

A little donkey caravan appeared. The animals had their ears decked with red paper; they were celebrating the New Year. And here were twenty camels without loads, being led eastward. The softly rounded hillsides were everywhere furrowed by the plough.

We had been warned that the robber-infested country started at Hua-chia-ling. And the road, we had been told, now ran through sparsely populated country for over 90 km. We had four soldiers with us, and they and we kept our fire-arms in readiness.

We drove over a few conspicuous ridges. This region was, after all, not entirely uninhabited. We passed through one or two villages, and ploughed fields were common. A solitary tree stood by the wayside; but otherwise the country was bare. Now and again we saw a shepherd with his flock of sheep and goats. The road was as slippery as ice, owing to the melted snow that ran down over the yellow loess from the snow-fields higher up. We were all the time expecting the cars to go sliding down over the edge of the road into an abyss. The wreck of a lorry lay by the roadside.

There was a change of scene every minute, and yet the landscape as a whole was rather monotonous. The road was simply horrible, and the small car often stuck in the mud. Then we had to wait till TSERAT came along and helped us out.

We had to drive for more than two hours longer through the pitch dark night in that dangerous country — an exciting journey indeed! Now we were on top of a ridge with a sheer drop on both sides, now on a steep slope, with at least one abyss always beneath us. Often no more than a meter separated us from the edge of a precipice and certain death.

The snow increased as we left the parched interior of the continent behind and drew nearer the coast and the moist winds. The snow-fields glimmered white even in the darkness. The steep, winding, uphill stretches were the worst. If the engine and brakes failed, and the car ran downhill as it had done the day before, EFFE would not be able to see the road in the darkness, and the car would run over the edge and fall into the depths.

In a short time we met three night-walkers, who told us that we had three li to go. We crept on. At last we saw a few trees and some houses. We drove into the main street of a village and encamped at a farm. We had driven 175 km from Lanchow, and we had another 138 to go before reaching P'ing-liang. On our way there we should have to cross the Liu-p'an-shan mountain range, which would mean an ascent of about 1,000 m. Then we should have a downhill run all the way to Sian.

Close to the village of Ma-chia-p'u was a watch-tower with five small pyramids. It was a long time since we had seen one like it. Here, too, there was an avenue, that continued, with many interruptions, until we entered a small valley. The road thereafter was good, but winding and hilly.