

it could but enlist and train for its service 'field literati' of such topographical sense, painstaking care, and intelligence as displayed by Chiang-ssü-yeh.

Luckily for me he was as lively a *causeur* on things and people in general as he was keen in enlarging his knowledge. So many a weary hour of these long desert marches was lightened by the endless flow of stories he would tell me from the varied experiences of his wandering life as a petty official from Lan-chou-fu to Urumchi, from Karghalik to distant Tarbagatai. There was always a plentiful admixture of good-humour in his stories, in spite of pathetic little incidents and irrepressible raillery at all the defects of the administration he knew so well. What amusing confidences he told me of all the unholy profits with which various Ambans of Chiang's far-spreading acquaintance were credited in the intimacy of their Ya-mêns, and about the methods more or less shady by which these quick fortunes were made! But that would be 'another story,' and—I know, Chiang would like me to be discreet.

On the morning of March 6th, a brilliantly clear day, when the minimum thermometer registered twenty-three degrees of frost, we set out from Besh-toghrak. The Abdal man we left behind in charge of the eight donkeys needing rest seemed to face his solitude with stolid resignation, comforted by a twenty days' supply of rations, a box of matches, and the prospect of unlimited sleep until the return of the donkey caravan. After moving about four miles to the east I was surprised to find the soft reed- and scrub-covered ground giving way to dunes of coarse-grained sand which stretched northwards across the valley from a high ridge of sand on our right. The dunes rose to twenty or thirty feet where we crossed the belt, but seemed a good deal higher both to the north and south; their surface had a curious crusted appearance suggesting the presence of binding salt grains.

The vegetation became exceedingly scanty. At a distance of about nine miles from Besh-toghrak we found ourselves on the western edge of an absolutely bare and uniformly level depression covered with salt efflorescence,