reeds Ridge». Eighteen days had passed since we last saw a human being, and we were now quite close to the first outlying village of the Hami oasis.

But there was still not a soul to be seen; no patrols were out, no camels, horses or oxen grazed on the luxuriant yellow grass — not even a dog barked. Was the country devastated and depopulated? Who ruled over this abandoned region?

Although we did not know the answers to these questions, we were all in the highest spirits. There was talking and laughter in my tent, and we sat up longer than usual. We would not give up till we found all exits and entrances shut. If we were expelled from Hami we meant to turn off to the south-east along the road to Anhsi and then, about half-way to that town, swing westward and try to reach Altmishbulaq and Korla through the Pei-shan. We should, in a word, leave nothing unattempted before beginning the retreat to Nanking.

On the morning of February 6th we did not hurry ourselves, for we were not exactly longing to plunge right into the lions' den — or rather, into a nest full of vipers. Breakfast, and the business of striking tents and loading, went as quietly as usual, perhaps even more quietly. None of us knew whether this was to be our last day of freedom, or whether before sunset others would be controlling our movements — or our sojourn in a gloomy, dank Tungan prison.

The track was extremely dusty; and the high wheels of the *arabas* had left deep ruts in the clay. The bearings of our map-makers became shorter than usual amid the dry winter vegetation covering the ground.