

CROSSING THE CHÖL-TAGH

In the morning we saw spread round us in the sunshine the landscape whose picturesque features had been hidden by the darkness when we encamped. The narrow valley was like a corridor. In the north it dropped towards the plain; in the south it ascended through wild mountain-scenery to a pass.

In the vicinity of the camp lay ten dead horses and fragments of military equipment, pack-saddles, and so on. The four officers of our escort lamented that we had not made an earlier start, for we must get to Qara-shahr that evening, before the robber-bands gathered to attack us.

The whole morning rifle-fire crackled round our tents and echoed among the precipices. It was our gallant escort, seeking thus to frighten the robber-bands that were sure to be lying in ambush on all sides.

The stream wound along ice-free, between belts of ice; and often we had to drive down from the ice into the bed of the stream and up again on the other side. Where the ice-edge was too sharp, threatening to cut our tyres to pieces, it had to be blunted with picks and spades. Dazzling white ice-fields, glittering water, precipitous rocks — this was no sort of a motor-road; but it was indescribably picturesque and exciting.

Progress was hopelessly slow. TSERAT's lorry broke through the solid sheet of ice, which had to be cut away right down to the stream. From this point the gorge was thirty meters wide, and its bed was full of firm ice, under which the stream still murmured on. We were driving through a world of wild, sheer rocks with magnificent views. Where the valley was always in shadow the ice was firmer; the places on which the sun shone down were brittle.

Our drivers now went reconnoitring up the valley on foot. The road was growing worse the higher we got. We were approaching the limits of the possible for cars. But we *must* get on this way, for there was no other road to Eastern Turkistan.

Yellow drift-sand covered the lower slopes of the mountains. We were seldom able to drive for four minutes on end before the next difficult place held up the convoy. In one spot where the bank was dry lay the body of a dead soldier. Of Kohna-örteng («The Old Inn») only the ruins remained.

Another stop; and the sharp edge of a sheet of ice was smoothed out with axes, while a perpendicular gravel wall three feet high was transformed into a gently sloping bank. We were all walking except the drivers.

A few small elms grew on a sandy incline. The telegraph line, that had hitherto gone over hills and peaks, now descended to the valley bottom. We drove unblushingly over the wire. It was not surprising that this line was out of order! Now and again we passed the mouth of a side-valley. Now we could drive for a quarter of an hour or so between the interruptions, and we stopped for several