

clay terraces, all cut up by erosion, appeared to mark its edge. Plentiful tracks of wild camels crossed the route from the south. Did they lead to grazing or to water? After about twelve miles we passed the wells known as Kosh-kuduk; but before this the dunes and fine gravel slope on our right had given way to an almost level expanse of reed-beds. Visible from a long distance before us was a low gravel ridge, which seemed to stretch right across the flat valley bottom. But on approaching it I found that this was an illusion, due partly to a slight bend in the direction of the valley.

The ridge, about 120 feet high, jutted out for only two miles or so from a gravel plateau now fringing the valley on the south. Yet after all the dull flatness of the ground behind us it looked quite an impressive feature, and as I crossed its top with Chiang-ssŭ-yeh over a narrow saddle we felt both as if we had reached at last the outermost gate of Kan-su. So we promptly baptized the ridge as 'K'ai-mên-kuan,' 'the Station of the Open Gate.' Much had we talked already on our long lonely rides from Lop-nor of that famous watch station of Yü-mên or the 'Jade Gate' which once stood on the Kan-su border closing this ancient desert route, and the true position of which I was eager to clear up after the oblivion of ages.

Curiously enough the view from the top revealed a distinct change in the landscape. An unbroken expanse of reed-beds, level like a yellowish lake, seemed to stretch away eastward. It was bordered on the south no longer by a high sand-ridge, but by almost vertically cut clay cliffs which looked as if eroded by the currents of some ancient river. The vegetation immediately to the east of the ridge bore a distinctly more flourishing look. Thickets of thorny scrub and round knolls of a reed-like plant not previously noticed became abundant. What a treat to tempt our poor camels and donkeys! It was hard to keep them going.

A black spot far away in the distance was recognized by Ata-ullah, the guide, as Besh-toghrak. But it was quite dark by the time we reached the five wild poplars which have given the place its name (Fig. 151).