

At camp No. 123 we calculated that we were hardly 400 km from Altmish-bulaq. That evening our guide, still slightly agitated, told us that the eleven Turkis we had surprised in the valley were a notorious robber band. He himself had once been attacked and robbed by this band when taking his smuggling caravan through the Pei-shan. He had recognized two of the men with whom I had talked; and one of them had evidently remembered him, and turned away when their eyes met. He knew from his own experience how these bandits went to work. Rushing out from ambush, they would stop a passing caravan and demand a certain sum, saying that they were in the Sinkiang customs service. When they had made sure that the caravan men were unarmed, while they themselves had rifles, they said nothing more about the sum they had mentioned, but looted everything of value, including the very camels, and sent the caravan men away stripped of their all.

»CAMEL WELL»

About 1 km to the south of camp No. 123 there was a well, which the guide called Lo-t'o-ching, »Camel Well». It was, strictly speaking, a spring, with rather salty water oozing from five crevices. But it was drinkable at a pinch. The water we got from melting the blocks of ice near the spring was quite fresh, however. Lo-t'o-ching would be an important base for us.

Brilliantly clear air, blazing sun, death-like silence! We soon lost ourselves among the hills. Three fellows from the robber band had climbed to the top of one of the highest to watch us. The landscape continually changed its aspect: we were driving now through narrow valleys with low, rounded hills, now across small patches of steppe where scrub and tamarisks grew. The older bushes were dead, and made the most excellent fuel; the younger ones were still living. Two men on horseback appeared ahead of us. On seeing us they vanished hurriedly to the south. We seemed to be shadowed by dubious characters.

The ground was soft, and the lorry frequently got stuck. Wild camels' dung was common, as were also the fresh tracks of wild asses and antelopes. Wild animals know all the open springs; and there were multitudes of tracks round Lo-t'o-ching.

To the north the country was extraordinarily open and flat; in the south we saw low hills a long way off.

In the afternoon we came out into a broad gully between erosion terraces 3 m high. We followed this welcome stream-bed for several hours, and hoped that it would long help us on our way. It fell imperceptibly W. S. W., and its soil was hard and level.

A solitary camel was moving slowly along to our right. He stopped short, raised his head, stood for a moment as still as a statue, and then, setting off at a