

»There are wild camels here. We haven't found any yet, but we are going on looking for them, north and west from here. We shoot them for their flesh. We are hunting foxes, too, for their skins.»

One of the men went off and returned with a couple of fox's skins, which he showed us.

When we asked how far west one could travel, they replied that they did not know the country for more than a short day's journey in that direction, and that it was hilly and difficult for vehicles all the way. They had reached Tao-tao-shui the evening before, and meant to return to Hami if the hunting was a failure. Our sudden appearance in that God-forsaken wilderness astonished them, and they could not conceal their nervousness. They evidently had bad consciences, and probably feared that we had come to search just for them. One of their number, a tall, strongly built Turki, asked cautiously where we intended to go. My answer that a new road was to be made to Korla, and that we were reconnoitring the ground, made no visible impression on him; he probably regarded it merely as a blind to cover our real intentions. We parted in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, we regarding them as a robber-band, and they believing us to be the spies of justice and the law.

We proceeded westwards on an old road, and passed a biggish but now ruined cairn. To the right we saw the ruins of a little house, or perhaps an ancient watch-tower, near a slight depression in which grew yellowed reeds and four trees. The ground fell slowly to the west. We had descended 200 m from camp No. 122. The ground was absolutely barren and fairly hard. Once or twice we saw fresh marks of horses' hooves. An eagle hovered over the desolate scene — the first sign of local animal life we had seen for a couple of days.

After driving 45 km we encamped near a low cairn. Here, in the midst of the wilderness, we could not help observing the course of an ancient road, probably made by the trampling of camels' feet. In places where the valley-bed is very narrow and the soil hard, and where the nature of the ground prevents erosion gullies from being formed, such a track, trodden into existence by the pads of innumerable camels, can remain for a very long time. It was pretty certain that the watch-towers, the ruined stone house, and the cairns on the more conspicuous hillocks, had not been erected in modern times. And this mountain region was doubtless as desolate, barren and weather-worn 2,000 years ago as it is now. The road itself, with its guide-marks and towers, is perhaps a relic of the time when Lou-lan flourished, and when the silk caravans from China — or at any rate many of them — preferred to travel in summer through the higher and cooler mountain regions rather than march over the suffocatingly hot desert depression in the south. Moreover, there was in the mountains a better supply of water in springs and wells; and even if this sometimes contained salt, the camels drank it. On the other hand, the track we were following was probably never used by carts.