

tzü. Our age-bent guide, trotting ahead on a diminutive donkey, had no explanations to offer. So to the pleasure of groping in growing darkness along a slippery, half-submerged rut, there was added uncertainty as to when and where we might again meet with our baggage.

At last about 10 P.M. loud barking told us that we were near some inhabited spot which proved to be an outlying farm of Ch'iao-tzü. Half-a-mile farther east our hapless 'Ya-i,' already half-overcome by fatigue, conducted us to a small group of homesteads which he declared to be the chief place of the oasis. It took time before we had aroused some men from their slumber, while a dozen or more of ferocious curs were yelping around us. The peasants had not seen or heard any carts pass, and with that persistent display of ignorance which seems to characterize these honest but wary folk on the Kan-su borders, refused to offer the slightest suggestion as to any other route the carts might possibly have followed under their far more intelligent guide supplied by the military commandant. Chiang would have gladly taken shelter then and there, in spite of the squalid look of the dwellings and his well-justified anger at the incompetence of the helpless representative of the civil powers.

But I was not prepared to give in so readily, and when Chiang had refreshed himself with my ultra-dry rusks—with satisfaction I watched him empty the little tin before he could realize in the darkness that there was nothing left for me—we set out for a fresh search. The rain had now stopped, but none of the drowsy villagers would act as guide. The 'Ya-i,' however, ransacking the dim corners of his memory, thought he had once in his younger days been to a part of the oasis known as 'South Ch'iao-tzü' which might be worth searching. Alas! we had not got far in the darkness before the old man's flickering sense of locality gave out completely. Stumbling at a lonely farm which he pretended was 'Nan-Ch'iao-tzü,' we received the not wholly unexpected information that nothing was known of our carts and people. So I resigned myself to spending the hours till daylight at what our 'Ya-i' had hailed as the best quarters of Ch'iao-tzü.