

UNDERGROUND CANALS

The road to Hami led over two *karez*, or underground canals. These curious irrigation canals are as characteristic of the Turfan basin as of Iran. A perpendicular shaft, two or more meters deep, is dug in the earth. From the bottom of this shaft horizontal passages are dug, almost parallel to the slope of the surface. Twenty meters farther down the slope a new shaft is sunk; and so on for many kilometers. The bottoms of the shafts are connected by the underground passage, that drops very gradually till it comes to regions where the soil allows of cultivation. These subterranean canals start at a spring or a hollow where melted snow and rain collect. From here the water runs the whole way to its destination underground, being thus protected against sun and evaporation. In this way grain is conjured out of the soil even in the driest regions. But the canals must always be kept clean. Now that the peasants had either been enrolled in the contesting armies, had been shot or had fled, the canals were slowly silting up; and the ploughed fields and gardens would by and by turn into desert.

HAMI

It was three o'clock when we crossed the eastern border of the irrigated, vegetation-clad area of the Hami oasis. Ruined farms and devastated gardens met the eye. Even in MARCO POLO's time the Hami oasis was renowned for its luxuriant gardens and its delicious fruit. But now even the charming old poplar and willow avenues that within the boundaries of the oasis had formerly cast their shade over the great caravan road had been levelled to the ground. Only axe-marked stumps bore witness to the splendour that had been. CHIN SHU-JEN's avenging hordes had swept through to chastise Hami for its rebellion in 1931.

Slowly and cautiously the heavy lorries rolled over the winding, dusty track. Quite close to the road were the ruins of a Chinese temple. An officer and three soldiers sprang up by one of the walls, as if from ambush, and rushed towards my car, which happened to be in front. The men had their rifles at the ready, and the officer made a sign with his hand and shouted to us to stop. He then demanded that our arms and ammunition be handed over to him. There was a long delay while he parleyed with CHEN; but at last he said that the cartridges need not be handed over till we reached Hami.

These men were Tungans. The manners of the officer were impeccable, he spoke politely and considerately; and it was clear that he knew who we were and had received special orders as to how we were to be treated, for he suddenly informed us that a house was being kept in readiness for us at Hami — the headquarters of the Sinkiang — Sui-yüan Omnibus Company. His object in examining us had evidently been to make sure that we really were the commission from Nanking.