

I bore for the lives of the eight travellers made me nervous. If the lorry had suffered any irreparable damage half way to Tun-huang, or the water-supply had been exhausted, their lives would not be worth much in that awful desert.

Our anxieties were thus fully justified, but, as we found on our return from Lop-nor, quite unnecessary. The truck had a breakdown shortly after the start, and then the convoy came upon such difficult country on its way through the hills to Altmish-bulaq that it did not reach this place until May 13th. It reached Altmish-bulaq from the north-west and returned to base-camp No. 70 the same day. The retreat of the convoy was due not to difficult country farther to the east, in the direction of Tun-huang, but to the fact that its supply of oil was coming to an end.

As our men were not at or near Altmish-bulaq before May 13th, the three heroes, APAQ, HAYIT and ISMAIL, could not possibly have seen any wheel-tracks on May 10th! The whole story they had dished up for me had been pure invention from beginning to end! Even the picturesque touch of colour provided by the nine wild camels was presumably a lie. The only tiny scrap of truth in their narrative concerned the tracks of camels, donkeys and sheep on the river bank, for these we had seen ourselves. They had evidently been on the river bank, but, I am sure, not a step farther.

When I heard, later on, that the cars had passed three days after the imaginary expedition of these heroes, I sent for them, called them rogues and liars, and informed them that they were not to receive the reward that had been intended. They sat with bowed heads and did not utter a word. When I had finished my lecture they went to their campfire and lay down, silent and ashamed. This is what some Turkis are like.

THE ISOLATION OF LOP-NOR

Not counting the different groups of our own expedition and a very small number of herdsmen on the Qum-darya, CHEN and I, with our ten boatmen and GAGARIN, were alone in the Lop Country.

We calculated that our nearest neighbours were: in the north-west Singer, where ABDURAHIM's brother lived 141 km from our camp; in the S. S. W. Miran, 192 km away; in the west Tikenliq, 212 km; in the north Luckhun, 215 km; in the north-east Hami, 376 km; and in the E. S. E. Tun-huang, 420 km. If one connects all these places on a map by straight lines they enclose a very considerable slice of Central Asia, or nearly 200,000 sq. km, in which we were practically the only human beings. This area is almost equal to the half of Sweden or to that of England and Scotland together.