

A bridge ran over a frozen watercourse in the valley bed; but it had a gap in the middle to prevent carts from using it — they had to drive across the bed of the stream.

The mayor of Ting-hsi, on whom we called, declared that the road was fairly safe for about 30 km ahead; but after that we must be on our guard against attacks. He therefore gave us an officer and two men as an escort.

We were climbing a terribly steep slope. The car could not make it; it stopped and began running backwards. The brakes would not hold — we gathered speed towards the edge of a precipice. At the last moment EFFE swerved round and ran the car full tilt against the perpendicular wall. It was soft, and the car suffered no damage worth mentioning.

We drove on — up and down nasty gradients. We often had our hearts in our mouths, and rejoiced every time we got across a side valley or round a bend.

It was getting dark. One ought not to drive over such country after dusk; so we stopped at the village of Hung-t'u-yao, camp No. 170, having covered 115 km. We were 2,000 m above sea-level. The yard of the inn was cluttered with a long train of carts, loaded with telephone-poles for a new line from Sian to Lanchow. So we put up at a farm large enough for our three cars and our two tents.

We resumed our journey at daybreak on February 4th. We were told that we had a tolerable road as far as Hua-chia-ling, and that the country was quiet; but that beyond this point the road became bad and there was danger from robbers. A short time before we started, our three soldiers had sat on a tower outside the village and done a little target-shooting. They were evidently testing their rifles, to be ready to meet an attack by robbers.

From the village we drove headlong down a horribly steep and narrow canyon-like road, and then slowly ascended a valley, in whose bottom we several times crossed a frozen brook. Then we were faced with another precipitous slope. Six men pushed. We made a few meters. Blocks of wood were placed behind the wheels. The piston-rings of the small car were loose; the engine had no power. Driving in such conditions was dangerous; I preferred to walk up these ghastly hills. And this road was newly laid down! The old road, which ran higher up, was even worse.

We reached a pass (2,200 m) and saw a village surrounded by ploughed fields on a slope. These Chinese farmers are wonderful; they do not waste a scrap of ground that is fit for cultivation.

We remained now, for a time, on the high levels. The curves were fearful, but the gradients were not difficult. Now and again we passed through a village. We noted a square fort on our left and reached another small pass, from which there was an immense view in every direction. Everything was yellow — hills, houses and walls.