

ACROSS THE PEI-SHAN

We were on the old main road between Hami and Anhsi. It was new to all of us. The going was sometimes tolerable, sometimes difficult. Here and there the route ran through belts of hard, dry, yellow grass. We encamped for the night in the little village of Chang-liu-shui, »Long Flowing Water». This was camp No. 109.

The desert extended as flat as a sea in every direction. Only to the north were the mountains still visible, faintly purple. We drove past a mounted mail-carrier. This man told us that he got sixteen dollars a month, but had to find his own horse or donkey and food. Poor fellow! One must have a soul as hard as iron, or no soul at all, to be able to spend one's life on that ghost-like, dead-and-alive road.

Although the minimum temperature had fallen to -5.8° C., it was blazingly hot in the noontide sun. The surface of the desert was sometimes hard and even, and quite comfortable to drive on, sometimes bumpy. The T'ien-shan mountains gradually faded away in the north-west. Now and again we drove past the ruins of very old mud houses; but there was no sign of human life. The ruins of a watch-tower stood on a hillock. At Ku-shui, »Bitter Water», the road forks, the right-hand branch going to Tun-huang, and the left to Anhsi. The village of Ku-shui, where we encamped, had been razed to the ground; but a couple of mail-carriers were living in a hovel.

We made an early start on October 28th, in brilliant sunshine and a stifling south wind. The surface of the desert was firm, and covered with hard gravel. We met a caravan of forty camels carrying tea and cloths. The owner, a merchant from Keriya, had left his native town eight years before, with goods for Suchow. Rebellion and war had prevented his return. Not till now had he dared to start.

We climbed 250 m to the top of an undulation, whence there was an endless prospect of fearfully desolate and barren desert. There was not a blade of grass, and not a trace of any wild animal; only a deathly silence. From time to time we passed the remains of a watch-tower or a ruined wall, on the lee side of which travellers could find a temporary shelter from violent storms. Sha-ch'üan-tze, »Sand Spring», was one of the very few places on this road where really good water was to be had.

When we had gone 48 km from Ku-shui, we had climbed 500 m; and at Hsiao-hung-liu-yüan, »Little Tamarisk Garden», we were 1,600 m above sea-level.

The road now went in among low hills, crests and ledges, following a narrow, sunken track between rocks of fine-grained grey granite, pegmatite and crystalline slate. The mountains grew higher. We climbed to a low pass 1,850 m high. Here to the right we saw the little temple of Hsing-hsing-hsia, ruined and abandoned. There was no priest in charge of the temple, whose ruined walls shone out redly