

out by secret channels. These routes were well-known to the smugglers, who were also skilled in the art of finding water in the desert. He himself had travelled south from Hami by a secret track farther west, and he knew three springs containing bad water to the west of Ma-lien-ch'üan. He used to transport his wares by camel, and preferably in winter, when the beasts could get snow-water.

After  $-10.1^{\circ}$  C. in the night we started off, on November 12th, through a valley, which at last allowed us to turn north-west and west. No road led that way, but we soon crossed an old track leading north. The ground was moderately soft, and intersected by numerous erosion gullies. Tamarisks and tufts of scrub occurred in places. No traces of wild animals were to be seen; but there was dung of camels, horses and oxen — probably from the caravans of refugees or smugglers who had used this by-road between Hami and Tun-huang. We drove on along the foot of the mountains we had crossed the day before.

### A ROBBER BAND

We had hardly covered 20 km of our day's journey when we spied nine camels grazing peacefully among hillocks just to the right of our track. Some trader's caravan on the way to Sinkiang, or refugees going the other way, we thought, and held our course. Next moment we saw a man with a gun a hundred meters ahead of us. Astonished at hearing the noise of a car in this desert, he stopped short, swung round on his heel and disappeared in the rough ground at the run.

To the south-west a watch-tower stood on an eminence. Before we had reached it we perceived, immediately to the right of the road and half hidden by the crown of a hillock, six men in shabby Turki clothes. Two of them had their muzzle-loaders at the ready. We were right on top of them before they noticed us, for the cars had been concealed in the small ravine we were following. So when they caught sight of the small car, with the lorry just behind, they were taken aback and obviously at a loss. One of them rushed off, to disappear among the nearest hillocks to the east, while two others ran away north, first throwing off their sheepskin coats so as to be able to run faster. The three remaining ones, who had not made up their minds so quickly, stayed where they were, crouching down on the ground.

We stopped abruptly and shouted to them. The three nearest came forward slowly, and in a short time the three others returned. Two wore soldiers' uniforms under their Turki sheepskins.

»What people are you?» I asked in Turki.

»We are hunters from Hami.»

»What are you hunting in this desert, where there isn't a sign of game?»