

The farm-house had been built originally in a substantial style, with large rooms arranged in orthodox Chinese fashion on three sides of an oblong court facing south. Now it was tenanted by several families of small cultivators. The walls in more than one place leant over in a dangerous fashion, and were for the time kept from falling by supports of roughly cut tree-trunks. Half the rooms had big holes in the roofing, the débris of timber and plaster which had fallen in filling the corners. Unspeakable litter was accumulated in the narrow court dividing the wings. It seemed too dirty a place even to my Turki followers for putting the ponies up. But there were plentiful tatters of coloured drawings and of inscriptions neatly penned on crimson paper decking the door-posts and half-broken window-screens, marks of former comfort and ease. It was not easy to get shelter here for my large party. But the driving dust outside and the howling gale made even the most critical among them settle down with contentment.

I had just given orders for my tent to be pitched behind the court wall of what looked a completely ruined building near by, when Tila, my observant Yarkandi follower, discovered in it a tiny room still tenanted and retaining its roof. The oldest of the cultivators, a quiet, white-haired man, had retired there with a half-crazy son on whom he seemed charitably to bestow his chief care. The old fellow looked eager to offer hospitality for the night; and when he saw my man surveying suspiciously the bundles of old clothes, etc., heaped up in a corner, he so promptly set about to clear out his belongings and tidy up his lair that I could not refuse so cordial a reception. The clouds of dust raised by the sweeping up of the half-ruined hovel were impressive even in this atmosphere of driving sand. After a clearing such as, I am sure, no place in the hamlet will ever receive before the desert overwhelms it, I moved in to relative comfort and shelter for the night.

I did not enjoy it long; for with some thirty-five miles of desert separating us from our goal, I was anxious to start early. By 4 A.M. I awakened the men, but it was close on 7 A.M. before the caravan with its contingent of Nan-hu labourers and camel-men not yet broken in