

Now followed a barren belt of thirsty sandy soil. Here and there rose *mesas* — yellow blocks, the remains of old clay deposits. Driving between two of these gave the impression of going through a narrow gate in a devastated town. Another such natural gate was so narrow that we had to go round it.

Presently we were approaching a portal more imposing than those we had passed through — the ravine of the Konche-darya in the southernmost ridge of the T'ien-shan mountains. To the left we saw a first bend of this important river, which is a continuation of the Khaidu-gol. Flowing out of Baghrash-köl, it joins the Tarim and terminates in the new lake Lop-nor.

We were now on the threshold of the mountain gateway, and the scenery was assuming savagely picturesque shapes. On our right the mountains rose very steeply, while on our left we had the river. Between the two there was only just room for the road, which had been cut out of the foot of the mountain in ancient times. From the other bank of the river, where one sighted an uninhabited village in the valley, the mountains rose to ridges and peaks. On the bank of the stream itself grew stumpy, twisted willows. A side-valley to the right gaped like an open door leading to mysterious rooms. A stream came rushing down across the road.

We went on, closely following at a few meters' distance the innumerable bends of the river. At each bend a new and astonishing view was revealed; pictures of wild, romantic beauty replaced one another in quick succession. The gorge contracted to a corridor, while the cliffs fell precipitously to the valley-bed. A few meters beneath us rushed the Konche-darya in foaming fury, its thunderous echoes filling the whole valley. The water was as limpid as rock-crystal; in Baghrash-köl it had grown clear, and had trickled through its filter of reeds. It shone dark blue-green, marbled by the snow-white foam-wreaths of rapids. Now and again a light green ice-floe came tumbling like a porpoise among the waves, diving beneath the seething foam of the rapids. The old black willows leaned out over the river in majestic calm, untroubled by the roaring masses of water and the warring men that passed by.

Ruined houses only served to enhance the romantic atmosphere. In and out, up and down we went, the Konche-darya always on our left. The road passed through a *p'ai-lou*, or gate, white-plastered, newly built and unbeautiful. More sharp bends, till the valley suddenly seemed to come to a dead end, and we wondered where the track went. Next moment we swung round a sharply projecting promontory of rock, and down the narrow corridor a new and splendid view lay before us.

On the left bank, which here widened out a little, a *mazar* had been erected in a grove of trees — an enchanting place, where it would have been pleasant to stop for a while.

As the last gleam of sun faded on the flecks of snow in the east, the twilight