

It was so hot in the middle of the day that we had to stop again and again to cool the engines. On these occasions the cars drew up side by side so that the drivers might have a chat. We took out one of the melons that HUMMEL had got in lieu of a fee and cut it up into long slices. It was seven minutes past twelve.

At that moment the loud, warning organ music was heard again. An aeroplane was seen to the south over the Chöl-tagh. A few minutes later it was making straight for us. The drivers were ordered to go ahead immediately, with long intervals between them.

The airman came nearer. It was of course ourselves he was peering at; for he probably thought that General MA was in the small car and that the lorries belonged to him. Was he going to drop his bomb just at that moment? Now he was right over our heads. Another second of suspense — but there was no explosion. He departed northward in the direction of the Celestial Mountains, flying at a height of about 1,000 m. The organ music grew fainter and died away in the distance, while the aeroplane vanished over the mountains like an eagle.

Our next stop was owing to a flat tyre; we had some exciting minutes as we expected the plane to return. But the airman did not come back.

When we resumed our journey we were moving in a curve towards the south-east, over a road that was sunk three feet deep in the clay soil. The bridge over the Toqsun river held; and a few minutes later we drove into the bazaar.

As the air-filter of TSERAT's motor was broken, we drove to a caravanserai and sent for a smith. While he was at work the whole of our party, masters and servants, went to a Tungan restaurant in the bazaar and had minced mutton and scrambled eggs. Here in Toqsun we met the Poles and LI with his students. They were travelling in a cart.

From Toqsun our course was due south. The thick clouds of dust that were stirred up by our wheels hung motionless in the air, without the slightest breath to scatter them. It was like travelling through the »sea of mists» on the moon. The sun was sinking, though the Bogdo-ula still glowed crimson above the shadowy earth. The road was awful — nothing but ledges, bumps, gutters and deep cart-ruts in layers of yellow earth. Time after time we had to stop, and set to work with spades and picks to remove hummocks and ridges that barred our progress.

Twilight was merging into night when we reached the last village, Sariq-dung, or »Yellow Hill». After this the road grew better, with a hard gravel foundation. Steering for the foot of the mountains, we drove into a river-bed, which we crossed again and again. It came from the mouth of a valley that grew ever narrower between the terraces and low hills closing it in. Before us a white, porous sheet of ice gleamed in the bottom of the valley, 50—100 m wide. We drove up over its edge. The ice crackled and creaked under the weight of the cars. Presently, the ice came to an end; but the stream still murmured along the bottom of the valley. It was nearly eight when we stopped at Su-bashi (»Water-head»).